aapti institute

CITIZENSHIP & SAMAAJ
IN TIMES OF COVID

CONTEXT

This readback is based on a roundtable on Citizenship & Samaaj held on the 13th of April, 2020. This roundtable brought together experts, civil society leaders, social entrepreneurs and citizens. In the unique circumstances a pandemic presents, we believe there is an opportunity to reflect on the concept of citizenship. Citizens are increasingly framed as subjects of state control and surveillance, and this is mediated by technology. Citizens are seen as subjects to be tracked, followed, surveilled and in some cases, disinfected, rather than as right-bearing individuals who can engage with each other and seek accountability from the state.

Part of the discussion at the roundtable involved asking if there was another lens to imagine citizenship – one where citizens are enabled to exercise their right to engage with the state . We realise the risks with pushing for an imagination of citizenship as replacing the state or for one that forces citizens to engage. So, we asked if we could imagine pathways to support the right of citizens to be more active participants in the polity, engage with each other, and seek accountability. Citizens can be empowered to play the role of 'problem-solving' agents who are capable of determining hyperlocal solutions based on rich local knowledge.

Especially in the pandemic, we realise that any form of support for active engagement will involve technology. This is in line with the greater emphasis on technology in citizen state relations. These technologies are developed by market actors, sometimes with the government, and it is therefore important to critically engage with the scope of tech and potential harms, and ask how it can enable a meaningful engagement with polity. Social distancing and lockdown measures present limitations in citizen engagement, technology can support public problem solving and facilitate civic action.

From Aapti's lens, we wish to complicate the ideas of citizenship and technology in a way that fosters human rights and individual dignity, and supports the rights of citizens to engage with the polity. We hope to use this document and the engagement with you all as a starting point.

STRUCTURE

To frame the roundtable, we used an article by Ed Yong. Yong's piece outlines three scenarios on how Covid19 may pan out: dangerous, unlikely and long. The **dangerous scenario** is the worst case scenario and assumes that as cases spike, healthcare systems will be inadequately prepared to keep up with growing numbers of patients, resulting in high casualties and eventually herd immunity. The second scenario, called the **long scenario** suggests that the lifespan of the virus will be long and governments will launch protracted efforts to limit the spread till a vaccine is found. The last, and most unlikely scenario, is a perfect response on behalf of governments, where the virus is brought under control, but resurgence is also a possibility.

 Based on these scenarios, we mapped potential trajectories and initial thoughts on how this would correspond to forms of civic engagement in the figure below. This allowed us to enter into a

discussion structured along our themes (described below) to explore trajectories for engagement, the limitations of each approach, and the existing architectures that could be leveraged.

THEMES

While the primary responsibility lies with the government to provide citizens with basic necessities during an emergency, it is often the case that the State is unable to effectively serve the entirety of the population. As a result, there is an increase in citizen response and willingness to support underserved populations. Defined by Quarantelli as 'situational altruism', this driver of civic engagement is manifested in multiple forms. To guide our discussion, we have focussed on four broad themes of civic action:

1. Information & Knowledge Dissemination
2. Community Relief & Welfare
3. Resistance
4. Mental Health & Well-being

These discussions were held under Chatham House Rule. Quotes have not been attributed. Quotes are not verbatim and have been edited for clarity and brevity.
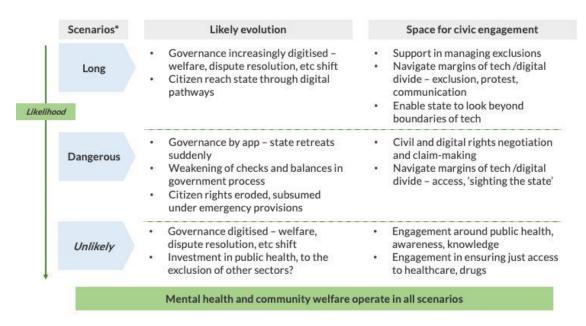

Scenarios*	Likely evolution	Space for civic engagement
Long	• Governance increasingly digitised – welfare, dispute resolution, etc shift • Citizen reach state through digital pathways	• Support in managing exclusions • Navigate margins of tech /digital divide – exclusion, protest, communication • Enable state to look beyond boundaries of tech
Dangerous	• Governance by app – state retreats suddenly • Weakening of checks and balances in government process • Citizen rights eroded, subsumed under emergency provisions	• Civil and digital rights negotiation and claim-making • Navigate margins of tech /digital divide – access, 'sighting the state'
Unlikely	• Governance digitised – welfare, dispute resolution, etc shift • Investment in public health, to the exclusion of other sectors?	• Engagement around public health, awareness, knowledge • Engagement in ensuring just access to healthcare, drugs

Likelihood (arrow downward)

Mental health and community welfare operate in all scenarios

Figure 1: Aapti's Covid Scenario Analysis – What are the implications on the citizen and state dynamic?

