

## **Messiah of the poor? Modi 'successfully' trading poverty in the market of *Bhogvad***

Prem Singh

(1)

There is contraction of meaning in the phrase capitalist consumerism. The correct expression for the view of life (*Jivan-drishti*) underlying the modern industrial capitalist civilization would be the phrase *Punjivadi Bhogvad*. The capitalist *Bhogvad* operates by incorporating feudal *Bhogvad* into itself. The view of life that has developed in the process of capitalist *Bhogvad* during the last three-four centuries can be briefly introduced as follows: Whatever resources and sources of energy are there in the universe, they all are meant for human sensual pleasure (*Indriya-sukh*); Man has to concentrate all his senses, all dimensions of his talent and activities in the direction of maximum sensual pleasure; Never mind the consequences like immeasurable disparities and catastrophic climate destruction; And not to worry about wars, civil wars, massacres and other violent conflicts while pursuing this goal. Further, even if far reaching human values like truth, aesthetics, sublimation and compassion have to be lost. In this sense, an English equivalent of *Punjivadi Bhogvad* is not available yet.

The word *Bhog* is unique in Indian literature. The solitary word *Bhog* is used in sacred religious and philosophical meanings. When, with the suffix *vad*, it becomes *Bhogvad*, it gives the meaning of a sensual-luxurious life-style. There is an old tradition of offering *Bhog* to God every day or on special occasions of puja/rituals. The thing offered in *Bhog* is accepted as *Prasad*. *Bhog* can be made up of anything available to the poorest of the poor, and also of fifty-six consonants (*chhappan Bhog*). The practice of offering *Bhog* to God/Deity is mainly related to *Saguna Bhakti* stream. But this practice is also adopted in some form or the other in the sects of *Nirgunavadi* saints. In Sikhism, there is a practice of offering *Bhog* along with the recitation of Guru Granth Sahib on special occasions related to life and death. The practice of *Bhog* has also been transmitted in Indian Islam and Christianity to some extent.

One meaning of the word *Bhog* has been associated with human suffering (*Dukh*). As per one anecdote Bhagwan Shankar conveys to Parvati who used to be moved by human sufferings very often and would request Shankarji to remove them. Shankarji would say that 'there is always less happiness and more

suffering in the world. So much so that even I cannot remove all the sufferings of everyone. If you are a human being, you will have to suffer.' In this sense, the word suffering is associated with a philosophical quest about the predicament of human life. That is, why is there suffering in the world; And can suffering be prevented? Can happiness always last? Is suffering a result of past deeds or are there other worldly reasons for it?

Whatever be the case, in both these senses – religious and philosophical - the meaning of *Bhog* is related to man's specific notion of life or view of life i.e. whatever we have received from you (God/nature), we accept it by first offering it to you; So that we are saved from sufferings. Under this view of life, there is a relationship of mutuality between nature and man. Thousands of years of feudal "*Bhogvilas*", an extension of which can also be seen in Thakurji's "*Chhappan-Bhog*", does not go beyond the limits of the mutual relationship between nature and man. The *Bhogvad* in the feudal era also had a strong sex-centric dimension. "*Bhogi*", the opposite of "*Yogi*", no matter how high his sensualist lust was, it could not go beyond this scope in the feudal era. Bhartrihari, the author of 'Vairagya Shatak', has cautioned - 'We do not enjoy the sensual pleasures, it is the pleasures that enjoy us'. This means to say that in feudal civilization *Bhogvad* was a tendency, not a view of life. Limits were set even on *Bhogvadi* tendencies.

The *Bhogvad* of modern industrial civilization, which bears at its core a competitive relationship between man and nature, knows no limits. It can be said that *Bhogvad* has been established as an elaborated view of life in this civilization. The "Development" – started from commercial capitalism to the corporate capitalism - under this civilization can be read from this perspective. Some renowned economists or thinkers of the world sometimes question this model of development; But they do not question the *Bhogvadi* view of life at its core. Gandhi adamantly questioned this *Bhogvadi* view of life; And submitted an elaborated alternative of the same. Several thinkers of the West have also critiqued and opposed the *Bhogvadi* view of life born out of modern industrial civilization. However, it has been only a small stream so far.

My purpose in writing this introduction is not to delve into this complex civilizational question. Rather, I would like to re-state the fact that the trade of poverty in the market of *Bhogvad* is being run openly in the name of New India. For the last 10 years, Narendra Modi has been running this trade very fast and efficiently. He, in fact, has a long experience of running this trade in Gujarat. Some sceptics felt that the Prime Minister's Office was not the same as the Chief Minister's Office. But Narendra Modi dispelled those doubts. He spends lavishly on daily luxury such as *tel-fulel*, haircare, garments, consonants etc. He, further, spends indiscriminately on getting his picture and name imprinted on every nook and corner, waving new advertisements of events/schemes/guarantees, setting up the most expensive pandals for speeches, frequent foreign trips and so on and so forth. Interestingly, Modi, who regularly spends billions of rupees of taxpayers' money on his image building, buying a new airplane for himself, building a new Prime Minister's residence, building a new Parliament House and Central Vista etc., claims to be the messiah of the poor!

