

Flip side of a fabulous century

Fantastic advancement has been made in science and technology in the 20th century. Man has conquered moon and now eyes Mars and other planets of the solar system. However, back on earth, the rich has only got richer and the poor poorer, writes Harun ur Rashid

At the dawn of this century, many unknowns lay to the humankind during the span of 100 hundred years. Some of the great mysteries have been resolved. The world of the 20th century is quite unlike that of any previous ones.

Two world wars, fascism and the holocaust, the arrival of communism and its sudden decline, the dramatic end of the cold war, the sweeping aside of colonialism in Asia and Africa, the emergence of China as a global power, the advent of nuclear weapons threatening to end all human beings, space exploration, stationary communication satellites hovering around the earth, computer technology, high-tech gadgets, discovery of mysteries of DNA and genetic engineering and the combined efforts through the United Nations to defuse conflicts and to remind and enable the world to better these make a formidable checklist in support of the claim that this century has been the most dynamic and turbulent one.

At the beginning of this century, Europe vibrated with power - technical power, economic power, cultural power and colonial power - over the world. All over Europe, every branch of art and literature was mobilised to illustrate and to embroider national empires. Intense competition among the European nations to expand their colonial empires was in full swing.

This century saw the diminution of power and influence of Europe in world affairs. In 1914, Europe's power was at its zenith but by 1945 almost all of its power had been lost. European colonial rule is almost gone. European prestige and moral standing eroded and its financial independence was surrendered. The vast sacrifices in two world wars (1914-1919 and 1939-1945) did not generate security in Europe. The two powers - the USA and the Soviet Union (USSR) - emerged after 1945. Interestingly neither of the two powers had been present at the beginning of the century.

Europe itself is being rebuilt under ambitious but contentious blue-prints for economic, monetary and ultimately political union. This appears to be a complete reversal of strong sentiment of nationalism which was witnessed in western and central Europe in the 19th century. The old animosity among France, Germany and Britain has disappeared.

Pre-eminence of the United States of America appears to be the hallmark of this century. In fact, it will not be incorrect to say that this century can be designated as having belonged to the USA. It appears that no framework for the conduct of international affairs is regarded as adequate or complete if it lacks the commitment and involvement of the US. The combination of military strength and the economic prosperity coupled with technological superiority of the US seem unassailable. The fact that eight of the ten biggest multinationals in the world are all American is an instance in point.

The monarchical system of government is almost gone by the end of this century. The few monarchs who exist today are mostly ceremonial entities. They reign and not rule the country. Democratic governments, elected by the people, are in vogue. Even the hereditary peers in the House of Lords has to face long over-due axe. Egalitarianism and freedom are cherished values which are fostered by the civil society.

An important geo-political change is the emergence of China as a world power. Today China enjoys not only one of the world's fastest-growing industrially and technologically backed resource-capabilities, but also is committed to its territorial integrity and to the prevention of aggressive expansionist actions by others in Asia-Pacific region. China is on track to launch a manned space flight early in the next century according to a leading Chinese scientist. The outstanding leap from the oppression by the Western powers to one of the major global powers is a splendid achievement of the people of China that is expected to play a greater role at the next century.

The Jewish people, with the support from the West, have been able to set up their own Jewish state (Israel) which was denied to them for centuries. The end of the racist regime in South Africa is a notable event. This century has also seen the emergence of large number of independent nations arising out of the colonial world. With the outburst of independent nations from the Third World, the political landscape has changed beyond recognition. These newly independent countries, mostly from 60s onwards, have asserted themselves in the political power-equation of the world. The membership of the United Nations from 51 in 1945 to 188 in 1999 demonstrates the vitality and the willingness of the Third World in the participation of global issues which affect each and every country in the world.

The political domination over the developing nations by the major powers is gone but it appears to have been replaced by the economic domination by them or their multinationals. Coca-Cola drink and McDonald's outlets display the omnipresent influence of the multinationals across the

globe. There is a view that the policies of the Western governments are being increasingly influenced by the multinationals as the days of market-economy (a late 20th century euphemism for the word "capitalism") have engulfed the world.

A remarkable event of this century is the collapse of communism. The speed of the collapse has exceeded all other great landslides of European history. The hated Berlin Wall which symbolised the East-West divide was dismantled in 1989 triggering the collapse of communism. This is an event which no one possibly dreamt of even during mid-80s. In fact, not only communism disappeared as a political philosophy in Europe, but the mighty Soviet Union had disintegrated.

