

Sadaqah: Misinterpretations and the True Philosophy in Muslim Societies

A Step toward a Just Social Order

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Abstract: This paper was prepared at the request of the Chairperson of the Council of Islamic Ideology, Pakistan, a constitutional body mandated to advise on the conformity of laws with Islamic principles to address the question: "How can an individual or institution help uplift the quality of life of the underprivileged?" In response, this study highlights the sacred institution of Sadaq'ah, prescribed in the Shari'ah, as a divinely ordained mechanism for social welfare, economic justice, and the holistic improvement of communal life. The institution of Sadaq'ah occupies a central place in Islam's socio-economic and ethical framework. It functions both as a means of wealth redistribution and as a spiritual discipline that cultivates Sidq (truthfulness), compassion, and collective responsibility. Yet, in many Muslim societies, particularly in South and Southeast Asia, the authentic Qur'ani and Nabawi vision has been overshadowed by cultural distortions, ritualism, and clerical exploitation. This paper interrogates these deviations, showing how ignorance of authentic Islamic teachings and the influence of 'Ulama al-Su' (corrupt clergy) have reconfigured Sadaq'ah into practices resembling non-Islamic traditions such as Hindu Daan and Dakshina. Methodologically, the study draws on Qur'an exegesis, Nabawi Traditions, and Sir'ah literature, alongside a critical examination of regional practices. Findings suggest that misuse of Sadaq'ah stems from clerical manipulation, where ritualised food distributions, animal sacrifices, or luxury gifts are promoted as means to ward off misfortune. Such practices diverge sharply from the Qur'an conception of Sadaq'ah as a sincere, voluntary act encompassing not only material giving but also simple deeds like smiling, guiding the lost, or removing harm from public pathways. Nabawi guidance and the traditions of Ahl al-Bayt (as) emphasise the dignity of the recipient, secrecy of giving, and the use of lawful wealth. Contrary to misconceptions, Hadith sources affirm its universality, with Muhammad (S) directing that charity be extended to people of all faiths. Especially profound is the notion of Sadaq'ah Jariyyah (ongoing charity), which secures perpetual reward and enduring Barak'ah even after death. The paper concludes that reviving the authentic philosophy of Sadaq'ah requires dismantling exploitative clerical frameworks, resisting cultural distortions, and reaffirming it as a comprehensive institution of social justice and spiritual elevation, vital for the Muslim Ummah to build a welfare-oriented society in harmony with the Qur'an and Sunnah.

Keywords: Sadaqah; Islamic Charity; Ulama al-Su; Misinterpretation of Faith; Qur'an, Hadith; Ahl al-Bayt (as); Social Evils; Muslim Society; Poverty, Class Discrimination; Welfare in Islam

1. Introduction:

Today the Muslim society is a victim of several social evils; the lack of Islamic education, narrow-mindedness and rigid attitude towards Islam and Islamic codes is the cause of all this evil. Ignorance of the sciences of Islam is the main reason for the mutilation of faith. This situation leaves people vulnerable to the influence of their surroundings, which later becomes a part of their faith. Rituals and customs of different Muslim communities are observed more strictly than the original Talim of the Shariah. Due to this ignorant attitude, no difference between right and wrong exists for some and the benedictions of the institution of Sadaq'ah seem to have lost its importance. The divine gift of Sadaq'ah which was conferred through the institution of Wahy for the elevation of the under-privileged - has lost its true essence. In South East Asia, Muslims practice Sadaq'ah in the same manner as the Hindu ritual of "Daan and Dakshina." The Hindus believe that if something is donated to the clergymen, in return their misfortune and difficulties would be removed. Islam places no such importance on the clergymen unlike Hinduism and Buddhism. Islam however has the concept of Wali and Hadi. Therefore, feeding the clergy for the removal of difficulties is a concept alien to Islamic faith. Such faith is a gift of Hinduism which has transcended in communities that converted to Islam through mass-conversions.

"Ulama al-Su" or plunderers of the faith, the so-called clergy are largely responsible for undermining the real spirit of Islamic institutions. They exploit the masses in the name of Allah and lead them to serve their own interests. It is worth mentioning what people do to drive away their misfortunes:

To avoid troubles, people would put the head of a goat on the corner of a street.

To cure an illness and fulfill other needs, people feed pieces of meat to birds.

