

The Seven Strata of Poverty and Their Solutions in the Sanātana Dharma

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Abstract

Whenever the word ‘poverty’ pierces our eardrums, our brain instantly conceptualizes it as a paradigm of “lack of money”, almost without any hesitation. Undoubtedly, this is the first and the foremost of all, but it is certainly inadequate to express the plethora of problems that are associated with the word, or the ‘term’ as an economist might be comfortable in calling it. In this article, I have expounded on the seven aspects that are related to poverty and endeavored to bring forth a solution to each one of them by corroborating the lessons from the various sacred texts of the Sanātana Dharma. As the paper encompasses insights upon several aspects taught in economics along with the multifarious notions that are found in the sacred texts, it exemplifies both qualitative and quantitative research. The library method has been used for data collection. As the paper contains many Sanskrit words, verses, and Indic names, they have either been written *in toto* or by using the transliteration method ascribed by the International Alphabet for Sanskrit Transliteration (IAST).

Keywords: Poverty, Economy, Solution, Sanātana Dharma.

Introduction

In 2014, the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI, Oxford University) delineated their latest measurement of poverty, terming it as Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI). Conducted upon 108 countries from all across the globe, the research claims that 1.6 billion people in the world are “multi-dimensionally poor”. The foundation of this new index was previously orchestrated in the 1980s by the Nobel Laureate Indian economist, Amartya Sen, and the American philosopher, Martha Nussbaum. It is *de facto* an apothegm of Dr. Sen who defined the notion of poverty thus: “Poverty is not just a lack of money; it is not having the capability to realize one’s full potential as a human being”. In this article, I endeavor to explain the seven pivotal aspects of poverty that can be enucleated thus:

The Pecuniary Problem

Whenever the word ‘poverty’ pierces our eardrums, our brain instantly conceptualizes it as a paradigm of “lack of money”, almost without any hesitation. Undoubtedly, this is the first and the foremost of all. Unemployment, dissatisfaction with monetary profit, and the inequality of *per capita* are indeed the pioneers of poverty, but many other aspects can even obfuscate the economists. Sabina Alkine, the Head of the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative, has demonstrated that a multi-dimensionally poor person is one “who has different things going wrong at the same time. They might not have many assets and they might have malnutrition. And they might not have more

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than five years of schooling. So, several things are going wrong in their life at the same time. That's what it means to be multi-dimensionally poor. It's not just one".

Kauṭilya's *Arthaśāstra*, written between 200 BCE to 500 CE as per most scholarly consensus, had already figured out the multiple dimensions of impoverishment and their root causes. Economic poverty does not merely emerge from the lack of wealth but from a variety of reasons that are often overlooked. For instance, Kauṭilya asserts that when a *rājā* abjures the way of the *dharma* and acts how he ought not to act, when he refuses to facilitate where he should and impedes the general weal where he should not, when he punishes the innocent and protects the guilty, when honorable men are snubbed and degraded folks are hired to positions, the subjects of that kingdom become disaffected and lack in motivation to cultivate good works. This leads to stagnation and stagnation leads to poverty. So, in other words, *adharma* is one of the root causes of poverty (*Arthaśāstra* 7.5.20-25). Kauṭilya has beautifully encrypted the entire solution to the problem in *Arthaśāstra* (*Sūtra* 1-6):

सुखस्य मूलं धर्मः। धर्मस्य मूलं अर्थः। अर्थस्य मूलं राज्यं। राज्यस्य मूलं इन्द्रिय जयः।
इन्द्रियाजयस्य मूलं विनयः। विनयस्य मूलं वृद्धोपसेवा ॥

[The root of happiness is *dharma*, the root of *dharma* is *artha* (economy), the root of *artha* is right governance, the root of right governance is victorious inner-restraint, the root of victorious inner-restraint is humility, and the root of humility is serving the aged.]

