

Şūfī spirituality fires reformist zeal:

The Tablīghī Jamā‘at in today's India and Pakistan

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

Typical of activist movements in South Asian Islam, the Tablīghī Jamā‘at combines the Şūfī principles of leadership with a reformist message. Therefore all that I will be saying is not meant to contradict Marc Gaborieau’s paper but has to be seen in conjunction with it.

To those unfamiliar with the Tablīghī movement it should be pointed out that they represent a voluntary mass movement of lay preachers founded by Muḥammad Ilyās in 1927 in the Mewāt region around Delhi in north India. At the time it was contesting Hindu preaching activities among tribal Muslim converts. After the demise of British colonial rule the Tablīghīs branched out from there to all Southasian countries and more recently to all places where Muslims live. They could be called a pietist movement devoted to the so-called internal mission, that is, they intend to strengthen their co-religionists, Muslims, in their faith where they feel it has become slack and is in danger of either not being observed at all, or not properly. For this purpose they form groups of travelling preachers of usually up to 15 members who head for a Muslim locality where they conduct door-to-door preaching, inviting people to come to the local mosque for prayer and for a religious sermon on the virtues of a pious life. This can either be done in the immediate vicinity or in far-away places, even in other countries. The formation of these groups of travelling preachers tends to become an end in itself as they seek to involve Muslims in ever growing number in this preaching activity for ever longer and more periods of time. The time spent in the movement, on the road becomes a measure of the commitment to the ideals of Islam. The travelling scheme has more recently been complemented by efforts to organise permanent preaching groups at local mosques called the ‘*masjidwār jamā‘at*.’

In doctrinal terms the Tablīghīs represent Ḥanafī Sunni Islam, although they remain open and attractive to all Sunni law schools and sects. Although they proclaim to be inclusive they practically share the inhibitions of Sunni radicals against Shi‘a Muslims, the Aḥmadiyya, a reformist sect considered by most Sunni Muslims as heterodox. They take their doctrinal lead from the purist Southasian Islamic tradition spawned by the *Dāru’l-‘ulūm* Deoband in north

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India that came into being in 1863. They are actively opposed by the modernist Jamā‘ati Islāmī, created by Maulānā Maudūdī (1903-1979) in 1941, which resents its seemingly apolitical attitude. Opposition is also coming from the Barelwīs who represent an orthodox Sunni movement much closer to Şūfī-inspired Islam, emphasising the centrality of pīr, shrine and grave worship. Barelwīs usually do not allow their mosques in Pakistan and India to be used by Tablīghīs and would not shy away from physical force to exterrn them, although rank Barelwī members occasionally do participate in Tablīghī activities. This is essentially a case of competition for influence among Sunni Muslims as the Barelwīs set up their rival organisation *Da‘wat-i Islāmī* led by Maulānā Muḥammad Ilyās Qādrī and closely modelled on the Tablīghī Jamā‘at.

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

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

1.

The Şūfī leadership principle

It is clear that Muḥammad Ilyās stood in the tradition of the Chishtīya Shaykhs. His connection with the purist Deoband seminary was no obstacle to this influence. Thereby he shared the mode of operation of many leaders of reformist – *işlāhī* – movements in the Indian subcontinent. They continued to operate as Shaykhs parallel to their reformist activities. They usually were initiated into several orders and they continued to grant *bay‘at* to disciples. As the Deoband statutes put it, they regarded the following of the *ṭarīqa* as the

‘... Consummation of good breeding, self-purification and spiritual traversing (*sulūk-e batin*) within the auspices of researching Şūfīs and their well-trying principles (inferred from the Book and the Sunna), because, without this, moderateness in morals, stability of zest and ecstasy, internal insight, mental purity and observation of reality are not possible. It is obvious that this branch is connected with *aḥsān* along with faith and Islam.’¹

Sufism was acceptable to Southasian reformist Muslims if it was the ‘right’ Sufism, based on the *sharī‘a*, on the Qur‘ān and the Sunna and did not follow heretic practices. The Deobandī reformists particularly rejected Shrine and pīr worship, some also emphasised the rejection of singing and dancing.

¹ Quoted here after Dietrich Reetz: God’s Kingdom on Earth: The Contestation of the Public Sphere by Islamic Groups in Colonial India. Habilitation thesis. Berlin: Free University 2001, Appendix I.

