The Subject and Paradoxes of Digital Security

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Over the last few decades India has increasingly registered some amount of growth in Information Technology-related commerce, services and production as well as displayed a marked tendency to shift the process of governance onto the affordances of digital technology. This has meant that the question of security has now become replotted along the critical axis of digital mediation. The question of digital security has however been a matter of constant paradox, particularly when we consider who or what has been the subject of the at times confounding pursuit of security in this region.

The nation-state as the founding concern in matters of 'national security' has markedly gained ground as a delicate territorial compact to be protected from the ingress of various foreign interference, obstruction, and attacks in the virtualised realm of the world wide web and in case of critical national infrastructure. Thus at least since the 26/11 Mumbai terror attacks, there has been a clear scaling up of the technical abilities of the state to monitor, control and even launch counter-attacks in the virtual realm. At least notionally, the concerned technical safeguards are also exercised or overlaid over matters of everyday digital existences of Indian citizens like in the case of Aadhar, UPI and the like.

At the same time, arguably, the protection in the same digital realm as available to the citizen - the fundamental constituent of the territorial unit of the nation-state - has gradually waned even as his/her/their lives have become even more implicated in the mediation of the digital. Thus, leaks of private data, commercial frauds, identity thefts, and mal-use of identification technology towards violent ends of exclusion and persecution have become only too common.

The state and the citizens at times seem to have almost competing interests in the matter of digital security. Very often these interests are posed across the interface of privacy. Privacy is at once seemingly constitutive of the social contract while being only too easily compromised at the altar of state reason. Keeping this in mind, a reconsideration of the issue of digital security at such a conjuncture as we live through in contemporary India, is only partially an issue of technology. The ever-shifting, yet critical parameter of law might be another index against which the question of digital security can be interrogated. The difficulties encountered in enacting a law for Data Protection and privacy in India is an obvious symptom of the tricky yet essential involvement of law in matters of digital security (and insecurities). We need to consider if the interaction of technology and law can broaden the definitions of security in a way in which the unavoidably digital existence of Indian citizens can be emboldened.