The governing body must take advice from eligible and esoteric economists, ministers, educationists, and senior diplomats before devising the economic strategy of the nation. It must not hesitate to accept criticism from them, nor should it belittle their opinions and suggestions. Not merely that, according to the *Arthaśāstra*, the economic disposition of a country depends on several aspects such as the function of the government, ethics, laws, economic policies, civil and criminal court systems, marketing and trading system, the selection procedure of the ministers, diplomatic strategies, warfare tactics, agricultural reforms, mineralogy, medicines, forests and wildlife et cetera (Olivelle, pp. 122-143). Therefore, the state must incorporate all these aspects and include qualified people in each of these domains as per the requirement. The kind of federal structure and bureaucracy that was proposed by Kauṭilya is not as complex as we have now, but it nonetheless was much more effective. Given the condition that India's GDP is staggering since the pandemic, the incumbent governing body of the nation should assimilate Kauṭilya's teachings into the sophisticated structures of the finance sector.

The Scantiness of Resources

One major adversity to the residents of third world countries is the lack of resources and, even more, the scarcity of the means to utilize them. For example, if a farmer possesses ample agricultural land to harvest but there is no means of irrigation, he is bound to end up hoarding the crops much less in quantity than he desired. Thus, despite having the land (which is an asset in terms of economics), he will remain poverty-stricken. Another example can be taken into account. Let us imagine that a motor company is hiring to fill up the vacancies and there are multiple engineers with degrees in motor engineering from any of the mushroomed technical institutes. Let us compare them with the local motor mechanic who possesses more skill and efficacy than the degree-holding engineers. However, the latter, despite having more deftness, shall not be considered for the interview. Thus, it will slacken the overall economic sustainability in two ways: firstly, on the personal level for the local motor mechanic who will be deprived of the opportunity, and secondly, on the broader level as the motor company would either have to work with less efficient engineers or put extra effort and money

to excel their qualities. Thus, despite having the resources, lack of means to utilize them can hinder the ultimate progress, keeping poverty in qualitative and quantitative aspects both.

The only solution to this kind of poverty is to develop a strategy to create new resources and to tackle the need for lacking ones by incorporating substitutes. Skill-based education (which is discussed in detail later on) is going to be a key factor determining the action. Living an eco-friendly and simple life as described in the *āyurveda* can help us minimize the consumption or waste of natural resources that are on the verge of crisis.

The Political Poverty

Malfunction of the government over the economic policies can substantially doom the citizens to the threshold of poverty. If a country has affluent resources and all the means to utilize them properly, yet it is failing to do so because of the lack of leadership and supervision, it is to be called political poverty. In other words, political poverty is the lack of sustainable leadership. This can either result in economic poverty arising from the lack of proper decision-making ability or in the stagnancy of the growth of the incumbent economic milieu of the country.

Kauṭilya has expatiated about the quality of an ideal leader in the *Arthaśāstra* (1.5). He concocts the idea of *rājarsi* (the sage king) and hails this as the ideal attitudinal disposition of a *dhārmika* governing persona. The *rājarsi* rules like a royal king but lives like an ascetic sage. The most identical quality of becoming a *rājarsi* is to have control over the self, namely over his lust, anger, greed, conceit, arrogance, and jealousy. The *rājarsi* must exterminate all flatterers from the court and seek advice from the eligible ministers and elders. The *rājarsi* dedicates his entire existence to the weal and welfare of his people and does not behave in an autocratic and tyrannical manner. He neither unnecessarily confiscates other people's property, nor craves for their wives and children. The way a *rājarsi* should aim to gain people's love and trust is through loyalty to them, not by merely being authoritarian in the royal dictum (Rangarajan, pp. 121-122). The *rājarsi* should always keep a *purohita* for personal and spiritual counsel (*Arthaśāstra* 1.9).

