

MEDIA DEBATES, ASYMMETRICAL ARGUMENTATION, AND THE NATURE OF VIOLENCE IN INDIAN POLITICS

Keerthiraj¹

ABSTRACT

Dialogue is often considered as a solution to reduce violent conflicts between different competing parties. Applying this logic of dialogue to reduce the possibility of violence holds validity. On the other hand, empirical evidence show that dialogues also resulted in violent conflicts, instead of ameliorating the situation. This paper focuses on this unique problem of applying dialogue as a remedy to violent conflicts in India with a special reference to media debates. Extended media including both mainstream and social media provided large space for dialogues regarding issues in the contemporary world. India is no exception to this fact. This paper critically analyses this entire discourse of media debates on contentious issues in India to test the hypothesis regarding the validity of dialogue as a remedy to prevent violence and chaos in Indian political context.

Key Words: Dialogue, Media, Indian Politics, Conflict, Violence, Post-colonial

¹ Assistant Professor Alliance School of Law, Alliance University.

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary society has a strong conviction that the dialogue is the finest solution to any kind of difference. There is a flaw in this general perception of dialogue as an effective remedy to violence in social, political, or cultural domains. This paper considers empirical evidence from the socio-political and cultural experiences in India to show the ineffectiveness of dialogue in addressing the problem of violence. Majority of the examples prove that dialogues not only fail to resolve conflict/violence but also act as a complementary force to provide a space to violence. The general claim that dialogue produces remedies to conflicts or claims that process of dialogue itself as the solution of violence etc. should be verified with objective inquiry. This paper specifically considers media debates to verify this hypothesis regarding the relationship between dialogue and violence. To understand this contradiction, one needs to frame conceptual understandings regarding the core issues involved in this area like nature and presumptions of dialogue, nature of violence in Indian socio-political setup, perception shaping in India, nature of media dialogues in India and other related issues.

Research Problem & Research Question

Generally, dialogue is an effective solution to prevent violence in any socio-political setup. But the empirical evidence from Indian socio-political reality shows that dialogues not only failed to establish peace but also worked to reinforce the elements of violence among competing parties. In this context, this paper examines the question, **why media debates increase the possibility of violence in India, even though dialogue is much paraded solution to violence?**

Hypothesis

Intense media debates directly contributed to the increase in violence as dialogue in Indian society fails to provide space for symmetrical argumentation.

Objectives of the Study

- To understand the effectiveness of dialogue in settling violence in Indian society.
- To analyze the nature of violence in Indian socio-political system.
- To evaluate the role of media debates in Indian public discourse.

Scope of the Study

This research paper deals with the media debates and its impact on Indian society with a special inquiry of the effectiveness of dialogue in settling violence in Indian socio-political scenario. Even though the paper deals with the larger issues like 'media' and 'Indian Socio-political scenario', focus of the study will be limited to investigate the relevance of dialogue in preventing violence as applicable to these larger discourses.

Methodology

This research paper will make efforts to test the hypothesis and to achieve the objectives of the study through different methods. Primarily, the proposed study will adopt theoretical, historical, descriptive, and analytical study design. The study depends on secondary sources of data, information, and literature.

Discussion

The discussion part of this paper is organized into four parts to address the research problem and to verify the hypothesis offered by this paper. The first part 'Understanding the nature of Dialogues in India' deals with the basic conceptual understandings about the nature of dialogue in India. Second part, 'Asymmetrical argumentation and the Source of Violence' shows the core problem within the process of dialogue which makes obvious space for conflict. Third part, 'Flaws of Universal Rationality and the Problems of Attribution' critically throw light on the problematic use of reason in dialogue and the unjustifiable imposition of attributions, which leads to an asymmetrical dialogue. Finally, 'Media Debates and the Myth of Preventing Violence' focuses on contemporary media debates to justify the claims made by earlier parts of this discussion.

1. Understanding the Nature of Dialogues in India

The empirical evidence on Indian socio-political scenario makes it clear that dialogues in different forms increased the probability of violence, instead of reducing conflict/violence. In this case a serious academic research consideration is very much necessary to analyze this contradictory situation. Particularly, the origin of 'dialogue' traces back to the emergence of liberal political values in European society. This idea of rational dialogue originated and evolved with the events like enlightenment, reformation etc. in European history. Many scholars considered that violence can be reduced only with the help of critical reasoning and rational dialogue. On the other hand, Indian socio-political context is witnessing contradictory results as debates go hand in hand with conflicts and violence. At the very outset, one can assume that the reason for this unique experience of India is that scholars without having the original experience of India studied and built knowledge on Indian socio-political realities. But this assumption fails to explain the situation because one cannot guarantee a different outcome even if an Indian scholar studies Indian society, as he will be using the same tools to explain Indian society, the results tend to be the same. Now the problem lies with the tools used to understand Indian society, to be precise

