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What is Society?

A society consists of groups of human beings who are linked together by means of specific systems and customs, rites and laws, and have a collective social existence. Collective life is that in which groups of people live together in a particular region, and share the same climate and similar foodstuffs.

Trees of a garden also `live' together and share the same climate and the same kind of nourishment. In the same manner, gazelles of a herd also graze together, and migrate together from place to place. But neither trees nor gazelles can be said to have a social life, as they do not form a society.

Human life is social in the sense that it is essentially gregarious. On the one hand human needs, benefits, satisfactions, work, and activity are social in essence, and the social system cannot be maintained but through division of labour, division of profits and a shared common satisfaction of needs within a particular set of traditions and systems.

On the other hand, specific ideas and ideals, temperaments, and habits govern human beings in general, giving them a sense of unity and integration. In other words, society represents a group of human beings, who, under the compulsion of a series of requirements and under the influence of a set of beliefs, ideals and goals, are amalgamated with one another and are immersed in a continuum of collective life.

The common social interests, and particular ties of human life unite human beings together, giving to every individual a sense of unity similar to that experienced by a group of people travelling together in an automobile or an Aeroplane or a Boat, heading towards the same destination, and sharing together the common hope of reaching the destination safely, the dangers of the way, and a common fate.

How beautifully the Prophet of Islam (saws) has described the philosophy of `enjoining right conduct and forbidding indecency' (*al_'amr bil ma'ruf wa nahy `an al_munkar*) by means of the following parable:

A group of people board a ship that sets sail on the sea tearing apart the waves. Every one of them has a seat reserved for him. One of the travellers claiming that the seat occupied by him belonged to none

other than him, starts making a hole under his seat with a sharp tool. Unless all the travellers immediately hold his hand and make him desist from doing so, they would risk drowning not only themselves but would also fail to save the poor wretch from being drowned.

Is Man Social by Nature?

The problem regarding the factors responsible for the emergence of social life in human beings has been raised from the ancient times. Is man born with the instinct of gregariousness, i.e. whether he was naturally created as a part of a whole, with an urge in his nature to be united with the whole or if he was not created as a gregarious being, but external compulsions and determinism imposed upon him a collective life?

In other words, is he by nature inclined to live freely, and is disposed not to accept any kind of obligations and restrictions which have been imposed upon him, although they may be essential for social life? Has he in fact learnt from experience that no one is able to continue one's life in isolation, and so he has been forced to surrender to limitations imposed by social life?

Or, although he is not gregarious by nature, the factor that persuaded him to accept social existence was not compulsion, or at least compulsion had not been the sole factor? Or, was it by the ruling of his reason and through his faculty of calculation that he arrived at the conclusion that only through co-operation and social life could he better enjoy the gifts of nature, and, therefore, he chose to live in company with other human beings? Accordingly, the problem can be posed in three ways.

(1) Man is social by nature.

(2) He is social by compulsion.

(3) He is social by his own choice.

According to the first theory, man's social life is similar to the partnership of a man and a woman in married life each of the partners was created as a part of a whole and by nature yearns to be united with the whole. According to the second theory, social life is like cooperation, such as a pact between two countries which are singly unable to defend themselves against a common enemy and are forced to work out an agreement of co-operation and collaboration. According to the third theory, social life is similar to the partnership of two capitalists, which gives rise to a commercial, agricultural or industrial company aiming at attainment of greater profits.

On the basis of the first theory, the main factor is inherent in man's own nature itself. On the basis of the second theory, it is something external to man's essence and independent of it. And according to the third theory, the main factor responsible for social life is man's intellectual and calculating faculty.

According to the first view, sociability is a general and universal goal which man naturally aspires to

attain. According to the second theory, sociability is a casual and accidental phenomenon, a secondary and not a primary objective. According to the third theory, sociability is the result of man's faculty of reasoning and calculation.

