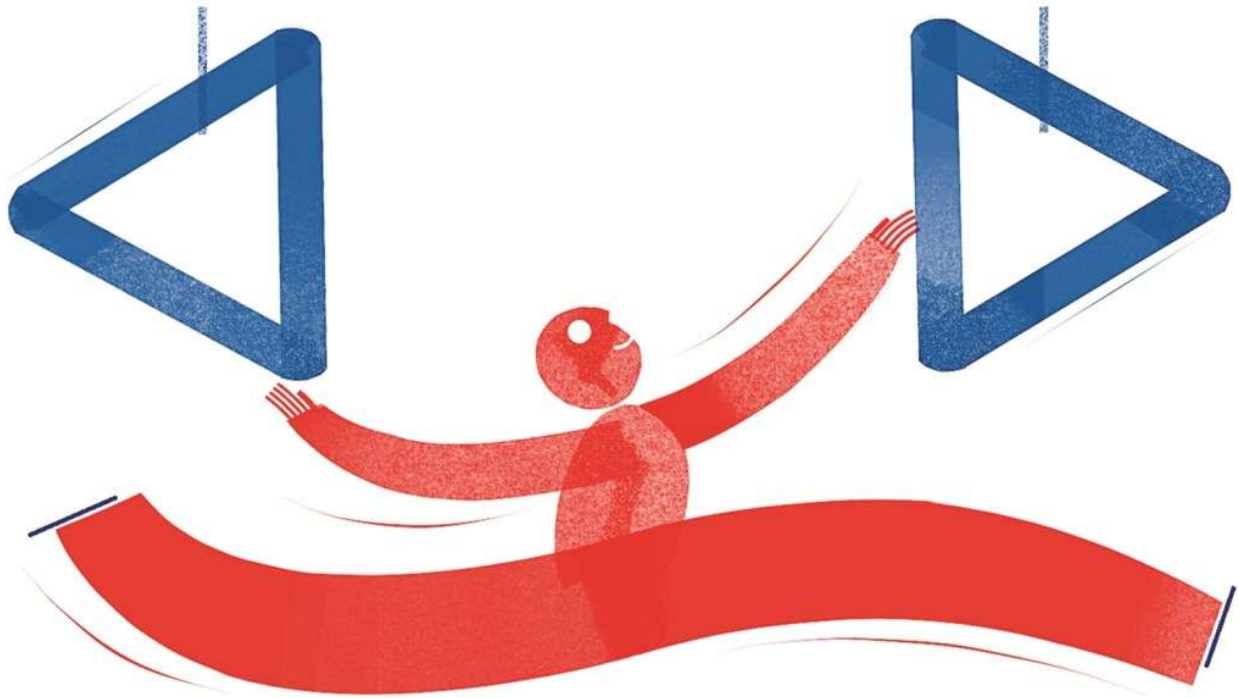


In 21st century, we need to be saved from 20th-century ideas meant to save us

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Europe's past and America's present have ceased to throw light upon our future. Western modernity is stale. Yet we dress it up daily to serve to our children



If we have the confidence to think beyond Western modernity, we could turn the 21st century into a bhuta-kaala in the best sense of the term. (Illustration: C R Sasikumar)

We live in a bhuta-kaala. Forget the jazzy self-images of the 21st century. We actually live in a tired century that belongs to bhuta in both senses of the word — past age and time of ghosts. We are living inside the haunted ruins of a building meant for a different age and another part of the world that we still mistake for our house. Every day, a manmade disaster appears on our timeline — destruction in Nepal, genocide in Gaza or the tantrums of Donald Trump — and reminds us that the grand designs that continue to rule us have mutated into bhas, grotesque inversions of what they were meant to achieve. We need to be saved from the ideas that were meant to save us.

About two centuries ago, Alexis de Tocqueville described his predicament thus: “I find no parallel to what is occurring before my eyes; since the past has ceased to throw its light upon the future, the mind of man wanders in obscurity.” We are in a similar spot, in between two worlds — one that is dead and another yet to be born. Except that we insist on carrying the cursed old furniture to the new world. Europe’s past and America’s present have ceased to throw light upon our future. Western modernity is stale. It stinks. Yet we dress it up daily to serve to our children.

