

Discourse on Disability in The Quran and Major Islamic Literature

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Disability is related to religion in many ways. We havenoticed that religious beliefs affect people in many ways and how religion itself plays a significant role in people’s lives. In the world, eighty percent of the population belong to some particular religious group or other. Religion plays an important role in reconstructing and deconstructing people’s lives. Like other minority communities, people with disability were also impacted by religion all around the world. We have discussed about Indic religions and we have seen its impact on the Hindu, Buddhist and Jain religious believers. Throughout history, disabled people like many others in the various societies, havebeen brought under influence by religion, either by direct or indirect means.¹ The history of humanity considers mental and physical healings as an important part of religion.² Despite the link between religion and disability, literature continues with its impact of religious studies in the fields of health and disability.³

In Islam, it is important to mention that Muslim scholars have not considered impairment as an unmistakable subject. Considering Abu al-Hasan Al Ashari in his book ‘Al-Ibaanah’ (Illumination) where he questions the idea of torturing infants can be taken as a good example here. He discusses about the children who suffer from leprosy and their hands and feet are cut off. Disabilities were associated with extensive terms in the Qur’an like ‘sayyia’, which means abhorrence, and ‘sharf’, which means malicious. The teaching of Prophet Mohammad and the religious book The Qu’ran speak about disability as a catastrophe or punishment. Jihad, for that matter, explains disabilities as, “not equal are those of the believers who sit (at home), except those who are disabled, and those who strive hard and fight in the Cause of Allah with their wealth and lives.”⁴

The fact that disability exists, questions the power of the ultimate God, “How to understand or justify the presence of nasty and painful things in the light of the fact that God the

¹ Selway, Deborah & Adrian F. Ashman (1998), p. 429.

² Issa, Ihsan al- (2000), p. 3, quoting from Alexander, F.G. & S.T. Selsnick (1966); Kilpatrick, S. et al (1999), p- 389

³ Selway, Deborah & Adrian F. Ashman (1998), p. 429; Issa, Ihsan al- (2000), p. 3.

⁴ Ch-4, 95th verse, Sūrat I-nisāa

compassionate, the Merciful is the supreme Power and that he has control over the universe?”⁵. Therefore, the answer to the question has become a central point of discussion throughout human history. In the subject of disability, some explanations either deny the existence of God or they understand goodness as one God and evil as another. Thinkers who had a theistic approach and acknowledged revealed faith, understood the strict guidelines that were to be followed while resolving the issues of ideas occurring that questions God’s existence and the reality behind the evil in what he created.⁶

In Islam, it has been said that that the arch-father of humanity that is Adam was the first one who raises the question on God. Prophets say that when Adam was shown his offspring by God, he found enormous discrepancies in them like some were rich or poor and strong or weak. Adam also witnesses his offspring with baras (leprosy), judhām (elephantiasis), blindness and other disabilities. Looking at them, Adam asks God, “why did you do so with my offspring? Wouldn’t it be better if you made them all equal?”. To this God answered, “I do so to be thanked and or to be thanked for my gift.”⁷ However, this resolution could not stop this problematic idea to prevail and the story of Adam is used widely as an important reference in the Islamic tradition.

Apart from the strong believers of God, there was a group of people who suffered from lunacy and widely criticized the activity of God. The story of a great mystic al-Shibili with a madman in a lunatic asylum is an example of the above argument. The madman requests al-Shibili to ask God, why was he mistreating him like this by keeping him away from his home and family, without food and in cold conditions. Al-Shabili agrees and is about to take his leave, when the man crying now says, “No, do not tell God anything. Otherwise he will make it worse. I shall not ask him for anything. For nothing can impress him. He is self-sufficient.”⁸ Commenting on this story, Hellmut Ritter, a German orientalist says, “Whatever

⁵ Maqsood, Ruqaiyyah Waris (2000), pp. 8-44; Ayoub, Mahmoud M. (1977), p. 267; Julaynid, Muhammad al-Sayyid al- (1981), p. 55.

Muṭawwa‘, Munīra Khālīd al- (1422-2001), in ‘Awaḍī, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ‘Abd Allāh al- & Aḥmad Rajā’ī al-Jundī (eds.) (1422-2001), vol. 2, p. 642.

⁶ Pessagno, J. Meric (1984), p. 65.

⁷ Mawṣilī, Abū Ya‘lā al- (1404/1984), vol. 11, p. 264; Qurṭubī, Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad Aḥmad al- (1372/1952), vol. 7, p. 315; Bayhaqī, Abū Bakr Aḥmad b. al-Ḥusayn al- (1410/1989), vol. 4, p. 107; Ibn Kathīr (1), vol. 1, pp. 78 & 88; Sa‘īd, Nadyā Muḥammad (1425/2004), p. 90.

⁸ Ritter, Hellmut (1952), p. 4.

happens to them is, in their eyes, always a direct action of God or on his behalf. Always they have to deal with God directly.”⁹

Furthermore, there was also a popular group of people who were considered as infidels and heretics. This group incorporated some popular members of Islamic society like theologians such as Jahm b. Ṣafwān who played a vital role to the Jahmiyya¹⁰ and other various significant poets, philosophers, their pupils. Their utmost concern was to question the perfect, spotless character of God by justifying the notion of evil and pain studied by Muslim scholars.¹¹ Jahm b. Safwān, in his work, unabashedly denied that God is merciful. Safwan held this view because he wanted to bring light upon God to understand the suffering of life in a more unhindered manner and hence, telling that God is very distinguished from his creatures. He often collected a group of lepers, suffering in life and spread his ideas by saying, “The most merciful of the merciful (that is God) does such things!”¹²

He strongly believed that the suffering or the evil does not show any light of mercy but absence of wisdom and mercy which highlights the indistinguishable power of God. Holding such views and propagating nihilism, had cost Safwān strong derogatory charges upon him and ultimately his life. And people like ‘Abd al-Qāhir al-Baghdādī, who worked on heresiography, comments on Safwān saying, “We condemn him as a heretic for all his errors and Qadarites (Indeterminists) declare him a kāfir (non-believer) for his assertion that God is the creator of the acts of mankind.”

