



Interrogating the Politics of Materiality: From Paper to the Digital

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Introduction

Everything all around us is getting digitized, is in the process or has already been digitized. The Internet of Things (IoT)ⁱ has greatly led to interconnections among these varied digitised entities, previously unconnected even when digital. However, now this seamless connection and access enabled by IoT by the proverbial click of a button or now just as simple as opening an app in our mobiles creates a sense of ubiquity, previously unheard or unseen. Digital revolution as we have come to call it now has been something that all governments and different human societies all over the world are vying to achieve.

The question however, one needs to ponder in order to understand this popularity of the digital is to first understand what entails this digitality? How has it come about and why is it that it is so popular? Such an explanation can be arrived at if we were to attempt to do so by looking at the government's initiatives towards e-governance especially in their attempts to digitise paper documents. This push to e-governance or 'Electronisation'ⁱⁱ as the then Finance Minister of India, Pranab Mukherjee calls it explaining the Government push for ICT in governance showcases that this allure of the digital has been most felt in the world of documents.ⁱⁱⁱ

Documents, documentation and ensuing documentary practices and its resultant manifestations such as identity documents, ownership titles, deeds, affidavits, licences, certificates, passes, tickets, cards, labels, tags, transcripts, manuscripts, archives, databases, repositories, libraries etc all have an important role to play in our lives.^{iv} Digitisation of these documents has meant transcendence of these documents based on paper to moving unto what can be increasingly called as 'digital' documents^v. Such digital documents bereft of its previous materiality is what has attracted the attention of countries world over^{vi} and so of this article as well. It is this change of materiality of paper documents that entails this digitization.

It is also exactly here that this article too wants to make a point of investigation. It does so by seeking to understand this movement of documents and documentary practices from the paper to the digital. This article is such then divided into three parts. The first part endeavours to study the connection between paper documents and us and possibly how this connection is made possible by the materiality of these documents based on paper. The second part tries to build the argument as to why this transition from paper documents to the digital documents has become an increasing necessity for governments world over, including us. The third and the concluding part of the article analyses this change in terms of characteristics of the digital document. As to whether this loss of materiality of the documents forbodes anything for us apart from the well-advertised and glamorised points about heralding the coming of more networked, interconnected, interdependent, efficient and smart world that the drive towards digital promises to bring.

'Wonder that is paper'. Materiality of the paper documents

Barry Smith in his essay titled '*Document Acts*'^{vii} lists the things which we could do with paper documents which were not previously available to us with other modes of documentation and the things include: sign, countersign, fill in, stamp, copy, witness, notarize, transfer, inspect, validate, invalidate, table, ratify, destroy, propose, amend, revise, nullify, veto, deliver, display, register, archive, falsify, redact, etc.^{viii} However, a qualification that needs to be mentioned here is that usage of paper for such purposes was available since its discovery^{ix} nevertheless it was only with the advancement in production of paper, of printing techniques including mass printing^x and most importantly the legitimacy accorded to paper by these premodern states that paper documents start gaining ground.

All of this however, would not mean that identity documents came to the fore only with the starting of mercantilism/industrial revolution that is when premodern states came into being.^{xi} For identity documents were there and have been found to have been in existence since human civilizations began^{xii}. What is so specific though about these documents that we need to pause for a specific time in history and bring this out and talk about it? The answer to which would be that it was around this time four things



start to happen to these documents. *First, it became all pervasive*, documents were required for everything especially, identity documents.^{xiii} For the vagaries of industrialization brought in its wake many unwanted characters and realities. The threat of journeyman, the highwayman or the vagabond became so big a threat to societies and nations that character certificates were instituted to be attached with identity documents.^{xiv} Anyone found wanting in either was looked with suspicion, arrested or even banished or turned away from that place.

