

The importance of listening well

Conversations between governments and citizens and among citizens themselves are crucial in a democracy



RAJEEV BHARGAVA

A very instructive passage on the difference in norms of debate among ancient Indian scholars, on the one hand, and kings and their subjects, on the other is found in the ancient text, *Milinda-pañha*. It records an exchange between the Indo-Greek king Milinda (Menander) and the Buddhist monk Nāgasena.

When the king fails to understand a point made by Nāgasena, he asks, "Will you discuss with me again?"

Nāgasena says: "If your Majesty will discuss as a scholar (*pan d itra*) yes; but if you discuss as a king, no."

"How do scholars discuss?"
"When scholars talk a matter over with each other, there is a winding up, an unravelling; distinctions are made and counter-distinctions; one or other is convinced of error, and then acknowledges his mistake; and yet thereby they are not angered. Thus, do scholars, O king, discuss."

"And how do kings discuss?"
"When a king, your Majesty, discusses a matter, and he advances a point, if anyone differs from him on that point, he is apt to fine him saying: 'Inflict such and such a punishment upon that fellow!' Thus, Your Majesty, do kings discuss."

Debates in ancient India, the text seems to say, were tranquil, stress-free events in which participants did not hesitate to change their opinions where necessary, a far cry from royal (political) discussions in which disagreement with political rulers was frequently fraught with danger and winning a debate was almost, and sometimes literally, a matter of life and death.

Listening to citizens

In fact, democracy is the only form of government where rules of scholarly and political debate are supposed to coincide, both among citizens and between governments and citizens. Debates are meant to be conducted fearlessly and in the ensuing discussion, mistakes are acknowledged and opinions changed. There is no anger or sense of humiliation if and when one is shown to be in-



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ror. Public arguments are meant to compel citizens to openly acknowledge when proven wrong and force governments to admit their mistakes and change policies. But is any of this possible without proper listening? It is said that it is the privilege of powerful people to speak and the lot of the powerless to listen. The beauty of democracy is that it obliges the powerful to listen.

Of course, even democratic governments do not always listen to their electors. But as soon as their legitimacy dips below a certain threshold, as soon as their habit of turning a deaf ear to their people threatens their survival, they seem instinctively to know that it is absolutely crucial to start listening.

Something akin to this appears to have recently taken place in India. A month ago, the current government appeared not to be listening to anyone. And although it is arguable that only a few top corporates were eventually heard, it is equally true that after months of silence on the pleadings of the 'people' to do something about the economic slowdown, the government finally listened to someone. Can we not now take this as an opportunity to demand an extension of this courtesy to others? To the farmers, or the poor more generally? To, say, teachers, scholars, dancers, musicians, painters, town-planners on education and cultural policy? To Kashmiris, Dalits and the minorities? Should not the government listen to those who dissent from their policies?

It is pretty obvious to me that the answer to these questions must be in the affirmative. Good governments make a habit of listening to citizens. Indeed, in democracies, those temporarily in power need to develop

the quality of being good listeners, *sushruta*. What do I mean by this and how will this help?

Good listening

Allowing someone to speak is, of course, the first precondition of listening. Remaining quiet while she is speaking is another. But silence can still mean not listening. One may even pretend to listen, but remain disengaged or distracted. We all know that there exists what might be called 'vacant-look listening', when the interlocutor is physically present but mentally absent. Even sincere silence may just convey paternalistic assurance or be viewed as a strategy to allow the speaker to let off steam. It can betray biased judgment, moralising, or a readiness for instant advice. These are conversation-stoppers, roadblocks to listening. Good listening is attentive, uninterrupted, and genuinely responsive.

There is more to good listening. The Indian spiritual thinker, Jiddu Krishnamurti, put this point across well. He said: "There are two ways of listening: there is the mere listening to words, as you listen when you are not really interested, when you are not trying to fathom the depths of a problem; and there is the listening which catches the real significance of what is being said." In short, good listening is empathetic and self-reflexive. It involves the capacity to step out of one's own perspective, consider things from the other's point of view – "climb into his skin and walk around in it", as Harper Lee put it. Good listening enables an accurate understanding of what another person is thinking, feeling, experiencing, and meaning. None of this is possible if one remains self-centered, or believes that truth and goodness is

on one side alone. Good listening further presupposes that others have much to teach us, especially those who, in important aspects, are different from us.

