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A Bitter Silence

The third section on the subject of Caliphate which has been reflected in Nahj al-Balaghah is the matter of silence and moderateness of ‘Ali (A.S.) and its philosophy.
By silence is meant the abandonment of a revolt and abstention from carrying the sword in hand. Otherwise, just as we had previously mentioned ‘Ali (A.S.) did not desist from setting forth his claim and complaining at opportune situations the injustice done to him.

‘Ali (A.S.) remembers this silence as bitter and reckons it to be an affliction and an agony of death:

و اغضيت علي القذي و شربت علي الشجي و صبرت علي اخذ الكظم و علي امر من طعم العلقم.

“I shut my eyes while there was a thorn in it and drank while there was a bone stuck in my throat. I was patient while my throat felt suffocated and there was a taste (in my mouth) more bitter than colocynth.”[1]

‘Ali’s silence was logical and a well-calculated one, not merely arising from compulsion and helplessness. He had two options and he chose the one that was based on expedience and was the most difficult and fatiguing one. It was easy for him to rise up in revolt and, if he had no friends or helpers, then at the most it would have resulted in martyrdom for him and sons. Martyrdom was the goal of ‘Ali (A.S.) and incidentally in this very situation he addresses Abu Sufyan in one of his famous sentences as such:

و الله لابن ابيطالب آنس بالموت من الطفل بثدي امه.

“By Allah the son of Abu Talib is more at ease with death than an infant with the breast of its mother.”[2]

By this sentence, ‘Ali (A.S.) had made Abu Sufyan and others understand that his silence was not due to fear from death but rather for the reason that his active revolt and martyrdom in such a situation would have been damaging to Islam (and not to the advantage of Islam).
‘Ali (A.S.) himself specifies that his silence was a pre-calculated one. He himself says that he selected

the path which was nearer to prudence:

وَ طَفِقْتُ اَرْتَأی بَیْنَ اَنْ اَصُولَ بِیَد جَذّاءَ، اَوْ اَصْبِرَ عَلی طِخْیَة عَمْیاءَ، یَهْرَمُ فیهَا الْکَبیرُ، وَ یَشیبُ فیهَا الصَّغیرُ، وَ یَکْدَحُ فیها مُؤْمِنٌ حَتّی یَلْقی رَبَّهُ! فَرَاَیْتُ اَنَّ الصَّبْرَ عَلی هاتا اَحْجی، فَصَبَرْتُ وَ فِی الْعَیْنِ قَذًی، وَ فِی الْحَلْقِ شَجاً!

“Then I began to think whether I should assault or endure calmly the blinding darkness of tribulations wherein the grown up become feeble and the young grow old and the true believer acts under strain till he meets Allah. I found that endurance thereon was wiser. So I adopted patience although there was a thorn in the eye and suffocation in the throat.”[3]

Islamic Unity

Naturally, everybody wishes to know which matter kept ‘Ali (A.S.) in so deep a thought that he did not wish to see any harm come to it and instead attached so much importance that he was prepared to tolerate the agonies and the sufferings?

Roughly it should be said that the important reason was the unity of the Muslims and the non- initiation of discord. The Muslims who were newly displaying their power and strength to the world were indebted to their unity and alliance of their creed (of faith). They acquired their astounding prosperity in the later years from this very unity. It was due to this expediency that ‘Ali (A.S.) as a rule, kept silent and acted moderately.

Is it believable that a pious youth of thirty three years could have been pushed to such corners; and controlled himself to such extent and been so much loyal towards Islam that for the sake of Islam, he chose the path which lead to his own deprivation of rights?

Yes, it is possible to believe. The extraordinary character of ‘Ali (A.S.) became manifest in such a situation. It is not merely a conjecture. ‘Ali (A.S.) has himself rationalized his actions and has, with utmost explicitness, given no reasons for his behavior other than his concern over discord among the Muslims. Especially during the period of his own Caliphate when Talha and Zubair broke their allegiance and started an internal conspiracy, ‘Ali (A.S.) repeatedly compares himself with them (i.e. Talha and Zubair) after the departure of the Holy Prophet and says: “I have overlooked my obvious right for the sake of not causing discord among the Muslims while they (in spite of willingly and voluntarily giving their allegiance) have broken it and have not bothered about the emergence of disunity among the Muslims.

