

Gandhi Belongs To The Future, Not Past, Of Artificial Intelligence

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(This is Part I of a two-part series by Sudheendra Kulkarni on Gandhi's connection with science and technology. You can read [Part II here.](#))

We are living in the most technologically-advanced age in human history. The standalone computer has evolved into the Internet, which in turn has engendered a bouquet of technologies that have brought our world at the doorsteps of what is called the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Artificial Intelligence, now in its infancy, is expected to lead to the integration of the human body with machine or non-biological intelligence, far in excess of our biological intelligence.

Alan Turing (1912-54), the British mathematician who laid the foundation for computer science, had prophesied the birth of thinking machines. In 1951 he wrote: "If a machine can think, it might think more intelligently than we do, and then where should we be?"

Is Gandhi A 'Prophet' of Communication Revolution?

With the human species thus getting ready to enter a new tech-driven evolutionary phase, what place, if at all, will there be for Mahatma Gandhi in this future? The question is pertinent because it is widely believed that he was opposed to modern science and technology.

True, as a preacher and practitioner of Satya (truth) and Ahimsa (non-violence), Gandhi belonged to that

small and saintly sub-section of the human species that has advanced far ahead of the rest on the path of moral evolution. Underscoring the indispensability of Gandhian nonviolence in the age of nuclear weapons, Martin Luther King Jr, his ardent American admirer, had said: “The choice is not between violence and nonviolence, but between nonviolence and nonexistence.”

Here we come across a paradox. Is Gandhi ji going to be relevant on the yardstick of morality and spirituality, but irrelevant on the criterion of modern science?

My research into the subject, which helped me write the book *Music of the Spinning Wheel – Mahatma Gandhi’s Manifesto for the Internet Age*, conclusively proves that he was not a foe of modern technology.

On the contrary, as Ray Kurzweil, a renowned techno-futurist and Google's Director of Engineering (his prediction: AI will surpass human intelligence by 2045, the year of ‘singularity’) said to me in an interview published in my book: “Gandhi is a prophet of the communication revolution.”

Why Gandhi Criticised Western Science & Technology

Here is how Kurzweil explained his startling assertion: “I regard human evolution as a spiritual process. Man’s biological evolution is now being accelerated and augmented by technological evolution. After ‘Singularity’ is reached, the distinction between the two will disappear. Both will together expand human consciousness, which I believe has a sacred quality. Consciousness is the ultimate repository of all moral and spiritual values, such as tolerance, compassion, nonviolence and love...These are the values we learn from Gandhi.”

Indeed, all the great minds behind the digital revolution have emphasised that technology is not only about tools, but should be guided by a lofty moral purpose.

For example, Turing’s own vision of computers was that they would not only be intelligent but also have human qualities – that is, “be kind, beautiful, friendly, ... tell right from wrong...” Notice the words: “Be kind”. And be moral – that is, “tell right from wrong”. Gandhi ji would have warmly applauded this vision of technology re-humanised.

His criticism of much of western science and technology was owing to the fact that their purpose and consequences were dehumanising.

He condemned their use to perpetrate violence and exploitation, enriching a minority, and impoverishing the majority both within and among nations.

The violence was targeted not only at humans, but also against nature – a fact that has become alarmingly evident now in the form of the relentless destruction of the environment.

As a result, much of the ‘development’ in the modern world is rendered soulless. Gandhi ji’s concept of ‘satyagraha’, in its broadest sense, was both a science and practice of the soul-force. In *Harijan* of 14 May 1938, he wrote: “If we have made unexpected progress in physical sciences, why may we do less in the science of the soul?”

Gandhi’s Prophecy: Science Will One Day, Advance The Cause Of Non-Violence

Gandhi ji was a supreme techno-optimist. In an appreciative and anticipatory comment about the advancements in science and technology in his time, he wrote in 1925: “Many things are impossible and yet are the only things right. A reformer’s business is to make the impossible possible by giving an ocular demonstration of the possibility in his own conduct. Whoever thought it possible before Edison, to speak to people hundreds of miles away from us? Marconi went a step further and made wireless communication possible. We are daily witnessing the phenomenon of the impossible of yesterday

becoming the possible of today. As in physical science, so in psychological.”

He audaciously prophesied that science itself would, in the future, advance the cause of nonviolence.

