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Article

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Nahjul Balaghah comprises various issues that cover major problems of metaphysics, theology, fiqh, tafsir, hadith, prophetology, imamate, ethics, social philosophy, history, politics, administration, civics, science, rhetoric, poetry, literature, etc.

Most of the discussions about various theological issues and philosophical notions in Islam have their origin in this very book. Similarly, all the controversies regarding socio-political problems in the Muslim society and state left their echo in Nahjul Balaghah, or rather those were inspired from the utterances of al-Imam 'Ali (as).

The book not only reflects the spirit of early Islam and the teachings of the Quran and the Prophet (saw) in the proper perspective, but also serves as a guide to traverse the future in the light of these teachings. It is a matter of regret that Nahjul Balaghah was not properly utilized by the Muslims as a source book of Islamic philosophy, kalam, fiqh, and ethics due to misconceptions about its attribution to al-Imam 'Ali (as) In the presence of strong and sufficient evidence in support of the contents of the book being authentic, it was sheer prejudice and lack of the spirit of inquiry that was responsible for neglecting such a reliable source of Islamic ideas.

In recent times, the Orientalists have spread the unfounded doubts of Ibn Khallikan and al-Dhahabi among Muslim and non-Muslim scholars in the name of objectivity in research, thus giving a respectable appearance to their ignorance, which was, of course, combined and prompted by their motive to alienate the Muslims from their intellectual heritage.

I know many a scholar in India and Pakistan questioning the authenticity of Nahjul Balaghah's ascription to Amir al-Mu'minin using lofty words of research-objectivity with a hefty-pose of a dispassionate seeker of truth. None of them, I am sure, ever studied any book about early sources of the sermons and letters of al-'Imam 'Ali (as), nor did any one of them ever try to gain really objective information about the book. Unfortunately none of them bothered to go through even the valuable research done by Imtiyaz 'Ali Khan 'Arshi, a widely read and respected writer in the literary circles of Urdu in the Subcontinent.

It was because of my first-hand knowledge of this pitiable situation that I have intentionally devoted the major part of the present article to the issue of the authenticity of the attribution of the contents of Nahjul Balaghah, in the light of earlier sources, to 'Ali (as). Those who insist upon denying the veracity of Nahjul Balaghah are either suffering from a malady of deep-rooted prejudice spread through the propaganda of the supporters of Banu Umayyah, or their minds and spirits have been blinded by the propagation of

falsehood by the Orientalists under the garb of high-sounding academic jargon. If our minds are cured of this jaundiced perception of our own past, Nahjul Balaghah can be paid the attention it deserves and its contents will be studied and its meanings will be fully explored and exploited for a better understanding of Islamic ideas and realities.

A look at the subjects discussed in Nahjul Balaghah will be helpful in ascertaining the wide scope of this invaluable treasure of wisdom. So far a few attempts to classify the subject matter of the book have been made, none of which has been comprehensive. A subject-wise index of the contents of Nahjul Balaghah has been prepared by 'Ali Ansariyan and published in Arabic under the title al-Dallil 'ala mawdu'at Nahjul Balaghah in 1395/1975. It was translated and published three years ago in Persian with the sub-title Nahjul Balaghah mawdu'i. The compiler has divided the contents into eight categories, each dealing with a specific subject further divided into various issues pertaining to the main theme. The main divisions are as follows:

1. Ma'rifat Allah,

2. Ma'rifat al-kawn,

3. Ma'rifat al-hujjah,

4. Ma'rifat nizam al-huqumah wa al-mujtama',

5. Ma'rifat al-'ahkam,

6. Wa'rifat al-'akhlaq,

7. Ma'rifat al-ta'rikh, and

8. Ma'rifat al-ma'dd

The major issues covered under the main categories can be summarized here:

1. Ma'rifat Allah (knowledge about God): The utterances and writings of Amir al-Mu'minin on God and His Attributes are divided into eighteen sub-headings in the following manner:

1. tawhid, the Unity of God;

2. sifat al-dhat, the Attributes of Essence;

3. 'ilm wal hikmah, the Knowledge and Wisdom of God;

4. 'azamah wa qudrah, Greatness and Power of God;

5. basir, Seer;

6. sami', Hearer;

7. hayy, Living;

8. mutakallim, Speaker;

9. jabarutiyyah, Omnipotence;

10. 'adl, Divine-Justice;

11. nusrah wa intiqam, Help and vengeance of God;

12. al-tawakkul 'alayh, Dependence on God;

13. al-tahmid lahu, Praise to God;