In explaining Sermon No.119, Ibn Abi al-Hadeed narrates from Abdullah ibn Junadah who said: “In the initial period of ‘Ali’s Caliphate, I was in Hijaz and I intended to go to Iraq. In Mecca I performed my ‘Umra’ (lesser pilgrimage) and came to Medina. I entered the mosque of the Holy Prophet and saw that people had gathered together for prayers. ‘Ali (A.S.) who had his sword with him came out and delivered a sermon. In that sermon, after praising and glorifying God and sending salutation upon the Holy

Prophet, he said:

“After the Holy Prophet’s departure, we (the household members of the Prophet) never ever imagined that the Ummah would usurp our right. However, that which could not be imagined did really occur. They usurped our right and we were ranked on par with the low-class people. Tears rolled down from our eyes and problems stood facing us.”

و ايم الله لولا مخافة الفرقه بين المسلمين و ان يعود الكفر و يبور الدين لكنا علي غير ما كنا لهم عليه.

“By Allah, if it were not for the fear of discord between the Muslims, the return to unbelief and destruction of religion, our stand towards them would have been a different one.”

Thereafter, he continued his speech by referring to Talha and Zubair and said: “These two gave their allegiance to me but later broke it. They took Ayesha along with them to Basra so that they could create disunity among you Muslims.”

Moreover, Ibn Abi al-Hadeed narrates from Kalbi that:
“Before going to Basra, ‘Ali (A.S.) in one sermon said: “After the Holy Prophet, the Quraysh snatched our right from us and attributed it exclusively for themselves.”

فرأيت ان الصبر علي ذلك افضل من تفريق كلمة المسلمين و سفك دمائهم و الناس حديثو عهد بالاسلام و الدين يمخض مخض الوطب يفسده ادني وهن و يعكسه اقل خلق.

“I realized that patience in that is better than dissipation of the Muslim creed and their bloodshed. I reckoned that the people are newly converted Muslims and the religion like a large leathern water bag, capable of being destroyed by the slightest weakness and of being overturned by the most insignificant person”.

Thereafter he said:

How good it would have been if Talha and Zubair had resorted to patience for a year or at least a few months and witnessed my rule and then taken a decision. However, they did not hold out and revolted against me. They entered into a skirmish with me for a matter in which Allah had never set any right for them.

Under the sermon of Shiqshiqiya, Ibn Abi al-Hadeed says: “Regarding the event of ‘Shura’, (consultative council) since Abbas was aware of its result, he suggested to ‘Ali (A.S.) not to attend the meeting. Although ‘Ali (A.S.) reckoned Abbas to be right as far as the results were concerned, he still did not accept his suggestion.” His reason was as he said:

اني اكره الخلاف

“I dislike discord.” Abbas said:

اذا ترى ما تكره

“Then you will encounter what you dislike.”

In Vol. 2 under sermon 65, he narrates as such: “One of the sons of Abu Lahab recited a poem regarding the virtue and the just right of ‘Ali and at the same time vilified his enemies.” ‘Ali prohibited him from reciting such poems (which in fact was a kind of provocation and threat to unity) and said:

سلامة الدين احب الينا من غيره

“We reckon the safety of the religion (and the continuation of the fundamentals of Islam(to be a matter more lovable and valuable than anything else.”

More explicit than this is what has come down in Nahj al-Balaghah itself. This explicitness can be seen in three different instances in Nahj al-Balaghah:

(1) When Abu Sufyan intended to create sedition under the pretext of offering his support to ‘Ali (A.S.), Hazrat replied:

شقوا امواج الفتن بسفن النجاة و عرجوا عن طريق المنافرة، وضعوا تيجان المفاخرة.

“Steer clear through the waves of mischief with the boats of deliverance; turn away from the path of dissension and put off the crowns of pride.”[4]

(2) In the Shura (consultative council) of six people, when ‘Uthman was selected by Abdur-Rahman ibn al-Auf, he (i.e. ‘Ali) said:

لقد علمتم انى احق الناس بها من غيرى و و الله لا سلمن ما سلمت امور المسلمين و لم يكن فيها جور الا على خاصة.

“You have certainly known that I am the most rightful of all for the Caliphate. By Allah, so long as the affairs of the Muslims remain intact and there is no oppression in it save on myself I shall keep quiet.” [5]

(3) At the time when Malik al-Ashtar became the Governor of Egypt, Hazrat (A.S.) wrote a letter to the

people of Egypt. (This letter is different from the famous lengthy directive). In this letter he relates the era of the beginning of Islam till he reaches to a point where he says:

> فامسكت يدي حتي رايت راجعة الناس قد رجعت عن الاسلام يدعون الي محق دين محمد صلى اللّه عليه و آله فخشيت ان لم انصر الاسلام و اهله ان اري فيه ثلما او هدما تكون المصيبة به علي اعظم من فوت ولايتكم التي انما هي متاع ايام قلائل.

