

FOCUS

Egalitarianism: For and Against

Inequality may be an inevitable concomitant of a market economy, which in turn is the only economic system consistent with the preservation of individual liberty... Of what use, it is sometimes asked, is freedom of speech or assembly, or freedom to choose one's occupation, to a starving man? This question, however, invites a counter question: which would you rather be, a well-fed slave or a starving free man?

by Abu Abdullah

Egalitarianism is the belief that incomes and assets should be equally distributed (income is here defined to include transfers from government and the imputed value of free access to goods and services that are provided free by the state). One of the major accusations against a free market-based economy ("capitalism") is that it tends to generate high levels of inequality. Capitalists wallow in luxury while workers, petty producers, and the unemployed lead lives of deprivation and insecurity to the point where even their biological functioning, and at times sheer survival are at stake.

A particularly offensive property of an inegalitarian system is supposed to be its self-perpetuating nature, with the children of the poor remaining poor (or becoming poorer) while the children of the rich wax obscenely richer, not because of any ability they might display, but simply because they inherit their parents' property and have access to superior education. The "old boys" (and girls) networks formed at school and the manners and social accomplishments (e.g. a "posh" accent) acquired there, also give them an unfair advantage.

Furthermore, an unequal society is bound to lose its unity, being split into two (or sometimes more) sub-societies, with the poor envying and therefore hating the rich, and the rich despising and fearing the poor. Violence increases, as the poor, or at least some of them, find in crime their only avenue for moving out of poverty (and also an outlet for class hatred), while the rich

invoke the majesty of the law, the police, the armed forces, and hired private thugs to protect their privileges. If there is a distinct middle class, they also suffer, mentally if not physically. Aspiring to the lifestyles of the rich, but terrified of sliding down into the ranks of the poor, their young become mentally unbalanced and seek solace in looking for shortcuts to wealth or retreating into a private world of drugs and other forms of deviance. Not infrequently, they also provide leadership to the poor in their constant struggle against the rich, either for a fairer share, or in extreme cases (revolutions) for the whole pie.

It is important to distinguish between inequality with or without poverty. Those who adhere to a relativist concept of poverty will not accept this distinction, but I think it is critical. You can conceivably have a society where incomes are very unequally distributed, but where even those who are at the bottom of the income scale have a reasonable standard of living eating well, owning or renting modest but comfortable and hygienic housing, having access to good schools and health services but not owning Greek islands or private yachts. (Imagine a family of four in today's Dhaka with a monthly income of Tk. 60 - 75,000). Would inequality then matter? I would say no - at least not a great deal though this may also be a split society, with little intermingling or intermarriage, with at least some sense of "exclusion" suffered by the "poor", and quite likely differential access to state power.

Nevertheless, even those who

object to inequality of incomes on principle will find it particularly offensive when it takes the form of islands of affluence in a sea of poverty. A common reaction is to suggest that the rich should be expropriated and their "surplus" income and assets distributed among the poor. In a primarily agrarian society the main vehicle of equalisation would be a redistributive land reform. In so far as large-scale industry is an important component of the economy, this can obviously not be physically divided up and redistributed, but there are a number of redistributive options: (a) keep all large industry (as well as commercial and financial establishments) in the public sector, (b) distribute shares among the workers, or (c) distribute shares among the population at large. Indeed, public ownership and control of "the commanding heights" of the economy and egalitarian redistribution of agricultural land, usually followed by some form of collectivisation, has traditionally constituted the core of the socialist project. However, the wealth appropriated from the rich was mostly diverted, not to meet the immediate consumption needs of the poor but to raising the rate of investment - i.e., the motive was growth rather than equality as

such. The results of such equalisation will depend on the current levels of average income as well as its current distribution. Whether there will be a significant impact on the levels of living of the poor will depend on how much of the nation's wealth is cornered by the economic elite. In some Latin American (and perhaps African) countries, expropriating the elite will perhaps release enough resources to more or less abolish poverty. In Bangladesh, on the other hand, while the income distribution data are probably not very reliable, the chances are that expropriating even the top 20 per cent will release too few resources to make a significant dent on poverty. In other words, pushing through an egalitarian programme will probably generalise poverty rather than eliminate it. (Of course "poverty" in the relative sense will be abolished by definition). Is this a good idea? Given that we cannot bring everybody's living standard up to that of the rich, should we, in the name of egalitarianism, bring the rich down to the level of the poor?

