

Observations & Views:

### *Materialism And Happiness*

(Non-possessiveness In Western Thought)

Commenting on materialism and happiness from the perspective of the Jain religion, Shri Surendra Bothra writes,<sup>1</sup> “The primary goal of man is to lead a healthy and happy life. Many individuals relate happiness to material possessions. Things such as a big house, expensive cars and fancy clothes lead to happiness. But it is just a mirage. In reality, contentment and non-possessiveness bring genuine happiness and peace of mind.” Modern researchers also have come to a similar conclusion.

Alain de Botton writes,<sup>2</sup> “The advantages of two thousand years of Western civilization are familiar enough: an extraordinary increase in wealth, in food supply, in scientific knowledge, in consumer goods, in physical security, in life expectancy and economic opportunity. What is perhaps less apparent and more perplexing is the way that **such impressive material advances may have gone hand in hand with a phenomenon: ... a rise in levels of status anxiety among ordinary Western citizens, by which is meant a rise in levels of concern about importance, achievement and income.**”

In a paper posted on the National Bureau of Economic Research website, economists David Blanchflower of Dartmouth and Andrew Oswald of Warwick University report that<sup>3</sup> **“generation after generation, Americans (like Japanese) are becoming more unhappy.** De Tocqueville knew as much more than 150 years ago: ‘So many lucky men, restless in the midst of abundance.’ ... Research shows that it's better to be middle class than poor. Things get complicated as you move further out on the ‘swinishly wealthy’ axis, because \$100 million doesn't buy a hundred times the pleasure of \$1 million. But no one stops earning money or striving for more money.”

James’s equation<sup>4</sup>

$$\text{Self-esteem} = \frac{\text{Success}}{\text{Pretensions}}$$

illustrates how every rise in our levels of expectation entails a rise in the dangers of humiliation.

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<sup>1</sup> Non-possessiveness: A Medicine For The Ailing Environment by Shri Surendra Bothra, Jain Study Circular, April 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Status Anxiety by Alain de Botton, Penguin Books, 2004, page 45.

<sup>3</sup> From the column, ‘The Secret to Happiness? Who Knows?’ by Alex Beam, published in The Boston Globe of April 20, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Status Anxiety by Alain de Botton, Penguin Books, 2004, pages 55-56.

James pointed out: “To give up pretensions is as blessed a relief as to get them gratified. There is a strange lightness in the heart when one’s nothingness in a particular area is accepted in good faith.”

Alain de Botton states,<sup>5</sup> “Criticisms of consumer society have focused not only on the shortcomings and inadequacies of the products, ... but also, more fairly perhaps, on the distorted picture of our needs that ensues from the way these products are presented to us. They can appear essential, blessed with extraordinary powers to bestow happiness on us, because we understand neither their actual identities nor our own functioning.”

In fact, contentment is the key to happiness. Consider Rousseau’s argument that states,<sup>6</sup> **“Every time we seek something we cannot afford, we grow poorer, whatever our resources. And every time we feel satisfied with what we have, we can be counted as rich, however little we may actually own.”**

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### *Scenarios From Ancient History*

(Who Discovered America?)

An interesting article by Ricardo Palleres entitled ‘Who Discovered America?’ is posted on the website [www.archaeologyonline.net](http://www.archaeologyonline.net). In the article, the author raises the questions: “What if Europe was really in darkness in comparison to the Far East and India that Columbus set sail to find? ... What if Hindus and Hopis, Advaitins and Aztecs, Tibetan monks and Mayans were part of one world culture -- a spiritual one?” ...

Ricardo Palleres continues, “Another historical scenario: The spiritually sophisticated Asians were the first to set foot on Western shores, and Asia, not Europe, was the seat of culture. The central focus of that culture was genuine spiritual development, not the mere shadow of the same in the form of the politically-motivated Pauline Christianity and later the Protestant ethic, which licensed humankind's exploitation of nature.

“This theory is found in the Vedic literature of India. The ancient *Puranas* (literally, histories) and the *Mahabharata* make mention of the Americas as lands rich with gold and silver ...

**“Many historians have scrutinized historical evidence to find more insight into the marvelous cultures that populated the**

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<sup>5</sup> Status Anxiety by Alain de Botton, Penguin Books, 2004, page 205.

<sup>6</sup> Status Anxiety by Alain de Botton, Penguin Books, 2004, page 62.

***American continent before Christopher Columbus was born. Their thirst for research was based on the assumption that the great Mayan, Aztec, and Incan civilizations could not have appeared all of a sudden in the Western world. Rather, they must have received strong influence from ancient Eastern cultures, mainly from India.***

In the same vein, W. H. Prescott writes,<sup>7</sup> “When Pizarro obtained possession of Cuzco, he found a country well advanced in the arts of civilization; institutions under which the people lived in tranquility and personal safety; the mountains and the uplands whitened with flocks; the valleys teeming with the fruits of a scientific husbandry; the granaries and warehouses filled to overflowing; the whole land rejoicing in its abundance; and the character of the natives, softened under the influence of the mildest and most innocent form of superstition, well prepared for the reception of a higher and a Christian civilization. But far from introducing this, Pizarro delivered up the conquered races to his brutal soldiery; the sacred cloisters were abandoned to their lust; the towns and villages were given up to pillage; the wretched natives were parceled out like slaves, to toil for their conquerors in the mines; the flocks were scattered, and wantonly destroyed; the granaries were dissipated; the beautiful contrivances for the more perfect culture of the soil were suffered to fall into decay; the paradise was converted into a desert. Instead of profiting by the ancient forms of civilization, Pizarro preferred to efface every vestige of them from the land and on their ruin to erect the institutions of his own country. Yet these institutions did little for the poor Indian, held in iron bondage.”

Bhikkhu Chaman Lal has presented similar views in his book ‘Hindu America’.

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<sup>7</sup> The Conquest of Mexico: the Conquest of Peru and Other Selections by W. H. Prescott, Edited, Abridged, and with an Introduction by Roger Howell, Twayne Publishing Inc, NY 1966, pages 297-298.