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Freedom and its sources

The method adopted by Imam Ali in the matter of politics, rulership and administration of the State was based on the principle of the freedom of the people. 1 He had an ardent belief in this freedom which can be observed in all his actions. Whether he said something, or gave some orders, or prohibited some actions, whether it was at the time of peace or war, or made an appointment of a governor, and in whatever manner he treated the people or his children or worshipped God – his conduct was based on all such occasions on this freedom.

The question, however, arises as to why the people should be free, why they should work according to their will and determination. From where did they get the freedom and what are its limits? According to Ali the real cause of this freedom is the human society which must proceed on the path of blessedness and prosperity.

Freedom is the result of the mutual relations, sentiments and inclinations of the people. It has a close relationship with a few things which exercise great influence on it.

Reason and experience prove this thing and it has also been confirmed by Ali that the members of a society are inter-related with one another. This inter-relationship of theirs is on account of personal interests as well as national interests. 2

It was the policy of Ali to reform these connections and ties, so that every person might lead his life in a better way. He provided opportunities to the people to utilize their freedom in the best possible manners and to discharge by means of this freedom the responsibilities which it is not possible to discharge without it.

In the first instance Ali made the people realize that to establish truth and to destroy falsehood is their own responsibility. They should get hold of their freedom, should not be subservient to the orders of the upper classes, and should neither betray the society nor be cruel to themselves. Throughout his life and before attaining to the caliphate, as well as thereafter, he explained to the people that they must discharge their duty to establish right and destroy falsehood.

Ali was endeavouring his best to provide means for the welfare of the people, and at the same time he was so severe in awarding punishment to the criminals that friends and foes were equal in his eyes in this matter and he did not observe leniency with anyone.

Ali was confident that his piety was known to all, and they were aware that he had no equal in the matter of piety, and he took from the world only as much as was sufficient for his living. The people also knew that the only purpose of his life was to establish truth and to help the needy and the oppressed, and that he did these things as a matter of duty and not to show kindness to others. He did not like to eat honey because he was afraid that there might be some persons among his subjects to whom even barley bread might not be available. He never wore fine dress, because there might be a member of the public who might not be having even coarse dress to wear. He did not like that the people should call him the Commander of the Faithful and he should not partake in their difficulties.

Ali kept himself free from all the pollution in which the rulers of those days were involved. He did not take advantage of his noble descent. He never coveted territory, high office or wealth. On no occasion did he display pride. He remained aloof from all irrational and worthless things. He never preferred his kinsmen and friends to others. He never nursed a grudge against his opponents, nor did he take revenge on anyone. He never did anything about whose goodness and correctness he was not sure. He did not say or think of anything which he did not like.

He was indifferent to the things which he ate or drank, the dress which he wore, and the house in which he lived. He utilized these things only as much as they were absolutely necessary for him. He did not take anything from the public treasury to meet his personal expenses, although he could take at least as much as the governors of the provinces did. Authentic narrations show that often he had to sell his sword, coat of mail and household articles to feed himself and the members of his family. However, he gave sufficient salaries to his governors so that they might not be obliged to take bribes or acquire money by unlawful means.

Ali kept himself free from all such bonds as might interfere with his administering justice between friend and foe. He has mentioned his own condition in this brief sentence. "Whoever forsakes desires remains free".

His piety was the piety of magnanimous persons. It was not tainted with any avarice. He had perfect faith in God and he acted according to his belief. There was no simulation of hypocrisy in his actions. His good deeds were not prompted by fear of Hell or desire for Paradise.

As regards the freedom of the common man its first stage is freedom of action. Imam Ali has given the body of the workers the same rank on earth as is enjoyed by the hearts of the righteous persons in Paradise i.e. this world welcomes the workers in the same manner in which Paradise remains ready to welcome the righteous persons. About the righteous persons he says: – "Their hearts are in Paradise and their bodies are busy doing work". (i.e. they do not attach their hearts with the worldly things).

He elevated the position of freedom and considered the work of a free person to be great. He had made it his principle not to compel any person to do any particular work, because any work which is not done voluntarily is dishonesty in freedom as well as in work.

