

# Islamic Revival and Emergence of Tablighi Jama'at in India

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**Abstract:** - *Islah (reform) and tajdid (revival) are religious imperatives that aim to return Islamic faith, its texts, principles, methodologies, understanding and inference to their original pristine state and remove any properties that effaced their essence and disfigured their reality. During the course of Muslim history a rich revivalist tradition expressed itself in the lives and teachings of individual reformers and in the activities of a host of movements. From the eighteenth century great movements of revival and reform swept throughout the Muslim world to halt the further decline. In the contemporary period Tablighi Jama'at is the most popular reform movement in the Islamic world on the whole. Tablighi Jama'at, a religious movement, was instituted in 1926 by Muhammad Ilyas al-Kandhlawi in India. The movement primarily aims at spiritual reformation by working at the grass root level, reaching out to Muslims across all social and economic spectra to bring them closer to Islam. This paper attempts to examine the Tablighi Jama'at in the context of Islamic revivalism and in order to better understand this movement a historical emergence of this movement is important.*

**Keywords:** - *Islam, Revival, India, Muhammad Ilyas, Tablighi Jama'at*

## Introduction

Islam possesses a tradition of revival (Tajdid) and reform (Islah) right from its earliest days. They are fundamental components of Islam's world view, rooted in the Qur'an and Sunnah of the Prophet (SAW). The responsibility of rejuvenating the Muslim community and returning it to the path of Islam afresh has been obviously handed down to individuals within the community in the declaration of the Prophet (SAW) narrated by Hazrat Abu Hurirah (R.A) in Sunan Abu Dawud.

إن الله يبعث لهذه الأمة على رأس كل مائة سنة من يجدد لها دينها

“Allah will raise at the head of each century such people for this ummah who will revive its religion for it.”

This suggests that the Muslim community after the Prophet (SAW) will go through the periods of stagnation and degeneration. This Hadith also contain an assurance that the community will certainly be revived and put back on track. While explaining this Hadith Maulana Maududi says, “the

Pronoun ‘mun’ in Arabic is used both for singular and plural numbers and therefore may imply a Single person, a group of persons or even movement or organization of people who will revive.” (Maulana Abul A'la Mawdudi. 1975. P. 35).

Muslims responded to what was regarded as decline of faith and practice. As such a rich revivalist tradition expressed itself in the lives and teachings of individual reformers and in the activities of a host of movements. From the eighteenth century great movements of revival and reform swept throughout the Muslim world to halt the further decline. The prominent ones being: Wahabi movement (founded by Muhammad bin Abdul wahab of Najid) of Saudi Arabia, Jama'at-i-Islami (founded by Maulana Abul A'la Mawdudi of India in 1941) of Indo-Pak sub-continent, and Ikhwan-ul-Muslimeen (founded by Hasan al-Banna in 1928) of Egypt. In each case these movements had indigenous origins but often received stimuli from movements elsewhere. From the eighteenth century the sub-continent was the centre of key Islamic movements of revival and influence with the

reformers and thinkers like Shah Waliullah, Sayyid Ahmad Khan, Ashraf Ali Thanavi, Ahmad Raza Khan Barelwi, Abul Kalam Azad, Mohammad Iqbal, and Maulana Maududi at the forefront. These Islamic stalwarts found some of their strongest manifestations in the reformism of the school of Deoband, the radical reformism of the Ahl-i-Hadith, the revival of traditionalism of the Barelwis, the modernism of Aligrah and the Islamism of the Jama'at Islami. Among them Tablighi Jama'at has emerged as the most popular grassroots Islamic movement of Indo-Pak sub-continent and a prominent transnational Islamic revivalist movement in the contemporary Muslim World. (Mumtaz Ahmad. 2004. P. 165). Other significant reformative and revival movements also emerged from South Asia during nineteenth and twentieth century. The Tablighi Jama'at is one of the major Islamic movements of twentieth century. They have many followers and serious influence even outside the subcontinent. Indeed, there is serious claim that the Tablighi Jama'at is the most popular reform movement in the Islamic world on the whole.

