



**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

**SOCIOLOGICAL INSIGHTS OF ASABIYYAH BY IBN KHALDUN: AN INEVITABLE  
FORCE FOR SOCIAL DYNAMISM**

**Heena Qadir\***

Discipline of Sociology, School of Social Sciences, IGNOU, New Delhi.

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**ABSTRACT**

The sociology of social dynamics or change has always been the product of times of flux, and the unmatched dynamics of our period. Social dynamics has been the area of focus for both classical sociologists as well as that of modern social theorists due to its everlasting essence and presence in every type of society. The concept of social dynamics constitutes a fundamental issue and challenge to all academic disciplines in general and to the subject of sociology in particular. This research paper is an attempt to analyze the broad horizon of social change from the systemic sociological insight of Ibn Khaldun. Khaldun asserted that social solidarity (*Asabiyyah*) is a vital function in explaining the cyclical theory of social change and plays a fundamental role in the rise and fall of societies and civilizations. Therefore, social solidarity function either 'constructively' or 'destructively'. Ibn Khaldun maintained the cyclical perspective of social change and identified an almost rhythmic repetition of rise and fall in human civilization besides analyzing multiple factors contributing to it. A factor that Ibn Khaldun emphasizes as important in social and political development is a sense of solidarity (*Asabiyyah*), the state of mind that makes individuals identify with a group and subordinate their own personal interests to the group interest. In his theory of the forces that determine history, Ibn Khaldun does not balance material and psychological factors; ultimately all other factors are subordinated to *Asabiyyah*. From the group of operating forces, *Asabiyyah* emerges as a dominating overestimated factor. He argues that *Asabiyyah* or social cohesion carries groups to power or gives rise to the ascent of a civilization and political power but contains within itself the seeds of the group's downfall to be replaced by a new group, dynasty or empire bound by a stronger cohesion. Ibn Khaldun deliberates over and expounds the philosophy of political sociology. His primary concern in this regard was his concept of *Asabiyyah*.

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**INTRODUCTION**

The word *Asabiyyah* is a derivative from the Arabic root '*asab*' which means 'to bind' people in groups. '*Usbatun*' or '*Isabatun*' are also derivatives of the same root, which means a group (*majmuah*). It demands unity of thought and actions against desires, wishes and wants, no matter be it right or wrong (Farhat Yousuf:2005). The term '*Asabiyyah*' being an Arabic word cannot be exactly and adequately translated into English, but the closest connotations for the term used are mainly 'solidarity', 'group cohesion', and 'group feeling'. Simon suggests keeping the term as it is (Simon: 2002). *Asabiyyah*, as Fida Mohammad contends is a 'we feeling' among people, which is the utmost base and a fundamental criterion for the survival of any political or a social organization. It is not just group solidarity; it is the merged effect of the group solidarity with a political determination to power and organized leadership (Fida Mohammad: 1998). Several modern commentators of Ibn Khaldun have interpreted *Asabiyyah* as the 'sense of solidarity', 'group feeling', 'group loyalty', and 'public spirit', but a close look into the subject matter of *Muqaddimah* shows that Ibn Khaldun had much more in his mind when he used the term as a basis for his thesis on civilizations. *Asabiyyah* is a positive and active expression of

men's attachment to one another in a family, in a tribe, in a clan and in a nation - the expression that can be translated into patriotism and nationalism. Arnold Toynbee has described Ibn Khaldun's doctrine of *Asabiyyah* as "the basic protoplasm out of which all bodies politic and bodies social are built up" (Toynbee: 1963).

It could be concluded that *Asabiyyah* is a psychological and emotional factor, a mutual understanding that holds people together, united, bound and keeps away from revolts, riots and mutinies with sovereignty as its ultimate aim. Common descent and blood ties may serve as a condition for *Asabiyyah* but it is not always a necessary criterion for the same, as it binds people on the basis of religions and ideologies, polity, economy, culture, approval of a common leadership and the core of it is a sense of commonality and a spiritual unity. Sati al-Husri, a leading Arab commentator of Ibn Khaldun of modern times, is of the opinion that the theory of *Asabiyyah* is not limited to the narrow communal feelings, which stems out of kinship or blood relationship. In his opinion, it is a spiritual force which transcends barriers of caste, color, tribe and family and could more appropriately be depicted in the form of le lien social or spirit de corps. It signifies social and organizational cohesion and any

