Across India, our public discourse waddles between two extremes, as seen in Sabarimala

Separated by a common language

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Over the past few months, Kerala has seen more than its share of public protests: from outright violence to peaceful expressions of solidarity. People have mobilised to reawaken Hindu consciousness on the one end and to protect women’s rights on the other. From the furies of their discontents, the schisms imposed by the usage of non-religiously inspired protests speak the same language, see the same world around them, but describe it differently.

The consequence of such inorganic cross pollination is that fullness of meanings under way is not deployed is at best an etiolated one in the receiving language. This, of course, is not Kerala’s problem alone but a post-colonial one. Across India, our public discourse waddles between two extremes. We have neither the organised will to invest renewed introspective energies to understand the vocabularies we grant so much power over our mental lives solely on account of them being patrimonial legacies, nor do we have the willingness to recognise the borrowed nature of our progressive vocabularies that speak differently than the present: a repository of the past or as a springboard for the future, they speak the same language, see the same world around them, but describe it differently.

Context matters

The schisms imposed by the usage of different sets of vocabularies within a same linguistic society is, however, not new in human or Indian history. George Bernard Shaw famously described America and Britain as two nations separated by a common language – on account of frequent misunderstandings and power politics playing between the two. Indian philosophers have known for long that even speaking the same vocabulary within the same language does not preclude one from coming face to face with contradictions when we think about how language, meaning and context interact. Prasastapada, a philosophical commentator from the 6th century, invented a “new semantic category” called ‘paribhasak’ to avoid contradictions between extant theories of meanings versus Nyaya philosophies. Even the same word used in a different socio-historical context – particularly, when translated from one culture to another – reveals how wobbly any language-contingent ethical framework can be. In the great moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre’s classic, A Short History of Ethics, he talks about a word like ‘agathos’ which, in a Homeric world, referred to qualities one must possess to perform one’s role in a hierarchy, or an inter-generational transmission chain, but rather are brim with the energies of the present and which promise to improve the future, through an application of reason. Where one side believes in the evocative prowess of stories from the past to sustain them through life, the other side relies on theories of social ordering to ostensibly improve their future. Both sides derive their ethical vocabularies from different models of how we ought to think about moral cosmologies in the Greek context, the original blends “fact and appraisal” and context-sensitive word in Greek is rendered into a context independent, adjectival gloss in English.

Between two extremes

In contrast, the public expressions of non-religiously inspired protesters speak in terms of niyamam (law), adhikaram (rights), purushaadhikathayam (patriarchy), vijitham (revolution), and navodhanam (reformation) – vocabularies that have no use for an immemorial past or an inter-generational transmission chain, but rather are brim with the energies of the present and which promise to improve the future, through an application of reason. Where one side believes in the evocative prowess of stories from the past to sustain them through life, the other side relies on theories of social ordering to ostensibly improve their future. Both sides derive their ethical vocabularies from different models of how we ought to think about moral cosmologies in the Greek context, the original blends “fact and appraisal” and context-sensitive word in Greek is rendered into a context independent, adjectival gloss in English.

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