

## Ali Shariati's Social Philosophy : A Brief Introduction

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Dr. Ali Shariati (1933 - 1977) was born in Mazinan, a suburb of Mashad, Iran. After graduating from College in 1960, on a scholarship he pursued post-graduate studies in France. Dr. Shariati, an honours student, received his doctorate in Sociology in 1964.

Raised in an atmosphere of social commitment, Shariati was heavily involved in political activities during his secondary school years. From the very beginning he was motivated by revolutionary zeal, and it was because of this that he became one of the most active members of the New Islamic Revolt Centre at that time. It was through this centre that he came in contact with the ideas of the "Islamic Revolutionary Movement of the Socialist Worshippers of God", the admiration for which might have motivated his first important work, "A History of the Evolution of the Philosophy", published in 1955.

In Europe, after his arrival, Shariati, joined the confederation of Iranian students, a revolutionary organisation opposed to the pahlavi regime. Later on he was one of the founders of the Iranian National Front in America, established in 1967 and shortly after the formation of the Iranian National Front in Europe, Shariati's revolutionary activities brought him in contact with such important figures as the West Indian Frantz Fanon, and Omar Ouzgam of the ALF<sup>1</sup>. His friendship and close association with Fanon led to the translation of the latter's, famous book, "The Wretched of the Earth (Doza Khyan-i Arazi) into Persian.

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"Shariati, in the context of his contemporary socio-political situation was a rebel, a reformer and mujtahid"<sup>2</sup>.

Shariati felt deep anguish for the plight of the common man. He applied his knowledge in the analysis of the socio-political miseries of his people and country and propounded an alternate course. For the same reason his deep concern for the common and poor men and contempt for the system were reflected in all his lectures and writings.

However, Shariati being deeply interested in his religion and culture, never loses sight of the fact that Islam was no longer studied as a world-view or ideology, because the study of Islam was reduced to the study of rituals. Such a situation had led to the creation of, what Shariati calls in one of his lectures as, "Mosaic culture", in the Muslim world, a culture that is confused and rudderless, a culture lacking both the ability and confidence to think for itself and to direct its own affairs.

Ali Shariati studied various philosophical and sociological trends during his stay in France. He was exposed to Karl Marx's revolutionary philosophy and Sartre's thoughts on existentialism.

Being deeply concerned with the conditions of common masses, he was naturally attracted to Marx's philosophy. It is perhaps for the same reason that we find that Ali Shariati has tried to trace out the material aspects of Islamic religion. He says that about 60% of Quranic teachings deal with material aspects of human welfare. In his earlier stages, Shariati regards Abu Zer Ghafari as the first socialist in Islam. Moreover, Shariati, like Marx, was critical of the negative role of religion. For example, in one of his lectures he says, while mentioning the plight of an unknown slave soldier who was killed while carrying heavy rocks to build the Pyramids for the pharaohs of Egypt, 50,00 years ago.

"It concerns me because it relates to my class, community, country and history... Great Prophets came with a promise for our deliverance but some of them proceeded to the palaces".

"Again, in the name of charity, the representatives of "God" and the successors of the prophets began to loot us. Again, in the name of holy wars, we were pushed into battle fields. We had to sacrifice our innocent children for the "God", temples and idols".

"How could I return to those temples which were built to enslave me? Shall I join those who claim to be examples of our national freedom but, in essence, are attempting to gain their inhuman privileges of the past? The mosques are no better than those temples".

"The civilizations, educational system and religions have made human beings into animals interested only in financial security or selfish and heartless worshippers or men of thought and reason who lack feeling, love and inspiration".

"Although we are not in physical slavery, we are truly destined with a fate worse than yours! Our thoughts, hearts, and will power are enslaved. In the name of sociology, education, art, search for freedom love of exploitation and love of individuals, faith in humanitarian responsibilities, and belief in one's own school of thought are entirely taken away from within our hearts!...

"Now, we, in the name of party, blood, land and system against system under go divisions so that each one of us can be easily taken into service"<sup>3</sup>.

