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**ISLAMIC PRINCIPLES ON LABOR RIGHTS: ETHICAL  
TREATMENT AND EMPLOYER RESPONSIBILITIES**

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**Abstract**

This article explores the Islamic framework for labor rights, emphasizing ethical treatment, compassion, and justice in employer-employee relationships. Drawing from the Qur'an, Hadith, and scholarly interpretations, it highlights the Prophet Muhammad's (peace be upon him) teachings on fair treatment of workers, including timely wage payment, leniency towards mistakes, and recognition of labor dignity. The study underscores the importance of integrating these principles into contemporary labor policies to promote social justice and economic fairness. By aligning modern labor practices with Islamic ethical guidelines, the article advocates for a more humane and equitable workplace.

**Keywords:** Employee, Labor Rights, contemporary labor policies, Islamic teachings

**1. Introduction**

Islam upholds the belief that the Creator, Sustainer, and Sovereign of the universe is Allah ﷻ alone. He is the One who created the cosmos and appointed the human being as His nā'ib (vicegerent) upon the earth. Among all of Allah's creation, the human being is unique and distinguished. He has been endowed with life, honor, dignity, and resources, and above all, the faculties of will and choice. By granting these blessings, Allah ﷻ entrusted humanity with the role of His representative on earth.

Alongside this responsibility, humankind was also gifted with *hidāyah* (divine guidance) and the faculties of intellect and reason ('aql wa shu'ūr), so they may discern right from wrong and open new paths of purposeful living. As the trustee (*amīn*) of the divine mandate, man is accountable to Allah ﷻ for every blessing and resource granted to him.

To fulfill the necessities of life, humans have engaged with various material means such as agriculture, trade, industry, and livestock. Among these, *tijārah* (commerce/trade) has been given a prominent place, as it serves as a primary means through which most human needs are fulfilled. Even during the pre-Islamic era (*Jāhiliyyah*), trade was widely practiced. The profession of *tijārah* was also the primary occupation of the Prophet ﷺ and many of his noble Companions (*Ṣaḥābah*).

Muhammad Khālid Saif notes that Islam introduced a standard of trade wherein there is no room for deceit, falsehood, fraudulent weights and measures, or concealment of defects in goods. Non-Muslims would often approach Muslim traders for commercial dealings but would leave with the treasure of *īmān* (faith) due to the traders' exemplary conduct and honesty.

<sup>1</sup>The Prophet ﷺ not only laid down the foundational principles of religion and spirituality but also elaborated comprehensive guidelines on social and economic dealings, including trade. Adherence to these principles ensures success in both the worldly life (*dunyā*) and the hereafter (*ākhirah*). Dr. Nūr Muhammad mentions that the Prophet ﷺ would frequently visit the marketplaces to reform commercial practices and ensure that business dealings were conducted justly. The objective was to make trade a source of *ḥalāl* income and mutual cooperation.<sup>2</sup>

In contemporary times, trade continues to play a vital role in strengthening national economies. A robust economy paves the way for a nation's progress and stability. It is for this reason that the Qur'ān also emphasizes lawful trade:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا لَا تَأْكُلُوا أَمْوَالَكُمْ بَيْنَكُمْ بِالْبَاطِلِ إِلَّا أَنْ تَكُونَ تِجَارَةً عَنْ تَرَاضٍ مِنْكُمْ<sup>3</sup>

"O you who believe! Do not consume one another's wealth unjustly, unless it be a trade conducted with mutual consent among you."

The term *bāṭil* (falsehood) here encompasses all illegitimate means of acquiring wealth, including income generated through *ribā* (usury /interest), which is categorically prohibited. However, wealth exchanged through mutually agreed trade is deemed lawful.

Dr. Ḥabīb al-Raḥmān Kīlānī highlights the excellence of *tijārah*, stating that it is a dignified and respectable profession. When practiced within the

<sup>1</sup> . Muhammad Khalid Saif & Muhammad Sarwar Tariq, *Golden Principles of Successful Trade*, Darussalam, Lahore, January 2006, p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> Dr. Noor Muhammad Ghafari, *Islamic Commercial Law*, Amprint Offset Printers, Lahore, p. 20.

<sup>3</sup> . Surah An-Nisa (4:29).

ethical and legal boundaries set by Islam, it not only ensures the abundance of sustenance in this world but also becomes a means of attaining higher ranks in the hereafter<sup>4</sup> Every individual naturally seeks to increase their wealth and assets. To achieve this, one may either engage in trade personally or entrust their capital to an experienced trader. As stated in the aforementioned verse, Allah ﷻ encourages trade based on mutual consent and ethical profit-making.

