



## Dysfunctional Meetings Exploring ancient Sanskrit satires on meeting conundrums

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### Abstract :

*Satire has been a common tool employed by poets throughout history to expose the realities of royal courts. Poets like Kshemendra, Jagannatha Pandita, Nilakantha Dakshina, and others are celebrated in Sanskrit literature for their sarcastic verses that serve as mirrors to the outside world and remain relevant even in contemporary times. This article illustrates lack of ethics in meetings, making the meeting dysfunctional. It also examines a portion of Mahabharatam that outlines the structure for communication through a discussion between Sulabhā and Janaka, prescribing ethics in communication and meetings.*

The 17th-century poet Jagannātha Paṇḍita, in his poetic work Bhāminīvilāsa, humorously compared an unruly meeting with a meeting of monkeys.

युक्तं सभायां खलु मर्कटानां शाखास्तरूणां मृदुलासनानि  
सुभाषितं चीत्कृतिरातिथेयी दन्तैर्नखाग्रैश्च विपाटितानि

yuktaṃ sabhāyāṃ khalu markaṭānāṃ  
śākhāstarūṇāṃ mṛdulāsanāni  
subhāṣitaṃ cītkṛtirātithēyī  
dantairnakhāgraiśca vipāṭitāni

"In the assembly of monkeys, the soft branches of trees serve as comfortable seats,

the monkeys' cries are considered valuable advice, and they express genuine hospitality by scratching each other with their fingernails and teeth."

This satirical verse hints at the possibility that the clamour and chaos in contemporary parliamentary sessions may not be a recent phenomenon; similar disorderly meetings might have existed in ancient times.

This leads us to contemplate two key questions: Did our ancestors have any established guidelines for addressing the challenges of reaching consensus, or did "the

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might” simply dictate the course of action? Can we draw valuable lessons from their experiences to steer modern meetings toward ethical discussions, rather than viewing them as mere contests of victory and defeat?

## Meeting Ethics

Since the time of the Vedas, knowledge transmission has occurred through various forms of debate and discourse. These are known by names such as brahmodya, vāda, praśna, and śastrartha, among many others. However vāda has evolved into a commonly used term for discussions in the contemporary world. The significance of vāda in the Indian knowledge system is underscored by the fact that the Nyaya Darshana treatise defines vāda (discussions and discourses) in its very first sutra.

प्रमाण-प्रमेय-संशय-प्रयोजन-दृष्टान्त-सिद्धान्तावयव-तर्कनिर्णय-वाद-जल्प-वितण्ड-  
हेत्वाभासच्छलजातिनिग्रहस्थानानां तत्त्वज्ञानान्निःश्रेयसाधिगमः

pramāṇa-prameya-saṁśaya-prayojana-dr̥ṣṭānta-  
siddhāntāvayava-tarkanirṇaya-vāda- jalpa-  
vitaṇḍa-hetvābhāsacchalajātiniḡrahasthānānāṃ  
tatvajñānānīḡśreyasādhigamaḥ

Vāda, jalpa, and vitaṇḍa are different forms of debates/discourses and discussions.

When discussions aim to uncover truth or facts, they are termed vāda. Conversely, discussions driven solely by the desire to win, regardless of truth, are classified as jalpa. Vitaṇḍa occurs when the debater engages in argumentation for its own sake, without seeking resolution.

The way debates and discourses were structured in the “bhasyas” and “darshanas” was to first reaffirm the issue being argued

(poorvapaksha), then point out the gaps in them, and finally suggest a new proposition (sidhantapaksha) to fill those gaps. The structure of any debate (verbal or textual) was in the form of vāda. The exception to it is a book by Mahākavi Śriharṣa—Khaṇḍana-khaṇḍa-khādyam. Here the poet provides the poorvapaksha with different philosophies, drills holes in them, but does not close them with his suppositions. Notwithstanding the fact that it is a textbook case of vitaṇḍavāda, the text is highly regarded for its thorough understanding of the subject. This text is more of an exception than a rule. Vitaṇ ḍ avāda and “jalpa” were frowned upon.