In Islam, in order to study the subject of impairment, understanding the importance of the terminology used is very important. According to Islamic sources, to use precise and non-offensive terminology in Islamic readings was made a point of utmost significance for a favourable Muslim milieu. Initially a person with mental insanity was called a mājnūn by some companions of the prophets, which could have been possibly seen as an indication of contempt or derogation. Therefore, to maintain the harmony and sensitivity of the disability

⁹ Ibid, p. 9. For similar Sufi practices in the Shī‘ī tradition, see Navar, Iraj & Peter J. Chelkowski (1994), pp. 111-129.

¹⁰ Watt, W. Montgomery (3) (2003), vol. II, p. 388.

¹¹ Ibn al-Qayyim (1358/1939), vol. 1, p. 251.

¹² Ibn al-Qayyim (1358/1939), vol. 1, p. 239; Subhan, Abdus (1937), pp. 221-227; Frank, Richard (1965), pp. 395-424.

discourse, the Prophet restated the terminology stating that, “This man is musāb (sick or ill). Junūn (insanity) comes only as a result of constant disobedience of God.”¹³

On the other hand, when the Prophet disapproved of his behaviour towards Abdullah ibn Umm Maktum by God, not because the prophet referred to him as a blind man but rather he neglected Abdullah, who came to him to learn. Later, out of dignity, the Prophet many a times in his absence assigned Abdullah as the head of Madinah. And this sets as a perfect example of Prophet’s generosity and good will for whom Abdullah’s blindness was not seen as any kind of hindrance in order to perform a duty. As in some instances of Hindu mythology, where disabled characters are witnessed as the most dutiful and dedicated, Abdullah ibn Umm Maktum’s disability is also seen in a bright light.¹⁴

Another example of the Prophet’s greatness leads us to the story of Julaybib. A close friend of the Prophet, known and described for his deformed appearance, Julaybib was considered an outcast by the people living in Madinah. Even when knowing about his disability and status, the Prophet asks a family to marry their beautiful daughter off to Julaybib and the daughter, respecting the offer made by the Prophet, wilfully agrees to marry him.¹⁵ Therefore these examples are significant to mention because they not only highlight the Prophet’s goodwill but his sheer sensitivity towards people who were suffering. Considering that mere things should not hinder a disabled person’s normal lifestyle, the Prophet intends to focus and bring out their inner beauty and pure souls in a similar way he does with his other companions.

Muslim scholars believed that the servant (‘abd), in undergoing a travel to God, is distracted by obstacles like calamities or afflictions. They further elaborate their ideas on moral attitudes like servitude (‘ubūdiyya), patience (ṣabr) and gratitude (shukr), as important tools that help the servant to overcome the effect of these calamities and afflictions, in which patience and gratitude were seen as the most important aspects. The scholars belonging to early and modern times, also stated that God has given the right of dignity to every individual

¹³ Qaysarānī, Muḥammad b. Ṭāhir al- (1415/1994), vol. 1, p. 679; Ḥusaynī, Ibrāhīm b. Muḥammad al- (1401/1980), Ḥadīth No. 692, vol. 1, p. 260; Abū Ghudda, ‘Abd al-Sattār, (1411/1991), p. 227; Ibn Ḥamza, Muṣṭafā (1414/1993), p. 18.

¹⁴ Qur’an Ch-80, Verse- 1-12

¹⁵ The Qur’an, Surah al-ahzab, Ch-33, Verse 36

despite their race, colour, or religion. As al-Alūsī said, “everyone and all members of the human race, including the pious and the sinner are endowed with dignity, nobility and honour whose magnificence cannot be exclusively expounded and identified.”¹⁶

As Allah says: “O mankind, indeed we have created you from male and female and made you people and tribes that you may know one another...”¹⁷. This draws our attention towards the fact that for Allah, all humans stand equal. Humans are meant to be created differently. It is hence, the work of Allah which is beautiful, and that individuals vary in terms of abilities, mentality or colour, suggests that we humans should respect the diversities around us and learn from each other’s experiences.¹⁸ The only thing that differentiates one individual from another is his or her consciousness of Allah (Taqwa) which can only be strongly developed and maintained when Allah keeps testing humans. Therefore, according to the Quran, these tests which come in different ways, shouldn’t be seen as punishments. Some might be tested on their wealth, some through painful experiences, and some through their health such as having a disability. However, this ideology doesn’t work in every aspect as we see the disability in the form of a test cannot be answered by newly born individuals.

In contrast to the aforementioned ideology, Mu’tazilīs who strongly believed in metempsychosis followed a belief that disabilities, misfortunes or illnesses are all sorts of deserved punishments which occur to humans in this life because they have committed a sin in their previous life.¹⁹ This entire idea depicted more or less the truth because even the Quran suggests the cause and effect link between sins committed and the diseases or disabilities as punishment attached it. For instance, the Quran says, “Whatever misfortune happens to you, is because of the things your hands have wrought, but for many (of them) He grants forgiveness”. Here the misfortune is understood as illness or punishment (musība) in this life²⁰, “what your hands wrought”²¹ suggests one’s misdeeds or sins and he who grants

¹⁶ Alūsī, Abū al-Faḍl Maḥmūd al-(1), vol. 15, p. 117, quoted by Kamali, Muhammad Hashim (2002), p. 2.

¹⁷ The Qur’an, Ch-49, Verse 13

¹⁸ the Qur’an, Ch-30, Verse 20-23

¹⁹ Aḥmad b. Khābiṭ. Also among the Mu’tazilīs who advocated this doctrine is al-Faḍl al-Ḥadathī Baghdādī, Abū Maṣṣūr ‘Abd al-Qāhir al- (1977), p. 255; Baghdādī, Abū Maṣṣūr ‘Abd al-Qāhir al- (1920), p. 93.

