



## Inactive Mosques: The Crisis of Contemporary Muslim Communities

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### ABSTRACT

According to the present conventional concept, mosque is only a place for the Muslims to offer prayer but in reality it should serve as a complex socio-cultural institution within the Muslim communities around the world. Though the contemporary evidences would go against this statement, it has to be noted that the original idea of mosque illustrates that it should be an institution that actively contributes to the development of the Muslim communities within the society. The aim of this paper is to explore the theological and historical evidences on mosque as an institution for community development. Then a brief overview will be presented on the contemporary issues i.e. the reason of the mosques being inactive nowadays and finally how to overcome this situation and revive the role of mosque in order to make it active again to contribute in the community development.

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## INTRODUCTION

From the very beginning of Islam, the lives of the Muslims revolved around the institution of mosque. Needless to mention that the “beginning” refers to the time of the first prophet Adam (peace be upon him) when he set up the house of Allah at Bakkah (Makkah) according to the commandment of Allah. Proceeding generations followed this footstep also and until the last prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) evidences are clear that the activities of Muslim community are strongly attached with the institution of mosque. Arguments could be established regarding this statement though most of the authentic references throughout the history supported this opinion. Scholars throughout the world in a wide range of time, unanimously agreed upon the significance of prophet’s (peace be upon him) mosque in the lives of early Muslim community during the establishment of Madinah as an Islamic state around 583 AD onward. For the contemporary scholars, it is now historically proven that, development of a Muslim community cannot be done in a holistic way (both spiritually and physically) without establishing the mosque institution as a focus for that community which must supports and serve the Muslims in their diversified issues evolved every day in contemporary modern society.

When mosque serves a Muslim community in the above stated manner that portrays the ideal situation similar to the time of prophet (peace be upon him). Unfortunately, the contemporary scenario is far from the ideal picture, in fact according to some recent scholars the situation is now completely opposite. Today’s mosques lost their significance as a focal point of Muslim communities and remain merely as a place only to offer prayers [10]. The diversified ranges of activities that used to be conducted by the people centering the mosque can no longer be observed in modern mosques. The mosque institution is stripped off of all its function and left only with the function of offering daily and occasional prayers, meditation or recitation [10]. By no means this paper indicates that the remaining functions are not important rather this research is emphasizing that for these functions to become more meaningful and significant in the practical lives of Muslims, mosque institutions need to serve other correlated functions similar to the time of the prophet (peace be upon him).

### *The concept of mosque in Islam and its significance:*

As a religion, Islam offers the complete set of guidance both in spiritual and physical or social contexts. And undoubtedly from the very beginning of the religion these spiritual and physical contexts were guided

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through the institution of mosque, around which the lives of Muslims' revolved as the communities grew gradually [10]. Robert Hillenbrand refers to the mosque as the principle religious building of Islam [5]. Dr. Tajuddin, prominent contemporary scholar on Islamic architecture, stated the same opinion with more emphasis that mosque is the most important building in Islam [12].

A.H. Immamuddin wrote on the social meaning of the mosque that the mosque should be a sign of unity and solidarity of the Muslim communities. A Muslim feels harmonized with his spiritual and communal aspiration within the premises of the mosque institution which acts as a symbol of identity, strength and justice [6].

Dr. Spahic Omer's comment should be noted for highlighting the significance of mosque institution in the life of Muslims. He stated that without any confusion the mosque is and always will be the center of Muslim life. He also mentioned two justification for this comment. First one being the inherent nature of man to long for worshiping its creator while the second one is man's tendency for social interaction and communal gathering in order to solidify the bonds of society which in return secure the welfare of the individual as well as the community life [10]. It should also be noted how this statement echoed the teaching of the Qur'anic verse stated before. Similar statement can also be found in the works of western scholars who acknowledged the inherent religious nature of man. As quoted from Martin Marty,

*"... Man is almost by his very nature destined to be religious. He may have low religion or high religion, one religion or another, but he is some-how religious.*

*Man does not easily escape religion in the most important moments of life."* [7].

Based on this statement [4] commented that, in order to solve the problem of people of a community, it must be kept in mind that 'religion' is one of the very most important fact in human life and for the Muslims religion is the priority for solving the issues that evolves every day.

On portraying the importance of mosque as a central institution for the Muslims, Dr. Omer combined the spiritual and the social role side by side, thus establishing the concept of Islam and mosque as its central institution in order to guide the Muslim communities toward their complete way of life.

#### *The mosque and the community:*

Reported by Hisham Mortada, the purpose of mosque is to generate harmony; harmony of Muslims with their Creator and of the whole community within itself as well. In more simple words, the social purpose of mosque is to unite the Muslims with their community and strengthen their social relationship [9].

As the institution of mosque has already been discussed it is important to define community in terms of Islamic teachings. Dr. Ingrid Mattson, in her speech at ISNA convention, described two types of group that can be found in a society- community and cult [8]. A community is a group of people where everybody is welcomed and diversity is appreciated. A cult, however, demands that every member be exactly the same. In a community, the difference of opinions, views etc. adds to the texture and diversity of that community whereas these are strictly prohibited in a cult. The reason to bring up this discussion is to establish Dr. Mattson's view that the Muslims within the society should act like a community, not a cult. She further stated that, in a community, when an individual faces any kind of difficulty, the whole community becomes responsible to act immediately and give support to that individual. From the history of early Muslim societies it is evident that this practice of communal inter-dependency was always prominent and it was the mosque institution that acted as the center for accommodating these activities.

Stated by Dr. Spahic Omer, the mosque seemed to be accommodative of every beneficial activity concerning worship, education, politics, economy, security and social relation, which enabled the nascent and ambitious society to make some civilizational headway [11].

