

The Moderate Nature Of Islamic Shari'ah And Social Impacts Of Religious Asceticism On A Society

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Abstract

The basic purpose of Islamic Shari'ah is, to unburden the human being. That's why, Islam advises only balanced kind of worship. Its every commandment is easy approachable for a common person. This study is to elaborate the moderate nature of Islamic Shari'ah even in ascetical activities. In Islam, different ascetical activities are practiced. But no extreme level of any ritual practice is allowed to Muslims. On one's character, Islamic asceticism affects in different ways. Some people also practice borrowed (anti-social or un-natural) ascetical practices to get some spiritual ends. This study also reveals the outcomes of ascetical activities practiced by Muslims. After studying the ascetical aspect of Islam, it was felt that the activities under Islamic asceticism need to be elaborated. The main objective of this study is to separate the Islamic and un-Islamic ascetical activities. The research question for this study is, How Islamic asceticism impacts on a society socially? A descriptive research method has been used for this study.

Key Words: Asceticism, Human Nature, Spirituality, Practices, Moderation.

I. The Moderate Nature of Islamic Shari'ah

Islam is a religion which was revealed by Allah on Holy Prophet (PBUH) with a lot of distinctive characteristics. Moderation or balanced nature of Islam is one of those qualities. Among more than one option, a balanced and middle way has been preferred in ritual practices, in Islam. This was not only adopted by Holy Prophet (PBUH) but also His followers adopted practically in their daily routines. For this reason, Allah named the Muslim Ummah, a moderate nation. As Allah

said in holy Book, "We have appointed you a middle nation."¹ (Q, 2:143) This term has Arabic root. For moderation the word in Arabic was used in Qur'ānic text as "Wastiyyah" or "Wast" in Urdu language "I 'tidal" word is used in this sense. Etymologically the word 'moderation' has been explained in such a way, "Moderation is often used interchangeably with "average," "core," "standard," "heart," and "non-aligned."² The basic meaning of this word or term is, to take an action between extremity and weakness. An action that is not at the highest level and that is not at extreme bottom level. Only the middle

level of both these levels is liked and preferred in Islam. Many examples are there in the life of Holy Prophet (PBUH) that He advised his followers to adopt a middle or moderate way in their daily worship activities. Once, some people were informed about the schedule of Holy Prophet (PBUH). They felt that their worships were insufficient. One of them decided to observe fasting continuously, second decided to offer prayer whole the night and third one decided not to marry a woman and would live a celibacy life. When Holy Prophet (PBUH) came to know about their decisions, He strictly forbade them to worship in such a way. He advised them moderation in their ritual practices. The Holy Prophet (PBUH) said, "I fast and break my fast, I do sleep and I also marry women."³ So they were advised to adopt a moderate and balanced ways in their daily activities. In Islam, worldly duties and social responsibilities have also been given the obligatory status in one's life. People were advised observing as well as breaking fasts in normal condition. For worships, extreme level of every aspect has been rejected in Islam. For, it violates the social norms in a society. For this reason, where there are different options in a single matter, one is advised to choose a middle way.

2. Islam, Asceticism and Zuhd

In Islam or in a Muslim society, for some spiritual purposes, ascetical activities are practiced. "Asceticism" is an English term and Islamic primary data is in Arabic language. So, on the base of its (asceticism) definition or activities which are counted as 'asceticism' (Pain gaining or self-disciplined) in English and same activities have also been advised in Islam, would be considered as "Islamic Asceticism". But, by nature, there is great difference between Islamic asceticism and asceticism practiced in other religions. The term "Islamic Asceticism" can be applied only for those ascetical activities whose nature, type and level have been approved by

