

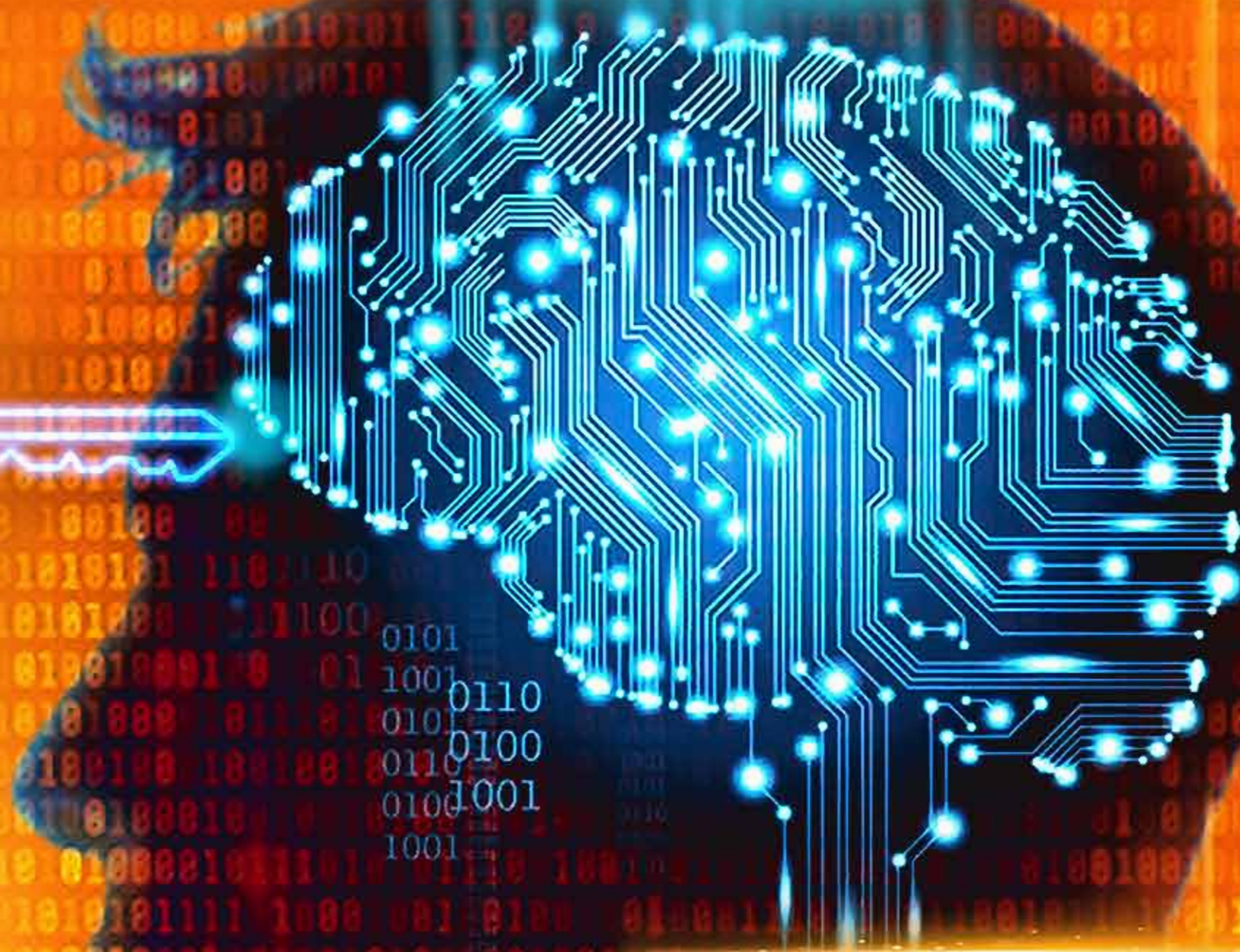