²⁰ Ṭabarī, Muḥammad b. Jarīr al- (1405/1984), vol. 25, p. 32; Shawkānī, Muḥammad ibn ‘Alībn Muḥammad al- (1), vol. 4, p. 542; Ibn Kathīr (1401/1980), vol. 4, p. 117; Alūsī, Abū al-Faḍl Maḥmūd al-(1), vol. 25, p. 41.

forgiveness to those sins is Allah. Many Muslims in a confused state, appeared in front of the Prophet, asking if this was all truth and the Prophet replies, that it is not evitable that such requital is bound to happen in the after-life.²² However, it can take the form of afflictions or calamities in a human's body in the present life. The verses above, reflect the minds of the early Muslims which were influenced by this particular idea. For instance, a companion named Imrān ibn Ḥusayn was suffering with a physical disease and when his friends paid him a visit saying, "We feel sorry for what you suffer," to this Husayn replies, "Do not feel sorry. This all happens because of a sin but what Allah pardons is much more".²³

Many traditions were witnessed being present during the Prophet's time when disability was understood with an association to committing unforgivable sins like being arrogant, disrespectful or untruthful to the Prophet. To substantiate this argument, some of the perpetrators' names are also taken as a reference which include a woman named as Jamra bintal-Ḥārith B. 'Awf, who was afflicted with leprosy²⁴ and a man named Yazīd b. Bahrām, who was afflicted with paralysis for intruding the Prophet's solemnity and piety.²⁵ On the contrary, some Islamic sources also proved that the generalised concept of the link between disability and sins can also be a mistaken one where it indicates that disabilities are not necessarily the outcomes of sins. To prove this, an individual named as Mu'āwiya b. Abī Sufyān, who was suffering from facial paralysis, states that there are three reasons behind his disability which are, receiving punishment or gaining a reward in future or finally learning a disciplinary approach.²⁶ In reference to this idea, it was considered that humans who are disobedient receive warning before being punished or afflicted. Therefore, disabilities and misfortunes befall on those as punishments who do not pay attention to these warnings, those

²¹ Bayḍāwī, 'Abd Allāh b. 'Umar al- (1416/1996), vol. 5, p. 131; Ibn Kathīr (1401/1980), vol. 1, p. 529; Shawkānī, Muḥammad ibn 'Alī ibn Muḥammad al- (1), vol. 4, p. 538; Jawzī, 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn 'Alī ibn Muḥammad al- (1404 A.H.), vol. 7, p. 288.

²² Qurṭubī, Abū 'Abd Allāh Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al- (1372/1952), vol. 5, p. 397; Mundhirī, Abū Muḥammad 'Abd al-'Azīm b. 'Abd al-Qawī al- (1417/1996), vol. 4, pp. 149 & 150; Ibn Ḥibbān (1414/1993), ḥadīth no. 2910, vol. 7, p. 170, ḥadīth no. 2923, vol. 7, p. 186 & ḥadīth no. 2926, vol. 7, p. 189; Tirmidhī, Abū 'Īsā Muḥammad b. Sawra al- (1), ḥadīth no. 2991, vol.5, p.221, ḥadīth no. 3038, vol. 5, p. 247 & ḥadīth no. 3039, vol. 5, p. 248. Also see, Qur'anic verses (23:76, 6: 42, 5:49, 8:51, 22:10).

²³ Suyūṭī, Jalāl al-Dīn al- (1993), vol. 7, p. 355.

²⁴ Ghazālī, Abū Ḥāmid, al- (1), vol. 2, p. 387.

²⁵ Ibn Ḥibbān (1395/1975), vol.3, p. 446; 'Asqalānī, Aḥmad b. 'Alī b. Ḥajar al- (1412/1992), vol.6, p. 649.

²⁶ Aṣbahānī, Abū Nu'aym al- (1405/1984), vol. 9, p. 154; Dhahabī, Muḥammad b. Aḥmad b. 'Uthmān al- (1413/1992), vol. 3, p. 156.

do not care to lead the correct path or feel repentance towards God and continue following the path of disobedience.²⁷

Another interesting approach was added to this discourse that punishments can also be seen as beneficiary within the framework of disability. The cathartic phase that kept the sinner away from his sins, brought him closer to solitude hence, keeping the torment away in the afterlife. Many prophetic traditions believed in this ideology and acknowledged the role of suffering and its effect on the individuals who lead a faithful life.²⁸ Providing examples for this is where one of the prophetic traditions says, “No calamity befalls a Muslim but God expiates some of his sins even if it were a thorn being pricked with.”²⁹

Another tradition states that, “The calamity continues to afflict the believing man and woman in body, property and progeny until he/she meets God (on the day of Resurrection) without any sins cleaving to him/her.”³⁰ According to the traditions mentioned above, Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī termed misfortunes as the divine medicine which helps a man to get cured of his fatal sins.³¹ Another explanation was presented where it is suggested that, “Had there been no worldly afflictions, we would have come insolvent (with bad deeds outnumbering the good ones) on the Day of Resurrection.”³²

The Quran very sternly mentions that in this life, the punishments are easier in comparison to the afterlife. For instance, the one who heard a specific section of the Quʿran every single day and ultimately got deaf is a fair example to consider in this aspect which reveals, that the divine rewards for every pious act which would be remembered forever, as if even after his disability, he still believes in the Quʿran and listens to it every day. The Prophet too has been witnessed saying that,

²⁷ Ibn al-Jawzī (1987), pp. 21, 30, 31, 197-199, 203, 204, 290, 291, 310, 311, 390,391, Ibn al Qayyim (3), pp. 39-86, 80 & 81.

²⁸ Imam al-Bukhārī (194-256 A.H.) mentioned in his *Al-Adab al-mufrad* a number of Prophetic traditions under “Bāb kaffārat al-marīd” or “Section of the Expiation of the Sick”. Bukhārī (1409/1989), vol. 1, p. 173. Imam Ḍiyā al-Dīn al-Maqdisī did the same in his *Kitāb al-amrād wa al-kaffarāt wa al-ṭibb wa al-ruqīyyāt*. See Maqdisī, Abū ʿAbd Allāh Ḍiyāʿ -al-Dīn al-(1420/1999), pp. 40 & 41.

²⁹ Muslim, Abū al-Ḥusayn b. al-Ḥajjāj (1), Ḥadīth No. 2572, vol. 4, p. 1992.

³⁰ Ibn Ḥanbal, Aḥmad (1), ḥadīth no. 7846, vol. 2, p. 287 and also ḥadīth no.9810, vol. 2, p. 450.