To fulfill hopes and good wishes, a lemon punctured with a clove is thrown on the street.

To protect a baby from evil-eye, an egg is waved around the head and thrown outside.

Other than money, Ulama al-Su, to satisfy their selfish desires, ask for various expensive items such as gold, silver, Musk, Oud (Aloes wood), Saffron, and other valuables, as per the financial status of the person in the name of "Sadaq'ah and Khair'at" in lure of solving their problems. [1]

2. Misinterpretation of Sadaq'ah:

It is necessary to examine the root causes of misinterpretation of the Qurani term "Sadaq'ah". Today, people treat the item donated in the name of Sadaq'ah with social stigma, as something which is meant for the poorest of the poor. No one even likes to touch it; people think that the hardship and ill-effect of the person in whose name it is donated will fall upon the receiver of the Sadaq'ah. Those giving anything as Sadaq'ah try to give it away as soon as possible and not hold onto it, as it is wrongly believed that carrying the same for long is a bad omen. On the contrary, it is advisable for people that they must carry Sadaq'ah amount or item with them and find someone deserving to give to. The reason for such ignorant beliefs is only due to not studying the right sources. There is no reference in the religious books that the receiver of Sadaq'ah will face any harm or problem, as is wrongly believed. The perfidious clergy have misled the masses and taken them away from the truth.

3. Definition of Sadaq'ah:

Those who divide Islam, politics and economics into three different categories will never find the solutions to the financial crises of the Ummah. The shortsighted clergy can never help in building a welfare society, which Islam has ordained. Social and economic crises of the Ummah will be solved only when competent religious scholars will follow the principles of Islam in every aspect of their lives. Presently, it is a neglected lesson, which exists without its original spirit. Raghib Isfahani writes in his famous book "Mufarradat al-Qur'an": [2]

"The meaning of the word Sadaq'ah in the language of the Shari'ah is to grant or donate with free-will to others".

Moreover, Sadaq'ah is explained in "Qamus al-Fiqh'e" as: [3]

"Sadaq'ah is that which is donated to others only to please Allah and to get His nearness".

The word Sadaq'ah is from the word Sidq, which means truth and sincerity. Any help which you give to others with the purest of intentions and sincerity, either in cash or in any form, is an act of Sadaq'ah. This act demands sincerity because it is Allah alone who in return removes or lessens the problems. Sadaq'ah is a very wide term and is used in the Qur'an to cover all kinds of charity.

Ahadith Literature provides enough Talim regarding Sadaq'ah:

"Your smile for your brother is Sadaq'ah". [4]

"Enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong is Sadaq'ah" [5]

"Smiling at or even giving a glass of water to a thirsty person or even a word of kindness is Sadaq'ah". [6]

"Planting something from which a person, bird or animal afterwards takes benefit also counts as Sadaq'ah".

"Your removal of stones, thorns or bones from the paths of people is Sadaq'ah". [7]

"Guiding a person who is lost is also Sadaq'ah". [8]

Following are more examples of Sadaq'ah:

- i). Helping someone establish themselves professionally;
- ii). Assisting someone learn;
- iii). Monetary assistance for the treatment of the sick;
- iv). Looking after orphans and the destitute;
- v). Granting scholarships to students;

All above charitable acts come under Sadaq'ah-Jaariyyah (everlasting charity). Sirah Literature guides us as follow: [9]

"The reward for giving Sadaq'ah in secret is seventy times superior to that of giving it publicly."

The most superior form of Sadaq'ah is that which is given covertly so that others may not know of it. However, one is not restricted from giving Sadaq'ah openly, but according to the Talim of the Qur'an and Sunnah, and the guidance of Ahl al-Bayt (as), it is preferable that Sadaq'ah be given secretly. According to the explanation of Moula Abi Abdillah al-Imam Jafar al-Sadiq (as), Sadaq'ah could be given to any needy Mumin except those belonging to the "Bani Hashim".

Al Qur'an describes the pious as: [10]

"And in their wealth, there is the right of the "Sa'el", the needy and the "Mahrum" (deprived) who do not approach others".

Good conduct is frequently termed as Sadaq'ah in the Hadith. In this extended sense, acts of love, kindness and even greeting each other with a cheerful face are regarded as Sadaq'ah. In brief, every good deed is Sadaq'ah. One should remember that Sadaq'ah begins at home, as per Hadith: [11]

"When one of you is poor, he starts with himself. If anything is left, he spends it on his family. If anything is (still) left, then on his relatives, and then, if more is left, he spends it here and there."

