Early Life of Imam Khomeini (R.A)

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Imam Khomeini (R.A): Address to Hajj pilgrims, 7 Jul 1984 In my endeavour to gather as much information I could get on Imam Khomeini (R.A), I sought to explore where and how life began for this legendary personality. My answer laid in Khomeini a little remote town, 49 kilometers to the south west of Tehran, the capital city of Iran. Khomeini is situated in the semi-arid areas of the country.

During its heydays, the little town was a prosperous place with a hive of activities. People could be seen on carts, donkeys and camels carrying goods along the main historical trade routes between the Persian Gulf and Tehran. Khomein served as one of the resting places for foreign traders on various missions to their distant destinations.

The town’s strategic position developed to be an important meeting place where local people interacted and shared their ideas with foreign visitors. The prevailing situation must have encouraged and widened the diversity of the comprehension of both parties who shared their experiences through dialogue.
In such an environment, baby Ruhollah Mussavi, later known as Imam Khomeini (R.A), was born on 14 September 1902. Ruhollah means ‘the spirit of God’. Coincidentally, his birthday coincides with the anniversary of the auspicious birth of Fatima Zahra (S.A), the beloved daughter of the Prophet of Islam. Fatima is the most revered and highly respected lady in Islam.

Young Ruhollah was born into a family of strong religious tradition. His father, Ayatollah Seyyed Mustafa Mussavi was a prominent religious leader of the people of Khomein and the nearby villages.

Ruhollah's mother also had a religious background. She was the daughter of Ayatollah Mirza Ahmad who happened to be a respected clergy and teacher in Karbala and Najaf Theological Centre in Iraq.

Ruhollah grew up without a father since barely five months after his birth, Ruhollah’s father Ayatollah Mostafa Musavi was ambushed and brutally attacked and murdered by the agencies of Khan who were strongly supported by the government of the time.

Ruhollah was left in the care of his mother Hajar and his aunt Sahebeh Khanom.

Unfortunately, both Ruhollah's mother and aunt passed away when the boy was only fifteen years of age. Unfortunately, Ruhollah became an orphan at that tender age. Yet psychologically that is the prime stage when children need the guidance and parental support to mould their behavior and character. Young Ruhollah did not enjoy such a privilege. Nobody ever imagined that the young orphan would one day turn out to be one of the most prominent leaders Iran has ever seen.

When Ruhollah Mussavi was born, sadly Iran was experiencing a time of rampant chaos and political anarchy. This was a result of a weak government prevailing during the Qajari Dynasty. The power was divided between unruly Khan Princes who did whatever they wanted with the Iranian masses. It was a time of danger and rampant plunder.
The danger posed by this Dynasty forced Ruhollah’s father to build a well-defended homestead that acted as a fortress for his family as well as his neighbors. It was also known that most of the people of Khomein often found refuge in this home when under attack.

Ruhollah’s father was killed on his way to seek government protection for the people of that small town. He also wanted to protest against continued attacks from government-sanctioned bandits.

As a child, the orphaned Ruhollah grew up under this dangerous atmosphere of fear from raiders. The Khans were robbing people and abusing the female folk. Imam Khomeini (R.A) later recalled those dark moments of his life by saying, “We used to build bunkers wherever we were in Khomein. I, too, had a rifle but I was a child. By the age of 11 or 12, we were given rifles and were taught and learned how to use them. From the bunkers, we could fight off the attackers. Chaos had overtaken everything in place. The central government was powerless…”

(Narrative Awakening, page 69, Hamid Ansari) Under that environment, things were made even worse by foreign powers that meddled in the affairs of the state. Vast lands of the Iranian territory had been taken over by the British and Russians.

The foreign powers did as they wished. They even went to the extent of appointing and dismissing government ministers, judges and army officers. This promoted an environment of lawlessness and insecurity in Iran.

From early childhood, Ruhollah had an infinite devotion to his studies. He learned how to read and write at a very early age. His brother, Ayatollah Pasandideh assisted him to master Arabic grammar, logic and other subjects. He later studied literature at the Centre for Theological Studies in Arak.

In Qom, he became an authority on theological and canon law. In 1347, he was officially ordained a ‘mujtahid’, that is a qualified jurist. At the age of 17, he was knowledgeable in the rational and traditional sciences, and began to teach philosophy. He wrote many books exploring aspects of religion and other issues.
However, later, young Ruhollah was sent to Arak for further education to study religious science. His studies were supervised by great figures of that time such as Sheikh Haeri, one of the greatest clerics of the 15th century whose teachings included both political activism as well as religious studies. Young Ruhollah’s studies were greatly influenced by this kind of combination of these disciplines. He was a serious and hard working young student who produced the best from what he learned.

Ruhollah Mussavi later moved from Ark to Qom, a small town known for its academic excellence. The tiny town was renowned for its prestigious theological colleges. Prominent scholars were known to live in Qom. Ruhollah devoted his time and energy towards his religious studies in conjunction with the history of Iran.

Meanwhile, a few months before Ruhollah moved to Qom, news of the birth of Prince Mohammad Khan on October 15, was splashed in Iranian press and media. The future king was born in one of the Shahs modest palaces in Tehran.

