
INTRODUCTION

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It has been our effort at the Institute of Policy Studies to initiate debate and discussion on some of the critical national and international issues through commissioned research, working groups, seminars and specialised studies. We have been trying to address ourselves to some of the problems that confront Pakistan, the Islamic *ummah* and the humanity in general. Because of the resource constraint, our areas of interest so far have been confined to economics, education, foreign policy and empirical study of Pakistani and Muslim societies.

We have tried to examine these issues as professionals, economists, educationists, foreign policy experts and also from the perspective of the religious and cultural values. In fact, there is one distinctive aspect of the work of IPS that relates to the cross-cultural and multidisciplinary perspective. Instead of looking at different problems in isolation, as some of the specialists have done, our effort has been to examine the issues in the context of the cultural, religious, intellectual and historical background. Our effort always has been to provide a forum to all intellectuals and people coming from different backgrounds. We have never tried to sell a particular view, although we have never felt shy in saying: yes, we have a viewpoint. But we like

to share and discuss that and hope that it is through discussion and dialogue that fairer and more appropriate alternatives will emerge. That has been the spirit in which we have been organising various programmes including the present seminar addressing ourselves to the question of poverty alleviation.

We are part of a world system that is characterised with human miseries on the one hand and abundance of resources and affluence on the other. Those who are poor do not wish to stay poor; those who are well-off speak of poverty to be reduced. However, poverty and deprivation prove to be robustly sustained. Several efforts have been made to alleviate poverty during the past four or five decades — both in theory and practice — but have almost failed to make any meaningful assault on poverty. Even today, more than one fifth of world population continues to be trapped in absolute poverty: a condition characterised by low income, malnutrition and illiteracy.

During the last decade, this issue has come into the centre of debate and discussion. One would recall the UN General Assembly session on the New International Economic Order where statesmen and politicians, belonging to the Third-World countries, tried to focus world attention on some of the disturbing realities of poverty, hunger, deprivation, exploitation, continuing legacy of colonialism and neocolonialism, international debt, dependence syndrome and the like. It is a welcome development that even institutions like the World Bank and the IMF, though of late, have become more conscious of these human dimensions of the problem. And instead of repeating the old trickle-down thesis, at least some effort has been made to address the real problems of poverty, injustice, inequity and exploitation.

I welcome the publication of the World Bank Report on Pakistan [Sep. 1995]. It would certainly be referred to during our discussion in this seminar. It has a particular background, and perspective, yet any attempt in that direction is welcome. Our effort, however, is to examine the problem of poverty alleviation from different perspective; not merely economic or political but a much more comprehensive approach, both interdisciplinary and bringing in the religious, ideological and cultural perspectives. To us the problem of poverty is important as a human

issue. This is important because justice demands that all human beings have an opportunity to participate in this effort. They should not be driven out of this race only because of a particular historical, social and economic situation. It has also its political imperative and those who have gone through the Brown Report and the Club of Rome reports will bear me out that many responses from the West have come, which signified the realisation that poverty could be a threat to the system as such. It is no longer possible to make poverty irrelevant by repression or conquests as was done in the era of colonialism. There is no possibility to ignore it; so some kind of reform is needed. Political threat to the establishment is also one of the motivating forces.

To us as Muslims, it is also a demand of our faith and of our tradition. The uniqueness of Islam lies in the fact that it differs with other cultures, as it regards economic development, political power, technological advancement or elimination of poverty as the objectives of human effort leading ultimately to the main good of seeking Allah's pleasure through moral fulfillment and establishment of justice. As a means to that the human rights have to be protected, poverty has to be eliminated and equality in opportunity has to be provided. Poverty in concurrence with affluence is a curse. That is why one of the prayers that our Prophet (peace be upon him) often offered was; "O Lord! I seek thy protection from poverty (deprivation)."

The Prophet (peace be upon him) has also warned that poverty may lead towards *kufr*. The Qur'an says, "Have you seen him who denies the religion [and the Day of Judgement]? It is he who harshly repels the orphan and does not urge others to feed the needy."

Among various institutions, *zakah*, along with *salah*, is the pillar on which Islamic system is built. And that is how the moral and material problems have been simultaneously addressed from the perspective that is spiritual as well as material; here lies the distinction of Islam, and that is why for us the questions of poverty and poverty-line are not new.

The term *sahib-e nisab* [a person who is obliged to pay *zakah*] defines the situation of poverty. Qur'an itself says that *zakah* is

[among the rest] for fuqara and masakeen [the needy and the poor). The concept of faqeer and miskeen is very clear in our faith and our history. The objective being to enable all human beings in the society to participate in an effort to make an honourable living, make life worth-living and to serve the higher objectives of life — individually and collectively. That is why Caliph Umar (may Allah be pleased with him) used to say, “For even a [sick] camel on the shores of Euphrates, I would be made accountable.” That is why a network of social security system has been an integral part of the Muslim tradition.

We need to look at the problem of poverty from different perspectives — the human perspective, the justice perspective, the contemporary world perspective and an overall Islamic perspective, and come up with a model of Islamic economy and social justice that fully fits the contemporary context. It needs certainly to be much more than general statements of goals and objectives, it should rather delineate a comprehensive policy framework for the elimination of poverty also identifying specific policy instruments capable of eradicating this menace.