

**THE TABLIGHI JAMAAT IN BANGLADESH AND THE  
UK: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF AN ISLAMIC  
REFORM MOVEMENT**

By

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## SUMMARY

The aim of this research is to provide an ethnographic account of the Tablighi Jamaat, a transnational Islamic reform movement, which originated in India in the 1920s. The movement claims to reinforce faith by preaching among Muslims. Tablighi Jamaat is now operative in 165 countries with about 80 million followers around the world.

This study looks at the Tablighi Jamaat in two very different contexts, Bangladesh and the United Kingdom (UK), where the Tablighi Jamaat has been successful. In Bangladesh, the Tablighi Jamaat is a very large-scale movement where several million people attend the annual congregation (*Bishwa Ijtema*) of the Tablighi Jamaat every year. The UK has a much smaller following of the Tablighi Jamaat than Bangladesh. There are perhaps 50,000 active Tablighi Jamaat followers in the UK.

This ethnographic study shows that the success of the Tablighi Jamaat results from the positive image, which it cultivates, and the systematic preaching activities of Tablighi Jamaat followers. The organisation's apolitical image, the public profile of the *ijtema*, the humbleness in personality and behaviour of Tablighi followers, and the attraction of belonging to the global Tablighi community, all assist to create a positive image of the Tablighi Jamaat among ordinary Muslims. In addition, family and peer pressure, and a variety of personal reasons explain why people join the movement.

In the thesis, I also argue that the Tablighi Jamaat remains successful because of its ability to hold its followers (both new and long-term) within a Tablighi-guided life. A Tablighi-guided life is perceived as a protection against the Western lifestyle. Followers define many elements of contemporary Western lifestyle as non-Islamic. By clearly defining what is Islamic and non-Islamic within contemporary society, the Tablighi Jamaat provides a way in which Muslims can live in the contemporary world, but remain good Muslims.

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# Chapter One

## Introduction

This first chapter introduces the Islamic reform movement, the Tablighi Jamaat, which is the subject of this thesis. It gives an initial account of my research on the Tablighi Jamaat, and discusses previous research on the movement. The last section of the chapter presents the structure of the thesis, and introduces the subsequent chapters.

### 1.1 Background of the Research

#### *The Tablighi Jamaat*

The aim of this research is to provide an ethnographic account of the Tablighi Jamaat, a transnational Islamic reform movement that originated in India in the 1920s and is now operative in many countries around the world. This study is based on field research in two countries where the Tablighi Jamaat operates, Bangladesh and the UK.

The word *Tabligh* means transmission or communication of a message or revelation; fulfilment of a mission. In contemporary usage, it is interchangeable with *dawah* (propagation of the faith). *Jamaat* signifies a group of people. Thus, going by the literal meaning of the words, the Tablighi Jamaat is a preaching group, which invites and communicates with people to improve their faith. This is how followers of the Tablighi Jamaat explain what they are practising and it is the reason why Masud (2000a) refers to Tablighi Jamaat as a ‘faith renewal movement’.

Tablighi Jamaat does not preach to people outside the Muslim population. Followers of the Tablighi Jamaat are explicitly directed not to preach among other religions. According to the Tablighi Jamaat, at the time when the Tablighi Jamaat began preaching among the Muslim community, Muslims had deviated from the original teachings of Islam. The founder of the Tablighi Jamaat, Moulana Muhammad Ilyas (1885-1944), initiated the Tablighi movement in the 1920s in India with a desire to make the Muslims of that time into “true Muslims”, and the movement is often described as purporting to making Muslims into true Muslims (Sikand 2002 and 2006).

According to the Tablighi Jamaat, the principal aim of the movement is individual spiritual purification. For Talib (1997), the main target of the Tablighi Jamaat is to encourage its followers to establish a spiritual relationship with Allah (God). They aim to achieve this spiritual purification and spiritual closeness with Allah by engaging with *dawah*, a central concept for the Tablighi Jamaat as for Islamic reform movements in general. This term literally means ‘call’ or ‘invitation’, with the specific meaning of calling people back to what is perceived as proper Islamic observance. For the Tablighi Jamaat, *dawah* is regarded as Allah’s way of bringing believers to faith. In the case of the Tablighi Jamaat, *dawah* includes both activities with other people in one’s own locality and missionary journeys to other places. These journeys provide opportunities to interact with people and to disseminate the message of the Tablighi Jamaat.

Through *dawah*, Tablighi Jamaat followers fulfil their obligation akin to followers of Prophet Muhammad of disseminating his message to other Muslims. The entire

process of *dawah* relates to the moral reform of the individual. During *dawah* journeys, Tablighi Jamaat followers leave their residence to travel to another area to concentrate on *dawah* for a certain period. They stay in a different place, in isolation from their family and their regular lifestyle, and dedicate their entire time for *dawah*. During their *dawah* journeys, male Tablighi Jamaat followers stay in local mosques in the areas they visit for the number of days committed to the journey (three days, forty days, or four months). Moulana Ilyas provided a series of recommendations for how long one should spend on *dawah* journeys. For example, Tablighi Jamaat followers are instructed to go on a journey of three days once each month, on a *chilla*<sup>1</sup> (a journey of forty days) once a year and on three successive *chillas* once in a lifetime. The *chilla* is considered as a fundamental training period for the beginner. Male Tablighi Jamaat followers are strongly encouraged to go on these forty-day journeys with the Jamaat, during which they focus exclusively on the self-purification programme of Tabligh and *dawah* (Alam, 1993: 902).

A second type of *dawah* journey, the *masturaat jamaat*, was formulated for married couples. It is a relatively short *dawah* journey, often for three days, in which a number of married couples travel together. However, married couples can go for a *chilla* as well. If a woman is not married, she can travel with her father or brother but she cannot travel alone with a *jamaat* of men unrelated to her. During the *masturaat jamaat*, men stay at the mosque in the community that is being visited, while the women stay in a house of a dedicated Tablighi Jamaat follower in the community who maintains strict *purdah* and segregation.

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<sup>1</sup> *Chilla* originates from *chahal*, a Persian word meaning ‘forty,’ and traditionally referred to a forty-day period of ascetic observance within Islam, generally in a Sufi context. In the Tablighi Jamaat context, it refers to a forty days long *dawah* journey.

Apart from these various types of *dawah* journeys, Tablighi Jamaat followers have to maintain a number of other observances. These are known as the ‘Five Tasks’ (*Paach Kaj*). They are:

1. Undertaking two *gashts* (preaching visits) every week;
2. Undertaking two *ta’leems* (study sessions)<sup>2</sup> every day;
3. Spending at least three days in *dawah* journey every month;
4. Attending a daily meeting (*mashoara*) in the mosque;
5. Spending two and a half hours each day in encouraging people to pray and join Tablighi Jamaat.

All Tablighi followers are expected to maintain the observance of these ‘Five Tasks’ on a regular basis. The purpose of the ‘Five Tasks’ is to maintain the practice of *dawah*. Moulana Ilyas developed these rules of *dawah* and Tabligh. His followers are expected to strictly maintain these in all parts of the world. Although Moulana Ilyas mainly focused his attention in the Indian subcontinent, and was not particularly concerned with expanding it elsewhere, his successors took initiatives to spread the Tablighi Jamaat movement outside the Indian subcontinent. This global expansion of the Tablighi Jamaat began in the 1940s just after the Second World War. Today, the movement is active in some 165 countries around the world.

The global headquarters (*markaz*) of the Tablighi Jamaat is located in the area of Nizamuddin<sup>3</sup> in Delhi. Tablighi Jamaat remains strongly active in India, Pakistan,

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<sup>2</sup> The word *Ta’leem* is related to *ilm* or Islamic knowledge, and refers to the process by which *ilm* is acquired (Alam, 1993). In the Tablighi Jamaat, it refers to a session where members read from the *Qur’an* and *hadiths* in a group. The purpose of the *Ta’leem* is to acquire knowledge on *hadith* and to learn to read properly the verses of the *Qur’an* that people need to recite in the daily prayer.

and Bangladesh. In Bangladesh, it has followers throughout the country. Their annual gathering at Tongi near Dhaka, which is known as *Bishwa Ijtema* (World congregation), is attended by several millions of people. It is claimed to be the second largest Muslim gathering after the *haji*. In 2011, the leaders of the Tablighi Jamaat in Bangladesh decided to organise *ijtema* twice a year, because of the increasing popularity of the *Bishwa Ijtema* in Bangladesh. People from all over the world attend this annual *ijtema* in Bangladesh. With its large number of followers, Bangladesh has become one of the most influential centres of Tablighi Jamaat after India; the movement is also very active in Pakistan. After South Asia, the UK has become one of the most influential centres of the Tablighi Jamaat in the West. The *markaz* at Dewsbury in the UK acts as the European headquarters of the Tablighi Jamaat.

My research examines the Tablighi Jamaat in two very different national contexts, Bangladesh and the UK. Bangladesh is a Muslim majority country, within which the Tablighi Jamaat is a very large movement with many followers. The population as a whole is sympathetic to Islam and a significant proportion of the population grace the ideology of the Tablighi Jamaat. Several million people attend the annual congregation (*Bishwa Ijtema*) of the Tablighi Jamaat in Bangladesh every year, and the image of this annual *ijtema* contributes in popularising the movement across the country. In Bangladesh, this study deals with rural and urban contexts of the Tablighi Jamaat where it has become a popular and dominant Islamic movement.

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<sup>3</sup> Nizamuddin is situated in New Delhi. It is named after the famous Sufi saint Nizamuddin Auliya, whose *dargah* (shrine) is situated in this area. The Markazi mosque in Nizamuddin also known as Banglewali Masjeed, is the international headquarters of Tablighi Jamaat.

The UK is a multicultural and multi-religious society where the majority of the population are not Muslims, so the Tablighi Jamaat has a much smaller following than in Bangladesh. At the same time, according to the senior followers of the Dewsbury *markaz*, the number of participants in the annual *ijtema* at Dewsbury is increasing every year. According to the organisers of the *ijtema* in Dewsbury, the *ijtema* in Dewsbury attracts more than ten thousand followers every year. This number is increasing every year, which is a sign of the Tablighi Jamaat's growing acceptance and popularity among Muslims in the UK. According to the London Markaz of the Tablighi Jamaat, there are about 50,000 active Tablighi Jamaat followers in the UK. They also claimed that about 1/10<sup>th</sup> of the Muslim population in the UK, although not classed as dedicated followers, have spent time in *dawah* activities. The Tablighi Jamaat has been able to establish itself as one of the leading Islamic revival movements among the UK Muslims, especially in the South Asian diaspora, who constitute the majority of the Muslim population in the UK. In the UK, this research deals with mainly the urban contexts where most British South Asian Muslims reside.

This research suggests that the Tablighi Jamaat remains a successful movement around the world because of the ability to keep its followers (new and long-term) in a Tablighi-guided life. I argue that the positive image of the Tablighi Jamaat and its preaching activities, along with family and peer pressure and a variety of personal reasons explain why people join the movement. Once they have joined, the practical advantages of belonging to the Tablighi Jamaat for living a life in the contemporary world encourage followers to remain dedicated to the Tablighi life.

## 1.2 Previous Studies: General

In this section of the chapter, I discuss some of the previous works on the Tablighi Jamaat outside the UK and Bangladesh. There have been a number of previous studies on the Tablighi Jamaat, including books by Anwarul Haq (*Faith Movement of Mawlānā Ilyās*, 1972), Shail Mayaram (*Resisting Regimes: Myth, Memory and the Shaping of a Muslim Identity*, 1997), Yoginder Sikand (*The Origins and Development of the Tablighi Jama'at*, 2002) and several articles by Yoginder Sikand, an edited book by Muhammad Khalid Masud (*Travellers in Faith*, 2000a), articles by Barbara Metcalf (see Metcalf 1993, 1996a, 1996b, 2000, 2002, and 2003), Rory Dickson (2009), and Marlon Janson (2008) and others. Dickson (2009) and Janson (2008) carried out ethnographic research respectively in Canada and Gambia. Although there have been short accounts of Tablighi Jamaat in Bangladesh and the UK (see below, Section 1.3) there has been no detailed ethnographic study of the movement in either country, a gap which the present research is intended to fill.

Tablighi Jamaat has attracted the attention of American scholar Barbara Metcalf, who has published several articles since 1990. Metcalf (1993) describes Tablighi Jamaat followers as living the *hadith*, because one of the priorities of the Tablighi Jamaat followers is to implement the lessons of the *hadith* in their everyday life. In this process of implementing lessons from the *hadith*, they internalise numerous *hadiths*. Therefore, they can quote from *hadiths* without going back to the text. In this article, Metcalf (1993) discusses key Tablighi texts that they follow as the principal guide in every aspect of *dawah*.



Metcalf has also commented on the gender relations of the Tablighi Jamaat. Metcalf (1996b) points out that the Tablighi Jamaat provides a set of responsibilities to be shared by men and women. Metcalf argues that Tablighi families are less hierarchical in comparison to other Muslim families. Metcalf (2000), states that the Tablighi Jamaat provides women with an opportunity to congregate with other women. This means they have greater access to Islam compared to other Muslim women in South Asia. Metcalf also states that Tablighi men are relatively calm and quiet, traits that are perceived as feminine rather than masculine. Therefore, many non-Tablighi men criticize them as lacking in masculinity. Similar criticisms have been reported from Gambia. Janson (2008) in her ethnographic research, encountered derogatory comments about Tablighi men; one woman commented that they are ‘just half big’,” meaning that they were not ‘real’ men (Janson 2008: 33-34). My current research aims to explore some of these issues in the context of Bangladesh.

The Indian scholar Yoginder Sikand (1999) has also commented on gender aspects of Tablighi Jamaat, arguing that the organisation prioritises women’s participation in order to establish an Islamic tradition within the family. Sikand states that the mother is treated as the first *madrasa*<sup>4</sup> for children among the Tablighi Jamaat followers. Sikand argues that although Tablighi Jamaat reinforces the traditional gender relations, it also provides women with an opportunity to spread Islam, which was almost forbidden in South Asia. For Metcalf (1996b), by actively engaging in organizing and presiding over the *dawah* meetings in their locality, women receive

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<sup>4</sup> The classical Islamic education system is based in institutions known as *madrasa*. *Madrasas* have their own curriculum that emphasise on the importance of studying various aspect of Islam. There are two types of *madrasas* in Bangladesh, *qawmi* and *aliya madrasa*. The former are independent of the government and determine their own curriculum, while the *aliya madrasa* receive State support and teach qualifications recognised by the State education system.

religious authority and empowerment. White (2010) also argues that women in Bangladesh enjoy religious empowerment through becoming involved with Tablighi Jamaat activities. Féo's study in Southeast Asia (2009) comes up with similar argument that the gender roles of the Tablighi Jamaat have positive advantages for women. I aim to explore through this study how Tablighi men see gender relations. In addition, how does a Tablighi approach to gender relations interact with the traditional patriarchal norms and values in Bangladesh?

Sikand also contests the claim that the Tablighi Jamaat is apolitical (2006). He states that many Tablighi Jamaat followers have had considerable political roles in various contexts. Sikand (2006) argues that the grass root work of the Tablighi Jamaat provides a fertile ground for Islamist movements in Bangladesh. Sikand points out that in 1971, when the Islamic political parties were banned in Bangladesh, many followers of Islamist political parties used the Tablighi Jamaat as a cover under which to hide. However, the insights of Tablighi Jamaat followers on the relationship between the Tablighi Jamaat and politics that I present later in the thesis will contribute to a clearer understanding of this aspect of the movement. In this thesis, I aim to explore the political implications of the Tablighi Jamaat in Bangladeshi society through an ethnographic approach.

A number of writers have discussed the role of the Tablighi Jamaat in relation to Islamic identity. Certainly, the creation of an Islamic community transcending national and ethnic barriers was always one of the aims of the Tablighi Jamaat. This is reflected in their *dawah* approach. The Tablighi Jamaat followers carry out *dawah* in the same way all over the world regardless of ethnicity and nationalities in order

to create a universal image of the Tablighi Jamaat. In the last speech of Moulana Muhammad Yusuf (d.1965), the second *ameer* or head of the Tablighi Jamaat, he discussed the importance of the creation of the *ummah* (Muslim Community). He began his speech by discussing the importance of the *ummah*, giving examples of the sacrifices made by the Prophet to establish a Muslim community, and stating that:

*Ummah* is not the name of a group belonging to one nation or one place, but is formed rather of people of various lands and climes joined together into one whole. Those who consider a particular nation or a people as their own are guilty of destroying the *Ummah* by breaking it up into separate entities (Khan, 2009: 46).

For Moulana Muhammad Yusuf, creation of a global Tablighi community was also a key area regardless of national and ethnic boundaries. This community would be based on Islamic identity rather than Tablighi membership.

The influence of the Tablighi Jamaat on the process of Muslim identity formation has in recent times attracted scholars across the globe. For example, Talib (1997), Kepel (2000), and Dickson (2009) discuss the formation of Islamic identity and the role of the Tablighi Jamaat. Talib (1997) focuses on India and the South Asian context overall, Dickson (2009) focuses on Canada, and Kepel (2000) discusses the case of France. All three scholars argue that the Tablighi Jamaat contributes on the formation of a Muslim identity in various parts of the world.

Kepel (2000) observes that building an Islamic cultural foundation is an essential element of the formation of Muslim identity and that Tablighis were the first group in France who were effective in doing this. He further states that these practices help to create a communal life. In this context, my study focusing on the issues of identity among Tablighi followers in the UK will help to understand the implications of the movement in a multicultural context.

Dickson (2009), looking at Canada, provides a detailed account of the construction of identity in urban spaces, based on ethnographic research. He argues that visible symbols, for example clothing, become crucial vehicles of the construction of identity. The ‘mosque centred spirituality’ of the Tablighi Jamaat helps to create a universal image of the Tablighi Jamaat. By engaging with the Tablighi Jamaat, followers create new and long-term social connections. As Dickson (2009) states, these can be local, regional, and transnational. The development of social networks and connectivity among Tablighi followers are doubtlessly common in various parts of the world.

Both Kepel (2000) and Dickson (2009) discuss Tablighi Jamaat identity in the Western context. In contrast, Talib (1997) provides a regional example of the Tablighi Jamaat and the formation of identity discussing three case studies from India. For Talib (1997), establishing a relation to Allah is the main agenda for Tablighis. In order to build the relationship with Allah, they transform their life into a dedicated Tablighi follower. Talib (1997) argues that it is a transformation from one identity to a Tablighi identity.

### **1.3 Previous Studies: Bangladesh and the UK**

Here I discuss the small number of previous studies of the Tablighi Jamaat in Bangladesh and the UK. Among them, Sikand (2002) studies Tablighi Jamaat in India, Bangladesh, and the UK with a historical development of the Tablighi Jamaat in these countries. For the case of the UK, Sikand shows that the Tablighi Jamaat is mainly organised by the South Asian Muslims in the UK and it is not much popular among British born Muslims.

Metcalf (1996a) provides a brief background to the Tablighi Jamaat in America and Europe. She focuses on how Tablighi Jamaat has become an influential transnational Islamic revival movement. Finally, Metcalf points out that the Tablighi Jamaat movement contributed on the process of building mosques in various parts of the world including the UK. Since the Tablighi Jamaat is a mosque centred movement, they prioritised the establishment of many mosques as they can in order to carry out *dawah*. In this process, they transformed many existing mosques into Tablighi mosques.

Elke Faust (2000) focuses on Britain and Germany. Faust shows that the Tablighi Jamaat contributed to the creation of an environment in which Muslims in Europe could practice their religion and express their identity.

Zacharias Pieri (2012) focuses on Tablighi effort of building a mega mosque in London. He shows that although the Tablighi Jamaat emphasises the unity in their methods and ideology that help to remain outside of worldly activities, the mega mosque debate forced them to engage in a debate with the wider community. Pieri

shows that The Tablighi Jamaat functions in a different way when the environment is not the same.

In relation to Bangladesh, Islamic Foundation Bangladesh published a book by A.Z.M Shamsul Alam (1993) on the Tablighi Jamaat in Bangladesh. The book, which is entitled *The Message of Tableeg and Da'wah*, provides an empathetic account of his experience as a Tablighi follower. Another book has been written on the Tablighi Jamaat by Muhammad Yeahia Akhter who is a political scientist at Chittagong University in Bangladesh. Akhter (2006) claims to provide a sociological analysis of the Tablighi Jamaat in Bangladesh based on a survey among Tablighi Jamaat followers. Sarah White (2010) deals with the gender politics of Islam in Bangladesh. White shows that women enjoy religious empowerment through becoming involved with Tablighi Jamaat activities based on case studies of two women, only one of whom is a Tablighi Jamaat follower. Geoffrey Samuel (2011) writes on gender relations among Bangladeshis with a focus on Tablighi Jamaat followers in Bangladesh and the UK, and on the Hijaz Community (a Sufi organisation) in the UK. Samuel shows that there is a desire among both Tablighi women and men for a Muslim masculinity imitating the life of the Prophet that help them to be calm and avoid aggression with a new gender relations. Some young women positively evaluate this new type of gender relation within the Tablighi Jamaat.

So far, however, there have been no substantial ethnographic studies on the Tablighi Jamaat either in Bangladesh or in the UK. This is perhaps surprising, because the annual Tablighi Jamaat gathering in Bangladesh has become well known among the

global Tablighi Jamaat followers, while the UK has become an influential centre in the West and has been acting as the European headquarters of the Tablighi Jamaat since 1980s when the organisation moved to its permanent location in Dewsbury from the *Markazi* Mosque<sup>5</sup> in London.

I hope that this thesis will help to fill the gap. Among the specific topics that I discuss in the following pages are: the process of the spiritual journey within the Tablighi Jamaat, and its role in the transformation from non-Tablighi to Tablighi; how going to the *ijtema* has become a new form of pilgrimage among many Muslims in Bangladesh and beyond; gender roles in the Tablighi Jamaat and their impact in Bangladesh; the process of identity construction among the Tablighi Jamaat followers in the UK.

#### **1.4 Summary of the Chapters**

In the last section of this chapter, I shall outline the overall structure of the thesis and introduce the following chapters. Chapter Two provides some background to the study, focusing on the historical context of Islamisation in Bengal. It then discusses the context of the Islamic revival in the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century in Bengal. The Tablighi Jamaat was part of this process of Islamic revival and evolved from the reform efforts of Moulana Ilyas in the early twentieth century in India. Later on, this chapter discusses the background of Islam in Bangladesh, where Tablighi Jamaat has become a significant vehicle of the Islamic revival.

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<sup>5</sup> The word *markaz* refers to main mosque where the Tablighi Jamaat organises groups to be departed and organises weekly session of religious speech known as *boyan*. Here, *Markazi* Mosque is the mosque that oversees the activities of the Tablighi Jamaat in London area.

Chapter Three discusses the methodology used in the research. The chapter provides an overview of the situation I went through in the field. My fieldwork involved participation in multiple sites. The chapter also provides a detailed account of the idea of multi-sited ethnography and its implication in my research. Since the Tablighi Jamaat is a transnational religious movement, a multi-sited ethnographic method was essential in order to get a comprehensive understanding of the Tablighi Jamaat movement both in various parts in Bangladesh and in the UK.

Chapters Four, Five, Six and Seven present the results of my research on the Tablighi Jamaat in Bangladesh. Chapter Four describes my participation in a *chilla* in the northern part of Bangladesh. This gave me an opportunity to participate in the day-to-day activities of the Tablighi Jamaat. The chapter provides an ethnographic account of *chilla*. It also helps the reader to understand the approach of doing *dawah* during a *chilla*.

Chapter Five discusses the effects of the Tablighi Jamaat on the lives of its followers. It shows how participation in Tablighi *dawah* acts as a force of transformation. By participating in Tablighi *dawah*, many followers from lower socio-economic class acquire a sense of social status by mixing with people from various classes during *dawah* journeys and other Tablighi activities. Followers experience a less hierarchical atmosphere while they take part in Tablighi *dawah*.

Chapter Six focuses on the *Bishwa Ijtema*, the annual three days' gathering of the Tablighi Jamaat in Bangladesh. It deals with the impact of *ijtema* on Tablighi Jamaat followers in Bangladesh. The *ijtema*, as a central occasion for participation in the



Tablighi Jamaat, has become the largest Islamic congregation in the world after the *haji*. With the growing number of participants, the *ijtema* attracts followers from all over the world. This chapter argues that the *ijtema*, as a regular congregational gathering, provides a new idea of pilgrimage among the Muslim community across the globe.

Chapter Seven investigates gender roles within the Tablighi Jamaat. Barbara Metcalf and others have raised the question of the impact of Tablighi Jamaat practices in the area of gender relations. On the surface, Tablighi Jamaat teachings stress the importance of male authority within the family in a way that conflict hardly at all with ‘traditional’ Bangladeshi patriarchal attitudes. However, the organisation also emphasises positive and cooperative relations between husband and wife and provides various opportunities for women’s participation. Chapter Seven analyses how involvement with Tablighi Jamaat help to develop female agencies in a number of ways.

Chapters Eight, Nine and Ten discuss the findings from the Tablighi Jamaat in the UK. Chapter Eight gives an ethnographic account of my participation in weekly *dawah* activities in a mosque in Cardiff. This participation in weekly *dawah*, which is known as *gasht*, provided an understanding of the process of Tablighi activities in the UK. My observation in both Bangladesh and UK suggests that fundamental process of doing Tablighi *dawah* is same in both countries.

Chapter Nine discusses the role of the Tablighi Jamaat in the creation of an environment of *dawah* in the UK. The Tablighi Jamaat movement accelerated the

process of *dawah* in various parts in the UK. The Tablighi Jamaat's Deobandi connections helped the Tablighi Jamaat to use their mosques for their *dawah* activities, since the Deobandis have the largest number of mosques in the UK. This provided the basis for the expansion of Tablighi Jamaat activities in many parts of the UK. This chapter demonstrates that dedicated followers, in both the UK and Bangladesh, see the Tablighi life as a protection against the Western lifestyle by offering an alternative value system. Participation in the Tablighi Jamaat also provides them with an opportunity to learn various aspects of Islam. In addition, the Tablighi Jamaat in the UK aims to establish a mosque oriented community. In doing so, mosques have become a hub for their social network.

Chapter Ten discusses the role of the Tablighi Jamaat in fostering a Muslim identity among contemporary British Muslims. The early leaders of the Tablighi Jamaat always prioritised working on the creation of a Muslim *ummah* (community) regardless of national and ethnic differences. This chapter looks at the Tablighi Jamaat's contribution to the process of Muslim identity in the UK.

The Conclusion (Chapter Eleven) discusses the key findings and arguments of my research on the Tablighi Jamaat in Bangladesh and the UK. It considers to what extent the Tablighi Jamaat has become and remains a successful movement, in both Bangladesh and the UK, and analyses the reasons behind the attraction towards the Tablighi Jamaat for Bangladeshi and British Muslims.

## **Part 1: Bangladesh**

## Chapter Two

### Islamic Reforms in Bangladesh

#### 2.1 Introduction

Chapter Two provides some general background to the development of the Tablighi Jamaat within Bangladesh, focussing on Islamic reform movements in South Asia and particularly Bangladesh from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed some of the influential Islamic reform movements in different parts of the world. British India was one of them, which was the birthplace for many Islamic reform movements. Tablighi Jamaat and Jamaat-i-Islami<sup>6</sup> (JI) were the most notable Islamic movements evolved in India. Jamaat-i-Islami is an Islamic political party that works for the establishment of an Islamic state. The emergence of Jamaat-i-Islami was linked with the liberation movement of the Indian sub continent. Tablighi Jamaat has a different context and they aimed on the moral reform of the individual. Tablighi Jamaat claims that they are not interested in involvement with traditional forms of politics. Thus, the Tablighi Jamaat has been able to create an apolitical image among its followers. Many Tablighi followers believe that an apolitical image helps to attract people from different class, ethnic and national backgrounds. With their 'peaceful' approach, Tablighi Jamaat is now active across much of the world and it is one of the widely spread movements all over the world.

Many Islamic movements emerged as the counterpart of the *shuddhi* ('purification') movement of reformist Hindus organisations such as the Arya Samaj, which had

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<sup>6</sup> Jamaat-i-Islami is an Islamic political party, founded by Abu al-Ala Mawdudi (1903-1979) in the 1940s at Lahore, British India (Now Pakistan).

been initiated in order to bring converted Muslims back to their ancestral religion. The movements associated with the journals *Tanzeem*<sup>7</sup> and *Tobligh*<sup>8</sup> were two notable groups that engaged in campaigning against the *shuddhi* movement in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Some other movements focused on reverting to the fundamental practices of Islam. The Faraizi movement of Hajji Shariatullah (1781-1840) is one of these that insisted on the need to follow the obligatory task of Islam. All of these Islamic movements had considerable impact on Bengal Muslims and later on Bangladesh.

I commence with a brief history of Islamisation in Bengal that is linked with the contemporary Islamic movement, then proceed to the background of the Tablighi Jamaat in Bangladesh. Finally, I discuss how Tablighi Jamaat has become a significant Islamic movement in Bangladesh. I also devote attention to some of the early Islamic movements in South Asia; that created the base for the Tablighi Jamaat movement.

## **2.2 Islamisation in Bengal**

The British Presidency of Bengal was initially constituted in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century by Bihar, Orissa, West Bengal (now part of India), and East Bengal (now Bangladesh). Thereafter, Bengal underwent a radical transformation during the British rule. In 1905, the Province of Bengal was divided into two parts, West Bengal and East Bengal. Although the two were merged again in 1911, Bengal was divided again at the time of the partition of the Indian Subcontinent in 1947. East Bengal became part

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<sup>7</sup> *Tanzeem* ('Effort') was initiated by Dr Safiuddin Kitchlew, as a counterpart of the *Sangathan* (organisation) movement of the Hindus headed by Lala Lazpat Rai (De, 1998: 70)

<sup>8</sup> A monthly Bengali magazine started their publication under the name of '*Tobligh*' in Bengali from Kolkata to preach among the Muslims and to counterpart the *shuddhi* movement in the 1920s and 30s.

of Pakistan, on the basis of its shared Muslim religious identity, and was renamed as East Pakistan. According to Chatterji (1994), horrific clashes between Hindus and Muslims influenced this final partition of Bengal. Subsequently, geographical distance, cultural difference and the oppressive character of the West Pakistan-dominated regime forced East Pakistan towards a liberation war. After a nine months war Bangladesh became independent in 1971. The obvious question arises of how Bangladesh became a Muslim majority region. Why did the majority of the population depart from their ancestral religion and become Muslims?

In order to understand this, I begin with a short historical background of Muslims in Bengal. Over the period, Bengal had been ruled by various rulers and underwent various religious and cultural traditions. With such diversities, Bengal always struggled with its identity. Sometimes, it was identified with the Buddhist rulers, sometimes with the Hindus and the Muslims. Each reign left its cultural and religious tradition in Bengal. Mughals were the last among them before Bengal was colonised by the British.

The expansion of Islam in Bengal followed an adaptive process with the local culture. The adaptive nature of Islamisation created an avenue for the indigenous people of Bengal. Although the Muslim settlement started in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, it speeded up considerably in the early thirteenth century (Eaton 1993 and 2003). The Muslim settlement in the area was connected with the succession of Turkish and Mughal emperors. The Turk and Mughal empires were eventually involved with the conversion into Islam. The Turk-Afghan period provided an environment for Islam to expand, which was fostered by the Mughal rule (Dasgupta 2004: 32).

During the early phase of the Mughal Empire, East Bengal was rather a neglected province and no one even felt the importance to integrate East Bengal into the political boundary of the Mughal Empire. During this time, Bengal was treated as an alien province (Dasgupta 2004: 32). Sultan Hussain Shah was the first to sense the need to strengthen the political foundation of the Sultanate in Bengal. This was the time when the Mughal empire extended their partnership to build mosques and *madrasas*, and appointed *qazis* or Islamic judicial officers (Ahmed 2001; Dasgupta 2004; and Eaton, 1993). This cooperation however does not provide the complete scenario of Islamisation in this region. Eaton (1993) shows how Islam expanded in this region. He shows that tax-free tenure accelerated the process of Muslim settlement and conversion. This tenure granted the pioneer of Muslim settlers, who were Sufi holy men, the right to clear up underdeveloped forests and bring them into cultivation. In return, as a condition, they had to create a mosque or a temple for local people (Eaton, 1993 and Dasgupta, 2004). Since most of the pioneers were Muslim, it was obvious that the new Islamic faith would have evolved on East Bengal's economic frontier (Dasgupta 2004). Eaton (1993) identified three 'frontiers,' which have played a role on Islamisation in this region:

One of these was the political frontier, which defined the territories within which the Turks and their successors, the Bengal sultans and governors of the Mughal Empire, minted coins, garrisoned troops, and collected revenue. A second, the agrarian frontier, divided settled agricultural communities from the forest, Bengal's natural state before humans attacked it with ax and plow. A third was the Islamic frontier, which divided Muslim from non-Muslim communities (1993: 2).

Many Sufi and holy men were also involved with deforestation and introduced the plough and axe cultivation. This cultivation ensured a stable and secure profession for many native non-Muslim people, which was the popular reason why many rural and low caste people convert to Islam (Eaton, 1993 and 2003). Through this process of plough and axe cultivation, this immaculate eastern Bengal became wealthy and famous for its agriculture-based economy, especially for cultivating wet rice. Surplus production of rice and the rising agrarian economy influenced the Mughals to set up their provincial capital at Dhaka in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. This was the first time the ‘underdeveloped’, ‘inaccessible’ and heavily forested area came under the scrutiny of the political and economic leadership of the Mughals (Dasgupta 2004: 33).

Muslim settlement by the Mughals weakened the entrenched caste system of East Bengal. However, in another way Islamisation gradually introduced a new hierarchy among the Muslims, with the segregation of *ashraf* (the Muslim aristocratic class) and *atraf* (rural converted Muslims). The new Muslim community were identified as *ashraf* or Muslim aristocratic classes, whose descendents had come from beyond Khyber and who led an Arabian and Persian lifestyle (Eaton, 2003: 75). On the other hand, rural converted Muslims were identified as *atraf*, with lower social status and less control over society and financial resources. The *ashraf* were the minority and classed themselves as urban residents. They maintained the most influential political and financial position in the society and did not show any interest in mixing and interacting with the *atraf* class (Dasgupta 2004: 32).



The *ashraf* classes influenced the forming of Bengal Muslim culture. With the ascent of a new Muslim community in the region, Bengal accumulated Islamic and indigenous customs and values, forming what Roy (1983) defines as a ‘syncretistic’ culture. Sufis in Bengal were the main actors of developing this syncretistic culture. During this early phase, *Sufis*, *darbesh* and *fakirs* were more influential than orthodox clerics such as *moulana* or high-class *ashraf*. This interplay of syncretistic ideas and practices were widely accepted among rural villagers in East Bengal. Hence, the peasant cultivators of Bengal, who had assimilated with Islam, did not see ‘Islam’ as an exotic and foreign religious system (Dasgupta 2004: 38). In contrast, Roy (2005: 51) states that the Islamic tradition for Bengali Muslims was running parallel with the non-Muslim traditions in Bengal. This syncretistic tradition of the indigenous people has a clear linkage with the process of Islamisation. He states:

It was precisely because of the converts continuing to be steeped in the non-Islamic cultural heritage of Bengal that the Muslim literati were compelled to construct a tradition which Bengal Muslims could call and claim their own (Roy, 2005: 51).

This syncretistic tradition was associated with the adaptation and survival of Islam in the region, but it was spontaneous. This cultural assimilation provided an excellent combination of ‘Islamic’ and ‘non-Islamic’ tradition that was a vector of social and technological transformations (Chatterji, 1998: 280). In contrast, for Roy (1983 and 2005) and Eaton (1993 and 2003) Islamisation was a combination of a simultaneous process of unification of Hindu and Muslim intellectual traditions in Bengal.

However, this was not a linear or quick process. Rather it took hundreds of years (Roy, 2005).

The mutual exchange of religious symbols and practices between Hinduism and Islam in Bengal were well known (Nicholas 2001, Roy 2005). This syncretistic cultural tradition was first challenged by Islamic revivalist movements during the nineteenth century, which criticised this tradition and pushed for controlling non-Islamic accumulation (Roy, 2005: 51).

### **2.3 Bengal Muslim under Reform Movements**

The 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries were very important periods for Bengal Muslims for several reasons. During this period, Bengal Muslims witnessed the rise of the East India Company and lost their independence in 1757. This period was marked as the developing phase of Islamic revivalism searching for a 'pure' form of Islam. Conflict between *ashraf* and *atraf* became apparent in relation to the pursuit of this 'pure' form of Islam.

During the early period of British rule, many Islamic scholars started to propagate the need for an 'orthodox' Islam, which set the early stage of Islamic reform in British India. Many concentrated on bringing back Islamic rule to the region. Shah Wali Ullah (1703-1762) was the pioneer on strengthening Islamic faith and he was involved with the *swadeshi* (independence) movement. He visited Medina to learn the *Ilme Hadith* (study of Hadith) under the guidance of Sheikh Abu Taher Medni. Shah Wali Ullah introduced the *Ilme Hadith* to the Indian subcontinent (Rijhvee, 2003). It was reported that during his stay in Mecca, he had a dream where the

Prophet commanded him to work for the Muslim community in the Indian subcontinent and he started to work after returning to India in 1732 (Ahmad, 1987: 298). He worked on the Islamic understanding of Sufism and wrote several books. He advocated a wider distribution of assets on egalitarian socialistic lines (Ahmad, 1987: 301). Many of his ideas and principles had become part of the curriculum of Deoband and he also influenced the initial phase of Islamic reform in the Bengal areas. Later on, Deoband became an influential Islamic educational institution (*madrasa*) for the Muslims (Metcalf, 1982). During the early phase of British rule, traditional *madrasa* education began to lose its 'glory' due to the shortage of funding.

De (1998) provided a detailed background on how traditional *madrasas* had lost their Muslim donor after the downfall of Muslim rule in India. According to him, a shortage of funding led many Muslim scholars to request the British colonial power to patronise the traditional Muslim education system. A group of Muslim scholars met Lord Warren Hastings in September 1780 to get support for modern Islamic education. In the same year, they had agreed to set up the Calcutta Aliya Madrasa. In 1791, the *madrasa* included natural philosophy, anthropology, law, astronomy, mathematics, logic and grammar as part of the reforms in their curriculum (Sattar, 2004: 125). This *madrasa* formally began its activities in 1781 headed by Moulana Mazduddin. However, many Muslims did not appreciate it since the activities were accommodated with the help of British colonial rule. Acceptance of support from the British colonial rule was questioned because *qawmi madrasas* did not accept contributions from colonial power.

After the Calcutta Aliya *Madrassa* was set up in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many aristocrats from the Muslim community took initiatives to improve the education system of many *madrassas* by liaising with the British government. These aristocrats felt that an English education was essential to increase the employability of graduates of *madrassa*. According to De (1998) Abdul Latif, a member of the textbook board of Calcutta University urged the government to modernise the curriculum of *madrassa* by introducing English education. The main purpose of this modernisation effort was to increase the competencies of Muslim students to obtain government employment in various sectors. There was hostility among many Muslims towards introducing extensive English education, since this involved removing Arabic and Persian language from the curriculum.

During the time of reform initiatives on the *madrassa* education system, Islamic reform efforts were evident in many places in British India. The Faraizi movement was the most notable and it had considerable influence among Bengal Muslims (De, 1998). Hajji Shariatullah (1781-1840) initiated the Faraizi movement (Khan, 1992). The movement of Shariatullah was known as the Faraizi because of its insistence on the fundamental duties of Islam (*farz*, pl. *faraiz*: an obligatory duty). Ideally, this activity denied some of the practices of Sufi and *pir* cults. Later Shariatullah's son Dudu Miah continued this activity. Although the Faraizi movement lost its direction following Dudu Miah's death, it nevertheless left its influences among the rural and urban Muslim middle class. This movement highlighted the 'purification' of 'local' Islam (Metcalf, 1982 and Khan, 1992). Until then, Islam in Bengal had not faced any challenges from orthodox Hinduism. However, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Muslims were challenged by the Hindu reform effort that was

known as *shuddhi* ('Purification'). The *shuddhi* movement undertaken by Swami Sraddhananda of the Arya Samaj aimed to bring back converted Muslims into the fold of Hinduism (De, 1998: 69).

This was the period when Bengal witnessed marked differences between Hindus and Muslims who thus drifted apart from each other. In addition, the partition of Bengal in 1905 also rooted the idea of separation between Hindus and Muslim. In response to the *shuddhi* movement of the Arya Samaj, Muslims expressed themselves through creating the Tanzeem (effort) and Tablig (propagation) organisations (De, 1998). During this time when both Muslims and Hindus were involved with reforming their religion, Moulana Muhammad Ilyas (1885-1944) introduced the idea of preaching in the name of Tablighi Jamaat in Mewat in the 1920s. Around 1927, Tablighi came into Bengal from the northern part of India. The first Bengal provincial Tablighi committee was formed under the secretaryship of Moulvi Abul Hayat with Moulvi Aftabuddin, who was sub-editor of *The Light* (De, 1998: 69).

The Tanzeem (effort) association of Dr Safiuddin Kitchlew was a counterpart of the Sangathan ('Organisation') movement of the Hindus headed by Lala Lazpat Rai (De, 1998: 70). The Bengal Tanzeem Committee was formed on 18<sup>th</sup> May 1926. The aim of the organisation was to organise the Muslims of Bengal on a purely non-political and non-sectarian basis in order to restore the economic, social, and spiritual life of the people on strictly positive lines and to protect Muslim interests. The association emphasised the importance of establishing cooperation and solidarity among Muslims from all classes. This movement disseminated the general principles of

Islam during daily and Friday prayers, and encouraged *tobligh* activities. They formed Tanzeem committees in various places in East Bengal (De, 1998: 71).

The Tanzeem movement was able to make an impact to unite Muslims against the movements for *shuddhi* and *sangathan*. In 1927 (1334 of the Bengali era) a monthly magazine started to be published in Bengali from Kolkata under the name of '*Tobligh*'. In the first issue, it explained the importance of *tobligh*<sup>9</sup> quoting the verses of the *Qur'an* (11: 104 and 105, 12: 110). Moulana Muhammad Muniruzzaman Eslambadi states in the first issue that it is *wazeb* to engage with *tobligh* for all Muslims (1334: 3 that is 1927: 3 in the English calendar). Treating *tobligh* as *wazeb* is of enormous importance because the term *wazeb* refers to an obligation that is close to *farz*. This command stands in between *sunnah*<sup>10</sup> and *farz*. The journal *Tobligh* was against political involvement and in the tenth issue of the first year it stated that many *tobligh* efforts lost their focus after involving themselves with politics. The magazine regularly published reports about the *shuddhi* movement and their *Tobligh*. It aimed to revive Islamic practices among the Muslims. During this time, some other magazines began to appear, focusing on the situation of Muslim community in Bengal region. They are *The Moslem Darpon*, *Mashik Mohammadi* (Monthly Muhammadi), *Shariatye Islam* and *Sawgat*. *The Moslem Darpon* regularly published news about the activity of the *shuddhi* movement to raise awareness among Muslims about this movement.

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<sup>9</sup> Literal meaning of *Tobligh* is similar to *Tablighi*. *Tobligh* is the Bengali pronunciation of the Urdu word *Tabligh*.

<sup>10</sup> *Sunnah* implies established custom, normative precedent, specifically based on the example of the prophet Muhammad. The actions and sayings of Prophet Muhammad are believed to complement the divinely revealed message of the *Qur'an*, constituting a source for establishing norms for Muslim conduct and a primary source of Islamic law.

However, these two movements (Tanzeem and Tobligh) did not last for long. There is no evidence for the existence of the Tanzeem and Tobligh movements in Bangladesh later on. In the early twenties of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the activities of the Tanzeem and Tobligh movements had influence in developing the *Bangiya Mussalman Sahitya Samity* (the Muslim Literary Society of Bengal). The aim of this association was to compete with Bengali Hindus in the literary area, to place Muslim writers in the frontline. However, many Muslim writers did not like this idea; as a result, a new organisation named *Muslim Shahitya Shamaj* (the Muslim Literary Society) was established on 19<sup>th</sup> January 1926, in Dhaka, under the guidance of the literary scholar Moulana Mohammad Shahidullah. This society aimed to be non-partisan and non-communal (De, 1998: 73).

During this time, many Bengali Muslims were eager to affirm their connection with a Muslim identity rather than a Bengali one (Ahmed, 2001). This is why, during the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947, East Bengal (the region which corresponds to contemporary Bangladesh) became part of Pakistan with a new name, East Pakistan. However, this new country with a new name, based on a Muslim identity, proved not to be the solution for Muslims in East Pakistan. This was realized through the independence of East Pakistan in 1971 and the formation of a new country named Bangladesh based on their Bengali identity.

East Bengal became part of Pakistan in 1947 based on a Muslim identity distinguishing it from the Bengali Hindus. However, Brass (1970) argues that Bengali Muslims had chosen to ignore their cultural, linguistic, and cultural distinctiveness to identify themselves with the other Muslim communities of India,

because it suited their economic and political interest to do so (cited in Madan, 1972: 79). Nevertheless, the concept of identity for East Pakistan changed during the political turmoil of 1969-71, when West Pakistani nationalist rule became the dominant political tool over East Pakistan (Ahmed 2001). Living under the new 'colonial rule' of West Pakistan, the people of East Pakistan realised that religious commonality could not be the sustainable idea behind a nation-state. That is why the idea of 'Bengaliness' became a dominant ideology during the liberation war of Bangladesh. The history of Bengali Muslims, until 1947, had been understood as a history of 'Islamisation'. Conversely, the history of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) between 1947 and 1970 was written as a history of 'Bengaliness' (Chatterji, 1998: 266). This shows how the identity search of Bengali Muslims has shifted between being Bengalis and being Muslims, in response to the socio-economic and political climate of the region (Rozario, 2001: 21).

During the Pakistan period, an Islamic political party named Tamaddun Majlis emerged in East Pakistan. It failed, however, to produce any impact on mainstream politics in East Pakistan (Hossain and Siddiquee, 2006). Other than Tablighi Jamaat, Jamaat-i-Islami (JI) was the only influential Islamic movement during this time. Although JI had little influence on the society on its first appearance, it attracted the attention of many later on and established itself as a major force in politics. During the 1950s in East Pakistan, many notable Tablighi Jamaat leaders joined the JI, since the Tablighi Jamaat was not involved with politics. JI provided them with the possibility to engage themselves in politics. Ghulam Azam (1922- ), a controversial leader of Jamaat-i-Islami in Bangladesh, began to follow the Tablighi Jamaat and acted as *ameer* of the Tablighi Jamaat in Rangpur district during 1952-54 (Hossain



and Siddiquee, 2006: 386). He joined the JI in 1954 with the intention of establishing an Islamic state.

During the 1940s, Jamaat-i-Islami was not a significant or influential political party in the Subcontinent. In 1948, they had only one small office in Dhaka, which was led by a West Pakistani, Rafi Ahmed Indori. Moulvi Abdur Rahim of Barishal, who was the *ameer* of East Pakistan in 1951, was the only notable JI leader from a Bengali background (Rahim, 2001). There were some other Islamic political parties during the Pakistan period (1947-1970), but they failed to attract the attention of the mass population. They were Nizam-i-Islami and Khilafat-i-Rabbani (Rahim, 2001). A moving force to revive Jamaat-i-Islami in East Pakistan was Ghulam Azam, who soon established himself as a leading theoretician and tactician of the party after he joined JI as *muttafiq* or associate member. In 1955, he was promoted as a permanent member of Jamaat-i-Islami and given the status of *rokn*. He became the general secretary in 1956 and became *ameer* in 1969 (Rahim, 2001; Hossain and Siddiquee 2006).

#### **2.4 Bangladesh and Islam**

After the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, the Awami League government banned all political activities based on religion. This was declared through the new Constitution of Bangladesh, which was authenticated in November 1972. The adoption of secularism as a fundamental principle of state policy prohibited the use and abuse of religion in politics (Ahmad 2008:51). However, this strategy did not continue for long. Because of mounting financial difficulties, Bangladesh had to seek aid from the oil-rich Arab countries, including Saudi Arabia (Rahim, 2001: 247).

The Saudis put pressure on successive Bangladesh governments to recognize the role of Islam in public affairs as a requirement for their assistance. The first stage of an Islamisation process began in independent Bangladesh with the release of members of JI who had been treated as war criminals from prison under a general amnesty declared on 30<sup>th</sup> November 1973. Those who were convicted for criminal charges were excluded (Rahim, 2001:246). During this time, most of the JI leaders came out of prison. Furthermore, the government of Bangladesh increased the allocation for Islamic education in *madrasa* from Taka 2,500,000 in 1971 to Taka 7,200,000 in 1973 to satisfy religious sensibilities within the country and abroad (Rahim, 2001: 248). The process continued when Sheikh Mujib, the first President of Bangladesh, established the Islamic Foundation in 1975, an organization promoting Islamic ideals and programmes through publications and seminars, as a visible sign of his commitment to restore Islam.

Sheikh Mujib was brutally assassinated in 1975 in a military coup. The process of Islamisation continued during the two successive military regimes of General Zia-ur-Rahman and Lieutenant Hussain Mohammad Ershad. During the regimes of Zia-ur-Rahman (1975-1982) and Hussain Muhammad Ershad (1982-90), these Presidents patronized Islam to achieve the widespread acceptance of their regimes. As a result, various actions of these governments of the newly independent Bangladesh opened up the passage for Islamic movements.

More specifically, President Zia-ur-Rahman introduced *Bismillah-ar-Rahman-ar-Rahim* ('In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful') as the opening lines of the Constitution of Bangladesh in 1977. Moreover, he replaced the secularism of

Article 8 (elimination of communalism in all form and state of political status in favour of any religion) with ‘absolute trust and faith in the almighty Allah’, which provided the Islamic political parties and other Islamic movements with a reasonable ground on which to develop their activities. This systematic action encouraged the rehabilitation of political Islam in independent Bangladesh. President Zia also undertook a series of symbolic measures to emphasize the salience of Islam in public affairs. These included promoting radio and television programmes on Islam, and also introducing Islamic holidays and special occasions (Miladun Nabi, Muharram, Ramadan and Jummatul Wida), which were widely celebrated by the government. The government also began to arrange transportation to facilitate the annual *bishwa ijtema* of the Tablighi Jamaat (Ahmad 2008: 52). On 7<sup>th</sup> June 1988, President Ershad declared Islam as the state religion through the eighth amendment. He patronised Islam in order to justify and to legitimate his regime to the people of the country, as the majority of the people were highly sensitive about Islam. He declared Friday instead of Sunday to be the weekly day of rest (Ahmad 2008: 52).

As a result of this process, the JI developed as a significant force during the 1990s, when Bangladesh came under democratic rule after the fall of Ershad’s military dictatorship. The JI got 18 parliamentary seats in the general election of 1991. It became a significant third party in Bangladeshi politics, leading the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and even the Awami League to seek alliance with JI. When the BNP boycotted parliament in opposition to the Awami League, the Awami League took initiatives to make an alliance with the JI, and the Awami League formed the government in 1996 (Ahmad, 2008). The Awami League was criticised by their members regarding their efforts to seek alliance with the JI. Subsequently,

the BNP formed an alliance with the JI. This alliance won the 2001 elections, and the JI was made responsible for two ministries of Bangladesh. This was the height of the power of the JI in Bangladesh, and all the previous governments, including those of the Awami League, had contributed to the process of revitalisation of the JI.

However, in the 2008 general elections, the JI received only two parliamentary seats, while their ally, the BNP, received 33 seats. The Awami League with 262 seats formed the government<sup>11</sup>. Although the JI got only two seats, their voting percentage did not fall in comparison with previous national elections. They continued to achieve a similar percentage of the vote to that in 2001 (Ahmed and Rahman, 2009). The JI is the only political party that follows democratic practices within their party, and they have an exceptionally strong organisational background compared to other mainstream political parties (Hossain and Siddiquee, 2006).

It is clear that the manipulation of Islam by the past governments of Bangladesh created the environment for political Islam. Jamaat-i-Islami benefited mostly from this process of manipulation. It also helped in the ascent of many other militant Islamic groups in Bangladesh, such as *Jamatul Mujahiden Bangladesh (JMB)*, *Horkatul Jihad*, *Hizbut Tahrir*, *Al Bayinaat* and, more recently, *Hefazot-e-Islam*. Tablighi Jamaat is another type of Islamic movement that also directly benefited from Islamisation process of Bangladesh.

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<sup>11</sup> See the full results on <http://archive.thedailystar.net/newDesign/news-details.php?nid=70862> accessed on 10-12-2013

## 2.5 The Tablighi Jamaat and *Dawah*

The concept of preaching in the name of Tabligh was not new to Islam. The Prophet Muhammad regularly conducted *dawah* among the people calling them to accept Islam. In his last *hajj*, he advised his followers to convey his message of *dawah* among the people who were not available in his time. Tablighi Jamaat took it as an instruction to convey his message to other Muslims who were not present on the last *hajj* of the Prophet, those followers in the future, in other words, to the rest of his followers. The Tablighi Jamaat followers view this as an implicit command of the Prophet to carry out *dawah* among the Muslims. Moreover, Tablighi Jamaat followers quote from the *Qur'an* to justify *dawah*. Three relevant verses<sup>12</sup> are:

And there may spring from you a nation who invite to goodness, and enjoin right conduct and forbid indecency. Such are they who are successful (3: 104).

You are the best community that has been raised up for mankind. You enjoin right conduct and forbid indecency; and you believe in Allah. And if the people of the scripture had believed it had been better for them. Some of them are believers; but most of them are evil –livers (3: 110).

They believe in Allah and the Last Day, and enjoin right conduct and forbid indecency and vie one with another in good works. They are of the righteous (3: 114)

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<sup>12</sup> Pickthall (2006) was used for the translation of the *Qur'an*.

The first verse explicitly states that Muslims should build a nation<sup>13</sup> or *jamaat*, which would encourage people to come to Islam. In the second and third verses, Muslims are said to be the best community<sup>14</sup> (*ummah*) because they enjoin right conduct and forbid indecency, and they are righteous. It implicitly commands them to engage in preaching activity in order to defend a living Islam. The following verse from the *Qur'an* recites the value of engaging in preaching work.

There is not good in much of their secret conferences except (in) him who enjoins almsgiving and kindness and peacemaking among the people. Whoever does that, seeking the good pleasure of Allah, we shall bestow on him a vast reward (4: 114).

From these verses, the Tablighi Jamaat received its determination to carry out *dawah* and Tabligh who advance people in the path of Allah. The followers are promised that Allah will reward them in the life hereafter.

It was evident that many reform efforts with various names did not continue in the end. The Islamic magazine *Tobligh* quoted the same verses of the *Qur'an* to justify their *tablighi* effort, but failed to establish it as an effective movement among the mass population. Moulana Ilyas was remarkable in this regard. In order to begin his Tablighi mission, Moulana Ilyas took ideas from Sufism and assimilated them into his work (Nadvi, 2006, Haq, 1972). He was a follower of the Chishtiyah Sufi order (Haq, 1972: 67). Sufi influence is evident in the activities of the Tablighi Jamaat, for example the idea of spending 40 days in *chilla*.

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<sup>13</sup> Some translations use 'group' instead of 'nation'. The Tablighi Jamaat uses the word *jamaat* in the *Fazayele Amal*.

<sup>14</sup> The *Fazayele Amal* uses *ummah* to signify community.

In various Sufi orders, for example, Chishtiyah and Qādiriyah, followers spend forty days in a secluded place or inside a room in meditation or contemplation (Haq, 1972: 64). Moulana Ilyas was influenced by this idea of spending time isolated from society and family. As Haq continues:

Following the Qādiriyah and Chishtiyah example, Ilyās wanted this time to be spent in observing and learning the work he was doing. One could either go to Nizamuddin and stay at the *madrasa* there or go to any other centre and, just as the inmates of a hospice learned from one another and mended their ways, the workers could observe and learn from one another (1972: 64).

