Building a New Kerala
Ideas and Reflections

Who will control the next-generation technology that will rebuild Kerala?

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The news about KPMG's possible involvement in managing reconstruction work in Kerala comes as a let-down.

But it is perhaps no surprise.

A lot has been written about the rise and rise of new public management (NPM) techniques in governance and how the essentials of twenty-first century bureaucracy include a devout faith in Public Private Partnerships (PPPs). The promise of digital technologies for good governance has only further legitimised such private sector involvement in public administration.

The problem here is neither the case for efficiency, passionately argued in the NPM rhetoric, nor the merits of digital technology and data, arguably vital for effective governance. An efficient public system that recognizes and responds to citizen claims is most welcome from the standpoint of the poorest and most vulnerable. Similarly, digitally mediated methods for transparency and accountability, like the MNREGS website and its data repositories, are immensely inspiring for the active and vigilant citizenship they have generated across the country.

The problem really is the widespread and deep-rooted conviction about corporate supremacy in matters of digital age government. No surprise then that we find entire sections within various ministries run by leading IT companies and transnational corporations (referred to, innocuously, as 'private consulting firms').

This has not happened simply by accident. The new age of big data and its promises have been essentialised as a private sector 'driven' process. From

the build up to the SDGs around 2014 that underlined "data for development", to current conjuncture, the discourse has rapidly evolved along a spectrum that includes big data analytics, artificial neural networks, blockchain, machine learning, 'AI for good' and the like. A beholden international development community has succeeded in naturalising Big Tech's ideas of governance and development.

KPMG pledging support to the effort to rebuild Kerala by drawing upon its global expertise and human resources, is part of this wider shift – an unchallenged redefinition of the social contract, a mission creep, that implies the take-over of public space in the name of expertise.

Today, a handful of companies like Google, with the data empire that they have painstakingly built over the years, are crafting digital intelligence solutions that can come to the aid of social problem-solving. Combining algorithmic power with huge volumes of data to train computers in pattern recognition, these solutions portend the future tools of public decision making. In 2008, researchers from Google claimed that their big data innovation, Google Flu Trends, could predict the disease spread of flu. Based on online searches for flu-related information on Google, the big data model was touted as providing almost instant signals of overall flu prevalence. In the 2013 flu outbreak, Google Flu Trends failed spectacularly, and was way off the mark. Evidently, something had gone wrong in the way the AI had not been updated.

Data-based intelligence that is privately held can be totally opaque in terms of method and data, with real dangers for public decision-making.

The KPMG team is reported to have discussed with the Chief Minister of Kerala how rebuilding the state's economy, assets, and infrastructure and the revival of livelihoods could benefit from "next-generation technology".Towards this, they will provide personnel and services pro bono. This ostensibly large-hearted gesture requires to be put through a serious scrutiny.

The private sector has a huge stake in accessing public data infrastructure. A state like Kerala - with its strong grassroots democracy - has a solid track record of data based local planning. Public data sets will have to be handed over to any firm that will process them for putting in place a new, digitally booted infrastructure. Sitting on top of existing public data sets and newly-generated ones that will quite certainly use existing government resources, can place such a firm in a remarkably smug position. Even as the company will provide suitable big data and AI solutions to the government, it will become an irreplaceable link in the wider public administration ecosystem.

Public data processes that are not embedded in strong accountability frameworks risk being captured. This, by no means is a notional threat. Civil rights organisations in South Africa took to court Net1 UEPS, a company, whose subsidiary was contracted to handle cash transfers for the South African Social Assistance Agency (Sassa). The firm was held guilty of mishandling public data and public funds for private gain, earlier this year.

What is at stake with enlisting KPMG's 'offer of support' is basically the simple, cornerstone ideal of participatory democracy, something that Kerala prides itself in.

Assuming KPMG's offer does not come with any axe to grind, and is purely well-meaning, it would still be necessary to ask the question - who will own the next-generation technology - the big data about people, things, forests, weather, land, roads, rivers and more - that will scaffold the new Kerala?

Kerala has been at the forefront of a different kind of IT revolution. Its well-conceived Akshaya programme provided a viable public access model, in the days before the mobile revolution. Even though a wee bit ahead of times and hence somewhat of an unsuccessful experiment, projects like e-*krishi* did seek to provide the farming community in the state a pioneering digital infrastructure. If any state can convert the extraordinary social crisis owing to the floods into a collective social opportunity of reconstruction, it is

Kerala. The resilience of local people, especially youth, during the rescue operations, has been widely acclaimed.

It may, therefore, be apt for the government to embark on a bold experiment through public consultations to explore a blueprint for a community-owned data infrastructure model. This will require a comprehensive policy about how spatial data, data from Internet of Things, sensors, drones etc. will be collected, aggregated and processed for local governance and future environmental sustainability in a transparent and accountable way.

Big data repositories do already exist; the UN has its Global Pulse initiative, setting up collaborative data repositories around the world. Flowminder, based in Sweden, is a nonprofit dedicated to gathering mobile phone data that could help in response to disasters.

Obviously there is a role for expertise in designing and executing this ambitious task. Private sector will have a role to play. But the government needs to be in the driving seat, putting in place the frameworks necessary to hand over to the people the possibilities for data infrastructures owned and driven by the people.

Gratitude for corporate largesse won't do. It could even prove to be a costly mistake.

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