

Essay

Idea of Data and the Virtual World: A National Security Perspective

Devsena Mishra

Can the platforms that run behavioural algorithms on people's screens in an 'auto' mode, manipulate the choice of their 'users' with precisely targeted content, see the 'privacy' of their consumers as a commodity that can be bought or sold to anonymous entities, facilitate networks of online scammers and shift the entire burden of 'responsibility/accountability' on their subscribers, and for whom any 'intervention' in this process by the democratically elected governments is a violation of their 'rights' to leverage this exclusive privilege, ever be inspired to change their approach to Data, Privacy, and Rights of their Users? These were perhaps some of the big questions before the drafters of the Digital Personal Data Protection Bill 2023 of Bharat, which is now an act. The Union Minister for Electronics and Information Technology, Rajeev Chandrasekhar, clearly felt they could be when he affirmed: "This law will start an era of responsible and accountable behaviour by data fiduciaries to maintain and protect citizen's digital privacy." Yet the matter is not so apparent at this point.

However, the debate around Data, Privacy, and Protection is a long and interesting one. Over the last few years, several jargons related to the idea of 'Data' were launched, and many have attempted to equate the term with the 'New Oil' and 'New Gold' and similar kinds of abstract definitions to highlight its ever-growing value/influence in our life! One of the biggest ironies of 'Data' is that it often comes from people who have been told that they are going to be obsolete or replaced by the same machines that this Data fuels, and yet they are addicted and trapped to an extent, so that they

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keep feeding these systems, pleasantly and voluntarily! According to some rough estimates, on an average, routine internet users produce some 2.5 quintillion bytes of data every day (a quintillion is equal to number 10 raised to the power 18).

Data is ‘Power’

“The fate of information in the typically American world is to become something which can be bought or sold.”

—Norbert Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings*, 1950.

Back in 2021, at the World Economic Forum (WEF) gathering, Russian President Vladimir Putin highlighted the digital giants’ increasing intervention in the social, economic, and political systems of the world, and he mentioned that¹ “in some areas, they are de facto competing with states.” Then he went a step further and asked the gathering, “Where is the border between successful global business, in-demand services, and big data consolidation and the attempts to manage society at one’s own discretion, and in a tough manner, replace legal democratic institutions and essentially usurp or restrict the natural right of people to decide for themselves how to live, what to choose and what position to express freely?”

Where is the border between successful global business, in-demand services, big data consolidation and the attempts to manage society at one’s own discretion?

These are undoubtedly the dominant questions of this century. And today, it seems that words like Data and Big Data have become some of the biggest fallacies of our time, more deceptive than Russian Maskirovka itself! Ask a normal user of the internet what’s the meaning of these popular terms like Data and Big Data, and they will reply promptly: ‘Information,’ without realising that it is this Data cum information which is capable of significantly influencing the election of governments, destabilising the political system, crashing businesses and markets, disrupting the socio-economic environment, and winning the battles (not just of narration but physical too)!

In a nutshell, today the idea of Data has become the source of unlimited/unrestricted Power! To know where this power currently resides and who controls it, one needs to go no further than to see the list of the world’s top 10 tech giants, and

their home countries (and there is not a single Indian Information Technology company in that list)! Now the question is if data is Power, then it must have produced some amount of hallucination and control! So, what does a mix of all this look like, and where is the Real arena?

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Virtual World

The word 'Virtual' means आभासी (abhasi) in Hindi. Something that one can sense and interact with but which does not exist in any physical form. Now the question is how can one perceive or sense something that doesn't exist? There are two possible ways (except addictive drugs) to sense the Virtual World: one, via gadgets and devices as propagated by the Western world, and the other is through ancient and timeless practices like yoga and meditation that belong to Bharat (i.e., India).

Western Approach (Open Eyes, Closed Mind)

"People's perceptions are filtered through their emotions; they tend to interpret the world according to what they want to see. Feed their expectations, manufacture a reality to match their desires, and they will fool themselves."

—American author Robert Greene, *The 33 Strategies of War*.

Western approach to the Virtual World is often reflected in the smart gadgets and devices we see around— from smartphones to Virtual Reality (VR) headsets/glasses to the whole ecosystem of the online world. All these tech improvisations attempt to offer a prescription of some reality, mixed with pleasure, entertainment and fun, in a highly simulated environment (like an improvised version of Skinner Box), which slowly starts inducing a bit of doubt, mistrust, and moral weakness among their consumers, and ultimately reduces their intellect and imaginations to an extent that even a small electronic gadget in their hand appears to them to be more superior than themselves!