\* Corresponding author: Heena Qadir

Doctoral Student, Discipline of Sociology, School of Social Sciences, IGNOU, New Delhi.

factor which strengthens group solidarity is legitimate (Cleveland: 1972). Some scholars like Gellner argued that *Asabiyyah* is confined to nomadic tribalism of the Bedouins but Baali refutes the argument by saying that Ibn Khaldun used it as a foundation of historical explanation of social life in nomadic and urban societies, which is *Asabiyyah-centric* and describes the shifts between *Badawa* (Nomadism) and *Hadara* (Urbanism) (Baali: 1998). Ibn Khaldun lifts the term from its narrow implications and makes it a basis for a universal theoretical framework, in examining the stability and life style of human groupings of all sizes.

Ibn Khaldun borrowed the term *Asabiyyah* from the vocabulary of *Ayyam al- Jahilliya* (times of ignorance which preceded Islam in Arabia), when the term was used by the Arabs of the desert to signify unity of purpose, oneness of thought and action, dynamic leadership and socio- economic cohesion in a tribe or a group. *Asabiyyah* was an instrument of defense as well as of aggression and its main objective was to maintain group solidarity (Ali: 1993). It was however considered to be one of the major evils of the socio-political life in Arabia against which the new faith of Islam revolted because the narrowness of pre- Islamic Bedouin tribalism and clannish affiliations did not fit into the universality of the Islamic doctrine and it contradicted the basic notions of justice in Islam. For it being a distinctive quality of the pre-Islamic Bedouin tribalism; it held a negative sense of perception which was disapproved in Islam. Rejection of *Assabiyyah* in the early Islamic literatures was mainly due to its repulsive features, which conceptualize close-knitting of people, economic cohesiveness and determines their thoughts and actions by the tribal ideology. It is more a blindly following the chieftain of a tribe and it may bring about positive or negative consequences (Grunebaum: 1971).

*Asabiyyah* was modified in favor of Islam and in later literature we find two concepts of *Asabiyyah*, one being the bad quality, fanaticism and chauvinism that were nullified in Islam and the other being the good which is associated with bravery. Instead of clear evidences in Quran and *Hadith*, Ibn Khaldun insisted that group-feeling or *Asabiyyah* is essential for the survival of all communities when it is put to use constructively. Ibn Khaldun has interpreted the prophet's approach in allowing or disallowing certain traits in human behavior in the following words: when the law- giver (Muhammad) forbids or censures certain human activities or urges their omission, he does not want them to be neglected altogether, nor does he want them to be completely eradicated or the powers from which they result to remain altogether unused. He wants those powers to be employed as much as possible for the right aim (Khaldun: 1967). Likewise when the religious law censures group feeling and says "Neither your blood relations nor your children will be of use to you (on the day of Resurrection)", such a statement is directed against a group-feeling that is used for worthless purpose, as in case of pre-Islamic Bedouin tribalism. It is also directed against a group-feeling that makes a person proud and superior, on the other hand, a group- feeling that is working for the truth and for the fulfillment of the divine commands is something desirable. If they were gone, religious laws would no longer be, because they materialize only through group-feeling" (Khaldun: 1958). According to Franz Rosenthal, two leading historians of Islam, Ibn al-Athir and Ibn al- Khatib had also used *Asabiyyah* to connote human emotions for unity and oneness and held the opinion that the term in no way was offensive to Islamic religion.

They pointed out that it could be used to represent genuine sentiments of affinity and identity in the form of Patriotism, Nationality and ideology.

Thus, throughout his detailed examination of human social organizations, Ibn Khaldun is making constant effort to amplify his own interpretation of the term *Asabiyyah*. He infused specific meanings in it and used it as a vital instrument to elaborate his thesis of the cyclic rise and fall of civilizations. It is one of the most important basic concepts in the *Muqaddimah*. It is a force that determines to a high degree the development of society and constitutes the core concept of Ibn Khaldun's work to explain the history of humanity. *Asabiyyah* plays an integral and decisive role in human history and acts as a motor of social change. This theme constitutes the pivot around which most of his discussions about man and society revolve. However Ibn Khaldun, although prescribed the concept of *Asabiyyah* as the factor behind civilizational growth and disgrace, yet believed that there could be dynasties established without the basis of an *Asabiyyatic* bond. He gave examples from the experience of Egypt and Syria, when there happens to be a very few cases of revolts and seditions.