14. al-'isti'anah bih, Seeking assistance from God;

15. al-razzdq wa al-rizq, the Provider and the provision, divided into further sub-issues;

16. worship and worshippers, divided into sub-headings dealing with various forms and kinds of worship and worshippers, the worst and the best human beings, and worship of other than God;

17. manifestation of God and the Beatific Vision;

18. al-qada' wa al-qadar, Divine Will and Intention;

2. Ma'rifat al-kawn , knowledge of the universe:

1. heaven and the earth;

2. creation and the properties of living beings under this topic al-'Imam 'Ali's descriptions of various animals such as the bat, the ant, the peacock and other birds are given;

3. many various aspects of human nature;

4. angels, their worship and utterances with special reference to Jibra'il and Mika'il;

5. Satan.

3. Ma'rifat al-hujjah, knowledge about the Proofs of God,: The first part of it is devoted to prophetology; that is, the characteristics and the aims of the prophets, their companions and families, their character, etc.; the next seven sections, from the second to the eighth, deal with the lives of Adam, Abel and Cain, Salih, Moses and Aaron, Banu Isra'il, David and Solomon, and Christ; the ninth section is devoted to the life and character of the Prophet Muhammad (saw), spread over 230 pages further divided into sub-issues to discuss the pre Islamic Arabs, the Family of the Prophet (saw), the main objectives of the

prophetic mission, miracles, wives of the Prophet (saw), the finality of his prophethood, hadith and the criteria of reliability and grades of authenticity, hadith-interpretation, Companions, jihad and the battles of the Prophet, the demise of the Prophet (saw) and its consequences; Ahl al-Bayt (as), Fatimah (as), al-Hasan (as) and al-Husayn (as), Ahl al-Bayt and zakat; the Quran: classification of verses, tafsir by conjecture (ra'y), the role of the Imam in the interpretation of the Quran, the attributes of the Quran, teaching of the Quran, important of correct understanding of the Quran, qira'ah of the Quran, tafsir of some verses.

Under the life of the Prophet, the meaning and the conditions of Islam are also dealt with, with reference to the characteristics of the Muslims and their dignity. Iman and mu'min form the theme of a separate section; at the end, infidelity (kufr) and its characteristies are discussed.

The tenth issue under hujjah concerns the caliphate and the Imamate with specific reference to the leadership of Ahl al-Bayt (as), the Imams of the Family of the Prophet (saw).

The eleventh part deals with the issues related to the oath of allegiance (bay'ah).

The twelth part contains the utterances of al-Imam 'Ali (as) concerning his own Imamate and his own role in the advancement of the cause of Islam; some sections give autobiographical details about the Imam. 'Ali's zuhd, justice, dress and food habits, humility and courage.

The last section of this part is about Amir al-Mu'minin's sayings about al-Imam al-Mahdi (as), his identity and his appearance.

4. Ma'rifat nizam al-hukamah wa al-mujtama' (system of governance and society): This part deals with the issues of society and politics, and is perhaps the most relevant to present-day Islam and the Muslim world. It spreads over more than four hundred pages. Such an in-depth treatment of the subject is indicative of the Imam's concern for socio-political life of the Ummah. The issues covered are:

1. Justice and oppression: forms of oppression and traits of oppressors; responsibilities of the just Imams; the duty of al-mu'minun vis-a-vis justice and oppression.

2. Right and wrong (haqq and batil): distinction between right and wrong; criterion of right; reciprocal rights and duties; duty towards God; and mutual duties of parents and children.

3. Semblance of truth.

4. Poverty.

5. People and their kinds: causes of differences and their sources; role of various groups in social changes; people's inner transformation, a prerequisite for reform; role of healthy elements in society; characteristics of evil and anti-social elements in society; people's attitude towards social change.

6. Government and society; this part is divided into twenty-three fusul (chapters).

1. The most fundamental objectives and duties of Islamic government.

2. The characteristics of rulers.

3. The duties of rulers towards people.

4. Ministers and advisers.

5. People's rights: social classes and their mutual dependence; the responsibilities of the army; and functions of rulers in fulfilling people's rights.

6. The Islamic army and choice of commanders.

7. The mutual rights of people and rulers.

8. Whom to refer to resolve differences?

9. Courts of justice and qadis.

10. Officials and functionaries of government, their mode of selection; the ruler's duty towards them.

11. Information and intelligence of the State, and military intelligence.

12. Taxes, public treasury (bayt al-mal), and tax payers: means of levying taxes; protection and guarding of public treasury; heads of expenditure of public funds; equitable distribution of bayt al-mal; and problem of misappropriation of bayt al-mal.