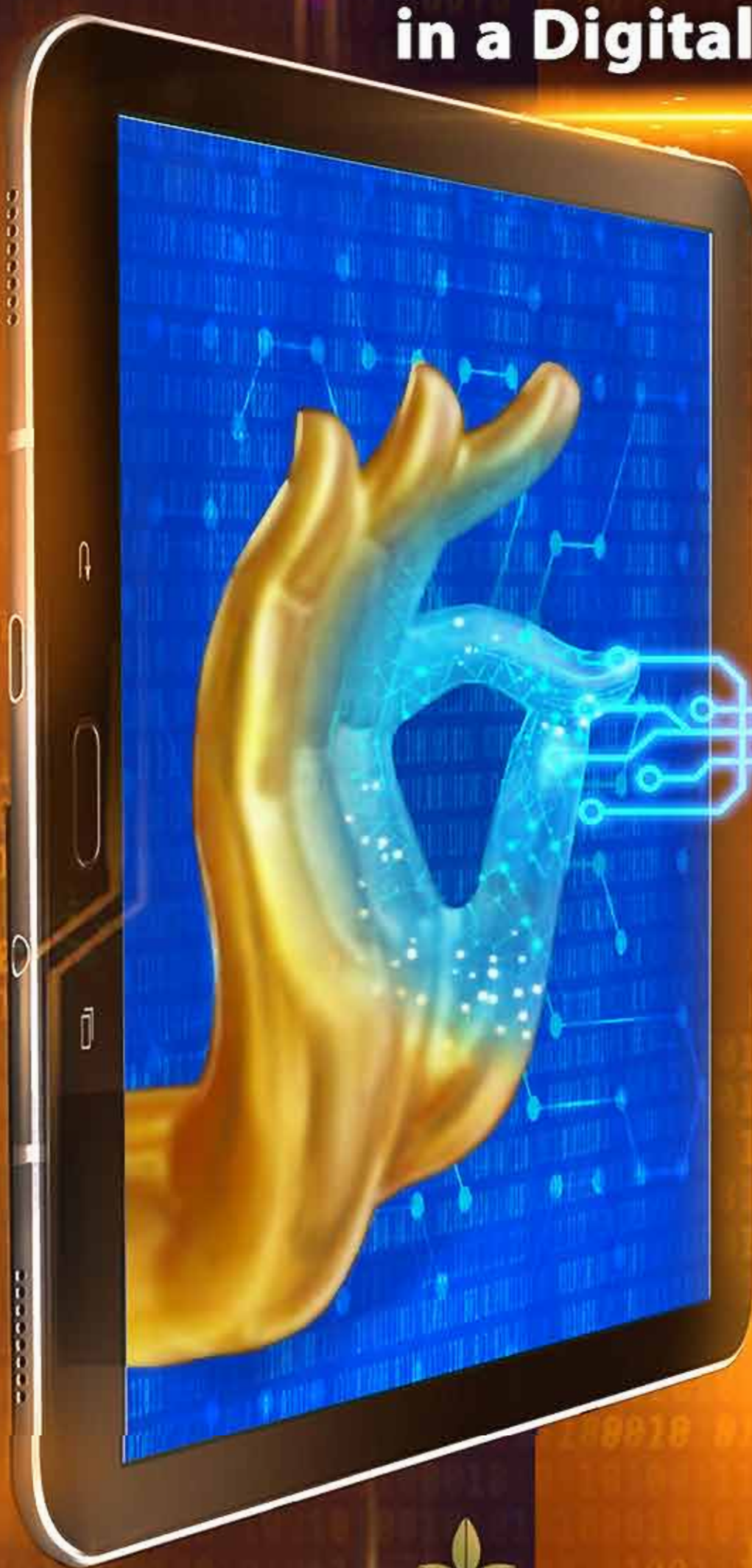
# PRABUDDHA BHARATA

