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THE OPENING CHAPTER OF QUR'AN - ITS ECOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION

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Divine scriptures are capable of variety of interpretation and specially those verses, which are not specific commandments of dos and don'ts. The first chapter of Qur'an has seven verses and is in the form of prayer by human beings to Allah. Allah Himself has revealed this prayer to His Prophet (PBUH) so that Muslims could pray to Him. This opening chapter is of utmost significance in Qur'an and Muslims repeat it in every raka' (unit of prayer). This prayer is rich in symbolic language and has been interpreted in various ways by different commentators.

Here I am attempting it yet in a different way to save the world from ecological disaster, which our world is heading to, if no attempts are made to check rising temperature on earth. It is beauty of the revealed scripture that even if interpreted to tackle contemporary challenges, it does not in any manner, lose its original meaning and significance.

The opening chapter of the Qur'an begins with invocation which Muslims use before beginning of any work i.e. "In the name of Allah Who is the Beneficent, the Merciful." Beneficent and Merciful are translations of Al-Rahman and Al-Rahim. Both are very significant words. Rahm in Arabic signifies tenderness requiring the exercise of beneficence (see Imam Raghbi's al-Mufradat). Thus rahm comprises ideas of love and mercy. Al-Rahman, also a noun, is intensive form and thus indicates greatest preponderance of the quality of mercy.

Thus Allah is greatest benefactor and merciful. The Prophet is reported to have said: Al-Rehman is the Beneficent God Whose love and mercy are manifested in the creation of this world, and Al-Rahim is the Merciful God Whose love and mercy are manifested in the state that comes after. (Bahr al-Muhit Commentary by Imam Athir al-Din al-Undalusi)

Now the first chapter right in the beginning says, "Praise be to Allah the Lords of the worlds i.e. Rabb al-'Alamin. Here both the words Rabb and 'Alamin have to be emphasized. Rabb in Arabic means, according to Arabic-English Lexicon by Edward William Lane, not only fostering, completing and accomplishing. Thus rabb conveys the idea of evolution of things from the crudest state to that of highest perfection.

And if we praise to that Lord of all the worlds who is Rabbi i.e. Who evolves things from crudest state to its highest perfection, the praiser's duty is to be of assistance in achieving this stage of perfection. What are we praising the Lord of the worlds for? For his function as Rabb and hence we cannot act contrary to that. Our acts should also reflect the function of evolution towards perfection, not its destruction.

He is not only Rabb al-'Alamin but also Al-Rahman and Al-Rahim i.e. one Who is Beneficent and Merciful, shows tenderness of love and mercy towards His creation in addition to taking it from various stages of perfection to ultimate perfection. And this not only for our world wherein we humans exist (but also all biological forms of existence, mountains, water streams, oceans, all forms of primitive life, animals and trees. All of us who praise Allah, have to dedicate themselves as agents of beneficence, mercy and perfection.

And, Allah, as this opening chapter says, is Rabb, not only of our world, our earth but of everything in this universe, of planets, stars, moons, black holes and whatever exists in this universe, visible or not visible to us or even of various planets to be discovered and which have not yet been so far discovered.

Adam's story in Qur'an is also very significant in this respect. According to the Qur'an Adam lived in paradise along with Eve and was provided with everything but was prohibited from eating the fruit of a tree. Adam would not have lost paradise, if he had not defied his Lord and ate the forbidden fruit. However, Adam was tempted to eat the fruit and was expelled from paradise.

What was that paradise? A perfect balance of needs and supplies and by eating the fruit Adam (representing human race) destroyed that balance through his greed to defy the Lord and violate the ban and that ban was also for human benefit only. It is very close to what human beings are doing with the earth they live on. They are trying to eat that forbidden fruit i.e. violating the balance of nature.

Thus if we have this understanding of paradise (quite in keeping with the verses of the Qur'an), on earth too, we can create paradise by being obedient to the laws of our Lord, the laws He has made for us. Had we observed these laws and there is no change in these laws of the Lord. "(Such has been) the course of Allah that has run before, and thou will not find a change in Allah's course."