*Asabiyyah* develops the spirit of self-sacrifice, courage, self reliance and helps smaller groups to emerge into a bigger one for defense and safety. Ibn Khaldun repeatedly explains that "group feeling" produces the ability to defend oneself, to offer opposition, to protect oneself and to press one's claims. Who so ever loses his group-feeling is too devitalized to do any of these things. To lose *Asabiyyah* and be vanquished by a superior force is unquestionably a calamity of great magnitude. Members of the vanquished group, according to Ibn Khaldun develop the most humiliating attitude of emulating the masters. They lose self respect and develop apathy, and their will to struggle and survive is completely eroded. These are symptoms of the demise of *Asabiyyah* (Khaldun: 1958). Assimilation by force, however, does not produce a genuine *Asabiyyah*. Even if the conquering group uses all the skills and strategies of favors, patronage and bribery, the unity generated by such means would still be artificial. It would lack the inherent binding force which is produced only by spontaneous upsurge of emotional oneness, which for instance stems out of common ancestry. Artificial *Asabiyyah*, he says, does not last long (Ali: 1993). The Purpose of *Asabiyyah* is to maintain mastery.

#### **Characteristics of Asabiyyah**

In describing *Asabiyyah* Baali (Baali: 1988) conferred the following characteristics of the term:

1. It is not inevitably a blood related concept, although many propose so.
2. It is natural and universal and not confined to the Arabs only, as Ibn Khaldun pointed out the *Asabiyyah* of Non-Arabs like the Persians, Jews, Assyrians, Greeks and others.
3. *Asabiyyah* and economy of a nation are intertwined. The economy of a *Badawa* society changes proportionately with the change of a society to a *Hadara* status.
4. *Asabiyyah* plays an immense influence on polity of a society. A dynasty evolves with the cohesiveness of *Asabiyyah* in a society. It is *Asabiyyah* which manipulates leadership.

5. *Asabiyyah* also ties with for a higher social solidarity. Ibn Khaldun exemplifies the success of the Arabs being tied in unity of Islam.

### **Factors which strengthen *Asabiyyah* and leads to Rise of Civilization**

The factors which cement the bonds of unity and thus allow *Asabiyyah* to be effective and dynamic as per Ibn Khaldun are: Mode of Living, Power, Leadership and religion (of primary significance). These are the sources from which *Asabiyyah* derives its strength. Associative sentiments, unity of purpose, community of social and economic interests, oneness of feelings and emotions are other important factors that strengthen *Asabiyyah*.

#### **Mode of Living**

Ibn Khaldun maintains that the methods by which human beings seek their livelihood determine the totality of culture of a civilization to a greater extent. They develop unique behavior and distinctive socio-economic institutions. Thus the members of a civilization develop common or collective feelings or togetherness so as to ensure security from external threats. Thus the common mode of living develops a common sentiment within civilization and becomes a determinant factor of *Asabiyyah*. According to Ibn Khaldun, the kind of food people eat and the quantity and quality of what they eat, also constitute major factors in determining the advancement of civilizations. Abundance and affluence lead to the premature senility of a social system and it decays. Even in the matters of religion it is the poor and the frugal that are devout (Khaldun: 1958).

#### **Power**

Force and power are listed among the basic ingredients of human civilization. Ibn Khaldun also rated power very high among the characteristics of *Asabiyyah*. Its intensity and ability to hold people together in a group he feels is an important factor in the generation of group feeling. How long a culture is going to last, depends on how effective the use of power is. Primitive cultures, he says are known for the ferocity of their power, and this is a major determinant factor of the strength of their *Asabiyyah* (Khaldun: 1958). Without the existence of an authority which has the power to coerce people into compliance, social cohesion cannot be maintained. Powers alone can restraint natural pugnacity of man, and it is through its influence that disruptive consequences of heterogeneity of the social organization could be minimized. It strengthens the bonds of discipline and unity in society and vastly reduces the chances of aggression and injustice.

