

The
***Maverick
Effect***

*A Reader's Musings &
Chapter Wise Overview*

by
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Prologue

Harish Mehta summarised India's problems during the decades after the 1950s well. Besides the infamous 3.5% Hindu rate of growth until the 1980s, we went through severe, economic, political, and social problems.

We have always been an argumentative society and armchair activism has been rife in our polity. The young group of tech and software entrepreneurs rewrote the rules of the game by rolling up their sleeves and getting down to doing what they knew best. They emphasized on 'doing' as contrasted with the 'preaching' prevalent amongst the time.

Today, with hindsight, we can see the stupendous effects of these mavericks' essaying answers to our deep-seated socio-economic problems. A feudal order has given way to the emergence & rise of a new middle class based on meritocracy, equal opportunities (including for our ambitious women), and the spawning of a digital India.

This has been the elusive level playing field leading to a generational brain drain that often drove the best and brightest to distant lands which offered the opportunity for growth and heady rewards for superlative performance. Many stayed there, have blazed trails in their chosen fields, and brought honour to their homeland as stars in the global enterprise firmament.

Some, like him, chose to return and devote their energies to the numerous problems at hand here and make a difference. And what a difference has been made!

We have transitioned from an old India, the trope of decorated elephants, holy cows roaming traffic-laden streets, swaying snake charmers, and an entire economy travelling at a bullock cart pace - to a digital India that is a competent and reliable tech partner and enabler to the world at large. The move from scarcity to abundance and change of fortunes in a few short decades is no less sweeping than the French Revolution in its time or the political independence of our country 75 years ago.

Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity have become more relevant at a mass level and have taken new meaning for a billion people in this country. The revolution continues as India's IT warriors keep pace with the ever-changing environment of technological developments. The social churn and its impact across India's varied societies grow in ever-expanding concentric circles.

The great wheel has been set in motion. There is no turning the clock back now.



Chapter 1. *A Tale of Two Countries*

His epiphany for being in the technology business was fortuitous, both for him and India. It was not a done thing back then. He seems to have looked within and taken the road less travelled. And that, as is said, has made all the difference.

People like Sharu Rangnekar, Dr. Sheshagiri, and FC Kohli did him a great service by saying the right things to him at the right time, leaving an impression on his psyche and motivating him to embark on his journey. We remain first-class citizens here but it is not a second-class country anymore, and even the administration is no longer viewed as third-class. Not under the current dispensation for sure, which has taken great strides and helped India be viewed as a thought leader in a global order desperately seeking leadership.

Seeing India's present standing in the global order, one can hardly stop marvelling at how much has changed. Between the 5% margin of diamond industry exports during the early 80s and the 60% plus margins that the emerging software industry was projected to offer lies a tale of our times.

That software exports could fetch as much net forex as the diamond industry's entire turnover at that time must have seemed heretical to industry czars and the establishment mandarins. Profundities often begin their tortuous journey with profanity. He was certainly audacious to highlight this then. It takes a seer to see what others look at but fail to notice.

The Financial Express spelling software as 'softwear' was a Freudian slip that stands as an ironical footnote to the story of the Indian software industry's early days. The optimism of a cycle of early hypergrowth lends its own buoyancy to a project. The conviction of doing the right thing at the right time seals the deal. A man has to find his calling in life and make it his vocation/mission.

A constellation of circumstances coalesced to help him find his. The revolutionary incubation of unlikely alliances began.

History was set to be written.





Chapter 2. *The Real-World Pathshala*

His seminal influences from his Kaka's collection of books and music and the deep philosophical debates with artists, writers, thinkers, and businessmen is well etched out.

He is lucky to have had a philosopher like Krishnamurthy staying in his house as a guest of his Kaka and asking him questions like 'Who are we?' These ruminations are guaranteed to inculcate a curious, inquisitive mind that accepts nothing at face value and questions everything in an unending quest for the truth.

As the American naturalist, poet, philosopher, and transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau famously said – "Rather than love, than money, than fame, give me the truth."

Nehru wished for the inculcation of scientific temperament among Indians. It seems to have happened to him effortlessly. The American experience with the street life in New York, the music of the Beatles, the Vietnam War, and the demonstrations and chants it occasioned in American public life, flower power, the hippie subculture, and the moon landing. To experience all this heady stuff in real time would have added an important slice of life of the times for a young person shaping his outlook on the world and the life that lay before him.