Thus Allah has fixed the course of His creation. Anyone who defies this course pays for it. Today we are disobeying our Lord and His fixed course and destroying the ecology of our earth, meant to be our paradise, if we faithfully obey the laws of nature, of our Lord. We have eaten the forbidden fruit (over using resources of earth, polluting it and destroying its ecological balance.)

We have been violating laws to fulfill our greed and disturbing the ecological balance. It is true Allah is Ghafur al-Rahim (Forgiver and Merciful) but we can be forgiven only when we repent sincerely and never repeat our mistakes. The earth even today produces in abundance for our survival but if give up our greed and check our consumption and reduce pollution of earth to minimum, rising temperature will come down and our earth will become paradise again.

As we pray to Allah as taught to us through this sura-i-Fatihah we say to Allah "Guide us on the right path. The path of those upon whom Thou has bestowed favours, Not those upon whom wrath has brought down, not those who go astray." Allah is our Lord, our Sustainer and if we seek our sustenance from Him we have to follow the right path shown by Him and pray to him to show us the right path. What is this right path (sirat al-mustaquim)?

It is the path devoid of greed and over consumption and Allah by forbidding Adam to eat the fruit of a tree in the paradise showed us this right path and as long as we follow this path our paradise will remain intact and Allah's bounties will continue to be enjoyed by humankind but we should not do anything to earn His wrath and follow the path of greed and over-consumption that will lead us astray.

This path of Allah's bounties had been available to whole of humankind as long as we followed sirat al-mustaquim (right path) of modest consumption of earth's resources and keeping earth pure tayyib and do not pollute it. Can we now say we are following the same path sirat al-mustaquim? We have to reflect on this serious question. We have violated this law and gone astray in number of ways.

The poor of the earth whom Allah calls mustad'ufin (weaker sections) and favors them have been deprived of their just consumption by those whom Allah calls mustakbirun (the powerful, the rich) who have been unjust and monopolized over-consumption and have over-polluted the earth. As we know the developed and rich nations are consuming more than 70 per cent of earth's resources and polluting it in that proportion.

The technological progress has enabled human beings to consume more and also to pollute the earth more and more. But this ability has to be used with wisdom. It is reason which enables us to discover new horizons and know more about our universe and again it is reason which enables us to discover more and more natural resources below and above ground and use them.

What is needed is what Qur'an calls hikmah (wisdom) and what is wisdom? Wisdom is reason plus values and experience. Without combining with values reason can play very dangerous role. But if reason is used with values like justice, benevolence and compassion, it can prove to be a great boon and that is what Qur'an advocates. According to Qur'an there are five key values: haq 'adl, ihsan, rahmah and hikmah i.e. truth, justice, benevolence, compassion and wisdom. These are Allah's names also. Allah's names are Haq, 'Adil, Muhsin, Rahman and Hakim i.e. Allah is Truth, Just, Benevolent, Compassionate and Wise. These values are extremely important for balanced progress of human beings.

Qur'an gives great deal of importance to hikmah (wisdom) and hikmah is most fundamental value in human progress. Qur'an goes on to say that "And whoever is granted wisdom, he indeed is given a great good." (2:269). Unfortunately human beings use reason for selfish ends and push us to the brink of destruction. But those who use wisdom behave according to the values of justice, benevolence and compassion and became saviours of humanity.

As we say, we go to hell because of our sins. What is hell? It is not something located out there on high heaven. It is around us, consequence of our own sins of over-consumption and destruction of our earth's ecological balance. Qur'an describes Muslims as ummatan wasantan (community of middle path), and as believers in divine revelation contained in the Qur'an it is their duty to lead the world in reducing consumption of oil which results in emission of carbon resulting in climate warming.

If we keep on praying five times every day and this prayer does not reflect in any meaningful way in our conduct, our social responsibilities, what is the use of such mechanical prayers? The quality of our faith (iman) depends in our action which promotes good of whole of humanity. After all believers have been charged with the responsibility of what Qur'an says amr b'il ma'ruf i.e. enforcing what is good and nahi 'an'il munkar i.e. fighting against evil. Is climate warming an evil or not and if it is evil should we not struggle against it?