

Into the Spirit of Debating

January 31, 2015 , by Kritika Lamsal

The first month of a new year is heralded by a zenith of new beginnings, resolutions and positive changes. Nepalese were expecting a dawn of a new era that could have probably been brought by the new constitution based on healthy negotiations on issues pertaining our nation. But veering off from the context, a demeaning act ensued. As the D-day loomed at the stroke of the deadline for the promulgation of constitution, the people's representatives were seen resorting to vandalism at the Constituent Assembly itself instead of voicing in opinions. The failure was evident one more time. While the vigilant eyes are quick to respond with anti-government chants, there are also people who just lean back and hope for better days in optimism. As the environment heated around the CA Hall in Baneshwor, few kilometres away, a group of young coaches were mentoring hundreds of high school students on the art of debating.



In the *All Kathmandu Debating Championship (AKDC)* that was organised by Interact District Council and **Debate Yatra**, the youngsters at the AITM hall in Hattiban were doing what our CA members have failed so far: a healthy dialogue. If the representatives are waging the war of force, the young generation of Kathmandu is growing an interest on the war of words.

Kathmandu valley has seen a rise in the emerging trend of debate culture amongst the youngsters with swift increase in the number of debaters, debate clubs and debate tournaments. Unlike the yesteryears, debate is no longer limited to an argument on 'A pen is mightier than the sword'. It has rather taken a form of a logical analysis, presentation and persuasion on pressing issues, as seen via the motion of the AKDC semi-finals: 'The Government of Nepal shouldn't take foreign aid'. The journey from the previous argument to the latter one couldn't have been easy.

After the semi-finals, DREAMS sat down with the panel of adjudicators of the tournament who are working not only for the success of this particular tournament but also in a collective expansion of the debate culture in general.

Why is debating essential?

Saurav: One thing that makes people happy is progress. Every time one debates, he/she not only hone the skills of expression or listening but also build perceptions through the information attained in the process. The most important thing that comes out of a single debate event is that we have hundreds of youngsters actually thinking, building perceptions and bouncing off ideas. The doers of tomorrow have to first be the thinkers of today.

Pradeep: When a person indulges in debating, as a debater or even as a spectator, there are ample of opportunities to grow into a better listener, rational thinker and expresser than before. As people are the human capital used in nation building, rational expressers through active citizenry will lead our country to better policies and implement mechanisms. Debaters aren't the followers of a herd jumping off a cliff. Due to the habit of challenging assumptions, a debater will never follow the illogical concepts without questioning it. Development of a nation doesn't have a hard and fast formula. However, the first step is to be able to collectively recognise the issues, acquire skills to express opinions on it and generate solutions for it. All this can be solely achieved by the practice of debate culture.



Saurav

Doesn't an argument lead to conflict?

Sandesh: This is entirely false. Debate creates solidarity not seclusion. During a debate, people work in a team fostering the sense of brotherhood and team work. In this age of individualism, debate actually brings like-minded people together who have a structured argument on a particular issue. As an unit, they bring new ideas, perspectives and facts on a single issue contributing to an all-round understanding of the debate topic. Regardless of the result, everyone has mutual respect for each other. If you observe our tournaments and trainings, only a single team wins but everyone celebrates equally. Plus, debate isn't a random argument but is a structured one which follows a format subsequently reducing rooms for personal insults and internalised conflicts.



Sandesh

What is the rationale behind practicing debates in a specific format? Is there just a single or multiple formats to debating?

Saurav: In Nepal, the acclaimed debate format is the Parliamentary Format with its multiple subdivisions, the most popular ones being World School's *Debating Championship Format (WSDC)* and *British Parliamentary Format (BP)*, the former one practiced by high school students and the latter by university level students. The reason behind the

popularity of the parliamentary format is its practice in the coveted *Annual Debate World Cup*, formally known as *World School's Debating Championship* for high school and university level. Apart from that, formats like *Lincoln-Douglas*, *Zero hour debating*, *Karl Popper* are used time and again.

During an argument, a person has an involuntary desire to gain significance, superiority and validation. The beauty of a format is that it fulfils these innate human needs in the most structured and constructive manner without letting it overshadow the actual logic of the speaker. It differentiates a debate from a dispute. A format structures the whole argument and acts as a ground to judge every other debater. The calibre of a debater is clearly reflected on his/her degree of adherence to the format as any argument without a format would just be a random verbal dispute.

How did it all start and how is it going now?

Pradeep: As per our knowledge, a small circle of students from *Chelsea College* including active youngsters like Sabin Gyawali, Kshitiz Raj Lohani and Abhinav Khanal started practicing Parliamentary form of debating in *Smart Club* after which they even organized the first *Chelsea Debate Fest*. This is where the spirit of debating was ignited but sadly didn't achieve expected momentum. Fortunately, Alliance for Social Dialogue, which works as a think tank in Nepal, bagged a project from an organisation Open Society Foundation, through which formal trainings were given by experts which produced the pioneer batch of debaters. Though many of those pioneers are not actively involved in the debate scene now, they have a huge hand behind promoting the culture and exposing the newer generation of debaters.



Pradeep

Samiksha: Debate is not a legacy because people who established the foundation have been passing down the vision to a new generation of debaters instead of branding themselves. In this panel, I am the one who has been practicing debate for the longest time but there are more knowledgeable debaters who mentored me but are no longer actively involved. Maybe few years down the line, our mentees will become potential leaders replacing our generation. With changing context, new generations of debate enthusiasts should replace the old ones in order to keep the growth, vibrancy and evolution alive. Every emerging debater has an equal stake on it. Debate is slowly taking form of a movement, not fueled by same old leaders but by ever changing successive generation, all sharing the same vision of extending the debate culture.



