The evening prayer was over; Bapu had permitted me to meet him for an hour as he did not have any other engagement on that day. After touching his feet, I sat down nearby. The big, warm and affectionate welcome smile on Mahatma’s face was more than enough to put me at ease and made me feel as if a part of his greatness had permeated my whole being. Without much ado, Bapu directly went to the point:

“Young people and that too from the sphere of modern technology do not come to meet me now-a-days. What has brought you here?”

“Bapu, the present-day youth and those working with modern technology include some of the most serious, sincere and sensitive people for whom you are a living presence and guiding light for now and all time to come. Wherever people are fighting for a noble cause, you are being remembered there. For example, those working for the Open-Source Software (OSS) movement, are citing your famous quote on ‘First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, then you win’ to carry on the battle against large multinational corporations for their proprietary and restrictive principles on software (I hand over a copy of the presentation material of one of the leading Open-Source Software proponents). Your statement on customer being the most important person has become the core principle (i.e. customer-focussedness) of Quality Management System. Therefore you are very much alive in the hearts and minds of the people working in the cutting edge of technology. Also a cursory search for the term ‘Mahatma Gandhi’ in the most powerful Internet Search Engine produces a list of 8,60,000 references, which speaks volume of your popularity in modern times.

But, Bapu, I came to seek your views on IT (Information Technology) or ICT (Information & Communication Technology)”.

“Look, Deepak, IT or ICT or any other technology for that matter, exists for the people. People do not exist for technology. Just as, (laughs) employers in some organizations who are very fond of quoting my statement on customers in their premises actually thought their organizations to exist for themselves only, not for their customers; such organizations, I am afraid, will not be able to last very long.”

“But, Bapu, noted thinkers like Alvin Toffler have pointed out that as modern life grows more and more complex, information processing and knowledge management are going to play a major role and this fact is responsible for the spectacular growth of ICT.
Complexity has always been the prime mover for the development of better information processing tools (i.e. the Brain) in the biological evolution as well – from the unicellular amoeba to Homo Sapiens or human beings. Toffler talks about the Third Wave where there will be a major shift of populations from the agricultural and industrial sectors to the Information Sector which is going to give rise to Information and Knowledge Society."

“Your Guru Toffler and his theories may be right in general. I agree that complexity in modern life is increasing and it may necessitate information processing and knowledge management in a progressively larger scale. But the shift of population to these newly emerging areas for their livelihood may not be automatic, at least not in the short-term period. That is why you are seeing the contribution to GDP (in India and other developing countries) from agriculture and industry sectors is diminishing and from the so-called Information Sector is increasing. But then are you seeing a corresponding shift of population also to the Information Sector? As this shift of population is yet to be appreciable, therefore the large wealth that is getting created in the Information Sector is not trickling down to people. Hence growth in the Information Sector may not necessarily lead to a more equitable distribution of wealth.”

“Then, what in your view, will be the proper use of ICT or do you advocate refraining from its use altogether?”

“ICT is definitely an ‘enabling technology’ as you technology people so often mention and I wish it had been available in my days. You remember my Talisman, do not you? If any use of ICT is going to ameliorate the lot of common people including the poorest of the poor that you know, such use of ICT should be encouraged.”

“How about the cases, Bapu, where the use of ICT can improve efficiency and transparency of governance and bring down the level of corruption?”

“I am all for it. Inefficiency, lack of transparency, etc., definitely stand in the way of good governance reaching the common people. Let the peoples’ representatives and government servants not think the government to exist for themselves; government exists for the people only.”

“Now-a-days, Bapu, there is a lot of talk about Electronic Governance or E-Governance.”

“Let us remember that Good Governance is the objective. The ‘e’ or ICT is merely a tool. By the way, are you technology people reaching out to the core of government functioning, i.e. the content of a large number of files? Is it possible now to make the information and its analysis in government files available to the common people?”

“Bapu, in most of the cases, government is using a File Tracking System for its own internal use; such a system merely helps the government to locate a file. In majority of the cases, the content of files exist on paper. Even where the contents of files are available in digital format, its analysis is not easy because such content is either unstructured or semi-structured information, which is not amenable to analysis. Also there is much to be done to make such contents available to the people.”

“Also, Deepak, I am told that there is an increasingly growing burden of irrelevant or unnecessary information especially in the form of so many websites. And it is probably not possible to automatically cull out and compile information from such websites. For example, is it possible to make a single query to the district websites in a State to obtain the names of the district-level chief functionaries of the Panchayati Raj Institutions? Such information must be available in most of the district websites.”
“You have highlighted another real technology problem, Bapu. As in the case of government files, all these websites are still unstructured and it is impossible to automatically cull out information from these sites. With the application of new technological advancements\(^4\), this problem is likely to be addressed.”

“Also are you making use of peoples’ languages instead of relying on English, which is the language of the elite?”

“Yes, Bapu, now it is possible to use various languages in ICT endeavours. However, a lot more needs to be done to enable people to use their own language while using ICT.”

A member of Mahatma’s entourage indicated that it was time for Bapu to reply to the letters; I asked the last question:

“Bapu, what do you think about Knowledge Society?”

“Knowledge, as the Gita says, is the ultimate entity, which all our actions culminate in or get reduced to. Knowledge is therefore the ultimate outcome of all our actions. Therefore, Knowledge Society is the ideal society.

But let us remember that the normal knowledge in such discussions actually means the knowledge about the multiplicity (i.e. the knowledge which helps us to know the universe as composed of multiple or diverse entities). Such knowledge alone is not enough. As all religions say, knowledge of the Unity is the great deliverer, not the knowledge of multiplicity. Knowledge of the Unity only can make us realize the ultimate truth and leads us to immortality. A society permeated with such knowledge only can be an ideal society.”

I touched Mahatma’s feet and rose to leave.

\(^a\) Red-Hat who is a leading proponent of Open Source Software uses Gandhiji’s statement in their presentations.

\(^3\) “A customer is the most important visitor on our premises. He is not dependent on us. We are dependent on him. He is not an interruption of our work. He is the purpose of it. He is not an outsider to our business. He is part of it. We are not doing him a favour by serving him. He is doing us a favour by giving us the opportunity to do so.”

\(^4\) Extensible Markup Language or XML is one such new technology under ICT.