

THE JAIN VIEW OF POVERTY: STRATEGIES FOR PREVENTION AND MINIMIZATION

The Global Scenario

The problem of poverty has assumed a monstrous proportion today at global level and is considered a stumbling block in the path of integrated social development. Of the six billion people inhabiting the planet more than two billion live in a state of absolute poverty with income and consumption levels below nationally defined poverty lines. Some six hundred million people go to bed hungry each night. Apart from these gruesome factors that bode ill for the future of humanity what is alarming is that the population of the world continues to grow at a menacing rate and seems to be transcending the limits which will make it impossible for the planet to sustain itself in the near future. Another disturbing aspect that affects social development and adds to miseries of the people of the planet is unprecedented unemployment. Out of the six billion people, three billion constitute the current global workforce. Of these, more than 200 million are estimated to be unemployed. The top 20 percent of the income earners receive 83 percent of the world's income while the bottom 20 percent receive only 1.5 percent. The enormous gap between the haves and have-nots that already exists is further widening everyday.

The above opening paragraph of my paper presents a grim spectacle of the situation that we encounter today globally. While the economists might analyse various factors and suggest remedies, we need to go deeper into the causes of poverty. We have enough resources available on the planet. If distributed equitably in an impartial and judicious manner, no one on the planet will be compelled to go hungry, unclothed and unhoused. Every inhabitant will find his life comfortable. We cannot end poverty merely by new economic theories and monetary policies unless there is a global ethic which is voluntarily accepted and integrated into an individual's lifestyle, unless each inhabitant of the planet pledges himself to limit his needs and desires and refrains from grabbing the resources of the planet for the gratification of his lust for power and fame. New economic measures and globalization also benefit the haves to a larger extent directly or indirectly. That is why despite numerous economic policies enunciated by ancient and modern economists, despite phenomenal growth in wealth in all parts of the world the poor are becoming poorer and the rich are becoming richer.

The Jain View

The Jain religious tradition strikes at the root and doesn't believe that superficial measures like asking people to consume more and produce more will eradicate poverty from the face of the world. It is the unrestrained habit of our consumption and lust for the accumulation of wealth beyond our requirement which is responsible for the galloping trend of poverty that we see in the present world. The Jains believe that one

should not acquire more than what one needs for survival. If we exercise restraint on our needs and desires and use the resources of this planet just to sustain ourselves, naturally the surplus resources which greedy people hoard and store or squander for luxury and personal aggrandizement will be released and the have-nots will be able to survive. The people are starving not because there is famine or drought but because they have no money to buy their meals.

To Lord Mahavira – the 24th Jain Tirthankar, the question of satisfaction and comfort was secondary: the question of peace was primary. When the objective becomes primary the whole approach changes. When peace is primary, the purity of means also gains supremacy. Mahavira didn't prescribe abrogation of all possessions for a normal family since it was not a practical proposition. How can a person so highly enlightened and spiritually exalted talk of impossible things? From the point of view of Anekant (non-absolutist view of all other streams of thought) he prescribed a middle course – a societal person cannot give up all but at least he can restrain his desires and adopt pure means to earn his living.

Mahavira was a great exponent of human nature. He analysed it critically and opined that the common trait in all living beings is passion and it is the basic constituent of man's nature too. The second trait of his nature is lust for wealth. Every human being longs for riches and prosperity and is inclined to use any method, fair or foul, to attain his target. The third trait of human nature is faith in religion and the fourth one is emotion. These four basic traits of human nature i.e. passion, acquisition and accumulation of wealth, emotion or desire for freedom and emancipation and faith in religion are more or less responsible for inequality, poverty, exploitation and violence that mark the present age. Every human being has a level of ability – some are extraordinarily intelligent, physically strong and composed by nature while others are mentally and physically weak and are ill-tempered. The very talk of equality is a figment of imagination. Some are bound to have more and some will have less. Keeping this factor in mind Lord Mahavira exhorted his disciples to moderate and control their desires. They should fix limits to all their needs and renounce what they think is in excess. The limitlessness in one's target or goal is the root of conflict and inequality.

