

Potential of Religion as a Correctional Agent



Religion

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ABSTRACT

There cannot be any reformation in prisons through improvement in living conditions alone. It is possible through the inculcation of faith, a belief in certain values of life.

It is observed that inmates are more inclined towards religions after their imprisonment. The deprivations imposed on them by imprisonment break their direct link with the outer-world. They gradually realize that religion does not necessarily promise a perfect life, nor freedom from sufferings, but it does guarantee the strength to bear sufferings. For them, religion becomes a trust in God and His mysterious ways. Such belief gives them the inner security and confidence they need to carry themselves through the adverse circumstances. Actually, they are rejected by society and frustrated with their own actions. When they take shelter of religion or God, they never lose hope in life and its goodness. Religion becomes a great source of help for their social re-construction. There is an increase of good-will among them for each other. They try to help each other in daily chores, in sickness and mental agonies, through listening to the tales of woe. The general atmosphere thus improves. Ultimately, they learn to behave in a socially acceptable manner.

INTRODUCTION

Literally speaking, religion is a principle of unification, harmonization and socialization. The word *Religion* is derived from the Latin term *religere* which means - to bind or unite again. Thus, religion is a strong instinctive feeling based on a belief of harmonious relation between man and the universe at large.

Modern times have seen a great psychological upheaval. It has been established that man is not what he seems to be. His conscious behaviour is not everything. The unconscious-self holds the key to the understanding of man. Thought is the seed of action and originates in the unconscious-self of a man; and if man is to be changed his thought should be changed. It is also a familiar method of sublimating the thoughts and giving them a direction whereby the man becomes an instrument of social-service and humility .

Uncontrolled thoughts and violent passions create disturbance in society and shake its peaceful foundations. It is here that motivation of religion is required. If properly understood and practised, religion can help in the eradication of crime and delinquency. The sum total of thoughts, consistently entertained by an individual, eventually turns him into a person of particular *nature or character*. Thoughts build character, and character goads us into action. If we intend to reform the society, purge it off crime and delinquency, we have to re-orientate the thought of man and give him some great ideals to follow.

Sometimes, some individuals resort to the anti-social activities due to their evil intentions. As a consequence, society deprives them of the privileges given as an average citizen and rights given as a free-citizen; they are sent to prison for correction and rehabilitation. It is assumed that prison life can make them realize their past misconduct and provide an opportunity for their re-construction as a social-being. For this purpose, their religious inclination can play an important role during their whole term of imprisonment. The monotonous life style and deprivations imposed by captivity make them disappointed and hopeless. The arousal of religious and spiritual thoughts can help these distressed inmates in calming, refreshing and strengthening.

PREVIOUS STUDIES

Western scholars like Donald Clemmer (1956), Gresham Sykes (1958), Donald Cressey (1961), Terence Morris and Pauline Morris (1963) conducted their studies on prison from a sociological point of view. Among Indian researchers, Vidya Bhushan (1957) and B.V. Trivedi (1987) conducted their studies on prison administration and highlighted the administrative methods and problems of Indian prisons. S.P. Srivastava (1977), like western sociologists, conducted an excellent social survey through his work *The Indian Prison Community* and somehow

recognized religion as a correctional agent. Kiran Bedi (1998), in her study of the Tihar jail, gave some special attention to religion as an effective tool of reformation. She emphasized on the spiritual aspect of religion and carefully ignored its institutional dimensions. Although, this study is full of empirical evidences, but it lacks the proper scientific gist and gives an impression of the autobiographical feature.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Actually, the religious thoughts, beliefs and behaviour of prisoners have not yet been exposed to any proper scientific inquiry, neither their correctional potential has been properly explored. The Indian penitentiary system vis-a-vis correctional potential of religion is still to be viewed from the standpoint of inmates. It is with this aim in mind the present researcher has taken up a subject which has so far missed its study in depth.

The prisons all over the world have greater resemblance than disparity inasmuch as their basic administrative and functional problems in relation to their inmates are concerned. And further the socio-religious system of the inmate community in all likelihood is largely identical on many places (esp.in India). It is only for this reason that we apprehend the significance of our study not only in national context, but in a broader world-wide perspective.

In the present study, we endeavoured to explore the potential of religion as a correctional agent. We also attempted to reveal all the possible ways through which religion could facilitate a prisoner's return to the socially acceptable conduct.

HYPOTHESES

A prisoner is likely to acquire more religious inclination while in prison.

Uniqueness of the situation compels a prisoner to redefine religion and assign a new role to religious beliefs, practices and teachings.

