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“Connectivity” over “Connections”: Networking Governance and Technology Down South

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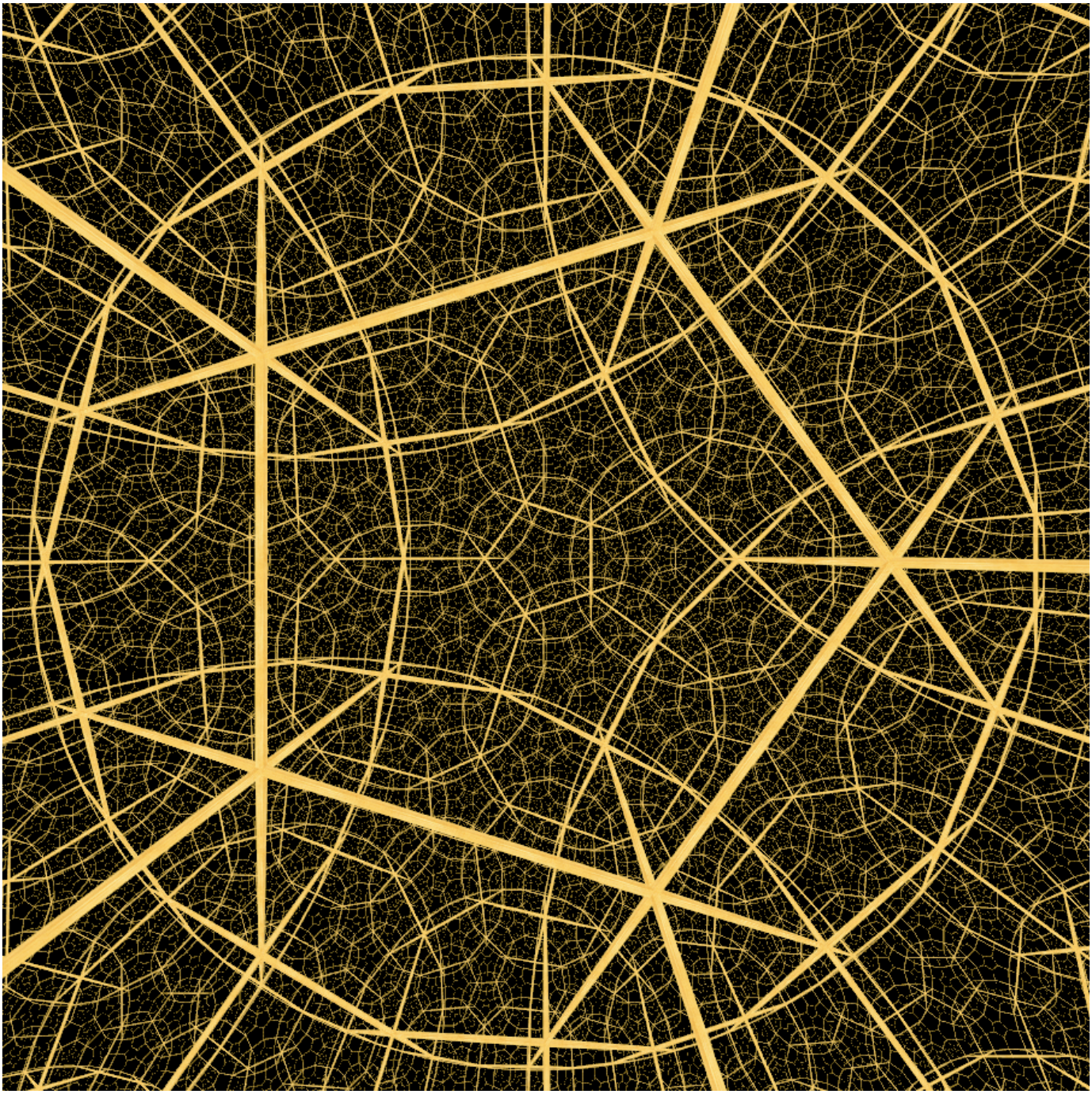
This brief essay seeks to draw attention to certain trends that are taking place in the domain of governance-technology relations in developing societies. The question I

pose is whether governance-sourced, human development-based *networking* in developing societies, such as India, is at all keeping pace with the spectacular development of technology-sourced *networks*. This very question leads us to another vital question: are developing societies prepared yet for such linkage?

In order to address the questions one has to trace the sources of tension between the imperatives of governance *networking* and those of technology *networks*. Let us have a concrete instance. 'Globalizing' India is supposed to be going through a phase of transition and restructuring both in governance and technological spheres. The shrill voice and the excessive frequency in which policymakers simultaneously utter "good governance", "inclusive technology" and "participatory development" should have been reassuring. But, as I have explained elsewhere in greater details (Sinha, 2005; 2010), there is a fundamental flaw in the policymakers' perception, which tends to ignore the vital point that technology needs to be in the service of the people, and not the other way round.

