Technology: A Blessing Or A Curse?

'Technology: the knack of so arranging the world that we don't have to experience it.' - Max Frisch, *Homo Faber*

We live in the age of technology. We commute by automobiles and airplanes and communicate by emails and mobiles. The media and the Internet provide us the latest information from all over the world. Movies filled with hi-tech special effects entertain us. Air conditioners and room heaters keep our life comfortable despite climatic inconveniences. The list goes on. Technology has transformed almost every aspect of our lives. Of course, a few of us may have concerns about the pollution and environmental problems that technology has led to. But overall most people feel that technology has benefited us immensely.

But, as per the above quote, that precisely is the expertise of technology: to not let us experience the reality of the world. Therefore let us go deeper to analyze the effects of technology on our society.

TECHNOLOGY HARMS MORE THAN IT BENEFITS

· How many people can afford a car? Not everyone. But how many people have to breathe the poisonous exhaust of the car? Everyone.

· How many people enjoy consumer products? A few. But when the industries manufacturing these products release toxic effluents into the rivers, how many people suffer? Everyone.

· How many people have benefited from fertilizers, insecticides, terminator seeds, and other artificial techniques for increasing agricultural production? Some people for a generation or two. But how many people are troubled by the soil infertility and the resulting ever-increasing prices of essential food grains? Everyone for many generations to come

· Who benefit from cell phones? The vendors and the users. But who are exposed to the harmful electromagnetic waves that fill the atmosphere? Everyone.

· Whom does nuclear technology help? Mainly a few power-hungry politicians. But whom does it endanger? Everyone.

· Who are benefiting from extensive technological advancement? A few developed countries. But who will suffer from the global warming they have caused in the process? All the coastal countries of world.

Technology offers luxuries to a few, but strips millions of their necessities in the process. In other words, **technology heals in retail and kills in wholesale**.

TECHNOLOGY CREATES A WORLDVIEW WHICH MAKES ITS MISUSE NATURAL

Often the proponents of technology argue that the misuse of technology is to be condemned, not technology itself. They liken technology to a knife; in the hand of a murderer it kills, but in the hand of a surgeon, it cures. Similarly, the argument goes, technology cannot be blamed if mavericks threaten to, say, misuse nuclear weapons.

The analogy is good, but does it apply to technology? Technology does not just create machines. It also creates the worldviews of the users of those machines. In a technology-centered world, multitudes of gadgets promise control and enjoyment. Consequently people develop, consciously or unconsciously, a worldview that everything is meant for their enjoyment if they can just get the means. Technological education, being secular, teaches them nothing about any higher spiritual purpose of life. Having no knowledge or opportunity for finding inner fulfillment, people consider material enjoyment to be the only goal of life. Further the media, using the most sophisticated technology, fills their minds with lust for enjoyment and greed for possessions. In a world of limited resources and unlimited desires, frustration of lust and greed is inevitable. This frustration soon erupts as anger. And whey people are given no knowledge of karmic justice, what is going to stop them 'impelled as they are by lust, greed and anger - from misusing technology, their most powerful resource, while pursuing pleasure?

· Once I saw a jazzy billboard announcing an upcoming beauty pageant. Below the lewd pictures read a note: The proceeds from this contest will be used to treat AIDS patients. I couldn't resist commenting to my friend, "I don't know whether any people will be cured of AIDS by this, but I know for sure that many people will get AIDS due to this."

· In many reputed educational institutes, students are provided with high-speed broadband Internet connections to facilitate their research work. But what is the main search object for most students? Pornography.

· Do we ever see ads promoting rice, vegetables and other essential food items that nourish our bodies? Rarely. But how often do we see ads that seduce us to smoke and drink and destroy our bodies? Everywhere all the time.

· What is the main purpose for which almost all the countries use technology? Defense. Not supply of food or other basic necessities.

· Where does most of the funding for technological research globally come from? Either the defense industry or the consumer industry. Both of these cater, not to the basic necessities of life of everyone, but to the lust, greed and anger of the powerful and the wealthy.

