An Archeology Of the Future
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Passengers fly from Los Angles to New York at 2,000 miles per hour - not in a plane but in airborne trains bulleting through vacuum tunnels. Postal system deliver mail in minutes to any PhoneFax in the world - Electronically. A one currency is issued for all European nations. Africa's poor and hungry burgeon to mind-numbing numbers. Indian's 750,000 villages are networked via satellite and Macintosh IX computers, making educational, business and scientific resources accessible in any regional language.

Last year our January issue showcased ten Megatrends affecting Hindus worldwide. This January is the dawn of a new decade, so we thought you might like to journey into the future. We explored the work of several major think tanks and journals dedicated to science's best guess about the century ahead. We also talked with Dr. Rashmi Mayur, a Bombay-based ecologist and futurist.

While most of us think of tomorrow as 24 hours away, to futurists that's yesterday's news. The extrapolate 10,50 or 100 years ahead. The most reliable predictions come from think tanks like the Rand Corporation in California, the Club of Rome and Israel's Twenty-First Century and in developing and Eastern Bloc nations they are in government and universities.

What kinds of things do these archeologists of the future see? Not one sees, or dares to see, a nuclear war. Most tell of two futures - a bright epoch for developed nations and a woeful vision of overpopulation, hunger and disintegration for the developing world. They project a future of tiny machines, so small they can be injected into the bloodstream and set about to destroy diseased cells. They discern more complexity in all fields and more cooperation among the wealthy nations,

less of an "us and them" consciousness, but a distressing and widening gap between those who have and those who do not. "It's scary to think about," said one, "While a minority of humanity will live in a high-tech fantasy world, the majority will live in over-crowded, filthy cities lacking basic services." Experts have even coined a world for such cities: apocalyptic megalopolises.

Futurists are a fickle group, unable to decide whether the future is bleak and ends in the demise of homo sapiens or whether we are on the threshold of increasing leisure time, knowledge and power. If they are not sure if it's a terrible time, they are agreed this is a terribly important time in human history.

They predict that the wealthy among us will have houses that are computer controlled, brewing the morning coffee before waking us, dimming lights in response to increased sunlight, informing mother the baby's diapers need changing. Education will be compute-driven too, with fewer classrooms and more individual pursuit of knowledge. Textbooks will be replaced by hypermedia, a mix of data, sound and video through which the student can explore history, art, science, literature, you name it. Television will become a center for learning and two-way communication. Jet propelled passenger ships will ferry people at 60 miles per hour from Tokyo to Hawaii, a-day trip costing one-tenth the 8-hour flight. Robots will fight fires, farm land, mine the seas and perform large-scale construction tasks.

Healing arts will change, too. Diagnostic medical analyses will take place in the home. A technological toilet will monitor urine chemistry and offer pre-programmed advice, including a dietary change. Traditional healing arts such as India's Ayurveda and China's acupuncture will gain stature in the West, though the USSR's infamous medical system will not get much better.

Solar and fusion energy will replace expensive and polluting oil-based fuels. Entire deserts will be converted to sun-collecting farms, as superconductivity permits long-distance transmission of energy. Hydrogen, the simple and abundant atom available from any water source, will be our cheap and clean fuel (three bills are now in the US Congress on this).

More and more, things of value will be intangibles, mere bits and bytes which can

be transmitted anywhere in the world. As these things - software, video, non-print publications and scientific formulae - by pass customs officials and import restraints, they will force new ways to define and control worth and information. Fewer people will be able to hold what they produce in their hands. And fewer of us will toil in offices or factories, while the home will become an increasingly popular work place.

The boycott of Africa from the world's technological know how will likely continue. In New Delhi Satesh Seth of the Department of Science and Technology says of India, "Turbulence, dissatisfaction, social agitation and shortages shall abound." Coping with an aging population will increasingly tax human resources, leading to a consensus against heroic life-saving measures. "The Arab world will lag in technological development because of high illiteracy rates and a lack of trained personnel," says Mahdi El Mandjra of Morocco.

Faced with an "unstoppable diversity" of all cultures as people and information break through accustomed boundaries, some futurists see an enlightened pluralism unfolding in which people celebrate their differences of language, dress and belief. This effect could be amplified when fifth-generation computers now being programmed in Japan begin automated translation of all major languages, making the literature and knowledge of one society available to all. A less rosy scenario is described by Francisco Sagasti of the World Bank, "Improved access to information form other parts of the world will have some drawbacks. The threat of cultural Western homogenization may trigger a retreat to traditional ways of thinking and even religious fundamentalism, such as the Islamic revival that swept Iran. New communications technology may also fuel discontent in the world's poorest nations, as people contrast the lifestyle they see on television with their own."

As individuals Hindus need to think more about the future than we presently do. Just as today's jet pilot must look farther ahead and respond faster than yesterday's bullock cart driver, so we face too much change to be unprepared. Plan for change, prepare for it, embrace it with eagerness, hope and reverence. Inform children what is happening in the world, how it affects them and the family, how a life of dharma can provide solutions to the ever-increasing problems people face. Hindu leaders need to ponder what lies ahead too, and train themselves in the art of strategic planning. Think tanks of experts in all fields should be founded and funded, where critical assessments can be hammered out and then widely disseminated and discussed. Such resources, focused explicitly on Hindu communities in all nations, will be invaluable tools for us all, maps to help us chart the course ahead.

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