

My Word: Unity, Diversity and the Triumph of the Individual

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When my family first moved to this area, way back in the late 60's, we were one of two families of Indian origin living in Newark. I can still remember, after we moved in, some of the neighbors shaking their heads and sighing in resignation that "there goes the neighborhood". Hence, I read with some interest and amusement, in the Sunday Argus, that now we have become such a large influential community that even our divisions are considered newsworthy. I was pleased to note that so many people of all backgrounds, even important local dignitaries, attended the Unity Dinner and the Republic Day events. I guess this shows that our neighbors now believe Indo-Americans make the neighborhoods rather than break them.

In light of the explosive growth in the size of the community, especially in the 90's tech boom, it should surprise no one that there are divisions among the community. We may all seem homogeneous. After all, most of us have brown/black hair, some hue of brown skin, eat spicy foods, and the women generally wear colorful clothes. However, the fact is that Indo-Americans hail from a country, poor in economic terms, but one which has hit the lottery in terms of diversity. India's population consists of followers of all major religions, and the country has a wide spectrum of art, culture and a rich historical heritage. There are something like twenty-four official languages spoken in twenty-five states and numerous other languages and dialects. Thus, just as it should come as no surprise that Italian Americans or Chinese American, for example, don't all pray at the same Church, there is no reason that Indo-Americans all have to belong to the same group. I grant you, politically, and I suppose, for ease of compartmentalization, it might be beneficial to belong to one group and speak with one voice. However, the reality is that irrespective of our origins, Indians, Chinese, or Europeans, we are all individuals first and foremost. Just as our thumb prints are unique, so is our own vision of the world as both Ramesh Japra and Jeevan Zutshi have demonstrated.

I did not have to make a choice between these two visions as I did not know about the Republic Day celebration. I managed to get a ticket, at the last minute, to attend the Unity Dinner which was completely sold out. I enjoyed it thoroughly. I appreciated the fact that the Indo-American Community Federation took the trouble to do outreach to diverse groups, such as members of the Chinese and Muslim Community. The speakers were varied and spoke about timely events such as the Afghan experience and the erosion of civil liberties. The speakers included such notables as First Lady Sharon Davis and inspiring individuals like Grandmaster Tae Yun Kim. I was especially delighted to hear and meet Congressman Mike Honda who has been at the forefront of defending the rights and dignity of minority groups. The dances were fun and colorful and showcased some of the brighter aspects of Indian heritage. I also appreciated the fact that the Unity Dinner celebration recognized some of our local neighbors and community members who have made significant contributions such as Dan Archer and Citizens for Better Community. Overall, the event did a credible job of addressing issues, concerns, and interests for the community at large and not only for Indo-Americans. So, in short, I am glad I attended the Unity Dinner, not just from the point of view of an American of Indian origin, but as a resident of the community that I and my family call home.