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KEEPING BUSY ON THE PATH OF ALLAH:
THE SELF-ORGANISATION (*INTIZĀM*)
OF THE *TABLĪGHĪ JAMĀ'AT*

In recent years the Islamic missionary movement of the *Tablighī Jamā'at* has attracted increasing attention, not only in South Asia, but around the globe. This is partly to do with the huge number of followers assembling at its annual congregations in India, Bangladesh or Pakistan, often counting between one and two millions. This attention is also generated by the fact that traditional Islam did not know an organised proselytising movement until the *Tablighī Jamā'at* was formed. The by now global network of its activities is another instance where Southasian Islam has contributed to the evolution of global Islamic activism.

While their congregations – *ijtimā'c* – create much publicity and the groups of their travelling preachers are widely known and recognised among Muslims, little is known outside the movement about the way it operates on a daily basis, how it organises its activities on a mass scale. This self-organisation in daily parlance is called *intizām* (administration). But in writing it is rarely admitted to exist. The current paper is based on interviews with informants in Aligarh, Bhopal and Delhi in December 2001 – January 2002, unless mentioned otherwise. It seeks to highlight the practical dimensions of the *Tabligh* work which is rarely documented in academic publications. So far mostly the hagiographic and propagandist literature of the movement has served as the basis for analysis. (Anwarul Haq 1972; Masud 2000) The movement has often successfully deflected investigative attempts by non-Muslim scholars. However, lately the number of case studies has increased. They concentrate on the movement's transnational activities in countries such as Bangladesh, Britain, and Morocco (Yoginder Sikand 2002; Faust 2001); or on local branches such as in the Indian state of Orissa (Zainuddin 2001). The internal workings of the *Tablighī Jamā'at* still await definitive treatment.

The philosophy of the movement has been discussed in the academic literature extensively. It is summarised in the famous six points, demanding to focus attention on (1) the confession of faith by reciting the *kalīma*; (2) praying regularly and correctly (*ṣalāt*); (3) acquiring religious knowledge and remembering God (*ilm*, *zikr*); (4) respecting fellow-Muslims (*ikrām*); (5) reforming one's inner self through pure intentions (*niyyat*) and (6) going out in the way of God (*nafr*). (Farīdī 1997: 114-116)

The movement's self-declared objective is the so-called internal mission, to make Muslims better Muslims, as the *Tablighīs* say. It strongly denies any political ambitions. Yet its efforts to 're-islamize' large numbers of Muslims cannot but have political consequences if only by providing a fertile ground for the activities of Islamic political parties and radical or militant groupings. The movement is pre-dominantly male-oriented, although it does organise women's activities on a limited scale in ways strictly conforming to prescriptions of dress and modesty by Islamic law. Women's activity may partly be regarded as emancipatory, if compared with traditional gender roles in South Asia or in other Islamist movements. (See Barbara Metcalf in: Jeffery, Basu et al. 1999; Masud 2000)

The travelling preachers

The *Tablighī* movement came into being in 1926 when Muhammad Ilyās (1885-1944) started preaching correct religious practices and observance of rituals to Muslim tribes in the region of Mewāt around Delhi (Cf. Mayaram 1997). In this Ilyās joined other Muslim activists and groups who opposed the Āryā Samāj preachers since the early 1920s. The area had become a battle ground for the souls of the local tribal population whose ancestors had converted from Hinduism to Islam. Since then the tribesmen had retained a number of earlier non-Islamic customs. The reformist Hindu movement of the Āryā Samāj aimed at reclaiming these tribes for the Hindu faith into which they would be readmitted after ritual "purification" – *Shuddhī* – the name by which the campaign became known. Contacting local elders, Ilyās aimed at reorganising the religious and social life of the tribals creating new facilities for religious education and improving social communication through regular council meetings in villages. His main innovation, however, pertained to the introduction of travelling lay preachers who were being dispatched to other Muslim regions in India. Their objective was twofold: the participants should reform themselves on these tours and they should carry the faith to other fellow-Muslims who so far had remained passive or disinterested in the observance of religious practices. Those preaching tours became the hallmark of the *Tablighī* movement. Today *Tablighī* lay preachers practically cover the whole Islamic world and all western countries where Muslims live.

The groups are formed at the local *Tablighī* centre which is usually attached to a Deobandī mosque or *madrasa*. Starting with Ilyās' personal association with the Dār al-ʿUlūm of Deoband, the movement has been supported by religious scholars, *ʿulamāʾ*, propagating the purist teachings of this seminary located in the north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh (U.P.) (Metcalf 1982). The *Tablighī* movement also kept close contact with the Nadwa seminary from Lucknow, the capital of U.P. (Malik 1997). Lists of volunteers are being kept at the *Tablighī* centres where destinations and routes of preaching groups are decided and reports are submitted afterwards.

