Breaking Barriers

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WE all crave diversity and variety in our lives. Many people enjoy travelling to foreign lands and studying other people's cultures, eating different types of cuisine, learning new languages as a hobby and often adopting styles and fashion tips from different parts of the world. The world no doubt, is getting smaller.

On the other side of the coin, however, are those who do not live in their countries of origin and as a result, are constantly facing the threat of having their cultures and traditions being obliterated by the more powerful, majority culture that they are in -- a culture which, in the case of cities such as New York, is an amalgamation of many different cultures all over one very small island.

Homesick Bangalis in New York are luckier than most, considering the abundance of Bangla speaking taxi-cab drivers, the advertisements for English classes written in Bangla posted in the subways, the many places in the city (such as the East Village and in the 28th and Lexington area) specialising in Bangali food, or even, if one wants the compact deshi experience of shopping, food, movies and more, the mini Bangla-town situated right smack in the middle of Queens, in the famous Jackson Heights area.

It is in the most centralised mid-town area of this extremely multi-national city, better known as Times Square, that banners saying 'welcome' in 50 different languages, including Bangla, have been proudly displayed until February 29. This project, organised by the Times Square Alliance, is geared to "celebrate the diversity of Times Square, under the theme of commerce and culture representing all the peoples of the world coming together here like nowhere else on the planet," says Udayan Chattopadhyay,Vice President of Business Development in the Times Square Alliance (TSA), the organisation responsible for the banners.

Founded in 1992 by local business owners, the TSA says a press release, works towards endorse Times Square by developing more on the factors that have made the area "an icon of entertainment, culture and urban life for over a century. In addition to providing core neighbourhood services with its Public Safety Officers and Sanitation Associates, the Alliance promotes local businesses; encourages economic development and public improvements; co-coordinates numerous major events in Times Square (including the annual New Year's Eve and Broadway on Broadway celebrations); manages the Times Square Information Center; and advocates on behalf of its constituents with respect to a host of public policy, planning and quality-of-life issues."

It was during the planning of the annual New Year's ball, famous around the world for the stroke of midnight when the big apple drops, that the TSA came about with the idea of different banners that welcome not only the one million people from around the world that come to celebrate New Year's in Times Square but also the 43 million tourists that pass through it every year, not to mention the increasing number of Bangladeshi street vendors, store owners, hotel staff workers, tourist gift shop retailers, sanitation workers, policemen, cab drivers, restaurant owners and news-agents that reside in the city.

"We wanted to showcase a selection of the world's languages," says Chattopadhyay, "and that is why Bangla is there, both as an important global language but also as a language spoken increasingly by New Yorkers, Bangladeshis being one of the fastest growing groups -- and these banners were meant to say 'welcome' to visitors coming here from the people who live and work here"

Interestingly enough, this project coincided with United Nations' International Mother Language Day, a commemoration of our Language Movement and Ekushey February a day that symbolizes the fight and sacrifice to give Bangla its rightful place.

If there is one thing we have learned from our history it is that unless we ourselves take pride in our culture and our language, nobody will understand the value of it. The banners hanging in Times Square are reminders of the fact that although we may all be so far away from each other, Bangladeshis from everywhere in the world will always have their history and their heritage to look back on and take pride in.

PHOTO CREDIT: Emile Wamsteker