Consider a concrete example. Access to education is usually unequal in any society. While part of this inequality can be defended to the extent that it is determined by ability (you cannot

get admitted to a good university unless you are bright), mostly unequal access is the result of unequal income - good schools tend to be in the private sector and expensive, while state schools, free or highly subsidised and hence accessible to the poor, tend to be staffed by inferior teachers and have fewer resources for libraries, labs etc. Uncompromising egalitarians would say that high-quality private schools should be closed down, since it would be too expensive to have enough of them to serve all eligible students. This would mean a generalisation of mediocrity which would act as a drag on social progress. A similar dilemma bedevils the provision of health facilities. Should we deny the rich the right to access expensive high-quality private health care because most people cannot afford it? Is it fair that an industrialist can go to the US, or Singapore, to have a bypass, while a rickshaw-puller who needs a bypass will almost certainly have to do without in effect will have no option but to die?

Put like that, the choice sounds grotesque if indeed there is a question of choice. But again we must ask ourselves, if we denied access to advanced and expensive medical care to the rich or if we "liquidated" the rich as a

class, would the poor be any better off? Again, adamant egalitarians might answer "yes", because a deprivation universally shared will not be resented as much as one to which a favoured few are exempt.

Without going to such extremes, one may still insist that all citizens should have access to a "reasonable" quality health care system, without insisting that the rich must be denied access to even higher quality private care abroad if they can afford it. True, the better the quality aimed at for the public system, the more highly it will have to be subsidised. This should not be an insuperable problem since our national budget still has a fair amount of fat. And if publicly employed doctors choose to work after office hours to supplement their income (for a richer clientele at higher fees), this should be seen as part of the solution rather than the problem.

Anyway, my purpose was not to present a treatise on health economics, but to assess the benefits and costs of egalitarianism.

Offhand, it hardly seems possible that anything reasonable can be said for inegalitarianism. But recall that Marxists allowed for some degree of inequality in the first stage of communism ("to

each according to his work"), and that Marx accepted as legitimate the market's conversion of concrete labours into abstract labour (so that one hour of the concrete labour of a skilled surgeon should count as equivalent to many hours of the labour of an unskilled labourer). A few episodes from the history of the Soviet Union and China are also instructive.

In 1916 or 1917, before the Bolsheviks came to power, Lenin wrote "The State and Revolution", in which he espoused an extreme form of egalitarianism, according to which factory managers should get paid the same amount as unskilled workers. But after coming to power, he realised that good management required that managers get paid more. He talked in terms of "one man management" (jettisoning ideas of workers' selfmanagement) and of "bribing" managers, if necessary paying them as much as they used to get before the revolution.

In agriculture, initially a system of compulsory deliveries of grain to the state was imposed on the peasants. Pretty soon this led to a crisis, as peasants lost incentive to produce, and grain availability to feed the urban population fell sharply. The Bolsheviks, under the intellectual leadership of Lenin and Bukharin, then introduced the New Economic Policy, which basically liberalised the grain market. The message of the NEP for the peasants was "Enrich yourselves". Differentiation among the peasantry increased, but so did output and marketed surplus. Most commentators feel that persisting with the NEP would have avoided the horrors of Stalinist collectivisation.

The Chinese leadership after Mao also realised that the extreme egalitarianism of the commune system was frustrating growth. When the household responsibility system was introduced, and free markets were allowed in the southern economic zones, China entered upon the most astonishing growth in recorded history, while inequality increased. The new leadership condemned Maoist policies for having been excessively egalitarian.

What these episodes suggest is that some degree of inegalitarianism may be either a prerequisite or a consequence of rapid growth, while ideologies that overemphasize equality may impede growth and hence in the long run help perpetuate poverty.

It must be pointed out, however, that recent empirical investigations, as well as recent theoretical developments, suggest that equality in the initial distribution of income may actually help pro-

mote growth. This could be because (as mentioned earlier) there will be more social harmony, hence less disruption of the production process, or because more equality may lead to more widespread development of human capital (here however the exact opposite may also be argued depending on the level of income). However, the theoretical bases of these models are not very firm, depending as they do on special assumptions, and the empirical findings often support a transfer of income from the rich to the middle classes rather than to the poor.

