

Diversity in Mumbai

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"Different religions teach different things. Differences are inevitable and so are the conflicts. Thus coexistence and peace is not possible between varied religious communities". This was an opinion voiced by Niketa, 19 year old college student from Mumbai. She along with 14 other students from Mumbai journeyed for 15 days to explore the diversity in the city. The above mentioned opinion was expressed on the very first day of the diversity exposure camp that was conducted by Centre for Study of Society and Secularism (CSSS) from 2nd to 16th November 2016. CSSS organizes diversity exposure camp to introduce youth to various aspects of cultural diversity in Mumbai. Mumbai has been described in multiple ways- financial capital of India, city of dreams, city of glamour etc. Mumbai is a vibrant city in terms of the people- coming from different communities, religious, linguistic and ethnic groups, its food, the occupations undertaken by the people, the rich history of music and literature that has shaped the lives of people in the city. But all these are multiple dimensions of culture. Culture in Mumbai has evolved over time with contribution by the people who live in Mumbai or who migrate to Mumbai.

This camp took the students to places where normally people who live in Mumbai rarely visit or sometimes are not even aware that it exists. Or not much thought is spared in knowing its history or background. Mumbai has a trove of treasures in the form of places which give a testimony to the mind boggling diversity and rich heritage the City has. Every morning there was an input session by prominent scholars and that was followed by visits to places. The places of visits included Chor Bazaar, Koliwada Gurudwara, Christian and fisher folk communities in Vasai, a Mosque and Dalit and Muslim community in Turbhe, a heritage walk of Mazgaon, Rashid compound in Mumbra, a tour of Dharavi and Triveni Samaj Vikas Kendra. These places gave them glimpses into the diversity of Mumbai which will be presented here.

Chor Bazaar has been a fascinating fixture in Mumbai. In this commercial hub, the relationship between communities is characterized by economic interdependence where commerce reigns supreme. This was said in as many words where one of the vendor of flowers in the *null bazaar* told the students upon being asked about the relationship between Hindu and Muslim traders/ shopkeepers in the market, commented "Dhande mein Dharam kaha se ata hai?" (Where does religion figure in commerce?). The sheer number of roads and the vast expanse of the bazaar are confusing. Two of the students were lost and had to travel in a rickshaw for 20 minutes to reunite with the group! While some students were overwhelmed by the din and colours in the Bohri Mohalla, some were uncomfortable in an all Muslim neighborhood (later they admitted it was due to the phobia and prejudices they encounter in day to day lives about Muslims), some students treated their taste buds to delicious chicken shawarmas and cool watermelon milkshake which are delicacies in the Moholla!

The visit to the Gurudwara was something that the students looked forward to. They didn't miss the opportunity to eat at the Langars where the draft of hot food welcomed them. The Group then interacted with the devotees who came to visit the Gurudwara and also a priest who explained the daily rituals in the Gurudwara and the teachings of Sikhism which borrowed some principles from Hindu religion as well as Islam. The piece of information that amazed the Group was that every evening the Guru Sahib Granth (Holy Book) is taken into an air-conditioned room made above the Gurudwara for the night stay and brought back every morning! While the Gurudwara presented the group the opportunity to meet the Sikh community, the visit to Vasai opened a window to a complete different experience where the Group interacted closely with Christian and fisher community. The group was grappling with the idea that one uses the word 'community' very loosely. In Vasai, the meaning of diversity became clear. A scholar who is studying the area of Vasai gave an example. He informed that Vasai singularly has contributed richly to Marathi literature. By this he meant Christian writers like Fr. Francis D'Britto who received the Dnyanoba- Tukaram Puruskar and Cecelia Carvalho are celebrated Marathi writers. This was an eye opener for the Group which associated the Christian community with western culture where everyone spoke English and dressed up in western clothes. Another thing that baffled most in the Group was when they saw women at a Christian wedding wearing traditional silk sari that they have seen in Marathi weddings! One of the student said, "I always imagined Christians to wear short dresses to the weddings or other occasions. I never imagined they dressed up like Marathi and looked exactly the same with the look complete with the *Gajra* (small bunch of flowers worn in the hair of the women)"! They were informed that the Christian community is not a monolith and there are different denominations in the Christians. The Group realized that identity as a concept is fluid where a group may have affinity more strongly to language or shared culture through they have a same religious identity. Region, occupation and language are equally influential factors in shaping of identity. The Group visited the fisher community after a sumptuous lunch by the sea. The family that hosted the group told about the village fairs that are enjoyed by the community apart from Christmas. All communities- Hindu fishers and Christian fishers participate in the village fairs. The group clicked a picture with the old mother and father of the family who were so beautiful in their traditional attire.