The groups are expected to take care of their own travel expenses. This con-

dition puts a ceiling on the travelling ambitions of some members as groups may travel to other countries and even continents. Yet there has always been some speculation that part of the travelling expenses, as well as of the cost of running the organisation, is borne by unnamed benefactors who may be private citizens from the business community, but also from sympathetic countries such as the Gulf States.

The association of followers with the movement is mostly a temporary one, lasting for the duration of the particular preaching tour. Those counted among the regulars would spend three days or more per month on *Tabligh* activities. Regulars would make up between 10 and 25% of *Tablighi* followers. Some give up their worldly pursuits entirely to spend their life in the service of the movement, either at its administrative and religious centre, the “Bungalow Mosque” in the Nizāmuddīn area of Delhi or at some local centre. They would lead a pious and ascetic life not dissimilar to the Hindu holy men, living on donations by family members or fellow-*Tablighis*. This may occasionally create problems for the families of these lifetime *Tablighis* who lose their bread winner. It is therefore officially discouraged but occasionally condoned.

The travelling groups would usually arrive at a local, mostly Deobandī mosque. There they would stay for two to three days and sleep inside the mosque – which is a practice not fully accepted by all ‘*ulamā*’. They always are self-sufficient with their bedding and cooking utensils which they carry with them. After prayer they go out and tour the local Muslim community. They knock on doors of most houses to invite people to come for the next prayer to the mosque. While responses vary, between 2 and 10% of those approached may turn up at the mosque out of which some might have come anyway to say their regular prayer there. After a joint prayer they are given an inspirational religious talk (*bayān*), reciting religious principles, instances from the Qur’ān and the Prophetic traditions (*hadīth*). Usually a session of religious education follows (*ta’līm*). This consists of reading from a book written by one of its founding fathers, Maulānā Muhammad Zakariyā (1898-1982), “The Virtues of Good Deeds” (*Fazā’ il-a A’ māl*), which the movement has adopted as standard educational reference material (Zakariyā, 1994). It presents a compilation of religious texts, mainly Prophetic traditions. Then those present are called upon to volunteer for future preaching tours (*tashkīl*). People stand up and give their name and local association which is being noted down in a special register or book kept at the mosque. Later the new volunteers will be taken up on these pledges and reminded to live up to them. When the group returns to its home base it will report to the local *Tabligh* centre either in oral or written form (*kārguzāri*).

Derived from the travelling practice as its main form of activity, the official arrangements for the work of the movement are kept deliberately provisional and temporary. It is part of the self-image of the movement that it is wholly based on voluntary work with little or no administrative input. The movement keeps no official publications, no formalised leadership structure, no written set of rules or objectives. Yet this self-representation carefully camouflages a differ-

ent reality of a highly hierarchical leadership which exerts significant moral and social pressure for compliance, a reality that comprises a wide range of unofficial publications detailing the guidelines and the rules by which the work has to proceed, a reality that includes a differentiated and well-defined administrative structure. There is an unwritten constitution of the movement that determines in great detail what issues are confronted in what way and how the work, that is organising the preaching tours, is being conducted, how new members are being attracted and how issues of leadership and guidance are being solved.

The congregations

Next to the preaching tours, its congregations (*ijtimāʿ*) constitute the most well-known feature of the *Tablighī* movement. They are of various scope: local, regional, national or international/global. A sub-variety is constituted by student or youth *ijtimāʿ*s. On one side they take up the tradition of the weekly Friday prayer congregation at the local mosque, on the other they represent a kind of community 'orientation' meeting, which perhaps has grown out of the initial local community meetings in Mewāt with religious scholars and tribal elders.

Basically their programme closely follows the itinerary of the preaching tours, consisting of joint prayers, inspirational talks, readings from the *Zakariyā* volumes, calls for volunteers to register for future preaching tours, and in addition a concluding prayer of supplication (*duā*).

*Ijtimāʿ*s are being held regularly on fixed days at the local *Tabligh* centre, usually once a week. They are held at or around prayer times to induce the faithful of the area who come to the mosque for prayers to participate in the *Tabligh* meeting as well. These *ijtimāʿ*s facilitate social communication and networking among followers.

