

Chapter 20: Economic Blockade

The easiest and the most convenient method of knocking down the minorities of a society is a negative campaign which is based on unity and concord.

A positive campaign necessitates various sources, because it becomes necessary that the fighting group should use modern weapons and should achieve their end by making physical and financial sacrifices and by surmounting hundreds of obstacles.

It is evident that this type of campaign is associated with innumerable pains and sufferings. The wise rulers resort to such a campaign after making necessary arrangements and full preparations and do not implement such a programme unless no alternative except war is left for them.

A negative campaign does not, however, require all this. It needs only one factor and that is the unity and concord of the majority. It means that a group of persons, whose object is to knock down the minority, unite sincerely and make a pact and swear that they would cut off relations with the opposing minority, disallow transactions with them, discontinue matrimonial alliances with them, would not permit them to partake in collective affairs and would not co-operate with them in personal matters. In such circumstances the earth, with all its extensiveness, becomes like a small and narrow prison for the minority and its pressure threatens them with annihilation every moment.

At times the opposing minority submits at this juncture and obeys the decisions of the majority. However, such an opposing minority must consist of people whose opposition is not prompted by a spiritual aim. For example, they might have been campaigning to acquire wealth, important posts and official positions.

When such persons sense danger and are faced with the hardships of blockade they, on account of their having no spiritual stimulant and their motives being purely material, prefer greater possible advantages to the transient pleasures and submit to the wishes of the majority.

However, the people whose opposition is based on faith are not cowed down by such hardships. The pressure of blockade strengthens their faith and they face the blows and attacks of the enemy with the

shield of patience and fortitude.

Pages of human history bear testimony to the fact that the strongest factor for the perseverance and steadfastness of the minorities against the aims of the majorities is their strength of faith, and sometimes they sacrifice the last drop of their blood to achieve their object. And there are hundreds of evidences to prove the correctness of this statement.

Declaration By Quraysh

The chiefs of Quraysh were very much disturbed due to the amazing advancement of Islam and were anxious to find a way out of this difficult situation. Embracing Islam by persons like Hamzah and inclination of the clear-sighted men of Quraysh towards it, as well as the freedom enjoyed by the Muslims in Ethiopia had also added to the perplexity and astonishment of the rulers of the time.

They were also very sad on account of the failure of their plans, and, therefore, thought of a new one. They decided upon 'economic blockade' of the Muslims so as to withhold the penetration and expansion of Islam and restrain the founder and the followers of the Divine religion from activity.

Hence the chiefs of the administration hung within the Ka'bah an agreement written by Mansur bin Akramah and endorsed by the grand council of Quraysh and they swore that the community of Quraysh would act till their death in the following manner:

1. Every sort of trade and business with the supporters of Muhammad shall be banned.
2. Association with them is strictly prohibited.
3. Nobody is entitled to establish matrimonial alliances with the Muslims.
4. Opponents of Muhammad should be supported in all circumstances.

The text of the covenant with the above contents was endorsed by all the prominent persons of Quraysh and was put into operation in letter and spirit. Abu Talib, the distinguished supporter of the Prophet, invited his kinsmen (descendants of Hashim and Abdul Muttalib) and made them responsible for the support of the Prophet. He also decided that all the families should quit Makkah and take up their abode in a valley, known as the 'valley of Abu Talib', situated between the mountains of Makkah, should set up small houses and tents there, and be away from the environments of the idolaters. To forestall sudden attacks by Quraysh he also planned to construct watch towers there and to post there observers, who should report upon every new development.¹

This blockade lasted for three years and the pressure and hardship suffered by them assumed unprecedented dimensions. The heart-rending cries of the children of Bani Hashim reached the ears of the stonehearted people of Makkah, but had no effect on them. Young persons and men ate only one

date per head and at times they divided a date into two parts.

Throughout these three years Bani Hashim came out of the valley only during the prohibited months (of fighting) when peace prevailed throughout the Arabian Peninsula. During these periods they made small purchases and again went back to the valley. Their great leader, the Prophet too could propagate his religion only during these months.

However, the right hand men and agents of Quryash practiced economic pressure even during these months, because they usually came to the shops and stores and as and when Muslims wished to purchase something they paid higher price for it and purchased it themselves, making it beyond the means of the Muslims to acquire it.

