

Why there are no public intellectuals in India

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Who is a public intellectual

There are no public intellectuals in India. Let me qualify this statement further before defending it. By intellectuals, I mean those writers/thinkers who aim to fulfil a public function in society. There are many public functions that a writer can fulfil. For example, they can educate people about things. In this group, you have scientists, historians, sociologists et al who are experts in certain scientific fields who give valuable information regarding aspects that affect the public in different ways. There are other functions that a writer can fulfill – which is to try and entertain or elevate aesthetic sense. Here we have poets and novelists who write to extend the narrative or imaginative scope of language. All of them play a very crucial role and they are all contributors to society in an important sense. However, by public intellectuals I mean those thinkers who fulfill a *political* purpose in a democracy by engaging in informed debates regarding the political domain of society. They are not merely ensconced in academies who speak only to specialists. I want to clarify here that a public intellectual is not necessarily an activist. He/She can be just a writer who talks about the larger political issues that politically affect a society.

The political domain of a society broadly is what occupies the interactive space between a people and its elected representatives. Common people interact with the politicians directly, or through the instruments of political governance, like the legislature, or with the judiciary and they exercise their political agency every five years by voting (in India for example). The government on the other hand brings about policies, rules, and reasons to either motivate or coerce obedience in a people. Public intellectuals of a political kind are like the *observers* of this space between the government and the public. They study or theorize this space from a historical, political or philosophical perspective. Here the intellectuals' vocation is to bring to light different hidden aspects of this political space. The best kind of public intellectuals are those who are not already political practitioners – that is, involved in political parties either as a worker or as a politician themselves. It is not to say that politicians or party members can't be intellectuals. It is just that the views of an intellectual who is already invested in the party-view of politics would become predictable and may be forced to toe the party-line.

At the same time, a public intellectual can't be like the commoner using a public platform to push her own private agenda. If she makes an ingenious argument to show how the government should give her a country house and a good car, we may admire her for her argumentative acumen but would hardly consider her an exemplary specimen of a public intellectual. She has to show empathy for people and address the political concerns that affect as wide a set of people as possible. She has to train her intellectual capacities along with her emotional sensitivity and the courage to express her opinions. This is the ideal type which we know doesn't exist in its fullest range anywhere in the world. Nevertheless, there are people in the past and the present in the world who showcase all these virtues.

The Indian Case

A robust democracy is one in which there are spaces – institutionally supported – which cultivate the virtues of a public intellectual. The universities or academies are such spaces where people are trained to use their minds free from worrying about the consequences of their opinions. They are allowed to follow the train of their thoughts to wherever it leads. Intellectuals gain the combative skills to argue for and defend their views. It is a training ground where they spar with each other. This is specially true of the humanities where young minds are exposed to different worldviews so they can make their empathy more capacious. It is these minds which go into different fields of writing and intellectual engagement and act as the intellectual observer of politics. They work either as journalists or teachers or independent writers. A democracy is functioning properly only in so far as there is a *distinction* that is acknowledged between those who engage in politics and those who think and talk about it. It is an important distinction that is fundamental to the proper working of a democracy. If there are only practitioners of politics and no-one to talk about it, then critical reflection is missing. If a democracy wants to have political and ethical upliftment, it is important that these ‘observers’ are given a free space and institutional support to engage in their work.

Now we come to India. India is on paper a democracy and to be fair to it, some of the engines of its democracy are working well. There are elections that happen. There is a judiciary which is fair. There is a party system and people are free to follow any party-view they like. However, in India, the distinction between the observer of politics and political actors doesn’t exist. India politically is currently in a position where it is highly suspicious of the observer. The current government doesn’t like the observer. It thinks that an intellectual ‘observer’ is an irritant at best and at worst a stooge of western ideological forces. It has undermined all the spaces where a public intellectual – as the intelligent observer – can thrive. The university space is closely monitored so it can spy on what people say and do. Appointments are made to universities based on the applicants’ allegiance to political views that are in line with the government. Journalism is mired with threats and punishments to people who don’t adopt the government view of things. When we review Indian socio-political life, we can see that there has been an erosion of the distinction between political practitioners and observers over the years. One can even make the argument that, even from the beginning of the Indian republic, the line has had a precarious existence and vanished at different points, for example during the Emergency. It is safe to say that in India the practitioner–observer divide was always thin.

The government of the day is supposed to act as the guardian of this distinctive line where people like public intellectuals are given immunity from persecution for their views on the government. In India, what we now have is immunity only to those who are part of the tribe of practitioners. If you are a politician in India you have freedom of expression. That explains why intellectuals in India who have political views either form a political party of their own (Yogendra Yadav) or join political parties (Shashi Tharoor). There are clearly intellectuals who exist in India but they don’t have the courage to occupy any space outside the political domain. The Congress party has a lot of intellectuals who only want immunity and therefore are happy not even to criticize their own leadership. Such intellectuals know that once they get out of

their zone
of protection they are easy meat for the ruling party. They will disappear into jails and silenced through sheer political force.

However, there are exceptions to this. There is an Amartya Sen and an Arundathi Roy and a Ramachandra Guha among others who are independent and not part of any political space. They may enjoy specialized immunity that comes from international recognition of their work in their respective fields. However, they know and we know that that immunity is very precarious. I can't find any intellectual in India who is a true public intellectual – free of party agenda and who enjoys freedom of speech. Those who do speak about India are outside India and those who are in India are all part of political parties. There is a big vacuum. There are no intellectuals in India.

Liberal minded people like to argue that there are no right-wing intellectuals - that they are all pseudo-intellectuals who are jingoistic and want to push a political agenda. It is claimed by the liberals that people like Swapan Dasgupta, Jagannath or any of the new-age right-wing historians like Vikram Sampath, or J Sai Deepak don't qualify as intellectuals because they have already revealed a hidden political agenda and spokespersons for the ruling dispensation. If what I have said above makes sense, there are no intellectuals – either on the left or on the right. There are people who espouse liberal views for sure. They even ascribe to themselves the label of being intellectuals- they write books, and articles and engage in public debate. But they can't be called authentic intellectuals because they don't have the courage to come out in the open without the safety-net of belonging to a party or being a practitioner. I am happy to admit there are people who write and talk across the board but they are not public intellectuals. I can't point to any Indian intellectual – *working and living in India* -- who comes from any of the established institutions like journalism or the academy. This is a structural and a social problem. Structurally, there are no institutions that support free-thinking and socially it is a problem because no-one wants to or can take on the role of a public intellectual which requires immense courage and the possibility of a loss of livelihood and even life. There is no public intellectual who is now in their prime working in India who fulfills the conditions above.

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