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Social Divisions and Polarization

Although society has a kind of unity, it is divided from within into different groups, strata and classes, which are occasionally opposite to one another. If not all, some of societies are divided into different and occasionally conflicting poles despite their apparent unity. Thus, in the words of Muslim philosophers, a specific type of `unity in plurality and plurality in unity' governs societies. In earlier chapters, while discussing the nature of the unity of society, we have elaborated what type of unity it is. Now we shall discuss the nature of its inherent plurality.

There are two well-known theories with regard to this problem. The first is the philosophy of historical materialism and dialectical contradictions. This theory, which would be discussed in detail later, is based upon the origin of private property. The societies in which the conception of private property does not exist are basically unipolar, such as the primitive communist societies or those communist societies which are likely to be formed in the future.

A society in which the right to private property. Exists is, of necessity, bipolar. Hence, society is either unipolar or bipolar. There is no third alternative possible. In bipolar societies, human beings are divided into two groups, viz. the exploiters and the exploited. Except these two opposite camps, i.e. the group of the rulers and the group of the ruled, any third group does not exist. All the social modes, such as philosophy, morality, religion, and art, may also be divided according to the class character of the two groups.

There are, therefore, two types of philosophy, morality, religion, etc., each of which bears the specific economic class character of each group. Hypothetically, if there were only one philosophy, one religion, and one morality prevalent in a society, it too represents the character of any one of these two classes and is imposed on the other. But it is impossible to imagine the existence of a philosophy, art, religion or morality without having a character independent of the economic structure of society.

According to the other theory, the unipolar or multipolar characteristic of society has nothing to do with the principle of private ownership. The social, ideological, cultural, and racial factors, too, are responsible for giving rise to multipolar societies. The cultural and ideological factors, in particular, play the basic role; they are not only capable of producing bipolar or multipolar societies with occasionally contradictory

poles but can also create a unipolar society without necessarily abolishing the institution of private ownership.

Now we have to discuss the view of the Qur'an regarding the plurality of society. Does the Qur'an affirm or negate social plurality? And if it affirms, what is its point of view about the polarization of society? Does the Qur'an affirm the bipol4rization of society on the basis of ownership and exploitation, or does it forward some other view? The best or at least a good method for determining the Qur'anic point of view seems to be that we should first of all extract the social terminology used in the Qur'an. In the light of the nature and meaning of the Qur'anic idiom we can infer the position of the Qur'an concerning this matter.

The social terminology used in the Qur'an is of two types: some of the words are related with a particular social phenomenon such as, millah (community), shari `ah (Divine Law), shir`ah (custom), minhaj (method), sunnah (tradition), and the like. These terms are not relevant to the present discussion. But a number of terms which refer to all or some human groups may be taken into account for discovering the Qur'anic viewpoint.

These words can reveal the point of view of the Qur'an. Such terms as qawm (folk), ummah (community), nas (mankind), shu`ub (peoples), qaba'il (tribes), rasul (messenger, apostle), nabi (prophet), imam (leader), wali (guardian), mu'min (believer), kafir (unbeliever), munafiq (dissenter or hypocrite), mushrik (polytheist), mudhabdhab (hesitant), muhajir (emigrant), mujahid (warrior), sadiq (truthful), shahid (witness), muttaqi (pious), salih (righteous), muslih (reformer), mufsid (corrupter).

Aamir bil ma'ruf (one who orders to obey God's command), nahi `an al–munkar (one who forbids indecent or illegitimate deeds), `alim (learned), nasih (admonishes), zalim (cruel, oppressive, unjust), khalifah (deputy), rabbani (Divine), rabbi (rabbi), kahin (priest), ruhban (monks), ahbar (Jewish scribes), jabbar (tyrant), `ali (sublime), mustali (superior), mustakbir (tyrant, proud), mustad`af (tyrannized, oppressed), musrif (lavish, prodigal), mutraf (affluent), taghut (idols), mala ` (chieftains), muluk (kings), ghani (rich), faqir (poor, needy), mamluk (the ruled), malik (owner, master), hurr (free, liberated), `abd (slave, servant), rabb (master, lord), etc.

Furthermore, there are other words which are apparently similar to these words, such as: musalli (one who prays), mukhlis (sincere, devoted), sadiq (loyal, true), munfiq (charitable), mustaghfir (one who asks for God's forgiveness), ta'ib (penitent), abid (adorer), hamid (one who praises), etc.

But these words have been used only for the purpose of describing kinds of behaviour and not to refer to certain social groups, poles, or classes.

It is essential to study the connotation and meaning of the verses in which the terms referred to earlier are used, in particular the words related to social orientations. It is also to be seen whether the above mentioned terms can be divided into two distinct groups. And supposing that these terms refer to two distinct groups, it should be determined who are their referents.

For example, can all of them be classified in two groups of believers and unbelievers, according to a classification based on religious belief, or into two groups of the rich and the poor according to their economic position? In other words, it is to be analyzed whether these divisions are ultimately based on any one primary classification, and whether or not all the other sub–divisions are essentially secondary and relative. If there is only one principle of division, it has to be determined.

