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The Tenth Imam, 'Ali Ibn Muhammad (Al-Naqi, Al-Hadi) (as)

Born in Madina 5th Rajab 214 Hijri (8.9.829 AD). Died in Samarra, Iraq 3rd Rajab 254 Hijri (1.7.868) aged 40 years. Period of Imamate 34 years.

The period of Imamate of our 10th Imam coincided with the decline of the power of the Abbasid Empire. They were threatened by the Turks and had to move the Capital from Baghdad to Samarra. He was only 6 years old when his father Imam Muhammad Taqi (as) was martyred in Baghdad when poisoned by Mu'tasim Billah Abbasi.

Our Imam lived in Madina for the remaining 8 years of the reign of Mu'tasim and 5 years of the reign of Wathiq Billah. It was when Mutawakkil became caliph in 236 Hijri (847 AD) the Imam was called over to the Abbasid capital Baghdad. Mutawakkil, was the cruelest and deadly enemy of the Ahlul Bayt (as) , who tried to drown the Grave of Imam Husayn (as) in Karbala' by diverting the waters of the Euphrates River.

But by a miracle the river water encircled the grave and did not go over it in spite of the fact that the surrounding ground was higher. When the Caliph failed in his action of drowning the grave he ordered that the whole area should be turned into farmland but when horses failed to take the plough over the grave, he realized his folly.

Eventually he left the hallowed ground as it was but as long as he lived he forbade any pilgrimage to the Shrine of Imam Husayn (as) . History tells us that pilgrims to the grave of Sayyidush Shohada (as) did continue to go in spite of the danger to their lives. Indeed many were killed on their way to the Shrine but the enthusiasm to visit the grave never subsided.

It was during the reign of Mutawakkil that our 10th Imam was brought to the presence of the Caliph from Madina to Baghdad. Yakubi writes in his history of the time that once the raiding party of soldiers found the Imam on his prayer mat and took him away to the caliph in the same state. Mutawakkil was engaged

in his nightly drinking and frolics and asked the Imam to join him. Imam declined replying, "A liquor such as that was never yet combined with my flesh and blood".

The half-drunk caliph asked the Imam to read some poetry. Imam said that he did not indulge in such habits. But when the caliph insisted, the Imam recited the following lines (Ibn Khalikan narrated the story word for word).

"Protected by valiant warriors they passed the night on the summit of their mountains but these mountains did not protect them. After all their power and pomp they had to descend from their lofty fortresses to the custody of the tombs. O'what a dreadful change their graves had hardly received them when a voice heard exclaiming, "Where are the thrones and the crowns and the robes of State?

Where are now the faces of the delicate, which were shaded by veils and protected by curtains. To this the tomb replied. The worms are now reveling upon these faces. Long were these men eating and drinking, but now they are eaten by the worms in their turn."

Many wept listening to these words uttered by the Imam. Caliph left the Imam alone for a while, but still kept him under house arrest. In the end Mutawakkil died in the hands of his protectors, the Turkish guards, and his son Muntasir became the next caliph.

Mutawakkil died in 250 Hijiri and Muntasir Billah assumed the caliphate. He ruled only 6 months. On his death Musta'een was enthroned. But soon he was also beheaded and succeeded by Mu'ta'z Billah. All this time our 10th Imam was either in Madina, or called by the Caliph to Samarra where he spent the last days of his life under house arrest.

Hardships Suffered by the Imam During This Period

Caliph Mu'tasim remained preoccupied with war against the Byzantines and also with the troubles created by the Abbasids tribesmen in Baghdad. But he did not harass the Imam who carried his responsibilities peacefully. After Mu'tasim, Wathiq Billah too, treated the Imam fairly. But later when he was succeeded by his brother Mutawakkil, son of Mu'tasim, the period of persecution and tortures began in full scale for the Imam and for all members of his family. This ruler exceeded all his predecessors in bearing animosity towards Ahlul Bayt.

Our 10th Imam's main occupation in Madina, whenever he was left in peace by the Caliphs in Baghdad, was to impart his knowledge to the people. He attracted pupils in large numbers from the provinces where adherents of Ahlul Bayt were strongest, namely Iraq, Persia and Egypt.