Second, nation states were to increasingly find that identity documents do indeed play an important role by having that unique ability **to control the mobility and movement of people** in space/distances (Torpey, 1997). It allowed for certain kind of people to have access to certain spaces while held in check other such people which were considered inimical to it, may it be because of war, crime or diseases. In this respect, identity documents helped in sieving if we were to use that analogy the good from the bad, the useful from the unwanted, and the diseased from the healthy.^{xv}

Third, the existence of such identity documents meant that they would have to be cross referenced somewhere so that if a case of doubt arises they can be cross checked. The need for this led to registers, ledgers, accounts. Entries were to be made in such before documents or for that matter identity documents issued. This allowed for **creation of collective memory of the state** (Matsuda, 1994). This memory which is a collective and which remains stored in the humongous entries, files and registers of the State thus creating for it the possibility and capacity of recall.^{xvi} Such a possibility and coming of the collective memory of the state opened up new frontiers regarding the governance mechanisms of the state. For the state the ability to recall what is where, who is whom, how much revenue is expected and accrued, where and how state resources are and whether they have been utilised for the correct perception or not opened up new governance strategies chief among which were the need to standardize and make things legible for the State (Scott 2002). Wherewithal it allowed State to employ strategies over what it held and ruled which now seemed to include not just the lands, the vegetation, the resources on or below it but also allowed it to look at its people as something which could be utilized, managed, moved about.^{xvii} Populations came increasingly under the ambit of understanding of what Foucault holds and now we understand as governmentality.

Fourth and the most important and remarkable thing if we were to look carefully around this time would be the materiality of the document itself for it undergoes a change. For there are appears to be a change in not just how documents or for that matter identity documents come into the fore and operate and for reasons which pre modern states find it appealing for its use but also in what they (identity documents) are composed or made of. The perceptible change in this regard has been the coming and the popularity of **paper documents**. As paper because of its intrinsic characteristics must have been very easy to source, produce and also easy to carry and incase of a need to make another document arriving out of the loss of the previous one unlike other modes of document (Smith, 2014). Again, paper as a medium without losing its characteristics would allow for further correction, adjustments and new information to be transcribed on it if it is required.^{xviii} One added advantage that paper documents had was of predurance because of which it scored over ‘speech acts’^{xix} or over other kinds of documents.

Paper also, importantly, as a material artifact or object could be interlinked with various other multiple documents.^{xx} This then helps in creating audit trails through such documents but they also help create new document complexes like mortgages, mirroring like those of the debtor-creditor relationships among institutions or people involved (Smith 2014) examples of which would be the financial derivatives (product) based on multiple mortgages bundled into one. However, these document complexes also create for construction of social realities, where our existence or our relationships with others or the government have come to be described by the kind of documents that we have or not have on us. These realities are then based and constructed on the legibility of these paper documents. It is this assumption that the paper documents are able to provide us and help it seed with supposed truth that it has made creation of realities such as paper currency as money true.

The effect of paper documents: materiality and politics

Now consider a few examples of other such realities. A smile flows over the face of a lover on reading the letter from her beloved, euphoria hits the candidate on seeing his employment card, a slum dweller reverently places his ration and voters card alongside the deity he worships every day. Old school notebooks hit us with nostalgia of times past. A first time voter standing on the line to vote clutches her voter card with youthful exuberance. A student is apprehensive about showing her mark sheet to her parents. A young cadet is filled with pride as she gets a letter confirming her appointment in the army.

A variety of actions takes place in these examples. As we see, every example showcases people of varied character coming in contact with some form of documents or other and how they interact with it and how eventually they react to it. Each having a different cause and a different effect, yet we can discern that there are three things which are similar. First of which would be that all these examples are concerned with documents encountered in one form or another. Second that all these people, while coming



in contact or while interacting with these documents, seem to evoke certain emotions or feelings. Third, such emotional responses or affect we can say seem to rise not just because of the message in those documents but because of the documents itself and most importantly because of the materiality of these documents i.e. all these documents were based on paper. How paper in its intrinsic capacity accruing out to its materiality is able to open up umpteen capacities and probabilities of emotions in humans when they come to interact with them.

We now know through the works of Matthew Hull (2012), Veena Das (2004), Goody (1986), Cody (2009), Verdery (1994, 2003) Riles(2000), Sharma & Gupta (2006) among many others that documents are not just media or medium of representation or signifier but that documents through their material form are able to evoke affects on people. This latent characteristic of the materiality of documents and in case of bureaucratic documents like identity cards again allows for creation of a certain kind of political space where people become political and in their interaction with the government through these documents contest the governmental strategies directed at them.^{xxi}

Again, paper because of such peculiar characteristics is able to become the person, entity, object or an agent if and when on an intent or intentionality is brought upon it, through a method of writing, printing, paintings, etc. Such intentionality might be through a variety of means. However, that intentionality is not something which is to be ordained on the paper document alone. For it was found that paper documents too on their own exert their own intentionality on the *intentioner* in the process of altering, modifying, editing or even in usage have come to exert an external intentionality on the users or those handling the documents.^{xxii} Such an external characteristics of paper documents however, it is now held is so because of the peculiar and particular nature of the paper document itself.

