Conclusion | The Technosocial Subject and new conditions of Governance

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The Technosocial Subject has been at the central focus of this dissertation. An attempt has been made to move away from the cyborg discourse that thinks of human-technology in isolated lab-like conditions. The chapters have discussed the Technosocial as a condition, a lens, a paradigm through which spaces, bodies and the digital cyberspaces can be studied. The Technosocial has been constructed as an embedded, contextualised framework that needs to be understood both as constituting and constituted by everyday cultural practices of the Internets. It has been the ambition of this dissertation to demonstrate how, examining digital objects and phenomena at the conjunction of law, technology and cultural production leads to an unpacking of the contemporary globalised forms of technology mediated subjectivities.

The different chapters have tried to complicate the universalist frameworks that have remained persistent in Cyberculture and showed how historical, social and cultural trajectories need to be recognised in the otherwise flattened accounts of digital phenomena. Chapter 4 in particular, was an attempt to look at the role that law, regulation, policy, and development agenda have played in shaping our engagement with the Technosocial. In the building of this framework, I have examined the construction of the physical cities that we occupy and the material bodies that we inhabit, to see how these ideas have been complicated for us with the emergence of Cyberculture theory and practice. In mapping the transitions of emerging technosocial spaces and bodies, the State has remained a strong presence but not yet analysed in this dissertation.

In this conclusion, I want to look at how, the production of a technosocial subject is not against the backdrop of a monolithic un-changing State and its governance apparatus. While
it is not in the scope of this dissertation to go into conceptualising a Technosocial State, I want to signal how, the State’s own technoscience imagination of itself has changed with the rise of ICTs and that the framework of technosociality can be extended to also look at the mechanics and politics of changing nature of governance in India. I want to signal these changes in the Technosocial State through two case-studies and suggest that further research in these directions will be fruitful to looking at larger processes of the Technosocial.

1. TECHNOSOCIAL STATE AND CONDITIONS OF GOVERNANCE

Ashish Rajadhyaksha (2011), in his landmark monograph on the Cultural Last Mile as a problem of Indian governance and technology, suggests that ‘India has had a long history of governmental techno-utopia – where technology has been presented as somehow clean, as everything that the state, in its messiness, is not – where, somehow, leaving it to technology instead of to mere human beings would make it faster, easier, more accessible and less corruptible.’ (39). He maps a long history of significant moments where different technologies have been invoked as ‘impartial, balanced, pluralistic, diverse, equally accessible, efficient and incorruptible’ (39) and thus able to assist the government in a seamless implementation of its governance in the country.

Drawing from Balaji Parthasarathy et al’s (2005) comprehensive study of e-governance initiatives in the early 2000s, Rajadhyaksha emphasises that ‘the cultural difficult of translating such symbolic attributes [like transparency and accountability] into functioning systems crippled several major initiatives, precisely because [of] their absolute belief in the capacity to attribute abstract democratic values into the technology itself.’ (40). Rajadhyaksha looks at other instances of techno-utopianism in the history of State Technoscience – the telegraph, the radio terrestrial or satellite television, the atomic
programme etc. – and proposes that technology has also been central to theories of governance in India. With the emergence of Information technologies, Rajadhyaksha suggests, there is a signal

change in the character of the State: namely, the very different role that technology – more precisely information technology – now plays within both the function of the State and the market...no good neoliberal would today call for State rollback...but would rather call for a radically different nature of State intervention...(and) one critical way this shift can be characterized is through shifting the very terms of political science, in their relationship to technology.’ (Rajadhyaksha, 2011, 45)

Rajadhyaksha looks at the Government of India’s formation of the Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI) as embodying this foundational change between the State and the citizen in contemporary India. The UIDAI initiative sought to issue unique identification number to Indian residents that would be robust enough to eliminate duplicate and fake identities and which can also provide identity authentication in an easy, cost-effective way. Rajadhyaksha argues that while, through its several iterations, these remain the two specific claims of the UIDAI, ‘as the potential for usage of this service is diversified, and coupled to a growing number of Government of India’s Centrally Sponsored Schemes (CSS), these claims have been refracted through several further claims on what such an initiative can do for India’ (166).

