Reflection on Social action from the religious perspective
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Introduction

Justice like any other value calls on human conscious will and that is how humans distinguish themselves essentially from other creatures. The fundamental constitution of consciousness means that to be a human being is to be structured interpersonally with one's self, with others and with God. One of the key points, centre of the history of monotheistic religions it the content of God's appeal to Abraham, that is Justice-the fundamental value of the revelation: "To do justice and judgement" (Gen; 18:19).This command is the key point and is to be obeyed in its fullness, for this very fullness marks the presence of God in human consciousness. God is not only just, he is justice itself.

Religious traditions incorporate a deep yearning for social justice. They also embrace the idea of human dignity and the importance of the human person (primauté de l'homme). From a historical perspective the work of charity is a phenomenon that was perpetuated by almost all religions in different ways. Mutual help towards another was propagated as a virtue and a means to attain salvation or divine favour. In some cases as in Islam or Hinduism helping the poor was also a moral obligation

In an international context where religious particularity is gaining more and more prevalence, religious fanaticism is in progression, the basic questions are :
- How to create a link between the religious dimension and the social action?
- How does the religious dimension intervene in the exercise of social action or how does it motivate social action?
- Is social action and the fight for social justice a basis for dialogue or is it a matter of tension and division among the people?
- When we talk about humanitarian action by a Faith Based organisation, does it automatically create a distinction between religious and the human dimension? In particular in the Asian context, how does the faith dimension influence social action and what are the challenges when social actions are carried out by religious institutions?

These questions are central to understand the context in which we work, from the cultural, social and religious point of view. In order to find relevant answers to these questions, this paper proposes to analyse the concept of social action, social justice as understood in the different religions namely Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism and Christianity. The first part will deal with the concept of social action in the different religions and the second part will deal with the challenges identified in real working situation in the different Faith based organisations (caritas) in the Asian context.

The papers will conclude with open questions for discussions based on our different experiences and will enrich the reflection and propose certain areas for dialogue with the Asian partners.

Religion and Social Action

Although there are fundamental differences among the dominant religions, it is possible to reconcile different religious ideals in the social context. In spite of the basic differences, human security, human dignity and human rights issues are somehow minimal basic consensus relating to binding values, irrevocable standards and moral attitudes which can be affirmed by all religions despite their undeniable dogmatic or theological differences and could also be supported by non-believers.

The following discussions will analyse the concept of social justice and social action in the different religions.

Islam, Socail justice and social action

Islam claims a tradition of social justice based on equality in law and justice for all. The notion of "Umma" or the belongingness to the "Community" has given rise to the concept of justice and equality within the community (i.e. the believers) and also outside the community of believers. Islam claims that there is equality among men in spite of the outward differences. Since there is equality among men, there is an absolute need to be righteous.

In Islam, the rich and the poor are placed on different ranks within the social ladder. It is so, not because they have been favoured or deprived of social distinction but rather of their being under divine trial. Opulence and penury are both intended to be states in which each one is tested. The Holy Quran holds out the promise of reward for one's deeds in this world and says that a complete record is constantly being made of human actions; and after death everyone will be standing before God to receive his just due. It is the moment where man will suffer the consequences of his misdeeds; on this day mankind will come divided on "virtue" and vices. Whoever has done an act of good will see it and whoever has done an atom of bad will see his fate sealed. In other words, the holy Quran exhorts each one to carry out good action or good deeds, in order to obtain God's favour and also to benefit from the divine justice.

The reflections above, on Islam and social justice, raises the issue of accountability towards one's neighbour and ultimately towards the creator. It is necessary to be extremely vigilant to carry out the deeds or one's duty according to the precepts of the Holy Quran.

One of the duties and responsibilities of the prophets of Allah, as mentioned in the Holy Koran, is the institution of Social Justice. The different holy prophets have fulfilled their mission by striving towards the achievement of social Justice.

The concept of accountability conditions each one to be careful in one's dealings with the other and the need to be just to everybody. Once one recognises that there is such a thing as accountability, then social justice becomes a prime necessity for everyone and is an obligation for each and every one of the faithful and nobody can neglect this. The holy Quran says "the noblest of you in Allah's sight is the most righteous of you. Allah is wise and all knowing (49:13).

