

Role of Prophet Muhammad (SAWS) in Erosion of Slavery***Dr.Ruqaiya T Alalwani***

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Abstract***Role of Prophet Muhammad (SAWS) in Erosion of Slavery*****Dr.Ruqaiya Alalwani**

Prophet Muhammad (SAWS) played a vital role in erosion of slavery through the teachings of Islam. He emphasized that only Allah should be glorified and every living soul has duties upon him, fulfillment and breach of those duties are based on the free will of human beings. His message was a beacon of light in a society where people enter into a vicious cycle of slavery as war captives, debt defaulter or kidnapped and ultimately sold in slave markets. One can trace back the history of slavery as ancient as 5000 BC, however more appalling forms appear in fifteen to seventeenth century particularly in Europe and America. There are many sayings clarifying the strong stance of Prophet Muhammad (SAWS) against slavery. He was not only vocal about rights of slaves, but also encouraged to set them free. He treated them with humanity, love, and affection to set a practical example. He started an era where slaves were no more exploited and have the rights of free lodging and marriage; they became human beings and were judged only on the basis of their virtues.

Keywords: erosion of slavery, Prophet Muhammad role, Rights of slaves in Islam

Introduction

Slavery is linked with the socio-economic status of a region or a country. Slaves are people deprived of basic human rights and are compelled to work without any compensation against their services¹. Historian proved that slavery was practiced in many ancient civilized countries; like China, Egypt, Greece, Persia, and India. There are many great monuments of the old world that were built on carcass by slaves.

Before the advent of Islam, slavery was widespread in Arabs. People were enslaved; during wars, debt defaulter or purchased from slave markets. Slaves do not have free will and were bound to execute laborious tasks day after day and during their trade journey to other counties. They were beaten, over burdened and did not have any basic human rights.

The Holy Prophet Muhammad (SAWS) broke the vicious cycle of slavery and stood besides them. He was a messenger of mercy, love, and affection to mankind and in particular to poor and slaves.

This paper presents a brief history of Slavery and highlights the role of Prophet Muhammad (SAWS) in erasing the slavery from the civilized world. Apparently people are free and have a basic right like; freedom to live their lives independently.

It is concluded that Islam and Prophet Muhammad (SAWS) has a divine role as the savior of humanity in combat against slavery. The principle of dealing with slaves in Islam is a combination of impartiality, kindness, and compassion.

History of Slavery

Slavery enters into human history with civilization. Man used to hunt or gather food at an individual or collective level and primitive farmers were unknown to a term "Slave."²

As the world becomes more civilized and started claiming over natural and man made resources, demand for cheap labor aroused³. On a large farm or in a shop, having cheap labor is an added benefit. Getting a slave is an ideal solution for such work as it costs only food and lodging. Many archeological sites tell the story that slaves had been used as cheap labor.

1.1 Egyptian Civilization

The ruins of Egyptians palaces and pyramids indicated that slaves were used in construction. The hieroglyph written on the walls of these magnificent structures support that ancient Egyptian used slaves as personal servants, as labor during construction and as soldiers during wars⁴. Many holy scripts like Torah, Bible, and Quran also indicate that the prophet Joseph (Yusuf) was sold in Egypt as a slave (Al-Quran; surah: Yusuf). Later on prophet Moses (Musa) saved Bani Israel from the slavery of Pharaoh of Egypt.

1.2 Greek Civilization

Greece was a great empire of ancient times, slavery was common, and apart from usual use as servant, labor or soldier Greeks used them as gaming animals. Historical records unveil their brutality and cruelty against slaves. They were thrown in front of soldiers for military rehearsals or hunted by wild beasts as a recreational activity. The so called democratic city of Athens was writing its history with the blood of innocent people. Most of the slaves were kidnapped from weaker coastal nations by Greek pirates and then sold as animals⁵.

1.3 Roman Empire

The transition of Roman society from an agricultural nation to a trading centre led to the bipolar society, upper ruling class, and lower working class which was actually manipulated by a ruling class. Slaves had no rights to marry, independent lodging, or any kind of freedom of expression. The masters should be protected by slaves and master had right to give them any kind of punishment, even death plenty⁶.

