**The Saga of Karbala**

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A religious scholar had once remarked, “Karbala is like a colossal mountain. Every angle presents a different view holding the human conscience in ever increasing awe.” Karbala is a phenomenon, monumental, multidimensional and mysterious. The enormity of the tragedy in which almost the entire family of the holy Prophet (PBUH) was ruthlessly decimated still evokes intense grief and compassion that the time centuries could not diminish. The yearning lingers, unsatiated like the unquenched thirst of the valiant martyrs. According to Iqbal, there are two parts to the story. One was written by Hussain at Karbala and the other by Zainab at Damascus. One was the prophetic courage of conviction of a saint solely intent on his glorious connect with the Sublime and the other was the dauntless and unique courage of an Arab lady refusing to buckle under the enormous physical, emotional, religious and social pressures.

The Islamic doctrine, “there is no God but God,” did not only challenge the three hundred odd deities stacked in Kaaba, but it also intended to transform the Jahiliya Arab entire outlook on life based on superfluous pretensions. The fragmentation of the tribal system was transformed into the unity of one Ummah. The old age pride and arrogance of Muruwwa (manliness) had to give way to humility and piety, essentials of the concept of Taqwa or love of God. ‘Achieving fame or legacy’ had to be eliminated from the system in view of the accountability on the day of judgement. “Reverence of and compliance with ancient traditions was challenged by Islam which instead assigned primacy to submit to God and following revelations.”

The foreword of the story of Karbala was written by the first righteous Caliph, Abu Bakr. Before he breathed his last, he nominated Omar as his successor, in his perception, the most popular choice. More importantly, he did not nominate his son to succeed him. Omar faithfully followed his predecessor. He also did not designate his son to succeed him. When Othman took over, according to Madelung, Abu Sufyan had remarked that the caliphate had landed in the courtyard of the Umayyads, it should never be allowed to leave. Still, while Othman lived, he did not nominate his son to succeed him or anyone from the Umayyads he was alleged to have unduly favoured.

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Ali as the caliph, according to a respected Ahl e Hadith scholar, Maulvi Ishaq, kept pleading with the people to support him otherwise they would be condemned to the eternal slavery of the dynastic despots. Ali also did not propose his son be the next caliph. His son Imam Hassan was elected by the people. That is why all the famous scholars call Imam Hassan the fifth and last of the Rashidun Caliphs.

Imam Hassan admirably wrote his part of the story. He abdicated in favour of Muawiya to avoid further shedding of the Muslim blood. His pact with the ruler of Syria was truly the first ever charter of democracy recorded in the history of the Saracens. The Muslim world was not familiar with the word democracy, but its spirit was unambiguously defined by the farsightedness of a saint. The predominant clause of the pact emphasized that after Muawiya his son would not be named a caliph. The people would be allowed to choose their ruler. He could not have more emphatically rejected monarchy and dynastic rule and equally upheld the election and freedom of the people to choose their ruler.

As the fantasy dream of the Caliphate ended with the unceremonious termination of the Ottoman Empire, and the Muslim scholars and the mainstream intellectuals began their search for a model of Islamic government, all of them had to pause at the tragedy of Karbala. They all came to unanimously condemn the infliction of the monarchy on the Muslims. Most vociferous critics of Monarchy and consequently, the Umayyads happened to be the Wahhabi scholars including Moudodi and Syed Qutab. While Moudodi carefully chose his words in his criticism of Uthman, the third caliph, Syed Qutab was too blunt to be quoted here.

Imam Hussain had quietly endured the vitriolic campaign to undermine his family, honouring the part of his older brother’s commitment to peace. But, when in flagrant violation of the agreement, Yazid was nominated as the caliph (King), he decided to intervene. Allegiance to Yazid would have perhaps saved Imam’s life. But Imam Hussain was determined. He, as the Imam of his time or spiritual heir to the Prophet (PBUH) could not put his stamp of approval on an oppressive system that was being introduced, the system of dynastic rule and absolute monarchy. That in his view would destroy the very basic human values Islam stood for. The stakes were too high for Imam Hussain to give in.

For Imam Hussain, the two concepts symbolized the two ends of the political spectrum, the difference between imposed and free will, absolute monarchy and popular democracy, utter slavery and complete freedom. Imam Abu Hanifa had refused to be the chief judge of the Abbasid, calling them the usurpers. He was by no stretch of imagination pleading the cause of the Fatimide. But he was at the same time, also totally rejecting monarchy.

History upheld the vision of the Imam. The kings changed and reversed the traditions of the Prophet (PBUH), completely devastated the concept of the prohibited and the lawful, right and wrong and injected innovations to justify their lust and greed for power. The theory of predestination lent Divine sanction to a king’s rule as ‘destined’ and ‘preordained’. The Ulema spousing predeterminism while basking in the rulers’ beneficence preached blind obedience to the sovereigns. Opposition to the king thus came to be regarded as a sin against God. The determined men at Karbala lost a battle. But with their blood, they had written for humanity the true meanings of freedom, liberty, justice and human dignity. This is another view of Karbala beckoning the true believers to enjoin good and forbid wrong, stand by the truth and reject falsehood. This message is as eternal as the compassion the tragedy evokes.

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