Islam and the Family System

A sensible and well-balanced family system is the very foundation of a happy life. Indeed, it is the root of an advancing civilization. Religion comes to take human beings nearer to Allah. Therefore, it must create an atmosphere conducive to that ideal; otherwise, it cannot achieve its goal. No religion can be regarded as complete unless it has a well-defined code of family life which expressly shows the exact responsibility and role of each member of the family. The family is a closely-knit unit of human society; and this nearness creates eminent danger of friction and conflict unless every member is told in unambiguous terms what his duties and rights are.

If a religion shuts its eyes to the intricacies of family problems, its followers, sooner or later, will revolt against it, destroying all religious tenets in the wake of that rebellion. The reason is simple; the prevalent environment and social system would not be in harmony with that religion; and the influence of inharmonious society would gradually push them further and further from that religion. Finally a time would come when the religion would have no more than a ceremonial function with little or no effect on life.

A good example would be Christianity which ignored the claims of human nature, extolling the idea of celibacy. Many zealous people tried to live up to that ideal, Monks and nuns shut themselves in monasteries. For a short period, this scheme worked well. Then the nature took its revenge; the monks and abbots cultivated the idea that they were representatives of Christ, and the nuns were given the title of “brides of Christ.” So with easy conscience they turned the monasteries into centres of sexual liberties.

Nature can be compared to a steel spring which when pressed down jumps back with equal force. When it took its revenge upon Christians, it turned the Christians societies into the most per-missive, libertine and undisciplined ones the world had ever seen.

This happens when a religion does not con-form with nature and when the leaders of religion think that it is quite enough to say `Love thy neighbour' without telling them how.

Islam and the Family System

Islam is the Final religion and has the most ideal shari `ah (revealed law). An unbiased observer cannot help admiring the equilibrium which it has achieved balancing the demands of body and spirit, providing guidance concerning life in this world as well as teachings concerning life in the hereafter.

It is the Leading Light which brightly illuminates every turning in the highway of human life. It is the Perfect shari `ah which did not leave any human need uncared for.

In so far as family-life goes, we see that Islam has unravelled every problem of the family system with such dexterity that one has to accept that it could not be solved in a better way.

One cannot but register astonishment at the attitude adopted by some Christians writers. They seem to be suffering from an inferiority complex when they compare the Islamic shari `ah with their religion which has no shari `ah at all. Therefore, they try to imply that, that perfection of shari `ah is a “drawback” or that the moral standard of Islamic teachings is not as high as that of Christianity.

Family Pillars

In any family there are those persons without whom a family cannot be regarded as complete. A human being is born of a father and a mother; the parents look after the child and bring it up. This child in turn attains maturity and is joined to a spouse in the golden link of matrimony. Then this couple start their own family. Thus we may say that the persons who form pillars of the family are father, mother, child, husband and wife.

Some people need help in their domestic chores. Therefore, Islam has added the `servant' also in the list.

Joint Family and Separate Family Systems

According to sociologists, there are two types of family systems in the world: “The Joint Family System” and “The Separate Family System”.

Joint Family System: This system implies that all members of a clan:- father, son, brother, sister, uncle, nephew etc., live together. The in come of the individual is not treated as his personal property, rather it belongs to the family and the expenses of all members are met by that `family income.'

Separate Family System: In this system every-one is responsible for his own immediate dependants. His income belongs to him and not to the family.

The Hindu family is a joint family while in Arabia the separate family system prevails. Perhaps it is for this reason that cousins are called 'brothers' and `sisters' in India, while in Arabia they are just sons and daughters of the uncle or aunt.

And, perhaps it was because of this system that Hindus regard cousins as falling within the prohibited degrees, that is, cousins may not marry each other in the Hindu religion. There is no such prohibition in Islam.

However, both these systems are very old, and each has its advantages and disadvantages.

Joint Family System: its Advantages and Disadvantages

The Joint Family System is a very good ex-ample of humanism, benevolence, mutual trust and co-operation.

Members of a family or clan are branches of the same root. It is only natural that they should remain united in their domestic management and family life. This `togetherness' is expected to create happiness and peace of mind.

Furthermore, this system ensures that those family members who, for any reason, are unable to earn their livelihood do not face destitution and poverty, and thus are spared disgrace and heartaches. This system acts like an Insurance company which accepts all responsibilities at the time of old age, unemployment and sickness, and the family members are saved from the troubling anxiety of tomorrow.

