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THE ABOLITION OF SLAVERY AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF SOCIAL EQUALITY IN THE PROPHEPIC ERA: A RESEARCH STUDY

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THE ABOLITION OF SLAVERY AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF SOCIAL EQUALITY IN THE PROPHETIC ERA: A RESEARCH STUDY

Muhammad Mudasir Nawaz, Farzana Solangi, Humera Naz

ABSTRACT:

Slavery was a phenomenon that was followed in the majority of ancient cultures such as pre-Islamic Arabia where slaves used to be denied the right to basic rights and social dignity. The appearance of Islam taught a revolutionary outlook on equality between people and social justice which slowly changed and undermined the slavery institution. This paper discusses the initiatives that were made in the Prophetic era to end slavery and put in place foundations of social equality in the early Muslim society. The study investigates the ethical and legal reforms presented by Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) through the qualitative interpretation of primary Islamic literature, such as the Quran, the literature on the Hadith, as well as classical Seerah. These reforms involved promotion of emancipation of slaves, setting up legal structures to emancipate slaves and moral responsibility of slaves. The paper also examines major instances of social integration and equality like the roles of Bilal ibn Rabah, Zayd ibn Harithah, and Salman al-Farisi who were accepted by the Muslim fraternity despite their social status. These conclusions show that the Prophetic reforms were meant to change the social system by enhancing human dignity, equality and brotherhood. The research concludes that the Prophetic approach provides valuable information on how gradual abolishment of social injustice and creation of egalitarian community founded on moral and ethical values can be established.

KEYWORDS: Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), Seerah Studies, Slavery in Islam, Abolition of Slavery, Social Equality in Islam, Human Dignity in Islam, Islamic Social Justice, Manumission in Islam, Early Islamic Society, Prophetic Reforms.

1. Introduction:

Slavery was a very entrenched practice in most ancient civilizations, such as the Greek, Roman, Persian, and the Arabian civilizations. Generally, slaves society as property in these societies and denied basic rights and recognition in the society. Their position was based on the aspects like being a prisoner of war or in debt or being born as a slave and most of them had very little chance of changing their status. The society of Arabian pre-Islamic was not an exception since slavery was a part of economic and social fabric. Slaves were usually treated in a cruel manner and they were mostly left out of the social and political life.¹

As Islam came into being in the seventh century, there was the introduction of major moral and social reformation, which confronted most of the unjust practices of that era. These reforms included a radical attitude to human dignity and equality. The Quran and the life of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) underlined the fact that all humans are created equal in their fundamental nature and that only a moral character and righteousness can make one better than another. This tenet spelt a radical change of the tribal and hierarchical norms that had been previously characteristic of the Arabian society.²

The Prophetic period saw a slow but a planned attempt to reorganize the slavery institution. Islam implemented a set of ethical, legal and social actions that were aimed at restricting and ultimately ending the practice of slavery instead of ending it abruptly in a society dominated by it. These were measures that advocated the emancipation of slaves, the inclusion of

¹ Bernard Lewis, *Race and Slavery in the Middle East: An Historical Enquiry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 5–9.

² The Qur'an, 49:13.

the freed in the Muslim community as well as the fostering of a sense of being brothers despite social and racial diversities. With these reforms the early Muslim community was now starting to drift towards a egalitarian social order.³

The main aim of the research paper is to investigate how the leadership of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) helped to bring slavery to its gradual end and establish social equality in the early Islamic society. The study aims to answer some of the following questions: What was the nature of slavery in pre-Islamic Arabia? What moral and legal changes did the Islam bring to slavery? And what impact did the Prophetic example have in changing into a more inclusive and egalitarian social form?

The paper is divided into a number of sections. After this introduction, this paper examines the history of slavery in pre-Islamic Arabia. It then looks into the Islamic teachings of human dignity and equality, the changes that were made in the times of Prophet in order to undermine the slavery institution and how the early Muslim community was able to integrate in the society. Lastly, the research points out some of the lessons of the Prophetic model that are still useful in the present-day debates of social justice and human dignity.

