



TUE, JUN 07, 2022 | UPDATED 12:33 PM IST



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Rein in the TV debates

June 6, 2022, 10:31 PM IST / Jagdish Batra in Cultural Inputs, India, TOI

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The action against the two BJP functionaries accused of mouthing inanities against the Prophet has come after it evoked reaction within the country and abroad. In the process, it not only eroded Muslims' trust in the BJP, but also severely dented Indian image in some Middle East countries where, of late, with great effort, the Modi government had been able to change perception of India for the better. Come to analyze the

WRITE

incident, it appears as much the result of overzealous young politicians as of the sensation-seeking electronic media.

For quite some time, it has been evident as daylight that the kind of vitriolic debates that are happening on the television screens are creating unnecessary bad blood between communities. It should have been tackled in time, but it seems the government did not take it seriously, mostly because the issues involved like Kashmir or demolition of illegal encroachments seemed to have an element of fairness about them. But the issue of temples involves religious sentiments and requires a different approach. RSS chief's recent advice too went unheeded.

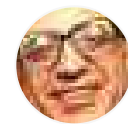
The ball once set in motion has been gathering mass and now, it seems, unless checked forthwith, there is every danger of the nation having to pay a heavy price for a lackadaisical approach. It is like inching towards a precipice. Our politicians are known for their unscrupulous and highly self-serving pronouncements without caring for decency, professional ethics or moral codes. Unfortunately, these are the ones whose unguarded remarks get highlighted. On the other hand, serious journalism seems a berated quality on electronic media even as the print media

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still swears by it. When media in our times espouses wayward comments, a molehill gets transformed into a mountain.

In this, our television channels seem to be competing with the social media where difference between factual news and rumour is obliterated and unwanted and unconfirmed videos do the rounds inflaming passions. In TV debates, not only does the heated cross-talk drown what is being said, but also sometimes, we see a participant swoop down menacingly at the opponent in the studio reminding one of our legislatures! The norms of a decent debate are thrown to the wind and what we get is virulent, mindless and toxic argumentation. The tendency of one-upmanship normally takes over the participants, particularly when they are political aspirants of whatever denomination.

It is not merely with regard to the matters concerning domestic affairs, but also we see such histrionics in TV shows on foreign affairs. Umpteen times in such debates, heated exchanges between retired Indian army officers and the Pakistani ones takes place. Diplomacy is the art of skilful and subtle negotiation. When it is brought to the public forum which television is, there is no scope for any resolution of a problem, but the discussions do lead to further antagonism

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between our two countries. How is this conducive to managing good relations with the neighbouring country?

It has to be recognized therefore, that while the unruly and ambitious participants are to blame in the first place, the TV channels are also no less blameworthy. The program producers look for the persons who rant and rave throwing all logic to the wind. The job of the moderator is not to moderate but to provoke the participants and in this the less experienced, young and passionate participants take the bait. All this is motivated by the desire on the part of the TV channel managers to get a news bite that can create sensation in next day's newspapers and attract more viewers. This is what seems to have happened in the present case.

There is dire need to rein in the media before we reach a point of no return in condemning public life. This is not to suggest to gag the media but censoring the high-voltage debates is very necessary. For this, the live coverage of such discussions should not be allowed so that cool and careful editing amputates potentially harmful stuff. We do have laws which bar inciting communal hatred through speech or action but over the years, so much wrong or manipulated implementation has happened, that the

laws have become a plaything in the hands of vested political interests. If and when such laws are operationalized, we see great hue and cry raised by vested interests and public agitations are managed finding fault with the implementation, and in the name of democracy and public voice, the right action is withheld. Let us hope the law takes its own course unhindered and unbiased so that a precedent is set for future.

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