

Characteristics of the Shia

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The main area of discussion of volume 65 of the compilation of traditions entitled Bihar al-Anwar is in regards to elucidating on the characteristics of the Shia (Sifatush Shia). How helpful it would truly be if we would all read this section (of Bihar al-Anwar) and truly comprehend what a massive responsibility we have been given by being referred to with the sacred title of being the Shia of the Ahlul Bait (as).

A person cannot simply profess to be a Shia nor can one simply say that he is a Shia just because his mother and father were Shia. Being a Shia is a concept so comprehensive that it encompasses many responsibilities which have been thoroughly explained by the Infallibles (as), under the banner of "Sifatush Shia" - the characteristics of the Shia.

Muyassir b. 'Abdul 'Aziz was one of the most well known companions of Imam Muhammad b. 'Ali al-Baqir (as) and has been highly praised in the books of 'Ilmul Rijal. The 5th Imam (as) has also said the following in relation to Muyassir: "O' Muyassir! Certainly death was prescribed for you on many occasions, however Allah delayed this event from coming to you since you maintain your family relations (Silatul Rahm) and because you try to alleviate the problems of your family members."

***Imam Muhammad b. 'Ali al-Baqir (as) once said to Muyassir:**

﴿ يَا مُيَسَّرُ أَلَا أَحْبَبْتُكَ بِشِيعَتِنَا؟ قُلْتُ بَلَى جُعِلْتُ فِدَاكَ. قَالَ إِنَّهُمْ حُصُونٌ حَصِينَةٌ وَ صُدُورٌ أَمِينَةٌ وَ أَخْلَامٌ وَ زِينَةٌ لَيْسُوا بِالْمُذْبِحِ الْبَدْرِ وَلَا بِالْمُجَفَّاتِ الْمُرَاعِينِ. رَهْبَانٌ بِاللَّيْلِ أَسَدٌ بِالنَّهَارِ ﴾

"O' Muyassir! Should I not describe to you who our Shia (true followers) are?" Muyassir replied, "But of course, may I be sacrificed for you (O' Imam)." The Imam continued:

"Unquestionably they (our Shia) are like a fortified stronghold; their chests (hearts) are places that preserve the trusts (given to them such as secrets and private information) and are those who have a firm, dignified intelligence; they do not spread rumors that they are told (by others) and are not strict, severe people; nor are they people who show off. During the night time, they are as monks (they stay up in the night, busy in prayer and the worship of Allah) while during the daytime, they are as lions (active, energetic, and involved in the activities of the world and their community)."

In this concise tradition, there are seven characteristics mentioned which one must possess in order to be classified as a Shia. Truly, a veiled and hidden (comprehensive) world of subject-matter and responsibilities has been given to us in this saying.

It is possible that the meaning of "a fortified stronghold" could mean that: "Our Shia are those who are not influenced by the negative propaganda of the enemies."

Right now, the state of culture of the world is in a very dangerous phase. Our youth are being faced

with this (cultural) menace - yet have we found any way to strengthen the inner will of our youth in relation to this cultural onslaught? If we are not able to destroy the causes of this sickness, then we must at least strengthen ourselves (in defence).

This point must also be kept in mind that during the time of the infallible A`immah, one of their greatest complaints was that some of their Shia used to speak openly about their (the A`immah's) secrets. The people of that time were told not to speak about the great rank and status which the A`immah possessed to just anybody. The stations of: Knowledge of the Unseen of the Imam; the Intercession of the Imam for his followers on the Day of Judgement; The Imams being the custodians of the knowledge of the Messenger of Allah (S); them being witnesses and observers of all of the actions of the Shia and also their rewards and punishments and... were all issues that the common people and the enemies of the Ahlul Bait did not have the ability to hear or accept.

There were some Shia that were very simple minded and would sit in any gathering and would speak about whatever they wanted (about the A`immah) and this act of theirs did not bring about anything except for division, enmity and hatred (for the A`immah). Therefore, the Imam has said, "Our Shia are they in whose chests (hearts), secrets and trusts are kept."

The A`immah have also said that their Shia are those who do not spread secrets of others without any reason; they do not seek to cause division between two people and even worse than this, they do not go to extremes in the religion such as those which have recently come about.

By using the pretext of having firm belief in the Wilayah (of the Ahlul Bait), there are some people who use terminology (in relation to the A`immah) that may lead to disbelief. In addition, they make use of expressions which are not befitting the A`immah and as such, the infallible leaders would never be pleased with such people and their words. Thus, we too must be careful of this new form of Ghulluw or extremism in the faith of Islam.

These people have two defects in them which lead them towards their own destruction. First off they think that if they attribute the characteristics of Allah (SwT) to the A`immah, Sayyidah Zainab (s.a) or the Shuhada' of Karbala, then this is exactly what the definition of Wilayah demands.