During the Eight years of the Caliphate of Mu'tasim and throughout the period of Wathik we do not hear that the Imam was molested. One of the most famous traditions he is said to have related, that had been written in the Sahifa by the hand of 'Ali Ibn Abi Talib (as) at the direction of the Apostle of God, and inherited by the Imams from generation to generation is related.

It was that the Prophet had defined faith (Iman) as contained in the hearts of men, and that their works (A'amal) confirm it, whereas surrender (Islam) is what tongue expresses which validates the union. (Masudi, Muruj'l Dhahab. V. vii p 382).

Although the person of the Imam was not touched by the tyrannical caliphs for a while, they were always suspicious about his activities. Masudi narrates one such occasion when our Imam was called by Mutawakkil who was not happy about the methods of teachings in the schools in Madina.

Mutawakkil asked the Imam a question. "What does a descendant of your father have to say in regard to Al-Abbas ibn Abdul Muttalib?" Imam answered, "What would a descendant of my father say O'Amir, in regard to a man whose sons required his people to obey, and who expected his sons to obey God." Caliph was pleased with this reply and let the Imam go."

And in the same connection Masudi quotes another incident, which Ibn Khalikan has incorporated in his description of our 10th Imam 'Ali Al-Hadi (as) "Secret information had been given to Mutawakkil that the Imam had a quantity of arms, books and other objects for the use of his followers concealed in his house, and being induced by malicious reports he was led to believe that the Imam aspired to the Empire.

Once Mutawakkil sent some soldiers of the Turkish guard to break in on him when he least expected such a visit. They found him quite alone, locked up in his room, clothed in a hair shirt, his head covered with a woollen cloak and his face in the direction of Makka. He was reciting Verses of the Qur'an expressive of God's promises and threats, and having no other carpet between him and the earth than sand and gravel.

He was carried off in that attire, and brought in the depth of the night, before Mutawakkil. When the caliph asked his captors about the arms and ammunitions found they said, there was nothing in the house which presents a threat to the throne. The caliph was ashamed of his misdeeds and let the Imam go.

During the Sixteen years of the Imamate, Imam 'Ali Naqi (as) had become famous throughout the Islamic world. Those who loved to learn the teachings of Ahlul Bayt always flocked around him. In the 4th year of Mutawakkil's reign the Governor of Madina Abdallah ibn Hakim started harassing the Imam. He sent hostile reports against him to Baghdad.

He wrote to the Caliph that the Imam was assembling lot of supporters here which could be a danger to the security of the State. Imam became aware of this animosity and in order to counteract, he wrote a letter to Mutawakkil explaining the personal enmity of the Governor of Madina against him. As a political step Mutawakkil was quick to dismiss the Governor. At the same time he sent a regiment under the command of Yahya ibn Harthama who explained to the Imam in a friendly way that the caliph wished him to stay in Baghdad for a while.

He can then come back to Madina. The Imam knew well the motives behind this request. He realized that the polite invitation meant his banishment from his ancestral city. But to refuse to go was equally impossible for it would have resulted in forcible departure. Leaving the sacred city was painful to him as it had been for his respected forefathers, i.e. the Imam Husayn (as) in 60 Hijri, Imam Musa ibn Ja'far in 170 Hijri and Imam 'Ali Al-Ridha' in 200 Hijri and also of his father Imam Muhammad Taqi in 220 Hijri.

This type of harassment had almost become a heritage. Mutawakkil's letter was respectful to the Imam and the military detachment which was sent to escort the Imam was actually a deceitful show. So when the Imam reached Samarra and the Caliph was informed, he neither arranged for any reception nor for his stay.

He was ordered to be accommodated in the wilderness of the city with beggars. Although the Ahlul Bayt as the descendants of the Prophet were gladly associated with the poor and the destitute, and they did not covet luxurious living, Mutawakkil meant to insult the Imam. The Caliph handed him over to the custody of his Secretary Razaqi and prohibited his meeting with others. It was almost a house arrest for the Imam.

It has been seen during the imprisonment of Imam Musa ibn Ja'far (as) that his moral charm had softened the cruel hearted guard's attitudes towards the Imam. In the same way Razaqi was also impressed by the greatness of the Imam 'Ali Naqi (as) and began to provide for his comfort.

This leniency could not remain hidden from Mutawakkil who transferred the Imam to the custody of Sa'id, a cruel and ruthless man in whose imprisonment he spent twelve years. In spite of all the hardships he had to suffer there, the Imam passed his time in Ibadah.