Why is such an approach necessary? Because a human mind with its cognitive abilities/characteristics, may never surrender to a prescribed and forced tomorrow! He could ask questions, seek answers, use his 'Free Will,' and tread a path of his own (something not suitable for the future of mind control). That's why they have based

their approach on a simple notion: “Control people’s perceptions of reality, and you control them!”

Cyberdelics and Cyberpunks

Back in the 1990s, while presenting the demo of his Virtual Reality Glove, called the ‘Data Glove,’ Jaron Lanier, the inventor of VR, said: “Well this is our virtual reality glove, it’s called the data glove and the idea is that you can put on this glove and the glove lets you feel a world that doesn’t exist,” then he put on his VR headset called ‘eyephone’ and said: “these are the special glasses called the eye phones that you put on and when you put them on you’re seeing inside an imaginary world instead of inside the physical world,” so the idea is that “by wearing computerized clothing right over your sense organs you transport your sensory system into a reality that can be of any description”(Lanier).²

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In its initial phases, VR was largely seen as an alternative to lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD) kind of psychedelic drugs. In countries like the USA, there existed an impression that VR clothing (gloves, eyephones, and data suits) and gadgets were designed to offer the same sensory response, pleasure, and experiences that LSD offers, or something that one can feel during Lucid Dreaming! Several research papers have been published to highlight the commonalities between the two— LSD and VR.

American psychologist and a leading advocate for LSD, Timothy Leary famously argued that ‘cyberdelics’ — the fusion of psychedelic drugs and cyberculture — could reprogramme the human mind! In the 1980s he became the spokesperson of the ‘Cyberdelic counterculture,’ whose followers called themselves ‘Cyberpunks’ as they were philosophical promoters of personal computers (PC), internet, and immersive virtual reality (VR). Leary went to the extent of proclaiming that the “PC is the LSD of the 1990s” and changed his popular phrase “turn on, tune in, drop out” to “turn on, boot up, and jack in.”³

The creator of the first VR experiment, Jaron Lanier, also highlighted this aspect in his book *Dawn of the New Everything: Encounters with Reality and Virtual Reality* (2017): “VR is sometimes compared to LSD, but VR users can share a world objectively, even if it’s fantastical, while LSD users cannot...it will be like riding a bike, not a roller-coaster ride.” It is interesting that some of the future plans of Silicon Valley’s leading

voices sound more like the SMI2LE vision (an acronym for Space Migration, Intelligence Increase, and Life Extension) of Timothy Leary! And today, if someone searches for VR online, he/she will end up receiving different psychedelic visual compilations (in music and animation video forms), with titles like 'Live LSD simulation' or some XYZ 'trip' experiences, etc!

To sum up, this is the overall Western idea of the 'Virtual World,' which is packaged and advertised as VR products! Is it wise to let a limited idea or narrow vision dictate the course of future technology? After all, there exists a completely different approach to Virtual World, and it belongs to Bharat.

Bharatiya Approach (Closed Eyes, Open Mind)

"It's a part of the culture that we are all built to explore, find out the inner self as well as outer self. So, for the outer, I do science, for the inner I come to temples."

— ISRO Chairman S. Somanath.⁴

Bharat is the undisputed oldest player of the Virtual World (आभासी दुनिया). From ancient times, there has been a tradition of Dhyāna-yoga, the basis of which is an absolute control of 'mind' and 'body' not by some external tool or gadget but by the individual (called Yogi) who practices this! In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Bhagwan Shri Krishna described the whole process (yog sādhanā), position (āsana and mudra), practice (meditation), and its impact on the human mind, body, and soul, to Arjuna (Chapter 6, Dhyān Yog). It's not just about learning discipline of the body, mind and senses, but a science of uniting the individual consciousness (Inner-Self) with the ultimate consciousness (Universal Wisdom). It's a journey to reach the divine heights of Spiritual Intelligence, for the benefit of humanity, and चराचर जगत (the whole world).

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"Elevate yourself through the power of your mind, and not degrade yourself, for the mind can be the friend and also the enemy of the self." *Bhagavad Gita*, Chapter 6, Verse 5.