The major defect in these people is - keeping in mind the present day and age (that we are living in) which is a time in which various ways and methods of diffusion of news and information are available such that if something happens that makes the news headlines this morning, then within one hour, it will reach the furthest points of the world - that these people use words of exaggeration in relation to the A`immah. It is these incorrect statements which are made and then spread far and wide and strike a huge blow to the Shia populous.

Once they say the things they want to say and then the news reaches to the various cities (of the world), people then proceed to scribble graffiti on the walls of their cities proclaiming the Shia to be disbelievers! After this of course, the enemies start to kill and murder the Shia. These simple minded, unaware people unknowingly utter some words that ultimately lead to the murder of the Shia in another part of the world!

May the curse of Allah (SwT) be upon such uninformed individuals; and may the curse of Allah (SwT) be upon those ignorant, unaware, uneducated people in whose hands are these Majalis (religious gatherings)! We must not let the organization and planning of such gatherings and Majalis lie in the hands of such people. Thus, their planning must stay in the hands of the 'Ulama (scholars) of the society.

From the characteristics that have been mentioned in the tradition under discussion in relation to the Shia is that they do not get angry. Rather they are people who are full of love and possess the traits of elegance and grace; they have the soul and spirit (of action and speech) of 'Ali b. Abi Talib (as) within themselves. They have the spirit of Imam Ja'far b. Muhammad as-Sadiq (as) and the rest of the Infallible Leaders of true guidance within themselves and thus, they even show love and kindness to their enemies!

In addition, the true Shia do not show off. The Imam has said that: "Our true Shia have two different states within themselves. If one of our Shia is busy in the night in the worship of Allah (SwT) and someone sees them, then that person would think that this worshipper has entirely cut himself off from the world and is an ascetic, since he does not take part in the activities of this world. On the other hand, when anyone sees them in the daytime, they would say that he is like a lion in his behavior and is always present in the daily activities of the society, keeping active."

With this said, we can divide the Shia and the Muslims into one of the following five categories:

- 1. The Geographical Muslim or Shia:** By this we mean a Shia who was born in (for example) Iran. From the point of view of geography, Iran is a country where the Shia live and thus, when they want to count the number of Shia in the world, simply being born in Iran is used as a criteria (for being Shia). Therefore, this humble servant of Allah (SwT) is counted as being a Shia just as all others born in Iran. So then if the person has true belief or not; if he know the names of the A`immah or not; if he can list the A`immah in order that they came or not - it makes no difference. This is what is referred to as the Geographical Shia.
- 2. Shia by Inheritance:** By this we mean a person whose father and mother were Shia and thus, they were born into a family whose parents are Shia.
- 3. The Verbal Shia:** These are people who verbally declare that, "We are the Shia of 'Ali b. Abi Talib (as)," however there is no sign of this belief in their actions.
- 4. The Marginal Shia:** These are Shia that practice the beliefs however are 'border-line' and have not reached the true depths of being a true follower. From the teachings of the Ahlul Bait, the only thing that you can see is their taking part in the 'Azadari (mourning for the death of Imam Husain b. 'Ali (as)) and seeking help and taking the A`immah as an intermediary (Tawassul) and other things such as this - however, how else can we tell that these are Shia? When the days of 'Ashura come about, they all gather together to beat their chests and attend the Majalis to mourn the death (of Imam Husain b. 'Ali (as)). They also rush to go to Masjid Jamkaran (A Masjid outside of Qum, Iran which was built by the order of the 12th living Imam) to pray and perform the special prayers there.

We do not wish to say that these things have little importance - rather, they are very, very important, however this is all that they understand from being a Shia and nothing else. As for the characteristic of being "monks during the night (staying up in prayer and worship during the night)" and being "a lion during the daytime (active and involved in the society)" and possessing the beauty of intelligence and preserving the trusts which are given to them (secrets), there are absolutely none of these signs in this group of "Shia"!

- 5. The True Shia:** These are people who have complete knowledge of the Divine (Allah (SwT)) and the books of the Ahlul Bait (their sayings and words) and their way of life is just as has

been mentioned as far as the characteristics have been mentioned in this tradition!

The 65th volume of Bihar al-Anwar consists of two important parts, The Greatness of the Shia (فضائل الشيعة) and the Characteristics of the Shia (صفات الشيعة). The chapter on the Greatness of the Shia, illustrates to us the superior status that the Shia possess, while the chapter on the Characteristics of the Shia discuss the characteristics and uniqueness which the Shia should have. For us (those who call themselves Shia), this means that in addition to the noble and lofty rank that is mentioned in the traditions which the Shia possess, they also have a great responsibility by being called Shia.

