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Analysis

The inequality we condemn, the wealth we worship



Pioneer News Service

Published on: 21 Nov 2026, 12:19 am

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A father is reading the newspaper. On one page, he reads that a handful of people hold a huge part of the country's wealth, and he says, "This is terrible." A few pages later, there is a profile of one of those very people. Now he calls his son and says, "Read this. See what you can become." Please tell me, which of the two does he mean? He means both. He is disturbed that so few have so much, and he would be very, very happy if his son became one of those few. Then what exactly is his objection to inequality?

Let me quote a few numbers first. The richest one percent of Indians now take more than 23 percent of the national income. By the early 1980s, the share of the top one percent had come down to around six percent, and then it went up again. It came down because of what we did, and it went up because of what we did.

But all these numbers look at only one side of the matter: who has how much. There is another side: who wants how much, and why. Call it the

Now, what did the extra hundred and eighty rupees buy you? They bought you the right to say, "I am somebody who eats at such places." So the stomach got the chapati. Who got the rest? That one is what is called the ego. The ego is the "I" itself, the "I" that has just used a chapati to become somebody. And because this "I" always feels that something is missing, it keeps picking up things to complete itself: a chapati today, a car tomorrow, a designation the day after.

Now see how it works with a house. I am living in a house that is perfectly all right. Then the man across the road builds a bigger one, and suddenly I feel small in mine. What has he done to my house? Nothing. Then how did he manage to make me small without even entering my gate? He could do it only because I had been using my house to feel big.

Does this mean that a family of six living in one room should not want a bigger house? Obviously, they should. That is a real need, and real needs have one beautiful quality: they can be met. Give that family the room and the matter ends there. Now give me one more room. Does the matter end for me? No, because first I have to go across the road and count how many rooms the neighbour has.

Take an employee who complains about the salaries at the top, and it is a fair complaint. And now look at the same employee on the day a senior executive arrives in a car worth several crore. He looks at the car, and in his mind he sees his own son getting out of it someday. Then his only objection to inequality is that he is at the wrong end of it. He has no problem with the ladder; he just wants to be higher up on it. And the one who wants the top of the ladder has already voted for the ladder.

Please do not take this to mean that the poor are as responsible for inequality as the rich. Who owns, who inherits, who decides the wages, who writes the tax laws: in all of these the wealthy have far, far more say. But see what the powerful get when those below them admire them. They get legitimacy.

Now, having said all this, let nobody conclude that poverty is a state of mind. No talk of inner freedom can be a substitute for food, medicine, a decent wage and a school. Every child born in this country is the country's child. She does not have to prove her merit to anybody before she gets her breakfast. Reform cannot wait till the poor become wise.

But the injustice that comes from outside is not the whole of human suffering, and the remaining part does not go away even when the outside has been set right. An ego that has not been questioned can use capitalism to collect wealth, and it can just as easily use socialism to collect power,

The Ishavasya Upanishad says, tena tyaktena bhunjitha: enjoy, but after renouncing. What has to be given up is the one inside who demands that things should complete him. And this is the one education that we do not give. We teach the young how to earn, how to multiply, how to invest. We do not address the question of wanting. So let us build a country in which poverty does not decide a child's future, and let us also educate that child, so that when she becomes prosperous she does not take her prosperity to be her worth.

The ego can use giving just as easily as it uses having. Outside a temple, a little girl puts out her hand and I put a coin in it. And I say, "I wish she could go to school." Now suppose that many years later I need some work done, and the young woman who comes to do it is that same girl. She knows her work. She tells me her fee. I offer her less. She says, "Thank you for your time," and gets up to leave.

At the temple, I was the one deciding what she would get. Today she is the one deciding what she will accept. Was this not exactly what I had wanted for her? Then why do I feel like telling her that she has forgotten where she came from?

Acharya Prashant is a philosopher and author whose work centres on self-inquiry and its application to contemporary life; Views presented are personal.



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