

Navigating the New Frontiers of the Great Transformation

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As a young knowledge worker growing up in the digitalized world, I visualize the 'great transformation' as multi-dimensional and **labyrinthine**. It sometimes feels like a rush; at other moments, a wave to surf and a puzzle to solve. While I do not understand the full impact of this transformation, I am aware that I am an active participant. I am yet to feel the full power of how it may affect the future of mankind. I am trying and reading the signs on my way. In this essay I take a cue from my real world experiences, the ancient scriptures and my contemporaries to describe my observations.

The vast, complex and inter-connected world feels like a giant, multi-dimensional maze. I feel like a charioteer galloping my way through. The social, cultural, economic and legal landscape is continually evolving. The charioteer has to outfox beasts and plow through uneven terrain, towards the destination. I have to navigate through the many layers of turbulence of the modern age. My chariot is my life and career. Digital technologies are the new age parallels to the natural forces for the charioteers.

I attempt to survive and thrive in an uncertain environment, which is fraught with turbulence and intensified by new dilemmas. I represent the globetrotter generation - for whom the place of birth is inconsequential and for whom the world is their oyster. I am an Indian national, living in the United States and working for a French multi-national company. I studied and worked in four cities around the planet during my educational journey of two decades. Each day I make business and life decisions that knowingly or unknowingly contribute to the 'Butterfly Effect'¹.

¹ Butterfly effect is derived from the theoretical example of a hurricane's formation being contingent on whether or not a distant butterfly had flapped its wings several weeks earlier.

Experiencing the Paradox of the Great Transformation

There are several warning signs of the great transformation. We live in a world where national borders are becoming relevant and blurred at the same time. The world simultaneously witnesses rising mobility and greater connectivity - all indicators that the world is getting closer in multiple ways. Geographer, David Harvey refers to this phenomenon as "time-space compression" - the way the world has in effect been de-territorialized by the acceleration and wider dissemination of capitalist practices, simultaneously creating higher levels of stressⁱ.

In this milieu, Montserrat Guibernauⁱⁱ argues that the nation-state is "steadily losing its relevance as a frame for political, economic, social and cultural life." But this is just one side of the coin. How do we explain the rise of protectionism and statism in a globally expanding world? Across the world, from Bolivia, Nigeria, the Middle-east, Europe, Russia and beyond, we witness the reinvigoration of nationalistic movements, the rule of statist to amass strategic resources and the return of protectionism in trade, society and polity. Contrary to how we imagine the globalized world today, we are still contracted within national boundaries. In the past century, humanity still experiences strains of the darker shades of nationalization: socio-political disruptions and divisions, ethnic cleansing and even genocide. In fact, Gellnerⁱⁱⁱ prophesizes that new forms of nationalism in nations may appear to combat the perceived threats, but may give rise to a politically divisive and tense environment.

Economically too we are not expanding as fast as we perceive. Sociologist J.A. Hall argues that most economic activity still remains firmly within the territorial boundaries of national states. Strategic thought-leader, Pankaj Ghemawat^{iv}, highlights indicators that justify the world is lot less globalised than we perceive it to be: "the percentage of all telephone calls that are international (2%), the percentage of all citizens in a given country who are recent immigrants (3%), the percentage of all Foreign Direct Investment (10%), and finally, the percentage of all exports relative to GDP (30%)." In a paradoxical state of flux, we are becoming inwardly local and outwardly global at the same time.

The Legend of Abhimanyu's Quest

Travelling further back in time to the two thousand year old Sanskrit epic, Mahabharata, Abhimanyu's dilemma stands out to me as a model for the transformative world-view. Abhimanyu, the son of Arjuna² was caught in the Chakravyuha (an impenetrable labyrinth) during the war. The Chakravyuha was a special, lotus shaped formation and the knowledge of how to penetrate it was limited to only a handful of warriors on the Pandavas' side. Abhimanyu learnt about the formation as a fetus while in Subhadra's (his mother) womb while her husband, Arjuna was explaining the formation and the strategy to escape unscathed. Subhadra listened to Arjuna as he described 'the right time to enter' and 'the right words to enter' but fell asleep when Arjuna was describing the strategy of escaping the Chakravyuha. As a result Abhimanyu possessed the knowledge about how to get inside the formation but did not know how to escape. During the war, Abhimanyu fought valiantly. He perished on the 13th day of the war after penetrating the penultimate layer of the formation, when the opposition, Kauravas, jointly massacred him.