These few examples indicate a general pattern: technology is used far more for the selfish pleasures of some than for the selfless good of all. Going back to the knife analogy, imagine giving a knife to a person who we know is blind and mad. What is he going to do with it other than misuse it to harm himself and others? As discussed above, the technological worldview makes people spiritually blind and materially mad. When such people ' whether they be scheming politicians, cunning businessmen or misled masses - are given technology, what will they do other than misuse it for gradual or sudden MAD (mutually assured destruction)?

TECHNOLOGY CREATES, NOT PROGRESS, BUT AN ILLUSION OF PROGRESS

In the past people would leave the doors of their homes open and still be fearless. Now we moderns lock, bolt, chain and buzzer-alarm their doors and are still fearful. Is this progress?

Most moderns are proud of their posh houses, fast cars, smooth roads and skyscraper offices, but they can't even sleep without a pill. Can a society be considered progressed if it makes its people struggle to get the simple and essential pleasure of sleeping, a pleasure that the 'primitive' villager gets effortlessly?

The technological worldview being materialistic gives rise to selfishness, competition and exploitation. Most moderns, despite the show of romantic love, can't trust their own spouses - what then to speak of parents and children or bosses and colleagues. Do alienated, suspicious people comprise a progressive society?

In the past, the main occupation for most people was farming. People would work around eight hours daily about four months a year during the sowing and harvesting seasons. That would provide them enough for the whole year. Then came the industrial revolution and we 'progressed' from fields to factories. And people had to work for eight hours throughout the year. As we now enter the information age, people have to work almost twelve hours a day throughout the year. To have to work more and more for the same basic necessities of life: is this progress?

In fact, we proud moderns go through far more anxieties - job insecurity, stock market crashes, political instability, scandals, crimes, to name a few - to get our necessities than our ancestors. And despite the entire struggle, what we get is substandard: no fresh food, clean water or pure air! To go through greater anxiety to get life's necessities of a poorer quality - is this progress?

Industrialization - an outgrowth of technological advancement - has led to factories replacing fields as the main workplace and machines replacing humans at the workplace. Result? Factories mostly provide hazardous, unhygienic or monotonous jobs that make humans slaves to machines. Even the office jobs being sedentary cause health problems. And mechanized factories can never offer as much employment as the farms did in the past. So a large number of people have to suffer or fear unemployment. For subsistence some of the unemployed turn to begging and others to crime. And overall the modernized industrial environment is so agitating to the mind that self-destructive addictions become the only solace for most people. Are these - unemployment, hazardous or unhealthy employment, criminality and addictions - indicators of progress?

Technology provides comforts, but the high-speed technology-centered lifestyle takes away the peace of mind necessary to enjoy the comforts. A software engineer has an AC in his office, but still he sweats - not due to heat, but due to tension. Thus **technology makes us comfortably miserable**.

Medical technology may have eradicated a few diseases and may offer cures to some more. But far more people need medical attention today than in the past due to unhealthy congested city living, sedentary lifestyles and polluted air, water and food. A greater number of hospitals is a sign, not so much of better health care as of worse health. Moreover many of the sophisticated medical treatments, unlike the traditional herbal cures, are prohibitively expensive.

Most moderns can hardly imagine life without television, movies and myriad other forms of hi-tech entertainment. And they pity the ancestors who did not have all this enjoyment. But people in the past knew how to find joy in the simple things of life - like sharing and caring in joint families, observing and learning from nature and hearing and chanting the names and glories of God. Consequently they did not find life boring. On the contrary it is we who have divorced ourselves from simple natural pleasures by our infatuation with technology. And so, despite our much-touted entertainment, we still find ourselves constantly bored. The entertainment industry may use sophisticated technology, but is the dependence on entertainment - and the serious inner emptiness that it symptomizes - a sign of progress?

Technology intoxicates us with the feeling of being the controller. Just by pressing a switch, we can cause huge machines to perform complex actions. Just by clicking a key, we can summon information from any part of the world. By constantly working with machines, we become habituated to controlling them and expect everything and everyone to be similarly controlled. When people refuse to be controlled like machines, we end up with all sorts of relationship conflicts ranging from cold wars to marital ruptures, from quarrels to murders. And in life when things don't go the way we want them to, we end up suffering from a wide range of mental problems, from depression to addiction, from stress to suicide.

