CHAPTER - I

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The emergence of Ithna 'Ashari Shi'ism is historically known to be a phenomenon of 9th-10th century. Before this the Shi'a were scattered in various groups and sects. However one thing that was common among all these sects was their belief in the imamate of 'Ali, i.e. the

---


2 For the views of different Shi'i sects regarding imamate see Husayn Ali Mahfuz, op. cit., Muhammad Abd'il-Karim Sharistani, Kitab al-Milal wa'l-Nahal (Beirut, 1965); Ibn Tahir Abu Mansur Abd'il-Qahir Muslim Schism and Sects, trans. by Kate Chambers (Columbia, 1920) and the works of W.M. Watt cited in n.1 above.
recognition of 'Ali as the legitimate caliph after the death of the Prophet. The Shi'is generally consider imamate as one of the fundamental doctrines of Islam. 'Just as it was necessary for Allah to send some one as Prophet, so it is also necessary for him to appoint an imam. It is necessary that at all times there should be an imam'.

According to the Shi'i concept of imamate the Prophet had designated 'Ali as his successor in his lifetime not only by an unambiguous declaration but also by indicating him in person. He had declared this as early as in the third year of the commencement of the revelation. The following is one of the most widely related tradition which according to the Shi'i scholars speak of clear designation of 'Ali. According to this, the Prophet invited members of his clan and the believers on meal. What happened in the meeting is told by Ali himself.


6 Allama Mohammad Hossein Tabataba'i, op. cit., p. 39, claims that the term Shi'a was prevalent during the life-time of the Prophet and to whom this term was first applied: "... Salman, Abu Dharr, Miqdad and Ammar."
... the Apostle of God addressed them saying O' family of 'Abd'l-Muttalib, by God, I do not know of anyone among the Arabs who has brought his people anything better than what I have brought you. I have brought you the best of this world and the next. God Almighty has ordered me to call you to Him. And which of you will assist me in this cause and become my brother, my trustee and my successor among you. And they all held back from this while I (Ali), although I was the youngest of them in age, the most diseased in eyesight, the most carpulent in body and thinnest in the legs, said: O' Prophet of God, will be your helper in this matter. 'And he put his arm around my neck and said: 'This is my brother, my trustee and my successor among you, so listen to him and obey.'

But the most evident and clear indication in this regard

is what is called the tradition of Ghadîre-e Khumm. It is reported that on his way back to Madina after performing the last pilgrimage, the Prophet stopped with his companions at a place called Ghadir Khumm. He performed prayer with his companions and then he took 'Ali's hand into his own hand and declared: "of whom-so-ever I am master (mawlâ), 'Ali is the master (mawlâ). May God befriend those who befriend him, and be an enemy to those who are enemies for him, may He assist those who assist him and forsake those who forsake him. May the truth be with him wherever he goes so, I have declared".

7 Moojan Momen, An Introduction to Shi'î Islam (Delhi, 1985), p. 12.

8 This is one of the most widely reported traditions regarding the appointment of Ali as the Prophet's successor. The length of the tradition varies in different works but the above quoted proclamation remains more or less identical. Roots of Religion, p. 148 ff.
The first theological exposition of the doctrine of imamate is said to have been given by 'Ali b. Mithān who lived during the Abbasid period. The other early theologians were Abu Ja'far al-Awwal, Hishām b. Salim al-Jawāliq and Hishām b. Hakam. Hishām b. Hakam is said to have held that the Prophet had clearly indicated the person who was to succeed, the people however did not recognize him. According to him, 'The imam was the legatee (wasi) of the prophet. He was infallible (ma'sūm) in all his acts and words, but unlike the Prophets did not receive divine message (wahy). The imamate was to be transmitted among the descendants of 'Ali and Fatima. Each imam appointed his successor by nass. Whoever obeyed the imam was a true believer, whoever opposed or rejected him, an infidel (kāfir). 'Ali ibn Mithān held that 'Ali was deserving of the imamate because he was the best man (afdal al-nās) after the Prophet and that the community in associating with Abu Bakr and 'Umar was in error, not sinfully but by leaving or abandoning the best. They dissociated themselves from 'Uthman and held them infidels who fought against 'Ali.