Islamic Shari'ah. Activities which are not allowed in Islam but people (Muslims) have copied them from other religions or societies even they use them for some religious causes, are considered un-Islamic. About borrowed ascetical activities and a life style adopted by copying others, has been condemned by Islamic scholars. Dr. Allama Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938), a modern Muslim poet, philosopher and thinker, named such life style un-Islamic and a basic cause of declination of Muslim Ummah in his famous book "The Reconstruction of Religious Thoughts in Islam". "The rise and growth of ascetic Sufism, which gradually developed under influence of a non-Islamic character, a purely speculative side, is to a large extent responsible for this attitude."⁴ Actually, with the passage of time, when Islamic state was expanded into vast area, partially, Muslims were influenced by foreign cultures. Many social or cultural values, concepts or beliefs and ritual activities were exchanged. In some areas, people adopted Islamic civilization and partially added ancient regional values or practices. Then these regional activities were penetrated to other Muslims and they practiced them as if a part of Islam. Consequently, many ascetical practices which were invented by non-Muslims were adopted by Muslims of different countries. To get some spiritual goals or to gain the next stage of spirituality, Muslims adopted non-Islamic attitudes like extreme level of ritual practices, celibacy, self-suffering and monastic way of life.

Such types of activities are not allowed in Islam. These activities have been rejected in Islam. Holy Prophet (PBUH) didn't approve them whole His life. Also, these activities are un-approachable for common men and are anti-social as well as against human nature. As monasticism (an un-social approach) was rejected in Holy Book "But monasticism they invented. We ordained it not for them."⁵ The ascetical practices or activities which damage the sociability of an individual or whole the society

or those are against the human nature are not permitted in Islam. So, asceticism is found in Islam but in balanced ways. The activities which have been borrowed from other religions, invented by people or particularly practiced by people of other religions are not allowed in Islam in any condition. Islamic asceticism means, those pain gaining activities which are permitted (with moderation) in Islam. A word or term “Zuhd” is used in Arabic literature. It shows the same sense as asceticism has. Its basic purpose is to get next level of spirituality. So, people worship more, they do dhikr in excessive form and avoid from wrong deeds. A Zahid (subjective form of Zuhd) spends most his time for his spiritual mission. Sometimes, he involves himself into difficult situations and gets pains to get some spiritual ends. He does more worship activities as compared to others. Sometimes, he adopts extreme level of Islamic practices and sometimes, he adopts un-social practices to get some specific ends. But in Islam, extreme level of a ritual practice or activity is not permitted in any condition. In every ritual practice, Islam doesn't ignore the human physical approach. Islam emphasizes on worldly as well as spiritual aspects. Historically, the non-Islamic (borrowed) activities which have been adopted by Muslims were actually taken from Greek. Even the physical styles of these activities are not same in different societies. Somehow, the basic objective is same and that is spiritual purification.

Generally, Muslim ascetics, mystics or Sufis borrowed a Greek philosophical approach which was later named as ‘Neo-Platonism’. This theory influenced different mystical approaches particularly Islamic mystical approach as well. “Beginning with Plato's ideology, and its later emergence in the Muslim world, I explore the idea of the ephebe (the beautiful human being), which was used by Neo-Platonists as well as by medieval Persian writers via the concept of ‘ishq (profane love).”⁶ Nowadays, both: natural and un-natural types of asceticism are practiced in

Muslim societies. Some people also adopt normal as per prophetic directions and some adopt extreme level of ritual practices which were forbidden by Holy Prophet (PBUH). We have basic standard of Islamic Shari’ah in this regard. The activities which are allowed in Islam or have been adopted by Holy Prophet (PBUH) or His pious companions would be considered as Islamic. But on the other hand, the practices which have no origin in Islamic history or have not advised in Islam, those practices would be enlisted in the category of un-Islamic.

