

Seerah-un-Nabi: A Source of Inspiration for Social Reform

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Abstract

Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) Seerah is a rich source of inspiration for social justice and change and provides both, ideologies and pragmatic solutions for today's global issues. It is the purpose of this abstract to examine and discuss how the life and the teachings of the Prophet contain a holistic paradigm for the development of ethical leadership and justice as well as the process of change in communities. From critical areas of the Seerah, this paper focuses on core aspects of Prophet Mohammed's life, including his fight for social justice, the common good and the principle of right conduct that, when applied to today's society, reveal the prophetic model for contemporary social change. Integral to the Seerah when it comes to social transformation is the stress laid on the ethical principles of leadership. Thus, the Prophet's clear focus on the principles of truth, justice, and accountability can give direction to the leaders who face the challenges of contemporary states' management based on the Islamic principles. Further, the Seerah reintroduces the virtues of social interaction and involvement in the community affairs as depicted by the collective responsibility to fight for social justice, as well as problem-solving skills on how to overcome barriers to effect change. That is why these principles are quite important at the present stage when society faces a number of challenges including inequality, corruption, and fragmentation. Standing in the context of social reform, this abstract ends with the plea of Muslims to look for inspiration in the Seerah. The solutions brought by the teachings of prophet Muhammad (PBUH) are practical and based on the principles of human justice and equity. Thus, through the application of these principles in their private and public spheres, it is possible for Muslims to become bearers of the message of the Seerah and become part of the solution to some of the problems besetting contemporary society. This work finally emphasises the significance of the Seerah as a resource for change and reform in the present world.

Keywords: Seerah, Prophetic Traditions, Social Reforms, Islamic Values, Positive Change.

Introduction

The Seerah-un-Nabi is basically a biography of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) which comprises of his life story, deeds, and sayings. It gives the account of his birth in Mecca, his

prophethood, and the Islamic state in Medina. While the Seerah provides details about his character, his management skill and the difficulties he encountered while trying to convey the message of Islam. His life also demonstrates for Muslims how the principles of Islam were put to practice in different spheres of life. This is the reason why Ibn Ishaq and al-Tabari have given a lot of details about these occurrences which are so useful in understanding the early Islamic period (Ibn Ishaq, 1955; al-Tabari, 1987). Social reform therefore encompasses the changes that seek to be made to the social fabric of a society based on social, economic and political challenges. It is the fundamental concept for establishing justice, equity and welfare of societies. Social reforms may be used to rectify inequalities and bring about positive change through policy and practice improvements in people's quality of life and social wellbeing. Traditionally, social reform movements have been crucial in the formation of the present society and in guaranteeing that every person get an equal chance and the necessities of life (Marshall, 1998). In Islam, social reform is a very important part of justice and equity as enshrined in the teachings of the Holy Prophet (PBUH).

It is, however, imperative to emphasize the fact that the life and teachings of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) offer solutions to most of the current social issues. His teaching on justice, charity, and moral behaviour provides a way of handling current problems like unfairness, poverty, and social injustice. It is therefore possible to learn from the principles of the Seerah and come up with strategies that will help society in the current world in the quest for social change that is acceptable in the Islamic faith. By so doing, this approach not only embraces the moral and ethical trend as promulgated by the Prophet of Islam but also helps in the process of transforming society into a more balanced one (Rahman, 2009). Therefore, the Seerah holds a universal guide to how social problems arise and can be dealt with in today's society.

The Prophetic Model of Social Change

The Pre-Islamic Arabian society also known as the period of 'The Age of Ignorance' or 'Jahiliyyah' was characterized by extreme tribalism, unfairness, and immorality. The Arabian Peninsula in the period under review was an arid climate region, and the main basis of existence was the power of clans. These tribes had a tendency to fight one another and revenge and blood feuds were rife among them (Mernissi, 1991). The society was also very much dominated by men and the female gender and other minorities had no say and were very much exploited. Women were subjugated, infanticide of females was practised, slavery

was rife and there was economic injustice (Donner, 1999). The religious demography was also highly diverse: polytheistic, and idolatry; the Kaaba in Mecca, for example, was home to numerous tribal idols. These two factors are attributed to the fact that there was no well-defined moral or legal authority and hence there was rampant corruption and moral depravity (Watt, 1953). Trade especially in Mecca was another source of income but it was associated with evils of interest bearing and fraudulent practices (Hawting, 1982). The society was thus left with no justice, ethical rule and no spiritual guide, which created the vacuum filled by the arrival of the Prophet of Islam, peace and blessings be upon him.