So much about its advantages. Ironically, these very advantages give rise to its disadvantages. The ease of mind provided by this system some times can be misused by some unscrupulous people. If a member of the family is lazy, he finds it easy enough to live on the fruits of others' labour; he never realizes the importance of earning his own livelihood. Once he acquires such taste, he will find many excuses to avoid work. After all, why should he exert himself when there are other relatives ready to take his burden on their shoulders?

Unless one is made to realize that one cannot exploit others in this way, one will not make real effort to earn his bread. Neither will he fell ashamed of his useless life.

Furthermore, this system kills the initiative to work harder. If a man exerts himself to the furthest limit and thus earns more, his standard of living, naturally, would be much higher than a person earning less. If a man earns twice as much as his brother, common sense says that their standards of living must be different accordingly. But the Joint Family System does not allow it. And the drive to exert oneself more, and to earn more, dies.

The most serious defect of this system is that, instead of creating harmony, love and trust in the family (as it is supposed to do), it becomes the chief cause of domestic strife. When a man works hard to meet the expenses of the Joint Family while his brother spends his time in roaming the streets aimlessly; or when he exerts himself to earn as much money as possible, while the brother throws away his chances of advancement, the resulting ugliness in the family relations is beyond description. Family members begin hating each other, tempers flare on the slightest pretext; suspicion, anger and hatred fill the place of trust, love and happiness. The atmosphere of the house gradually turns into a living hell and then comes a time when

separation remains the only remedy.

Separate Family System: its Advantages and Disadvantages

The Separate Family System does not suffer from the disadvantages mentioned above of Joint Family System, nor does it have its advantages.

To remain aloof from one's own relatives is likely to kill the finest of human instincts. This system may breed selfishness and meanness. Those who look upon mankind as if raised on a high pedestal feel that the whole of mankind is akin to the limbs of one body - humanity; but the Separate Family System turns brothers into strangers, who may meet several times a day but do not care for one another.

The Wise System of Islamic Society

Now, let us look at the wise system of Islam. Here we find that Islam has laid down a straight-forward highway with such skill that a man walking on it may enjoy the sweet smell of both these systems, and still not be beset by the thorny problems of either. How?

Islam removed the basic cause of lethargy by decreeing that everyone is responsible for the expenses of his own dependants: he has no right to put the burden of his children, for example, on the shoulders of other relatives. Thus, the evil effects of the Joint Family System were avoided; at the same time, everyone was emphatically enjoined to “keep the bond of relationship intact.” This prevented the tendency to selfishness and aloofness from one's own flesh and blood.

Dependants

In principle, the dependants (whose responsibility must be borne in any case) was limited. Al-Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq (a.s.)[1] said: The ways to spend (one's) wealth are twenty-four in all . . . Thus, the five ways in which spending money is obligatory (wajib) are the expenses of the maintenance of his dependants, of his children, his father and mother, his wife and his slave. These are obligatory up-on him whether he be hard-up or affluent.

But if he is affluent and well-to-do, then he has been emphatically enjoined to spend on other relatives also. The same hadith (tradition) goes on to say: And the five strongly recommended expenses are: Dedication of perpetual gift, doing good to one's relatives, doing good to other believers, recommended charity and emancipation of slaves.

This hadith is narrated in Wasa'il ash-Shi `ah. There are numerous ahadith (traditions) extolling the virtues of doing good to one's relatives, which will be mentioned in appropriate chapters.

An interesting point to ponder over is that the Hindus, in spite of their Joint Family System (or should it be said, `because of it?') never felt such intense love towards their relatives as was seen in the Arabs in spite of their Separate Family System, and that Islam upheld that love to a reasonable extent.

One cannot help but admire how Islam has interwoven the “family sympathy” of the Joint Family System with the “legal orderliness” of the Separate Family System. There is no escape from admitting that such a beautiful as well as perfect family system was never adopted before Islam.

After all, what is the use of a joint family in which two Hindus (even if they are father and son) are not allowed by their religious customs to eat together? And what is the harm of a separate family if the people are encouraged to eat in one another's house and thus strengthen the bonds of love and relationship?

