Living like the Pious Ancestors:
The social ideal of the missionary movement of the Tablighi Jama'at

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The paper discusses preliminary findings from field research in India and Pakistan devoted to elicit views and information on the worldview of the Tablighi Jama'at. The project aimed at going beyond the hagiographic literature to reflect the internal culture of the movement. A central element of their sociology is their interpretation of the life of the founder generation of Islam. The paper will show how Tablighi interpretation of this ideal strives to strike a compromise between reformist concepts and current requirements. Their views gain increasing influence as a model for re-Islamising broad sections of Muslims in South Asia and beyond, as they branch out into all regions of the globe where Muslims live.

The Tablīghī Jamāᶜat is a missionary movement of Sunnī Islam that was created in 1926 by Muḥammad Ilyās in India. Along with other *ᶜulamā'* he responded to a campaign of religious reclamation started by the Hindu reformist movement *Āryā Samāj*. The latter had targeted tribes and castes, which had deserted Hinduism and embraced Islam some generations back, but preserved some Hindu customs, which they fused with Islamic rites. As Islam was a minority religion in India community leaders and clerics felt their religion was under siege and sought to defend it lest it dissolved in all-embracive Hinduism.

The Tablīghīs became known for their peculiar strategy to form groups of travelling lay preachers going to areas where they felt Muslims were in need of shoring up their faith. They approach Muslim households and invite its members for prayer and religious talks – *bayān* – at the local mosque, where in turn they draft new prospective members for their travel groups. It is therefore usually considered an **internal** missionary movement. They prided themselves in having no organisation, no literature, and no expenses, except this strategy executed by volunteering Muslims and guided by *ᶜulamā'*.

In the beginning it was a movement limited to a region around Delhi, the Mewat, but it quickly spread out through the entire subcontinent. After independence, that is since 1947 it covered almost the whole globe, practically all places where Muslims live. Its annual gatherings in India, Bangladesh and Pakistan attract between one and two million followers each. Some call it the largest living Islamic movement in the world, although in some countries, particularly in the Arabian Peninsula, its branches have not met with much success. They represent a purist, *Salafī* Islam inspired by the Dēoband school of thought. As is characteristic of Ḥanafī Islam in South Asia, they have not given up their Ṣūfī roots. In fact they use Ṣūfī rituals and references to help mobilise their followers. However religious dissenters such as Shīᶜa, the Ṣūfī-related Barēlwī, or the Aḥmadī come under enormous pressure either to stay clear of the movement or to convert.

My research project financed by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft aimed at pinpointing the parameters of the worldview of the Tablīghīs, the characteristics of their internal organization and daily behaviour. While I wrote and delivered some papers on certain aspects on other occasions, I will concentrate here on the ways the Tablīghīs approach the implementation of their social ideal – a society of the pious ancestors – in today's modern and globalised world of which Pakistan and India are very much part. The findings are based on structured qualitative interviews with select activists from two specific settings: Universities

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in India and Pakistan where they are particularly active and the annual gatherings – *ijtimāʿ* – in Bhopal (India) and Rāʾewind (Pakistan).

The Tablīghīs as reincarnation of the pious ancestors

Ilyās as a living ancestor

The literature of the movement painted him as a model of religious behaviour. More specifically, Ilyās himself was occasionally likened to the companions of Muḥammad (*ṣaḥāba*). His biographer S. A. H. A. Nadwī referred to a statement attributed to the *Shaykh al-Hind* Maḥmūd al-Ḥasan that when he saw Ilyās he was reminded of the *ṣaḥāba* (Nadwi 1983: 8). Discussing this comparison further, Maulānā Muftī Sayyid-ur-Raḥmān, in his introduction to the *Tablīghī* tract *Irshādāt wa Muktabāt*, stressed two aspects of the companions – their God-fearing attitude and their humane qualities. These were also present in Ilyās, whose mission included dismantling the system of oppression and externalism and erecting the building of the divine, spiritual kingdom (*Khilāfat*) (Farīdī 1997: 14). He also referred to prophetic dreams bestowing upon him legitimacy to lead the movement. Ilyās alleged to have received a 46th part of prophethood through a dream in which he was told to preach to the people like other Prophets (Ilyās 1989: Saying No. 50). Other adepts of the movements have played this down and emphasised that this was said to highlight the origin of the method of *daʿwa* from the Prophet and his companions. But as there was no Prophet to come after Muḥammad *tablīgh* was a charge for the whole *umma* (Masud 2000: xix, xx). Others called him a *mujaddid*, a renewer of the faith (Masud 2000: 93).