He prayed during the night and fasted during the day. Although confined within the four walls of the house in Samarra, his fame spread rapidly throughout the Provinces of Iraq. Every household in the city of Samarra seemed to know the whereabouts of the Imam and somehow they got knowledge of Islam and of Ahlul Bayt from him.

Fadhl ibn Khaqan, a secret follower of Ahlul Bayt, had risen to the post of Minister in the cabinet of Mutawakkil solely by virtue of his intellectual and administrative merits. On his recommendation, Mutawakkil ordered that the Imam's imprisonment be changed to a house arrest.

He granted him a piece of land and allowed him to build a house and live there. Sa'id was directed to keep a close watch over the activities of the Imam. His house was often searched for subversive activities but nothing was ever found.

During this period too, Imam 'Ali Naqi (as) set an admirable example of trust in God, ignoring all worldly gains. In spite of permanent residence in Samarra, the Imam neither made a protest to the Caliph, nor did he ever ask for any favors. The same worshipping and hermit-like life that he led during his imprisonment was passed in this state of house arrest.

The tyrant changed his behavior but the saint had maintained his own. Even in such circumstances he was not allowed to live peacefully. His followers were not allowed to approach him openly to gain the true Islamic knowledge from the Imam. But he endured all hardships for the sake of giving knowledge to all who sought that from him. Mutawakkil knew that and continued with persecuting the followers of the Imam.

Another event of these wretched times was equally painful. Ibn as-Sakkit of Baghdad, the acknowledged scholar of lexicography and syntax, was tutor of Mutawakkil's son. One day the cruel ruler asked him: "Are my two sons more respectable than Hasan and Husayn?" Ibn Sakkit was a true follower of Ahlul Bayt. On this question he could not control his feelings and flatly replied, "Not to speak of Hasan and Husayn (as), Imam 'Ali's slave Qamber is more respectable than both of your sons".

Hearing these words Mutawakkil was outraged and ordered that Ibn Sakkit's tongue should be cut off. The order was carried out immediately leading to the death of the most excellent artist of the time and a true follower of Ahlul Bayt. Imam 'Ali Naqi, was not himself physically connected with these events, but each of these was a like a blow of the sword not striking the neck but torturing the soul.

Mutawakkil's cruelties caused common hatred and even his own children set their hearts against him. One of them Al-Muntasir, conspired with his slave Al-Rumi to murder his father while he was asleep using his own sword, thus the world had a sigh of relief. The death of the tyrant and the caliphate of al-Muntasir were proclaimed. After the assuming of power, Al-Mustasir revoked the unjust orders of his father.

The Visiting of the Shrines of Najaf and Karbala were permitted without any restrictions. The tombs received minor repairs. The Caliph's conduct towards Imam 'Ali Naqi (as) was also fair. But this Caliph's life was short and he died after a brief rule of only six months. After him, Al-Musta'een too displayed no maltreatment towards the Imam.

As stated, Imam 'Ali Naqi (as) had built a house in Samarra and did not go back to Madina either of his own free will or under the orders of these rulers. Due to his continued stay there and the lack of interference by the regime, the students, thirsty for knowledge, thronged around him to learn the teachings of Ahlul Bayt.

This alarmed Al-Mu'taz so much that he decided to end the sacred life of the Imam. He arranged through some courtiers to mix poison in his food. The Imam died soon after eating the poisonous food.

Imam 'Ali Naqi's conduct and moral excellence were the same as those displayed by each and every member of this sacred house. Whether in Imprisonment, confinement or freedom, in every case these sacred souls were engaged in worship and in helping the poor and the needy.

Totally refraining from desire, greed and worldly ambitions, they lived dignified in misfortune, dealt fairly even with their foes. To help the destitute, were the qualities marking their conduct. The same virtues

were reflected in the life of Imam 'Ali Naqi (as) .

During imprisonment, the Imam had a grave dug up ready by the side of his prayer mat. Some visitors expressed concern or surprise. The Imam explained, “ In order to remember my end I keep the grave before my eyes.”

The Imam died in Sarammara, the funeral was attended only by his son Imam Hasan al Askari who led the funeral prayers and arranged his burial, laying him to rest in his house.

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