Seclusion of Women

Islamic civilization, which is based upon the principle that women should not mingle with men, emphasizes separate domestic arrangements. With the influence of Hindu culture, Indian Muslims gradually adopted the Joint Family System. As a result, that very important Islamic principle has been sacrificed and it has, in its wake, disturbed many other important aspects of Islamic society. The following ayah (verse) needs careful study: And say to the believing women that they should lower their eyes and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what (must ordinarily) appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands, or their fathers, or their husbands' fathers, or their sons or their husbands' sons or their brothers or their brothers' sons, or their sisters' sons, or their women or those whom their right hands possess, or those male servants who are free of physical needs, or small children who have no sense of the hidden things of sex; and that they should not strike their feet in order to draw attention to their hidden ornaments. And O' ye believers! turn ye all together towards Allah, that ye may attain bliss. (Qur'an, 24: 31)

This list does not include the husband's brothers nor his nephews. A Muslim woman must, therefore, keep aloof from them as well as from other strangers.

But the Joint Family System does not allow adherence to this important rule. And once a Muslim woman shows her beauty to the brother or nephew of her husband, she has broken out of the secure boundary of the Islamic commandment, and once the limit is crossed, there is no saying where this “showing off” will end, or whether it will end at all.

Another ayah in the same surah clearly shows that one should not put the burden of his domestic arrangement even on one's parents forever, one must be self-reliant and self-supporting. The ayah is as follows

There is no blame upon . . . yourselves that ye eat (without asking permission) in your own houses or the houses of your fathers, or houses of your mothers, or the houses of your brothers, or the houses of your sisters, or the houses of your fathers' brothers, or the houses of your fathers' sisters, or the houses of your mothers' brothers or the houses of your mothers' sisters, or in houses of which the keys are in your possession, or in the house of a friend of yours . . . (Qur'an, 24: 61)

The ayah clearly mentions separate `houses' for fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, uncles and aunts, etc. It shows that there is a difference, in the eyes of Islam, between `your house' and the `houses of your fathers' and `houses of your brothers', for example

The harmony and unity which must be created by following this law is self-evident. Eating in one another's houses is the surest way of creating love and friendship.

Question: There was a Separate Family System in Arabia. Was it not because of this that the Qur'an mentioned separate `houses' for each relative ?

Answer: Islam had not come to follow the Arabs or anybody else. It had come to lead the whole mankind including the Arabs. There were hundreds of customs - good and bad - in Arabia at the advent of Islam. Islam eradicated all evil and defective customs and rites, and allowed only those systems to continue which were desirable from its own point of view.

If Islam had not liked the family system of the Arabs, it could easily have changed it. But instead, the Qur'an mentions that system without any hint of objection, thus endorsing it.

We find many examples in the lives of the Holy Prophet and his Ahlu'l-bayt (family members) which prove that they had adopted Separate Family System in their lives.

There was famine in Mecca in 35 Amu'l fil (the year of the Elephant). Abu Talib had many children and his means of livelihood were limited. The Holy Prophet felt that Abu Talib was facing difficulties. He suggested to `Abbas (another of his uncles), who was wealthy, to share the burden of Abu Talib. `Abbas went with the Holy Prophet to Abu Talib and it was decided that `Ali should live with the Holy Prophet, Ja'far with `Abbas and `Aqil was to remain with Abu Talib.

This fact proves that the domestic arrangement of the Holy Prophet was separate from that of Abu Talib. There is no need to remind the readers that the relationship between Abu Talib and the Holy Prophet was more tender and loving than is between a father and his son.

This event, while confirming the Separate Family System, clearly shows the other aspect of

Islamic family code: “Keeping the bonds of relationship strong.”

During the last Ramadan of his life, Amir al-mu'minin, `Ali ibn Abi Talib (a.s.) used to break his fast one day at the house of al-Imam al-Hasan (a.s.), next day at the house of al-Imam al-Husayn (a. s.), the third day at the house of `Abdullah ibn Ja'far, his son-in-law.

This fact, again, shows both aspects of the Islamic code: Separate Family arrangements and “keeping the Bonds of Relationship strong.”

These two examples are sufficient to guide Muslims in their daily life. If any Muslim ventures to deviate from this straight path, he will no longer remain on the path of Islam.

In short, Islam has brought for mankind a Family System which combines the good features of both family systems mentioned earlier and has weeded out the evil aspects of both. It has the legal straight-forwardness of the Separate Family System as well as the harmony and sympathy of the Joint Family System.

And it is only by following this Islamic code that mankind can obtain peace of mind in this life and everlasting happiness in the life hereafter.

Notes:

[1] (a.s.) is the abbreviation of -Arabic phrase `alayhi(or ha /himu)'s-saldm (may peace be upon him/her/them).