Perhaps the most compelling reason for putting up with at least some degree of inequality is that the market economy, even when subjected to some universally accepted constraints (payment of taxes, regulation of natural monopolies, enforcement of contracts etc.) inevitably generates such inequalities. But the market economy is not only (usually) an efficient mechanism for organizing production and exchange, it is also the only such mechanism that accomplishes these goals without subjecting individuals to the coercive powers of the state apparatus. In other words, inequality may be an inevitable concomitant of a market economy, which in turn is the only economic system consistent with the preservation of individual liberty. For those who rest their case against egalitarianism on this, individual liberty is the ultimate, non-negotiable goods. I will confess that I have some sympathy for this point of view. But I can see that this is by no means an argument that will convince the skeptic. Questions remain as to the relative value of different kinds of freedom - negative or positive. Of what use, it is sometimes asked, is freedom of speech or assembly, or freedom to choose one's occupation, to a starving man?

This question, however, invites a counter question: which would you rather be, a well-fed slave or a starving free man? The usual answer is that under egalitarian socialism, the poor would not be slaves, they would be masters, the dictators in a dictatorship of the proletariat. Historical examples the Soviet Union, China, North Korea, Cambodia do not inspire great confidence in this vision. My personal view, for what it is worth, is that any system that depends on the concentration of essentially arbitrary power in the state apparatus is a recipe for totalitarianism.

SHAB-E- MIRAJ Prophet's Journey to the Higher Sphere

by Iffat Mirza

The blessed month of Rajab in the Islamic calendar is very special to the Muslims. Apart from it being a sacred month, Rajab is also important because Prophet Mohammad (pbuh) received a special honor from Allah in this month. Allah allowed him to visit the highest Heaven while he was still alive, on the night of 27th Rajab, 621 AD or one year before the Hijra (migration from Makkah to Medina). He also saw Paradise, Hell and the whereabouts of the prophets of the olden days. This extraordinary episode of the Prophet's life is known as Isra and Miraj. Isra refers to his nightly journey to the site of Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem, where the current day Dome of the Rock and the Al-Aqsa mosque complex is situated. The Miraj refers to his ascension to Heaven from Jerusalem.

The Quran mentions about the Isra in the following verse of the chapter 17, Sura Bani Israh: "Glory to (Allah) Who took His Servant for a Journey by night from the Sacred Mosque to the Farthest Mosque, whose precincts We did bless, in order that We might show him some of Our Signs; for He is the One Who hears and sees (all things)." [Quran 17:1]

The object of the nightly journey is clearly stated here - Allah wanted to show the Prophet His Signs. The Sacred Mosque is the Kaba in Makkah the most ancient place of worship built by Abraham and whose history goes back to Adam. The Farthest Mosque is the site of Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem, which had already been destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD. It is called the Farthest Mosque because it was a far away place of worship known to the Arabs. At the time of our Prophet, Jerusalem was in the Christians' hands as a part of Roman Empire. Early Muslims used to pray facing towards Jerusalem since it was sacred to the Jews and the Christians and to empha-

size the fact that Islam is a continuation of those earlier religions. Then the Quranic injunction came to face Kaba for praying in the year 2 after Hijra and the Muslims stopped the previous practice.

In the Sura Najm, Allah talks about the Miraj briefly in the following verses of the Quran: "Will you then dispute with him concerning what he saw?"

For indeed he saw him at a second descent, near the Lote-tree beyond which none may pass.

Near it is the Garden of Abode. Behold, the Lote-tree was shrouded (in mystery unspeakable)

For truly he saw of the Signs of his Lord, the Greatest!" [Quran 53: 12-18]

Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) saw Angel Gabriel in his actual shape in which Allah created him on two occasions, first near the cave Hira and then during his ascension to the heaven. It is said that the Prophet saw him with his 600 wings covering the entire horizon. The other times Gabriel came to him in human shape or without taking any form. From the authentic tales of the Prophet related by his close companions we get a vivid description of the whole incident of his night journey to Jerusalem and then his flight to the Heavens from there. In fact more than 25 people described Isra and Miraj as recorded in different Hadith collections and although there are some disparities in their minute details, the salient features remain the same. It is understandable that the Miraj has a deep spiritual connotation beyond its physical description. It was like a comprehensive course for Prophet Muhammad (pbuh)

in his mission of prophethood, which enhanced his strength and uplifted his confidence.

