

The Tabligh Jama'at and Islamic revivalism in Fiji

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Abstract

Approximately 60,000 labourers travelled from various parts of India between 1879 and 1916 to Fiji to work in the sugarcane fields. Over seven thousand of these were Muslims who, like their fellow Indians, hoped to return home after earning enough money in Fiji. However, after the end of their tenure, some remained to start a new life in Fiji. Muslims gradually established themselves and their religious life started to flourish. Over time, as Muslims became better organised and more resourceful in Fiji, Islam slowly assumed a public and institutionalised role. However, it also developed in a syncretic manner because of the intimate interactions and mutual support structures between Muslims and Hindus. Over the last several decades, Islam in Fiji has taken a new turn with the arrival of the Tabligh Jama'at. There is a process of de-syncretisation in motion involving the abandoning of certain symbols and practices associated with "popular" Islam and the promotion of strict observance of scripturally based teachings and practices among Muslims. In the literature such a phenomenon is known as Islamic revivalism. This paper investigates Tabligh Jama'at's revivalist activities in Fiji. It particularly concentrates on the movement's approach to proselytisation and reconfiguration of Muslim identity in Fiji.

Keywords: indentured system, Islam, proselytisation, revivalism, Tabligh Jama'at

Introduction

Fiji is a small island republic situated in the western Pacific, an archipelago with over 300 islands in total. The two main islands are Viti Levu and Vanua Levu. Suva, the capital, is located on Viti Levu, the largest of all Fijian islands. The British colonised the islands in 1874. The Colony of Fiji was a British crown colony which Britain ruled from 10 October 1874 to 10 October 1970 when Fiji became independent. Following a series of coups d'état in 1987, Fiji was declared a republic.

The British colonial authorities' interest in Fiji was to develop a sugar cane industry for which they needed a consistent supply of labour. They were reluctant to use Indigenous labour and intrude on the Fijian way of life and the importation of labour from the neighbouring Solomon Islands and Vanuatu triggered objections in the United Kingdom. The colonial authorities, therefore, looked to other British colonies for labour and they found it in British India. Between 1879 and 1916, approximately 60,000 Indian indentured labourers arrived in Fiji in a total of 42 ships during 87 voyages (Ali 1980).

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Indian indentured labourers were recruited to work in the sugarcane fields during the British colonial reign. Out of the approximately 60,000 Indian indentured labourers about seven and a half thousand were Muslim (Brennan, et al. 1992). Islam was brought to Fiji by these Muslim indentured labourers. Islam has played a crucial role since its introduction to the Fiji Islands, developing and organising the social, cultural, and economic lives of Muslim residents.

Fiji's current population is 884,887 with the Taukei (the Indigenous settlers of Fiji) making up about 56.8% of the total Fijian population, followed by Indo-Fijians (37.5%), Rotumans (1.2%), and others (Europeans, other Pacific Islanders, and Chinese) (4.5%). In regards to religion, Christianity is the nation's main religion, followed by Hinduism and then Islam (Lal 2016). 64.5% of Indigenous Fijians are Christian from various Christian denominations; 27.9% are Hindu, 6.3% are Muslim, 0.6% identify as 'other', and 0.8% identify as 'no faith' (Index Mundi).

A vast majority of Muslims in Fiji are Sunni (Sunnis stress the primacy of sunnah – the Prophet Muhammad's sayings and deeds), most of whom are followers of the Hanafi school of jurisprudence. Ahmadis, who are considered by a majority Muslims globally to be a heterodox group, are in the minority among Fijian Muslims. Within the Sunni group, there are various sub-sects or out-groups such as Ahl-i-Hadithis (an off-shoot of the Wahhabi movement), Miladis (a part of Indian Barelvīs who follow the Maturidi school of Islamic theology), and the Tablighis (members of the Tabligh Jama'at who subscribe to Deobandism—an Indo-Pakistani reformist ulema movement centred in the Dar al-Ulum of Deoband).

