

Islamization and Muslim Identity: The Case of Meos

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INTRODUCTION

Aziz Ahmad (1964) has argued that social and cultural practices followed by the Muslim communities in India are a hang-over of the past and shall be finally eliminated. His main thesis is that centripetal force of the unity of universal Islamic culture is far greater than the local forces of common socio-economic system. Speaking of Muslim India in relation to Hindu India, he writes, 'Islam alone, rigidly monotheistic, iconoclastic and religio-culturally insular, resisted Hinduism's assimilative pull' (Ahmad, 1964 p: 75). Well known social anthropologist Clifford Geertz has observed the existence of diverse non-Islamic elements in the culture and social structure of Muslim communities in many parts of the world (Geertz, 1968). He envisages gradual absorption and apprehension of Islam. Islamic conversion is not a sudden total overwhelming illumination but a slow turning toward a new light (Geertz, 1965). Both Ahmad and Geertz assume the in-avoidability of Islamisation of Muslim communities in India and other parts of the world.

Robinson (1983) writes that although Islamic practices all over the world were influenced by pre-Islamic existence, but there is a definite historical tendency of movement towards high traditions of Islam. Islam offers a pattern of perfection for Muslims. It is contained in Quran. It is also seen in the traditions relating to what the prophet said and did in life. The pattern of perfection provides a standard which all should strive to reach (ibid: 191). Robinson notes that there cannot be a permanent synthesis and co-existence of Islamic and non-Islamic practices. The process of Islamisation is carried on continuously by transmission of knowledge to the laymen. The learned and holy men play an important role in the transmission. Contacts with those who have already achieved higher state of Islamic perfection also play significant role.

Historically trade, the *hajj* pilgrimage, role of the state and religious movements have contributed to Islamisation of the Muslim communities.

Imtiaz Ahmad (1973, 1976, 1981a,b) has put forth an opposed viewpoint. He points out that Muslims in India are greatly diversified on the bases of language, social structure and cultural traditions. The diversity arose due to the co-existence of the non-Islamic cultural and religious traditions along with the high Islamic traditions. He advocates the use of anthropological approach to study the folk religion of Muslim communities rather than the Islamicists' approach which puts emphasis on the textual study. Ahmad points out the differences between Islamic law and Muslim practices in India. The beliefs and practices constitute the totality of religious system. Muslims in India show syncretic form of religion due to Islam's own struggle for survival in alien environment. Indian Muslims are highly differentiated and should not be viewed as homogenous monolith. Thus many Muslim communities show distinct cultural features not shared by other Muslim communities in India and else where. Mann (1992) also finds the persistence of non-Islamic features among the Muslims of Aligarh in west Uttar Pradesh. She finds that Muslim of the town are divided into different segments based on the hierarchical principle.

The author seeks to examine the view that Muslim communities in India are being transformed rapidly into Islamized groups and assuming common Islamic identity over their distinct ethnic identity.

This paper discusses the impact of Tabligh movement' on the Meo community in Haryana.

Tabligh, in Arabic, literally means to instruct or to educate the people about their religion. Thus, the Tabligh is a religious movement which urges its followers to be regular

in the observance of Islamic prescriptions in their daily life (Mines, 1973: 68). It can be called a movement in the sociological sense as it has the essential elements of a religious movement; namely, an ideology, an organization through which the message is put across, leadership and a system of recruitment of the followers.

From time to time, attempts have been made for the renewal of Islam in the Indian subcontinent. These attempts have taken various forms and have differed in terms of their organization and scope depending on the circumstances and the socio-political context in which they arose. Generally, the aim of these socio-religious movements has been revitalization of Islam in India. Two well-known movements arose in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries - the Shah Wali Ullah movement and the Mujahidin movement². Shah Wali Ullah witnessed the collapse of the Muslim state in India in the eighteenth century. Non-Muslim groups - such as the Mahrathas, the Jats and the Sikhs - had come into power in their respective areas. The British had already established their foothold in Eastern India. Shah Wali Ullah, who had studied theology at Medina in Arabia, attempted to strengthen the Islamic communities of North India by unifying the different Sufi orders under the banner of orthodox Islam. Shah Wali Ullah emphasized *ijtihad* (reasoning) in applying Muslim religious laws, and argued that these laws should be basically based on the Quran and the *Hadith*. He emphasized the utility of congregated gatherings such as the Friday prayers and the performance of *hajj*. He subscribed to the theory that Islam was the final religious system which supersedes all other religious systems which have become obsolete. He sensed danger to Islam from syncretism or compromise. Islam, he felt, must be made more orthodox and purer. In India, the purity and orthodoxy of Islam was endangered due to the entry of new converts into the Islamic fold who continued to practise and believe in non-Islamic elements. So he felt that the non-Islamic elements must be consciously eliminated from the culture of the Muslim communities in India. However, minor devi-

ations could be condoned provided these were not tantamount to being anti-Islamic (Ahmad, 1964: 209).

Another Islamic movement which emphasized orthodoxy was the Mujahidin movement started by Sayyid Ahmad Shahid of Baraily (1782-1831). His aim was to purify the Islamic communities in India of all syncretic elements, so that these could be based exclusively on the *Quran* and the *Sunnah*. He wanted to eliminate the following three types of excesses from orthodox Sunni belief: (i) Sufism which goes against the tenets of religious law; (ii) celebration of *Muharram* as a public festival, as it is of Shia origin; and (iii) non-Muslim elements which have been either borrowed from Hinduism or which have survived among the converts from Hinduism. It may be noted in this connection that Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi, the originator of the Mujaddid movement in the seventeenth century, had argued for the superiority of *Shariat* over *Tariqat* (Rizvi, 1965: 225).