2. The historical background of slavery in Pre-Islamic Arabia:

Prior to the advent of Islam, slavery was a well-established and popular established institution in the Arabian society as well as in most other parts of the old world. The slaves were mostly treated as property and not as people with rights and even legal protections. They were measured by a

³ Jonathan A. C. Brown, *Slavery and Islam* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2019), 87–92.

number of parameters such as warfare, debt and trade to determine their status. Those that were taken in tribal wars were usually put to slave, and those that were incapable of discharging their debts could be also turned into servants. Moreover, there were slave markets in some areas in Arabia where the enslaved individuals were sold and purchased as commodities.⁴

Pre-Islamic Arabia had the lowest social status of the slaves. They were normally denied the basic freedoms, and they did not have much control over their own lives. Their work was usually exploited in house service, farming, commerce and other manual labor. Most slaves were ill-treated and there were not many systems to prevent them to be abused or exploited. In the vast majority of situations, their social identity was forever associated with their role as slaves and, in such a way, they had few chances to be socially mobile or integrate with the rest of the community.⁵

The other feature of pre-Islamic slavery was the close relationship between the social structure and tribal identity. The society in Arabia was also highly structured according to tribal affiliations and those individuals who lacked the protection of the tribes like slaves and freed men were usually the lowest in the social hierarchy. This system strengthened social inequality and restricted the participation of the marginalized groups in social and political life in full.⁶

⁴ Jonathan A. C. Brown, *Slavery and Islam* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2019), 27–30.

⁵ Bernard Lewis, *Race and Slavery in the Middle East: An Historical Enquiry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 10–13.

⁶ Patricia Crone, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 75–78.

The slavery institution was so entrenched in the socio-economic activities of the day, irrespective of the harsh realities of the system. Consequently, the abolition of slavery had to be a social change and not an abrupt abolishment attempt. With the introduction of Islamic religion in the seventh century, there came ethical teachings that focused on human dignity, compassion, and justice. These values slowly undermined the current mindsets on slavery and preconditioned the changes towards better treatment of slaves and their liberation.⁷

Learning the situation of slavery in pre-Islamic Arabia is thus necessary in understanding the radical contribution of the reforms that were made during the Prophetic period. Islam was the beginning of a process that transformed the social life of the early Muslim community by instigating equality and moral responsibility, as well as gradual emancipation of the individuals who were slaves.

3. Islamic Principles Regarding Human Dignity and Equality:

Islamic religion brought a radical change in the moral and social perspective of the Arabian society, by highlighting the natural dignity and equality of all human beings. Unlike the hierarchical organizations, which were typical of the ancient societies, the Quran came up with the principle that all individuals are descendants of the same human family. This idea stressed the social differentiation according to lineage, wealth, race, or status which was formerly a determining factor in the social order. Insisting on the oneness of the human race, Islam provided the moral

⁷ Ira M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 33–36

structure of the society where all the people were seen as having the intrinsic dignity and moral values.⁸

3.1 Human Equality in the Qur'an:

The Quran explicitly spells out the fact that all human beings are equal in terms of their origin and morality. It is widely known that in one of the verses it is written that mankind was created out of a single male and female and split into nations and tribes so that man can know others. The verse also clarifies that the true test of excellence among people is righteousness and moral nature. This doctrine was a direct and explicit contradiction to the tribal and racial orders of the pre-Islamic Arabian society and set forth the universal standard of equality between humans.⁹

Besides stressing that all people are equal, the Quran also stipulates that all human beings are dignified. Human dignity (karamah) is the notion which is brought forth as a divine dignity of all people. This dignity means that all people should be respected, treated justly and well irrespective of their social rank. These principles formed a moral system that did not condone discrimination and promoted the humane attitude to the weak members of the society such as slaves and the poor.

3.2 Shariah and Islam as a Social Justice:

The prophet Muhammad (PBUH) emphasized these teachings of Quran by his actions and words. The formation of brotherhood among believers and the elimination of social and racial discrimination was one of the main messages of his message. The Prophet stressed the idea that no one was superior to another because of his or her ethnicity or descent. Rather,

⁸ Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 37–40.

⁹ The Qur'an, 49:13.

ethical behavior and holiness were introduced as the actual measures of respect and respect.

The Prophet made this point very clear in his Farewell Sermon when he said that an Arab was not better than a non-Arab, nor a non-Arab better than an Arab, nor a white person better than a black person except by righteousness. This statement was a strong statement of defiance against racial and tribal subjugations and solidified the Quranic teaching of human equality.¹⁰

Another teaching of the Prophets was the compassion and justice given to social vulnerable persons. The way slaves, the freed and individuals not under tribal protection were perceived was to be treated with kindness and respect. The Prophet kept on reminding the society that everyone was a servant of God, and thus fit to be treated fairly and with dignity. Through propagation of these values, the social environment in the early Muslim community slowly evolved to acknowledge with humanity and human rights of people irrespective of their social status in the past.

To conclude, the Islamic focus on human dignity and equality formed the basis of morality and ethics of the reforms that were implemented in the Prophetic times. These values questioned the status quos of the society and promoted the creation of a more accepting society founded on justice, brotherhood and human dignity.

