

HI-TECH

The German friend of ours had been clicking pictures all along the route from Delhi to Agra. It was his first trip to India and everything from the trucks moving on the wrong side of the road to cows crossing the highway was fascinating for him. As we turned towards the Taj, he expressed concern that the memory of his digital camera was nearly full and he was not carrying any extra memory stick. I tried to lighten the moment by saying that if only he had an old fashioned film camera, there would be loads of urchins trying to sell him film at the Taj. Sure enough, as soon as we alighted, about 10 “salesmen” descended upon us selling replicas of the Taj, keychains and, to my utter surprise, memory sticks of various kinds to fit different digital cameras!

I am always intrigued by the speed at which technology is adopted and put to use by us. The proliferation of mobile phones is just the most blatant example of this. But there are several other cases where, whenever technology is available which is cheap and easy to use, people will adopt it. The photographers at the Taj now routinely use digital cameras and can email the pictures to you if you want. The prints that they take out are not processed in a photolab but mostly on a regular desktop printer. Hawkers use microwave ovens to heat burgers and patties. Vegetable sellers use electronic scales so that people can buy any amount that they want. There are many such examples.

The point is that contrary to what one might believe naively, the adoption of technology has little to do with literacy or education or indeed economic status. If a consumer finds the technology easy to use, affordable and effective, then s/he will quickly adopt it. Technology forecasters have well developed models for predicting the growth of a technology in a society. The growth curve is typically an S shaped curve where the initial acceptance is low, followed by a period of huge growth and then a plateau of saturation.

This model clearly does not take into account disruptive technologies. A wonderful example is that of the pager- the revolutionary technology of the nineties. Pagers died an untimely death with the advent of the cheap mobile. Pagers could never become as popular as mobiles because they were not as easy to use as mobiles. The vegetable hawker who now takes orders on his mobile clearly had no use for it! Even mobile telephony took a long time to be adopted universally because of affordability. It was only with the coming of cheap mobiles and talk-time that demand boomed.

On this topic of technology adoption, my favorite story is from the mid-eighties. I was accompanying a relative for jewelry shopping in Dariba Kalan in Chandni Chowk. We went into a small shop where the ground floor functioned as the shop and the upper floors as the store. The owner would sign a chit when he wanted something from the store and send it upstairs. The chit, now countersigned by the storekeeper would come back with the jewelry. The shopkeeper exhibited several sets of jewelry and after we had finished, took the load of chits that he had accumulated and to my utter surprise, put all of them into a portable paper shredder! All this happened 20 years ago and that too in a modest establishment in the lanes of the Walled City! Clearly, the shopkeeper had found an effective way of preventing misuse of the chits and the cost to him of misuse far outweighed the expense of a shredder.