Computerisation in Rajya Sabha - An Overview

Introduction

Technology remains at the heart of human progress. Mankind has evolved from one age of technology to another with each age opening new vistas of communication, which has contributed spectacularly to shrinking of distances and spreading of the ideas of democracy, freedom and liberty of people.

While the industrial age commencing with the invention of new means of production diminished distance and brought people and societies across the globe closer together, the cost of doing so remained high. Evolution of what is called 'the network age' with the introduction of computers and internet brought about a paradigm shift in technology application for "unprecedented networking and knowledge opportunities" at a cost which is incredibly small and hitherto not even dreamt of. It is appropriately said that communication revolution driven by information technology is attempting to make the 'impossible of yesterday' the 'possible of today.'

In fact, the Internet has been described as the first metaphysical invention in human civilization, which will guide the advancement of mankind in future. Statistics reveal that while radio took 30 years to reach the first 60 million populations, television took 15 years and Internet merely 3 years. Given its fast growth pattern and spread, Internet has the potential to transform just about everything by bringing peoples closer. Tim Berners Lee, its inventor, in his book Weaving the Web has written 'the web is more a social creation than a technical one… I designed it for social effect -to help people work together – and not as a technical toy.' Information technology and the technological innovations that have followed heralding an era of global-information-networking is in the process of opening a window in the social space which is far more valuable in the liberal democratic environment of the twenty-first century. The central challenge and the perennial quest since the idea of democracy dawned in the minds of humans has been to make people feel a sensation of participation in the representative bodies where, the people whom they elect, discharge their functions in their name. Ideas and institutional mechanisms for technological application remain at, and the root of all attempts, to bring people and Parliament closer together. Information and communication technologies have raised hopes of responding to that central challenge effectively. Professor Arno

Penzias, Noble Laureate of 1978 in physics, referring to the computer very insightfully observed, "… for the first time this machine in its network is empowering the poor as no other human inventions did in the last 5 millennia".

Parliaments as central institutions of democracy provide a crucial fora for debate, discussion and above all for policy formulation and scrutiny of executive functioning. Essentially, as institutions representing the will of the people, they need to be closer to them articulating their interests and acting as mirrors of society as a whole. Every innovation within these representative bodies is an attempt to further the cause of democracy. Human Development Report of 1999 which focused on globalisation has commented, "…information and communications technology can be a tremendous force for human development for all those Connected- by providing information, enabling empowerment and raising productivity."

The new information and communication technologies have thrown up several new possibilities for forging instant linkages between the electorate and their representatives, which can make representative democracy more effective. Networking communication through e-mail, computer facilitated audio and video conferencing, online consultations, etc., which forms a part of the larger concept of e-governance, is being gradually adopted by Parliaments in their day-to-day functioning.

Parliaments are a repository and reservoir of information, which are of strategic and seminal significance for people, the body politic and society at large. Information has always been a critical input for effective decision-making. It acquires manifold significance in a democratic society, which in our time is striving for giving the right to information to the people. Legislatures, as people's institutions, have to work in a setting where there is free-flow of information for arriving at decisions and assessing policies which aim at fulfilling the hopes and aspirations of the people. Success of a parliamentary democracy, therefore, largely depends upon efficient multi-directional flow of information. Application of information and communication technologies would be of immense help for dissemination of such information.

It is worthwhile to also note that rapid strides in communication and information technology and convergence of various such disciplines have opened up newer vistas of information-sharing. It has made access to various kinds of data easier. Members of Parliament in order to discharge their responsibilities effectively need to have objective up-to-date and authentic information. At the same time, a proper exchange of information between the Government and the Members of Parliament and vice-versa is

also vital for democracy. And this may be better facilitated by harnessing these new technologies for sharing and exchange of information between the executive and the legislature.

