

Prophet Muhammad ﷺ and Social Justice: Some Reflections

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Abstract

Justice is a concept of moral rightness based on ethics, rationality, law, natural law, religion¹, equity and fairness. In Islam, justice stands for placing things in their rightful place. It stands also for giving others equal treatment with no discrimination whatsoever. Islam has emphasized several principles of that relationships among members of the society may be justly and fairly organized. Foremost among these principles is social justice with all the denotations and connotations the term may involve. The aim behind social justice was to found a society that enjoys peace, fraternity, love, and welfare. Indeed, justice in Islam is not restricted to or practiced on Muslims only. Rather, it is the genuine right of all members of the society regardless of anything else. Muhammad ﷺ the last Prophet of Islam was among those religious figures, whose remarkable character and personality inspired uncommon confidence and commitment. He has served as the Ideal model for Muslim life, providing the pattern that all believers are to emulate. Various number of incidents testify the Prophet's ﷺ justice. He lived in a place where people of different religions, languages, races and tribes all coexisted. It was very difficult for those societies to live together in peace and security, and to check those who sought to spread dissension. Yet, the justice of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ was a source of peace and security for those other communities, just as much as it was for Muslims. The present paper intends to highlight the Islamic concept of social justice, it will also show how Prophet Muhammad ﷺ translated that concept into the living reality by citing different incidents from the Seerah.

Key Words: Social justice, Prophet Muhammad ﷺ and Seerah.

Introduction

Islam has emphasized several principles so that relationships among members of the society may be justly and fairly organized. Foremost among these principles is social justice with all the denotations and connotations the term may involve. The aim behind social justice was to found a society that enjoys peace, fraternity, love and welfare. Remarkably, Islam lays great emphasis on justice because it facilitates the establishment of social order that enables humans to develop their humane qualities, live in peace and harmony and make this world worth living. Peaceful life is possible only when we are just in our thinking and activities. Indeed, justice in Islam is not restricted to practiced Muslims only. Rather, it is the genuine right of all members of the society regardless of anything else. Establishing justice is the law of Allah (swt). The essence of justice is the recognition that all humans are equal and it means creating harmony. Once we

accept the principle of human equality, then we need to reject all racism, nationalism, and ethnocentrism. This is something some people find difficult to accept; but that is the one remedy leading us towards justice and peace. The findings on the Prophet's values of moderation revealed that he placed a lot of weight on justice. Let's begin from the world's first charter, treaty or constitution or the document of peace called *Mithaq-e-Medina* when first Islamic State was established in Medina by the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) after Hijrat (migration from Mecca).

This paper intends to highlight the nature of social justice described in the Qur'an, as social justice became the pivot for creating the harmonious community. It will also show different incidents from Seerah where prophet Muhammad ﷺ practiced social justice as one of the central principles of Islam.

Social justice in Islam

Islam presents a well articulated and coherent model of justice. The Islamic view of justice includes an understanding of how society can maintain a balance in its network of social relationships and how it can prepare individuals to accept and adopt the Qur'anic mandate reflecting the Will of Almighty Allah. This view of justice can completely vindicated by empirical methods. The definition of justice in Islam has two important corollaries:¹ First, it implies that where two men are equal in the relevant respects (so that their dues are the same) they should be treated the same way. Islam endorses the principle "Treat Equals Equally". It is also supported by another fundamental principal "Render To Each His Due". An inference can be drawn from these two statements that amount of benefit a person enjoys or the amount of burden he suffers be proportional to the quantity of the relevant attribute which he possesses.²

Islam the very name of which means "peace" submission to the will of Allah and ladder on which man can always keep rising morally and spiritually is at all related to tolerance. The Quran attaches great value to peace. Peace at the expense of justice is not acceptable to the Quran. These two issues peace and justice are not only correlated but complementary to each other.