or AWAKENED INDIA

A monthly journal of the Ramakrishna Order  
started by Swami Vivekananda in 1896



Living a Meaningful Life  
in a Digital World



January 2022

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# THE ROAD TO WISDOM

## Swami Vivekananda on Materialism versus Idealism—II

**W**e are not individuals yet. We are struggling towards individuality, and that is the Infinite, that is the real nature of man. He alone lives whose life is in the whole universe, and the more we concentrate our lives on limited things, the faster we go towards death. Those moments alone we live when our lives are in the universe, in others; and living this little life is death, simply death, and that is why the fear of death comes.

The fear of death can only be conquered when man realises that so long as there is one life in this universe, he is living. When he can say, "I am in everything, in everybody, I am in all lives, I am the universe," then alone comes the state of fearlessness. To talk of immortality in constantly changing things is absurd. Says an old Sanskrit philosopher: It is only the Spirit that is the individual, because it is infinite. No infinity can be divided; infinity cannot be broken into pieces. It is the same one, undivided unit for ever, and this is the individual man, the Real Man. The apparent man is merely a struggle to express, to manifest this individuality which is beyond; and evolution is not in the Spirit.

These changes which are going on—the wicked becoming good, the animal becoming man, take them in whatever way you like—are not in the Spirit. They are evolution of nature and manifestation of Spirit. Suppose there is a screen hiding



you from me, in which there is a small hole through which I can see some of the faces before me, just a few faces. Now suppose the hole begins to grow larger and larger, and as it does so, more and more of the scene before me reveals itself and when at last the whole screen has disappeared, I stand face to face with you all. You did not change at all in this case; it was the hole that was evolving, and you were gradually manifesting yourselves. So it is with the Spirit. No perfection is going to be attained. You are already free and perfect.

What are these ideas of religion and God and searching for the hereafter? Why does man look for a God? Why does man, in every nation, in every state of society, want a perfect ideal somewhere, either in man, in God, or elsewhere? Because that idea is within you. It was your own heart beating and you did not know; you were mistaking it for something external. It is the God within your own self that is propelling you to seek for Him, to realise Him.

**F**rom *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2016), 2. 79-80.



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## Living a Meaningful Life in a Digital World

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### ***This Special Issue***

This special issue is devoted to the theme '*Living a meaningful life in a digital world*'. The world we live in is no longer termed as an organic world but as the digital world. This is due to the overwhelming influence that digital and communication technology is exerting on human beings. In this special issue, an attempt has been made to analyse the pros and cons of the digital revolution including that of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and find solutions to various kinds of problems and challenges that humanity in general and individuals, in particular, are facing today due to this new phenomenon in the human history.

This topic is a multidisciplinary theme covering a variety of areas of human interests

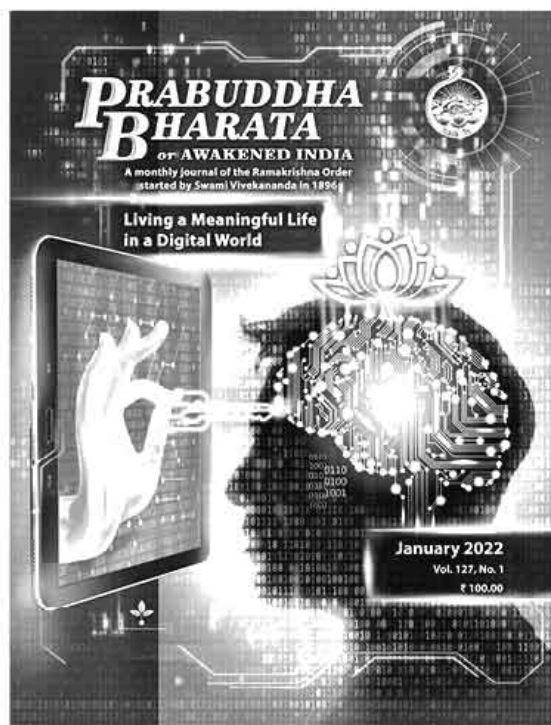
including Spirituality, Philosophy, Psychology, Science and Technology, Sociology, Work Ethics, and the like. Several eminent authors including monks of the Ramakrishna order, scholars, academicians, technocrats, professionals, and young people working in the digital atmosphere have shared their knowledge and experience in dealing with the present scenario to find ways to lead a fruitful and enriched life by adapting eternal values of spirituality, especially Vedanta. The articles presented here are not only of academic interest but also give an illuminating understanding of how to adopt spiritual and ethical values in the digital way of life we are living today.



### ***Artist's Perception behind Cover Page Artwork:***

The golden hand is of The Almighty. Man is in the mortal world which comes under the realm of Maya. The Almighty has full access to both worlds; so whenever need be, He enters in the world of Maya and unlocks the key for the upliftment of mankind. Thus, He frees one's mind from bondage and takes one to realisation, making one unchangeable, into permanent Gold, just like Him. For this purpose, He uses today's contemporary medium. In the ancient times, the medium for transmission was speech, then it turned to script, and now, audio visual, virtual, and augmented reality. This chain of different mediums of transmission will be continuing on and on, but the real 'Meaning of Life' will remain eternal (*Sanātana*).

