

# A discordant century

IN spite of all the material progress in this modern twentieth century, mankind has not learnt to lessen strife and live together, to improve civilisation at the lowest level of daily living — the poverty level defined by the economists gripping two thirds of the world's 600 billion souls (there is now new unit: the HR Index).

For the affluent in the first world, the peak period of the rise appears to have flattened, and the curve is on the downward trend, to the dismay of the West, and the societies, so laboriously built up, are feeling the effects of marginalisation. Meanwhile, the communities living elsewhere at the fringe see some visions of fringe benefits.

The divergent communities go on for one another, throats than the clasping of the hands, or to sit together side by side, not face to face. Man has messed up his life and made it more complex, and the simple joys now seem distanced and complicated. Even meagre capitals and assets cannot be maintained properly. Approaches and institutions are breaking up, bringing in disintegration, disharmony, and discontent, giving rise to discipline, defiance, terrorism and violence. New goals create new problems.

Change means renewal (of life's basic and intimate processes), but now the processing itself has been made more complex, as the basic liberties are felt by more people with more sensitivity and urgency.

Mankind has taken a giant stride in material progress but has not learnt to lessen strife and live together, writes A M M Aabad as he takes a critical look at the 20th century

Information increases awareness, and clarifies the goals at the bottom of the scale, putting more thrust in the will of the poor majority against the dominant minority at the top.

The world's rich help the poor, but cannot read the poor, even in this information age — the illiteracy of the affluent. This economic illiteracy has to be addressed with more than cosmetic depth. Money cannot provide the basis of the solution — the human touch has to permeate.

The mid-century was the harbinger of many changes; starting with six years of World War II. The 1970s revealed the first fruits of rehabilitation; with Japan showing the way, with the capture of the world's markets with new-technology products, backed by a disciplined society bent on showing the world they had the inner power to recover, in spite of microscopic attempts with atomic particles.

Two historical landmarks were the end of the British Raj in India, creating Pakistan; and the establishment of the communist regime in China, after severe blood-shedding for more than a decade. The evaluation is taking place at the end of the century, with political insta-

bility ruling the four capitals. The verdict may be long and cruel.

The USSR socialism collapsed after a generation, unable to stop the economic bleeding of the cold war rearmament. Today the after effects of the transition to 'democracy' can be seen clearly in the continued teething troubles of Moscow. Grogny has been twice revisited, in more than a century of conflict. Moscow has not forgotten in the drubbing in Afghanistan.

The European Muslims had to pay for the 600 years of rule of the Ottoman empire in the Balkans, central and eastern Europe. Italy had natural protection from the seas on three sides. The reunification of Germany is another landmark. Turkey has learnt a religious lesson: trying to be Europeanised, and is being shunned today by the EU. The divide and rule Western policy continues in the ME and the Arab nations; the Palestine conflict is refusing to melt away after the suffering by two generations. The Sheikdoms continue, blithely ignoring the western prescription of materialistic capitalism (consumerism and the burnt-out which follows the genocide on mother nature; otherwise nick-

named the Greenhouse Effect).

The penultimate decade of the twentieth century is full of changes (cleansing process of the cosmos?). Pakistan lasted for one generation, and the newly-created Bangladesh is beset with severe teething problems. The godless bastion of Burma (Myanmar) is under the hawk's vision, based in a nearby country. Religion has entered politics in the largest democracy of the world; and the world's largest Muslim country is just beginning to feel the after shocks of two enforced regimes lasting three decades each (too long is too much for harmonious transition of the process of growing up of the state called citizenship).

It looks like that political ideology is seeking a replacement, its form and shape are nebulous at present, but the trends are looming clear. There is no time to settle down to the old ways of life of the good old days. Sticking to pre-conceived notions of power and governance may no longer pay dividends. The political investment climate is changing.

What is the role of the politicians in the 21st century? Let them respond to the question themselves.

# Newspaper nerves over shots across the bows

As a general election looms large, domestic and foreign critics are accusing the government of high-handedness in its dealings with the press. The media's own weakness in the face of pressure has also been lambasted. The government argues that restraint is required in an ethnically polarised society. **Mangai Balasegaram** writes from Kuala Lumpur on a clash over controls

WHEN Canadian journalist Murray Hiebert wrote about the growing number of defamation lawsuits in Malaysia in an article titled *See You In Court*, he never expected to find himself dragged into a protracted two-year legal battle.

