

Tablighi Jamat and Hindu Revivalism

Yoginder Sikand

The twentieth century witnessed the emergence of a number of movements for religious revival, revitalization and reform among Muslims all over the world. One of these, probably the largest Islamic movement in the world today, is the Tablighi Jama'at (TJ). Although it has its roots in the South Asian Muslim environment, with which it is still closely identified, the TJ is now said to be active in almost every country with a significant Sunni Muslim presence. Its founder, the charismatic alim, Maulana Muham-mad Ilyas (1885-1944), believed that Muslims had strayed far from the teachings of Islam. Hence, he felt the urgent need for Muslims to go back to the basic principles of their faith, and to observe strictly the commandments of Islam in their own personal lives and in their dealings with others. This alone, he believed, would win for Muslims the pleasure of God, who would then be moved to grant them 'success' (*falah*) in this world and in the life after death.

Although not identified as a specifically Sufi movement as such, the TJ emerged from the reformist Sufi project represented by the renowned Dar ul-'ulum madrasa located in Deoband, a town not far from Delhi, it first took root in the mid-1920s in the area of Mewat, south of Delhi, among a community of Muslim peasants known as the Meos. The Meos continue to be closely involved in the work of the TJ, although their involvement has declined somewhat in recent years as the movement has assumed global proportions. Yet, as TJ ideologues and activists see it, Mewat is said to be the most successful experimental ground of the movement.

The TJ has its origins, as mentioned above, in the reformist Sufi project represented by the Dar ul-'ulum madrasa at Deoband. Established in 1867, the Deoband madrasa set in motion a powerful movement to reform popular tradition, exhorting Muslims to closely follow the Prophetic model and to abandon what it condemned as 'un-islamic' customs. This entailed a fierce attack on beliefs, customs and practices that were seen to have no sanction in the shari'ah and the practice of the Prophet, and which were consequently declared as bida'at or wrongful 'innovations'. It also entailed the definition of what constituted 'orthodox' Islam. As the Deobandis saw it, 'true' Islam lay not simply and entirely in the classical scripturalist sources, including the Qur'an and the canonical collections of Hadith or Prophetic traditions, but also in the writings of the Hanafi 'ulama. As strict muqallids, the Deobandis insisted on rigid taqlid of the 'ijma of the Hanafi 'ulama, and even went to the extent of condemning inter-mazhab eclecticism. They were fiercely opposed to western culture, represented by the British colonial regime, which they saw as threatening the integrity of Islam and the Muslims' commitment to their faith. They roundly condemned Muslim modernists who advocated reforms in the historical shari'ah in the name of ijtihad. Yet they did not oppose modern technology or forms of organization as such, and in fact willingly embraced modern methods of communication, such as the printing press, to spread their doctrines to a wider audience.

While insisting on the need for Muslims to closely abide by the shari'ah and internalize its norms, the 'ulama of Deoband also sought to cultivate a rich inner life. Leading Deobandi 'ulama also acted as Sufi shaikhs, serving as spiritual preceptors for many of their students, and initiating them into various Sufi orders. To summarize, the Deobandis were particularly concerned to reconcile the tariqat with shari'ah, the inner mystical journey with the exter-nalist path of the law. This entailed new definitions of what constituted 'orthodox', and hence acceptable, Sufism in the Indian context.

Ilyas wrote almost nothing about his own project of reformed, shari'ah-centred Sufism, stressing that 'practical work' ('amali kam) for the sake of Islam was more important than merely writing about it. Here he followed the path of the early Sufi masters, who insisted that Sufism was, above all, a practical, rather than simply an intellectual, discipline. Nevertheless some of Ilyas' disciples collected his letters (maktu-bat) and utterances (malfuzat), which they published after his death. These are important traditional genres of Sufi writings and provide valuable insights into Ilyas' own understanding of his work.

