

MEANING OF OCCULTATION ?

Although all kinds of doubts have been raised regarding 'Mahdaviyat', the matter of 'Ghaibat' (occultation) seems to be the most complicated one - as regards its concept and significance. It is for this very reason that to have belief in the Hidden Imam is one of the necessary qualifications of a believer. Traditions regarding the occultation of Imam Mahdi (A.S.) are found in exceedingly large numbers in the books of both the Sunnis and the Shias. For example, the famous scholar of Sunnis, **Allama Muttaqi Hindi in his book 'Al Burhan Fi Alaamaat-e-Akhirizzaman'**, **Allama Suyuti in his book "Al Arful Wardi Fi Akhbaril-Mahdi"** and **Muqaddasi Shafae in "Iqduddurar Fi Akhbaril Muntazar"** have narrated such traditions. Other Sunni scholars have also collected numerous traditions on the same topic. Similarly the Shia scholars also have compiled a great number of books with regard to the occultation of Imam Mahdi (A.S.). These books deal exhaustively with the topic of occultation. For example, Shaykh Sadooq (a.r.) in his famous book **'Kamaaluddin wa Tamaarnun Nema'** **Shaykh Toosi and Shaykh Nomani in their books 'Ghaibat'** (both the scholars have given the same title to their respective books). All these books have a large number of traditions from the Holy Prophet (S. A.W.) and the infallible Imams (A.S.) which discuss the various aspects of occultation. On the basis of the large body of traditions that exists on the ghaibat of Imam (A.S.), we must admit that there is no scope of any doubt in this regard.

However, a question arises at this juncture as to the meaning and definition of 'Occultation'. Secondly, in what sense of the word is our Imam (A.S.) hidden?

(I) Meaning of Occultation:

Occultation does not mean that our Imam (A.T.F.S.) is present in some other world like the belief of the Shaikhiya Sect. Occultation also does not mean that our Imam (A.S.) is hidden in some well or cellar. And that he will come out of his hiding place only at the time of reappearance, like some Sunni Scholars believe. Also occultation does not mean that Imam (A.S.) is possessing a body which is invisible like a spirit or a soul. And that it is because of this that the people are unable to see him as is the belief of some common people. Finally, occultation also does not imply that Imam (A.S.) is residing in a secret location on this earth and never leaves his place of stay, as is evident from some narration in certain books. The true meaning of 'Ghaibat' of Imam (A.S.) is that like his pure predecessors he too possesses a material body and is living his life in this world. He speaks and responds to the calls of help from people. He guides those who have lost their way. He participates in the rituals of the Hajj. He visits the graves of other Masoomeen (A.S.). His help reaches the oppressed and the Shias who seek his assistance. People see Hazrat-e-Hujjat (A.S.) and speak to him but are unable to recognise him. However, all these facts do not deny the possibility that the Imam (A.S.) escapes dangers with the help of extraordinary powers

like indetectability by others. Just as his respected grandfather, the Holy Prophet (S.A.W.) left his house on the night of hijrat and was not detected by the infidels of Mecca. Hence our Imam (A.S.) is not an invisible Imam but an Imam who is not recognised when seen by the people.

(II) Story of the Cellar (sardab)

