

A HISTORICAL SURVEY OF BEGGAR RELIEF IN INDIA

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The varna institution and the joint family system have had important bearing on the problem of beggary in ancient India. According to Dr. Moorthy, the former "defined the scope and methods of mendicancy, distributed the social burden of poor relief and prevented haphazard and promiscuous begging", while the latter encouraged the pooling of resources and the even distribution for all. But the institutions, as they exist, no longer fulfil these original functions; indeed, they do not even help to mitigate the problem. Further, the various forms in which beggar relief found expression, such as alms giving, sadavartas, dharmasalas, etc., which were financed both by individuals and the State, have also deteriorated. And consequently, the author maintains that the changed conditions call for new techniques for handling the beggar problem.

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IN an enquiry into our methods of beggar relief one has to bear in mind some important factors in order to appreciate the problem in its proper perspective. The problem of beggar relief is a part of the problem of poor relief. Hence an investigation of beggar relief in India is really a part of the study of the methods adopted to alleviate poverty. Begging is associated with indigence. It is only the helpless poor that beg. Begging presupposes a condition of helplessness in which one *cannot* earn his livelihood by any means whatsoever, and must perforce depend for existence on the good will of others. A person may be rendered helpless by becoming blind, by the loss of limbs or by any other disability; and being so disabled to earn his livelihood, he may have to live by others' grace. But if he is born in affluence or has relatives to look after him, he need not necessarily turn out to be a beggar. A legitimate beggar is he who cannot earn his livelihood and also has no one to befriend him but society. This definition, of course, excludes the able-bodied professional beggars as being classed as "legitimate beggars". Religious mendicants, so long as they have no satisfactory excuse to offer for begging, are also not legitimate beggars but are really able-bodied ones. One may be a beggar by necessity or by inclination. But the problem of mendicancy is mixed up with the able-bodied beggars as well as the disabled poor and the helpless. In practice, we have the disabled begging side by side with the able-bodied. For, beggars do not much care to keep within bounds of finely defined categories; and the social worker has to deal with the problem of mendicancy in its entirety taking into account legitimate beggars as well as those who do not properly belong to that class but trespass into it.

There is another consideration also. Persons may be rendered temporarily helpless and be enforced to a life of begging for the time being. Such ones are usually poor children suddenly deprived of their parents or guardians, and also people made homeless and shiftless by calamities like earthquakes, floods and famines. This survey includes the consideration of all types of beggars. What was the strength and position of beggars in olden times in India? What was the general feeling in India regarding beggars? Were there institutions to relieve the helpless poor? And what were the ways and means adopted by the State and the people in general to render assistance to the beggars? What was the nature and extent of this relief? These are some of the questions which we shall try to answer.

The problem of mendicancy appears to have been of little consequence in the very early India. According to Macdonell and Keith the word *bhiksha* in the sense of alms, as that which is obtained by begging, is used in the Atharvaveda.¹ But "beggar is a term not found in Vedic literature."² The beggar as applied to the religious mendicant is a later extension of the term belonging to the system of the *Asramas*.³ This does not mean that persons mainly dependant on alms did not exist at all during the Vedic times. But religious mendicancy had not yet come to be established as an institution and professional beggary was not yet a noticeable phenomenon. The Aryans penetrated into India as invaders not traders and settled as conquerors, chieftains and landlords. The original dwellers of the soil were driven further south and those who were subjugated were converted into slaves and labourers. The early Aryans lived in India with the awareness of their belonging to the ruling classes. Psychologically they were averse to begging. Perhaps also, in those days of plenty and of less pressure of population there were not many persons who were forced to beg at others' doors. Moreover, this fact, revealed by Anthropology, namely, that in all earlier societies it was incumbent upon the family, the clan or the tribe to support their own helpless members, applies to Vedic societies as well. In view of all these facts it is not surprising to find the problem of mendicancy very insignificant in the Vedic times.

