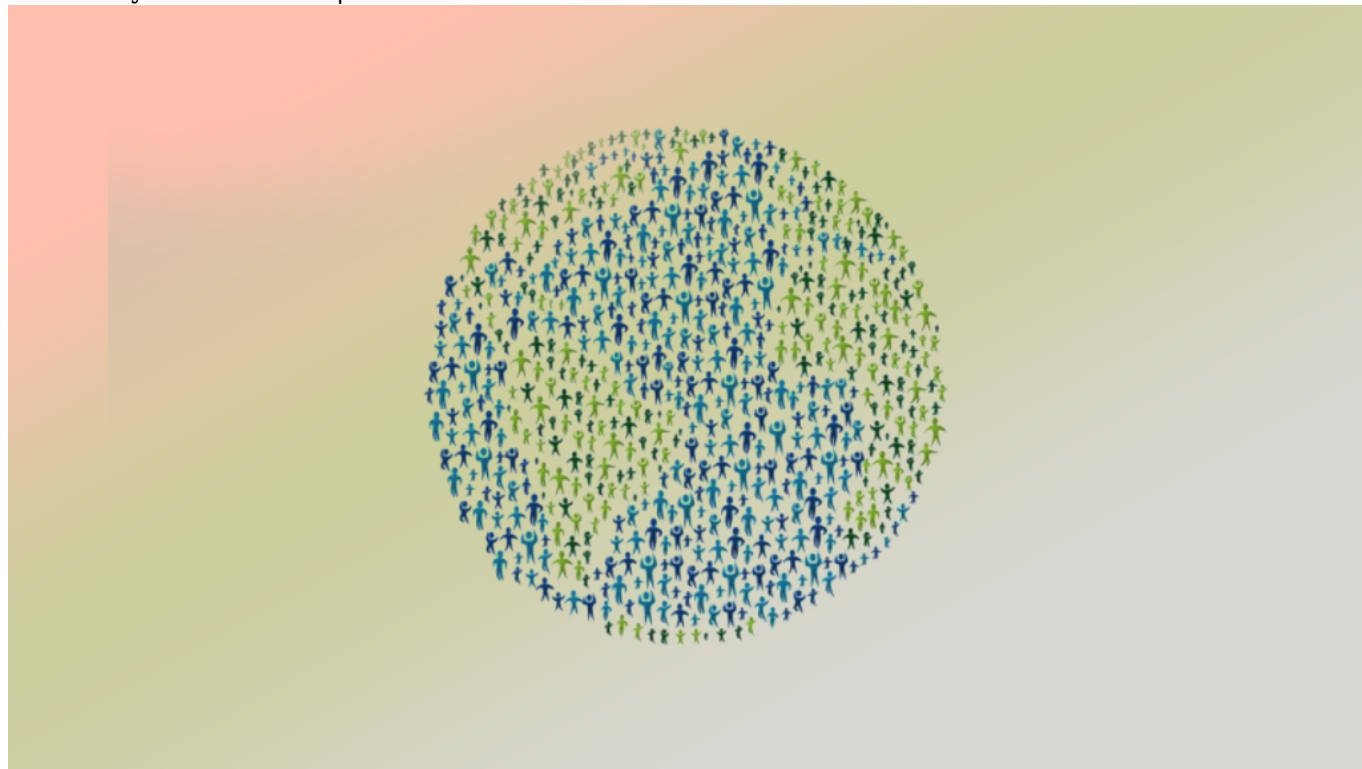


Data Divide Dilemma between Citizens and States

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Context - While this year's Economic Survey focuses on improving the quality and quantity of data for better and quicker assessment of the state of the economy, it pays little attention to access to the data by citizens, ignoring the criticality of data for a healthy and informed public discourse on issues of policy relevance.

Amassing of data by the government in itself will not lead to improvements, but its use by different stakeholders will.

Importance of Data

- In a digital economy, data is the central resource and Data is being considered as a nation's new wealth. How data is employed fruitfully, and its value captured, decides a nation's rank in the emerging new global geo-economic and geo-political hierarchies.
- Publishing accurate data and facts about various social, political and economic indications of the country is important for the effective working of a democracy. It is also an example of good governance.
- It holds the government accountable for its actions while giving a clear picture of ground realities, which in turn will help in policymaking.

Govt. Initiatives to Strengthen Data Infrastructure:

- The government has been proactively strengthening the data architecture for tackling corruption and better targeting of beneficiaries.
- Since 2014, the scope of UIDAI has seen a huge expansion. JAM (Jan Dhan-Aadhaar-Mobile) has private details of citizens.
- The government is sufficiently empowered to collect and use information about its citizens touching all the spheres of their life.
- Along with traditional instruments such as the Census, sample surveys and registers of various departments, the government is now armed with real-time data.

Challenges with Widening Information Gap

1. **Delayed release of survey data** - The citizen's right to access relevant data for quality public discussion seems to be gradually eroding. In this process, the government has refused to hold itself accountable. This is evident from repeated events of delayed release of various survey data. For example, data from the consumption survey 2017-18 has not yet been released.
2. **Undermining of scientific data** - Further, instead of relying on the Annual Survey of Industries (ASI), a systematically designed survey for estimation of industrial sector GDP, the government has started to depend on self-reported, unverified data submitted to the Ministry of Corporate Affairs since 2011. Now that ASI is nearly redundant for official estimation purposes, the future of this database is uncertain. Another example of undermining the scientific database is the delay in the release of Water and Sanitation Survey data 2018.
3. **Information gap** - The information gaps in the area of migration are well documented. While the JAM architecture and pandemic induced tracking tools allow for the mapping of individuals, researchers and the civil society do not have access to that information, which is useful to ascertain the level and prevalence of migration across regions within the country.

Way Forward and Conclusion

While there is a critical need to link the databases of various departments, it is not easy as territorial jurisdictions and household-level identifiers are likely to vary from department to department. There is a need to bring some mechanism to homogenize these various data sets with a single identifier. More importantly, there is a need to validate these data sets through urban local bodies and rural local bodies.

This data divide between the state and its citizens is a potential threat to the smooth functioning of a democracy. Without bridging this data gap, the scope of modern technology for tracking development cannot be realized.