4.The Prophetic Era of the Gradual Abolition of Slavery:

The development of Islam which occurred in the seventh century brought an innovative attitude to the concept of slavery. Instead of the sudden abolishment of slavery in a society where it was highly institutionalized in

¹⁰ Abu Dawud, *Sunan Abi Dawud*, Book of Rituals (Hadith no. 1905).

the economy and social systems, Islam adopted the gradual reform approach with the intention of curbing and eventually eradicating the vice. The Quran, and the policies of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) aimed at transforming the social mindset towards slavery by advocating compassion, promoting emancipation and assimilating the freed slaves into the society. Such a slow operation enabled the early Muslim community to move towards a more egalitarian social order without the social disruption occurring to a severe extent.¹¹

4.1 Manumission (Freeing Slaves) Must be Encouraged:

Among the most influential tools that Islam brought to undermine the slavery institution was the high encouragement of freed slaves (manumission). The Quran glorifies the process of liberating slaves again and again and makes it appear as a good action that yields spiritual benefits. The liberation of slaves is a righteousness act and a way of achieving moral excellence in a number of verses.¹²

Moreover, the emancipation of slaves was also put in place by the Quran as a form of expiation (kaffarah) against some of the sins and law contraventions. Indicatively, people who accidentally hurt others or acted against some religious duties had to release a slave as a way of repentance. Through the establishment of emancipation as a moral and legal duty, Islam established viable ways of ensuring gradual abolishment of slavery in the society.¹³

4.2 Reforms brought about by the Prophet (PBUH):

¹¹ Jonathan A. C. Brown, *Slavery and Islam* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2019), 95–100.

¹² The Qur'an, 90:12–13.

¹³ The Qur'an, 4:92.

Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) strengthened these principles of Quran by his teaching and example. He also urged Muslims to treat slaves humanely and with respect and ordered them to feed and dress slaves in the same way they fed and dressed themselves. Such teachings notably enhanced the living standards of the slaves and reinforced the need to see them as humans.¹⁴

Another thing is that the Prophet himself freed a number of slaves and invited his companions to follow suit. Some of the most influential individuals in the early Muslim society were once slaves who had become respectable and influential people after being freed. The Prophet enabled the breaking of the social isolation walls that had discriminated against the freed individuals by including them in the community social and religious life.

4.3 Legal and Moral Processes to abolish Slavery:

Laws that were aimed at facilitating emancipation were also introduced by Islam. The contract called mukatabah was one of the vital institutions that enabled the slaves to enter into an agreement with their masters to buy their freedom on an installment. The Quran motivated the slave owners to provide such agreements whereby the enslaved persons proved to be capable of doing it. This clause provided a way of liberation to a number of slaves.¹⁵

Besides the legal reforms, there was a gradual change in the social attitude toward slavery due to the moral laws of Islam. The Prophet (PBUH) taught the Muslim community to treat slaves as fellow human beings

¹⁴ Muhammad ibn Ismail al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Book of Emancipation of Slaves, Hadith no. 2545.

¹⁵ The Qur'an, 24:33.

worthy of respect and compassion by highlighting the human dignity, equality and brotherhood. All these reforms led to the eventual demise of slavery in the early Muslim society.

To conclude, however, Prophetic approach to slavery involved not only moral teachings but effective measures that would help to minimize and finally end the practice. With the promotion of emancipation, better treatment of slaves, and the creation of the legal systems that guarantee freedom, Islam triggered the transformational process that made the social system of the early Muslim community different.

5-Prominent Examples of Social Equality in the Prophetic Era:

The social organization of the early Muslim community did not exclude the reforms that were introduced during the Prophetic era but were clearly portrayed in the theoretical teachings. A good number of these people who once had a marginalized or an enslaved background became honorable and influential people in the Islamic society. Their experience explains how the works of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) contravened the accepted social orders emphasized earlier and the development of a society grounded on equality, dignity, and merit. Some of the brightest ones are Bilal ibn Rabah (RA), Zayd ibn Harithah (RA), and Salman al-Farisi (RA), whose lives would show how the social equality was practically implemented in the early Muslim community.