Such good listening is especially needed in times of deep disagreement when we forget that there are as many views as there are people and delude ourselves into believing that the world is divided in two: us and them. We believe that only two views exist, and the one held by us is correct. This particularly crude form of binary thinking exacerbates conflicts, and deepens polarisation. A polarised world contains perfect conditions for people to stop listening to each other. It is precisely at such times that we need encouragement to start listening, so that we can broaden the horizon of our experience, to break the horrible habit of dismissing differences. Listening helps reveal hidden commonalities that bolster cooperation. It dispels mistaken assumptions. It brings greater acceptance. In such deeply divided times, should it not be the duty of democratic governments to encourage people to de-escalate bitterness and discord and begin listening to one another?

Listening to many

The government has made a good beginning by listening to a few. Since good democratic governments strive to be inclusive, to win the trust of all, they must listen to the many, become *bahushruta*. Deliberative democrats often emphasise the importance of good arguments and wish the best argument to determine its decisions. But can we ever know 'the best argument' if we haven't listened to all of them? Unless we ensure that, as far as possible, all points of view have indeed been taken into account? This inclusion is impossible without listening to voices that may have been repressed before, voices of the powerless and the vulnerable.

A continuing conversation between governments and citizens and among citizens themselves is crucial in a democracy. But good conversations presuppose good habits of listening. Governments must take seriously their duty to be not only *sushruta*, but *bahushruta*. Citizens too must take more responsibility for cultivating these public virtues.

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Inequality of another kind

Why the right to Internet access and digital literacy should be recognised as a right in itself



SUMEESH SRIVASTAVA

Recently, in *Faheema Shirin v. State of Kerala*, the Kerala High Court declared the right to Internet access as a fundamental right forming a part of the right to privacy and the right to education under Article 21 of the Constitution. While this is a welcome move, it is important to recognise the right to Internet access as an independent right.

Digital inequality

Inequality is a concept that underpins most interventions focussed on social justice and development. It resembles the mythological serpent Hydra in Greek mythology – as the state attempts to deal with one aspect of inequality, many new aspects keep coming up.

In recent times, several government and private sector services have become digital. Some of them are only available online. This leads to a new kind of inequality, digital inequality, where social and economic backwardness is exacerbated due to information poverty, lack of infrastructure, and lack of digital literacy. According to the Deloitte report, 'Digital India: Unlocking the Trillion Dollar Opportunity', in mid-2016, digital literacy in India was less than 10%. We are moving to a global economy where knowledge of digital processes will transform the way in which people work, collaborate, consume information, and entertain themselves. This has been acknowledged in the Sustainable Development Goals as well as by the Indian government and has led to the Digital India mission. Offering services online has cost and efficiency benefits for the government and also allows citizens to bypass lower-level government bureaucracy. However, in the absence of Internet access and digital literacy enabling that access, there will be further exclusion of large parts of the population, exacerbating the already existing digital divide.

Moving governance and service delivery online without the requisite progress in Internet access and digital literacy also does not make economic sense. For instance, Common Service Centres, which operate in rural and remote locations, are physical facilities which help in delivering digital government services and informing communities about government initiatives. While the state may be saving resources by moving services online, it also has to spend resources since a large chunk of citizens cannot access these services. The government has acknowledged this and has initiated certain mea-

sures in this regard. The Bharat Net programme, aiming to have an optical fibre network in all gram panchayats, is to act as the infrastructural backbone for having Internet access all across the country. However, the project has consistently missed all its deadlines while the costs involved have doubled. Similarly, the National Digital Literacy Mission has barely touched 1.67% of the population and has been struggling for funds. This is particularly worrying because Internet access and digital literacy are dependent on each other, and creation of digital infrastructure must go hand in hand with the creation of digital skills.