Description of the Journey The Prophet was in Makkah at the house of his cousin Hind also known as Umm Hani, daughter of Abu Talib. After saying the night prayer he went to bed. Then the angel Gabriel came to him and took him to Kaba and poured wisdom in his heart. Then he took him to Jerusalem riding on Buraq, a white extra-terrestrial creature with wings. It had a human face but its body resembled a horse and it was smaller in size than a mule but bigger than a donkey. From there he ascended to heaven with angel Gabriel. They passed the seven gates of the Seven Heavens one by one and met with a number of prophets there. In the first Heaven he met Adam, in the second Yahya (John the Baptist) and Isa (Jesus), in the third Yusuf (Joseph), in the fourth Idris (Enoch), in the fifth Haroon (Aaron), in the sixth Musa (Moses) and in the seventh heaven he met Ibrahim (Abraham). He exchanged greetings with all of them.

Then Gabriel left him near Sidratul Muntaha or Mysterious Lote tree beyond which no one can go, not even Angel Gabriel. Dazzling golden butterflies were fluttering around the Lote tree and incomprehensible mystery was surrounding the place. Our Prophet was allowed to go farther from that point by removing seventy thousand veils to go even nearer to the Sublime Divine Presence. The Prophet witnessed Allah's wonderful Signs hard to describe by any language. At that time Allah commanded for His servants compulsory prayers (salat) fifty times a day.

When he was returning and reached the sixth heaven Prophet Moses asked him what Allah had commanded for his followers. Our Prophet told him that He prescribed prayers 50 times a day. Prophet Moses told him to go back and ask Allah to reduce the number because he thought it was too much for his followers to maintain. Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) went back to plead Allah to reduce the number to half and Allah accepted his request. While he was coming back and passing Prophet Moses again, he asked our Prophet to go to Allah again to reduce the number and this continued until the number of prayer came to five times a day and Allah said "These are five prayers and they are all equal to 50 in reward for My Word does not change."

Even then Prophet Moses asked our Prophet to go back to Allah again to further reduce the number. But Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) said that he was ashamed to request Allah again. On his way back he stopped in Jerusalem again. He prayed with a number of prophets of the past in a congregation of which Angel Gabriel made him the imam. Then he met a caravan heading for Makkah. They had lost one of their camels. The Prophet helped them find it. In fact he saw a stray animal on his way and he took them there. Then he drank some water from their water carrier.

All these events took place in a very short time and the Prophet came back to Makkah just before Fajr prayer. When he told Umm Hani about the incident she discouraged him to disclose the event to anyone else fearing a negative repercussion. But the Prophet said that he was going to tell that to everyone just then. In our modern age of Internet it is

not difficult for us to perceive how could all that happen. We know the speed of light is 186,282 miles/second, we are familiar with Einstein's Theory of Relativity, we have powerful telescopes and scientists are discovering a new planet or galaxy almost every month, we watch Star War movies and let loose our imagination, we read books on near death experience.

In short, we have a very good idea of the abilities of the Creator of the Universe, Who is independent of time and space. But fourteen hundred years ago the situation was different, it was a big challenge for Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) to make people believe this supernatural incident. Because of his truthful nature his followers believed it on its face value. He described Jerusalem correctly although he had never been there, even then the unbelievers thought he was absolutely crazy

and some weak believers even turned back to idolatry.

Few hours later a caravan arrived to Makkah from the north i.e. from the direction of Jerusalem. They related how one of their animals had been lost and a stranger helped them to locate it in the middle of the night. They also said that something strange happened, one of their water jars had its seal broken...

Supplication for Miraj Although the event was a tremendous help for the Prophet to carry on his mission, he never celebrated the Lailat al-Miraj or the Night of the Ascent as such. But now-a-days some Muslims spend the day listening to stories of the Prophet's life. It is very rewarding to say few units of optional prayer on this blessed night i.e. the night of 27th Rajab and then fast on the following day. We never know when we get the call to go to the next world. We better prepare ourselves by grabbing every opportunity to earn some blessings.

BANGLADESH SHILPA BANK Head office : Dhaka Notices For

Enlistment of Panel Lawyers (Only for Head Office)

Bangladesh Shilpa Bank is looking for legal Adviser and some qualified and experienced lawyers from among the Bangladesh citizens for enlistment as its panel lawyers. The job, amongst others, would call for verification of security documents, drafting of legal documents, complaints, objections, drawing up of contracts and agreements connected with the bank's business, filing and representing suits in all relevant courts of law.

Lawyers, having experience in conducting writ and other cases in the High Court Division of the Supreme Court Shall have to mention the duration of the experience separately in the application.