13. Secretaries and record-keepers of official matters (ministers and high officials).

14. Businessmen and industrialists: administration of economic affairs, and government's supervision of economic matters of the State.

15. The oppressed and the deprived sections of society, and ruler's duties towards them.

16. Governors' direct contact with people for listening to their grievances, and people's right to have aecess to rulers.

17. Governors' personal responsibility in certain matters.

18. Direct supervision by governors and government authorities of current affairs of the State.

19. Ruler, his family and relatives.

20. Duty of governors vis-a-vis charges levelled against them.

21. Pacts and peace treaties with other States.

22. Guidelines for performance of governors' individual and social functions.

23. Seeking God's help for being just.

7. Ma'rifat al-'ahkam (religious laws): This part is divided into eighteen sub-headings. The first section contains the Imam's views about the philosophy of laws. The second and the third sections deal with prayer (salat) and the virtue of congregation prayer, Friday prayer and midnight prayer. The fourth section is devoted to the Imam's sayings about fasting (sawm). The fifth one comprises Amir al-Mu'minin's interpretation of laws regarding women's obligation in compulsory matters.

The remaining chapters deal with the following issues: the sixth about almsgiving (zakat); the seventh about property laws; the eighth about Hajj pilgrimage and the Holy Ka'bah; the ninth about al-'Amr bi al-ma'ruf wa al-nahy 'an al-munkar (enjoining good and prohibiting evil), one of the fundamentals of faith (furu'al-Din) that covers all forms of activities, social, political, economic, as well as individual duties.

The tenth and the eleventh chapters deal with laws concerning jihad, a term with a very wide range of connotations, but its special meaning covers all forrns of struggle against unbelief, which itself embraces various forms of injustice and oppression, denial of God is an atrocity against one's own self. In this section, emphasis is on the laws pertaining to war and military activity; the last two subheadings deal with martyrdom and martyrs, and peace treaty with enemies.

The twelfth chapter is about injunctions regarding the circumstances which necessitate hiding of faith with the purpose of defending individual as well as collective existence of the Muslims (taqiyyah). The thirteenth chapter is devoted to the laws of business transactions with special emphasis on usury (riba) and loan. The fourteenth chapter covers laws about adultery (zina). The next four chapters discuss issues involved in theft, murder, dying of the hair, and laws concerning human conduct in desperate situations (ahkam al-mudtarr).

8. Ma'rifat al-'akhlaiq (ethical laws): This is the longest section of the book, spreading over six hundred pages. The first part of this section covers general issues of morality in the following order:

1. reason, its virtue, forms, effects, and functions; limitations of reason and evil consequences of its misuse;

2. contemplation and intellection;

3. the heart as the inner faculty which is the source of moral virtues and evils; its general condition and relation with other organs of the body; its qualities and means of strength, weakness, hardening, and limitations;

4. knowledge: definition and scope; useful and useless forms of knowledge; relation between knowledge

and practice; effects of knowledge; teaching and learning; limitations of human knowledge;

5. theologians and their duties;

6. misguided and misleading 'ulama';

7. wisdom and the role of learned persons in society;

8. the wood and the Hereafter–salient features of worldly life; comparison and contrast between the world and the Hereafter; temporality of the world and eternity of the Hereafter; relation between the two; purpose of the creation of the world; deception and pride of the world; proper and improper utilization of the world; world–outlook of awliya ', the Prophet of Islam (saw), pious persons, and al–'Imam 'Ali (as); man's attitude to the world;

9. capital and its distribution;

10. good and evil.

The second part of ethical discussions deals with moral behavior and conduct. This is itself divided into ten sections dealing with various modes of conduct:

1. Repentance and seeking forgiveness (tawbah and istighfar);

2. piety (taqwa);

3. characteristics of muttaqun;

4. zuhd;

5. patience and resignation (sabr);

6. the tongue, its function and its relation to other organs of the body; tongue–control;

7. friendship and friends: how to choose friends; reliance and dependence on friends; mutual duties of friends;

8. manners and courtesy;

9. forbearance and patience;

10. abstention from self–praise.

Moral vices are discussed under the following: lust and love (in its negative sense); miserliness; extravagance; envy; pride; hypocrisy and hypocrites (nifaq and munafiqun); deceit or self–indulgence (narcissism).

At the end of this section certain moral issue with reference to women are dealt with. The concluding part gives an account of supplication, its need, circumstances and effects, with some of the supplications of al-'Imam 'Ali (as) on different occasions.