But in right measure and form Sufism was seen as an indispensable element of true Islam shaping a moral and pious character, a necessary supplementation for theological students, but also for salvation in general.

The Tablīghī elders enshrined this dichotomy in their famous 6 basic points detailing their ‘articles of faith.’ Point three has been called *‘ilm-o-zikr* demonstrating the unity of religious knowledge and (Ṣūfī-inspired) ritual as they view it:

(3) Knowledge and remembrance of God (*‘ilm-o-zikr*)

To spend some time in the morning and in the evening on gaining (religious) knowledge and remembering God. The common ritual of commemoration (*zikr*) for every person consists of (counting the beads of) one rosary on reciting the third Kalima in the morning, one in the evening, and two each on invoking God’s blessing (*darūd*) and asking God’s forgiveness (*istighfār*). If one is connected to a Shaykh one should follow his recommendation for prayer (*zikr*). For (religious) education one should read [from the Tablīghī tracts of] ‘The Virtues of Prayer’ (*faẓā’il-i namāz*), ‘The Virtues of Commemoration (of God)’ (*zikr*), ‘The Virtues of the Holy Qur’ān’ (*faẓā’il-i Qur’ān*), ‘The Stories of the Companions of Muḥammad’ (*ḥikāiyāt-i ṣaḥābā*), ‘Reward of Good Deeds’ (*jazā al-a‘māl*). If the Qur’ān was not read previously it should be studied. For those qualified in religion (*ahl-i ‘ilm*) (it is recommended to read) a book on virtuous deeds (*kitāb al-a‘māl*), on (religious) knowledge and beliefs (*kitāb al-‘ilm-wa-al-e‘tiqādāt*), on tradition (*kitāb al-sunnan*), on holy war (*kitāb al-jihād*), on fighting (the Infidels) (*kitāb al-maghāzī*), on revolt (divisions in Islam) (*kitāb al-fitan*), on good behaviour (*kitāb al-raqqāq*), on what is right (and what is wrong) (*kitāb al-amr bi’l-ma‘rūf*).²

The quotation refers to the fact that the major book of the Tablīghī movement, the *Faẓā’il-e A‘māl*, a collection of ḥadīth and pious commentaries written by the main ideologue of the movement, Muḥammad Zakariyā (1898-1982),³ contains a separate chapter on *Zikr*, indicating its central importance for the movement. Judging from this text alone one has to assume that the movement condones, perhaps even encourages dual commitment of Tablīghī members to a Ṣūfī Shaykh and to the movement. But the text makes also clear that the movement in some form takes on the obligations of a religious guide, of a Shaykh itself, detailing the ritualistic commitments, the fulfilment of which would lead to salvation.

A strongly Ṣūfī-inspired element in Tablīghī obligations also seems to me their emphasis on the reformation of one’s own intentions, or *niyyat*. Point 5 of their ‘articles of faith’ reads:

(5) Correction of intention and conduct (*taṣḥīḥ al-niyyat wa al-khalāṣ*)

All this work should be undertaken for the glory of God and for one’s self improvement (*iṣlāḥ*). Don’t turn the gaze to any external aim. Also do not pay attention to effect and result (of your action).⁴

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

² Ditto.

³ Zakariyā, Muḥammad: Tablīghī Niṣāb (Urdu– course on the propagation of Islam), Delhi: Madīna Book Depot, 1975 (1940). Numerous editions, later editions under title: *Faẓā’ili A‘māl – The Virtues of (Correct) Religious Practices*.

⁴ See fn 1.

It is perhaps worth noting that books such as the *Fazā'ih-e Aṣmāl* take on a ritualistic function in defining the movement. An abundance of other ritualistic literature was also created. A special status is accorded to the reports on the life of the *Tablīghī* elders. They are written in the format of hagiographies well known from life sketches of *Ṣūfī* saints in connection with certain shrines. There are *Tazkīrā* written on the life of the second Amīr of the *Tablīghī Jamā'at*, Muḥammad Yūsuf (1917-1965) who was the son of Muḥammad Ilyās.⁵ And there are the *Malfūzāt*, the sayings of the saints, attributed in this case to Maulānā Ilyās and Maulānā Yūsuf.⁶ One cannot escape the *Ṣūfī* connotations of such categories of literature.

The question today is what is left of this influence in the *Tablīghī Jamā'at*?

