Sûfî spirituality fires reformist zeal: The Tablîghî Jamâ’at in today's India and Pakistan

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Typical of activist movements in South Asian Islam, the Tablíghí Jamâʿat combines the Suﬁ principles of leadership with a reformist message. Therefore all the points I will be making here are not meant to contradict Marc Gaborieau’s paper (published here in the same issue) but have to be seen in conjunction with it.

To those unfamiliar with the Tablíghí movement it should be pointed out that it represents a voluntary mass movement of lay preachers founded by Muhammad Ilyâs (1885-1944) in 1927 in the Mewat region around Delhi in Northern India. At the time it was contesting Hindu preaching activities among tribal Muslim converts. After the demise of British colonial rule the Tablíghís branched out from there to all South Asian countries and more recently to all places where Muslims live. They could be called a pietist movement devoted to the so-called internal mission. They aim at reconfirming their Muslim co-religionists in their faith where they feel it has become slack, where Islam is not being correctly practiced or in danger of not being observed at all. For this purpose, they form groups of travelling preachers of usually up to 15 members, who head for a Muslim locality where they conduct door-to-door preaching. They invite people to come to the local mosque for prayer and for a religious sermon on the virtues of a pious life. This preaching activity would be undertaken either in the immediate vicinity or in far-away places, even in other countries. The formation of these groups of travelling preachers tends to become an end in itself as they seek to involve Muslims in ever growing number in their preaching for ever longer and more periods of time. The time spent in the movement, on the road, becomes a measure of the commitment to the ideals of Islam. The travelling scheme has more recently been complemented by efforts to organise permanent preaching groups at local mosques called the masjidwâr Jamâʿat (cf. Reetz, 2004).

In doctrinal terms, the Tablíghís represent Hanafi Sunni Islam, although they remain open and attractive to all Sunni law schools and sects. While they proclaim to be inclusive, they practically share the inhibitions of Sunni radicals against Shiʾa Muslims and the Ahmadiyya, a reformist sect considered by most...
Sunní Muslims as heterodox. They take their doctrinal lead from the purist South Asian Islamic tradition spawned by the Dāru‘l-‘ulūm Deoband in North India that came into being in 1863. They are actively opposed by the modernist Jamā‘at-ī Islāmī, created by Maulānā Maudūdī (1903-1979), in 1941, which resents the seemingly apolitical attitude of the Tablighī. Opposition is also coming from the Barelwīs who represent an orthodox Sunnī movement much closer to Sūfī-inspired Islam, emphasizing the centrality of pīr, shrine and grave worship. Barelwīs usually do not allow their mosques in Pakistan and India to be used by Tablighīs and would not shy away from physical force to exterm them, although rank Barelwī members occasionally do participate in Tablighī activities. This is essentially a case of competition for influence among Sunnī Muslims as the Barelwīs set up their rival organisation Dawat-i Islāmī led by Maulānā Muhammad Ilyās Qādri (b. 1950) and closely modelled on the Tablighī Jamā‘at.¹

Its propaganda activity has long relied on a similar course book – Faidūn-i Sunnat elaborating the benefits of the norms and practices of the life of the Prophet (Ilyās Qādri, 2000) although it is being reviewed at present. The Barelwīs aggressively deny the Tablighīs their Sūfī antecedents and brand them as Deobandi, or even Wahhābī outfit (Qādri, 1969).

While the Tablighīs are propagating a message of puritan, reformist Islam, they have partly preserved and partly developed an internal culture that is laden with Sūfī-inspired rituals. This culture apparently accounts very much for their cohesion. To everyone watching Tablighī meetings and ceremonies, it becomes clear that the workings of the Tablighī Jamā‘at both in their internal and external activities follow repetitive and carefully controlled rules often invoking a spiritual connotation. These set it demonstrably apart from other reformist movements. It is argued here that these rituals make the movement more accessible and popular in the true sense without necessarily making far-reaching compromise on the reformist message they are spreading.

I treat the Tablighīs here as an activist Islamic movement. In this context activist movements are understood to be movements of Islam that came into existence since the nineteenth century and pursue mobilisation of believers through mass activism. In this sense they are seeking a public role for activist Islam akin to the role of other public bodies and organisations, creating an increasingly vocal public sphere of Islam, what I call elsewhere an Islamic sphere or Islamic sector (Reetz, 2006).

### Sūfī guidance and leadership

It is understood that Muhammad Ilyās’ relationship with Sufism (tasawwuf) is grounded in the tradition of the Chishtiya Shaykhs. His connection with the

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¹. Cf. its website at http://www.dawateislami.net
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purist Deoband seminary was no obstacle to this influence. Thereby he shared the mode of operation of many leaders of reformist - islābi - movements in the Indian subcontinent. They continued to operate as Shaykhs parallel to their reformist activities. They usually were initiated into several orders and they continued to grant affiliation (hay'at) to disciples. As the Deoband statutes put it, they regarded the principle of following the (sūfi) path, or tariqa, as the

... Consumption of good breeding, self-purification and spiritual traversing (sulāk-e bāttin) within the auspices of researching Sūfis and their well-tried principles (inferred from the Book and the Sunna), because, without this, modernity in morals, stability of zest and ecstasy, internal insight, mental purity and observation of reality are not possible. It is obvious that this branch is connected with absān along with faith and Islam (Rizvi, 1980, vol. I, p. 329).

