

Editorial:

Technology and Evolving Social Spaces

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In modern times technology has come to have a pervasive influence on almost everything vital to human existence explicitly in terms of material comforts and wellbeing. The way human interactions with the world and with fellow beings have come to be defined - be it in terms of goals and actions, kinds of states and changes in society, the objectives and forms of politics (from welfare to warfare) - the sense and quality of life, even human fate and that of the environment are all of it mired in the technological enterprise as it extends in magnitude and depth.

It would be worth the attempt to scout the complex phenomenon of technology and search for the motive forces that brought the world to its present technologically advanced status. The pressures of competition-for profit, for power, and security, have acted in a way as perpetual mover in the global appropriation of technical improvements. Even more such pressures are operative in the process of invention itself, dependent on constant outside subsidy and even goal-setting. At all times, probably, war or the threat of it, has proved an especially powerful agent. The aspirations for having more of the same and the demand for better versions of the same have kept alive the spirit of inventions unfaded. Besides the pressures of competition, we could identify other pressures arising out of population growth and of the fear of the impending exhaustion of natural resources.

Concerned as we are with characteristics of modern technology one could ask what distinguishes it from an earlier form of technology. Whereas modern technology seems like an enterprise and process characterized by speed, earlier technology appears more of a static possession of a gradual emergence. The use of artificial implements for the day to day conduct of life, starting with its invention, followed by occasional additions and improvements, marked the nature of technology for the most part of human history in sharp contrast to the phenomenal growth of modern technology in the past three hundred years. In the earlier millennia a given set of tools and procedures remained constant, providing a stable equilibrium of unchallenged technical competence for long periods. Within the apparently stagnant life styles emerged, by accident than by design, revolutions like the agricultural and the metallurgical that initiated the transition from the Neolithic to the Iron Age. The rise of cities, and such permanent settlements along riversides, happened in slow spontaneous fashion than as consciously planned

or created. Though from the hindsight of contemporary perspective they seem like "revolutions" the people who populated the savannahs and prairies did not experience them as revolutions going by the cave arts of Australia or France or India.

Technology defines the status of a society. Indian cities are symbolic expressions of 'desire on the march' competing with each other to have Metros as signature features to define its style in the integration of technology for people's convenience in transport. It was something similar in yesteryears marked by the yearning for computerization and even earlier for full access via telephones. People everywhere and always have looked to providers of technologies - newest and sleekest - as heroes: Steve Jobs and Mark Zuckerberg or Bill Gates and Narayana Murthy. The love for technology, especially which impacts the social network of peoples and brings them together and closer into the world of one another has always been appreciated and applauded.

The conceptualization of the 'Technology and society' Seminar, the outcome of which takes the form of this issue of the journal, took place nearly two years ago and was intended to contextualize the impact of technology in Darjeeling and North Bengal. It was conceived and materialized by the fledgling Computer Science department and the UGC was kind enough to encourage the venture by which scholars were invited from across the country. A shortlisted selection of papers presented and a few others constitute the present issue of the journal. Technology has the ability to be an extension of personal identity. When the 'moderns' of an earlier generation used a pocket radio or a landline phone or a walkman it was one mode of being extended into more than one's physical or even emotional space. Presently we have the internet and the mobile which can increasingly with newer and newer apps connect to so many other gadgets (or become simultaneously multiple accession source) that the extension of one's experience of space - even self identity - is of a different texture. Technology is defining us as who we are or intends to be, who stays closer and who is not on the loop. It creates a new way of identifying the likeminded and even friends and foes.

This issue of the Journal is divided into three parts - Innovations of technology, Sociology of technological impact and Location specific applications of technology. These revolve around the technical innovations and happenings in the field of technology, the manner in which technology provides its own language a social interface for linking peoples and the region specific impact it has had or could have. The first section contains the set of articles that deal with the constantly innovative features of technology as can be seen in the thoughts and concerns of Neha Mittal, Jayanta Loha, Pravin Titumus Mukhia, S. Jothi, A. Vijayarega, Amit Ghosh Roy, Ardhenendu Mandal, Shantha Mary Jositha, R. Savithri, Debashish Pradhan, Dhirodatta Subba, Pawan Prasad and Jeewan Pradhan. The kind of awareness and impact that technology can have in the social space of a society is being looked at from various angles, in the second section, by Kasturi Ghosh, Vivek Mishra, Bedika Rai, Arnab Baul and Pius V Thomas who, in his philosophical take on the role of transdisciplinarity, in a way, brings together the concerns of interfacing technology and society for a wider reach.

