

## The Bases of Social Equality in the Message of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him and his progeny)

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### ABSTRACT

*Though the concept of social equality in the message of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) has been vividly highlighted and discussed from time to time, but to delve deep into his message of social equality it seems quite apt to find the bases of the same. The present paper would be a humble attempt to showcase the fact that how the Prophetic model of an egalitarian society, apart from being based on the righteousness of conduct (taqwa), is firmly based on the notions of the primordial human dignity (karamah) and the organic unity of the mankind, and how these notions formulate the underlying principles for establishing a just social order.*

### 1. Introduction

According to the Islamic tradition, Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him and his progeny) is the last messenger of Allah and the message he brought to the mankind is the most perfect manifestation of Allah's absolute will. His message is primarily grounded upon the Divine revelation in the form of Holy Quran and its elaborate explanation in the form of his own model of conduct (*Uswah*). The prime and fundamental concern of this message, with which it is permeated through and through, is the concern for man himself. Notwithstanding the arguments of historical materialism vis-a-vis the rights of man to lead a life of freedom and dignity, the concept of human dignity in the Holy Quran is essentially wedded to the concept of primordial dignity (*karamah*) of the human seed. It being the last and final Divine revelation revealed upon Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him and his progeny), takes a meta-historical standpoint to celebrate the dignified status of man. It is replete with the verses that how the nature (*fitrah*) of man has been fashioned up on the nature Divine (*fitrat ullah*)<sup>1</sup>, and how the Divine spirit was breathed in Adam (the proto-type man) and how the angels were commanded by Allah to bow down in reverence for Adam and how by denying the eternal Divine will, Satan (*Iblis*) not only rejected the faith in the creative wisdom of Allah but

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also in the right of man to lead a dignified life, right from the point of his pre-eternal existence:

Behold! Thy Lord said to angels: 'I am about to create man, from sounding clay from mud and moulded into shape;

When I have fashioned him (in due proportion) and breathed into him my spirit, fall ye down in obeisance unto him.'

So all the angels prostrated themselves, all of them together:

Not so Iblis: he refused to be among those who prostrated themselves<sup>2</sup>.

Again it is with the same continued sense of honour and dignity that Adam and his progeny, according to the Holy Quran, was sent down with in this temporal realm of existence:

"We honoured the sons of Adam; provided them for sustenance things good and pure; and conferred on them special favours, above a great part of our creation<sup>3</sup>."

## 2. Social Equality on the Basis of Primordial Human Dignity

The Prophetic message, through and through, showcases this meta-historical and primordial greatness of man, by the dint of his very nature (*fitrah*). In order to safeguard this sense of greatness and the endless possibilities latent within the human self, Quran has vehemently asserted man to have firm belief in the unity of God (*tawhid*) and not to accept the over lordship of any one save Allah. While addressing people of the Book, who unlike the pagans did not stoop so low from their position of human greatness, so as to worship the animate and inanimate objects and the forces of nature; which according to the Holy Quran were created in servitude to man; Quran in its own right, wants people of the Book to over throw all traces of over lordship of man upon man, albeit in the form of consecrated and hereditary priesthood:

"Say: 'O people of the Book! Come to common terms as between us and you: that we associate no partners with Him; that we erect not, from among ourselves, lords and patrons other than Allah<sup>4</sup>."

Since, belief in servitude to anyone other than Allah; who is the source of all goodness and greatness; is detrimental for the realisation of greatness vouchsafed to the mankind, Quran has vehemently asserted mankind not to accept the over lordship of anyone except Allah and has termed the act of worshipping others save Him as the greatest form of tyranny (*zulmun azim*), which man could inflict upon his Divinely ordained sense of honour and dignity<sup>5</sup>. In fact, it is this realisation of

human honour and dignity (*karamah*) in the strict backdrop of *tauhid*, which may be considered as the prime basis and the starting point for Prophet Muhammad's (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him and his progeny) message of human and social equality.

