

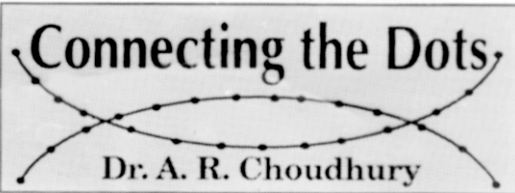
The New Millennium has to be an Improvement

DOES history march forward purposely, or backward peevishly? Or does it just zigzag aimlessly? Any division of time is artificial. Even birthdays. But they can be moments for deeper reflection. We look backward, most often in gratitude, and then forward with new resolve. Some thinkers argue that human events cannot help but proceed in such a way as to advance the species - in other words, that history crawls forward. So whether the last millennium was a boon or a bust, here's a toast to the new one: it's bound to be better. Despite all the hoopla regarding the millennium celebration last year, the real millennium started on January 1st of this year. But as we staggered to its doorstep, a contrary view emerged out of some sobering developments. The ethnic cleansing in Europe, Asia and parts of Africa cast doubt on the notion of human progress. In that sceptical vein, the twentieth century has yielded some nightmarish vision of the future. Witness Alex Huxley's book

Perhaps the triumph of the last millennium merely ended Book 1 of the human story. Perhaps Book 2 includes the struggle to live up to the promise of liberalism, to fashion a society in which citizens are equally free to fulfill themselves. Perhaps the next text will focus on efforts to end hunger, poverty, war and ethnic cleansing and to protect the thin web of life that hugs the planet. Surely, such struggles will shape the beginning of this millennium.

"Brave New World", George Orwell's book "1984", or Paul Verhoeven's movie "RoboCop". These gloomy works doubtless flowed from twentieth century horrors. For all its claim of being the pinnacle of human advancement to date, the century that had drawn to a close last week is likely the bloodiest ever. Surely no earlier villains matched Germany's Adolf Hitler or Cambodia's Pol Pot in body count. Surely the most ferocious army of earlier centuries came nowhere close to inflicting as many casualties in one swoop as did the US in Hiroshima, and then Nagasaki. The atomic bomb serves now as the classic example of technology gone awry. Our tools propel us into the future, but perhaps a menacing future - a source of worry for writers like Alex Huxley.

George Orwell got his inspiration from the rise of totalitarianism in the form of Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia, where the state attempted to control what the citizens wanted to think. For Orwell, rather than living up to its promise of liberating humans, technology furthered



state control. The Detroit of "RoboCop" is not totalitarian. Rather, its focus is the widening gap between the haves and have-nots, between the suburbs and the city. The movie rides that trend line into a grim future. In contrast to the dour vision of

the science fiction writers, Francis Fukuyama is optimistic about the future. He stirred up much debate in 1992 with a book titled "The End of History and the Last Man". He takes up the 200-year old ideas of German philosophers Immanuel Kant and Georg

the bourgeoisie. The final stage is the classless society, Marx contended. The dramatic collapse of Marxism-Leninism reaffirms Hegel, Fukuyama argues. The end point of history is liberal democracy. Sure, many nations have yet to reach the finish line. But a growing number have. What's more, many of the laggard recognise liberal democracy - that is, a political system in which the people elect the leaders and basic laws safeguard individual rights - as their only legitimate destination. Perhaps the new millennium takes on special significance because it is the first to be celebrated since the advent of the notion of globalisation of the domestic economy. Our neighbours are no longer just those we live near. Rapid communication has brought the whole world

immediately before our eyes, as never before in history. Because of that world platform, we must ask not only who is left behind in our nation but also who is left behind in the world economy. We can take this occasion to call on the developed nations for writing off the existing foreign debt that strangles the poor of so many nations, preventing them from living truly human lives. At the same time, we must help these people to overcome the internal hold that corruption has often had on their nations, so that any debt-relief truly helps those in need and does not end up increasing the Swiss bank accounts of a select few. Perhaps the triumph of the last millennium merely ended Book 1 of the human story. Perhaps Book 2 includes the struggle to live up to the promise of liberalism, to fashion a society in which citizens are equally free to fulfill themselves. Perhaps the next text will focus on efforts to end hunger, poverty, war and ethnic cleansing and to protect the thin web of life that hugs the planet. Surely, such struggles will shape the beginning of this millennium.

Another New Year for South Asia

Of late, there are some positive activities of the SAARC and some analysts feel these may lead to the holding of the summit within a few months - around mid 2001 or early second-half of the year.