However, dialogues and deliberations were not limited to philosophical discussions or royal court proceedings. Poets also had a role to play, and they challenged each other through poetic discourses, sometimes in formal settings of “kavya-sammelans.” Some of Mahākavi Nīlakaṇṭha Dīkshita’s humorous predicaments give us a glimpse of that world.

## Nīlakaṇṭha Dīkshita on destructive behaviors

Mahākavi Sri Nīlakaṇṭha Dīkshita was a poet of the early seventeenth century, an adviser to the King Śri Tirumalai Nayaka of Madurai, minister in the Pandya kingdom. In the first sarga of his mahakavya Śivalīlarnava , he takes a dig at the argumentative “tarkikas” ( logicians) –

घट्टोपविष्टानिव वाग्भिरर्थैः शब्दागमज्ञानुपसान्त्वयामः ।

उत्प्लुत्य भल्लूकवदापतन्तः कथं नु जय्या इह गौतमीयाः ॥ ७१॥

ghaṭ ṭ opaviṣṭāniva vāgbhirarthaiḡ śabdāga  
majñānupasāntvayāmaḡ |  
utplutya bhallūkavadāpatantaḡ kathaṃ nu  
jayyā iha gautamīyāḡ || 71||

“Even a grammarian (like a person manning a tollgate) can be placated, either through money/meanings, but who can win the “Gutamiya” (logicians), who jump and pounce upon you like a grizzly bear.”

May be the poet is alluding to Jalpa and vitaṇḍa type of discourse prevalent then. These types of behaviors are causes of dysfunctional meetings even now. Another verse in the same book explains one of the signs of destructive people—people who reject a creative work just because they did not compose it. They therefore strive uselessly to uncover faults in it.

एको हि दोषः परकीयतैव पद्येषु सर्वेष्वपि दुर्जनानाम् ।  
तस्मिन् पुरस्थेऽपि कियद्यतन्ते वृथैव ते दोषगवेषणाय ॥ ६२॥  
eko hi doṣaḥ parakīyataiva padyeṣu  
sarveṣvapi durjanānām |

tasmin purasthe'pi kiyadyatante vṛthaiva te  
doṣagaveṣaṇāya ॥ 62॥

“The only defect “durjanas” find in poems is that they are written by others. Even while facing the poet, they try hard, in futility, to find defects in them. “

Another trait of destructive behavior in people is that they steal others’ work without giving them due credit.

स्वोक्तिं मुषित्वा पुरतः पठन्तं स्वस्यैव पश्यन् कविसाहसाङ्कम् ।  
प्राज्ञो जनः किं प्रतिपद्यतां तमाहन्तु वा स्वोदरमाहतां वा ॥ ५१॥  
svoktiṃ muṣitvā purataḥ paṭhantaṃ svasyaiva  
paśyan kavisaḥasāṅkam |

prājño janaḥ kiṃ pratipadyatām tamāhantu vā  
svodaramohatām vā ॥ 51॥

“The poet asks what should he do in a situation when some other individual

(durjana), confident like a legendary king Sāhasāṅka, presents the poet's verses as his own and that too in the poet's very presence. He seeks counsel from the wise, whether to hit this “durjana” or hit his own stomach.”

This reflects well with a frequent grievance in the corporate realm or any other place with multiple people working towards a common goal—someone else appropriates credit for others work, especially during a meeting presentation.

Regardless of what the motive is, there are people who use foul language to overwhelm others. The poet has following to say to such people:

आपूर्य वक्त्रं लशुनैर्विधाता किं निम्बसारैः कुधियामसिञ्चत् ।  
न चेत् कथं वाचि ततः क्षरन्त्यां स पूतिगन्धः स च तिक्तभावः ॥ ४३॥  
āpūrya vaktraṃ laśunairvidhātā kiṃ nimbasāraiḥ  
kudhiyāmasiñcat |  
na cet katham vāci tataḥ kṣarantyaṃ sa  
pūtigandhaḥ sa ca tiktabhāvaḥ ॥ 43॥

“Did Almighty create the speaker by filing his mouth with garlic and nurturing him with the bitter “neem” juice ? If not, how can one explain the foul smell and the bitter “bhava” coming out of his words.”

