

Can Technology deliver freedoms for India's poor?

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The TechFest in IIT Bombay is a very important event which brings some of the brightest young minds together for three days. It is a great opportunity to be able to speak to you today. I spoke two years ago at the Techfest and am pleasantly surprised that I have been invited back! My talk today is addressed to concerned citizens who are not experts on the subject. Many of the issues I am touching on require a much more complex and nuanced treatment but this talk is deliberately taking a simpler narrative.

INTRODUCTION

I want to approach the subject of my today's talk through the prism of my own journey. I grew up in Bangalore at a time of great political turbulence, the period when Indira Gandhi, the then PM, declared a political emergency in the country in 1976, the only time that this has happened in our country's history, suspending all civil and political rights. I was in school and my father being an activist journalist, so many of our friends had been thrown into jail at the time. Apart from the politics of social movements with which my parents were involved, I also got active in student politics and became the President of the student's union. As I was completing my undergraduate degree, I had a slightly unexpected twist to my life when I got admission into IIM, Ahmedabad, an offer that was and I suppose still is, hard to refuse. While there were many enjoyable parts to my time in IIM-A, I had my struggles with the very limited attention that was given to the most pressing problems that the country was facing. From campus, I joined Azim Premji's Wipro. Much as I learned a great deal with Wipro and I continue to deeply admire and respect Premji, the corporate world was not my calling. I saw an advert for ActionAid, a development NGO. Like most Indians at the time, I had never heard of NGOs. The only NGO we knew was non-gazetted officers! I spent the next ten years in the development NGO world in India mostly working with the rural poor in some of the most remote parts of the country, particularly in the poorest states. In 1995 I moved with ActionAid to Kenya to work on rural development and poverty eradication in Africa and from then on have been out of the country working with the UN and Amnesty International etc and have only just got back to India after living outside the country for 23 years. I have been visiting several times a year and following things fairly closely. But it is obviously not the same thing as living here.

The India I left is clearly very different from the India I have returned to. The differences are quite striking - 23 years is after all one whole generation and many of the students here would not even have been born when I left the country. But what is more surprising is the lack of difference on so many fronts and how little has changed. I will come back to this in more specific terms later.

FREEDOMS

I want to talk about technology and freedom in this context of the dramatic changes and the even more dramatic non-changes in the last 23 years. When I refer to freedoms I am looking at in the frame that the United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) talks about freedoms. This is particularly relevant given that this is the week when the world is celebrating the 70th Anniversary of the UDHR, which was adopted just a year after India gained independence.

Drawing inspiration from President Roosevelt's speech on four freedoms from 1941, Kofi Annan, the then UN Secretary General and one of my favourite bosses, had spoken in 2005 at the UN General Assembly about "In Larger Freedoms" - of freedom from want and freedom from fear, towards security, development and human rights for all. Freedom from want refers to basic human needs and rights - freedom from hunger, illiteracy and disease. Freedom from fear covers fundamental freedoms like freedom of expression, assembly, association and basic human security, of the right to life and safety. I would like to use this framework for today's discussion.

Let me see what the views of the audience on this are before my talk and let's try again after to see if you have changed your views. So, do you think that for the poor of India, on the basic needs and rights - generally enjoy freedom from want and has the situation has significantly improved? And the same question in relation to freedom from fear - ability to raise their voice, protest, organise?

As I launch into my talk, let me introduce a couple of notes of caution here on data. Those of you use public statistics in India would appreciate how different sources, sometimes even from the same department, have entirely different numbers on the same metric. So please do bear this in mind, although I have tried to use the most reliable and independent sources. But I am not really trying to play a numbers game. Sophistry on cutting numbers in clever ways to make one's point is not what I am after. But I do want to focus on some stark truths which we would be foolish to ignore. Second, we have much to celebrate in terms of our achievements in the last 25 years but I have consciously focussed on the challenges as that is what we need to address.

FREEDOM FROM WANT

Back on point, let us start with the most pressing issues for a poor country like India and particularly for the poorer sections of its society, which is freedom from want.

As we are in IIT, Bombay, one of the leading institutions of higher learning in India, let me begin with looking at Education. After all, there can be little argument about it being a foundational freedom and human right.