Religious Mendicants.—The periods that followed, of the Brihmanas and of the Upanishads, were marked by the emergence of a new phenomenon in the social history of India. The development of the Varnasrama system of life, which was collateral with the growth of ritual and philosophy, brought into being religious mendicants. Religious mendicants are those who have passed or renounced the householder stage of life and devoted themselves to wandering and asceticism. These are supposed to be interested in no temporal arts. They

¹ Vedic Index.²

Ibid.

³

Ibid,

abandon and shun all possessions and professions. Their profession is self-realization and they maintain themselves by begging. The number of this class of mendicants in early times is not known. With the growth of Jainism and Buddhism, and the monastic orders connected with them religious mendicancy must have received a considerable accession of numbers. The pessimism which generally characterized the mediaeval ages, together with the introduction of the Muslim *fakirs* further increased the numbers. Now the problem of religious mendicancy is associated with vagrants and able-bodied beggars to whom yellow robes and rosaries afford a convenient mask and make-believe. The religious mendicant is to-day looked upon as a person possessing inscrutable powers of doing mischief or of dispensing good to whomsoever he likes. He is a miracle-man of magic and of medicine. People give alms to him more out of dread than veneration. The order of religious mendicants was never in such disrepute.

Factors Responsible for Beggary.—No account, however, is available of legitimate beggars during any period in the past, of those who were helpless on account of natural disabilities, of orphans and of those who could find no means of livelihood other than begging. But we must remember the fact that old India, particularly mediaeval, following the break up of the Empire of Harsha was composed of a congeries of states. Wars between these states were frequent and ferocious; and almost every war was attended by blood-curdling pillage. Also epidemics and famines left their devastating effects upon villages, towns and cities. In view of the frequent operation of these factors one may reasonably imagine that there were often periods during which many were rendered homeless and helpless. Though one may not exaggerate the uncertainty of life in the past one has to recognize that there were forces then as now which from time to time disorganized family life, beggared well-to-do persons, orphaned a few, and altogether threw many on the charity of other citizens, or on the mercy of the State. We should not also omit to mention the melancholy fact that in old India the nature of penal law was such that it left a few victims mutilated in body. For certain crimes, the offenders had their thumbs or hands or legs cut off. After their discharge, these unfortunates, unable to do anything, probably joined the world of beggars. Thus the problem of poverty and mendicancy is an old and yet a live one, calling for solution now and again.

Preventive and Curative Methods.—Methods of beggar relief in the past may be considered under two heads: (1) Preventive and (2) Curative. Usually, in a study of this nature, some include punitive methods also. But to describe punitive measures as a form of beggar relief is a trick of dialectical caricature. Punishment of beggars is no relief to them; though, perhaps, it

may afford some immediate relief to society in that it is saved from the bother of beggars ! Moreover, in the past, begging when one was helpless was not considered as a legal offence. Therefore, for the present, we may well dismiss the classification of punitive methods as a type of beggar relief.

Preventive methods of relief are based on the formula that a stitch in time saves nine. They are only present devices to ward off future troubles; and their adoption involves foresight and a profound understanding of the laws that govern social phenomena. Preventive relief measures in India in the past took the form of institutional designs and ethical regulations. The *Varna* and the joint family systems were considered by far the most efficient and cooperative institutional endeavours to restrain shifty and adventurous living, to limit and reduce to a minimum the social burden of vagrancy and mendicancy.

The Varna System.—How did the Varna system serve to prevent begging? Did it not rather allow, indeed encourage, the entire Brahmin community to beg ? This is a paradox with calls for an explanation. It is well known that the ancient *Varna* system was based on the principle of division of functions. It is true that the Brahmins were allowed to beg; and we have earlier suggested that the Varnasrama scheme of life was largely responsible for the growth and prevalence of the mendicant orders in early and mediaeval India. But the popular belief that the Brahmins as a class were allowed to beg is not true. The Manusmriti mentions begging (*bhaikshyam*) as one of the ten means of livelihood open to all those who are in distress.⁴ All the four *Varnas* obtained livelihood through the performance of their respective functions. The Brahmins, as devoted to spiritual learning, were forbidden to amass wealth. They were called upon to bear poverty; and history reveals that many high souled individuals in the past voluntarily renounced their wealth and embraced a life of poverty. Among the Hindus the goddess of learning (*Sarasvati*) and the goddess of wealth (*Lakshmi*) are considered as naturally shunning each other's company. Scholars should take no thought of the morrow. "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof." This view explains why Brahmins were asked to live by begging during their pupillary stage. Either the teacher, if well-to-do, maintained his students or the students begged and maintained their teacher and themselves. The students went to the doors of three or five or seven different householders according to their needs, and "like bees" collected alms therefrom. This method of obtaining food or grain was called "*Madhukari*". The tradition and opinion in favour of *Madhukari* was so strong that no householder ever disappointed those students who came to beg at his doors. Indeed, the householder stage of life was highly prized and

