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On the Latent Political Functions in the Social Role of *Jama'at-e-Tabligh*

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Abstract: The role of religion in communal social life and its influence on politics have demonstrated a consistent and indispensable manifestation throughout various periods of social development in the South Asian Subcontinent. A century ago, amid the reconfiguration of power structures in the South Asian Subcontinent, the establishment of *Jama'at-e-Tabligh/Tablighi Jama'at* endowed Muslim communities with a new social role. This initiative represented both a dismantling and a reestablishment of South Asia's rigid social hierarchy within a religious framework. It served as a timely response to addressing social fragmentation within Muslim societies following the formation of nation-states, while also balancing the elite-dominated party politics prevalent in post-colonial nation-building across the region. Implicit in these efforts of *Jama'at-e-Tabligh* was a political function aimed at reconciling individual—collective relationship—despite its ostensibly non-political nature. This paper is based on the research of the development of the existing historical context, through the induction of the characteristics of its development path, tries to explore the political potential contained in the organizational activities that constitute the social facts, and to further reveals the characteristics and development process of Islam in contemporary South Asia. It provides a basic research for in-depth understanding of the dynamics of South Asia, as well as the religious and political ecology.

Keywords: *Jama'at-e-Tabligh/Tablighi Jama'at* South Asia Politico-religious relationship

1. Introduction

Entering the 21st century, we have witnessed the expansion of *Jama'at-e-Tabligh* worldwide and the election of President Trump by vast numbers of blue-collar workers in the United States. The growth of *Jama'at-e-Tabligh* may be regarded as an organizational representation—in terms of horizontal scale and breadth—within economically underdeveloped societies, while Trump's election serves as an individual case of vertical political ascension in a developed economy. Despite their apparent dissimilarity, these two phenomena convey the implicit grievances of marginalized majorities, whose lived realities are often overlooked by mainstream media and elite educational narratives.

Jama'at-e-Tabligh or *Tablighi Jama'at* was established in 1926 in the north-central region of the South Asian Subcontinent and has become one of the most influential non-political Islamic organizations within a century. The establishment of it may be examined through both external and internal factors affecting the Muslim community. On the one hand, the *Shuddhi* (Purification) Movement launched by the Hindu reformist organization *Arya Samaj* actively reconverted many indigenous groups who had previously embraced Islam back into the Hindu fold. On the other hand, a profound social chasm had long existed between Muslim rulers and the grassroots Muslim population during the imperial era, with minimal interaction between them in South Asia. The rise of nationalist sentiments and party politics compelled religious identity to assume a primary role in democratic political movements, thereby creating an urgent need for unity within the previously fragmented Muslim community in South Asia. Similar to the emergence of the *Shuddhi* Movement, the formation of *Tablighi Jama'at* was driven not only by cultural and religious imperatives but also by political necessity^[1]. During critical historical periods, religious organizations offer their followers not merely pursuits of faith and rituals, but also—and more significantly—provide communal bonds and a sense of social belonging amid societal upheavals. They assist their adherents in reestablishing connections with the reconfigured broader society, and even with the world at large. As observed by Hefner, “Modernization involved the incorporation of little-community villagers into a macro-world of unfamiliar peoples, territories, and customs, thereby provoking a massive crisis of religious identity. In the new context, the local gods and spirits of the traditional cosmos no longer had a sufficiently broad explanatory scope. Religion, as a result, was redefined in more global terms, sufficiently generalized to be widely applicable within this broader social horizon.”^[2]

The founder of *Tablighi Jama'at*, Ilyas, built the organization upon traditional ideologies and methods while devising strategies adapted to the changing times. His approach was tailored both to mobilize and develop the vast Muslim

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population and to resonate with individuals within it, thereby breaking away from the historically elite-dominated structure of Muslim communities and fostering a distinctive model of mass participation. This aligned with the global trend of communal politics maturing in the late nineteenth century, which successfully consolidated otherwise loose and unstructured Muslim masses while resisting encroachments from Hindu groups. Nonetheless, it cannot be denied that, a century after its establishment, the movement highlights the enduring challenges of nation-state building in South Asia and the inevitable rise of religious nationalism.