“An equation for me has no meaning unless it expresses a thought of God,” said the great Mathematician Srinivasa Ramanujan, who is said to have powerful visualisations (that goddess Namagiri used to reveal in his dreams) that used to guide him in formulating the unbelievable organic mathematical equations! Something that was never seen or heard in the world of Mathematics before! In Ramanujan’s own words: “While asleep, I had an unusual experience. There was a red screen formed by flowing blood, as it were. I was observing it. Suddenly a hand began to write on the screen. I became all attention. That hand wrote a number of elliptic integrals. They stuck to my mind. As soon as I woke up, I committed them to writing.” That’s the power of the Bharatiya approach to Virtual World, and there are countless such remarkable examples and products in every domain of human life and human experiments. There is a reason why millions of people, across geographical, religious, social, and cultural boundaries, are moving toward Bharatiya Meditation and Yogic Practices! One can say that it’s about closing the eyes and opening up the mind for Spiritual Intelligence. This approach is in complete contrast to Western ideas, which lower individuals’ perception of themselves, and gradually make them a slave of their desires and senses, that are remotely channelised and controlled by someone else!

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The question is why Bharat as a nation encourages and promotes such an approach, across the globe and why it has opened up its source of precious knowledge assets, Gyaan (ज्ञान) of its great sages (Rishi Munis), their theories, philosophies, methodologies, practices, and products, that are the outcome of thousands of years of meditation, tenacity (तप) and Yog (योग), for the whole world that we know includes our enemies and friends alike, and even some of those perspectives that remain uncomfortable with Bharat’s growth! Is it our over-benevolence or some kind of hesitancy to real Power/Control? The simple answer is — Bharat doesn’t see enlightened and capable human minds as a threat. Instead, being an ancient civilisation and culture, we believe in the amalgamation of constructive energies from all sides, for the larger good of the world! Can a nation with such a broad outlook and worldview be diluted or subverted? The ongoing efforts to do so and the rise of new challenges with improvised mediums cannot be ignored.

'Wolf Whisperer' Approach

Can a wild and intelligent beast like a wolf be tamed or made a pet? Wolf is a social animal, they live in packs and communicate using vocalisations, body postures, scent, touch, and taste. As a creature, the Wolf has been long viewed with great fascination by Western societies and they experimented with different ways to mingle with them. But a wolf being a wolf does not easily let them in, and this behavioural pattern of a wolf gave rise to the idea of the Wolf Whisperer. Wolf Whisperers are those (mainly wildlife researchers and anthropologists) who carefully mimic wolf behaviour, communicating with them through scent and sound, eating what they eat, sleeping the way they sleep, and doing everything that makes the wolf and their pack believe that these 'outsiders' are one of them. There is a sense of entitlement and a different kind of thrill of 'control' involved too! And interestingly, such efforts do provide them with a harmless entry and a safe pass for pursuing their objectives.

“Both wolf pack and human tribes, practice certain rituals — for instance, ceremonial greeting centred around the leader and gathering and singing before going hunting, after eating, and in the evening. These behaviours are social and may also be considered cultural.” —*Wolf and Man – Evolution in Parallel*, a collection of research papers, edited by Roberta L. Hall, Henry S. Sharp, 1978.

All of this research and experimentation reflects an attempt to identify the minute behavioural traits that make domestication of wolves, or as they call it, “wolf civilization,” an impossible task. But some of these experiments have produced a middle path too, such as the idea of breeding of wolf and a dog, which produced the Wolf Dog, which gives them the thrill of domestication of a Wolf and service of a Dog, both! And unlike Wolf, the Dog (a descendant of the Wolf) is always ready to be 'civilizing' at their hands and to earn the badge of being “Man's Best Friend.” After decades of research on Wolves, Man, and Dogs, their domestication and civilisation, social organisation, behavioural patterns, communication, and cognitive mapping, Western researchers reached some common conclusions, methods, and approaches, and it seems that their experiences and learnings have helped them beyond wolf pack too. Their approach to mix and engage with different cultures and societies, across the geographies (mainly in Asia and Africa) reflects that trait!

Today a rising power, Bharat, in many ways is setting the tone for global exchanges with an emphasis on its civilisational/cultural values, where human welfare and global good form the core of its approach. At this moment, we will have to be more cautious of such ‘Wolf Whisperers’ around, which are consistently trying to make their way into domains of our social and cultural life, via a path of spirituality, religion, politics, and culture, with new and improvised methods. And technology is proving a big help in their old pursuit. This situation can be seen as an emerging threat to national security!

