

Ambassador's Mon Avis Challenge
16th Inter-School Debating Competition for Indian Schools in Muscat
Indian School DARSAIT
August 29, 2024

'The Argumentative Indian: Debating in the traditions of Bharat'

Remarks by Ambassador Amit Narang

***Members of Board of Directors of Indian Schools in Oman,
Members of Management Committees, Principals, Teachers, Parents, Students
Esteemed panel of judges
Participants,
Ladies and Gentlemen,***

Good Afternoon, Namaskar,

I am happy to participate in the 16th Edition of Ambassador's Challenge-2024 - now titled 'Mon Avis' - the Inter-School Debate Competition organized by the Board of Directors.

I thank the Management of Indian School, Darsait for hosting this year's function and for inviting me.

I extend my congratulations to all the students who have participated in this year's edition.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Public debates are one of the most enriching and challenging extra-curricular activities for children. They help build character, help in the development of logical reasoning, and also imbibe a spirit of open yet constructive management of different opinions. I am happy therefore that this debating competition is now a permanent fixture in the calendar of Indian Schools in Oman.

This is the 3rd consecutive Debating competition that I am attending, although I missed to witness the debates today due to conflicting engagements.

At the previous editions, I had requested that debating is not about polemics but the ability to respectfully - and logically - disagree.

I have argued therefore that our debating should be embellished with more वाद and less विवाद.

Dear Participants,

This tradition of debating has long been a part of Indian tradition and argumentation and public reasoning have been deeply rooted in Indian history and philosophy. This in turn has contributed to India's vibrant democratic processes and our dynamic intellectual landscape.

Dialectical arguments and debates – discovering what is true by considering opposites – have been an intrinsic, and a unique intellectual heritage of Bharat.

This land of wisdom and philosophy has always valued the art of intellectual discourse. Our ancient scriptures are full of examples of debates and argumentation.

In Bhagawad Gita, it is shown, quite tellingly, that one can engage in a debate even with God! In other words, even God's word is not final. It can be debated and logically questioned.

While Krishna argues for Arjuna to 'fare forward' without hesitation and without any expectation of the fruits of such action or consequences; Arjuna seems to think that 'faring well' is at least as important as 'faring forward'.

While Krishna's views carry the day - and rest is as they say history - the dialectical arguments and reasonable doubts of Arjuna are not to be cast aside lightly. He argues and argues well, but in the end accepts the wisdom of Krishna and fights the just fight.

The ancient Vedic tradition of 'Shastrarth or logical argumentation is our proud legacy, a unique element of Indian culture. In 'Shastrarth,' the conclusion is arrived through logical arguments between two scholarly participants.

In our Upanishads for example, there are stories of debates that were as worthy of admiration as waging wars and winning conquests.

What is more important, the tradition of debating in ancient India was not limited to men only. In fact, as Prof Amartya Sen has shown in his landmark book 'The Argumentative Indian', some of the most celebrated dialogues in ancient India involved women with the sharpest questionings often coming from women interlocutors.

The famous story from Brihadaranyaka Upanishad about the 'arguing combat' involving the legendary scholar Yajnavalkya, is more famous because of the daring questions asked by woman scholar Gargi who provides the sharpest edge to the intellectual discourse.

Dear Students,

Debates stimulate critical thinking and foster ability to formulate and articulate opinions. Debates provide a platform to express ideas, challenge perspectives, and influence others through logical arguments and persuasive communication.

I am sure that your participation today in this edition of Mon Avis, has enabled you enhance your analytical skills while researching and understanding various perspectives.

Mastering the art of debate is a skill which can be developed and honed.

There are many formulas available in contemporary literature on how to enhance the debating skills. I had spoken in this very Forum last year about the Sapta Swaras or the 7 Mantras of a good debate.

The most important thing to remember is that the purpose of the debate should not be victory at any cost. We must pursue the establishment of truth as logical conclusion to the debate rather than debating merely to score points.

It is not enough to state and hold on to an opinion; one must substantiate it with facts and well-structured reasoning.

There is no substitute to truth as truth only triumphs - Satyamev Jayate - and the purpose of whole exercise should be seeking out the truth, finding common ground and by doing so fostering understanding.

The purpose of debate is not to defeat an opponent but to arrive at a deeper understanding of the subject. A good debate is one which enables constructive engagement, where ideas are refined, and knowledge is expanded. It is an opportunity for collective growth.

As we seek to become good debaters therefore, you will do well to heed the words of Archbishop Desmond Tutu who said “Let us not raise our voices. Let us improve our arguments”

Thank you.

Jai Hind!