New Contexts and Sites of Humanities Practice in the Digital

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The last couple of decades have seen an increasing prevalence of digital technologies and internet in the study and practice of arts and humanities. With the growth of fields like humanities computing, digital humanities (henceforth DH) and cultural analytics, there has been a renewed interest in the increasing role of the 'digital' in interdisciplinary forms of research and knowledge production. DH in particular has become a field of much interest and debate in different parts of the world, including in India. Globally, in the last two decades, there have been several efforts to organize the discourse around this field which seeks to explore various intersections between humanities and digital methods, spaces and tools[1]. But DH also continues to remain a bone of contention, with several perspectives on what exactly constitutes its methodology and scope, and most importantly its epistemological stake. A specific criticism has been the Anglo-American framing of DH, located within a larger neoliberal imagination of the university and the higher education system at large. As a result, the connection of these two threads—a history of DH located in humanities computing and textual studies and its contextualization within the American university—is often represented as the history of DH. This has been met with resistance from several scholars and practitioners across the world calling for more global perspectives on the field. Drawing upon excerpts from a recently completed study on mapping the field of DH and related practices in India, this essay will attempt to outline the diverse contexts of humanities practice emerging with the digital turn, along with a reading of some of the global debates around DH to understand the discourse around the field in the Indian context.

Histories of a Digital India

The discourse around DH as a discipline/field is still developing in the Indian context, and the term has often been reiterated with respect to connections that technology has forged with education in general,

especially in relation to concerns of access, infrastructure and context. Some of these challenges however are much older, as seen in rising criticism about the growth of a seemingly neoliberal model of education that has brought about drastic changes in the functioning of universities[2]. These include debates on the privatization of education, the entry of foreign institutions and increased vocationalisation that have grown over the past decade[3]. Even as institutions have been grappling with several basic issues, often technology is seen as a recourse, in a large part also due to the futuristic imagination of a techno-democracy envisioned within policy. Classrooms have changed with the ubiquitous presence of technology, demanding a rethinking of curricula, and a move towards a digital pedagogy. Access to online spaces of knowledge production such as Wikipedia, and the prevalence of blogs, social media and new publishing platforms such as Academia or Scalar, have offered new opportunities to collaboratively produce and circulate research. Access to these 'smart' classrooms however remains a challenge, with issues of diversity and quality playing a key role. In fact the context of the introduction of the internet and digital technologies in India, like with most countries in the Global South, has been rather chequered, given a persistent digital divide.[4] From the development of Information and Communication technologies for Development (ICT4D) in different sectors to now programmes like Digital India that seek to foster new modes of e-governance, there has been a significant growth in the adoption of digital technologies by the state, and this has informed the discourse around technology more broadly. In the education sector in particular, there have been a slew of policy initiatives aimed at harnessing the potential of digital technologies and internet in developing more advanced learning environments, and addressing problems of access, quality and diversity in education[5]. Most recently, the report of the committee for the evolution of the New Education Policy (2016) outlined several recommendations for the use of ICTs at all levels of the sector, including teaching-learning practices,

remedial education, adult literacy, teacher training, and in governance and information management.[6]

Several memory institutions, such as archives and museums have also been investing in digitizing their collections, largely as a matter of preservation and record, but now with the possibilities offered by the internet they are also contemplating wider public access and outreach. The increased availability of digital technologies, better access through gadgets like the mobile phone and a culture of sharing has contributed to a growing interest to record, store and circulate information, and therefore the creation of large corpora of different kinds of material, both in terms of private collections and public archives. Problems with digitization still persist however, such as preservation of analogue material, curation, copyright, privacy, access to and usage of digital material. The digitalization of content in Indian languages poses a set of unique challenges such as sourcing of material, lack of Optical Character Recognition (OCR) for Indic language fonts, and wider circulation. The growth of a number of independent spaces of research and creative practice in arts and humanities however, often at the margins of academia and supported by the availability of funding from government and private resources, is another development here, that draws greatly from the affordances of new digital tools and platforms. The transition of archival practice to the digital space, and the growth of such alternative or peripheral knowledge spaces would be important factors for consideration in understanding the landscape of digitalization of arts and humanities practices in India.

