

THE FUTURE OF MAN

By Indira Gandhi

In December 1982, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, then the Prime Minister of India, delivered this Besant Lecture at the 107th Annual Convention of the Theosophical Society in Adyar, India.

It is always a pleasure for me to come to Adyar, the home of beauty and harmony. The Theosophical Society is a fellowship of seekers. Its contribution to India's cultural and political rebirth is well known. The gentle strength of the quest of Truth enabled it to withstand opposition and misrepresentation in its early years. Perhaps that is what attracted my father to it. Several devoted people have been associated with the Society, none more remarkable than Annie Besant. What an extraordinary person she was. A woman of dedication and fervor, she made India her home and eloquently and courageously espoused the cause of Home Rule and what may be called the rule of the spirit. The Society tried to correct the West's assumption of superiority, and Mrs. Besant herself was a powerful supporter of the emancipation of women. She was elected President of the Congress, the highest honor we could then bestow.

My family was closely associated with Mrs. Besant. She helped to mold my father's thinking at an impressionable age, and probably the message of Theosophy had much to do with his universalism, his reverence for different faiths, and his repugnance for any kind of fanaticism. On this occasion we remember also Madame Blavatsky and Col. Olcott.

I must confess I am rather overawed by the subject you have set. I have studied neither philosophy nor science. I cannot even say whether what knowledge I have has come my way through study, or has seeped in through observation, experience and intuition, through the mind or in other ways. I hope you will forgive me for not giving the learned lecture the occasion demands and, instead, do some loud thinking.

Time is our creation, a convenient method to map our lives. The past and the future both live in us. In Mrs. Besant's lifetime thoughts of the future concerned India's freedom from bondage, the basic unity of all religions, the new internationalism and the marvel of science. Today India is independent but our minds have not attained the heaven of freedom for which Tagore prayed. Internationalism is an inescapable fact, permeating, even pressurizing, all aspects of life, yet that has not contributed to greater understanding or fellow feeling. Science is opening door after door towards greater knowledge, but its offspring, technology, has grown faster and has a life of its own.

Way back in 1926 my parents took me to a film in Geneva. The story was of a group of scientists and industrialists who had devised robots to do the tedious work of

their factory. The robots became more and more effective and one day they revolted and drove out humans. We thought the story fantastic and amusing at that time. But no longer is this a fantasy. Machines are becoming more powerful and even more independent. An American magazine, as you probably know, has named the computer as "Man of the Year." Computers can now calculate, coordinate, translate, correct their own malfunctioning, serve as memory banks. In the advanced countries they are fast becoming constant companions of school children and housewives, no less than of people in business, industry and so on.

Today's prophets are the writers of science fiction. It is astounding how many of their projections are now part of our reality. Knowing of my interest, people send me articles and books dealing with such developments. I have read that "every gun will have its integral computer which can indicate a magnified day or night view of the target zone. It can ask for the target to be identified on a viewing screen, decide what sort of projectile should be fired, aim itself, make allowance for wind speed and direction, then fire on command." Can you imagine the terror of it? Even more amazing is the work in cell biology, cellular genetics and biochemistry which add up to genetic engineering. Individual human genes can be put into other organisms. The creation of proteins from which living matter is constructed means that new strains can be introduced in grains, animals and even in humans. Soon doctors may be able to carry drugs to specific parts of the body to attack specially identified diseased cells. Scientists are working on artificial intelligence, i.e. computers which will not only duplicate our hearing and seeing, but be able to think creatively. You have probably heard that a computer has written a novel. The possibilities and permutations are endless. What glorious potential for good; but alas, in the hands of the ignorant or evil minded, what devilish power for the manipulation of the human personality. Apart from such manipulation, isn't there possibility of changes in the structure of humans as they are today?

The human [race] is an evolving species. If we could meet our earliest forebears, would they or we recognize any kinship? The question which is agitating many minds is whether the human race will survive. The Bhagavad Gita says all that is born must die. Does that apply to individuals and not to species?

The species that have survived on our earth are those which have evolved and transformed themselves in consonance with changing conditions. Those that could not, became extinct. So, if machines take over more and more tasks, certain human faculties may change. If the computer performs brain work, what will happen to the human brain? And as yet no one has the answers, only questions.

These material developments are a far cry from rural India, which does not yet have a wide enough base on which to build. Furthermore, we are saddled with the

beginning of an industrial revolution which is becoming obsolete. Can we leap over the industrial age to attain the computer age? And if we do not, are we not once again endangered by the enormous increase in power of the affluent and the technologically advanced nations? As it is, even the French Minister for Culture said in UNESCO, "The financial and intellectual imperialism no longer takes over territories. It takes over our consciences." Questions regarding these matters, and those concerning what is called the "proper" use of science and technology, must be asked.

In all ages there have been predictions of the end of the world. Ours is no exception, but there is an added urgency. So far as we know this is the first time that humans themselves have fashioned such powerful instruments of destruction which have the capability of annihilating, if not all the earth, at least a major part of it. Einstein pointed out; "Radioactive poisoning of the atmosphere and hence annihilation of any life on earth has been brought within the range of technical possibilities." Since his day the size of nuclear stockpiles has grown. Nuclear weapons are stored in many continents and are carried under the seas. Between a future and no future the difference is the distance between two adjacent buttons, the right one and the wrong. Actions taken and substances made to fulfill some real or imaginary need have imperiled the earth's defenses.

