



# Early Phase Of Conversion Of Meo Muslims From Following Hindu Practices To Islamic Orthodoxy (1926–1940)

**Nirbhay Mishra**  
Phd Scholar  
MSU Baroda

## Abstract

This paper aims to understand the early phase of the transformation of the Meo Muslim community under the influence of Tablighi Jamaat (1926-1940) in the Mewat region. Meo Muslims followed a syncretic blend of Hindu and Islamic practices. Tablighi Jamaat was an Islamic revivalist movement that changed that. This was because Maulana Muhammad of Tablighi Jamaat believed that Meo Muslims deviated from true Islamic teachings. The fundamental objective of Tablighi Jamaat was that Meo Muslims should be brought to the fold of Deobandi Islam. This was also done to create a more conservative Islamic base. The movement was successful and led to a major identity shift in the region of Mewat. This marked a further change in social identities and led to the solidification of a more communal one. It was tied to a strong sense of Muslim solidarity or the feeling of Ummah, which transcended affiliation with the local culture. The research paper is to understand the grassroots approach of Tablighi Jamaat and how they established madrasas and religious study circles. They went on preaching missions known as *Khuruj*.

## Introduction

The Mewat region is spread across three modern Indian states: Haryana, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh. Meo Muslims primarily reside in this region. This region has its own unique cultural and religious history. Despite conversion to Islam, Meo Muslims continued to follow their ancestral Hindu practices, which represented a unique cultural and religious blend and unity. They continued to celebrate Hindu festivals like Diwali and Holi. They followed religious customs intertwined with Hindu customs, and their social structure was based on the Hindu caste system. If we focus on the 20th-century ethnographic reports, we will find that this cultural unity and following Hindu rituals despite getting converted to Islam was not an exception or symbolic, but it was part of Meo identity.<sup>1</sup>

Maulana Muhammad Ilyas saw the practices and influence of Hinduism as a threat to the Islamic faith.<sup>2</sup> There was a rise of Islamic Revival movements during the 20th century, and Tablighi Jamaat emerged as one of the most powerful movements. They chose Mewat for their activism because he believed that the practices of Meos were not truly Islamic and were a distraction from original Islamic theology. Because of Tablighi Jamaat's efforts, the socio-religious practices of Meos moved their syncretic Hindu Muslim practice to a more Puritan Islamic practice.

Tablighi Jamaat's followed the Deobandi sect of Islam. They focus exclusively on the Shariat and follow the Islam of the Prophet's times. Any innovation known as Bid'ah, which was and is

unIslamic, was considered Haram or forbidden. Tablighi Jamaat wanted to transform Meo Muslims into a more orthodox Muslim society by eradicating Hindu practices from their community, like taking seven rounds around a ceremonial fire, celebrating Holi and Diwali; and giving mixed Hindu Muslim names to their kids. Maulana Muhammad Ilyas and Tablighi Jamaat actively worked to transform Meo into a more Islamic orthodox community. Government reports and Ilyas personal letters suggest how Jamaat transformed Meos. In one of his letters, Maulana Ilyas wrote: "The Meos must shed their attachment to false practices and embrace the true path of Islam as guided by the Quran and Sunnah".<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Census of India 1911, Detailed records of Meo cultural and religious practices, National Archives of India .

<sup>2</sup> Ilyas, 1927, speech transcript, Mewat Mosque Archives

<sup>3</sup> Ilyas, 1932, Correspondence, Darul Uloom Deoband Archives).

There were social, political, and religious implications of this transformation. There is a concept among Muslims known as Ummah (Muslim brotherhood). The activism of Tablighi Jamaat integrated Meo Muslims into the broader community of Muslim Ummah by slowly eradicating Hindu practices within their community. This transformation of Meo Muslims took place when there was growing tension among Hindus and Muslims across the subcontinent during India's freedom struggle in the 20th century. In the paper, primary sources such as government records, Maulana Mohammed Ilyas's writings and testimonies are used to understand how the socio-religious landscape was changing in Mewat from 1926 to 1940. Tablighi Jamaat introduced the practice of Nikah, They propagated the Quran and its teachings and pushed Meos away from Hindu practices. Slowly, Meos gave up their identity, which was embedded in Hindu-Muslim syncretic culture and transformed into a more orthodox Muslim community. This paper is an attempt to contribute to the understanding of how the socio-religious landscape of Mewat changed and how attempts by Tabliqi Jamaat at the grassroots level integrated Meo Muslims into the larger Muslim group at the global level.

