



Concern for the Poor in Hinduism

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SWAMI VIVEKANANDA DECLARED THAT renunciation and service are the national ideals of India. It is here that man has boldly experimented to see with how little he can manage to live and not with how much. No wonder then, that the various systems of Indian philosophy have taught that poverty—which is another name for austerity—is one of the important means of achieving spiritual wealth.

But self-imposed poverty as a spiritual discipline and poverty caused by one's own infirmities or by extraneous factors beyond one's control, are poles apart. The latter has always been looked upon as a curse, to be despised and disposed of. According to the *Garuda Purana* (5.55), such poverty starts a vicious circle, thereby sustaining itself. Poverty forces a person to commit heinous sins. Sins cast him into hell. After suffering there, he is reborn in poverty. And, due to the acquired karmas, the cycle repeats itself!

Sudraka (3-4 century A D), a well-known Sanskrit poet, in his magnum opus, the *Mricchakatika*, poignantly describes the myriad miseries wrought by poverty. No one believes a poor man. Whatever strength or self-confidence he has abandons him. So also do his relatives and friends! Unable to bear the derision and insults of others he becomes a total wreck.

The Hindu scriptures keep before all human beings, the four *purusharthas* or goals to be striven for in life: dharma (righteousness), artha (wealth and goods), kama (desires of the flesh) and moksa (liberation

from transmigration). Poverty is considered an enemy of the *purusharthas*. By leading a person astray from the path of dharma, it can prove to be a positive evil, both at the individual and at the social level. That is why it has rightly been condemned by all noble people, including the rishis of yore.

Though Hinduism, through the *purushartha* scheme, posits moksa or spiritual freedom as the final goal of life, life here and now has never been despised or relegated to the background. The *Isha Upanishad* (1 and 2) advocates that a person should desire to live one hundred years—the full span of life—enjoying the good things of life in the world as the grace of God. The sage of the *Taittiriya Upanisad* (1.4) offers oblations into the Vedic fire with a prayer for wealth so that it could be used for educating more and more Vedic students. Kalidasa in his well-known work, *Raghuvamsha* (1.7) declared that the kings of the race of Raghu accumulated wealth with a view to gifting it to the needy.

While a poor man is exhorted to work hard to attain wealth (vide *Yajnavalkya Smriti* 1.349), the social responsibility of the well-to-do towards the poor is also greatly stressed. The *Hitopadesha* of Narayana (12 century A D), quoting probably from the *Mahabharata*, says: 'O Yudhis-thira! Support the poor (by giving gifts to them). Do not give monetary help to the rich. Medicine and diet are needed by the sick. What use is medicine for one who is healthy?'



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This brings us to the concept of *dana* or giving gifts, a fundamental concept that has contributed greatly to social well-being. Though our 'common-sense' advises us to give gifts to others after making ourselves comfortable, the *Bhagavata* (7.14.8) startles us by a statement that is supposed to apply to all of us! The sage Narada, while describing the duties of a householder, exhorts thus: 'An embodied being is entitled to possess what is required as food to fill his stomach. One who claims more than that, is a thief and deserves punishment!'

It is interesting to note that the *Taittiriya Upanishad* urges us to produce food in large quantities, not to find fault with it and to give it to deserving persons, along with lodging facilities if they ask for it (3.7-10).

It is thus seen that concern for the poor and the needy has been an article of faith in Hinduism. This concern has fructified in the principle of *dāna* or giving the right type of gifts to needy persons at the right time and place.

Giving gifts to the poor is an ancient institution in Hinduism. The *Rigveda* (10.117.6) castigates a person who consumes food without sharing it with other hungry people. The *Gita* (3.13) corroborates it. The *Chandogya Upanishad* (2.23.1) considers *dāna* as an integral part of dharma or righteousness. The *dharmasastras* or religious law-books declare that *dāna* is one of the ten *sāmānya dharmas* or primary duties of every householder, irrespective of his caste (vide *Yajnavalkya Smṛti* 1.122).

Every householder—especially an able-bodied earning member of the society—is expected to perform five sacrifices everyday (known as *panchayajnas*) out of which *nri-yajna* or feeding the poor is an important item.

The affluent sections of society have been urged to accumulate *punya* or religious merit by performing the *ishta-purta-karmas*; i.e. Vedic sacrifices and acts of public charity, like digging wells and tanks, or building free food-distribution centres.

As already pointed out, the concern for the poor takes us to the topic of alleviation of their poverty through *dana* or giving gifts. However, gifts should be made not merely with a philanthropic attitude but as a religious duty. Such an attitude helps the giver to become spiritually elevated even as the receiver is materially benefited.

Gifts can be of various types: food, clothing, shelter, money, household articles, land and so on.

Giving gifts, now elevated to the level of a religious act, has to be done with proper reverence. It should be given unobtrusively, in all humility, to the right person at the right time.

There has been an unfortunate aspect of poverty in the Hindu society. A large number of people had been relegated to the lowest strata, being branded as *asprishyas* or untouchables. They had to suffer not only the privations of material poverty but also the social stigma of untouchability. Fortunately for them, various saints of the Bhakti Movement like Ramanuja (A D 1017-1137), Sri Krishna Caitanya (A D 1485-1533) and a host of others took up their cause and brought about a social revolution, thereby bringing relief to them from time to time.

In conclusion, it may be stated that concern for the poor, and attempts at alleviating their miseries have always been a part and parcel of the Hindu psyche over the centuries.



If God can manifest Himself through an image, then why not through man also?

Sri Ramakrishna