ELECTRIC BLUES!

A few months ago, I received a bill from the Delhi Vidyut Board. The bill was for an exorbitant amount of Rs. 6500/-. Since my monthly bill never exceeded Rs. 800-900 there was obviously something wrong. On checking the readings, I realized that the meter reading was faulty. Instead of a final reading of 18220, the meter reader had noted down 19700! I had two options: One was to ignore the bill, hope that in the next cycle, they would themselves rectify the error. Or I could go and try and get the bill corrected. My neighbor, who had taken the first option, found on coming back from a vacation that DVB had disconnected his power and had to spend several days without electricity before they restored his connection. SO I had to choose the second option. Thus began a tale that is in some ways representative of the run around the bureaucracy can send you on.

I had to make eleven, yes eleven trips to the DVB office at Adchini. At various times, the clerk dealing with the matter was not available, or came to office late or the docket which contained my bill information was out or the computer operator was on leave and so on. The long and the short of it is that eleven working mornings, roughly a couple of hours each time I spent getting the error rectified. All this because some careless meter reader had jotted down the wrong reading! I had to get signatures from seven different people, wait outside their offices (while they were busy having tea) and run from desk to desk to get the correct information. You can imagine my relief when I finally managed to get the bill corrected and paid the required amount.

I was not alone in having this harrowing experience. While waiting in the DVB offices, I met tens if not hundreds of people, old women, young executives who were missing office, and mobile totting businessmen all of whom had similar tales to tell. Nor was this experience unique: I have had similar, sometimes more harassing at the Passport office, with MTNL, the Ration Office and the granddaddy of it all, DDA. Any law-abiding citizen, who is not willing to pay a bribe or pull strings, faces similar problems in any interaction with the bureaucracy in this city. Endless visits to the concerned office (on weekdays and not weekends), no one to give you the correct information and a general apathetic attitude of the staff.

All of the above is nothing new; everyone knows this and complains about it. And yet bears it with or without protest. Why am I bringing this up? I am reminded of all this on reading an advertisement in the newspaper brought out by the Delhi Government. The ad seeks suggestions from citizens for "VISION 2003: Cyberstate Delhi". In 36 months, the government wants to make Delhi the number 1 cyberstate, whatever that means. To this end, the Information Technology (IT) task force has invited people's suggestions on how to " promote e-governance, improve civic services using IT, preparing children for the digital age and providing medical and other services using IT".

It seems that all our travails in various govt. offices are about to come to an end. The "cyber wand" will be waved and lo and behold, e-governance will ensure that no one has to spend 12 days getting a bill corrected! Your sewage pipe is clogged or there is no water? No problem. IT will solve the problem for you! There is an onset of gastroenteritis in the slum near your house because of water logging in the monsoon; get IT to solve it for you.

All of this could be ignored as one more hare-brained idea of a young, net savvy bureaucrat who has read about the laurels the cyber savvy (and one may add, media savvy) Chandra Babu Naidu is getting from the glossies. The bureaucrat is probably well meaning too. Just a bit confused. But the issues are important. E-governance, the Net etc. are all the new mantras that are being chanted by all and sundry as a panacea for all the ills. Let us try and put things in a bit of perspective.

The world is more wired and connected today than ever before. The growth of the Internet, though slowing down for the last year or so, is still phenomenal. There are roughly 70 million host

computers in the world. The number of Internet users in the US is now close to a 100 million. E-commerce had a turnover of roughly $45 billion last year but will grow to a ten times that amount in a couple of years. Information technology has certainly revolutionized the way we live, in ways that may not be immediately apparent.

Now let us look at some figures relevant to us: The total number of Internet users in our country of a billion people is roughly 250,000! Compared to this, even China has roughly 2 million which are expected to grow to 6 million this year! Our PC and phone penetration is abysmal. Compared to China which has 10 phones and 1.4 computers per 100 the numbers in our case are 2 phones per 100 people and   . Admittedly, our telecommunication infrastructure has improved considerably in the last decade or so, but still we are way behind what is required.