Abhimanyu's story makes me think deeply of the present situation. Due to an unfinished lesson of how and when to exit, Abhimanyu could not dismantle the formation. It was the lethal gap between knowing and doing. The mismatch between knowing and doing plagues today's organizations too. With all the knowledge floating inside and outside their eco-system, organizations struggle to bridge the knowing-doing gap. As a result, they experience shortage of talent and their opportunities for growth in the market are lost easily to competition. They experience a paralysis as their financial and resource problems become deep infections. The period of stagnation or inactivity in organization continues and eventually customers and investors lose trust in its capacity to thrive and survive. The organization shrivels-up like dead sea-weed.

What causes this deadly knowing-doing gap? The inability to listen to the warning signs and steer the company's strategy and operations is one cause. The 'noise' in the eco-system causes organizations to commit resources to 'traps'. Once they over commit resources, they are caught in their own formation.

As a corporate combatant, I feel like Abhimanyu, I am in the midst of unfinished lesson too. I have entered the new battlegrounds, armed with an instinctual ambition. I face a vastly open ground of opportunities but I am just one of many in there. The choices are mindboggling and the vistas are infinite. Sometimes I 'know' what to do, but I feel I am not 'doing' enough. In other cases, there is an over-emphasis on action but no conscious effort to synthesize the 'knowing'.

² A celebrated Pandava hero

Around me, there are other young people in their own mythical chariots caught in more difficult formations – of being unemployed, of being uneducated and disconnected from the modern battlefields. Still worse are youth stuck in a bleak future in war-torn nations. My generation is indeed living on the edge than any of its predecessors^v.

I note that some of them in my generation are part of organizations with an outdated and mercantilist outlook for labor. Their organizations pay their 'laborers' so that they may work more, produce more, sell more and stick to their organization. This stands true even in environments where their productivity cannot be measured in simple terms like number of units produced per unit of time. They are treated as hire-able commodity that can be discarded when the market indicates so. No wonder there is a backlash felt from those who feel stuck in such a formation. I notice that such employees feel disengaged. We witness the extreme forms of expression as strikes, union sit-ins, go-slows, and work-to-rule. Clearly these organizations are not paying heed to Drucker, when he reminded us that knowledge worker must be considered a 'capital asset' instead of a cost centre^{vi}.

The modern Abhimanyus like me broadly face the six frontiers of the Great Transformation. In the following paragraphs, I will describe my *umwelt*.



The First Frontier: The Individual

The human or the individual forms the basic unit of the society. As managers, individuals align resource capacity to the organizational capability to innovate. Individuals have a wide range of choices to decide what they want to do with their lives and of others. This blinding array of possibilities forms the backbone of their dilemma. Nowadays, individuals can expect to outlive organizations. Organizations are becoming ever so dynamic, with their emphasis on shortening product life-cycles and virtualization.

Our generation faces newer challenges to tackle the problem with the second half^{vii} of our lifetimes as we coexist and compete with cohorts of several generations. In the more developed regions, the proportion of older persons already exceeds that of children; by 2050 it will be double. In the developing world, age-distribution changes have been slow, but they will accelerate over the next 50 years^{viii}. Consequently, young people all over the world will be thinking of their second life sooner and deeper than the past generation.

The Second Frontier: Organizations

In a way, the organizations are stuck in their own quagmire. Every day, organizations have to make a choice: to chase new markets and customers by answering questions like whether to introduce new products or to improve existing products or to serve new customers. In his book, *Innovator's Dilemma*^{ix}, author Clayton Christensen answers why organizations must continually innovate. He says, "The same practices that lead the business to be successful in the first place eventually also result in their eventual decline." This is similar to Abhimanyu's fatal edge of knowing how to enter the Chakravyuha. Organizations like 3M, Intel, General Electric, IDEO Product Development are known to be innovative. But these are the exceptions than the rule. In a study called 'The Challenge of Speed' conducted by the Economist Intelligence Unit, and sponsored by Ricoh, 73 per cent of senior executives reveal that their companies need to be faster in order to adapt to changing business conditions^x. Organizations and individuals need to be agile and continuously translate ideas into action.

In an environment of government scrutiny and regulations, the bigger players need multiple strategies to compete and collaborate. They are bogged under the pressures of 'bottom-line' and short-term results, incentives for their leaders and ignorant of the value they add.

The Third Frontier: Media

The Media today is a huge swarm of entities - some independent and others controlled by big businesses, wealthy individuals or even nation states. The most pronounced development has been the rapid emergence and uptake of the digital social media. This has enabled consumers of media to be both its creators and users. The rapid proliferation of the 'anon' or anonymous creators of content is a threat and an opportunity. Never before this meek, anonymous voice or the dissenter has had more voice than in the digital age! The digital natives expect unbiased news, views, entertainment and more across devices 24x7, and that too at no or minimal cost. As a result, the media industry has gained clout in terms of new participants but now has to continually react to a wide diversity in consumer preference and play catch-up with the rapid change in broadcast and personal technology^{xi}.