Advocating pure religious practice, *Jama'at-e-Tabligh* now operates in nearly two hundred countries and regions and claims tens of millions of adherents globally. The tension between its professed apolitical stance and its de facto social functions illuminates the dynamic interplay between “macro-politics” and “micro-politics” within contemporary secular societies. Furthermore, the diverse social identities of its members underscore the complex, often contradictory, relationship between individual political attitudes and religious commitments. For scholars of South Asian Studies, analyzing the evolving religion-politics nexus across different periods is essential to understanding the region's developmental contradictions and aspirations. It also provides a critical framework for externally examining its heterogeneous cultures and societies. By tracing the developmental trajectory of *Tablighi Jama'at*, this paper explores the latent political functions embedded within its organizational activities—functions that constitute significant social facts. Ultimately, it aims to elucidate underlying social structures and contradictions in South Asian nations and to map the evolving role of Islam in contemporary South Asian society.

2. Literature review

Research on *Jama'at-e-Tabligh* predominantly emerged in the late twentieth century, largely comprising qualitative studies conducted by scholars from South Asia or those specializing in religious studies. These works focused extensively on the organization's attributes and activities, primarily exploring its religious nature, sectarian affiliations, and leadership etc. Extended research often touched upon historical and social conditions in the north-central South Asian Subcontinent during the late colonial period, including topics such as the *Khilafat* Movement, peasant uprisings, and Hindu social reform movements. The cataclysmic events of September 11 dramatically intensified scholarly interest in *Jama'at-e-Tabligh*, marking a peak in related research. In the subsequent two decades, the focus of most studies shifted toward the global propagation of *Jama'at-e-Tabligh*, particularly its expansion and influence in Southeast Asia, as well as its perceived connections to extremism and terrorism.

In recent years, significant research findings have predominantly come from scholars outside South Asia. For instance, Jan A. Ali and Faroque Amin from the Centre for Religious and Social Research at Western Sydney University published a comparative study in 2020 titled “*Jama'at-e-Islami and Tablighi Jama'at: A Comparative Study of Islamic Revivalist Movements*”^[3], starting from the perspective of Islamic revivalism, the study compares the organizational models and social roles of *Tablighi Jama'at* and *Jama'at-e-Islami*, arguing that Muslim movements active worldwide are responses to Westernization, secularization, and modernization, each exerting varying degrees of influence on policy-making and political landscapes in their respective countries and regions. In 2019, Sukron Ma'mun published a text-based study titled “*Tablighi Jama'at: An Islamic Revivalist Movement and Radicalism Issues*”^[4], which synthesizes and analyzes recent research findings, categorizing and comparing the viewpoints of major scholars. To some extent, the author's perspective represents the mainstream view among Western scholars: that *Tablighi Jama'at* is an Islamic revivalist movement, though its relationship with radicalism and terrorism requires cautious examination^[5].

Additionally, scholars such as historian Barbara D. Metcalf position *Tablighi Jama'at* as a representative of Islamic revivalist movements, focusing particularly on its impact on Western civilization and social security. French scholar Olivier Roy argues that *Tablighi Jama'at* emphasizes solely correcting Muslims' actions, attitudes, and habits, distinguishing it from other political and violent Islamic movements, and defines it as a “neo-fundamentalist” movement. On this point, Metcalf and Roy share relatively consistent views. However, in her analysis of *Tablighi Jama'at*'s influence on the West, Metcalf suggests that the *Deobandi* movement may not be as directly relevant to Western contexts as commonly perceived^[6].