Recreating the early Islamic community

The whole pattern of activities of the Tablīghīs is structured by their desire to re-live the early Islamic community. It starts with the argument that the very practice of *Tablīghī* work was gleaned from the *ṣaḥāba* who were going round spreading the word, the message of the Prophet to other people in the way, the *Tablīghīs* do it.
In some ways one is reminded of a constantly ongoing passion play where historic idealised Islamic roles are re-enacted. It starts with the (1) travelling preaching group, the *jamāʿat*. They consist of 10 – 15 people who elect an Amīr from among their midst. Their behaviour is marked by egalitarian principles. Members are told to use only polite language, show respectful and courtly behaviour to fellow Muslims, obey the orders of the Amīr unquestioningly and do nothing without his explicit consent, whether to go to the local market or to go to the toilet. There are preaching groups for ordinary members and for the *Khawas*, dignitaries or other special groups of people, I heard of groups for academics (Professors), for industrialists, for landowners, for sportsmen and actors.
Another form of the model community is the (2) congregation, *ijtimāʿ*. They are held in regular intervals in places where the Tablīghīs have instituted local centres, *marākaz*, usually once a week. Their agenda is very uniform, starting with religious pep talk, *bayān*, after prayer, then follows a call for new adherents – *tashkīl*. They are also organised by provincial units, and by national centres. The latter ones attract attendants between one and two million each. Their programme is slightly different. There are also specialised congregations for students, for certain professional groups.
A third form is the (3) Tablīghī centre or *markaz*. They are established across the country at mosques sympathetic to the movement, usually Dēobandī. The most prominent example is the national Tablīghī Centre in Rāʾewind near Lahore in Pakistan, which is almost like a small holy city. They have departments there, Tablīghī groups arrive and depart from there, at any time there are several thousand inhabitants. There is a common kitchen offering free food. Tablīghīs sleep on their own mattresses. Life is like in a utopian community: you do every

thing together, praying, religious debate and education, sleeping, eating. Social and religious order is enforced by ordinary social pressure or by special groups, doing security service, seeing to it that for prayer people line up in regular rows, that visitors, and more so foreign visitors do not go stray but are guided. It is a guided community life in every aspect.
The principles by which community life is supposed to be guided are also gleaned from the ancestors. A *shūrā* or council is formed at these congregations to deliberate matters of administration of the centres organisation of these preaching tours, expenses. They hold open council in sessions, theoretically accessible by all. Shūrā members are volunteers, sometimes chosen by followers, but more often selected by elders or higher-standing bodies. The role of the Amīr is supposed to reflect the Islamic principles as well. He is similarly chosen or nominated. Obedience to the Amīr has to be absolute, at the same time it can be everybody's turn to become Amīr and try his hands on guiding the faithful. There is an Amīr for the travelling jamāʿat and for other units, although he is not always called such, sometimes Faisal, or decided.

How to organise pious life under today's conditions

<u>The regulars as today's ancestors</u>

Previous research on the Tablīghī Jamāʿat mainly relied on the hagiographic literature of its founders and ideological stalwarts. Other scholars described the external structure and commitments or did local studies, as in the Indian state of Orissa (Zainuddin 2002). Yet research has so far failed to penetrate the internal workings of the movement. A major finding of my research pertained to identifying the key role played by regulars in the movement. The regulars form a group of between 10 and 20 percent of all adherents, depending on the social and religious environment. They participate in most of the obligatory preaching tours and other commitments while others join them only occasionally. The regulars form an Islamist bureaucracy of astounding rigidity.

<u>Roaster of commitments</u>

Tablīghīs face an ascending number of commitments.

