

'The Argumentative Indian' by Amartya Sen

In his essay *The Argumentative Indian*, Amartya Sen tells us about the argumentative qualities of Indians and how it has made path-breaking achievements. He begins the essay by giving the example of Krishna Menon's record speech of nine hours at the UNO. Speaking leads to arguments and counter arguments which spread over incessant debates and disputations. Christopher Isherwood translated the Bhagawat Gita into English. It endorses an admiration for Krishna's arguments on the priority of doing one's duty against moral consequences. T.S. Eliot too has admiration for the Bhagawat Gita. J. Robert Oppenheimer, the American physicist also found justification in his technical commitment to develop a bomb for what was clearly the right side. He said " When you see something that is technically sweet, you go ahead and do it and argue about it, only after you have had your technical success." Yet Arjuna's doubts and hesitations had fair ground because how could any good come from killing and carnage? How can the fruits like victory and kingdom be enjoyed through bloodshed?

Similar arguments are relevant in the contemporary world. The reasons for doing one's duty must be strong yet we cannot remain indifferent to the consequences that may follow. The problems of the global world—like terrorism, wars, violence, epidemics, insecurity, grueling poverty or in the case of India like—economic development, nuclear confrontation or regional peace should be considered on the basis of Arjuna's consequential analysis and also on Krishna's arguments for doing one's duty. An argument which wins cannot be a foolproof, flawless truth because the defeated argument also has a power of its own. It remains alive and vibrates with a lot of truth in it too.

Gender, Caste and Voice

India has had deep inequalities regarding gender, class, caste and community. The argumentative tradition would be very limited if the marginalized sections are not allowed participation. Yet Sarojini Naidu, the first woman President of the Indian National congress was elected fifty years before Britain elected a woman as Prime Minister— Margaret Thatcher.

Going back to the Upanishads we have the example of Gargi's intellectual argument. The arguments presented by women speakers in epics and classical tales do not always conform to the tender, homely and peace loving image that is assigned to women. In *The Mahabharata*, it is Draupadi who instigates her husband Yudhistira to fight the Kurukshetra war. Thus the Indian argumentative tradition is not solely the preserve of men but also of women.

Argumentative encounters have even crossed the barriers of class and caste. In fact, socially disadvantaged and underprivileged groups had had the courage and voice to take up arms

against religious orthodoxy. It is the argumentative nature of Indians which acted as a levelling feature and undermined the superiority of the dominant class. Substantial sections of early Buddhist and Jain literature contain expositions of protest and resistance. Thus the argumentative tradition in India, has been present since the ages of the epics and the Shastras.

It must be noted with seriousness that the arguments of the well tutored, educated class might be at an advantage, while the arguments of the deprived and the less privileged might not appear strong enough—though the grounds of their arguments might call for attention. However, since ancient times, arguments advocating the equality of men had come from the working class. For example, - Kabir was a weaver, Ravi Das a shoe-maker, Sena a barber and also from women like Mirabai.

Democracy as Public Reasoning

The richness of the tradition of arguments shapes our social world and the nature of our culture. Persistent arguments are an important part of our public life. Moreover, it influences Indian politics, democracy and secularism.

The tradition of public reasoning is closely related to the roots of democracy, across the globe. When India became free from the British rule and chose a democratic constitution she actually drew on its own tradition of public reasoning and argumentative heterodoxy. There has been a tenacious persistence of this democratic system with due priority given to civilian rule. The Emergency of 1977, which was a threat to democracy was overthrown in the succeeding elections.

Indian democracy is not without a horde of flaws. But these can be overcome through the argumentative tradition of our country. It must always be remembered that democracy is intimately connected with public discussion and interactive reasoning. Democracy can be preserved only through public discussion or rather through an argumentative approach. There must therefore be ample opportunities for the masses, for open public discussion. The opportunity to vote is also to be combined with the opportunity to speak and listen without fear. James Buchanan has defined democracy as 'Argument by discussion'. Indian Buddhist had a strong commitment to discussion as a means of social progress. Emperor Ashoka ensured that public discussions should take place peacefully and so did Emperor Akbar, who believed that reasoned dialogues would help address difficult problems. Public reasoning therefore is an essential ingredient of a healthy democratic government..

