



## RETHINKING THE INSTITUTION OF *MASJID* AS A COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT CENTER IN BANGLADESH

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### ABSTRACT

The institution of *masjid* (mosque) acted as the center of activities of Muslim communities for centuries. Until now, *masjid* has been a significant establishment within any Muslim community. Nevertheless, today's *masjids* are not involved with society and not as active as they were during the early age of Islam. In Bangladesh for particular, where 86% of the population is Muslim, the institution of *masjid* is merely utilized as a place of worship, devoid of any community development activity. This study aims to identify the factors behind the idleness of *masjid* institutions within Muslim communities in Bangladesh and proposes recommendations to improve the situation. There is so much potential to utilize the existing *masjids* as a center for community development by extending the scope of activities with the participation of the community members. This study compiled and analyzed the opinions of previous researchers regarding this issue and formulated queries to conduct semi-structured interviews among selected respondents. Experts and professionals were interviewed to evaluate the current scenario regarding this topic and compile recommendations proposed by them. By analyzing the results through descriptive analysis, this study concluded that several factors are responsible for the idleness of *masjids* in Muslim communities. Inefficient management, absence of income-generating schemes, exclusion of certain social groups, and inadequate facilities are the significant factors identified by this study. Some minor factors were also identified, and recommendations were made based on all of these factors. It is highly recommended that these institutions be fully utilized to develop their surrounding communities. The findings are crucial to rethink the role of the institutions of *masjid* as a significant catalyst for community development in the Muslim communities in Bangladesh.

### Keywords:

Bangladesh; Community Center; Community Development; *Masjid*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

From the very beginning of Islam, the lives of the Muslims revolved around the institution of *masjid*. The notion of "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. The next generations also followed this, and until the last Prophet, Muhammad (pbuh), evidence was found that the activities of the Muslim community were firmly attached to the institution of *masjid*. Arguments could be established regarding this statement, while the majority of the authentic references throughout history supported this opinion. Scholars worldwide, in a wide range of time, unanimously agreed upon the significance of the Prophet's (pbuh) *masjid* in the lives of the early Muslim community during the establishment of Madinah as an Islamic state around 583 AD onward [1]. For contemporary studies, it could be derived from historical evidence that the development of a Muslim community cannot be accomplished in a holistic way (both spiritually and physically) without establishing the *masjid* institution as a focus

for that community, which must support and serve the Muslims in their diversified issues evolved every day in contemporary modern society [2]. When *masjids* are able to serve a Muslim community actively, it reflects the ideal situation similar to the time of the Prophet (pbuh).

A *masjid* is an institution established on a prior basis whenever a Muslim community is formed. Therefore, in contemporary Muslim settlements, *masjids* are found everywhere [3]. Community members willingly meet each other in this institution every day to offer obligatory prayers. This creates the opportunity for communal gatherings and social interaction, forming the basis of Muslim society. Social interaction is crucial to initiate developmental activities in any community [4]–[6]. For Muslim communities, *masjids* have the most potential to act as social interaction platforms. This institution's inherent quality is about accommodating communal gatherings as its primary function. This study focuses on the potential of the *masjid* to be a center for community development in Muslim societies. Bangladesh, a Southeast Asian country with a Muslim majority, is selected as the study area. Hence, this study aims to evaluate the situation of contemporary *masjids* as potential community development centers in Bangladesh.

This study focuses on the institution of *masjid* from a functional perspective. The following process is adopted to conduct the study:

- a. Identifying reasons why *masjids* are unable to address the issues regarding contemporary phenomena.
- b. Reviewing literature and physical surveys identifying activities that could be incorporated within a *masjid's* function concerning modern Muslim society's needs, social activities, Communal activities, Welfare, Entertainment, etc.
- c. Redefining the institution of *masjid* by proposing a framework to make it more adaptable to modern Muslim communities' needs.

As stated in the previous section, this study most specifically relates to the context of Bangladesh.

The contemporary scenario is far from the ideal picture where *masjids* are recommended to serve as an active institution in the development of the community. In fact, according to several recent scholars, the situation is now the opposite. Today's *masjids* have lost their significance as a focal point for Muslim communities and remain merely as places to do prayers and perform some religious rituals in a limited scope [1], [7]–[11]. The diversified range of activities used by the early generations of Muslims centering on the *masjid* can no longer be observed in modern *masjids*. The *masjid* institution has been stripped of all its significant functions and left only with the function of offering daily and occasional prayers, meditation, or recitation [12]. This study does not indicate that prayer, meditation, and recitation are unimportant. It attempts to suggest that these functions become more meaningful and significant in the practical lives of Muslims when *masjid* institutions simultaneously serve other related functions [13].