THE year 2000 was eventful in many ways for the South Asia. It began with a visit in March by United States President Bill Clinton to Bangladesh, India and Pakistan. It was the first visit by an American president to Bangladesh. The year witnessed ups and downs in domestic affairs of different countries in the area and also in the bilateral ties of some of them. How the New Year will influence the South Asian scenario? Will it be qualitatively different from the preceding year? If so, in what ways and how will the developments impact the overall scene - positively or otherwise? Will the most densely populated region of the world be able to present at least a semblance of healthy political climate which was badly lacking in the 2000? Many had expected that the new millennium would usher in a new era of goodwill and fraternity for the peoples here who are bound by so much of commonality. The shared history has propelled them to come under a forum called SAARC for common economic, social and other benefits for the vast multitude living in the seven countries. But these hopes were belied in the first year of the millennium much to the dismay of those who wish the region well. The much-expected next summit of the SAARC could not be held due to the adverse political climate and some countries of the forum also saw major internal developments during the period. A great setback that the region as a whole suffered last year was

the failure to hold the SAARC summit although the event was scheduled to take place in October 1999. The summit is to take place once in every calendar year but in the past too it was deferred due to unavoidable reasons. The conference takes place only when all the members are unanimous about its timing and necessity. But this time the postponement and delay to reconvene the summit was so long that even in the beginning of the 2001 no one really knows whether it will be possible to hold the event shortly as still it hangs in the balance. However, a faint ray of hope is discernible for the positive side and one may also call it thawing the icy situation. Of late, there are some activities of the SAARC and some analysts feel that indications of good omens may lead to the holding of the summit within a few months - around mid 2001 or early second half of the year. This is a pious hope but certainly depend on certain developments which are sending positive signals. This cautious optimism stems from some forward movements in the otherwise hostile Indo-Pakistan ties which are fundamentally responsible for the sharp deterioration in the SAARC environment. Admittedly, Kashmir is at the heart of their relations. The difference

between New Delhi and Islamabad both at state and personal levels at the top widened so badly that SAARC summit could not be convened. The standoff continues and only lately both sides dropped hints and also took some concrete

steps towards improvement of the condition. The cease-fire by India in Kashmir at the start of the holy month of Ramadan and its subsequent extension augured well and Islamabad responded by partial pulling out of its troops from the line of control (LoC). Hopes are gaining ground that bilateral talks between the two countries will resume at some levels although it seems difficult to predict when these actually will place. Earlier, India and Pakistan used to hold talks at various levels. A change in this undesirable situation will obviously lead to betterment of the political climate and facilitate the next SAARC summit in Kathmandu which also houses

the forum's secretariat. If that happens, this will be a big gift by the leaders of the SAARC and more particularly by those from India and Pakistan to South Asia. One can remain hopeful about better political atmosphere in the region in coming

the NDA, acceptable to all partners of the ruling coalition. Such a condition may embolden the opposition for bigger anti-government push. But it is for Bangladesh the year 2001 would be very remarkable since it's an election year. There is no need to elaborate the importance and ramifications of the coming polls and we all will keep our fingers crossed about the shape of things to come. A free and fair election should be the most desirable event for the nation now. In the island state of Sri Lanka, the year would be crucial either for a negotiated peace to end the civil war or a decisive outcome of the nearly two decades-long hostilities. Himalayan state of Nepal may witness political turmoil as the leftist opposition has just successfully enforced a two-day general strike, and close on the heels prime minister G.P. Koirala has survived a no-confidence move initiated by dissidents of own Nepali Congress. The beautiful tiny state of Bhutan may see more relaxation towards eventual democratisation as the King there shows slowly but increasingly willingness to involve people in affairs of the country. The peaceful Indian island state of Maldives is likely to remain so barring unforeseen developments. The year 2001 will be full of developments and we hope that these will be healthy and not fraught with negative or destructive tendencies.



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Kremlin Feels the Heat as Workers' Power Hits the Street

Simon Pirani writes from Moscow

Unpaid and underpaid workers have become a perennial problem in past-Soviet Russia. But this time Russia has the money to pay, having sharply increased its foreign exchange reserves due to healthy export prices. The Kremlin blames it all on regional authorities for mishandling funds. But workers' unions accuse the Kremlin of getting its priorities wrong.

IN the Russian Far East winter temperatures dip well below zero, to minus 20 degrees centigrade and lower. So when the regional authorities in Primorye cut the power, leaving some towns with just an hour or two of heating and some none at all, thousands of workers said enough was enough.

They went on strike. On 1 December some 40,000 teachers in the Primorye region joined thousands of other teachers and hospital workers who had already struck work nearly a month earlier in a show of workers' power. They blockaded the main roads leading out of the region to China and Mongolia.