*"I withheld my hand only as long as I saw that many people were reverting away from Islam and calling for the effacement of the religion of Muhammad, blessings of Allah on him and his family. I then feared that if I did not help Islam and its people, I would see in it a breach or destruction, the calamity of which would be far more grievous to me than the loss of authority over you which was in any case, only to last for a while."*6

Two Outstanding Stances

In his sayings, 'Ali (A.S.) refers to two distinguished stances on two occasions and reckons his stance in these two instances to be a privileged and limited one. That is to say, in each of these two crucial instances he took such a decision that only a few in this world would be capable of taking under the given circumstances. In one of these two crucial cases, 'Ali (A.S.) had kept silent while in the other he revolted – A splendid silence and a more splendid revolt. The stance adopted by 'Ali (A.S.) in the case of his silence is the same, which we have explained.

In certain circumstances, silence and moderation requires more strength, power and possession of the 'self' than bloody uprisings. Imagine a person who was the symbol of bravery, courage and zeal, a person who had never shown his back to the enemy and the brave ones shivered due to fear from him. Conditions and circumstances became such that politically-motivated people took advantage of the crucial situation and made things difficult for him such that when his most beloved wife was subject to insults, she addressed her husband with such sentences that make mountains move from their places. She (A.S.) said:

"O son of Abu Talib! Why have you crawled in one corner of the house? You are the same person in fear of whom the brave ones could not sleep. Now you are exhibiting yourself as a weak one before the people. I wish I had died and not seen such a day."

Angered by the events, 'Ali (A.S.) is provoked as such on the side of his wife who holds him extremely dear. What power was it that could not move 'Ali (A.S.) from his place. After hearing the speech of Hazrat Zahra (A.S.), he consoles her and says: "No, I have not changed. I am the same as before. Expediency lies in something else". He comforts her until Zahra (A.S.) is content and hears from her the sentence of:

حَسْبي الله وَ نِعْمَ الوَكِيل

Below Sermon No.215, Ibn Abi al-Hadeed has narrated this famous incident:
“One day Fatimah (A.S.) called on ‘Ali (A.S.) to revolt. At that very moment the call of “Muezzin” could be heard saying:

أشْهَدُ أنَّ مُحَمَّداً رَسولُ اللهِ

“I testify that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah”.

‘Ali (A.S.) asked Zahra (A.S.): “Would you like this call to be extinguished”? She replied: “No”. ‘Ali (AS.) said: “Then my words are the same.”

However the splendid revolt (limited to ‘Ali (A.S.) himself) which he was proud of and about which he used to say that none had the courage to do what he did was the revolt against the Kharijites.

فَانا فقأتُ عين الفِتْنَةِ و لم يكن ليجْتَرَأ عَليها أحَدٌ غيري بعد أن ماج غيهبها و اشتدَّ كلبها

“So now, O people, I have put out the eye of dissension. No one except me ventured towards it when its darkness was surging and its frenzy was intense.”

The apparent piety of the Kharijites was such that it would keep any discerning believer in doubt. An atmosphere obscure and gloomy and a sphere full of doubt and hesitation had come into existence. They were 12,000 people who had calluses on their foreheads and knees due to excessive prostration. They practiced abstinence in their food, clothing and way of life. Their tongues were constantly moving in praise of God. However, they were unaware of the spirit of Islam and did not possess the Islamic insight. They wanted to compensate all their shortcomings forcibly through bowing and prostration. They were narrow-minded, apparent – worshippers, ignorant, rigid and a big barrier in front of Islam.

As a matter of great honour, ‘Ali (A.S.) says: “It was I who perceived the great danger brought about by these narrow-minded so-called religious people. Their calloused foreheads, their ascetic garb and their constant liturgical praise of God could not blind my discerning vision. It was I who realized that if ever they establish themselves, they would so drive Islam towards stagnation, conventionalism, petrifaction and outward show such that the back of Islam would no longer be straightened.

Yes! This honour was only for the son of Abu Talib! Which powerful soul existed that would not be moved in the face of such (outwardly) impressive personalities? And which power existed, that could rise up to strike their heads and not tremble?

1. Nahj al-Balaghah, Sermon 26.

2. Nahj al-Balaghah, Sermon 5.
3. Nahj al-Balaghah, Sermon 3.
4. Nahj al-Balaghah, Sermon 5.
5. Nahj al-Balaghah, Sermon 72.
6. Nahj al-Balaghah, Letter no. 62.

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