Ilyas' malfuzat and maktubat reveal a man passionately concerned with the fate of the Muslim community—both its worldly conditions and what he saw as its digression from the Prophetic model. The community's fortunes, Ilyas was convinced, depended critically on strict observance of the shari'ah. As he saw it, the Muslims' plight owed simply to their having strayed from the path of God's law and having 'adopted' the ways of the 'disbelievers'. Hence, he regarded the need to reform popular tradition as particularly urgent. In this view, of course, he was not alone. Early twentieth century Indian Muslim reformists of all hues, including the Deobandis as well as Islamists and Muslim modernists, rallied against popular customary practices, exhorting Muslims to 'return' to the path of the 'authentic' Islamic tradition. Although the ways that they envisaged Islamic 'orthodoxy' and 'authenticity' varied considerably, and were often mutually opposed, the reformists were united in their opposition to custom, which they roundly castigated as 'un-Islamic'.

Yet, whatever their concern for 'orthodoxy', the entire effort seems to have been deeply influenced by an overriding concern on the part of Muslim reformers to draw rigid boundaries between Muslims and others (mainly 'Hindus') as part of a wider project of constructing an 'imagined community' of Muslims. This must be seen in the context of Muslim marginalization following the collapse of Mughal political authority, and the growing challenge of Hindu 'nationalism' that threatened to absorb the Indian Muslims into the Hindu fold. In Ilyas' particular case, it appears that the growing success of the Arya Samaj, a neo-Hindu revivalist group, in bringing into the Hindu fold large numbers of what were seen as 'nominal' Muslims (generally referred to as nau musalman or 'new Muslims') goaded him on to realize the importance of inculcating a deep sense of unity among Muslims of all classes based on a common commitment to the shari'ah. Only in this way, he believed, could Muslims stave off the Arya challenge and preserve their faith and identity intact.

In other words, the growing stress that late nineteenth and early twentieth century Indian Muslim reformists placed on shari'ah-centred Islam and their attacks on popular custom must be seen as intimately related to the particular political context of colonial north India, one characterized by growing and increasingly fierce rivalry between Hindu and Muslim elites. Here it is important to note the concern of Muslim elites with the shari'ah as a symbolic marker of identity, uniting Muslims while at the same time distinguishing them clearly from Hindus. This concern had much to do with the fact - which the reformists lamented - that the Muslims of India (like the Hindus) did not actually constitute a single community. Sharp divisions of language, locality, ethnicity, sectarian affiliation and even caste divided the Muslims of the country, and in no sense of the term could they be considered a single homogeneous, monolithic group. The attack on local customary practices, and their replacement by commitment to the universal, normative standard of shari'ah-centred scripturalist Islam, thus served as a powerful symbolic resource in the process of constructing a pan-Indian Muslim community transcending internal divisions.

At the same time, by attacking customary practices that were condemned as borrowings from 'infidel' Hindus, the reformers helped undermine traditions of popular religiosity and religious culture that brought Hindus and Muslims together in a shared cultural universe. Stressing the distinctions between Muslims and their Hindu neighbours, based on a firm commitment to shari'ah-centred Islam, reformists exhorted Muslims to remain deeply conscious of their separate communal identity, for only then could Muslims effectively meet the perceived threat of being absorbed into the Hindu fold by organized Hindu revivalist groups. This had its counterpart on the Hindu side as well, as Hindu reformers strongly condemned the visiting of Sufi shrines by Hindus and the widespread observance of what were seen as 'Muslim' practices. In turn, these attacks on popular religious traditions bolstered the process of constructing sharply defined Boundaries between Muslims and Hindus.

Ilyas' reformed Sufism, as expressed in the form of the TJ, had crucial implications for the constitution of religious authority. By attacking popular custom, the TJ directly challenged the authority of the custodians of the Sufi shrines (*sajjada nashin*), who were seen as having a vested interest in preserving popular custom for their own claims to authority rested on these. Since a true Muslim was sought to be defined as one who carefully followed the shari'ah in his own life, the claims of the *sajjada nashin* to authority on the basis of their special links with the buried saints, generally as relatives or descendants, were effectively challenged.