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Entertainment-Driven Attacks (EDA)

Entertainment is the leading flavour of all social media/internet-based platforms. It started with ‘content is king’ kind of phrases (which Bill Gates wrote in his 1996 article), then it became the ‘marketplace of ideas,’ and gradually upgraded to tags like ‘influencers,’ creators, creative entrepreneurs, who troll or roast people, boost impressions/engagements, make things viral and produce entertaining memes, and they do it not often but on a regular basis! The way things are moving, there seems a pattern, in almost every single domain of human life, be it religion, politics, socio-economic culture, education, mass media, etc., where entertainers are in command! These platforms need a special category of people (con artists cum loudmouths) with ‘gifted skills,’ to lead their followers — those who seek every day a new ‘Masala’ or ‘explosion’ — with the condition that they must produce something which makes people a bit sadder, concerned, hopeless, less empathetic, reactionary, aggressive or violent, at least once in a day! And whatever they produce or do, the flavour of ‘entertainment’ is a must! Today, every piece of technology and its ecosystem seems designed to facilitate and nurture these entertainers!

But the question is, why only the entertainers are in demand on these platforms? What’s the rationale for this overdose of entertainment in people’s lives? And if this is nothing but ‘plain entertainment’ then why is the frequency of technology-led violent clashes, riots, and anarchic incidents increasing, with time?

Anarchy as a Service (AaaS)

It's a historical fact that the entertainment industry played an important role during World War II (WWII). Its participation through stage, print, radio, and electronic formats, aided at every level, from recruitment to motivation to propaganda! But the times have changed; today's entertainment industry is diverse, globalised and has players who can originate from anywhere and take any form. The character of the medium of entertainment itself has undergone a shift! "You know something about not mass media right now, but the social network you can basically feed deliberately with big data and big money, you can just feed slogans and get into people's minds," said Israeli PM Netanyahu in a recent interview to podcaster Lex Fridman.⁵

The power of sloganisation and mobilisation that these big tech tools offer, is a matter of concern for all democracies, irrespective of their size and location! Today, predicting where and at what moment a violent clash among social groups/communities will break out, and in which part of the country, and pro-actively working to prevent or control them is almost beyond control. In most of the cases, these attacks are generally driven by the artistic/entertainer community, silent or loud, and harvested on these platforms. This puts the democratically elected governments on a double-edged sword. If they let these entertainers pursue and exploit their edge, the situation will only get worse, and if they try to control them by the law of the land, then the whole scenario will be painted as an attack on the 'Freedom of Expression.' Left with no other option (in case of violence or riots) when government authorities attempt to temporarily shut these services or cancel the medium itself, they are tagged/compared to oppressive regimes. In-between all this tussle among the System, the Entertainers-cum-'guerrilla vanguard', and the people, it is the owner and controller of the medium who smiles and enjoys this unlimited privilege over the idea of democracy, government, and the idea of the nation!

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For any System to remain functional, it must be capable of maintaining 'Balance' and 'Hope,' but it seems that such capability is now diminishing with each passing day! In such a context, this is not a national but international security concern, and all like-

minded nations must come together to brainstorm and chart out a framework, through which technology can be reset to its original purpose— the idea of service, human welfare, and global good.

Why Bharat’s Techade Matters

“This is today’s India, fearless India, warrior India. This India thinks in a new way and spreads the beam of light in the world even after getting into the dark zone. In the 21st century, this India will solve the biggest problems of the world,” said Prime Minister Narendra Modi while addressing the Team ISRO (the Indian Space Research Organisation) on the historic success of Chandrayaan-3.

Similar to space science, the story of Bharat’s Tech sector is equally inspirational. There was a time when India was known for its service sector and their manpower, and there was a huge demand for tech talent of the country. Today, it is known for both its tech talent and digital public infrastructure, which is based on a human welfare-centric approach towards technology. Whether it’s JAM (Jan Dhan-Aadhaar-Mobile) trinity, Unified Payments Interface (UPI) ecosystem, drone-based delivery of governance in remote areas (SVAMITVA scheme), Covid Vaccine Intelligence Network (CoWIN) platform, which helped Bharat to provide over 200 crore (2 billion) vaccine doses to people, futuristic initiatives like Open Network for Digital Commerce (ONDC) — in many ways Bharat has provided a template for the right use of Technology to the world. India’s approach to Artificial intelligence (AI)/Machine Learning (ML), the deep tech related researches, and the women-led development in rural and remote parts of the country are also part of this template.

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The country has received global recognition and endorsement for its vision of the future of global technology, at various global forums. The way Bharat has assured ‘stability’ in global supply chains amid the most unstable phases of history, be it Covid crisis or the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war, it is capable of offering the right solutions to tech-related global challenges as well. Bharat’s ‘Techade’ — a decade dominated by technology— matters not only for the country but for the global good and for a better world, where technology serves humanity and plays its part in human welfare.

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