In his different lectures (compiled by Hamid Algar under the title on 'The Sociology of Islam', (Mizan Press, 1979) Shariati has dealt with philosophy of history. Here he seems very close to the materialist interpretation of history. Quoting the instances of Abel and Cain, Shariati shows that Cain represents the stage of feudalism, as he

possesses land and property, while Abel represents the class of labourers, having all the characteristics of 'have nots'. In this way the conflict between the two represents a class conflict. The property relations determine the over-all behaviour and attitude of both the symbolic figures according to Shariati, i.e. that the root of conflict was the property. It stems from the feudal mentality of Cain who deprives Abel from his genuine rights and compels him to surrender before his authority and command. But Abel did not submit, hence the conflict. In the same way Ali Shariati highlighted the importance of masses in bringing about revolutions.

Shariati says: "generally, the people addressed in every school of thought and religion are the fundamental and effective factor of change of that society in that school of thought. According to this, we see that in all the various parts of the Qur'an the people (al-Nas) themselves are addressed. The Prophet is sent on a mission to the people. He speaks to the people. He is questioned and investigated by the people. He is a transition factor to promote the people. The people are responsible for society and history."

He continues : "The word, people, is a valuable word. The only word that is close to it, is mass (tudeh). In sociology, mass means the body of the people without any regard to class distinction or indicators which would distinguish them from other human groups. Therefore, mass means people without considering the special classical form or group of their society"<sup>4</sup>

He talks of the 'mustadafeen' (the oppressed) and equates them with the believers or 'momineen' and equates the 'mustakbereen' with 'kafreen'. And according to Shariati, prophets have always sided with 'mustadafeen'.

Ali Shariati has expressed the view that when a class or a community becomes deprived of material

resources, it loses all its cultural and historical significance and is reduced to a skeleton in the museum of history. Same is the case with an individual. He says "when a person becomes poor, the good things that he does are looked down upon, while some one who has power and wealth can force his defects on others as art, his nonsense as good conversation, his rude behaviour as philosophy science and religion"<sup>5</sup>.

In other words, Shariati views that it is the possession of material resources, which shapes and forms the trends in the society. Here also we can discern that Shariati seems to be deeply influenced by Marxian thought, especially by "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844". In this way, it is the person, who has command over material resources that sets all super structural models let prevail in society in Mehdi Bazargans' language.

Shariati was fully aware of the perennial conflict between the forces of status quo and change or between conservatism and radicalism. Between the protagonists of the two-revolutionist and the modernst-he added a new synthetic person "Inner Radical". The Inner Radical believes in the complete transformation of the human condition and pursuit of a total revolution in reflection, perception, ideology and cultural revolution. Shariati is severely critical of any system, religious, social or political which exploited or tyrannized the man. Shariati was a champion of the down-trodden and the poor and outspoken critic of the men of power, wealth and the capitalist system. He accepted the Marxian principle that human history has been a history of conflicting class interests and that there had been a perpetual state of confrontation between the 'wretched of the earth' and the propertied classes and he provided an interesting sociological dimension to the complexes of the rich in the particular Iranian environment<sup>6</sup>.

Although Shariati regards religion of Islam as a dynamic religion, yet he is aware of the deterioration which followed the decadence of Islamic ideology. His approach to religion is not one of a conservative or, for that matter, one of a revivalist like, Maudoodi or Syed Qutb, but rather a realistic and progressive one. He says in one of his lectures:

"As a person who is "knowledgeable about religion" and whose field of study is the "history of religions", I reached the following conclusions as a result of my study and research of the historical evolution of each faith whereby I compared what the faiths were in the past and what they are now as well as a compassion in the differences between the "truth" and the "reality" of the faith. My conclusion is not based on personal religious feelings nor religious prejudices:

"If we study and evaluate the effectiveness of each religion in terms of the happiness and evolution of mankind, we will discover that there is no prophecy which is an advanced, powerful, and conscious as the prophecy of Mohammad (PBUH) (i.e. Islam) and its role in mans' social progress, self-consciousness movement, responsibility, human ambition and struggle for justice, Islam's realism and naturalness, creativity, adaptability with scientific and financial progress and orientation toward civilization and the community contemporaneously, we will discover that there is no prophecy which has deteriorated and been transformed into a completely different representation as much as the prophecy of Mohammad (PBUH)"<sup>7</sup>.

