

MOVING INTO THE 21ST CENTURY

by
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TRANSACTIONS

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With just a few years to go for the dawn of the 21st century a good number of intellectuals and others are talking about the conditions that are likely to prevail as humanity moves into it. Being in the period of transition it is necessary for everyone to take stock and act in the appropriate manner in each situation.

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(Prof. N. A. Nikam Memorial Lecture Delivered at the Indian Institute of World Culture,
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By H P . Pandit

It is more than a privilege for me to participate in this function on honour of the memory of Prof. Narayan Rao Nikam. For I had a personal relation with him though we met only once. That was when he visited our Ashram at Pondicherry. He showed me a manuscript of his paper on Sri Ramana Maharshi and we had a short discussion on it. I was deeply impressed by his humility; his vast learning wore lightly upon him. He was the very cream of Indian culture at its best. Later I happened to review one or two books of his on the Upanishads which were very profound and he promptly wrote to me in acknowledgement.

I am glad that the endowment for this lecture, annually, has been entrusted to this renowned Institute which is being run so efficiently with all its multifarious activities. I am struck by the way in which the entire premises have been maintained. And that is not what we could say of many institutions in our country. Most start impressively; but there is no follow up and things begin to deteriorate .within a few years, I congratulate the INDIAN INSTITUTE OF WORLD CULTURE on its selfless service of this high order.

The theme of our meeting is : moving into the twenty-first century. Let me state at once that the twenty-first century is not something that is to dawn upon us after December, 31, 1999. It is already upon us, steadily emerging all over the world. All the negative developments in the present society involving so much of pain, suffering and destruction are really the labourpains of the Birth-Being at a crucial juncture in her evolutionary .course. Things are not happening haphazard, they are following a charted route. Let me explain.

There are, in our ancient texts like the Veda and the Upanishads, some apologues and legends which are symbolic and presage events that are to happen in the future. Some put in the picturesque form certain truths of the manifestation of the universe viz, the Holocaust of the supreme Purusha. The Taittiriya Upanishad narrates the story of Bhrigu son of the sage Varuna which has relevance to our discussion today. Young Bhrigu approaches Varuna and requests him: 'Father, may I know of Brahman the Eternal?' The sage tells him: 'Concentrate and find out that from which all beings arise, by which all are sustained and into which all enter in their passing.' Bhrigu retires and does the tapasya—austerity—of concentration. He comes back and reports to his father: 'I have found the Eternal which is Matter, annam. For from Matter all come into being, by Matter all are maintained and into Matter all dissolve in their passing.' Varuna nods and tells him: 'Go and concentrate further.' The boy does likewise and comes to announce that he has found the Eternal in Prana, Life. For from like all come to birth, by Life all are sustained and into the universal Life all disappear in the end. He is asked to concentrate still further. The exercise is repeated three times more and Bhrigu discovers that Mind is Brahman, Knowledge is Brahman, Bliss, Ananda, is Brahman. The parable pinpoints the truth that Brahman, the Eternal, is manifest as Matter, as Life, as Mind, as Knowledge, as Bliss. It is a progressive manifestation. There is first the material order, a material world based upon the principle of Matter. The universe is perceived and experienced in terms of Matter: material laws, material processes, material objectives. This cycle is followed by another in which the Life principle is underlined: vitalism. It is an age of adventure, of the assertion of the Life-Spirit. Next is the age of Mind, manomayas a civilization built on a mental basis, such as ours is. The Mind is supreme and it is the gods of the Mind that are worshipped. But this cycle too exhausts itself and calls to be replaced by

another based upon a still higher principle. Toynbee analyses the history of as many as twenty-one civilizations of the era of the Mind and concludes that the mankind has reached a blind alley and can save itself only opening to the reign of the Spirit.

If you look around you will find that there is a gigantic breakdown of all the ideals and the institutions based upon them that had ruled humanity for the last several centuries. In the nineteenth Century, the mechanistic theory of the universe held supreme. The universe was treated as a mechanism run on two principles, Matter and Mind, Nature and Super-nature. It was looked upon as a huge machine which had only to be operated intelligently, But today that theory of Cartesian Dualism holds no longer. It is a holistic approach that is steadily gaining ground. The Systems Theory is an illustration of the development. All us a Whole; everything is a part of the Whole and can be understood only in terms of the rest of the Whole. Nothing can happen in one corner without having consequences in the other. What is true of the human organism is equally true of the universe. The Bootstrap theory underlines the same truth: you cannot tighten one part of the strap without at the same time pulling up all the other parts. Thus the universe is more an organism than an organization; it is growing order, not a set mechanism. This truth of holism has entered almost every field of life, health, education, polity, social sciences and all else. The rigidities of mental classification and organization no longer hold; there is demand for more of plasticity, suppleness, adaptability in our approach and handling of problems. In other Words the call is for Freedom in every sphere of life. And freedom is the characteristic feature of the Spirit, the Soul.

