

The Crisis of Obedience

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NIETZSCHE observed that obedience is a phenomenon noticeable everywhere. Nietzsche was right in that no organisation can sustain itself without obedience ; it is implicit in all organisational relationships but one may equally and rightly say that disobedience is found everywhere. When we look around and observe disobedience in politics, educational institutions, industries and other social organisations including families, a feeling of dispondency sets in. Have we reached a stage of crisis ? That, in a progressive society, there must be a proper mix of obedience—disobedience, hardly needs any elaboration, but it is the shift towards disobedience which causes concern to every thinking man.

The armed forces have to remain constantly alive to the problem of obedience as discipline is the backbone of its organisational structure. Certain philosophies may question the authoritative structure of our organisation and the nature of command and control, but on the practical plane Macaulay was right when he said—that no army has ever prospered under a debating society. In the systematic concept, events in one part will affect the other parts and the whole, and obviously, therefore, what is happening outside will have its impact on the armed forces. The armed forces have no control on social and political environment but that would hardly be an excuse good enough to remain reticent. There is a requirement, more than ever before, to preserve the organisational culture of the armed forces and prevent corrosion due to external influences.

In this article we will examine factors which have led to the present crisis of obedience, its psychology and remedial measures with reference to our situation.

Disobedience is byproduct of social development. The way our society has progressed, it is painfully apparent that disobedience will increase with material progress. The old order with its belief

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1. Friedrich Nietzsche—German Philosopher of 19th Century.
 2. Macaulay —A well-known historian.

in God, faith, acceptance, pre-destination, divine retribution, cleavage to customs and suppression of desires was decidedly more conducive to obedience. Often we say—"this is not how we should have progressed" and since we also say—"this is not how we should progress", let us remain content with facts as they are. The values, attitudes and socio-philosophy of modern life contains the seeds of disobedience. There are obvious flaws in the method of upbringing of children, system of education, family ties, philosophy of work and industrial morality. Let us briefly examine each aspect.

UPBRINGING OF CHILDREN

Unlike in the past the children have become the centre of attraction in the families. No wonder, our markets are flooded with children's garments, toys, books, games etc. We accept that maximum possible freedom should be given to children, nothing should curtail their liberty, and some go to the extent of advocating that the relationship between children and parents ought to be that of equals, like friends. So far so good, but how are our children, brought up in free atmosphere, going to accept various constraints and restrictions posed on adults in a society? The spirit of freedom entails defiance; it would be a folly to expect wisdom from young hearts, ability to differentiate between principles and practice, and nor can we expect from them patience and understanding. Much of our troubles in schools and colleges are due to youth being carried away by emotional philosophies such as that of Rousseau and Marx without realising the brute realities of life and human nature. Here there is no place for cool reasoning and matured judgement.

Certainly, we must not impose restrictions on the growth and development of children, that would be a retrograde step, but to grant free reign to the passionate impulses of youth is equally harmful. What is required is balance, but balance is a difficult proposition in life which is manifest in movements.

SYSTEM OF EDUCATION

Radhakrishnan rightly pointed out that education produces sceptics. Educated people lack faith, they believe in God and religion for convention and convenience, and doubt almost every thing. Little education, that dangerous thing, neither gives understanding nor wisdom. The situation perhaps would be different if people in a society are highly educated, devoted to learning but that is not possible for the majority. The masses have learnt only material facts and defiance to promote self-interest by misinterpreting liberty and freedom.

The situation is not very different even in respect of elite, the privileged class who have had the benefit of higher education. The modern higher education produces specialists. It is indeed our great ability to break the whole into parts and study each part in detail, but what about the synthetic process ie ability to place each part in the whole ? Here our specialists fail miserably. They disagree and disobey (with conviction), propagating their own theories without understanding the totality of the situation.

Mere education does not give wisdom nor should we expect it. As far as obedience and order is concerned, most of us will have to learn these from socio environment and philosophy. We had expected that education will improve environment, the fact is that it is polluting the environment as far as social order and obedience is concerned. This however, should not be construed as a plea to scrap education, but change in the system of education is definitely warranted. Let us leave this problem to the educationists, still unable to resolve the very first and fundamental question—what should be the aim of education ?

