

Hindu scriptural injunctions on poverty and charity

Poverty is bad and there cannot be two opinions about it in the view of any religion. Hence the Hindu scriptures are unanimous in prescribing ways to eradicate it by certain moral conducts. The Hindu scriptures deal in an ethical or religious way with the same threefold business of economics, namely production of wealth, its equal distribution and the appropriate consumption. In creation we see inequality between any two species and between any two animals of the same species as well. It is almost a natural law; Charles Darwin came up with his theory – of the survival of the fittest! Only man with his tools of civilisation and culture can offer some remedy to this by protecting the poorest, weakest and the most vulnerable. As the highest among the evolved species we have a moral responsibility to bring a balance and lessen the gap, at least in the human society, between the haves and have-nots. The importance of charity cannot be exaggerated.

In a debate of which is more important, – ‘faith in God’ or ‘faith in charity’, we are sure God would also uphold his children who believe in charity first. “Thy need is greater” is the sweetest note in the melodious music of mankind. Ethics is subtler than the law. While a person obeys the law out of fear of the state, he acts ethically out of fear for the destiny of his soul.

In fact, in Hinduism we have a term “Yajna” which is contentiously unique as being even subtler than ethics. It is a wholesome phrase meaning “the spirit of sacrifice” by which one acts harmoniously with the universal laws. Yajna is upheld unilaterally as the highest among the human virtues in all the scriptures of the Hindu religion. Like our breathing which is routine, perpetual and inevitable, everything is safeguarded by Yajna, the cosmic order. God’s voice in the Bhagavad-gita is the final dictum which summarises all the scriptural commandments in ‘Yajna’, the paramount ethics. This single action plan is the panacea which can resolve the world’s poverty. Inequality, exploitation, weakness, conflicts and their consequent needless extinction of lives, whether born of ignorance or selfishness, shall find no room while Yajna persists.

The sincere followers are always drawn towards the prescription of philanthropic ways like charity, donations, helping the less privileged. Paying for construction of temples, donations to organisations, schools, hospitals etc. all pertain to the optional duties of a Hindu.

The Hindu scriptures contain numerous examples of generous people who help the underprivileged, donate food, money and even properties on holy occasions and festivals. Such gestures of generosity make them the role models / icons for society. They lived for ennobling their worlds by their selfless sacrifices.

On those lines we have countless examples in Indian pre-history of some extremely self-sacrificing people - flesh from one’s body (Shibi), one’s backbone (spinal cord donor Dadheechi), one’s blood with a couple of ribs (Karna), and another one gave up his life to rescue a serpent (Jeemootavahana) - and the list goes on!

QUOTATIONS, from a few of the scriptures:

Rg Veda:

II, 28, 9 – Varuna Sukta: The name of God in itself symbolises the twofold virtuous implication, - of always giving out help and never accepting help. In fact Varuna sukta is full of such frets, strands or reeds of that divine melody.

The Upanishads:

Ishavasya Upanishad, 1: “Everyone is only a trustee or custodian for the wealth lying with oneself (from God); he cannot enjoy all of it”. Isha vaasyam idam sarvam yat-kincha jagatyaam jagat; tena tyaktena bhunjeethhaah maa gtrdhah kasya-svid-dhanam.

Taittiriya Upanishat I, 21: "Thou shalt give away whether you have faith in it (of any reward) or not" When you give, do that with humility (without superior feeling), even when you don't trust, do give away! 'Shraddhayaa deyam; ashreddhayaa deyam'.

Taittiriya Upanishat III, 3, x: Like in a well the more you fetch, more water oozes . . the more you give the more you get. This generosity is mandatory to every individual. Hurry to promise or pledge to help. It is one thing - glorious and divine - to strive for getting an occasion for that.

Maha Narayana Upanishat IV, 10 Among the austerities, giving gifts for no return is counted.

