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Quiet revolutions

Is 2012 the year when life as we know it will come to an end? Predictions and warnings of such dire nature have been circulating in newspapers, internet discussions, and even Hollywood (with the blockbuster film 2012). Many have pointed to alleged prophecies by Nostradamus, or by ancient indigenous peoples, to back this claim.

Yet others say that 2012 will be the year when humanity achieves a great transformation — in consciousness, in relations among people, and in our relationship with the earth. Many Mayan indigenous people interpret their calendar system to suggest that there will be a new ‘cycle of the sun’ starting in 2012 (or soon thereafter), which will take humanity on the road to peace and harmony. Closer to us, the self-styled Guru Kalki Bhagawan says it will mark the end of the Kaliyug, bringing enlightenment to humanity.

Predictions are hazardous, not only for the predictor but also for those who come to believe in them. One can, however, speculate based on known trends. What could 2012 bring in relation to some of today’s key concerns, such as environmental degradation and climate change, and food and water insecurity?

Dominant trends of the last few years point to one inescapable conclusion: humanity is on a rapid descent into collapses of various kinds. The economic crises of the last few years are one very visible indication, and most economists who are open-minded and not driven by the dogmatic assertions of governments desperate to show a brave face, agree that these crises are not going away. Parallel, and connected, is the ecological crisis, most dramatically illustrated by the climate change-related disasters that are taking place around the world.

Less visible but as devastating are its quieter dimensions, including biodiversity and ecosystem destruction leading to declining fish and crop productivity, and loss of livelihoods for hundreds of millions of people. Also parallel, and also connected, is the increasing insecurity that thousands of communities face in obtaining safe, adequate food and water. This has been dramatically illustrated in food riots, and in the increasing number and scale of conflicts relating to water-sharing. The prediction of some analysts that World War III will be over water, may not be much of an exaggeration. Or if it’s not water, it will be energy; already the US has waged wars over oil, and attempts by the rich and powerful of the world to meet their energy demands by turning food producing lands to biofuels, or massive energy plant installations, is only likely to generate further conflict. Add to this the growing tensions around the widening chasm between the rich, enjoying obnoxiously wasteful levels of consumption, and the poor, not finding even enough to eat.

But then there are counter-trends. Increasing awareness about the above issues itself is one, as is a rapidly growing mobilisation of people to protest the continued inaction to deal with these crises. Climate change talks in the last few years have been dismal failures, but they have also generated massive movements of people advocating changes in ‘business as usual’ policies, and actually doing things on the ground. The

same with other inter-governmental failures, such as the Millennium Development Goals that promised an end to poverty and hunger and illiteracy and other ills; or the pledges made at the Earth Summit 20 years ago.

This latter is the subject of a global review process, culminating in the Rio+20 meeting in mid-2012. Not much hope is being put on the official meetings there, nor on the ‘Green Economy’ vision that some United Nations agencies are putting forward. But a range of exciting peoples’ initiatives at Rio+20 promise more hope, such as a Permanent Peoples’ Assembly as a parallel process to the governmental one, and Peoples’ Sustainability Treaties to work on various alternatives beyond the meeting (<http://rio20.net/en/ejes/ethical-pillars-of-the-new-21st-century-civilizations>).

The new year will also see more mobilisation around the radical visions that some countries are putting forward, for example, the Bolivian proposal on conservation of forests which puts their biodiversity, water, food, and community livelihoods as central values, rather than their economic value that many other governments and private corporations are pushing in the context of climate change treaties. And the Ecuadorian proposal for a Universal Declaration on the Rights of Nature. It will also be the year when a high-level panel established by the UN Secretary General will deliver its report on global sustainability.

Back home, too, there are interesting developments. A task force has been constituted to develop a low-carbon development model for India (though its interim report does not challenge many fundamental problems with the current model), and the Comptroller and Auditor General is beginning to develop frameworks for auditing the sustainability of India’s development. Most important, though, are the thousands of grassroots initiatives on sustainable agriculture, decentralised water management and renewable energy, community-based enterprise and marketing, urban sustainability, locally relevant education and health services, and locally governed planning. Many of these are quiet revolutions in the making, with little media attention, but they are as important as the more visible public churning that is taking place on issues like corruption.

If such counter-trends can be strengthened in 2012, through local, national and global actions, we have greater hope that the Mayan vision of transformation will come alive in the next few years.

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The views expressed by the author are personal

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