He says: – "It is not my intention to compel any person to do a particular work". He prescribed award for making people do useful work and preserving freedom and deprived of reward a person who compelled others to work. He says: "The canal belongs to one who dug it on his own accord and not to one who compelled others to dig it" (or one who does not work on it).

It appears necessary to mention an important point here. The word freedom as it was used in those days did not carry as vast a meaning as was attached to it by Ali. Others did not mean by it what Ali meant. In those days freedom was the opposite of slavery and freeman was the opposite of slave. Caliph Umar has said: "How did you make the people your slave when their mothers gave birth to them as freemen?"

When we ponder over these words and take into account the time and the conditions in which they were uttered by caliph Umar we clearly learn that by freeman he meant the opposite of slave i.e. one who cannot be bought or sold. However, during the modern times the words free and freedom do not carry the same sense in which they were used by caliph Umar.

We hereby put forth another proof of our view. In the sentence quoted above caliph Umar has expressed annoyance for the people who had reduced their subordinates to slavery. He rebuked the powerful persons and told them not to consider the weak people to be slaves, because their mothers had given birth to them as free men. Caliph Umar did not tell the slaves that they were free and should not obey those who claimed to be the masters of their slaves. In short, caliph Umar in his sentence has admonished the masters to give freedom to those subservient and weak persons.

According to Imam Ali the meaning of freedom is different from what is meant by caliph Umar and carries a much wider sense. In the first instance we reproduce below a clear remark of his on the subject and shall later reproduce his other remarks, recommendations and orders in support of our view. As opposed to the remark of Umar he says: "Do not be the slave of anyone when God has created you free".

Caliph Umar had addressed the masters and told them to give freedom to their subordinates. He had not told the subordinates to decline to obey their masters. Ali, however, addresses the subordinates themselves and tells them to have self-reliance and a sense of freedom. He advises them to realize their right of freedom which is the essence of their being. He reminds them that God has created them as free beings and whatever they do or do not do should depend on this natural right of theirs.

By uttering this sentence Ali sowed the seeds of revolution in the hearts of those subordinates, and prepared them to fight against anything which might stand in the way of their freedom or involve them in perplexity.

The readers might think that there is not much difference between the remarks of caliph Umar and those of Ali, because Umar has addressed some particular person viz. the masters not to enslave the people whereas Ali has addressed all the people and told them that they are free. He has made their freedom dependent on their own intentions and not on the intentions of their masters so that they may keep them enslaved as long as they like and make them free as and when they (i.e. the masters) wish.

However, there is basically a great difference between these two remarks. Ali's sentence shows the deep insight which he had on the meaning of freedom. His sentence shows the reality that the fountain-head of freedom is the being of man himself. He has been born free and he himself should select his path of action and not that someone else should take pity on him and set him free.

This sentence of Ali shows that he considered the freedom of man to be inherent and natural and all the actions of man are the outcome of this inherent and natural freedom. This freedom is free from all external influences. This freedom is enjoyed by him internally and not externally. It is like the light of the sun which cannot be separated from it. It is not like the light of the moon which declines.

Hence there is a real and basic difference between the sentences uttered by Caliph Umar and Imam Ali. To one category belong the persons whose freedom depends on the will of others. This freedom is external and does not emerge from its own foutain–head. To the other category belong those free persons whose freedom depends on their nature. This is the real and true freedom. Such free persons act according to their reason and interests and do not do what they do not like. However, those whose independence depends on others are not subordinate to their own views and thinking.

The type of freedom which Imam Ali desired was the one on which human relations are based. It is this freedom by means of which the human beings can walk side by side with one another on the path of prosperity. It is this freedom which can bring a great civilization into existence.

As the freedom of the kind mentioned above was considered by Imam Ali to be the real freedom, all his orders were issued keeping this very freedom in view, and he also determined the human rights on that basis. We clearly find the observance of this principle in all his orders and regulations. He treated all the human beings to be equal in the matter of rights and responsibilities and did not fix any limit in this behalf. And if he did fix any such limits it was fixed keeping in view the interests of the public in general.

