

## So what was the problem again?

Article 1 is titled; “The plague of passivity in India.” What does this really mean? A *plague* suggests that it is a widespread *problem*. On the surface, passivity seems like a trivial trait, a harmless behavior that is shared by most humans to some extent or the other, and is especially shared by most Indians, myself included. So even if we agree that Indians are passive, why should passivity be considered a problem or a plague? This article looks into passivity and similar issues, elaborates on how these seemingly minor traits translate into bigger problems, and also briefly directs the reader on how we should go about addressing them.

Let me start by going over a simple instance of passivity that’s ingrained in most of us; We see a person take a bribe, but we don't do anything to stop it. A simple thing, that happens every day. Another instance, we see someone litter, but do little to stop the person, or prevent the person from doing it.

So when does this seemingly harmless individual trait, or behavior of ours, become a problem?

It becomes a problem when it is so deeply ingrained in our minds and so widely spread across society, that the system or government begins to reflect our individual trait or behavior.

It is a problem when you know, in your gut, that something is wrong, but you don’t react to it in any way but sheer silence.

It’s a serious problem when it becomes such a common aspect of our daily lives, that we don’t even see it as a problem!

It’s a serious problem because essentially, we as individuals, are the system; the government is simply a reflection of us. And hence, these traits that we find in ourselves, essentially translate to the traits that we find in our government!

We are passive when we see someone break the line at a local office or airport, the police man is passive when he sees someone break the law, the government is passive when they see a nation that needs their urgent help.

Statements such as “we are the system”, “the government is a reflection of us”, or similar statements are made so often that the significance of the statement is lost. And since the notion that *we are the system*, is one of the most fundamental issues around which all other arguments revolve, let me take a moment to elaborate on this critical fact with the help of a couple of examples.

As I write this, I think of all my friends who I studied with in school, and later in college—these same students are the future of our country. One of my friends might become a lawyer, another person a businessman, another will become a political leader, and perhaps another would become an IAS officer. Not too far into the future, most of our friends, would be the people running our government, our businesses or some other establishment, and essentially we are always part of the system. In fact, our elders, are already in those positions in our country.

Since the system is essentially made up of us individuals, simple traits that we display as individuals are eventually reflected in the system and sometimes even passed on to the next generation.

At this point, I couldn’t stress enough about how critical it is to realize that some of the fundamental problems (or behaviors) that affect our country stem from within us. You can take any (or

## **So what was the problem again?**

most) social behavior in our country today and you'll find that we are in our own way tainted (as individuals) by that same social problem, to some extent of the other.

Since this is such a critical issue, I'd like to put things in perspective with a realistic example.

I'll elaborate on the issue of discrimination with regard to justice. Very often, there are situations where the law is effectively and efficiently applied when the victim happens to be someone important. But when poor people in our country are victims of a similar fate, our government is a lot slower to react.

When this happens, most of us know that it isn't right, the media rightfully points this out and sometimes this is also turned into a big issue and the problem eventually is addressed.

But where does this attitude—that one person is more important than the other—stem from? Where does this attitude of discrimination arise? And what about the other factors such as corruption, or an unresponsive government, that usually go hand in hand with such an event? Our government? But I just said that the government is a reflection of us? We aren't passive when we see injustice, are we? Well....ok...but..... but we certainly don't discriminate between the poor and more important people in our society, do we?

How many of us give our domestic help the same respect we give our friends or colleagues at work? If you employ people at a firm, how many of you treat your domestic workers in the same way that you would treat an entry level employee at work?

After they have completed their duties for the day, and the dining table is free, how many of us would like our domestic help to eat on the same table as we do? Have we ever bothered to ask them if they would like to eat on a table at all? or are they resigned to the fact that they must sit on the floor? If they want to sit on the floor, have we bothered to give them a mat to sit on?

Isn't this discrimination?!

A more subtle example: How many of us have said, "Oh, I have so many comforts in India, I have a driver, a maid to clean my house for me, a cook to cook my food."

What do statements like that subtly imply??

Do they not imply a certain lack of empathy? We make them so casually, but do we ever stop to think about whether the person who cleans and cooks for us, actually has any other choice of profession? Do we know where they came from? and Why they might have migrated from where they have? Or do we consider this, but then brush it off, cause it makes us uncomfortable?

And what about their children? Some of us may see to it that their children go to school, but do we make sure that their children continue with their schooling beyond just the primary level? We all want our own children to have the best of education, so shouldn't we have similar dreams for the children of our domestic help? What about if their children come home and begin to play with our kids?

I was at a wedding recently, where the first (and only) adult, to take a domestic workers kid, and dance with her on the dance floor, happened to be a woman from Canada, a friend of the grooms. Yes, this young girl was hanging around the wedding ceremony all smiles, not working, but just enjoying the process, but why was it that it was only a woman from another country who was the first one to include her in every aspect of the festivities that were unfolding?

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These may seem less harmless on the individual level. Perhaps we are good people, and we talk to our domestic workers kindly. But on a deeper level, aren't we actually treating them differently? If not by any way else, then by simply being blind to their problems or fate?

Isn't this discrimination? It's more subtle perhaps, probably even nearly invisible, but we have to realize that these same attitudes translate into the system, translate to the government, and they seem a lot more unjust when they happen on such a large scale. The truth is, these attitudes are unjust and deplorable at every level.

Upon reading this, a lot of you may ask, "so what should we do?", "even if we try to treat our domestic workers as equals, they refuse", or, "if we treat them as equals, they won't work for us anymore, they become dishonest."

Well, this isn't the point I am making in this article, the point I am making is that there is a bottom line of respect, courtesy, empathy and concern that we must show any human being. And unfortunately, we have lowered that bottom line to unfortunate depths when it comes to our domestic help.

The point of this article is for us to realize that these seemingly inconsequential issues and attitudes (passivity to minor infractions, subtle discrimination, etc.) that harbor in our own minds, translate to some of the more visible and some of the biggest problems facing our country today. Issues and traits that we may not even recognize in ourselves, but we certainly recognize in our government.

So what can be done about this? Well, the answer is simple. Since the problems are so ingrained in ourselves, the change must start with us. We must think about these issues, our behaviors, and begin to change them right away, right now. It's harder to do in practice, but it has to be done. The change must begin with us, and eventually, it will permeate through society. A simple start will be to pause and think about the people who work for us, see what their problems might be, start to raise that bottom line that we have currently set for them. If we see other people ill treat or talk disrespectfully to our domestic help, we must take action and correct them. All of us must get socially involved; see how we can go about getting the underprivileged better jobs, if not for them, then for their kids. We must get our kids involved with similar activities, so even they are sensitive to the issues of the underprivileged. We must strive as individuals and as a society to reduce the number of people who would want to come into our homes and work for us.

There are millions of things we can and should do, the point is we have to start, and have to start now.

*Silent Change, February 6, 2007*

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