

The whims and fancies of technological modernity: Biometrics and the digital empire of (mis)trust



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This blog post aims to highlight the resurgence of biometrics as a governance technology from colonial times to the contemporary neoliberal era, and with it tries to open some provocations on the nature of knowledge. In doing so, it reflects upon the fractures in technological modernity and governance in a country like India and other countries of Global South[\[1\]](#). My central argument is that the fantasy of digital modernity (digital infrastructures and unique identity) is based on the premise of providing welfare governance and development to millions of people (especially *Dalits* and *Adivasis*) living in extreme poverty. However, the compulsion to own a digital identity and enrollment in newer

digital welfare programs (healthcare) in an extremely unequal and hierarchical society, especially for below-poverty line population groups, shows deep-seated fractures in this utopic fantasy; fractures that show an impinging reality faced by such population groups negotiating between historical, political, and social mistrust, and their survival dependency on the welfare state for food, social security, health, and education as key ones among other social welfare programs.

India is a post-colony projecting itself as a tech-savvy Digital India (Ministry of Electronics & Information Technology, n.d.) while being entangled in a past of colonial realities and practices of

control and dominance. In the last decade, India witnessed the colossal rise of one of the world's largest biometrics identification systems—the Unique Identity (UID/Aadhaar) project. The whims and fancies of biometrics-led digital identity/identification systems are to be technologically modern through their 'efficient', 'reliable' and 'foolproof' use for governance and development. However, the ambition of technological modernity and the associated pursuit to be a technology nation is accompanied by fractures which have deep-seated social and human implications. These implications in return demand a more humane and sensitive approach to make sociological sense of the lived experiences of the

bodies of unprivileged and poor population groups categorized as BPL—below the poverty line—by the government. It comprises of the bodies of lower *Jatis* (castes) and *Adivasis* (indigenous tribes), classified as ‘Scheduled Castes’ and ‘Scheduled Tribes’ respectively in the Constitution of India (Ambedkar & Roy, 2014).

During a recent phase of fieldwork (October 2023), I visited a remote Adivasi village in Jharkhand state. The local district administration had organized a camp with the intent of connecting the Adivasi population of the area to the ‘mainstream’ by extending the assumed benefits of government welfare schemes to them. The camp focused on updating and enrolling

the residents on a health welfare program using the biometrics UID system. However, at the ground this intention reflects a distorted reality, different from the utopic fantasy on digitalization, development, and governance. This village was a former rebel-dominated area where they openly revolted against the state, its ideologies, and its ruling apparatus. Most people waiting for their turn were tribals with a history of being left out of the 'mainstream' and seen with suspicion and mistrust by society and the state elites. The ground realities of challenges in implementation, and enrolling people having a long history of discrimination create a different picture of actuality compared to

what is fantasized of digitalization solving problems of development



Biometrics scanning hardware (fingerprint and iris scanner) and the integrated interface (software) application through a connected laptop and peripherals. The photo was taken during a UID/Aadhaar update camp explicitly organized for a tribal majority village in

Jharkhand, India; fieldwork October 2023.

Seeing the assemblage of biometrics technologies as an avatar of technological modernity for the claimed welfare of lower *Jatis* and *Adivasis*, reflections of its colonial entanglements with mistrust and suspicion become apparent. Bodies potentially considered subversive and a threat to the interests of the British Empire were recorded in colonial registers and record books (Waits, 2016). Even in its second coming, re-institutionalizing suspicion and mistrust remains at the heart and soul of this governmentality. Using biometrics for governance and development also records the biometrics of these mistrusted bodies, though in the name of a more 'just' purpose of improving

their life condition with digital access to welfare entitlements. However, unlike earlier colonial practices that served the interests of the empire, the current practice serves the interest of an alliance of the state, market, and international biometric companies. This alliance runs, operates, and perpetuates the digital empire of (mis)trust.

The reach and extent of this pervasive empire is such that it operates over millions of bodies daily. Its cogs run with the help of the technological systems of biometrics, databases, and digital identification infrastructures. It makes a living person digitally present in a database, with means and ways of authenticating the

person's 'reliability' and 'existence'. However, the practice of this empire is not just technological, with the use of biometrics and digitalization. Instead, it is a sociotechnical ideological practice mixed with social and historical discrimination of lower *Jatis* and *Adivasis* by upper caste and the ruling elites from colonial times to the present, biometrically marking and algorithmically checking the tagged-digital identity of the person. I believe that the current sociotechnical practice of biometrically identifying (mis)trustful bodies adds a technological layer of inequality over a persistent social structure of deep-seated discrimination. It is a deadly

cocktail of caste and tribe-based discrimination by upper caste and class elites mixed with technologies of biometrics rooted in Galtonian ideas of biometry and racial classifications (Breckenridge, 2014). Biometrics-based digital identity recorded in a centralized database is now the source of truth and trust of millions of bodies belonging to the BPL groups. However, the mediation of (mis)trust and establishing the authenticity of bodies now lies with the algorithms—the moment a person submits biometric scans to access essential services.



