Rights of Relatives in Islam

And fear Allah, through Whom you demand your mutual (rights), and (reverence) the . . . (relations of) wombs (that bore you); for surely Allah ever watches over you. (Qur'an, 4:1)

The right of those relatives who are not among the “dependants” is called “silat ar-rahm” in Islamic language. Literally it means “to join the womb”. As the relatives are joined together through birth, this term practically means “to do good to relatives”.

It is here that Islamic ethics and the principle of mutual sympathy and love bring out the beauty of Islam. In the first section we have explained briefly the importance and virtues of this aspect of Islamic ethics. The finer instincts of human nature do demand that relatives behave with mutual sympathy and cooperation, and should deal gently with the another.

Apart from the spiritual benefits, “silat ar-rahm” maintains the unity of the family; the confidence that there are people who are always ready to extend their helping hands in time of need, creates peace of mind and contentment of heart.

on the other hand, “qat` ar-rahm ” (severing the relationship) creates strife and conflict and the unity of the family is shattered. It is common knowledge that disunity in the family always brings in its wake disgrace and misfortune, and opens the door of need and poverty.

The Qur'an and ahadith have emphasized these aspects of “silat ar-rahm ”, as will be seen in the following pages.

The Virtues of “Silat ar-rahm” according to Qur'an and Traditions

We have earlier mentioned this ayah: (O' Prophet), tell them that whatever (wealth) ye spend, it is (primarily) for the parents and relatives . . . (Qur'an, 2:215)

Another ayah says: And remember We took a covenant from the Children of Israel that worship none but Allah, and do good to your parents and relatives . . . (Qur'an, 2:83)

These two ayat show that doing good to the relatives is next in importance to the obedience of parents. The ayah mentioned at the beginning of this section creates the same impression. al-Imam `Ali ibn Musa ar-Rida (a.s.) has commented on that ayah in these words: Verily, Allah ordered three things joined with three things . . . and ordered to fear Him joined by “silat ar-rahm ” - thus one who did not `join his relationship' did not fear Allah.

Another ayah says: Verily, Allah commands justice, the doing of good and giving to kith and kin .(Qur'an, 16:90)

A point to ponder: Helping relatives comes under both “Justice” and “Doing good”. Still Allah mentioned it separately; it shows how important this item is in the eyes of Allah.

If anyone wants to find out, in the light of the sayings of the true leaders of Islam, the material benefits of `joining the relationship', the following ahadith will guide him.

1. al-Imam al-Husayn (a.s.) said: One who desires that his life be elongated and his sustenance be increased, should join his relationship.

There are many such ahadith from ma`sumin[1] (a.s.):

2. The Holy Prophet said: Verily (it happens that) a man joins his relationship while only three years have remained from his life, so Allah increases his life to thirty-three years; and verily (it happens) that a man severs his relationship and thirty-three years have still remained from his life, and Allah shortens that life to only three years.

Al-Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq (a.s.) has described two incidents showing the truth of this matter; but space does not permit their description here.

3. al-Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq (a.s.) said that the Holy Prophet said: Joining relationship builds homes, increases lives and increases prosperity, even if they be infidels.

4. The Holy Prophet said: Some people go on an evil path and commit sins, but they behave gently with their relatives and because of this silat ar-rahm their wealth is increased and their lives elongated. How much reward would have been theirs if they had been good people?

5. It is because of this, that Amir al-mu'minin `Ali (a.s.) said: Man is not given reward of any good work sooner than that of silat ar-rahm.

6. So far as its reward in the life Hereafter is concerned, the Holy Prophet has said: The reward of charity is ten times; and the reward of lending is eighteen times; and the reward of doing good to a believer is twenty times; and the reward of doing good to a relative is twenty-four times.

7) Prophet Musa (a.s.) asked Allah what was the reward of silat ar-rahm. Allah told him: O' Musa! I postpone his death (increase his life); and make easy for him the death pangs, and the keepers of Paradise will call him to enter it from whichever gate he wants.

The ahadith mentioned above tell us of some rewards of silat ar-rahm which are given in this life and other which will be given in the life Here after. So far as this world's rewards are concerned, they are given to anyone who practises silat ar-rahm, even if he is an unbeliever. These are as follows:

a) His life is elongated;

b) His sustenance is increased;

c) His home and family prosper;

d) His death pangs are eased.

But the rewards of the life Hereafter depend upon Islam and true faith. They are

a) silat ar-rahm is complementary to the fear of Allah and piety. Piety without ar-rahm is a thing incomplete.

b) All the gates of Paradise will be opened for the believer who practises silat ar-rahm.