When Islam first arrived in Fiji, it did not have a significant public presence. The first Muslims to land in Fiji were only nominally Muslim. Under the harsh conditions of indenture, they practiced their faith privately, to varying degrees and in various forms, whenever possible. When the indentured labour system was abolished in 1916, Muslim numbers gradually increased through birth and migration and Islam assumed a public and institutionalised role fortified by Muslims becoming better organised and more resourceful, particularly under the umbrella body of the Fiji Muslim League (1926). However, Islam in Fiji developed nuances of syncretism because of the close interaction and established mutual support structures between Muslims and Hindus.

Over the last four decades, Islam in Fiji has taken a new turn. With the arrival of the Tabligh Jama'at in 1968, Islam in Fiji has progressively undergone a systematic religious 'purification' and 'reinvigoration' as part of the global phenomenon of Islamic revivalism. Islamic revivalism is a global sociological phenomenon constituted by a wide diversity of Islamic revivalist movements. It has always been localised in nature and represents a defensive reaction to the uncertainties or crisis situations prevailing in numerous Muslim societies (Dekmejian 1995). Yet in many ways these uncertainties or crisis situations in different national settings are strikingly similar, giving Islamic revivalist movements a trans-national character.

These uncertainties or crisis situations, from an Islamic revivalist perspective, are typically attributed to the negative consequences of modernity. Modernity is seen by the revivalists largely in a negative light. It is described by revivalists as jahiliyah (ignorance or a state of un-Islam). Revivalist resistance to modernity has its roots in Muslim responses to European colonialism and imperialism at the turn of the twentieth century. However, modernity is not viewed as completely fruitless or as constituting a total state of jahiliyah; only certain aspects of it, namely secularisation and Westernisation, are perceived in such a way. Hence Islamic revivalism is not so much a rejection but a defensive reaction to modernity or to a state of jahiliyah.

For Islamic revivalists, the promise of modernity—that is, greater secularisation and the application of rational thought to address the problems of societies—have not brought an end to human suffering. Poverty, unemployment, inequality, homelessness, racial and religious discrimination, crime, corruption, human exploitation, underdevelopment, poor education, environmental degradation, and numerous other social ills plague even the wealthiest and most technologically advanced societies such as Australia and the United States.

This article explores the role the Tablighi Jama'at has played over the years in reviving Islam in Fiji as part of the global phenomenon of Islamic revivalism. Islamic revivalism is a Muslim desire for a return to Islamic origins—the essentials of the faith as detailed in the primary scripture of Islam, the Qur'an, and the secondary source of scriptural authority, the sunnah (the sayings and actions of Prophet Muhammad, compiled into collections called the hadith). It concentrates on the movement's proselytising strategy embodied in Tablighi rituals and practices and examines the refinement and reconfiguration of Muslim identity in Fiji in which the Tablighi Jama'at has made much investment.

Origins and Evolution of Islam in Fiji

Islam is an Arabic word. It is a verbal noun deriving from the trilateral or triconsonantal Arabic root S-L-M (sin, lam, mem). This root appears in a sizeable collection of words chiefly relating to concepts of totality, submission, and peace. The root word of Islam is 'al-silm' meaning 'submission' or 'surrender'. In a religious sense, Islam means complete surrender or submission to Allah (God). Islam is an Abrahamic monotheistic religion. Its doctrine subscribes to a faith in a single incomparable God and the prophethood of Muhammad as the seal of prophets (the final prophet). Those who submit to Allah are called Muslims.

Islam is often described as a *din* (the complete way of life) and rests on five pillars. Islam's holy book, the Qur'an, presents the five pillars as a framework for worship. They consist of:

- i. shahadah (testification of the unity of God and prophethood of Muhammad);
- ii. salat (five ritual prayers);
- iii. zakat (almsgiving);
- iv. saum (fasting during the month of Ramadan); and
- v. hajj (the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in a believer's lifetime).

