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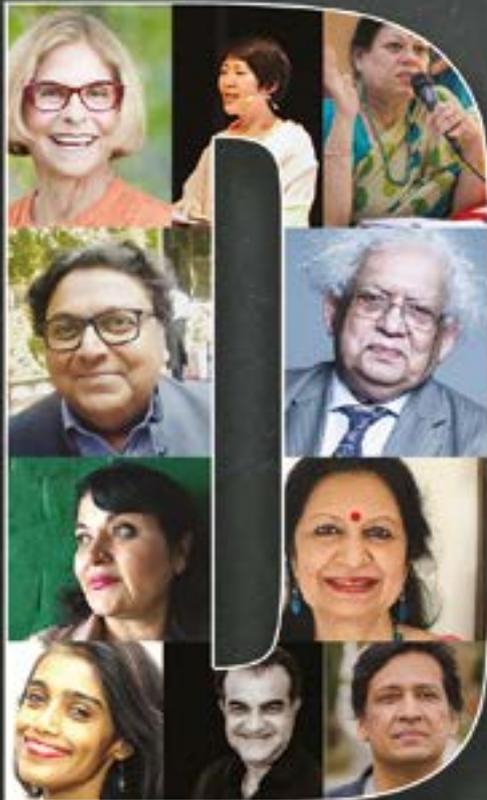


“Our ability to reach unity in diversity will be the beauty and the test of our civilisation.”

Mahatma Gandhi’s words ring true as the world comes together, despite differences, to deal with the pandemic.

What do we mean by diversity? 18 authors explore the concept in this edition.

Delving



into

DIVERSITY

Pg 4-40

INSIDE

CONCERT FOR BENGAL

40



TAMBOLA WITH TISCA

44



WEDDING VIEWS

48



WRITING CRIME

50



Freedom and Diversity are Shields

Ashwin Sanghi

Two words that often appear together are *freedom* and *diversity*. This is not surprising because they are interlinked. It is freedom that fuels diversity; and it is diversity that protects freedom.

Let's start with freedom. It usually implies the right to think, speak or act as one wants without hindrance or restraint. But in the context of nationhood, it has generally come to mean liberalism. In Latin, the word 'free' translates to *liberalis*. And it is from *liberalis* that one derives the word *liberal*. Thus, freedom is inextricably linked to the rise of liberalism.

Until the 20th century, most countries were either monarchies, dictatorships or colonies of the former two. But the end of World War II heralded changes around the globe. Many countries and colonies morphed into liberal democracies. The values encompassed within the broad term 'liberalism' include individual rights, democracy, free markets, freedom of speech, freedom of religion, gender equality, racial equality and separation of church and state.

Judging by the components of liberalism, one sees that diversity is an integral part of it. But what exactly do we mean by 'diversity'? Diversity is often defined as the condition of being different. Broadly, it implies appreciating that each human being is unique and valuing the differences between individuals. Those variations could be on several dimensions including religion, nationality, ethnicity, race, gender, economic status, caste, political leanings, sexual orientation, age, community or several other criteria. Diversity is about not only appreciating those differences but also celebrating them. The concept contains an implicit understanding that the sum total of differences is better than an aggregate of uniformity.

But in the context of the 21st century, why are freedom and diversity so important. Simple, really. Freedom and diversity are the best shields against fundamentalism. I see fundamentalism as the attempt to impose a single truth on a plural world. One can observe fundamentalism in



all walks of life. Religious fundamentalism is the most obvious example, but political fundamentalism is no less dangerous. The Wahhabism of Saudi Arabia and the totalitarianism of the Communist Party of China are facets of fundamentalism.

Liberalism was meant to be a solution to such fundamentalism. Alas, liberals spawned their own fundamentalists. To understand what I mean, look at the contradictions within the liberal narrative itself. While preaching liberalism at home, America was supporting dictatorial and monarchial regimes in the West Asia that suppressed women's rights, killed homosexuals and punished non-Muslims. Great Britain was teaching the world about liberalism while it drained 45 trillion dollars from India during 173 years of colonial rule. France gifted the Statue of Liberty to America (the ultimate gift symbolising liberalism) while colonising Algeria and Indo-China. Mahatma Gandhi, the messiah for equality and religious tolerance was happy to support the Khilafat Movement ostensibly aimed at reviving the Ottoman caliphate. Liberals let down liberalism. What we got was illiberal liberals.

