

OLD AGE AND SPIRITUALITY

By Zahid Jamil

Holy Quran says (Surah Yaseen, Ayat 68)

"Do they not have sense enough to note that when We grant a long life to any person, he is reverted to the position of helplessness in which he was when he was born?"

Yes, Old age brings problems of all kind and in a difficult situation, man (and woman) tends to turn towards God and seek peace in spirituality. After life long experiences, reality sets in, arrogance dies down, helplessness increases, the end starts looking closer, the thought of futility of the world becomes more dominant and man starts seeking forgiveness from his lord and starts preparing for the life after death. Frequent illnesses brings misery to the life, forgetfulness become disturbing, various faculties start losing the strength and the man needs the support which was needed at the beginning of the life as a little child. Then it was the mother and the father who were most ambitious to do every thing possible, now no one is willing to do so and the man finds himself at the mercy of others. Emphasis on Haqooq-ul-Ibad in Islam encourages the young to serve these elderly but it is very often not inherent in human nature. Neglect by ones own children and by near ones become even more painful. Regular departure of near contemporaries from this world disturbs the thought process. As more and more serious sicknesses are diagnosed amongst contemporaries, the fear sets in. Death of one's own spouse generally becomes the most shocking event which the man/woman find hard to bear at this old age. At times the serious sickness or death of one's own son or daughter at a relatively young age may prove most devastating to an old person. As children grow in life, so do their problems. Old parents become more sensitive to the problems faced by their children and grand children. In many instances failure of children in life, disputes of children with their spouses, disputes among children, rejection and lack of obedience by them become extremely frustrating. Rapidly changing value systems of the society, its impact on the children and the grandchildren, society and nation also disturb the elderly. Thus generally, elderly go through the difficulties which we can not even imagine at a younger age. At this time man tends to turn to God and Muslims elderly seek consolation in the teachings of their noble religion. They become more religious, more pious, more sensitive to the religious needs and try to fulfill religious obligations and requirements to their best ability.

Certainly, people with such difficulties, limitations and disabilities need to be helped. In Islam, Haqooq-ul-ibad (serving the humankind) is considered as important as haqooqullah (worshipping Allah SWT). Serving the elderly provides great opportunity for haqooq-ul-ibad and enhance spiritual attainment amongst the young.

Post retirement and pre-fragility period provides an opportunity to many retirees to do what they could not do during very busy working life. For many Muslim retirees, it becomes the ideal time to engage in the study of Quran and Hadith, enhance their knowledge base, spend extra time in prayers and find peace in spirituality. This time also provides an opportunity to engage in some social activities and work for the community, which could not be done earlier due to work commitments. Religious and charitable organizations can find ways to tap the potential of these elderly and use their ability, wisdom and experience for the benefit of the communities. As with the advancement of health and science, people enjoy better health and live longer, it is important that they continue to find meaning and purpose in life and such engagements will help them in achieving the same.

In this article we will detail how the spirituality plays an important role in the lives of Muslim elderly as well as those who serve the elderly. We will also analyse the requirements of aged care facilities to cater for needs of Muslim elderly.

Let us begin with the analysis of specific Quranic teachings relating to the care of old parents:

"Your Lord has commanded that you worship none but Him, and be kind to your parents. If either or both of them reach old age with you, do not say 'uff' to them or chide them, but speak to them in terms of honor and kindness. Treat them with humility, and say, 'My Lord! Have mercy on them, for they did care for me when I was little.'" (Qur'an 17:23-4)

This verse clearly commands Muslims to show care, compassion and love to their elderly. It advises the followers of Quran to serve the old parents, be patient with them and in doing so gain the pleasure of Allah SWT. We need to do necessary physically work to make our fragile elderly comfortable which may involve helping them in the essential activities of daily living such as bathing/showering, dressing/undressing, using toilet to maintain personal hygiene, eating/drinking, getting in and out of bed, a chair, a wheelchair or moving from place to place by walking, a wheelchair or with a walking aid. We should also spend time with them to make them feel wanted, listen to them and

appreciate what they say even if we disagree with their point of view or find them boring. We should talk to them about their difficulties and console them as much as possible. We should consider such acts an honor and blessing from Allah SWT and look at it as a great opportunity of Haqooq-ul-Ibad and our spiritual growth for which great reward is reserved in this life and the life hereafter. We should not forget that when we were children, our parents had preferred us to themselves.

"And We have enjoined on man (to be good) to his parents. In travail upon travail helpless did his mother bear him, and in two years was his weaning. Show gratitude to Me and to thy parents; to Me is thy final goal."
(Chapter31: verse14)

This verse again emphasize how the mother bears extreme pain during pregnancy and during birth and in raising the child. The parents give all the sacrifices in bringing up the children and thus when they reach old age it is their turn to expect from their children some favours in return. The contribution of parents in bringing up their children is only second to God who is the creator and the sustainer. Thus one should have gratitude to the parents only second to God. In fact gratitude to Allah is incomplete without showing gratitude to one's parents. It is only apparent that as to be grateful to Allah earns heavenly reward so does showing of gratitude to one's parents.