Sufism was acceptable to South Asian reformist Muslims if it was the “right” Sufism, based on the sbari'a, on the Qur'ān and the Sunna and did not follow heretic practices. The Deobandi reformists particularly rejected shrine and pir worship, some also emphasised the rejection of singing and dancing. But in right measure and form Sufism was seen as an indispensable element of true Islam shaping a moral and pious character, a necessary supplementation for theological students, but also for salvation in general. Maulana Sayyid Abul Hasan Ali Nadwi exemplarily discussed the merits of correct Sufism in the light of Islamic reformism (islāb) in his book Purification and kindness or mysticism and initiation? (Tazkiya-o-absān yā tasawwuf-o-sulāk? 1989). His assessment is widely shared by the Tablighīs. The book was recommended to me by an experienced Tablighī functionary during interviews in Lahore in 2001 stressing its character as a guideline.

The Tablighī elders enshrined this dichotomy in their famous six basic points detailing their “articles of faith”. Point three has been called ilm-o-dbikr demonstrating the unity of religious knowledge and (Sūfī-inspired) ritual as they view it:

(3) Knowledge and remembrance of God (ilm-o-dbikr)

To spend some time in the morning and in the evening on gaining (religious) knowledge and remembering God. The common ritual of commemoration (dbikr) for every person consists of (counting the beads of) one rosary on reciting the third Kalima in the morning, one in the evening, and two each on invoking God’s blessing (darūd) and asking God’s forgiveness (istighfār). If one is connected to a Shaykh one should follow his recommendation for prayer (dbikr). For (religious) education one should read [from the Tablighī tracts of] ‘The Virtues of Prayer’ (fādā’il-i namāz), ‘The Virtues of Commemoration (of God)’ (dbikr), ‘The Virtues of the Holy Qur’ān’ (fādā’il-i Qur’ān), ‘The Stories of the Companions of Muhammad’ (zikrayat-i sahābā), “Reward of Good Deeds” (jāzā al-a‘māl). If the Qur’ān was not read previously it should be studied. For those qualified in religion (ahl-i ‘ilm) (it is recommended to read) a book on virtuous deeds (kitāb al-‘ilm-ul-‘aml), on (religious) knowledge and beliefs (kitāb al-‘ilm-ul-‘ilm-ul-‘aml-ul-‘ilm), on tradition (kitāb al-sunnah), on holy war (kitāb al-jihād), on fighting (the Infidels) (kitāb al-muhājir), on revolt (divisions in Islam) (kitāb al-fitan), on good behaviour (kitāb al-naṣṣār), on what is right (and what is wrong) (kitāb al-amr bi-l-ma‘rūf iyyās, 1997, p. 114ff).
The quotation refers to the fact that the major book of the Tablighi movement, the *Fadā’il-e a’māl*, a collection of *hadīth* and pious commentaries written by the main ideologue of the movement, Muhammad Zakariyā (1898-1982; Zakariyā 1975 [1940]), contains a separate chapter on *Dbīkr*, indicating its central importance for the movement. Judging from this text alone one has to assume that the movement condones, perhaps even encourages dual commitment of Tablighi members to a Sūfī Shaykh and to the movement. But the text makes also clear that the movement in some form takes on the obligations of a religious guide, of a Shaykh members itself, detailing the ritualistic commitments, the fulfillment of which would lead to salvation.

Among Tablighi obligations, the emphasis on the reformation of one’s own intentions, or *niyāt*, also seems to be a highly Sūfī-inspired element. Point 5 of their ‘articles of faith’ reads:

(5) Correction of intention and conduct (*taṣbih al-niyyāt wa al-khalās*)

All this work should be undertaken for the glory of God and for one’s self-improvement (*islāb*). Don’t turn the gaze to any external aim. Also do not pay attention to effect and result (of your action) (Ilyās, 1997, p. 114ff).

From this, a self-effacing attitude is derived as their main instrument of encountering doubters, non-believers or non-Muslims. They would always first blame themselves for failing to properly explain their position. Internal self-reformation becomes key to turning into a genuinely pious person, improving your chances for the hereafter and generally reforming society and life in the spirit of Islam. Rituals such as *Dbīkr* and *du’ā* but also pious deeds are supposed to help the Tablighi improve and purify his *niyāt*.

It is perhaps worth noting that books such as the *Fadā’il-i a’māl* take on a ritualistic function in defining the movement. A special status is also accorded to the reports on the life of the Tablighi elders. They are written in the format of hagiographies (tadkira) well known from life sketches of Sūfī saints in connection with certain shrines. There are biographies written about the first three leaders of the Tablighi Jamā’at, Muhammad Ilyās, Muhammad Yūsuf (1917-1963) and Inām-ul-Hasan (1918-1993), some of them under the title of *Tazkīrā* (Bijauri 1980; Hasan 1996), others as *Sawānīh-i Hayāt* (Nadwī 1980 [1946]; Shahid Sahāranpūri 1997; Hasanī 1982). And there are the *Mafīzāt*, the sayings of the saints, attributed in this case to Maulānā Ilyās and Maulānā Yūsuf (Nu’mānī 1993; Shāh Qāsimī 1994). One cannot escape the Sūfī connotations of such categories of literature, also when considering that some of these biographical works have obtained ritual meaning in the Tablighi movement. Especially Ilyās’ biography written by S.A.H.A. Nadwī (1980) is widely read in preparation of new Tablighis for their first preaching tours.

