

ISLAMIC GOVERNMENT ON RELIEF OF POVERTY AND HUNGER

A. Hamid

The world today is passing through a great fear of widespread poverty and hunger in a number of countries. Whilst some donors may be seen offering their help, what is often experienced is the deplorable state of maldistribution of food to the needy or cases of misappropriation of funds. The reason is lack of sincere and honest workers who could be expected to have reasonable concern and mercy in their hearts for those suffering from hunger and poverty.

The fact is that no faith or creed has in its original teachings prescribed such ways and means and provided guidance for relief of poverty as Islam has done. It did not come just to show ways of individual upliftment and salvation but it came as a complete code of life for the benefit of individuals as well as the Muslim society collectively. So much have individuals been asked to help one another that those failing to do so were to be considered as outcasts from the Muslim society. The holy Prophet of Islam is reported to have said:

“ Those hearing the voice of the helpless and the weak Muslims yet do not respond favourably, are to be considered out of Muslim society.”

An established Islamic government is empowered to collect some of the religious dues like zakat and khums from the wealthy class so as to help those deserving and relieve poverty from the Muslim society. Similarly one of the paramount duties of the government is to ensure work for the jobless by providing them land or other facilities. The government in Islam has discretion to such an extent that from state treasury and income of religious dues, it can provide capital or other means to those in need to enable them to raise an income for their living.

An Islamic government is not designed just to provide alms and food to the poor but its services are required to include facilities of transport, residence, water supply, education, medical treatment etc from its sources. Thus under the shelter of collective protection against poverty and afflictions in Islam, an individual is able to enjoy a peace of mind and confidence in his daily life.

That there is no limit to which one can spend his religious dues for the relief of poverty can be gleaned from the following hadith:

Ishaq bin Ammar says that I asked the sixth Imam Jaffer Sadiq (A.S) whether I could from my zakat dues pay one hundred dinars in one go to a needy Muslim. The reply from the Imam was yes. Again I asked how about two hundred, three hundred or four hundred dinars? The reply was that you can to the extent you have to fulfil his need. (Wsa'il u Shi'ia 4:160)

So wide is the scope of relief of poverty under Islamic government that its welfare services are not restricted to the Muslim individuals only but even the non-Muslims do

benefit. One day Ali Ibn Abi Taleb (A.S) was passing through a lane and he witnessed an old and weak Christian begging people for some help. The Imam inquired "What is this? That during his youth you obtained his services but now that he is incapacitated, you have neglected him. His past shows that he was a man of work and struggle. Take him and provide him with a continued relief from the state treasury."

Islam has not encouraged begging and dependence upon others for one's livelihood as it aims at upholding human dignity. Therefore it declared labour and struggle for earning one's sustenance as act of worship and dignified it further by considering a worker as better than a pious worshipper who was sitting idle. Islam has reserved relief for those incapacitated and weak from those holding surplus wealth by imposing religious levies on their net income and idle remaining funds under certain specified conditions.

Sama'a a disciple of Imam Jaffer Sadiq (A.S) once asked the Imam that some Muslims have surplus income whilst their fellow brother Muslims are in dire need of food that even the available zakat money does not suffice. Is it fair and acceptable that some live satiated whilst others from their brothers in faith remain hungry?

In reply the Imam had this to say:

"A Muslim is he who does not oppress nor cause injustice to his fellow brothers nor does he deny them leaving them in destitute condition. It is incumbent upon Muslims to meet the wants of their brothers and endeavour to maintain mutual benevolence and assistance." (Wasail u Shi'ia 6:332)

These are but only some of the ways and system of upbringing the down-trodden and the poor in a Muslim society. The present day Iran under Islamic rule can herewith be cited as a vivid example of how an Islamic state can provide various facilities for the relief of poverty and hunger.