Although, Moulana Ilyas adapted many concepts from Sufi practices, Masud states that, ‘Tablīghī Jamāat does not seem to be a Sūfī movement, not does it focus on the reform of Sūfism. It is more in line with the ‘ulamā’s reformist activities’ (2000b: xl). Tablighi Jamaat also does not regard itself as a Sufi movement at all, although it has received many components from Sufi practice. Tablighi Jamaat has managed to create a new *dawah* movement by taking some elements of Sufism. Moulana Ilyas himself was a disciple of a Sufi order, and he was an educated member of the *ulama*. He accumulated ideas of forming the Tablighi Jamaat from all of his studies. Later he developed the idea of spending time for *dawah* staying in a local mosque isolated from family. *Chilla* is the most important type of *dawah* journey where the followers spend forty days in a mosque. *Chilla* is treated as the fundamental training period for learning *dawah*. According to Haq (1972), Ilyas followed the normal Chishtiyah

types of dress. The significant difference between a Sufi group and the Tablighi Jamaat is that Sufis do not go to the people to communicate the message; rather, people come to them. The followers of the Tablighi Jamaat, in contrast, go to people in the community to invite them (Haq, 1972: 65).

For Ilyas, renewal of the faith of Muslims was the first priority and his idea was that if the Muslims could go back to the fundamental Islamic practices, they could achieve everything. Moulana Ilyas also took the idea of Walī-u'llah, which was to bring together all Muslims minimising differences to bring them into a unit (Haq, 1972: 72).

Moulana Ilyas started the Tablighi Jamaat movement among the Meo people in Delhi. According to Wahiduddin Khan (2009), the Meo people converted to Islam during the life of the legendary Sufi saint Nizamuddin Aulia. However, the people of Mewat were far away from Islam and did not follow an Islamic lifestyle. Khan (2009: 8) states, 'They kept their Hindu names, like Nahar Singh and Bhup Singh; they left a lock of hair on the top of the shaven head as Hindus do; they worshipped idols, celebrated all the Hindu festivals and made sacrifices to the pre-Islamic gods and goddess'. They did not pray and observe Islamic life and were known as 'half Muslim', which was a major concern for Muslim scholars in that time. Moulana Ilyas was one of these scholars, who established *madrasas* to promote Islamic practices among the Muslims of Mewat, but this had little influence among them (Mayaram, 1997). Moulana Ilyas then formed groups of Muslim preachers to motivate the Muslims of Mewat. The problem was intensified when preachers of the Arya Samaj movement started to work to bring back many converted Indian



Muslims to their ancestral religion in 1921 (Khan, 2009:9). The Arya Samaj movement in Mewat accelerated the initiatives of Moulana Ilyas, but it was not the only facilitating factor to start Tablighi Jamaat in Mewat. The family tradition of Moulana Ilyas influenced him to begin preaching in Mewat. His father and older brother had also spent time trying to bring Meo people under 'proper' and 'pure' Islamic guidance (Khan, 2009: 9).

The family tradition of Moulana Ilyas gave him a link to work in Mewat, but why it was successful is a question. Mayaram provides an explanation in this context. Mayaram (1997) shows that the Meos as a minority community had always struggled for their identity as a result of being seen as 'half Muslims'. In such a context, the Tablighi Jamaat provided them with a wider space of identity. Later on, the 'half Muslims' of Mewat became well known for their religiosity through their Tablighi activities.

Moulana Ilyas came up with the idea of Tablighi Jamaat, and it was a result of an extensive and practical experience of working among the Meo. His ideas of the Tablighi Jamaat sharpened over the period, and by the middle of the 1930s, the Tablighi Jamaat had assumed a solid shape as a movement.

Moulana Ilyas instructed followers of the Tablighi Jamaat to focus on the moral development of individuals and avoid political activities. For him, *dawah* is the most important element for achieving the goal of this movement. Tablighi Jamaat followers carry out *dawah* among the Muslim community and they go out for a number of days to do *dawah* work. In the first stage, volunteers go out for three

days; then they are encouraged to go for 40 days (*chilla*). Tablighi followers are expected to carry out *chilla* and *dawah* work on a regular basis. Participants acquire the commitment of receiving the divine blessing through *dawah* activities (Metcalf, 2003: 145). *Chilla* is considered as the training of *dawah* for new followers, so that they can do *dawah* properly in their local community to attract new followers. After *dawah* and *chilla*, all followers should continue the 'Five Tasks' regularly in their community.

Every Tablighi follower should practice the 'Five Tasks' every month in his area. All new followers are advised to join the existing Tablighi Jamaat group in their respective area to engage with the 'Five Tasks'. The first one of the 'Five Tasks' is the weekly *ta'leem*, where followers read and discuss *hadith* and verses from the *Qur'an*. They regularly do two types of *ta'leem*. One type of *ta'leem* is to be done at home for family members, particularly for women and girls. Another type is arranged in a local mosque for people who come to pray. The second task is a *mashoara* (meeting); again, one type is with the family members and the other one is with the people in the mosque. The aim of the *mashoara* is to discuss strategies to increase the number of Tablighi followers and to increase the strength of their activities. Tablighi Jamaat followers always refer to the Prophet Muhammad as having engaged in regular *ta'leem* and *mashoara*. The third task is to spend two and a half hours for *dawah* every day to motivate Muslims. The fourth is to do a weekly *gasht* (preaching visit). *Gasht* is a combination of *boyan* (religious speech) and a short *dawah* visit in the local area. When a group performs a *dawah* visit, another person talks on *iman o ekin* (faith and believe) in the mosque. Followers have to carry out a *gasht* in a neighbouring area once every week. The fifth task is to go out

for at least three days on a *dawah* trip allocated by the headquarters. All members' activities are based on six basic principles, which are known as the 'Six Points' of the Tablighi Jamaat.

## 2.6 The Six Points of the Tablighi Jamaat

1. the *Kalimah*- complete belief that the Prophet Muhammad is the messenger of Allah;
2. Prayer (*salat*);
3. Knowledge (*ilm*) and Remembrance (*dhikir*);
4. Honoring and respecting all Muslims (*ikram al-muslim*);
5. Sincerity in Worshipping Allah (*ikhlas i-niyyat*); and
6. *Dawah* and *Tabligh*

Moulana Ilyas identified these points that people need to focus on in order to increase their religiosity. The first point refers to complete submission to Allah and belief that the Prophet is the messenger of Allah. This is essential for all Muslims to believe and assign their faith to it. This is one of the five pillars of Islam. For Moulana Ilyas, regular prayer has to be the next priority for Muslims. Prayer helps to forbid a person from bad deeds. *Ilm* (knowledge) helps a person to acquire the necessary information to lead a religious life. *Ilm* also provides proper understanding of the requirements of leading an Islamic life. By *Ikram- al-Muslim*, Tablighi Jamaat followers refer to helping Muslims. Ideally, all Tablighi Jamaat followers are instructed to help disadvantaged and underprivileged Muslims in the community and it is a duty of a Muslim to help 'Muslim brothers'. *Ikhlas i-niyyat* means sincerity of worshipping Allah in every aspect in their life. Both *ikram-al-muslim* and *ikhlas i-*

*niyyat* are important to achieve moral and behavioural transformation to be a ‘good’ human being. Finally, Moulana Ilyas prioritised the importance of carrying out *dawah* among the Muslims to bring them back to the fundamental teachings of Islam.

Each of the ‘Six Points’ complements each other. For Tablighi followers, their mission would be incomplete if any of the ‘Six Points’ is ignored. The ‘Six Points’ help followers to continue with the proper Tablighi way of life. Regular practices in these areas make a follower confident regarding the Tablighi Jamaat. During *chilla*, Tablighi Jamaat followers emphasise learning and internalising the ‘Six Points’ as soon as possible, because it helps new followers to talk confidently with non-Tablighi people so as to motivate them towards the Tablighi Jamaat. The Six Points make it easy for even an illiterate person to learn the fundamental aspects of Islam that are essential for Muslims. Hence, internalising the ‘Six Points’ is considered as the first step towards becoming a dedicated Tablighi Jamaat follower.

## **2.7 Conclusion**

This chapter started out by providing a brief background to Islamisation in Bangladesh, before turning to the history of the Tablighi Jamaat. It also introduced the principles of the Tablighi Jamaat. The Islamic revival in India in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century provided a footing for many Islamic movements in Bangladesh. The Tablighi Jamaat is one of these movements that emerged in India and expanded to Bangladesh and beyond. During the 19th and 20th centuries many Islamic reform efforts were evident in British India, including Bengal. Kolkata was the main centre for Bengali Muslims. Many Islamic magazines were regularly published from

Kolkata, for example *Tobligh*, *The Moslem Darpon*, *Mashik Mohammadi* (Monthly Muhammadi), *Shariatye Islam*, and *Sawgat*. *Tobligh* was dedicated to reviving *dawah* activities among the Muslims but it did not last for long.

Two observations can be concluded from this background knowledge. The first observation is that it is evident that during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Bengal witnessed the marked separation of Muslims and Hindus. During this time, the Arya Samaj began their preaching movement, oriented around the theme of *shuddhi* or ‘purification,’ with the aim of bringing those who had converted to Islam back to their ancestral religion. Their effort fuelled many Islamic reform efforts. This Hindu reform effort began in the same period as many Islamic reform movements had already begun, and many started after the *shuddhi* movement. Some scholars have suggested a causal relationship between these two reform efforts. De (1998) and Sikand (2003) argue that the Tablighi Jamaat movement emerged as a counter effort to the movement for *shuddhi*. The *shuddhi* movement was not the only reason that accelerated the development of the Tablighi Jamaat. Mayaram (1997) argues that the *shuddhi* movement may have made the effort difficult for Moulana Ilyas, but it was not the only reason for him to engage with *dawah* in Mewat. The ability to provide a wider space for the marginalized Meo people with a strong Muslim identity was the reasons behind the success of the Tablighi Jamaat in Mewat. The family tradition of Moulana Ilyas motivated him to work among the Meo people to encourage them to pray regularly. His father and older brother had begun their *dawah* effort among the Meo people to bring them to the ‘pure’ and ‘proper’ Islamic practices before Moulana Ilyas. Moreover, the *shuddhi* movement had a significant influence on the relationship between Hindus and Muslims in many parts of Kolkata and East Bengal

(now Bangladesh). This was reflected through the news and discussions about *shuddhi* in many Bengali Islamic magazines, and the counter activities of Muslim activists in different parts of Bengal.

The second observation is that the process of Islamisation in the early years of independent Bangladesh helped to develop the Tablighi Jamaat in Bangladesh. Although Bangladesh began with a secular political system, this was not continued after the death of Sheikh Mujib in 1975. Bangladesh's Constitution defines it neither as a secular nor as an Islamic state. Neither has Bangladesh shown any real tendency to implement the structures of an Islamic state. Two successive military regimes of the country in the 1970s and 1980s used Islam as a tool to legitimise their regimes to the people of the country because a majority of the population identified with Islam. Two leading Islamic organisations benefited from this. One was the Jamaat-i-Islami that was reborn after a period of suppression; the other was the Tablighi Jamaat.

Having sketched the general background to the Tablighi Jamaat in South Asia and Bangladesh in this chapter, I turn in to Chapter Three to introduce my field research and the methodology behind my research.

## Chapter Three

### Methodology

#### 3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss the ethnographic methodology that I applied in the research, and provide some information about the various field situations within which I worked. The methods used were participant observation, informal discussion, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions (FGD).

In my research, I employed participant observation to observe the day-to-day activities of the Tablighi Jamaat during *ijtema*, *gasht* and *chilla*. I participated in a *chilla* with a Tablighi Jamaat team for a consecutive forty days in the northern part of Bangladesh. I spent the entire time with them participating in every activity of their *dawah*. During the *chilla*, I had the opportunity to engage myself in informal discussions with participating team members. This provided me with the socio-economic background and individual perspective of Tablighi Jamaat followers. My participation in this Tablighi Jamaat team helped me to identify followers with whom I could carry out in-depth interviews to get more detailed and individual perspectives of the Tablighi Jamaat.

This chapter provides an overview of how I went through and negotiated situations in the field in order to get a detailed understanding of everyday activities of Tablighi Jamaat followers. The chapter begins with the discussion of justification of employing ethnographic methods to understand the Tablighi Jamaat. It also provides a detailed account of multi-sited ethnography and its implications in the current research. It might be expected that as a native researcher (in the context of

Bangladesh), I would have relatively easy access to the people with whom I conducted fieldwork. In reality, the situation was not straightforward. In the beginning, I was regarded as an outsider by most of the followers of the group, although my Muslim identity made it easy to participate with the group. At the initial stage, I had to meet many Tablighi Jamaat followers to build rapport. Attaining trust and building rapport was the beginning of my fieldwork, and afforded me a good entry into the group. I now turn to discuss how I selected the ethnographic methods used in conducting my fieldwork.

### **3.2 Why Ethnographic Research?**

Malinowski set the standard of fieldwork by his ethnography on the Trobriand Islanders. It has been treated as the classic example of ethnography that is read and followed as a model of doing ethnography. By spending a lengthy period in the field, a researcher can acquire substantial knowledge about a community. For Geertz, ‘ethnography is like trying to read (in the sense of “construct a reading of”) a manuscript – foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries, but written not in conventionalized graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behaviour’ (1973: 10). For him, ethnography is not just an approach, techniques and procedures. This is a process of bringing out the hidden meaning that he calls, ‘thick description’. Thus, the purpose of ethnography is not merely describing something but to analyse and construct the realities that are not visible. This statement of Geertz shows the significance of ethnography, at the same time it also points out the challenges of conducting ethnography, which is not just describing.



The significance of ethnographic research is the ability to interpret and represent ‘another culture’. As Marcus and Fischer (1999: 18) state:

Ethnography is a research process in which the anthropologist closely observes, records, and engages in the daily life of another culture - an experience labelled as the fieldwork method – and then writes accounts of this culture, emphasizing descriptive detail.

In comparison with other methodologies, the strength of the ethnographic approach is its ability to uncover reality. In this context, participant observation has the greater benefit of exploring *dawah* in both the locality and *chilla*. Continuous observation was helpful to understand the internal dynamics of the Tablighi Jamaat. Without participating with the Tablighi Jamaat, specially in the *chilla*, it would not have been possible to get a holistic view of their *dawah* activities. Senior Tablighi Jamaat followers instructed me several times to go out for a *chilla* in order to know about the Tablighi Jamaat. When I met one of the senior Tablighi leaders in Dewsbury in the UK, he sat on the floor holding my hands and told me:

I am not going to tell you much about Tabligh. You are an intelligent boy; you will be able to understand. Look, I had studied Nuclear Physics during the Pakistan period and got a scholarship to study in the UK. I worked for the nuclear energy plant in Pakistan. I had studied aeronautical engineering in the UK. What I am doing now? This is what Allah wants us to do. If you study about swimming, you could know everything about swimming. You could have become an expert on swimming. If you jump in the water, what

would happen? Can you swim? In a similar way, it would not be possible for you to understand the Tablighi Jamaat from the outside; you have to get inside it. I am suggesting to you to go for a *chilla*, and you will be able to know everything about the Tablighi Jamaat.

His comment in a way provided the logic of selecting participant observation. He might not have been aware of participant observation as a research method, but he pointed out that without participating in Tablighi *dawah* I would not be able to learn about the Tablighi Jamaat. At the same time, the nature of the study defines the method. Later on, I decided to go for a *chilla* in Bangladesh. It provided a holistic understanding about the Tablighi Jamaat. I told them in the beginning of the *chilla* that I was participating in the *chilla* as part of my research study in a UK university. They treated me as an ordinary Tablighi follower during the *chilla*. Senior followers of the *chilla* wanted me to learn everything about the Tablighi Jamaat, so that I could internalise the principles of the Tablighi Jamaat to practice it in my life. They expected me to be converted to a dedicated Tablighi Jamaat follower. Maybe this is the reason why they provided me with easy access to their group.

After two weeks, the team decided to assign new followers to take the lead in preaching in the community in the afternoon (*gasht*). In a meeting, they divided followers into six small groups. Each group had two new followers and one experienced member. The experienced member was our mentor and guided us in learning the process of *dawah*. It involved updating religious knowledge and skill to talk and motivate non-*tablighi* members. Moulana Abdul Khalek was my mentor and one day in the morning just after *fazr* prayer, he told me to lead the *gasht*. In the

*gasht*, we had to spread out in the nearest area of the mosque and had to find Muslims who do not go to the mosque to pray or do not pray at home. Our task was to speak to them about the importance of praying and following Islam. In the process, we invited them to meet with us in the mosque, to spend time with our activities. The following example clarifies how I participated with Tablighi activities during the *chilla*.

Moulana Abdul Khalek: Assalamualaikum, How are you *vaijaan* [brother]?

Emdadul Haque: Good.

Moulana Abdul Khalek: This *vaijaan*<sup>15</sup> [pointing to me] has come from London to meet you. Please listen to him, all right? Is this your son?

Emdadul Haque: Yes

Moulana Abdul Khalek: Stay with us son, your father will talk to us for a minute.

Bulbul: We have come to your mosque from Dhaka with a *jamaat*. Who is he? [There was another older person with him]

Emdadul Haque: *Dadu* [granddad]

Bulbul: Mashallah. You just have completed *fazr* prayer, haven't you *dadu*?

Dadu: Yes

Bulbul: What do you do for your living *vai*?

Emdadul Haque: I am a motorcycle mechanic.

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<sup>15</sup> In Bangladesh, the general trend to call someone with honour as *vai* or *vaijaan*. *Vaijaan* is relatively formal and represent the humbleness.

Bulbul: So you have the flexibility in your job, haven't you?

Emdadul Haque: Yes

Bulbul: So you are not busy all the time with your work, are you?

Emdadul Haque: No

Bulbul: *Vai*, if we follow the rule of Allah and lead our life as our Prophet advised, it would bring happiness, peace, and success in our life. We all want happiness, peace and success (*sukh, santi ebong safolota*), don't we?

Emdadul Haque: Yes.

Bulbul: We do many things for this-worldly affairs, but we have limited time in our life. We have limited *hayat* [life]. How many years will we survive? 60, 70, or 80, 90 years maybe. For this short life, we give all our efforts to make our life nice and better. We have so many dreams, plans to implement these dreams, haven't we?

Emdadul Haque: Yes.

Bulbul: Everything we do, we do it for our family, wife and children. Sometimes we forget about ourselves. We love our family so much that we ignore our own interest. Every activity becomes a benefit for the family. We dedicate our life to fulfil the need of the short life of the world. But we have another life, life after death, that everlasting life, *akhiraat* [Day of Judgment]. Don't we want happiness, peace, and success in *akhiraat*?

Emdadul Haque: Yes, certainly we want that.

Bulbul: Assalamualaikum, please come. [Another person named Fazlul joins in our discussion on the street] So how much time do we need to

spend to get success in that everlasting life? Allah will give us everything in that everlasting life, whatever we want. Allah will fulfil every demand. So, *vai*, don't we think that we need to work hard to achieve this happiness?

Emdadul Haque: Definitely, we have to.

Bulbul: To make this effort successful we have to pray regularly in the mosque and have to engage with *dawah*. We have come from Dhaka just to invite you to come to the mosque for your prayer. Have you spent any time with *dawah* and Tabligh?

Emdadul Haque: Yes, I have spent three days in *dawah*.

Bulbul: Sometimes we see that we could not pray regularly. That is why we need to spend a longer period in *dawah*, for example three *chillas* or *chilla* to learn *dawah* and get it into our heart. That helps to pray regularly, it will become your habit to pray.

Emdadul Haque: Yes, I will try. [He was smiling and hesitating to agree to go for the *dawah*]

The *Rahbar*<sup>16</sup>: Please make a *dua* [ask a favour of Allah] to Allah to complete three *chillas* soon. *Mashallah, mashallah* [whatever Allah wills].

Bulbul: If you do not go to *chilla*, it does not mean that you do not have to pray. A single *neki* [good deed] will become so precious in the time of judgement. No one will remember and help you, even your family members. Everyone will become selfish that day. Then we will realise, what have we done? I have done everything for my family, and now they

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<sup>16</sup> *Rahbar* is a Tablighi term. Generally, the person from the local Tablighi Jamaat group who guides the team for *gasht* is called *rahbar*.

do not know me. I am alone. Therefore, *vai*, it is for ourselves, for our own good, we have to pray regularly. We have to spend time in the name of Allah. It has been two days now in your area, please come to join us in the mosque. When do you join us *vai*?

Emdadul Haque: In *esha* time.

Bulbul and Abdul Khalek: Can you come to pray in the *magrib* time.

Abdul Khalek: We will leave tomorrow *vai*.

Bulbul: We have come to your area as your guest, we request you to join us in *magrib* please.

Emdadul Haque: I work in a workshop; he is a builder [pointing to another person]. We will try to attend the *magrib* prayer.

Bulbul: We will have a beneficial *boyan* [religious speech] after *magrib* prayer. Try to attend it *vai*. Come to see us in the *magrib* time and try to attend *fazr* prayer tomorrow to say goodbye to us, okay brothers.

Emdadul Haque: Sure, we will try.

Bulbul: You promised *vai*. It is for Allah, not for us. See you soon *vai*.

*Assalamualaikum.*

I had this opportunity to lead a session because of my active participation with Tablighi Jamaat group. Without participation with them, it would not have been possible for me to get this role. It also helped me to understand the Tablighi process of talking to non-Tablighi people to motivate them. Tablighi Jamaat has a distinctive way of talking to non-Tablighi that is shown in the above conversation. Tablighi

Jamaat follower always begins with a positive approach and start with the discussion of the greatness of Allah. They leave an open question to the person they speak. It forces a non-Tablighi person to think about the Tablighi Jamaat. Without active participation, it might have been difficult for me to understand much of the unseen realities of the Tablighi Jamaat, which participant observation made possible for me. In the process of participation, I did not have any privilege with my researcher identity in the team. I had to go through with all the decisions made in the team meeting. I had to follow everything as any other follower did, for example, *dawah*, *gasht*, cooking, cleaning plates, and doing grocery shopping, etc.

After the end of the *dawah* journey, the team leader appreciated me a lot because of my quick learning. Shamsur Rahman and I did the *boyan*, organised the *gasht* and led respective teams in the last ten days of the *chilla*. We achieved the basic competencies during the *chilla* and acquired confidence in speaking about Islam with non-Tablighis. A Tablighi follower has to be competent about the content of the conversation. Close guidance, instruction, and regular practices in mosques helped me to be competent and confident. Without an ethnographic approach and participant observation, it would not have been possible to have access to such practical involvement. In this process, the experienced members of the team have to be convinced by the expertise gained by new members through their everyday learning. Once they are convinced that a new Tablighi Jamaat follower can lead *dawah* or *gasht* they employ the new person to lead. Without active participation, no one would get this access. However, in the beginning of the *chilla*, I was nervous and concerned about how they would treat me in the group. In the end, it worked out well for me.

### **3.3 Multi sited Ethnography: Field, Site, and Location**

In anthropology, fieldwork is the primary means to generate knowledge. Fieldwork based knowledge made anthropology a distinctive discipline. At the same time, it also maintains the boundary with other disciplines in the social sciences. As Gupta and Ferguson (1997: 2) states, 'fieldwork thus helps define anthropology as a discipline in both senses of the world, constructing a space of possibilities while at the same time drawing the lines that confine that space'. The primary orientation of the field was to concentrate on the single, isolated, native or primitive community predominantly not touched or influenced by the characteristics of 'civilisation' that remains as a natural site or 'laboratory' of gathering data.

During the post Second World War era when the global political economy began to change and many of the colonial states had become independent, the debate on the classical idea of 'fieldwork' began. 'Field' in anthropology stands for the most important element, in the changing and interconnected world, it was necessary to reformulate the anthropological fieldwork tradition that would decentre and defetishize the concept of 'the field' (Gupta and Ferguson, 1997: 5). Gupta and Ferguson propose the need to redefine the field; for them, in an interconnected world we are never really 'out of the field' (1997: 35), the field as a form of motivated and stylized dislocation (1997: 37). They view a research area less as a 'field' for the collection data than as a site for strategic intervention (1997: 39). In this sense, the idea of 'field' moves from its single site location to be more flexible, virtual, wide and interconnected, not only with various locations but also with the global socio-political context.



The notion of 'fieldwork' has transformed in many ways with the transformation of global culture and change in the world system. With the changes in the global political system, everything has become connected, and the classic example of the 'field' has become scarce in the new world order. The kinds of 'native' or 'primitive' society, which were treated as the 'natural laboratory' in the past no longer exist or are hard to find. The wave of globalisation has connected the 'local' everywhere with the 'global'. Global and local or centre and periphery are no longer isolated from each other as they were in the past. In such a context, Arjun Appadurai (1991) suggests that ethnography must confront this changing world. Appadurai states:

Central among these facts is the changing social, territorial, and cultural reproduction of group identity. As groups migrate, regroup in new locations, reconstruct their histories, and reconfigure their ethnic 'projects,' the *ethno* in ethnography takes on a slippery, non-localized quality, to which the descriptive practices of anthropology will have to respond (1991: 191).

With globalisation, when the mobility of people becomes a common phenomenon, the idea of territorial identity starts to disintegrate. Various levels of communication with different parts appear as a new social reality that people maintain. The field of study thus becomes interconnected with different parts. This new social reality initiated a method to conduct ethnography in changing social context where sites of study are no longer single and isolated. The idea of multi-sited ethnography evolved in a context where sites are connected with each other. Especially in the migration

and diasporic situation, this idea of a 'multi-site' has become an effective way to conduct ethnography.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the methodological debates of Clifford and Marcus (1986) and Marcus (1995) opened up a new discussion in anthropology about the direction of new ethnography. Marcus (1995) used the term 'multi-sited ethnography' systematically as an alternative solution of the ongoing methodological debate. This new concept of 'field' has started to break down the hierarchy and stereotyped idea of the 'field'. It remains the core methodological issue now. The question is what would be the methods of conducting fieldwork that involves multiple sites and locations.

### ***What is Multi sited Ethnography?***

Multi-sited ethnography constructs its field as a combination of several interconnected sites. Compared to the traditional ethnographic approach, multi-sited ethnography attempts to connect with other sites to understand a culture and community. Marcus (1995: 96) describes this new form of ethnographic research as 'self-consciously embedded in a world system'. For Marcus, the world system is an essential element that forces anthropologists to come out from the boundary of a single site. As he further argues, '... it arises in response to empirical changes in the world and therefore to transformed locations of cultural production' (Marcus, 1995: 97). According to Marcus (1995), multi-sited ethnography requires the ethnographer to follow the people in their interconnected world. It also helps to understand the world system, which a single-sited ethnography is unable to do.

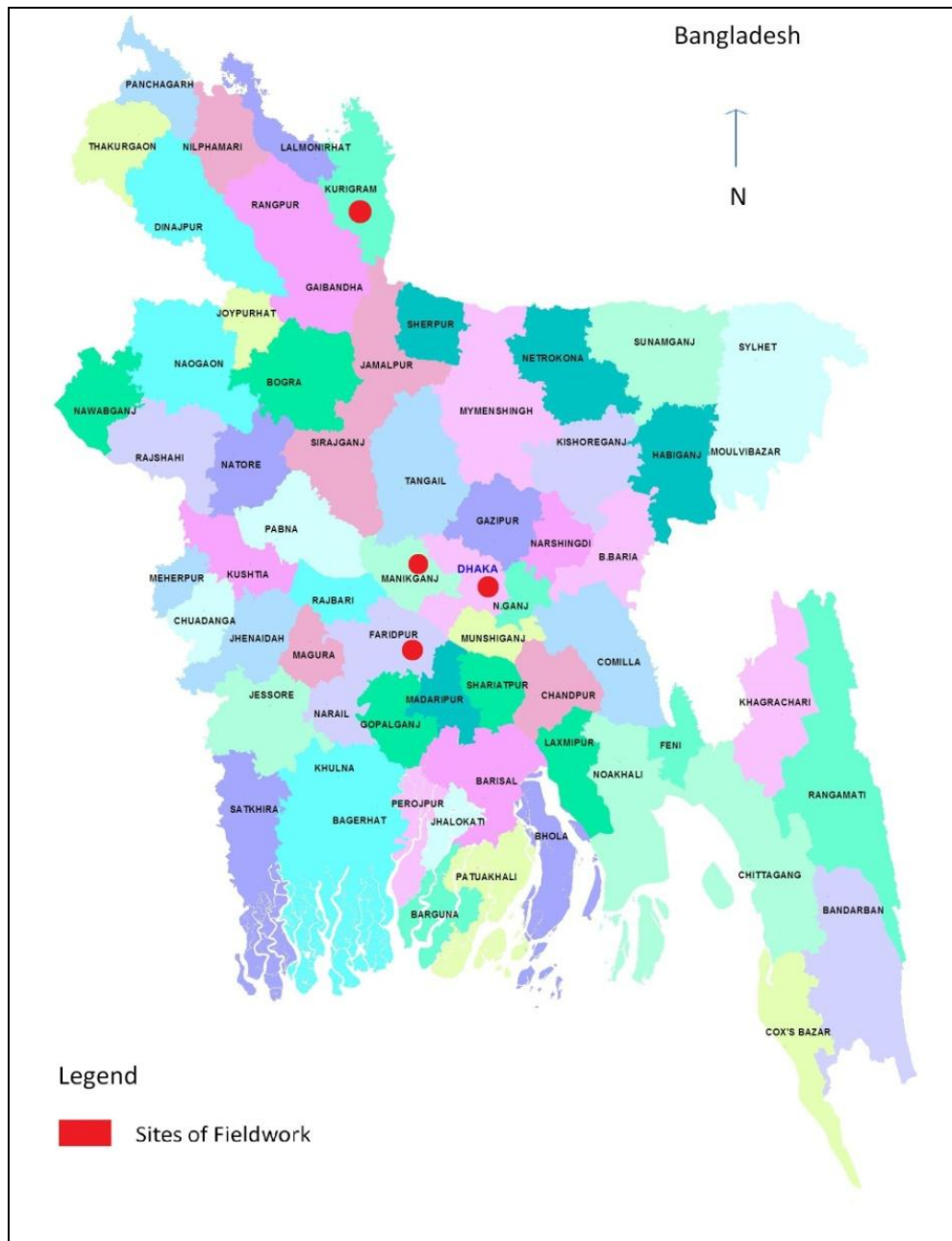
In his study on news media foreign correspondents, Hannerz (2003) points out some of the practical implications of multi-sited ethnography. For him, 'the sites are connected with one another in such ways that the relationships between them are as important for this formulation as the relationships within them; the fields are not some mere collection of local units' (Hannerz, 2003: 206). Hannerz (2003: 208) was clearly not trying to study the entire culture and social life of three sites in his research. It might not be possible even in single-sited ethnography to cover every aspect of social and cultural life of a local community.

Although it has become a popular method for many anthropologists, at the same time, some argue that it is not the appropriate way of doing 'fieldwork' (Hage, 2005). Hage (2005) in his four-year long multi-sited ethnographic study on migration of Lebanese points out some of the inadequacies of a multi-sited ethnographic approach. For him, as he describes, time limitations make it unfeasible in practice to keep travelling around many places:

I was constantly suffering from jet lag. Multi-sited ethnography was unhealthy, especially for (most) people who have teaching and families to go back to and therefore cannot take all the time they might wish to take. They need to cover the various sites in a limited amount of time. The body of the anthropologist, even a post-modern one, simply cannot cope with such fast and intensive travelling for a very lengthy period of time (Hage, 2005: 465).

In practice, Hage could not gain the in-depth familiarity, which is necessary for an ethnographer with more than two sites, at the most. A degree of immersion is also necessary to produce a good ethnography (Hage, 2005: 466). If we go back to the work of Malinowski in the Trobriand Islands, we can see that he did follow the Kula ring (Hannerz, 2003 and Hage, 2005). In this sense, he is again the first person who used multi-site approach in his ethnography. Hage (2005) does not prefer to define this new ethnography as 'multi-sited' rather for him it is 'neo-Kulan ethnography'.

Since my research did not follow a traditional single site approach, in what sense, can it be defined as a multi-sited ethnography? The next part of this chapter clarifies this through a discussion based on my fieldwork experience in Bangladesh and the UK. The religious community that I studied is the Tablighi Jamaat and the main principle of the Tablighi Jamaat is to move across the country and the world to propagate their religious belief to others to revive religiosity among the Muslims. For a certain amount of time, a year and a month, they stay outside their home to propagate Islam. In order to understand the process of propagation, I decided to take part with them on many occasions. I had to choose a multi-sited ethnographic approach, because the main activity of the Tablighi Jamaat involves travel, and with a single-sited approach, it would not be possible to understand the nature of the movement completely. Therefore, the adoption of a multi sited ethnographic approach was the most effective way to conduct my research.



Sites of my Fieldwork in Bangladesh

### 3.4 Introduction to the Field: Bangladesh and the UK

In Bangladesh, the sites of my fieldwork were in four districts, which are Dhaka, Manikganj, Faridpur, and Kurigram. I was based in Dhaka and regularly participated in the weekly *dawah* and *gasht* of the Tablighi Jamaat in two mosques. In Dhaka, I visited 12 different areas to participate in various activities of the Tablighi Jamaat, including *gasht*, *ta'leem*, to take in-depth interviews, observation, and FGDs. I

carried out fieldwork in three national universities in Bangladesh, namely BUET (Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology), Dhaka University, and Jahangirnagar University. These are thought to be the influential centres of the Tablighi Jamaat for the students. In Manikganj and Faridpur, I conducted in-depth interviews and FGDs. I carried out participant observation at Nageswary in Kurigram district. This is situated in the northern part of Bangladesh. Nageswary is a relatively poverty prone area and known for its contemporary *manga* (famine). I spent forty days in a *chilla* and stayed in 13 mosques in various parts of Nageswary. *Chilla* provided me with an opportunity to observe Tablighi Jamaat activities in a rural part of the country. While some scholars believe that the Tablighi Jamaat is predominantly organised mainly by educated urban people (Ellickson, 2002), my fieldwork in Nageswary and three other districts shows that the Tablighi Jamaat is equally strong in rural areas of Bangladesh. That is why many senior leaders of the Tablighi Jamaat mentioned that the Tablighi Jamaat is a strong organisation in Bangladesh because of the sacrifice and the dedication of rural people.

In the UK, I have regularly taken part in *gasht* and *dawah* activities in the three mosques in Cardiff; these are the Shahjalal, Umaar, and Uthman Mosques. The Shahjalal mosque is a predominantly Bangladeshi community mosque, while Pakistani and Indian Muslims in Cardiff mainly dominate the other two. The Tablighi Jamaat is particularly strong in the Umaar and Uthman mosques. The Shahjalal mosque does not allow Tablighi Jamaat groups to stay overnight, but it permits them to perform *dawah* and *gasht* during the day.

I carried out participant observation with a mixed group consisting of Bangladeshi, Pakistani, and Indian Muslims in Cardiff. Apart from Cardiff, I have conducted interviews, observation and participant observation on Bangladeshi ethnic groups in London, Luton, Dewsbury, and Nottingham. Almost all in-depth interviews in the UK were conducted among British Bangladeshi and Bangladeshi students in the UK. I have conducted five in-depth interviews with non-Bangladeshis (Indian, Pakistani). However, when I participated in *ijtema* in Dewsbury and the weekly *gasht* in Cardiff, I participated with a mixed group of Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Indians and other Muslims (Somali, Arabs and some Malaysians). During this phase of participation, I carried out informal conversations with them on many occasions. I attended the annual three-day *ijtema* in Dewsbury with local Tablighi Jamaat followers from Cardiff who were mainly British Pakistanis and British Indians.

My sample of informants was recruited through two methods; personal contacts and meeting with Tablighi Jamaat followers in local *gashts*. Once I participated in a *gasht*, it provided me with further contacts of three-day *dawah* trips, *ijtemas* and *chillas*. Most of the informants in both countries were from lower, lower middle, middle-class, educated urban background. Many interviewees were students in various universities and colleges; this group made up 37.5% (12) in Bangladesh and 45.45% (10) in the UK. The remainder in both countries were engaged in various professions, including doctors, engineers, self employed and retired.

A breakdown of the interviewees is given in Tables 1-2.

Table 1: Individual interviewees

	Interviewees								Total
	Unmarried				Married				
	F		M		F		M		
	20≥	30≥	20≥	30≥	30≥	50≥	30≥	50≥	
Bangladesh	1	-	14	3	-	-	12	3	33
United Kingdom	-		7	2	1	-	7	5	22

Table 2: Focus Groups

	Focus Groups
Bangladesh	8
United Kingdom	1

I started my fieldwork in Cardiff on 17<sup>th</sup> of October in 2008, two days before travelling to Bangladesh for my fieldwork. One of my colleagues, Ramin Ahmed, who knew some Tablighi followers in Cardiff, informed me about a Malaysian Tablighi Jamaat group who were staying in Dar-ul-Isra mosque in Cardiff. I met them in Dar-ul-Isra mosque on 17<sup>th</sup> of October. There, I met Abdul, who is a British Bangladeshi, who later on became my key informant, and provided access to the Tablighi Jamaat group in Cardiff.

My first field trip in Bangladesh began on 19<sup>th</sup> October 2008. The main purpose of the trip was to find a suitable field site. As I already knew some of the Tablighi Jamaat activists, I thought it would be easy to find a Tablighi Jamaat group for participant observation. Shumon was the first Tablighi follower who I spoke with and interviewed. He was a second year student from Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET). I spent some time with him and his friend at his university hall of residence. My brother in law Tonmoy, who was also a student from the same university, helped me to establish frequent contacts with them. This



provided an opportunity to build rapport with them and helped to go back to BUET to conduct in-depth interviews with some of them. BUET was the first site of my fieldwork in Bangladesh. Some of the early Tablighi Jamaat followers were academics at BUET. BUET is the pioneer institution for Tablighi Jamaat activities in Bangladesh. It has a positive effect on many other engineering universities in Bangladesh. That is why engineering students have a significant number of Tablighi Jamaat followers among the students in Bangladesh.

On 31<sup>st</sup> of October 2008, I met my old friend Dr. Mashiur Rahman, who decided to consider Tablighi Jamaat seriously, when he was doing his internship in a renowned medical college in Bangladesh. His residence is a 10-minute walk from my family home in Badda, Dhaka. He suggested to me that I participate in his group's weekly *gasht*, so that I could meet some regular Tablighi Jamaat followers in his area. Around 4:00pm, we left his home to attend *asor* prayer and *gasht*. This was the first time I attended a *gasht*, which is known as the backbone of *dawah*. I spent the entire time participating in the *gasht* and evening prayer. The *gashts* and the in-depth interviews or informal discussions gave me some initial ideas about the Tablighi Jamaat. Everyone I met advised me to go for a three days' *dawah* trip. I was waiting to go with the same group because I had established a relationship with them. The main organisers of this mosque were young. I met five to ten followers who had just completed their BSc in engineering from various engineering universities in Bangladesh. My idea was to carry out participant observation on a *dawah* trip and then to participate in their local area to observe the process of *dawah*.

On 28<sup>th</sup> of November 2008, Mashiur called to inform me that there was a *jamaat* preparing to begin a three-day *dawah* trip. Many of its local followers would accompany this group, and I accepted the invitation. The site of the three-day *dawah* was at Shahjadpur in Dhaka, and the name of the mosque was Dokhinpara Jame Masjeed. This was my site for the next three days. I met some Tablighi Jamaat followers from this *dawah* trip. Later, on my second visit, they helped me to find another group to go to *chilla* with. This was a *dawah* trip for 40 days.

After coming back from the *dawah* trip, I attended many sessions of religious speech in Kakrail on Thursday nights. These are known as *shobgujary*<sup>17</sup>. Tablighi Jamaat organisers held regular religious talks on every Thursday night in Kakrail. People from many parts of Bangladesh attended these sessions; some stayed overnight and some left after attending the *esha* prayer at night. During this field trip, I attended the *ijtema* in January, which was three days long; this was the second largest Muslim gathering in the world outside the hajj. After obtaining an overall idea about the Tablighi Jamaat in Bangladesh, I returned to Cardiff on 7<sup>th</sup> of February 2009, for my first substantial period of field work in the UK.

In Cardiff, I commenced fieldwork with the help of Abdul, whom I had met before going to Bangladesh. He was cooperative and helpful. He told me to meet him at his local mosque in Plantagenet Street. I met Abdul after *asor* prayer. Abdul introduced me to other Tablighi Jamaat followers in the mosque. Most of them were British Pakistanis and Indians. There were three or four Bangladeshis in this group. Most Tablighi Jamaat followers from this mosque were curious about my PhD research on

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<sup>17</sup> The word *shob* means ‘night’ and *gujary* means ‘to spend’, that means spending night in a mosque. Tablighi Jamaat followers do it on Thursday nights. It is also known as the night of *jummah* (the Friday prayer).

the Tablighi Jamaat. They wanted to know why I was conducting it and what would be the benefits to Cardiff University. I told them that I chose the subject on my own, and the university did not derive any personal benefit from it. I started to participate in the group's *gasht* once in a week. I attended *ijtema* in Dewsbury with them in May 2009. I also met two other Tablighi Jamaat groups who came from London in the Shahjalal mosque in Cardiff in 2009.

On 1<sup>st</sup> September 2009, I went to Bangladesh for my second field trip in Bangladesh, and was fortunate enough to find a group with whom I could go for a *chilla*. The *ameer* for the three-day *dawah* in which I had participated in Bangladesh during the previous November informed me that he was going to attend a *chilla* and that if I was interested I could join this group. I took part in this *chilla*, carrying out participant observation in Nageswary, a sub-district of Kurigram. During the *chilla*, I had to travel to 13 mosques in rural and semi-urban areas in Nageswary. I stayed in each mosque for three days with the *chilla* group to carry out *dawah* and *gasht*. This provided me with the opportunity to understand every activity of the Tablighi Jamaat. This is not something that can be achieved by only interviewing people.

After I came back from my fieldwork in Dhaka, I kept close contact with some Tablighi Jamaat followers of the *chilla* group in order to conduct interviews and to participate in their local *gasht*. At this point, I could see my entire sites together, and I followed my respondents to attend *dawah* activities in their local communities. One of the key ideas of multi-sited ethnography is to follow the people (Hannerz, 2003). I met them several times in their areas after coming back to Dhaka. Many of them maintained relationships with each other over the phone and sometimes they visited

each other's area although most of them were not living in the same area. Each of the sites that I visited during my fieldwork provided information on the activities of the Tablighi Jamaat that enhanced my understanding of the movement.

The site of my research is constituted by the combination of multiple sites in Bangladesh and the UK. In my research, it would not have been possible to follow the connections the way Hage (2005) followed them, because Tablighi Jamaat does not always maintain the same group to carry out *dawah*. Hence, it was very difficult for me to follow them when they were back in the community. Furthermore, not all followers in the *chilla* were from the same community; they were from various areas.

The main advantage of this multi sited ethnographic approach was for me to grasp two perspectives (Bangladesh and the UK) on the Tablighi Jamaat. At the same time, I faced serious disadvantages. Managing time for the field research for the two transnational locations was very difficult for me. I also faced language barriers while carrying out fieldwork in the UK. For example, in the UK, most of the Tablighi Jamaat followers were Urdu speaking, and I did not have much time to learn this language during my fieldwork. I managed to overcome this issue, because I mainly focused on Tablighi Jamaat followers from a Bangladeshi background and I interviewed some English speaking Indian and Pakistani followers in the UK. Hindi is similar to Urdu and I was a little familiar with Hindi, which helped me to listen to the *boyan* during the weekly *gasht* in the Uthman mosque in Cardiff.

### 3.5 The Challenges of the Research

My identity helped me in accessing the field. Being a native researcher, I had an easy access to the field and sites in Bangladesh. I did not face any language barrier as many anthropologists do when they conduct fieldwork in an exotic ambience, among native, ethnic people, out of the civilised world in a remote and isolated area. My Muslim identity helped me to participate in every part of *dawah* activities during the *chilla* in Bangladesh and the weekly *gasht* in Cardiff. Apart from these benefits, I faced some challenges during the fieldwork process. These began with my father, who is a religious person. He did not find any strong basis for the research on a religious topic that was complex and esoteric. He had always shown concern regarding my research, because I was not educated in Islamic studies. Therefore, there was a fear in his mind that if I misinterpret any of the religious matter this possibly would not bring me any positive good in my 'religious life', and Allah might not be happy with my activities. He repeatedly told me to be careful at every step during the fieldwork. I managed to convince him that I would be careful not to misinterpret any religious aspect.

My father was not the only person who discouraged me. Bokhtiar from London arrogantly told me to leave this research. His logic was different from my father's. As he stated:

If you take money from anyone to work for *deen*<sup>18</sup> it will not work. You will not be able to find the real meaning of the Tablighi Jamaat. You have to work on your own, and you are getting support from non-Muslims.

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<sup>18</sup> The word *deen* generally refers to religion and a way of life for Muslim.

Leave your PhD; it would not bring any positive result. You are working for the British, and they will use this data against the Tablighi Jamaat and Islam. They are very clever.

Yasin from Bangladesh advised me not to leave my PhD but to follow the Tablighi Jamaat, as it would benefit and help me on the Day of Judgment. Yasin continued:

Yasin: How did you select this topic of research?

Bulbul: I decided to do research on this issue, and the university is guiding me.

Yasin: Why did you think that you had to work on the Tablighi Jamaat?

Bulbul: People have various opinions about the Tablighi Jamaat, especially in the west. I am not taking any position, whether it is right or wrong, but the main perspective is to provide a clear idea about the Tablighi Jamaat so that people could understand and know about the Tablighi Jamaat and its activities. I am looking at another issue, that is, without any formal organisational structure, how has the Tablighi Jamaat become such an influential movement around the world? These are the reasons for working on the Tablighi Jamaat.

Yasin: As a Muslim, it is your duty to follow the Tablighi Jamaat in your life. It will help you to earn something for the *akhiraat*.

Bulbul: Definitely.

From these conversations, it seems people were a little concerned about the purpose of my research. This may have been due to the recent global attention on Islamic

world. In Bangladesh, people at the grassroots level do not have any idea what is exactly happening with Islam and in the west. They have questions, but there is no one to answer them. Therefore, when they see someone who can answer their queries, they ask such questions without any hesitation. Some of my respondents assumed in the beginning that Britain sent me to collect information on the Tablighi Jamaat. That is why I came to Bangladesh and had spoken to them. Most of the respondents were convinced that I was doing the research for academic purposes. It had a positive influence on them that ‘now students are studying the Tablighi Jamaat in a UK university’. It was something that made them feel proud. Some of them had a feeling that by this type of research, people from other religions would get the opportunity to learn about the Tablighi Jamaat. In return, they accepted me well, and they wanted me to convert to a Tablighi Jamaat follower. This became clear during the *chilla* trip. All the senior followers were extremely keen to motivate me to follow the Tablighi activities. One day, the *ameer* told me that ‘you are in a good position, if you follow the Tablighi Jamaat, you can bring positive changes to many of the people you hang out with. So try to contribute to your religion’. I always acted in a positive way and I never engaged myself in any argument by saying ‘no, it is not possible for me’. They were expecting me to continue for three consecutive *chillas*, which would last for 120 days. They motivated me to grow a beard, which is a *Sunnah* (religious requirement). Shamsur Rahman and I started to grow and keep a beard. I stopped the *chilla* after 40 days and came back to Dhaka. When I met Shamsur Rahman after his consecutive three *chillas*, his appearance had changed. He decided to keep a beard permanently that was quite long by this time after all the *chillas*. He had become calm and quiet and adopted a Tablighi lifestyle that encouraged him to talk slowly and to maintain a low voice and calmness. These are

the common characteristics of a dedicated Tablighi Jamaat follower. After the *chilla*, I met him several times, and I called him from Cardiff sometimes to discuss various aspects of the Tablighi Jamaat. Senior followers of the Tablighi Jamaat thought that if I had continued with them to complete three *chillas*, it might have transformed me into a Tablighi Jamaat follower. It was a two-way interaction. I was interested to carry out fieldwork for my research, and they were trying to motivate me to follow the Tablighi Jamaat. I think this was the problem of being a native researcher. One cannot avoid such conversations or the expectation from the community. At the same time, I had to keep in mind that I was there only for the carrying out of fieldwork, and maintain the objectivity of my research.

I witnessed difficulty particularly when I started to write notes. All young participants curiously looked at me and asked me various questions, for example, what was I doing, why I was doing this, how did I feel living in the UK and many more. At some point, I had to stop writing in order to satisfy their curiosity to know more about me and my life in the UK. I found an alternative way of taking field notes. I brought a voice recorder with me thinking that it might be useful during the *chilla*. When everyone went to sleep in the night, I started to record my experiences and the events of the day. It was easy during the time of *chilla*, but it was time-consuming to transcribe those long recordings later.

Another attitude of the Tablighi Jamaat followers put me in an uncomfortable situation. Several times when we were trying to motivate local people, the senior followers of the Tablighi Jamaat gave my example. They told many local people that ‘look at him [me], he came all the way from the UK to carry out a *chilla*’. This was



not entirely true, because the primary purpose of carrying out the *chilla* was for my fieldwork. They were trying to use it to motivate others. It might help people to think about the Tablighi Jamaat, so I did not request them to stop using my example.

### **3.6 Problem of the Researcher**

When I came back from the *chilla*, I felt different. I was thinking about the Tablighi Jamaat. Should I follow the Tablighi Jamaat? The Tablighi Jamaat and the *chilla* made an enormous impact on me that influenced me even after coming back to Dhaka. I was in a dilemma because as a researcher I knew I should not be biased in relation to the Tablighi Jamaat. During the forty days' journey, during the *chilla*, I followed everything a Muslim should follow. I prayed five times a day, and as guided by Tablighi Jamaat followers did not engage myself with any worldly affairs. My wife was concerned about me and she was worried that it might transform me into a Tablighi Jamaat follower. After coming back from the *chilla*, I did not stop praying. I kept praying regularly five times a day.

Surprisingly I started to do *ta'leem* in my home like a Tablighi Jamaat follower. It is the standard process of beginning the Tablighi Jamaat at home. Tablighi Jamaat has to begin from your home. Therefore, I started to introduce its teachings into my home. I called my mother, sister, and wife every afternoon and started to read the Tablighi book. Everyone in my family was surprised with my activities. In the meantime, I did not shave. I trimmed my beard, because I was thinking at this point that if I shave, it would not look good if I meet *chilla* members again for the purpose of my fieldwork. They might not be friendly if they see me without a beard. I decided to carry on with a beard. I did not encounter any problem with that; rather, it

was helping me to continue my fieldwork in Dhaka. My father was happy to see me like this. All of my relatives and friends were surprised, as if I had converted to the Tablighi Jamaat while doing my fieldwork. Finally, it was time to come back to the UK. At this time, I was a little bit worried about my beard because I wanted to keep it. I thought it might be difficult at the airport with a beard as in my passport I do not have a beard. I decided to shave. After coming back to the UK, I slowly came back to my regular lifestyle.

### **3.7 Conclusion**

As a native researcher, I was able to make friends quickly. This was particularly notable for the *chilla*. Since I had a limited period for forty days in the *chilla*, I had to get into the group quickly. In the *chilla*, I knew only one person whom I had met on a three-day *dawah* trip. Building rapport is the key fact of participant observation. The more familiar and close one can be during the fieldwork, the more it helps the researcher to get into the hidden realities of the subject. This was the main strength of the ethnographic methods in the current research. During the entire fieldwork time and intervals, I always kept my connection with some of the key informants and friends that helped me a lot not to feel isolated each time I have visited my field.

I also had to face some challenging factors in the field. The most challenging factor was to keep connection with various sites of my field research. Ideally, I planned to find a Tablighi group in Bangladesh so that I could participate with them locally and go for a *dawah* trip with them. The reality was different to my plan. When I was ready to go out for *dawah*, I could not find a group. I had to wait for my second visit

to Bangladesh to be able to find a *chilla* group. When I came back to Dhaka from the *chilla*, I kept participating in *dawah* activities with some of the *chilla* members in their local mosques. These various locations and sites therefore constituted my entire research site. Regular visits and participation in Tablighi activities helped me to maintain a close link with all sites of my research. My participation and regular meeting with the *chilla* members helped me to understand their everyday life when they are not in *chilla*. Methodologically each site of my field becomes a valuable source of acquiring knowledge about the movement.

However, the context in the UK was not the same. The process of entry and of finding a Tablighi Jamaat group was difficult compared to Bangladesh. Bangladeshis and the Muslim community helped me to find local Tablighi Jamaat groups. Once I had met some Tablighi followers, I found to my surprise that they were all connected with other Tablighi followers in Cardiff and South Wales. In Cardiff, they all knew each other, as the number of Tablighi Jamaat followers was not very high compared to Bangladesh. Therefore, they preferred to keep close contact with each other for the betterment of the movement and their individual gain in religious aspects. I then started to participate with them in mosques every week. Participation in an *ijtema* in Dewsbury provided a different perspective tho the *ijtema* in Bangladesh.

However, the main context and principles were the same in both countries. In the UK, my site was also the combination of various sites. It was not feasible to learn about Tablighi Jamaat using a single-sited ethnographic method, because a characteristic feature of the Tablighi Jamaat *dawah* is to move between various locations. The study would have been incomplete if I did not participate in their

*dawah* trip. Obviously, the process of *dawah* of the Tablighi Jamaat helped to define the research methods of the current research and the multiple interconnected sites and locations made it a multi-sited ethnography.

Chapter Three has presented my field research and methodology. The following chapter, Chapter Four, is the first of four chapters in which I present my research in Bangladesh.

## Chapter Four

### Undertaking a *Chilla*: Becoming a Tablighi Follower

#### 4.1 Getting into *Dawah*

In Chapter Four, the first of four chapters in which I present my Bangladeshi research, I look at a defining process in becoming a Tablighi follower. This is undertaking a *chilla* or a 40-day preaching journey. This is a key context for learning about and performing *dawah*, and coming to understand whatever being a follower of the Tablighi Jamaat involves.

Tablighi Jamaat views *dawah* as the fundamental responsibility for all Muslims. To justify the efforts of *dawah*, Tablighi Jamaat followers refer to the speech of the Prophet in his last *hajj* where he mentioned, ‘it is you who have to pass on my message to others who are not present today’. For the Tablighi Jamaat, conveying the Prophet’s message to the Muslim community is considered as *dawah*. Tablighi Jamaat followers believe that they are following the command of the Prophet. Consequently, performing, *dawah* is not just a voluntary task for them, but obedience to the Prophet’s instruction to convey his message.

According to the followers of the Tablighi Jamaat, the organisation aims to reinforce faith through the various levels of the *dawah* journey. Among many types of *dawah* journeys, the most important is the *chilla*, which lasts for 40 consecutive days. My informants suggested that the senior leaders always recommend to followers that they should complete three successive *chillas* in order to be a dedicated Tablighi Jamaat follower. During the *chilla*, participants carry out missionary journeys to

other places, as allocated by the Tablighi Jamaat Headquarters. The Tablighi Jamaat considers *chilla* a training period for the beginner and a practice for the dedicated Tablighi Jamaat follower. The intention is that the followers will then be able to stay on the course of a Tablighi-guided life for the rest of their lives.

Since *chilla* is considered by the followers of the Tablighi Jamaat to be a significant and important *dawah* journey, I participated in a *chilla* in the northern part of Bangladesh as part of my fieldwork. I was familiar with many activities of the Tablighi Jamaat before going on *chilla* because of my father, who was a Tablighi Jamaat follower. My father began to attend *dawah* trips of the Tablighi Jamaat seriously in the early 1990s in a mosque at Dhaka. This gave me a close acquaintance with the activities of the Tablighi Jamaat. From that time, I noticed that many people from middle class and lower middle class backgrounds in Dhaka in Bangladesh were very receptive to and cooperative with the Tablighi Jamaat. The Tablighi Jamaat's claim of avoiding political involvement and its reluctance to engage in worldly affairs has a positive impact among the wider Bangladeshi population. Through this image, the Tablighi Jamaat has managed to avoid controversy and to represent itself as a benign type of religious movement to the wider society in Bangladesh. My father perceived the activities of the Tablighi Jamaat in a similar way. I could see the happiness on my father's face when he came back from his *dawah* journey. It meant something for him to carry on the unfinished job of the Prophet.