#### **Leadership**

The role of leadership is decisive and critical for the survival of all groups and organizations. The qualities of the head and heart of the leader, his ability to inspire confidence and prudence in guiding his followers, his ability to maximize compliance among the people led by him, his ability to win the support of majority, so as to justify his authority as legitimate determine the solidarity of the group. Ibn Khaldun realized that every human group tends to be heterogeneous in composition. Therefore it is difficult for a leader to win the support of majority. The best way to end this difficulty is to have a leader from that segment of society which has a permanent majority. This will give him the required power to carry out his commands and the people would be more responsive to him. Such an arrangement would strengthen

*Asabiyyah*, which in turn would enable the continuity of leadership. To perpetuate *Asabiyyah* and maintain cooperative spirit needs a powerful leadership. The individual, whose group feeling is recognized superior to everyone else, becomes the leader. A leader, in order to establish his indisputable superiority over the rest of the community must show his ability to comprehend and mobilize the group-feeling and this he can do only if his own group-feeling is better than every other member of the group (Ali: 1993).

Ibn Khaldun also adds that leadership would further be strengthened in its *Asabiyyah*, if it remains in one family for a long time, particularly if that family has a long history of superiority. Family provides very dependable crutches to the leader, but these familial ties have to be genuine. Leaders, he says, can establish fake ties with noble families to win support from the masses. But he concludes that such a facade and deceit cannot last long. Even in genuine cases a leader can make the best use of his family connections only if he himself has competence to hold a position of leadership. Thus family has only a complementary role in leadership. In the end, it would be the personality of the leader which would determine the length and strength of his *Asabiyyah*. When his personal group feeling disappears, time will run short for his leadership (Khaldun: 1958). Social prestige is the basic lubricant of leadership and this according to Ibn Khaldun, can be acquired only through *Asabiyyah* and lasts as long as the group is convinced that the person in authority is in fact superior to rest of the members in group feeling. Ibn Khaldun adds that leader should not be over-clever or over-shrewd, because too much shrewdness is an indication that a leader thinks too much of himself. In his opinion, the leader must avoid extremes and should follow a middle course which is prudent and safe.

#### **Religion**

Similarity of religious views is one of the strongest bonds of human organizations. Religion helps in the creation of moral, spiritual and material cohesion in society, and facilitates oneness of thought and action. It eradicates jealousies, mitigates prejudices and reduces rivalries which constantly plague human relations. Ibn Khaldun has elaborated the importance of religion in the following words: Only by God's help in establishing His religion do individual desires come together in agreement to press their claims and hearts become united. Religious coloring keeps away mutual jealousy and envy among people who share an *Asabiyyah* and cause concentration upon the truth. When people (by the help of religion) come to have the right insight into their affairs, nothing can withstand them, because their outlook is one and this object is one of common accord.

Religion according to Ibn Khaldun is a very powerful thrust towards unification, and because of its sanctity, is stronger than many other elements which constitute *Asabiyyah*. But at the same time, he is convinced that religion only strengthens but does not replace *Asabiyyah*. He contends that there have been situations in history when even the most fervent religious sentiments failed to sustain unity of a group. He goes to the extent of saying that one should not be surprised if in many cases religion is dependent on *Asabiyyah* for survival. Religion in his opinion is both a sociological and spiritual experience (Ali: 1993). It is a bond of social unity as well as an instrument for the purification of human soul and mind. When religious laws dominate the destiny of a society, policy makers tend to abstain from self interest and work for the betterment of the masses that result in very strong

*Asabiyyah* and when the ruler deviates from religion and is inclined towards worldly affairs, *Asabiyyah* becomes weak. Ibn Khaldun's convictions regarding the over-powering role of *Asabiyyah* are so strong that he feels that even prophetic missions can flourish only with the consensus of the people. He explains that even the rapid spread of Islam under the Holy prophet and his immediate successors was mainly due to the presence of *Asabiyyah* among the Arabs. The Prophet, in his opinion, brought the word of God, but its receptivity was rooted in the minds of the people themselves. Ibn Khaldun says that "when the Muslims got their religion from the law-giver (Muhammad), the restraining influence came from themselves as a result of the encouragement and discouragement, he gave them in Quran. In elaborating further, the relationship between religion and *Asabiyyah*, Ibn Khaldun says that both are adversely affected by the rise of sedentary civilizations.

