

TABLIGHI JAMAAT : IDEOLOGICAL STRUCTURE

Rameez Ahmad Lone*

Abstract:

Among the various and great Islamic movements, Tablighi Jamaat has emerged arguably the most widely followed movement in the Islamic world. Emerging from the social, economic and religious conditions of the Mewat region, near Delhi around 1926, it has come to establish its presence in and over one hundred and fifty countries throughout the world with adherents in between 100 to 150 million. This is primarily because of the unique ideology it has pursued in its dawah (call towards Islam) and has further capacity to flourish in a wide range of social and political environments. In this paper an effort has been made to throw light on the ideological structure of the Tablighi Jamaat. The paper is based on secondary sources and the main objective of the paper is to provide deep insight into the ideological structure of the Tablighi Jamaat in a precise, compact and systematic manner.

Key words : Tablighi Jamaat , Ideological structure, Islamic, movement, Dawah.

* **Doctoral candidate, UGC NET/JRF, SET, Dept. of Sociology AMU, Aligarh**

Introduction

Tablighi Jamaat - a religious revival movement was founded by Moulana Mohamad Ilyas in 1920's in Mewat has now grown into a global organization with its headquarters in the Delhi and branches all over the world. However it is noteworthy to mention that Ilyas never himself referred it by that name (Tablighi Jamaat). Instead Ilyas stressed the one true jamaat – the jamaat of the Muhammad- had already been founded by the Prophet and no one after ‘the seal of the prophets’ could lay claim to establish a new jamaat. However it appears that Ilyas himself preferred to call it, the Tehrik-i-Imaan or The Movement of the Faith.(Sikand, 2002, p. 66). This movement emerged at a time when socio-political conditions in British-India were not favorable to it. On the one hand, in 1921 Mapillas of Malabar- an impoverished Muslim peasant community led a violent revolt against British and their local allies, the landlords - high caste Hindus, ended up in communal tensions. On the other Shuddi and Sangathan movements were at peak and its leaders were not only calling its adherents to convert all 65 million Indian Muslims to Hinduism but were openly branding Islam as blood thirsty religion (ibid., p. 35.36) Consequently these Shuddi and Sangathan Hindu revivalist movements succeeded to greater extent in converting neo-Muslims back to Hinduism. So Ilyas started his project of dawah-preaching among the Mewati's - neo Muslims who were still practisizing their age old Hindu customs and traditions. He initially tried to establish a network of mosque-based religious schools to educate them about Islamic beliefs and practices but was disappointed with the experience that these institutions were producing religious functionaries, but not preachers(Ahmad:1991). So he opted for direct and oral method of preaching having much appeals and appropriate for illetrate and ignorant Muslims like Mewati's.

Besides one must remember during the same time many great Islamic thinkers like Maulana Asraf Ali thanvi (1863-1943), Khawaja Hassan Nizami (1878-1955), Maulana Abdul Bari (1878-1926), Syed Abu Ala Madudi(1903-79) etc called upon all Muslims, Ulams , Sofi's to fight against irtidad (shuddi compaign) by safeguarding their religion through Tabligh. For instance Madudi wrote, ‘the Ulama and the Sofi's too have a crucial role to play in a wide project of tableegh. Calling people to Islam is not to be restricted simply to verbal or written appeals. Rather every individual Muslim act as a missionary.(Sikand, 2002, p. 57-58). So out of the above mentioned conflicting - socio-cultural and political conditions together with cultural

onslaught of British colonial occupation, Maulana Ilyas founded a Jamaat with distinctive ideological structure.

Ideological Structure.

