



## Subir Gokarn: Trysts with e-governance

Life has become simpler for dogs and drivers, but could be even more so

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Soon after we moved to Mumbai a few years ago, we were informed that our dog needed a licence from the municipal authorities. Not wanting the favourite member of the family deemed an illegal alien, we set out to obtain one. We entered the building with trepidation, born out of years of frustrating and mind-numbing encounters in government offices, expecting to spend much of the day moving from one counter and one queue to another. Not to mention, the dust, grime and stacks of musty files.

We needn't have worried. The customer-facing part of this particular office had clearly been re-done with e-governance in mind. A number of counters all with desktops, a large waiting area and, best of all, hardly any queues greeted us. I reached the counter and requested a dog licence. Instantaneously, a form appeared on the screen - name, father's name, dog's name, etc, etc. When the dog's breed was mentioned - dachshund - a dropdown menu appeared. Standard or miniature? Smooth, wiry or long-haired? I was impressed! Then came the first hurdle. Dog's age? Eight. Months? No, years. Hesitation and a worried look on the other side of the counter. She then asked me to wait and called a huddle with her colleagues. My heart sank.

It didn't take them very long, though. She came back and told me that the system did not allow her to issue a new licence for an eight-year-old dog. She could only renew an existing licence; a new one was issuable only to a dog less than one year old. The empire strikes back! I said that we'd just moved from New Delhi, so I couldn't have got him a Mumbai licence before this in any case. But, apparently, there was no provision for adult dogs re-locating to Mumbai.

I asked how much the licence fee was. She said it was Rs 100 a year. Rs 100?! I offered a solution. Let me pay the back dues - Rs 800 in all and issue me licences for his whole lifespan. She called another huddle and, reassured by her colleagues, agreed to this proposal. In and out in about 20 minutes. Not bad at all! But then came the second twist. Go upstairs and get a signature, I was told. My old fears came rushing back.

I walked up the stairs and with every step, the old stereotype of government offices came more and more into view. I found the room, entered and was directed to a desk that was, predictably, unoccupied. No one else in the room volunteered any information, so I just waited - amidst the dust, grime and musty files. Fortunately, the person returned in a few minutes. He looked at me as though I was something he'd scraped off his shoe, but took the licence and signed it without a word. No perceptible value was added by this process, but it took just another 10 minutes and showed me a look that I've been trying to imitate since.

Back in New Delhi, I had to renew my driving licence, which had been issued in Mumbai. The last time I did this, it took six weeks. The Mumbai licence had to be sent back for a no-objection certificate, on receipt of which the New Delhi authority would issue me a fresh licence. Two trips to the office, each of which lasted a few hours, jumping through a number of hoops, the nightmare government office environment - I had the full experience. This time around, though, I was obviously on a different planet.

There was a new office within walking distance from my home. The public areas of the facility were spacious,

clean and airy, full of promise for efficient transacting. The room that I was directed to was occupied and the person in charge was handling multiple transactions with great efficiency.

Then came the great surprise! He looked at my licence and, in response to my query about how long it would take, said that just the same as any local licence renewal. I asked about the whole six-week procedure and he said that that was no longer in place. There was a national register of licences now and all I had to do was to get a printout of my Mumbai registration. I got that in about five minutes from another counter and then just had to fill out the regular forms for a local renewal. In and out in 15 minutes, plus another visit, based on an appointment made over the phone - they called me - to get photographed and the licence issued. It reached me by mail a week later. Total time spent in the authority office on both visits: 30 minutes. I was ecstatic!

Even then, while going through the process, I felt it could be speeded up further. I had to stand in about four different queues to complete the process. About half the people ahead of me in all of them turned out to be in the wrong queue. Information about each counter's functions are provided, but sketchily and apparently beyond many people's comprehension. The need to visit multiple counters itself is part of a legacy process that detracts from efficiency.

Based on these and a few other transactions, I am hugely appreciative of how much better routine interface with government has become. But there is always room for improvement.

First, do away with needless steps in the process. E-governance systems make many steps and, consequently, people redundant, but we seem to feel the need to keep them occupied in some way. Hence, the traipse up the steps and the scathing look. It took me only 10 minutes, but the queue for his signature could have been a lot longer.

Second, create full-service counters. Enable all counters to carry out all the steps in the process. Specialised counters are a legacy of a manual process and can easily be done away with, saving time and easing confusion.

Third, provide more comprehensible information and better facilitation services. The much-maligned touts who have been barred now, among other things, were also effective information providers. Their disappearance has left a vacuum, both for customers and new employees! It needs to be filled by the system.

And, of course, accommodate the possibility of adult dogs re-locating!

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*The writer is director of research, Brookings India, and former deputy governor, RBI. These views are his own*