

# Is it really a time to celebrate?

For the deprived and down-trodden millions across the world, there is no meaning to the advent of a new year or a century or a millennium. It's the age-old struggle for survival for them. Future holds no promise. Still, some brace for tomorrow, a tomorrow that never comes, writes Rafiqul Islam

FOR some it began long ago, for many it will start precisely when it is supposed to start, while for the vast majority of mankind and for all of every life form on earth - what is it in anyway? For them it never had any inherent significance or meaning.

When the dial-hands of timepieces cross the 12 o'clock mark at midnight on December 31, 1999, for many it will be not merely the beginning of a new year, but also of a new century and a new millennium - all three in one instant. A very rare occasion indeed, for a very few of us make a century of life and no-one ever makes a life of one thousand years. The actual new century and the new millennium do not begin until past midnight, December 31, 2000. Never mind, time and the machines to measure it are our creations, and we want occasions to celebrate - a year in advance is a god-sent gift for the weary ones who aren't so sure to live up to the precise moment on December 31 in the year 2000. Uncertainty of life-span makes us go by the modified theory of 'better early than never' since everyone realises that late may mean 'never'. The lucky ones can celebrate it again in the year 2000. Why not? Celebrating an event in advance or later is neither on the negative list in the holy books nor restricted by science, and not at all bad for health (may, in fact, be beneficial).

What after all is a new year, century or a millennium? It's all related to time which is an adaptation of the humans and is measured surprisingly on entirely different math-basis - seconds and minutes on a 60 math-base, day and week on base-seven and a year on base-12 math (similar to measurement of distances i. e. inches). And, the century as well as the millennium is on the conventional decimal base. Why everything relating to time has not been built on a uniform math-base (say 7, 12, 60 or the decimal) is a different story.

Life's cycle went on unhindered even when there were no time-keeping devices and calendars. The fact that of this planet's nearly four billion years only few hundreds saw the clocks and calendars does not diminish its importance to the modern man who is somehow totally chained to its own creation - time. But, our ancestors, the Homo erectus - who had added to the mystery and beauty of planet earth nearly 300,000 years ago - were bound to the sun in their routine chores of life. To them the appearance of the sun meant time to work and its disappearance - the night-fall - meant a period of rest, hiding into shelters against harmful adversaries (some real, some imaginary).

Time essentially serves humans. To all other life forms it isn't there. But does life, which has been defined by scientists as a "self-sustaining chemical system with inherent capability of undergoing evolution" means only this much. That would imply that time serves a chemical system confined in the body - differently built for each species. Have we, humans, with our inherent capability of adjusting through evolutionary changes created time, in base units, and linked it to our life cycles? That evolutionary process over the past millions of years has helped man to understand to some extent, about its own self and attain great mastery over nature (though man doesn't have control over many of nature's awesome powers, forces and behaviour). But beyond these that make surviving easier we haven't yet been able to find answers to many questions like: our behaviour with other homo sapiens, our relationship with other life form, our position in the cosmos (are we alone?) and - in the first place - why are we here in this planet and not elsewhere?

Along with these a very pertinent question comes to the mind: what was there for serving any life form when there was nothing called time? Conversely, what happens to time (or what and whose purpose would it serve) once all chemical-systems in various species cease to function with this planet's merger in the cosmic through total disintegration? Those, however, aren't so vital for the modern man who yearns for every conceivable occasion to celebrate.

What are the celebrations and revelry all about? Expectation! That the millennium and the century we are carving out from the future will change every thing in our lives - ending our sufferings and sorrows.

What do we demand from the future that the past didn't give us? What are our expectations and based on what? For whom will the new century be? How did the entire past differ from the first day of the 1st century and the 1st millennium, how did it differ from the last day of that century or the millennium? How did the first day of the 2nd millennium and each subsequent century differ from the previous ones? What are the differences between January 1, 1901 - when this century began - and December 31, 1999 (one year short and still no harm celebrating century-end)? Are we celebrating a century well spent or the eagerly awaited arrival of a new century? What were our achievements and failures in the past that we think can be taken care of in the future. From here where shall we be at the beginning of the 4th millennium?

