# M-government in rural India

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## ABSTRACT

M-government, or mobile government, is a prominent research domain ever since the emphasis upon electronic government (e-government). M-government is a burgeoning research area and it needs to be emphasized that in a developing country like India where the rural-urban divide is starkly evident, the role and significance of m-government assumes mega proportions. M-government holds special place in the democratic governance at the rural levels. The present study seeks to underline the opportunities and challenges associated with m-government, especially from a developing country's context wherein interviews are solicited from 10 experts belonging to the public sector across different domains. Findings from the study show that m-government has been able to proliferate across the rural depths over a period of time however the lack of proper infrastructure coupled with the economic divide and the literacy levels of the users leads to serious ramifications on the efficacy of public service delivery via m-government. The study concludes with directions for further research along with practitioner implications.

**Keywords:** M-government, Rural, India

## INTRODUCTION

Mobile government (m-government) is a significant ramification of electronic government (e-government) wherein public service delivery is made via internet and in the case of the former; mobile phones are being tapped for availing public services via SMS (Short Messaging Services), social media or mobile applications (apps) (Trimi & Sheng, 2008). Given that the overarching goal of m-government is to realize economy, efficiency and effectiveness in administration, it is important that the merits of m-government be impressed upon the citizens. Given that the idea behind launching the m-government services is to ensure that the 3 E's of public administration, viz. economy, efficiency and effectiveness, are realized apart from furthering the need to be transparent and promote trust of the citizens, it is important that the quality standards of technological infrastructure supporting the m-government initiatives be well in place. This refers to the speed of internet, provision of complete information, provision of options regarding the services to be availed by the citizens and the provision of grievance handling mechanism at the immediate call of the citizens (Amailef & Lu, 2013). M-government is cheap to use because of its economic usage and cost-affordability and the fact that the mobile devices are portable and easy to use, the citizens are able to tap m-government services much easily.

The present study seeks to present a background of the challenge and opportunities of m-government in a developing country, i.e. India, with a specific focus on the rural areas. To drive home the point, the study delineates itself into providing a brief on the literature on m-government, followed by a brief on the research design. Thereafter, the opportunities and challenges are summarized as culled out from the inferences derived from the opinions of the 10 experts specializing in Information Technology (IT). The tail-end of the research paper is constituted by the limitations, directions for further research and practitioner implications.

### Background

Ever since the waves of transparency in administration have emerged across the global politico-administrative landscape, it has become important that corruption be curbed at all costs and there should be ushered an era where collaboration and participation of the users be encouraged at all levels of government (Sharma & Gupta, 2005). In this light and the fact that the digital government had emerged on the scene with an emphasis upon the need to harness internet for public service delivery, the governments adopted the principles of e-government, i.e., the provision of public services via online modes (Chen, Vogel & Wang, 2016). To extent to the e-government domain came the implementation of m-government, i.e. the usage of mobile phones for the provision of e-government services. M-government goes a long way in bringing the citizens and the government closer to each other and thus, the public officials are brought in direct contact with the citizens (Guo, Chen & Luo, 2022). M-government also facilitates the citizen to citizen interaction because the citizens are able to communicate with one another regarding their grievances and complaints or to seek information regarding m-government services. Since monetary transactions happen via m-government, it is important that the m-government platforms be secure. Thus, while interfacing with m-government, citizens are wary of the fact that their personal and banking details might be compromised while using the insecure networks. Furthermore, it needs to be taken care of that the details transacted be not made available to the third parties thereby infringing upon the privacy of the users.

Academic interest in m-government has been on the rise. There is ample research on the nature, scope, efficacy, challenges and opportunities of m-government (Almarashdeh & Alsmadi, 2017). In the context of India, significant research has been undertaken regarding the benefits and pitfalls of m-government. Given the heterogeneous population of the country and the fact that the socio-demographic profiles of the inhabitants is much varied at every mile, it becomes important for us to understand the reasons behind the proliferation and need for m-government in the country. Obviously, the advantages to be accrued from m-government are the same as those from e-government, however, in a developing country where is digital divide such that there is variation in terms of the IT infrastructure as also the digital literacy among the people, the implications of m-government are different in urban and rural areas. Given the volume of research in m-government in the urban areas, it becomes pertinent to conduct a study on the efficacy, opportunities and challenges of m-government in the rural areas.

