Homo ex machina

WHERE WILL MAN TAKE US?
ATUL JALAN
Penguin Portfolio
318 pages
₹ 399

Some of Jalan’s questions are quite intriguing. Such as, will astrology be upstaged by data science? The answer, unfortunately, is a poem, which is a bit of a cop-out. But he points out that algorithms are already at work in online matchmaking, replacing the priest, the astrologer and the neighbourhood barber. He takes a position on other issues like machine intelligence, where he predicts that at a future date, there would be no need for monkeys to type Shakespeare. The element of chance, he expects, will be overruled by artificial intelligence. Currently known for winning AlphaGo games against humans, machines, he believes, can learn more human attributes.

How technology is unmaking and remaking us is a question with innumerable dimensions. In the election season, the most urgent are the filter-bubbling of news, where we seek information which may only confirm our prejudices, and the targeting of swing voters to produce predictable outcomes. This is the wellspring of the current disquiet about social media, whose influence is expected to have been a factor in the US elections and the Brexit referendum.

But the story of technology is not inevitably dystopian, irrespective of the native instinct of science fiction. For instance, despite the chaos that Bitcoin trading has seen, the currency is the only one to be completely protected against inflation, since only a finite number of coins can be mined. Also, while the currency’s volatility is problematic, the underlying ledger system is being ported to record routine transactions, like in the property markets, in ledgers that cannot be forged. The questions that Jalan raises — especially his philosophical speculations — will not be answered in a hurry, but all the answers will obviously not be bleak.

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