But how all of this came about, how is that simple documents were able to do all of this? How is that people, things and ideas come to be encapsulated within the realm/grasps of documents? So much so that nature itself came to be encapsulated within this realm. Why is that changes in the documentary realm were leading to changes in the physical realm of things, object and ideas. Documents as such were not just affecting the material world but also having its impact on the ideational realm. Our existence and reaction thereof have forever become embedded in this phantasm world created by paper documents. A change in one was having a corresponding change in the other and in most of the times it was found that changes were sought to be effected in the documentary realm so as to bring the desired change in the physical realm too.

However, this becomes problematic when we see that the documentary world is not completely phantasmic but the phantasm is allowed for, created and maintained through the existence of documents which again is possible because of its materiality.^{xxiii} This as we have come to know now through Matthew Hull's scholarship on materiality of paper that it rests not only on the matter of the document itself i.e. paper but also on its method of production, how it seeks to have certain criteria's on it, how it seeks to get operated on the official settings, how its movement in the bureaucracy is mediated, how it ultimately comes to rest in terms of mobility and how it eventually gets archived and kept as records and lastly how such archives can or would be accessed.^{xxiv}

All of this therefore entailed the materiality of the document. However, interestingly each and every aspect of this materiality during the entire course from its origin, existence, travel and resting place to again later access to it produces this amazing emotional linkage with people it comes in contact with.^{xxv} Such emotional response or affect that the document through its materiality produces therefore has a resultant effect on both the evidentiary access that any document provides as also how people react and act to such materiality of a document as a whole or in its parts. Coupling this with another idea of how the documents therein in its capacity of its materiality are able to grasp human action and endeavor whereby they (the documents) themselves come to have human characteristics. Result of which is that people while encountering documents, within the sociology of the document are actually encountering human or human bits in action. Therefore, the consequential reaction by any person encountering a document is also akin to that of meeting people or another human being. As such it is this engendering of humanness within the confines of the materiality of the document that leads to have or create an affect on people when they come in contact or encounter paper documents. Enacting documentary regimes based on paper and its intrinsic materiality therefore was found to have a great effect on the way people behaved and acted. As such documentary regimes were to be accordingly formulated within the understanding of governmentality.

Problem with Paper: Hindering governmentality

The materiality of paper as such seems to provide the basis for governmentality which all governments pursue. Yet, we see that paper-based documents are increasingly being seen with, suspicion, fear, apprehension and anxiety.^{xxvi} This can perhaps be explained through one of Benjamin Kafka's work titled "*Demon of Writing*". In this article he importantly observes how Saint-Just on October 10, 1793 requested the National Convention to give emergency powers to Committee of Public Safety so that the



drudgery of paperwork that was effecting administration was done away with.^{xxvii} In doing so Saint-Just created the metaphor of demon of writing and how it was affecting the Republic. For according to him '*the demon of writing is waging war against us, we are unable to govern*'. The speech led to the suspension of the new constitution and emergency was imposed by declaring the government 'revolutionary until peace'.^{xxviii} Thus began the Reign of Terror. The result though was something completely different as expected by Saint-Just. The taming of the 'demon' was not possible what happened instead was that as more powers got vested in the Committee to search, arrest and put any men suspected of monarchial allegiance or anti-republican sentiment to death, more paperwork needed to be done. Ironically, with great and more powers came greater paper work. So much so that the Committee had to employ more clerks to handle the flow and order of the incoming paperwork, more positions were created, more bureaus allotted and more surveillance needed to keep all of them in check which again could be provided only through paper.^{xxix} The demon of writing had truly gobbled up the new Republic.