Education

My first ten years of work with ActionAid in India in the mid -eighties was heavily focused on education. I remember this as a period in the country of huge innovation and excitement in the field of education. Rajasthan in particular, with the strong push from Anil Bordia, the then Secretary of Education at the central level, had become a hive for trying out new approaches

like Lok Jumbish. The district primary education program was introduced in 1993 which was based on many of the learnings from innovative NGO and government programmes. There was a lot of talk about the importance of the Directive Principles in the Constitution and how it should become a fundamental right which finally led to the passing of the Right to Education Act in 2009. The biggest progress we have made in the last 25 years in education is certainly enrolling more girl children with gross enrolment ratio going up from 84% in 1995 to full enrolment (124%) in 2016 in the primary segment and 35% to 76% at the secondary level¹.

Despite the important achievements, the overall picture is grim for a country that has been independent for nearly 70 years. India remains the country with the highest proportion of adults (46%) of adults who have not attained primary education among all G20 and OECD countries². The gender gap remains excessively high. Independent experts put the number of children still out of school in the tens of millions, many of whom are obviously engaged in child labour. The Right to Education, having been passed with great fanfare, has been mostly ignored. Pre-primary education/ECD has been severely neglected. 1.5 lakh govt schools remain closed while private schools, of even more dubious quality, continue to mushroom. 9 lakh primary school teacher positions lie vacant. Over 90% of training institutions are run by the private sector. The most alarming aspect of our basic schooling system is the dismal learning outcomes or the quality of education. Report after report from ASER assessing the ability of children who have been through primary school to read and write, let alone compute basic arithmetic, is dismal³. So much so, I understand that our largest state, Uttar Pradesh, has now invited leading education NGO Pratham to run remedial classes in the next three months to address this. Underlying this is the gross underinvestment in education which may have even declined over time. In 1997, government expenditure on education was 3.4% and this number has seemingly declined by 2017⁴. This is despite political party election manifestos, including that of the BJP, committing to take this up to 6% of GDP. The argument that the GDP itself has grown does not hold much water because of the huge increase in population from 960 million to about 1.3 billion. An increase of 340 million which is more than the population of any other country in the world, other than China. Contrast this with India being one of the highest spenders on military in the developing world, we allocated 2.6% of GDP on military expenditure in 1997 and nearly the same in 2017⁵! As I mentioned earlier, some of the most shocking facts are the ones that show how little has changed, as if time has stood still.

Health & nutrition

Let me now move to the second foundational freedom, the right to basic health, including the right to life itself.

¹ The World Bank: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.PRM.ENRR?locations=IN>

² OECD 'Education at a Glance Report, 2017':
<http://gpseducation.oecd.org/Content/EAGCountryNotes/IND.pdf>

³ ASER 2017, 'Beyond Basics':
<http://img.asercentre.org/docs/Publications/ASER%20Reports/ASER%202017/aser2017fullreportfinal.pdf>

⁴ The World Bank: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.XPD.TOTL.GD.ZS?locations=IN>

⁵The World Bank: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.GD.ZS?locations=IN>

A very important overall metric of health and well-being has seen steady progress, life expectancy has inched up from 60 in 1995 to 68 in 2016⁶. Because of the poor status of women in India and South Asia, we have historically had shockingly high numbers and rates of women dying during childbirth. But in the last 25 years, we have made huge strides in addressing this. India's maternal mortality ratio has gone down from a staggering 471 in 1995 to 174 in 2015. 130,000 women used to die every year during pregnancy and childbirth in 1995, this came down to 45,000 in 2015⁷. This means 85,000 women's lives that were dying unnecessarily are saved every year. How many hundreds of thousands of women's lives have been saved in the last 25 years. What a wonderful achievement. Similarly, on infant mortality, the rates came down from 78 in 1995 to 34 in 2016⁸, again an impressive reduction. At the same time, what has not changed is equally stunning. With our South Asian neighbours we continue to account for almost half the number of maternal deaths in the world. And a staggering 38% of our children, one in three Indian children, suffer from moderate or severe malnutrition⁹. The issue of maternal and child health is fundamentally linked to the way we treat women and children in our society and we will come back to this later when we discuss freedom from fear. Again, investment on health at less than 1% of GDP has remained nearly the same over decades and well below what is required¹⁰.