A societal being has to exercise utmost restraint on his daily needs for social harmony. *Aparigraha* or non-possession or non-acquisitiveness is an ideal but a social being who lives in society cannot do without materialistic resources. Mahavira, therefore, steered clear of extremes and prescribed the middle path – the path if adhered to by all will give rise to a balanced society which will have both rich and less rich but will not have abjectly poor or extremely rich as we see in a capitalistic society. Despite 70 years of experiments and rigorous measures communism failed to achieve equality in Soviet Union.

Acharya Mahapragya, a Jain Acharya and an eminent thinker, spiritual patron of Anuvrat Movement – a movement that inspires people to commit themselves to basic human values and author of the internationally acclaimed book "*Economics of Mahavira*" has made an extremely significant observation

‘The most important principle of economic management could be that the basic needs of a society should be fulfilled. Every individual in a society should be able to get the basic facilities like bread, house, clothes, medicine and education. There is no point in raising the question of economic equality. All people have different levels of skills to earn money and have different levels of professional competence. Some earn more, some less. It is impossible to eliminate economic inequality. It is not possible that everyone in a society will become a millionaire. What is possible is that everyone is able to fulfil his minimum basic needs. He should have an excess to them equally. If an individual earns profits through his special skills, no one should have an objection to it.’

The root of poverty

As has already been propounded by Acharya Mahapragya that economic inequality cannot be abolished altogether though the term ‘equality’ has become high-sounding and is used frequently in discussions everywhere. It can be conceived in a technical sense but it cannot be considered at the level of a practical reality. What is the root of poverty in the world today? It is due to man’s limitless greed and his unrestrained desires for luxury and comfort that have robbed the less capable people of their basic needs and have added to their struggle and difficulties. Man’s ambition to grab resources of the planet and dominate others has also resulted in senseless wars killing millions of people. The Hiroshima and Nagasaki catastrophe could have been averted if the Japanese rulers had realized the folly of continuing the Second World War despite the fall of Hitler and had responded to the appeal for a cease-fire. The wars and violent conflicts result in destruction of essential resources and the people subsisting precariously on minimum basic facilities are rendered homeless wanderers without clothing, food and roof to shelter them. The dream of equitable distribution of resources of the planet is shattered. Mahavira said ‘*put an end to luxury. Unrestrained passion increases unhappiness*’.

Another factor that is responsible for increase in poverty is population. It has already exceeded six billion and the number is increasing everyday. The planet earth can sustain only two billion population. All our resources are being devoured by the ever-increasing population. It is the ticklish problem and needs to be tackled tactfully. The third world people need to be educated. Self-restraint as preached by Lord Mahavira alone can check population growth.

Strategies for Prevention and Minimization of Poverty

In order to prevent acquisition of wealth beyond one’s needs Mahavira laid down the twelve-fold path for his votaries consisting of 12 small or basic vows. *Ahimsa* is central to his philosophy. If an individual’s faith in the power of *ahimsa* is strengthened and established he will refrain from exploiting the poor for his comforts. I know disparities cannot be ended all together but they can, of course, be minimized. If all individuals in society are encouraged to practise the twelve-fold path (**anuvrat** – small or basic vows) shown by Lord Mahavira and later modified and expanded by late His

Holiness Acharya Mahapragya to make it more meaningful and relevant in the present context, poverty can certainly be minimized if not abolished. Here are the twelve *anuvrata* (small or basic vows) prescribed by Mahavira for his disciples (*shravaks/shravikas*) each of whom was required to pledge himself/herself to the following vows:

1. ***Pranatipataviramana vrata*** (the gross vow of refraining from violence)

I will refrain from killing any guiltless moving living being. I will also refrain from attacking, alienating, exploiting or unsettling specifically human beings.

2. ***Sthul Mrisavadaviramana vrata*** (gross vow of refraining from lying)

I shall not behave deceitfully in matters like blaming somebody, blaming with conspiracy, printing of heart-pinching matter, misguiding and fraudulent articles for tarnishing someone's image. This is the austerity of truthfulness.

3. ***Sthul Adattadanaviramana vrata*** (gross vow of abstaining from taking anything that is not given)

I shall not take anything that is not given to me. I shall not steal. I shall avoid taking stolen goods, exporting or importing prohibited goods, selling fake goods in place of genuine goods, adulterating, deceitfully weighing or measuring, taking of bribe and such other prohibited/forbidden activities as cause misery or suffering to others.

