

Truth, Harmony and Justice

Rohit Dhankar

Professor of Philosophy of Education in Azim Premji University, Bangalore. He has been part of many NCERT initiatives in developing material and curriculum through various committees.

Indian society currently seems to be struggling hard to preserve meaning in its old slogan “unity in diversity”. The slogan recognises the range of diversity in Indian people that is beyond imagination for many other societies; and simultaneously claims unity at a level deeper than this diversity. The number of languages (22 constitutionally recognised and 270¹ languages spoken as mother tongue) is only the tip of proverbial iceberg of diversity underneath the Indian unity. Add to that the diversity in cultural customs, attires, food habits and religious beliefs and one has a very complex tapestry of a society, where even communication between all groups seems to be a huge challenge. Almost all major world religions are significantly represented in India. The amorphous nature of Hinduism coupled with its enormously complicated caste system itself seriously challenges the claimed unity within this set of people. The three major religions - Hinduism, Islam and Christianity - almost always look at each other with suspicion. That gives Sikhism, Buddhism and Jainism anxiety and they start asserting their own identities. This diversity has now crystallised into hard and contesting political positions.

1. As per census data 2011. Linguists note a much larger number of spoken languages.

It is but natural that such a diverse country will have a wide range of value systems informed by culture, local customs and religions. It is also natural that there shall be cross cutting interest groups concerned with economic, political and social power in this diversity of value systems. It is also natural and legitimate that these diverse groups will formulate their separate political agendas and will work through political discourse, protests and agitations to realise those agendas. All this has pushed Indian society into a deep turmoil at the level of thinking and political action. This could be understood as adversarial strife or could also be seen as a churning, to find ways of creating a just political and social order according to the constitution, and overall cultural milieu of the country. I would prefer the latter. In this sense it is akin to the mythological *Samudra-manthan*². But it is a *Samudra-manthan* with a difference. In the mythological *Samudra-manthan* there were *devas* and *asuras* with very definite characteristics; *devas* were presented as good and benevolent while *asuras* were assumed to be all bad and malevolent. In the contemporary *Samudra-manthan* there are no such definite categories; therefore, the deceit used by *devas* in gaining all the nectar can have not even a semblance of justification in this new age churning. Here the poison as well as the nectar have to be shared equally by all; and that makes the situation much more complicated today than described in the mythology.

As said above, it is legitimate for diverse population groups to work towards realising their values and agendas in a democracy. But if democracy is to remain functional and

2. This term literally means, “churning of the ocean”. It is a reference to the mythological event when *devas* (gods) and *asuras* (demons) they had to cooperate and churn the ocean in order to get *amrut*/nectar (elixir of immortality). The *devas* conspired and designed the happenings in a way that only they would get the nectar, and not the *asuras*. Details of the story can be found at: <https://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/vp/vp044.htm>

the country to be united, then a certain kind of harmony beneath all this turmoil is an imperative. Contradictions in value systems and political agendas necessarily lead to struggle, strife, opposition and antagonism. A society rife with such qualities cannot be called harmonious. Harmony can be regained only through resolving all these contradictions, getting rid of strife, and cessation of struggle. In a democracy with so much diversity, complete resolution of contradictions and cessation of all struggle is impossible, as new issues will necessarily emerge as soon as old ones are resolved. Peace and harmony are not static and fixed for all times in any society. They are dynamically or perpetually created conditions which constantly face new problems, and keep solving them. Thus, the aim could only be to reduce these contradictions etc. to a level where harmonious functioning of democracy for a common good is not threatened; and to build socio-political systems which are alive to such challenges, and rational capabilities of its people who can continuously produce ideas and practices, that are operationalised through those systems.