In the second half of the nineteenth century, many movements arose among the Muslims in India. Well-known among these were the Ahmadiyah movement³, Sir Sayyid Ahmad's Aligarh movement⁴ and the Ahl-i-Hadith movements⁵ of Maulvi Muhammad Husayn of Batala. The aim of these movements was also to revitalize Islam in India.

A number of movements arose in the second decade of the twentieth century, which aimed at strengthening the Muslim communities through *tanzim* (organization) and *tabligh* (religious propaganda). These movements arose in the wake of the *Shuddhi* and *Sangathan* movements of the Arya Samaj (Mathur, 1972: 181-83 and 186-87). More than one organization came into being to carry out *tabligh* among the Muslim communities. But the one which has had the maximum effect and the longest duration was the Tabligh movement among the Meos of Mewat. Started by Moulana Muhammad Ilyas (1885-1944) of Kandhla, district Muzaffarnagar, in Uttar Pradesh. It was started in the Mewat area of district Gurgaon in Haryana (erstwhile Punjab). Later it spread to other parts of the Indian sub-continent. At present it has even as-

sumed an international complexion. Before we discuss the origins of the movement, it will be appropriate to describe the social organization of the Meos with special reference to their religious beliefs and rituals, and social life which they retained even after they were converted to Islam from Hinduism.

MEO COMMUNITY

Mewat, the land where the Meos live, is a cultural area. It comprises parts of three contiguous districts of Gurgaon, Bharatpur and Alwar. Gurgaon district forms a part of Haryana and Bharatpur and Alwar districts form part of Rajasthan. Geographically, it lies to the south-west of Delhi, and its Northern boundary comes fairly close to Delhi. The dialect spoken in the area is called Mewati which is closer to the Rajasthani dialects of Hindi. The Meos constitute one of the major communities of the Mewat region. It is claimed that the name of the region is actually derived from the name of this community. The territory of Mewat is divided into different geographical areas by the low Aravalli ranges known as Kala Pahad (black mountain) in Mewat. These ranges have played a very significant role in the history of the Meos in Mewat. Many historical monuments indicative of the past are situated along the ranges. The undulated landscape near the foothills has always provided natural protection to the Meos who claim to have been looters and plunderers. Some historical accounts also refer to the Meos in this role⁶. They always posed a problem of law and order to the rulers in Delhi. Mujeeb (1967: 218-19) quotes Barani: 'In the middle of the thirteenth century, the Meos who lived in the hilly areas west and south of Delhi not only plundered people on the highways around Delhi but even stole into the town. They came up to the haud-i-Shamsi, molested water-carriers and maid servants, who came to draw water, stripping them and walking away with their clothes'.

The Meos are primarily agriculturists. They are mainly dependent on rains except in a small area of Mewat where a canal irrigation system exists. Animal husbandry is the sec-

ondary source of livelihood. Those who are close to the hilly ranges also rear sheep and goats. Now milk-selling is catching on in those areas which are located by the side of main roads and where milk chilling plants have been started by the Delhi Milk Scheme.

The Meos claim to be the descendants of Kshatriyas who had embraced Islam⁷. They perceive of themselves as being high caste-*unchi jati* or *unchi qaum*. They practise endogamy rigidly. An element of hierarchy is evident in their relationship with other castes. They treat the Hindu chamars and bhangis as untouchables. They had *jajmani* relationships with both the Hindu and Muslim castes such as *kumbhar* (potter, Hindu), *lohar* (blacksmith, Muslim), *khati* (carpenter, Hindu or Muslim), *nai* (barber, Muslim or Hindu), *sakka* (water-carrier, Muslim), *chamar* (leather-worker, Hindu), *bhangis* (scavenger, Hindu), and *mirasi* (Muslim). The families of these castes which served the land-owning Meos were known as *tehalavas*. They were paid in kind. Their relationship were enduring and hereditary. Now the traditional pattern of relationships has undergone a great deal of change. *Chamars* have given up carrying and skinning dead animals. They also refused to accept food and water from the Meos because of the latter were Muslims. The Meos were clients of Brahmins who used to work out auspicious dates for marriages for them. The Muslim *mirasi*, and *jogi* are still treated as inferior (*chhote log*), and the Meos would not like to accept food from them. However, all Muslims can pray at the same mosque and smoke from the same *huqqa*.

Internally, the Meos are divided into a number of exogamous groups called *pals* and *gots*. The membership of these groups is hereditary and is based on patrilineal descent. Traditionally, Meo society is divided into twelve *pals* and fifty-two *gots*. One often hears the expression '*bara palaur bavan got*' being used by the Meos whenever they refer to the totality of the Meos. Actually, the number of *pals* is thirteen, although the thirteenth (*palhat*) is referred to as *pallakra*, meaning half pal. The number of actual *gots* is more than fifty-two. Each *pal* is traditionally associated

with a territory. The region of Mewat can be subdivided into thirteen distinct tracts. Each tract belongs to a *pal*, and is known by the name of that *pal*. The boundaries of *pal* territory are no longer very clear. Earlier, each *pal* had a chief called Chaudhary who played an important role in the political structure.

