

Street-Level Bureaucracy and E-Governance Service Delivery in Gram Panchayats: A Study of Karnal District, Haryana

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Abstract

People living in rural areas often interact with the government through their local Gram Panchayats. Parivar Pehchan Patra (family ID), certificates, pensions, and property cards are just a few of the services that have gone digital in the past several years. Last but not least, the sarpanch, computer operator, panchayat secretary, and Common Service Center (CSC) operator are all villagers who still have a say in the delivery process. This research examines the discretionary actions of frontline workers in the delivery of e-governance services in Karnal district, Haryana, using Michael Lipsky's concept of street-level bureaucracy. In all, 120 residents and 16 frontline workers from eight different Gram Panchayats across four different blocks participated in the survey. Analyses are conducted using percentages, mean scores, the t-test, and the chi-square test. According to the data, 88.3% of people require assistance while using e-services, waiting is still widespread, and satisfaction is moderate (mean 2.91 out of 5). The biggest issues include slow internet, insufficient staff, and inadequate grievance procedures. The study finds that although e-governance has altered service delivery, discretion remains with front-line employees. It has just passed it on to different people. Some easy things that could be done include more effective training, application monitoring, local language support desks, and a functional grievance system.

Keywords: street-level bureaucracy, e-governance, Gram Panchayat, service delivery, discretion, Karnal, Haryana

1. Introduction

Over 2.5 lakh Gram Panchayats are located throughout India. Their inclusion as the third level of government and the assignment of responsibilities for local planning and service delivery followed the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution (1992). Sometimes, the only government office within walking distance for a villager is the Gram Panchayat. Farmers will typically visit the panchayat first if they require a birth certificate for a kid, a pension for a widow, or an income certificate for a scholarship. In an effort to streamline these services, the government has been implementing e-governance initiatives over the past 20 years. Common Service Centers were established as part of the National e-Governance Plan in 2006. Online distribution and improved internet access in rural areas were priorities for Digital India (2015). The e-Gram Swaraj site (2020) facilitates online plan preparation and account reporting for panchayats. A number of initiatives have been introduced by Haryana, including the Right to Service Act (2014), Antyodaya Saral Kendras, and the Parivar Pehchan Patra (PPP), a family database that is currently integrated with several welfare programs. Theoretically, an online system ought to lessen the need for human interaction and bias. The sarpanch who signs the suggestion, the operator who uploads the papers, or the secretary who reviews the form are all real people whom a villager still encounters in practice. Michael Lipsky (1980) compared these frontline employees to officials operating at the street level. Because regulations may not apply in every situation, they must exercise discretion when interacting with the public, and they are often overwhelmed by the amount of work they have to do with the resources at their disposal. Because of this, they really determine the speed, politeness, and service recipient list.

The basic question that this study seeks to answer is: who exactly provides online services in a Gram Panchayat, and how do these front-line employees influence the citizen's experience? A relatively well-connected and agriculturally rich district in Haryana, Karnal is the site of the study. Poorer and more isolated areas are likely to have more severe difficulties if they do arise even here.

2. Conceptual Background and Review of Literature

Street-level bureaucracy: Public policy is not solely decided in executive offices, according to Lipsky (1980). Teachers, police officers, healthcare providers, and clerks who interact directly with the public also make it daily. First, they deal directly with the public; second, they have considerable leeway in making decisions; and third, they juggle heavy workloads with constrained resources. Bureaucrats on the ground resort to routines that simplify their work, ration services (by making people wait, for example), and attempt to exert control over the customer (by requesting more paperwork, for example) in order to deal with the immense pressure they are under. They are "people-processors" who classify individuals, according to Prottas (1979). Workers do more than just follow the regulations; they also use their personal standards to determine who deserves what (Maynard-Moody and Musheno, 2003). After reviewing a large body of research, Tummers et al. (2015) classified coping strategies as either getting closer to the citizen (assisting), getting further away (avoiding), or fighting back (controlling).

E-governance and the discretion debate: Using numerous Indian instances, Bhatnagar (2004) argued that e-government may speed up processes, decrease corruption, and increase access to services. Heeks (2006) cautioned that a "design-reality gap"—the system's idealization in comparison to the actual world—is a common cause of project failure. Bovens and Zouridis (2002) provide the strongest case in support of our research. They speculated that bureaucracies at the street level would become "screen-level" and eventually "system-level" bureaucracies as software rather than humans determines most cases. In response, Hupe and Hill (2007) noted that technology does not inherently simplify accountability in street-level activities. Poverty makes it harder for people to cope with bureaucracy and ambiguity, as Gupta (2012) demonstrated in her work on India.