The central idea behind the formation of Tablighi Jamaat(now onwards TJ) was to revive and rejuvenate Islam among Muslims through Dawah or preaching. They interpret Dawah (call towards Islam) in the light of Quran when it says: “and there may spring among you a nation who invite to goodness, and enjoin right conduct and forbid indecency” (Sikand 2002: 12). Consequently it followed certain ideological measures in its call towards Islam. First of all, they were of the view that it was wastage of time to call non Muslims towards Islam, when Muslims themselves were not truly practicing Muslims- good Muslims. So the immediate focus of TJ was not conversion of non- Muslims but “making Muslims true, self conscious Muslims, strictly abiding by the dictates of their faith” (ibid: 66)

The rationality behind the argument is that, it is illogical and irrational to preach non- Muslims, when Muslims themselves were not living their lives as per shariah (Islamic code of life). Likewise Yogindar Sikand (2002: 66) writes;

“Ilyas argued that Muslims needed first to strictly follow Islam themselves before they could go out to preach others. Once they began to live their own lives in accordance with the shari’at, non-Muslims would be so impressed that they would themselves seek to enter to the Muslim fold” Similarly I.S Marva in his article, “Tabligh Movement Among the Meos of Mewat,” (ed. M.S.A Rao 1979: 96-97) writes;

“the tableeghi movement, however, did not try to convert non-Muslims to Islam; its exclusive focus remained on making Muslims better and purer Muslims”

Likewise in *Fundamentalism Observed* (ed. Martin E Marty and R Scott Appleby:1994) Mumtaz Ahmad mentions; “its message to the Muslims were simple: Ae Musalmano Musalmaan banu (oh, Muslims be good Muslims)”

Second, TJ came as a reaction against Hindu revivalist movements that were founded to win back Hindus who had converted to Islam and Christianity. So main idea was to save and secure these neo- Muslims against Hindu revival movements on the one hand, on the other central idea was to purify these neo-borderline Muslims who were still practicing their age old customs and religious practices. TJ started their project of purification and dawah among the neo- Muslims of Mewat who had converted from Hindism. Likewise Mumtaz Ahmad writes;

“the Tablighi movement of Maulana Ilyas, a Muslim missionary came as a response to the militant Hindu efforts of Shuddi and Sangathan, should be seen in this proximate context. The essential thrust of the movement was to ‘purify’ the border line Muslims from their Hindu accretions and to educate them about their beliefs and rituals so that they would not become an easy prey to the Hindu proselytizers”.

Third, unlike many Islamists TJ is of the opinion that Dawah is not only the Ulama led project but it is the responsibility of each and every Muslim to live life according Shari’at and to engage in dawah. Thus unlike Jamaat e Islami in whose focus are only educated and middle class Muslims, TJ included in this project of dawah all Muslims including ordinary and illiterate. Likewise Yoginder Sikind (2002: 67) mentions ;

“we have wrongly left this task to ulmaha alone. The Muslim Ummaha (worldwide community) could, he repeatedly stressed, regain its lost glory of Khalifa (vice regent) of God on earth only if every Muslim began to lead his or her life strictly according to the dictates of Islam at constantly engage in its dawat (invitation) and tabligh. It was the religious duty of each Muslim to see himself or herself foremost as a Muballigh or missionary of Islam”.

Similarly M.S Agwani (1986: 40) while citing Mianji Mohammad writes; “It is not necessary for one to be an alim (scholar of religion). Every Muslim has the responsibility of creating awareness of Islam among others”. Further Mumtaz Ahmad (1986: 2) writes; “ TJ is a gross-roots movement with followers from all sections of society, the JI support base consists mainly of educated , lower middle class Muslims”.

Fourth, unlike many Islamist groups like JI, Muslim Brotherhood, TJ ideology differentiates between deenvi (religious) and duniyavi (worldly) matters. In other words they separate religion from worldly affairs. They are mainly concerned with realms of sprit and rituals (ibadat) and maintain strict aloofness from the affairs of state like entering into politics, talking about education, technology, military etc. Likewise Jansen, as quoted in Sikand, p. 4 (2002: 1) writes: “worldly or duniyavi concerns or today outside the immediate focus of Tablighi attention. This is in marked contrast to the position taken by Islamist groups, who countenance no such distinction between the deen and duniya (this world), arguing that Islam is an all embracing ideology that governs both spiritual as well as temporal affairs”.

