

Data is Oil, but People drive Performance

I posted 'Twelve Policy Lessons from Covid' twelve days ago. Policy makers have learned some lessons. For example, use of masks in public is finally mandatory across India. However, some lessons are not yet learned. Allowing shops to open only three days a week concentrates buyers in the market on those three days. This challenges social distancing more than a policy of allowing shops to remain open all days of the week – even 24 X 7.

Since my previous post on the subject, I have learned a few more lessons. I discuss Lesson No. 13 in this post...

Mukesh Ambani famously remarked a few years ago that *Data is Oil*. If I may add, oil needs motorised vehicles or other machines to demonstrate its utility. The technology behind such vehicles or machines determines potential. The person using the technology (in this analogy, driving the vehicle) determines performance as compared to potential. So, people are an intermediating variable connecting data to performance.

Governments collect a lot of private data that privacy warriors object to. The argument to justify the data collection is that it will be used only for public good e.g. controlling terrorism. Income tax authorities the world over use private data to control tax evasion. Interestingly, South Korea has emerged as a trail-blazer in using private data for public good, in its fight against Covid. What did South Korea do?

Contact-tracing is an integral part of every country's Covid containment strategy. The typical approach is to ask the affected person about the people he or she came into contact with in the previous fortnight; thereafter, these direct contacts of the affected person are traced and investigated for their direct contacts. As the number of levels of tracing increases, the number of people to be investigated explodes. A thankless job indeed.

How did South Korea handle contact tracing? Once a person tested positive for Coronavirus, location data from mobile phones, credit-card transactions and CCTV footage was used to trace the people at risk who needed to be quarantined. South Korea applied Artificial Intelligence technology to the historical location data to make the contact tracing faster and fool-proof. Some of the location maps were published. Therefore, people who felt they were at risk could approach the authorities. Speed of tracing and quarantining helped South Korea control the problem **without a lockdown**.

The same location data is available to the government in most developed and developing countries. They use this data to investigate crime. How many of them used the data for contact-tracing? The same policemen who use the same data for tracing criminals, did not think it fit to use it for tracing the Covid-exposed!

Demonstrating use of private data for public good can be an effective weapon for governments to overcome the objections of privacy warriors.