In 610 CE, the Prophet Muhammad, at the age of 40, established Islam in the Arabian Peninsula after receiving revelations from God that were conveyed to him by the archangel Gabriel. From there, Islam gradually developed and spread to various parts of the world. Today, Islam is practiced by Muslims in every country on the planet. It is the second largest world religion after Christianity, with a global Muslim population of 1.8 billion people, or 24% of the global population (The Changing Global Religious Landscape 2017).

The first Muslims to arrive in Fiji were primarily from North India, although some also travelled from South India, mainly from the Madras Presidency governed by the British and the princely states of Mysore, Travancore, Hyderabad, and Cochin (Ali 1976). Approximately seven and a half thousand Muslims entered Fiji under the indenture system to work in the sugarcane fields (Brennan, et al. 1992). The indenture system was essentially a labour contract regulating the labourers' recruitment and living conditions. It was a harsh system with no specific provision for the preservation or practice of cultural and religious tradition. There is no evidence that Muslims who arrived in Fiji as indentured labourers were especially devout but those who had any yearning to preserve their religious rites such as daily ritual prayers, practices such as fasting in the holy

month of Ramadan, and festivals such as Eid al-Adha (feast of sacrifice) proved extremely challenging under the harsh reality of the indenture system. There were no mosques or religious scholars and “[t]hrough plantation life was not conducive to the maintenance of religious values, Muslims nonetheless clung to their religion” (Ali 1980: 108). Similarly, Andrews and Pearson (1918) note that religious decline during indenture in Fiji had been much slower amongst Muslims than Hindus and that, by and large, Muslims managed to preserve their social system and religious life. Individuals achieved this to varying degrees, depending on the extent of personal religious conviction and an Islam-based identity.

As stated above, Muslims in Fiji initially lacked competent leaders and mosques. Though self-styled maulvis (Muslim teachers) existed, their recognition and authority were limited. Mullah Mirza Khan was an exception who organised his own travel from India to Fiji in 1898 to offer his services in religious instruction (Ali 1981). In around “1900 a mosque was built at Navua by public subscription on land bestowed by the Fiji Sugar Company, with the Mullah in charge at first; shortly afterward another small mosque and school were erected at Nausori on land leased from the C.S.R. company” (Gillion 1962: 149). Mullah Mirza Khan invested heavily in promoting Muslim interests and spreading Islam in Fiji and became a venerated Muslim leader. However, his status declined following the emergence of various Muslim associations such as the Anjuman-i-Hidayat-ul-Islam in 1915, Anjuman Ishait El Islam in 1916, and Anjuman-e-Islam in 1919 (Ali 1980).

By 1920, “there were three or four schools, and three buildings in country districts for worship; in Suva, the capital, where there were only 70 Muslims, there was neither mosque nor school” (Ali 1980: 109). Gradually, the period from the end of the indenture system in 1920 to the mid-1970s saw the considerable growth in Islam in Fiji. The Fiji Muslim League representing all Muslims in Fiji came into being in 1926. Through it, Muslims in Fiji gained increased exposure to the wider Muslim world. The ulema (Muslim scholars) from India, Pakistan, and other Muslim countries began to pay serious attention to Fijian Muslims. The importation of Muslim scholars to Fiji increased and at the same time young Fijian Muslim men were sent abroad to seek religious education at Islamic institutions in India and various other Muslim countries. The Fiji Muslim League led the drive to secure funding and scholarships from established Muslim institutions in India and Pakistan and also successfully lobbied the Saudi Arabian government for financial aid.

Islam was gradually becoming institutionalised in Fiji. By 1995, there were 21 Sunni primary schools, eight Sunni high schools, and one Ahmadi primary school and high school (Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology 1996: 2). There was also a sudden surge of mosques and markazes (prayer halls) to cater for an increased demand for congregational prayers, recitation of the Qur’an, and other religious activities. Muslim women’s associations such as the Rewa Zananah League and the Suva Zananah League were established to cater for women’s religious and social needs (Ali 2003).