This brief overview urges the need to locate the present debates around DH and related digital practices in India, within a wider imagination of the 'digital' and what it implies across different contexts, especially countries in the global South. For several reasons, there are various forms of scholarship and practice related to digital technologies that do not find themselves within the ambit of DH yet. This is not only because the field is still considered emergent in many places outside the Anglo-American world, but also because there is a need for a more critical understanding of digital technologies and their implications for the arts and humanities. Following criticism about the invasion of universities by neoliberal agendas, paving the way for more profit-driven forms of functioning, it is important to recognize what such a change has meant for the arts and humanities in particular, and where digital technologies play a role in realizing these mandates. In terms of policy alone, there have been significant gaps in terms of addressing the development of humanities, arts and social sciences, and what role digital technologies may play in them. The NEP Report 2016 offers few recommendations on arts and humanities

education in a detailed manner, in fact the larger policy itself has seen some criticism for being restrained in terms of its scope.[7] To go back a little earlier, a report published by the India Foundation for the Arts, Bangalore, in 2010, while offering several insights into the landscape of research in arts and humanities in India, remarks on the shifts that have taken place in these disciplines over the last three decades, largely in terms of a "renegotiation of boundaries of traditional disciplines, and emergence of new institutional structures and new interdisciplinary courses, or altogether new themes/fields of research". It identifies these shifts as a result of the way new and traditional institutions have articulated their research and funding interests based on a critique of the definition and constitution of established research practices within the domain of the arts and humanities, and adapted to the need for interdisciplinarity. The report notes that "UGC's existing measures and evaluation systems as well as its funding strategies have not adequately recognized and/or responded to these transformations" (IFA, 2010). Interestingly, the report mentions the importance of new media technologies and archiving practices in furthering innovative forms of research in the humanities. The NEP 2016 also devotes substantial thought to the role of ICTs as mentioned earlier, especially in the light of the Digital India programme opening up several new possibilities, but this is yet to speak to discipline specific issues. Also, the imagination is still in terms of specific tools and platforms as aiding a certain existing form of teaching-learning practice, rather than a focus on what new forms of pedagogy may be developed keeping in mind the digital environment that we now inhabit. Research in arts and humanities in India, and in new fields like DH need to contend with these challenges of a changing digital policy and socio-political landscape.

Doing Humanities in the Age of the Digital

Lata Mani (2015) notes that "critical political discourse in India has largely been shaped by the social sciences. However, the instrumental thinking of this period and its bequest, the transactional nature of communication, compel us to integrate into our practice a fresh reconsideration of language and of forms of representation, concerns core to the arts and the humanities." With reference to her work on video-poetry and a multi-genre collection, she illustrates how the 'exploratory sensibilities' offered by these disciplines may help render lived experiences closer, and positively inflect the terms of critical discourse. This offers several insights on the scope of these disciplines, and interestingly, as seen in the examples—how different forms and genres of representation—may effectively contribute to new ways

of thinking about not only core disciplinary concerns, but also critical discourse at large (ibid). The use of new media technologies, though not addressed explicitly here, is also a relevant point in terms of the role they play in engendering these new modes of representation. The advent of the digital has opened up several possibilities now for research, pedagogy, scholarship and practice in the arts and humanities, with the availability of a large body of cultural artifacts with digitization, as well as emergence of new kinds of digital objects which also require new methods of study. However, there is also a need for contextualizing these changes, especially in countries like India with an acute digital divide—where conditions of access and usage, transition from analogue to the digital, and the notion of 'digitality' itself need to be defined better. What questions about the scope, context and methods of such forms of enquiry may a field such as DH offer is an important question, as the field itself seeks to be interdisciplinary, and includes within its ambit even creative practices outside academia.

In India, debates around the term digital humanities have been largely within academic or university spaces so far, with digital archives, game studies, textual studies, design and cultural heritage being some of the key areas of work, spanning both academic and applied practices. Even with increasing interest in the field, there is lack of consensus on what it means in India, with questions around definition, ontology, and method remaining pertinent as well as the need for recognition within policy. The study on mapping DH in India tried to address some of these questions, through an exploration of several digital initiatives in humanities in India. Importantly, while a lot of these efforts may not necessarily identify themselves as 'DH projects' what they offer/represent are different kinds of responses to the new contexts and sites of humanities practice in the digital. One of the earliest instances of a project that speaks to some of these questions is a digital variorum of Rabindranath Tagore's works titled Bichitra, developed at the School of Cultural Texts and Records (SCTR), Jadavpur University. The variorum hosts a comprehensive collection of Tagore's work across several genres in English and Bengali, and uses a unique collation software, titled Prabhed ('difference' in Bengali) that helps to assemble text at three levels (a) chapter in novel, act/scene in drama, canto in poem; (b) paragraph in novel or other prose, speech in drama, stanza in poem; (c) individual words, thus helping trace variations across different editions. As the researchers behind the variorum point out, the most novel aspects of this 'integrated knowledge site' are these functions of cross-referencing and integration. The process of digitization itself is fraught with its own challenges, such as sourcing

material, lack of OCR for Bengali fonts, and problems of privacy and access among others.[8]

