

## The Real Vs. The Virtual World

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Recently my son, who is a senior executive of Google and a computer scientist living in San Francisco, came visiting and was horrified to see my obsolete mobile telephone which is good only for making outgoing and receiving incoming calls. He offered to replace it with a state-of-the-art mobile telephone on an android platform. I told him that I would not even know how to switch it on and for my pains I was informed that I was in danger of suffering the same obsolescence that outdated technology faces. That set me thinking about where the world was headed and I read a few articles on the subject of how almost every act now done manually would be taken over by programmed robots. Cars would be on autopilot, maintenance would be done robotically, every manual job would disappear as labour would no longer be needed and automation would be the order of the day. In such an environment one needed technologists, who would be the only ones who are employable and the whole education system would have to be revolutionised so that there would be hardly any place for humanities, social sciences and liberal arts. A poet, a painter, a philosopher, a sociologist would all be unemployable because there is no jobs for them. The world would then consist only of three categories of people. (1) The people who design robots and the computers which control them. (2) The people who create the software for controlling the robots. (3) The vast army of the redundant who did neither of the above jobs.

A people devoid of any sense of history, of culture, of arts, of philosophical thought, of metaphysics or even idle musing would have no place in the virtual world towards which, according to the Cassandras, we are now heading. In such a world uniformity of behavioural patterns, precision cloning and a complete lack of original thought would rule us and the finer points of human instinct, differing aesthetics and eccentric creativity would have no place. In such a world a perfect computer would be built, a space station would take shape, but there would be no room for the Taj Mahal.

I did argue that what may become possible in California need not necessarily be true in India and would definitely not apply to sub Saharan Africa. For example, robotic cars would call for a highway system in which all traffic is precisely ordered and regulated. Transferring the scene to India where the roads may be potholed, the lanes narrow and twisting, the traffic chaotic or totally unpredictable, would a pre-programmed robot be able to drive a motor car, or would there have to be manual override?

I find that a section of society, including in India, has now begun to measure every endeavour in terms of pay packages, the earnings of companies from small but deliberate changes, the expansion of commerce and the support services which would make this possible. In such a highly monetised system there obviously cannot be any place for something which cannot be quantified. Here a comedian may, through humour, be able to entertain and thus have marginal value, but there would be no place for an Adi Sankara and his philosophy of Advaitya. Would such a world be worth living in? One cause of worry in the virtual world which is being advocated is that ideas would no longer be at a premium. To give one small example, the entire semi conductor revolution came out of an idea that a Japanese scientist had that it was possible to

replace the entire circuitry of valve driven radio by a transistor. From this has emerged the entire system by which the world connects and communicates, the computer and its downstream products, the mobile telephone and now the smart phone which performs every function known to man except excretion, nutrition and reproduction. It is argued that such research has given the hardware, but actually it is software and its applications which are changing the world. Ergo, real creativity now lies in software.

Is there no room for a scientist who does fundamental research, the master craftsman who builds a prototype, an agriculturist who produces crops? A megalomaniac such as Hitler, by total misinterpretation of Nietzsche's political thoughts and completely screwed up views on racial superiority, almost wrecked the world through the Second World War. That is the destructive force of an idea. Feynman, who rejected classical physics, ultimately became one of the scientists who harnessed nuclear energy for both war and peace. Thomas Hobbes, Rousseau, Jeremy Bentham, Adam Smith, our own Chanakya, Confucius were all thinkers who moulded whole nations and entire races on how they will think, organise themselves socially and politically and what kind of a State apparatus they will create. That is the positive force flowing from thought and ideas. I refuse to believe that a bunch of computer scientists sitting in Silicon Valley will determine how the world will be twenty years from now, may be a century from now. What gives me nightmares is that because in India the informal sector employs between 85 and 90 percent of the entire work force, the virtual world will render almost the entire population of India redundant. One view is, so what? If manual, semi-skilled workers in the United States are laid-off, social security takes care of them till the time they are taught new skills or otherwise absorbed in gainful employment. That is because the number of the redundant as a proportion of the whole is very small. If 90 percent of the population of the country is laid off what one would get is a vast army of the unemployed who would tear the system apart. The virtual world would then turn into a real, living nightmare.

One cannot reverse the tide of modernisation, but one must recognise that geographically there are areas where the tides are high and others where they are low. One would like a real debate on whether the extreme scenario of the virtual world will overtake India, can it be moderated and will we be in a position to create our own unique model of development in which people and their happiness reign supreme. Is anyone game for such a debate?

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