



Entitlement or Empowerment? Choice Is Ours

By Anil Shrivastava 'Musafir'



Lately, we have been hearing a lot about entitlement and empowerment. This has a special significance in view of the recent disturbances happening in America's major cities. It seems that the line between entitlement and empowerment is blurred due to the noise coming from various partisan groups who love fishing in troubled waters.

"Entitlement is the belief that one is inherently deserving of privileges or special treatment" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). The problem with entitlement is that it can be an impediment to one's own potential. It can also mean surrendering one's control over to destiny at the cost of self-achievement and self-esteem. Many of our readers who came to this country in the 1960s and 1970s had only eight dollars in their pocket and an education to go with. The education was mostly provided by

their parents which, in turn, empowered them to go out and earn a living. They still had to go through the struggle of finding jobs and surviving through frequent layoffs. Many of them painted houses and bused tables in the interim. Even when employed, the insecurity of losing jobs and worrying about the next economic cycle were their constant companions.

According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary,

"Empowerment is the granting of the power, right or authority to perform various acts or duties." Empowerment enables one to get stronger and more confident, especially in controlling one's own life and claiming one's rights.

In a society of equals, no one inherently deserves anything. Everything has to be earned without any special treatment. No one gets anything above and beyond what he or she should receive. Problem is that we don't live in a utopian society with equal playing fields. Yes, there are some who are born with a silver spoon in their mouth and others who live in a world void of any hope. This is nothing new. This has been there since the beginning of the civilization in every corner of the world. The good news is that the gap between haves and have-nots has shrunk. According to World Bank, "over the last 25 years, more than a billion

people have lifted themselves out of extreme poverty, and the global poverty rate is now lower than it has ever been in recorded history.”

However, according to the same sources, “More than 700 million people live in poverty around the world, living on less than \$1.90 a day. Every day, 15,000 children die of preventable diseases like diarrhea and pneumonia. More than 260 million children are out of school, limiting their chances of breaking the cycle of poverty.” This makes us think, do they need entitlement or empowerment?

Entitlement has been used by the rulers and politicians to keep the masses dependent, loyal and pacified. The use of entitlement (present day welfare) caused the fall of the Roman Empire. The soldiers were given exorbitant retirement packages in the form of free tracts of farmland or large bonuses of gold equal to more than a decade’s worth of their salary. They were also given enormous and periodic bonuses in order to prevent uprisings.

Today, entitlement is used by many dictators in the Arab world to keep their subjects from revolting against them. The locals lead a cushy life working one hour a day mostly in public sectors. The real work is done by temporary migrant laborers. As a result, we don’t hear any innovation or erudite coming from those countries. They are kept vegetating and satiated to avoid any trouble for the rulers.

In big democracies like the USA and India, entitlement is used by the politicians to maintain their vote banks. The politicians want to keep certain sections of people impoverished so that they would depend on freebies and would vote for them. This can’t be more self-evident than Mr. Biden’s recent statement, “If you are still deciding..., you ain’t black.” These politicians are demagogues with personal history of hypocrisy who’d always place their own political agenda above the needs of the disadvantaged.

Empowerment perpetrates the feeling that we will only get what we will earn and not

necessarily what we may feel we deserve. A good example of empowerment was set by Miss Rosa Parks. Miss Parks refused to offer her bus seat to a white person on December 5, 1955 which started the famous Montgomery Bus Boycott and ignited the civil rights movement. Her message was about rights of blacks not entitlement.

Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke, “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” Rev. King’s civil rights campaign played a pivotal role in ending racial segregation and the denial of voting rights to African Americans in the southern states. It also created a cultural shift in attitudes on race issues.

In the 1960s, America was marred by racial riots. Berry Gordy took a different approach. He started Motown label that brought unknown black artists (and whites also) on the world stage including Otis Redding, Aretha Franklin, Stevie Wonder, Diana Ross and dozens of others. He empowered the black musicians to make waves in the world of music. We can feel their contribution in the air all the time.

The world is full of stories of liberations through empowerment in every aspect of human life including women’s rights, freedom of nations from imperialists, elimination of certain social stigmas and inclusiveness. They all happened through empowerment not entitlement. Entitlement is like opium which creates addiction in us, whereas empowerment is like a medicine that can cure us. The choice is ours.