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Time as Infrastructure. Reflections on Service Culture in Digital India

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Digitalization has transformed communication, enabling near-instant connections across vast distances and linking people, processes and institutions in ways that were previously unimaginable. Nowadays, when Indian citizens access public or private services, such as insurance, welfare or food delivery, they are likely to interact with digital portals, fill out online forms or use biometric IDs. As this data moves through the system, it affects the daily lives of various stakeholders, including delivery workers, insurance officers and government bureaucrats, each of whom operates under different timelines, rules and constraints. This paper introduces the concept of *temporal infrastructure* to highlight the vital work of temporal alignment that weaves together the components of a digitally augmented service infrastructure. It analyses the temporal techniques people use to bridge the gaps between different social rhythms, thereby enabling the delivery of goods, the reimbursement of hospital bills or the payment of welfare. These temporal techniques include backdating applications, delaying delivery, moving between different platforms, are switching off devices. They are both methods of creating alignment and means of negotiating power relations in complex, highly dynamic socio-technical arrangements.

Biographical Note

Ursula Rao is Director of the *Department 'Anthropology of Politics and Governance'* at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle, Germany. Over the last ten years, she has established herself as a significant voice in the anthropological discussion of the state and digital governance, and is currently finalizing a book manuscript titled: *Temporal Infrastructure. Health Care in Digital India*. Rao has also worked on urban governance and urban religion, Indian journalism and Hinduism.

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