1.4 Slavery among Arabs

Before the advent of Prophet Muhammad (SAWS) slavery was a common practice in Arabs. Most of the slaves were of African origins which were captured during wars, but debt defaulters and slaves from other areas were also purchased⁷. Like all other societies and civilization Arabs were no different, slaves do not enjoy any of the basic human rights. In Arab society slaves with war skills were valued more. In Arab society slaves can buy their freedom. They could utilize their skills to earn money and can pay back to get their freedom, some people used to free their slaves on special occasions as an act of generosity. Like Abu Lahab, uncle of Prophet Muhammad (SAWS) freed his slave Soiba when she broke the news of birth of Prophet Muhammad (SAWS) to him⁸. On another occasion Hind wife of Abu Sufiyan freed her slave Wahshi according to her promise⁹. Although slaves were freed or they had earned their freedom from their masters, but they were not accepted in the society. They did not have equal rights like other citizens.

1. Prophet Muhammad (SAWS) vs Slavery

Holy Prophet Muhammad (SAWS) announced his prophet hood at the age of forty, his truthfulness, honesty, and affectionate nature was already established among Arabs. His

message was primordially based on equality of all human beings. He led the foundations of a society that do not discriminate people on the basis of color, race, or ethnicity¹⁰.

He gave a hope to the poor and underprivileged people of the society to live with dignity and honor. There are several sayings that endorse his commitment to erode slavery and establish a state with equal human rights.

It was narrated that Abu Dharr (may Allah be pleased with him) said: The Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: “They are your brothers whom Allah has put under your authority, so if Allah has put a person’s brother under his authority, let him, feed him from what he eats and clothe him from what he wears, and let him not overburden him with work, and if he does overburden him with work, then let him help him.” Narrated by al-Bukhaari (6050).

It was narrated that Abu Hurayrah (may Allah be pleased with him) said: I heard Abu’l-Qaasim (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) say: “Whoever accuses his slave when he is innocent of what he says will be flogged on the Day of Resurrection, unless he is as he said.” Narrated by al-Bukhaari (6858).

Ibn ‘Umar (may Allah be pleased with him) manumitted a slave of his, then he picked up a stick or something from the ground and said: There is no more reward in it than the equivalent of this, but I heard the Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) say: “Whoever slaps his slave or beats him, his expiation is to manumit him.” Narrated by Muslim (1657).

Moreover, he convinced people that Allah almighty created all human equal and will only consider your virtues and devotion. It is clear from the Quran, “NOW, INDEED, We have

conferred dignity on the children of Adam, and borne them over land and sea, and provided for them sustenance out of the good things of life, and favored them far above most of Our creation". (Quran; surah Al Isra verse;70)

2. *Emphasis on Rights of Slaves*

There are many occasions when Prophet Muhammad (SAWS) emphasized on the rights of the slaves and strictly ordered their masters to treat them well with provision of all basic rights like marriage, independent lodging, and participation in other social events. He applied the principle of "eye for an eye" for the rights of slaves. *Smara* reported that he heard that Prophet Muhammad (SAWS) said "Whoever kills his slave, we will kill him and whoever cuts off his slave's nose, we will cut off his nose." (*Sunan an-Nasa'i* 4736, In Book Reference: Book 45, Hadith 31, English Translation: Vol. 5, Book 45, Hadith 7440).

Prophet Muhammad (SAWS) condemned any kind of physical abuse against slaves. It was a usual practice in Arabs to cut nose or ears of slaves as a punishment, in extreme fury masters have the authority to even kill their slaves. *Ibn--Umer* reported that once he slapped his slave and then freed his slave as he heard Prophet Muhammad (SAWS) saying

"Whoever slaps his servant, his expiation is to liberate him." (Narrated by Muslim (1657). These accounts clearly indicate his stand on rights of slaves. Many neutral historians reported the kindness and concern of Prophet Muhammad (SAWS) for the acceptance of slaves as dignified members of society. It is reported by Arnold Joseph Toynbee that the extinction of race consciousness among Muslims was one of the outstanding achievements of Islam, and in the contemporary world there is, a crying need for the propagation of this Islamic virtue¹¹.