9 Watt., The Formative Period of Islamic Thought, p. 158.
11 Watt, op. cit., p. 159.
13 Cf. Watt., op. cit., p. 158.
During the 'Abbasid period the Shi'a remained more or less subjected to their changing fortunes. Far from being an organic whole or a religious or theological school, they represented a political trend, passive at most of the time and suddenly active occasionally. Upto the close of the 9th century we can find two distinctly different currents in Shi'ism from political point of view: One being politically quietist crystallized into Ithna 'Ashari Shi'ism and the other politically active came to be known as Zaydis and Isma'ilis. It was the latter who made considerable efforts in the field of politics and tried to work out Shi'i political theories. In the second half of the 9th century initial successes were achieved by the Zaydi resurgents in establishing small principalities in the southern coast of Arabian Peninsula. Two Zaydi states came into the being; one on the Caspian Sea and the other in Yemen in 864/250 and 897/284 respectively. The descedants of the latter ruled that area for a very long time even to this century.


itself. At the beginning of the 10th century Qarāmītā rose to power occupying north eastern and southern parts of Arabia. Ismā'īlī branch of Shi'ism established Fatimid state in Egypt in 909/297.

Here it is interesting to note that these political successes were achieved either by the most moderate Shi'is i.e. the Zaydis or the Ghulat Shi'is (extremists); both the above dynasties belonged to the Ghulat.\textsuperscript{16} The Twelver Shi'is, on the other hand, could not achieve any political success of the same nature until the establishment of Safavid rule in A.D. 1501. However, it came to enjoy help and patronage from ruling dynasties, though they did not profess Ithnā'Ashari faith. In the period between the beginning of the age of ghaybat up to the establishment of Safavid state in Iran Ithnā'Ashari Shi'is enjoyed relatively more political freedom. They also found support of a few rulers and dynasties such as the Samanids of Khorasan (903/290) Hamadanis of Mashhad (929/317) and Buyids of Baghdad (945/334). Although the Samanids were not Shi'is they not only tolerated Shi'i activities but their emergence was a great source of relief for the Shi'is of Khorasan. Equally important was the support of the Hamadanis for them who went so far as to patronize Shi'a activities though in a limited way. But the most important support and patronization was that of the Buyids

\textsuperscript{16} Husayn Ali Mahfuz, \textit{op. cit.}, p.34 ff; Ibn Tahir Abu Mansur Abd'1-Qahir, \textit{op. cit.}
who for a long period not only supported them but provided them a free and conducive atmosphere to grow and carry-out their intellectual and scholarly activities. It is said that although they did not declare Shi'ism as their official policy, they participated in propagating Shi'ism. Shi'a had full freedom to carry out passion demonstrations in Baghdad. Baghdad was one of the main centres of Shi'a concentration at that time. Thus Buyid patronization in their home was a great source of support for Shi'ism. It is important to note that under the Buyids Ithna 'Ashari manifestation of Shi'ism began to gather prominence; and its teachings started becoming crystallized and it started occupying the main theme of Shi'ism so much so that the term Shi'a became synonymous to Ithna 'Asharis. In the following centuries other branches of Shi'ism like the Zaydis began disappearing from the scene (although their state remained intact in Yemen) on account of similar ideas to that of the Sunnis. The Ithna 'Asharis on the other

17 See Donaldson, op. cit., p. 277.

hand, assimilated within itself the moderate views and it tried to give ideological foundation of Shi'ism as opposed and different to that of Sunnism but not similar to the extremists (Ghulat). Thus it could be able to unite all the Shi'is having moderate views and according to Watt by the first half of the 10th century the Ithna 'Ashari doctrines had acquired definite shape. Thus by this time the Ithna 'Ashari doctrines came to be widely accepted by moderate Shi'is so that most of the small sects ceased to exist. The works which led to the unification of non-revolutionary Shi'ism were mostly accomplished before A.D. 925.\textsuperscript{19}

The disappearance of the Twelfth Imam in A.D. 874 marked a completely new era in the history of Shi'ism. So far in all legal, religious and, for that matter, political matters imam was approached whose words were considered as final and binding. He was the person who knew all the exoteric as well as esoteric meanings of the shari'a. He was a religious as well as a political authority who possessed the sole rights of interpreting the shari'a (God's will) and implement it. Now there remained no such authority, a number of theoretical formulations started taking place. Among them most important being the theory that there are only twelve awsiya' (legatees) of the Prophet and the theory of occultation of the last Imam.

\textsuperscript{19} Watt, The Formative Period of Islamic Thought, p. 275.
According to Ithna 'Ashari belief the son of the Eleventh imam, Muhammad, was still young when the Imam died. He concealed himself after a couple of years after the death of his father in 874 AD and was not seen to his followers, and thus began the period of ghaybat (occultation). The Ithna 'Asharis also believe that after him there was no imam and the chapter of imamat was thought closed. This Imam, it is believed by them, will reappear on a particular time and "fill the earth with justice". He is, therefore, known as Mahdi, Qa'im, Gha'ib, Muntazar and by various other names.

The Imam, however, kept himself in touch with his followers through his representatives. They are called wukalā' (sing. wakīl) or sufārā' (sing. safīr) or such names.