### **Emergence of Tablighi Jama'at**

Tablighi Jama'at, a religious movement, was instituted in 1926 by Muhammad Ilyas al-Kandhlawi in India. The movement primarily aims at spiritual reformation by working at the grass root level, reaching out to Muslims across all social and economic spectra to bring them closer to Islam. It emerged as an offshoot of the Deobandi movement. Tablighi Jama'at maintains a non-affiliating stance in the matters of politics and Fiqh (Muslim jurisprudence) so as to eschew the controversies. Although, Tablighi Jama'at emerged out of the Deobandi sub-school in the Hanafi Fiqh, no particular interpretation of Islam has been endorsed since the beginning of the movement. Tablighi Jama'at has largely avoided electronic media and has emphasized a personal communication for proselytizing. The teachings of Tablighi Jama'at are mainly rudimentary and the Six Principles put forward by Muhammad Ilyas form the basis. It was also a continuation of the broader trend of Islamic revival in India in the wake of the collapse of

Muslim political power and the consolidation of the British rule.

The emergence of Tablighi Jama'at coincided closely with the rise of Hindu proselytizing movements that launched massive efforts in the early twentieth century to reconvert Hindus, converted to Islam and Christianity. Notable among these Hindu revivalist movements were Shuddhi (purification) and Sangathan (consolidation) movements. The Tablighi movement aimed to reaffirm Muslim religio-cultural identity of borderline Muslims who still practiced customs and religious rites connected with Hinduism. The Tablighi Jama'at emerged as a direct response to the rise of aggressive Hindu proselytizing movements of Shuddhi and Sangathan, as such Maulana Ilyas, the founder of the Tablighi Jama'at, believed that only a grassroots Islamic religious movement could purify the borderline Muslims from their Hindu accretions and educate them about their beliefs and rituals in order to save them from becoming easy prey to the Hindu proselytizers. (Ibid. P. 166).

Tablighi Jama'at was formally launched in 1926 from Nizamuddin, which later became the movement's international headquarter. The Tablighi Jama'at originated in Mewat, a Gangetic plateau in North India inhabited by Rajput tribes known as Meos. When Maulana Ilyas started this religious movement in Mewat, most Meos were Muslims in name only.

Maulana Muhammad Ilyas was of the view that the cause of irreligiousness among Muslims was due to lack of direct interaction of the 'Ulama with masses. Realizing its imperativeness he decided to make direct contact with common masses. As the masses were not aware of their disease so surely they will not approach the 'Ulama and specialists, as such the initiative has to come from 'Ulama. That is why Maulana Ilyas emphasised on making direct contact with common Muslims to cultivate and nourish imaan in their hearts. The 'Ulama were to have a special place in the scheme of things as envisioned Maulana Ilyas. (Ubaidullah Fahad Falahi. 1996. P. 305).

Maulana Ilyas was himself a devoted disciple of the leading Deobandi 'Ulama and committed to popularize their teachings. He believed that the methods of communication that they adopted—setting up dini madaris (religious schools), issuing fatwa or writing scholarly tomes—could hardly take them beyond a small, selected circle. Ilyas's own contribution lay here, in devising a novel method of Tabligh to spread Deobandi message to wider audience. (Ibid. P. 67). As he himself would often stress, his aim was to spread the teachings of his spiritual preceptor, the leading Deobandi 'Alim Ashraf 'Ali Thanaviؒ —hailed by many as the mujaddid (renewer of the Faith) of the age—but by using different methods. (Arshid ul-Qadri. P. 21). In a talk with Maulana Ataullah Shah Bukhari, during his last illness, the Maulana expressed his views in these words:

“In the beginning, when I taught in the Madrasah, a large number of pupils came to study, and there were many good and promising boys among them. I thought that the net result of the time and energy I spent on them could only be that they would be end up being Molvis and 'Ulama, and then take to professions that were generally accepted during those days. Some of them would learn the Unani system of medicine and open their clinics, some would pass the university examinations and become teachers in schools and colleges, and some would have to rest content with serving as Molvis in the Madaris. That was all I, thereupon, lost interest in teaching in the Madaris...”

“Then a time came when my spiritual mentor gave me the permission to teach Dhikr to the seekers of Truth and I also felt inclined towards it. By the grace of God, those under my instruction made such a rapid progress that even I was surprised. With it I also started thinking what it all was and where would it lead to. At the most, some men of spiritual merit would be produced and people would come to them with requests to invoke Divine favour on their behalf to win a law-suit, or give them an amulet for having children. Ultimately, I lost interest in it as well, and resolved that the proper use of the capabilities God had endowed me with were to be employed for the same purpose for which the Holy

Prophet had employed his own capabilities, i.e. for leading the bondsman of the Lord, specially the heedless and the negligent, towards Him and giving rise to the practice of striving to the utmost, even to the extent of sacrificing one's life, for the glory of the Word of God. This, solely, is our endeavour, and this is all that I say to everyone. If this work is seriously undertaken, a thousand times more Madaris and Sufi-lodges will get established automatically, or rather, every Muslim will become a Madrasah and a Khanqah, and the boon and blessing brought by the sacred Prophet will come to be distributed at the level of the common man.” (Abul Hasan Ali Nadvi. 2006. PP. 221-222 ).

