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Reality of Salat

It is evident that the Holy Qur'an has been revealed in eloquent Arabic. The Holy Prophet ('s) and the infallible Imams ('a) conveyed their views and opinions to the people in the customary language prevalent in those times. And there is no evidence or document in support of change in the meanings of terms used by these holy personalities.

Therefore, it is obligatory that every term that has come in the Qur'an or used by the Holy Prophet ('s) and the infallible Imams ('a), must be used in that very literal meaning as was prevalent in their times. This premise is applicable to all the terms and phrases used by them including the words that mean worship. But for the limitations and conditions set by them on the literal applications, especially of the words used to imply worship, we must apply the apparent meanings to achieve our aim.

The word '*Salat*' is among the Arabic words which is used in abundance in Qur'an and the traditions of the Holy Prophet ('s) and the infallible Imams ('a). Thus, to know its actual meaning, first and foremost, we must search for its literal meaning and then strive to look for its conditions and definitions in the words of the infallibles ('a).

In Lesaanul Arab, vol. 14, p. 464, Ibn Manzoor writes: *As-Salat* means *al-dua* (invocation) and *al-istighfar* (seeking forgiveness).... And Zujjaaj has said: The root in the word *al-Salat* is necessity. It is said, 'when a thing becomes obligatory (i.e. when it does not become separate or separates a thing). And among the meanings of a *musalli* is the horse that comes second in the race, i.e. it trails behind the first horse. Yet another meaning of *sal'ya* is roasted meat and other roasted items. Also, *Salat* means to warm one's hands...*Salat* also means to whirl or spin a staff to soften it or to make it straight.

Ibn Athir, in *al-Nihayah*, vol. 2, p. 50, writes: *Salat* means a special form of worship. Its literal root implies invocation....Also it is said that its literal meaning indicates respect.

The meaning that has been accepted by all Arab litterateurs is 'invocation'. This translation is also universally accepted among the jurists. But considering the fact that the word invocation is always used in the transitive form, while *Salat* is non-transitive, it becomes clear that these are not synonyms or equivalents of each other. The reality of invocation is not only calling out or supplicating, rather it is only

one of its facets. Invocation, in reality, suggests the calling out the invoked one by the one who invokes to attract the attention of the former.

And when it is coupled with calling out, it is termed as *'dua'* (supplication). But as the word *'Salat'* is non-transitive, i.e. it is not in need of an object, it connotes sheer attention of one to another, without him expecting that person to pay attention to him. Therefore, the literal meanings of this expression indicate that *Salat* is an attention that is accompanied with softness, respect and following.

The word *'Salat'* has been used in this very meaning in the Holy Qur'an and tradition. Like in the verse,

إِنَّ اللهَ وَمَلاَئِكَتَهُ يُصَلُّونَ عَلَى النَّبِيِّ

"Surely Allah and His angels send blessings on the Prophet." (***Qur'an, 33:56***)

where the blessings of Allah upon the Prophet ('s) have been supplemented with the blessings of the angels.

Similarly, in another verse,

وَمَا كَانَ صَلاَتُهُمْ عِندَ الْبَيْتِ إِلاَّ مُكَاءً وَ تَصْدِيَةً

"Their (***polytheists***) ***prayers in the Ka'ba was nothing but whistling and clapping of hands."*** (***Qur'an, 8:35***)

In still another verse, the Holy Qur'an declares,

هُوَ الَّذِي يُصَلِّي عَلَيْكُمْ وَمَلاَئِكَتُهُ لِيُخْرِجَكُم مِّنَ الظُّلُمَاتِ إِلَى النُّورِ

"He is the One who turns towards you and so do His angels that He may bring you out from the darkness to light." (***Qur'an, 33:43***)

Yet another verse commands the Holy Prophet ('s),

وَصَلِّ عَلَيْهِمْ إِنَّ صَلاَتَكَ سَكَنٌ لَهُمْ.

"And turn your attention towards them. Certainly your attention provides them comfort." (***Qur'an, 9:103***)

The *salawat* sent by the Muslims on the Prophet ('s) and his progeny ('a), which incidentally is the most

oft-uttered *dhikr* in Islam, is another evidence to support our view. Therefore, it is clear that the *Salat* of Allah, His angels and the Muslims on the Holy Prophet ('s) and his pure progeny ('a), and similarly the *Salat* of the polytheists in the Ka'ba and the *Salat* of Allah's Messenger on the Muslims while taking charity from them, none comprised of prostration, bowing or other essential elements of the daily ritual prayers in them.

Another proof is this famous slogan that was used in the early period of Islam to call the society towards Allah's religion, "**الصَّلاَةُ جَامِعَةً**" which is the Arabic equivalent of 'your attention please,' when you want to draw the attention of others to a very important matter.

Yet another proof is that traditions have talked about the *Salat* of Iblis, Hazrat Adam ('a), Hazrat Nuh ('a), Hazrat Sulaiman ('a), Hazrat Musa ('a) and Hazrat Isa ('a). Therefore, it is evident that the literal aspect, root and reality of *Salat,* was present in all the Prophets ('a). Moreover, there were many Arabs who practiced Christianity and Judaism yet used this term for their form of worship.

And if the word *Salat* bore any other meaning than attention in their vocabulary, it would have been used in that very sense. In that case, the unanimity of the litterateurs on the meaning of this word would not hold water.

