

Madaaris, Performing Monkeys And Dancing Bears

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One sometimes watches television programmes on various channels in which the anchor or moderator invites people to discuss a particular issue. Amongst the well known anchors in India are Barkha Dutt, Arnab Goswami, Rajdeep Sardesai, Rajat Sharma, Karan Thapar and Vikram Chandra. Of these perhaps the most polished is Vikram Chandra. All our TV channels, which are largely Delhi based, seem to have come to the conclusion that all the intelligence, all the knowledge and all the expertise on every subject under the sun resides in Delhi and that, too, in a few people, certainly not more than about 30 or 40. There is some inkling of rudimentary human intelligence in a few people in Mumbai, Chennai and Bangalore and that outside these cities we have a vast sea of people who are ignorant, devoid of intelligence and incapable of thinking or reacting to any issue which concerns us as citizens and India as a country. Therefore, all TV channels invite only the same few people to their programmes, where questions asked are predictable and the answers that each participant will give are also predictable. It is a comfortable club of cronies and they all behave in a given pattern which would have delighted the likes of Sigmund Freud. When the programmes relate to the Army, especially such delightfully controversial people as Gen. V.K. Singh, the reaction of at least some of the distinguished panelists would have delighted Friedrich Nietzsche, whose philosophy is said to have guided Adolph Hitler and the Nazis. In politics it is Manish Tiwari and Digvijay Singh (at one time Abhishek Manu Singhvi was the Congress spokesperson), Nirmala Sethuraman from BJP, D. Raja from CPI, etc., with Vinod Mehta being a constant factor as a commentator. On administrative matters and foreign affairs T.S.R. Subramanian, Mani Shankar Aiyer and G. Parthasarathy are often to be seen. Some anchors try and draw out the panelists. Some, in particular Arnab Goswami, love to bully and browbeat the panelists. One common factor in all programmes is the equivalent of the specially invited village idiot, a person who is not very articulate, who can be trusted to tie himself knots and who is the fall guy, to use an Americanism, who becomes the butt of the anchor's ridicule.

Personally I prefer watching BBC programmes, one of which is Hard Talk. This is a one-to-one programme in which the BBC representative talks on some world issue to an eminent person from anywhere in the world. The programme is well researched and both questioner and participant are a delight to hear. There are many panel discussions, not necessarily confined to BBC headquarters. Just a few days ago BBC had arranged a discussion in Australia on a proposed Bill which would legalise same sex marriages. The programme was well researched and competently moderated and the protagonists and antagonists had been chosen with great care for their knowledge of the subject, their articulation and reasoned views. The arguments on both sides were presented brilliantly, the time schedule was adhered to, there was no cross talk and each speaker was given an equal opportunity to give his or her views. Audience intervention was to the point and the moderator ensured that the discussions did not go off the track. I have not come across a single television discussion which comes anywhere near those of BBC. In the programme to which I refer the participants were Australians and not British intellectuals. Karan Thapar also has a programme based on BBC's Hard Talk, but he is so aggressive, he comes across as being so cynical that the participant is never really at ease and the entire programme appears to be forced and artificial.

To revert to panel discussions, I saw Digvijay Singh being grilled by Barkha Dutt who, to give her credit, acted as the executioner whose smile never faded whilst her sword descended with finesse on

the neck of a hapless Digvijay. The question she had asked was whether the Congress was not worried by the hammering it received in the June by-elections, especially in Andhra Pradesh. Digvijay said that there was no cause for concern because after all Mamata's Trinamool Congress and Jaganmohan Reddy's YSR Congress were both ultimately Congress. Smilingly Barkha delivered the coup de grace by asking whether Digvijay acknowledges that these two parties were his Congress. Digvijay's discomfiture was obvious and because I am fond of him I decided to speak to him over the telephone and ask him why he participated in such a programme. Watching the antics of our TV anchors one stark reality hit me almost like a thunderbolt. Suddenly every anchor appeared to be a madaari, a petty magician or organ grinder who tries to find ways of amusing his audience so that he can make a little money. The madaari prepares a stage on which the participants, who really are like performing monkeys and dancing bears, go through their paces to the beat of the "dug-dugi" or little drum which the madaari plays, to whose beat the performers dance. All this for the entertainment of a TV audience which neither the madaari nor the performing beast sees but to please which they willingly go through the whole drama.

Does TV has a serious purpose in life or is it only a means of entertainment? Looking at BBC and the vast range of subjects it covers, the intelligent audience it addresses, the quality participants it invites, one feels that TV has a serious purpose in life. I invite my readers to listen in on a BBC programme called Date Line London broadcast every Saturday between 20:00 and 20:30 hours. Foreign correspondents posted in London come together to discuss issues of public life, British and international. It is a fascinating programme and exposes the audience to well informed views from different perspectives. Can our channels not do something similar, initiate intelligent debate, invite meaningful audience participation and leave the viewers better informed and in a mood for introspection? Can they not identify talented people who live outside Delhi and invite them to these programmes so that the Delhi centric focus of our TV channels expands into an all India context? Can we stop having the madaaris dominating our TV channels and performing monkeys and dancing bears taking over the stage?
