

Examining the Concept of Justice in Imam Khomeini's Opinions¹

By Sayyed Mohammad Razavi

Discussion of the Concept of Social Justice

As a complete Islamologist and founder of an administrative system based on the teachings of Islam, Imam Khomeini gave a lot of importance to the question of social justice in his speeches, messages and writings. For instance in the twenty-two volume collection of his work "Sahifeh-ye-Imam," the term social justice has been mentioned four-hundred and seventy-one times.² Although in his written works and statements he has not discussed in detail the precise definition of justice from its social aspect, however, the importance and perception he has of the question of justice and equity in society as well as in economic, political, social and judicial bodies reveals that he considers justice not simply an individual virtue; rather, an attribute and a social condition. According to this perception, justice is the attribute and characteristic feature of society's laws and characteristic feature of its economic, social and political factions and institutions as well.

Imam Khomeini opines that Divine Justice can be achieved relatively in societies and on the basis of it, human beings can engage in policy-making, legislation and establishing institutions in various spheres of the society's affairs.

"Practicing Islamic justice is not the exclusive territory of the judiciary and its affiliated bodies; rather it is of solemn importance in the rest of the establishments of the Islamic Republic of Iran right from the legislative assembly, the government and its affiliated organizations, etc...and other administrators and executives as well."³

Standing of Justice

Imam Khomeini places establishing and realization of justice in society on par with principles and pillars such as belief in the Oneness of God and asserts: "in

¹ The article has been summarized and translated by International Affairs Department of the Institute.

² Mohammad Hossein Jamshidi, *Theory of Justice*, year 2001, p. 357

³ *Sahifeh-ye Imam*, vol. 17, p. 140

the universe, values are of two types; one type of spiritual values such as belief in the Oneness of God and ‘Jihad’ are related to divinity; and of the (second) type of social justice is the rule of justice and equitable behavior of regimes with people and social development among nations...that are unchangeable.”¹

With belief in the religion of Islam’s universality in meeting the material and spiritual needs of individuals, Imam Khomeini presents establishment of social justice as Islam’s grand objective² and mentions the objectives of Islam’s economic system as being directed towards achieving the school of Islam’s objectives.³

Thus in his opinion, the question of justice is something that cannot be overshadowed by any economic consideration and should be taken into account in all planning and even in establishing of institutions both in the short and in the long terms.

Imam Khomeini mentions establishment of justice in society not as an objective of Islam’s recommended economic system; rather, he considers it to be superior to all objectives and even on the same footing as the causes of formation of political regime.⁴ Based on this premise, Imam Khomeini mentions consideration of principles and norms of justice in all constituents of the economic system including both hardware (tools) and soft ware sectors (policies) as a prerequisite of the economic system’s Islamism.

Analyses of the Objectives of Establishing Justice

In his perception of the Islamic economy and despite great emphasis and big role that he considers for justice, Imam Khomeini mentions its achievement in society not as an ultimate objective; rather, as a preliminary one. “When we read the noble verses (of the Quran) or observe the traditions of the Divine prophets, we see that one of the tasks that all of them—of course it wasn’t an objective but rather a preliminary—took up was to establish justice in the world.”⁵ While pointing out that in Islam the economy plays an instrumental role,⁶ Imam Khomeini introduces acquisition of Divine knowledge as the

¹ Ibid., vol. 11, p. 1

² Ibid., vol. 1, p. 198

³ Ibid., vol. 5 p. 437

⁴ Ibid., vol. 9, p. 20

⁵ Ibid., vol. 20, p. 410

⁶ Ibid., vol. 9, p. 457

ultimate objective from establishing justice in society. “The major objective of the Divine Book (the Holy Quran) and the exalted prophets was acquisition of knowledge. All the tasks that they would take up were with the intention of promoting knowledge of God in the true sense of the term. The battles were fought with this intent; peace was made with this intent and this was the ultimate objective of social justice.”¹

Divine knowledge which has been mentioned in Islamic texts as the objective of creation is considered by the religion of Islam as an educational issue. While referring to it, Imam Khomeini mentions that the ideal economic regime of Islam ought to be directed towards the religion of Islam’s cultural objectives.