³¹ ʿAsqalānī, Aḥmad b. ʿAlī b. Ḥajar al- (1379/1959), vol. 10, p. 112.

³² Ibn al-Qayyim (1407/1986), vol. 4, p. 192.

Truly God may examine you with an affliction (*balā'*) the same you may examine your gold with fire. As a result, some people will come out of it [i.e., the affliction] as pure gold. These are the persons whom God has guarded against doubts (*shubuhāt*). (Others) will come out (with a result) less than this. These are the ones who had some doubts. The last will come out like black gold. These are the ones who failed the test.³³

Ibn al-Qayyim comments in accordance to the aforementioned idea that the reason why this life is created was to test people by making them go through different difficulties, pains, pleasures and various ups and downs which will later prove who are the true believers of God. And on the basis of these tests, people are either given the privilege of being admitted to the Paradise (receiving pure pleasures) or thrown into the Hell (receiving pure pains) in the afterlife.³⁴

Al-'Izz b. 'Abd al-Salām, presents a different approach by stating that the benefit of being afflicted by calamities is that the individual realises his servitude to the God which therefore, is the most pious thing.³⁵ The idea of servitude suggests that man in this universe is nothing but a poor servant (*'abd faqīr*), who is always looking for his creator (*rabb*) and hence, this notion is considered to be good (*khayr*).³⁶ If a calamity occurs on a Muslim, it is said that he/she should be observed for whether they failed to pay attention to the Islamic instructions properly.³⁷ As Imam Abū al-Ḥasan al-Qaṭṭān says that, "I have been visited with affliction in my eyesight as a punishment for speaking too much during the journey (of searching for knowledge)"³⁸, which suggests that to prevent any other destruction, it is advisable to any sinner to start taking steps which would guide him to stop sinning.³⁹

Shams al-Dīn al-Dhahabī, in his book *Al-Kabā'ir* (Grave Sins), gives us a reflection about the aforementioned thesis by telling a story about an influential person who misuses his political position and illegally takes a fish from a poor fisherman. Feeling the extreme injustice done

³³ Mundhirī, Abū Muḥammad 'Abd al-'Azīm b. 'Abd al-Qawī al- (1417), ḥadīth no. 5169, vol.4,p. 143.

³⁴ See Būṭī, Muḥammed Sa'īd Ramaḍān al- (2001), pp. 193-196.

³⁵ Qāsimī, Jamāl al-Dīn al- (1424/2003), vol. 1, p. 490.

³⁶ Būṭī, Muḥammed Sa'īd Ramaḍān al- (2001), pp. 193-196.

³⁷ Ibn al-Jawzī (1399/1979), vol. 4, p. 229.

³⁸ Dhahabī, Muḥammad b. Aḥmad b. 'Uthmān al- (1413/1992), vol. 15, p. 464.

³⁹ See Ibn Taymiyyah (1), vol. 2, p. 109. See also Zīdān, 'Abd al-Karīm (1414/1994), pp. 213 & 216.

to him, the fisherman addresses God saying, “O God! This one made use of his power against my weakness and took what you provided me with out of injustice. Show me [what] Your Power [can do] with him”. After a few days, the influential person gets bitten by the fish, suffering severe pain in his thumb, he visits a doctor and gets diagnosed with gangrene and to cure the disease, the doctor suggested to get the thumb amputated. Even when the thumb was amputated, the infection continued to spread which further led to the amputation of the entire arm. People who have had an idea of the man’s story, suggested to him to ask the fisherman for his forgiveness, as otherwise the infection which is a punishment for his sin, would spread in his entire body. The person returns to the fisherman, kissed his feet and asks for forgiveness. When the fisherman forgives him, he repents to God so that he can prevent any further destruction in his life.⁴⁰

A different approach was witnessed by a well-known Qur’ān exegete, Abū ‘Abd Allāh al-Qurṭubī on the verse 6:164 from the Qu’ran, where he states that humans are also punished with disabilities or calamities for grave sins done by their allies, parents or children.⁴¹ On the contrary, Ibn al-Qayyim, whose principles are considered valuable in Islam, states that an individual only gets punished because he committed a sin and getting punished for their allies’ sins is simply an unjust (zālim) act of God.⁴² Vardit Rispler-Chaim comments on this viewpoint as an “exception” in Modern Islamic Literature. Rispler-Chaim, quoted from Qudsiyah Hijazi’s book, says that according to him the author claims that the parents’ misconduct leading to their children’s disability is a punishment from God.⁴³ He further elaborates that conducting improper sexual conduct and misleading the divine laws, leads to the birth of disabled children. Furthermore, emotions, thoughts, actions and moods played a very crucial yet significant role in influencing the genes of the parents and hence, any kind of immoral behaviour can end up effecting the foetus.⁴⁴ The reason why Rispler-Chaim stated this viewpoint as an “exception” is because it literally differs from what is mentioned in the Quran and it is also widely disagreed upon by the scholars of Islam. However, it was not an exception as it was not only Qudsiyah Hijazi who came up with such sort of an argument. Aḥmad al-Sharabāṣī (1918-1980), a scholar from Egypt, also states that parents having blind

⁴⁰ Dhahabī, Muḥammad b. Aḥmad b. ‘Uthmān al- (1), pp. 113 & 144.

⁴¹ Qurṭubī, Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al- (1372/1952), vol. 7, p. 157.

⁴² See Ibn Yūsuf, Mar’ī (1410/1989), vol. 1, p. 57.

⁴³ Rispler-Chaim, Vardit (2007), p. 11, quoting from Hijazi, Qudsiyah (1), p. 422.