Over the past few decades, there has been a dramatically increased interest in Islamic rituals and practices. There are visible changes in the dressing styles of Muslim men and women who, under the influence of the Tabligh Jama’at, have abandoned traditional Indian attire and adopted more Arab-looking clothing. Muslim women who never covered their head before are now wearing the hijab (headscarf). There is a greater emphasis on the pardah (segregation of the sexes). Muslims who would only a few years ago have spent recreational time in the cinemas or drinking yagoona (kava) are spending more time in the mosques and places of worship (Ali 2003). The Tabligh Jama’at has invested tremendous effort in proselytisation through education (members organise meetings weekly in mosques and prayer halls to impart Islamic knowledge) and preaching tours (visiting people in their homes). The result is an ideological change—a sharp shift from the Indianisation of Muslim cultural practices to a broader espousal of Islamic culture and values, and to the scriptural precepts that inform the daily routines of Muslim life.

Tabligh Jama'at in Fiji and Islamic Revivalism

The Tabligh Jama'at (which means 'a group conveying the message of Islam') is an apolitical Islamic revivalist movement. It emerged within the Muslim Meo community in Mewat, approximately sixty kilometres south of Delhi, India, as a direct response to the rise of the Hindu Arya Samaj sect. The two proselytising movements of shuddhi (purification) and sangathan (consolidation) of the Arya Samaj sect were engaged in large-scale efforts to 'win back' 'strayed' Hindus who had accepted Islam during a period of Muslim political hegemony in India. To counter Arya Samaj proselytising among the Muslim Meos, the Tabligh Jama'at embarked on a mission of Islamic faith renewal among the Meo community of Mewat and subsequently the wider Muslim community in India. It sought to do this by "seeking out ordinary Muslims and inviting them to undertake missionary work, da'wa or tabligh" (Metcalf 1994: 707).

To respond to the Arya Samaji threat to Islam, Mawlana Muhammad Ilyas, a Deoband educated scholar, argued that practical measures were needed, so he established the Tabligh Jama'at in 1927. The aim of the movement has been, since its inception, to purify Muslims from religious syncretism and 'remake' them into better Muslims or 'model citizens of the world'—examples for the rest of humanity to emulate.

The views and beliefs of the Tabligh Jama'at rest on the following six principles, of which the first two belong also to the five pillars of Islam:

- i. shahadah (testification of the unity of God and prophethood of Muhammad);
- ii. salat (five daily ritual prayers);
- iii. ilm (knowledge) and dhikr (remembrance of God);
- iv. ikram-i Muslim (respect for every Muslim);
- v. ikhlas-i niyat (emendation of intention and sincerity); and
- vi. tafriq-i waqt (spare time).

The survival of the Tabligh Jama'at depends on the khuruj (preaching tour). The khuruj is the 'engine' that drives the Tabligh Jama'at. It has three key elements—ta'lim (teaching), jola (preaching mission) and bayan (speech). Through khuruj the Tabligh Jama'at seeks self-reformation in Muslims. Typically, khuruj operates under the movement's six principles and involves forming a group of approximately ten members and embarking on a preaching tour for a specific period of time—three days in a month, forty days in a year, and four months in a life time—to learn din (religion) in order to reform oneself and then help others embrace din in their lives. Learning din involves studying the Tablighi text, the Faza'il-e-A'maal, and imparting its contents to fellow Muslims (Ali 2012).

All this is driven by the Tablighi ideology which centres on the relationship between the faithful and Allah (Gaborieau 2000). Its central claim is that nothing is more important and worthwhile than establishing this relationship and cherishing it (Metcalf 1996b). This relationship is responsible for the source, the importance, and the final approval of the values of morality and their incorporation into a distinct socio-cultural and legal structure (Ali 2010). According to the Tablighi ideology, all of life rests on this relationship. For this reason, the faithful Tablighi tenaciously embrace the notion that an 'Allah cognisant' attitude can be evoked and life can be oriented towards Allah's commands. The faithful should feel constant nearness to Allah. The relation between the Tablighi and Allah is embedded in a certain common socio-physiological basis. A Tablighi achieves this through his or her introduction to the movement and training in conveying the message of Islam (doing tabligh), routines, and rituals through which he or she learns about

Allah, gets to know about His omniscience and omnipotence, and ultimately, through pure spiritual devotion, feels a constant nearness to Him.

