It was one of those lazy winter afternoons when the Sun is inordinately warm, you don’t have much to do and the world (or at least my 10,000 year-old city, Benares, which sufficiently fulfils my definition of the world) feels cosy and content. As is my wont, I was loafing by the banks of the Ganges, stretched out on an ancient stone slab, watching the river flow merrily along the ages-old waterfront of my beloved city.

A dog was gently fanning my face with its tail, in the hope that I would share a bit of the jalebi I was biting into. A bull I was sort of friends with was making half-hearted attempts at bullying me into giving it the leaf plate I was eating the jalebis out of. I was idly scratching its horns, and thinking of the possible molecular mechanisms by which l-5-hydroxytryptophan could be phase resetting the neural output of the suprachiasmatic nuclei. Neither I, nor the dog, and definitely not the bull, expected a distortion in the space-time continuum to open up right above my head. The jalebi, however, gave it away by quietly unravelling its complicated spangles, and neatly re-looping itself into an infinity spiral.

“Oh no!” I yelled, dropping the plate of jalebi (much to my chagrin, and the delight of the bull and the dog). I ran pell-mell for the by-lanes, hoping to confuse the search beam that would follow out of the rift, now visible as a shimmering distortion in the air. The distortion persisted over my head as I ducked into one of the lesser-
known lanes of Brahmanaal, wavered and slipped around a particularly space-time-distorting arrangement of temples and yantras around the Siddhakshetra, and caught up with me just as I was about to enter the zone encompassed by the fifty-six Ganeshas of Varanasi, where I would have been almost impossible to lock on to.

“Not again!” I groaned, then started swearing in choice Banarasi as the search beam locked on, and the rift became a shimmering swirl of colors all round me (and I became invisible to onlookers, not that there was anyone within sight anyway).

The rift compressed, I felt the familiar sensation of being tugged agonizingly apart into uncountable sentient beings and excruciatingly put back together again, lost consciousness for a second, and then woke up with what I can best describe as a whump to find myself face to face with 200 kilos of solid muscle that thumped me heartily (OUCH!) on my back and yelled, “Welcome back, Grandpa!”

“Shut up, you oaf!” I grumbled, massaging my head and back simultaneously and wondering if I had been rendered dyslexic again, as I had been on my last trip. I tried doing some algebraic sums in my head, gave up because of the throbbing, and glared balefully at the 40th generation of Basu Roy Chowdhury’s after me. Or tried to, my eyes weren’t focusing properly.

“I thought the Council decided that you had nothing to learn from the past?” I sneered. “So, did they pull your funding or did they let you off with another written case report?”

He looked abashed, but only for a fraction of a second. “They did pull my funding, but the resources our clan has are...considerable. The one-rupee coin from British India that you gave me last time alone fetched a billion work-hours and two billion affirmative opinions. Moreover, we are the most ancient family documented – that gets us sufficient social disbursement to fund a dozen of these trips a year – maybe more if you didn’t struggle so much each time we tried to fetch you.”

I looked at him irritably, aware that travel to the future, which didn’t actually exist from the point of view of the past – was theoretically impossible, and this being one of many possible futures, I was living in a realm of constant existential dread, where the wag of a tail or the fall of a pebble back in the Benares of 2015 could completely obliterate this probable eventuality of a future.

Let me, then, explain from the start.
We are from an ancient family, one that ruled and lost kingdoms every five hundred years or so. Our historically documented lineage (admittedly liberally spiced with glorious PR descriptions of completely non-existent good deeds of my ancestors) goes back eleven hundred years from 2015, and our family diary and family tree from 1810 was the sole surviving document of lineage in the year 3067. In a society where the upkeep of a person was dependent on the number of generations he could trace backwards, this apparently made us trillionaires by current...er...2015 standards.

Let me explain further. The main currency in this future is the work-hours and per-person opinions a person can command to be used for a particular purpose. A genius capable of multitasking easily makes a billion opinions and half a billion work hour credits in a year. Which exactly pays for someone willing to actually, biologically, cook one meal for him if he fancies anything other than what his auto-cordon-bleu-chef makes him. A human-hand-tailored shirt costs a billion work hours, if hand-ironed as well, add half a billion opinion credits.