Several issues should be taken into consideration while considering the institution of *masjid*. These issues are social, religious, economic, and political related. Without a proper understanding of the current scenario of modern Muslim societies, it is impossible to identify why present-day *masjids* cannot significantly impact Muslim communities.

Bangladesh is a country of approximately 160 million people, where 86% are Muslim [14]. The country is divided into seven divisions for administrative purposes, and the largest one of these divisions is the capital, Dhaka. Dhaka has been and continues to be a city of *masjids*. In 1985, there were 1650 well-known *masjids* in Dhaka city. However, the total number of *masjids* was around 4000. In 2005, the number of well-known *masjids* increased to 1800 while the total number in Dhaka city, including small and unimportant *masjids*, was around 7000 [15]. As an expanding city, new *masjids* are often being established in Dhaka. Unfortunately, most of these *masjids* are only used for prayers and recitation. They have no role and no contribution to developing society. Incorporating additional activities into these existing institutions could bring significant positive changes to the communities they serve Rahmani [18]. Addressing this issue, the current study focuses on identifying potential activities to be incorporated with these institutions to revive the concept of *masjid* according to the practice of the Prophet (pbuh).

#### **A. THE CRISIS OF MASJID INSTITUTION IN THE PRESENT TIME**

Unanimously, it is agreed by scholars that *masjid* should be the center of activity to accelerate the development of the Muslim community. Despite that, the present situation of contemporary Muslim societies is the opposite. It happens mainly because modern Muslim societies nowadays separate their religious and secular activities by adopting the lifestyle of the Western world. Furthermore, 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. [7]. Thus, Islam, as a complete way of life, has lost its significance within contemporary Muslim communities, and *masjid* has become a place for worship and meditation only, losing its role as the center for communal activities.

However, the recent resurgence for reviving Islam to fulfill its role as a complete way of life calls for revitalizing the *masjid* institutions so that, once again, they may act as a center of community development. [7]. According to Hesham al-Awadi, a well-known Muslim scholar and historian, Islam has to be contemporized to solve the issues evolving in present-day Muslim societies. [16]. This statement by no means implies that Islam is not contemporary enough to solve the issue of modern Muslim societies; rather, it indicates that academics and scholars need to contemporize themselves to interpret the teachings of Islam to solve the issues that Muslim communities face in the modern world.

*Masjid* institutions in the contemporary world are facing issues with multiple dimensions and are going through rapid evolution, especially in the Western world, where Muslims are a minority. The struggle of the Muslim minority regarding their recognition as Muslim citizens and the freedom to practice religion calls for redefining the conventional concept of *masjid*. Erkoçu & Buğdacı [10], in their book 'The *Masjid*: Political, Architectural and Social Transformations', raise a debate among practitioners, scholars, and academicians regarding this issue.

"Society turns out to be a more complex entity than people initially believe... many young Muslims have long since turned their backs on traditional *masjids*... what we and many other young Muslims want is a *masjid* that we can "customize", in other words, a standard but flexible building in which religion and community are central, but in which we can put together a program attuned to our needs. That means that it would have to include a variety of facilities, such as leisure- a lounge area- a bath-house, say, as well as counselling, clothes collection, and courses." [10]

Indeed, this comment opens the horizon for thinking about *masjids* in different functional dimensions. However, the authors stated, "This would be nothing new since *masjids* have always had that multifunctional role. It makes them lively, ensures the building is financially viable, and gives it a place in society." [10]

As written in his book titled 'Rethinking Islamic Architecture', Rasdi [2] reported, "Today, fortunately, the relevance of God to every aspect and element of space-time is being discovered by Western Christendom and the repudiation of an isolated, unique, religious, holy or sacred element is being prepared for. In its place, the religiousness of everything is being discovered, a religiousness that does not consist in the thing's being a mere *relatum*. Islam has for centuries been teaching the religiousness of all space-time, of all life." [2] The statement clearly announces the timelessness of Islamic teachings and their validity throughout the period.

The sources of Islamic laws are flexible enough to deal with contemporary issues. Moreover, the laws contain specific rules and thoughts that allow a response to modernizing Muslim cultural and physical contexts [9]. It implies that Muslims can take advantage of other cultures, i.e., the Western culture, to gain some benefits. However, the original values should lie in the teachings of Islam, even in a modern context. Again, that Western culture is going through a re-evaluation and trying to re-discover values from the past is an irony. So, according to Hisham Mortada [9], "it would be inappropriate for Muslims to follow or adopt any behavioral characteristics or habit which is in the West itself subject to criticism and re-evaluation." [9]

Another significant issue regarding the present crisis is the seclusion of the community's female group from the *masjid's* premise. This unfortunate phenomenon did not prevail during the early Muslim generations. Hamid [17] reported that during the time of the Prophet (pbuh) and the earlier generation of Muslims, women attended *masjids*, as did men, for all kinds of prayers and some activities. However, with the development of orthodox notions, morality teachers questioned women's participation in the *masjid*.

