

Opinion | The dream of a new India trapped in old realities

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Hunting for a house to make your first home away from home is a rite of passage. He was doing this in a small town 2,000km away from his home. My young colleague's anxiety reduced as the conversation with the kindly lady progressed. She was the owner of a house, which he wanted to rent. Soon she was calling him beta.

She transformed immediately on hearing his name. "Aap to mussalmaan ho!". Turning to her husband, she again proclaimed: "He is a Muslim", as though he had not heard. Then she asked my colleague to leave immediately and the husband loudly endorsed the dismissal. As his search for an abode continued, he met a Muslim man. This man was equally straightforward, unhesitatingly telling my colleague that he could not be trusted since he was from Kerala, adding that he must be having links with nefarious people in the Gulf.

Idealism has fired this young man to work with us to help improve public education. For this, he has moved across India to a place that is strange to him. He could have lived nearer home, taken an easier job. But he wants to contribute to the most disadvantaged, and help build a better society. But at this moment, he and his idealism are being tested by the reality that he wants to change.

Our work is such that my colleagues live in about 200 small towns and a few cities spread across seven states. Every year, we add a few more locations. Living where they work is the only way to do something deep and sustained. There are over 1,500 people in our team across these places, and each year, we recruit more than 200. Most of the people we recruit have to relocate. They search for houses in these towns that are new to them. If any of our colleagues are already living in the town, they help in the search. But, ultimately, it comes down to the individual who is going to be living in the house.

Being spurned and taunted because of religion and region is not unusual in the hunt for a house. Muslims find it very hard to get a house for rent across almost all the places we work, with the exception of some parts of north-east Karnataka. Non-vegetarians have to lie if they want a house on rent, particularly in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh.

Young unmarried women find themselves in the same boat as Muslims. They may get more polite treatment, but the result is the same. Caste matters a lot, sometimes more than religion. Many house owners ask for the caste of the potential tenant directly, but even more want to know the full name. It is from the surname that they judge the caste,

sometimes wrongly, mostly correctly. All they want is to avoid Dalits. And if you are their own caste, so much the better. If your looks suggest that you are from the North-East, the meeting to discuss renting may not even start.

Other than the minor variations already mentioned, there seems to be no difference on these matters across all the places that we work. Also, there is hardly any difference on this across large to small cities and large to small towns. Some of these cities are capitals of states, seemingly very diverse and modern. At the other extreme, many of the towns are as small as having populations of 15,000.

The hunt for a house uncovers all manners of prejudice that lurk just beneath the surface all around us. Eventually, everyone does find a house. Some because not every house owner is prejudiced. And some because with no other alternative available, they accept to live in what are really ghettos, however small. Many of our new team members bear the brunt of all this; only upper-caste Hindu men are spared these indignities. Singed by such personal experiences, it takes tenacity to stay committed to the work.

Particularly because this work is about helping build temples of modern India, or new India, if you will. With the constitutional values as the sacred good. When I used this metaphor in my last column, at least a couple of people chastised me for affronting Nehru. But my use of the phrase was eulogical, since that phrase captures not just what our schools could be, but also a different organizing principle for our nation's quest to improve.

That is what really fires all these people to pursue this difficult work that they do. To help make our schools foster equality, demolish discrimination, develop a humane spirit, and build scientific temper in our society. They live with this searing contradiction between their work and their reality. They live enmeshed with discrimination, injustice and inequity. And they have to help schools change this reality.

Staying committed and not losing faith in the face of all this is tough. Especially if it is as harsh a reality as not being able to find a room to live in. Many survive these ordeals, often strengthened in their commitments, having been in a crucible. Their innate fire which led them to this work, supported by the organization and its explicit commitment to the same purpose, takes them through.

But we can only help in developing the new temples of modern India. It is the teachers who have to actually make it happen. They would need a lot more help: from the curriculum, the administrative culture, the political class, and the overall society. But if we do want the India that we have promised ourselves in the Constitution, there is no route other than to build these temples.

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