Maha Narayana Upanishat IV, 12 – Not by great deeds nor by great progeny but just by a single virtue, namely relinquishing all possessions one acquires immortality – Na karmana na prajayaa dhanena tyaagen

Maha Narayana Upanishat IV, 78: The Divinities rejoice in that when somebody's happiness owes to another's sacrifice given voluntarily.

Ramayana:

II, 1, 15, 36. In Rama's kingdom which was the ideal for many ages, even the secularists (like the pagans in the West today) who did not necessarily believe in any theism had cultivated the fondness of giving. They said, it makes them feel great.

I, 6, 11, 14-17. A person's nobility lies in never becoming humble; always remember the helps you had however minute it could be; identifying every soul as your own, rush to help them without being asked.

Princess Sita's nature was to visit forests and penance groves with all fortitudes and with the sole intention of meeting those who were desperate.

I, 1, 19 The prince Rama who embodied God, was never humble but always rushed to those whoever humble. He was as generous as Varuna, the god of wealth. In his kingdom (since his ancestors' time) nobody was willing to be in the receiving end but were always searching for those who needed gifts.

I, 72, 22-26; II, 6. On special occasions they did in Sita's wedding in Videha and at Rama's coronation in Ayodhya, the king as well as the prominent people used to organise free meals and other comforts for all, even outsiders who went in the streets. The best you have given are those given to strangers and whom you never even remember.

Manusmriti – III, 15 – 19

The Creator God (Prajapati) gave His injunction to human beings, demons and divinities as Datta = Give away; Damyata = Curb your desires, and Dayadhvam = Be kind, respectively.

It is peoples' obligation always to share to others of whatever they possess, and without fail on festive days, sacrifices, marriage, and the funerals etc. which are marked for acquiring virtues.

The best help is the one which is given to strangers where there is no reciprocation (of getting a help in return).

Even a beggar, a forest dweller, a monk will have to search for giving the help at his reach.

Money is alone not one can part with.

Every one shall always keep searching one's own help, and those who require help.

The whole universe is run with this fuel of philanthropy, namely giving away, sacrifices and feeding others.

'Adattanam-anupadanam': Never desire a thing not given to you – this is the pinnacle of human conducts. This virtue being neutral, gets a positive character when one shares one's possession with others.

Mahabharatam XVII, 5 – Vishnu Sahasra Naama verse 23, 26, 48, 53, 72, 74, 95, 96, 102, 104 and 105

Help, support, charity, gifts, protection or rescue, are all the virtues which embody godliness.

Bhagavadgita – Has more than 22 references as emphasising the nobility of Dana (given away with religious or spiritual interest)

III, 12 By sacrificing, Gods bestow wealth upon us; if anyone doesn't share them, he is a thief indeed.

13 Any person who thinks of one's self only while cooking food, he partakes the sins of others.

15 The all pervading, Bramha the Absolute eternally rests in the spirit of sacrifice.

IV 30 – 33, People can purify themselves from sins by doing everything with a sense of sacrifice.

IX 16, 26 He who offers to Me even a fruit, a flower, a leaf or the least a drop of water accompanied with humility, Arjuna! I shall accept that as it is accompanied with pure devotion. I am not desirous of those who are of lavish nature only to show off their wealth which in reality Myself has given to them.

X 5, Among those aspects of nature which are the virtues of divinity, count donations or charity given in an unselfish manner and with purity of dedication.

XII 12 The spirit of total dedication is the superb one which instantly liberates the donor from all bondage, sins, ignorance and of inferior sense.

XVI 1 Charity is one among the most sublime virtues a human being can be blessed with.

XVI 21 Greed or miserliness can alone lead a mortal being by fast track to the gate of hell.

XVII 20 – 22 The sense with which anything is given away is solely responsible in making it the noblest, ordinary or the mean (low) in category.

XVIII, 5 Among the Nitya Karmas, the imminent actions, giving away one's possessions is included. To give or not to give is not a matter of option.

Kamandakiya Niti Sara: Whenever you happen to come across any of these, don't fail to offer any thing suitable, - food, cloth, vehicle, money, jewellery etc as appropriate - to a saint or a monk, a cow or such animal, a student (bachelor), temple, a worshipper, pregnant woman, child, hungry person, beggar, destitute, a dead body being carried. The help you do comes back in multiples later.