When I told my father about the topic of my research, he was surprised because he could not understand the importance of undertaking research on the Tablighi Jamaat.

When I managed to clarify the purpose of my research, he helped me to find Tablighi Jamaat followers from his peer group. He explained to me the daily activities that took place as part of the *dawah* journey of the Tablighi Jamaat. However, I could not really grasp the full essence of *dawah* journey from his description. Then he told me to go out at least for one *chilla* to experience what Tablighi Jamaat followers do during a *dawah* journey.

The *chilla* or forty day's journey is the primary type of *dawah* journey practised by the followers of the Tablighi Jamaat. In order to be a dedicated Tablighi Jamaat follower, experience of *chilla* is essential. Since my aim was to conduct ethnographic research, participation in a *chilla* was my plan from the beginning, to know about the process of Tablighi Jamaat preaching. The following section provides an empirical account of daily activities during the *chilla*. It shows how members of the group conduct learning sessions during the *chilla*, engaging the beginners in their regular *gasht*, *mujakkera*<sup>19</sup> and *ta'leem*. *Chilla* provided an opportunity to meet people from various locations, and also provided an impression of how non-Tablighi men view the activities of the Tablighi Jamaat; do they see Tablighi Jamaat as a positive force or do they see Tablighi Jamaat critically? All these helped me to get a sound understanding of the Tablighi Jamaat as a whole.

Before going on a *chilla*, I participated in a three days' *dawah* journey to gain an initial impression and make some contacts. This three-day *dawah* journey helped me to find a group to begin the *chilla*. Since I was familiar with many Tablighi norms, I did not face the initial culture shock that many anthropologists face when first

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<sup>19</sup> Tablighi Jamaat followers describe *mujakkera* in Bengali as '*poramorsho*' (consultation). In *mujakkera*, followers discuss various issues on Islam for example how to pray properly, how to eat following Islamic etiquettes, how to learn *dawah* etc.

entering the field. My long-term familiarity of the Tablighi Jamaat helped me to get into the field in a smooth way. However, as I have discussed in the methodology chapter, this process was not entirely free of challenge. Familiarity with many Tablighi activities also helped me to find a Tablighi group relatively easily and quickly.

#### **4.2 Finding a *Chilla* Group**

When I returned to Bangladesh for my second fieldwork in 2010, in September, I contacted Moajjem Hussain, who had been the leader (*ameer*) of my three-day *dawah* journey, to see if he could help me to find a group to go out for a *chilla*. Moajjem Hussain informed me about a group which aimed to carry out a *chilla* and I did not hesitate to travel with them. On the first day of my *chilla*, I met Moajjem Hussain at his local mosque in Badda, Dhaka. Sohrab Hussain and Abdur Rahim joined us in *fazr* prayer in the morning. Moajjem Hussain told them that I came from the UK to attend this *chilla*. He did not mention that I was participating in the *chilla* for a PhD research. We met the rest of the members of the group at the Notun Bagh Jame Masjeed in Khilgaon in Dhaka, which was an influential Tablighi mosque in Dhaka. There were eighteen members in this group. This was a relatively large number for a *chilla*. Generally, the number of members of a *chilla* group is about twelve.



Table 3 Participants of the *Chilla* in Nageswary

Name	Age	Profession	District	Marital Status <sup>20</sup>	<i>Chilla</i> (completed)	<i>Three Chillas</i> (completed)
Monirul Islam	Mid 40	Jewellery Shop	Dhaka	M	Yes	Yes
Enamul Haque	Mid 30	Newspaper Business	Dhaka	M	Yes	Yes
Moulana Khalek	28	Property Business	Dhaka	M	Yes	Yes
Moajjem Hussain	Mid 30	Business	Dhaka	M	Yes	Yes
Sohrab Hussain	Mid 30	Business	Dhaka	M	Yes	Yes
Abdur Rahim	Mid 60	Retired Police	Dhaka	M	Yes	Yes
Dabir Uddin	Mid 30	Laundry Business	Dhaka	M	Yes	Yes
Sharmsur Rahman	25	Student (now works in a private firm)	Dhaka	U	-----	Yes
Belal Hussain	21	Works in the shop of Monirul Islam	Dhaka	U	Yes	Yes
Belal (Junior)	16	Student	Shariat pur	U	-----	Yes
Robiul Islam	18	Small Business	Shariat pur	U	-----	Yes
Saddam Hussain	21	Unemployed	Dhaka	U	----	----
Abdus Salam	70	Retired	Madari pur	M	Yes	-----
Abdur Razzaque	65	Retired Local Govt. Member	Barishal	M	Yes	-----
Mohammad Jalal	55	Small Business	Dhaka	M	No	No
Md. Yusuf	35	Small Business	Dhaka	M	-----	Yes
Iqbal Hossain	35	Small Business	Dhaka	M	Yes	Yes
Nur Alam	22	Works in a Shoe Store	Dhaka	U	-----	Yes

Followers maintain a dress code that is generally Islamic, but dedicated followers always prefer to dress like the Prophet to maintain *Sunnah*. Experienced and dedicated followers of this group wore *panjabi*, *payjama*, Islamic cap (round cap), scarf and *lungi* (traditional Bangladesh male clothing). I took a couple of *panjabis*, trousers and *lungi* with me. Later on experienced members of the group instructed me to use *lungi* or *payjama* instead of trousers, since trousers were not considered as Islamic clothing. I wore a *panjabi* and trousers on the very first day of my *chilla* journey.

<sup>20</sup> Married = M, Unmarried= U

Once we met with the group, Abul Khayer, the leader of the Tablighi Jamaat at the Khilgaon mosque conducted a meeting to select the leader for the *dawah* journey and to talk about some basic guidelines that we should follow during the journey. Abul Khayer asked the group members to express their opinion about the leader. In the end, he selected Monirul Islam as leader in consultation with the group members. He then told us to accept (*manar joggota*) all decisions of the leader without any argument, to sacrifice our individual interest to help other members, and to stay calm and gentle by controlling our anger and temperament.

After the meeting, we went to the headquarters of the Tablighi Jamaat of Bangladesh at Kakrail to seek permission. Each group is required to show a recommendation letter from a senior Tablighi Jamaat follower from its local area to ensure its legitimacy. The leaders from Kakrail did not allow anyone to go on a *chilla* without a recommendation letter. In the past, they were not as strict as they are now. Some people took advantage of their flexibility. There were some incidents where people pretended to be Tablighi Jamaat followers and robbed valuable things from several mosques. Furthermore, many men joined the movement to hide their political identity. Sikand (2006) shows that many members of the JI joined Tablighi *dawah* after the liberation war of Bangladesh in 1971. Hence, many non-Tablighi men criticise the movement by saying that the Tablighi Jamaat is the hiding place for many controversial political members.

The leaders from Kakrail selected the destination of a group for *dawah* journey based on two factors. One factor is that the group will be sent to strengthen the

activities of the Tablighi Jamaat in a particular area. The second factor is the quality of a group. For example, if the leaders think that a particular area has disadvantages on *dawah* activities, they send a group there that has experienced and knowledgeable followers including religious scholars (*alem*). Our group had seven dedicated and experienced followers who had already completed three consecutive *chillas* several times. The leaders from Kakrail instructed the leader of this group to go to Nageswary, a sub-district of Kurigram district in northern Bangladesh, with a target of motivating as many people as they can to go on a *chilla*.

We did not begin our journey that day, but stayed the night at the Baitul Mamur Jame Masjeed, near Kakrail. Next night, at 11.30 pm, we embarked on the journey to Nageswary. In the beginning, we all had to read a verse from the *Qur'an* for the journey. Many of us did not know the *dua*;<sup>21</sup> therefore, experienced followers recited it loudly for the new followers to pursue. I sat next to Abdur Rahim. During the entire journey, he talked about the significance of *dawah*, Tabligh and the 'Six Points' of the Tablighi Jamaat. The 'Six Points' is an important part of the lesson for new Tablighi Jamaat followers because Tablighi Jamaat followers consider the 'Six Points' as the foundation of Tablighi speech. In Bengali, it is known as '*choy usul*'. In the morning, we stopped the bus near a mosque beside the road to say Morning Prayer. Around 7:00 am in the morning, we reached the Nageswary bus stop where we met a Tablighi follower. We stayed at Nageswary to carry out *chilla* from 9th October 2009 to 19<sup>th</sup> November 2009.

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<sup>21</sup> A *dua* is a prayer in the form of a personal supplication to Allah. It is additional to the five obligatory prayers.

### **4.3 Chilla in Nageswary**

At one time, the activities of the Tablighi Jamaat had been very strong in Nageswary, but it had declined in recent times. The leaders from Kakrail informed the followers from Nageswary to guide this group in organising the route of the journey in Nageswary. The guide took us to the local *markaz*<sup>22</sup>. We said an additional prayer that is known as a *nafal* prayer after reaching the mosque. After the *nafal* prayer, we finalised the list of mosques that we were to visit. We decided to put up for one night in this mosque and move on to the new mosque, the Berubari Bazar mosque, on the following day.

In Nageswary, we visited a total of thirteen mosques. We stayed for a period of three days in each mosque. As an example, I will now discuss how we spent a day performing *dawah* at the Roy Ganj mosque in Nageswary.

#### **4.4 A Day in the Roy Ganj Mosque**

According to local Tablighi Jamaat followers, the Roy Ganj mosque was the place in Nageswary where the Tablighi Jamaat began their activities in the early 1970s. Many local Tablighi Jamaat followers told me that it started out there around 1971 or 1972. There is a myth among many Tablighi Jamaat followers that a pious man carried out a *dawah* journey in many parts of Nageswary in 1971 and decided to stay in Nageswary permanently. Since then the Tablighi Jamaat became popular among many people and the Roy Ganj mosque became one of the main centres in Nageswary. But in recent times the activities of the Tablighi Jamaat started to

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<sup>22</sup> The various local, regional and national headquarters of the Tablighi Jamaat are known as *markaz*. This was the regional headquarters for Nageswary.

decrease which was one of the reasons why this group was sent from Kakrail to work on reviving existing Tablighi Jamaat followers and recruiting others.

We reached the Roy Ganj mosque on 20<sup>th</sup> October 2009. After reaching the Roy Ganj mosque, the group performed a ritual called *manjil*. When a group of the Tablighi Jamaat reaches a mosque, they do *manjil*. The purpose of *manjil* is to devote their attention to *dawah*. During the *manjil* of this group, everyone put their luggage in one place in the mosque. They made a circle keeping the entire luggage in the middle. Then the *ameer* asked a follower to conduct this short session. He then delivered a speech on the *manjil*:

‘We have come here with a target. We came through the *bazar* [market] and public road. The outside environment of the mosque distracted us from *dawah*. We have to focus on our targets and duties during this *dawah* journey. Oh Allah, please forgive us if we have not followed the *tartib* [rule] of the journey properly. Please help us to continue the *dawah* task properly in this area’

The representative of the local Tablighi Jamaat (*rahbar*) filled the group in on the activities of the Tablighi Jamaat in the area. He provided the name of the responsible person (*jimmadar*) who organized the activities of the Tablighi Jamaat in this mosque, the approximate number of Tablighi Jamaat followers in the area with a breakdown of the followers who had completed various levels of *dawah* (three *chillas*, one *chilla*, a three day journey or *masturaat jamaat*). This gave us an idea of

the current activities of the Tablighi Jamaat in this area. We followed this process in every mosque during the *chilla*.

The day began with the Morning Prayer. We had to wake up around four in the morning, that is, about an hour before the Morning Prayer. We had to put our luggage together in a corner of the mosque to make space for the people. There were only two toilets for eighteen men with no washroom or bathroom in the Roy Ganj mosque. Therefore, we had to wake up early to freshen up. The situation was the same in all the mosques we visited during the *chilla*, although they all had an open area where people do ablutions (*wudu*). It was winter and there was no facility for hot water. We all missed our home comfort, but no one complained. Tablighi Jamaat followers believe that hardships during a *chilla* or spiritual journey make the feelings during *dawah* stronger. It was the sacrifice of home comfort to please God.

After the Morning Prayer, the group began with a speech on the ‘Six Points’, then everyone went out to preach to local people who came to pray in the mosque. When we came back from preaching it was time for the meeting, where the team leader planned and distributed various tasks for every member of the group. This included grocery shopping, cooking, *gasht*, doing *ta’leem*, *boyan*, etc. The entire day was divided into many sections with various activities. These includes two *ta’leems* (one in the morning and the other one in the afternoon), *taskhili gasht* (mainly in the morning), *umumi gasht* (in the afternoon), *margrib bad boyan* (after evening prayer),

reading from the *Hekayete Sahaba*<sup>23</sup> (after *esha* prayer), and two *mujakkeras* (one in afternoon and the other one at night before dinner).

During this whole process, the senior followers always kept an eye on the new followers to make them competent in *dawah* with various learning sessions, for instance, *ta'leem* and *mujakkeras*. Among all these activities, the *tashkili gasht* and *umumi gasht* provided us with an opportunity to meet people from the local area. It gave me an idea how local people react to *dawah*.

#### **4.5 Learning by Doing**

The *Chilla* is considered a learning session for the beginners. The followers see the *chilla* as a place where one can learn the process of *dawah*. According to the experienced followers, a new follower can learn *dawah* by performing it during the *chilla*. Therefore, the experienced followers were always aware of the need to educate the beginners through their learning session and *dawah*. They always discuss various aspects of *dawah* outside their scheduled task; for instance, during going out for shopping, *gasht* and leisure time. The Tablighi Jamaat sees the *gasht* as a practical orientation for beginners to learn how to carry out the *gasht*.

#### ***Tashkili Gasht: the Case of Hasan Ali and Shukur Ali***

Of the people we were directed to visit, one was a rich local farmer called Hasan Ali. Hasan Ali had apparently participated in three consecutive *chillas* in 2007. After that *dawah* journey, he was not regular in mosque based *dawah* activities and did not participate in any further *chilla*. Hasan Ali even stopped going on three-day *dawahs*.

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<sup>23</sup> *Hekayete Sahaba* is a book that describes the facts, stories, and life of the companions of the Prophet.

The local Tablighi follower (*rahbar*) updated us about Hasan Ali. In a meeting, the leader decided to send a two-member team to Hasan Ali to motivate him to go on a *chilla*. Abdul Khalek and I were assigned to visit Hasan Ali. This type of *gasht* is known as *tashkili gasht*. In *tashkili gasht*, the Tablighi Jamaat targets specific people to motivate them. Hasan Ali was a rich farmer. He was the father of seven daughters all of whom were married. Hasan Ali planned to arrange a get-together with his daughters during the Eid ul Azha that was about to take place in a month's time. He bought a cow for sacrifice (*kurbani*) and renovated his house. When Moulana Abdul Khalek asked him to go on a *chilla*, he gave these reasons why he could not do it. He also told us that there was no one to look after his family in his absence.

Since I was a beginner<sup>24</sup> and not a Tablighi Jamaat follower, I was not supposed to engage in the discussion. Abdul Khalek told him that a friend of Hasan Ali would also go this time. Therefore, he would not be bored during the *chilla*, but he was not convinced. In the middle of the discussion, he told us to wait and went inside the house to bring biscuits and snacks. He took us inside a room where he and his wife prepared puffed rice with spicy snacks (*chanachur*), biscuits, and betel leaves with nut (*pan*). Offering *pan* to guests is a custom in this area. If anyone visits someone, the host offers *pan*. Abdul Khalek told him that we would not take anything, if he would not give his word to join in a *chilla*. This is a sign of dishonour for the host if any guest leaves without eating what the host offers. This is why in the meeting the *ameer* and others decided that they would not eat anything from any house until the person agreed to join the Tablighi Jamaat. Abdul Khalek used this technique and told

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<sup>24</sup> Most team members treated me as a beginner of the Tablighi Jamaat despite my researcher identity. A beginner never gets a chance to lead a *tashkili gasht*, because they believe that to motivate people like Hasan Ali needs experienced and dedicated followers.



Hasan Ali that we would not accept anything unless he would promise to go on a *chilla*. Hasan Ali promised to meet our team leader in the mosque.

We then moved on to meet Shukur Ali in the same village. Shukur Ali was an active Tablighi Jamaat follower; his son Ahmad was not religious or interested in the Tablighi Jamaat, but Shukur Ali very much wanted Ahmad to join the Tablighi Jamaat. Shukur Ali was concerned about his son's religious life because of his involvement with traditional rural theatre (*jatra*) and music. Ahmad, who was married and a father, was called to come and speak with us. Abdul Khalek began to motivate Ahmad by saying 'you should fulfil your father's wish. In addition, you promised your father that you would go on a *chilla*. If you fulfil your father's wish, Allah will be happy, and your father will pray for you, which would be granted by Allah. It is beneficial for you to listen to your father'. Ahmad went inside the house to consult his mother and returned to tell us that he would go on the *chilla*. We informed Ahmad that Hasan Ali had also agreed to go from his village, so he would not be alone. Shukur Ali gave us five hundred taka in advance to confirm Ahmad's participation in the *chilla*. It is considered a *Sunnah* to pay an advance to confirm such spiritual activity.

### ***Ta'leem and Mujakkera***

We returned to the mosque at 10:00am and attended the *ta'leem*, which was conducted by Haji Enamul Haque. Enamul Haque began with the *Fazayele Qur'an*, which forms part of the book called *Fazayele Amal*<sup>25</sup>. After a while, we were split

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<sup>25</sup> *Fazayele Amal* (The Virtues of Pious Deeds) is a compiled book of *hadith* that includes selections from the *Qur'an*, and stories from early days of Islam. The Tablighi Jamaat considers it as the key guiding book. It also discusses Hajj, prayer, charity, Islamic etiquettes to lead everyday life and etc.

into some small groups and Enamul Haque selected a team leader for each group. This session was known as *sura kerater mosko* (the practice of reading verses of the *Qur'an*). He chose some verses, which people commonly use in everyday prayer, so that people can read and recite them perfectly during everyday prayers. We continued this session for about 30 to 45 minutes. After that, we went back to *Fazayele Amal*. Enamul Haque then involved two members from the group to go out to do *dawah* and invite people from nearby area to attend the *ta'leem*. This is called *ta'leemi gasht*. He sent another group for twenty minutes to do *ta'leemi gasht*. Generally, one or two groups were sent out for *ta'leemi gasht*, and we followed this custom in this *gasht*.

The final section of the *ta'leem* was devoted to discussing the 'Six Points' of the Tablighi Jamaat. In the beginning, one experienced follower discussed the 'Six Points'. Many people outside the Tablighi Jamaat criticise these 'Six Points,' and in fact many of my non-Tablighi interviewees told me that the 'Six Points' kept the Tablighi Jamaat followers ignorant. When I asked an experienced Tablighi Jamaat follower of this group about the criticism of the 'Six Points', he told me that Tablighi Jamaat strictly follow the 'Six Points' to keep their speech easy and simple. After the *ta'leem*, we had to participate in two sessions of *mujakkera* to discuss various aspects of Islam. One *mujakkera* was after the *johr* prayer and the other was after the *esha* prayer at night.

The experienced followers of the team discussed the importance of maintaining a strict and disciplined life during the *chilla* in Nageswary. We had to follow some

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*Fazayele Qur'an* (The Virtues of *Qur'an*) is a section of this book that includes discussion on the benefits of the *Qur'an*.

basic rules. The first rule was not to go outside the mosque without the permission of the team leader. Second, if someone needed to go out for personal reasons, he had to justify this and another member of the team had to accompany him. Finally, we were discouraged from going out frequently. The team leader explained that the more we go outside of a mosque the more we would be distracted from the aim of *dawah*. We were here not for worldly affairs, we came here sacrificing our worldly interest therefore each member of the team should not spend time on any other purposes.

The team leader advised us in the *mujakkera* not even to contact our family members because it would divert our attention from *dawah* to the family. In order to avoid frequent contact with our families, we were not allowed to bring any mobile phone with us . We were also strictly directed not to mingle outside the mosque too much during the *chilla*. The senior followers informed us that the market is the worst place. We should not spend much time there, because it could divert our concentration from the *dawah*. They wanted the members of the group to give full attention to *dawah*. I noticed that when I went out too much, I lost my attention. It also happened when I called home. Although I was not a Tablighi follower, it distracted me a lot. I discussed and compared this with other members of the group. I encountered similar reactions and observations from several other members of the group. With this approach, they tried to force their mind to concentrate only on the *dawah*. They did not want to think too much about family or other issues that involved worldly affairs.

This is one of the areas that many non-Tablighi men criticise the Tablighi Jamaat about. They argue that Islam would never approve of carrying out a *dawah* journey if this involved neglecting one's family. Rather, the family has to be the first priority

for every Muslim. In a focus group discussion with a secular oriented young group in Dhaka before my participation in the *chilla*, most of the group members were very critical about the Tablighi approach towards family, especially when they carry out *dawah*, leaving the family on their own. Tablighi Jamaat followers explain that family members also have to sacrifice for the sake of religion. Since the household head has dedicated his time for *dawah*, the other members should support him by accepting his absence in the family for a significant number of days. Abdul Khalek told me that they never encourage people to attend *chilla* if this involves leaving their family in a difficult situation.

### ***The Umumi Gasht***

‘After *dua* there will be an important speech about faith and practice (*iman* and *amal*), we all will listen to it. It would be beneficial for us’.

This was the announcement to attend afternoon *gasht* for the community of people who came to the mosque to pray. It was known as *umumi gasht*. The *Umumi gasht* is considered the backbone of all *gashts*. Md. Yusuf stood at the front of the mosque and waited until most men had finished their prayers. He then began explaining the etiquette of *gasht* (*gasht er adab*). He described the importance and the process of *gasht*. He began with, ‘thanks to Allah that we are very fortunate to pray in the mosque in a *jamaat*’. Then Md. Yusuf discussed the process of *gasht*. He divided the group into two parts: one stayed inside the mosque to discuss faith and practice (*iman o amal*) and the other *jamaat* went out to motivate local people.

Md. Yusuf selected a leader, a guide, and a man (*mutakallin*) who would invite people. There were additional members (*mamur*) with the *jamaat*. The role of these additional members was to do *dhikir* during the *gasht*. Members were not allowed to talk during *gasht*. Before going out, the group performed *dua* outside the mosque to make this mission successful. Finally, Md. Yusuf provided the following directions:

‘We will not engage ourselves in any worldly conversation during *gasht*. We have to control our eyes and always keep our eyes towards the ground. If anyone accidentally looks at any woman on the street, please turn your eyes down and do not look again. Always walk on the right side of the road with *dhikir* and think about the success of the *jamaat*’.

I participated in this *gasht* as a member. On the way, our guide stopped two men; one was going to the market for grocery shopping. Another person was walking on the road. Shamsur Rahman was the *mutakallin* and he started to speak to one of them. Shamsur Rahman began:

Shamsur Rahman: ‘Brother, How are you?’

Unknown Person: I am well.

Shamsur Rahman: We have come to your area from Dhaka to meet people from your area. It is our duty to do the *dawah* of the Prophet. As a follower of the Prophet, it is our duty to convey his message to others.

Unknown Person: We know all these. Go to them who do not know these.

He sounded rude to the Tablighi group. The *zimmadar*<sup>26</sup> of the *jamaat*, Abdur Rahim then instructed the *rahbar* (guide) not to stop people on the road. After some days, I found out that this person was a follower of the Ahle Hadith<sup>27</sup>. The Ahle Hadith do not appreciate the efforts of the Tablighi Jamaat. I noticed that the Tablighi Jamaat does not encourage people to use books other than *Fazayele Amal*, *Hekayete Sahaba*, and *Muntakib Hadith*<sup>28</sup>. Belal Hussain once discussed a story that was not from *Fazayele Amal* and he had to face criticism from senior members of the group. After the *umumi gasht*, we came back to the mosque and attended the evening prayer.

### ***Magrib bad Boyan (Religious Talk after Magrib Prayer)***

The *Gasht* was followed by the religious speech after the *magrib* prayer. This was the most important lecture of the day. This is why the *ameer* selected one of the experienced Tablighi Jamaat followers for this session. The speaker engaged the audience in his discussion. The speaker left an open question to the audience, ‘are we all happy to learn how to do *dawah*?’ Most audiences including the *chilla* members replied; ‘yes we all want to learn it’. In response, the speaker asked, ‘who wants to go for *dawah* in the next few days?’ Then he asked, ‘does anyone have any plan to go in the near future?’ Many raised their hand to confirm that they would go. During this time, a member of the group wrote down the names who were interested to go out for a *dawah*. The ideas of writing names were to motivate volunteers further to go on a *dawah* journey. Another purpose of writing down the names was if someone decided to go for *dawah* he would get *neki* (good deeds) no matter if he could make it or not. The speaker concluded the session with a *dua* for everyone, and he

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<sup>26</sup> The term *zimmadar* refers to the person responsible for carrying out *gasht*.

<sup>27</sup> Ahle Hadith is an Islamic movement that claim that they are proper followers of *Sunnah* of the prophet. Muslims who prefer the authority of Prophetic tradition (*hadith*) over that of a ruling by one of the schools of Islamic jurisprudence (Hasan, 1998).

<sup>28</sup> *Muntakib Hadith* is a compiled book of *hadith* by the Tablighi Jamaat.

mentioned the names who were interested in going on a *dawah* journey. The day ended with a short reading from the *Hekayete Sahaba* and *mujakkera* after *esha* prayer.

Participation in a *chilla* indicates that the followers intend to keep their time for the *chilla* separate from their daily activities when they are living in the society. They do not intend to spend time during the *chilla* discussing worldly affairs. It is also evident that followers also see the Tablighi Jamaat as a protection from activities that they believe to be non-religious or sinful. For example, Shukur Ali said that Ahmad and some of his friends planned to arrange a village theatre, which Shukur Ali did not like because Shukur Ali believed that music is forbidden in Islam. He was against this theatre. He was concerned about Ahmad's involvement with this group. He desperately wanted Ahmad to be part of the Tablighi Jamaat in the hope that it would discourage Ahmad from being involved in the *jatra*, perhaps because, the *jatra* is an occasion for gambling and other illicit activities. Shukur Ali believed that if his son goes on a *chilla* that would eliminate the 'bad habit' of his son. For him, theatre was not a good social activity, thus he treated Tablighi Jamaat as the place to rehabilitate his son. I will discuss many other social implications of the Tablighi Jamaat in the next chapter. It is important to see how members implement this learning from the *chilla* after they come back in their existing society, which is very hierarchical and structured. If they are successful in doing that, to what extent, can it transform their family and social life? The next chapter addresses all these aspects of the Tablighi Jamaat.

## Chapter Five

### Spiritual Journey within the Tablighi Jamaat

#### 5.1 Introduction

Chapter Four provided an ethnographic description of the *chilla*, a central spiritual *dawah* exercise of the Tablighi Jamaat, which involves a forty-day preaching journey, based on my own participation in a *chilla* in Bangladesh in September 2010. In the present chapter, I aim to build on this ethnography through a discussion of two broad themes, relating to how the Tablighi Jamaat aims to bring about a transformation at the individual level and at the societal level. The first theme relates to the principal social implications of participating in the *dawah* and the *chilla* of the Tablighi Jamaat and in particular, how they contribute to an enhancement in social status by engaging in various religious activities in a mosque and in the community. I will also discuss how Tablighi Jamaat helps to transform an individual so that he or she adopts a Tablighi mode of life. The second theme of this chapter is the Tablighi approach of transforming the society into an Islamic society. This links to the discussion of the politics of establishing an Islamic society by the Tablighi Jamaat. I argue that despite various criticisms, the Tablighi Jamaat helps followers to take on a Tablighi mode of life with an aim of establishing an Islamic world. Various social implications and the claim of being apolitical of the Tablighi Jamaat create a positive image among the Muslims of Bangladesh. The positive image of the Tablighi Jamaat also facilitates attracting followers from various socio-economic backgrounds.



## **5.2 Social Implication of *Dawah*: Participation in *Chilla***

Many Tablighi Jamaat followers describe the *chilla* as a life changing experience, which has transformed their ‘ordinary’ life in a Tablighi Jamaat life. My participation in the *chilla* provided me with the opportunities to witness how some of the new Tablighi Jamaat followers decided to choose the Tablighi Jamaat after participating in the *chilla*. The followers of the Tablighi Jamaat say that they choose this life to increase their faith and they believe that Tablighi Jamaat is the right way of practicing Islam. Do people join the Tablighi Jamaat purely in order to strengthen their faith or are there some other social factors involved that drive them to join Tablighi Jamaat? My field data suggests that involvement with the Tablighi Jamaat has a positive effect on their social status as a result of their mixing with people from higher social classes while carrying out *dawah*. This is a key area to take into account in order to understand the social implications of the Tablighi Jamaat in Bangladeshi society.

### ***Status, Authority, and Religious Empowerment***

For many Tablighi Jamaat followers, the *dawah* and *chilla* provide an opportunity to mix with different classes in the society. In Dhaka and other rural parts of Bangladesh, many followers from the lower and lower middle classes get an opportunity to mix with middle class people by carrying out *dawah*. The Tablighi Jamaat claims that they treat all participants in the same manner without any hierarchy. Followers of the Tablighi Jamaat believe that there is no hierarchy or stratification in Tablighi Jamaat activities, and this helps to attract people from lower social classes. According to senior Tablighi Jamaat followers, such people feel welcome within the Tablighi Jamaat. During their *dawah* journey, people cook, eat

and stay together outside their society. They call each other ‘brother’ to neutralise the sense of class and status.

In reality, it is difficult to accept that the Tablighi Jamaat is entirely free of hierarchy. There is a hierarchy among Tablighi followers, who follow a leader (*amir*) without any argument. In a group situation, a leader holds the supreme authority to direct his group during *chilla*, but the experienced and senior members in a group always receive attention and priority by the leader in decision making during a *chilla*. However, this does not seem to encourage divisions within a group, rather, it keeps the group disciplined. There is a conscious intention of reducing the gap between members from different classes and backgrounds. The members are always expected to control their anger and behave politely during the *dawah* journey. During my fieldwork with Tablighi Jamaat followers, I noticed that most followers strictly managed to avoid any argument with their fellow members during their journey. For them, this was a conscious practice of self-control. This attitude helps to reduce the social gap between the members.

When followers come back after the *dawah* journey to their respective social contexts, what happens? Do they immerse themselves back to their existing social structure or do they continue to follow some of the Tablighi norms that they had practised during their *dawah* journey? One of the members from my *chilla* team in Bangladesh, Dabir Uddin, who runs a small laundry business in Dhaka, told me about the impact of being a Tablighi Jamaat follower. He said that people honour him because he keeps a beard and wears a cap. Everyone addresses him as *hujur*.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> *Hujur* generally refers to a religious person.

He says that many a time when he had been waiting for a bus, the conductor had helped him to get in the bus before other passengers, saying *Hujur apni age ashen* [*Hujur*, you come first]. People greet Tablighi Jamaat followers politely and speak to them in a generous manner. I noticed similar attitudes from many local people of villages and small towns I visited during the *chilla* in Bangladesh, since I kept a beard and followed *Sunnah* in terms of my clothing. Dabir Uddin also reported:

I am a poor laundry man. I wash and iron clothes for the people of my area. This is not a profession that is considered as honourable in the context of Bangladesh. However, after joining Tablighi Jamaat, many people started to speak to me politely and with honour. I go for *dawah* and *ijtema* with other respectable people from my society. Many of them are engineers, doctors, first class government service holders. They respect me and value my opinion, which I believe happens because of the Tablighi Jamaat.

The statement suggests that dedicated Tablighi Jamaat followers from upper class also behave politely with him. Someone who follows Tablighi Jamaat receives higher status and attention from many people in the society. It also implies that Tablighi Jamaat followers intend to practice Tablighi values of equality while they are in the society. I experienced a team effort of helping a poor follower by a Tablighi Jamaat group in Dhaka. Once a follower did not turn up to the weekly *gasht* even though he was a regular follower. After the *gasht*, Mashiur told me that he would go to visit that Tablighi Jamaat follower to see if everything was going well with him. I went with him and found that the Tablighi Jamaat follower's younger brother was sick, and they could not afford to go to a hospital. He was very

emotional when he saw us, because someone who was not from his class had come to visit him. Finally, Mashiur and some other Tablighi Jamaat followers agreed to help him financially to get his brother to a hospital for treatment.

These two examples suggest that the Tablighi Jamaat followers are concerned about their followers, not about social status. This allows the followers to interact regardless of their class background. While Bangladeshi society always encourages the maintenance of social differences, Tablighi Jamaat offers a sense of equality across class boundaries, at least during *chilla* and regular *dawah* activities that helps to motivate people from a lower class to join the Tablighi Jamaat.

In Bangladesh, the Tablighi Jamaat is treated as less controversial than other Islamic movements such as Jamaat-i-Islami Bangladesh, Al Bayinaat and many Sufi oriented movements. Most people view Tablighi Jamaat as a positive Islamic movement. Therefore, the State itself helps Tablighi Jamaat followers in their *ijtema* by providing a water supply, security, transport and land. People have a soft spot for the Tablighi Jamaat in Bangladesh and when they see a young man with humble behaviour, they respect him. The case of Dabir Uddin is no exception. He is a young man who follows his religion properly and serves the community by his profession receives a warm welcome by the people from the middle and upper middle classes in the society.

In many mosques, especially in my fieldwork areas in Bangladesh, I noticed that Tablighi Jamaat followers maintain and look after the mosques. In the past, only people from the upper classes used to have authority to manage the mosques. This

change is the outcome of the Tablighi Jamaat movement. Tablighi Jamaat provides an opportunity to the lower class to get involved with religious activities in the mosques.

A similar situation can be found among female Tablighi Jamaat followers. During *ta'leem*, women from different social backgrounds sit together closely. They are always told to sit closer, in their term '*gaye gaye lege bosha*' [sitting closely touching each other]. In Bangladeshi society, middle and upper class people are careful to maintain physical distance from people from lower classes, but these women ignore their class situation, at least in the *ta'leem*. Regular participation in the *ta'leem* impacts on the participants in two ways: it provides an opportunity for women from lower classes to mix and interact with the middle and upper classes, and the other is an increased willingness of women from middle and upper classes to mix with women from various backgrounds who are not necessarily from their class.

With this kind of temporary mixing in the special context of the Tablighi meeting, the lower class Tablighi Jamaat followers also gain authority to speak on Islam in society, which is a beneficial outcome of the movement. In Bangladesh, not every person has the authority to talk about Islam. The *ulama*, *Imam* and Sufi leaders are the group of people who lead in the mosques and *madrasas*. They have the authority of speaking about Islam. For Kramer and Schmidtke (2006), knowledge plays a crucial role in the creation of authority. A 25-year old student, Shamsur Rahman, one of the members of the *chilla* in which I participated in Bangladesh, spoke about the knowledge that he acquired from the activities of the Tablighi Jamaat. As he stated, 'Through this process [*dawah*], some basic *ilm* (knowledge) automatically enters to

someone's heart. That is why it becomes easy to do *amal* (prayer)'. Shamsur Rahman also reported that by doing Tablighi *dawah* he realised that he had needed to learn many aspects of Islam. For him, participation in Tablighi *dawah* motivated him to learn many aspects of Islam in order to lead an Islamic life in the society. In the past, only *ulama*, *imam*, *mufti* and Sufi leaders had the religious authority to talk about Islam, as they were the people who had the knowledge and expertise on *Qur'an* and *hadith*. However, in recent years the Tablighi Jamaat has appeared as a new movement, which also claims to have knowledge and expertise on Islam. However, most Tablighi Jamaat followers do not have formal training in Islam. They learn the fundamentals of Islam through their practical experience of the *chilla* and *dawah* tasks. This is a reason why many Islamic scholars do not approve of the Tablighi Jamaat. They argue that Tablighi Jamaat followers do not have formal training in Islam and so are in danger of misinterpreting many aspects of Islam.

Social status and authority to talk on Islam provide a sense of religious empowerment. While people from the upper social class generally dominate and hold positions in the mosque management committees, the Tablighi Jamaat provides an opportunity for many lower class people to work with these social elites in mosque management committees. At the same time, many people avoid Tablighi Jamaat followers because they perceive them as promoting 'conservative' values in the society. However, the overall attitude of the people of Bangladesh towards the Tablighi Jamaat is positive, which gives Tablighi Jamaat followers access to the dominant religious community by managing mosques, *madrasas* and other religious institutions.

### ***Community Engagement: Mosque Based Activities and Social Entrepreneurs***

By seeing class as insignificant, followers of the Tablighi Jamaat in Bangladesh, help to create a positive relationship with the religious classes in the society. This gives followers of the Tablighi Jamaat an opportunity to influence existing religious norms and values by introducing Tablighi norms and ideology in the society. There are several Tablighi followers who are influential and play an important role in this process. The Tablighi Jamaat has spread its norms and values among the people who do not follow the Tablighi Jamaat but who pray in the mosque regularly. There are many traditional religious practices in Bangladesh that the Tablighi Jamaat is particularly concerned about and followers of the Tablighi Jamaat can easily preach against these, for example, against the popular way of celebrating *shab e barat*<sup>30</sup>, the celebration of the birthday of Prophet Muhammad and the observance of *milad mahfil*<sup>31</sup>. These activities were once a significant part of the Islamic culture of Bangladesh but due to the Tablighi preaching, many people are reluctant to practice them in their traditional way. For example, people used to make special food for *shab e barat* and share it with the poor and pray in the night. However, senior leaders of the Tablighi Jamaat argue that if people spend most time of the day preparing food and become tired, how can they spend time in the night praying? For the Tablighi Jamaat, it is more beneficial to concentrate on praying in the night rather cooking in the daytime. They are also critical about *milad mahfil*, which they do not regard as an authentic Islamic practice. For them, it is an innovation of Sufi tradition and thus cannot be treated as Islamic. *Shab e borat*, *milad mahfil* and similar activities have now become less attractive among many people in the younger generation because of this campaign. This has also brought into question of the idea

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<sup>30</sup> *Shab e barat* is the 15<sup>th</sup> night of Shabaan month of Arabic calendar. It is observed as a night of salvation and divine blessings. Hence, many Muslims prefer to spend the night praying.

<sup>31</sup> *Milad mahfil* is a group activity where worshippers repetitively praise the Prophet and God.

of the ‘syncretistic’ nature of Islam in Bangladesh, where both ‘Islamic’ and ‘Bengali’ culture co-existed.

Since Tablighi Jamaat is a mosque-based movement, people can easily notice the group’s activities and many non-tablighi men occasionally take part in Tablighi meetings. Followers of the movement can easily influence people once they have access to the mosque management committee. This process has two forms of impact on the society. First, they can recruit followers from the society and secondly, they can get involved with the mosque management committee.

Through this process of getting involved with the management committee, the Tablighi Jamaat can have access to a part of the community, the regular users of the mosque. Men go to mosque to pray when they get older and have more time to spend for religion. However, there are significant numbers of young men who seriously follow Islam and pray at the mosque regularly. With such mosque-based activities, Tablighi Jamaat can access practising Muslims, who are relatively easier to convert. Tablighi Jamaat recruits most of its followers through mosques. The regular activities of the Tablighi Jamaat make them visible to people who come to the mosque regularly, so that gradually many of them begin to spend time with Tablighi Jamaat followers, if only out of curiosity.

During the fieldwork in Bangladesh, I noticed that many Tablighi Jamaat followers were in mosque management committees. Rahmat Ullah is a dedicated Tablighi Jamaat follower and the treasurer of the *Baytus Sujud Jame Masjeed* at Badda, an area of Dhaka. He is also the *ameer* of the Tablighi Jamaat in this mosque. Enamul



Haque, Monirul Islam, Shamsur Rahman, Moajjem, all of whom were the Tablighi Jamaat followers in the *chilla* that I took part in, are also involved with their local mosque management. Since the mosque does not get any support from the government or from any other organisation, the committee is responsible for mobilizing resources from the community to meet the mosque's expenses. Thus, Tablighi Jamaat followers who become members of the mosque management committee get easy access to the community by visiting people. Tablighi Jamaat followers use this opportunity to recruit new followers and establish Tablighi ideology.

Recently some Tablighi Jamaat followers started to establish institutes like hospitals and rehabilitation centres for drug addicts in Dhaka. The Tablighi Jamaat is exceptionally strong in medical colleges in Bangladesh. That could be the reason for establishing hospitals and rehabilitation facilities. At this stage, I am aware of two hospitals that have been established by a group of Tablighi Jamaat followers. According to the website of one of the hospitals, Khidmah Hospital, the hospital "was established in 2003 in Dhaka by the initiative of a group of pious Muslim investors and physicians". On the website, they clarify their objectives:

The main objectives of 'Khidmah Hospital' is to provide state of the art health services to the patients keeping in mind that Islami Shariah is properly practiced in every stage. Khidmah has some characteristics in providing health services based on Islamic *Shari'ah*. It maintains separate arrangements for the male and female patients to ensure Hijab (Parda) as

well as adequate privacy for female patients. It always tries to serve the patients with best and modern services at a reasonable rate.<sup>32</sup>

Two aspects of this statement are significant; one is the intention of maintaining Islamic *Shari'ah* through separate arrangements for male and female patients, so that they can maintain *purdah* (seclusion of women from men). The other is the hospital's intention of providing modern service to the patient at a reasonable rate. The hospital also creates employment opportunities for the Tablighi Jamaat followers. In a conversation, Aminul Islam, who is an employee of Khidmah Hospital, told me that:

This hospital was established by some Tablighi Jamaat [*tobligh er shathi der dara*] followers. Among them Moulana Omar Faruque, Moulana Zubayer<sup>33</sup> and some retired officers from the army are the shareholders of this hospital. It was established to serve the people to maintain Islamic life. It is not a business but to help people. 90% of the staff are Tablighi Jamaat followers. Moreover, the rest are sympathetic to Tablighi Jamaat and follow Islam.

Bulbul: There are many hospitals in Bangladesh. Why do you think it was necessary to establish another hospital?

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<sup>32</sup> <http://khidmahhospital.com/about.htm>, accessed 11 Sept 2014.

<sup>33</sup> Both of them are senior members of the Tablighi Jamaat in Bangladesh and are based in Kakrail mosque

Aminul Islam: It is different from all other hospitals. It maintains *purdah* very strictly, which allows our *ahleya*<sup>34</sup> to come to this hospital maintaining *purdah*. We have separate floors for men and women. We ensure an Islamic environment here. You can find Islamic hospitals but they do not maintain strict *purdah* in their hospitals but we do. We do charity and our charges are 30% cheaper than other hospitals. If anyone is unable to bear the expenses here, based on *mashoara* [meeting] we do not charge them. Poor people have their treatment free of cost over here. These are the special features.

The organisers did not mention on their website that a group of Tablighi Jamaat followers had established the hospital. Despite this, many Tablighi Jamaat followers in Bangladesh know that Tablighi Jamaat followers established it. Since most Tablighi Jamaat followers are concerned about *purdah*, this hospital attracts patients from the Tablighi community. Tablighi Jamaat followers can get their treatment from this hospital since they know that the organisers and doctors of this hospital are also Tablighi Jamaat followers. Since the cost is relatively cheaper than other hospitals, non-Tablighi patients also have higher chances to come here. Aminul Islam told me that the organisers give priority to employ people with Tablighi background. That means that Tablighi Jamaat followers have a better chance of getting a job here. The movement also has plans to establish a Medical College soon that would also create jobs for Tablighi Jamaat followers. There is also a rehabilitation centre for drug addicts established in Dhaka by Tablighi Jamaat followers. In this hospital, they carry on Tablighi *gasht* and *ta'leem* among the

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<sup>34</sup> Female members of the family are known as *ahleya*

patients as part of their rehabilitation process. With such activities, the hospital can attract new followers for Tablighi Jamaat.

This process of establishing institutions as part of the religious faith resembles Weber's analysis of the Protestant ethic where the 'calling' was the central idea that accelerated the development of capitalism. According to Weber (2003), in Protestant Asceticism they treated labour as a calling and saw it as a religious activity. In Calvinism, with the ideas of worldly Protestant Asceticism, the followers managed to engage themselves with labour and accumulate enormous capital, while they were against the spontaneous enjoyment of wealth. They treated the accumulation of wealth as a sign of God's blessing, and preferred by God. This encouraged them to avoid unlimited consumption and luxuries. In return, it helped to accumulate capital and helped in the ascent of a bourgeoisie class. For the Tablighi Jamaat, I can only find these two examples of economic activities that affect the Tablighi community predominantly in Dhaka.

This trend of developing institutions can also be found among the Jamaat-i-Islami (JI), the main Islamic political party in Bangladesh. The JI runs a number of institutions that include hospitals, clinics, banks and a private University where in most cases its own members are employed. The JI prefers to appoint new staff from the active members of the JI. These organisations also help the JI to recruit and attract followers, because followers may get a job in the future.

What does this similarity suggest in the context of the Tablighi Jamaat? Aminul Islam from Khidmah Hospital of the Tablighi Jamaat claimed strongly that the

Khidmah Hospital is different from other Islamic hospitals. According to Aminul Islam, the other Islamic hospitals do not follow proper Islamic guidelines during treatment whereas the Khidmah Hospital strictly follows them, for example seclusion between men and women during treatment in the hospital. If we look at the objectives of both the JI and the Tablighi Jamaat, it can be assumed that both groups want to establish an Islamic society. The JI wants to achieve this by assuming State power and the Tablighi Jamaat wants to achieve it through their *dawah*. In this context, even if it appears that the Tablighi Jamaat does not want to follow the JI's political strategy, the Tablighi Jamaat certainly follows the JI's approach to attracting followers by establishing various institutions.

The way Tablighi Jamaat followers perceive labour and work has similarities with Protestant Asceticism. The Calvinists considered spontaneous enjoyment of wealth as a sin. However, while the irrational use of wealth was discouraged, the rational acquisition of wealth was acceptable. The Tablighi Jamaat's ideas on labour and the professions are based on a similar understanding. In Tablighi Jamaat ideology, the followers do not have any problem with earning. They are perpetually advised by the leaders to use money in a rational way and not to use it for the purpose of enjoyment. Many Tablighi Jamaat followers follow the Prophet's profession, which was business. That is why business as a profession is common among many Tablighi Jamaat followers. They consider it as religious and it helps them to follow *dawah*, because they can manage their own time in their businesses. Rationalisation of labour is evident to both Tablighi Jamaat and Ascetic Protestants. This parallels findings for some other contemporary Islamic movements. Thus, Sukidi (2006) finds similarities between Calvinism and the Muhammadiya, a religious movement in

Indonesia. Sukidi argues that the Muhammadiyah, who developed a batik fabric industry, share some elements of the Protestant ethic and that, although Weber (2003) regards Islam as the opposite to Calvinism, Muhammadiyah can be considered as a Protestant type of movement. Sukidi (2006) finds similarities between Calvinism and the Muhammadiyah: the doctrine of scripturalism, the rejection of religious intermediaries, the disenchantment of the world, the consequences of disenchantment of the world and inner worldly asceticism. Sukidi argues that these helped the Muhammadiyah to be able to establish itself as a movement for social transformation, and the idea of ascetic means was the main strength behind this transformation.

Since, the Tablighi Jamaat does not encourage its followers to indulge in unlimited consumption, why do many of its followers engage themselves in establishing hospitals and a university? Is it purely because of the benefit to the society or the benefit of the movement attracting followers from diverse backgrounds? The answer may be both economic and social. For instance, these types of institution are one of the sectors in Bangladesh that made a lot of profit. There are nearly about 90 private universities in Bangladesh and thousands of private hospitals. That means that the institutions of the Tablighi Jamaat also help its followers to accumulate capital and invest it further. The case of the Tablighi Jamaat may have a different context in Bangladesh since there are not many organised efforts like the Muhammadiyah, but there is a potential that the Tablighi Jamaat may emerge as a Protestant-type movement in Bangladesh in the future.

### *Transformation, Communitas and Chilla*

The previous two sections suggest that most dedicated Tablighi Jamaat followers undergo a transition to a different social reality in terms of social status, empowerment and community engagement. Many dedicated followers positively accept the Tablighi mode of life. The Tablighi life is different from their previous life because they accept key Tablighi elements in their life, for example, choosing Tablighi style clothes, eating on the ground, avoiding luxuries and finally, establishing the *Sunnah* in their lives. All this may not be the case for those followers who do not take the Tablighi Jamaat seriously and cannot be classified as dedicated.

Transition to a sacred phase of life is the expected outcome for Tablighi Jamaat followers. People go out for the *dawah* journey for a longer time and many of them return with a new vision of life, which in turn changes and transforms their way of life as a whole. This is particularly true for many new followers of the Tablighi Jamaat. If we look into the following case of 25 year-old Rafiq, it is easy to understand how this can happen.

Rafiq: I was frustrated because I was not getting any chance for admission in any of the universities.

*Bulbul: you were disappointed and got motivated to join the Tablighi Jamaat, maybe you thought you would gain peace of mind....*

Rafiq: No No, I used to say my *namaz* already, but I also thought that the Tablighi Jamaat was good. They say good things. Moreover, I had become

‘bad’ and thought I had to become ‘good’. [*Tablighi jamaat ke bhalo money kortam. Era bhalo kotha boley. Ar ami asholey onek kharap hoeyey giechilam – money korlam ektu bhalo hotey hobey*]

*Bulbul: Please explain what do you mean by you had become ‘bad’?*

Rafiq: I mean, I would not say my *namaz*, used to spend much time doing *adda* [idling away time with friends, simply chatting, listening to music etc]. I was *chonnochara* [like a vagabond] scattered, nothing was disciplined.

*Bulbul: When did you first notice a change?*

Rafiq: The first time I had no change in me, second time after I went on a three days *dawah*, I noted change.... The change in my personal life that is Allah Pak sent us to this world to undertake *ebadot bondigi* [worship]. Only *ebadot* [worship], now by *ebadot* I do not mean just the *ebadots* that centres on mosques. A Muslim’s every task will be *ebadot* if each task is done according to Allah’s *hokum* [order].

*Chilla* and *dawah* bring significant changes to the life of many people like Rafiq who are beginning in the Tablighi Jamaat. Rafiq was frustrated for a number of reasons and he joined Tablighi Jamaat to get peace of mind as a last hope. Religion acted as the place of complete submission for Rafiq and, finally, it transformed his life. If we look into the following case of Moajjem Hussain, a 40 –year-old businessperson from Bangladesh, we can see a similar transformation.



One of my grandfathers, who live in the UK but visits Bangladesh frequently, motivated me to join the Tablighi Jamaat for a three-day *dawah*. I spent three days with a group in Dhaka city. However, it did not have that much influence on me, but it forced me to think about *dawah*, which led me to take part in the Tongi *ijtema* in 2004. This was the turning point for me. I listened to all the *boyans* attentively and I thought this is what I should follow. That particular *ijtema* changed me and I started to follow the *Sunnah* in every aspect of my life.

Here, it can be noticed that Moajjem's life after coming back from *dawah* is different from his previous life. His everyday life has been transformed into a 'disciplined', 'religious' and 'pious' life. This does not mean only being religious or pious; rather, it is the transformation of his entire lifestyle. Moajjem Hussain thought that his existing job might not allow him time to carry out regular *dawah* tasks. Therefore, he left the job and established his own business. He motivated his wife to follow Islam properly. He now eats together from the same plate with his wife and young daughter on the ground. Eating on the ground over a clean cloth<sup>35</sup> (*dastarkhan*) is a *Sunnah*. He also changed his dress, and wears long *payjama* and *panjabi*, which is again a part of the *Sunnah*. That means that he entered into a new phase of life and moved from one stage to another in terms of his practice and belief. During my fieldwork in the *chilla*, two followers, who attended the *chilla* for the first time in their lives, decided to complete three consecutive *chillas*. After one *chilla*, they decided to continue with the *chilla* and complete three *chillas*. They were motivated enough to adapt the Tablighi lifestyle for the rest of their lives. When I met one of

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<sup>35</sup> *Dastarkhan* is made up with cloth. The prophet had food on *dastarkhan* during dinner. Use of a *dastarkhan* is perceived as *Sunnah*

them after his two *chillas* at the Kakrail mosque in Dhaka, Shamsur Rahman, told me about his realisation:

Bulbul vai [brother], now I realised how necessary it was to continue the *chilla*. I hesitated during one *chilla* whether I could follow this or not. You know that I was not ready to carry on three *chillas*. However, my uncle, who also was a Tablighi Jamaat follower, insisted that I carry on the *chilla*, which I could not deny. Now I can feel that this is the way we should follow. Allah gave me the opportunity to be involved with the *chilla* and I have to complete it.

The last time I met him, he was concerned about his final exam that was scheduled to be held in a few months time. I met him when he came back to the Kakrail mosque after finishing two consecutive *chillas*. During that time, he told me that what Allah was doing was the best for his life. This realisation came because of the change in his lifestyle with the motivation of adopting the Tablighi lifestyle. It also transformed his way of viewing the world. It shifted the priorities of his life. Dickson, in a study of the Tablighi Jamaat in Canada, states that these new priorities are manifested in the greater times spent in the mosque, with a correspondingly greater value placed on faith and religious activity as opposed to career or monetary pursuits (2009:108). Thus, with the shift in their life project, Tablighi followers enter into a new identity, which is not limited within a single nation; rather, it transcends nationality and connects with the global Tablighi community.

When I met Shamsur Rahman after his three consecutive *chillas*, I felt there were significant transformation in his attitude, dress, and behaviour. He looked calmer and quieter than when I had seen him previously. He had stopped shaving since his first *chilla* and kept a beard permanently. I asked him, what was the role of three *chillas* in motivating you to transform your life?

It brought a fear of Allah inside me. It developed a fear in my heart. If I do not lead my life according to the guidelines of Allah, Allah would punish me in the afterlife. It helped me to create a desire and hope for life after death. I cannot explain to you clearly what happened, but I can feel changes and transformations inside. It created a thirst for *ilm* [knowledge], a thirst for learning knowledge. If you have the relevant knowledge for what you are going to do, it is easier to follow. [.....] Now I am working to introduce Tablighi Jamaat activities to our mosque in the apartment complex where I live. I have started to learn how to read *Qur'an* properly. Another change I noticed, when I go to bed, I can sleep within five minutes. This is very good.

*Bulbul: What is the reason behind it?*

Shamsur Rahman: it is nothing but the blessings of Allah. I think there is an explanation in the *kitab*<sup>36</sup>, those who pray *esha* in the night; they have better sleep at night. Something like that, but I am not sure.

A search for knowledge (*rihla*) is also evident in religiously inspired travel in Islam (Eickelman and Piscatori, 1990). The case of Shamsur Rahman refers to this search

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<sup>36</sup> The meaning of *kitab* is book. Here the respondent refers to various religious books including Tablighi books.

for knowledge and *chilla* that helped him to realise the importance of learning Islamic knowledge. The completion of three *chillas* also enlightened him with many Islamic ideas. From the *chilla*, that I took part in, Rabiul (18) and Nur Alam (22) also continued their three *chillas* with Shamsur Rahman. They also experienced a similar transformation. Rabiul kept a beard after the *chilla*. Nur Alam had kept it before joining this *chilla*. He went to a three-day *dawah* before joining the *chilla*. The three-day *dawah* brought changes in him. However, with the completion of three *chillas*, he got a stronger foundation of *dawah* and Tabligh. Belal (21) did not go on to do another *chilla* after the one we did together, but he was a regular Tablighi Jamaat follower.

Dickson (2009) emphasises the ‘shift of priorities’ of Tablighi Jamaat followers, which is important. Shamsur Rahman, Moajjem, Rafiq, Rabiul, Belal and Nur Alam have shifted their priorities towards *dawah* and started to follow Islamic guidance properly. In the past, they might have placed enormous importance on worldly benefits, for example, how to get a good job, how to maintain a family, community, or friends. Now they are happy to lead a religious life that follows the lifestyle of the Prophet. It is a transition from one state to another. During the *chilla*, followers are separated from their regular life and over the course of time; they achieved certain qualities that transform many of them to a dedicated Tablighi Jamaat follower. It is obvious that not all who take part in a *chilla* will become dedicated followers, but from my *chilla* group six beginners were convinced to take on the Tablighi mode of life.