4. ***Sthul Maithunaviramana vrata*** (gross vow of refraining from all illicit sexual contacts)

I shall not have any sexual contact with men/women and animals except with my own spouse. I shall practise moderation in sexual contact even with my spouse.

5. ***Aparigrahaviramana vrata*** (vow of limiting one's possessions)

I shall forsake excess of resources and limit my desires. I will fix a limit to all my belongings in the present and in the future and forsake all extra retainers.

6. ***Digvrata*** (vow of limiting the area of one's activities)

I will limit my movements for carrying out my activities in all the ten directions.

7. ***Bhogopabhogaparimana vrata*** (vow of limiting the quantity of things for consumption)

I will limit the quantity of things that are used everyday by me and the things I use repeatedly like cloth etc.

8. ***Anarthadandaviramana vrata*** (vow to abstain from purposeless, harmful activities)

I will refrain from purposeless and harmful activities.

9. ***Samayik vrata*** (vow of remaining completely equanimous for a *muhurta* (fortyeight minutes))

Samayik means detachment from sinful activities and attachments.

I will do at least one *samayik* everyday.

10. ***Desavakasika vrata*** (vow of reducing for a limited period of time the limits of the area set forth in the sixth vow)

I shall reflect on the limitations of ten sides that I have imposed upon myself daily or at regular intervals of time.

11. ***Poushadha vrata*** (vow of observing fast and living like a monk for a day and night)

I shall perform at least one *poushadha* and shall practise evenness day and night.

12. ***Atithisamvibhag vrata*** (vow of sharing with the deserving guests)

I shall give a suitable portion of acceptable food to saintly monks and shall become a helper in their disciplined life. I shall safeguard my *Atithisamvibhag vrata*.

The Jains emphasize purity of conduct in word, thought and deed and discourage its disciples to crave for worldly possessions. Thus the Jains use all things in a limited way and believe in spiritual transformation in preserving ecological harmony. Acharya Mahapragya – an eminent Jain thinker and head of the Jain Terapanth Order is of the view that the principles propounded by Mahavira can help us to combat poverty. The need of the hour is to launch a worldwide campaign for global ecological ethic unitedly by all religions and save the people from dying from starvation. Renunciation of excessive means and pledging oneself to avoid indulging in acquisition of wealth beyond a limit set voluntarily by oneself can salvage humanity from extinction.

The two basic vows prescribed by Mahavira for his disciples are most relevant in the present context i.e. *atithisamvighag vrata* (sharing with others) and *digvrata*. Mahavira even went to the extent of saying that one who accumulates wealth for self alone and does not share it with others cannot attain moksha (liberation) '*asamvighagi na hu tassa mokho*'. Even *moksha* has been barred for those who refuse to share their resources with others. *Digvrata* had one basic objective. It was to put restraint on imperialistic mentality. Be it economic or geographical empire it should not go beyond a

limit. There is a limit to transportation i.e. restricting it to five hundred kilometres or so. Mahavira fixed a linear restriction – in a linear direction, curved direction or downward direction in any given direction. Outside this limit one will not sell anything; one will neither import nor export. It proved effective in checking imperialistic mentality. *Digvrata* also encouraged the use of *svadeshi* products. For example the people who reside in Jaipur and believe in the path shown by Mahavira may take this *digvrata* – I will not use anything from outside Jaipur. I will wear clothes made in Jaipur district and the items of my food I eat will be those produced in Jaipur district. Mahatma Gandhi emphasized the spirit of *svadeshi* in his campaign against the foreign rule. He took cue from Mahavira's *digvrata*. Mahavira said:

- ❑ Do not put anybody in bondage.
- ❑ Do not kill.
- ❑ Do not mutilate.
- ❑ Do not ignore or belittle devotion.
- ❑ If engaged in the occupation of agriculture, do not use fetters, bonds. Do not keep either animals or men under subjugation.
- ❑ Do not beat anybody. Do not strike at anybody. Do not harass any people.
- ❑ Do not destroy organs or parts of someone's body.
- ❑ Do not put too much load on men or animals.
- ❑ Do not deprive people of their livelihood.
- ❑ Do not exploit anybody.
- ❑ Ensure that you do not extract too much work and pay less.

