

Panel A: Access to the Economy: Facilitating Small Business Development

"Bhoomi, State Government of Karnataka, India"

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Who were the disadvantaged in this case?

The population of the state of Karnataka, India is largely rural, with 66% of the state's residents cultivating the countryside. The crucial document for farmers in India is the Record of Rights, Tenancy, and Cultivation (RTC). This document records a wide range of information about agricultural property beyond basic registration and taxation, such as the shape of the land, soil type, land use, and irrigation plans. A valid RTC is required for all land transactions, crop loans, other loans, and concessions linked to the size of the land holding. These records are essential for establishing ownership rights even for obtaining bail in criminal cases. Whenever land is transferred due to inheritance, partition, or sale, the RTC must be altered in a process called mutation. The bureaucracy governing RTCs is a serious obstacle to economic growth for rural residents and landowners in India.

For the past 300 years, changes to RTCs have been carried out manually by Village Accountants. These Accountants do not report to any higher authority, leaving the system open to manipulation by unscrupulous officials in favor of wealthy patrons. Farmers have faced delays in getting copies of records, harassment, and extortion. To improve access for farmers to their own land records, and to speed RTC mutation time, Karnataka began an ambitious reform of the RTC system in the form of the Bhoomi initiative.

What was the innovation, and how did it improve access?

The Bhoomi project began by eliminating the manual recording system entirely and establishing an electronic database in its place. All 20 million of the state's land records have been computerized and are available for alteration or inspection at any time. Farmers, by paying Rs.15, can seek copies of land records from any of the 200 kiosks at the sub-district level, or from the 800 village kiosks. No written request is required in seeking a copy of the record. Mutation by farmers can be completed online, making land transfers transparent and easy for local landowners. Records are available for public scrutiny on the Internet and through touch-screen computers at Bhoomi kiosks, allowing the landowners themselves to scrutinize their documents and dispute any unauthorized changes.

To encourage farmer confidence in the authenticity of the records, Bhoomi's innovators have introduced a fingerprint verification system. Fingerprints are required not only to verify the identity of the landowner, but also to monitor the individuals updating RTCs at every level. By relying on fingerprinting technologies, innovators are working to avoid the danger of password theft to ensure accountability at all levels of the RTC mutation process. By giving farmers direct access to their own RTCs, and by allowing them to initiate their own land transactions, Bhoomi encourages due process and the rule of law in all matters relating to land ownership in Karnataka.

What were the obstacles you encountered?

Establishing computer centers in remote areas was a difficult task, given that data entry operators had to be trained in sufficient numbers to digitize all 20,000,000 land records as efficiently and uniformly as possible. Even more difficult was getting the validation for digitized RTCs from village accountants, given their own vested interests in the previous system. The Revenue Department was responsible for this process, employing civil servants who were also occupied with natural disasters and other civil duties. Their many responsibilities made it difficult to gain priority for Bhoomi's work. A further obstacle to the validation process was the Revenue Department workers' own cynicism about the program and its capacity for change; similar initiatives had come and gone, and government employees were dubious about Bhoomi's potential. Thus, the program was met with indifference, passive non-cooperation, and neglect, all of which the program's authorities had to persevere to overcome while meeting program deadlines.

What were the results of the innovation?

In the old system of manual land records, the entire hierarchy of revenue officials and privileged members of the State benefited from this opaque and archaic system. Land use became subject to bribery, extortion, and government exploitation. The establishment of a transparent records system subject to the wishes of the program's beneficiaries has been an historic achievement.

In 2006, the United Nations granted the UN Public Services Award to Bhoomi. The first Prime Minister's Award for Excellence in Public Administration went to Mr. Rajeev Chawla, Project Officer of the Bhoomi Project. Bhoomi was also given the spotlight at the World Bank Summit on Reducing Poverty held in Shanghai in 2004. Given the program's spectacular success, the Government of India has begun a new scheme for horizontal replication of the project in all of the states of the country.

Rajeev Chawla is a member of the Indian Administrative Services and Commissioner of Settlement Surveys and Land Records for the state of Karnataka. After joining government service in 1987, he designed and implemented India's largest e-governance project, Bhoomi, an initiative for digitizing land records. This project has won numerous international awards,

including the Commonwealth Award and the Tech-Museum Award in 2002, the National e-Governance Award in 2003, and the extremely prestigious United Nations Public Service Award in 2006. Mr. Chawla also received the first Prime Minister's Award for Excellence in Civil Services in 2007, in recognition of his groundbreaking work on the Bhoomi Project. In 2003, Mr. Chawla became the first Secretary for e-Governance for the state of Karnataka, in which capacity he has initiated several ambitious e-governance projects such as the Bangalore-One Project, a one-stop-shop for public service provision, and Nemmadi, a rural telecenter project. Mr. Chawla holds a degree in Electrical Engineering from the Indian Institute of Technology in Kanpur.