

## **Dr. Ali Shari'ati's Methodological Views About Understanding Islam\***

*Dr. Bashir Ahmad Dabla\*\**

- 1. Scientific Method in Social Science Research**
  - [i] Scientific method means the adoption of various rational tools and techniques in the course of social investigation. Its role stands most crucial in the field of social sciences research, including the discipline of Islamic Studies, in the present-day times. So, its explanation seems important for correct understanding and proper perspective of various ideas, issues and problems and in the contemporary sense. Thus, scientific method in social sciences research essentially refers to pursuance of research about social reality and social phenomenon within the framework of certain scientific method.
  - [ii] At the elementary level, it may be stated that scientific method is used in social science research in certain particular steps/stages which include formulation of hypothesis, making an preliminary observation, carrying out testing, framing a research design, doing field investigation, work for data processing, developing general-particular propositions, forming a theory or theories, and finally reaching at the level of facts. The explanation of these features follow. First, the hypothesis refers to raw or unconfirmed proposition about the

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\* This paper is based on the lecture delivered by the author in Shah-i-Hamdan Institute of Islamic Studies, University of Kashmir, Srinagar. The lecture was meant to expose scholars, researchers and students of Islamic Studies to the elementary concepts of research methodology to be applied in this discipline in the present-day times.

\*\* The author is Professor and former Head, Department of Sociology and Social Work, University of Kashmir, Srinagar. He is the author of the book entitled *Islam and Muslims: Dr. Ali Shari'ati's Sociological Views* [New Delhi, 1997, Harpreet Publications] and reprinted [Srinagar, 2010, Jay Kay Books].

concerned problem. It has generally two main sources which are based on individual's theoretical-practical knowledge about the problem and past written records/documents about the problem. Second, the preliminary observation means a simple and straight view of the concerned situation which is done objectively and purposefully. Third, the preceding observation of the social phenomenon leads to the testing, i.e. confirmation or rejection of the hypothesis earlier established. A highly scientific research work absolutely confirms nature and contents of hypothesis. Fourth, the social scientist carries out the boundaries/contours of research design in which he/she formulates/finalizes the specific topic of research, determines the universe of study, its theoretical-thematic dimensions, nature of methods-techniques to be used in the field, investigation-observation, methodological feasibility, makes a sample of study, its composition and sampling techniques. Fifth, in this state, the field investigation is carried out about the concerned problem which gives its necessary data and information. Sixth, this stage of scientific method enables the researcher for aggregation, classification, typology, tabulation, explanation and interpretation, in other words information/data processing. Seventh, after all these stages of research, the social scientist formulates the proposition, which leads to finalization of facts logically and rationally. Seventh, finally, systematic arrangement of these facts leads to the development of theory or theories in social sciences<sup>1</sup>.

All these stages of scientific research applies to the present-day discipline of Islamic Studies. While the empirical perspective stand dominant in the disciplines of Sociology, Economics, Geography and others, this can equally be applied in the field of Islamic Studies. It is in this context that hundreds

and thousands of empirical studies on Islam and Muslim societies have been carried out in different universities and research centres in the United States and Western Europe. The need of the hour is to adopt this new methodological scientific perspective in the research institutions in the non-Western world also.

**2. Dr. Ali Shari'ati: The Great Islamic Sociologist**

- [i] Dr. Ali Shari'ati was born in Iran in the year 1933. He stood primarily as a distinctive Islamic sociologist for two specific reasons. First, he was a professional and trained sociologist. After completing traditional education from theologians and clerics in Iran, he mastered the modern education and sciences in Western Europe. He carried out two Ph.D.s, one in Sociology and second in History of Religions, in France during 1960s when the 'leftist' ideology was dominant in the intellectual circles of that country. Second, at the same time, he was a 'committed Muslim' who was completely rooted in his culture and civilization. He proved his loyalty to Islam and Muslims by giving his life at the younger age when he was killed by the Israeli secret service in 1977 in London. There were lesser number of intellectuals in Muslim societies in Asia and Africa who were educated and trained in both sciences during the colonial period. In that background, Shari'ati represented ideas and ideals of revolution aimed at demolition of Western domination and dis-establishment of the colonial and imperialist powers. In this way, his contribution to the Islamic revolution in Iran can hardly be minimized or negated.
- [ii] His academic contribution stands historical, unparalleled, and largest. His lectures at the 'Husseini Centre' covered all fields, problems, dimensions, issues and, other aspects of life, especially in colonized Muslim societies<sup>2</sup>. He dealt