During the 40 days (for one *chilla*) or 120 days (three *chillas*), followers experience a less hierarchical relationship and they live in an atmosphere of equality in which every follower is treated in the same way regardless of their class and status. This may involve a loss of status and class for people from higher social classes. All followers have to go through and abide by the Tablighi norms and values as discussed earlier, and these are different from those of the normal society in which they live. In Bangladesh, society reinforces the idea of class. During the *chilla*, Tablighi Jamaat followers lived, at least for forty days, in an environment that followed Tablighi norms and values and where many social norms and values of the existing society were insignificant.

That may have significant links with the idea of *communitas* suggested by Victor Turner. Turner developed the idea of *communitas* in relation to his research in an African community (Turner, 1969 and 1973). He linked up his concept with the 'liminal phase' of *rites de passage* of Arnold van Gennep (1960). Three phases are marked in rites of passage: separation, margin or limen and re-aggregation. Turner adapted the idea of liminality to develop the concept of *communitas*. For Turner (1969: 97), 'liminality implies that the high could not be high unless the low existed, and he who is high must experience what it is like to be low'. Liminality represents a negation of many of the features of preliminal social structure (Turner, 1973). Thus, this concept leads to a situation where social hierarchy and status becomes unimportant; rather, it refers to a state that is opposite of everyday social structures. That is why Turner says, '*communitas* emerges where social structure is not' (1969: 127). Later, Turner (1973) argued that *communitas* was an important feature of

pilgrimage journeys. Turner (1973) tends to see pilgrimage as 'antistructure'. He further stated:

Nevertheless, it may be said that, while the pilgrimage situation does not eliminate structural divisions, it attenuates them, removes their sting. Moreover, pilgrimage liberates the individual from the obligatory everyday constraints of status and role, defines him as an integral human being with a capacity for free choice, and within the limits of his religious orthodoxy presents for him a living model of human brotherhood and sisterhood (Turner 1973: 221).

Thus, social and cultural structures are not abolished by *communitas*. For Turner, *communitas* offers a space where individuals can behave in a different situation where social structure is absent. The Tablighi spiritual journey is not an annual activity and the followers are advised by the senior leaders to carry out various types of spiritual journey throughout the year. It imparts to them an experience of temporary communal life at regular intervals. Maybe this is one of the reasons why Tablighi Jamaat followers want to come back to participate in a *chilla* and *dawah* regularly to experience this hierarchy-free environment for a short period. It may not abolish the hierarchy absolutely but it attenuates the existing class and the notion of stratification much as Turner explains.

Sallnow (1981) assesses the relevance of Turner's ideas in group pilgrimage in the Andes. Sallnow observes that 'various parties of pilgrims from different communities maintained a ritualised distance from one another which accentuated,

rather than attenuated, the boundaries between them. At the shrine, they each maintained their separateness, and never coalesced into a single unified congregation' (1981: 176). Sallnow further states that, 'this is not to say that the notion of egalitarianism was not paramount in Andean pilgrimage. Egalitarianism, however, is not necessarily the same as *communitas*' (177). Sallnow also mentions that detachment from their local domains temporarily annulled hierarchy but this does not itself create *communitas*. For Sallnow, Andean pilgrimage is a complex mosaic of egalitarianism, nepotism and factionalism, of brotherhood, competition and conflict, which is in a way opposite to Turner's idea of *communitas*.

The less hierarchical, more egalitarian types of lifestyle during the *chilla* of the Tablighi Jamaat have some similarities to Turner's ideas of normative *communitas*. He defines normative *communitas* as '...under the influence of time, the need to mobilize and organize resources to keep the followers of a group alive and thriving and the necessity for social control among those members in pursuance of these and other collective goals..' (Turner, 1973: 194). *Communitas* offers a hierarchy-free space to act on at least during a *chilla*. It might be expected that Tablighi followers should implement their experience of hierarchy-free communal life to transform the existing society. Now the question arises, to what extent can they implement it when they come back to their respective society? For the Tablighi followers, it is nearly impossible to live a hierarchy-free life when they get back to their respective societies because in the society they do not get an opportunity to live like they did during a *chilla*. During a *chilla* or other types of *dawah* journeys, participants live in isolation both from their society and from family. This allows them to create a hierarchy-free society for a short period. When I visited some participants after the

*chilla* in Dhaka, they were living within the existing societal norms and values. That suggests that the idea of *communitas* does not exist during their everyday life. *Communitas* may emerge only during the *chilla*. Austin (1981) examines Turner's idea of *communitas* among Pentecostal religious followers in Jamaica to see whether religious *communitas* acts as a vehicle of social change or not. She argues that the believers create *communitas* during various steps of their congregation, but it does not have any impact on social change. Austin shows that social change in Jamaica does not depend on Pentecostal *communitas*. The Pentecostals repeatedly experience *communitas* only during their congregational meetings.

Now, let us turn back to the context of the Tablighi Jamaat. Tablighi followers experience *communitas* during their *chilla*, but it does not seem to have any impact on the existing society. Tablighi *communitas* like the Pentecostal *communitas* does not have any influence on social change, which supports Austin's critique on Turner's explanation on *communitas*. Since the Tablighi Jamaat wants to establish an Islamic society by transforming existing society, how does it intend to achieve this? This is an important area to examine. Since social change does not depend on the idea of *communitas*, the Tablighi Jamaat followers must have a different approach on establishing an Islamic society.

### **5.3 The Transformation of Society**

It appears that the Tablighi Jamaat only works on reinforcing religious faith at individual level, but in reality it also wants to build a society based on their spirit. Tablighi Jamaat followers believe that if it is possible to transform an individual, the transformation of the society is inevitable. Since the Tablighi Jamaat claims that they



are not interested in politics, how could they establish an Islamic society? Most Tablighi Jamaat followers answer the question about political involvement of the Tablighi Jamaat quite vaguely, or they avoid this discussion by saying they are not allowed to discuss politics. This suggests that they either want to hide their intention about politics or they have no interest in politics, but it is hard to accept that they do not have a position on politics.

### ***Politics and the Tablighi Jamaat***

The Tablighi Jamaat claims to avoid politics, the followers would rather engage in *dawah* to transform individuals into practising Muslims. Establishing an Islamic society without getting involved in politics has been criticised by many Islamic movements and they do not agree with the approach of the Tablighi Jamaat. Although Tablighi Jamaat does not speak publicly about politics, it does not mean that they do not have any political agenda.

Sikand (2002 and 2006) has already contested the alleged absence of a political ideology in the Tablighi Jamaat. Sikand (2006) argues that the Tablighi Jamaat movement does have a political vision and that its views on politics have gradually changed over the time. He also states that the Tablighi Jamaat adapted various political roles in order to survive and expand. Survival may be crucial for the movement in India where Muslims are the minority, but in Bangladesh, the Tablighi Jamaat always receives the support of the State, especially during the annual *ijtema*. He also points out that many government officials in some Muslim countries become the followers of the Tablighi Jamaat and they gradually promote Islamisation in the State structure. In Bangladesh, many Tablighi followers are observed among the

armed forces (Sikand, 2006). It might be difficult to say to what extent these government officials have an impact on state policies. In the context of Bangladesh, except for the Jamaat-i-Islami (JI), the Islamic political parties do not have a strong influence on state power and democracy. The only notable Islamic political party is the JI, which has had a significant influence on politics in Bangladesh. The leader of Jamaat-i-Islami, Ghulam Azam (1922- ) began his journey in Islamic movements with the Tablighi Jamaat and later on joined the Jamaat-i-Islami. These two Islamic movements in Bangladesh do not see each other as *sahih* (authentic) Islamic movements. Sikand also mentions that the Tablighi Jamaat provides a fertile ground for many Islamist movements to take root, although Sikand's argument does not have much empirical evidence to substantiate his claims. In this context, Metcalf observes that:

Some observers and political figures claim that the movement [Tablighi Jamaat] in fact is covertly political; others, that it is a first stage on the way to militancy. This argument is particularly made in Pakistan since the majority of Tablighi participants there belong to the frontier province adjoining Afghanistan (Metcalf, 2002: 17).

Here, Islamists engage them with the idea of *jihad* to establish an Islamic state. For the Tablighi Jamaat, they define many of their activities as *jihad* but their definition of *jihad* is different to other types of *jihad*. If we consider *jihad* as a political activity, the Tablighi Jamaat is obviously political. We need to be cautious here, however, because according to the Tablighi Jamaat, they never promote or encourage militant *jihad* that involves war. The Tablighi Jamaat defines *jihad* in a different way. In this

context, Metcalf notes that ‘Participants in *tablighi* activities define their efforts as *jihad*.’ (Metcalf, 2002: 11). She goes on to explain, however, that there are two kinds of *jihad*; one which emphasises personal purification and the other which is warfare. Both kinds aim at transcending the nation-state towards a global *umma* But Tablighi *jihad* refers to personal purification not the warfare (Metcalf, 2002: 11).

For the Tablighi Jamaat, *jihad* is to control the mind or *nafs* from wrongdoing. This is what Metcalf describes as personal purification. Personal purification is linked with the entire movement. In other words, it is the core of the Tablighi movement. By achieving personal purification, followers of the Tablighi Jamaat want to achieve spiritual closeness to Allah. How this spiritual purification is linked with contemporary notion of politics is an important issue that would help to understand the Tablighi Jamaat as an Islamic movement. However, there is an impression among followers of the Tablighi Jamaat that the non-political theme is stronger with the Tablighi Jamaat in Bangladesh.

### ***Heavens Above and the Grave Below***

It is a popular idea among Tablighi Jamaat followers that they are not interested in worldly affairs, rather they are interested in ‘heavens above and the grave below’ (*matir nicher ebong akasher uporer bishoy*). This is one of the issues that many Islamist groups and political parties criticize. For example, in Bangladesh, the Jamaat-i-Islami criticizes Tablighi Jamaat because of its reluctance to become involved in political issues. During my *chilla* in Bangladesh, our team stayed in a mosque that was dominated by Jamaat-i-Islami members. The JI was regularly doing

*Qur'anic Tafsir*<sup>37</sup> in the mosque after *esha* prayer every week, something that the Tablighi Jamaat group did not know before coming to the mosque. The Tablighi Jamaat had arranged their programme for the time when Jamaat-i-Islami followers were scheduled to do their *tafsir*. When the Tablighi Jamaat came to know of the *tafsir* of the Jamaat-i-Islami, I saw an anxiety in the team and the Tablighi Jamaat group postponed their evening activities. After their *tafsir*, I spoke to one of the members of the Jamaat-i-Islami to find out about their activities in the area and he gave me some leaflets. Tablighi Jamaat followers did not appreciate my doing this and they told me not to contact them in the future because they were not a proper Islamic group in the Tablighi view. When they left, the *ameer* of the Tablighi Jamaat group started to criticize the JI's activities to the *chilla* members inside the mosque. He stated:

The aims of the Jamaat-i-Islami are to stop the *kawmi madrasa* and *dawah* of the Tablighi Jamaat. If they [the Jamaat-i-Islami] obtain State power, they would stop these two, because whatever is *haq* [righteous] they are against it. Again I think, they are not a proper Islamic party, they can do anything to achieve State power. Economically they are stronger than any other political party in Bangladesh.

This statement shows how the Tablighi Jamaat views the Jamaat-i-Islami. The Tablighi Jamaat has other criticisms of the JI, but at the same time, they do not necessarily exclude their own involvement in politics at some future date. One of the members of the *chilla* said that, 'it is not possible to succeed without individual

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<sup>37</sup> Tafsir means translation and explanation. *Qur'anic tafsir* means translation from the *Qur'an*.

spiritual development. If we [the Tablighi Jamaat] achieve this in the future and if it is necessary, we [the Tablighi Jamaat] will shift our priority'. Here, with the phrase 'shift our priority' he meant that the Tablighi Jamaat might get involved in politics when necessary. This explicitly shows the Tablighi long-term vision about politics. I will now describe two other instances that suggest that the Tablighi Jamaat is not reluctant about politics; rather, the movement has a specific political agenda.

### *Two Cases*

During my entire fieldwork with the Tablighi Jamaat, the political implications of the movement puzzled me because many Tablighi Jamaat followers did not feel comfortable talking about politics. One Tablighi Jamaat follower told me that the Tablighi Jamaat receives this question frequently, thus, they have a clear and logical explanation about politics. When I finished my *chilla* in Bangladesh, I met Iqbal Hossain at Dhaka, who was a member of the *chilla* that I participated in, to discuss the relationship between politics and Tablighi.

When I asked Iqbal about the role of Tablighi Jamaat in politics, Iqbal told me:

I also thought that you might have some questions about this. The Tablighi Jamaat is not out of politics, it is not like that. In the time of the Prophet, politics and *dawah* prevailed at the same time but in a different way. For example, they worked based on priority [...] When they felt the importance of *dawah* they did *dawah*. When they felt that they could not avoid war, they did *jihad* [holy war]. For them, *iman* [faith] was the most important factor. *Iman* was their main strength that enabled them to go to

*jihad*. When they got back from *jihad*, they felt that the biggest *jihad* was to control their mind. It is extremely difficult to control our mind (*nafs*) that is why *jihad* against the mind is always treated as the biggest *jihad*. They [the Prophet and his companions] prioritized their plan based on existing reality. Politics was part of the process. Islam was not spread with the sword. Islam expanded with the influence of *akhlak* [manners, morals]. If you see now, we do not have the strength of our faith like the Prophet and his companions. That is why the Tablighi Jamaat does not speak publicly about politics. It would not bring any solutions if we shout about politics. Can politics provide all solutions for us these days? We have to work hard in silence. When we would realise that this is the right time, we would have to express it in the public. To follow Islam means to be involved with politics. It is the politics of getting *akhiraat* [the Day of Judgment], *jannath* [paradise], but not for this world. Politics has to be there, but the leaders from the headquarters do not encourage discussing it with the general people [*eta am jonothar kache bola nishedh kora hoyeche*]. There is a risk of misinterpretation, which is why it is forbidden to discuss it in public.

The Tablighi Jamaat is active all over the world in the same way. If it was active only in specific regions like Bangladesh, India and Pakistan, we could have seen the result. Since it is active all over the world, it is taking time. Nevertheless, it will happen some time in the future. The concept of politics in Tablighi Jamaat can only be realised if someone does research about it. There are many political parties, are they all successful? There are many Islamic political parties among them. They are not right. I was

involved with the Chatro Shibir [a student organisation of the Jamaat-i-Islami Bangladesh] in my student life. Gradually I realised that they have many misconceptions within their philosophy. I then, debated with both Tablighi Jamaat followers and the Jamaat-i-Islami. Finally, I realised that the Tablighi Jamaat is the right way of doing *dawah* and creating an Islamic movement.

Iqbal had initial exposure to the Jamaat-i-Islami and finally, he realised that it was not the right way of practising Islam and he then proceeded to the Tablighi Jamaat. Sikand (2006) mentions many notable leaders of Islamic militant groups who had their initial exposure in the Tablighi Jamaat and he sees this as one of the political implications of the Tablighi Jamaat. Many Tablighi Jamaat followers including Iqbal told me that the Tablighi Jamaat is an authentic Islamic movement that follows the directions of Allah and *Sunnah*. Iqbal finds it useful, and his understanding about the politics of the Tablighi Jamaat is that it does not aim to force people to establish an Islamic state. It primarily wants to establish Islam in every aspect of life. A long-term political vision of the Tablighi Jamaat is evident from Iqbal's analysis, but obviously, Tablighi Jamaat does not consider this as its immediate goal. Iqbal also mentions that the Tablighi Jamaat discourages discussing politics publicly because it may create confusion among its followers. In this context, Mahmudul Hasan, a dedicated Tablighi Jamaat follower and a government official in Bangladesh, provides an explanation about politics and Tablighi Jamaat that clarifies some of the issues, such as the process of establishing an Islamic society. In his discussion, he told me:

I want to establish Islamic laws in the society, but what would be the process to achieve it? Does this process begin with acquiring State power? Alternatively, would everything come automatically if we keep doing our *dawah*? These contexts have different implications. One is, once I get the power, I would establish Islamic laws. Another is, we have to work to establish Islamic rules in the world. Thirdly, I do not have to put any effort in achieving state power. I will propagate the messages of Islam in society to please Allah. As a result of this effort, if we get the power that is fine, if not, there is nothing to worry about it. When such an environment would prevail in society, people would not have to queue for the leadership; rather, the people would make someone a true leader. In the contemporary time, people want leadership and they get it following the democratic process. ...In Islam, the process is different. Prophet Muhammad did not get leadership in such way. Abu Bakar [one of the early companions of the Prophet] did not beg for the vote. People wanted him to be the leader without any vote. ...When we go to *jamaat* [the *dawah* journey], no one wants to be the *ameer*, but when the senior leaders requests that someone be an *ameer*, people accept it. This is the process of getting responsibilities and this is the *sahih* Islamic *tariqah* [religious order].

*Bulbul: In that case, how do you explain the process of the Caliphate<sup>38</sup> in the early Islamic civilisation?*

Mahmudul Hasan:

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<sup>38</sup> *Caliphate* is a concept that refers to the early Islamic rule in Arabia that was started by Prophet Muhammad.



The Prophet did not do *dawah* to achieve the *Caliphate*. When people demanded the leadership of the state, they chose him. This is the difference, and it will not match with the process of any other parties in the world.

*Bulbul: Why is the Tablighi Jamaat known as a 'non-political' movement?*

Mahmudul Hasan:

If you say 'non-political', that highlights politics. Politics is a common phenomenon and people understand it. When you say 'non-political', it means Tablighi Jamaat is out of politics and Tablighi Jamaat is less important. It implicitly means inactive or not conscious, but this is not the case. This [the Tablighi Jamaat] is a movement that is superior to any political movement. The Tablighi Jamaat is a positive movement and everything we need would come from this movement [...] the purpose of our movement is to establish the directions of Allah and the guidelines of the Prophet in every aspect of life. When you achieve this, reality would guide you, would you be in power or not [...]. This is a complete code of life.

Mahmudul Hasan aims to establish Islamic laws and rules in society, but does not mention getting state power. State power is a secondary element for him like many other Tablighi Jamaat followers. State power would come in an autonomous way if people work hard on *dawah* and implement the commandments of Islam in their lives. For him, state power may come or may not. Either way is acceptable for him and he would not worry about it. He also says about the process of leadership, that they follow a similar process that the Prophet did in his time. The way Tablighi Jamaat maintains leadership is a top down process. They never follow the

democratic process of choosing a leader. If it is necessary to assume the leadership, it has to come from the higher authority of the Tablighi Jamaat.

Both Iqbal and Hasan explicitly explain the role of the Tablighi Jamaat in politics in a way that implies that they are conscious about politics but not working for it directly at the moment. The primary concern is to establish Islam in every sphere in society and to follow Islam as a complete code of life. By following this process, Islam would become established in the State structure. That is the politics for the Tablighi Jamaat. I mentioned earlier that individual spiritual purification is the key area that the Tablighi Jamaat works on, and by achieving individual purification, the Tablighi Jamaat intends to transform the majority of the population to bring about an Islamic society.

It has already been mentioned that the claim of being an apolitical movement was contested by Sikand (2002 and 2006), and my own field data shows that the idea of politics is not insignificant for the Tablighi Jamaat in Bangladesh. The Tablighi Jamaat may avoid direct involvement in contemporary politics, but since it is actively working to create an Islamic society on earth, it undoubtedly has a long-term political vision. This was evident in the 2013 demonstrations in Bangladesh by the Hefazot-e-Islam<sup>39</sup> movement, which were unofficially supported by the Tablighi Jamaat. These demonstrations were led by a Deoband trained cleric, Ahmad Shafi, who is the principal of a renowned *madrasa* in Chittagong (a district situated in south-eastern part of Bangladesh) named Al-Jamiatul Ahlia Darul Ulum Muinul Islam Bangladesh (popularly known as Hathazari Madrasa). Many followers of the

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<sup>39</sup> Also known as Hifazat-e-Islam

Tablighi Jamaat supported Hefazot-e-Islam by their active participation in the demonstration. Many Tablighi Jamaat followers provided food and drinks during the demonstration.

Although it is evident that the Tablighi Jamaat has a long-term political vision, Islamic political parties for example, the JI and the Islamic Movement Bangladesh known as Islami Andolan Bangladesh, criticize the Tablighi Jamaat. They believe that the Tablighi Jamaat is not working to promote an Islamic political movement. In the same way Sufi cults have a similar assumption about the Tablighi Jamaat, for instance the *pir* of Rajarbag Shareef is a fierce critic of the Tablighi Jamaat because he argues that the Tablighi Jamaat never engages itself with contemporary politics nor does it have any opinion on contemporary political situation of the country. If the Tablighi Jamaat were to present itself as a movement to encourage Islamic political ideology, many followers of the Tablighi Jamaat would leave the movement. Many men join the movement because of the apolitical image of the Tablighi Jamaat. In addition, if the movement were to change in this way, the people and the government of Bangladesh may see the Tablighi Jamaat as suspicious because Islamic politics is not appreciated in the country and many people are against religion-based politics in Bangladesh. There was huge public support during the Awami League government in 2013 for banning the Jamaat-i-Islami as an Islamic political party, due to its controversial role during the liberation war of Bangladesh in 1971.

From this perspective, both apolitical and political ideologies are problematic for the Tablighi Jamaat. Thus, deliberate withdrawal from worldly affairs becomes a solution for the Tablighi Jamaat, and it appears to be an effective way for them to

avoid controversy about whether they are a political or an apolitical movement in the contemporary context.

#### **5.4 Conclusion**

The leaders of the Tablighi Jamaat direct that one should carry out a *chilla* at least once a year and three *chillas* in a lifetime. Dedicated Tablighi Jamaat followers always try to follow this instruction. The followers of the Tablighi Jamaat see the *chilla* as the example of a longer version of the *dawah* where they can learn *dawah* in the hope of reinforcing faith and transforming the society to an Islamic society. It appears that the Tablighi Jamaat only focuses on the individual, but in reality, it has various impacts on both the individual and the society. My field data suggests that participation in the *dawahs* and *chillas* of the Tablighi Jamaat is linked with individual and societal transformation. In the first place, the *chilla* acts as a vehicle to transform many beginners to be dedicated Tablighi Jamaat followers and then all dedicated followers work on establishing an Islamic society. My field data also suggests that participation in a *chilla* helps many lower class men to gain social status. By engaging in various religious activities in mosques and the community, the followers from various classes carry out *dawah* among Muslims. Since the Tablighi Jamaat claims to encourage reducing the social gap between their members, participants experience a less hierarchical atmosphere during *dawah* journey and mosque based activities of the Tablighi Jamaat.

Participants from upper classes may feel the loss of status while they mix with men from lower classes during *chilla*, and it is implied that they go through the stage of liminality where they all have similar status. At this stage of the *dawah* journey,

followers may experience *communitas* that may not exist when the followers get back to their respective areas. It is unclear how far Turner saw *communitas* as a vehicle of longer-term social change, but this clearly is not the context of the Tablighi Jamaat. *Communitas* is a temporary experience and does not act as the vehicle of social change for Tablighi followers. The Tablighi Jamaat wants to transform the society by establishing Islamic norms and values in their own lives with a long-term political vision. This denies the claim of the Tablighi Jamaat to be an apolitical movement and the Tablighi Jamaat may emerge as a dominant political force in the future.

The Tablighi Jamaat concentrates on establishing various institutions that directly benefit the followers of the Tablighi Jamaat in many ways. The Khidmah hospital claims to provide an Islamic environment for the Tablighi followers and it creates employment opportunity for the followers. This institution helps to attract followers indirectly by providing service. The movement has plans to establish some other institutions. The establishment of this kind of institution by political parties is not new in Bangladesh. Almost all the major political parties, including the JI, have their institutions (banks, hospitals, universities and others) where they accommodate their followers, and the Tablighi Jamaat is following the same approach at least to some extent. This is one of the ways that the Tablighi Jamaat wants to establish an Islamic society, which is not so very different from mainstream political parties in Bangladesh.

If people acquire a sense of achieving social status by participating in Tablighi *dawah*, this may have an impact among other Muslims in the society. I suggest that

this acts as one of the attractions to the Tablighi Jamaat. Attaining social status, the experience of participating in a hierarchy-free and less stratified environment during *dawah* journeys, and the movements claims of being apolitical all contribute in promoting a positive image of the Tablighi Jamaat that helps to attract new followers and transform them to living a Tablighi life for the rest of their lives.

In Chapter Five, I have explained something of what belonging to the Tablighi Jamaat means in the everyday lives of Tablighi followers. In the next chapter; Chapter Six, I turn to look at the largest and most spectacular of all Tablighi events, the annual (now twice-annual) *Biswa Ijtema* at Tongi, near Dhaka. This, as I have already mentioned, is the second largest regular gathering of Muslims in the world, and it is certainly a major event in the lives of those who attend it. What does the *ijtema* mean to Tablighi Jamaat followers?

## Chapter Six

### *Bishwa Ijtema* as a New Form of Islamic Pilgrimage

#### 6.1 Introduction

The subject of Chapter Six is the *Bishwa Ijtema* at Tongi, an annual three days congregation of the Tablighi Jamaat that attracts millions of people every year from all over the world. The news media and followers of the Tablighi Jamaat in Bangladesh claimed that the *ijtema* at Tongi in 2010 attracted about five million participants from all over the country, along with thirty thousand foreigners. If this figure is realistic, the Tongi *ijtema* is the largest international Muslim gathering outside the *hajj*. With its huge number of participants, the *ijtema* has already become a symbol of the Tablighi Jamaat movement. Although the *ijtema* is purely a Tablighi gathering, it also has a strong appeal to non-Tablighi Muslims in Bangladesh. This is one of the reasons why a huge number of participants join the *ijtema* every year. The participants expect to receive blessings and mercy from God from attending the *ijtema*.

The only obligatory pilgrimage in Islam is the *hajj*. Muslims are expected to perform the *hajj* at some point in their lives to fulfil the commandment of God. *Hajj* is obligatory for all those who have both physical and financial ability to travel to Mecca. Despite the financial and physical hardship involved, most Muslims intend to perform *hajj* because it is the central pilgrimage in Islam. In contrast, with *hajj*, attending the *ijtema* is not obligatory for Muslims. However, whilst attending the *ijtema* is a voluntary religious activity, it has become a popular event among Muslims across the world.

There are other Islamic forms of voluntary pilgrimage besides *hajj*. In Bangladesh and elsewhere in South Asia, the idea of Muslim pilgrimage is generally associated with Sufi saints. The generic term for Sufi saints in Bangladesh is *pir*, a Persian word that means elderly person and saints. The *pir* is also considered as a teacher. *Pirs* are believed to possess spiritual powers and to be a source of miracles. Therefore, many disciples visit their *pirs* for many pragmatic reasons, for instances, healing, good luck or to have divine blessings. Due to these types of miracles and spiritual powers, the graveside shrines (*mazar*) and tombs of Sufi leaders have become recognised as pilgrimage sites in many parts of Bangladesh. Sufi orders generally hold *urs* or shrine festivals on an annual basis to commemorate the death anniversary of the founding saints of each shrine. Being a Sufi means many different things – the *urs* represents one kind of Sufism, the personal pietism of the *pir*-disciple link is another kind. Here, I mostly concentrate only on the *urs* as an expression of Sufism in Bangladesh, since the *urs* is the central congregation of Sufis in Bangladesh. Attending an *urs* is a popular and traditional form of pilgrimage that is observed in many places in Bangladesh. The devotees treat the place of the *urs* as a sacred place.

In comparison to the *urs* and the *hajj*, the *ijtema* is a relatively recent addition to Islam. The idea of the *ijtema* has become popular because of the annual congregation of the Tablighi Jamaat, although *ijtema* is not purely a Tablighi concept. Generally, any mass congregation in Islam is recognised as an *ijtema*. However, *ijtema* as a concept has become a symbol of the Tablighi Jamaat. The Tablighi Jamaat organises an *ijtema* in every country in which it operates. Tongi is the permanent site of the annual *ijtema* in Bangladesh, and the Tongi *ijtema* has become a popular destination



for Muslims in Bangladesh and beyond. The followers of the Tablighi Jamaat do not consider the *ijtema* as a pilgrimage. The Tablighi Jamaat describes the *ijtema* as an essential Tablighi annual congregation where they can discuss many aspects of Islam. Tablighi Jamaat followers consider the *ijtema* as an event that helps them to achieve spiritual closeness with God without the guidance of a Sufi master or holy men. The open and flexible accessibility of the *ijtema* attract participants from non-Tablighi background from all over Bangladesh. Through a comparative discussion on the *ijtema*, the *urs* and the *hajj*, this chapter shows that the *ijtema* has become a new pilgrimage site among the Muslims in Bangladesh and, with its global solidarity, beyond. In addition, the popularity and global participation in the *Biswa Ijtema* helps to create a popular image of the Tablighi Jamaat that attracts many Muslims to get involved in the movement.

## **6.2 The *Ijtema* of the Tablighi Jamaat**

It has been mentioned earlier that Islam encourages certain types of travel. Historically the notion of travel is linked with two Islamic events. One is the *hajj*, the pilgrimage to Mecca. Another is the *hijra*, the migration of the Prophet and his companions from Mecca to Medina in 622 (Eickelman and Piscatori, 1990). Both events include a journey. The Tablighi Jamaat effectively uses the concept of *hijra* and travel in their preaching journey.

Masud (2000b) considers Tablighi travel comparable with the concept of *hijra*. He states:

It is comparable with the concept of Hijra, both in the sense of migration and withdrawal. In these senses, it is travel within one's self. One temporarily migrates from *dunyā* (worldly pursuits) to *dīn* (religious concerns), a favourite dichotomy among Tablighīs. It is migration from corruption to purity, withdrawing from worldly attachments to the Path of God (2000b: xvi).

Tablighi followers applied the concept of *hijra* to legitimize the idea of travel for their *dawah*. The idea of *hijra* is important for the Tablighi Jamaat for two reasons. The first is, *hijra* was one of the consequences of *dawah* initiatives of the Prophet. The Prophet had to travel to Medina, leaving Mecca, when the Meccans did not accept Islam. Thus, the Tablighi Jamaat links its *dawah* effort with this event and they hold that they need to travel from one place to another to carry out *dawah* since the Prophet had to travel for the sake of *dawah*. *Dawah* then symbolically refers to the idea of *hijra*. The second is that by carrying out a preaching journey, Tablighi followers want to purify themselves temporarily by withdrawing from worldly affairs. They symbolically migrate from one state to another. Tablighi travel involves both a preaching journey and a pilgrimage. Many followers organise their *dawah* journey to end with the *ijtema* and many start their *dawah* journey from the *ijtema*. The idea of Tablighi preaching was discussed in the previous chapter and this chapter focuses on the *ijtema* as an example of a new pilgrimage among Muslims.

The *Ijtema* was introduced in the Tablighi Jamaat soon after the movement was initiated. Moulana Abul Hasan Ali Nadvi mentions in the biography of Moulana Ilyas that, in the 1930s, the Tablighi Jamaat regularly organised an annual *ijtema* at

Mewat and they had a fixed location for the *ijtema*. Moulana Ilyas attended these *ijtemas* and the biggest *ijtema* in his lifetime was held at Nuh in the district of Gourgano, from 28th to 30th November in 1941 (Nadvi, 2006). According to Nadvi (2006), that was a remarkable *ijtema*. There were about twenty-five thousand participants in that *ijtema*. The Tablighi Jamaat was also able to send many groups (*jamaats*) to various parts in India from this *ijtema*. In April 1943, they sent a group (*jamaat*) to Karachi in Pakistan.

Sikand (2002) provides a description of the historical development of the Tablighi Jamaat in Bangladesh. According to Sikand, the first *ijtema* held in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) was in 1954 in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh. Later that year, they organised another *ijtema* in Khulna, a south-west district in Bangladesh. During this time, the movement in Bangladesh was based at the Lalbagh Shahi Mosque in Dhaka. The mosque was not large enough for the increasing number of followers. Therefore, they had to move in to the current location at Kakrail. In 1954, there were about fifteen to twenty thousand participants who took part in the first *ijtema* in East Pakistan. By 1965, the Kakrail mosque could not accommodate the huge number of participants for the *ijtema*. Therefore, they began to look for a new place for the *ijtema*. In 1966, they shifted the venue to Tongi near Dhaka. In 2011, the organisers decided to divide the annual *ijtema* into two parts so that more people could attend the *ijtema* every year.

### **6.3 The *Bishwa Ijtema* in 2009 and 2010**

The annual Tablighi *ijtema* in Bangladesh is known as the *Bishwa Ijtema* (world congregation). I attended this *ijtema* for the first time when I was in college in 1995.

Since my childhood, I had noticed that many people were eager to participate in the final day supplication and invocation (*akheri munajaat*) in the hope of getting divine blessings and mercy from God. Until now, it is a popular idea among many Muslims in Bangladesh that participation in the *ijtema* can help them to receive mercy from God. From a similar perception, one of my friends managed to motivate me to spend two days and a night in *ijtema*. That was my first experience with the Tablighi Jamaat. Since then, many followers of the Tablighi Jamaat tried to motivate me to participate in an *ijtema* and go out for a *dawah* journey, but I never felt any necessity to respond to their calling.



The Tongi *ijtema* by the bank of the river Turag (Photo was taken by the researcher)

As part of this research on the Tablighi Jamaat, I participated in the *ijtema* again, in 2009 and 2010. Each time I attended the *ijtema* for my research, it reminded me of

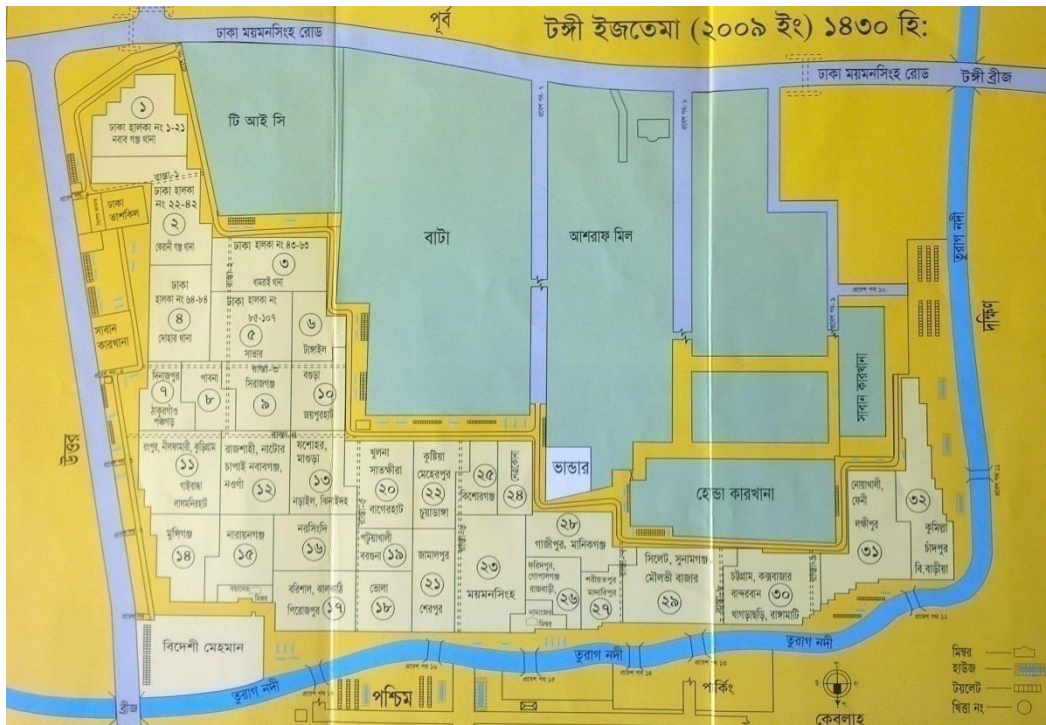
my first visit to the *ijtema*. My first visit was religiously inspired, but this time it was for my research. I noticed some changes in the *ijtema*; the size of the congregation had nearly doubled, and international participants were increased significantly. At the same time, I noticed that many people had started their businesses near the *ijtema* to attract customers from the Tablighi Jamaat. Many owners of these businesses were Tablighi Jamaat followers. I found a similar atmosphere in the *urs* in Bangladesh. Due to the Sufi affiliation of my father, I used to attend an annual *urs* with my father in Manikganj when I was a teenager. In the *urs*, many people maximised the opportunity to profit from their small businesses. Later on, I attended another *urs* of the *Baul Samrat* (the king of baul) Rashid Sarker for my graduate dissertation in Bangladesh. He was a *baul* singer. He was also well known as a *pir* and his followers extended beyond Bangladesh. I noticed similar festive fairs in the *urs* of *Baul Samrat* Rashid Sarker. A similar festive atmosphere can also be found in the shrine of Hazrat Shahjalal in Sylhet. The main products for sale at the shops near the *ijtema* were the Tablighi books, Tablighi clothing, scarves, mobile luggage with beddings suitable for a *dawah* journey, *meswak*<sup>40</sup>, warm clothes etc.

I participated in the *ijtema* with my friend Dr. Mashiur Rahman in January 2009. I have already mentioned that Mashiur is a medical doctor and a dedicated Tablighi Jamaat follower. I called him on the 29<sup>th</sup> of January 2009 to check if he was going to join in the *ijtema*. He told me to meet him at 9:00 am on 30<sup>th</sup> of January in his house. Around 9:30 am, we started from his house. We met another dedicated Tablighi Jamaat follower on the way to Tongi.

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<sup>40</sup> A type of toothbrush made of branch or the root of certain trees that the Tablighi Jamaat followers believe is a *Sunnah*.

Tongi was not far from where I stayed in Dhaka. It was supposed to take about an hour to reach Tongi, but it was a very busy day because of the *ijtema*. In addition, it was Friday, and many people were going to attend the *jummah* prayer of Friday in the *ijtema*. When we reached Uttara near Tongi by bus, we were stuck in huge traffic. Mashiur decided to walk because the bus could not move forward at all. We were not the only group who decided to walk towards the *ijtema*. It was very difficult to walk because of the huge crowd. Mashiur kept his one hand up while walking to make it easier for us to follow him in the crowd. After nearly two hours battling with the crowd, we reached the frontline of the *ijtema*. The *ijtema* organiser divided the whole area into 33 sections. Each section was called a *khitta*. Each *khitta* was subdivided into thousands of pillar (*khuti*) numbers. If someone knows the *khitta* and *khuti* number, he can find any group in the *ijtema*. Our *khuti* number was 6505. There were doorkeepers inside the massive tent at regular intervals. They helped to maintain discipline and managed the participants. They kept telling everyone to keep right and do *dhikir* while walking. With the assistance of some volunteers, we managed to find our group in the *ijtema*.



Map of *ijtema* ground, Tongi 2009

I found Mohammad Yasin here with whom I had previously carried out a three-day *dawah* journey. I asked him; how do they manage a huge gathering in *ijtema*? According to Yasin, the Tablighi Jamaat divided the urban areas of Dhaka city into one hundred forty sections; each section was known as a *halka*. The first seventy-three sections were responsible for looking after the Kakrail mosque, the national headquarter of the Tablighi Jamaat in Bangladesh. The followers from the rest of the sections were primarily responsible for the management of the *ijtema*, but any follower of the Tablighi Jamaat can offer to help to organise the *ijtema* through their volunteer labour. Since there was no permanent building or tent at Tongi for the *ijtema*, it needed a huge number of volunteers to set up tents, toilets, and places of ablution and bathing. The organisers developed their own way of managing the huge crowd. They were disciplined not only in organising the crowd but also in dividing the entire place into sections by the name of *khitta* and *khuti* that helped followers to

find their group in the *ijtema*. They have a division of labour to maintain the workload of Kakrail and the *ijtema* that is voluntary.

Since my first visit, the government of Bangladesh had built some permanent toilets on the *ijtema* ground. When I first attended *ijtema* in the 1995, there were no such permanent sanitary latrines available. Therefore, the Tablighi Jamaat volunteers had to build temporary toilets for the period of the *ijtema*. The government provides the water supply every year. Followers from all over the country give their labour to set up everything for the *ijtema* every year. Many followers join in the work force every weekend before the *ijtema*. Many followers stay in the ground for a week or so to help the organisers. The Tablighi Jamaat continues to receive governmental support from its early days in East Pakistan (Now Bangladesh) in the 1960s. Perhaps the governmental support has become one of the reasons why the *ijtema* of the Tablighi Jamaat is so successful in Bangladesh. The Tablighi Jamaat managed to receive the attention of the government of Bangladesh soon after the liberation war and it continues its regular efforts with confidence in the newly born country. Almost all the leaders of the major political parties and the Prime Minister of Bangladesh visit the shrines of Shahjalal and Shahparan, while former President Hussain Mohammad Ershad visits the *Atroschi pir* regularly. They all also attend the *ijtema* every year. Participation in these popular religious events is not merely a religious act; it has a long-term impact within the State structure. For example, in the 1980s, Hussain Mohammad Ershad declared Islam as the state religion with an amendment of the constitution of Bangladesh. This was not an isolated move by the President of Bangladesh. It had several reasons: one was to legitimise his regime by manipulating Islam. Since he was known as an autocratic President, he always wanted to win a



soft spot in the hearts of the people of Bangladesh, and finally he managed to form a political party that is still active in Bangladesh with some popularity. He was considered to be influenced by the *pir* of Atroshi to declare Islam as the state religion, a declaration, which has not yet been changed.

I knew most participants of my group because I had gone on a three-day preaching journey with many of them. It was an opportunity for me to meet them again and to build up a relationship that later considerably helped me to carry out the fieldwork. I met some Tablighi Jamaat followers in this group who were not regular with *dawah* in their local mosque, but had joined in the *ijtema* in the hope of eternal benefit. We did not have much time before the *jummah* (Friday prayer). After 5-10 minutes, we had to prepare ourselves for the *jummah* prayer. After the *jummah* prayer, we had lunch. I met Engineer Jafar Iqbal after lunch. I had met him for the first time on a three-day *dawah* journey. He had joined in the Tablighi Jamaat while he was a final year student of engineering. He attended a three-day *dawah* journey in the beginning. Finally, he decided to carry out a *chilla* for forty days that converted him to a Tablighi follower.

Jafar Iqbal thought that I was involved with the Tablighi Jamaat for my own religious benefit. He encouraged me by saying, 'You are doing a great job by getting involved with the Tablighi Jamaat. When you get time, try to keep this Tablighi work on'. At this point, I explained to him that it was for my research. Then he tried to motivate me to carry out preaching for rest of my life. It was the time of the afternoon sermon and I found many Tablighi followers closed their eyes while sermon was being said. Why did they close their eyes? I asked Jafar Iqbal. He told

me that ‘when I concentrate on the *boyan*, I feel isolated from the mundane world. I feel better during that time. It helps me to think about life in the hereafter and to concentrate on spiritual matters’. Many people criticise this practice, saying that in the *boyan* most people sleep and lose concentration. Some other Tablighi Jamaat followers told me that after joining the Tablighi Jamaat, they never had a problem with sleeping. At the time of the *boyan* in the *ijtema*, I noticed many people were keeping their eyes closed while listening to the *boyan*. I noticed this in every Tablighi *boyan* that I participated.

The *boyan* is an essential element of both the preaching journey and the *ijtema* of the Tablighi Jamaat. During the *ijtema*, participants do not carry out *gasht*, but they concentrate on the *boyan* after praying. Global and national leaders of the Tablighi Jamaat share their thoughts and experiences in the *boyan*. Many participants attend the *ijtema* only to listen to the religious speeches of the global leaders of the Tablighi Jamaat. In every *ijtema*, Tablighi Jamaat leaders from India and Pakistan deliver speeches. They deliver speeches in their own languages and interpreters simultaneously translate them into Bengali, English, and Arabic for the audience. Listening to the *boyan* is like meditation for many Tablighi Jamaat followers. Repeated listening to the *boyan* helps them to be passionate and sympathetic about Tablighi Jamaat. They begin the *boyan* after the *fazr* prayer each morning and continue until the evening prayer. They take breaks in between for prayers, breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

In the *boyan*, the speakers also emphasize the importance of engaging women in the Tablighi movement. In Bangladesh, women do not have the same access to the

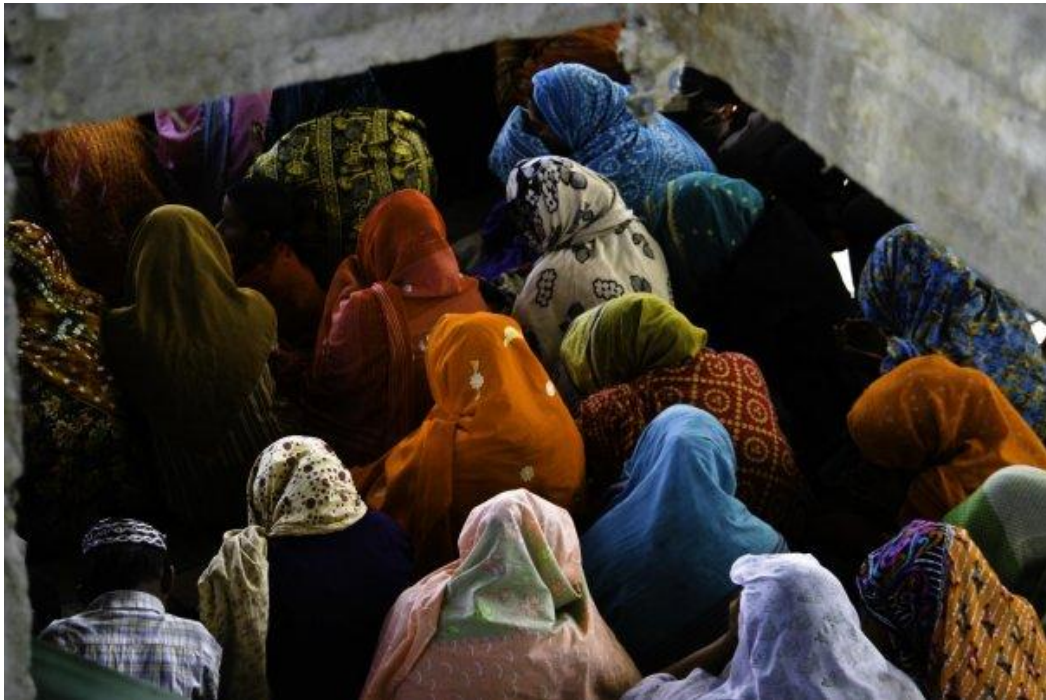
*ijtema* as the men do. Given this state of affairs, the leaders want the participants to disseminate the key learning and message of the *ijtema* to women at home, so as to give women some ideas about the *ijtema*. The *boyan* on women inspires many participants to introduce Tablighi norms and values into the family. Despite many limitations, many women take part in a three days *ijtema* every year.



Photo: Alhaji Nazimuddin (Photo was taken by the researcher)

On the second day of the *ijtema* in 2009, I met Alhaji Nazimuddin, a 65 year-old Tablighi follower who had also performed the *hajj*. He had brought his wife to attend the *ijtema*. He attends the *ijtema* every year. This time he came with a group from Tangail (a nearby district of Dhaka) hiring a bus. They rented a room near the *ijtema* for women to allow them to follow the main events of the *ijtema*. His wife also shared a room with other women. Women participants pray at the same time with the *ijtema* congregation. In the *ijtema*, the organisers use microphones and a sound system to reach everyone, so they can follow the *ijtema*. Alhaji Nazimuddin paid about 400 BDT for 3-4 days for his wife to stay in a secluded place with other

women while he stayed inside the tent of the *ijtema*. Every year, many people rent out their houses during the *ijtema* for three to five days to earn extra money. Lal Hossain was one of them. He renovated his house before the *ijtema* and earned about twenty thousand BDT. Many women attended the *akheri munajaat* (final day supplication and invocation to God) from the roof and under a constructed building near the *ijtema*.



Women attending *akheri munajaat* in 2009 (Photo was taken by Jessica Muddit)

I participated in *ijtema* again in 2010 from 21<sup>st</sup> to 24<sup>th</sup> of January after coming back from *chilla*. This time, I went with the group of *Baytus Sujud Jame Masjeed*, the local mosque near my house in Dhaka. Most participants knew me very well. In addition, due to the participation in a *chilla*, they treated me like an experienced and dedicated Tablighi Jamaat follower. I met my friend Mashiur and his friend Musharraf in this *ijtema* who came with their local Tablighi groups based in their mosques. They told me about their realisation and motivation to join in the *ijtema* every year. Musharraf stated:

Musharraf:

If I do not go to mosque regularly, I stay away from *dawah* and the five regular tasks of the Tablighi Jamaat. Then I face many difficulties in my life. That is why I go to mosque. For example, my boss at work does not like my work; my relationship with wife does not go well. If I stay with this work, I feel peace at home and work goes well, my boss never complains. Interesting, isn't it? This is not a coincidence and it did not happen only once. If I do *dawah*, I get this result regularly. This is why I participate in the *ijtema* every year and go to mosque regularly and keep myself in touch with *dawah* and Tabligh.

Mashiur:

The comment of Musharraf *vai* [brother] is common in the Tablighi Jamaat. Everyone would tell you the same. For example, I find peace here, which is *hayatut taiyeba* [peace in heart]. What are we doing to achieve peace? You and I are studying; we got married, bought a house [...]. But what is peace? You describe it one-way and he may describe it another way. These all are the external factors of getting peace. What are the internal factors of getting peace? I have everything what a person should want, but I am not happy with these. When I cannot pray, it hurts me. When I do not behave well with others, it hurts me. It is not because of humanity only. Religion taught me about humanity and how to behave with others. My life is directed by my faith. If I talk to someone with a smiling face, I do it because religion taught me to talk to everyone with a smiling

face. It is not because he is a doctor or engineer. If I do not eat well, I still get peace. Who is giving me peace? When I do not do *dawah* and *tabligh*, I do not feel peace inside me. What does it mean? It means, when I am into *dawah* and *Tabligh* it helps me to stick to my prayers and faith.

Both Musharraf and Mashiur had a common realisation that the Tablighi Jamaat brings peace in their mind. They do not feel right if they failed or forgot to pray. If they stay with *dawah*, they can stay on the line of religious practices and can say their prayer regularly. Mashiur stated that the discussion about various aspects of religion in Tablighi Jamaat helps them to stay in a religious environment. They also told me that the *ijtema* is the best place to engage with such discussion that is why many people attend the *ijtema* every year. Participants can discuss and share their experiences and learn from other followers in the *ijtema*. They can also listen to the *boyan* of the world leaders of the Tablighi Jamaat.

Tablighi Jamaat followers do not see the *ijtema* only as a place to meet people and listen to the *boyan*. They describe the *ijtema* as an event that transforms and motivates participants to begin their preaching journey for a *chilla* or three *chillas*. Many men convert into a dedicated Tablighi Jamaat follower after attending the *ijtema* every year. I discussed the case of Muajjem Hussain in the previous chapter, the fact that he was motivated and convinced by his grandfather to attend a three-day *ijtema* in 2004. It was the first time he attended the *ijtema* and by listening to the *boyan* attentively he finally found himself motivated enough to carry out a *chilla* later on.

Transformation to Tablighi identity and adoption of an Islamic life requires serious commitment. A dedicated Tablighi Jamaat follower has to transform his entire life. This involves wearing the correct clothing, keeping a beard, maintaining a *halal* profession, following *Sunnah* and many other things. Many people find their motivation to commit to a Tablighi life from the *ijtema*.

The *ijtema* was an introduction to the Tablighi Jamaat for Muajjem. He joined in the *ijtema* because he did not want to disappoint his grandfather, who had advised him to attend the *ijtema* just for once to see what he thought about it. Therefore, he attended the *ijtema* to satisfy him. By the end of the *ijtema*, he realised the importance of following the command of God and the *Sunnah*. From the *ijtema*, he decided to carry out a *chilla* that made his faith stronger.

At the *ijtema*, participants are encouraged to go out for a number of days immediately after the *ijtema*. My respondents explained to me that after attending three days at the *ijtema*, the mind becomes subdued and many people could not resist going out for a preaching journey to fulfil the command of the Prophet. If they go home, it can distract them from going out for *dawah*. This is a major difference from traditional pilgrimages. Most pilgrimages end with a mass congregation, but the *ijtema* provides an opportunity to begin a *dawah* journey from the mass congregation. This is one of the aims of the *ijtema* to encourage people to carry out a longer *dawah* journey. The organisers finalise groups in the last evening of the *ijtema* to send them to various locations in Bangladesh and beyond, those who can begin a *dawah* journey immediately after the *ijtema*.

Motivating people for the *dawah* journey after *ijtema* is an essential activity. Nadvi (2006: 116) mentions the early *ijtema* in Mewat, ‘in which people passionately listened to the *boyans* of the senior Tablighi Jamaat follower. The aim of the *ijtema* was to encourage people to go out for a *dawah* journey from the *ijtema*’. That was considered the mark of the success of an *ijtema*. Senior followers instruct leaders of small groups to motivate (*taskhil*) their team members to go out for a number of days and *chilla*. In 2010, about 4002 groups (*jamaats*) were formed to carry out *dawah* journeys of various lengths (three *chillas*, a *chilla* and short term) after the *ijtema*, to different parts of Bangladesh. (See table 4).



Table 4: *Ijtema* - 2010 (22 to 24<sup>th</sup> January): *Khittawary* Jamaat (Jamaat per *Khitta*)

No	Name of <i>Khitta</i>	1 Year	3 <i>Chilla</i> (120 days)	1 <i>Chilla</i> (40 days)	Days	Total	Remark	Number of Participants
1	Dhaka-1		10	140	8	158	Third	
2	Dhaka-2		2	87	14	103		
3	Dhaka-3		5	201	21	227	First	
4	Dhaka-4		4	127	8	139		
5	Dhaka-5		14	128	11	153	Fourth	
6	Dhaka-6		9	63	2	74		
7	Tangail		8	51	5	64		
8	Dinajpur		11	46	2	59		
9	Pabna		3	25	0	28		
10	Shirajganj		19	84	1	104		
11	Rajshahi		13	77	2	92		
12	Rangpur		15	74	9	98		
13	Jessor		10	51	5	66		
14	Bogra		12	54	14	80		
15	Munshiganj		1	82	1	84		
16	Narshingdi		8	61	3	72		
17	Narayanganj		3	135	6	144		
18	Barishal		7	65	2	74		
19	Vola		17	115	5	137		
20	Patuakhali		5	43	2	50		
21	Khulna		14	92	4	110		
22	Jamalpur		12	57	6	75		
23	Kushtia		3	28	1	32		
24	Momenshahi		22	102	5	129		
25	Netrokona		10	29	5	44		
26	Kishorganj		11	55	1	67		
27	Faridpur		1	83	14	98		
28	Madaripur		7	44	1	52		
29	Manikganj, Gazipur		17	86	7	110		
30	Sylhet		16	152	6	174	Second	
31	Chittagong		17	130	2	149	Fifth	
32	Noakhali		15	104	4	123		
33	Comilla		12	90	3	105		
Tashkil Room		7	6	69	4	86		
Total			339	2830	184	3360		43507
In Abroad		60						
Arab Tent		340						
English Tent		172						
Indo-Pak Tent		50						
Others		20						
Total						4002		

Source: Kakrail Mosque, Dhaka Bangladesh

The table shows the total number of groups at the *ijtema* prepared to begin preaching journey in different areas of Bangladesh and beyond. The table shows that *chilla* groups were formed based on their regions who travelled together to attend the *ijtema*. Many of them decided to carry out a preaching journey for a number of *days* and *chillas*. Among the four to five million people, 43507 followers decided to carry out preaching journeys from the *ijtema* in 2010. Four thousand and two groups were prepared from that *ijtema* to go out for preaching. The table also shows the breakdown of the region and the number of groups formed from each region. The Dhaka region (Dhaka 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6) was in the first, Sylhet was in the second, and Chittagong was in the third place in terms of the number of groups. It also reflects the density of the movement in Bangladesh. Sixty groups were prepared to go overseas to carry out a preaching journey. Among the foreign participants, three hundred and forty groups from the Middle East, one hundred and seventy two groups from English speaking countries and fifty groups from the Indo-Pak region decided to carry out preaching journeys in various parts of Bangladesh. It is a well-established idea among Tablighi Jamaat followers that if someone spend a *chilla* in the Subcontinent, that is equivalent to spending three *chillas* in Western countries. In the Subcontinent, people have to go through hardship that includes poor living standards, inadequate toilet facilities, transport and warm weather, which are not usual problems in the West. These make a preaching journey even harder for a foreigner. Many foreigners wanted to carry out preaching journeys from the *ijtema* for a *chilla* or three *chillas*, to learn the basics of preaching and experience Bangladesh.

