



Re-Engineering Public Service Delivery: Investigating the Role of BSK in Fostering Digital Equity and Administrative Efficiency in Rural West Bengal

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DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20099363>

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Accepted: 21-04-2026

Published: 10-05-2026

Keywords:

Public Service Delivery, Digital Equity, Administrative Efficiency, Social Inclusion, Bangla Sahayata Kendra (BSK), Last-Mile Delivery

ABSTRACT

The architecture of public service delivery in the developing world is undergoing a profound transformation, as rigid Weberian bureaucracies give way to technology-mediated, citizen-centric systems. This paper critically examines the Bangla Sahayata Kendra (BSK) initiative in West Bengal as a paradigmatic case of administrative reengineering that simultaneously pursues efficiency and equity. Drawing on a rich body of secondary data like official government reports, statistical dashboards, policy documents, and scholarly literature and the study traces the journey from a fragmented, department-centric, intermediary-ridden legacy system to a transparent, single-window digital interface. The evidence shows that by December 2023, BSKs had delivered over 130 million services, generated more than ₹400 crore through e-transactions, and by mid-2025 had processed over ₹1,000 crore in e-wallet transactions. Notably, more than 90 % of these services reached rural populations, and 39 % of beneficiaries were women. The initiative's 'mediated access' model, where trained Data Entry Operators assist citizens free of cost has proved instrumental in bridging the persistent digital divide and fostering social inclusion. The paper argues that BSK represents a paradigm shift in inclusive governance, where technology is deployed not as an end in itself but as a catalyst for social justice. The study contributes to the wider public administration discourse by



offering a replicable blueprint for last-mile delivery that reinforces accountability, restores citizen dignity, and ensures that governance genuinely reaches the doorstep of the most marginalised.

Introduction

Around the world, public administration is moving decisively away from the classical Weberian model characterised by rigid hierarchy, rule-bound procedures, and centralised command toward what scholars have termed the New Public Service (NPS). In this emerging framework, the state is no longer a distant, controlling authority but a facilitator that places citizens at the heart of governance, treating them as active participants rather than passive recipients. Nowhere is this shift more urgent than in developing societies like India, where the primary administrative challenge has historically been ‘last-mile delivery’ or the ability of the state to extend its services reliably to citizens in remote, rural, and marginalised locations.

For decades, rural West Bengal epitomised this governance deficit. The administrative machinery was heavily concentrated in block and subdivision towns, far removed from the scattered hamlets that house the majority of the population. For a villager, obtaining a simple caste certificate, a land record, or enrollment in a welfare scheme meant undertaking an arduous journey to a distant block office, losing a full day’s wages, negotiating complex paper-based procedures, and frequently falling prey to touts and intermediaries who exploited information asymmetry for profit. This system was not merely inefficient; it was structurally exclusionary, denying the most vulnerable citizens their statutory entitlements.

The institutionalisation of Bangla Sahayata Kendras (BSK) from 2020 onward marks a watershed intervention in this landscape. Conceived as a network of digital service kiosks located at the Gram Panchayat, block library, and sub-divisional levels, BSKs were designed to fundamentally reengineer the state–citizen interface. By early 2023, 3,561 such centres were operational across the state, with an additional 1,461 sanctioned to cover underserved Gram Panchayat areas. These centres offer a single-window platform for over 260 services drawn from 40 state departments ranging from the issuance of income, caste, and domicile certificates to enrollment in landmark conditional cash transfer schemes such as Lakshmir Bhandar and Kanyashree. Crucially, every service is delivered entirely free of cost to the applicant.



This paper undertakes a macro-level assessment of the BSK model, aiming to understand how it has reengineered public service delivery, bridged the digital divide, and fostered administrative efficiency. The analysis is organised as follows: first, I locate the initiative within key theoretical frameworks; second, I examine the structural flaws of the pre-BSK delivery system; third, I dissect the operational architecture of BSK; fourth, I investigate its contribution to digital equity and social inclusion; fifth, I evaluate its impact on administrative efficiency under the West Bengal Right to Public Services Act; and finally, I assess the broader socio-economic effects, identify persistent challenges, and offer policy recommendations.

