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Chief Guest

Since I was three years old till his passing away in 1942, I had several occasions to receive Jamnalalji's love and affection. I recall his last years living extremely simply at Gopuri near Wardha, and looking after cows, apart from giving his advice and performing other Gandhian constructive activities. In 1931, Mahatma Gandhi had a dream. He dreamt of an India in which the poorest would feel that it was their country in whose making they would have an effective voice, an India where there would be no higher or lower classes of people, an India where there would be no curse of untouchability, an India where women would enjoy the same rights as men, an India which would be in peace with the rest of the world, neither exploiting nor being exploited, requiring the smallest army imaginable. He said "I shall be satisfied with nothing less".

It was this dream which led millions of Indians to fight under his leadership the most formidable Imperial power of the world, not with arms but with 'ahimsa'. The world looked with amazement at this struggle between David and Goliath, which was so unequal, so uneven and seemingly so predetermined. It observed with utter disbelief and bewilderment when sheer moral authority humbled the fierce brute force of the Imperial power, with all humility and compelled it to transfer power to India. Ethics and morality were the corner stones of our freedom struggle. The human values practiced and preached by Gandhiji and nationalist leaders like Jamnalalji Bajaj still shine so brightly against the surrounding darkness of materialism, greed, avarice, pride and prejudice which today tend to fracture and dismember the cohesiveness of our polity and society.

More than 50 years after we achieved our independence, in the year 2000, 26% of our population continued to live below the poverty line. Top 5% of Indians enjoyed 704% higher consumption expenditure compared to the bottom 5% (NSSO Consumption Expenditure Survey 1999-2000). This appalling degree of inequality is surely not desirable anywhere and certainly not in our sovereign, socialist, secular, democratic Republic.

Today we discover that we gave rise to an infrastructure that basically looked after the consumption needs of the well-to-do, of providing them with a lifestyle comparable to those in the advanced capitalist countries of the North" (Rajni Kothari). There is no denying that inspite of spectacular successes in certain sectors, the state still failed to secure justice - social, economic and political and equality of status and opportunity to all its citizens as mandated by the Constitution and dreamt of by its founding fathers.

There appears to be a crisis in governance. There seems to be a growing culture of intolerance and insensitivity wherever and whenever the poor and the weak raise their voices to assert their legal and Constitutional rights. Empowerment of the masses through the enforcement of their legal rights seems to be an anathema to the governing establishment cutting across the party lines. All the noble ideas and maxims enshrined in the Directive Principles of State Policy are far from being realized even after more than 50 years of the adoption of our Constitution, Where will the poor seek relief? Who would provide them succor? Or, would they be left to fend for themselves and nobody will listen to them till they take the path of destructive militancy? We have to provide an answer not only in the intellectual plane but also in practical terms if we are to avoid the tearing asunder of our social cohesion and stability.

With the acceptance of the policy of economic reforms through liberalization, privatization and globalization the situation has become all the more piquant for the weak, disadvantaged and marginalized sections of our society. At the dawn of independence the Indian State identified itself as a Welfare State. But that State is gradually withdrawing from welfarism yielding the commanding heights of the economy to the private sector. The space vacated by the State is being occupied by the corporate sector. However the private sector would occupy only that area which would yield

dividends to its share holders. Basically profit motive would guide their choice of activity. There is, perhaps, nothing wrong in that. After all, business and industrial houses are not philanthropic entities. Who would occupy the space vacated by the State and not catered to by the corporate sector? Will that area remain unattended to? Here comes the role of the civil society.

The term 'civil society' is being used to distinguish the whole set of organizations, institutions or entities from governmental, semi-governmental and statutory bodies. In an era of retreating governance, free market, privatization, deregulation, restructuring, et al, formulation and implementation of major policies seem increasingly to be undertaken by organizations of civil society. Though civil society by definition has a wide coverage, for the purpose of this short discourse, it would be desirable to restrict its ambit and to define civil society broadly coterminous with voluntary agencies which are free associations of free people with the objective of bringing about social and economic change for the people, particularly those who belong to the disadvantaged and deprived groups and which are non-profit making and non-political in character. Their activities cover a wide spectrum from literacy, education, health and sanitation, provision of drinking water, micro savings, local level planning to popularizing science and promotion of scientific and rational temper. In their advocacy role they move from anti-liquour, anti-drug, anti-dowry movements to conscientization- a word used by Paulo Ferrairi, well-known educationist - of the masses for proper appreciation of correlations of social and economic forces which keep them suppressed and oppressed to organizing and mobilizing the poor for changing the exploitative socio-economic structure. In the realm of ideas they vary from shades of conformism to radical non-conformism. They, however, do not constitute a homogenous universe. In their diversity and variety they encompass various coalescing and opposing interests and ideas to give them a multi-colored rainbow splendor. In simple terms, where the state power is controlled by the privileged and the elite, the civil society has a definitive role to act as change agents whether evolutionary or revolutionary. Thus the civil society has an important role to play in changing the configuration of the society and the polity and in bringing the marginalized and the cast away groups of our society into the mainstream. The four awardees today represent this concept of 'civil society'. They are the role-models for all of us.

To the poor, God appears as a morsel of food, so said Gandhiji. Mahatma was totally against inequality and inequality with all their attending misery and evil. To bring about an egalitarian and caring society he propounded the theory of trusteeship. According to him the wealth of the wealthy does not belong to him. What belongs to him "is the right to an honourable livelihood no better than that enjoyed by millions of others." The rest of his wealth belongs to the community and must be used for the welfare of the community. Jamnalalji followed this principle in letter and spirit. He sanctioned himself a meager sum of money for his day to day expenses, which also he gradually brought down by reducing his personal needs.