Nor did he expect to spend weeks in a Malaysian prison with no privacy — even in the toilet — and no possessions aside from a prison-issue toothbrush and a grey cap. But his case shows just how fleeting freedom of the press can be in countries where strong government legislation exists — and is used — on the media.

The former Malaysia bureau chief of the weekly *Far Eastern Economic Review* was released in mid-October at the end of six weeks in jail for contempt of court after losing an appeal against a 1997 conviction.

In ruling that Hiebert's article had "scandalised" the court, the judge noted that journalists had been criticising the judiciary for too long.

Hiebert's article discussed the merits of a \$2.4 million lawsuit filed by the wife of an Appeal Court judge against her 17-year-old son's private school, which had dropped him from the school debating team.

This is a shot across the bow for journalists in Malaysia, observed 50-year-old Hiebert. "I just wrote about a debating team for Pete's sake."

Hiebert is the first journalist to be jailed in Malaysia — and in a Commonwealth country — for contempt. He also had his passport impounded for more than two years pending the appeal.

"It's a shocking and traumatic thing to lose your freedom — to go from being as free as a bird to being locked up in a cage," he said. "Freedom of the press and freedom of speech are more precious to me now. I took it for granted before."

His highly publicised case drew sharp criticism internationally. The New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists said it might be a "warning" to journalists, while United States President Bill Clinton raised Hiebert's case during a meeting of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation in New Zealand in September.

Murray's time in prison serves to remind us how press freedom in Malaysia is similarly behind bars, says former opposition politician Lim Guan Eng, who was released from jail in August after serving a year for sedition.

Lim's "crime" was questioning the attorney-general's handling of a statutory rape case involving a 15-year-old schoolgirl and a leading politician, a close ally of Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

The Committee to Protect Journalists calls Mahathir one of the world's top 10 "enemies of the press" — a distinction he shares with leaders of Yugoslavia, China, Cuba, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Tunisia, Peru, Ukraine and Egypt.

Lim criticises the region's journalists for failing to speak

out against Hiebert's sentence.

When journalists are being sent to jail for writing the truth, it's clear that press freedom has taken a slide back," he notes.

Elizabeth Wong, coordinator of local human rights group Suaram, agrees: "Most of the region's press have made a lot of progress. Many editors in Thai newspapers were former student leaders in the 1970s and have brought their politics with them. But our press seems to have taken a step backwards."

Malaysian newspapers, largely linked to political parties in the ruling coalition, give widespread and generally uncritical coverage of the government, yet only selective coverage of the opposition.

Newspapers require an annual licence to print. The fear of having licences revoked, which occurred in 1987 when the government shut down several newspapers, has led to much self-censorship.

"Self-censorship is practised on such an art that the official censors couldn't do a better job," Lim claims.

Malaysia's restrictive laws on freedom of speech were criticised in a damning UN report released last February. UN special rapporteur Abid Hussain said he was "deeply concerned" at the extent that the Internal Security Act, the Sedition Act and the Printing and Presses and Publication Act were used to repress expression and curb peaceful assembly. Hundreds of people have been arrested in the past year at public demonstrations that followed the imprisonment of former deputy premier Anwar Ibrahim.

"The government believes this control is necessary and a runaway media is dangerous," Suaram's Wong said. "They believe that we need to give up certain freedoms in order to achieve economic development."

The UN report also said that "specific instructions" had been given to limit negative reports. "These laws hang like a Sword of Damocles over journalists," warns local journalist K C Lau. "I bear this in mind whenever I write; it curbs my freedom to express myself."

But Lau says the profession is also suffering a crisis, with a general malaise and lack of passion: "This is a reflection of society in general. We're pushed against the wall and we don't know how to fight back."

Local journalists presented a 581-name petition to the government on World Press Freedom Day calling for the repeal of the restrictive laws so the media could "regain credibility" in the public eye.

Mahathir and the former prime minister of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew (now senior minister), have long engaged in a vigorous campaign to promote "Asian values" — Western notions of democracy and human rights. Their argument is that national interest must precede individual interests and respect must be given to elders — or leaders.

Malaysia and Singapore were driving forces behind the 1993 Bangkok declaration, which opposed using human

## Journalists make news

22 journalists have been killed this year:

- Sierra Leone 9 Indonesia 2 Lebanon 1
- Yugoslavia 6 Nigeria 2
- Colombia 2



rights as a means of international pressure and admonished the UN conference on human rights in Vienna.

"I completely reject the Asian values theory," Lim says. "A critical press is necessary for more equitable development and for transparency and accountability. A free press can apply pressure on the government to overcome any weaknesses."