### **Tablighi Jama'at and Revival of D'awah**

Maulana Ilyas considered that the Da'wah (means inviting people towards Islamic faith and practice) was the mission of all the Messengers (Al-Qur'an. 2:213) and the last Messenger of Allah, Muhammad (SAW), also has been commanded to proclaim the mission, which has been revealed to him from his Lord. This command is so serious that the fulfillment of his mission depends upon the propagation of it.

It has been established on the authority of the text of the Holy Qur'an and authentic Traditions that the Muslim Ummah, following the example of the Holy Prophet, has been deputed by Allah to convey His message to all nations of the world. As a matter of fact, this Ummah was created and sent out to the world with the purpose of fulfilling the obligations of D'awah, Tabligh (propagation of the message of Allah) and amr bil ma'roof wa nahi 'anil munkar (enjoining the Good and forbidding the evil). The following verse elucidates the fact:

“You are indeed the best community that has ever been brought forth for (the good of) Mankind: you enjoin the doing of what is right and forbid the doing of what is wrong....” (Al-Qur'an. 3:110).

This verse clearly states that the Muslim Ummah has been raised for the guidance of all other communities. The purpose of this Ummah's creation is that it should serve all the other nations in the sense that it should enjoin them to do good deeds, propagate good actions and forbid what is

wrong. Now, if this Ummah neglects this duty, it will not be fulfilling the function for which it was raised.

In Maulana Ilyas's view, this Ummah has been given special status (Ummat-o-Wasat, Khar-i-Ummah, Ummat-o-Wahid) over all other nations, not because of the Salah, Zakāt, Hajj, Saum or any other rituals, but for having assigned to perform the task of D'awah. This practice, according to him, was very popular in the Prophet's period. The Prophet himself used to send out groups for preaching and everyone who had sworn allegiance to him did the same with enthusiasm.

Emphasizing the importance of Da'wah in Muslim Ummah, Syed Sulyman Nadvi writes:

“A wisely-planned (system of) D'awah and Tabligh, “amr bil ma'roof wa nahi 'anil munkar” is the backbone of the entire body of Islam. It is D'awah on which depend the foundation, strength, expansion and success of Islam. I believe that, in these days, D'awah is more needed than it was in any time in the past; and in contrast with converting the non-Muslims to Islamic Faith, this is more important to make Muslims as Muslim, i.e., making effort on those who are Muslims in name or by nationality so that they become true and dutiful Muslims. In the light of the present-day religious state of Muslims, it becomes the duty of every Muslim to raise the cry of the Holy Qur'an: “O you, who believe, do believe in Allah and His Messenger and in the Book” with all force and potential. This demands that we go about from city to city, village to village, and from door to door, persuading those who are Muslims in name to become true Muslims by faith and by practice”. (Syed Sulaiman Nadvi. 1947. P. 25). The imperativeness of D'awah has been emphasized by the predecessors also. Maulana Ilyas has said, if you don't become dā'i, you will surely become mad'uu. (Ibid. P. 26).

Maulana Ilyas not only reformed the work of Tabligh but also revived the method (i.e., going door to door, village to village and city to city with the message of Islam as Sahāba did) that was completely different from other existing revival movements around the world. He was of the view

that Tabligh is the lifeblood of Islam and in order to revive it we will have to adopt the exact methods and ways which are laid down and were demonstrated by the Holy Prophet himself when he reformed the pagan Arabs. In this very connection, Hadhrat Imam Malik said: “Reformation of the last (part) of this Ummah will not be possible except by adopting the method which was used in the beginning by Holy Prophet.” (Maulana Ehtisham-ul Hasan Kandahawi. P. 25).