Well, broadly, the past has seen success and failure - equally astounding, glaring and, in some cases, mind-boggling.

The single most miraculous achievement and success of man has probably been invention of vocabulary and language to communicate with each other. Invention of alphabets and numbers and the mastery of their use - revolutionised through invention of the printing press - were all that was needed to store and disseminate information and knowledge at unimaginable speed to millions of people all over the world. The past, the present and the future of the planet are not to be lost ever. Knowledge of one generation could be preserved for generations to come.

Next came invention of stone tools. Since the human body didn't have adequate defence capability to face an attack from other animals, this single invention followed by newer and better tools of all sorts coming hot on their heels helped man overcome these deficiencies. This came invention of fire, the wheel. From that stage on, man's conquest of the planet was unstoppable.

At a much later stage invention of vaccines and antibiotics gave men the basic tools to fight diseases and lead healthy life, while the invention of power (fuel- and electricity-based) brought about total revolution needed for men to be poised for the giant leap forward - totally eliminating the risk of faltering on its expedition for the conquest of this planet and the world beyond. Between the stone-tools, fire and language, and today's spacecraft from which we look at ourselves from deep within the space - millions of inventions and discoveries bear testimony to the truth that whether or not there are other intelligent beings in the universe, man's position is unique, unique and unparalleled. Behind these achievements of immeasurable dimension are the hard work, toil and sacrifices over a period of 300 millennium, of billions of our ancestors as well as of writers, thinkers, planners, explorers, researchers and scientists of the modern age. But, the major breakthrough was made by man only in the 19th and the 20th century, more specifically in the second half of the 20th century - a mere fraction of the 300 - as if in the twinkling of the eye.

During that period, man has made great strides in other fields as well. He has successfully organised himself in societies and communities, nations have been formed and the concept of rule of law and democracy has been deeply rooted in much of the human society. International co-operation in various fields has brought nations and the people closer to each other to the mutual benefit of all. Gender equality and equal rights for all has been internationally recognised and accepted. War, a necessary evil for now, has been transformed more into a high-performance art or game (call it by any name), with conventions detailing do's and don'ts. In trade and commerce and in the field of economic co-operation - with some hurdles still to cross - it is one of the greatest success stories of human societies. The list of achievements and the stories of human-success is too huge for any person only to study - even if he spends over a hundred years in that.

So far, so good!

The picture of a human child, a six- or a seven-year old, on a desolate wasteland in central Africa is vivid in our memories. But for a future waiting nearby and a photographer, she was alone. Her parents had perished in their long trek away from home in search of food. Her siblings had also dropped en route - unable to drag the body any further. She had travelled for the extra day and could move no further. Emaciated beyond recognition, the child's frail body revealed all the bones wrapped in pale skin. The photographer stood between her and death, between her and the hungry, huge vulture. On a world-wide basis food is aplenty. In fact, no one on earth would go hungry if only callous waste of food could be stopped. But who would take lead in that direction when some of the leaders and planners have gone to the extent of using food as a weapon of war. So, when there is lavish excess (and misuse) of food by millions of people, there is nothing for such lonely children staggering alone in a world that appears so unknown, strange, apathetic and heartless to the tragic plight of its own species. Such avoidable tragedies have struck man in the past in many countries, is taking its toll now and this is likely to remain the scenario for a long time to come. Leaders in the world's capitals and diplomats in the United Nations are busy in their routine (I) activities that are simply too grandiose for people to make much sense of when facing starvation and savage conflicts or war. Leaders and diplomats deliberate on such issues as

whether or not to send help and, if at all, how to send it. By the time they reach some decision so many perish, and no one is to be blamed for it! There are other important agenda, too. Decisions have to be taken on imposing sanctions against a government that has violated something of the UN Charter (although, in the end, it's the common men, and not the rulers, who pay the price). Then, of course, other issues: declaring the year or decade - of protecting the environment; of ensuring pure drinking water supply to all; of the mother, father, child; decade of women; (along with that they discuss equally important issues of protecting various species facing extinction and on even how to rescue a whale that got struck on a sea beach somewhere).