In his perceptive analysis of the psychology of social development, Sri Aurobindo points out how in the early beginnings of the society there is a preponderance of an intuitive mentality. The rational mind is not -yet. Men sense, instinctively, the presence of mighty powers in Nature which govern the lives of all creatures. Behind outer appearances they perceive subtler presences which they call gods and develop means of communion with them. This is an unmistakable feature of the first societies all over the world. A symbolic and religious spirit pervades every corner of life. This intuitive age is followed by the conventional age in which people do things because their forefathers did them; the truth of things recedes into the background. All goes according to set conventions. This era lasts long but inevitably it is met by a -questioning as the human mind develops. The age of the individual, the age of revolt ensues. Traditions are given the go by and men claim freedom to live their own lives. But vary soon it is found that unmitigated freedom for the individual has not meant an unmixed blessing. The leaders of thought try to fathom the true springs of life, the vertities that alone can ensure an order of harmony, unity and peace. This is the beginning of the subjective age which is marked by an intense effort to go below the surfaces of life and find the hidden motives of action, thought, feeling. This is best evidenced in the literature and arts of the contemporary society such as ours. But this can only be a threshold. The superficial probings by the intellect of man cannot deliver the goods. One has to go deeper and discover the true bases of life in the depths of the soul. That ushers in the last and the crowning age, the spiritual age. The spread of spiritual and semi-spiritual movements all over the world are a standing testimony to this intention in evolving Nature. All the main features of the age that is passing have broken down. There is an unmistakable trend towards decentralization, de-massification. The individual is coming into his own, refusing to be a faceless member of the collectivity. Education is undergoing a drastic change of outlook and procedure. Developments in the field of health point to the tapping of the inner resources in the being of man. There is a turn from exploitation of

natural resources which are limited, to the human potential which is unlimited. The oil crisis has forced the planners and leaders of societies to shift from hard technology based upon fossil-fuel to soft technology based upon alternate sources of power viz. wind, water, sun. The awakening of the environmental sense in present societies has added a new dimension to the situation. The patriarchal pattern of society is yielding to an order of equality of sexes. The consumer movement is fast spreading challenging the rule of the monopolist agents of commercial exploitation. And above all there is a growing realization that peace and unity in the world cannot be established firmly by external means. There has to be a psychological support, a spiritual basis for the achievement of these objectives. In a word there is a distinct turning away from external imposition to an inner choice. The movement is towards freedom and equality of opportunity. Unity is no longer confused with uniformity.

There has been a pronounced shift of emphasis from the external to the inner side of man. It is being recognized that the diseases of the present civilization like tension, split-personality, cancer, cannot be tackled with surface remedies and researches are under way to explore the inner realms of the human being. Meditations, contemplation, asanas, self-healing, are becoming part of the accepted modes of better health. The fact of consciousness is being increasingly accepted and the old notions of the unconscious, libido etc. are being reexamined. The evolution of consciousness is no longer a hypothesis. Seers like Sri Aurobindo, thinkers like Teilhard de Chardin, have developed elaborate philosophies and techniques to demonstrate them; primitive conceptions of creation by God from his heaven above are no longer held as gospel truths. Religious superstitions have faded in the face of the authentic knowledge made available by dynamic philosophies of life. Religion, institutionalized religion, with its dogma and ritual, is no longer the dominant force it once was. Divisions created by these organized religions are being replaced by perspectives of universal vision. Spirituality is steadily replacing the outmoded religions. Man is being linked directly to his Maker. The establishment remains only a relic of the past. There is a growing acceptance of the truth that in the nature of things, there cannot be one religion for all, one way to God for all. Vivekananda's dream of each individual having his own religion is coming true. The occult side of life is being explored by scientists of Yoga and the secrets of hidden Nature are brought into the open. Yoga therapy, healing, telepathy, telekinesis and other techniques are expanding the range of man's control over nature. In the spiritual field itself there has been a marked change. The old ascetic, world-shunning, traditions are giving way to more positive approaches. The spirituality of today is affirmative. It accepts the reality of life, of the world, and seeks to change its character in terms of the higher verities of freedom, harmony, unity. It is holistic in character. It excludes nothing, but accepts every element in life and subjects it to spiritual transformation. It is integral in its approach. Each advance upward is followed by a descent to take up the lower elements for integration. Thus the spirituality that is spreading now restores the dignity of man and gives full value to life in this world. It seeks to realize and manifest God on earth instead of seeking an escape into the heavens beyond.