This itself is a proof for the fact that the word *Salat* has been used in Islamic ideology in its literal sense and nobody used it in its new sense in the initial era of Islam. And only after applying the requisite definitions and conditions to it, they have excepted and limited its literal meaning and concept.

More important than all these is the basic and fundamental difference in the types of *Salat* – obligatory (*wajib*), recommended (*mustahab*), types of obligatory and types of recommended. Also, the differences in *Salat* prescribed for different individuals – traveler, sick, drowning and dumb.

Obviously, no other meaning can take in its fold all the above applications, except the literal meaning on which everybody agrees – the only difference being in the definitions and conditions attached to them. E.g. the daily prayers are the same as the Friday prayers but each of them possesses certain conditions peculiar only to itself. In the tradition of ascension (*mi'raj*) it has been narrated from the Holy Prophet ('s):

"Hazrat Musa ('a), in one of his munajat (whispering supplications) to Allah prayed, 'O Allah! Grant me Your recognition.' Allah retorted, 'Testify that there is no god but Allah.' Hazrat Musa ('a) asked, 'O Allah! How is Salat?' Allah the Almighty replied, 'Say, 'There is no god but Allah' and till the day of judgement, My servants will utter this statement."[1]

A little attention on this tradition reveals the fact that the literal aspect of the word *Salat* covers all types of remembrance and attention towards the Almighty. The only difference being among them is that while one is perfect, the other is more perfect, one is obligatory and the other, recommended. To imply that the application of the word *Salat* is true only for the obligatory while for others it is just metaphorical, is

definitely wrong and incorrect.

For, the most complete *Salat* is that which includes the recitation of the Holy Qur'an, its invocations and other conditions that are available in the traditions of the Holy Prophet ('s) and his infallible progeny ('a). As the Qur'an itself descended in stages and the traditions of the infallible were narrated sequentially, proves that *Salat* of the Prophets ('a) prior to the Holy Prophet ('s) and that of the Muslims in early Islam, was only in its metaphorical sense (and not as used today).

Then it will not be incorrect if we say: The literal meaning of *Salat* is applicable everywhere, except that for each occasion some conditions and restrictions have been imposed. In the conversation between Imam As-Sadiq ('a) and Mansur, the Abbaside Caliph, the same meaning can be derived:

"On a Friday, Mansur emerged from his palace while leaning on the shoulders of Imam As-Sadiq ('a). On seeing this, a person called 'Razaam' remarked, 'Who is this man who enjoys such a status that the chief of the believers (Mansur) is leaning on him?' He was told that he is Abu Abdillah, Jafar Ibn Muhammad al-As-Sadiq ('a). He cried (with the intention of insulting the Imam), 'How I wish that the face of Abu Abdillah would become the shoe of Mansur!'

Thereafter, he came in front of Mansur and said, 'O Chief of the believers! Permit me to pose a query. Mansur answered, 'Ask him (Imam ('a)).' He insisted, 'I want to ask you.' Mansur was obstinate, 'Ask him'. On this, Razam stood before Imam As-Sadiq ('a) and demanded, 'Define for me Salat and its conditions and restrictions. Imam ('a) replied, 'Salat has four thousand definitions and you do not deserve to be informed of all of them.'

He said, 'Inform me only of those conditions that cannot be forsaken and without which Salat will not remain a Salat.' Imam ('a) explained, 'Salat will not be complete till a person performs the ablutions (Wudhu) completely and prays without any shortcomings. Unawareness, hypocrisy and deviation should be totally discarded. He should recognise Allah and stand before Him with total cognition. A feeling of humility and modesty should encompass him. He should find himself between complete hope and absolute despair, patient as well as anxious.

That is, he should stand as if Allah' promises will be fulfilled for him and that His threats will be actualised against him. He should put aside his own honour and dignity. His aim and goal should be right in front of his eyes. He must submit his heart to the Almighty and tread on His path. He should not be distanced with his prayers to such an extent that his relationship with his Lord is totally severed. Remember, he is standing before Him who is his aim and brought for Him his own gift, and at the same time, hoping for His Help, Assistance and Grace.

The Salat that is ordered and revealed (in Qur'an) is this very Salat. And it is this Salat which keeps a person away from evils and indecencies.'When Imam As-Sadiq ('a) completed his reply, Mansur turned to him ('a) and said,

‘O Abu Abdillah! We always quench our thirst from the ocean of your knowledge and come nearer to you. You have extricated us from deviation and have dispelled our darkness with your light. We will always float in the brilliance of your holiness and the oceans of your greatness.”2

Therefore, the reality of the term ‘*Salat*’, its subject and application, is the very attention towards Allah the Almighty but this meaning has been subjected to some definitions, restrictions and conditions in the Quranic verses and traditions of the infallible (‘a). For instance, the condition of timings, facing the Qiblah, saying ‘Allah-o-Akbar’, recitation of Qur’an, glorification, praise, saying ‘there is no god but Allah’, witnessing monotheism and prophethood, praying for the Prophet (‘s), bowing in respect, prostration, etc. Hence, the various actions and utterances in the obligatory and recommended prayers and the numerous types of prayers, are not the reality of the term ‘*Salat*’. Rather, these have been connected to it through the medium of other proofs.

1. Bihar ul Anwar, vol. 93, p. 202
2. Bihar ul Anwar, vol. 84, p. 250

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