When I'm looking for *Ṣūfī* influence on principles of leadership I would distinguish between informal and formal observance of a *Ṣūfī* style of leadership. Informal observance might be characterised by personal, charismatic and moral authority, based on chastity and sanctity as recognised by others, on erudition in the formal principles and sources of Islam, on the knowledge of the Qur'ān, ḥadīth and the Sunna, of the internal culture of the movement and its guiding moral principles.

Formal observance might refer to the initiation of disciples creating a personal attachment of followers with their leaders through *bay'at*.

I discussed this issue with some of my informants during my field research.⁷ It appears that *Tablīghī* leaders in India and, to a lesser degree in Pakistan, continue acting as a Shaykh initiating disciples into their favourite orders. I received confirmation of this practice from the members of the inner circle of *Tablīghī* activists stationed at Ḍalīgarh. Particularly InḌām al-Ḥasan (1918-1995) was reported to have administered *bay'at* to groups of *Tablīghī* activists on the sidelines of their annual congregations by throwing a peice of doth over them. This mass *bay'at* was nevertheless a closed affair. Workers who wanted to get this favour granted had to intimate the leadership beforehand of their intention in writing. The composition of the group was carefully screened and participation granted only selectively. The criterion was loyalty and allegiance to the *Tablīghī Jamā'at*. I was told that the disciples were used by InḌām al-Ḥasan as a source of financing much of the expenses for the *Tablīghī Markaz* or centre in Delhi.

Another direct form of *Ṣūfī* leadership is embodied in their direct connection with the Meo tribes living in India around Delhi. It was from the Mewat region that the *Tablīghī* movement originally took its beginnings. The Meo tribesmen regarded Ilyās and also his father as their Shaykh and Pīr to whom they feel they still owe allegiance. At the annual congregation of the *Tablīghīs* in India and Pakistan, Mewatis always constitute a sizeable delegation. They usually make it a point to seek a special interview with one of the central leaders for whom they hold special reverence. Here Maulānā SḌād as the most direct heir of Ilyās being his great

⁵ Bijnaurī Azīzurrahmān: *Tazkīrā-yi Amīr-i tablīgh Maulānā Muḥammad Yūsuf*. Bhērā: Zunnūrain Akādmī, 1980. For Ilyās, see Maulānā Ehteshāmu'l-Ḥasan: *Tazkīrā-e Islāf - Ḥalāt-e Mashā'ikh-e Kāndhalā*. Part I. Kāndhalā: Dār al-Ishā'at 1996.

⁶ Muḥammad Manzūr NuḌmānī: *Malfūzāt Shāh Muḥammad Ilyās*. (Urdu – Sayings of Muḥammad Ilyās.) Lucknow: Al-Furqān Book Depot, 1993 (1950), numerous editions; Muftī Ṣshān Shāh Qāsīmī (ed.)/ Maulānā Muḥammad Yūsuf, 1994: *Malfūzāt-o-Iqtibāsāt*. (Urdu – Sayings and Quotations) Delhi: Idārā Ishā'ati Dīnīyāt, 1994.

⁷ The data mentioned here refer to interviews with *Tablīghī* respondents in field research on case studies at Ḍalīgarh University and the *Tablīghī* annual congregation in Bhopal (India) in December 2000 and January 2001, and at Lahore University of Management Sciences and the *Tablīghī* annual congregation at Rā'ewind near Lahore (Pakistan) in October-December 2001.

grandson plays the central role. Also when he visits Pakistan for attending the annual congregation there, he grants special audiences to the Pakistani Mewatis who migrated as refugees in sizeable numbers to Pakistan at partition. Many of them settled near Lahore in Kasur district.

A third reference may be the self-conscious portrayal of the central leaders of the Tabligh, primarily in India, as belonging to the Chishtiya sub-group or *silsilā* of the Kāndhalawī. This refers to all those related to Maulana Ilyās and Muḥammad Zakariya who called themselves Kāndhalawī after their place of origin Kāndhalā in the north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. This was manifested by the publication of a directory of members of this clan and *silsilā* by a Tablighī elder, Maulānā Ehteshāmu'l-Ḥasan.⁸ Here he deliberately discusses the 'conditions of the Shaykhs from Kāndhalā.'

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

2.