The *Arthaśāstra* does not only contemplate upon the character of the king but also makes explicit accounts of how he should select his officials and advisors. For forming an advisory committee, he should rely upon qualified elders, accomplished wise men, scientists, and educators from each field of study. Poets, authors, and academicians must be given their due respect and rightful position in the court. For the selection of ministers and officials for the royal council, Kauṭilya advises the king to judge the merit, trustworthiness, and wisdom of the applicants. However, he has made a very shrewd distinction here by noting that the ministers and officials must not be wiser than the king as then there would always be the risk that they might locate the king's vulnerabilities and manipulate them in their favor. The best persons the king should select as ministers should be his *āmātya* (trustworthy friends in the court who are qualified as well). The qualities of an *āmātya*, termed as *āmātya sampat* in the *Arthaśāstra*, are sound training in theoretical and practical aspects of the court, foresightedness and visionary outlook, strong memory, bold and clear-speaking nature, kindness and philanthropy, and devotion to *dharma*. Ministers whose integrity is questionable and doubtful must be expelled. Strict punishments should be meted out to the disloyal, anti-national, and spying people (Olivelle, pp. 72-76). The art of diplomacy and warfare depicted in the *Arthaśāstra* (7-11) should be taken with sincere consideration. The taxation system should be rigorous and yet *pro bono publico* so that a balance can be achieved (*Arthaśāstra* 5.2.70). A detailed lesson from the Kauṭilya's system of taxation would benefit the current government.

It is needless to point out that corruption and scams are two quintessential facades that have been sucking the blood of the economic equilibrium like a vicious leech. The role of the government does not merely end at ensuring a corruption-free bureaucracy, but it must also draft reformative economic policies and implement them in a thoroughgoing manner, keeping the political scenario in mind. Fortunately for India, the incumbent government has taken many lessons from the *Arthaśāstra*, but many of them have also gone unheeded (which the governing bodies should look after).

The Social Poverty

It is said that an example is the best definition. To elucidate this aspect, I shall stoop to the old proverb. One day, when Mr. X went to the market to buy vegetables from a street vendor, he was asked to pay 25 bucks per kilogram of potatoes. But he bargained with the vendor and reduced the rate to 20 bucks. That very evening, he went to a fancy restaurant with his girlfriend Ms. Y and ordered two plates of Italian dishes and a bottle of wine which had a combined cost of 5800 bucks. He gave the waiter three shiny pinkish notes of the Indian currency and asked him to keep the change. This is social poverty.

We bargain with the rickshaw paddlers and street hawkers but act spendthrift where it is, at least financially, needless. However, social poverty can also be kaleidoscopic as it includes all the social evils such as inequality, rape, violence, lynching, criminal offenses et cetera. Pessimistic it may sound, but it is a reverie to infer that the world would ever be utterly free from all sorts of social poverty, yet optimistic thinking can surely better our future experience from that of the present scenario.

Inequality is the chieftain of this stratum. The judicial system in India has long been covertly biased and partial on three different grounds: gender, caste, and religion.

Firstly, whereas many women in the remote villages of the country are still tortured for dowry, many women in the metropolitan cities manipulate the laws to file false rape cases just to settle some scores or sue their husbands to get alimony after divorce. Whereas the press, media, and society jump into protests when the victim is a female, the same turn a blind eye when the victim's gender changes. Deepika Narayan Bharadwaj's *Martyrs of Marriage* (2016) and *India's Sons* (2018) can be referred to as two eye-opening documentaries in this regard. The *Manusmṛiti* and the *Arthaśāstra* both have significant proportions dedicated to the rights of women— be it her right to education and inheritance of ancestral property or the will and consent for marriage, provided with the freedom to choose her partner. No doubt that the state should champion women's equal rights and protect their dignity. As *Arthaśāstra* (3.55-56) asserts:

यत्र नार्यस्तु पूज्यन्ते रमन्ते तत्र देवताः ।
यत्रैतास्तु न पूज्यन्ते सर्वास्तत्राफलाः क्रियाः ॥

[Where women are revered, there the gods rejoice; but where they are not,
no sacred rite bears any fruit.]

