

Democracy and Humility

Humility functions to eliminate the grounds on which arrogance and hate flourish.

The attitudes of arrogance and hate seem to have suffused the electoral campaign of the 2019 Lok Sabha elections. Although such expressions were evident in varied degrees among campaigners belonging to different parties contesting the elections, this attitude was consistently seen in the members of the ruling party and was arguably more prominent among the leaders and supporters of the incumbent ruling combination. This is despite the fact that the Election Commission of India (ECI) has been intervening to pull up the offenders. Yet, such interventions of the ECI in order to control these morally offensive tendencies were limited and discriminatory in nature. It showed both helplessness and unwillingness to exercise its power and this has left no decisive impact in curtailing the growing use of offensive language in Indian politics. The ECI is supposed to police the limits of free speech, which it does by banning some leaders while giving regular clean chits to powerful others.

The question that we need to raise is, why is it that some leaders do not feel the moral burden of carrying within them an intense hate and arrogance that creates a corrosive impact on not just their opponents, but also on those who expect the expansion of decent society? What is the value of humility and what function does it perform in controlling the “social evil” of arrogance and hate?

Humility has been understood as the ethical capacity for continuous self-appraisal. Self-appraisal in turn serves to control the flames of pride stoked by the ambition to retain political power. Humility as a virtue has the power to filter out hateful, bad speech. It does not allow the accumulation of such expressions. The necessary condition for being humble in the Indian context is to respect differences and dissent, and tolerate plurality of opinion. Humility promotes the political culture of engaging in robust debate on issues that matter more to the people than to the leaders. Democracy can create the condition for humility to acquire articulation through tolerating plurality of opinion.

Humility as a virtue, however, has to exist not as an afterthought or in a post facto situation where leaders begin to see an imminent danger (in the present case) in the elections, but through the confidence sustained by the amount of good work done by a leader or their ruling party for the public. Genuine humility is not premised on an opportune time such as during

elections, but all the time, that is, also apart from the elections. The attempt to adopt the image of a humble person can result in producing an instrumental if not completely elusive form of humility. This instrumental practice of humility can result in humiliating opponents through ridicule and insults. What we have witnessed during the past two months is the instrumental, time-tested view of humility, as practised by some leaders through the media.

Humility, however, finds it difficult to succeed against electoral politics that seem to have been overdetermined by the presence of the language of “entitlements” and the skewed notion of “pride.” Pride as an expression of appreciation of a nation’s progress should emerge from an affirmative indexing of human well-being. Taking pride in the military achievement at the border can be considered one of the parameters. However, reducing pride to one index would give rise to “arrogant nationalism.” The category of pride as the overtaxing content of nationalism necessarily eliminates the grounds on which the possibility of humble democracy could be imagined and perhaps practised.

Why does humility not succeed against arrogance? Because these leaders prioritise the language of entitlements over the common good that underlies the need for a decent society. In fact, the language of rights seeks to eliminate the grounds for humility. Here, we are referring to rights that are unilaterally asserted by a certain section of society and which underlie and renew unqualified arrogance and unfounded pride. Such a partisan conception of rights necessarily suggests that a particular party or a social group possesses exclusive claim over a nation. This is evident among the supporters of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government. In their attempt to establish exclusive rights over India, they often discount similar rights that others too have over the nation. “Go to Pakistan” is one common expression that the members of the Hindutva brigade use for those who question some of their vocal supporters trying to infringe on the democratic culture of this country. When they do not accept the right of the other to rule the country, they do not have to be humble. The capacity to repent gets destroyed due to the tendency to defend one’s mistake by referring to the mistake of one’s opponents and holding them guilty for their past mistakes. It actually promotes a recalcitrant attitude that denies the person from taking a moral lead in creating new norms that

