THREADS 2023 CONFERENCE
Multiday virtual conference to be held in October 2023
Theme: Being Hindu in the Age of Artificial Intelligence

Being Hindu in the Age of Artificial Intelligence
Multiday Virtual Conference October 7, 14, 21, 28 - 2023

Call for Papers

Threads 2023, a virtual conference on "Being Hindu in the Age of Artificial Intelligence" will be held over 4 weekends in October 2023. Panel discussions will be held on wide ranging topics, including the AI technology, its promise, and potential risks for the human society with special focus on Hindu ecosystem, relevance of Hindu values and knowledge systems in coping with the AI-dominated world order, and many more.

The conference will appeal to the general public, as well as researchers and educators in such diverse fields as technology, social and political sciences, physical and mental healthcare, Hindu knowledge systems - secular and spiritual.

Papers are solicited from thought leaders, educators, established researchers as well as young scholars from all relevant fields. This is a global conference; submissions from anywhere in the world are welcome.

Approximately 24 papers will be selected for presentation at the conference. Multiple submissions from the same author(s) will be entertained.

All selected papers for presentation at the conference will be published as Symposium Proceedings; 5 best papers will be selected for special recognition.

Step 1: Abstract
Send abstract (250 words max) of your proposed topic to Dr. Jai Bansal, VP of Education – VHPA, at jai.bansal@vhp-america.org. The abstract should be in Microsoft Word format (not pdf or Google doc) and should be sent as an email attachment. Deadline: August 7, 2023

Step 2: Paper
Send completed paper manuscript to jai.bansal@vhp-america.org by September 15, 2023. Papers should be sent as email attachment in Microsoft Word document format (not as pdf or Google doc).

All authors will be notified by September 22, 2023 whether their papers have been selected or not.

Step 3: Online presentation at the Conference
Conference schedule will be published, and all selected authors will be notified of their time slot and other details for participation in the conference by September 22, 2023.

Sponsoring organizations and Organizers

The conference is a collaborative effort of:

- The World Hindu Council of America (VHPA)
- Dharma Civilization Foundation (DCF)
- Hindu University of America (HUA)

Organizing team:

Dr. Jai G. Bansal – VP of Education, Vishwa Hindu Parishad of America (VHPA)

Dr. Abhaya Asthana – Chairman of Advisory Board, VHPA

Dr. Subhash Kak – Regents Prof. of Computer Science, Oklahoma State Univ, USA

Sh. Sahil Aggrawal – CEO, Rishihood University, Sonipat, India

Sh. Srikant Palkar – President, Dharma Civilization Foundation, USA

Sh. Kalyan Viswanathan – President, Hindu University of America

Inquiries: Dr. Jai G. Bansal, jai.bansal@vhp-america.org

Background

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has recently emerged as one of the most transformative and promising technologies of our times. There is little doubt that it has the potential to revolutionize various aspects of human life, from healthcare and transportation to education and entertainment. Its commercial reach is already very substantial and growing rapidly.

However, a technology that could out-think humans, and mimic such uniquely human traits as empathy and ethical reasoning, also raises serious long-term concerns for humanity. Issues such as massive job displacement, lack of transparency, impaired capacity for decision-making, propagation of fake information, security risks and malicious misuse are all well-recognized and hotly debated topics. However, the specter of unexpected behaviors resulting from AI's inherent complexity and the lack of human oversight will continue to haunt us for a long period of time.

A vast majority of these risks are generic and shared equally by all. However, there are certain challenges that are specific to the Hindu ecosystem. One such challenge stems from India's long colonial past. Over the more than a thousand years of India's domination by outsiders, copious amounts of derogatory narrative about Hindu traditions have been maliciously created and disseminated through print as well as digital media. Since the AI algorithms have been trained on these data, the resulting AI models are, ab initio, disposed to be biased against Hindu Dharma. This is by no means a hypothetical scenario. In a recent experiment, a query on a popular AI platform, ChatGPT, happily produced jokes on Rama and Krishna, but refused to do the same for other faiths, claiming such actions would be disrespectful to those faiths.

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Furthermore, AI algorithms can be selectively trained on cherry-picked texts or interpretations to promote certain ideologies, thereby rendering even such pillars of Hindu Dharma as "*Ekam sat, vipraha bahuda vadanti*," (One Truth described variously) as serious vulnerabilities. The lack of transparency and absence of human agency would make these new purveyors of "facts" nearly impervious to challenge – legal or otherwise.

The Appendix provides a detailed list of dangers, concerns and issues associated with AI technology, along with some relevant references for additional information on the subject.

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In view of the foregoing, a number of leading Hindu organizations and thought leaders have joined hand in organizing a multi-day conference to discuss the implications of this emergent technology – both positive and negative - for Hindus and Hindu Traditions, and discuss ways to develop the capacity to deal with them.

The conference will be held virtually over 4-days in October 2023: October 7, 14, 21 and 28. There will be two session each day to explore a variety of subthemes related to the primary theme of the conference "Being Hindu in the Age of AI."

- Panel 1 (October 7): Coexisting with AI
- Panel 2 (October 14): Role of Hindu Institutions in sustaining values and traditions
- Panels 3 and 4: Role of Indian knowledge systems in coping with AI-dominated world

There will be two 90-minute sessions each day, with one keynote speaker and 3-4 written paper presentations per session.