Besides other towns in the Primorye region, power cuts also hit the mining settlement of Vorkuta in the northern republic of Komi and parts of the distant Siberian region of Chukotka.

But it was not the power cuts that initially led workers to walk out of their jobs. Russian workers in Primorye region had more fundamental grievances. Besides receiving low pay for their work, teachers and hospital workers are still owed several months' salary by the regional administration. And they wanted their money.

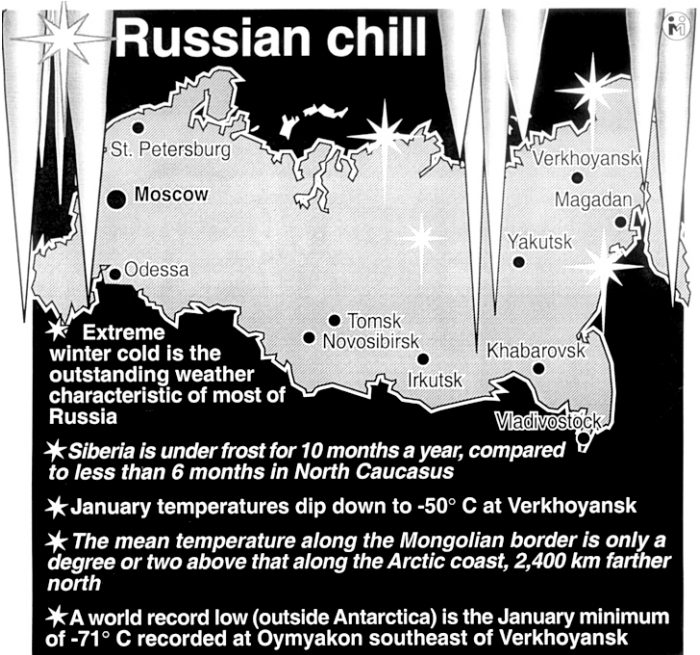
They haven't got their dues. Instead Russian President

Vladimir Putin has denounced regional leaders for misappropriating funds. He has referred in particular to Primorye's governor Yevgeny Nazdratenko for allegedly diverting the monies.

The federal government has supported at least eight court cases against regional and municipal officials in Primorye. Similar legal actions are underway elsewhere.

The Primorye authorities are not the only ones guilty of not paying wages from money allocated from Russia's federal finances. Up to December, last year only 10 of Russia's 89 regions have paid their workers. Valentina Matvienko, deputy prime minister in charge of welfare reckons that by mid-November wage arrears had totalled a massive 1.2 billion rubles.

Union leaders are not satisfied with President Putin's explanations. Mikhail Kuzmenko, president of the Health Workers Union, believes that wrong government priorities are to blame.



"President Putin has stated publicly that health and education are the priorities, that a

sick, badly-educated people will never build the economy," says Kuzmenko.

"But it is well known that the population's health has become a national disaster, that the death rate is twice as high as the birth rate, that the proportion of the population that is disabled is rising rapidly and that 80 per cent of schoolleavers have some form of illness."

"But the president's speeches and government actions are different things," says the union leader derisively, pointing out that Russia spent only 2.6 per cent of its gross domestic product this year on health and education, and according to the 2001 budget projections spending will be under two per cent.

The United Nations recommended standard is 5.7 per cent.

The teachers' union too believes that the problem of wage arrears has been compounded by wrong priorities in the Kremlin.

"Our members are striking in areas where arrears have built up again, but nationally we are focusing on the fact that the pay scale itself impoverishes teachers," says Nikolai Kolobashkin, the union's international liaison officer.

Russia's state finances in 2000 have been the best in the last decade, thanks to price rises in its main exports. The prices of oil, gas, and metals have stayed high. Russia is now running an impressive budget surplus and, in 2000, doubled its foreign exchange reserves holdings to \$28 billion.

This makes union leaders all the more furious about the wages backlog and the miserly levels of public sector pay which has fallen steadily and further behind over the last two years during which Russia's finances recovered surprisingly quickly from the 1998 financial crisis.

Workers' unions claim that interest on a small part of the reserve would comfortably meet their most pressing demands.

"There was a budget surplus of 190 rubles in 2000. The government announced it would go to state sector employees and we thought our members would get a slice of it. But after

the army, police and other security services received increases, there was nothing left of the cake," says Kuzmenko.

A conference of union delegates demanded on 2 December a long-term increase in health service funding, including substantial pay rises, and free medical treatment for health workers, who are ten times more likely than the average Russian to be sick and often cannot afford to pay their own hospital charges.

