

Historical Background of Kufa

In Shi'ite history, Kufa has had a central position. From the time of the caliphate of Hazrat 'Ali (as) to the revolutionary period of Imam Husayn (as) and further till the steadfast and firm stand taken by Hazrat Mukhtar, many important incidents took place there.

One of the most important of these was the peace treaty of Imam Hasan (as). It would be appropriate to give a brief description of the historical background of Kufa before the peace treaty of Imam Hasan (as), so that the conditions through which the residents of Kufa were passing or had faced earlier, would become clear.

Kufa was founded in 17 A.H. when the Muslim army had achieved success in the Qadsiya wars and the 2nd Caliph had asked S'ad b. Abi Waqas, the commander of the Muslim army to stay on in Iraq. This way he could advance towards Persia after strengthening the Muslim army. However, the Muslims soldiers were on the lookout for a site which may, apart from being a suitable place for the army, offer a good climate and have suitable living conditions.

After a two year search, a location on the western side of the river Euphrates was selected as the army garrison, where Muslim soldiers could come from other cities to stay, and after getting due training, plan for an attack on the then great Persian kingdom.

In the beginning Kufa had a population of 24,000, of which twelve thousand were from southern Arabia (Yemen) while eight thousand were from northern Arabia (Nazaar). Apart from these, there were four thousand Persian prisoners of war or slaves who had been arrested during Qadsiya battles and had converted to Islam.

Initially, Kufa was inhabited by those persons who had come to fight in the Qadsiya wars, but later, Muslims migrated to the city from other cities. After the decline of the great Iranian kingdom, a large number of Iranians had also settled there. These were in addition to those whom the Muslims had brought as their slaves or maids.

By the time of the caliphate of Hazrat 'Ali (as), a new generation from the maids had grown up. Apart

from the Muslims, a sizable number of Christians from Najran had also settled there. It is said that at the time of the caliphate of Hazrat 'Ali (as) there were forty thousand Muslim soldiers, and Kufa and its population has been estimated at about one hundred thousand inhabitants.

Whereas other cities normally had a tribal set up, Kufa, having been founded on conquest and strategic considerations, consisted of persons from different tribes and areas. Due to these conditions, S'ad b. Abi Waqas faced many problems in settling the persons of different colour and race under various tribal groups or to assimilate them in one social and cultural set up. After some time he divided them into seven groups.

It has been reported that during the period of the 2nd Caliph, some effort was made to spread Islamic culture in Kufa and to train the Muslim army on an Islamic pattern. For this purpose, Ammar Yasir was appointed the governor of Kufa.

However, due to the fact that the caliph used to treat the Muslim soldiers better through the distribution of Bait ul Maal, and the number of slaves and maids had considerably increased due to extensive victories. The values had changed and wealth, authority and such other considerations had taken the place of Islamic and moral values.

As a result, the wealthy persons had acquired a much higher status in Kufa. Later, during the rule of the 3rd Caliph, with the appointment of Walid b. 'Aqaba as governor, the tribal aristocracy was revived and the Islamic values were even ridiculed. During this period, the Umayyads had attained domination in the politics of Kufa but the religious and the faithful persons of Kufa could not bear the ridicule of religious values and stood against the rulers.

Thus Kufa had become divided into different groups. On one side was the religious group who were devoted to the teachings of the Holy Qur'an and the Sunnah, while on the other side was the ruling clique who wanted to strengthen its rule and the capitalistic system. During the caliphate of Hazrat 'Ali (as), the religious group had attained an upper hand in Kufa as many Muhajirin, Ansars and the Companions of the Holy Prophet (saws) had immigrated there due to its becoming the capital.

Apart from it, a large number of Shi'as had appeared in Kufa during the caliphate of Hazrat 'Ali (as). However, the influence of non-believers and tribal chiefs, who had been against the religious group from the beginning and had been intriguing against religion ever since, was not an insignificant one.