Religion contributes in the social re-construction of inmates.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

This study is a part of the research-program conducted inside Central Jail, Patiala (Punjab, India). It is based on the empirical evidence collected through 4 years of participatory observation of the inmates. Apart from that relevant information has also been collected from other sources like academics, prison-records, prison-officials, convicts *on parole*, released prisoners and convict-overseers.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Modern ages have seen the rise of materialism and atheism as a

philosophy of life. The phrase of *survival of the fittest* is its very basis. Religious and moral values have been virtually forsaken from the practical life. God-worship has become ritualistic and pompous; it is more for a show than out of *conviction* or *faith* in a Supreme order. The inevitable implication of the concept of materialism is a depraved competition that is bound to generate violence and moral destruction.

Any society based on material values and influenced by atheistic philosophy can hardly inculcate in its members the sense of love, universal brotherhood and humility. There is an unconscious urge to outdo others, and to snatch whatever is being possessed by others. Actually, materialism deteriorates the society in both ways. On the one hand, it creates a sense of aggrandizement and consequent islands of wealth in oceans of poverty; on the other hand, it bewilders the *have-nots* and makes them ignoble to the extent that they are motivated to commit crime and violence for the attainment of material benefits.

The objective of social welfare can be achieved if excessive materialistic interests are avoided, and it is here that religious teachings are relevant. Not to forsake matter, but to master it. This change can only be brought about by the teachings of great religious masters. Despite scientific advancement, a welfare society cannot be built without the infrastructure of religious values. Science can give material welfare, but can't give direction to our lives. It cannot bestow upon the real context or purpose of living. Science can't help in the subjugation of mind which is the very source of strife, competition and crime. Hence, there is a need of religious atmosphere inside prisons for the benefit of offenders.

Religion and Civilization :

There is hardly any civilization where religion does not exist in one form or the other. Some early travelers, ethnographers and anthropologists described that some tribes did not have any religion, but studies conducted later did not support their views. Their observations were subjected and biased, because they attempted to define religion according to their own notions of what constituted religion and did not apply any objective viewpoint to find out the beliefs and practices of the primitive people. They ignored the fact that religions vary from civilization to civilization and culture to culture.

Religion has been found to exist from earliest times of human existence. It is maintained that the predecessors of modern man, the *Neanderthals*, must have had some kind of religion, since it is evident from the discovery in France that they buried their dead in a definite position and placed their tools at their sides, indicating a belief in the *after-life*.

Religious Experiences and Psychological Satisfaction:

The emotion, faith, devotion, self-surrender, moral values, self-sacrifice, inspiration, spirituality and transcendental experiences are the major components which integrally constitute religion. It is the general notion of religion that *Ultimate Reality* cannot be described in the rational language. Religionists point out the imperfection of intellect and consider intuition to be the only means. French scholar Henry Bergson criticized intellect and observed that *Reality* can be grasped only through a direct intuition. William James in his study, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, describes about the lives of many Christian sages who performed such acts in the service of others which cannot be even speculated. It was so because they saw God in everyone.

The spiritual and transcendental experiences give an individual the feeling of complete satisfaction. Though, psychologists define these experiences in terms of self-hypnotoses, auto-suggestions or self-projections, but it can be observed that these experiences not only give spiritual bliss but also the physical, biological and psychological satisfaction. Religionists opine that these experiences are means of a touch with *infinite* and *cosmic consciousness*. They view that in order to feel the pulse of true religion, one must abandon all attempts to understand it by means of ordinary human language.

Religion and Human Transformation:

Man can't understand all events of this world and mysteries of creation. He learns from his daily experiences that there are so many things on which he has no control. Consequently, he believes that there is some invisible power which is more potent than him. The beliefs and activities related to this divine power are viewed as religion. J.G. Frazer says. "By religion I understand a propitiation or conciliation of powers superior to man which are believed to direct and control the course of nature and human life.

Religion, at many levels, has the capacity to transform the outlook and behaviour pattern of human-beings. Without the belief in someone more important than themselves, people fail to achieve their own potential importance. Sometimes individual acts selfishly and inclines to follow his immediate impulses. But this road can lead to emotional instability, maladjustment and unhappiness. It requires religion, or something higher than the individual or even a society of individuals to overcome the selfish impulses of the natural man, and to lead him to a more successful and fuller life. So, it can be observed that religion helps the individual in rising above the purely selfish interests, for the satisfaction of which he may sometimes resort to certain anti-social activities.