#### 6.4 The *Ijtima* and the *Hajj*: Comparison

The previous section provides an empirical perspective of the *ijtema* that I took part in. It provides an overall sense of the *ijtema* with the number of groups formed in the *ijtema* in 2010 to go out for preaching in various parts of Bangladesh. It includes groups from other countries, which gives the sense of international participation in the *ijtema*. Now let us move on to a comparative discussion between the *hajj*, the *urs* and the *ijtema* to see if the *ijtema* really offers a new idea of pilgrimage for the Muslims in Bangladesh and beyond. I begin with the comparative discussion between the *ijtema* and *hajj*.

Tablighi Jamaat followers do not see any conflict between the *ijtema* and the *hajj*. My informants mentioned that senior leaders never compared or encouraged their followers to compare the *ijtema* with the *hajj*, because the *hajj* is *farz* (obligatory) and the *ijtema* is not. The founder of the Tablighi Jamaat, Muhammad Ilyas, performed the *hajj* four times in his entire life. During his second *hajj*, he felt that he had been ordered to undertake the work of preaching (Haq, 1972). He then began preaching among Muslims in the name of the Tablighi Jamaat. In reality, most Tablighi Jamaat followers are eager to perform the *hajj* as soon as they reasonably can. There were some members in the *chilla* in which I participated in Bangladesh who had already performed the *hajj*. Three of them were in their mid thirties. The general trend in Bangladesh is for men to perform the *hajj* at an older age when men can fully concentrate on religion. It is different among Tablighi Jamaat followers. Since the *hajj* involves physical fitness, to be able to cope with extensive travel in Mecca, people are expected to perform the *hajj* when younger. The *hajj* also involves considerable physical activities, for example, long walking, hardship during

the journey and living in a less comfortable environment. Therefore, Muslims are advised to perform *hajj* when they are physically fit to meet these challenges. Tablighi Jamaat followers also believe that praying when one is young appeals more to God than when one is older.

Unlike the *ijtema*, there are set instructions and guidelines for the *hajj* in the *Qur'an*. There is a complete chapter (*sura*) on the *hajj* named *Al-Hajj* (chapter no: 22), and it explains the background and the importance of the *hajj*. No direct recommendations can be found in the *Qur'an* about the *ijtema*. However, Tablighi Jamaat followers believe that any congregation dedicated to a divine purpose receives a reward. In addition, although there are some differences between *dawah* and the *ijtema*, Tablighi followers carry out most of the significant religious activities they follow during a *dawah* journey, with the exception of the *gasht*. The major additional item in the *ijtema* is the spiritual speeches of the global and national leaders of the Tablighi Jamaat. In these daily religious speeches, they share experiences from various countries. During the religious speeches, participants are advised to sit closely and listen carefully. One of the main attractions of the *ijtema* is to listen to global leaders speaking on various aspects of Islam including *dawah* and its benefits. Tablighi Jamaat followers view the *ijtema* as an essential part of their spiritual life that helps to strengthen their faith. *Fazayeel Amal*, the compiled book of the Tablighi Jamaat, refers to some verses (3: 104, 3: 110, 3: 114) from the *Qur'an* that emphasise the importance of engaging in *dawah* and Tabligh, that I already discussed in the second chapter (see section 2.5 Tablighi Jamaat and *Dawah*) of this thesis.

By justifying *dawah* and Tabligh with the reference to the *Qur'an*, the Tablighi Jamaat also sees the *ijtema* as a good deed that is for them an essential part of *dawah*. The *ijtema* as a congregation does not seem to have any conflict with the core beliefs of Islam; rather, the followers of the Tablighi Jamaat hold that the *ijtema* is a beneficial religious event. Most of my informants claimed that by participating in the *ijtema*, they gained substantial Islamic knowledge. The *ijtema* offers them an opportunity to acquire fundamental religious knowledge.

### **6.5 The *Ijtema* and Visiting Shrines: Comparison**

Visiting shrines (*ziyaras*) and travelling in search of knowledge (*rihla*) are additional examples of religiously inspired travel (Eickelman and Piscatori, 1990). The *urs* at shrines is the most vibrant traditional religious practice in Bangladesh. It is believed by Sufi followers that without the direct guidance from a spiritual leader it is impossible to achieve spiritual closeness to God. Sufi leaders or *pirs* are considered like 'part-human and part-divine' by their followers (Mills, 1998: 50). They are considered to be bridging the gap between God and human beings. Since participating in the *urs* does not involve a great deal of expense, people from all classes can join in the *urs* for spiritual and many other reasons. One of the reasons to join an *urs* is to receive spiritual healing. Reading from the *Qur'an* and blowing on people are the most common type of healing used by many South Asian Sufi masters.

The *urs* takes place at the shrine (*dargah*) of a Sufi master (*pir*). *Urs* is an Arabic-derived Persian word that means union and in some contexts 'wedding'. In Bangladesh, the term refers to the days of commemoration of Muslim divines. It is

the day of death of a saint that is celebrated because it is believed that in death the Sufi saint reunites with the divine (Mills: 1994). Werbner (2003) identifies three aspects of *urs*: ritual, popular and the *urs* as a hub of the organisational power of a Sufi cult. Religious poetry recitation, praise songs to the prophet and a festive character are the key elements of the *urs* ritual that need strong organisational skills to maintain. The disciples provide all the necessary labour on a voluntary basis. The disciples see this voluntary labour as the opportunity to get closer to the *pir* and to God (Werbner, 2003). The main events of the *urs* generally are *dhikir* (remembrance of the name of Allah), *milad mahfil* in which a group of worshippers repetitively chant the names and praises of the relevant saint, with the first line of the *kalimah* or statement of faith (*la ilaha il-Allah*) (Bertocci, 2001: 64). They also perform spiritual music, which is known as *qawali*, a form of Sufi music. The *urs* may take place couple of times in a year. Although the death anniversary of a saint is treated as the main event, it is coordinated and organised by the descendants of the saint who are considered as living *pirs*. In most cases, a descendant of a *pir* is also treated as *pir* in Bangladesh, who is believed to offer a spiritual guideline for devotees.

*Pir* veneration in Bangladesh is alive and well. Both the Sufi tradition and the Tablighi Jamaat co-exist and form multiple styles of Muslim identity and Islamic practice in Bangladesh (Ellickson, 2002). However, they may not co-exist with harmony everywhere in Bangladesh because many followers of Sufi orders in Bangladesh do not see Tablighi Jamaat in a positive way, and the followers of the Tablighi Jamaat are very critical about some elements of Sufi practices in Bangladesh. I came across some followers of the Charmonai Sufi tradition during the *chilla* at Nageswary in Bangladesh who claimed that the Tablighi Jamaat is not the

right way to practice ‘authentic’ Islam. Therefore, this area had fewer followers of the Tablighi Jamaat in comparison to other places we had visited during the *chilla*. When we moved into a mosque named Banur Khamar at Nageswary, we struggled to find Tablighi Jamaat followers to start *dawah* in the area. Later on, the followers of the Tablighi Jamaat told me that the Charmonai Sufi tradition was very strong in this part of Bangladesh and they do not appreciate the activities of the Tablighi Jamaat. Then I asked a member of the *chilla* about the Tablighi views towards Sufi tradition and, he told me that the Tablighi Jamaat is also critical about many Sufi rituals. The Tablighi Jamaat does not accept spiritual music in the form of *qawali*, while touching and kissing the feet of a living Saint is also forbidden by the Tablighi ideology. In this regard, Mohammad Yasin, a 26 year-old engineer and Tablighi Jamaat follower from Bangladesh criticized visiting a living saint:

People call their *pir*, *baba* [father] and call his wife, *ma* [mother] and disciples bring gifts for them. Sometimes they bring fruit, poultry or cattle for their *pir*, as if they are their real parents. We should not consider them in this way. If you want to do something to please Allah, you should give the best thing to your parents. Allah tells, ‘after me, you have to obey your parents’. There is no other option for us. People are worshipping these *pirs*, as a medium to reach Allah. You can see, what these *pirs*, are doing? However, the *sahih pir* will not receive these gifts and order their followers to obey and to take responsibility for your own parents.

Bulbul: Many devotees of Sufi order think that it is necessary to follow the guidelines of a spiritual master to achieve spiritual closeness to God.

Yasin:

There is no strict rule in Islam that suggests that someone has to follow a *pir*. It is optional for Muslims. It depends on the individual's willingness.

It is clear from the statement that Tablighi Jamaat is critical of some elements of Sufi tradition in Bangladesh. At the same time, they do not reject this popular form of Islam entirely. Tablighi Jamaat followers believe that people do not need any intermediary to reach God, which is the key belief in Sufi cults. The Tablighi Jamaat is particularly concerned when the devotees worship their Sufi master as a medium of achieving spiritual closeness to God. I already discussed, in the second chapter, the fact that the founder of the Tablighi Jamaat, Moulana Ilyas, was believed to be inspired by many elements of Sufism that helped him to develop the Tablighi Jamaat (Haq, 1972; Reetz, 2006; Sikand, 2007).

Sayed Muhammad Rezaul Karim, the current *pir* of Charmonai, regards the Tablighi Jamaat as an important force in contemporary Islamic movements (Hussain, 2013). Since the Charmonai *pir* is actively involved with conventional form of politics and his organisation participates in parliamentary election in Bangladesh under the name of Islami Andolan Bangladesh (Islami Movement Bangladesh), some leaders invite the followers of the Tablighi Jamaat to support and to take part in the political movement of the Charmonai *pir* (Hussain, 2013). Although the grassroots followers of the Charmonai *pir* do not see the Tablighi Jamaat as an authentic Islamic movement, central leaders want to get the support and cooperation of the Tablighi Jamaat by deliberately avoiding disagreement between them.



The *pir* of Rajarbag Shareef,<sup>41</sup> Mudda Jilluhul Ali, is also critical of many activities of the Tablighi Jamaat. Rajarbag Shareef is one of the main Sufis who publicly claims that the Tablighi Jamaat is not an authentic Islamic movement and they have published a series of *fatwa* against the Tablighi Jamaat in their monthly magazine, *Al Bayinaat*. According to my informants among the disciples of the *pir* of Rajarbag Shareef, the Tablighi Jamaat deliberately wants to keep Muslims out of State power. They also criticize the Tablighi Jamaat because of its reluctance to be involved in any political issue. Ariful Islam, a follower of the Rajarbag *pir*, stated that the Tablighi Jamaat does not follow everything in Islam. He continued:

Tablighi Jamaat followers think that they say prayers properly and do *dawah*, which alone are not enough to follow a proper Islam. There are many aspects that Muslims have to follow. Tablighi Jamaat followers keep themselves limited within the *Fazayele Amal* but in Islam acquiring knowledge is an important part that is not possible only by reading the *Fazayele Amal*.

This is a common criticism about the Tablighi Jamaat, that it does not encourage people to learn about Islam beyond the boundary of *Fazayele Amal*, *Hekayete Sahaba*, and *Muntakib Hadith*. I have noticed during the *chilla* that Tablighi Jamaat followers always read and follow only these books. They do not mention any other references and they do not even encourage the followers to use references outside these books.

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<sup>41</sup> Rajarbag Shareef is the headquarters of the Rajarbag *pir* based in Rajarbag, Dhaka. The current *pir* is Mudda Jilluhul Ali. The early Sufis of his lineage came to Bangladesh in the late eighteenth century from Ajmer Shareef. They have their own *madrasa*, newspaper, and a monthly Islamic magazine known as *Al Bayinaat*. More details can be found on <http://rajarbagshareef.com/>

Despite this unstable relationship between contemporary Sufism and the Tablighi Jamaat in Bangladesh, many followers from Sufi backgrounds take part in the *ijtema* and *chilla*. There was a disciple of Charmonai *pir* in the *chilla* in which I participated, who followed all necessary requirements of the *chilla* seriously. The Tablighi Jamaat welcomes Muslims from all backgrounds to join in their preaching activities. It may have some negative impacts on Sufi tradition in general. There is an impression that *pir* veneration has been facing challenges in recent times by the Tablighi Jamaat. In a study on the Maijbhandari Sufi order, Bertocci states that the Maijbhandari Sufi order is facing the greatest challenge to its legitimacy from the Islamist versions of orthodoxy (2001). Bertocci refers to the Tablighi Jamaat as one of the massive forces against the Maijbhandaris and *pir* cult in general in Bangladesh. Bertocci also states that the Maijbhandari order is also facing resistance from many Islamic political activists who aim to establish an Islamic state. The Maijbhandari is also critical about the role of the Tablighi Jamaat. All politically oriented Islamic political parties believe that the Tablighi Jamaat also does not have any aim to work on establishing an Islamic state. The history of Islam in Bengal region is closely linked with Sufi saints, thus in the process of the expansion of Islam into the region the idea of 'syncretistic' Islam emerged which was born from the interactions between 'orthodox' Islam and the indigenous culture. For the Tablighi Jamaat this idea of 'syncretistic' Islam is problematic, because they want to go back to the 'orthodox' Islam. The Sufi tradition in Bangladesh is also facing challenges due to the huge popularity of the *ijtema*. The *ijtema* continues to get huge attention in Bangladesh and millions of people attend the *ijtema* every year. By attracting

participants from various levels of society including from a Sufi background, the *ijtema* has been able to establish itself as an influential and new form of pilgrimage.

### **6.6 *Ijtema*: a New Pilgrimage for the Muslim**

The *ijtema* has become an influential religious event in Bangladeshi society. The impact of the *ijtema* can be determined through the attitude of many religious leaders (*imam*) of mosques when they discuss the importance of participating in the *ijtema* during the Friday sermon. For instance, two weeks before *ijtema* in 2010 at Tongi, I attended a Friday prayer in my local mosque in Dhaka. This was the first time I encountered an *imam* who discussed the *ijtema* with a positive attitude. Although he was not a Tablighi Jamaat follower, the way he discussed and advised men to attend the *ijtema* was no different to a Tablighi follower. The *ijtema* has an enormous impact on the lives of Tablighi Jamaat followers and other participants. Moulana Zamir Uddin, one of the senior followers from Kakrail mosque, mentioned in a *boyan* in 2008 that I listened to at Kakrail, as part of my observation that ‘the *ijtema* is a blessing (*neyamot*) from God. It helps to soften the heart of the participants’. The participants are given an idea about the guidelines to stay on the course of religion from this three days meeting. It is a common belief among the participants that participation in an *ijtema* brings them the mercy of God. The attraction of the *ijtema* lies in the value they would receive after participating.

There is no specific promise from God about the benefit of participating in an *ijtema*. However, for the participants of the *hajj*, there is a promise from God that anyone who fulfils the requirement of the *hajj* will be awarded with forgiveness, in other words with a rebirth as an innocent person. Bianchi mentions the benefits of *hajj*,

‘For pilgrims, the *hajj* is the peak of spiritual life. Cleared of all sin, they are as pure as the day they were born - assured of paradise if they should die before returning home’ (2004: 3). If there is no such promise by God about the *ijtema*, why do people attend the *ijtema* every year? The *ijtema* may not be comparable with the *hajj*, but people certainly find something meaningful in attending the *ijtema* who, cannot afford to perform *hajj*. An explicit critique on the *urs* at saint's shrines among the Islamist movements has been discussed in the previous section. It is important to know why people find that critique persuasive. What do the new 'Islamist' versions of Islam offer that the older styles did not?

In comparison to *hajj*, the *ijtema* provides relatively easy access without any formal membership for the mass of Bangladesh. For the poor Muslims in Bangladesh, it is easier to attend an *ijtema*, since it is much cheaper than performing the *hajj*. The *hajj* is expensive in terms of travelling to Mecca and sacrificing animals, which is almost impossible for the poor people of Bangladesh. Similarly, the *urs* involves the practice of offerings, which is also an example of sacrifice to please God. Although offerings are not officially obligatory for the devotees, it is expected at the *urs* that every devotee must bring something according to their ability. It is a practice of the *urs* to offer something in the hope to please God and the *pir*. Often people will have made *manot* (a pledge to a saint) and will be repaying it at the *urs*. That is a symbolic exchange between divine power and devotees. It is these key features of this popular type of pilgrimage where devotees bring offerings to a god. Eade and Sallnow state that ‘pilgrimage shrines are the pre-eminent centres for dealings between human beings and the divine’ (1991: 24). That the *ijtema* does not involve such exchanges

may be because the *ijtema* is not held in a shrine and it is not linked with any Sufi master.

There was a potential for Moulana Ilyas to emerge as a traditional Sufi leader by increasing his number of personal disciples but he consciously avoided this temptation. According to Nadvi (2006), many followers became disciples (*murid*) of Moulana Ilyas. During the time of affiliation, Moulana Ilyas emphasised the importance of *dawah* and he always asked his new disciples to promise to do *dawah* for the rest of their lives. Thus, his own followers became active followers of the Tablighi Jamaat (Nadvi, 2006). Moulana Ilyas did not want to create his own Sufi order. After Moulana Ilyas's death, his descendants also did not encourage his followers to build a cult around his tomb, as would be normal practice for a significant Sufi *pir*. Moulana Ilyas, his son Muhammad Yusuf and his nephew Inamul Hasan are all buried together near the global headquarters of the Tablighi Jamaat in Delhi, but the followers of the Tablighi Jamaat do not consider their tombs a site of pilgrimage (Gaborieau, 2006). Although the Tablighi Jamaat does not consider these tombs to be a site of pilgrimage and the central leaders do not encourage keeping personal disciples, the leadership of the Tablighi Jamaat has remained in the family of Moulana Ilyas. This is similar to Sufism where leadership of Sufism normally passes through the lineage.

The low cost of attending *ijtema* cannot be the main reason for participating in the *ijtema*. There are some other aspects beyond expenses. The eternal benefit of attending the *ijtema* is the main reason. The *ijtema* opens up a channel of spiritual life for many participants, although it is only an introduction to the Tablighi Jamaat.

Thus, people can put their efforts into learning proper Islamic practices, which is the principal target of the Tablighi Jamaat. The *ijtema* also opens up the channel to acquire religious knowledge. Since the Tablighi Jamaat strictly follow their own compiled book of *Fazayele Amal, Hekayete Sahaba, Muntakib Hadith, Fazayele Hajj*<sup>42</sup> as the principal guideline, it is easier to get the necessary information about *dawah* and fundamental religious practices from these resources. Even senior leaders of the Tablighi Jamaat always follow these books and encourage others to follow. The followers believe that these books help them to acquire the essential religious knowledge that they need most in everyday prayers. Repeated listening and reading from these texts help to internalise a fundamental knowledge of religion. This is why many followers treat the Tablighi Jamaat as a *madrasa* for adults who have been unable to attend a *madrasa* to acquire religious education. The Tablighi Jamaat in this sense is a living *madrasa*. Many followers describe the Tablighi Jamaat as a good source of religious knowledge.

Most Tablighi followers from among my informants believe that participants can learn many religious elements by participating in an *ijtema*. Many believe that participation in an *ijtema* creates a desire to acquire knowledge that is required to lead a religious life. They can learn without going to a spiritual master. Since the Tablighi Jamaat believes that it is not essential to follow a spiritual leader to achieve spiritual closeness to God, the followers can achieve it by individual devotion and practice. This learning method does not, however, involve a *pir-murid* (Sufi master-disciple) relationship. This is perhaps another reason why people prefer to attend an *ijtema* that is a self-exploratory method of learning for Tablighis.

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<sup>42</sup> *Fazayele Hajj* (The virtue of *hajj*) is a book that discusses importance and benefits of performing *hajj*.

Tablighi Jamaat followers can obtain basic religious education through their own efforts engaging themselves with *dawah*. There are many participants who are unable to read and write. For them, the *ijtema* and the Tablighi Jamaat provide a space to learn the fundamentals of Islam. They can reasonably learn how to pray and read the *Qur'an* in a proper way with the practical guidance of experienced followers in the *ijtema*. Sermons in the *ijtema* are a good source of religious information for men who never went to a *madrassa* or do not have fundamental knowledge on Islam. Although the learning process happens in a group during a *dawah* trip or in an *ijtema*, the followers can spend further time to learn more about Islam by individual effort. According to the respondents of the Tablighi Jamaat, the learning during *dawah* trips only creates a thirst for further learning for the participants; therefore, they must invest more time to learn. It empowers the followers in terms of competence in talking about Islam in public. Since it is necessary for the followers to engage in religious discussion while motivating people during preaching, they need religious knowledge and competence to have a successful discussion with others. Tablighi Jamaat provides an opportunity to learn fundamentals of Islam at an older age without going to a religious institution. Although, the three days of the *ijtema* cannot provide all the necessary knowledge and information that a person needs, it gives a direction to acquire basic religious knowledge.



Preparation of food in an *ijtema* (Photo was taken by the researcher)

The experience of a less hierarchical environment in the *ijtema* seems to have a positive influence on increasing mass participation every year. As already mentioned, participation in a *chilla* is expected to provide followers with a hierarchy free environment, which is also evident in a three-day *ijtema* but not at the same level. Participants attend the *ijtema* with a small group. Each group stays closely together and they have their own arrangement for food. Sometimes two or three groups share food inside the massive tent. Participants from all classes stay in the same place. People from the upper class and lower or middle class stay in a group. Class does not seem to have any role to play here. As discussed in the previous chapter in relation to the *chilla* or three *chillas*, a sense of *communitas* may emerge. Although during the *ijtema*, participants do most activities they carry out during *chilla*, a three-day congregation may not be long enough to create *communitas*.



The followers of the Tablighi Jamaat are expected to treat each other equally, but in reality, many participants do not seem to be serious enough to immerse wholly into Tablighi norms and values because many of them do not identify themselves as Tablighi Jamaat followers. They only want to get the benefits of attending an *ijtema*. For them, the *ijtema* is just another annual pilgrimage. Therefore, they do not seem to be careful to abide by many Tablighi etiquettes and norms during the *ijtema*. In addition, the *ijtema* is not a formal activity like a *chilla*. During a *chilla*, each member has to stay under the close observation of senior and dedicated members and anything that does not fall under Tablighi ideology will become the target of serious criticism. Therefore, members of a *chilla* are always very conscious to abide by the Tablighi norms and values. Following Tablighi norms for a longer period make it a habit in most cases, which is absent in the *ijtema*. Ideally, all participants are expected to forget the hierarchical practices of society like class, status and segregation, while participating in an *ijtema*. In addition, the *ijtema* offers an environment where participants ideally stay in an environment that is less stratified than the society in which they live. Participants are expected to implement their learning when they return to their respective society by ignoring class differentiation, but reality is different when they return to the society. Tablighi Jamaat followers fail to maintain a hierarchy-free relationship while they are in the existing society, which is also true for the *chilla* that we discussed in the previous chapter. It does not create any sense of *communitas* while they are in the existing day-to-day mundane society.

People take part in an *ijtema* to achieve individual religious gain. Participation in an *ijtema* does not seem to be associated with increased social status for the participants but it may help to mix with people from middle class and upper middle class

backgrounds to some extent. If we take into account of the *hajj*, we may find different circumstances. The *hajj* has a huge social impact on the lives of the pilgrims who are known as *hajji* or *alhaj* once they complete the *hajj*. The term *hajji* itself is associated with higher social status in Bangladesh. *Hajjis* always receive special attention in the local religious sphere. Performing *hajj* means a step ahead to higher social status. In most parts of Bangladesh, *hajjis* enjoy greater honour in mosques and any other social or religious events. The social implication of the *hajj* provides a different set of honour and prestige, but ideally, the *hajj* is not supposed to encourage stratification. Since, in practice, only people from a certain economic class can perform the *hajj*, the *hajj* itself becomes associated with class. Completion of the *hajj* is considered as a lifetime achievement for the pilgrims. The *ijtema* does not necessarily affect the class dimensions of society, but it certainly encourages the reduction of existing gaps between classes among participants.

Place is not an important element in the *ijtema*. In the *hajj*, pilgrims have to visit certain sacred places with specific rituals. Sufi masters organise the *urs* in shrines or tombs. The *ijtema* at Tongi is not associated with such sacred places or any shrine. The leaders of the Tablighi Jamaat never really wanted to establish the *ijtema* as a shrine-based congregation. During the *ijtema*, the entire place of Tongi transforms into a sacred space with their congregation. In the *ijtema*, there is a lot of preaching going on, many words (the *boyan*). There is a shift in style here and this is part of modernist Islam generally. At the same time, by this type of modernism, the Tablighi Jamaat aims to go back to the ‘original’ teachings of Islam following the *Sunnah* of the Prophet and the *farz*. This distinguishes the *ijtema* from the *urs*. The main difference between Sufi traditions and the Tablighi Jamaat is the process of

preaching. The Tablighi Jamaat argues that Sufi leaders (*pir*) do not go out to encourage people to the path of God, but the Tablighi Jamaat goes out to preach among Muslims. This is a shift from the largely inwardly-directed piety of traditional Sufism to the much more outwardly-directed missionary orientation of the Tablighi Jamaat. These are the key attractions of the new 'Islamist' version of Islam for the participants that traditional Sufism does not offer, at least in its contemporary forms.

In addition, *ijtema* is not an event to remember the death anniversary of Moulana Ilyas, neither is it associated with a particular Sufi order. In such a context, to what extent can the *ijtema* be treated as a pilgrimage? There are certainly some elements identified, those are serving the purpose of pilgrimage. First, although the *ijtema* does not have any tomb or shrine like the *urs*, the *ijtema* does provide an opportunity to achieve divine blessings and mercy from God, which is the key purpose of pilgrimages, including the *hajj* and the *urs*. It is a symbolic visit to a sacred space that inspires participants to congregate in the hope to achieve spiritual closeness to God. With their participation and intense religious conference in the *ijtema*, they transform an ordinary place to a sacred space. There is no permanent establishment yet in the *ijtema* site in Tongi, therefore people do not treat this place as a regular site of pilgrimage beyond the *ijtema*.

Second, three days of intense conference with repeated religious sermon helps participants to strengthen their faith. The participants believe that by attending the final day supplication and invocation (*akheri munajaat*), they will achieve the mercy of God. In recent times, many Sufi orders in Bangladesh have begun to use the term *ijtema* instead of *urs*. They are trying to modernise the *urs* by introducing the idea of

the *ijtema*, where the meaning of the term *ijtema* is a mass gathering that does not contradict with the purpose of the *urs*. This modernisation effort may help them to attract more devotees from all classes, because the idea of the *ijtema* is already popular as a mass religious gathering. It is difficult to say anything about the organisation of this type of new *urs* in the name of *ijtema*, since I did not participate in any of these new types of *urs* while carrying out research in Bangladesh.

Third, the *ijtema* does not encourage any of the elements of popular culture that Werbner (2003) analyses in the *urs*, as both a popular and religious festival. The traditional *urs* involves *qawali and na't*<sup>43</sup> that brings a festive colour in the *urs*. Followers of the Tablighi Jamaat do not see the *ijtema* as a festive event like the *urs*; rather, for them, the *ijtema* is a congregation that only focus on to strengthen faith with the hope of reviving a 'pure' and 'authentic' form of Islam. Finally, participants bear their own expenses during the three-day congregation. There are no central arrangements to cook food during an *ijtema*. The organisers only provide accommodation, water and sanitation services. Followers are always advised by the leaders not to spend too much time preparing food because *ijtema* only lasts for three days and they want to utilize most of the time when they arrive here. Whereas the *urs* represents a popular and traditional form of Islam, the *ijtema* intends to create a global image of Islam that transcends any national boundary. Despite many differences between the *ijtema*, the *urs* and the *hajj*, the main purpose of these congregations is almost the same. With its puritan attitude and the rejection of many popular practices of Islam in Bangladesh, the Tablighi Jamaat offers an alternative space for many Muslims across the world.

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<sup>43</sup> Na't is a Sufi praise song for the Prophet (Werbner: 2003), which is also an expression of religious devotion.

## 6.7 Conclusion

It is evident that the Tablighi Jamaat as a modernist Islamic movement has its roots in Sufism. At the same time, the Tablighi Jamaat in contemporary Bangladesh is also critical about many elements of Sufism. The Tablighi Jamaat invented a outwardly-oriented mode of preaching by conveying messages to the people through travelling, to reach Muslims all over the world. However, the attempt of this chapter has been to show how the *ijtema* of the Tablighi Jamaat establishes itself as a significant pilgrimage by providing a comparative discussion of the *ijtema*, the *urs* and the *hajj*. The *ijtema* is relatively a modern Muslim congregation. It is not only related solely to the Tablighi Jamaat, since many other Islamic movements have been using the ideas of *ijtema* for many years. The Tablighi Jamaat began its *ijtema* in the early twentieth century. From the beginning of the *ijtema*, it has been able to attract a significant number of participants. The organisers have now decided to organise two *ijtemas* in Bangladesh every year to accommodate participants since the participants are increasing every year. The *ijtema* attracts people from all classes to achieve spiritual closeness to God. The *ijtemas* in Pakistan and India also attract a large number of participants every year. Tablighi followers organise the *ijtema* in every country in which they operate. Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India are the main centres of the Tablighi Jamaat and the *ijtemas* organised in these countries are also considered the main *ijtemas* among all Tablighi followers.

The popularity of Tongi the *ijtema* transcends the national boundary of Bangladesh. It has become a popular destination for the Muslim world. About 30,000 foreigners took part in the 2010 *ijtema*. They were not necessarily Bangladeshis from overseas, but people of different nationalities from all over the world. It is claimed by the

Tablighi Jamaat that devotees from approximately 150 countries attend the *ijtema* in Bangladesh. Many British Bangladeshis attend the *ijtema* every year, but it is difficult to say how many. One of my respondents from the UK told me that participation in *dawah* in Bangladesh and South Asia in general has higher significance since participants face hardship during *dawah* journeys in these countries. Foreign participants can also learn how to carry out *dawah* from visiting these countries. At the end of the *ijtema* in 2010, six hundred groups were formed from among the foreign participants who intended to carry out *dawah* in various parts of Bangladesh. The growing popularity of the *ijtema* is an indication of a new type of pilgrimage in Bangladesh and beyond. The three-day conference of the *ijtema* discusses the benefits and obligation of carrying out *dawah*. In addition, people attend *ijtema* in the hope of getting the mercy and blessings of God. The less hierarchical social relationship between followers affords a very good impression to many beginners, encouraging them to carry on Tablighi *dawah* seriously.

The annual *ijtema* in Bangladesh manages to attract participants from all over the country. This also shows the popularity of the Tablighi Jamaat. The *ijtema* in Bangladesh now has become a symbol of the Tablighi Jamaat, which creates a positive image of the Tablighi Jamaat not only nationally but also globally. Maintaining a good image is very important for Tablighi followers. In practice, a positive image helps the Tablighi Jamaat to attract new followers and to encourage dedicated followers to maintain a Tablighi life. It has also established the *ijtema* as a dominant and new type of Islamic pilgrimage among many Muslims in Bangladesh and beyond.

In Chapter Seven, the last of the four chapters in which I present my Bangladeshi material, I look at a specific issue that has received considerable attention in the general literature on Tablighi Jamaat. This is the effect of membership in the organisation on gender relations.

## Chapter Seven

### Reconfiguring Gender Relations

#### 7.1 Introduction

The gender aspects of the Tablighi Jamaat have received some attention from Barbara Metcalf, who studied the movement mainly in Pakistan (Metcalf 1996b, 1998, 2000), and more recently from Marloes Janson, who looked at the movement in Gambia (Janson 2008), Agnès de Féo, working mainly in Southeast Asia (Féo 2009), and Jan Ali, working in Australia (Ali 2011). While the Tablighi Jamaat's views on gender roles appear at first sight to be conservative and restrictive, several of these authors have suggested that the movement opens up certain possibilities for the reconfiguring of gender relationships. In Chapter Seven, I inquire on the basis of my own field research whether the Tablighi Jamaat in Bangladesh has had a significant effect on gender relationships of those engaged with the movement.

As we have seen, *dawah* is a central concept for the Tablighi Jamaat. With *dawah*, Tablighi Jamaat followers fulfil their obligation as followers of Prophet Muhammad of disseminating his message to other Muslims. The entire process of *dawah* relates to the moral reform of the individual. During the *chilla* journeys, male Tablighi Jamaat followers focus on the self-purification programme of Tablighi and *dawah* (Alam, 1993: 902). On their return, they are expected to apply what they have learned on their *dawah* journey, in everyday life and, most importantly, in family life. The senior leaders of Tablighi Jamaat advise that *dawah* has to begin from the family. That is why Tablighi Jamaat followers prioritize family life as the most important place for implementing their learning. They are expected to establish the



*Sunnah* and the direction of Allah within the family. The purpose of *dawah* is to follow Islam in every aspect of life to seek the mercy of Allah. It includes following all the primary directives of Islam, among which the Tablighi Jamaat particularly stress reviving the *Sunnah* of the Prophet Muhammad.

In relation to family life, younger Tablighi followers are expected to get married as soon as they reasonably can. According to Islam, every man and woman should get married as soon as they become mature (*balek*). This encourages early marriage for both men and women. Marriage is thought to play a significant role in maintaining a controlled and disciplined life, and in this sense, it acts as a protection for both men and women. Once Tablighi Jamaat followers have fulfilled the essential obligation of marriage, they can concentrate fully on *dawah* and Tabligh work. The Tablighi Jamaat treat *dawah* as an obligatory task for all Muslims, and fulfilling this obligation requires support from one's family. Consequently, most young Tablighi Jamaat followers marry someone who also has a Tablighi Jamaat background. This allows men to continue to perform *dawah* on a regular basis. It is also a priority for Tablighi Jamaat men to engage their wives in *dawah*, including *dawah* journeys among other Muslims, during which women are expected to maintain strict *purdah*.

Carrying out *dawah* is not only obligatory for men; it is also important for women. Therefore, Tablighi Jamaat men encourage their female members of the family to become involved with *dawah* work. In subsequent sections, I discuss finding partners and the significance of marriage for the Tablighi Jamaat, conjugal life and women's involvement in Tablighi Jamaat activities, and finally I will consider the impact of *dawah* activities on contemporary gender relations in Bangladesh. I will

suggest that participation in *dawah* creates a new and wider space for Muslim women in Bangladesh, and thus helps to reconfigure gender relations. Although it may reinforce the traditional patriarchal system in certain respects, at the same time it provides women with greater authority and agency in respect to Islam.

## **7.2 Marriage in the Tablighi Jamaat**

As already mentioned, Tablighi Jamaat followers are expected to follow the *Sunnah* in every aspect of their life, not only in the case of prayer but also in relation to all the activities of life (this is known as ‘reviving the *Sunnah*,’ *sunnat ke jinda kora*). In particular, marriage is considered as part of the *Sunnah*. Depending on individual circumstances, marriage can also be interpreted as obligatory (*farz*). In fact, there is disagreement about whether marriage should be considered primarily as a *Sunnah* or as *farz*. Most Tablighi Jamaat followers however hold that marriage is a *Sunnah*, which is why they emphasize on the importance of getting married as soon as possible. This notion of early marriage, especially for girls, is also in line with Bangladeshi patriarchal values.

For both men and women, the first stage is the selection of an appropriate partner. This is an important task and has to be carried out according to Islamic instruction. Moulana Abdul Khalek, a 29-year old man who participated in the same *chilla* journey as me, explained his views on the selection of a bride:

If your wife (*bibi*) is a religious person, everything will be easy (*ahsan*) for you. You will be responsible for your wife. At the Day of Judgment, you have to be accountable to Allah for your *bibi*. [If you have not taught your wife properly] At that time, your wife will say, ‘My husband provided me

food and clothes, but did not teach me how to be religiously observant (*deendar*). Now, due to my lack of *deendari*, you are sending me to hell, but before you send me to the hell, send my husband to hell first'. However, if the husband helps the wife to learn *deendari*, Allah will reward him with heaven through his wife's recommendation. A man is responsible for four classes of women, his daughter, wife, mother, and sister. A woman can take a man in any of these four relationships to hell with her if they fail to teach her *deendari*. Alternatively, if they teach her *deendari*, she can take them to heaven. That is why *deendari* is important. If your wife is *deendar*, whatever you bring to your family, they will be happy. She will manage the family properly and will say, '*Alhamdulillah* [May God be praised], look, your father brought this for you, he is working hard for you. This is *halal* and Allah will give us benefit (*barakat*)'. She will make your children understand that if they are happy with the food they are given, Allah will reward them in heaven. When your *bibi* is *deendar*, she is happy and contented with the income and food, and she manages her children well. If she is not *deendar*, even if you bring better food, if she does not like it, she will not be happy. Moreover, she will tell the children, 'Your father brought this, if you want to eat, then take it, or you can go'. When this kind of thing happens regularly, children will lose their faith in their parents. They will demand more than you can ever fulfil. If your wife is *deendar*, if you buy her one piece of cloth [such as a single *sari*], she will wear it for an entire year. She will say, '*Alhamdulillah*,' and will be grateful to Allah. She will lead her life, as you want (*apnar manosha motabek cholbe*). There is a popular proverb, if you give me an educated

mother, I will give you an educated nation. If a mother is *deendar*, all the children from the family (*silsila*) will be *deendar*.

Thus, when looking for a bride, finding a *deendar* woman is the most important issue. A *deendar* wife can be strongly helpful for the family to maintain an Islamic lifestyle. Another precondition involved with an Islamic lifestyle is *purdah*. Here are Moulana Abdul Khalek's views on *purdah*:

*Purdah* keeps women at home. They do not go out because they maintain *purdah*. That is why they cannot interact with other men. They do not have any idea about the character and company of other men. Therefore, when a woman who has observed *purdah* marries, she is happy with whatever her husband is able to give her. She thinks, 'This is new to me and I never experienced this, now I am receiving it and I like it'. She gets 100% attention and love from her husband. In return, she also loves her husband in the same way. There is no differentiation in their love. This helps them to be happy in their conjugal life.

In Islam, as it was practised in Bangladesh and elsewhere, the open expression of love between husband and wife was not seen as appropriate. However, the Tablighi Jamaat philosophy is to try to follow the conjugal lifestyle of Prophet Muhammad, which forms part of *Sunnah*. Consequently, Tablighi Jamaat followers believe that the expression of love, as practised by the Prophet, is important, and they try to follow it in the initial stages of marriage.

Moulana Abdul Khalek explained another Islamic rule regarding the selection of a bride:

One of the Islamic instructions on marriage is that the status of the groom has to be higher than that of the bride. When this is the case, understanding becomes easy between the two. The wife never expects anything beyond her status, and if she demands anything, that will be within the means of her husband. Moreover, it is easier to control her. In such a case, the wife does not have any pride. She cannot say, ‘My father is much richer than you are. What have you got?’ It is easier for them to adjust to each other.

Marriage also has a significant relationship with undertaking *chilla*. Almost all of my unmarried *chilla* mates, along with other Tablighi Jamaat informants, expressed the wish to complete three *chillas* and then get married. For example, Shamsur Rahman said:

If I can complete my next *chilla*, that is my *nesabi*<sup>44</sup> *chilla*, I will be free of tension. After that, I can get married. *Nesabi chilla* is important for those who completed three *chillas*. The senior leaders (*murubbi*) of Kakrail<sup>45</sup> always emphasize it. If you cannot do your *nesabi chilla* every year, you may lose your attachment to the Tablighi Jamaat and become more and more involved with worldly affairs. For example, you will start feeling that you cannot perform your next *chilla* due to your worldly tasks. That is why

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<sup>44</sup> After completing the first three *chillas*, Tablighi Jamaat members are advised to complete one *chilla* each year. This *chilla* is referred to as the *nesabi chilla*, the scheduled *chilla* for each year.

<sup>45</sup> The headquarters (*markaz*) of the Tablighi Jamaat in Bangladesh is located at the Kakrail Mosque in Ramna, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

if we can do it regularly there is no risk of being isolated from the Tablighi Jamaat. At the same time, I want to do a diploma in information technology and to start my own business. If I do this now without first undertaking the *nesabi chilla*, I might not be able to find time for the *chilla*. Therefore, completion of the *chilla* is my first priority at this time. Otherwise, it would be difficult for me to continue my *nesabi chilla*.

Another Tablighi Jamaat follower, Abdul Kader, expressed his views on *chilla*:

After completing three *chilla*, I will marry *inshaallah*. ... Three *chilla* helps us to be on the track of *dawah*. It also helps to maintain the direction (*hukum*) of Allah. People can maintain a *halal* lifestyle. It helps to keep our faith (*iman*) strong.

I asked him further about the idea that undertaking *chilla* helped to keep one's belief strong. He replied,

Yes. I am going to three *chillas* to make it strong and firm. So that, I can follow Islam in every aspect of my family life. ....After submitting my thesis I will go on three *chillas* and then I will plan for my marriage.

My Tablighi Jamaat interviewees view marriage as an effective tool for getting rid of sins. They also hold that it helps them in maintaining a religious life. It was a common belief among my interviewees that, through marrying, a person can get rid

of various kinds of sins. Marriage acts as a protection. This is like *purdah* for men.

Shamsur Rahman told us more about this:

Through marriage, a man can get rid of sins. By marrying, a person can control himself from the attraction of other women. It also helps one from unnecessarily gazing at other women, which is difficult for an unmarried man. Whenever an unmarried man sees a woman, he is forced to think about her. In a sense, he becomes distracted for a while. However, a married person does not have that problem. That is why it is said that the prayer of a married person is more effective than prayer of an unmarried man.

Dr. Mashiur Rahman, who studied in a renowned Medical College in Bangladesh, has a similar understanding about marriage. He explained the logic behind why he got married early. Doing *chilla* brought a huge change in him. However, he was already thinking about leading an Islamic life before going for *chilla*. An Islamic lifestyle can bring a peaceful life, and marriage makes it easier for a man to lead his life with faith (*iman*) and hope (*amal*). Rahman said:

Because most of the sins we commit are related to women. Isn't it? When we have a family, we have responsibilities for the family and for wife. It is said that, 'If your *deel* (heart) diverts to other women, you should think about your wife. Because your wife has everything that other women have got'. You will find peace in this way. This means that it would be easier to maintain a religious life if you get married. After I got back from the *chilla*,

if I looked at women, it seemed to me that I was committing sin. At every step, I thought I was doing wrong, which was not the case before. Finally, I realized that this is not the right way. From that point, I thought about marriage seriously. Marriage would help me to lead a religious and Islamic life. After marriage, I did not have any female friends; my only concentration was on my studies and family. During my *chilla*, all the time I said *dua*<sup>46</sup> so that I could lead a religious life. I always pray *tahajjud* [an additional, voluntary prayer performed at night] at night. I did it 30 to 35 times during my stay in the *chilla*. I also did the special prayer of *istekhara*<sup>47</sup>. I learnt from the *alem* (teacher, scholar) that you could say *dua* for your marriage. I always said a *dua* after praying *istekhara*. After coming back from the *chilla*, I talked to my parents about getting married and they agreed with me.

Thus, the Tablighi Jamaat followers I interviewed view marriage as an effective tool in leading an Islamic lifestyle. That is why early marriage is a common practice among many Tablighi Jamaat followers. It is also easy within family life to revive the *Sunnah* of the Prophet and to follow his directions. Therefore, marriage is not something undertaken only because of human demands; it is also a way of helping people to reach their religious destiny. For this reason, every ritual and practice related to marriage has to follow the rule of Islam.

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<sup>46</sup> *Dua* are special prayers or supplications performed in addition to the five regular prayers each day (*salat*).

<sup>47</sup> This is another special kind of prayer, which is performed in order to seek guidance from Allah when one is in a confusing situation or struggling to take the right decision. The recommended time for performing *istekhara* is after the *esha* or evening prayer.



Love is also central, since this reflects the ideal lifestyle of the Prophet. Following the Prophet means ‘reviving the *Sunnah*,’ and one will be rewarded for it in heaven. Premarital love, however, is strongly discouraged by the Tablighi Jamaat. Abdul Kader explained his thoughts on this issue:

The concept of Islam is my concept. I do not have any special concept about marriage. The way Islam says, I have to follow that. There is no option in Islam that allows one to see a woman. This is not acceptable (*jayej*). Even if there is an urgent need to speak to a woman, one can talk to her behind a curtain. Natural conversation is not allowed in Islam. Therefore, there is no option for premarital love at all.

This does not mean that a man cannot see his bride before marriage. The Tablighi Jamaat however do not support the practice of so-called ‘*halal* dating’, which is encouraged by some Islamic revivalist movements. In this practice, men and women are encouraged to meet under proper Islamic circumstances in order to find an appropriate partner. According to the Tablighi Jamaat, a man is allowed to meet his bride once before marriage and to talk for a limited period, but the time is restricted and they cannot meet repeatedly. Tablighi Jamaat followers are quite strict about this. They are also concerned about the social and festive nature of the marriage, and have specific directions about organizing the marriage ceremony. Moulana Abdul Khalek explained about the marriage ceremony:

In the marriage, performing the *walima* is a *Sunnah*. The *walima* means *bou vat*, the main reception programme that is organized by the groom at

his house. There is no concept of *barjatra*<sup>48</sup> in Islam. There is no obligatory direction about a number of people going to the house of the bride. The *walima* is a *Sunnah* and it has to be within three days of marriage. For the bride, there is no obligation to arrange a reception programme. If anyone wants to or is interested in doing this, he can do it, and it will be counted as a good deed. If the father of the bride says, ‘Allah gave me the capacity, I will organize an event for marriage,’ [he can do it]. However, the others cannot force him to. Now another trend is the *gaye holud*,<sup>49</sup> that is totally *na jayej* (not allowed) in Islam. The husband sits on the stage, everyone goes and put a little bit of turmeric on his or her face ...why do you put turmeric on his face? By doing this, people do not keep their *purdah*, rather men and women interact with each other; they touch each other; that is totally *na jayej*. There is no allowance for the *gaye holud* in Islam.

Bangladeshi marriages consist of an elaborate series of ceremonies and receptions, though the details vary considerably (Rozario and Samuel 2010). They normally start with the *gaye holud* or ‘turmeric ceremony,’ the ritual which Moulana Abdul Khalek is rejecting above as un-Islamic. In its usual contemporary form, this is performed for the bride in her house and separately for the groom in his house. As part of the ceremony, the bride’s and bridegroom’s relatives, including members of the opposite sex, come up to them, feed them sweet rice and place turmeric paste on their face and body.

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<sup>48</sup> In Bangladesh, a group of people goes with the groom on the final day of marriage to the bride’s house. This journey is known as *barjatra*.

<sup>49</sup> The *gaye holud* is a standard part of most Bangladeshi marriages.

Singing also plays a big part in marriage rituals. There are groups of women from neighbouring households who regularly sing during the marriage ceremonies. This song is known as *biyer geet* or the song of marriage. In recent years, people from the upper classes have begun to hire groups of professional musicians to sing in the *gaye holud* event, making it even more objectionable to the Tablighi Jamaat. Marriages also generally allow for a certain amount of free mixing between young men and women, again regarded as unacceptable by the Tablighi Jamaat.

In practice, Tablighi Jamaat followers may try to insist on the marriage being carried out in an 'Islamic way,' with limited contact between men and women and as little as possible of the conspicuous display characteristic of normal Bangladeshi weddings (e.g. Rozario and Samuel 2010). Sometimes, marriages are carried out at the *Bishwa Ijtema* which is a specifically Tablighi Jamaat occasion so that the whole event can be performed in accordance with Tablighi Jamaat requirements.<sup>50</sup>

### **7.3 The Tablighi Jamaat and the Family**

I now turn to look at the role of the Tablighi Jamaat in family life. Throughout the *chilla* and *dawah* that I undertook the accompanying senior Tablighi Jamaat followers repeatedly emphasized the importance of starting the Tablighi activities from the family. If the entire family realizes the importance and significance of the *dawah*, it will be easier for the husband to immerse himself in the Tablighi Jamaat.

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<sup>50</sup> As Janson notes for The Gambia, where a similar development has taken place, this also means that a whole area of ritual and ceremonial activity traditionally under the control of women is now being eliminated (Janson 2008: 19).

The beginning of Tabligh at home starts with the practice of *ta'leem* or Islamic instruction.<sup>51</sup> The Tablighi Jamaat leaders advise that one should start *ta'leem* when everyone is available at home. It is to be performed with the mutual understanding of family members. In the early stage, the length of the *ta'leem* should not last for long. The time and length of the *ta'leem* should increase slowly. The *ta'leem* helps to create the environment at home for the Tablighi Jamaat. It also helps to transform the mind-set of family members. During the *chilla*, the senior members advise the participants to engage the female members of their home to join the Tablighi Jamaat. They should begin by introducing the *ta'leem* and the final stage is to go out with their wives for *masturaat jamaat*.

The *masturaat jamaat* is designed especially for couples. It consists of a short *dawah* journey, often just for three days, in which a small number of married couples travel together. The men stay as a group at mosques in the places they visit, as normal, while the women stay as a group in a house in each place belonging to a local Tablighi Jamaat follower. During my fieldwork in Bangladesh, senior Tablighi Jamaat followers regularly tried to motivate me to take my wife on a *masturaat jamaat*. This always took place in the context of a one-to-one discussion, usually when we were relaxing together in the mosque. After coming back to Dhaka after the *chilla*, I attended a five-day *joor*<sup>52</sup> in Tongi. During this time, I met a couple of my *chilla* mates. One of them was Munin Ahmed, who suggested that I should take my wife on a *masturaat jamaat*. As he advised:

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<sup>51</sup> The word *ta'leem* is related to *ilm* or Islamic knowledge, and refers to the process by which *ilm* is acquired (Alam, 1993).

<sup>52</sup> This is a preparatory gathering at Tongi, which takes place one month in advance of the annual *Ijtema* to organize the work plan and discuss their targets with the members. It is aimed primarily for Tablighi Jamaat followers who have already completed at least one *chilla*, but other Tablighi Jamaat followers also take part.

Try to motivate your wife to attend a *masturaat jamaat*. Three days long, the *masturaat jamaat* is very important for women. It is said that 40 days of *dawah* for a man is equivalent to three days *dawah* for a woman. The heart of a woman is soft; therefore, it is easy to motivate them. Three days of *masturaat jamaat* can have a tremendous effect on their lives.

The creation of this mind-set of one's wife is considered as an important task. Once the women realize the significance of the Tablighi Jamaat, they will not complain about their husbands' *dawah* tasks, and will be ready to sacrifice for the betterment of the *dawah*. In achieving this, the *ta'leem* and *masturaat jamaat* play important roles. They provide the anchor. Moreover, the *ta'leem* and *masturaat jamaat* provide the opportunity for women to learn more about Islam. Acquiring more knowledge increases women's ability and confidence when talking about *dawah* to other women and many of the female Tablighi Jamaat followers organize regular *ta'leem* sessions in their locality. The entire process of *ta'leem* and *masturaat jamaat* provides women with both the opportunity and the strength to motivate other women in their society. Men have the opportunity to travel to various places for *dawah* work. However, women have restricted mobility, and can only meet other women during the weekly *ta'leem* sessions or the *masturaat jamaat*.

If the men get support from their family, it becomes easier to continue the *dawah* task. As Moulana Abdul Khalek said:

When I decide to go out for a *chilla* or a three-day *dawah* journey, my wife helps me to prepare my luggage. She always gives me mental support for the *dawah* task. She never asks a question or poses an argument about why I am going now or why am I spending so much of my time in *dawah* work, because she realises the significance of the *dawah* work. My wife helps me to wake up at midnight to pray *tahajjud*. I am getting huge support from my family to continue my religious task.

That is why Tablighi Jamaat followers stress the need for regular *ta'leem* sessions at home. However, it is relatively easy for Moulana Abdul Khalek to get the support of his wife regarding the Tablighi Jamaat, since her father is also an active and dedicated Tablighi Jamaat follower, and she has received the basic teaching and knowledge about Islam and Tablighi Jamaat from her family. This might not be the case for most Tablighi Jamaat followers, who may have to work harder to create the appropriate home environment for their family.

Apart from the *ta'leem* and *masturaat jamaat*, women can contribute in another way. They are asked to say *dua* for the success of the *ijtema* and *joor*. The senior leaders of Tablighi Jamaat at Kakrail advised the participants in the *ijtema* to motivate their wives to pray and say *dua*. The Tablighi Jamaat says that, if the women do *dua*, they will be rewarded in the same way as the men are for their *chilla*. As they are not in a position to take part in the *ijtema* directly, they can achieve similar rewards by praying for the success of *ijtema*. With some other men, I took part in a *ta'leem* session that was specially organized for women in Dhaka, where the speaker, who

came from the Kakrail mosque, stressed on the importance of saying *dua* for the upcoming *ijtema*<sup>53</sup>.

#### **7.4 Gender and the Tablighi Jamaat**

As I noted at the outset, the question of gender relations in the Tablighi Jamaat has already attracted considerable academic interest. Metcalf noted some years ago that the Tablighi Jamaat ideal for men was that they be 'humble, pious, consultative, simple in their living habits, and unconcerned with hierarchy' (Metcalf 1998: 114). In the context of *dawah* tours, Tablighi men take on typical female tasks such as cooking, serving food, washing clothes and nursing the ill. Metcalf suggests that while Tablighi women are expected to remain at home and have distinct social roles from men, the emphasis on humility and piety, and the willingness of men to take on female roles, encourages more egalitarian relationships between women and men (Metcalf 1998: 115). De Féo argues that Tablighi Jamaat gender roles have positive advantages for women:

Despite appearances, disappearing behind the black veil does not mean inactivity for women. In fact, Tablighi women are much more involved in outside activities than other Muslim women obeying their traditional domestic roles. And they get more by wearing the *purdah*: behind a "fanatical" appearance, they show their social level and they use their clothes to exercise power over men. This does not mean that Tablighi women are not virtuous and strongly religious, but that belonging to the

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<sup>53</sup> I sat in a separate room with the men. There was a microphone in the men's room, so that the speech delivered by the senior man could be transmitted to the women's room. The house also had two different entrances, so that women and men did not need to meet or interact with each other face to face.

Tabligh is not only a spiritual way of life, it is also another way for women to assert themselves (Féo 2009).

In the Bangladeshi context, as in Metcalf's material on Pakistan, female Tablighi Jamaat activists are not visible in the public sphere of life. They observe strict *purdah* and confine themselves within the household. Even if they want to go for *dawah*, they have to be accompanied either by their husband, brother or father, who is responsible for women in all aspects of their lives. Women have to live under the supervision of men. Saiful Islam, the *ameer* (leader) of the *chilla* that I went on in Bangladesh, said:

Allah created men as superior to women. They always have greater authority compared to women. That is why a man has to be the household leader. Even when we consult within the household about any issue, women cannot hold a leadership role. If the husband is not alive, her son has to be the *zimmadar* (person in charge).

This statement clearly argues for the superiority of men. However, the Tablighi Jamaat discourages the notion of autocracy within the family. During my *chilla*, senior members always emphasized that whatever decision you take should come through mutual understanding and consultation with your wife. Each man is responsible for his wife and family. The main purpose of the teachings people obtain during their *chilla* journey is to make the family harmonious and peaceful. Family life is not only about responsibilities. It is also about living harmoniously together. Shamsur Rahman, one of the members with whom I went on a *chilla*, said:



The conjugal life should be a friendly relationship. Our Prophet, himself, was playful with his wives. They teased each other like friends (*hasi thatta korten*). He always used the same glass as his *bibi* and particularly that part of the glass where his *bibi* had touched her lips. This is the example of love (*mohabbat*). He used to feed his *bibi* with his own hands. There has to be honour for each other. Your *bibi* is to be considered as a friend and treated with great honour. There has to be respect.

