PROPHET MUHAMMAD (PBUH) AND THE HOUSING PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT IN MADINAH

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Abstract- This paper discusses several social and religious aspects of the housing planning and development in Madinah during Prophet Muhammad’s era. The paper focuses on the housing area that surrounded the Prophet’s mosque which, in turn, functioned as a community development center. The paper concludes that housing played a significant role in developing and managing the first Muslim community in Madinah on account of the house phenomenon in Islam denoting a physical locus of the family institution without which the fulfillment of the divine purpose on earth is virtually impossible. By means of housing, strengthening fraternity among the Muslims was intended to be achieved. Through it, the urbanization and development of the city-state were meant to be further intensified and sustained. Some core Islamic principles underscoring the philosophies of housing and man, and what relationship ought to exist between them, have thus also been put into practice. By exploring those topics, the strength and integrity of the fundamentals of the first Muslim community clearly come into sight, as does the visionary disposition of the Prophet (pbluh) to development, leadership and management. The nature of the paper, along with its content, methodology and conclusions, is conceptual and philosophical, rather than empirical.

Keywords- Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), Madinah, Housing, Development, the Mosque

I. INTRODUCTION

In 610 CE, Muhammad (pbluh) was appointed the last messenger of God to humankind. He was then forty years old. Makkah, Muhammad’s hometown, was the first focus of his prophetic mission. However, the city proved infertile for the establishment of a base where the seeds of a new culture and civilization with a global agenda could be sown. Other alternatives were thus considered.

In Islamic vocabulary, the term “Hijrah” denotes the migration of the Prophet Muhammad (pbluh) and his followers from Makkah to Madinah in 622 CE in search of a better setting for the propagation and realization of the Islamic message. At the time of the Hijrah, the ongoing revelation of Islam was already about thirteen years old and the Muslims were yet to set up a free and autonomous state of their own. Once the city of Madinah with most of its inhabitants wholeheartedly welcomed the new religion, so fiercely disapproved of by many where it had originated, i.e., in Makkah, the wait finally came to an end and the stage was set for broadening the focus of the young community’s undertakings. As a result, the focus of revelation was likewise widened.

The religion of Islam thus began to assert itself as a universal code of life overlooking no segment of human existence, a momentous development indeed after having been portrayed essentially as an inclusive belief system during the precarious episode in Makkah. From the point of urbanization and cultural development, the whole duration of the Islamic city-state of Madinah headed by the Prophet Muhammad (pbluh) - a period of 10 years - was exceptionally eventful too.

II. THE PROPHET MUHAMMAD’S MOSQUE AS A COMMUNITY CENTER

The first urban element which the Prophet Muhammad (pbluh) introduced to the city of Madinah was the mosque as a community development center. Possessing the mosque institution and freely enjoying its services the Prophet (pbluh) and his first followers had been unjustly denied during the entire duration of their stay in Makkah, although they were in dire need of it.

On his way to Madinah, the Prophet (pbluh) rested four days in Quba’ - a suburb of Madinah about three miles to the south-east – whence he next proceeded to his final destination. Even though his stay accounted for a short interlude under some totally new circumstances, the Prophet (pbluh) succeeded in establishing a mosque: the “Mosque of Piety”. He is said to have positioned first a stone on the mosque’s side which the Muslims face in their prayers (qiblah). (Ibn Hisham, 1936) This historic event clearly demonstrated how much the first Muslims needed the institution of the mosque for their pursuits to be facilitated and further spurred.