9. Mairifat al-ta'rikh (history): This section gives us an idea of al-Imam 'Ali's view of history and historical events, divided into sixteen parts, and each part divided further into many sub-headings provides an intimate picture of the life and times of al-'Imam 'Ali (as), his contemporaries, and the Prophet (saw):

1. Analysis of history: main currents and traditions in history; causes of the rise and fall of nations; and lessons from history.

2. Life history of al-'Imam 'Ali (as); glimpses of an autobiographical account of the life of the Imam (as) with reference to his role in the unity of the Ummah by foregoing his right and snubbing divisive efforts of some opportunists.

3. Saqifat Bani Sa'idah

4. Fadak

5. Al-Imam 'Ali (as) and the caliphs, Abu Bakr, 'Umar and 'Uthman; the Imam's role as an adviser during the period of 'Umar's caliphate; the Shura's role in the election of 'Umar's successor; reasons of the Imam's allegiance to 'Uthman, and the latter's deviations; 'Ali's counsel to 'Uthman; 'Ali's innocence in the assassination of the third caliph and his stand after the assassination.

6. The caliphate of al-'Imam 'Ali (as): the Imam's reasons for being reluctant to accept the caliphate; people's pressure and insistence; declaration of the Imam's policies and programmes.

7. Parties and groups opposing the Imam.

8. The Battle of Jamal with special reference to the role of 'A'ishah, Talhah and al-Zubayr; the Imam's attitude during and after the battle towards his opponents (the Nakithun).

9. The Battle of Siffin: the role of the Qasitun; the Imam's reasons for fighting the Qasitun; his attempts to convince the Qasitun about the evil consequences of war.

10. Tahkim: the evil of the tahkim and its roots; the Imam's reasons for rejecting the proposed arbitration; evil and far-reaching consequences of the arbitration.

11. The Khawarij: the Khawarij's role and their misleading notions; the Imam's repeated efforts to pursuade the Khawarij from fighting before the Battle of Nahrawan; the Imam's anticipation of the fate of the Khawarij.

12. The last days of the Imam: the Imam's foreknowledge of his martyrdom; the last sermon; the Imam's words on the dawn of the nineteenth of Ramadan before being fatally injured; the last moments of the

Imam (as) and his will.

13. Praise and criticism of the Imam's companions: basic traits of the disheartened elements; comparison of the Imam's companions with those of the Prophet (saw) and those of Mu'awiyah; relations between the Imam (as) and his companions; their praise; evil consequences of disobeying the Imam (as)

14. Opponents of the Imam 'Ali's rule and the reasons for their dissent.

15. Events of Egypt: the appointment of Muhammad ibn Abi Bakr and its abrogation; the appointment of Malik al-'Ashtar; the Imam's letter to the people of Egypt; the assassination of Malik al-'Ashtar; Malik al-'Ashtar's great qualities; the martyrdom of Muhammad ibn Abi Bakr.

16. Personages: Abu Dharr; al-'Ash'ath ibn Qays; the companions of al-Mada'in; Umru' al-Qays; Anas ibn Malik; al-Burj ibn Mushir al-Ta'-i, Banu Umayyah and their disruptive role in Islam; Hamzah and Ja'far al-Tayyar; Khabbab ibn al-'Arat; Khadijah; Sa'id ibn Malik; Sa'id ibn Namran; Abu Sufyan; Sa'sa'ah ibn , Sawhan; 'Amr ibn al-'As; the Quraysh, their tribal background and their opposition to the Imam, and the Imam's attitude towards the Quraysh; Kumayl ibn Ziyad al-Nakha'i; Marwan ibn al-Hakam; Masqalah ibn Hubayrah; Mu'awiyah ibn Abi Sufyan and the Imam's correspondence with him; al-Mughirah ibn Akhnas and a'l-Mughirah ibn Shu'bah.

17. The Imam's historical and eschatological foresight: conditions of the last days of the world; destiny of Basrah and Kufah; destiny of the Arabs; duties and responsibilities of the faithful (mu'minun) in the last days.

10. Masrifat al-Ma'ad (Resurrection and the Hereafter): death, its agonies and mysteries; the mu'min's preparedness for death; the Angel of Death; what happens after death?; learning lesson from death and graveyard; the Day of Judgement: proof of Resurrection; symptoms of the Last Day; judgement of human deeds; Sirat; human condition on the Day of Judgement; heaven and hell.

The above-quoted index of subjects in Nahjul Balaghah reveals a vast span of themes and issues. As it suggests, it can be used as a source and guide in the theory and practice of Ijtihad. Shi'i 'ulama' have been using Nahjul Balaghah as a guide in the matters of fiqh. How far is Nahjul Balaghah dependable and useful as a source book of fiqh?