Computerisation and application of information and communication technologies in parliamentary bodies is part of the modernization efforts of various Parliaments across the world. In the House of Commons as part of the modernization programme it has been suggested that new technologies can help widen participation. The Information Committee in its First Report, Digital Technology: Working for Parliament and the Public had recommended that Parliament should make more use of information and communication technologies to increase the accessibility and transparency of Parliament. The Report stated that there was concern amongst the public and the members that the House appeared remote and that it does not respond as well as it should to the public. Normally, public perception about Parliament is formed from a distance, through correspondence and reports of its proceedings. There is a noticeable disenchantment amongst the people towards parliamentary institutions which political scientists have attributed mainly to 'a crisis of political communication.' In fact, it is suggested by a report of the House of Commons that its modernization, among other things, by application of information and communication technologies could reverse the public perception about decline of Parliament.

The Indian Parliament representing a billion strong population of the world has remained on the forefront in embracing this technology. Parliament especially Rajya Sabha has made concerted efforts to adopt and internalize these new technological tools in order to take Parliament closer to the people. The computerization efforts in Rajya Sabha are broadly focused in three areas. Firstly, to computerize the existing parliamentary activities within the Secretariat and effectively manage the information it is receiving on a day-to-day basis in order to improve the service while saving on time and effort. Secondly, to effectively disseminate information generated by Parliament to the wider public and society through internet. And thirdly, for information gathering so as to make up-to-date and accurate information available for use of members for their meaningful participation in the House.

Background

The idea of introducing automation services in Indian Parliament was conceived way back in 1982 and a computer based information retrieval system called PARLIS (Parliament Library and Information System) was set up in 1985 with the help of the National Informatics Centre (NIC). PARLIS is linked with the NIC's satellite based network called NICNET which is linked with the capitals of all the States of India and also with all district headquarters enabling faster exchange of information with State legislatures and district headquarters through e-mail. In the Rajya Sabha Secretariat, computers were introduced for the first time in 1987 in the Pay & Accounts Office followed by a few other sections. In 1993 the computerization efforts within the Secretariat were placed under the Training Unit and in 1997 a separate Computer Cell was set up to computerize the Secretariat.

With the advent of the new information and communication technologies and their proliferation in India, a need was felt to adopt and utilize these to improve the services to members. In this regard several new initiatives have been undertaken to harness these new technologies in order to streamline the functioning of the Rajya Sabha Secretariat so as to provide a more efficient service to members. At the outset, due thought was given to standardization in terms of software and other associated facilities so as to enable easy movement of information within the Secretariat and also to and from the members. All the systems operate on similar software and facilities provided are also largely standardized. This was achieved by constituting a core group which was instrumental in planning, coordinating, implementing and scheduling of the process of computerization in Rajya Sabha Secretariat.

Committee on Provision of Computers to Members of Rajya Sabha

In order to put the entire efforts of computerization in an institutional framework, the General Purposes Committee at its meeting held on 20 February 1997, recommended that a Committee consisting of seven members be constituted to go into all aspects relating to provision of computers to Members of Rajya Sabha and authorized the Hon'ble Chairman, Rajya Sabha to nominate such a Committee under the chairmanship of Deputy Chairman, Rajya Sabha. Accordingly, the Committee on Provision of Computers to Members of Rajya Sabha with the Deputy Chairman, as the Chairman of

the Committee and seven members, was constituted by Hon'ble Chairman, Rajya Sabha on 18 March 1997. The Committee, inter alia, deals with matters relating to areas and activities to be computerized for the benefit of the members, provision of computers and computer related information to members including Internet and other applications for their use and lays down policy guidelines for the training of members. Technical support to the Committee is provided by the Standing Technical Advisory Committee (STAC) consisting of officers of the Secretariat and National Informatics Centre (NIC).

The Committee has been meeting from time to time and has taken decisions on various aspects relating to procurement of computer equipments for Members of Rajya Sabha, improving the information availability on the Rajya Sabha Home Page, etc. With a view to enabling members to store and retrieve information at a faster speed and have access to information regarding legislative and parliamentary matters from the Rajya Sabha Home Page and also equipping the members to obtain information on varied subjects from internet, Members of Rajya Sabha have been provided computers with internet connectivity. Under the Provision of Computers to Members of Parliament and Officers – Rules and Procedures, 1995, a copy of which is placed at Annexure I, the computer related equipments (Desktop computer, scanner, DeskJet printer and UPS) are supplied to a member for use during his/her term of Rajya Sabha. Apart from dealing with issues of procurement of computer equipment for Members of Rajya Sabha, the Committee has also made several recommendations to the Government of India for enhancing the utilities of the websites of various Ministries and Departments so that those can be used by the Members of Parliament effectively.

