

Humanistic Aspects in Nahjul Balagha

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Nahjul Balagha is a magnificent collection of the sermons, precepts, prayers, epistles, and aphorisms of Ali ibn Abu Talib. Ali ibn Abu Talib's words and writings were rich with literary beauty, philosophical thought and intellectual awareness. Prophet of Islam says: "I am the city of knowledge and Ali is its gate". Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib was a cousin, son-in-law and companion of the Islamic prophet Muhammad. He ruled as the fourth rightly guided caliph from 656 until his assassination in 661. He delivered many famous speeches. He wrote large number letters during his reign. He made numerous sayings involving philosophical wisdom. His extempore sermons without any preparation became famous.

Ali ibn Abu Talib's discourses and writings were collected by Syed Sharif Radi. Sharif Radi was the most famous poet and philosopher among contemporary literary men. He gave great importance to collecting Ali's sermons and writings.

Nahjul Balagha

The Nahjul Balagha is a collection of sermons, precepts, prayers, epistles and aphorisms of Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib compiled by al-Sayyid al-Sharif al-Radi about one thousand years ago. Even after fourteen centuries, Nahjul Balagha has retained the same appeal, freshness and charm that it gave to the people of earlier time for today's audience. Those who heard Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib were deeply influenced by his words. His lectures moved hearts and brought tears to eyes.

Spiritual glimpses from the Qur'an and Hadith are often evident in Nahjul Balagha. One of the most important features of Nahjul Balagha is its literary elegance and eloquence. The second feature is its multi-dimensional nature. Various issues are mentioned in Nahjul Balagha. Metaphysics, theology, fiqh, tafsir, hadith, ethics, social philosophy, history, politics, administration, civics, science, rhetoric, poetry, literature are important in this. The various topics covered in Nahjul-Balagha can be described as follows:

Government and social justice

Foundations of Faith

Branches of Faith
The Purpose of Creation
The object of Religion
Mystic path and worship
Social philosophy
Social and political conditions of that period
Characteristics of a Leadership
Conditions required an Ideal State
Political System of Islam
The description of the Mysteries of Universe
The Universal realities of human life
Critiques of the contemporary society
Religion principles for human behaviour
Development of an Ideal Human Being
Heroism and bravery
Morality and self-discipline
Welfare of mankind

Humanism

Humanism or Humanism is a philosophy based on humans. Humanity becomes meaningful when it is applied in all areas where human beings interact, such as religion, social, cultural, economic and political. Being able to see man as man is the basis of humanity. Humanity is formed when it is possible to consider all others and to respect the rights and freedoms of others like oneself.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 enshrined the dignity of man in its preamble. The recognition of the inherent dignity and equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.

Almost all religions, schools of thought, and intellectual movements claim to stand for the goodness and perfection of humanity. The force of their claim depends on the co-relationship articulated between God, man, and the universe.

Human Rights and Humanism in Nahjul Balaga

The theme of Humanism is repeatedly emphasized and elaborated in the Nahjul Balaghah. Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib said in a letter to governor: *“Remember, Malik, that amongst your subjects there are two kinds of people: your brothers in faith, and your equals in humanity. People of either category suffer from the same weaknesses and disabilities that humans are inclined to...”* (Nahjul Balagha - Letter 53)

Nahjul Balagha emphasizes in Nahjul Balagha that God created man as a rational and free being. God guided him to the right path with God's blessing. But man has become self-bound by wrong desires and misguided ambitions. He constantly reminded us of the nature of man and his ability to exercise his freedom in the right way. *“He who does not know his own worth is ruined”* (Nahjul Balagha, Saying 149); or says that *“Learned is he who knows his worth. It is enough for a man to remain ignorant if he knows not his worth”*. (Nahjul Balagha-Sermon 103). *“Allah has given inborn disposition to human minds to shape themselves towards good and towards evil”*(Nahjul Balagha - Sermon 75).