Objectives and Methodology

The study is driven by four interconnected objectives:

- To analyse how BSK has transformed the traditional ‘department-centric’ service delivery architecture into a citizen-centric, single-window system.
- To examine the effect of this decentralisation on rural citizens, specifically in terms of reducing the time, cost, and physical distance required to access government schemes.
- To assess the role of BSK’s ‘mediated access’ model where trained Data Entry Operators assist citizens free of cost in bridging the digital divide and ensuring inclusive governance for technology-deprived and marginalised groups.
- To evaluate the contribution of BSK to the time-bound, transparent delivery of public services as mandated by the West Bengal Right to Public Services (WBRTPS) Act, 2013.

Methodologically, the research adopts a qualitative, analytical design grounded exclusively in secondary data. The primary sources include official reports from the Department of Personnel and Administrative Reforms, Government of West Bengal; statistical dashboards published by the BSK portal; legislative documents and policy circulars; journal articles on public administration and e-governance; and authenticated media reports that quote verified government data. The reliance on secondary data means that the study lacks primary field-level validation; however, this limitation is substantially offset by the use of aggregated, officially authenticated statistics that reflect the entire universe of BSK operations.



Theoretical Framework

To understand the magnitude of the BSK innovation, it is essential to anchor the discussion in established administrative theory. First, Fred W. Riggs' (1961) ecological approach to public administration insists that no administrative system can be understood in isolation from its surrounding social, economic, and geographical environment. The rural hinterlands of West Bengal present a highly complex ecology dispersed settlement patterns, varying levels of literacy, deep-seated caste and class hierarchies, monsoon-dependent transport infrastructure, and a significant proportion of the population dependent on subsistence agriculture. In such a context, the classical Weberian bureaucracy with its emphasis on standardised rules, hierarchical authority, and physical presence at centralised offices becomes an impediment rather than a facilitator of welfare. The BSK initiative can be read as an ecological adaptation: it decentralises the state's presence to the Gram Panchayat level, embeds digital interfaces within familiar local institutions, and replaces lone citizens' struggles with a supportive human-digital interaction. This alignment of administrative form with ecological reality is a necessary condition for effective governance.

Second, the New Public Service (NPS) paradigm, articulated by Janet and Robert Denhardt (2015), proposes a fundamental shift in the role of public servants. Instead of 'steering' society through top-down control, public servants should 'serve' citizens, helping them articulate and meet their shared interests. The BSK model operationalises this philosophy in a tangible way. By providing a trained Data Entry Operator (DEO) at every kiosk, the state takes on the burden of navigating the digital bureaucracy, ensuring that the citizen does not need to be digitally literate to claim his or her rights. The DEO translates citizen needs into digital inputs, much as a public servant in the NPS ideal facilitates citizen engagement with governance processes.

Third, the Indian Constitution provides a powerful normative anchor. The Preamble commits the state to securing social, economic, and political justice for all citizens. Articles 38 and 39 of the Directive Principles of State Policy further direct the state to minimise inequalities and ensure that the operation of the economic system does not result in the concentration of wealth. A public service delivery system that imposes disproportionate costs in terms of time, money, and dignity on the poor fundamentally undermines these constitutional mandates. By eliminating physical distance, financial cost, and the need for intermediaries, BSK gives practical effect to the constitutional vision of an accessible welfare state.



Discussion

Before the widespread institutionalisation of digital kiosks, the public service delivery mechanism in rural West Bengal was characterised by a fragmented, ‘department - centric’ architecture. A citizen seeking, for example, an income certificate, a caste certificate, and a land mutation record had to visit three different administrative nodes the Block Development Officer (BDO), the Sub-Divisional Officer (SDO), and the Block Land and Land Reforms Officer (BL&LRO) often located in different towns. This design produced a cascade of constraints.

