

Knowledge and sagacity of Ali

Ali was matchless so far as power of perception is concerned. The Islamic learning rotates on the pivot of his intellect. He was the fountain head of knowledge. There is no branch of science in Arabia which was not founded by him or in the foundation of which he was not the chief figure. We shall write in detail later about his great skill in social sciences, because this topic deserves to be discussed separately. In this chapter I propose to deal only briefly with his knowledge of jurisprudence, scholasticism and Arabic literature, as well as his judicial acumen. I shall be brief because many others have written on this subject and some of them have conducted deep research. I shall, therefore, narrate briefly those facts which they have dealt with in detail, and shall narrate those things in detail which they have dealt with only briefly.

I begin with the Qur'an and the Hadith (tradition) and shall write about other sciences later so that it may become known as to how far the following words of the Prophet proved to be true about Ali:

“I am the city of knowledge and Ali is its gate”

Ali was brought up by his cousin. He became his disciple and adopted his habits and conduct. The Prophet's heritage became implanted in his heart and brain. He reflected over the Qur'an with the intellect and eye of a sage and learnt its latent realities. The circumstances provided him ample time to reflect over the Qur'an. So long as Abu Bakr, Umar and Uthman remained busy with the caliphate, he kept his attention directed towards the Qur'an. He mastered its words and meanings. His tongue could recite it eloquently and his heart was immersed in it.

His knowledge of the traditions of the Prophet was such that none else could compete with him in the matter. And there is nothing surprising about it, because he was always associated with the Prophet and benefited from him more than any other companion or Mujahid did. Whatever heard by others was heard by him and whatever was heard by him was not necessarily heard by others.

It is a well-known fact that Ali did not narrate any Hadith from anyone except from the Prophet. This was so because he was certain that not even a word of the traditions of the Prophet was hidden from his ears and heart. He was asked: “How is it that you are superior to all other companions in the matter of the

knowledge of Hadith?” He replied: “It is so because the Prophet told me whatever I enquired from him, and if I did not enquire about anything he himself made it known to me”

Ali was superior to all others in the matter of jurisprudence and Islamic learning just as he acted upon them in a better way than others. Those who were his contemporaries did not find a greater jurist and a greater judge than him. Abu Bakr and Umar always approached him for the solution of difficult problems. These two caliphs benefited much from his knowledge and wisdom. Other companions of the Prophet also consulted him for the solution of their problems. None could put forth better arguments than him with regard to legal problems.

As regards jurisprudence Ali's knowledge was not limited to text and orders. He was more adept than his contemporaries in other branches of learning also, as their knowledge is necessary for a jurist (for example mathematics).

Abu Hanifa is called 'the grand Imam' in the capacity of a jurist. He was a pupil of Ali, because he learnt jurisprudence from Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq and the chain of his teachers when taken upwards, ended with Ali. In the same way Malik son of Anas was a pupil of Ali through a few intermediaries. Malik learnt jurisprudence from Rabiya. He learnt it from Akrama. He learnt it from Abdullah and Abdullah learnt it from Ali.

Abdullah son of Abbas, who was the preceptor of all others, was asked: “What is the ratio of your knowledge to that of your cousin i.e. Ali. He replied: “The ratio is the same as exists between a drop and the ocean”.

The companions have unanimously quoted the Prophet as saying: “The best judge amongst you is Ali”. Ali excelled all other persons of his time in matters of law, because he knew the Qur'an and religious rules and regulations better than all others, and in Islam correct judgments depend on these two things.

He possessed such intelligence, wisdom and power of thinking that in the event of dispute he could give the most rational judgment. His conscience was so strong that he was capable of giving a conscientious and just decision after examining and understanding various aspects of a matter.

Umar ibn Khattab has been reported to have said: “O Abul Hasan! May that problem be not auspicious for the solution of which you are not available”.