That is why the residents of Kufa had, in the beginning, decided to remain neutral in the camel ('Jamal') war and the religious group had not succeeded in their efforts until the arrival of Imam Hasan (as), who succeeded, after long discussion, in recruiting twelve thousand soldiers for the army, though forty thousand soldiers were present there at the time.

During the caliphate of Imam Hasan (as), another group, known as 'Khawarij' had gained considerable influence in Kufa. These persons had become the enemies of Hazrat 'Ali (as) after the Siffin war and had

particular, specific ideas. It is said that their speeches used to swiftly influence the thinking of the people who were accepting their ideas.

The common people were confused, being divided into these three groups. Due to the varying views, ideas and opinions, they were unable to decide who was right and who was wrong! For further understanding the conditions prevailing at the time of the caliphate of Imam Hasan (as), three points should be well understood:

After crushing the internal rebellion of the camel ('Jamal') war, Hazrat 'Ali (as) decided in 36 A.H. to declare Kufa as the capital. There is no doubt that this was a major step in the history of Kufa. The historical records do not reflect any clear reason for this decision. No historian has given any indication that the Imam (as) wished, before the 'Jamal' war, to announce the shifting of the capital to Kufa.

However, some researchers have written that when the Imam (as) heard the news of the death and destruction by the rebellious group in Basra, he was busy at the time in preparing for war against the insurgents of Syria. But, realizing the nature of the rebellion, he had to postpone the earlier war plans and to march towards Basra.

After restoring peace in Basra, his first priority was to bring the Syrian insurgents back on the right path as directed by Almighty Allah and to fight them, as ordered by the Holy Prophet (saws). From a military point of view, Kufa was an ideal location where a large Muslim army was present and soldiers from other areas could also be gathered there.

Moreover, he could also contain the internal and external conspiracies which had been hatched against the Muslims and reached a city like Kufa. One link of these conspiracies was the 'Jamal' war itself which had been planned by the Syrian rebellious group, and was difficult to control from Madina.

The historical perspective described here makes it clear that a majority of the influentials in Kufa belonged to the group of self-seekers and those after status. They had old associations with the mutineers of Syria. Although they were with the leader of the faithful in the Siffin war, yet behind the scenes they had been intriguing against the Imam (as). These aversive intrigues at first led to the Imam (as)'s outward set back in the Siffin war, the disobedience of his orders, and finally his martyrdom.

From the above facts it can be concluded that in addition to differences due to race, colour, ideas and beliefs, Kufa was also a hot bed of malice, mistrust and intrigue. The main aim of the intrigues was to weaken the truly Islamic Alavi government. So, these extended till the time of Imam Hasan (as) and beyond. Imam Hasan (as) also faced great danger due to these intrigues, as they had reached a crisis stage during the time of his caliphate.

It is a historical fact that the residents of Kufa used to say so many things emotionally, yet at the moment of trial they would run away from the battle field and lacked patience and steadfastness. This fact emerges more clearly at the time when Imam Husayn (as) went to Kufa at the invitation of its nationals

and wished them to participate in his revolution. Then the people advised him otherwise, explaining the nature of the residents of Kufa as follows:

"No doubt their hearts are with you, but their swords are with your enemy", which meant that those people were very emotional while expressing love, regard and respect for someone but would abandon him at the time of trial and tribulation. At that time they only worried about their personal interests.

There is no doubt that in the Siffin war these people were responsible for the leader of the faithful suffering a set back from a victorious position they did not follow the command of Imam Hasan (as) for war and left him alone at Madain, due to which the carpet was pulled under his feet and he was severely injured in a dagger attack.

Subsequently, when Hujr b. Adi, the Companion of the Holy Prophet (saws), started a movement against the representative of Muawiya, the residents of Kufa withdrew their support for him at a difficult hour. Hazrat Muslim b. Aqeel faced the same fate and Imam Husayn (as) had to face untold problems and tribulations, even though it were the residents of Kufa themselves who had invited Imam Husayn (as) to come to Iraq.