Fifth, further TJ ideology is “hostile to the use of reason and science in religious matters ” (Sikand 2002: 4). They strongly disapprove science or gaining knowledge regarding this world. In other words they believe gaining knowledge regarding polity, economy, history, society etc as merely ignorance. Likewise

“Shaikh-ul-Hadith Maulana Mohammad Zakariya, a close associate of Ilyas, who wrote a six volume Tablighi Nisab (reader) commonly used by the preaching teams, defined a perfect scholar as one who learnt those sciences which were of use for the next world and shunned those which are not. “In our ignorance”, he said, “we consider knowledge related to worldly gains as science. In fact, such knowledge is plain ignorance”.(Agwani 1986 : 48)

Sixth, an important ideological belief of TJ which needs elaboration, is its separation of Islam from politics. “Ilyas took the utmost care to steer clear of all politics. And his movement is unique in that it has demonstrated; perhaps for the first time in the history of Islam, that religion and politics would be separated. In the past, certain sufi orders had advocated aloofness from politics, but Ilyas made it a basic principal of his work” (Agwani 1986: 50). Unlike many Islamist groups like Jamaat-i- Islami who consider Islamic state (Islamic political community) as a necessary pre condition for enforcement of the shariah in the personal and collective affairs of Muslims, TJ instead argue “being good Muslims” or making Muslims good Muslims as a necessary pre condition for Islamic state or enforcement of shariah. They consider it – struggle for political power or Islamic state is illogical and wastage of time unless Muslims are good

Muslims living their lives in accordance with Islam. “As the late Umer Palanpori – a senior Tablighi leader put it, when Muslims cannot regulate even their own personal lives in complete conformity with the shari’at, aspiring to capture political power to set up an Islamic state is absurd (Sikand 2002:2). In this regard the TJ’s bottom up approach is in striking contrast to the top down approach of many Islamist groups, for whom the establishment of the Islamic state is a necessary prelude to the enforcement of the shari’at in the personal and collective affairs of Muslims. In Islamic terms, while the Islamist agenda is based on the model of the political community established by Mohammad at Madinah that of the TJ corresponds to the Prophet’s earlier years in Mecca where he devoted himself simply to preaching. (Sikand. 2002 : 3)

However M.S Agwani(1986: 50-51) comments that Ilyas’s hostility towards politics, and its differentiation from religion came as a reaction from his bitter experience in Saudi-Arabia when he was banned from preaching there. So he realized when even in the heart land of Islam he was denied, how come he will be allowed to preach in British India ruled by principal enemies of Islam. This bitter experience might have come as a shock to Ilyas. So he must have concluded that “the aims of modern political authority and Islam do not coincide and that if Islam were to make any progress as a faith it must be divorced from politics” (Haq, n.2 p 99 and 170). There is yet another view, for ; for Ilyas believed, that perfect implementation of Islamic rituals and holy Law were "leading ultimately to the establishment of Islamic political structures" (Troll, 1994, p. 129). Political aims are included in the means; they are not to be sought for; they will come in addition. In this way "it cannot therefore be concluded that Maulana Ilyas had no political vision and agenda" (Masud, 2000, p. 99).

Seventh, TJ ideology unlike many Islamist groups strongly opposes ijthihad or the use of independent reasoning in adopting Muslim law to modern concerns and problems for e.g , Islamists generally happily conform to modern science and use ijthihad in its application to present needs and problems of Muslims, while TJ does not. For instance, M.S Agwani (1986:48) while quoting Maulana Mohamad Zakriya, one of the founding fathers of TJ writes “in our ignorance, he said, we consider knowledge related to worldly gains and science, in fact, such knowledge is plain ignorance. Instead, Tablighi Jamaat “calls for ‘taqleed’ or strict adherence to

Islamic jurisprudence as developed over the centuries by the Ulama of the schools of sunni Islamic law.(Sikand 2002:3)