While corrupt regional officials and wrong political priorities account for the wages crisis, making sense of the heating cut-offs is not easy. Misappropriation, or at least mismanagement, of funds is part of the problem.

Improving Russia's neglected heating network will be harder than finding someone to blame. In Soviet times, industry subsidised domestic heating. But now, in many of the coldest parts of Siberia and the Far East, industry has slumped or disappeared entirely.

Politicians from the Kremlin downwards agree that heating and power industries should be restructured, and privatised. So do the World Bank and IMF.

But nobody really knows quite where to start in such a big, cold country. Although inviting private business in will mean increasing tariffs, it is clear that ordinary Russians cannot pay any more.

The first step would require a massive infusion of capital to improve the dilapidated network that loses 40 per cent of power in the transmission process, experts say.

"In Soviet times, whole towns and areas were populated to support industries which in market conditions may not be sustainable," says Kakhka Kaknaveidze, a power industry analyst at Torika Dialog investment bank.

"The heating problems will be worse in 2001 and worse again the year after that. It is entirely possible that over the next 10 years many of these areas will be depopulated."

—GEMINI NEWS

The author is a freelance journalist based in London who regularly travels to Russia.

To the Editor ...

Baitul Mukarram Mosque

Sir, Every year thousands of Muslims offer Jumat-ul-Wida (the last Friday Juma prayers of the holy month of Ramadan) at Baitul Mukarram National Mosque and the authorities concerned make special arrangements for the prayer.

This year however there were some exceptions. No shamiana was erected over the concrete open floor space of the center of the mosque protecting the Musullis from the heat and rays of the sun, water supply was inadequate in the southern ablution chamber and the eastern and north-eastern ground compound were condoned off as some development and construction works were going on there.

We are surprised and shocked as to why the Masjid authorities failed to erect shamiana as

usual and ensure sufficient water supply. And couldn't they start the construction and renovation work after the observance of Jumat-ul-Wida and Eid-ul-Fitr keeping in view the convenience and interest of thousands of Musullis?

Would the Masjid authority kindly ensure better services in future?

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Solar-lamp network in rural areas

Sir, The story of the pilot project on DC lamps in an off shore island in Patuakhali (DS, Dec 22) made interesting reading, not only for the novelty of the news, but that the village women were assembling such battery-lamps locally. Some photos and diagrams would

have helped the readers.

It is not clear why the micro solar-power projects are not taking off in the LDCs. In Bangladesh there is the solar energy project in Narsingdhi, but evaluation reports on the economic feasibility and local assembly are not forthcoming. The solar unit is much more convenient than constant and regular recharging of the batteries.

Since the capital investment is comparatively higher, some big NGOs can band together and provide solar dish networks in isolated areas, and run the micro electric rural project on monthly rental or hire-purchase system, to be later transferred to the private sector with injection of more investment. The government's keenness is also not evident, as no master plan or pilot projects have been announced, perhaps in the absence of lack of interest by the

foreign donor agencies. There should be more awareness and interest in solar power electric entrepreneurship.

AMA
Dhaka

GCC meeting in Bahrain

Sir, Your January 1 article, Gulf leaders urge Saddam to prove "peaceful intentions" claims that, in 1999, the UN offered to end sanctions if Iraq allowed weapons inspections to resume. With respect, this statement is inaccurate.

Security Council Resolution 1284 of December 1999 offers to "suspend" sanctions on renewable, 120-day periods, as long as Iraq cooperates completely with weapons inspectors. This is not equivalent to "ending" sanctions: with a mere suspension,

few outside companies would risk investing in Iraq, since sanctions could be re-imposed at any time. Furthermore, although Iraq did not cooperate fully with UNSCOM, the sanctions were not scaled back even when Iraq did cooperate. Therefore, Iraq has little reason to believe that the Security Council will ever lift sanctions, whether weapons inspections are allowed or not. Denis Halliday, the former coordinator of Iraq's oil-for-food program who resigned to protest the sanctions, has said that resolution 1284 was "designed to fail." Whereas the earlier resolution 686 allowed sanctions to be lifted when Iraq was disarmed, resolution 1284 only offers renewable suspensions of the sanctions, and even this depends on an undefined level of Iraqi cooperation. Therefore, 1284 is actually a step away from the eventual lifting of sanctions.

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Congratulations, Mayors!

Sir, It is nice to notice the news of Chittagong and Dhaka placed at 37 and 39 respectively out of 40 cities in the AsiaWeek Quality of life Index (Dec 15, 2000). Congratulation to both the mayors for their achievements! Before they are delighted over the result, I will request them to see and study how this was done and also notice the differences with other competing cities!

Tanzia Choudhury
Chittagong