As soon as a child is conceived in this future (in a fertilization chamber, unless the parents were feeling adventurous enough to actually risk a biological birth and earn the three-billion-opinion credit reward), he, she, it, or a temporally variant combination of these, was given a frightening number of nano-implants in critical brain progenitor cell lines, which would automatically give him/her/it full access to all the knowledge in the world, replay any music or documentary at varying simulated sound qualities, would encourage thought patterns to flow in intelligent ways, remain in communication with whomever (s)he/it chose, share thoughts and cognitive processes across 3 billion brains (thus resulting in the most formidable cloud computer in the Universe), simulate pleasure (or lack thereof), character (or lack thereof), euphoria (or-oh, you get my point), and essentially be the same as every human on the planet.

Humans have the equivalent of IQ 800 (mine is 144, so they treat me like a one-year-old puppy). Thus, there are essentially no variations in humanity. Mostly, even bodies are bionic, and biological tissue is grudgingly tolerated because biology is more efficient than the most evolved synthetic processes when it comes to making a human brain.

What goes on in the brain is regulated by the Council (who invented some sort of immortality elixir and wisely forewent most of the implants), or, if the family is rich enough, by the head of the family. When a person dies, his recorded thought processes and experiences are added to the collective brain in a way that these processes are still capable of voicing an opinion. So, people not only have ghostly voices in their heads, they listen to them, being outnumbered by them.

Not that it makes much of a difference, since everyone is essentially the same, anyway. They had made me a sort of thinking-cap which roughly simulated some of the effects, but I had steadfastly refused to wear it for more than a second. It actually caused mental imbalances and variability in their brain cloud, so that some “individuals” had to be segregated and cognitively quarantined, as highly-valued objects of curiosity. Some cognitive pattern repositories belonging to the dead had to be deleted forever.

So, in this world of division-less conformity, the slightest variation is either prized or deprecated almost hysterically. My bloodline inherited a particularly persistent gene that resulted in variability in thought and the ability to foresee unexpected permutations and combinations, and could be traced back from 3067 to almost 1000 BC. Our family thus had the most concurrent opinion credits, including those of dead generations, on record. That, apparently, made my 40th descendant, and by proxy, me, the most powerful people on Earth, except for the Council. Which consisted of three of my kinsfolk and five other people who had relatives who at some time or the other either married into or fought with our family. Because everyone was honest – by design, not by upbringing – there was no despotism. No need for it, either. Why subjugate, essentially, copies of oneself?

My rather adventurous descendant, who has been accorded the rare honour of a name (Tamopaha, the name of my 30th forefather) experimented with the idea of bringing me to the future to impart first-hand knowledge of arcane religious practices and early attempts at collective consciousness. He had enough opinion credits to actually swing the deal, and since I allowed them to keep genetic samples from me, I enjoyed high favour in their society for a while. Also, I had helped add emotion and sensation profiles to their simulation systems that were superior to the ones they had. Apparently, no one wants to be pinched, tickled, or fed a chilly, and their simulations were subsequently a little bland.

On the sly, I made unwarranted additions to the family diary – which would survive – that revealed the locations of a few rare and extremely valuable artifacts, like a real ink pen. Well, they were honest. I can do a little business to ensure the well-being of my future descendants, right? It’s called evolution. Read Dawkins’s book.

So, I tapped my great-to-the-power-40th grandson gingerly on his bionic shoulder, ruffled what should have been his hair, and gave him a dime from 1994. He beamed.

As I relaxed my aching limbs in a zero-gravity-zone “bed” (which wasn’t the same as a good old four-poster), he quizzed me on the actual practices of Aghoris, the differences between nuances of mildly abusive slang in Kaashika and Bhojpuri, and
As the nameless intruder raised his hand, preparing to crush my great-grandson’s head, I let loose a roar that sounded shockingly loud even to me, leapt up, grabbed his hand, and punched him right below the left ear with all my strength ......................

by rage alone. He wanted revenge. He was coming....

For the most powerful person on Earth. Of course... Tamopaha.

