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Norms of history mentioned in the Qur'an

As we have said the Qur'anic concept of the norms of history has been mentioned in a large number of its verses and the fact of their existence has been emphasized in many ways.

In some verses the concept of the norms has been given in general terms and in some other verses their examples have also been given. Similarly some verses call upon us to make a thorough investigation of historical events in order to find out historical trends and norms. We see that a very large number of verses have dealt with this subject in different ways.

In this connection we propose to quote a good number of verses. Some of the verses which we produce here as evidence, quite clearly indicate the existence of the norms of history. Some other verses, though not so specific, are in perfect harmony with the spirit of the teachings of the Qur'an regarding this issue, and may be looked upon as a supporting evidence.

Some Examples of Norms of History in the Qur'an

The following two verses are an example of those verses of the Qur'an which describe the idea of the laws and the norms of history in general terms:

For every nation there is an appointed time. When their time comes, then they cannot put it back an hour, nor can they put it forward. (Surah Yunus, 10:49, Surah al-A'raf, 7:34)

As may be noticed, in these two verses it has been said that for every nation, that is for every society there is an appointed time. It is evident that this "appointed time" is different from that which exists in the case of every individual.

The Qur'an calls ***ummah*** or nation that society the members of which are linked together on the basis of some common ideas and principles which furnish them with certain common powers and capabilities. Such a society has an appointed time. In other words like an individual, it lives, moves and dies. So long as an individual moves, we say that he is alive. When he ceases to move, he dies. The same is the case

with a society. As the death of an individual has an appointed time and is governed by a law and a system, similarly societies also have their appointed time and are governed by certain laws of their own.

These two verses give us a clear idea that history has some norms which are different from the laws and norms which exclusively apply to the individuals. Allah says in the Qur'an:

And We destroyed no township, but there was a known decree for it. No nation can outstrip its appointed time, nor can they lag behind. (Surah al-Hijr, 15:4-5)

Exactly the same thing is mentioned in the following verses:

No nation can outstrip its appointed time, nor can they lag behind. (Surah al-Mu'minun, 23:43)

Have they not seen the dominion of the heavens and the earth, and what things Allah has created, and that it may be that their own term was nigh? In what report after that will they believe? (Surah al-A'raf, 7:185)

The wording of the verses indicate that the appointed time which is nigh or about the nearness of which warning is being given, refers to the collective death of a society, not the individual death of its members, for all members of a nation do not normally die together. When the collective death of a people is mentioned, it means their social death, not their individual death.

As we know individually people die at different times. But when we look at them as one group bound together in matters of justice and injustice, prosperity and misery, then they have one appointed time of death. This social death is the death of a nation. In this sense the following verse is closely linked with the verse preceding it:

Your Lord is Forgiver, full of Mercy. If He were to take them to task, for what they earn, He would hasten on the doom for them; but they have an appointed term from which they will find no escape. And those townships! We destroyed them when they did wrong, and We appointed a fixed time for their destruction. (Surah al-Kahf, 18:58-59)

If Allah were to take mankind to task for their wrongdoing, He would not leave a single living creature on the face of earth, but He reprieves them to an appointed time, and when their appointed time comes, they cannot put it off an hour nor can they advance it. (Surah an-Nahl, 16:61)

If Allah were to take mankind to task for what they earned, He would not leave a living creature on the face of the earth; but He reprieves them to an appointed time, and when their term comes, then surely (they will know that) Allah is ever aware of His slaves. (Surah Fatir, 35:45)

In the last two verses the Qur'an says that if Allah wanted to take people to task during their lifetime, He would not leave a living creature and would destroy all people.

Difference Between Punishment in This Life and the Next

Now there is a difficulty about this Qur'anic concept. As we know, all people are never unjust. There may be Prophets, Imams and their executors living among them. Will this general destruction include the Prophets, the Imams and the righteous believers? This doubt has been so magnified that some people have produced these two verses as a proof of the invalidity of the idea of the infallibility of the Prophets and the Imams.

