

Sunnah of the Prophet (S.A.W) is the second most important source of knowledge and guidance in Islam after the Qur'an. The Sunnah refers to the noble life of the Holy Prophet (S.A.W) which is the supreme ideal that the Muslims are supposed to follow. Literally the word sunnah means habitual practice. In this sense sunnah can denote the practice of one individual as well as the established custom of a community. In its broadest sense sunnah can mean a tradition or the customary practice of various successive generations. In pre-Islamic Arabia the word Sunnah was used by different tribes to refer to their respective tribal customs which were initiated by the precedents set by the tribal forefathers. In the absence of a government the loyalty of the Arabs was exclusively directed towards their own tribes. The "tribal sunnah" therefore became the most important guiding principle for the Arabs. After the advent of Islam the same word sunnah was used to refer to the precedent set by the Prophet (S.A.W). For the Muslims the Sunnah of the Prophet (S.A.W) was meant to comprehensively supersede the tribal customs.

In the Islamic context the Sunnah refers to three things: the sayings and the teachings of the Prophet (S.A.W) (قول), the actions committed by the Prophet (S.A.W), both intentional and unintentional (فعل) and the tacit approvals of the Prophet (S.A.W) (تقرير). By tacit approvals the scholars refer to those actions which were done by the companions in front of the Prophet (S.A.W) and which the Prophet (S.A.W) did not disapprove of. The fact that the Prophet (S.A.W) did not object to those actions designates them as permissible.

The word Hadith literally means a saying or a piece of information. In the context of Islam Hadith refers to the recorded and the reported form of Sunnah. Hadith contains information about the sayings, actions and the tacit approvals of the Prophet (S.A.W). Therefore it can be said that while Sunnah is the reality of Prophet's noble life, Hadith is the representation of that reality in written or oral form. Because Hadith is the carrier of Sunnah, the two words are often used interchangeably.

Sunnah of the Prophet (S.A.W) carries immense importance in Islam, second only to the Qur'an. The Qur'an and Sunnah are together understood as the two primary sources of knowledge and guidance in Islam. The authority of the Qur'an is based on the fact that it is the word of God. Islam is the religion of submission to Allah (S.W.T) which requires absolute commitment to fulfill the Divine Will. The Qur'an is the text which conveys the Will of God to His bondsmen. Therefore the Qur'an has an authority of its own because it is the manifestation of the Divine Will. However the authority of Sunnah is because of the Qur'an. Allah (S.W.T) says:

وَأَطِيعُوا اللَّهَ وَالرَّسُولَ لَعَلَّكُمْ تُرْحَمُونَ

And obey Allah and the Messenger, so that you may be graced with mercy. [Surah Aal Imran: 132]

Allah (S.W.T) commands the Muslims to obey the Prophet (S.A.W) and the only way to obey the Messenger (S.A.W) is to follow his teachings found in the Hadith. In fact the authority of the Prophet (S.A.W) is much more than what would require mere obedience (اطاعت). Rather the Muslims are not only required to obey the commandments of the Prophet (S.A.W) but they are also supposed to do اتباع, i.e. they have to completely follow the exemplary and noble life of Allah's Messenger (S.A.W). To assert this fact Allah (S.A.W) says:

قُلْ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ تُحِبُّونَ اللَّهَ فَاتَّبِعُونِي يُحْبِبْكُمُ اللَّهُ وَيَغْفِرْ لَكُمْ ذُنُوبَكُمْ
وَاللَّهُ غَفُورٌ رَحِيمٌ

Say (O Muhammad): "If you sincerely love Allah, then follow me; Allah will also love you and forgive you your sins. Allah is Forgiving, Merciful." [Surah Aal Imran: 31]

The authority of Sunnah is unquestionable because it is established by the Qur'an which carries absolute authority. However there are some people who sometimes question the authenticity of the Hadith. They claim that the Hadith was not gathered in the same way as the Qur'an was compiled. They say that the hadith was transmitted orally in the beginning and the corpus of Hadith was written down many centuries after the Prophet (S.A.W). This leads them to cast doubts on the authenticity of the hadith. However if an objective investigation is done it can be easily found out that the claims of the critics of hadith have no truth at all. While it is true that there were a number of fabricated narrations which were wrongfully attributed to the Prophet (S.A.W) but the fact is that the scholars of hadith have already identified those fabricated narrations after thorough investigations and have excluded them from the established canon of hadith. So there should be no doubt in our minds about the authenticity of the narrations found in the well-known books like Sahih Bukhari and Sahih Muslim, etc.

There can be various ways to prove the authenticity of hadith. Arguing deductively we can say that when Allah (S.W.T) has said in the Qur'an: "Obey Allah and the Messenger", He has sanctioned the obligation to obey the Prophet (S.W.T) for all the generations of Muslims that ever were or that ever will be till the Day of Judgment. The commandment to obey the Prophet (S.A.W) is for all the Muslims up till the End of Time. For those people who haven't met the Prophet (S.A.W), the hadith is the only way to know the teachings of the Prophet (S.A.W). Obedience of the Prophet (S.A.W) could not have been possible for us had the hadith containing the teachings of the Prophet (S.A.W) did not reach us in pure form. Allah (S.A.W) would not have commanded something which is impossible

for the Muslims to fulfill because He does not burden His slaves more than their capacity. Allah (S.W.T) says:

لَا يُكَلِّفُ اللَّهُ نَفْسًا إِلَّا وُسْعَهَا

Allah does not burden any human being with more than he can bear.