These bits and pieces go on to shape who we are. Having experienced this stimulating variety that life has to offer, we are never the same again. At work, the observation of the disappearance of hierarchy at the altar of the coffee machine is a tactile experience of the cultural ethos. The tech industry in India can be said to have largely imbibed this ethos of equality. It is one of the things that sets it apart from other, especially traditional industries.

But equally important would be the learning of the unspoken rule of the limits to the rise of a non-WASP to the upper echelons of corporate America. Even in the land of the free and the home of the brave, meritocracy had its limits. Even this is seen to have changed dramatically in contemporary Western corporate life as evidenced by scores of Indian origin CEOs having made their mark in as many global companies in tech and allied fields.

The tragedy of the accidental death of his young son Chirant is tear-inducing. We will never know why such undeserved, heart-wrenching grief should be visited upon good people.

As he stoically put it – sometimes there are no answers. His values of Sweekar and Aparigraha have stood him in good stead when he needed them most. He turned to the work to be done – helping nurture a fledgling industry that was to deliver us a new India.





Chapter 3. A Caravan Sets Out

Although, during the 70s, it was difficult to explain the value of software to authorities and other important constituents due to its intangible nature, he sensed that this emerging technology was set to revolutionise the world as we had known it.

And as we all know from history; no force can withstand the power of an idea whose time has come.

Vijay Mukhi, with his tech knowledge and sociable skills, certainly played a pioneering role in helping to bring software industry people together to air their issues and look actively for solutions and making them realise that they were not alone in their problems or their quest.

The core group coming together with each individual having a grand vision for the potential of the services business was a great beginning. Dealing with MAIT, the reigning 1000-kilo hardware industry gorilla in the forest of regulations and the maze of skeptical, distrusting bureaucrats and politicians must have taken some deft manoeuvring.

Luckily, his team was up to the task. Realising that the 80% of the software industry top line that his association would come to represent, in spite of different business interests, shared more similarities and long-term interests and that was important to develop camaraderie and enable working collectively towards a common goal.

Once this was in place, the rest of the journey became somewhat easier. Convincing Dr. Sheshagiri and F C Kohli about the need to deal with the unique, intangible nature of the business and getting them to be allies was a coup of sorts. Once a caravan like this got rolling, the snowball effect set in. It gathered momentum, got larger and larger as it rolled along, and ultimately had a massive impact, which in the present time is there for all of us to see in the form of NASSCOM.



Chapter 4. Fold the Future In

Given the kind of reputation that most businessmen in India had built until the 90s, politicians and bureaucrats had reason not to trust or respect them. Large family-run businesses were often fraught with greed, self-centredness, and grabbing profits while evading taxes.

The NASSCOM crew faced a daunting uphill task in trying to change perceptions. They had their task cut out for them. Luckily, they were more than up to it. With transparency and open communication, when the skeptical 'they' became part of an 'us', the arid ground of distrust was suitably watered and turned green again with the grass of trust.

Finding good bureaucrats and motivating them to align themselves with the greater cause and give their best would have been a tough journey but it made all the difference.

Dewang Mehta was a serendipitous find. The right man in the right place at the right time - to create history. The streak of madness in him helped them achieve seemingly impossible tasks. One of them surely would have made hard-nosed policymakers feel the break of dawn before the sun of an upcoming sunrise industry had risen in plain view.

It takes guts to project software services exports to rise from \$150 million to \$1 billion in a few years. When it is backed by research and data by an entity of the gravitas of the World Bank, even those hitherto asleep would wake up from their slumber and listen.

N. Vittal's fond acronym for NASSCOM and his declaration of being the leader of this crazy group of dreamers helped make the dream come closer to a shared reality. C K Prahlad's encouragement to 'fold the future in' would surely translate into incorporating elements of the future into the present - incorporating new technologies, new methods of problem-solving, and new ways of thinking into everyday life.

It meant a way to stay ahead of the curve, and be prepared for the waves of change to come in the future. With \$150 billion-plus of net forex earnings each year in 2021-22, the journey down this long, hard, and winding road could not have been more surreal.



Chapter 5. *Thriving in chaos*

To forsake a product business that makes money while one sleeps for a services business that does not let one sleep in peace would have been a brave choice.

The challenges of on-site and offshoring work were clearly numerous and seem to have been met head-on.

His fallout at Hinditron could have cost him the membership at NASSCOM but Onward Technologies' nomination as an EC member, and with a gentle push by Dewang, turned the tide and saved the day.

