



AI Ignition

Ignite your AI curiosity with Vilas Dhar

AI for social good

Beena Ammanath: Hello, my name is Beena Ammanath. I'm the executive director of Deloitte AI Institute. And today on AI Ignition, we have Vilas Dhar. Vilas is the president and trustee of the Patrick J. McGovern Foundation. It's a 21st century multi-billion-dollar philanthropy advancing AI and data solutions to create a thriving, equitable, and sustainable future for all. Vilas is an entrepreneur, technologist, and human rights advocate with a lifelong commitment to creating more robust human-centered social institutions. Welcome to the show, Vilas. We are so excited to have you. I'd love to start by asking you about your career journey. Obviously, you have a wide-spanning background. Your training is in computer and biomedical sciences, and you've had a successful career in law and social entrepreneurship. How did you first become interested in data and AI, and why have you focused your attention from a societal impact angle?

Vilas Dhar: Beena, thanks so much for the conversation. Thanks for having me. I have loved watching your podcast, and love how you lift up the themes that really matter in this AI world. So you asked a big question, how did I come to this, and maybe I'll take you even before my formal education and just share with you. I grew up in a time of incredible privilege. And what I mean by that is not so much material privilege, but I was born and really grew up in the eighties. And I feel like at a time when the world was cresting on a wave of what technology could be, I was born with a surfboard. I grew up six blocks away from the National Center for Super Computing, this incredible, federally funded research institution that was sited in semirural Illinois, downstate.

And so from the time that I was really in school and got to really engage extracurricularly, I saw the incredible development of these technologies, everything from early computers, all the way through to seeing the first web browser come out of NCSA in the mid-nineties. So I've always really believed that technology can make the world better because I've seen it. But I have to tell you being on the other side of that story, along with growing up so close to technology, my family is from south India and often in the summers, I would go back to where my family's from and I would see a very different world. I'd see a world where we weren't talking about computers and Game Boys and Nintendos. We were still trying to figure out how to get basic electricity into homes, how to make sure that water flowed 24 hours a day. And I began to see how the first pieces of technology that were entering that world didn't just create

a better entertainment system after school, it totally transformed people's lives. So those are the two things that have always driven me. On one side, this incredible optimism about what technology can do for us. But on the other side, a very clear understanding that the world we aspire to is not the one we have today. Today, we still have a significant inequality in access. We have a significant failure in equity and justice around access to tech. So that's maybe what drives me in a nutshell.

Beena: And how did you hone in on data and AI as the area that you want to focus on for now?

Vilas: As we've seen what technology's delivered, we've seen all of these different ways that it's addressing different facets of our lives. But I think I have a core hypothesis that much of what we've seen so far has been about efficiency, has been about changing the ways we communicate and making it easier how we buy things online, whatever else. But with data and AI, I think we have a moment of not just efficient iteration, but real social transformation. This new thing that has been unlocked for us, the ability to understand through something that's not even a human capacity, to understand massive amounts of data and figure out how it changes the way we interact, not just with businesses or with governments, but really with our core sense of what it means to be human. I can't think of a more fascinating thing for us to talk about, to engage with, and to steer in a direction that actually leads to a more equitable world.

Beena: I talk a lot about humans with machines, and at Deloitte, we fundamentally believe that it's about humans doing better with machines. And I love what you just shared. And we're also seeing this whole rise of social enterprise or awareness around purpose and doing good with technology as a whole. And you are obviously ahead of the curve. What would you share to enterprises and large companies who are beginning to think about purpose? What have you learned in your journey interacting with so many segments of society?

Vilas: I start from a basic proposition that at the end of the day, these technologies that are being built, we are still trying to figure out what we can do with them. And there's a huge opportunity ahead of us. Now in that opportunity space, there are probably good outcomes and bad outcomes. And as I engage with Fortune 500 CEOs all around the world, our conversations come back to something very simple. It's to say, how does this potential application of a technology make our business stronger, more capable of delivering on profit to our shareholders, but much more fundamentally, how does it make us a better stakeholder organization? How do we make sure we have long-term sustainability, that we're upholding our values? And you talked about purpose, something that is really core to what I believe in, how do we make sure that our purpose, which is often in language of the humanist studies around morals, ethics, and perspective, translates into what we do with our technology, a totally different vernacular.

