Data and the Indian state

A set of essays examines the interaction between the expansion of the digital economy and India's socio–political framework

CHINTAN GIRISH MODI

Why has the digital economy in India been steadily expanding for the past decade? How did data become so pervasive and powerful? What is the impact of emerging infrastructures on identities and relationships, financial transactions, ways of remembering? When did governance come to be synonymous with surveillance? Where does one situate the ethical ambiguities around data mining as a mode of knowledge production? These urgent questions animate the pages of Sandeep Mertia's edited volume *Lives of Data: Essays on Computational Cultures from India*.

This book would appeal to readers interested in database design, online archives, digital payments and artificial intelligence. In the introduction, Mertia writes, "Data is never produced in silos. Life of any kind of data is shaped by actual and potential relations with other existing data, classifications, paper and digital infrastructure, statistical techniques, data collection and cleaning practices, and possibilities of circulation. Such a life of data is not entirely new and derives from the emergence of modern states and statistics over the past two centuries."

Published by the Amsterdam-based Institute of Network Cultures, this book has emerged from the "Lives of Data" research project of the Sarai programme at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies in Delhi. It is an engaging compilation of 14 essays that strike a balance between academic scholarship and practice-based research on digital cultures in India. Mertia, an engineer-turned-anthropologist who used to work with

Sarai, is a PhD candidate at the Department of Media, Culture, and Communication at New York University.

The book begins with a crisp foreword by Ravi Sundaram, mapping the intellectual curiosities and political concerns developed further by the essayists. Noting that "it is now almost 25 years since the internet arrived in its early avatar in India in the mid-1990s", he sets the stage for cross-disciplinary conversations around data "in the context of authoritarian politics, socio-economic crisis, and pandemic melancholia". This framing invites the participation of not only data scientists and policy-makers but also activists, historians and media theorists.

As readers explore the five thematic sections of this book — Histories, Forms, Political Designs, Practices, and Fields — it is crucial to stay aware of the irony Mertia points out in his introduction: "India has the world's largest number of software engineers, fastest growing mobile internet user base and market, and nation-wide government programmes for building a 'Digital India', 'Startup India', and one hundred 'Smart Cities'. And yet it has highly fragmented infrastructural conditions of technological access, and nearly half of the population still does not have broadband internet access."

Mertia's essay, "Did Mahalanobis Dream of Androids?", serves a reminder that the enthusiasm about data governance has historical antecedents that beg to be studied. It examines the history of computing in India under Prasanta Chandra Mahalanobis, who founded the Indian Statistical Institute and the National Sample Survey. He writes, "Mahalanobis is widely cred-

ited to be one of the first visionaries to realize the value of electronic computers for large-scale data processing for national planning."

The use of statistical data to secure national interest comes up again in Anirudh Raghavan's essay titled "The Work of Waiting: Syndromic Surveillance and the Paradox of Immediacy," which is concerned with public health, disease management and epidemic intelligence. It is extremely topical since India has just rolled out one of the biggest inoculation drives in the world. He looks at how "the management of epidemics in a population is as much a problem of containing infection as it is of modulating the flow of information about the disease-event".

Aadhaar critics would enjoy reading Ranjit Singh's "Study the Imbrication: A Methodological Maxim to Follow the Multiple Lives of Data" and Anumeha Yadav's "Reporting the World's Largest Biometric Project". The former explores who is counted, how and why they are counted, and what happens to those who aren't. The latter exposes how a scheme designed to ensure doorstep delivery of services has been hampered by authentication failures, poor internet connectivity, logistical difficulties, and lack of redress mechanisms.
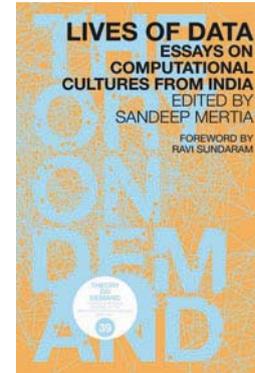
Preeti Mudaliar's "Broken Data: Repairs in the Production of Biometric Bodies" is perhaps the most heartbreaking essay in this volume as it shows how data regimes can dehumanise people. She writes, "The insistence on biometric authentication as the sole authenticating factor for food supplies can render beneficiar-

ies 'infrastructural orphans' when confronted with failure." The hazy fingerprints of manual labourers, mainly the elderly, are blatantly rejected because their fingers are "callused, hardened, and cut up" due to the nature of their work.

Lilly Irani hits the nail on the head in "Hackathons: Labour, Politics, and the Organization of Public Passions" when she writes, "The temples of modern India… have shifted in scale, from dams produced by the technocratic state to apps produced by technocratic entrepreneurs. The civil engineer has given way to the computer engineer and designer as an ideal citizen." She demonstrates how government agencies have caught on to the idea of hackathons from open source communities in order to recruit volunteer labour, foster collaborations, and inspire civic engagement.

The range of topics covered in this book is remarkable. Guneet Narula's "Collecting Open Data: Data Practices, Tools, Limitations, and Politics" is an indictment of the development sector that collects massive amounts of data for monitoring and evaluation but is cagey about sharing actual datasets. Aakash Solanki's essay, "Untidy Data: Spreadsheet Practices in the Indian Bureaucracy", takes stock of the challenges that face information systems that are neither wholly digitised nor completely paper-based. The burning question here is whether people on the ground are aware of the reasons behind data collection, and how this data is eventually used.

The book is not a page-turner. It demands the labour of contemplation and multiple readings. The gem in this collection is Noopur Raval's essay "*Hisaab Kitaab* in Big Data: Finding Relief from Calculative Logics", which analyses the handwritten account books maintained by cab drivers who use ridesharing apps. They prefer to "annotate time spent at work" on their own terms, and relate to data beyond the language of earnings, trips and incentives offered by ridesharing firms. That is when data becomes comprehensible, manageable and personal.

> Mertia's essay, "Did Mahalanobis Dream of Androids?", serves a reminder that the enthusiasm about data governance has antecedents that beg to be studied

LIVES OF DATA: ESSAYS ON COMPUTATIONAL CULTURES FROM INDIA

Editor: Sandeep Mertia

Publisher: Institute of Network Cultures

Price: $12.98

Pages: 160