On his arrival in Madinah, of the first concrete things that the Prophet Muhammad (pbluh) undertook was marking out and then building his mosque, the principle mosque of the city. However, some celestial elements presided over determining the location of the mosque. Upon entering Madinah, the Prophet (pbluh) decided to disembark and build his mosque – as well as his own residences - at the place where the camel he was riding stops and lies down. So delighted were the residents of Madinah on seeing the Prophet (pbluh) finally arriving to their realm that everyone
ardently wished to have him as a guest until the mosque and his residence were ready. Some of them could not contain their joy and excitement, so they wanted to intercept the Prophet’s camel as she was passing by their houses. At this, the Prophet (pbuh) would only smile to everyone remarking: “Let go her reins, for she has been instructed (by God). I shall disembark where God causes me to disembark.” (Ibn Kathir, 1985) And so it happened. The mosque was built where the Prophet’s camel stopped and lied down. The mosque location stood between the existing Madinah settlements. It was neither too away from them, nor within the ambit of anyone of them. Thus, the mosque institution was set to be introduced at once as a nucleus of the believers’ existence and as an epitome of the inexhaustible struggle between good and evil on earth. Its physical existence was to be advanced as a guidepost and its message and philosophy as an inspiration and guidance in all development, building and planning undertakings in the making. It goes without saying, therefore, that the position of the mosque signified the position of the future focal point of the city-state of Madinah as well.

The Prophet Muhammad’s mosque was a community center with a variety of activities taking place under its very roof and the roof of some of its abutting edifices, catering thus to the spiritual, social and political needs of the ever-growing community. Apart from being a place for congregational prayers and other collective worship (‘ibadah) practices, the mosque, likewise, furnished the Muslims with other most vital social amenities: it served as the seat of the Prophet Muhammad’s government, a learning center, a place for some medical treatments and nursing, a detention and rehabilitation center, a welfare center, and the place for some legitimate recreational activities. Such was the impact of the mosque complex on the development of Madinah that the core of the city eventually grew to be just about ring-shaped centering around the complex.

Thus, the standard was set for every future city of the Muslims in terms of both the role of its principal mosque and the mosque’s position vis-à-vis the rest of the city’s spatial components, especially housing.

By reason of the civilizational stature of the Prophet’s mosque, it was but appropriate for the Prophet (pbuh) to erect his houses in closest proximity to it. Hence, against the outer side of the eastern wall of the mosque the houses for him and his household were built. (Al-Samahudi, 1997) Thus, yet another precedent, namely positioning the ruler’s official residence attached or next to the city’s principal mosque, has been inaugurated. From then on, the tradition was to be followed by virtually all Muslim rulers. The rationale behind this arrangement, above all, was convenience, accessibility, transparency and responsibility towards the people.

Since it was a multifunctional community center positioned most strategically in the city, the Prophet’s mosque always provided everyone with easy access to its social services and facilities. The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was always easily accessible too because of his constant presence if not inside the mosque proper, then in his residences adjoining the mosque. This quality, however, had a few bothersome implications for the peace and privacy of the Prophet (pbuh) and his household, which, nonetheless, was judiciously handled by revelation. (Qur’an, 49:1-7; 5:101)

III. THE HOUSE INSTITUTION IN ISLAM

In Islam, the house is a place to rest, relax the body and mind, and enjoy legitimate worldly delights. In the house, we are surrounded with privacy, protection and security. Within the house realm, we also worship, teach, learn and propagate the message of Islam. The house is one of the fundamental rights that must be enjoyed by every Muslim. Allah, be He exalted, says in the Qur’an: “It is Allah Who made your habitations homes of rest and quiet for you”… (al-Nahl, 80).

The house is a microcosm of Islamic culture and civilization, in that individuals and families bred and nurtured therein constitute the fundamental units of the Muslim community. The house, therefore, has a potential to take up the role of an educational and training center able to produce - in concert with other societal establishments - responsible, caring and productive individuals. By the same token, if misconstrued and its role perverted, the house has a potential to become a breeding ground for many a social disease, which if left unchecked could one day paralyze entire communities and drug them to the bottommost. In the latter case, the only remedy for the predicament will be the restoration of the position and role of the house institution and with it the role of individuals as well as the family institution. According to Isma’il Raji al-Faruqi (1995), the family is indispensible for the fulfillment of the divine purpose. “Regardless of which is cause and which effect, civilization and the family seem to be destined for rising together and falling together.” (Al-Faruqi, 1995).