“We are constantly being astonished at the amazing discoveries in the field of violence,” he observed, and then predicted: “But I maintain that far more undreamt of and seemingly impossible discoveries will be made in the field of nonviolence.” Further, he said, “Science has yet much to learn. It has so far touched only the hem of the garment.”

The most remarkable and lesser known aspect of the Mahatma’s ‘Experiments with Truth’ is that he had a vague idea of where technology was headed.

Specifically – in terms of Martin Heidegger’s concept of “unconcealment of new technologies” – he had an intuition about the future arrival of both the Internet and Artificial Intelligence (AI).

To know this, it is necessary to delve into his profound and original reflections on the subject of man-machine duality, which has engaged the best minds in philosophy and science in our times.

Gandhi’s Reflections On ‘Ideal Society’ & ‘Ideal Machine’

Contrary to popular misconception, Mahatma Gandhi was not dogmatic about his *charkha* (spinning wheel) as the sole carrier of his political, economic, cultural and spiritual message. On numerous occasions, he wrote that he would readily embrace if science produced a better substitute, that carried the same message. In a remarkable interview on 21 July 1946, he elucidated not only his conception of an ‘ideal society’, but also his speculation about an ‘ideal machine’.

Gandhi’s ‘ideal society’ would not be “a pyramid with the apex sustained by the bottom”.

Rather, it would be like a majestic “oceanic circle whose centre will be the individual” – linked integrally through a bond of freedom and inter-dependence with the village, nation and humanity, “in which the last is equal to the first or, in other words, no one is to be the first and none the last”.

What kind of technology would such a society need?

There would be, he said, “no room for machines that would displace human labour and that would concentrate power in a few hands. Labour has its unique place in a cultured human family. *Every machine that helps every individual has a place. But I must confess that I have never sat down to think about what that machine can be.*” **(Emphasis added)**

The Internet Era: A Gandhian Dream Fulfilled?

As he lived in the pre-computer era, Gandhi could not have had a clear idea of what was coming. But, since then, has technology “unconcealed” a machine / technology that “helps every individual”? Yes. It is the Internet.

For the first time in human history, we have a machine that can help and be used by anybody, anywhere, anytime in the world.

Uniquely, it also connects every person to every other member of the planetary population, thus catalysing countless conversations each day across the globe. “I would not like to live in a world which has not become one,” Gandhi *ji* often said.

That dream of human unity in the proverbial Global Village is being slowly realised by the Internet. In tomorrow’s age of ‘glocalisation’, 3-D printing, decentralised digital economy, and limitless cultural-artistic interactions across national, religious and linguistic boundaries, hold the promise of realising another Gandhian dream: “For my material needs, the village is my world. For my spiritual needs, the

world is my village.”

Gandhi's Intuition About AI

Now, to Gandhi's intuition about AI. To understand this, we should first know that Gandhi *ji* had deep faith in the power of science and the machines it creates. Indeed, he believed that the greatest machine ever created is the human body itself.

But he also believed that this unique 'machine', a product of human evolution over several billion years, was going to evolve even further in the centuries to come.

In his book *Conquest of Self*, Gandhi reflects: “What was not possible for the vast majority a hundred years ago, has been found possible today. And what is a hundred years in the cycle of time open to us for making infinite progress? *If scientists are right, it was but yesterday that we found ourselves with the human body. Who knows, who dare prescribe, its limitation? Indeed, every day we are discovering the infiniteness of its capacity for good as well evil...* [But] man is not a brute. He has risen to the higher state after countless births in the brute creation. *He is born to stand, not to walk on all fours or crawl. Bestiality is as far removed from manhood, as matter from spirit.*” **(Emphasis added)**

Artificial Intelligence was not a common word when Gandhi *ji* lived. It perhaps belonged to science fiction then. Now that it has become a reality, now that emotional and spiritual intelligence are being studied as higher forms of AI, and now that the greatest of scientists (Einstein, Turing, Kurzweil and many others) have asserted that a strong moral purpose must guide all the creations of the human mind for survival and higher evolution of the human species, can anyone still claim that the Mahatma belongs to the past, and *not* the future, in the journey of technology?

*(The author was an aide to former Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. He has recently founded 'Forum for a New South Asia', which advocates India-Pakistan-China cooperation. He welcomes comments at sudheenkulkarni@gmail.com. He tweets [@SudheenKulkarni](https://twitter.com/SudheenKulkarni). This is an opinion piece and the views expressed are the author's own. **The Quint** neither endorses nor is responsible for them.)*

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