

Mapping Digital Humanities in India

The field of Digital Humanities (DH) has today emerged as a space for much interdisciplinary work in knowledge production and innovation in India. At a time when the arts and humanities are perceived to be in state of crisis thereby calling for them to demonstrate their relevance, the move towards the ‘digital’ is seen as an interesting development, away from traditional methods and objects of research enquiry. The growth of networked environments and proliferation of digital technologies particularly in education in the last couple of decades has several implications for new humanities scholarship. However, what is DH as a field, what are its historical and disciplinary moorings, its significance for new research and pedagogy, and more importantly how can we locate or contextualize it with respect to work in India have been some preliminary challenges to developing a further understanding of the field.

Historically the basis of DH lies in humanities computing, driven by the need to process and disseminate large sets of data generated by research. DH in the West has seen two distinct phases – the computational and the digital turn; the first largely characterized by the process of digitization itself, and the second seeing the internet become a space for production and sharing of multi-dimensional forms of knowledge, and moving away from traditional text-based models. The present phase sees digital technology as an integral part of the process of knowledge production, wherein objects and methods of enquiry already inhabit the digital space. In India, these three phases have been simultaneous rather than successive, which gives rise to additional challenges in summarizing the field. There is also the inherited separation between the ‘digital’ and the ‘humanities’, with the former being in some sense inaccessible to certain groups or classes for various reasons. This problematizes the notion of the ‘digital’ as a post- gender, race, and class space. Tracing a historical trajectory of the development of DH in India would therefore be imperative, to see how it mediates this space between the traditional humanities and changes that are imminent with the advent of digital technology, and whether this discourse has been inclusive of all groups of people.

In the context of higher education in India, the challenges are multiple. The ‘digital divide’ still persists, which requires us to consistently re-imagine pedagogy and curricular resources that employ technology. Policy initiatives to integrate ICTs in education and large-scale projects on digitization are some efforts in trying to address the access question. Developing teaching-learning materials for a socially diverse and multi-lingual classroom, integrating archival material and training researchers and teachers in using new kinds of technology are some other areas that need intervention. More importantly, how do students or young people negotiate with these changes in the learning environment is a case in point. The present generation has the ubiquitous reputation of being ‘digital natives’ and therefore already possessing the access, skills and competence required in mediating both worlds. With increased access to technology, the role of youth in social change through participation in civil society and

the political process is also being recognized. The world over today, the importance of developing the potential of youth for social change has been emphasized by policy makers, institutions and society at large. In the Indian context, where 20% of the population¹ consists of people between the ages of 15-24, this factor acquires even more significance. This number is also said to increase to 40% by 2016. According to a more recent report commissioned by the UN Global Urban Youth Research Network, there are 430 million young people in the age group 15 – 34 years in India. The report also includes a survey on political participation by youth, in which 71% of urban youth (aged 18-34) said they are moderately interested in politics, and attributed this change to education and increased media exposure². The National Youth Policy (2003) emphasises the need for the active involvement of youth in the political process, through their increased representation in civic bodies and also stresses that young people be provided with the requisite knowledge, skills and capacities towards this end. Higher education then is a crucial space to address these gaps in knowledge and skills that would contribute towards this development. The importance of technology in facilitating this process cannot be ignored, but then how do we see its role beyond that of access and skill-building, to fostering critical engagement with questions of socio-political concern would be imperative. The ‘digital classroom’ has today fostered new forms of iteration, sharing and collaboration. More importantly, what then is the perception of the youth of the ‘digital’ and how do they see its relevance to the processes of knowledge production, learning and change would be key questions for DH scholarship.

Under the larger rubric of youth, technology and higher education, the proposed mapping project will try to examine some of the broader questions that are central to defining and setting the agenda for further work in DH in India. The exercise will span several institutions and disciplines, but would focus on the demographic of youth in higher education. Some specific areas of interest for the studies to be conducted would be:

1. **Youth and technology:** studies on how young people engage with collaborative multimedia technologies today, both within and outside the classroom, what are the tools and devices at their disposal and the creation of new learning environments in higher education.
2. **Histories of the present:** studies mapping the digital landscape today and its antecedents, and looking at the emergence of the techno-social subject as a focus of the research enquiry.

¹ Youth in India: Situation and Needs Study, Policy Brief No. 30, 2010. International Institute for Population Sciences and Population Council

² State of the Urban Youth in India: Employment, Livelihoods and Skills, 2012. IRIS Knowledge Foundation. Commissioned by UN-HABITAT’s Global Youth Research Network .

3. **Technology and Institutions:** studies to survey and assess existing digitization efforts in India, creation of open access archives and new resources, particularly materials in Indian languages and the need for integration of content, new curricular initiatives and pedagogic strategies.

The mapping exercise would consist of commissioned research projects of about two-four months. Interested students/ researchers may also suggest proposals for the same which would then be reviewed for funding.