Among South Asian scholars, Indian researcher Yoginder Sikand, in his doctoral dissertation and other academic works, meticulously examined the historical, geographical, and socio-cultural context in which *Tablighi Jama'at* emerged. Through field surveys, he interviewed participants of the organization across different age groups and professional backgrounds, conducting detailed research on its content, practices across time and regional development. His work provides rich material for the further exploration of this study. However, Sikand's research perspective does not transcend the boundaries of mainstream viewpoints in English-language studies, similarly framing *Tablighi Jama'at* as a representative of Islamic revivalist movements and tending to categorize it as a Sufi-oriented practice strictly centered on Islamic doctrines and regulations. Pakistani scholar Muhammad Amir Rana, building on studies by

researchers from various countries and combining his observations and understanding of *Tablighi Jama'at* within Pakistan, proposed that “the best response of *Tablighi Jama'at* to the West lies in taking measures at a broader ideological level rather than at the organizational level”^[7]. In China, representative research includes Qian Xuemei’s 2009 study titled “A Study on *Tablighi Jama'at*”^[8].

3. The power restructuring in post-colonial South Asian societies

During the transformative era of late colonialism, when autonomy was pursued through party politics, the vast ordinary populace became targets of political solicitation and mobilization. This period necessitated a redefinition of the relationship between individual and collective. In this context of social transformation, religious authorities primarily engaged in organizational mobilization through two distinct approaches: the mass line exemplified by *Tablighi Jama'at*, and the political party line represented by *Jama'at-e-Islami*. *Tablighi Jama'at*'s apolitical stance and pragmatic missionary methods provided a tranquil alternative for masses disoriented by intense political recruitment. By inviting (*dghawat*) people through comprehensible, actionable, and personally meaningful methods, the organization offered accessible theological frameworks alongside opportunities for individual agency. In the struggles for political power and social resources that followed independence and nation-building, Islam represented the sole source of hope for social justice and communal belonging for the vast and dispossessed Muslim masses^[9]. As Freitag noted, Populist politics among South Asian Muslims entailed the use and manipulation of a powerful, shared symbolic language, one that served an abstract notion of community^[10].

Furthermore, in the historical process, the internal contradictions within the South Asian Muslim community have primarily manifested among various sects, between the *ulama* (elite) and ordinary believers, and between the *ulama* (political parties) and the government. The mass line approach adopted by *Tablighi Jama'at* circumvented these traditional contradictions embedded in the social structure, thereby harmonizing and consolidating the entire community. Meanwhile, the rapid expansion of post-independence party politics and the assertive advancement of Western political models left many local intellectuals in a state of profound disquiet. Within this context, *Tablighi Jama'at* provided an organizational sanctuary insulated from political strife, enabling them to balance their personal lives without being coerced into political movements or marginalized by mainstream society. This phenomenon indirectly underscores the organization’s latent political potentiality despite its professed apolitical stance—a reality that also partly explains recurrent accusations of its “duplicity”. This inherent contradiction constitutes not only a defining feature of the organization but also one of its advantages for expansion.

The epoch-making significance of *Tablighi Jama'at* lies in its founder Muhammad Ilyas’s redefinition of the role of *ulama* within the Muslim community in South Asia. He argued that if the *ulama* continued to function merely as religious auxiliaries to political authority—as had been the case during the imperial era—they would become increasingly detached from the general Muslim populace. And in this way, they would be perceived as “strangers” eventually evolving into a minority group isolated from the masses in terms of thought and language. Consequently, their authority would remain confined to court and mosque spheres, and their elevated image would fail to effectively persuade or guide the broader community. Thus, Ilyas contended that both *ulama* scholars and elites of various orientations in the new era should engage directly with ordinary believers, offering face-to-face guidance and establishing genuine connections. This approach, he believed, would not only help preserve their authoritative status but also substantially enhance their influence in social religious life. In the late colonial period, when nationalism was rising and mass politics was beginning to take shape, Ilyas’s modest model of egalitarian participation—centered on the *ulama*’s personal guidance of the faithful—responded directly to the demands of the time.

The groundbreaking nature of *Tablighi Jama'at* lies in its disruption of the rigid “social roles” traditionally entrenched within Muslim communities in South Asia. It simultaneously challenged the authoritative position of the elite religious scholars (*ulama*) and the localized leadership of Sufi saints as spiritual guides. During the late colonial period, a time when traditional social structures were profoundly disrupted and a new order had yet to be established, the organizational model of *Tablighi Jama'at* represented an attempt to envision and practice an alternative system. In its principles and methods, *Tablighi Jama'at* introduced a transformative shift in the conception of religious authority. Viewed within its historical context, the organization’s founding vision and practical endeavors were not only products of their era but also a necessary response to existential challenges faced by the Muslim community in South Asia.

