



THE SIGNIFICANCE OF VALUES IN SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

Values are essential for the smooth running of society. They provide moral conduct to guide our behavior. The neglect of values bring chaos and frustration. It should be the endeavor of institutions to present the model and inculcate the values among the young generation.

KEYWORDS: VALUES, DRIVES, CONTEMPORARY, DEHUMANIZATION, NOTHINGNESS, NIHILISM.

Values provide sustenance and nourishment to all social relationships and are of fundamental significance in any society. Though it is difficult to define them they are the very core of any culture. Their neglect leads to unethical and unpleasant situations. Values give ideal images of conduct to ordinary man and woman and thus define "what individual goals shall be sought in a society" (Graham 125). They help a man to have certain ideals and standards in his life. Values guide him to "orient himself in his conduct" (Kahler 187).

Jules Henry draws a sharp distinction between values and drives with reference to American society:

Drives are what urge us blindly into getting bigger, into going further into outer space and into destructive competition; values are the sentiments that work in the opposite direction. Drives belong to the occupational world; values to the world of the family and friendly intimacy (14).

According to him, drives motivate a person towards "expansiveness, competition and achievement" which ultimately generate the feeling of loss, fear, anxiety and lastly paronia. In contrast values inspire and cultivate the feeling of "gentleness, kindness and generosity among people". Today, Americans believe more in drives than in values and Jules Henry calls it "a driven culture"(13).

The moral beliefs which people attach to their profession and work have been referred to as "functional values" or "functional responsibilities" by Kahler. He thinks that people confuse functional values with real values though in fact these are "mere standards". The real values are the outcome of general consensus. They represent the "actual choice" of the members of the society, while functional values "are determined by objective, practical necessities and are collectively enforced" (317).

Values are not fixed, nor are they imposed by any external authority. They are flexible and change with the progress of civilisation. However, this fact does not justify the dislocation of values in the contemporary society. Disrespect for traditional values are not an outcome of the natural process of change.

T.S. Eliot attached great importance to the "historical sense" and related it to the concept of "tradition". He said "the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past" (295). In other words, the past and the present are interdependent. Similarly, the past values are not dispensable in the present times. Ralph H. Gabriel affirms that "each generation combines the tradition it has inherited from the past with the knowledge that springs from an experienced present to formulate and reformulate the values which guide the conduct of its members"(149).

In the twentieth century, rapid progress of science and technology has dwarfed the significance of human beings. Instead of generating optimism in them, it gives way to terror in their hearts. The continuous dehumanization of society fills people's heart with despair and a feeling of nothingness, finally culminating in nihilism.

In politics, the ideologies of John Locke and Adam Smith inspired people thought. Both these writers had stressed the values of individualism and equality as prerequisites for advancement, Therefore during the frontier days, individual initiative and self-reliance were held in high esteem. Gradually these values helped in the emergence of capitalism in America and other countries which encouraged equal opportunity of progress to everyone irrespective of caste and creed.

Irving Kristol draws attention to the fact that people welcomed capitalism because it promised three unusual things which were unprecedented in human history. It promised material prosperity to all of its citizens. It promised unprecedented measure of liberty. And lastly, it promised "that amidst prosperity and liberty, the individual could satisfy his instinct for self-perfection - for leading a virtuous life that satisfied the demands of his spirit" (5). Kristol regretted later that "the third promise of a virtuous life and a just society was subverted by the dynamics of capitalism itself" (6).

Capitalism no longer remains a dream of an individual's enterprise. Today individual ownership of business is vanishing and is giving way to corporations and

"collectives" (Kahler 275). In an article, "Ignoring the individual" Chand Joshi, while analysing the causes of the demise of communism, has pointed out that "the failure of communism has been its propagators inability to translate Marx's essential humanism" (4). He also quotes James Thurber, the satirist, who had said that in the beginning the world started with one man, one woman and one flower. In essence, no system flourish long until it gives the individual man his due importance.

With the passage of time the dream of success looms large in the psyche of multitudes but the moral force of puritan temper has vanished. This has resulted in the worst aspects of capitalism to surface. These are the advent of cut-throat competition and the justification of success by whatever means it comes. Daniel Bell thinks that an absence of moral conduct would bring "an extraordinary contradiction within the social structure" (71).

