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Item Type	Preprint
Authors	Engineer, Asghar Ali
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Download date	2026-11-08 19:54:12
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/184084

ISLAM AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE

Asghar Ali Engineer

Justice is one of the central values of Islam and any economic system which is not based on juice cannot be acceptable to Islam. Qur'an greatly emphasizes distributive justice and expresses its full and unqualified support for weaker sections of society which Qur'an calls *musad'ifun* and condemns arrogant ruling classes (called *mustakbirun)* which suppress the weaker sections. We would like to throw more light on this in this article.

I was inspired to write this piece by the movement launched in America which also spread to other parts of the world specially Europe. This movement raised an interesting slogan 'we are ninetynine per cent' since, leaders of this movement maintain, one percent Americans have concentrated all wealth in their hands depriving 99% people of America of their just rights. Hundreds of people wearing badges 'we are 99% can carrying similar slogans gathered in Wall Street which is financial district of America and also occupied other strategic places.

In America which is fortress of capitalism profit is the only sacred word and distributive justice almost a dirty word. In America freedom is considered very fundamental value but this freedom was hardly inclusive of freedom to be socialist, much less communist. It is from this same America that a movement has started which is supporting socialism and distributive justice and is opposing concentration of wealth and such concentration that one percent Americans have almost entire wealth of American people.

It would be very interesting o compare what was happening in Mecca before rise of Islam. Mecca was, as we all know, centre of international trade and finance and various tribal chiefs had formed inter-tribal corporation to monopolis we this international trade and were accumulating wealth and neglecting tribal morality to look after weaker sections. In other words, like in our own times, globalization and liberalization of economy allows few people to accumulate wealth, in Mecca too, before rise of Islam, polarization between rich and poor had greatly increased leading to social tensions. Social tensions had become very explosive ad has been very vividly described in surah No.104.

This surah says man who accumulates wealth and counts it again and again and thinks that this wealth will make him eternal. But surely he will be thrown into 'hutumah'. What is 'hutumah' What is 'hutumah'. It is burning fire which will engulf his heart…Yet in another Meccan surah Qur'an says, " Don't you see the man who belies *Deen*. It is this man who pushes away the orphans and does not induce people to feed the poor and deprives people of their small needs.(107)

Before rise of Islam Mecca had become centre of world trade and fiancé as most of the international caravans laden with luxury goods passed through that city and tribal chiefs who first acted as guides for crossing the vast desert between Mecca and boarder of Roman Empire but slowly became expert traders themselves and these traders became greedy for more and more wealth and kept on reinvesting their resources in trade to make yet more profit.

This dynamics of trade and profit kept them so engaged that in Surah 102 Qur'an says that your riches have made you quite negligent of your studies till you visit your graves. While this dominant section of Meccan tribals chiefs was becoming super rich, the poor, the orphans, widows and slaves were being totally neglected and exploited to accumulate more riches. They were leading the lives of poverty and deprivation. Nothing moved the rich whereas there was earlier no concept of poor in a tribal society.

It was in this background that such verses were revealed in the Qur'an. Justice, moreover, is so central in the Qur'anic ethics that Allah's name is '*Adil* and also Qur'an says that "Do Justice, it is closest to piety"(5:8). Thus there was complete absence of distributive justice on one hand, and concentration of wealth, on the other. Compare this with what is happening in America. Wealth has got so concentrated in the hands of 1% that 99% people are feeling the heat, losing the jobs and have started living the life of starvation – in America where in the midst of plenty people had forgotten what is life of poverty.

It is under these circumstances that this movement has started and thousands of people are demonstrating on Wall street or at many other strategic places. Of course media is not much interested in such movements which exposes weakness of capitalist system and hence does not report much. Only occasionally it is compelled to write about it without making it much visible both in print as well as electronic media. I need not say much who controls the media.

In those days in Mecca there was neither democracy, nor awareness about ones rights, nor any democratic movements and so only way to make people aware of their rights was divine revelation and hence Qur'an, an instrument of divine revelation through Muhammad (PBUH) these verses were revealed condemning concentration of wealth and deprivation of people. These verses created awareness among the faithful about distributive justice.

It is also important to note that the Qur'an is in favour of need-based life and opposes concept of greed based or luxurious life. It clearly says give away what is left with you after fulfilling your needs (what is called by Qur'an ('*afw*). However, Muslims, except few followers of the Prophet (PBUH) during his life and few years thereafter, never practiced it. In fact many companions of the Prophet (PBUH) considered it sinful to drink water in gold or silver vessel. But it was short lived.

If Muslims had taken these verses seriously and put them into practice they would have been the role model for the world for distributive justice and a conflict free world, a world without wars and bloodshed, a peaceful world where everyone would have felt secure and peaceful, a real paradise on earth. But America, in order to make lives of its own people life of plenty made the whole earth hell.