### 3. Social Equality on the Basis of the Organic Unity of the Mankind

Further, the Prophet (peace be upon him and his progeny) sees the basic human nature to be blessed and Divine, and considers every new born among the human stock, irrespective of its caste, creed, colour and sex, to be born with the purity of nature, only to be corrupted later on because of a peculiar group consciousness or denominational learning. It is narrated by *Bukhari* on the authority of *Abu Hurairah* that the revered Prophet (peace be upon him and his progeny) said:

Every newly born is born upon the (pristine and pure) nature, and it is his/her parents which turn him in to a Jew or a Christian or a Magian. As an animal delivers a perfect baby animal, how do you find it mutilated?<sup>6</sup>

This tradition implies that how Prophetic teaching in spite of realistically acknowledging the ideological and denominational grading of mankind believes in its teleological and organic unity. It is this organic unity of mankind, which formulates another basis of social equality in the message of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him and his progeny) and which eventually finds a lofty expression in the charter of Human rights as put forth by the blessed Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him and his progeny) on the occasion of his farewell pilgrimage (*Hajjat ul vida*). He (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him and his progeny) is reported to have said:

... Remember neither an Arab is superior than a non-Arab, nor is a non-Arab superior than an Arab and no white skinned one has a claim to superiority over a black skinned one and none of the blacks has any superiority upon the White, save by virtue of piety. All of you are the progeny of Adam and clay is his origin<sup>7</sup>

### 4. Social Equality on the Basis of Righteousness of Belief and Conduct (Taqwa)

The concept of organic unity of mankind is oft repeated in the Quranic verses and prophetic traditions (ahadith; sing. Hadith), yet in order to transform this concept of organic unity in to the concept of human equality, the human beings are asked to follow the Divinely inspired sense of distinguishing between the right and the wrong:

“By the soul, and the proportion and order given to it;

And its inspiration, as to its wrong and its right;

Truly he succeeds that purifies it,

And he fails that corrupts it<sup>8</sup>

This ethical sense of distinction between the right and wrong, according to the Holy Quran has been engrained in the essential nature (soul) of man by the dint of his very existence. As a matter of fact, the ethical norms associated with the human soul are absolute and permanent in nature because humanity for its survival is, of necessity, always in need of some permanent values like belief in the absolute creator whose creative prudence turns this otherwise multi-verse in to a universe, which ontologically suggests the belief in the existence of One absolute Being, which ipso facto necessitates the belief in the utility of the absolute values like truth, mercy, compassion, justice, equality, fraternity, mutual understanding and much more. By absoluteness and permanence of these values it is meant that these values are not to be learned extraneously by denominational learning or by means of pure or discursive reasoning alone, but are intuited by the human self just like, if not more than, the fundamental and absolute laws of rudimentary mathematics. It is the sum total of these absolute norms, a strict adherence to which and a strict abstinence from who's opposite, is referred to in the Quran and *ahadith* as *taqwa* (righteousness) and it is on the basis of this absolute sense of *taqwa* that Prophet of Islam (peace be upon him and his progeny) wanted to create an egalitarian society based on the notions of justice and equality. Quran explicitly asserts to this effect as follows:

O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise each other). Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most righteous of you, and Allah has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things)<sup>9</sup>.

The above mentioned verse makes it manifest that how Quran vividly sees the organic unity and consequent equality of the human race and how it wants to build a just society on the firm foundations of *taqwa*; a society whose 'division into tribes and nations has no other purpose except recognition.' For the first time in history tribalism and nationalism were abolished as sources of hostile divisions. All civilised humanity was invited to believe in a common purpose and live for it. Salvation or well-being was extended to all good men, irrespective of race or nation or secondary differences in rituals and conventions. All those who believed in one good God and virtuous lives formed essentially one people who need not quarrel

with one another about in details. This is given as the minimum of a common basis for civilised humanity. Islam not only preached it as a counsel of perfection but practised it and instituted a new social order; it gave the chance of enjoying equal rights to the Arab and the non-Arab, to the Jew and the Gentiles, to the Negro, the downtrodden, and the outcasts of all nations<sup>10</sup>.

This fundamental message of the organic unity of the human society and its further restructuring on the basis of absolute and permanent values of righteousness, therefore closes all the doors of distinguishing between man and man on the basis of wealth, power or popularity and there upon envisages a society which is least based on the notions of class conflict and more upon the notions of *taqwa*. This never means that Islam wants to create a society of pious elites whose exclusivist claims to righteousness would crystallize into a sort of ecclesiastic institution but what is meant by the above mentioned verse and the consequent discussion is that Islam wants to make *taqwa* a common attribute of the entire social order.

