

Khalifa Umar bin al-Khattab - Inter-Personal Relations and Interactions

Umar's Care For The Poor

It was the year of the famine. Umar took pains to ensure that adequate relief reached all people, and that there were no persons in the city who went to sleep hungry.

One night as usual Umar went on his round. He was accompanied by his slave Aslam. As he strolled from street to street all was quiet and the people seemed to be asleep. Umar thought to himself, "Thank God, there is no one in this city whom the famine has afflicted."

Then as he turned a corner he saw a cottage where light was burning, and from where the sound of the weeping of the children was heard. Umar went to the cottage. He saw that the lady of the house was cooking something on the hearth, and the children were crying.

Umar knocked at the gate, and addressing the lady of the house Umar enquired why were the children crying. She said that they were crying because they were hungry. "And what are you cooking", asked Umar. The lady said that in the kettle there was only water and stones. That was to while away the children that food was being cooked for them. She hoped that exhausted the children would go to sleep.

Hearing this tale of woe, Umar felt guilty. He had thought that because of the arrangements made by him, no one was afflicted in the city and here was a family which was starving. Umar said to the lady that he would arrange relief for her family immediately.

Umar went to the Baitul Mal. There he put the necessary provisions in a bag and carried the bag to the cottage. His slave insisted that he would carry the bag, but Umar said that he would carry his burden himself. Umar handed over the bag of provisions to the lady. Umar sat by the hearth and helped the lady cook the meals. When the meals were ready the children were awakened and served with the delicious meals. As the children ate to their fill and were satisfied they smiled the smile of happiness. Seeing the destitute children smile Umar also felt happy.

Umar enquired of the lady whether there was none to support. She said that the father of the children had died, and there was no body to support. Whatever little was in the house had been gradually used up and they were starving since the last three days.

Umar asked the lady why she had not brought her distress to the notice of the Caliph. The lady said that in spite of her poverty she had some sence of self-respect and she could not go and beg the Caliph for any favour. She added that it was incumbent on the Caliph to ascertain that there was no one in his charge who was starving.

Umar said, "You are right. Please excuse me for the remissness in the past. For the future it will be my responsibility to see that your wants are satisfied."

And when the lady realised that the man who had come to her relief was the Caliph himself, she felt satisfied that the Caliph had discharged his onerous responsibilities creditably.

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