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**A CENTURY OF WAR AND PEACE, HOPE AND
DESPAIR, ORDEALS AND TRIUMPHS
1914 – 2014**

BY



ACHALA MOULIK

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While remembering the century - 1914 to 2014 – the words of the novelist Charles Dickens spring to mind -“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.”

A new age is born from a dying one. And never has this been so dramatically enacted as in the last century of the second millennium AD. The first millennium AD collided into the second when Asia met Europe in the Holy Land in an encounter called the Crusades. It was not the first encounter; commercial connections had been established earlier in the first millennium AD. Arabs had brought ideas on agriculture, irrigation, and manufacturing three centuries earlier to Spain and Sicily. Asia and Russia witnessed disruption of their settled ways with Mongol and Turkic invasions that carved out new empires and new creeds.

By contrast the second millennium was a process of gradual change, of decay and renewal and slow evolution of institutions and ideas. The first salvos of defiance were fired on 14th July 1789 when Parisians stormed the Bastille and challenged the established order. The mood and temper of the new third millennium was probably born on that distant summer day.

From the signing of the Treaty of Vienna in 1815 to early 1914 Europe enjoyed a century of unprecedented prosperity and stability. Colonial empires had brought immense wealth to Britain, France, Belgium and Netherlands; Germany followed suit in the race for empires in Africa and Middle East. But beneath the surface serenity, the dogs of war were straining at the leash. Austro-German militarism, Franco-British imperialism, and Pan-Slavism ushered in a frantic arms race as the three camps readied themselves for mortal combat. Neither the Kaiser, nor the Tsar or the British king visualized that their *dance macabre* would spell their end and usher in an age where they would have no place.

However, the early months of 1914 were filled with a promise of spring. The privileged European world lived in a fool’s paradise, ignoring the seismic tremors on the ground, where dancing shoes and horse hooves trod. Notwithstanding the arms race, building of dreadnoughts, compulsory conscription in the armies, the grab for Africa and the Middle East, the four emperors –Emperor Franz Josef I, Kaiser Wilhelm III, Tsar Nikolas II, King George V- whose

nations ruled most of the world, called themselves Nicky, Willy, Bertie when they met at royal weddings. The Germanic Kaiser refused to countenance impertinent demands of the Slav people in his realm, the Russian Tsar periodically let loose dreaded Cossack troops on hungry protesters, and at English horse-races, fashionable society laughed at women suffragettes who tied themselves to railings demanding equality or death, while the natives of Asia and Africa, peasants and labourers across the world bore intolerable burdens of poverty and disease. Those who were stirred to rebellion, as in India, were put down without compunction.

Everything changed at Sarajevo on 28th June 1914 when a Serbian student, Gavril Princip, killed the heir to the throne of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his morganatic wife Countess Sophie who were visiting the troublesome province of Bosnia-Herzegovina that Austria had annexed in 1908. An outraged Austria issued a humiliating ultimatum to Serbia who accepted almost all the terms. But Austria wanted this *casus belli* to crush Serbia; she declared war on Serbia. Germany seized this opportunity and supported Austria. Russia knew that Serbia was a mere pawn in the game. The Austro-German alliance wanted to wage war against the growing and formidable power of Russia. Russia declared war on Austria and Germany. Britain and France, allied to Russia by the Entente Cordiale, eagerly followed suit. By August 1914 the two armed camps were at war. Thus began World War 1.

Amidst the jingoism and vows to crush the enemy and amidst declarations of patriotism, one man saw the outcome of this conflagration. Lord Grey, British Foreign Secretary lamented : “The lights are going out in Europe. We shall not see their likes again.” He was right; disaster descended on Europe which changed forever.

Never has a war altered the world as did the First World War. The mystique of imperialist supremacy dissolved in muddy trenches where the flower of European youth perished. The economic Depression in the western world brought a realization to the subjugated nations that empires were not invincible, while people within these empires questioned the structure of their societies. Egalitarian ideas of European philosophers awakened them to their rights – social, political and economic - as citizens.

The economic consequences of war, as Keynes said, were formidable and demanded remedial measures. With the eventual end of colonialism, old imperial powers were on the retreat. A new power, Nazi Germany, rose from the ashes of defeat, presaging a new and bigger world war. In the matching choreography of violence, human suffering was terrible. Atomic explosions in Hiroshima and Nagasaki changed the very idea of warfare and morality.

By 1945 the world scene changed significantly. There was a global shift of power to the Soviet Union and USA. Dismantling of empires led to creation of independent nation states. As new nations in both Eastern and Western hemisphere developed economically, once more there was a diffusion of power as well as wealth. Within these nations, in turn, there were changes; migrations from villages to towns, from predominance of agriculture to industry, from ignorance to education, from disease to hygiene. Higher expectations and aspirations altered the mood of developing nations.

To assist these aspirations, science and technology became hand-maidens of humanity. Advances in medicine and diagnostics have raised longevity and eradicated ancient scourges – cholera, smallpox, polio - while holding out cures for cancer, and other life threatening diseases. Development of prosthetics has given mobility and limbs to the disabled.

Exponential progress in communications, connectivity and convergence has brought the world closer and has created inter-dependence among people spread across continents. One man's prosperity can be another man's prosperity as well, and vice versa. The depression of 2008 was a demonstration of this. Connectivity has united the youth of the world in values, habits, dress and aspirations. There appear to be *no strangers* at the gates.

But *there are* such strangers. Migrants from poor societies and war-torn lands to prosperous ones have altered demographic patterns. In some Western countries a quarter of the population are foreigners, yet to be assimilated, yet to absorb the ethos of their new homes. While wishing to share the economic pie, they cling to their old identities with a degree of intensity that make them unwelcome in their adopted homes.

While the end of colonialism has subdued the ferocity of nationalism, it has failed to curb racial tension, ethnic strife, tribal blood-letting, and a religious fanaticism that has not been experienced since the wars of religion in 16th century Europe. Religious fundamentalism and oppression of minorities has unleashed terror upon the world. Though the nuclear deterrent has prevented world wars, vicious battles have been fought throughout the century on pretexts of self defense, of preserving a certain way of life, of spurious causes that are a travesty of humanism.

Tragically, violence has been an able partner in technology. Satellite imaging can help kill enemies, real or imagined. Remote controlled detonators can blow up innocent bystanders. Even petty crimes are facilitated by technical devices.

The quest for wealth has led to unbridled mining in India with serious consequences. Health has deteriorated in these areas, bringing new maladies. Indiscriminate use of Dynamite has weakened the earth and facilitated earthquakes and deforestation has removed topsoil and opened the flood-gates. Industrial emissions have clouded the air and sky.

Five centuries ago the French writer Rabelais foresaw this when he said “science without conscience is the ruin of the soul”.

What will save the soul of humanity? Will it be the determined efforts of men and women who work tirelessly for reducing human suffering, who strive to bring peace to strife-torn places, who serve humanity disregarding dangers to themselves, who venture out into unknown terrain to help the sick and the deprived. Such men and women have always been there. On them rests the future of civilizations.

Ms. Achala Moulik, I.A.S.(Retd.), Former Education Secretary, Government of India.