DISCUSSION

INFORMATION & KNOWLEDGE DISSEMINATION

Today, by virtue of increased communication channels, increased data availability and low barriers to content creation, there is a rise in misinformation and the spread of fake news. This spread of misinformation and fake news magnifies existing social cleavages (communal or caste-based cleavages), and also cause harm due misreported information about health and policy. Misinformation has dangerous consequences on the health, wellbeing and security of citizens. To mitigate unequal access to verifiable information and limited pathways to connect with the state, we were interested in understanding how citizens are actively seeking and disseminating knowledge within their communities, and how citizens can be enabled to quell misinformation, and the role of technology in this context.

We asked speakers how citizens are working within their communities to create new and innovative channels of communication to reach the most vulnerable and how instances of fake news and misinformation are tackled?

SPACES FOR CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Support citizen intermediaries and 'civic champions', to deliver critical information
Citizens can use a range of mediums, including pamphlet distribution, messaging platforms (WhatsApp, Telegram and turn.io) to reach mass audiences. This material needs to be created and made easily accessible.

Create tools and training to ease citizen access to welfare and grievance redressal
For further support, citizens can also help others in navigating bureaucracy and accompanying digital infrastructure.

Support trust building within communities
To combat sources of misinformation, work within communities to ensure that even if a contradictory news piece comes to a citizen from a family or colleague, a factual piece of evidence will be trusted instead. This comes from training and supporting citizen capacity by making the right information available.

Enable platform accountability through collectivisation
While complicated, with a critical mass, citizens can ensure that platforms remain accountable when misinformation circulates. This collective claim-making may be supported through offline or online mechanism

CONSIDERATIONS FOR STATE-LED ACTION

Verify or release statements to counter instances of fake news
The government, which includes police departments have the capacity to correct, verify and take action to prevent the spread of misinformation.

Enable opportunities for citizens to build an intermediary network for offline verification

Create space for citizens to more actively report instances of fake news or misinformation through a decentralised process.

COMMUNITY RELIEF & WELFARE

Formal, bureaucratic processes of distributing relief and welfare are often undermined by inefficiencies This is complicated by the lack of policies that universalise welfare, and also a compromised digital welfare distribution architecture. Civil society, comprised of NGOs and neighbourhood collectives, and also interested individual citizens, are emerging to provide rations and relief kits to those the state has been unable to reach.

We asked speakers about the role of citizens in delivering critical necessities when compared with the state and how can citizens can be provided space to help solve challenges that prevent effective relief.

SPACES FOR CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Support citizens to map hyper local demand and supply

Citizens often are better placed to identify demand and communicate this knowledge to local bodies much quicker than through a top-down approach

Provide platforms for citizens to act as 'architects for problem solving'

To prevent repetition and redundancies in the process, citizens can actively collaborate to solve these problems at a decentralised level. Platforms can enable such 'public problem solving'.

Enhance citizens ability to support and contribute capacity to Urban Local Bodies

Civil society has the ability to support local bodies in information delivery and increased cognitive bandwidth.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR STATE-LED ACTION

Strengthen and leverage existing local bodies like Ward Committees

Comprised of an inclusive group of citizens, these committees are formed to ensure government programs reach the last mile. These networks must leveraged by the state as they often have better knowledge and ability to translate state instructions and can keep in mind on-ground realities.

Facilitate decentralization by devolving power and funding to local bodies

While high levels of mistrust exist of local government, State Authorities need to grant local government support in enforcing policies. Local bodies often have better visibility of on-ground realities

RESISTANCE

In extraordinary circumstances like these, existing spaces for protest are limited by bans on mobilizing. This has forced, in some cases, these struggles to shift online. While online platforms still enable forms of virtual protest, they also expose and make citizens more visible to the state, which has ramifications on individual safety. In recognizing the inherent right of dissent and protest that citizens must possess, it becomes critical to understand how these individual liberties are balanced with public health & safety concerns by the State.

In this section, we asked speakers what digital protest may look like and what they identified as its limits. We also were interested to explore how existing sites of resistance can be strengthened and what the role technology will play in enabling this.

SPACES FOR CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Build ways to reimagine forms of digital protest

Protests may have to be reimagined on digital platforms, keeping in mind the penalty that those receive for voicing dissent. This requires active engagement with means of protest.