Barhaspatyam: Our possessions result in three ways, enjoyment, sharing or Dana and wastage or destruction. One who does not make either of the first two, the third shall happen to his possessions – Daanam bhogo vinassha-ha tsro gatayo bhavanti vittaysa
Yo na dadaati na bhunkte, tasya trteeyaa bhavishyati.

Vidura Neeti: Only a donor is approached even while he is low, like a well;

Even if the miserly is high, people seldom like to go to him, like the clouds.

Sarnagadhara paddhati: Among the gods who walk upon this earth are these two, -

Those who are powerful by forgiving and those are penniless yet charitable.

Shukra Neeti: When hands can't be bent; gods dine by each feeding the opposite; since the demons are not in habit of feeding, they could only starve.

Subhasita Ratna bhandagara:

When God is showering upon you with four arms, how can you empty them all by your two arms?

If God starts snatching yours with four arms, how can you save all by earning with mere two?

Hence always give, whether gods are kind to you or unkind to you.

Anukoole harau deyam yatah poorayitaa Harih. Pratikoolo Harau deyam katham rakshyasi
kshinabahuh.

One could easily cite numerous quotations from our scriptures with reference to Daana or donation, charity or giving away one's wealth for strangers. They hold that it is rare - only one in a hundred could be a brave fighter, one in a thousand who is a wise scholar; a great orator could be one in ten thousand; but to find a donor however is the most difficult - there might be or might not be one in the entire land!

How Hinduism regards individual responsibility concerning poverty

On the doctrine of Karma, Hindus explain that however hard one might work, the riches of a person solely rests upon one's destined fortunes born of his actions in previous lifetimes = karma-phala. The individual as well as his / her Karma are jointly responsible for the financial achievements.

The impact of poverty on individuals and communities

The scripture Bhagavad-gita insists on simplicity, honesty and dedication. To reinforce this, it quotes Lord Krishna's assurance that He accepts the offering of love and devotion, whether it be a fruit, a flower or even some water. Hence purity of intention, sincerity in the performance – a good heart, humility and gentleness on the part of the devotee do really count in bringing the merits for the performers. Even going on pilgrimage and similar costly duties are not compulsory for the poor, aged and diseased.

Everyone should be judicious in giving alms where they are correctly utilised and serve the poor directly in a proactive manner. (The ubiquitous beggars in London often use proceeds for drugs).

1. He should have emphasised that one of the five daily yajnas in Hinduism includes paying one's debt to society.
2. Feeding and distributing alms to the poor is a common practice at Hindu festivals and gatherings (langar etc.).
3. The unique concept of incarnation and accumulating spiritual merit through sacrifice, donation, and penance as mentioned in the Gita for securing a better after life, rather than material wealth, which is temporary.
4. The integral concept of 'Sewa' in Sanatan Dharma
5. The scriptures prescribe donating at various times of one's life through the Samskaras (birth of a child, marriages, approaching death etc) or for alleviating adversity.

In Hinduism the concepts of Daan (alms-giving) and Sewa (service to others) is built into the Hindu way of life through Karma injunctions and an almost everyday ritual of some sort. Karma teaches one to take only what is earned, never to trespass nor to take others property and always to give back to society for ultimately one has to renunciate all before leaving this body.

The central ritual to teach people to give is performed through "Yajna" where sacrifice of one's belongings is required for others. Hinduism does not teach simply to love thy neighbour, it rather requires to go beyond that and love the "other" for loving thy neighbour is seen to contain a selfish element of gain but the loving the "other" is seen as selfless.

The entire Brahmin caste when the system was in full glory used to live on alms alone, donation - daan, from people. Even now the Brahmin priest will never charge a fee for his service, he still does a full service in return for daan - donation - to whatever one's capacity.

Charity is part and parcel of everyday living in the Hindu way of life.