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### A Fresh Look at the Understanding of Charity with Special Reference to the Present Indian Practice

By

James Massey\*

The discussion of this paper is divided in two parts: *Present understanding* of Charity and *a fresh look* at the understanding of Charity particularly with a reference to the present Indian practice.

#### **I. Present understanding**

As the major religious and theological perspectives specially from the Christian and the Islamic point of views are being dealt by other presentations in this seminar, therefore, the discussion here is limited only first, to the dictionary based linguistic meaning of Charity as understood in three main English speaking contexts and then (second), the Charity as practised in the Indian context.

The new and revised deluxe edition of the *Webster's Encyclopaedic Unbridged Dictionary of the English Language* has given the following meanings of Charity: 1)charitable actions, as almsgiving or performing other benevolent actions of any sort for the needy with no expectation of material reward: *to devote ones life to charity*, 2)something given to a person or persons in need; aims: *she asked for work not charity*, 3) a charitable act or work 4) a charitable fund, foundation, or institution: *He left his estate to one of his charities*, 5) benevolent feeling, esp. towards those in need or in disfavour: *she looked so poor that we fed her out of charity*, and 6) Christian love; agape 1 Cor. 13.<sup>1</sup> The *Chamber English Dictionary*, the meanings of Charity gives as: universal love (N.T.): the disposition to think favourably of others, and do them good almsgiving: a usu. non profit-making foundation, institution, or cause, devoted to caring for those in need of help etc.<sup>2</sup> According to *Concise Oxford Dictionary* Charity means: 1) an organisation set up to provide help and raise money for those in need, 2) the voluntary giving of money those in need, 3) tolerance in judging others and love of humankind, typically in Christian context.<sup>3</sup> These three set of meanings of Charity, represent the three English regions or contexts: American (Webster), Scottish (Chamber) and English

(Oxford). The common important element in all for these three is, the Christian understanding of Charity, because all the three directly have referred to the Biblical usages of Charity in some forms. Here for the discussion of this paper, one can also add that even these usages are limited to the contextual understanding of the English world. Because language is also considered as a vehicle of a culture.<sup>4</sup> But it is true that even the English speaking persons from the non-English world particularly of the Southern countries, (where English rulers have ruled in the past), understand the meaning of Charity more or less in the above sense only.

In the case of India, it was Mother Teresa, who added a fresh idea to the whole understanding of Charity. She while making a difference between her poverty and the poverty of the Indian poor, said: “The only difference is that these people (*Indian poor*) are poor by birth, and we are poor by choice.”<sup>5</sup> This is a very important point in the Indian context, which is most of the time is missed by those people and groups who are engaged in charitable works in a country like India and also those who support such actions even from the Northern countries. In this regard a comment made by a biographer of Mother Teresa may be a noteworthy, which reads as:

Many people are trying to correct this state of affairs; and even the government is trying to remedy it, but they are all meeting with large obstacles: this extreme division of labour is greatly aggravated by the social system which forbids a person to engage in an activity foreign to his hereditary profession; and by the tradition of family unity which leaves a salaried person with fifteen idle people to support. This distribution of labour according to birth goes on even among the outcastes, where strict divisions separate the butcher, the curer and the cobbler from their brothers, because they have been soiled by contact with the hide of sacred cows.<sup>6</sup>

The main point here needs to be noted is that even to-day in India, the occupations are decided by birth, because of which certain communities of poor specially of the Dalits have lost their self respect to such an extent that they even regard their work to which their community is condemned not as a curse from which they should extricate themselves, but they take as a privilege, which they would like to preserve, and protect.<sup>7</sup> To such groups of poor *UNDP – Human Development Report 1997* has named as “chronically poor.”<sup>8</sup> It is here these ‘Chronically poor,’ who needs a different ‘charitable approach’. But how the Indian themselves understand the issue of Charity? The answer to this question is being discussed briefly here.

In the Indian context a common expression used for the ‘almsgiving’ in most of the religious traditions is *punya-dana*, which means ‘good or pure gift’ offered to a the needy or poor person. The concept of *punya-dana* includes the concern for other, but also according to them the giver always expect in return some kind of reward either spiritual or worldly.<sup>9</sup> The visible examples of *punya-dana* in action one can find at the gate of any religious shrine in the central part of Delhi or New Delhi. These religious shrines include, Hindus temple like *Birla Mandir* (New Delhi), Sikh Gurudwara like *Bangla Sabib* (New Delhi), a Muslim Mosque like *Jama Masjid* (Delhi) and a Christian Church like *Sacred Heart* (New Delhi). Almost every day (particularly on the day of worship) one can find hundreds of beggars with their hands extended toward the worshipers, who are going in and coming out from these religious shrines. Besides these open-ended actions of Charity, there are now hundreds of organised places, where the organised forms of charitable actions are also conducted.