He has extracted billions of rupees from big and small corporate houses into his party's account. He has also made the office of the world's biggest party the most expensive. When the leader is a successful trader, the party will definitely be a trading company. The news of this party trade remains in the media headlines regularly under "Operation Lotus". The established norm of a trade is – whatever is seen, that sells. Modi, his *Nav-Ratnas*, party, parent organization and his supporters based in America and Europe all think "big". So big that the eyes of the little ones are bound to be left wide open!

In April 2019, in the article 'Narendra Modi: Investigating Eligibility', I tried to identify some qualifications of Modi as an obedient leader of corporate capitalism. Let us further investigate Modi, who is doing a successful trade of poverty in the market of *Bhogvad*. Before the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, while joining the race for the post of Prime Minister, Modi had heavily publicized his poverty. Needless to say, there was no dearth in his grandeur while being the Chief Minister of Gujarat. He could be seen enjoying every comfort associated with modern technology. He was the biggest advocate of liberalization-privatization policies in any state of the country and happened to be favourite of both Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Dr Manmohan Singh for this very reason. Naturally, he was a favourite of the corporates in India and abroad.

In fact, some magnate of the corporate world considered him like their toy. It seems that Modi too has no objection to this fact. He enjoyed flying in Adani's private airplane. Ambani must have used the picture of Modi in the advertisement of his Jio SIM with full authority. The fine of Rs 500 itself shows that it was a "friendly crime" committed by Ambani. In New India, if someone is openly with the corporate and at the same time openly against the Muslims, then his trade will continue. Under Modi's leadership, a large number of educated and economically/administratively empowered Indians have accepted that being an "awakened Hindu" requires continued hostility towards Muslims and Christians. There is an inexhaustible treasure house in history for them as the source of this animosity.

Poverty is not a unique thing in India. Therefore, it is not unusual for a leader in India to have a poor family background. Except Jawaharlal Nehru, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, Vishwanath Pratap Singh, almost all the Prime Ministers here come from small-marginal farmer families or from lower-middle class service or business families. Even before becoming big leaders, Nehru, Indira Gandhi and Vishwanath Pratap Singh had given up their wealth in the interest of the country's independence and the betterment of the society. There has been no dearth of leaders who have adopted the beauty of simplicity during the struggle for independence and even in the independent India. This can be said about all streams and parties engaged in politics.

One may observe that social psychology used to be developed in the personality of a poor person. Even if he has had to spend his entire life in poverty, or if he has achieved some kind of position and prestige. Generally, there can be found three categories of the people who achieve position and prestige despite being from a poor background: One, he always wants to be in the company of rich persons, wants to be friend with them, wants to establish family relations with them, and imitates their lifestyle, behaviour, customs and hobbies. The poor become "worms in the drain" for him too. Two, such a person develops a deep prejudice against the rich/sirs, due to which he adopts a rebellious attitude against them; And keeps trying to run-down/demolish them. Third, such a person becomes completely generous-hearted on attaining position and prestige; And keeps looking for opportunities to help the underprivileged. He tries to live with simplicity and moderation in his life. Modi is the poor of the first category. The funny thing is that, call it hypocrisy or guilt, along with being rich and indulgent, he also claims to be a "Yogi-Yati-Fakir" etc.!

In 1991, Congress deviated from its path by implementing the New Economic Policies imposed by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) instead of the Directive Principles of State Policy guided by and enshrined in the Constitution. Expressing his happiness Atal Bihari Vajpayee had said that the Congress has facilitated Bharatiya Janata Party's path by doing this. The same Vajpayee who, in the speech delivered at the first national conference of the BJP held in Bombay in December 1980, had strongly declared the new party's allegiance to the doctrine of Gandhian socialism along with the tenets of democracy and secularism. Even the national conference venue was named as 'Samta Nagar'. Before that, Lal Krishna Advani, in his speech delivered on the occasion of the party's foundation conference held in April 1980 at Feroz Shah Kotla, Delhi, had said that the new party was committed to the idea of Jayaprakash Narayan's total revolution. Obviously, the pressure of the Indian Constitution and 'Poor India' was intact on 'Rich India' till then.

But the same Vajpayee and Advani not only welcomed the New Economic Policies but became the star campaigners of 'Shining India'. However, one should keep in mind that Vajpayee and Advani were not alone in the support of neoliberalism. Today, most of the intellectuals who curse Modi day and night for tearing down constitutionalism, overtly or covertly supported the very ideas of 'Shining India', 'New India', 'Corporate India', 'Developed India', 'Economic Superpower India'. Even today their position has not been changed. Apart from the Congress and the BJP, most of the leaders/parties have made the Constitution a laughing stock by continuously belittling the basic constitutional values – socialism, secularism and democracy.

