**Neglect of the Disabled Children**

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My motivation to write on the subject matter stems from a letter written to me by a female assistant professor from Quetta, whose son is suffering from Cerebral Palsy, since his child-hood. Cerebral palsy is a group of disorders that affect a person’s ability to move and maintain balance and posture. The boy is now 25 years old. It is really hard to imagine the mental stress and agony that the family has had to endure during all those years, besides incurring astronomical expenses on his treatment in hospitals at Karachi, Lahore, and Multan because of the lack of medical facilities at Quetta to treat the condition of the boy. I am sure there must be many more in the province who might have been facing the same ordeal.

It is really a matter of shame that Quetta being the capital of the largest province of Pakistan, even in twenty first century, relies on primitive medical infrastructure, and no government has ever bothered to pay attention to the plight of the disabled children and their families. The neglect of the disabled children reflects badly on the sense of social responsibility of the rulers.

All civilized societies and states are very sensitive to issues related to children especially those with disabilities. There is a global movement for rights of the disabled. The establishment of UNICEF as part of the UN system in 1953 was an outcome of that movement. It operates in 190 countries of the world. One of the world’s largest providers of vaccines, UNICEF supports child health and nutrition, safe water and sanitation, quality education and skill building, HIV prevention and treatment for mothers and babies, and the protection of children and adolescents from violence and exploitation.

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The UN also adopted Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities which was signed on 30, March 2007 by 81 countries. Earlier the heads of state and government adopted an unequivocal statement in UN General Assembly special session on Children in May 2002 declaring: “Each girl and boy is born free and equal in dignity and rights; therefore, all forms of discrimination affecting children must end…. We will take all measures to ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms, including equal access to health, education and recreational services, by children with disabilities and children with special needs, to ensure the recognition of their dignity, to promote their self-reliance, and to facilitate their active participation in the community.”

Our religion also lays emphasis on taking care of the people and children with disabilities. Islamic philosophy has a positive attitude towards needy individuals and those who are in a disadvantaged situation. The Qur’an and the Hadith not only declared the existence of disabilities as a natural part of human nature, but also provided principles and practical suggestions for the care of disabled people, as well as discussing the significance of such care. An example of this is in the Qur’an (48, 17): “There is not upon the blind any guilt or upon the lame any guilt or upon the ill any guilt. And whoever obeys Allah and His messenger – He will admit him to gardens beneath which rivers flow: but whoever turns away – He will punish him with a painful punishment.”

In fact, the generic term ‘disability’ is not mentioned in the Qur’an; the term ‘disadvantaged people’ has been used to refer to those with special needs. In fact, society’s civil responsibility is illustrated in the Qur’an, which stresses that society is responsible for taking care of such individuals, and is responsible for improving their conditions.

A role-model in this regard is Caliph Omar Ibn Al-Khattab, who provided housing to a blind man near the mosque after the father of the disabled boy complained to Omar about his son being unable to reach the mosque. A further example is the second Islamic state in Damascus, when the Umayyad caliph, al Walid ibn Abd al Malik, established the first care home for intellectually disabled individuals. He also built the first hospital which accommodated the intellectually disabled as part of its services. He also assigned each disabled and needy individual a caregiver.

The inclusion of children with disabilities is a matter of social justice. It is not based on charity or goodwill but is an integral element of the expression and realization of universal human rights. It is estimated that there are 650 million individuals who are disabled as a result of mental, physical, and sensory impairments (United Nations, 2006), and approximately one-third of them are the children in developing countries.

Poverty is both a cause and a consequence of disability. Families living in poverty are much more vulnerable to sickness and infection, especially in infancy and early childhood. They are also less likely to receive adequate health care or to be able to pay for basic medicines or school fees. The costs of caring for a child with a disability create further hardship for a family, particularly for mothers who are often prevented from working and contributing to family income. That is where the role of the state and society comes in. It is our religious as well as global obligation to look after the disabled, and arrange treatment facilities for their disabilities so that the families with scant means do not have to bear the burden of their treatment. That is also the underlying spirit in the concept of a welfare state.

Providing health facilities to the masses is one of the basic responsibilities of the state and government. Unfortunately, our record on this count has been very dismal. The government, especially the provincial government of Balochistan has to reset its priorities in conformity with our international obligations, religious norms and objectives of the SDGs adopted by the UN in 2015. The federal government must also take notice of the situation, and help the provincial government for setting up state of the art medical facility at Quetta to for the treatment of children with disabilities.

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