Harmony is more than absence of struggle and strife. Absence of struggle and strife or active antagonism is called “negative peace” in the literature on Education for Peace. Harmony is closer to “positive peace”³ which is characterised by cooperation and collaboration for common good, mutual respect and tolerance of difference in opinions and value systems. It is compatibility in opinion and action. Negative peace can be achieved even in an unjust social order, as it is possible to either manipulate people’s opinion and actions through deceit, or to silence difference of opinion by force. Indian society in maintaining its caste system has been using

3. Gur-Ze’ev, International Encyclopedia of Education, Third Edition (2010), Academic Press (Academic Press is an imprint of Elsevier), London. (Electronic Edition: page: 6:22)

these two in tandem for centuries. Such a social peace can be legitimately characterised as unjust; and it is rightly said that “*the demands of justice must take precedence over the claims of peace*”⁴. The reasons for such a precedence to justice over peace are not only pragmatic, they are primarily ethical, which we will see presently.

Without going into details it could be plausibly argued that a just socio-political order necessarily grants (i) equal opportunity to develop one’s reason, and (ii) rational autonomy to form one’s judgment to each citizen.⁵ If some people are not allowed to, or denied opportunities to develop their rational capability and use those capabilities in forming their opinion, such a socio-political order can not be called just in a democracy. Also, any action that deliberately hinders people’s development of reason and forming informed opinion has to be counted as hindering justice and being opposed to harmony.

Therefore, lasting and just harmony has to be achieved only through freely formed rational opinion of citizens on all issues of controversy and strife. Two necessary conditions of being able to form rational opinion are, having knowledge and capability for rational deliberation.

Capability for rational deliberation is more than logic alone, it involves moral and emotional commitment to truth and consistency. As Scheffler notes “[R]eason stands always in contrast with inconsistency and with expediency, in the judgment of particular issues”. Reason treats evidence fairly without bias, in the interest of truth. “In the moral realm, reason is action on principle, action that therefore does

4. NCERT, National Focus Group Position Paper on Education for Peace, page 4

5. In addition, a just social order also entails fair distribution of liberties and material and social goods. Here we need not go into those details.

not bend with the wind, nor lean to the side of advantage or power out of weakness or self-interest. Whether in the cognitive or the moral realm, reason is always a matter of treating equal reasons equally, and of judging the issues in the light of general principles to which one has bound oneself⁶. Thus reason is also a self-made commitment to general principles, consistency and truth, even in the face of self-interest, advantage and power.

The second necessary condition for forming one's own rational opinion is availability of knowledge. Often knowledge is confused with belief. Whatever one believes is deemed as his knowledge. However, knowledge is more than just the psychological process of forming beliefs. It necessarily requires epistemic criteria of justification and truth. Justification is having evidence and arguments that support the belief in question, and cognitively convince one to consider it to be true.

In spite of truth being a very problematic and controversial concept in epistemology, no concept of knowledge can do without it. Scheffler has argued at length that truth can survive acceptance of fallibility and loss of certainty in empirical matters, he concludes his discussion on truth as a condition of knowledge by stating that “even if we totally reject certainty as a condition of knowledge, we need not also reject (absolute) truth. To attribute knowledge that Q⁷, is not only to attribute belief that Q but also to affirm that Q — in effect, to affirm that “Q” is *true*, in the absolute sense of the term⁸. Truth here survives not always as an achieved

6. Israel Scheffler, *Philosophical Models of Teaching in Reason and Teaching*, Routledge, Oxon (2014) (1973), Page 76.

7. Q being the asserted proposition.

8. Israel Scheffler, *Conditions of Knowledge: An introduction to epistemology and education*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, (1965), page 53.

goal, but as a necessary ideal for a belief to be counted as knowledge.

I would argue that a commitment to this epistemic ideal of truth is necessary in public discourse aiming for justice and harmony. Even more important for such a discourse is another related but distinguishable notion of truth, i.e. moral notion of truth. Moral truth is certainly connected with epistemic truth, but is not identical with it. Epistemic truth is concerned with judging whether a belief is correct or not, and has to meet certain standards of evidence and justification to establish its correctness. Moral truth is about expression or communication of the belief so formed. When one communicates a belief as one holds it, s/he is telling the truth. But when one's communication is at variance with his/her belief, s/he is telling a lie. It is possible to have an epistemically false belief B and still tell a moral truth by communicating it as it is, i.e. by communicating the belief as one holds it.

