The Illustrious Period of the Imamate of Imam Zayn al-'Abidin

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No Imam began his Imamat in a more tragic atmosphere. The first day of his Imamat saw him seriously ill and a captive of the army of Yazid in Karbala. His father and predecessor had sacrificed all he had on the altar of truth; and Imam Zayn al-'Abidin found himself with a group of helpless widows and orphans being led from place to place, from the durbar of Ibn Ziyad to the court of Yazid. Finally they were thrown into a prison, where the Imam spent the first year of his Imamat, cut off from the followers of his father and unable to look after their affairs. Understandably, the tragedy of Karbala had created a chaos in the Shi'a world. Shi'as were in the throes of a dark pessimism, and the community was in disarray. A movement had already begun to accept Muhammad al Hanafiyah, son of Amir-ul-Mu'minin 'Ali as the 4th Imam. Muhammad al Hanafiyah himself had no such design. But the problem was: how to stop that movement without putting the life of Imam Zayn al-'Abidin in danger?

Yazid had not hesitated to murder Imam Husayn in spite of the highest prestige the Imam had in the Muslims' eyes. It would have been far more easier for him to kill Imam Zayn al-'Abidin a young man of 23 years of age, whose divine virtues were yet to shine before the Muslim community. And it was not in the interest of Islam that Imam Zayn al-'Abidin be martyred so soon after Imam Husayn.

Altogether, Imam Zayn al-'Abidin had three difficult tasks before him:

1. To announce his Imamat publicly without seeming to oppose outsiders.
2. To weld the community together, making a "tasbih" (rosary) out of the scattered beads - doing it in such a way as not to give Yazid and Yazidites an excuse to retaliate.
3. To expand true faith, providing a beacon of light to guide the seekers of truth to the safety of true faith and virtuous deeds - doing it without attracting untoward attention of his enemies.

Any of these Himalayan tasks would have defeated a lesser being. But Imam Zayn al-'Abidin under divine guidance did achieve all these aims in such a beautiful and unobtrusive way that even his followers, who tremendously benefited, and are benefiting, from his superb leadership did not consciously realise how they were being guided.

Announcement of his Imamat

This took the form of a family dispute:

Muhammad al-Hanafiyah claimed that he was the Imam after his brother, Imam Husayn (as Imam Husayn, had become Imam after the eldest brother, Imam Hasan). Imam Zayn al-'Abidin said that his uncle's claim was wrong; that he (i.e. Imam Zayn al-'Abidin) was Imam after his father, by divine appointment. This family "feud" apparently could not be resolved; and ultimately Imam Zayn al-'Abidin suggested that the "Black Stone" (al-Hajarul-aswad) of Ka'bah be approached for its judgement. Muhammad al Hanafiyah readily agreed and both parties went to Mecca during Hajj season, when thousands of pilgrims had assembled for the pilgrimage.

The stranger than fiction news must have spread like wild fire that 'Ali bin al-Husayn and Muhammad al-Hanafiyah wanted the Black Stone to judge between them. Everyone must have wondered how could a stone judge between two persons. They must have eagerly waited to see the outcome when the two parties would approach the Stone. What would they say when the Stone, being a stone, would not respond to their arguments!

This must have been the feeling of the crowd when the uncle and the nephew slowly advanced towards the Black Stone. First Muharnmad al-Hanafiyah talked to the Stone; there was no response. Imam Zayn al-'Abidin said: "Had you, O Uncle, been the Wasi and Imam, it would certainly have answered you." Muhammad al-Hanafiyah said "Now, O Nephew, you pray and ask it." Imam Zayn al-'Abidin prayed to Allah and then asked the Black Stone to declare in clear Arabic as to who was the Wasi and Imam after al-Husayn bin 'Ali.

There was a tremor in the Stone and then Allah made it speak in clear Arabic: "O Allah, verily Wisayah and Imamah, after al-Husayn bin 'Ali is for Zayn al-'Abidin 'Ali bin al-Husayn, son of 'Ali bin Abi Talib and Fatimah bint Rasulillah." Muhammad al-Hanafiyah accepted the verdict and declared his allegiance for Imam Zayn al-'Abidin. *(al-Ihtijaj of al-Tabrasi, al-Kafi of al-Kulaini, Basa'-erud-Darajat, A'lumul-wara, Manaqib of Ibn Shahr 'Ashob, Biharul-Anwar, Vol. XI, of Majlisi).*

This "dispute" was the beginning of the end of the Kaisaniyah movement, which wanted to accept Muhammad al-Hanafiyah as Imam. The schism in the Shia rank was arrested; and as it was only a "family feud", Yazid could not object to it in any way.