4. The latent political functions in the social role of *Jama'at-e-Tabligh*

In the early twentieth century, the South Asian Subcontinent was home to approximately 70 million Muslims. However, the interest-driven nature of the previous imperial political structure had resulted in a historically polarized Muslim community. The social reality faced by *Tablighi Jama'at* at its inception was twofold: On the one hand, the *ajlaaf* class (commoners) within the Muslim community consisted of grassroots masses at the bottom of the social hierarchy, who were marginalized in political life and had neither the time nor the means to understand Islamic doctrines and regulations correctly and precisely. On the other hand, in the transformative late colonial era, self-governance was being pursued through party politics in South Asia, and the vast, previously neglected groups of *ajlaaf* there became

targets of political co-option and mobilization due to their numerical significance. In this historical process of decolonization and political restructuring in the South Asian Subcontinent, *Tablighi Jama'at* established a non-confrontational network at the grassroots level by deliberately maintaining distance from politics and eschewing public attention, which provided an individual psychological space for the general public.

As for the construction and development within the South Asian Subcontinent, *Tablighi Jama'at* established a systematic management and dissemination network, ranging from its central headquarter in *Nizamuddin Markaz* in New Delhi to local centers at the village level. Following the Partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, the organization strategically expanded by establishing branches in regions where operational conditions were more favorable in the first place. In addition to utilizing mosques as conventional bases, it prioritized both traditional religious schools (*madrasas*) and modern comprehensive universities as key venues for its activities. In 1971, the People's Republic of Bangladesh gained independence and adopted a secular state model, guaranteeing freedom of religious belief while explicitly prohibiting religious authorities from intervening in politics and banning the formation of religious political parties. Within such a political environment, *Tablighi Jama'at*'s consistent avoidance of political power struggles and its commitment to maintaining distance from political affairs allowed it to secure social space for its own development. This apolitical stance facilitated its operations and expansion despite the secular constraints imposed by the state.

As population distributions shifted, the organization's network expanded beyond the geographical boundaries of the subcontinent, following Muslim migrants to various parts of the world. With its orderly internal management processes, stable mechanisms for integrating new members, straightforward religious guidance, and harmonious internal relations, the followers of *Tablighi Jama'at*—supported both by the tangible structure of the organization and its intangible socio-psychological framework—successfully forged religious emotional bonds and a sense of communal belonging. To a certain extent, this enabled a balance between social role participation and personal spiritual practice. And this has been the crucial foundation of *Tablighi Jama'at* to its sustained growth and expansion.

During its initial phase of overseas expansion, *Tablighi Jama'at* primarily focused on leasing or purchasing land to construct mosques in local communities. Parallel to mosque establishment, it also emphasized the founding of Islamic schools. Unlike Islamic modernists, who represented the Muslim elite class and pursued macro-level goals such as reinterpreting classics, textual exegesis, and reconstructing theories, *Tablighi Jama'at* concentrated on ensuring that the daily practices of ordinary believers adhered to Islamic regulations. This simple and pragmatic approach fostered greater cohesion among followers and strengthened socio-psychological bonds within the Muslim community. In regions outside South Asia, *Tablighi Jama'at*'s membership predominantly consisted of the elderly and children, with the latter often coming from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. For adult Muslim migrants striving to make a living abroad, there often existed a deep-seated psychological quest for rootedness, identity, and cultural authenticity^[11]. However, the crux of the matter lies in the fact that such psychological pursuits often remain latent over extended periods, with individuals seldom developing conscious awareness of their underlying psychological needs. In social contexts, this manifests as immigrant groups' reluctance to integrate into the mainstream local lifestyle, resistance to host cultural practices, and even refusal to reside in integrated communities with native inhabitants, *Tablighi Jama'at*'s existence provided them with a sense of identity.