FAMILY

Confucius summed up the problem in one sentence, as only a philosopher can—‘if only people can learn to live happily in a family, no other code of morality is needed’. We will have to learn a great deal from Confucius. The family is a primary unit of the society. Here in a rudimentary form lies all the subtleties of obedience, such as—respect for elders, the principle of give and take, acceptance of unfortunate handicapped and the desirability of sacrifice in the interest of harmony. Unfortunately, we decided to break joint families into smallest possible units and found hostels to house the limited but cumbersome children. If we destroy the very foundation of obedience, surely we should not expect any spectacular results from our children.

WORK

The modern notion that all work is a contract is equally disruptive for obedience. Implicit in contract is disobedience in case of breach by either of the parties. We accept right to strike, collective bargaining and the principle of self-interest. Painfully absent is the principle of sacrifice and work for work's sake. Compare this modern attitude without ageold concept that work is Dharma and the difference would be obvious.

Contract is unavoidable in certain spheres, but their lurks a danger of its extension into other fields. And sure enough, it is extending even into close relationships such as between husband and wife, parents and children. No wonder, confrontation and disobedience is the order of the day.

RESPECT FOR AUTHORITY

Our age is noted for lack of respect to men in authority. The cry is against the competence and character of men in power and their privileges. It is accepted as a principle, and not without reason, that power will corrupt any one. But, obedience without respect is a difficult proposition.

It is true that no man including Avatars, Buddha or Christ was ever born with a halo nor could have acquired one in the life time. Halo, miracles, super-natural powers etc are follower-made features of greatness designed to elicit respect and obedience.

The modern views are not very wrong. No leader is ever so great as he is made out; it is only others who make him great to promote their self-interest. The concept of great man is equally down to earth. The great men are those who do their work well, look after the welfare of men and look after their personal interests. These views, right as they are, are cold and cannot inspire and arouse public.

It does not need much of a common sense to explain that men who rise in any hierarchical structure do possess uncommon qualities, otherwise they simply cannot rise and this is so even after giving allowance to human weaknesses and faults in the selection system. Such men in authority must be respected. Privileges are not entirely without meaning ; time being fixed, all facilities must be extended to such men so that they can devote their time to official work.

But, the pendulum has swung. There was a time when men in power blatantly abused authority; today despite all their show of simplicity, honesty and integrity—no one bothers.

Meanwhile, the function of administration in our complex society is becoming difficult day by day requiring exceptional grasp and competence. Those in authority do possess such qualities but the common man fails to realise because he is never confronted with such problems. Society is influenced by slogans and the slogan of the day is down with authority.

INDUSTRIAL MORALITY

Morality changes with age. From hunting and food gathering, we passed on to the agricultural and are now in the industrial age. India, however, displays a unique combination of industrial and agricultural morality.

Each age has distinctive features of morality. Typical features of agricultural code are hard work, thrift, peace, stable relationships, adherence to customs, rigid social structure, early marriages and innumerable children dear to God. The distinctive features of industrial code are specialisation, long years of training, fluid relationships, self interest, sexual promiscuity, search for new (however stupid) and avoidance of children who are verily a nuisance.

It should not be difficult to infer that agricultural morality is conducive to obedience whereas the industrial morality carries the seeds of discontent.

A scrutiny of above factors will explain why disobedience is increasing. It is byproduct of modernisation, which we will have to accept unless there is radical change in social value—attitude system.

Will the present trend of disobedience, in the long run, be beneficent to the society? If not, can we control it? Society generates forces of restoration and somehow equilibrium is reached, but the equilibrium is of dynamic kind and the direction of progress towards material comforts is fairly obvious. Revolts occur only when official machinery lacks competence and means to deal with expectations of people and mob fury. If progress in a society keeps pace with expectations of people, there should be no cause for disobedience, but that would be heavenly. Perhaps, the present phenomenon of disobedience is an aberration, a surface current without much of significance. A philosopher with his mind probing into the distant future, and a politician in power with his mind glued to the next election may say that present is not very material and better times are ahead. But the official class, lacking the clairvoyance of a philosopher and personal interest of a politician, has to face present problems. He needs to understand what individuals and groups obey and what they disobey.

