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EASY DOES IT

## We are addicted to convenience, and it's a fatal attraction both for us and the planet

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Ready-made meals, motorised transport, smartphones make our lives a lot easier, but at what cost?



Image credit: REUTERS

Observe an escalator and a flight of stairs at a railway station, airport or shopping mall, and count the number of people using each. The escalator-users will far outnumber those taking the stairs, even though most may be perfectly capable of climbing it.

I recently asked 100 students at a media college in Pune how many of them lived within 4 km of the college, and how many of these cycled? The response: while a few dozen stayed in this range, not a single one bicycled or walked to college, all used cars or motorised two-wheelers.

And how many of us often email or text or WhatsApp someone in the same office, when walking over and having a face-to-face conversation will do as well?

Convenience. We are addicts of convenience. And it is a fatal attraction, both for us and for the earth.

A classic example is the remote control. Not restricted to flipping television channels or CD songs from the comfort of our couch, the remote control now enables us to control every part of our smart house, if we happen to be rich enough to own one. No getting up to answer the door, make a meal, water the plants. And as electronics and robotics advance, every bit of our work can be replaced. I guess we will still make the effort to have sex... or will virtual reality dispense with that also?

Convenience now pervades every part of our life and lifestyle. Ready-made meals popped into the microwave, and two-minute noodles for children of parents too busy to cook. Computer programmes that do the spellcheck and math for us, making us mentally careless. Photoshop that allows me to make a perfect picture after having taken it, rather than use my brain and instincts during the shot. If I'm a pilgrim to a holy Himalayan site, I no longer want to walk up (was such effort not supposed to be intrinsic to the path to salvation?). I demand motorable roads.

So what? Is it not good that we can do more with less effort? Does it not help us save time that can be devoted to other activities?

## **The downside**

Before we get into the claimed benefits of technologies of convenience, let us look at their downside. Almost every time we choose convenience over a bit of extra effort, we lose the chance of exercise, or of social interaction, or of saving ourselves and others from pollution. Every time we choose junky fast food, we abuse our bodies. Surely, all this must contribute to the obesity, diabetes, heart disease and stress-related epidemics sweeping the urbanised world?

But convenience is also trashing the earth and disrupting community life. Unlimited motorised transport and escalators, electrical and electronic gadgets, chemicals and packaging for increased shelf-life mean carbon emissions, pollution, chemical contamination, mining. Other species and other people (whose homes happen to be above the mining deposits) are just collateral damage for a society drunk on the technologies of convenience. The more machines take over, convenience also leads to worker layoffs, unemployment, and the wasting of handmade creativity. The more virtual our exchanges become, the less we relate to actual people.

And then we think up superficial solutions to these breakdowns, what I call systemic convenience. The state and corporations invent technological and market fixes to pretend they are solving the problems. The fossil fuel industry's clever attempts at greening – for example, planting trees to supposedly offset emissions from thermal power plants, but making little

attempt to eliminate the emissions in the first place – is an obvious example. But green economy proponents, too, are culpable as they come up with ambitious targets for renewable energy, avoiding inconvenient questions about how much energy we should be consuming in the first place. Unlimited solar energy production would trash the earth (silicon, a key component of solar panels, needs to be mined), only a bit slower than fossil fuels.

This is, in turn, linked to the way in which capitalism and state-led economies trap the vast majority of people into working harder and harder. With billions of people having to work long hours (mostly in boring jobs) just to keep their heads above water, conveniences are understandably tempting; as they are when patriarchy forces women to do impossible multi-tasking.

This is not a diatribe against technology. Nor am I an apologist for the drudgery of backbreaking, undignified labour that far too many people from marginalised classes, castes, and ethnicities are condemned to. When asked about a mechanised charkha, Gandhi said he was not against machinery that reduced drudgery, but against that which displaced labour. Technological innovations that enable greater dignity of work, change conditions of exploitation and ill-health, or empower women and other marginalised sections are welcome. Special facilities for the elderly, the differently abled, and otherwise disadvantaged are imperative. Note that the origin of the term convenience is to assemble or agree, from the Latin *convenire* (*con-* “together” + *venire* “come”). Electric toothbrushes, however, have little to do with this.

## Doing it right

How then do we ensure that convenience is really about reducing drudgery and enhancing dignity, and not about sheer laziness? This question also arises regarding consumerism, another earth-trashing phenomenon. One then gets into not only the existence of the remote control, but of the dizzying rate at which new brands of televisions and cellphones come out. One has to question not only escalators in airports, but the ubiquity of air travel itself. The West's throwaway society (increasingly adopted by the East also) is convenience and consumerism at its extreme.

But then there must be something deep within us that gets swayed by the advertising agencies promoting all this? How do we save ourselves from ourselves?

Perhaps, we have to appeal equally strongly to something else deep within us: a sense of community, solidarity, responsibility. For the better part of human history, societies have practised self-restraint in their use of natural resources. Such rules are inconvenient, for it is surely easier to hunt and fish all year round than take a break during the breeding season. But communities knew that doing so would have resulted in a subsequent crash in animal

populations, leading to much greater long-term inconvenience. Wisdom and foresight prevailed over short-term convenience. Is this so hard for modern humans to learn?

Hard, yes, but not impossible. In several European cities, one sees people of various ages and classes, including businesspersons in their three-piece suits, cycling to work. This is also (very slowly) picking up among the urban Indian middle classes. Many of these cyclists could easily have used a motorised vehicle, but they chose exercise, perhaps ecological passion, or some other motivation, over convenience. Across the industrial world are the beginnings of a counter-trend: renewed interest in hand-made products, urban gardening, manually repairing things rather than throwing them away, reliving face-to-face interactions in neighbourhood assemblies, sharing products and services free of cost, living more simply without denying oneself basic needs and comforts. Overcoming convenience is a combination of urges: creative expression, concern for those who would face the consequences of our technological choices (including unborn generations), reconnecting with people and nature, and wisdom in the ability to choose what is right.

Imagine if cyclists, craftspersons, people living simple lives, and those willing to give their time and products freely were the role models in our schools... not the celebrities whose glitzy lifestyles fill the media? Imagine if learning and education systems focused on the dignity of labour, the pleasure of doing something with one's hands, the thrill of seeing someone else happy, the visceral feeling of being within nature? Would it then not be possible to bring out the selfless, caring streak in us while retaining our own interests, a sort of responsible individualism? Would we then not create processes of social regulation of technologies, frowning on those that increase inequities and ecological havoc? As we move towards a greater sense of planetary oneness (sharpened by the very visible signs of climate and ecological distress the earth is in), these messages may well be heard more widely. We may then face up to the fact that convenience without bounds will create an extremely inconvenient future for all of us.

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