Concerning the belief of Mahdaviyat, the most common objection of the Sunnis against the Shias is that the latter believe that after the martyrdom of Imam Hasan al Askari (A.S.), Imam Mahdi (A.S.) descended into a well or a cellar in the city of Samarra and lives there. And that he will emerge from there only at the time of his reappearance. Sunnis allege that, it is for this reason the Shias recite supplications to Imam at the edge of a well when they go to Samarra for Ziarat. Some of the ignorant Sunni scholars and poets have written couplets in this regard and termed as 'the fiction of the cellar'. Extensive research into this episode has brought to surface the fact that the originator of this piece of 'fiction' is Hafiz Mohammad bin Yusuf Ganji (d. 658 A.H.) who was a native of Syria and an important leader of the Shafaei school. The Hanafis have followed him in this regard and copied the episode from him. However all that is written in the Shia books refutes this allegation rather than supporter defend it. Such shrewdness in fabricating allegations proves conspiracy of defamation. The Shias have never had the belief that their Imam (A.S.) is hidden in some cave or cellar. How is it possible to call him 'Hidden' if everyone knows that he is in that cellar? According to the Shiite belief, Imam (A.S.) participates in the Hajj every year. People see Imam (A.S.) but do not recognise him. Thus this belief contradicts the 'fiction' of cave or cellar. Shias as well as Sunnis have the belief that Hazrat (ATFS) will reappear from the Holy Kaaba. Thus if the narration of 'cellar' is true, then he would have reappeared from the 'cellar'. The author of the book '**Al-Yawaqeeeto waiJawaahir**' has mentioned besides Hasan Iraqi, other Sunnis who had the opportunity to meet Imam Mahdi (A.S.) in different parts of the world. Whereas according to the fictitious allegation all these meetings should have been at the cellar. During the time of 'Ghaibat', none can say for sure where Imam (A.S.) is. Every Friday the Shias address him in the following words, "I wish I had known in which part of the land you are!" This only shows that none is cognizant of the location of Imam (A.S.). On the basis of this it is not the belief of the Shias that Imam (A.S.) is in some cave or cellar. Only one point remains to be clarified. That if the Shias do not accept the belief that Imam (A.S.) is in the cave or cellar then why do they perform the ziarat of the cellar (Sardab) in Samarra? The reply to this question is clear enough. It is that place which had been the home of three Imams (A.S.), viz. Imam Ali Naqi (A.S.), Imam Hasan al Askari (A.S.) and Imam-e-Zamana (ATPS). It is one of those houses about which Allah (A.J.) says, "**In houses which Allah has permitted to be exalted and that His Name may be remembered, in them...**" (Nur: 36) It is because that this house had been inhabited by the Imams (A.S.) and thus is blessed and not that the Imam (A.S.) still resides in it. It is just like the respect shown to the houses of the other Prophets (S.A.W.).

The belief that Imam (A.S.) is confined in the cellar from the time of his birth till the time of his reappearance may be a Sunni belief but is definitely not a Shia one. And this assertion is not without a valid argument. The argument is that the renowned Sunni scholar, **Hafiz Abdulla Mohammad bin Yusuf Ganji Shafai** (born 958 A.H.) wrote in

the 25th chapter of his book '**Al Bayan Fi Akhbare Sahebizzamaan.**', "The disbelievers in Mahdi raise the objection that if Mahdi is confined to the cave then how does he receive nourishment?" Now this statement of Hafiz Ganji proves that he had the belief that Imam Mahdi (A.S.) was residing in the cellar. The only question that remained to be answered was that of his nourishment. Because of this belief, he tries to reply this question. The great Shia scholar **Ibn Isa Irbeli (R.A.)** who had studied the book '**Al Bayan**' from **Hafiz Ganji** himself, writes in his book '**Kashf-ul-Ghumma**' after discussing about this matter, **"It is strange indeed that those who refute the existence of Hazrat Mahdi (ATFS) believe this (that he is in the cellar), whereas those who accept his existence do not (believe that he is in the cellar)."**

Those who have visited Iraq: and other warm countries are aware of the fact, as is also the custom in the hot areas of India, that people in these places used to construct basements in their houses in order to take shelter from the scorching summer heat. They used to spend the summer season in these cellars. The house of Imam Hasan al Askari (A. S.) was in Samarra, Iraq, which is known for its hot climate. According to the custom of that period, this house also had a cellar, which is known as 'Sardaab' in Arabic. The family members of Imam Hasan al Askari (A. S.) used to put up in this cellar during the summer. After the martyrdom of Imam Hasan al Askari (A.S.), the agents of the tyrant Caliph were dispatched to arrest Imam Mahdi (A.S.). When they reached the cellar they saw the Imam (A.S.) occupied in prayers. But by the help of Allah's power they failed to arrest him and had to return empty handed. According to another report, when the house of Imam (A.S.) was invaded by the soldiers, Imam (A.S.) managed to escape from the cellar in the same way as his respected grandfather, the holy Prophet (S.A.W.) had eluded the infidels of Mecca on the eve of hijrat. The soldiers searched the house but could not find Imam (A.S.-). This narration is reported by **Nuruddin Abdul RehmanJani Hanji in his book 'Shawahid un Nabuwwah.'** Hence our discussion proves that the belief of Mahdi (A.S.) hiding in a cellar or a cave is a Sunni belief. None of the Shia scholars ascribe to this view And this belief is absolutely the opposite of the actual Shia belief. It is not known as to how some Sunni scholars ascribe to such baseless opinions. After the martyrdom of his respected father, Imam Hasan al-Askari (A.S.), Imam Mahdi (A.S.) went into occultation to remain safe from the atrocities of the tyrant caliphs who followed the way of Pharoahs and Nimruds. He has been kept away from the sight of the people.

He has entered into occultation by the permission of Allah and living a life with none knowing of his whereabouts. He shall remain in occultation as long as Allah wishes.
When Allah will desire, he will reappear. Insha-Allah. .