A Practical Insight

The computerization of Rajya Sabha Secretariat has been an on-going process. As part of this exercise automation of certain activities of this Secretariat which began in 1987 has been further improved upon. Preparing for change has always meant keeping essential resources ready and building on past efforts. A Computer Cell was set up in 1997 by the Secretariat to deal with various issues emanating in the wake of adoption of new information and communication technologies for the Members of Parliament and its officers. Computer Centres of NIC, one each at Parliament House(PH) and Parliament House Annexe(PHA), have also been set up to look into developing new tools and

provide necessary hardware and software support to various branches of the Secretariat and to the Members of Rajya Sabha. Though setting up of the institutional mechanism for computerization efforts is very significant, it does not constitute the whole process. Actual application of any technological innovation can be said to evolve only step by step as part of a well thought out plan.

At the outset, sections were computerized and a Local Area Network (LAN) of the Secretariat was made operational. In the next stage, several client-server softwares for various applications, namely, for Parliament questions, government assurances, legislative Bills, Committee meetings and their tours and reports, special mentions, etc. with web-enabled outputs were introduced. And now, the data outputs are filtered and made available in the Parliament and Rajya Sabha website ensuring access to anyone with internet connectivity. Information systems have been largely systematized by working out the annual IT Induction Plans for the Secretariat and constituting informal set-ups (web updating group) to monitor and suggest means of improvement in the various computerization efforts.

Introduction of Computers

In the first stage, computers were introduced in the work environment. It was a major step in itself for it involved weaning the staff away from the manual and electronic typewriters and making them accept computers with MS Suite packages as their work stations. It involved restructuring of work in a new format and setting an environment based on a completely new technology. Acceptability was a little slow in the beginning but gradually with substantial inputs in terms of training sessions organized by the Training Unit with the help of the technical staff of NIC posted in the Secretariat, a fundamental and decisive change was affected. It may not be an exaggeration to state that the shift from typewriters to computers has been a landmark step towards computerization and networking efforts in the Secretariat of the Council of States.

All sections have now been provided with as many computers as are necessary and all have been put on LAN. It has ensured familiarity of the staff with electronic data maintenance, and most significantly it prepared the staff for the next level of computerization, i.e., the client server applications.

Software Applications

The client server applications have been designed to address the needs of the respective sections while ensuring updation of the data at the section level. The data outputs have been structured and filtered and made accessible on the intranet for further use for other sections of the Secretariat. Thus, the routinely generated data which was being manually handled earlier in the section is now made available through the client server applications on the intranet by using applications software programmes (ASPs). And once the data inputting and checking is complete the final information is made available on the internet for the consumption of the public at large.

In order to streamline the processes a conscious decision was taken at the very outset that in every application manual data maintenance would be replaced by electronic database and accountability for the data generated was also fixed. Wherever any data is flowing from one section to another, the originating section is required to send the data in electronic form so that the section disseminating it would not have to bear more than its normal share of work. The data thus generated has been found to be largely systematized and more or less error free.

The introduction and actual operation of these clientserver softwares in the secretariat was not without challenges. Interventions at various levels were needed, meaningful improvements were suggested and incorporated for these to suit the requirements. And with growing familiarity with the steps involved, the staff have also gained confidence for working in the new environment, thereby improving the overall efficiency and saving on time and effort. On the whole, the adoption of these softwares has helped to save labour and enabled the staff to transact business with speed and accuracy. Thus, a concerted effort to streamline the processes involved in generating the database by itself has been an enriching experience. Several client server softwares have been introduced in Rajya Sabha, namely, for Parliament questions, Government assurances, Who's Who, Bulletins, Bills, Committee meetings, tours and reports, special mentions, etc.