3. *Initiatives to Erode Slavery*

Islam was the first religion that took many concrete steps to erode slavery in accordance with orders of God almighty and Prophet Muhammad (SAWS) . It clearly defines that slaves are bound to do physical work, but their minds are free to make independent decisions. War slaves can be freed after paying ransom or any productive service to the Islamic state. Like prisoners of Badar were freed by Prophet Muhammad (SAWS) after teaching Muslims how to read and write. The Slaves cannot be physically abused and must be treated on the basis of equality.

Al-Ma'rur bin Suwaid quoted a Hadeeth: "I noticed that Abu Thar Al-Ghifari wearing a cloak, exactly like his slave. We inquired that both were dressed alike? He told that once he abused his slave and he complained about him to the Prophet Muhammad (SAWS) . The Prophet inquired him, 'Did you abuse him by slighting his mother?' and added, 'Your slaves are your brethren, but Allah has given you authority over them. So, if one has his brethren under his control, he should feed them with the like of what he eats and clothe them with the like of what he wears. You should not overburden them with what they cannot bear, and if you do so, help them.

Islamic history is full of events when Prophet Muhammad (SAWS) and his companions treated their slaves with mercy, freed them, and fought for their rights.

As pre-Islamic Arab society was dependent on slaved labor so Prophet Muhammad (SAWS) did not prohibited it at once, but gradually molded the society in a direction where slaves should be accepted as equal citizens. He conveyed the message of Allah to the people that they should spend money to free a slave as it is an act of piety and has greatest reward in the hereafter.

“The offerings given for the sake of God are only for the poor and the needy, and those who are in charge thereof, and those whose hearts are to be won over, and for the freeing of slaves, and those who are overburdened with debts, and in God’s path, and to the traveler; an ordinance from God – and God is all-knowing, wise. (Al-Quran; Surah: *Al-Tawba* 60)

Similarly, on another occasion Allah the almighty appreciated the freeing of slaves and gave them two options *Mukataba* and *Kitab*¹². Muslims were encouraged to pay their religious taxes to free slaves or free them for the sake of God or free them if they pay back their costs. “And those of your slaves who wish to enter the contract of *Mukataba* (a written agreement between master and slave, where slave pay back money to his master) with them, if you recognize some good of them. And give them out of the wealth of Allah that he has given to you.” (Al-Quran; Surah: *Annur* 33)

4. Reflection of Prophet Muhammad (SAWS) ’s Life

Prophet Muhammad (SAWS) has not just said with words, but also practiced mercy, love, and affection with slaves. *Zayd ibn-e- Harithah* was a slave of Prophet Muhammad (SAWS) presented from his first wife Khadeja. He was kidnapped and sold in Mecca, but Prophet Muhammad (SAWS) treated him so well that when his parents found him and asked him to return, *Zayd* refused. After his decision to pick Muhammad against his parents Prophet Muhammad (SAWS) announced him as his son. Prophet Muhammad (SAWS) arranged his marriage with his Qureshi cousin and made him commander at the battle of *Mo’ata*¹³.

Ans bin Malik was another companion of prophet and narrator of many sayings. He was presented as a slave to Prophet Muhammad (SAWS) . He was always treated like a family member by Prophet Muhammad (SAWS) and his devotion was valued¹⁴.

A remarkable example of contribution Prophet Muhammad (SAWS) in erosion of slavery is Bilal. Prophet Muhammad (SAWS) was given important duty to call for prayers. He was trusted by Prophet Muhammad (SAWS) and was assigned a number of important duties during the war like supervision of supply lines of Muslim army and collection of taxes¹⁵.

5. Acknowledgment from Non Muslim World

The well known Orientalist Hamilton Jeb reasserts that Islam imparted greatly to humanitarian issues and came nearest to attaining equivalence and obviating ethnic and racial discrimination. There is no other religion that has this rattling record of equality, offering opportunities and supporting cooperation between different genders¹⁶.

He also added that Islam ordained emancipation for slaves. It came to societies which intemperately depended on slavery, banned the barbarous and brutal practices and imparted only what is permissible even now in terms of prisoners of war and their deployment in servitude of the conquering combatants.

Islam incorporated the laws that made it a government responsibility to free slaves and utilize government monetary resource to ransom slaves from their masters. This obligation spreads across both the public and private sectors down to individuals through Zakat and statute law on the propitiation of sins¹⁷. Whether it's enough or not, it was the most reformist legislation on the slavery of its time and none of the world's nations have delivered anything more effective thus far¹⁸.