Each *pal* is further divided into subgroups called *thamas* or *thambas*. A *thama* consists of the putative patrilineal descendants of a common ancestor, generally referred to as *dada*. The *thamas* are named either after the ancestor or after the original village of the ancestor. Each *thama* also has a Chaudhary, whose office is hereditary. The *thamas* have political as well as social functions. These are most relevant in matters relating to marriage and divorce.

A *got* consists of the descendants of a common male ancestor whose genealogical relationship is not exactly traceable. Members of a *got* may be dispersed, but usually a cluster of contiguous villages are inhabited by the *sehgottias* (people of the same *got*). The *gots* are exogamous groups. Many of the Meo *got* names are common with the *gots* of non-Meo communities such as the Jats, Gujars, and Minas. The *pals* and *gots* can be further grouped under different *vamsa* or *bans* such as Kachhwas bans, Jadu bans, Tomar bans. These *vamsa* are common to Meo and Hindu Rajputs.

The Meo household is constituted by the blood relatives and their spouses who reside together and form a *chulah* (hearth) group. It is known as a *ghar* in the Mewati dialect. The households among the Meos can be divided into two main categories: simple household and complex household. Simple households may consist of the elementary family, one-member household, incomplete elementary family or supplemented elementary family. The complex household consists of two or more nuclear families or parts thereof who reside together in one building and possess a common hearth. A complex household may be further subdivided into two basic types: lineal joint family and collateral joint family. The lineal joint family consists of husband, wife, married sons and unmarried sons and daugh-

ters. The collateral joint family consists of married brothers living together.

Another set of family type is based upon the polygynous family composed of man and more than one wife. Among the Meos, a polygynous family comes into being due to levirate practice, i.e., when a man marries his brother's (usually elder brother) widow or it may be resorted to when the first wife has failed to bear a child.

The lineal joint family and the collateral joint family are considered to be an ideal social norm in Meo society. Ideally, the residential unity of the patrikin and their wives is cherished. The rule of residence is virilocal. The married sisters and daughters move out to join their husband's natal families. This allows the parental family to grow into an extended family where the son or sons form the link between the elementary families. Such extended families have the tendency to break-down after the death of the parents. This may happen even in the lifetime of the parents if the land-holding of the family is insufficient.

The inheritance rules of Meos are strictly patrilineal. Land is equally divided between the sons. Widows have no share in ancestral property. Daughters and sisters have no right of inheritance in property. Daughters may receive a gift of land in the absence of any male heir. The customary laws of inheritance rather than the Shariat prevail among the Meos.

When a separation takes place within the family, a new homestead is built within the common compound called *bakhal*. The households of agnatically related individuals are generally situated within a *bakhal*. The members of the *bakhal* may form a patrilineage which is called *ghariya* or *khas kunba*.

At another level, the lineage group may be called *kunba* and *khandan*. Both the terms are used for patrilineages of varying genealogical depth. The terms are used for the descendants of a common male ancestor and are referred to as *ek dada ki aulad*. Sometimes all families belonging to a *got* in a village may belong to one *khandan*. The terms *khandan* and *kunba* emphasize common descent. The term *kunba* is generally restricted to a definite, closely interacting descent group. It is a descent group

which acts as a corporate group at the time of the performance of rituals connected with the life cycle. Usually the members of this group also form the neighbourhood group. So, the *kunba* is a lineage group where the genealogical relationships are very precisely known, at least to the elders.

There are several views on when and how the Meos embraced Islam⁸. The Meos believe that they were converted during the earlier phase of the spread of Islam in India, they trace their first contact with the Muslims back to Mohammad bin Kasim's attack on Sindh in the eighth century. The Arab invaders worked intently for the spread of Islam in Sindh. The Meos believe that they were spread up to Sindh at that time and must, therefore, have come under the influence of Islam (Shakur, 1974: 317).

The second phase of the spread of Islam among the Meos began in the times of Mahmud Ghaznavi in the eleventh century. Sayyid Salar Sahu, Mahmud Ghaznavi's sister's husband, was in command of the royal forces. He established himself at Ajmer and started conquering the areas around Ajmer. His son Sayyid Salar Masud Gazi defeated Tejpal, a Meo chieftain, at Dhandgarh near Rewari. Tejpal is believed to have embraced Islam and thus became the first known Meo Muslim (Shakur, 1974: 319-20). Sayyid Salar Masud Gazi is remembered among the Meos. All over Mewat, pucca platforms (*chabutras*) connected with Sayyid Salar Masud Gazi are to be found in the villages. These *chabutras* (square platforms) are believed to be sacred. Lamps are lighted over these *chabutras* on certain occasions. Members of a caste known as Majavars, who claim to be Shaikhs, are responsible for looking after these sacred platforms. The flag of Sayyid Salar Masud Gazi is also considered sacred and used to be worshipped by the Meos in the past.

Although the Meos became Muslims long back, they continued many Hindu beliefs and cultural practices. Many Meos traced their genealogical relationship with Lord Krishna. Janam-ashtami, the birthday of Lord Krishna, was celebrated. Hindu festivals such as Diwali and Dussehra were also celebrated. They used

to participate in the Holi celebrations.

