

Animal rights and welfare in Islam

Abstract

Animalia is the essential part of the universe. Their existence on this planet is evident far before that of the mankind. The first fossils that might represent animals appear in the 665-million-year-old rocks of the Trezona Formation of South Australia. Some of the animals have been domesticated by the mankind over the centuries. Humans have been using them to serve multiple needs for generations. Being the part and parcel of the human society they have been entitled with certain rights to be offered by the human beings. This paper unfolds the truth that how the animals were deprived of their basic rights in the pre Islamic era and how Islam has laid down a complete code of their welfare. It puts forth the various important aspects of animal welfare in contrast with the modern industrial regulations regarding their lives, treatment, feeding, etc. Furthermore, this paper has been strengthened by the number of revelations from Quran and Sunnah and by the regulations from halal and non-halal industrial guidelines.

Keywords: Islam, animals, welfare, slaughtering, cruel, European commission, Halal standard

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Introduction

Animal rights refer to the entitlements of animals to the possession of their own lives and their most basic interests including need to avoid suffering. On the other hand, the term “welfare” designates the state of an individual in relation to its surroundings (environment), which is measurable. Animal welfare, thus, denotes the state of the animal and the treatment it receives during whole life span. This includes animal care, animal husbandry and humane handling. Failure to manage with the environment and difficulty in coping are indicators of poor welfare. Suffering and poor welfare often occur together, but welfare can be poor without suffering. The indicators of poor animal welfare include impaired growth, impaired reproduction, body damage, disease, immunosuppression, adrenal activity, behaviour anomalies, etc.

Globally, animal welfare is a matter of concern and is receiving more attention from the legislative authorities, the public and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The reasons advocated for this trend are that the animals are living beings and deserve kindness. Secondly, in commerce, the maltreated animals yield lower quality meat than the ones well-kept and well handled. Hence, improvements in animal welfare as well as animal handling systems are gaining consideration, especially for the meat animals to produce quality meat and meat products. Additionally, technological developments and mechanization have led to develop animal friendly systems that handle animals to ensure consideration for their welfare. Improvement of animal welfare also leads to higher quality products and reduced waste, thereby increasing profits. Therefore, good animal welfare is excellent business and the development and implementation of technology is the way to obtain improved animal welfare.¹

In European Union (EU), welfare of animals raised for food purposes is the subject of ever on-going debate. The governments are focusing on this by calling reduction of such techniques that are painful for the animals. These include tail docking, castration, transport conditions, etc. However, the legislation in developed countries demand increased emphasis on animal welfare. Additionally, the market has established requirements for better food quality including demand for healthy meat leading towards efficient production systems and technologies. These are geared to improve animal welfare, product quality and efficiency as well as working conditions for development of meat industry.²

Besides EU, regulations are also set by different organizations

that demand animal welfare during production, transportation and at slaughtering. However, Council Regulation No. 1099/2009 significantly focuses on animals handling on slaughtering day. Additionally, EU legislations also require that slaughterhouses must appoint an animal welfare officer, establish standard operating procedures and entrust animals’ handling to properly trained personnel only. Moreover, operators need a certificate of competence that clearly reflects their ability to handle the animal to avoid stress in them. Globally, OIE (World Organization for Animal Health, formerly called Office International des Epizooties) has greatly contributed to increased awareness of animal welfare for meat animals. It is also trying to establish international standards for better handling of animals.³

Islam is the religion of compassion and affection. One of its objectives is to create and provide ease. The word “Islam” has been derived from peace and harmony. Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) preached brotherhood, compassion, mercy, mutual cooperation and trustworthiness all of his life. He (ﷺ) started from himself and exhibited a model to His followers. Nevertheless He (ﷺ) revealed a complete code of welfare for the animals as well. They were treated in the manners even mankind was not behaved alike in other parts of the world in His sacred era. Therefore, feeling the need of the hour, this paper intends to explore the various aspects of animal welfare highlighted by Islam in contrast with the modern day’s industrial practices and regulations.

Islam and animal welfare

All living creatures including humans, animals, birds and insects are worthy for consideration and deserve respect since Islam views them as Allah’s creations. Islam strongly enforces its followers to treat animals with compassion and do not abuse them. The Holy Qur’an, Ahadith as well as history of Islamic civilization have witnessed numerous examples of kindness, mercy, and sympathy for animals. According to Islamic teachings, animals have specific position and purpose in the creation hierarchy. Fundamentally they have been created to fulfil the multiple needs of the mankind. On the other hand humans have been directed not to waste the lives of animals and are held responsible for their well-being and feed.

