

EFFECTIVE UTILIZATION OF OUR MOSQUES

by

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Introduction:

Masjid (Mescit) is a word meaning 'place for prostration', and was used by the early Muslims for houses of worship, even by followers of other religions. Today the Arabic 'masjid', and the English 'mosque' are used exclusively for religious houses in Islam.

While the salat or prayer can be performed anywhere, it is considered more meritorious when performed in the mosque, i.e. together with other people. The Sunna [practices by the Prophet Mohammad (PBUH)] states that prayer performed in the mosque is 20 times more valuable than the one performed at home. This emphasizes the unifying spirit of Islam where collective effort in building the society is largely emphasized. Five time prayers create an opportunity for people of the locality to know their neighbors, learn, interact and support in any need. This unifying and collective responsibility of Islam is also reflected in a saying of Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) where he stated that 'He, whose neighbor goes to sleep starving, is not a true Muslim'. Mosques further emphasize and develops the practice of accepting ones leadership. It breaks down the social barriers of race, color or wealth by making everyone stand in a row, shoulder to shoulder in prayer to Allah. Metaphorically, the unity of people symbolizes the Oneness of Allah, to whom all submit in prayer.

The role of the mosque is important in society. While in a multi-cultural society, the mosque is a symbol of identity, in a homogenous society such as Bangladesh, it solely serves the purpose of a place of worship and prayer. In this regard, there is much room for the expansion of the use of the mosque. Along with it being the house of worship, it should also serve the community on a philanthropic level.

Considerations while Building Mosques:

One may be surprised by the number of mosques in Bangladesh. Sometimes several mosques exist in the same neighbourhood within a close proximity. Until 1986 a total of total 131,641 mosques existed of which 123,006 mosques were built by Waqf. It may be noted that amongst 150,593 Waqf estates of Bangladesh over 80% were utilized to build mosques. Why have such practices evolved?

Besides being a centre for prayer or unifying the Muslims to perform their personal, social and cultural responsibility, mosques also provide wealthy Muslims a scope to perform their

charitable duties to society. To conceptualize the reasons behind the building of hundreds of mosques in our country, one has to understand the concept of charity that is encouraged in Islam. For every performing Muslim the act of participating in charity is based on his desire to attain purification. The Holy Quran states:

“By no means shall you attain Al Birr (piety, righteousness), unless you spend (in Allah’s cause) of that which you love; and whatever of good you spend, Allah knows it well.” (Sura: Al Imran, Verse: 92)

Prophet Momammad, (PBUH) said *“Charity is obligatory everyday on every joint of a human being. If one helps a person in matters concerning his riding animal by helping him to ride on it or by lifting his luggage onto it, all these will be regarded as charity.”* (Shahih Al Bukhari Vol 4, Hadith No 141)

Thus, Muslims participate in charitable acts to attain Al Birr out of their love for Allah. While Zakat is an obligatory duty by which the poor enjoys a right on the wealth of the rich, there are other voluntary acts like Waqf, Sadqah etc. which are not obligatory.

Amongst them Waqf is the most widely practiced form of charity that has lead to building of hundreds and thousands of mosques in Bangladesh. Waqf is an Islamic Trust whereby a particular wealth or property is donated in perpetuity in the name of Allah for the benefit of humanity and certain causes permitted by Shariah. Traditionally, all types of Waqf enjoyed enormous growth and popularity. Typically, dedicated Waqf property would include a mosque, a madrasa, hostels for travellers, commercial complexes etc.

During the time of the Holy Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) and afterwards the practice of Philanthropic Waqf was initiated. This aimed at supporting the poor segment of the society and activities which are of benefit to people at large such e.g. scientific research, education, health services, care of animals and environment, etc. Philanthropic Waqf was first initiated by Prophet Mohammad (PBUH).

While establishment of mosques through Waqf should continue and be encouraged, it should also be remembered that there remains other approved charitable and social activities by Sharia. Since numerous mosques already exist, it is vital that emphasis on two issues should be given:

1. Highlighting the true teaching of Islam in creating other socially responsible charities including mosques.
2. Utilizing existing Mosques and expanding their facilities to serve its community.