When we study the character of Imam Ali we clearly see that he did not violate this freedom in any of his laws, orders, rules and regulations and kept the public welfare in view in all his actions. He meted out equal treatment to his friends and foes. We have already mentioned that he did not compel any person to do any work against his will, nor did he allow forced labour.

We have also said that he did not compel anyone to take the oath of allegiance to him. Those who declined to take oath of allegiance to him were no doubt wrong-doers, but he left them to themselves because he knew that their not taking the oath of allegiance would make no difference nor would the public interests suffer on that account. They refrained from taking the oath for quite a long time, but by

doing so they did harm only to themselves.

He did not take any action against them so long as they did not prove harmful to the public interest. Addressing Mughira bin Sho'ba he said: "I permit you to do whatever you like about yourself".

It may also be mentioned that once Habib ibn Muslim Fehri approached him and said: "You should abdicate so that the people may select a caliph through a consultative council". Thereupon Ali replied: `What have you to do with this matter? You should keep quiet. Why do you speak about something with which you are not concerned at all".

Habib then stood up and said: "By God you will find us at a place which will not be to your liking".

The threat latent in Habib's words is quite clear. But what did Ali do? Did he also threaten him in a similar manner? Did he imprison him so that he might not be free to oppose him and might not instigate his tribe to rise against him?

Ali did none of these things. On the contrary he cast a glance at him and said like a man who fully believes in his own justice and who respects the freedom of others: "Go and mobilize as many infantrymen and horsemen as you like. May not God keep me alive till the day when you should take pity on me".

Another proof of the full freedom allowed by Ali to the people is that many persons belonging to the Hijaz and Iraq went away and joined Mu'awiya, but he did not stop them, nor did he consider it necessary to keep them under observation. They were free men in his eyes and were free to adopt any course they liked. If a person chose the right path it was well and good, but if he decided otherwise the path to Damascus was open for him and Mu'awiya was awaiting such a person with his treasures.

Hence, when Sahl bin Hanif Ansari, the Governor of Madina informed him that some persons had gone over to Mu`awiya he wrote to him in reply: "I understand that some of the persons belonging to your area are secretly joining Mu'awiya. You need not worry at all about the number of people who have left, and the support, which has been lost. It is sufficient for their going astray and your being relieved of worry and sorrow that they are running away from truth and guidance towards ignorance and perversion. They are worldly people who are inclining towards the world and running to it. They recognized, saw, heard and learnt justice. They have understood very well that here all are treated to be equal in the matter of rights and are, therefore, running away towards the place where discrimination is practised. By God they have not run away from injustice and have not joined justice and we hope that God will make easy every difficulty which is involved in this matter, and will make the stony land level for us".

Another proof of the fact that Ali believed in the complete freedom of the people is provided by his treatment of the Kharijites. One group of the Kharijites was that which had rebelled openly and it was these people most of whom were put to sword in the Battle of Nahrawan. However, there were others who held beliefs common with the Kharijites but they considered it expedient not to rebel, and were mixed up with the people of Kufa. Imam Ali behaved kindly towards the Kharijites of the second category

and did not permit his companions to contend with them. He also gave these Kharijites pensions as much as to the Muslims and had allowed them to go freely wherever they liked.

His way of action was based on perfect freedom i.e. all human beings are free and may do whatever they like and love or hate whomsoever they wish. However, none was permitted to harm the people or to create mischief on the face of earth. If anyone indulged in mischievous activities he was not spared and was punished for the crime committed by him.

Once a Kharijite named Khareet bin Rashid came to Ali and said to him: "By God I shall not obey you and shall not offer prayers with you". Imam Ali did not interfere with him and left him free to do whatever he liked.

After some time Khareet collected a number of men and revolted against him. Even then Ali did not prevent the persons who deserted him and joined Khareet, from doing so, although he could stop them from joining Khareet. However, when those persons took undue advantage of this freedom and began committing robberies and murders he sent his army and suppressed them.