For example, a member of Flat Earth Society may actually believe that (B) "The earth is flat". Epistemically this may be provable as false based on available observation data. But if he (i) actually believes in this, and (ii) communicates the same to others, he is not telling a lie, as he is communicating his belief as he holds it. Though his statement that "The earth is flat" is epistemically false, he is speaking truthfully. In such a situation we call him "wrong", but not a "liar". On the other hand, imagine the same person appearing for Geography teacher's interview in a school. He knows that if the interview board comes to know of his true belief about the shape of earth, he will be considered lacking in knowledge and will not get the job. When asked: "What do you believe about the shape of the earth?" he says "It is nearly spherical". Epistemically he is correct, but he is giving false information about his belief, thus is telling a lie. Moral truth is not about

the correctness of the statement one makes, rather it is about the “correct communication” of what one happens to believe. The opposite of moral-truth is a lie. The intention of a liar is to deceive others into forming false beliefs, either about himself or about the state of affairs in the world. Harry Frankfurt rightly states “[I]n some accounts of lying there is no lie unless a false statement is made; in others a person may be lying even if the statement he makes is true, as long as he himself believes that the statement is false and intends by making it to deceive”⁹.

In public political discourse in a democracy intellectuals and politicians have a responsibility to be epistemically and morally committed to truth. Deviation from truth in either sense aids injustice and disrupts harmony.

As mentioned above, dignity and autonomy of individual citizens demand that a just order in society should be formed on the basis of freely formed opinions of citizens. Their agreement on the definition of common good and compromises made in their personal and group values, and interests should be arrived at of their own free will and on the basis of reasons they themselves accept cognitively.

Meeting these tough standards of rational decision making by every single individual in a society is not possible. In actual fact perhaps a majority of people do not meet the standards of knowledge and rational deliberation. However, this fact can not be used to trample upon their dignity and autonomy. A public political discourse should aim at convincing the public with epistemically fair means, without deceit or taking recourse to lies or obfuscation of information. It is the job of public intellectuals, politicians and media to provide required information as well as styles of argumentation,

9. Harry Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, (2005), page 8

making sense of that information, and often actually on formed opinions. Furthermore public political discourses, movements and agitations are a form of mass education in democratic citizenship. Dewey defines education “as the process of forming fundamental dispositions, intellectual and emotional, toward nature and fellow men”. And notes that “[P]ublic agitation, propaganda, ... are effective in producing the change of disposition which a philosophy indicates as desirable, but only in the degree in which they are educative—that is to say, in the degree in which they modify mental and moral attitudes”¹⁰.

Opinion makers (public intellectuals, politicians and media personalities) have a sway over the thinking of large sections of population. When such people are epistemically careless, and disregard standards of justification and truth, they are guilty of misleading people into forming false beliefs. In comparison to well considered true and justified beliefs, false beliefs are less likely to produce appropriate action to achieve the aims of justice and harmony. Thus, they harm the prospects of justice and harmony in the society.

But when opinion makers deliberately tell lies or hide truth, they harm justice and harmony even more. In this latter case they are guilty of manipulating people into false beliefs. Manipulation of citizens is an attack on their dignity and autonomy. It is a direct interference in their freedom of thought and expression, and in their autonomous judgment. This is deliberate corruption of their rational cognitive processes. Further, in both these cases, of epistemic laxity and moral deception, the public is being miseducated, thus harming future prospects of justice and harmony in the society.

10. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, Aakar Books, Delhi, 2004 (1915), page 354

To clarify the issue further let's take two examples. About 20 years back one very prominent and famous professor-cum-activist started arguing that "all children out of school should be considered victims of child-labour under the law". Now the idea of child labour means that children are pushed into labour beyond their capabilities, which harms their health, physical growth, and adversely effects their mental growth. The operating concepts here are "labour", "harm" and "adverse effect on growth due to being involved in labour". A child can be in a situation which is harmful to him/her and adversely effects his/her growth; but no labour may be involved. Malnutrition is an example. But malnutrition cannot be called labour. If one uses common sense, a child being malnourished cannot be called a victim of child labour. A child out of school and having no opportunity of education is actually in a situation where his mental growth might be adversely affected. However, if she is not pushed into work it is not because of labour, but for some other reasons. Therefore, calling all out of school children child labour is actually an attack on people's epistemic sensibilities. It is obfuscating the ideas of labour and child-labour.