The question today is what is left of this influence in the Tablighi Jamā’at? When I am looking for Sūfī influence on principles of leadership I would distinguish between informal and formal observance of a Sūfī style of leadership. Informal
observance might be characterised by personal, charismatic and moral authority, based on chastity and sanctity as recognised by others, on erudition in the formal principles and sources of Islam, on the knowledge of the Qur’án, hadith and the Sunna, of the internal culture of the movement and its guiding moral principles.

Formal observance might refer to the initiation of disciples creating a personal attachment of followers with their leaders through bay’át. I discussed this issue with some of my informants during my field research.² It appears that Tablíghi leaders in India and, to a lesser degree in Pakistan, continue acting as a Shaykh initiating disciples into their favourite orders. I received confirmation of this practice from members of the inner circle of Tablíghi activists based at Aligarh. Particularly In’ám-al-Hasan was reported to have administered bay’át to groups of Tablíghi activists on the sidelines of their annual congregations by throwing a peace of cloth over them. This mass bay’át was nevertheless a closed affair. Workers who wanted to get this favour granted had to intimate the leadership of their intention in writing in advance. The composition of the group was carefully screened and participation was granted only selectively. The criterion was loyalty and allegiance to the Tablíghi Jamī’át. I was told that In’ám-al-Hasan used offerings by his disciples to finance a substantial part of the running expenses of the Tablíghi centre (markaz) in Delhi.

Another direct form of Sufi leadership is embodied in the direct connection of Tablíghi elders with the Meo tribes living in India around Delhi. It was from the Mewat region that the Tablíghi movement originally took its beginnings. The Meo tribesmen regarded Ilyás and also his father as their Shaykh and Pir to whom they feel they still owe allegiance. At the annual congregations of the Tablíghis in India and Pakistan, Mewatis always constitute a sizeable delegation. They usually make it a point to seek a special interview with one of the central leaders for whom they hold special reverence to receive his blessings. Here Maulana Muhammad Sád (b. 1965), one of the two current Amirs, as the most direct heir of Ilyás being his great-grandson plays the central role. When he visits Pakistan for attending the annual congregation there, he also grants special audiences to the Pakistani Mewatis who migrated as refugees in sizeable numbers to Pakistan at partition. Many of them settled near Lahore in Kasur district.

A third reference may be the self-conscious portrayal of the central leaders of the Tablíghi, primarily in India, as belonging to the Chishtíya sub-group or silsilá of the Kandhalawi. This was manifested by the publication of a directory of members of this clan and silsilá by a Tablíghi elder, Maulána Ehtesámu’l-Hasan (1996). There he pointedly discussed the “conditions of the Shaykhs from Kandhalá”. This refers to all those related to Maulána Ilyás and Muhammad

². The data mentioned here refer to interviews with Tablíghi respondents in field research on case studies at Aligarh University and the Tablíghi annual congregation in Bhopal (India) in December 2000 and January 2001, and at Lahore University of Management Sciences and the Tablíghi annual congregation at Raiwind near Lahore (Pakistan) in October-December 2001.
Zakariyā who called themselves Kāndhalawī after their place of origin Kāndhalā in the North Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. Zakariyā was Ilyās’ nephew and became the main theoretical head of the movement by writing dozens of religious tracts which are still widely used in the movement. He also showed special inclination towards Sufism. The two lineages of Maulānā Ilyās and Muhammad Zakariya started intermarrying consciously since 1935 when the two daughters of Zakariya married the two future Amīrs of the Tablíghī Jamā’at, Maulānā Yūsuf and Maulānā In’ām-al-Hasan following the well-known pattern of South Asian family clans. Between them, they now control most of the leadership positions of the Tablíghī Jamā’at at the Nizamuddin Markaz and at the Islamic school of Sahāranpur. Follower of Maulana Zakariya over the years have independently formed into a separate silsīla spreading throughout the Islamic world wherever Indian Muslims migrated. Notable examples are Pakistan, Bangladesh, Burma, South Africa, Saudi Arabia and Britain. His network of disciples (khulafā) fused Islamic schools in the Deobandi tradition with strong participation in Tablígh activities, personal loyalty and spiritual devotion in the Sufi tradition. A recent directory lists 110 initiated khulafā (Mutalā, 1986).

On a lesser scale, Sūfī practices by Tablíghī elders also continue today. Although the Tablíghī leadership tried to switch to a less personal style of functioning after the demise of in’ām-al-Hasan, it is known of Maulānā Zubair-ul-Hassan (b. 1951), a grandnephew of Maulana Ilyās, that he continues to initiate disciples. In Pakistan, among the Tablíghī elders, it is Maulānā Jamshed Ahmad, who is doing the same. He is the follower of Maulānā Ashraf Ali Thanawī (1863-1943) who was both a writer of reformist tracts in the Deobandi tradition and a Shaykh of wide influence. But apparently these practices are not undisputed. Several informants referred to a decision taken collectively by Tablíghī leaders in India and Pakistan some years ago, that Tablíghī elders should refrain from using Tablíghī activities to extend their influence as Shaykh. This was portrayed as a form of voluntary self-restraint, typical of Tablíghī culture. But the fact that it was considered necessary to take such a decision is remarkable. It shows that there was apparently some conflict of interest. It seems that it was feared pīr-murid relations could potentially “corrupt” the “pure” Tablíghī message. As for the selective acceptance of Sufi practices on part of some elders, it also seems to indicate that within the inner circle of elders, much more is condoned or encouraged – if it is in the interest of the movement – than is formally acknowledged to a wider circle of activists.

