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# The millennium myth

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**T**here seems to be a widespread misunderstanding that the 21st century or the new millennium will begin on January 1, 2000. It will not. It will begin a full year later on January 1, 2001. The reason is simple. A century has 100 not 99 years. This is 1999, ie, the 99th year of the 20th century is ending. The hundredth or last year of the present century will begin on January 1, 2000 and after one year we shall enter the 21st century. It will also be the new millennium since a millennium is of 1000 years counted since the birth of Christ. Two thousand years after Christ's birth will come to an end on January 1, 2001 and on that date we shall enter the new millennium.

Why has such a misunderstanding occurred? I believe the first reason is the presence of the number 2 in the date of the last year of this century. This is merely a fact of continuing and the error can be rectified in a moment if one goes back to the first century AD and counts up to 99. Clearly the year 99 AD was the 99th, not the 100th, year of that century. The hundredth year was obviously 100 AD. The new century started from January 1, 101 AD. Keeping this in mind one can rectify the error.

The other reason for the misunderstanding is that the computer industry calls January 1, 2000 as the millennium bug. That is because computers were dated with a view to economy of space. Instead of 1954, for instance, only 54 was used because the numbers 19 would have taken space which was limited in the early versions of computers. The prefix of 19 was taken for granted. But after 99 comes 100 so that the computer with only two numbers for recording the year will read 01-01-00. This is an absurd date since the year 1900 also ended in two zeroes and by itself two zeroes do not make any sense. Being absurd nobody knows what the computers would do. Everybody fears that they would crash or give absurd instructions causing bank balances to disappear and air crafts to crash. That is why computer experts started calling this the 'Millennium bug' and there have been hectic efforts to cure it. Because the term 'millennium' flew around many people assumed that the millennium too would change. The fact, however, is that the computers will change to feature 2000 and not 1900 but the new millennium will be ushered in a year later.

The third reason why people believe that they will enter a new century and a new millennium is that business and the media have promoted this

hype. After all goods sell better if you are celebrating a momentous event like the birth of a new century rather than only that of a new year—and the very last year of a century at that! Hence the hoteling trade, the gift trade, the greeting cards business and the whole entertainment lobby has created a colossal hype about entering the new century and millennium which is based on a miscalculation. Whether the industry will do the same next year when we really enter the new century remains to be seen. What face will they put on to this year's hype, one does not know. But obviously the industry will only gain if the same hoopla is repeated next year.

The year 2000 is an unusual year anyway. It is mistaken as the first year of a new century while

ence to the rise of the sun and the moon. When the sun rose it was the beginning of the day. When the moon completed its phase (ie, became full or came out for the first time again), it was month. Agricultural communities, close to nature, did not need the fixation of dates or hours. They lived according to the seasons and did not need to fix them.

Later, the quest for standardisation and permanence made it necessary to fix festivals exactly so that they would always occur at the same time. Dates had to be fixed in permanent period of time, ie seasons. The Julian calendar made this possible. We in Pakistan fluctuate between several calendars. Most people still begin the day at first light and not at midnight. They fast according to the lunar calendar and celebrate the Eid, which is changeable, ac-

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being the last year of the present century. Moreover, it is a leap year and will have 29 days in February instead of the usual 28. Why this happens takes us back to Pope Gregory XIII's reforms in the solar calendar made by Julius Ceasar in the middle of the 1st century AD. In the Julian calendar the year was of 365.25 days. This gives an error of 11 minutes and 14 seconds per year. This seems to be a minor error but in 200 years it amounts to a day and a half. This means that the calendar would keep changing and the feasts of saints would not fall on exactly the same day according to the season. The new Gregorian calendar, therefore, rectified the error by calculating a new value of it. This new value was 0.78. days per century. This meant that in 400 years there would be a difference of 3.12 days. The way this was adjusted was to add a month of 29 days to years divisible by 400. The year 1600 was divisible by 400 and now, four hundred years later, the year 2000 is divisible by 400 again. Thus we have a year with 29 days of February, a leap year, again.

All these strategies to keep the calendar constant show that all dates, all reckoning of time, is arbitrary. All that exists is a ceaseless timeless, infinite flow. But the idea of infinity is frightening and incomprehensible. Moreover, it is not practical at all. So, to avoid facing the mystery of existence and to carry out practical activities, time has been arbitrarily divided. The Egyptians were probably the first to do so and other civilisations followed.

The earliest reckoning of time was with refer-

cording to the cycles of the moon. The offices, which live by the Gregorian calendar, give two days holidays but hardly ever three to cater for the Eid falling after 30 days.

The tiller of the soil counts his months from an ancient Hindu calendar which goes back to 1000 BC. That is why he still talks of *Saun*, *Bhadon* (the months of rain) and *Jeth* (the month of heat). Modernity has brought the ticking clock but the ordinary Pakistani still lives in the Agrarian, pre-modern mindset. In this mindset the season is important as it is connected with food but arbitrary divisions of its are not. Time, after all, is an unending flow and it becomes a tyrant only when we enter the modern age. For most Pakistanis, then, the midnight of 31 December 1999 will be a non-event.

They will look at the heavens for rain for that is an event—a momentous event. And for those Pakistanis for whom this particular midnight is an event; perhaps the rain and the food which it creates are non-events. These are affluent and urban Pakistanis who do not have anything but contempt for the peasant who grows the food they consume in the parties held on December 31. And then there are other Pakistanis, believing that the celebration of the new year is immoral and un-Islamic, who will beat up the party-goers and attack their cars. They too have contempt for the peasant but for them the enemy is the party-goers and not the system which makes it impossible for most people neither to go to parties nor even hope for enough to eat in the new year. We live in different worlds!