Due to such restrictions, a separate compartment inside the *masjid* developed gradually for women, which is certainly not the same phenomenon as the time of the Prophet (pbuh). It is custom or tradition rather than religious prohibition that reduces or sometimes negates the participation of women in the institution of *masjid*; instead, they are equally entitled to attend.

Regarding the issue of women in the *masjid*, Tariq Ramadan said, as reported by Erkoçu & Buğdacı [10], "People are talking about men and women praying together... as if it is something new... they were astonished... yet the prophet (pbuh) himself once said, listen to my daughter when she speaks in the *masjid*!" [10]

This phenomenon can be identified as one of the crises regarding *masjid* institutions. An institution serving the needs of both genders (male and female) may be more important to society than one serving only the needs of one group (male). It is, therefore, essential to study the position of the *masjid's* function concerning the needs of the female segment of the community [17].

In dealing with the issue of Islamic revival in modern times and developing a guideline for the physical context of Muslim societies, Rasdi [7] called for a revival of Sunnah architecture [7]. He agreed with Basim Selim al-Hakim in this regard, who pioneered the use of Sunnah (the teachings and practices of the Prophet, peace be upon him) to derive criteria for urban design and city planning, compiling a significant list of hadith and juristic rulings on various aspects of Islamic urban design [2].

Muslims were innovative and inspiring, not introverted but out worldwide. Nevertheless, today, people confuse seeking inspiration in the past with copying the past. Concrete and steel, molded into historical forms, cannot conjure up the spirit of the old Islamic empire. Nostalgia is a beautiful, fragile emotion, but bombastic buildings reflect only lousy taste and ignorance [10].

The statement above called for a revival in innovation, creativity, open-mindedness, and the courage to explore to bring back Islam's lost glory. Creative solutions to design and plan *masjids* with flexibility and functional variety would be a step towards it. Furthermore, this requires people with vision and imagination.

As reported by Erkoçu & Buğdacı [10], Azra Akšamija argued about the preconceived formal expression for designing or defining *masjids* and provision for innovation. She stated, "The absence of a formal definition of the *masjid* allows for innovation in *masjid* design. Yet, innovation can only be possible if both architects and Muslim communities accept the foundational ideological elasticity of Islam that allows for the *masjid*'s formal transformation and cultural adaptability." [10]. Tariq Ramadan believes the principle of Islam can be translated repeatedly into a form suitable to each new context; creativity is a crucial role player in this regard [10].

So, the principles of Islam can be applied to redefine the architecture of the *masjid* as a center for community development. However, it requires a brief discussion of the philosophy of Islamic architecture based on the Quran, Sunnah and the texts of early scholars. This study will address these sources to derive a guideline for defining the architecture of *masjid* according to Islamic principles.

## **B. ROLE OF THE *MASJID* INSTITUTION IN BENGAL REGION**

According to Rahmani [18], before the colonial period in the Indian sub-continent (pre-1947), the history of Islamic rule over the Bengal region had a significant positive impact on the lives of people residing there [18]. Until then, rulers and education patrons established numerous *masjids* and affiliated madrasas (schools) across the region, which resulted in an intellectual uprising among the Muslims of Bengal. Because of this *masjid*-based education, finding any person who needed to be taught about Islam's teachings and other related study areas was difficult. This trend of *masjid*-based education continued until the colonial power introduced different modes of education and patronized institutions to follow the new system.

The statement above proved the importance of *masjid*'s role in the lives of Muslim communities in this region and how the institution of the *masjid* upgraded intellectual values by providing a system of education that was traditional and effective regarding the context.

Concerning the present-day situation, Rahmani [18] identified three kinds of education systems, such as:

1. Informal education (teachings from family, society, and so on),
2. Formal education (provided by the formal educational institutions),
3. Non-formal education (provided by institutions other than the formal ones) [18].

It is recommended that evaluating the success of providing non-formal education through the institution of *masjid* from 1953 until the present time, steps should be taken to reinforce this program to ensure literacy for every person [18].

The targets of Non-formal education campaign in 1990-1992, titled "*Masjid*-based children and mass education plan" are:

- a) Establish a well-organized *masjid*-based basic education system for the children,
- b) Prepare the children for joining the primary education institutes,
- c) Reduce dropout issues by providing education to the children who failed to attain formal institutions,
- d) Encourage adult literacy programs,
- e) Contribute to the process of continuing education.