Panel 1 (October 7): Coexisting with AI

The imaginative human mind, creative and inventive, will continue to evolve tools and technologies forever, notwithstanding the impact of their application to the benefit or detriment of this planet and its inhabitants. A transformative technology that is becoming increasingly ubiquitous in the age ahead of us is Artificial Intelligence (AI). Despite its many advantages, there are several risks and limitations associated with AI that must be understood. AI-powered systems can only make decisions based on the data they have been trained on, and bias could enter directly into the programming of the human being who designs the system, based on her/his own biases. As AI grows more sophisticated and widespread, the voices warning against the potential dangers of AI grow louder.

This panel will explore

a variety of issues associated with AI technology, such as:

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- How do common people survive in a scary world with deepfakes, social surveillance, autonomous weapons?
- What are the consequences of the inherent biases baked into AI algorithms for power and wealth inequalities and social manipulation?
- Are we hyping the impact of these technologies without knowing their limitations?
- Is AI indeed the pathway to Utopia?

Panel 2 (October 14): Role of Hindu institutions in sustaining values and traditions

Institutions are the pillars of a civilization. This includes 'formal' institutions like universities as well as 'informal' institutions like temples, families, community groups, and even commercial enterprises. As artificial intelligence technologies take on more and more human functions, we will need to rely on our institutions to ensure that we are a resilient society that doesn't get bogged down by the advent of technology but rather uses it to advance the objective of human awakening.

Typical issues to be explored:

- What role can our institutions play to mitigate the technology-induced disruptions to our social order, cultural vitality, and way of life?
- Are there any institutions that are vulnerable to being overwhelmed by the incessant march of technology?
- Are they prepared or can they get in shape to respond to the emerging challenges?
- On the other hand, are certain Hindu institutions better positioned than non-Hindu counterparts to serve the needs of the society in the "brave new world"?

Panel 3 (October 21): Role of Indian knowledge system in addressing crisis of consciousness.

Many experts predict that the day of "singularity," - the day when artificial intelligence surpasses human intelligence - is no more than a decade away. In such a scenario, human society will experience serious loss of self-worth and consciousness. Afterall, what would it mean to be a human if technology can do critical thinking, creative work, and potentially surpass human intuition? What would be the purpose of human existence? Indeed, might we begin to project divinity onto AI? Thankfully, many of these issues have been explored to a large extent by Indian thought leaders of yore. Not only had they plumbed the depths of the human mind and formulated highly advanced theories about its workings, but also developed practical techniques to attain higher states of consciousness. For instance, the relationship of the Indian schools of philosophy such as Advaita Vedanta and Kashmir Shaivism to the emerging science of consciousness is now well recognized.

- What are the challenges to bring relevant techniques from the Indian knowledge systems to the general public?

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- How to facilitate and promote consciousness-based public policy and mental healthcare systems?
- How would we perceive spirituality?
- What would be the role of Advaita Vedanta and Kashmir Shaivism in AI-dominated world?
- As the current university model collapses, how can AI technology help in developing alternate models to deliver curated knowledge to the next generation?

Panel 4 (October 28): Role of Indian mind sciences in addressing mental health issues in an AI dominated world.

Increasing reliance on AI-driven communication and interactions could lead to diminished power of reasoning, empathy, social skills, distortion of or dissociation from reality, isolation (parading as individualism?), mental and behavioral dysfunction, disintegration of family structure, and, eventually, of society as a whole. Coincidentally, the Indian mind sciences of Yoga and Meditation have found valuable applications in the mental healthcare system as CAM (Complementary and Alternative Medicine).

- How can mind science such as Yoga and Meditation prevent the erosion of self-worth?
- How much strength does Hindu ecosystem have? How do Hindu values help in coping?

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Appendix

Challenges, Concerns, and issues with Artificial Intelligence technology

- Misinformation: Convincing, computer-generated images or video can propagate misinformation, misleading new reports, revenge pornography and much more, made worse by the paucity of competent regulations to protect the innocent.
- Loss of Privacy: Imagine an Orwellian world where AI models, trained to recognize individual faces, surveil individuals and exert control over human behavior.
- Massive job disruption: This time it won't be just the blue-collar jobs that are lost or displaced. As yourself: Who needs software engineers if AI can develop its own software?
- Latent Discrimination: In 2018, Amazon had to stop using a recruiting tool after it was found to be biased against female applicants!
- Power and wealth inequities: Concentration of AI ownership within a select group of large corporations could severely disadvantage smaller players.
- Security Risks: Malicious actors could launch more advanced cyberattacks, bypass security measures, and exploit vulnerabilities in systems.
- Erosion of self-worth, consciousness: What does it mean to be a human if AI can do critical thinking, creative work, and potentially surpass human intuition? The result could be disconnection from reality, isolation (parading as individualism?), mental and behavioral health issues, disintegration of family structure, and, eventually, of society as a whole.
- Existential Risks: When, not if, 'singularity' is reached, i.e., AI surpasses human intelligence, its objectives and priorities may not be aligned with those of humanity, leading to potentially catastrophic consequences for the human race.

Background Reading Material
- For an excellent primer on issues specific to Hindu ecosystem, refer to this article by Sh. Rajiv Malhotra: A Dharma Perspective on Artificial Intelligence – AI & Faith (aiandfaith.org)
- Robots are performing Hindu ritals. Some worshippers fear they'll be replaced | PBS NewsHour
- Chat GPT – An 'Artificial Intelligence' tool is Anti-Hindu for its 'biased Learning'
- What Are the Dangers of AI? - Decrypt
- The 15 Biggest Risks Of Artificial Intelligence (forbes.com)
- Artificial Intelligence: Implications for Ethics and Religion - Union Theological Seminary (utsnyc.edu)