Eighth, Tablighi Jamaat stresses on oral and direct method of preaching and show hostility or indifference to publicity or written material . For tableeghi activists , Islam is seen,above all, as a practical activity (amali kaam), and not something to be talked , written or read about. The Prophet and his companions did missionary work not through writing or reading books but orally. So Muslims must strive to strictly to follow the path (sunnat) of Mohammad ,thus they too, should abide by his method of preaching. Adaptation of western or modern techniques of communication of the message are to be particularly avoided because this may have an impact on the spiritualism of the movement as a result of which the attention of its activists might be shifted from the fundamentals to the incidentals (Alam :11,132). Tablighi's deliberately seek low profile and distaste for literature because they see somehow publicity as threatening. This policy is seen as pragmatic that enabled the movement to carry preaching without opposed by governments or other sources. However it must be noted that despite this fact of hostility towards publicity, number of books, pamphlets and slim tracts have been written and published about its doctrines in recent years.

Ninth, regarding impression of Sufism on TJ's ideology, Haq(1972), has portrayed it as a direct continuation of medieval Sufism, which he believed was the main agency of conversion to Islam in India. Kepel (2000a, p.42) has seen it opposing Sufism, condemning idolatry-the cult of tombs. Khalid Masud thinks that Tablighi Jama'at "does not seem to be a Sufi movement ... It is more in line with the Ulama's reformist activities" (Masud, 2000, xl). The institution of Sufism is not found among Tablighi's (leadership) who belong to the non mystical line of the Sabiriyya – Chastiyya but among the rival theological school of Barelwis (Sanyal, 1996) who are affiliated either to the other branches of the Chishtiyya (Ernest,Lawrence,2002,p. 104-127), or to Qadrriya order (Sanyal, 1996, p. 97-127) or the Naqsbandiyya (Buehler, 1998). Explaining the success of the movement several scholars have attached it to Sufism, whereby they have maintained Sufi charisma attached to the lineage, has passed from Ilyas to Yousuf (intiqal-i-nisbat) and from one incumbent to the next (Haq,1972; Troll,1985; Gaborieau, 1986). Similarly Khanqah(whereby Ilyas described his movement as a 'moving hospice-khanqah') (Nadwi ,1979; troll,1985, p. 149),

remembrance(dhikr) (Muhammad Zakariya Kandhalawi n.d., p. 42; see Masood,2000, p.84), muraqaba (meditation-where a sheikh selects a type of dhikr with respect to the spiritual status of his disciples), (op. cit., p. 57), Chilla (a forty days retreat derived from khalwa – the Persian term, according to Anwarul Haq) (Trimingham, 1971, p. 187; Veinstein, 1996, p. 617) are Sufi terms and practices used in the movement. However Gobarieau argues dhikr or forty days are not used to induce ecstasy in tableghi circles like Sufism but for the remembrance of God. He comes to conclusion though the Jamat's lineage is linked with Kandhalawi or Sabriyya Sufi order, but the esoteric individual quest and its ecstatic complement, which is the essence of Sufism, do not constitute the an integral part of Tableghi agenda. He further says that the label of Sufism is used to divert any accusation of fomenting any sectarian dissensions or of being prone to fundamentalism and to gain legitimacy and good reputation for the movement. In conclusion we can say Jamaat's lineage is linked with Sufism with some characters like transference of charisma (intiqaal-i- nisbat) purely Sufhistic with less or least impact on the members of the Jamaat or its adherents.

Lastly and more importantly, in its call towards Islam TJ follows a certain ideological structure in the form of six principles. These six principles will help in renewal of faith at the grass root level. In other words we can say, TJ is otherworldly apolitical religious revival movement, which focuses on spiritual and moral reform of Muslims in the light of these six essentials. Likewise Sikand (1986: 71 & 77) writes;

“in order to cultivate their faith improve their knowledge and practice of basic ritual observances six principles were expected to be followed by tablighis while visiting certain areas for dawah”. Similarly Mumtaz Ahmad in *Fundamentalism Observed* maintains “The method adopted by Maulana Ilyas was to organize mobile units of at least ten persons and send them to various villages. These tablighi units, or jamaats (groups), would visit a village and invite the local people to assemble in the mosque, if there was one, or at any other meeting place, and would present their message in the form of the six demands”