This call for righteousness and obligation towards the neighbour forbids each believer from seeking his own interest because it is in contradiction with the wider social justice. Standing for justice is considered closest to Godliness as quoted in the holy Quran, " be just, that is closest to Godliness". In other words the religious and social responsibilities of each one is to work for just causes and one's faith requires that one stands witness to justice, fairness and equality not just in words but in practice. One is not considered a Muslim if he goes to sleep with his stomach full while his neighbour sleeps hungry. A good Muslim has an obligation to help the orphans and the needy by sharing with them part of his wealth through paying Zakat and voluntary charity.

Unlike Christianity, Islam has no formal organisation of clergy. The groups of scholars known as the Ulamas provide leadership for its communities and unofficially interpret and administer religious law. Their authority rests on the knowledge of the Shariah, the body of law that grew up during these centuries after Mohammed's death in 632 AD. They generally are graduates of the Madrassa, the Islamic schools and have the titles of Mullah or Maulvi. These religious figures lead prayers, advise on

religious practice, make local decisions and perform marriage and funeral ceremonies. They are also looked up to as defenders of the integrity of Islam and the interest of the Muslim traditions.

The growth of Islamic fundamentalism since the last two decades and the anti western attitude has resulted in resorting to "communitarian" attitude which brings the Muslims to refuse that aid from Zakat be given to no-Christians. In the 'war on terrorism' époque and with the day to day injustice meted to the Muslim brother in the Palestine, some Muslim leaders have resorted to enticing the believers towards a negative attitude towards the West amalgamated with Christianity at large. Many of these leaders especially in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Indonesia and Bangladesh "have motivated the Muslims especially the poorest strata of society to develop anti Christian and anti western attitude, sometimes resulting in violence and above all promoting a communitarian culture."(Fr.Ismartano Crisis center,Jakarta). For example during the Easter of 2008, in Jakarta a group of Muslim ulemas came with Muslim believers and asked the local Catholics not to celebrate the Pascal mass in the open air and the priest had no other alternative but to decline celebrating mass; in Pakistan since the war on terrorism started, the number of churches that have been burnt down is quite important, and the number of Christians both men and women condemned under the Sharia law is also appalling.

This trend has an impact on the social action of Caritas, which is also perceived as western, Christian and amalgamated with the church. Sometimes the work of the Caritas is perceived as humanitarian action with a religious hidden agenda. This perception contributes to reinforce the Muslim communitarian culture and is often source of difficulties especially in societies where there is a tendency towards radicalisation of Islam.

Hinduism

The Indian tradition upholds that the true nature of man like that of Brahman is *Sat*, *Cit* and *ananda,* that is pure being, consciousness and bliss. It is taken to be a fact rather than a philosophical speculation by the Indian sages that man essentially is *nitya – Shuddha – Buddha – mukta – svabhaava - parmaataman*, the eternally pure, awakened and free self. The question then arises: if the nature and essence of man is such as it has been conceived to be, then from where do the brutish , evil, lethargic and ignorance in man come into being and how can one get rid of them and be restored to his prime glory?

In traditional Hinduism, worldly pleasure is given due place and the satisfaction of desire is not seen as something profane. That is why among the four Purushaarthas (goals of life) namely, Dharma, Artha, Kama and Moksha which can be described broadly as 'leading of a moral life', 'earning of wealth', 'enjoyment of the pleasures of the senses' and 'seeking of liberation' respectively, artha and kama i.e. acquisition of wealth, material prosperity, fulfilment of carnal desires and sensual satisfaction, occupy an important place. It is primarily because the Indian thinkers recognised that "men possess a complex personality which seeks expression through four channels; his instincts and natural desires, his craving for power and prosperity, his social aim and his spiritual urge". This defines a truly integrated theory about the kind of life that human beings ought to live and the goals that they ought to pursue both in their individual and social or group life, taking into account all these four factors. Likewise a good state is one which creates conducive conditions and provides suitable opportunities to an individual or a group for the growth and fulfilment of each of these individual urges.

In practice, in the day to day life and struggle for survival, man often loses sight of his compassionate nature and becomes covetous. He becomes selfish and does not care for the welfare of the others as well as society. With such a passion for wealth and egoist attitude he loses the purity of spirit with which every one was born. Because of the ego in him he no longer sees the essential unity of all mankind and

starts perceiving things in terms of mam and tva-mine and yours. He no longer considers everyone as an equal. Ultimately man finds himself in a state of "non-state» which is total anarchy where justice is non-existant and the law of jungle prevails. This situation of "non-state" is "matsaya-nyaya" the law of the fish, which is the bigger fish eating the smaller one, wherein the survival of the fittest prevails.