Many Sufi saints, such as Hazrat Khwaja Mohiuddin Chisti and Nizammuddin Aulia, impressed the Meos, and they were held in great esteem. The *mazars* of these saints were treated as holy shrines, and the Meos used to pay homage at these tombs. They also participated in the *urs*. Another mystic, Shah Madar (c. 1315-1436), was also a highly revered saint. He was reputed to have possessed miraculous powers and was responsible for the spread of Islam among many non-Muslim communities in India. His tomb exists at Makanpur and the Meos considered it to be sacred. They carried a flag in his honour and went to his tomb in procession, singing songs in praise of Hazrat Madar Shah. Some Sufi saints, who were associated with religious preachings in Mewat, were also remembered. Hazrat Shaikh Musa and Shah Chokha were two such well-known saints. Their tombs were worshipped and annual *urs* were held in their honour. At the local village level, certain deities such as Panchpir, Khera Devta, Chabunda, Bhomiya and Bhairon were also worshipped. These deities were represented either by platforms or by stone slabs. People used to light earthen lamps on them and offer sweets. These offerings were given to the Faqir. Thus, the Meo Muslims retained many Hindu modes of worship.

Indeed, the Meos achieved a cultural synthesis between their original Hindu culture and Islam. The basic structures of family, *pals* and *gots*, and of lineages did not undergo radical transformation after their conversion to Islam. These groups have remained as exogamous units. In the selection of a spouse, one must avoid one's *got*. Members of *gots* and *pals* are looked upon as agnates. Some *gots* are the receivers, others the givers. Some *gots* and *pals* are both receivers and givers. The subdivisions of a *pal*, the *thambas*, are also treated likewise. The rules governing the selection of a spouse are complex and involve various degrees of prohibition such as the avoidance of cross cousins, those from one's own village, or from one's mother's brother's village, etc. These rules of exogamy have shown a great deal of persistence in spite of the Islamic char-

acter of the community. By themselves, these rules do not go against the laws of Shariat, but in the case of marriage between prohibited categories of individuals the customary rules are given precedence over the laws of Shariat. The same is the case with laws governing inheritance. The customary inheritance laws of the Meos seem to be closer to traditional Hindu laws than to those based on the Shariat. The Meos also maintained the traditional brotherhood relationships with some of the Jat, Ahir and Thakar clans.

However, changes had taken place over time in many life-cycle rituals due to the impact of Islam. *Khatna* (the circumcision) ceremony was a very important ceremony. It was conducted on a fairly lavish scale, but was treated more as a social occasion than a religious one. The recitation of the holy *Quran* had no place in the ceremony. Marriage was treated as a contract. The *Nikah* ceremony was conducted through a kazi. Many Hindu elements in the rituals associated with marriage also survived - such as, *manda*, *ubtan*, *chak-pujna*, fixing an auspicious date and time through a Brahmin, and the playing of music. The most significant Islamic ritual adopted by the Meos was the practice of burial instead of cremation which was their earlier custom. A funeral feast was given after forty days called *chehallum*. Though these rituals of life-crises were Islamic, many Hindu or traditional elements associated with them remained.

The method of naming children among the Meos was very peculiar. The Hindu practice of using Singh was never given up completely. The essential Hindu name was given a Muslim twist by adding the suffix Khan. Thus these were names like Mangal Khan, Simrath Khan, Sumer Khan, Kapur Khan.

The Meos, especially the males, never gave up their traditional dress, which was no different from their Hindu Jat and Ahir neighbours. Women, however, had taken to Muslim dress much earlier. Women did not observe the Muslim *purda*, although they did practise the *gunghat*.

The traditional folk songs which the Mirasis sang at the time of weddings alluded to the Hindu past of the Meos. The story of the *Ma-*

habharata was recited on certain occasions. A famous Meo poet, Saadullah, had composed a Mewati version of the *Mahabharata* which was very popular among the Meos. Thus, the Meos retained many aspects of Hindu religion and culture and it is in the context of this lack of a separate and distinct identity that the Tabligh movement arose.

TABLIGH MOVEMENT

The Tabligh movement was started in Meowat after the Arya Samaj had started its reconversion movement (*Shuddhi*) in Northern India in the earlier part of the third decade of the twentieth century. The Shuddhi movement was basically aimed at such Muslim communities which were considered to have been Hindus in their recent past - the aim being to persuade these communities to return to the fold of Hinduism. This movement caused considerable anxiety among the Muslims, and they started consolidating their position by propagating religious orthodoxy.

The aim of the Tabligh movement was to bring about a reawakening of faith in Islam among the Muslims in India and elsewhere. It was thought that the Muslims had come to such a sorry state of affairs, particularly in the Indian subcontinent, because they had forgotten the true teachings of Islam. The rich were involved in leading a luxurious life, forgetting their obligations to God. The learned ulemas had not been successful in spreading their knowledge of Islam, or the message of Islam, to the lay Muslims. Many Muslims had started questioning the validity of *Quranic* injunctions. In this context the Tabligh movement aimed at spreading the message of Islam to all Muslims. It aimed at purifying the Muslims and making them orthodox Muslims. The Tabligh movement, however, did not aim at conversion of non-Muslims to Islam but only at making Muslims better and purer Muslims. Its message to the Muslim was *Ae Musalmano, Musalman bano* (call to the Muslims to be devout) (Hasni, n.d.: 15-16).

Ilyas, the founder of the Tabligh movement, felt that a number of Muslim communities living in rural areas had hardly any true knowledge of Islamic practices and laws. Such Mus-

lim communities still, therefore, practised many un-Islamic social customs. They did not either observe the basic tenets of Islamic faith or they were indifferent to these. Hence there was a necessity to teach the basic principles of Islam to such communities.