But the miraculous nature of the episode and the timing served its purpose. The pilgrims on returning to heir homes must have felt compelled to narrate this strange story; and thus the Shi'as throughout the Muslim world came to know, without any formal proclamation, that Imam Zayn al-'Abidin was their divinely-appointed Leader and Guide.

Uniting the Shia Community

This is an even more fascinating aspect of his Imamat. How was he to unite all the Shi'as in an, ever-lasting bond? What was the factor which could join them permanently? Philosophical exhortations? But they have effect on only small group of intellectuals; man-in-the-street is not influenced by them. Moreover, it cannot influence the "feelings"; and "unity" is a feeling of oneness. Some joyous aspects of religion? Joy and happiness is a "feeling", no doubt. But it does not necessarily "unite" the people. Many is the time when a man celebrates a joyous function and his brother refuses to join him, because of some minor misunderstandings. But let there be a tragedy in that house, and the same brother would rush therein to share that sorrow.

This tendency of human nature brings us to the third alternative Sorrow. Sorrow and grief succeeds in binding the mourners together, while intellectual arguments and joyous functions fail to achieve that object. Have not you seen how at the time of a national tragedy all political differences are genuinely forgotten and how the whole nation unites together to share the sorrow and shoulder the resulting responsibilities? Imam Zayn al-'Abidin under divine command selected this method to unite the community. And again it was adopted apparently just as a personal way of life, without its being aimed against anyone.

Majlisi (in Bihar al-Anwar, Vol. XI) has written a chapter, "His mourning and Weeping on the Martyrdom of his Father, May Grace of Allah be on Both", in which he, inter alia, writes: "And it is said that he (i.e. Imam Zayn al-'Abidin) continued to weep till his eyes were endangered. And whenever he took water to drink, he wept till the tears filled the pot. Someone talked to him about it and he replied: "Why should not I cry, when my father was denied the water which was free to the beasts and animals? "And never was food brought to him but that he wept, so much so that a servant told him: "May I be your ransom, O Son of the Messenger of Allah! I am afraid that you would die (of this weeping)". The Imam said: 'I only complain of my distraction and anguish to Allah and I do not know. Never do I remember the massacre of the children of Fatimah but that tears strangle me.'"

Naturally, this example set by their Imam was followed by the Shias every where; and they joined hands to establish mourning of Imam Husayn whenever possible. This created a feeling of oneness and unity in all persons attending those mourning-sessions.

And how could Yazid or Yazidites tell Imam Zayn al-'Abidin not to remember his father? This institution of mourning became the focal-point of all religious activities of the Shia community and the life-line of their faith. In later periods, the enemies of the faith realised the vital role which the "mourning" plays in religious education and character-building of the Shias,

and they tried to stop it by the force of their "Fatwa". Now they have changed their tactics. Now they ask: Why should one mourn for an event which occurred more than 1300 years ago? They ask it while they are fully aware that these mourning sessions (Majalis) are the best-organised, well-attended religious schools, where the participants willingly learn the basic tenets of faith, are exhorted to emulate the way of life of Ahl i-Bayt; and thus their Islamic outlook on the life and the world is fortified.

This seat of learning was given to the Shi'a community by Imam Zayn al-'Abidin so unobtrusively that even the community did not realise its importance and significance in the beginning.

Teaching True Islam

The previous two tasks were stepping-stones to reach this most important of his responsibilities. We have seen how the Imam announced his Imamat by means of a "family feud", and how he gave his followers a platform of unity in the form of his mourning for his father. In neither instance he addressed any outsider; still the message got through. Likewise, in meeting this third and most important of his tasks, he did not address any human being. He selected the form of Du'a (invocation) for this purpose. He recorded his Du'as in a book form and asked his two sons to make copies of the book. This recording itself is an, indication that these invocations were not just a prayer, but also a means of guidance for the Muslims. How could anyone tell him not to ask his wants from Allah? How could anyone come between Allah and His servant, when raising his hands he called his Lord in a heart-rending voice to come to his aid and to help him out of his difficulties. But those recorded duas are a treasure of Islamic knowledge. One finds in them almost all theological and ethical questions answered eloquently and eruditely. Reading them, the heart is filled with true belief and sincere love of Allah; and the light of virtue and nobleness illuminates the character.