From these views of Shariati we can easily discern his passion and concern for the change in the existing atmosphere. It is, perhaps, for the same reason that Shariati discusses the "most important pillars" of Islam, which have lost their significance due to the lethargy on the

part of Muslims themselves and the motivated attempts of the Orientalists.

Shariati says: "unfortunately, the teaching of the concept of Tawheed is limited only to elementary schools. Beyond that it may be spoken of at the philosophical and theological discussions held by religious leaders; but such discussions are totally foreign and inapplicable to the lives of the people. In other words, only the existence and oneness of God are considered not Tawheed in its real sense. As for the concept of Jihad, it is absolutely forbidden and buried in the graveyard of history. The fundamental principle of Jihad, encouraging to do good deeds and to avoid wrong deeds" ( *المطرب المصروف ونبي عن المنكر* ) is only applied when blaming the friends instead of when correcting the wrong doers. And lastly, 'Hajj' is viewed as the ugliest and most illogical action that Muslims perform yearly". (Hajj)<sup>8</sup>.

Giving a totally unique and revolutionary explanation of Surah 'Zilzal' Shariati says that this is what the Prophet brought when Islam, "the real sense of submission", was revealed to him, submit to that which gave you roots, the one God and not the multiple forms which attract one away from one's roots. Strengthen your roots and your earth so that when there is a 'mighty shaking', as the Qur'an so firmly announces, which at one level can be interpreted as an "awakening of consciousness", your roots will hold, you will prevail, the outer winds, storms, lightening and thunder cannot pull you away".

The consciousness or awakening is, thus, a basic aspect of Shariatis' social philosophy. Shariati does not turn his back to the hard realities of life and from realistic attitude, yet, he says:

"But as apposed to realism, Islam does not accept the status quo but changes the realities. It changes their essence in a revolutionary way. It carries realities along

with its idealistic goals, its real desires, which are non-existent by themselves. Unlike realists, Islam does not submit to it. Islam does not turn away from realities as idealists do. It seeks them out... Islam uses that which hinders the idealists as a composite for its own ideals" <sup>9</sup>

It is here that Shariati develops the concept of Islamic social justice. In Islam it is sufficient to tell ones' own self, "thou shall not do this or that", for there is a commitment which each individual is bound by and that is to be an active participant in social ills. That is, one should say to one self, "thou shall not be an oppressor", and one is equally obliged to say to one self, "Thau shalt help the oppressed" <sup>10</sup>

Shariati realized that concepts must be tested according to the cultural and social criterion of a given environment. He was able to redefine the basis of the beliefs of his people, his society and his societys' perception of itself. He awakened latent ideas. His goal was the development of a dynamic social environment, which would be embedded in the historical background and conscience of that society<sup>11</sup>.

Jalal Ali Mohammad in his two books 'Gharb Zadagi' and 'Dar Khidmat-Wa Khanat-i-Roshanfikran' has also presented similar views. But Dr. Shariati has fuller command on language and captivating style of expression with his comprehensive awareness of the contemporary philosophical and sociological trends. But being less concerned with economic aspects of his times, Shariati could not provide an elaborate system of Islamic socialism. Murtaza Mutahhari Baqar Sadar and Tolaqani have dealt with the economic aspects in an Islamic social system in more detail though, in religious and theological framework. But Ali Shariati has evaluated the whole social aspects of Islam and has provided a new and radical interpretation of the sociological implications of the concepts of "Migration", "Shahadat", "Vesayat", "Shura", "Khilafah", "Immamat", etc.



etc., which is more than the traditional explanation of the social phenomena. Shariati has in the same manner defined the limits of Velayat, denying the blind following of religious Ulema without limiting their roles and status. He supports himself with some instances of Islamic history and highlights the importance of "Shura" (consultation) instead of arbitrary leadership of clergy.