Requirement:
Recognised professional qualifications with at least 7 years of legal practice (inclusive of 5 years in the High Court Division) would be needed. Work experience as panel lawyer with DFIs or Banks would be treated as an added qualification. A retired judicial officer practicing as an advocate may also apply. A selected candidate must be of sound health and mind and capable of undertaking tours/visits outside Dhaka. Bank's existing Legal Adviser and panel lawyers may also apply.

Applications alongwith curriculum vitae, photo-copy of all certificates etc. be sent to the Asstt. General Manager, law Department-1, Bangladesh Shilpa Bank, head Office, 8, Rajuk Avenue, Post Box No. 975, Dhaka-1000 within 15(fifteen) days from the date of publication of the notice. Decision of the Bank regarding selection would be final and conclusive.

Asstt. General Manager
Law Department -1
Bangladesh Shilpa Bank
Head office
8, Rajuk Avenue, Dhaka.

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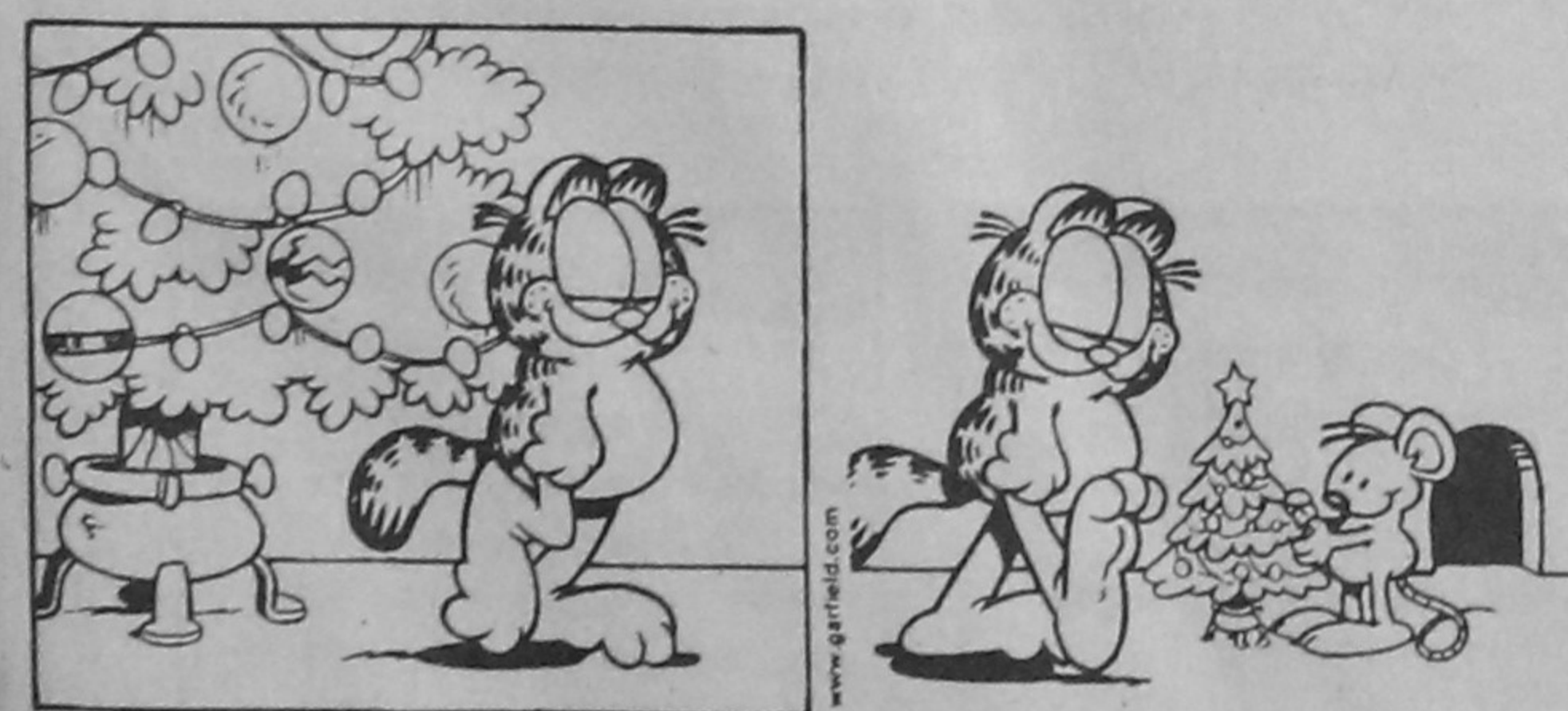
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