Such a situation was not in harmony with the real and true nature of person as described earlier, and in order t do away with "matsaya-nyaya" a state in which "dharma" reigned supreme was established. Dharma is defined as the practise or conduct of good men, it is righteousness and even the king is subordinated to it. The prominent significance of Dharma is Law, Justice and Duty and it characterises the standard conduct as a member of the Aryan community, as a member of the castes and as a person in a particular stage of life.

The basic function of the state is to remove adharma-unrigheteousness and to establish dharma. The state as opposed to non-state is an institution which is law giving, secondly it dispenses justice and thirdly is duty enforcing. According to the Hindu thinkers all the three roles of the state are in fact rooted in its power of punishment –Danda, which stands for suppression of anti-social elements by inflicting necessary punishments. The principle of punishment as opposed Dandaniti is opposed to the principle of righeteousness (dharmaniti). These principles of dandaniti and dharmaniti apply to artha and kama (earning of wealth and its related sensual enjoyment at the individual level) and to the governance of state at the social level.

In the social sphere much importance is given to punishment for it is held that men follow their "svadharma"- duties for fear of punishment. It is the fear of punishment (danda) which makes not just human beings but all creatures keep to their respective duties – svadharma. It is the fear of punishment which makes people 'virtuous' and refrain from committing aggressions on others or telling lies. No one is exempted from dandanidi. But dandanidi-punishment- must also be just, in conformity with the sastras (legal texts) and conducive to the people (respecting their customs and traditions).

It is believed that doing justice preserves justice and justice being violated destroys justice. Not doing justice is also perceived as promoting injustice. Justice is perceived not just as strength, but as harmonious strength. One of the characteristics of Dharm as justice is the ideal of equality, or in other words treating similars similarly and dissimilars differently. This is the underlying principle of social justice in Hindu tradition. According to the ancient Indian lawgivers, equal treatment, has to take into account the merits, needs and circumstances of the persons or the groups involved. Since the classes or varnas of men differ from each other in terms of their functions, their capabilities, their merits, their worth, the treatment to be met to each one of them has to be differential, even referential depending upon the requirements and situational factors and general social context in each case. So Indian thinkers supported the view that justice is giving everyone his due, even if it results in inequality, for inequalities are inborn.

Then, the aim of establishing a just society is to enable man to discharge his obligations and attain liberation-moksha. In the Indian thought men do not enjoy any rights, they have only duties which they are supposed to perform for their own sake without any concern for the fruits of their action. The purpose of just state in the Indian conception is to create conditions conducive to the efficient discharge of one's duties

The above discussion illustrates clearly that in Hinduism, social justice and the social action which follows, is an individual effort to live a righteous life by discharging one's obligations and attain liberation-Moksha. The fear of punishment motivates one to be just in his action in the day to day life.

Dharma conditions the acts of each individual. There little collective responsibility towards the adharma and attaining moksha is an individual effort through individual act of Dharma.

The concept of social justice and social action in Hinduism opens the discussion for making a distinction between the "religious" and the "human" dimension. The concept of dharma and adharma; danda and dandanidi are religious traditions which motivate individual svadharma. This can be termed as the inner circle in order to attain individual moksha. On the other hand the human dimension is more inclined to orient towards reaching social harmony through social justice, reached by doing away with matsaya-nyaya by establishing Dharma which is nothing but Justice, law and duty.
This explains the absence of institutionalised or organized social action in favour of social justice towards the poor because this is considered as the obligation of the state and each individual.

Buddhism

Buddhism aims at individual salvation through inner transformation. The concept of selflessness is the underlying basis for social Justice and it does not endanger Buddhism's primary focus on individual salvation. For the earlier Theravada Buddhists, the religious goal of Buddhism is the attainment of inner peace through the experience of enlightenment, often described as liberation or nirvana. It was a state of being extinguished or blown out and refers to the elimination of various obstacles essentially derived from the poisons of desire, hatred and ignorance.

Later the Mahayana Buddhist preferred to signify liberation as the attainment of wisdom, which was interpreted as freedom both from the bondage of life and death, "samsara".

The Buddhist rarely addresses the topic of social justice in the modern sense, that is, in terms of such things as human rights, the fair distribution of resources, the impartial rule of law and political freedom. Buddhism has a rather very simple and utopic signification of social justice: "When one's mind becomes purified, society will also be purified" and in particular when talking about social issues, "common good can be realized through the promotion of individual morality".

As said earlier the Buddhist philosophy advocates selflessness as a core doctrine with a focus on individual salvation. The Buddhist theory of selflessness, when considered in terms of the individual and his or her place in the community, really becomes something of great social power: an extended interpretation of selfhood. That is in Buddhism the individual self is redefined to include all other selves through the theory of mutual interpenetration. The concept of selflessness opens the avenue to social awareness and the necessity of engagement.