He adds that Singapore could not be cited as an example in

this case, noting: "It's a small country with a reasonably clean administration."

"Asian values do call for respect of elders but that doesn't mean we should blindly respect the authorities," Lim argues. "In the Confucian system, the Emperor must also fulfil his obligations. Otherwise, he loses the divine right to rule."

The author is a Malaysian freelance journalist based in Kuala Lumpur.

# Reality of a virtual world

SOME call it "the meeting place of the new millennium", some call it "the place to be when there's nothing else to do", some make it their life and love, some go there just to find Ms. or Mr. Right while others go there just to have fun and to fool around. There is no room for reality in it. Everything is either made up or just plainly a figment of the imagination — it is the virtual world. It is Internet Relay Chat (better known as IRC), a software for chatting which has made quite an impact on the new generation Bangladeshis.

IRC is a programme which is used world-wide and thousands of people all around the world logs into it to meet up with their friends and family or simply to make new friends (and family). IRC made its inception in this country quite a while ago, when it was first introduced in the country, but it has never been as popular as it is now.

Four or five years back, a group of innovative young people opened up their own channel and called it #Bangladesh (# means channel). The three founders (Cyber King, Cooltalk and another person) and their friends (who were made the operators) invited more and more users to popularise their channel and as users increased in number, so did the interaction between Bangladeshis home and abroad. This seemed positive and light-hearted. But trouble began when they all became too serious about it. Instead of being an enhancer of fun and enjoyment, it turned into a battlefield. The founder operators had problems within themselves, and one fine day, two of them changed the channel password and threw the third person (Cooltalk) out. They were real friends, they practically grew up together but it did not matter anymore, not to them. The power they had as channel founders (which includes giving operator status to users, kicking and banning users and maintaining the code of conduct) had brainwashed them and resulted in the break-up of a life-long friendship. The third

The Bangladeshi 'chatting' scene has all the flavours of real life, but it is unreal, and very few people understand that, writes Nadine Murshid

person, then, opened up his own channel and called it #Dhaka, which is quite popular now. He still (after years since the 'incident') wants his channel back, and cannot forgive or forget what his so-called friends did to him.

On the Bangladeshi chatting scene, there is yet another channel, #Bangladeshnet, founded by two of the operators of #Bangladesh. Politics raised its ugly head yet again, and one of the two gentlemen gave away the channel to a girl, whom he calls his sister. The other person, who calls himself Odhbbut, did not approve; in fact, he was livid, because his channel was taken away from him. The girl had changed the password of the channel and there was no way she was going to tell him what it was, and that gave rise to a major altercation between Odhbbut and Kayser (the other founder who gave the channel away) where the former stated that "it is my life and you took it away from me" or words to that effect. On the other hand, when Kayser made #Bangladeshnet, he was "deposed" (removed from operator status) in #Bangladesh for being a *rajakar*!! The #Bangladesh operators treat #Bangladesh as their own country and if anyone opens another channel or even chats in another channel, they term them as *rajakars*!! Of course, this cannot be generalised. Everyone isn't the same, but the founder and some of the 'sops' (super operators) think that way, and that's what counts because they rule that channel. Incidentally, the girl to whom #Bangladeshnet was given away is an ex-operator of #Bangladesh as well, who does not have a single good thing to say about her previous 'bosses'. While most of the sops were rude to her only because she had a life other than IRC, some of

the 'aops' (auto operators) kicked her because "they felt like it". (Kicking in IRC means putting a person out of the channel. When that person is kicked away, but otherwise, that person can go right in.) She, of course, made all that very clear to everyone as she spoke on the main and she opposed the weird rules set by the founders as well as the abasement of the users by operators, and therefore, she too was de-oped.

So this is the scenario of the channels and how they came into existence. Now let's get to know the types of people that can be found there. The first category is that of 'too cool' guys who advertise themselves. Most read: "Anyone looking for a tall, dark, handsome guy with lots of money and power?? Please message me", or "Any girls above 30? Then I have found your man". I have never tried doing so (sending them messages), so I really don't know what they say to you in private, but whatever they say can't be what you want to hear and are most likely to be what you don't want to hear (isn't that the same thing?). Then there are the ones who play mind games and that does not apply to the male population only. There are people who actually enjoy making people falling in love with them (they are smooth talkers, they tell me, and are extremely charming) and when they are done and when the victim is "in love", they ditch them. Odhbbut and Corrina are two such persons, who are masters of this game, and the only thing I can say about them is, they are perfectly suitable for one another. They say, birds of the same feathers flock together. If that has any truth to it, we'll see the two of them happily married sometime in the future? The other category (actually