The import and the thrust of this revolutionary concept of Mahatma was totally lost and forgotten when at the dawn of our independence India accepted the idea of a welfare state tending towards a socialist pattern of society. State was supposed to look after all aspects of an individual citizen's life and well-being. Now that the state is itself receding from this concept and embracing a policy of free market moving towards a form of laissez-faire, the significance of this theory is becoming self evident. In such a situation what sanction would be there to check unethical and improper acquisition of wealth by a few to the exclusion of many? In fact there would be none. Hence the theory of trusteeship today becomes not only relevant but provides the only sanction against gross inequality which a free market with retreating governance would generate. Unchecked and ugly acquisition of income and assets by a few would threaten our polity and society. No nation can survive for long with a few having all and many having nothing. Democracy and inequality are incompatible. For the survival of our democratic state and society, egalitarianism is essential. There was an interesting finding in the World Economic Forum Annual Meet last year, that there was a direct and unquestionable correlation between poverty and terrorism. In fact, it was the unemployed youth without any means of sustenance that become easy fodder for terrorist outfits.

There is hardly any other instrument available today to reduce the crass unfairness of the acquisitive society except the voluntary self abnegation by the rich under the theory of trusteeship. Here again I recall the Herculean efforts made by Shri Ramkrishnaji to propagate the idea of trusteeship and fair trade practices. Though some others in the business community ridiculed this he was undeterred by that and firmly carried on his crusade. May I with all humility suggest to this Foundation to promote this theory among those who have, to share their wealth with the community of have-nots. Cautioning against the rising disparity of emoluments between the top brass US corporations and their ordinary workers, a management guru predicted: "In 2010, I project the gap will be that between Louis XVI and his workers - and you know what happened to Luis XVI". I just leave it as a thought.

The other area of concern to all of us is the threat of fragmentation of the polity due to inter group violence based on ethnicity, religion, caste or language. India is a great country with enormous diversity. But this diversity is good when there is an essential unity underlying it. With its long tradition of assimilation, synthesis and tolerance, India did achieve a remarkable degree of unity based on unity of heart and mind. But it is also a fact of life that often this unity is disturbed by bouts of wanton violence whether religious, casteist or ethnic. These may be aberrations but when such horrible disorders take place, they tend to shake the foundation of our society and even of our polity.

Hence there is a need to appreciate the concept of secularism propagated by our founding fathers and enshrined in our Constitution. Secularism as interpreted in our country does not mean negation of or discouragement to any religion. It means free play of all religions. The State has nothing to do with any religion. It means freedom of religion and conscience including freedom for those who have no religion. Nehru interpreted this term much more widely which included the idea of social and political equality. Thus according to him a caste ridden society is not properly secular. Unfortunately, we are witnessing today resurgence of ugly casteism and religious intolerance which is against our noble tradition of assimilation and acceptance.

Suspicion, prejudice, false images -these are very easy to plant. Like poisonous weeds they strike roots and spread fast. Countering them is an arduous task, needing perseverance, strong conviction and determination and willingness to suffer unpleasantness. We should remember what that great saint Ramakrishna Paramhansa said. He observed that there were as many paths as there are beliefs. But all these paths have the same destination - realization of one God. He preached and practiced unity of religions. He himself by turn adopted Islam and Christianity. But he did not cease to be a Hindu and a Hindu saint at that. That is the essence of Indian culture which fosters a feeling of reverence to all religions and tolerates all faiths with equal veneration.

Gandhiji was an intensely religious person. Yet he was totally secular. Religion to him was an entirely personal matter. He had equal reverence for all religions - Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Zorastrianism and Judaism. In a recent report, UNESCO pointed out that out of 128 countries where Jews lived before Israel was created only one country, India, did not persecute them and allowed them to prosper and practice Judaism in peace. The same is the history of the Parsis who, having been hounded out from Persia, found safe haven in India and became important part of Indian polity and economy in a much larger measure than their number would otherwise justify.

In various fora, I often stress on the need, especially for those who are educated, established and able, to return back to the society something for what they have received from it. There is an old Biblical saying - It is dangerous to increase the number of exiles; the exiles may invade the Kingdom. The suffering masses are tired of waiting. They should be in a position to reap benefits of the all-round and fabulous developments that India is achieving. Let us this day pledge again to help the masses to better their conditions. No one loves to live in poverty. What the poor and the downtrodden need is a slight push and a little support. You cannot possibly have islands of

prosperity amidst an ocean of tears, hunger and want. Can we be unconcerned with the 25% of the population that lives under the poverty line going hungry? Remember, unless we involve the destitute, the downtrodden, the educated unemployed and the youth in the socio-economic development process of the country the situation can not improve. Each one of us should think and act in our own sphere of influence to make India great.

There are some organizations which reflect history. There are some organizations which contribute to history. This Foundation is one such organization which can do both. Holding on to the torch of peace, harmony and tolerance lit by Mahatma Gandhi and his great disciple and son Jamnalalji Bajaj, let it guide us to a better, Just and more humane world - in the words of Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore -

"Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;
Where knowledge is free;
Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls;
Where words come out from the depth of truth
Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection;
Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit;
Where the mind is led forward by thee into ever-widening thought and action-
Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake."