Research gap: Research on bureaucracy at the grassroots level in India has mostly focused on three professions: teaching, healthcare, and law enforcement. Many e-governance studies merely track supply-side metrics like the quantity of online services, the number of computers, and portals. The Gram Panchayat employees responsible for implementing e-governance and their impact on village residents have been the subject of scant research. For Karnal district, this article seeks to address that deficiency.

3. E-Governance in Gram Panchayats and the Study Area

Online portals now provide the majority of citizen services in Haryana. Any member of the public can submit an application to the panchayat's computer operator, an Antyodaya Saral Kendra, or a Common Service Center. Many programs, including pensions, use the Parivar Pehchan Patra as a means of verifying a family's eligibility. A violation of the deadline for the delivery of specified services may result in disciplinary action against the offending officer under the Haryana Right to Service Act (2014). Citizens have a right to prompt service under the law, but they need to be aware of this right in order to use it.

One of the more ancient districts of Haryana is Karnal. Its 2,520 square kilometers are home to renowned research centers including the National Dairy Research Institute as well as rice, wheat, and milk (DCMSME, n.d.). The 2011 Socio-Economic and Caste Census (SECC) estimates that 421 villages and 405 Gram Panchayats make up the district, with approximately 63% of the population living in rural areas. The Karnal, Indri, Nilokheri, and Assandh blocks are only a few of them. If you want to compare blocks, you should know that the ones closest to the district office have better roads and internet than the ones further away.

4. Objectives and Hypotheses

The study has the following objectives:

1. To find out which e-governance services citizens use at the Gram Panchayat level and how they access them.
2. To study how front-line functionaries use discretion while delivering these services.

3. To measure citizens' satisfaction with e-service delivery and to compare it across blocks.
4. To identify the main problems faced by citizens and functionaries, and to suggest improvements.

Three hypotheses are tested:

H1: Most citizens (more than half) depend on an intermediary to use e-services.

H2: Education level is related to whether a citizen can use e-services without help.

H3: Citizens who paid extra (unofficial) money are less satisfied than those who did not.

5. Research Methodology

The research is structured as a descriptive and analytical study using main sources of information. It was a multi-stage sampling procedure. We started by picking four blocks—Karnal, Indri, Nilokheri, and Assandh—from the Karnal district to ensure that we covered both nearby and faraway places. The second step was to choose two Gram Panchayats for every block. The third step was to select fifteen residents from each Gram Panchayat who had made use of an online service within the past year. In addition, we spoke with all sixteen frontline employees (8 secretaries and 8 computer/CSC operators) from these panchayats. You can see the sample in Table 1.

Table 1: Sample Design

Block	Gram Panchayats	Citizens	Secretaries	CSC / computer operators
Karnal	2	30	2	2
Indri	2	30	2	2
Nilokheri	2	30	2	2
Assandh	2	30	2	2
Total	8	120	8	8

Source: Researcher's sampling plan.

We employed two different types of schedules. On a five-point scale from 1 (very low) to 5 (very high), the citizen schedule asked about services used, access method, time required, visits, additional payment, and issues. The routine of the functionary schedule inquired about routine tasks, workload, and challenges. We used percentages, means, and frequencies to analyze the data. For H2, we utilized the chi-square test, and for H3, we employed the independent-samples t-test, both with a significance level of 5%. When it comes to average scores, we consider values below 2.5 to be low, 2.5 to 3.5 to be moderate, and scores above 3.5 to be high. There was an implied promise that participants' identities would remain anonymous, and participation was entirely optional.

6. Data Analysis and Interpretation

6.1 Profile of citizen respondents

Table 2: Profile of Citizen Respondents (n = 120)

Characteristic	Category	Number	Per cent
Gender	Male	72	60.0
	Female	48	40.0
Age (years)	18–30	34	28.3
	31–45	44	36.7
	46–60	26	21.7
	Above 60	16	13.3
Education	Illiterate / primary	22	18.3
	Middle / secondary	46	38.3

Characteristic	Category	Number	Per cent
	Senior secondary	30	25.0
	Graduate and above	22	18.3
Occupation	Farming	48	40.0
	Labour	26	21.7
	Business / private job	30	25.0
	Homemaker / student / other	16	13.3
Social category	General	52	43.3
	OBC	30	25.0
	SC	38	31.7

Source: Field survey

6.2 Services used and mode of access

Table 3: E-Services Used by Citizens (multiple responses, n = 120)