But is there anything wrong with the Indian *punya-dana* or the above mentioned contextual understanding of the English world of Charity? Partly our answer is ‘yes’. Because we have to accept the fact that Charity as stand to-day, is not helpful in bringing a change in the situation of the poor or needy. It only offers them a temporary relief or help. Besides these limited benefits, the Charity especially in the context like India in the form of *punya-dana* (even upto some extend the Christian Charity as originated from the English speaking contexts) has gone in its connotation more in the negative sense, both from giver’s side as well as from the taker’s side. One of the main draw backs of such Charity is that it makes people (poor) more dependent, because it does not help them to become self-dependend. Because instead of empowering or regaining the self respect, it further makes them to lose their human dignity and respect. Such

Charity as a whole does not deal with the causes of poverty or misery, it only deals with the resulted situation and its consequences. It is these reasons which force us to re-think about our whole understanding of Charity in the present context of the poor.

## II. A fresh look

As seen in our earlier discussion, one common meaning of Charity in almost all the religious traditions has been the 'almsgiving'. This meaning of Charity has been summarised by one of the authors of the Deutero-canonical books of the Bible in these words:

*As water extinguishes a blazing fire,  
so almsgiving atones for sin.  
Those who repay favors give thought to the future;  
When they fall they will find support.  
(Sirach 3:30, 31 NRSV)*

*Punya-dana's* meaning in the Indian religious traditions also carries the above meaning of almsgiving or Charity. But it is also true the Indian religious traditions like the other traditions, also has the other deeper meaning specially when it is used without the prefix *Punya* meaning of *Dana* or Charity. For example a devotee (*upasakas*) according to Buddhist tradition, does earn merit by *Dana*, which in turn not only liberate a human being from ignorance and suffering, but it also raises the level of human him or her.<sup>10</sup> In the case of Hindu tradition, it is true according to it, human being is "not born with birth-rights, but with birth duties" and every human being has to redeem oneself by performing faithfully these duties. Among the five such duties, the fourth and fifth duties directly are related to Charity: "providing food and shelter, as well as expressing in daily prayers one's gratitude to all those who make one's life and well-being possible."<sup>11</sup>

The Sikh religion represents one of the youngest Indian religious traditions, which lays a very special emphasis on Charity. The Sikh religion has three Golden rules, which are supposed to govern the life of a Sikh. These are *Kirat Karo* (to earn one's livelihood by honest creative labour), *Vand Chhako* (to share the fruits of one's labour with others) and *Nam Japo* (to meditate on God's name). In a way all these three rules are inter-connected, but for our to-day's discussion, the second rule is directly related to the subject of Charity, because in *Vand Chhako* the emphasis is on selfless services to others. It is not like almsgiving, where always on one side a beggar and the other is a giver, one is a depended slave and other is a master, but *Van Chhako* lays emphasis on equality.<sup>12</sup>

Besides the various religious traditions, it is Mother Teresa and her Missionaries of Charity which need a special reference in the Indian context. According to Sister Nirmala Joshi, the understanding of Charity of Mother Teresa and her Sisters was based on their experience of the cross. Sr. Joshi also says that Mother Teresa got a direct command from Jesus, who told her: "I want Indian nuns, victims of My love who would be Mary and Martha, who would be so united to Me as to radiate My love on souls, who would be My fire of love amongst the poor, the sick, the dying and the little children. I want free nuns covered with My poverty of the cross...obedient nuns covered with My obedience of the cross...full of love nuns covered with My charity of the cross."<sup>13</sup>

Besides the experience of cross, Mother Teresa's understanding of Charity is having a number of other aspects, which are important for the right understanding of Charity in a context like India. The idea of going out to the poor was the main focal point of Mother's charity,<sup>14</sup> which is also the meaning of solidarity or 'solidarity with the needy.' As part of a Mother Teresa's Charity mission, she declared openly: "My home is among the poor, and not only the poor, but the

poorest of them: the people no one will go near because they are filthy and suffering from contagious diseases,..."<sup>15</sup>

#### IV. Concluding remarks

In the concluding remarks, I want to add only one point that our understanding of Charity has to go beyond the almsgiving. It has to be comprehensive in nature, more in the sense of 'solidarity', means to become a part of the struggle of the poor against any form of poverty. Because poverty is an evil. But sadly, the number of the poor in the world are on the increase specially through the present form of globalisation. In this situation the challenge before all of us is to stand with the poor or needy in their struggle for the removal of poverty. This will be the only possible way to enter in to the process of an authentic 'solidarity' or 'Charity' with the poor. This form of Charity will help in achieving the economic and social equality and will become the basis of establishing a just and humane society, which in future ought to be the goal of all charities.

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*\*Prof. Dr. habil. James Massey is the Director of the Centre for Dalit/Subaltern Studies (Theology), New Delhi, India and a Privatdozent at the Faculty of Protestant Theology at the Johann Wolfgang Goethe-University in Frankfurt am Main, Germany.*

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