

By Sidharth Mishra



The other day somebody shared a video link of an old television debate where I featured. Then came the query, why aren't you debating on television these days? I replied that since I am out of sync with the style of the debate which is in vogue now, I opt out of the few offers that come my way especially when they need a dozen people peeping out of the windows on the screen.

The person on the other end of the exchange of conversation was not ready to take my reply lying down. He said it's a case of sour grapes as I was outdated. Have I become that outdated? I had been mulling over it for some time and was shaken when the news of Congress spokesperson Rajiv Tyagi collapsing after a 'toxic' debate came. On the hindsight, I thought, it had been a wise decision for a hypertensive and pre-diabetic person like me to opt out of these cantankerous shows of abusive persons baying for each-other's blood, spurred by an unscrupulous cheerleader christened as anchor. With no political fortune to seek, and the channels increasingly tightening their purse strings when it came to paying the panelists, I think it indeed has been a well-thought decision to not put one's life at risk.

Many years ago, when one had just moved from being a newbie in the profession to a middle leadership position in The Pioneer, a tempting job offer had come from a television channel my way. Channels were then popping up by dime a dozen as the apex court order had ended monopoly of the Doordarshan on airtime.

There were many who thought, and rightly so in many cases especially those who were poor with writing and editing skills, that television was the platform to be in. When I entered editor Chandan Mitra's office with the offer letter and the permission to resign, he asked me to sit and ordered for a cup of coffee. He said someone with a good writing skill should never seek to make a career as television reporter. I thought this to be a stratagem to retain me in an organization because in those days Mitra himself would frequent television studios and was a celebrity.

My doubts got cleared when he said with a sip of coffee that television was a great place to be in if one was invited as a panelist for inputs beyond bare news. That is what the television debates ought to be and to be fair it remained that way for a very longtime. Unfortunate that it has now been turned on its head.

Must share that I was introduced as a television panelist on the recommendation of Mitra on a news item which I had penned and had created quite a stir. The appearances remained infrequent as I neither enjoyed the political and social station of Mitra nor the liberty of the Editor to leave office early for a television talk.

I, however, had a long-run as TV panelist between 2008 and 2017 when the erstwhile STAR News and later ABP News under the stewardship of Shazi Zaman planned pre-recorded talk show-based content. The guest would be presented before a group of people from across the social spectrum and a few journalists, who would grill the personality but never ever crossing the lines of civility.

The shows were planned in such a manner that for the panelists, quick wit and intelligence became the paragon tools for creating an impact and survive the scrutiny of the audience. It was very clear that shouting, running down and abusing co-panelists were not part of shows' grammar.

Appearances at these shows also gave me the opportunity to rub shoulders and meaningfully interact with many a veteran of profession specially from language papers. They brought with them sagacious knowledge not earned by the way of appending a foreign degree but by years spent in field witnessing evolution of Indian society and politics and remaining its consistent student.

The recording sessions which would expand over three to four hours always included space for informal interaction with the guest of the day. These sessions were actually great sittings in scholarship. Today I see on screen such 'scholars', by the way of holding a professorial position, shaking hands, pointing fingers and spitting saliva which would make even the most wayward student cower with fear.

#TelevisionDebates: A Euphemism for A Blood Bath

Written by Administrator

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A media platform's essential occupation should be dissemination of well-argued information rather than have debates which could pass off as any goat or a cock fight in a village marketplace. Late Rajiv Tyagi had the reputation of being a 'forceful' spokesperson for the Congress party. Rahul Gandhi in his condolence message called him a Babbar Sher (lion).

However, not to forget, that at the end of the day Tyagi too was another gladiator in the ring for blood bath set up by channels every evening. The world of professional boxing and wrestling is full of the tales of gladiators getting fatally injured and dying early. Are we now seeing a similar trend emerging in the television debates which today is a euphemism for sessions of aggressive abusing with physical assault thankfully being avoided with corona protocols in place?

Given the demise of Tyagi and humiliation which is heaped on many in the name of debate, personally for me sour grapes are preferable over being lined in a row to be caned by a hectoring anchor.

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