Similarly, in his other literary works such as Śāntivilāsaḥ, Anyāpadeśaśatakam, Vairāgyaśatakam, Kaliviḍambanam, and Sabhārañjanam, the poet quotes many such examples to show dysfunctional behaviors of debaters and poets. In this essay, only a few sample verses are described so that interested readers can look into the original work for inspiration.

We can now find out if there are prescriptive guidelines to avoid such conundrums. For

this, we can look into one of the “sargas” in the epic Mahabharatam.

## Sulabhà & Janaka Samvàda on Communication Management

In Shanti Parva of Mahabharatam, there is a dialogue between a ṛshikà named Sulabhà and the King Janaka, which can be understood as a prescriptive framework for communication management. The detailed analysis of each verse is beyond the scope of this essay. However, the relevant verses in this chapter are summarized in different categories.<sup>1</sup>

### The features of a sentence

Communication uses sentences as its basis. Sulabhà lists out a set of features of a sentence that one needs to pay attention to, which are explained in the verses below.

सौक्ष्म्यं साङ्ख्यक्रमौ चोभौ निर्णयः सप्रयोजनः।  
पञ्चैतान्यर्थजातानि वाक्यमित्युच्यते नृपा॥ १२-३२५-७९  
saukṣmyaṃ sânkhyakramau cobhau nirṇayaḥ  
saprয়োjanah।  
pañcāitānyarthajātāni vākyaṃityucyate nṛpa  
(12-325-79)

A sentence is made from five features: “saukṣmyaṃ” (subtlety), “sânkhyam” (enumeration), “krama” (order), “nirṇayaḥ” (conclusion), and “prayojana” (utility).

#### 1. Subtlety - saukṣmyaṃ

ज्ञानं ज्ञेयेषु भिन्नेषु यदा भेदेन वर्तते।  
तत्रातिशयिनी बुद्धिस्तत्सौक्ष्म्यमिति वर्तते॥ १२-३२५-८१  
jñānaṃ jñeyeṣu bhinneṣu yadā bhedenā vartate।  
tatrātiśayinī buddhistatsaukṣmyamiti vartate॥ 12-325-81

“Subtlety is the ability to discern between distinct objects of knowledge by understanding the underlying differentiator minutely.”

As they say, a genius is defined as someone who can find similarity between totally dissimilar objects and dissimilarity between identical objects.

#### 2. Counting - saṅkhyā

दोषाणां च गुणानां च प्रमाणं प्रविभागतः।  
कंचिदर्थमभिप्रेत्य सा सङ्ख्येत्युपधार्यताम्॥ १२-३२५-८२  
doṣāṇāṃ ca guṇānāṃ ca pramāṇaṃ pravibhāgataḥ।  
kaṃcidarthamabhipretya sā saṅkhyetyupadhāryatām॥  
12-325-82

“Enumerating its pros and cons in relation to a specific subject is called sânkhya or a count.” [ By listing the merits and demerits, the subject becomes clearer.]

#### 3. Sequence/ Order – krama

इदं पूर्वमिदं पश्चाद्वक्तव्यं यद्विवक्षितम्।  
क्रमयोगं तमप्याहुर्वाक्यं वाक्यविदो जनाः॥ १२-३२५-८३  
idaṃ pūrvamidaṃ paścādvaktavyaṃ yadvivakṣitam।  
kramayogaṃ tamapyāhurvākyaṃ vākyaṃ vidō janāḥ॥  
12-325-83

What intended feature must be said earlier and which one later is called “krama,” or a sequence or order. The wise call such a disciplined sentence “kramayukta.” [ While explaining one’s point, it is important to prioritize the order in which one picks up a subject.]

#### 4. Conclusion - nirṇayaḥ

धर्मकामार्थमोक्षेषु प्रतिज्ञाय विशेषतः।  
इदं तदिति वाक्यान्ते प्रोच्यते स विनिर्णयः॥ १२-३२५-८४  
dharmakāmārthamokṣeṣu pratijñāya viśeṣataḥ।  
idaṃ taditi vākyaṅte procyate sa vinirṇayaḥ॥ 12-325-84

1. Some of the verses are in first person, as Sulabhà explains how she would approach it. But for simplicity, we are putting the translation in simple words.

