# Should robots be nationalised?

As we ask ourselves how employment is threatened by technology, we should look at how labour has changed in recent decades. Before we get so attached to the current job market, and feel we must defend it from an eventual robot takeover, we should examine how unfair the labour system has become and how robotics could contribute to change that.

If properly managed, the robotic revolution could be a chance to free millions of people from a system of exploitation of labour which is unprecedentedly inhumane. Or not.

In ancient Rome, a slave worked a maximum of six hours a day. A third of the year was spent in festivities. European workers in the Middle Ages had a six-hour work day and spent 150 days in religious celebrations — almost half the entire year off!

Nothing close to the 13 to 14 hours put in by the average, always-on entrepreneur of our times. Or the 10 hours a regular employee often clocks in, which explains why overwork is causing so many deaths across Asia.

The Industrial Revolution and the continuous automation of work have morphed us into becoming increasingly less human workers. This is the central premise before looking into what robotisation can offer to the future of work in India.

Is there also a continuing percolation, in India, from the agricultural sector, through urbanisation and its consequences, into the service and manufacturing sectors? Certainly.

‘Robotics revolutionising labour market’

Could this happen in a more humane way, as easily automated jobs are slowly stolen by robots? Is farming also destined to be substituted by Artificial Intelligence (AI)? Could we then envision a future of a widely urbanised class with more leisure time thanks to robots? Utopia.

But there may be a way to go in that direction, if we think about the advantages of robotisation being equally distributed among those who will lose their jobs.

A socially sensitive policy should consider this a chance for the government to gather advantages from higher robotisation and distribute them to the work force by creating job alternatives. Or by providing subsidies and employment systems with less working hours — such as part-time and work from home. Finally, robotised work should distribute earnings to those who will permanently lose their jobs. And this could be done in very specific ways.

First, we should consider how to capitalise from the current market. The premise for doing so requires a radical change of perspective.

When we read that in a town in Andhra Pradesh, an AI company hires women and youth and spends some of its profit on education and drinking water for the community, we should not be humbly thankful. We should be worried.

But what is passed for bringing employment to underdeveloped areas is neo-colonial exploitation at its best. Workers are paid peanuts to build the very same AI that will render them obsolete. This is not explained to them. So they are thankful for an extra little water and infrastructure, in exchange.

This trick is fooling Western underprivileged people as well. To refine conversation skills, a digital AI assistant needs to be told over and over when it has failed. There are plenty of American college students spending 10 to 30 hours a week, for $10 an hour, on phones or computers as AI supervisors, evaluating search results and chats through sites such as Clickworker. If they understood the ramifications of their work, they might demand to be paid much more.

Robots that steal human jobs should pay taxes: Bill Gates

This is policy recommendation number one: enforce a high international minimum wage for all data-entry and data-supervision workers. Help people who are “feeding the machine” be better paid for contributing to coding reality into its virtual version.

There is a more serious issue in the Indian job market. In 1810, the agricultural sector was 90% of the U.S. economy. In 1910, it was down to 30%. In 2010, it was 2%.

Is this what’s in store for India, where agriculture is still occupying half of the work force? Will it happen faster here? How do we retrain farmers? And where are they to relocate?

What will happen to “the rejected” as Pope Francis called them, “the forgotten,” as U.S. President Donald Trump labelled them during his campaign?

More interestingly, will we move into a “humanistic intelligence” era in which we transform our workers, first with wearable computers (smartwatches and Google glasses are a beginning, the new smartphones operating according to moods, gaze and gestures are the next step), and then with deeper integration, like the Swedish company Biohax, implanting chips under the skin of their employees’ wrists?

It is called “shortening the chain of command”— from the smart screen era, to the cyborg era.

At first, technology might not immediately take all our jobs, it will take over our bodies. Of course, it’s already doing that. For example, I wear a hearing aid. Would I wear a bionic eye for sensory and visual augmentation, or for, say, drone operation? Maybe.

Is this how humans will compete with robots in an intermediary phase? What does it mean for society and its sense of identity, our relationship to our bodies?

There might be a lot of jobs for our new cyborg selves out there, in what is called the aug-mediated reality. Humans, some argue, are not to be defended, but expanded. So, will we be become transhumanistic, pimped-up cyborgs, with mechanical elements expanding our physical limitations? Isn’t this already happening? Is this the Nietzschean Übermensch we are supposed to become? Shouldn’t policy regulate that as well?

The focal question here is: as labour is being transformed at its roots, should economic forces be the only thing that matters? Aren’t we in front of an ethical and political, rather than an economic, question? And what if the answer is simply that everyone must benefit from the capital generated by robotisation?

Shouldn’t we begin to think of an alternative form of ownership of the robots? Shouldn’t they be public property, since they are objects that occupy and operate on public grounds, impacting public economy and nation-wide employment?

Shouldn’t they be owned by everyone? Should India consider nationalising robots? As ludicrous and anachronistic as it may sound in the post-neoliberal zeitgeist, it is something at least worth

opening up for reflection.

Or could robots owned by private companies be allowed to operate only by purchasing a costly state licence, benefitting society at large or, specifically, displaced workers, thus funding unemployment?

Is it conceivable to create “job permits for robots” so that 30% of the revenue they raise with their work goes directly to finance the pension funds of the workers made redundant by robotisation?

This may not be the specific solution, but discussion should begin on these topics, as one of the ways to avoid famine and death possibly brought on by massive unemployment in a relatively short time.

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The new U.S. Fed Chairman is unlikely to opt for policies that might upset the President’s plan

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