E-service	Users	Per cent
ParivarPehchanPatra (family ID) update	84	70.0
Income / caste / residence certificate	68	56.7
Birth / death certificate	52	43.3
Old-age / widow / disability pension	47	39.2
Ration card and related services	39	32.5
Property ID / SVAMITVA card	21	17.5
Panchayat tax / fee e-payment	18	15.0

Source: Field survey

Since many schemes are interdependent on the PPP, a typo in the family ID could disable other benefits; this makes it the most popular service, used by 70% of eligible individuals. There is a lot of interest in pensions and certificates as well. Less people use simple, one-time services like paying taxes online. Clearly, the primary motivation for utilizing e-services is not convenience, but rather the need to access essential documents and welfare benefits.

Table 4: Main Mode of Access to E-Services (n = 120)

How the citizen accessed the service	Number	Per cent
Self (own mobile or computer)	14	11.7
Common Service Centre / Saral Kendra operator	49	40.8
Panchayat secretary or GP computer operator	36	30.0
Sarpanch, local influential person or agent	21	17.5
Total	120	100.0

Source: Field survey

11.7 percent of the population made independent use of the service. An middleman was necessary for the remaining 88.3%. Nearly 20% turned to community support centers, 30% to panchayat employees, and 17.5% to the sarpanch or an intermediary. The first hypothesis (H1) is valid. That the "middle person" is still there, but with a new identity, is the key idea behind the online system. Today, a non-government worker operating a CSC for a private company is carrying out an official need.

6.3 Time, visits and unofficial payment

Table 5: Time Taken, Number of Visits and Extra Payment by Service

E-service	Average days taken	Average visits	Paid extra money (%)
PPP update	9	2.4	22
Income / caste / residence certificate	11	2.8	27
Birth / death certificate	6	2.1	15
Pension	24	3.6	30
Ration card and related	18	3.2	26
Property ID / SVAMITVA	15	2.9	24
Tax / fee e-payment	1	1.2	6

Source: Field survey

Time (24 days), visits (3.6), and reported additional payment (30%) are all greatest for pension services, according to the table. On the other hand, the minimum additional payment required for tax/fee e-payment is 6% and the service takes only 1 day with approximately 1.2 visits. Services requiring more human involvement and verification tend to take longer, necessitate more visits, and exhibit a greater incidence of additional payments, according to the overall findings.

6.4 Citizens' satisfaction

Table 6: Satisfaction with E-Service Delivery (mean score on a 1–5 scale)

Dimension	Mean	Std. deviation	Level
Behaviour and courtesy of staff	3.41	0.98	Moderate
Awareness about e-services	3.12	1.08	Moderate
Fair and equal treatment	3.05	1.10	Moderate
Ease of access	2.94	1.14	Moderate
Promptness (time taken)	2.78	1.21	Moderate
Transparency (knowing application status)	2.63	1.17	Moderate
Grievance redressal	2.41	1.25	Low
Composite satisfaction	2.91	–	Moderate

Source: Field survey

The total score is 2.91, which falls somewhere in the middle of "good" and is still considered reasonable. Staff behavior is the most important factor in citizens' satisfaction (3.41). This demonstrates that, when approached in person, front-line employees are typically kind and accommodating. Concerns about openness and the ability to air grievances rank lowest among citizens (2.63). In layman's terms, people are taken care of, but they are in the dark about the status of their application and cannot easily voice their dissatisfaction when things go wrong.

Table 7: Block-wise Comparison

Block	Citizens	Mean satisfaction	Dependent on intermediaries (%)	Paid extra money (%)
Karnal	30	3.18	83.3	20.0
Indri	30	2.85	90.0	30.0
Nilokheri	30	2.79	90.0	33.3
Assandh	30	2.82	90.0	30.0
All blocks	120	2.91	88.3	28.3

Source: Field survey

The Karnal block, located next to the district headquarters, has the lowest share of extra payments (20%) and the highest satisfaction (3.18). Nearly 2.8 is the distance between the other

three blocks. Maybe the change is due to better internet, more CSCs, or stricter monitoring. More than 80% of residents still rely on others, even in the most idealized neighborhood.