After the four major Shi'i compendiums of hadith Nahjul Balaghahh stands higher than all other collections of hadith. Besides the traditions of the Prophet (saw) this is surely the most authentic guide in theology, morality, fiqh, social administration, political theory and its practice, and many other matters which are vital for Muslim society and are relevant to our own predicament in the modern age.

Nasir Makarim Shirazi, in one of his articles on the role of Nahjul Balaghah in fiqh, has discussed the question of the worth of the traditions contained in the book. Can we use these traditions as a secure foundation for deriving the ahkam of fiqh? Do they fulfil the criteria of reliability laid down in Usul al-fiqh?

Does a tradition relating to moral, social and political matters need not fulfil the conditions of hujbiyyah (proof) as required in the issues of fiqh?

His answer is:
Whatever is contained in it regarding the issues of belief is supported by rational and philosophical arguments. And it ought to have been so; for, the principles of belief are established conclusively only through this method. They cannot be proved on the basis of a single tradition.

This principle is applicable to most of the guidelines concerning politics and society. Therefore, dependence on tradition in such matters is not required (in the presence of rational arguments).

In the sphere of moral problems, also, dependence on tradition is not of fundamental importance; because the fundamentals of morality are self-evident and are in harmony with nature. The role of a moral guide is to ingrain these principles in the souls of his followers, and to stimulate them to move in their direction; such a job does not depend on any authority. Especially in moral matters that do not fall under the categories of the obligatory (wajib) and the prohibited (haram), but come in the jurisdiction of the desirable (mustahabb), the application of this criterion is obvious; for they can be accepted on the well-known principle of al-tasumuh 'an adillat al-sunan, that is non-essentiality of citing textual evidence for mustahabbat, often practised by the authorities in usul.

But in legal matters (masa'il al-fiqh) in general, and in matter of worship wajib and haram in particular, one is bound to refer to an authentic tradition. In such matters howsoever strong an argument may be, it will not stand on its own in the absence of a tradition. Though the importance of authority is not denied in other matters too, its vital role in the matters of fiqh is undeniable.

1. It is a matter of regret that al-Sayyid al-Radi, the compiler of Nahjul Balaghah, has not paid due attention to support most of the sermons, letters and stray sayings with asnad, the chain of narrators.

As a result, Nahjul Balaghah comes down to us in the form of hadith mursal. However, we have access to many an early source of these traditions to prove their authenticity through chain of reliable narrators, and most probably al-Radi didn't pay attention to furnish their asnad due to their well-known availability in other sources. Or he had other stronger reasons for avoiding reference to asnad. He might have considered their contents to be above any doubt.

2. Another means of proving the reliability of a tradition is its compatibility with the Quran ... We apply this criterion with regard to the traditions of the Infallible Imams (as). Employment of this method in the case of Nahjul Balaghah is of much value.

3. The third way to ascertain the authority of a tradition is its fame and general acceptability among the 'ulama'. If we accede to this criterion, Nahjul Balaghah is at the zenith of fame and is greatly respected by scholars of eminence, who support their ideas with quotations from this book and refer to its authority in various matters ...

4. Another means of arriving at the target, that is, establishing the authenticity of a tradition or a book, is the spiritual sublimity of its content. What is meant by sublimity of meaning is its higher level of spirituality and inspiration, which implicitly leads us to believe that it can't originate in a fallible mind. This criterion is acceptable to a number of great fuqaha' ...

For instance al-Shaykh al-'A'zam al-'Allamah al-'Ansari, in the Rasa'il, accepts a well-known tradition of al-'Imam al-Hasan al-'Askari in the matter of undesirable (madhmum) and desirable (matlub) imitation (taqlid) ...

or Ayatullah Burujardi refers to the words of al-Sahifat al-Sajjadiyyah in the context of Friday prayer. Though al-Sahifat al-Sajjadiyyah has not reached us through a chain of authorities, sublimity of its content reveals that it could not have been issued from the tongue of an ordinary mortal.

On the basis of these various criteria, of which the first one can be applied only with reference to the early sources of the tradition that have occurred in Nahjul Balaghah, it is concluded that the book can be justifiably used as an authority in ijtihadat.

The writer of the above mentioned article has furnished a long list of traditions which have been or can be used in fiqh.

Nahjul Balaghah is also of great value in construing the Islamic approach to various issues of vital significance to the present world of Islam.

Addendum: This information was sourced from:
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