

DEPARTMENT: REVIEWS

Review of *Lives of Data: Essays on Computational Cultures from India* by Sandeep Mertia

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Since the arrival of the Internet in India a little over two decades ago, numerous academics and practitioners have written about the promises afforded by the digitization of one of the world's largest economies. As a result, there has also been a widespread informational turn, which has included the generation of volumes of data on various aspects of everyday life and has seen the rise of several infrastructural frameworks that support data governance. Addressing these intersections of governance, computation, and knowledge production, in the introduction to this edited volume of 14 essays, entitled, "Lives of Data: Essays on Computational Cultures from India," [1] editor Sandeep Mertia asks, "How did data become so powerful, pervasive, and relatable in the first place?" (p. 9). This question frames a generative, critical set of conversations within the volume, ranging from the histories of data to its current socio-political forms and practices. The range of these conversations allows for a critical examination of the assumptions behind the origins and trajectories of computational data since the informational turn in India.

The book pays close attention to the sociotechnical relationalities of data, i.e., "the . . . ways in which data generates and is generated by relations among objects (digital and analog), people (collectives of users and nonusers), and phenomena (social and mathematical)" (p. 16) in India. This edited volume is noteworthy for the ways in which it offers a wide-ranging cross-disciplinary engagement with topics of interest to historians, anthropologists, data scientists, media studies and STS scholars. Each of the essays in this volume engages carefully with both theoretical and methodological questions that are common to studies of big

data and data infrastructures in India. Altogether, the essays also engage with the question of how this informational turn has impacted broader questions of biopolitics and governmentality. As Mertia notes, the book's focus on both the speculative and the material affordances of data allow for a sustained engagement with the numerous specific imaginaries and practices that come to be grouped under the realm of the digital. Most usefully, the volume remains continually attentive to the many pluralities and fragmentations within Indian digital infrastructures, as well as the ways in which they intersect with stark social hierarchies.

The five sections allow for an expansive interdisciplinary engagement with the historical and current ways in which computational cultures shape and are shaped by data. Organized into "Histories," "Forms," "Political Designs," "Practices," and "Fields," these sections provide a comprehensive set of frameworks through which to begin the complex and often unwieldy task of mapping how digital worlds and practices intersect with and influence governance. In the first section, "Histories," two chapters—authored by Sandeep Mertia and Karl Mendonca, respectively—explore links between the historical and contemporary contexts within which big data might be situated. Taken together, these two chapters offer nuanced commentaries on the ways in which historical entanglements between power, capital, and labor have shaped current understandings of the realm of the digital. In the next section, "Forms," Sivakumar Arumugam, Ranjit Singh, and Puthiya Purayil Sneha each write about different contexts—ranging from cricket targets to the study of Aadhaar, (i.e., the biometric ID card) and finally, to online cinema and poetry archives—in and forms through which data comes to matter.

Subsequently, in "Political Designs," three chapters by Lilly Irani, Anumeha Yadav, and Preeti Mudliar examine the ways in which questions of citizenship and belonging are shaped both by the implementation of national policies and failures in technological

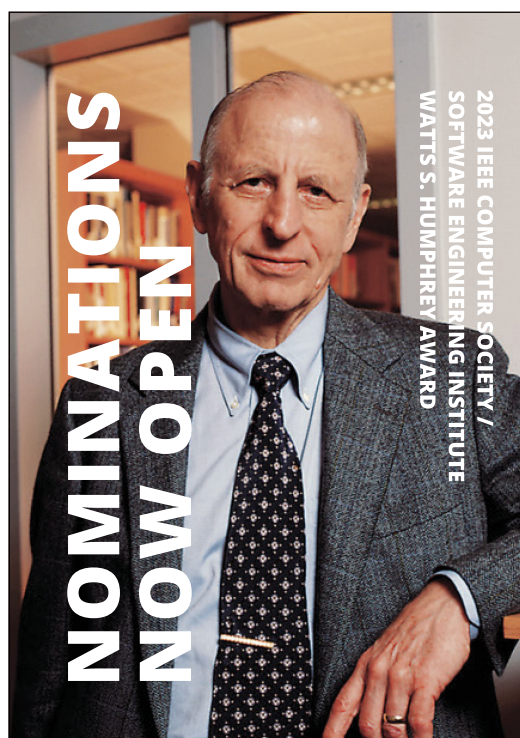
infrastructures. The chapters in this section offer a commentary on the various forms of labor embedded in sustaining, maintaining, and repairing data infrastructures. Next, in "Practices," Perna Mukharya and Mahima Taneja, Guneet Narula and Gaurav Godhwani offer three reflective essays on their work as practitioners engaged in making meaning of big data and implementing systems designed to collect these data. Coming full circle, in the final section, "Fields," Noopur Raval, Aakash Solanki, and Anirudh Raghavan draw upon ethnographic fieldwork to reflect on the ways in which data infrastructures and analytics come to be uniquely situated within historical contexts and practices. The chapters in this final section engage extensively with the work that numbers do as governing devices, both driving and being driven by ideological assumptions about the nature of citizen-state interactions.

This wide ranging, thoughtful collection of essays emerged from a 2017 workshop organized by the Center for the Study of Developing Societies in Delhi. As a result, while each essay offers its own uniquely

reflective engagement with ongoing debates on the use of big data in India, the volume also outlines several rich, thoughtful dialogues between authors within and across sections. Through their rigorous attention to the lives of data emergent in India, these essays also make significant contributions to ongoing conversations on the study of computational cultures in South Asia and non-Western contexts more broadly. Altogether, *Lives of Data* is a critical, nuanced compilation of cross-disciplinary scholarship of current interest to scholarly conversations and communities of practice, while also serving as a valuable resource for subsequent scholarship on computational cultures outside of non-Western contexts.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- [1] *Lives of Data: Essays on Computational Cultures from India*, Sandeep Mertia, Ed., Amsterdam, The Netherlands: Inst. Netw. Cultures, 2020.



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