While both mother and father are to be honoured, mothers receive a higher status in the following hadith:

Someone went to Mohammed (PBUH) and asked him "Who has the first priority to be well treated?"
Prophet Mohammed answered him "your mother",
He asked "then who?"
He(PBUH) answered" your mother"
Asked again, "then who?"
Answered (PBUH) "your mother"
Asked "then who?"
Mohammed (PBUH)"answered your father".

This means that the mother deserves three times more love and care than the father. The reasons are multifold. Mother, being a woman, is emotionally and physically more fragile. Allah has placed tremendous love in mother's heart for her children which makes her give huge sacrifices during pregnancy, early childhood and later in the life.

Another famous Hadith says, ***“Paradise lies under the feet of the mother”***. Which implies that doing good to our mother would lead us to Paradise.

Unconditional love of parents for their children throughout their life should be acknowledged by the children and returned by the serving the parents during their old age. In Islam, serving one's parents is described as a duty second to prayer.

It is certainly a low act if a person expresses irritation when one's parent or for that matter any other elderly become difficult due to old age. Showing disrespect to one's parents and not being helpful to them is considered a great sin. The Prophet (peace be on him) declared disobedience to parents to be a major sin, second only to shirk i.e. ascribing partners to Allah. Al-Bukhari and Muslim reported prophet (pbuh) as saying, ***‘Shall I not inform you about the three major sins?’*** Those who were present replied, ‘Yes, O Messenger of Allah.’ He said ***‘Associating partners with Allah and disobedience to parents,’*** and sitting up from the reclining position, he continued, ***‘and telling lies and false testimony; beware of it.’*** He also said, ***“Three persons shall not enter the paradise: the one who is disobedient to his parents, the pimp, and the woman who imitates men.”*** Another hadith quotes ***“Allah defers (the punishment of) all sins to the Day of Resurrection excepting disobedience to parents, for which Allah punishes the sinner in this life before his death.”***(Reported by al-Hakim).

Thus, as Muslims let us be good to our parents as it is their fundamental right. We should be good to them physically as well as assist them financially if need be and of course be kind to them in our words and actions. We should be obedient to them unless we find that their instruction will become disobedience to Allah or it may cause harm to ourselves. Let us not forget that soon we will also become old before our children as our parents have become old before us. We will then be needing the help of our children as our parents need us today. If we are doing good to our parents, we will inshallah have a better showing from our children. Whoever remained good to his parents, his children will also be good to him; and whoever annoyed his parents, will also be annoyed by his children. It is the process of recompense “as you sow, so will you reap”.

Being dutiful to one's parents assumes priority even over Jihad (fight in the cause of Allah) as is narrated in the tradition of Ibn Mas'ud(R.A.) when he asked the Prophet (peace be upon Him) :

"Which deed is most beloved by Allah" "He said, "Observing prayer in time." And next to that" He said: "Being dutiful to one's parents." And next to that" He answered: "Jihad (fight in the cause of Allah)."

Elderly and weak are to be given special consideration even during congregational prayers as reported in the following hadith:

When a person leads a congregation prayer, let him make it short, as there may be around the weak, the sick and the elderly. However, when a person prays by himself, he may extend his prayer as much as he wishes. Narrated by Abu Hurairah.

Even after the parents have passed away, we have some obligations to them. Abu Osaid Ibn Assaaidi, a companion of prophet said that we were near the Prophet (peace be upon him) when a man of Banu Salma came to Him and asked: “Ya RasulAllah (peace be upon him), Is there any obedience to parents left that I can show to them after their demise?” He said: ***“Yes! (You can be obedient to them) by praying for them, to seek forgiveness for them by fulfilling their instructions after their death, by keeping affinity to those who are not connected with you but through them and to honour their friends”*** reported by (Abu Dawud and Ibn Maja).

Now let us look at some of the issues relating to the life we lead in this day and age particularly in the western countries and how they pose additional challenges. Both husband and wife need to work to meet ever increasing commitments of modern day competitive environment. They have big mortgages, children need to go to private schools for better future and every body in the house is too busy to spend quality time with each other. With such family atmosphere, old parents are left isolated and very often unattended even within the house. They are left home alone for the entire day and children return home in the evening, only too tired to do much for their old parents. They do not have time to even speak to them, let alone helping them in a substantial manner. Usually our elderly do not have familiar surrounding as modern neighborhood do not have close association.

This situation demands that alternative ways are found to cater for the needs of old parents. As most people living in a country like Australia, are in the same boat, collective effort of the community is the best method for solving such situations. It would be ideal for our elderly to stay in retirement villages where they have their contemporaries whom they can talk to and engage in various

activities on day to day basis. When they become more fragile, nursing homes of varying degrees are needed depending on their health needs.