Self-organisation and interaction in the style of a Sufi order

The central leadership figure in the Tablíghī Jamā’at is the amīr. This is not diminished by the fact that the Tablíghís themselves rather emphasise the šārā

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and the consultation principle as its key element of functioning. But the formation of the shūrā both at the central level and in local centres (marākaz) cannot obscure the fact that some are more equal than others in this system. It is obligatory for all Tablígh activities that an āmir is selected or elected at any stage in any meeting. The āmir principle embodies different and competing traits of political culture. From one perspective, it reflects western and democratic influences. Every activist, belonging to what I call the regulars for meeting a certain number of obligations, is encouraged to become āmir at one stage of his membership. Without taking on these obligations at least once, the regular is not understood to have completed his formation as a pious Tablíghī. While apparently there truly is a sometimes broad-based consultation process on who would become āmir, it is equally clear that crucial positions are filled through nominations. These are decided in a small elite leadership circle to whom not many elders even have access. The āmir has the last say when leadership councils are formed in important places or leadership jamā’ats are being created for special tasks of supervision. These patriarchic beginnings are reinforced by the internal culture surrounding the position of āmir. It is clearly spelled out that an āmir at any level of the organisation can demand unquestioning obedience. It is strongly discouraged to ask questions and to make fuss about unclear issues. While a Tablíghi is on jamā’at, as the term goes for preachers out with their groups in the path of Allah, he is not supposed to do anything without permission from his āmir, including going to toilet, or leaving the group. He should ask no questions, not even harbour any wish to ask a question in his heart, which is enshrined in the four things not to do.

But what is more important in terms of the Sufi antecedents of the movement is the way by which Tablíghi etiquette obliges the āmir to rule by moral example. He is supposed to share all menial work during travel, including cooking or cleaning, including the toilet. He is supposed to lead by his sincerity and knowledge. Tablíghi elders are revered for their pious character – and of course for their knowledge of Islam and of the books of the Tablíghis. The āmir for all practical purposes is a Shaykh showing his fellow preachers the path of Allah. He is moulding them, educating them not only in Islam but also in Islamic and Tablíghi etiquette, in civil etiquette in general. While being on tour, Tablíghi preaching groups in special sessions discuss with their āmir the correct ways of praying, fasting, but also eating or sleeping. In this sense, it could be argued the whole movement is a collective Shaykh for the new lay preachers joining its ranks. The movement, or more precisely the body of regulars who devote much or most of their life to its activities, have set themselves the task of bringing new followers in stages to a pious life. They are preparing their members for the hereafter by deeply intervening in their religious attitudes and personal behaviour. They see

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4. Political culture is simply understood here as the ways of how things are being done that can be traced back to one or the other political tradition.
to it that the ordinary member changes his life style; that he dresses simple in the way of the Prophet; that he sleeps and eats in the way of the Prophet and his companions; that he approaches life in all its facets in the way of the Prophet. It seems clear that the example of the Prophet for them holds a larger than life, a mystical fascination. But for them, it is also a consequential reformist attitude as it brings out a true Islamic life style in new adherents, as they are subjected to islāh.

Particularly for the regulars, life in the Tablighī Jamāʿat is so full with daily ritualistic obligations that it resembles more life in a monastic order than an activist Islamic movement. Ascetic features start dominating the whole of your life activities. You start changing your cloth donning the shalwār-kamīz and shunning any western clothes. You forgo any comfort while on tour, carrying your own bedding, cooking utensils. You spend money while on tour on the level of the poorest fellow preacher. With time passing, you will stop watching television for entertainment and ultimately remove the TV set from your house. You will stop going to the pictures and of course refrain from gambling and drinking alcohol. And you are ascending on the ladder to Tablighī perfection by the amount or percentage of time you spend on its activities. Gradually, many regulars are drifting out of this world into another reality. There is also a category of full-timers who are called muqīm. They reside at the centre, the marākaz, although they have to look after their family and income, which they do in clearly defined intervals like once per week or per month. They have almost fully renounced worldly life in favour of working for the message of Allah to be spread to the greatest effect. There are different categories of the muqīm forming a clear hierarchy. According to informants, there are about 300 muqīm at the Raiwind centre near Lahore, Pakistan, and perhaps up to ten at every local marākaz. The elders who form part of the decision-making council or shūrā enjoy the highest authority. Some of them are teachers (Maulānās) at the Madrasa of the Tablighī centre. Even the eldest among the shūrā members are not spared the obligation to perform the excruciating long variation of the preaching tour, the grand chillā, consisting of three chillās per forty days, regularly. There are also younger muqīm who have their family life continuing and live at the centre in intervals. They are usually much advanced on the ladder of commitments having served a large number of travelling preaching terms; sometimes they are related to the elders like being their sons. They are perhaps groomed – or aspiring – for future leadership positions within the movement. A third category of muqīm consists of regulars who serve a long preaching term, such as a grand chillā, a seven-month or a one-year tour. They live as interns at the centre as part of their term, welcoming and chaperoning guests or incoming Tablighis, running errands for the elders or serving as ushers, forming sort of a lower rung of leadership and administration at the markaz. It is obvious that one can here also discern modern influences of business organisation and public administration.