In addition to the century and the millennium they need more issues and occasions to celebrate. Discussions, deliberations and adopting resolutions - that's their job and they are in no hurry or pressed for time as people in the line of fire or living through starvation are. The super powers squabble over cutting down a few nuclear weapons. (As if even one per cent of whatever would be left operational is not good enough to destroy everything on this planet - hundreds times over. We had harnessed the power of the atom, hoping it would serve mankind. It does and, unfortunately at the same time, keeps mankind tethering on the brink of total obliteration.)

Ironically, the very success of the human race in survival and proliferation is at the very roots of its own misfortune as it probably gives all human beings a strange feeling of relief and comfort that they would never face extinction. So, one, two, millions of dead don't matter when there still are billions elsewhere and more on way to enter the stage of life. The feeling of vulnerability that united man against other animals when they first started their journey in this planet is now totally forgotten and lost. This is probably the greatest, and perhaps irreversible, tragedy for mankind.

How much are politics and modern day economic policies to be blamed for some of the mess and the misfortune? Well, Economic is still an imperfect science that has nearly perfected the art of keeping enslaved all those who can't afford to pay for freedom from poverty.

And, poverty haunts more than half of mankind. Most planners think that the solution to poverty lies in bringing about social changes in economic policy and through charity, least realising that it's a social malaise as well. The solution probably lies not merely in changing economic policies from time to time and in big charity programs, but in linking these to a socio-cultural revolution directed against the curse of poverty. We have to aim at guiding the society in changing its outlook and attitude towards poverty and the poor.

Another major failure of man is that it has failed to prevent wars. And worst, man has learnt nothing from its own mistakes of the past. Conventions of war have been signed by all only to be flouted at will by the strong. Weapons of mass destruction have been used time and again with so much loss of lives, and human sufferings of such magnitude that 20th century is likely to remain marked as the worst period in the history of civilised man when reasoning failed, as always, and killing of human beings in an unprecedented scale raised serious questions about sanity of man as a rational animal.

The horrifying images of the wars in this century have, instead of uniting the leaders on a common stand against war, led to more research and development - spending billions of dollars -- of precise, lethal weapons of mass destruction, while millions of children go hungry everyday and remain without shelter, clothing, education and medicine or treatment. (Precise weapons - to minimise collateral damage, as they claim - that can take precisely the breath out of all living beings, leaving roads, bridges, houses and other infrastructures intact. What better regards for human life with the advent of civilisation?)

What then was the intent of the world leaders when they formed the League of Nations and later the United Nations (UN)? Were there enough trust and goodwill amongst the nations? Did they believe in sincerity? The devil that rendered the League of Nations ineffective took over the United Nations in the form of the "veto" power reserved for the strong few nations. People of the world can't be blamed for believing that there was lack of trust and sincerity amongst these nations right from the beginning, and it is likely to remain like that at least through the 21st century.

If the founders didn't lack in goodwill, sincerity and trust; if each of them didn't have in mind the hidden ambition or plan to dominate and dictate the lives of people all over the world, why did they need that exclusive right which is contrary to the very spirit of equality-of-all? In itself veto-power is a negation of the basic fundamentals of democracy. The record of the past half-century of the UN bears evidence to the fact that veto has unfortunately been used, time and again, unjustly against the interest of human beings. In keeping with the spirit and dignity of the human soul veto should be 'veto-ed' out in the new century - forever, and consigned to the black chapters of history.