These campaigns gained mass popularity; thus, the targeted population was achieved within the given period. This shows the acceptance of *masjid* institutions among the Muslim communities in Bangladesh and the vast potential that these institutions hold to contribute to other spheres of life [18].

As Hamid [17] reported, Ali Asgar Bhuinya, in his report titled "*Imams* as a teacher" written in 1960, made a significant plan to use the potential of *masjid* institutions as existing infrastructure to promote mass education. For this purpose, the Academy of Rural Development in Comilla (Bangladesh) took up a vital project in 1968 to use the rural *masjids* as schools and functionaries like Imam and Muezzin as teachers. It was reported that quite encouraging results were being achieved [17].

In a daily newspaper known as Haq Katha in 1972, the respected leader of Bangladesh both in pre-independence and post-independence times, Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani, who fought for the regeneration of Islamic ideals, stated that 96 thousand *masjids* of Bangladesh are lying in a state of lifelessness. The people who lost their sense of direction due to recent social upheavals are not able to wholeheartedly attend Allah's services in *masjid*, the active centers of social, economic, and mental upliftment. *Masjid*-centered organizations should be built up." [17]

Before the colonial invasion in the sub-continent, people had an effective traditional and indigenous education system. The teachers were the *imams* of the Muslim society, and the institutions were known as *Maktub*. This mass education medium had a tremendous following in rural areas. The rural people maintained it; it was deeply rooted within the society. Foreign systems imposed on the people failed to achieve this Indigenous system's impact on people's lives [17]. Realizing the significance of these institutions, Ali Asgar Bhuinya proposed a program to develop education in rural areas, which recommended the idea of *masjid*-centered *maktab*. [17]

Regarding higher education and significant centers of learning, it is prominent from historical evidence that all great *masjids* also served as great centers for learning. For example, the *masjid* of Al-Azhar, which was established in 970 A.D., started with only 35 students [17]. The number of graduates in 1985-1984 was 10,710 people, including male and female students [19]. Al-Azhar is no longer an old-fashioned madrasa for religious education; it is now a modern university managing different faculties and is fully facilitated with residential provisions for the students and other necessary social and cultural facilities [17].

Regarding community development and the institution of *masjid*, another institution has played a vital role since its establishment in Bangladesh. Initially established as an Islamic Academy in 1960 (pre-independence time) in Dhaka, the institution eventually merged with the National *Masjid* Society and was named "Islamic Foundation Bangladesh" in 1975 (post-independence) [20]. From the beginning, this foundation has been associated primarily with the National *Masjid* of Bangladesh.

Among the programs that the Islamic Foundation conducts, there are:

- a) Islamic mission: social welfare, poverty alleviation, accessible health facilities, disaster management, moral development, etc.,
- b) Zakat board: collect and distribute Zakat on a national level,
- c) *Masjid* library,
- d) Imam training centers,
- e) *Masjid*-based children's education program,
- f) Developing Islamic Encyclopedia,
- g) Da'wah/Islamic preaching programs,
- h) Islamic publication programs,
- i) Research,
- j) Financial donations.

The Islamic Foundation is dedicated to serving the needs of Muslim communities nationwide. Most programs are conducted through the *masjid* all over Bangladesh [20]

## 2. METHODS

This study aims to explore certain issues regarding the institution of *masjid*. Belonging within the area of social science research, it approaches the issues systematically and empirically. It falls under the research area of evaluation, having the features of data collection and analysis as a basis for assessing the activeness of the *masjid* institution within particular communities.

As the study had focused on the functional crisis of the *masjid*, the qualitative research method was chosen to conduct the process because it would allow the collection and compiling of necessary data and comparative study of selective cases to conclude. This study has used the qualitative research approach where it describes the practices and life of the Muslim communities regarding the institution of *masjid*.

### A. CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

The study was conducted within the context of Bangladesh, the fourth-largest Muslim country by population. 86% of the population of Bangladesh are Muslim. The whole country is divided into nine divisions, and among these, the most important area is the central division - Dhaka, which was named according to its most significant city. The 400-year historic capital city of different regimes and currently serving as the capital of Bangladesh, Dhaka city is known as the "city of *masjid*" [21]. This study focuses on the *masjids* of Dhaka city, considering its long and steep history as an Islamic city and its virtual significance over the country's other cities. Based on the classification of *masjid*, three types of *masjid*, namely National *Masjid*, Djami *Masjid* or Friday *Masjid*, and Community *Masjid*, are selected within Bangladesh for evaluation. As for the case studies, Bait-Al\_Muqarram *Masjid* was selected as Bangladesh's National *Masjid*. Apart from the National *Masjid*, the other two *masjids* are selected based on their scale, innovative way of incorporating activities, and apparent significant impact on the surrounding communities, namely, *Masjid* Al-Amin (Djami *Masjid*) and *Masjid* Dar-ul-Ulum (Community *Masjid*). The selected interviewees are related to the management, activity organizer, and day-to-day usage of the case studies.