A supporter of calling out of school children 'child-labour', however, might argue that terms like child-labour should be legally defined and they have no "absolute meaning" in a society. Defining all out of school children as child-labour will benefit children, as child-labour is illegal in the country and, therefore, keeping children out of school will become illegal. This is a sentimental appeal to morally good-hearted people to discard their epistemic sensibilities; in other words, this is a false juxtaposition of epistemic and moral concepts of truth; claiming that justice can be better achieved if we blur epistemic truth.

In another case a very famous and powerful Indian politician is on record saying that he deliberately misled people on

an issue that involved their safety and had far reaching political consequences. In 1993 there were eleven bomb blasts in a single day in Bombay, killing 363 people (according to the politician on record) and injuring another 1400. There was mounting tension between two major religious communities in the country and particularly in the city of Bombay. The bombs were planted targeting one community, say X, and it was an easy conclusion for anyone that the terrorist group responsible belongs to the other religious community, say Y. The government also had information that automatic weapons were distributed to select members of community Y by the terrorist group responsible for bomb blasts. The Chief Minister of the state reached the right conclusion that the bomb blasts and weapons distribution is part of a larger plan to start religious riots in the city. He surmised that such religious riots will take a larger toll on community Y, it being a minority; and that will prepare the ground for young people of the community Y to be recruited as terrorists. He wanted to avoid further riots as well as their aftereffect. To prevent riots, he invented a twelfth bomb blast - which never happened - in an area where the fatalities would have been more in community Y. By this false information he wanted people to form a belief that it is not only one community (X) that is targeted. He further invented a lie stating that the material used in the blasts was the kind used by another terrorist group active in a neighbouring country and belonging to community X. The terrorist group indicated by the Chief Minister had never claimed any religious reasons for their attacks, and had conducted only one targeted attack in India, killing the then Prime Minister of the country in 1991. But since this was in the minds of the people his ploy of diverting attention from one terrorist group (community Y) to another (community X) had chances of success. He thinks that by these lies he averted serious religious riots in the city and

prevented loss of life and property. Therefore, his intentions were good and honorable.

Let's note that:

- The first case is that of epistemic obfuscation, that attacks people's capability to think clearly.
- The second is a deliberate lie, to divert accusation from the actual culprits and to accuse innocents at the least in this case. This also involved fixing the responsibility on members of the religious community which was targeted in this incident.
- Both cases have good intention at heart, as per claims.
- The first is supposed to enhance the prospects of better opportunity for education of deprived children.
- The second is supposed to preserve social harmony in the city and the country.

From the point of view of argument in this article both these issues are important in a democracy. Both examples manipulate citizens in order to form beliefs which are epistemically abhorrent to truth. Thus, both attack the dignity - as rational decision-making agents - and the autonomy of citizens. Morally speaking, from this point of view they run counter to justice and freedom of thought of citizens. Both manipulate people and use them for the aims set by the activist-professor and the politician without people's informed and free consent. Thus, these actions of disregarding epistemic and moral truth cannot be justified, if we think from the citizens' dignity and autonomy perspective.

But can they be justified from consequential point of view in pragmatic socio-political discourse? At the first sight it

depends on what the results of their obfuscation and lies were. Understanding the results of these actions is an empirical question. On the basis of available information, perhaps some children might have got an opportunity to attend school as a result of the first campaign. The politician's lie may have helped avoid a major religious riot in the city, and maybe in several other cities, as religious riots also have an induction effect. But one has to also think of the consequences of taking these devices as 'accepted principles' of conducting public discourse, and the long-term results of frequent use of such principles. Again, this is largely an empirical question; answer to which will depend on several things, including public awareness and capability to think clearly, politicians' prowess in telling lies, intellectuals' capability to obfuscate thinking and killing clarity of mind and so on. But perhaps it is not too far fetched to imagine that frequent use of such devices will produce diminishing dividends and finally the intellectuals and politicians will lose credibility. Also, the politician's device is a calumny of the community X, and hides a problem in community Y. Repeated one sided use of such devices, if successful, may finally result in the vilification of community X, which is direct injustice to the members of that community.