Ilyas argued that the task of spreading the true faith must be shared by all Muslims. It should not be left only to the learned few – the *ulemas*. It was the duty of every Muslim to teach people to do good deeds and prevent people from bad things. So people must take up the responsibility of spreading the message of Allah. People should be made conscious of their obligation to God. *Iman* (belief) had to be created. The aim of Tabligh, in the words of Ilyas, was to spread the message of the Prophet.

Secondly, Ilyas said that the aim of the movement was to inculcate an emotional relationship with God – to bring the men of Allah, especially the unconcerned, to Allah's path. Thus, the Tabligh movement essentially professed an ideology of reawakening the faith of Muslims in God and in the message of God, while eschewing unIslamic beliefs and customs.

MOULANA ILYAS

The Originator of the movement Moulana Ilyas was born in 1886. Moulana Ilyas took charge of the Nizamuddin mosque after the death of his elder brother, Moulana Mohammed, in 1919. The *madrasa* was in a very poor financial condition. He worked hard to run the *madrasa* and even spent from his private coffers to sustain it. He was undaunted by the hard conditions of life in this period and even considered this as necessary to good training and education. One thing which was striking in his life was that the Moulana always considered it his destiny to serve the cause of Islam and Muslims. In 1919, just before he took over as Imam, he barely survived a very serious illness. He attributed this to his mission of serving the people and Allah. During his second visit to Arabia for the performance of *hajj* in 1926, Moulana Ilyas dreamt that God would make use of him. He pondered over how he could be of use to God till he realized that

the best way was to fulfil his mission of serving Muslims. It was after his return to India that he started the system of *jamats* (organized group) to move about among the peasants teaching them the bare minimum of *Kalma*, *Toheed* and *Namaj*.

Moulana Ilyas even wanted to start his Tabligh movement in Medina. He had an audience with the governor of Medina and sought permission to start Tabligh. But he returned to India without waiting for the final reply as he thought his mission was to work in India. Later on, he wrote to one of his friends in Medina that he would start Tabligh in Medina if he felt that it was worth-while to do so (Hasni, n.d.: 103).

His hard life and the arduous journeys he undertook in the village had left the Moulana weak and sickness overtook him. In 1943 he had an acute attack of dysentery and never recovered from it. He died in July 1944 in New Delhi.

Moulana Ilyas adopted the six-article (*chhe number*) course of teachings which formed the essence of his movement (Ferozepuri, n.d.: 44-105):

(i) *Kalimah*: Every Muslim must be able to recite *Kalimah* which means that there is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his messenger. *Kalimah* stresses the oneness of God. It is believed that the recitation of *Kalimah* can save a man from burning in hell for eternity, provided he fulfils the following conditions: Firstly, one should be familiar with the correct wording of the *Kalimah*. Secondly, the meanings of the *Kalimah* should be known. Thirdly, its implications must be realized, i.e., to submit oneself fully to the Almighty in every action and thought. Fourthly, one must develop complete faith in God. One cannot accomplish anything without the help of God and that Allah is not dependent on anyone else. Success can be achieved only by strictly following the teachings of the Prophet.

(ii) *Namaz*: Every Muslim is enjoined to say prayers at the appointed hours of the day and night. Apart from the ritual of offering prayer, every Muslim must be earnest in his faith. *Namaz* is a pillar of Islam. One who gives up *Namaz* comes close to being a dis-believer. It

is enjoined upon Muslims to teach *Namaz* to every child at the age of seven.

(iii) *Illum* (knowledge) and *Dhikr* (remembrance of Allah): Seeking of knowledge has been greatly emphasized in Islam. According to the *Hadith* those who travel out to seek knowledge, will find the path to the heaven easier. Knowledge is what the Prophet Muhammad conveyed to the people. The true knowledge is based on what is mentioned in the *Quran* and the *Hadith*. So every Muslim must acquire the true knowledge of the *Quran* and the *Hadith*. 'Seeking of knowledge is a duty of every Muslim man and woman,' says a *Hadith*. There are four dimensions of knowledge: (a) Knowledge of the ways of living such as the domestic life and relationships between neighbours and the family. Muhammad has shown the ways of living through his own life which must be treated as a model. (b) Knowledge concerning the *Ibadat* such as the prayer, fasting and *hajj*. (c) Knowledge of the practices which one adopts to earn one's living. (d) Knowledge of correct dealings concerning loans, gifts, etc., and between different types of persons.

According to the *Hadith*, knowledge can be acquired either by reading the *Quran*, or by learning the *Quran*, or by listening to the *Quran*. Muslims are also required to learn about the life of the Prophet and his companions. Their lives should form a model. Every Muslim is also required to teach others. Moulana Ilyea laid great stress on learning and teaching. He said: 'It is our duty to teach the ignorant Muslims' (Hasni, n.d.: 305). Moulana Ilyas wanted every Muslim to spare some part of his life for the propagation of knowledge to others. The Moulana thought that the teaching and learning of knowledge should not be confined to the institutions but should reach the common men (*ummat*), who are too busy to go to these institutions. The knowledge of the *din* (faith) can be acquired through association with believers, just as language and culture is learnt through keeping company with cultured and learned persons. This is the most natural way of learning. He said, Unless the heart directs, mind will not go in for correct knowledge. The feelings of heart

depend on the application and not on bookish knowledge (Hasni, n.d.: 304). Moulana Ilyas wrote, 'No person can succeed in acquiring knowledge unless he transmits it to the others, especially to those who are less learned,' (Hasni, n.d.: 305). According to the Moulana, every Muslim must acquire the knowledge of *din* – establishing a relationship with *din* is an important part of a Muslim's life. So every Muslim must devote his time for Tabligh and *din*.