قَالَ الصَّادِقُ : إِمْتَحِنُوا شِيعَتَنَا عِنْدَ مَوَاقِيتِ الصَّلَاةِ كَيْفَ مُحَافِظَتِهِمْ عَلَيْهَا وَ إِلَى أَسْرَارِنَا كَيْفَ حَفَظْتَهُمْ لَهَا وَ عِنْدَ عَدُونِنَا وَ إِلَى أَمْوَالِهِمْ كَيْفَ مَوَاسَاتِهِمْ لِأَخْوَانِهِمْ فِيهَا .

Imam Ja'far b. Muhammad as-Sadiq (as) has said, “Test our Shia during the times of the (five daily) Salat - how do they protect them (the Salat) and (also test our Shia) in relation to our (the Ahlul Bait's) secrets - how do they protect them in relation to our enemies; and (also test our Shia) in relation to their money and wealth - how do they spend it among their fellow brothers.”

When the Shia have some work or job to perform and the time for Salat has also arrived, do they give precedence to their work or to the Salat? There are some people who think that the Salat is only to be done when there is nothing else to do, but one tradition tells us that, “Salat in its appointed, initial time (earns) the pleasure of Allah, and Salat in its last time (earns) the mercy of Allah.”

There are even some people from among the Ahlus Sunnah who claim that they are the only true Muslims since they give a great importance to the performance of Salat on time and that we (the Shia) do not!

In relation to the importance of Salat, Imam 'Ali b. Abi Talib (as), in his famous letter of recommendations to Malik al-Ashtar has stated:

إِجْعَلْ أَفْضَلَ أَوْقَاتِكَ لِلصَّلَاةِ. كَيْفَ مُحَافِظَتَهُمْ عَلَيْهَا .

“Make the best of the times that you reserve (during the day) for the Salat and see how all of you (you and your subjects) protect and safeguard this time.”

The word used in this tradition in regards to the Salat is **محافظة**, and this word intends to tell us that many things will cause the Salat to be destroyed. However, the Salat must be protected and of course in these regards, the 'Ulama and scholars must be a practical example for the people.

I will not forget the time when the late Ayatullah Khumayni was teaching classes in the Hawzah 'Ilmiyyah in Qum. We were (at that time) students of the Hawzah, and one day the late Ayatullah Sa'idi had invited us to go to his house and Ayatullah Khumayni was also present at that gathering. We were busying talking and having religious discussions when the time of the Salat came and the sound of the Adhan was heard (in the house). Without even a pause, Ayatullah Khumayni got up, and without any delay or hesitation, started to perform the Salat.

The same rule applies today that wherever we are and whoever we are with, we must give importance to the Salat - especially Salatul Fajr. There are some people that perform the Salat only when they are in the company of others - this is not the Salat (which can be expected from) a student of religion!

Continuing on in the tradition, the meaning of protection of the secrets is to safeguard the status and rank of the Ahlul Bait. By this we mean that the rank which the Ahlul Bait possess must not be spoken about while in the presence of their enemies who do not believe in them (things such as the Wilayatul Takwini (their power and jurisdiction (by the permission of Allah (SwT)) over the universe, Miracles, Knowledge of the Unseen, etc... which they possess) since these things are nothing other than the secrets of these Noble Personalities. During our present time, there are some people, who in addition to mentioning their secrets (to the enemies of the Ahlul Bait), also resort to exaggeration in relation to them. For example, some people who compose poems in their praise who out of their own lack of intelligence say things such as Zainab binte 'Ali (s.a) is the manifestation of Allah (SwT) (may Allah (SwT) protect us from such words)!

Poets hold a very high status and the Infallible Leaders used to give them great importance - people such as Da'bal Khaza'i who held a great rank in the sight of the A'imma. However we must strive to make sure that the religious gatherings (Majalis) are not organized and held by people such as this (who write corrupt poems and have deviant thoughts).

Those who are writing poems and composing poetry in relation to the Prophet (S) and the Ahlul Bait must make sure that they present their poems to the 'Ulama first (to read over and make sure they are proper). They must keep away from all forms of exaggeration especially in those instances where the poets are competing with one another to attract the attention of the people.

In regards to this, sometimes we see that one person resorts to Ghuluw (exaggeration of the greatness of the Ahlul Bait) and thus, the next person is forced to present even greater exaggerations, and this act is very dangerous.

The third section of the tradition under review uses the word "مواسات" and this word can be understood in two different ways from its lexical meaning.

The first is to assume that the word comes from the root **وآسى** and the second is that the root word is **آسى** however both of these end up (after the rules of morphology are applied to them) in making the word **مواسات** which is in the meaning of assistance and help.

The Shia is one who is tested through his wealth - how much of it does he keep aside for the help of others?

In our present time, we are faced with many difficulties:

1. Unemployment, which is the real root of all other forms of corruption such as: addiction to drugs, theft, robbery and prostitution;
2. Problems with the youth getting married;
3. Difficulties for people finding affordable housing;
4. Difficulties in going for further education. Many families face the difficulty of providing tuition fees for their youth to go and acquire further education.