The same can also be said true to all documentary practices based on paper. The colonial projects of governmentality were all based on paper^{xxx} and its ensuing documentary regimes that were created to control also well entrenched with the continuous creation of paper documents for its sustenance. The same interestingly however, was also found true to the national projects of economic development, that newly independent nations pursued as their own *tryst with destiny*^{xxxi}. In both the colonial and newly independent countries the paperwork required and necessitated was found to be not only humongous but also the number of agencies involved were numerous.^{xxxii} All of this leading to corresponding increase in paper documentation and unleashing of the proverbial 'demon of writing'. The infamous red tape in India attributed to the slow and ineptness of the Indian bureaucracy is also reflective of its colonial past. In both the cases, colonial or independent India, the movement of files and documents always requires more documentation and more agencies to do what is necessitated resulting in '*lal fithasahi*' or red tapism. This term with its colonial legacy has tragically also come to haunt its present.

For predominantly the documentary practices and documentary regimes ensuing through materiality of paper is still the same. Like in the past to the present it is found that only after a documents acquires a large number of signatures or similar markings from the officials handling it, so as to make it too important enough to be stopped or returned backwards that the file/document or folder eventually moves or if its lucky gets necessary approvals. In other words, it means that only when the materiality of the document comes to possess a certain kind of materiality that it is deemed important and serious enough to be approved or passed. As Hull mentions in his book 'Government of Paper' how the signatures of big politicians or their spouses in Pakistan came to effect the nature and result of such files having their names, signatures, marks or stamps which was but the result of affect that would arise on the officials handling those documents/files.

Other reason for delay in the passage/approval of files was also because of the fear among the officials handling them that they would be held responsible for any and all action or absence of action pertaining to the files, even much after they might have retired and left office. The innate ability of audit trail that paper allowed was not only leading to surveillance on the actions these officials were doing but for them it was also like a Damocles sword hanging over their heads which might fall on them even after they retired and left their departments.^{xxxiii} Their accession to a particular action personified through their markings and signature made them fearful of the future for any and all of their present and past work. This was then cleverly sought to be avoided by diffusing the decision among a number of officials each giving a decision to a particular aspect of the file so that no one could be called into question for the eventual work that was done. But all of this leads to great inordinate delays in not only making policy but also implementing them. India's governmental policy typified by *license raj* and *permit raj* till 1990's greatly increased the role of paper work in the administration and the documentary practices flowing from there was increasingly being looked with suspicion for corruption and its ineptness for efficiency. More rules, more regulations, more checking meant more paperwork to deal with, more cumbersome practices to negotiate with the bureaucracy to get the work done. More such negotiation meant more chances of arbitrary role, political intermediaries and bureaucrats would come to have which again increased the role of corruption in getting things approved or passed by the government. All of this was generally held as the reason of not only making the administration and government unpopular but also slowing the growth and prosperity of the country. A magic bullet was required to do away with these problems. India like many other countries saw hope in the up-and-coming Information and Communication Technology (ICT) revolution.

Dawn of the Digital World: Loss of materiality of Paper?

The digital promised the going away of the cumbersome documentary practices. Ease in navigating the bureaucratic spaces which previously was possible only through continuous reproduction of graphical and material artefact on the paper documents. Allow for a much seamless control over the paper documents which at various places and at different time had come to have a life of its own. As such this proverbial gaze of the State which was weakened was sought to reinvigorated. Paper documents with their propensity of *affect* were increasingly becoming sites of interaction between people and the government but that it was also



creating possibilities of politics directed towards State and becoming thus sites of political challenge against the State. Governments world over sought to overcome this by way of the novel introduction of the digital document.

A digital document bereft of materiality that paper documents possessed was imagined as a perfect foil. For it was this materiality of documents based on paper that were supposed to be aiding and abetting on unleashing the *demon of writing* on us. Just as in the introduction and popularization of paper document began through identity documents. Digital documents too followed the same path. Digital national identity cards and concomitant documentary practices following it was sought to be created to tame this *demon* of paper. Examples of Hong Kong's HKID, Malaysia's MyKad, Pakistan's CNIC, South Africa's Smart Card ID, India's Aadhaar, UK's botched attempt of Identity Scheme, Australia's Digital ID, USA's Real ID and many more are but attempts by the different respective governments in introducing the digital documents. The success, challenges and the processes availed by these governments to bring about a change in their documentary practices also showcase the politics that has emanated out of such attempts. We have seen how introduction of digital documents especially digital identity documents.

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