Freudian psychoanalysis involved in dialogues to understand the psyche of Indian society. (Balagangadhara, 2012)

Academicians or scholars are trying to initiate a dialogue about 'Hindu traditions', 'culture', 'practices' etc. through their writings, speeches, or any other form of expression. But these expressions quickly attract a violent rebuttal from the respondent and the further dialogue fuels more conflict. For example, Paul Courtright's portrayal of Ganesha in his book 'Ganesha: Lord of Obstacles, Lord of Beginnings' (Courtright, 1989) received harsh responses from Hindu community (Singh A. , 2009). Academia and scholars termed this response as inimical to academic freedom connecting it to the rising Hindu Fundamentalism. But the question of dialogue remains unanswered, if academia thinks Courtright's effort is to initiate a dialogue with the respondent community i.e., Hindu, why dialogue created so much of violent results? We cannot simplify this phenomenon as it is the problem of outsider studying Indian culture, as there won't be any difference in the outcome even if an Indian studies about the same case using the same set of psychoanalytical tools. Other set of arguments limit this phenomenon within the domain of Hindu fundamentalism also fail to describe the phenomenon, as it questions the whole effectiveness of dialogue as a panacea to violence/conflict between two competing parties.

Any effort by academicians, journalists, or artists to interpret an Indian phenomenon becomes a controversial domain. Religious and cultural domains are specifically more sensitive than other areas, where a dialogue seems almost impossible. In fact, a comment on Sabarimala issue, Triple Talaq article 370, JNU, CAA or any other issue is an attempt to initiate the dialogue with the other party. But, in reality this attempts to initiate a dialogue ends up with death threats, violent conflicts, chaos etc. These aggressive and violent reactions cannot be and should not be easily labeled as fundamentalist, anti-academic freedom forces. As this attitude of looking at different phenomena in a binary vision of black and white yielded us no or negative results in most of the cases. Now this is the time to relook into the nature of dialogues in India with a critical understanding about how they work in nonwestern societies.

2. Asymmetrical Argumentation and the Source of Violence

Dialogue has a basic structure of argumentation with loaded assumptions. When western scholar or even an Indian scholar is initiating a dialogue regarding a phenomenon in Indian context, they

inquire the status with some interrelated cognitive moves. These interrelated set of cognitive moves, psychoanalysis etc. make the argumentation imbalanced between the scholar and subject of his/her inquiry. In the process of using psychoanalytical tools, the scholar ignores the fact that the rationality of those tools evolved in a particular context in western philosophical domain and they are alien to Indian context.

The paper illustrates this with an example of dialogue between 'Party A' (Scholars/academicians initiating a dialogue about Indian polity/society) and 'Party B' (The people who are expected to answer the claims of 'Party A' i.e., Indians). Here 'Party A' tries to invoke rational logic of the other party by attributing some assumptions on the other party through explanations and interpretations. Dialogue requires several assumptions from one party on the other party to keep the dialogue alive. Interestingly, the party attributing these assumptions (i.e., Party A) is not accountable to the assumptions made by it. But on the other hand, 'Party B' will be burdened with the responsibility to prove its actions by continuing the process of dialogue without knowing the assumptions attributed by 'Party A'. This uneven distribution of responsibility/ accountability leads dialogue to the violent end.

Logical reason and psychoanalytical tools might be appropriate to understand western psychology, but they appear inappropriate to deal with non-western societies. But logical reason and psychoanalytical tools become inevitable to have a dialogue. This contradiction in intercultural encounters make dialogue more problematic with attributed assumption on non-western societies (Party B) with an additional burden on them to justify their actions without understanding nature of assumptions attributed on them. On the other hand, attributor of these assumptions (Party A) has no onus of providing evidence to their assumptions. In other words, 'Party A' escapes from the onus of providing evidence as it can switch between explanation and interpretation, but 'Party B' must stick on to explanation to justify their cause. This asymmetric argumentation puts 'Party B' in an unfavourable situation, as it cannot defend its stand/action within the dialogical discourse. The situation makes it clear that the dialogue increases the frustration and anger of 'Party B' leading to violence. In this context of violence, a demand for more dialogue will only bring more violence.