However, women must restrain themselves from misapplying laws for their vendetta. A truly conscious and humanitarian decision can be made by women themselves to fight against the misuse of such laws against men, and men, on the other hand, can take positive steps to ensure women's safety. Men and women are not two different species, but rather two sexes of one species known as *homo sapiens*. Therefore, progressive and forward-looking society should not discriminate between the two sexes and turn them pitted against each other, but rather try to nourish a congenial and harmonious relationship between the two. A beautiful lesson can be taken from the fact that the Sanātana Dharma always celebrates the masculine and the feminine together— Rāma and Sītā, Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa, Śiva and Pārvatī— as creation can only take place with the union of both.

Secondly, caste-based discrimination still exists. But what most people fail to observe is that it happens antithetically from both ways. In some rural parts of India, people belonging to the lower castes are afflicted. At the same time, poor people belonging to the upper castes are also suffering because of the prolonged caste-based reservation system. Most people in India are suffering from a fundamental misconception that the caste system in ancient times had been notoriously based on birth to promote nepotism and to plunder the weak. Political leaders, scholars, and many iconic figures have, time and again, misunderstood and misinterpreted it. The *varṇa prathā* as enucleated in the *Veda* is not based on birth but rather based on the merit and efficacy in performing different chores of *karma*. As the *Skanda Purāṇa* (18.6.239.31-34) states:

जन्मना जायते शूद्रः संस्काराद् द्विज उच्यते ।
वेदपाठाद् भवेद् विप्रः ब्रह्म जानाति ब्राह्मणः ॥

[Everyone is a *śūdra* by birth. By *saṃskāra* (purification), one becomes *dvija* (twice born). By reading the *Veda*, one becomes *vipra* (wise). By attaining divine conformity with the Brahma, one becomes *brāhmaṇa*.]

The four *varṇas* (videlicet *brāhmaṇa*, *kṣatriya*, *vaiśya*, and *śūdra*) are four different categories of civilians in society as per the *varṇa prathā* of the *Veda*. It does not indicate any rank, nor does it posit one category higher over another. In the Vedic times, any person, irrespective of the family s/he is born into, could attain any category by their actions. Thus, the opportunity to practice one's free will was always there and there was no oppression based on the *varṇa* (or as German scholars translated it as 'caste') the person belonged to. As Śrī Kṛṣṇa says in the *Bhagavad Gītā* (18.41):

ब्राह्मणक्षत्रियविशां शूद्राणां च परंतप ।
कर्माणि प्रविभक्तानि स्वभावप्रभवैर्गुणैः ॥

[Duties are distributed amongst the *brāhmaṇa*, *kṣatriya*, *vaiśya*, and *śūdra* according to the abilities of their own nature.]

Considering people of all the *varṇas* equal was a fundamental prerequisite to be a true *brāhmaṇa* according to Manu. The maxim of equality has been championed by the *Manusmṛti* (12.125) thus:

एवं यः सर्वभूतेषु पश्यत्यात्मानमात्मना ।
स सर्वसमतामेत्य ब्रह्माभ्येति परं पदम् ॥

[He who thus recognizes that just like his individual *ātmā* (soul), the other *ātmās* too exist in all beings, becomes equal-minded towards all and enters the highest state, the *brāhmaṇa*.]

However, as time passes on, laws become obsolete and corruption grapples with them. Thus, the *varṇa prathā*, which was created to provide equal opportunity to all and to make the society function effectively, ironically became the means of oppression at the hands of some corrupt *brāhmaṇas*. As a result, it has lost its relevance in the present time. Similarly, the system of the caste-based reservation, which was once made with pious intentions, has now become a mere tool for vote-bank politics. Therefore, restructuring of the age-old laws and the reformation of the constitutional structure of the nation both have become necessary over time. The government should think of economic policies that would be based on economy, rather than identities of birth.

Thirdly, discrimination and appeasement politics on the ground of religion have long been a reality in India and no one can overlook it. As previously told, appeasement towards any particular section or community will only bring dissatisfaction in the other. However, it must also be kept in mind that while fixing these issues, no intolerance gets to set into debacle the state machinery. People's conscience must be inspired to voluntarily relinquish the unnecessary facilities that they are enjoying at the expense of the taxpayers' money. Establishing non-violence, amicability, and inter-faith fraternity can be a solution as the *Manusmṛti* (6.75) hails them as great virtues that can bring positive changes in social growth.