Beena: What role do you see AI playing in shifting human interactions? Can you share some examples and what you have seen or what you envision will happen?

Vilas: Absolutely. And I think it's very fair to say the private sector is ahead of the pack in terms of how these are being implemented. But I like to reason by parallel analogy. We see how AI is transforming, for example, logistics and supply chains. And we're seeing how companies are driving incredible efficiencies. Well, at the start of the pandemic, our institution stepped forward to say, how do we bring AI and data to really critical questions of vulnerability? And one of the areas we identified was the infrastructure in this country of food banks. Now these are institutions that have a hundred-year history in America of serving food to those who are most at risk and most economically vulnerable, but their model has pretty much not changed in a hundred years. It's identifying sources of food that are below market rate, hopefully, or sometimes at market rate, bringing them into warehouses, re-parceling them

and distributing them. Over the course of the pandemic, we began to engage with some of the largest systems in the country and said, “If we could bring data analytics, if we could bring some predictive capacity to you, how would you actually deploy this?”

And what we’ve seen is a fundamental transformation of many of these institutions’ capacities to identify the right kinds of food sources that fit within better nutritional profiles, but also our below-market prices, to bring them using just-in-time inventory and mechanisms into warehouses, to use AI to better define where and how you should parcel and pack that up and make sure it gets to homes much quicker. It’s doing all the things that I think you and I maybe engage with all the time in our work, it’s leading to reduce costs of transactions. It’s creating more than institutional smoothness. It’s helping them align the strategy, but much more fundamentally, it’s getting more meals into the hands of the people who need it as quickly as we can.

Beena: I’m curious because there are so many similar challenges and problems, how do you, in your role, choose the areas or the problems that you want to focus on solving for?

Vilas: We start with a core conception that’s actually—and I say this often, Beena—even with my history as a technologist and now leading a premier technology-focused philanthropy, my work is very rarely about the tech itself. And so the answer to your question is we don’t actually pick the kinds of solutions. Instead, we say, who are the social entrepreneurs and organizations that are already well positioned to answer the challenge? How do we equip them with the tools of data and AI? And we do that in a couple of ways. I mean, one, as a grant-making institution, of course we make grants and we help them build technical capacity in-house. But I think the real unlock is to say for the first time we’re a philanthropy that also provides direct services around data maturity and AI algorithm development. So, we have in-house a team of data scientists and engineers. And they essentially get the content out to these organizations in real deep partnership to say, let’s help you build data maturity. I feel like the underlying theory of change is with those many, many organizations out there that are led by teams that really understand their problems. We don’t need to go figure out what the solution to their problem is. We need to empower those incredible individuals and groups to use these tools to address the problems they already get.

Beena: So, in essence, you are actually providing a platform to accelerate the solution for some of these biggest problems that we face?

Vilas: That’s exactly right. And I don’t want to take really very much credit for that at all. I think the people in the field know what the work is that needs to be done. We’re maybe providing a resource that helps smooth some of the costs of them getting access to those tools. And it’s really quite a simple proposition. But there are analogs to the private sector as well. I think we’re often seeing that many of the institutions that have really invested five or 10 years in developing these tools are certainly ahead of the game. But for the rest of these industries, there’s plenty of easy on-ramps with the right supporters and advisors that get them to competency very quickly.

Beena: How do you engage with private corporations and companies that want to get involved in and partner with you? What are some of the options that you provide?