It was a revolutionary aspect of his sociologist bent of mind, that he says: "we see that even knowing the position of the prophet, he permitted the people to vote and express their opinions. He valued the vote of the majority in social affairs. Thus counsel by council (shura) in Islam is the most important principle in running society, while leadership of a social group is a universal principle. The traditions (Sunnah) of the Prophet show how much importance Mohammad placed in his personal actions on counsel and a yielding to public opinion and the votes of the majority."

On the other hand, Shariati mentions the issue of 'vesayat'<sup>12</sup>.

Shariati does not agree with the idea of unquestionable authority of any person, no matter how higher his status may be. It is perhaps for the same reason that after Iranian revolution, some radical people have claimed to be followers of Shariati when those were arrested for their rebellion against the authority of clergy.

There is a general feeling among the people of Iran (Ali Shariati's former students included), that the hue and cry raised by so-called modernist-Westernised elements of Iran claim their allegiance to Shariatis' thought. During my recent visit to Iran (Nov. 1996), I have come across good number of students and intellectuals, who have expressed their views on the subject and considered Shariatis' view's responsible for the deviation of some of the so-called westernised activists, who are working for the stereo type Capitalist democratic ideals in Iran. One of Ali Shariatis'

former student Mr. Jawad Mahmaddi Khamak (Mashad) said, for example, that "I feel sorry that some of the so-called followers of Ali Shariati want to bring back the old westernised ideals in the society of Iran and also aspire to say good bye to Islamic way of life in Iran".

Prof. Latif (Mashad University), who had also the honour of being student of Shariati, agreed that the suitable method to study religion is Islamic one rather than the sociological and anthropological one as suggested by Shariati.

It may be, perhaps, for the some reason that Ali Shariati has been side-tracked in Iran and his influence has been bracketed due to his radical and un orthodox views<sup>13</sup>.

In his detail study of Shiism, Shariati makes a meaningful contrast between the early Shiism of the companions of Ali (Tashayyu-e-Alwi) and its latter distortion, the Shiism of the Safavids (Tashayyu-e-Safavi). The latter made Shiism the ideology of the rulers, made it the religion of mourning, distorted the principle of Immanat, and rejected the principle of accountability and commitment to the poor.

According to Shariati the prophets belonging to the Abrahamic tradition came from the oppressed humanity. He makes a very interesting comparison between the Oriental, the Persian and the Abrahamic Prophets. The former belonged to the rich classes and the latter to the class of the disinherited. The Prophet of Islam, like his predecessor, Moses, again a liberator of the oppressed people, addressed himself to what the Aristocratic Quraish called, the 'ignoble' (arazal-i-Nas) those who are dispossessed, who toiled and were deprived of the fruits of their toil<sup>15</sup>.

But the above discussion should not lead us to think that Dr. Shariati was a complete follower of Marx. No

doubt, Shariati was inspired by Marxian philosophy, especially its humanistic aspects. But in "Marxism and other Western Fallacies" (Tr. By Campbell, Mizan, U.S.A., 1980) Shariati seems to be engaged in showing that Marxism seeks to perform the promethean function of freeing humanity from the shackles of religion. Shariati says: "it is vulgar to criticize the weakness and corruption of the religious classes and to infer from it that religious studies are futile. To identify the role in society played by the Christian clerical class in the middle ages with that of Jesus, the Messiah, in the Palestine of two thousand years ago is, if not tendentious, indicative of utter ignorance".

Shariati has provided three main concepts on which he develops his criticism against Marxism and propounds his own concept of social change. These are, 'Khalifa' 'Taqwa' and 'an-Nas'.

- a) Khalifa - According to Islam the human being is vice regent of God on earth. Its existence is not a matter of accident but there is a purpose behind it, i.e. to fulfil the will of God on earth by establishing a just society.
- b) Taqwa - This is described as God-consciousness or the recognition and attempt on the part of human beings to implement Gods' will into all spheres of life.
- c) al-Nas - all humanity is one hinted community, irrespective of ethnic or other differences. It has to overcome the mistakes of its ancestors who defied God by lowering His status to that of a man, an idol or exclusive concern for a particular race only. This means all humanity is invited by Islam to join together in the obedience of one and only one God. In practical affairs, this means all human beings are equal and no one has a higher or a lower status determined by race, sex, colour, economic status or religion. Therefore everyone is responsible for his/her own actions, both individually and with respect to implications for the society. Utilizing the above concepts Shariati intends

to develop an Islamic view of humanity which stands in total contrast to the other views. His purpose is:

- 1) To do away with the narrow view of humanity present in medieval Islamic thought, which developed during the period of crises of the Caliphate and continues even in modern times.
- 2) The Muslims being a part of the third world have become the victim not only of Colonialism but also of neo-colonialism both politically and ideologically. Shariati seeks to pull the Muslims out of this situation<sup>16</sup>.

