

Sir Propofol

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An interesting contamination in our society is saying “Sir.” But before venturing into Sir-ing, let me share a few reader responses to my last week’s article when I’d asked for more occasions we say Yes in India when we mean No (<http://www.indianexpress.com/news/yes-no-yes/1141578/0>).

“On Friday I asked an employee of mine if he’d be around for a Monday meeting. He mumbled Yes. Later when I logged into my email he’d sent a mail to HR, copied to me, saying he will be on leave on Monday! Did not want to say it to my face....” wrote a client of mine who’s Chairman & Managing Director of a company. Another CEO client said that at 11 pm he got a resignation letter by email from his senior manager whose workplace is just adjacent so he’s always visible through the glass partition. They’d worked together that whole day, even had a good review and planning session and parted amicably at 8pm. So he felt clueless and surprised that he couldn’t mention his resignation face to face but had to send a mail at night. Eminent senior journalist of a news channel, Sudipta Sengupta, wrote “There is at least another reason: Haven’t learned to say NO!”

Reader Gopal Kulkarni wrote, “Compliments for dragging out an unusual and unthought-of subject and converting it into a delightful piece

of reading. It’s truly 100% correct reflection of Indian society in diverse situations.” He added his Yes input: “In North India, especially in Delhi, ‘yes’ has a tactical business dimension so as not to lose a customer come what may.” He said the customer is kept occupied, even with a cup of tea, while the shopkeeper’s assistant is secretly sent out to procure the item the retail didn’t have. Another reader, Vibhu Haleja wrote that people say Yes when not understanding that “No” is a complete sentence that needs no explanation. They sometimes shy away from No to avoid explaining why they are saying no, or lack the conviction of their reasons for the No. “Perhaps people simply lack the courage to say No,” says Vibhu. “Many are programmed from childhood to put the needs of others before self, so Yes becomes a habit that continues. Also, when you want to be liked by all or feel indebted to someone, you don’t say No.”

Perhaps culturally we are not trained to say No. I really don’t know if this phenomenon is a deficiency, lack of boldness, or use of the politeness metaphor, but in any business transaction, a dubious Yes is certainly non-productive and considered untrustworthy. Now let’s tackle “Yes, Sir.”

Impact of colonial culture: “Sir” is a British colonial residue that’s entered our collective bloodstream. Not having worked in India earlier, I’m not used to Sir culture. At different corporate meetings, my Indian clients are surprised when my sub-30-year-old colleagues all address me by my name. I wasn’t born into

the Sir title, so why take it from anyone? In my analysis, subordinates escape their business responsibility by saying Sir, or it's another way to butter up the boss. I've sometimes even witnessed in India that everyone stands up when the boss enters the meeting room, somewhat like giving him a standing ovation, only the applause is missing! I've noticed the boss feels happy with this kind of respect. It's akin to Britishers ruling their subjects, imposing dictatorial supremacy as personal power over another race. Unfortunately, bosses here have literally copied this kind of attitude to keep their employees under the thumb.

My brush with colonial attitudes materialized on a hot day in early 1990s when I'd just landed from Paris for a couple of days in Kolkata. My friend Basanta Choudhury, one of the best Bengali film heroes, invited me for breakfast at a famous gentleman's (it now has lady members too!) club that started from colonial times. I wanted to relax, so I wore the new pair of leather sandals my mother had bought knowing I love to be without shoes in the summer heat. Alighting from the car, I couldn't believe that the door man was actually making hand motions to say I cannot enter even as he was addressing me as Sir, "Without shoes I cannot let you in Sir." Nonplussed, I gaped around. Mobile phones had not come to India then, so on seeing a member going in, I sent word to Basanta Da (this is how we address elders in Bengal) who hurried out and apologized for such club rules. The club actually stocks shoes for under-dressed guests like me. My real shock was that in a city like Kolkata, home to some of the poorest people in the world, where many don't even have footwear while others go without shoes in the debilitating muggy weather, this colonial club still maintains decadent British rules as discipline. Later some Bengali friends gloriously revealed that Indians were not

allowed inside certain clubs even up to 1955. In a country where discipline is a question mark, that colonial discipline still existed makes the ingraining factor of Sir very evident. Basanta Da and I looked at each other, laughed at the quirkiness of history, and left the club to enjoy breakfast outside.

If the Sir culture is abolished in business and society, our business productivity would be superior by at least 40%, and people's real capability will flesh out. Oftentimes, undeserving people are promoted at work because of their overwhelming "Sir-ing" character. It takes street smartness, not competence or capability to butter up the boss. Time and again capable people don't make the grade being too simple to understand this kind of unprofessional tactics for climbing the ladder. If Indian enterprises can pledge to stop the Sir culture, they can progress in every sense. "Sir" is like propofol, the powerful drug that killed the King of Pop, Michael Jackson. Propofol interrupts or deprives normal sleep cycles, while making the person experience a true night's sleep. "Sir-ing" similarly anesthetizes the boss and takes the company and society into deep sleep.

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