The root of the problem lies in overestimating technological networks at the cost of human development—the base of effective governance networking. As a result, technology-induced *connectivity* is prioritized over human-sourced *connections*. For example, amidst the repeated promise of 'access' to information kiosks by ordinary people, the fundamental question of relevant and appropriate content for end users, which lies at the base of democratization and sustenance of access, is underestimated. There is little evidence—with notable exceptions like the voluntary organization-based Info Villages in Pondicherry, South India, or the corporate-driven e-Choupal in select regions of India—of localization of software, use of local language-based keyboards or the linkage of local knowledge and resources to the kiosks. As a result, most kiosks are largely ineffective, with a pathetic lack of footfalls. Policymakers' zeal to negotiate the more publicized digital divide overwhelms the need to minimize the knowledge divide—making the whole process a self-defeating venture. Not surprisingly the Info Villages[1] and the e-Choupals[2] effectively use the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in conformity with local resources, knowledge and skills.



In general, developing countries are now reverberating with the slogan of ‘good governance’, along with its key indicators—transparency, accountability and responsiveness. Still, we are left with a complex *knot* when it comes to the interface of governance and technology. Invoking the ‘networks’ mechanically does not really solve the problem; on the contrary, in such a process the ‘solution’ itself becomes the problem.

The question is, what is ‘network’ and why is it of fundamental importance to policymaking? As Manuel Castells (1996) explains, a network is a set of inter-

connected nodes which are necessary for the circulation of money, information, technology, images, goods, services, or people throughout the network.

Castells adds that the most central distinction in the organizational logic is to be or not to be—in the network. As he puts it, “Be in the network, and you can share and, over time, increase your chances. Be out of the network, or become switched off, and your chances vanish…” It is true that living in the days of globalization—marked most fundamentally by unforeseen contraction of both space and time—policymakers can no longer take refuge in the argument that developing societies still have sufficient time to adjust to the network-dependent scenario. It is all the more true in a world in which late-starters are contemptuously dismissed as ‘laggards’. The imperative of ‘being in the network’ is now guided by the “do it now” spirit. Then again, such initiatives hang loose without a reasonably good baseline of human development.

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Let us assert here that (new) technology, contrary to the perception of policymakers in the developing world, is not neutral. As the saying goes, *technology is neutral insofar as no one knows what technology is used for and so far it is never used*. The intense political implication of such ‘neutral’ stance is inescapable. As Wajcman warns (2002), the view of technology as an external and autonomous force exerting an influence on society narrows the possibility for democratic engagement—through debates and dissent—with the order of technology. We may add that not just technology, but the twin business of governance and development are ‘non-neutral’ ideas and practices as well. They are supposed to be purposive acts based on a sort of positive bias in favour of the welfare of people.

However, in the growing amnesia of policymakers the idea of human development is lost. This happens despite the fact that in the contemporary discourse of development and governance the notion of ‘capability’ has acquired an important place. Conceptually developed by Amartya Sen (1999) and Martha Nussbaum (2000), capabilities, in broadest possible terms, refer to “what people are effectively able to do and be”. Intertwined with the extremely sensitive and significant issues of justice and equality, the shaping of capabilities, as Sen clearly notes, should be an

outcome of public deliberations and reasoning based on the specific context in which it occurs. The point is particularly relevant in the context of developing societies in which the poor and the marginalized are in perpetual deprivation. Technology in general and the ICT in particular have great potential to enhance capabilities, but utilizing the power of technology has to rest on two cardinal points: first, technology must limit itself to play the role of the ‘facilitator’; and second, beyond the exclusive emphasis on ‘design transfer’ policymakers need to stress building the capacity of end-users.

When technology-induced networks are hyped at the cost of human development/capability-oriented reforms in governance, ordinary people get trapped, downgraded and wasted. Such a process has substantial political implications as well.

Ironically, the ideas of Sen—whom the Government of India and the governments of several federated states of India, consult for advice—continue to be ignored, with disastrous implications. When technology-induced networks are hyped at the cost of human development/capability-oriented reforms in governance, ordinary people get trapped, downgraded and wasted. Such a process has substantial political implications as well. The process takes its toll by threatening, minimizing and even ending, the traces of dissent and critique vis-a-vis the effectiveness of network initiatives. In India “ICT”—the ‘backbone’ of networks—is a buzzword, a political rhetoric, a magic wand—which is supposed to do away with the symptoms of underdevelopment that “cannot” be addressed otherwise. In this technocratic order the networks are too sacrosanct to come under critical scrutiny. To reiterate, in dealing with the excessively complicated interface of governance networking and technology networks the base-strategy cannot be a blind promotion of the latter at the cost of the former. Policymakers in the developing countries should keep in mind Tom Bentley’s poignant observation (2003): “Governance would be effective not just when every strategic centre is networked but when networks extend from blue sky of long-term strategy to coal-face of everyday experience”.

Notes

[1] Info Village was initiated by M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation in 1988. The objective is to provide value-added information for generating livelihood for the families of fishermen and farmers.

[2] e-Choupal, created by the corporate giant ITC, are information kiosks-cum-supply chain, providing local farmers information about agricultural inputs, farm productivity, scientific farming practices, market prices of crops, and also goods and services.

[Both initiatives have been part of the author's research projects.]

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