By following the lifestyle of Prophet Muhammad, Tablighi Jamaat followers can replicate this in their own family life as well. Tablighi Jamaat followers use the life of Prophet Muhammad as a guide for every aspect of their life. Two of Metcalf's interviewees commented on how being involved in the Tablighi Jamaat has improved their family life (2000: 53), and this is certainly in agreement with my own findings.

In the traditional patriarchal family structure in Bangladesh, there is an established hierarchy among men and women, which is particularly visible in the division of labour, with women most likely involved with the roles that bear less status in a society. The Tablighi Jamaat may stress the need for more cooperative and harmonious relationships in the family, but it is difficult to say how far being involved in the Tablighi Jamaat actually reduces the hierarchical nature of the relationships. As we have seen, Tablighi Jamaat followers believe that men are superior to women and that it is men's responsibilities to maintain and look after the women in the family. In the *chilla* and other *dawah* journeys, the senior members and *ameer* always stress the need to manage the women in the family.

It is particularly important to establish a Tablighi atmosphere in the family. The mother is described as the ‘first *madrasa*’ for children in the Tablighi Jamaat movement (Khan, cited in Sikand, 1999: 49). That is why the first step enjoined in the *chilla* is to introduce the *ta’leem* at home. There are also specific recommendations what should be included in these initial *ta’leem* sessions. For example, one should read about the involvement of women in various religious activities in the early days of Islam and the sacrifices that they made. This helps to prepare their mind to follow Tablighi Jamaat activities. Once women believe in Tablighi Jamaat principles, everything will become easy for men. Men can guide them according to their wish. They slowly become isolated from the outside world and become a part of the Tablighi world.

Janson reports that in the Gambia, Tablighi men may take over part of their wives’ domestic workload so that the women can participate fully in *ta’leem* or other Tablighi activities. Tablighi Jamaat women in the Gambia participate actively in *dawah* activity, going on *chilla* for 40 days, if under male supervision. Some women also work outside the home to help support their husband’s missionary activities, though in traditionally feminine areas such as teaching or nursing (Janson 2008: 25). This points to a rather different pattern of gender relations from the Bangladeshi Tablighi Jamaat. Tablighi Jamaat men in Bangladesh help their wives with some of their household tasks, but the expectation is that women will withdraw from society, including education and paid work, and in effect become invisible. It is very difficult to find a married female Tablighi Jamaat follower in Bangladesh who works outside the home. In contrast, in other Islamic movements in Bangladesh, such as Jamaat-i-Islami Bangladesh, women engage with the movement actively and take part in

every sphere of life. While they are following Islamic practices, they also go to work, study and so on. Tablighi men in contrast seek brides who will stay at home, accept the lifestyle chosen by their husbands, and follow their directions. Shamsur Rahman, talked about his expectations for his prospective wife:

All the responsibilities of my wife are mine. I want my *bibi* to stay at home. Her responsibilities are to maintain and look after the home. I do not want my *bibi* to work outside. It is not because of my recent move to Tablighi Jamaat. Before I joined Tablighi Jamaat, my intention was the same. However, after joining Tablighi Jamaat this sense has become stronger. When I discuss this with my friends, they laugh at me . . . We have unlimited demands. Look at the people of Dhaka. Amongst the educated, husbands and wives both work. As they both work, their living expenses also increase. That means they are remaining in the same place. In return, they are losing their peace. They are running after money. I do not want my children getting half of their mother's love. I want them to have full concentration and time from their mother. If my *bibi* worked outside of the home, it would not be possible. Many of you may think of me as old-fashioned, but this is the line along, which I think.

The practices which Shamsur Rahman supports reinforce traditional notions of patriarchal gender relations and the subordination of women within the family structure. Access to education and employability are the two main preconditions of women's empowerment. If the Tablighi Jamaat tends to uphold the idea that women

should stay within the household for the sake of religion, this clearly makes them easier for men to control.

The use of religion to maintain relations of dominance is not new. However, apart from controlling women, the Tablighi Jamaat offers a new dimension as well. As Sikand states:

Although the movement aims at reinforcing the traditional gender division of labor, it affords, in the process, new role models for women to emulate which can be seen as providing, at one level, significant departures from traditional gender norms. What is particularly interesting here is the central role that women come to be seen as playing in the spread of normative Islam, a role that traditional Islam in South Asia at least had hardly envisaged for them before' (Sikand 1999: 48-49).

Sikand (1999) further states that *tabligh* may 'open up new spaces for women' within the family situation as well, allowing them 'to exercise greater say in religious affairs' (1999: 49). Women's participation in Tablighi Jamaat and *dawah* provides them with the confidence and legitimacy to express their own views about religious matters. Women are encouraged to learn about Islam so that they can engage in *dawah* and *tabligh* among other women and family members (Metcalf, 1996b).

For women who lead *ta'leem* sessions, the Tablighi Jamaat can arguably lead to significant empowerment through religious authority.<sup>54</sup> Other participants may also benefit, if in a lesser way. My wife, who helped me by participating in *ta'leem* sessions during my fieldwork, noted how one of the norms of women's *ta'leem* sessions is that the women sit together closely, touching each other (*gaye gaye lege bosha*). In the Bangladeshi context, it is unusual for women from different social classes to sit closely together, and the lower-class women clearly appreciate the respect they were in effect being given. The result might not be empowerment in any strong sense, but it definitely has a positive impact on their behaviour and well-being.

In Saba Mahmood's well-known study of a women's mosque-based movement in Egypt, *The Politics of Piety*, she argues that training in *dawah* had given many Egyptian women substantial authority from which they can speak and challenge their husbands on issues of proper Islamic conduct (Mahmood, 2005: 179). Mahmood claimed that this movement provided women with significant agency in relation to religious affairs. In Bangladesh, women rarely have access to mosques. The Tablighi Jamaat provides them with a chance to engage in *dawah*, which is predominantly conceived as the role of men. Here it is important to recognise that, as Monsoor argues, the subordination is not really caused by religion or tradition as such, but by patriarchal influence and authority (Monsoor 1999: 35). Both religion and tradition are used by men to justify or to legitimize their domination over women. In such a

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<sup>54</sup> See White 2010 for an example of a rural Bangladeshi woman ('Amma Huzur') who has attained a significant amount of religious authority in her rural community through involvement in Tablighi Jamaat.

context, religious knowledge provides women with a weapon of resistance and positive agency.

In most cases, wives are already motivated and have a positive concept about the Tablighi Jamaat. Tablighi men consciously look for women who are already oriented towards the Tablighi Jamaat or at least have a strong religious orientation. The case of Fahmida illustrates how this can work. Fahmida was about 22 years old when she got married with a Tablighi man. It was her own choice to marry a Tablighi man. Her mother had taken her regularly to *ta'leem* sessions. She was so influenced by them that she started to follow Tablighi and Islamic rules in her life. She left her studies and stopped going to the college for her bachelor degree. She said, 'I am covering myself with the veil and it protects me from the view of other men, that's all right. However, when I go out, how can I control my eyes when I see men on the street? If I stay at home, no one will see me and I will not be able to see other men either.' After a while, she married a Tablighi man who was an engineer by profession. They did not see or meet each other before marriage, they only enquired about each other's level of religiosity and dedication to Islam.

This example illustrates how women can accept the context of the Islamic family in which men have the ultimate authority. Submission to the husband's authority leads them to a situation where neither argument nor resistance are required. Everything becomes part of the process of making Allah happy and following the direction of the Prophet. Thus, the worldly issue of control over women becomes less important.

However, not all marriages work this smoothly. In Fahmida's case, she had chosen her husband. This is not the general case for Bangladesh. Women always have less choice in relation to marriage than men do. In fact, in Islamic practice in Bangladesh, the girl often has no choice at all, though in Islam it is said that the bride should have a say in choosing her partner. In practice, many Tablighi Jamaat followers impose their decisions on their child, seeing this as part of the process of implementing Islamic values in every aspect of life. The next case will clarify this. The *ameer* of the Baytus Sujud Jame Masjeed, Rahmat Ullah, who was also a founder member of the mosque, got involved with the Tablighi Jamaat in the 1980s. His elder daughter Jhumi, aged about 20, got a place in the Women Studies Department at Dhaka University. She had to leave her studies to be married to an *alem* (religious scholar) who had graduated from a *madrasa*. After marriage, she had to stop her studies entirely due to her husband's pressure. Her parents also did not try to insist on her returning to university. Here we can see the rejection of the 'secular' form of education by Tablighi Jamaat followers. It is hard to find Tablighi Jamaat women at university in Bangladesh, although every public university in Bangladesh has a large number of male Tablighi followers. Thus, Tablighi Jamaat followers deliberately pressure women to stay indoors and look after the family.

As I mentioned above, the wife of Moulana Abdul Khalek was the daughter of a Tablighi follower. I met Moulana Abdul Khalek's father-in-law during my *chilla* in Nageswary, in northern Bangladesh. He had stopped his daughter's schooling and kept her at home under the supervision of his wife. His wife taught everything that she thought necessary, including religious education and the study of *Qur'an* and *Hadith*. This is very common among many Tablighi Jamaat families. In most cases,

the girls accept what is happening and become isolated from the world, eventually being married off to a Tablighi Jamaat man. This helps to ensure, as we have already seen, that the bride is accustomed to the Tablighi lifestyle and that it will be easy for husband and wife to carry on the *dawah* task together.

## **7.5 Conclusion**

As stated at the beginning of this chapter, the central idea of the Tablighi Jamaat is to learn the process of *dawah* and to implement that basic learning in every aspect of life. The first step of implementing their learning begins from the home or family; men have to establish what they have learned within their own families. At the same time, they have to work to convey this message to other Muslims within and beyond their locality. The idea is to bring *deen* alive among the whole people.

The Tablighi Jamaat is very aware that it will be easier for men to follow the Tablighi Jamaat if they have support from the family. Thus, introducing and promoting Tablighi Jamaat within the family is of benefit to men as well. At the same time, it is the duty of men to make sure that their wives are involved in *deen* and maintain *deen*. These are the primary reasons why the Tablighi Jamaat emphasises teaching within the family.

We can ask in conclusion what changes Tablighi Jamaat practice brings within the family, and what consequences these have for the wider society. To begin with, the family, as we have seen, is the initial stage in which the *ta'leem* is introduced at home. The successful establishment of *ta'leem* at home encourages women to participate in weekly *ta'leem* sessions in some reputed local Tablighi Jamaat



follower's house. Finally, women may participate in a *masturaat jamaat*, although this is less popular in Bangladesh. All these practices have longstanding potential influence on the formation of a family. Their ultimate target is to follow the lifestyle of the Prophet, which will help them go to paradise. Senior Tablighi Jamaat followers constantly repeat the need to create a simple life within the house (*sada sida zindegi ghar er modhe*), and say that if anyone can do so, he or she can maintain a life of paradise (*jannater zindegi*).

Does this life, however, offer anything new to the wider society? If we look carefully, we can see that the Tablighi Jamaat is not at all interested in trying to break the circle of patriarchal authority. Rather, they consciously place men in a superior position to women, reflecting the male dominance within the movement. As Sikand (2002) states, the Tablighi Jamaat's narrow and restricted gender regime in fact reinforces women's subordination. However, participation in the *ta'leem* and *dawah* gives women positive knowledge about Islam and can lead to a sense of agency. Whether this leads in Bangladesh to the same degree of empowerment and agency that Metcalf, Janson or Féo suggests in their studies, or that Mahmood argues, in a non-Tablighi Jamaat context, for Egypt, is uncertain. There are undoubtedly some cases where this happens (as in the case of the Tablighi woman discussed in White 2010), but the overall pattern is mixed. In my own field material, it seems at least as true to say that many women who become involved in the Tablighi Jamaat lose their individual voice and their ability to make choices in areas such as education, marriage, or other life activities, and become invisible to the wider society. Yet this can itself be the result of a conscious choice, as with Fahmida, who clearly wanted a Tablighi Jamaat husband, and was able to get what

she wanted. For Fahmida, a man involved with the Tablighi Jamaat seemed the most reliable choice, since he could be expected to follow Islam in his life and so to treat her in the way that the Prophet treated his wives.

As for Metcalf's argument that Tablighi Jamaat men adopt a more humble and feminine role, my wife found many women at *ta'leem* sessions praising their husbands for treating them politely, gently and with honour. However, the husbands retain authority in the family. In this sense, what the Tablighi Jamaat offers in Bangladesh is a new family structure that nevertheless stays within local patriarchal norms. The new Tablighi Jamaat family offers women avenues for agency and individual self-expression through personal engagement in *dawah*, as well as a degree of consideration and gentleness from their husbands, which might be less common in many patriarchal families in Bangladesh. However, it does not provide a context for radical empowerment of women, and it was never intended to. Women's agency in the Tablighi Jamaat remains strictly limited by Tablighi Jamaat understandings of Islamic teachings on men's authority over women.

Chapter Seven was the last of the four chapters presenting my Bangladeshi data. In the next three chapters, I present material from my research in the UK.

## **Part 2: UK**

## Chapter Eight

### Participation in a Weekly *Gasht*

#### 8.1 Getting Involved in *Dawah*

Chapter Eight is the first of three chapters presenting the results of my fieldwork in the UK. In this chapter, I give an ethnographic account of my participation in weekly *dawah* activities in a Cardiff mosque. I started my fieldwork in the UK when I met a Malaysian Tablighi Jamaat group who came in the UK to preach among the Malaysian Students. As part of their preaching journey, they stayed for three days in a mosque near Cardiff University. I met Abdul here, who is a Bangladeshi Muslim living in the UK, as I progressed with the fieldwork; Abdul became my key informant in Cardiff. Later on, he introduced me to his fellow Tablighi Jamaat followers in his local mosque in Cardiff where I participated in their regular weekly *gasht*. When I came back from Bangladesh after the first field visit and began fieldwork in the UK, one question came to my mind, that is; does the Tablighi Jamaat in the UK follow the same process of preaching? Or is it different from Bangladesh? How successful is it in the UK?

When I began to participate with the local Tablighi group in the Uthman Mosque located in the district of Cardiff called Riverside, initially it looked similar to the Tablighi work in Bangladesh. After spending some time with the group, I noticed some differences in doing the weekly *gasht* in Cardiff. The environment of the UK and the ethnic diversity of the Tablighi Jamaat group had led to a need to be flexible in some aspects of preaching.



The Uthman mosque: Cardiff (photo was taken by the researcher)

The main official aim of the Tablighi Jamaat in the UK is to strengthen faith by establishing Islamic practices among Muslims, which is not different from the aim in Bangladesh or elsewhere. The Tablighi Jamaat in the UK follows the same fundamental books that guide members of the movement throughout their preaching worldwide, and which have been translated in to Urdu, English, Bengali, Arabic and some other languages. In Cardiff, they follow these books in Urdu. Initially before joining the *gasht* in Cardiff, I asked Abdul how they do *dawah* in the UK. Abdul told me that they follow exactly the same process that is developed by Moulana Ilyas. Abdul stated:

The main *usul* [foundation or the base] is the same. We can't say three *ta'leem*, it's two *ta'leems*. One is local and one in the mosque. Two *gashts*,

not three *gashts*. One local *gasht*, one *beruni gasht*<sup>55</sup>. One *mashoara* [meeting] Bangladeshi, Pakistan, Indian, Saudi Arabia everywhere, one *mashoara*, the time of doing *gasht* may be different. At least a three-day *dawah* in every month has to be carried out.

A similar opinion came from Bokhtiar, who is the leader (*ameer*) of the Tablighi Jamaat in the East London Mosque:

It's all the same. You cannot find any difference in our *dawah* work at all. All of us follow the same clothing; keep a beard, which means to follow the *Sunnah* in their lives. People here use an overcoat or heavy clothing in winter. Other than this, everything is the same.

It is clear from these two statements that the followers of the Tablighi Jamaat say that the fundamental process of doing *dawah* is the same in every country. My observation and participation with various levels of *dawah* in Bangladesh and the UK also suggests that the fundamental process of doing *dawah* is the same. The followers are not allowed to add any new element in their *dawah*. If any changes are necessary, it would come from the global headquarters based in Delhi. I observed the presence of traditional Tablighi clothing that is influenced by the clothing style of the pioneers of the Tablighi Jamaat in Mewat, India. I noticed, however, that the Pakistani followers sometimes used small hats that are different from the traditional cap that one has to wear during prayer. In most cases I found that they wore *shalwar kamez* (*payjama panjabi* in Bengali terms), and kept a beard. The clothing style is

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<sup>55</sup> *Gasht* in a neighbouring mosque is known as *beruni gasht*.

almost the same as that of the Bangladeshi Tablighi followers. In Bangladesh, most Tablighi followers wear these *shalwar kamez* because this is the dress that Tablighi followers wear in most parts of South Asia. Tablighi followers in Bangladesh also use a *lungi* instead of a *payjama*, because it is the widely used traditional dress for men in Bangladesh.

## **8.2 The *Gasht* at the Uthman Mosque<sup>56</sup>**

Abdul told me to participate in their weekly *gasht* to learn how they do *dawah*. With the help of Abdul, I began to take part in their *gasht* every week during my fieldwork. Abdul introduced me to most of the Tablighi followers in the mosque. Most Tablighi Jamaat followers in Cardiff had emigrated from Pakistan. This is why they make most of their speeches in Urdu<sup>57</sup> (the national language of Pakistan). I was not very familiar with Urdu but survived with listening. Abdul was the only Bangladeshi, so if I needed any clarification, I asked him. Tablighi followers from the Uthman mosque did an *umumi gasht* (a weekly *gasht*) on every Monday after *asor* prayer. After the *asor* prayer, the caretaker of the mosque (*muajjeen*) invited all participants who came to pray in the mosque to join in the *boyan* (sermon) and *gasht*. This invitation is known as *ehlan* among the Tablighi Jamaat followers. He started in Urdu. He mentioned that *dawah* is one way of serving God. Finally, he said,, ‘it is the duty of every Muslim to pray and invite other Muslims to pray’. He wanted to know the intention of the participants, whether they were ready to do that or not. Everyone nodded their head and loudly said that, ‘yes, we all will do *dawah*’.

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<sup>56</sup> In 2012, I noticed the name of the mosque was changed to Riverside Islamic School, Masjeed Uthman.

<sup>57</sup> Urdu is thought to be the language of Islam in South Asia. In many *madrasas* in India and Bangladesh, the language of education is Urdu, which is why Tablighi Jamaat followers use many Urdu words during their Tablighi conversation with others.

This was the beginning of the *gasht* and it was known as the rule of the *gasht*. According to Tablighi followers, there are some specific ways of doing *dawah* that every Tablighi follower has to follow everywhere they do *gasht*. First of all, the speaker has to talk about the greatness of Allah to motivate people and move on to the discussion of *dawah*. Finally, the speaker divides the participants into two small groups. One has to go out to invite Muslims from the neighbourhood and the other should stay inside the mosque to do *dhikir* (remembrance of Allah). He followed all these rules. We formed two groups, one stayed inside the mosque to do *dhikir*, and the other went out to invite Muslims from the neighbourhood. Since this mosque had a strong background of Tablighi work, they had already done a survey to get the names and address of the Muslims from neighbourhood. They made name cards containing the house number and street name of neighbouring Muslims. They kept these cards in a box in the mosque. This was different from what I had found in Bangladesh. Followers do not maintain any address cards in Bangladesh. Most people in Bangladesh are Muslims and they know most of their neighbours. In the UK, however, where most families are not Muslims, keeping address cards was an effective way to find a Muslim man to invite.

Abdul brought some address cards for visits and he asked me whether I would be interested to go with them. I went with them to observe *dawah* as a participant. I met Mohammad Ibrahim and Mohammed Amir from this mosque who were regular Tablighi followers. The father of Mohammad Ibrahim was also a dedicated Tablighi follower who was the key initiator in building this mosque. This was a Tablighi mosque from the beginning. They did *dua* before beginning the *gasht* to make it successful and to receive divine help. Ibrahim brought his son with him to carry out



*gasht*. He felt that regular participation in the *gasht* would provide a good orientation to the Tablighi Jamaat for his son. This is one of the ways in which the Tablighi Jamaat attracts new followers from the second generation of the Muslim community in the UK. We walked to the mosque which was in a nearby street . Ibrahim and Amir were in the front. I and the *muajjeen* who conducted the speech in the mosque were following them. Amir knocked on a door a couple of times, but no one responded. We kept walking and knocked at three houses. Then we crossed the road and started to do the same to another house but no one responded. Finally, we found a man and Ibrahim told him that an Arabian Jamaat<sup>58</sup> had come to the mosque and they would give a speech after evening prayer. Ibrahim invited him to join us after the evening prayer.

We met another man on the street, who had just come out of his house, and we approached him. Ibrahim started to tell him about the significance of *dawah* in short and then requested him to join us in the evening prayer (*magrib*). The man promised to join in the *magrib* prayer in the mosque. We tried another house but there was no response. From another house, a young boy came out. He was eating and the team invited him to join at the mosque. We found an older man in a house. He thought that I had come from Bangladesh with a Jamaat to visit the UK and was impressed by this. I could not explain to him that I was doing research on the Tablighi Jamaat, because I was not allowed to speak while in a *gasht* since I was a *mamur* (a person who only does *dhikir* during *gasht* and is not allowed to speak during the *gasht*). He promised to join us. Amir requested another young man to join us at the Mosque. He replied that he was very busy. Ibrahim told him, ‘we all are busy, but we have to

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<sup>58</sup> This was an Arabian Tablighi Jamaat group that came to the Uthman mosque to deliver a speech after the evening prayer. They were staying in the Bilal mosque in Cardiff for three days.

make some time to worship Allah'. He initially hesitated and then promised to join. After speaking to him, we returned to the mosque.

During the *gasht*, I noticed that people were talking to each other and they were not walking in a straight line while they were walking along the street. In Bangladesh, I observed that only one person could speak to invite people. No one else can even talk except the leader of the team. In Bangladesh, several rules were followed strictly while undertaking the *gasht*. These included keeping a straight line while walking, keeping right on the road, doing *dhikir* all the time, keeping eyes on the ground to avoid any gaze on women on the street or anything that can divert the concentration from the *gasht*, and finally, avoiding conversation. Tablighi followers were very flexible about these rules in the UK.

### **8.3 Religious Speech after the *Magrib* Prayer**

After coming back from the *gasht*, we prepared ourselves for the *magrib* prayer. Ibrahim did *boyan* after the *magrib* prayer. This is the most important part of the *gasht*. I noticed that many people joined the prayer after the *gasht*. This is an opportunity for them to motivate and attract prospective Tablighi followers to go out for *dawah* in the future. Ibrahim stood up, once he finished his prayer and waited for the others to finish. Once everyone had finished their prayers, Ibrahim began his *boyan*:

Allah is great; he created us and we have to be grateful to him. He created everything. Nothing will happen without the help of Allah. Everything continues for Allah. You cannot imagine the greatness of Allah. If the

ocean became ink and all the trees became pens, and you start writing about the greatness of Allah, ink and pens would cease but the greatness of Allah would not cease. We have to believe in him. An angel will ask us three questions in the grave: Who is your creator? Who is your Prophet? And what is your *deen*? We all know the answers right now, but if we are unable to establish a relationship between the tongue and the heart, everything will be useless. It is not a matter of the tongue. This is a matter of our heart. Does our heart believe that firmly? If our heart believes it, we can give the right answer. We have to establish *la Ilaha Illallahu Muahammad ur Rasul Ullah* in our heart. After death we all would be less important to our relatives, they will call us a dead body. People will not stay alone with the dead body and will ask someone else, you stay with me, I am scared. One day in heaven would be equivalent to 55,000 days of this world. Allah will be giving us heaven, which is everlasting. The person who would have the small part of the heaven, that would be bigger than our whole universe [.....]. We have to dress like our Prophet, lead our life like him; he is the ideal example for us. This is the responsibility of every Muslim person to engage with the Tablighi Jamaat and *dawah*. We have to set an example to the wider world about the greatness of Allah. We have to impress non-Muslim ‘brothers’ with good behaviour. In addition, establish the truth that we are not bad people; a Muslim brother cannot be a bad person.

In many ways, the entire speech was identical with the speeches after *magrib* prayer by the Tablighi followers in Bangladesh. The followers in Bangladesh also began

with the greatness of Allah then gradually moved to the importance of *dawah*. In the UK, the followers added a discussion about the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims. The Tablighi followers are keen to set an example to non-Muslims to demonstrate that Muslims are not bad people. One reason is the negative image of Muslims after the incidents of 9/11 and 7/7. In contrast, I never noticed Tablighi followers in Bangladesh talk about contemporary issues in their speech. In Bangladesh, Tablighi followers are not expected to engage in any discussion related to worldly affairs. Ibrahim cleverly engaged himself with a discussion on an important context. He also proposed a solution of this problem, which was to engage with *dawah* in order to be a good Muslim and to set an example that, ‘a Muslim cannot be a bad person’. The last part of the religious speech by Ibrahim is significant where we see the eagerness to prove that Muslims are not the ‘bad people’. Ibrahim also mentions that good behaviour vis-à-vis non-Muslims is the only solution.

After the speech, Abdul stood up with a notepad and pen to write down the names of interested people who want to join Tablighi Jamaat for a *dawah* trip in the future. About 5-10 people provided their names and wanted to go out for *dawah*. They also mentioned the approximate and convenient time they wanted to begin. This was the first step for a newcomer to practice *dawah*. For the existing followers, it is a regular practice to keep a connection with *dawah* and Tabligh. The regular involvement with the Tablighi Jamaat and *dawah* help the followers to stay focused on the religious sphere. The repeated task of doing the same activities in *dawah* helps them to internalise the activities of the Tablighi Jamaat and the basic principles.

Abdul and his fellow Tablighi followers come to pray in the mosque when they can. Since they all have to work during the day, most of them join in the evening. Most of the Pakistani and Bangladeshi Tablighi Jamaat followers in Cardiff have their own businesses. For instance, Abdul has a take-away business. Therefore, it is easy for them to come to the mosque five times a day by managing to take time out from the business. The mosque is the place where Muslims go to pray. If they fail to manage the time to go every day, most of them go to the mosque at least every Friday to attend the *jummah* prayer. Since the Tablighi Jamaat wants to build a mosque-based society, for them, the mosque is the ideal place to meet Muslims. Meeting at the mosque helps to begin preaching among non-Tablighi Muslims. This allows them to motivate and attract followers from among non-Tablighi Muslims who come to pray in the mosque. This builds a trust between non-Tablighis and the Tablighi group about their activities. The Tablighi Jamaat treat the mosque as an institution that provides fundamental Islamic education for children, which is similar to the context of Bangladesh where the mosque is the institution where young children get their orientation on various aspects of Islam.

The Muslim population in the UK is a minority and is more ethnically and linguistically diverse than in Bangladesh, where Bengalis are the majority, and more uniform ethnically and linguistically. Going to the mosque and doing *gasht* in such an environment in the UK make the Tablighi followers visible in the wider society. The traditional Pakistani and Tablighi clothing become a visible symbol of their religious faith and it has an effect on the identity of the Tablighi followers themselves. It helps to build an image of the Tablighi Jamaat that in turn contributes to the process of identity formation that I will discuss in chapter Ten. In addition, the

positive image of the Tablighi Jamaat helps to attract new followers to spend time in *dawah* journey.

## Chapter Nine

### Tablighi Jamaat in the UK

#### 9.1 Introduction

In Chapter Ten, I move out from the Tablighi Jamaat in the Cardiff mosque to discuss their place in the wider British Muslim society. The presence of the Tablighi Jamaat in the UK goes back several decades. The initial success of the Tablighi Jamaat in Mewat motivated its expansion in other parts of the Indian subcontinent. Through this process of expansion, the Tablighi Jamaat began to expand into various places in India and Pakistan. Moulana Yusuf, son of Moulana Ilyas and the second *ameer* (leader) of the Tablighi Jamaat, believed that the Tablighi Jamaat should expand *dawah* efforts to revive Muslims from all over the world, and took the initiative to expand the Tablighi Jamaat outside the Indian subcontinent. The Tablighi Jamaat is now said to be active in almost every country where Muslims live (Sikand, 2002). The UK has become a major centre of the Tablighi Jamaat in the West, and serves as the European headquarters of the Tablighi Jamaat.

The Tablighi Jamaat came to the UK soon after the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1940s. The first Tablighi *gasht* and meeting in the West was organized in an Indian quarter of London on 20<sup>th</sup> January 1945 (Hasni, 1989 cited in Sikand, 1998). According to Metcalf, it was 1946 when the Tablighi Jamaat had begun its activities in the UK (Metcalf, 1996a). It can be assumed that the 1940s was the time when the Tablighi Jamaat entered the UK. During this time, the Tablighi Jamaat started to send regular exploratory teams to the UK (Ahmad, 1994). No

evidence has been found of when Bangladeshi Muslims began to join the Tablighi Jamaat in the UK.

The Tablighi Jamaat was initiated in the UK by the first generation South Asian Muslims and the Tablighi Jamaat is widely popular among this first generation of South Asian Muslim immigrants in the UK. The Tablighi Jamaat also has followers from British-born Muslims. Although Sikand (2002) finds that the movement is not very popular among British-born Muslims, the leaders of the Tablighi Jamaat in Dewsbury claimed that participants from among British-born Muslims were increasing.

This transnational Islamic movement came to the attention of the UK media for its plan to build the Abbey Mills Mosque to accommodate nearly 70,000 people in London near the Olympic village. It also came under scrutiny after the London Underground bombing (7/7/2005) because two of the attackers regularly attended Dewsbury seminaries (Pieri, 2012). The leaders of the Tablighi Jamaat denied the allegation of being promoters of a 'terrorist' ideology. DeHanas and Pieri (2011) find that the movement is loosely structured and it has no control over participants and followers. Therefore, they can come and go, which contradicts the structure of a terrorist organisation. The movement is also often characterised as separatist and isolationist by the Western media, while the movement itself encourages its followers to concentrate on the life hereafter, withdrawing from worldly affairs.

Despite these various criticisms, the Tablighi Jamaat has managed to create a space for itself in the UK. Why the Tablighi Jamaat has been successful in creating a space



among British Muslims, when various types of Islamic movements are active, each offering different ideological dimensions of Islam is a question. One of the reasons is the Tablighi Jamaat's aim of creating an Islamic environment for Muslims in the UK. For many Tablighi Jamaat followers, the movement acts as a protection from a Western lifestyle, providing a complete guideline of how to live an Islamic life in Western society. The Tablighi Jamaat followers believe that the Tablighi Jamaat provides an alternative to Western life for them. Tablighi Jamaat also acts as an effective source of religious education for children of Tablighi followers. These various types of social functions of the Tablighi Jamaat have been the main reason behind its successful establishment of an Islamic movement in the UK. The aim of this chapter is to explore the context of how the Tablighi Jamaat remains successful and to explore the attraction of the Tablighi Jamaat in the UK.

Before moving on to the discussion of the Tablighi Jamaat, a short background of the Muslim settlement in the UK will help to trace the context for the spread of the movement in the UK.

## **9.2 Muslims in the UK**

The settlement of Muslims in the UK was linked with British colonialism across the world. This colonial relationship provided the channel for many Muslims to emigrate from former colonies to the UK. Thus, the East India Company became the conduit for the immigration of Muslims to the British Isles for many South Asian Muslims (Lewis, 2002; Abbas, 2009 and Gilliat-Ray, 2010). According to Abbas (2009) the first Muslim group, who arrived in the UK in the eighteenth century, were mainly

seamen (lascar) and employed by the East India Company. Many of them settled in the UK.

The migration of the early generation of Bangladeshis to the UK began in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and they were mainly seamen who worked in British ships (Gardner, 1993; Asgar, 1996; Geaves, 2000). As part of their duty, these sailors had to travel in and out of the UK frequently. Therefore, their jobs provided many sailors with an option to settle in various parts of the UK. The first permanent Muslim populations were established in Cardiff, Liverpool, Manchester, South Shields and East London in the mid-nineteenth century. Mass migration of Muslims from South Asia, primarily from Pakistan and Bangladesh to Britain, began after the Second World War (Ansari, 2002). Lewis (2002) identifies a four-phase pattern of South Asian migration to Britain. Lewis states:

First the pioneers, then what is known as ‘chain migration’ of generally unskilled male workers, followed by the migration of wives and children and finally the emergence of a British-born generation (2002: 17).

Substantial migration began to meet the post war labour shortage in the 1950s. The 1962 Commonwealth Immigration Act also permitted family reunification, which unintentionally promoted settled migration (Lewis, 2007). This process allowed South Asian Muslims to bring their families in Britain.

### ***Bangladeshi in the UK***

Most Bangladeshis in the UK are from Sylhet, a region of Bangladesh which has been strongly influenced by the Sufi saint Shah Jalal and his followers. Shah Jalal was a charismatic Sufi master who contributed to the expansion of Islam to Sylhet during the 14<sup>th</sup> century (Eade and Garbin, 2006). There is a general impression in Bangladesh that the people of Sylhet are more religious than those from other parts of Bangladesh. This is why the religious tradition of Sylhet has an influence on British Bangladeshis in general. Sufism in the UK is also linked with the migration process from South Asia where Sufism was the dominant form of Islam (Geaves, 2000). Many Bangladeshis in the UK are associated with Sufi saints of Sylhet. For example, many Bangladeshis are disciples (*murid*) of a famous *pir* and spiritual master, the late Sheikh Abdul Latif Chowdhury (1913-2008), who was a theologian and studied the *Qur'an* in Mecca. He was said to be a descendant of Shah Kamal, one of the disciples of Shah Jalal (Eade and Garbin, 2006). He was also known by the name of his village, Fultoli, thus he was known as Shaheb Qibla Fultoli. He had been visiting Britain regularly since 1976 (Husain, 2007). He had a significant number of followers among first-generation British Bangladeshis.

Sufi traditions in the UK have also undergone a substantial number of reform initiatives; the Hijaz Community is an example. This community was founded by a Pakistani Sufi teacher, Shaykh Abdul Wahab Siddiqi (1942-1994). They are now based in Nuneaton, near Birmingham. Most followers of the Hijaz community are from a Pakistani ethnic background, but the Bangladeshi followers of the Hijaz community have been increasing in recent years. This Sufi tradition does not follow the lineage of the key Sufi master in naming their tradition; rather, they prefer to be

known as the Hijaz Community. Their main annual event, which is referred to as the 'Blessed Summit,' is an occasion where they discuss fundamental issues in Islam, undertake *dhikir*, and listen to religious sermons delivered by the leading religious scholars associated with the Hijaz community. They also perform Sufi songs. Although many aspects are similar to traditional annual events like the *urs*, they have also introduced some elements that they claim are modern in comparison to a traditional *urs*. They have established a religious institution named Hijaz College. According to one of the followers of the Hijaz community, many graduates go on to mainstream universities in the UK for further education.

The Fultoli Sufi order is not equally popular among second and third generation British Bangladeshis, compare to the Hijaz community. The Hijaz community has been able to attract Muslim youths from various ethnic backgrounds, predominantly from South Asia. British born Bangladeshi youths are also involved with the Islamic movement of Young Muslim Organisation (YMO), a student wing of Islamic Forum Europe (IFE), which is not a Sufi movement. IFE has significant connection with the Jamaat-i-Islami Bangladesh. In the 1970s, just after the liberation war of Bangladesh, many members of the Jamaat-i-Islami left Bangladesh and settled in the UK. They initiated the Dawat'ul Islam, which has similar principles and ideology to the Jamaat-i-Islami as they had operated it in Bangladesh. In the beginning, the YMO was an active part of the Dawat'ul Islam. In the late 1980s, as the result of a factional conflict, members of the *Dawat'ul Islam* formed a new organisation, the IFE, and the YMO became the student wing of the IFE.

The YMO is one of the most influential groups among Bangladeshi communities (Eade and Garbin, 2006; Husain, 2007). The YMO provides a platform for the wider community to share ideas and learn various aspects of Islam. Their parents' version of Islam does not appeal in the same way to many young British Muslims. First generation Bangladeshis brought the religious orientation that they found comfortable to practice from Bangladesh. Since the UK is a multicultural society, it provides a different context for the younger generation to become acquainted with varieties of religious practices within Islam. This leads the younger generation to adapt to the global religious culture of the UK. Many Islamic reform efforts use the idea of 'modernising' Islam, which appeals to the younger generation. The YMO came up with similar ideas. There is very little influence of the radical Islamist groups such as Hizb ut Tahrir among British Bangladeshis (Glynn, 2002; Garbin, 2005).

These Islamic movements are critical about the practices of the first generation migrants to the UK. This critique of religious observance in the parental generation provides an essential background to young people's attitude to Islam in both the UK and Bangladesh (Rozario and Samuel, 2011). When British Muslims look at modernising Islam, Tablighi Jamaat offers a 'purist' form of Islam that inspires Muslims to go back to the traditional practices of Islamic observance. The following section attempts to analyse how successful it has been in the UK by estimating the number of participants in various regional contexts. Later on, I will discuss the implications of the Tablighi Jamaat in the lives of its followers in the UK that will give a sense of why the Tablighi Jamaat has been able to attract followers from various backgrounds.

### **9.3 Tablighi Jamaat Followers in the UK**

There is no official estimate available of the total number of Tablighi Jamaat followers in the UK. The Pew Forum (2010) refers to an unpublished report by Reetz (2009) that estimated European followers of the Tablighi Jamaat to be about 150,000 or more. Within Europe, UK, France and Spain have the most significant presence of the Tablighi Jamaat. Another estimate suggests that France has about 100,000 Tablighi followers (Ali, 2010). If these two estimates are correct, Tablighi Jamaat followers in the UK might be around 50,000 or below. I contacted senior leaders of the Tablighi Jamaat at Dewsbury while participating in an annual *ijtema* there in 2009, and also through emails but they could not provide any information about total number of Tablighi followers. The organisers told me that since the Tablighi Jamaat does not keep formal records about its followers, it does not have any statistical information. I received a reply from a Tablighi Jamaat follower of the London *markaz* of the Tablighi Jamaat with some estimates of the Tablighi Jamaat in the UK. According to him, there are 50,000 (including men and women) active Tablighi participants in the UK. He also provided an estimate of people who had spent time in *dawah* but not in regular Tablighi Jamaat activity. He suggested that roughly a tenth of the Muslim population in the UK. That means that perhaps 250,000 to 300,000 out of the 2,706,066 Muslims in the UK have attended a Tablighi *dawah*.

My observation and participation with Tablighi followers at various levels provides a sense of regional participation in Tablighi Jamaat activities. This will give regional snapshots of the number of Tablighi followers in the UK.

I begin with the annual *ijtema* at Dewsbury. I have attended the annual *ijtema* held in 2009 at Dewsbury, and the organisers estimated that there were about 10,000 participants who come from various parts of the UK. However, the number is increasing every year. My informant from the London *markaz* told me that there are nearly 15,000 followers who have attended the annual *ijtema* at Dewsbury in recent times. Faust (2000) also states that about 8,000-15,000 followers attend the annual *ijtema* every year at Dewsbury, from all over Europe. During this *ijtema* at Dewsbury, representatives from 10 mosques<sup>59</sup> presented their local *dawah* activities, including the number of men and women who had attended *dawah*. The representatives from the ten mosques from England and Wales mentioned that 903 dedicated Tablighi men attended Tablighi *dawah* that year from their respective regions. There were 294 *masturaat Jamaat*, that means that total number of men and women in the *masturaat Jamaat* were 588 because each woman has to be accompanied by a man according to the Tablighi norm. That gives a total figure of 1,492 people who were all dedicated Tablighi followers. If we include occasional Tablighi Jamaat followers who were not regular in *dawah* activities but attended *dawah* and *gasht* irregularly, the total number of Tablighi follower would be 7,228, including participants of *masturaat Jamaat*. In addition, there might have been some women Tablighi followers who do not go for *dawah* tours. It is likely however that these ten speakers were representatives of a small number of mosques with highly active Tablighi Jamaat groups. The situation of Tablighi followers in other parts of

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<sup>59</sup> Mosque representatives from Nottingham, Leicester, Loughborough, Birmingham, Wolverhampton, Western Birmingham, Brighton, and Gloucester presented their progress of *dawah* efforts in a session called *karguzary*. The literal meaning of *karguzary* is progress of work or routine of work. The Tablighi Jamaat uses this concept to discuss the strength and weakness of its activities with detailed activities carried out in a particular area by Tablighi Jamaat followers.

the UK may have a different scenario. For example, Cardiff provides a different picture.

According to my observation, in Cardiff there are about 150 dedicated Tablighi Jamaat followers who are mostly based in seven mosques. Outside this figure, some Tablighi Jamaat sympathisers also occasionally attend local Tablighi Jamaat sermons in mosques. When I participated in the weekly *dawah* in Cardiff, I noticed that some Tablighi Jamaat sympathisers stayed in the mosque after prayer and attended activities of the weekly *gasht*. There were about 100-200 men who occasionally had attended Tablighi Jamaat sermons in various mosques in Cardiff. In addition, dedicated followers strictly maintain Tablighi ideology at home. That means there is a possibility of having women followers in Cardiff but it was difficult to estimate since I did not have an opportunity to participate in *masturaat dawah*. According to my estimate, there are nearly 350 dedicated and occasional Tablighi Jamaat followers in Cardiff. Most Tablighi followers in Cardiff were from an Indo-Pakistani background. There were about 50 followers with a Bangladeshi ethnic background in Cardiff. Most Tablighi followers in Cardiff were from lower and middle class backgrounds and working in the trading profession. All Bangladeshis and Pakistanis I met were involved with restaurants, take-aways and other businesses. There were also three medical doctors from India, one engineer from Sri Lanka and five students from a Malaysian ethnic background. There were also some followers with an African ethnic background. The overall number would be higher for the whole of Wales because there are some mosques, which Tablighi Jamaat groups visit regularly outside Cardiff city areas. I met a Tablighi Jamaat group, for example, who were going to visit a mosque in Barry Island, a few miles from central Cardiff.



There are five Tablighi regional *markaz* in the UK, situated in London, Leicester, Birmingham, Glasgow and Blackburn. Each of these organises a regional *ijtema* every year and weekly gatherings every Thursday. According to my informants, each regional *ijtema* in London, Birmingham, Leicester and Blackburn attracts 1000 to 3000 participants from nearby cities. The Masjeed-e-Ilyas, the *markaz* in London, has a capacity of 6000 (male) worshippers<sup>60</sup>. Pieri (2012) states that it has a capacity of 3000 worshipers that is usually reached during the weekly Thursday gathering. My informant suggests that the weekly gathering at the London *markaz* reaches 5,000. The actual number of Tablighi Jamaat followers may vary because not all Tablighi followers regularly attend the Thursday *boyan*. According to a need assessment survey of the Riverine Centre<sup>61</sup>, the Masjid-e-Ilyas attracts worshippers from 300 mosques in London and the South East during Thursday and other regular congregation or meetings. This also indicates that there are Tablighi followers at 300 mosques in London and neighbouring areas, where the total number of mosques in Greater London is 354<sup>62</sup>. In addition, Leeds, Bradford and Manchester have a higher number of South Asians and so are likely to have significant number of Tablighi followers.

As a Deobandi-derived movement, the Tablighi Jamaat maintains a cooperative connection with Deobandi mosques and institutes in the UK. Cooperation with Deobandi mosques accelerated the process of expanding the activities of the Tablighi Jamaat in the UK. The Tablighi Jamaat can easily use Deobandi mosques for the

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<sup>60</sup> <http://www.londonmarkaz.co.uk/>, accessed on 17/06/2013

<sup>61</sup> The mosque Masjeed-e-Ilyas is also known as the Riverine Centre. See for more details <http://riverinecentre.com/needs-assessment/>. Accessed on 17/06/2013

<sup>62</sup> <http://mosques.muslimsinbritain.org/show-browse.php?town=London&expand=1>, accessed on 17/06/2013

purpose of *dawah*. In addition, the *Tabligh-i Nisab*<sup>63</sup> is read daily in Deobandi mosques in Bradford for about fifteen minutes after afternoon prayer (Lewis, 1993). Geaves (1994) through his PhD research found that Deobandi institutes all over the country read the *Tabligh-i Nisab*. These show the close relationship between British Deobandis and Tablighi Jamaat. John King (2002) states that the Deoband and the Tablighi Jamaat have a close link in Britain. He states:

Structurally, then, Deoband and Tabligh coexist, feeding and reinforcing each other. The Deobandi mosques form the static framework of a system which also involves Tablighi Jamaat as a mobile element. The Deobandi mosques provide a haven for Tablighi preachers and other travellers engaged in *khuruj*, while they also encourage their own members to leave their local areas in order to preach, either for short periods, or for spells of months or even years which may involve foreign travel, to India or to other Muslim countries, or to countries with minority Muslim populations (2002: 296).

The statement by King suggests that Deobandi mosques are pro-Tablighi Jamaat. My informant from the London *markaz* told me that ‘All Deobandi mosques are pro-Tablighi. Moreover, there are some non-Deobandi mosques in the UK which are also pro-Tablighi’. There are 738 Deobandi mosques<sup>64</sup> in the UK that have Tablighi Jamaat followers and help the Tablighi Jamaat to expand. The Tablighi Jamaat also has activities in many non-Deobandi mosques. For instance, the Shahjalal, Jalalia and Darul Isra mosques in Cardiff welcome Tablighi followers to carry out *dawah*

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<sup>63</sup> *Fazayele Amal* was named as *Tabligh-i Nisab* in the past.

<sup>64</sup> See [http://www.muslimsinbritain.org/resources/masjid\\_report.pdf](http://www.muslimsinbritain.org/resources/masjid_report.pdf) accessed on 12/05/13

activities. While the Darul Isra is affiliated with the ideology of Abul Ala Maududi, the founder of the Jamaat-i Islami, this mosque welcomes Tablighi groups to stay overnight and preach. Although, the Shahjalal and Jalalia mosques do not permit any Tablighi Jamaat group to stay overnight, they are happy if any Tablighi Jamaat group wants to carry out *dawah* during the day. One of my respondents, who I met in the Shahjalal mosque, which is a Bangladeshi community mosque, told me that the Tablighi Jamaat is very serious in maintaining *halal* and *haram*, and especially they are very keen to maintain a profession, which is *halal*. Many British Bangladeshi working in the restaurant business and so involved in selling alcohol, which is seen as *haram* by the Tablighi Jamaat, were not very comfortable with the Tablighi Jamaat. In addition, they felt that there was a risk that the Tablighi Jamaat might take over the authority of maintaining the mosque. Members of this mosque's management committee did not want the Tablighi Jamaat to take over the control of the mosque. Therefore, in Bangladeshi mosques in Cardiff, there were no regular Tablighi activities. A Tablighi group from London that I met during my fieldwork in Cardiff tried to facilitate to introduce Tablighi activities in the mosque while carrying out a *dawah* tour in Cardiff. They tried to motivate me and two Tablighi Jamaat sympathisers to take the responsibility to begin Tablighi *dawah* in this mosque. However, they failed to introduce Tablighi activities in this mosque.

#### **9.4 The Implications of the Tablighi Jamaat in the UK**

##### ***A Mosque Oriented Community***

Global leaders of the Tablighi Jamaat felt the importance of expanding *dawah* activities in the UK for various reasons. One reason was to create an environment where Muslims in the UK can follow Islam properly. The Tablighi Jamaat and

Deobandis had begun to establish mosques, Islamic education centres and *halal* stores. In the early days of the Muslim settlement in the UK, there were no *halal* stores and not even butcher shops. In a biography of Moulana Muhammad Yusuf, Bijnori (2002) mentions that *ulamas* (religious scholars) in the UK asked for advice from the leaders of the Tablighi Jamaat on slaughtering animals by machine. At the same time, during the early days of Islam in the UK, they were concerned about the small number of mosques where people could go to pray.

Since the Tablighi Jamaat maintains its activities from mosques, it prioritises the building of mosques for the Muslims in the UK (Sikand, 1998 and 2002; Faust, 2000). In the 1960s, when the children and spouses of the Muslim men who had come over earlier began to enter in the UK, the Tablighi Jamaat was at the forefront for setting up Islamic institutions (Pieri, 2012). Although the Tablighi Jamaat were not the only group involved in establishing mosques across the UK, the number of mosques significantly increased after the Tablighi Jamaat started their activities in the 1940s and 1950s in the UK. Metcalf (1996) also finds that the Tablighi Jamaat contributed to establishing mosques in the USA and many European countries, including Britain. As I have shown in the previous chapter, the Uthman mosque in Cardiff was established by the community with a Tablighi follower taking a leading role. The Anjuman–E-Islah-Al-Muslimeen (Madrassa Ta’leem Ul Islam) of the UK is a registered charity of the Tablighi Jamaat in the UK that runs both the Dewsbury *markaz* of the Tablighi Jamaat and an Islamic institute adjacent to the *markaz* known as the Darul Ulum. One of the aims of this charity is ‘to establish mosques and

schools for religious education' in the UK<sup>65</sup>. Donations and collections is the main source of its income. In addition, it receives contributions from parents of the students who attend the Darul Ulum. This does not show whether the Tablighi Jamaat helps directly to establish mosques in other areas outside Dewsbury, but it gives a sense of how the organisation generates its funds and grants. Tablighi informants from Cardiff, London and Luton told me that individual and generous contributions from members of the community were the main source of their funding to meet expenses of establishing mosques. This does not cover individual expenses of Tablighi followers to carry out *dawah* and travel. Each Tablighi follower has to manage his own expenses, thus followers say that 'our pocket is our fund'.

In order to begin and keep the movement active in the UK, the Tablighi Jamaat needed either to build mosques or to use existing mosques for Tablighi purposes. Why did the mosque become an important institution for the Tablighis in the context of the UK? My field data implies two broad reasons behind the importance of mosques for the Tablighi Jamaat. One is that the mosque is both a social centre for the Tablighi followers and the centre of all Tablighi activities. The other is that the followers of the Tablighi Jamaat use mosques as learning centres for young Muslim children. Bangladeshi mosques in Cardiff have activities that promote learning the Bengali language. Tablighi mosques are completely dedicated to religious education.

Carrying out weekly *gasht*, daily meeting and reading from *hadith* are some examples of mosque-based activities. When the followers of the Tablighi Jamaat travel to another place for *dawah*, they stay in a local mosque. In addition, the

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<sup>65</sup> See [http://apps.charitycommission.gov.uk/Accounts/Ends32%5C0000505732\\_ac\\_20101231\\_e\\_c.pdf](http://apps.charitycommission.gov.uk/Accounts/Ends32%5C0000505732_ac_20101231_e_c.pdf) accessed 13-06-13

mosque is the place of worship for all Muslims. Informants from both Bangladesh and the UK told me that the mosque is the best place for Muslims, because the time they spend in a mosque counts towards their good deeds and they would get heavenly rewards. For Muslims, in general, the mosque is the centre of increasing faith (*iman*). Tablighi Jamaat followers believe that praying in a mosque has greater reward than praying at home. In addition, they believe that praying in a congregation in a mosque also has a greater benefit. Sadat Anwar from the University of Nottingham, an active Tablighi Jamaat follower, talked about the significances of the mosque:

For *mu'min*<sup>66</sup>, the mosque is like water for fish. If we isolate a fish from water, will it survive? It is similar for *mu'min*. It will give him the food for his *iman* [faith]. If you go inside a mosque, you will feel something. Do you see the lovely carpet or good air conditioning? No, but you can feel something. You do not see the angels, but you can feel it.... with the effort of the Tablighi Jamaat, people built mosques and *madrasas* in the UK. Many students became *hafez* and *aleem*. It is helping to create the environment here. The environment is the most important factor in order to maintain *deen*. If people see someone praying, it will attract them to pray in a mosque.

Sadat Anwar sees the mosque as the proper environment for a faithful believer. The Mosque provides spiritual food to strengthen faith. He also believes that the Tablighi Jamaat had contributed to establishing mosques and *madrasas* in the UK. In

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<sup>66</sup> The word *mu'min* refers to a faithful and religious believer in Islam and its laws.

addition, the Tablighi Jamaat has guidelines regarding the amount of time one should spend every day outside of praying time. By doing so the Tablighi Jamaat followers aim to keep mosques open 24 hours a day so that people can come and pray in mosques any time they want. In the time of the Prophet, mosques were also the centre of community activities. Tablighi Jamaat wants to follow and replicate the idea of keeping the mosque active for 24 hours a day. Tablighi followers in Cardiff began to keep their mosques open outside of prayer times. In order to achieve this goal of keeping mosques open for 24 hours, the leaders of the Tablighi Jamaat from Dewsbury instructed their followers to spend at least two and half hours every day in the mosque after praying. Abdul explained how two and half hours dedicated time would help to keep the mosque open for twenty-four hours a day and seven days a week:

From 24 hours, everybody should give two and half-hours for the *masjeed* [mosque], for *deen*. That is the calculation for everyone in the world. We target 6-8 hours. We begin with two and half hours. If I give two hours, *hafij shaheb*, you and *ameer* two hours, others can give two hours. This *masjeed* could be occupied for 12 hours a day. You know how they do it in Gloucester and many other places. For example, you and he devote two and half hours together. Collaborate always with a partner. For example, you finish your college at 3 o'clock and you are going to come to the *masjeed* at 4 p.m. We do *telawat* and everything in the *masjeed*. So, do *mashoara* and you go and meet the brothers. Ask them how are you, why don't you come to the *masjeed*? Everybody contributes two and a half hours. *Wallahi*, this *masjeed* will have 24 hours of *ebadot* [worship and religious activity].

Every *masjeed* will be open 24 hours, every *masjeed*. Allah says, ‘you keep Allah’s house *ebadot* and occupied’, Allah will make your house *ebadot*. That is the condition.

This is the vision of the Tablighi Jamaat, to keep mosques open for prayer and *dawah* twenty-four hours a day. Followers of the Tablighi Jamaat use mosques for various purposes that include *gasht*, *ta’leem*, *mashoara* and to socialise with fellow Tablighi followers. Through this process, mosques create a space of social interaction for Tablighi followers. Abdul and other followers from the Uthman mosque were working to achieve this goal to keep their local mosque open for twenty-four hours every day.

Followers keep the mosques open for a longer period primarily to say regular prayers, but this process also contributes to the creation of a Tablighi community by meeting with other Tablighi followers who meet regularly in the mosque to perform *dawah* and to socialise. Dickson (2009) finds this function of the Tablighi Jamaat in urban spaces in Canada where mosques create a physical, spiritual and social space for Tablighi followers. Mosques become a vehicle for social networking for followers. I noticed during my participation with Tablighi Jamaat followers at the Uthman mosque that Tablighi men preferred to stay in the mosque after the *gasht* until evening prayer. This is the time when Tablighi men meet and spend time with their friends and colleagues in the Tablighi network. Abdul sometimes invites one or two friends from the Tablighi network to have a cup of tea at his place after the *gasht*. Every Monday when I completed the *gasht* at the Uthman mosque while carrying out participant observation, I, Abdul and Amir used to visit Abdul’s house



to have a cup of tea. This is where I had most of my informal discussions with Abdul and Amir. In this way, he created a social space where they could meet at least once a week with Tablighi men from the mosque. This may have helped to create long-term relationship between followers. It also allowed them to remain in a Tablighi environment and to keep focussed on performing *dawah*, something that is important for them. This approach of keeping close contact with fellow followers has a positive impact for attracting and keeping a beginner in a Tablighi network. Therefore, beginners can gradually become a part of the wider Tablighi network. Staying in a Tablighi network also contributes to transforming an ordinary Tablighi follower into a dedicated follower. It protects them from what they consider non-Islamic activities. Living an Islamic life and avoiding non-Islamic activities helps Tablighi followers to strengthen their faith.