I could sense him coming closer, entering the house. A moment of brief puzzlement as he detected my brain waves, and then I could feel some of the external stimulators in my cap shutting down. I snatched off the cap and fell prostate to the floor, hiding the cap under me.

He entered and looked us over, scowling. He held a heavy stone in his hands, and when he saw my brain processes taking over the body I had a flash of light from the thinking cap and fell prostate to the floor, hiding the cap under me.

As the nameless intruder raised his hand, preparing to crush my great-grandson’s head, I let loose a roar that sounded shockingly loud even to me, leapt up, grabbed his hand, and punched him right below the left ear with all my strength ......................

the actual locations, merits and demerits of the sweet shops of Varanasi.

I was holding forth on the comparative merits of Malai gillori as prepared by Kuber vis-a-vis the heavenly version Ram Bhandar made, when disaster struck. Tamopaha stopped mid-sentence, and slowly keeled over. He fell to the floor in an untidy heap, and I leapt up with alacrity. I could not get him to respond. The robotic minders he has all over his house scurried to him, clustered around him and moved back, looking forlorn. They wandered off to whatever they had been doing. I knew enough to know that his body should have automatically taken care of anything up to a stroke, and that an emergency team should have been there. Nothing.

I paced, waved my hands in front of what I hoped were security cameras (they weren’t, I learnt later; they were three-dimensional interconnected projectors of a sort which enabled someone to be present at two places at once almost physically). Nothing.

In desperation, I went to his desk. I put my hand on it. It responded to my DNA (they have an angstrom-level radiative diffraction analysis system for that), since it was pretty close to Tamopaha’s, and opened. I could see what looked like weapons (they weren’t; they joined and opened out into a flight module, which had weapons. I’m not always wrong). I could see a ball of solid gold. And I could see the thinking cap. I put it on and listened.

Their world opened up into my brain. The shock literally sent me mad for a brief moment before the cap adjusted my faculties and correctly integrated me into their brain cloud. I could sense brains being stifled all over the world. People simply keeling over, one by one. And I could sense someone gloating. He had taken over control of all the implants. His thought processes had been deprecated as bordering on primitive. He had bypassed his own controlling implants by that virtue, node was hooked up with – I couldn’t believe my eyes – what looked like a very slim QWERTY keyboard. The Council invaded my thoughts (much easier than with the cap, they occupied a body with semi-functional implants). “Do you know how to reset this?” asked a trilling, sweet, female voice.

“Yes, my little baby granddaughter, I think I do!” I chuckled back.

“Please think of me as the High Councilor. And get me a real teddy and a chocolate next time, okay?” she said. I laughed (the semi-functional body didn’t, very disconcerting). I hit Ctrl, Alt, and Del.

...And hurried back to my corporeal body. I took off the thinking cap and shook my head. I wasn’t having myself reset, by chance, eh?

Tamopaha blinked rapidly, and sat up.

“Rescued by your grandpappy, eh?” I kidded him.

“You’ve got to go, now!” he shouted at me.

“Don’t you mean thanks?” I yelled back.

“They’re coming for you! They know about the coin and the notes in the family diary! They want you for questioning! Gotta go! Now!” He made a gesture in the air, and the shimmering rift opened up above my head.

“Tell them I just saved the world. How much is that worth in real and future work-hours and opinion credits, eh? I own all of you now. Every single one of you will do as I say. And she gets her teddy and chocolate next time. Tell her that, you twerp!”

I stepped smartly into the search beam, making a rude gesture at my great-to-the-20th grandson, who stood there, slightly slack-jawed by the revelation. “My first decree is: you won’t freaking bother me again unless I consent to coming here! And especially not when I am having a jalebi, you numbskull! So long, haustorial appendages!” I laughed and disappeared in a swirl of colours.

He had the last laugh, though, since I re-materialized astride the back of the bull. The bull resented it severely. So did I.

Dr. Priyoneel Basu is Eyes High Postdoctoral Fellow, Hotchkiss Brain Institute and Dept. of Psychology, University of Calgary, Calgary, Canada. His Indian address is: S/o Prof. B.N. Basu, A-1/11, Gopal Kunj, Nariya-Lanka Road, Varanasi-221005, Uttar Pradesh; Email: priyoneel@gmail.com