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On Being Distinguished

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Bahraich, India

No government can eliminate poverty absolutely (for there are those that rejoice in poverty), nor can it give every needy all the help he needs. Social or charity work, as it has a very important role to play in filling up such gaps, can by no means be overlooked. The aspiration to become a distinguished person is a virtue because it inspires people to do something impossible or to do social work which they otherwise, with certain unpleasant setbacks that volunteers on different charity projects often experience, might never do.

Generally, the poor are poor because they choose to be. Most of them enjoy themselves drinking wine, smoking, talking of politics and playing cards and scarcely opt to go to work till they have spent every last rupee on them. Anybody who knows their ways does not like to help them, although their wretched wives and children are pitiable figures. Likewise, there are certain other situations where a help is inevitable - for example, to carry a road accident victim to a hospital, cremation of dumped corpses, schooling and fostering dumb and deaf, handicapped and orphans, to minister to the neglected and deprived old people etc - and certain places where supply of drinking water can be a life saving work; and health care, a compelling need. A cemetery being another home should therefore need to be kept in good condition; and the villages or towns that have none at all should have one.

The government is, generally speaking, responsible for this kind of public services, but in fact it often fails to reach the required standard; so the question arises as to who else would do that when people these days are self-centred and prefer to do lucrative jobs only, when life is lived at such a hectic pace that they have little time for the unhappiness of others, or even for their wives and children and when the present-day lifestyle has little place for scruples and spiritual values, which, as usual, leads people to snatch bread from the mouth of a ravenous man, and the middlemen and people in power to cart off the major portion of what the common people produce in the sizzling sun, rain and the cold mist, often before they bring it in.

Nonetheless, there are those who get into peculiar kinds of vocations: some of them scale the highest mountains, some walk along a rope at great heights between skyscrapers or gorges, some go skydiving, some dive off the cliff into the sea, some skate on the sea waves and on ice at a lake, some wrestle with dangerous animals, some enter the sports car championship, some spend their lives writing and reading books, preferring to live in genteel poverty, and some grow beard to preach people at the cost of their social lives. They are mad? Nay, since fame is prized above money and power and veneration above all else, they work as the price that nature reserves for them and also for those few who choose to build non-profit hospitals, schools, water fountains, cowsheds, marriage halls, almshouses, etc and to modernize and manage a resting place, by persuading people to chip in, employing workers, purchasing materials, inspecting the activities and taking care of everything deemed necessary.

Compared to the other tasks of this sort, the charity work is more difficult and also makes fewer fans, because there are people who donate sums to charity but they rarely put their time and effort into it, and if somebody did, they would soon be disgruntled with none else but the main beneficiaries who – instead of admiring them for their arduous tasks – suspect that they profit from even such jobs, directly or indirectly, envy them and what is more make the mess of the things that they provide for them. The poor would not be poor if they knew how to appreciate a good work and could realize that the rich do a social work because they want to have their names carved on a stone. Perhaps this is why God does not give us anything without a genuine effort.

The cemetery in our city is among the best-known cemeteries in the country. It is located alongside the River Saryu, has flowering gardens in leafy suburban areas, lawns surrounded by clipped hedges, a park with a recreation centre and surrounding trees, temples, parking places, both pumps and running water and adequate electric light and is equipped with a modern crematorium. The credit for the routine maintenance of all these things and the facilities management goes to Mr Sheetal Prasad, one of the richest persons of our district.

One day a prominent old man of Sheetal's acquaintance died. Hundreds of people came to attend his funeral service at the city cemetery. Sheetal was already present in the crematorium yard. When people stood around in groups, waiting for the ceremony to start, he, perhaps with a view to fishing for compliments, edged forward over to the funeral pyre, inspected everything carefully, then started to give the cemetery workers instructions on what more was needed there; but to his surprise, nobody paid any attention to what he was doing, nor did anyone ever appreciate the efforts and intentions of his club in providing them with one of the best equipped cemeteries in the country.

Being disheartened by their hostile reaction, he walked over to a group of people and pointing to the garden, lawns, flower plants, statues, idols of gods etc, he started to give them a brief account of how he and the members of his club had been doing to revamp the cemetery. They listened to him and looked at what he asked them to, but they still did not make any admiring comment. Then at last he chose to complain to them that the people had parked their vehicles inside the yard even when there was a spacious parking place outside.

Had they felt the lack of a crematory, or rather, felt compelled to cremate a dead body on a piece of marsh or swamp, they might have realized the value of the contribution made by Sheetal and his team – for relativity begets comprehension.