⁴ Manu, X. 116 (See Kulluka's commentary).

praised as enabling one to be useful to students and also others in other *asramas*. In addition to students, *Sannyasis* and *Vanaprasthas* also were advised to live by *Madhukarl*. The *Sannyasopanisad* gives elaborate rules which *Sannyasis* should observe concerning the manner, time and place of begging. *Manu* prescribes the ways in which the members of the first three *Varnas* in their pupillary stage of life should address the ladies of the houses where they go on asking for alms. This means that students of the three *Varnas* were permitted to beg.

Begging as a Discipline.—Though begging was thus allowed to the students and the *Sannyasis*, its scope was strictly limited with rules and regulations. Begging was not to be a nuisance to others but a discipline to oneself. Mendicancy was not an occupation; it was a form of austerity. It may be said that Hinduism generally discourages begging.⁶ Living by alms is only permitted during certain conditions and stages of life. On the other hand, giving of alms (*dana*) is considered to be one of the highest duties of man; and even those students and others who obtain alms are advised to partake of their meagre receipts with their co-students and fellows. Not only giving of alms (*dana*) is much praised but non-acceptance of a gift (*aparigraha*) is also considered as a course of conduct which all the *varnas* have to observe. Indeed, it is looked upon as a mark of irreproachable virtue and integrity on the part of a house-holder to refuse the offer of a gift. If at all one has to accept a gift or ask alms he has to do it of a good and true man.⁶

Varna Obligations.—According to the old *Varna* scheme of life the duties of each *Varna* constituted the professions of its respective members. But the greater burden of providing for the community fell on the shoulders of the *Kshatriyas* and the *Vaisyas* who were richer than the other two *Varnas*. The *Kshatriya*, in fact, was held to be responsible for the material well-being of the entire Hindu community. While there was no lack of charities and employment for the higher orders the *Sudras'* well-being was not unregarded. *Manu* says that the *Brahmins* should engage the *Sudras* in their service and support them and their families according to their work and needs.⁷ The *Brahmins* are advised to give to those *Sudras* who serve them, the remnants of meals, old clothes, grains and such other things which the *Brahmins* can easily afford.⁸ If the *Brahmins* were not able to maintain and support

⁵ According to the canons of Islam also begging is forbidden. Head Report of the Committee on the Prevention of Professional Beggary in the Bombay Presidency (1920).

⁶ *Suddhat pratigraha*. As *Kalidasa* says: "Better is begging fruitless at the hands of a good man and true than that which is fulfilled at the hands of a mean fellow." (*Megha*.)

⁷ *Manu*. X. 124.

⁸ *Ibid*. 125.

the Sudras, it devolved on the Kshatriyas and on the Vaisyas to engage and support the Sudras.⁹ The Brahmins on their turn, maintained themselves by teaching; and the Kshatriyas and the Vaisyas engaged them as family priests (purohitas) and maintained them handsomely. It was common to make endowments of lands to learned Brahmins. And particularly during mediaeval India many were the scholars who were created practically zamindars. Peddanarya, who flourished during the heyday of the Vijayanagara Empire says that Krishnadeva Raya gave away the village of Kokat and *several others to him* in any districts he asked.¹⁰ By ancient traditions such endowments of lands to Brahmins were the custom all over India and the modern rentfree holdings such as *Srotriyas* and *agraharas* are only survivals of old endowments. Being thus enabled to maintain themselves and others, it is no wonder that the Brahmins were required to employ and find support to the lower orders.