Declaring “this is this/ this is that” with respect to Dharma (duty/righteousness), Kāma (desire), Artha (wealth) and Mokṣa (liberation) after making a hypothesis (pratiñāya) is called Nirnaya or a conclusion. For any discussion, one makes a hypothesis initially and declares such and such is so and so, with respect to Dharma or Artha or Kāma or Mokṣa. This leads to a conclusion. [ Here, the underlying meaning is that, one must to be clear about which aspect related to these four paths of our conduct the subject should support.]

### 5. Prayojana - Utility

इच्छाद्वेषभवेर्दुःखैः प्रकर्षो यत्र जायते।

तत्र या नृपते वृत्तिस्तत्प्रयोजनमिष्यते॥ १२-३२५-८५

icchādvēṣabhavairduḥkhaiḥ prakarṣo yatra jāyate।

tatra yā nr̥pate vṛttistatprayojanamiṣyate॥ 12-325-85

Due to desires and jealousy, suffering arises. The intent to mitigate these sufferings is called "prayojana," or purpose. Remember, even in project management, one has to be clear on the ROI (return on investment). [The prayojana explains what is the ROI in a way.]

### The pitfalls in communication

Only fixing the technicalities of sentences won't build a good communication principle. There are other pitfalls in communication that Sulabhā lists as eighteen possible fallacies.

The pitfalls in communication could be due to the structural flaws or flaws of intention. There are nine possible structural flaws and nine attributed to intent.

नवभिर्नवभिश्चैव दोषैर्वाग्बुद्धिदूषणैः।

अपेतमुपपन्नार्थमष्टादशगुणान्वितम् १२-३२५-७८ ॥  
navabhirnavabhiṣcaiiva doṣairvāgbuddhidūṣaṇaiḥ।  
apetamupapannārthamaṣṭādaśaguṇānvitam॥  
(12-325-78 )

“There are nine plus nine defects, arising out of the structure of the sentence and the intent of the speaker respectively. Removing these flaws will result in eighteen merits.”

### The structural flaws

उपेतार्थमभिन्नार्थं न्यायवृत्तं न चाधिकम्।

नाश्लक्ष्णं न च संदिग्धं वक्ष्यामि परमं ततः॥ १२-३२५-८७  
upetārthamabhinnārthaṃ nyāyavṛttaṃ na cādhikam।  
nāślakṣṇaṃ na ca saṃdigdhaṃ vakṣyāmi paramaṃ tataḥ।  
(12-325-87 )

“A sentence shall have a clear meaning without any ambiguity (abhinnārthaṃ) and shall be logical (nyāyavṛttaṃ). A sentence should neither be confusing ( na saṃdigdhaṃ), nor verbose (nādhikam) nor laconic (aślakṣṇaṃ).”

न गुर्वक्षरसंयुक्तं पराङ्मुखसुखं न च।

नानृतं न त्रिवर्गेण विरुद्धं नाप्यसंस्कृतम्॥ १२-३२५-८८  
na gurvakṣarasamyuktaṃ parāṅmukhasukhaṃ na ca।  
nānṛtaṃ na trivargeṇa viruddhaṃ nāpyasaṃskṛtam॥।  
12-325-88

“A sentence will not be harsh and also it won't be easily dismissable by the opponents. It will not be false or opposed to the basic values of human beings - dharma, artha and kāma.”

न न्यूनं नष्टशब्दं वा व्युत्क्रमाभिहितं न च।

सदोषमभिकल्पेन निष्कारणमहेतुकम्॥ १२-३२५-८९  
na nyūnaṃ naṣṭaśabdaṃ vā vyutkramābhihitam na ca।  
sadoṣamabhikalpena niṣkāraṇamahetukam॥ 12-325-89

“A sentence should be complete, and it should not lack words or be disorderly or have faulty words. Also a sentence should not be a conglomeration of meaningless words lacking in purpose.”

### Flaws due to the attitude of the speaker<sup>2</sup>

After covering the structural flaws, Sulabhà lists out flaws arising out of intent.

