

UNCOMMON GROUND ROHINI NILEKANI

RISING FROM THE ASHES

The airy café at London's British Museum, just across a hallway exhibiting newly discovered mummies of sacred animals from ancient Egypt, was the perfect place to chat with John Elkington about the Phoenix Economy.

John, who coined the phrase "triple bottom line", to include not just profits, but people and the planet, now believes that a new business ethos will rise from the ashes of the current crisis. A report recently published by his new company, Volans, suggests that a new Phoenix Economy is self-assembling, even as various governments are spending money shoring up dinosaurs of the old order. This economy is heralded by the work of various pioneers—and the report lists 50, who are innovators, entrepreneurs, investors—all of whom are focused on providing social and environmental solutions where markets and governments have failed.

You would expect that the chosen 50 would belong mostly to the social entrepreneurs category. But while there are enough of those, the report includes names of multinationals that are change makers as well. The report was the result of multiple surveys within and without the corporate world and does not claim to be a scientific study.

Yet, its cautious optimism is a refreshing backdrop for the many thinkers and activists who have begun to get beyond

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the blame game to ask, "What Next".

There seems to be a growing consensus that this economic crisis is not like the others, that it is in fact a discontinuation or a disruption that will generate profound social change. Growth at any cost is an idea that has finally lost its legitimacy, and this time, the main drivers will be the social inequity and massive ecological debt that we are up against.

So how will the new economy look, if indeed it emerges? Many hope it will return markets to their servant status from the recent master megalomania. In a forthcoming book, Rajni Bakshi details the journeys of many entrepreneurs and communities that take back the market space to serve society. And in an essay

entitled "After Capitalism", Geoff Mulgan describes the periodic accommodations, driven by depression, war or the fear of revolution, by which capitalism has survived. The next great accommodation, which could well be under way, will be shaped, he says, by the triple pressure of ecology, globalization and demography.

Elkington, Bakshi and Mulgan, among others, all point to similar examples from the world of capital, of work, and of consumption that they hope will pull back capitalistic market economies from the brink. There are the new technologies, for instance, from low-energy systems to open-source software. There are fledgling movements for alternative currencies that recalibrate the idea of money itself. There are slow food movements, organic collectives, and the eco-footprint mappers. There are people and communities in every part of the world redefining energy use, communication, education, healthcare, mobility, and much more, that call on business and the state to respond urgently.

But what about India? Will the Phoenix Economy emerge in India? Will business as unusual combine with government as unusual to create markets that better serve both society and the environment?

There are many Indian examples in the Volans report, including Aravind Eye Hospital, Seva, Himanshu Parikh Consulting Engineers, etc., that come from the ethos of fixing the future rather than repairing the past.

In India, since we have not finished building the public infrastructure needed for a billion people to live in dignity, we luckily still have many clean choices ahead.

These choices, however, will have to be guided by a moral compass that is discussed and articulated. If the ecology and

the economy have to meet, it needs a strong ethical bridge across the divide. Phoenix Economy entrepreneurs understand this well. One of my own favourite stories is that of Harish Hande and Selco, which seeks to provide energy solutions to the poor. Harish's business model is based on an intimate understanding of his clients' economic situation and aspirations, and is rooted in a conviction about renewable and distributed energy sources. Together, it provides a robust model for what the future holds.

If we want economics as if people and the planet mattered, however, we also need politics as if the future mattered. Right now, this appears world over to be a stumbling block, especially in the democratic framework, where short termism becomes a by-product of the election process itself.

At home, the election campaigns have yielded depressingly little discourse about the future. But maybe it will be a resurgent idea of the world post the financial crisis that will also reshape the politics and the idea of the state.

Globally, new institutions look ready to emerge to manage the new challenges of the 21st century, whether of carbon emissions and trade, financial regulation, migration or the oversight of new technologies. In India, it might be the grassroots political structures that will define the debate. In either case, it is time, along with the idea of a phoenix economy, to define a phoenix polity as well.

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