Two other recent projects that raise similar questions are: a) the Scottish cemetery project at Presidency University, Kolkata[9], an online archive of narratives which offers a comprehensive collection of images, stories and historical information on the cemetery and Scottish heritage, and tools to enable analysis of this data through flexible and comparative searches, building of timelines and creating map locators, and b) Two Centuries of Indian Print, a pilot project by the British Library and other partner institutions in India[10] which aims to digitize 4,000 early printed Bengali books and explore how digital research methods and tools can be applied to this unique digitized collection, through digital skills workshops and training sessions at Indian institutions to support innovative research within South Asian studies. All the above initiatives illustrate changing methodologies, prompted by new practices of digitization and notions of textuality, reading and writing.. Through the possibility of search and retrieval of data across a large corpus of different kinds of texts, such as maps for instance and using tools such as collation, they offer a new form of enquiry that is unconventional within textual methods and literary studies.

The growth of open-access publishing, although at a very incipient stage right now, is an important part of this evolving landscape. An interesting project here is KSHIP at the IIT Indore[11], which seeks to promote an open-access publishing model for academic work in Indian languages, by publishing original research monographs in Humanities, Social Sciences, Sciences and Engineering, and hosting peer reviewed journals from academic societies primarily in India. This is an important development that fosters an open access environment for better research accessibility in spaces that have traditionally followed standard subscription based models of publishing. Moving to a similar model of developing innovative platforms for creating and sharing content, Indiancine.ma and Pad.ma are two examples of online archives of film and video, which offer users diverse ways to engage with cultural content not just for storage and retrieval but also to work with them in multiple video and audio formats and themes through annotations and referencing, by adding transcripts, descriptions, events, keywords and maps. This recontextualistion of the film object also creates a new research object that necessitates new methods of study, apart from raising questions of ownership, access and diversity of uses of the archive[12].

In addition, several universities have already been offering coursework on DH or related areas which open up possibilities for a critical exploration of the

digital within existing disciplinary frameworks of media studies, oral histories, cultural archives, design and informatics for example[13]. Importantly, how do these approaches, within academia and outside then contribute to furthering core disciplinary concerns of the humanities? What kinds of skills and expertise do they demand of researchers/practitioners working in these fields? The interdisciplinary and collaborative manner of research and creative practice that these platforms require also encourage the development of new methodologies, and DH could be a place to develop, explore and critique these possibilities by rethinking forms of digital pedagogy. In fact, these challenges of method and scope can be extended to understanding ways of navigating and studying the internet at large, where forms or visualization, curation, search, retrieval and analysis of information in a meaningful manner have become increasingly complex given the vast amounts of material or data now available, but also being made invisible through forms of customization like filter bubbles and echo chambers. These processes continue to be informed by the availability and access to large databases of cultural material, and the development of infrastructure, expertise and resources that facilitate their creation and use in diverse ways.

DH and the Humanities Crisis

A much-debated essay published in the Los Angeles Review of Books [LARB] last year located the emergence of DH within a larger phenomenon of a 'neoliberal takeover' of the university, and highlighted a number of criticisms of the field, including its emphasis on 'building and making' (seemingly at the expense of interpretation and critique), the privileging of technical expertise over other forms of knowledge, and an apparent exclusion of perspectives that take into account race, gender and other minority voices in the larger global discourse around the term[14]. The LARB essay joins the extant criticism of the term[15], but it also raised several niggling concerns about the field itself that continue to remain persistent, becoming an important flashpoint in the global discourse on DH. While this traces the problems of definition on one hand, it is also that of unravelling its ontological basis, in the process also prescribing what it must be and do. Even as efforts at sketching out those boundaries continue, across disciplines and practices, it is also imperative to map how much of an uptake the field had found, whether in research, pedagogy or practice across diverse areas in the humanities. How various disciplines and practices engage with DH, its problems and politics also ties into the question of where they locate it. A large section of the global literature on DH clearly addresses a more prominent, available history which can be traced to humanities computing[16]. A few scholars, including those in the LARB essay have countered this with a history of DH emerging from textual studies, an important precursor to much work being done today in the field, and where the authors also locate its criticism about being apolitical, or not political enough. The authors suggest that through its focus on archiving materials, and developing tools and building software, DH has often been also seen as reverting to a form of cultural conservatism[17], lacking in a political or critical stake, pandering instead to a 'corporatist' imagination of the university. The implication is that in its focus on building certain kinds of skills and practices, DH is instrumental in serving the mandate of a neoliberal university.