कामात्क्रोधाद्भयाल्लोभाद्दैन्याच्चानार्थकात्तथा।

ह्रीतोऽनुक्रोशतो मानान्न वक्ष्यामि कथंचन॥ १२-३२५-९०

kāmātkrodhādbhayāllōbhāddainyāccānārthakāttathā  
hrīto'nukrośato mānānna vakṣyāmi kathamcanā॥ 12-325-90

“I will not speak with emotions such as desire (kāma), anger (krodha), fear (bhaya), greed (lobha), self-pity (dainya), hopelessness (ānārthakā), shame (hrīta), pity (anukrośata) or pride (māna).”

### The core of communication

When all the flaws are removed, how does one make the communication effective is the next line of thought that Sulabhà provides.

वक्ता श्रोता च वाक्यं च यदा त्वविकलं नृप।

स ममेति विवक्षायां तदा सौर्थः प्रकाशते॥ १२-३२५-९१

vaktā śrotā ca vākyaṃ ca yadā tvavikalam nṛpa  
sa mameti vivakṣāyāṃ tadā sorthaḥ prakāśate॥ 12-325-91

“Hey king, when the speaker, the listener and the words are all aligned, it will resonate with the meaning that the speaker wants to convey.”

[We have to be convinced ourselves before we convey our thoughts to others in the form of words.]

वक्तव्ये तु यदा वक्ता श्रोतारमवमन्यते।

स्वार्थमाह परार्थं तत्तदा वाक्यं न रोहति॥ १२-३२५-९२

vaktavye tu yadā vaktā śrotāramavamanyate  
svārthamāha parārtham tattadā vākyaṃ na rohati॥ 12-325-92

“A sentence will not mean anything, if they are solely driven by the speaker’s self-interests and it ignores the interest of the listeners.”

[Listeners need to be respected for the communication to be effective.]

अथ यः स्वार्थमुत्सृज्य परार्थं प्राह मानवः।

विशङ्का जायते तस्मिन्वाक्यं तदपि दोषवत्॥ १२-३२५-९३

atha yaḥ svārthamutsrjya parārtham prāha mānavaḥ  
viśankā jāyate tasminvākyaṃ tadapi doṣavat॥ 12-325-93

“However, if the sentences convey only what the listeners want to hear, the sentences won’t be trusted either.”

यस्तु वक्ता द्वयोरर्थमविरुद्धं प्रभाषते।

श्रोतुश्चैवात्मनश्चैव स वक्ता नेतरो नृप॥ १२-३२५-९४

yastu vaktā dvayorarthamaviruddham prabhāṣate  
śrotuścaivātmanaścaiva sa vaktā netaro nṛpa

“Hence, the narrator is a true speaker (vaktā), if the sentences align with the interests of both the speaker and the listeners.”

The balance between self-interest and interest of the listeners has to be achieved for proper communication.

### Conclusion

Established rules and protocols for Vāda and Samvāda, governing debates and discussions, have been evident since ancient times, as evidenced by the extensive body of ancient literature in both oral and written forms. Maintaining decorum in meetings and discussions is crucial for civilized communication and positive outcome. In the modern era, it is common to see instances where individuals have taken liberties with language, be it on social media or television channels. One has to remember that language

2. The communication fallacy is due to the speaker’s attitude are clubbed as buddhidūṣaṇaiḥ.

is a gift to humans and should be used as a tool for the development of the world.

Meetings become effective when participants adhere to ethics in their communication and actions. When members derail meetings through cacophony, they not only impact the outcomes but also cause a loss of precious person-hours. As a society, we need to introspect to see how any meeting of minds could be made more fruitful. As this essay shows, our ancient texts can be a source for us to study and get insights on how to improve our behavior in social interactions.

Today, the world has moved towards remote participation, with meetings conducted over electronic waves. Meetings are becoming mechanical and recorded as well. So it is

imperative that people follow the meeting decorum, and ethical communication, avoiding the various structural and attitudinal flaws to have productive meetings.

### References:

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5. *Khaṇḍana-khaṇḍa-khādyam - Śriharsa - 11-12 CE*

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## MIND POWER

**In every small outer turbulence,  
When you respond peacefully and remain stable  
You are increasing your inner resilience.**

Sacrifice is greater than love, Character is greater than beauty, Humanity is greater than wealth, But nothing is greater than keeping relations alive.