Nahjul Balagha describes about the differences in human characteristics: *Malik ibn Dihyah said, “We were with Amir al-mu'minin when discussion arose about the differences of men (in features and conduct) and then Amir al-mu'minin said”: They differ among themselves because of the sources of their clay (from which they have been created). This is because they are either from saltish soil or sweet soil or from rugged earth or soft earth. They, resemble each other on the basis of the affinity of their soil and differ according to its difference. Therefore, sometimes a person of handsome features is weak in intelligence, a tall statured person is of low courage, a virtuous person is ugly in appearance, a short statured person is far-sighted, a good-natured person has an evil trait, a person of perplexed heart has bewildering mind and a sharp-tongued person has a wakeful heart.* (Nahjul Balagha: Sermon 233)

Ali ibn Abi talib's conception of humanism can be seen throughout Nahjul Balagha. Human rights issues constantly came up in Ali's words. He dealt with human rights issues by relating them to his religious beliefs. He opposed all forms of discrimination. He spoke for human brotherhood. He worked to create a society with equity and justice. His style of administration and policies were favourable to it. If anyone encroaches on the weaker section of the society, he stands with the weaker section.

Ali ibn Abi Talib never gave his officials the opportunity to violate the rights of the people. Because he respected man in every way. He told the tax collectors: *“do not approach*

them in a way as to make your approach hateful to them. Do not tax them more than what is actually due from them to Allah. When you reach a group of people (tribe or village) to assess a tax on them, then stay only at their watering-place (a well or water-hole the most convenient place for stay in desert regions) and do not stay in their houses. Then go to them maintaining your dignity and prestige and when you are in their midst, wish them peace and blessings of Allah and show due respect to them. Tell them that the Caliph of Allah has sent you to collect from them their dues to Allah". (Nahjul Balagha, Letter 25).

He said in a letter to governors: *"The following are his instructions to Zakat collectors. I order you to fear Allah in all those affairs and on all those occasions where there is none to witness your actions and deeds or to guide your activities. I order you not to pretend fear of Allah and assume false piety and to go against His Orders secretly. One whose deeds coincide with his words and who is as honest in his secret activities as in open deeds, is the person who has faithfully discharged the duty laid down upon him by the Lord, his honesty handed over the things entrusted to him and has sincerely obeyed Allah only to achieve His Favours and Blessings. I order you not to meet Muslims as a tyrant or an oppressor, not to ill-treat them and not to calumniate them because they are your brothers in religion and they will help you to collect taxes and to find means and ways to help the poor. Certainly there is a share for you in Zakat but remember that the poor, the destitute and the have-nots also have claim over it. Verily, I have paid you your share and now you should pay them their shares otherwise there will be many who will complain and protest against you on the Day of Judgement (they will be your enemies on that day)". (Nahjul Balagha Letter 26)*

He wrote to one of his officers saying: *"Do not say to the people that you are their master or a man of authority and that they have to obey you. This will spoil your heart and weaken your faith in religion and furthermore it creates anarchy in the state."*

In another instruction to the governor he says: *"(Fear) Allah and keep Allah in view in respect of the lowest class, consisting of those who have few means: the poor, the destitute, the penniless and the disabled; because in this class are both the self-contained needy and those who beg. Take care for the sake of Allah of His obligations towards them for which He has made you responsible. Fix for them a share from the public funds and a share from the crops of lands taken over as booty for Islam in every area, because in it the remote ones have the same shares as the near ones. All these people are those whose rights have been placed in your charge. Therefore, a luxurious life should not keep you away from them You cannot be excused*

for ignoring small matters because you were deciding big problems. Consequently, do not be unmindful of them, nor turn your face from them out of vanity. Take care of the affairs of those of them who do not approach you among those who are looked at with contempt and whom people regard as low. Appoint for them some trusted people who are God-fearing and humble. They should inform you of these people's conditions. Then deal with them with a sense of responsibility to Allah on the day you will meet Him, because of all the subjects these people are the most deserving of equitable treatment, while for others also you should fulfil their rights so as to render account to Allah.” (Nahjul Balagha. Letter 53)

Ali ibn Abi Talib always enlightened the people to protect their rights and intervene in the affairs of the state. He asked the officials to explain in the mosque what the constitution says about the duties of the people and the duties of the governor. This was to give awareness to the people about their rights. As a result, the governor was careful to perform his duties properly and refrain from unfair practices. The people informed Imam Ali about the irregularities on the part of the governor. Ali suggests making decisions according to each person's determination and free will. But it should not harm the freedom of another person. So, freedom is also a responsibility. Every individual should respect the interests of the public. While enjoying his freedom, the interests of the society should also be considered. He thought that no one should tolerate injustice; So, he said: "Be against the oppressor and support the oppressed". Autocrats always rule according to their interests rather than the law.

