



SHORT STORY
DINANATH MANOHAR

SANSKAR

“MADAM, I am Londhe.”

“Please come in”, said Vandana, rising from her chair, “I was waiting for you. I was beginning to think you would not turn up today. Well, let’s get to work.” As she gathered up the papers from the table and put them in the tray, she glanced at the youth. He was slightly built and had an innocent face. She noticed the volume of poems in his hand. Pleased, she thought he must certainly be emotional and sensitive.

Proceeding to the inner room, she beckoned to a woman sitting nearby, and

said : “Come along, Smita, let us get it over with, fast. We are behind schedule today.” She passed through the room and reached the inner cell. In the room stood a table and two chairs but there was only one chair in the cell. Vandana seated Smita in this chair and began to secure around Smita’s chest one of the belts that hung behind the chair. She kept up a continuous flow of talk : “There is no cause for fear, Smita. I will take complete care of you. You will not be harmed at all. But please do not try to get off the chair.”

Still talking, Vandana fitted another belt around Smita’s waist and a third round her feet. Smita’s wrists were tied to the arms of the chair. Pressing a button behind the chair, Vandana said; “Now the speaker is on. Now we will be able to hear every breath you take.” Then she beckoned to Londhe and drew his attention to the rear of the chair. The chair was made of metal and had two wires attached to it. Ignoring” Londhe’s questioning look, Vandana patted Smita’s shoulder and left the cell.

As she closed the heavy door of the

cell, she remarked to Londhe : “The cell becomes completely soundproof as soon as this door is closed. No sound can penetrate inside nor can any sound emanate from within. Of course, we can hear sounds through the speaker connected to the mike on the chair.”

She took him up to a machine in the outer room. The machine looked rather ordinary. It consisted of a voltmeter fixed to a broad panel with a row of small red and yellow bulbs beneath it. On the right hand was a speaker from which a humming sound could be heard.

“Please sit down on the chair, Mr Londhe. Please move the handle on the right side forward and backward.”

Londhe sat down and pushed the lever forward.

“Your principal must have given you all the necessary information but I would like to go over it once more. This institute undertakes psychological research. We usually take the help of students of your college in our experiments. Not that we have any shortage of people here. But we feel that if we involve young people in our work, they may get attracted to the idea of this kind of research. Some students have been involved in this particular experiment too. We are going to take a total of 100 samples. You must have read in the newspaper recently about a young man in Europe who is able to allow electricity to flow through his body. He uses his body as a conductor, like a wire, and can even light up bulbs that way. He is now planning to sit in the electrocution chair in the States. In India, too, there are some people who can bear a flow of 250 to 300 volts through their bodies. To what extent can the human body bear the flow of electricity? How can this immunity be increased? We are researching these and related questions.

“This is a simply built machine. When you press the lever forward, for instance, up to 20 volts, the metre reads 20, and these two bulbs light up. The chair will begin to transmit 20 volts of electricity. The flow will continue for a

few seconds and will stop automatically when the circuit breaks. You will increase the voltage gradually. I am sitting right here and looking into the cell through the observation window. I will also be attending to the instruments that measure the reactions of the person in the metal chair. Let us begin now. If you have any questions, please ask me. I cannot leave my chair but I will definitely answer your questions. And one



important point. When electricity flows through the body, it does hurt, of course, but mental fear is the more important factor. It is this fear which creates mental tension. If the experiment goes on too long, the brain may become paralysed. So it is essential that the time interval between two shocks be minimised. If the flow gets disturbed, please push the handle forward.”

Still talking, Vandana reached her chair, picked up the mike that was attached to the panel on the wall and spoke into it : “Well, Smita Didi, shall we begin ?”

“Yes, I am ready”, came the reply from the speaker, Londhe’s, face grew grave. Fear, curiosity, eagerness, a thrill. “Please begin : the experiment’?”, Vandana said to him, “Let us start at 50 volts.” She pressed a button somewhere, and two green bulbs on Londhe’s panel lit up. Londhe pushed the handle forward to 50, the needle on the metre showed 50, five small red bulbs lit up. “Oh, Oh”, a cry or mingled surprise and pain came from the speaker.

After a few seconds, the needle

returned to zero. The five bulbs remained lighted. “Take it to 60”, came Vandana’s voice. Londhe moved the lever forward. The needle shook, A scream rent the air. “Don’t pause too long in between, Londhe”, instructed Vandana.