→ The **local mosque** scheme, or *masjidwār jamāʿat*; it requires what is sometimes called the five *aʿmāl* or good deeds:

- to attend all five prayer sessions at your local mosque which are used to fulfil specific functions for the movement;
- to form a council (*shūrā*) which meets daily, and to attend its sessions at one of the prayer times;
- to spend 2 ḥ hours daily of dedicated Tablīgh activities in meeting fellow-Muslims and inviting them on to the path of Allah in an individual capacity which is called 'meetings' (*mulaqāt*);
- to conduct two educational sessions (*taʿlīm*) daily by reading from the Zakarīya volumes (1994) for about 30 to 45 minutes, one at the mosque and one at home;
- to make two rounds of preaching walks (*gasht*) per week, around the immediate neighbourhood on one day – which is fixed for every local mosque – and around the adjacent mosque area on their fixed day.

→ The **travelling group** scheme, called *jamāʿat*, requiring to spend

- three days per months on a full preaching tour to another locality in your home region;
- 40 days per year, is called by the Ṣūfī term *chillā*, generally a longer period of withdrawal or seclusion for contemplation and prayer, which could be to other states or provinces of your country, but also to other countries;

- the 'grand *chillā*,' consisting of 3 consecutive *chillās*, once during your lifetime, which can also be a long tour of four consecutive months (120 days);
- for the ardent there are even longer *chillās*, mostly when going abroad, for a period like 7 months, or on foot across the country for a whole year. (Ḥasnī 1989: 772)

Rules for behaviour, the famous 6 points and other rules of the thumb

As a way of organising work the Tablīghī founders have formulated a number of multi-point rules, which are learnt like poems or religious texts. Of course, this is sometimes criticised as externalism or even heresy. It starts with the famous six points detailing the ground rules for the philosophy of the movement, demanding to focus attention on (1) the confession of faith by reciting the *kalima*, (2) praying regularly and correctly (*salāt*), (3) acquiring religious knowledge and remembering God (*ʿilm, ẕikr*), (4) respecting fellow-Muslims (*ikrām*), (5) reforming one's inner self through pure intentions (*niyyat*) and (6) spending time on the propagation of Islam through Tablīghī work, making oneself a servant of God (*nafr*). (Farīdī 1997: 114-116)

There are also the four things to do, to do less and to refrain from:

4 things to do: 1) *daʿwat*, 2) *taʿlīm*, 3) *namāz-o-ẕikr*, 4) *khidmat* (of oneself and of others, includes sleeping, eating);

4 things to do less (*chār bāteñ jō kam karnī hay*): 1) sleeping, 2) eating, 3) talking, 4) going outside the mosque (*masjid se bahir kam jānā*, includes going to toilet - for which you ask permission by raising your hand announcing '*taqāza*': Ghani);

4 things forbidden, not to get involved in: 1) to ask a question from anyone (*kis se sawal karnā*), 2) don't even ask in your heart (*dil kā sawāl*); 3) excessive expenditure (*isrāf*), 4) don't take anybody's things without permission (*kisi kī chīz isteʿmāl karnā baghair puchhē*).

There are some more four things not to do:

1) rejection of others (*tardīd*), 2) criticism of others (*tanqīd*), 3) competition with others (*taqābil – muqābilā*), 4) showing pride, regarding oneself superior (*tanqīṣ*). One cannot fail to note that they rhyme on the first letter, obviously for better memorization.

Religious incentives and spiritual career

All Tablīghī work starts with *targhīb*, motivational talk. The rewards for good deeds are a major element. It is important to show that we live only for the Hereafter – *ākhirat*. Life on earth is very short, people are reminded to think of how much longer the Hereafter lasts and that it is not worth to reap fruits from this live but rather have a good and comfortable life in the Hereafter (Nuʿmānī 1993: 18). Rewards or *sawāb* are counted on the basis of the traditions, *ḥadīth*, the Sunna of the Prophet, pertaining to good deeds, to prayer, to observing Islamic ritual in all possible details. You are encouraged to collect *sawāb*s like rebate points. For the regulars there is a spiritual career in the movement where your standing advances in accordance with the number and regularity of Tablīghī commitments you meet.