Biometrics scanning hardware (technology) and a connected laptop's integrated interface (software) application. Used for biometrics scans to provide healthcare access under the national universal health coverage program (PM-JAY). Jharkhand, India; fieldwork October 2023.

Without possessing a biometrics-

based digital identity, it is practically impossible for millions of bodies belonging to the BPL groups to survive. Within this group, the *Adivasis* form a significant chunk, totally dependent on the welfare state for food, healthcare, social security, livelihood programs, and education. Having no digital identity or facing problems with their digital identity brings the severe repercussions of being again left out of the 'mainstream'. A tribal farmer said aptly during my fieldwork, "I do not exist if I do not enrol for the UID/Aadhaar", and "I am not a human of flesh and bones, but a suspected human reduced to a number, with the onus of proving my identity—to digitally prove that I exist" (Field Diary

Notes, 2017).

The implications from the operation of this digital empire are not just at the individual and social level faced by these bodies in India but hold wider ramifications in the context of the increasing push for biometrics for development in other countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. A study of these demands, an analytic and methodological focus that is more 'global' in Global South than in the Global North! The level of knowledge, concepts, and methods of understanding this contextual 'globalness' thus also requires a sociological imagination that is rooted in people's everyday lived experiences and unique circumstances. This is a moment of

further introspection and intellectual engagement for a crucial network like Global Sociology and Qualitative Research.

Many canons of the social sciences in general, and Sociology in particular, along with the narratives of 'modernity', developed in the West (Europe and the United States) (Adas, 2014). The persistent and unwavering Western notions and canons of understanding social realities placing the postcolony(s) at the peripheries, creates a perpetual market of development and research (Bhambra, 2016)! Moreover, the narratives of newer ideas and practices of development considered, technologically modern states are still largely controlled

and dominated by the countries, institutions, and actors from the West. The control of knowledge, narrative and 'benchmarks' by the West, continuously makes the postcolony(s) aspire to become 'developed' with their newer whims and fancies on technological modernity.

Failure to do so perpetuates the categorization or the classification of a country as underdeveloped and still developing. Moreover, in this well-knit ideological, political, and economic control, the postcolony(s) become the thriving grounds for the market of (digital) development governance, especially in the developing world of Asia, Africa, and Latin America (Schiller, 2000).

This leads to the formation of an alliance of postcolonial states, neoliberal institutions, and multinational technology companies, perpetuating this digital empire of (mis)trust and constantly re-inventing capital and capitalism. It's not surprising to see programs such as ID4D (Identification for Development) and ID4Africa (Identification for Africa) being increasingly pushed in the countries of Global South, with the aims of bringing and connecting millions of bodies to the 'mainstream'. In the context of colonial history and newer forms of market-driven neoliberal practices, we need to rethink the Western notions of 'modernity' and the way social sciences canons emerge and revolve around it. The bodies of

people belonging to historically discriminated groups by the local elites and colonial masters tend to be discriminated and controlled time and again.

Thus, it is important to bring analytic focus on the way bodies become objects and subjects of a new pervasive digital empire, rapidly carrying its flags in the so-called developing world. Moreover, the analytic focus provides a methodological opportunity (not in a positive sense) to be more sensitive in the ways of making sense of the lived experience of such bodies. Is it enabling or disabling to conduct fieldwork with 'scientific' and established practices of studying the field? Or do we need to find

ways through which we can reflect the essence of the reality lived by such bodies? Our thoughts and minds are not only colonized by the notions of modernity and development from the West but also by the surrounding realities (Latour, 1993). A dilemma and a challenge that impinges more on researchers and academics at the crossroads of a 'globalness' of knowledge and knowledge creation. Can the 'globalness' of global Sociology help to make us more aware of the challenges we face? Does it implore researchers who stand at such crossroads to ask if it is the same to do social research in India, Ghana, and Indonesia as it is in England, Germany, and France?

[1] I do not use 'The Global South' in a specific manner, because I believe there cannot be one

homogeneous clubbing of 'the' Global South.

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