#### ***Causes for decay of Asabiyyah and Fall of Civilization***

1. Misuse of power by rulers is the first cause for decay of *Asabiyyah*. Power is a blessing when it is shared but becomes a bane if used as a monopoly by a person or a group of persons. Monopoly of power is another name for Tyranny. It is a source of aggression and breeds jealousies and prejudices which sap solidarity of human groups. In a society, when power is used as an instrument of exploitation, bonds of unity are completely wrecked and the society is internally divided into numerous centers of power, tied up in a cut throat competition to outdistance each other. Ultimately those who hold this monopoly are overpowered by the countervailing forces. Abuse of power corrupts and demoralizes the social system and produces a climate in which *Asabiyyah* cannot survive. According to Ibn Khaldun power must have a safety value of mildness. A frequent use of force leaves the people depressed, and inculcates among them a deceit and treachery. A ruler who indulges in abuse of power will be betrayed by his subjects at times of need. They will willingly participate in conspiracies and coups against him (Khaldun: 1958).
2. *Asabiyyah* also disappears from a group which is plagued with weaknesses such as injustice, double dealing and hypocrisy. Group-feeling needs selflessness from its members for survival. Deceit, treachery and selfishness produce disorder and restlessness in society. They shatter the bridges of trust between the rulers and the ruled, and leadership in a community becomes hollow and ineffectual. Ibn Khaldun says dynasty and government serve as the world's market place, attracting to it the products of scholarship and craftsmanship alike. Whenever the established dynasty avoids injustice, prejudice, weakness and double dealing with determination, keeping to the right path and never swerving from it, the wares on its market are as pure as silver and fine as gold. However, when it is influenced by selfish interests and rivalries or swayed by vendors of tyranny and dishonest, the wares of this market become as dross and debased metals.
3. Ibn Khaldun concludes that accumulation of too much wealth also weakens *Asabiyyah*. It makes people ease-loving and comfort seeking and deprives them of group feeling which is needed in the struggle for survival. In

his own opinion, wealth itself is not bad, but it is the ill-gotten riches and their demonstrable misuse which creates social and economic strains in society (Ali: 1993).

#### **CONCLUSION**

Earlier generations of social thinkers contended that Khaldun was a founder of sociology (Kremer, 1879; Flint, 1893; Gumpowicz, 1928; Maunier, 1913; Oppenheimer, 1922-35; Ortega Y Gasset, 1976-8). Sorokin, Zimmerman, and Galphin believed Khaldun to be an Historian, Statesman, Sociologist, and the "Founder of Sociology." They noted that Khaldun described the transformation of Arabian society from *badawa* (rural society) to *hadara* (urban society), and analyzed this transition. Ibn Khaldun maintained the cyclical perspective of social change and identified an almost rhythmic repetition of rise and fall in human civilization besides analyzing multiple factors contributing to it. He asserted that societies are living organisms that experience cyclic birth, growth, maturity, decline and ultimate death due to universal facts. He opined that no individual dynasty or society can permanently remain at a high level of development; soon after maturity is attained decay sets in, just as individual plants and animals achieve the maturity, natural to the species and then decay. A factor that Ibn Khaldun emphasizes as important in social and political development is a sense of solidarity (*Asabiyyah*), the state of mind that makes individuals identify with a group and subordinate their own personal interests to the group interest.

Ibn Khaldun argues that *Asabiyyah* or social cohesion carries groups to power or gives rise to the ascent of a civilization and political power but contains within itself the seeds of the group's downfall to be replaced by a new group, dynasty or empire bound by a stronger cohesion. Civilization rises due to stronger *Asabiyyah* and declines as soon as the *Asabiyyah* loses its strength. For Ibn Khaldun, *Asabiyyah* is the basis for political power and cultural hegemony while uncontrolled individualism was a source of the downfall of groups. Societies he believed are held together by the power of social cohesiveness, which can be improved by the unifying force of religion. *Asabiyyah* provides the motivational force to bring the dominant groups to power and it arises spontaneously among tribes or other smaller groups.

Ibn Khaldun's social system was based upon the fact that there are two types of social life viz. the nomadic (*badawa* or *bedounis*) and sedentary (*hadara* or urban dwellers). Khaldun maintains that history is a constantly changing cycle between these two groups of people namely nomads and towns people with peasants in between. He tried to establish that the physical and moral superiority of the nomadic people goes above the city dwellers claiming Bedouins are closer to being good than sedentary people. He observed the advancement of history as a cycle of growth and decline and identified the progress as a change from a nomadic to a sedentary or from primitive to civilized society respectively. Ibn Khaldun's reflections on history and his study of social life command the admiration of modern social scientists to the extent of claiming him as their true predecessor and the originator of their sciences.

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