In yet another statement, Imam Khomeini remarks that the objective of achieving social justice is development and spiritual purification of man.² The basic question asked is that what could be the relationship between promotion of Divine knowledge and/ or spiritual purification (that are educational and cultural objectives that Imam Khomeini presents as being the religion of Islam’s ultimate objectives) with achievement of social justice which is reckoned to be a fundamental pillar and unchangeable principle in the economic and social system of Islam’s consideration? A close look at Imam Khomeini’s thoughts shows that the general concept of ‘security’ is the connecting link of the question of social justice and development of Divine knowledge. He mentions establishment of social justice as being the cause of creation of a peaceful and secure environment for realization of the individuals’ potentials, creativities and likewise, inherent and intrinsic talents (including theology).

“The consequence of establishing justice is creation of opportunity for every person to bring whatever he has (to realize his potentials). It cannot be done when he is confused...a calm environment promises achievement of everything.”³

This (aforesaid) statement of Imam Khomeini reveals the importance he attaches to the concept of economic security as an aspect of the overall concept of security within framework of the economic system (which secures the educational and cultural objectives of the school of Islam).

¹ Ibid., vol. 19, p. 115

² Ibid., vol. 8, p. 255

³ Ibid., vol. 20, p. 116

General Concept of Social Justice in Imam Khomeini's View

Due to the fact that the concept of justice is included in value concepts, the cognitive principles of individuals and religions fully intervene in the way they are interpreted and in the type of perception of justice. Thus, an identical condition and situation could from the viewpoint of different individuals or schools of thought be described as equitable or inequitable. Among the opinions of Islamic thinkers and intellectuals in the field of social justice, the opinions and ideas of Imam Khomeini due to his encountering the society's realities and needs in the strategic station of a political regime, enjoys a far superior position as compared to the rest of the Islamic intellectuals. In Imam Khomeini's thought, the question of justice and social justice in particular, have been dealt with extensively. Of course, the social justice of his consideration has a general aspect to it and includes fields such as politics, culture and law as well. However, the most important and most fundamental application of the concept of social justice from Imam Khomeini's standpoint is related to the field of economics and society's livelihood. This point can be observed on numerous occasions when he has referred to the concepts of justice and social justice. For this reason in some of the research studies that have been undertaken concerning Imam Khomeini's thoughts, the phrase 'economic justice' has been used.

A detailed analyses of Imam Khomeini's thoughts in the form of his speeches, messages and writings that have in one way or the other discussed the topic of justice and the concept of social justice, shows that on many occasions he has mentioned the concept of social justice together with concepts such as deprivation, destitution, the needy strata and other such interpretations. Also, he has with the help of different words and phrases in one way or the other referred either directly or indirectly to the relationship between the concept of social justice and elimination of poverty and deprivation:

"You all know that as long as the current regime (the Pahlavi monarchy) is in power, no action is going to be taken on social justice and attending to the needs of the hardworking poor."¹

¹ *Sahifeh-ye Imam*, vol. 3, p. 488

“God wants justice to be implemented among the people; God wants that something should be done about the condition of these weak and downtrodden classes.”¹

In a categorical statement, Imam Khomeini asserts that deviation from policy of supporting the deprived and not seeking to rid them of their deprivation as well as negligence in providing for their basic needs is reneging from the principle of justice envisaged by Islam and states: “What the clergy should never renege on and should never due to the propaganda of others neglect and become indifferent is support for the deprived and the destitute because any person who reneges on it has reneged on Islam’s social justice.”²

Similarly, Imam Khomeini believes that the cry of the poor and the deprived and the low-income stratum for attending to their essential needs is their cry for justice and states: “A group of people out of hunger and poverty settled on the outskirts of Tehran; and they have neither water supply nor electricity and nor bread nor anything else. They want justice.”³

