

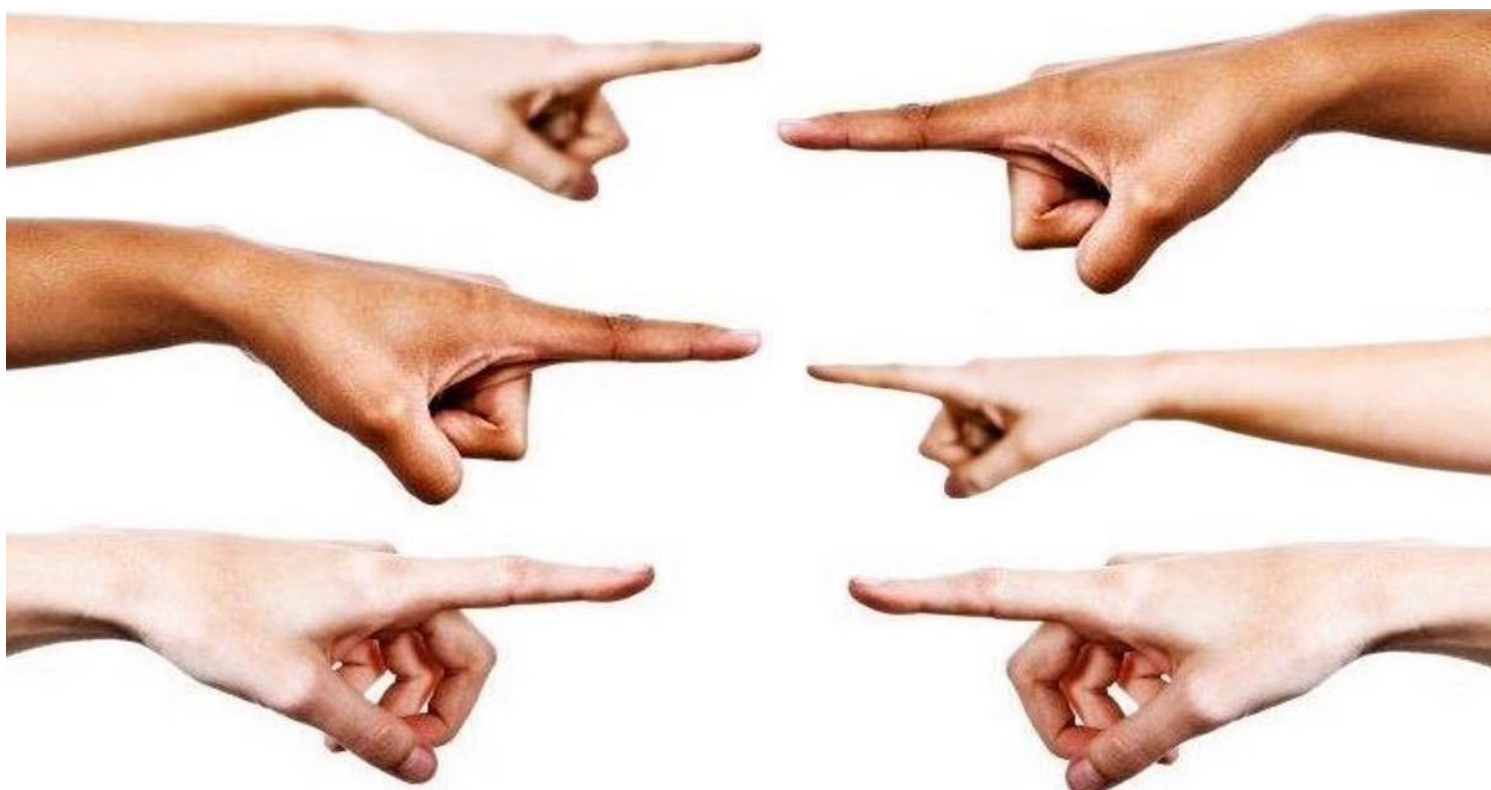
OPINION

If Left, Right and Centre could talk to each other in a civil tone earlier, what is the problem now?

What sort of engagement can we hope for unless we adopt a less hostile attitude towards our ideological opponents to begin with?

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In an [open letter](#) to Arun Jaitley recently, writer Kiran Nagarkar urged him to engage with those students and other citizens of this country whom members of the Hindu Right have repeatedly targeted in the name of nationalism – whether through violence, threats of violence, legal action, or threats of legal action – in the last few years.

The letter asked Jaitley to “chill out,” to listen to protesting students rather than talk down to

them, to condemn violence against them, and to show them that “the oxygen of democracy is freedom of expression and inclusiveness”. It ended with some thoughts on the importance of dialogue and the difficulty of conducting it when disagreement is immediately recast as treason:

“PS: One simple question: How come we, the people of this land, cannot have a conversation with you, Prime Minister Modi, Amit Shah, Ravi Shankar Prasad, and most of your leaders and spokespersons? The slightest disagreement and all of you come down on us as if we were traitors. Is it not possible to lower the temperature and talk to each other instead of being constantly slammed down? Is dialogue with all of us outside the pale of Hindutva? It might come as a shock to you but we are not the enemy. We too belong to the same country as you and are Indians.”