However Agwani (1986:43) writes; “as for the subject of preaching, Ilyas required the instructors to concentrate on seven essentials”. But while quoting Bulandshahiri, Agwani

(1986:footnote,45) writes; “the first six principles are, according to Ilyas, central to the work of Tablighi Jamaat. The seventh one is of general character”

These seven essentials including the fundamental six principles are:-

1. “Shadaha or kalima (which literally means testimony, but here refers to the verse of the Quran which says: “there is no God but Allah and Mohammed is His Messenger”). By reciting this verse the Muslim binds himself to the obedience of only Allah and His Messenger in all matters concerning his daily life and to none else. Every activist is taught how to correctly pronounce the kalima as well as the literal meaning and the demands it makes in the part of every Muslim.
2. Namaz (prayers). One must learn about various details and rules of namaz. On the Day of Judgment, the first item to be accounted for will be prayer or namaz . Hence the five-time daily prayers must be offered sincerely and punctually. The verses to be recited during prayer must be correctly learned and memorized. Congregational prayers carries more merit than individual prayers.
3. Ilm -o- Zikr (knowledge and remembrance, of God). Here a tableeghi member is expected to learn about various other obligatory religious practices and rituals such as fasting, zakat, etc and how to mediate on God by reciting various Arabic supplications (du ‘as) called zikr. Zikr is the best way to cultivate the Love of God. Increasing practice of zikr deepens knowledge and purifies the heart.
4. Ikram-i-Muslim (respect for the Muslim) . A Muslim must show respect for and politeness to fellow Muslims. He should not bear envy or grudge against any Muslim. He must help the needy and comfort those in distress
5. Iklas –i-niyyat. (Sincerity of intention). All good should be motivated by the desire to please God rather than to gain public recognition or material rewards. Divine reward depends on sincerity of intention.
6. Tafrigh-i-waqt. (sparing time). The greatest part of time available in life must be spent in seeking the pleasure of God. While on the preaching tour one should stop thinking of worldly preoccupation and work single – mindedly to earn God’s favor. Usually this sparing of time varies between three days, forty- days , four months.

7. Tark-i-Laya'ni (giving up of meaningless pursuits). Meaningless pursuits, even if not prohibited by God, result in wastage of valuable time. This general principle should be carefully observed when one embarks on a preaching tour”.

Ilyas believed that Muslims in India were becoming increasingly ignorant of the essentials of Islam and that their belief in the oneness of God and the Prophet hood of Muhammad were weakening. What they needed most, therefore, was not more madrasahs and academies of higher learning but renewal of faith at the grassroots level (Agwani 1986 :45) through tablighi's direct and oral method of preaching.

Conclusion

Out of the conflicting socio-political and cultural conditions as mentioned above , Ilyas formed an apolitical jamaat, with policy of hostility to publicity and written material. He focused on the direct and oral method of preaching which was quite appropriate to the ignorant, common and illiterate masses (Mewatis) and will be so today which fortunately or unfortunately comprise the majority. Also because of this fact, of TJ's focus on illiterate and common masses its has grown far greater than other Islamist groups unfortunately who don't have such policy for the same people. Besides out of the circumstances when Muslims fell easy prey to Shuddi activists , he was quite wise in his ideology of securing Muslims, thus making them truly practicing Muslims strictly abiding the dictates of faith, than to focusing on the conversion of the non Muslims. However, in talighi project it's not mentioned, how and when or how much time an activist should spent with the jamaat so that he can give dawah to non-Muslims or should strive for Islamic state. Besides the TJ's linkage with Sufi lineage which believes in transference of charisma (intqal-i-inisbat) might have impacted the leadership of various units of the organization. In conclusion, the ideology of the TJ was relative to time, space and circumstances. The world has much changed since 1920's. The TJ's separation; of religion from politics, duniyavi(worldly) matters from deenvi (religious) matters, hostility to reason, science and publicity has made its ideology unique and strange which is still subjected to debate and contest.

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