Justice is the central theme in the Qur'an. God has repetitively called the Muslims for the formation of justice which can be realized in the Qur'an and also throughout the life of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ Qur'an says:

*"And whoever earns a fault or a sin and then throws it on to someone innocent, he has indeed burdened himself with falsehood and a manifest sin."*³

"And we ordained therein for them (The Jews): "Life for life, eye for eye, nose for nose, ear for ear, tooth for tooth, and would equal for equal. But if anyone remits the retaliation by way of charity, it shall be for him an expiation. And whosoever does not judge by that which Allah has revealed such are the Zalimun (polytheists and wrong-doers of a lesser degree)".⁴

The Qur'an further commands:

*“Allah commands justice, the doing of good, and liberality to kith and kin, and He forbids all shameful deeds, and injustice and rebellion: He instructs you, that you may receive admonition.”*⁵

The domain of justice in Islam can be sub-divided into two spheres of legal justice and social justice. Legal justice includes “*Tazeer*” which concern the punishment of wrong-doing and the compensation for injury. It stipulates the conditions under which punishment may be inflicted and adjusts the scale of punishment to fit the nature of different crimes. In the sphere of civil law, the legal justice regulate the amount of restitution which must be made for injuries. Both the sections of legal justice lay down the procedures of a fair trial and also rights of appeal. Social justice concern the distribution of benefits, material and otherwise, and liabilities throughout the Muslim society as it results from social, economic, religious and political institutions. It deals with such matters as regulation of wages, administration of profits, protection of individual rights, allocation of food, clothing and shelter, and provision of education, health and welfare benefits.⁶

With the advent of Islam, all the ideas based on an inherent inequality lost ground. In different ways, and with great persistence Islam presented to the world the concept that, in spite of outward differences, all human beings are equal. All are entitled to equal social status and equal rights. No one is inferior or superior. The Holy Quran refers to it as follows:

*“Men, we have created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes that you might get to know one another. The noblest of you in Allah's sight is the most righteous of you. Allah is wise and all knowing”.*⁷

According to this verse of the Qur'an, the differences of colour and race found among human beings is for the purpose, not of discrimination, but of identification. Men in essence are equal. What really distinguishes one man from another is character. His superiority can therefore be spoken of only in terms of the degree to which a man is honourable. The truly honourable man is one who is God-fearing and who recognizes and fulfils the rights of God and his fellow men.

So far as human status is concerned, Islam clearly states that if people have been placed on different rungs of the social ladder, this is not a matter of having been favoured with or deprived of social distinction but of their being under divine trial. God has created man in this world in order to test him. Worldly goods and position (or the lack of them) are used by God as instruments of this test. They are like examination papers set by the Almighty. Opulence and penury are both intended to be states in which man is tested. He should, therefore, stop suffering from inferiority or superiority complexes, and should consider instead whether he is going to pass or fail this test. Islam is strongly opposed to all forms of injustice. And the Prophet took all measures to ensure that justice prevailed in every dealing he had undertaken with people.

Prophet Muhammad ﷺ and social justice

The Muslim society in the formative period, i.e. the period of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ and the Rightly Guided Caliphs, is the ideal period which is always dreamt to be implemented by the generations after it.⁸ Such is because this period had implemented Islamic teaching in its real form, either in the worldly or in the future life matters. Hence, by discussing a problem, like that of social justice, during this period, we can see that the thought of this period will be referred by the next generation of the Muslims. Here, then, some highlights on Islamic perspective on social justice at that period.

Prophet Muhammad ﷺ (571-632) is the last prophet having the last revelation of God.⁹ Muhammad ﷺ was among those great religious figures whose remarkable character and personality inspired uncommon confidence and commitment. He is not only known as a prophet, but also as a statesman forming a body politic based on religion,¹⁰ His phenomenal success in attracting followers and creating a community-state that dominated Arabia could be attributed not only to the fact that he was a shrewed military strategist but also to the fact that he was an unusual man who elicited loyalty and steadfastness the ideals discussed throughout the Qur'an. Muhammad's ﷺ followers found him righteousness, trustworthy, pious, compassionate, and honesty. Prophet ﷺ exemplified the virtues of humility, nobility, magnanimity, and charity; and truthful and sincerity. Above all the attributes, Prophet Muhammad ﷺ was a great practitioner of social justice while dealing with diverse groups of the social order in different circumstances both in Makkah as well as Madinah.