3. Objectives of Islamic Asceticism

In Islam, the basic objective of Asceticism is to get spiritually purified or mental satisfied condition. For this purpose, an Arabic term “Tazkia e Nafs” is used to achieve such situation. It is to purify one’s character from wrong deeds. Allah also has declared the people succeeded those who try to get such condition. “But those will prosper who purify themselves.”⁷ In Islam, for ascetical practices, the ultimate objective of every activity is to get purification from sins. Zuhd in Islam has also same objectives as asceticism has in other religions. It is to keep somebody away from wrong deeds. In the sense of renunciation of worldly pleasures this term is also used. As this word has been explained in English translation of “Nahj al Balagha” in the sense of asceticism, “Zuhd (abstinence); the renunciation of worldly pleasures and luxuries, the renunciation of inordinate desires.”⁸ Totally renunciation of worldly pursuits or rejection of social responsibilities is not allowed in Islam. One has to get spiritual ends even living in a society. One has to fulfill one’s social duties in his surroundings. A lot of social duties have been assigned by Islam on a man. One day he would be asked about his performance and would be given good or bad reward on the base of one’s actions.

4. Nature of Asceticism which is allowed in Islam

Islamic asceticism is totally different from the ascetical activities practiced in other religions. In Islam, the main focus of every ritual practice is, to facilitate human being. Islam imposes every commandment, on its follower according to their physical or psychological strengths. Islam does not allow its followers to practice any activity which is considered un-social or unapproachable for a man. Circumstances are also examined when a verdict is issued by a jurist. For example: fasting has been declared an obligation for everyone and no one can leave them in any condition. But one can delay them, if one is not fit medically or one is in travelling position (passenger). On the other hand, one can't give up the worldly responsibilities or duties for the sake of a religion or to get some spiritual ends. The actual nature of asceticism can be derived from the following hadith.

Three persons came to the wives of Holy Prophet (PBUH) and asked for the religious activities of Holy Prophet (PBUH). When they were informed about it, they felt that their performance was extremely insufficient. Then they decided, one said he would offer prayer whole the night, second said he would keep fast all the time, third said he would live a celibacy life and would never marry. When the Holy Prophet (PBUH) was informed, Holy Prophet (PBUH) regret on them and taunted them that that was not fair, the Holy Prophet (PBUH) said that he offered prayer at night and also sleep, he kept fast and also remained without fast and he had married with women.⁹

In Islam there is a concept of asceticism but with moderation. Extremity in any practice is not allowed. One cannot cross the boundary of Shari'ah. If somebody for the sake of a religious purpose or to get next level of spirituality adopts

some activities at their extreme level, un-social activities or those activities which are not harmonious to human nature are considered to be un-Islamic according to the above Hadith. For religious mission one can't ignore the worldly responsibilities and for worldly affairs, one can't leave the religion. So, for a follower of Islam, it is necessary to lead a balanced life. One ought to carry on both: ritual practices as well as worldly duties. To make both these aspects prosperous Allah also has advised. "And of them (also) is he who saith: "Our Lord! Give unto us in the world that which is good and in the Hereafter that which is good, and guard us from the doom of Fire."¹⁰

5. Islamic Asceticism, its Features and Social Impacts (Medical / Spiritual)

By nature, ascetical activities allowed in Islam, are totally different from the asceticism practiced in other religions. Even the ultimate objectives may be same but apparently, a huge variation can be seen between Islamic asceticism and ascetical practices of other religions or societies. In Islam, every practice is eternal as well as universal by nature. These practices are much too easy approachable for every follower. These practices are moderate in nature and don't hurt the social setup in any society. Some renowned ascetical practices can be discussed with the following points.

5.1 Murāqabah (Meditation); Its Social Impacts on a Personality

Murāqabah is an activity or technique which is used by thinkers or philosophers to resolve the social issues. In same Sense as Murāqabah has, meditation or mediation is used in English literature. It is mostly done for positive purposes. Some thinkers investigate a matter by insight and deep thinking. It leads toward self-recognition as well as recognition of Supreme power, Creator or in Islam, recognition of Allah. "According to the Koran, Murāqabah, or "constant vigilance," is exerted by God with regard to His creatures. This

