

A crusade with conscience

As we well know by now, no-ones are not the only stuff that is instant these days. Along with many other things – much more than I care to admit, actually – opinions too are subject to this procedure. If you are educated, reasonably well-informed, and can argue till you are blue in the face, then local television stations will roll out the red carpet for you, always at short notice, of course, avidly recording your take on everything ranging from the annihilation of the planet to the lack of a viable waste disposable system in your city. The catch is – your opinions have to be more than instant. They have to be strong, no holds barred, capable of making the viewer sit up boltright on his couch. You must be committed to not yielding to others on the panel. If your argument doesn't hold much water, you could of course shift gears to high decibel. Once you are warming up to that level, you can bet your bottom dollar that the camera will linger lovingly over you and the anchor's voice, announcing the resumption of the discussion after a short commercial break, will be full of barely suppressed excitement.

If you have made a good impression at your very first appearance, it could be that you will be called again, and then some, so that before you realise it, you are in this loose, informal sorority, this brotherhood of panelists who keep televised discussions alive. It is not a responsibility to be taken lightly. For one thing, just think of the tremendous reach of this medium. So, if you are to be taken seriously at all, you have to do all you can to sidestep the obvious and throw light on aspects of the issue that are not so discernible to the layman.

You have to back your arguments with facts, data, the findings of specialists in the field. And you have to decide whether you want to be politically correct, or truly honest. While being a commentator on this highly visible medium does give one a degree of well earned satisfaction, it is also a double edged sword. There is the risk of too much familiarity or overexposure, as well as the pressure to better your performance each time. Not to speak of the weird coincidence that the cleverest lines and the most profound insights come to mind only just after the cameras stop rolling.

All these thoughts have resulted from my declining to appear on telly to express my views on whether the transparency revolution spearheaded by Anna Hazare and Baba Ramdev will be successful. My point is that this revolution is a work in progress, new events are unfolding every day. Fasting, *satyagraha*, non-violence once brought the greatest imperial power to its knees. When we see candlelight vigils to bring Jessica Lal's killers to justice, or thousands sing and dance to patriotic songs to cleanse the rot within, we cannot deny the hope that rises with this power of collective action. But revolution is not just about taking to the streets and expecting miracles overnight. If today we are elated that so many are together in this crusade, we must also acknowledge that we are all unitedly responsible for corruption – all of us, from the celebrity criminals now in Tihar Jail to the most anonymous of us bribing our way through for a gas connection, a ration card, a seat at a school or college, a job. Everything is up for grabs. And the highest bidder wins. According to Transparency International, a reputed German NGO, India is the sixty-ninth most corrupt nation in the world. Cameroon is the most corrupt and Pakistan is more corrupt than we are. I think it is good to know sixty-eight countries are ahead of us in this road to perdition.

I have a friend of mine who is never tired of narrating this story. Here she goes again. "One evening, I had visitors at my home. My cousin, her husband and their ten year old son dropped in. My cousin is a housewife, whereas my brother-in-law had a government job. He is pretty junior in rank and I could not help noticing that they had done pretty well for themselves, the swanky car, her gold choker, the bandying around of high end brand names. The boy is quite a brat. The little tyke even broke my porcelain ashtray. Anyway, to get to my point, after tea I told them I had to get my daughter home from her tuition classes. So they said of course, they would drop me there. During our conversation at tea, my cousin had let me know that very recently, besides their house in Guwahati, they had also bought a flat in New Delhi. So, teasing my little nephew in the car, I said, "You know what, I'm going to stay in your new flat in Delhi. Will you let me?"

"He turned to me, his eyes wide with alarm. "Shhh!" he put a warning finger to his lips – "Sssh! Not in front of the driver!"

"But why?" I asked mystified, "If they find out, they will handcuff Papa and put him in prison!"

At this point, my friend always shakes her head in disbelief and tells me that the man's corrupt ways did not shock her half as much as the little boy's awareness about the whole shady business, and his complicity in keeping his father protected. So, while I was watching the transparency revolution live on TV, my friend called me and said, quite disheartened. "Nothing's going to come of this, is it? Don't you think it's a bit too late?"

You cannot have a pat answer for a question like that. Nor can you harp of a past which you believe was pure as driven snow. But, let's face it, more than ever before, we have become indifferent to the wheeling dealing that goes on all around us. If we tread on the moral high ground about not indulging in it ourselves, we are also guilty of not doing anything to stop others who do so. People who have too much integrity to accept bribes are seen as relics of a dead past, eccentrics out of sync with the real world, or just not smart enough to have an eye on the main chance. Bollywood doesn't help either. I have lost track of the number of movies I have watched which were nothing but cautionary tales about what happens to the honest police officer, the idealistic school teacher et cetera. Instead of inspiring us to stand for what is right and just, they suggest that clammng our mouths shut and keeping our heads down is the secret of longevity.

Here I am tempted to recount another story, also a true one, about one man's tragic defence of his innocence. Decades ago, there was a family living in a small town in Assam. The man was a middle level government official, and the family lived simply, almost frugally. The three children were in high school and the man's salary just about covered the household expenses. Festivals were always a time for worry, for relatives descended from all over, but otherwise expenses were carefully minimised. Like any other middle class family, there was some money put aside, a bit at a time, for the daughters' weddings. The son was expected to aspire for a career in medicine, or engineering. All this changed the day the man was summoned by the director of his department. He listened, pale and trembling, as he was accused of deliberately fudging up some records and pocketing money meant for some government work. It was a small amount, laughable in these days of mega-crore scams, but for this man, it was as if someone had struck a blow to his face. Speechless with shock at first, he began protesting his innocence, swearing on the heads of his children, offering to go through the books again, telling his boss he could never even dream of doing such a thing. But, the wheels had been implacably set in motion. A departmental enquiry was ordered. He was suspended from his job. By the next day, everybody – his colleagues, his neighbours, the townsfolk – knew about the black stain on his honour. He could not bear to face anybody around him. Three days later, the world stopped seeing this man. No, he did not take his life. Perhaps that would have been better. Instead, he sequestered himself – to waste away in a kind of living death. He simply locked himself up in his tiny, windowless room... for days, months, years. He did not see the rain, the sunlight, or felt the wind on his face. The seasons changed, the children grew up, left home. His wife's hair grew white. The home became shabby, decrepit. He emerged now and then like a shadow to bathe, and slipped in again. His wife learnt to leave his meals outside his door, wash the clothes he passed out. On the other side of the door, there was this deep silence, a dreadful stillness. There came a time when not a single word escaped his lips. Nobody knows what came of the enquiry. Some say it was a conspiracy by a fellow colleague. But his life ended that terrible day. And years later, when he actually breathed his last, that town had long forgotten who he was, or what had made him such a shadowy, haunted recluse. By today's standards, when scoundrels wave jauntily to the crowds on their way to jail, this man would be no tragic hero, only a pathetic fool and a loser. I wish someone proves me wrong.

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