While governments in western countries have facilities of retirement villages and nursing homes, ever increasing demand is putting huge strain on government budgets. Private providers are usually very expensive and can only be afforded by rich. Many church groups and ethnic bodies have actively worked on this front and have established facilities for the followers of their religions or for the members of their ethnic community. While they allow others to be placed in their facility but only as long as they have a vacancy. Quite often, once they receive an elderly from their own community, an outsider is expected to leave.

It is unfortunate that Muslims in Australia have thought very little about elderly care. Peak Muslim bodies and associations have ignored this very critical issue over past 20-30 years. The main focus of the community has been to build mosques and Islamic schools. Some of our Islamic clerics have discouraged the idea of elderly care at community level describing it as un-islamic as according to them, it is the responsibility of the children only to care for their old parents. They failed to realize the challenges faced by Muslims living in western countries as detailed earlier.

Grants are available from the government to build aged care facilities but only in part. Community groups have to generally raise at least half the money themselves before they can expect to get the balance from the government. However, it is a great challenge to raise money for such purposes. Many Muslims are willing to pay for building a mosque as they consider it an act of great sawab but they are reluctant to extend such a support for an aged care facility. They need to realize that while a mosque is a building for Haqooqullah, an aged care facility is built for serving the elderly, an act of haqooq-ul-ibad. While the two buildings can not be compared, but haqooq-ul-ibad is considered as important as haqooqullah.

Some government agencies as well as many volunteer groups also provide elderly care to people living at home. Muslim volunteer organizations should be formed to provide such services as they would serve the religious and cultural needs better for our elderly. They can take elderly to mosques for Friday prayers, take them to Doctor if children are unavailable due to their work obligations, cook food for the elderly who live all by themselves and also arrange picnic and other entertainment periodically. Muslim volunteer

organizations can also make the relationship between their volunteers and the elderly mutually beneficial. Elderly can teach Quran, religion as well as other subjects to volunteers or to their children. Elderly can also advise the young volunteers on life issues and mentor them.

We will now discuss few Issues which need to be considered while building aged care facilities for Muslims.

Retirement villages and nursing homes for Muslims should incorporate the specific structures and facilities to meet their religious needs. The toilets should have adequate washing arrangements, there should be ablution facilities and prayer rooms. The toilets in such buildings should not face Mecca, Beds should be placed so that the feet do not face Kabah. Each room should indicate the direction of Kaabah. Not only meat should be halal but other food products should be checked for not having any non-halal ingredients. Care should also be taken in medicines and alcohol based syrups should be avoided as much as possible.

Regular visits by religious teachers for lectures to keep the elderly in good spirit should be arranged. Counseling for those elderly who may be going through stress or a difficult time by religious as well as qualified counselors should be available.

Muslim Aged care facilities should also address the male to female segregation issues as prescribed in Islam. Female doctors and nurses should be assigned to look after the female elderly as much as possible.

Till Muslim community build their own retirement facility, support can be sought through the government agencies who help in placing diversified cultural groups in existing facilities. They coordinate with existing aged care providers to pool a number of elderly into one facility. These providers can then be asked to address language, cultural and religious specific needs of the Muslim elderly as much as possible.

Another important aspect for Muslim elderly relate to their financial issues. Their pension schemes need to be looked into. Most pension funds invest monies in interest bearing securities or in shares which may not be sharia compliant. Interest is considered haram in Islam and shares may involve companies which are engaged in non-Islamic industries such as pork, liquor, gambling etc. It is important that Muslim elderly have pension funds which are free from above investment types. Some banks, investment companies

and financial advisers now offer services where they can structure portfolios of Muslim clients to suit Islamic guidelines. Some Islamic banks and financial institutions now operate in many countries offering sharia compliant financial products.

Other financial issues may relate to Zakat obligations. At times, these elderly may be asset rich arising in high zakat obligations but income poor which may make it unaffordable for them to pay due Zakat. Much of their pension income may be consumed in paying for retirement villages and nursing homes. Islamic institutions should work on this issue to find appropriate solution.

It is obligatory on children to extend financial support to their old parents for their personal needs. They should also pay for their religious obligations as needed such as paying for fidya if parents are unable to fast during Ramadan due to ill health or for taking them to Haj, if it was not done earlier.

Muslim elderly should also seek legal advice in matters of their 'will' and family matters. Their will should be prepared in accordance with Islamic laws. Peak Muslim bodies should campaign in their respective countries to seek certain concessions in legal frame work so that Muslims can follow Islamic guidelines in matters such as distribution of the deceased estate.

For most Muslims, Islam is much more than a religion or madhab which only demands its followers to perform certain rituals. Islam is a deen, a complete way of life. Thus for Muslim elderly, the requirements are far more than offering few prayers. It extends to their eating, clothing, washing, finance and estate distribution. By facilitating all aspects of Islamic living, we can help our elderly in achieving spirituality they seek in this age.

References/acknowledgments:

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