Some people claim that the Qur'anic view suggests a bipolar society. They say according to the Qur'an, society is divided into two classes: one is the ruling, dominating, and exploiting class, and the other consists of the ruled, exploited, and subjugated people. The ruling class consists of those whom the Qur'an calls `mustakbirun', i.e. the arrogant oppressors and exploiters. The subjugated class is of those who are called by the Qur'an `mustad'afun' (the weakened).

All other divisions, such as mu'min (believer) and kafir (unbeliever), muwahhid (monotheist) and mushrik (polytheist), salih (righteous) and fasid (corrupt) are secondary in nature. It means that it is tyranny and exploitation that leads to infidelity, idolatry, hypocrisy and other such evils, whereas, on the other hand, subjugation to oppression and exploitation leads towards iman (faith), hijrah (migration), jihad (struggle), salih (righteousness), islah (reform) and other such qualities.

In other words, all such things which are regarded by the Qur'an as deviation and aberration in religion, morality, and deeds are rooted in the practice of exploitation and the economic privileges of a class. Similarly, the source and root of the attitudes and acts morally, religiously, and practically approved and emphasized by the Qur'an, lie in the condition of being exploited. Human consciousness is naturally determined by the material conditions of life. Without changing the material life of a people, it is not possible to bring about any change in their spiritual, moral and psychic life.

According to this viewpoint, the Qur'an perceives social conflicts as basically class conflicts. It means that the Qur'an gives essential priority to social and economic struggle over moral struggle. According to this interpretation, in the Qur'an, infidels, hypocrites, idolaters, the morally corrupt and the tyrants arise from among the groups whom the Qur'an names as mutraf (the affluent), musrif (extravagant and wasteful), mala' (ruling clique), muluk (kings), mustakbir (arrogant) and so on. It is not possible for these groups to arise from among the opposite class.

In the same way, they say, the prophets (anbiya'), messengers (mursalun), leaders (a'immah), upholders of truth (siddiqun), martyrs (shuhada'), warriors (mujahidun), emigrants (muhajirun) and believers (muminun) emerge from among the class of the oppressed and the weak. It is not possible that they may arise from the opposite class. So it is mainly istihbar (tyranny and arrogance) or istid`af (weakness, or condition of being oppressed) that mould and direct the social consciousness of the people. All the other social modes are products and manifestations of the struggle between the exploiters and the exploited, and the oppressors and the oppressed.

According to this viewpoint, the Qur'an not only considers the two above mentioned groups of people as

manifestation and expression of the division of society into two classes of the mustakbirun and the mustad'afun, but it also divides human attributes and dispositions into two sets.

Truthfulness, forgiveness, sincerity, service, insight, vision, compassion, mercy, pity, generosity, humility, sympathy, nobility, sacrifice, fear of God, etc. constitute one set of positive values on the other hand, falsehood, treachery, debauchery, hypocrisy, sensuality, cruelty, callousness, stupidity, avarice and pride etc. constitute another set of values, which are negative. The first sets of attributes are ascribed to the oppressed class and the second set is considered to characterize the oppressors.

Hence, they say, oppression and subjugation not only give rise to opposite groups, but they are also the fountainheads of conflicting moral qualities and habits. The position of a class either as oppressor or oppressed is the basis and foundation not only of all human attitudes, loyalties, and preferences, but also of all cultural and social phenomena and manifestations.

The morality, philosophy, art, literature, and religion originating in the class of oppressors always manifest and represent its character and social attitude. All of them support and justify the status quo, and cause stagnation and decadence by arresting social progress. On the other hand, the philosophy, art, literature, and religion originating from the class of the oppressed are dynamic and revolutionary, and generate new awareness.

The class of the oppressors, i.e. the mustakabirun, because of its hegemony over social privileges, is obscurantist, traditionalist, and seeks shelter under the shadow of conservatism; whereas the class of the oppressed is endowed with vision, and is anti-traditionalist, progressive, zealous, active, and is always in the vanguard of revolution.

In brief, according to the advocates of this theory, the Qur'an affirms the view that it is actually the economic structure of a society which makes a man, determines his group-identity and his attitudes, and lays down the foundation of his thinking, morality, religion, and ideology. They quote a number of verses from the Qur'an to show that what they teach is, on the whole, based upon the Qur'an.

According to this view, commitment to a particular class is the measure and test of all things. All the beliefs are to be evaluated by this standard. The claims and assertions of a believer, a reformer, and even a prophet or a spiritual leader, can be confirmed or rejected only through this test.

This theory is in fact a materialistic interpretation of both man and society. No doubt the Qur'an gives a special importance to the social allegiances of individuals, but does it mean that the Qur'an interprets all distinctions and classifications on the basis of social classes? In my view such an interpretation of society, man, and the world is not consistent with the Islamic world view.

It is a conclusion drawn from a superficial study of the problems discussed in the Qur'an. However, since we shall discuss this matter fully in a later chapter dealing with history under the title "Is History Materialistic in Nature?" I shall abstain from further elaboration at this point.

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