

Digital India: Whose India? Whose agenda?

*Presentation from IT for Change*

Panel on Gendering Global Media Policy: Critical Perspectives on Digital Agendas

IAMCR 2015

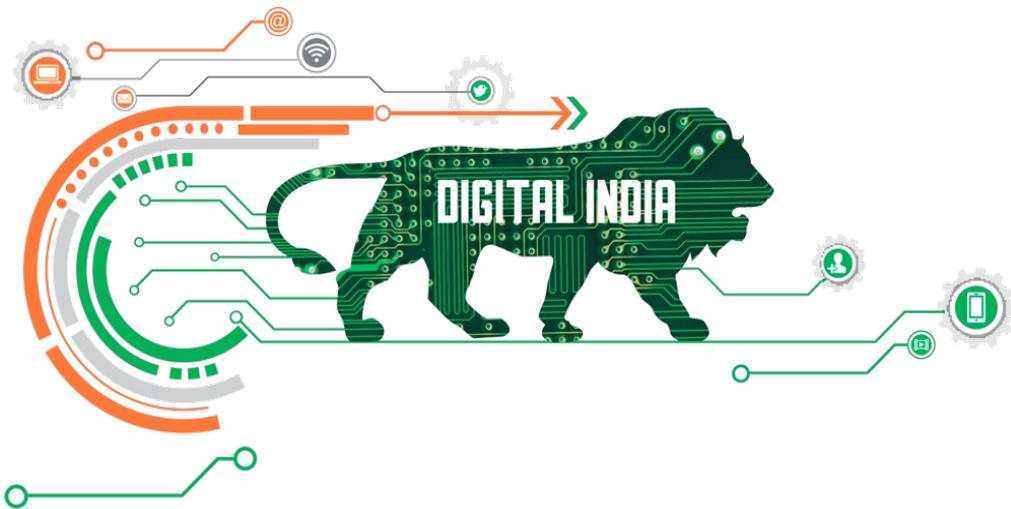
# 1. What is 'Digital India'?

- **Not just...**

a GOI programme launched in July 2015 for developing a e-gov plan for digitally transforming Indian economy and society

- **But a...**

political discourse contributing to a contemporary, hegemonic idea of the Indian nation



## 2. Understanding the 'Digital India' discourse

- Unpacking how the discourse of the digital intertwines with the 'Modi brand' of development that combines
  - a post-modern neoliberal aspiration of material prosperity, with
  - a disciplined idea of 'Indianness'.

### 3.Unpacking this requires us to..

- Adopt a Critical Discourse Analysis to deconstruct the seemingly discrete fragments of **Digital India**,
- In specific:
  - the idea of India
  - its gendered underpinningsas emerging in the Prime Minister's vision for the country...

## 4. Three main strands ...

- Governance and Citizenship
- Control over the public sphere
- Economic Growth

## 5. Women in the emerging technocracy of corporatised welfare

- India at a moment of complete transition from a traditional socialist welfare model to a **market-based poverty-alleviation paradigm**
- For the current regime, broad-based social welfare is a waste of resources, and market mechanisms are more efficient – rendering **welfare policy redundant.**

## 5a. Women in the emerging technocracy of corporatised welfare (cont)

- The Modi Cabinet's energies are completely devoted to:
  - Digitally rebooting the welfare apparatus through a unique identification card-based system for **replacing all social schemes with cash transfers.**
- Women's agenda the biggest casualty
  - women's budget slashed by over one-third; and livelihood and food security **programmes with demonstrated impact on women, strangled.**
  - cash transfers are to households and not individual women

## 6. Digitally reconstituted public sphere and the gender agenda

- The role of the digital in perpetuating the Modi brand of authoritarian populism
- Modi's strategic silence on debates on women's rights and gendered experiences of marginality – and playing to the male vote-bank

## 6a. Digitally reconstituted public sphere and the gender agenda (contd.)

- Is **#SelfiewithDaughter** an exception to this trend?

Not really

- Digital India has a place for patriarchal benevolence, for male celebration of 'daughters'....

but no room for dissent.

## 6b. No country for dissenters..

- Politics re-framed as spectacle and consent manufactured through:
  - Propaganda management (control of community radio)
  - Data suppression (UNICEF nutrition survey)
  - Draconian measures that contain any voice that threatens India's image (Greenpeace; the case of 'India's daughter')
  - Disciplining democratic debate (Mygovportal)

## 7. The digital economy: Space for (some) women?

- Grand vision for material prosperity focusing on
  - 1.8 million jobs
  - 720 million USD (45 lakh crore INR) of investments
  - digital highways across all villages (national broadband network)

# 7a. The digital economy: Space for (some) women?

- **Lip service to the idea of women's enterprise**

“Housewives” as partners in crowd-sourced digitalization of legacy government records

- **No fizz in the buzz..**

(a) Budget and economic policies don't recognize women as economic agents.

(b) Uneasy absence of women' struggles that stand in contestation

No other versions of economic truths (for eg. women farmers' struggles to prevent corporate takeover of their livelihoods and their commons)

No attempt to democratise the Smart cities discourse

# 8. Conclusion

- Digital India emerges through, and erects, a politically contingent, **gendered** idea of the nation, in a global marketplace.
  - the social contract is recast as a mutually serving arrangement between the patriarchal household and the patriarchal state through a technocratic welfare apparatus
  - democracy is emptied of its contents through the obscuring of gender politics – by strategic manipulation of the digitalized public sphere
  - promise of an IT economic revolution reinforces the masculinist desire of being a part of the global market-place – a vision in which only some women are granted a place as the enterprising class of volunteers.

## Conclusion (contd.)

- The state's digital agenda creates new versions of patriarchy, through carefully managed assertions and erasures.
- In this agenda, women's digital empowerment is co-opted in a compact of convenience between the nation state and the global market.
- This global digital agenda for women is merely a toothless, depoliticized idea of access - a post-modern construct of connectivity and freedom, uncoupled from structural justice issues.

## Conclusion (contd.)

- How can we move towards a **meaningful digital agenda for women?**
  - Bring into policy spaces alternative imaginaries of social, political and economic discourses that **challenge hegemonic narratives of the digital.**
  - This is a highly sophisticated endeavor where **women's rights activists and digital rights activists must join hands.**

Thank you!

Write to us at [itfc@itforchange.net](mailto:itfc@itforchange.net)