Is extinction foreordained and inevitable? Is human civilization a brief and passing phase, or does it have in it something of the effulgence of eternal energy? Through *tapas*, Ravana and some others in our mythology gained erudition and might, only to challenge and try to destroy the very ones from whom they had received those boons. Is that the role of the technology created by the human brain, only to overpower humans? Shall we wait for a *deus ex machina*, or does the answer lie within ourselves? Looking into one's innermost recesses, where there is no demarcation between the conscious and the subconscious, is a task we cannot delegate to anyone else. Only when we know ourselves can we know others, only when we change ourselves can we attempt to change others.

Indian thought has taken a longer view in terms of *Kalpas* and cycles of birth and death, of creation and destruction, as episodes in the long history of time without beginning or end. The magnitude, magnificence and mystery of our universe were felt by, and therefore known to, our ancient sages who spoke of *anoh aniyam*, *mahato mahiyan*—minuter than the minutest and vaster than the vastest. The more mathematical terms of contemporary mathematicians do not more clearly illumine the distance and the relationship than what the sages had perceived. Western Science is now discovering for itself some of our old truths. One of the most interesting of these scientific quests is to find whether the scientific world as perceived and interpreted today is indeed the whole of reality.

It is already a giant step for Western Scientists to acknowledge that there are elements, forces and influences beyond our present sight and touch, and unclassified by experiment; that there is far more in our universe than we can know. Our ancient concepts also underlined the unity of life. Many of society's ills are the result of formulating ideas and viewing events in isolation of time and place. Economic and political issues, social and cultural matters, are all part of the giant problem of human civilization. Similarly, local and national problems are now increasingly linked with international situations, even though the connection or the influence may not be discernible. Our world is well rounded in shape and concept. It is beautifully balanced. In Nature nothing is wasted, everything serves some purpose, and when it doesn't, it goes, either with a bang or a whimper.

How have human beings already changed? In the affluent countries, one reads of drug taking, child battering and other problems of alienation. There is a sharp increase in violence, and what is shocking is that most of this is being accepted as normal. People do not feel concerned about crime except as an item of news or a subject for photography.

We must eradicate poverty and its accompanying misery. But should comfort and convenience cost us the joy of, and wonder at, life? I have seen tribal folk come straight from a remote area, so poor yet so spontaneous and colorful, full of laughter and song. We help them to raise their living standards and soon the singing is no longer from the heart. Visitors from the most advanced countries often comment on the smiling faces and hospitality they find in India, in parts of Spain and other such places, contrasting this with their own societies.

Citizens of industrialized countries and many of our own are no longer concerned in any intimate way with the world around them. And, what is more, they look down upon those who have or who consciously want to keep that close relationship. Even if we wish, we cannot go back to the even tenor, the leisurely pace and the fresh air of non-industrialized living, but that need not mean the snapping of ties with nature and its ways. No matter how fast the pace, there is always time for a sympathetic thought, a kindly act and a glimpse at the poetry around us and of course, love.

Life for my family and for the myriads of others who gave their all for the freedom struggle, was hard physically and mentally when seen from what is supposed to be the point of view of comfortable, carefree living. But what was that compared to the honor and sense of pride in being a part of so great a cause? There is a proverb—I believe it is Spanish—"Take what you want," said God. "Take it and pay for it." Fair enough. We paid willingly, for we know it was worth all that and much more. We also knew that freedom was not a panacea for our ills, merely the opportunity to work for the lessening of evils, not only poverty but superstition, barbarous customs and all

that degrades, divides, narrows and discriminates. We felt, in the words of Harindranath Chattopadhyaya, that "by fighting for our people, we are fighting for the world." One cannot weed out a seed so deeply embedded in one's being. Yet in today's cynical world, so interested in uncovering the worst in everyone, such passions are rejected as meaningless.

Human beings use only an infinitesimal part of their awesome potential. Western scientists have mainly concentrated on one or two aspects. Intellectually humans are stretching their reach on earth, in the ocean and the outer space. Physically they are continuously breaking endurance records. But the spiritual aspect has been left largely dormant. Indians are not more spiritual or less materialistic than any other people, but as a race we respect, though sometimes it may be only in lip service, the higher values. We are a land of sages, some known and scholarly, some unknown and without formal education. A rare few are teachers, reaching out to the people, but most are content to remain remote. Because of this exclusiveness and reluctance to pass on to others, so much knowledge has gone unshared, so many have been denied the spiritual touch, the healing touch, and the benefits of other special endowments. Ultimately of course each one of us is alone in fighting life's battles. Individuals must discover and develop their own inner resources and find their own light. Not all can undertake this journey within. If they do not get enlightened guidance, they turn to ritual and superstition or to those who offer shortcuts whose effect also will be short-lived and superficial.

All is not dark. In every direction there are stirrings of awareness for greater and more equal opportunities to the underprivileged be they brown or black peoples, tribals and other sections who have long been suppressed, and women everywhere. In the midst of increasing mechanization and uniformity, people yearn to assert their individualities. There is growing concern for a new understanding with the environment, not exploiting but using the forces of nature, enabling our globe to regain its recuperative powers. The movement for peace and nuclear disarmament is gathering momentum. But these are still mere voices, lacking coordination and effective action.

We are not for impediments to progress. There can be no going back. We do ask for the ending of old discriminations and the avoidance of new ones. Neither the strong nor the weak can prevail by themselves. It has to be a common endeavor. Only in a spirit of cooperation for mutual benefit can peoples and nations meet these formidable challenges. The responsibility to create an atmosphere conducive for such thinking, the easing of tensions, divisive tendencies and confrontations, rests on every conscientious man and woman.

Adyar is identified with the great banyan tree. The banyan is a symbol of the ever living, ever growing, ever renewing. "To the theosophist nothing that is human is

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foreign," said Annie Besant. Let us weave the wisdom of the ages into new knowledge and give consideration to values that are timeless, to bring out the true worth of humankind, and reinforce its humanity.