فَإِذَا قُضِيَتِ الصَّلَاةُ فَانْتَشِرُوا فِي الْأَرْضِ وَابْتَغُوا مِنْ فَضْلِ اللَّهِ

“Then when the prayer is concluded, disperse within the land and seek from the bounty of Allah.”<sup>5</sup>

This Qur’anic command clearly demonstrates that Islam encourages trade and economic activity. The growth and prosperity of nations are largely dependent on trade, and Islam acknowledges this by advocating for it. Hafiz Zulfikar Ali explains that "seeking the bounty of Allah" refers to trade and business. When such endeavors are undertaken in accordance with Islamic injunctions, they become a means of attaining nearness to Allah.<sup>6</sup> the exalted status of a trader is evident from the following Hadith of the Prophet ﷺ :

7 حَدَّثَنَا أَحْمَدُ بْنُ سِنَانٍ... قَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ: التَّاجِرُ الْأَمِينُ الصَّدُوقُ الْمُسْلِمُ مَعَ الشَّهَدَاءِ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ

“The honest and trustworthy Muslim trader will be with the martyrs (shuhadā’) on the Day of Judgment.”

This Hadith has been narrated by Ahmad ibn Sinān through a reliable chain up to Ibn ‘Umar (RA), who reports that the Prophet ﷺ granted such a noble status to the trustworthy and truthful businessman.

Further emphasis on the rights of workers is also found in the Hadith:

8 حَدَّثَنَا هَذَا... قَالَ النَّبِيُّ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ: التَّاجِرُ الصَّدُوقُ الْأَمِينُ مَعَ النَّبِيِّينَ وَالصِّدِّيقِينَ وَالشُّهَدَاءِ

The truthful and trustworthy trader will be (resurrected) alongside the Prophets (anbiyā’), the truthful ones (ṣiddīqīn), and the martyrs (shuhadā’). These narrations underscore the spiritual elevation of a sincere and trustworthy merchant — his rank will be among the most honored groups in the Hereafter. Commenting on this, Abu Nu‘mān Bashir highlights a current-day concern: many traders today are indifferent to whether their

<sup>4</sup> . Dr. Habib-ur-Rehman Kailani, Trade Rulings and Transaction Issues, Maktaba Darussalam, Lahore, July 2003, p. 45.

<sup>5</sup> Surah Al-Jumu'ah (62:10).

<sup>6</sup> . Hafiz Zulfikar Ali, Islamic Rulings on Economy and Trade, Abu Huraira Academy, Lahore, 2010, p. 25.

<sup>7</sup> . Ibn Majah, Sunan, Book on Commerce and Transactions, Chapter on Encouragement of Earning, Hadith No. 2142.

<sup>8</sup> Al-Tirmidhi, Sunan, Book on Sales, Chapter on the Prophet's Address to Traders, Hadith No. 1224.

trade practices are ḥalāl or ḥarām, and even those concerned often lack proper understanding of Islamic business ethics.<sup>9</sup>

The Prophet ﷺ greatly emphasized ḥalāl earnings. He regarded the pursuit of lawful sustenance as being on par with obligatory acts. The following narrations affirm this:

طلب كسب الحلال فريضة بعد الفريضة<sup>10</sup>

“Seeking ḥalāl livelihood is an obligation after other obligations.”

حدثنا إبراهيم بن موسى... عن المقدم - رضى الله عنه - عن رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم قال: ما أكل أحد طعاما قط خيرا من أن يأكل من عمل يده<sup>11</sup>

“No one ever consumed food better than that earned through the labor of his own hands,” reported al-Miqdām (RA) from the Prophet ﷺ.

### **The Current Commercial System and Workers’ Rights in Light of the Prophetic Model**

One of the key crises facing today’s Muslim societies is the negligence of religious teachings. Muslims, abandoning the guidance of the Qur’an and Sunnah, have adopted the practices of the Western world. Despite being gifted a complete Shari‘ah by Allah, which offers comprehensive solutions, they continue to wander in search of answers. Were they to return to the study of divine revelation, they would find resolutions to the problems of daily life.

Islam grants a unique status to commercial dealings and trade-related regulations, a status unmatched by any man-made economic system. The Qur’an offers numerous instructions concerning commerce.