is also widely echoed by “sober” Sufis, who apply themselves to the practice of vigilance in their relationship with God.”¹¹ Such kinds of conditions also have been adopted by Sufis in Islam for spiritual purposes. Students of this field are also advised to adopt this condition at their starting stages. It is very simple and demands low energy and can be practiced easily by every kind of people. “From the earliest stages of suluk, disciples are encouraged to remain especially attentive to the colors they see in dreams and during the practice of zikr and Murāqabah.”¹² In Islamic societies, by Muslims, particular Sufis, Murāqabah is performed also. In Sufi literature, a term Mari ‘fat is used to get realization of Allah. The early step of Mari ‘fat is meditation or Murāqabah. It is highly appreciated and liked by scholars, mystics and Sufis. For meditation, The Holy Prophet (PBUH) used to go Hira cave. There, He used to meditate, worship and did the dhikr of Allah for days. He also meditated there about His nation. “When Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was nearly forty, he had been wanting to pass long hours in retirement meditating and speculating over all aspects of creation around him. This meditative temperament helped to widen the mental gap between him and his compatriots.”¹³ For this reason, on the base of this practice, many Muslims of different countries use to meditate (Murāqabah) to get their specific ends. In normal situations, when someone does dhikr in his routine life, everybody requires a condition of concentration. So, everybody has to meditate in such position so that he (or she) can achieve his goals easily. “Essential during dhikr is therefore a constant state of Murāqabah.”¹⁴

Murāqabah leaves both spiritual as well as medical impacts on an individual and ultimate on whole the society. It helps to resolve a lot of social issues. Actually philosophers, thinkers or reformers of a society use this technique to bring their nation out, from social darkness to brightness. Islamic meditators or people who do Murāqabah are in search for the solutions of their

problems. First of all, it strengthens the connection between man and Allah. With deep thinking, one becomes able to realize the purpose of one’s creation and to realize his actual creator. A man can save himself easily from social evils from this technique by keeping one busy mentally and physically. A meditator can be more devoted for a spiritual cause as compared to others. So, he can achieve his goals rapidly. The power of invention or creation enhances by this technique. So, it is an initial stage of a positive revolution in a society. It grows the thoughts and emotions of a person who meditates or does Murāqabah. It changes one’s character from negative to positive by improving one’s good qualities. “Just as through physical exercises and other practical ways, like good diet and so on, the physical condition of the body can be improved, in the same way through Murāqabah, mental activities can be improved as well.”¹⁵

Prophet (PBUH) was a revolutionary personality. He brought an absolute change in the character of people and changed the world view, from negative to positive. He used to meditate in Hira cave before bestowing the prophet Hood. Murāqabah affects a body medically in different ways. From this technique, a man can be able to make personal stamina strong; ultimately, it enhances one’s performance in different fields. To minimize mental stress or depression, meditation helps somebody in different ways. Resultant, in this way, one’s ultimate performance becomes fruitful. It creates a lot of abilities to face social challenges. Inner qualities of somebody like: self-confidence, thinking power, control over bodily desires and positive senses are boosted with meditation. “Murāqabah is a beneficial spiritual and psychological tool that has a therapeutic implication with Muslims in clinical settings. Although Muslim clinicians look to the classical Sufi tradition for this rich spiritual practice, they also need to adapt it to treatment context, diagnoses, and interventions.”¹⁶

