

Henry David Thoreau on Civil Disobedience

Arvind Kumar Mishra*

ICSSR Doctoral Fellow, Department of Political Science, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi-221005

Abstract: *The paper explores Henry David Thoreau's 'Civil Disobedience' and elaborates his emphasis on the role and relation of individuals in dealing with the affairs of the state. His principle of 'Civil Disobedience' has inspired generations of leaders to raise their voices against colonialism and unjust governments across the globe.*

Key Words: *American Government, State, Individual, Conscience, Law*

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It was Thoreau's civil disobedience which made him politically famous and popular. Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Junior were too much influenced and took inspiration from Henry David Thoreau, They adopted his ideals and principles to resist the unjust laws of government and even unjust government also.

While defining civil disobedience, we can say that "civil disobedience" is an analysis of the individual's relationship to the state that focuses on why men obey governmental law even when they believe it to be unjust" (Wendy McElroy)

We see 'Civil Disobedience' as a response of Thoreau when he spent a night in the prison due to his refusal to pay the poll tax. He got imprisonment in 1846, and two years later, in 1848, he delivered a lecture on "on the relation of the individual to the state" at the concord meeting hall to share his ideas and his jail time experience before his townsmen. This lecture became the essay what we know as 'civil disobedience'. This essay was published in 1849 titled "resistance to civil government" by Elizabeth Palmer Peabody.

Thoreau starts his civil disobedience by saying that, "that government is best which governs least." Thoreau believed that, that government is not an ideal and good one which imposes its unjust laws to citizens, so he criticises the government of his time because it was not really a free, just and enlightened government. According to Thoreau it was the corrupt and unjust state because it supported and was in favour of slavery and Mexican war. The democratic rule of America did not care for the opinions of the people. Thoreau said that we must not obey the unjust state, it should be a welfare state. He says that "There will never be a really free and enlightened state until the state comes to recognise the individual as a higher and independent power

from which all its own power and authority are derived, and treats him accordingly."

Thoreau appears as a great advocate of individuals. Government imposed poll tax on everyone. Thoreau refused to pay his poll tax to the government because a portion of his tax money would go to the military budget, which paid for the war in Mexico. Due to his refusal to pay the poll tax, the tax collector took him to jail and there he spent one night. Someone paid his tax (most probably his aunt Maria), then only he could come out of the prison. Thoreau says that the individual is the final judge of right and wrong and he should act according to his conscience. This is the political duty of man to correct any injustice which he directly causes and to deny his cooperation to other injustices.

Thoreau believed that the state should never rank above the individual conscience or the business of living. But if state demands a person's first allegiance by asking him to violate his conscience and participate in an injustice, the person should disobey, not through violence but by removing his cooperation.

Thoreau says that when men find that government is supporting slavery and waging unjust wars then honest men should rebel and revolutionise. Thoreau believes in non-violent means to protest the unjust government, he says that what men should do that is not to cooperate with government. They should not obey the unjust laws of the government. Thoreau believes in the purity of means, according to him, evil means cannot bring about good ends and good beginnings are as much necessary as worthy ends itself. Thoreau is against the blind obedience to the state thus he says in his essay that "the mass of men serve the state thus, not as men mainly, but as machines, with their bodies. They are the standing army, and the militia,

jailers, constables, *posse comitatus*, etc. In most of cases there is no free exercise whatever the judgement or of the moral sense ; but they put themselves on a level with wood and earth and stones; and wooden men can perhaps be manufactured that will serve the purpose as well. Such command no more respect than men of straw or a lump of dirt. They have the some sort of worth only as horses and dogs. Yet such as these even are commonly esteemed good citizens. Others-as most legislators, politicians, lawyers, ministers and office holders serve the state chiefly with their heads and, as they rarely make any moral distinctions, they are as likely to serve devil, without intending it, as god. A very few as heroes, patriots, martyrs, reformers in the great sense, and men serve the state with their conscience also, and so necessarily resist it for the most part; and they are commonly treated as enemies by it. A wise man will only be useful as a man, and will not submit to be "clay", and stop a hole to keep the wind away, but leave that office to his dust at least."

While explaining, Thoreau says that in the state, there are a large number of people who don't listen to their conscience and work like machines without any true spirit and sentiments. These people are the most responsible ones for the existence of such unjust government. Talking about such people who don't listen to their inner voiced blindly given themselves to the state, Thoreau has compared such people to horses and dogs, because these blind people doesn't command any respect by the state. People should immediately give that blind faith away and start to resist the government with their non-cooperative means through non-violence.