It may be said on the basis of the study of the Qur'anic verses that sociability is inherent in the very nature and creation of man. In the Surah al Hujurat the Qur'an says:

.. يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُم مِّن ذَكَرٍ وَأُنثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا ۚ إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِندَ اللَّهِ أَتْقَاكُمْ

"O mankind! We have created you male and female, and have made you nations and tribes, that you may know one another [***not that on account of this you may boast of being superior to others***]. ***Certainly, the noblest of you, in the sight of Allah, is the most God-fearing among you"*** (49:13)

In this verse, besides an ethical precept, there is an implication which indicates the philosophy of social existence of man, according to which mankind is so created that it always lives in the form of groups, nations and tribes, and an individual is known through his relation to his respective nation and tribe an identity which is an integral part of social existence. If these relations which in one way, are the cause of commonness and association between individual men, and, in the other way, are the cause of their separation and dissociation did not exist, it would have been impossible to distinguish one man from another.

As a consequence, social life, which is the basis of relationships of human beings with one another, would not have come into existence. These and similar other factors in social life, such as differences in features, colour, and physique, provide the ground for specific marks of distinction of an individual and impart individuality to persons.

Had all the individuals been of the same colour, features, and physique, and had they not been governed by different types of relationships and associations, they would have been like the standardized products of a factory, identical to one another, and consequently could not be distinguished from one another.

It would have ultimately resulted in the negation of social life, which is based upon relations and exchange of ideas, labour and commodities. Hence, association of individuals with tribes and groups has a natural purpose. The individual differences among human beings serve as an essential condition of social life. It must not, however, be used as a pretext for prejudice and pride; for superiority is supposed to lie in human nobility and an individual's piety.

In verse 54 of Surah al-Furqan, the Qur'an states:

وَهُوَ الَّذِي خَلَقَ مِنَ الْمَاءِ بَشَرًا فَجَعَلَهُ نَسَبًا وَصِهْرًا

"And He it is who hath created man from water, and hath appointed for him kindred by blood [***relationships by birth***] ***and kindred by marriage*** [***acquired relationships***]***."*** (25:54)

This verse reveals the purpose of birth relationship and marriage relationship, which together bind individuals with each other, as underlying the design of creation. It is through these relationships that individuals are distinguished from one another.

In Surat al-Zukhruf, verse 32, it is stated:

أَهُمْ يَقْسِمُونَ رَحْمَتَ رَبِّكَ

نَحْنُ قَسَمْنَا بَيْنَهُم مَّعِيشَتَهُمْ فِي الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا

وَرَفَعْنَا بَعْضَهُمْ فَوْقَ بَعْضٍ دَرَجَاتٍ لِّيَتَّخِذَ بَعْضُهُم بَعْضًا سُخْرِيًّا

وَرَحْمَتُ رَبِّكَ خَيْرٌ مِّمَّا يَجْمَعُونَ

"Is it they who apportion their Lord's mercy? We have appointed among them their livelihood in the life of the world and raised some of them above others in rank, that some of them may tape labour from others, and the mercy of thy Lord is better than* [*the wealth*] *that they amass. "(43:32)

While discussing the conception of Tawhid (Divine Unity), in the part dealing with the world outlook of Tawhid, I have dealt with the meaning of this verse. Here I will give just the substance of the verse. Human beings have not been created alike in respect of their talents and dispositions. Had they been created so, everyone would have possessed the same qualities and all would have lacked diversity of talents. Naturally, as a consequence, none would have required the services of others, thus making mutual co-operation and mutual obligations meaningless.

God has created man in diversity with different spiritual, physical, and intellectual aptitudes, dispositions, and inclinations. He has given some people special abilities, and has imparted superiority to some over others in certain talents. By means of this, He has made all human beings intrinsically needful of others and inclined to associate with others. Thus He has laid down the foundation of collective and social life. The above mentioned verse also asserts that social existence is not merely a conventional or selective or a compulsive affair, but a natural one.

Does Society have an Essential and Independent Existence?

