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MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD AND THE IDEA OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

By: Abhishek Rao

Abstract

For long, the Muslim Brotherhood has been considered a militant organisation and a threat to peace. It's pertinent to analyse the ideological motivations of the Muslim Brotherhood in the context of social justice. The works of the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood Hassan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb, a leading theorist of the Muslim Brotherhood, provide a glimpse into the vision of the Muslim Brotherhood which is imbued with the aim for a welfare state, social justice, and redistributive economics in tune with the mandate of the Quran. The paper focuses on the economic vision and social justice component of the Muslim Brotherhood with special emphasis on the vision of its founder Hasan al Banna and leading theorist Sayyid Qutb. The author aims to critically examine the idea of social justice according to the Muslim Brotherhood and the feasibility of the economic vision of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Keywords: Muslim Brotherhood, Social Justice, Islam

1 Introduction

The Muslim Brotherhood concept was developed by Egyptian scholar Hassan al-Banna in 1928. Under its founder, Muslim Brotherhood had the vision of controlling the affairs of the state and society under the Islamic Sharia, liberating Muslims from foreign imperialism, spearheading social democratic rights for all Muslims, and uniting all the Arab states. Al-Banna condemned imperialistic neoliberalism policies, socialism, and capitalism as un-Islamic.

The Muslim Brotherhood was heavily influenced by Salafi revivalist and Pan-Islamic themes that addressed contemporary social, economic, and religious challenges. Sayyid Qutb, a leading theorist of the Muslim Brotherhood has been considered as an ideological fountainhead of the terrorist organisation Al-Qaeda for his espousal of "Offensive Jihad" and the concept of Takfiri i.e. declaring other Muslims as apostates, and to justify their killings.

Abdel Nasser, the then president of Egypt viewed the movement as a threat to dismantle his legacy and ordered the members to be persecuted and sentenced to death. Those who survived to continue to spearhead the Brotherhood's vision and mission.

Gradually, the Muslim Brotherhood gravitated towards neoliberalism. Examples of the

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neoliberalism policies supported were liberalization, privatization of social services, and fiscal consolidation policies¹.

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1.1 Hypotheses

Though the economic vision of the Muslim Brotherhood is a noble one, most of its constituent elements are impractical in the modern age. The literal following of religious scriptures in shaping the economic policies of the State is an unviable idea. The call to return to the golden age of Islam is a disastrous idea and has wreaked havoc across the world. The Muslim Brotherhood has rightly changed its stance towards neoliberal policies in tune with current socio-economic considerations.

1.2 Research Questions

- 1 What is the grand vision that inspired the founding members of the Muslim Brotherhood?
- 2 What is the idea of social justice according to the Muslim Brotherhood?
- 3 What are the limitations of the economic vision envisaged by the Muslim Brotherhood?
- 4 Whether the economic vision of the founding fathers of the Muslim Brotherhood is relevant in current times?
- 5 Why did the Muslim Brotherhood change its stance towards neoliberalism?

1.3 Research Objectives

- 1 To critically examine the concept of social justice according to the Founding Fathers of the Muslim Brotherhood
- 2 To analyse the feasibility of the economic vision of the Founding Fathers of the Muslim Brotherhood
- 3 To trace out the shift of the Muslim Brotherhood towards the concept of neoliberalism

1.4 Research Methodology

The researcher has employed 'doctrinal' research methodology. A variety of approaches such as historical, descriptive, and comparative have been used. He has done a comprehensive survey of the existing literature related to the topic, to sum up, the existing arguments. Then, he has done a critical analysis of the economic vision of the Muslim Brotherhood to test its merits and demerits. The feasibility of the social justice dimension of the Muslim Brotherhood has been dealt with in great detail and the researcher has concluded the research paper with his thoughts on the viability of the economic vision of the Muslim Brotherhood in the current times.

¹ Gamal, W. (2019). Lost Capital: The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's Neoliberal Transformation. Carnegie Middle East Center. Available at: https://carnegieendowment.org/files/2-1-19_Gamal_Muslim_Brotherhood.pdf.

2 Literature Review

There have been concerted efforts by leading scholars across the globe to map out the ideological trajectory of the Muslim Brotherhood. There is renewed interest in the ideological convictions of the Muslim Brotherhood since the Arab Spring. Also, after 9/11, scholars have focussed on the ideological leanings of Sayyid Qutb who is considered as the Father of Salafi Jihadism.

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Hasan al-Banna's Fifty-Point Manifesto² lays out his socio-political vision in a detailed manner and his attempt to use Islam as a functional tool to reform society to achieve the goal of social engineering.