⁴⁴ Rispler-Chaim, Vardit (2007), p. 10, quoting from Hijazi, Qudsiyah (1), pp. 398 & 403.

children is considered as a punishment. According to Sharabāsī, a punishment is kind of a disciplinary warning that parents should protect themselves from; otherwise, God can inflict their children who are closest to their parents punishment for disobeying God.⁴⁵ “Nothing befalls the believer even if it were a thorn being pricked with but Allah records thereby (the reward of) a good deed (ḥasana) for him or expiates a sin for him.”⁴⁶

Some scholars argue that only through sickness or disabilities, the sin is expiated, where the possibility of being rewarded or being elevated on the religious ranks is excluded because the person cannot experience any of such privileges because he/she is sick or disabled. However, according to al-Nawawī, scholars who believe in the idea mentioned above, were completely unaware of the prophetic traditions which clearly suggest that sickness can also be seen as the cause of gaining rewards or experiencing elevation in the religious ranks.⁴⁷ And the most preferable example of people who are afflicted with disabilities and still get rewarded and gain praiseworthy ranks in Paradise regardless, are of the Prophets.⁴⁸ Prophets are considered to be sent by God to share the significant knowledge of piety and obedience among the humans, where committing sins are performed in less numbers.⁴⁹ However, it is noteworthy that many Muslim scholars disagree on the notion that Prophets too can be affected by afflictions or disabilities.⁵⁰ Therefore, to prove their disagreements invalid, many Islamic sources came out with a good number of references which proved that Prophets too were affected by afflictions and disabilities.⁵¹ For instance, Muslim scholars talk about Prophet Jacob (Ya’qūb) as an example here. Prophet Jacob who was afflicted with severe weakness in his eyesight and perhaps also majorly suffered blindness for almost six years and got his

⁴⁵ Sharabāsī, Aḥmad al- (1375/1956), vol. 1, p. 265.

⁴⁶ Muslim, Abū al-Ḥusayn b. al-Ḥajjāj (1), ḥadīth no. 2572, vol. 4, p. 1992. See also Haythamī, Abū al-Ḥasan ‘Alī b. Abī Bakr al- (1407/1986), vol. 2, p. 301; Ibn Ḥanbal, Aḥmad (1), vol. 4, p.56; Nawawī, Abu Zakariyya Yaḥyā b. Sharaf al- (1392 A.H.), vol. 16, p. 128; ‘Asqalānī, Aḥmad b. ‘Alī b. Ḥajar al- (1379/1959), vol. 10, p. 105.

⁴⁷ Nawawī, Yaḥyā b. Sharaf al- (1392/1972), vol. 16, pp. 128 & 129.

⁴⁸ Zaydān, ‘Abd al-Karīm (1414/1994), p. 213.

⁴⁹ Ibn Ḥazm, Abū Muḥammad ‘Alī (1), vol.4, p. 136; Rāzī, Fakhr al-Dīn al- (1990); Ījī, ‘Aḍud al-Dīn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Aḥmad al- (1997), vol. 3, p. 415 & 423; Sabtī, Abū al-Ḥasan ‘Alī b. Aḥmad al-Umawī al- (1990), vol.1, pp. 32 & 138.

⁵⁰ Disagreements on whether a prophet can be blind, Shawkānī, Muhammad ibn ‘Alī ibn Muhammad al- (1), vol. 2, p. 522; Alūsī, Abū al-Fadl Mahmūd al-(1), vol.12, p. 123 & 124; Ṣafadī, Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn Khalīl b. Aybak al- (1329/1911), pp. 43 & 44; Sharabāsī, Aḥmad al- (1375/1956), vol. 1, p. 193.

⁵¹ Kan ‘ān, Aḥmad Muḥammad (1420/2000), p. 81.

eyesight restored later, serves as a good remark to the argument above made by al-Nawawī.⁵² Furthermore, The Quran also mentions the story of Prophet Moses in this particular respect. Prophet Moses, who was suffering from a speech disability called lisp, was once asked by Allah to meet and convey a message of faith to the Pharaoh, and in return Moses requested God to heal his speech disability.⁵³

As Bazna and Hatab (2005) suggest that ‘disability’ as a term was never present in the holy book the Qu’ran but rather, a more cultural friendly name ‘disadvantaged people’ was used in order to refer to people with special requirements. As witnessed, the idea of disadvantaged people was being abused before Islam came in; the religion enlightened its people with Qu’ranic verses, and practical references from the life of the Prophet, to inculcate the idea of protection and respect towards disabled people. Therefore, the Quranic verses suggest that without over-generalising and under-estimating others, respect is the basic human right that every individual entitled to regardless of being disabled or non-disabled.

The emphasis in the Qu’ran is on the importance of society and its functions and responsibilities for people with disability, and providing them basic requirements such as safety, food, shelter and care. The Qur’an tries to break the burden in society by clearing any kind of injustice happening by making it compulsory that Muslims are supposed to give a share of their earning as charity (Zakat). With this notion, it acts as a regular cue for the Muslims that disabled individuals too have a share in society and the duty of every individual is to keep social justice intact in the society. Certain exemptions can be made for the people having disabilities. For instance, certain duties and responsibilities like fasting in Ramadan or performing daily prayers can be compensated in terms of making reductions while looking at the physical limitations or absence of mental maturity of individuals having disabilities.

Many Psychiatric Conferences have held discussion on the topic related to what things satisfy people with disability, where many participants have suggested that disabled individuals do

⁵² Bayḍāwī, ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Umar al- (1416/1996), vol. 3, p. 305; Qurtūbī, Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al- (1372/1952), vol. 9, p. 248; Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-‘Imādī (1), vol. 4, p. 310; Baghawī, Abū Muḥammad al-Ḥusayn al- (1407/1987), vol. 2, p. 444; Shawkānī, Muḥammad ibn ‘Alī ibn Muḥammad al- (1), vol. 3, p. 48; Jawzī, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn ‘Alī ibn Muḥammad al- (1404 A.H.), vol. 4, p. 270; Alūsī, Abū al-Faḍl Maḥmūd al- (1), vol. 13, p. 40.

⁵³ Ṭabarī, Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-, vol. 16, p. 159; Mujāhid, Abū al-Hajjāb b. Jabr (1), vol. 1, p.396; Ibn Kathīr (1), vol. 3, p. 389; Bayḍāwī, ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Umar al- (1416/1996), vol. 4, p. 47; Munāwī, Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Ra’ūf al- (1410 A.H.), vol. 1, p. 619.

not feel satisfied when they are pitied and seen as objects of charity; rather, when they are treated with good will, that is the greatest amount of satisfaction for them.