Mahavira stressed adoption of pure means even in agricultural production. He prescribed the above vows for his votaries which naturally put a check on the growth of poverty and exploitation.

Anuvrat Movement:

A Powerful Means to Alleviate the Pangs of Poverty

There are many international campaigns engaged in generating awareness against arms race, proliferation of nuclear weapons, ecological and environmental degradation but the Anuvrat Movement is singularly unique in that it aims at limiting and controlling the human tendency to indulge in falsehood, violence, stealing and materialistic possessions - the evils which have aggravated the problems like hunger and social disharmony. It is also unique in the sense that it probes deep into human nature and shows the way for self-transformation. It is the first worldwide movement which is based on man's faith in religious vows. '*Anu*' means basic or small and '*vrata*' means a vow. The word *anuvrata* was first used by Mahavira – the 24th Tirthankar of the Jain tradition to inspire his votaries to advance steadily towards disciplined and simple lifestyle. It was launched by late His Holiness Acharya Tulsi in 1949 in the wake of increasing violence and degeneration of moral and spiritual values after India gained independence. It lays down the following moral code of conduct for all sections of society – be they Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims, Buddhists or Christians and exhorts them to practise minimum ethic in their day-to-day actions:

1. *I will not kill any innocent creature:*
 - ❑ I will not commit suicide.
 - ❑ I will not commit foeticide.
2. *I will not attack anybody:*
 - ❑ I will not support aggression.
 - ❑ I will endeavour to bring about world peace and disarmament.
3. *I will not take part in violent agitation or in any destructive activities.*
4. *I will believe in human unity:*
 - ❑ I will not discriminate on the basis of caste, colour and creed etc.
 - ❑ I will not treat anyone as an untouchable.
5. *I will practise religious tolerance.*
 - ❑ I will not rouse sectarian frenzy.
6. *I will observe rectitude in business and general behaviour.*
7. *I will set limits to the practice of continence and acquisition.*
8. *I will not resort to unethical practices in elections.*
9. *I will not encourage socially evil customs.*
10. *I will lead a life free from addictions:*
 - ❑ I will not use intoxicants like alcohol, hemp, heroin, tobacco etc.
11. *I will always be alert to the problem of keeping the environment pollution-free:*
 - ❑ I will not cut down trees.
 - ❑ I will not waste water.

I would like to sum up my paper by quoting the most significant conclusion of the Seville Statement issued by social scientists, anthropologists, professors of political science, eminent scientists and sociologists who had assembled at Seville on the eve of the International Year of Peace which says that both seeds of war and peace originate in the minds of men. So we must direct our efforts to root out the seeds of war sprouting in the young minds. In a way this conclusion reached by the elite group of thinkers of the world drawn from different disciplines is an endorsement of the spirit of the Anuvrat Movement which imparts to people training in *ahimsa* and endeavours to wipe out the germs of war which have infected the young generation to a large extent. At present His Holiness Acharya Mahapragya is continuing this lofty tradition and we hope the religious leaders of the world will pay their attention to the root of poverty and will work for the alleviation of human suffering.

Conclusion

Religion has a tremendous potential and can play an important role in reducing levels of poverty. It is already seized with the problem and is involved in poverty elimination programmes in many parts of the world. If religion and state can work in tandem, it may help the poor in affliction to a great extent. Religion can inspire its followers to renounce a part of their earnings everyday. The Jain spiritual leaders Anuvrat Anushasta Acharya Mahapragya has recently launched a new initiative called *visarjan*. It calls upon people to renounce a part of their earnings everyday as a primary step towards the goal of non-possessiveness.

A person joining the network of renouncers has to take a vow that he will set apart a part of his income and practise non-attachment. To earn money is not bad but it is the love of money or what we call a feeling of attachment to it is bad. This tendency in human beings has been instrumental in widening the gap between the rich and poor. Acharya Mahapragya's initiative of *visarjan* can work wonders if the spiritual leaders belonging to other religious tradition join hands to transformation of individuals. It may herald a new age – a new era.

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