with all important sociological topics and themes in a highly professional way as he dealt with concepts of man, Tawheed, human society, historical change and development, colonialism and its impact, modernization, ummah, Marxian ideology, methodology and sociology as a discipline<sup>3</sup>. He has explained all these concepts, processes and theories in an objective, rational, scientific and sociological perspectives/framework. This has not affected in any way his distinctive Islamic perspective which is equally objective, rational, scientific and sociological. He sincerely felt that the Western colonial powers and their role and the existing situation of present-day Muslim societies have not been analysed in a rational, objective and scientific perspective. That stands the greatest problem of the generations of Muslims in the world<sup>4</sup>.

- [iii] His publications are mostly in Persian language and some of these were translated in English and other languages. These cover whole gamut of human-social life<sup>5</sup>. In fact, not many important contributions/ publications of Shari'ati have been translated in English. So, he remains comparatively un-introduced, if not unknown, to the larger section of Western scholars and researchers. The first serious and academic attempt to present Shari'ati as a professional Sociologist was made by Hamid Algar who edited some of his writings and speeches and published on the name of *Ali Shari'ati's Sociology of Islam* in 1978<sup>6</sup>. Subsequently, many of his brief writings and speeches in different languages of the world inside and outside Iran<sup>7</sup>.
- [iv] From the academic and scholarly contribution Shari'ati made, it may be said that his contribution stands to the level of Ibn Khuldun, the famous Muslim scholar in the century, qualitatively as well as quantitatively. Since Ibn Khuldun's *Muqadimma*<sup>8</sup> was translated in English in the

middle of middle of 20<sup>th</sup> century and so got introduced to the Western scholarship, while Shari'ati remains un-introduced on the whole. It is interesting to note here that while the theoretical framework and methodological orientation of Ibn Khaldun suited the academic and global Western colonial interests in the East, Shari'ati's theory, ideology and methodology was completely against the colonial domination and imperialism and urged the colonized-dehumanized lot to destroy and dismember this demon. Thus while the former legitimized the western scholarship, the latter opposed and debased it.

- [v] It seems important to note here that Ali Shari'ati's belonging to a particular sect of the Muslim community does in no way restrict or negate his level of scholarship and contribution to knowledge and humanity at the global level. When the Jewish origin of Karl Marx and Max Weber [considered as two founding fathers of the discipline of Sociology in modern times] do not belittle in any way their historic and unprecedented contribution to the emergence of Sociology in contemporary times, how can the most important contribution of Shari'ati be ignored. Thus the concepts, theories and methods developed by Ali Shari'ati need to be understood properly and applied in all studies in the discipline of Islamic Studies. In the following sections of this paper, we make an attempt to present the distinctive methodological views of Shari'ati.

### **3. Methodological Views**

In this section we will identify and analyse distinctive methodological views of Dr. Ali Shari'ati about Islam in general and 'understanding Islam' in particular.

- [i] Islam is a worldview which encompasses the whole of life. While it deals with personal matters, it provides guidance

in all social affairs. For Shari'ati, Islam is a "school of thought that gives life to man, individual and society and that is entrusted with the mission of the future guidance of mankind". He felt that Islam is universal, humanistic, scientific, innovative, creative and divine guidance to the Muslims and humanity at large. It is for change and revolution and against exploitation and injustice, demands full commitment in theory and practice, and provides the model society – *Ummah* and the model personality – *Prophet Muhammad* (SAAS). He presented Islam in the historical perspective by observing that Islam is not a new religion but an integral part of a large stream which has flowed through the chord of entire human history. Various prophets were ordained at different times to establish the universal religion in accordance with the circumstances of the age and need of the era. He relates Islam with other movements which, through out history, have been launched to emancipate and ameliorate the lives of the people.