The literature on the launching and spread of the Tabligh Jama'at in Fiji is almost nonexistent. However, a Fijian Tablighi anecdote suggests that the Tabligh Jama'at was first introduced to Fiji in 1968 when six Tablighis of Indian descent from Zambia arrived on a preaching mission. They worked with some local Muslims in Nadi (a town on the main Fijian Island of Viti Levu) where they first arrived and moved to other urban centres on the island. After this first visit of Tablighis from overseas, more visits were organised by other Tablighis—particularly from India and Pakistan. By the 1980s, Fiji had become an important destination for Tabligh work and it continues to be so.

Once the Tabligh Jama'at was firmly established in Fiji and Tablighi activity started to gain acceptance in the Muslim community, the movement began to make consistent progress and expanded to all main towns and cities on the two large islands of Fiji— Viti Levu and Vanua Levu. In all these areas, the Tabligh Jama'at has been able to exercise considerable influence over the Muslim population and paved the way for Islam to undergo a monumental transformation. It is only possible in this short piece to examine a few important aspects of the dynamics and the scope of this transformation.

Like elsewhere, the Tabligh Jama'at in Fiji has concentrated on reforming nominal Muslims by engaging them in the fundamentals of Islam. Muslims, both men and women, who once did not know how to pray, were unaware of the distinction between halal (permissible) and haram (impermissible), could not read the Qur'an, had no basic knowledge and understanding of Islam (for example, of its five pillars), practiced gender integration, stayed away from the mosque, and engaged in secular pursuits, became pious and devout Muslims through the Tablighi initiative inspiring spiritual enlightenment and self-reformation. Supporters of Tabligh Jama'at believe that Muslims have reached new heights of religious consciousness: their piety has risen, their vigilance in gender roles and segregation has increased, and syncretistic elements from former religious practices have been removed. Consequently, the public appearance of Islam has become more visible through Muslim men sporting beards and wearing traditional Muslim attire including the shalwar (baggy trousers) and kameez (long shirt), and women donning the hijab (headscarf), burqa (body length loose gown with face covering), and niqab (a face covering). Islam's public appearance has been made further visible through the emergence of a plethora of mussallahs (prayer halls) and markazes (religious centres).

What is particularly striking about the Tabligh Jama'at in Fiji is the movement's emphasis on symbols that work as markers of identity positioning Tablighis as different from non-Tablighi Muslims and Hindus. Encouraging Muslims to abandon standard dress (shirt and trousers for men and sari and dress for women), Indian practices and customs such as the celebration of the Hindu holi (festival celebrating colours) and the Muslim tazia (religious procession) and niyaz (offering), and the Fijian national pastime of yagoona drinking have been integral to the Tablighi revivalist strategy. The strategy involves the negotiation and reconstruction of a separate Muslim identity in the broader structure of Fijian society. For the Tabligh Jama'at, a new collective identity is critical and to achieve it, the movement has adopted a strategy of uniting Muslims in Fiji through the reconstruction of certain boundaries. Old boundaries based on language, ethnicity, social class, and socio-economic status are reduced in favour of new fixed social boundaries relating to every aspect of everyday life. The new boundaries are what revivalists see as pristine Islamic tradition, based on the Qur'an and hadith. For many Tablighis then, moving away from existing associations and routines of mundane life to spiritual activities or the quest for Allah means participating in the process of forming a new identity.

