

Police Apps and Websites: Issues of Standardisation

In the digital world of ubiquitous online presence of everyone, all the Indian police organisations too have gone online. Police Apps and websites have become a popular platform for Indian Police organisations to disseminate information and connect with the citizens through various online services. They are now an integral part of good governance, community policing and are also very helpful in making the police operations transparent and more accessible to public in various ways. However there are considerable variations in the Apps and websites of various police organisations in India in terms of contents, information and services being offered etc.

The group of officers, constituted by Bureau of Police Research and Development, has studied and deliberated on this issue and has prepared this report. As a part of this study a number of police Apps were studied and all the Indian Police websites were also visited.

Police Apps

Although several States have their police Apps still there are few States and Union Territories, which do not have any official police App. There are police Apps offering crime reporting, traffic updates, matching of stolen vehicles, telephone directory, information about traffic signs, traffic offences and penalties, information about traffic notices and payment, road safety, information about nearest location based on geo location, distress calls related to women safety, tenant/ servant/employee verification, lost/found report, missing person report, etc.

Although there are large number of police Apps for citizens but there are very few mobile Apps related to the internal functioning of the police department

Various states have designed their own Apps based on their own requirements, however from the analysis of all the Apps, that have been developed across the states, it is clearly evident that there are different Apps which are either Government developed or government supported or private ones developed using the logo of the Government, There are also Apps developed at District/division levels and also at the initiative of individual officers levels thereby creating confusion in the minds of public as to which App is official or otherwise. The services offered by these Apps also differ a lot. To end this confusion amongst the public there is a great need of standardization of the Apps. There is also a need to have a uniform countrywide template for Police App, which would have common features to ensure uniformity in the services provided in the platform. Each state is free to customize the Apps as desired, however the App should have certain minimum functionalities and features. The app should be in English with local language support as there is a Unicode platform available thereby reaching to the masses which are non-English speaking. An ideal standardised App should have the following features.

List of features that should be available in standardized Police App

1. Dial 100 in cases of emergency. Informing control room about accidents and other crimes.
2. SOS alerts to be shared with the control room with or without audio & video, along with the GIS coordinates when the aggrieved person is unable to make a call.
3. Locate the nearest Police Station around Citizen with a map showing distance with directions and jurisdictional boundary of the Police Station.
4. Lost and found article report; citizen can report a found/abandoned article along with/without the photograph and can also report a lost article,

wherein a digitally signed certificate will be issued to the citizen which can be used for various legal purposes.

5. Lodging complaint against traffic violators; the citizen can lodge complaint against the traffic violators with a photograph with the date, time and place of violation.
6. Tenant/servant verification; the citizen can get his tenant/servant verification done online.
7. Search stolen vehicles; every citizen should be able to search if any vehicle is stolen based on vehicle number, engine number or chassis number. If this feature is integrated with all India database of stolen vehicles, it would be an added advantage.
8. Register online complaints; this facility is provided to the citizen to register online complaints.
9. Tips for traveling; this facility will brief the public/end users about the state, weather and other aspects about the states, particularly those where a lot of tourists go.
10. Do's & Don'ts; it will caution the public in general about the desirable and the avoidable things preventing the users from engaging in unwanted acts / untoward incident.
11. Track traffic challan and make payments; this will ensure the status of the challan issued and fines to be received/ recovered.
12. Telephone directory of police officials; all numbers of all the Police Officers.
13. Various NOC's can be obtained online, such as Police clearance certificate, rally, sound permission, etc.
14. View FIRs and status of the FIR (only for the complainant).

It is suggested that:-

1. Updated News for press releases should be flashed across all the platforms.
2. Receiving and giving online RTI service can be a feature to be included.
3. Live chat based on the lines of Police Control Room. i.e. Queries about Police procedures.
4. Provision to solicit new ideas, opinions, suggestions and feedback.
5. Creating awareness about citizens' rights.
6. Emphasising proper infrastructure and a failsafe mechanism in case of any contingency should be of utmost importance. E.g. Cyber-attacks, malware attacks, bug issues, ransomware, etc.
7. Timely software updates, audit reports to be carried out with timely updates of telephone numbers, etc.
8. Each App should be monitored for user feedback and proper response should be given.
9. Each App should be audited for cyber security before releasing it to the public. There must be adequate safety mechanisms for the user data.
10. There is a strong need for developing various mobile Apps for internal work flow of Police organisations and making CCTNS also accessible on smart phones so that Police officers are able to perform various functions from field itself.

In the digital world, where more and more citizens are now having access to smart phones and cheap data connectivity it should be our endeavour to deliver as many police services and interaction with citizen's using mobile Apps, as is possible.

Analysis of the apps of various states on iOS and Android platforms has been carried out and the details are enclosed at Annexure – A.

Police Websites

It has been noticed that all the State and union territories police organisations have their websites which hosted on nic.in or gov.in on NIC servers. These police websites offer a platform for a number of services such as lost/found article report, lodging complaint against traffic violators, tenant/servant verification, police clearance certificate, search stolen vehicles, register online complaints, tips for traveling, do's and don'ts, track traffic challan and make payments, telephone directory of all police officials, informing control room about accidents and other crimes, various NOCs, view FIRs and a bundle of photographs in the photo gallery.

Other than individual interactions between the police officer and the citizen, the website and related web-presence of the police department is one key element that defines this communication.

Having a social media/website presence can benefit the police department and community by building a trustworthy relationship and a sense of belongingness by engaging with each other, leveraging police department's reputation with the community, providing a forum for people to ask questions and for the department to share tips which would otherwise not be shared, spread knowledge quickly and with minimal effort that could protect your community, help catch suspects, find missing persons, etc. The effectiveness of the website for any organisation depends on the layout and the contents available. The content and layout define the core essence of what is being sought to be communicated to the public in general.