Therefore we can say for sure that the ahaadith containing the teachings of the Prophet (S.A.W) are destined to reach every single generation of this Ummah. Moreover it can also be said that without hadith it would not have been possible for the Muslims to follow even the Qur'an because the explanation of the Qur'an is found in the ahaadith. For example, the commandment to establish the daily prayers is found in the Qur'an but the details and the method of prayers is found only in the ahaadith. Without the ahaadith the Muslims would not have found the correct method to pray to God. Hence it can be said without any doubt that the Qur'an and Hadith together make the strong foundation of our religion. Those people who question the authenticity of Hadith are actually trying in vain to shake the foundations of Islam.

In addition to the deductive (principle-based) argument given above, the authenticity of hadith can also be established inductively, i.e. based on an objective study of facts related to the history of the compilation of hadith. There is no doubt about the fact that the scholars have gathered the ahaadith of the Prophet (S.A.W) with the utmost care and with due sense of responsibility. The ahaadith were gathered both from previously existing written records and authenticated oral narrations. After a thorough study of the history of hadith compilation one will have to admit that all the ahaadith contained in the famous books are in fact authentic.

It is totally wrong on the part of the hadith critics to say that ahaadith were written down for the first time only in the third century. The truth is that the ahaadith were being recorded in written form even in the life of the Prophet (S.A.W) also. In the beginning of his prophetic career the Prophet (S.A.W) had forbidden the Muslims to write anything other than the verses of the Qur'an. This was a precautionary move so that the verses of the Qur'an were not mixed up with the ahaadith. However later on, when the Messenger (S.A.W) realized that the companions were now able to differentiate between the Qur'an and the Hadith he allowed some of them to write his sayings. A number of companions wrote down prophetic sayings in their personal collections. The best known example in this regard is the collection of ahaadith made by Abdullah Ibn 'Amr Ibn al-Aas (R.A). Abdullah's compilation, known as Sahifa Saadiqa, is taken by some scholars to be the first ever book of hadith. The books of hadith written in the days of the companions were mostly devoid of any proper organization. The companions collected ahaadith as they came across these Prophetic sayings. These types of books of hadith are known as Sahifas. So a Sahifa is a book of hadith which does not have any specific order. It contains ahaadith in a random sequence.

After the companions, in the time of the tabi'een and the taba' tabi'een there were more compilations which emerged. The most famous ones were those compiled by Hassan al-Basri, Ibn Shihab al-Zuhri and Hammam Ibn Munabbih. However two compilations stand out from this era and are read even to this day. These books are the Mu'atta of Imam Maalik and the Musnad compiled by Imam Ahmad Ibn Hanbal. Most of the books that appeared in this period were better organized than the previous ones but the chapters in such books were arranged according to the first narrators of ahaadith. Hadith books with such method of arrangement are known as Musnads. The book of Imam Ahmad Ibn Hanbal was a Musnad because he divided the ahaadith into different chapters on the basis of their narrators. For example all the ahaadith narrated by Abu Hurayrah (R.A) are in one chapter while all those narrated by Abdullah Ibn Abbas (R.A) are included in another.

The most well-known and the most widely referenced books of hadith came to be written in the third century Hijri. This era saw the compilation of hadith books which were very well-organized. It was the era of the Musannafs. A Musannaf is a type of book of hadith in which the ahaadith are arranged into different chapters based on topics. So, for example, these books would contain all the ahaadith related to the topic of daily prayers in one chapter while the ahaadith about ritual purity and cleanliness would be in another. Such books were much easier to reference as compared to Sahifas and the Musnads. For this reason the third Islamic century is known as the golden period of hadith compilation. The famous Sihah Sitta (the six authentic books) were compiled in this century. The Sihah Sitta include: Sahih Bukhari, Sahih Muslim, Sunan Abu Dawood, Sunan Nisai, Jami' Tirmizi and Sunan Ibn Maajah. Most of the Muslims now rely on these six books because they are well-organized and are easier to use as reference books. Moreover these six books contain almost all the sayings of the Prophet (S.A.W) contained in the previous books. All six books are Musannaf, i.e. they contain a topic-wise division of ahaadith into various chapters. There are two types of Musannaf books: Jami' and Sunan. A Jami' is a type of book which contains ahaadith related to all the topics whether they are of legal or non-legal nature. A Sunan, on the other hand, is a type of book which contains ahaadith of only legal nature. Among the six books Sahih Bukhari and Jami' Tirmizi are Jami' books while Sahih Muslim, Abu Dawood, Nisa'i and Ibn Maajah are Sunan books.