— *Sudhir Mirage*





## Surmounting Digital World Challenges in the March Towards Utopia

Prof. Dr Rao Tataavarti

**T**REMENDOUS ADVANCES in digital technologies have no doubt ushered in many facilities to the people around the world resulting in better lifestyles and health. But at the same time, they have also brought in associated challenges detrimental to society at large. This article discusses the recent advances in science and technology in general—cognitive sciences in particular, to highlight the persuasive power of the narrative on the human psyche. Further, showcasing how the power of narrative is being used

A distinguished academician and a scientist, Prof. Dr Rao Tataavarti is currently a Senior Professor and Director of GVP-SIRC and GVP College of Engineering, Visakhapatnam. He is also the founder and Chairman of Castle Advanced Technologies and Systems (CATS), a high-end technology firm specialising in photonic systems for civilian and defence applications.

by governments and big corporations for surveillance, intelligence gathering, and business purposes, the article highlights the narrative power of the Indian philosophies and fables. These, from time immemorial, are building and framing the Indian psyche and ethos for realising a better society. Keeping in mind the unique opportunity the nation enjoys today, the article suggests and argues that Indians should harness the demographic dividend by utilising technological advances for inculcating moral and ethical values propounded in the Indian philosophies and fables. Using the above arguments, the article concludes that necessary mechanisms *can and should* be built to realise a better, and perhaps, utopian society tomorrow.

### **Life in the Digital World**

Not very long ago, the commonly held belief was that *land, labour, and capital* were the key

drivers of an economy, while intellectual pursuits and scientific knowledge had no role in improving human lives and nation-building. Today, tremendous advances in digital technologies—especially in the fields of Photonics, Biomedical Technology, Information and Communications Technologies (ICT)—have enabled people across the world to:

- enjoy a better and faster means of communications and stay connected even with persons far away in remote places thousands of miles away. In fact, they can stay connected even with astronauts in outer space, or with divers in the deepest trenches of the oceans.
- travel to far-flung places anywhere in the world, including outer space and the deepest ocean, through sophisticated and faster modes of transportation.
- lead more luxurious lifestyles.
- access and utilise better healthcare and medical facilities.
- live longer with increased lifespans.
- access wide-ranging information on any subject, past or present, instantaneously.
- visualise and listen to the happenings anywhere in the world in real-time, sitting in living rooms.
- order for almost anything, from anywhere in the world and get them delivered to chosen locations with remarkable speeds.
- teach and learn any art or subject online.

### **Challenges for Digital Utopia**

Not surprisingly, the recent technological revolutions underpinning human advances, improvements in health systems and the overall lifestyles of people across the world, have now completely overturned the earlier beliefs. So much so, that today, digital technologies are unquestionably accepted as the harbingers for better and healthier lives and secure and prosperous nations.

This paradigm shift in the public perception, often misleads the layman to believe that the advances in science and technology pertaining to the digital world are the stepping stones on the path to utopia—an ideal society in which laws, government, and social conditions are solely operating for the benefit and well-being of all its citizens.<sup>1</sup> Technological utopianism is often associated with discourses presenting technologies as agents of social and cultural change.<sup>2-3</sup>

The logic of digital utopianism often imagines that digital technologies can be the panacea for all the problems of society; and that they are the means for attaining eternal peace, happiness, and prosperity, since technological utopianism naively views only the positive impacts of technology.

Digital utopian critics, therefore, rightfully claim that techno-utopianism's identification of social progress with scientific progress is a form of positivism and scientism. They point out that technological utopia is a misguided optimism, as science, technology, and society cannot be seen as independent, as should be construed as interdependent. The critics also say that the philosophical reflections on scientific activity and technological doing are essential in understanding the effects on society.<sup>4</sup>

Against this backdrop, this article attempts to carry forward the utopian exuberance of the digital world vision, by projecting it on a perceived model of socio-technological innovation that hopefully can translate into a more pragmatic reality in the march towards digital utopia.