But in a certain way the marākaz also resemble Sufi hospices (khānakāhs). A tour of the Tablighī centre at Raiwind is very telling in this respect. The huge
compound represents a sprawling religious city with a huge free kitchen or langar provided for its resident inmates, a mosque, halls of residence and prayer, administration buildings and a graveyard. They establish a kind of Islamic microcosm insulated from the real world in many ways, a kind of Islamic socialism, the embodiment of the Islamic ideal of life of the early Islamic community formed by the Prophet and his companions. The food for the residents is free. Food items and provisions sold to incoming and outgoing Tablighi travelling preachers are sold at subsistence prices. No salaries are paid to residents. Praying is done collectively – and it is compulsory with guards calling those lagging behind. Regular religious talks – bayân – complement the day leaving little room for personal affairs. Everyone sleeps on the ground in huge halls on his mattress.

Sūfī traditions in Tablīghī rituals

Sūfī influences can be discerned at various levels of Tablīgh activities.

They directly relate to practices and rituals known to be particularly favoured by Sūfī-Islam, such as Dḥikr, du‘ā, and bay‘at. Here belong practices at their congregations – ijtīmat – used not only to convey knowledge – ilm – but also to transmit grace, or barakat, to the believers. The ritual of devotional seclusion or chillā as interpreted and practiced by the Tablīghīs also has to be seen in this context.

They indirectly concern the very structured and ritualistic internal culture of the Tablīghīs that places upon followers obligations not necessarily identical with Sūfī rituals but fulfilling a similar purpose of ensuring that members travel the path to perfect piety guided by the elders.

As can be seen from the quotation in the beginning, Tablīghīs consider the regular practice of Dḥikr as an essential element of their internal reformation, of the purification of their intentions. The regulars in the movement have clearly internalised this approach. Respondents who worked in the comparatively modern environment of a reputed Business School would use their free time to make silent Dḥikr whenever they can. When we were driving from the School to the compound where the annual congregation was held, my informant would start driving the car not without an appropriate du‘ā (prayer) for auspicious travel. When the Tablīghīs are on the road in their preaching groups, they will discuss techniques of Dḥikr and exchange most auspicious du‘ā. Before and after eating, at bedtime, the more aspiring Tablīghī under the close gaze of his fellow-preachers will miss no opportunity to make the appropriate du‘ā.

When looking at the institution of the Tablīghī chīllā, which is the technical term for a fourty-day preaching tour that is obligatory once a year, it becomes obvious that going out with up to fifteen other men can hardly be called solitude.
So apparently there is no meaning left of the Sufi devotional seclusion. Yet, interviewees told me repeatedly of their experience with these and other longer tours: it is this seclusion in the group, which becomes a test of character, devotion and piety. While on tour, members are not allowed to leave the group or even make phone calls to the parents who at times are much perturbed about the whereabouts of their boys. An experienced Tablíghí elder from Pakistan told me that he had been together with another colleague on a grand chilla, that is, four months, about which experience he remarked that you get to know each other very well and have to endure the presence of other Tablíghí members for such long periods of time without problems or tension.

The habit of the Tablíghís to stay over night in mosques while travelling on their preaching tours may also be rooted in Sufi practice. Occasionally ‘ulamá’ from the same Deobandi tradition in which the Tablíghí Jamá’at is rooted criticise the Tablíghís for this practice. The Tablíghí elders usually defend it with reference to the pious practice of i’tikāf, the ritual seclusion in the mosque during the fasting month of Ramadân. This reference is apparently meant to show that such action is permissible and not in violation of the Qur’án and the hadith. Considering the special connection of the Tablíghí founder with the Chishti order, it is interesting to note that some Chishti Súfís like Gisu Daraz (d. 1422) stressed the importance of i’tikāf in various connotations, largely in the meaning of seclusion for self-purification. Also here the Tablíghí appropriation of this custom has considerably moved away from the original meaning.

A special remark has to be inserted here about the role of pious dreams and their interpretation. Dreams are given a special significance also in the Tablíghí movement. They are used to give added legitimacy and authority to da’wá. When visiting the weekly proceedings of the rather powerful Lahore shúrā at their head mosque, I encountered a determined effort by the present elders to give me concerted da’wá, although strictly speaking, the Tablíghís don’t make the task of preaching to non-Muslims explicit. One of the elders used the opportunity to emphatically impress upon me the virtues of Tablígh, with reference to a pious story central to which was a dream and providence shown in it. He narrated a story where a poor Tablíghí member could not go on the planned foreign preaching tour, which generally Tablíghís must finance individually, because he could not present his money draft to the selection committee, while the cut-off date was nearing after which he would be excluded from the tour. So he prayed to Allah constantly that a miracle might happen. In the meantime, a merchant in Karachi had a dream where Muhammad directed him to go and give a certain amount of money to a person by a certain name in Kohat, in the Pakhtún tribal area in the northwest of the country. After he had had the dream twice, he

became worried and started to seek the person out. When he went to Kohat, the poor Tablighī was sitting at the local mosque, praying, weeping, and wailing that he had no means to go out on the path of Allah. Then the merchant approached him, inquired about his name and gave him the money as he had been instructed. But the poor Tablighī would not take the money before the ‘ulamā’ would certify that it was right to accept this gift for this purpose. The story clearly reveals Sūfī antecedents. References to dreams in which the Prophet appears and gives instructions have a long tradition in South Asian Islam, also among reformists who as was mentioned earlier never fully renounced their Sūfī heritage. Such dream is also attributed to the founder of the movement, Ilyās who hinted that he had received the message and method of Tablighī from the Prophet (Nu’mānī, 1993). The controversial founder of the Ahmādiya sect, Mirzā Ghulām Ahmad (1839-1908), did the same. He was famously preceded in this by Shāh Waliullāh who is nowadays regarded as the father of the Indian school of Islamic reformism (islāh) and was said to have shared views and influences with Abdul Wahhāb. Waliullāh claimed that in his dream he had been presented with a pen that belonged to the Prophet. He even alleged that in this way the Prophet himself administered bay’at to him (cf. Rizvi, 1980, vol. 1, p. 2).