Calls to the Right to choose intellectual engagement over violence have been made often in the last two years, **most recently** in connection with the violent **disruption** of a seminar on “Cultures of Protest” at Ramjas College on February 21, followed by the assault on a protest against this disruption the following day.

The Ramjas incident prompted Apoorvanand to write another **open letter**, this time to “friends of the ABVP”, which expressed confidence in the possibility of disagreeing with ideological opponents in an atmosphere of mutual respect and engagement, rather than one of mutual contempt and violence.

Apoorvanand’s confidence was predicated on childhood memories of friendly debate and disagreement between members of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, his own staunchly Nehruvian father, and communists in his native town of Siwan.

While historical analysis cannot substitute for substantive **contemporary political debate**, it can enrich such debate by expanding our imagination of what is possible.

Apoorvanand’s piece is one instructive example. The attitudes of the Congress towards the RSS in the wake of Mahatma Gandhi’s assassination in January 1948 provide another. They contrast strikingly not only with Right-Wing attitudes towards Left-liberals today, but also perhaps with Left-liberal attitudes towards the contemporary Right.

And so they may hold lessons for all of us.



Congress, RSS and Gandhi's assassination

Independent India's first budget session took place in the shadow of Mahatma Gandhi's assassination. On March 15, 1948, a dissident Congress leader, Professor Shibban Lal Saksena, made a remarkable speech in a **cut motion** entitled "Suppression of Civil Liberties." The liberties in question were those of the RSS, which had been banned the previous month.

"I have been watching the course of events in the country. About 30,000 people have been arrested, of which 25,000 are RSS men and the rest are labour workers. Sometimes I feel that if we had diverted somehow the energies of these RSS men in different channels, the Mahatma's life would not have been lost. It was a great misfortune that we did not do it or probably God ordained it so. Now are we doing something which we ought to have done in the beginning?"

Saksena then referred to a speech delivered by Sardar Patel in Lucknow in January 1948:

"I was present at Lucknow when Sardar Patel delivered his speech, in which he said to the RSS men that they were young men, who despite their ideals were going in the wrong way. He asked them to mend themselves and join the Congress. He made a speech which would go down in history."

Saksena was not a supporter of the RSS or its ideology. Nor was Patel, who was to say that the RSS posed a danger to the country and might "throw [it] back on the path of slavery," and that while members of the RSS claimed to be the defenders of Hinduism, "they must know that Hinduism would not be saved by rowdyism." Yet both were able to separate the rejection of an ideology from a rejection of the people espousing that ideology. Patel had made this clear in the Lucknow

speech which Saksena referred to:

“In the Congress, those who are in power feel that by the virtue of the authority they will be able to crush the RSS. You cannot crush an organisation by using the danda. The danda is meant for thieves and dacoits. They are patriots who love their country. Only their trend of thought is diverted. They are to be won over by congressmen, by love.”

Saksena also feared that a policy of repression would not have the effect of reclaiming the “hearts and minds” of misguided RSS youth:

“But what is it that we are doing? We are putting these people in jail and when they come out they will come out more hardened RSS men. We were put in jail by the British Government and when we came out we were more hardened Congressmen than what we were. It is the same mistake which we are committing. I am afraid when these men come out they will not be chastened but will become worse RSS men than what they were before. I therefore think that the time has come to reclaim them, which Sardar Patel at Lucknow talked about.”

Saksena’s point was not only an instrumental one. There were larger issues of principle at stake as well. One of these was an attachment to civil liberties as such. Another was the importance of avoiding political persecution:

“I wish all of them were released now, except those against whom there is a charge of complicity in the assassination of Mahatmaji. Those people who had any hand in the murder of Gandhiji will go down in history as the blackest of men in the world. But let it not be said that we have used this occasion to suppress our political opponents through political motives.”

For Patel, these principles included the norms of non-violence upheld by Gandhi himself. Thus Patel’s impassioned plea on the evening of the assassination, reiterated many times afterwards:

“The occasion today is for grief and not anger. Anger is sure to make us forget the great teachings which Gandhiji preached all his life. We did not take his advice during his life and let it not be said that we did not follow him even after his death.”

Another principle was that political persuasion should not be accomplished by extra-constitutional means. One of Patel’s disagreement with the RSS was regarding the national flag, with which the RSS had historically **a troubled relationship**.

In a meeting with Golwalkar after the ban, Patel is **reported** to have said that the national flag should be “universally respected in this land, and if anyone thought of having an alternative to

the National Flag, there must be a fight. But that fight must be open and constitutional”.

Saksena concluded with an optimistic belief in the possibilities of dialogue and argument in the process of constructing the new nation:

“When they talk to me in this way, I argue with them, I appeal to them that it is wrong. The country is bewildered: we have lost the father of the nation. We want to root out communalism. We want to build up a great state in our country. But with all our arguments we are unable to convince them. We must think coolly and try to reclaim these misguided youths and make them to become the builders of the nation. There may be 50 lakhs people in the RSS. You may not be able to convert them all but you can make most of them staunch pillars of the nation by approaching them in a different manner.”