One could continue the good fight into the days to come.

Chapter 6. *The pillars of NASSCOM*

The parallels between Jean Monnet's idea of a federal union of Europe to leverage their potential and resources and NASSCOM's concept of collaboration of member companies for the greater good and the development of a healthy, growth-oriented ecosystem are relevant and noteworthy.

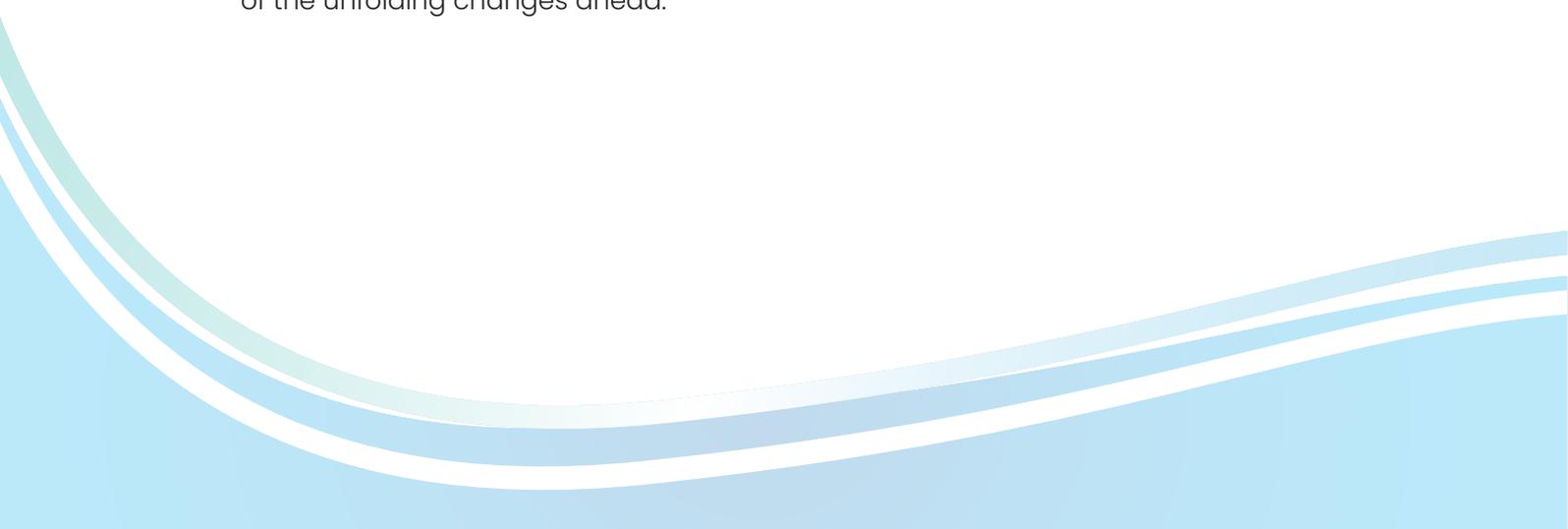
Liberalisation, well-meaning bureaucrats, good policy decisions, and the passion of founding members and early supporters were the cocktail that delivered a heady brew.

'No personal agenda', 'collaborate and compete', and practice of a 'growth mindset' became the core values acting like guiding stars which would enable the fledgling association to withstand the test of time.

The emphasis on an egalitarian culture and open communication were the clinchers. Good men make great things possible. But it is the institutions that stand the test of time and leave a lasting and ever-expanding legacy.

This lesson seems to have been well learned and remains for posterity to follow and benefit from.

In a world where rapid change is the only constant, remaining relevant is an ongoing challenge. NASSCOM seems set to not just survive, but flourish in the chaos of the unfolding changes ahead.





Chapter 7. Roti Kapda, Makaan aur Bandwidth

Shannon's theory of communication systems deals with the transmission, storage, and manipulation of information. It is defined by the fundamental concepts of Entropy, Mutual Information, Channel Capacity, Source Coding, and Error Detection & Correction. Its comparison with the value of the flow of money in an economic system is appropriate and valid.

The information technology revolution is well grounded in the scientific process of empirical data where observation, developing, and testing of an idea and getting results precede the arrival of conclusions.

Bandwidth had taken its time to join the list of existential essentials in India. Now that data is consumed in India as we breathe in air, it is hard to think of a time when this was not the case.

