

This conversation happened as Neelam & I sat in front of a whizzing cooler, trying to get some relief from the hot and humid pressure cooker that Delhi had become in the first week of July.

Me: So. What do you think about the Uru Residency?

Neelam: What do you mean?

Me: I want to talk about our experience.

Neelam: We talked about it, didn't we?

Me: Yeah. But still. I thought I'd have a conversation about it again.

Neelam: Okay. What do you want to talk about?

Me: Well. You suggest.

Neelam: So many things happened. We went to a new place. Fort Kochi was an experience in itself. Now when I think about it, I feel like having lived for seven days in some sort of a surreal bubble. I get flashes of Kochi every now and then. Then, we spent time with new people. New characters. Those were seven intense days. So many things happened.

Me: You forgot the main reason we went there!

Neelam: What?

Me: *Philosophy*. It was supposed to be a monsoon residency in *Philosophy*!

Neelam: Oh. Of course.

Me: I wanted to talk about it.

Neelam: Ok. What about it?

Me: I am not sure if any philosophy happened in those seven days, save the talks that I delivered. I am distressed about that fact.

Neelam: That's arrogant. And conceited. But why should you be distressed about it?

Me: I am distressed because we came and sat together to do philosophy. But ended up doing none of it. It was more of a *monsoon residency* rather than a monsoon residency *in philosophy*.

Neelam: Well that would depend upon what you mean by Philosophy.

Me: Exactly.

Neelam: So. What do you think it means?

Me: That's kind of beside the point. There's a more important issue here.

Neelam: Enlighten me.

Me: The point is: whatever I or anyone else might actually mean by the word, *the word must have a meaning*.

Neelam: Of course. I agree.

Me: Thus, whatever we do in the name of Philosophy must be governed by whatever we accept the word 'philosophy' to mean.

Neelam: Obviously.

Me: Maybe. So, if doing philosophy involves doing some set of activities, say A, then doing anything which doesn't belong to the set A cannot be called philosophizing. Isn't it?

Neelam: I think I know what you are getting at.

Me: Well. My point is: everyone was pretty much doing their own thing. Disgracing discussions. Random talks without a focus or a direction. Then, there were the brute psychological effect of sitting in company of people you don't know: everyone projecting a version of themselves. People belonged to such different backgrounds, had such diverse agendas, and the discussions were so specialized that no single common strand seemed to unite them.

Neelam: That's the very point of a residency! It brings together people from diverse backgrounds. Possibly the very idea of a residency depends on the confidence that bringing together people from diverse backgrounds creates the right conditions for creativity, growth, and birth of new ideas.

Me: Possibly. I would not contest that assumption. But I wonder why they call it a monsoon residency *in philosophy*. They should call it a monsoon residency.

Neelam: What do you mean?

Me: Well. I told you earlier. Insofar as the word 'philosophy' is *meaningful*, doing philosophy means engaging in one set of actions and not engaging in some other actions. Irrespective of what philosophy *actually* means, the fact that everyone was doing something very different from each other shows that everyone did not engage in one common single thing. Maybe one of the many things that people did *was* philosophizing in which case we could say that among other things philosophizing *was one* of the activities at the residency. Nevertheless, it cannot be said to be a monsoon residency *in philosophy*. For it to be a monsoon residency in Philosophy, *everyone* should engage in one common thing, i.e. philosophy, for most of the time, if not all the time.

Neelam: You seem to be arguing about a trivial verbal matter. A mere change of name could put an end to any such verbal bickering. It's philosophically uninteresting to argue

about naming conventions. Let's bypass such verbal bickering to make way for a real disagreement, if there is one.

Me: That's simply bypassing a genuine argument by calling it names. Do you have a *real* response to what I am asking? Not mere abuses, but a real and solid argument.

Neelam: Okay. How's this for an argument: Your position depends on a few presupposition; and I am not sure if those presuppositions are true.

Me: That's more like it. What presuppositions?

Neelam: Firstly, you are assuming that words do have one single, coherent meaning. Maybe they don't. Maybe their meaning evolve. Maybe we can never find out meanings of words in language.

Me: Hmm.

Neelam: And that is a common thing for logicians to know. In your own MA thesis on Truth, you mentioned Tarski's celebrated result on the indefinability of Truth predicate for semantically closed natural languages. So it is indeed *possible* for words and concepts to be indefinable. Then, how can you assume – without an argument – that a single, coherent definition of philosophy can be found?

Me: Ok. I agree. Perhaps that *was* an unjustified presupposition.

Neelam: I take another objection to your view. Look. Even if it is possible to define words, it is not necessary that their definitions exist out there in the world like precious metals, chairs, or prime numbers do. Perhaps the definitions do not exist for someone to go and *discover*. Maybe this whole way of thinking is mistaken.

Me: What do you mean?

Neelam: Sometimes, we simply assume that correct answers to questions already exist in the world and apply ourselves to go and 'discover' those answers. Some people even live their lives that way. They assume that there are *correct* ways of leading their lives, one *right* manner to exploit their talents, and one *specific* manner which will make them happy. They take psychometric tests, they seek counsel of experts, and engage in lengthy calculations to find the right way of leading their lives. Maybe some domains of human life – perhaps science or mathematics – *do* have right, correct, and specific answers. Maybe exploring answers within these domains does warrant such approach, but not all domains do. Like Kierkegaard says, there are no *objective* answers to questions like '*how should I lead my life?*' Some questions require one to *create* solutions rather than *discover* them. Some questions have objective truths as their solutions. That's the domain of the sciences. Other questions have subjective truths as their solutions.