Self-organisation and interaction in the style of a *Ṣūfī* order

The central leadership figure in the Tablighī Jamā'at is the Amīr. This is not diminished by the fact that the Tablighīs themselves rather emphasise the *shūrā* and the consultation principle as its key element of functioning. But the formation of the *shūrā* both at the central level and in local centres (*marākaz*) cannot obscure the fact that some are more equal than others in this system. It is obligatory for all Tabligh activities that an Amīr is selected or elected at any stage in any meeting. The Amīr principle embodies different and competing traits of political culture.⁹ From one perspective, it reflects western and democratic influences. Every activist, belonging to what I call the regulars for meeting a certain number of obligations, is encouraged to become Amīr at one stage of his membership. Without taking on these obligations at least once, the regular is not understood to have completed his formation as a pious Tablighī. While apparently there truly is a sometimes broad-based consultation process on who would become Amīr, it is equally clear that crucial positions, where leadership councils are formed in important places or leadership *jamā'ats* created for special tasks, are filled through nominations, which are decided in a small elite leadership circle to whom not many elders even have access. These patriarchic beginnings are reinforced by the

⁸ Ḥasan, Tazkirā-e Islāf, *ibid*.

⁹ Political culture is simply understood here as how things are being done.

internal culture surrounding the position of Amīr. It is clearly spelled out that an Amīr at any level of the organisation can demand unquestioning obedience. It is strongly discouraged to ask questions and to make fuss about unclear issues. While a Tablīghī is on *jamā'at*, as the term goes for preachers out with their groups 'in the path of Allah', he is not supposed to do anything without permission from his Amīr, including going to toilet, or leaving the group. He should ask no questions, not even harbour any wish to ask a question in his heart, which is enshrined in the four things not to do.

But what is more important in terms of the *Ṣūfī* antecedents of the movement is the way by which Tablīghī etiquette obliges the Amīr to rule by moral example. He is supposed to share all menial work during travel, including cooking or cleaning, including the toilet. He is supposed to lead by his sincerity and knowledge. Tablīghī elders are revered for their pious character – and of course for their knowledge of Islam and of the books of the Tablīghīs. The Amīr for all practical purposes is a Shaykh showing his fellow preachers the path of Allah. He is moulding them, educating them not only in Islam but also in Islamic and Tablīghī etiquette, in civil etiquette in general. While being on tour Tablīghī preaching groups in special sessions discuss with their Amīr the correct ways of praying, fasting, but also eating or sleeping. In this sense it could be argued the whole movement is a collective Amīr for the new lay preachers joining its ranks. The movement, or more precisely the body of regulars who devote much or most of their life to its activities, have set themselves the task of bringing new followers in stages to a pious life. They are preparing their members for the hereafter by deeply intervening in their religious attitudes and personal behaviour. They see to it that the ordinary member changes his life style, that he dresses simple in the way of the Prophet, that he sleeps and eats in the way of the Prophet and his companions, that he approaches life in all its facets in the way of the Prophet. It seems clear that the example of the Prophet for them holds a larger than life, a mystical fascination. But for them it is also a consequential reformist attitude as they bring out a true Islamic life style in new adherents, as they subject them to *iṣlāḥ*.

Particularly for the regulars, life in the Tablīghī *Jamā'at* is so full with daily ritualistic obligations that it resembles more life in a monastic order than an activist Islamic movement. Ascetic features start dominating the whole of your life activities. You start changing your cloth donning the *shalwār-kamīz* and shunning any western clothes. You forgo any comfort while on tour, carrying your own bedding, cooking utensils. You spend while on tour on the level of the poorest fellow preacher. With time passing you will stop watching television for entertainment and ultimately remove the TV set from your house. You will stop going to the pictures and of course refrain from gambling and drinking alcohol. And you are ascending on the ladder to Tablīghī perfection by the amount or percentage of time you spend on its activities. Gradually many regulars are drifting out of this world into another reality. There is also a category of full-timers who are called *muqīm*. They reside at the centres, the *marākaz*, although they have to look after their family and income, which they do in clearly defined intervals like once per week or per month. They have almost fully renounced worldly life in favour of working for the message of Allah to be spread to the greatest effect. There are different categories of the *muqīm* forming a clear hierarchy. According to informants, there are about 300 *muqīm* at the Rā'ewind centre near Lahore, Pakistan, and perhaps 10-12 at every local *markaz*. The elders who form part of the decision-making council or *shūrā* enjoy the highest authority. Some of them are teachers (*Maulānās*) at the Madrasa of the Tablīghī centre. Even the eldest among the *shūrā* members are not spared the obligation to perform the excruciating long variation of the preaching tour, the grand *chillā*, consisting of 3 *chillās* per 40 days, regularly. There are also younger *muqīm* who have their family life continuing and live at the centre in intervals. They are usually much advanced on the ladder of commitments having served a large number of travelling preaching terms; sometimes they are related to the elders like being their sons. They are perhaps groomed – or aspiring – for future leadership positions within the movement. A third category of *muqīm* consists of regulars who serve a

