

CRYSTAL BALL

## Dog-eared Floppy Disks, Anyone?

When humankind opens a new door, it does not necessarily close all the others. All the medical triumphs of this century have not wiped out alternative medicine, instant and processed food has not taken away the pleasure of fresh food, nor have speedy cars, trains and planes dented the pleasure of walking.

SHASHI DESHPANDE

The end of a century is certainly a significant moment in human history: a marker for historians, a time of introspection for humanity and of excitement for individuals. But the hysteria that is gathering round the end of this century, the end of the millennium as it is wrongly considered to be, goes beyond the thrill of standing on the cusp between two centuries. One senses in it the echo of a fear of facing a deep abyss. As if what lies ahead is the dark unknown. As if from this point nothing will ever be the same. Which is why as a writer I am put in the position of defending the future, not of literature, but of the printed word itself. Will the printed word survive the onslaught of the electronic medium? Will this make it redundant?

To be fair, the pace of change and its comprehensiveness makes this fear valid. And, considering the fact that printing itself was a revolution that displaced other things, it seems logical that it, in turn, will have to give way to something else. If my son in the US can read the Bangalore paper almost at the same time as my son in Bangalore does, it seems inevitable that we will soon turn to the Internet for all our news and entertainment. One has to agree that at no point of time in human history has life changed so much as in the last 50 years - and the computer stands at the vanguard of all this change. When I see the mushrooming of computer classes, the Cyber Points inviting you to use the Internet, to chat, get your e-mail, it seems very likely that this medium will soon drive out everything else.

But this is Bangalore - the Silicon Valley of India. There is a world outside and beyond this where computers are neither so prevalent nor so accessible. A world in which it is impossible to think that every home will soon have its computer. But even if it did, would we forgo the pleasure of reading the newspaper to get the news from the Internet? Do we read only to gather information? I can think of a million reasons why a newspaper or magazine will continue to hold its place, apart from the fact that for many it is a ritual essential to starting the day. You can carry it everywhere (even to the loo!), you can read it while waiting for the bus or train to arrive, read during the journey, read it when stringing beans or shelling peas. As for books, if I am to think about what they mean, I have only to remember a visit to Australian writer Elizabeth Jolley's home. As we picked out her books from the shelf, things tumbled out of the pages - cards, letters, reviews - all of them connected somehow to that book. These were not just books; they were storehouses of memories. My own books, specially the ones often reread, are like a journey back through time. Old cards kept as markers, a line on the first page saying where I bought the book and when, the dates and times of subsequent readings scribbled on the last page. Yes, books are visible, palpable treasures. Friends and companions. We want to see them on a shelf, to exult over them; being aware of their existence on a hard disk or wherever else they are stored can never be the same.

The simple truth, almost forgotten, is that books, newspapers and magazines will not disappear unless we decide we no longer want them. We can choose. "We are a spectacular splendid manifestation of life," says scientist Lewis Thomas. And elaborates his statement by adding, "we have language, we can build metaphors, we have affection...and above all we have music." Indeed, yes - music, literature and the arts. To imagine that we will choose the path of swiftness, efficiency and utility and reject everything else is to negate this part of us, a part that is connected to the core of our humanness. Even as we look for speed, efficiency and convenience, we find in ourselves a yearning for something else. There is always the Don Quixote in all of us, seeking something beyond the mundane, the reasonable, beyond comfort and ease, even. And therefore, even if it costs more, even if it occupies space. I would choose a printed book, enjoy its look, its feel.

"Do you use the computer for writing?" I am often asked. Yes, I do, but only after I have written out the entire manuscript by hand. The touch of the pen, the feel of it on paper, the irregularity of my handwriting, the words trailing away when I'm tired, the narrow margin densely packed with symbols only I can understand - all these mirror, not just me, but the chaos and waywardness of life itself. So too when reading - to hold the book in one's hands, to feel its existence, is part of the act of reading. Touching, feeling, responding are intrinsic to the human experience. To presume that the young, who are so wholly absorbed in this 'e-world', will reject everything else, is to ignore the fact that all humans hunger for something more than information. It is to ignore the fact that for most thinking humans, the quest for information ceases at some time or the other and we realise that ideas matter more.

When humankind opens a new door, it does not necessarily close all the others. All the medical triumphs of this century have not wiped out alternative medicine, instant and processed food has not taken away the pleasure of fresh food, nor have speedy cars, trains and planes dented the pleasure of walking. And space exploration notwithstanding, the earth remains to us the centre of the universe. So too with computers; they have their use (for editing speed and efficiency I know the computer scores), but they cannot replace everything else.

A few streets from our home is a community reading room which in the evenings is crowded with rows of people reading the morning's newspaper. When I see them, I know they are not there just for the news; these are a few moments of relaxation and self-indulgence. I know that even while they read, their other senses are open - they can glimpse the green of the park beyond, they are aware of the walkers, of the low hum of their conversation. This is as much a part of their reading as the news gathering itself. Shall we surrender these to the frantic pace of 'e-living'? Or rather, will we?

I think not.

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