**Shrinking spaces**

BY J A N E A L A M K H A K I 2020-11-13

IN our times, there is an impression that sectarian spaces are enlarging due to political, religious, economic and ideological factors. I argue that the sectarian divide is shrinking globally in real life. This is propelled not by forgetting ideological differences, but by practical realities and the formation of new communities, such as civil society organisations (CSOs), voluntary organisations, virtual communities including social media, etc. In today`s life, people do not always come together because of traditional communities, but also because they share goals andinterests.

We see this in our friends, families, schools, universities, hospitals, NGOs, philanthropic organisations, WhatsApp groups, etc. The Global Centre for Pluralism highlights some shining international examples of the work done by many CSOs to minimise the gap between different divides. The centre has established an award that recognises the `extraordinary achievements of organisations, individuals, and governments around the world who exemplify living peacefully and productively with diversity`.

All over the world, Muslims and other faith communities are slowly embracing each other in different ways. Wherever there is f reedom from communalism, youngsters are reaching out to other communities to socialise based on shared identities not necessarily pertaining to faith. Many of the younger generations born outside Muslim societies, for example, in the West, do not always carry the baggage of sectarianism or communalism. They feel proud of being, for example, a Canadian that teaches them the cardinal principle of pluralism not sectarianism, while keeping their own communal identities.

So, the élan vital of our time is building bridges, removing walls. Today, in many parts of the world, Muslims and others are working with faith communities, sharing their resources, and working for the good of all. This does not mean that their sectarian or communal identity has disappeared not at all; they have receded into the background, as of secondary importance, the first being a humanistic approach to human problems, which all religions claim to be committed to.

Coming to the Muslim contexts, we are informed that the beginning and end of all humans is like one soul. The Quran advises us to know each other (49:13), and reflect on the diversity of creation as God`s `aapa` (30:22). Muslims have a powerful inspiration to come together rather than move away from each other. In one of his inspirational verses, Jalaluddin Rumi rightly advises, `you have been commanded to con-nect with, rather than separate from the people`. In order to further squeeze the separating space, and develop more inclusive societies, we could consider at least the following.

First, we can see each community as a `firqa` which means a `branch` of a gigantic tree. Branching out is a natural process of all trees/traditions. Loving one`s community does not mean hating the rest. Each community has evolved having a dif ferent interpretation of the same dimensions of Islam.

Farhad Daftary, a scholar of Islamic studies, rightly calls these the `communities of interpretation`. The times of cursing each other on theological grounds, thankfully, are over. We should reject historical prejudices and traditional hate talk about different communities. We should understand communities the way they understand themselves, not the way their detractors see them. Farid Esack`s Qur`an, Liberation and Pluralism is a worthwhile reference on thissubject.

Second, we should make a difference between the `propaganda material` and `knowledge`about different sects.

Historically, a lot of distortions have gone intosectarian polemics, ethnic prejudices, and judgemental attitudes, even within the same community. In these attempts, truth/ religion was treated as private property with sole propriety rights over it.

Third, we focus on action (amal) as to who is doing the greatest good to others, instead of boasting about the brilliance of one`s own community`s truth claims. Times have changed; people have changed; issues have changed. We now live in a global world, a relatively peaceful environment, sharing our resources, problems and destinies, regardless of who we are. We need to remember a remarkable verse, which says, `... unto every nation have We made their deed seem fair. Then unto their Lord is their return, and He will tell them what they used to do` (6: 108). Here is yet another one of God`s secrets for those who reflect on His signs! So, in order to further shrink the sectarian divisions, let us contribute to the marvellous mission of building future humanity on humanistic values informed by the Islamic faith which tells us we are created from one soul.  The writer is an educationist with an interest in the study of religion and philosophy.