The Prophet (ﷺ) warned, “there is no person who kills a small bird or anything larger for just nothing, but Allah, the Mighty and Sublime, will ask him about it”. When the Messenger of Allah was

asked about “nothing”, He (ﷺ) replied: “that you slaughter the animal and eat it and do not cut off its head and throw it aside”⁴ In simple language, one is only permitted to kill an animal for particular need, e.g. food, etc. Apart from the daily usual and common benefits Islam has disclosed some outstanding characters bestowed upon the animals which can be even useful in the present scientific era. The Prophet (ﷺ) revealingly said: When you hear the barking of dogs and the braying of asses at night, seek refuge in Allah, for they see which you do not see.⁵ According to this revelation some of the animals have the capability to foresee the natural events such as flood, earthquake, or hurricane that cause great damage or loss of life. Hence, they need more attention from the mankind in contrast to what humans normally offer.

The Holy Quran and animals

The Almighty Allah, the Creator of this Universe, assigned space to all its creations:⁶

“And the earth, He has assigned it to all living creatures” (LV:10).

This reflects that the earth is not only meant to be used by the human race, but for all the living beings—be these insects, rodents, animals, birds, or the water creatures. The significance of animals in Islam is evident from the fact that out of 114 Suras (Chapters) in the Holy Quran, six have been named after them. Among these are Al-Baqarah

(The Cow, II), Al-An’am (The Flocks, VI), An-Nahl (The Bee, XVI), An-Naml (The Ant, XXVII), Al-Ankabut (The Spider, XXIX) and Al-Fil (The Elephant, CV). Besides these, there are numerous verses in different Chapters that deal with the animals. These citations in the Holy Quran reflect the fact that along with human beings, animals are also noteworthy in Islam and have their rights. No doubt, superiority rests in the children of Adam, yet these creatures have a significant role to play in this universe. The above-mentioned Chapters, in addition to Surah Al-Maidha (V), narrate their benefits for mankind. Some animals are domesticated as livestock, hence provide milk, meat and leather, while others are used for transportation (XL-79-80).

“Allah it is Who hath appointed for you cattle, that ye may ride on some of them, and eat of some - Many benefits ye have from them - and that ye may satisfy by their means a need that is in your breasts, and may be borne upon them as upon the ship.” (XL:79-80).

Every living organism in this universe has worth and is part of the human society. Therefore, Muslims are required to treat them with compassion and not to abuse them. Islam has laid down rights for animals long before even the human rights were recognized in the Western world. In Islam, all the creations, including animal, are believed to praise the Almighty Allah since, like humans, they are creations of Allah. Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) was sent as a mercy to mankind and a blessing for all creatures, as reflected in the following verse:

“And We have not sent you but as a mercy for the worlds.” (XXI:107)

107 يَا بَنِي آدَمَ إِنِّي جَاءْتُكُمْ بِالْحَقِّ وَالْحَقُّ أَكْبَرُ مِنْ سِرِّ الْأُمَمِ

The Holy Quran further defines animals as well as all living beings, as submissive, since they live the way that Almighty Allah has created them to live, and they follow Allah’s laws:

“There is not an animal that lives on neither the earth, nor a being that flies on its wings, but they form communities like you. Nothing have we omitted from the Book, and they all shall be gathered to their Lord in the end” (VI: 38)

“Have you not seen that to Allah extol, whoever are in the heavens and the earth and the birds outstretching (their wings)? (Or: in ranks) Each has already known its prayer and Extolment; and Allah is Ever-Knowing of whatever they perform”. (XXIV:41)

These verses serve as reminder to all of us that none of the animals are created without purpose and that they have feelings. Therefore, they have the right to their lives, as well as protection from pain and suffering. Man must consider their lives as worthwhile and cherished.

Animal welfare in Sunnah

There are numerous Ahadith that dwell on humane handling of animals. The Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) urged Muslims to express kindness towards animals and birds, and repeatedly prohibited cruelty towards them. This is reflected in some Ahadith that are quoted below:

Using animals as shooting targets

Before the arrival of the Holy Prophet (ﷺ), animals were cruelly confined and tied as shooting targets. The people at that time used to enjoy this practice. This was banned by the Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) who prohibited taking a living thing as a shooting target (Jami` at-Tirmidhi 1475).