## B. SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW

Experts' interviews contributed to the compilation of significant information for conducting the comparative analysis of selected examples and, therefore, directed the study towards generating a framework as stated in the research scope. The interview sessions were conducted qualitatively, establishing a conversational mode with open-ended questions. Comments of the interviewees were noted and later organized under specific topics. Sessions with the experts include (a) an academician, (b) an architect, (c) a high-level official of a renowned *masjid* in Bangladesh, (d) an *imam*, and (e) manager operations of a non-profit organization that upholds the values and practices of Islam among communities. The commentaries are organized into five topics addressing the research problem from different angles. The interviewees were encouraged to talk about the original idea of the *masjid* followed by contemporary situations; the same sequence is maintained while presenting the topics.

The findings of this study served several purposes. First, it identified why people were detached from the *masjid's* institution. This led to the second stage, where the study discussed probable recommendations relating the *masjid's* institution to contemporary Muslim societies' needs. Finally, an outline of appropriate programs and recommendations has been suggested that could revive the institution of the *masjid* to contribute actively to the development of the community (Figure 1).

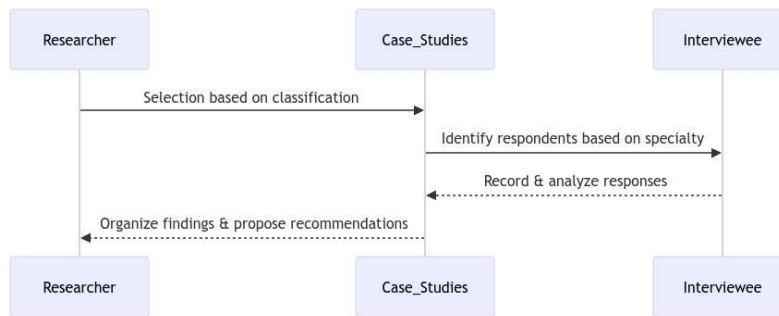


Figure 1. Simplified research design diagram

## 3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### A. FINDINGS FROM THE SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW

This section presents the significant findings from the semi-structured interviews. The details of the interviewees are kept confidential due to the ethical considerations and the nature of the data presented on national issues.

#### A. 1. Universality of Prophet (Pbuh) *Masjid*

An Islamic society is based on religious practices. Because of this, *masjid* became the center of society. A high-level official of a renowned *masjid* in Bangladesh commented,

*"Prophet (pbuh) built his masjid on a priority basis after establishing the first Muslim community at Madinah. However, he did not emphasize the structure itself; rather, he focused on constructing a generation of the spiritually developed community."* [Interviewee c]

The Prophet's (pbuh) *masjid* was planned in a minimalistic way where simplicity was the fundamental characteristic. It was a *masjid* based on activities, not aesthetic appreciation of elemental value.

The academician commented on the characteristics of the Prophet (pbuh) *masjid* layout. He said, *"The prophet's (pbuh) masjid laid the basis for masjid architecture in Islam. Later, the materials were changed to be more durable, whereas the layout remained unchanged. This layout was developed to hold communal gatherings of the community."* [Interviewee a]

He further commented on the transparency of this *masjid* in its activities.

*"Another characteristic of this layout was that every activity was transparent and clear to all the community members. So, the understanding and trust of the community members towards this institution developed naturally."* [Interviewee a]

### A. 2. *Masjid* as a Training Center of Community Members for Developmental Activities

Two different opinions are recorded regarding this topic. The first is the approach where individual development is prioritized over collective development. It states that the community's spiritual development has more significance than the physical development at an initial stage. A Muslim community is recommended to serve several significant activities centering on the institution of the *masjid*, which accelerates the development process within the society. Emphasizing the seclusion of Muslims to ensure a controlled training environment, two of the interviewees stated,

*"It is more important to train the community members in a secluded and controlled environment and then send them back to their community for rendering their services."* [Interviewee b & c]

The second opinion, which was the opinion of most interviewees, affirms that social interaction plays the most vital role in creating a balanced society, which is a precondition to partake in any developmental activities. Preferred by other interviewees, this opinion said,

*"Masjid within a Muslim community has the most potential to be the social interaction platform. Socialization is the initial platform for community development."* [Interviewee a, d, & e]

In modern communities, the interaction among neighbors has decreased significantly. A *masjid* can be the place to revive the relationship among neighbors, resulting in a better harmonious community. According to the Sunnah of the Prophet (pbuh), *masjids* are recommended to be highly active. The interviewees highlight the *masjid's* inherent nature of holding social gatherings.