There is diversity in our society not just in terms of our religions or languages but also in terms of our gender. This diversity was experienced by the Group through their visit to Triveni Samaj Vikas Kendra. The Group discovered that gender is portrayed as being highly binary by society. This normative binary marginalizes and stigmatizes the transgender communities. The transgender community shared with the Group their experiences of violence and oppression caste which are given impunity by non inclusive laws that depict the disregard for transgender agency. There were misconceptions of the students such as "once you reach the gharana, is it true that you are never allowed to go back?" "Do you kidnap children and forcefully castrate them?"

To this the organization told them there were previously rules that were instated in the community never to return to the birth homes because of the violence faced there in general. "Many of our sisters never came back after going home and eventually the gurus decided not to send anyone home. But things have changed now. We do visit our homes at times, but mostly as the gender assigned to us at birth. Child castrations and kidnapping is an age old stigma attached with our community. There might have been a few instances where some transgender individual might have kidnapped someone, but how does that reflect on the entire community?"

While various development organizations works with the community on the issues of gender and sexuality, their primary concern is HIV/AIDS and exclude major aspects including health as an overall aspect, livelihoods and education, old age care among queer aged individuals. This reflects their biases and derogatory attitudes towards the transgender community. This visit was challenging as well as emotional for the students since it compelled them to come face to face with their own deep seated prejudices and discriminatory attitudes. One student expressed, "My perception towards the transgender was marked by disgust and hatred. This interaction has helped me look at them as human beings and open up by mind to different choices in regards to sexuality".

Mumbai is a mesmerizing mosaic of different people, traditions and cultures. Very few people including the residents of Mumbai know about the existence of a Chinese shrine called Kwan Kung temple. The 90 plus years old temple nestles in Mazgaon or what came to be known as Chinatown in Mumbai. The name is reflective of a strong Chinese community, See Yup Koon, which resided in the area. The community came to India from Southern China to work for the East Indian Company as merchants, sailors and traders. The group was told that the Chinese wore their traditional attire and there were small restaurants selling

Chinese delicacies in the area. Post Indo- Sino war in 1962, most of the community returned back to China. But a sizeable number stayed back. This shrine serves as a place of worship to those who remain and is the only Chinese shrine in Mumbai. The visit to the Shrine was an exotic experience and the group felt transported to another place and culture with Chinese calligraphy adorning the roof and figurines of Chinese warrior Gods placed at the altar. Beautiful red lanterns and files of bamboo sheets under different numbers and corresponding tarot card roused the interest of the Group. The Shrine is looked after by a caretaker. The devotees gather every Sunday morning and the Chinese New Year is celebrated with enthusiasm with the Chinese Diaspora in Mumbai. Chocolates are given as offerings to the devotees, the Group found this fascinating. But what caught the attention of the Group that though the Shrine offered a glimpse into Chinese culture, the staircase inside the Shrine was lined with *rangoli* stickers commonly found in Hindu temples. The Chinese Shrine and seeing the houses around it which bore ethnic Chinese names was a unique experience for the Group and none of us were aware of the existence of a strong Chinese community in Mumbai and what they have contributed to the city historically.

Mazgaon had other surprise treasures for us. The socio cultural fabric and ethos of Mazgaon is heavily influenced by the sea and the docks. One of the aspect of this culture influenced by the docks and related occupations is the system of kudd or clubs which came into existence 150 odd years back. There are a number of Kudds or clubs in the vicinity of Mazgaon. Kudd is a dormitory like accommodation. Each Kudd is named after a village of Goa and the Kudd will house Christian Catholic men of that village from Goa. In colonial times, the migrants from Goa came to Mumbai to work on the docks and were 'shippies'. Kudd was a home away from home for the youth coming from Goa. Each member in the kudd was given one chest to keep their belonging in the Kudd. There is a small chapel in the Deussua Kudd. Members from a particular village in Goa can come and stay in the Kudd at the rate of INR 50 per month. The Kudd is equipped with a kitchen where members can cook their meals. The membership of the Kudd is hereditary and only members whose ancestors were members can become members. Like mentioned above, in the colonial times, the men coming to work on the sea came to Kudds but today men working in private firms or engaged in business come and stay at the Kudds. When the group asked one of the members that despite the dwindling number of the inmates, why do members who can afford the luxury of Hotels come to stay the Kudd, a member of Deussua explained that Kudds don't just offer reasonable accommodation but is a centre of cultural and social life. The members play games like Carrom and other traditional games played in Goan villages. The members are proud of the shared heritage of their village and revel in this common identity in Mumbai.

