The 'Pey' and 'Bhutam' in India's Technology-Fuelled Development Crusade

It is critical to understand and evaluate the role it plays, both for us as individual users, and in terms of institutions using our data to govern, regulate, and control. Credit: Reuters

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In an article published last year in the journal *History of Political Thought*, <u>Matthew Baxter examines</u> the nuances of the first but incomplete Tamil translation of *The Communist Manifesto* of Marx and Engels. Periyar, the pioneer of the <u>Self-Respect Movement</u>, published it in a serialised form in 1931. Periyar had written the introduction for this version that expanded the Marxist credo into a wider struggle for equality – not only against class but also against caste oppression. It was hence called *Samadharma (equal dharma) Manifesto*. The choice for an appropriate Tamil word for "spectre" found in the famous opening lines of the book is crucial. *Pey* and *bhutham* were candidate Tamil words. Pey meant a vampire-like evil spirit while bhutham was a friendly ghost. Referring to an 18th century Protestant missionary in India, Bartholomaus Ziegenbalg, who noted the divisions of supernaturals in Tamil, Baxter writes that "such Bhuta[m]s were created for the

service of gods and other persons. Even though they have to do the most tedious jobs, [South Indians] do not consider them to be an affliction because they were not created for anything other than their jobs. Hence, one could not compare them to the wretched state of peys."

The cultural-historical context meant that peywas pejorative while bhutham had a positive, transformative connotation. Consequently, the "spectre of communism" was translated as "bhutham *of samadharma*" in the first translation.

The pey-bhutham duality can be used as an effective lens to look at how Indian democracy is being fashioned in the age of data deluge. Various agencies, both private and public, are accessing our data, guiding our preferences, and also controlling our actions on many occasions. It is virtually impossible today to remain agnostic about the role of data in our lives. It is thus ever more critical to understand and evaluate the role it plays, both for us as individual users, and in terms of institutions using our data to govern, regulate, and control. It is in this context that we need to understand, in Periyar's framing, if data in its modern avatar is more akin to being pey or bhutham.

The overdrive of the current coercive government to make Aadhaar mandatory has the horrific possibility of infringing on personal liberty and dignity mediated through seemingly "consensual" disclosure of data.

In other words, the potential of data playing the role of pey*.* The recent judgment on the 'Right to Privacy' (RTP) by the Supreme Court is remarkable in its import. It reinforces that not all citizens are criminals and upholds the ethic of jurisprudence of "innocent until proven guilty". It substantiates that in a genuine democracy there is no *a priori* reason for the state to monitor its citizens through mandatory data contraptions like Aadhaar. It is astonishing that Ravi Shankar Prasad, a Bharatiya Janata Party minister, made a U-turn after the Supreme Court verdict that the central government always wanted to uphold the RTP. If his post-verdict comments are true, why was there a court case? While upholding the RTP is non-negotiable, we must start charting the contours of its relationship with the Right to Information (RTI) Act through which data is a potential bhutham*.*

RTI has been a big feather in the cap of transparency. While there is still a long way to go, it has been a powerful instrument in creating a substrate for participatory democracy. We must remember that the government is elected for the people and not the other way around and that comes with a basic set of behavioural norms for the state. It would be disastrous to conflate individual liberties, enshrined in the constitution and RTP, with the state's mandatory disclosure of information through Section 4 of the RTI. It is thus imperative that we as citizens continue to monitor the state and its actions and ensure that the state doesn't end up annihilating or curbing transparency as any kind of bargain for the RTP.

It brings me to another point of how data, in its pey form, can hide facts. As an example of harnessing transparency, underline recently in a study, using publicly available data, we were able to highlight the true extent of delays in wage payments in the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA). By analysing over nine million transactions across ten states, we assessed that the true payable penalty by the government to the workers for payment delays for one financial year alone was around Rs 1200 crores. Whereas, the reported amount of penalty for payment delays by the government was only Rs 519 crores. The under-reporting of penalty is a faulty, definitional sleight of hand, by the state in the NREGA Management Information System (MIS). The MIS assumes that the date of electronic invoice generation of wages in the individual states is the date on which wages are paid to the labourers. It doesn't account for the delay in transferring wages from the Centre to the states. The Centre has thus completely abdicated responsibility for delays in funds release to the states.

This analysis was possible solely due to availability of transaction-level details in the NREGA MIS. Data, looked at this way, assumes the form of bhutham. The study will, we hope, assist the government to rectify its "mistake" and make computer systems reflect the truth. Addressing this problem to adhere to the Act is more a question of political willingness than a mere technical fix. True spirit of transparency dictates that information needs to collated and presented in a manner not so much to obfuscate facts but to increase agency and participation of the most marginalised. In NREGA alone, there are numerous examples of casting the role of data in the pey-bhuthamframework.

As another example, not so long ago, I had a long conversation with an Adivasi woman, Anita Devi (name changed), in a village in Palamu district, Jharkhand. Anita Devi is not literate in the popular usage of the term. After discussing a range of topics from the functioning of NREGA to pensions and statistics to local governance, I deliberately posed a rather complicated question: "Can a machine learn democracy?". She responded with casual elegance, saying "A computer doesn't have a mind of its own. A computer is after all made and run by humans. If we truly want it to imbibe principles of democracy then we can teach it, isn't it?"

This comment from the ground would likely make Harvard law professor Lawrence Lessig chuckle, echoing as it does his motto "code is law". Devi's deep, insightful response speaks volumes about the need for compassionate information systems design to enable participatory democracy.

Transparency and accountability of the state and privacy of individuals are key pillars of a just society. We have to be mindful that none of these pillars are sacrificed at the cost of the other. As Anita Devi eloquently stated, to sustain constitutional ideals, we must incorporate democratic principles in the design and implementation of information technology, lest it become a tool of surveillance or exclusion. In this regard, much like Periyar's coinage, data and its modern day twin, information technology, need to be well

thought-out. A non-enactment of RTP may have turned data into *pey* and the essence of RTI has made data closer to bhutham*.* I say closerbecause there is still some distance to be covered for proactive disclosure of information to be genuinely implemented. There is much work to be done in designing and presenting public data from a bottom-up "user-friendly" perspective as opposed to a top-down "management" friendly perspective. In a hazardously unequal society like India, data can be a powerful friend if leveraged creatively for a more humane and equitable society. We need to rethink information structuring not just as MIS but as Janata Information Systems (JIS) to truly reconcile data being a bhutham*.*

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