

Was it justified?

In continuation of what has been stated and before giving an account of the Kharijites, it appears necessary to mention two particular events which took place in the Battle of Siffin. We feel that these two incidents are an abundant proof of the fact that Ali successfully achieved his aim, because real success means winning the hearts and not planting one's standard on the fort of the enemy.

We propose to mention these incidents in detail in particular, because many admirers of Ali think that on these two occasions he did not act expediently and treated Mu`awiya and his army in a manner which they did not deserve.

These persons say that if he had not acted on these occasions as he did he could succeed without actual fighting and even if it had been necessary to fight the battle would not have been so bloody and so lengthy.

The first event was the one we have already mentioned in the foregoing pages viz. when Ali obtained control over the bank of the Euphrates he permitted his enemies to utilize the water of the river like his own army, although earlier, when the bank of the river was controlled by the Syrians, they had declined to allow Ali and his companions access to water, and had said, "We won't give you a drop of water until you die of thirst". But Ali beat them off, and after gaining control over the river, left its bank open for the enemy.

Mu`awiya had treated the control of the bank of the river to be his first success and had vowed that he would not allow the Iraqis to have even a drop of water, unless they gained control over the bank of the river by force. However, after Ali had beaten off the Syrians and occupied the bank of the river he said to them: "You can drink water just as we were drinking it".

The second event relates to Amr ibn al-Aas who was at one moment at the mercy of Ali during the battle, but he did not kill him. Briefly the story is as follows:

When Ali saw that a fierce battle was in progress and so many persons were being killed, he ascended a mound and said: "O Mu`awiya!" Mu`awiya said: "Yes". Thereupon Ali said: "Why should these people

kill one another unnecessarily for our sake? Leave them alone and come into the battlefield yourself so that we two should decide the matter by combating each other. Whoever is victorious should be the caliph". Amr ibn al-Aas said to Mu`awiya: "Right it is! Ali has said a just thing". Mu`awiya laughed and said: "O Amr! You too have become a victim of greed". He meant to say that if he went to fight with Ali he would certainly be killed, and his death would pave the way for Amr to become the caliph. Amr said: "I swear by God that you can save your honour only if you fight against Ali". Mu`awiya replied: "By God you are joking. I shall fight with Ali along with my army". By this he meant that it was not possible to engage with Ali in a single combat.

The historians say that Amr ibn al-Aas said ridiculing Mu`awiya. "It is a pity that you show cowardice in facing Ali and injure the feelings of your well wisher I swear by God that even if I had to die a thousand times I would not have desisted from fighting against Ali".

Amr came up to fight with Ali. Within the twinkling of an eye Ali attacked him with his spear and down fell the enemy on the ground. Then the sword of the Commander of the Faithful flashed on Amr's head like lightning and Ali was about to kill him, but he (i.e. Amr) became naked. Ali then turned his face and left the place because his inherent modesty and magnanimity did not permit him to glance at the private parts of any person.

Those who admire Ali, and wish that he had been successful, say that on both these occasions he did not act expediently. They are of the view that when he had gained control of the bank of the river he was entitled to deprive the Syrians of water on two accounts:

Firstly it is permissible in war to resort to a strategy which makes the enemy surrender or weakens him so much that he is not in a position to fight effectively. With these things in view Mu`awiya had gained control over the river and had called it his first success.

Secondly Ali had gained control over the bank of the river after fighting, and now it amounted to war booty. According to military laws, therefore, he would have been justified in refusing its use to Mu`awiya and his army.

Similarly, they say that Ali acted inexpediently when he allowed Amr ibn al-Aas to run away and spared his life. Amr was the Commander-in-chief of Mu`awiya's forces, a shrewd political intriguer and Ali's sworn enemy. He instigated the people to revolt against Ali and mobilized a large army to fight against him. If he had killed him there and then when his Zulfiqar had reached his head he would have been justified in doing so on three accounts.

Firstly, according to military laws, killing Amr would have meant the killing of one of the dangerous brutes of the Syrians. After his death the enemy forces would have been demoralized and would have run away. Mu`awiya would have lost his right hand man and Ali would have killed his most deceitful, cunning, and influential enemy.