While collecting the sayings of the Prophet (S.A.W) the scholars have introduced various systems of classification for the ahaadith. Classification is extremely important for application of ahaadith in legal matters. The prophet (S.A.W) said many things which were binding for all the Muslims and at the same time he said many other things were not binding for all Muslims but were directed to some specific individuals. Many times there are apparent differences in the ahaadith narrated by the scholars. In such cases which ahaadith are supposed to be preferred? In order to address similar problems the scholars have introduced various classifications which define the legal functions of different ahaadith.

One of the basic classifications of ahaadith is done with respect to the number of narrators who have transmitted the hadith to later generations. If a hadith is transmitted by a large number of narrators then it will carry more value than a hadith which is narrated by a smaller number of people. For this purpose normally the scholars look at the number of companions narrating a hadith because in the later generations narrators of all the ahaadith reached large numbers. For instance if two companions are narrating a hadith and each companion has ten students who narrate the hadith from him then effectively in a span of one generation the number of narrators will increase from two to twenty.

According to the number of narrators there are two types of hadith: Khabar Mutawatir and Khabar Wahid. Khabar Mutawatir is that hadith which is narrated by a sufficiently large and diverse number of narrators at each stage of narration so much so that the possibility of concoction is logically inconceivable. Such a large and diverse number of narrators could not possibly have agreed on a false report. Sometimes the multiple narrators are narrating the hadith in the exact same words and in this case the hadith is known as Mutawatir bil-Lafz or Verbal Mutawatir. On the other hand if the hadith is narrated with different words but the words convey the same meaning then it is called Mutawatir bil-Ma'na or Conceptual Mutawatir. For example there is a hadith in which the Prophet (S.A.W) said: "Whoever invents a lie and attributes it to me intentionally, let him prepare his seat in the fire." This hadith is narrated by about seventy companions with the same wording. Therefore it is Verbal Mutawatir. On the contrary there are various ahaadith with different wording which convey the message that the Prophet (S.A.W) commanded the Muslims to pray four mandatory rak'at for zuhar prayer. Although the wording is different but all the reports convey the same message which establishes that the number of mandatory rak'at in zuhar is four. So it is an example of Conceptual Mutawatir.

All the important religious matters relating to beliefs and practices are established through Mutawatir Ahaadith. Only the Mutawatir Ahaadith have the capacity to independently set a ruling of Sharia or an article of faith. Ahaadith which are not Mutawatir cannot independently set Sharia laws or articles of faith. However they can be used to find the detail of laws and beliefs which are already set by the Qur'an and the Mutawatir Ahaadith.

Khabar Wahid, to put it simply, is a hadith which is not Mutawatir. Therefore a hadith whose narrators are not in sufficiently large number is Khabar Wahid. Khabar Wahid in turn is of three types: Khabar Mash'hur, Khabar Azeez and Khabar Ghareeb. Khabar Mash'hur is that hadith which has atleast three narrators at each and every stage of narration, Khabar Azeez has atleast two narrators at each stage while Khabar Ghareeb has atleast one narrator at each stage of narration. In order to be established as an authentic hadith a Khabar Wahid has to undergo scrutiny which is based on a thorough investigation of its sanad (chain of narration) and matan (text). Such a scrutiny is not required for a Khabar Mutawatir because its authenticity cannot be doubted at all.

In order to be established as an authentic hadith a Khabar Wahid has to fulfill certain conditions with respect to its sanad and matan. Some of the conditions pertaining to the sanad of Khabar Wahid are:

- The chain of narration should be complete and without flaws (متصل)
- All narrators of hadith should be of good character (عادل)
- All narrators of hadith should have good memory (كامل الضبط)

The conditions pertaining to the text of Khabar Wahid are:

- The text of the hadith should be supported by evidence from the Qur'an and other ahadith
- The text of the hadith should be supported by actual facts

After a thorough scrutiny by applying the above mentioned conditions the scholars then classify the Khabar Wahid ahaadith into the following types:

- Sahih (صحيح – Authentic): A hadith which perfectly fulfills the criteria of evaluation regarding the chain of narration and the text.
- Hassan (حسن – Good): A hadith which fulfills the criteria like Sahih Hadith **BUT** there is one narrator in the chain of narration who does not have good memory.
- Za'eef (ضعيف – Weak): A hadith which has a broken chain of narration **OR** there is one narrator in the chain of narration who has committed mistakes.
- Mawzu' (موضوع – Fabricated): A saying which is wrongly attributed to the Prophet (S.A.W)

In important religious matters only the Sahih and Hassan ahaadith can be used. But still they cannot set a law or belief independently. Such privilege is given to the Mutawatir ahaadith only. The non-Mutawatir Sahih and Hassan ahaadith can be used to find out the detail for those laws or beliefs which are already set in the Qur'an and Mutawatir ahaadith. As far as the Za'eef ahaadith are concerned they can be used as supportive evidence and not as a primary evidence in important matters. So, for example, a Za'eef hadith can be quoted to emphasize the virtue of praying in congregation because the virtue of praying in congregation is established by Sahih ahaadith and the Za'eef hadith in this regard is being used only as a supportive evidence.