

The Plague of Passivity in India

A couple of weeks ago, I was reading Srikanta – an autobiographical novel by Saratchandra Chattopadhyay. Saratchandra was one of the greatest Indian novelists of the twentieth century who lived from 1876 to 1938. In the story, when Srikanta leaves for Burma, he witnesses insensitive treatment of women and children at the hands of the British. He feels sad about the act, but does not react. Instead, he curses the “*passivity ingrained in Hindus from time immemorial*.” I paused at this point, for a moment, to ponder over what he meant by this. I thought that since the British were powerful, Indians succumbed to their mistreatment and surrendered to the inevitable. However, I could not understand what he meant by *time immemorial* here. Why does he mention *Hindus* rather than Indians? I pondered that Hinduism, especially after Mahatma Gandhi’s practice and preaching of non-violence, and the fact that I heard that India has not attacked any other nation in the last 1000 years, should be considered peaceful, but not passive? Then, why does someone as thoughtful and observant as Saratchandra describe Hindus as being passive?!

Recently, a Professor from my University in the US, visited India. He traveled through Delhi, Agra, Jaipur and near by villages, and to Benares for about a fortnight. Then, he went to Hyderabad to attend a scientific conference. While he was at the conference, he wrote me an email saying that India is quite different from any other country that he has visited before. He was glad that he had decided to go on this trip.

I am a proud Indian. My pride knows no bounds whenever someone speaks good about India. I came to US in 2001. Since then, every time that I’ve visited India, I am pleasantly amused to watch India develop. Therefore, when my Professor wrote me these lines, I became joyous that he found his visit fulfilling.

However, I was wrong. I had misinterpreted his words. When he came back, we talked at length. He explained that the trip was indeed different from any other he has ever had because it was the most challenging one. I was ready to accept that he would talk about the traffic in India or the lack of structure in the way things happen there. These things do not upset me that much, because I see they are changing fast. However, he was talking about something different. India drained him out of his energies. He felt Indians did not treat him as a human being. Wherever he went, there was someone trying to swindle and loot him. But still, the thing that angered him the most was not that Indians were trying to loot, but that the fellow Indians did not stop the offender, or object in anyway about what the other person was doing, even when they knew what was going on.

Let me narrate just two of many such unfortunate incidents here. First, he took a taxi to visit some village in the outskirts of Jaipur. On the way, he informed the taxi driver that he would want to buy some sweets with the intention of offering them to the children of the village. The taxi driver then took him to a local shop. Now, my Professor had already been in India for about a week. Therefore, when the shop owner asked for Rs. 500 for a packet of candies, he understood that the price was ridiculously high. How can Indian candy be costlier than candies in US when the labor is so much cheaper in India? When

he objected that this price seems too high, the owner declined to the fact. Thus, he did not buy the candies. On the way to the village, he asked the taxi driver about what he thought about the price. The taxi driver smiled at him and agreed that the shop owner was trying to make extra bucks from him. My Professor curiously questioned him about why did he not ask him to stop trying to loot him. Should he not be ashamed that some visitor gets such a treatment? It is not a way to greet people, or is that the way that it is in India? Why did he show such disgraceful *passivity* towards the incident when his own customer was being mistreated?

Second, he was standing in the line to check in to his local flight to Hyderabad. A couple comes along and tries to break into the line. Enough Indians notice this and do not react. My Professor lost his patience. He went to the couple and cordially asked them if they were in any hurry? Were they about to miss their flight? No! Then, why would they not like to join the line from where it begins? The person smiled, said that my Professor was right, and the couple moved to the end of the line. He wondered why no one else objected. Then my Professor questioned me – why are Indians passive about all such matters?

Now these incidents may look trifle to the readers. I have especially taken very insignificant looking incidents to show how deep passivity is embedded in us. I have enough incidents that my Professor shared with me that I could elaborate upon. For example, our passivity towards people breaking traffic rules and getting away by bribing the police, police accepting bribes, people spitting chewed beetle in public places, even places such as hospital walls or people shamelessly peeing into the holy Ganga on the Ghats of Benares, or walls of a restaurant, or any public place for that matter.

Here I want to focus only on passivity, so I am not even mentioning the numerous episodes when there was an attempt to swindle my Professor, for which he has personal grievances. However, his greater concern was the passivity of the Indians, which he initially thought was towards *others* alone, but was astonished to find it prevalent even when it affected them as well.

I could give excuses of poverty, population and uneducated Indians; however, I realized there is no excuse for self-degradation. We are Indians. We are from the land where Mahatma Gandhi set an example of how *not* to oblige that which is wrong. We are a democracy where people have the power to change. We are the proponents of Yoga, whose roots lie in principles of truthfulness, non-stealing, purity, endurance, self-study and self-discipline. We may have become passive from ages of oppressive tyranny, but now is the time to free ourselves.

I call upon all my fellow Indians to respect themselves, and respect India. Think of ourselves in a higher light. Generate pride and love towards our nation, and treat ourselves with great respect and dignity. Let us take some time to raise these questions, to feed the minds of our fellow friends, to ponder, and most important - to act. In as simple words as I can write - Freedom does not mean we are free to pee anywhere. Freedom means - to be free from disease, which in turn means NOT to pee anywhere.

Freedom means we choose to act. Thus, it means responsibility - an ability to generate able responses. Let us promise etiquette for ourselves, for our nation. Let us not be passive any more. Let us act.