

Data divide between state and citizen

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This year's Economic Survey of India focuses also on improving the quality and quantity of data for better and quicker assessment of the state of the economy. For example, The Chapter 11 of the Economic Survey 2022 impresses upon making use of modern technology of satellite imaging and cartographic techniques for tracking development in the country. The Economic Survey throughout emphasizes on the importance of technology-based data collection and its use for tracking development such as the use of high frequency data for the real time monitoring of economy. In fact, The Economist magazine speculated on the end of macroeconomics as internet enabled digital devices, sensors and electronic payments become common place. With the advent technology, there occurred a revolution in data science also. Advancements in the field has been constantly driving down the time lag and cost of data. Working with big data is more convenient nowadays. Economic Survey also gives stress to this fact. Promotion of many information technology based ideas such as digital currency and digital university are the examples of the same. But the Government at the same time overlooks the part of data dissemination to the public.

Being a part of the digital world, we are knowingly or unknowingly sharing our personal data with our service providers. From our biometric information to our mobility, tastes and preferences, everything is being recorded somewhere or other. We voluntarily keep our biometric information in Aadhaar while GPS tracks our mobility via smart devices. So data is everywhere about everything. But who uses the data and which of the data are accessible to whom and for what purposes they are being used are some of the questions we must think of.

The Indian state has been proactively strengthening the data architecture in the name of tackling corruption in the public delivery system, delivering direct benefits to its beneficiaries in swift manner and for removing targeting error. Current regime's aggressive stances in gathering on individual citizens are more than obvious now. Since very inception of the NDA-II regime, scope of Uidai experienced a huge expansion. By insisting on integration of Aadhaar, PAN and bank account government made it impossible for anyone to protect his/her privacy, a fundamental right under the constitution. This came to be known as JAM (Jan Dhan-Aadhaar-Mobile) which can now provide details of every activity of citizens. When citizens questioned such integration of databases in court of law, government resorted to artificial barriers and restrictions in accessing public services for those who are unwilling to share their details. The consolidated JAM architecture acts now as a 'system' which no one can elope. In other words, surveillance state has reached its peak. People who once fought tooth and nail for privacy rights, mutely accepted the status quo. To top it all, there are instances of the presence of spyware like Pegasus in mobile devices of high-profile targets. The spyware can read text messages, access camera and microphone, track calls, indicate locations and detect saved passwords of mobile users.

In summary, our Government is in a position to collect and use all information about its citizens touching all the spheres of their life; social, economic and political. The collection of data becomes less challenging and cheap. Earlier Census and the Sample Surveys and the registers kept by various departments served as the prime sources of information. Currently, that is not the case. Along with the traditional form of information, additional data is seamlessly produced using JAM architecture. In the process of information amassing regarding its citizen the government has done everything at its capacity to make individual citizens accountable to the state. In fact, state gone to the extent of making citizens vulnerable as their fundamental right to privacy can be breached by state on small excuses.

Is Government accountable to its citizen in the same way? Do citizens have access to necessary information to hold state accountable? The recent events of delayed release of many survey data on the part of the Government indicate gradual erosion of the accountability of the state to its people. Effectiveness of announced policies and targets by the government can be judged only through independent statistical wings of the government which are expected to act at arm's length from the government. India's track record in producing such data in quality and quantity is well appreciated by global agencies. However, this is not the case in recent times. Such data were released in a routine manner by statistical

agencies but now the Government is increasingly intervening in everyday functioning of statistical agencies to delay or stop their release for political convenience. For example, the Government so far did not release the data or results of Household Consumption Expenditure Survey conducted during 2017-18 by NSSO. The leaked summary results of the survey suggest some disturbing facts that may not be politically comforting for the current government. Owing to similar concerns data of first Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) was released only after general elections were held between April-May 2019. However, major patterns from this data were leaked out in January 2019.

Another depiction of the absence of quality data for the evaluation of a policy initiative is the delay in release of 'Drinking Water, Sanitation, Hygiene and Housing Condition' survey data conducted during 2018. Prime minister declared India 'Open Defecation-Free' in October 2019 and the data was released in November 2019. It was entirely possible to use the independent survey to cross examine how many toilets are actually functional and how individuals actually have been using the toilets on a regular basis provided that data from survey was released on time. However, government on the basis of administrative data on expenditure on toilet constructions justified PM's declaration. Information gap for citizens is huge in the area of migration as well. While JAM architecture allows government to map the location of individuals at every moment, researchers and civil society in general cannot use that information ascertain the level and prevalence of migration across regions within the country. The latest NSS survey on migration is old as 2007-08. The urban rich woke up of sheer scale at which people migrate in this country at the onset of lockdown when mass of migrants workers were pushed out of the sweatshops. There has been no initiative, so far, the by the government to generate and share a data set to assess the differentiated impact of pandemic on lives and livelihoods of people belonging to different socio-economic and demographic groups. The indifference of state towards the bottom half of the population is not difficult to gauge when one sees no effort by the government assess the incidence poverty, deprivation and impact of devastating pandemic.

The divergent trends in accountability of citizens towards the state and vice versa is quite stark in India. Indian state marched fast towards a surveillance state which only collects data but not distributing them. In fact, the agencies of the Government such as NSS are actively engaged in data collection that is critical for assessing socio-economic and demographic changes in the country. It is ironic that latest data available on poverty level is a decade old, that is 2011-12.

Therefore, the government purposefully muting researchers and active citizens by restricting access to routine data sets that are expected to be made available by the statistical agencies. This data divide between the state and its citizen is a potential threat to smooth functioning of democracy. While Government has significantly expanded its scope as the custodian of data, it is increasingly limit the scope of access to it by the responsible citizens and stake holders. This results in an intentional data gap between the Government and its people. Without bridging this data gap the scope of modern technology for tracking development will remain futile.

References

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