

Our Ways

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Abstract: The West seems to view “Technological Progress” such as embodied in Artificial Intelligence (AI) etc as something unstoppable, like hurricanes, and all that one can do is to try and minimise the devastations caused by it. Such surrender to technology comes perhaps naturally to the West as it is largely in continuation with its tradition of surrendering oneself to man-made institutions for the sake of greater power and control. India has had a different tradition of setting limits to what man-made institutions can do to the individual; total surrender was reserved only to gods (that too the deserving ones!) and not to any mortal authority. It should therefore come naturally to us to set limits to what technologies like AI are allowed to do to us so that large scale devastations are avoided.

The challenges of driving on roads in India are well documented, very often with winning wit and humour, and every generation makes creative contributions to this industry or art form – recall the recent moon walk episode on the state of Bangalore roads in the wake of the Chandrayan-2 launch. The one I want to bring up here is our attitude towards the traffic regulation mechanisms such as traffic signals; it is notorious that we don't always respect them, and this malady is expected to be treated by levying hefty fines as being presently attempted. It is the collective experience of all of us road users, including pedestrians, that the green signal is no guarantee that we can drive on or walk on safely; it is only one of the requirements for doing so. Even with the green light on, we all have to be alert to a variety of other impediments that might stop our progress , or worse still , send us off unceremoniously from this world altogether – such as people, cattle, vehicles, boulders, holes, cables, building materials etc appearing suddenly in front of us, notwithstanding the assurance we had from the green light , backed ultimately by the authority of the State, that it is our right to move on unobstructed. Far from trusting the green light entirely and moving on unconcerned, we continue to be on full alert regarding the dangers ahead , sobered by the thought that, like guerrilla fighters, we are pretty much on our own for our survival and reaching which ever destination we set out for.

The knowledge that the green light can not anyway be trusted fully for our safety and survival on the road also shapes our attitude towards the red light. The red light certainly is warning us that there is danger ahead, but that need not be taken as the last word on the matter. With or without red light, and even with the green light, we know there are dangers ahead in our path all the time and it is entirely upto us to deal with them on our own, guerrilla fighter style as mentioned. In this sense, the red light is not treated as the last word in the matter – just as we couldn't trust the green one fully any way. The traffic signals in our country thus do not control the traffic by itself; it is only one of the aids for us to negotiate the traffic; ours is at best a “signal aided” traffic.

This apparently is not the case in the rich industrialised countries where green is an unconditional sanction to move on unobstructed, and red is an entirely non-negotiable no-no. One makes oneself entirely powerless before them, in return for which there is guarantee that their writ runs unquestioned. Using the combatant analogy again, a road user here is more like a soldier in a regular army with the knowledge that there is a huge infrastructure and system in place that can be depended up on for one's safety and survival, unlike the guerrilla fighter model for the users of Indian roads. Such countries could be said to have a “signal controlled” traffic.

This unwillingness to put ourselves entirely at the mercy of the those in charge of running the affairs of our society is not confined to road traffic alone; all of us who can afford to do so do create and maintain back ups (often many layers of them) for most of the routine provisions and services that we are expected to receive as a matter of right and for which we have made payments. Thus, even in metros where there is reasonable infrastructure being provided, we do provide for back ups for electric power, cooking fuel, water supply, security arrangements, children's schooling, etc. at our homes so that we can get on with our lives even when the main system fails to deliver. Huge drums for storing water is a common sight even in homes where the corporation water supply is fairly assured and steady. Same with DG sets and UPS, kerosene stoves etc. (We will for now overlook rumours of some people even keeping pigeons and horses in case phones fail and transport system collapses!). It is as though we do not trust the 'establishment' to do what it is expected to do under normal circumstances; we seem to think that when things become difficult, we are entirely on our own

and the larger system can not be relied up on to take care of us – the guerrilla fighter syndrome again! (The many who can not afford to build such back ups are entirely at the mercy of whatever the system provides).