6.5 Discretion and coping by front-line functionaries

Table 8: Practices Reported by Front-Line Functionaries (n = 16)

Practice	Yes (number)	Per cent	Lipsky's idea
Ask people to "come tomorrow" when server is slow or work is heavy	15	93.8	Rationing
Give informal priority to elderly, widows and disabled	14	87.5	Helping / need-based
Explain rules orally in local language	13	81.3	Helping
Help known villagers or acquaintances first	11	68.8	Favouring
Use own mobile or own money for scanning / printing	10	62.5	Coping with lack of resources
Ask for extra documents not required in rules	9	56.3	Controlling
Consult sarpanch or influential person before processing	7	43.8	Local power
Reject an incomplete form instead of guiding	6	37.5	Simplifying / avoiding

Source: Field survey

6.6 Problems faced

Table 9: Problems Reported by Functionaries (n = 16)

Problem	Number	Per cent
Poor internet / server down	16	100.0
Too many portals with separate logins	13	81.3
Shortage of staff (one secretary looks after more than one GP)	12	75.0
Low digital skills of villagers	12	75.0
Not enough training	10	62.5
Pressure from senior officers to meet targets	9	56.3

Source: Field survey

Table 10: Problems Reported by Citizens (multiple responses, n = 120)

Problem	Number	Per cent
Website / server slow or not working	88	73.3
Too many visits needed	79	65.8
Did not know the status of the application	71	59.2
Confusion about which documents to bring	62	51.7
Staff not available at the office	57	47.5
No smartphone or low digital skills	52	43.3
Asked to pay extra money	34	28.3

Source: Field survey

The major issue, according to both camps, is the server and the internet. It was named by every official and 73.3% of the general public. Second, the system itself is a common issue; there are numerous portals, multiple logins, and document lists that are not always apparent. Consistent with the low transparency score in Table 6, about 60% of citizens are unaware of the current status of their application. In addition to being under target pressure, functionaries report a lack of personnel and training. So, it is clear that employee morale is just one of the issues. Their origins lie in the system that employs these people.

6.7 Testing the hypotheses

H2: Education and use of e-services. Those who utilized e-services independently and those who need assistance were classified as "up to secondary" (68 respondents) and "senior secondary and above" (52 respondents) respectively (Table 11).

Table 11: Education and Ability to Use E-Services without Help

Education level	Self (number, %)	Needed help (number, %)	Total
Up to secondary	3 (4.4%)	65 (95.6%)	68
Senior secondary and above	11 (21.2%)	41 (78.8%)	52
Total	14 (11.7%)	106 (88.3%)	120

Chi-square = 8.01, df = 1, p = 0.005 (p < 0.01); Cramér's V = 0.26.

Since the computed chi-square value (8.01) exceeds the table value (3.84), at the 5% level of significance, we accept H2. A higher level of education is associated with nearly five times the likelihood that an individual will utilize an e-service independently (21.2% vs. 4.4%). Education is an important but not sole element, since the connection strength is minimal to moderate (V = 0.26). Other factors include self-assurance, smartphone availability, and internet connectivity.

H3: Extra payment and satisfaction. Table 12 shows the results of an independent-samples t-test comparing the two groups' composite satisfaction scores.

Table 12: Satisfaction by Payment of Extra Money

Group	n	Mean satisfaction	Std. deviation
Paid extra money	34	2.40	0.72
Did not pay extra money	86	3.11	0.68

t = 5.07, df = 118, p < 0.001; effect size (Cohen's d) = 1.03.

The impact is substantial, and the statistical significance of the 0.71 point difference is high. We accept H3. People who had to pay more are obviously not happy about it. Inevitably, this comes with a warning: the public loses faith in the entire e-governance system when quick cash is involved, not just in the recipient.

6.8 Summary of main findings

Table 13: Summary of Findings against Objectives

Objective / hypothesis	Main finding	Result
Services used and access	PPP, certificates and pensions are used most; only 11.7% access services on their own	Dependence on intermediaries is high
Discretion of functionaries	93.8% ration time; 87.5% give informal priority; 68.8% help known persons first	Discretion continues under e-governance
Satisfaction	Composite mean 2.91; grievance redressal lowest (2.41); Karnal block highest (3.18)	Moderate, uneven across blocks
Problems	Server and internet failure named by all functionaries and 73.3% of citizens	System-level weakness
H1: Dependence on intermediaries	88.3% need help	Accepted
H2: Education and self-use	Chi-square = 8.01, p = 0.005	Accepted
H3: Extra payment and satisfaction	t = 5.07, p < 0.001	Accepted

Source: Compiled from Tables 3 to 12.

As a whole, the findings point to a service system that relies on humans, not just the gateway, to function. The front-line worker a villager encounters, the network's efficiency on that particular day, and the person's ability to pay for or arrange assistance are the main factors that determine the kind of care they receive.