In this respect, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was a very deep social reformer in this context, who came up with a message that was aimed at targeting the roots or causes of pre-Islamic Arabian society. His position was not only a religious one but also a social one where he was both a guide to the people's souls and an advocate of change in the society (Esposito, 2002). The basic tenets of the message of the Prophet when he began receiving revelations were Tawhid and the sanctity of human life, principles that would form the bedrock of a civilised society (Armstrong, 2006). He criticized the vices that were prominent in the society including; subjection of women, support of the poor, and inhumane treatment of slaves (Watt, 1953). He taught that people should respect the rights of the other and defend the rights of the oppressed or minorities and the need to set up social justice measures (Donner, 1999). The house of the Prophet and his endeavours of building a community in Yathrib also known as Medina or the Ummah was significant in that it was a society that was founded on equity and justice, laws of the society were derived from divine revelation and thus ethical (Esposito, 2002). His ability to solve inter-tribal disputes and to unite the people of Medina, making them feel like brothers and respect each other was another way through which the Prophet of Islam was a reformist leader (Mernissi, 1991).

Eradicating social injustice is one important principle that can be learned from the Seerah; the life of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). The basic principle is Tawhed, which asserts the oneness of God and, thereby, of humanity irrespective of color, tribe or race (Armstrong, 2006). Another principle is justice (Adl), which the Prophet (PBUH) emphasized and proposed as the basis of the society's management. This is evident in his endeavours to set up a sociable legal order that would give every person fairness without discriminating against the high ranking in the society (Esposito, 2002). Another element of the Prophets Leadership style was Shura which in English translates as consultation and

therefore making everyone involved in governance (Donner, 1999). Moreover, the Seerah also stresses on the principle of Rahmah, which translated means compassion and mercy as the principles that the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) applied to all his interactions with individuals in society (Watt, 1953). The Prophet's call for education and knowledge for the emancipation and uplifting of society is clear indication of the value of attaining both, intellectual and spiritual enlightenment (Hawting, 1982). These principles as formulated sum up the comprehensive social message of change based on ethical and spiritual values which the Prophet of Islam (PBUH) used to transform his society for the better.

Addressing Social Injustice

The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was a champion of equality and human rights for people in early Medinian society, which gave them justice throughout the world. He categorically turned down the tribal structure that characterized Arabian society before the emergence of Islam, and proclaimed that all people were equal in the sight of Allah (Rahman, 1979). The Prophet also stressed that the criteria of judging a person are based not on their ancestry or wealth but on their level of righteousness, as the Prophet Muhammad in his last sermon stated that there is no preference for an Arab over a non-Arab, or for a white person over a black person except that one who has taqwa and avoids evil (Haykal, 1976). His teachings included the respect for women, the poor, and the slaves and an assurance of their rights; this was in contrast to the culture of the time (Siddiqui, 1996). Another area of justice that the Prophet of Islam was very insistent on as one of the fundamental principles of Islam was justice in legal affairs, where he always emphasized the need for fairness, and made sure that even the oppressed groups of the society could turn to law and get fair trial (Gibb, 1983). This commitment to equality and human rights was the ethical foundation of the first Muslim community, respect for the other and social integration (Nasr, 2002).

Eradication of poverty and economic injustice was given due consideration by Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) since both these aspects remained major threats to societal order and human honor. He also initiated the practice of Zakat a kind of forced charity through which the Muslims were obliged to offer a portion of their income for the assistance of the needy (Watt, 1988). This system not only eradicated poverty but also established equality in terms of financial status within the community and minimized the conflict based on the economics (Abu-Rabi', 2003). Apart from Zakat, the Prophet (PBUH) also taught the people the importance of voluntary charity or Sadaqah in order to promote the culture of

giving among the people so that they will be more responsible in helping the needy (Hallaq, 2009). He also defended fair business practices that prohibited the taking of interest (usury Riba) and that of practicing deception in business dealings (Ghamus), (Rahman 1980). Economic changes initiated by the Prophet made an attempt to balance the society's wealth circulation, and the needs of the community members. To achieve this, the Prophet (PBUH) worked towards eradicating economic injustices so as to do away with the factors that would cause social imbalance and make people have to fend for themselves in order to have a decent livelihood (Izutsu, 2002).