Islam feels dutiful towards those who are in need. It has been said that the Prophet, out of sheer humanity, always visited disabled individuals, to console them, lift their hearts, and pour confidence. His generosity gets underlined when he would often travel to somewhere in the outskirts just to attend a person who is in need or to visit an afflicted individual's house and perform prayers. For instance, Etban ibn Malik, who was afflicted with blindness, says to the Prophet that, "I wish that you, O Messenger of Allah, would come and pray in my house, so that I could take it as a place of prayer." The Prophet listens to the man's request and agrees to visit him by saying, "I will do, if Allah so wills." Etban further tells that, "Allah's Messenger and Abu Bakr came early in the morning. Allah's Messenger asked for permission to enter, which I gave. And without settling he says, 'In which part of your house would you like me to pray?'. I pointed to a certain place in the house, so the Messenger of Allah stood and started praying and we, in turn, stood in a row and prayed with him."⁵⁴

Witnessing the Prophet's behaviour, it is clear that it indicates that, the act of visiting a diseased or disabled persons and later soothing them for their state of suffering, is a part of Islamic legislature. Islam also mentions about the problematic, unacceptable approach of Muslims towards disabled individuals especially during the social gatherings like marriages or family visits which further leads to issues like isolation, feeling of pessimism and birth of psychological illnesses in a disabled individual's life. Therefore, in this context, the Islamic idea highlights the significance of never looking down or labelling or ridiculing others, especially people with disabilities, because "perhaps they may be better than them."⁵⁵ As Islam suggests, it is crucial yet very important to amalgamate the understanding of a disabled individual's emotional and mental well-being in society, which is why Islam provides rights to those who are in need in order to maintain the social order in the society. And these rights include a variety of notions like disabled people have the right to be respected and relish social justice, and it is must that they are provided with basic facilities like food, shelter, clothes and get proper care and treatment.⁵⁶ A country where Shariah rules, it is certain that

⁵⁴ Tawassul, Part 3

⁵⁵ The Qur'an, Ch-49, Verse 11

⁵⁶ The Qur'an, Ch-24, Verse 61

disabled people receive a share from the Zakat and keeping their physical and mental conditions in mind, and certain religious duties are also set aside or reduced.

An interesting contrast in relation to the afflicted people was drawn by Ibn al-Jawzī, where he marks the difference amongst different responses to afflictions or calamities (al-balā'). While he categorises them, he also arranges them in an ascending order. According to him, the first category includes individuals who see al-balā' as an easy test which comes with a reward later. The second category involves those who see al-balā' as the final submission of one's own self without any objection. And finally, the third category involves those individuals who feel content by the love of God, regardless of their state of suffering. Ibn al-Jawzī states that the majority of individuals belong to the third category which believes in enjoying al-balā' as it is the part of God's Will.⁵⁷

Furthermore, al-Zamīlī broadens the notion by introducing the scope of faith-test (ibtīlā' or tamhīs), suggesting that not only should people afflicted with calamities or disabilities be included in the course of discussion but people who are living with them, which includes their families or societies, carry huge significance as well. He states that a sick person symbolises a test, where taking up the responsibility of the disabled and looking after him show how the society and the family play their role in order to accomplish this test.

Therefore, the presence of disabled or sick people acts as a parameter to measure how much goodness resides in a society.⁵⁸

Islam plays a major role in terms of warning individuals about activities or emotions that might affect them in a negative manner. When it comes to harming one's own self, the act is considered as disgraceful and prohibited in Islam as one's body is provided by Allah with trust. The Quran says, "And spend in the way of Allah and do not throw (yourselves) with your [own] hands into destruction"⁵⁹. Islam propagates the notion that it is an individual's and society's responsibility to protect a person from getting indulged in the act of self-destruction. The Prophet talks about various figures from Islamic history who set a remarkable example in terms of how Muslims and Islamic society should act dutifully

⁵⁷ 'Aqalānī, Aḥmad b. 'Alī b. Ḥajar al- (1379 A.H.), Vol. 10, p. 112.

⁵⁸ Zamīlī, Zuhayr Muḥammad al- (1409/1988), pp. 70-72.

⁵⁹ The Qur'an, Ch-2, Verse 195

towards disabled individuals. Some of these figures are, Umar Ibn Al-Khattab, who after listening to a blind man's father's misery related to his son's inability to visit the mosque and offer his prayers, builds a mosque near the blind man's house so that he should not face any kind of apprehensions, sets as an outstanding example of a social vigour. Another significant figure is Umar ibn`Abdul-`Aziz, a notable Umayyad Caliph who, "asked rulers of the provinces to send him the names of all those who are blind, crippled, or with a chronic illness that prevented them from establishing their prayers. When they sent him their names, he, in turn, ordered that every blind man should have an employee to guide and look after him, and that every two chronically ill persons — those with special needs — be attended by a servant to serve and care for them." Al-Waleed ibna`Abdul-Malik, who was another Umayyad caliph, "ordered the establishment of a foundation specialized in looking after the disabled. He granted a regular allowance to persons with special needs and told them, 'Do not beg people.' Thereby, he made them sufficient enough to not beg others. In addition, he appointed employees to serve all those who were disabled, crippled, or blind."

Muslim scholars' response towards the pre-existing notion of disability being linked with evil is important to notice. Islam's strong belief in Allah, always protected the notion of the good image of God where it comments that the image of God should not be questioned because he brought afflictions to humans and made them suffer. And even Hinduism and other different religions also consider this as a strict guideline which is to be followed and not transgressed in any way. Islam, more or less like Hinduism, however believes that disability is associated with evil. And to substantiate the argument, one of the most influential Muslim philosophers, Ibn Sīnā, focuses on the problem of evil in a larger spectrum.⁶⁰ Ibn Sīnā works on the restoration of the belief and maintenance of peaceful relations with God when a subject like evil is talked about. He emphasises that being in connection with God fulfils one requirement of spiritual serenity and mental satisfaction. And in order to achieve this spiritual serenity, especially during the time of a calamity or when one is afflicted, he discusses two main genres of psychology oriented literature which were evolved by many Muslim scholars in order to have an insight on the psychology of the disabled people. Many of them wrote about 'ilāj al-muṣība (healing of catastrophe)⁶¹, while some spoke about tasliyat ahl al-maṣā'ib

⁶⁰ Inati, Shams C. (2000), p. 65.