The seamless way in which the IT revolution has assimilated itself into the very fabric of this country is a tribute to the vision of those who saw what was and imagined what could be. The advantage of having Shammi Kapoor promote the use of the internet when it needed to be promoted was an evangelical coup. The magical use of computers in daily life applications was set to take off.

A period of great turmoil and rapid change had begun. We were thrown into the Chinese curse of living in interesting times. A supposed curse that turned out to be a great blessing for the country at large.

A revolution was in the making. A new civilisation was being built without the spilling of blood.

Chapter 8. Proud to be Indian!

Stories define and shape our lives.

The stories that came out of India till the 80s showed India in a poor light. A major rebranding exercise was required. Given the complexity of the task, it was easier said than done. The vile nexus of neta, babu, lala on the one hand, and the jhola, baba, and gunda on the other, ensured we remained mired in the quicksand of corruption and backwardness.

Our antiquated motor cars and basic wristwatches until the 80s were symbols of our woeful condition. Indian software engineers were already living in a VUCA world and coping with it successfully when the term was not yet well defined or understood.

NASSCOM successfully corralled the many good qualities of home-grown Indian engineers and sang out the story to the world. It was India's 'soft' (ware) power at work.

Our credentials as the largest democracy, our rich heritage and knowledge centres, our tradition of inventiveness, our skilled manpower resources, and our huge domestic market were effectively highlighted to the target audience. Indian Americans, with their conduct, hard work, and achievements became valuable ambassadors to enhance India's image further, but the cultural conundrum of our diversity had to be navigated to establish Brand India Inc.

Recasting BPO to BPM to blunt the criticism of stealing American jobs was a brilliant move. Bringing efficiencies, growing the economy, catalysing growth, and improving the local business environment were irrefutable and persuasive arguments to change perceptions.

It was a long journey from 'doing someone's mess for less' to becoming a 'strategic business process management partner.' The seizing of the Y2K bug problem and its positive impact on brand India was truly a case of preparation meeting opportunity. Fortune (With the windfall of Fortune 500 clients) favoured the bold and the brave.

The combination of lower costs and quality, consistently, in a sustainable manner was the stuff of formidable brands. India Inc was getting there.

'They came for the cost and stayed for the quality' was the equivalent of the quote referring to Emperor Augustus - 'He found Rome in bricks and left it in marble.'

The story of Silicon Valley with a Kris going back to being Krishnamurthy is emblematic of a renewed pride in being seen and identified as an Indian. The insightful compliment of 'having set out to change India but having ended up changing the world with the innovation of the outsourcing business model' is a great summary of NASSCOM's luminous trajectory.

It was about the restoration of izzat to the Indian-origin US cab driver to his passengers and about his walking tall as an Indian.



Chapter 9. *Copyright vs the Right to Copy*

Bringing about an attitudinal change from 'What is the problem with piracy?' to 'Piracy is wrong. Period' must have been a monumental task, that the intangible had value would have gone against the grain of our societal thinking.

Good IP legislation is essential for innovation to flourish, with China as a casebook lesson of what not to do.

All government offices switching to only a licensed version of the software would have sent a great message across the land, but the spectacle of an elephant crushing pirated CDs underfoot in front of an agog crowd and a buzzing media in a central city marketplace was a master stroke. The message etched itself deep in the world's memory, enabling the wheel of a reliable, trustworthy Brand India to be set in motion.

The flywheel, with the acceleration and momentum of the new macro environment nurtured so diligently by NASSCOM, powered the next wave of innovations and propelled Indian IT into a new orbit.



Chapter 10. *The Maverick Mehta*

The photo album in this chapter is a great visual depiction of the life and times of Harish Mehta and NASSCOM's journey. It adds a valuable dimension to the story and brings many of the dramatis personae to life.

It helps the viewer enter their world beyond what words alone can achieve. The Jekyll and Hyde sides of Dewang Mehta's driven personality are well brought out. His willingness to torture data, and have it conform to his will and his zealous patriotic streak, all come across clearly.

Although, some price has to be paid for maintaining a scorching pace of growth, and ruffling a few feathers and treading on a few toes is the least part of it.

When one's intent and energy are beyond reproach, it becomes hard to run down or speak out against the protagonist publicly. But it's also true that you cannot keep running away from your demons forever. Ultimately, incessant and obsessive immersion in work took its toll and set him free. The Japanese have a word for it – Karoshi, or occupation-related, sudden death due to overwork. Heart attacks and strokes are the most common medical causes.