- a) Geographical and economic barriers were acute: Administrative headquarters are typically located in semi-urban block centres, often 20 to 30 kilometres away from interior villages. For a daily-wage labourer or a smallholder farmer, a single visit to a block office entailed not only the cost of bus fare—often ₹50 to ₹100 or more—but also the loss of a full day’s income, which could be the difference between two meals and one. For many, particularly women and the elderly, this economic calculus made accessing government services prohibitively expensive. The result was a form of structural exclusion: the most marginalised voluntarily dropped out of the system, unable to bear the transaction costs.
- b) Information asymmetry and the middleman culture compounded the problem: Government schemes and procedures, though theoretically public, were communicated through complex, bureaucratic language and paper forms that assumed a level of literacy and administrative familiarity that most rural citizens simply did not possess. Into this information void stepped a thriving ecosystem of intermediaries—locally known as ‘dalals’ or touts who charged exorbitant unofficial fees to fill forms, ‘speed up’ files, and navigate the bureaucracy. These middlemen thrived precisely because the official system was opaque and inaccessible. Citizens paid not for value addition but for basic access.
- c) Red-tapism and opacity were inherent features of a paper-based, multi-desk workflow: A single application file physically moved from clerk to clerk, desk to desk, with no mechanism for the citizen to know where it was stalled. Delays of weeks or months were routine. The lack of tracking mechanisms bred frustration and a profound distrust of the local administration, reinforcing the perception that government was an indifferent, if not hostile, entity.

In this environment, public service delivery was not a right to be claimed but an obstacle course to be navigated. It was precisely to dismantle this crippling legacy that the BSK reengineering was conceived.



The Reengineered Architecture of Bangla Sahayata Kendras

The BSK initiative is not a mere digitisation of existing paper records; it represents a radical redesign of the administrative workflow what public administration scholars term ‘reengineering’. Reengineering involves the fundamental rethinking and redesign of core processes to achieve dramatic improvements in critical performance measures such as cost, quality, service, and speed. The BSK model accomplishes this across several dimensions.

- **A unified single-window system:** At the heart of the BSK model is the consolidation of multiple, department-specific counters into a single point of contact. A citizen can walk into any of the 3,561 active centres and apply for services that previously required separate visits to different offices. The kiosk functions as the digital front-end of the entire state government, drastically simplifying the citizen’s journey. At the back end, the BSK portal is integrated through Application Programming Interfaces (APIs) with the databases of 40 departments Health, Education, Social Welfare, Land, and more, so that a single portal processes applications across the entire service spectrum.
- **Digital workflow through E-District 2.0:** Most statutory services such as income, caste, domicile, and residence certificates are routed through the e - District 2.0 platform. Once a DEO submits an application, it enters a digital pipeline where it is electronically verified by the designated officials, approved online, and ultimately issued as a digitally signed certificate. Physical movement of paper files is eliminated, and every step leaves a digital footprint that is automatically time-stamped.
- **Mediated access: the human-digital interface:** Perhaps the most critical innovation of the BSK design is the provision of a trained Data Entry Operator (DEO) at every kiosk. The architects of the initiative recognised a fundamental truth about digital governance: deploying portals and online forms is meaningless if the intended users cannot navigate them. In rural West Bengal, where digital literacy rates remain low and smartphone penetration uneven, the state could not simply push services online and expect citizens to follow. Instead, it built a human bridge. The DEOs interview applicants, understand their requirements, fill the appropriate digital forms, upload supporting documents, and generate the Application Identification Number (AIN) that enables real-time tracking. The citizen’s lack of digital skills ceases to be a barrier because the state bears the cost of the human intermediary.

By early 2023, 3,561 BSKs were active, and an expansion to 4,000 was underway. Crucially, over 90 % of all BSK services have been delivered in rural areas, confirming that the network



is genuinely penetrating the hinterlands rather than merely reinforcing urban access. The centres are deliberately located in Gram Panchayat offices the most local tier of self-government so that a farmer or a woman in a forest-fringe village has a state service point within walking or cycling distance.