Beside wars, we have helplessly witnessed communal violence, genocide and ethnic cleansing in almost every continent. Millions of people have been ruthlessly massacred and maimed, children - and, even infants - systematically slaughtered. The events are far too many. The UN deliberated on 'to-do' or 'not to do' options while the film-footage from the scenes of occurrences sent chills through our spines and shattered our faith in the effectiveness of the UN. And worst, the UN declares an area as 'safe heaven' resulting in an onrush of innocent, unarmed and helpless people into the area. Then the high drama begins with an assault on the 'safe heaven' and the UN shamelessly abandoning the innocents who were then gruesomely murdered by the attacking criminal forces and the genocidal army.

The lives of troops under UN command are too valuable to be sacrificed in such situation! In other instances the soldiers under UN command appears to be deployed to compete with NGOs to establish tents and provide basic necessities. The UN in such cases converts the soldiers into sheer civilian labour force while some of the NGOs - Red Cross, MSF, SCF, Oxfam, to name a few - put up braver and better soldierly show of their own with little resources and no fire power. And in most cases the member states of the UN remain preoccupied in protecting their regional and national interest only, sacrificing the imperative of saving lives. To the lesser part of the world, there are smaller wars, low-level conflicts, hatred of centuries - all excuses for inaction. For the helpless person on harm's way there is nothing called a small or big war, a low- or high-level conflict. A single bullet, a shell fragment, and a machete-raised hand aimed at him - each is bigger, decisive and absolutely fate-sealing for that individual. The biggest conflict or the greatest war is for the leaders living in safe distances. That may be the reason of their apparent complacency and apathy to human sufferings. To them, casualty figures relate to statistics, and nothing more.

Part of the problem is in the very concept on which nations have been established. Human beings prefer to identify themselves on cultural, lingual, racial, religion and ethnic lines - in fact on every conceivable difference that can be exploited by various interest groups for whatever advantages can be gained in the process.

In politics and in diplomacy there is more to do with the interest of the state and less with that of the individuals - specially belonging to different ethnic, religion, and race. Colour, not even skin deep, has been exploited time and again, and the division is likely to continue for quite some time to come. (If men could, only while seeing other humans, be colour-blind). In wars and in conflicts arising out of such division, states may overlook the rights and dignity of human beings as no alternative basis (race, ethnicity... and so on) is yet in sight on the fundamentals on which modern-day states have been formed. And, from that point of view, states are left with very little option to act in crisis relating to such issues the way most of them do (except for brute-socialities). Here is a dilemma. 'State' is a creation of man while 'man' is a creation and a gift of God for this planet. In wars and in conflicts we sacrifice God's creation and gift to protect man's interest and creation in the name of 'patriotism'. Patriotism and fierce nationalism are neither offsprings nor allies of humanism and universalism. Unless this dilemma is resolved and patriotism linked more to humanism than to nationalism or the state, conflicts and wars will continue taking a very heavy toll of innocent lives.

Going a little deeper into the kingdom of the human mind will reveal the truth that men haven't as yet found answers to such questions as to why are we in this planet and what are our relationship with all the others? That, every species in this planet plays a balancing role and is in sync, with not only our environment but with the known universe, is something how not yet fully understood by us. Nor have we been able to plan and work for a better, liveable (and loveable) world embodying all of mankind, with due consideration for other species as well - specially, in the kingdom of birds and animals. They, too, feel pain, age and - depart. On that mysterious journey of life - of different lengths for each - we travel alongside each other and yet don't understand each other's minds or the feelings - about our lives, families, and

about our fragile existence.

What, then, do we want from the future?

A popular, young Bengali poet, Shukanta, had once written *Purnima chand jeno jhalsano rooti* (The full moon is like a well-baked rooti, a disc-shaped thin bread made by hand). In the countless millenniums to come, the moon will remain firmly in its place. The rich and the affluent will go to the moon - holidaying - and, who knows - to a colony in the Mars for a change of weather or heart (the emotional aspect of it). And the world's hungry poor, more than 3,000,000,000 of them, will undoubtedly be searching for the moon-shaped rooti - at least through the 21st century. Gloomy?