Vilas: We have a few mechanisms, but I’ll start with principles. The first principle that we always speak from is, this is not a competitive environment for us. In fact, all of this development that’s happening, and you heard me speak earlier about how we translate what’s happening in supply chain to large nonprofits. I think we have to build a collaborative environment and there’s no throwing technology companies out with the bathwater, if you will allow me a somewhat mangled analogy. So, what we instead do is partner with the C-suite of very large organizations, both directly and on a bilateral basis.

And as you very likely know, through our shared work with the World Economic Forum, with Kay Firth-Butterfield's leadership, we want something called "Gaia," which is really a congregation of private sector, civil society, and government actors coming together to share use cases to really begin to understand what are we learning in our particular silos? How do we lift up best practices, and how do we share them back to the community?

Beena: What do you, in that ideal world ten years from now, what do you think the world would look like if we are able to use AI to the best possible outcomes?

Vilas: Now I love that question. Beena, I like to say I'm a very pragmatic optimist. So much of my time is thinking about that ideal world. And maybe later we'll talk about what we're doing to create it. But in that ideal world, I think a few things are true. And again, they're core and basic principles. One is that individuals really have the ability to not just own the AI or the data solutions that are affecting them, but to co-create them. And that doesn't mean that I envision a world where everybody's a technologist, but rather I think about a world where these technologies are deployed with voice, with allowing individuals to really shape their creation and their use. The second is I think these technologies create really incredible economic opportunities. We focus so much sometimes on the displacement of workers or the idea that we're going to have massive job losses, but really many of the studies and many of the practical implementations have showed that's actually not what happens. Instead, what happens is the creation of new fields and roles that require human talents. And if I may be so bold, I think the things that we actually enjoy doing, moving from manual labor to applying our human creativity and ingenuity, to actually doing work that, as you put it earlier, has purpose. So I think that's a second part of that future.

And the third and the one that I hope for the most is that set of possibilities that even on a 10-year time horizon that feels so short, we can't even quite imagine yet. There are so many things that are popping up. AI-driven art. The way that AI is connecting with this new world of crypto. There are so many things happening. I'm actually curious, Beena, to hear from you. I have a feeling that you might have a few favorite little vignettes of what that world in 10 years might look like. Anything that's particularly compelling to you?

Beena: Yeah, for me, I believe in history and I like to visualize more tangibly. And for me it is very focused on education. Making education accessible to every person in the world, like that remote village in that remote part of the world, where there is no network currently, no 5G, no technology, but being able to provide that level of access to somebody that would never have had it. For me that is very, very important and that's the vision I have. Because I truly believe that education can help us find solutions to problems that we may not currently have the solutions. So, to put it even more tactically, I imagine a world where we are able to find the solution for, say, cancer and it comes from an 80-year-old grandmother from remote Africa who has that solution in her head, but didn't have access, didn't have the background, the education to actually bring that solution to mankind. So, making education accessible and tapping into those solutions, which are there in all our human minds, but bringing it out to the forefront, providing that opportunity. For me, that is that world that I imagine that everybody has equal access.

Vilas: I love that, Beena, and it's such an aspirational and inspirational vision. Let me tell you some of the things we're doing around that. One is the creation of new products and tools that bring education out of the classroom and into children's play and their experiences. So an entire new category of, we can call them whatever you like, robots or companions or anything else. But what's interesting about it is, what we found is the form factor doesn't really matter. It doesn't matter if it's a robot, a young puppy, or a globe. What matters is AI's ability to track a conversation, to understand a child's curiosity, and to dynamically deliver the kind of content that keeps them engaged. And even in very early studies, we're

seeing the level of retention, the level of engagement, the level of satisfaction is sky high compared to what happens when you're one of 30 kids in a classroom, in one of those remote parts of the world you described where you maybe don't even have a textbook per person.

