

The Ideal of Islamic Charity

Happy is the man who makes others happy. Eid-ul-Fitr is the practical demonstration of this lesson.

Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq said that Muslims have been asked to fast "so that rich may feel the pangs of hunger and thus realise the plight of his poor and needy brethren". Looking at fast from this angle, we can easily understand the philosophy of Zakat-ul-Fitrah, which every Muslim is obliged to pay on the eve of Eid-ul-Fitr. A Muslim must give to the needy food-stuff at the rate of a prescribed weight, on behalf of himself and of every member of his family, including servants and guests who were sheltered under his roof at sunset.

That Zakat must be paid before Eid prayer; and it is preferable to pay the price in cash (instead of the foodstuff), so that the recipient may purchase some necessary items, like clothes etc., for his children before taking them out for prayers.

According to Islamic ethics, our joy and happiness are not complete unless we make our less fortunate brethren happy. It is a lesson worth remembering, especially in this era of materialism, when scant regard is paid to the moral and ethical values which are so much emphasised by religion.

Our children are taught nowadays that only the fittest has a right to survive, and weaklings are bound to perish. In this educational back-ground, why should they care if a poor man dies of hunger? He is a misfit, and he must perish.

But the teaching of religions is quite different. Religion teaches us to care; it enjoins the strong and wealthy to help their weak and poor brethren.

Islam has set a very high standard for charity. Charity must be in the way of God; it should expect no reward or return in this world; it should not be marred by subsequent references or reminders and never should any annoyance or injury be caused to the recipient. In the present-day jargon, the aid must be without any strings. God says in the Qur'an:

"Kind words and covering of faults are better than charity followed by injury (to the self-respect of the recipient)".

Admonishing the believers not to nullify their charity by reminders and by causing injury to the recipients, God condemns false charity which is done so that others may see how generous the donor is. God compares such so-called charity to "a hard barren rock, on which is a little soil. On it falls heavy rain which leaves it a bare rock. " So a false charity will be washed away on the Day of Judgment, leaving the selfish and egotistic motives naked for everyone to see and despise.

In contrast to it is the true charity, done for the sake of Allah and with conviction of faith. Such a charity is likened to "a garden, high and fertile. Heavy rain falls on it and makes it yield a double increase of harvest; and if it receives no heavy rain, light moisture is enough for it."

True charity is also likened to "a grain of corn; it groweth seven ears, and each ear has a hundred grains; and God gives manifold increase to whom He pleases. "

And how will fare the false charity? It is wasted and will not do the donor any good when it would be needed most. Allah has explained it in this way: "Does any of you wish that he should have a garden with date-palms and vines, and streams flowing underneath, and all kinds of fruits, while he is stricken with old age and his children are not strong enough (to look after themselves), that it should be caught in a whirlwind with fire therein and be burnt up? Thus does God make clear to you His signs so that you may ponder. "

According to Islamic ethics, a donor should remain obliged to the poor brother who accepted his charity. It may seem strange to worldly people like us. But look at it from Islamic point of view and you will understand.

A donor helps the recipient in this world by giving him certain aid or some material benefit which is bound to perish in due course. But that charity brings the donor nearer to the Grace of Allah, which is ever-lasting, and which will benefit him on the Day of Judgment. Thus the recipient of charity helps the donor in a far better way than the aid which he receives from the donor.

It has been declared in Islam that poor are the family of Allah and the rich persons are the agents of Allah. An agent has no right to despise the children of his principal when he is required to pay some of the principal's money to his children.

This is the ideal of Islamic charity. On this auspicious day of Eid-ul-Fitr, we are reminded of this sacred duty by the rules relating to Zakat-ul-Fitrah. Shallow would be our joy if we shut our eyes from the plight of our poor brethren.

The fast of Ramadhan has shown us how it feels to be hungry; Eid-ul-Fitr is showing us the real meaning of happiness. Let us remember these two important lessons in our daily life.

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