She was seated at a panel which had several metres on it. Through a nearby window, she could look into the inner room. But Vandana’s attention was not directed towards the metres or towards the window. She was looking at Londhe. She was closely observing him, the movements of his fingers, the expression on his face.

The handle moved forward. The number of illuminated small bulbs kept on increasing. 70, 80, 90, 100—with each jolt, the reaction audible on the speaker grew more intense. A scream, a sign of relief then sudden whimpers, suffocated gasps for breath, another scream.

When the needle reached 120, Smita screamed loudly and tried to jerk herself out of the chair. “Enough, stop it now”, she pleaded with trembling lips. Beads of perspiration shone on Londhe’s brow. Now 12 bulbs glowed in front of him, while sobs resounded in his ears. In a trembling voice he asked : “Madam ?”

“Don’t worry. I am observing, the process. You are to keep increasing the flow. Just see that you don’t waste time in between. That increases the mental tension. I am right here. Even if anything were to happen, I would be responsible”, said Vandana, taking, on all the accountability.

The handle moved forward — 130, 140. Screams, sobs, the breathing, like a sledgehammer, continued to issue from the speaker. There was no pause. The intensity of the sounds kept growing.

And Vandana was growing more and more restless. This Londhe too had turned out the same way. Despite his innocent face, his interest in poetry—Oh damn—holding herself in check, she watched his movements, the grasp of his hands, the pause between two brakes, the changing expression on his taut face. She wanted to study all this in a calm, detached manner. But she found

her mind running away from her.

A despair seemed to descend on her mind and carry her away. Something was wrong, someone had blundered. Up to the fourteenth person, that Joshi, everything had proceeded in an orderly fashion, the reactions of the men and women seemed normal, but after that, 'everything had turned out in an unexpected way.

Hearing a shriek that rent the heart, Vandana came back with a start. She looked at the metre—240!

"Mr Londhe, stop!" she shouted. She had noticed one more fact. After 150 volts, Londhe continued to increase the electric pressure. He did not hesitate at all or look towards Vandana for her permission or her moral support. The first 13 men and women had reacted in a different way. They had again and again sought her permission and support. The eighth person had flatly refused to increase the pressure beyond 150 volts, and had said: "Madam, I'm sorry. I just can't listen to these sobs and shrieks any longer."

Vandana approached Londhe. He looked exhausted and was lying limp in his chair. His brow was damp with sweat and he was gazing in curiosity at the panel before him.

"Mr Londhe, let us go now. You have had a lot of trouble. Thank you very much for your assistance. If we need you again, we will inform you." Londhe stood up. He looked quite perplexed. Vandana went with him to the door and then returned. Drawing a deep breath, she attempted to regain her physical and mental equilibrium. What was happening? She was unable to understand it.

She reminded herself: "Vandana, you are a scientist. The experiment is not yet completed. Only 33 out of a 100 persons have been tested. But it is certain that something is wrong with the methodology of this experiment. One 'kind of reaction up to 13 and a completely opposite reaction after. 13—how is that possible? Why is this happening? All the women and men up

to the thirteenth were sensitive sympathetic, but after that, all were selfish, cruel, mindlessly obeying orders like so many puppets. This is impossible. The problem lies not in these men and women but in the methodology of my experiment."

Picking up her purse, Vandana strode out. Ignoring the gateman's salute, she walked out of the institute towards the highway instead of the station. She wanted to walk in the open air and calm her mind.

The whole affair had started a couple of months earlier, when one of Vandana's psychologist colleagues showed her an article on psychotherapy published in a journal. The article presented the results of an experiment conducted by an American psychologist. The experiment was similar to the one now being conducted by Vandana. The men and women who assisted in the experiment were actually its guinea pigs. The psychologist's attention was focused on the man or woman who sat in the chair, moving the lever and inflicting torture on another person.

The psychologist tried the experiment on 100 men and women from different strata of American society and came to a fearful conclusion. If a senior authority is prepared to take the responsibility, people are usually ready to inflict any amount of torture on another

person. As long as someone else is going to take the blame, they are ready to go to any lengths in cruelty. People are so habituated to taking orders from superior authorities that they do not hesitate to commit inhuman actions if they are ordered to do so.