20 There is a great deal of disagreement as to when the last Imam concealed himself. Different dates are mentioned which vary from 873 to 878. See S.A.A. Rizvi, A Socio-Intellectual History of the Ithna 'Ashari Shi'is in India (Cambridge, 1986), part I p. 87, and Noojan Woman, op. cit., pp. 161-177.

21 There were four of such representatives. They are: Uthman al-'Amri, Abu Ja'far Muhammad b. Uthman, Abu'l-Qasim Husayn b. Ruḥal-Nawbakhti and Abu'l Husayn Ali b. Muhammad al-Samarri. The Chief function of these wukalā' was to implement certain tasks previously undertaken by the imams so as to save him from the political pressure of the Abbasids ... (and) to draw complete darkness over the names of the Imam and his whereabouts ... (and) to prove the existence of the Imam to his reliable adherents ... The activities of the safirs also aimed at protecting the congregation from any more schism by proving the authenticity of the imamate of Al-Askari's son. Jassim M. Hussain, The Occultation of the Twelfth Imam: A Historical Background (Cambridge, 1982), pp. 83-84.
The last of the wukalā' died in A.D. 941. The period between the concealment of the Imam and the death of the last of wukalā' is called ghayba al-sughara (Minor Occultation) while the period thereafter is known as ghayba al-Kubara (Greater Occultation).

Abu Sahal al-Nawbakhti (d. 923) and Sa'ad b. Abd-Allah al-Gummi are the earliest theologians who formulated the Ithna 'Ashari doctrines. Al-Nawbakhti was the one who established the idea of the occultation of the Twelfth Imam.\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{22} His ideas regarding the imamate are summarized as follows: (1) God has on earth a hujja (proof) from the son of Al-Hasan b. 'Ali (the eleventh imam) and he is a wāqi to his father; (2) the imamate may not fall to two brothers after al-Hasan (the second imam) and Al-Husayn (the third imam); (3) The imamate is in the progeny of al-Hasan b. 'Ali (the eleventh imam) (4) If there were only two men on earth, one would be a hujja, and if one died, the one left would be hujja ..." (5) the imamate may not be in the progeny of a man who died in the lifetime of his father, whose imamate was not established and who had no hujja. (6) The earth may not be without a hujja, we acknowledge the imamate and death of al-Hasan b. 'Ali and maintain that he has a descendant from his lions who is the imam after him and who will appear and publicly assert his imamate, (7) It is not for any believer to choose an imam by rational consideration (rā'y) or choice (ikhtiyār). God appoints him (8) there is justification for concealing the identity of imam and he will not be known until he appears. Cf., Watt, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 274-75.
These ideas were subsequently, developed further by the 'ulama' of the Buyid period since the 10th century when a number of theologians took up the task of collecting traditions and sayings of the imams in support of their ideas. The development of 'ilm al-usul, 'ilm al-fiqh and 'ilm al-hadith took place along with the evolution of the doctrine of imamate and other doctrines in Ithna 'Ashari tradition.

The main features of the theory of imamate was developed by Ibn Babwayh (d. 992). According to him 'each Prophet had a wasi whom he gave instructions by the command of Allah. And concerning them we believe that they brought the truth from Allah, that their word is the word of Allah, that their command is the command of Allah and obedience to them is obedience to Allah and that disobedience to them is disobedience to Allah. They spake not except on behalf of Allah and on being inspired by Him'. He also declared that there are only twelve awsiyā appointed by Allah. He says:

Our belief regarding them [imams] is that they are in authority ('ulu'l-amr). It is to them that Allah has ordained obedience, they are the witness for the people and they are the gates of Allah (abwāb) and the road (sabīl).

---


26 Ibid., p. 95; see also pp. 101-102.
to Him and the guides (dalīl, P. adillā) thereto, and the repositors of His knowledge and the interpreters of His revelations and the pillars of His unity (tawhīd) they are immune from sins (khāta) and errors (qalāl); they are those from whom Allah has removed all impurity and made them absolute pure; they are possessed of (the power) of miracles and of (irrefutable) arguments (dala’l)....

Regarding the Imam-e Gha’īb he says:

... he, the Imam-e Gha’īb WHO WILL FILL THE EARTH WITH JUSTICE AND EQUITY, JUST AS NOW IT IS FULL OF OPPRESSION AND WRONG. And it is he through whom Allah will make His faith manifest "in order to supersede all religion, though the polytheists may dislike (it)". He it is whom Allah will make victorious over the whole world until from every place the call to prayer will be heard, and all religion will belong-entirely to Allah,... He it is, who is the Rightly Guided (mahdi), about whom the Prophet gave information that when he appears, Jesus, son of Mary, will descend upon the earth and pray behind him, and he who prays behind him is like one who prays behind the Prophet of Allah, because he is his vicegerent (Khalīfa).