A number of incidents testify to the Prophet Muhammad's ﷺ justice. He lived in a place where people of different religions, languages, races and tribes all coexisted. It was very difficult for those societies to live together in peace and security and check those who sought to spread dissension. One group could become aggressive towards and even attack another over the slightest word or action. Yet, the justice of the prophet Muhammad ﷺ was a source of peace and security for those other communities, just as much as it was for Muslims. During the time of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ Christians, Jews and pagans were all treated equally. The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ abided by the verse "There is no compulsion where the Religion is concerned"¹¹ explaining true religion to everyone but leaving them free to make up their own minds.

Declaration on last sermon

Justice was one of the characteristics of the Prophet, that he was brought up on. His justice included those who were close to him and those who were far from him, his friends and enemies, believers and disbelievers, alike. His justice extended to animals as well. He would even ask people to retaliate against him, fearing that he might have wronged or harmed any of them, and this is the epitome of justice.

On the occasion of the final pilgrimage, the Prophet delivered his last sermon while sitting on his camel. One of the things he said is recorded in these words:

'O people, listen carefully, your Lord is one Lord, there is no doubt about it. Your ancestor, is one ancestor, there is no doubt about it. Listen well to my words: no Arab has any superiority over a non--Arab, and no

non—Arab is superior to an Arab. No black is superior to a brown or red, and no red superior to any black. If there is any superiority in anyone it is due to his God--fearing qualities. Have I conveyed the message?' the Prophet asked the people. The people answered from all corners, 'Indeed so! God be witness.' Then the Prophet said: 'Let him that is present tell it unto him that is absent.'¹²

This declaration was made by the Prophet in the final year of his life at a time when the whole of Arabia had been conquered. As such, it was not the declaration of a reformer, but of a ruler of the time. His definition of human equality was not just listened to as a theory, but was immediately put into practice--nay, enforced in society.

In his declaration, the Prophet told the people that just as there is one Creator of this world so all the human beings in this world were born of one man and woman. All human beings were thus equal, being each other's brothers and sisters. They might differ in respect of appearance, but as to honor, status and the right to legal justice, there was no difference between them.

Treatment towards different sections of society:

• **Slaves**

1. In ancient times, it was unthinkable for a girl of noble birth or even of any free person, to be married to a slave. The Prophet, wishing to break with this tradition, decided to arrange a marriage between his own first cousin, Zaynab bint Jahash (d. 20 AH), who belonged to the Banu Hashim, the most respectable clan of the Quraysh tribe, and Zayd ibn Haritha, a black Negro slave. This most extraordinary event served as an important example of Islamic justice.

2. The Ka'aba, the most holy place of worship, was considered sacrosanct in all its parts. Therefore, when the call to prayer had to be made from its roof, it was only a person of noble birth who could ascend it. A man of lowly birth performing this religious duty was not be countenanced. After the conquest of Mecca, the Prophet broke with this tradition by asking a Negro slave, Bilal ibn Rubah to go up on to the roof of the Ka'aba and give the call to prayer (Azan). This was a unique event, not only in Arab history but also in world history of ancient times. Had Islam not become dominant, people would certainly have killed Bilal for his 'arrogance'. They did, however, voice strong reactions against this act, which is an indication of how shocking it had appeared to them. For example, Utaba ibn Usyad of Mecca thanked God that his father was no more and could not, therefore, witness this horrible sight on that day. Harith ibn Hisham asked, 'couldn't Muhammad have found someone other than this Black crow?'¹³