Camille Mulcaire³ focused on the political ideologisation of Islam and he tries to map the efforts of Hasan al-Banna to seek the solution of every problem, be it social, political, or economic, in Quran and his attempt to portray Islam as an alternative to the political ideologies such as capitalism and communism which he denounced as western constructs.

Sayyid Qutb's Milestones⁴ serves as a blueprint for the revival of Islamic society and his critique of Marxism for going against the natural human instincts by imposing collective farming in a top-down manner with disastrous consequences.

Adnan A. Musallam⁵ deals with the theme of social justice in Sayyid Qutb's ideology in the political, social, economic, and intellectual context during the war and post-war period. The disillusionment of Sayyid Qutb with the prevailing conditions and his shift towards the Quran to seek solutions has been beautifully set out in the article.

William E. Shepard⁶ analyses the idea of justice according to Sayyid Qutb expressed in his book "Social Justice in Islam". He discusses in detail the theme of Sayyid Qutb on Islam, social justice, usury, co-operation, etc.

Asyraf HJ AB Rahman⁷ delineates the doctrinal basis of social justice in Sayyid Qutb's writings and he discusses the practical dimensions of justice in his writings. He analyses every aspect of justice dealt with by Sayyid Qutb in the context of Quranic principles.

3 Hasan al Banna's vision of social justice

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² Available at: https://pointdebasculecanada.ca/the-50-point-manifesto-of-hassan-al-banna/.

³ Mulcaire, C. (2016). *Hasan al-Banna and the Political Ideologisation of Islam in the 20th Century*. E-International relations. Available at: https://www.e-ir.info/2016/02/02/hasan-al-banna-and-the-political-ideologisation-of-islam-in-the-20th-century/.

⁴ Qutb, S. (1964). P 3. *Milestones*. Available at: https://holybooks-lichtenbergpress.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/Milestones.pdf.

⁵ Musallam, Adnan A. (1993). Sayyid Qutb and Social Justice, 1945-48. Journal of Islamic Studies 4:1 pp. 52-70.

⁶ Shepard, William E. (1996). *Sayyid Qutb and Islamic Activism*. Social, Economic and Political Studies of the Middle East and Asia, Volume 54.

⁷ Rahman, Asyraf Hj Ab. (2000). *The concept of Social Justice as found in Sayyid Qutb's Fi Zilal al-Qu'ran*. Available at: https://www.era.lib.ed.ac.uk/bitstream/1842/7394/1/490065.pdf.

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Hasan al-Banna considered Islam as an entirety in itself. He conceived Islam as a solution to all the ills afflicting the world. He considered the secular concept of a divorce between politics and religion as a western concept and alien to the ethos of Islam. According to him, Islam has a paramount role in the ordering of society and the ideal society can be achieved by following the teachings of Islam. Thus, in his vision, Islam permeates every aspect of individual life⁸.

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Al-Banna called for remodelling every sphere of an individual's life according to Islamic principles. He called for the management of the affairs of the State according to the principles of 'Islamic governance'. It was a temporary arrangement to make way for the restoration of the 'Caliphate'.⁹ Al-Banna worked hard to fight for the rights of Muslim workers who suffered at the hands of foreign colonialists, especially from the Suez Canal Company.

Hasan al-Banna's Fifty-Point Manifesto¹⁰ provides a glimpse into his vision of economic reforms to order society based upon true teachings of Islam. He reiterated the use of Zakat in helping the needy, outlawing usury, protecting indigenous workers from exploitation by multinational companies, raising the standard of living of workers, etc. His noble economic vision, if translated into practice, has the potential to root out inequality and oppressive practices and to make this world a better place to live.

4 Nature of social justice in Sayyid Qutb's writings

Sayyid Qutb was a leading proponent of the Muslim Brotherhood. It's quite a paradox that on the one hand Sayyid Qutb is denounced as the Father of Salafi Jihadism and on the other hand, conservative Muslim scholars condemn him for his advocacy of abolition of slavery and promotion of social justice. They criticise him for the overuse of ijtihad (mental reasoning) and accuse him of innovation (Bid'ah) which is antithetical to the core Islamic practices¹¹.

Sayvid Qutb considered Quran as a comprehensive guide covering every aspect of human conduct and behaviour. Sayyid Qutb's idea of social justice is a comprehensive and feasible one. It calls for liberating mankind from servitude to anyone except god¹². In today's world, if we apply this idea in the society around us, it solves a lot of problems. If we all consider ourselves as servants of a higher entity, i.e. god, then the notions of superiority weaved around wealth, race, caste, class, fairness will vanish as we are all servants and servants can't carry the baggage of superiority.

Sayyid Qutb focuses on substantive equality and faults Marxism on this aspect. Every individual's

⁸ Mulcaire, C. (2016). *Hasan al-Banna and the Political Ideologisation of Islam in the 20th Century*. E-International relations. Available at: https://www.e-ir.info/2016/02/02/hasan-al-banna-and-the-political-ideologisation-of-islam-inthe-20th-century/.