Committees:

A significant area of parliamentary work where client server application has been profitably introduced is in the Committees of Rajya Sabha. The application of the

software has ensured the gradual development of a useful database for future reference. The client server softwares with web-enabled interface in respect of parliamentary Committees is developed to include the parliamentary committee membership details with search facility on name, committee and time period. The web interface also includes information regarding meetings and tours of parliamentary committees with provisions for outputs in terms of specified committee and time period. Other web-enabled information are the reports, their recommendations and their implementation. Admittedly, introduction and actual customization of this software for the various committees of the Rajya Sabha was a difficult task. This was more so as issues dealt with by the various committee sections are vastly different from each other. For example, the work of Committee on Papers Laid on the Table (COPLOT) is quite different from what is handled in the Committee of Privileges. Notwithstanding these inherent differences, standardization in terms of systems design and outputs were attempted in the Committee Sections. In order to arrive at this, common median intervention at various levels were made and several series of workshops with the actual users of the committees' software were undertaken. All these efforts have proved successful in terms of standardizing and systematizing the outputs and also in developing a database of essential committee related information.

Who's Who:

Another major initiative in computerization has been the Who's Who software. Who's Who is a biennial publication of the Rajya Sabha Secretariat giving personal detail of the members of Rajya Sabha, their professional achievements and other relevant information. This work used to be done manually and the compilation of the bio-data published biennially. With the development of the Who's Who software, the bio-data of the Members of Rajya Sabha are readily made available on the web page and changes and updations are promptly reflected therein. The sections handling various aspects of the bio-data provide information to the respective fields in the client server software for data inputting which is then further put on the web. The Table Office has been provided access to the particular fields in the client-server applications relating to party affiliation, local and permanent addresses, etc. and

other information relating to the members' bio-data is handled by the Research and Library Section. The combined information is then made available on the intranet for use in the Secretariat and on the internet for the public at large. The software has enabled us in getting various outputs like alphabetical list of members, their e-mail addresses and residential addresses. To further enhance and sharpen the outputs, a Who's Who search form has also been developed. The fields worked out for classifying the members relate to their party affiliations, membership, age, profession, their educational qualifications, etc. This is likely to enable the public to understand better the composition of the Rajya Sabha.

Special Mentions:

A new software for special mentions was also developed and implemented in 2001. The software includes a module, wherein the Ministry of Parliamentary Affairs which is the nodal Ministry for the purpose, updates the status of the response of the Ministry concerned to the special mentions made by the members from time to time.

Answers to parliamentary Questions

Apart from the data generated from within the Secretariat a lot of information flows to Parliament from the executive that is, from the government of the day. The computerization efforts in the Rajya Sabha Secretariat has attempted to bring this vital information also within its ambit. In this direction the creation of a database of answers to parliamentary questions has been a completely new initiative. Herein, the main information, that is, the answers to Parliament questions, comes from the numerous Ministries and Departments of the Government of India. To organize and institutionalize the whole process involving all the Ministries and Departments of the Government of India was a daunting task. It was decided that the answers would be received through e-mail and further made accessible on the internet. Standardizing the format of the answers received from the Ministries and Departments and accepting e-mail as a regular channel of communication between Government Departments and the Secretariat for getting such answers were considered gigantic tasks. After much effort by the Secretariat, standardization has been largely achieved. And the database is now available with a multiple search facility and can be accessed by anybody on the Internet.

Computerisation of the Reporting Service

Another major development has been the computerization of the parliamentary reporting Service. The parliamentary reporters who transcribe the verbatim proceedings of Rajya Sabha are all provided with computers and multilingual software named Indian Standard Font Code (ISFOC) Script Manager to enable them to transcribe the uncorrected debates more neatly, precisely and quickly. Another software known as Parliamentary Reporters Information Systems(PRISM) provides the facility for file creation, storage and merging the texts of the debates transcribed by the reporters separately to produce the complete debate. The uncorrected debates are being made available on the web. These are also made available on the LAN within the Secretariat and the electronic texts of these debates are further utilized by the Editorial Service for preparing the final version of the debates for printing. To hasten the process of printing, the Secretariat has started preparing camera-ready-copy (CRC) of the material on a standardized pattern. This has been done with a view to effectively cutting down the time taken to print certain parliamentary papers.