This injunction to find employment to the unemployed, especially of the lower orders was not merely an ethical obligation implied in the *Varna* institution, but also a legal enactment. Manu lays down that the King (the State) should enforce the Vaisyas and the Sudras to do the works belonging to their professions.¹¹ And in his commentary Kulluka explains "*the king should punish those Vaisyas and Sudras (able-bodied) who do not work.*"¹² Manu further says, "If the Kshatriya and the Vaisya, driven by the necessity for an employment (Vrittikarsitau) seek the help of the Brahmin, the Brahmin should support them by giving them employment accordingly."¹³ And here, again, Kulluka explains: "*If the well-to-do Brahmin does not support these who approach him the king should punish the Brahmin.*"¹⁴ This leads one to the two important conclusions: (a) *that in old India it was held to be a punishable offence on the part of the able-bodied unemployed to refuse the offer of an employment;* (6) *and also that it was a punishable offence on the part of the well-to-do to refuse to employ and support persons who were in need of such employment and support.*

We are thus justified in concluding that the *Varna* institution defined the scope and methods of mendicancy, distributed the social burden of **poor** relief and prevented haphazard and promiscuous begging. But the one great defect of the *varna* system, from the point of view of poor-relief, is that while some provision was made for the employment of those in distress it did not provide for the fluidity of employment. It created class and caste distinctions

⁹ Ibid. 121.

¹⁰ "Kokatagramadyanekagrabaramuladigina simala yandu nicche."

¹¹ Manu. VIII. 410.

¹² "Akurvanau vaisyasudrau rajna dandyau." See com. to Manu. VIII. 410.

¹³ Ibid. 411.

¹⁴ "Evam balavan brahmanah tavupagatavabibhranrajnS dandaniyah." Manu.

which are repugnant to modern ideas and ideals of social justice, solidarity and integrity.

The Joint Family as Belief Centre.—Along with the *varna* institution the joint family system was an important factor in the prevention of needless beggary in old India. The joint family was based and organized on the dual principles of trusteeship and equality. The elder member or members of the family held the entire property in trust and administered it in the interests and well-being of all the other members of the family. At the death of the father or the eldest member of the family, the eldest son was to administer the family property and maintain all the members. The unity and integrity of the family was the main concern of the joint family system. Whosoever in the family earned was supposed to earn for all the members of the family. No one earned for himself alone. Consequently all the family resources could be pooled together and concentrated and evenly distributed for the benefit of all the members. In one family there could be no distinction between the rich and the poor, which unhappy distinction is a recent phenomenon. Now-a-days a man can wallow in wealth while his brothers may be beggars. We know of callous instances where sons are affluent while the parent practically begs. Was there a lame or a blind member in the joint family? He had claims of benefit equal to any other members. Was there a widowed girl or a parentless child in the family? She had rights of protection and maintenance along with the other members. So far as benefits accruing from the property were concerned there was perfect equality among all the members. The unfortunate ones of the family were not driven to the hazards of a precarious mendicant existence. The joint family system brought and held together all the members under its broad roof and provided shelter and sustenance to every one. This benefit and regard to family members was strictly enforced by the State in ancient India. Writes Kautilya: "When a capable person other than an apostate or mother neglects to maintain his or her child, wife, mother, father, minor brothers, sisters, or widowed girls, he or she shall be punished with a fine of twelve panas."¹⁵ The State thus guaranteed the obligations and benefits of the joint families to their unfortunate members. It was also laid down that "when, without making provision for the maintenance of his wife and sons, any person embraces asceticism, he shall be punished."¹⁶ In these instances the interference of the State was obviously with a view to utilize family organization and resources so as to minimize and keep within bounds

¹⁵ Kautilya. Bk. II ch. 1. (Shama). It may be also mentioned here that the property of bereaved minors was safeguarded and improved during their minority by the elders of the village. See Kautilya. II. 1.