Compassion

Hazrat Muhammad (ﷺ) was sent on the earth as compassion and mercy, not only for mankind but also for the animals (XXI: 107). In this regard He (ﷺ) forbade the people from harming or torturing the animals. On different occasions He (ﷺ) prohibited the people from dragging, mutilating and branding the animals or

making them fight each other. Moreover, He (ﷺ) barred people from caging the birds as He (ﷺ) declared it a painful act. He (ﷺ) also prohibited the followers from killing non-hazardous tiny creatures like ants, bees, frogs, etc. These aspects of kindness towards the animals are reflected in following hadiths:-

- The Holy Prophet (ﷺ) passed by a man who was dragging a sheep by its ear, He (ﷺ) said: ‘Leave its ear and hold it by the sides of its neck’.⁷ Pulling an animal by the ears is more painful than pulling it by the neck.
- The Holy Prophet (ﷺ) forbade beating (animals) on the face.⁸ Face is more sensitive than other parts, hence it is painful to the animal to hit on the face.
- It is reported that He (ﷺ) disliked making animals fight each other.⁹ When animals fight, they hit each other with full strength that causes pain to both the fighting animals.
- The Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) forbade mutilating animals.⁷ Mutilating is an act that is disliked even today. It is painful when using hot iron or other such techniques.
- A man said to the Holy Prophet that he was going to slaughter a sheep and then felt sorry for the sheep. The Holy Prophet (ﷺ) said twice, ‘Since you showed mercy to the sheep, Allah will show mercy to you’.⁹
- Abd al-Rahman b. ‘Abd Allah quoted his father as saying: When we were on a journey with the Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) and he had gone to relieve himself, we saw a Hummarah with two young ones. We took the young ones. The Hummarah came and began to spread out its wings. Then the prophet (May peace be upon him) came and said: who has pained this young by the loss of her young? Give her young ones back to her. We also saw an ant-hill which we had burned. He asked? Who has burned this? We replied: we have. He said: it is not fitting that anyone but the lord of the fire should punish with fire.⁵
- Narrated Abdur Rahman ibn Uthman: When a physician consulted the Prophet (ﷺ) about putting frogs in medicine, he forbade him to kill them.⁵

- viii. Narrated Abdullah ibn Abbas: The Prophet (ﷺ) prohibited to kill four creatures: ants, bees, hoopoes, and sparrow-hawks.⁵
- ix.
- x. In line with the above revelations the modern halal industrial standards also emphasize that the animals/birds should be treated humanely. They should be treated in ways that minimize fear, pain, stress and suffering. They should be provided with water, food, proper handling, health care, an environment appropriate to their care and use, with thoughtful consideration for their species-typical biology and behaviour. Moreover, they should be provided with water and feed during the long journey. If animals/birds have arrived from long distance, they should first be allowed to rest and be provided with water and feed (PS: 3733, 2016).
- xi. With the support and close co-operation of the Member States, the European Commission has been promoting animal welfare for over 40 years gradually improving the lives of farm animals. An important step in 1998 was Council Directive 98/58/EC on the protection of animals kept for farming purposes which gave general rules for the protection of animals of all species kept for the production of food, wool, skin or fur or for other farming purposes, including fish, reptiles or amphibians (EC, 2009). They reflect the so-called 'Five Freedoms':
- Freedom from hunger and thirst
 - Freedom from discomfort
 - Freedom from pain, injury and disease
 - Freedom to express normal behaviour
 - Freedom from fear and distress

Reward and punishment for treatment of animals

Islam has surprised the world by qualifying a person to haven for being kind to animals and to hell for ill treatment. In the ages of darkness, when even mankind could not be imagined to be treated well, animals were put in the slant of compassion and kindness. Following hadiths are eye openers to the mercy of this religion in this context.

- On one occasion, the Holy Prophet (ﷺ) narrated a story that a man felt very thirsty while he was travelling. He came across a well, went down and quenched his thirst. When he came out, he saw a dog panting and licking mud because of excessive thirst. He said to himself that this dog is suffering from the same thirst as I did. So, he went down the well again and filled his shoe with water and watered the dog. Allah rewarded him for that deed and forgave his sins. The people asked, "O Allah's Messenger (ﷺ)! Is there a reward for us in serving the animals?" He (ﷺ) replied: "Yes, there is a reward for serving any animate (living being)".⁸
- It is reported that the Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) said that a woman punished her cat by imprisoning it until it died of hunger. Because of this, she entered the Fire (was sent to hell).⁹