### **Impact of Digital Transformation on the Digital Generation**

Digital Transformation is the adoption of digital technology to transform manual processes with digital processes, or replacing older digital technology with newer digital technology. Digital solutions generally enable efficiency

via automation. Today, we live in an interconnected world, empowered by invisible networks of instant communications and various modes of transportation, facilitating communications and movements with incredible precision and speeds. Digital transformation has affected our lives in all the fields covering education, economy, business and commerce, defence, communications, transportation, health, and medicine, and hence has a significant impact on the common public.

Digital transformations have immensely affected young people's lives in more significant ways. Today's youth form the *digital generation*—a generation of people born in the digital era that has grown up with access to digital information and possesses abilities to navigate new communication technologies. These have a tremendous impact of information and communication technology on youths' ideology, organisation, mobilisation, and the societal structures which underpin their way of living.<sup>5,6</sup>

Today for the youth, social media serves as an avenue for civic participation. It affects their norms, values, attitudes, and behaviours regarding democracy, power, politics, policymaking, social, and political participation—both online and offline, and the organisation of economic, social, and private life.<sup>6</sup>

### **Science, Technology, and Society**

Today, we are all more conversant with the field of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) comprising of the internet, virtual reality, and robotics and the many fascinating pathways for progress they promise. Recent developments have ushered in new fields like Artificial Intelligence (AI), Machine Learning (ML), and Deep Learning (DL) into the realm of public knowledge and our everyday lives.

In simple words, Artificial Intelligence (AI) involves machines that perform tasks, characteristics

of human intelligence—like planning, object recognition, sound recognition, understanding language, learning and finally problem solving, while Machine Learning (ML) is a way of achieving Artificial Intelligence. Deep Learning (DL), although different from Machine Learning can simply be stated to be one of the many approaches to Machine Learning primarily inspired by the structure and functioning of the human brain, wherein huge amounts of data are processed and analysed to arrive at intelligent solutions using what is called as *predictive analytics*.

It is against this backdrop, of huge advances made in AI, ML, and DL, that we look forward to solving many of the pressing societal problems by *allowing* and *training* machines to arrive at the best judgements objectively by resorting to Deep Learning technologies. This may significantly result in (i) the elimination of bias so common in conventional designs by engineers, and (ii) phenomenal multiplication of the speed of delivery of desired outcomes. It is hoped by many scientists and researchers, that using appropriate AI, ML, and DL tools may result in eliminating and adjusting the associated imbalances in the society so that national progress is unimpaired.

Smart algorithms, Natural Language Processing (NLP), Machine learning, and Big Data technologies are used to create analytics and insights. NLP is designed to be inherently language agnostic, or genomic with text mining. In simple terms, NLP can be construed as an area of artificial intelligence research that attempts to reproduce the human interpretation of language. With the advent of the World Wide Web, XML, and the World Wide Web Consortium's (W3C) Resource Description Framework (RDF), the *realisation of a fully communicating artificial intelligence*, earlier considered a science fiction fantasy, is fast becoming a pervasive reality.<sup>7</sup>

People often wonder, how their personal computer, phone, or tablet has the uncanny ability to showcase information suiting his or her tastes and perceived behaviour. They would be surprised to realise that Deep Learning is now responsible for conversation-carrying *chatbots*, Amazon Alexa, Facebook, Google Assistant, Instagram, Microsoft Cortana, Twitter, YouTube, and more in our daily interactions with computers. It is imperative to realise that on social media and across search engines like Google, Bing, Chrome, Microsoft Edge and the like, the algorithms based on Deep Learning are the ones that *churn out content and suggestions based on perceived individual preferences, biases, and tastes*.

Few people are aware of the significant developments in the fields of Linguistic Genomics and Deep Learning, which make it possible to learn, not only about the *content and preferences* of people using the internet, but also, make accurate inferences regarding the *intent* of the users. This kind of information is now routinely being used by various governments, corporations, and intelligence agencies for surveillance and intelligence gathering. Not surprisingly, it is Deep Learning and Linguistic Genomics that is now helping companies and corporations customise their advertising to individual tastes.