Now, the beauty of AI is the cost of delivering that to that last mile, to that last individual, it's actually pretty nominal. You have to have the physical infrastructure on the devices, but the AI can be evolving all over time. We're seeing such exciting opportunities. Another area is health care. In much the same way that you talked about education as an empowering agent to let people find solutions, we're working with governments across the world to begin to say, if we could use AI in incredibly resource-poor environments, to understand how the intervention of a particular drug, a particular community health worker, a particular non-medical intervention changes health outcomes. And we could really use the power of AI to understand this at massive scale. How can we fundamentally change the trajectory of entire communities in their health journey? These are things that, and I know you and I are probably the type of people that could talk about this for hours. This is what drives us, these incredible opportunities to transform welfare and participation and dignity.

Beena: But now coming back to reality, in today's world we are facing these massive global challenges, from climate disasters and health crises to economic inequities. And it just seems like the challenges are becoming larger. What role do you see AI and technology playing in addressing these challenges? And can you share some examples in addition to the ones that you just shared that we can do today, that companies can do today to help with these global challenges?

Vilas: Absolutely. And again, I said I'm a pragmatic optimist, so let's go to the pragmatic nature of it. And the question you're asking, Beena, is fundamentally why we exist as a philanthropic organization. Because let's face it, if we were simply to say, let's let technologists build technologies and hope with our fingers crossed that we'd solve all of those challenges, that isn't necessarily the best path. So, what it leads us to is we need an intentionality, and it's not simply the civil sector calling for better technologies. It's a broad-based and universal understanding that as we build this tech, we should do it with a purpose. And the purpose should be not just to address the challenges you described, but really to usher in a new frame for how we think about broad-based participation. In order to get there, we're doing a few things.

The first is to really pilot and understand solutions to a few of those challenges you described with our partners. So, around climate change in particular, our approach to that has been to say, how do we bring AI not merely to the science-based solutions that are going to address climate change, but also to support those global advocacy organizations and nonprofits that are protecting the most vulnerable today against the impacts of climate change. And so, two examples I'll share with you very quickly. The first is, we found there is an incredible sophistication in the field of using things like geospatial imagery and applying predictive analytics to it, to understand what areas are maybe most at risk for illegal logging or for poaching or for other things. But you know what, those tools that have been built that are incredibly robust are still sitting pretty far away from where the problem is happening.

And so we partnered with an incredible organization called Digital Democracy. And what they've done is they've built essentially a technology stack that allows all of that incredible AI that's operating up in the cloud and across these organizations to feed into a phone app that can be used by the indigenous protectors of their lands, where they live, as they're sitting there and trying to figure out, "Well, what's likely to happen in my community? And how can I use these very complex tools to give me guidance on where, how, and when I should intervene in order to protect my particular piece of land? Now that's an incredible story, right? Because it's not clear that those communities would have direct access to those tools without intermediary players coming in and saying, "You know what, we just have to build the connective tissue." But with that, we now have empowered sovereign owners and participants in their own communities who can use these tools to advance their own particular and specific local agendas.

Beena: I was thinking as you're speaking that there's almost an opportunity to look at AI tools or technologies that have been built for monetization purpose, or from a private company use perspective and see, is that same technology applicable in a social good context? And is there a way to extend out that product usage for other use cases beyond for what it was built?

Vilas: I think you have put your finger right on it. It is the most incredible opportunity. If you are sitting as the CEO or CTO of a large organization that has incredible AI tools, to ask a pretty fundamental question with very little cost accruing to the organization—how could we open up access to these tools in ways that fundamentally transform an organization's approach to a social challenge? I think we'll see a lot of that happening over the next 10 years. And we're seeing some really early positive approaches to that.

Beena: Because it's kind of where we were with AI and ethics, I would say, two years ago where there's a lot of headlines, there's a lot of talk about it, but what 2020 and 21 has brought to the forefront is it's moving beyond that talk to making it real. And I think we are seeing that emergence of the trend around purpose and social good, which we're right in the midst of, but if you are already investing in building a tool, is there a tweak that can be done? Is there something that can extend its life beyond its current use for profitability to actually social good? And that might be the trend that we are at the cusp of and everything that you're describing.