Secondly Amr ibn al-Aas belonged to an army which did not owe allegiance to Ali and was inimical towards him and his friends.

Thirdly it was Amr ibn al-Aas who had come to fight with Ali and had challenged him. If he had been as brave as Ali and had got an opportunity to kill him he would certainly not have spared him. That being so if Ali had killed Amr nobody would have blamed him.

In view of the fact that Ali was the Commander of an army and on these two occasions success was at his feet, it was necessary for him not to lose that opportunity, because it is the law of war. The real attribute of a military commander is that he does not lose even the smallest opportunity of winning the war.

From purely military point of view the objection raised by the critics is correct. But the question is: "Was Ali only the Commander of an army?"

What we have said about Ali so far shows clearly that there was not the least double-dealing or contrariety in his personality. Then how could it be possible that on the one hand he should possess virtues of the highest degree and look at things with broad-mindedness and on the other hand he should be so narrow-minded and selfish that he should forsake all the values and principles only to gain victory? The fact is that he did not desire only victory in a war like other commanders but he also safeguarded rational and human principles and had a great regard for human values.

Ali's virtues and moral principles were the concomitants of his personality and he never abandoned them for even a moment. His conduct was the same in the Battle of Siffin as in the Battle of the Camel. His enemies had blocked his way to the bank of the river and had said that they would not allow him to have even one drop of water till he died. But he advised the people in these words:

- "If your brother is displeased with you try to reconcile him by means of goodness, and ward off his mischief by being kind to him".
- "Overpower your enemy by means of goodness and kindness. Such a victory is more delicious"
- "What is the use of that goodness which is acquired through evil?"
- "The rank of one, who performs jihad and is martyred in the path of God, is not higher than one who does not permit his enemy to be harmed after overpowering him. Such a man is very near to the angels".

He is the same Ali who had said about his assassin after the Battle of Siffin: "If you forgive him your act will be nearer to virtue".

Undoubtedly a great personality is not bound by the limits which the admirers of Ali wish to prescribe for him. Ali's qualities were not those of the commander of an army who wants to achieve victory at any

cost. During war high morals and human virtues are usually ignored and no importance is attached to human life. The conscience and reason of great and magnanimous persons, however, have a regard for these things. Of course, Ali was too magnanimous a person to deprive even his enemies of water, although by doing so he could bring them to their knees. He had formulated principles for the dignity and honour of human life which were much superior to the prevalent rules and regulations. His modesty and magnanimity could not permit him to kill Amr ibn al-Aas when he was subdued by him although it would have been quite in order to kill him in accordance with the rules of warfare.

By adopting on these two occasions the unique behaviour, Ali added a golden chapter in the history of mankind. Magnanimity is one thing and bravery is another. Magnanimity combines the concept of bravery with noblemindedness and love for mankind. A person in whom all these qualities are combined is supernatural as compared with others, and respectable in the eyes of all who are wise and learned.

If bravery means attacking the enemy and gaining victory over him, magnanimity and manliness means all this as well as fear of God, forbearance, love, kindness and sacrifice. The so-called brave man does not believe in any limit or condition in the matter of victory and wants to overpower the enemy by all possible means. A manly and magnanimous person, however, follows some rules and principles in this matter. He is not happy with his victory unless it is in keeping with morality and human dignity. He prefers to die himself rather than to violate human dignity and honour. And if these qualities were ever combined in any person it was Ali son of Abu Talib.

Could it be possible for Ali to deny to human beings, even if they were his enemies, that water which was being utilized even by animals and birds? Could he tolerate killing a man who wanted to live like all others?

Could Ali like to kill a man, who wanted to live with others, look at the sun and the moon like other human beings, eat bread, and drink water?

Do the admirers of Ali not realize that these two events which occurred at Siffin resemble many others on account of which his critics object to his general policy of government? These critics say that he committed a number of political mistakes.

Firstly he dismissed Mu`awiya from the governorship of Syria immediately upon his becoming caliph although it was necessary for him to have delayed this action till his government was firmly established. Secondly, he antagonized Talha and Zubayr. If he had maintained good relations with them the Battle of the Camel would not have taken place and his strength would not have diminished. Thirdly, he was very strict with his governors and officers and did not allow them to accumulate wealth by unlawful means, although he should have been lenient towards them so that they might support him.