Society is composed of individuals, without individuals a society does not exist. What is the manner of this synthesis? How is an individual related to society, and what kind of relationship is it? Let us take into consideration the following views:

First View

Society is constituted of individuals. This is merely a hypostatized synthesis i.e. a synthesis does not exist in reality. An objective synthesis takes place when a series of elements influence one another, and when there is a reciprocal and mutual relation of action and reaction between the elements. These actions and reactions prepare the ground for the emergence of a new phenomenon with its own specific. Characteristics, as observed in the case of a chemical synthesis.

For example, due to the action and reaction of the two gases, oxygen and hydrogen, for example, a new compound, namely, water, is produced with a new form and a new set of properties. The essential condition for a real synthesis is that the constituent elements are merged into one another in the process of synthesis, giving up their individual nature and properties, to bring into existence a new substance: the compound.

In collective life, human beings never merge with one another in this way, and a society does not represent anything like a `unified man'. Thus, society does not possess an essential and independent existence, but a secondary and a hypostatized one. It is the individual alone who has independent, real,

and essential existence. So, although human life in society does have a collective form and colour, but members of society do not merge to form a real compound called `society'.

Second View

In reality, society cannot be compared to the natural compounds, it is an artificial compound. An artificial compound is a kind of compound although it is not a natural one. An artificial compound, like a machine, is a system of interrelated parts. In a chemical compound, the constituent elements lose their identity, and dissolve in the `whole' and essentially lose their individuality. But in an artificial compound, the components do not lose their identity; they just surrender their independence.

The components are interconnected and related in such a way that the effect of the resultant product is quite different from the sum total of the individual effects of its ingredients. For example, an automobile carries persons or things with a great speed from one place to another. Its mobility and speed cannot be attributed to the sum of individual performance of its parts when considered as independent and disconnected from one another.

There is a sort of coordination and coherence between its parts, which is artificial and imposed from without. However, merger of identities of the ingredients in the `whole' does not take place. Yet, the whole does not exist without its constituent parts. The whole is the sum total of its parts in addition to the specific connections and relations among them.

Society, in the same manner, is comprised of several primary and secondary organizations and bodies. These organizations and the individuals who are connected with them, all are inseparably related with one another. Any changes in any one of these institutions cultural, religious, economic, legal or educational bring about changes in other institutions also. Thus, social life is a phenomenon dependent on the social machinery. But in this process, neither the identity of individuals nor that of institutions is dissolved completely in the society as a whole.

Third View

Society is a real compound like the natural compounds. But the synthesis here is of minds and thoughts and of wills and wishes; the synthesis is cultural and not physical. Like the material elements, which in the process of action and reaction, reduction and dissolution in one another, prepare the ground for the emergence of a new substance, and due to this re-organization a new compound comes into existence and the elements continue their existence with a new identity, individuals also, who enter into social life with their gifts acquired from nature and their inborn abilities, spiritually merge into one another to attain a new spiritual identity, which is termed the `social spirit'.

This synthesis itself is unique and special, with no parallel in the universe. Since the components do affect and influence one another and are transformed by mutual effect to acquire a new personality, this synthesis is a natural and real synthesis. However, in this case, the `whole' or the `compound' does not

exist as a single physical entity. It is different from other compounds in the sense that in other natural compounds the synthesis is physical and the components influence and affects one another to the extent of acquiring a totally new identity, and the compound becomes a single indivisible entity, a real unit. The multiplicity of constituents is dissolved and transformed into the unity of the compound.

But in the synthesis of society and individual, though an actual synthesis takes place because, the constituents, the individuals, as a result of their interaction, attain a new form and identity the plurality of individuals is not converted into a unity. This synthesis does not produce anything like a `unified man', a physical entity in which all individuals have physically merged. Society conceived as a single physical entity is only a hypostatized abstraction.

Fourth View

Society is a real compound of a higher order than a natural compound. In the case of natural compounds, the constituents have their own individuality and identity before the synthesis occurs. During the process of their action and reaction, conditions for emergence of a new substance are produced. However, the human individual did not possess any kind of individuality at the stage of pre-social existence.

At that stage, he is like an empty container capable only of embracing the social spirit. Without social existence, human beings are absolutely like animals, with the only difference that they possess human aptitudes. The humanity of a human being i.e. his feeling of being a human being, his consciousness of his human `egohood', thought, human likes and dislikes, and other emotions and feelings associated with man originates under the influence of the social spirit.