On the other hand `severing relationship' keeps a man away from all these benefits. It is not possible to give here all the ahadith in praise of `joining relationship' nor the , ones condemning `severing relationship'. However, a few ayat and ahadith concerning `severing relationship' are .given below to complete the subject

The Evils of Severing Relationship

Here are three ayat: Those who break. Allah's covenant after it is ratified, and who cut asunder what Allah has ordered to be joined, and do mischief on earth; these cause loss to themselves. (Qur'an, 2:27)

And those who break the covenant of Allah after having plighted their word thereto, and cut asunder those things which Allah has commanded to be joined, and work mischief in the land, on them is the curse, and for them is the terrible home. (Qur'an, 13:25)

Then, believe ye are, if ye hold authority, that ye make mischief in the land and break the ties of relationship? Such are the men whom Allah has cursed, for He has made them deaf and (blinded their sight. (Qur'an, 47:22 -23

Now some ahadith:

1. Amir al-mu'minin `Ali (a.s.) said in one of his sermons: “I seek protection of Allah from the sins which hasten death.” `Abdullah ibn Kawwa said: “O' Amir al-mu'minin, is there any sin which hastens death?” Amir al-mu'minin said: “Yes; and it is severance of relationships. Verily, members of a family remain united and help each other, so Allah gives them sustenance, though they be drinkers of liquor; and, verily, members of a family separate from each other and one of them severs relationship from another, so Allah deprives them (of their sustenance) though they be pious.”

2. al-Imam Muhammad al-Baqir (a.s.) said: “My father told me in his wasiyyah (will): `O' my son, do not sit with five persons, do not talk with them, nor accompany them in a path,'

“I said: `May I be your ransom, O' father! who are those five?'

“My father said,. ` Do not keep the company of one who transgresses Allah's commands, because he will sell you for a morsel or even less than that.' “I said: `O' father, and what is less

than that?' He said. `In expectation of a morsel which he will not get.'

"I said: `And who is the second?'

"He said: `Do not keep the company of a miser, because he will cut you off from his wealth when you will need it most.'

"I said: `And who is the third?'

"He said: `Do not keep the company of a liar, because he is like a mirage, shows you the near thing as distant, and the distant thing as near one.'

"I said: `And who is the fourth?'

"He said: `Do not keep the company of a fool, because he will want to benefit you but will only harm you.'

"I said: `O' father, and who is the fifth?' "He said: `Do not keep the company of one who severs relationships, because I have found him cursed in three places in the Book of Allah.' "

(These three places, perhaps, are the same three ayat mentioned in the beginning of this section.)

3. Salimah (the slave-girl of al-Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq [a.s.]) said: "I was near al-Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq (a.s.) at the time of his death; presently he became unconscious; when he came to, he said ` Give Hasan (Aftas) ibn `Ali ibn `Ali ibn Husayn ibn `Ali ibn Abi Talib seventy dinars, and give this one so much and that one so much.'

"I said: `You are bequeathing to a man (Aftas) who had attacked you with a knife and wanted to kill you?' The Imam said: `Do you not want me to be among those whom Allah has praised for "joining the relationship" and has said for them

Those who join together what Allah has commanded to be joined, and fear their Lord and are afraid of the terrible reckoning. (Qur'an, 13:21) '

"Then he said: `O' Salimah, verily Allah created Paradise and made its scent pleasant and its scent reaches upto the distance of two thousand years; but the person who disobeys the parent or the one who severs relationship will not smell its scent.

Divine Law in Practice:

This bequest of the Imam for his relatives is the practical interpretation of this saying of Allah: It is prescribed for you, when death approaches any of you, if he leaves any goods, that he make a bequest to parents and relatives, according to reasonable usage; this is due from the God fearing. (Qur'an, 2:180)

Though this `Law' was abrogated after the enforcement of succession laws, the eternal call of

“this is due from the God fearing” is exhorting the believers to remember their relatives in their will.

We can find countless people who do good to their relatives; but such example of doing good to a blood-thirsty relative is very rare in the history of mankind; but it is these examples that .demonstrate the true spirit of Islamic ethics

Circle of Ar-rahm

Which of the relatives are within the circle of silat ar-rahm? Who are the relatives with whom silat ar-rahm is obligatory?

It is . very difficult to draw a line to divide near and distant relatives. A person having a broad outlook may widen the circle of his relatives as much as he likes. Distance or nearness in this context depends upon the angle of vision. In other words, we may call it a play of vision. Ten miles is `far' in comparison with five miles, but is very near in comparison with hundred miles. The following narrative will explain this matter very clearly.

`Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan said: “One day we were with Mu'awiyah; many Quraishites including some of Banu Hashim, were in that group. Mu'awiyah turned towards Banu Hashim and said: `O' Banu Hashim, on what ground do you pride yourselves against us? Are we not (both Banu Hashim and Banu Umayyah) from the same father and mother? And do we not share the same house and birth-place?'

“`Abdullah ibn `Abbas replied: `We pride our-selves against you because of that thing by which you (Banu Umayyah) boast against the whole tribe of Quraysh, and by which Quraysh boast against the ansar (helpers of Medina), and because of which the Arabs boast against all non-Arabs. We pride ourselves against you because of Muhammad (who was from Banu Hashim) and his relationship which you cannot deny and (it is a fact) from which you cannot escape.'

