

Pegasus – No Longer Just a Mythical Flying Horse

The Pegasus, once a majestic mythical flying horse in Greek mythology, is now the most malicious surveillance software to be used on the planet.

The biggest surveillance crises to hit the political and intellectual sphere in India is the Pegasus Spyware crisis. It was revealed by a joint investigative initiative undertaken by 17 international media organisations including the Guardian, the Washington Post, The Wire, Le Monde and Frontline amongst others. The project unearthed revelations of governments abusing the software across the world. In India, the government was accused of targeting journalists, ministers and opposition leaders, political strategists, Supreme Court Judges, and activists. It was even used against the heads of the Election Commission and the Central Bureau of Investigation.

But what is the Pegasus Spyware?

Developed by the NSO group, an Israeli cyber-arms company, it is marketed to and licensed only to national governments around the world.

“It can copy messages you send or receive, harvest your photos and record your calls. It might secretly film you through your phone’s camera, or activate the microphone to record your conversations. It can potentially pinpoint where you are, where you’ve been, and who you’ve met” (Pegg & Cutler, 2021). In order to collect the findings, 37 phones were analysed by cybersecurity experts at Amnesty International’s security lab. Of the 37 phones, 10 were from India.

The government was criticized for its use of the spyware – which it has not denied. However, the government claims that the software was used legally and that the revelations are an international ploy to malign India’s image on the global stage (The Washington Post, 2021).

There was outrage against the use of the spyware across the country, with the opposition stating that the Prime Minister had committed Treason. The Campaign for Judicial Accountability and Reforms stated that the scandal was “a flagrant violation of the right to privacy as upheld by the Hon’ble Supreme Court and an affront on the civil liberties of citizens” (Upadhyay, 2021). They called for a judicially monitored investigation into the matter. The Press Club and the Editor’s Guild also released similar statements into the matter.

Sushant Singh, a senior fellow at the Centre for Policy Research in India says, “Because the Israeli cyberweapon is claimed to be sold only to ‘vetted governments’ for use against terrorists and criminals, the snooping list denotes that the Indian democratic framework is no longer free and fair. This is no less than India’s Watergate moment” (Singh, 2021). The political implications of the scandal were immense. It had implications on the freedom of the press, the integrity of national elections and democratic institutions, and on national security.

The use of the spyware raises a lot of questions regarding the integrity of democratic institutions in the country, and whether the elections that have been held since usage began have been valid. With the lack of privacy on mobile phones, an essential need, it effectively curbs the possibility of saying or writing anything against the status quo. The invasion of privacy is also a sign of the depth of mistrust that runs within the political institutions.

As stated by the Indian Express columnist, Pratap Bhanu Mehta (Mehta, 2021), “The Pegasus scandal is a matter of grave concern for Indian democracy. The widespread and unaccountable use of surveillance is morally disfiguring. Privacy is not about the wish to hide, as is often asserted. It is about having a space of one’s own where our thoughts and being are not the instrument of someone else’s purposes. It is an essential component of dignity and agency. So surveillance needs to be treated as a moral affront.”

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