### **Cooperation with Workers**

Trade is essentially based on mutual cooperation. Just as commercial partners collaborate in a spirit of fairness and support, the same principle must be extended to workers. Support for laborers should not be conditional on profit or loss. The Qur’an declares:

وَتَعَاوَنُوا عَلَى الْبِرِّ وَالتَّقْوَىٰ وَلَا تَعَاوَنُوا عَلَى الْإِثْمِ وَالْعُدْوَانِ<sup>12</sup>

“And cooperate in righteousness and piety, but do not cooperate in sin and aggression.”

This verse instructs believers to engage in mutual cooperation for noble causes. Therefore, a laborer striving to earn a ḥalāl income for his family must be supported and assisted with dignity and fairness.

The Prophet ﷺ himself commanded this principle.

<sup>9</sup> Abu Nauman Bashir Ahmed & Maqbool Ahmed, *Islamic Trade*, Islamia Printers, Lahore, March 2008, p. 11.

<sup>10</sup> Al-Bayhaqi, *Shu'ab al-Iman*, Riyadh: Maktabah al-Rushd, 1423 AH, Vol. 11, p. 175.12. Surah Al-Ma'idah (5:2).

<sup>11</sup> . Al-Bukhari, *Sahih*, Book on Sales, Chapter on Earning and Working with One's Hands, Hadith No. 2072.

<sup>12</sup> Surah Al-Ma'idah (5:2).

حدثنا سليمان بن حرب، قال حدثنا شعبة، عن واصل الأحدب، عن المعرور، قال: لقيت أبا ذر بالريذة، وعليه حلة، وعلى غلامه حلة، فسألته عن ذلك، فقال: إني ساببت رجلاً، فغيرته بأمه، فقال لي النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم: "يا أبا ذر أعيرته بأمه؟ إنك امرؤ فيك جاهلية. إخوانكم خولكم، جعلهم الله تحت أيديكم، فمن كان أخوه تحت يده فليطعمه مما يأكل، وليلبسه مما يلبس، ولا تكلفهم ما يغلبهم، فإن كلفتموهم فأعينوهم".

"I met Abu Dharr in al-Rabadhah. He and his servant were both wearing matching garments. I asked him the reason, and he said: 'I once insulted a man my servant by disparaging his mother. When the Prophet ﷺ heard of this, he said: "O Abu Dharr Did you mock him for his mother? You still carry traces of jāhiliyyah (pre-Islamic ignorance). Your servants are your brothers; Allah has placed them under your authority. So, whoever has his brother under him should feed him from what he eats, clothe him from what he wears, and should not burden him with what is beyond his capacity. If you must ask them for such work, then help them in it"<sup>13</sup>."

#### Fixing the Wages of a Laborer

When hiring a laborer, their wage must be mutually agreed upon **prior** to the commencement of work. Payment should not be based on the employer's whim after the task is complete. The wage should be settled upfront both the employer and the laborer must be clear about the terms. Moreover, the wage must be sufficient for the worker to live with dignity and meet basic needs.

This is endorsed by the **Sunnah** of the Prophet ﷺ:

أَخْبَرَنَا مُحَمَّدٌ قَالَ أَنْبَأَنَا جَبَانٌ قَالَ أَنْبَأَنَا عَبْدُ اللَّهِ عَنْ حَمَادِ بْنِ سَلَمَةَ عَنْ يُونُسَ عَنْ الْحَسَنِ أَنَّهُ كَرِهَ أَنْ يَسْتَأْجِرَ الرَّجُلُ حَتَّى يُعْلِمَهُ أَجْرُهُ<sup>14</sup>

"It is narrated from al-Hasan that he disliked it when a man would hire a laborer without first informing him of his wage."

In this context, **Khaleel ur-Rahman** observes:

"Even today, when the question of a fair wage arises, people often refer to American or British labor laws. Yet fourteen centuries ago, Islam gave laborers a universal principle that remains relevant and essential today as it was back then."<sup>15</sup>

#### Timely Payment of Wages

Delaying or withholding the payment of a laborer's wages or giving them reluctantly and with arrogance is clearly condemned in **Shari'ah**. The Prophet ﷺ warned strongly against such practices.

أَخْبَرَنَا مُحَمَّدُ بْنُ حَاتِمٍ قَالَ أَنْبَأَنَا جَبَانٌ قَالَ أَنْبَأَنَا عَبْدُ اللَّهِ عَنْ شُعْبَةَ عَنْ حَمَادِ عَنْ إِبْرَاهِيمَ عَنْ أَبِي سَعِيدٍ قَالَ: إِذَا اسْتَأْجَرْتَ أَجِيرًا فَأَعْلِمَهُ أَجْرَهُ<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> 13. Sahih Bukhari, Book on Faith, Hadith No. 31.

