INTERNAL STRUGGLE FOR POWER - THE SUNNIS VERSUS SHI'AS
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The fight between Shi'as and Sunnis has assumed dangerous proportions in Islamic world in general and in Iraq, in particular. And this despite the rhetoric of ummah wahidah (one community of Muslims). More this rhetoric is used, more cleavages occur between Muslims. Of course this rhetoric is being used to hide reality through the cover of ideality. Ideal is never realised, even not realisable and hence we need soul comforting rhetoric. More ugly the reality, more attractive the ideal.

Fact is that except during the period of Prophet (PBUH), Muslims never stood united throughout the history of Islam and Muslims. To justify these differences a hadith (saying of the Prophet) was made current that "Muslims will be divided in 72 sects after me and only one sect among them would be naji (i.e. would achieve salvation)" and each sect of Islam claimed to be naji. Every sect denounced the other as having astrayed from the right path.

Repeated attempts have been made to mitigate these differences in order to stand united against the onslaught of external forces. It meets with temporary success and this unity falls apart again when faced with powerful vested interests. The division was not merely between Shi'ahs and Sunnis but each in term were divided in numerous sects. In the first century of Islam itself number of these sects was running into more than hundred and scholars like Baghdadi wrote books like Farq bayn al-Firaq (Difference between sects).

Let alone Sunnis Shi'ahs themselves were divided into numerous sects like Zaydiyah, Ithna Ashriya, Isma'iliya, Qaramita, Batinia, Seveners etc. Zaydiyas themselves were divided into three sub-sects: Jarudiya, Sulaimaniya and Salihiya. The Imami Shi'ahs themselves were divided among Baqariya, Ja'fariya, Nawusiya (who believed that Imam Ja'far is still alive and will reappear after some time), Aftahiya and Isma'iliya.

It makes an interesting reading to go through the differences among these various sects. Besides these there are numerous sects both among Sunnis and Shi'ahs. However, two major sects today are Sunnis (a blanket term for numerous Sunni sects) and the Shi'ahs (refers mainly to Ithna Ashriya sect) and the power struggle is taking place between these two sects.

The American invasion on Iraq in 2003 has suddenly changed the balance of power not only in Iraq but also have had serious impact on balance of power in the Islamic world. The Sunnis though in minority had ruled over Iraq all these years and had held all key posts in administration. However, democratic elections tilted balance in favour of Shiahs and internecine fight between Shiahs and Sunnis began and we see horrible killing every day - Shi'ahs killing Sunnis and Sunni Shi'ahs.

Now accusation of rape has also begun. According to Marc Santora's story filed with Baghdad deadline, "The most wicked acts are spoken of openly and without reserve in Iraq. Torture, stabbings and bodies ripped to pieces in bombings are all part of the daily conversation. Rape is different. Rape is not mentioned by the victims, and rarely by the authorities. And when it is discussed publicly, as in several high profile cases involving American soldiers and Iraqi women, it is usually left to the relatives of the victim to give the explicit details."

Marc continues, "So when a 20 year old Sunni woman from Baghdad appeared on the satellite television station Al-Jazeerah on Monday night with a horrific account of kidnapping and sexual assault at the hands of three officers in the Shia-dominated Iraqi National Police, people across the country were stunned, some disbelieving, others horrified, but all riveted. Almost immediately, Shia leaders lined up to condemn the woman, calling her charges propaganda aimed at undermining the new security campaign. The Sunni politicians offered the woman their support." (Times of India 22nd Feb. 2007, Mumbai edition).
Such killings or rape have nothing to do with religion or religious beliefs. This is nothing but struggle for power. In this struggle for power by Sunni and Shia'h leaders they condemn each other and declare each other as 'heretics'. Shamed by the fact that on one hand, they blame the West for onslaught against Islam and such fratricidal wars, on the other, they attempt reconciliation and hold conferences to bridge the breach.

A conference was held in the Palace of King Abdullah sometime ago and a declaration was issued that Shi'a'h are also Muslims and unity of Ummah was very much needed in the Islamic world. However, soon after this declaration an influential Saudi cleric issued a fatwa declaring Shiahs kafirs and even went to the extent of saying that Christians and Jews are much better than Shiahs.