Maximizing the Utilization of our Mosques:

To ensure better utilization of our mosques certain initiatives can be taken from a national and social level:

- (i) **Women's' Access and Education:** Neither the Holy Koran nor the Sunna restricts women from entering mosques. However, there are regulations on how a woman in a mosque shall conduct themselves. Mosques can be segregated, either in time, or in space. But in some Muslim countries, women entering mosques is not welcomed. In Bangladesh there are very few Mosques which facilitate women to pray inside. Such practice needs to change and allocating space and provisions for women to participate in Mosques can educate women and fight religious oppression based on misconception and misinterpretation. Women should be encouraged to participate in mosque activities and fundraising. Furthermore, training programs offered to them will help towards their education and awareness. When women are engaged with the mosque, their children will be encouraged to attend as well and thus the education of future generations will be in the hands of women who are empowered.
- (ii) **Imams as Agricultural Advisers:** Unlike many other countries, every Mosque in Bangladesh has a designated Imam and a Muajeen. Imams, particularly in village areas can be educated on agricultural and farming matters. These trained imams can contribute to the development of agricultural sector of Bangladesh in assistance with the local Agricultural Offices of Government.
- (iii) **Library and Resource Center:** The mosque should be a symbol of knowledge. Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) strongly emphasized the importance of attaining knowledge. History reflects that during the Golden Age of Islam, Muslims were at the optimum; they excelled in the sciences, math, economics, architecture etc. Massive libraries were constructed and books from all over the world were collected and accessible. In this regard, the mosque should be a source from which its attendants can learn not only about Islam and other Faiths but about subjects in multiple disciplines.
This knowledge can be disseminated and shared in various forms. First and foremost, discussion sessions after prayers should be organized. Secondly, classes for adults and children should be offered on Islam and the Holy Quran towards building moral values and ethics. Additionally, Arabic and other languages can be taught.
- (iv) **Responsibilities of the Imam as a Community Leader:** In addition to the Imam training Programs as discussed above, the Imam has the responsibility of educating and raising awareness on contemporary issues such as issues pertaining to the environment protection, HIV/AIDS, rights of minorities and disabled, poverty alleviation, and all other concerns for social justice and peace. In doing so, it will raise the responsibilities of Muslims and their role towards the betterment of humanity.
- (v) **Income Generating Projects:** Mosques in various countries are surrounded by trade bazaars which are conducted by those who are underprivileged. Similarly, mosques in Bangladesh should encourage small entrepreneurs who sell handicrafts and religious artifacts to generate income for those underprivileged people. Small proceedings from the profit then can be given to the mosque for its maintenance. In this way, this will allow these people to have an income which will also benefit the mosque by creating a

sense of community whereby everyone can have a sense of belonging and attachment to the mosque.

- (vi) **Training Programs:** Instead of creating new mosques in the same locality, the new charitable funds should be utilized effectively through creating IT training centers in existing mosques for the underprivileged.
- (vii) **Shelters during Natural Disasters:** During the occurrence of natural disasters such as floods, the mosque can be used as a cyclone and flood protection center if it is designed in a particular manner.
- (viii) **Interfaith Initiatives:** Through sermons of dissemination of the Holy Quran and the teachings of our Beloved Prophet Mohammad (PBUH), it is vital that the message of respect and love for other faiths must be passed on. In an age where there is a tendency to perceive one's faith exclusively, it is imperative that inter-faith discussions are encouraged.

The Holy Quran says that we must respect prior Prophets (PBUT) and hold them in high regard. Through the exemplary examples of our Prophet (PBUH)'s life and his engagement with people's of other faiths, we have learned that he was a Prophet and Leader that brought about revolutionary changes; he reformed a society that was corrupt and morally degraded and transformed it by encompassing people of all faiths to co-exist peacefully and with dignity. If we are to truly understand what it is to be Muslim, we must first start with respect and love for all of Creation as taught in the Holy Quran where it states:

"There is no compulsion in religion" (Surah Al-Baqarah, Verse 256)

It is imperative that Imams and community leaders are brought to implement this belief.

Conclusion:

From a spiritual aspect, the mosque symbolizes the Oneness of our Creator. This is reflected in the practice of praying together as one body irrespective of any differences. The prostration in the absence of any visible deities represents the submission to the unseen supreme entity. It represents the inner faith in every Muslim about the presence of our Creator; the Absolute Entity.

The practice of unity must be implemented in all aspects of life. In this regard, although the mosque allows the physical self to be united in prayer, it must also represent unity in society. By creating equal opportunities for men, women and children, it will not only encourage increased participation, but will serve society as a whole. The belief and practice of Islam must remain as one.