Erecting houses in Islam rests within the category of permissibility (ibahah) and remains there so long as something does not come about and causes it to infringe some of the divinely prescribed norms, hence renders it prohibited. Cases that can make building houses forbidden (haram) are building on illegitimate places, building for the purpose of spreading depravity and wickedness, building for a sheer display of might or affluent, building for the purpose of causing harm to others, and the like. However, if observing the objectives of Islam – that
is, the preservation of religion, self, mental strength, progeny and wealth - is meant foremost to be realized by constructing houses, the whole matter then becomes highly praiseworthy and so correspondingly rewarding. (Hakim, 1988: Al-Hathloul, 1996) In other words, it becomes part of one’s worship (‘ibadah) practices, whereby one duly discharges some of the duties entrusted to him as a vicegerent on earth. Some scholars, accordingly, assert that having a dwelling falls within the necessary minimum that must be sought by everyone since lack of it causes people to be displeased with God and even sometimes to deny Him. (Abul Qasim, 1975)

IV. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROPHET’S HOUSING PLANNING POLICIES

Soon after the Prophet’s mosque was completed, the private houses started clustering around it under the Prophet’s supervision, forming the city’s core. As the position of the mosque was chosen primarily by a divine intervention – as we have seen earlier - so could be, to some extent, asserted about the emerging residential area(s) too, taking into account the latter’s affiliation with the former in the city’s spatial arrangement as dictated by the philosophy of the new religion.

Erecting houses around the Prophet’s mosque and his own residences by many companions - albeit mostly by the Migrants from Makkah - significantly contributed towards the projected promotion of social justice, equality and integration among the first Muslims. Due to a possible long-term impact of the housing issues on the society’s wellbeing, the Prophet (pbuh) himself was involved in allotting and marking out many dwellings. He may have been involved in some way in planning and building some houses as well. (Al-Samahudi, 1997)

Geographically, the chosen site for the mosque and city’s residential core was the most fitting one for the future of Madinah’s and its overall development, since there were no acute natural hindrances, such as big and steep hills or completely infertile land, in its immediate vicinity. As such, development activities could be for quite a long time freely planned and evenly dispersed, thus avoiding disproportionate exploitation of the limited natural resources and the concentration of growth on one area at the expense of the other. This also meant that most people would live at an equal distance from that which they now treasured most: the Prophet (pbuh) and his mosque. As it meant that access to the social amenities which were available under the roof of the mosque complex will become easily accessible to all, more or less at an approximate distance from most of the extremities of the city proper. This way, evenly balanced population distribution could be attained too, and there could hardly be such a thing as highly appealing and highly unappealing quarters.

The thrust on even and fair distribution of the population was extremely important and the Prophet (pbuh) handled it with utmost prudence and wisdom. For instance, once the people of the Banu Salamah tribe wanted to shift to a place near the Prophet (pbuh) and his mosque, but the Prophet (pbuh) disagreed saying: “O Banu Salamah! Don’t you think that for every step of yours (that you take towards the mosque for prayers) there is a reward? (Al-Bukhari, Hadith No. 625).

By positioning the new midpoint of Madinah between the existing settlements rather than either too far away from them or within the ambit of anyone of them, the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) offered several new development opportunities. Some new portions of uncultivated land now became cultivated and the others, which had been previously owned but neglected, revived. Communication networks between the old settlements now improved and further extended to the new ones.