Poverty and macro-economic growth

The closest proxy metric for freedom from want arguably is the percentage of population living below the poverty line and here we have seen creditable progress in India. Several hundred million people would have come out of poverty in the last 25 years. In percentage terms, about a fifth of the population is estimated to be below the poverty line of \$1.25 a day in 2011. This should be even lower by now, compared to over 40% in 1995¹¹. This means that there are at least several hundred million people still below the poverty line. And on the key composite index of well-being and freedom from want, the human development index, our ranking has hardly changed. In 1995, we were ranked at 134 out of 174 countries and in 2018, we are still 130/189¹². The number of hungry people in India are in the hundreds of millions.

When I left, India had started moving rapidly on economic liberalisation. The sluggish Hindu rate of growth of 3.5% p.a. was being left behind and by 1993 we had already accelerated to 4.8%, Gone were the days of having to travel to Kathmandu or wait for friends or relatives to visit from the U.S. to get our treasured pair of Levi's or Wrangler jeans or jackets. This was a time of great aspiration and hope for the future. The country was finally opening up, and we could only go up from here...and that's exactly where we went in many ways. I have come

⁶ The World Bank: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.LE00.IN?locations=IN>

⁷ The World Bank: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SH.MMR.DTHS?locations=IN>

⁸ The World Bank: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.IMRT.IN?locations=IN>

⁹ UNDP: <http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/IND>

¹⁰ The World Bank: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SH.XPD.GHED.GD.ZS?locations=IN>

¹¹ The Hindu, '8% GDP growth helped reduce poverty: UN report': <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/8-gdp-growth-helped-reduce-poverty-un-report/article6862101.ece>

¹² UNDP Human Development Report 1995: http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/reports/256/hdr_1995_en_complete_nostats.pdf

back to a very different country economically, with an annual growth rate of around 7%¹³, India is purportedly the world's fastest growing economy surpassing China in 2017. India has become a major exporter of IT services, Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) services, and software services with \$154 billion revenue in FY 2017. This is touted as the turbo engine of the economy. Although the service sector is the largest exporter in India, most of the country's population does not have the skills and education to be able to benefit from it, leading to jobless growth.

Inequality

Steady macro-economic growth and targeted anti-poverty programmes like the employment guarantee schemes and many others have no doubt massively reduced extreme poverty. But income inequality in India has increased greatly, which is more the consequence of the pattern of growth we have chosen. As of 2016, India was the twelfth most unequal country in the world. The richest 1% of Indians own over 58% of wealth. The richest 10% of the Indians own 81% of the wealth¹⁴. The commentator and journalist Sai Nath contrasts this eloquently with our great pride in being number 4 in the Forbes billionaires list last year. We were up from 50 billionaires to 119 in the last one year¹⁵. And these 140 individuals own over one fifth of our national wealth (22% of GDP). Before somebody points out the inevitability of growth increasing inequality, it is worth comparing the situation between India and China, Thomas Piketty's seminal work on inequality has shown that both countries have had a huge increase in concentration of wealth at the top from 1980 to 2000. But while China's figures have stabilised, India's have only worsened, with China being at about 14% and India's over 20%.

The current government's heavy investment in infrastructure projects like building highways, waterways and airports has a growth logic but almost all infrastructural projects have been mired in controversies like land grabbing, violation of environmental norms, displacement and loss of livelihood looming large. Those speaking up against the projects are often condemned as anti-development or even anti-national. A similar situation arises with the country's reliance on coal for power, versus the environmental concerns that comes with this. Thomas Piketty's work is also drawing interesting parallels between the growth of inequality and carbon emissions. The top 10% of the population account for more than 50% of the emissions, so climate change is not just an issue of which countries are the biggest culprits but equally which individuals.