These very actions of Ali which are criticized by his critics were in our view his best acts and were the outcome of his tender sentiments and good conscience. We think that his critics raise these objections because they judge his actions according to the standards of the time when honesty and integrity had

ceased to exist. His actions may be objectionable in the light of the moral standards of the days of Bani Umayyah and Bani Abbas but they are certainly not objectionable when we keep his own time in view.

In the matter of planning and politics Ali was more prudent and wise than even the greatest Arab politicians. He had a deep insight into political and military matters and knew the inner feelings of the people much better than the hypocrites like Mu`awiya. However, he hated political intrigues and opportunism. He despised everything which made man dishonourable. He did not desire any success which was achieved by fraud and deceit. He always liked uprightness.

Even when Mu`awiya was notorious for his intrigues and deceit and it was said that Ali was not shrewd like him he said: "I swear by God that Mu`awiya is not cleverer than me but he is treacherous and wicked. If I had not despised treachery I would have been the cleverest man among the Arabs".

We have briefly discussed the two events of the Battle of Siffin to show that not only the critics of Ali but also his admirers have not been able to understand Ali's personality properly. Some criticize his administration and others say that he did not avail of the opportunity for victory in the Battle of Siffin. In fact both of them have failed to understand Ali fully because in his eyes the origin of the meaning of politics and the rules of warfare was the same or in other words it was the soul of Ali, whose different manifestations were in perfect harmony with one another, and they are the different rings of the same chain. According to him the criterion for goodness and evil, lawfulness and unlawfulness was good conscience and kind manners.

A friend of mine who is a well-read literary man and takes keen interest in the history of Islam said to me once: "You cannot convince me that Ali was well-versed in politics and competent enough to administer the affairs of the people as claimed by you".

I replied to him: "Suppose that Ibn Muljam had not planned to assassinate Ali, and even if he did he had not succeeded in achieving his object on account of the presence of Ali's friends around him and he had remained alive. And suppose that he had then fought against Mu`awiya, as he had already intended and had gained victory over him, as was very probable. Or suppose that the arbitration scheme of Mu`awiya had failed and Ali's army had not been divided into two groups and he had continued the battle and captured Mu`awiya and Amr ibn al-Aas. In other words the result of this battle had been similar to the Battle of the Camel, and Ali had defeated Mu`awiya as he had defeated Talha and Zubayr. In all these cases much would have depended on the circumstances or luck.

Then what would you have said about the administration and war strategy of Ali? Then would you not have said like us that in spite of his oratory, wisdom, nobleness and high morality Ali was a cleverer politician than Mu`awiya and more competent to solve the problems than Amr ibn al-Aas. Hence if he did not gain victory over Mu`awiya why should it be said that he was ignorant of politics and war tactics. Why should it not be said that chances were the real cause of his remaining unsuccessful. And what we have said about the politics of Ali in connection with the events of Siffin is equally applicable to the

dismissal of Mu`awiya and other governors. Just as his failure in Siffin was due to circumstances in the same way he did not succeed in the case of the dismissal of Mu`awiya and others. The chances of the time, the politics of Uthman and the changed circumstances, provided such weapons of deceit and injustice to the governors as could not be utilized by Ali owing to his magnanimity, nobleness of mind, wisdom, greatness and dignity'.

All persons including the critics and the historians have become habituated to look upon various events and give verdicts about them according to the popular opinion, and assess the competence of great personalities in the light of their successes and failures. They do not keep in view the means used by them nor do they take into account the high morality and base qualities of the opposing parties. It has often happened that the greatest politicians and very efficient persons failed because of chances and sudden occurrences, and ordinary persons succeeded because of those very reasons. Neither the efficient politicians could prevent those occurrences from taking place, nor could the ordinary persons cause them to happen by means of their own strength and will.

In short the admirers of Ali wish that Ali too should have adopted diplomacy and a policy of fraud and deceit and should have consequently been victorious. Ali was not, however, prepared to deviate from truth and righteousness. These people desire that Ali should have become Mu`awiya son of Abu Sufyan, when he was Ali son of Abu Talib, an embodiment of the attributes of the Prophet of Islam.

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