The Buddhist model places less emphasis on social institutions and more on personal behaviour, most especially on such personal qualities as compassion and benevolence- qualities that are seen as contributing to the search for enlightenment. Social justice in Buddhism is not an end by itself, but rather a continuous cyclic means to achieve enlightenment.

The social action by the Buddhist community is rather an individual action towards the poor and this is based more on the individual undertaking of selfless act for his purification and to realise the common good. There is less reference made to institutional or collective social action for the poor as in the case of Hinduism.

Christianity

The foundational principle of all catholic social teachings is the sanctity of human live. The inherent dignity of the human person starting from the very conception through natural death is constantly emphasized.

Solidarity is a principle of catholic teaching and a Christian virtue and this is highly articulated in Solicitudo Rei Socilis , by Pope John Paul II, wherein the concept of common good and the obligations for Christian to essentially act in favour of the well being of all, particularly those who are the poor and marginalized from political influence.

Solidarity with the poor and the marginalized is identified as a constitutive element of the Gospel and essential for lasting peace. It is not a vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all. As a Christian virtue, it seeks to go beyond itself to total fraternity, forgiveness and reconciliation. It leads to a new vision of the unity of humankind, a reflection of God's true intimate life. Solidarity helps us to see the "other" whether a person, people or nation, not just as some kind of instrument who can be exploited, but as neighbours, sharers and brothers in the banquet of life to which all are equally invited by God.

It also calls for interdependence which must be transformed into solidarity, enrooted on the principle that the goods of creation are meant for all. The social concern of the Church is constantly directed towards an authentic development of man and society which would respect and promote all the dimensions of the human person, irrespective of caste and creed.

The social encyclical Gaudium et Spes begins : " the joy and the hopes, the grief and the anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the grieves and anxieties of the followers of Christ, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts".

In fact if the social question has acquired a world wide dimension, this is because the demand for justice can only be satisfied on that level. To ignore this demand could encourage the temptation among the victims of injustice to respond with violence as happens at the origins of many wars. Dire poverty seen as an unjust violence meted out to the poor brings the victims to respond through violence. In this sense taking the cause of the poor and justice for victims becomes a moral obligation for each Christian as the letter of St.James pointedly reminds us : "What causes wars, and what causes fighting among you ? Is it not your passions that are at war in your members? Your desire and do not have (Js 4:1-2). On the contrary, in a different world, ruled by concern for the common good of all humanity, or by concern for "spiritual and human development of all" instead of by the quest for individual profit, peace would be possible and the result of a "more perfect justice among people".

The Catholic teaching mobilises the faithful to be actors of social justice through commitment and concrete acts of solidarity which liberate the victims from their dehumanised condition of life in modern society. As members of the universal community sharing the same humanity, each individual is actor of social justice thus contributing to social harmony and giving back to the poor and the suffering their due humanity and dignity. It is not a choice but a moral obligation to be fulfilled, adopting a passion and a genuine commitment for safeguarding the human condition of the neighbour and the less fortunate, be it a neighbour or living far away. Each Christian is entrusted with this mission, with an obligation to fulfil it.

Caritas is entrusted with this mission of building solidarity as a service of the church and contributing to the holistic development of all man and all men. This is carried out in close synergy with the local church and its instruments for social action. This socio-Pastoral dimension of its action, inspired from the gospel which is the guiding principle for action, confers to Caritas its uniqueness and the specificity of the mission entrusted.

Secular concept of Social justice and social Action

The idea of the citizen as a free and dignified human being sets the basis for reflection on social justice. A political conception of justice involves a commitment by citizens to recognize each other as free and equal persons within the framework of social order. Because of the fact, that all, just by being human, are of equal dignity and worth, no matter where they are situated in society, and that the primary source of this worth is a power of moral choice within them, a power that consists in the ability to plan a life in accordance with one's evaluation of ends.

This moral equality of persons gives them a fair claim to certain types of treatment at the hands of the society which will respect and promote the liberty of choice and respect and promote the equal worth of persons as choosers. The core of rational and moral personhood is something all human beings share, shaped though it may be in different ways by their differing social circumstances.