long preaching term, such as a grand *chillā*, a seven-month or a one-year tour. They live as interns at the centre as part of their term, welcoming and chaperoning guests or incoming Tablighīs, running errands for the elders or serving as ushers, forming sort of a lower rung of leadership and administration at the *markaz*. It is obvious that one can here also discern modern influences of business organisation and public administration.

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

3.

Ṣūfī spirituality in Tablighī rituals

Ṣūfī influences can be discerned at various levels of Tabligh activities.

They directly relate to practices and rituals known to be particularly favoured by Ṣūfī Islam, such as *Zikr*, *D'ua*, and *Bay'at*. Here belong practices at their congregations – *ijtimā'* – used not only to convey knowledge – *'ilm* – but also to transmit grace, or *baraka*, to the believers. The ritual of devotional seclusion or *chilla* as interpreted and practiced by the Tablighīs also has to be seen in this context.

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

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

When looking at the institution of the Tablighī *chilla*, which is the technical term for a 40-day preaching tour that is obligatory once a year, it becomes obvious that going out with up to fifteen other men can hardly be called solitude. So apparently there is no meaning left of the Ṣūfī devotional seclusion. Yet, interviewees told me repeatedly of their experience with these and other longer tours: it is this seclusion in the group, which becomes a test of character, devotion and piety. While on tour members are not allowed to leave the group or even make phone calls to the parents who at times are much perturbed about the whereabouts of their boys. An experienced Tablighī elder from Pakistan told me that he had been together with

another colleague on a grand *chilla*, that is, four months, about which experience he remarked that you get to know each other very well and have to endure the presence of other Tablīghī members for such long periods of time without problems or tension.

A special remark has to be inserted here about the role of pious dreams and their interpretation. Dreams are given a special significance also in the Tablīghī movement. They are used to give added legitimacy and authority to Da‘wa. When visiting the weekly proceedings of the rather powerful Lahore *shūrā* at their head mosque I encountered a determined effort by the present elders to give me concerted Da‘wa, although strictly speaking the Tablīghīs don’t make the task of preaching to non-Muslims explicit. One of the elders used the opportunity to emphatically impress upon me the virtues of Tablīgh with reference to a pious story central to which was a dream and providence shown in it. He narrated a story where a poor Tablīghī member could not go on the planned foreign preaching tour, which generally Tablīghīs must finance individually, because he could not present his money draft to the selection committee while the cut-off date was nearing after which he would be excluded from the tour. So he prayed to Allah constantly that a miracle might happen. In the meantime a merchant in Karachi had a dream where Muḥammad directed him to go and give a certain amount of money to a person by a certain name in Kohat, in the Pakhtūn tribal area in the northwest of the country. After he had had the dream two times he became worried and started to seek the person out. When he went to Kohat, the poor Tablīghī was sitting at the local mosque, praying, wailing and weeping that he had no means to go out on the path of Allah. Then the merchant approached him, inquired about his name and gave him the money as he had been instructed. But the poor Tablīghī would not take the money before the ‘ulamā’ would not certify that it was right to accept this gift for this purpose.¹⁰ The story clearly reveals Ṣūfī antecedents. References to dreams in which the Prophṫ appears and gives instructions have a long tradition in Southasian Islam, also among reformists who as was mentioned earlier never renounced their Ṣūfī heritage. Such dream is also attributed to the founder of the movement, Ilyās who hinted that he had received the message and method of Tablīgh from the Prophet. The controversial founder of the Aḥmadiya sect, Mirzā Ghulām Aḥmad (1839-1908), did the same. He was famously preceded in this by Shāh Walīullāh who is nowadays regarded as the father of the Indian school of Islamic reformism (*iṣlāḥ*) and was said to have shared views and influences with ‘Abdul Wahhāb. Walīullāh claimed that in his dream he had been presented with a pen that belonged to the Prophet. He even alleged that in this way the Prophet himself administered *bay‘at* to him.¹¹

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

And it is not least the *ijtimā‘* or huge congregations where rituals are observed that betray Ṣūfī influences. The most prominent of them is the concluding prayer of supplication, or *D‘uā*, at the annual congregation. It takes place on the last day and concludes the meeting. It is transmitted by huge loudspeaker systems all over the congregation ground. It is the one event that attracts the largest number of participants. Not only would the delegates to the congregation attend it. Also many chance visitors, sympathisers and local Muslim people

¹⁰ So narrated to me at Bilāl Park mosque on November 5, 2001.