It is of paramount importance, therefore, to understand that however essential science and technology are considered, the assumption that the tools of science and technology would always be deployed with altruistic intentions in a society, is at best *naïve*, and at worst, extremely perilous. One need not dig deep into the checkered history of humankind, to realise that unbridled ego, self-centred ideas and ambitions, greed for wealth, power, and pelf—have caused immeasurable and widespread devastation in our world.

Prudent pragmatism, therefore, suggests that the myriad complexities of societal structures

demand that the public discourse, narrative, and consensus as essential ingredients ensure responsible deployment of tools of science and technology in a society.

### **The Power of Narrative**

The human brain is considered the most complex, sophisticated, and powerful information-processing device known. Today the breakthroughs in Brain and Cognitive Sciences reveal that it is the *narrative* that can be persuasive and powerful. A narrative can entertain, inform, and persuade—but *most importantly, it can forge a deep, meaningful, and lasting connection*.<sup>8</sup> Most of us realise that when we listen to a narrative, whatever our age, we get vicariously transported to another time and space. Most of us have also experienced that depending on the narrative that we read, watch, or listen to, our palms start to sweat, eyes blink fast, and our heart flutters or skips a beat. A growing body of brain science and cognitive psychology has brought additional insights into what is behind these experiences, and based on functional MRI scans, it was discovered that many different areas of the brain light up when someone is listening to a narrative.

*Lo and behold*, now all the professions have a compelling interest in how the brain works. Educators, curriculum designers, engineers, scientists, judges, public health and safety officials, architects and graphic designers, and especially big business, mega-corporations, and governments—all want to know more about how the brain processes information. Brain research and its resulting applications have now become an integral part of how corporations and organisations function and succeed. It is against this backdrop of the power of narrative and the feasibility of deploying the same for narrow-minded and self-centred motives, that sufficient

checks and balances need to be put in place in the digital world.<sup>9-10</sup>

### **Power of Narrative Enshrined in Indian Philosophy**

Digressing from the present narrative on the recent advances in Brain and Cognitive Sciences brought about by research, conducted primarily in the Western world, if one were to indulge in *divergent thinking* and *ponder*, it would be pleasantly surprising to note that the importance of the power of narrative was well recognised by the venerable sages of India, from time immemorial. Indian ancestors had the wisdom to guide, disseminate, and help people imbibe the great virtues, ethics, and morals. Indian psyche and culture are eternally punctuated and peppered with the philosophy garnered from the Vedic period (1500 BCE–600 BCE), the Epic period (600 BCE–200 CE), and the Sutra period (from 200 CE).

The Vedas, Upanishads, and the eighteen Puranas are in Sanskrit, which is perhaps the oldest recorded language of the world. The four Vedas comprise the Rig, Sama, Yajur, and Atharva Vedas. The Vedas are considered the oldest extant literature. The Vedas collectively refer to a corpus of ancient Indian religious literature that is considered by adherents of Hinduism to be revealed knowledge.

The two famous works that are synonymous with the epic literature of India are *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. These two classical epics of India are written in ancient Sanskrit and present the most common ideals of human civilisation and where the value of truth, the importance of self-sacrifice, and so on—that make good human beings—are explained in much detail. The Indian epics are full of moral teachings and sacred discourses that are relevant eternally for a utopian society.

Although the world is aware of the role the great epics—*Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*—play

in guiding our everyday lives to lead a righteous, moral, and meaningful life with good values, a lesser number of people are aware of the role played by *Panchatantra* and so many other fables, in helping people lead a good and meaningful life.

To the uninformed, *Panchatantra* is perhaps one of the oldest collections of Indian fables still surviving. *Panchatantra* (*Five Treatises*) is an ancient Indian collection of interrelated animal fables in Sanskrit verse and prose, written by the great Hindu Scholar Pandit Vishnu Sharma, around 200 BCE.<sup>11-13</sup> It is considered as *Niti-Shastra*—an essence of maxims on proper conduct. The book is written in the form of simple stories and each story has a moral and philosophical theme that has stood the test of time in the modern age of atomic fear and madness. Therefore, it guides us to attain success in life by understanding human nature.