But that's what is in store for mankind unless we, all of us, want to shape the future of our species. It's not only in areas of feeding the world's population that we have to prepare our action plan. A host of other issues have assumed great significance in our quest to make the world a truly liveable place for all.

Population increase is one such issue that has already alarmed everyone. As new vaccines and antibiotics prevent diseases or cure them, lowering child mortality and increasing longevity, numbers multiply at an alarming rate. While more miraculous achievement in the field of medical science is an absolute imperative and almost certain to come by, we must also ensure that the sheer weight of number doesn't offset all our well-means. After all, the resources necessary for the sustenance of life are not unlimited, and every additional mouth puts a little more pressure. The availability of sweet-water, the single most vital resource needed to sustain life remains at the same level (if not less) as it was at the beginning of man's journey. From the 1st year of the 1st millennium to the end of that millennium world population remained between 200 and 250 millions. Over the next 800 years it increased to 800 millions - an increase of nearly 600 millions in 800 years (less than one million a year). Around the year 1800 AD, when the world had a population of 800 millions, water was needed mainly for agriculture, drinking and washing. The few industries in those days had little need of potable water. In the following 200 years, the population increased from 800 millions to 6,000 millions - roughly 26 millions per year. And, the demands for water in the agriculture sector increased countless many times as many more farmers bring unimaginably vast tracts of land under cultivation and compete to grow at least three crops (made possible by one-gestation period and high yielding varieties of crop) against a one-crop - a year cycle of the past. The additional load was because of the huge requirement in the industrial sector as well as for sports, recreation and a whole range of other activities. One can only imagine the pressure on this scarce resource - the shortage of which could lead to massive crop failure and consequent famine and death.

Unless alternative arrangements are made, nations could be involved in deadly wars at some stage in the 21st century over the rights and control of water.

Other resources are shrinking rapidly as we take out more and more, not only to meet the essential demands of modern life but for luxury and, in some cases, outright abuse as well. Much of these resources are used for military purpose (bullets and shells from copper to kill people) which raises their price, making it expensive and difficult for the poor to have access to products made out of these. At some stage over the next millennium man has to agree to one fundamental, that resources beneath and on earth's surface - irrespective of the country these are located in - are meant for all of us. These need to be universally managed for proportional and rational use for the welfare and benefit of all.

Resource management, protecting the environment that sustain all life form, ensuring fair play and justice, preventing exploitation of human beings on race, colour, ethnicity, lingual or gender basis (the barbaric practice of circumcision on girls in certain African societies must stop now), stopping human rights abuses, preserving rich and beneficial cultures of various societies - all these will require lot of thinking, action plans and hard work.

Warfare may not be eliminated altogether, not in the coming century, nor do we foresee any elimination of all weapons of mass destruction any time soon. But the process will gain more public support, so that at some stage in the future the military will find itself in a different role when warfare, as we think of it now, will be totally out of fashion and unacceptable. However, under some unified global command - on precise, set rules of engagement - the military may still be used for surgical strikes. Such interventions would be to save lives and eliminate evil practices that harm the people - individually or collectively. Heroism, then, would be measured not by victory achieved through killings and destructions, but on calculated risks and actions taken to save lives - not on mere capturing land and territory, but on winning the hearts and minds of the people.

Between then and now a serious threat looms ominously on the fate of mankind. The various nations - specially the USA, Russia and China who have serious mistrust about each others intentions, secretly continue developing newer weapons and anti-missile system (star-wars) capable of rendering the nuclear arsenal of the other ineffective and useless. As soon as anyone of them realises that the balance of military power is likely to be fully tilted anytime by an effective anti-missile or similar system; or by the use of Lab-made virus - capable of silently infecting and eliminating millions of people - the possibility of an all out strike taking place (and the doctrine of what's now termed as M.A.D. (Mutually Assured Destruction) coming in to play can't be ruled out. This is a possible course of action by the state which would feel it's well behind in the race, balance of power is about to be tilted and the adversary is on the verge of the breakthrough which will allow the opponent total control and absolute military supremacy.