- [ii] Shari'ati believed that the analysis of the approaches and methods of understanding Islam is of fundamental importance because of the fact that they develop correct thought which is basic to true knowledge, and true knowledge creates sound belief. This analysis is also important because the Muslims in general and non-Muslims in particular lack the correct understanding of Islam.

In regard to understanding of Islam, Shari'ati raised a question of fundamental importance, i.e. what is the correct method of knowing about Islam? According to Shari'ati, while trying to know this correct method, one must not fall into the trap of imitation of any European methods – naturalistic, psychological or sociological. This is because whole-sale borrowing or borrowing with some adjustments of the European methods distorts theoretical as well empirical realities prevalent

in the non-Western societies. So, he felt that, in order to find a proper method, to learn about Islam, one must be innovative in devising a new method, which may include some of the elements of European methods. This partial inclusion of Western methods is necessary because these new approaches have been discovered in the West for investigation of religion and its role in society.<sup>9</sup> He asserted that there may not be a unique method for understanding Islam comprehensively due to the fact that it is multi-dimensional. So, application of plural methods seems realistic and relevant. He said:

Islam is not a religion based solely on mystic intuition of man and restricted to the relationship between God and man; this is merely one dimension of the religion of Islam. In order to study this dimension, a philosophical method must be adopted because man's relations to God is discussed in philosophy in the sense of general and unfettered metaphysical thought. Another dimension of this religion is question of man's life on this earth. In order to study this dimension, use must be made of methods that have been established in the human/natural sciences today... Islam is a religion that has both, a society and a civilization. In order to study these, the methods of history and sociology must be used.<sup>10</sup>

Shari'ati held that there are two fundamental methods for learning Islam correctly. These are:

- [i] the study of the *Qur'an*, taking it as the compendium of the ideas and scientific and literary output of the person known as Islam; and
- [ii] the study of Islamic history, taking it as the sum total of developments undergone by Islam from the beginning of the Prophet's mission down to the present.

He explained these two methods in the logic of equating

Islam with the human personality. A religion, according to him, is like a person in the methodological context. In order to acquire knowledge about a great personality, the researcher adopted two main methods which are [a] investigation of the intellectual, scientific and written works of the individual concerned, and [b] extensive study of his biography which includes all of his major or minor life events. Similarly, the correct understanding of Islam can be attained by the study of its original source, *Qur'an*, and its historical development. What precisely he meant was as follows:

The knowledge and understanding of the *Qur'an* as the source of the ideas of Islam, and knowledge and understanding of Islamic history as the record of various events that have occurred at different times. These are the two fundamental methods for attaining a precise and scientific knowledge of Islam<sup>11</sup>.

3.3. Shari'ati presented another method, which is one of the widely used methods in Europe, for gaining knowledge and understanding of Islam, i.e. the method of typology. The meaning which he attached to this method that it consists of "classifying topics and themes according to type and then comparing them on that basis." In this context, he developed a particular method for studying religion, which is applicable to all religions. This method has got two important features. First, it emphasizes on identification of five distinct characteristics of the religion. Second, it compares them with corresponding features of other religions. He felt that five distinctive and comparable characteristics of any religion are as mentioned below:

- [i] the god or gods of every religion, i.e. the entity worshipped by the followers of those religions;
- [ii] the prophet of every religion, i.e. the person who proclaims the message of that religion;



- [iii] the book of each religion, i.e. the foundation of law proclaimed by the religion to which it invites men in faith and obedience;
- [iv] the circumstances of appearance of the prophet of each religion and audience to which he addressed himself, for each prophet proclaimed his message in a different fashion; and
- [v] those choice individuals each religion nurtures and produces – the representative figures it has trained and then presented to society and history.<sup>12</sup>

3.4. Shari'ati has operationalized this method in terms of five stages in the case of Islam and their explanation follows:

[i] *The First Stage:*

One must understand the type; concept, features and characteristics of God discussed in Islam. One must refer to the Qur'an and words of the Prophet (SAAS) as well as the elite among those whom he trained; and one must compare *Allah* with the figure depicted in other religions as God – Ahuramazda, Yahwa, Zeus, Baal, and so forth.