While giving his judgment Ali had regard for the claimants as well as for the nation and the general public. This double consideration and regard on his part was inter-dependent. He was the first judge who proved the rights of the people from philosophical point of view and said that it is the duty of the rulers to pay due consideration to these rights. Besides in the case of claimants it is also necessary to observe justice in the case of all persons in the matter of general administration. People are under obligation to perform certain acts for the reformation of the society in which they live.

There is mutual relationship between the human beings, and the public laws have joined them with one another. It is necessary to respect these laws for the reformation of the nation and not only for achieving personal ends.

Ali established public laws and national unity, and treated all the individuals as one person in the matter of rights and responsibilities. In his orders and judgments he fully observed this principle which is being followed strictly by the civilized people of the present times.

One night Ali heard some afflicted person crying for help. He ran towards him at once and said: "The rescuer has come". He saw that one man was holding another man by his collar. When he saw Ali he left his opponent. Then he said addressing Ali: "I sold a piece of cloth to this man for nine dirhams and did not also violate any condition of the bargain. He gave me base coins and when I asked him to give me good ones instead he abused and slapped me".

Ali asked the buyer to take back the base coins and give the seller the good coins. Then he enquired from the other person whether he had any witness to confirm that the buyer had slapped him. He produced the requisite evidence. Thereupon Ali asked the buyer to sit down and told the other man to take revenge. He, however, forgave him.

When Ali saw that the claimant had forsaken his right and forgiven the other person he did not press him to take revenge. He, however, kept this point in view in connection with this incident that it was necessary to take care of the rights of the common people and it was his duty to punish the oppressors so that the link of justice might remain firm amongst the people, and the rights of the nation might not be violated.

He also kept in view the fact that in every community there are many powerful and cruel persons who usurp the property and rights of the weak, and the latter cannot take back or demand their rights on account of weakness or fear, although it is only appropriate that their rights should not be encroached upon. He, therefore, thought within himself: "Who is there besides myself who should support them and claim their rights so that they may lead a peaceful social life and should rest assured that there is no distinction between the individuals in respect of social rights, and their rights are safe?"

In the case mentioned above, therefore, Ali let go the person who had been beaten but caught the aggressor by the hand and slapped him nine times in the presence of the other person saying: "This is the right of the ruler".

Ali was not contented with the outward appearance of anything and was keen to go deep into all matters. He pondered over the Qur'an and the religion sagaciously in the same way in which other thinkers ponder over worldly matters.

No doubt a person possessing celestial power like Ali does not content himself with the apparent orders of the religion, the carrying out of prescribed duties and the formalities of worship. Mostly the people look

at the religion and the orders relating to transactions and judgments in a superficial manner. However, Ali looked at their interior and realities also. He made these things the subject of his reflection and research, and proved that religion is based on the principles which are linked and related with one another. This led to the establishment of the science of scholasticism and Islamic philosophy. Ali was the first scholastic ('Arif) and founder of scholasticism. (For details see "On Ilmul Kalam wal Irfan, ISP 82)

The ancient scholastics drank deep from this fountainhead, because they acquired the elements and principles of scholasticism from him. The later scholastics also admit him to be their leader, because they also acquired guidance from him.

Wasil son of 'Ata was the chief and the central figure of Mu'tazila sect. This was the first sect in Islam which introduced reason into religion and advocated that the religious precepts should conform with the principles of logic, and the correctness of religion should be proved by means of reason.

Wasil son of 'Ata was the pupil of Abu Hashim son of Muhammad son of Hanafiya and his father Muhammad was the pupil of Ali.

The same thing can be said about the Asha'ira, because they were the pupils of the Mu'tazila, who acquired knowledge from Wasil son of 'Ata, and he acquired it through some intermediaries from Ali.

The source and basis of Sufism lies in Nahj-al-Balaghah.

Before becoming aware of the Greek philosophy the Muslim Sufis had acknowledged the sayings of Ali to be the source of their ideas, because till that time Greek philosophy and Persian philosophy had not yet been transferred to the Arabic language.