Expectedly, to the novel and encouraging developments in Madinah the Migrants from Makkah contributed their own share. Having been established on a relatively uninhibited but productive land and next to the mosque, justice has been done to them for all the services which they had rendered earlier to the Islamic cause while in Makkah. As this also meant that they, at the same time, were encouraged to work hard and become self-reliant and start a life on their own as soon as they could, thus becoming an asset to the modest and nascent community, rather than a liability. Had the mosque been constructed somewhere within the ambit of any of the available settlements and the Migrants had to settle elsewhere, there would have existed a real possibility of marginalizing some of them in certain aspects. This would have made the plight of the Migrants all the more difficult and the solicited integration a distant and easier-said-than-done aspiration. In this case, the initial stay of the Migrants with the Helpers, or Ansar (the natives of Madinah), would have been prolonged as well and both their self-sufficiency and needed contribution to satisfying the socio-political and economic needs of the community would have been deterred for some time. And to remain needlessly dependent on their brethren from Madinah was the last thing the Migrants were asking for. The response of a Migrant Abd al-Rahman b. ‘Awf to his adopted brother Sa’d b. al-Rabi’, a Helper, who suggested that everything he owned be shared between them, is perhaps one of the best attestations to this reality. The same incident is to be viewed likewise as a perfect personification of the Migrants’ attitude towards such issues as work, cultural adaptation and social integration.
Abd al-Rahman b. 'Awf narrated: “When we came to Madinah as emigrants, the Prophet (pbuh) established a bond of brotherhood between me and Sa’d b. al-Rabi’. Sa’d b. al-Rabi’ said to me: “I am the richest among the Helpers, so I will give you half of my wealth and you may look at my two wives and whichever of the two you may choose I will divorce her, and when she has completed her prescribed period (before marriage) you may marry her.” ‘Abd al-Rahman replied: “I am not in need of all that. Is there any market-place where trade is practiced?” Sa’d replied: “The market of Banu Qaynuqa’ (the Jewish tribe).” ‘Abd al-Rahman went to the market the following day. He continued going there regularly, and few days later he came having traces of yellow (scent) on his body. The Prophet (pbuh) asked him whether he had got married and ‘Abd al-Rahman replied in affirmative. Then the Prophet (pbuh) asked him to give a wedding banquet (walimah) even if with one sheep. (Al-Bukhari, Hadith No. 264)

Nor were the Helpers held in contempt by selecting the mosque site and with it the future city nucleus where in terms of housing the Migrants were shortly to dominate. The arrival of Islam and the Prophet (pbuh) in Madinah meant that each and every avenue for reviving the centuries old antagonism between the two major Arab tribes in the region: Aws and Khazraj, had to be blockaded for good. Doing a favor to the Helpers either from Aws or Khazraj while neglecting the other party, could have been one of such avenues, as most of the Helpers had only recently embraced the new religion. Moreover, while some refused to accept Islam until the Prophet (pbuh) arrived, there were still some Helpers who needed some time even afterwards to reconcile themselves to the new code of living and finally bear witness that there is no god but Allah and that Muhammad was His Messenger. Above all, there was a considerable group of hypocrites who by all possible means were attempting to cause mischief, discord, confusion and unfaithfulness to prevail and thus push back Madinah to the state of its old dark days. Doing any careless and imbalanced favor to either Aws or Khazraj to the detriment of the other side would surely have been exploited by the forces of evil in Madinah, which were such in quantity and vigor that a long time was needed for their utter defeat and elimination. The idea of the mosque, as well as housing issues, had to be cautiously and optimally utilized for the purpose of purging forever the old indigenous conflicts and disparities, and for the purpose of making some decisive steps towards permanent pacification and union. Hence, not positioning the Prophet’s mosque in the ambit of either Aws or Khazraj was, as a matter of fact, one of the most productive moves that could have been made under the circumstances.

The sensitive and volatile relations between Aws and Khazraj remained as such for quite some time. The matter is illustrated in the following incident. On one occasion a Jew passed by a group of both Aws and Khazraj. Having witnessed an enviable degree of understanding and harmony between them, where only several years ago this was unthinkable and absolutely out of the question, the Jew became distressed. So he decided to do something about it. He chose a man (probably a hypocrite) who consented to frequent the assemblies of the two leading Arab tribes and try his best to revive their old bloody rivalries during discussions between the two groups. The man did as directed. In the end, so overwhelmed by fury and desire to settle some outstanding disputes did some people become that they started yelling out at each other in anger. The old warring slogans were repeatedly shouted and the weapons were sought out.