There are numerous instances of statements such as the above that Imam Khomeini has made in connection with justice and elimination of poverty and securing the needs of the deprived in order that they enjoy a normal standard of living. Imam Khomeini has time and again mentioned the need to adopt policies aimed at getting rid of poverty and emancipation of individuals and the deprived strata from deprivation; and to engage in planning in order to meet the essential needs of the poor strata. Basically, he mentions Islam’s economic stance as being aimed at safeguarding the interests of the deprived and downtrodden: “Presentation of plans and blueprints and clarification of Islam’s economic stance directed at safeguarding the interests of the deprived as well as promoting their general participation and...is considered to be the biggest gift and good news of man’s freedom from the incarceration of poverty and destitution.”⁴

On the other hand, Imam Khomeini has on numerous occasions referred to the equality of all individuals and different strata of society vis-à-vis Islam’s commandments and laws. “You should know this that Islam is not for a single

¹ Ibid., vol. 4, p. 461

² Ibid., vol. 21, p. 99

³ Ibid., vol. 4, p. 461

⁴ Ibid., vol. 20, p. 340

stratum...Islam is for all. Islam is for entire mankind...there is no discrimination in Islam.”¹

Upon close examination of the aforesaid instances and similar cases, one comes to the conclusion that in Imam Khomeini’s thought, on the one hand establishing and achieving justice and getting rid of poverty and deprivation; and on the other hand, securing the essential needs of all strata and individuals of the society—and particularly of the poor and lower income classes—enjoy a general framework and are of equal importance. In other words, the central core of Imam Khomeini’s thought on the question of defining justice is made up of the concept of ‘equality’ and ‘providing for the essential needs.’ On the basis of the traditional Islamic thoughts, firstly he believes in the equality of human beings and secondly, he includes providing for the essential needs of individuals and various strata of society as an integral part of human rights and essential for their spiritual growth and perfection. Therefore, one can conclude that Imam Khomeini has considered justice in the sense of ‘equality of opportunities for securing the essential needs of individuals and different strata of society.’ Thus Imam Khomeini’s stance and emphasis on improving the living conditions of individuals and the deprived² and providing for the essential needs of society’s individuals based on the idea of justice is present in his thought.

Meanwhile, what appears to be necessary here is answer to the questions that what needs does Imam Khomeini mention as being the essential needs of individuals and strata of society and what does he mention as index of deprivation in their absence and want planning and adoption of policies in order to secure them?

Essential Needs according to Imam Khomeini’s Thought

In numerous statements in particular on the subject of injustices and negative consequences of economic positions and policies of the former Pahlavi monarchy, especially in rural and backward regions, Imam Khomeini mentions the need to meet certain needs which he calls “the essential needs of individuals.” By emphasizing the point that all individuals in society have common physical needs and providing for these needs is firstly, part and parcel of their rights and secondly, is the necessary conditions for achieving the educational and humanitarian objectives envisaged by Islam, Imam Khomeini

¹ *Sahifeh-ye Imam*, vol. 7, p. 78

² *Ibid.*, vol. 5, p. 489

refers to the religion of Islam's focus and attention on the subject. In his opinion essential needs consist of the following:

- A) Provisions and public services: By emphasizing securing essential goods and general provisions for all strata of people, Imam Khomeini refers to lack of availability of utilities such as water, electricity, roads, etc...as one of the most important aspects of deprivations and states: "These oil revenues that ought to be spent on the state itself; spent on the impoverished in the country, these have basically not been spent on electricity and road construction and so forth in Tehran itself—electricity, road asphaltting and water supply that are primary things (utilities)."¹ On certain occasions Imam Khomeini has called public services as the end products of civilization² and has solicited their employment as essential needs of individuals and strata of society.
- B) Housing is yet another of the needs that Imam Khomeini calls as "essential needs of living of individuals." He gives a lot of importance to fulfillment of this need and mentions the lack of home ownership as one of the aspects of poverty and deprivation. "All the deprived people and deprived creatures of God should be in a position to benefit from this Divine favor (possessing a home). All the deprived should have a house. No person in any part of the country should be deprived of having a house."³ The term 'shanty-town dweller' is mentioned in Imam Khomeini's statements always as a symbol of deprivation and injustice; and he has time and again referred to the necessity of enjoying a suitable environment for dwelling and existence.
- C) While referring to the standing of science and knowledge in the present era, Imam Khomeini considers the availability of facilities for public learning and education as an essential need of individuals and strata of society and mentions the lack of fulfillment of this need as yet another aspect of deprivation.
- "It is not as though you are deprived only of school and road and the rest of the things that are concerned with living."⁴
- "At present, a large number of the impoverished people of Iran are deprived of the basic necessities of living...many of the nation's