With the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union, the cold war has ended. The demise of the cold war has changed enormously the international strategic environment and its diverse ramifications remain a palpable factor in the world today. The cold war led many proxy wars in the developing countries, mostly in Africa. The war in Angola is a typical case how the proxy wars were fought. The communist

quencies. The people are enjoying more holidays, visiting all corners of the earth, including the arctic and the Antarctic regions. The conquest of the highest mountain peak, Mount Everest (Sagarmatha) in 1953 is a significant achievement of human endurance and determination.

The war strategy has gone through a metamorphosis. Wars are often no longer fought between two opposite standing armies. It is fought from 15,000 feet with devastating consequences on the other weaker side. The remote-controlled war in Kosovo by NATO is an instance in point. Not a single soldier from NATO died in combat and yet NATO claimed victory in the war. It would be incomprehensible war strategy in the past centuries.

This century introduced cyber-warfare. A surprise electronic warfare attack is a reality. Cyber-war had already commenced to attack the web sites of the opposite parties. The acquisition of cyber-war capacity is an imperative to fight future wars in which the software beats manpower. An electronic "Pearl Harbour" is a realistic prospect. One could wake up one morning and find a city or the country or a section of the coun-

made-to-order babies with "desirable" characteristics exist but on moral grounds the experiment is on hold. The scientist had already been successful in cloning a sheep named as "Dolly" in Scotland.

Inequality seems to prosper in this century. The gap between the rich and the poor countries is larger at the end of this century than it was in the beginning. Why it that difference in income per head between the richest and the poorest is more than 400 to 1 compared to five to one 250 years ago? Why is it that there is a huge gap in health and wealth in this century? Why is that we divide the world into three kinds of nations at present: those that spends lots of money to reduce body weight, those where people eat to live and those where people don't know where the next meal is coming from?

According to the latest UN Human Development Report, the richest has 20 per cent of the world's people but 86 per cent of its income. The poorest one-fifth of nations get one per cent of world's income. Two hundred richest people doubled their income in past four years to \$1,000 billion dollars while 1.3 billion people out of six billion live on less than \$1.00 a day.

out recompense. One US company has "patented" basmati rice. Poor people may thus be forced to pay for seeds or products they have traditionally used. There is no structure for ensuring that the development and sale of the genetically modified food is based on food security and health rather than on short-term profit.

The seed of an agricultural crop is time incarnate, containing past, present and future. But the genetic modified seed is making it infertile through terminator technology which is the deliberate insertion of death into the heart of life. Perhaps the interference with nature may have gone too far to the detriment of the common people.

Natural environment has taken a heavy toll in this century. Modernity steals resources faster than nature can re-make them. Modernity, some believe, destroys nature, yet ideologues pretend it is somehow inevitable, predetermined or necessary - like law of nature. There is a report that every year the world burns as much as fossil fuel as the earth produced in almost a million years. Eighty-five per cent of it are being burnt by the industrialised countries to meet the needs of their consumer-society. Global warming - some of it the result of humanity's urgent speed and progress in transportation - is altering nature's time. Some say that the British spring now comes five to seven days earlier than it did just 25 years ago. Many of the low-lying island-countries may face total extinction due to the rise of the level of the sea at the next century because of the greenhouse effect.

While environment degradation continues, a vigorous



THEIR "WEDDING OF THE CENTURY" BECAME TABLOID MELODRAMA

attempt to protect the animals and plants has been in place. The symbiotic connection between human beings, plants and animals is recognised. The same right to exist as the human being in this earth. The World Wide Fund and the environmentalists have stressed the significance of bio-diversity of the earth. The hunting of tigers, elephants, rhinoceros, whales which was rampant in past centuries is being banned in Britain. Wear of the leather skin garments is discouraged. The plants in Amazon (Brazil) tropical forests are being protected through international co-operation and finance.

Today's terrorism appears to be far more freelance operation driven by personal fanaticism, rather than by practical and political objective. It has changed its modus operandi and has

unfolded with high technological base. The operation of remote controlled bombs has become a normal feature of violence. Chemical and biological weapons are easy to manufacture. In germ warfare tiny quantities could be enough for a terrorist to inflict tens of thousands of casualties. Political and economic chaos could be created by terrorists by hacking into or destroying computer systems with virus or through bio-chemical warfare. Cyber terrorism could display its ugly head in the next century. Nuclear-armed subversives are perhaps the worst of all.

At the end of this century, it is an irony that in the days of high technology and advances in genetics and space exploration, majority of people in poor countries often face one of the most ancient challenges - starvation. This seems to indicate something is wrong some-

where. The inequalities need to be corrected and there can be no argument about the humanitarian obligation of richer nations to help the poorer. To quote Tagore: "There is only one history - the history of man. All national histories are merely chapters in the larger one."