While this criticism importantly reflects larger changes in the university system, and higher education in general, it is still also a specific Anglo-American framing of DH which traces a history in humanities computing and textual studies. The criticism of a neoliberal takeover of the university has been expressed time and again by scholars, a not so recent example being a lecture by Noam Chomsky (2013), where he laments the impending 'death of American universities' due to the growth of a corporate business model, emphasizing on certain kinds of practices, skills and forms of education, often to the detriment of others. He also talks about the introduction of a condition of precarity into the education system due to these changes. The growth of the adjunct system, resulting in reduced full time employment and poor compensation, no security or benefits, the rise of a class of administrators that changes conditions of academic labour, and a gradual rethinking of the practices and objectives of higher education are some of the factors outlined by Chomsky[18]. These speak clearly to the apprehensions about a 'crisis' in the humanities and liberal arts [19] which has not only been a subject of much debate in academia over the last decade or so, but has also been a prominent aspect of the global discourse on DH[20]. As many scholars also point out, the crisis has led to reflection on traditional forms of enquiry in the humanities, and the need to engage with creative practices and diverse skills outside the academic context. The advent of digital technologies is seen as both adding to the challenges posed by these changes, but paradoxically also helping to address them. In moving away from conventional forms of research and practice, it expands the scope of work that can be done in the humanities, but at the same time there is also a perceived threat to traditional forms of research and practice, as reflected in the criticism around methods such as distant reading[21], or building, hacking and making.

Closer home, initiatives like Humanities Underground (HUG)[22] have been proactively responding to this idea of a crisis, by contributing to and documenting emerging research, writing and practice in humanities and arts in India. As they note, the increasing pressure to vocationalize and professionalize the humanities is something that has evoked several anxieties, as these are often seen as a detriment to traditional disciplinary concerns, and its functions of political critique. There is also a need to understand in a more nuanced way where the digital is implicated in these changes, and what that means to the humanities, beyond facilitation of certain forms of communication and ideas. Most importantly, the changes in the humanities need to be located within a context of existing issues within higher education institutions – such as lack of autonomy, funding constraints, need for rethinking pedagogy and assessment, concerns about employability, restrictions on access to education by women and marginalized communities, and curbs on freedom of expression among others. The digital has been a space of resistance towards these issues, with innovative forms of writing, activism and research especially around caste, gender and sexuality taking place within the online space, and any exploration of the scope of DH as a field will need to engage with these concerns as well. Through an engagement with humanities work in multilingual and multimodal (including offline) forms, these contexts need to be brought to bear upon a study of the evolving digital landscape in India. DH, therefore, is as much about the humanities in a digital environment as it is about the 'digital' or technological, and separation of these threads could lead to concerns of the field becoming apolitical or lacking in cultural criticism. To paraphrase Shah (2015), 'the challenges of the digital humanities are two-fold in India, where it needs the support of state infrastructure to mitigate issues of access, wider outreach and enrollment of the masses in higher education, but as a result it also becomes aligned with its neoliberal imagination of technology; secondly, it needs to repoliticize the stakes of higher education by rescuing it precisely from the onslaught of these neoliberal mandates of careers, employability, access, etc, which distance it from its core concerns of human and social interest.'

