

Cultural Diversity, Indian Style

Diversity is part of everyday consciousness in India

by Shekhar Deshpande

The encounters that Indians may have with attempts at division and discord are overwhelmed by the unstated successes in their own lives in living with difference. They do it quietly in their everyday lives. Even those who don't agree with such co-inhabitation in principle practice it in their lives.

The U.S. media gloat that the United States is a truly diverse country, culturally and racially, and that this is the only place in the world that merits the claim of being a universal society. Despite the enormous problems between races and classes and silent quarrels between the south and the north and the east, the mid-west and the west, United States offers the only opportunity in history and the world to live in a multicultural society.

It is said the greatest failure in our times was the fall and deterioration of Sarajevo. It was the city (along with another jewel, Mostar) in the Balkans that housed three distinct religious, territorial, cultural and political faiths. Despite General Tito's stern rule, there was something deeply intense in the collaborative and co-inhibitive desires of the people of Sarajevo to live in a multicultural society. Failed as it is, it is becoming a living, real example of how diversity could allow people to live together meaningfully.

For those who believe that theirs is the true version of a multicultural society, there should be a required experience of living in India. It is not a matter of expressing a "nationalist" arrogance in international debate, but that India offers a genuinely intriguing and pragmatically successful example of what it is like to live with people with whom you share a different language, different culinary taste, different gods, different music, different systems of beliefs and different versions of the same religion as well as different religions.

Cultural diversity is very much a part of everyday consciousness in India. It is only after Indians travel abroad and then face a sea of sameness with others that they begin to realize how different

they are from others, including other Indians. While in India, living with cultural diversity is living in an environment that allows you to breathe and therefore slips in your consciousness without making any splash.

Even the experience of doing your grocery (since it does not mean one-stop shopping) brings you in contact with merchants who sell oil, grains, vegetables, and household supplies, who come from different regions of the country. There is a Gujarati, a Hyderabadi, a Marathi and a Punjabi in that encounter. These people are part of your town community. They live amongst you. They speak a different language at home, yet their effortless and home-grown facility in your local language makes it easy to interact with them. And when you notice their faltering accent or the manner of dress, the imprint of another region, the deliberative moves of another custom, it does not shock you. It is part of the mindscape, projected into a reality that foreigners call the "colorfulness of India."

It is a truly decentered world. Generations grew up in India with the folk-knowledge that certain goods would be sold and would be sold better by the Gujaratis and the Punjabis. We live with a multitude of languages. All this talk of counting languages and dialects makes sense in narrow academic legitimacy. No one has the Indian facility to mix languages, to move with skill into another language, another vocabulary in mid-sentence, even before the lungs plunge for another breath. Besides, folk-knowledge has told us that a new dialect emerges every 24 miles and the taste of food changes each leap of 48.

Indians woke up listening to their radios, which are carefully paced devo-

tional songs, multi-language news broadcasts, and the dominant Hindi film songs. Even the most revered of devotional songs for favorite deities were sung (and are sung) by singers who, in their own lives practiced a different religion. Thus, a Muslim would sing a Hindu devotional song and a Hindu would render the Muslim passions of love and loyalty into a popular tune. The steadfast devotees did not mind that this slippage would technically foul the purity of their prayers, or pollute their existence.

Only a "cultured" civilization has a complex food pattern and taste. That indicates an intense involvement and understanding with sensual landscape of nature, the elements and the unexplored pleasures of the body. Indian taste in food changes, both subtly and sharply with each neighborhood. Regional differences are legendary. Indians are not "stiff" with their food. That is, they don't eat with formal clothing or noise-free plasticity. They eat amidst a cacophony of sounds, a storm of flavors, and a full plate of senses.

Indians know better how food binds people. The old wisdom about binding loyalty with salt holds true even in this age. They have cemented cultural differences with delicious complexity of food, in all possible dimensions.

All of this is not a script to sing praises of Indian cultural diversity in the language of tourism that masks the real troubles and frictions amongst people. Indeed, the conflicts that are fueled by the extremists, who are in turn encouraged by complex political and economic forces around the world, remind us of the success so far in developing a country where one expects to live with expertise in cultural and other diversity.

The encounters that Indians may have with attempts at division and discord are overwhelmed by the unstated successes in their own lives in living with difference. They do it quietly in their everyday lives. Even those who don't agree with such co-inhabitation in principle practice it in their lives.

Such is the paradigm of cultural diversity in India.

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