Science (and the scientists) has taken us too far, too soon. In exploration (whether deep below the sea or far beyond into the unknown domain of the stars and galaxies), in the field of communication or medicine - human achievement in every field has been phenomenal, unimaginable and incomprehensible. There is so much more to come that we can't even imagine those today.

Imagination: the most valuable gift for human beings from the creator. And memory. And, the ability to understand and interpret. All these traits combined make up the human intelligence.

Not long ago, watching a orang-utan (our nearest cousin in the animal world; having nearly 98 per cent genes identical to ours) lazily staring simply at nothing, portrayed the helplessness of that species - and all other species but man - to survive in a world of brutal competition. Do or can they think of their past and the present, and imagine the future? Man understands its own self and its position in the immediate surroundings, and tries to carve out a role for itself in this planet - and in the universe. This is the crucial area where man has excelled. Man can think of the future through imagination and a logical process with the knowledge of the past stored in its memory. Others are incapable of doing so.

Other animals can't probably understand their position even in the immediate environment and understand nothing about the rest of the other species. Because of the transformation over the last 300,000 years, man can at least understand something about the behaviour of other animals, birds and marine life. If not in the new century, some time beyond that man will hopefully be able to understand some of the basic traits and instincts of many animals and, who knows, even communicate through some recognisable signals or symbols. (Can we succeed in establishing communication with some other species so as to make them at least feel that, appearances apart, we all are the same? Don't we all have roots in the same unknown origin in which we shall merge at some time in the millenniums beyond?) Shall man, besides taking care of its own species, establish centres in different parts of the world to help relieve sufferings of other life-form who are not gifted with the similar ability that has given man the mastery of science to fight disease, pain and ageing.

Ageing! Yes. All minds tuned to it. Human beings - artificially created or genetically altered - eagerly awaits the invention of something which can slow down or stop ageing. It is the responsibility of the visionary, the scientists to work in these areas. We want the benefit of their hard work. No body wants to age. And we want vaccines against all viruses. We want better medicines. We want to genetically correct our inherent deficiencies so that we can live meaningful, healthy lives for a long, long time (how long? no consensus as yet). While slowing down ageing will be possible, stopping it may not be possible. After all, growth - from birth onward - is part of the same process as ageing, and de-linking ageing from the natural process of our life is likely to adversely affect the very process of growth. Whether we should tinker with nature to that extent requires more serious thinking as its far-reaching consequences can't be assessed at this stage. Each life is in fact a biological-clock, set to stop at death, so that when the first beat announces the beginning, it in fact sends the signal that it's clicking toward the end.

If there were arrangements to continually record the total transformation from the beginning to this state of the human species, and we had the opportunity today of watching those in whose form, anyone would have exclaimed - 'what the eyes behold, the mind can't'. The transformation of the human mind - would be too baffling to assimilate even for the human mind - the most ingenious of god's creation. All our ancestors, each and every one of billions of them in the past, made some contribution to

the entire process. But the major achievements came through the efforts of small groups of people at each of the different stages in that long journey of man. They are the visionaries, thinkers, philosophers, explorers, researchers and scientists - supported by great entrepreneurs - all of whom shaped our lives for what it is today. And, they will lead mankind through inventions and exploration, maintaining the perfect ecological balance essential for harmonious growth and prosperity of the human race. Much of what we dream of in the future relates to our physical well-being, longevity and exploration of the universe. In many of us there's a yearning to know about our origin and destination and to understand whether both merge at one point somewhere in the past. We want to stop ageing and death as much as we want to travel freely through the domain of the stars as we do in a luxury cruise-ship in the calm waters of some of the oceans on earth - totally relaxed. But, the human body had never been designed or engineered to meet the irresistible demand of the mind over the past it has slowly, inefficiently adjusted to the mind's demand - not only up to a limit and no more. The two (body and mind) are not in harmony. The visionary, the researchers and the scientists will face insurmountable difficulties in the 'engineering' the body so that it can cope with the challenging 'demand of the mind'. The games that the mind plays are 'Imagining' and 'thinking', and that's its life - of sort. Inevitably, though, at some stage the two (mind and body) unite and are in sync, when it's time for both to embrace eternity.

