DOING THEIR DUTY

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Why do people obey orders even when it goes against their conscience?

Why do human beings kill other humans? Soldiers kill enemies and civilians with relative ease when commanded by authority. We see atrocities all over. In the Sikh carnage of 1984, the Babri Masjid episode, the Gujarat riots thousands of innocents lost their lives for no fault of theirs. Everyday we read of suicide bombers carrying out attacks on civilian targets in Afghanistan. Just last week 500 Naxalites in Orissa attacked a police post, looted the armoury and killed policemen. The 9/11 attack in America took the world by storm. The World's most powerful nation could not defend and shield itself from the attack by a handful of highly motivated people.

From 1933 to 1945 millions of innocent Jews were systematically slaughtered on command and shoved into gas chambers. These inhumane policies may have emerged in the mind of a single person - Hitler, but they could not have been implemented unless a large willing force was ready to obey orders. The German soldiers were brought up in the most rigorous code of obedience and in the name of obedience they assisted in the most hideous and large scale murders in the history of the world.

The Nazi extermination of European Jews is the most extreme instance of cruelty. Yet in lesser degree this type of thing is constantly recurring. Ordinary citizens are constantly ordered to destroy other people in the name of nation, religion, patriotism and language. People consider it their duty to obey orders. Thus obedience to authority, long praised as a virtue, becomes a heinous sin when used for a malevolent cause.

Conservatives argue that the very fabric of society would be threatened by disobedience. So, it is better to follow orders even if they are sometimes immoral. But humanists insist that the moral judgments of the individual must override authority when they are in conflict.

There have been strong for and against stands on human aggression. Are human beings innately cruel? May be aggression played a definitive role during the evolutionary period but does it help humanity in this global era? Many thinkers have argued strongly in favour of human "goodness". Human beings are products of their circumstances. Culprits, rogues, criminals are products of a debauched social system, and changed circumstances make "good" citizens. These philosophical arguments there have been few experiments which throw light on the nature of human aggression. One pioneering experiment was conducted in the early 60's and this is described below in detail.

In the early 1960's an experiment was carried out in Yale University. The experiment was simple. It was concerned with the effect of punishment on learning. Two people were involved - one a "teacher" the other a "learner". The "learner" was taken to a room,

seated on a chair, his arms strapped to prevent excess movement, and an electrode attached to his wrist. He was told that he was to learn a list of pair words.

If the "learner" gave a wrong answer, the "teacher" was expected to punish by administering an electric shock. The "teacher" could increase the intensity of the shock from 15-volts to 450-volts. The point of the experiment was to see how far a person would proceed in a concrete and measurable situation in which he was ordered to inflict increasing pain on a protesting victim. At what point would the subject refuse to obey the experimenter.

When the "learner" received a shock of 75-volts he grunted. At 120-volts he complained verbally. At 150-volts he demanded to be released from the experiment. His protests continued as the shocks escalated, growing increasingly vehement and emotional. At 285-volts his responses could only be described as an agonized scream.

Many "teachers" kept giving increasingly large shocks despite the pleadings of the "learner" to be released. The experiment was tried with a 1000 different "teachers". Almost 700 gave shocks to the "learners". In fact the "teacher" in the experiment was a genuinely naïve subject. He just came to the laboratory as a participant. The "learner" was a professional actor who actually receives no shock at all. The victim just feigned the shocks.

The experiment was conducted scientifically. The students in the Yale University would have been easiest to get as "subjects" or "teachers". But there was a chance that some of them had heard about the experiment. It appeared better to draw subjects from the wider society – a larger source. To recruit subjects an advertisement was placed in the local newspaper. It called for people of all occupations to take part in this study of memory and learning. It offered a small compensation for travel. Typical subjects who participated in the study were postal clerks, high school teachers, salesmen, engineers and labourers.

How does one explain this behaviour?

Many "teachers" administered shocks to the victims at the severest level. Were they all monsters? Did they represent the sadistic fringe of society? Almost two-thirds of the participants fell into the category of "obedient" subjects – they went on administering greater electric shocks. But they were all ordinary people drawn from various sections of society. How does one make sense of it? Is aggression and violence innate to human nature? Did it play a key role during evolution? Have religious tenets and teachings made any difference to human aggression?

The question arises as to whether there is any connection between what we have studied in the laboratory and the manifestation of violence in Nazi camps and communal carnage. The difference in the two situations may be enormous but the essential features remain intact. The essence of obedience consists in the fact that a person comes to view himself as the instrument for carrying out another person's wishes, and therefore he no more

regards himself responsible for his actions. After this critical shift of viewpoint a persons starts obeying almost blindly. The essence of obedience lies in a person giving himself over to authority and no longer reflecting and holding himself responsible for the cause of his own actions.

The most fundamental finding of the study: ordinary people simply doing their jobs, and without any particular hostility on their part, could become agents in a terribly destructive process, and relatively few people have the resources to resist authority. Americans bombing Vietnamese children said they "did it for a noble cause." The terrorists who kill innocent people in the name of religion, nation, and patriotism offer the same plea.

George Orwell caught the essence of the situation:
"As I write, highly civilized people are flying overhead, trying to kill me. They do not feel any enmity against me as an individual, nor I against them. They are only 'doing their duty' as the saying goes. Most of them, I have no doubt are kind-hearted, law abiding men who would never dream of committing murder in private life. On the other hand, if one of them succeeds in blowing me to pieces, with a well placed bomb, he will never sleep the worse for it."

The above experiment is a reflection of the uncritical ways we school our children. Most schools have a prayer – which essentially coaxes children to submit to the power of the Almighty, teachers and the parents. Later the Nation State builds upon this edifice of chauvinism, patriotism and recruits, conscript young people into the army to fight a "global war on terror".