The news reached the Prophet (pbuh) who at once hastened to the people. On his arrival, he calmed them down advising them that revisiting the age of ignorance (jahiliyyah) will do them and anyone else no good, especially now when he, Allah’s Messenger, is in their midst. Then, he recited to them the Qur’anic verse: “And hold fast, all together, by the Rope which Allah (stretches out for you), and be not divided among yourselves; and remember with gratitude Allah’s favor on you; for ye were enemies and He joined your hearts in love, so that by His Grace, ye became brethren; and ye were on the brink of the Pit of Fire, and He saved you from it. Thus doth Allah make His Signs clear to you: that ye may be guided.” (Alu ‘Imran, 103). Having heard the words which they had actually heard, understood and heeded before, but now under the momentary lapse of concentration somehow paid no attention to, the culprits from both Aws and Khazraj repented, embraced each other, and dispensed with the weapons. (Al-Sabuni, 1981)

By and large, with the exception of some sporadic inconsequential incidents such as this, both Aws and Khazraj – except the hypocrites - were so delighted with the advent of Islam, the Prophet (pbuh) and their brethren from Makkah that in their stride they took the whole affair. They enthusiastically, but amicably, competed with one another in doing what was best for the community, generating in the process an atmosphere of optimism, confidence and buoyancy which was very much gratifying the Prophet (pbuh) and other Migrants. (Ibn Kathir, 1985)

Some of the land which stood on the way of the Prophet’s housing scheme was neither public, nor uncultivated, nor vacant. It belonged to the Helpers, some of whom lived right there, or close by, such as Abu Ayyub al-Ansari in whose house the Prophet (pbuh) had resided until the completion of the mosque complex, and several other households mainly from the Banu al-Najjar clan. Nevertheless, no sooner had the Helpers become acquainted with
the urbanization plans of the Prophet (pbuh) than they hastened to donate the needed land to him and their brethren from Makkah. There were instances, however, where the Helpers too embarked on building for themselves close at hand - although such cases might have taken place after some time. Certainly, the only thing that the native people of Madinah - those who managed to erect houses near the mosque - wished was to become an integral part of the growing world-shattering phenomena, and to everlastingly blend themselves with the emerging Islamic paradigms of culture, civilization and the urban settlement.

Surely, had it not been for the revelation of the verse 12 from the Qur’anic chapter Ya Sin, a larger number of the Helpers would have aimed to move as close as possible to the mosque. (Al-Sabuni, 1981) This verse in which it is understood that even one’s steps made for Allah’s sake are generously rewarded - in this case the steps rewarded are the ones made to the Prophet’s mosque - reads: “Verily We shall give life to the dead, and We record that which they send before and that which they leave behind, and of all things have We taken account in a clear Book (of evidence).” (Ya Sin 12)

Such was the ensuing development of the city of Madinah that most of its suburbs, having been inspired by the Islamic perceptions of society, brotherhood and integration, before long started expanding freely and towards each other recognizing no boundaries rooted in socio-economic and cultural considerations. Thus, the decisive standing and roles of both the Helpers and Migrants have been duly recognized, needing but a wise and visionary planning paradigm, as well as viable and competent management and coordination systems, during the subsequent maturing processes. Their respective roles were complementing each other and, as such, they never ceased to grow from strength to strength. In consequence, the stage was set for writing a chapter in human history never paralleled afterwards by anybody and anywhere. The triumphs of the Prophet (pbuh) and his companions were emulated by every subsequent generation of the Muslims who strove to either emulate them or just draw an inspiration and impetus from such triumphs, while making a civilizational headway of their own and within their own contexts.