### **Demographic Dividend and the Digital World**

A 2019 United Nations report<sup>14</sup> on the young population of the world points out that about 16% of the global population (around 1.2 billion people) are youth, aged 15 to 24 years. India's youth comprise more than 50% of its population (around 695 million) forming the unique and often bandied about the demographic dividend, which is hoped to leapfrog the nation to greater heights of development.<sup>15</sup> Juxtaposing these statistics with UNICEF's State of World's Children report<sup>16</sup> elucidates that one in three digital technology users is younger than 18 years, and 71% of 15–24-year-olds are online, making them the most connected age group worldwide. Out of this young population, almost 75% are known to be deeply associated with digital tools, spending most of their wakeful hours in the digital world. It is therefore not surprising that digital technologies have profoundly changed the youth,

children, as well as infants of today. Digital information and communication technologies like the Internet, World Wide Web, and the means to access it, such as computers, iPods, iPhones, tablets, and smartphones, along with social media platforms and messaging apps, have become inseparable and integral to the lives of infants, children, and the adolescents around the world.<sup>17</sup>

A common experience most of us are subjected to these days is that people (more often the youth) are more withdrawn, indifferent, and at times insolent. Even family members and friends sitting next to each other are generally seen twiddling their thumbs, engrossed in their smartphones. Studies have shown that there are clear problems and issues linked to becoming *digital slaves* and failing to develop adequate social networking by transforming into self-centred individuals. They generally have these undesirable traits:

- lack of emotional connection,
- propensity to be hurtful,
- decreased face-to-face communication skills,
- inauthentic expression of feelings,
- diminished understanding and thoughtfulness,
- disinterested and disconnected face-to-face interactions,
- laziness,
- skewed self-image,
- reduced family closeness, and
- constant distractions.

For the digital generation, therefore, the digital world has left an indelible mark and significantly transformed their daily lives, education, and learning, the way they make and maintain friendships, how they spend their leisure time, and their engagement with wider society. The undesirable traits which are often reflected in the youth of today have a pernicious influence on the society at large, as they comprise an overwhelming majority of the Indian population.

### **The Solution to Overcome Challenges— March towards Utopia**

For a nation like India, where youth are clearly projected to be the demographic dividend for the nation's development, it certainly pays rich dividends—if we can effectively persuade the young to develop core values and abilities to solve the problems threatening to tear the fabric of an ideal civil society.

Recent studies have demonstrated how the young people of today can become caring family members, innovative workers, ethical leaders, and engaged citizens in an increasingly complex society, by inculcating the core moral and ethical values and abilities of *adaptability, creativity, curiosity, compassion (empathy), enthusiasm, integrity, positivity, resilience, resourcefulness, self-awareness, and sociability*. Interestingly, these are the very core values, morals, and ethos that are taught by the great Indian Vedas, Epics, Puranas, and Fables like the *Panchatantra*.

Studies have shown how families, schools, and communities can play critical roles in raising and educating tomorrow's citizens by nurturing, imbibing, and inculcating the core values and ethos needed by youth to navigate their lives in meaningful ways in their chosen endeavours to become good, caring human beings, and engaged citizens of the community.<sup>18</sup>

Against this backdrop, it is argued that utilising the advances in digital technologies and employing the power of the narrative, systematic mechanisms *can and should* be built to nurture, imbibe, and inculcate the moral values and ethos into the sensitive minds of the youth, as reflected in the Indian philosophies and fables.

The idea to manipulate the content for the young consumers to help constantly reify their moral and ethical constructs may be contradictory to the common beliefs.<sup>19</sup> But it is argued that however contrarian it may sound, it is

nevertheless worth pursuing, as irrefutable evidence exists on how ideas—originally thought to be unrealistic, unreachable and a utopian fantasy—can become a reality in our lifetime.<sup>20</sup> In fact, we do have a very good example of how the digital world can be reified to imbibe the age-old ethical and cultural values encapsulated in our age-old *Upanishads*, if one were to view the 2012 Tele serial *Upanishad Ganga*, created and conceptualised by Swami Tejomayananda of Chinmaya Mission with a vision to take the message of *Upanishads* to the masses.<sup>21</sup>

On a concluding note, despite the challenges brought about by digital technologies of today, it is imperative that we safeguard, nurture, and goad the younger generations through the digital technologies themselves to become good human beings by inculcating the core moral values and ethos as enshrined in Indian philosophies and fables. This is a necessity for enabling tomorrow's dream of a utopian society. ☸

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