¹⁶ Ibid.

the problem of beggars. *One is led to conclude that in ancient India it was held that family irresponsibility and family disorganization were the potent causes of beggary and that the State was anxious to nip mendicancy in the bud by insisting on family integrity and responsibility.*

The merits of the joint family system as a means of limiting and preventing beggary are manifest. The joint family system inculcates the lesson that if every family took care of its own members, beggars would be rare. Every family is viewed as a relief-centre; and since relief is provided to family members, the head of the family has the advantage of knowing personally and intimately the needs and necessities of individuals requiring help. But the joint family organization is an efficient medium of relief only when there are large resources at its command and when there are willing workers who replenish and rehabilitate the resources as they get constantly exhausted. With limited resources and expanding members a joint family will soon collapse. And it is also ruinous to insist on a joint family with limited resources to provide relief to an expanding circle of unfortunate members.

Localisation of Beggary.—Thus far we have shown how the institutions of the varna and the joint family functioned as agents for the prevention and minimization of mendicancy. It is well here to take into account another contributory factor which operated towards the localization of beggary in old India. This factor was mainly physical in its nature, but it had its immense influence on the problems of begging. The conditions of the times, unassisted by scientific inventions imposed restrictions on mobility. The powers of space-dissolving steam had not yet been realized. Further, it is imaginable how old India, honeycombed with states, big and small, could have no well coordinated system of roads. Locomotion, of even the able-bodied ones, was limited and hazardous. It is to-day, comparatively easy for the helpless poor to migrate from one part of the country to another. Rumours of colossal cities, of gigantic industries, of unheard of amenities, of the fabulous flow of capital, attract and concentrate the poor, the helpless and the vagrant in urban areas like Bombay, Calcutta and Madras. Ticketless travelling by the railways helps to move these adventurous unfortunates over immense distances. But in old India though poor relief and philanthropy ran amock in pilgrim places, beggars could not easily cover distances. It was impossible for a blind man or a lame one in Bangalore to migrate to Benares, though he knew that he could maintain himself better at the latter than the former place by begging. At best, his range of begging all his life covered about a hundred miles round. Naturally, the beggar became personally known to the local citizens and the citizens became known to him. Necessarily, therefore,

the problem of mendicancy was localized. Also, by legislative enactments the movements of vagrants and strangers were closely watched and restricted.¹⁷ These physical and legislative restraints on mobility contributed to keep beggars within bounds. Unlike the present situation, beggars in old India were not massed, though perhaps in a few pilgrim places, those who could afford to move about a hundred miles gathered together. The local problems of mendicancy comes to-day to be concentrated in cities like Bombay and Calcutta due to facilities of transport; and cities are called upon to bear the burden of poor relief which should be legitimately distributed over wide areas and centres. Such a concentration of the mendicant problem was non-existent in the past in India. The old restrictions against such concentration have disappeared. In the mass of beggars, we miss the true ones.

Preventive methods of poor relief went a long way in alleviating human misery in old India. But preventive methods alone could not have sufficed to adequately meet the constant demand for relief. Preventive methods helped to control and keep within limits the numbers joining the army of beggars. In spite of all preventive methods of relief there must have been many helpless ones and numerous unemployed and hungry souls who needed assistance from society. What was the nature and form of relief given to them? This question leads us to the consideration of the curative methods of poor relief in India.

Curative Methods : Almsgiving.—Curative relief in old India emanated either from private individuals and institutions or from the State. Curative relief to the helpless springs from motives of kindness, charity and sympathy. Relief to the helpless blind and lame, to the mentally deformed and defective, to orphans and the honest unemployed is a duty preached to all individuals by all religions. In old India there was no lack of private charity to helpless men, women and children. This charity took the form of giving alms to any one that came to beg at one's doors. The things given usually consisted of grain, cooked food and old clothes, and the helpless came begging only for these necessities. Alms were never denied to any one during the morning hours and during the evening hours and also during meal-time. In the morning hours, householders usually kept apart a quantity of grain to be given to all those that came begging. This practice of allocating for beggars a part of the grain in the household every morning is observed even now by some Indians. During afternoon and evening hours almost as a rule only cooked food was given to beggars; and it was, and still is, the Indian practice