Saksena’s optimism seems to rest on two foundations. The first is simply in the possibilities of rational dialogue through argument with our ideological opponents. The second is the belief that it is possible to construct a national vision which is attractive and capacious enough to bring on board people of varied ideological persuasions. Both require the further assumption that our opponents are presumptively members of the same political community – an assumption made movingly by Jawaharlal Nehru in an **address** to the Constituent Assembly following Gandhi’s assassination:

“Yet he must have suffered, suffered for the failing of this generation whom he had trained, suffered because we went away from the path that he had shown us, and ultimately the hand of a child of his – **for he, after all, is as much a child of his as any other Indian** – the hand of that child of his struck him down.”



The RSS was banned two days after Nehru’s speech, but it is worth recalling the grounds on which it was banned. The official communique announcing the ban alleged that members of the

RSS had been involved in “violence involving arson, robbery, dacoity and murder”. It pointed out that in practice members of the RSS had failed to live up to their professed ideals of fostering “feelings of brotherhood, love, and service among Hindus”.

Thus the ban was justified in terms of what RSS members were alleged to have done, not in terms of their ideology. Indeed, efforts to engage with RSS members, and to recruit them into the Congress, continued while the ban was in place. Even supporters of the ban such as Nehru and Patel recognised the importance of protecting civil liberties in general; and both repeatedly denounced anti-RSS violence.

Possibilities of engagement today

Saksena thought that it would be possible to convince at least some members of the RSS of the errors of their ways by means of rational argument. If senior journalist Shekhar Gupta is correct, Atal Bihari Vajpayee – with whom Nehru shared an affectionate and mutual regard – might have approached the protesting students at JNU, HCU, DU along the lines sketched above. But it is hard to imagine a member of the contemporary Right who might say:

“We want to root out anti-nationalism. We want to build up a great state in our country. But with all our arguments we are unable to convince them. We must think coolly and try to reclaim these misguided youths and make them to become the builders of the nation.”

It is even harder to imagine them saying, a la Patel

“You cannot crush an organisation by using the danda. The danda is meant for thieves and dacoits. ‘Leftists’ are patriots who love their country. Only their trend of thought is diverted. They are to be won over by love.”

Where Nehru and Patel condemned anti-RSS violence repeatedly and vociferously, the BJP leaders have said that violence is “a natural response of a common man to anti-national sloganeering;” ABVP leaders denied taking part in the violence at Ramjas College, while tacitly condoning it as an instance of nationalist students “venting their emotion”.

Where the vision of the nation which Saksena wanted to build was an inclusive one which looked to the future, the shape of the nation the Hindu Right wants to build seems to look to the past – an “Indic civilisation” which excludes much of India’s actual past, and which seems to have little room to accommodate so much of India’s present diversity.

And where Saksena, with Nehru, took for granted that his ideological opponents were members of the same political community, this is not the case for the present-day Hindu Right. Its

opponents are instead “to be sent to Pakistan”. The Hindu Right’s treatment of its ideological opponents today stands in stark contrast with its treatment by its ideological opponents in 1948.

What about the Left?

But is it so easy to find a Saksena on the liberal-Left? Consider that physical violence is not the only barrier to engagement: intellectual arrogance, moral superiority, the tendency to dismiss our opponents by labelling them sanghis or bhakts – these elements of what Avijit Pathak calls the **symbolic violence** of some voices on the Left – come in the way as well.

In a speech in 1949 the UP Congressman AG Kher argued eloquently that one should not demonise the RSS:

“[C]alling them Fascists, abusing and insulting them, and again and again repeating old charges does not serve any purpose, nor is it a Gandhian method.”

Is there space for voicing such a sentiment today while also being critical of what the RSS stands for? Yet what sort of engagement can one hope for unless one adopts a less hostile attitude towards our ideological opponents to begin with?

To respond to the nationalism of the Right by **harping** on the absence of RSS involvement in the freedom movement is also, after all, to look backwards, not forward. What room is there in such a vision of the nation for conversation with those who identify, for whatever reasons, with the RSS today?

It is not clear, also, whether such nostalgic attachment to the freedom movement has room to accommodate at least some aspects of India’s present diversity – for instance the millions of co-citizens drawn to spaces such as the **Akshardham** temple, or to the followers of figures such as Baba Ramdev? Both Nagarkar and Apoorvanand stress that their invitations to dialogue are made in a friendly spirit, without malice. What is less obvious is that this spirit places demands both on the inviters as well as on the invited.

The attitude expressed by Saksena, Patel, and Nehru seems to be an alien one today. It would be worthwhile to explore the social and political conditions which made it possible then. No doubt it was partly the expression of a generosity which comes from a peculiar kind of self-confidence, born out of the conviction that one is on the right side of history.

But even if this self-confidence is out of our reach today, there are other elements of the sensibility which are perhaps more available to us. To distinguish one’s attitude towards a person from one’s attitude towards their ideology, to aspire to regard people who have views one

considers abhorrent as nevertheless members of one's political community, to forswear the danda (physical or intellectual) in dealing with them – to have these would be something.

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