Concept Note
The Chronicle Project: Documenting India
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Introduction

This proposal outlines the project to document India at the local level. While some such efforts were made in the British gazetteers, we break away from the framework of our colonial masters and go far beyond. We envisage a much more comprehensive, deeper and innovative design for this journey of nation's local, self-discovery. We call the project, *the Chronicle Project* (the Project, hereinafter)*,* and the product, *the District Data and Culture Hub* (the Hub, hereinafter)**.**

The project will be executed by the Centre for Knowledge Alternatives (CKA), FLAME University, starting with a pilot in two-three districts. The design of the is being envisioned as an online platform, in which users can add more information to enrich and update it over time.

Historical Background (the Gazetteers)

Perhaps the most notable efforts to document India was undertaken by the British. They created encyclopedic, geographic directories of India called the Gazetteers. Starting in early to mid-19th century, gazetteer-writing was crucial to colonial understanding of India and helped the British in ruling over the subcontinent. The gazetteers offered detailed, local knowledge about India, which they used to build political strategies, design institutions and build narratives on India.

Why did they go to such lengths to document India? Well, for Europeans, India was an explosion of a human diversity. They encountered a bewildering array of cultures, geographies and social norms. As they began amassing more power, it became clear to them that they needed a systematic information about the their subjects. They wanted to document this knowledge to make it easy for new British officers as they joined the districts. Such knowledge gave huge powers to the Europeans. Over time in fact, it also triggered the rise and forged the direction of Indian sociology and anthropology. [i] But of crucial significance of documenting India was the indispensability of data for legislation, famine relief, sanitation, epidemic control, judicial procedure and all other kinds of administrative purposes.[ii] Indeed, the British officers were also joined by Christian missionaries in this process of documenting.

The practice continued well into 20th century, with a view to give *'a new Collector a comprehensive, and, at the same time, a distinct idea of the district which he has been sent to administer.'*[iii] Lord Curzon for instance, went on record to indicate how important the gazetteers were to the administrative, revenue and police officers posted in that district, and remarked how frequently they were referred to.

Post 1947, the process of writing gazetteers has fallen into disrepair. States do have gazetteer department, but it has not been a priority for most of the time. This is a major oversight. A district gazetteer typically '*should describe all that is worth knowing about the district. It should be an authoritative*

reference book for the administrator, the traveller who has a little more than a fleeting interest in the country, the public servant, the social worker, the scholar and also the man on the street.' [iv] For such invaluable information devices, it is disappointing that an ordinary Indian has hardly heard of them.

Gazetteer writing was not unique to British India, but in this subcontinent, they were most comprehensive. Celebrated librarian Douglas Mathews, who spent ten years in India studying gazetteers, remarks that the these books '*give one of the most detailed and comprehensive accounts of **any** large country **ever** to appear, and as authoritative records of their period they are probably unrivalled anywhere.'* [v] He divides writing of gazetteers in three phases:

A. 1815-1881: The early official or quasi-official gazetteers were produced for small territories (e.g., Henry Morriss' *Godavery*, 1878), for states (e.g., Lewis Rice's *Mysore*, 3 volumes in 1877-78), for larger provinces (e.g., Akinson's on Northwestern Provinces or Hunter's on Bengal)

B. 1881-1903: W.W. Hunter began the process of systematically documenting gazetteers in the Imperial Series: the first 1869 proposal for Imperial Gazetteer of India published in 9 volumes in 1881, 14 volumes in 1885-87 and finally, 26 volumes in 1909. The 'Hunterian' system thus evolved became a standard in which gazetteers continued to be written afterwards.

C. 1903-1914: Finally, and perhaps most importantly, come the District Gazetteers published under the authority of provincial government. The general pattern was that each district gazetteer will have a basic 'Text' volume with details on the district's geographical, historical, ethnic, linguistic, economic and administrative nature and that it would be supplemented by a 'B' or Statistical volume which was to be updated over time. The statistical volumes were updated in the 1920s for most districts, and even in the 1930s for some. Perhaps, Arthur J. Dash's Darjeeling's Gazetteer 1947 is the last pre-independence B volume, an upgrade on its 1907's version.

Post-independence accounts

After independence, there was some enthusiasm to continue the practice of writing gazetteers. New princely states had joined which were to be documented, the existing accounts had to be cleaned up of colonial mindset and labels, and most importantly, their utility as administrators' handbooks had to be transformed to a new informational tool in the hands of the common man. The government even constituted an Expert Committee in 1955, to this effect.