There is a status like *rozānā ke sāthī*, which means you are one of the trusted comrades. These are usually members of the district leadership or *ḥalqā kī jamāʿat*, those who agreed to give time to tablīgh work on a daily basis more then 4 hours (instead of the mandated 2 1/2 hours). You will have done your 3 *chillā*s, plus one *chillā* every year. The upper-standing *shūrā* or the Rāʾewind Markaz determine who comes under this category, workers may be willing, but will be selected. New ones are recruited at the inner-city *ḥalqā* level for replacement of those leaving for other assignments (proposed to *markaz* and endorsed there).

Time is a very important consideration for your spiritual career. The more time you take out from your worldly life and devote entirely and sincerely to *tablīgh* work, the nearer you are to

a wonderful life in the Hereafter. Activists count the percentage of their time they spent on *tablīgh* and they reach a point of elation when this surpasses 70 % or so, calculated on the basis of a 24-hour day, including also sleeping time.
Advances on this ladder qualify you also for the much prized foreign tours or *berūn tablīgh*. This is apparently a very attractive goal for which you strive hard to be admitted. Because even if you can collect the money to go to Australia you will be only allowed to do so on spiritual merit. You will have to pass through preparation camps and to withstand the scrutiny of controlling groups supervising preaching groups travelling to foreign lands.

Bureaucracy, leadership

This bureaucracy produces enormous social pressure on followers to conform to certain standards of behaviour. It challenges the self-representation of the movement that it is all fluid, flexible and a wholly voluntary effort. It is expressed in carefully designed layers of leadership. Decisions are taken in council, *shūrā*, dominated by the opinion of elders, the *buzurg*, who form a category of their own. Also veterans of the movements (*purāne sāthī*), not necessarily in age, but in terms of maturity and advancement in fulfilling most or all commitments regularly, enjoy a special status. They convene in special meetings and are trusted with selected tasks of leadership and guidance.
Leadership groups - *jamāʿat*s – are formed for supervision and controlling.
An Amīr heads the movement in various countries and on different levels. It is emphasised that his decisions have to be obeyed unquestioningly. At the same time he is obliged to seek consultation from experienced and trusted functionaries through the council system. Individual members are required to submit to the group and the *Amīr* especially while on tour. No contact with the outside world is permitted there without clearance by the *Amīr*, including making phone calls to relatives, or going for shopping to the local market. Even when going to the toilet the hand is raised and with the word '*taqāza*' permission is requested.
Paper work is usually denied to exist. Yet papers of various types are produced: letters from local units containing demands (*taqāza*) for preaching groups to be sent as they feel they are in need of strengthening Islam in their area; reporting is sometimes done in writing – *karguzārī*; the national leader sends out regular letters of instruction to local centres (*marākaz*) summarising the results of national *shūrā* meetings and containing advice; clearance for expenditure on matters such as extending praying and meeting facilities at the local mosque or centre is sought from and given by higher-standing councils in writing.

Changing people's life

It is the intention of the movement to change the outward behaviour of its adherents. For this reason the Prophetic traditions (*aḥādīth*) are studied and quoted. While on tour the *Tablīghīs* form study groups dealing with certain topics as covered by the traditions, such as sleeping, eating, or dressing. One could say there is a real cult in place to imitate the Prophet in minute detail. It is almost a competition in which nobody wants to be outdone. Its prime source material in the movement is the classical collection of traditions *Shamāʾil-i Muḥammadīya* by *al-Tirmizī*, which the *Tablīghī* founders translated and re-published with a commentary in Urdu (Ibn Sūrat Tirmizī [1925]).

Ritual Prophet-style

Judging from the principles announced by the movement the most important element of reformation is to attract people to regular worship in the proper and correct manner. In particular, the movement was sparked off by confronting the inability of the Meo tribes to properly say (and pronounce) the *kalima* (cf. Nuʿmānī 1993: 21), and to correctly and regularly perform prayer – *ṣalāt*. A whole book of the Zakarīya volume is devoted to the 'Virtues of *Ṣalāt*.' The guideline seems to be the ritual in the Ḥanafī tradition, although they seem to easily tolerate variations on the basis of other law schools.