Digital Equity: Bridging the Divide Through Mediated Access

The global digital revolution, while extraordinary in its potential, has created a new axis of inequality: the ‘digital divide’. In India, National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) data indicate that only 24 % of rural households have internet access, compared with 66 % in urban areas. This gap is not merely about infrastructure; it is about affordability, literacy, language, and relevance. Without deliberate intervention, e-governance initiatives risk deepening inequality by creating a two-tier system where the digitally literate sail through while the technology-deprived are further marginalised.

The BSK model confronts this risk head-on by operating as an instrument of digital equity. Digital equity, as defined in contemporary policy discourse, means ensuring that all individuals and communities have the information technology capacity needed for full participation in society, democracy, and the economy. As digital equity specialist Abhas Vyas has argued, bridging rural digital gaps requires “blended financing, inclusive tech designs, and governance frameworks that transform policy into real-world impact,” stressing that demand-side barriers affordability, digital literacy, and social trust are as important as supply-side infrastructure. The BSK framework addresses these demand-side constraints through its strictly free-of-cost mandate and its provision of a supportive human intermediary.

The impact on social inclusion is not merely theoretical; it is quantifiable. Data from official sources show that:

- a) Gender equity: As of early 2023, 39 % of BSK beneficiaries were women. This is a striking figure in a society where women’s mobility, financial independence, and access to public spaces are often constrained by patriarchal norms. The hyper-local presence of BSKs has been particularly instrumental in the uptake of Lakshmir Bhandar a universal basic income scheme for female heads of households and Kanyashree, a conditional cash transfer for adolescent girls to prevent child marriage. Women who previously had to rely on male family members or middlemen to process paperwork can now directly interact with a DEO in a familiar Gram Panchayat setting, often with other women present, thereby reclaiming agency over their entitlements.



- b) Caste-based inclusion: Between 2021 and 2024, approximately 2.5 million Scheduled Caste citizens and 700,000 persons from Other Backward Classes accessed services through BSK. The streamlined, digitised issuance of SC/ST/OBC certificates has profound implications. These certificates are gateways to India's affirmative action system reservations in education, government employment, and legislative bodies. Historically, the bureaucratic hurdles involved in obtaining them meant that many from the most marginalised communities could not claim their constitutional rights. BSK has drastically simplified this pathway, reinforcing substantive equality.
- c) Unorganised sector integration: Schemes like Samajik Suraksha Yojana the social security scheme for unorganised workers require enrollment at the Gram Panchayat level. Agricultural labourers, daily-wage workers, construction workers, and transport workers can now visit a nearby BSK to register for provident fund benefits and health insurance without losing a day's work or paying a middleman. This integration of the informal sector into the formal social security architecture is a critical step toward inclusive development.

By absorbing the technological and financial costs of access, the BSK model ensures that the benefits of the digital revolution are democratised. It converts e-governance from a potential instrument of exclusion into a vehicle for social justice, reinforcing the social contract between the state and its most vulnerable citizens.

Administrative Efficiency and the WBRTPS Act, 2013

Efficiency and accountability are the twin pillars of good governance. In 2013, the Government of West Bengal passed the West Bengal Right to Public Services (WBRTPS) Act, a landmark legislation that designates specific public services and mandates their delivery within stipulated timeframes. If a designated officer fails to provide the service within the prescribed limit, the Act empowers an appellate authority to impose penalties and recommends disciplinary action. A dedicated commission the West Bengal Right to Public Service Commission (WBRPSC) was established to oversee implementation and hear grievances.

However, before the BSK network and its accompanying digital backend were deployed, the enforcement of the WBRTPS Act was severely hampered by the fundamental opacity of a paper-based system. Physical files moved invisibly through layers of bureaucracy, making it nearly impossible to determine where and why a delay had occurred. Citizens could complain, but they had no mechanism to support their grievance with hard evidence of administrative drift.