In effect, we have a world that claims to be free but actually isn't because we have fundamentalists at one extreme and we have illiberal liberals at the other end. We need to find a way to occupy and enlarge the middle ground. That is the only way that we can defend freedom and diversity.

We have seen time and again in history that the effort to homogenise has resulted in terrible consequences. Adolf Hitler's attempt to fashion an Aryan super-race resulted in the extermination of 6 million Jews. Mao Zedong's efforts to subsume everyone into a communist utopia killed around 30 million people. Winston Churchill may have saved England from fascism but his attitude of racial superiority allowed millions of Indians to starve to death during the Bengal Famine (an act no less horrendous than genocide). Stalin's purge of property owners and ethnic minorities killed around 1.2 million people. More recently, Islamist extremism killed 84,000 people in 66 countries owing to the actions of 121 extremist groups in a single year alone. Fundamentalism in religion, politics, history, culture, science or any other field is dangerous. Freedom and diversity are the first line of defence against it.

The Upanishads talk of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*, the notion that the world is one family. Dharmic thought has always embraced multiple truths — 33 million deities can be part of the same family; even Jesus Christ can be an avatar. You could be Aastik or Naastik, Shaivite or Vaishnavite, vegetarian or meat-eater, fire-worshipper or idol-worshipper... all are welcome. You may think that the Shiv Linga is a stone and I may think that a stone is a Shiv Linga, both of us are welcome. There can be unity in diversity.

On America's national seal is the motto *E pluribus unum*. Translated from Latin, it means "out of many, one". Just take a look at the trajectory of the US in the 20th century and you would see that diversity has had a significant role to play. A few years ago, a study surveyed the top 1500 companies in the S&P and found that female representation in top management led to an average increase of \$42 million in firm value. A study by the National Bureau of Economic Research found that cultural diversity actually spurred the economic development of a country. So diversity turns out to be profitable too, not that today's politically-charged climate would allow the Trump administration to admit it.

The US is often called a "melting pot". Given that it is a country of immigrants, the idea was that the beliefs, customs and cultures of diverse groups would blend together over time and lose their distinctions. But today, observers prefer to call it a "salad bowl". The individual ingredients of a salad do not blend into one but they aggregate into something that can be quite delicious (with

each component retaining its original flavour). This has been a predominant feature of India too.

India has 122 major languages and 1,599 other languages. In matters of faith, Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, Buddhism, Jainism, Zoroastrianism and even Judaism co-exist. Travel from North to South and one experiences a dramatic change in the culinary experience. We are racially diverse, too, with Indo-Aryans, Dravidians, Mongoloids, Turko-Iranians, Scytho-Dravidians and many other racial combinations. Economic disparities between states abound. And yes, that diversity has often been the cause of problems. There have been countless cases of Hindu-Muslim riots, language agitations and caste-based violence. Just observe the racial fault lines of America or the backlash against immigrants and one understands the difficulties of managing diversity.

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Forget nations, even in corporate cultures, one cannot expect to toss in diversity, press a button and get an improved result. But remember this: the lack of diversity can be even more treacherous. Differences in political opinion preserve democracy; differences in ability encourage meritocracy; differences in faith prevent theocracy; and differences in power prevent aristocracy. William Sloane Coffin, the clergyman turned civil rights crusader correctly observed, "Diversity may be the hardest thing for society to live with, and perhaps the most dangerous thing for a society to

be without."

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Sanghi is a winner of the Crossword Popular Choice Award 2012, Atta Galatta Popular Choice Award 2018, WBR Iconic Achievers Award 2018 and the Lit-O-Fest Literature Legend Award 2018. He lives in Mumbai with his wife, Anushika, and son, Raghuvir.

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