It is absolutely true that there is no need to mystify or romanticise such observations about contemporary India as these can be easily understood in terms of the large scale scarcity of resources, poor quality of infrastructure and governance, etc., which when rectified should make us behave exactly like those in the rich west. Possibly, but may not be entirely so too. Our disdain for man-made authority (the state and its laws, the police, traffic rules, tax laws, energy/resource conservation measures, hygiene and environmentally healthy practices, physical fitness etc) is quite pervasive and across the classes and regions, and is often traced back to the days of our independence struggle when open and public defiance of the state and its laws, as well as of many social norms and practices, was a powerful form of fighting for national independence and ridding the society of many of its evils. There is a view that this practice of public 'disobedience' of authority, deployed so effectively by Mahatma Gandhi and his disciples, has stayed on with us much after we became free and masters of our own destiny, at least nominally.

But as scholars like Dharampal have pointed out, such practices may have a much older history in our case wherein open defiance of the state and its authority was considered a legitimate way of fighting for justice – for oneself, one's family, one's community, one's region etc. Unconditional surrender to man-made authority was perhaps not ever considered a great virtue – god in his/her various forms were the only ones who could command such absolute surrender. For endless generations children in our society have been growing up listening to stories of men and women of virtue (sages, poets, kings and nobles, plain householders etc) standing up to mighty emperors who they felt were deviating from the path of righteousness, virtue and justice. This was the case even with gods who the virtuous felt were deviating from the path of righteousness; they would be defied too, just as they would defy a tyrannical king. Limits were set to what the global can do to the local, the outer can do to the inner, etc. Autonomy and inviolability of the individual seems to have been the corner stone of our social and political consciousness and conduct; what Mahatma Gandhi termed Swaraj at the level of the individual.

This streak of putting clear bounds that can not be crossed by any form of man-made authority no matter how mighty has perhaps been endemic to us for long. Unconditional surrender is reserved only for those humans and gods who in one's perception have stayed the course of righteousness and justice unwaveringly.

For most parts of its existence, such might not have been the case with the West where no one had any public sanction to defy the many forms of man-made authority such as the church, the king, the army, the hospital, the school, the academia, science & technology, etc. Total surrender to the authority of such institutions was required from the citizens, and their proven ability to do so unconditionally over long periods of time could also be responsible for the unprecedented power and domination that the West has achieved in the world – traffic flows smoothly as the signals are obeyed unconditionally. For over a century, no where has this surrender of the West to its institutions been so complete as in the case of its S&T; “listen to the scientists” is what the 17 year old Climate Crusader from Europe tells the politicians and the corporations for saving the world – the biting irony of it being that our environment and climate got to this stage precisely by doing so!

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is the latest (and perhaps the last?) of the institutions that the Western man seems to be eager to surrender to – an institution that looks to subsume all other man-made institutions and become the sole Master for the humans, and represents a logical culmination of the long process of surrendering to the machine that the West has been pursuing. While there is little that we can do to influence the West in the matter, there may be some definite learnings from our own civilisational inclinations and preferences in this domain that we can bring to bear while making our decisions on technological issues like AI. If indeed we have historically been able to put limits to what authority and power is permitted to do to the individual, then there is nothing like the 'inevitability of technological progress' which we are told we all have to subject ourselves to like a force of nature. We can choose to draw the lines where we wish to; for example we may decide to have an “AI aided ” life rather than an “AI controlled” life, etc. The knowledge that we have had a civilisational track record of putting limits to what role technology (man-made institutions and authority in general) should play in our lives, should help us take a sensible and practical stand on issues like AI. We need to move closer to the spirit of what Mahatma Gandhi had said in

Hind Swaraj:“ *...it was not that we did not know how to invent machinery, but our forefathers knew that, if we set our hearts after such things, we would become slaves and lose our moral fibre...*” The emphasis on not getting enslaved, by machinery/technology or anything else. As in the case of much else he wrote and spoke, it should be taken that Gandhiji is not here just giving his personal opinion on the matter, but was reflecting the thinking and understanding of the ordinary people of our country. This should thus give us the confidence that , in the case of AI or anything else that threaten to over power us, we can fall back on our own historical experiences and learnings and chart our own path of resistance; we need not be limited by the ways in which such resistance may be developing in the West itself, constrained as they would be by their own historical settings.

We would most likely decide to have traffic lights in our urban centres for sure, but we would also have more realistic expectations of what role they can play in regulating our traffic!