Our society consists of people who claim to be Shia, however we see excessive amounts of wealth being wasted on useless things, yet some people in the society do not even have the basic necessities of life!

Therefore, the characteristics of the Shia must also be kept in view and we must remember that we cannot only concentrate on the status and rewards that are promised to the Shia - rather, we need to implement these characteristics within ourselves.

We hope that all of us can keep in mind the commandments of the A`immah in our day to day life and act upon them!

Today, we wish to discuss two traditions in relation to the followers of the Ahlul Bait - the Shia. The first tradition concerns the greatness of the Shia, while the second tradition is in regards to the characteristics of the Shia.

دَخَلْتُ عَلَى أَبِي بَكْرٍ الْحَضْرَمِيِّ وَهُوَ يَجُودُ بِنَفْسِهِ فَنَظَرَ إِلَيَّ وَقَالَ لَيْتَ سَاعَةَ الْكَيْدِ أَشْهَدُ عَلَى جَعْفَرِ بْنِ مُحَمَّدٍ أَنِّي سَمِعْتُهُ يَقُولُ لَا تَمَسَنَّ النَّارَ مَنْ مَاتَ وَهُوَ يَقُولُ بِهَذَا الْأَمْرِ

The narrator of the tradition states that, "I entered the presence of Abi Bakr al-Hadhrami (one of the special companions of Imam Ja'far b. Muhammad as-Sadiq (as)) while he was about to pass away. He looked at me and said, 'This is not the time to speak lies. I bear witness on (the life of) Ja'far b. Muhammad that I heard him say, 'The fire of hell shall never touch the person who dies while believes in this command (the Wilayah of the Ahlul Bait).'"

عَنْ سَلِيمَانَ بْنِ مَهْرَانَ قَالَ: دَخَلْتُ الصَّادِقَ وَعِنْدَهُ نَفَرٌ مِنَ الشَّيْعَةِ وَهُوَ يَقُولُ مَعَاشِرَ الشَّيْعَةِ كُونُوا لَنَا زِينًا وَلَا تَكُونُوا عَلَيْنَا شَيْنًا قُولُوا لِلنَّاسِ حُسْنًا إِحْفَظُوا أَلْسِنَتَكُمْ وَكَفُّوْهَا عَنِ الْفُضُولِ وَ قَبِيحِ الْقَوْلِ

Salman b. Mahran said, "I entered into the presence of as-Sadiq (as) while there were a group of people from among the Shia in his company and he said the following to them, 'O' assembly of Shia! Be a beauty for us (the Ahlul Bait) and do not be a source of embarrassment for us. Speak to the people in good ways and protect your tongues. Save your tongues from speaking things that do not need to be said, and which are detested.'" (Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 65, pg. 161)

Imam Ja'far b. Muhammad as-Sadiq (as) brings up two issues in this tradition - the first being a general rule and regulation, while the other is a clear example that must be put into practice.

The general rule is that through our actions, we must not be a source of embarrassment for the Ahlul Bait meaning that we must act in such a way that when people look at us, they would immediately send blessings upon those whom we follow and would say, "Congratulations to people such as yourself that have been trained and nurtured as you have been." We must not be a source of shame for the Ahlul Bait since they are the progeny of the Prophet (S).

The 'Ulama of the Science of Akhlaq have stated that for those traversing the spiritual path towards reaching Allah (SwT), the first step that must be taken is to correct one's tongue, and as long as the tongue and what one speaks is not corrected, the heart will never become purified.

The tongue is the key to the entire essence of a person such that we are able to discern what kind of a person an individual is by his method of speech.

It is stated that:

إِخْتَبِرُوا هُمْ بِصِدْقِ الْحَدِيثِ

"Test and examine people by the truthfulness of their speech."

If a person's tongue is under lock and key, then one will definitely speak very carefully, with

honesty, and will be extremely vigilant in what one says.

One of the ways to protect the tongue is just as the final commandment in the tradition states that one should:

﴿ كَفُّوْهَا عَنِ الْفُضُوْلِ ﴾

“Prevent it (the tongue) from speaking excessively.”

Speaking less is one of the first things a person can do to begin his journey on the path towards Allah (SwT) and this is known in the books of Akhlaq as sumt or keeping quiet.

One scholar has said that there are five things which can any person who has defects within himself become a perfect and complete person and they are: silence, fasting, waking in the night (to pray), seclusion, and the constant remembrance of Allah (SwT).

Truly, if a person were to practice these five things, one would definitely become closer to Allah (SwT).

The first of the points mentioned which is silence, does not mean that one does not speak at all. Rather, it means that one should not speak if it is not necessary and one must avoid and kind of foul or vulgar speech!