Social action from the above concept of social justice, as argued by Amartya Sen, is promoting the capability of the individuals or groups, focussing on, what the people of a community or a group or a country are actually able to do and be. This implies probing into the needs individuals have for resources and their diverse abilities to convert resources into functioning. Two important questions emerge out of this reflection on capabilities:

1. Which changes or transitions are compatible with the existence of a being as member of the human kind and which are not?
2. What kind of activity must there be or must be undertaken if we are going to acknowledge that a given life is human?

The answer to the first question, gives a list of capabilities to continue to exist as a human being:
- Life: Being able to live to the end a human life of normal length.
- Bodily health and integrity: being able to have good health, adequate nourishment, adequate shelter etc.
- Bodily integrity: being able to move freely, secure from violence or aggression including sexual aggression.
- Senses, imagination: being able to use one's senses, being able to think, imagine, and to reason. This means that access to education is achieved. The use of one's mind to express freely and being guaranteed of freedom of expression, religious exercise etc.
- Emotions: being able to attachment to things and persons outside ourselves; being able to love those who love and care, experience gratitude and justified anger.
- Practical reason: being able to engage in critical reflection about planning one's own life, with a protection for liberty of conscience.
- Affiliation: being able to live for and in relation to others, to recognize and show concern for other human beings, to engage in various forms of social interaction, having the capability for both justice and friendship, being able to be treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others.

- Other species: being able to live with concern for and in relation to animals and the world of nature.
- Play: being able to laugh, to play to enjoy activities.
- Control over one's environment

    i. Political: being able to participate effectively in political choices that govern one's life; having the right of political participation, free speech and freedom of association.
    ii. Material: being able to hold property, having the rights to seek employment on an equal basis with the others.

The different capabilities listed above are separate components and each one of them is centrally important. At the same time they are related to one another in a complex manner and are interrelated and together they define the integral development of the individual.

These capabilities can be classified into three types:

1. Basic capabilities are the innate equipment of individuals that is the necessary basis for developing more advanced capabilities.

2. Internal capabilities refer to sufficient conditions for the exercise of the corresponding function (on condition there are sufficient contribution of external conditions.) Internal capabilities build on pre-existing basic capabilities by process such as exercise, education, and training or capacity building. Many internal capabilities require a more structured educational environment.

3. Combined capabilities are defined as internal capabilities plus the external conditions that make the exercise of a function a live option. The aim of public policy is the promotion of combined capabilities through promotion of internal capabilities and secondly the making available of the external institutional and material conditions.

These capabilities linked with the idea of human rights have the following implication in terms of moral principle: the capabilities of human beings should not be permitted to fall below a certain floor, so far as the nation-states and the international community are able to produce that minimum threshold for everyone. What we are actually capable of doing is primarily a matter of combined capabilities, which depend in turn upon internal capabilities and basic capabilities, but internal capabilities and combined capabilities depend in different ways upon external conditions, and it is these that political and public action can modify or improve.

Social action from the secular perspective thus can be defined as a means of enhancing the capabilities of the individual or a group of people. It is making them become capable of living as equal citizens and it is the fulfilment of the common commitment to the principles of justice and the basic structure in order to ensure to promote the just distribution of a qualitatively diverse set of capabilities among every member of the society. It is a question of considering each member of the society as a right holder, whose human existence in dignity is the duty of the society which must enable each one to have access to living conditions that will help them live as equal citizens. Here the society at large is the duty bearer to ensure the necessary conditions are achieved.

Conclusion and debate

As illustrated by the different points discussed, Social Action has evolved over the period of time. Different actors are involved in activities that aim at community participation and collective empowerment of the communities to attain social justice through socio-economic autonomy.

The different programmes implemented target individual and collective empowerment in order to enhance the capabilities broth from the individual and collective dimension, leading to their political participation. This leads to social transformation of the society based on social justice which will lead to sustainable development of the individual and the community.

A From the above reflexion on social justice, social action and religions we can raise a certain number of questions to understand our mission better and also to contribute to a better dialogue among the different caritas MO, with the different stakeholders working for the same cause in different contexts both religious and secular.

1. How do we address the effectiveness of the mission of Caritas and its role in the civil society in a non-Christian environment?
2. In our mission of building the capabilities of the people with whom we work, how can we share the religious or the faith dimension? What are the risks involved in a context of religious radicalism? What is the added value in bringing forth the religious dimension?
3. Given the natural identity of Caritas as a Church Based Organisation, how can caritas address the issue of its mission with the larger community and not just with the religious community?
4. As Caritas, how do we address the social action based on building capabilities to attain social justice which draws its inspiration from the Gospel values?
5. From the above discussions how can we raise the issue of our identity and our mission towards the wider community of beneficiaries of our action?

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