The series of changes introduced by the Tabligh Jama'at into the lives of Muslims in Fiji and elsewhere is actually a transformation of identity:

This transformation seeks to then nullify the dominant modes of material existence and modern practices that stand in the way of piety, spiritual elevation, and the creation of a Muslim ummah. Therefore, the tabligh activity functions as a means to salvation in the life hereafter. In this way the tabligh work helps the construction of new symbolic definitions of collective identity and posits new models of legitimising piety in line with pristine Islam (Ali 2003: 179).

Here, Tablighi ideology and worldview resonates with Islamic revivalists more broadly who feel that modern values and ways steer Muslims away from Allah and threaten Islamic identity. Modern values and ways promote the idea that happiness and success lie in the possession of material wealth, which ultimately leads to a questioning of the value of religious fundamentals. Under conditions of modernity, Tablighi believe, society has departed from a religiously authorised blueprint of how individuals should behave and from the values that should be upheld by society as a whole. Hence, in modernity, the ideals of the modern self, with its emphasis on self-actualisation and consumption, are perceived as spiritually empty. In this context, the re-establishment of tradition offers a way to regain a sense of purpose, meaning and spiritual fulfilment.

Thus, Tablighis and Islamic revivalists generally make themselves 'border-markers'. Although Muslims in general are concerned with the moral good and divine truth, revivalist Muslims pay much greater attention to them. They are strict in their attitude towards religious texts (Almond, Appleby, and Silvan, 2003) and lay great stress on the idea that there is only one single and unchangeable interpretation of religious norms and ideals which is binding for all believers. They tend to ardently promote and defend this approach as exclusively their own invention and see themselves in a supreme and more elevated position than the rest of the Muslim population. Importantly, revivalist Muslims emphasise Muslims forming an ummah (a single community of believers) and stipulate that they be bounded by Islam. For revivalists, a strong sense of being a religious community member, not the individual, is important. It is this aspect of Islamic identity that is most likely to translate group membership of Muslim revivalists into an in-group based orientation. The feeling among revivalist Muslims is that their shared views, norms, and ideals bring them together and create a deep feeling of obligation to stick together and to define themselves in opposition to the rest of the Muslim population and the population in general. Thus, they articulate sharp religious boundaries between social groups, that is, in-group (us) and out-groups (them) and strive to distinguish themselves from others through increased religious diligence such as wearing Islamic dress, offering ritual prayers, observing gender rules and engaging in da'wah (preaching). At the same time, they seek to extend their sphere of influence through proselytising. Their attentiveness to monitoring and implementing belief and practice abreast with their commitment to modelling the 'proper way' has produced a set of representational creeds and observances that set them apart from 'less pious' Muslims.

Tablighi boundary building around diverse points of contact with 'outsiders' in Fiji is not a reflection of animosity towards the out-group or of not wanting to belong, but of actively seeking a separate identity to feel as though one is an authentic Muslim; a Muslim whose source of religious instructions and ideals emerge from Islamic scriptural sources and not from tradition where rituals and practices are imitatively replicated.

Conclusion

The prevailing Fijian environment was not conducive to religious practices and the British colonial authorities never had an appetite for religious activities. Fiji was an occupied territory when Islam arrived between 1879 and 1916 and in such an environment the challenges and struggles for Muslims proved enormous and overwhelming. Islam found itself struggling to survive under the harsh conditions of the indenture system but survive it did.

With a growing Muslim population, Islamic zeal and serious religious commitment in Fiji Islam began to flourish once the indenture system was abolished in 1916. Around this time Islam's institutional development found momentum and by 1980s refined religious practices in the work of the Tabligh Jama'at began to pervade the Muslim community. Refined religious practices were part of a larger global phenomenon of Islamic revivalism which sought to remove foreign accretions from Muslim religious rituals and practices and replace them with Qur'anic and hadithic values. This process remains current and has helped refine and reconfigure Muslim identity in Fiji and to transform Islam from a religion characterised by syncretism and foreign accretions to one reflecting the scriptural values embodied in the Qur'an and hadiths. It is this transformed and revived Islam that many Muslims in Fiji identify with— one that mirrors the Islam which is currently emerging under the rubric of Islamic revivalism.

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