The importance of digital literacy

Internet access and digital literacy have implications beyond access to government services. Digital literacy allows people to access information and services, collaborate, and navigate socio-cultural networks. In fact, the definition of literacy today must include the ability to access and act upon resources and information found online. While the Kerala High Court judgment acknowledges the role of the right to access Internet in accessing other fundamental rights, it is imperative that the right to Internet access and digital literacy be recognised as a right in itself. In this framework the state would have (i) a positive obligation to create infrastructure for a minimum standard and quality of Internet access as well as capacity-building measures which would allow all citizens to be digitally literate and (ii) a negative obligation prohibiting it from engaging in conduct that impedes, obstructs or violates such a right. Recognising the right to internet access and digital literacy will also make it easier to demand accountability from the state, as well as encourage the legislature and the executive to take a more proactive role in furthering this right. The courts have always interpreted Article 21 as a broad spectrum of rights considered incidental and/or integral to the right to life.

A right to Internet access would also further provisions given under Articles 38(2) and 39 of the Constitution. It has now become settled judicial practice to read fundamental rights along with directive principles with a view to defining the scope and ambit of the former. We are living in an 'information society'. Unequal access to the Internet creates and reproduces socio-economic exclusions. It is important to recognise the right to Internet access and digital literacy to alleviate this situation, and allow citizens increased access to information, services, and the creation of better livelihood opportunities.

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Why seek Western validation?

For many Western film critics, Indian cinema is often synonymous with Hindi cinema

KUNAL RAY

Recently, *The Guardian* released its list of 100 best films of the 21st century. The only Indian (read Hindi) film in the list is Anurag Kashyap's *Gangs of Wasseypur*. This mention attracted considerable attention in the Indian media. While some sections of the media praised the film, a few wondered if it is really that good.

Individual preferences

It should be noted that most lists are arbitrary and often reflect the preferences of the individuals who prepare them. We concur with some choices and disagree with others. But the veneration of the film because of its mention in the list points to a larger, deep-seated malaise in India: the need for Western validation.

There is also another problem with such lists. It is that for many Western film critics, Indian cinema doesn't exist beyond Hindi cinema. Hindi cinema has a wider reach, clout and visibility. Hindi mainstream actors also have a pan-Indian presence. Some of them regularly act in non-Hindi films. Hindi cinema is also widely written about in popular media and academia. Other film cultures and industries in India do not enjoy this exposure. And so, in the larger Western imagination, Hindi cinema is synonymous with Indian cinema or representative of it. I wonder if parts of the West even know about the other film cultures that thrive in India and the brilliant films that have been made in non-Hindi film industries of India, which are as good as, if not better than, *Gangs of Wasseypur*.

This is not to say that *Gangs of Wasseypur* is not a good film. It is not a mainstream Bollywood film. Kashyap decenters the gangster-mafia conversation beyond Mumbai and throws us into a world of characters who don't look, feel, or talk like their counterparts in other Hindi mafia-gangster films. I would say that Kashyap retains many formulaic Bollywood conventions of the genre with

his use of music, violence, sex, and a love story, but situates these conventions in a milieu that is foreign to mainstream Hindi cinema audiences. He uses local sounds, actors and dialects. The lead characters are as vulnerable as their opponents. There are no hero characters in the film. He also exposes the unholy nexus between politics and unorganised crime and highlights issues of caste. Kashyap renders formula in a non-formulaic way. The first part of *Gangs of Wasseypur* is captivating indeed, but the second part falters in some ways.

