

Cherishing diversity

A red square containing a white capital letter 'N'.

Mr. Neil Buhne and
Ms. Vibeke Jensen

When Pakistan was created, Muhammad Ali Jinnah envisioned a state that would be a home to all people, irrespective of their race, religion, or cast.

He said, “You may belong to any religion, caste or creed – that has nothing to do with the business of the state”.

When the UN was created, among the first words in the charter were that, people of the UN were “to practice tolerance and live together in peace with one another as good neighbors”.

Mr. Jinnah and the founders of the UN recognized that a tolerant society is an important precondition for human development in a society.

Since the 1940’s both in Pakistan, and the world, tolerance of others has grown – but sadly progress has been inconsistent whether in terms of attacks on cultural heritage, such as at Bamian, in Afghanistan, or on religious tolerance as shown most recently and horribly in the 14 November attack on hundreds at the Shah Noorani Shrine.

An important example of progress is that on the day of its fiftieth anniversary, 16 November 1995, UNESCO’s Member States adopted a Declaration of Principles on Tolerance. Among other things, the Declaration affirms that tolerance is neither indulgence nor indifference.

It is respect and appreciation of the rich variety of our world’s cultures, our forms of expression and ways of being human.

Tolerance recognizes the universal human rights and fundamental freedoms of others. People are naturally diverse; only tolerance can ensure the survival of mixed communities in every region of the globe.

As we mark the 21st Anniversary of the International Day for Tolerance, we owe it to our children to pause, and with considerable modesty to reflect on how far we have come and what future we are building for our generations especially with regards to respect for diversity and variety in religion, culture, ethnic backgrounds and so on.

At the macro level, fighting intolerance requires respect for rule of law. Each Government is responsible for enforcing human rights laws, for banning and punishing hate crimes and discrimination against minorities, no matter who they are committed by: individuals or groups.

By ensuring that people have equal access to courts, human rights commissioners or ombudsmen, we safeguard that they won't resort to violence to settle their disputes. The establishment of the Pakistan National Human Rights Commission, is a step in the right direction.

It goes without saying that fighting intolerance requires education; in order to shape individual attitudes.

Intolerance is often a consequence of ignorance and fear: fear of the unknown, of the other cultures, nations and religions.

These notions are taught and learned at an early age, therefore it is vital that we make greater efforts to teach our children about tolerance and human rights, and about different ways of life.

This can be done, and in fact we have seen it being done well in Pakistan, starting from Early Childhood Education.

It is also important that we take a holistic approach to education - it must be reach all people of all ages; it should take place everywhere: at home, at the workplace, in schools, in the marketplace etc.

By countering influences that lead to fear and exclusion of others, we should educate our young people and help them develop the capacity to exercise independent judgement, critical thinking and ethical reasoning.

Internalising this important value is absolutely critical for us to be good teachers for our youth so that they realise the dangers of intolerance and are able to confidently work towards nurturing a community that is inclusive, positive and healthy.

In Pakistan, UNESCO works with the youth and local community to sensitize them and to promote a culture of peace, tolerance and social cohesion through a number of initiatives. These include, but are not limited to: training workshops, capacity building sessions, poetry competitions, street theatre, radio dramas on peace, and developing Teachers' Resource Kits. These programmes are geared towards building the capacity of teachers to spread the word on intercultural tolerance, critical thinking and promote peaceful coexistence among youth and the local communities.

Other members of the UN country team complement this through work in schools, communities and with Government.

Most often we play the blame game and think the deterioration in our social fabric is a result of what other people are doing and has nothing to do with us.

But intolerance in a society is the sum-total of the intolerance of its individual members. Bigotry, stereotyping, stigmatising, insults and racial jokes are examples of individual expressions of intolerance to which some people are subjected daily; Women, religious minorities, people with disabilities, or just about anyone holding a starkly different opinion, for instance.

Intolerance breeds intolerance.

It leaves its victims in pursuit of revenge.

In order to fight intolerance, individuals should be aware of the link between their behaviour and the vicious cycle of mistrust and violence in society.

Each one of us should begin by asking: am I tolerant? Do I stereotype people? Do I reject those who are different from me? Do I blame my problems on 'them'?

When confronted with an escalation of intolerance around us, we must not wait for governments and institutions to act alone.

We are all part of the solution.

We should not feel powerless for we actually possess an enormous capacity to wield power. Nonviolent action is a way of using that power- the power of people.

The diversity of our world's many religions, languages, cultures and ethnicities should not be a pretext for conflict, but is an invaluable treasure that can and should enrich us all.

Mr. Neil Buhne is the UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator in Pakistan and Ms. Vibeke Jensen is the UNESCO Representative to Pakistan.

Most often we play the blame game and think the deterioration in our social fabric is a result of what other people are doing and has nothing to do with us.

Source: <http://nation.com.pk/columns/18-Nov-2016/cherishing-diversity>