Further he says that "he who gives himself entirely to his fellow men appears to them useless and selfish; but he who gives himself partially to them in pronounced a benefactor and philanthropist." By this he means to say that there must be a balanced obedience based on the reason not on the blind faith, means when the government is just and in reality the people's government then we must appreciate and follow it, but when it appears unjust and against the interest of people then there should be no reason to be obedient to it , and thus the need of a mass protest to this government arises. According to Thoreau, American government of his time was such type of government. American government started to impose certain unnecessary and unjust taxes on its people. In his times, the government forced people to pay church tax but he refused to pay it and instead argues that this is unjust to pay a tax to priest in the name of church and make him more stronger and rich. He said that I am not a member of this institution, and one who is not member of any such institution or society should not be forced to pay the concerned taxes by the state.

American Government, according to him was thirsty of bloodshed in the name of Mexican war and was so

keen to occupy Mexican land illegally and the poll tax which he refused to pay was not a federal tax and it was a composite tax including state tax, country tax and town tax, and this was a part of that instrument to finance the American-Mexican war which leads to a large scale bloodshed, and American government of his time was so keen to continue the institution like slavery. These were the major faults of the American government on which the whole principle of civil disobedience of Thoreau is based.

Thoreau further explains his argument "if the injustice is part of the necessary friction of the machine of the government, let it go, let it go: perchance it will wear smooth, certainly the machine will wear out. If the injustice has a spring, or a pulley, or a rope, or a crank, exclusively for itself, then perhaps you may consider whether the remedy will not be worse than the evil; but if it is of such a nature that it requires you to be the agent of injustice to another, and then I say, break the law. Let your life be a counter-friction to stop the machine. What I have to do is to see, at any rate, that I do not lend myself to the wrong which I condemn." Here machine means the government, we all know that the friction plays an important role and thus it is required for proper and smooth functioning of the machine but if the injustice is inside that friction, so according to Thoreau, there is no need of such type of friction. But machine will not work in the absence of friction, on this point, Thoreau says that let the machine stop, we need not to have this unjust machine. He motivates the people not to be an agent of injustice and asks that make your life counter-friction and the machine will stop, and then we would get rid of such machine which exists in the form of government. He strongly expresses his principle and set an example that I am not going to do any wrong or become a part of the wrong system which I disapprove and hate.

Thoreau argues "the state never intentionally confronts a man's sense, intellectual or moral, but only his body, his senses. It is not armed with superior with or honesty, but with superior physical strength. I was not born to be forced. I will breath after my own fashion. Let us see who is the strongest. What force has a multitude? They only can force me who obey a higher law than I. They force me to become like themselves. I do not hear of men being forced to live this way or that by masses of men. What sorts of life were those to live? When I meet a government which says to me, "Your money our your life," why should I be in haste to give it my money? It may be in a great straight, and not know what to do, I cannot help that. It must help itself; do as I do. It is not worth the while to snivel about it. I am not responsible for the successful working of the machinery of society. I am not the son of the engineer. I perceive that, when an acorn and a chestnut fall side by side, the one doesn't remain inert to make way for the other, but both obey their own laws, and spring and grow

and flourish as best they can, till one, perchance, overshadows and destroys the other. If a plant cannot live according to nature, it dies; and so a man." We can see that how has he beautifully described the prevailing scenario of his time. He says that even in a country like America which is independent and powerful, its people are not yet really free and cannot act according to their own wishes. Thus he means to say that the state is not superior to individual in the terms of intellect and rationality, but it is superior only in the term of physical strength. It has power to suppress physically because it has an army who follows blindly to the state. He clearly depicts that nobody is born to be forced and it is not the real state in itself which compels the people not to live their lives on their own. He talks about dishonesty of the state when the state says that "Your money our your life." Thoreau disliked this type of democratic government which doesn't imbibe the democratic spirit.

Thoreau says that everything in this world requires certain basic rules, principles and its own way of life to sustain itself and everything has its own nature and thus man so, and if a man is misguided and forgot to live his life as per certain basic principles, his existence becomes endangered. By his 'Civil Disobedience' he taught us a way of life, to live fully and to live a just life and to make others happy. He gives us a spirit to raise our voice against anything which is unjust and unfair, and suggested that always act according to your own conscience because it gives you an inspiration to do good and be just. Thoreau's principles were adopted by many leaders of various movements. In 1940s it was read by the Danish resistance, in 1950s it was cherished by people who opposed Mccarthyism, in the 1960s it was influential in the struggle against South African apartheid and in 1970s it was discovered by a new generation of anti-war activities.

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Corresponding Author

Arvind Kumar Mishra*

ICSSR Doctoral Fellow, Department of Political Science, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi-221005

arvindpolitical@gmail.com