¹⁰ Available at: https://pointdebasculecanada.ca/the-50-point-manifesto-of-hassan-al-banna/.

¹¹ Moussalli, Ahmad S. (1992). P 223. Radical Islamic Fundamentalism: the Ideological and Political Discourse of Sayyid Qutb. Beirut: American University of Beirut.

¹² Musallam, Adnan A. (1993). *Sayyid Qutb and Social Justice, 1945-48*. Journal of Islamic Studies 4:1 pp. 52-70.

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tastes and capabilities are different and everyone can't be equated. For example, some people are by nature hard-working and some are by nature lazy, some are healthy and some are weak by disposition. The two can't be compared and put in the same bracket. There should be an equality of opportunity but treating everyone with the same yardstick can be counter-productive as it will lead to the under-utilisation of the talents and abilities of individuals with higher calibre ¹³. He observed the situation of Russia under Tsars and communist rule. Russia produced surplus food under Tsars but had to import it during communist rule ¹⁴. The concept of collective farming is against human nature as it stifles competition and there is no feeling of ownership. If everyone is assured payment by the state and there is no incentive to work hard, then everyone becomes lazy and it will lead to the deterioration in the productive capacity of an individual.

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Sayyid Qutb focussed on the co-operation among individuals. According to him, we are all creations of God, and if seen in a comprehensive outlook, as there is harmonious unity among different creations of God, the same way all human beings must co-operate to achieve the aim of an ideal society¹⁵. Although life in an ideal conception of an Islamic society is based on the promotion of mutual love, cooperation, and harmony, there is a scope of healthy competition to realise the true potential of an individual which will contribute to the welfare of society. By the same logic, the distribution of wealth among the masses shouldn't be equal as it depends on individual efforts, abilities, and hard work. But, wealth shouldn't become a hindrance in an individual's ability to march forward as it is the responsibility of the State to provide an individual with a congenial atmosphere to grow without discrimination of any kind¹⁶.

But, the acquisition of wealth shouldn't become the sole guiding light of humanity otherwise it will be lead to avarice, corruption, and debauchery in society. There are other moral and spiritual obligations to fulfil.

He argued that Islamic society is based upon cooperation among its members instead of bargaining and friction among members of conflicting interest groups. He stressed the need for Zakat in tune with the mandate of the Quran. Zakat is to be distributed among the people who are unable to work due to illness or some other weaknesses¹⁷. It's a noble way of wealth redistribution from the riches to the impoverished masses. Also, it leads to the circulation of wealth which is a healthy sign for society.

¹³ Shepard, William E. (1996). P 35. *Sayyid Qutb and Islamic Activism*. Social, Economic and Political Studies of the Middle East and Asia, Volume 54.

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Qutb, S. (1964). P 3. *Milestones*. Available at: https://holybooks-lichtenbergpress.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/Milestones.pdf.

¹⁵ Shepard, William E. (1996). P 29. *Sayyid Qutb and Islamic Activism*. Social, Economic and Political Studies of the Middle East and Asia, Volume 54.

¹⁶ Ibid. P 37.

¹⁷ Rahman, Asyraf Hj Ab. (2000). *The concept of Social Justice as found in Sayyid Qutb's Fi Zilal al-Qu'ran*. Available at: https://www.era.lib.ed.ac.uk/bitstream/1842/7394/1/490065.pdf.

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Also, he stressed the need to stamp out usury (riba) from Islamic society¹⁸. Today, we are seeing the ill-effects of usury which leads to the destitution of masses at the cost of riches of a few.

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5 Limitations in the vision of the Muslim Brotherhood

Though the Muslim Brotherhood espoused a noble economic vision, it's difficult to translate it into practice because of inherent weaknesses and impracticality. The ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood has caused much bloodshed and immense suffering to mankind. Its insistence on the return to the ancient golden era of Islam is impractical. Also, Syed Qutb's ideology of offensive Jihad and Takfir (decrying fellow Muslims as apostates) has inspired terrorist organisations such as ISIS to kill Shias by declaring them as heretics and disbelievers. The idea of total submission to God is untenable and everyone has the right to live life on one's terms. This idea can be abused by extremists to grind their axe to trample the rights of others in the name of god. Also, some of the economic concepts espoused by it are not viable in modern times. For example, Zakat ordained by Quran is just 2.5% of the wealth generated in a year and is insufficient.