¹⁷ Read Kautilya's Arthashastra, Bk. II, ch. 34 to 36. "Whoever is provided with a pass shall be at liberty to enter into, or go out of, the country. "Whoever, being a native of the country, enters into or goes out of the country without a pass shall be fined 12 panas." (Artha, Bk. II ch. 34).'

to prepare more food especially for the purpose of giving away to the helpless poor, and also to animals and birds. This method of relief was highly efficient in that it kept alive on the part of the householders the human sentiments of pity and kindness and fellowship. Since it was usually cooked food and old clothes that were given away the beggars used them almost immediately without having any idea of amassing and making business out of them. Also this kind of relief seemed to be continuous and not temporary.

Relief by individuals to the helpless poor was also given on festive occasions and feast days. When a rich man of the town or the village celebrated his son's or daughter's marriage, or when an heir was born to him, he usually fed and distributed clothes to the poor. This old custom prevails even now in many places. The idea of bestowing such gifts on the poor seems to originate in the feeling that when a man has an occasion to be specially happy he must endeavour to make all others about him put off their gloom and share in his happiness and thus earn their blessings.

Sadavartas.—In old India well-to-do persons regularly fed fifty, a hundred or two hundred or as many persons as came to be fed, either at his own house or at any temple or at any public place appointed for the purpose. This custom of regularly feeding persons on every day or on select days was well known as *sadavarta*. The tradition was that while a person had plenty to eat and drink and spare he should see that others about him did not go hungry. It was generally believed and the belief is still held—that in this life a person enjoys abundance of comfort because of his charity and liberality towards the needy during his past life; if one liberally shares with others what he has he will have more yet in lives to come. Wealth comes to those who righteously spend it. Many Hindus according to the Hindu traditions are advised to regularly spend one tenth or one twentieth part of their earnings on charities. According to the Muslim traditions one should spend on philanthropic purposes one fortieth of his income. However, in old India persons regularly gave in charities according to their own capacities. During special months like *Sravan* among the Hindus, and *Ramzan* among the Muslims alms to the poor and helpless were freely distributed even by those who could not ordinarily afford to be charitable.

Dharmasalas and Feeding-houses.—Along with the institution of the *Sadavarta* there was the tradition of constructing *dharmasalas* for the benefit of the poor.¹⁸ *Dharmasalas* were free homes where lodging, and in some cases

¹⁸ Charities among the Hindus were divided into two types, *Ishta*, which was of a spiritual character (like offerings and sacrifices), and *Purta*, which was secular in its nature comprising the construction of wells, tanks, lakes, temples, giving food, planting public gardens etc. Rich men even to-day keep up the practice and tradition of endowing *purtas* for the benefit of the public and the poor.

boarding, was made available to anyone in need of it. *Dharmasalas* were endowed mostly by very rich persons, zamindars and kings. While some Dharmasalas were attached to temples in old India, others existed independently and served as powerful agents and centres of poor relief. Perhaps *jamaatkhanas* and *langarkhanas* (feeding houses) and *mussaffarkhanas* were Muslim proto-types of *dharmasalas*. In the South during the early and mediaeval centuries rich persons, chieftains, and kings built free feeding houses called *uttupuras* where pilgrims on their way and poor persons could have their mess and lodging temporarily. Of the detailed working and administration of charitable institutions, of their constitution, of their legal position we have very scant information. Even to-day some of the old *dharmasalas* exist and old religious endowments and charities in some provinces are formally supervised by the government. But the exact position of old charitable institutions and endowments at present is not yet a decided question at law.