It's with those people who play the mind's games that the new century began long before its time came. They aren't bound by the chronology (unconsciously metered and measured units of time, tied to the machines) of the past. For anyone who works for the future, a century or millennium begins when the mind starts its play in the future for the well-being and prosperity of man (and life on earth in general). With them, the time begins in advance when - in the horizon less vast landscape of the kingdom of their minds - they begin building images of the future and start working on them. Not later, when the dial-hands in time-pieces cross the designated marks, or when the dates on calendars are changed.

But for others, time begins when its turn comes. At the precise moment and date. Not earlier, nor later. These are the common folks with set goals, ambitions, faiths and beliefs who want to get as much out of life as possible, realising that with every tick-tock of the machine (man-made though) we move closer to life's end. So, make the best of it for as long as it lasts, and look for every favourable occasion - birthdays, anniversaries, a new century and, what better than a millennium - to celebrate and be a part of the event, big or small. As if the participation in each of these events would be permanent flag-posts of our existence in this planet, and the future generations would remember all of us when they recollect the past. Well, for some it will be true. For the vast majority, alas, mere participation in the revelry is not enough to guarantee a place in history, and they would have to be content with a place for at best as long as the revelry lasts. No more than that. This may be the reason why there are many who try to bask in the warm sunshine of the glory and success of their own past.

Doesn't mean people shouldn't celebrate. Everyone should, all together, on every possible occasion. These are great moments to bring people close to each other and strengthen the human-bondage, remove the differences that divide us (on race, religion, culture), and make us all feel good and strong. Strong, that, no matter how alone in the cosmos or not, we are the ones who own this planet, and the cosmos came into existence for all of us. Otherwise, there would probably have been no justification for the creation of the universe. We are the life and soul of the universe, we are what the creation of the universe is all about.

Some of the basic needs are common for all living beings, while a few traits are the speciality of man. Food and drink to meet the body's biological demands against hunger and thirst, and activities linked to procreation, sleep - all these are probably the absolute raw basics for most life form.

But, man has some other exclusive need - work, pursuit of knowledge, leisure and recreational activities. These are distinctively man's speciality.

Neither the new century nor the new millennium will see any change in these areas, although there will be continual changes in the quality of life that we live. The basic impulses and emotions - love and affection, hatred, kindness, aggression and violence will remain unchanged even with artificial life or with the cloned. Hopefully, and desirably, there will be changes elsewhere - the human spirit will soar along with the superiorly engineered body, and the human species will be able to handle more efficiently and effectively such unfortunate issues as inequalities, injustice, oppression, exploitation and deprivation.

Others will not be that fortunate. Some of the species will be extinct as in the past. Thanks to our ancestors whose enduring pain, inventions of the various tools, of language and numerals, of fire and the countless hundred and thousands of inventions, discoveries and explorations saved the human race from extinction. From here onward, but for some galactic apocalypse or our own follies, we remain invincible. The name of our game will be 'conquest' - of almost each and everything that the mind can imagine. So, we should celebrate.

When the sun goes down and darkness falls, adrenaline starts building up in our blood in wild and eager expectation to embrace the new day, year, century and the millennium (Humans welcome the new day at midnight - not when the actual day begins at sunrise - which is the practice with most birds and animals.)

