



A STUDY ON POVERTY IN SANSKRIT LITERATURE WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO PANCHATANTRA

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ABSTRACT

Poverty is a socio-economic phenomenon in which a section of society is unable to fulfill even its basic necessities of life. Literature is considered as the mirror of the society. There are many famous literatures in various languages like Sanskrit, Hindi, Marathi, Odia, Bengali, Telugu, Tamil etc. which describes the abject poverty of the people through their characters. It's the greatness of king-poet Sudraka that he had brought out the burden of poverty through fictional characters in his Sanskrit play *Mruchha Katikam*. However, the present paper will focus how poverty is mentioned in Sanskrit literature with special reference to *Panchatantra*. Here, the *Panchatantra* describes about on privilege, poverty and servitude. Thus, Poverty in fact, is a socio-economic phenomenon that is intimately associated with inequality. In this context, the *Panchatantra*, an ancient treatise clearly mentions different aspects of poverty including how a man is ill treated by the society and the status of a man of poverty in the society.

KEYWORDS: Poverty, Literature, Sanskrit, *Mruchha Katikam*, *Panchatantra*, necessities, opportunities, inequality, *nispratibha*, consumption etc.

INTRODUCTION:

Poverty is a social-economic phenomenon in which a section of society is unable to fulfill even its basic necessities of life. The minimum needs are food, clothing, housing, education and other basic minimum human needs. Humanity faces pains and miseries if it does not attain a subsistence level of such needs. It is generally agreed in this country that only they who fail to reach a certain minimum consumption standard should be regarded as poor. "No society can surely be flourishing and happy, of which the far greater part of the members are poor and miserable" (Adam Smith, 1776).¹ Poverty is about denial of opportunities and fulfillment of human potential. Poverty and inequality are closely related, and inequality appears to have been on the rise

worldwide in recent decades at both national and international levels.²

Literature is considered as the mirror of the society. There are many famous literatures in various languages like Sanskrit, Hindi, Marathi, Odia, Bengali, Telgu, Tamil etc. which describes the abject poverty of the people through their characters. Be it poems, essays, story or fiction, the writer or poets describe different forms of poverty in their writings. Human poverty means the denial of choices and opportunities for a tolerable life in all economic and social aspects recognizing the problem.³ It's the greatness of king-poet Sudraka that he had brought out the burden of poverty through fictional characters in his Sanskrit play *Mruchha Katikam*.⁴ The name of the 10-act, first century BC drama is derived from the little clay cart with which the protagonist Charudattas's son plays and from which courtesan Vasantasena's ornaments were stolen form the crux of the play set in ancient Ujjain. After experiencing utmost poverty⁵, Charudatta describes it as the sixth sin, after the 'pancha mahapatakas' (five sins).⁶

However, the present paper will focus how poverty is mentioned in Sanskrit literature with special reference to Panchatantra. Here, the Panchatantra describes about on privilege, poverty and servitude. Panchatantra which was written by Vishnu Sharma contributes a lot to the horizon of knowledge.

Throughout, the Niti literature⁷, the very profusion of sympathetic portrayals of the miseries of poverty is in itself sufficient to demonstrate a significant degree of social conscience in Sanskrit.⁸ Even D.D. Koshambi concedes that poverty seems to be the only reality with which the poet of Classical period came to grips; but he immediately stipulates that the only property which concerned such a poet was the poverty of his won class.⁹ It seems to me impossible to prove that all or even a majority of complaints against poverty in Sanskrit springs from poet's selfish class interests or demonstrate their inability to generalize from their own experience of deprivation- assuming, for the sake of argument that such was their plight to that of others.¹⁰ Certainly verses from the Panchatantra do much to suggest sympathy rather than selfishness.

Wealth according to Panchatantra, confers unfair advantage upon its possessors while the poor suffer a consequent lack of opportunity. If a man is observed to ever cocksure, speaking arrogantly and domineering, then we may be sure of his strength comes from money. But,

*"surah surupah subhagasca vagmi
sastrani sastrani vidankarotu
artham vina naiva yasca manam
prapnoti marttyotra manusyaloke ."(5. 25)¹¹*

(should an ordinary mortal be brave, handsome, amiable, eloquent, and learned with respect to both weapons and texts; nevertheless, without money, he will gain neither fame nor respect in this human sphere).

