

When 'them' becomes 'us'



SHIFTING IMAGES
MILIA ALI

AS one more year fades away into the realm of the past, it may be useful to reflect on the core aspects of our life. Not about the trip to the Aegean Sea or the Amalfi Coast, but about how we have evolved over time.

This reflective mode was turned on by an intriguing Facebook post from a Bangladeshi-American friend: "I was 22 years old on 16th December, 1971. As Indian soldiers and freedom fighters were rolling onto the streets of Dhaka It was hard to control emotions. It is very hard to grasp that 46 years have passed. When I go back to my motherland... I don't feel connected to it as much. Don't know why." Since the artist is a great patron of Bangladeshi art and music in the United States, I was surprised by the comment. He is also a regular at *deshi* dinners and concerts. Yet he says he cannot "connect" to his motherland! What then does connecting mean - physical proximity or something deeper?

After some thought, I concluded that the identity ambivalence all we experience is most probably related to the multiple identities embedded in our psyche. Often we miss this reality, consigning it to our subconscious. The tendency is quite

understandable since belonging to a tribe makes it easier for us to cope with the inner conflict of "them versus us", while helping us to distance ourselves from someone or something we consider to be the "other". My Facebook friend may feel more comfortable in the salubrious setting of his Maryland home than in his "motherland" where garbage is piled on sidewalks and the pristine environment of 1971 has been replaced by a concrete jungle. But I wonder if Walt Whitman's poetry evokes the same sentiments in him as Tagore's lyrics? Can he connect the same way to American country music as to the Baul folk melody of Bengal? Perhaps not. I must, however, admit that with time we acquire an affinity for the environment we operate in -- the acculturation process is inevitable in the case of all immigrants, especially for first-generation arrivals.

However, the truth is that no matter how long we live in our adopted country the break with the homeland is never complete. The culture of the ethos of the country where we have spent the formative years of our youth and childhood always remains ingrained in our psyche. But as we make the journey of life we change and adapt and learn to live with multiple identities.

Amartya Sen, the philosopher and economist who won the Nobel Prize, has expanded this idea in his



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book, *Identity and Violence*. He believes that being fixated with a single identity is the root cause of divisiveness that can morph into terrorist and hate movements. Sen began thinking about these issues at the tender age of eleven when an

injured Muslim labourer, Kader Mia, staggered into his family garden in Dhaka. Kader was knifed by a Hindu during the riots that occurred in Bengal in the last phase of the British Raj. The victim was rushed to the hospital but died.

This heart wrenching incident left an indelible mark on Sen who realised that Kader would have lived if only his Hindu assailant had seen him not just as a Muslim, but as a fellow Bangali and a poor man who perhaps had a family to support. As Sen articulates eloquently in his book -- no person is just one thing. It's ludicrous to categorise people of different genders, colours, cultures and passions as only Muslim, Hindu, Bangladeshi or American. In Sen's view the idea that we can be divided in this way leads to a "miniaturisation" of humanity, with everyone locked up in little boxes from which they view others as aliens. The reality is that each one of us is a little bit of everything -- a mix of all our life experiences.

You might be wondering why I branched into the topic of multiple identities from my friend's Facebook post. It's because I believe that the posting was rhetorical and not meant as an absolute declaration of disengagement. It may also have been part of a process of self-questioning. For, no one is a caricature of one or two demographic factors. Yet, we are not all similar, but we have a common thread running through our human characteristics. The future hope of our planet rests largely on a better appreciation of the plurality of our identities, which works against divisiveness.

I have often been asked why I left my motherland and embraced a foreign country as my own. The

answer is too complex to be covered in a mere column. But the more important fact is that the move has done little to diminish my innate Bangali identity which is part of my DNA -- nothing can change that, no matter what passport I hold. I feel it each time I arrive in Dhaka and am deflected by the loud cross talk at public places. Or irked by the honking, crazy traffic in overcrowded streets. It may be a stark contrast to the discipline and order I encounter in the US, but the disorderly familiarity of the street babbles in my mother tongue, and the gridlock, which I must admit is one of its kind in the world, give me a strange sense of belonging.

As we approach the New Year, I want to reiterate the truth about my multiple identities -- that I am a human, a Bangali, a Muslim, a US citizen, a singer, a wife, a mother, a grandmother -- but above all, a human being. I can find something in common with an American activist, an Indian musician, a Syrian refugee and even the Bangladeshi worker from the Middle East who stands beside me in the immigration line at Dhaka airport. The amazing thing is that the more I recognise the commonalities between these people and me, the more I am beginning to understand myself!

Milia Ali is a Rabindra Sangeet exponent and a former employee of the World Bank.

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

Can Europe Sustain the Macron Moment?



CARL BILDT

AT the start of 2017, many feared that the European project would experience a near-breakdown within the next year. The United Kingdom had decided to leave the European Union, the United States

had elected a president who cheered the Brexiters on, and populists running in the French and German elections posed a clear danger to European integration.

As we approach the start of 2018, the picture is very different. The European project has not only survived, but may be gaining new momentum. At least within the bubble of EU institutions in Brussels, one senses a newfound confidence.

More than anyone else, French President Emmanuel Macron is at the centre of this turnaround. His post-election victory speech in May was accompanied by the EU anthem, Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" -- a strong symbolic gesture. Since then, Macron has launched or proposed one initiative after another to strengthen EU institutions, while taking a lead in European foreign policy. With German Chancellor Angela Merkel struggling to form a



French presidential candidate Emmanuel Macron in La Defense, near Paris PHOTO: AFP

government after September's general election, all eyes are on Macron.