3. Flaws of Universal Rationality and the Problems of Attribution

Asymmetric relationship between two parties in the dialogue makes it difficult to 'Party B' to remain within this discourse of dialogue. This cognitive asymmetric relation enables the 'Party A' to defend their point in the name of psychoanalytical analysis, as this analysis has been used to understand different issues and religions including Christianity. In this established situation, any set of argumentations will be inclined in favour of 'Party B'. This process of attributing assumptions to the practice of 'Party B' makes the dialogue possible, but such attributions won't make such sense to 'Party B'. So, this process also makes sure that 'Party B' is not intellectually fit for dialogue. In this way, tools evolved in a particular context of western history concludes non-western societies like Africans or Indians as inferior species without even having a basic understanding of their own socio-political experiences. Thus, 'Party B' must counter and question this core logic of psychoanalysis and the universality of logical reasoning.

Psychology has an established assumption that rationality is universal, which has its roots in enlightenment and reformation phases in European history. This psychoanalysis firmly believes in the relationship between reasons and actions, beliefs, and behaviour etc. Most importantly these theories of rationality are paraded as universal beyond their philosophical context, where they really originated. But the failure of dialogue to prevent violence in societies like India has something significant to say regarding this phenomenon. A reasonable discussion or a rational dialogue is only possible when two parties stand on the symmetrical position sharing common sense and common folk psychology. This is true when rational dialogue happens within the domain of western culture, but it fails miserably in intercultural encounters. Reasonable discussion will not remain as a neutral mechanism when west is dealing with non-western societies. In this unique context much celebrated liberal idea of 'reason' fails to acknowledge one more celebrated liberal idea i.e., 'pluralism'.

4. Media Debates and the Myth of Preventing Violence

Contemporary media debates in India regarding various issues are getting complex day by day attributing a binary view of Indian society based on the claim of rationality. Media debates and discussions are representing the conceptual issues of dialogue discussed in the earlier three sections. Media is on the frontline along with other driving forces like literature, social sciences etc. in suggesting dialogue among contesting parties to reduce the possibility of violence/conflict.

With the advent of internet media/ social media platforms, the space for dialogue is increasing than ever before.

No one can deny the space produced by media and especially by internet media in facilitating dialogue among different communities in India. Internet media played an important role in increasing the mass participation media in the place of elitism. This also brought a claim of objectivity to the discussions happening around, but unfortunately increasing the violence. Again, it is not the elite media, not surely the mass participation in media, nor is the access of internet the reason for the escalation of violence. Background ideas of different communities involved in a particular dialogue are producing a black and white binary vision to look at the issues in India neglecting the original experience.

There is no dearth of debates as Indian socio-political discourse provides a rich list of debates to analyze the problems of dialogue. A close observation on media behavior and media debate on recent contentious issues on Indian society proves the Hypothesis of this paper right. Debates on Citizenship Amendment Act, National Register of Citizens, National Population Register, women entry to Sabarimala temple, academic freedom of JNU and other universities, Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code and many other issues were still being debated pushing communities towards more hostility. Each of the issues raised here, despite of the differences in their nature meets up at common point i.e., two communities opposing each other. A focused concentration on these media debates will tell us one more important fact that the parties involved in these debates are busy in defending their stand and not really interested in the facts or the actual process and outcome of that issue. Even when facts are used in such dialogue, such use will have mere purpose of supporting the stand of respective competing parties. Such debates and dialogues help nothing but in escalating the violence/conflicts.

This problem is much bigger than it seems to be. Generally accepted accusations against media like corporate control, political influences, TRP ambitions can give a temporary relief to the questions raised here. These reasons look impressive as there are huge communities to believe in these allegations, when they are made against the media which is on the opposite camp. Right, Left, Centre, liberal, conservative, feminist, theist, atheist or any other group is not an exception to this. Media seems objective to a particular group when it suits their narrative and the allegations

mentioned above will be reserved for the media, which contradicts their narrative. But these allegations are only help us to show media as a self-aggrandizing selfish parasite and nothing else. Only deeper understandings of background ideas which work behind media narratives help us to go beyond the age-old allegations against media. Otherwise, a push for more dialogue comes with an increased amount of violence.

CONCLUSION

This paper is an attempt to explore the contradictory complex phenomena of the interrelation between dialogue and violence rather than offering a solution to the problem of violence in Indian socio-political setup. With one voice, academic scholarships, political system, in fact the whole public discourse suggested dialogue as the solution to violence in India. On the other hand, it is also true that India failed to achieve its objective through dialogue, as they became more problematic with the passing time. Even though, this paper lacks enough space, both in technical and intellectual level to provide concrete solutions to this problem, it provides an abstract if not a concrete base to relook this phenomenon with new academic rigor. This paper concludes by opening a vast research gap on the appropriateness of dialogue in media studies, public policy and other socio-political discourses of India.

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