We have to regretfully state the fact that when the historians discuss the peace treaty of Imam Hasan (as), they ignore these hard realities, as if the residents of Kufa had, against their very nature, become fully prepared for war and that Imam Hasan (as) had ordered them to accept peace to avoid bloodshed!

There is no doubt that a large number of Shi'a and the devotees of the household of the Holy Prophet (saws) ('Ahlul Bayt') were present in Kufa, who had faith in Imam Hasan (as) and accepted him as their caliph and Imam, but only till such time as their own interests were not endangered and Imam Hasan (as) had not instructed them to face any major responsibility. There were very few Shi'a who were determined to remain faithful to the Imam (as) till death.

The time of the accession to caliphate of Imam Hasan (as) was such a sensitive and difficult one that the people of Iraq had by then become extremely disheartened due to prolonged internal wars. The wars had resulted in huge destruction and their social and political conditions had become miserable.

The people of Iraq were facing a very cunning and formidable enemy. Under the leadership of Hazrat 'Ali (as), they had tried, in the Siffin war, to finish off the rival who was based in Syria, but the war did not result in success due to some moneyed persons and self-seeking officers. A number of wars continued later till the people got tired of the same, so much so that they started disobeying the orders of the leader of faithful himself.

The unending wars, beginning with the camel ('Jamal') war, and continuing with the Siffin war, the Nahrwan war against the 'Khawarij', the skirmishes with the detachments of the Syrian army sent by Muawiya, and the use of the army to quell revolts in certain areas all had resulted in a situation where the people of Kufa had started to betray the leader of the faithful.

They had openly started to disobey Hazrat 'Ali (as) due to which the Imam (as) had condemned them. In the sermons of the Imam (as), quoted in '*Nahjul Balaghah*', his views are clearly reflected. He states that while the people had become tired and sad, they had also disappointed him. Among the consequences of these wars, two points need serious attention:

(a) A large number of the Companions of the Holy Prophet (saws) and sincere and religious personalities had lost their lives in these wars and the group devoted to religious values which could present the Islamic ideals, had become weak. For that reason, the common people had lost the sense of deeper values of life and the hereafter. They were after only the worldly benefits.

(b) In the bitter Siffin war a large number of the soldiers from Iraq and Kufa had lost their lives and those who had survived were remembering their loved ones in grief. Later, when their near ones fought the Nahrwan war as the 'Khawarij', remaining rebellious despite the advice of the leader of the faithful, and were eliminated, it had a very bad effect on the residents of Kufa who became revengeful.

The selfish Iraqi leaders, taking advantage of the prevailing conditions, disobeyed the orders of Hazrat 'Ali (as) after the Nahrwan war, to go to fight against the rebellious group of Syria, which the Imam (as) had planned. These leaders, pretending excuses, forced the Imam (as) to postpone the war.

The situation in Kufa at the time was such that the soldiers had a mixed feeling of grief and revenge. It was not an ordinary situation, as they had lost many of their relatives. Thus they could not be expected to fight a formidable enemy very soon. The rest of the people, who included the wealthy group, preferred peace and understanding.

In those distressed conditions they had also lost their Imam and caliph and were facing the aggressive rulers of Syria who had been their rivals. However, they were very hopeful that Imam Hasan Al-Mujtaba (as) would find some political solution to the existing hatred between Syria and Iraq, so that peace and tranquility would prevail in Kufa.

In his sermons, Imam Hasan (as) has himself described the pathetic conditions prevailing in Kufa at the time, which we would discuss in subsequent chapters. Apart from these, another consideration for Imam Hasan (as) was that he had to take into confidence those persons from Kufa and other cities who had gathered for a final battle with Muawiya and who had taken a vow with his illustrious father to fight till death. They were pressing the Imam (as) to march against Muawiya immediately.

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