It is the social spirit that fills this empty pot and confers personality upon a person. The social spirit has always been co-existing with man and shall co-exist with him forever through its manifestations such as morality, religion, education, philosophy, and art. The cultural and spiritual causes and effects, actions and reactions among the individuals take a specific shape due to the influence of the social spirit.

Hence, they are not prior to it. In fact sociology is prior to human psychology. This view is contrary to the former view, which accepts the possibility of human psychology even before the stage of social existence, and regards sociology as belonging to a later development. According to this view, if man had not acquired social existence and sociology, he would not have reached the stage of acquiring human psyche and human psychology.

The first theory is a theory maintaining the priority of individual because, according to it, neither society has a real existence, nor law, custom nor social destiny have an independent reality. Only individuals have an objective existence and are knowable objects in an epistemological sense. The life and destiny of every individual is independent of that of other individuals.

The second theory is also a theory of the priority of individual. It does not recognize the society as an

independent `whole', and also denies an objective synthesis of individuals as a necessary condition of social existence. But it considers the relationship among individuals as somewhat objective, although confined to physical association.

According to this theory, whereas society does not have an existence independent of individuals, the individual alone has a real and objective existence. But according to this view, individuals, being the constituents of a society, share a common destiny just as the components of a machine or an automobile are related and linked together in the form of a mechanical association of cause and effect, their movements being mechanically interlinked. Moreover, society–that is the group of inter related and interconnected individuals–from the point of view of its specific system of mechanical cause–and–effect relationships, has an identity independent of its individual parts.

The third theory, however, emphasizes the reality of individual as well as that of society. This theory recognizes the independent existence of individuals because, according to it, the existence of components of society (individuals) is not merged into the existence of society. It, also, does not accept any unified existence for society like that of chemical compounds. At the same time, it recognizes the objective reality of society, because it considers the synthesis of individuals similar to a chemical synthesis with regard to their spiritual and intellectual makeup.

As a result of this synthesis, individuals acquire a new identity, which is the dominant character of society–although society is not a physically unified entity. On the basis of this theory, due to the process of interaction between the parts, an entirely new entity has emerged: a new spirit, a new consciousness, and a new will, which is over and above the intelligence, consciousness and will of the individuals, and which dominates the intelligence and consciousness of all its individual members.

The fourth theory believes in the essentiality and absoluteness of social reality. According to this theory, whatever exists is the collective spirit, the collective consciousness, the collective sensibility, the collective will, and the collective `self'. Individual consciousness is nothing but a manifestation of the collective consciousness.

The Qur'anic View

The verses of the Holy Qur'an confirm the third view. As I have stated earlier, the Qur'an does not discuss human problems in our philosophical and scientific terminology. Its language and approach is different. Nevertheless, the Qur'an views the problems concerning society in such a way that it supports the third view. The Qur'an puts forward the idea of a common history, a common destiny, a common record of deeds, a common consciousness, understanding, sensibility and a common conduct for the ummahs (societies) [1]

It is obvious that if the entity referred to as `ummah' did not have an objective existence, it would be meaningless to talk of fate, understanding, conscience, obedience, and disobedience with reference to it.

It may be inferred that the Qur'an believes in a certain kind of life which is the collective and social existence. Collective life is not just a metaphor or an allegory, it is a reality likewise collective death is also a reality.

In verse 34 of Surat al–'A`raf, the Qur'an asserts:

وَلِكُلِّ أُمَّةٍ أَجَلٌ فَإِذَا جَاءَ أَجَلُهُمْ لَا يَسْتَأْخِرُونَ سَاعَةً وَلَا يَسْتَقْدِمُونَ

"And every ummah (society) hath its term, and when its term cometh, they cannot put it off an hour nor yet advance (it)." (7:34)

This verse refers to life and existence that is given a limited period of time, the duration of which cannot be changed. The end can neither be advanced nor delayed; and this life is associated with the nation (ummah), not with the individuals; or else it is evident that individuals of a nation are deprived of their existence individually and separately and not collectively and simultaneously.