The concept of social welfare or community development was in fact a core part of the prophetic vision for society. He brought into being a well-coordinated social welfare state that took care of the elderly, the orphans, the widows and the needy in the society; the vulnerable in society were not overlooked (Hamidullah, 1993). The Prophet (PBUH) of Islam stressed on social cohesion where the rich are to help the poor and there is a responsibility that each and every person share (Khan, 1998). He also set foundations for community development by supporting education and equally distribution of resources since he understood that knowledge and resource was key to the sustainable development of the Ummah (Nasr, 2002). One of the important plans that have been launched by the Prophet was the idea of Waqf (endowment), where money and the property was used for public benefit, for the financing of schools, hospitals and other necessary services (Hassan, 1982). Such processes not only enhanced the well-being of the individuals but also helped to build a working social body the members of which are ready to face all possible kinds of pressure from outside (Esposito, 1998).

Building a Strong and Cohesive Society

The principles of family and kinship within the framework of Islamic teachings are a cornerstone in the formation of a unified and integrated society. The family is regarded as the foundation of social organization and is responsible for the moral and ethical education of the individuals. In the light of Islamic teachings, one is supposed to keep good relations with ones kith and kin as this provides them with a sense of security and stability. The Quran and Hadith contains numerous directive on the importance of family as faithful is encouraged to respect their parents, take care of their relatives and uphold the relationship of kinship (Kamali, 2008). When these values are maintained, people help to make society stronger and more united.

Besides the family, there is a need to promote togetherness and coexistence in the larger society to promote unity in the society. For Islam, Ummah or the Muslim nation is a significant characteristic which cuts across ethnic, racial or national identity. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) has left behind a legacy of respect, cooperation and peaceful solution of all disputes and conflicts (Siddiqui, 2012). These principles help the Muslims to come together for the achievement of a common goal and foster unity among the Muslims thus reducing factionalism. The focus of community members on each other's welfare and support enhances the social cohesion of the people and leads to more stability and progress in society.

Education and knowledge are essential for social change, and a society that is well-built and coherent. Islam mandates people to seek knowledge since it is one of the ways through which the community and individuals can be improved. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) famously stated, "Seeking knowledge is an obligation upon every Muslim" (Ibn Majah, n.d.). Education fosters critical thinking, moral development, and social awareness, empowering individuals to contribute positively to society (Rahman, 1982). By promoting educational initiatives and creating opportunities for learning, Islamic societies can ensure that their members are well-equipped to address contemporary challenges and work towards the betterment of the entire community.

Interfaith Harmony and Tolerance

Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) Seerah can be viewed as a rich source of the teachings of interfaith cooperation and tolerance for social justice. Non-Muslims were also treated with respect and justice by the Prophet (PBUH), and the main message was tolerance of other people's beliefs. One of those examples is the Charter of Medina that he signed, which would make Medina a city for all three religions: Muslims, Jews, and other people of other religions lived in Medina with equality and friendly relations. This social contract did not only ensure the freedom of religion but also justice and responsibility of each individual. The lessons that can be learnt from the Charter of Medina are still significant in the modern world as it outlines the foundation for the formation of societies in which people of different groups can coexist (Lings, 1983).

The Prophet's (PBUH) relations with non-Muslims are also used to explain his efforts to build bridges with other people of other religions. He was courteous in his debate with Christians, Jews, and pagans, and answered all their questions, either with subtle logic or with evident patience. Another event that also speaks volume of his diplomatic nature of

solving conflict rather than opting for war is the Treaty of Hudaibiyyah. Non-Muslims' safety and their rights mean that Islam is a religion that protects all people encompassing all the religions. Besides enhancing the social cohesion of the early generation of Muslims, this strategy also provided a clear path for the succeeding generations to emulate in as much as inter-religious tolerance is concerned (Haykal, 1976).

In modern world, the Seerah of the Prophet (PBUH) is a source of guidance in combating problems of religious radicalism and societal disintegration. Hence it is possible for the communities of the present generation to construct a more liberal world by using the principles of justice, compassion and respect for the diversity. The Prophet (PBUH) himself is a beacon of social change and the message of Islam is a symbol of social justice in which the main purpose of religion is to unite people and spread the message of tolerance among them. He urged his followers to accept the non-Muslims and to work for the improvement of the society by respecting other people's differences instead of condemning them (Watt, 1956).