The other part of this article is concerned with *Dhikr*. *Dhikr* means remembering the Almighty in praise and glorification. One must always keep God in one's heart as it helps to purify the heart. Some time must be spent every day in remembering Allah and in singing His glory. There are general ways of doing this, such as the recitation of the *Quran* and by offering prayers. Both the *Quran* and the *Hadith* stress the importance of remembering the Almighty. The Tabligh teachings lay stress on the recitation of the third *Kalimah* which means 'Glory be to Allah! Praise be to Allah! There is no God save Allah! Allah is the greatest! There is no power and no strength save in Allah - the sublime - the tremendous' (Waheeduzzafar, 1971: 141).

(iv) *Ikram-i-Muslim* (Respect for Muslims): Respect for human beings in general, but Muslims in particular, has been stressed. An important element of the *Ikram* is recognition of the rights of others - the rights of seniors, the rights of neighbours, the rights of the poor, etc. In a *Hadith* it is recorded that God helps those who help the men of Allah (Ferozepuri, n.d.: 77). The idea was to bring back the various factions and different classes in the Muslim society to the fold of the real Islamic brotherhood (Faruqi, 1971:65).

(v) *Ikhlas-i-Niyat* (Sincerity of Intention): Actions must be performed with the sole intention of pleasing Allah. All matters relating to faith and to worldly affairs must be made subservient to Allah. Anything which is performed with unpious intentions is not acceptable to the Almighty. According to a *Hadith*, Allah does not look towards your appearances or your possessions but he looks into your heart and deeds (Ferozepuri, n.d.: 86).

(vi) *Tabligh*: Travelling far and wide in order to spread the message of Allah is the duty of every Muslim. Moulana Ilyas desired that every Muslim should spare some time for the propagation of the faith. This must be done as it was done by the Prophet himself. The above-mentioned six articles must be practised by the *tablighees* (the believers in *Tabligh*).

One could learn about the faith by studying in *madrassas* (religious school) and through books, but a very large majority of people can never hope to go to a *madrassa* or a *marktab* (institution of elementary education run by mosques), or they may never be able to devote any time to it because they are too busy with their work. Moulana Ilyas was concerned about the unlettered peasants who formed the majority but knew very little about the faith. Such a large number of people could be made familiar with the true principles of the faith only if it was directly communicated by those who had acquired the knowledge. Moulana Ilyas wanted to restart the practice of groups of people (*jamaat*) moving about to preach the true faith to the ignorant as was the practice during the lifetime of the prophet.

We have given up the practice of *jamaats* moving about to preach. This was the basic principle. Prophet Muhammad (peace be up him) himself moved about to preach. In Mecca, the Muslims were in minority. Every convert to Islam was required to move about to convert the non-believers. When the Prophet reached Medina he started sending *Jamaats* to all the four corners. So the movement of preaching to others was basic to Islam. All this had been given up (Hasni, n.d.: 278).

THE MEWATIS AND MOULANA ILYAS

It was Moulana Ilyas' father, Moulana Mohammad Islail, who had first attracted students from Mewat to his *madrassa* in the Hazrat Nizammuddin complex. The Mewatis used to visit the *dargah* of Nizammuddin Aulia to participate in the annual *urs* and to offer prayers. Moulana Mohammed Ismail started taking an interest in those Mewatis and lured some of them to his Banglawali masjid

and persuaded them to join his *madrassa*. It is said that, in the beginning, he once encountered a group of Mewatis who were on their way to Delhi to work as labourers. He asked them about their destination and their purpose. He offered to pay them the amount which they hoped to earn as labourers only if they stayed in his *madrassa* and learnt about Islamic theology. This was the beginning of a long relationship between the Mewatis and the *madrassa* at Nizammuddin. Moulana Mohammed Ismail had established friendship with some Mewatis of Ferozepur-Namak and Nuh. They had come to regard him as a sacred and pious person and he occasionally paid visits to Mewat (Ferozepuri, n.d.: 9).

When Moulana Ilyas took charge of the *madrassa*, some Mewatis who had patronized his father and brother as holy men came over to him and invited him to visit Mewat. The Moulana agreed, on the condition that they started a *marktab* in the village to celebrate his visit. That was the only way to honour him, he said. The Mewatis being peasants had never paid sufficient attention to religious schools as they thought these as being useless for their children. The Moulana was very keen to start *marktab*s and *madrassas* in Mewat. This he thought was the only way to spread the Islamic faith and the knowledge of Shariat among the ignorant peasant Muslims of Mewat. He was aware of the fact that the Meos were very ignorant of their religion and wanted to create conditions favourable for bringing the Meos closer to Islam. He thought that by opening centers of religious instruction, the younger generation could be reformed. Moulana Ilyas started establishing *marktab*s and *madrassas* in Mewat. He even spent his personal income for this. Thanks to his missionary zeal, a large number of *marktab*s and *madrassas* were opened in a short span of time.

DISAPPOINTMENT WITH THE MARKTAB AND MADRASSAS

Soon the Moulana was disappointed with the progress of the spread of Islam through the regular *madrassas* and *marktab*s. First, although a large number of *marktab*s and *madrassas* had been opened in Mewat, only a

very small number of children were actually studying in them. Secondly, the Moulana feared that those who were trained 'would be lost in the vast expanse of the ignorance' which Mewat represented. Moulana Ilyas was shocked and disappointed to meet a person who was trained in an Islamic school in Mewat but whose beard was shaved off, and whose face, form and dress did not show any trace of Islam (Hasni, n.d.: 81). The Moulana was very keen to spread the basic knowledge of Islam in the whole of Mewat as fast as possible.