PSYCHOLOGY OF OBEDIENCE

Serving in an organisation like ours, we have to watch the forces of disobedience generating within the group and take timely

remedial measures. We need to know two aspects; what is it that a man obeys? What does a group obey?

Let me take the liberty of narrating what I obey.

I obey self interest. On a particular day I wear best set of uniforms, appear most cheerful and carry out wishes of my boss with an unusual exuberance. I wonder if my boss knows (perhaps he does) that at a suitable moment I am going to request him for leave, car advance or some such thing. Subordinates obey their bosses to further their own self-interest and bosses have meaning only as long as they are in chair, in a position to help.

I obey fear. There are times when my boss gets annoyed. Extra energy wells inside me and I set out getting the work done, not unfrequently distributing to subordinates the very dose of anger which I received. I am indeed very conscious of security of my job.

I obey needs. I am governed by needs—both physiological and psychological. I obey money because I cannot do without it; if only I have money it satisfies my other needs. I want to belong to my coworkers and earnestly strive to get their affection and love. I am sensitive about my self-respect. I obey to earn money, belonging and self respect.

I obey social codes, customs and conventions. Here I follow others; I do what they do. Frankly, I do not analyse each and every action of mine. The social codes, customs and conventions elicit from me automatic obedience. The socialisation process started with me from my birth and had continued for long years. Today, I am victim of habit—I recall Thorstien Veblen; habits are the driving force behind human actions and thought.

I obey personalities. There are superiors whom I admire. I like to emulate them. I obey whatever they say. Sometimes, their decisions are wrong. I know it, but even then I get carried away finding reasons to justify even wrong actions. I know I am prejudiced. Take the opposite case, sometimes I am reluctant to obey even the most legitimate and just orders of the bosses whom I do not like.

I obey ideals. There are times when I disregard self-interest, fear, money, social customs etc. In such moments I am either sublime or stupid.

There is one thing which I do not necessarily obey and that is orders and instructions. It is not that I take pleasure in flouting

orders, but I simply do not know the plethora of rules, regulations, orders and instructions. The way in which every organisation and association expects me to know all their rules and regulations is frustrating. And if this is my case, imagine the plight of our ordinary workers. I obey most of the orders because they appeal to simple commonsense. But you can trust my intelligence, I circumvent orders when I want to.

The problem of individual obedience is complex as no two individuals are same. Our drives, motives and experiences are different, but, luckily when it comes to groups, ideas get crystalized. It is comparatively easy to command groups because its sentiments are fairly well defined. No wonder, most of us who command groups fairly successfully fail to elicit obedience from our wives and children. In any organisation, it is individuals who pose problems; its severity depends on chairs occupied by them.

What does a group obey? This problem has occupied sociologists for quite some time and we must profit by their findings. A group is not an aggregate of individuals. Admittedly, there is no such thing as group mind, but the groups show distinct personality traits with its own likes, dislikes and sentiments. Groups differ from each other; they are very conscious of their entity, preservation and progress. Groups are more rigid and change-resistant compared to individuals.

A group can be sustained only on right lines. A band of robbers can be held together only by the towering personality of its leader. Such groups perennially face crisis of succession and sooner or later disintegrate.

Much depends on the attitude of officers for the maintenance of healthy climate within a group. Their attitude can ruin or promote healthy atmosphere. (See Table below). Cliques, rivalries and formation of subgroups foul life within a group. We must maintain healthy group-life to elicit obedience.

TABLE OF ATTITUDES

<i>Attitudes which ruin group life</i>	<i>Attitudes which promote healthy climate</i>
Hate	Sympathy
Dislike	Affection
Aversion	Trust
Distrust	Tenderness
Suspicion	Love
Spitefulness	Friendliness
Malice	Kindliness
Cruelty	Courtesy
	Helpfulness

Actions which conform to group sentiments such as welfare schemes, religious ceremonies, social functions etc. find ready obedience. But the function of leadership is not merely to follow group sentiments. Here the task of military leadership is indeed difficult. Leadership, according to Field Marshal Sir C. Slim, is projection of leader's personality to make a body of men do those very acts which they are not inclined to. Battlefield is a most challenging situation to elicit obedience from individuals or groups. Military leadership demands managerial ability plus something. The best we can do is to ensure that before the battle, groups are healthy, full of faith and confidence, and thereafter lead it from success to success.