In keeping a mosque-oriented community functioning, the followers of the Uthman mosque see the *imam*<sup>67</sup> as the religious and spiritual leader of the community. Tablighi followers will see an *imam* as their religious leader even if he is not a Tablighi follower. Tablighi Jamaat followers believe that this is the way of replicating the idea of the mosque-oriented society of the Prophet Muhammad. Along this line, Abdul mentioned that the *imam* (spiritual leader) of a mosque should be the leader of the society. Abdul mentioned:

In our mosque, nobody controls the *imam*. He is our leader. He should be teaching us. We should respect him. Respect our *imam*; he is a scholar. In many cities in the UK, if the *imam* talks about good things and *haram*

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<sup>67</sup> The general term of *imam* refers to a person who led five times prayer in mosques who is also treated as a religious leader of a community.

things, they are out<sup>68</sup>. They want their *imam* to say as they want. This is not right. That is why they cannot move forward. We have to give an *imam* some space. He should be the *zimmadar* [responsible person] of the *masjeed*. He should also be the *zimmadar* for the society. He should be doing the funeral; we learn many things from him. We should respect our *imam*.

He described how a Tablighi mosque is different from other mosques. He provided examples of mosques where the *imam* is subject to the mosque committee. Later in my fieldwork, I found that Abdul was referring to Bangladeshi mosques (the Shahjalal and the Jalalia mosque) in Cardiff whose members control the *imam* and where they want the *imam* to maintain the mosque according to their will. This is one of the reasons why they bring the *imam* from Sylhet in Bangladesh. On the contrary, the Tablighi mosque has a different approach to dealing with the *imam*. Abdul and his Tablighi community respect the *imam* and they believe that the *imam* should have the highest authority in dealing with religious issues of the society as he has proper knowledge on the *Qur'an* and *hadith*.

Tablighi followers believe that they have to establish a relationship with mosques in order to establish a mosque-oriented community. Thus, the Tablighi Jamaat begin by using the mosque as a centre to meet fellow followers. Eventually, the mosque becomes an Islamic education centre for children and adults. At the same time, The Tablighi Jamaat has managed to establish independent and formal Islamic education

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<sup>68</sup> He means that people resent it if the *imam* tells people what they should or should not do, for example following *halal* profession, or not to sell alcohol in restaurants. Most Bangladeshis in the UK are involved with the restaurant business, which generally involves selling alcohol. In addition, they appoint the *imam* from within their own community. Sometimes they bring the *imam* from Sylhet in Bangladesh; therefore, it becomes easy for them to control the *imam* as they want.

centres following the Deoband tradition in many places in the UK. Bradford is one of the cities in which the Tablighi Jamaat has a strong institutional background.

The case of Bradford clarifies how Bradford has become an influential centre of Deoband traditional education and the Tablighi Jamaat in the UK. In most cases, the Tablighi Jamaat maintains a close relation with the Deobandis in India. The Muslim Association of Bradford was established by the Deobandis in 1959 (Ansari, 2004). It was also known as the Howard Street mosque. It was successful in attracting attention and support of the local authority in order to establish an Islamic education centre (Lewis, 2002). This mosque also functions as the centre of the Tablighi Jamaat in Bradford. According to Lewis (2002), there are 14 Deobandi centres in Bradford. By 1989, the number of mosques in Bradford rose to 34. Among them, thirteen mosques and two supplementary schools belong to the Deobandi tradition (Ansari, 2004). According to his 'Muslims in Britain'<sup>69</sup>, there are 1664 mosques active in Britain. However, McLoughlin and Abbas (2010) state that there are an estimated 2000 mosques and Islamic centres in Britain. Among the total number of mosques 738 are Deobandi mosques. This suggests how serious the Deobandis were in their intention to establish mosques and Islamic education centres (*madrasa*). These Deobandi mosques have become the haven for Tablighi activities in the UK.

In continuation of this process, the Deobandis have established six Islamic education centres (*madrasa*). Among these *madrasas*, students from the Dewsbury *madrasa* and the Darul Uloom al-Arabia al-Islamiya (DUI) at Holcombe near Bury are actively involved with Tablighi Jamaat efforts in the UK (Faust, 2000). In the

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<sup>69</sup> See [http://www.muslimsinbritain.org/resources/masjid\\_report.pdf](http://www.muslimsinbritain.org/resources/masjid_report.pdf) accessed on 12/05/13

Dewsbury *madrasa*, the students and teachers are directly engaged in various activities of the Tablighi Jamaat, for example, helping the organisers during *ijtema* and the weekly gatherings. These two *madrasas* also help Tablighi Jamaat to attract Muslims from the younger generation. However, the aim of establishing *madrasas* by the Tablighi Jamaat according to Sikand (2002) is to transmit Islamic rituals and beliefs to children that would give them a potential link to the Tablighi Jamaat.

### ***Educating Children by Tablighi Initiatives***

Development of mosques, *madrasas*, and other Islamic centres created an environment for Muslims to practise Islam in the UK. At the same time, Tablighi followers were concerned about religious education for their children. It was not easy to provide religious education to young children in the UK. Religious education for children of Tablighi Jamaat followers was crucial for two main reasons. First, the Tablighi Jamaat needs dedicated followers from the younger generation to sustain the movement. Sikand (2002) found that the Tablighi Jamaat was not successful in attracting the younger generation of Muslims in the UK. However, after a decade the situation has changed because of the initiatives taken by the leaders of the Tablighi Jamaat in educating young Muslims in Islam that subsequently helps to convert them into Tablighi followers. Going to a Tablighi mosque gives young children a good orientation to the Tablighi Jamaat.

Second, followers of the Tablighi Jamaat believe that in a diasporic society, children do not have many options to receive a basic religious education from the society because there are not many Islamic institutions in their neighbourhood. In this case, Amir who is a taxi driver by profession and a dedicated young Tablighi Jamaat

follower from Cardiff, told me why it is necessary to educate children, to involve them in the *dawah* tasks of the Tablighi Jamaat and to pass on the knowledge in Islam to them:

We received our religion through inheritance, but if you want to be religious and knowledgeable, you have to work hard to achieve it. If a father becomes a religious person, it does not mean that his children will be automatically religious like him. It may or may not happen. Someone has to work hard to achieve this. This is the work of our Prophet, the *dawah* work, which we should carry out. We will learn Islam by getting involved with the Tablighi Jamaat. It will also help children to learn about Islam perfectly.

According to Amir, religion has to be learnt. People inherit religious identity from family, but religiosity depends on the efforts of an individual. People have to achieve it with their hard work and they need to guide their children to learn about Islam. Many Tablighi followers have similar views on educating their children. The Tablighi Jamaat provides a platform for youth and adults to learn fundamental aspects of Islam, for example, following the *Sunnah*, praying in an appropriate way, learning etiquette and behaviour, etc. Tablighi Jamaat followers consider *dawah* as an opportunity to learn these while they carry out a *dawah* trip.

Tablighi Jamaat mosques in Cardiff and in many other places in the UK act as Islamic education centres for young children and adults. Children can learn the *Qur'an* and many other valuable aspects of Islam from these Islamic centres. I have

observed in the Uthman mosque at Plantagenet Street in Cardiff during my participation in the weekly *gash*t that they used this mosque as an Islamic learning centre for young children and adults in the afternoon. They operated learning sessions for *Qur'an* and *hadith* every day for children, headed by the *imam* of the mosque. The *imam* looked after the sessions. This three-storey building became full and young children read from the *Qur'an* in Arabic loudly. They also have learning sessions for adults. However, the time and day depends on the availability and interest of participants. Abdul said that they had a small group of adults who wanted to learn the meaning of the *Qur'an*. Therefore, they decided to meet once a week with the *imam* to increase their understanding of the *Qur'an*.

The Tablighi approach of providing basic religious education appeals to parents, because children do not have the opportunity to learn the fundamentals of Islam from school. Schools are unable to provide lessons on Islamic norms, values, and etiquettes for children. This is why parents are attracted by *madrasas* in the UK. Tablighi *madrasas* recruit students from the UK and abroad through the informal Tablighi network (Lewis, 1993). In addition, parents also use the Tablighi network to send their sons to Deobandi *madrasas* in the UK.

Tablighi-dominated mosques and *madrasas* provide orientation in the Tablighi Jamaat ways for young children. That creates the foundation for attracting followers from the second and the third generations of UK Muslims. Tablighi followers motivate young children to attend these mosque-based learning centres and this makes it easy to motivate many young children to join the Tablighi Jamaat afterwards. Dewsbury, the European headquarters of the Tablighi Jamaat,

emphasizes the importance of motivating young children first to attend mosques for prayer and eventually to join *dawah* trips. In the *ijtema* at Dewsbury that I attended in May 2009, the leaders of the Tablighi Jamaat instructed the participants to approach the younger generation to bring them into Tablighi activities. They were told to motivate Muslim youths to go for at least a three-day *dawah* during the vacation, for example, during Christmas, Easter, and the summer holidays as they have a longer time off during this time from schools, colleges and universities. The leaders also warned not to put pressure on these younger participants when they were in a *jamaat* to go on a *dawah* journey. The senior leaders from Dewsbury instructed the audience to be polite to young participants, to be flexible in the times and activities, and to offer a discount for their expenses. When I went to Dewsbury to attend the annual *ijtema* in 2009, I experienced this flexibility and I was given a student discount for my expenses in the *jamaat*.

The gradual influence of Tablighi norms and practices helps a beginner to become transformed into a dedicated Tablighi follower, a transformation that also requires a change of his entire lifestyle. The creation of a mosque-oriented community and learning centre connects with this in that it provides a strong base for the Tablighi Jamaat in the UK. Accepting the ideology of the Tablighi Jamaat does not only mean having a membership of a transnational Islamic movement. For followers of the Tablighi Jamaat, the movement becomes a way of life that offers a direction to live one's life in a complex and multicultural Western society.

### *The Tablighi Jamaat as a Guideline for Islamic Life in Western Society*

Dedicated Tablighi Jamaat followers believe in the Tablighi ideology and guidelines that in turn shape their everyday lives. For them, religion shapes their entire life. Many dedicated followers of the Tablighi Jamaat have transformed their life according to the guidelines of the Tablighi Jamaat. Followers of the Tablighi Jamaat find a way to live an Islamic life in a modern and complex world through Tablighi *dawah* activities. Why the followers consider the Tablighi Jamaat as an essential means to live an Islamic life in the UK is a question. The following section is an attempt to answer this question, analysing cases from the UK of members who were dedicated followers.

#### *Two Cases*

Abdul was a 31 years old British Bangladeshi with two children who lives in Cardiff. He used to live with his brother in the same house, but now moved into another house, which is a 15-minute walk from the Uthman mosque on Plantagenet Street. He became involved with the Tablighi Jamaat in 1999 and got married in 2003 to a rural girl from Sylhet, Bangladesh. He used to work in a clothing company, but he moved into his family business. In order to follow a *halal* profession, Abdul and his brothers have transformed their restaurant business into a take-away to avoid selling alcohol.

By accepting the ideology of the Tablighi Jamaat, followers either choose a *halal* profession or transform their profession into *halal*. For them, a profession can be part of prayer if it follows Islamic guidelines. Followers of the Tablighi Jamaat do not see



religion as an isolated part of their life; rather, for them religion and everyday life are intertwined, where religion shapes every aspects of life.

Abdul narrated how he joined the Tablighi Jamaat and influenced his entire family to become Tablighi followers:

In 1999, I lost my brother in a car accident. He was driving and I was sitting at the back. I witnessed his death. I was feeling terribly bad after that time. I was very different from what I am nowadays. I used to lead an English lifestyle. I had been through alcohol and many other drugs. Everybody knew me in Cardiff. You can go to the pub and drink. It was an independent and free life. I was so bad, *astagfirullah*<sup>70</sup>.

Watching my brother's death in front of my eyes struck me terribly. During that time, one of my friends [a Tablighi follower] told me to go to Bristol<sup>71</sup> to listen to the *boyan*. Then I went Bristol to listen to the *boyan*. It was unbelievable and I felt motivated to get back to a normal life. Then I went for a three-day *dawah*, then for 10 days and 40 days. Now I am in a better life. I can feel peace inside me. I started a regular *ta'leem* at home.

*Who was the first person to join the Tablighi Jamaat from your family?*

I am the first person who has joined the Tablighi Jamaat in 1999 and I encouraged my younger and elder brothers to join Tablighi Jamaat.

*Do they regularly do dawah like you?*

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<sup>70</sup> The expression *astagfirullah* is an act of seeking forgiveness from Allah (God).

<sup>71</sup> Bristol is the local *markaz* where followers from Cardiff attend Thursday *boyan* every week.

None of them is giving time like me, but they follow the Tablighi Jamaat. My younger brother is a dedicated follower and he regularly goes out for *dawah*. My elder brother had 3 or 4 restaurants at Cardiff, but he gave up those businesses after joining Tablighi Jamaat.

*Why did he stop the restaurant business?*

You know, if you are in the restaurant business, you have to sell alcohol for the consumers, which is *haram* [unlawful] in Islam. Therefore, he sold those businesses and started take-away restaurants, in which he does not have to sell alcohol.

The case of Abdul explains how the Tablighi Jamaat has changed his life and his entire family. He wanted to get rid of anxiety, personal crisis and a disorganised lifestyle and participation in Tablighi Jamaat activities brought discipline and peace into his life. The Tablighi Jamaat entirely transformed his family and business. In order to follow the Tablighi lifestyle they had to transform their business to a *halal* one. Moreover, they avoid using the bank because banks involve interest, which is not *halal*. Sometimes it is not possible to avoid transactions with banks. In such cases, if they receive any interest they donate it to help the poor and charities. They believe that through such a way they can follow an Islamic life while living in a Western society.

The Tablighi Jamaat deliberately targets Muslim men who are suffering from personal crises and are facing problems in living with contemporary Western cultural influences. Some contemporary crises, which tend to be the direct effect of modernity and westernised life such as the rise of individualism, insecurity, the

disillusioned life of the young generation, drugs etc. may have acted as a force to go back to their religious life. These are evident from the case of Abdul. In a study focussed in the context of France, Kepel (2000) states that the Tablighi Jamaat has targeted people that suffer from deep disorientation, ethical crises, and loss of direction. All of these are derived from the frustrations of Western life. Kepel further argues that the entire range of activities and lifestyle of the Tablighi Jamaat reintroduced its followers to a communal life and a sense of responsibility and participation (Kepel, 2000). The Tablighi Jamaat shows its followers an alternative direction for life in Western society.

Personal crisis and a disorganised living style may have an influence in choosing the rather strict and disciplined life offered by the Tablighi Jamaat. Choosing a Tablighi life does not only mean to pray and do *dawah*, but it involves a gradual shift in priorities that has to match the ideology of the Tablighi Jamaat. Thus, in this sense, it is a change in their way of seeing life.

Transformation is not only linked with professions but according to the Tablighi teaching, the initial transformation has to begin from one's personal life. An example is the case of Abdul, who was involved in a westernized lifestyle and then transformed himself into a Tablighi Jamaat follower. He transformed his entire lifestyle with the help of the Tablighi Jamaat. The ideology of the Tablighi Jamaat helped Abdul to live a controlled and disciplined life later on. When Abdul entered a disciplined life with a Tablighi ideology, he accomplished other priorities of his life, for example, having a *halal* profession, *purdah*, Islamic knowledge, Tablighi norms, and Islamic education for children, as part of the process.

A different context can be found from the case of Abdul Aziz from Cardiff. Abdul Aziz was a 22-year old unmarried Tablighi Jamaat follower who studied at Cardiff University and looked forward to building a career in school teaching. His parents were from Sylhet, Bangladesh. Abdul Aziz was a practising Muslim before getting involved in the Tablighi Jamaat, but he was not aware of all the necessary aspects of Islam. He explained his background when joining the Tablighi Jamaat and its impact on him:

I am not an example of a rapid converter to an Islamic life. It seriously happened when I was doing my A levels. One day a Pakistani man came to pray at our mosque [the Shahjalal mosque]. He was older than I am. Eventually I talked with him and he invited me to come and pray at the Umar mosque [Connaught Road, Cardiff]. One day I met him at the Umar mosque at prayer. I was surprised to see all my school friends there. It was the turning point for me to join the Tablighi Jamaat. I found that these people were very much into practising Islam. Moreover, the elder people here were extraordinarily cooperative and friendly with the youngsters, which impressed me. I was not familiar with such attitudes of elder people in our mosque. They were not shouting at the youngsters. It seemed to be the perfect place for youngsters. I liked it.

During this time, I did not even know all the details about *haram* and *halal*. I knew the basics, but did not know that music is forbidden in Islam. What impressed me more and attracted me to them was the personality and behaviour of some of the people I was hanging around with.

He also talked about his plans for marriage and his future life, which were also influenced by the Tablighi Jamaat:

I used to work part-time in an agency. There was a young girl who worked there. One day I overheard that girl speaking in Bengali. The surprising thing was she did not look like a Bangladeshi girl. She was more like a British girl. Her attitude and clothing were more like the British. Outside the home, they are different and none of her family members knew about this life. I was afraid to see her. I would make sure that I am not going to marry a girl like her. I would prefer a girl who had just completed her college. I would look for a girl who is not exposed to western British culture.

*How would you choose your bride?*

Abdul Aziz: I will leave that to my parents. If they failed to arrange someone from home, I would try to choose myself.

*You mean from Bangladesh?*

Abdul Aziz: Yes.

Abdul Aziz was influenced by the personality and behaviour of Tablighi men while praying in a Tablighi environment at the Umar mosque. In addition, he found many of his school friends in this mosque who were involved in the Tablighi Jamaat. These influenced Aziz to follow the Tablighi Jamaat in a way that is different from Abdul. One of my informants from Bangladesh told me that participation in Tablighi

*dawah* brings positive changes in behaviour (*akhlak*). The Tablighi Jamaat teaches its followers to be generous, calm and polite with others. He believes that these changes in behaviour are significant because they attract and motivate others to join the Tablighi Jamaat. For Tablighi followers being polite, calm and generous is another kind of *dawah* that makes the dedicated followers ambassadors of the Tablighi Jamaat. During a *gasht* at the Uthman mosque, Ibrahim mentioned that ‘we have to impress non-Muslim brothers with our good behaviour’. Although his speech was in a context where he wanted to say that ‘we (Muslims) are not bad people’, it also showed the eagerness of promoting a Tablighi notion of ‘good behaviour’. The Tablighi environment at the mosque Umar provided Abdul Aziz with an opportunity to reunite with his old friends that probably was an extra motivation for him to remain a Tablighi follower. I found from my fieldwork that Tablighi followers always emphasise the importance of choosing their company from Tablighi followers since it keeps them in a Tablighi environment. Although Abdul Aziz was born and raised in the UK, after getting involved with the Tablighi Jamaat, he feared trusting Western culture, especially when it came to the question of marriage. Abdul Aziz was in the process of getting married. He was significantly influenced by the Tablighi Jamaat, which shaped his ideas in marriage and family life. As we have seen the case of Abdul, he also got married to a girl from Sylhet, Bangladesh. Both of them wanted to make sure that they would find a bride who had never been exposed to Western, modern urban culture. The Tablighi Jamaat encouraged them to find brides who were not exposed to Western culture. Abdul Aziz was worried about marrying a girl from the UK, since he believed that getting married to a girl who had been exposed to Western culture might cause problems.

There is clearly a fear of losing faith among the Tablighi followers in the UK if they immerse themselves in a Western lifestyle. What do they fear? Is it only related to their faith or to losing the identity? In the context of the Tablighi Jamaat in Australia, Ali (2006) shows that it is related to their religious identity. If they lose their religious identity, they potentially lose their faith. The Tablighi Jamaat followers in Western society do not want to lose their faith. 35 year-old Bokhtiar, who is a dedicated Tablighi Jamaat follower and a leader of a Tablighi mosque from London, narrated about the fears of Western culture that motivate people to follow the Tablighi Jamaat. He said:

There are instabilities in the society, problems with family life, the rise of individualism: people are becoming isolated from the society and family life. These sorts of things are influencing people to join the Tablighi Jamaat.

Bokhtiar sees these issues as linked with the impact of Western lifestyle, which he sees as increasing insecurity in family and social life. The Tablighi Jamaat's ability to provide solutions to these problems of contemporary society becomes an attraction for many to join them. Tablighi teaching motivates its followers to go back to what they consider a 'pure' form of Islam, to live a simple and disciplined life by avoiding Western lifestyle. Modern forms of insecurity and fear derive from suspicion of others and their intentions, the refusal of trust or the impossibility of trusting. The new dimensions of contemporary society are currently creating the above-mentioned uncertainty, which can cause tension and insecurity between different groups (Bauman, 2004). Bauman (2004) further states that the loss of social

capital and the rise of individualism lead people to think only about themselves, no longer accepting responsibility for their kin or vulnerable groups. In case of risk and anxiety, Beck (2002) argues, that people are living in an age of incalculable, uncontrollable human-made, unnatural, manufactured uncertain risk that obviously transcends national boundaries. In this context Bauman (2007: 95) states, ‘we dream of a reliable world, one we can trust. A secure world...’. In such an unstable life of fear, Tablighi Jamaat offers a simple life for many Muslims even in a complex society.

## **9.5 Conclusion**

Chapter Nine has discussed some implications of the Tablighi Jamaat in the lives of its followers in the the UK, for whom some features of Western culture are key reasons for joining the Tablighi Jamaat. The initial agenda of the Tablighi Jamaat in the UK was to create an environment for Muslims along with strengthening faith. It provided Muslims with an infrastructure within which they could follow and practice Islam in the UK.

Since the Tablighi Jamaat encourages its followers to begin their *dawah* from home, they have the opportunity to educate their family members and children in Tablighi ideology. Through mosque-based activities, children can be educated on various aspects of Islam. The Tablighi Jamaat wants to implement Islamic teachings in every aspect of life as a complete code of life. Followers want to live their entire life according to the guidelines of the Tablighi Jamaat by taking on regular *dawah* activities. Regular involvement with *dawah*, that is, carrying out two *gashts* every



week, a three-day *dawah* tour in every month and a *chilla* every year, help followers to stay in the Tablighi environment for the rest of their lives.

The cases discussed in this chapter illustrate that following Tablighi teachings and guidelines contributed to transforming the lives of these individuals. The Tablighi Jamaat acted as the guiding principles for them to maintain their family and social life. This was reflected in many of their activities, for instances, finding a *halal* profession in the case of Abdul and finding a suitable bride in the case of Abdul Aziz. Participation in a Tablighi *dawah* also influenced plans for future for these two cases. Thus, the Tablighi Jamaat gives a direction for the lives of its followers.

The Tablighi Jamaat's ability to provide solutions to various problems that have emerged from contemporary society, its guidelines for an Islamic life, the global Islamic observances that link its followers to a global community and the frustration arising from a Westernized life have been key attractions for many Muslims who join the movement. Moreover, peer influence and Tablighi orientation in the family also help to attract new followers. Sikand, (2002) points out two main reasons for the popularity of the Tablighi Jamaat among British Muslims; one is that the traditional *ulama* were not well organised in the UK, and the other is that the Tablighi Jamaat provides a universal, scripturalist Islamic piety that is easy to propagate. The Tablighi Jamaat made religion accessible to ordinary Muslims who did not have a proper religious education. In addition, two Deobandi *madrasas* produce *ulama*, trained in Tablighi Jamaat ways during their courses. All the Tablighi mosques and *madrasas* became recruitment centres for the Tablighi Jamaat. In Dewsbury, the students of *madrasa* spend a year in *dawah* tours after their graduation. These

establishments have helped to increase the movement's followers with practical training in the Tablighi Jamaat, something which was necessary to attract the younger generation in order to make the Tablighi Jamaat sustainable in the UK. I observed during my participation in the *gasht* that some followers were regularly bringing their young children to do *gasht* in Cardiff at the *Uthman* mosque. Ibrahim was one of them. This also helps to attract followers from the second and third generations.

Tablighi followers believe that the weekly *gasht* is the key to attracting men to Tablighi activities, which is why many followers see this *gasht* as the backbone of *dawah*. I have shown in the previous chapter how Tablighi participants go from door to door to invite and motivate Muslim men to attend Tablighi activities. In this way, followers of the Tablighi Jamaat manage to attract new followers to begin *dawah*. I have noticed in both Bangladesh and the UK that many men turn to mosques to pray and to attend the *boyan* of the Tablighi Jamaat after *gasht*. As I have shown in the previous chapter, Ibrahim tried to motivate men during the *gasht* by discussing the eternal benefit of participating in *dawah*. Four or five men provided their names to be listed as potential *dawah* participants. After the *gasht*, Tablighi followers sit with people who are new to Tablighi activities to motivate them to spend time in *dawah* activities.

The mosque becomes a centre for all their religious activities. This helps to create a mosque-oriented community. For the Tablighi Jamaat in the UK, the mosque is not only a place for prayer, but it acts as a social centre. The mosque-oriented

community creates a local network of Tablighi Jamaat followers that subsequently connects them to a global Tablighi community.

In Chapter Ten, I look at the role of the Tablighi Jamaat in developing Tablighi and Muslim identity among contemporary British Muslims.

## **Chapter Ten**

### **Searching for a Global Identity**

#### **10.1 Introduction**

Chapter Ten discusses the question of Tablighi and Muslim identity among British Muslims. Over the period since their initial settlement in the UK, Muslims in Britain have developed a community with a combination of diasporic culture and various forms of religious observances. In this context, Geaves (2005: 67) states that ‘they have had to discover how to be Muslim in a secular society and to develop the appropriate strategies for living as a minority in a non-Muslim society’. Living as a minority in a multicultural society forces many Muslims to seek a broader platform outside their national and ethnic boundary. An identity based on religion provides them with a platform to belong to a wider, global community. It gives them a sense of participation and belonging to the wider Islamic community in the UK, which is part of a global Muslim community.

For the early generation of South Asian Muslims in the UK, Islam was not just a religion but always acted as a vehicle for maintaining a tie with the culture and tradition of their homeland. It helped them to create a ‘little home’ within Britain’s multicultural society. The situation is different for the later generations who were born and raised in the UK. Unlike their parents, they see Britain as their home. This younger generation considers Islam as a means of expression that connects them with the global Muslim community, which becomes one of the attractions of a ‘modernist Islam’ or ‘new Islam’.

Robinson states that 'Islamic reform both opened the way to modernity and then worked with it' (2008: 279). Robinson further states that Islamic reform has many outcomes that destroyed a great deal of the traditional authority. In addition, Islamic reform emphasised the human will to establish an Islamic society on earth, a transformation of the self that involves self-consciousness and reflectiveness, and a rationalisation of Islam that conceived their faith as an entity. Many of these outcomes are relevant to the activities of the Tablighi Jamaat. Modernisation in Islam or the 'new Islam' in the form of Islamic reform does have an appeal to young Muslims in the UK, because of its potential to offer solutions of problems that the new generation face in British society. In addition, the Iranian revolution and, more recently, the events of 9/11 and 7/7 may have had an influence on the attraction to the modernist Islam. Events such as those of 9/11 and 7/7 turned global attention to the Muslim world. In recent times, Muslim identity in the public sphere has come to seem problematic (Werbner, 2004). Muslim youth in immigrant societies responded to these situations in many ways. One was to 'develop a greater and more self-conscious sense of collective identity' (Kibria, 2008: 246). This sense of collective identity and belonging helped to shape Islamic reform movements in the UK. The Tablighi Jamaat provided Muslims in Europe with a means of expressing their identity (Faust, 2000).

The Tablighi Jamaat as a global Islamic reform movement also aims to establish an Islamic society through the renewal of faith in the Muslim community. It is against the 'this worldly approach' of some Islamic reform movements. In this process of establishing an Islamic society, Tablighi Jamaat rejects many elements of

modernity<sup>72</sup> and a Westernized lifestyle by going back to what the movement considers as fundamental Islamic practices. Fundamental Islamic practices mean to Tablighi followers following what they regard as a ‘pure’ form of Islam. By reviving this Tablighi notion of a ‘pure’ Islam among Muslims all over the world, the Tablighi followers set a uniform guideline to live a life in the contemporary world. The uniformity of the activity and guidelines of the Tablighi Jamaat helps to constitute a global Tablighi community. The creation of a Tablighi community contributes in the process of identity formation of the Tablighi Jamaat by transcending local community. In this context, I aim to explore the role of the Tablighi Jamaat in fostering Islamic identity among British Muslims in the UK. Focusing on the activities of the Tablighi Jamaat, I argue that the movement contributes to fostering a global Muslim identity by creating a distinctive Tablighi community through shared and common *dawah* activities.

## **10.2 Identity Formation of the Tablighi Jamaat in the UK**

### ***Why Identity is Important***

Identity becomes an issue in the diasporic context where second-generation young Muslims and many Muslims from first generation find themselves in a position of being ‘between two cultures’. At home, they have to follow their parents’ cultural and religious tradition. In the wider society, they are part of British society and culture. British-born young Muslims represent two identities at the same time; one is ethnic and the other is national. They see a global Islamic identity as a potential way of resolving this dilemma of living between two identities. Many see Islam as the key element of their existence in a diasporic society, because of its ability to offer an

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<sup>72</sup> I have used the term modernity with a general sense, meaning the contemporary way of living and other associated elements.

alternative space that can assist in resolving various types of crisis in modern life. The idea of identity might be derived from the crisis of modern life. ‘The trouble faced by the contemporary Muslims is a combination of socio-economic and political crisis threatening their faith and identity. If they lose their identity, from a religious perspective, they feel they also effectively lose their faith, and as a result they lose everything’ (Ali, 2006: 14). Thus, the contemporary crisis faced by Muslims in diaspora comes to be interlinked with their faith and existence.

For Many Muslims ‘the attraction to Islam is a reaction to, and a defence against, the experience of racial exclusionism they face in the multicultural society they live in’ (Gardner and Shukur, 1994: 163). Gardner and Shukur (1994) argue that ‘they [young British Bangladeshis] have constructed new and varied lifestyles of their own’. The motivation of their new lifestyle comes from Islamic ideology. In this context, Eade (1997: 151) states that, ‘British Bangladeshis are in a complex situation as they are associated with moving between two nation-states. For many of them the identity that is “Muslim” is also notable’. They clearly identify themselves as British and Muslim. This implies that their Muslim identity is preferable to their ethnic identity among British-born Muslim immigrants.

35-year old Fouzia, a Bangladeshi student at a British university who once was a Tablighi Jamaat follower, states how Islam has become an essential aspect of identifying an individual:

The crisis of identity is extremely important to look at among the Muslim immigrants in the UK. Crisis in the sense that people are experiencing a

gap in their sense of belonging. Human beings always want to belong to a group. For example, by nationality, I am Bangladeshi, it makes us proud or not so proud, and whatever it is, but I identify myself with a group, with Bangladeshi nationalism. This sense of belonging is getting weak worldwide. It creates an urge to search for a different form of belonging. I think there has been a breakdown of national identity. Now I personally do not look particularly for Bengali people around, rather I look for an international Muslim community. The world is now globalized, and hybridity is a common phenomenon. People are mixing and moving from one country to another, and national identity is getting weaker. In such a context, Islam is playing a role in creating a global Islamic identity. There is a concept of brotherhood, which is not particularly strong in other religions.

Fouzia points to a crisis of identity among Muslim immigrants in the UK that is linked with their dilemma of belonging. For her, national identity is getting weaker at a time where Islam provides a global identity for Muslims. The appeal of a national identity may have declined among the younger generation, but the earlier generation prefers to be attached to the religious and cultural traditions that they brought with them from home. The parental generation in most cases expects the younger generation to follow their tradition and this creates an identity crisis for the younger generation. This is an ideological crisis derived from the internal conflict between the parental and the younger generation in observing and practising Islam in a multicultural society. Islam has a different meaning for parents and their children. This tension between the parental and the younger generation has an influence in



unlocking a new window into a new Islam. Abdul Aziz, a 21-year old British Bangladeshi and a final year student at a UK University who is also a Tablighi Jamaat follower, describes how he feels about the tension of religious understanding with his parents. For him, this tension has influenced him to search for an Islamic tradition other than that of his parents, one that has a global significance. As he stated:

..... These elders are not practicing Islam. Youngsters are practising Islam and trying to pray properly. That is why they feel that this is different from their Islam. Older people do not appreciate this shift in the mode of practising Islam very much... There was a young Bangladeshi doctor, who used to be involved with the Tablighi Jamaat here. I knew him personally, and he was an exceptionally knowledgeable person. He managed to motivate more than 30 youngsters to pray regularly and attend *ta'leem* sessions at the mosque [the Shahjalal mosque, Cardiff]. The seniors from the mosque management committee did not allow him to continue this activity.

Abdul Aziz's statement refers to a shift in practising Islam from the parental generation. Abdul Aziz thinks that the parental generation is not following a 'proper' form of Islam and they do not appreciate the Islamic practices of youngsters, which are new to them. Perhaps it is not purely a generational difference. This tension originates because the parental generation does not want any reformist Islamic tradition in the community that may end their existing religious authority over the community. The Tablighi Jamaat's challenge to the religious authority of the past can

be seen as one of the outcomes of the modern Islamic reform movement. Abdul and some other Tablighi followers told me that two Bangladeshi mosques in Cardiff (the Shah Jalal and Jalalia mosques) do not allow the Tablighi Jamaat to stay overnight in the mosque. I came across a Bangladeshi Tablighi Jamaat group during my fieldwork who had come from London to carry out *dawah* in Cardiff but they were not allowed to stay overnight in either of these two Bangladeshi mosques in Cardiff. Local Tablighi followers in Cardiff believe that organisers of Bangladeshi mosques in Cardiff mostly want to control these mosques in order to keep their religious authority over the community, while, the Tablighi Jamaat wants to use the mosques as the primary institution of *dawah*.

In most cases, first generation Bangladeshis prefer to keep the religious traditions that they brought from their home country. Migrants keep a range of connections with their country of origin in many ways (Vertovec, 2001). For first-generation Bangladeshis, their localised version of Islam become a means of maintaining a connection with their home country. Many first generation immigrants also see modernist Islamic traditions as a threat that might break down their existing connection with their home country by rejecting the religious traditions they brought with them. In addition, many first generation Bangladeshis and other South Asians expect their children to follow their religious traditions, but British-born Muslims do not see Islam as their parents do, and this leads to a crisis of religious identity. At the same time many first generation Muslims also join the Tablighi Jamaat, and may do so as part of affirming a Muslim identity. The Tablighi Jamaat was introduced by the first generation of Muslims in the UK. Thus, the sense of identity is crucial for both

the first generation and the second generation of Muslims, and the Tablighi Jamaat seems to provide a solution for both.

Thus, a crisis of identity, living in between two cultures, reaction against a parental Islamic tradition, the impacts of a Western lifestyle, contribute to the search for a global and wider Islamic platform for younger British Muslims. Many Muslims find a solution to these complexities in the Tablighi Jamaat with its unofficial membership of a global Tablighi community. The question is, how do they foster a global Tablighi community, which subsequently contributes to the formation of a Tablighi identity? The following section attempts to answer this question by exploring the role of the Tablighi Jamaat in fostering a global identity.

### ***Community, Identity, and the Tablighi Jamaat***

Although the initial priority of the Tablighi Jamaat is the renewal of faith, it has various other social implications that I have discussed in the previous chapter in relation to the UK and also in chapter five in relation to Bangladesh. For followers, the Tablighi Jamaat is not just a *dawah* movement; rather, it provides them with a direction to live their life in a Western and multicultural society. In a contemporary world, in the wake of globalisation, a Western lifestyle is not necessarily confined only in the West. It also has strong influences in the urban spaces of developing countries. Followers of the Tablighi Jamaat believe that it provides a guideline that helps the followers to protect themselves from being immersed into the Western lifestyle and helps them to live an Islamic life even in a different social and cultural atmosphere. Therefore, the Tablighi Jamaat as an Islamic revivalist movement is not anti-modern but it is observed as a response to modernity (Ali, 2003: 267). However,

the Tablighi Jamaat's rejection of many elements and characteristics of modern life puts them in a position that indicates an anti-secular and anti-modern attitude of this transnational movement. This will be clarified in the later part of the chapter.

The sense of identity among Muslims in the UK is intertwined with their faith. Now let us move on to the activities of the Tablighi Jamaat that construct a Muslim identity in the UK. The formation of a Tablighi community is the key element in constructing a distinctive identity. The notion of identity is closely linked with the concept of community. The idea of community provides a space where people want to belong. It creates hope for them to stay together. Bauman describes the way in which we envision a community as follows:

In a community, we all understand each other well, we may trust what we hear, we are safe most of the time and hardly ever puzzled or taken aback. We are never strangers to each other. We may quarrel – but these are friendly quarrels, it is just that we are all trying to make our togetherness even better and more enjoyable than it has been so far and, while guided by the same wish to improve our life together, we may disagree how to do it best. But we never wish each other bad luck, and we may be sure that the others around wish us good (2001: 2).

The question is to what extent does Bauman's description of how we imagine a community correspond to anything that exists in the real world? Bauman further states, 'community stands for the kind of world which is not, regrettably, available to us – but which we would clearly wish to inhabit and which we hope to repossess'

(2001: 3). According to Bauman, this ideal society or community might not exist in the real world. The imagination or the hope of such a community helps people to stay together in society. Benedict Anderson (2006) provided the idea of an 'imagined community' as defining a nation where people will not know everyone in their community. A nation cannot encompass the entire population of the world; hence, the community of a nation is limited. Anderson argues that print technology and capitalism came together to create the opportunity of imagining natural community. Although Anderson's discussion of imagined communities focuses on the creation of a nation, it also helps to explore the formation of a community that goes beyond the boundary of a nation. The sense of belonging to a wider and global community involves an imagination of a community.

The process of imagining a homogenous community is essential in constructing identity (Baumann, 1996). Globalisation brings people closer and at the same time, it transcends the boundary of the nation. It is difficult today to find a community restricted within their cultural and societal practices without any influence of globalisation. In such contexts, the imagination of belonging to a wider society is a key to a new form of community that eventually helps to form an identity. Appadurai (1990: 297) calls it 'imagined worlds'. For him, it is not just the imagination of a community, but it is also about imagining the world we live in today. The imagination of a distinctive Tablighi lifestyle is evident in Tablighi Jamaat activities. The imagination of creating a unique Tablighi lifestyle is not limited to a specific ethnic community but it is equally applicable within the entire Muslim world. Followers of the Tablighi Jamaat transcend national boundaries by carrying out *dawah* tours all over the world. Tablighi followers in every country follow the same

guiding books (translated into the relevant language) and literature approved by the headquarters of the Tablighi Jamaat, showing how effectively the Tablighi Jamaat uses the print technology in order to create a global Tablighi ideology. At the same time, these transnational tours connect Tablighi followers from various ethnic, national and cultural backgrounds to a global community of the Tablighi Jamaat. In such a context, the Tablighi Jamaat can be seen as an imagined community where followers do not know each other, but belong to and believe in the same Tablighi ideology. Tablighi Jamaat followers in the UK do not constitute a Tablighi community based on a single ethnic community. Rather, the Tablighi community consist of a combination of multiple ethnicities with diverse socio-cultural backgrounds.

My participation in weekly *gashts* with Tablighi Jamaat followers in Cardiff and participation in *ijtema* in Dewsbury shows that participants join from various ethnicities, including British-born Muslims. I observed that participants from the Middle East, Malaysia, Africa and from younger generations are increasing. This is why the organisers started to translate the main religious speeches during the annual *ijtema* in Dewsbury, where Urdu is the principal language of communication, into English and Arabic. This shows their intention to attract followers from a wider range of ethnic backgrounds. Through this process of assimilating diverse ethnicities into a common Tablighi *dawah* practices, followers of the Tablighi Jamaat constitute a Tablighi community where every dedicated follower maintains the fundamental rules and regulations recommended by the Tablighi Jamaat.

Following a unique method of *dawah* globally seems to be the strength of the Tablighi Jamaat in creation of a global community. The basic way of doing most tasks of the Tablighi Jamaat are the same in Bangladesh, UK and beyond. However, as I have already discussed in relation to my participation in a *gasht* in the UK, some differences can be found in the mode of carrying out the *gasht* between the UK and Bangladesh. The recommended group activities of the Tablighi Jamaat during *dawah* also contribute to the formation of a Tablighi community. My fieldwork observation shows that most Tablighi activities are done in a group environment with collective participation of Tablighi Jamaat followers. Senior leaders of the Tablighi Jamaat always put stress on the importance of group work, for example, *dawah*, *ta'leem*, *ijtema*, *gasht*. Every task is done in groups.

Followers meet fellow followers in their local mosques while carrying out Tablighi activities. They do daily *mashoara* and *ta'leem*, weekly *gasht* and informal visits to other areas to see the progress of Tablighi Jamaat efforts. They go out for three-day *dawah* tours every month. Tablighi followers believe that *dawah* is not only the effort that exists during a *dawah* tour and an *ijtema*; rather, the Tablighi Jamaat recommends making *dawah* a habit of everyday activity by performing *mashoara* and *ta'leem* everyday in a local mosque. By doing all these repetitive *dawah* activities, dedicated followers of the Tablighi Jamaat build a relationship and network with other followers that on many occasions lasts for a long time. This network of Tablighi Jamaat followers created through collective efforts can be seen as a strength of the community that may emerge as a positive force for society outside of *dawah* activities. Chakrabarti (2010), in a study among Gujaratis in India, shows that the local and everyday network of the Tablighi Jamaat could function as

social capital for getting involved in the rehabilitation process during an earthquake in 2001 and targeted violence in 2002. In other words, the localised efforts of *dawah* of the Tablighi Jamaat created a sense of community that constituted social capital during a political crisis.

The Tablighi Jamaat in the UK operates a charity under the name of the Anjuman–E-Islah-Al-Muslimeen (Madrassa Ta’leem Ul Islam) of UK. One of the trustees of the charity is Hafiz Patel who is the current *amir* of the Tablighi Jamaat in the UK and Europe. Two of the trustees are also associated with two different registered charities, the Islamic Cultural Centre (Wembley) and The Muslim Education Trust (W. Yorkshire)<sup>73</sup>. The Anjuman–E-Islah-Al-Muslimeen runs the Dewsbury *markaz* of the Tablighi Jamaat and an Islamic institute adjacent to the *markaz* known as the Darul Ulum. Darul Ulum has nearly 300 students who spend a minimum of one weekend every month and a whole year after the end of their studies to Tabligh work (Faust, 2000: 148). Spending regular time in Tablighi *dawah* activities while studying and a whole year in Tablighi *dawah* after graduation endows students with a strong Tablighi orientation, who then can contribute in *dawah*. The Deobandi *madrassa* near Bury is also strongly connected with the Tablighi Jamaat. All these organisations provide a sustainable structure where the younger generation can be trained in religious education as well as Tablighi *dawah*, which is important for the sustainability of the movement in the UK.

Another element in creating a sense of community is the unique and identifiable style of Islamic clothing of the Tablighi Jamaat. The idea of Tablighi clothing, which

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<sup>73</sup> See for more details on <http://www.charitycommission.gov.uk/search-for-a-charity/?txt=505732> accessed 13-06-13.



is derived from following the style of the Prophet, is seen as a symbol of *Sunnah*. Dress becomes a visible symbol of the Tablighi Jamaat, with all dedicated Tablighi men wearing similar dress with long *pyjama* and *panjabi* with an Islamic cap and a beard. Horstmann (2007) observed similar Tablighi dress, that represents them in the wider society, among followers in Southern Thailand. Dickson (2009) sees this visible symbol of Islamic religiosity as an important feature of constructing a Tablighi identity. Dickson observed that Tablighi followers wear 'traditional clothing' in the urban areas in Canada where he carried out his research. He also mentioned that the Tablighi Jamaat provides an opportunity for many who work as professionals to wear traditional clothing in Tablighi activities at least during weekends. Visible symbols identify them as a distinctive group. This also represents a homogenous Tablighi style of clothing that links the followers to the wider, global and imaginary Tablighi community. The visible symbol of the Tablighi Jamaat does not only refer to their distinctive clothing but the collective *dawah* tour, the *gasht* in mosques and, often the praying in an open space, which is notable among Tablighi Jamaat followers. Tablighi Jamaat followers always prefer to pray on time even in difficult situations while travelling.

I experienced praying with a Tablighi group in a parking area while travelling to Dewsbury to attend the annual *ijtema* from 22<sup>nd</sup> to 24<sup>th</sup> of May in 2009 as part of my participant observation. During the journey to Dewsbury, the Tablighi Jamaat group performed a prayer in a parking space in a service station since there was no other suitable place for them to pray. Praying in an open space reminds them of the stories of the *sahabis* (companions of the Prophet) who used to travel in many parts of the world and prayed on time. I have never seen Tablighi followers pray in an open

space in Bangladesh while travelling; the reason may be Bangladesh already has mosques in almost every area, so that men can easily find a mosque and stop by to pray. Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, is known as the city of mosques because of the existence of large number of mosques. It is different in the UK because mosques are not available in the UK like in Bangladesh, although there are nearly 2000 mosques and Islamic centres in the UK (McLoughlin and Abbas, 2010). I then asked Kasem, one of the group followers, if they faced any problem while praying in such environment. Kasem told me that he had never faced any problem while praying outside. He told me that, 'In the past people were curious about our praying and having dinner outside but now people know about us. I didn't see any problem of performing *salat* outside'. People who see them praying in an open space are likely to identify them as Muslims rather than as Tablighis because very few people in the wider society would know about the activities of the Tablighi Jamaat. For Tablighi followers, however, this type of practice helps to represent them as a distinctive group in comparison to other Muslims, since Muslims without a Tablighi background might not generally pray in such situations. Rather, they would pray later, a practice that is known as *kaza*<sup>74</sup>.

If we look into the historical background of the Tablighi Jamaat in the UK, we can see a similar situation in the 1960s that was expressed in the writings of Bijroni (2002). He described an early *ijtema* in Manchester. The *ijtema* in Manchester was recognised as one of the successful *ijtemas* in the UK in that period by many Tablighi Jamaat followers. Tablighi men from various social and ethnic backgrounds had taken part in that *ijtema*. Tablighi Jamaat followers prayed on the street during

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<sup>74</sup> The word *kaza* refers to delayed prayers when a Muslim unable to perform prayer on time due to difficulties they have to pray in next suitable time to make it up.

their journey. After all these years, Tablighi Jamaat followers in the UK are following this tradition.

### ***Shared Tablighi Experience and Memory***

Shared memory and experience are the next elements of forming a distinctive identity that also refers to collective action. ‘Shared memories and a sense of continuity between generations’ (Smith, 1990: 180) are important factors in creating an imaginary cultural tradition that binds members in a collective identity, while Castells (2010) argues that shared experience is also an integral part of identity formation. The idea of shared memory and experience are relevant in analysing the process of identity construction of Tablighi Jamaat followers, who believe that they share a common historical background rooted in Islam in general. Moreover, the Tablighi Jamaat emphasise the importance of following the lifestyle of the Prophet as a model, which is an act of *Sunnah*. The context of the *Sunnah* provides a sense of shared experience for the followers, which in turn motivates them to follow the lifestyle of the Prophet, for example sharing food by eating together from a single plate, dressing like him and assuming responsibility for helping other Muslims in the community. In the *ijtema* in Dewsbury, I observed that all the participants sat on the ground to have their food on a *dastarkhan*<sup>75</sup>. I also followed them and sat on the ground to have meals on a *dastarkhan*. Following Tablighi etiquettes all over the world is a symbol of homogeneity and has a common meaning for followers. I also noticed the use of the *dastarkhan* while participating in two *ijtemas* in Tongi in Bangladesh. The *dastarkhan* is one of the *Sunnahs* they follow during meals. There are additional etiquettes while eating that the followers of the Tablighi Jamaat follow

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<sup>75</sup> A *dastarkhan* is made of cloth. In Dewsbury, the organisers used plastic tablecloths on which food was set out in common for the whole group. The prophet had food on a *dastarkhan* during dinner. Use of a *dastarkhan* is perceived as a *Sunnah*.

all over the world, for instance, spending less amount of time on meals, eating with the right hand, never eating anything while standing, drinking water at regular intervals, sitting on the ground, avoiding talking, etc. They have specific etiquettes for sleeping and even going to the toilet. I observed all of these etiquettes among Tablighi followers in Bangladesh and in the UK. Following common Tablighi etiquettes and norms creates shared meanings for followers and it creates a homogeneous image of the Tablighi Jamaat.

Transnational *dawah* tours and annual *ijtemas* worldwide provide a shared experience for Tablighi Jamaat followers. Participation at various levels of Tablighi Jamaat activities also creates a common meaning for its followers. Thus, by creating a common meaning and shared experience globally, the Tablighi Jamaat constructs a Muslim identity. McDonald (2010) finds that the Tablighi Jamaat constructs Muslim identity in South Africa by shaping a common meaning and experience derived from the legitimate and authentic Tablighi practices.

The transnational *dawah* activities of the Tablighi Jamaat promote the idea of a world based on the Tablighi notion of an Islamic society. Thus, the idea of territory becomes insignificant for the Tablighi Jamaat. In an age of globalisation, groups are not tightly territorialised these days (Appadurai, 1991). For Appadurai, community and identity in the contemporary world are de-territorialized, where the association of a community with a given territory becomes insignificant. For Appadurai, de-territorialisation is a force that helps to create a community in the West with a new identity, at the same time that creates differences with others. Although Appadurai (1991) points to a general trend in the contemporary world, this idea can also be

useful to explain Tablighi activities that effectively contribute to the creation of a global Tablighi community and brotherhood. The insignificance of territory in a globalised world becomes a positive force for the Tablighi Jamaat in carrying out transnational *dawah* activities. By creating a distinctive and transnational Tablighi tradition all over the world, followers of the Tablighi Jamaat distance themselves from mainstream British society. The attitude of staying in isolation from the mainstream community became evident during the Abbey Mills Mosque controversy when the leaders of the Tablighi Jamaat were not interested in engaging in a public debate (DeHanas and Pieri, 2011).

Belonging to a Tablighi community also refers to a collective unity of all dedicated Tablighi Jamaat followers that binds the followers to a global Tablighi community. In addition, ‘the Tablighis share a common language, a common pool of metaphors, a common mode of explanation’ (Metcalf, 1993: 601) that helps to construct this unity. This may not be comparable with the collective consciousness of Durkheim (1984), but a collective unity prevails among Tablighi followers worldwide. Durkheim (1984) argues that religion in primitive society unites members of the society by creating a collective consciousness. Durkheim (1976) sees collective consciousness as the highest form of psychic life. Although Durkheim’s argument refers to primitive society, various activities of the Tablighi Jamaat help to construct a unity through common religious and social practices. This unity of the Tablighi Jamaat emerges in a very different context that is not necessarily similar to the idea of collective consciousness in Durkheim’s work, but it helps Tablighi Jamaat followers to create a single and global Tablighi tradition. Regular and repetitive reading from common Tablighi books contributes to the creation of this unity for

Tablighi Jamaat followers across the globe. Thus, when followers travel in places with various cultural and ethnic backgrounds, they can easily connect and communicate with other Tablighi followers because of this unity. Common metaphors and explanations worldwide by the Tablighis emerge through repetitive *dawah* activities, reading and listening to the *hadith* and stories from the Tablighi recommended books.

I observed that Tablighi followers both in Bangladesh and in the UK repetitively read and listened to stories relating to the life of the companion of the Prophet from the *Hekayete Sahaba* (the Stories of the Companion), the *hadith* and other Tablighi recommended books. Stories from the *Hekayete Sahaba* and the *hadith* describe the past of Islam as a standard to be imitated (Metcalf, 1993 and 2003). Tablighis believe that they are living in a time of *jahiliyaa*, ‘a time of ignorance classically understood as the pre Muhammad age in Arabia’ (Metcalf, 2003: 144). Although the term *jahiliyaa* classically refers to the time before the coming of the Prophet Muhammad, Tablighis use it to describe the present time where Muslims are deviated from the original teachings of Islam. Thus, the stories from the *Hekayete Sahaba* and the *hadith* are seen as a standard guide to leading a proper and authentic Islamic life by dedicated Tablighi Jamaat followers. In other words Tablighis intend to ‘make the past live’ (Metcalf, 1993: 590). Rafi, a Tablighi follower from Luton, told me that the repetitive tasks of the Tablighi Jamaat help a Tablighi follower to follow Islam properly. As he mentioned, ‘If you get involved with any job, it will divert your concentration to many other things. That is why the Tablighi Jamaat does the same tasks repetitively. If we do not practice regularly, we would not be able to do *dawah* properly’. Followers of the Tablighi Jamaat read Tablighi-recommended

books during every *dawah* activity in a group. Once they finish reading these books, they start again from the beginning. Followers also do *gasht* everyday while they are on a *dawah* tour. Repeated reading, listening and doing the same activities repeatedly create a common intellectual platform where followers from all over the world connect with each other. Metcalf argues that ‘The Tablighi Jama'at creates a society defined by shared cosmopolitan languages as people read Tabligh texts and imagine a worldwide community of individuals also reading them’ (1993: 606). Stories from Tablighi books inspire its followers from all over the world to imagine being part of a global Tablighi community. Followers always relate and compare their *dawah* experiences with the stories of the Prophet and his companions, to combat *jahiliyaa* in contemporary times.

I observed during my participation in various Tablighi activities in Bangladesh and the UK that, when they meet they discuss and share experiences, the followers perceive that they are following in the footsteps of the Prophet and his companions. When I travelled with them in the UK and Bangladesh, I noticed that followers always consider their efforts as similar to those of the Prophet. The followers believe that they are carrying out the unfinished *dawah* tasks of the Prophet and this causes a huge impact on the lives of Tablighi followers all over the world. During my participation in an *ijtema* at Dewsbury, in a *boyan* a senior Tablighi follower mentioned that ‘*dawah* is the unfinished work of the Prophet’. As he continued:

This [*dawah*] is an important obligation for us. Tablighi *dawah* is the unfinished work of the Prophet, which we are doing and every Muslim in the world should do. Our Prophet passed away and no more Prophets will

come in the future. Therefore, this is our responsibility, to transmit his message to all people in every part of the world.

This statement refers to the Tablighi explanation on carrying out *dawah*. Tablighi followers that I met both in the UK and in Bangladesh view the logic of doing *dawah* in a similar way. Ibrahim, a follower of the Tablighi Jamaat in Cardiff, mentioned in a *gasht* that the Prophet is the ideal example for all Muslims and Muslims are responsible for carrying out *dawah* work. By emphasising the Prophet's directions and guidelines in doing *dawah*, the Tablighi Jamaat inspires its followers to replicate many elements from the life of the Prophet. Following a distinctive way of doing *dawah*, the repetitive reading of stories about the sacrifices of the Prophet and his companions, provide a common context and understanding about *dawah* for every Tablighi follower.

In this way, the Tablighi Jamaat constructs a common Tablighi tradition, which unites all Tablighi followers worldwide. In the context of France, Kepel (2000: 203) argues that for Muslims in France in the 1980s, 'the existence of cultural foundations was a prerequisite for the construction of their identity. Such foundations had not yet been established, and the Tablighīs were the first to do so'. Much the same could be said about Tablighi Jamaat in the UK, where they contributed towards establishing cultural foundations through building mosques, *madrasas*, halal shops, etc. Although there were several established Islamic movements already functioning in the UK who also influenced the formation of a global Muslim *ummah*, the Tablighi Jamaat presented themselves as a distinctive community, which contributes in forming a global identity through a mosque-oriented Tablighi community.



