

Germany shows the way

All European cities somehow look familiar and identical to me. Berlin is no exception. Like any other great old European metropolis, the German capital is a heady blend of the old and new, with tradition and modernity living in harmony with each other.

It is incredibly instructive and fascinating to see the lengths to which the Europeans go to take care of their cities. They know that their cities are not merely urban habitats but remnants and living symbols of their nation's history and heritage. The past is cherished and protected with a passion that is quite alien to us.

Unlike South Asia and the Middle East, where history is taken for granted and forever abused, no landmarks and monuments are abandoned or allowed to go to seed in Europe. Every slice of history is preserved for posterity with great care.

This may explain why European cities like Berlin and London proudly live and breathe the past whereas in a country like India, which is steeped in 5,000 years of history, old Delhi are falling apart and cheap, partisan politics is rampant over globally celebrated icons like the Taj Mahal.

Travelling through the German capital today, it is hard to believe that this is the same city which had been at the heart of action during World War II. Being at the head of Hitler's unstoppable juggernaut that ravaged the whole of the continent, Berlin witnessed the most catastrophic war in human history.

Nearly 70 million people – about the size of Iran's population – were killed, not to mention the economic and other incalculable costs of the war. The Nazi monster was eventually defanged, but not before it had wreaked havoc all across Europe and beyond. It took the collective might and firepower of the US, the Soviet Union, Britain and the rest of Europe to bring the Fuhrer to his knees.

The endless Allied bombing during the Great War totally decimated Germany, with the victors partitioning the country and even dividing Berlin right down the middle. Indeed, the wall that separated the two parts of Berlin came to define not just the division of one country but also epitomised the split of the world into two perpetually bickering blocs and a nuclear holocaust that the cold war threatened.

Not surprisingly, when the Berlin Wall came crashing down, under the weight of its own historical contradictions and a changing world, it was not just the Germans who cheered; the world celebrated with them.

The ground had truly shifted. It was the end of an era – literally. So it all began and ended here in Berlin. For decades, Germany had been humiliated and made to pay for Hitler's appalling crimes against humanity and delusions of grandeur – just as it had happened after the First Great War.

Today, the scars of that destruction and all the evil that took place in this land are hardly visible. What is truly remarkable is the incredible pace at which Germany has managed to spring back to its feet. Like the mythical phoenix, it has risen from its ashes – just as it had risen after World War I – emerging even more powerful and clearly more mature and wiser in its new avatar.

It has not just managed to survive the last great war and the years of humiliation and punishment that followed, but has emerged as the continent's largest economy – and not just as the leader of post-war Europe but a global power once again. Although thanks to its past, its military wings still remain clipped and, like Japan, it is still largely dependent on the US for its protection and defence, Germany has begun to come into its own slowly but surely.

With the continuing economic meltdown claiming one formidable EU economy after another, the impregnable economic fortress that Europe used to be has suddenly started wobbling slowly but unmistakably. The only port that looks safe in this economic storm is Germany. Even more so after a Britain full of hubris decided to walk out of the EU.

Barring some awfully polite protests demanding higher wages and curbs over immigration, Germany did not witness the chaos that ruled the streets of Europe after the 2008-9 market crash. Its economy remains robust. Indeed, the country has been helping others.

Germany has invested a great deal of hard work and famous German dedication over the decades to reach where it finds itself today. The Germans put in the longest working hours in Europe. The country has moved towards other fronts too. It appears to have learned from its past and is remorseful over what happened to minority groups under the Nazis. There are no attempts to gloss over the past or brush it under the carpet.

So, is the mindset that created the Nazi Frankenstein and sent millions of innocent people to their deaths dead and buried now? The answer is in the negative. It is still seen in the occasional targeting of mosques and Jewish and Muslim cemeteries. Despite the growth of far-right anti-immigrant parties like the AfD (Alternative for Germany), the Right remains in check thanks to the charismatic and powerful leadership of Chancellor Angela Merkel.

Perhaps to compensate for the Nazi crimes against humanity and religious minorities, Merkel's Germany generously welcomed refugees from conflict zones in the Middle East and Africa, especially the victims of Syrian conflict. In 2015, at the height of the Syrian refugee crisis, Germany accepted at least a million refugees. People opened their homes and churches to accommodate the guests, winning hearts and minds around the world – especially in the Muslim world.

When it comes to safety and a general sense of security for religious and cultural minorities, Germany is perhaps far ahead of many European nations that trumpet themselves as champions of human rights and tolerance.

While the vilification of immigrants, especially Muslims, has acquired dangerous proportions in France, Austria and the Netherlands, Germany has managed to buck this growing trend of demonising the other. The country is home to nearly five million Muslims, a majority of them from Turkey (almost two-thirds); the Balkans; and the North African Arab countries, forming five percent of the 82 million-strong population. For their part, Muslims are at peace with themselves and their adopted nation even as they remain loyal to their tradition and faith. You see Middle Eastern or halal eateries all over Berlin and elsewhere with Germans queuing up for their regulation doner kebab with their characteristic discipline.

A 2009 survey by the German government together with the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) found that Muslims are far more integrated into German society than other European nations. Second-generation German Muslims, especially women, are better educated and more upwardly mobile than their parents as compared with second-generation Muslims in France and Britain. Clearly, when it comes to tolerance and cultural diversity, today's Germany can teach a lesson or two to the rest of Europe. Adolf must be turning in his grave.

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