Livelihoods & income

I want to now touch on the area of livelihoods and income, a key basis for well-being and freedom from want. We know that nearly half the population of India continues to depend on agriculture for its livelihood and well-being. Statistics vary, based on the source, on the percentage of the country's population that is employed in agriculture. ILO data puts the

¹³ The World Bank: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?locations=IN>

¹⁴ Hindustan Times, 'India second most unequal country in the world: Wealth Report: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-second-unequal-country-in-the-world-wealth-report/story-MGla7MbWAdzhKFvwhitilel.html>

¹⁵ Forbes Billionaires list: <https://www.forbes.com/billionaires/#415c0ed251c7>

number at 61% in 1995 down to 43% 25 years later i.e. by 2017¹⁶. Despite the massive increase in demand for food and steady increase in food price to urban consumers, agriculture has become a less and less viable occupation causing what has been called “farmer distress”. Neglect by successive governments has resulted in a sharp rise in input prices without commensurate increase in produce price for farmers. As a direct consequence of this state and market failure, a tragically high number of farmers have resorted to committing suicides to avoid the ignominy of not being able to look after their families and pay back debts. The government has suspiciously stopped publishing data on this for the last few years. Sai Nath, who has looked at starvation deaths and farmers suicides for decades puts the number at multiples of tens of thousands in the last three years. From 1995 to 2012, the government had reported about 3 lakh farmer suicides. Earlier this year, the Union Minister of State for Agriculture presented figures in the Lok Sabha that suicides in the farming sector had declined, from over 8000 or 22 every day in 2016 to about 6500 or 17 every day in 2017¹⁷. I can’t imagine that any of us in this room would find this particularly comforting.

Employment

As more of the population seeks non-agricultural employment, it is important to understand how this metric is moving. ILO estimates show the percentage of population (15+ age group) employed actually going down from 58% in 1995 to 52% in 2017¹⁸. A very worrying number is that the percentage of youth that are unemployed (15-24 age group) has gone up marginally from 7% in 1994 to 11% in 2012¹⁹. We can’t forget that 60% of our population is below the age of 25 and almost half are under 15. 180 million Indians are in the 18-25 age group. We will have the largest number of tertiary graduates in the world by 2030 with a significant proportion unemployed. Jobless growth is not an option for the future.

Let me now move to the other set of freedoms, freedom from fear. Let us be clear that the two are indivisible and inter-dependent.

FREEDOM FROM FEAR

Freedom from fear is the essence of modern democratic societies. As Indians, we pride ourselves on the world stage, of our democratic heritage, Constitution, institutions, elections and practise. We consistently call out the difference between our strong democratic credentials and the autocracies that are Pakistan and China - two neighbours with whom we are in permanent battle if not war, whether it is on military, trade, sports or cultural fronts.

At its most basic level, Freedom from fear is all about how we treat each other. Do we make our family members, our friends, our neighbours, our community members, the others in our colony and *mohalla*, feel safe, secure, included, cared for, loved? In the first instance as citizens and individuals and then of course as the state whose job it is to protect and promote human rights for all. And for corporations and institutions who also have the obligation to respect people’s freedoms and rights. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the

¹⁶ The World Bank: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.AGR.EMPL.ZS?locations=IN>

¹⁷ IndiaSpend: <https://www.indiaspend.com/farmer-suicides-down-21-in-2016-farming-sector-suicides-at-decade-low-56122/>

¹⁸ The World Bank: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.EMP.TOTL.SP.ZS?locations=IN>

¹⁹ The World Bank: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.1524.NE.ZS?locations=IN>

Constitution of India begins by talking about every individual being free and equal. On the upside, we have elections like clockwork and has just been shown in the results from the state elections in the last few days, people do have the ability to choose their leaders, despite the many vitiating variables. We have a Supreme Court and justices that have time and again shown their spine, despite all odds. And the India I have returned to has seen a complete transformation in terms of information and communications technology. In 2017, 730 million Indians or almost 60% of our population used mobile phones²⁰, touching the remotest areas of the country and in the urban setting has cut across class and caste boundaries. Internet penetration is much less ubiquitous but nevertheless impressive and growing rapidly, increasing from less than 1% in 1995 to 30% in 2016²¹. It is estimated that in 2019 there will be nearly 260 million social media users, an increase of nearly 100 million in the last three years²². YouTube and Facebook, followed by Whatsapp dominate the scene.

Unlike development indices, indicators of democracy and freedom are less developed and less easily available. Despite this, the difference over the India I left in 1993 and what I am coming back to in 2018 is truly alarming. The last time that we had this level of deterioration in our democracy indicators was only in the period 1975-77.