Ethical and Moral Leadership

Ethical and moral leadership is one of the key aspects of Islamic Shariah and the character of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) as the leader. Some of the moral values that one can infer from the life of the Prophet include kindness, modesty, fairness, and commitment to the truth and the right course and as such, the Prophet is a quintessential example of ethical leadership. This is why the subject of moral integrity was so clearly illustrated in relation to leadership skills: It is impossible to speak about a great leader and not mention the way he inspires people with his own example in difficult situations (Lings, 1983). It was proven that the Prophet was a fair and kind leader, whose decisions and actions should be followed by the leaders of different fields of life.

Of the various principles of ethical leadership as contained in the Islamic faith, the principles of honesty, integrity and accountability are some of the most important. These values are not only advisable but are expected of anyone in a leadership role of any organization. Truthfulness and integrity are other essential aspects of leadership as the Quran demands that leaders should be just in their dealings (Quran, 4: 58). Another essential component of leadership is also accountability and here in Islam leadership is viewed as stewardship where leaders are expected to take care of their followers (Al-Ghazali, 2008). Through the observation of such values, leaders are able to create organizational trust and

respect besides being able to provide leadership that is not only efficient but also one that is fair.

Eradicating corruption and advocating for good governance are some of the key facets of the Islamic ethical leadership. According to Islamic teachings, corruption, bribery and any other form of dishonesty is prohibited as these activities are seen to be socially irresponsible and disruptive vices which are severely punishable by Islamic law as forms of sins which destabilise society (Siddiqui, 1996). Islam is very clear on the principles of good governance and these include justice, equity and the welfare of the people. The leaders are encouraged to fight against corruption and ensure that measures that support the fight against corruption are put in place and practiced in all the spheres of state management (Esposito, 2000). In this way, following these principles, leaders obtain just and equitable society that corresponds to the Islamic rules.

Case Studies of Successful Seerah-inspired Social and Environmental Initiatives

1. The Charter of Medina and Modern Pluralistic Governance in Malaysia

The Charter of Medina signed by Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) as the first constitution of a plural society has been cited as the model of modern pluralistic governance, especially in Malaysia. The Charter focused on freedom of religion, justice and mutual responsibility of Muslim, Jews and other non-Muslims which reflects Malaysia's way of dealing with its diverse ethnic and religious diverse population. The Malaysian government has borrowed from Seerah when formulating policies that encourage tolerance, understanding between the different faiths and cultures, and protection of the rights of all the citizens irrespective of their faith. This has helped in placing Malaysia in a category of relatively stable country in a region that has a lot of religious and ethnic conflict.

2. Seerah-Inspired Educational Reforms in Pakistan: The Taleem-ul-Quran Initiative

Pakistan's Taleem-ul-Quran programme has been taken from the model of education that was practiced by Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) the founder of Islam who stressed on the need of education for boys and girls irrespective of their class or cast. This programme was started in several regions of Pakistan and is based on the combining of Quranic education with modern education to enhance moral and ethical education of students. The hope is to produce a society of young Muslims who not only understand the religion but also embrace the right values that should enable them to be responsible citizens. This method of teaching

based on Seerah has proved effective in combating dropout rates and enhancing the performance of the learner, especially in the deprived areas.

3. The Seerah Foundation's Interfaith Harmony Project in the United Kingdom

The Seerah Foundation, UK has launched a project of interfaith harmony based on the teachings of Seerah with an aim to bring religious communities closer. In order to foster inter-religious dialogue the project hosts the workshops, dialogues and community meetings with Muslims, Christians, Jews as well as people of other beliefs to share the values and discuss the problematic aspects of society. As a result of the foundation's work in this area, it has been possible to achieve the objective of bringing together people of different faiths and reducing tensions in areas where conflict between the two groups has been a common feature. The success of the project has been acclaimed as a best practice in interfaith work in Europe.

Case Studies of Successful Seerah-inspired Environmental Initiatives

1. The Green Mosque Initiative in Turkey

Following the teachings of environmental aspects of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) especially in the preservation of resources and nature, Turkey started the Green Mosque Project. This project is going to be centred on the process of converting mosques into environment friendly structures, like rain water harvesting, solar power usage and minimizing waste. Sometimes mosques are used as a center where people can attend to be taught on the Islamic view of the environment. It springs directly from the Seerah where the Prophet (PBUH) was keen on protection of natural resources and planting of trees. The Green Mosque Initiative has been effective in decreasing the adverse effects of many mosques in Turkey, and has also made people aware of the Islamic teachings regarding protection of the environment (Denny, 1998).

2. Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences (IFEES) in the United Kingdom

IFEES stands for Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences which is an organisation that undertakes its environmental work in light of the Seerah and the Quran. IFEES has played a major role in enhancing the understanding of environmental issues among Muslims around the world through the integration of Islamic principles with current environmental issues. They have a number of key projects, one of which is the "Eco-Jihad," the campaign promoting environmentalism for Muslims as a form of worship. Based on

moderate teachings of the Prophet (PBUH) and his admonitions on moderation and conservation and the hadith which requires every human being to maintain the Earth, IFEES has embarked on the fight against deforestation and championing sustainable agriculture and the fight against wastage. The organization's work has encouraged similar social movements in other Muslim-majority countries, meaning that it has greatly contributed to the enhancement of environmental consciousness and response (Foltz, 2003).

3. The Million Tree Project in Indonesia

Another example of the Seerah-inspired project is the Million Tree Project in Indonesia that focuses on the fight against deforestation and for reforestation in Indonesia. Based on the Sunnah of the prophet Muhammad (PBUH) where planting trees is considered as charity and a form of continuous giving (sadaqah jariyah) this project seeks to involve religious scholars, students and farmers in planting trees in area which have been affected by logging and soil erosion. The project has not only helped in afforestation and restoration of large areas of forest but also enhanced local biological diversity as well as yield income to the communities through sustainable exploitation of forest produce. The Million Tree Project is a good example of how Islamic teachings can be utilised in the fight against environmental degradation and the management of the Earth (Nasr, 1996).

Contemporary Challenges and Prophetic Solutions

In the light of the Seerah, life and teachings of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) are relevant solutions to the modern day problems. It is in this sense that one could consider the Seerah as actually providing solutions to problems in a highly effective manner that are anchored on principles of ethical and moral nature which are highly valid even in the contemporary world. For example, prophetic call for socio-economic justice, equity, and the welfare of the society offers a reference point to tackling the modern problems like poverty, inequality, and social exclusion (Rahman, 1982). Thus, by referring to the Seerah, Muslims can learn how to meet the challenges of the contemporary world pursuing the objectives and acting in accordance with the ethical standards of Islam.

To understand the hurdles of social change in the modern Muslim societies and the determination to implement the spirit of the prophetic guidance one needs to learn more on the challenges affecting the contemporary Muslim societies. It shows that the Seerah is a clear example on how to establish change when people are unified, determined and patient, together with the use of intelligence in planning for the change. The opposition that Prophet

Muhammad (PBUH) encountered in his mission to reform society was massive but the strategy that he adopted of change that was slow as well as his commitment and consistency in the pursuit of the truth and justice yielded positive societal change (Watt, 1974). Today, such lessons point to the possibilities of patiently overcoming the internal resistance to social change within Muslim societies with the help of well-coordinated collective actions that are based on long-term strategies.

It is, therefore, seen that the role of Muslim leadership in bringing about the positive change that is required for the challenges facing the society is essential. Islamic leadership by virtue of the Seerah should therefore be in the pursuit of the common good, fairness, and justice. Managers are required to balance between the implementation of Islamic values in the society and the change which is required to meet the society's needs (Esposito, 2002). In this manner, Muslim leaders being the examples of the ethical and moral principles set by the Prophet can call for the positive social change in the community and create the society that is in line with the teachings of Islam despite the challenges of the modern world.

Conclusion

Therefore, the lessons and values of the Seerah of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) offer a clear guide to tackle modern day issues. The role of ethical and moral leadership, such as that of the Prophet, is instrumental in the direction of these communities to Justice, integrity, and accountability. With knowledge derived from the Seerah, Muslims can therefore approach modernity problems wisely, and in the same manner as the Prophet Muhammad, bring harmony, social justice, and change to the society. It is therefore important to point out that social reform is indeed a continuing and relevant role of the Seerah. In this vein, the example of the Prophet's life remains relevant today as a model for how to solve all sorts of problems in society, including the distribution of wealth and injustice. His way how to cope with the challenges being a strategic thinker, patient, and actively involved in community building provides a good example for the contemporary Muslim societies. Even today the Seerah is practical, sharia compliant and feasible solutions are proposed to be implemented in the light of the Seerah to address the contemporary issues and needs. Therefore, the challenge for Muslims is to practice these teachings and become change makers in the society. In other words, Muslims can engage in processes to cause justice, equity and the common good in society as encouraged by the prophetic tradition. Thus, only through the commitment to

ethical leadership, social reform, and community service, it is possible to continue the practice of the Seerah, so that generations to come will benefit from it.

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