this should have been the first category) is that of the operators and 'bots' (which are programmed software which has to be hosted by a server. These bots can be programmed to kick and ban if users swear and use inappropriate words). They are of supreme power and have the right to throw people out and keep them out if he/she so wishes. #Bangladesh, being a little less progressive, and a little more chauvinistic, has no female operators while #Bangladeshnet's founder is of the so-called fairer sex and #Dhaka has quite a few operators who are girls. The bots are unisex... lol (laughs out loud). Operators are divided into sops and aops, with sops having more power (e.g. they can give aop status to a user) than aops (the aops can only restrict users, change the topic - though not in #Bangladesh, and moderate the channel which means normal users cannot 'talk' on the main when the channel is 'moderated' only ops and VIP chatters can).

Another category is that of users who do not care about the channels or the other users and go there just for the fun of it. They are the ones who are in the best position because they seriously have fun by harassing the ops, flooding the channels with excessive 'typing', saying whatever they feel like, to whoever they feel like and not letting a simple thing like a 'ban' getting to them. They are the ones who keep the operators busy, so it can be said that the operators exist because of such users!

This is what the Bangladeshi virtual world is like having all the ingredients of real life including politics, feelings, emotions, patriots, *rajakars*, fundamentalists and anything else one can name; the only difference is that, at the end of the day, it means nothing, nothing at all.

# The Frankenstein factor

A passionate debate is raging over the use of genetically modified crops into which foreign genes are introduced to make them resistant to such things as pests and adverse weather conditions. So far the main concern has been human health, but unless more research is carried out before these crops are used, the real victim could be the global environment, writes **Claude Martin** from Gland, Switzerland

THROUGHOUT history, one of the strongest forces driving the development of human society has been concern for health. Many fundamental scientific and technological advances have occurred as a result of the desire to control or eradicate disease and to improve the quality and duration of our lives. In the 20th century, a huge international industry has grown up dedicated to the promotion and achievement of good health and prolonged fitness. It covers everything from drugs and medical technology to our lifestyle habits and the food we eat.

Most recently, what has become almost an obsession with health has led to renewed interest in traditional medicine and in the potential of biological

treasures such as those contained in tropical forests, which harbour a vast array of plant species with possible medicinal value.

At the same time, however, the health industry and public expectations have combined to produce new branches of science based on interference with the fundamental materials of life. The study of genetics, of course, is not new, but what is different about it now is the ability of scientists to manipulate genetic material easily for the production of drugs.

But the science of genetic engineering has also responded to the other great current theory on health, which concerns diet. The race is on to create almost unlimited quantities of what is considered to be good, healthy and affordable food. Here,

though, genetic manipulation has run into trouble. Fears are growing that genetically modified organisms, or GMOs, will produce food that is itself dangerous to health.

We have been eating plants and animals which have been produced with the help of man for centuries. Plant and animal breeders have always mixed and matched genetic material to create the species of vegetables, fruit, cattle and so on that we take for granted. Those modifications, though, were carried out among closely related species through selection processes using cross-pollination and cross-fertilisation. What is new about today's genetically modified foods is that we can cross species barriers, so that in order to achieve the results we want we can take genes from, say, a fish, and place them in an animal.

If that sounds far-fetched, it is not. The gene that protects a flounder from extreme cold has been introduced into the make-up of tomato plants so that they will continue to flourish in adverse weather. That may help to ensure ready supplies of tomatoes but the question is, what effect might the foreign gene have on the people who eat them?

WWF believes that is not enough. Certainly people should be able to identify products containing the now widely used genetically modified soy and other GMOs, but the broader environmental threat demands much stronger action.

Now that such risks are beginning to be understood, a fierce international debate has begun over GMOs. Some countries, such as Switzerland, are demanding clear labelling of foods containing genetically modified material so that worried consumers can avoid them. WWF believes that is not enough. Certainly people should be able to identify products containing the now widely used genetically modified soy and other GMOs, but the broader environmental threat demands much stronger action. WWF is calling for a moratorium on the use or release of GMOs until their potential impact on the general environment has been carefully re-

# Zing back in Silicon Valley

Recent decision on tax concession by the Karnataka state government has given rise to expectations of a rosy future for India's information technology (IT) industry, writes **Imran Qureshi** from Bangalore

THE signals of an attitudinal change being sent out by new Karnataka Chief Minister S.M. Krishna have put the zing back into the information technology (IT) industry in Bangalore, dubbed India's Silicon Valley.