The thing which is most surprising is that even at the most delicate moments of his period Ali paid due respect to human freedom and never violated it. This he did because he considered freedom to be the most important thing for humanity.

He did not detract from this freedom even when campaigning against the *Nakitheen, Qasiteen* and *Mariqeen* who had appropriated large tracts of land to themselves and were the sworn enemies of Ali.

It was permissible according to every law and religion to fight against such persons and every person with sound judgment would have treated such a fight to be a just one.

In the circumstances it was necessary for Ali to mobilize his supports and march to join battle with the enemy. However, Ali did not compel any supporter of his to partake in a battle, whether he was his kinsman or someone else. Although he was the caliph and possessed authority, but he did not compel his companions to render material or spiritual assistance, because in whatever manner he might have resorted to compulsion it would have been opposed to the freedom in which he believed. 3

Imam Ali performed his duty by showing themclearly the true path and appealing to their intellect and reason. He put forth arguments regarding his being correct so that whoever liked it might recognize his right, and support him, and whoever did not like it might oppose him in spite of knowing the truth.

He prayed for the welfare of those who responded to his call and praised them. As regards those who did not respond to it he warned them about their mistake by tendering them advice. Whoever a person was and wherever he was, was free. Ali did not compel anyone and did not consider compulsion to be proper.

He never liked that anyone should join him without proper reflection and faith and knowledge. He did not

compel anyone to enlist himself in his army to fight in the Battles of the Camel, Siffin and Nahrawan for if he had so desired he would have filled the plains and mountains with soldiers.

Ali knew very well what freedom is and what its ins and outs are. He explained it by his words and actions and observed it in his behaviour towards the people. He kept the principle of freedom in view in eradicating the evils from the society, in enforcing the religious law, in mobilizing the forces, in ruling over the people, in making recommendations and tendering advice, and, in short, in everything. Every day of his life provided a fresh proof of the fact that man's right of freedom deserves to be respected provided that it does not mar the freedom of the public at large and this is the real meaning of freedom.

- 1. The author of the book has proved in this chapter that the political freedom which exists in the advanced nations of today is the same freedom which prevailed during the period of the caliphate of Imam Ali. There is no sign of such freedom in the governments which existed earlier than the caliphate of Ali.
- 2. In the terminology of the western philosophers, freedom means the same thing which is meant by the following belief of the Muslims: "None is permitted to compel another to do a particular work or to appropriate his property without his permission". These philosophers believe that the cause of every oppression is deprivation of the human beings of their freedom and the murders, robberies and other crimes are its consequences. They say that freedom and self-determination are the inherent properties of man in the same manner in which heat is the inherent property of fire.
- <u>3.</u> Even today the westerners are unaware of the freedom which was allowed by Imam Ali, as has been explained by the author, although some social experts like Rousseau have mentioned it in their books and endeavoured to make people believe in it. Some persons may possibly think that the penal laws of Islam contradict the claim of the author and also that the Muslims do not consider it permissible that someone should apostatize from Islam or use indecent words about God or the Prophets. Drinking of wine was punished during the caliphate of Ali as well as other caliphs, purchase and sale of intoxicants was treated to be a crime and the apostates were executed. Such persons may, therefore, ask as to where the freedom exists.

The reply to what the author wishes to prove is that all these things (viz. punishment for apostasy and other crimes) are correct. However, the freedom which is praiseworthy and which was supported by Ali is not the freedom enjoyed by a person to appropriate his property and use it as he likes and to adopt the occupation which he desires. In short Ali believed in political and social freedom.

All Muslims agree that drinking wine and apostasy are crimes. Now when these acts are crimes from the social point of view how can freedom to commit them be commendable? Hence if Imam Ali had given freedom to the people to commit these crimes his act would have been opposed to the divine commands as well as to the freedom of the people. If caliph Abu Bakr and Umar had not fought against the apostates they would have opposed the majority. of the Muslims. Even now some parties in various countries are declared to be unlawful, because many people consider the views and beliefs of these parties to be crimes. Similarly apostasy is a crime according to the Muslims, because it certainly creates trouble in the society.

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