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The unjust exclusion of silence

Prakash Iyer

"We are in a democratic society and everyone should know their rights. But that is not enough, one should be capable of making good reasonable arguments. Rights can only be claimed through reason and argument."

I was disturbed by Ira's statement, and more so by her condescension. As if being a citizen in a democracy was a specialist's work, and only people who can be articulate could become active citizens. I was overcome by irritation, but couldn't do anything about it. Her demand that one needs to be an expert in reasoning silenced me. I think she is wrong, and I wanted to ask her why she thought so. I spoke but my voice came out hoarse and I had to clear my throat. But she was already looking somewhere else. I walked away to the water filter, filled the glass and was staring at it. The glass looked so clean and spotless that I felt I would dirty it by sipping from it. I was sweating, with chalk dust all over my hands up to my elbow. I am sure some of it was on my face too, as I often push my hair back, or wipe my sweat in the classroom. Against my dark skin the chalk powder created such a contrast. The powder was taunting me and telling me how dark-skinned I am.

The glass and chalk powder on my hand brought the image of Ira back. She is fair, and always well dressed. A hint of perfume, neatly combed hair, slight elegant makeup, beautiful sandals, and a sweet ring in her voice. She could sound firm and even curt when she wanted to. Next to her I felt ugly, dirty and incompetent. I was disgusted by myself. I could never speak the way she speaks. She always uses the right words, mixes languages so well. Every time she argued she would state reasons for her stance very clearly. She even anticipated what others would say, and would always be ready with an answer. That impressed others, and created the feeling that she had thought about everything. She made everyone defensive even before they spoke.

Emotional reasoning

Our school culture is egalitarian, with no hierarchy. All staff meetings are organized in a way that everyone has a chance to speak. If someone does not speak, they are asked to share what they think even if they are just repeating what others said. Speaking is necessary in our meetings. I reason well when I am thinking but am not able to translate that into speech.

Why is objective reasoning so difficult? In a democratic society, reasoning is supposed to be the standard process for deliberation. Important decisions taken at all levels in a society, presume that everyone has the ability to reason. In residents associations, with local municipal authorities, civil groups fighting for people's rights...they are all expected to engage in reasoning. Here I am not even able to argue with a colleague.

Stories and some emotions should be considered acceptable in public forums. The validity of an argument comes from whether the reasons given can stand scrutiny or not. The way one places the argument should not matter. Stories, emotional talk do not corrupt the validity of an argument. The point made by a story should fulfil only one condition – it should be acceptable to any human being. The force of logic needs to be communicated in any way that people would understand and feel the force of the argument. How does it matter if it is a story or emotional outbursts!

This force cannot be felt only when presented in a particular manner. Being convinced by an argument is also feeling emotional about it. When we deliberate on a decision, we are not exchanging reasons alone. We are exchanging emotions too.

The emotions that I feel when I am bothered by my appearance and my body stop me from arguing with Ira, or at least responding to her. I could have used those emotions to make a point. I should have said, "Ira are you saying that we will get the right to be treated as equal only if we have a Diploma in Reasoning for Citizenship?"

Stories do this very well. Premchand's story, "Sadgati" communicates how deeply caste hierarchy is imprinted in our minds. Dukhia is apologetic all the while for disturbing "Brahmin" with his needs. So much so that even when he comes to say he has completed the work he was asked to do without any payment, he is careful not to offend the brahmin. He does all this at the cost of his own life. I wonder how Ira would have reacted to this story! This story communicates what I wanted to say to Ira very well.

It is not always possible that one sees their rights being compromised, leave alone being able to argue well for it. Dukhia wasn't even aware he had the right to be treated as an equal. This story would help Ira comprehend the limitations of her stance, which a strong well-reasoned argument could not.

Embodied talk

But why am I unable to be calm and reason the way she does? Surely it is not a capability issue. Here I am writing all this reasonably well. I am even able to strategize the way I will do this. I can imagine how I could be as calm and collected as Ira is. Why did I feel ugly and humiliated when Ira wasn't even talking to me or talking about me? I feel that way most of the time.

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Ira reminds me of those two girls I met at an elite college in South Bombay. I had gone there to buy tickets to a music concert, and could not find the ticket counter. I saw them in cool clothes, smiling and joking, speaking English with no trace of an Indian accent. I decided to ask them and walked straight towards them. Bang! My head hit the glass door that I didn't notice in my nervousness. They turned towards the sound of glass, saw me and burst out laughing. I turned and ran away without the tickets.

In my class, there are students who come from well-to-do family, wear cool clothes and speak English very well. I stiffen up when some of them come to talk with me. They are not disrespectful at all. But their demeanour makes me feel disempowered.

It has become part of my body now, this nervousness, trepidation and feeling of intimidation. I was taught to be demure, shy, polite and to keep away from loudness and trouble. But in the bargain, I also became simple, insecure and un-confident. How could I become expert at articulation and reasoning!

Iris Marion Young says,

"We decide beforehand – usually mistakenly – that the task is beyond us and thus give it less than our full effort. At such a half-hearted level, of course, we cannot perform the tasks, become frustrated, and fulfill our own prophecy. In entering a task we frequently are self-conscious about appearing awkward and at the same time do not wish to appear too strong. Both worries contribute to our awkwardness and frustration."

Our bodies learn to hold ourselves back, like my voice did this morning when Ira spoke. This led to the spectrum of emotions that I was not able to describe, even to myself. It seemed like my body was incapable of arguing with reason. I wanted to escape from the situation but the glass of water ensured this feeling was retained in me. I had to come home to a safe space to be able to say all that I have said so far. She says this particularly about women, but men from disadvantaged contexts experience the same.

Young says when we think of injustice or oppression we always look for direct actions that cause them. But that is not always the case, she says. This behaviour and incapacities get carried over by social structures such that entire groups of people continue to be the way they are, and others remain the way they are. Some oppressions are caused by social contexts people come from, and they are not intentional. Ira could not be blamed for my inability to speak back. The situation I was in was not directly caused by her behaviour.

Including the excluded

But particular situations can only be repaired by individual actions. Allowing emotional talk or healthy rhetoric is not enough to deal with behaviours and trepidation that bodies carry. They need to be observed, recognized and acknowledged by others. Taking behaviours and embodied talk into account, interpreting them and including the interpretation into the conversation is a significant first step towards including people. One could argue that over time this will transform the nature of conversations in a democracy and about democratic dialogue.

That responsibility lies with those who are the dominant category and hence advantaged people. Ira could have behaved differently. Like I shall try to do in my classes from tomorrow. I have to first find ways to include those children in my class who seem to be incapable of participating in discussions. Allowing anecdotes and stories are the first step, but we have to go beyond them to also educate other children to observe embodied talk that is visible in the behaviour of many children so early in their life. Being silent or ignoring them will encourage their reluctance to speak well. Polite indifference is as oppressive or sometimes more oppressive than apathy.

Reference

"Throwing like a girl" by Iris Marion Young in "On female body experience".

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