The words *atra* and *manusyaloke* deserve special mention here. The poet who wrote the Panchatantra pointedly reminds his readers frequently that he speaks of this world with all its imperfections and not by implication, the earthly paradises dreamed up by the Mahakavis. In their idealized world, virtue never fails to be rewarded and poverty is seldom even suggested. But here in this world, as the Panchatantra's poet puts it,

*"Vikalamiha purvasukrtam vidyavanto pi kulasamudbhutah
yasya yada vibhavah syattasya tada dasatam yanti."* (5.9)¹²

(Previous good turns count for nothing in this world, even well-bred men of learning become the slaves of whomever has money at the time)

Of course, it is not 'this world' literally which is responsible for this injustice, but rather the men who populate it and colour it with their philistine values.

*"sukulam kusalam sujanam vihaya kulakusulasi lavikale pi
adhye kalpataraviva nityam rajayanti jamanivahah"* (5.8)¹³

Turning away from a decent man of talent and breeding, the people become as fascinated with a rich man as if he were wishing-tree, though he lacks breeding, talent or character". In the eyes of the world then, the virtues without money lose their lusture; character purify, forgiveness, skill, gentility and noble birth- all these fail utterly to lend lusture to an impoverished man" (5.2)¹⁴ The poet here and in the next two verses plays upon the convention within Sanskrit poetry which associates success with property of shining ness. Thus, the fame attended upon success is itself considered fancifully to be white in colour (c.f. the proper name 'Candrakanti' referring to one whose fame is like the moon in implied white ness and luminosity). There is also in this imagery a connotation of the loss of self confidence, which of course, goes well with the condition of being both impoverished and reduced to beg the indulgence of others.

Thus, Sanskrit poet describe the impoverished as nispratibha, literally, 'lack lusture' , but perhaps better rendered as 'crestfallen' or even 'depressed' or 'downtrodden' . So, it is that the Panchatantra's poet declares that a poor man's various virtues- however excellent-do not shine forth in the least; but, by its very nature, wealth makes all qualities shine, even as the sun illumine all manner of things(2.94)¹⁵.

In similar imagery, a poor man is said to 'sullied' by his poverty, which, in turn, leads him to a state of utter humanitarian (2.104)¹⁶. Moreover, akin to the concept of losing one's luster through impoverishment is the notion that through the same process, one becomes unsightly to the degree that, in accordance with the common place Hindu superstitions, even to be observed is to expose your beholder to possible misfortune. Thus, a poor man is said to be avoided exactly like several tabooed objects. For all intents and purposes, the poor man is dead; even his own kinsmen look upon him as if he were dead (2.103)¹⁷. His kinsmen suffer embarrassment on his account and seek to conceal their connection to him; similarly his friends became estranged (2.105)¹⁸. And, if that were not enough, his master, though well served, becomes hostile; his wife becomes insolent; his sons will abandon him(5.25)¹⁹. And still the burden of having a family continues: though he be of considerable intellect, still his mind is wasted on worry over butter, salt, oil, grain, clothing and fuel (5.4)²⁰. His status is diminished to such a degree that he stands bellow ritually unclean, inanimate dirt; even clay left over from toilet routines finds some use, where as the poor man is of no use to any one. If he approaches some one with more money, the latter avoids him, suspecting him to have come to beg or steal, though in both the cases the poor man may have only approached his more fortunate acquaintance with the intention of doing him a favour.

Perhaps, more frustrating than being shunned is the poor man's experience of being totally ignored. Even with effort, no one will seemingly be able to see him, the

gloom of his poverty obscures him even on a sunlit day. His existence is name only. Any fate is preferable to that of living off kinsmen (5.23)²¹ or begging. The poor are impotent or like widows of good breeding, their only alternative is to torture their minds with unfulfilled hopes; such hopes, again, are as useless.

CONCLUSION:

Thus, Poverty in fact, is a socio-economic phenomenon that is intimately associated with inequality. It adversely affects human health, efficiency and productivity which in turn affect their income. It deprives a segment of society of bare necessities of life- food, clothing, housing, education and health. Poverty is more of social marginalization of an individual, household or group in the community/society rather than inadequacy of income to fulfill the basic needs. Indeed, inadequate income is therefore one of the factors of marginalization but not the sole factor. In this context, the Panchatantra, an ancient treatise clearly mentions different aspects of poverty including how a man is ill treated by the society and the status of a man of poverty in the society.

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