

Genes and development

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ISLAMABAD: Developing countries like Pakistan must start allocating funds for genetic research if they want to compete the Western nations in the 21st century which is the age of genetic engineering.

This was stated by Dr Sohail Inayatullah of the Queensland University of Technology, Australia, in a seminar on "Trends transforming the future: genetic, the net and new metaphors of the self" here at TVO House Friday.

Dr Sohail Inayatullah said that cancer treatment cures you but germ line intervention is fatal affecting future generations. He said along with the genetic and net technologies, multiculturalism also contests the idea of the traditional self and the modern self, of self as work-oriented. He said that metaphor of the self is materialistic and simplistic where gene is the key factor. He referred to the "net children" whom he referred to "dot com generation" who talk of not thinking but "downloading an idea."

He said changing self would be like changing clothes. He said that one cannot rule the possibility of a person changing genes according to their flavour in contrast to what their parents had thought and done including changing the gender after every few years in future. What does that mean for the forces of tradition, he asked. It will be a big question how to have some sense of rooted self that is still movement or universal oriented, he said.

He said the debate like fiction stories also deals with weapon potentials. It may be possible to have genetic weapons protocols as such armament will cause fatal diseases in human beings of particular races though the US state department does not uphold the idea. To use the post-modern metaphor, they would be "downloading the race" he said.

Dr Sohail said that the main problem is not right gene but interaction with others. He said we might have better metaphors in future provided that are not like magnetic tapes in the mind. He said in future, history of diseases would also change. A CD-ROM containing your genetic information will be the first attraction for insurance companies. He said the largest population had 20-year average and now it is 40 thanks to science. But this also means in 25 years Germany and Italy will become poor in human resources, as the dynamic age groups will be reduced. He said US would meet the challenge by immigration.

He said one way of dealing with the situation could be a multicultural society with soft Islam, soft Buddhism etc. The net is going to eliminate middleman that was the basis of capitalism. He said the networking of the world would cause transformation yet not perceived. Big difference between the North and the South would seem minor once the gene culture sets in. He referred to a study predicting human beings born with wings to fly with. He said the question is who will decide: the public or the few.

In question hour, a participant said that the next divide would be genetic divide. A retired diplomat observed that nuclear weapons were going to damage the developed countries more so they tried their level best to forestall nuclear proliferation. But the genetic bombs will inflict more damage on developing nations so the West is not serious to meet the challenge. Another participant referred to genetic terrorism in future. A lady participant stressed the need of democratising technology globally. A participant said that Pakistan needs a genetic bomb that kills Hindus only and spares Muslims of India in any future war though the speaker said that science has not so far been able to add ideological dimension to genetics.

A participant said that sparks in the research could be used to excite our young generation to study it and find what was appropriate for us. A journalist observed that the superior being may have both the sexes in one go but like earthworms but its importance would be reduced to the insect having the same qualities in the face of mechanics of gene culture.