US consulate brings e-governance masterminds together in Kolkata

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KOLKATA: The city got a glimpse of the benefits of e-governance on Friday at a seminar organized by the US Consulate General, Kolkata, and Indus Institute of Information Management (IIIM), a non-profit organization set up by the Bengal government with the mission of providing IT education at an affordable cost.

Joanne Joria, American Center director, hosted the event while US Consul General Helen LaFave said the opening words, explaining: "The purpose of this meet is to discuss the objectives, success and issues of e-governance." IIIM secretary Soumyabrato Das elaborated on the objectives and outlined the achievements of the organization. Piyush Gupta, the vice president of National Institute for Smart Government (NISG), gave a powerpoint presentation depicting how e-governance can touch and transform lives across the country. He showed instances of e-governance in Karnataka the 'Bhoomi' scheme where one can get any information related to land in 30 minutes for Rs 15. In Andhra, he described the e-Sagu scheme, which has greatly benefited farmers. "In future, nobody will have to waste time standing in queues," he said.

Ashok Patnaik, former additional chief secretary of Bengal, spoke on the 'Difficulties registered during implementation of smart governance'. Ashok Ranjan Thakur, the vice chancellor of echo India University, delivered a lecture on 'Technology-driven capacity-building in implementing e-governance'. Former inspector-general of police Sandhi Mukherjee spoke on 'E-governance and police'. "The police were one of the earliest to use computers in the city. From 80s onward, we started getting officers with technology background, and that was a great boost. But unfortunately, we are still held by the Police Act of 1861," he said.

Subrata Gupta, the jute commissioner of Bengal, outlined the 'challenges of e-governance.' "There is bound to be more failures than success. But in some cases in Bengal, the failures could have been avoided. When the Motor Vehicles department..."
needed to be upgraded, the state government didn't take it forward. Private players stepped in and as a result, the system is run in Informix in one district, Sybase in another and Oracle in yet another. Then there's duplication of work. In India, Bengal was the first state to computerize the budget system. But the CAG didn't accept the treasury data in digital format, so that bit had to be done manually," he said.

Recounting his days as an undersecretary, he said: "When computers were mulled, the unions feared job losses so they interrupted the process. The transport department didn't want to upset the agents. I had said, then we should all ride rickshaws, one person will be employed for two persons. They accepted the logic, but rejected the proposal."

Professor Manoharan Aroon of Kent State University participated via digital video conference on the success of e-governance in ensuring participatory democracy in the US.