Tablighi Jama'at's loosely structured membership mechanism and self-sustaining economic model have not only facilitated rapid dissemination across the subcontinent but also enabled it to transcend national boundaries with relative ease. Under the principle of deliberately maintaining distance from politics, this potential manifests in practice as one of the organization's non-purposive and implicit functions, which is realized through the following pathways:

First, the systematic replication and uniform operation of *Tablighi Jama'at*'s organizational structure. Whether in its place of origin or overseas, from global headquarters to rural towns, *Tablighi Jama'at*'s organizational framework follows the same model: an *Amir* (leader) or a consultative council assumes the role of local supreme leadership, establishing central departments in various localities. These departments are supported by a suitable number of groups that assist in daily operations, communicating and assigning the core ethos and missionary tasks to each member. Regardless of scale or administrative level, the central departments are consistently tasked with encouraging more Muslims to join the activities and coordinating *Tablighi Jama'at*'s activities within their respective regions.

Second, close communication and coordination between local and central levels, overseas branches and the global headquarter, as well as across all hierarchical tiers. *Amirs* (leaders) at the local level of *Tablighi Jama'at* maintain uninterrupted contact with provincial and national central institutions. Similarly, *Amirs* working in central institution of various countries remain closely connected with the global headquarter in *Nizamuddin Markaz*, New Delhi. They regularly report on the progress of the activities in their respective countries while receiving directives from the central

headquarter. To further strengthen these ties, *Amirs* from central institutions in various countries periodically visit the headquarter in *Nizamuddin Markaz* of New Delhi, and vice versa.

Third, the notable feasibility and acceptance within *Tablighi Jama'at*'s social organizational functions. On Thursday evenings, gatherings of *Tablighi Jama'at* are typically held. Both local Muslim residents and visiting Muslims come to the central headquarter to listen to speeches delivered by experienced members. After the lectures, attending Muslims are encouraged to join the activities and sign up for missionary trips of varying durations to different destinations. Moreover, its principles and practices are non-radical and non-interventionist in politics, which has—at the very least in quantitative and scalable terms—laid the groundwork for its rapid expansion. From its early successes in the Mewat region to its global reach nearly a century later, it is undeniable that *Tablighi Jama'at* established exceptionally solid roots in its initial “testing ground”. This regional transformation ultimately serves as a historical case study of sociopolitical change achieved through religiously guided means.

Fourth, *Tablighi Jama'at* is closely intertwined with the realm of public education, providing educational opportunities for impoverished populations while actively recruiting individuals with strong educational backgrounds. From its inception, local existing schools and the establishment and growth of *Tablighi Jama'at* were mutually reinforcing. For instance, in the Mewat region, both Islamic schools and primary schools established by British colonial authorities provided some of the physical infrastructure that later supported the network of *Tablighi Jama'at*. Moreover, by the mid-nineteenth century, Urdu language had gained increasingly widespread usage among the general populace, supported by colonial policies, which provided the “software conditions” for the work of the *Tablighi Jama'at* to carry out. In 1837, the British colonial government mandated the adoption of indigenous languages as official provincial languages of British India. In northern regions of the Indian subcontinent, Urdu replaced Persian as the primary language among Muslim communities. Supported by this policy, many schools adopted Urdu as the medium of instruction. By the early 20th century, the number of people capable of reading Urdu texts had significantly increased in northern parts of the subcontinent. Consequently, from its founding, *Tablighi Jama'at* designated Urdu as the medium language for its propagation efforts. In rural areas, *Tablighi Jama'at* provided opportunities for marginalized Muslims to access basic education. In urban higher education institutions, its activities attracted the attention of local governments, resulting in varying treatments depending on the regional context.