Intranet

The Rajya Sabha intranet consists of all the information available on the Rajya Sabha Home Page and also information regarding the staff, officers and other information relating to the Secretariat. The information common to the intranet and the Web Page are given in the form of static and dynamic pages. Static pages consist of several documents which include publications and other information relating to Rajya Sabha like List of Business, Bulletin Part I and Papers Laid on the Table with date index. Dynamic pages consist of web-enabled outputs from the various client server applications and also debates of Rajya Sabha with free text search facility. Apart from these, the intranet consists of Personnel and Establishment (G) Information System which contains the database of all the personal and service details of the employees of the Secretariat. Office orders, circulars and notifications issued from time to time by the Secretariat are also made available on the intranet for the ready reference of the staff. All the application forms for use of the staff, namely, for loans, leave, etc. are also placed on the intranet for the staff to download as per their requirement.

Internet

In an effort to increase information availability to members and also to public, the Rajya Sabha Website was augmented in 1999. To further promote it the Web Page has also been made available in Hindi from March 2001 onwards. Prior to this, information regarding Rajya Sabha was made available in the Parliament Home Page inaugurated in 1996. Now, with further computerization of the Rajya Sabha Secretariat and installation and operation of various client server softwares, electronic databases have been developed with web-enabled outputs and this information is made available on our two websites, namely, http://parliamentofindia.nic.in which is shared with the Lok Sabha and http://rajyasabha.nic.in the separate bilingual website pertaining exclusively to information relating to Rajya Sabha. Both the internet sites are user-friendly and structured for use by Members of Parliament, Ministries and the general public. It provides up-to-date information about the business before the House and its proceedings including legislative and other business transacted every day. Session-wise Resume of the work done and Session-wise Journals are also available on the internet.

The Rajya Sabha Web Page consists of static and dynamic pages. The Home Page of Rajya Sabha as it appears on internet as well as the list of the online content is placed at Annexure II.

Publications:

The static pages consist of many relevant publications related to procedure and other matters which are being put on the Parliament Home Page making it available to people anywhere in the world. Important publications like the Rules of Procedure and Conduct of Business in the Council of States (Rajya Sabha), Rajya Sabha at Work, Directions by the Chairman, Handbook for Members, etc. have been put in the Rajya Sabha Web Page.

Debates:

The debates of Rajya Sabha are available in two versions on the Web Page, that is, verbatim proceedings and the official report. The verbatim proceedings are placed in the form of hourly debates of the House as static pages in Hyper Text Markup Language (HTML) and are updated on the website daily during session days. The official report consists of the edited debates of Rajya Sabha with free text search

facility. Indices to Debates of Rajya Sabha from 178 Session have been made available on the web facilitating access to information to anyone having a personal computer with Internet connection. A publication titled the Journals of Rajya Sabha has also been made available from 174 Session. Thus, all kinds of information regarding Rajya Sabha which was available earlier in the form of printed material is now available to anyone across the globe through internet.

Sessional Information:

The sessional information relating to list of business, Bulletin Part I, papers laid on the Table, etc. are available as static pages in HTML format with date index. Archives facility regarding previous sessions is also available. Other information relating to the earlier sessions is available in dynamic pages which consist of filtered outputs from client server applications relating to parliamentary questions, Government assurances, Bills, Bulletin Part II, special mentions, etc. Since much of the information is available in databases, it is quite easy to retrieve a comprehensive information on all these aspects.

Notice forms:

Notice forms, which members use to raise matters in the House have been made computer compatible. They are also made available on the Website. At present, the notice forms for starred and unstarred questions, calling attention, special mention, etc. are available in computer compatible format.

Member's Home Page:

A Member's Home Page containing the details about members and their contributions to the House has been developed. The Member's Home Page provides, inter alia, links to their detailed bio-data, questions asked by them in each session, pending assurances, Committee membership, etc. as also information regarding the allocation of funds and their utilization, under the Members of Parliament Local Area Development Scheme (MPLADS).