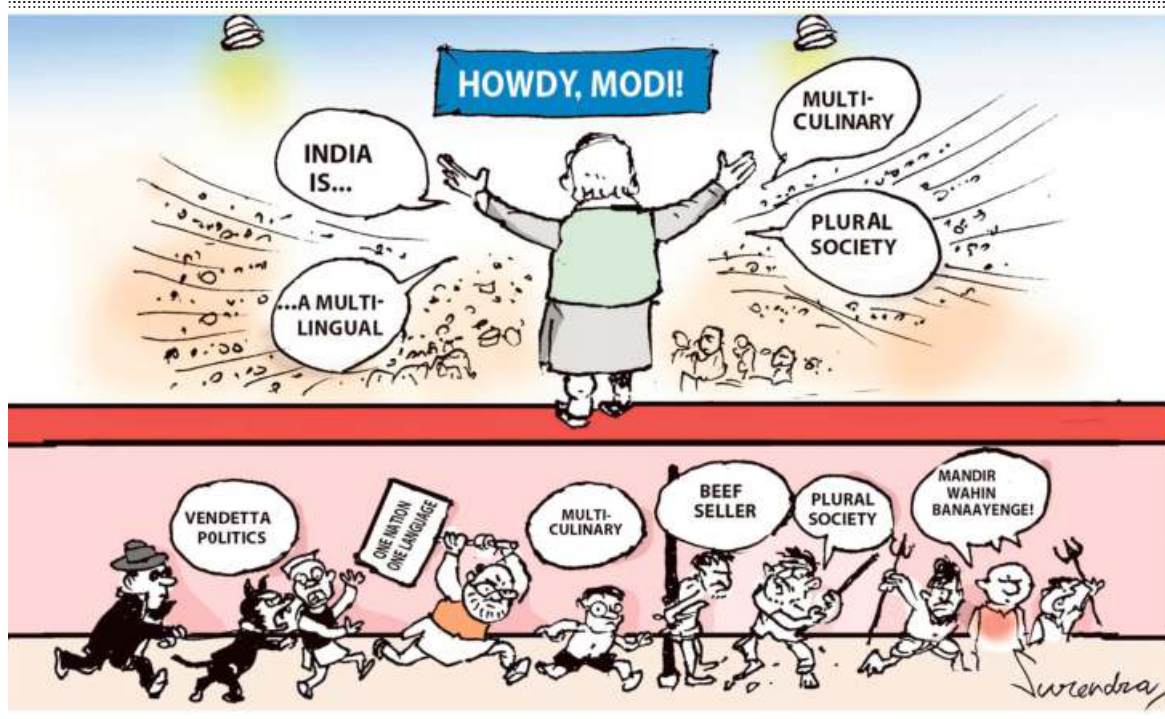
Other contenders

Having said that, is it really the best Indian film of the 21st century? I don't think so. For that spot, there are many contenders from non-Hindi film cultures of India. Lijo Jose Pellissery's Malayalam crime drama, *Angamaly Diaries*, is a remarkable film. It shows how local youth are

drawn to crime and eventually form a gang. It is also a commentary on the aspirations and needs of a social class. Rajeev Ravi's *Kammatipaadam* explores similar territory. Vetrimaran's films in Tamil are no less. Karthik Subbaraj made *Jigarthanda*, an ode to gangsters. Ameer Sultan's *Paruthiveeran* gave me the chills. What about Gurvinder Singh's Punjabi films *Anhe Ghere Da Daan* and the intensely lyrical *Chauthi Koo?* Raam Reddy made the genre-bending Kannada film, *Thithi*. In Marathi, Nagraj Manjule made *Fandry*, Chaitanya Tamhane made *Court*, Avinash Arun made *Killa*. Even within the Hindi film fold, Nandita Das debuted with a searing commentary on the 2002 Gujarat riots, *Firaq*. There are others like *Masaan* and *Newton* with inventive storytelling. Rajat Kapoor made the perplexing *Ankhn Dekhi* which deserved more discussion.

These show that we ought to celebrate and recognise India's best cinema for reasons that are entirely our own, not because some of these films are appreciated by the West.

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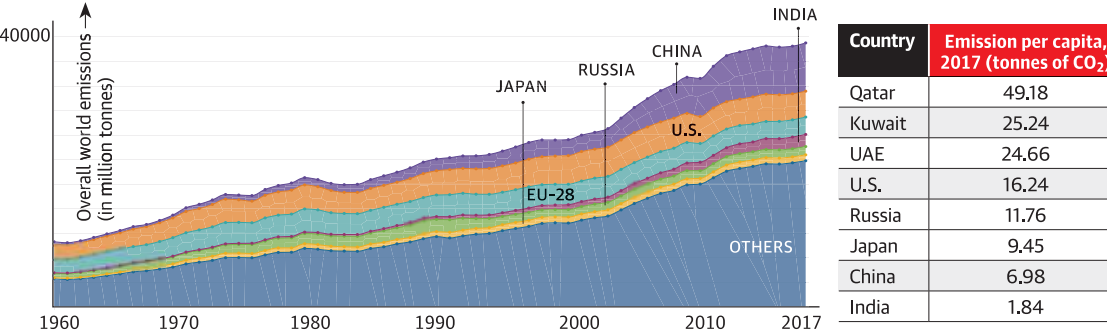