Only a few years after the implementation of the New Economic Policies, a concern arose as to what to do with the poor in the neoliberal system that breeds economic exclusion and unemployment? This concern of the political and intellectual class was no longer driven by constitutional obligations, as was often the case till the eighties, but was driven by the objective of consolidating political power by securing the votes of the poor. At the same time, their objective was to deny and suppress the explicit voices of opposition to neoliberal policies, and in support of an alternative based on the values of the freedom movement and the Constitution. For this, poverty started being traded through various welfare schemes with the nomenclatures of Prime Ministers-Chief Ministers and various past icons. This was done outside the main economy with the promises of free bees, eradicating corruption, providing good

governance and making India great in the world. The leaders of the stature of Prime Minister, President, Vice President and ministers got involved in this task without any qualms.

With this, religion, by blocking the sources of spirituality, compassion, philosophy and art innate to it, was literally made the opium of the masses through electronic media. Traditional religious sects, Akharas, monasteries and temples did not make any efforts to stop this sumptuous loss of religion. Various babas, who emerged from the womb of the market of *Bhogvad*, spread a huge business net-work of devotion, spirituality, yoga and art of living in the country and abroad. The sweet-and-sour experiences, dreams and ideals of Indian life almost disappeared from TV serials and films. In the market of *Bhogvad*, a life full of sensuality and luxury was presented as the only ideal of the people.

Gandhi was 'assassinated' once again by saying that 'This is the India of Gandhi's dreams.' Narasimha Rao and Manmohan Singh, speaking in the US Congress, told this "truth" (one may read post-truth) to the world. The resolve to establish Gandhian socialism has not yet been removed from the BJP's constitution. The nascent middle class (reinvigorated under neoliberal policies) took revenge on Gandhi for daring to advocate simplicity in life. Gandhi was made to stand at the reception doors of grand wedding pandals begging for alms from the guests. People would laugh and play with him and hand over five-ten rupees. Referring to one such incident, I had told earlier that at a wedding ceremony, liquor to guests was served by Gandhi and Charlie Chaplin.

During the same period, a new experiment was done by placing a garland of liquor bottles around the neck of Gandhi's statue on the Ridge of Shimla. This was the time when some intellectuals intensified their endeavours to beat Gandhi with the stick of Ambedkar and Bhagat Singh; And Dalit leaders pulled down Gandhi's statue and stomped on it. As if by toppling Gandhi, they were creating the India of Ambedkar's and Bhagat Singh's dreams!

The trading of poverty in the market of *Bhogvad* is double-edged – on the one hand, votes are traded to gain political power; On the other hand, political power is used to hand over national/public resources, enterprises and assets to private companies collecting huge amounts of money from them in exchange. This deed is done openly in the name of Gandhi, Ambedkar, Bhagat Singh etc. In this trading, billions of rupees are spent on advertising to give free five kilos of food grains to the people. As if eighty crore “beneficiaries” are not citizens of India but refugees from the neighbouring countries; And in that respect, should not be equal partners in the country's wealth. If “free bees” are distributed then the “great Indian middle class” is not left behind. I had once mentioned that my teacher Dr Vishwanath Tripathi once told me with an overwhelmed feeling that Kejriwal has made a revolution by making electricity and water free!

If this political leadership, which is trading poverty, will not mobilize people in the name of religion and castes and make them fight among themselves, then how will they be able to acquire immense wealth to run their families/parties with pomp and contest/win elections? In the democracy we are running, the trading of poverty is actually the eviction of the poor from the democracy itself. Compact arrangements have been made to buy their votes by making them apolitical under the corporate politics.

Some nice people, disappointed with the disintegration of the opposition in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, and the manoeuvring of the central government to paralyze the opposition by using government agencies like Enforcement Directorate (ED), Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), National Security Agency (NIA) etc. hope that the public will take an initiative in order to bring about change. This hope is obvious in a democracy. But there are two things to keep in mind: First, in the last two Lok Sabha elections about 70 and 64 percent voters have not voted for BJP. Therefore, implementing a proportional representation electoral system should be the main issue in the discussion of electoral reforms. Vajpayee himself advocated this in his 1980 speech.

Secondly, under corporate politics, the tendency of leaders/parties to mobilize voters through electronic media and advertisements has taken away the right of initiative from the public. This trend was established with great fanfare in the politics of India with the anti-corruption movement and the formation of the Aam Aadmi Party. Both the current *godi* media and the resistant media were on

the same side in that tremendous attack on the political conscience/wisdom of the people. The RSS and corporate were there as natural allies.

As a result, even an undercurrent is manufactured by the media and advertising net-works. For this, leaders/parties need corporate funding worth thousands of crores. This vicious cycle can be broken only by the continuous efforts of constitutionally conscious citizens. Possibilities for a new/alternative politics will open up with civic sensibility. Human beings cannot accept being an object of trade forever, neither individually nor as a community/class.

*(Associated with socialist movement the author is a former teacher of Delhi University and a fellow of Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla)*