



The Sound of Silence

Significance of silence in this chaotic world

Warija Adiga*

Abstract

Sanskrit literature is a treasure trove of ancient wisdoms which continue to be pertinent even today. From time-immemorial, our ancient sages have been extolling the virtue of silence. “Mounam”, the Sanskrit word for “silence” derives from the word “Muni” as “Muneh idam - Mounamiti” (that which is pertaining to Muni). This shows how important silence was for the ancient rishis. However, in this age of fake news and social media, the signal to noise ratio has become very low, with truth and ethics getting lost in the din. In the following article, we let “silence” speak for itself. From the subhashitanis that silence quotes, discerning readers can easily understand the role of silence in ethics and management.

Shhh, my name is silence. “Tarkikas” (logicians) call me an “abhava padartha” or absence of sound (shabda), choosing to ignore me completely in their treatise. However, they have the audacity to give a lot of importance to “shabda” and include it in the list of methods for “pramana” (proofs). Life is not fair. For example, in one of the stories by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Sherlock Holmes, the famous detective, gives a clue to Watson for solving a murder. He suggests Watson to think why people did not hear the dog bark on the night of the murder. As Watson scratches his head in futility, Mr Holmes gives him the answer. He says, “My dear Watson, the dog knew the

intruder”. See I can be a clue to mysteries and I also provide the proofs or “pramana”. Thus, I dare say, even if it means going against my own true nature, there is always a lurking story behind me and please hear me out.

I am omnipresent, yet I get drowned in the hustle-bustle of the world. By embracing me, people become creative. They let their creativity do the talking without them having to abandon me. I am also a life-long companion of the deaf but unfortunately, they resent me.

I am a boon for yogis, and I am a bane for the incarcerated. Even if I am considered a

* Ms Warija Adiga is a software professional with a career spanning 20 years in Information Technology and also a Scholar in Sanskrit literature. Her work has enabled her to interact with people from different countries and varied backgrounds. After completing her MA Sanskrit (Karnataka Sanskrit University), she is now pursuing research in ancient history and culture, at Jain (Deemed-to-be) University, Bengaluru. She is also a regular contributor to Sanskrit magazines, such as Sambhashana Sandesha and Sanskrit Bhavitavyam. CAHC, Jain University, Bengaluru, E-mail: warija@gmail.com, Cell# 9845375460`

boon, yogis have to make their mind to accept me for their self-realisation or “tapas” to succeed. For this reason, in his treatise Yoga-sutra, Patanjali muni has listed several ways to tame the mind. Considering the aversion of the mind towards me, the poet Rajashekhar called it a drunken monkey, bitten by a scorpion, seeing ghosts everywhere in the following verse-

मर्कटस्य सुरापानं तन्मध्ये वृश्चिकदंशनम्।

नन्मध्ये भत्सचारो यद्वा भविष्यति।

markaṭasya surāpānam tanmashye vrścikadañśanam!
tanmadhye bhūtasañcāro yadvā kadvā bhaviṣyati

OK, let us not delve on the mind too much. But one finds me in places, where I should not be there. In the following verse on Nitishatakam, the sage Bhartrihari laments why he finds me, that omnipresent “Silence”, instead of any appreciation.

: बोद्धारो मत्सरग्रस्तः प्रभव स्मयदूषिताः।
अबोधोपहताश्वान्ये जीर्णमङ्गे सुभाषितम्।

boddhārō matsaragrastāḥ prabhava smayadūṣitāḥ।
abodhopahatāścānye jīrṇamaṅge subhāṣitam।

[Wise are consumed by jealousy, powerful are consumed by pride, ignorant cannot understand me, so all good things that I want to say, remain within myself].

However, a subhashit in Subhāṣitaratnabhāṇḍāgāram gives a reason for this behaviour un-categorically as follows

नागुणी गुणिनं गुणी गुणिषु मत्सरी।
गुणी च गुणरागी च विरलः सरलो जनः॥

nāguṇī guṇinam vetti guṇī guṇiṣu matsarī।
guṇī ca guṇarāgī ca virala: saralo jana:॥

[Those not having talent, cannot understand talent. Those with talents are envious of other

talented people. It is rare to find talented people, who like talent in others, in the world.]

Well, for whatever reason I end up not giving a person his/ her rightful dues, history is a witness to the fact that I indirectly resulted in atrocities on innocents. Case in point is that, when Kashmiri Pandits were driven out of their homes and there was a genocide in Kashmir against them, the people in power and media chose me over action, either because of indifference or because of fear. History can show many such instances, and I am too ashamed to talk about these here.

But that side of me, is very rare. I am appreciated and am useful in many places. People need to understand me better to reduce unnecessary tension and unhappiness. One poet rightly said in Nityaniti-

मौखर्यं लाघवकरं मौनमुन्नतिकारकम्।
मुखरं नूपुरं पादे कण्ठे हारो विराजते॥
-नित्यनीतिः

maukharyam lāghavakaram maunamunnatikārakam!
mukharam nūpuram pāde kaṇṭhe hāro virājate।

[Silence is more valuable than garrulity. The noisy anklet is worn on ankles and the silent chain is worn on the neck.]