Curbing democratic freedoms

Let me at the outset quote from the V-Dem 2018 report which tracks a very wide range of democracy indicators, expresses deep concern about the autocratisation of India. “In India, the infringements on media freedom and the civil society activities of democracy.....have started to undermine the longest-standing and most populous democracy in the Global South...While there are about 12,000 newspapers circulating, the media is increasingly being censored...Several newly introduced or more harshly enforced laws hinder free speech and encourage censorship. For example, India’s law on defamation contains prison sentences of up to two years and is used to silence critical journalists at an increasing rate. Moreover, sedition laws that were upheld by the courts in 2016 even allow harsh punishment of people accused of inciting “dissatisfaction” – disloyalty and all feelings on enmity – towards the government...Harassment of journalists is also on the rise. Many journalists have been murdered or threatened for reporting critically on the actions of the ruling party. Three journalists were killed in March 2018 alone.²³”

Independent media have reported 54 attacks on journalists and seven murders from Jan 2016 and April 2017, majority being perpetrated by those in power. Four journalists were killed in 2015 and there were 142 attacks in 2014-15. For example, the editor Gauri Lankesh, who was a known feminist and critic of the caste system as well as of the Hindu nationalists, was shot dead in September 2017. There has been a spate of killing of public intellectuals and arrests of prominent human rights defenders. This is a direct attack on freedom of expression.

²⁰ Statista: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/274658/forecast-of-mobile-phone-users-in-india/>

²¹ The World Bank: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.ZS?end=2016&locations=IN&start=1995>

²² Statista: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/278407/number-of-social-network-users-in-india/>

²³ V Dem Annual Democracy Report 2018: https://www.v-dem.net/media/filer_public/3f/19/3f19efc9-e25f-4356-b159-b5c0ec894115/v-dem_democracy_report_2018.pdf

Back to the V-Dem report: “The *autocratization* process in India has also led to a partial closing of the space for civil society. The government increasingly restricts the entry and exit of civil society organizations by using a law on foreign funding for NGOs, the Foreign Contributions Regulation Act (FCRA). As of 2017, 20,000 CSOs – mainly working on human rights and environmental issues – have lost their licenses. After that only 13,000 CSOs remain to continue working unconstrained. Three UN special rapporteurs have urged Prime Minister Modi to repeal the FCRA, claiming it is progressively used more to “silence organisations involved in advocating civil, political, economic, social, environmental or cultural priorities, which may differ from those backed by the government.”

Media and civil society organisations and individuals that have raised any kind of dissenting voice are facing increasing harassment and intimidation from state agencies have lost all their independence: the CBI, Enforcement Directorate, Income Tax Authorities etc. This is a systematic curbing of freedom of association. Two consecutive Governors of the RBI have quit for not being allowed to do their job with the autonomy they need. In an exceptional action, four Supreme Court Judges went public about the interference through the then Chief Justice in their independence and Justice Kurien even explicitly talked about remote control from the executive. The untimely death of Justice Loya here in Maharashtra under suspicious circumstances is another example. Many major state institutions have been hollowed out including academic and cultural institutions and key bodies like the Central Information Commission where pro-executive cronies have been appointed, often with little or no competence to perform their roles. Attempts are being made to dilute the Right to Information Act and increase the power of the surveillance state online with the IT Act, its draconian Section 66A and the use of archaic sedition laws. Despite the Supreme Court declaring the right to privacy as a fundamental right and the scope of Aadhar being curtailed, the effort to constantly increase the power of the state over the individual citizen online and offline is relentless.

These are all examples of the state’s overreach. Sadly, we also have far too many examples of corporations violating individual freedoms of Indians. Across many categories of industries but particularly in the extractive sector where mining companies operate in areas rich with natural resources that have been owned and cared for by Adivasis for centuries. Basic principles of free, prior, informed consent are violated and tribal youth often face extreme violence.

Criminal justice system

Like most developing countries, India has a weak and ineffective criminal justice system. The rich and powerful use the law to their advantage and the poor and voiceless are at the receiving end of the wrath of the state and the elite. State security forces are often used to enforce unjust actions. The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), another state institution that has never been empowered but now even less so, has itself raised the issue of fake encounters. This often happens in areas where there is a heavy army and police presence like Kashmir, the tribal areas and the north east. The NHRC has recorded hundreds of cases over the years but there is complete impunity. UP, which has always been a leader in encounter deaths, has broken its

own record. By January of this year, within nine months of coming to power the new Chief Minister, the police had conducted 1038 encounters, resulting in 32 deaths²⁴.