The integration of BSK with the digital administrative workflow has transformed this scenario by operationalising three critical accountability mechanisms:

- a) **Real-time tracking and transparency:** Every application filed through a BSK is assigned a unique Application Identification Number (AIN). Citizens can use this number to monitor the exact status of their application online or by inquiring at the centre. For the first time, the citizen is equipped with information that was previously the exclusive preserve of the bureaucracy, fundamentally altering the power dynamic.
- b) **Automated accountability:** The e-District digital workflow automatically logs the date and time an application arrives at and leaves each desk. If the processing time for, say, an income certificate exceeds the statutorily mandated 30 days, the system flags the delay to the next higher authority. This digital surveillance creates a powerful disincentive against wilful delay and bureaucratic apathy, because the source of the bottleneck is now transparent and contestable.
- c) **Decongestion of administrative nodes:** By diverting front-desk operations to over 3,500 BSKs, the sheer physical footfall at BDO, SDO, and District Magistrate offices has plummeted. This decongestion liberates senior administrative officers from the tyranny of routine public dealing, allowing them to devote their time and cognitive resources to core functions such as development planning, programme implementation, and grievance redressal. In effect, BSK unbundles the service delivery function from the policy and oversight functions, allowing each to be performed more effectively.

The growing public trust in this accountable framework is reflected in the numbers. By May 2023, BSKs had cumulatively delivered over 100 million services. The total number of e-transactions processed since November 2021 had crossed 85 crore, and footfall had exceeded 5 crore. By July 2025, e-wallet transactions alone through which citizens can pay utility bills, taxes, and fees—crossed the ₹1,000 crore mark. The Chief Minister described this milestone as a reflection of “the growing public trust in the BSKs’ digital platform, highlighting the efficiency and transparency of West Bengal’s digital public service delivery model.”

Socio-Economic Impact of BSK at the Macro Level

The cumulative socio-economic impact of the BSK network is best understood by stepping back from individual anecdotes and examining aggregate patterns.



- a) Economic savings for the rural poor: The elimination of multi-stage travel to block headquarters generates substantial direct savings for rural households. If even a modest ₹100 is saved per visit on transport and lost wages, and if one multiplies that across tens of millions of visits, the aggregate figure runs into hundreds of crores of rupees retained within the rural economy. Simultaneously, the near-eradication of the dalal system—since the state now provides the form-filling and tracking services for free—means that extralegal payments that previously drained household savings are no longer necessary. The ‘zero-cost’ application model thus functions as a powerful indirect fiscal transfer from the state to some of its poorest citizens. The revenue dimension supports this: BSK-facilitated financial transactions generated ₹303 crore in government revenue in 2024, a 79% increase from ₹169 crore in 2023, indicating that the platform is not only saving citizens money but also strengthening the state’s fiscal capacity through formalised, trackable payments.
- b) Dignity and the transformation of citizenship: Equally important, though harder to quantify, is the psychological and political transformation effected by the BSK model. In the old system, the rural citizen was essentially a petitioner before an opaque and often indifferent bureaucracy. He or she stood in long queues, was subject to the moods of clerical staff, and had little recourse when things went wrong.
- c) The BSK experience is qualitatively different: There is a designated, welcoming service point. There is a trained DEO who is there to help, not to obstruct. There is a digital receipt with an AIN, signifying that the application is in the system and can be tracked. The citizen leaves with a tangible sense of being a rights-holder, not a supplicant. This shift—from subject to citizen—is the very essence of democratic deepening.
- d) Geographic equity: The spatial distribution of BSK service uptake reveals that the highest volumes in 2024 were recorded in districts like East Burdwan and East Midnapore—densely populated but historically underserved regions with a high dependence on agriculture and informal labour. This suggests that BSK uptake is strongest precisely where the pre-existing administrative infrastructure was most strained, confirming the model’s equity-enhancing character.