This century is stimulated by constant movement. Human curiosity fed a ferment of ideas which prompted energetic activity. Like all human activities, this century is to be judged on its achievements and shortfalls. It can be viewed with admiration or with disgust or with a mixture of both. Whatever this century has given to the world by far exceeds that which any previous century had contributed to understand the new frontiers.

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Charles Lindbergh's historic flight comes to an end

government in Angola dominated by the Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) was supported by the Soviet Union and Cuba while the rebels controlled by the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) was assisted by the US and apartheid South Africa. With the end of cold war, all outside powers withdrew from Angola.

The creation of the UN is an event which has influenced many episodes in this century. It carries out a span of activities that ranges from the normative to the operational and an institutional presence that is at once global, regional and country-based. New programme areas and work modalities of the UN, in particular in socio-economic spheres, are so pervasive that they were not conceived at the birth of the UN. If the UN's activities are measured against the state of world a century ago, it is an impressive record. However due to financial crisis, the UN is described to have a heart of gold but limbs of clay.

With the assistance of the World Health Organisation, small-pox has been eradicated, polio is almost conquered and leprosy is not seen as a curse but treated like any other disease. Hi-tech surgery and human-to-human transplants have become a norm. Doctors in the industrialised countries rely on computer software and extensive databases to make difficult medical decisions and use the internet to consult faraway experts. The changes made in this century with information technology and the ability to map the genetic make-up appears to have eclipsed all the advances of the past centuries. However, a new deadly virus, HIV-AIDS, unknown in the last century, has caused colossal damage to the human population in Africa and Asia.

This century has fostered three big ideas: speed, progress and technology. Computer has revolutionised every facets of human activities. One of the characteristics of this century is its entry into information age and as a result rewards are gained through efficiency and time saving. Cable TV, mobile telephone and e-mail shrank the distance of time and place and provided speedy news and information. With the arrival of the Internet, a new vista has unfolded. A wonderful new world of opportunity and knowledge has been unveiled.

The information technology has led often not to read or write books. The best place to keep up the latest ideas are web sites. No kind of curb or censorship seems to be possible on the cyber super highway. Public meetings are being replaced by "electronic meetings" in town halls. US Presidential Democratic candidate Bill Bradley is reported to have obtained more donations through the internet than those by traditional channels.

Day today life and its chores have been made more easier and comfortable with the ever increasing arrival of modern gadgets accessible to the affluent people. This has lessened physical movements, sometimes with unpleasant conse-

quences without power because of a surprise electronic warfare attack.

In every century, there is a phenomenon that suddenly become ubiquitous. The phenomenon of this century appears to be "Globalisation" which is being used in all sorts of context by all sorts of people. Globalisation seem to promise understanding and hopes of the day. There is a ready audience for those who are able to reap huge benefits from it. The movement of capital from one end to the other has given an unprecedented opportunity to invest in foreign countries. At the same time flight of capital has been made much easier, often with disastrous consequences.

Globalisation, however, needs to be humanised to enable its benefits more apparent to the people of developing nations. Appropriate structures are required to be set up that can shape, mould and control the powerful new forces unleashed in this century. The idea that the internet and technology transfer will make globalisation all-inclusive appears to be a myth for many of the developing countries whose large number of population remains illiterate. Even for the literate people in such countries, the possession of a personal computer appears to be a luxury. For example, to buy a computer in Bangladesh costs an average eight years' income compared to one month's average wages in the US.

This century saw the shift from a manufacturing-dominated industrial economy to a service economy which represents a "third wave" comparable to earlier replacement of agricultural civilisation (the first wave) by industrial one (the second wave). The core institutions of industrial society - the mass trade union, the centralised nation state - are being broken down by a wave of individual empowerment, in which mass markets are being replaced by products tailored for individual consumers and social conformity by individual lifestyle choice. The protection of fundamental human rights to preserve the dignity and worth of the human person is now incorporated in the constitutions of every state. Gender equality and the participation of women in the community has been recognised.

Nuclear technology, biotechnology and space exploration are distinct belongings of this century. This is the age which split the atom, use atomic clock to split the second. Bio-technology splits time from nature. The man on the moon and the robot on Mars are successful achievements. Space stations are being erected by the US and Russia. At the next century people from the earth may visit the space stations or celestial bodies for holidays. Medical research, in particular, in molecular genetics, has advanced in recent years that had previously seemed entirely impenetrable in areas, such as, birth defects, genetic diseases and ageing. A few eminent genetic scientist are of the view that the technology to produce

Three richest people have more assets than the total assets of the poorest 600 million. These are not merely statistics but a grim reality at the end of this century. The challenge in the next century is to fight this grotesque inequality through shared responsibility of nations.