But even on an on-going basis India has nearly half a million people in its hundreds of prisons across the country. Two thirds of them are on remand or under trials which means detained without a trial, mostly for petty offences like loitering, sleeping on railway platforms etc. In Sealdah stations platforms alone, it is said that 3-4000 people are arrested every month. The vast majority of them are from the lower castes and minorities and simply can't afford to pay bail. It is a well-known fact that once an individual enters the prison system, the likelihood is that they will turn into criminals for life. The cost to the exchequer is exorbitant, yet this system continues to operate mindlessly and is a huge source of corruption at the lowest levels.

Freedom from violence and discrimination

As a country that is highly stratified for thousands of years by caste, religion, ethnicity, gender, language, region and multiple other identities, equality and respect for diversity of opinions, cultures, and practises don't come naturally. But as has been often said it is India's diversity that is our strength. Dr. Ambedkar and the founding fathers knew very well that post independent India had to make a huge effort to hold the country together. The Constitution that was adopted, the values that were promoted and the laws that were put in place were all meant to copper-fasten this aspiration. But in the last 25 years, and particularly the last few years, this has been tested like never before. The city of Mangalore which is the district headquarters of the area that my family originally comes from was one of the greatest testimonies to multi religious and multi-cultural diversity. But what has happened in the recent past has ended up polarising communities like never before.

Let me start with the status of women. Despite the fact that we have many examples of individual women excelling in their own fields and making the country proud on the international stage, India does very poorly on all indices concerning the status of women. On the Gender Inequality Index, we rank 125 in the world in 2016²⁵. In its most raw form, discrimination against women is displayed through the high levels of violence women in India face on a daily basis. Karin Kapadia's work in the recent Economic & Political Weekly using data from a Reuters Foundation survey and a Lancet article from earlier this year has some very challenging facts in it. The survey found that India is the most unsafe country for women, worse than Syria, Iraq and the Congo - all countries in conflict. Nearly 40% of all female suicides in the world occur in India. India's contribution to global suicide deaths increased from 25% in 1990 to 37% in 2016 among women. The decline in the sex ratio at birth worsened this year in India's 21 largest states, with Gujarat recording the greatest reversals. Karin Kapadia is clear that a major cause of the suicides in the 15-39 age category, now the leading

²⁴ The Wire, 'A Chronicle of the Crime Fiction That is Adityanath's Encounter Raj': <https://thewire.in/rights/chronicle-crime-fiction-adityanaths-encounter-raj>

²⁵ UN Women: Global database for Violence against Women: <http://evaw-global-database.unwomen.org/en/countries/asia/india#1>

cause of death for women in that age group, is domestic violence²⁶. A Population Fund study separately showed that 62% of women thought it was legitimate for their husband to beat them²⁷. Yes, this is not news from 1993 but the sad reality from recent surveys, showing how much this has been normalised. India recorded 106 rapes a day and four out of every ten victims were minors. Shockingly, the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB)'s "Crime in India 2016" report reveals that in nearly 95% of the cases, the perpetrators were none other than the victim's relatives or acquaintances²⁸. In 2016, only one in four rape cases in India ended in conviction – the lowest since 2012 – according to national crime data. India's conviction rate for rape, at 25.5 percent, remains low compared to all cognisable crimes.

Violence against Dalits has shot up in the last five years, the National Crime Records Bureau recorded a six to eight-fold increase compared to the preceding five years, extreme crimes of murder, rape etc being the vast majority of the nearly 200,000 crimes recorded against Dalits²⁹. There has been a fair bit of reporting on the lynchings related to beef, which is mostly targeting Muslims and Dalits. 25 Indians were killed in 60 incidents, most of them in the last four years³⁰. A recent report by Minority Rights Group International recorded 700 outbreaks of communal violence in 2016 alone, with 86 killed and 2,321 injured, most of the victims were Muslim³¹. The issue of the National Register of Citizens in Assam which is clearly targeting Muslims to be deported as foreigners or stateless to Bangladesh, the effort to ask the small number of Rohingya Muslims that have been hosted by India for decades and the aggressive revival of the call for the Ram Mandir to be built, revisionism in history and educational text books and the hate speech against Muslims on major TV channels and in election rallies are not helping minorities in India to feel any freedom from fear. Quite the contrary. Unfortunately, this fear has also spread to the Christian communities because of sporadic attacks against Christian missionaries in Orissa and elsewhere. Little wonder that we rank 136 out of 163 countries in the Global Peace Index in 2018³².