It is also interesting to note that the Tablighis in all their reformist fervour have developed a particular liking for auspicious fragrances (attār). Near major Tablighī centres as much as near Deobandi Madrasas such as the dārul-‘ulam in Deoband proper, there are shops found trading in the fragrances, supposedly favoured by the Prophet. The Tablighis very much share this custom. Fragrances are selected for particular occasions such as the season – winter or summer –, for treating emotional or physical ailments. The use of these fragrances is regarded as auspicious as it is supported by traditions (ḥadīth) linking this custom to the Prophet and his companions.

And it is not least the ḥaṭimā or huge congregations where rituals are observed that betray Sūfī influences. The most prominent of them is the concluding prayer of supplication, or du‘ā, at the annual congregation. It takes place on the last day and concludes the meeting. It is transmitted by huge loudspeaker systems all over the congregation ground. It is the one event that attracts the largest number of participants. Not only would the delegates to the congregation attend it. Also many chance visitors, sympathisers and local Muslim people come for this special occasion. This event easily draws participants up to a million and more. They come dressed in their finest, move in on bus, bike, tractor, or on foot. They clearly regard it as an auspicious event transmitting an enormous amount of barakat. Suddenly the congregation site becomes a huge shrine and the preacher of the du‘ā its pīr. The final du‘ā is always given by a prominent Tablighī leader, in India and Pakistan very often by Maulana Zubair. He is

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The participation in the preaching tours is at the centre of these efforts. Several respondents told me about the difficulties followers might face when deciding to go out on a long preaching tour, notably with financial and family matters. But they will then share their experience with you about the good or endless barakat all this brought them, as in the end in spite of seemingly insurmountable difficulties things miraculously settled all by themselves. If sons previously had no employment, the absence of their father forced them to seriously seek some. If wife and mother were constantly quarrelling, they were forced by the husband/son’s absence to mend their ways. If in an extended family, a good earning Tablighi breadwinner was previously thinking of buying a second car he – and the whole family – would cut down on expenses required to sustain the Tablighi activities, leading a much more contented life afterwards on a lesser scale. Wives and sons would turn the Tablighi way, rendering suddenly the huge sacrifice in time and money much more acceptable in the family.

The repeated assertion of my informants was that, of course, there were those who were wavering and found it difficult to go the way of Allah. But those who were ready to make sacrifice would be rewarded not only in the hereafter, but also here and now spiritually.

The scope of this paper does not allow detailing the Tablighi internal culture and their ritualistic attitude in full. Suffice it to note the strict rules they have established for their various schemes of activities. For instance, there is a grid of rules transmitted to every new Tablighi to guide him on the Tablighi preaching tours. There are four things to do (da’wa, ta’lim, namaz-o-zikr, khidmat), four things to do less (sleeping, eating, talking, going outside the mosque while on tour), four things not to do (asking unsolicited questions, not harbouring those even in your heart, excessive expenditure, not taking anything without permission) and four things to refrain from (rejection, criticism, competition, pride). There is a highly structured and fixed way of conducting the tour itself; there is a ritualistic way of addressing each other, and particularly elders or the Amīr.
During the annual congregations, rituals have been introduced, designed to spread the reformist message while the proceedings have become ritualistic themselves. This starts with the major religious speeches, or bayān, forming part of any Tabligh meeting, where religious anecdotes mixed with references to the Qur’ān and the hadith are being recounted to inspire listeners, a kind of religious pep talk. At the big congregations there is evidently a hierarchy of speakers for these bayān, some of which are considered much more effective and auspicious than the others. The youthful radiance and pop star charisma of Maulānā S’ād inspires elation and hope of barakat in his listeners as I witnessed myself at the Bhopal congregation in January 2002. So do the tales recounted, some of which make free use of miraculous incidents, either narrated in the Qur’ān and the Traditions or related by the elders as referred to above in the case of the dream.

The annual congregations now for many years have been featuring mass marriages. They were originally designed to propagate simple marriage ceremonies in line with the shari’a, as many South Asian families bankrupt themselves in lavish marriage feasts, the Valima dinners, and also in paying the huge bride money typical of South Asia. Now it is considered particularly auspicious to participate in these mass marriages (nikkāh) and the numbers of participants are swelling from year to year. About 150 marriage parties attended the ceremony at the Bhopal congregation in January 2002. At the Raiwind congregation in October 2002 there were so many marriage parties that the du’ā had to be administered in several groups so that the general proceedings would not be disrupted. A small number of such Tablighi marriages is being conducted at local marākaz of some status, such as in Delhi or Lahore. All formalities would be regulated beforehand with the local qāzi. The bridegroom and the bride’s representative (uwālī) would participate at the congregation. Their names and the amount of dowry (mebr) fixed to be paid at the time or in the event of separation would be read out.