From these, the grand national meetings stand out in a category of their own. The annual congregations of the *Tablighīs* in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan are remarkable for the huge numbers they attract and the amount of publicity they generate, among the local population, but also on a wider scale in national newspapers and international media. *Tablighīs* use to stress that these meetings represent the second-largest congregation of Muslims after the Hajj. Reports assume that up to two million people participate in the Bangladesh meeting in Tongi, between one and one and a half million in India and Pakistan each. The latter usually takes place at Raiwind, the location of the Pakistani centre of the movement near Lahore. In India, major annual congregations were held at different places, although now they seem to have settled on the longstanding Bhopal *ijtimāʿ*. For about 50 years it was held at its huge mosque *Tāj ul-Masājid* (crown of the mosques) but has shifted recently to open fields outside the city for want of space. The congregations seem to be important venues for mobilising support not only among Muslims, but also among Non-Muslims and secular elites, notably politicians. The Presidents and Prime Ministers of Bangladesh and Pakistan have repeatedly used the meetings to rub shoulders with the praying millions on occasions that are bound to attract mass media

attention.¹ The former head of the Afghan Taliban regime, Mullā ‘Omar, was also reported to have attended the Pakistan congregation. In India cooperation with state authorities is smooth and traditional, although less publicity-oriented. *Tablighī* leaders seem divided over the merits of such huge meetings. Muhammad Yūsuf (1917-1965), second Amīr of the Indian *Tablighī Jamā‘at*, had already emphasised that the regular work in propagating Islam was more important than the meetings. There are attempts made in India nowadays to scale back the national congregations in favour of the regular work.

At the national congregation local *Tablighī* organisations are represented by formal delegations squatting on the prayer ground behind signboards indicating their place of origin. Also attendance from other countries is a regular feature now as the movement has become truly global. Contrary to assertions made by members of the preparatory committees, a huge organisational effort constitutes the backbone of these congregations. Special departments are created for logistical support (food, sound system, medical services, fire services, security, transport), usually in close cooperation with state authorities for which the organisers are often not charged. Local businesses also provide their services often for free, regarding it as a moral duty and an effective form of ‘product placement’. A huge department takes charge of coordinating the routes of all participants for preaching tours as the congregation winds up with sending off all participants on their respective tours having recharged their motivation and energy.

The increasing social function of the movement is displayed in staging mass marriages (*nikkah*) celebrated by prominent luminaries of the movement. Also the concluding act, the prayer of supplication (*du‘ā*) apparently holds an enormous social importance. It is this prayer which attracts huge additional crowds from among the local population seeking benediction (*barakat*). It is they who swell the participating numbers to the millions making clear that the actual number of participating *Tablighīs* is significantly less than generally assumed.

The local mosque scheme

The *Tablighī* activists devote growing attention to a scheme that has slowly but steadily evolved over the past decades, the formation and operation of a local ‘mosque group’ (*masjidwār jamā‘at*) in contrast to the travelling preaching group, the *tablighī jamā‘at*. It considers the local mosque as the basic unit of operation. The details of this scheme have been fixed in a rigid grid of demands that are made on its participants on a daily basis. It rests on the understanding that every potential follower of the movement is always and first member of his local mosque group. This makes the scheme somewhat akin to ideological structures of mobilisation. In particular, one comes to think of the basic units of the Communist movement. In reality, it is only the regulars who are involved in it. It requires

1 –For the 2000 congregation, see Dawn, 5-7 November 2000; for Bangladesh see AFP: ‘Muslims stream into Bangladesh for the 34th Biswa Ijtema’, dateline 29 January 2000.

- to attend all five prayer sessions at your local mosque which are used to fulfil specific functions for the movement;
- to form a council (*shūra*) which meets daily, and to attend its sessions at one of the prayer times;
- to spend 2 ½ hours daily of dedicated *Tabligh* activities in meeting fellow-Muslims and inviting them on to the path of Allah in an individual capacity which is called 'meetings' (*mulaqāt*);
- to conduct two educational sessions (*ta'lim*) daily by reading from the Zakarīyā volumes for about 30 to 45 minutes, one at the mosque and one at home;
- make two rounds of preaching walks (*gashṭ*) per week, around the immediate neighbourhood on one day – which is fixed for every local mosque – and around the adjacent mosque area on their fixed day.

As a faithful follower of the movement you will also want to attend the *ijtimā'* of your locality which comprises several mosque areas (as mentioned above). Once you engage in all these activities you are certainly counted among the regulars. You will then want to consider also the other obligations which are prescribed for regulars in ascending order one in addition to the other. These in particular suggest to spend a fixed amount of time on *Tabligh* tours, beside the daily 2 ½ hours and the weekly two days in your own and the adjacent locality as mentioned above, that is

- to three days per months on a full preaching tour to another locality in your home region;
- 40 days per year, called by the Sūfī term *chillā*, generally a longer period of withdrawal or seclusion for contemplation and prayer, which could be to other states or provinces of your country, but also to other countries;
 - the 'grand *chillā*', consisting of 3 consecutive *chillās*, once during your lifetime, which equals four months (120 days);
 - for the ardent there are even longer *chillās*, mostly when going abroad, for a period like 7 months, or on foot across the country for a whole year (Cf. Hasan, 1982: 772).