The changing mood in Europe over the past year has been influenced by three factors in particular. The first is Brexit, which is undeniably causing problems for the British -- and in turn causing most Europeans to begin to understand the extent to which their economies and societies are intertwined. The once-glorious country of Great Britain is now in a state of political agony as it tries to sort out the politics, economics, and logistics of leaving the bloc. It is unlikely that voters in any other member state will envy the British experience.

The second factor is Donald Trump, whose US administration has a lower standing in Europe than any other in recorded history. According to one recent poll, Germans now regard Trump as a greater threat to their country's interests abroad than Russian President Vladimir Putin or North Korean dictator Kim Jong-un. In a true race to the bottom, Trump is ahead.

Over the past year, European leaders have accepted that Europe will have to take more

responsibility for its own affairs. After a vexing encounter with Trump at the G7 summit in Italy in May, Merkel summoned up a sentiment that most other European leaders now share. "We Europeans must fight for our own future and destiny," she said in an unscripted outburst at a campaign stop. "We Europeans truly have to take our fate into our own hands."

The third factor is Putin's Russia, which has continued to meddle in Western elections and act aggressively in Ukraine. All told, the "BTP effect" -- Brexit, Trump, Putin -- has convinced even sceptical Europeans that EU-level cooperation is necessary.

But, in addition to the impetus of the BTP effect, Europe is being propelled by stronger economic growth. The dark days of the euro crisis have begun to fade into memory, as has the refugee crisis of late 2015, which had a profound political effect on Germany, Sweden, and other countries. Although the huge task of deepening EU integration remains unfinished, the political and economic conditions for seeing that process through have improved.

At the same time, the EU has suddenly

emerged as the preserver of the liberal world order. In September, the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) between the EU and Canada entered into force. And, since then, the EU has moved closer to finalising an even more important trade agreement with Japan, and, separately, with the founding countries of Mercosur -- Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay. Britain may be leaving, but the rest of the world seems to be lining up to make deals with the EU.

Still, there is no room for complacency. Despite many positive developments, governance is becoming more complicated within certain European countries, owing to an increasingly fractured political landscape. In Germany, forming a new government after an election used to be a straightforward affair. But now the country could be under a caretaker government until March, with little clarity about what sort of government will emerge. In the meantime, Germany can hardly play its customary role as Europe's anchor of stability.

In the Danubian lands of Hungary, Austria, and Bavaria, nationalism is on the rise. And in Italy, few would dare to offer any solid predictions of what will happen in the next general election, which must be held before May 20, 2018.

Moreover, Europeans cannot rely indefinitely on the low interest rates that have contributed to the current recovery. EU leaders will need to push much harder for structural reforms than they have so far. Although Spain has revived its

economy with important reforms, and Macron has tackled France's notoriously Byzantine labour code, the EU is still struggling on many fronts. For example, despite Estonia's heroic efforts to create a digital-reform agenda during its presidency of the Council of the EU, far more needs to be done in that area.

Next year will be the last chance to pursue EU-level reforms before a fateful year of reckoning begins. In March 2019, Britain will leave the EU, without a divorce agreement then. In May, come elections to the European Parliament, and new leaders will be appointed for the EU's core institutions. Before we know it, Jean-Claude Juncker's presidency of the European Commission will be over.

Macron is anxiously awaiting a new government in Berlin. As things stand, it is far from clear that the next German coalition will support his EU-reform agenda. And, with each passing day, the European Commission will be running out of time to pursue any new initiatives that could realistically be finalised before 2019.

So, while the gloom and doom of 2016 may have receded, it could all too easily return. Sustaining the momentum generated by Macron's election in France and realising the promise that it holds will require decisive action in the months ahead.

Carl Bildt is a former prime minister and foreign minister in Sweden.

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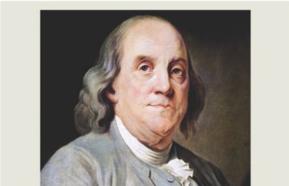
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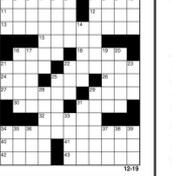


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| 7 Stratford river | 40 Wife of Zeus | 17 Sufficient |
| 11 Magic medicine | 41 Baltimore mayor | 19 Put a cap on |
| 12 Farm sight | 42 Nervous | 20 Reads over |
| 13 One enjoying the slopes | 43 Start a round | 21 Talker's gift |
| 15 Looks for | DOWN | 22 Add up |
| 16 DC team, familiarity | 23 Beer dispenser | 25 Chocolate imitation |
| 18 Suffers | 26 Ocean lane | 27 Covered beverage |
| 21 Precious stones | 39 Sassy talk | 28 Sassy talk |
| 22 North Pole VIP | 41 Real | 37 Sweet-heart |
| 24 Phone download | 5 Low cards in pinocle | 31 Intent look |
| 25 Pool stick | 6 Holder of ornaments | 33 Plant part |
| 26 Twist of films | 7 Invites to enter | 34 That woman |
| 27 Fragrant wood | 8 Clock numerical | 35 Composer/Rorem |
| 29 Bell sound | 9 Bullying cheer | 36 Kin of assn. |
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| | | 39 Game caller |



YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

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