

# Problematizing Technology In The Pandemic

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by Astha Kapoor, Dr. Sarayu Natarajan

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Five months into the snowballing pandemic in India, we face the omnipresent health crisis, a crumbling economy; personal financial forfeiture and a massive global slowdown. The focus of Government spending is on public health, with resources required to jumpstart economic activities being limited, and social distancing and lockdowns slowing down economic growth.

What we experience today is the deep digitisation of work, the state and our personal lives, built on the extraction and commodification of our personal data. Though we have seen the architectures for this digital transition being laid down over the last couple of decades, the current crisis will inevitably change justice, innovation and freedom and their interface with digital technologies forever.

The time is ripe to ponder the responsibility of the state and the potential of technology, in view of public welfare, individual rights and liberties. The decisions we make now will reframe our world for years to come, and it is imperative we ask the right questions. How do we ensure citizen rights and constitutionalism in an era of the digital state? In a world witnessing increasing informalisation of work and more participation on the platform economy, in what way must we shape labour and industrial relations to empower, support and enable workers in the platform economy to seek better lives? Is there a new social contract for data?

## Governance and Citizenship

The level of state dependence on technology seems reasonable given that technology offers innumerable possibilities to address the pandemic. The trajectory of technology is unsurprising in India, which has already been increasingly deploying technology for aspects of state function

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such as digitised welfare, platforms enabling access to municipal services, citizen to state reach etc.

However, the term 'digitising state' obscures the underlying retreat of the state. One must therefore look at the implications of COVID in the time of a retreating state that is also digitising. Technology, while valuable in supporting state function, raises a set of attendant concerns relating to justice, role of state, marginalities in access and the affordances of technology. Technology in the state-people relationship may mean that the state sees only the people and problems that technology allows it to see, excluding those people that are on the wrong side of the digital divide (women, backward communities, sexual minorities).

Recognising the broader constitutional frame, in view of fundamental rights and accountability, the deployment of technology in the people-state relationship must include more thought and debate, both in terms of claim-making and civic activism, and in the state reaching its people.

#### Futures of Workers

The nature of work has transformed – widespread remote work, automation of tasks, innovations for last mile delivery infrastructure have become ubiquitous. In the COVID 19 scenario, these trends intersect with existing conditions, to exacerbate harms and concerns.

Tech-workers have been impacted by the drop in demand for e-commerce, food delivery workers are on the frontlines of the health crisis, with high risks of exposure, and there is reduced demand for services like ride shares and personal services. Additionally, delivery workers, particularly those engaged in essential services are being recast as 'public infrastructure'. Whereas platform tech work allows flexibility, research shows that the aspirational 'entrepreneur' tag applied to platform workers obscures significant hardships – such as that workers being surveilled in their work via the very technology that enables their work; while receiving little protection against income and market volatility. This experience is also significantly gendered - though women benefit from flexibility due to care giving expectations at home, they also are at raised risk for sexual harassment.

The distress faced by large numbers of migrants is shocking. While the overlaps between migrants in anguish and platform tech workers are less understood, the demographic force of migration and platform work are deeply interrelated, raising with it questions and vulnerabilities around welfare interoperability.

In the long term, there needs to be a rethink of platforms' relationships with workers. This includes better negotiation of more humane terms, regulations that treat platform workers as employees and critical to their businesses, and forms of collective bargaining to enhance negotiating abilities of tech workers. This push towards a recognition of the fundamental power differentials between those who provide work and those who enable it is a necessary trajectory in this sector in any case, but must be prioritised.

#### Data Economy

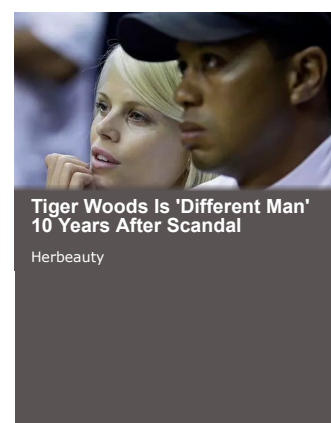
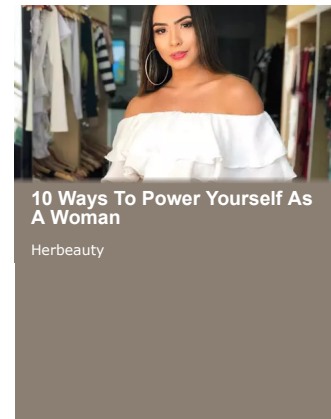
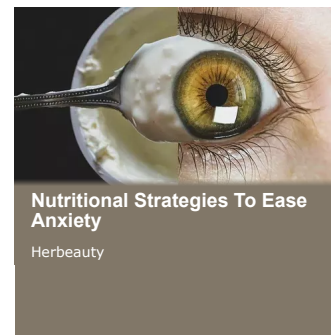
Nothing is off the table as Governments hasten to institutionalise new methods of surveillance to track the spread of COVID 19 - contact tracing, facial recognition, etc. have paved the way for a new trend "COVTECH". The unbridled growth of technology over the past decade has made it easier for these developments, especially the increased commodification of personal data. While this response seems valid and important, it also reveals more alarming possibilities for surveillance over time, along with its expansion and normalisation. This immediate surveillance is only a manifestation of an overall encroachment of privacy rights and individual liberties, which are diminished in the interest of the community or collective. This state overreach is difficult to problematize because it has been accepted by the broader public, which may be willing to compromise personal data and related rights for community well-being. The seemingly pragmatic agreements and infrastructures built for surveillance right now are likely to outlast the pandemic and therefore it is important to create checks and balances to the state's power over personal data immediately.

There is a need to build resilience which can only be done through rights-based thinking at this critical juncture. This means robust legislation and policies that offer social protection and comply with constitutional principles and judicial pronouncements in incursions upon data rights, while simultaneously ensuring that there are adequate public dispute mechanisms that allow the enforcement of these rights. Making rights central to the conversation on health crisis management in particular, will ensure that all stakeholders - the government, private sector, communities, individuals - remain accountable to each other.

It is of utmost importance to create mechanisms and processes that build trust between the public and the government. This trust can be inculcated through greater transparency in communication, improved access, ensuring that systems are voluntary, such as the downloading of contact tracing apps. Further, social solidarities are a critical tool for working effectively together to address the pandemic and can reduce the need for harsh policies such as curfews and surveillance. This can be done through communication of common objectives, problematising behaviours and not people and creating effective systems of financial support. Solidarities create a space for workers and migrants to mobilise and negotiate change in their relationships with the platform economy.

As the state becomes more digital, more active involvement in political action is imperative. The shift of the state to digital spaces means reduced opportunity for resistance and claim-making. Citizens should engage with local communities, educate themselves and others about rights, combating fake news etc. It is through this participation that citizens can collectively hold the government and technology companies accountable.

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