⁶¹ Ibn al-Qayyim (1407/1986), vol. 4, pp. 188-196

(supporting people who face the catastrophe)⁶². While a huge range of scholars talked about specific catastrophes but the most popular and worthy of focus amongst all of them is a child's death.⁶³ Although writers did not lose their focus from disabilities, especially blindness in this aspect. Prominent writers and their works which involved deep insight on this topic are "Tasliyat al-ḍarīr" (comforting blind people) by al-Zamakhsharī or "Ta'jīl al- bishāra li man ṣabar 'alādhahāb al-baṣar" (gifting good fortune to those who exhibit patience after being afflicted with blindness) by Muḥammad b. Ṭulūn, who was a Damascene scholar (1475-1546)⁶⁴ and "Tasliyat al-a'mā 'an baliyyat al-'amā" (comforting the blind during their suffering) by 'Alī b. Sulṭān al-Harawī al-Qārī, who was a Hanafī jurist Mulla.⁶⁵ On the contrary, some Muslims also believe that disability is a form of Allah's punishments or some black magic, and hence they either refuse to take any treatment or get deeply involved in the web of witchcraft. However, such behaviours are not acknowledged by the real teachings of Islam but people still continue to believe in this particular idea of distortion.

Focusing on the subject of job and opportunities that Islam holds in respect to people afflicted with disabilities is important. And as per the Islamic sources, the word 'amal' is a well-known equivalent term for work, which is highly used in the Qur'an.⁶⁶ And the Qur'an, a well standardised text in Modern Islam and Arabic discourses, emphasises on the work, jobs and rights of the workers. It holds a strong juristic approach towards the disabled individuals' employment which covers four jobs of high prestige and circles around the religious milieu. These job opportunities for the disabled people include the role of muezzin (the one who makes adhan or the Muslim call for prayer) or as imām (the one who conducts ritual prayers) or as the leader, or a judge of the state.

Islam also mentions the role of talking about a family's financial revenues where affording the special needs of disabled members is the point of concern. It suggests that maintenance (nafaqa) is a necessary duty of those members of the family who are financially strong to help the poor members of their family. Hence, this helps in building the feeling of peace and

⁶² Manbijī, Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al- (1347/1929).

⁶³ Ibn Nāṣir al-Dīn, Muḥammad b. 'Abd Allāh (1420/1999); Suyūṭī, Jalāl al-Dīn al- (1304/1880). For a Shī'ī source on the same topic, see 'Alamī, Zayn al-Dīn Jabā'ī al- (1923).

⁶⁴ Ibn Fahd (d. 954/1547), folio 15a; Ghaly, Mohammed M.I. (2005-2006), p. 21.

⁶⁵ There two editions available viz., Qārī, 'Alī b. Sulṭān b. Muḥammad al-Harawī al- (1993); Qārī, 'Alī b. Sulṭān b. Muḥammad al-Harawī al- (1994). On the author, see Ziriklī, KHayr al-Dīn al- (2002), vol. 5, p. 12.

⁶⁶ Bannā, Jamāl al- (1985).

togetherness in the family. And as family members, through bequest (waṣiyya) or funds (waqf ahlī), the disabled people can enjoy their right of being financially supported. Therefore, in order to bring serious focus on these three financial revenues concerning the financial dependence of people with disabilities, detailed juristic discussions on its regulation are held in the Islamic studies and traditions. Furthermore, in this aspect, Islam not only focuses on the financial support provided by the family, it also draws out attention on waqf khayrī and zakat, the two important financial revenues which are the welfare endowment that aim to manage financial requirements and hence, disabled people, being the members of the community, can avail them. Not only this, if any kind of disparity or insufficiency is witnessed, jurists suggest that in order manage the monetary gap and maintain the social order, imposition of financial obligations on the people who are well-off is a suitable option.

Besides the financial rights, Islam also covers the subject of educational rights of the disadvantaged people and emphasises that abilities should not to be underestimated in any manner. In this aspect, the Quran says, “He, the Prophet frowned and turned away because there came to him a blind man. But, what would make you perceive, O Mohammed, that perhaps he might be purified, or be reminded and the remembrance would benefit him?”⁶⁷. Prophet Mohammad does not entertain the blind man, who asked him to give him knowledge about Islam, because he was occupied by the noble people, teaching them about Muslim traditions. Allah rebukes his messenger, the Prophet, for his act; the Prophet realises his mistake and becomes humble towards the blind man whenever he met him. And as discussed earlier, the prophet also made the blind man the leader of the city Madinah.⁶⁸ Furthermore, to strengthen the subject of equality, the reference of Sunnah is also significant to mention. The tradition, as per the Quranic text, supports the notion of equality and suggests that there is no difference in terms of people’s physical appearance, colour, nationality or race. They are all to be treated equally and the only way they can differ is through the amount of faith they may have in Allah.

The subject of marriage also carries huge relevance in the discourse of a disadvantaged individual’s civil rights. As the Quran states, “Among His signs is that He created you wives

⁶⁷ Qur’an, Ch-80, Verses 1-3

⁶⁸ Qur’an, Chapter 80, Verses 1-12

from among yourselves that you may find repose in them”⁶⁹. Therefore, the right to have a family is entitled to every Muslim regardless of their abilities or disabilities. However, intense debates have been held by the scholars and physicians of Islam across the globe, where they are not referring to all disabilities but a specific disability which is mental disability, arguing that whether an intellectually disabled person is fit to choose a partner and have children with them. The idea seemed logical and hence it was felt that an association like a marriage should be modelled with specific conditions and in the presence of a guardian.⁷⁰

Two main methods are studied and mentioned concerning what viewpoints and attitudes does Islam hold towards the treatment of disabilities. According to the juristic sources, the first method is termed as ‘physical medicine’ which involves consuming medicines and drugs which are known to the field of medical science at present. The second method is called the ‘spiritual medicine’, which involves making use of certain religious practices in addition to what the Quran suggests and the words that have been ascribed to the Prophet of Islam.