##### **5. Concept of Social Equality on the Basis of the Essential Sacredness of the Human Life**

Further, on the basis of organic unity of mankind, Islam being the religion preached by Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him and his progeny), treats each human soul, irrespective of its socio-religious denominations, to be an inseparable phenomenon of the basic human noumenon. By making the children of Israel as the immediate addressees Quran wants this principle to be understood by one and all:

On that account: We ordained for the children of the Israel that if any one slew a person – unless it be for murder or for spreading mischief in the land – it would be as if he slew the whole people. And if anyone saved a life, it would be as if he saved the life of the whole people. Then although to them came our messengers with clear signs, yet even after that, many of them continued to commit excesses in the land<sup>11</sup>.

Thus as per Islamic value system each human being as regards the sacredness of his human essence is equivalent to the entire humanity. No matter, even if the person is a non-Muslim, if he is a non-combatant, his life is sacred and he needs to be treated kindly and justly:

“Allah forbids you not, with regard to those who fight you not for (your) faith nor drive you out of your homes, from dealing kindly and justly with them: For Allah loveth those who are just<sup>12</sup>.”

### 6. Non-Muslims and the Prophetic Concept of Social Justice

As regards the social equality of the non-Muslims under treaty, *Abu Dawud* has set forth a tradition in his *al-Sunan* on the authority of the numerous children of the companions of the Prophet (peace be upon him and his companions), all of whom reported on the authority of their fathers that the Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him and his progeny) said:

“Beware! Anyone who wrongs a non-Muslim under treaty, or diminishes any of his rights, or over burdens him or takes anything from him which he is not willing to give, I shall plead on his behalf on the day of resurrection<sup>13</sup>.”

### 7. Manumission of the Slaves and the Prophetic Concept of Social Equality

With regard to the social status of the slaves, again the concept of organic unity of mankind has been invoked by the beloved Prophet (peace be upon him and his progeny) by declaring slaves to be the brothers of their masters, and that too at a time when the slaves were considered to be the wretched menials. *Bukhari* has narrated on the authority of *Abu zarr*, that Holy prophet told him:

Your servants are your brothers whom Allah has placed under your authority, so whoever has a brother under his authority should feed him from what he eats and clothe him with what he wears. Do not burden them with what is too much for them to bear. When you ask them of that (work), assist them<sup>14</sup>.

Although slavery was an important component of the medieval social fabric, yet the general tendency of the Quranic and Prophetic injunctions is towards encouraging the masters to set their slaves free, so as to enable them to become full and equal members of the society. How manifestly Quran eulogises the one who has freed his bondman:

“And what will explain to thee the path that is steep?

(It is) freeing the bondman<sup>15</sup>.

It would be pertinent to note that how the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him and his progeny) encourages the faith community to free their believing slaves and to provide them the status which is at par with rest of the society. *Bukhari* has narrated that *Abu Hurairah* said:

I heard Allah's Messenger say, 'Whoever frees a believing slave, then for every part that he freed, Allah shall free a part of him from the hellfire – until he frees his private parts on account of freeing his (slave's) private parts'<sup>16</sup>.

### 8. Gender Justice and the Prophetic Concept of Social Equality

So far as the Prophet's (peace be upon him and his progeny) message of social equality is concerned, gender justice and equality has always remained at the heart of the Prophetic message. No doubt, unlike the feminist diatribe against Islam, Quran realistically acknowledges the difference in the emotional and the physical makeup of the men and the women; which at times gets manifested in the Islamic legal system in the shape of men having certain additional duties and responsibilities; yet in no way it recognises any contradistinction between the rights of man and woman. As regards the essential equality between men and women; here too the main stand point of Prophetic message is the organic and teleological unity of the entire human race. Quran makes it clear that the entire humanity is the progeny of a male and a female, the feminine phenomenon itself emerging from the essential nature of man (Adam). It is to this effect that Quran says:

Oh mankind! Fear your Guardian Lord, who created you from a single person, created, out of it, his mate, and from them twain scattered (like seeds) countless men and women; fear Allah, through whom ye demand your mutual (rights), and be heedful of the wombs (that bore you): for Allah ever watches over you<sup>17</sup>

The verse provides a firm religious and scriptural basis to the believers to believe in the essential equality of the genders and their mutual rights upon each other, although their roles and responsibilities may naturally vary according to their peculiar existential circumstances. As regards the specific rights of women upon men; which in itself implies the indispensable responsibility of men towards women; a *hadith* has been narrated by Imam al- Tirmidhi in *al- Sunan* on the authority of Muawiya bin Hayda, wherein he says:

I said, O Messenger of Allah! What rights do our wives have over us? He replied, 'That you feed her when you eat, clothe her when you clothe yourself and you should not strike in the face, use hateful words, or avoid her [in specific conditions] except in your house'<sup>18</sup>.