Despite the promise, the exercise fell into disrepair, with less than half of the sanctioned gazetteers printed by 1975.[vi] Despite educationist politicians like Humayun Kabir pushing for the cause, the central government remained uninspired. In fact, there was some interest at state level (for instance, state of Bombay and Tamil Nadu had begun their work right after independence), but over time, even that waned.

In other words, there has never been any systematic effort to document local/district level details on its cultures and histories on one side, and development and governance indicators on the other. One is quite startled at the stark contrast between the overwhelming nature of the project of documenting British India, and that of apathy and ignorance of the same in independent India. Most district gazetteers produced in independent India are crude copies of the British gazetteers, following their framework,

format and even content. They remain un-updated, archaically constructed and non-interactive. Most states have gazetteer departments, lying in various ministries. For instance, in Haryana or Bihar, the gazetteer office is under the Department of Revenue & Disaster Management Department; in Maharashtra and Karnataka, it falls under the Cultural Affairs Department. Amongst large Indian states, very few gazetteer departments and their contents (Maharashtra, Karnataka, Haryana for instance) have an online presence, indicating some serious engagement with the idea, although that is not true for most others.

The Need for New Imagination

The world has moved fast ahead, and there is a need to go beyond traditional ways of knowledge production and consumption. While gazetteers do carry some value, and while we do draw some inspiration from them, there are deeper reasons to go beyond them. Gazetteers carry British legacy, a historic outlook and a colonial lens to view India. Most people are unaware about them, but these accounts have been the most important sources for constructing knowledge about us. In fact, when we study about India today, we are really studying British experience of India. Despite the presence of the factual details they carry, reading a gazetteer is like going through the colonial script of India. The chapterization, the articulation of history and people, the cultural attributions, focus on specific parts of how we live(d), the governance impulse and self-selected indicators that impact certain vision of governance clearly makes it a document in and for the hands of a ruler, visibly alien. Even the post-independence ones have not shed those 19th century anthropological frames.

We need to go beyond. We need to dissolve such frames to evolve new ones that truly reflect a self-discovery. This can be done through creating new imagination of documenting ourselves. We need to develop participative, collaborative and untheorized accounts of India. We want to collect and synthesize knowledge about ourselves in our own way, the way we experience ourselves.

Most of all, we need to do it locally. It's unfortunate that even though we have fairly comprehensive knowledge and large-scale insights about India, sometimes even its states, the details of district or a taluka however, are entirely absent. We know about big, metropolitan cities, but barring some of them, the only way to even vaguely know about India's local societies, economies and cultures, one has to visit them. They are like those surrealist paintings, which only make sense at a distance, rather than as a whole (poetic for a country like India, perhaps).

Each district administration maintains their own websites, but most of these websites are static, and thinly populated with content. Information remains very scattered, lackadaisically developed and uninterestingly articulated. Wikipedia may be another source, but (barring a dozen large cities) their articles run into just a couple of pages. In fact, travel websites and books are more detailed, but they focus only on tourist cities.

Such absence of district-level information of independent India stands in stark contrast to the painfully detailed documentation of British India. Such absence of local knowledge encourages parallel biographies

and narrativized ideological battles to mushroom. It also sets the path for dysfunctional policy and decision-making. Worst of all, ignorance about one's own place disconnects her identity from it, and without any belongingness, a collective indifference emerges. In the globalizing world already facing battles of knowledge, consequences for diverse society like ours can be disastrous.

This does not need to be this way. *Firstly,* India has one of the most comprehensive systems of data collection (census and various economic, household surveys) otherwise in place. The vast machinery of district-level departments and bureaucracies are also required to keep a record of information relevant to their departments. *Secondly,* the rise of information technology and internet allows meaningful collection, integration and diffusion of this information very efficiently.

If decentralization is the future of governance, then local-level knowledge and information is a prerequisite. The goal is therefore, to collect and curate district-level data and history, for greater use by not just the governments but also (and perhaps more importantly), the people. A nation that moves from one century to the next must shed anxieties about its future and history, and ride in the vehicle of coproduced knowledge. We need to give our districts and talukas, the power to define their identity and their own development agenda. If this is not the promise of democracy, one wonders what is.

For this, we must imagine new designs to document India! We must imagine a Data and Culture Hub of a district/taluka.