¹¹ See fn. 1, p. 117.

come for this special occasion. This event easily draws participants up to a million and more. They come dressed in their finest, move in on Bus, bike, tractor, or on foot. They clearly regard it as an auspicious event transmitting an enormous amount of *barakat*. Suddenly the congregation site becomes a huge shrine and the preacher of the *d'ua* its *pīr*. The final *d'ua* is always given by a prominent Tablighī leader, in India and Pakistan very often by Maulānā Zubair. He is known for his 'good' *d'ua*. Some *d'ua* of the prominent Tablighīs or Deobandī elders are published in printed collections of memories, biographies etc. The *d'ua* is also a political affair as it is closely watched who and what is mentioned in this prayer. It was noted with particular concern by many radical Islamists that the Tablighī elders failed to mention the *ṭalibān* after their downfall from power by the American-led war following September 11, 2001.

Then there is a wide grey area of ritualised behaviour where the ritual is not necessarily recognisable as being of Ṣūfī origin but where the ritualistic conduct resembles efforts to establish a sort of 'Protestant church' with its own attractive rituals transmitting as much *barakat* as the established and reviled conventional shrine and *pīr*-related activities. The participation in the preaching tours is at the centre of these efforts. Several respondents told me about the difficulties followers might face when deciding to go out on a long preaching tour, notably with financial and family matters. But they will then share their experience with you about the good or endless *barakat* all this brought them, as in spite of seemingly insurmountable difficulties things miraculously settled all by themselves. If sons previously had no employment, the absence of their father forced them to seriously seek some. If wife and mother were constantly quarrelling they were forced by the husband/son's absence to mend their ways. If in an extended family a good earning Tablighī breadwinner was previously thinking of buying a second car he – and the whole family – would cut down on expenses required to sustain the Tabligh activities, leading a much more contented life afterwards on a lesser scale. Wives and sons would turn the Tablighī way rendering suddenly the huge sacrifice in time and money much more acceptable in the family.

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

The scope of this presentation does not allow detailing fully the Tablighī internal culture, their ritualistic attitude. Suffice it to say that they established strict rules for their various schemes of activities. For instance, there is a grid of rules transmitted to every new Tablighī to guide him on the Tablighī preaching tours. There are four things to do (*da'wa*, *t'alīm*, *namāz-o-zikr*, *khidmat*), four things to do less (sleeping, eating, talking, going outside the mosque while on tour), four things not to do (asking unsolicited questions, not harbouring those even in your heart, excessive expenditure, not taking anything without permission) and four things to refrain from (rejection, criticism, competition, pride). There is a highly structured and fixed way of conducting the tour itself; there is a ritualistic way of addressing each other, and particularly elders or the Amīr.

During the annual congregations rituals have been introduced designed to spread the reformist message while the proceedings have become ritualistic themselves. This starts with the major religious speeches, or *bayān*, forming part of any Tabligh meeting, where religious anecdotes mixed with references to the Qur'ān and the *ḥadīth* are being recounted to inspire listeners, a kind of religious pep talk. At the big congregations there is evidently a hierarchy of speakers for these *bayān*, some of which are considered much more effective and auspicious than the others. The youthful radiance and pop star charisma of Maulānā S'ād inspires elation and hope of *baraka* in his listeners as I witnessed myself at the Bhopal congregation in January 2002. So do the tales recounted, some of which make free use of miraculous incidents either

narrated in the Qurʾān and the Traditions or related by the elders as referred to above in the case of the dream.