#### *The crisis of inactive mosques:*

Unanimously it is agreed upon by the scholars that the mosque should be the center of activity to accelerate the development of the Muslim community. In spite of that, the present situation of the contemporary Muslim societies is completely opposite. This is mostly because nowadays modern Muslim societies separate their religious and secular activities by adopting the lifestyle of the western world. And this happened partly because of the failure of Muslim scholars and intellectuals to convince the Muslim society that Islam can ensure a better and prosperous future in this world [12]. Thus, Islam as a complete way of life has lost its significance within the contemporary Muslim communities and mosque becomes only a place for worship and meditation losing its role as a center for communal activities.

But recent resurgence of reviving Islam to fulfil its role as a complete way of life calls for revitalizing the mosque institutions, so that once again it may act as a center of community development [12]. According to Dr. Hesham al-Awadi, a prominent Muslim scholar and historian, Islam as a way of life has to be contemporized to solve the issues evolving at present day Muslim societies [1]. This statement by no means implies that Islam is not contemporary enough to solve the issue of modern Muslim societies rather it indicates that the academics

and the scholars need to contemporize themselves to interpret the teachings of Islam to solve the issues that the Muslim communities face in the modern world.

*Potential activities for the revival of mosque towards its original concept:*

The Prophet's (peace be upon him) mosque represents a model per excellence of the Islamic way of life. [12]. Performance of prayers at formally appointed time is a major function of mosque, but also there were other social, political and administrative functions that should be noticed [11]. Dr. Tajuddin marked out several characteristics, which he suggested, outlined the eternal idea of mosque. According to his opinion, mosque is a place for worship but the sacred area for offering prayers should be limited so that the rest of the spaces can accommodate other flexible functions. Secondly, mosque is the house of community and in its very nature it is a multifunctional building fulfilling the functions of administration, education, prayer, welfare, social activities and judiciaries. Then comes the functions related to social issues which acts as a platform for fostering Islamic brotherhood. And the final function of mosque is concerned with its relation to the non-Muslim communities or the non-Muslim members of a Muslim dominated community. It is the responsibility of the Muslim community to present the teachings and values of Islam to their fellow non-Muslim communities [12].

Robert Hillenbrand, in his book titled 'Islamic Architecture: form, function and meaning' compiled a range of activities which was associated with the mosque institution from the time of Prophet (peace be upon him) towards the later period of Islamic reign. This compilation illustrates a range of diversified activities both religious and secular establishing the fact that mosque was always the center of activities within the communities rather than only being a place for worship. These activities consist of worship or spiritual activities, learning center, center for scholarship, publication and authorization (certification), library and book shops, accommodation for travelers with food facilities (i.e. kitchen), hospitals and morgues, lecture sessions, debate and discussions on daily issues in academic manner, charity distribution, marriage, divorce, burial and so on. The mosque was also served as a place for preservation of relics much like the modern day museums, law courts and military bases in newly conquered territories [5].

The varied range of functions that a mosque must serve, again briefly compiled by Dr. Tajuddin in just two major spectrums. He argued that the present day mosques should have a curriculum of activities which will consequently generate proper architectural guidelines for designing mosques. The two major spectrums he stated is, 1) intellectual development, 2) strengthening the brotherhood of Islam [13]. These two spectrums contain the compulsory functions that should be incorporated in the mosque.

Another important issue regarding the compilation of mosque's activities is to incorporate friendly and welcoming atmosphere for all genders and age groups. Dr. Hesham emphasized that mosque should be designed as a child friendly way and he brought evidence from the life of Prophet (peace be upon him). He said, Prophet (peace be upon him) used to incorporate children in the mosque with a loving attitude in a very welcoming atmosphere [2].

*Mosque and modern Muslim communities:*

Although evidence history gives a broad spectrum of activities which was incorporated with the mosque and played a vital role in community development, re-interpretation of these functions in the modern context to address the issues of contemporary Muslim societies is required. Dr. Tajuddin reported from many academics commenting on this regard. Like Ismail Kamus, who suggested that the Prophet's (peace be upon him) mosque was built solely for the purpose of uniting the Muslims in single brotherhood and today's mosques should also be built to serve the same purpose [12].

He proposed a theoretical framework of guideline for mosque architecture. These guidelines are aimed to address the issue of modern Muslim societies by considering their requirements and the programs the final program are categorized under five distinct sections; 1) educational program, 2) social program, 3) economic program, 4) welfare program and 5) judicial program [12].

From a more contemporary research on the effectiveness of mosque during disaster time shows the universality of this community based institution. This research focus on the functional aspect of mosque at the earthquake affected areas of Pakistan and emphasized on the suitability of community-based religious organization in disaster management [14].

Another research by Ahmad Ashraf discussed the relationship of Mosque and the commercial center or bazaar and how each entity influence other one in various issues. He said in Iran, the recent revolution and revolts within the country's social and political history were centered on this bazaar-mosque alliance [3]. It is important to note that how mosques can even play roles in altering the political powers of a region with its ability to accommodate revolutionary activities.

*Conclusion:*

The timelessness of mosque institution demands that reinterpretation of its activities and architecture to match the needs of modern Muslim societies is utterly significant. As stated by Dr. Spahic, "the mosque institution is bound to serve as a focal point of the religious and social life of the Muslims, advancing its

physical stature as a guidepost and its message as an inspiration and guidance in all our development, building and planning undertakings” [11].

“It is not for the polytheists to maintain the mosques of Allah (while) witnessing against themselves with disbelief. (For) those, their deeds have become worthless, and in the Fire they will abide eternally. The mosques of Allah are only to be maintained by those who believe in Allah and the Last Day and establish prayer and give zakah and do not fear except Allah, for it is expected that those will be of the (rightly) guided.” [Surah At-Tawba: 17-18] [15].

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