Furthermore, Usury or charging of interest can't be completely stamped out in modern times. Unusually high rates of interest are abhorrent but as inflation is rising every year, some reasonable amount of interest is necessary to keep up with the inflation. For example, suppose a person buys a flat for investment purposes and sells it after some years at a higher amount, he makes a profit. In the same way, money-lender should have some incentive to lend money, and the modern banking system is based on it. The Banks and other formal lending mechanisms usually charge a reasonable percentage of interest. It has to be ensured by the State that the gullible poor masses don't fall prey to the notorious moneylenders and they have access to the Banks and other formal financial systems in times of their need. If banks and financial companies are unwilling to lend them money due to them being unable to offer any collateral, the State should act as a guarantor and it's happening to some extent today.

Moreover, mixing of religion and polity is not feasible as it will lead to the hegemony of clergy over the state policy and it will suppress scientific progress, technical innovations, and individual freedom. It will have disastrous consequences. Also, religious scriptures can be interpreted by vested interests to advance their nefarious agenda, and thus, religious scriptures can't become the sole guiding light of the policy of a State.

6 Transition of Muslim Brotherhood towards Neoliberalism

It's interesting to note the changing attitude of the Muslim Brotherhood towards neoliberalism with times. It moves away from the orthodox positions of its founders who denounced capitalism,

¹⁸ Shepard, William E. (1996). P 264. *Sayyid Qutb and Islamic Activism*. Social, Economic and Political Studies of the Middle East and Asia, Volume 54.

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neoliberalism as un-Islamic. It gradually adopted a neoliberal stance, favoured privatisation and private businesses¹⁹. Its approach can be termed as pious neoliberalism in marrying business with religion and charity. It's pertinent to analyse the reasons behind this tectonic shift in the stance of the Muslim Brotherhood towards neoliberalism. This dynamic approach can be attributed to protect the interests of its bourgeoisie members, to meet the aspirations of its upper-middle-class members who swell the ranks of the Muslim Brotherhood. Also, it was an attempt to paper over the class differences that threaten religious unity.

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7 Conclusion

The Muslim Brotherhood started as a revivalist movement to restore the pristine glory of Islam but soon, it became involved in various terrorist activities and caused havoc in the middle-east. Though some of the economic aims of the Muslim Brotherhood are noteworthy, most of its ideas are regressive and are more suited to the medieval ages than to modern times. The democratic secular nations are afflicted with inequalities be it social, or economic, and often fail to ensure justice to the downtrodden. These inequalities provide a fillip to the religious extremists and revivalists to aim to go back to the old golden period of their religion. For example, Hasan al-Banna was dismayed at the sight of poverty-afflicted workers of Egypt working at Suez Canal Company, while its foreign employees were living a luxurious lifestyle²⁰. It provided him with an impetus to reject the modernist ideas and instead return to the golden age of Islam where justice would be assured to every individual and presumably, there would be no discrimination. The return of the Taliban in Afghanistan is partly due to widespread corruption and a delayed justice delivery system in the democratic system, and the masses looked up to the Taliban to solve their disputes swiftly and impartially.

As St Augustine said, "What are States without justice, but robber bands enlarged?" The modern democratic nations have to work towards bridging inequalities, rising inflation, exploitation otherwise the extremists can take advantage of the despondency of the masses and will show them the dreams of the Caliphate where everything will be hunky-dory and there would be no exploitation of any kind. It will go a long way to stem the rising tide of extremism, intolerance, and terrorism. The economic vision of the founders of the Muslim Brotherhood is an elusive one and it's tough to

The economic vision of the founders of the Muslim Brotherhood is an elusive one and it's tough to sustain it in the modern world. Though it contains some noteworthy ideas such as equality of opportunity, the welfare state, etc., there is a need to fine-tune them in keeping with the requirements of the present times. The Muslim Brotherhood has also gradually changed its stance

¹⁹ Gamal, W. (2019). *Lost Capital: The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's Neoliberal Transformation*. Carnegie Middle East Center. Available at: https://carnegieendowment.org/files/2-1-19_Gamal_Muslim_Brotherhood.pdf.

²⁰ Mitchell, Richard P. (1968). P7. *Chapter 1: Hasan al-Banna and the Founding of the Society of the Muslim Brothers*. The Society of the Muslim Brothers. New York: Oxford University Press.

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The religious extremist organisations attract the people with their grand vision of returning to the old golden age of religious kingdom where there will be no discrimination and it will be based upon the teachings of their religion. But, it's impossible to return to the old period. As in this world, change is the only constant. Religious scriptures were revealed to cater to the needs of that period but it has to be modulated according to the requirements of the present times. As Muslim Brotherhood experience has shown, religious extremists are hesitant to take positions when class disputes arise as they are wary of highlighting class disputes, which threaten the illusory unity of the

members of their religion. Also, these extremist organisations remain a tool in the hands of the

powerful and bourgeoisies to cater to their interests and to deceive the gullible masses.

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