The fact is that these two verses neither speak of this worldly punishment nor that of the next world. They speak of the natural consequence of the unjust deeds of a nation. The natural consequences of its deeds do not remain confined to the wicked of society but encompasses all its members irrespective of their personalities and conduct.

When as a result of their misconduct Israelites were doomed to roaming about in the desert, this punishment did not remain confined to the wicked. It equally affected Prophet Musa, who was the most pure and active person of his time and who most courageously had faced the tyrant and his tyranny. Prophet Musa being a member of the community had to share the chastisement inflicted on the community as a whole for its wickedness. Consequently he also had to wander about in the desert for 40 years along with other Israelites.

Where as a result of their deviation from the right path the Muslims were afflicted with a calamity and Yazid ibn Mu'awiyah was imposed on them to ride roughshod over their lives, property, honour and creed, it were not the wrongdoers among the Muslims society alone who suffered.

Even the infallible Imam Husayn, the grandson of the Holy Prophet, who was the most virtuous and the most upright person on the face of the earth, was killed along with his companions and the members of his family. All this was in consonance with the logic of the norms of history. When a punishment in this world comes to a society in accordance with the norms of history, it does not remain confined to the unjust of that society. That is why the Qur'an says:

Guard yourselves against a chastisement which cannot fall exclusively on those of you who are wrongdoers, and know that Allah is severe in punishment. (Surah al-Anfal, 8:25)

At the same time the Qur'an at another place says:

No burdened soul can bear another's burden. (Surah Fatir, 35:18)

Yes, in the next world only the culprits will be punished. But this worldly punishment is more extensive and affects the culprit and the innocent alike. Hence the two previous verses have nothing to do with the punishment that will be awarded on the Day of Judgement. They speak only of the norms of history and what a nation can achieve through its efforts.

Another Example:

They indeed wish to scare you from the land so that they may drive you out from there. In that case they will not be able to stay there for long. Same has been our method in the case of Our Messengers whom We sent before you, and you will not find Our method to be changing. (Surah Bani Isra'il, 17:76)

This verse also lays stress on the norms of history. It says:

You will not find Our method (Our law) to be changing.

In other words, Allah assures that the way He treated the former Prophets is still valid because His law never changes.

Allah says that the people of Makkah now want to harass the Prophet in order to drive him out from there, for they have failed to eliminate him, to silence his voice and to crush his mission. Now the only option left to them is to drive the Prophet out of their city. This is one of the norms of history which we propose to explain.

According to this norm the people of Makkah could not stay there for long when after the failure of all their efforts to resist the Holy Prophet they had become so desperate as to drive him out of this city. This did not mean that any chastisement was to befall them soon. Hence it cannot be said that no chastisement befell the people of Makkah while they successfully harassed the Holy Prophet and forced him to emigrate to Madina.

What the verse means is that they will not for long continue to be a fighting force, for because of their behaviour they will soon lose their position and will cease to be a force to be reckoned with. The Prophet who has baffled their designs so far, in future also will succeed in practically overawing them and breaking their resistance. And so it was.

After the Holy Prophet left Makkah, they could not withstand for long. Their resistance was broken. Makkah fell and became a Muslim State. A few years later it became the second centre of Islam.

Thus the above quoted verse first speaks of a norm of history and then emphatically declares:

You will never find our method to be changing.

The following verses are other examples:

There have been many examples before you. So travel across the land and see what has been the fate of the rejecters. (Surah Ale Imran, 3:137)

This verse lays stress on the norms of history and urges people to follow the truth and look into historical events to learn a lesson from them and find out the trends of history.

Messengers indeed have been denied before you, but they were patient under the denial and prosecution till Our help reached them. There is none to alter the words of Allah (the conditions of His promises). Already there have reached you some reports about the Messengers. (Surah al-An'am, 6:34)

This verse encouraging the Holy Prophet, tells him of what the past people experienced, and explains that in this respect there exists a law and a norm which is equally valid in his case as it has been in the case of the former Prophets.