Hailing the fresh approach to d'awah work of Maulana Ilyas, the founder of Jama'at-i-Islami Maulana Maududi observes that the most reformative movements of contemporary era have restricted their method of Tabligh—to publish books, establish Madaris, having their own journals or magazines or newspapers or flags etc. and using electronic media. Through these methods, according to Maulana Maududi, they did not remain sincere and lead to show off their work. The methodology used by these reform movements became inadequate to reform the Muslims, because they only used modern tools for Tabligh and neglected the prophetic model and failed to show up the predictable results over a long period of time. It was Maulana Ilyas who did this charismatic work of 'revival of d'awah' which later also served as key for Talighi Jama'at to expanse rapidly all over world. (Maulana Maududi. 1939. P. 09). In this connection, Nadvi observed:

“Within a short period of time this D'awah movement spreads all over India. It affected and touched the heart and mind of people across the sections of society. What was the driving force behind this speedy success of D'awah? It was not due to any advertisement in newspapers, any collection of money from public or government, any pamphlet, banner, poster or any propaganda means. The force behind this phenomenal success was firstly “its D'awah methodology was very close to the D'awah and reformation methods adopted at initial period of Islam. Secondly “The Ikhlas (sincerity of intention) in D'awah worker was exhibiting glimpse of the era of Salaf-us-sālehin period (early generation of Muslims) that sacrificed in the path of D'awah only to please the Almighty.

They bore all difficulties with patience and smile.” (Maulana Manzoor Noomani. P. 29).

### **Tablighi Jama'at and Revitalization of Faith (Yaqin)**

Maulana Ilyas realized that the very foundations upon which the superstructure was to be raised were crumbling among the Muslims and even their belief in the fundamental articles of Faith was weakening day by day. In Maulana's own words:

“The fundamental doctrines have ceased to be fundamental and lost the power to sustain and regulate the subsidiary doctrines”. (Abul Hasan Ali Nadvi. P. 130)

Therefore the correct procedure of reformation is that firstly the erroneous yaqeen should be uprooted from the hearts by means of Lā ilāha, and then, through Illallāh, correct yaqeen upon Allah should be set— that Allah is the only doer. Its example is like that of a teacher who instructs his pupils to first wash away the tablet and then write the lesson on it. In Ilyas's easier words:” what is Tabligh? Tabligh is the effort of sending every word of deen to the hearts”.

Maulana Ilyas aimed to recapitulate the alleged piety and practice of Muhammad (SAW) and his Companions in the 7th century AD, and as such was concerned not just with Hindu or Christian inroads into the Muslim community but with stemming the rising tide of westernization and secularization. Unlike other contemporary Islamic renewers, Ilyas did not believe that Islam could be reconciled with Western science, technology and political ideologies. He believed that through the onslaught of western imperialism (political as well as intellectual), the thing which suffered most in Muslims, was their imān. Although today Muslim lands had achieved the political independence from west but ideologically and intellectually they are still the slaves of western culture and philosophy and this dominance is stronger than political. This western ideology and philosophy is based on atheism, godlessness and materialism and since its inception is in conflict with religion. The dominance of western culture and philosophical thought is so pervasive and universal that even the

point of view of such people who are fighting against it are unconsciously influenced by west. Indeed, they are themselves to great extent western in their approach and method and even in their purported ideology. (Dr. Asrar Ahmad. 2009. P. 18).

The emphasis of most Islamic movements is more social and political than religious. They are more 'this-worldly' than 'other-worldly'. They are distinguished from other political and economic movements only in holding the Islamic way of life as a better solution to human problems than the systems of life enunciated by capitalistic democracy or communism. Therefore it is imperative for the intelligentsia of Muslim Ummah to strive that a forceful movement should be launched for reviving and revitalizing the imān in the whole Ummah.

Today majority of Muslims have strayed away from Islam. They remained Muslims only by name and in practical life closely resemble with Ayam-ul Arab. In between, the wind of westernization has made their faith ambiguous. For the reformation and second renaissance of Islam and Muslim Ummah, we have to follow the footsteps of last Prophet. The prophet in his life went through different stages and these stages are important for Islamic movement to reform Muslim Ummah once again. We firmly believe that this methodological progression of the prophet's life is divinely directed and Allah has guided his prophet throughout. (Maulana Manzoor Noomani. P. 45). They were planned by Allah so that they would be guidance for us, in our attempts to establish Islam again. So it is very important for us to see the stages the prophet went through and the progression of his Da'wah. In the initial stages, rather during entire Makkan period (comprising of thirteen years), the whole emphasis was given on fundamental of Islam i.e., imān (imān billah, imān bil-risalah and imān bil-akhirah). The thirteen years of Makkan period set the foundation upon which the structure of Madinian state and society was based. This point was very aptly conveyed in a statement of the Prophet's companion, Ibn Abbas: “we first learned imān and then we learned the Qur'an”.