With Devang's jet-setting, frenzied lifestyle coming to a tragic, premature end, one can only imagine the shock waves it must have sent through the NASSCOM structure he had so painstakingly helped build. His meteoric rise in just 10 years facilitated the transformation of the destiny of millions and helped put the country on an upward cycle of economic growth. Such a blaze of glory is given only to a few.

He has etched his name indelibly in the annals of India's software revolution. Thank you for highlighting this extraordinary man's remarkable contribution.



Chapter 11. *From Krishna to Ram*

The analogy of shifting with the changing times from a Leelavati 'War is Dharma' Krishna to a more rule-based 'Maryada Purushottam' Ram-like leader with conventional wisdom is vivid and apt.

NASSCOM's evolution to a data analytics centre, guiding IT industry strategy was timely.

Transparent and data-driven, reliable reports inspire respect and trust and elevate an association's stature by its sheer credibility. The limited tenure attached to every officer at NASSCOM, the devolution of power, strong processes, constant training, and value systems have served the association well, and have helped benefit both, the member organisations and the country.

Chapter 12. *The 'Finest Hour'*

The way the Satyam scam or, more accurately, the 'Raju scam' exploded in the face of the still-developing IT industry and the way its potentially lethal fallout was imaginatively handled, is a tribute to the depth and resilience of NASSCOM.

The failure was systemic. All the institutional safeguards failed to notice or prevent the scandal. It must have been a shattering experience for all serious and interested observers. But then, as Prof Bhasin concluded, human conduct is often swayed by greed, ambition, and hunger for power, money, fame & glory. Given the lack of a moral compass, over-vaulting ambition can make villains of otherwise iconic figures. Raju fell upon his own petard, nearly undoing all the good work done by a tribe dedicated to transforming both, brand India and India itself.

In vivifying NASSCOM's real values demonstrably, this epic scandal became a 'successful failure'. NASSCOM's many actions and decisions have influenced the way the world looks at India because they have influenced the India we live in today.



Chapter 13. An Association. A Catalyst. A Movement

A trusted catalyst for the IT industry and other stakeholders, with a vested interest in the growth of the industry, and thereby the upliftment of the nation, seems like a fair description of a not-for-profit enterprise called NASSCOM.

Welcoming whoever develops the human capital in India as a criterion for making them a part of NASSCOM, was a good idea. The country has benefited a lot from the GCCs and ER&D players and their world-class benchmarks, infrastructure and operational practices, polity, standards, and so forth.

The fertile soil of the 1991 economic reforms may not have yielded the flora without the seeding and nurturing of NASSCOM.

The great Indian middle class has matured as a market and as a source of enterprise, making it the envy of much of the developed world. Indians from modest backgrounds are heading trillion-dollar companies in the West. Women have found a level playing field and come into their own in the IT industry and related areas. Ethics, openness, and transparency have set new local benchmarks in corporate governance standards.

All this was unheard of a few decades ago. Even now, seeing is believing. It is nothing short of a revolution - a movement that continues to roll out progress and development in a land that was parched and thirsty for the same.

With NASSCOM's core values and a critical mass of industrial success in place and available to facilitate further growth, the future is ready to be invented.

Millions of eager entrepreneurs transforming India will surpass a thousand flowers that Mao's China wanted to bloom in that authoritarian land. In good times, we should have our own Steve Jobs and Elon Musks. The transformation from a developing nation to a developed one and finding our rightful place in the frontline of nations of the world shall be the goal.

The Sone ki Chidiya is no longer a distant dream.



Chapter 14. Transformation 2.0

Intellectual capital technology is the means for all citizens to become productive and add their might to make India a Sone ki Chidiya once again.

We have to evolve into a smart nation, not just users of smartphones. The more choices people have, the better they can judge what is right or wrong for them. India will need to adapt technology to create more jobs and make people more productive; not automate and make people redundant. Our traditional values, native talent, and scientific mindset would make a world-beating combination. The disruption that technology causes in many fields has to be welcomed. The dilemmas thrown up will resolve themselves over time. Our skilled talent, demographic advantage, and the gift of mathematics, logic, and dealing with a VUCA world will keep us ahead of the competition adroitly. AI can and will be used to our advantage. Our inherent creativity, emotional quotient, natural affinity for empathy, and native intelligence would keep us ahead of the curve.

Failure as a stepping stone to success will need to be accepted and even celebrated. A collective grand vision of the future will need to be created. The rise of a million technopreneurs will change the fortunes of this country decisively. Technology has a way of enforcing ethical behaviour – something that has always troubled Indian society.