### Research context

The guiding research question for the present study is: "What are the efficacies, opportunities and challenges of m-government in rural India?" For the purpose of addressing this research question, it

was deemed advisable to conduct interviews with 10 experts hailing from Information Technology (IT) department of a prominent private university based in India. It was considered to be borne in mind that the selection of interviewees is based on the fact that they have been leading researchers in the m-government research domain with a particular focus on rural India on some or the other facet. Following the methods of snowball and convenience sampling, it was considered appropriate by the researcher that interview protocols be followed and the experts be made well aware of the research objectives and purpose. Prior consent forms were signed by the interviewees and the interviews were held at the place of their convenience- mostly their office chambers were selected for the interview purpose. Furthermore, the dates and time of the interviews were also decided with due accord to the convenience of the interviewees.

**Interviews**

A semi-structured interview format was adopted for the purpose of conducting the interviews with the experts to give them more opportunity of discussing their perspectives regarding the efficacy, opportunities and challenges of m-government in rural India.

Regarding the efficacy of m-government for rural regions of India, it was unanimously agreed upon by all the experts that besides bringing about a revolutionary change in the rural landscape in terms of the adoption of a novel technology by the users, m-government is poised to grow in the coming years. Especially in a democratic country like India where the participation of people in the democratic processes is high, it automatically implies that the participation of people in the administrative innovations launched by the government should also be high. Thus, when the full-fledged m-government initiatives in the form of SMS, mobile apps or mobile portals were launched under the aegis of Digital India campaign launched by the government at the centre under the leadership of Narendra Modi, and it was the impetus of the government to cause the proliferation of m-government in the rural pockets of the country. This became all the more important given that the number of mobile networks and mobile telephony increased over the years in the rural as well as urban areas. Thus, the government bodies stand to gain by tapping the opportunities unleashed by m-government. People would be more adaptive to the use of m-government services in the due course of time. Rural folks are adept in using mobile phones and thus, availing m-government services should not be a problem for them. From the side of the government, there would be more efficacious and expeditious public service delivery.

That, there are several opportunities to result via m-government need not be understated. For instance, it was pointed out by the experts that m-government would result in building trust of the rural citizens in the public administration which would go a long way in strengthening the democracy of the country. M-government services might evolve themselves further with the influx of latest technologies like Artificial Intelligence (AI), Internet of Things (IoT), Metaverse, Blockchain, etc. This integration is important given that the society is progressing from Society 5.0 to Society 6.0 and from Industry 4.0 to Industry 5.0. Thus, such integral frameworks would result in more complications that might require different and state-of-the-art technical solutions. Also, it needs to be borne in mind that in a rural area, these technologies need to be revamped in line with the infrastructural availability and rural competencies and capabilities.

Experts were divided regarding the challenges associated with m-government in the rural India. On the one hand, it was pointed out that, "M-government in rural India will fail eventually because people are not going to be that receptive to the idea of m-government" and on the other hand, it was surmised that, "Notwithstanding the opportunities associated with m-government, it remains to be seen if m-government in the rural India would progress in parallel with the urban India". Conceding that there are challenges linked with the socio-economic profiles of the people, occupational and professional background and the literacy levels of the rural people across time and space, the challenges of m-government are here to stay.

## Conclusion

The study began with the quest to understand the manner in which m-government-an offshoot of e-government- is efficacious and speedy for the public service delivery. Given the fact that the overarching aims of the government are to be digitally advanced amidst a globally diversified and connected economy, it is important that India should be able to adapt itself to the digital innovations unleashed by the government. M-government has been able to realize its objectives to a certain extent in the urban areas to a great extent but the fruits of m-government in the rural India are yet to be realized. For driving home the significance of our research question, interviews were conducted with 10 experts hailing from a premium university's Information Technology (IT) department. M-government seeks to provide ample benefits to the users in rural India and this was one of the main conclusions from the interviews of the experts. The experts also averred that m-government needs to improvise itself to suit itself amidst the changing landscape of technologies and the consequent societal transformation.

The study is limited in its scope given that only an exploratory overview was provided with a backing of interviews of 10 experts. Further studies are warranted to assess the empirical veracity of this study and this might involve a comparison of developed versus developing or rural versus urban areas in a cross-sectional or longitudinal methodological landscape. Future research may appreciate the manner in which the technologies like metaverse, blockchain, IoT, AI might be fruitful for refurbishing the m-government landscape. Finally, using the technology adoption models, it might be fruitful to understand if and how the m-government users are able to accept and adapt themselves for m-government services (Ahmad & Khalid, 2017).

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