Prosthetic Parliament

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PROSTHETIC PARLIAMENT

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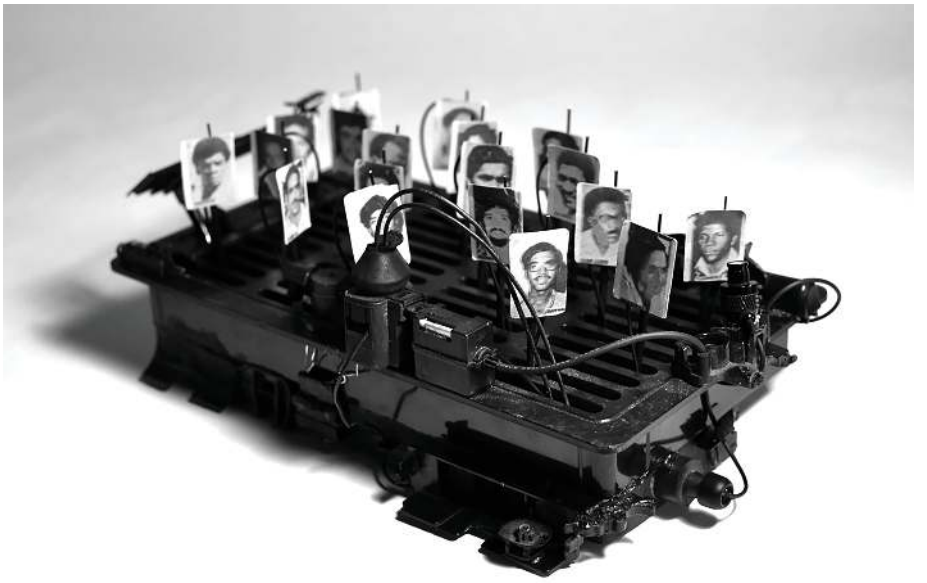
After the nation of India dissolved into a federation of city-states, amidst suspicion and support, a program replaced parliament. It became near impossible to organize disparate populations, much less hold elections. The initiative to reconstitute the government as a mainframe computer—built and housed in Gurgaon, funded by private conglomerates—began as an experiment modeling the country's operating procedures (e.g., GDP); leaders started to rely on the supercomputer's predictions, eventually installing it to function as the Nation itself, effectively outsourcing self-management. Various inputs, regulated feedback, and complex maths ostensibly allow the government-machine to best determine how to divvy materials and services amongst regions, reconcile episodic ethnic strife and territorial disputes, and negotiate trade agreements and international treaties, all in an impersonal yet even-keeled manner. The program provides a hyper-rationalized set of decision-making protocols, sifts immense sets of data and runs powerful cost-benefit calculations.

Within the device, there is a processing sub-unit per each district plugged into the frame's clustered grid of parallel rows, each with its own administrative domain. In order to allay civilian fears and literally put a human face to the machine, each representative has a screen displaying an avatar of 1970s cricket players from Bombay and the West Indies. The assembly's construction suggests a cobbled-together circuit board with tubes and wires, ventilators and heat sinks, switches and designators: a *jugaad* government hooked into a respirator. Since the program is constantly running, the spinning heads chatter away at all hours; speeches stumble over one another and rebuttals arrive at the same time as arguments. The deliberative voices merge with humming hard drives to emit a drone of dialects and mechanized movements.

While it is true that the nonhuman government has certain advantages over organic politicians, many past problems are simply displaced. For example, although voting processes are less susceptible to bribery, critics raise potential risks of corruption stemming from the device's physical security, cyber encryption, or energy consumption. The volume of computation sometimes leads to gridlock and errors; command channels and communicative scripts produce a paralysis wherein the data-handling logics—at times circular, always synchronic—cannot process decisions, all too reminiscent of party members unable to arrive at a compromise or consensus. The machine's ciphering tends to present a view of legislation as opaque as previous human-based models.



Proponents of the modulated democracy claim supercomputers are the only means to manage and resolve the types of pressing problems and sets of often intertwined contemporary issues at stake locally and globally. Moreover, the sheer speed at which the new parliament performs calculations understandably enables analysis and action in fractions of seconds. Automatic economic adjustments occur in rapid response to natural or manmade events. Infrastructure is administered in a hyper-efficient and holistic deployment. However, even its most vocal advocates admit the machine knows not of water but instead {"resource management"}, {"flood zones"}, and {"potability percentage"}. Likewise, the CPU contraption tabulates hungry bodies without registering the anguish of malnourishment. Others decry an ever-increasing digitalization where the feel of one's palm across a tabla's goat skin is lost in the act of encoding and playing back rhythmic cycles. The greater the population grows, the more the individual is resigned to a statistical reality of representation. The greater the population grows, the more the unforeseen complexities of daily life overwhelm the processing capacities of the most advanced algorithms and bulk data banks.

Outside of the mega-metropolises and beyond integrated towns, in some of the far-reaching rural parts remaining, amidst entire villages with LED-festooned temples powered on pirated electricity, there are outlier populations unaware that a machine has usurped elected officials. Even in urban areas, the routines of some societal segments remain for the most part unaltered. The governing machine's whirring district surrogates and decision-making circuitry advance a networked intelligence seemingly free of human error or ethics precisely because it is otherwise.