Ali ibn Abi Talib said: *“Among all the people, the most detested before Allah are two persons. One is he who is devoted to his self. So he is deviated from the true path and loves speaking about (foul) innovations and inviting toward the wrong path. He is, therefore, a nuisance for those who are enamoured of him, is himself misled from the guidance of those enamoured of him, is himself misled from the guidance of those preceding him, misleads those who follow him in his life or after his death, carries the weight of others’ sins and is entangled in his own misdeeds. The other man is he who has picked up ignorance. He moves among the ignorant, is senseless in the thick of mischief and is blind to the advantages of peace. Those resembling like men have named him scholar but he is not so. He goes out early morning to collect things whose deficiency is better than plenty, till when he has quenched his thirst from polluted water and acquired meaningless things. He sits among the people as a judge responsible for solving whatever is confusing to the others. If an ambiguous problem is presented before him he manages a shabby argument about it of his own accord and passes judgment on its basis. In this way, he is entangled in the confusion of doubts as in the spider’s*

web, not knowing whether he was right or wrong. If he is right, he fears lest he errs, while if he is wrong, he hopes he is right. He is ignorant, wandering astray in ignorance and riding on carriages aimlessly moving in the darkness. He does not try to find the reality of knowledge. He scatters the traditions as the wind scatters the dry leaves. (Nahjul balagha. Sermon 17)

Ali says about good behaviour with people and ignoring their faults. *“I lived as a good neighbour to you and tried my best to look after you, and I freed you from the snare of humbleness and the fetters of oppression through my gratefulness for the little good (from your side) and closed my eyes to your many misdeeds which my eyes had observed and my body had witnessed”.* (Nahjul balagha- Sermon 158)

Muawiya's army had blocked the waters of Siffeen to force Ali's army to surrender. Muawiya was in control of Siffeen at that time. Later, the army of Ali ibn Abi Talib captured Siffeen. They thought of blocking the water like Muawiya and his army did. Imam Ali (RA) told them: “Do not meet evil with evil . It is far from humanity”. His enemies (the Khawarij) could come and go freely in Kufa, his administrative centre, where they often caused Ali a lot of trouble. Despite this, they were given their due share from the national treasury.

When someone inquired about Imam Ali's torn clothes, Caliph Ali replied to him. Why are you inquiring about my clothes? People wear this type of clothes now. Why don't you think about people's lives and their clothes? I will increase my standard of living only if people's standard of living increases. He tried to protect the rights of the people, whether big or small.

Ali ibn Abi Talib says: *Do you command me that I should seek support by oppressing those over whom I have been placed? By Allah, I won't do so as long as the world goes on, and as long as one star leads another in the sky. Even If it were my property, I would have distributed it equally among them, then why not when the property is that of Allah. Beware; certainly that giving of wealth without any right for it is wastefulness and lavishness. It raises its doer in this world, but lowers him in the next world. It honours him before people, but disgraces him with Allah. If a man gives his property to those who have no right for it or do not deserve it, Allah deprives him of their gratefulness, and their love too would be for others. Then if he falls on bad days and needs their help, they would prove the worst comrades and ignoble friends.* ((Nahjul Balagha - Sermon 125)

In other place he adds, “Associate with people in such a manner that they weep for you when you die and long for you if you are alive”. He spent his ideal life to serve the humanity. “Generosity is to help a deserving person without his request, and if you help him after his request, then it is either out of self-respect or to avoid rebuke”.

Ali constantly exhorts his soldiers to show compassion to each other, even in times of war. “*Whoever among you feels spiritedness of heart during the action and finds any of his comrades feeling disheartened should ward off (the enemies) from him just as he would do from himself, because of the superiority he enjoys over the other, for if Allah had willed He would have made the former also like him.*” (Nahjul Balagha - Sermon 122)

Conclusion

In his speeches and letters, Ali clarified the human values that each individual should follow in his own life and the highest values that each individual should maintain while dealing with the society. Ali envisioned visions based on religious values. He instructed to respect everyone and respect the rights and liberties of others like himself. Nahjul Balagha exclaims that human beings should have good qualities like love, brotherhood, compassion and empathy. Nahjul Balagha describes humanism as a divine gift. From the speeches and letters of Nahjul Balagha, it is clear that humanism is the sum total of qualities and values instilled in human beings by birth and is universal and eternal.

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