5.2 Fasting; Spiritual and Physical Effects on One's Character

Fasting is an important component of asceticism and to get spiritual ends. It is observed by ascetics of different religions or societies with some variations. It is a common factor of different ascetical approaches. By ascetics, it is used to purify one's soul from sins. Even in world religions, its nature is different but somehow with some variations, fasting is observed having common objectivity. In Islam, it is also practiced by Muslim as a basic pillar. It has been declared an obligation on every Muslim as said by Allah. "O ye who believes, Fasting is prescribed for you, even as it was prescribed for those before you."¹⁷ In Islam or Muslim societies, this worship is also used to waive the intensity of one's sins. It enhances the spiritual level of an observer. This is a pain gaining activity also. From fasting, one can control many wrong desires and also a lot of physical problems can be solved with it. Imam Ghazzali has explained the basic purpose of fasting in his book "The Revival of Religious Learning" with the following wordings, "The object of fasting is to bring under control belly and sexual passion, or else it ends in depriving this body from food and drink."¹⁸ For these reasons, fasting is observed by Muslims as an obligation. For this ascetical technique, Muslims of different areas achieve a lot of physical as well as spiritual ends. One month for fasting has been declared obligatory and many other opportunities have been given to Muslims to observe fast. For emancipation of some major sins, fasting is advised. Some special days have been declared, in which optional fasting is observed. Sufis, for these purposes, observe optional fasts more as compared to others. About fasting, in *Kashf al-Mahjub* the writer has explained the actual reason of this ascetical activity. "Fasting is an inwardly devotion and has no outwardly connection. The others cannot know about this devotion; therefore, its recompense is in abundance."¹⁹ For a person who observes fast, only for the sake of

Allah, he would be given the regard on the Day of Judgment and an observer would be rewarded only by Allah. Relaxation in observing fast has also been given. One can delay it, if he is not physical fit or is in travelling position (traveler). One of many advantages of fasting is to get spiritual purification. Fasting leaves positive effects on an individual and on whole the society.

Also, from fasting one can get both religious as well as clinical benefits. In Islam, a complete month for fasting is observed as obligation. Nobody is exempted from this practice even one can delay them in some special cases. For spiritual purposes or to waive someone's sins fasting is recommended in Islam. Even in case of committing major wrong deeds fasting is advised to make up for those sins. A person who is observing fast is actually doing practice to avoid from sins. For this reason, fasting is named as safety shield for a person who observes fast in different days. This concept has been elaborated by Holy Prophet (PBUH) in this way. "Narrated Abu Huraira: Allah's Apostle said, "Fasting is a shield (or a screen or a shelter). So, the person observing fasting should avoid sexual relation with his wife and should not behave foolishly and impudently, and if somebody fights with him or abuses him, he should tell him twice, 'I am fasting.'"²⁰ A person while observing fast is recommended to control his wording, desires and negative activities. So, one's character becomes purified from social evils. A lot of social evils, antisocial activities and crimes can be controlled from this practice ultimately. Fasting brings revolutionary changes in one's body. After recession of food or eatables, the performance of stomach improved. Consequently, one's overall body becomes healthy. A healthy body always has a healthy mind. So, a person, who observes fast, becomes positive, creative and innovative. In the favor of fasting, modern doctors and physician have also given positive remarks. "Fasting greatly contributes to the preservation of health. The

great American physician Dr. Dewey said: "Take the food away from a sick man's stomach, and then you have begun to starve not the sick man but the disease."²¹ This statement shows that a lot of physical diseases can be cured by observing fast. Fasting controls sexual desires of a man. With the help of this technique the rate of rape cases and women harassment (sexual) can be controlled in a society.

5.3 Simplicity; its Religious and Economic impacts on a Society

Simplicity means to live a simple way of life. It doesn't mean to give up the social setup or social responsibilities. Simplicity in Islam means to live a simple way of life, like a poor person. It also means to avoid from royal living style which creates hurdles in the ways of a spiritual mission. It is not only theoretically liked by Holy Prophet (PBUH) but also adopted practically in whole His life. Further, this style was adopted by His pious companions, even having resources. For this reason, in Islam, people are advised to wear, eat and use normal things. A royal or luxurious life has not been liked by Allah and Holy Prophet (PBUH). The history of Islam shows a number of examples in which simplicity was adopted by people by their own choices. Against a royal style or one's possessions, it is considered as bone of contention for a person who owns them. "Your possessions and your children are a test, and that with Allah is immense reward."²²

