



## Creating citizens of the world

**In a world divided by colour, ethnicity and gender, a new connectedness owing to global business is developing**

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Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, which means the whole world is a single family, has been a belief in Indian thought for centuries.

Philosophical notions like these may seem appealing and perhaps even unreal, but the truth is that anthropologists will tell you that human beings are actually genetically connected. Genome researchers have now concluded that we come from the same genetic Adam and Eve, out of Africa! In his remarkable book, *Bound Together - How Traders, Preachers, Adventurers, and Warriors shaped globalisation*, Nayan Chanda says, 'The physical differences among humans that form the basis of what we call 'race' were forged ... by geography, climate and natural selection.'

Be that as it may, with economic activity gaining ascendancy where trade once flourished between nations, today, the same nations are at war with each other over racial and intellectual superiority. The recent spate of violence against Indian students and workers in Australia has brought to our attention an ugly truth that we often ignore — the fate of the immigrant worker.

Paradoxically, global trade is once again connecting us all. Economists remind us that one of the major reasons for the spread of recession with such speed is the domino impact of global economic coupling. An interesting question that comes up is whether national boundaries are valid any longer? In a world where global brands exist and consumers are charmed by the same offerings, a new kind of connectedness is developing. The rise in global business has also created a supra-national identity. Multinational companies have vaulted over national borders and often remind us that beyond the national flag, there is a business cooperation flag that binds people together. So, besides being an Indian or a Chinese or an American, we also are an IBMer, Microsoftie or a Citibanker.

What characterises such individuals? Are they a new emerging class of global citizens? It is an intriguing thought to believe that businesses can break national boundaries. Perhaps if they did, then the notion of cultural or racial superiority would get diluted.

A recent report in *The Economist* mentions that between 2000 and 2008, Indian companies have announced over 1,000 international mergers or acquisitions, worth over \$72 billion. While the hyper-patriotic have cheered this Indian foray overseas (reading more into it than just market economics), there is no denying that those involved in running the business at the ground level have faced inter-cultural challenges, particularly in Europe.

Transnational business leaders are expected to be culturally sensitive to local issues, but not all companies have invested in their employees to create this self-awareness to ethnic value differences across societies. Ironically, we have forgotten that the Mahatma said, 'Civilisation is the encouragement of all differences'. At home in India, we have become prickly about every supposed slight to our culture and have tended to react violently.

While much credit has been legitimately given to Indian software companies for their outstanding achievements across the globe, many in the industry have failed to prepare the young engineer before sending him overseas on assignments. Consequently, many bright (but socially untutored to an alien setting) engineers have failed to adjust to the new communal reality in foreign locations and the negative stereotype of the Indian software techie has been reinforced.

A few large global firms have mastered the art of building bridges across societies to achieve their business purpose. In a world divided by colour, ethnicity and gender, there is an opportunity for them to share their methodology and perhaps also take the lead to create bonds of friendship and trust over the gulf of misunderstanding that often separates societies. Perhaps then we can hasten the creation of a global citizen by valuing diversity.