The Design of the Project

We aim to need to develop an informational tool which gives communities access to data and information about them, which they can use creatively for their own good.

The rise of technology has given us new ways of assessing and comprehending information. The idea is to create and develop this repository in an online platform, which is open-access, and allows access to anyone, anytime free of cost. Over time, it will be modelled with user generated content (web 2.0) so that district administration, government, scholars and ordinary people can continue to enrich it over time (one can think of a highly interactive Wikipedia-type model).

With this, a number of possibility emerge. The portal can be participative, data-heavy, but meaningfully illustrated and even aspirational, using tools that allow planning and envisioning.

The existing information at local levels remain in a scattered, disaggregated form. There is need to integrate it all. The project will be characterized by spatial imagination through extensive use of maps, and filled with illustrative graphs that enable us to see the trends. It will also enable populating photographs and videos that will allow people to see the information come alive, and the ways their regions are changing with time.

The Project will have three parts. Part 1 will cover history, society, geography, geology, folklores and culture of the place, part 2 will illustrate the governance and development indicators revealed under agriculture, industry, health, education, occupation, labour, law and order, revenue, and the like. Part 3 will propose designs for future.

Note that for part 1, the Project does not embark on re-writing history of India, but merely retelling of it in more intelligible form as well as bringing out the little-known stories from historical records and archives. The idea is not to depend on any theory or position, but simply express what exists, or has existed in archives, historical and oral accounts. This is not an exercise in interpretation or hermeneutics, with any predetermined frame or normativity.

The project helps us build relationship with places we live in. The end-product will therefore, stand for:
- Identity and Soul of the place
- A new citizenry
- Policy analysis and intervention
- Inventory of knowledge for both local entrepreneurs and big businesses
- Recording traditions, folklores, cultures and memory
- Governance and Transparency
- Imagination for unique, preferred futures

Potential Impact

The Project and the Hub will assist (a) local administration, (b) local entrepreneurs for understanding markets better and/or connecting them with larger value chains, (c) ordinary people on the street, wanting to know (their own) history and heritage. There are five levels of impact envisaged.

Firstly, it will recreate histories fueled from local narratives in addition to existing accounts. This instils the much-needed pride in the population about their own roots, heritage and traditions. Every culture and society are entitled to feel proud about their own traditions and heritage. The project can excavate the buried confidence and pride of people in their own lands and stories.

Secondly, greater informational access will lead to a more rigorous policymaking, helps evolve intelligent interventions and a creative better planning for the future. The governance mechanism of any district or a taluka needs meaningful data, spatial imagination, and emotional understanding of the target beneficiaries. These documents will help familiarize new bureaucrats with the district they govern, giving insightful infographics for better policy planning, that will allow data-based management of the district.

Thirdly, the Hub will be an ocean of ideas and data for the enterprising local population and businesses located far-off to harness that information for their use. People would connect with

each other, find gaps in the market, locate potentialities, understand regulatory processes and start their own enterprises. It will help build backward and forward linkages. If the next level of development is hinged on small town aspirations, the Hub will offer useful starting points for local market research.

Fourthly, like any knowledge resource, the platforms of the Hub will likely become a favorite dwelling space for curious visitors. Students, scholars and ordinary citizens will perhaps learn to make ingenious ways to use, and even enrich it. This may catapult tourism, and generate interest in the district even within outsiders.

Fifthly, the project can help integrate government and citizen engagement under one roof. Government services are delivered by multiple departments. This Hub could be a one-stop platform, where services converted online by the government can be linked (with open APIs), so people can come to this portal, and use it to navigate themselves directly to the portals where online transactions can be done.

The Products

Raw data: We create a repository of raw data, mostly in digitized form, which can be made available for people to study. This will help more research and meaningful policy designs to emerge. The information will also build a strong culture of access that will go a long way in democratizing knowledge. The reputational gains for the districts will be very high.

Web-based Portal: We develop a web 2.0 type web-based application, where after the first design and framework is evolved, it is opened up for crowdsourced information and collective intelligence. People will be able to access the information in an interactive fashion, populate it with more information and use it for their everyday purposes. This portal will be used by citizens over time to claim their entitlements from the state. The district government will use it for their planning and evaluation purposes. It will also be used by local schools and colleges to help make their own children and youth aware of the local histories and engage with it. Tourists otherwise concentrated in some parts of India will find this portal extremely useful. It will also embed many locally available services by local or even distant entrepreneurs. Most of all, it will lend a useful tool at the hands of the state or central governance systems to design and implement better policies.