Dr Qureshi had commented on the article: "Look, Vandana, this is what the world is. Authoritarianism and servility to authority is in the human bloodstream. Human beings know only two ways of life—to show their power and to bow before another's power."

Vandana took the journal from his hand and went through it again. Then she put it aside and said: "Dr Qureshi, I do not agree with the conclusions drawn by this psychologist nor do I think you are right in what you say. Not that I doubt the authenticity of the facts given here or of the data collection. It is only the conclusions that I take objection to."

Dr Qureshi looked up from his book. Taking off his spectacles, he looked straight at her, as was his habit. After thinking for a short while, Vandana continued: "First of all, it is not necessary that these conclusions will prove true of all human beings. They may show something about an average person in American society. It would not be proper to generalise about the truth of this with regard to a European or an Asian."

Dr Qureshi motioned to Vandana to keep talking. By now, several other colleagues had gathered around to listen.

"I don't think this experiment proves that an average person is authoritarian or servile to authority. Rather, it shows the innate cruelty and inhumanity of an American. The person sitting before you is writhing in agony and is in mortal danger, yet you are ready to increase the pressure—this shows the extreme selfcentredness and inhumanity of an American. People in American society are not in the habit of considering others fully human. That is all that this experiment proves, as far as I can see. If we want to measure the tendency to



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obey orders, we will have to keep several other factors in mind. For instance, if someone else is giving orders and is ready to take responsibility, will an average person be able to inflict torture on himself or herself?"

Dr Qureshi considered this. Then he replaced his spectacles on his nose and said : "Vandana, your second point is worth thinking about. The tendency to obey orders alone cannot be the cause of such a reaction. There must be several other factors involved. But please clarify your first point."

"Instead of comparing Europe and America, we should talk of the average Indian. An Indian will never show the kind of cruelty and inhumanity that an average American shows in the experiment. And, Doctor, the reason is the difference in the social system of the two countries. The family system has broken down completely in America but it is still fairly strong in India. Here, everyone is taught from childhood that the individual is not all-important ; the other members of the family are important too. Very often, it is considered more ethical, more worthwhile, to control or even deny one's own wishes, aspirations, ambitions, for the sake of the other members of the family. An Indian is conditioned to believe that happiness lies in living for others. On the other hand, in America you are taught to live and let live. You are taught to compete with others, fight with them. You are expected to use others, to guard your own interests, to seize every opportunity of pushing others back and going forward yourself. The American person's growth is not self development but development in comparison to others. An Indian personality develops with a consciousness of the limits of the individual. The American personality moves forward, viewing limiting factors in society as forces opposed to itself."

Dr Qureshi raised a hand to stop Vandana. Vandana saw her colleagues' eyes fixed on, her with curiosity and surprise. Dr Qureshi began to speak in a low voice.

"Vandana, I know your background, otherwise I would say that this is the false arrogance of a frog in a well who has not seen the outside world. But I know that you were born and brought up in the west. I also know that you are a real scientist, I congratulate you on your having viewed American society with the detachment of an intellectual. Yet what you say makes me wonder whether right now you are not inspired by an anti American prejudice. I would not like to term it Indian chauvinism but..."

The discussion continued for quite some time. The other colleagues tended to agree with Vandana. A strange tension grew up between Dr Qureshi and Vandana. Finally, Vandana told Dr Qureshi that she would prove her contention by conducting an experiment and she began her preparations.

It was difficult to get the project funded by the institute. When Vandana declared her willingness to finance the experiment herself, Dr Qureshi went to the director and got permission for her to use the institute's apparatus. Her other colleagues too helped her a lot. Smita, Shende, Dharap, all lent a hand. The electrician and fitter had to help too. And all this had to be done along with her regular work. But Vandana could think of nothing else but this.

Observing the intensity of her pace, Dr Qureshi had one day tried to caution her : "Vandana, I think it would be best for you to postpone this experiment for a while. You are getting too involved with it. We conduct experiments to discover the truth. Not to prove that what we think is true must really be true. It is not desirable to lose one's mental equilibrium and detachment. Don't you think you are becoming too emotional over this ?"

Vandana did not reply. She knew he was right, to a certain extent. But she wanted to prove to him how great is the role played by conditioning in moulding the personality. True, all human beings share, a common humanity, but each of them also grows up in a specific family, under specific social, cultural and historical conditions.

