

Talk to the poor, don't talk down: Abhijit Banerjee

ABHIJIT BANERJEE AUGUST 9, 2013 | UPDATED 12:12 IST

What we need in India today is to rediscover how to talk to each other. We are of course the Argumentative Indians, but these days we argue to win points and not win friends.

The central role of public debates in a democracy-and indeed in any civilised society-is to persuade people with different views that there is a way to look at the problem that minimises the distance between their positions. Capitalist or worker, BJP or Congress, liberal or theocrat, arguments are a way to identify exactly where we differ and in the process, to discover the common ground from which we can work towards a solution.

This is what we don't do enough of these days. Consider Rajnath Singh's recent advice to the Congress leadership: "If you want to see poverty, don't see it in statistics. If you want to see poverty, look into the eyes of the poor." Splendid rhetoric no doubt, but I am sure that even his own party is not about to take his advice seriously.

Could he not have instead initiated a discussion on what might have contributed to the apparently fast reduction in poverty, the redistributive policies of the UPA or the effects of better connectivity and greater migration that came out of the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana or the Golden Quadrilateral that the NDA can take credit for, and thereby initiate conversation about alternative development strategies?

Or even more intrepidly, he could have asked whether, given that the UPA is pushing what it sees as good news on progress on poverty reduction, there is any way to justify the expansion of the public distribution system (PDS) in the current perilous state of the macro economy. But then how could he have, given that the UPA had played its own rhetorical master move, justifying pumping money into the notoriously leaky PDS as an actualisation of the "Right to Food". Who would dare to oppose that? Once again, instead of pre-empting the issue in this way, could they not have initiated a debate about how to fight the tragedy of malnutrition? We have ample evidence that doling out food will not do it-for one, poor people in SubSaharan Africa have half the malnutrition rates as middle class people in India, who have many times their real purchasing power.

But why blame politicians? Our media is currently delighted in exposing how it's impossible to feed oneself on what the Government calls the poverty line, ignoring the fact that so many do. I am entirely in favour of raising what I would call our aspirational poverty line, but it's worth saying that the share of food spending in total expenditure among the poorest is only 50 per cent or so and they could increase their calorie consumption by something like 20 per cent by simply cutting back on tea, coffee, snacks and other inessential stuff that does not count towards better nutrition. Could the media not have done more for malnutrition by trying to understand the consumption choices that the poor make and push them towards better nutrition, than by grandstanding?

And then there is us, civil society. One of the best and brightest figures in Indian civil society recently told me he is convinced "that radical and strong positions are crucial for civil society even as a strategy". In other words, let us demand the sky and see what falls out. The problem is that it leaves the job of mediation, of laying out the trade-offs and making informed choices, to someone else-except that there is no one (especially since politicians don't do it either). So civil society is not responsible for pointing out that the Right to Food will probably contribute to inflation which will hurt the poor, but then who is?

I believe that we are all making the same mistake of underestimating the intelligence of the Indian voter. We assume that they are simply duped into making the choices they make, when in fact they are very sophisticated (and often both sympathetic and cynical) about the compulsions politicians face. No one understands budget constraints and the need to balance multiple needs better than the poor. I think when we try talking to them instead of talking down, we will be surprised at how much more sophisticated and constructive our conversations will become.

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