Persistent Challenges and Strategic Policy Recommendations

Despite its multiple successes, the BSK model is not without friction. Several structural challenges demand careful, forward-looking policy responses-



- i. **Technological connectivity and server resilience:** The efficacy of a cloud-based portal is entirely contingent on reliable internet connectivity. In the deeper reaches of West Bengal the Sundarbans delta, the forested western plateaus, and the chars (river islands) internet outages and bandwidth constraints are routine. Server bottlenecks during peak loads, especially during the rollout of massive state-wide campaigns for schemes like Lakshmir Bhandar, have led to system crashes and long turnaround times. Recommendation: The state should invest in scalable cloud architecture and develop offline data-capture modules that sync automatically once connectivity is restored, ensuring continuous service in remote areas.
- ii. **Human resource capacity:** Data Entry Operators, who are the human fulcrum of the model, are increasingly expected to possess knowledge spanning wildly diverse domains: land mutation laws, health insurance protocols, social security eligibility rules, and more. While initial training is provided, the continuous expansion of the service basket makes regular, structured capacity-building essential. Recommendation: Institutionalise a mandatory, tiered training programme for all DEOs, covering not only technical data entry but also soft skills in public dealing, and legal-administrative nuances of the WBRTPS Act. Clear career progression pathways would also improve motivation and reduce attrition.
- iii. **Physical infrastructure and user experience:** Many Gram Panchayat offices lack even basic amenities adequate seating, shade, drinking water, and toilets to accommodate the large crowds that BSKs attract, especially when new schemes are announced. Chaotic queues and uncomfortable waiting conditions undermine the dignity that the model seeks to confer. Recommendation: Roll out a standardised BSK spatial design with covered waiting areas, token-based queuing integrated with SMS alerts, and climate-resilient infrastructure. A push-button feedback system at each centre could further improve accountability.
- iv. **Transitioning toward self-service:** While mediated access is currently a necessity, the ultimate goal of e-governance should be to empower citizens to independently interact with the digital state when they are able. The younger, smartphone-savvy generation in rural areas is already a potential user base for citizen-facing apps. Recommendation: BSKs should double as digital literacy hubs, offering periodic community workshops and encouraging the use of mobile applications like the recently launched 'Ed-BSK' vertical, which provides educational services. Over time, this would reduce the load on physical centres and build long-term digital citizenship.



- v. Financial sustainability: The free-of-cost model requires sustained public expenditure. The 79 % increase in government revenue from BSK-facilitated financial transactions in 2024 suggests a degree of fiscal self-reinforcement, but as the network expands to 4,000+ centres, the operational budget will rise. Recommendation: The government should commission independent annual cost-benefit audits and explore cross-subsidisation opportunities through the expanding e-wallet platform, which already handles a high volume of utility payments.

Conclusion

The Bangla Sahayata Kendra initiative represents more than an efficiency upgrade; it is a profound reimagining of the relationship between the state and its rural citizens. By systematically dismantling the fragmented, opaque, and exclusionary legacy system and replacing it with a decentralised, transparent, and mediated digital single-window, the Government of West Bengal has demonstrated that administrative reengineering can be a vehicle for social justice.

The evidence marshalled in this paper confirms that the BSK model has dramatically reduced the time, cost, and indignity associated with accessing public services; has bridged the enduring digital divide by embedding a human interface within the digital framework; has operationalised the statutory guarantees of the WBRTPS Act through automated tracking and accountability; and has measurably advanced social inclusion, with women, Scheduled Castes, and unorganised workers all registering significant gains.

Challenges of connectivity, capacity, physical infrastructure, and long-term sustainability are real and must be systematically addressed. However, the direction of change is unambiguous. As one state official succinctly put it, the transformation is captured in the image of a person who “used to stand in long queues for paying his electricity bill” now being able to “visit a BSK near his home and clear the bill in five minutes.” That compression of time, cost, and anxiety into a simple, dignified interaction is the quiet revolution of the Bangla Sahayata Kendra. It is a model that shows how, when administrative design is guided by equity rather than mere efficiency, technology becomes what it should be: not a divider, but the most powerful equaliser of our time.



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