Samiksha

Has there been significant growth?

Kapil: I entered the debate scene two years ago as a naïve high school pass out who was unaware of the direction to choose in life. Back then, debate community was small with only a handful of debaters with limited platforms. Suddenly, we witnessed a spurge of events like *Mahakumbha*, *Tarkashala*, *Kathmandu Debates*, creating platforms for interested people like us which later highly contributed to the expansion of the debate community. Now, the handful has added up to thousands in number and the process continues with better results.

Prabin: Expansion of the debate culture becomes purely evident when we see the people whom we mentored grow into a coach for another participant within a few months. The circle of debaters is widening now, with new faces having new ideas.



Kapil

Bishesh: I clearly remember how I participated in *Mahakumbhapure* based on the confidence I had on my fluency without even a speck of interest in the actual debate. I entered the tournament as a disinterested participant and came out as an enthusiastic debater. The way I perceive things has totally changed. For instance, I was never a guy who cared about the environment but after the debate on the theme of Sustainable Environment, I actually have stopped littering. A year back, I could never picture myself the way I am now. The most exciting part is that there is more to experience in this community. So, yes apart from the growth in number, we can clearly identify the internal growth as well.

Pradeep: If we talk about the expansion of scope of debating, I am happy to declare that it is not just limited to academic spheres. Recently, a debate on climate change was organized with policy makers themselves as participants. Also, upon request, Debate Nepal Network trained the leaders of the political party 'Bibeksheel Nepali'. With baby steps, we are now taking the debate culture to the state level which, if successful, might be the turning point for the entire nation.



Bishesh

How is debate culture sustaining financially?

Sandesh: The rate of growth has increased but it isn't as sustainable as we needed it to be. With only a limited pool of aware investors, it is an arduous task to find sponsors for our events as they still don't see how debate could help them or their business. However, due to the growing trend of Corporate Social Responsibility in Nepal, more investors are keen to sponsor our events which is somehow sustaining the debate culture financially for now. Regardless, we still don't get an overwhelming number of sponsors but with the growth that we've seen in the last few months, our optimism level has spiked.

Samiksha: Apart from the funded national events, a lot of Nepalese debaters have been participating in funded international tournaments frequently. For instance, Sandesh and I represented Nepal in the *World School's Debate Championship* in Malaysia while Saurav, Kapil and Prabin represented Nepal in *NUJS Debate Tournament* in Kolkata. These sort of funded programs have been another advantage of being a part of the debate community.

In most parts of the conversation, it has been said that debate requires a person to express their opinions unabashedly. Does this imply that introverted people can never be a good debater?

Prabin: I am a breathing contradiction to that assumption. I grew up as a reserved kid who always spoke less in the private as well as public spheres. Despite having interest in public speaking, I could never gather up the courage to actually do it. However in debating, logic overweighs fluency due to which an introverted person won't be disadvantaged. Plus, introverts are usually good listeners which is a quality every good debater needs the most for coming up with logical content and retaliating the opponent's points. On top of that, note taking is allowed which can later be referred while putting forth their arguments. This reduces their chances of failing to deliver the content due to their nature. So, the nature of debate in no way hampers the chances of an introvert emerging as a good debater. As they go on expanding social horizons, building perspectives and acquiring more skills, their confidence increase simultaneously.



Prabin

Manoj: From being a debater, there are other ways in which one can engage in the debate culture. For instance, I am not an active debater but a regular observer of the debates which in itself is an opportunity to acquire more knowledge and stimulate cognitive skills. Also, if you want to go further and be a part of a debate team and still not speak up front, you could be a researcher who gathers all the information for helping the speakers come up with a better case.



Manoj

This active panel of debaters is a small group of representatives of the bigger debate community. With passion, they are thriving for the promotion of debate culture to bring change from the grassroots to the state levels. They are just at the starting point with the finish line out of sight. However, with the rate of growth seen within a few years, the debate

community has proven its calibre to enhance the quality of human capital in Nepal. With the establishment of each debate club, hosting of debate event and emergence of new debaters, the foundation of the culture is strengthening. If the culture of debate is able to develop its roots in our country, it might signal towards an end of the war of force and beginning of the war of words to gain consensus in nation building.

Samiksha Neupane has been actively debating for three years and takes debate as a powerful tool for improving one's cognitive skills. She represented Nepal in the *World Universities Debating Championship 2014* held in Malaysia.

Pradeep Ghimire, 21, loves being referred as a professional “guffadi” and is an advocate of debate for life and democracy. Co-founder/chair of Debate Network Nepal, Pradeep is working in various national and international debate related initiatives.

Bishesh Bajracharya is an 18-year old Business student at *Rato Bangala School* who is a proactive debater. He was the Event Convener of ‘*AKDC 2015*’.

Saurav Bhatta, 19, is the core member of *Debate Yatra* who is self-studying psychology and is interested in Public Speaking & Debating. Recently, he represented Nepal in *NUJS Debate Tournament* in Kolkata.

Prabin Basyal, 18, is a student of Chartered Accountancy. He is a debating enthusiast working in several debate projects and is an active debater of Nepal.

19 year old Debate Enthusiast, **Kapil Adhikari** recently completed his High School from *St. Xavier's College, Maitighar*. He was the winner of Kathmandu's Debate *Mahakumbha* and is looking forward to take his debating career to a whole new level in 2015.

Manoj Bohara, 20, Unlike others, he has acted as core organiser in debate tournaments instead of just being a participant. An energetic public speaker, Manoj has also been a part of the Core Coordination Team of *Smart Club*.

(by Kritika Lamsal for Dreams Magazine | Archived at <http://mydreamsmag.com/article/into-the-spirit-of-debating/>)