7. Discussion

While adding a new point on e-governance, the results also back up Lipsky's main premise. To begin, discretion is still much alive and well. Human judgment would be diminished by computers, according to Bovens and Zouridis (2002). The situation is completely reversed in Karnal's Gram Panchayats. The individual seated at the computer determines which documents are sufficient, which applications are uploaded first, and at what times, due to the fact that numerous villagers are unable to use the portals. An individual operates the screen, which is the final stage. As a second point, discretion has spread out and transformed. There was a time when the sarpanch and panchayat secretary were involved. We are now working with private CSC operators as well, and they are not government workers and so are not subject to all of the accountability regulations that apply to public servants. This makes it more difficult to assign blame in the event of an error. It is in line with Gupta's (2012) contention that complicated procedures give rise to increased opportunities for arbitrary behaviour and predominantly impact the poor. Finally, Lipsky's coping mechanisms, such as care and favouritism, routines (such as coming tomorrow), and rationing, are plain to see. It should be mentioned that the majority of this conduct stems from an inadequate work environment, including an unstable network, an excess of portals, a secretary responsible for multiple panchayats, and the influence of targets. A malicious motive is not always to blame. This is corroborated by the high staff behaviour score in Table 6: citizens perceive the individuals as courteous, but they perceive the system as sluggish and ambiguous. This is what Heeks called the "design-reality gap" in his 2006.

Also, the results broken down into blocks highlight the significance of location and infrastructure. The neighbourhood closest to the district office had superior results across the board. There needs to be more help for rural panchayats because the disparity between blocks indicates that a standard policy is insufficient.

8. Suggestions

The research found that there are a number of doable things that may be done to enhance the delivery of e-governance services at the Gram Panchayat level. To begin, there has to be a reliable power source and internet connection at each Gram Panchayat office and Common Service Center (CSC). If there are ever any issues with the servers or the network, residents should not have to return home without the services they need because of an offline-to-online facility. We need to implement a system that properly tracks applications. Each applicant should be given an application number and a receipt. At various points along the application process, they should also receive SMS updates. In addition to letting people know where their applications stand, this can also make the process of providing services more open and transparent.

Additionally, several e-governance systems should have their access procedures simplified. Service integration into a single window should replace the need for users to create multiple accounts and log in every time. At Panchayat offices and CSCs, you can find a basic document checklist in Hindi. People with impairments, widows, and the elderly should have explicit written priority norms. To further guaranty equitable service and eliminate favouritism, a token or queue system can be implemented.

Additionally, CSC operators need to be held more responsible. It is important to have the official service charges displayed clearly and to have a receipt for every payment. The public can be better protected from unwarranted fees through regular inspections, measures to prevent overcharging, and an easily available complaint number. While doing so, it is important that CSC operators and Panchayat secretaries undergo periodic, shorter-term training to ensure they are up-to-date on all digital platforms, processes, and service requirements. Proper workload management for Panchayat secretaries is also necessary to ensure that no single secretary is tasked with an excessive number of Gram Panchayats.

Last but not least, people who have trouble utilizing digital services should get extra support. Help desks and digital literacy camps at the village level can be especially useful for women, the elderly, and others with less schooling. Another way to improve the system for handling complaints is to establish firm deadlines for their resolution. Timeliness and transparency in addressing complaints and delays in service delivery depend on citizens being well informed about both.

9. Limitations of the Study

Due to the studies narrow scope (just eight Gram Panchayats in one district), extrapolating its findings to the entire state of Haryana would be a daunting task. It all comes down to the honesty of the answers when it comes to questions about favoritism and unofficial payments. We can expand this study by using service counter observations, interviews with cops at the block level, and a bigger sample size in future analyzes.

10. Conclusion

The village's residents appreciate the helpfulness of the front-line employees and the abundance of services made available through e-governance. The research does reveal, however, that humans are still required for the final leg of electronic governance. Almost 90% of residents in Karnal's Gram Panchayats require assistance while utilizing e-services; roughly 14% have paid something extra; and waiting and repeated trips are still commonplace. Because they are under constant pressure and have limited resources, front-line workers mimic Lipsky's pattern of behavior: they prioritize certain tasks over others, adhere to routines, and budget their time. Extra payments decrease trust and contentment, while education makes people more independent. Technology cannot improve service delivery on its own, and this is the most important lesson. There needs to be adequate and competent personnel, open and honest tracking, trustworthy networks, and responsible middlemen to back it up. To realize its potential as a simple, equitable, and trustworthy service for all villagers, e-governance must be governed by transparent systems and front-line employees' discretion must be regulated by explicit regulations.

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