Moulana Ilyas was also conscious that many of the customary practices of the Meos went against the Shariat. Some ulemas were trying to stop such practices but had not met with much success. The Moulana came to the conclusion that in order to achieve reform, people must be prepared to accept reform. People must be made conscious of their duty towards God – they must be brought closer to *din* (Faith). This, he said, was like preparing the land fit for cultivation. After the Moulana returned from his second *hajj*, in 1927, he called a public meeting at Nuh. At this *ijtimah* (religious meeting), the Moulana put forward his idea of the *jamaats* moving from one village to another in order to influence people. This idea met with a very warm response. Within a month, a *jamaat* of eight persons had been formed. The *jamaat* moved out of its village of origin, Ferozepur - Namak, and moved to other villages reaching a town called Sonna next Friday. The Friday congregation prayers were offered at Sonna and again the movement began. The next two Friday prayers were held at Taoru (in Rajasthan) and Nagina (district Gurgaon) towns. This was the first *tablighi jammat*. It consisted of the Mewatis and toured villages within Mewat. It is claimed that Moulana Ilyas got his idea of the *jamaat* going about persuading people to say their prayers during his stay at Ferozepur Namak in Nuh tehsil in Gurgaon district. A few villagers, who had received training in a religious institution in Delhi, used to exhort their neighbours to attend Friday prayers in the village mosque. When Moulana Ilyas saw this, he was excited by the idea and wanted them to go out to the adjoining villages.

In 1933, the Moulana performed *hajj* for the third time, and on his return he plunged himself in the *Tablighi* work with greater zeal. He went to Mewat with a big group consisting of over one hundred persons. He divided his group into smaller batches and asked them to go to different villages. They were asked to persuade the peasants to say prayers along with them. He then thought of sending the Meos to areas outside Mewat so that they could meet non-Meo Muslims and learn more about Islam from this association. For this he looked towards the adjoining area of Western Uttar Pradesh (Saharanpur and Muzaffarnagar districts) as representative of the Islamic way of life. The first Mewati *jamaat* was sent to Kandhla in Muzaffarnagar district, the birth place of Moulana Ilyas.

Moulana Ilyas was very systematic in his work of *Tabligh* in Mewat. He had a map of Mewat prepared in which information regarding roads, names of villages, population figures of each village, and names of the prominent Meos was given. A number of *jamaats* were set up, which included non-Meo Muslims, and they started touring the villages in Mewat. In this way the Moulana brought the Muslims of different communities together, hoping to bring them closer culturally. Hasni (n.d.:96) writes, After many such tours within and outside Mewat, the Mewatis took to Islamic dress, the bangles of hands and the earrings vanished. Men started sporting beard, anti-Shariat customs of marriage became less. Drinking liquor, to which the Meos were addicted, was given up. Crimes, riots and immoral behaviour began to show decrease in incidence.

The Moulana exhorted the Meos to go to the well-known centers of Islamic learning such as Deoband, Saharanpur, Raipur (U.P.) and Thana Bhand (U.P.). The *jamaats* were sent to these centers, from where they spread to other villages nearby. Moulana Ilyas was not content with only changing the customs and habits of the Mewatis. He desired that even their language should change into Arabic. At least the students should speak Arabic within the precincts of the *madrasa* (Hasni, n.d.: 228-29).

The Moulana could not tolerate any infringement of the Shariat laws. In a letter to a friend, the Moulana wrote: It should be emphasized that the panchayats and the other activities must be in accordance with the Shariat. If the laws of Shariat are disobeyed or disregarded, then Islam is finished and *kafur* comes up (Hasni, n.d.: 233).

EFFECTS OF THE TABLIGH

Though the Tabligh movement was initiated in the late twenties of the twentieth century in the Mewat region, its influence had been largely imperceptible before Independence. After 1947 its influence increased tremendously, especially in the Haryana region of Mewat. As a result of the Tabligh movement, the degree of Islamic influence on the Meo culture increased considerably. Islamization was conceived of as a transformation of social customs and practices along the lines indicated by the scriptures. The culture of the Meos is undergoing Islamization rapidly. The process of Islamization involves the elimination of non-Islamic or traditional Hindu elements on the one hand, and, on the other, the conscious and deliberate introduction of what are perceived as Islamic practices.

The life-cycle rituals are being Islamized and the Hindu elements are being weeded out. Singing by women when *baraat* party enters the *bakhal* has been declared to be undesirable. Use of turmeric and rice and yellowish cotton thread has been stopped as it is associated with Hindu symbols. The practice of deciding the auspicious day has been given up resulting in the elimination of the role of the Brahmin. *Neq*, the customary gift for the serving castes which were given by the bridegroom's party at the *bhaddar* ceremony, have been given up. Other customs associated with marriage—such as, *chak pujna*, *kuan pujna*, the custom of the newly weds visiting the graves of *pirs* and *bhairon*, etc. — have also been stopped. The *tablighi jamaats* and the religious leaders (Mullas and Maulvis) emphasize on reducing the wedding rituals to the barest possible extent. Some new ceremonies, such as *akika* on the birth of a son, have been introduced.