In its founding working paper ‘Creating a Unique Identity Number for Every Resident in India’, the UIDAI claimed that it envisioned itself as providing a UID Aadhaar number without any intelligence which would provide a ‘yes-no’ authentication without any
possibility of fraud and theft. The Aadhar number would only collect basic information on
the resident for its functioning, but might facilitate other registrars in collecting more
significant information on the enrollee in the system. As Rajadhyaksha notes,

In setting up this architecture, the UIDAI claims to have drawn major lessons from
previous State experiments in providing a clear identity to residents, starting with the
1993 effort of the Election Commission to provide voter IDs, the Multipurpose
National Identity Card (MNIC) approved in 2003, and PAN and EPIC (Electoral
Photo Identity Card)...Three of its key claims, that it is not a citizenship record,
second, that submission of personal data would be voluntary and not coercive,
and lastly that it would directly facilitate major public distribution welfare systems
derive from its avowed distance from previous schemes. (Rajadhyaksha 2011, 168).

The UID programme, thus, clearly demarcates itself from earlier modes of State-thinking as
can be found in the NATGRID, that, in the words of Home Minister P. Chidambaram, was
supposed to include '21 sets of databases...to achieve quick seamless and secure access to
desired information for intelligence and enforcement agencies’. The NATGRID was
supposed to include a series of surveillance apparatus databases such as the DNA data bank,
Crime and Criminal Tracking Network and Systems (CCTNS) and a National Counter
Terrorism Centre, which would produce a devastatingly frightening surveillance society.

The UID, in its quest for identifying residents, and not citizens, also veers clear from the
National Population Register (NPR), the official census body of the State. Rajadhyaksha
claims that there is a very clear divide between the intentions and the designs of the NPR and
the UIDAI, although the NPR seems to be riding on the UIDAI to get its work done (171). He
marks the distinction of the UID from earlier identity schemes, when he writes,
It has become increasingly evident that on its own, unlike purpose-driven identity definitions, whether these are social security numbers, voting registrations or driving licenses which became only secondarily a proof of identity, the UID has no primary purpose other than establishment of such identity, if it was indeed an identity. (Rajadhyaksha 2011, 171)

The UID thus becomes a facilitator, an empty receptacle which can be modified and used by different actors for their own purposes. Since the UID’s avowed claim is to be in the business of producing identity which can be used for numerous purposes, the chimera like nature, the explosion of definitional responsibilities, and varied uses by the both the State and the market is something that the UIDAI has willingly taken on. Simultaneously, as Rajadhyaksha notes, ‘it has also clearly asserted that it would not itself be directly responsible for such uses, since these were autonomous domains of functioning.’ (172)

Usha Ramanathan (2010), a legal scholar and historian who has been one of the most strident critiques of the UIDAI argues that the project is a gross and fundamental violation of privacy and dignity. She clubs it together with the NATGRID and how it alters the characterization of citizens and residents. Rajadhyaksha reads Ramanthan as suggesting that in this changing relationship with the state, ‘all citizens are seen as a priori terrorists who are presumed guilty and need to establish their innocence and this is incompatible with our democracy’ (179). In her essay ‘A State of Surveillance, Ramanathan argues, that this is a new moment for the Indian State where the politics of suspicion, ‘dramatically erodes the ideas of citizenship, privacy, and minimum-invasion-and-that-when-there-is-reason-why’ as the state becomes ‘pre-emptively readied to catch whoever of the 1.4 billion may commit the act of terror’ (1). Ramnathan summarily dismisses the UID’s claim that enrolment will be voluntary, that it is pro-poor, and that only basic information will be gathered. She passionately writes,
Scratch the surface of these assertions, and a different truth emerges. The creation of the National Population Register, with its element of compulsion, is one aspect of this exercise in creating the UID database. And there is one fact about the UID that is incontrovertible; that it provides easy route for the market and the security agencies to identify and profile any person. That is how the UID fits into the larger scheme of monitoring and control, and that, as the current discourse reveals, will be its central purpose. (Ramanathan 2010, 1).

Whether or not Ramanathan’s critique of the UIDAI’s intentions is valid or not, belongs to a different set of debates. However, there is no denying the fact that Ramanathan, like Rajadhyaksha, is pointing to a significant transition in the State-citizen relationships in India, catalysed by the emergence of digital technologies. This transition is from being a Welfare State into what Ramanathan calls a ‘Surveillance State’.

Sahana Basavapatna (2010), in her well detailed essay, also marks a similar but different transition¹. For Basavapatna, the transition is in the State’s recognition of resident non-citizens as constituting its subjects. The essay charts anxieties around what would happen to these resident non-citizens and who are the various people who occupy these positions, ranging from foreign travellers to asylum seekers; from the homeless to the dislocated who would be subjected to the surveillance of the State without accruing any of the benefits that the system is supposed to offer, because these benefits are clearly linked with benefits afforded to the citizens only. The State’s interest in exercising its power over these people who were not always at the centre of its other endeavours like the National Population

¹ The digital copy of this text available at http://www.merg.ac.in/Development/draft_Symposium/Sahana.pdf requests that this text not be quoted in any manner, and hence I am only summarizing her position rather than citing from the text.
Register data collection, gives us a new insight into the changing nature of State governance in the country in the face of rapid digitisation.