It is not possible to give here even a short review of this sacred book, generally known as "As-Sahifatus-Sajjadiyah" and "As-Sahifatul-Kamilah"; and also called "Psalm of 'Ale Muhammad" and "Injil of Ahlul Bait."

When this book was shown to Egyptian scholars, they were thunderstruck and awed by its beauty. They were amazed and stunned by the purity of thought and perfection of character to which this book irresistibly leads its reader.

The renowned scholar, late Al-Tantawi wrote:

"I have studied this book with utmost care. I have gone through the Du'as (invocations) and Munajats (supplications) with a searching eye. I was stunned by the lofty meanings and deep

sense contained therein. I was deeply impressed by the value and magnificence of these invocations. I wonder how the Muslims all along been ignorant of such valuable treasure. They have been in deep slumber all these centuries. They could not even feel that Allah had supplied them with such a precious store of knowledge.

"The invocations in this book have two distinct approaches: the one seeks for the knowledge and guidance to keep away from sins and evil things, while the other persuades and exhorts one to enable one's 'self' by performance of virtuous deeds. We may say that these Invocations, full of knowledge and guidance, are a wonderful treasure of secrets, and contain hints regarding self-reproachment, admission of shortcomings, with tears and self-purification, warding off vicissitudes and difficulties, safe-guarding oneself from the tyrannies of the enemy, recovery from various diseases and so on. All such Du'as are found mostly in the first part of the book, while the later part consists of the loftiness and grandeur of Allah, His creation and other wonders of His power and might.

"Is it not wonderful? Does not it show that these holy personages are unveiling many secrets of learning and unravellirig many mysteries of knowledge for Muslims, who happen to be completely ignorant of it. It is a fact that the affairs of human beings are divided into two parts: The one is to keep away from evil, the other to acquire good traits together with the knowledge of Divine existence, which is essential for self-purification and spiritual perfection."

Then he goes on expounding these points with help of many invocations. In another article, he compares an invocation of Imam Zayn al-'Abidin with the prayer of the Prophet Nuh (Noah). Just to give an example of the high religious and ethical standard taught by our Holy Imam, I am quoting here extracts from a Du'a, known as Makerim-ul-Akhlaq (Noble Character). This Du'a is enough to lead the reciter on the right path, making him a perfect Muslim and a virtuous believer.

O Lord, Thou art my shelter if I grow sad, and Thou art my resource if I am in need and unto Thee I cry for help, when deeply afflicted, and with Thee is recompense for what is lost, and reformation for what is corrupted, and alteration for what Thou disapprovest:

Therefore, favour me with security before calamity, and bounty before begging (for it) and right direction before error and spare me from bearing me peace on the day of resurrection and favour me with hand some guidance.

O Lord, bless Muhammad and his Al (family) and ward off (evil) from me with Thy grace, and nourish me with Thy blessing, and reform me with Thy graciousness and cure me with Thy goodness and hide me in the shelter of Thy mercy and clothe me with Thy approbation, and help me, when matters grow difficult about me, (to choose) the most righteous of them, and

when actions become dubious, (to select) the purest of them, and when the creeds conflict, (to adopt) the most praiseworthy of them.

O Lord, bless Muhammad and his Al (family) and crown me with sufficiency and adorn me with the grace of Thy love and grant me true guidance and do not try me with prosperity and confer on me the beauty of comfort and do not make my life a succession of trials, and do not reject my prayer with repulsion; for, I do not recognise any as Thy rival, and I do not call upon any as Thy equal.

O Lord, bless Muhammad and his Al (family) and restrain me from extravagance and preserve my subsistence from waste and increase my possessions by giving blessing therein and let me walk along the path of benevolence; in whatever I spend my (wealth).

In this way Imam Zayn al-'Abidin spent his life providing guidance not only for the Muslims of his time, but also for the generations to come. When he left this world, he had more than accomplished all that he was entrusted with by Allah.