This concern also features in the book reviews. The reach of technology - or rather - its unequal reach into the rural, hilly, backward, tribal hinterlands of India with special reference to one such location - Darjeeling - becomes the focus of the papers in the third section. Prasanta Mangar, Smriti Rai, Kishan Harijan, Samar Thapa, Sudha Rai and Amitabha Bhattacharya - as budding local scholars - look at these issues from different economic, historical, literary and market perspectives.

Chronologically looking back at the way electronic devices and Information Technology contributed to the growth process of an Indian of the sixties it would be Radio, Telephone, Tape recorder, gramophone, cinema; TV in the seventies and Computers in the eighties and then the flurry of gadgets like mobiles, ipods, laptops, palmtops and present day iphones and blackberrys, ipads, fonepads and tablets of 2G to 4G spectrums.

Basically the intensity of the impact in terms of reach to populations, it has been in the order of Radio, the cinema, the TV, the Computer, and the mobile. The latter have created for the present generation the awareness of the virtual world. What is the virtual world? It is in spatio-temporal terms, non real or surreal, a kind of pervasive in-between space linking the real and unreal, of being anywhere and yet being almost everywhere. What does it do to someone who lives in such a virtual world in contrast to the real locatable, here and now, physical world? How does it affect and impact on one's sense of self in the manner one uses it: To uplift mood by listening to music, to hunt out an information just like on ones fingertips to help codify and systematize one's knowledge and store it for later usage. Just like oral culture and mnemonic memorization got a short shrift with the arrival of the printing press, the arrival of the digitized information storage and dissemination has made an indelible blow to the erstwhile textbook oriented knowledge gathering and preservation.

It created the revolution in thinking that one can be not only a consumer of information but equally creator of information that others can consume - the social networks as learning tools unearths and unveils this possibility powerfully.

From a philosophical perspective, the effort is to search into the impact digital technological advancement has on the emerging 'self' of the third decade of 21st century in contrast to the 'self' that took to itself in the early 70s of the twentieth century. In other words, do persons develop with different sense of 'who they are' across decades. We consider it as of now as possible and as having happened across cultures and across ages. Does the fact of a new generation living more and more connected with the virtual world give them a different sense of who they are?

The speed with which one encounters, creates and commutes in one's own world has undergone a drastic change. The moment you are able to access e-world you create a new identity for yourself. One thing is to know 'I am here all by myself' enclosed by my space and another to know 'I am out there' gazed and consumed by all those in my

chain/network/virtual community and probably in the chains/networks or virtual communities I am even unaware of until a sudden and new request for friendship, for guidance, for sharing a resource I have created comes up.

E-resources of all kinds then add a new possibility, a new realm of choices, out of which the present day younger generation especially has to decide how s/he will define himself/herself and grow up to be not only for his or her family's satisfaction - as it used to be, but, for the satisfaction of a world that watches one's growth and performance, successes and achievements in the virtual world.

E-resources, therefore have added a new criterion to self definition, to the content of who I am, as I am led to define myself 'as the other perceives me'. This kind of logic of 'being out there' simultaneous to 'being in here' enhances the space one has. These possibilities are challenging opportunities and the reason why a new generation is different from the previous. The exploration of the world which erstwhile generations undertook by way of travels and literal mountain climbing and sea-faring is being done now all in one place - in the virtual world. (I saw a young tour operator learning all about the cities where he was sending his clients to - just online.)

To these conjectures on digitized technologically savvy social space one could also add the overall global impact of the growth in technology and especially the emergence of artificial intelligence: computers that can create music and play chess, can probably also beat the human brain in thinking and creativity. This is what Raymond Kurzweil claimed in 1965 as a youngster and continues to persist in predicting such possibility of a singularity moment for humanity. It is the vision of an immortal future for humanity wherein singularity is the moment when technological change becomes so rapid and profound; it represents a rupture in the fabric of human history. His claims for a singularity moment are based on the accelerating pace of change and the exponential growth in computing power (leading to the creation of the PowerMac G4) which will supersede the brains and intelligences of the entire human population. Would this mean, then, the end of human consciousness as we know it?¹ These and other thoughts played with in the articles of this issue in your hand takes the discourse on technology and society more than playfully.

1 Cfr. Lev Grossman, "2045: The Year Man becomes Immortal" in *Times*, 21 February, 2011, 25-31.