Me: I must interrupt your sermon to point out that you are being vague. I don't need a lecture on Kierkegaard. I need you to respond to the issue at hand.

Neelam: Ok. What was it that I was responding to?

Me: I contended that there must be some definition of philosophy; and that there must exist a set of actions that might be called *philosophizing*. You provided a criticism against my argument: that perhaps such definitions don't exist. And you were giving another.

Neelam: Yes. My second criticism. Listen. Just like the right manner of approaching questions like '*how ought I live my life?*' is not to go out trying to discover an answer, Similarly, maybe the right way to obtaining definition of philosophy, if it exists, is not to go out and *discover* it. Definitions are often established by original actions. The way to do philosophy is sometimes to *do something* first and call it philosophy.

Me: That's hardly satisfactory! How can we allow someone to do anything can call it philosophy? Allowing such stipulations would leads to absurd consequences!

Neelam: What absurd consequences?

Me: I could pick my nose and stipulate that it is philosophizing!

Neelam: That's absurd!

Me: My point exactly!

Neelam: No. I mean you can't make any such arbitrary stipulation. It must be backed up with an argument! There must be good reasons to *justify* such stipulation.

Me: Of course. I was wondering what reasons might justify the stipulation of whatever happened in the residency as philosophy.

Neelam: Look. You are extending the argument to a point to which I did not intend to. I am making the limited point that calling something by a name does not necessitate that the speaker knows the requirements or criteria for anything to be called by that name. Calling something by a name may be an original act; as it happens when we baptize a child.

Me: And my point is that this argument does not apply in this context.

Neelam: How so?

Me: If we have new things, we can assign them new names. But coming up with new names for things that already have a name would only create more confusion. When we give a new name to a newborn child, we perform a service to the child and to the community. That child will be recognized by his or her name. But when we begin already existing individuals with new names, or begin calling individuals with a name that is not their own, we will only end up creating confusion.

Neelam: What do you mean?

Me: Philosophy is not something that was *born* at the residency. The discipline already exists and has a history, a character, and a flavour. So insofar as we are using the word, we ought to retain that history, a character, and that flavour. And if we think that what we did at the residency is something altogether different and new, we ought to come up with a new name for that thing, and not use the name philosophy. If we use the name 'philosophy' for what we did at the residency, we will be guilty of appropriating a name. So, the justification that you provide does not hold.

Neelam: Hmm

Me: Infact, now when I think about it, I realise that allowing the use of any name for anything would make language impossible. The appeal of language lies precisely in its ability to individuate specific things by the use of specific symbols. Allowing any symbol to be used for a specific thing or allowing anything to be designated by a specific symbol is tantamount to destroying a language.

Neelam: I agree.

Me: And in that I have a response to your first criticism too. Philosophy does have a definition. It is not any other word from natural language. It is an artificial, technical word coined by a particular individual in a particular context. We can choose to do new things and call them by new names. But insofar as we wish to use the word philosophy, we ought to use it for things that it designates. We ought to investigate history and *discover* the original extension of the term. In fact, I made an argument in the residency that the very point of a philosopher is to find the correct extension of a term. Philosophy is an attempt to call things by their right names. And if it sounds like useless hair-splitting or verbal bickering, maybe philosophy is hair-splitting and verbal bickering.

Neelam: I have many things to agree with you here, and many things to disagree with. Don't you think that in coming up with any specific conception of what philosophy is, we will make *some* assumptions, presuppositions etc. And there is every bit of a possibility that we might be wrong in what we think philosophy is. No?

Me: I agree.

Neelam: Then how can you expect to impose one manner of philosophizing as the right manner? Why should everyone confirm to what you think is the right manner of philosophizing? And even if you have an argument for what you think is indeed the correct meaning of philosophizing, why should you be so insistent on your conceptions? You might be wrong.

Me: Of course. Mine is just an argument for what *could* count as philosophizing. But then, how does it bears on the subject that we are discussing?

Neelam: Well, if we are not sure about what philosophy is how can we stop anyone from pursuing something that one thinks is philosophizing and calling it philosophy?

Me: Now you are taking it too far. Is it really so difficult? Even a basic education in philosophy is enough to train a person in the mannerisms and etiquettes of philosophy. Insofar as we claim to do philosophy, we ought to at least keep the aims and structure of our arguments clear. Incessant speaking, merely regurgitating what one already knows, or constantly digressing is not philosophy.

Neelam: And you think this didn't happen in the residency?

Me: Yes. I think so.

Neelam: So we are equally guilty.

Me: Why should you want to be so politically correct? I made best efforts to make sure that I was understood. I know my discipline, and I know the mannerisms and etiquettes of my discipline.

Neelam: I wasn't being politically correct. Remember we discussed how we talked about the residency being a mimesis of life itself? The goods and bads of the residency are merely copies of the goods and bads that we meet in life. There are digressions in the real world, so were in the residency.

Me: My point is, if it were to be a mere copy, why call it a residency *in philosophy* and not simply a residency?

Neelam: And you need not to be so aggressive. I think you were being quite unphilosophical yourself. Your criticisms remind me of some points that you made during discussions in the residency. I found them infested with antinomies. I would like to discuss them with you.

Me: That's an ad-hominem. And I will love to discuss your objections. But that will be a conversation for some other day. I am myself grappling with some of those things.

Neelam: A conversation some other day we will have then.

Me: I am hungry. Shall we go to Hudson for a shake?

Neelam: Sure. Let's go.