

The dream of a borderless world

More than the biological virus, civilisation is experiencing a pandemic of barriers and barricades across the world



SHELLEY WALIA

The more I see images of racist violence, of the dispossessed sea of humanity travelling hundreds of miles by foot to reach their homes, of migrants being turned back by xenophobic immigration policies at the Mexican border, of vulnerable hungry people moving from Somalia to Jordan, or Bangladesh to India, or of a white policeman suffocating an African-American with his knee pressed into his neck, the more I am compelled to think that the world needs to rise above the frenzy of labels of race, gender, caste, religion and political bias, and begin, instead, to address as one people the issues that are far more crucial to humanity. More than the biological coronavirus, civilisation is indeed experiencing an excruciating world-wide pandemic of barriers and barricades, a disease that since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 has jumped from a little more than a dozen border walls to over 60.

The real image

But a different image comes to mind when you visualise a borderless earth from far away in space. The arsenal of concertina wires and checkpoints are not visible. You do not see the barriers of language, culture or distance from here. **And you do not see the blockade of Gaza where two million Palestinians “caged in a zoo” that could easily be a toxic slum with negligible access to medicines, food, electricity or drinking water.** The landmass or the seas

and oceans stretch across the globe interspersed with rivers and mountains. The mind begins to wander across the mountains, an eternal tranquil stretch across the face of the earth.

Absorbed in the landscape, I begin to imagine a world undivided by race, gender, religion or nationalities, a global consciousness unabashedly pro-diversity that is like the white cloud moving freely or the blue sky stretching far into the horizon, a peaceful land that gives you a deep sense of belonging. The cloud is not fenced in like many threatened by death behind a razor-sharp fence that is reproduced globally, in every continent, in every nation, in every state. However, at the back of my mind, I can feel the hidden bazooka-like cameras revealing sorrowfully the apprehensive face of a mother crossing the border from Mexico to Arizona to reunite with a lost child. Cold-blooded xenophobic immigrant laws, threats and detentions clash with the deep sense of peace that I experience from the placid landscape before my eyes, resonating a flash of some utopian borderless world that might someday become a reality.

Rights for all

But as a river bursts out of a dam that its gushing waters find irksome, fences too are broken by rebels incarcerated for no crime but the love of freedom or a happier tomorrow. How long can you keep a human being locked up when the crime is struggling for the human rights of all? The insatiable desire to breakout becomes the carnival of the oppressed, an iconic symbol of that ray of hope that sustains the power of imagination and reclaims the space for freedom and the dream of reality where the past meets the future in the present.

The wandering cloud or the ef-



GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

fortless river is a souvenir of rebels dancing on the edge of chaos, between the broken and the built, each telling her untold story that profoundly surpasses in its intensity the single overriding story that is always ideologically frozen in its linearity and intransigence. Their action is the action of life, powerful as the winds converging into a whirlwind, distinct, and yet a reflection of the many alliances uniting to target the rich and the powerful in their palaces and in the government buildings gradually beginning to feel insecure.

Tyranny of the majority

The fence is a testimony of death and terror of race and ultra-nationalism, something Mexicans or Palestinians or we in India can very well realise, cut off as we are from the rest of the world lest we infect it with an unsurpassable wave of death and human suffering. **We stand fractured by not only borders but political and economic and social and ethnic differences. Surveillance, lockdowns and military vigilance at the borders are a lame excuse of self defence camouflaging the tyranny of the majority aiming at the expulsion of the “other”.**

Between the rich and the poor, between the business class and the tourist class travelling in the same plane, reaching the same destination or crashing together,

between an upmarket gated community and the suburbia of poverty and hunger, between the mosque and the temple, there is the jarring sense of imbalance, screaming out in a burlesque of the inordinate magnificence of bigotry and self-indulgence.

An onslaught

Sorrowfully, **racism now seems to be embedded in the very idea of the fence.** The world overflows with stern vigilantism, the cold and heartless bureaucracy, the secret agents and the terrorising state apparatus. The onslaught is on the people, jobless and homeless, with no choices in their own land. They leave their homes seeking a better way of life as well as serve the host country supplying it the labour that it so desperately needs to uphold its economy. **Migration occurs owing to the unbearable suffering in war-torn homelands lacking social security, or the construction of mega-dams that drive out the native farmers from their land, the only means of their subsistence.** As the author Naomi Klein says, they “are increasingly treated like cargo, with no rights at all”. Rich nations who believe in free trade do not realise that the migrants who have come to their shores in the face of death are not their “clients but sellers” of their labour, their blood, sweat and tears. How long will they remain silent?

If you listen carefully, you can hear the whispering of the voices from below, the voices the rich and the powerful refrain from hearing. How long will they ignore the farmers, the artisans, the builders? How long will they turn a deaf ear to the demands of those who want to break out of the confines of chauvinism or racial fanaticism? **How long will their voices go unheard from across the fences, voices fortified with the words**

of resistance not for rewards but for the vision of peace and freedom, of human rights and dignity that await people of all races, of all colours of all ethnicities, of all genders?

These voices cannot submit to the powerful and the rich. They cannot because they are on the other side of the fence opposing the rich nations which meet annually in sickeningly opulent venues, discussing and adjudicating on the poor and the deprived on whose land they now exercise their will and their right. Armed policemen keep the hungry and the deprived out, and if ever they dare to cross over, the unfortunate wither away in detention centres behind the impenetrable walls of the hawk-eyed state. The fence keeps them at bay from vast stretches of land preventing thousands from cultivating on the land that rightly belongs to them. Surely, clean air, drinking water, health care, land and shelter and food are their birthright.

The power of peace

The only option left is to peacefully send across the fences their messages and songs of resistance that reverberate across the world with the ideas of revolution and hope, of emancipation and freedom from the tyranny of the handful who rule the world. The rebel voices, sooner or later, will remember their poets and the songs of their past that will penetrate the fences, tear them down in globally interconnected social movements when the extremes of wealth and poverty will no longer be endured. The language of diversity and dignity would soon engulf the unilateral predatory game plans of the rich and the mighty.

Shelley Wallia is Professor Emeritus at Panjab University, Chandigarh and is the author of ‘Humanities at the Crossroads’