4. The Philosophy of Sadaq'ah in the Qur'an:

Sadaq'ah is the best act through which a person can achieve nearness to Allah and fight evil. The economic system of Islam provides us Talim that wealth should not get accumulated in the hands of one to prevent the growth of another. This is why Shaddad, Hamm'an and Abu Lahab are considered snakes of the evil system. Similarly, the trustees of Bayt al-Ma'al should not utilize the funds unjustifiably. The Qur'an has defined the community as a large family which deserves close co-operation, mutual help and care, a feeling of sacrifice amongst each other. The Qur'an has given assurance to this family (community) for survival and bestows a golden principle: [12]

"Help and co-operate among each other in goodness and virtue."

5. Strong Recommendations of Sadaq'ah:

Sadaq'ah is the institution of charity in Islam. This is an institution through which one can spend in the name of Allah, for the cause of Allah. It is the name of carrying good deeds. It is the way to fulfill the needs of those deserving. Rasulallah (S) guided the Ummah regarding Sadaq'ah and Inf'aq several times and encouraged them through numerous Ahadith. The Qur'an says: [13]

"Say: Verily my Lord increases the Rizq for whomsoever He wills of His servants and restricts it (for whomsoever He wills) and He repays whatsoever you spend. He is the best of all providers."

One assurance has been given in the Qur'an, which is not found in any other Scriptures: [14]

"Those who spend their money (by giving Sadaq'ah or Khair'at to the deserving) openly or quietly in the day and at night, their reward is with their Lord the Cherisher; they will not face any danger nor face sorrow or grief."

Commentators of the Qur'an are unanimous on the Tafsir of the above Ayah that it came down in praise of Amir al-Mumineen Ali (as) to glorify his Sadaq'ah of four Dirhams in the way of Allah, one by night, one by day, one secretly and one openly.

Today, when people have become increasingly materialistic, they first secure their selfish interests although the Qur'an has given the best assurance to secure profits in the following Ayah: [15]

The example of those who spend their wealth in the way of Allah is like a seed [of grain] which grows seven spikes; in each spike are hundred grains. And Allah multiplies [His reward] for whom He wills. And Allah is all-encompassing and knowing.

Qur'an mentions the misers so strongly that the entire body shivers. It warns: [16]

"Listen! You are invited to spend your money in the way of Allah, but some among you are misers. In fact, they are committing misery with themselves (i.e. not sharing a part in Sadaq'ah

and Khair'at has deprived them of Barak'ah and Naim'ah) while Allah is self-sufficient and you are needy. If you turn your back, He will bring other people in your place (the Naim'ah you have should be snatched and transferred to others) who will not be like you".

After this, again there is a warning of a horrible punishment: [17]

"No one will be thrown in it but the miser who denies the truth and turns his back".

Strong tone and clear wording of the above Ay'ah are enough of a warning to the misers. Numerous Ahadith carry Talim and explain the significance of Sadaq'ah. The Qur'an and Ahadith repeatedly and vigorously inform and insist upon those in the Ummah, who have been rewarded with bounty, not to spend their wealth as an Isr'af and Tabzir, or for self-glorification among people. Instead, they must spend it on the deserving and needy who keep their problems hidden, due to dignity and self-respect.

6. The Evils of Society:

One should keep in mind that class discrimination and poverty are two different things. In each society, class discrimination is present. According to Islam, the prosperous must support the underprivileged in order to control poverty. Class discrimination is a tyranny, which is the outcome of the three evils whose origin is very old. Islam warned the Ummah to stay away from it. This evil trio tried to crush Islam but the attempt was futile. They gathered against Rasulullah (S) as the following:

- i). First was the Ruler, Abu Jahl;
- ii). the second was the Capitalist, Abu Sufiyan
- iii). and third was the Cleric, Abu Lahab.

These three evil forces are still present today in different faces and dresses. The influential partners of this "Troika" are "Ulama al-Su" (sick clerics). They are the most dangerous as they cheat in the name of Allah and His Rasul (S). These "Ulama al-Su" do not offer true guidance to the Muslim community, but mislead them. When the underprivileged discuss their problems with them, they provide an incomplete and wrong interpretation of the Hadith by saying that this world is akin to a jail for Mumin and that the reward is in the "Jannah in A'akhir'ah". If people will come out of the stronghold of the Ulama al-Su, they would be able to live better lives. People of all classes should avoid financial support to the clergy in the name of Islam, and donate to charitable institutions which help the destitute instead.