5.1 Bilal ibn Rabah (RA) and the Abolition of the Racial Stratification:

One of the most effective examples of the way Islam changed people is Bilal ibn Rabah (RA), an Ethiopian former slave. Bilal experienced extreme persecution before converting to Islam because of being a slave. He underwent inhuman torture by his master when he declined to denounce his faith after he had accepted the Islam message. Later, he was

released by one of the closest companions of Prophet, Abu Bakr (RA).¹⁶ Bilal became a very respected person in the Muslim community under the guidance of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). He was named the first muadhhdhin (caller to prayer) of the Islam religion by the Prophet, with the honour to call on the faithful to worship. Such position was very prominent and symbolic especially in a society where hierarchies of race and social classes had hitherto reigned supreme. The status of Bilal proved that it means that respect and honor in Islam is not founded on ethnicity or social background but the faith and character.

5.2 Zayd ibn Harithah (RA) and Freed Slaves:

The other notable means of social equality is Zayd ibn Harithah (RA), who was first a captive and a slave but later joined the house of the Prophet. Prophet (PBUH) later liberated Zayd and treated him with a lot of affection and respect. Zayd was invited to be one of the closest companions of the Prophet and actually adopted as his son even before the subsequent revelation that changed the process of adoption in the Islamic law.¹⁷

The position of Zayd within the Muslim community was exceptional since he was handed over with great duties and authority. Other companions respected his leadership and he was appointed as a military commander in various expeditions. It goes to show that the reforms of the Prophet allowed freed people to engage in social and political life to the full extent without being restricted to the status of the former one.

¹⁶ Muhammad Husayn Haykal, *The Life of Muhammad* (Indianapolis: American Trust Publications, 1976), 86–88.

¹⁷ W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Medina* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), 234–236.

5.3-Salman al-Farisi (RA) and Beyond Ethnicity Equality:

Another example of the early Muslim community being inclusive and universal is Salman al-Farisi (RA). Salman was originally Persian and involved in a lengthy spiritual quest to find the truth when he eventually came across the message of Islam. He converted into Islam and he was respected by the society and became close to the Prophet (PBUH).¹⁸

The fact that Salman contributed to the Muslim community further shows the aspect of equality as advanced by Islam. In the Battle of the Trench, he had suggested the strategic concept of a defensive trench being dug around Madinah a military concept, unknown to the Arabs of the time. The Prophet took his proposal, and this was very useful in securing the defense of the city. This incident shows that it was merit and wisdom that assigned the position of an individual within the early Muslim society, and not the tribal origin or ethnicity.

These instances show that the reforms that were brought in during the Prophetic era were from the perspective of transformation. By raising the people of different social and ethnic origins, the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) created a community where dignity, respect and leadership were not founded on heritage and social status but rather on faith, personality and talent.

6.Prophetic Society Social Integration and Human Dignity:

The reforms that were implemented in the Prophetic age did not only promote the emancipation of slaves but also guaranteed their complete social inclusion into the Muslim society. Among the most extraordinary

¹⁸ Tariq Ramadan, *In the Footsteps of the Prophet: Lessons from the Life of Muhammad* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 97–100.

features of the society founded by Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was the elimination of strict social classes of society dividing people according to their ancestry, wealth, or position. Islamic teachings focused on the fact that all believers belonged to one brotherhood that was united by faith and moral duty. This ideology provided a social context where people with diverse backgrounds could equally engage in religious, social, and political existence.¹⁹

One of the main aspects of the integration of the social life of the early Muslim community was the creation of fraternity between the believers. Soon after the migration (Hijrah) to Madinah, the Prophet (PBUH) made the system of brotherhood (mu'akhah) between the departing Makkah (Muhajirun) and the assistants of Madinah (Ansar). This organization promoted unity and solidarity between people who formerly belonged to various tribes and social classes. This brotherhood included former slaves and freed people, which further supported the notion that Islamocentric social standing was based upon faith and character and was not established on birth or lineage.²⁰

The other significant dimension of social equality in the Prophetic society was the elimination of racial and tribal discrimination. Tribal pride and ethnic segregation were the two factors that had a great impact on pre-Islamic Arabia and in most cases, they would define the position of individuals in the society. All these separations were challenged by the

¹⁹ Ira M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 38–41.

²⁰ Martin Lings, *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1983), 126–130.

teachings of the Prophet Muhammad PBUH as he taught of unity of humanity and equality of all believers. This was well explained in the teachings of Prophet that no human being is superior to another, be it in regard to race or ancestry. Those teachings were used to redefine the mindsets of the early Muslim community and also taught the people to respect others irrespective of their ethnic or social background.²¹

Marriage and social mobility also indicated that the freed people were integrating into the society. Islam promoted inter tribal and inter social marriages which worked to eliminate the divisions that were formed between various groups in the past. In a number of cases in the Prophetic period, the freed slaves got married to people belonging to established families in the Muslim community. These marriages represented the new social order that was brought about by Islam where moral character was the basis of dignity and honor instead of being inherited.²²

Also, representatives of the formerly marginalized groups were not prohibited to engage actively in the religious and administrative aspects of the community life. They were teachers, military leaders and advisors who helped to develop and stabilize the Muslim society. This non-discriminatory strategy reinforced the feeling of cohesiveness and shared responsibility in the community.