Pre-emptive, consultative policy making will reshape the technology landscape. A strong judiciary will have to protect IP for innovation to flourish. The government's own decision-making process will need to evolve by using analytics and AI efficiently. Global technologies will need to work with more permeable geographical borders. Self-reliance cannot be an exclusive mantra. Mutual reliance based on efficiencies and merits would help arrive at a more calibrated solution.

Harnessing data, using it to design the right policy, and enabling the business environment, and creating and using digital infrastructure to create value would be the way forward in the coming decades. There is a reason to put much hope in the new breed; bubbling with infectious energy and enthusiasm, the young and restless minds of India. They can help bring about a blissful dawn and make the country the heaven of our dreams. The vile nexus of the old order of vested interests will have to be broken and the parasites defeated. Centres of excellence would need to spring up across geographies.

More stars would need to dot the dark skies. Their collective sparkle would light up the night sky as a self-actualised India shines bright in the global firmament.

We shall not just meet the future. The future shall be us.



The Epilogue

This is a great rounding-off to a remarkable book. It brings us closer to the writer and helps us appreciate his struggles, his blessings, and his achievements. It helps us understand what forces shaped him and what made him tick, the rationale behind that mindset is about his core values, it is truly enlightening. The sharing of pastimes and lifestyle choices completes the picture. The reader feels that they have gained insightful knowledge of a man who has lived life his way and has made a difference to the world around him.

Maana ki iss zameen ko na gulzar kar sake, Kuch khaar kam to kar sake guzare
jidhar se hum. – Sahir Ludhianvi
(I couldn't make this land blossom, at least I can reduce some
bitterness from where I pass by.)

In Harish's case, it has been a case of both reducing the thorns and helping create a resplendent garden.



Afterword

Shri Sitanshu Yashaschandra has penned a very appropriate afterword to a path breaking book, that well qualifies as being ranked as a modern classic.

He presents us with Immanuel Kant's idea of 'form' and 'content' going together, of one being blind and the other being empty without the other. We cannot afford scientific knowledge that is empty of the human context. Nor the artistic ideological sentimentality that feeds upon itself. To expand on this further, form and content are dependent on each other. Each makes the other whole. The form is the mode of existence, the expression or internal organisation of the content of a thing; content is in turn the totality of relations and potentialities of the same thing.

A simple example from nature should suffice. When we say the 'sky is blue'- the blueness as the form of the sky merges seamlessly with the content of space the sky represents. So much so that we cannot imagine one without the other. NASSCOM's collaborative structure and enshrined values make it a force of nature. Opportunities are not given to many industry associations to go beyond even their own industry's interest parameters and become conscience keepers of the nation.

NASSCOM is not just singing the song of the humungous growth and potential of the IT and services industry. In doing so, it is singing the song of a rapidly changing digital India; one that threatens to be, in the next few decades, unrecognisable from its mid-twentieth century, leisurely-paced analogue past. A certain confluence of fortuitous circumstances and good choices in capitalising on those factors have brought us this far. Continuing on this sweeping journey into a future of accelerated changes will require that we continue to make further good choices.



The right pathway shall lead to the right gate, which, we may then find, will also carry the right inscription.

Two of Yaksha's questions to Yudhisthir come to mind -

Q. What is fleeter than Wind? A. Mind

Q. What is more numerous than Grass? A. Thoughts

Given that the IT revolution is premised on the development of intellectual property, fleeting minds and the fertile grassland of numerous new thoughts and ideas will ensure continuous rejuvenation and sustainability of this movement. In time, the IT revolution of present times is sure to find its place in history alongside the Green Revolution of farming and the White Revolution of milk cooperatives. In its scope, breadth, depth, reach, and socio-economic impact on India and possibly a good part of the world, it will both lead and service, and it is likely set to surpass them both.

When the history of modern India gets written, it will occupy a very special position of thoughtful leadership and be deemed in a class of its own. If our knowledge industries know compassion, if they, in Shri Yashaschandra's words, are fully alive in compassionate knowledge, if their knowledge is comprehensively compassionate, then they shall arrive in that venerable realm described by the ancient Chandogya Upanishad.

Thus -

"The little space within the heart is as great as the vast universe. The heavens and the Earth are there, and the sun and the moon and the stars. Fire and lightning and winds are there, and all that now is and all that is not."