E-mail:

Wider use of e-mail facility for speedy disposal of information to Members of Parliament is one of the distinguishing features of the adoption of information technology in Rajya Sabha. Each Member of Rajya Sabha has been provided with e-

mail address and parliamentary information is regularly mailed to him/her at that address. In addition to the distribution of printed material to members in the usual way, e-mail is also used to send such material more quickly. The information sent through e-mail is available both in English and Hindi.

Photo Album:

Photo album in the Web Page containing archival photos of Parliament House helps the viewer to identify himself/herself with our history. Pictures of statues, busts and portraits of noted freedom fighters, which adorn the Parliament House and its precincts, have been made available to the world at large. Several panels of mural paintings by noted artistes have been displayed in the corridors of Parliament House. Photographs of these paintings have also been made available on the Rajya Sabha Web Page, thus making a virtual visit to the Parliament House possible at the click of a mouse.

Feedback facility:

The Internet offers new ways of access and can emerge as another forum for public dialogue. The easy access to information and still easier means of interaction which the Internet offers, can go a long way in bridging the gap between the citizen and the Parliament. It can supplement the existing means of communications available while invigorating and enlarging popular participation. With this perspective in view, a feedback facility has been provided on the Rajya Sabha Web Page. It offers another opportunity to the public for interactive deliberations on issues before Parliament. It has the potential to convert the citizens from being passive viewers of parliamentary deliberations to active participants.

Additionally, a list of members with their local and postal addresses along with their e-mail addresses has been made available on the Internet. With ready availability of the e-mail addresses of all the members on the Web Page another critical addition for interaction and communication with the representatives has been provided.

Rajya Sabha Secretariat:

Each category of information put on the web gives at the end, the name and e-mail address of officials who may be contacted for further clarifications. Further, the

officers and Sections of the Rajya Sabha Secretariat with their respective charges and e-mail addresses are also available on the web page for direct sharing of information, quicker contact and effective response. Moreover, in order to meet the research and information needs of the members, a capable work force well adapted to the information technology will be of immense help in helping the members to discharge their duties effectively. Ready availability of internet connectivity goes a long way in this direction.

Additional links:

Further, to use the Internet for research purposes and access information available in the World Wide Web, the Rajya Sabha Web Page provides links to several of the important search engines. Other useful links on the Rajya Sabha Web Page include the websites of newspapers, Election Commission, States and Union Territories, State legislatures, Parliaments of the other countries, International Parliamentary Union and other such bodies.

CD-Rom Library

The new technological changes, in terms of information storage and retrieval, have added newer dimensions to the existing services. It is, therefore, desirable to have an electronic as well as a virtual library in addition to the existing library with its large holdings. The proceedings of the House are being recorded on CD-ROM and copies are being kept in the library for future reference. In pursuance of this aim, a CD-ROM Library with relevant titles for Members of Rajya Sabha has also been set up.

Touch-screen kiosks

Additionally, to provide information to visitors to the Parliament House Complex about parliamentary activities, twelve touch screen information kiosks have been installed at vantage points. These kiosks disseminate information on questions, debates, bulletin, list of business, telephone nos., postal and e-mail addresses, etc. of members. While only Ministers and members can access information through the touch screen computers placed at the Inner Lobby of the Rajya Sabha Chamber and the Lok Sabha Chamber, information can be accessed by all those who visit the Reception Office and the Parliament House Annexe through these kiosks. The touch screen computer kiosks

set up at the Central Hall can be used by the members, accredited journalists having Central Hall entry passes and those entitled to come to the Central Hall.

Conclusion

With the emergence of new technological innovations, it appears that the future is likely to be more interactive than the past. And as we move towards digital convergence, new platforms for the provision of parliamentary information and communication are likely to emerge. Internet has a tremendous potential to become an inclusive medium by bringing people closer together in this network age. Harnessing this new technology in addition to the existing modes of public debate in a parliamentary democracy is likely to enhance the contact between Parliament and citizens and promote the development of a genuine participatory democratic culture.