In a society where access to even simple technologies is so terribly skewed in favor of a few haves, one should be careful of prescribing technology driven solutions without any political content. It is true that technology has an impact on society. But it is important to fold in the socio-economic realities when one recommends technological solutions to deprivation. Some technologies clearly have benefits which transcend to a large extent the economic divide. Availability of cheap, durable plastic footwear has proved to be extremely beneficial to a large section of the population.

With all new technologies, there is a tendency for people to look at it as an antidote for all maladies. There is a significant section of the intelligentsia which is mesmerized with new technology and the latest gizmos in the West. This of course is actively promoted and abetted by the people who stand to benefit from the introduction of the technology in question. In all this hype a genuine assessment of the impact and the value of the technology is lost. Of course, a with everything else in our society, the elite define which technology is "needed" by the country.

A simple example will illustrate this point. When mobile telephony was being introduced in the country, there were all kinds of rosy projections about the spread and use of this phenomenal technology. All the focus of privatization and the telecom revolution was on mobile telephony. What was never realized that more than these gizmos (which may be convenient and useful to a handful of people, as the companies are now finding to their dismay) the potentially revolutionary technology for the country is paging. Introduction of cheap, easy to use paging will go a long way in satisfying a genuine need of a large number of people in the metropolitan sprawls. One can see that the technology is really catching on when the neighborhood plumber and electrician , not to speak of the restaurant delivery boy are all using these small devices. But pagers are not chic while mobiles are!

A fetish for technology is not unique to our times. After all, as someone a long time ago said, Communism is Soviet power Plus Electricity! In the case of information technology the fetishisation is even more dismaying. Here is a technology which can genuinely be used as an enabling technology. But one needs to give a lot of though to what the best possible use of the technology would be. A fine example of technology as an enabling device is the use of computers in railway reservation. What a boon it has proved to be for the ordinary citizen. Or for that matter computerization of records in hospitals or even banks. The enormous power of computers is being used in such cases to facilitate the access to information for use of the public.

Let us now look at what the Delhi Government wants to do. As any citizen of the capital will tell you, there is a breakdown in civic services in the city. Apart form the VIP conclaves of Lutyen's Delhi, everywhere else, elementary civic amenities are missing or are in a terrible shape. The more well to do citizens have done what they always do: created an alternate infrastructure. No municipal water supply has meant digging of deep bore wells. Erratic power has meant thousands of smoke spewing generators. Poor policing has meant a proliferation of security agencies. Those who can, continue to milk the system dry by shamelessly appropriating government provided services, either in the form of 24 hour power of gun totting security

personnel. Others have given up on the state and gone ahead with the privatization of civic services.

The citizens of Delhi, will be very happy to have some governance. Once we have that, we will think about E-governance, whatever that is. Again, we will be satisfied with the availability of elementary civic services which are taken for granted in most metropolitan cities, never mind the IT. Or preparing children for the digital age should come after providing them with reasonable education.

Information technology can be a useful tool for providing good and responsive governance. But for that we first need transparency. Implementation of a Right to Information is the first step towards this goal. Unless the citizens have the legal right to information, it hardly matters to them whether the information is on hard disks or in good old-fashioned paper files. But once we give the people this right, then of course, IT can be if great assistance. If all the information is stored digitally, accessing it and generating meaningful correlation is drastically simplified. A recent example is of the gram panchayat in Bellandur in Karnataka. They have put all the land records and other administrative records on a computer and with one stroke of the keyboard, done away with the power of the local functionaries and in the process also made them more answerable.

Information is truly power. The power that the clerk in the DVB office has over me since he and only he has the docket which contains details of my electricity bill. Without him cooperating, there is precious little I can do. It is this power over information which needs to be attacked. Yes, technology can provide the arsenal. But the decision to attack is ultimately a political one. If the government is serious about providing transparency in governance, then and only then can IT play a major role in facilitating the process.