Committing yourself to these activities puts a heavy burden on the shoulders of every regular. It is not uncommon that those doing so tend to neglect their worldly engagements. At the same time, the mobilising efforts can also have affirmative results. A survey made at Aligarh University in India was said to have shown that the academic achievements of Muslims students who were *Tablighī* regulars significantly surpassed those of their co-students.

Yet a regular can hardly pursue his predilection for *Tabligh* work unless he makes it his lifetime occupation and doesn't count the hours. This also entails social consequences with regard to *Tablighī* family life. Several informants suggested during interviews that those families where both partners were actively involved in *Tabligh* work tended to have fewer children. They would have more simple marriage ceremonies – because they shun ostentatious expenditure – and they have easier divorces – because they don't ask for bride money, both under

the influence of reformist teachings.² Young *Tablighī* activists even seek out the advice of their elders in questions of finding suitable partners tolerant of the demanding *Tabligh* work.

The leadership question

In its self-representation the movement stresses its egalitarian character. Outgoing preaching groups (*jamā'at*) elect a leader (*amīr*) from among themselves whose orders would be obeyed unquestioningly. Yet he could be any of them, and more important, he is expected to lead through his personal example in his devotion to preaching, praying, religious education, but also in his humble demeanour towards other members of the group, in his readiness to take over ordinary daily chores of cooking or cleaning. Beside this leader of the basic preaching group, the only other leader who is known in public is the national leader of the *Tablighīs* in India or Pakistan (or any other country). The middle rung of leadership is hardly visible to outside observers and not even to irregular participants. Yet the movement is ruled by a clearly defined command structure at every level being both flexible and rigid in turns. It is based on the *shūra* principle gleaned from the Qur'ān and the *hadīth*, lead by an *amīr* or a responsible person of varying designation. It is assumed that the Prophet's practice of consultation with his companions is the example. Council is held in open accessible by all member or interested people, at least in theory. In practice though there is a selection of those attending. And not all business of the movement is conducted in public, if only in the presence of their own followers. There definitely is a closed or secret part of business of the movement which is deliberately kept away from the public eye.

Taking India as an example, where the movement started and its global headquarters are located, the leadership structure comprises the following levels:

- The lowest level is the travelling preaching group, the *tablighī jamā'at*. Leadership here is a temporary assignment for the duration of the tour. As the size of the groups rarely exceeds ten, fifteen people, there is no *shūra* formed here. At this level always an *amīr* is selected, or sometimes appointed.
- Next comes the mosque group where a *shūra* is formed and in operation. But its composition varies. The regulars of the locality take turns in sharing responsibilities. Its leader would be the 'decider' – *fāisal*. While his appointment may be confirmed by higher-standing authorities in the movement, the assignment rotates, even at short intervals like after two or three months.
- The next higher up level would be the locality where a local *shūra* is in operation. In a city like Aligarh there are two *Tablighī* centres, one in the university area at the Sir Sayyid Hall Mosque and the other at

2 – This refers to the Puritanism of the concept of *islāh*, a movement for Qur'ān-based reform of behaviour that emerged in Egypt at the end of the nineteenth century and spread to the whole Islamic world.

the old town mosque. The *shūra* has four to five members. Its composition and more so the function of *faisal* is usually confirmed by the higher up *Tablighi* leaders, either at the state/provincial level or even at the national level. In the case of Aligarh's university *shūra* due to its eminent status in the *Tablighi* movement as a centre of learning and the seat of the most prominent Muslim university it was confirmed by the very leaders of the *Tablighi* movement in India, the Nizāmuddīn *shūra* at Delhi. The *shūra* members often keep their post until they die. Age in the *Tablighi* understanding only adds to authority. This *shūra* would also meet every day, but hold council on the more important affairs of the movement in the locality on the day of the *ijtimāʿ* which for the university area was Sundays.

- There are also *shūras* in operation at the level of the Indian states and Pakistani provinces. Some of their leaders were formally designated *amir*. They conduct the affairs of the movement in their state or province fairly independently. Nowadays the new heads of the *shūra* are preferred to be called by the less formal and presumptuous title *faisal*.