Understanding Secularism

India has been a shared home for Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, Jains, Jews, Christians, Parsees, Sikhs, Bahai's and others and this reflects the tolerances of religious diversity in the country. Each religious community managed to retain its identity within India's multi-religious spectrum. The Vedas which date back to the middle of the second millennium paved the way for Hinduism., Buddhism and Jainism--- which both emerged by the 6th century. The Jews came to India in 175 BC. Christians congregated by the 4th century; Parsis started arriving in the late 7th century', Muslims settled in India in the 8th century. The Bahai's were the last sect to seek refuge in India in the last century.

The tolerance of diversity has been argued on the basis of preserving the richness of variation , and for the need to interact with each other, in mutual respect through dialogue. Two great Emperors of India—Ashoka and Akbar have made remarkable contributions towards public reasoning and advocated strongly the necessity of secularism. Ashoka emphasized that tolerance and reverence for others' faith and beliefs are important. The politics of secularism also received a boost from Akbar who championed pluralistic ideals. Diversity has also been accepted and exalted in literature—in Kalidas, Amir Khusrou, Sudraka, kabir, Dadu, Ravi Das and others. But unlike in certain western countries Indian secularism has emphasized neutrality in particular rather than prohibition in general. For example, the French had banned the wearing of headscarves by Muslim students, on the ground that it violates secularism. In India, however, neutrality is accepted to maintain secularism—members of different religions are treated equally and given freedom to follow their own customs.

Sceptics , Agnostics and Atheists

All religious beliefs co-exist with skeptical arguments and this has been present since the middle of the second millennium BC. Even the Vedas have radical doubts. "Whence this creation has arisen--- perhaps it formed itself, or perhaps it did not—the one who looks down on it, in the highest heaven, only he knows."

These 3500 years old doubts would recur in Indian critical debates again and again. The doubts sometimes take the form of agnosticism, sometimes that of atheism. In philosophical discourses throughout Indian history, atheists and skeptics make frequent appearances and even though in many cases, their points of view are ultimately rejected, they do get their say.

In fact, important documents and scriptures are brushed aside through mere scepticism, because of their religious content. For example Kautilya's *Arthshastra*, (which can be

translated as Economics) composed in the 4th century BC is basically a secular treatise, despite its focus on religious and social customs.

Science , Epistemology and Heterodoxy

Scientific advancement is closely connected with the role of heterodoxy, since new ideas and discoveries have to emerge initially as heterodox views, that differ from and may be in conflict with established views.

In India, the tradition of skepticism, questioning and arguments have paved the way for scientific development. Science and Mathematics began to develop during the Gupta period in the 5th century by Aryabhata, in 6th century; by Varahamihira and in the 7th century by Brahmagupta. There have also been significant departures from accepted beliefs, in epistemology, in this period.

In the *Ramayana*, Javati, a skeptical pundit tells Rama that we must rely on only what we can observe and experience. He said that the rituals of religion like worship, sacrifices, gifts, penance have been laid down in the Shastras by clever people, just to have a control over other people. The logical advice he gave to Rama is “ follow what is within your experience and do not trouble yourself with what lies beyond the province of human experience.” The observation is similar to the materialism of Lokayukta and the Carvaka system, of the 1st millennium BC, which concentrate on materialism, pleasures and the present life. The Lokayukta is a discipline of arguments and disputes.

In 1605 Francis Bacon in his *Advancement of Learning*, “ The registering and proposing of doubts has a double use.” The first is straightforward which guards against errors. The second is the role of doubts which will lead to enquiry and truth.

A great many departures in science and Mathematics occurred in India from the early centuries of the first millennium which altered the state of knowledge in the world. Indian Trigonometry and Astronomy in particular have a historical importance . It is also because of the way in which they influenced India’s relations with other civilization, particularly the Arab world and China. The new theories and discoveries of Varahammihira, Brahmagupta and Bhaskara involved sharp departures from established religious orthodoxy, which further involved considerable courage and determination to publicize their feelings. It has been recorded by the Iranian astronomer, Alberuni, that Brahmagupta lacked the fortitude and courage of Aryabhata and played up to religious orthodoxy by criticizing Aryabhata, even though he himself used Aryabhata’s scientific methods and procedures. The constructive role of heterodoxy and of the courage to disagree is therefore a pivotal factor in science and in fostering public reasoning.

Word meanings

Heterodoxy----not following traditional standards or beliefs

Skeptics---people who questions accepted beliefs or statements

Agnostic—people who do not know whether god exists

Atheists—people who do not believe in the existence of god

Epistemology—the brance of philosophy that deals with knowledge