An Urdu poet discusses the hypocrisy of Ulama al-Su: [18]

"Jiyo Mulla Dharak'e Say;
Duniya Mar Ga'e Faqay Say"

Crooked clerics! Enjoy life since you are free of worries;
Population dead due to starvation

"Tu Kha'a Maze Se Halway M'anday;
Tujh Ku Kiya Hy A'atay Say"

Enjoy lavish feasts every day;
You have nothing to worry for the troubles of poor?

7. The significance of Sadaq'ah in Ahadith:

The importance and utility of the Sadaq'ah has been mentioned in the following Ahadith:

- i. *"Sadaq'ah provides protection from divine punishment". [19]*
- ii. *"Sadaq'ah sets one free from Jahannam". [20]*
- iii. *"The person who is capable of giving Sadaq'ah but never gives it is cursed."*
- iv. *"Spending one Dirham as Sadaq'ah is much greater than ten days Nawafil. [21]*
- v. *"Those who give Sadaq'ah as reward will be protected from the heat of the grave". [22]*
- vi. *"Give Sadaq'ah as it removes poverty and difficulties and prolongs life". [23]*
- vii. *"The sick should give Sadaq'ah through his hand and should request the receiver to offer Dua for him (when the receiver offers Dua, the giver should recite A'ameen). [24]*
- viii. *"When people abandon the practice of Sadaq'ah, health problems multiply." [25]*
- ix. *"Treat and cure your patients through Sadaq'ah". [26]*
- x. *"Each closed door has its own key, and Sadaq'ah is the key of Rizq". [27]*
- xi. *"Spend Sadaq'ah to minimize the ratio of poverty as it will increase your wealth and Allah will bestow upon you benedictions." [28]*

8. Talim of Ahl al-Bayt (as) regarding Sadaq'ah:

Ahl al-Bayt (as) gave a number of recommendations regarding Sadaq'ah:

Al-Imam Ali ibn al-Husayn Zayn al-Abideen (as) says: [29]

"Whenever anybody gives Sadaq'ah to the needy, and the receiver offers Dua for the giver, the Dua is definitely accepted."

Whenever the Imam gave something as Sadaq'ah, he kissed the hand of the recipient just to pay respect. Someone inquired:

"You are the grandson of Rasul (S) and people kiss your hand as reverence - why do you kiss the hand of the beggar"?

The humble reply of the Imam (as) guides us on how we should treat the needy. To teach the manner of sincerity in Sadaq'ah, Imam said:

"Sadaq'ah is like an article that comes through Allah."

Never remind or taunt the receiver regarding what you donated to him. Qur'an has warned in Ayah 264 of Surah al-Baqarah in this regard clearly. Do not offer Sadaq'ah degradingly, but with grace and honour. If the recipient accepts your Sadaq'ah, then through his Dua your action will be blessed by Allah. It becomes your provision for the eternal journey and source of salvation.

When Al-Imam Ali ibn al-Husayn Zayn al-Abideen (as) was buried, there was a mark on his back. Someone asked his son, Al-Imam Abi Jafar Muhammad al-Baqir (as), about the mark as it did not seem to be a wound. He replied: [30]

"My father was a great benefactor of the poor, orphans, widows, helpless and the needy. He used to take dates and bread in a bag and carry it on his back every night through the streets of Madinah to distribute it to the needy. The mark was caused by the weight of those things."

The Imam of Ahl al-Bayt (as) says: [31]

"Sadaq'ah takes away your Qard (loan) and brings blessings".

Love for worldly possessions is primarily a disease of the heart and Sadaq'ah acts as its antidote. Sadaq'ah serves as a form of Zikar to remind us that all forms of wealth comes from Allah and what we possess is simply a short term loan for which we will be held accountable for when our contract expires. This loan is meant to cater to our personal and familial needs, and those of society.