Unlike Ruhollah the orphan, Mohammad Khan was born a Prince and grew up with both parents. He enjoyed parental care and guidance, which assisted in nurturing and shaping his behavior. Mohammad Khan lived in mansions in Tehran the capital city, while Ruhollah spent most of his boyhood life in the little remote towns of Khomein and Qom.

As an academic, he turned out to be a prominent scholar whose proficiency in ethics and philosophy, attracted and impressed his colleagues and students in Qom. Ruhollah was rated an intelligent and serious scholar who dedicated himself to his studies all the times. He took classes in jurisprudence and mystic studies.

Ruhollah was polite, clean and neat. He always remarked that clergymen should not look like beggars. He gradually became famous not only in his hometown but throughout Iran. In later years of his life, Ruhollah the orphan boy became an international figure who became a torchbearer for the oppressed countries that were struggling for their independence.
While Ruhollah was pursuing his studies in Qom, he emulated the lifestyle of his teacher, the famous Sheikh Abdul Karim Haeri who had a modest disposition despite his fame. Sheikh Haeri's character attracted young Ruhollah who regarded him as his role model.

Ruhollah had known several people who had been corrupted by positions of power they held. In Sheikh Haeri, he found a famous man who was polite and down to earth.

In Qom, he had proposed to his teacher and fellow students to fight against the corrupt central government, which was bent on eradicating Islam in Iran. Sheik Haeri totally opposed the idea of using violence in solving problems. Ruhollah obliged because he respected the Sheikh so much but did not erase his mind of opposing the government even if it meant the use of violence. To him, freedom of the masses from the tyrant rule of the dictatorship of the Shah was paramount. He vowed to dedicate his life to rescuing the marginalized people of Iran even if it cost him his own dear life.

Ruhollah was regarded a disciplined clergy who had successfully attained the academic and professional qualifications of a clergy. He fought his battle being fully aware that he was born in Iran a country which had maintained a continuous reign of monarchial government.

Therefore, Ruhollah’s dream for an Islamic state was not an easy road to travel neither was it any easy war to win. At any one time, did any person imagine that the young clergy would one day cut the traditional trends of his religious profession that obliged him to only teach and preach the spiritual tidings without interfering with the politics of the state?

While at the religious institution, he struggled and later convinced a big number of clerics who supported him. Together, they mobilized the masses to wage campaigns against the Pahlavi Dynasty from Reza Shah to Shah Mohammads regimes.

Initially, the clergies were expected to deal with issues pertaining only to religion and never to involve themselves with politics. But the young clergy defied the traditional restrictions as he found no reason to separate religion from politics. Most of his colleagues in the clergy had no courage to
oppose the government. These had stuck to the thinking of Sheikh Haeri whose beliefs were just in the opposite direction of Ruhollah Mussavi. As a result, two factions emerged in the ulama. In this regard, it required self-discipline and great foresight for Ruhollah to courageously stand out openly and oppose the mighty Pahlavi regime. The Shah had a strong army, backed with the strong support of the powerful western powers. It appeared as though nothing would move and disturb its foundations.

In 1949, and at the age of 27, he decided to marry. His wife says that when he first proposed love to her she refused. That night she saw Fatima, the Holly Prophet’s daughter, in a dream encouraging her to marry Ruhollah.

The following day, she told her parents that she had changed her mind. When they finally got married, Ruhollah, kindly told his wife that all he required of her was that she should observe the rules of Islam. Today, she boasts that she was the first and only wife of Ruhollah for their life-long marriage which lasted sixty years.

Ruhollah led the life of an exemplary man. He always led a modest life and was devoted to his religion and cultural tradition. He was not happy with the way the country was being run by the Pahlavi Regime. This made him to stand up and vehemently voice his concern without any fear of victimization. It was inevitable that armed with his strong religious conviction, coupled with his true sense of right and wrong, Ruhollah Musavi was fully prepared to fight the corrupt Pahlavi regime.

Meanwhile, in the political scenario, Shah Ahmad the last king of the Qajar Dynasty who had succeeded to the throne in 1906, at the age of eleven, was regarded as a weak personality who did not have a full grip in the affairs of his reign. The clergy opposed his adverse attitude towards the development of religious institutions and Islam as a whole.

In the clergy arena Ruhollah’s role model, Haeri, believed that the clergy should not be involved in politics yet the young clergy Ruhollah was just the opposite of his teacher’s thinking. Reza Pahlavi, the King of Kings had made changes in the country and went unpopular with the clergy who felt that they were the custodians of Islam. Ruhollah supported the faction of the clergy which believed that politics should not be separated from
religion. He saw it as his utmost duty to challenge the Pahlavi regime in its evil attempts to destroy Islam in Iran.

However, the situation reached a climax at Qom on 11 March 1928 when the Queen, the Shah’s wife, unveiled her head at a traditional service. People regarded the act as an insult and protested by holding demonstrations. In retaliation, Shah Reza went to Qom with some soldiers and entered into the Shrine with his shoes on. He assaulted and arrested members of the clergy. The ulama including Imam Khomeini( R. A) condemned the action.

From the Qom instance, many clergymen as well as other Muslims were convinced that the Shah was bent on destroying Islam in the country. Since then, the clergy and the faithful Muslims never forgave the Shah for that act.