

If we are to believe the latest reports from medical laboratories, immortality is within human reach. By the next century, the prospect of living up to 5000 years might well become reality. Does this mean that it's time to bring out the bubbly and celebrate the conquest of the final frontier of science? Certainly not. There can be nothing more dismal than the possibility of living indefinitely. What makes life so fascinating is its transient nature. It is the knowledge that death can come calling anytime and anywhere which gives such poignancy to our lives. This finds expression in Wallace Stevens's wonderful lines: "Death is the mother of beauty; hence from her. Alone, shall come fulfilment to our dreams and our desires". The idea that death is the key to life is also the foundation of Martin Heidegger's philosophy of being.

Leaving aside these philosophical considerations, the predictions of immortality are at best based on dubious science. The scientific fraternity rarely takes seriously the prophets of immortality, who say that one can turn back the biological clock or at least keep it constant. But even if we were to assume for a moment that the majority of humans will live beyond 5000 years, that would spell disaster for mankind. At a time when the earth's resources are stretched to the limit, one shudders at the thought of an ever burgeoning human population. If human longevity is artificially enhanced, all governments would eventually go bankrupt trying to provide even the most basic amenities to their citizens. Those who harbour ambitions of emulating Methuselah are best advised not to tinker with the natural cycle of birth and death. Instead, they should savour every moment of life as death might be waiting in the wings.

In the 1970s, Chipko activists in TehriGarhwal used to sing a song praising their hills as paradise, the place of Gods, where the mountains bloom with rare plants and dense cedars. Chipko began as a movement to save the indigenous forests of oak and rhododendron from being felled by the Forest Department. It soon became a wider assertion of local rights to the environment, protesting against inappropriate policies imposed on the hills by a distant plains based campaign for regional autonomy. The state of Uttarakhand was formed in 2000, and many hoped that the region would finally chart a path of development that was in harmony with its unique ecology and culture.

The recent catastrophic rain, landslides and floods, and the consequent human tragedy, make us look more closely and critically at Uttarakhand's development narrative. The story that is told- the state can produce wealth and welfare by using natural resources to the fullest- grossly misunderstands the nature of Himalayan ecology. First, the Himalayas are known to be geologically active. Earthquakes and glacial lake outbursts are natural hazards that accompany these processes. But the destructive power of these events has been eclipsed by man- made hazards that exponentially increase the instability of the Himalayan landscape. Cutting mountains for building roads often trigger landslides. Blasting tunnels through the mountains for river projects destabilizes an already fragile geology. The pressure of water in dam reservoirs induces tectonic shifts. Multiplying the risk of earthquakes. Second. Like the mountains. Himalayan rivers are dynamic entities. Blocking and diverting their path with dams and tunnels. Dumping close to the river channel has disastrous consequence. The cloudburst that precipitated the recent disaster was a natural event, but the toll taken by the floods and landslides was made much worse by Uttarakhand's development strategy. It has become clear that our understanding of nature is poor, our ability to control and manipulate it poorer still. Nonetheless, we chose to forge ahead with building more concrete infrastructure because in the short term, that's where the money lies. This is a warning to us that development has to incorporate the precautionary principle, anticipating potential harm and acting prudently to prevent it. This means a conservative approach to construction in the hills.

Forget goodwill and equality when it comes to our friendships. Research has shown that when comes to picking friends, we feel most comfortable in the company of people who we think are on the same level as us socially or even slightly below us. It doesn't matter how well you're doing as long as you believe you are better off than your friends and neighbours, you find your life more fulfilling.

This new research might come as a shock to many, but if we are completely honest with ourselves, we would realize that we have felt slightly threatened by a friend's success some time or the other. Even with past friendships, the real reason could be that at some point, one of you may have felt a bit superior or inferior to the other. Even if we don't spell it out, most friendships have a lot going on below the surface.

As much as we may try to deny it, or pretend otherwise, most of us are easily impressed by a great job, a large bank account or rising social status when it comes to picking a partner or friends. In both cases, we want people who are there for us and reinforce our own self worth. So more often than not, the question that is running through our heads is, how can we choose a good friend, if we were not as good ourselves?

But it's not all about the outward tapings. Very often it is the emotional bit that is relevant. For instance, a woman losing vast amounts of weight may get not every complimentary feedback from close friends, no matter how fabulous she looks. She could be accused of being too thin or even arrogant suddenly. What has happened basically is that as her friendship status has gone up, she is forcing her friends to re-evaluate theirs.

Education is the beginning of empowerment. It is a key to happy and satisfactory life for the special children, who are cruelly segregated from the society. In India, there are around 35 million disabled children but less than one per cent have access to education. The most pressing needed is to bestow the precious gift of education on them and let them be the bearer of torch towards the path of progress

Special children, without education, are a burden on their families as well as society. The crude discrimination between normal and abnormal children leads to severe psychological disorders, giving birth to frustration which we all know, is not healthy for any progressing nation. Several NGOs are working towards the upliftment and betterment of such children, but again a grave problem that is faced by the volunteers is lack of motivation in such children and even their families. Those who are from the well-to do families may not find themselves in this menace, but those belonging to the lower economic section feel that the effort to obtain education is simply wastage of time and energy not to say anything about money.

Another factor which is hindering the path of education for such children is the lack of opportunities or facilities available in schools. Even if the parents do send such children to school, the schools themselves are sadly lacking the facilities to cater to their needs. The government has started the integrated system of education' that enables the disabled to study with normal children in normal circumstances with few facilities for them. Yet again hard mould. Special schools have also been established by the government and NGOs to meet specific needs of such children but their number is pitifully low as compared to the normal schools.

There is an urgent need to strike at the roots of their neglect to enable the disabled.