10. A few eye opening points:

People often donate stale food, used clothes, old shoes, and rejected household items to the poor as Sadaq'ah in the name of Allah. This is not Sadaq'ah but being hypocritical with Allah. It is a misinterpretation of the meaning of Qur'an and a shameful act. Ayah 267 of Surah al-Baqarah guides us in this regard: "Not to give that which we reject as bad". Sayyiduna Abizar al-Ghaffari's question from Rasulullah (S) and his reply should be adequate guidance. He asked: [32]

"O Moula ! Which Sadaq'ah is the best?"

Rasulullah (S) replied:

"It should be valuable and the receiver should appreciate it very much."

It is pertinent to note however that many undeserving people ask for Sadaq'ah. These are often professional beggars seeking Sadaq'ah from every corner. It is better that the person who gives Sadaq'ah should investigate the recipient on whether the person is eligible or not. Fiqh Literature has condemned such professionals who do not work to earn their livelihood by lawful means. They want the easy way out and hate putting in the work. Such people take the wrong advantage of Sadaq'ah without any justification and earn their livelihood without the due struggle. Sadaq'ah is reserved only for the really needy and deserving. Moula Abi Abdillah al-Imam Jafar al-Sadiq (as) says: [33]

"A few Ans'ar came in the presence of Rasulullah (S), extended Salaam, and submitted that they came with the intention that he will fulfill their demands". Rasulullah (S) inquired about their demands. They requested, "We wish for a great thing". Rasulullah (S) asked: "Tell me what it is." They said: "We want the assurance of Jannah". Rasulullah (S) bent down his head for a while, then he marked a line on the flour with a stick, and raising his head replied, there is one condition, and it is that you will never ask anyone for anything except Allah."

First: a Muslim must give Sadaq'ah in the name of Allah.

Second: all money donated as Sadaq'ah must be from a legitimate source. Money that has been obtained by unlawful sources or earned unethically is unacceptable before Allah.

Third: all excess wealth is considered ownership of Allah, so spend it as Sadaq'ah.

11. Concluding Remarks:

People want to help those who truly deserve it, but unfortunately, all they end up doing is give Sadaq'ah (alms and other provisions) to that crowd of professional beggars who swamp the streets around Masajid or markets during Ramadan or the whole year. Apart from them, it is difficult to find those who are genuinely in need of monetary assistance and under financial stress. However, this should not be an excuse for those who wish to earn the nearness and pleasure of Allah by the means of helping those in need. One should put in some efforts to find out the deserving people and should actively trace such people, and once they are discovered, approach

them with utmost humility and offer them help. Helping out our immediate and extended family that are not well to do should be prioritized as helping them gets us twice the reward than helping others.

A labourer who after completing his day job tries to earn additional money so that he can provide basic necessities of life to his family is definitely deserving of your charity. Those female workers who work for hours for a meager salary to support their family are truly worthy of your financial assistance. Those daily wage workers, hawkers and street vendors who put up with intense physical labour under harsh climatic conditions to feed and clothe their family are in great need of your charity and kindness. That Aalim (religious scholar) who survives on meager stipends educating children of our society while his own wife and children often face severe deprivation of all the pleasures and comforts of life will truly cherish your financial help. There are many more instances of such people in our society who are more or less going through the same hardships. Such people will die of hunger but out of dignity and self-respect will never ask for anyone's help. They will always turn towards Allah to seek sustenance and work hard to gain it. It will be very difficult to offer them any help, they will straight away deny your offer, but you will have to approach them sensitively with all your humility. Insist that they take the help offered as a gift from a fellow brother who will never recall this favour to insult or humiliate them. When your approach would be such, they will surely accept your gift and their Dua will benefit you and your progeny in this world and in A'akhirah, 'in sha Allah. The following quotation is "Khit'am al-Misk" (seal of Musk) of our discussion. Sayyiduna Husain bin Saeed al-Ahwazi (d. around 256 A.H) transmitted traditions of Ahl al-Bayt (as) in his book, "Kit'ab al-Mumin" [34], from Moula Abi Abdillah al-Imam Jafar al-Sadiq (as). He was the "Hujjah Jazirah" of the 9th Shia Fatimi Ismaili Imam. (In the Ismaili Daw'ah hierarchy, the world is divided into twelve Jazair (continents) and each continent is headed by one Da'i called Hujjah Jazirah). The Hujjah Da'i of Jazirah quotes: [34]

"One who provides monetary relief to a Mumin at the time of financial crisis and helps him for his "prosperity", Allah shall fulfill his Haj'at (wishes), in Duniya (here) and in the A'akhirah (hereafter)".

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