<sup>14</sup> 14. Al-Nasa'i, Sunan, Book on Conditions, Hadith No. 3895.

<sup>15</sup> 15. Khalil-ur-Rehman, Islamic Concept of Labor, Al-Maktabah al-Rahmaniyyah, Lahore, p. 140

<sup>16</sup> Al-Nasa'i, Sunan, Book on Conditions, Hadith No. 3894.

Abū Saʿīd al-Khudrī reported: "If you hire a worker, then you must inform him of his wage (beforehand)."

According to **Dr. Aussaf**,

"A righteous employer is one who pays his laborers on time. Moreover, during periods of economic prosperity, he should increase their wages accordingly<sup>17</sup>."

**Work Should Match the Laborer's Capacity**

An employer must not assign tasks that exceed a worker's physical or mental capacity. Overburdening those leads to exploitation and resentment, which is categorically forbidden in **Sharī'ah**.

As the Prophet ﷺ instructed:

18 *ولا تكلفوهم ما يغلبهم، فإن كلفتموهم فأعينوهم*

"Do not burden them with tasks beyond their ability. And if you must, then assist them."

And in another narration:

هم إخوانكم، جعلهم الله تحت أيديكم، فمن جعل الله أخاه تحت يده فليطعمه مما يأكل، وليلبسه مما يلبس، ولا يكلفه من العمل ما يغلبه، فإن كلفه ما يغلبه فليعنه عليه<sup>19</sup>

"These servants are your brothers. Allah has placed them under your care. So, whoever has a brother under his command should feed him from what he eats, clothe him from what he wears, and not impose upon him work that is beyond his strength. If you must, then help him."

**Adopting Kind Treatment with Workers**

An employer (ājir) is expected to interact with subordinates in accordance with exemplary moral conduct and to practically demonstrate good treatment (ḥusn al-muʿāmalah). In this regard, Shaykh Ḥammād Amīn Chāwlah notes that this principle is described in Sharī'ah under the term samāḥah, which implies:

Demonstrating noble character and refined behavior, dealing with matters cheerfully and gracefully, exercising generosity, and showing kindness and compassion to the weak and the destitute. These are essential ethical directives that every Muslim must embody, particularly during commercial transactions, business dealings, and financial exchanges.<sup>20</sup>

The Prophet ﷺ emphasized the importance of treating workers kindly and justly:

21 *حَدَّثَنَا إِبْرَاهِيمُ بْنُ مُوسَى... قَالَ حُسْنُ الْمَلَكَةِ يَمْنُ وَسَوْءُ الْخُلُقِ شَوْمٌ*

<sup>17</sup> Al-Nasa'i, Sunan, Book on Conditions, Hadith No. 3894.

<sup>18</sup> Sahih Bukhari, Book on Faith, Hadith No. 31.

<sup>19</sup> Ibn Majah, Sunan, Book on Etiquette, Chapter on Good Treatment of Slaves, Hadith No. 3694.

<sup>20</sup> Hammad Amin Chawla, Al-Bayan, Al-Madina Islamic Research Center, Karachi, June 2013, p. 18.

<sup>21</sup> Abu Dawood, Sunan, Book on Etiquette, Chapter on Rights of Slaves, Hadith No. 5127.

“Ibrāhīm ibn Mūsā narrated from ‘Abd al-Razzāq... from Rāfi‘ ibn Makīth (who was among those present at Ḥudaybiyyah) that the Prophet ﷺ said: ‘Kind and gracious treatment of servants brings blessings, while bad character brings misfortune.’”

#### Overlooking Workers’ Mistakes

The employer (ājir) should be forgiving towards minor mistakes committed by the employee (ajīr) and must refrain from scolding, humiliating, or punishing them for small errors or occasional disobedience. In case of deliberate mistakes, the employer is urged to adopt a magnanimous attitude and respond with forbearance and mercy.

The Prophet ﷺ said:

حَدَّثَنَا قُتَيْبَةُ... قَالَ كُلُّ يَوْمٍ سَبْعِينَ مَرَّةً<sup>22</sup>

Qutaybah narrated... from ‘Abdullāh ibn ‘Umar that a man came to the Prophet ﷺ and asked: ‘O Messenger of Allah, how often should I forgive my servant?’ The Prophet ﷺ remained silent. The man asked again, and the Prophet ﷺ replied: ‘Seventy times a day.