A recent conference of Muslim 'Ulama and intellectuals in Amman, Jordan from 4-6 July 2005 on 'True Islam and its Role in Modern Society' also issued similar declaration. According to this declaration 'Whosoever is an adherent of one of the four Sunni Schools of jurisprudence (Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i and Hanbali), the Ja'fari (Shi'I) School of Jurisprudence, the Zaydi School of Jurisprudence, the Ibadi School of Jurisprudence, or the Thahiri (ZahirI?) School of Jurisprudence is a Muslim. Declaring that person an apostate is impossible. Verily his (or her) blood, honour, and property are Sacrosanct. Moreover, in accordance with what appeared in the fatwa of the Honourable and Respectable Shaykh alAzhar, it is not possible to declare whosoever subscribes to the Ash'ari creed or whoever practices true Sufism an apostate. Likewise, it is not possible to declare whosoever subscribes to true Saafi thought an apostate.' (see Muslim India February 2007, p-32)

These are of course commendable efforts to forge unity among all sects of Islam which pull, theologically speaking in different directions and give rise to powerful establishments and ultimately control over these establishments becomes the preoccupation and power struggle centres around these establishments.

To begin with the differences may be genuine, differences in perspective, differences in theological interpretation but later on when a sect comes into existence on the basis of these theological differences or differences of interpretation, it soon becomes an establishment and struggle for its control begins. Ali Shari'ati, an Iranian intellectual who inspired thousands of Iranian youth to take part in Islamic revolution of Iran and provided inspiring leadership to it, came out with his own theory of Shia'h- Sunni conflict and coined very creative terms which represent these conflicts.

He said the real conflict is not between Shi'a'h and Sunnis but between what he terms as 'tasunnan-i-Umavi and tashayyu'a-I- Safavid. Umayyads represent the political establishment of Umayyads who were Sunni and Safavids represent the ruling Shi'a'h dynasty of medieval Iran. Thus according to Ali Shari'ati it is clashes between two political establishments rather than two sects of Islam.

We would like to throw light in this paper on this revolutionary interpretation of Ali Shari'ati as even today these terms represent the reality of power struggle between political establishments. What is happening in Iraq is really fight between tasannun-i-Umavi and tashayyu'I-I-Safavi i.e. it is a power struggle between the Sunni politicians and Shi'ah politicians.

As against tasannun-i-Umavi we need tasunnan-I-Muhammad and in place of tashayyu'I-I-Safavid we need tashayyu'I-i-Alavi. Ali shari'ati has put his views on this in his book in Persian Tashayyu'1-Alavi wa Tashayyu'I Safavi. In other words when religion becomes part of political establishment it looses its revolutionary message and its core values. It only becomes an instrument of power.

Tashayyu' means partisanship, support and tashayyu'-'i-Alavi would thus mean following the cause Ali stood for, not establishing a powerful political or even religious establishment in his name and then fighting or shedding blood to control it. Similarly tasannun-i-Muhammad would imply following the causes Muhammad (PBUH) stood for, and not establishing political
power in his name and then fighting to control it. Then it will represent tasannun-i-Umavi as establishing political power and then fighting to control it in the name of partisanship of Ali as Safavis did. There is always going to be conflict between such tasannun and tashayyu'.

Among all sects of Islam we see huge establishments have come into existence and there is always conflict between various sects, less on account of theologies, beliefs and dogmas but more on account of politics of control of these establishments. Then fatwas declaring each other kafirs fly at each other and some selective Qur'anic verses or ahadith are conveniently quoted to establish the 'truth' of ones sect.

Ali Shari'ati maintains that Islam came into existence by proclaiming 'no' by Muhammad (PBU) to what existed in the form of powerful establishment controlled by tribal chiefs of Quraysh. He said no to all that and affirmed oneness of God and oneness of all people created by Him. Islam first proclaims 'la' (no) and then affirms (illa) what is One God and One people and prophethood of Muhammad who stood for values of Truth, justice, compassion and sympathy with weaker sections of society - the poor, the needy, the orphans and widows.