OBEDIENCE CLIMATE IN INDIA

Much that has been written on factors creating crisis of obedience applies to Western countries rather than ours. However, the malady has taken roots and symptoms are visible. Will we follow the known Western model?

The obedience climate in our country is frankly good and in many respects enviable. It is due to factors such as cultural heritage, agricultural morality and economic conditions.

Here in our country, a socio philosophy was evolved which is most conducive to obedience climate. Tolerance, acceptance, non-violence, self-abnegation, respect for others etc. come to us naturally as a part of social heritage. We have preserved our culture but how long more? Will we crack under the impact of modern education, money-economy and industrialisation? MacIver, an eminent American sociologist thinks that cultural progress in a society takes place at a very slow pace. MacIver distinguishes between civilizational and cultural progress; in a society, civilizational progress pertaining to art and material facts takes place very rapidly but cultural progress pertaining to socio philosophy is very slow. There is ample evidence to show that we have progressed a great deal in matters of housing, material comforts, means of communication, transportation etc, but our values, attitudes and folk-ways have not altered much. One sincerely hopes, that we are able to maintain affiliation dominated philosophy which is most conducive for social harmony and obedience.

Earlier we had noted that agricultural morality is conducive to obedience climate. The west has completely switched on to industrial morality. Although we have started off fairly well with industrialisation, but we may never be able to completely switch to industrial morality. This is because of population distribution. Compare 80

percent of our population being in villages with America whose rural population is only 4 percent, Canada and Australia 2 percent and Europe 8—10 percent. It does appear ridiculous to accept two sets of code within the same country but that is how the Indian situation is. It would be prudent to accept industrial morality within the overall framework of agricultural code. The agricultural code has its drawbacks but it is more conducive to obedience climate.

Poverty makes people obedient. Gods are safe as long as mankind remains poor. Napoleon wondered how is it that poor don't get together and throttle the throats of rich ? Faith and religion provide glimpses of hope to the poor who are otherwise shackled in chains. Mankind has sufficiently exploited poverty and religion to exhort obedience and one sincerely hopes that the days of such exploitation are over.

Cultural heritage, agricultural code, poverty and religion are the factors which contribute to good obedience climate, but this should not mean that we remain complacent. The awakening amongst the masses can easily turn violent and overthrow the influence of cultural heritage, religion and the natural demands of agricultural code.

The old equilibrium was different where intellectuals (Brahmins) showed disregard for wealth and material possessions. the Kshatriya had meaning due to frequent wars and Vaishyas in any case did not enjoy social prestige. We are trying to reach a new equilibrium in the age of money economy and industrialisation. Till such time that we reach new equilibrium, we must not lose sight of dangers. These dangers can only be averted by population control and increase in production.

REMEDIAL MEASURES

We do not run any training courses for leadership alone, nor is it desirable to learn this art in isolation. In thousand and one ways, we are instructed in the art of gaining obedience—such as experience in command of troops, guidance from superiors, art of communication, professional knowledge, management, maintenance of proper code and conduct by officers and so on. Throughout our career, we learn the art of leadership in one way or the other. If only we understand the underlying spirit behind the scores of our daily activities rather than follow like a clog in the wheel, the organisation will be a great deal gainer.

In an article of this nature, it is not possible to dwell on each and every aspect. We will examine only two aspects ie need to understand and personal example.

NEED TO UNDERSTAND

Sociologists are right when they say that most of our problems are due to lamentable lack of understanding. We have to understand reasons for deterioration in the obedience climate. Frustration is least likely to solve any problem. Every age has its own problems and we must learn to face them squarely. Today, an officer has to learn many more details than his predecessor had to know. Authority cannot be exercised by mere rank and appointment. We need to understand psychology of obedience and improve human relations. We must adjust with time. There is no panacea to the problem of obedience; much depends on situational analysis. Leadership has no fixed ingredients; it is an art which changes with time and is highly individual.

