

Multiculturalism across the globe: Multiple challenges, Multiple possibilities

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The moment we talk of multiculturalism, we tend to fixate on the definitions, which in actuality are only subjective descriptions of multiculturalism's ethnic, sociological, and political dimensions. Once the definitions are hardcoded, we then move to rank the various cities of the world based on convenient 'parameters'. The outcome is the litany of rankings, more so on the digital media, which hail or condemn a city for its multiculturalism or the lack of it, based on the pride, prejudice, notions, whims and fancies of each ranker. Across the web, we find enthusiastic voters bestowing the numero uno crowns to the usual suspects including the US cities of NYC, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Canada's Toronto, Australia's Sydney, Brazil's São Paulo, French capital of Paris, England's premier city of London, and Amsterdam, the capital of Netherlands. Western media hardly talks about Mumbai and Bangalore which are distinctly multi-cultural. While the former has been a finance hub of unanimous choice, the latter is the country's tech capital and both global domains have played a key role in shaping the multiculturalism of both metros.

But the moot point of the whole issue is not about ranking cities but attacking the problems faced by practitioners of true multi-culturalism in any city of the globe. Multiculturalism is an integral to global harmony but sadly it is often examined from a narrow purview. People tend to equate it with a shared celebration of festivals, which is often superficial. True cultural diversity runs deeper, in the form of a genuine respect for other people's customs, values and moral codes. The inclusive behaviour springs from within, it is rarely advertised. And it is also a function of time.

Some time back, a seminal study found that, people find it hard to accept cultural diversity in the short term but over time, they adapt to the demands of diversity and even learn to cherish them, given the sunrise possibilities inherent in multiculturalism - whether for economic gains, social affinity or cultural harmony.

The United States is a classic example of a multicultural society, where individualism is duly acknowledged and even celebrated. India on the other hand, has a 3,000-year history of multiculturalism rooted in religious and cultural tolerance. But in recent times, we find both cities losing their multicultural shine and various factors are responsible for the gradual

decline: the steadily expanding gap between the rich and the poor; unprecedented rise in populism, polarity, and pluralism; emergence of unabashedly authoritarian leaderships; rampant suppression of minorities' interests; and blatant abuse of power to nip dissent in the bud as also to settle political scores. Even the rapidly proliferating digital devices, which have admirably democratized communication in terms of reach and impact, are regularly emitting the toxic smoke of distorted versions of the Truth, especially through the social media chimneys. For the first time, fear has become an alarmingly recurrent variable of a callously twisted democratic equation.

We all know the ills and evils; what we seek are credible and sustainable ways of removing them. The time has come for deep societal introspection, not mere reflection, on the glaring lack of accountability and transparency in the political system that surrounds a democracy. Unless there is an organized effort from the leading democratic nations to ensure that free societies thrive amid differences of faith, beliefs, customs, practices, and opinions, the gaps and ambiguities will continue to create an enabling environment for the autocratic strides lurking behind a façade of democracy.

And the onus is on the US and India to take the initiative on this front. US and India present two similar-yet-different versions of a democracy mired in self-doubt. While one is the world's oldest, the other is the world's largest. The US of today is a mute witness to the falling standards of its presidential debates and rampant discrimination based on absurd notions of colour and race, while back home in India, a new wave of authoritarianism has created a conducive environment for fanatical trouble mongers to run factories of nuisance value to cause mayhem and discord where none exist.

More importantly, this much-needed citizen movement doesn't deserve to languish at the level of a political rhetoric. Thinkers, crusaders and conscientious activists across different spheres - medicine, engineering, technology, manufacturing, services, academia, polity, arts, sport, entertainment - must form a freewheeling consortium to brainstorm on key issues plaguing humanity, even if the democratic degeneration may not affect them personally and professionally. The focal point of this selfless activism should be on remedying a democracy which alone can build a unbreakable cocoon of multiculturalism across the globe.