And, when the sun goes down, a poor mother huddles her hungry children around her and tries to put them to sleep, or reassures that their sufferings and pain from sickness will be over. An equally helpless young child consoles a younger brother or sister. A father consoles his children. There has been, are and will be millions of them in the future in most countries of the world. They are to be found in thatched huts in villages, in slums in cities, in footpaths and pavements or just under the open sky. For a 12-year old kid orphaned with a younger sibling (and, there are hundreds and thousands like them at any given time) how different is today from the previous one or how will it be tomorrow? For him as well for the helpless parents, the night fall would be a period of waiting in desperation for the new day - if at all it brings anything better. Their dreams are simple and ordinary - to protect their siblings or children from hunger, disease, deprivation, oppression, abuse and injustice. In a world that surprisingly is selective and calculative in loving, caring and in dispensing affection - even such simple dreams are hard to come by. Why do these unfortunate matters still plague human societies - whether the problem is with our mind-set or with social, cultural and economic system, or a combination of all - there isn't any simple answer to all these complex questions.

Economics as a modern tool of management of the economy has somehow created the great-divide at the level of human understanding of each other such that, although as human beings we seem to be working together and interacting with each other on a continual basis, we are not understanding the joys and sorrows, the sufferings and the pain, and the simple dreams of the helpless common people - we in fact are living different planes. It is apparent that on the issue of emotional attachment with fellow human beings we all are, at the same time, one species - too many.

And yet, for the deprived millions, life is in the 'tomorrow'. There will be food - 'tomorrow'. Medicine - 'tomorrow'. Shelter and clothing - 'tomorrow'. Justice - 'tomorrow'. That magic 'tomorrow' hardly ever comes for them, so that when the day dawns and sunlight is aplenty, one rarely sees the smile in their faces (in as much as the children or the siblings don't see in the darkness of the night the tears of despair gathered in the eyes of the parents or the elders who have been consoling them of relief from the pain and sufferings of hunger and disease).

For the fortunate, sufferings of hunger and disease) starts rising in the blood, when darkness falls, adrenaline that will see their dreams fulfilled, the grand celebrations and a future that has transformed us into 'one species with many', a disturbing question keeps troubling the mind. Shall humans, like a spoiled child, take away most of everything from 'mother earth' too, depriving her other children (all other species) - or be more considerate and help her protect rest of the species.

Some can, while others can't protect what they love and want to protect. In the Serengeti game reserve in Africa a fawn is chased by a cheetah as the mother deer watches helplessly, while rest of the flock flees. The mother deer runs alongside, nervously ears its tail (as if between hope and despair) and straightens its ears - may be to hear the sweet call from its baby that it has escaped. But then, when the deer sees its baby's neck trapped between the cheetah's fangs and the listless body awash in blood, the deer also can realise that all is over. It nervously takes a last look from a safe distance, wags the tail (like humans slapping their forehead when overtaken by grief) and moves away. For another night. Another day. It has to do it over and over and over and over. Just like what the humans do. A scene repeated over and over, and over again - to continue up to the end of the journey for all on earth.

Like the deer as much as like the human parent or the siblings, isn't mother-earth trying to protect us in the vastness of the space where unknown dangers can obliterate everything in less than the twinkling of the eye?

Somehow, everything in the cosmos replicates something, in some way that we have so far failed to comprehend. The sheer complexity and enormity, the timelessness of the entire system is not even for the human mind to behold, and assimilate - not yet.

May be, in the future, humans ahead. That, for many, would be a great dream to pursue so that the present can link the fulfilment of that dream with the contributions of today's visionaries. (The past has seen the best and the worst in man - in scientific achievements on one hand and its use in colossal destructions and killings on the other, in its efforts to save lives as well as in its apathy toward genocide and ethnic cleansing.)

So, we welcome the new with the hope that the process of unlocking the secrets - of life and of replication - which is being pursued by man, will be completed in the future. And, for the present of that dream the future will have to maintain links with the past (not chained to it). For that link, six billion-plus people will establish the bridge between the 20th and 21st centuries, between the 2nd and 3rd millennium. More precisely, between the past and the perpetually unfolding future, from the past, through the present to the centuries and millenniums beyond. So, goodbye 1999 - the last (but one) of a century. And welcome-year 2000. Welcome - all those who enter upon the life. And for all, god speed in our eternal journey, broken by a short spell of time-specific existence in this world-life.