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Sloth¹

E. SAMBAYYA

Sloth is hardly a sin in India. Perhaps this is due to a general tendency to indolence among us! Sometimes sloth is induced by the strain of overwork coupled with poor health; or by an unbalanced diet and unkindly weather, or by the restricted scope of rural life. But more frequently the prevailing philosophy of world-negation, or the fatalistic outlook engendered by belief in *Karma* and the resulting sense of futility is the cause. Like measles sloth is well-nigh universal though the factors which favour its prevalence are more clearly noticeable among the Indian people.

In the vast panorama of Indian thought it is the Epic philosophy which contains some references to sloth. Following the lead of *Samkhya* the Epic philosophy views sloth as a category of metaphysics rather than of ethics. As a part of the natural order man is made up of the three strands of *Sattva*, *Rajas* and *Tamas* in varying proportions. He in whom *Tamas* (which is variously rendered as dulness, darkness, grossness) predominates is styled a *Tāmasic* or slothful one. The *Gīta* develops the doctrines of the *Gunās* more fully. 'It is the *Guna* born of Prakriti that compels all creatures to act. Character and duty of a person depend upon the *Gunās*, and vary according to their proportion in each being' (4:13; 14:5-18; 17:18). 'For this my divine delusion of the strands is hard to pass; those who take refuge in me pass beyond this delusion' (7:14). The work of *Tamas* is described as: 'That pleasure which in its beginning and in its consequence deludes the self, rising from sleep and sloth and heedlessness is declared to be of darkness' (18:39). The *Mahabharata* describes *Tamas* as the quality of inertia or in man the spirit of stupor. It aims at satisfaction of senses. Its end is pleasure and its character ignorance.

The approach of Buddhism to sloth shows a certain emancipation from preoccupation with metaphysics. Indolence and laziness in spiritual struggle comes in for repeated denunciation in Buddhist writings. It is said of Mahamogallana that he had been assailed by torpor and sleepiness a week after his ordination. Therefore Buddha aroused him with the words 'Mogallana, idleness is not the same as Aryan silence!' One of the later *Nikāyas* which deal with ethical matters says that an ideal monk is never lazy. Again sloth is mentioned as one of the five *Nivaranas* (or hindrances) to spiritual life. It is said to be caused by overeating and attachment of mind. But strangely enough sloth is never mentioned in the sixfold team of the foes of spirituality. The *arishadvarga* (the enemy team of six) comprises passion, wrath, meanness, lust, pride and malice. It is possible that there is an insufficient appreciation of sloth as an enemy of moral effort and spiritual culture in Indian thought (in general).

¹ I am indebted to the Bishop of Chota Nagpur for some of the ideas in this essay.

The Bible

The Bible on the other hand takes a serious view of sloth. The Wisdom literature with its habitual emphasis on prudence describes sloth with devastating satire and great precision. 'As a door turneth upon its hinges, so doth the sluggard upon his bed. He burieth his hand in the dish, it wearieth him to bring it again to his mouth' (Prov. 26:14-16). 'Go to the ant, thou sluggard' (6:6). 'I went by the field of the slothful . . . and, lo, it was all grown over with thorns. The face thereof was covered with nettles. And the stone wall thereof was broken down' (24:30-31). Under its deadening influence the walls of virtue which we have reared with great labour begin to crumble down and passions clamour for satisfaction. The garden of the soul remains overgrown with bramble and thorn. 'Be not slothful to go and to enter in to possess the land' (Judg. 18:9). These words of Joshua to the children of Israel suggest that sloth robs one of initiative and the spirit of adventure. The three parables of judgment in the 25th chapter of S. Matthew are parables of omission with the implication that sloth is at the bottom of failure in each case. The servant who failed to invest his talent profitably received the rebuke 'thou wicked and slothful servant'. In sundry places the Bible is punctuated with warnings against sluggishness.

Further, sloth contravenes the Biblical doctrine of work. Work in the routine sense is normal and fitting for man. 'And the Lord God took the man and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and keep it' (Gen. 2:15). The Psalmist speaks of work as the divine ordinance for the life of man when he says 'man goeth forth unto work' (Ps. 104:23). It is true that there is no command, 'thou shalt not be idle' but the command to rest on the Sabbath day includes 'six days shalt thou labour' (Exod. 20:9). If work is a curse at all it results from man's rebellion against God's good law. Our Lord accepted the ordinance of work and His last utterance was, 'It is finished'. S. Paul sets us a lofty ideal of work when he says that we are fellow-workers with God (I Cor. 3:9). Thus God seeks the true happiness of man by laying on him the law of work. But the ambition of many nowadays is to do as little work as possible and have a good time. We look not to an eternity of idleness but to work which brings no fatigue. It is a mistake to regard heaven as a place of idleness. 'His servants shall do him service.' (Rev. 22:3). Very often sloth is inclination to idleness and apathy in action. Sometimes this morbid disposition may be due to ill health; but most frequently it is a disease of the will. The tendency to sloth is present in every one of us and hence we should detect it without delay so that it may not bring about our ruin. It is possible to be active externally and be slothful in spirit at the same time.