This century saw the marked growth of population in the world (6 billion in October). The longevity of men and women has increased considerably. However, the population boom, mostly in the developing countries, has an adverse impact on the environment. In simple terms, the more people there are, the more land is cleared, the more wood for fuel is gathered, the more trees are felled and the more soil erosion takes place. It is estimated that the world's farmers are trying to feed 100 million people more on 24 billion fewer tonnes of top soil occurring in the countries of Asia and Africa.

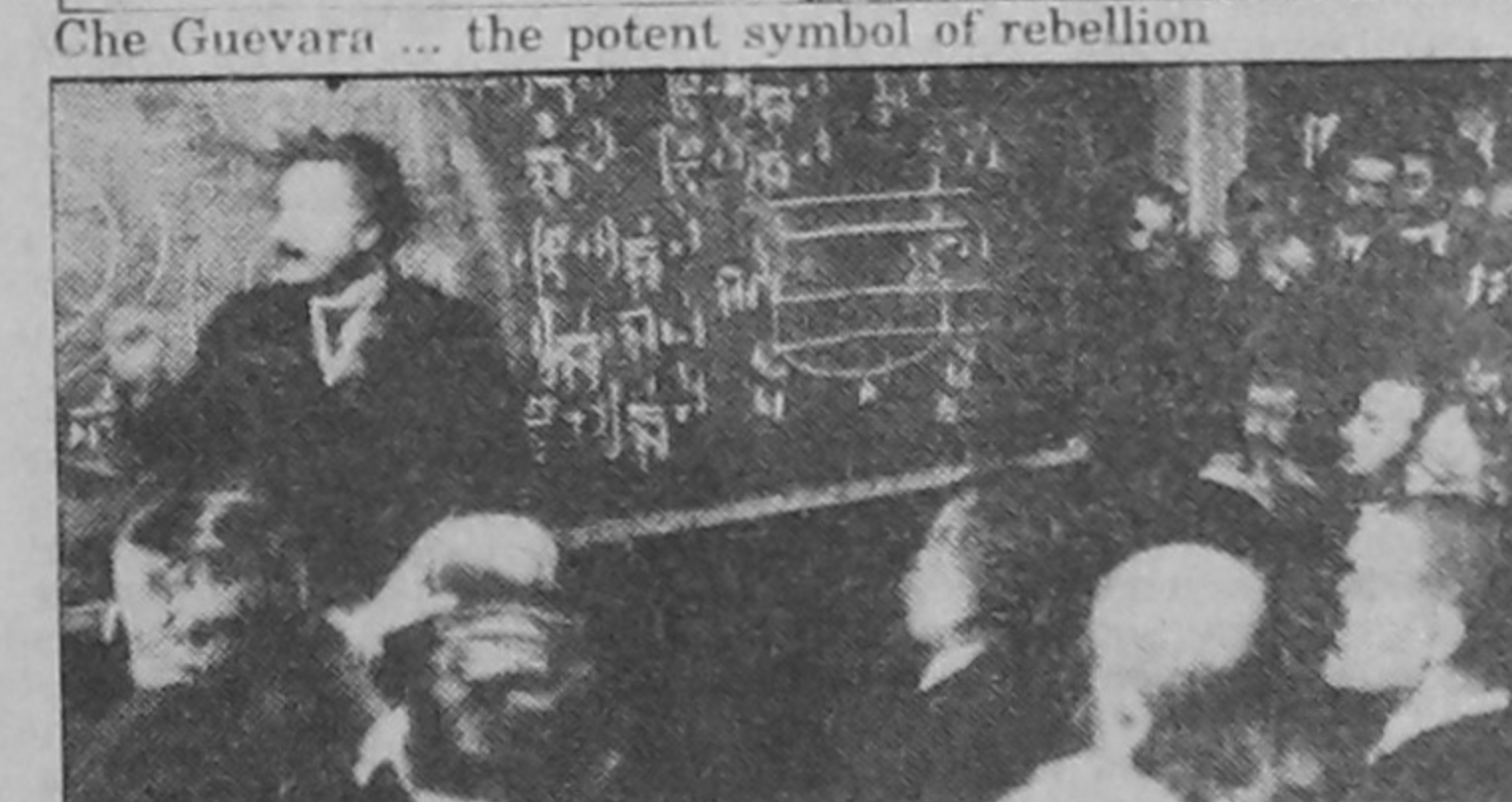
Bio-technology has not been an unmix blessing. The multinationals attempt to patent foods, seeds and natural medicines used for centuries. In Indian sub-continent, it is reported that generations of knowledge and work have resulted in the development of over 60 varieties of potato or other crops. But corporations have now patented some of them, stealing knowledge with-