In other words, attempts were made to transfer the locus of authority in the TJ from the deceased Sufi or the *sajjada nashin* to the charismatic community, the roving *jama'at* or preaching party of Tablighi missionaries. The Sufi discipline was to be cultivated within the *jama'at*, rather than in a Sufi hospice (*khanqah*) associated with a particular Sufi order (*silsilah*). God was believed to grant His blessings and even sometimes to arrange for suitable *karamat*, in the context of working in the *jama'at*. In a sense, then, the TJ represents a significant democratization of religious authority, at least in comparison to the closely controlled and steeply hierarchical cults of the Sufis centred on the shrines.

Ilyas' reformist project was first launched in a culturally distinct region south of Delhi called Mewat, comprising large parts of the Alwar and Bharatpur districts of the present-day Indian state of Rajasthan and the Gurgaon and Faridabad districts of Haryana state. Mewat is the land of the Meos, a Muslim community who are for the most part peasants, and who today number some one million. The Meos were regarded, and in some sense continue to be seen, as *nau-Muslims*, although their first contact with Islam goes back several centuries. The Meos claim to be of 'high' caste Hindu Rajput origin, but although some of them may well be of Rajput stock, the vast majority of Meos appear to be descendants of 'low' caste and tribal converts, who now claim a 'high' caste origin for themselves.

The Meos are now all Musalmans in name, but their village deities are the same as those of the Hindus, and they keep several Hindu fasts... Meos, in their customs, are *half Hindu*. The Meo places of worship are similar to those of their Hindu neighbours... As regards their own religion [Islam] the Meos are very ignorant. Few know the *kalima*, and fewer still the regular prayers, the seasons of which they entirely neglect.

Reading of the Qur'an was less popular than reading the Hindu epics Ramayana and Mahabharata. Hindu shrines far outnumbered mosques in Mewat. Few Meos prayed in the Muslim manner, but most of them performed the *puja* - worship at the shrines of the Hindu gods and goddesses.

As an almost entirely peasant community, the Meos had few religious specialists of their own. Instead, they sought the help of Hindu pandits as well as Muslim faqirs, custodians of the Sufi shrines, for various ritual purposes. Meo religion was, above all, practical—rooted in specific life-cycle events and geared to the propitiation of deities. These included Allah, and a host of spirits and hidden saints for favours or to ward off misfortune. As for the way the Meos identified themselves, the notion of ‘Muslim’ as clearly excluding and being set apart from or against ‘Hindu’ was quite unknown.

From the late nineteenth century onward, and gaining particular momentum from the 1920s, a complex set of developments set in motion a process of radical redefinition of Meo self-perceptions, including religious identity. These developments included the introduction and spread of reified notions of religion and community identity popularized by colonial administrators, particularly census officers, as well as Muslim and Hindu elites; growing competition between Hindu and Muslim elites, leading to Hindu-Muslim conflict in large parts of northern India; a series of Meo peasant revolts in the context of the Great Depression of the 1930s that the Hindu rulers of the Bharatpur and Alwar states saw as ‘Islamic’ movements and accordingly sought to brutally crush; the role of external Muslim organizations and leaders in assisting the Meos in their revolt and articulating their grievances to a wider audience; and, finally, the role of Ilyas and his movement in the area from the mid-1920s, seeking to save the Meos from the threat of being absorbed into the Hindu fold at the hands of the Hindu revivalist Arya Samaj.

All of these developments appear to have fostered an increasing stress on the Islamic aspect of Meo identity. The TJ had a crucial role to play in this process. Its call for the Meos to identify with and observe the rules of the shari’ah struck a receptive chord among many Meos, who now sought to distinguish themselves clearly from their Hindu neighbours. Yet, the TJ really took off in a major way among the Meos only in the aftermath of the Partition of India in 1947, after the bloody rioting in Mewat in which tens of thousands of Meos were killed. Faced with the fierce hostility of their Hindu neighbours most Meos found in the TJ a source of strength, and its call to eschew ‘Hindu’ customs and beliefs were now certainly more acceptable than before.

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