It is again barakat, which followers expect to flow from this ceremony in abundance.

**Sūfī spirituality in Tablighī philosophy**

If the Tablighīs occasionally stand accused of exoteric practices and a lack of esotericism (Gaborieau), I believe a digression on the way the Tablighi philosophy is being shaped may help mitigate this impression. In order to revive the Tablighi message all the time, there is a constant attempt on the part of the Tablighi leadership to keep their message evolving, so as to satisfy also the inquisitive and intellectually demanding members. Some key expressions and references are regularly reinterpreted to make them appear as if there is a new accent or meaning. One example of this is the emphasis on imān or faith and the way this is being
interpreted. My impression is that the more devotional leaders of the Jamā’at make it a particular reference point stressing that all they are doing is to create the perfect religious man (insān-e kāmil) – a Sūfī connotation for the Prophet.² The emphasis on faith is to show that it is an internal quality, which is required and which the whole movement revolves around. Without faith there is no barakat to be expected from prayer or other externalist practices. One Tablighī intellectual explained to me the special meaning of the causative relationship between imān (faith) → ibādat (worship) → du‘ā (prayer for supplication) → and Allah’s help, as the various stages for the Tablighīs to get help from God. Maulana Muhammad S’ād, the great grandson of Muhammad Ilyās and one of two current Amirs of the Indian chapter of the movement, which is also in charge of global coordination, explained this interconnection at the 2002 congregation in Pakistan and it was understood to reflect his intellectual and religious acumen and capacity to develop the Tablighī legacy further. He particularly stressed the connection between imān and ibādat, that it is not enough to know about the rules of Islam, but their practice has to come from your heart with sincerity; between ibādat and du‘ā, that it is not enough to come for prayer without actually regularly worshipping God, as only then you will get Allah’s help. While this is from one perspective an approach that all ideological movements employ, it is apparently not without meaning that the internal changes in man the movement wants to stimulate are the centre of the Tablighī’s concern, where the way of personal purification and piety is the only way to God, which could be understood as an application of the Sūfī concept of individual Union with God.

Contrasting influences

The overview of the Sūfī connotations in the Tablighī Jamā’at has to be contrasted with other factors as well. One of them is the influence of the country of operation. It is felt that India allows more leeway for the display of the Sūfī characteristics of the movement than Pakistan, for instance. Several respondents remarked that the character of the different branches and leaders can be distinguished. The Indian leaders are understood to be more spiritual and demonstrably pious. The Pakistani leaders and the movement led by them is more organised, disciplined and one could even say militant or dogmatic – in terms of doctrine and practices. This may perhaps be an undesirable generalisation, but it seems indicative of trends.

The preaching groups usually appoint a guide with local knowledge (rāḥbar). Indian respondents spoke of incidents where Tablighis on their tours relied on the help of pious Hindus serving as guides and leading them to houses of Muslims,

² This reference was made by Maulānā Fahīm Sahib, who teaches at the Madrasa attached to the Tablighī centre, on 11 December 2002 in Lahore – DR.
especially where Muslims were in a minority. But it was clear that Hindu neighbours occasionally endorse the participation of their Muslim neighbours in the movement on grounds of a shared vision of piety.

In media, the continued activity of Tablighi leaders as Shaykhs granting bay’at is not an issue, it is not discussed but apparently still present. No particular conflict is seen in this. In Pakistan, respondents on the contrary emphasised the clear-cut division and that the movement should be kept free from these activities.

Another factor to be taken into account is the opposition of Tablighis to shrine and pir-related rituals. Interviews at the Nizamuddin shrine in Delhi near the Tablighi headquarters revealed that many Tablighi leaders used to visit the shrine and pray there. But they would never buy flowers to make an offering at the shrine. While ordinary Tablighi members still continue to visit the shrine, leaders have now stopped doing so. Relations have become even more tense with attempts by the Tablighi headquarters to dominate the local area historically structured around the Nizamuddin shrine. The Tablighi leadership stands accused of making concerted efforts to push out non-Deobandi Imams from the local mosques replacing them with their own candidates.

The Barelvis, representing the organised Sufi-Islam, which by no means exhausts the large and very diffuse sector of popular Sufi-oriented Islam, have shown growing resentment of Tabligh activities, seen as a competition making inroads in their territory of control. The Tablighis accuse them of corrupt practices referring to their massive collection of money at the shrines. The interviewees at the Nizamuddin Shrine retorted that, if anyone was corrupt it was the Tablighis accusing them of hypocrisy. It was not clear the Nizamuddin shrine keepers would contend where the money for the construction of the huge concrete Tablighi Centre in the neighbourhood had come from. The Tablighis, they contended, would also completely ignore social issues, not looking after destitutes in the area, whereas the Nizamuddin shrine feeds a large number of poor people in the langars. Tablighi would never donate a single rupee when visiting the shrine.