Technology represents a tragic misuse of the human intelligence

Imagine a doctor who prescribes only a painkiller to a seriously sick patient. The patient is happy because he gets relief. The doctor is happy because he gets his fees. Happy end of story, isn't it? The problem is - the story doesn't end there. The patient's pain is not cured, but covered. Soon it will recur and worsen.

All of us are like the seriously sick patient. From the moment of birth, we have a death sentence on our heads. Time forces us to helplessly grow old, get diseased and die. Along this doomed journey from birth to death, miseries from our own bodies and minds (e.g. fever, indigestion, stress, depression), miseries from other living beings (e.g. mosquitoes, competitors, superiors, relatives), and miseries from nature (e.g. extreme heat or cold, floods, earthquakes) periodically torment us.

The Vedic texts explain the root cause of our suffering. We are spiritual beings entrapped in material bodies. We belong, not to this temporary and miserable material world, but to an eternal and blissful spiritual realm, where we live forever in loving harmony with God. Due to our desire to enjoy independent of God, we are placed in this world, which is an arena for experimentation and rectification. Our advanced human intelligence is meant to recognize our terrible predicament here. For such intelligent humans, the Vedic texts offer a systematic spiritual path that enables them to re-harmonize with and return back to God.

In our modern times, this intelligence has been used, not to advance spiritually, but to develop technologically. Technology gratifies our senses, inflates our ego and makes us feel comfortable and proud. However, **technology provides entertainment, not peace; comforts, not happiness; medicines, not health; cosmetics, not youth; life support systems, not immortality**. Thus technology is like the painkiller that deadens us to the suffering of material existence. It creates an illusory sense of well-being, which makes us feel that a spiritual solution is unnecessary. Technology, by its false promises, deprives us of the opportunity to attain everlasting happiness and condemns us to stay on and suffer in this world of birth and death.

Srila Prabhupada succinctly states the superficial and futile nature of technological advancement, **'The intelligence that is meant for solving your problems permanently is misused to convert a castor oil lamp into an electric lamp.' (paraphrased).**

MAKE THE BEST USE OF A BAD BARGAIN

'Do we have to give up technology and return back to village life?' That is not undesirable, but it may not be practical for most of us.

We don't have to give up technology; but we do have to give up the illusion that technology can make us happy. As spiritual beings our happiness lies not in material acquisition, but in spiritual realization. When by spiritual knowledge and practice we find happiness in loving and serving God, we can use technology in His service, for spreading His message and mission.

Some of you may be feeling a sort of double standards in this article ' it condemns technology, using technology. Srila Prabhupada would often give an example to clarify this:
Suppose a gang of thieves robs a bank and flees in a car at a speed of 80 mph on a road with a speed limit of 40 mph. What should the police van chasing the thieves do - stick to the speed limit and let the thieves escape or break the speed limit, go faster than the thieves, arrest them and retrieve the stolen wealth?

Similarly just like the thieves breaking the traffic rules, technological advancement is against the purpose of the material world. Yet when people's spiritual knowledge is being stolen away by the propagation of godlessness and materialism through technology, what should the spiritual guardians of society 'the devotees of God' do? They use the

same technology to vigorously propagate God consciousness and spirituality. They thus try to save the innocent people from being misled into needless suffering in the name of technological progress.

In fact Srila Prabhupada envisioned an East-West synthesis of Indian wisdom and Western technology. He knew that this alone could usher in a new global era of harmony and happiness. He compared the coming together of Vedic spirituality and modern technology to the coming together of the proverbial blind man and the lame man. But for this synthesis to take place, the technologically advanced West has to recognize that it is lacking in spiritual vision. And the materially crippled India has to recognize its wealth of spiritual knowledge. If we acknowledge our respective endowments and deficiencies, we can become pioneers in bringing about an international spiritual revival, which is the only hope for our disastrously misled modern world. Are we ready?

The Spiritual Scientist