Vilas: Absolutely. Beena, I look always for the win-win, the thing that creates extra value in the world. The amount of energy and time and money that's gone into developing this first set of tools in the private sector, it's an incredibly heroic act that it's even been done. But if we don't realize its promise to actually create better value in the world, then we've kind of missed an opportunity. I'm with you a hundred percent. I think this is the trend that's happening. It's not to say that conversations about ethics and morality and responsible AI aren't important. Of course they are fundamental. But they have to be balanced with practical action. And so that's really where our eyes are as we look forward is, what would it look like to get to that 10-year vision we talked about over the next three to five years? To build thousands of these kinds of case studies and stories to really make sure that there's nobody on the planet who says, "I don't have access to understand what AI is about." That is where we have to start.

Beena: That is so true. We've definitely, I would say, even five, six years ago, it was all about "How do we get value from this technology for our business?" That extended to, "Okay, how do we also put the guardrails in place so that this technology doesn't go rogue and create challenges?" Now it's more also about, in addition to value creation and putting in the guardrails for it to be ethical and trustworthy, can we extend this technology for social purpose? I personally, as we talk, I am so excited about where we are heading. And I think you are in the midst of it, you are kind of triggering a lot of these conversations. As somebody who has a network of people focused on AI for social good, are there other examples that you can share on what emerging trends are coming out from a social perspective?

Vilas: Super happy to. So I should take one step back and maybe just share with you, Beena, a little bit of what we are as an institution, because we are a bit of a many-headed beast, if you will. There aren't many like us. We are a philanthropic organization, so a foundation with a hundred-year history of what our foundation's done in America and around the world, it's a pretty great story. But this sector that I represent in particular has not always been the most tech forward. And so to be a technology-literate and technology-first organization inside the philanthropy means that we're often asking the question that you just asked me, which is, "What do we need to do to build the infrastructure so that these cases of social good and social collaboration become everyday instead of being exceptional?" So there are a few things we think about. One is, how do we create new partnerships between academia, the private sector, and multinational organizations to actually have inputs that are coming in, not just from the pragmatic experience of companies that are deploying these tools, but also those large organizations that are understanding how local contexts really transform the application of the front line. And how do we make sure that universities are a part of that story? And so, we're beginning

to knit together those kinds of consortium on a regular basis. We're seeing that institutions have a real interest in figuring out how to deploy these. And we're seeing the creation, new incubators and accelerators often out of corporate VC arms, or out of corporate innovation arms, where they're actually encouraging the connection with nonprofits, because not simply as what we just talked about, value extension, but because figuring out how to take their solution and deploy it in a particularly edge case actually creates more resilience inside of their core.

I'm always struck by a story from a few years ago. And it was a pre-AI story, but a very large company that is a well-known brand name to all of us that had distribution networks across very rural parts of low- and middle-income countries, and a set of individuals that wanted to figure out how to distribute vaccines more in those same places. And what they were able to do was actually to say, understanding how to deliver cold chain vaccines into these very remote areas in partnership with this company, actually let that company increase its sales and its penetration in those markets. Now, what's funny, Beena, as you take that story and you bring it forward probably 10 years and we're now looking at partnerships between large drone manufacturers, large logistic supply companies, and vaccine providers. It's almost the same story 10 years later that again is going through the value flywheel. And we're seeing, and I think you probably know this, we're seeing the beginnings of drone-based vaccine delivery in places like Rwanda, in what is, I think, probably the best example of multi-sectoral collaboration you could possibly imagine, and all empowered and enabled by the fact that AI is opening up these new opportunities that who would've ever thought that you could be in a small village in rural Rwanda or rural Uganda, and one day you would see a drone flying in that would bring you a hundred doses of whatever the vaccine that's needed at the moment is. What a great story.

Beena: I love it. That's how we all want to see technology working. On the other side of things, what about AI or technology worries you? And I love it that you're a technologist in this space. So you know how technology works deeply and you are also trying to use it for good. What is it that keeps you up at night, that worries you?