Summing up, one could say that the Tablighi Jamā’at represents a typical amalgam of reformist Islam in the South Asian variety. It has strong Sufi roots, which it prefers not to acknowledge publicly. Sufi references and principles are used for the mobilisation and control of adherents. The personalised Sufi style of functioning with its connotation of piety and spirituality is found useful for its more direct impact on the psyche and conduct of individual Muslims. It allows Tablighi leaders to mould adherents to an extent where their personal identity and behaviour are radically redefined. This could be an explanation why secular critics often accuse the Tablighi of brainwashing techniques.
It will be difficult and perhaps not even advisable for the Tablíghí leaders to completely rid the movement of Sufi influences. They will want to use this personalised style of leadership for effective control. Also there are the problems of growth. With the attraction of large masses in both India and Pakistan, and beyond, society at large with its variety of social, cultural and religious styles enters the movement. This increasing diversity makes it more difficult to impose a unified mode of operation. Traditional influences compete with modern objectives. The movement’s elite is increasingly contemplating Tablígh activity in terms of strategy, goals and achievements, of territories covered or not sufficiently worked upon. By this it grows more ideological, trying to maximise control of society in its own way. This ambiguity will not go away; rather we may be witnessing increased tension between its utilitarian aspects and its pietist beginnings.

It appears that the Tablíghís have indeed adapted the Sufi heritage to their needs. The symbolism and rituals are designed to help the adherents on the path of Allah to prepare themselves for the hereafter. They become endowed with an auspicious meaning, with the capacity to mediate between the follower and God. They may not be an initiatíc Sufí order. But they have internalised the Sufí legacy to an extent where it naturally flows into other areas and forms. And, compared with other reformist groups of Islam in South Asia, they seem to be by far the most pietist and devotional, relying on internal perfection of their religious personality. In this sense I would call them a true modern incarnation of Sufí aspirations.

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Résumé

L'article discute les résultats d'un travail de terrain en Inde et au Pakistan portant sur l'influence de pratiques et de concepts liés au soufisme dans le fonctionnement du Tablíghi Jama’at. Il s’agit là d’observations préliminaires, dans la mesure où le projet et le travail de terrain n’étaient pas axés spécifiquement sur la question des rapports avec le Soufisme mais sur les conceptions sociales et organisationnelles des Tablíghís. Afin d’organiser les observations du terrain, l’article se concentre sur trois points : comment la direction et l’orientation religieuse personnelles sont construites sur le modèle du Soufisme ; comment l’interaction et l’auto-organisation à différents niveaux de prise de décision dans le Tablíghi Jama’at sont modélisés sur un ordre soufi ; comment la spiritualité soufie est utilisée dans les rituels et la philosophie Tablíghi pour mobiliser les adhérents. On signalera ensuite des influences opposées comme les variables locales entre les différentes sections en Inde, où l’on peut affirmer que l’héritage Soufi est plus fort, et au Pakistan, où l’héritage soufi est en passe de devenir « clandestin ». En conclusion, on se demandera dans quelle mesure le succès de la Tablíghi Jama’at est fondé sur sa fusion réussie de ses antécédents soufis et réformistes.

Mots-clés : Tablíghi Jama’at, islam soufi, mouvements missionnaires, mouvements piétistes, Inde, Pakistan, tradition deoband en islam, réformisme islamique (Islah).

Abstract

The paper discusses the results of field research in India and Pakistan with regard to the influence of Sufi-related practices and concepts in the workings of the Tablíghi Jama’at. These observations are of a preliminary nature, as the project and field research were not specifically focused on Sufi connections but on the social and organisational worldview of the Tablíghís. To structure the observations from the field research, the presentation concentrates on three issues: how personal religious leadership and guidance are constructed on the Sufi model; how interaction and self-organisation at various decision-making levels in the Tablíghi Jama’at are modelled after a Sufi order; how Sufi spirituality is used in Tablíghi rituals and philosophy to mobilise adherents. It will then raise countervailing sing influences such as local variables between its branches in India, where the Sufi legacy is arguably stronger, and Pakistan, where the Sufi heritage is going “underground”. In conclusion it will discuss as to what extent the success of the Tablíghi Jama’at is rooted in its successful fusion of its Sufi and reformist antecedents.

Key words: Tablíghi Jama’at, Sufi Islam, missionary movements, Pietist movements, India, Pakistan, Deoband tradition in Islam, Islamic reformism (Islah).

Resumen

El artículo discute los resultados de un trabajo de campo en India y en Pakistán centrado en la influencia de las prácticas y de los conceptos ligados al sufismo en el funcionamiento de la Tablíghi Jama’at. Se trata de observaciones preliminares, en la medida en que el proyecto y el trabajo de campo no estaban centrados específicamente en la cuestión de las relaciones con el Sufismo, sino en las concepciones sociales y organizacionales de las Tablíghís. Con el fin de organizar las observaciones de
campo, el artículo se concentra en tres puntos: cómo la dirección y la orientación religiosa personal es construida sobre el modelo del sufismo; cómo la interacción y la auto-organización en diferentes niveles de toma de decisión en la Tablighi Jamā’at son modelados sobre un orden Sufi; de qué maneras la espiritualidad Sufi es utilizada en los rituales y la filosofía Tablighi para movilizar a los adherentes. Senalaremos luego influencias opuestas como las variables locales entre las diferentes secciones en India, donde se puede afirmar que la herencia Sufi es más fuerte, y en Pakistán, donde la herencia Sufi está en proceso de volverse «clandestina». En conclusión, nos preguntaremos en qué medida el éxito de la Tablighi Jamā’at está fundado sobre su fusión exitosa de sus antecedentes Sufis y reformistas.

Palabras claves: Tablighi Jamā’at, islam sufi, movimientos misioneros, movimientos pietistas, India, Paquistán, tradición Deoband en Islam, reformismo islámico (Islah).