In Surat al–Jathiyah, the verse 28 states:

كُلُّ أُمَّةٍ تُدْعَىٰ إِلَىٰ كِتَابِهَا .

"Every ummah (society) shall be summoned to its record.

" (45:28)

Thereupon we come to know that not only individuals have a particular record of deeds of their own, but societies are also judged by their own records of deeds, because they, too, are like living beings who are conscious, responsible, and accountable for their acts, as they have freedom of will and act accordingly.

In Surat al–'An`am, verse 108 states:

زَيَّنَّا لِكُلِّ أُمَّةٍ عَمَلَهُمْ

"Unto every nation have we made their deeds seem fair" (6:108)

This verse affirms that every nation evolves its own particular consciousness, its own particular standards and its own particular way of thinking. The consciousness, understanding, and perception of every nation has a specific and distinguishable character.

Every nation judges things according to its own standards (at least in the matters involving practical values and notions every nation has its own special way of perception and comprehension. There are many acts which are `good' in the eyes of one nation and `evil' in the eyes of another. It is the social atmosphere that moulds the taste and perception of the individuals of a nation according to its value-system.

In Surat al-Mu'min, verse 5 says:

وَ هَمَّتْ كُلُّ أُمَّةٍ بِرَسُولِهِمْ لِيَأْخُذُوهُ وَجَادَلُوا بِالْبَاطِلِ لِيُدْحِضُوا بِهِ الْحَقَّ فَأَخَذْتُهُمْ فَكَيْفَ كَانَ عِقَابِ

"....And every nation purposed to seize their messenger and argued falsely, [***thinking***] ***thereby to refute the Truth. Then I seized, and how*** [***awful***] ***was my punishment.*** "(40:5)

This verse is about an unrighteous resolution and decision of a nation. It refers to a collective decision of immoral opposition to truth, and asserts that collective disobedience deserves collective retribution and punishment.

In the Qur'an, there are frequent instances how the actions of an individual are attributed to the whole group, or sins of a generation are associated with later generations. 2

In such cases, the people had the same (collective) thinking and the same (collective) will, or, in other words, they had the same social spirit. For example, in the story of the Thamud, the act of hamstringing Salih's camel, which was the deed of an individual alone, is attributed to the whole nation **فَعَقَرُوهْا** (they hamstrung the she camel).

The whole nation was considered to be responsible for the crime. Consequently all of them were considered to deserve the punishment for committing that crime **فَدَمْدَمَ عَلَيْهِمْ رَبُّهُم** (so Allah doomed them for that sin).

'Ali (as), in one of the sermons of the Nahj al-balaghah, elucidates this subject in the following manner:

أَيُها النّاسُ إِنّما يَجْمَعُ النّاسَ الرِضا وَ السَخَطُ.

O people, actually that which brings together a community [and imparts unity and a common fate to it], is the common feeling of approval and disapproval.

Whenever any proper or improper action having collective approval has been performed, even though by a single individual, the whole society is held responsible for it.

إِنَّما عَقَرَ ناقَةَ ثَمُود رَجُلُ واحِدٌ فَعَمَّهُمْ اللهُ بالعَذابِ لما عَمّوهُ بِالرِضّا فَقالَ فَعَقَرُوها فَأَصْبَحُوا نادِمين.

Indeed only one man had hamstrung the she-camel of Thamud, but God included them all in His punishment, because they all condoned his act. So, God has said (in the Qur'an) "***They hamstrung her and woke up repentant***."

God sent down His punishment collectively on the people of Thamud, because the whole nation maintained the same position and approved the act of one individual, and when his decision was enacted, it was actually the decision of the whole nation. God, in His Book, has attributed the act of hamstringing of the camel to the whole nation, although the act was performed by one person. It says: "***That nation hamstrung the camel***," and does not say that one person from among them committed the sin.