Book/Monograph: We will also publish books, with illustrations, maps, graphs to allow for those who enjoy reading rather than browsing information. The book will be populated from the web-based portal, some form of a condensed version of the portal. It will also lend a special significance for many people and institutions like libraries. For them, the book represents a historicity, and academic enterprise that cannot be matched with an online platform.

Publishing Laws and Ownership

Information revolution is here to stay. Indeed, local data is an idea whose time has come. This project therefore offers the first such opportunity for the grand vision of knowledge revolution. In undertaking the ambitious exercise, two points come to mind, namely, (a) is government allowed to publish the information expected in the project, and (b) is this data open, free and owned by everyone. The answer to both, legally, is a resounding 'Yes'.

Indian laws are very clear about it. The government actually has an expectation to publish in the public domain, all the relevant data that is required in the project. The RTI Act 2005 is very clear in this matter, with the goal of promoting transparency. It imposes a positive obligation on every public authority to publish vast array of information (all of which is part of gazetteers), and make it accessible to people. In particular, Section 4 of the RTI Act covers almost all kinds of information that the public authority has, or is likely to have, and expects all of it to be made public through appropriate dissemination. In fact, the definition of 'record' includes all kinds of documents, films, images, on stored in computers (section 2(i)), and 'right to information' consists of inspection and obtaining of work, documents, records, and even information in the computer (section 2(j)). Most of the time, government offices have too much work and therefore timely dissemination of the information is not possible. This project actually assists the government to fulfil its promise and advancing the principles of democracy and good governance.

As far as data ownership is concerned, since the project is not commercial in nature questions on ownership don't arise. The entire project and its related data is going to be in public domain, and hence no one will be single owner of the information.

By way of a Prologue

Textualizing anything has its own politics and cost. Any process of codification will inevitably ignore the un-codifiable, the tacit knowledge, something which often is more important than the explicit knowledge. Such processes come with an erasure of certain subjectivities and may even narrate selectively. They may eclipse certain scenarios and illuminate others. They may even end up trimming overflowing divergences. We are well aware of that.

But should this be the reason for the activities not to be carried out, is the real question. The point is not the merit of documenting, but the demerits of not.

We must recognize that codification in today's world is inescapable anyway. Cyberspace is inflating with all kinds of information being collected involuntarily. Organizations are collecting and slotting us in data categories without us knowing. Natural Language Processing programmes for instance, are absorbing vernacular languages and designing codified frames without adequate involvement with native speakers. The process of homogenization is aggressive. The idea of codification is one such whose time has come.

What we can do is (a) to allow for a user-generated framework which can change, improve and advance over time through people's participation, preventing the dominance of a singular narrative, (b) to document experience without a theory in mind, and (c) to have the it all documented by us, the natives, even locals, rather than outsiders.

The delight far exceeds the anxiety. note that written word creates a textual ecology of culture. It helps preserve local knowledge as well as knowledge about locals. It stores for future, the emotional and the conscious, ready to be retrieved by generations to come and enjoy a life of the past. It may fossilize stories and myths, but cultivates through it, a new generation of scholars and thought-processes in time.

Our Project and the curation of local information will be rich tapestries, treasure-trove of fun, emotion and knowledge. This will be quite a journey, punctuated with moments of despair and delight, in sheer abundance. This is an exercise of listening to a place. And if one listens carefully, the songs seem like calling us.

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[i] Srinivas, M.N. and Panini, M.N. 1973. The Development of Sociology and Social Anthropology in India. *Sociological Bulletin*, 22(2), 179-215.

[ii] Cohn, Bernard S. 1968. Study of Indian Society and Culture. In Milton Singer and B. S. Cohn (ed.) *Structure and Change in Indian Society.* New York: Wenner Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, Inc, at p. 17

[iii] See, Campbell, 1896, p. vii, citing Hunter's words in a letter the latter wrote in 1871): Campbell, James M. 1896. Gazetteers of the Bombay Presidency (Volume 1, Part I: History of Gujarat). Bombay: Government Central Press.

[iv] Chaudhary, P.C. Roy. 1975. The Story of the Gazetteer. *India International Centre Quarterly*, 2(4), 259-265.

[v] Mathews, Douglas. 1991. Gazetteers of India in the British Period. *IDC: Brill.*

[vi] Chaudhary 1975, *supra* n. 3