Tashyyu', according to Ali Shari'ati, is saying no to oppression and exploitation, domination and istikbar (arrogance, powerfullness). Ali, who was heir to Muhammad and was manifestation of Islam and justice, and he (Ali) distinguished himself in history of Islam as one who stood for justice and in the council set up for selection of khalifa headed by Abdur Rehman, said no to distinction of birth (nobility) and maslihat (i.e. strategy over principle). This has been the distinguishing feature of Shi'I Islam - love of the family of Prophet (PBUH) and following in the footsteps of Ali and it has been a party of those following Qur'an and Sunnah, but not the sunnah of families of Umayyad, Abbasid and Ghaznavids and Saljoquis and Changizi wa Taymuri wa Holagu by the family of Muhammad was its distinguishing feature - before the Safavi period.

Shari'ati says that tashayyu' began by saying no to all that history which adopted traditions of jahiliyyah (period of darkness before Islam) and Qaier wa Kisra (the Roman and Sassanid emperors) in the name of Qur'an and Sunnah. Shi'ah are not those who follow those who obtained khilafah in the name of being deputies of Messenger and supporters of Islam and cheated people in their glorious names. But Shi'ah are those who stand for justice, who were also oppressed by the rulers and all those who seek justice and fight oppression can join them.

According to Shari'ati, the Al-e-Muhammad, all of them stood for justice of the oppressed and never compromised with the oppressors and rulers, violating all principles of Messenger of Allah - they are real shi'ahs. Thus those who stand by, and become supporters of Messenger of Allah and his family, would always be ready to sacrifice all they have and their lives.

Shari'ati calls, on the other hand, tashayyu' Safavi as tashayyu'-i-Siyah i.e. black shi'ism. Tashayyu'-i-Siyah is mere symbolic, not substantive. It only uses black as a colour of mourning and is not ready to sacrifice. Safavi Shi'ism is black Shi'ism as while supporting ruling establishment which is oppressive and unjust, it adopts black as a colour of mourning without courting death.

And Shari'ati calls tashayyu'-i-Alavi as tashayyu'-i-surkh i.e. red shi'ism as red is the colour of martyrdom, of sacrificing and of courting death. Thus real Shi'ah are those who are ever ready to sacrifice in the way of Allah, in the way of justice and for fighting oppression. Black Shi'ism, on the other hand only adopts some rituals mourning the death of Husain, the grand son of the Prophet (PBUH).

Similarly, one must distinguish between tasannun-i-Mohamma-diand tasannun-i-Umavi. Those who follow tasannun-i-Mohammadi always stand for equality of all human beings and justice and never hesitate to sacrifice their lives for the principles of Islam. Their jihad is jihad for justice and uprightness for ma'ruf (what is good) and jihad against what is munkar (evil), what is oppression and exploitation. Those who follow tasannun-i-Mohammadi and tashayyu'-i-Alawi, it would be seen, can never clash. Their paths are same and they have same objectives to fulfil.
It is only those who follow tasannun-i-Umavi and tashayyu'-i-Safavi clash among themselves as they are supporting establishments of respective sects or ruling empires. They are not clashing on the basis of principles but interests. But those who are following tasannun-I-Umavi and tashayyu'-i-Safavi are bound to clash and can hardly accommodate their conflicting interests.

What is happening in places like Iraq is not really clash between Sunnis and Shi'ahs but clash between ruling class interests - and in fact it is not clash between tashayyu' and tasannun but between Shi'i establishment and Sunni establishment. That way the rhetoric of one ummah can be greatly relevant if it is oneness of principles and oneness of values - principles of Islam and values of Islam.

Genuine Sunnis are as much against what can be termed as Yazidiyyat (an ideology of empire-building on the basis of injustice and oppression) as genuine Shi'ahs are. Both can unite to fight Yazidiyyat. It is Yazidiyyat which brought about paradigm shift in history of Islam. This paradigm shift - from khilafat to mulukiyyayt (from deputising the Prophet to building dynastic empire) changed the very basis of Islamic society. It was this paradigm shift which not only established monarchy in Islam - something one does not find either in Qur'an or Sunnah - but also made history of Islam bloody and violent.