Ajay Kumar and David Zhang (2010), in their edited anthology on *Ethics and Politics of Biometrics*, locate the UID and its biometry driven database creation in a larger transition in State’s practices to accommodate for new forms of technology based labour and lifestyle identities which are arising in India. They write,

> Expanding cyber security threats, evolution of cyber terrorism, requirements for speedier trial of, increasing awareness of security of personal data gathered by organizations, data protection requirements of Indian IT/BPO companies serving global clients and increased security requirements for expanding e-governance and e-commerce demand a national level security ecosystem. (Kumar and Zhang 2010, 144).

This national digital ecosystem covers a wide range of fields within which structures like the UIDAI are producing systemic changes. While their primary interest might be the ‘business of identity’, there are efforts to link various public sector services like banking and micro-finances, identity and authentication, privacy and security, health-care and biometrics that the Aadhaar project signals in the country. As the ‘Study Report on Assessment of Mode e-districts’ also mentions, ‘under [the] National e-Governance Plan (NeGP) initiated b Department of Information Technology (DIT), Government of India...[e-governance] proposes to adopt an integrated approach for delivery of citizen services...through automation of backend, workflow based on process redesign and data digitization across participating departments’ (DIT, 3). The very vocabulary of State’s imagination of itself and how it is to engage with the technosocial subjects has changed. The UIDAI’s Aadhaar project is a part of
a much larger set of transitions that the Indian State is going through in its attempts to become a Technosocial State, thus producing new conditions of governance.

2. TRANSACTION OF THE TECHNOSOCIAL STATE

As Bhuwaneshwari Raman and Zainab Bawa (2010) show in their analysis of ground realities of the Citizen Service Centres in India, ‘embedded nature’ of these technologies need to be further interrogated to see what are the systemic changes that are emerging within the State structures as on the material practices of governance. They quote policy researchers Robin Williams and David Edge, to talk about how the rise and emergence of digital technologies change the landscape of governance and governmentality in emerging contexts like India:

[T]echnology does not develop according to an inner technical logic but is instead a social product, patterned by the conditions of its creation and use. Every stage in the generation and implementation of new technologies involves a set of choices between different technical options. Alongside narrowly technical considerations, a range of social factors affect which options are selected, thus influencing the content of technologies and their social implications. (Williams and Edge 1996, 2 in Raman and Bawa 2010, 6).

They argue that technological interventions ‘reconfigure existing power relations and social structures’ which affect both the ‘bureaucratic rationality for introducing ICTs in government processes’ as well as ‘the ability of different groups in society...to respond to the claims of different groups of citizens’ (7). By looking at ‘anthropological perspectives on everyday politics, everyday state and embedded relations’ (8), they examine the role of technology in shaping agency and social relations in the face of a State that is quickly changing in its structure (11). It is evident that the introduction of an ICT interface between the state and
citizens would lead to claims of efficiency, transparency and accountability being made on both sides. However, Raman and Bawa suggest that this formulation hides the ‘technological determinism, where technology is assumed to be an artefact outside the influence of human agency or the context in which it is embedded and whose influence can be predetermined’ (17).

Their research resonates with the central idea posited in this conclusion – that while the Technosocial subject is necessary to be unpacked and studied, it is equally important to look at a Technosocial State and how it is constructed with engagement with technology. Just like in the case of the technosocial subject, the technosocial state also needs to be examined beyond tropes of access, infrastructure building and development agenda. There is a new layer of governance, which is new in form, structure, implementation and imagination that is being structured by the embeddedness of digital technologies in policy, regulation and state departments. Raman and Bawa identify, for example, the emergence of a ‘screen bureaucracy’ that emerges as an evolution of the system bureaucracy which has been a part of India’s governmental functioning (18). They write,

[w]hen technology gets embedded within existing processes and systems and in the process additional layers of bureaucracy is created which citizens have to navigate and negotiate before they can receive services and interact with their governments...[t]he introduction of information technologies in a fraught and contested context adds more layers which...citizens have to navigate before they can actually attain the welfare services. (Raman and Bawa 2010, 19-20)

Empirical work like this that concentrates on the material practices of state policies and grass-root transactions enabled by the State’s engagement with digital and internet technologies, open up existing theories of State governance to new articulations and practices.