In Conclusion

The above are examples of digital initiatives and emerging digital forms that in many ways speak to some of the larger, global concerns about DH, and outline the contexts and sites of the field in India. Yet how much of the learnings from these practices have pervaded the discourse around DH in India remains to be explored, for there still is a need to effectively document and understand what is an Indian practice of DH, within and outside the university context—which accounts for and is influenced by larger questions about the digital landscape in the country. There is a resistance to a perception of American DH as a global narrative of DH, as seen in the work emerging from different parts of the world, especially from countries in the global south, but also in strands that address concerns of gender, race, ethnicity and accessibility within the prevailing discourse[23]. The criticism about DH being a manifestation of the neoliberal policies of the state may not be explicitly visible in India yet, but as a field that is premised on the use of digital technologies, it may soon be asked the same questions. While the attempt here is not to argue against, compare or separate these threads, they do offer a possibility of tracing a history of objects and practices that are specific to India. Some examples of the directions that such an enquiry may take are: How do we understand the digital turn in the creation of cultural repositories, and where do they challenge the norm of colonial archival practice? How do challenges of Indian language content and tools inflect the practice of doing DH in India? What are material practices of reading and writing, and oral histories that we could trace as precursors to notions of digital textuality? These are just a few of the emerging entry points to this enquiry. Importantly, whether such iterations could also help form a different basis of fields such as DH, which is not only aware of the role of neoliberal agendas in the growth of the internet and digital technologies itself, but then may also offer a space to critique the same would be pertinent. These would provide several insights into the not only the growth of fields like DH, or new media and digital cultures more broadly, but also help to map shifting modes of research and practice in the humanities and arts in India.

Notes

1. For some of the early works on the field see: A Companion to Digital Humanities, ed. Susan Schreibman, Ray Siemens, John Unsworth. Oxford: Blackwell, 2004. http://www.digitalhumanities.org/companion/. Also see the CUNY Debates in DH series edited by M.K Gold, published by University of Minnesota Press: http://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/

2. Nayak, Dhanwanti. 2014. Understanding the Logic of Neoliberalism in Higher Education. Economic and Political Weekly. Vol. XLIX. 13. March 29.

3. Tilak, Jandhyala B.G. Higher Education Policy in India in Transition. Economic and Political Weekly, March 31, 2012 vol xlviI no. 13.

4. For more on this see the Centre for Internet and Society's monograph series on 'Histories of Internets in India', 2011. https://cis-india.org/raw/internet-histories

5. For a detailed overview see Nishant Shah in "Beyond Infrastructure: Re-humanizing Digital Humanities in India" (2015), where he notes that such policy reform still falls within a rubric of 'infrastructure building' that is geared towards addressing issues of access to education, digital literacy, unemployment and economic development with the motive of India becoming a significant player in global information societies. He further argues that the assimilation of digital humanities within this existing discourse of the state has also led to a flattening of earlier histories of 'science-technology-humanities-society studies' that were initiated by the state. Also see Sneha, P P ' Context' in Mapping Digital Humanities in India, 2016

6. National Policy on Education 2016: Report of the Committee for Evolution of the New Education Policy. Government of India. April 30, 2016. http://www.nuepa.org/new/download/NEP2016/ReportNEP.pdf

7. Gupta, Vikas. Politics of the Guarded Agenda of National Education Policy 2015–16. Economic and Political Weekly. October 15, 2016 vol lI no 42

8. For a more detailed description see interview with Prof. Sukanta Chaudhuri in Mapping Digital Humanities in India, 2016.

9. http://readinggamesplayingbooks.com/scots/

10. https://www.bl.uk/projects/two-centuries-of-indian-print

11. https://iitikship.iiti.ac.in/site/about/

12. For more on these archives see https://indiancine.ma/ and https://pad.ma/; also interview with Ashish Rajadhyaksha in Mapping Digital Humanities in India, 2016.

13. As an indicative list see courses offered at Jadavpur University (https://sctrdhci.wordpress.com/about/the-course/), Presidency University (http://dhgenedpresi.blogspot.in/) and Srishti School of Art, Design and Technology (http://srishti.ac.in/programs/pg-program-ma-in-digital-humanities)

14. See: Allington, Daniel, Sarah Brouillette and David Golumbia. 2016. "Neoliberal Tools (and Archives): A Political History of Digital Humanities." Los Angeles Review of Books. May 1, 2016.

15. For more on this see Stanley Fish, "Mind Your 'Ps' and 'Bs': The Digital Humanities and Interpretation. New York Times, January 23, 2012; Stephen Marche, "Literature is Not Data", LA Review of Books, October 28, 2012 and Adam Kirsch, "Technology Is Taking over English Departments", May 2, 2014.

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20. Liu, Alan. "The Meaning of the Digital Humanities" PMLA, 128(2). March 1, 2013. http://escholarship.org/uc/item/5gc857tw#page-12

21. Franco Moretti, Distant Reading, 2013.

22. http://humanitiesunderground.org/

23. See Roopika Risam, "Beyond the Margins: Intersectionality and the Digital Humanities" DHQuarterly, 2015.

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