PARENTS BEWARE OF THE DIGITAL DEMON
MALAVIKA KAPUR

Contents

Preface

It rots the sense in the head!
It kills imagination dead!
It clogs and clutters up the mind!
It makes a child so dull and blind!
He can no longer understand!
A fantasy, a fairyland!
His brain becomes as soft as cheese!
His powers of thinking rust and freeze!
He cannot think – he only sees!

—Roald Dahl

What on earth is our favourite writer talking about? It is about the impact of that time's (in the 1940s) new technology gadget, the Television! I, as a child psychologist, endorse his view. At present I am concerned with the impact Internet of Things (IoT) and Artificial Intelligence (AI) have on developing minds and brains.

I was an avid fan of science fiction as a youngster. Isaac Asimov, Arthur C Clarke and others of the genre held me spell bound. I truly believed in Asimov's three laws of Robotics.

Isaac Asimov's Three Laws of Robotics

i. A robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm.
ii. A robot must obey orders given by human beings, except where such orders would conflict with the First Law.
iii. A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Law.

I truly believed the above laws to be sacrosanct as the Oath of Hippocrates is in the practice of medicine. Despite the attempts by the evil forces to destroy the world order, the good forces invariably won. How naïve I was to believe in it! I also plead guilty of enjoying horror novels of the genre of MR James to Stephen King.

Mary Shelly was prescient about the future of science when she wrote her novel, *Frankenstein.* She predicted the dangers of scientific curiosity meddling with the natural order of the world. The horror stories were exciting to read but one always identified with the victims empathically and the reader was happy and relieved when the aggressors or the evil ones met a bad end.

In stark contrast, in the present genre of novels or movies, the excitement of horrific deeds is with the perpetrator and the victims only provide joy to the aggressor. Most of the games or events representing victory are based on shooting, killing and destroying the so-called enemy. Identification of the reader or viewer now rests with the aggressor. There is not even a single ray of hope or empathy for the victims.

In these days of bystander apathy to witnessing pain in a road accident, there is no evidence of empathy, compassion and spontaneous helpful behaviour. Bystanders are thrilled to be able to video record and share their excitement and joy of having witnessed something horrific! Enjoyment of inflicting pain has taken over the humane emotion of empathy and compassion.

I do not propose this to be a compendium of all the knowledge available at this time of the dangers of IoT and AI. I choose some research findings and guidelines for reducing this danger. I do not aim at cataloguing notorious school shootings and murders by young children and youth, sensationally described on all media outlets. Nor do I propose to give an overview of all the available literature, be it Indian, Asian or Western on the worldwide web. *The emphasis here is on Indian experiences in schools, child guidance centres and interactions with parents.*

In the 1990s, I saw a case of an adolescent girl who had 'affective disorder' and was addicted to TV programmes with warrior men and women, with obsession about a particular hero indulging in violent acts resulting in lot of blood and gore. I had thought it to be an isolated case. It is not uncommon in clinical practice to find the latest technological ideology or practice getting embedded in active psychotic ideation of a patient. For example, a large number of paranoid patients harbour suspicions based on their belief that these reached them through TV, radio or sound waves or aliens. As a commonsense advice for this particular patient, the family was told to curtail her TV viewing. She recovered after being on anti-psychotic drugs and was back to school.

We had no inkling at that time about television viewing, which we thought as an incidental finding. It took us some years to link child mental health and learning problems to *screen time.* On the other hand, I have been working for almost three decades in the remote rural areas and in tribal belts in Karnataka in the government and tribal schools. These, typically, were with poor infrastructure, paucity of funding and very scarce number of teachers, that too with poor training. This is when I had the 'Eureka' moment. As promoted by advances in research on

Developmental Psychology, and my own experience as a home schooled happy child, I realised that children can be their own resource. I knew it in my heart of hearts. Now I had evidence. I started focusing on Child-Centred Play Way method as a pedagogic tool and adopted it in over 30 schools with more than 4,000 children. I followed the renowned educationist Prof Yash Pal Sharma's dictum, 'Learn from children what to teach them'. Finally, I have found a replicable, successful, child-centric model for poor countries where the children are indeed our sole resource.

How does one link the Digital Demon to child development, mental health and education?

This is where I attempt to bridge gaps between the three domains. Screen time negates attachment and bonding while 'actual quality time' is only promoted by the family and friends through play, reading and talking.

Indian teachers adopt mostly teacher-centred, authoritative and punitive approach where rote learning and memorising is emphasised and punishment is a norm. The child has no scope for creativity or play or to interact with teachers. Internet, like a traditionally followed way, also uses the top down method despite claims to be an interactive process. It 'dishes out', 'gives', 'serves'

programmes. With the use of techno-centric and the traditional teacher-centric methods, children are doomed to become poor learners.

I hope that this book sheds some light on this vast area, and especially sensitises adults to their ignorance about the great potential children have for learning about themselves, others and the world, their ability to communicate and through empathy, form bonding and attachment with family and the society. Parents need to pick up the skills of keen observation from the young children and learn from them how to make the world a better place to live in.

Let me also add a word of caution. It is but natural, in a technologically-advancing and changing world, that at times