• **Women**

History tells us that before the advent of the Holy Prophet, women were treated as chattel and slaves and in some tribes, newly-born girls were buried alive. Women were treated as inferior species that had no legal existence. In such a primitive world, what the Holy Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be to him) achieved was remarkable. The very idea that a woman could act as a witness or could inherit anything at all in her own right was unthinkable.

social justice is closely related to the concept of right. For every human being has certain rights and justice means rendering everyone each due. During the Farewell Hajj, the Prophet said: “O people! You have rights over your wives and your wives have rights over you ... Treat your wives with kindness. Verily, you have taken them on the security of Allah and made them lawful unto you by the words of Allah. And feed your slaves as you feed yourselves and clothe your slaves as you clothe yourselves. If they commit a fault which you are unwilling to forgive, then sell them, for they are the servants of Allah and are not to be harshly treated”.¹⁴

A woman of the *Makhzoom* family with good connections was found guilty of theft. For the prestige of the Quraysh, some prominent people including Usaamah Ibn Zayd, may Allah be pleased with him, interceded to save her from punishment. The Prophet ﷺ refused to condone the crime and expressed displeasure saying:

"Many a community ruined itself in the past as they only punished the poor and ignored the offences of the exalted. By Allah, if Muhammad's (My) daughter Faatimah would have committed theft, her hand would have been severed." ¹⁵

The Jews, in spite of their hostility to the Prophet ﷺ were so impressed by his impartiality and sense of justice that they used to bring their cases to him ﷺ and he decided them according to Jewish law.¹⁶



• Neighbours

When Prophet Muhammad ﷺ was divinely sent, he found that it was a common practice for people to be bad neighbours. Everybody used to wrong their neighbour and treat him badly. Moreover, people did not see that this behaviour was a fault or a blemish to one's character. Ja'afar ibn aby Talib, the cousin of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ described briefly the then common practice while talking to Negus, king of Ethiopia, as saying: “we were a nation of ignorance and evil. We used to break our family ties and treat neighbours badly”.¹⁷

Therefore, a neighbour did not feel safe from his neighbour's evil, but rather expected evil from his neighbour at any time. So, the Prophet ﷺ came and raised the value of being a good neighbour, giving the neighbour more rights that helped secure the community and establish the rules of love, security, safety and cooperation among people. On one of the occasion, Aisha(R.A) asked him saying, “O Allah's Messenger! I have two neighbours and would like to know to which of them I should give presents.” He replied, “To the one whose door is nearer to you”.¹⁸ Also, he referred to the importance of a neighbour smiling to his neighbour, and sharing his food by saying, “Don't consider anything insignificant out of good things even if it is that you meet your brother with cheerful countenance”.¹⁹ The Prophet also said. “O Abu Dharr, if you cook soup, make a lot of it and give your neighbours”.²⁰

Prophet Muhammad ﷺ always treated his neighbours with extreme kindness and consideration. He used to say that the angel Gabriel had emphasised consideration so often that he sometimes began to think that a

neighbour would perhaps be included among the prescribed heirs. Abu Dharr relates that the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said to him: : Abu Dharr, while broth is being cooked for your family, add a little more water to it so that your neighbour might also share in it". It does not mean that the neighbour should not be invited to share in other things but, as the Arabs were mostly a migratory people and their favourite dish was broth, the Prophet ﷺ referred this dish as a typical one and taught that one should not think so much of the taste of the food as of the obligation to share it with one's neighbour.

• Prisoners

The first battle in the Muslim history is very significant. It took place in the 2nd year of the Muslim calendar between the Muslims and the polytheists of Mecca. Even though outnumbered and ill-equipped, the Muslims defeated the Meccans and took seventy prisoners of war.

The norm among all societies at that time was to either kill the prisoners of war or make them slaves. But Prophet Muhammad instructed the Muslims to treat the Prisoners of war humanely; they were brought back safely to Medina and given decent lodging in the houses of the people who had taken them prisoners. The Qur'an decreed the Prisoners of war must not be ill-treated in any way.