For this reason, mostly Muslims, particularly ascetics, choose a simple way of life. In this way they can concentrate more on their spiritual missions. "The more a dervish is poverty stricken, the more extensive is he in his (spiritual) state," because it is harmful for a dervish to own material goods. He should not even have a thought of anything, so that he might not get captivated in love of that. The friends of Allah live by means of His secret bounties. Worldly wealth holds them back from the path of quietism."²³ A lot of examples have been quoted in Islamic history in which simplicity was

preferred. The Holy Prophet (PBUH) even having a lot of money, gold, silver, cattle and other possessions in Bait ul-Mall didn't adopt royal style but kept His living style like a poor. In the life of pious Caliphates, simplicity was preferred. Once a man of other country came to meet Hazrat Umar (R.A), he found him taking rest under a tree. He was lying on a sheet of date's leaves, without protocol or royal servants and without luxurious facilities. Many other great personalities also preferred such living style. Later this style was adopted by Islamic mystic or Sufis of different periods or regions. Hazrat Ibrahim bin-Adham an early Sufi was a governor of Balkh. He gave up his royal life and adopted simplicity to get his spiritual ends. About him, the writer of *Kashf Al-Mahjub* explained, "He repented, abandoned worldly governance, and entered on the path of asceticism and abstinence."²⁴

In Islam, simplicity not only advised theoretically but it was also adopted practically by Holy Prophet (PBUH) as well as by His pious companions. Although, they could enjoy with many basic facilities but they preferred simplicity rather than a royal life. Many historians mentioned this style in praising way. "It is interesting to note that this one man, who has done so much to change the course of human history, was actually a thrice-orphaned child who grew up tending sheep. As you learn more about his early life, you will gain a greater appreciation for the simple directness that Islam is famous for."²⁵ This type of living style causes frugality in one's life. It saves the natural resources. A man who wears or eats normal and lives a simple way life is always happy and contented. Spiritually, a man's simple style shows his zero accountability but one who enjoys a luxurious life would be detained till he would have to explain his every action or resources he used in his life. "Islam is not an unapproachable belief. It is a system that balances economics, politics, morality, and social structure as a simple way of life from God we

came; to Him shall we return.”²⁶ Simplicity saves the resources of a country. From simplicity, lower classes in a country can be uplifted by donating them the spare resources. Corruption level decreases with the adoption of simplicity by an individual and by whole the society. When ruling body adopts simple way of life then all subordinates would follow that style. A lot of social crimes and deviances like: begging, stealing, killing, exploitation of poor, robbery cases and other anti-social activities can be prevented by this activity. In this way, a prosperous and a crime free society can be existed. This all was done in the state of Medina practically and a progressed state came into existence in which every member of that society adopted a simple way of life. Not only poor were advised to adopt this way of life but also rich were also advised to prefer this kind of status.

6. Concluding Points

Asceticism or ascetical activities are found in Islam. In Islam, moderate or balanced ascetical activities are allowed only. The significant quality of Islamic asceticism is that it promotes human nature as well as sociability of a man. Meditation, fasting and simplicity are practiced in Islam as ascetical activities. There are distinctive variations among the ascetical activities of different religions but all have same objectivity of

spiritual purification. Every ascetic wants to get this objectivity. Some un-natural as well as un-social activities have also been practiced by Muslims of different countries. But Islam is not responsible for all the activities done by Muslims. Such practices are borrowed from other religions or societies. Socially, these ascetical activities impact on an individual as well as on whole the society, in different ways. Pure Islamic ascetical activities leave positive impacts on a society but borrowed ascetical activities have both positive as well as negative impacts.

7. Recommendations

Social awareness is necessary for every person male or female. A religion's role in a society is to solve the spiritual issues as well to make people tied in a strong social relation. So, on the name of a religious belief, un-social activities should be discouraged by religious scholars. To prevent the extreme level of ascetical activities, legislative body also ought to play their role. Such activities should be banned legally in every country. Mass media can play a significant role in modifying the concept. So, on every platform of media, especially on social media the process of socialization should be done. Only moderate and balanced ritual practices should be allowed to promote or preach in a society.

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