In society, Tablighi Jamaat followers do not stay together all the time and they have their family priorities, so the egalitarian approach does not exist in the society in the same way that it does during a *dawah* journey. When they come back to their area, they do not have the opportunity to stay together 24 hours of the day. As I have shown in the previous chapter, Tablighi Jamaat followers intend to keep mosques open most of the time out of the 24 hours. This gives them an opportunity to meet fellow Tablighi Jamaat followers regularly in local mosques and do *dawah* in their respective areas every day. Tablighi Jamaat followers keep their association within their Tablighi group and I observed that they do not have many friends outside their Tablighi Jamaat circle, both in the UK and in Bangladesh. They prefer to keep and make most of their friends from the Tablighi network. Many Tablighi followers even aim to marry from the Tablighi network to make sure that they find a partner with a Tablighi background. Salahuddin, a young and unmarried Tablighi follower from Luton with a Bangladeshi ethnic background told me that many Tablighi Jamaat followers approached him to ask whether he was interested in marrying a girl from a Tablighi background since he was looking to get married. He too showed interest in marrying a girl with a Tablighi background. Involvement with regular *dawah* provides followers with the opportunity to live in an environment of *dawah* and Tabligh even when they reside in existing society. In this sense, they are never out of their imagined community. Although physically they live in a real-world society, psychologically they belong to a different society, which is the global society of *dawah* and Tabligh where they have their own norms and values.

### ***Transformation and Tablighi Identity***

Transformation into a Tablighi follower can be seen as a shift from one identity into another (Talib, 1997). Transforming into a Tablighi follower does not only mean having a flexible membership to a wider Tablighi community; rather, it is a complete shift of priorities of a follower's entire life where a dedicated follower carefully chooses a distinctive Tablighi life and a new Tablighi identity. Abdul mentioned how participation in the Tablighi *dawah* motivates to transform himself to live a Tablighi life:

If you go to the *jamaat*, you will learn *adab* [etiquette]. Muhammad (peace be upon him) says *adab* is very important. When you go to the *jamaat*, you meet many people. Slowly you will change, because every day you are doing 5 *namaz* [prayers] in the *masjeed* [mosque]. Not only listening, you would do this in practice. You will be listening to *hadith*, talking about Allah, hearing about Allah. All these things are good. You will be eating *halal*. They cook their own food. Many people send their sons to the *jamaat* to get rid of bad habits, for example, drugs, alcohol, clubbing, mixing up with girls etc. I cannot shout at my son in this country. My son, go on a *jamaat*, I will pay. *Inshallah*, if you go on a *jamaat* you will experience a change. Many of my friends changed. Those people did not know the solutions; they did not know the tactics. They just send their son on *jamaat* in the hope of change.

It is evident from Abdul's statement that the Tablighi *dawah* is expected to bring about transformation to having a Tablighi identity, which Abdul considers good.

Through such a transformation, a person enters into a new Tablighi life through the process of *dawah*, which is different from his previous life. Second, as a Tablighi Jamaat follower, Abdul believes that many elements of Western life are not good, being non-Islamic. Thus, many parents prefer to send their sons on a Tablighi *dawah* with the expectation that it will transform them into Tablighi followers. Chakrabarti (2010) also finds that families of young men in Gujarat approached local leaders of the Tablighi Jamaat to invite youngsters who were discovered to have problems with heavy drinking. I also found a similar explanation for joining the Tablighi Jamaat in Bangladesh as well. Guardians think that by sending their sons and brothers on a Tablighi *dawah* trip this would reform their 'bad habits'.

Through this type of transformation, Tablighi followers deliberately establish a fine boundary between the Tablighi and non-Tablighi world. Furthermore, acceptance of a Tablighi life creates a distance from a westernised life; Metcalf (1993) argues that the Tablighis want to identify themselves with the key learnings of the *hadith*, which creates a distance from much of their existing society. Thus, Tablighi teaching and the Tablighi mode of life deliberately segregate them from the existing, dominant social life in Britain. By such conscious segregation, followers of the Tablighi Jamaat construct a new identity that is based upon a Tablighi-directed life, which for them is an alternative to a Western secular life.

By entering into an alternative value system, they also reject many elements of Western society, which can be seen as the mark of a shift towards a conservative lifestyle. For them, the contemporary world is comparable with *jahiliyaa* and by rejecting this lifestyle, they want to go back to the early Islamic practices. Dedicated

followers believe that this value system of the Tablighi Jamaat protects them from all non-Islamic activities including the influences of Western lifestyle in the UK. By accepting such a Tablighi life, followers become the part of a global Tablighi community. Dickson too argues that ‘the *tablighi* focus on individual self transformation allows participants to carefully construct a new identity’ (2009: 108). Having a Tablighi identity also means fulfilling the commands of God, following the *Sunnah*, carry out *dawah* regularly, and motivating family members to adopt a Tablighi ideology.

Belonging to a wider community of the Tablighi Jamaat creates an obligation to follow the example of the *dawah* of the Prophet and his companion. The Tablighi Jamaat intends to replicate the process of *dawah* and the lifestyle of the Prophet in the contemporary world. By following the example of the Prophet, the Tablighi Jamaat aims to reduce the gap between the followers to construct a hierarchy-free atmosphere at least during their *dawah* tour. In the *dawah* tour, the communal sharing, for example, the eating of food from a single, common plate, the following of *Sunnah*, doing *dawah* in a group, taking care of each other, and sacrificing of individual interests, creates a sense of community by eradicating the existence of class and hierarchy. In the Tablighi Jamaat, followers say ‘we all are equal’. Tablighi followers act like members of an egalitarian society during the period of a *dawah* tour. They physically and mentally isolate themselves from the everyday complexities of their existing society as if they have established a society with new norms and values.

This entire issue of identity is linked with followers' faith and religion. In contrast, the notion of Bangladeshi or any other South Asian identity might have little appeal to many young British Muslims. Moreover, through religious identity, Muslims in the UK enter into the global Muslim brotherhood and *ummah*. Their brand of religion forces them to go back to their religious identity, and the Tablighi Jamaat has been using this idea of religious identity to attract younger participants.

### **10.3 Conclusion**

As a modernist movement, the Tablighi Jamaat is working to construct an Islamic society on earth. They also emphasise human will as a major force to establish an Islamic life through the practice of *dawah*. They do not leave this responsibility of establishing an Islamic society entirely to God; rather, personal responsibility and self-reflectiveness is important for the Tablighis. It is important for Tablighi Jamaat followers in the UK to establish an Islamic society because they believe that a Tablighi mode of life can protect them from the impacts of a Western lifestyle. By protecting their faith, they subsequently assume a distinct global identity. At the same time, through the idea of protection from the Western lifestyle, followers create a distance from existing British society.

By maintaining a common and shared activity, the Tablighi Jamaat has managed to create an impression among many British Bangladeshis and other Muslims in the UK that it welcomes all Muslims regardless of their ethnic, national and class boundary. People from various ethnic and class backgrounds carry out shared *dawah* activities together without any conflict. In the *ijtema* in Dewsbury, people share food with each other from a single plate, sit together closely, listen to the sermon together

and sleep on the floor inside the mosque. All of these practices provide them with a common and shared experience of Islam.

All Tablighi Jamaat followers follow a common text all over the world. The Tablighi Jamaat recommends following a set of books that contain detailed guidelines of how to do *dawah* and how to establish an Islamic life. These common Tablighi books disseminate Islamic knowledge that is universal for all Tablighi followers all over the world. When people talk about Islam, they talk from the context of Tablighi practices and keep their discussion within the boundaries of the Tablighi-recommended books. This helps them to stay within a shared boundary of *dawah* and Tabligh. It creates a network of the Tablighi Jamaat based on their common practices and understanding of *dawah*. Therefore, Tablighi followers can easily communicate with followers with varied ethnic, cultural and national background when they meet during a *dawah* journey or in an *ijtema*.

After internal sharing and commonality, the visible symbols act as an important factor of identity formation. A dedicated Tablighi Jamaat follower strictly follows the universal dress code of the Tablighi Jamaat. It is a *Sunnah* for a Tablighi Jamaat man to grow a beard and to maintain dress code. It then becomes an integral part of their religiosity. Following a homogeneous dress code helps them to identify themselves as a unique community. In addition, Tablighi dress itself becomes a protection against wrongdoing and it helps them to stay on a religious path. One of my Tablighi informants said that ‘when you are wearing a complete Tablighi dress, you cannot do anything that goes against Tablighi ideology. It becomes difficult to do anything that looks silly inside the Tablighi community, and people can point at

to you and say, how can a Tablighi man do this?'. This serves as a motivator for followers and prevents them from doing anything that goes against Tablighi ideology. It is not just wearing an Islamic dress that makes them distinctive but the many social implications that come with it and help to retain a Tablighi ideology.

Tablighi Jamaat provides a context of sharing and collective activities through practices and rituals. Participants from all ethnic, national, age and class background follow common guidelines that create a shared meaning for them.

This brings to a conclusion my presentation and analysis of my British field material, which has taken up Chapters Eight to Ten of this thesis. In the last chapter of the thesis, Chapter Eleven, I revisit the key findings and arguments of my research on the Tablighi Jamaat in Bangladesh and in the UK, and ask what general conclusions can be drawn about the attraction of Tablighi Jamaat for Muslims in the two countries.

## Chapter Eleven

### Conclusion

The aim of this research has been to provide an ethnographic account of the Tablighi Jamaat in Bangladesh and the UK, in order to explore why the Tablighi Jamaat has become a successful reform movement, which attracts followers from a variety of backgrounds. The success of the Tablighi Jamaat can be seen from the impact of the movement in various spheres of the society. A huge number of participants who attend an annual three days congregation of the Tablighi Jamaat in Bangladesh every year can be designated as one sign of its success. Various social aspects of the Tablighi Jamaat motivate many followers to abide by the movement. A wider acceptance of the Tablighi Jamaat, and seeing it as a positive Islamic movement, are also the outcomes of the success of the Tablighi Jamaat in Bangladesh.

By contrast, the indications of success of the Tablighi Jamaat may not be the same for the UK, where the *ijtema* does not attract a huge number of participants as in Bangladesh. The number of participants is increasing, however, which shows the growing acceptance of the Tablighi Jamaat in the UK. Besides, the ability to provide solution to the insecurity, complexity, and frustration derived from a westernised lifestyle attracts followers from the UK. By accepting a Tablighi-guided life, followers have become connected to the global Tablighi community, and are contributing to construction of a global Muslim identity. All of these can be ascertained as signs of success of the movement.



The success of the movement has several reasons; one of the key reasons is the creation of a positive image of the Tablighi Jamaat through its systematic preaching activities, which has made the movement popular among Muslims in Bangladesh. The construction of an apolitical image, the public profile of the *ijtema*, the humbleness in personality and behaviour of Tablighi followers, and the attraction of belonging to the global Tablighi community helps to create a positive image of the Tablighi Jamaat. Although the Tablighi Jamaat claims to be apolitical, this ethnographic research shows that the movement has a long-term political vision that cannot be apolitical. However, the general perception of the movement among Muslims in Bangladesh is that it has an apolitical appearance, which makes the movement less controversial than many other Islamic movements in Bangladesh, where the use of Islam in politics is generally interpreted in a negative way. Therefore, the claim to avoid politics has been a major attraction for many Muslims. Furthermore, the support of the Government for the Tablighi Jamaat during the annual *ijtema* also created trust among Muslims in Bangladesh. All of these helped to create and foster the positive image of the Tablighi Jamaat, which made the movement successful by attracting followers from a wide range of people within the Muslim community.

In Bangladesh, the Tablighi Jamaat has become known and popular by its annual *ijtema* held at Tongi. The annual *ijtema* shows that followers attend the event from all over the country and its popularity transcends national boundaries. The media and followers repeatedly claim that the *ijtema* attracts several millions of followers every year. This is the only estimate of the Tablighi Jamaat followers found in Bangladesh. Since the Tablighi Jamaat do not maintain a formal membership, it is very difficult

to know the exact number of Tablighi followers. Getting an estimate from an *ijtema* may not be accurate, however, because there are many non-Tablighi participants who join the *ijtema*. Moreover, not all Tablighi followers attend the *ijtema* every year. Estimates from the *ijtema*, however, at least give a general sense of the size of the Tablighi following in Bangladesh. The *ijtema* has been so successful in creating a positive and popular image of the Tablighi Jamaat that it has become the symbol of the Tablighi Jamaat in Bangladesh and beyond.

The positive image of the Tablighi Jamaat has set the ground for the Tablighi Jamaat to recruit new followers in Bangladesh. It has become easy for Tablighi Jamaat followers to convince men during *dawah* tours and weekly *gashts* to spend at least three days in *dawah* at least once. Participation in a *dawah* activity in this way gives an initial exposure of many beginners to the Tablighi Jamaat. Likewise, my ethnographic data shows that many followers join the movement for personal reasons and many of them decide to pursue the Tablighi Jamaat after spending some time in a *dawah* activity.

The reasons behind joining the Tablighi Jamaat vary. Preaching during a *dawah* journey by the Tablighi Jamaat is one of the reasons that motivate many followers to join the movement. Motivation from family, friends and relatives is also a noteworthy reason why men get their initial exposure to the movement. There is a preconceived notion among many parents in both Bangladesh and the UK that the Tablighi Jamaat has the ability to rectify the disorganised westernised lifestyle of their sons, which is why they send their sons to carry out Tablighi *dawahs* in order to lead a disciplined life. This type of transformation is expected among many

Muslims, which has developed from a long tradition of *dawahs* that has created the image of the Tablighi Jamaat.

Participation in a *dawah* and *chilla* of the Tablighi Jamaat is expected to facilitate transformation into a Tablighi follower, as was discussed in Chapters Five and Nine. This does not mean that all the participants who spend time in Tablighi *dawah* are transformed into dedicated Tablighi Jamaat followers. I observed three new Tablighi Jamaat followers during the *chilla* in which I participated in Bangladesh, however, who decided to follow the Tablighi Jamaat for the rest of their lives after completing the *dawah* journey.

Outside the *dawah*, some other conclusions can be drawn from this research on the reasons that influence many men to join the Tablighi Jamaat and to live a simple and honest life. For example, a personal crisis, a disorganised living style and the complexity of modern life were frequently reported as reasons why many men join the movement. For them, the Tablighi Jamaat forms a protection from what they consider non-Islamic by providing a complete guideline of how to live an Islamic life in society. The ability to provide solutions to these problems of contemporary society becomes an attraction for many to join the Tablighi Jamaat.

The lack of a formal membership of the Tablighi Jamaat in both Bangladesh and the UK encourages many people to join the movement because they can exit at any time if they do not like the Tablighi Jamaat, without any obligation. This loose structure of the movement provides an easy access for Muslims in both Bangladesh and the UK. The flexibility can also be seen as a major disadvantage for the Tablighi Jamaat.

As Sikand (2006) shows, many members of Jamaat-i-Islami (JI) joined the Tablighi Jamaat to hide their political past after the liberation war of Bangladesh when the government of Bangladesh banned religion-based politics. My field data also confirmed that many men made use of the Tablighi Jamaat to hide their controversial past by participating in Tablighi *dawah*, as discussed in Chapter Four. The use of the Tablighi Jamaat for such purposes was easier for many men because of its 'open door policy'.

This loose structure of the Tablighi Jamaat has had a different impact in the UK in comparison to Bangladesh. Since the Tablighi Jamaat does not have control over its participants, it is likely to fail to monitor members who have an ideology that may promote terrorism. For example, two attackers who had been accused of being involved in the 7/7 London bombings were also said to be involved in Tablighi *dawah* in Dewsbury. This is one of the reasons why many in the Western media see the Tablighi Jamaat as a promoter of a terrorist ideology, an accusation that leaders of the Tablighi Jamaat have always denied.

Despite various criticisms, the Tablighi Jamaat has been able to establish itself as a leading Islamic movement. In order to be a successful movement, the Tablighi Jamaat has needed to convert and motivate as many participants as it can, in order to carry out its *dawah* journeys. The less hierarchical environment of the Tablighi Jamaat is a key motivator for many to remain within the Tablighi Jamaat. Experience of the less hierarchical environment of Tablighi *dawah* gives a sense of increased social status for participants from lower classes who can mix with participants from middle and upper middle class. This is particularly evident in Bangladesh, as I

showed in the Bangladesh part of the thesis in Chapter Five. Speaking in a soft tone and in a humble way, without any segregation, and treating everyone in the same way, are the keys to reducing the gap between followers from a variety of backgrounds and classes. By contrast, I did not notice any person of increased status among the Tablighi Jamaat followers in the UK, because the society in the UK is not as stratified as in Bangladesh.

A similar situation can be found in women's *ta'leem* sessions where they sit closely, touching each other. As I showed in Chapter Seven, it is unusual for both men and women from different classes to interact in this way in the society, hence the activities of the Tablighi Jamaat create this opportunity for men and women, which has a positive impact on their behaviour and well-being. Participation in the *ta'leem* and *dawah* gives women a positive understanding on Islam and can lead to a sense of agency. However, women's agency in the Tablighi Jamaat remains strictly limited to Tablighi Jamaat understandings of Islamic teachings on men's authority over women. I was unable to attend or observe any women's *ta'leem* sessions in the UK; it is thus difficult for me to compare the situation in the two countries. This is also a major limitation of this research. Furthermore, I was unable to interview female Tablighi Jamaat followers in Bangladesh and the UK, to explore their perspectives on the movement. These demand further inquiry.

The Tablighi Jamaat has different implications for its followers in the UK. Most important is the contribution that I showed in Chapter Nine, to creating an environment for Muslims in the UK. Establishing mosques across the UK is one of the contributions of the Deobandi tradition in the UK, and all of the mosques they

establish are pro-Tablighi Jamaat. The Deobandi links help the Tablighi Jamaat to attract new followers. Many Deobandi *madrasas* in the UK serve as recruitment centres for the Tablighi Jamaat. Among them, the Dewsbury *madrasa* and the Darul Uloom al-Arabia al-Islamiya (DUI) at Holcombe near Bury are the two most active *madrasas*, and both directly encourage their students to be involved in Tablighi preaching while they study. Through these *madrasas*, the Tablighi Jamaat attracts followers from the second generation of South Asians in the UK, which is important for the sustainability of the movement. In his research, Sikand (2002) showed that the Tablighi Jamaat was not successful in attracting followers from the second generation, but my ethnographic research shows that followers from the second generation are increasing because of the vast network of Tablighi mosques and *madrasas* in the UK. Outside Tablighi activities, these mosques serve as centres for basic religious education for children.

The Tablighi Jamaat also acts as an effective source of religious knowledge for the adults, as I discussed in Chapter Five. Many followers in both Bangladesh and the UK reported that they see the Tablighi Jamaat as a *madrasa* for adults, where they can learn many aspects of Islam by carrying out *dawah* regularly, during which followers repeatedly read Tablighi recommended books. As I showed in Chapter Five, for many participants, performing *dawah* creates a desire for learning fundamental aspects of Islam. Hence many of them put an effort into learning more about Islam, for example reading the *Qur'an* properly, reading the *hadith* to gain knowledge on the *Sunnah* etc. This process of learning through Tablighi *dawah* does not require an intermediary, as with Sufi cults, where the guidance of a spiritual master is an absolute necessity. Thus, the avoidance of intermediaries in learning

Islamic knowledge has become an attraction for many men that motivates them to follow the movement.

As I showed in Chapter Nine, Tablighi mosques in the UK constitute a physical space, a spiritual and social hub where a mosque-centred community can be created. Dickson also (2009) discovered a similar function of the Tablighi Jamaat in an urban area in Canada, where the mosques creates a spiritual and social space for Tablighi followers. In this way, mosques become the basis for a social network for the followers. This use of mosques as social and spiritual hubs contributes in the establishment of a mosque centred community in the UK. The mosque-centred community also contributes to the process of identity formation among Muslims in the UK.

The issue of identity is more important for Muslims in the UK than in Bangladesh, as the Tablighi Jamaat provides a global, wide platform for Muslims living in the UK by fostering shared and common *dawah* activities. Shared and common *dawah* activities all over the world create a sense of an imagined global Tablighi community. This builds up a sense of a global Tablighi community with a distinctive Tablighi lifestyle. By maintaining uniformity in their activities, the Tablighi Jamaat constructs this imagined Tablighi community. The Tablighi Jamaat carefully maintain this uniformity in their activities all over the world. This creates a unique Tablighi life, including the wearing of distinctive Tablighi clothing, following distinctive *dawah* all over the world and reading the same guiding books. These processes develop unique Tablighi norms and values that are common to every Tablighi community.

The use of a common language and explanations for Islamic traditions helps to construct a Tablighi tradition and unity worldwide. The widely used language of communication of the Tablighi Jamaat in the UK is Urdu. It is also evident in Bangladesh that dedicated Tablighi followers prefer to use Urdu words, concepts and terminology during *dawah*. Following a common way of expression and explanation connects followers together to a global Tablighi community. The desire of becoming a member of this global Tablighi community motivates many Muslims including first and second generation migrants in the UK to follow the Tablighi Jamaat. Many Muslims from first generation also join the Tablighi Jamaat to affirm a Muslim identity.

I discussed in Chapter Ten, the construction of a distinctive Tablighi community that fosters a Muslim identity that at the same time creates distance from mainstream British society. From a psychological perspective, followers belong to the global Tablighi community, but this isolates them from British society. Therefore, many non-Tablighi men see the Tablighi Jamaat as a ‘separatist’ and ‘isolationist’ movement in the UK that does not help anyone to integrate with the mainstream community. This is in contrast with the case in Bangladesh, where Muslims are the majority and most of them are Tablighi sympathisers. In the UK, Muslims are a minority and there are a relatively smaller number of Tablighi followers.

This research provided the opportunity to explore the reasons for the success of the Tablighi Jamaat with a view to gaining a sound and substantial understanding of the movement. The Tablighi Jamaat is successful in both Bangladesh and the UK because of its ability to attract and keep followers within the Tablighi guided life.



The Tablighi Jamaat has been able to create a positive image through its regular *dawah* journeys and annual *ijtemas* that make it easy for its followers to motivate and attract new followers. The attraction of joining the movement also lies in various social and practical implications, which followers achieve and experience through their journey of *dawah*. Furthermore, following a Tablighi life means becoming a part of a distinctive imagined global Tablighi community that transcends the boundary of any nation-state. Followers become connected to a wider Tablighi community. Adopting a Tablighi guided life provides an assurance of being saved from what followers consider as non-Islamic activities. Tablighi followers from Bangladesh and the UK consider the movement as a protection from all types of non-Islamic activities. For Tablighi Jamaat followers, acceptance of a Tablighi life means entering into a new value system, which is a conscious choice that every dedicated Tablighi follower makes in Bangladesh and the UK.

## Appendices

### The Ideology of the Tablighi Jamaat: Three Sermons

#### A Short Note on the Appendices

Academic presentations of the ideology of the Tablighi Jamaat movement can be found in the articles by Mohammed Talib and Mohammed Khalid Masud in Masud's collection, *Travellers in Faith* (Talib 2000; Masud 2000c, 2000d). Both authors express doubts about presenting Tablighi ideology as a formal system on the basis of Tablighi texts. Talib notes the aversion of Tablighis to theoretical knowledge (2000: 60). This aversion is linked to their emphasis on personal transformation through undertaking *dawah* activities. Instead, he focusses on analysing the narratives of his informants, the meanings they derive from reading the stories in the Tablighi books, and the "complex of imageries from the Tablighi lore" (2000: 78). Masud focusses more on Tablighi literature, but translates two letters written in Urdu by Tablighis in an Appendix, saying that such letters can "reveal a conception of *Da'wa* in Tablighi mind that is not apparent in the Tabligh literature" (Masud 2000c: 107). Here I present three sermons by Tablighi speakers, which I heard during my fieldwork, since they give a good insight into the way in which Tablighi ideas are presented in practice.

The general aim of the Tablighi Jamaat movement, as discussed in the body of the thesis, is to bring about individual spiritual purification. This is based on the idea of establishing a spiritual closeness with Allah. This is a relationship between faithful believers and Allah. Followers of the movement aim to achieve this spiritual closeness through engaging in the regular preaching activities, which are known, as

*dawah*. In undertaking *dawah*, followers of the movement deliberately avoid any intermediary between Allah and faithful followers. The core principles of the movement have been expressed through ‘Six Points,’ themselves a condensation of fifteen points presented by the movement’s founder, Mawlana Ilyas, in a meeting in 1934 (Masud 2000d: 21-24). These Six Points are

- the *Kalimah*- complete belief that the Prophet Muhammad is the messenger of Allah;
- Prayer (*salat*);
- Knowledge (*ilm*) and Remembrance (*dhikir*);
- Honouring and respecting all Muslims (*ikram al-muslim*);
- Sincerity in Worshipping Allah (*ikhlas i-niyyat*); and
- *Dawah* and *Tabligh*.

The ‘Six Points’ provide a general structure that helps followers to continue with the proper Tablighi way of life. Regular practices in these areas make a follower confident regarding the Tablighi Jamaat movement. Thus, all followers are advised by the leaders of the Tablighi Jamaat to follow the ‘Six Points’ in their everyday lives. Followers of the Tablighi Jamaat believe that the principles of the ‘Six Points’ will be acquired if they regularly go out for *dawah* journeys. For them, *dawah* is the leading activity that helps them to focus on achieving their targets. *Dawah* also relates to the moral reform of the individual, which is also indicated by the ‘Six Points’. Followers of the Tablighi Jamaat believe that all Muslims have the duty to engage in *dawah*, since *dawah* is the task that the Prophet carried out in his lifetime. Engagement in *dawah* has to be a lifetime commitment for all Muslims. These

principles therefore underlie how Tablighi speakers structure what they say in giving sermons like the three I present here.

I have presented the sermons in table form, with the text of the sermon in the left-hand column and the main themes in the right hand column. The sections of the sermons in which these main themes are presented are bolded.

**Appendix A: Transcript of a Sermon at Kakrail after Completion of the *Chilla***

Date: 19-10-2009

From: 6 pm to 6.30 pm

[A senior leader of the Kakrail mosque delivered this speech.]

<i>Text</i>	<i>Themes</i>
Dear brothers, it is our responsibility to go out for preaching journeys in order to follow the order of Allah.	
<b>Allah sent us in this world to perform <i>dawah</i>. This does not mean only to carry out one <i>chilla</i> or two <i>chillas</i>; this is a responsibility for the entire life. It is not as if we should follow this for only four months and then we stop. We have to keep this practice of <i>dawah</i> for the rest of our lives.</b>	<i>Dawah</i> as key activity in life.
We are not just business persons, teacher and doctors; beyond all of these identities that we portray, we are the followers of the Prophet Muhammad and we have to follow his instructions. Preaching among Muslims is one of his important instructions. Preaching is not a responsibility for men only, women are also equally responsible for this. This is the task for all of us, including the poor and the rich. If you are unable to deliver a sermon, convey the message of <i>deen</i> [religion, the Islamic way of life] to others.	
<b>If a person dies without faith in Allah and the person is unable to remember the <i>Kalimah</i>, the statement of faith (<i>la ilaha il-Allah</i>), during the time of death, he</b>	Importance of <i>Kalimah</i>

<p>or she will remain in hell forever.</p>	
<p><b>In the <i>hadith</i>, his world is considered as a market for faithful believers. Many people return from a market with profit and many without any profit. Likewise, many people make profit and many people are unable to make profit from this world, and the transaction happens between Allah and the human being. The person who makes profit will be rewarded with unlimited happiness, while those who are unable do so will be left in hell forever. It is our duty to make such people understand this, so, people can pray and perform good deeds to answer the question of Allah. Many Muslims in this world are not following the orders of Allah properly, they need to be brought back in the right path. It is our duty to bring these people back into the path of Allah. All of us are dependent on the order of Allah and the <i>Sunnah</i> of the Prophet. Hence, we have to achieve the ability to follow the various orders of Allah and the <i>Sunnah</i>. Many people do not want to pray, but they want to leave the practice of telling lies. They fail to achieve this, because without praying it is not possible to achieve such an ability. Therefore, it is our responsibility to invite these people to the path of Allah through <i>dawah</i> so that they can pray regularly</b></p>	<p>Importance of bringing about reform in lives of individual Muslims.</p>

<p><b>and achieve this ability.</b></p>	
<p>Allah said, “If you perform <i>dawah</i> on behalf of me to bring people into religious practices, I will always be with you”. If anyone performs <i>dawah</i>, Allah will assist him/ or her for every task. What else is needed for such a person? The responsibility of <i>dawah</i> is not only limited for the place like Hindustan or Pakistan, but also for all Muslims from all over the world.</p>	
<p><b>The purpose of <i>dawah</i> is to invite Muslims so that they can follow the order of Allah and follow the <i>Sunnah</i> of the Prophet, so that people can be saved from the life of hell.</b></p>	<p>Importance of <i>dawah</i></p>
<p>I did not start performing <i>dawah</i> only to be rewarded by Allah. It is true that if a person spend one Bangladeshi <i>taka</i> [about 0.8p], he or she will receive a reward equivalent to seven hundred thousand <i>taka</i> from Allah, but we have to keep our aim focused only on pleasing Allah. If a person make a window in his room, he or she will receive the sunlight, but if that person’s intention is to read the <i>Qur’an</i> in front of the window, to perform <i>dhikir</i>, to listen to the <i>adhan</i> [the call for prayer], that person will be rewarded by Allah for his or her good intention by Allah.</p>	
<p><b>Allah sent us to liberate Muslims from the slavery of this world, and to become slaves of Allah instead. We</b></p>	<p>Need to see life in terms of obedience to Allah, to</p>

<p><b>listen to our bosses, we listen to our wives because they will not be happy if we do not follow their instructions. Thus we are acting like slaves in this world. We never think how Allah will react if we do not follow His orders.</b></p>	<p>reject this-worldly interests.</p>
<p>It is my responsibility to bring people to the path of Allah, if I can do this through <i>dawah</i> by investing my assets and time, Allah will always be content with me. Allah said, ‘Those who follow my orders, I consider them as my soldiers and they will never be defeated by any force in this world. I will help them both in the world and in the life hereafter.’ The things people consider as valuable and use to show off to others, these things are not valuable to Allah.</p>	
<p><b>People will not be able to achieve the closeness of Allah through their wealth and assets. The desire for expensive clothes, for house and cars has to be erased from the mind. It is very important for us to escape from such this-worldly desires.</b></p>	<p>Rejection of this worldly-interests.</p>
<p>People cannot achieve the closeness of Allah through their wealth. Concentration on building wealth can be the source of ultimate loss in the life hereafter. The companions of the Prophet sacrificed happiness and wealth to perform <i>dawah</i>, therefore, Allah declared that the companions of the Prophet would go to heaven.</p>	



<p><b>Dear brothers, this world is not our priority, it is like a prison for a faithful believer. Allah sent us in this world to test us. The world should not be the first priority for us. It has to be secondary for us.</b></p>	<p>Rejection of this worldly-interests.</p>
<p>Allah sends us to disseminate this message to Muslims living all over the world. Allah has told that whatever we do, it has to be according to the rule of Allah. The aim of 4 months' <i>dawah</i> journey [three <i>chillas</i>] is to live a life following the rule of Allah. We will learn this quality during <i>chillas</i>.</p>	
<p><b><i>Chilla</i> will bring a change in us, which will help us to do every activity in this world according to the order of Allah and the <i>Sunnah</i> of the Prophet. We are not telling you to go to the mountain and to abandon your family. You will live a life with your family, you will have to work, but when you are required to follow the order of Allah, you will have to follow this. When you listen to the <i>adhan</i>, you will have to pray. You have to prioritize the order of Allah in the first place above all tasks.</b></p>	<p>Importance of <i>dawah</i> and of prayer.</p>
<p>This is very important. If you do not prioritize the order of Allah, it will not bring you any benefit even if you complete three <i>chillas</i> or a full year <i>chilla</i>. We need to spend four months in <i>dawah</i> journey to internalise this. Dear brothers, you have to visit homes to perform <i>dawah</i></p>	

<p>and to tell them the greatness of Allah. This practice will help to increase your faith on Allah. This faith will transform your life. You have to work hard during the <i>dawah</i> journey.</p>	
<p><b>You have to believe and disseminate the knowledge that Allah is feeding us and He is looking after us.</b></p> <p><b>When we take a medicine, it heals our body.</b></p> <p><b>Likewise, performing <i>dawah</i> heals our <i>nafs</i> [heart] and transforms it towards Allah.</b></p>	<p><i>Dawah</i>, especially the <i>chilla</i>, as bringing about inner purification and sincerity.</p>
<p>You will see that many people have transformed their outlook after <i>chilla</i>, but not their <i>nafs</i>, because their base was not strong.</p>	
<p><b>If you work hard and show your dedication while performing <i>dawah</i>, this will bring positive changes inside you. The purpose of <i>chilla</i> is to bring changes in life.</b></p>	<p><i>Dawah</i>, especially the <i>chilla</i>, as bringing about inner purification and transformation</p>
<p>The Prophet Muhammad used to visit the houses in the morning and in the evening, even if many of them did not like him. He did not feel annoyed. Never be annoyed with people while performing <i>dawah</i>.</p>	
<p><b>We go to <i>chilla</i> with a love to carry out <i>dawah</i>. You have to nurture this love for <i>dawah</i>. Over the period, this love will increase through performing <i>dawah</i>. We will pray to Allah to establish this love in our hearts and in our souls, so that we can do the tasks of the</b></p>	<p>Prayer, sincerity, focus on other-worldly concerns</p>

<p><b>Prophet and we can help others to follow the path of Allah. We have to develop a desire in our hearts to perform all types of good deeds and prayers. We have to create the intention to pray in the front line in the mosque, and to say Alhamdulillah where relevant. We should not engage ourselves in idling, and laughing at things. <i>Chilla</i> will help to achieve such an ability. Faith and good deeds lead you to be successful in the life hereafter.</b></p>	
<p>Allah said that all human beings are in danger, except those who have the faith on Allah, pray regularly, and seek forgiveness of Allah. They will be saved. Many people do not do good deeds but engage themselves in wrongdoings without following the order of Allah. They do not understand the consequences of their deeds. They need to pray to Allah for the forgiveness. If they are unable to get the forgiveness of Allah before their death, what will be the consequences in their lives after death?</p>	
<p><b>Therefore, we all have to perform <i>dawah</i> among Muslims to make them understand the importance of following the order of Allah in this world. We need to pray to Allah to be successful in performing <i>dawah</i>. <i>Dawah</i> will help us to bring Muslims back to the path of Allah.</b></p>	<p><i>Dawah</i> as transforming other Muslims and bringing them back to Allah</p>
<p>Therefore, brothers, please aim at spending four months</p>	

<p>in <i>chilla</i> to learn how to perform <i>dawah</i>, and perform <i>dawah</i> for the rest of your lives. We also have to take the initiative to implement these aims into action. We have to pray regularly, perform <i>dawah</i> and to do good deeds. Brothers, who is ready to engage in three <i>chillas</i>? Please stand up. [<i>Many people stood up to show their intention to carry out three chillas</i>]. May Allah accept our wishes. <i>Amen.</i></p>	
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## Appendix B: Transcript of a Sermon during the *Chilla* Delivered by Moulana

**Abdul Khalek**

Date: 05-10-2009

From: 6 am to 6.20 am

[Moulana Abdul Khalek delivered this speech after the Morning Prayer while we were in the *chilla* in the northern part of Bangladesh.]

<i>Text</i>	<i>Themes</i>
<p>Dear brothers, it is obvious good etiquette to sit closely without leaving empty spaces during a congregation.</p> <p>Because, if there are any empty space, Satan will sit there to divert our mind from the discussion. This <i>boyan</i> is invaluable, so we have to listen to it with a full attention. May Allah provide us with good fortune. We are thankful to Allah that we managed to pray in the morning instead of sleeping.</p> <p>Praying is one of the important orders of Allah. It has several benefits. They are described in the <i>Qur'an</i> and in the hadith.</p> <p>According to the <i>Qur'an</i>, those who go to mosques in the night to pray they are considered as faithful (<i>imandar</i>). Allah will reward those who would pray, leaving the comfort of sleeping in the night.</p>	
<p><b>Allah created human being to worship Allah and to conduct good deeds. Allah mentioned in the <i>Qur'an</i>, ‘I created human beings only to worship me’. All of the Prophets who were sent by Allah advised human beings to worship Allah and to do good deeds. If you can do this,</b></p>	<p>Importance of other-worldly emphasis.</p>

<p><b>you will be successful. This world is only for a short period. You will not stay in this world forever; you have to leave this world one day.</b></p>	
<p>A complete faith in Allah and prayers will bring you success. If you are unable to utilize the time in this world to be successful, you will suffer in the life hereafter. Such people will cry during the time of life hereafter. They will urge to Allah to send them back to the world again so that they can do good deeds and pray, but Allah will not give them any chance. For this reason, we have to utilize the life in this world to please Allah by praying. Those who spend more time in praying and worshipping Allah, they will benefit during the Day of Judgment rather than during life in this world. Allah will reward them. Heaven is like an empty land. We have to cultivate this empty land. Every good deed, every prayer, can be considered as planting something in this empty land. For example, if someone recites <i>alhamdulillah</i> [May God be praised] once, there will be a massive tree in heaven. If the finest horse of this world runs for 500 years, it will not be able to go past that tree. This is an example of a small worship of Allah. You can imagine what will happen if you follow all the orders of Allah. Death and life depend on Allah's will. Happiness, peace, wealth, honour all depend on the will of Allah. If Allah is pleased with someone's worship, He will give that person heaven. The Prophet and his</p>	

<p>companions never ran after success in this world; rather, they all prioritised success in the life hereafter.</p>	
<p><b>Allah said that if a person aims for the Day of the Judgement, he or she will be successful. People who give their efforts to be successful in the world will not be rewarded but will have to face difficulties during the Day of Judgement. Therefore, it is essential to make Muslims aware of religion, to spread the word of the Prophet and to invite them from all over the place. We have to carry out this task. This task is not new. This is the task of the Prophet. Allah ordered us to carry out this task. If people engage themselves in this task, the religion will remain alive. If we do not carry out <i>dawah</i>, the religion will disappear.</b></p>	<p>Importance of prayer, of emphasis on the life hereafter.</p> <p>Unimportance of this-worldly activities.</p> <p>Importance of <i>dawah</i> as obedience to Allah's command.</p>
<p>There was no <i>dawah</i> activity between the time of the Prophet Isha [Jesus] and the time of the Prophet Muhammad. During this period of 600 years, people worshiped the sun, fire and various images. Nevertheless, although it is now almost 1400 years after the last prophet. Muhammad, people are still following Islam, because there has been <i>dawah</i>.</p>	
<p><b>Now we read the <i>Qur'an</i> and the <i>hadith</i>. We worship Allah. If we do not perform <i>dawah</i>, the next generation will not know about our Prophet Muhammad or about Allah. For this reason, we have to perform <i>dawah</i> to keep the religion alive among the future generations. There is</b></p>	<p>Importance of keeping Islam alive for future generations through <i>dawah</i>.</p>

<p><b>no other alternative to performing <i>dawah</i>. <i>Dawah</i> has to begin with me. If I perform <i>dawah</i>, I will be rewarded. Religion will be in my heart. In the same way, <i>dawah</i> will inspire others to follow the religion. This is the responsibility of all. The companions of the Prophet performed <i>dawah</i> in the past. During the last <i>haji</i>, the Prophet Muhammad instructed, ‘It is your responsibility to convey my message to others who are not present today’. In response to this instruction, many of his companions left to spread out all over the world, leaving their home country, in order to invite people to follow Islam.</b></p>	
<p>They knew that if they stayed in Mecca or Medina they would have received the reward of their good deeds, but they spread out all over the world to perform <i>dawah</i>. Due to their efforts, the religion reached to us, and we are now the followers of the Prophet Muhammad. Therefore, if we continue to perform <i>dawah</i>, we will be able to pass the religion to the future generation. If we do not carry out <i>dawah</i>, many people will stay away from Islam. I will be the person responsible person for them not performing <i>dawah</i>. Allah will ask us about <i>dawah</i>.</p>	
<p><b>The Prophet Muhammad said, ‘Each of you has been given the responsibility, and you will be asked whether you would have fulfilled your responsibility during the</b></p>	<p>Personal responsibility to follow command of</p>



<p><b>Day of Judgment'. If we do not follow the instruction of the Prophet, what answer shall we give to Allah?</b></p>	<p>Allah.</p>
<p>The Prophet experienced many hardships just because of performing <i>dawah</i>. He was wounded by non-Muslims, he starved, he prayed nights and days for the betterment of his followers. If we do not follow his footsteps and do not perform <i>dawah</i>, how can we face him during the Day of Judgement? If we work hard to perform <i>dawah</i>, it will strengthen our faith in Allah. We will receive benefit in this world and the life hereafter. So, are we all interested in carrying out this task of our Prophet? [<i>The audience replied, 'Yes we are'.</i>]</p>	
<p><b>We will go to everyone in our locality to invite them to the path of Allah. We have to invite every member of the society. We have to be careful not to leave out a single person from <i>dawah</i>. Our responsibility is to try; Allah will make us successful, as, He is the source of all power.</b></p>	<p>Importance of including all in <i>dawah</i>.</p>
<p>May Allah provide us with good fortune. <i>Amen</i>.</p>	

**Appendix C: Transcript of a Sermon in a *Ta'leem* Session organized for Women at Khilgaon in Dhaka.**

Date: 28-12-2009  
From: 3 pm to 4 pm

[A senior leader from the Kakrail mosque delivered the speech from another room for the women gathered from the neighbouring area.]

<i>Text</i>	<i>Themes</i>
Dear sisters, Allah said, 'men and women are equally responsible for each other. So tell each other to perform good deeds.'	
<b>Always behave politely with your husband, teach good things to your children and read them the stories of the pious men. Read out the stories of the companions of the Prophet to your daughters.</b>	Importance of teaching children, spending time with them and telling them stories of Prophet and his companions.
The Prophet Muhammad did not like to talk after the <i>Esha</i> prayer, but he approved of spending time with children.	
<b>You have to teach your children to wear Islamic clothing. Women should always work on their faith and it will bring positive impact to their lives.</b>	Importance of Islamic clothing, of working on one's faith.
That is why it is said in the religious books that if men introduce religious practices in their families, women will be able to contribute more. Therefore, it is better to make a habit to tell the stories of the companions of the Prophet with family members. For women, it is better to stay inside	

the house.	
<b>It is preferable for women to stay inside the house.</b> <b>Allah said, ‘It is better for you [women] to stay inside the house. You will be rewarded for this’.</b>	Importance of women staying at home.
Even if you follow appropriate <i>purdah</i> when you go outside, it is still better for you to stay inside the house. Many women ask, ‘Shall we remain inside for our entire life?’. Allah said in this regard, ‘If you live your life as I instruct you, you will receive everything in the life after death’.	
<b>Those who will not follow the order of Allah in this world, they will be kept in a box and left in hell forever.</b> <b>Allah will then tell them, ‘You will not see any kindness of mine’.</b> Allah gave us the holy religion, and we have to follow this. For this reason, we have to remind our mothers and sisters to follow the orders of Allah.	Importance of following Allah’s orders.
<b>Young boys do not say Islamic greetings (<i>salam</i>) while they see elders these days. It is not very difficult to change them; this can be rectified through the effort of our mothers and sisters. If your son does not say <i>salam</i>, tell him to go outside and say <i>salam</i> before entering into the house. Tell your husband to say <i>salam</i> before entering into the house. It is your responsibility to instruct them, and you also have to follow this.</b>	Importance of Islamic greeting.
Therefore, if a woman starts to follow religion properly, the	

<p>entire family will be changed, and they will start following this. If you raise your children according to the guidelines of Allah, it will become easier for you to achieve heaven. Teach your children religion, Islamic etiquette, and to wear dress in an Islamic way. If you give your children a dress that does not cover the knee, that means you are encouraging them to wear inappropriate clothing. They will eventually become used to this and will remain oblivious. If you give them Islamic dress, they will wear this. They will make it their habit to follow your instructions. My sisters, if you live in this world as if you are in heaven without following the rules and orders of Allah, you will not see the kindness of Allah during the Day of Judgement.</p>	
<p><b>You have to consider this world as a jail, so that you can live in discipline. Always follow the <i>pardah</i>, do not listen to songs, do not sing, do not spend your time idling around with your friends, do not shout, and always speak in a soft tone without raising your voice. If you follow these in your family, this practice will pass on to your children. You will receive the reward of Allah in the life after death. You will receive the ticket to heaven. Our life in this world is limited. It is not very difficult to spend this short life in a disciplined way following the orders of Allah and sacrificing worldly happiness. If you can do this, you will go to heaven,</b></p>	<p>Other-worldly emphasis, need to reject this-worldly pleasures, follow command of Allah. Reward in afterlife.</p>

<p><b>which will last forever.</b></p>	
<p><b>Allah makes it easy for our sisters and mothers to achieve heaven. According to the <i>hadith</i>, if a woman prays five times a day properly with concentration, fasts during Ramadan, and follows the instruction of her husband, Allah will keep the eight doors of heaven open for her to enter. She can choose any of the doors to enter into heaven.</b></p>	<p>What Allah asks of women.</p>
<p><b>On the other hand, for men, they have to honour their fathers and mothers. They have to look after their parents. Parents are considered as the doors of heaven. If anyone can make his parents happy, it will become easier for him to go to heaven. Likewise, for women, the husband is very important. Do not shout at your husband, and say <i>salam</i> when he enters into the house. Allah sends women to please their husbands following the rules and order of Allah.</b></p>	<p>Men have to honour and please their fathers and mothers. For women, the most important thing is to obey and please their husbands, subject to Allah's commands.</p>
<p>For example, if your husband tells you to go to New Market [a popular shopping area in Dhaka] for shopping, you have to tell him, please forgive me, I will not be able to go. I will accept the clothes that you will bring for me. I will not make Allah angry by going outside.</p>	
<p><b>Always remember, you have to please your husband while staying within Islamic norms, values and rules.</b></p>	<p>Allah's commands take precedence over the husband's orders.</p>

<p><b><i>Purdah</i> is very important. Teach your children how to live a life in which they maintain <i>purdah</i> when they are young. If you already sent your children to schools, colleges and universities, do not stop their studies; rather, teach them <i>purdah</i> and help them to learn the religion, so that, they can follow this properly.</b></p>	<p>Importance of teaching <i>purdah</i> to children.</p>
<p>Always live a simple life and motivate your family members to follow this. People buy many things these days only to show off to others and to live luxurious lives. This is not necessary.</p>	
<p><b>Many people in our society are very poor, and are unable to arrange food for their family members, but what we all are doing? We are spending money for unnecessary luxuries. This is not right. Unnecessary wealth will act as a witness during the Day of Judgement and it will speak up against you. Therefore, sisters, live a simple life in this world.</b></p>	<p>Importance of living a simple life.</p>
<p>Sisters and mothers, I will now turn your attention to the <i>ijtema</i>.</p>	
<p><b>You can get rewards [in heaven] if you campaign for the <i>ijtema</i>. Followers of the Tablighi Jamaat from all over the world will come to this <i>ijtema</i>. Allah will appreciate your effort, if you send your sons, brothers and husbands to the <i>ijtema</i> to help the participants of the <i>ijtema</i>. Send your sons, brothers and husbands to</b></p>	<p>Encourage sons, brothers, husbands to go to <i>ijtema</i> and to <i>chilla</i>. Women can get the blessings of the <i>ijtema</i> by motivating</p>

<p><b><i>chilla</i>. If you are unable to do so, motivate others from your area to attend the <i>ijtema</i> and to go out for <i>dawah</i>. In such way, you will also receive the blessings of the <i>ijtema</i> from Allah. You can fast and pray for the success of the <i>ijtema</i>. You will receive your reward for this.</b></p>	<p>their menfolk to go, and by fasting and praying for the success of the <i>ijtema</i>.</p>
<p><b>Those who are new and are attending this session for the first time, please take the initiative to begin <i>ta'leem</i> [Islamic instruction] at home. Try to follow the <i>Sunnah</i> in your clothing, eating, etc. Do not hang photographs of any human being or animal in your house. The angels will not enter into your house if there are such photographs. <i>Amen</i>.</b></p>	<p>Importance of <i>ta'leem</i> and of following <i>Sunnah</i> in relation to clothing and to decorating the house.</p>

## Glossary

*Adhan*- Call to prayer.

*Adab*- Islamic etiquettes.

*Ahle Hadith*- *Ahle Hadith* is an Islamic movement that claim that they are proper followers of *Sunnah* of the prophet. Muslims who prefer the authority of Prophetic tradition (*hadith*) over a ruling by one of the schools of Islamic jurisprudence.

*Ahleya*- Female member of the family is known as *ahleya*.

*Akheri munajaat*- Final day supplication and invocation of *ijtema*.

*Akhiraat*- Day of Judgment.

*Akhlak*- Ethics, morals, natures, dispositions, habits, manners. A general term for morality.

*Amal* – The primary meaning of *amal* is action. This is only to please Allah and his prophet Mohammad.

*Ameer* – Leader.

*Asor* - Late afternoon prayer.

*Ashraf* - Muslim aristocratic classes.

*Astagfirullah*- An act of seeking forgiveness from Allah (God).

*Atraf* - Converted Muslims are identified as *atraf*, with lower social status and less control over society and financial resources.

*Balek*- Mature.

*Beruni gasht*- *Gasht* in a neighbouring mosque is known as *beruni gasht*.

*Bibi*- Wife.

*Biswa Ijtema*- World Congregation.

*Boyan*- Religious speech or commentary.

*Caliphate*- A concept that refers to the early Islamic rule in Arabia that was started by Prophet Muhammad.

*Chilla*- The word *chilla* originates from *chahal*, a Persian word meaning ‘forty’. In Tablighi Jamaat context, it is a forty days long *dawah* tour.



*Dastarkhan*- Made up with clothes. The prophet had food on *dastarkhan* during dinner. Use of a *dastarkhan* is perceived as *Sunnah*.

*Dawah*- Call or invitation. Propagation of Islamic faith.

*Dargah*- Muslim Shrine or tomb of a reputed holy person.

*Deen*- The word *deen* generally refers to religion and a way of life for Muslim.

*Deendar*- Religious.

*Deel*- Heart.

*Dhikir*- Remembrance of Allah.

*Dorud sharif* - *Qu'ranic* verse dedicated to the Prophet.

*Dua*- Supplication and invocation to Allah - asking favours from Him.

*Ehlan* – Announcement.

*Ebadot*- Worship of Allah.

*Esha*- Prayer at early night.

*Ekhlas*- Sincerity.

*Farz*- Obligatory task for all Muslims.

*Fazayele Amal* - The 'Virtues of Pious Deeds,' book by Muhammad Zakariya Kandhlawi.

*Fazr*- Prayer before the sun rises.

*Gasht er Adab*- Etiquette of *gasht*.

*Gaye holud*- Turmeric ceremony.

*Hadith*- Narration, traditions of the Prophet.

*Hajj*- Pilgrimage to Mecca.

*Hayat*- Life.

*Halal*- Lawful activities.

*Haram*- Unlawful activities.

*Hekayete Sahaba*- Book written by Muhammad Zakariya Kandhlawi that describes the facts, stories, and life of the companions of the Prophet.

*Hijab*- Veil.

*Hijrah*- The Prophet's migration on July 16, 622 from Mecca to Medina.

*Ijtema*: Arabic word *ijtema* means ‘Congregation’ or ‘gathering’.

*Ikram al-Muslim*- Honoring Muslims.

*Ilm*- Knowledge.

*Iman* – Faith.

*Imam*- Religious and prayer leader.

*Istekhara*- A prayer, which is performed in order to seek guidance from Allah when one is in a confusing situation or struggling to take the right decision. The recommended time for performing *istekhara* is after the *esha* or evening prayer.

*Jahiliyaa*- A time of ignorance classically understood as the pre- Muhammad age in Arabia’.

*Jannath*- Paradise.

*Jihad*- Holy war.

*Johr*- Midday prayer.

*Joor*- A preparatory gathering at Tongi, which takes place one month in advance of the annual *ijtema* to organize the work plan and discuss their targets with followers.

*Jummah*- Weekly prayer on Friday at midday.

*Kaza*- The word *kaza* refers to delayed prayers when a Muslim unable to perform prayer on time due to difficulties they have to pray in next suitable time to make it up.

*Karguzary*- The literal meaning is progress of work or routine of work.

*Kitab*- Book.

*Madrasa*- Religious School.

*Magrib*- Evening prayer.

*Mamur*- Additional members with a group during *gasht* known as *mamur*. The role of these additional members is to do *dhikir* during *gasht*. Members are not allowed to talk during *gasht*.

*Manjil*- A type of *dua* (supplication and invocation to Allah). When a group of the Tablighi Jamaat reaches a mosque, they do *manjil*. The purpose of *manjil* is to bring their attention to *dawah*.

*Manot*- A favour from a saint.

*Markaz*- The headquarters of the Tablighi Jamaat is known as *markaz*.

*Mashallah*- Whatever Allah (God) wills.

*Mashoara*- Tablighi Jamaat followers call their formal meeting in a mosque *mashoara*. The aim of *mashoara* is to discuss strategies to increase the number of their Tablighi followers and to increase the strength of their worship.

*Masturaat Jamaat*- *Masturaat jamaat* is designed especially for couples.

*Mohabbat*- Love.

*Masjeed* – Mosque.

*Milad mahfil*- A group activity where worshippers repetitively chant the praises of the Prophet and God.

*Muajjeen*- Caretaker of the mosque.

*Mujakkera*- Tablighi Jamaat followers describe *mujakkera* in Bengali as ‘poramorsho’ (consultation).

*Mu'min*- Faithful and religious believer in Islam and its laws.

*Muntakib Hadith*- *Muntakib Hadith* is a compiled book of *hadith* by the Tablighi Jamaat.

*Murid*- Disciples of a *pir*.

*Mutakallin* - *Mutakallin* refers to a person who invites people during *gasht* of the Tablighi Jamaat.

*Na jayej*- Not allowed.

*Nafs*- Mind.

*Na't*- Sufi praise song for the Prophet.

*Neki*- Good deeds.

*Nesabi*- After completing the first three *chillas*, Tablighi Jamaat followers are advised to complete one *chilla* each year. This *chilla* is termed as *nesabi chilla*, the scheduled *chilla* for each year.

*Pir*- A Sufi master.

*Purdah*- Seclusion of women from men.

*Qawali*- A form of Sufi music.

*Qur'an*- The holy book of Islam.

*Rahbar* – Guide.

*Shab e barat*- 15<sup>th</sup> night of *Shabaan* month of Arabic calendar. It is observed as a night of salvation and divine blessings. Hence, many Muslims prefer to spend the night praying.

*Sahabi*- Companions of the Prophet.

*Sahih*- Authentic.

*Salat*- Prayer.

*Shari'ah*- Islamic law according to the *Qur'an* and *hadith*.

*Shuddhi*- The *shuddhi* undertaken by Swami Sraddhananda of *Araya Samaj* who aimed to bring back borderline Muslims into the fold of Hinduism. There was similar movement named *sangathan* who also worked in a similar ideology.

*Sunnah*- The practices of the Prophet.

*Sufi*- Follower of Islamic mysticism.

*Sura*- Chapter in the *Qur'an*.

*Tablighi Jamaat*- Transmission or communication of a message or revelation; fulfilment of a mission. *Jamaat* means a group of people. *Tablighi Jamaat* is a preaching group who invites and communicates to people to improve their faith.

*Tahajjud*- A supplementary prayer instructed to pray after midnight.

*Ta'leem*- Islamic instruction.

*Tanzeem*- Muslim consolidation movement.

*Tariqah*- Religious order.

*Tashkili Gasht*- Visiting targeted people in an area who are generally seen as the honourable members of the society for *dawah* is known as *Tashkili Gasht*.

*Telawat*- Reading from the *Qur'an* is generally known as *telawat*.

*Tobligh*- *Tobligh* is a monthly published magazine in Bengali that did not represent the *Tablighi Jamaat*.

*Umumi Gasht*- Weekly *gasht* carried out by the *Tablighi Jamaat* followers. It is considered the backbone of all *gashts*.

*Ummah*- the Islamic community.

*Urs*- an Arabic derived Persian word that means union and in some contexts 'wedding'. In Bangladesh, the term refers to the days of commemoration for Muslim

divines. It is the death anniversary of a saint, which is celebrated because in death, the Sufi saint reunites with the divine.

*Walima*- Bengali meaning of the word is bou vat meaning wedding reception organised by the groom.

*Wazeb*- Not obligatory but it carries high importance and suggested to follow it.

*Zimmadar* – Responsible Person.

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