Therefore, these methods in Islamic jurisprudence gradually evolved as a matter of study on how to protect the birth of a disabled person and how to heal it. However, one can find various literary discourses in Islamic studies on medicine, but it is hard to search for a study where the medicine covers the specific topic of treating disabilities. The only text which is seen to be as a prominent one, which defines intense study of the aforementioned topic, is, “Al-I’āqa fī al-turāth al-’arabī al-islāmī” (Disability in the Arabic Islamic Literature). It provides scattered sections and information on physical and mental disabilities mentioned in the medical sources which were given by some early Muslim physicians.⁷¹ Abu Huraira, who was the most prolific narrator of Hadith, narrates from Sahih Bukhari, that it is the chief responsibility of mankind to conduct researches in order to find more medicinal treatments and cures of the afflictions and disabilities and to bring medicine to good preventive use and remedial purposes. On the other hand, immunisation can also be done by immunising the spirit which is called ‘Tahseen’ (fortification). This particular method in no manner is related to any physical therapy or medication, and hence involves intense spiritual treatment which is

⁶⁹ The Qur’an, Ch-30, Verse 21

⁷⁰ Dar Al-fit Al Masriyyah, 2005

⁷¹ See ‘Ajūba, Mukhtār Ibrāhīm et al (1417/1996).

done by performing special prayers and according to the Islamic beliefs, such prayers prevent a person from evil or destructive things.

For instance, practising ‘sabr’ (patience) at the time of any calamity or when one is afflicted with disability is not only considered as a practice that should be followed only during bad times in order to outshine one’s own chivalry or strength, but it is considered as one of the religious duties in Islam that every Muslim should observe.⁷² The significance of ‘sabr’ is denoted with a very famous story which serves as a good example in this matter. Once when the Prophet was asked for his ‘du’ā’ for the healing of a woman who was suffering from epilepsy, the Prophet in return suggested the woman to practise ‘sabr’ so that she can attain paradise.⁷³ Therefore, the prophetic traditions speak about this topic within specific sections. Quoting from a famous text in the subject, “If I test my servant (‘abdī) by depriving him of his two precious ones [meaning his eyes or eyesight] and he faces that with patient perseverance, I shall compensate him with Paradise.”⁷⁴ Another aspect known as ‘shukr’ that suggests a feeling of gratefulness for an act that proved to be favourable (ni’ma), although the original meaning of ‘shukr’ is denoted as a blessing which is why the opposite of shukr is ‘kufr’ that denotes ingratitude.⁷⁵ It is witnessed that people practise ‘shukr’ at the times of enjoying success and luxuries, whereas practising ‘shukr’ during the time of calamity or afflictions is something that carries real understanding and piety and thus it should be aspired as something of a higher status.

In spite of concrete study of Islamic cultural values, many false beliefs and malpractices exist in many Muslim societies. For instance, individuals consult spirits for resolution of their problems or to heal children with autism.⁷⁶ Muslims in South Asia who think of disability as enemy’s black magic, approach the ‘Shaman’ (a person having access the world of good and evil spirits) for their services.⁷⁷

⁷² Ibn al-Qayyim (1998), pp. 11, 16 & 19; Ibn al-Qayyim (1393/1973), pp. 112 & 113.

⁷³ Bukhārī (1407/1987), ḥadīth no. 5328, vol. 5, p. 2140; Muslim, Abū al-Ḥusayn b. al-Ḥajjāj (1), ḥadīth no. 2576, vol. 4, p. 1994.

⁷⁴ Bukhārī (1407/1987), ḥadīth no. 5329, vol. 5, p. 2140; Bayhaqī, Abū Bakr Aḥmad b. al-Ḥusayn al- (1414/1994), ḥadīth no. 6344, vol. 3, p. 375; Mundhirī, Abū Muḥammad ‘Abd al-‘Azīm b. ‘Abd al-Qawī al- (1417/1996), ḥadīth no. 5228, vol. 4, p. 154.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Bernard-Opitz, Kwok & Sapuan, 2001

⁷⁷ Kalyanpur, 1999

Thus, in spite of what core texts of Islamic theology and jurisprudence say, till now, disabled children in many Muslim families are seen as social embarrassment for the family. People tend to give various explanations when the disability of one of their family members is obvious and not hidden from society. Muslims often refer to it as 'Hasad' (Envy or Evil Eye) as the most common explanation as they believe that the disability is the result of 'Hasad'.

Although, the discourse on Envy is deeply studied in the Quran and Sunnah, people present it as the argument, which they think is the only way a disability will be accepted in the society. Therefore, based on this approach, parents tend to choose amulets or spiritual treatment.⁷⁸

Furthermore, parents also try to avoid the social stigma and the embarrassment attached to the idea of disability by denying their children's disability or hiding the child from the outside world whenever the signs start to become obvious. Even though the Quran emphasises on the subject of social equality and equal respect towards disabled people, in order to avoid the stigma, parents don't take their disabled children to any social gathering or mosque.⁷⁹ Even in other religions like Hinduism or Buddhism, the concept of disability is discussed in the context of 'Evil Eye'⁸⁰ In South Asia, people strongly believe the evil eye is possessed by the Jinn (evil spirits) and it leads to mental illness and other disabilities. For

instance, epilepsy is described as the state where spirits "catch you and you fall down,"⁸¹ another reference that shows how people mix cultures and religious beliefs in Islam. Many people think that refusing abortion can prevent the possibility of having a disabled child.⁸² It is mostly found in the working-class families where other family members are deeply involved in the lives of disabled children. In such families, especially the groom's father and mother play a very key role and have a lot of say regarding the decision of having an abortion because in Islam, the act of killing the foetus is evil.

Unlike Hinduism, Islam officially doesn't believe in rebirth but its beliefs in regard to the treatment of disabilities is more or less the same. However, keeping aside one's own assumptions or prejudices, both the religions believe in the fact that disability is not a disadvantage or hindrance, and hence, they emphasize on making strong efforts to ensure the

⁷⁸ Hasnain, 1986, p. 5354

⁷⁹ Hasnain et al., 2008; Turner et al., 2004)

⁸⁰ Miles, 1995

⁸¹ Fadiman, 1997

⁸² Al-Qaradawi, 1997

physical as well as mental comfort of disadvantaged people in order to keep the social harmony intact. And this is thought to be possible only when society starts looking at the disadvantaged people.

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