Facilitate citizen organization to align on broader objectives

Citizens must collaborate to identify and build cross issue solidarity and prioritize action based on needs and evolving realities.

Enable stronger collaboration by leveraging digital tools and platforms

Platforms that allow for anonymity can present digital safe spaces that assure citizens that their concerns are listened to. Citizens must consider themselves as relational networks, where through a snowball effect, they are able to bring individuals and a diversity of perspectives into discussions.

Engage people in authority or those with influence to amplify voices within campaigns

In order to strengthen citizen petitions and retain their authenticity, platforms can help bring in members of parliament, chief ministers and potentially celebrities.

Create and leverage tools to bridge technology access constraints

IVR platforms like Gram Vaani and CGnet Swara can reach citizens who have feature phones or those with limited access to internet.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR STATE-LED ACTION

Ensure spaces are maintained for citizens to exercise their right to protest and dissent both online and offline

There is a potential 'shrinking' of spaces to express dissent and concerns that post Covid, these sites will be limited to online forums.

MENTAL HEALTH

As public health concerns with Covid occupy the bulk of our conversations, it becomes necessary to also consider the implications of the pandemic on mental health. As isolation, growing uncertainties, and the economic downturn negatively affect the population at large, evidence suggests that those that suffer from underlying mental health conditions face a more serious risk.

Aside from questions pertaining to access of mental health infrastructure, we asked speakers: How is mental health considered and infused in our community movements? What is the role and possible limitations of citizens in delivering mental health support? How is technology currently employed to navigate lack of access to mental health services and what needs to be considered?

SPACES FOR CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Support younger organizations in building resilience

As organizations contend with the realities of Covid and build responses, it is critical to lend them support in aligning with larger movements and ensuring movement fatigue does not occur.

Employ the use of platforms as 'safe spaces' for individuals and to sharing best practices among mental health practitioners

Platforms allow individuals to share their experience and establish a sense of connectedness, hope and belonging. To mitigate negative implications of social distancing, platforms can be considered as virtual safe spaces for citizens. Mental Health practitioners can also use these forums to discuss and share learnings within their networks to build best practices. These include forming routines that emphasize learning and socialization, and building community-based systems that allow reporting/intervening on incidences of harm/abuse on the vulnerable segments (old people, children, immigrants, etc).

CONSIDERATIONS FOR STATE LED ACTION

Balance norms on social distancing with considerations on the development of safe spaces

Support citizen-led efforts to create virtual safe spaces and provide necessary facilitation to ensure citizens can equitably access these new resources.

THE WAY FORWARD

There is tremendous promise in shifting the perception of citizens as 'active' participants in shaping relief responses and structures as opposed to subjects of surveillance and bearers of disease. It is also worth considering what progressive possibilities may emerge for reforming citizen-state relations after this crisis. Relationships between the state can be re-negotiated to consider concerns like more effective last-mile delivery. As the state builds infrastructure for door step delivery, this could replace a model which required citizens to queue to receive claims and secure grievance redressal.

Centring citizens as critical actors while building relevant and effective covid responses allows for local knowledge and community networks to be effectively leveraged, and empowers citizens to design models for self-protection. In creating an enabling environment for civil society to problem solve, it is also imperative to consider the following:

Advocate for decentralization of relief management to local government bodies

Representatives at the district, sub-district and community level are more proximate to their constituents, benefit and act upon better information on conditions and can tailor policies to suit local requirements.

Empower citizen involvement by ensuring movements are relevant and accessible

The collective experience of outrage and uncertainty can be harnessed as a motivator for involvement. Movements must ensure their language is accessible and that imagery is translated into action and participation in local campaigns. Relevance needs to be strengthened by enabling citizens to feel personal connections to the work.

Ensure movements are inclusive of the needs of marginalized communities

Civic capacity-building must recognize existing community disaster strategies, including community models of sharing resources. These models of engagement must be included and brought to discussions around civic engagement.

THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY

While technology is increasingly being used as a tool by the State in digitizing governance and welfare measures, it is also harnessed to facilitate civic engagement across themes discussed above.

Based on our discussion, we see that technology exists and is being utilized to disseminate critical information and enable forums to mobilize communities. These technologies rely on networks of intermediaries, informants, mediators and supporters. This demonstrates the importance of building social and human architectures around technologies. In some spaces like resistance, technology potentially limits the resonance of protests and exposes citizens to repercussions for dissent. We are also witnessing the rise in innovation and creation of new technologies that can help us solve for

Covid-specific challenges like mental health. Going forward, we must ensure that the development of technology considers marginalities and access limitations.