In accordance with this law which has already proved correct in the case of the former Prophets, he will soon receive divine help and will gain victory provided he fulfils all the pre-requisite conditions. These conditions are patience, perseverance etc. Success can be achieved only through these traits. That is why the Qur'an says:

They were patient under the denial and the persecution till Our help reached them. There is none to alter the words of Allah – the conditions of His promises. (Surah al-An'am, 6:34)

According to this verse the words of Allah cannot be altered. In other words the pre-requisite conditions and the circumstances on the materialization of which the fulfilment of His promises depends, cannot change over history.

Here 'word' signifies the relation between success and the fulfilment of its conditions and other circumstance, as explained in different verses dispersed in the Qur'an. Only a hint has been made here. This relation is a norm of history.

Are the Norms of History Changeable?

On the basis of this norms the Qur'an says:

When a warner came to them, it aroused in them nothing but repugnance, arrogance in the land, and plotting evil; and the evil plot encloses only the men who make it. Then do they expect the application of a law different from that which applied to the people of the old? You will not find any change in Allah's law, nor will you find any case of its failure. (Surah al-Fatir, 35: 42-43)

Did you suppose that you would enter paradise while yet you have not come to the like of that which befell those who passed away before you? They were afflicted by misery and hardship and were so severely shaken that the messenger and those who believed along with him said: 'When comes Allah's help?' Now surely Allah's help is nigh! (Surah al-Baqarah, 2:214)

Allah criticizing these people, asks them why they expect that there should be an exception in their case with regard to the norms of history?

They should not expect that the laws of history would fail to be effective in their case and they would enter paradise without leading the life of those nations which were successful and entered paradise. These nations passed a hard life so much so that in the words of the Qur'an, they were severely shaken. Hardships, worries and unfavourable circumstances are a sort of a training school for this Ummah and are a test of its will and perseverance.

They are an exercise which enables this Ummah to gain power gradually and occupy the position of the middle nation. Allah's help is nigh, but it has a method. It is not accidental, nor does anyone get it haphazardly.

Allah's help is nigh, but according to the Qur'an, to get it, it is necessary to know historical norms and understand the logic of history, for it often happens that a patient has his medicine near at hand, but he does not use it because he is not aware of its medicinal properties.

The knowledge of the norms of history enables people to receive divine help. The above verse denounces those who wish to be an exception to the norms of history. The Qur'an says:

We sent not to any township a warner, but it's pampered ones declared: 'Surely we are disbelievers in that which you bring to us'. And they say we are (more than you) in wealth and children. (In the Hereafter too) we are not going to be punished. (Surah Saba, 34:34 – 35)

All over history and in all societies there has always been the same relationship between the Prophets and the pompous people living in luxury. This relationship points to a norm of history.

It should not be regarded as a mere chance. Had it been a chance only, it would not have been repeated again and again and would not have acquired a generality to the extent that Allah says:

We sent not to any township a warner, but its pampered ones declared: . . ."

Therefore there is always a negative relationship and a contradiction between the celestial missions in the social life of people and the position taken by the pampered ones living in luxury. In fact this relationship separates the role of the Prophets in social life from that of the luxurious ones.

On the whole this relationship is a part of the social outlook of these two groups, as we will explain when we deal with the role of Prophethood in society and the social position of the Prophets. There we shall show that those who live in luxury are the natural opponents of Prophethood in society.