Orphanages and Hospitals.—In old India charities by private individuals and bodies were supplemented by state charities. In times of general distress, like famines, the kings temporarily established free feeding houses as the Bahamani kings did during the famines of the 14th century. According to Kautilya, during famines the kings should distribute to his people his own collection of provisions or the collection of the rich men of the town. He may also take the help of his neighbouring kings.¹⁹ We have already spoken of kings granting acres of land, even whole villages to the poor and deserving Brahmins.²⁰ Manu says that the king should always give gifts and do other kinds of charities to a learned Brahmin, to one who is affected by disease or affliction, to one who is young (an orphan), to him who is very old and also to him who is born in a noble family.²¹ The king in his private capacity as an individual and a rich man dispensed gifts and charities to deserving persons. But being the head, and having great control of the institution and machinery of the State, the king was specially required to take care of the destitute and the helpless. Kautilya also says: "The king shall provide the orphans, the aged, the infirm, the afflicted, and the helpless with maintenance. He shall also provide subsistence to helpless women when they are carrying and also to the children they give birth to."²² This statement by Kautilya naturally provokes the questions: how was relief and maintenance given to the orphans and the infirm, and poor pregnant women?

¹⁹ Artha. iv. 3.

²⁰ See also Kautilya, Bk. II, ch. 1.

²¹ Manu. VIII, 395, Srotiyam vyadhitartan cha balavriddhavakinchanam, mahakull-namaryam cha raja sampujayetsada,

²² Kaut. Bk. II, ch. 1.

Where were all these persons lodged ? Does Kautilya refer to the institutions of orphanages and infirmaries and maternity homes with which we are to-day so familiar ? Perverse, indeed, must that scholar be who in the face of this evidence can have the dialectical penchant to press the opposite conclusion. Indeed, history reveals that Asoka endowed many charitable institutions for the benefit of man and, animal not only in his own empire "but also in the territories of friendly independent kingdoms" (Smith's Hist. of India). Fa-hien, giving an account of the Gupta Empire during the 5th century mentions that in the towns of Magadha charitable institutions were numerous; and the capital possessed an excellent free hospital (Smith's Hist. of India). There is no doubt that this tradition of endowing charitable institutions for the benefit of the poor and infirm has continued to our own day, though on a smaller scale and in spite of State indifference.

Provision for Employment.—The states in old India not only thus provided relief to the destitute and the helpless but also provided employment to those who were unemployed and could work. Here, again, Kautilya is illuminating. He refers to a construction called "working house" (karmagriham) being enclosed within the fort.²³ Though he does not give details pertaining to the "working house" he elsewhere suggests the existence of "working houses", to provide employment to the helpless poor, particularly women who could not go about in search of any legitimate means of livelihood. The words of Kautilya are worth quoting: "Widows, cripple women, girls, mendicant or ascetic women, women compelled to work in default of paying fines, mothers of prostitutes, old women-servants of the king, and prostitutes who have ceased to attend temples on service shall be employed to cut wool, fibre, cotton, panicle, hemp, and flax."²⁴ This means that some sort of work-houses existed to provide light employment to really helpless women. The employment of these helpless women was effected by the State through the medium of the maid servants of the weaving department of the State.²⁵ It appears that great regard was shown to the modesty of these helpless women and also promptness was observed in the payment of their wages.²⁶

Spies and Ascetics.—The state employed able-bodied persons who were in need of means of subsistence, in agricultural pursuits and industrial arts. Crown lands were open to cultivation by slaves, free labourers and prisoners. In old India the State particularly took care of orphans, dwarfs, the hump-backed and otherwise deformed and helpless people, and employed them as spies.²⁷ These persons were given training in the arts according to their

²³ Bk. II, ch. 4.

²⁴ Bk. II, ch. 23. (Shama.),

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Vide whole of Bk. I ch. 11-12, Kautilya.