In summary, during the historical process of colonial withdrawal from the South Asian Subcontinent, local populations began redefining their roles in the society, and various groups sought to consolidate their internal strength in the struggle for social power. Through its intricately woven organizational model, *Tablighi Jama'at* gradually evolved into a dynamic community within Muslim society that operated in parallel to, yet independently of, the mainstream social structure. Its members thus assumed dual social roles:

On the one hand, within the division of labor in mainstream society, they derived social status and professional identities through their occupations, familial ties, and other societal markers. On the other hand, while under the framework of *Tablighi Jama'at*, they engaged in the propagation of Islam, enjoying relatively equal social roles within the organization and establishing social relationships based on its internal rules. The latter provided them with a stable social foundation encompassing a sense of community, identity, and belonging, which in turn facilitated psychological adaptation and the fulfillment of professional roles in mainstream society. From this perspective, the myriad religious organizations and communities existing in the contemporary world serve functions similar to those of *Tablighi Jama'at*.

5. Conclusion

From a macro perspective, although *Tablighi Jama'at* advocates staying away from politics, its latent political functions in the course of its practical development cannot be overlooked. These political functions are reflected, on the one hand, in social mobilization targeting other (religious) groups during periods of social transformation, and on the other hand, in aggregating votes and forming a voter base during political elections in times of social construction. After nearly a century of development, the implicit political functions of *Tablighi Jama'at* are evident not only in its vast and well-organized network but also in its stable and effective social mobilization efforts, such as the extent of its discursive power in local affairs. This may be related to the public office backgrounds of its members within the mainstream society.

In countries with Muslim-majority populations, the core objectives and organizational model of *Tablighi Jama'at* serve both to fulfill individual spiritual pursuits and to provide members with a sense of collective social belonging. Its continually expanding global scale and widespread network have become social facts underscoring its immense latent political potential. As an astute commentator has noted, “*Tablighi* leaders themselves claim to have no political pretensions, but their very silence on matters of worldly concern, particularly on affairs related to state power, is a profound political stance, one that plays straight into the hands of the political establishment.”^[12] Although these social functions and roles were not the original intention or goal of *Tablighi Jama'at*'s founding, the organization's practical

responsibilities and influence have evolved alongside social transformations and its own growth, emerging as issues that can no longer be overlooked.

Tablighi Jama'at has established a globally dispersed network of branches, interconnected horizontally to form a comprehensive international structure. Through its annual gatherings, it inadvertently demonstrates its scale and influence. While adopting an avoidance stance toward politics—refusing to discuss or participate in political affairs—its clear internal hierarchy, core principles^[13], non-violent ideology, and the social impact derived from its large-scale development have not only endowed it with potential political agency but also constituted a social reality: the capacity to mobilize human resources, organize large-scale assemblies, and exert influence worldwide.

Within global religious organizations or movements, *Tablighi Jama'at*'s development model diverges markedly from the top-down “elite approach” led by elites or Islamic modernists. Instead, it operates through a bottom-up strategy, targeting Muslims at the socio-economic margins of society. Its core mission—to call believers to “become true Muslims”—is advanced through mosque-based religious activities and collective missionary travels, all characterized by simplicity and practicality. They initiate at the community level, progressing from individual points to broader areas, and gradually expand the network. Their distinctive trajectory, which does not prioritize the pursuit of political influence, aligns well with the selection of individual social roles and the exercise of agency in the context of modern nation-building. Thereby, its expansion corresponds, to some extent, with the trends of contemporary development and transformation. The practical advancements achieved in its implementation have, in turn, bolstered confidence in its sustainable development, while reinforcing the validity and feasibility of its model.

Tablighi Jama'at requires its members to prioritize religious duties over intellectualized religious knowledge and to believe that social and institutional reform can only be achieved effectively through education and personal transformation. According to its teachings, reliance solely on political power is insufficient to ensure the proper organization of an Islamic social order.^[14] These explicit requirements and principles, in turn, reflect the pervasive social challenges faced by Muslim communities in South Asia.

In summary, *Tablighi Jama'at*'s deliberate avoidance of politics in its self-positioning represents both a choice of non-political social engagement and a cultivation of latent political functions. To a certain extent, *Tablighi Jama'at* perceives itself as a necessary organizer in the endeavor to perfect the social order.

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