Overall, the Prophetic society has shown the society immensely powerful model of social integration based on the principles of equality and human dignity. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) created a society where people were considered based on its religious beliefs, personality, and

²¹ The Qur'an, 49:13.

²² Jonathan A. C. Brown, *Slavery and Islam* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2019), 103–105.

contributions. Not only was this model able to advance the lives of the once enslaved people but it also formed a more unified and fair social order of the early Islamic society.

7. Lessons to the Contemporary Discussion of Social Justice and Equality:

The social reforms that were brought about in Prophetic period in the context of slavery and social equality can bring valuable information to the modern discourse of social justice and human dignity. The societies of the modern world are still plagued by inequality, discrimination, and social marginalization. Racial, economic and social marginalization problems are still high in most regions of the world. The case of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) indicates that ethical leadership, moral change, and real institutional reform can make significant social change.

Human dignity as the cornerstone of social justice is another of the most crucial things learned during the Prophetic model. According to Islam, all human beings have a certain level of dignity, and need to be respected regardless of their social, ethnic, and economic status. This value has a direct challenge against the systems that discriminate people on the basis of race, classes, or any other social identify. The Islam teachings can foster human societies to design policies and institutions that safeguard the rights and dignity of every person because it preaches that humans are equal before God.

The second lesson is the progressive and realistic method of social reform. The Prophet (PBUH) did not seek to tear off institutionalized societal systems using brash and startling actions. He, in his turn, also brought a set of moral lessons and legal changes that changed the attitude and the practices of society slowly by slowly. This strategy enabled the early Muslim community to pursue more equality and social stability at the

same time. Modern day reform movements can draw useful implications on this approach by integrating moral advocacy with workable reforms which will tackle the structural inequalities.

The Prophetic model also emphasizes on the issue of social integration and inclusion. The former slaves and the marginalized were invited to the Muslim community and allowed to lead their social, religious and political lives in totality. Their contributions were appreciated as per merit and character and not on their past social status. This integrative style allowed the community to be united and made it socially cohesive.

Lastly, the example of leadership provided by Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) proves the fact of equality and justice by leadership based on ethical principles. Social values and institutions are highly influenced by a leader. Through the example of compassion, impartiality and humility, the Prophet managed to influence his followers to treat others with respect and dignity. The example of his life demonstrates that social reform can only be sustained through moral vision and practical leadership with a sense of commitment to justice.

To summarize, the Prophetic approach to slavery and social inequality offers an eternal model of the dissemination of justice and human dignity. Emphasizing equality, inclusion, and ethical leadership, modern communities will be able to learn a lot and apply changes proposed by the Prophetic era.

8-Conclusion:

This paper has examined the revolutionary strategy that was inspired during the Prophetic period to the slavery institution and the creation of social egalitarian in early Islamic society. The analysis reveals that the problem of slavery was handled by Islam in a gradual manner by carrying out ethical change, the law, and assimilation. Rather than immediate

abolishment that would have led to acute social disturbance in a society where slavery was a common practice, the Quran teachings and the leadership of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) encouraged a gradual approach that would undermine and ultimately bring down the practice.

The analysis has brought forth the fact that the Prophetic reforms were based on the wider Islamic values of human dignity, equality, and justice. Islam undermined the tribal and social structures, which hitherto characterized the Arabian society, by reiterating the fact that all human beings have a common origin and that real nobility and greatness are in the character of the moral and the righteous. These were manumission encouragement, introduction of legal provisions to effect emancipation, and the assimilation of those who were freed into Muslim community, which helped in changing the social order gradually.

Moreover, the lives of some of the companions like Bilal ibn Rabah, Zayd ibn Harithah and Salman al-Farisi demonstrate how the first Muslim generation practiced the teaching of equality and inclusiveness. Such people managed to become honorable and influential regardless of their ethnic and social backgrounds and that is another sign that the status of the Islamic world was not based on the lineage and status but on the faith, character, and merit.

To sum up, the reforms that were presented in the Prophetic period mark one of the landmark milestones in the history of social justice and human dignity. The Prophetic model offers sustained information about what ethical leadership and a gradual change can do to eradicate social injustice and create a more equitable and inclusive society.

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