

Religious Traditions and Social Justice

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Abstract

Universal concepts of justice and social justice developed with the eternal teachings of the world's great religions including Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Zoroastrianism, Confucianism and Sikhism. All religious traditions substantiate the fact that social justice is required for spiritual as well as social development. Semitic and Aryan religious traditions also confirmed that social justice is a virtue and is central to their socio-religious teachings. All religions emphasized on unity of humankind, social equality, human dignity, and elimination of social discriminations.

Introductory Background:

In any society, a religion plays a vital role in the creation of socio-cultural, political and economic structures. Every religious tradition lays down a definite code of conduct or a way of life for their followers to achieve the ultimate goal of life i. e. the realization of the Infinite Reality. All religions primarily determine the socio-economic values, choices and behaviour patterns of an individual in any society. Religious traditions have also played a crucial role in conceptualizing the idea of social equality and social justice and in responding to perceptions of social injustice, inequalities and prejudices. Every religion support the social justice activities to help the poor and marginalized sections of a society and contribute to create a more humanitarian, fair and equitable societies.¹

Social injustice, economic exploitation, gender inequalities, racial arrogance, religious bigotry, marginalization of weaker sections and political absolutism is antithetical to the teachings of all religions. It is evident from the history of mankind that the founders of all religions raised a strong voice against social inequalities and discriminations and laid supreme sacrifices to restore the human dignity and resist the social injustice and political tyranny.

The present research paper is a humble attempt to give brief sketch of an idea of social justice in the various religious traditions as follow:

Jewish Notion of Social Justice:

Judaism is the first humane and universal religion. Thirst for justice and equality goes back to Moses. It is religion, which first affirmed faith in human destiny, human dignity, human equality and human freedom.² Jewish religious traditions raised strong voice against political oppression, institution of slavery and exploitation of weaker sections of society. Judaism teaches the importance of justice for all: those slaves are to be treated with humanity: orphans and widows are to be cared for, strangers are to be protected, and even prisoners of wars have rights.³

Social justice has always been a central teaching of Judaism, one that many of the Prophets considered the most important part of the Torah. The Prophet

Amos, for example, denounced those who mistreated the poor. He believed that that the Covenant was special blessing that had been given to Jews and demanded that all Jews should help other people when they were in need.⁴ Synagogue in Jewish religious traditions is a building, where a Jewish assembly or congregation meets for religious observance and instruction endow with spirit of social action for social causes. The synagogue offers a platform to strive for social justice and to fight against various kinds of social injustice.

Christian Notion of Social Justice:

In Christianity, social injustice is where people in society are given fewer rights and privileges than others. In the Bible, Lord express disapproval of exploiter and rebuked those who ill-treat others. He has sympathy for those who face social injustice. Justice has many meanings in the Old Testament. It is used in legal codes to draw up rules and regulations to bind the community. It prescribes restitution for an injury done to persons or property. Laws are just when they lead to harmony within a community. Paths are called just when they fulfil their function and lead to a destination or goal. The person who acts justly is seen as one who helps to sustain the life of the community: "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8). The Biblical idea of justice has been summed up as a harmony which comes from a right relationship to the covenant Lord and to the neighbour to whom a person is related by covenant

bond.⁵ Christian ethics taught justness or righteousness is the constant willingness to the actual recognition of the rights of every moral personality, as well those of God as those of man, it is love in the fulfilling of the command.⁶ Christian ethics arise out of a new idea of the reality of brotherhood, introduced into society by Christian faith. The New Testament word, meant to denote this, *koinonia*, which is often translated – Fellowship. It is fellowship based on common sharing of Divine forgiveness through Christ by which men are reconciled to God.⁷

Islamic Notion of Social Justice:

Prophet Muhammad, the founder of Islam, gave a message of Oneness of God, social equality and universal brotherhood. The idea of social justice is an integral part of teachings of Islam. Justice and righteousness is the cornerstone of the teachings of Islam. Justice in Islam is termed as '*adl*' which means to split two things equally or to keep the balance. This term is used in the Holy Qur'an for righteousness and fairness in every sphere of life. Islam teaches the believers to be fair in their dealings.⁸ The concept of justice as formulated in Islam is comprehensive and encompasses all aspects of human life. It governs all kind of relations in life including those between the ruler and the ruled, between husband and wife, between parents and children, and between individuals in their private relationships.⁹

Social justice in Islam has three facets: creation of just relationship between man and his creator, man and man, and man and the universe. All the three are co-related that merely a just relationship between man and man, which

is the basis of the social justice, cannot even be thought of without the rest of them.¹⁰ The concept of social justice in Islam simply means justice for all irrespective of racial and religious distinctions. This is implied in the Islamic tenet of human equality for the message of Islam is for the entire humanity and not for a particular race. The Islamic concept of social justice seeks to realize equality and justice for all in all walks of life, Islamic notion of human equality contends that despite obvious differences in terms of colour of skin, physical stature gender or social status all human beings are essentially equal.¹¹

