

**hindustantimes**

■ Tuesday, April 10, 2012

[Abhijit Banerjee](#)

February 02, 2012

First Published: 21:12 IST(2/2/2012)

Last Updated: 21:16 IST(2/2/2012)

## And that is a fact

Censorship was the one jarring element in this year's otherwise wonderful Jaipur Literary Festival: Salman Rushdie was invited and then disinvited; his volunteer voices were silenced by jail threats; and finally even the promised video link was cut.

What made it worse is that the Rajasthan government was unapologetic about the whole thing. I understand what they were worried about: the possible collateral damage from provoking some Islamic hotheads (what if some innocent people got hurt?). But why didn't we hear the word sorry? If they are telling us that they are incapable of protecting our constitutionally given right to listen to a great writer like Rushdie (as well as his right to speak), shouldn't there be some kind of acknowledgement? Don't we denigrate the right itself when governments are so casual about defending it?

I am no Rushdie. The only people who think of silencing me are my students, on days when my lectures are more opaque than usual. But there is a more insidious kind of censorship that happens when people hear but don't listen: During the Q&A after our session at the literature fest, one rather agitated young woman put her hand up. I had spoken at some length about how the Village Education Committees (VECs) in Uttar Pradesh existed, for the most part, only on paper, and that bothered her. She had been to a number of VEC meetings in Haryana, she said, and found them lively — women came in large numbers to complain about the education their children were getting. Then she came to the clincher: what is my hidden agenda? Is it to dump government services so that everything can be privatised?

I tried to explain that she was reading too much into that one example — the point of the story from UP was just what I said and no more, namely, that good intentions don't make a good programme. But the encounter did slightly shake me up. I would probably still have forgotten all about her, given the many enjoyable distractions that the festival offered, if it weren't for a second, very different conversation the same evening.

A very nice man who I had just met was telling his friends about my talk, while I was standing by, trying (and not quite managing) to balance my plate of kebabs. I was for entrepreneurship as the way out of poverty, he told them, suggesting along the way that he approved of the idea. I had not mentioned entrepreneurship in my interventions, except to emphasise the difficulties faced by small farmers. Indeed a lot of my written work is quite explicit in pouring cold water on the recent enthusiasm for the enterprises of the poor. It was just that I had spoken out against some government

programmes, and therefore, it must be that I was for entrepreneurship. Like my previous interlocutor, he was listening for some unstated overarching theme, and stopped, it would seem, when he thought he had found one.

In a world where audiences listen for attitudes rather than arguments or information, speakers must feel the pressure to posture rather than engage. Everything then said is for a political purpose simply because that's all that will stick. That's why for her it made sense to ask "what is your hidden agenda?"

Perhaps it was not always like this. A lot of the best work on both poverty and agriculture in India in the 1970s was done by a triumvirate of scholars associated with the Indian Statistical Institute — the proudly neo-liberal TN Srinivasan, the ur-Marxist Ashok Rudra and the maverick leftist Pranab Bardhan, working together or in pairs. Did anyone ask them what their shared hidden agenda was? What could their reply have been, other than 'we really just want to know the facts'?

One reason why people aren't so interested in the facts themselves may be the declining quality of official data in India. To take a simple but worrying example, if one uses the National Sample Survey data to compute our national income (which should be possible, since it is meant to be a representative sample), we get a number that is about half of what the Central Statistical Organisation claims it to be (which is what we tell the world), and more worryingly, the gap between the two estimates has been growing quite fast over the last 20 years. Then, which estimate should we trust?

But there is a more basic problem. Rukmini Banerji, who oversees the production of the herculean Annual Survey of Education Report (Aser) year after year, testing something like a 1,000 children in every one of India's 600 districts to find out what they are learning, talks of her recent encounter with a very prominent economist. She was explaining the worrying trends highlighted by the recent Aser (learning levels seem to be going down, from an already low level), when he waved his hand dismissively and announced, nobody believes your results. Not 'we have done a comparable survey of many lakhs of children and find something different'. Just — nobody believes your results! Despite the fact that the Aser facts have been checked and rechecked by many others, despite India's similarly dismaying performance in the recently concluded Programme for International Student Assessment (Pisa).

If honest data collection followed by transparent analysis is not the answer, what's left but your hidden agenda and mine? The high point of the Jaipur festival, as far as I was concerned, was a panel on literary journalism, where five of the top journalists in the world spoke out for the primacy of facts. I hope at least the young people were listening.

( Abhijit Banerjee is Ford Foundation International Professor of Economics and Director, Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab, MIT )

*The views expressed by the author are personal*

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