The earlier parts of this paper were meant to develop understanding. Disobedience is one of the lamentable side-effects of modernization. Freedom, liberty and equality are terms which are not understood in correct perspective by an average man. It will take some time to restore equilibrium and till then we must show patience.

We distinguish one organisation from the other because of culture, and to be sure, the army has its own distinctive culture. A new entrant, very understandably, finds difficulty in adjusting to the new environment, but with the passage of time most of us adjust and learn to enjoy life under the new culture-pattern. Those who fail to adjust get weeded out in due course.

It is natural that people in one organisation compare their life with those in different organisation. Comparisons are very valid in certain spheres such as pay and emoluments, material comforts, retirement benefits and so on, but there can be no comparison in organisational culture. When it comes to code of conduct, discipline, conditions of work, officer-man relationship etc, there is no question of any comparison whatsoever. This is one aspect, which officers need to understand and explain to men. Understanding of organisational culture will certainly improve obedience climate.

PERSONAL EXAMPLE

It would appear trite to emphasise the importance of personal example. But look around! All over the world, the elite are busy in money making and sex. Philosophy knew it long before, man is addicted to women and property. There is nothing novel or new about our behaviour.

For a sermon, we don't have to look outside. Here is what Gita says—lower classes or castes emulate upper classes and castes. Men do what the officers do. In a situation, where officers concern themselves only with comforts, material possessions and amassing of wealth, one can hardly expect anything else from men. In material culture, the warfare can only mean furtherance of material self-interest ; it would pathetically lack ideals of maintenance of Dharma, social order and destruction of evils. Scriptures repeat and repeat the importance of sacrifice, which is hard to find.

There is something more which Gita has to add. Masses are always steeped in ignorance, darkness and lethargy. 'Pramad' is the word used in Sanskrit. But this should not be the reason to detest subordinates. We must understand the environment under which they are brought up and show sympathy. Magnanimity is an important attribute of leadership.

The most admirable feature of our organisation is narrow gap between the pay and emoluments of officers and men. This is how it should be and one must accept it with understanding and cheer. This does not mean indifference and disregard to the living conditions of officers, but a wide difference in the living conditions between officers and men will only ruin the obedience climate. The disruptive element in a society, according to sociologists, is not class or caste but economic disparity.

To preserve obedience climate, officers must set personal example. They must show respect and obey their seniors in the traditions of the armed forces. If only officers show personal example, men will follow suit. This does not mean that officers have to become conformists and 'yes men'. We have to avoid extreme situation ; take for example two cases. Case one—an order is passed and it is obeyed without stir or even raising of a voice. Such a situation would appear ideal from the point of view of authorities but it is full of dangers. It closes all the avenues of progress. Are we to assume that the order is so perfect that there are no different opinions ? Case two—order is passed, it is flouted openly and no action is taken. Drawbacks of such a state are fairly obvious. For progress, we must promote discussions, views and ideas. There must be differences of opinion at the planning stage, but once a decision is given there must be whole-hearted cooperation even if decisions appear wrong to certain individuals.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we have briefly examined the causes of disobedience in modern societies. Frankly speaking, there is a little hope for improvement unless there is a radical change in social, economic and political situation.

In the army, we are most concerned about the problem of disobedience. The culture and philosophy of our organisation is different but it is essential and inextricably linked with goal effectiveness. Our problem, then, is how to maintain our culture and philosophy in an environment which is none too conducive.

We certainly envy the past culture in which —

“Theirs not to reason why ;
Theirs but to do and die.

Or, where the soldiers too had

“Drunk delight of battle with their peers
Far on the ringing plains of windy Troy.”

We cannot go back to the past, but also we cannot accept the present as obedience is a functional requirement. The solution, then, lies in understanding the problem. The lead, as in other cases, has to be taken by officers. They must understand the culture and the philosophy of the organisation and explain to men. Equally they must demonstrate a high standard of personal example in obedience.