Dongri recently has been in news and public domain mainly as a site for gang wars in Mumbai. The stereotypical understanding of Dongri is for its busy crowded by lanes, majority Muslim population and a booming informal sector. However in this underbelly of Mumbai, there are gems of culture which unfortunately not many have unraveled. The greatest example of these gems is the Moghul Masjid. The Masjid is majestic monument in blue tiles. What meet the eyes first in this architectural wonder are the glinting tiles in all shades of blue in intricate patterns and designs. After one gets over the overwhelming entrance of the Mosque, well manicured lawns and a clean pond of water awaits the visitors beyond which the actual Mosque lies. The serenity and beauty of the place gives a refreshing break from the din, smells and sounds of the world outside the premises. The history behind this 150 odd years old monument is as interesting as the monument itself. Mumbai was a favorite destination for traders and merchants for business from Iran and surrounding region. These traders contributed to building the Mosque. The peculiar feature of this Mosque which again indicates the diversity in the architecture of mosques is that unlike other mosques, this Mosque doesn't have a dome. It only has minarets. This is characteristic of the Shirazi form of architecture in Iran and the Moghul Masjid is a splendid example of the same.

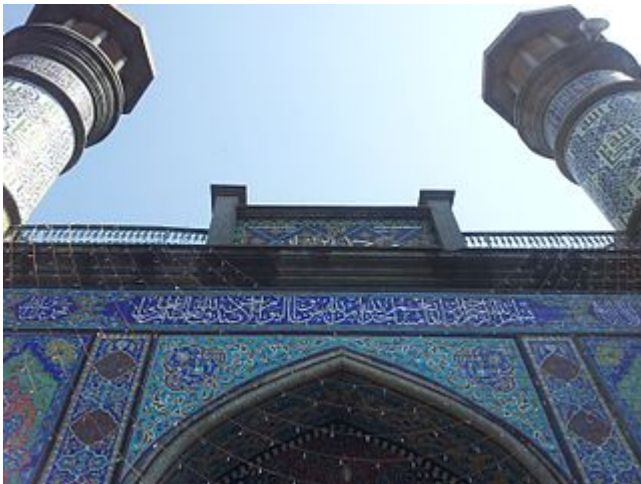


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The visit then proceeded to see the one only existing Turkish bath (Hammam) in Dongri in a neighborhood called Imamwada. A Turkish bath or Hammam is a place for common bath. This particular one is for males where anyone can have a tough but relaxing massage from a *Pehelwan* and go in for a hot bath for INR 100. This was built by the Iranis who settled in Mumbai and is reminiscent of their cultural practice. The Hammam is dilapidated today with paintless mold laden walls and a blackened unclean water tank in a state of disrepair. Nonetheless it is a remnant of Irani contribution to the history of Mumbai and deserves to be restored and preserved to its pristine glory as a heritage.

The visit to Dongri opened a floodgate of information and dose of royal culture in a sense that the group was awed by the rich Urdu tradition that Mumbai is endowed with. Wazir restaurant, the now Shalimar hotel was a den for Urdu poets and film makers to assemble daily and recite their poems and works. The most proud moment of the heritage walk when we were showed a street where the Urdu legend Sadat Hasan Manto resided in Mumbai for some years of his life. With such legends to boast of, there is a Bhendi Bazaar Urdu Festival that's organized by Urdu Markaaz along with others. The Festival celebrates the rich heritage of these icons. In the past, the Festival featured Sufi Music and compositions of Bulle Shah.

The 15 days of journey through Mumbai not only helped the Group understand their own city better but also make wonderful friends. The Group expressed astonishment over the rich cultural diversity that exists in the city and how it has survived over the centuries. Niketa now understands how different religious groups coexist. The common thread that weaves them is culture- diverse and inclusive culture.