It was this paradigm shift which brought about gross misuse of concepts like jihad. It was this paradigm shift which made sword central to Islam rather than uswa-e-husnah (model character of the Messenger of Allah), it was this paradigm shift which made Islam a religion of sword rather than religion of peace. It is thus duty of all genuine Muslims to go back to tasannun-I-Mohammadi and tashayyu'-i-Alawi.

Shari'ati also calls the tashayyu'-Safavi as nizamha-i-irtija'i i.e. a reactionary system. It adopts black colour as colour of mourning in order to ritualise shi'ism and create an illusion among the Shi'i Muslims that they are followers of Imam Husain. In fact they are not. They are simply followers of a reactionary political system, a system based on injustices and exploitation.

What we need is tashayyu'-i- surkh i.e. red shi'ism and red is symbol of martyrdom and martyrdom is based on spirit of sacrifice. Genuine martyrdom is not to kill but to get killed for upholding certain principles and values enshrined in Islam. Jihad and martyrdom go together precisely in this sense that one makes maximum possible efforts to uphold uswa-i-husnah and if necessary to court death for that purpose - to go to gallows, to go to prison for the sake of upholding values of justice, freedom and equality.

To kill is oppression, taking away life of a human being and which Qur'an equates with the life of entire humanity. But to get killed is martyrdom - gifting humanity values of justice equality and freedom. To kill is yazidiyyat and to get killed is husainiyyat (Husain sacrificed his life and lives of his loved ones for the sake of values of Islam). Those who kill are mustakbirun (powerful and arrogant) and those who get killed are mustad'ifun (i.e. the oppressed and weak).

Tasannun-i-Mohammadi was tashayyu'-i-Alavi are not only ever alive but keep pace with life and changes which keep on occur in life. Thus ijtihad (creative application of principles and values) becomes a living and dynamic application of everlasting teachings and values of Qur'an. But for tasannun-i-Umavi and tashayyu'-i-Safavi ijtihad looses its importance and it remains only in name and certain rituals acquire lead over values and principles of equality, justice, compassion and wisdom.

Tashayyu'-i-Safavi, according to Shari'ati, is to accept status quo. For the 'Ulama fiqh (jurisprudence) becomes the core of Islam and which jurisprudence? Jurisprudence developed during a period of tribalism of Arabs and feudalism of the period, jurisprudence of the period of agricultural production. Changes ever since, the changes that occurred since then, are ignored. Or do not matter to these jurists.

Living principles and values of Islam do not matter. What matters is what strengthened the
ruling establishment. Tashayyu'-i-Safavi believes in non-interference in politics. Similarly tasannun-i-Umavi wants politics to be left to the rulers and for others it is their duty to obey the rulers and for which Qur'anic verse 4:59 is repeatedly quoted. But Qur'an does not say follow blindly and uncritically those rulers who are unjust and oppressors. Ulil Amr (those in authority) referred to in Qur'an are those who are just and followers of all the values enshrined in the Qur'an.

Throughout medieval ages, and even today, unjust and oppressive rulers legitimise their unjust rule by referring to the above verse (4:59) and both tasannun-i-Umavi and tashayyu'-i-Safavi want their followers to remain obedient to the regime. But for a real followers of Sunnat-i-Rasul and tashayyu'-i-Alavi active participation in politics is highly necessary to keep it on the right path. Its continuous criticism is vital for its healthy value-oriented functioning.

Ruling and reactionary establishments have constantly promoted politics of mutual confrontation that has resulted in violence and bloodshed. There is great need today to challenge these ruling establishments which readily compromise with imperialism and grossly exploitative American rule. In fact they come to power with their help or prop up their tottering regimes with their support.

It is therefore, highly necessary to bring Shi'ahs and Sunnis together on the basis of tasannun-i-Mohammadi and tashayyu'-i-Alavi and end this bloodshed between them. What is happening in Iraq, let us remember, has nothing to do with Shi'I and Sunni religions but with politics of power and playing in the hands of imperialist powers. The common Shi'ahs and Sunnis should come together and end such endless confrontation of interests.

Neither Shi'ahs nor Sunnis should dominate that region but people of that region should be empowered to solve their problems which are any way common. It is only the ruling classes which think Shi'ahs should dominate or the Sunnis, not the people.

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