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Digital India's Excluded Millions

By: Usha Ramanathan

Drawing on field surveys & policy documents, a collection of articles examines how digitalisation has failed India's most vulnerable. Digital delivery is mistaken for actual delivery, the state is withdrawing from basic services, and digitalisation has not delivered what was promised.

These are strange times. The world is going somewhere, and no one knows where. The imagination is getting crowded out by promises of a future in which all problems that humans have been unable to solve are going to be set right by technology. Everything will be more convenient, more efficient, more perfect.

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The frailties of the people will be dealt with by interfacing them with the machine for, human intelligence being wanting, artificial intelligence (AI). Machine learning, general AI, agentic AI and more such fascinations will pull us up by the nape of the neck and deposit us in a place where our thoughts cannot reach.

We are tantalised by every artefact and are drawn into marking our presence in every system for fear of missing out. What we do, what we spend, how we exercise, how we eat, what we have-everything about us is of significance and goes into building up images of who we are and what we deserve. The digital is to reign. So too the creators and controllers of the digital world, but that comes as a much more mixed message-of tech czars and the world's richest, who are uncluttered by regulation and free to experiment with the world and all of humanity as their laboratory.

In these strange times, the real world-in contrast with the digital one-is witness to poverty, joblessness, homelessness, malnourishment, illiteracy, displacement, ill health, everyday violence, prejudice, uncertainty, and precarity. Every natural, man-made, and policy disaster drags the vulnerable down further. Demonetisation, complex taxation systems such as the goods and services tax (GST), pandemics and their effect on education, and the erosion of workers' rights add layer upon layer to vulnerabilities that already exist.

In this strange world, it is not the problem that seeks a solution, but what is offered as a solution that decides how a problem will be defined. In 2009, the Unique Identification (UID) project was marketed as a solution to corruption, leakage, and the wastage of public funds. Every person had to be uniquely identified, de-duplicated, and required to prove to the system that they were not a ghost before they could avail of any assistance from the state.

But the problem of corruption and the siphoning off of huge sums of public money was happening through the unholy nexus of political figures, bureaucrats, and corporate leaders. The names are familiar: Harshad Mehta, Abdul Karim Telgi, Sahara, Satyam. Or Vyapam, where witnesses simply died, one after another-around 40 at one count. This is a shrivelled list of what could fill a volume.

And yet, even as this project was held out as the answer to corruption, when asked what the systemic answer to corruption was, Nandan Nilekani-the project's voice and face-had this to say: "First of all, we need to distinguish retail corruption from wholesale corruption. Retail corruption is the millions of small transactions where people go to get a service and have to pay … for consuming that transaction, right?" Things like getting a pension, rations, or a birth certificate.

"Wholesale corruption, on the other hand, happens at a macro scale. It happens in land, spectrum, or natural resources …. So, wherever the government is at a macro level a buyer, a seller, a regulator"-leading to corruption and crony capitalism. Let us separate the two, he said. "I think the Aadhaar role is really on the retail corruption side. It can't solve the other one, the big stuff."

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Therein lies the explanation for the significant subtitle of this book of essays on digitalisation in India: "The Class Agenda". What has happened in the 15 years when digitalisation was expected to clean up systems, make governments more efficient, make services more inclusive, reduce poverty, and reduce dependence on the state and reduce inequality? Okay, that last was perhaps never said to have been on the agenda, but it should have been. The articles brought together by the Research Unit in Political Economy (RUPE) analyse, through field surveys and policy documents, the experience of those whom the system has so far failed to serve.

The introduction captures what the essays find: that digitalisation is being substituted for government in addressing the basic needs of the people. When services are delivered by digital means, they are deemed to have been delivered-never mind that they may not have reached the intended recipient.

The project converts people into atomised entities, weakening the potential for collective action. With digitalisation, the ground is being prepared for the withdrawal of the state from basic services, to be replaced by corporations using digital means. And once a digital identity is created, when it fails to identify the person, it is the identity that is treated as real-not the person.

A decade ago, these may have been hypothetical concerns. No longer, as the chapters reveal. They bolster what has been appearing in reports and surveys over the past decade, consistently showing that identity, digitisation, digitalisation, and datafication have not delivered what was claimed.

This was already plain with the death of Santoshi, the 11-year-old child who died of hunger in September 2017 after her family was unable to link their UID number to the ration database. As Rajendran Narayanan reports in his chapter, "Automating Exclusion", such deaths had risen to over a hundred within a few years, documented by the Right to Food movement between 2015 and 2019, many of them caused by the hurdles posed by the identity number and biometrics. That starvation deaths occur at all in the digital age is revealing.

The Lok Niti-Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) survey during the 2019 elections, foregrounded in RUPE's chapter on digitalisation and government finances, is staggering. Twenty-eight percent of ration card-holding households said they had been denied foodgrains "due to non-possession/production of an Aadhaar ID or because their Aadhaar biometric details didn't match, or on account of technical or server issues". Thirty-nine percent of households with a monthly income below Rs 2,000 had, at some point, been denied rations due to "Aadhaar problems".

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In Bihar, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, and Uttarakhand-where poverty levels are relatively high-40% of ration card-holding households reported denial of rations. When these regions and questions were revisited between 2019 and 2021, the figures were 36% in Rajasthan, 39% in Chhattisgarh, over 40% in Madhya Pradesh and Jharkhand, and 56% in Bihar.

How does one reconcile this record with the blithe continuation of the use of the UID and biometrics in welfare? Does experience and evidence even matter?