Side by side with the growth of this comprehensive vision of spirituality, there is an enlarging of the frontiers of Science, Scientists of note no longer swear by Matter as the sole reality; their researches have stumbled upon far reaching discoveries and there is a pronounced change in their accent. New phenomena in areas of outer and inner space have compelled them to declare that they are unable to be too positive in their conclusions about the nature of the ultimate reality. Science is steadily nearing the domain of spirituality. It is only a question of time before both science and spirituality join hands in the consciousness of man. In fact this is going to be one of the bridges leading from the old to the new Age.

No longer do we hold that East is East and West is West and never shall the twain meet. Technology and the explosion of knowledge such as has taken place during the last three four decades or so have brought the whole world together as it was never before. They speak today of a global village. The patterns of life are no more distinct in the old sense. There is a continual interchange between the peoples of the East and those of the West. One World is not a dream anymore. The human consciousness is expanding, the world is shrinking.

We spoke of decentralization. Till recently, by and large, centralization was considered essential for effectivity. Whatever the outer appearance, real power was invested in a few or a single authority. That was perhaps inevitable in a period of growth. But Nature is always known to vary stages of concentration with those of dispersion. The present trend is definitely towards a loosening of the centration. Everywhere we find evidence of collective leadership. The age of the messiah is over. Hereafter it is the rule of participatory democracy in politics, distributed leadership in other spheres of life. More and more numbers are being inducted in centres of power. Even in the field of religion and spirituality, the days of unquestioned Guruhood are over. The Guru — at any rate the authentic Guru — is no longer a spiritual despot. He is a mid-wife, a channel between the seeker and God. The onus of responsibility rests upon the shoulders of the individual seeker.

In other words the individual is coming into his own. The latest trends in education are towards making the child the centre of the enterprise; it is being increasingly recognized that the aim of education should be to awakes and develop the potential of the student instead of turning out mass specimens of tailored graduates through the slot-machines of collets and universities.

We referred briefly to the growing equality of sexes. This movement is no longer confined to the West. Even in the East, there is a general awakening and acceptance of the right of women to participate in all spheres of life with absolute equality with men. It has been realized that legal provisions are meaningless without economic security. More and more careers are being thrown open to women. Religious taboos to the disadvantage of women are not tolerated any more.

Thus man, woman and child are emerging out of the prison of traditions, customs inequalities imposed by vested interest. The prospect of freedom for the development of personal potential is exciting.

What about the accumulation of dangers such as nuclear weapons, the catastrophes threatened by uncontrolled environmental pollution, the rabid growths of fundamentalism in the different parts of the world? Is it not true that we are being relentlessly pushed to the brink of disaster? A legitimate question. It will be safe to say that there is an acute awareness of the dangerous possibilities inherent in the situation among the leaders of the powerful nations and brinkmanship has become a fine art. We can trust to the strong instinct of survival in humanity to assert itself. Besides there is the Hand of Providence that is shaping the future of the world on large lines; we must recognise that to an over-all view mankind has progressed remarkably well across the centuries and with the growing enlightenment that is unmistakable on the globe, we can safely predict a greater future for humanity.

We are undoubtedly at a crucial juncture in the evolution of the earth-consciousness. Occultists will tell you how natural calamities like earth-quakes, floods and other disasters are the result of mighty heavings of Nature in her effort to effect the transition from the old to the new.

We have discussed some of the characteristic movements which are gathering momentum pointing to the advent of a new era in human evolution. Whether we call it the aquarian age or the beginnings of the spiritual age, it marks the birth of the twenty-first century. In the measure in which we rightly understand the implications of these changes and adapt ourselves to them, we get ready for the new era. Electronics, computers, space technology — all these are parts of the on-going process on different levels. There is no going back on &sp advances made by the various sciences in the material, biological, mental and allied spheres. They are to be appreciated as legitimate expressions of the manifesting Spirit, the explorative workings of the powers of the Soul for the fullest development of the potentialities of Nature in all her aspects.

Let us not lose ourselves in the shifting complexities of the present. This is, after all, a period of transition. If we put our weight on the right side in each situation, we will be hastening the establishment of a new order based upon the soul-values of truth love, harmony and oneness. We need to be moving, forward and not backward. It is the law of Nature that one cannot go back and live in the past which has no relevance to the present, nor can one stay put in any ideological organization of the day. The compulsions of Time are inexorable. And if only we summon our best will and true sincerity we are capable of meeting the demands of the evolving Spirit which will not be denied.