Civility Prophet-style – Eating, Sleeping, Dressing

Conduct of lay preachers in preparation of tours and while on tour is subjected to close scrutiny by elders if it conforms to what they understand by traditional Islamic standards of behaviour. It is elaborated in every detail. A table cloth has to be used at all times to lay out food on the ground, one should not eat standing nor in a haste, always share with fellow preachers, not to be first to take food, not to take too much and not to take the last bid. Sleeping has to observe rules of modesty allegedly practiced by the Prophet such as keeping your knees together, not to sleep lying on the belly etc. Dressing follows local patterns, traditional clothing is preferred and western clothes, particularly jeans, are rejected by regulars, or at least while on tour. When questioned, however, more intellectually inclined *Tablīghīs* concede that in the end this should not decide about your piety. The dress of South Asian Muslims, baggy trousers and a loose shirt (*shalwār-qamīṣ*) has to be worn in such way that the trousers end over the ankle allegedly in the manner of the Prophet. Together with a mattress and simple cooking utensils, this becomes a kind of uniform by which they are easily recognisable. It bears an unmistakable ethnic flavour which distinguishes them also on foreign tours where they sometimes are known as 'Indian Muslims', for instance in some Arabic countries or in Indonesia.

Political life

Advice on political, social and economic activity was also inferred from the traditions. Again the model of the early Islamic community was quoted or emulated. In this process however it becomes clear that the *Tablīghīs* as much as everyone else in reformist Islam interpret the legacy of the pious ancestors selectively.

One such difficult issue is the relationship with the powers to be. Interestingly, Ilyās saw loyalism to government – judged in the colonial context – as an expression of opportunism and self-interest. He argued those people where loyal to none but to themselves. 'Their self-interest (*gharaẓ-parastī*) has to be replaced by interest in God (*khudā-parastī*) and an attempt has to be made to turn them into true loyalists of Allah and his religion...' (Nuʿmānī 1993: 11). Over time a more pragmatic attitude evolved. As Ilyās also gave advice that every follower should fulfil his role in life where God has put him, all service and business functions were eventually condoned if they did not directly contravene Islamic principles. There is separate advice and a special organisational effort to involve the elites. This is seen instrumental in making the movement successful. Therefore they distinguish today between ordinary preaching walks – *ʿumūmī gasht* – and those addressed to elite groups – *khuṣūṣī*. The *Khawāṣ* are addressed by specialised preaching groups for professors, medical doctors, landowners, industrialists etc.

Relationship with Christianity and the west in general was another thorny issue. Ilyās warned his followers not to imitate the Christians (Nuʿmānī 1993: 124). The next dangerous threat, which Islam faced after reformist Hindu preachers was, according to him, atheism (*ilḥād*) and materialism (*dahrīyat*) spread by the western government and its policies in colonial India. These threat perceptions were shaped by the fear that Muslims as a minority would loose their cultural and religious identity in colonial India under the onslaught of western educational and cultural policies and majority Hindu domination.

This perception changed after independence. A much more aggressive tone marked the position held by Ilyās' successor, Muhammad Yūsuf (1917-1965), second Amīr of the Indian Tablīghī Jamāʿat (Qāsimī 1994). He regarded a true Islamic society to be incompatible with Christian and Jewish values. Asked about the difference between an Islamic and an un-Islamic society (*moʿasharat-e jahilī*), he answered: 'One society is that which the Prophet brought with him and which the Sahaba had chosen. And another society is that which the

pre-Islamic (*jahilī*) peoples practiced the flagbearers of which are the Jews and the Christians. At the basis of the society of the Prophet are chastity/purity (*pākīzagi*), simplicity/sincerity (*sādagī*) and modesty/sense of shame (*ḥayā*), whereas at the basis of the society brought by the Jews and Christians are shamelessness, (*bē-ḥayā*), extravagance/excess (*asrāf*), living a good, pleasant life (*ta'aiyush*). Have you come to like the society of those who spilt the blood of your ancestors, have taken away your honour/chastity (*iṣmat*) and torn apart your countries and who now protect you giving help like you protect/look after chicken (to kill them)? …' (Ḥasnī 1989: 733)
As Ilyās was nowhere quoted as having attacked the Jews, Yūsuf's position betrayed the experience of the Arab-Israeli conflict over Palestine. In its reference to the *jahilīya* it reflected the more radical argument against the degeneration of the west held by Arab Salafī activists like Quṭb.