FREEDOM FROM GREED

I want to also flag a third freedom which I believe we also urgently need to work on. It is not the case that India was not corrupt and the concentration of wealth was not high 25 years ago

²⁶ Kapadia, Karin (2018) 'Where Marriage is Dangerous for Women':

<https://www.epw.in/journal/2018/48/alternative-standpoint/where-marriage-dangerous-women.html>

²⁷ UNFPA Report, 'violence against women in India': <https://india.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/435.pdf>

²⁸ The Quint: <https://www.thequint.com/news/india/india-rape-data-106-rapes-per-day-4-in-10-victims-minors>

²⁹ The Wire, 'Rise in Violence against Dalits': <https://thewire.in/caste/rise-in-violence-against-dalits>

³⁰ The Guardian, 'Mobs are killing Muslims in India, why is no one stopping them?': <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jul/20/mobs-killing-muslims-india-narendra-modi-bjp>

³¹ Minority Rights Group: https://minorityrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/MRG_Rep_India_Jun17-2.pdf

³² The Hindu, 'India's rank marginally improves in peace index': <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/indias-rank-marginally-improves-in-peace-index/article24098321.ece>

but the levels of greed and capital accumulation in the hands of a tiny minority has reached dizzying heights. As the work of the Association of Democratic Reform has consistently shown us, a third of our politicians have criminal records. Neerav Modi walks out in full gaze of the authorities, maybe even with their support! We slipped to the 81st rank in the latest Corruption Index from Transparency International and singled out as “one of the worst offenders in the Asia Pacific region”³³. Grand corruption deals are now becoming completely brazen. The leaders of the banks and financial institutions that everybody held up as huge successes for years now: ICICI, ILFS, Yes Bank - all have huge clouds hanging over them. Not to mention the nationalised banks like SBI and PNB., Power and egos dominate battles at the Board level even in the best known corporate houses like Tata’s and Infosys. That the Ambanis can have this level of vulgar display of their wealth in the wedding this week and in their assets in Bombay and elsewhere shows how little they care about anything at all. This is not a rant against capitalism but it is definitely a refusal to accept crony capitalism where friends and relatives get contracts and nepotism rules the day. Anything can be bought and sold it seems, including reputations, elections and even lives.

TECHNOLOGY & FREEDOMS

So, let us now turn to the role of technology is delivering these freedoms. As I said in my last Techfest talk on coincidentally the very same date two years ago entitled *Technology, force for progress or tool for repression?*³⁴: “In the face of all the challenges in the world, the potential of technology to contribute towards addressing some of these intractable problems looms ever larger. The promise of technology to drive social and economic progress is immense – from advances in medicine to expanding access to education to enabling access to basic services. The power of the internet and mobile communications have revolutionised information flows, transparency and more. But it also drives great uncertainty and fear for the future. Technology facilitates the darkest of human behaviours and automation brings new threats. The powers of replicability, scale and anonymity that technology now offers is unprecedented. So, the issue is not *what can technology do for us*, it is *what we want technology to do for us*. And this is the question we are grappling with today: is the trajectory in technology towards social and economic progress; peace, justice and freedom? Or is technology simply an enabler of ever more efficient repression and inequity? Just as in the present we see a combination of hope and challenges, so it will be in the future, though on a grander scale. Huge technological advances will ask big questions of our ethical and legal standards. Emerging technologies from artificial intelligence to robotics to biotechnology will have a radical impact on societies and significantly disrupt many aspects of our lives. They present great opportunities, but also create significant risks. They pose questions about what kinds of societies we want to live in.”