The way the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ dealt with the prisoners was very revolutionary. The poor prisoners were released free; those who came from affluent families of Mecca were returned for a specified ransom.²¹ But the most interesting case was of those prisoners who were literate- the prophet Muhammad ﷺ made a deal with them that they could go free if they could teach ten Muslim children how to read and write.

• Jews and Christians

The Constitution of Madinah which the Prophet drew up with the multi-religious community of Madinah, soon after his arrival there, remains a shining model for communities that strive for social justice to this day. It was a magnificent historical document, authored and dictated by Prophet Muhammad. This document secured and promoted cooperation and alliance among all people of any creed, colour, ethnicity, and lineage. And it set down the criterion of righteousness as the basis of distinction. It also guaranteed the freedom of worship to all religious communities. And the spirit evidenced there shone into the hearts of all the followers of the Prophet. That is the spirit of equity, tolerance and understanding. The Prophet insisted that the lack of tolerance towards the non-Muslims, under Islamic rule, is a grave offense.

Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was able to establish a model society based in Madinah, on the firm foundation of universally-recognized moral principles. Among these principles, equality and justice were given supreme importance; and this is evident in the life and practice of the Prophet.

This agreement between the first Muslim community and the Jewish community in Medina shows the sense of justice portrayed in the Prophet's character in dealing with minorities. It also clearly shows that the Prophet

did not spread Islam, even in the city of Medina, by force; on the contrary, he promoted peaceful co-existence with followers of other faiths, especially Jews and Christians.

The Prophet and his followers were migrated to Medina due to the maltreatment of Quresh of Mecca where the Muslims were minority. When the torture became unbearable he migrate to Medina, a city in northern Arabia, most of whose inhabitants had already accepted Islam. Once he settled in Medina, the Prophet realized that there was a minority Jewish community in that city that had no inclination to accept Islam. He met them and invited them to a pact with the Muslims so that each religious group in Medina knew its rights and obligations as well as limitations. Some relevant part of the charter reads as follows:

- The Jews who enter into this covenant shall be protected from all insults and vexations; they shall have an equal right as our own people to our assistance and good offices. The Jews of the various tribes...and all other non-Muslim residents of Medina shall form with the Muslims one composite nation²²
- They shall practice their religion as freely as the Muslims.
- The allies of the Jews shall enjoy the same security and freedom. The guilty shall be pursued and punished. The Jews shall join the Muslims in defending Medina against all enemies. The interior of Medina shall be a sacred place for all who accept this Charter. The allies of the Muslims and of the Jews shall be as respected as the principal parties of this Charter.²³

This agreement between the first Muslim community and the Jewish community in Medina shows the sense of justice portrayed in the Prophet's character in dealing with minorities. It also clearly shows that Prophet ﷺ did not spread Islam, even in the city of Medina, by force; on the contrary, he promoted peaceful coexistence with followers of other faiths, especially Jews and Christians. Out of the three Abrahamic faiths, it is only Islam which has recognized Judaism and Christianity on a theological level; the Jews and the Christians are known in Islam as Ahl-ul Kitab, the people of the Scripture.

Henceforth, Social justice is highly upheld by Islam. From the above mentioned incidents we came to know that Prophet Muhammad ﷺ himself had never differentiated between "the upper class", "the lower class", or even to his family. Such is because, in Islam, there is no difference between human beings; the admitted difference is only in piety and awareness of Allah.

Conclusion

Through its intellectual revolution and the practical examples it set, Islam thus created a history which had an impact on almost the whole of the inhabited world of that time. Prophet Muhammad ﷺ was able to establish a model society based in Madinah, on the firm foundation of universally-recognized moral principles. Among these principles, equality and justice were given supreme importance; and this is evident in the life and practice of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. In order to create an ideal society, we need to study and

follow the exemplary pattern that the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ has set for us. We are indeed at crossroads. Time has come to apply the ideals of Islam and demonstrated in practice. Those of us who are in spiritual and moral slumber need to reconsider our thoughts and reshape our lives in the light of the Seerah to head towards the just society.

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