“Mu'awiyah could only say: `O' Ibn `Abbas, you have been given a very sharp tongue.'”

This talk shows that if we look at the fact that the Holy Prophet was from Banu Hashim, then even Banu Umayyah will go out of the circle of relationship; but if we compare that relationship with the distance of ansar of Medina, then not only Banu Umayyah but the whole tribe of Quraysh will be counted as the relatives of the Holy Prophet.

What we want to stress is the fact that no mathematician can solve this problem by counting the notches in the family-tree. We have to adopt the system which the Shari'ah has prescribed for such matters; and that is “common usage”. For this purpose, relatives should be divided into four categories

o Those who are within the prohibited degree (mahram);

o Those who are not within the prohibited degree, but are included in the table of inheritance;
o Those who are neither within the prohibited degree nor are included in the table of inheritance; but their relationship is known and one feels that they are one's relatives;
o Those whose relationship is not known.

There is no doubt that the first and second categories are within the circle of silat ar-rahm; and the fourth category is surely excluded from its sphere.

But what about the third category? The following two ahadith provide the answer:

1. al-Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq (a.s.) said that the Holy Prophet said: I saw a relation dangling with the`arsh (The Throne of Allah), complaining before Allah against one who had severed it. I asked Jibra'il (Gabriel) : “How many generations above do they meet?” Jibra'i1 said: “Seven generations.”

2. The Holy Prophet said: When I was taken to the heavens (in mi`raj ) I saw a relation dangling with the `arsh complaining of a relative. I asked it: “How many generations are between thee and him?” It said: “We meet in the fortieth forefather.”

Obviously the complaint of a relative removed seven or forty generations can be reasonable only when both parties had the knowledge of mutual relationship and still one of them neglected his duties of silat ar-rahm. In other words, the criterion of silat ar-rahm's obligation is the knowledge of relationship, not the distance of that relationship.

Ways of Silat ar-rahm

What are the ways of silat ar-rahm? What are its highest and lowest grades?

“To love and sympathize with the relatives and do good to them”: this is the shortest definition of silat ar-rahm. And all the `ways' of sympathy and good behaviour are the ways of silat ar-rahm.

It was mentioned in the `Rights of Parents' that some of their rights are of `wealth' and others of soul and body. According to Islam, the relatives also have some rights on one's wealth and some on one's soul and body.

The Holy Prophet said: Whoever goes to his relatives to do silat ar-rahm with his self and his wealth, Allah gives him the reward of a hundred martyrs; and on every step he is awarded forty thousand good deeds and forgiven forty thousand bad deeds; and his rank is elevated forty thousand grades; and he is treated as though he worshiped Allah hundred years with patience and full attention.

When is monetary help compulsory? It is compulsory (wajib) when the person concerned has some wealth left after meeting the necessary expenses of himself and his dependants, and the

relative is in need of such help.

Notwithstanding the conditions mentioned above, a Muslim must help his relatives as much as possible even when monetary help is not wajib.

The Holy Prophet said.: Join your relationship even if it is with a drink of water.

On the other hand, the obligation of love and sympathy is unconditional.

To deal with relatives with love, to demonstrate by one's actions and behaviour that one shares their happiness and sorrow, to visit one another's homes regularly, to observe the Islamic ethics in mutual relationship - these are some facets of silat ar-rahm, which one can instinctively feel and which cannot be justifiably codified in writing. The Holy Prophet has drawn our attention to these small things by saying

Do silat ar-rahm even if it is by salam (salutation).

And now a hadith of the Holy Prophet on this very subject: “The best way of silat ar-rahm is not to give any trouble to the relative.” For those who understand human nature, this hadith is a .mine of wisdom

Summary

We may summarize this part in the following sentences:

1. Islam has made it compulsory to do good to relatives; and `severing of relationship' is (like disobedience of parents) a capital sin whose culprit is not likely to be forgiven.
2. silat ar-rahm means that a person should not give any trouble to his relatives; should deal with them with love and Islamic ethics; should participate in their sorrow and joy; and if possible, should help them financially.
3. silat ar-rahm covers all relatives whose relationship is known; it makes no difference whether they are within or outside the prohibited degrees or within or outside the table of .inheritance

A Reminder

It was shown in Part One that Islam supports the Separate Family System with the provision of silat ar-rahm. Now it should be mentioned that the concept of relationship in Islam is so wide that even the Joint Family System cannot compete with it.

It proves that `love' and `sympathy' have found their true meaning only in the Islamic shari`ah. Without Islam, these words were bodies without soul. No other system can show such open-heartedness, nor can any `ism' bring forward such all-encompassing well-defined family-code.

The Holy Prophet said: “I was sent to complete (fulfil) the noble ethics.” He fulfilled his task; his holy hands completed the boundaries of Islamic ethics. It is one more proof that he was the .Last Prophet and his religion is the Last Religion

Notes:

.[1] The Holy Prophet, his daughter Fatimah and the twelve Holy Imams