

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 – what has been called global warming. 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.

Maulana Azad in early twenties of the last century interpreted this chapter in his multi-volume commentary of Qur'an to prove unity of whole humanity by emphasizing importance of the words *rabb al-'alamin* (i.e. nourisher of the whole universe) Maulana's contribution is indeed very important and will remain of great significance for long time to come. Maulana's learned interpretation is very different from any earlier interpretations. It thus also shows that succeeding generations has every right to understand Qur'an in different ways to seek Divine guidance to solve their problems. This chapter being in the form of prayer, provides greater inspiration.

To seek inspiration from this opening chapter is very very important as world's ecological balance, on which depends survival of humanity, is at stake. According to *The Hindu* of 28th May 2009, which quotes from *Guardian* Newspaper, "Senior doctors in the U.K. recently published a report warning that climate change is the biggest threat to global health of the 21st century Rising global temperatures would have a catastrophic effect on human health, the doctors said, and patterns of infection would change, with insect-borne diseases such as malaria and dengue fever spreading more easily."

This is just on health side. Other effects like shortage of water, an essential commodity for life, would be equally disastrous. There is complete unanimity among scientists that glaciers, even on North Pole are melting and melting of glaciers will have disastrous effects in more than one ways. It would result even in rise of sea levels submerging many coastal cities causing great disaster. Sea levels along some coastal towns have already risen causing worries to its people.

Faced with such disaster to human survival we have to seek inspiration and succor from Allah's own words, the creator of this universe. 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 Raghīb's *al-Mufrīdat*). 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 every thing but was prohibited from eating 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.

Allah is highly Beneficent and takes care of all the needs of human beings He has created. Humans were living in the paradise. Paradise, here, is not a fixed place there in heavens but right here on earth. Maulana Muhammad Ali a translator of the Qur'an, says, "...paradise, according

to the Holy Qur'an, is not a place for simple enjoyment or rest; it is essentially a place of advancement to higher and higher stages: But those who keep their duty to their Lord, shall have high places, above them higher places, built(for them)" (39:20)

"This shows", Maulana says, "that not only does paradise admit the righteous to high places, but it is, in fact, the starting point for a new advancement, there being higher and higher places still, and it is in accordance with this that they are spoken of as having an increasing desire for attaining to higher and higher excellences, their prayer in paradise being: 'Our Lord, make perfect for us our light' (66:8)"

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 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.)

It is by these actions that we have been expelled from the paradise and converting it into hell. In the fourth and fifth verses of opening chapter we say "Thee do we serve and Thee we do beseech for help." This we say every day in our five times prayers but are we indeed observing it in practice or saying so merely ritually? Obviously we say so only ritually. While we say this in our prayer we continue to violate course fixed by Him, we violate laws of nature on every step.

If we serve Him and saying so again and again, should we pollute His earth, should we overdraw from its resources? Can we still beseech Him for help? Can we deserve that? Certainly not? Are we not sinning against Him and still seeking His help? If we are serving Him we must obey all His laws, the course fixed by Him and then only we can beseech Him for His help.

Allah, in this opening chapter *Sura-i-Fatihah* is described as Master of the Day of Requitul." i.e. *yawm al-Din*. Din, according to Imam Raghīb means recompense, requital. And *yawm* (day) in the Qur'anic terminology is any period of time from a moment (55:29) to fifty thousand years (70:4) i.e. from indefinitely small to an indefinitely large. So if we violate Lord's laws for a small amount of time to a large amount of time, we will be recompensed accordingly on that Day of Judgment.

We have been violating these 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 resources and keeping earth pure *tayyib* and did not over 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.

How correct is Qur’an’s pronouncement when it says, “And when We wish to destroy a town, We send commandments to its people who lead easy lives, but they transgress therein; thus the word proves true against it, so We destroy it with utter destruction.” (17:16). What Allah says in this verse that those habituated to easy life (i.e. the rich) do not hear the words of wisdom and continue to violate it in sheer arrogance (what the Qur’an calls *istikbar*) and then Allah destroys them.

The rich of the earth forgetful of final consequences of their life style continue to ignore all the warnings and ultimately face the doom. Are the rich nations of the west, particularly USA, not ignoring all the warning of rising temperature of earth and pushing us all closer to the disaster? They insist the poorer nations and developing countries reduce their consumption and not they. The G-8 nations which are all developed nations in their recent conference in Italy once again did not agree to reduction of their consumption of earth resources.

Qur’an repeats this warning when it says, “Nay their hearts are in ignorance about it, and they have besides this other deeds which they do. Until, when We seize those who lead easy lives among them with chastisement, lo! They cry for succour.” (23:63-64) Do we not find precisely same behaviour on the part of rich nations of the west? Are they not refusing to mend their ways and reduce their consumption of earth resources? Will they not push our earth to the brink of disaster by ignoring the warning?

Technological progress is most welcome but it can be boon or curse depending how this progress is used by the rich and powerful. The weaker sections and poor nations are, after all, totally helpless and their voice is never heard. But warning has to be repeated as Qur'an says to the Prophet to warn as he has been sent as warner (*nazir*). If people listen to him they will be rescued, if not, they will face doom.

The technological progress has enabled human beings to consume more and more and also to pollute the earth too 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.

But reason is, let us be clear, a double-edged sword, a mere tool, which could be used or misused. It is because of reason that we have progressed tremendously from primitive to advanced human beings, from caves to skyscrapers but then it is this reason which has given us tools to destroy our planet through over-consumption and over-pollution which is leading us to disaster.

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 also as it did in Europe through weapons of destruction finally resulting in making all destructive nuclear weapons and in Hiroshima and Nagasaki it killed more than two hundred thousand people.

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 savior of humanity.

Thus the path of wisdom is indeed path of bounties and of divine blessings. When we pray to Allah to guide us to that path on which He has showered His bounties, it is the path of wisdom. So if our prayer has to have any meaning we have to follow this path of wisdom and save our earth, created by *Rabb al-'Alamin* and He has perfected it gradually until all forms of life appeared on it.

It took millions of years for perfect conditions for human life to appear but now because of our irresponsible behavior we are destroying it and if do not restrain our overdrive for consumption human life may become extinct due to destruction of ecological balance. And this is not

exaggerated statement in any way. This is already being predicted by scientists. But *mutrifun* (those addicted to easy life) refuse to take heed.

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.

The oil wealth is also hidden below deserts in Muslim countries of West Asia and they can certainly ration oil production in such a manner as to reduce carbon consumption. It is they who pray five times every day to Allah to guide them to the right path and thus it is for them to act in a responsible manner so as to compel the western nations to reduce their carbon consumption.

This will surely save our earth from impending disaster. It is true it is extremely difficult and complex problem. There is every danger that western countries led by USA may invade the countries with oil resources as they did in Iraq. But then they can convene conference of all developing countries and seek their cooperation. Of course it is easier said than done but one has to find solution to what all of us know is sure disaster.

Surely, those who possess rich oil resources can play some responsible as well as creative role in the matter. We possess Qur'an and Qur'an shows us path of wisdom. Are Muslims going to use this wisdom specially as they also possess the oil wealth? So far indications are not very encouraging. The Muslim nations hardly have courage to confront USA as they depend so much on it for technology and for weapons of destruction.

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?