Indira Chakravarthi, writing about the National Digital Health Mission (NDHM), looks for a discernible logic in this massive collection of data and in interoperability-the other phenomenon that is becoming an inevitable ambition of digital systems-and finds none. While the government measures success by the number of people registered on its system, the problems on the ground are of access, continuity of care, and avoiding stigma. Excessive data collection, poor quality data, no clarity on how the data may be useful, and the increased burden of digitisation on an already overburdened system are just some of the problems she sets out.

The ransomware attack on the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) server not only crippled medical services but also compromised the data of over 30 million patients. Yet there is little to suggest that these circumstances have prompted any rethink. As Chakravarthi asks-and more fundamentally still-why does the National Health Authority want to centralise the health data of millions of citizens?

There is the policy tragedy of disaster as opportunity. Demonetisation, already full of pathos and panic, became an opportune moment to push everything digital. Recall Amitabh Kant, Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Niti Aayog, saying "we must understand that this is a huge opportunity for the country to make India a cashless economy. It is a huge opportunity to make India shift towards digital payments. It's a huge opportunity to make India a formal economy. It's a huge opportunity for India to increase its tax base"- and his

list goes on.

In this volume, in a piece written in December 2020, when Covid-19 was looming, Rahul Varman works at making sense of the then current moment of the "onlination" of teaching. With a vocabulary of "online learning", "e-teaching", "edtech", "edutech", "smartphones in the role of teacher", and more, there was a concerted attempt to push education into the digital.

Thomas Friedman, writing about the Massive Open Online Course in 2012 in the New York Times, had been euphoric about the "budding revolution in global online higher education". "Nothing has more potential to lift more people out of poverty," he had written, and it has the "potential to unlock a billion more brains to solve the world's biggest problems". His imagination flowed on-and yet again, as when he was carried away by the idea that the "world was flat", he was wrong. (He is now said to be writing on AI. Oh well.)

On edtech, the Indian experience is somewhat defined by Byju's-and that has been a disaster. Manali Chakraborti and Rahul Varman write scathingly about the "commodification of the very idea of education … being provided by edtech … epitomised by the systematic promotion of byte sized content", and the "global elite (being) excited by the idea that now education can be delivered in sachet sizes, like shampoo or pan masala". Sufficient unto the day for the masses.

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Then there is the fintech industry, cosseted by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) and steered by its desire to enter the credit space through the digital, using AI to scour people's lives through the digital footprints they must leave if they are to be included. There is the smart city, where "smart" denotes "technocracy, not technology". There are the digitisation and digitalisation of agricultural records in a sector where the deep-seated problems are of climate change, farmers' suicides, control over seed, and unremunerative prices-and where technology is offered not as a facility but as a solution.

And there is the World Bank, with its report "What's Cooking: Digital Transformation of the Agrifood System" (2021), which assigns the state the role of creating an "'enabling environment' for private digital technology firms in agriculture" and making accessible "foundational data" while "overcoming issues of privacy and data ownership".

The editors are no techno-sceptics- quite the contrary. "It is not technology as such that causes the various effects we have described." Rather, it is the specific uses made of that technology by those with the power to make decisions, among whom are "digital billionaires" who directly intervene in the shaping of policy, and whose "class agenda in relation to a wide range of sectors is purveyed as unbiased wisdom".

These essays bear the stamp of field research as well as deeply engaged policy analysis. Literature of this nature can act as a trigger for acknowledgment and action-though brute reality and experience so far do not allow for too much optimism.

After all, the project started with untested technology. A hard-won battle for the right to privacy, and the Supreme Court's caution not to let the number creep into every crevice, did nothing to halt the state in its relentless pursuit of making the digital identity ubiquitous. The concept of function creep was discarded even before you could say "function creep", and a punitive regime began to be put in place for anyone who resisted using the number-and the law be damned.

Birth, death, sickness, school, pensions, scholarships, marriage, family, land, house, work, taxes, mutual funds, social security, food, agricultural produce, public interest litigation (PIL) in the courts, bank accounts, cooking gas-the list is unending. APAAR, CoWIN, UHID, NMID, UDID, UChID, DigiYatra, DigiLocker, FASTag, UPID, ULPIN, ABHA ID, PPP (Parivar Pehchan Patra), Jeevan Praman Patra, PMMVY, PMJJBY, PM-Kisan ID, BOCW ID, NSP OTR ID, Poshan Tracker ID, Bal Aadhaar, e-Shram UAN … Acronyms and databases have multiplied. The state claims ownership over all personal data.

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The linking of the UID with the voter ID was enacted into law, challenged, tamed somewhat, and then the Supreme Court generously offered that the UID would be accepted as proof of identity in the making of the electoral list. The Election Commission now gathers

it in heaps, proclaiming to all who can hear that it is no proof of citizenship-which it is not-while millions ejected from the voters' list worry that they will lose food, work, and pensions in a single stroke, the number providing the ease for causing civil death.

Project proponents observed a grim silence on surveillance. Yet farmers protesting the three farm laws-which the government was eventually forced to repeal-were surveilled, facial recognition technology was used against them, and threats were issued that their passports and visas would be cancelled for "causing disturbances". The criminal law has been amended to collect "measurements" of those arrested, including all manner of biometrics and DNA, preserved for 75 years, to be "shared" and "disseminated".

Alongside all this, the lure of AI has turned the world upside down, where workers are deemed best when making themselves redundant.

It is a topsy-turvy world. This volume has landed gently into it.

Usha Ramanathan works on the jurisprudence of law and poverty, and has been writing on and debating issues around technology for over a decade and a half.