Vilas: The biggest thing is the fact that without the right intentionality, technology just perpetuates systems of inequality. And what I mean by that is if you have a few technologists that are representing a few stakeholders with a large amount of capital, it's easy to build technology that continues to propagate that same dynamic. I often talk about how we have really asked our technologists to go out and build these amazing institutions, massive platforms, all of this stuff. And they have all of the power tools you could ever imagine that you need in order to build these crazy kind of skyscrapers. And then you've got everybody else and we've tasked them with doing things like curing malnutrition or making sure that climate doesn't affect all of us. And we've given them the tools you need to build sandcastles, like plastic shovels and plastic buckets. We've got to change that. And that's the thing that keeps me up at night, Beena, is how do we make sure that technologists, not to say they shouldn't be doing what they do, but are also supporting this other side of the field? And we've got to step into that. And that's CEOs, that's government regulators, that's philanthropy, that's all of us making a united call to say, "There's a vision of a future that we believe in and we need to build technology towards." Let's make sure we do that, too.

Beena: So tactically speaking, how would you encourage these CEOs, board members, companies, to think beyond their organizations to consider that societal impact?

Vilas: So, the first thing is I don't think that we have to do it. I think companies are really coming to this realization themselves. A lot of that comes out of the sustainability long-term planning stakeholder movement that I think has been transformative in business. But the second thing is, even acknowledging that intention is there, I think we do have a shared responsibility to build more on-ramps onto this kind of shared highway that we're talking about. So pragmatically, I think a few things. One is having investors and stockholders ask companies to make sure that they have really smart and transparent

guidelines around the ethical uses of AI. I think that this is not a role or function that should be held inside a technology domain. It should be at the C level and it should be at the board level. And many of the boards that I sit on, we're now engaging with that conversation to say, "How do we make sure that we have consistent values and ethics that translate into our technology stack?" The second is, I think we should lift up and share and champion these stories. Too often, the headlines are about the next terrible thing that the next terrible technology company did. What about all of the wonderful things that the heartland of America and across the world, the backbone of industry of so many of these different sectors are doing to use these tools to actually deliver social outcomes? I think we should create spaces and really recognize them for the work they're doing.

Beena: We have to move beyond those clickbait headlines, which are usually anchored on fear to actually driving that positivity. And I'm certainly seeing a lot of signs of that happening both in the private enterprises, but also in general, among technologists. More and more are getting interested in this and are trying to contribute. So if people want to engage with the work that you're doing, what's the best way for them to learn more and engage with you, Vilas?

Vilas: What a wonderful question. Thank you, Beena. So a few things. One is, certainly please engage with us. Of course, we have a website and social media, and we'd love to hear these incredible stories and see how we can support. As a grant-making institution, we're also always just looking for great projects that we can provide some capital and support to. But maybe more kind of macro and more important is the kinds of conversations, Beena, that you lead, that so many others lead across the world, that are really beginning to tie these threads together. And what we need is more participation. We need to make sure that people from places that maybe, and I grew up in a place like this, but places where AI feels still like a pretty faraway construct. We need to reduce that distance to knowledge. And we need to inspire people to really think about the positive value of what's possible here, but also to understand that they have a role in shaping that future, that we all have that role. And I think that's work that we can all do together.

Beena: Vilas, that is so inspiring. Thank you for all the amazing work that you do. I know you are a force to reckon with, you are out there informing, making people aware of the positive things that we can do with technology and AI. How can people stay connected with you and follow all the amazing work that you're doing?

Vilas: You're really kind, Beena. Certainly, the Patrick J. McGovern Foundation, please find us on all the digital channels you can imagine. My name is Vilas Dhar, that's my handle across all of these platforms as well. Would love to connect, would love to hear from your viewers, and would love to start new conversations about what we can do together.

Beena: Vilas, thanks again for being with us on the show. And I want to thank our audience for tuning in to AI Ignition. Be sure to stay connected with the Deloitte AI Institute for more such amazing conversations.

Vilas: Thank you, Beena.