Abu Lahab was especially active in this respect. He loudly addressed the people in the bazaar: "O people! Raise the prices and deprive the followers of Muhammad of their purchasing power".

Hence, in order to ensure stabilization of the prices at a high level he himself purchased things at higher cost. For this reason the level of prices always remained high.

The Pitiable Condition Of Bani Hashim

The pressure of hunger had reached such a stage that Sa'd Waqqas says: "One night I was coming out of the valley in such a condition that I was about to exhaust all my faculties. Suddenly I saw a dried hide of a camel. I picked it up, washed, baked, and ground it. Thereafter I kneaded it with some water and used it for three days".

The spies of Quraysh kept vigil on all the paths leading to the valley so that no one might carry any provisions to Bani Hashim. However, in spite of all this control, Hakim bin Hizam, nephew of Khadijah, Abul 'As bin Rabi' and Hisham bin Umar, loaded, every now and then, wheat and dates on camels at midnight and brought them near the valley. Then they wound the bridles of the camels round their necks and released them.

At times rendering this assistance also created problems for them. One day Abu Jahl saw that Hakim had loaded a camel with provisions and was carrying it to the valley. He was very much annoyed with him and said: "I think I should take you before Quraysh and humiliate you".

Their conflict was prolonged. Abul Bakhtari, who was one of the enemies of Islam, disapproved of the action of Abu Jahl and said: "He is carrying food for his aunt (Khadijah). You have no right to stop him from doing so". He did not content himself with this sentence only but also assaulted Abu Jahl.

The severity of the action of Quraysh in implementing their covenant did not diminish the patience and fortitude of the Muslims. Eventually the piteous clamouring of the infants and the children, and the tragic condition of the Muslims aroused the sentiments of some persons. They very much regretted having

endorsed the covenant and began to consider ways and means for the solution of the problem.

One day Hisham bin Umar went to see Zuhayr bin Abi Umayyah who was the grandson (daughter's son) of Abdul Muttalib and said to him: "Is it proper that you should eat food and wear the best clothes whereas your kinsmen should remain hungry and naked? By Allah! If you had taken such a decision about the kinsmen of Abu Jahl and asked him to implement it he would never have agreed to do so".

Zuhayr said: "I alone can't reverse the decision of Quraysh, but if someone else joins me I will tear up the covenant." Hisham said: "I am with you". He said: "Find out a third person also". Hisham stood up and went out to find Mut'am bin Adi. He met him and said to him: "I don't think you would like that two groups (viz. Bani Hashim and Bani Muttalib), of the descendants of Abd Munaf, to which family you too have the honour to belong, should die". He said: "What can I do? One person can't do anything in the matter".

Hisham replied: "Two other persons are also with you and they are myself and Zuhayr". Mut'am said: "It is necessary that some other persons should also cooperate with us". Hisham, then, mentioned the matter to Abul Bakhtari and Zam'a also, and asked them to co-operate. Consequently all of them agreed to meet in the mosque on the following day, early in the morning.

The meeting of Quraysh took place and Zuhayr and his confidants participated in it. Zuhayr said, "It is only proper that today Quraysh should steer clear of this shameful stain. It is necessary that this cruel covenant should be torn up today, because the pitiable condition of the children of Hashim has made everyone uncomfortable".

Abu Jahl interfered and said: "This proposal is not practicable at all and the covenant of Quraysh must be respected". From the other side Zam'a rose to support Zuhayr and said: "It must be torn up and we were not in favour of it from the very outset". From another corner some others, who were keen that the covenant should come to an end, supported Zuhayr. Abu Jahl realized that the matter was serious and prior consultations had taken place, and those people had already taken a decision in his absence.

He, therefore, did not press his point and sat quite. Mut'am availed of the opportunity and went to the place where the covenant was lying so as to tear it down. He, however, observed that the entire sheet had been eaten up by termite and only the words: "In the name of the Lord" (with which Quraysh commenced their writings) had survived."²

After observing the developments, Abu Talib related the matter to his nephew and consequently those who had taken refuge in the valley returned to their houses.

1. Seerah-i Ibn Hisham, vol. I, page 350 and Tarikh-i Tabari, vol. II, page 78.

2. Seerah-i Ibn Hisham, vol. I, page 375 and Tarikh-i Tabari, vol. II, page 79.

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