The Environmental Poverty

If a person is wealthy, but he lives in a metropolitan city where there is no fresh air to breathe and no greenery or natural surroundings to behold, he is suffering from environmental poverty. For the psychological fecundity of our mind, the smooth function of our physical organs, and the development of our bonding with nature, living in a green atmosphere is advisable. Not merely for the children, but also for the adults and old ones. However, one who lives in the metropolitan cities is very likely to be surrounded by the bricks and the walls of buildings, the drones of the vehicles and the buzzes of the streets, the smoke-puffing chimneys of the factories, and the nimbus of the sassy electric advertisements. Even if the person is affluent and wealthy, treading upon the green grass and enjoying the chirping of the birds in the morning are merely limited to poetry and music for him. In such circumstances, he may have all the riches, but he is environmentally poor. This will undoubtedly take a toll on his physique and his psyche both.

To keep the greenery of the state and to make it environmentally rich, Kauṭilya has advised the governing body to take adequate measures in protecting the wildlife and forests (*Arthaśāstra* 2.19), extolling the fact that the Maurya Empire under Chandragupta II [322-298 BCE] gained a positive result by following it. He expounds a simple solution to the complex problem of keeping the reciprocal relationship between man and nature intact. He recommends the higher authorities of the state to supervise the zonal officers appointed for the protection of the forests and the wildlife to decide and ensure the right quantity of the forest products to be extracted and used for commercial purposes so that the aspect of the environment and the aspect of the economy both are taken care of (*Arthaśāstra* 2.35). He also enlists several trees that ought not only to be protected but also be reproduced more (Olivelle, pp. 44-45, 140-142). A reading of these aspects tells us that if Kauṭilya had emphasized the importance of the environment around two millennia ago when the earth was

much greener than it is now, how much concern we need to put upon these issues today when we are facing impending catastrophes like deforestations and global warming.

The Educational Poverty

This poverty can primarily and simply be defined as the lack of means or the lack of opportunities to attain education in any given field. In India, we have the ‘Sarva Siksha Abhiyaan’ scheme, but its effectiveness is questionable. Although there have been some praiseworthy signs of progress made to encourage women in the field of education, they have largely remained confined to the cities and the towns. There is one astounding recent trend that is observed in the villages and city suburbs that more boys have abandoned study after the tenth standard than girls. A gender-based college drop-out ratio also indicates that boys are slowly losing ground. Whereas the government has focused on providing bounteous facilities for women empowerment (obviously for due reasons), somewhere a reluctance towards the upliftment of the male children is also conspicuously lurking from behind—which must not be ignored.

In the Vedic Period of human civilization, men and women were bestowed equal opportunities in attaining *śikṣā* under the *gurukūla paramparā* which was not as monochromatic as the Eurocentric education system is, but was rather diverse and inclusive. For instance, pupils were taught skills in four different sections (videlicet erudite scholarship, the art of the war, the art of commerce, and the skills of menial tasks). Thus, all sections of the society would benefit from the education which, in turn, would be beneficial for the pupils alike based on their fundamental capabilities.

Not merely in providing education, enhancement of the quality and aptitude of the students was another pivotal aspect. Fortunately for India, the National Policy on Education (NPE 2020) has focused on the skill-based education system, although some unaddressed loopholes must be fixed as early as possible. For instance, although it has focused heavily on the educational sectors of science and technology, no attempt has been made to revamp the disciplines such as humanities, arts, and social sciences. The government needs to understand that while technological advances provide us with pleasures and comforts, the advancement of consciousness helps us to organize and understand ourselves. Sincere adherence to the suggestions of the academicians who have a wide understanding of the Sanātana texts is required beyond any doubt for the improvement of the curricula and the system.