aptitudes and sent out to do the "under-world work" of the State. Spies were drawn even from the ascetic orders. The management and maintenance of the ascetic spies were left to the supervision of a diplomatic recluse. He was provided with money and disciples and ordinarily carried on "agriculture, cattle-rearing and trade on the lands allotted to him for the purpose." For all practical purposes he was created a land-lord. Out of the produce and profits thus acquired, this ascetic was required to "*provide all ascetics with subsistence, clothing and lodging, and send on espionage such among those under his protection as are desirous to earn a livelihood (vrittikama).*"²⁸ This provision particularly for the ascetics, seems to be a special arrangement, made for the subsistence as well as for the benefit of the State and of the public. The State would benefit in that the services of the ascetics as spies would be available and the public would benefit in that the ascetics would not be parasites and pests on the public. Samasastry suggests that the present day *bairagis* may be survivals of the ascetic spies in old India. May be, with the disintegration of the old states and the rise and spread of British domination throughout India the institution of the ascetic spies became defunct. Since now the State has no use for them, and also since no provision is made for ascetics no wonder the *bairagis* move along the flags of fashionable cities begging and also flourish on fortune-telling and guiding the speculations at the exchange and the turf.²⁰

From the foregoing account it is evident that beggar relief in old India was not neglected. The methods of relief expressed themselves in highly institutionalized devices and ways of living, which prevented the problem of mendicancy from growing to unmanageable proportions. The mutual responsibility of the *varnas* to help and maintain one another was insisted upon. Joint families were looked upon as primary social welfare centres. Religious tradition and legislation contributed to whip up, preserve and enforce family responsibility. The greatest feature of the problem of mendicancy in old India was, that it was localized. Every region was called upon to solve its own beggar problem. Naturally, the incidence of beggar relief fell on the region or area to which the beggars belonged. The citizens knew the beggars

²⁸ Kau. I. 11. Compare with this the words of the Committee on Beggar Relief in the Bombay Presidency, contained in their Report of 1920. "The trend of opinion among the enlightened heads of Sadhus is that the governance of the Sadhu community should be entrusted to the hands of the respective religious heads or an assembly thereof, and they may do yeoman service if they can see on the one hand the spiritual sanctity of their cult preserved safe and on the other if they can see means to place the entire community on a spiritually utilitarian principle." P. 2.

²⁹ In Bombay city alone according to the census taken by the Corporation in 1921, the number of able-bodied bairagis (fakirs and sadhus) was 1,598,

of their locality, and the beggars knew their benefactors; personal contact was thus possible between the two. Also, the State in old India took interest in the well-being of the poor and the helpless. One would wish that it had not taken care of orphans and the deformed with a view to utilize their services as spies. It would have been better if it had employed them in nobler and more elevating occupations. Perhaps, in those days, it was thought that the orphans and the deformed and the otherwise helpless, being unable to earn a living by and for themselves in any other way, would be faithfully attached to the State and thus be excellent and sincere members of the criminal and secret intelligence departments of the state. However, it must be said that the relief and employment afforded to the helpless, though they did certainly alleviate the sufferings of the poor by answering to their animal needs, did not, except in rare cases, conduce towards the unfoldment of their personality. It is true that in the case of beggars their animal needs are exhibited in glaring relief. Their lean sides, their lack-lustre eyes, their hungry mouths clamour for food. Their gaunt structures claim the passing tribute of rags. In the sight of this appalling misery one is apt to throw food and old clothes at them and escape to brighter scenes with the secret satisfaction of beneficence being rendered unto the poor children of God. The philanthropist is apt to treat beggars as kindly as he treats animals. He forgets that beggars though they want their animal needs to be urgently satisfied, are not animals. Beggars are persons. Relief is that which not only temporarily removes hindrances in the way of living but creates permanent advantages and channels for good-living. Relief is not mere negative aid but positive uplift. Mere existence we assure even to the lower animals. Somewhat more than crumbs and clothes are due to man. The new civilization has destroyed old institutions. The *varna* obligations have become anachronistic. The joint family is disorganized. Old charitable organizations like the dharmasalas have become effete and functionless. The competitive industrial economy of our times which has ousted the old co-operative rural economy from its place engages man in a ruthless struggle for existence. Mobility is bidding fair to outgrow the dimensions. And the State throws up its hands and disclaims its responsibility for the growth of beggars. Until our present competitive economy is changed, until new social obligations are instituted and mobility is controlled to localize beggary and the State throws off its indifference and rehabilitates old charitable institutions along new lines, the hydra of mendicancy may well await the coming of its Hercules and Iolas.