Kindness to animals during slaughter

Islam permits consumption of meat of halal animals only. None of the halal animals can be consumed without proper slaughtering as directed by the Muhammad (ﷺ). Even for these animals, the Holy Prophet (ﷺ) has directed His followers to show mercy, that will be rewarded by Allah on the Day of Rising".⁹ He (ﷺ) emphasized on the manners and etiquettes of slaughtering, in addition to the basic principles, to safeguard the animals from unnecessary pain. Following a hadith proclaim the protocols of slaughter:

- The Holy Prophet (ﷺ) said that Allah has decreed that everything should be done in a good way, so when you kill an animal, use a good method. The version of the narrators, other than Muslim, says: "So kill in a good manner." And when you slaughter, sharpen your knife, and give the animal as little pain as possible.⁵
- In another hadith, Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) said that verily Allah has enjoined goodness to everything; so when you kill, kill in a good manner and when you slaughter, slaughter in a good manner. He (ﷺ) further said that everyone must sharpen his knife, and let the slaughtered animal die comfortably.¹⁰ It is narrated that the Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) forbade the devil's sacrifice (cruel killing). This refers to the skinning of slaughtered animal whose jugular arteries and veins are not properly severed and the animal dies without proper bleeding.⁷

Fourteen hundred years ago Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) directed that animal must be treated humanely particularly when they are being slaughtered. Today merciful treatment with animals has become talk of the town. Specific pre and post-slaughter guidelines have been introduced to the abattoirs. Currently the animals are being slaughtered under the guidance of both halal and conventional (non-halal) standards. But both the types are conscious regarding the compassionate treatment during slaughter. The conventional standards feel that animals must be stunned before slaughter. It is a standard industry practice worldwide, since this makes them unconscious and reduces the pain. The knife should be very sharp, without blemishes or damage and be at least double the width of the neck. It should be used in a fast, aggressive cut across the throat with the least number of strokes in order to bring about immediate and massive blood loss.¹¹

Whereas gist of the halal standards in this regard reflects that animals must be served with merciful treatment, hence, they must be treated as such that they are not stressed or excited prior to slaughter. Holding areas for cattle should be provided with drinking water, as well as they should be nourished and well rested. The slaughter knife must be sharp. The size of the knife (blade length) should be proportioned to the size of the neck. The knife should not be sharpened in front of the animal. Furthermore, one animal should not be slaughtered in front of the other animal.¹²

Cutting a part from live animal

Cutting a part from a live animal was a cruel practice in the customs of Arabs. They used such organs for consumption. More often the injured animal died due to bleeding and pain. The Holy Prophet (ﷺ) strictly banned this ill treatment, as evident from the following ahadith:

- The people of Madinah were in the habit of cutting the humps off the camels and cutting the buttocks from the sheep. When the Prophet (ﷺ) came to Al-Madinah and saw this practice, he said: 'whatever is cut from an animal while it is still alive, then it is dead flesh' (and dead is haram in Islam).¹³
- The Prophet (ﷺ) cursed the person who did Muthla to an animal (i.e., cut its limbs or some other part of the body while it is still alive).⁸
- These two ahadith reflect the height of kindness towards the animals. Islam not only advocates that live animals be treated with mercy, but the partly dead (that has not bled completely and still shows signs of life) must also be taken care of. It is prohibited to start skinning or cutting parts of the animal after slaughtering until it is completely dead. The act of torturing animals after

slaughtering is prohibited by decreeing that the meat of such animals becomes haraam.

Slaughtering lactating animals

Lactation implies the secretion of milk from the mammary glands and the time duration that a mother lactates to feed her young. This period is considered important for the better growth and nourishment of the new born. In Islam slaughtering or killing of lactating animals is disliked as is evident from the following hadith: Once Hazrat Muhammad (ﷺ) came nearer a man from among the Ansar who had picked up a knife to slaughter an animal for the Messenger of Allah (ﷺ), the holy Prophet (ﷺ) said to him: “Avoid those animals that are lactating”.⁷

Conclusion

From the above discourse, it can be judged that Islam is the religion of peace and compassion. It not only takes care of the mankind but the animals also. Before Islam there was darkness everywhere. Animals were treated very cruelly. They were tied as shooting targets and made fighting each other for the fun and pleasure of the people. Their body parts were cut for consumption even when they were alive. They were used in long journeys without having been properly fed and drunk. The people at that time did not hesitate while slaughtering the lactating animals. All these barbaric acts resulted in the miserable death of the animals. There was no compassion and mercy for them. Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) decreed that they shall be treated in good manners. As they are the part and parcel of the human society, hence they shall be treated humanely in all aspects of their lives.

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Conflict of interest

The authors' don't have any conflict of interest towards the publication of this paper.

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