The Barefoot Prophet: Ivan Illich's Forgotten Warnings for Our Times

by John Kurien*

An Unexpected Visitor

"*John, can you come over? There is a gentleman here who seems to be an important person and wants to meet you!*"

That was my director's voice, hushed and in Malayalam, crackling through the intercom of my office at the Centre for Development Studies, Trivandrum, in April 1978.

I entered to find a tall, unshaven man in wrinkled clothes, barefoot, with the air of a wandering monk.

"*Ah, you are John? The fishers at the boatyard on Vizhinjam beach told me about you. I'm Ivan Illich.*"

My heart raced. This was the man whose books had already upended my understanding of education, health, and technology. And here he was, not in a European lecture hall, but in Kerala, asking about fishers, village libraries, and the People's Science Movement.

Months later, I found him again on the banks of the Ganges, speed-learning Hindi from a guru in Varanasi. Between those two encounters, I realized: Illich was not just a philosopher—he was a scout from the future, warning us about the traps of '*progress*' we now call normal.

Who Was Ivan Illich? The Radical Monk of Modernity

Before diving deeper, let me pause to introduce this forgotten giant.

Ivan Illich (1926–2002) was an Austrian Catholic priest-turned-philosopher, greatly influenced by Paulo Freire

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Kurien, J. The Barefoot Prophet: Ivan Illich's Forgotten Warnings for Our Times. Conspiratio, 2025/26, p. 187-191

and Arnold Toynbee, who dismantled the myths of industrial society with the precision of a surgeon. Born in Vienna, he worked in New York and Puerto Rico before his critiques of institutional power made him a heretic to both the Church and the academy. By the 1970s, he was a global nomad, debating Sufis in Iran, and—as I witnessed—learning Hindi in Varanasi and studying Kerala's grassroots library and People's Science Movement.

The four seminal books Illich published in the 1970s—works I had absorbed years before meeting him—read today not as period pieces but as an urgent survival manual for our century.

In *Deschooling Society* (1971), he exposed how institutional schooling substitutes certification for true learning, manufacturing obedient workers rather than curious minds.

His *Tools for Conviviality* (1973) drew a crucial distinction between technologies that amplify human agency and those that create dependency—a warning that resonates from outboard motors to artificial intelligence.

In *Energy and Equity* (1974), he demonstrated mathematically how speed, beyond a certain threshold, inevitably erodes community—whether through highways that displace villages or digital platforms that replace human connection.

And in *Medical Nemesis* (1975), he laid bare medicine's paradox—how hospitals, in their relentless specialization, often generate new forms of sickness even as they treat others. Together, these works form a diagnostic framework for understanding how our most trusted institutions can become instruments of control.

Illich was not against progress—he was against progress that robs people of dignity. Today, as we drown in AI hype, climate chaos, and pandemics of loneliness, his voice is urgent.

The Kattumaram and the Outboard Motor: When Progress Becomes Prison

In the 1970s, Kerala's fishing communities still used *kattumarams*—log rafts with lateen sails that moved with the wind's wisdom. When I first introduced Japanese outboard motors (OBM) to them in 1975, the fishers tried them briefly, then rejected them with laughter. "*The sea speaks to the sail, not to this motor*," one explained, patting his weather-beaten raft.

By the 1990s, everything had changed. The same fishers now depended entirely on Yamaha and Suzuki motors, trapped in a cycle that would have made Illich nod grimly.

"*Earlier, the Japanese only set the price of our catch*," fisherman Pathrose told me. *"Now they decide if we can fish at all."* The motors needed constant repairs, the spare parts cost half a day's earnings, and the fuel prices rose with distant wars. What was sold as liberation had become invisible chains.

Illich saw this coming. In *Tools for Conviviality*, he wrote: "Industrial tools replace competence with demand." The OBM did not just drown the sound of sails—it drowned the right to repair, the right to refuse, the right to rest.

True tools empower communities; industrial tools create dependencies. Today, we see the same pattern everywhere—from farmers locked into seed patents to workers replaced by algorithms.

Learning Without Schools: The Library Movement's Quiet Revolution

Illich was fascinated by Kerala's library movement, where laborers pooled rupees to buy books, they would discuss after work. In *Deschooling Society*, he argued that true learning happens in communities, not classrooms. Education happens when people pursue meaning, not certificates. How different this is from today's coaching factories that

produce exam-takers rather than thinkers. Kerala's *grandhasala* (library) movement worked because it grew from what people truly wanted to know—not what some bureaucrat decided they should learn.

The Medical Paradox: When Healing Creates Harm

On the Varanasi ghats, Illich never spoke of hospitals. He was too busy learning Hindi from a guru who asked no fee but demanded complete presence. This embodied his radical view in *Medical Nemesis*: health cannot be institutionalized without being diminished. Today, India's healthcare swings between AYUSH nostalgia and corporate hospitals. Illich would scorn both: the first romanticizes, the second commodifies.

Modern medicine, he warned, often creates new illnesses even as it treats others. We see this today in the explosion of *"managed"* conditions and pills for ordinary human experiences.Kerala's palliative care movement—where volunteers care for the sick and dying at home—along with neighborhood ASHA workers and midwives, and the fostering of the courage to suffer meaningfully, comes closer to Illich's ideal: that true healing happens in community, not sterile clinics.

The Tyranny of Speed

Illich moved through India at human pace—walking, cycling, sitting long hours in conversation. In *Energy and Equity*, he showed mathematically how speed creates inequality. High-velocity transport does not save time collectively; it redistributes it from the poor to the rich. Kerala's fishermen learned this brutally. Their OBM let them race farther, only to discover they had to go ever farther to find fish, destroying stocks and their own solidarity. Today, as we chase faster digital connections while feeling more disconnected, Illich's warning echoes: *"Beyond a certain speed, no one saves time without forcing others to lose it."*

Conclusion: The Prophet We Should Have Listened To

Half a century after his warnings, we inhabit the world Illich foresaw—one where technology isolates, education standardizes, and medicine commodifies. Yet his legacy offers not despair but direction.

As AI reshapes our cognitive landscapes, as climate disasters accelerate with each passing monsoon, as pandemics emerge from the fractured boundaries between human and natural worlds, Ivan Illich's once-radical questions now demand answers with new desperation. The fundamental question of tools—*who truly controls the off-switch?* —has evolved from outboard motors to ChatGPT, but remains essentially unchanged.

Our health systems have become battlegrounds where we must ask whether we can still reclaim sovereignty over our bodies from pharmaceutical empires. Education, that sacred promise of liberation, now shackles generations to decades of debt while delivering diminishing returns.

And we must confront why visions of '*development*' still insist on eight-lane highways carving through communities and ecosystems alike.

These are not abstract concerns—they echo through Kerala's fishing villages where OBMs replaced sails, through its classrooms where standardized tests replaced curiosity, and through its clinics where healing became transactional. Illich framed these as civilizational choices fifty years ago. Today, they have become existential questions.

The barefoot prophet we ignored may yet show us the way home.