Mother Teresa at a Calcutta slum



Che Guevara ... the potent symbol of rebellion



Einstein delivering a lecture in Paris



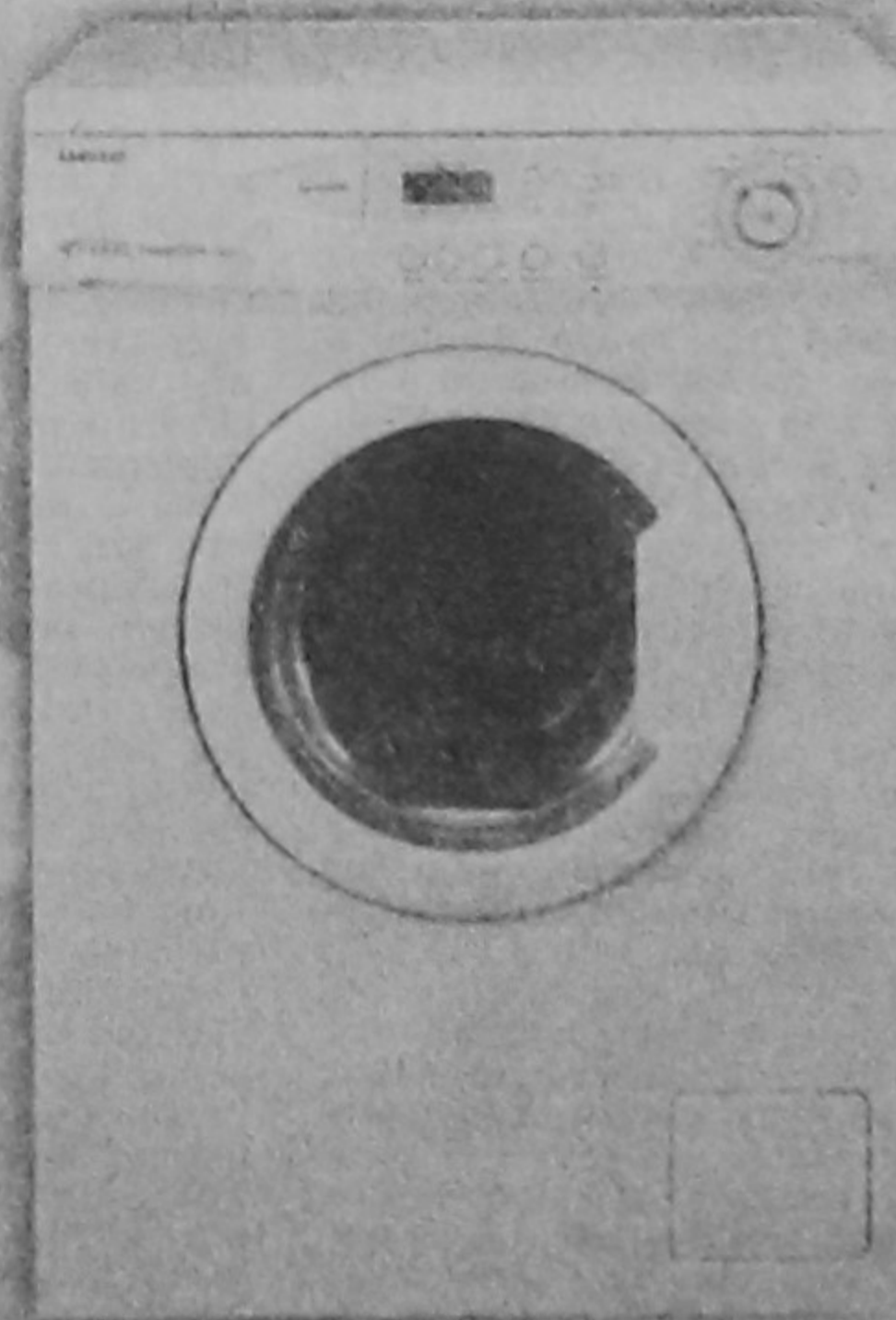
Rosa Park ... her simple act of protest galvanised civil rights revolution



Anne Frank (centre with a hat on) ... her diary lent a searing voice to the fight for human dignity



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