The annual congregations now for many years have been featuring mass marriages. They were originally designed to propagate simple marriage ceremonies in line with the *shariʿa*, as many Southasian families bankrupt themselves in lavish marriage feasts, the Valima dinners, and also in paying the huge bride money typical of South Asia. Now it is considered particularly auspicious to participate in these mass marriages (*nikkāḥ*) and the numbers of participants are swelling from year to year. About 150 marriage parties attended the ceremony at the Bhopal congregation in January 2002. At the Rāʿewind congregation in October 2002 there were so many marriage parties that the *dʿuā* had to be administered in several groups so that the general proceedings would not be disrupted. A small number of such Tablighī marriages is being conducted at local *marākaz* of some status, such as in Delhi or Lahore. All formalities would be regulated beforehand with the local *qāzī*. The bride and the bride’s representative (*wālī*) would participate at the congregation. Their names and the amount of dowry (*mehṛ*) fixed to be paid at the time or in the event of separation would be read out. It is again *baraka*, which followers expect to flow from this ceremony in abundance.

4.

Şūfī spirituality in Tablighī philosophy

If the Tablighīs occasionally stand accused of exoteric practices and a lack of esotericism (Gaborieau), I believe a digression on the way the Tablighī philosophy is being shaped may help mitigate this impression. In order to revive the Tablighī message all the time, there is a constant attempt on the part of the Tablighī leadership to keep their message evolving to satisfy also the inquisitive and intellectually demanding members. Some key expressions and references are regularly reinterpreted to make them appear as if there is a new accent or meaning. One example of this is the emphasis on *Imān* or faith and the way this is being interpreted. My impression is that the more devotional leaders of the Jamāʿat make it a particular reference point stressing that all they are doing is to create the perfect religious man (*insān-e kāmil*) – a Şūfī connotation for the Prophet.¹² The emphasis on faith is to show that it is an **internal** quality, which is required and which the whole movement revolves around. Without faith there is no *baraka* to be expected from prayer or other externalist practices. One Tablighī intellectual explained to me the special meaning of the causative relationship between *Imān* (faith) → *ʿIbādat* (worship) → *Dʿuā* (prayer for supplication) → and *Allah*’s help, as the various stages for the Tablighīs to get help from God. Maulana Sʿad explained this interconnection at the 2002 congregation in Pakistan and it was understood to reflect his intellectual and religious acumen and capacity to develop the Tablighī legacy further. He particularly stressed the connection between *Imān* and *ʿIbādat*, that it is not enough to know about the rules Islam but their practice has to come from your heart with sincerity; between *ʿIbādat* and *Dʿuā*, that it is not enough to come for prayer without actually regularly worshipping God, as only then you will get Allah’s help. While this is from one perspective an approach that all ideological movements employ, it is apparently not without meaning that the internal changes in man the movement wants to stimulate are the centre of the Tablighīs’ concern where the way of personal purification and piety is the only way to God, which could be understood as an application of the Şūfī concept of individual Union with God.

¹² This reference was made by Maulānā Fahīm Sahib, who teaches at the Madrasa attached to the Tablighī centre, on 11 December 2002 in Lahore– DR.

5.

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

The preaching groups usually appoint a guide with local knowledge (*rehbar*). Indian respondents spoke of incidents where Tablīghīs on their tours relied on the help of pious Hindus to lead them to houses of Muslims, especially where Muslims were in a minority. But it was clear that Hindu neighbours occasionally endorse the participation of their Muslim neighbours in the movement on ground of a shared vision of piety.

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

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

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

6.

Summing up one could say that the Tablīghī Jamā'at represents a typical amalgam of reformist Islam in the Southasian variety. It has strong *Ṣūfi* roots, which it prefers not to acknowledge publicly. *Ṣūfi* references and principles are used for the mobilisation and control of adherents. The personalised *Ṣūfi* style of functioning with its connotation of piety and spirituality is found useful for its more direct impact on the psyche and conduct of individual Muslims. It allows Tablīghī leaders to mould adherents to an extent where their personal identity and behaviour are radically redefined. This could be an explanation why secular critics often accuse the Tablīghīs of brainwashing techniques.

It will be difficult and perhaps not even advisable for the Tablīghī leaders to completely rid the movement of *Ṣūfi* influences. They will want to use this personalised style of leadership

for effective control. Also there are the problems of growth. With the attraction of large masses in both India and Pakistan, and beyond, society at large with its variety of social, cultural and religious styles enters the movement. This increasing diversity makes it more difficult to impose a unified mode of operation. Traditional influences compete with modern objectives. The movement's elite is increasingly contemplating Tabligh activity in terms of strategy, goals and achievements, of territories covered or not sufficiently worked upon. By this it grows more ideological trying to maximise control of society in its ownway. This ambiguity will not go away; rather we may be witnessing increased tension between its utilitarian aspects and its pietist beginnings.

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