*"The social interaction during the daily five prayers could play a vital role. The young members of the community have more potential to perform developmental activities for the community, but often, discontinuation or inconsistency stops the progress. Trust is the keystone of growing a harmonious society. Masjid allows the action of building trust among people through interaction and sharing common activities."* [Interviewee a, d, & e]

### A. 3. *Masjid* as an Interaction Platform for Different Social Groups

Regarding the incorporation of different age groups and gender within the *masjid*, two opinions were recorded. The first one is that the women folks of the community are advised to stay at home rather than come and take part in the activities within the *masjid*. It says,

*"Masjids must have educational activities for men while the women are advised to participate in educational activities within their homes. Programs for children can be held within masjid premises also."* [Interviewee b & c]

The majority holds the view that the women members of the community, as well as the children and the seniors, are highly appreciated for participating in the *masjid's* activities. Not only do the men within the society connect in *masjids*, but the women and children can socialize within the premise of *masjid*.

*"Masjid helps the neighborhood's growth in a healthy and wholesome manner. Men, women, children, and senior citizens all share the opportunity to meet and connect with people of their choice and create a balanced and active social life."* [Interviewee a, d, & e].

### A. 4. *Masjid* in Contemporary Scenario

Islamic architecture is not recommended to be object-oriented. Icons or elements are not important here. It requires durability and functionality along with aesthetics. Muslims did not confine themselves to the culture and practices of the place of birth, i.e., the Arabian Peninsula.

*"Muslims adopted, practiced, and improved the practices, technologies, and knowledge of the conquered regions at a later period. Austerity is another significant characteristic of masjid architecture. Cost-effective materials and technology are recommended for planning and constructing masjid."* [Interviewee a & b]

One of the issues that contemporary *masjids* face is the problem of over-sanctification. Other religious cultures influenced the over-sanctification of the *masjid* institution at a later period. For example, as stated by the academicians,

*"In the Indian subcontinent, the over-sanctification of masjids resulted from the influence of Hindu temples."* [Interviewee a]

Nowadays, there is confusion regarding what might be incorporated within the sacred premise of the *masjid*. Because of this over-sanctification, many initiatives are forced to stop to maintain the sanctity of the *masjid*. However, he also pointed out the conflict between upholding the *masjid's* sanctity and the ruler class's tendency not to maintain transparency in their activities. He said,

*"Masjid does not allow corruption or wrongdoings. That is why, in the later period, the ruling class excluded their activities from the institution of masjid. Justice, discipline and practice of good deeds are preconditions to revive the institution of masjid for developing a Muslim community."* [Interviewee a]

Another issue was pointed out by one of the interviewees. It is the social networking within contemporary *masjids*. He said,

"Modern-day people depend a lot on social networking through the internet in the virtual world. *Masjid* has the potential to be the real-life social networking platform where members of the community can connect." [Interviewee e]

#### A. 5. Political Influences and Restrictions on *Imams'* Role

The issue of government-appointed *imams* and the restrictions imposed upon them to only express opinions on subjects approved by the government significantly reduce their ability to contribute to the community's affairs.

"As the *masjid* is stripped of all the relevant activities to have a positive impact on contemporary societies, similarly, the role of the *imams* has also become solely spiritual, which is virtually disconnected from all the day-to-day issues in which people may seek guidance or advice from the *imams* of their community. Over sanctification of the *masjid* put restrictions to incorporate activities within its premise, and similarly over sanctification of the *imam's* role reduces his ability to participate in the communal activities independently." [Interviewee d & e]

There are key differences between government-appointed *imams* and independent *imams*. Independent *imams* can join the community's activities and express opinions without certain restrictions. Interviewee 'e' pointed out the main issue regarding this by saying,

"Leadership conflict and political influences can deteriorate a *masjid* from its original role." [Interviewee e]

### B. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The proposed recommendations are linked with the research objectives, focusing on the factors that enable *masjid* institutions to increase their participation in community development. The recommendations are compiled below under a specific title.