The Spiritual Poverty

Spiritual poverty is the rapid decay of peacefulness and tranquillity in the mind, accompanied by the rising catatonia, dementia, and schizophrenia in the postmodern world that we are living in. Under the fragmented social structures and their pastiched traits originating from globalization and standardization in the age of mixed capitalism, keeping one’s roots alive is an emerging challenge faced by humanity, especially by the youth. Whereas over-thinking is deranging the mind from one end, unchecked thoughtlessness of the mind is also plaguing it from the other. Somewhere in between these two, the art of balanced thinking and conscious action is lost. *Bhagavāna Śrī Kṛṣṇa* winsomely describes a similar condition of the human mind in the *Bhagavad Gītā* (2.66):

नास्ति बुद्धिरयुक्तस्य न चायुक्तस्य भावना।
न चाभावयतः शान्तिरशान्तस्य कुतः सुखम्॥

[The wisdom of the self comes not to the unsteady person and no meditation is possible for him. The unmeditative person can never find peace, and without peace how can one be happy?]

In Sri Aurobindo's *The Life Divine* (2.27-28), the peaceful mind which floats with the melody of the divine wisdom has been ascribed as the '*supramental consciousness*'. It can be attained by any individual through guided procedures of *yoga*. Unfortunately, this is lacking in our generation, especially among many of the youth. Not only that they do not practice any *āsana*, *prāṇāyāma*, or sport, they neither go through the *dhārmika* texts that inspire and embolden the mind. Our young generation is so glued to the mobile and computer screens that the layer of dust on the storybooks has thickened. In the world of social media platforms run by unscrupulous capitalists, somewhere the scope for literature is lost, and so is lost the rhyme and the rhythm of life. Let me ask one fundamental question to you, dear reader: 'If a world has all the wealth and no poetry, would you call it rich?'

The solution to these seemingly insurmountable problems lies in embracing the truth and the wisdom of the Sanātana Dharma and discarding the *māyā*. A healthy reading habit must be developed and *dhārmika* texts should find a prominent place in the bookshelves of our libraries. *Veda*, the root of the Sanātana Dharma, should once again find a place in our lives if we are to do away with social poverty. As the *Manusmṛti* (2.6-12) states:

वेदोऽखिलो धर्ममूलं स्मृतिशीले च तद्विदाम्।
आचारश्चैव साधूनामात्मनस्तुष्टिरेव च ॥

.....
वेदः स्मृतिः सदाचारः स्वस्य च प्रियमात्मनः।
एतच्चतुर्विधं प्राहुः साक्षाद् धर्मस्य लक्षणम् ॥

[The root of the *dharmā* is the entire *Veda*, and then the tradition and customs of those who know, and the conduct of virtuous people, and what is satisfactory to oneself. The *Veda*, tradition, the conduct of good people, and what is pleasing to oneself – they say that is four fold mark of *dharmā*.]

However, cautionary advice must be provided that whereas reading them would enhance our perception, standing firm on those lessons in our deeds will surely better our life. Additionally, practicing *yoga* and taking part in social and *dhārmika* traditions would also make us spiritually enlightened. And, last but not the least, complete devotion to the *bhagavāna* is advised by Śrī Kṛṣṇa:

सर्वधर्मान्परित्यज्य मामेकं शरणं व्रज।
अहं त्वा सर्वपापेभ्यो मोक्षयिष्यामि मा शुचः ॥

[Abandon all earthly duties and surrender thyself to me alone: I will liberate thee from transgressions and provide you the *mokṣa*, the ultimate liberation.]

Conclusion

“Poverty is very good in poems, but very bad in the house; very good in maxims and sermons, but very bad in practical life”, explicated H. W. Beecher once very rationally. Perhaps, there is no better way to trumpet the purpose of this article. However, we must not live in the amnesia that the economy is the sole basis of poverty. With changing times, changing viewpoints must be formed unequivocally. In the end, I can only assure one cryptic prophecy to the reader that whatever this article may

propound, it is a sordid fact that while I am writing this hippopotomonstrosesquipedalian essay and you are evaluating it, there will be almost a billion people in the world who will starve or sleep half-fed tonight.

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