More than Krishna's announcements of tax concessions to the industry at the inauguration of Asia's biggest IT show, BangaloreIT.Com, it is his plans for more IT penetration in administration, rural areas and high schools that caught the imagination of the industry captains.

"It is clearly a positive attitude. This is a definite change. The concessions will help the industry. Business that was going to other states because of lower taxes will start coming into Bangalore." Som Mittal, CEO and president of Digital Equipment India, told India Abroad News Service. "But it is his other plans which will, in the long run, help the industry."

The concessions covering sales tax and entry tax account for just Rs. 270 million (\$6.2 million). "This figure might look small. But, the import of it is that we will be able to retain companies like Wipro and others from setting up units in places like Pondicherry because of a favourable tax regime," a senior state government official said.

Companies like IBM have considered tax concessions in Pondicherry as an important ingredient for moving out of Bangalore, though the major consideration was a functional warehouse in the Union Territory. "More importantly, tax concessions send a signal for investments," said the official.

However, it is the overall attitude that appears to have brought back the enthusiasm for Bangalore, described as the "cornerstone of India's IT triangle of three states —

Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu) by the U.S. Ambassador to India, Richard Celeste.

The Chief Minister personally took down voluminous notes during our discussions with him last week. And he was fair enough to acknowledge that today's announcements were "based on that meeting with industry representatives," said an industry captain.

Among Krishna's well-received plans are the setting up of cyber parks in Mysore, Hubli and Mangalore, establishing a single window for all clearances by bringing four departments under an IT secretariat, establishing a communication backbone to cover rural administrative units, launching a bilingual internet portal to open business opportunities for rural products and setting up a task force headed by Infosys chairman N.R. Narayan Murthy.

But his announcement of setting up software certification systems to service software companies located all over Asia by February 2000 received the biggest applause. Karnataka

has teamed up with Indian Institute of Science (IISc) and LG Soft, India, under an agreement with Carnegie Mellon University to provide the highly valued CMM-SEI certification.

To further back up the change in attitude was Krishna's brutally frank talk at the national seminar on e-governance. He did not mince words in saying that the attitude of the government should be to look beyond funding of hardware and software so as to change the feudal mindset which still viewed right to information with great suspicion.

"If our colleagues talk of attitudinal change, we are talking of this clear direction in which he (Krishna) has started off. He wants e-governance, an irreversible process that will really bring governance in the public domain. And he wants to provide participation in the bottom up rather than the top down approach," said industry sources.

"Overall, the government is coming through as being sincere for the development of the state in general and IT in particular," said Nandan Nilekani, managing director and CEO of Infosys.

But some want to wait and watch before singing praises. "Agreed that there is a change in attitude. But let us wait and see how the implementation takes place. If the attitudinal change finds expression in execution of ideas, it is good for the industry because there is no place better for it than Bangalore," said a software company executive.

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The same applies to genetically modified crops such as soy, corn, maize, rape and potatoes which have been developed by conglomerates like Monsanto and Novartis, chemical firms which now prefer to describe themselves as "life science companies".

All this is worrying enough, to the extent that agricultural GMOs have been dubbed "Frankenstein foods". But there are wider implications that concern us at WWF — effects that could radically alter the biological structure of the entire planet.

An example of what can happen when GM crops are introduced was reported last month in the USA. Pollen from corn into which a toxin called Bt had been genetically engineered killed nearly half the monarch butterfly caterpillars fed on it in a test at Cornell University. The really worrying point of this is that the test was carried out only after the Bt gene had been added to almost a quarter of the US corn crop.

Imagine the possible results if GMOs were widely used. Cross-pollination could transfer the foreign genes to other plants, with the result that

searched and evaluated - and proper safeguards have been established. Moreover, it is vital that the implications for the food chain and the natural environment are openly communicated to the public so that informed choices can be made. Nor should control of genetic technology be left to scientists and commercial organisations; there must be official regulation through independent statutory bodies with the power to ban future GMO releases until agreed standards have been met.

With the prospect of a global food crisis looming, it may be that industry claims for the capacity of GMOs to ensure abundant supplies will eventually be justified. But until the companies come clean about the dangers and clearly demonstrate the benefits, and unless they respond to growing concern by dropping their commercially-inspired opposition to independent research and proper regulation, there is no case for pursuing a course that could end in more harm than good.