#### B. 1. Administrative Factor

An efficient *masjid* management committee comprising highly skilled personnel as well as scholars is an essential requirement for a *masjid* to be highly active. The management of *Al-Amin Masjid* and *Dar-ul-Ulum Masjid* has made these *masjids* distinguishable from the other existing *masjids* in the community. Significantly, the educated sector of the community prefers to join the activities due to the association of these *masjids* with the renowned scholars of the country.



Figure 2. *Dar-ul-Ulum Masjid*, Friday sermons are being recorded for online distribution as an outreach strategy by the management

#### B. 2. Formal and Non-Formal Educational Activities

These activities allow the community members to learn and discuss religion and other relevant topics from scholars. In contemporary societies, all people do not usually have the provision to attend formal religious educational institutions except for the students of religious schools, which are quite a few. Hence, in Muslim communities, it is recommended that the *masjids* arrange this kind of program regularly [22]. The study cases recorded that, despite the busy scheduled urban life, most community members are willing to participate in these kinds of educational programs arranged by their local community *masjids* (Figure 3).





Figure 3. Bayt al-Mukarram, Islamic Foundation Bangladesh Library as the national Islamic resource center

### B. 3. Effective and Rational Economic Scheme

For the sustenance of the *masjid*, financially effective economic schemes are recommended to be applied from the beginning. Most of the *masjids* usually survive on donations. Because of this, these *masjids* can barely cover their expenses for salaries and bills, let alone help out the community's people. If this is the case, *masjids* cannot participate effectively in community development. So, the management committee must plan commercial activities along with the other programs [23]. In Muslim communities, *masjids* have an advantage because the community members visit the *masjid* five times every day, and any commercial activity governed by the *masjid* naturally has the support of these people to sustain (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Bayt al-Mukarram, Market courtyard

### B. 4. Planning for Phased Development

Extending and expanding the physical structure and extent of activities for small-scale *masjids* is not always possible. Financial constraints play a significant role in this regard. This is why developmental works are recommended to be planned to be executed in phases. Usually, the *masjids* in Bangladesh follow phased development for expansion or upgrading the structure. However, it is also crucial that they extend their facilities and activities in phases so that more community members have the provision to join. Also, it would be easier to assess if the community members welcome any program the *masjid* offers (Figure 5 & 6).

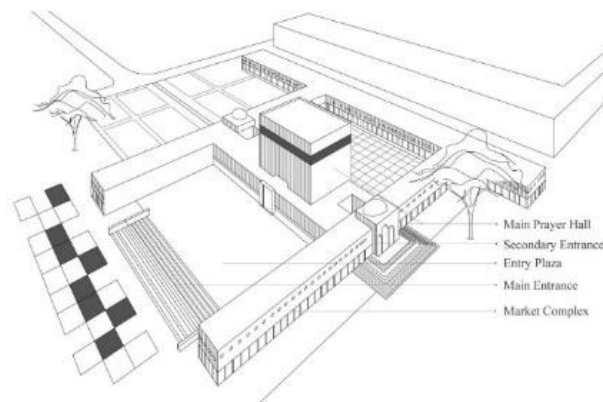


Figure 5. *Masjid* Bait-al-Muqarram, original design

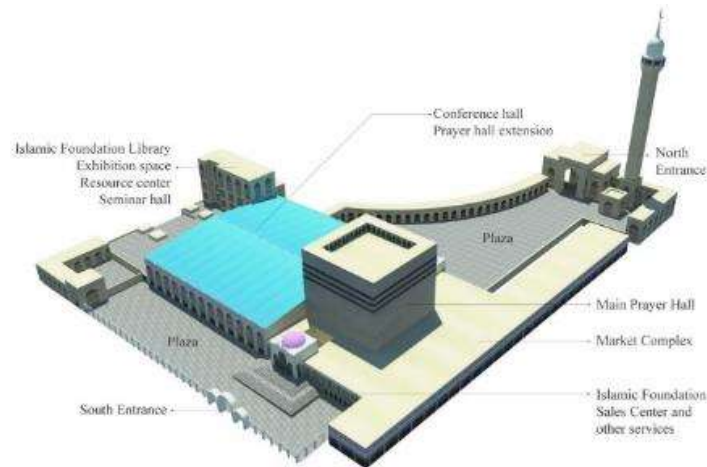


Figure 6. Bait-al-Muqarram *Masjid* , a phased development showing the conference hall as an extension of prayer space and the Islamic Foundation library as the resource center

### B. 5. Spatial Provision for All Groups

The development of a community cannot be done with a limited group of people (i.e., the men) while excluding the other groups of society (i.e., women, children, and elderly). Providing spaces for women to join the *masjid* activities is not usually practised in Bangladesh, which has become a tradition. Men do not expect the female members of the community to join the prayers and other activities in the *masjid* as well, and the women tend to think that they are not allowed to do so. Fortunately, the situation is changing gradually. Few *masjids* in the country, providing spaces for women and encouraging them to join the prayers and other activities, are gaining popularity among the educated sectors of society. These *masjids*, for example, Al-Amin *Masjid* and Dar-ul-Ulum *Masjid*, are more actively involved in developing the surrounding communities (Figure 7).