And we believe that there can be no Qā’īm other than him, ... for the Prophet and the imams have indicated him by his name ... 28

The concept of imamate and the occultation and return of the last Imam is the corner-stone of Shi’ī political theory. As

27 Ibid., pp. 97-98.

28 Ibid., pp. 98-99.
the twelfth imam is alive therefore the infallible origins of legislation and infallible guidance is deemed to be uninterrupted and everlasting'. It was believed that the divine justice will prevail only when the Imam will reappear who will fill the Earth with justice. It was also believed that only Imam is the rightful and legitimate ruler. Thus the Shi'i theory of imamate in its political dimension denies legitimacy to all temporal authorities except the Imams. Shi'ism regards each and every


political authority as de jure illegitimate.\textsuperscript{29}

Al-Mufid (d. 1022) a successor of Ibn Babwayh raised the status of imams to a place very close to that of the Prophets. He held that the Prophets and imams both possess intrinsically the same qualities. He believed that imams received revelation (wahy).\textsuperscript{30}

The idea of Prophets and imams being mediators was also developed

\textsuperscript{29} Joseph Eliash, The Ithna'ashari Shi'i Juristic Theory of Political and Legal Authority, pp. 425-26. '... Concept of the status of the Imamate in relation to prophecy is the basis of the Ithna'ashari-Shi'i legal and theological notion that unites the authority of the Shari'ah and that of the Imam; the living Imam is the living entity of the infallible divine law, its interpreter-maker and executor. Yet, until now, the Ithna 'ashari-Shi'i doctrine of the Imamate has not served juristically to enhance or justify the position of the Ithna 'ashari-Shi'i ruler despite the existence of an Ithna'ashari Shi'i sovereign state for more than four centuries in addition to the various earlier Ithna'ashari-Shi'i regimes. On the contrary, it deems, in fact, as unbelief any declaration to the effect that the ruler is the representative of the Shari'ah or the shadow of God upon earth, and it divests him of any authority but temporal power the source of which may be the ruler's own person and that of other fellow men, in either case human not divine.

\textsuperscript{30} A.K.S. Lambton, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 231.
by Al-Mufid. He also asserts the function of the Prophets and imams to be the same. The function of the imams, says he, is 'to take the place of the Prophets in executing the decrees (ahkām) of the shari'a, applying the legal penalties, protecting the law (hifz al-shari'a) and punishing man (ta'dīb al-anām). He thus emphasized both the spiritual and the executive powers of the imams.

The theory of imamate was expanded and elaborated further by the 'ulama' of Ilkhanid period. The distinctive feature of these developments is the mixture of kalām and philosophy in the discussions of imamate and related subjects. The most distinguished theologian of this period who has written a number of treatises on this subject is Ibn Mutahhar al-Hilli (d. 1324) known as Allāma. His arguments regarding the 'isma of the imams, necessity of the imamate, ghaybat of the imam and the principle virtues of the imams have shown considerable influence of kalām and philosophy. He described imamate as a 'universal authority (riyāsa) in the things of religion which distinguishes it from the dominion of judges and vicegerents'. According to him imamate is a necessity for human being for his individual

33 Lambton, op. cit., p. 234.
as well as social and political purposes. Conflict among the human beings can be settled when there is an imam who is immune from all faults and errors in his judgement and actions to arbitrate between them. Only thus could the rights of one against the other be effectively defended, the legal penalties of the divine law applied, and peace and order guaranteed to the community. Being a pupil of Nasir al-Din Tusi, Ibn Mutahhar's theory of imamate assumes more and more the shape of a political philosophy. He emphasized the need of an imam whom he calls ra'is (leader) to interpret and preserve the shari'a to prevent man from committing aggression against each other, to restrain tyrants and to help the oppressed. Without a leader chaos would ensure and the Qur'an and the Sunna would not be observed. There had inevitably to be an imam immune from error and sin appointed by God to make known the decrees (ahkām) of the shari'a. An imam was also necessary to delegate authority to qādīs, army leaders and governors. Obedience in these matters, upon which the good order of the human race depended, would only be given to someone who was infallible. Similarly an imam was necessary for enjoining the good and forbidding the evil. The imam was the protector of the shari'a, war and jihad were by his command and on his summons, and he applied the

34 Ibid.

legal penalties'. He also believed that 'the designation of the imam was an obligatory grace (lutf wâjib) which imposed itself on God in the same way as the sending of Prophets .... having closed the succession of the Prophets with Muhammad, God had therefore to appoint certain holy personages (awliyâ') destined to guide the world towards the good and to protect it from error.... There was no real distinction between the imam and the Prophet; the function which the Prophet derived from revelation, the imam obtained through his infallibility, which made him not only the guardian (hâfiz) but also the interpreter of law'.

36 Lambton, op. cit., p. 235.

37 Ibid., p. 236.