That is why the Qur'an says:

When We would destroy a township We send commandments to its people who lead a luxurious life, and they commit abominations therein, and so the word of doom has effect for it, and thus We annihilate that township completely. How many generations have We destroyed since Nuh! And Allah suffices as the Knower and the Beholder of the sins of His slaves. (Surah Bani Isra'il, 17:

16 -17)

This verse speaks of a definite relationship between the injustice of the rulers and the destruction which follows it. The verse emphasizes that this relationship being a historical norm, has existed all over history. On this very subject another verse says:

If they had observed the Tawrat and the Injil and that which was revealed from above them and from beneath their feet. " (Surah al-Maidah, 5:66)

Still another verse says:

If the people of the township had believed and refrained from evil, surely We should have opened for them blessings from the sky and from the earth. But they denied, and so We seized them on account of what they used to earn. (Surah al-A`raf, 7: 96)

Had they kept treading the right path, we would have given them abundant water to drink. (Surah al-Jinn, 72:16)

The above three verses show that there is a special relationship between acting in accordance with the commandments of Allah on the one hand, and prosperity and abundance of production on the other. In modern terminology it may be called the relation between fair distribution and increased production.

The Qur'an emphasizes that there can be no shortage of production and no poverty where fair distribution prevails. Fair distribution increases wealth and boosts up prosperity. Some people think that fair distribution causes poverty, but that is not true. The trend of history proves contrary to that and shows that whenever celestial rules of distribution are observed, national wealth increases and the blessings of the heaven and the earth are showered.

Necessity of Investigating Historical Events

Other verses of the Qur'an urge the people to thoroughly examine the historical events and ponder over them so that they may discover the laws of nature and the trends and norms of history. Allah says in the Qur'an: ***Have they not travelled in the land to see the nature of the consequence for those who were before them? Allah wiped them out. And for the disbelievers there will be the like thereof.*** (Surah Muhammad, 47:10)

Have they not travelled in the land and seen the nature of the consequence for those who were before them? (Surah Yusuf, 12: 109)

How many a township have We destroyed while it was sinful, so that lies in ruin, and how many a deserted well and lofty tower! Have they not travelled in the land, so that they may have hearts to feel and ears to hear? For indeed it is not the eyes that grow blind, but it is the hearts in the

bosom, that grow blind. (Surah al-Hajj, 22: 46)

How many a generation have We destroyed before them, who were mightier than these in prowess so that they overran the lands! Had they any place of refuge? Surely therein is a reminder for him who has a heart or gives ear with full intelligence? (Surah Qaf, 50: 36 – 37)

These verses taken together make clear the concept of the norms of history. They emphatically say that like any other field there exist definite laws in the field of history too.

Importance of Discovering Norms of History From the Qur'an

The discovery of this Qur'anic concept is a big achievement, for as we know, the Qur'an is the first book which emphatically and in a very convincing way tells us of the existence of the norms of history and severely opposes the idea that events take place automatically. It also rejects the view that all events being divinely decreed, we have no choice but to submit to them.

Most people regard historical events as a series of incongruous happenings. They interpret them on the basis of accident, fate or power of Allah, whose decree cannot be resisted.

The Qur'an is absolutely against this wrong idea. It does not consider any event to be without a cause or to be a mere manifestation of Allah's irresistible power. In contrast, it tells human intelligence that the field of history is governed by definite laws and norms, and that to be the master of his destiny man must know them. If you are aware of these laws, you can influence them, otherwise if you keep your eyes shut, these laws will certainly overpower you. Therefore you should open your eyes so that you may recognize them and dominate them instead of being dominated by them.

This great Qur'anic discovery paved the way for human intelligence to understand and realize the practical role of history in human life. Eight centuries after the revelation of the Qur'an efforts in this respect were begun by the Muslims themselves.

It was Ibn Khaldun who undertook the study of history and discovered its laws and norms. At least four centuries thereafter in the beginning of the Renaissance period the Europeans began to pay attention to this subject which was not pursued further by the Muslims.

The Europeans discussed this subject from various angles, and the basis of their way of thinking each of the various European schools of thought such as the idealists, the materialists and others tried to determine the laws of history from its own point of view.

As a result several theories emerged, the most renowned and clamorous of them being historical materialism or Marxism which has influenced history itself. Therefore we may say that all efforts in this connection has been inspired by the Qur'an, which still retains the proud privilege of introducing this idea for the first time in the field of human knowledge.

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