

Between two millennia — II

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While far from creating a world culture, trade increasingly moved ideas. Scandinavians carried the notion of a popular assembly to present-day Russia which, however, did not last there. The chair which was commonplace in China then has, however, become a permanent fixture everywhere. Bean cultivation spread in North America. The slave trade flourished and the Slavs and Africans were major sources. All in all, from what has been stated above, it will be evident that the first years of this millennium were not really the "Dark Ages" as they are made out to be.

Let us now turn to the future and find out what are speculations and predictions for the first years of the next millennium. Here are some of the predictions that are talked about seriously these days.

Information Technology: This technology will evolve as several earlier technology-based revolutions have evolved over the past five hundred years since Gutenberg's printing revolution around 1455. In particular the assumption is that the Information Revolution will be like the Industrial Revolution of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and will generate such tremendous speed in all aspects of our lives, including production, processing and various transactions that many will find difficult to cope with. As the saying goes, a billion hours ago human life appeared on the earth. A billion minutes ago

Christianity emerged. A billion Coca Colas ago was yesterday morning.

E-commerce: As a product of information technology and the Internet, commerce through the Internet will have explosive growth worldwide. It will eventually be the major worldwide distribution and communication channel replacing conventional mediums of trade and printed journals and newspapers. This process has already started and will have exponential growth in the coming years. In the new mental geography created by the railroads, humanity mastered distance. However, in the current mental geography of E-commerce, distance has been eliminated. There is only one economy and one market. The competition will no longer be local, it will be global without any national boundaries.

Agricultural technology: Bio-technology in this field will help farmers to produce more by developing new crop varieties that are drought-tolerant, resistant to insects and weeds and able to capture nitrogen from air. Bio-technology will also enable food farmers to produce more nutritious plants by increasing Vitamin A, iron and other nutrients in edible portions of plants. Once this happens food production will increase to meet the expanding needs of larger populations particularly in developing countries.

Nano-technology: The science of developing tools and machineries

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as small as one molecule will grow, having as big an impact on our lives as transistors and chips did in the past forty years.

The human genome revolution: This revolution has just begun. Francis Crick, the Nobel Prize winning coordinator of DNA, believes it will take a century of research to understand and supply all the potential breakthroughs this knowledge makes possible. Other scientists predict that by 2025 computers will not only have brains but also feelings and emotions replacing biological human beings by virtual beings.

Measurement of human brains: New instruments will make possible new measurements of human brains proving that mental health parity is essential to any health care programme and offering new opportunities to cure schizophrenia, bi-polar disease, Alzheimer's disease and many other diseases now challenging cure and prevention.

Genetic therapy: Injecting healthy genes into the healthy human body to replace damaged or defective ones would revolutionise medicine by enabling doctors to attack the causes of diseases such as cancer and cystic fibrosis, rather than just the symptoms.

Scourge of war: Mankind will continue to be afflicted with the scourge of war to the point of obliteration of the human race and will still be far off from "parliament of

men and federation of mankind".

Future of capitalism: Capitalism as an economic system will survive in European countries and Japan where their leaders have addressed the difficulties arising out of the inexorable logic of its accumulation. By using the state and government in various ways that they have, without breaking the system itself, they have tried to manage the myriad problems of capitalism viz. helplessness against the internationalisation of capital, its propensity to inflation, its extreme social and ecological vulnerability to technological disruption, its extreme disparity of income, etc.

But the United States, where the winner takes all leaving nothing for the loser and where the role of state and government is being systematically denigrated, may continue it against the tide that has widened and deepened the social underpinnings of most advanced European capitalism.

Future of democracy: Democracy will survive and spread further to many countries particularly developing ones. But it will no longer be a so-called representative one merely electing people at frequent intervals to rule the country in which government is controlled by the elite. Instead, it will be a more participatory democracy at grassroots levels giving opportunities to larger numbers of people to govern themselves.

Challenges of Philosophy and

science: Like philosopher Avicenna, mankind will continue to grapple with the task of reconciling rationality of science with the faith of religion, equating the rational philosophy of the ancient Greeks with the faith in something eternal transcending time and space and helplessly looking for, as it is now, the origin of the universe, its shape, its age and its universality and the meaning of human life. Mankind will continue to roam in the realm of absolutes still groping to find out The Absolute. Scientists and philosophers have found out answers to many 'whats' and 'hows' in this millennium. But in the next millennium they will be still trying to find out answers to 'whys' including what life is here for.

What is the morale of the above discussion? It simply is that as we embark on the new millennium, we should approach life with a sense of humility and with a clear grasp of what the Algerian-born French writer Albert Camus had said: "There is no absolute, there are only absolutes". As we are gathering knowledge we are becoming painfully aware of the larger scope of our ignorance. And in this context it will perhaps not be out of place to mention what I observed in my book 'Japan: Centrepiece of the World' ten years ago — "we are not owners of the planet, we are only the custodians having obligations not only to the past but also to the future."

Concluded