Take democracy, that charming ideal of realising every human being's quest for self-rule. The revolutionary idea of the last century has by now turned into a standardised global template called liberal democracy. The idea of popular sovereignty has been translated into representative government based on majority rule through competitive elections. In our collective struggle to protect this minimalist version, we shy away from facing the harsh truth that the regimes we call democracy have achieved self-rule only for a few, in select places and that too for a short period of time. More often than not, modern democracy or its clones have produced disempowerment of the people in the face of an omnipotent state, unaccountable party oligarchy, corporate-controlled media and money power. Populism, majoritarianism or elected autocracies are not maladies of modern democracy. These are the natural consequence of the mechanism that we have accepted and celebrated as democracy.

Turn to the next grand template — the nation-state — that we now treat as the natural political home for citizens. This arises from human beings' innate need to belong, their desire to be free from solitude. In modern times, we realise it by carving the world into political communities called "nations". These imagined communities serve as the loci of state power, solicit our affection and demand our undivided loyalty. Again, any unvarnished history of nation-states would tell us that these political communities have produced more othering than belonging. Except for anti-colonial nationalism like ours, the sense of we-ness has usually been produced by inventing an enemy within or at the cost of hatred for neighbours. In this century, nationalism has become synonymous with chauvinism and jingoism, if not bloodthirsty supremacism.

The third dream sought to achieve freedom from wants and realise our basic search for material well-being. We still call that dream by its 20th-century name — development. This was translated into continuous economic growth, driven by mechanisation, industrialisation and urbanisation. By the beginning of this century, capitalism was the only engine available for this kind of growth, based on private property, free markets and the global movement of capital. By now the consequences of the pursuit of this dream are for everyone to see. The promised land of prosperity has arrived for a tiny slice of humans at the cost of the rest of humanity. The standard of living for a vast majority may have gone up, but so has the minimum bar of human needs. By now there is no doubt that even this partial success of the dream of development has caused ecological destruction whose cost is to be borne by our future generations, non-humans and nature. Crony capitalism and destructive development are not the deformities of the model of development that we have inherited; these may well be its features.

The fourth quest is about freedom from ignorance and falsehood. The modern regime of science responds to this need by laying down a specific protocol that all knowledge must follow. This format insists that any claim to knowledge must be objective, value-free, replicable and validated. Technological success serves as the proof of truth. This regime of science, the new religion of our age, has bifurcated human knowledge into domains that have registered hitherto unknown advances and domains where existing knowledges have been erased or downgraded. The narrowing of the human mind, its fragmentation into technical domains of expertise and Western intellectual hegemony are the inevitable consequences of this knowledge regime.

And finally, we must mention the human quest for happiness, for inner peace. Institutionalised religion is not a modern invention. But the “secular age” inaugurated and universalised by Western modernity has transformed the nature of all religions. For most parts of the world, it has not meant the decline of religion but a more conscious enumeration and demarcation of religious communities and their mutual competition. This has also resulted in the rise of commodified and fundamentalist expressions of religion. You can argue that modern humans are materially better off and more knowledgeable than before but it would be hard to claim that they are happier than their predecessors.

The word bhuta has a third meaning that refers to the basic elements of the universe. Hindu religious texts identify five such maha-bhutas: Earth, air, water, fire and sky. The 21st century invites us to identify five such basic elements of human nature: Self-rule, belonging, well-being, truth and happiness. And it offers us an opportunity to redesign fresh institutional templates to respond to these five elementary quests. Such a redesigning need not begin in thin air. Templates of Western modernity that have dominated for long now face an atrophy, thus offering us an opening. Many older forms in the rest of the world have survived and can still germinate. And we have seen the rise of innovative hybrids across the world. If we have the confidence to think beyond Western modernity, we could turn the 21st century into a bhuta-kaala in the best sense of the term.

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