Hinduism and Social Justice:

Sacred texts of Hinduism reflect a deep commitment to the ideal social justice. The Vedas and the other Hindu religious texts encourage equality, freedom of expression, self-discipline, and righteous values for a just and equitable society to promote the cause of social justice. Indian thinkers much before Western thinkers have recognized that treating equals as equals and unequal as unequal, or in other words treating similar similarly and dissimilar differently is the inherent principle of social justice. Plato in his *Republic* advocates that justice is rendering everyone his due and Rawls in his *A Theory of Justice* says that everybody has equal right to the basic liberties unless an equal distribution of any social value is to the advantage of everyone. According to Indian law givers, since the classes or *varanas* of men differ from each other in terms of their functions, their capabilities, their merits, their worth the treatment to be met to each one of them has to be differential, even

preferential, depending upon the requirements and situational factors and general social context in each case.¹²

The Varna ashram Dharma system so frequently described as a form of virtual enslavement especially in some of its modern forms, in classical times was officially regarded as an instrument of both social cooperation and individual emancipation. By following the duty of one's varnas which was clearly detailed in books of law and subject to the just administration of the state, one actually attained the necessary liberty to engage in the universal spiritual quest.¹³ A very characteristic institution of the Hindus is caste. From the time almost of the Rig-Veda, the Hindus have accepted this typical institution. It stands for the natural inequality of men and tries to utilize this fact in the interests of society, by making it one of the main principles of division of social labour. It is, therefore, fundamental in the view accepted of social organization by the Hindus. The ordering of society on the lines of justice and utility requires that each man should take to that work for which he is most fitted by nature, by temperament, and by education.¹⁴

Hierarchy is not the concept used by the Hindu lawgivers to describe their own society. They do not propound or uphold hierarchy as a principle of social organization. They also do not talk in terms of a rigid structure or ideal, valid for all times, comprising the 'upper' and 'lower' beings or strata society for them is maintained not by what we today call hierarchy but by order (*rta* or Dharma). Dharma to them does not signify hierarchy per se, but a natural order that maintains everything's in a state of harmony and

balance internally within the individual self and externally in the society and the universe at large.¹⁵ Perfect justice is the due of all, the rich and the poor alike. No inequality ought to exist in a court of law. All persons irrespective of their rank and condition should have perfect access to the personality of the king and should be properly heard.¹⁶

The conception of righteousness in the Rig-Veda finds its expression in the term *rta*, the equalvant of the Avestan *asha* which denotes primarily the cosmic order and then order of the moral law, on the one hand, and performance of the sacrifice on the other hand.¹⁷ It is usually rendered 'Law' or 'Order' by English translators of the Vedas. It represents in a way both natural and moral order, and also that order which characterizes correct worship of the gods through sacrifice and prayer and all else that belongs to service of the gods. The idea does not emerge for the first time in the Rig Veda, but has been traced back to Indo-Iranian times. It is the *Asa* of the Avesta.¹⁸ *Rta* stands for moral order and is opposed to sin or unrighteousness.¹⁹ In social affairs, *rta* is the propriety that makes harmony possible in the actions of all loving beings. In human speech, *rta* is truth, and in human dealings it is justice. When *rta* is observed by human beings, order prevails and there is peace among individuals.²⁰

Buddhist and Jain Notion of Social Justice:

The Buddhist philosophy has close relation with Humanism. Humanism is not merely a theory but it is predominantly practical in outlook. Basically, it is concerned with the ways that would be helpful in the elimination of human suffering. Buddha fully realized the

voidness of mere theoretical solution of suffering. It is due to this reason that his doctrine of 'Four Noble Truths' is not only able to explain clearly the human suffering, but also the way to its elimination in the form of 'Eightfold Path.' Through the recognition of theory and practice Buddha discovered the way to the humanization of man and the regeneration of man as a strictly human being. All this projects Buddha as an ardent supporter of social justice and, thereupon, a champion of human rights.²¹

The Buddha saw the strongest links between ethics and society, ethics and politics, and this whole dimension is summed up in the Buddhist conception of justice which may be rendered by the term righteousness a notion which colours Buddhist thinking on equality.²² *Pancha Sila* i. e. the five principles are the foundation of Buddhist ethics. *Pancha Sila* implies *Pancha* (five) *Sila* (discipline) form the basis of social justice oriented society. These five precepts are: a. do not take life, b. do not take what is not given, c. do not distort facts, d. refrain from misuse of the senses, e. refrain from self-intoxication through alcohol or drugs.