[ii] *The Second Stage:*

One must understand what kind of a book the *Qur'an* is, what topics it discusses, and what areas it emphasizes? One must study what matters does *Qur'an* treat and in exactly what fashion?; and one must develop a comparison between the *Qur'an* and other religious texts such as *the Gospels, the Torah, the Vedas, the Avesta* and so on.

[iii] *The Third Stage:*

One must concentrate on the personality of the Prophet in both – human and prophetic – dimensions; One must study the way in which he spoke, worked, thought, smiled, sat and slept?; One must observe the nature of his relations with

strangers, with enemies, with friends and family; One must examine his failures and his triumphs and the manner in which he confronted great social problems; One must compare him with other prophets and founders of religions like Moses, Jesus, Zoroaster and the Buddha.

[iv] *The Fourth Stage:*

Did the Prophet appear without any preliminary and was any one waiting for him; did he anticipate and know the mission are worth bearing questions. One must enquire about an extraordinary current of thought which began to flow through his mind, totally changing his manner of speech and personality in such a fashion that he initially found it difficult to bear. One must compare the circumstances under which the Prophet of Islam appeared with those under which other prophets appeared, such as Jesus, Abraham, Moses, Zoroaster, Confucius, Buddha and so forth. A definite comparison is portrayed by Shari'ati among prophets of the Abrahamic and non-Abrahamic lines. While all prophets of the non-Abrahamic line turn immediately to the existing secular power, hoping to propagate their message in society by means of that power, all prophets of the Abrahamic line from Abraham to Muhammad proclaim their missions in the form of rebellion against the existing secular power.

[v] *The Fifth Stage:*

One must choose to study Aaron in the religion of Moses, St. Paul in the religion of Jesus, and 'Ali, Hussayn or 'Abu Dharr in the religion of Islam, as outstanding specimens of each of the religions. During the study of the life of Hussayn, one must try to know the principles for which he fought, his

sensitivity with respect to social matters and the destiny of the people, and his devotion and self-sacrifice towards the Islamic cause. Shari'ati compares Hussayn with 'Abu Ali Sina and Hussayn bin Mansur Hallaj. Ibn Sina was a great philosopher, scholar and genius, and a source of pride to the whole history of science and philosophy in the Islamic civilization. But, he placed himself in the service of rank and power showed any concern with the destiny of men and the fate of his society. Similarly, Hallaj was a man aflame from the passionate love of God. He was constantly immersed in the burning invocation of God and this was a source of true exaltation for him. But, his "spiritual lunacy" could hardly contribute socially.<sup>13</sup>

3.5. Shari'ati felt that if Islam is understood through the adoption of the above-mentioned scientific methods, new realities will dawn upon observers, including laymen. In fact, the scientific study of Islam will lead to new horizons of knowledge. In this regard, he said:

There are several important topics in the human science that I discovered with the aid of the Qur'an that have not yet been discussed by these natural sciences.<sup>14</sup>

In order to prove his point, he gave examples of the ideals of 'migration' and 'change and development'. He maintained that the study of these ideas in the Islamic context will divulge new realities which could not be discovered within the Western scientific framework. This type of study will also help in understanding many questions of history and sociology in a better, fresher and more precise fashion.

According to Shari'ati, migration (*hijra*) is not merely "a historical event" from the point of view of the *Qur'an*. It is rather a profound philosophical and social principle in the

sociological and historical sense. It is because the development of all known civilizations was indirectly related to the process of migration. On the basis of his study of the Qur'an, Shari'ati concluded:

All the civilizations in the world from the most ancient that we know of, the civilization of Sumer – came in to being on the heels of migration. In each case, a primitive people remained primitive as long as it stayed in its own land, and attained civilization after undertaking a migration and establishing itself in a new land. All civilizations are, then, born of the migration of primitive people."<sup>15</sup>

3.6. Similarly, Shari'ati discovered some distinguishing ideas in Islam regarding the basic factor in change and development of societies, the topic which has been debated in the human sciences for hundreds of years. In regard to this topic, the social scientists in the West have taken varying positions, often contradictory and one at the cost of other. While one school considered 'accident' to be the basic factor, another school believed in the human evolution in accordance with pre-determined laws that play in human society exactly the same role as the laws of nature play in the human realm. In the same way, while some proclaimed that laws are no more than a tool in the hands of powerful personality who always act as the guide for societies, others held the opinion that the people - the totality of society – do play the role in determining their destiny. Shari'ati comments that none of these theories could be found in Islam exclusively. After detailed and careful study of Qur'an, he concluded as following:

While the people are those to whom the Qur'an addresses itself and constitute the axis and fundamental factor in social development and change, and while they are responsible before God, at the same time, personality, chance and tradition

also have been recognized as capable of affecting the destiny of society. According to Islam, there are then four fundamental factors of social development and change-personality, tradition, accident and *al-nass* [the people].<sup>16</sup>

Among these four factors, he distinguished two – *al-nass* and tradition as the most important. It is because the former represents will of the mass of the people and the latter stands for the scientifically demonstrable laws which exist in human society. The meaning, nature and implications of these fundamental factors are explained by the following points:

- [i] Personality, according to Islam, is not a creative factor in itself. Even the prophets are not ones who have created new norms in the society. Sociologically, their superiority over teachers and reformers may be explained in terms of their divine knowledge and consequent behavior. In Qur'an, the prophet has been portrayed as the bearer of a message whose duty was to show man the school and the path of truth. However, his message had a definite context. That is why, his personality had an important "role in bringing about change, development and progress in building a future civilization and in changing the course of history."<sup>17</sup>
- [ii] Accident has no decisive role in Islam, for God intervenes directly or indirectly in all affairs. It has neither a logical cause nor an ultimate purpose. Moreover, accident cannot withstand Islam because it, as a scientific school of thought, believes that change and development stems from the social dynamics which possesses immutable and scientifically demonstrable norms. However, a certain form of accident exists in the human fate. Shari'ati explained it by putting forth an example,

according to which, “Changiz Khan appears in Mongolia, comes to power in accordance with social norms and assembles a large force around him. But the defeat of Iran at the hands of C. Khan is an accident; it was quite possible for it have not occurred.”

- [iii] The historical fact is that those addressed by any school of thought, religion or prophet constitute the fundamental factor of social change. While *Qur'an* is addressed to *al-nass*, the prophet was sent to the same. Moreover, it is *al-nass* [the people without any particular class or social form], not the prophet, who are accountable for their deeds, especially for decline and degeneration. Shari'ati said:

Islam is the first school of social thought that recognizes the masses as the basis, the fundamental and conscious factor in determining history and society.<sup>18</sup>

- [iv] Islam appears to approach the theory of determinism in a particular way. While accepting the fact that change emanates from the society on the basis of fixed pattern and immutable laws, the individual is equally responsible in determining the society's fate. So, both – society and individuals – are responsible for their destinies. Shari'ati says:

Society... has been established on the basis of God-given norms and patterns, and its development and evolution is also found on them. But at the same time man is responsible and he cannot divest himself of his responsibility through reliance upon Khayyamian fatalism or historical determinism, thus ridding himself of accountability for the destiny of his society.<sup>19</sup>

- [v] The role and interaction pattern of these factors is interesting. The proportional influence of these

factors depends on the circumstances prevailing in the society. In societies where *al-nass* is advanced, in the cultural and educational fields, the role of personality gets decreased. In contrast, in societies that have the lower level of civilization, the personality emerges as influential. Moreover, at different stages of social development, one of the factors will have more effect than other factor.

**Notes and References**

1. See Max Weber, *Methodology of Social Sciences*, London, 1923.
2. Dr. B. A Dabla, *Islam and Muslims: Dr. Ali Shariati's Sociological views*, New Delhi, 1983 and Hamid Algar, *On The Sociology of Islam*, Berkeley, 1979
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. See detailed bibliography in B. A. Dabla, *op. cit.*
6. Hamid Algar, *op. cit.*
7. See A. H. H. Abidi, "Dr. Ali Shari'ati: The Man and His Ideals", *Islam and Modern Age*, New Delhi, May 1982.
8. Ibid., p. 95.
9. These views are based on two lectures of Dr. Ali Shari'ati which he delivered at Hussain-i-Irshad on the topic, "Ravish-i-Shinakati-Islam." These lectures were translated by Hamid Algar in his edited book *op. cit.*
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.