V. THE CASE OF THE HOMELESS MIGRANTS

In the process of solving the housing problems, the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) did not neglect those Migrants who have been so poor that they could not afford even their daily sustenance, let alone the shelter. They were called the ‘People of the suffah’. The Prophet (pbuh) set up for them a shaded structure in a corner of the northern side of the mosque. Most of the suffah dwellers (suffah, meaning a ‘raised platform or bench’) were from Makkah, but some were from Madinah, those who wanted to live a life of asceticism (zuhd) and poverty, despite the fact that they could afford not to do so, and had houses in Madinah. (Umari, 199; Lings, 1983) The Islamic unique treatment of the poor covered everyone, no matter who the individuals might have been and from which economic and social background they might have come from.

The suffah could house between seventy and one hundred individuals and the number of tenants was subject to how fast their overall condition was improving. The ‘People of the suffah’ would frequently go out to perform whatever work they could find in order to procure as much of their sustenance as they could. They actively participated in wars against polytheists and some of them died as martyrs on different battlefields. There were actually two suffahs: one for men and the other for women, the former seemingly outnumbering the latter.

Although the ‘People of the suffah’ tried hard to live on their own, they found it impossible to make ends meet. So the community had to help them in the short term by providing necessities almost on a daily basis (inviting the suffah dwellers for a meal or bringing food into the mosque and eating in a group, was a norm), and in the long term by providing some permanent work opportunities, thus encouraging them to stand on their own feet as soon as it was possible. Hence, the number of the suffah’s occupants was always erratic and unstable. There were always those who were leaving it and those who were coming in. Seldom, however, were the alterations in a commensurate mode, resulting in the place sometimes being overcrowded and at other times almost vacant. (Umari, 1991)

Although the Islamic state was not so affluent financially, in particular for the duration of the first few years after the Hijrah, the poor and needy of the state were not to worry at all. Not only to the problem of housing did this apply, but also to all other exigencies needed for living a respectable and decent life. It was for this reason, therefore, that the prescription of Zakah (the alms) and Sadaqah al-fitr (charity of fast-breaking) came about during the earliest Madinah period, aiming at creating the ethical and caring individuals who will constitute a sound, principled and caring society.

CONCLUSION

The first urban element introduced by the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) to the city of Madinah was the mosque institution. Since its inception, the mosque was a multifunctional community development center.
with activities of different types being conducted under its roof. In the wake of the mosque completion, demarcating, planning and building the houses of the Migrants from Makkah was the next pressing task. Due to a possible long-term impact of housing on the future of the community, the Prophet (pbuh) himself was involved in allotting and marking out many dwellings.

Throughout his celestial prophetic mission never did the Prophet (pbuh) neglect the issues pertaining to the house and housing. By means of housing strengthening fraternity among the Muslims was intended to be achieved. Some Islamic principles underscoring the philosophy of the house institution and man, and what position man occupies and what role he plays on earth, have been thereby strikingly put into practice.

Those Muslims who were so poor and deprived that they were unable to procure a dwelling for themselves, have been aptly taken care of in the process. The housing areas surrounding the Prophet’s mosque in the end emerged just about ring-shaped. The number of houses in that particular Madinah sector – the midpoint of the city-state - at the peak of the Prophet’s urbanization scheme varied between 250 and 350. The chief reasons for this figure have been explained earlier.

All in all, the house institution - as both a concept and sensory reality - played a significant role in developing the first Muslim community in Madinah. Such was expectedly the case, in that the house in Islam is the physical locus of the family institution without which the fulfillment of the divine purpose on earth becomes virtually impossible. Irrespective of their austere form, the first houses of Madinah certainly had what it takes to function as educational and training centers producing in concert with other societal establishments the individuals and family units that helped transforming the entire neighborhoods and communities they belonged to.

The planners, builders and owners of Madinah houses perceived the house institution as a sheer means, an instrument, a carrier of the spiritual, not a goal itself. The goal was and remained a noble and heavenly one, that is, translating the words of divine guidance onto every facet of human existence, within the private as well as public spheres.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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