The individual is part of society

Every individual has an autonomous character but there is such a thing as national character, too. Had she not experienced this when living in London, a city inhabited by people of many nationalities ?" Had not her father spent his life alone in a foreign land, on the strength of this belief?

She went about her preparations with speed. By telling the subjects, of the experiment that she was interested in the effects of electricity she took every precaution to ensure that they did not suspect what she was after. She rehearsed Smita, Shende and Dharap repeatedly in the art of sobbing, screaming and crying. Then she taped the sounds, on several cassettes. As the handle was moved forward, the intensity of the sounds increased on the taperecorder. Vandana had worked* night and day to ensure that no loophole remained in her experiment, yet, today, she was confronted with this problem, this question.

The first 13 persons had reacted in the way she had expected. The eighth person had refused to go beyond 150 volts. The twelfth person, Alka Pawar, had reproved! her saying : "What can you achieve by such a third rate experiment ? What do you mean by inflicting: such pain on someone for no reason at all ?" There were differences between the reactions of each of the 13 persons, but it was clear that the Indian mind is more humane and social than is the American mind. But then came the fourteenth, that Joshi, and he was quite different from the first 13 people. He went on increasing the velocity, just as the Americans had done. Vandana told herself that: there are always such exceptions to the rule. But then came the fifteenth, a woman, the sixteenth, a man, the seventeenth, the eighteenth... one after another, they reacted in a way she had not anticipated.

After the twenty sixth person, she reviewed all the information she had about the 26 persons. She tried her best to discover whether there was any difference between the first 13 and the next 13. She tried to observe whether

there was any difference between the reaction of men and, that of women. She checked all the meter again, examined repeatedly her own style of speaking, her methods, her procedure. But the mystery remained.

And every fresh subject only deepened the mystery. Vandana grew more and more upset. Then came the thirty third person, this Londhe. He had utterly perplexed her. For the last four weeks, she was being consumed by this one question. Why was there such a glaring difference between the first 13 persons and all those who came later ?

What was the meaning of it ?

When she reached home that day, she had a splitting headache. A thought had come to her when was walking down the highway. Dr Qureshi possibly have a hand in this ? If those men and women came to know that the person sitting in the chair was not really suffering the shocks at all, then of course, they would be willing to increase the voltage indefinitely. Could Dr Qureshi possibly have disclosed the secret to the subjects after the thirteenth person? But then she felt ashamed of herself. It was wrong even to imagine such a thing. What could the real reason be ? 13—the unlucky number 13. Throwing out this foolish doubt from her mind, she lay down, without eating or drinking anything.

The next day, Vandana occupied herself with her routine work, in some corner of her mind, the question continued to worry her. Like a sound that continues to echo and reecho in a dome. In the evening, when Dr Qureshi and the others went home, she began to prepare the rooms for the reception of the fresh subject. She picked up the taperecorder that was lying some distance away from the chair in the inner room. It was necessary to rewind the tape. She pressed the rewind button and sank into thought as it span backwards.

This should stop, today. The person who came today should be like the first 13. If the person who came today was not sensitive and obedient to conditioning, she was in danger of losing faith. Although she knew the family

system had defects, yet she had always been proud of the Indian family system. that the seeds of Humane behaviour are sown within the family. This belief was not founded on blind faith but on scientific conclusions. Today, the foundation of that belief was being shaken.

No, no. There must be some other reason for the clean division between the first 13 and the rest. The reason must lie in the methodology of the experiment. It could not be in the subjects.

Suddenly, the recorder came to a halt with a snap. She started, and when her eye fell on something else lying near the recorder, she started even more. Another cassette lay near the recorder. Vandana remembered. When the experiment was being conducted on the thirteenth person, the cassette had sounded creaky,

so she had removed it, and inserted another of her prepared cassettes, into the recorder. The cassette used for the first 13 persons was different from the one used for all those who came thereafter.

Staggering like a blind person, she came out and stood in the verandah, dazed, benumbed. She should have realised this before. The first tape contained Dharap's voice and the second Smita's. On the first tape, the screaming, crying voice was a man's and on the second tape, it was a woman's. Up to the thirteenth subject, Dharaphad been seated in the chair, and thereafter, Smita had taken his place.

**(translated from Marathi, by Chayanika courtesy Bayaza)*