If the above discussion and its tentative conclusions are acceptable then commitment to truth - moral and epistemic - seems to be a necessary condition for justice and harmony in the society. However, the present day Indian socio-political discourse does not seem to exhibit any serious commitment to truth.

Two enemies of truth

In the Indian discourse today political correctness and what Harry Frankfurt calls bullshit seems to be the most

pronounced enemy of truth. Both of them are much more dangerous than plain lies.

Political correctness manifests itself in two interrelated forms. One, its evolved form, is about using “language that seems intended to give the least amount of offense, especially when describing groups identified by external markers such as race, gender, culture, or sexual orientation”¹¹. This form is concerned with sensitivity in civilised conversations and discourses. This may impinge on truth if taken to extremes, but is generally benign and harmless; even a demand of civility. In this article we are not talking of this form of political correctness.

The other and its original form, which is alive and kicking in all ideological discourses, is inimical to truth. This form is a gift of communist ideologues, and emerged after 1917 Bolshevik revolution. Political correctness in this form is “to judge the degree of compatibility of one’s ideas or political analyses with the official party line”¹² and publicly express only that which is most compatible. At the least in India this form is practiced by all political parties and public intellectuals supporting them. It is no more a prerogative of left-wing parties alone.

Political correctness in this form necessarily involves hiding, twisting, ignoring evidence and truth; and fabricating evidence, justification and lies. In addition to the above-mentioned dangers of lack of commitment to truth it also throttles freedom of expression. Not only in avoidance of speaking the truth, but also through intellectual attacks on those who express opinions against the accepted political

11. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/political-correctness> 2020.

12. Pierre L. van den Berghe, *Political Correctness*, in *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, 2nd edition, Macmillan Reference USA, 2008, Volume 6, page 298.

lines. Thus, botching up debates and freedom of thinking. It is consciously directed at manipulating people into accepting the party line.

Harry Frankfurt in “On Bullshit”¹³ claims that bullshit is much more prevalent in societies than we think. He analyses the concept of bullshit, not as a term of abuse but as an expression used to communicate a standpoint in conversations. Frankfurt claims that: one, bullshitters are profoundly indifferent to truth. Two, they are not concerned with communicating information, though they may pretend to be doing so. Three, that they are fakers and phonies, as “the essence of bullshit is not that it is *false* but that it is *phony*”¹⁴ and that what they care about primarily is whether what they say is effective in manipulating opinion.

This understanding of bullshit leads Frankfurt to the conclusion that “bullshitting constitutes a more insidious threat than lying does to the conduct of civilized life.”¹⁵ Because a liar at least recognises the force of truth as well as its place in life; and he lies to avoid that force. A bullshitter is unaware of the place of truth in society and is profoundly indifferent to it; all that matters to him is manipulation of opinion to gain prominence and power.

Conclusion

If the above discussion has any merit, we can safely conclude that attacks on truth - epistemic and moral - happen in many forms. Some of them are a result of laxity in epistemic standards, deliberate obfuscation, plain lies, political

13. Harry G. Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 2005

14. *Ibid*, page 47.

15. Frankfurt, Harry G. *On Truth* (pp. 4-5). Random House. Kindle Edition

correctness and bullshitting. All these forms are used to manipulate public opinion, often in the name of justice and harmony. However, any manipulation of peoples' opinion constitutes attack on their dignity and autonomy; rational and informed persuasion is the only legitimate way of creating consensus in a democracy. Manipulation, thus, is morally unjustifiable. Secondly, a frequent use of devices of manipulation creates trust deficit in the society. Lack of trust in intellectuals, politicians, the state and any one in power in general makes smooth functioning very difficult, and it may invite the breakdown of law and order. Therefore, all such attempts decimate the democratic fabric of the society, even if often in an invisible manner. They are incapable of producing "just harmony", rather they add fuel to strife and keep power struggle and animosity alive.