The Fourth Frontier: Technology

"We have smartphones and supercomputers, big data and nanotechnologies, gene therapy and stem-cell transplants. Governments, universities and firms together spend around \$1.4 trillion a year on R&D, more than ever before."

- *The Economist, January 2013*

Technological and scientific change has always been a pioneering force. However, it is only now that the rapid pace of technology is seen and felt far and wide. Ever since the Industrial revolution, the pace of commercialization and 'massification' of new innovation is mind- boggling.

A recent Economist article^{xii}, compares the impact of early 20th century inventions like cars, planes, the telephone, radio and antibiotics and the later innovation drivers like computerization. Though it can be debated which era in human history provided the most valuable innovations, the pace of innovation will always be unfathomable to the human mind.

In 2008 at the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) meeting, an 18-strong team of scientists, entrepreneurs and thinkers identified the greatest challenges for technology in the 21st century that, if unraveled, would change the world³. They came up with 3 top problems for the next 50

³ The group among others included futurologist Ray Kurzweil, biologist Craig Venter, inventor Dean Kamen, Google co-founder Larry Page and Harvard University professor of International Development Calestous Juma. They were brought together by the U.S. National Academy of Engineering (NAE)

years: Reversing the effects of ageing, reprogramming genes to prevent diseases and producing clean energy^{xiii}. There are many more for technologists to solve: great divides exist for everyone on the planet to access resources- healthy food, potable water, clean energy, ample information, education and employment opportunities. The expanding population and its ever increasing demands expect technology to be the savior. But technology also constrains us than it frees us. Often technology causes us to be dependent and replaces our natural instincts- ever tried to navigate without a GPS or navigating software at hand? More seriously, by creating a gap between the "haves" and the "have-nots", technology access restricts the horizons of how much distance we can go with it in terms of adoption and further innovation.

The Fifth Frontier: Civil Society

The fifth frontier is the civil society. The power of individuals and organizations that choose to associate for a cause is undeniable. Drucker in his work, acknowledged work of civil society players, The Girl Scouts, the Red Cross, the pastoral churches etc., and gave them recognition as America's management leaders^{xiv}. The civil society now consists of a diverse set of players than ever before. Non-governmental organizations consist of network of diverse stakeholders including spin-offs of private and international organizations, informal groups and coalitions. There are new roles of the civil society as active service providers and innovators rather than just facilitators or advocates. They are working across borders and despite supra-national constraints, really pioneering innovation and management practices.

The Final Frontier: The Governments

The final frontier is the government. Governments are powerful in terms of access to resources and the power to create and destroy. The government creates the laws of the land, distributes wealth and enforces taxes. The governments decide its enemies and friends. The bigger the government, the more stranglehold it has it's on the freedom and rights of its own citizens. With the greater application of technology, interesting implications arise for the ruled and the rulers. Technology is being used for surveillance and clampdowns by the state and at the same time, it is fueling the 'expose culture' by citizenry and media.

Navigating the Complexity of the Great Transformation

The ways in which these frontiers interact also give rise to complexity of the overall puzzle. Often, there is no common goal or understanding between the layers of the formation which predictably leads frequent turbulence and leaves an air of distrust. For a meaningful world, they must collaborate, synchronize efforts and break down the proverbial walls, and clean up the muck that makes them an impenetrable bog. Bhagavad Gita⁴'s oft-repeated message stresses the importance of meaningful action: "You have the right to perform your actions, but you are not entitled to the fruits of the actions". A similar focus on duty and results is resonated in Peter Drucker's words: *"You have to produce results in the short term. But you also have to produce results in the long term. And the long term is not simply the adding up of short terms."*

The frontiers all overlap, none of them are mutually exclusive. They have to focus on common goals. Profits should not be the goal but an indicator of how the business is doing in motivating their human resources to produce goods and deliver services of value to customers^{xv}. Common goals will aid the knowledge workers to navigate the labyrinth.

Each of us in essence, has to rely on our limited faculties to make sense of the multitude of improvements around us and adapt to the innovative world in front of us. In an environment where the pressure to deliver results is immense and frontiers are cooperating and competing with several others at once, individuals will have to ultimately be responsible for their own lifelong learning through the maze of the Great Transformation.

⁴ The holy text of Hinduism

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