- Then there is the central *Tablighi shūra* at Nizāmuddīn. This name is applied to the current collective leadership and also to a larger ruling council. Ilyās was succeeded as *amir* first by his son Muhammad Yūsuf and then by his grand-nephew Inʿām al-Hasan (1918-1995). After the latter's death, a collective leadership took over as the movement could not decide on a single successor. It consisted of the Maulanas Saʿd al-Hasan (grandson of Yūsuf and great-grandson of Ilyās), Zubair al-Hasan (son of Inʿām) and Izhār al-Hasan (maternal nephew of Ilyās). Inʿām al-Hasan himself was reported to have contributed to the 'democratisation' of the movement as he moved to strengthen the role of the *shūra* against the *amir* and the role of the daily work (within the mosque group) against ostentatious congregations. After Izhār died, this collective leadership or small *shūra* now only consists of two persons. Among these it is Maulana Saʿd who has now clearly moved to the centre of the movement. He is seen as the new theoretical, spiritual, and symbolic head of the movement. He seems to be immensely popular with followers as can be judged from reactions to his appearance at the 2002 Bhopal congregation. Maulana Zubair apparently concentrates more on the internal structure and organisation of the movement.

Beside the small circle of collective leadership there is a larger *shūra* in operation at Nizāmuddīn which consists of elders (*buzurg* or *bare*) from all over India and counts approximately 15 members. While it meets daily it holds open council on Thursdays on the occasion of their version of the weekly *ijtimāʿ*. Not all its members attend all its sessions. There is a rotation and sharing of responsibilities at work guaranteeing that issues concerning the reception of incoming or preparation of outgoing preaching groups are not left undecided.

On questioning the impression is given by the movement's representatives that all issues are decided impromptu. While this may often be the case, a cer-

tain amount of paper work is apparently still generated and regular offices are also in operation at the centre. Paper work mainly relates to requests (*taqāzā*) from outlying mosques or *madrasas* for preachers to be sent to them to strengthen the propagation (*tablīgh*) of Islam for whatever momentary local reason. A number of activists runs regular administrative offices at the centre dealing with incoming and outgoing groups, coordination of their travelling destinations and overseeing the work in the regions and provinces. The role of *Chhote Sayyid Bhai* ('the younger Sayyid') may serve as an example, a 'nom de guerre' by which a Maulānā from Nizāmuddīn went who was in charge of coordinating travel routes for outgoing preaching groups. He also was a member of the preparation team for the Bhopāl *ijtima*^c 2002, attended by the author. While he explicitly denied any role of regular administrative work in the running of the movement, he was reported to have his own permanent office at Nizāmuddīn where he kept a huge oversize chart of all possible destinations of preaching tours in the world, complete with the names and schedules of train and bus stations.

A third group of regular full-timers is indispensable for the running of the movement at the Nizāmuddīn centre. They occupy no formal office yet they attach themselves to certain leading elders and assist them in carrying out their functions. They are sort of religious 'interns'. The author talked to some who had graduated from universities and now took time out from their civic life supporting themselves on contributions from family members or sharing meagre resources with other *Tablighīs* to be able to devote their full time to the movement. The less sophisticated among them work as ushers there making sure every incoming or outgoing *Tablighī* or visitor finds his group or stays in touch with his programme. They also shield the centre's core activities from stray visitors, particularly non-*Tablighīs* and non-Muslims, foreigners, journalists.

Remarkable is the rather strict spatial separation between local/Indian or South Asian *Tablighī* and foreign *Tablighīs* both at the centre and at the congregation. At the centre they are directed to different levels in the building, at the Bhopāl congregation foreign *Tablighīs* were interned in a separate tent camp on the mosque ground for 'hygienic and security reasons'. For the foreign *Tablighīs* there are always volunteers around who help with translations and organisation. Many foreign visitors who come on a preaching tour to South Asia not for the first time, have picked up Urdu which evolves as a global lingua franca of the *Tablighī* community.

The movement's impact cannot be judged uniformly. While it apparently contributes to a strengthening of religious attitudes, and inculcates even bigotry in some followers, it links many aspiring lower middle class Muslims in South Asia with a moralistic version of modernity. In this it can contribute to the moral and cultural emancipation of selected Muslim strata both in a minority setting such as India or in a Muslim majority society such as Pakistan. It can also prepare the ground for groups professing Sunni radicalism or pursuing some form of militancy. Generally it promotes a quietist, value-laden outlook on life, which can be healing and invigorating for many but debilitating for some. Its

most worrisome feature is perhaps its closed character, which can generate enormous pressure on participants, although in an open-society context such as India people find it still easy to withdraw from it if they want to. It is difficult to see that it can expand much further and may have reached its peak. Where it will go from here, whether moving into decline or towards a new quality, will be fascinating to watch for political analysts and religious studies experts alike.

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