

Between two millennia

History, it is said, looks at events through a rear-view mirror. As we stand today, a lot of people — both scholars and ordinary people — are trying to look at life and people prevailing in the planet at the turn of the last millennium (1000 AD), which has disappeared in the tide of time. A number of books have been recently published on the subject and a lot of information were downloaded in various websites through the Internet. Here is a pen picture of that period drawn from the narratives on web sites, newspaper articles, many authors and writers, particularly Alvin Toffler, Jay Tolson, Fuad Azmi, Jouch Blank, Tim Zimmerman, Lewis Lord, Daniel Rodish, Peter Drucker and late Thomas Kuhn.

Life at the turn of the second millennium had far more colorations than popular imaginings tend to ascribe to it. Individual lives could be nasty, brutish and short but collectively the 300-odd million who populated the earth in the year 1000 forged a period of history that was anything but gloomy.

The year 1000 AD was a time of great achievements — and terrible misery. Sailors in creaking ships reaped enormous fortunes on strange seas. On land disparate peasants eked out a meagre existence barely surviving from one harvest to the next. Long before the Internet and E-commerce, humankind laid the groundwork for a global economy. Over land by camel caravans or across the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean in their famous dhows, Islamic traders began to connect the "Old World" through long-range commerce and exchange.

Equally renowned for this nautical daring were the dreaded Vikings whose ships brought Europeans to the shores of North America almost five centuries before the arrival of Columbus. And even the relatively insular Chinese took to high seas around a thousand years ago becoming vigorous players in maritime trade of the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean. One millennium ago the best roads in Europe were several centuries old, the neglected relics of the Roman Empire.

America was different then. Eagles soared over the oak and poplar forests in Manhattan where the fragrance of wild roses filled the air and deer, turkeys and great horned owls inhabited in what would become Fifth Avenue. Boston teemed with beavers. Herds of buffaloes trod through Chicago. And in the heart of the Midwest in that year — 1000 AD — the first city in what is now the United States was on the verge of becoming an Indian metropolis — Cahokia. The city had a specialised labour force, an organised government, public construction projects and a trade network that extended the length of the Mississippi river.

The crossroads of the world was Constantinople with more than a million inhabitants, far more populous than any city in Europe. Emperor Basil II is now remembered as the slayer of Bulgarians. But Byzantium's fame rests less on military might than on arts, culture, ideas, icons and affluence that used to flow between the emerging Christian nations to the West and the flourishing Islamic world to the East. Byzantium had just started to use a revolutionary product introduced from China where it had been in use for a millennium already. It was called paper.

Christians and Muslims were not yet really at each other's throats. Islam's fiercest battles were in Hindu northern India where a Turkish ruler named Mahmud led seventeen plundering expeditions in two decades. Christianity's major run-

ning battle had been with paganism. Newly Christianised lands included Denmark, Hungary and Kievan Rus where Prince Vladimir-I allegedly chose Orthodoxy over Islam because he knew, among other things, Russians would never accept a prohibition over alcohol.

Pope Sylvester-II, termed as the Man of the Year 1000, will be remembered as a Renaissance man long before the Renaissance. In his life and works he heralded the ideas of an emerging European civilisation. Combining classical and theological learning with practical and scientific aptitude, this pope became a new kind of intellectual, a "universal man" anticipating the humanists and scientists of the Renaissance.

The Europeans were merely interested in farming, especially since cutting-edge technologies such as horseshoes and heavy ploughs were producing huge yields. Throughout Europe families used to gather around the fire in their one-room dwellings at night — with their livestock — cooking dishes such as small bird and bacon stew with walnuts. When relieving themselves they used to grate a handful of moss to

Democracy will survive and spread further to many countries particularly developing ones. But it will no longer be a so-called representative one merely electing people at frequent intervals to rule the country in which government is controlled by the elite. Instead, it will be a more participatory democracy at grassroots levels giving opportunities to larger numbers of people to govern themselves.

clean up as they headed out the door. Most people used to wear a simple tunic and cloak, changing and washing only the undergarments. Fashions did not change much for centuries. Rich folks used to wear jewellery but the stones were lacklustre since gem cutting was invented after four hundred years. In England there was a large number of slaves, mostly imported from Europe. Economic distress forced families to sell their children.

In contrast, the Islamic world was devoted to scholarships and Pope Sylvester-II learnt what he could from the East where science was enjoying a golden age without parallel since ancient Greece. In medicine master surgeon Al-Zahrawi can justly be compared to the Greek physician Galen. Born in 989 AD near Bukhara, Avicenna was a great scholar who wrote more than a hundred books. Best known is the *Canon of Medicine*, a comprehensive book summarising the medical knowledge of the day. He was also a big thinker and one of his interests was squaring the rational philosophy of the ancient Greeks with the monotheis-

tic faith of Islam, science with faith. Ibn Al-Haythan, a Muslim mathematician studied atmospheric refraction around 1000 AD, and by 1100 AD, Muhammad Al-Idrisi divided the world into seven climatic changes.

The de facto capital of Islam was Baghdad which exceeded even Constantinople in size and splendour. Visitors used to gasp at marble palaces and gardens, the river used to teem with every kind of raft, from old Assyrian rafts of inflated skins to the newest, smartest Chinese junks. Cordova in Spain, with a population of 450,000 people and with street lights at night was the glittering city in the world. The Islamic community or Ummah had an impressive geographical reach. From its Arabian and Middle Eastern core it expanded west across North Africa into Spain and east into Central Asia and the Indus River Basin. By the year 1000 AD Muslims had effectively built a world economy in and around the Indian Ocean — with India at its centre and the Middle East and China as its two dynamic poles.

The Chinese civilisation, being the home of one-fourth of the world's total population, was so advanced that it had already perfected bureaucracy and urban sprawl. At a time when Europe's military forces were loosely organised bands of knights and foot soldiers, China's Sung Dynasty had hundreds of thousands of men in a professional army supported by imperial taxes and a large iron and steel industry. That industry also gave the Chinese a super weapon, a sophisticated crossbow that historians believe could penetrate leather armour. Although guns had not been invented the Chinese had gunpowder which they used in fire arrows and bomb-like devices. The Sung Dynasty saw the first paper money, the development of movable type-settings and the building of ships capable of carrying thousands of men.

Across the Atlantic, the Mayan civilisation, its glory days behind, was migrating Northwest to the land of turkey and deer now known as Yucatan.

At the turn of the millennium the fertile flatland watered by the five rivers of northern India was experiencing a great cataclysm. The horsemen of this particular apocalypse thundered down from Afghan mountains and life on the Indian sub-continent would not be the same. In the year 1000 AD the Hindus of India did not think of themselves as Hindus and would not have identified their homeland as India. The words were coined far away and used from the time of Alexander the Great. The inhabitants of this region lived in a mishmash of kingdoms, spoke myriad languages and worshipped a multiplicity of gods in a boundless variety of ways. As far as religious identity went, the only clear line they drew was between people who recognised the primacy of Vedic scriptures and people who did not do so.

In and around 1000 AD, India created a numerical system based on nine numbers and followed by a symbol of zero. In 1000 AD the world was shining as a Viking explorer, Leif Erikson reached America. His sister planned to import New World timber but she had a falling out with her partners whom she hacked to death with a battle axe. Viking navigation was virtually instrument-free and used the position of the sun and stars to estimate direction and latitude. The Norsemen had the skills and courage but they could not sustain a presence for various reasons including temperature change in North America.

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