Similarly, there is a famous prophetic saying wherein he (peace be upon him and his progeny) venerates the one who strives in the upbringing of the female issues.

It has been narrated by Muslim on the authority of Anas bin Malik that the Prophet (peace be upon him and his progeny) said:

“A person who brought up two girl children to the age of adulthood, he will come at the day of resurrection that he and I will be like this; and then he held his two fingers tightly together<sup>19</sup>.”

Further it is to be noted that unlike biblical teachings, wherein the woman is considered to be the cause for the ‘fall of Adam’, Quran considers both Adam and Eve to be the co-sharers in the act which led to their descent upon the earth<sup>20</sup>. This verily exempts the role of womankind from being the root cause of the so called ‘original sin’ and consequently negates the claims of the medieval Christianity wherein the woman has been considered as the main cause of the misery and struggle of the mankind in this transitory world. According to the Holy Quran both men and women have an equal claim over the better prospect of life both here and here-after, provided they possess sincerity of the faith and righteousness of the conduct:

“Whoever works righteousness, man or woman, and has faith, verily, to him will we give a life that is good and pure, and we will bestow on such their reward according to the best of their actions<sup>21</sup>.”

## 9. Conclusion

There are many more frames of reference which may be directly or indirectly related to the concept of social equality, yet for all practical purposes it is possible to conclude from the entire foregoing that Prophet Muhammad’s (peace be upon him and his progeny) message of social equality encompasses all aspects of establishing a just social order wherein a due credence has been paid to the gender justice and the rights of religious minorities and under privileged are duly recognised. In the immediate backdrop of the concept of *tauhid*, it envisages a human society which is free from the notions of class conflict, where the real bases of equality are located in the Quranic concepts of Primordial human greatness and the organic unity of the entire humanity. Any restructuring, there upon, of the society must only be done on the basis of *taqwa* which makes Muslims as a faith community more responsible towards their duty of safe guarding the rights of one and the all.

## Endnotes and References

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- <sup>1</sup> See Al-Quran; 30:30
- <sup>2</sup> Al-Quran; 15: 28-31
- <sup>3</sup> Al-Quran; 17: 70
- <sup>4</sup> Al-Quran; 3: 64
- <sup>5</sup> see Al-Quran; 31:13
- <sup>6</sup> Muhammad bin Ismail Bukhari, *Sahih al Bukhari*; Book of Funerals. Hadith No. 467
- <sup>7</sup> .Ahmad Hanbali, *Musnad Ahmed bin Hanbal*
- <sup>8</sup> Al-Quran; 91: 07-10
- <sup>9</sup> Al-Quran; 49: 13
- <sup>10</sup> khalifa Abdul Hakim *Islamic Ideology*, Institute of Islamic Culture, Lahore, 2006, pp. 156,157
- <sup>11</sup> Al-Quran; 5: 32
- <sup>12</sup> Al-Quran; 60:8
- <sup>13</sup> Abu Dawud, *Sunan*, “Book of the land tax” Hadith no.3052
- <sup>14</sup> Muhammad bin Ismail, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Book of the Faith, Hadith no.30
- <sup>15</sup> Al-Quran; 90: 11- 12
- <sup>16</sup> Muhammad bin Ismail, *Sahih al-Bukhari*; the book of manumission; hadith no.2381.
- <sup>17</sup> Al-Quran, 4:1
- <sup>18</sup> Abu Isa Tirmidhī, *al-Tirmidhī*; Book of exemplary Qualities; Hadith no. 3895
- <sup>19</sup> Imam Muslim, *Sahih al- Muslim*; The book of Virtue, Re-compensation and Etiquettes; Hadith no. 2631
- <sup>20</sup> See Quran, 2:36
- <sup>21</sup> Al-Quran; 16: 97.