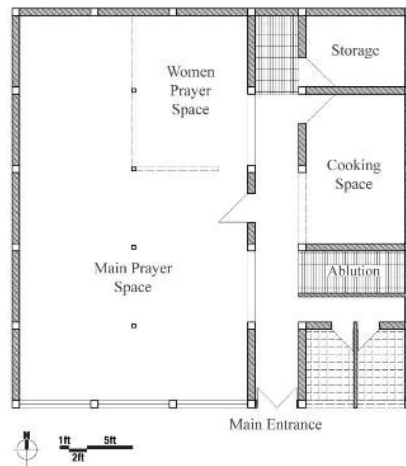


Figure 7. Dar-ul-Ulum *Masjid* has a provision for women to participate in the *masjid's* activities.

### B. 6. Provision of Leisure Activities

The youth in any society are the key to bringing positive changes. They have the energy, time, and creativity to get involved with the community's issues and participate in active developmental works. So, the *masjid* must provide sufficient facilities for leisure and entertainment activities to attract the youth to its premises. Leisure activities are also useful for children and elderly members of society. It ensures a healthy interaction among different age groups, thus creating harmony in society (Figure 8).



Figure 8. Dar-ul-Ulum *Masjid*, Informal session after prayer with the Ustadh

### B. 7. Incorporate Modern Technologies to Reach Out to People

Communication and networking with people are vital for reaching out to people nowadays. *Masjids* are physical, social hubs where people communicate and interact. Technological advancement enables *masjid* to bring this social interaction platform into the virtual world. By taking advantage of online social networking, *masjids* can reach out to people so that they may benefit from the teachings of Islam (Figure 9).



Figure 9. Al-Amin *Masjid*, Online activity page on the Facebook platform

### B. 8. Practice Sustainable Design Scheme

It is recommended that *masjids* apply sustainable design schemes to minimize their impact on nature [24]. The *masjid* is the center where people come to learn and practice good deeds. So, a sustainable approach towards design will ensure a healthy and friendly environment for the Muslims as well as encourage them to spend more time in the *masjid* and participate in its activities. Moreover, people will learn to be sensitive in dealing with the environment if the interaction hub of their community, i.e. the *masjid* itself, is designed in an environmentally friendly way. Contextual architecture is more acceptable for the community, and it enables people to connect easily with their community *masjid*, which is recommended to be the hub of activities for Muslim societies.

## 4. CONCLUSION

The institution of *masjid* acts as the central hub for Muslim communities. Because of the Muslims' religious obligation, they establish a *masjid* whenever a community is formed at any place. No matter how limited the activity of a *masjid* is, it will always be visited by community members and play its role as a hub for social interaction. So, the existence of this institution within a Muslim community is compulsory, and this fact is undeniable. Moreover, being an institution where people come willingly and interact with each other, the *masjid* holds enormous potential to contribute to the betterment of society. The participation of *masjid* institutions in active community development was evident in the early *masjids*, but in the later period, Muslims observed a gradual deterioration of this practice. The contemporary *masjids* are evidence of this phenomenon where the lives of Muslims in the society are primarily detached from this institution except for prayers. This study set up the objectives to identify and analyze the factors that enable the institution of the *masjid* to revive its role as a center for community development.

This study focused on three particular *masjids* in Bangladesh. The data were collected from these three *masjids* and opinions from experts residing in Bangladesh. The recommendations are appropriate primarily for the context of *masjids* in Bangladesh. However, being a qualitative study, the recommendations were made in a general manner, which broadened the scope of their implications. *Masjid* is a universal institution, and the concept of this institution is similar for all times and places. Only the physical characteristics of the *masjid* differ from place to place, depending on the context. This study focused on the idea of a *masjid* institution, its significance within a community, and its potential to contribute to it. So, the recommendations are also based on these factors rather than the physical properties of the *masjid*. Thus, the findings apply not only to the *masjids* in Bangladesh but also to the *masjids* in Muslim settlements.

Further scope of research on this topic requires a series of quantitative studies based on the output of this research and separate studies focusing on the communities where Muslims are a minority. This research and the other projected research are aimed towards the more significant benefit for the world's Muslims by empowering *masjids*, the most significant institution of Islam.

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