

INDIA IT SUMMIT
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Preparedness to Meet the Challenges

"The IT revolution came without an instruction manual"

A Talk By T.P.Sreenivasan*

The challenges faced by the IT industry in India and the rest of the world are literally at our finger tips. A Google search will bring up any number of lists of top challenges, compiled by IT professionals, managers, executives and academics. These range from global competition, deceleration of demand and inadequate productivity to lack of innovation and cultural incompatibility. There is no dearth of solutions either. This summit itself has thrown up ideas, which can be imaginatively implemented by our IT community, which is second to none in the world.

At a similar conference last year, I spoke of the transformation that the IT revolution has brought about in traditional professions, particularly diplomacy. In the last three months, my focus has shifted to higher education in Kerala, of which IT is an essential component. We consider ourselves the software super power of the world, but the sad fact is that our education system is not using even a fraction of the immense possibilities that the IT revolution has opened up. We live in two different worlds, one, which provides the best services to the world and the other, which still uses a stencil and poor ink to prepare important documents and to record research findings. Many educational institutions have no connectivity or technical capability to put IT to productive use. No data base exists as to which institutions have the necessary equipment and training to cope with the challenges of technology or to create IT professionals with the required levels of skills, imagination and innovation. Like Macaulay's education system created clerks for the British empire, we are producing the work force for the Microsoft and Apple empires. We have embellished the discoveries of others, but we still have not developed our own rival systems to conquer the IT world.

Bridging the huge gap between our Universities and the IT world have several aspects. One is to use IT as a tool for modern methods of education, such as teleconferencing, clustering and other interaction through the internet. Computers in the Universities must come alive and not just be used as hat stands or coffee

tables. The cost of providing connectivity for every student is a financial and logistical challenge. The fast progress in technology will render equipment obsolete before it is installed. But a beginning has to be made. Second is the need for invention and innovation to move to the laboratories in the Universities. Young minds engaged in research are the catalysts of innovation. An idea and a PC have combined to conquer cyberspace in garages in San Jose. Research has to be at the centre of higher education. The third need is for the IT industry to be deeply involved in planning research and learning to create graduates, who are competitive in the industry in Kerala, the rest of India and the world at large. The Universities must provide guidance to the industry for investment, create products and processes and also create a competent work force. The Higher Education Council has taken the initiative to create a forum for partnership between the industry and the Universities. I invite you to participate in it to benefit both the industry and the academic world.

The IT industry and the education system must also find answers to the immense social problems that the IT revolution has generated. As Pico Iyer said in a New York Times article recently, “the IT revolution came without an instruction manual”. It came like a tempest and shook the political, social and cultural foundations of the world. Before we realized it, we found ourselves in a new world, where information and knowledge came to us at lightning speed. A bewildered world is looking for an anchor to stabilize themselves. Unless the industry and the society shape the new world with care, the young generation will be blown away by the challenges of the information age, which is also known as technoculture and technocapitalism. The opportunities are many, but the challenges are even more. Disparities in the traditional society in terms of national income, health care and education have increased substantially.

The bewildering flow of information requires a new approach to learning. What is really required is the skill to decide what to look for, how to retrieve it, how to process it, and how to use it for the specific task that prompted the search for information. The guidance that the parents gave in an earlier era has disappeared because they are considered illiterate in the digital age. The loss of the position of elders as wiser than the younger generation is the biggest consequence of the IT revolution. The young have suddenly become wiser than the old. The young have moved from knowing nothing about the world to knowing too much overnight.

The total reversal of the traditional configuration of the wise old men and the innocent young has transformed the role of the elders in society. The children and the grand children have become the source of information as they have access to the internet. Disinformation and propaganda on the net is believed as the gospel truth. Someone created a spurious website on the "Attitude of Cats and Bearded Men" with pseudo statistics only to find that it became part of animal behavior science! The digital revolution is opening doors to increased communication and involvement, but other doors are closing in front of the younger generation. Sadly, the younger generation is not aware that they are losing out in the new dispensation.

Today, communications between parents and children are through the sms or chat, depriving such communications the warmth of personal interaction. Husbands and wives send net messages to each other from the same bed. Body language and smiles that determine the quality of relationship have receded into the background. Cell phone based interaction between children and parents and husbands and wives tends to diminish the importance of personal interaction , robbing them of the opportunity to develop a well defined sense of self that generally evolves through such interaction.

The dream of every youngster in our schools and colleges to reach the Silicon Valleys of the globe presents its own challenges. If the brightest and the best go to the IT industry, who will be left to become our doctors, our administrators, our politicians, our singers, dancers and artists? The IT professionals, consisting of our best minds, confine themselves to a single sector, leaving the rest of the arena to people with less talent. Would this be conducive to our growth as a developed country? We need good people for IT, but we need equally good people for every other field of activity. This is a challenge that the IT sector seems unaware in its rush to grab the best brains. The Universities should play a role by channelising our brilliant minds to different sectors in equal measure and the IT should work with the universities to facilitate equity and justice in deploying our youngsters in all vital sectors. The future of IT itself will depend on well managed development.

The information revolution has brought in speed into our lives, but speed, by itself, does not enhance quality of life. Henry David Thoreau said, "the man whose

horse trots a mile a minute does not carry the most important messages." Many of you may recall the telling photograph of a rocket being carried to the launching pad by a bullock cart. Speed on the ground is unnecessary for the rocket to gain speed when it is launched. When things come at you very fast, you naturally lose touch with yourself, it has been said. To go back to Pico Iyer, when we have more and more ways to communicate, we will have less and less to say. In our bid to beat deadlines again and again, we lose lifelines, he said.

I am afraid I have strayed away from the challenges faced by IT to the challenges faced by the society on account of the information revolution. But these are the two sides of the same coin and one cannot be dealt with without dealing with the other. We should use the immense opportunities presented by the IT revolution, but we should also meet the challenges posed by it. The screen, however accomplished, cannot give us the emotional and moral character and we need to learn what is essential, not what is available. Merely running away from connectivity by seeking out "black hole resorts" or "internetless" weeks, only to return to this busy information highway will not reshape the IT sector to the advantage of man. The man is superior to the machine and he should prevail in the end.

Thank you.

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