Even in the corporate-world, one can see careers going down-hill for those who are garrulous. As they say, loose-lips sink ships. Silence is golden is a well-known phrase [I am blushing].

There is another example, breaking me resulted in getting the truth out as shown in this verse -

काकः कृष्णः पिकः कृष्णः को भेदः पिककाकयोः।
वसन्तसमये प्रात्ये काकः पिकः पिकः॥

kākah kṛṣṇah pikah kṛṣṇah ko bhedah pikakākayoḥi
vasantasamaye prāpte kākah kākah pikah pikah!

[Crows and cuckoos are both black and one cannot discern any difference between them. Only when it Vasanta season, it is clear the crow is a crow, and the cuckoo is a cuckoo.] Of course, they would have ditched me in Vasanta season for people to understand the truth.

No wonder, the sage Bhartrihari says, that I am a gift given by the almighty to dim-witted, to hide their ignorance in the following verse

स्वायत्तम एकान्तगुणं विधात्र विनिर्मितं छादनम अज्ञतायाः।
विशेषा अतः सर्वविदां समाजे विभूषणं मौनम्पण्डितानाम॥

svāyattam ekāntaguṇam vidhātṛ vinirmitam chādanam ajñatāyāḥ।
viśeṣā atah sarvavidām samāje vibhūṣaṇam maunampanḍitānām॥

I am considered a jewel on their crown.
The main reason the cat gets out of the bag is if they choose to ditch me. All wise in meeting, will think the “silent” person knows more than he/ she normally knows.

It is not just that, I am a jewel to not-so-bright people, but wise people are also advised to use me in some situations. A poet advises people –

कोलाहले काककुलस्य जाते विराजते कोकिलकूजितं किम।
परस्परं सम्वदतां खलानां मौनं विधेयं सुधीभिः।

kolāhale kākakulasya jāte virājate kokilakūjitat̄ kim!
parasparam̄ samvadatām̄ khalānām̄ maunam̄ vidheyam̄
satataṁ sudhībhīḥ॥

[When crows are cawing, will cuckoo chirp? When bad people argue, wise should always be silent.]

On the whole, I can be a treasure for all the people in the world, but they don’t realise the truth. They throw me away and land in trouble most of the time. Before, I go back to my own shell, I want to share an advice found in Manusmriti on how to use me effectively –

नपृष्ठः कस्यचिदब्रूयान् चान्यायेन पृच्छतः।
जानन्नपि हि मेधावी चडवल्लोकमाचरेत।

nāpr̄ṣṭah kasyacidbrūyānna cānyāyayena pr̄cchataḥ।
jānannapi hi medhāvī jaḍavallokamācaretaḥ।

[You need not answer a question not addressed to you or if it is an inappropriate question. At such times, a wise person may act like an ignorant person even if he knows the answer.]

Hothhon ko sì chuke to zamāne ne ye kahā
Ye chup si kyon lagi hai aji kuchh to boliye

[When I have sealed my mouth, the world told me. Why are you so quiet, please tell us something. From a famous Hindi song, sung by legendary Lata Mangeshkar.]

ॐ शान्तिः शान्तिः

Conclusion

In this monologue, we can see different shades of silence. While the importance of silence can never be over-emphasised, there are times, the same silence can cause irreparable harm. Silence, as well as its absence, steer the narratives in a society, drawing a line between what is ethical and what is not. When it is used by the powerful, it is a sign of strength and when others use it, it becomes a sign of weakness. The current world is full of influencers and leaders, who

sway people with their words and at times are conveniently silent on issues needing a voice. On the other hand, history can vouch for the fact that society has often regressed when sounds of fury drown the voice of reason. This is the ethical dilemma of societal silence. On a personal level, there are people who use silence to hurt others through passive aggression and there are some who show their anger by violent words.

Depending on the context, silence can be good, bad or ugly, a perpetual ethical dilemma. There are no golden rule to tell you when it is ethical to be silent, and when it is not, and classify with certainty under the above categories. I am sharing some scenarios, which may help you decide. Suppose a friend comes and tells you excitedly, she bought a pair of shoes for ₹ 1000 (in a non-refundable sale). She is mighty proud of her bargain. But you had got a similar set for ₹ 300 earlier. If you choose to keep quiet, it is an example of good silence. Telling her the price you got would have made her miserable without serving any purpose. Let us look into a typical management review scenario. Suppose you find a colleague misrepresenting data to the management, you have a choice to either

remain silent and let management figure it out, or you speak-up and risk antagonising your co-worker. If you have chosen silence here (may be to protect the cordial relationship at work), it is a bad-silence and ethically wrong. Ethical decisions require courage, and silence here is a cowardly act. In the same scenario, when you find your colleague committing a mistake and you deliberately keep quiet, hoping he gets punished, here is a silence in ugly form.

References

The verses (subhaśitani) quoted in the essay were from reading various texts. Readers interested in finding these and other verses can refer the following references. These are also available in in the internet:

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Be happy with the little you have.
There are some people with nothing
who still manage to smile.

'Less' is better than more. With too
much of what you do not need, it is
hard to find the things you do need.

The wisdom of Life consists in the
elimination of "Non-essentials".