In order to reform the Muslims, who do not even know the details of the subject of Kalimah-e-

Shahādat, i.e., the things which constitute the very foundation of Islam; it would be a deadly mistake to reform the upper structure while ignoring the basic elements of faith. Ilyas maintained that the common and wide-spread disease of the Muslims of the age was their un-wanted (spiritual emptiness) and senselessness about deen. People have misunderstood this situation and consider that since imān is already present, therefore working on those things which come after iman is necessary, whereas the actual need is the building of iman from the beginning. He used to say:

“Our work is based upon making an effort on the foundation of deen. Our movement is, in reality, the movement of Imān. But, whatever collective efforts of deen are commonly being made nowadays, their workers and pioneers, in the belief that this foundation (i.e., imān) is present, work for raising the upper-structure of Ummah. So, they concentrate their attention and resources on building upon this (supposed) foundation. Whereas to us, the foremost requirement of the Ummah is only that, at first, the light of true imān should enter its hearts.”(Ibid. P. 53).

Therefore the real task in front of Ummah is reviving the faith and basic values of Islam. For second renaissance of Islam, Abul Hasan Ali Nadvi also advocates that, “for this substantial job, the first and major thing which Muslim Ummah need to do, is to revive the imān of Muslims. Islam is religion for all times and Muslims did not require new religion, new prophet or new Shari‘ah rather they need to revive their imān because the new challenges, riots, powers cannot be fortified with weaker faith.” (Abul Hasan Ali Nadvi. 1992. P. 289). The Tablighi movement is ideally suited to meet the demand of time and repel the mounting challenge of disbelief and irreligiousness. The present day materialists and irreligious movements make a direct appeal to the common masses and sedulously sow the seed of doubts among them. Ideological debates, religious literature and plans and activities that are confined to the elite and do not involve the common man cannot arrest the progress of apostasy and materialism. Only a religious movement which begins at the grassroot

and goes straight to the labourer’s cottage and farmer’s field and ignores no section of the society can provide an effective answer to the menace of irreligiousness. In one of his letters Maulana Ilyas wrote:

“A nation, whose decline in religion has dropped deep down even from the mere wording of Lā ilāha illallāh, how is the correction of outward of the nation possible without correcting its foundation? I therefore have completely eliminated thinking on intermediate and higher stages. When the opening gets corrected and people start going on the right track, they can reach the ends even by themselves. Thinking of ends, when the beginning is wrong, is but the slavery of the passion and desires, and is like building castle in the air.....” (Maulana Manzoor Numani. P. 102).

It was the weak or a loss of faith at an individual level which made Maulana Ilyas argue that Islamic revivalism was first and foremost about purifying and intensifying individual faith in Islam, which led him to concentrate on the work of D‘awah which eventually became a movement—Tablighi Jama‘at. It is popular that the Tablighi Jama‘at is concerned with only Kalimah and prayer. In reality, it is a movement of faith and conviction; faith in the unseen realities, faith in Allah. Maulana Ilyas used to say, “I never even thought of suggesting any name and if I would suggest any name for this then it would have been Tahreeki Imān.” (Nadvi. P. 220).

### **Conclusion**

Tablighi Jama‘at has emerged as largest and most influential Trans-national Islamic movement of the contemporary times. Today the Jama‘at has followers all over the world. Its annual international conferences in Raiwind (Lahore, Pakistan), Tongi (Bangladesh), and Bhopal (India) attract millions of people. In fact, in recent years the Raiwind annual conference has become the second largest religious congregation of the Muslims after Hajj. The Tablighi Jama‘at organizes huge gatherings every year without any advertisement, hand bills or posters and without making any announcement on loudspeakers. Hundreds and thousands of people

involve themselves in this work but no magazine is issued to fetch them together, to lure them or to give them instructions. Revitalization of faith, D'awah methodology and role of mosques are the key factors of Tablighi Jama'at that separates it from other Islamic movements of the contemporary era. It is generally assumed that Tablighi Jama'at is restricted to Kalimah and Prayer. Factually, it is a movement of faith and conviction; faith in unseen realities, faith in God. The method adopted by Maulana Ilyas was simple. Organizing Tablighi tours for specific periods served as the training platform in multi-dimensional way. This Tablighi method has worked very well. Many who were steeped in ignorance have reformed their lives in its wake. They do not rest content at their personal reform but zealously reform others as well to bring them to the same straight path which they discovered for themselves. Another feature peculiar to Tablighi is that, despite the change in leadership, its work has not slackened since its inception; rather it is on the rise. The success of Tablighi Jama'at is also because, from the time of Maulana Ilyas till this date, it does not changed much in pattern and methodology unlike other movements.

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