DATA POINT

Warmer by the year

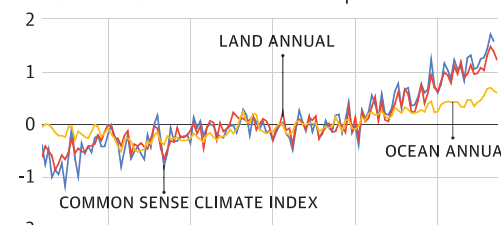
The UN's climate change summit began on Monday at a time when increase in greenhouse gases and variations in global temperatures are at record highs. India is the third largest contributor to emissions after the U.S. and China. Meanwhile, a survey on attitudes to climate change shows that about 6% of U.S. respondents were in denial about climate change. By Varun B. Krishnan

Big polluters While India is among the top Carbon Dioxide (CO₂) emitters (as of 2017), its share of emissions (36,153.26 MT) was lower compared to other big emitters like China and the U.S. China's in particular has risen significantly in the last 30 years



Rising temperatures

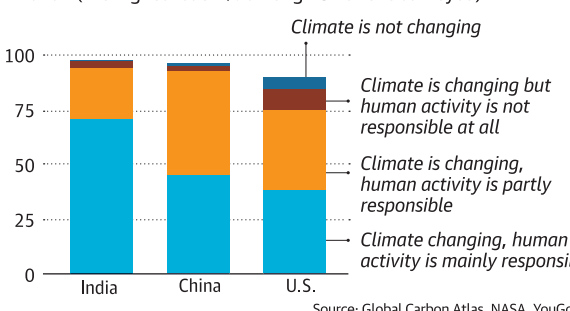
An increase in CO₂ emissions has contributed to an increase in global temperature anomalies, which indicate how much warmer or colder it is than normal* for a place and time



*The average over the 30-year period 1951-1980. Common Sense Climate Index is a composite index of climate quantities. Positive values refer to warming

Varying attitudes

Nearly 9% of those surveyed by YouGov in the U.S. said that the climate was changing but human activity was not responsible for it at all (the highest such % among 28 nations surveyed)



Source: Global Carbon Atlas, NASA, YouGov

The Hindu

FROM THE ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO SEPTEMBER 24, 1969

In search of a Constitution

(From an Editorial)

While the Pakistan Press has been writing sarcastically about the Congress Party crisis in India and prophesying the political collapse of this country, the constitutional debate in Pakistan continues unabated. President Yahya Khan has called for the preparation of electoral rolls on the basis of adult franchise, thus conceding a major popular demand. It is also certain that the shape of the future constitution will be federal and that the Centre will retain powers over defence, external relations and finance. But the hottest point of the debate relates to the "one unit" system which was introduced in the 1956 Constitution. According to that scheme, the former provinces of West Pakistan were merged into a single unit so that only two provincial legislatures remained, one for the West and one for the East. The limited powers which these provincial legislatures enjoyed disappeared with the introduction of Ayub Khan's 1962 Constitution and even the Central Legislature was reduced to a debating society with the Cabinet responsible to the President rather than to the legislature.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO SEPT. 24, 1919.

The Imperial Council.

(From an Editorial)

The rejection of the Hon'ble Mr. B.N. Sarma's resolution in the Imperial Legislative Council urging that an expert committee of officials and non-officials be appointed to consider the question of the establishment of a State Bank for India is bound to be viewed with some misgivings in the country. It is now certain that we have been driven by force of circumstances to resort to some sort of a central bank for the whole country, not merely to secure the economies resulting from the centralisation of reserves, but also to see that our currency and exchange are placed on a more stable and sounder basis. There are many problems of great intricacy involved in the establishment of such a bank. Some of these relate to the nature of the control that should be exercised over it; some others are connected with the distribution of the resources of the bank among the various provincial branches so that one province might not unduly monopolise the funds of the bank to the detriment of the other.