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Giving people incentive to digitise medical data can help fill critical gaps in health information

1. Context: A Nation Rich in Data, Yet Policy-Conflicted

- India, with **over 1.4 billion people**, now has a population larger than all **38 OECD nations combined**.
- Coupled with rapid digitization, India has the **potential to generate one of the world's largest data ecosystems**.
- The **economic value** of India's data — when adjusted for purchasing power parity — may soon rival that of developed nations.
- However, **confusion in policy design** is preventing this potential from being realized, especially in **critical sectors like healthcare**.

2. The Policy Disconnect: Identity vs. Property

- India's data governance suffers from a **conceptual gap** — treating **data solely as personal identity** rather than as a **monetizable economic asset**.
- This binary thinking leads to **policy confusion**, where privacy is prioritized in a way that **blocks innovation**.
- Particularly in healthcare, this distinction becomes critical, as vast amounts of data are **underutilized or lost**.
- Unless this **disconnect is resolved**, India risks **stalling digital value creation** and missing out on its data dividend.

3. Healthcare: The Best Example of Data Underuse

- Healthcare in India is **highly fragmented**:
 - Elite private hospitals have digital systems.
 - Government hospitals use **basic digitization tools** under the **National Health Mission**.
 - The majority of healthcare occurs in **small private clinics**, with **minimal or no digitization**.



- This results in **no centralized or interoperable digital health record** for patients, harming continuity of care and diagnostics.

4. Ripple Effects of Data Fragmentation

- Lack of integrated health data leads to:
 - **Inaccurate pricing by insurers** due to poor risk profiling.
 - **Hindrance to medical research** and AI-driven innovations due to absence of large datasets.
 - **Reduced efficiency in patient care**, especially for chronic disease management and preventive health.
- Without a digital backbone, India cannot develop **cost-effective, personalized healthcare systems**.

5. Ayushman Bharat Digital Mission (ABDM): A Vision with Roadblocks

- **ABDM** aims to build a **national digital health infrastructure**, where citizens **own and control** their health data.
- Its goals include **interoperability, transparency, and accessibility**.
- Yet, **on-ground adoption is low** due to:
 - Lack of **incentives** for doctors and patients to store or share data.
 - The general public does **not yet recognize the tangible benefits** of digitized medical records.

6. Making Data Valuable for Citizens: A Bottom-Up Approach

- For ABDM to succeed, citizens must **personally benefit** from their data:
 - Easier diagnosis and **continuity of care**.
 - **Lower insurance premiums** with better risk profiling.
 - Faster, **hassle-free consultations** across providers.
- When citizens begin to prefer data-compliant institutions, the **entire ecosystem will shift**, encouraging:
 - Clinics to adopt data standards.



- Startups to build **health data tools**.
- Emergence of **data exchange intermediaries** (like payment gateways for health data).

7. India Needs a Unique Governance Model

- **Western models** are unsuitable for India's realities:
 - **US (HIPAA)**: Restricts patient control over data monetization. Institutions profit from anonymized datasets.
 - **UK (NHS)**: A centralized, statist approach that cannot be replicated in India's **decentralized, privatized healthcare sector**.
- India needs a **citizen-first model** that allows individuals to **own, control, and benefit from their personal data**, with **opt-in data sharing** mechanisms.

8. Balancing Freedom with Privacy and Security

- Recognizing **data as property** doesn't mean **compromising privacy**:
 - Advanced **anonymization tools** can safeguard personal identity while enabling large-scale data use.
 - These tools should be treated as **digital public goods** and made accessible to all data users.
 - **Digital forensics and audit trails** can help **track data misuse**, ensuring accountability and consumer protection.

9. Enabling the Infrastructure and Legal Safeguards

- To build a **secure digital data economy**, India must:
 - Enact **data ownership laws** granting individuals control over usage and value-sharing.
 - Establish **interoperable digital health systems** linking hospitals, insurers, and citizens.
 - Train professionals and health workers to **engage with data systems effectively**.
 - Launch public awareness campaigns showing how **data benefits citizens** directly.



10. Conclusion: A Policy Shift for the Future

- India is at a **crossroads in data governance**.
- By **moving beyond outdated privacy-centric frameworks** and embracing **citizen-centric data ownership**, India can:
 - Democratize the **economic value of data**.
 - Catalyze innovation in **healthcare, fintech, education**, and other sectors.
 - Build a **resilient, inclusive digital economy** that benefits every citizen.

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