The idea of social justice in relation to Jainism can be drawn from the teachings of Jainism in relation to 'Three Jewels', *Mahavratas*, *ahimsa* and ideas on casteism. The Jaina, sum up all their belief, as expressed in the *Tattva*, in their vows, and in their rules of conduct, under the heading of the Three Jewels.²³ These are: (1) *samyag-darsana*, right conviction, faith and perception combined, (2) *samyag-jndna*, right knowledge, (3) *samyak-cliaritra*, right conduct.²⁴

Zoroastrian Notion of Social Justice:

The substance of Zoroaster's doctrine is to be found in this sentence of Ys. Xxx. 'The two primal spirits who revealed themselves in vision as twins are the Better and the Bad in thought, word and action. And between these two the wise knew to choose a right, the foolish not so.'²⁵ The Prophet of Iran induces in his followers a militant instinct, a fervent longing to combat the Evil Spirit. Life thus becomes an interminable crusade against the forces of evil and imperfection from the abyss of imperfection to the summit of perfection. During this process social wrongs have to be adjusted, social justice has to be rendered, society as a whole has to be regenerated, the world has to be redeemed.²⁶ In the Zoroastrianism, there is constant conflict between the good and evil forces. A true Zoroastrian is expected to remain on the side of the good. Men should, therefore, practice righteousness and promote Asha or order, Truth and righteous conduct everywhere.

The spirit of social justice in Zoroastrianism lies in Zoroastrian ethical code of conduct i.e. *Humata* (good thoughts), *Hukhta* (good deeds), and *Hvarshta* (good words). By "Good Thoughts," a Zoroastrian is able to concentrate his mind in Divine contemplation of the Creator, and live in peace, unity, and harmony with his fellow-brethren. For the love of his fellow-men, he is enjoined to protect them in danger, to help them in need and want.²⁷ By "Good Words," he is enjoined not to break his contract with others, to observe honesty and integrity in all commercial transactions.²⁸

Confucian Notion of Social Justice:

In the view of Confucius, a harbinger of the Chinese culture, justice is the way of life based on people's organized and harmonious living.

His idea of justice is inherent in the principle that "man is the measure of man", that is, man's good conduct, having begun from family, then community and nation, plays an important role in establishing right relations in the whole world. From the standpoint of Meniscus, another Chinese philosopher, the foundation of the basic unity of all social relations is the individual. That is why good and just society is based on individual's moral conscience. By nature man is good, four virtues are inherent in him: love, righteousness, honesty and wisdom. Thus, no society can be good and just, unless individuals come forward and establish human relations based on these four virtues.²⁹

The main concern of Confucius was with humans and with the fundamental principles of humanity. Confucius believed that these principles are the roots of social relationships, the foundation of the stability, peace and prosperity of the state, the family and individuals.³⁰ Justice, to Confucius, is concerned with others not with one self, and is based on eliminating selfishness, envy and greed.³¹ The principle of '*ren*' can be understood as Confucian principle of general justice because it demands the complete virtue (*ren*) in relation to others, not only has what concerned self. Accordingly, the ultimate concern of Confucian general justice loves human by

pursuing intrinsic goods, rather than distributing instrumental benefits.³²

Sikh Vision of Social Justice:

Guru Nanak, founder of Sikhism, gave a comprehensive concept of social justice. To Him, social justice includes casteless society, classless society, and unity among people of different creeds, gender equality and respect for human dignity. Guru Nanak was in favour of plural, fair, equitable and just society. For Him, none is born great, none is inferior to other, the walls and prejudices created in society are only man-made. He advocated the removal of all social barriers between man and man, man and woman.³³ To restore justice in society, Guru Nanak raised a clarion slogan against atrocities of the Mughals and exploitation of Brahmans. This ideal of social justice culminated in Guru Gobind Singh's hand with the creation of Khalsa Panth.³⁴

Guru Nanak and His successor Sikh Gurus made every possible effort to struggle against social injustice. They raised strong voice against contemporary rulers for their misrule, injustice and exploitation of masses. The positive concept of justice can be constructed from what the Sikh Gurus have described to be unjust in the then society and polity.³⁵ They established various institutions to build just society. The institutions like *Sangat-Pangat*, *Daswandh*, *Guruship*, *Dharmsal*, and *Khalsa* aimed at laying the foundation of classless and casteless society in which socio-economic and gender justice will prevail. Guru Nanak taught mankind to respect the rights of others to fight and injustice for the sake of justice and the

interests of weaker sections of society. Sikh Gurus not only advocates social harmony, social equality, oneness, justice and unity among masses but also practiced the same in their lives and made supreme sacrifice for the sake of creation of just and equitable society.

Conclusion:

From the above analysis, it can be concluded that the primary objective of every religion is to lay down the path of righteousness for human beings to seek the merger in to Supreme Being. Every religious tradition has its own kind of conception of social justice. Both Semitic and Aryan or Eastern religious traditions have given due importance to the idea of social justice. In every religion, disregard for human dignity, social discriminations, gender injustice, economic disparities, political absolutism and religious chauvinism are regarded as the obstacles in the way of spiritual growth of an individual. All religions strive for the creation of an ideal egalitarian social order in which there will be no place for social injustice.

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