The phrase "new capitalism" which came into use for the first time in 1920s presents another dimension of cultural contradiction of capitalism (Bell 75). It invokes the values of the protestant ethic in the domain of work for gearing up production. On the other hand, it stimulates a desire for fun and consumption of material things. The enthusiasm for going ahead is so vigorous that even religious scriptures are used for mobilising people. In *The art of Loving*, Fromm reveals that in modern capitalism the concept of God is used as "a psychological device to make one better fitted for the competitive struggle" (105).

The new ethic preaches the idea that no hindrance is acceptable in the path of success, believing that even religion sanctifies material prosperity. The modern capitalism presents another dimension of cultural contradiction. Bell has pointed out, "Getting ahead is no longer a matter of rising up a social ladder, as it was in the late nineteenth century, but of adopting a specific style of life - country club, artiness, travel, hobbies" (68). A person is judged, not for his human qualities but for his market values. Selling has become the hallmark of consumptive society. Contrary to the protestant ethic of frugality, consumption stresses extravaganza. It extols "the lavish display" against the puritan temper of asceticism (Bell 49). Eric From presents a very gloomy picture of this system :

Modern capitalism needs men who co-operate smoothly and in large numbers: who want to consume more and more; and whose tastes are standardized and can be easily influenced and anticipated. It needs men who feel free and independent not subject to any authority or principle or conscience - yet willing to be commanded, to do what is expected of them, to fit into the social machine force, led without leaders, prompted without aim- except the one to make good, to be on the move, to function, to go ahead (The Art of Loving, 85).

The more fundamental change occurred in the economic system. It transformed the "motivations and rewards" (Bell 74) expected out of a deal. The work was no more considered a religious calling but a success which can only be achieved at the failure of other. The accumulation of

wealth was not an end itself but it should lead to conspicuous consumption. The puritan temper valued deferred gratification. The new culture emphasised immediate gratification. In place of hard-work and frugal living the new thoughts exalted the life of comfort and luxury. The extravaganza has become the life-style.

As opportunities are shrinking it has become extremely difficult to satisfy these desires. It gave rise to many problems such as alienation, lack of communication, mutual hatred, suspicion and fear. Those who have surfeit of material prosperity are suffering from complacency, stagnation, lack of love and loveliness. David Madden laments the bleakness of present scene in these words:

Pastoral ideals and the second chance for mankind in a New Eden have been defeated a nightmare of closed systems and electronic preclusions; human resources have gone from budding to blight.(Xvi-Xvii).

The symptoms of the fall of a civilisation as described by various world thinkers have one thing in common. They believe the events clearly show, decline of morals. In the opinion of Arabian thinker Ibn Khaldun, "these are the transformations from simplicity to luxury." Plato in Book two of *The Republic* called this decline as the change from "the healthy city to the fevered city" (qtd. in Bell 82). Oswald Spengler pointed out loss of creativity as the key factor in the decline of civilisations (qtd. in Bell 82). In 1970s Daniel Bell referred to this phenomenon as "the change from asceticism to hedonism" (82).

Religion has an important place in every society. It controls human behaviour by imposing moral norms. Commenting upon religion and culture in a post-industrial age, Bell writes "modernism as a cultural movement trespassed religion and moved the center of authority from the sacred to the profane" (158). Traditionally, religion had performed basic two functions in the western society. "It has guarded the portals of the demonic" and "has provided a continuity with the past" (157). The rise of modernism as a cultural movement contradicted these basic assumptions of religion. Instead of subordinating the "aesthetic impulses to moral conduct" (157) a modernist deals with the end explores everything which comes in his imagination. In this process of substitutions of realms, sacred is sacrificed and "we are left with the shambles of appetite and self-interest and the destruction of the moral circle which engirds mankind" (171).

The loss of human values and the decline of resilience in traditional institutions such as family, marriage etc. have brought degeneration in character. The pursuit of money, power, success have dehumanised mankind. The material prosperity and conspicuous consumption are the basic cause of the dislocation of values in contemporary society. People are frustrated of their lives. The dominant feelings are of anger and fear. In this way, the neglect of values lead a society to nothingness. It would be the endeavour of social scientists and institutions to uphold the practise and inculcate the values among the young generation. It is never too late to revert this cycle. The beginning should be

made from the individual family.

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