Types of Sloth

Sloth appears in a variety of forms: Bodily sloth is either sluggishness or laziness. It is a kind of Monday morning feeling which causes a man to take up his task reluctantly. The sluggard does not absolutely refuse to work but delays and postpones the accepted task. The lazy man on the other hand wants to do nothing which proves irksome. He has an aversion to all work. Thus in its crudest form sloth is bodily sin or a sinful disuse of the body. Without falling into sinful deeds men

can surrender themselves to the love of comfort that they become slaves of the body. The lazy man fails to perform his essential duty. This is very serious because men are created to serve God and fulfil their obligations to society and State. Therefore if without doing anything positive against the divine law we sit lazy we deserve the rebuke of our Lord 'why stand ye here idle all the day?' (Mtt. 20:6). The barren fig tree by the mere fact of its being unfruitful, deserves to be cut down and thrown into the fire.

Mental and intellectual sloth manifests itself either as self-complacency or refusal to think and form one's own judgments. It is intellectual sloth which does not take the trouble to be informed about the Faith, and which passes under the name of tolerance in religion and morals. Unable to make moral decisions people get into the habit of drifting; and herein lies the malignity of sloth. It undermines our strength of will and paralyses moral faculties.

Sloth is most dangerous when it attacks our spiritual life. The name for spiritual sloth is *accidie*. S. Thomas Aquinas calls *accidie* a kind of sadness in the face of some spiritual good which one has to achieve. This is the spiritual gloom and heaviness which kills devotion, takes life out of our prayer, implants distaste for spiritual things and renders the soul unhappy. The soul grows torpid at the thought of religious endeavour. The idea of right living inspires not joy but disgust because of its laboriousness. *Accidie* is also described as a sad dejection of the spirit in which a man feels out of sorts with God, with himself, and the world. It is acute universal boredom. It is boredom of things pertaining to God; and when God wants to bring the soul to its eternal happiness it cries in disgust 'my soul loaths the means of grace, and is sick of this hard and stony pilgrimage'. As the soul is cut adrift from the highest love it is prone to every form of sin. *Accidie* is reckoned a root sin as it gives rise to many other sinful tendencies such as contempt of spiritual things, despair and renunciation of the highest good. Many middle aged clergy become casualties to *accidie* though it is not the malady of religious people only. The modern way of life presents us with many instances of this deepseated disease. The growing fear of hardship, failure to lay hold on eternal life, and the futile busy-ness of many moderns are some of the instances which come readily to mind. Very often the cause of spiritual sloth is the misconception of God's character who is ever calling us to co-operate with himself. This explains why 'the foolish virgins' fell asleep at the critical hour, and the 'goats' thought that they never saw our Lord in need. It is worthy of note that *accidie* is the special malady of middle-aged clergy who have lost the idealism of youth. Middle age is the period of greatest spiritual mortality. It is when we know that we know our work well that it bores us. Thus you get slothful clergy and backsliding laity. The Epistle to the Hebrews was written to warn and encourage Christians who were tempted to apostatize owing to difficult external conditions. Ours is an age of indolence, and Bunyan's description of the Simple, the Slothful and the Presumptuous with fetters round their feet is a very apt description of many men of our age. The modern craze for pleasure arises from boredom and laziness. Also the deepseated reason that husband and wife have for not having children is the fear of having to work harder and put up with inconveniences. Thus sloth attacks us at every level of life and all through life.

Is there anything that we can do about it?

In combating this great evil it is necessary to approach it from a supernatural angle. We have to have a firm conviction that our end in life is to love God with all our heart and soul, our mind and strength; and thus only to save our soul. Sloth, it should be remembered, is omission or refusal to love God in this manner. It is necessary to think frequently of our Lord who challenges our sloth saying 'strive to enter the narrow gate', or 'what more are you doing, even the Gentiles do the same'. We must meditate on these words till they act like spurs in the side of our halfhearted effort and laziness. Or let us contemplate God as addressing us 'why stand ye here idle all day long; go and work in my vineyard'. The New Testament makes it quite clear that the Christian life is not vague sentimentalism but is in the nature of a pilgrimage 'with no abiding city here'; that it is a warfare, and a striving against great odds calling for constant vigilance.

Next, we must form strong convictions about the necessity of work. This is the lesson which our Lord wants us to learn from the barren fig tree. By earnest toil we must bring forth a harvest in our life. Sterile Christian life is indefensible. Even a rich man has to work inasmuch as God has endowed him with powers of body and mind. The toil of each is the service of all according to the universal law of Christian fellowship. It must be realized that there is no creature more wretched than an idle man, as the industry of an ant can readily teach us. Willing work slays sloth and brings happiness.

Sustained effort must be made to train the will remembering, that true devotion lies in the will but not in the feelings. The way to worship is prepared by amendment of life and self-discipline. The will must be made to co-operate with God when He puts good desires into our hearts. Under no circumstances should we capitulate to sloth and avoid participating in public worship, because in worship we are lifted up out of ourselves. It is only a sluggard who says 'there is a lion in the streets'. Therefore it is important that we should not exaggerate difficulties in life as it is a snare of sloth and cowardice. God demands that we should attempt great things for Him because he has given us a warrant for expecting great things from Him.

We must cultivate a sense of detachment towards certain habits which seek to bring us into captivity by restricting our freedom. S. John of the ladder in his treatise 'Scala paradise' interprets *accidie* as one of the offshoots of talkativeness. Too much talk dissipates the presence of God in the soul. It is a great help to recall frequently to mind a typical day in the life of our Lord,—a day in which work and worship are wisely blended, a day from which sloth and cowardice are banished. It is frequently necessary to contemplate the love of God which is active love. The love of God is the supreme motive which should encourage us to perseverance here and now. In the same way the vision and possession of God Himself is the great reward which will crown all drudgery and suffering which this involves.