This ḥadīth (ḥasan gharīb) illustrates the level of patience and mercy an employer is encouraged to exercise toward those working under them.

#### Rewarding Workers for Their Labor

It is highly recommended that employers, apart from the agreed wage, offer additional rewards to the workers as a token of appreciation. This gesture boosts morale and encourages commitment and sincerity in their tasks. The Prophet ﷺ also advised such generosity.

حَدَّثَنَا مُحَمَّدُ بْنُ عَبْدِ اللَّهِ... فَإِنْ أَبَى فَلْيُنَاوِلْهُ مِنْهُ<sup>23</sup>

“Muḥammad ibn ‘Abdullāh ibn Numayr narrated... that Abū Hurayrah reported: The Messenger of Allah ﷺ said, ‘When your servant brings your food, let him sit and eat with you. If he refuses, then at least give him a portion of it.

Dr. Ṭāhir al-Qādrī writes that Islam encourages employers to make their workers partners in profit-sharing. This participation can take the form of financial rewards or motivational bonuses.<sup>24</sup>

These teachings suggest that sharing one’s profit with workers fosters mutual respect, cooperation, and emotional connection, which benefit both party’s employer and employee.

<sup>22</sup> Al-Tirmidhi, Sunan, Book on Righteousness and Maintaining Ties of Kinship, Chapter on Forgiving the Servant, Hadith No. 2034.

<sup>23</sup> Ibn Majah, Sunan, Book on Foods, Chapter on Giving Food to the Servant, Hadith No. 3294.

<sup>24</sup> Dr. Muhammad Tahir-ul-Qadri, Islamic Economics, Minhaj-ul-Quran Publications, Lahore, March 2007, p. 731.

### The Contemporary Labor Policy

In the modern era, an Islamic labor policy has been formulated which aligns closely with the prophetic directives mentioned above. Dr. Ṭāhir al-Qādrī outlines the core features of this policy:

- Labor is not a commodity for sale.
- Rejection of oppression and injustice.
- Graded and fair wages.
- Compensation for overtime
- Fulfillment of additional rights.
- Balance between capital, skill, and labor.
- Prohibition of child and female labor in exploitative roles.
- Legal and moral protection of workers' rights.<sup>25</sup>

This policy directly reflects the principles laid down by the Prophet ﷺ over fourteen centuries ago. The pressing need today is to practically implement these teachings so that laborers, crushed under poverty and injustice, may improve their lives with dignity.

In this context, Ḥāfiẓ Zulfikār 'Alī rightly observes:

“Islamic directives serve the broader social interest. Ignoring those leads to economic imbalance. Therefore, in a Muslim society, those ignorant of Islamic trade regulations should not be permitted to conduct business.”<sup>26</sup>

### Conclusion

In the contemporary world, the pursuit of wealth is a common ambition to improve living standards and fulfill familial needs. While striving for ḥalāl income is commendable, abandoning Islamic teachings in this pursuit renders one's wealth a burden in both this world and the Hereafter.

This article demonstrates that trade is a blessed profession practiced by prophets and must be guided by both worldly and eternal objectives. Commercial dealings must conform to the principles of the Qur'ān and Sunnah and be conducted within the bounds permitted by Shari'ah. True success lies therein.

The Prophet ﷺ rescued society from the depths of injustice and immorality and replaced it with peace and equity. He not only gave verbal instructions but practically lived them he engaged in trade, labored, and treated his subordinates with utmost grace. Even in his final days, he emphasized the rights of servants and the underprivileged.

Thus, genuine peace and prosperity can only be achieved by implementing the Prophet's ﷺ teachings regarding workers' rights. In our time, seminars, workshops, and conferences often advocate for labor rights, but practical implementation remains lacking.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 743.

<sup>26</sup> Hafiz Zulfiqar Ali, Shariah Rulings on Contemporary Financial Transactions, Abu Huraira Academy, Lahore, September 2008, p. 21.



Ironically, even on May 1st, International Workers' Day, many workers like domestic servants, street laborers, and employees in restaurants or malls remain unaware of the significance of the day and continue working without respite. The aḥādīth discussed above reinforce that the Prophet ﷺ provided a comprehensive framework for workers' rights not merely for discussion but for practical implementation so that justice, peace, and prosperity may reign in society.