¹ Ibid., vol. 5, p. 114

² Ibid., vol. 3, p. 408

³ Ibid., vol. 6, p. 519

⁴ Ibid., vol. 8, p. 400.

inhabitants are unable to send their children to school because of poverty and deprivation.”¹

D) Another thing that Imam Khomeini gives importance to as a basic need of individuals is that all have access to public health services. He pays special attention to getting rid of this deprivation in remote rural areas and villages. “One of the journalists on a visit to the impoverished people of the south (of Iran), had reported that in the villages and rural areas of southern Iran there is absolutely no doctor or medicines of any kind available. There is no (running) water; and in one village most of its residents were blind. On the whole, they were lacking in all basic facilities and needs of living.”²

Imam Khomeini mentions access to suitable occupation as being among the essential needs of society’s individuals as well and points out to the government’s obligation to adopt policies and programs for creating employment especially for the educated classes. “Every group who came from the surrounding regions to meet with me would tell me that there was a lot of unemployment in their area; that they had no facilities; no water and no electricity...”³

In addition to referring to unemployment as one of the characteristics of poverty and deprivation, Imam Khomeini regards it as one of the factors of deprivation and poverty as well.

With a view to all that has been stated so far, in addition to essential needs such as general provisions and foodstuffs, Imam Khomeini has referred to needs such as housing, health and sanitation, education, public services and employment as being part and parcel of the essential needs of individuals and various strata of society as well. Moreover, he considers the equality of all people in making use of amenities, in securing and fulfilling these needs to be social equality.

The point to note is that Imam Khomeini was neither in the position of an economic nor social theoretician; rather, his viewpoints and ideas concerning justice stem from the kind of his perspective and understanding of the basic principles of Islam’s social philosophy. However, it is interesting that in the sphere of knowledge of economic development, a viewpoint has been put forward which is almost similar to

¹ Ibid., vol. 3, p. 484

² Ibid., vol. 1, p. 271

³ Ibid., vol. 7, p. 223

that which Imam Khomeini has mentioned concerning the concept of justice. This viewpoint is famously known as ‘model of essential needs’ in topics related to economic development. Thus, it could be claimed that Imam Khomeini’s opinions on the subject of equality are to an extent in harmony and in line with existing principles and scientific frameworks of the conventional science of economics as well.

Conclusion

An analysis of the concept of social justice in Imam Khomeini’s opinions reveals that from his standpoint social justice is a general concept that is related to various spheres of humanities. However, upon close examination of this issue, it becomes clear that the most important focus of his attention on the question of justice is the economic functions and indices of this concept.

In most cases, Imam Khomeini mentions the concept of justice alongside the question of poverty and deprivation. He considers ‘providing for the essential needs’ of the poor in order to rescue them from their plight to be a part and parcel of their rights. On the other hand, by referring to ‘equality’ as one of the most critical aspects of justice, he describes the laws and regulations of Islam on the basis of equality of individuals and different strata and classes of people. Thus one can define justice from Imam Khomeini’s point of view as “creation of equal opportunities towards securing the basic needs of all individuals and strata of society.”

The noteworthy point in Imam Khomeini’s perception of justice and his explicit definition of this concept is its proximity to one of the models and strategies of development which in economic books and literature is called ‘prototypes of essential needs.’

A precise analysis of the concept of justice from Imam Khomeini’s standpoint and the ideological basis of his approach to the issue shows that he has taken into consideration certain principles as ideological foundations and theoretical framework in his characteristic explanation of the concept of justice. Adaptation of the practical model proposed by him for establishing justice could turn out to be useful as well.