The Tabligh movement also deprecates the holding of *urs* and the custom of visiting the graves of saints (*pirs*) or ancestors, as this amounts to worshipping which goes against the tenets of Islam. So the worship of *mazars*, of culture heroes and saints (Sayyid) and the local deities has been gradually abandoned.

The celebration of Hindu festivals such as *Holi*, *Diwali* and *Dussehra*, *Goverdhan* and *Teej* has also been stopped. In the mixed villages, the Meos are asked to avoid participation in these festivals. Islamic festivals such as *Id-ul-Zuha* and *Id-ul-Fitr*, are increasingly given great importance.

Even the celebration of certain Muslim festivals such as *Muharram* is being discouraged. On *Muharram*, *tazias* were brought out in big villages. These were taken round the village, followed by a procession of mourners, to be finally dismantled. The decorated *tazias* were considered sacred and women even worshipped them. In some village *chalisa* was also observed. This was meant to mark the fortieth day after the martyrdom of the third Imam Husain and his associates. It was treated as a day of jubilation and a *mela* was held on the day. These festivals are also being discouraged as they are considered to be deviations from orthodox Islamic practices. A non-Meo Imam, who had opposed the observance of *Muharram* in a village, expressed his indignation to me: 'Those people are ignorant of the true knowledge of Islam. These ten days of the month should be spent in prayer and remembrance only.' The Meos, especially the younger ones, did not like the interference of the Pesh-Imam in their traditional affairs.

The Tabligh movement has resulted in the rapid Islamisation of Meo society. Two related processes are involved: the gradual elimination of the syncretic elements of the traditional Meo culture which one considered un-Islamic; and the increasing trend towards religious orthodoxy. They are seeking to assert their Islamic identity. The assertion of Muslim identity has increased since partition. The Meos had passed through traumatic experiences of communal riots and the forced attempt at reconversion at the time of partition (Aggarwal, 1969: 1677-81). The Tabligh

movement has definitely fostered cultural unity among diverse Muslim communities in India (Singh, 1973: 76). Such Islamic identity becomes quite apparent during the critical phases such as communal riots or the demolition of Babri Mosque in 1992. At the same time Meos have not given up their ethnic identity. They seek to consolidate their Meo identity. They are very conscious of their distinct history. The historical narratives of their traditional culture heroes are still remembered. They conceive themselves as a high caste claiming Rajput descent. They distinguish themselves from the service castes of Hindus as well as Muslims. The Meos bury their dead in their own cemetery. Other Muslim castes have separate cemetery.

The Meos still practise endogamy and value it strongly. The social structure of the community is still based on *pal* and *got*. The political significance of *gots* and *pals* has diminished but not eliminated. The Meo marriage system has not undergone basic structural changes. *Got* exogamy is very rigidly adhered. They still avoid parallel cousin marriage. Marriage with patrilineal cross-cousin or the first matrilineal cross-cousin is avoided. They maintain a clear distinction between wife-giver and wife-receiver.

Father's sister and mother's brother play important role in marriage ceremonies.

In short the Meos participate in the regional caste system having economic, political and relations with Muslim and Hindu castes of the area. The kinship structure distinguishes them from other Muslim communities.

Thus the Meo identity can be viewed at two levels; on the one hand they have developed strong Muslim identity. The Tabligh movement has been very crucial in creating this horizontal religious identity among the diverse Muslim communities in India (Singh, 1973: 76). On the other hand Meos have retained the traditional ethnic identity based on the caste, kinship and other features of social organisation. They have made conscious efforts to retain their Meo ethnic identity. They provide an interesting example of social and cultural diversity within the broad Islamic identity at the national level.

KEY WORDS Islamization, Muslim Identity, Tabligh Movement, Meo Ethnic Identity, Moulana Ilyas, Shariat, Sufi Order, Islamic Movement, Mewat.

ABSTRACT Many Muslim communities in India show the persistence of non-Islamic cultural features. This has resulted in the existence of heterogeneity among the Indian Muslims. Some authors assert that ultimately all Muslim communities will shed the pre-Islamic and non-Islamic features and show movement towards high tradition of orthodox form of Islam. The alternative view point that Islam in India must be studied in anthropological perspective of viewing their cultural in totality of both the Islamic and non-Islamic practices. The author examines the case of the Meos of Haryana who were Islamized but continue to exhibit many non-Islamic features in their social structure. Thus the Meos have retained their separate ethnic identity while moving towards greater Islamization.

NOTES

1. For various accounts of the movement see Haq (1972), Faruqi (1971), Marwah (1984), Metcalf (1993) and Talib (1997).
2. See Ahmad (1964:201-17) and Mujeeb (1967:277-82).
3. For the Ahmadiyah movement, see Farquhar (1919:137-148), and Lavan (1974).
4. See Mujeeb (1967), Ahmad (1967: 11-56) and Jain (1965).
5. See Ahmad (1967: 113-22) and Titus (1959:195-97).
6. Refer to Elliot and Dawson, Vol. III (1964: 103-5); Lal (1963:58) and William Crooke (1907:143-44).
7. See Shakur (1974). The title of the book is itself very suggestive. Also, see Aggarwal (1971).
8. According to the Census Report of 1811, conversion took place about the time of Allauddin-Ghori. See W.W. Hunter (1964), however who states that conversion took place after the invasion of Mahmud Ghaznavi in the eleventh century.
9. For a detailed account of his life, see Haq (1972), also see Amir-Ali (1970:33-45); Aggarwal (1969:1677-81); Ferozepur (n.d.); and Hasni (n.d.).

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