Shariati's comprehensive and humanistic understanding of Islam is reflected in his realization that humanity as whole faces common problems of freedom, equality and justice, in response to which there have appeared three - dimensional approaches of mysticism, Marxism and existentialism. The issues addressed by the above three intellectual currents are not restricted to West, infact, they extend to all humanity. Islam no doubt addresses itself to such human problems and offers scope for responding to them. Yet in expressive aspect of Islamic thought, it has failed to answer these questions, and as a result its own community finds itself between differing world views. The reason for this is the non-use of 'Ijtihad' and the lack of confidence in its own thought process evident in the contemporary world. Islamic thought is highly repetitive rather than creative and developmental, and this is what he aspires the contemporary Islamic thought to do. That is, instead of simply condemning or shunning what other ideologies address themselves to, it should develop and project a positive Islamic response. Shariati attempts to provide an intelligent Islamic view of humanity in terms pertinent to today's rationalism. In spite of being so vocal in his criticism of Marxism and the Ulema, Shariati fails to concern himself with the burning issues like feudal land-lordism, just labor-

employee relationship, ownership and management of capital vis-a-vis religion, society and state etc. His silence on these key concerns of the time reduces his criticism to merehetorics<sup>17</sup>.

In this way though Shariati was very much concerned with the ills of society, he could not provide any comprehensive system of social change based on the principles of social justice and welfare in religious framework.

However, Shariati provided a unique blend of socialism and Islam and in this way tried to evolve a new approach towards the problems faced by humanity in general and Muslims in particular.

#### CONCLUSION:

Ali Shariati was born in a very religiously-oriented family of Iran, and taught by no less than a person than his father Taqi Shariati, a religious scholar in his own right. Being revolutionery from his earlier college days he was associated with Iranian National Front in America, 1967 and Islamic Revolutionery Movement of the Socialist Worshipers of God. He studied various schools of philosophy and sociology during his stay in France. Moreover, he went through school of existentialism of Heidegger and Jean Paul Sartre etc. etc. But the most important subject with which Dr. Ali Shariati was deeply involved was Marxism. He seems to be very much influenced by the Marxist interpretation of history. He uses the terms 'al-nas' (Tudeh); 'Mustadhfeen' and 'Mustakbereen'; etc. etc. frequently and mentions the words like a "Plebian Masses" proletariat, "haves and have nots" communes etc.etc. After scrutinising Ali Shariati's social philosophy in strict Islamic perspective, we get convinced that despite his sincerity and Islamic orientation, he could not establish balance between his religiosity and intellectual training. The paradigm of Islamic orientation as maintained by the religious scholars and ulama like

Murtaza Mutahari, Baqar Sadar and others could not be displayed by Ali Shariati in strict sense of the term. Divine Revelation as the source of Islamic Theories and Social transformation seems to have been relegated to secondary status and replaced by so-called anthropologico-sociological approaches by shariati. Thus become more and more convinced that the Quranic themes should be made as the basic hypotheses of all the studies relating to sociological and religious theorisation rather than investing reliance on the sterio-type westernised philosophies pertaining to these subjects. The paradigms in this regard provided by Allama Khomeini, Maulana Mawdudi, Syed Qutb, Murtaza Mutahari, and Baqar Sadar are more in consonance with principal Islamic teachings rather than the ones presented by people like Shariati, Sir Syed etc.etc. In other words, we can say that the Quran must be made as the source of guidance in all such matters, rather than point of reference to the foreign theories and philosophies, as done by Muslim Scholars who had delved deep into westernised secularist education.

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