It is essential to remind here that mere approval of a sin, as long as it remains a verbal approval alone and practical involvement has not occurred, is not to be considered as a sin. For example, a person commits a sin and another comes to know about it before or after its committal and approves it, even though the approval leads to the stage of resolution but is not translated into action, it is not a sin as the resolution of an individual to commit a sin, which is not translated into action may not be considered a sin.

An approval is considered as participation in sin when it plays an active role in its planning and execution. The collective sins belong to this category. The social atmosphere and the social spirit favour the occurrence of the sin and support it. If one of the members of a society whose approval is a part of the collective will and whose decision is a part of the collective decision commits the sin, it is here that the sin of an individual becomes the collective sin. The above quoted passage of the Nahj al-balaghah which refers to the contents of the Qur'anic verse, explains the same fact. It is not merely the approval or disapproval which is regarded as participation in the intention or committal of a sin.

The Qur'an occasionally associates the acts of an earlier generation with the latter generations. For example, the action of an earlier nation, namely the people of Israel, has been associated with the Israelites of the Prophet's age, and the Qur'an says that these people deserve ignominy and wretchedness because they slew prophets unjustly. It is not so because in the view of the Qur'an they were the offspring of the same race, but because they represented the same evil social spirit. It has been said that "human society has more dead than living. [3]

It means that those who are dead participate in the formation of every age more than the living. Therefore, it is also said that "the dead rule the living more than before." [4]

In the Qur'anic exegesis, al-Mizan, it is argued that if a society has a single soul and the same social thinking, it is as if a single individual. In this case, members of society are like the bodily organs and faculties of one organism, intrinsically and physically united, and are amalgamated in the form of a single human personality in thought and action. Their pleasures and pains are like the pleasures and pains of one person and their bliss and adversities are like the bliss and adversities of one person. This

discussion is further continued on the following lines:

In its judgement on nations and societies having religious or national prejudices or having a unique social thinking, the Qur'an regards the latter generations punishable for the actions of the earlier generations. A present generation is regarded accountable and punishable for the actions of those who have passed away. In the cases in which people had the same social thinking and the same social spirit, the Divine Judgement could not be otherwise. 5

1. `Allamah Tabataba'i, al-Mizan, vol. II, p. 102.
2. Following Qur'anic verses are referred to:

فَوَيْلٌ لِّلَّذِينَ يَكْتُبُونَ الْكِتَابَ بِأَيْدِيهِمْ ثُمَّ يَقُولُونَ هَٰذَا مِنْ عِندِ اللَّـهِ لِيَشْتَرُوا بِهِ ثَمَنًا قَلِيلًا فَوَيْلٌ لَّهُم مِّمَّا كَتَبَتْ أَيْدِيهِمْ وَوَيْلٌ لَّهُم مِّمَّا يَكْسِبُونَ

"Woe, then, to those who write the Book with their hands and then say: This is from God, so that they may take for it a small price. Therefore, woe to them for what their hands have written, and woe to them for what they earn. "(2: 79)

ضُرِبَتْ عَلَيْهِمُ الذِّلَّةُ أَيْنَ مَا ثُقِفُوا إِلَّا بِحَبْلٍ مِّنَ اللَّـهِ وَحَبْلٍ مِّنَ النَّاسِ وَبَاءُوا بِغَضَبٍ مِّنَ اللَّـهِ وَضُرِبَتْ عَلَيْهِمُ الْمَسْكَنَةُ ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمْ كَانُوا يَكْفُرُونَ بِآيَاتِ اللَّـهِ وَيَقْتُلُونَ الْأَنبِيَاءَ بِغَيْرِ حَقٍّ ذَٰلِكَ بِمَا عَصَوا وَّكَانُوا يَعْتَدُونَ

"Abasement shall be pitched on them, wherever they are come upon, except they be in a bond of God, and a bond of the people; they will be laden with the burden of God's anger, and poverty shall be pitched on them; that, because they disbelieved in God's signs and slew the Prophets without right, that, for that they acted rebelliously and were transgressors." (3:112)

3. Auguste Comte, as quoted in Raymond Aron's Main Currents in Sociological Thought, vol. I, p. 91.
4. Ibid.
5. Al-Mizan, vol. IV, 112.

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