The embodied human individual is a thinking entity. He is constituted with the awareness of right and wrong, truth and falsehood, and good and evil. He is so constituted that his awareness of selfishness and unselfishness, distinguishes him from animals. He knows that his mode of thinking and functioning has to be different from non-human individuals comprising of plants, trees, creatures, birds and animals. The manner of functioning, based on selfishness, is proper for the individuals other than human-beings as they are constituted with senses capable of functioning only to that extent. But, for man, the mode of thinking and functioning must be unselfish. In man is inherent the awareness that it is possible for him to function both selfishly and unselfishly. Since man's spiritual progress depends on his functioning humanly, harmonious to the awareness with which he is constituted and which is part of him, the selfish tendencies and relishes get transformed into human tendencies and human relishes. This moral elevation results in his habits, thinking and conduct getting transformed into those proper for his race. With this transformation are generated in him feelings of his oneness with all, his responsibility towards all and his concern for the *well-being* of all.

Social Behaviour of Prisoners:

Prisoners, like the people outside, constitute a small society of their own and act not only upon the formal rules and regulations of prison administrations, but also upon the norms and values of their own social system. Despite variegation in terms of their religion, caste, age, nationality, language, education, socio-economic status and the offences, these captives have an emotion of belongingness to each other. Precisely, the *prison brotherhood* is a sentiment that dominates the mental plane of the inmates and brings them closer to each other despite many heterogeneities. Good as well as bad members of the *society of captives* reciprocate with each other and enter into a complex network of relationship.

All inmates under the burden of captivity, willingly or unwillingly attempt to ignore their basic differences and apprehend themselves as one community. This community of inmates comprises a distinct code of conduct, a set of guiding principles for the maintenance of status within its social system. This phenomenon is a reaction to the dull routine of the custodial life. It is a method of compromising with the situation and making the best of the circumstances.

Role of Religion in Resocialization:

Motive of modern society behind sending an offender to prison seems to teach him a lesson for the future. Generally, it is noticed that a person gets more inclined towards religion after being incarcerated (esp. in case of guilt). He perceives the ordeals and claustrophobic conditions of prison as *God's will*. He becomes

complacent and prepares himself for the *penance*. Uniqueness of the situation compels him to redefine religion and assign a new role to religious beliefs, practices and teachings. In order to divert his attention from the deprivations imposed by captivity, he embraces religion more closely. The predicament of being surrounded by the unpredictable and unpleasant incidents cultivates in him a habit of self-analysis. He tries to find out the answers to many mysterious questions about life. His proximity with the self and God increases. He endeavours to appease God by behaving good to others and following the religious as well as moral principles strictly. It can be said that the occurrence of this phenomenon facilitates his return to the *socially acceptable conduct*. Thus, his chances of becoming a *recidivist* decline.

It is observed that religion becomes an influential agent for the socialization of inmates. It gradually teaches them the norms, values and beliefs that they are expected to follow and stick to. This voluntarily adopted *code of conduct* explicitly prescribes and prohibits the do's and don't's for the captives. It fosters social cohesion and resocializes them.

Penal reformers, policy planners and prison administrators also realize the value of religion as an effective device for the correction of offenders. It is noticed that prison officials try to encourage the religious activities inside prison as it decreases the chances of indecent behaviour by inmates. Correctional activities like occasional preaching, yoga camps, meditation training, holy-music and *laughing therapy* are being frequently harnessed inside prisons all over the world.

CONCLUSION

For prisoners, religion has long been recognized as a strong

lever of reforming the conscience and facilitating their return to a moral conduct. Penal reformer Alexander Paterson apprehended religion as a necessary part of the prison administration, because it works as a potential instrument for the reformation of captives. It is assumed that confinement inside the walls compels them to remain in a state of solitude, which facilitates self-monitoring and increases the possibilities of a habit of introspection in them. Generally, due to adverse circumstances of prison life, they feel themselves very close to God and start realizing their past mistakes as evil-acts or sins (in case of guilt). Thus, it can be said that self-analysis prepares the ground for a change in their behaviour and is urged by their religious inclination.

Practically speaking, in the process of reformation, many factors can integrally work like a formula of success, i.e., learning from the past mistakes + planning for the future + Hard work. Religion can enable the prisoners to realize their past misdeeds, prison environment can compel them for the forethought of future, and *prison-labour* can teach them a lesson of social responsibility.

The modern concept that the true objective of imprisonment is reformation, social re-education and final rehabilitation of offenders – seems very noble and humane. If honestly implied, it can help the prisoners in learning to behave in a socially acceptable manner, and they can become a better *social-being* after their release from prison walls.

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