Still later, such criticism is heard nowhere on behalf of the Tablīghīs. Their leaders have become very careful today not to make any public argument against the west or Christianity. During the congregations, which the author visited, they emphasised the need of all *Tablīghī*s to reform themselves in order to change society and government. Their support for the *ṭalibān* government in Afghanistan was much veiled while they implicitly criticized excessive harshness and the use of force bringing a bad name to Islam. Their position on *jihād* was that its time had not yet come, as the *umma* was not prepared – a task with which the *Tablīghīs* see themselves fully occupied. To all their radical Islamist critics they answer that it was they, the *Tablīghīs*, who in the end would form the biggest army of all in the final *jihād* and come over the enemy like a flood.

Social life

Social relations and attitudes are also to be guided by the traditions of the early Islamic community. Gender segregation has to be observed. Pictures are banned in relation to cinema, television, and the Internet. But the implementation of these principles is voluntary, and mostly limited to the regulars. With a sufficient saturation level of principles of behaviour, most of my interview partners conceded, they stop going to the pictures, remove the television set from their households, although condoning that children go watching television with the neighbours, and avoid entertainment-related content on the Internet. Yet the use of the Internet itself is accepted and supported. A clear majority of activists from the University contexts looked at come from faculties with a technical, mechanical, or engineering background, also mathematics, statistics and computer-related. Very few were members of social science faculties.

Marriage life is to be guided by Islamic reformist principles. Several informants related stories how participation in *Tablīgh* work helped alleviate their marriage woes. In the beginning they would have a difficult family life, their wife, usually living with his parents would constantly quarrel with the informant's mother, wife and children would feel neglected by his *tablīgh* duties. When the wife started sharing his passion for this work, 'miraculous' change would take place. She, although often (i.e. among the university informants) highly educated, would start observing *parda*; take interest in receiving religious education; stop quarrelling with her mother-in-law; the son would join *tablīgh* groups and stop listening to 'cheap' western music.
Tablīghī boys increasingly look for girls to marry from families with a history of involvement in *tablīgh* work. They would ask teachers and elders in the *Tablīghī* movement for advice, names of suitable families with girls in the right age. This reflects the very typical way of Southasian match-making. This also threatens to turn the *Tablīghīs* into an endogamous sect, something, which the leaders of the movement fear to happen. They want to keep the movement open for all Muslims. Therefore a standard ideological advice is for Tablīghī boys

to take 'on' a girl educated in the western tradition and wearing jeans. If he can convert her, he can give *daʿwa* to anyone, meaning proselytise.
Tablīghī boys are welcome marriage partners for South Asian Muslims, as they would not ask for bride money, the scourge of families with many daughters. They would also shun huge expenditure on the marriage feast and go for a 'reformed' wedding. A growingly popular craze among the ardent *Tablīghī* boys is to celebrate marriage at the local *Tablīghī* centre, and better still, at the congregation, the annual *ijtimāʿ* where prominent Tablīghī elders in a public ceremony perform hundreds of marriages. The registration of the marriage is done in advance at the local *qāẓīyat*. The girl is represented by her guardian - *maḥram*, as she is not allowed to participated in the *Tablīghī* meeting.

Conclusions

Islamic principles of the ancestors' life are re-interpreted and remoulded according to the internal culture of the movement. It presents the actual adaptation of the life of the ancestors as a counterculture project set against the dominating westernised largely secular state and polity.
The movement adapts itself to modernity by developing a spiritual bureaucracy, spiritual career options. It has to deal with modern social and cultural features such as TV, Cinema, Computer. The *TJ* attempts to inculcate a value-based, ritual-laden pious life-style.
The resultant re-Islamisation has broad and diverse consequences, for some it is reinvigorating, which may also be the case for radicals and militants, for others it is debilitating, leading them to the neglect of and withdrawal from the world.
But more and more, in a countries like Pakistan and India where it is a mass movement, it takes on features of the social and political mainstream. It is instrumentalised as a forum to solve social and political issues though not necessarily by intent or with the consent of the leadership. The movement is facing problems of growth. It has outgrown the parameters of a counterculture movement where the model of the pious ancestors can challenge the ruling culture of imperfect and distorted capitalism, of a soulless and irreligious society. May be it has reached its apogee already. It is not clear if it is passing into decline from here or will transform to take on more active forms of remoulding Muslim lives today.

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