From the police perspective, the core objective is to gain trust worthy communication link with all the citizens and the police website is one important facet of an overall web/virtual interaction presence.

A static website is only a one way communication. The citizen services should be user friendly so that the citizen can register complaints online at the click of a button, upload informative pictures thereby making the website interactive and user friendly. Special emphasis should be laid on having a senior citizens helpline, children's corner/helpline wherein the children can unhesitatingly ask their queries pertaining to the police department, road signages and traffic related issues. The website should be bilingual, mobile friendly, able to reach to the masses.

The website should have a linkage to the data base of the CCTNS project so that the complainants/applicants are updated about the status of their complaints/applications by means of automatically generated SMS or Email. If possible live chat should also be introduced so that the shy public are able to express their views, lodge complaints, inform about crimes happening and other aspects that need attention from the police. A monitoring mechanism also needs to be in place for the feedback received with an interactive helpdesk for content management, replying to queries. In addition security audit of the website should also be conducted annually or whenever structural changes are made so that the website is hack proof. Every website should have a linkage of the police Apps offered by the department. Linkages may be by means of QR codes wherein the user can scan the QR code which will redirect the user to download the Police App. Overall the website should be an end-user friendly platform.

Assessing the quality of the department by its presence on social media is difficult, however it would surely act as an effective mechanism for police-public communication, which can be used to show and spread the positive intent

of the police departments. It is seen that the design, contents, colour scheme, navigational ability and user friendliness of various police websites differ a lot. There is a need for standardization of basic templates/design of police websites also. The bare minimum ingredients what a website should have are listed below.

List of features that should be available in Police website

1. Locating the nearest Police Station around Citizen with a map showing directions and also knowing the geographical surroundings.
2. Lost/found article report; citizen can report a found/abandoned article along with/without the photograph and also report a lost article. So also a digitally signed certificate should be issued to the citizen which can be used as a legal document.
3. Lodging complaint against traffic violators; the citizen can lodge complaint against the traffic violators with a photograph/video showing the date, time and place of violation.
4. Tenant/servant verification; the citizen can get his tenant/servant verification done online in the form of digitally signed certificate.
5. Search stolen vehicles; every citizen should be able to search if any vehicle is stolen based on vehicle number, engine number or chassis number. If this feature is integrated with all India database of stolen vehicles, it would be an added advantage.
6. Register online complaints; This facility is provided to the citizens to register online complaints.
7. Tips for traveling; This facility will brief the public/end users about the state, weather and other aspects about the states. Tourism destination states can offer citizens various tips during their travel.

8. Do's & Don'ts; It will caution the public in general about the desirable and the avoidable things preventing the users from engaging in unwanted acts / untoward incident.
9. Track traffic challans and make payments; This will ensure the status of the challan issued and fines to be received/ recovered.
10. Telephone directory of police officials; All numbers of all the Police Officers posted in the department, however less stress should be laid on organisational description and more on visitor needs. A citizen typically is visiting the police website to seek services and that should be a priority. Organisational description as well as information of officers who may be dealing with specific jurisdictions or cases continues to be important but its 'footprint' on the main-page could be reduced. Light content-footprint to enable friendly experience for low-screen-size and low-bandwidth devices, thereby enabling the content loading at the fastest speed.
11. Various NOCs can be obtained online, such as Police Clearance Certificate, Rally, Sound permission, etc, in the form of digitally signed pdf document.
12. View FIRs and status of the FIR (only for the complainant).
13. Photo Gallery of the good work done by the police.
14. Children's corner; having road signages, road safety tips, wherein the children are free to login and complain.
15. Senior citizens help line; Through this the senior citizens can contact the control room at ease.
16. Advisory/Creating awareness, one of the easiest ways for law enforcement agencies to prevent crimes of opportunity is by educating the public about the value of privacy in social networking sites. Posting about their vacation, evening plans or new purchases become a potential target for a break-in or theft.
17. Information about police martyrs from the state.

There have been momentous shifts underway towards standardisation of the police websites and effective utilization of the various police software applications throughout the country. Based on specific needs and the requirements, most of the states have devised and brought into use applications with intention to FastTrack the policing procedures that include replying to the day to day queries to providing quick emergency assistance to the citizens in stress. This new approach is embedded within the rule of law and security.

Process of standardizing the police websites along with effective applications is increasingly recognised as being central focus to the successful conduct of police procedures and protocols depending on the way applications are designed.

It causes a greater and deeper scope of providing quick solution to the issues that range from answering day to day queries to providing timely assistance to any citizen in distress. Standardising the sites and introducing new applications dedicated to serve the citizens eases out most of the challenges currently faced by the police department. Implementation of one uniform system throughout the country would lead to a better understanding sharing between the states, bringing about a virtual sense of acceptance to positively modernise our already lacking decade old policing structure which is nothing but obsolete.

Standardising the police websites would help public in navigating the websites and they would know what is expected from a police website.

Objective of using software applications is very realistic approach to improve the functioning of the police force and funds have been allocated for this in the modernization plan accordingly.

ISSUES

As of now no states or union territories is operating their websites on domains such as .com, .in, .co.in, .org, .net, etc. Analysis of the websites of various states has been carried out and the details are enclosed at Annexure – B.

Many of these domain names are used by private entities or are available. A policy decision should be taken to either own all these available domains or leave them. Only a few websites use SSL certificates and most of the websites are on http protocol. Some websites have not been updated frequently. Each state should also have a SOP to deal with a situation in case a website is hacked. Strong back-end support (24x7) for quick interaction, interactive response with automatic replies generated to the public which should also include inbuilt time bound escalation process with immediate manual follow-ups with the citizens for redressal of their complaint.