On the global level, the power that is now concentrated in Google, Facebook, Microsoft, Amazon, Twitter and increasingly Netflix is simply scary. Interestingly, Indian software engineers are at the leading edge of this in Silicon Valley and elsewhere, many of them in top leadership positions. Some Artificial Intelligence-based technology has already been put to

³³ The Wire, ‘India’s Ranking in Global Corruption Perception Index Slides to 81 from 79’:

<https://thewire.in/external-affairs/india-ranks-81st-in-global-corruption-perception-index>

³⁴ Amnesty International: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2016/12/salil-shetty-speech-techfest/>

harmful use like automated weapon systems. The future with robotics could look dystopian. Whatsapp has been used in India and elsewhere to be an instant purveyor of hate campaigns. The mob attacks and killings of alleged child lifters in the last year in India based on rumours spread on whatsapp was horrific. In criminal justice systems, there is evidence to show that Artificial Intelligence reinforces biases through its algorithms using past data as a predictor of future behaviour. The use of surveillance technology is another example of how the state has become Big Brother even in so called liberal democracies. India, we should not forget, has a very sophisticated surveillance system in place. On the opportunities side in India, we already have fin tech for financial inclusion, ed tech to provide education online, health and med tech to deal with diseases. Several governments and NGOs have pioneered the work in e-governance and tech for good. AI is now being increasingly used for criminal justice in the west. I am aware of the clever use of apps for running the Jivika programme in Bihar with women's self-groups which are crucial for monitoring and managing the programme. Andhra and Telengana have been ahead of the game. I know that *Aam Aadmi Party* is increasingly using tech in all its work in Delhi. I assume that there are many of you in this room that are already working on these issues and many of you plan to do a lot more. If only the best minds in our country had applied even a fraction of their time and capability in fighting for these freedoms, we would not be so unfree any more. I wish you every success in this.

TECHNOLOGY AND THE SECOND FREEDOM MOVEMENT?

I am of the view that India and Indians in 2018 are at a fork in the road. We should be proud of our achievements since we secured political independence from the British in 1947 but we have to acknowledge that we still have a massive freedom deficit. Either we come together and focus our collective energies on fighting for freedom from want and fear. And freedom from greed. Or we reconcile ourselves to a grim future where we continue to remain around the bottom of almost all the global indexes that matter. Not just on the index on ease of doing business. But on the index of ease of living and sheer survival for the poor. What we need is well-being not for the few but for all. In order to achieve this, in my view, what we need is nothing short of a second independence movement. A movement that unites, not divides. A movement that goes beyond political parties and religious and other divisions. A movement led by young people to fight for freedom and equality for all Indians. A movement that recognises the marginalisation of women, Dalits, adivasis, minorities and the lower castes. A movement that embraces them all and shows that there is another way that our country can move forward.

So, my call today to young people, to those of you in IIT and the Techfest today and beyond is to help build this second independence movement for the India we all want to see. An India that has a much greater sense of urgency to secure the freedoms I described earlier. Freedom from want - empowering our farmers, ensuring dignifying jobs and income for our youth and decent quality education, health care, nutrition, water, sanitation and housing for all. And freedom from fear for all, but particularly for our women, girls, Dalits, Adivasis, minorities and lower castes who have been historically excluded. Based on the values of our constitution, celebrating and not homogenising diversity and differences. This movement will embrace all

existing movements that stand up for human rights for all, including women's self- help groups, Ambedkarite groups, students groups, workers groups, tribal groups etc.

This movement will have to be built up brick by brick from the ground up. Here, technology can play a pivotal role. The only limit is our imagination and the time we can allocate to this. At the outset technology can help in researching both on and offline what the best approach is to mobilise and organise young people across the country. Once we have a clear proposition, it can help in reaching out to the young people on social media and beyond. The outreach is to mobilise people to get organised into *Hamara India* youth and other groups at the local level. There are a massive number of government programmes to help the poor from the state and national governments and from NGOs and corporates. These often never reach the poor. Making the information available on these programmes and how to access them will be a huge service. Tracking the performance of elected representatives from the ward/panchayat level to MLAs and MPs is another important task which technology can enable. Very little data is organised along electoral constituency lines and technology can help us to reorganise this and hold our elected leaders and our bureaucrats to account. The agenda is long and important and will evolve. What I am sure about it is that serious and sustained change can only happen ground up, from the people of India at the local level. It will not come from outside and it will not come from any formations that are only interested in narrow and short-term interests. I have no doubt that technology can hugely enable this process and that the youth will have to lead this process. Techfest and IIT Bombay can be an appropriate launchpad for this. All ideas are welcome and I look forward to the discussion that follows my talk. Thank you for your patience and joining us today.