The Almighty God willed that as in the case of religious knowledge Ali should be the pillar and centre of Arabian learning. Not even one person in his time could compete with him in the matter of Arabic literature.

With his perfect knowledge of syntax, eloquent tongue and great power of thinking he formulated the rules and principles of correct Arabic language. He confirmed it with logical reasoning and arguments. His skill in logical reasoning can be realized from the fact that he laid the foundation of Arabian sciences and paved the way for others to promote them.

History shows that Ali was the founder of the science of syntax. One day Abu'l Aswad, who was one of his companions came and saw that Ali's head was bent down and he was reflecting about something. He said: "O Commander of the Faithful! What are you thinking about?" Ali replied: "In your city (i.e. Kufa) I have heard something which was expressed by the speaker in a wrong manner. I have, therefore, decided to write an elementary book on the principles of the Arabic language".

He then handed over a paper to Abu'l Aswad on which it was written that the words are of three kinds: noun, verb and preposition.

This incident has also been narrated in another way and it has been said that Abu'l Aswad complained before Ali that the people usually spoke incorrect language, because since the time the Arabs had mingled, after their conquests, with the non-Arabs, incorrect phrases had penetrated into their conversation.

The Imam reflected a little and then asked Abu'l Aswad to write down what he was going to dictate. Abu'l Aswad procured a pen and a sheet of paper and then Ali said: "The Arabic language is composed of noun, verb and preposition. Noun tells about the things which bear that name, verb tells about the motion and action of that thing and preposition conveys a meaning which is neither noun nor verb". "Things are of three kinds viz. a patent thing, a latent thing and a thing which is neither patent nor latent". (Some scholars of syntax say that by the third kind of things Ali meant 'demonstrative pronoun').

Then he asked Abu'l Aswad to expand and complete the subject according to the same 'nahw' (i.e. method or manner). From that day onwards this branch of learning began to be called 'Nahw' (syntax).

One of the other attributes of Ali was his sharp intelligence and quick understanding. Often it so happened that whether it was an assembly of friends or a gathering of enemies he uttered extempore wise words, which became proverbs and passed from one tongue to another. Difficult mathematical problems which were enigmas for others were solved by him in no time. It is said that a woman came in the presence of Ali and complained that her brother had died leaving behind six hundred dinars, but out of that money she had been given only one dinar. Ali replied: "Perhaps the heirs of your brother consist of one widow, two daughters, mother, twelve brothers and yourself". And the position turned out to be the same as was mentioned by the Imam.

One day while Ali was delivering a sermon from the pulpit, one of those present said: "A man has died and he has left behind his widow, father, mother and two daughters". Ali replied at once: "The one-eighth share of the widow will be changed into one-ninth. As the Imam gave this judgment while he was occupying the pulpit, the problem began to be called". "Obligation of the Pulpit".

Ali was the philosopher of Islam. Philosophy comes into existence by means of wisdom and intelligence and strong power of perception and inference. A philosopher is he who mentions a number of important matters in a brief narrative and endeavours to live according to his words.

Ali occupies the highest position not only among the philosophers of Islam, but also among the unique personalities of the human race.

It is very difficult to find a person like Ali who may infer theoretical and rational matters with the power of his intellect, and state them in beautiful and brief sentences in such a way that time may preserve them, and they may become proverbs. Islamic sciences and learning absorbed the colour of humanity in their paintings by means of celestial philosophy and their fountainhead were the two personalities viz. Muhammad and Ali.

The Imam looked philosophically at the secrets of creation, human life and society and numerous sayings with regard to the Oneness of God, divine matters, and metaphysics, are available. We have already remarked above that he was the founder of scholasticism and theology. He was a preceptor, whose skill and leadership has been admitted by every person, who came after him with his own view or remark. In Nahj al-Balaghah he has strung so many pearls of wisdom that, time has made him stand in the first row of the philosophers of the world. Muhammad in fact referred to Ali when he said: "The scholars among my followers are like the Prophets of descendants of Israel".

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