According to the renowned historian Louis Bernard the comparison between what Islam has accomplished in improving the treatment of slaves and the barbarous handling of slaves over

centuries in the Atlantic region and the Western world as a whole, depicts that the latter should feel ashamed. What is said on the matter of slaves applies also to issues brought up by the West about polygamy, autarchy, etc.

“We must study the history of Atlantic slavery and expose this great shame in the history of the Western world and the Americas north and south in all its horror. This is a task which falls upon us as Westerners, and in which others may and should join us. In contrast, however, even to mention - let alone discuss or explore - the existence of slavery in non-Western societies is denounced as evidence of racism and of imperialistic designs. The same applies to other delicate topics as polygamy, autocracy, and the likes. The range of taboos is very wide¹⁹.”

In Islamic states, slaves have the right to independent housing, marriage and other social freedom. They have equal rights, and are bound to get as good treatment as others. After freedom, they enjoy all civil, political and citizenship rights and can hold any office within Islamic government. Mamluks is the best example, who after getting freedom ruled Egypt for 260 years²⁰.

The historian John Esposito says: “Within Islamic jurisprudence, slaves are able to occupy any office within the Islamic government, and instances of this in history include the Mamluks, who ruled Egypt for almost 260 years and the Eunuchs (castrated human males) who have held military and administrative positions of note. They are also able to marry, own property, and lead the Muslim congregational prayers (the five daily ritual prayers). Slavery would be theoretically abolished with the expansion of Islam. Islam's reforms seriously limited the supply of new slaves....²¹”.

6. Relapse of Slavery

In the 15th century, a few African nations played a role in the slave trade. They traded their captives or prisoners of war to European customers. In next a few years, they started transporting slaves directly to the tropical colonies in the America.

The first slavery market was created in Portugal in 1444, with an estimated 800 slaves were imported annually from African countries. Most of them were kidnapped from the western coast²². While Spaniards were the first in Europe to import African Slaves in The 16th century. The Native population of their conquered states, preferred to die rather than work for them²³.

In 1619, the first hordes of the African slaves landed in North America. The Atlantic slave trade was at its peak in the late 18th century, when the largest number of slaves was captivated through raiding military expedition into the interior of West Africa²⁴.

While slavery was illegal in the Netherlands, yet it expanded in the Dutch Empire, and plays its part in supporting the economy. The imperial powers established worldwide empires based principally on plantation agriculture raised by slaves imported from Africa²⁵.

7. Results

It is evident from various references that Prophet Muhammad (SAWS) took bold initiative to uproot the system of slavery by; creating awareness about human rights based on equality and discouraging racism. He encouraged spending government funds and personal money to set slaves free and promised elevated stature and great rewards to those people in the hereafter. He gave respect to slaves and designated them as companions like Bilal and Ans who participated in policy making and other important economic issues of state of Madina. His teachings weakened the slavery system in the Muslim world which was gradually abolished. His preaching was a milestone in eradicating this inhuman system. Later on people in Europe,

America and other parts of the world raised their voices against slavery, directly or indirectly based on the teachings of Prophet Muhammad (SAWS) . It is evident from known history that Allah has created all human with free will and no human can be the master of another free being. Prophet Muhammad (SAWS) practically translated these verses through his actions and spread the universal message of humanity and justice in terms of their basic rights²⁶.

This message led foundation of Islam as in the beginning poor and enslaved people embraced Islam to gain self-respect. Whenever history of slavery is discussed role of Prophet Muhammad (SAWS) in erosion of slavery cannot be denied. He will always be remembered as a source of inspiration, a symbol of humanity and mercy for people suffering from torments of life.

Conclusion

Data analysis establishes the role of Prophet Muhammad (SAWS) in erasing the slavery from the civilized world. Apparently people are free and have a basic right like; freedom of speech, freedom of expression and freedom to live their lives independently. It is the need of hour to realize the true spirit of human rights in Islam, according to teaching of Prophet Muhammad (SAWS). It is concluded that Islam and Prophet Muhammad (SAWS) has a divine role as the savior of humanity in combat against slavery. The principle of dealing with slaves in Islam is a combination of impartiality, kindness, and compassion.

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