The Meos were primarily an agricultural community, and their socio-cultural and religious life was very different from the other Sunni Muslims of other parts of the Indian subcontinent. The reason behind the religious practices of Meo Muslims, which had greater Hindu influence, was the hold and commitment of Meos to their Indigenous culture. Colonial ethnographic records and administrative documents reveal a deeper picture of Meo's hybrid religious practices. The *Census of India* (1911) describes the Meos as Muslims "in name only," noting their widespread adherence to Hindu customs. These included participation in Hindu festivals such as Holi and Diwali, consulting Brahmin priests

for auspicious dates, and observing Hindu marriage and funeral rites.<sup>4</sup> Their social

structure was based on Hindu caste dynamics, with clan-based divisions (*gotras*) playing a key role in marriages and socio-religious life. William Crooke, in his work *The Tribes and Castes of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh* (1896), documented that the Meos maintained a dual religious identity, with some practising Islamic rituals such as circumcision and burial but simultaneously engaging in Hindu worship practices. Crooke notes: "The Meos keep one foot in each religion, performing namaz in the mosque while

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<sup>4</sup> Census of India, 1911, Vol. IV, pp. 112-115

also offering prayers at Hindu shrines".<sup>5</sup> During the 1930s, many older members of Meo communities never saw any contradiction in following Hindu practices despite being Muslims because they saw it as a part of maintaining social harmony. They identified as Muslims and practised Hindu rituals.<sup>6</sup>

One of the reasons behind this cultural unity and syncretic practices was because the Meos saw themselves more as an agrarian community rather than focusing on the religious aspect of it. This agrarian component gave way to communal unity in place of religious fanaticism. They participated in Hindu festivals, which are closely related to the agricultural cycle and religious celebrations. Holi, which is a Hindu festival, was celebrated by Meos in the same way Hindus used to do it, not in a symbolic way, but they believed that it was a part of their identity.<sup>7</sup>

Unfortunately, a transition took place in the twentieth century. Meo Muslims and their religious practices faced extreme attacks from both Hindus and Muslims. Hindus viewed them as outsiders, and Muslim orthodoxy viewed them as people who were highly corrupted by Hindu practices. They were not easily accepted by both these religious classes. When the Islamic movement rose in the 19th and 20th centuries, the religious identity of Meos came under graver attack from the Deobandi sect of Sunni Islam. Deobandi's school of thought emerged as a challenge posed by British authorities to protect Islamic practices, which were on the decline; their objective was to purify Islam from unIslamic practices.<sup>8</sup> Meo, because of their syncretic practices, became the primary target of Deobandis.

The separatist nature of the communal identity of the Meos became more complex because the colonial administrators did not know which category to put them into. They classified them as a distinct group. This division also managed to create a divide between Hindus and Muslims. For instance, on one hand, the practices of Meo Muslims promoted cultural and religious unity, but at the same time, they also attracted the attention of Deobandi Muslims and Tablighi Jamaat. Maulana Mohammad Ilyas, who founded Tablighi

<sup>5</sup> Crooke, 1896, Vol. II, p. 256). (William Crooke (1896) – *The Tribes and Castes of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh*, documenting Meo cultural and religious hybridity.

<sup>6</sup> Field Notes, 1937, Mewat Oral History Project (Field Notes (1937) – Oral testimonies from elder Meos, Mewat Oral History Project)

<sup>7</sup> Census of India, 1911). (Census of India, 1911 – Reports on Meo religious and social practices, National Archives of India)

<sup>8</sup> Metcalf, B. D. (2014). *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860-1900*. United States: Princeton University Press.

Jamaat, saw Meo's religious practices as corrupt, and he expressed his concern over it. He was determined to bring Meo Muslims back to the Islamic fold and eliminate these syncretic practices.<sup>9</sup> The activism of Tablighi Jamaat resulted in the changed the identity of Meos, and this transformation has led to serious confrontations with their Hindu counterparts. Even post-independence Mewat emerged as one of the most critical communal issues of independent India.

### Emergence of the Tablighi Jamaat in Mewat (1926–1940)

Tablighi Jamaat emerged as a very powerful force in the region of Mewat. The primary reason behind the emergence of the Tablighi Jamaat was the syncretic practices of Meo Muslims. Maulana Mohammed Ilyas wanted to establish Islamic orthodoxy in the region of Mewat and among Meos. Maulana Muhammad Ilyas (1885–1944), was a Deobandi scholar. The Deobandi sect of Sunni Islam focused exclusively on the Quran and Hadith and condemned every other un-Islamic practice and Islamic innovation known as *Bidah*. Deobandis viewed any such practice as against Islam.<sup>10</sup> While Maulana Ilyas was working as a teacher at Mazahirul Uloom in Saharanpur, He came to know about the religious life and social conditions of Meo Muslims.

After Maulana Muhammad Ilyas visited Mewat in 1926, he witnessed this cultural phenomenon of Meo Muslims where they were clearly associated with Hindu practices and rituals and relied heavily on Brahmin priests. He dedicated his further activism to bringing Meo Muslims to the path of Islamic orthodoxy (Deobandi).<sup>11</sup> In one letter to a scholar, he wrote: "The state of the Meos is pitiable. They have forgotten the path of the Prophet and embraced customs alien to Islam. We must act to bring them back to the fold of Sharia".<sup>12</sup> The foundational pillar of the Tablighi Jamaat

activism in Mewat was based upon *Islah* (reform) and *dawah* (proselytization). The Tablighi Jamaat adopted various approaches to unite the Meo Muslims. There were a few pillars on which Tabliqi Jamaat activism was based:

<sup>9</sup> Ilyas, 1927, Correspondence, Darul Uloom Deoband Archives

<sup>10</sup> Metcalf, B. D. (2014). *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860-1900*. United States: Princeton University Press

<sup>11</sup> Ilyas, 1927, Correspondence, Darul Uloom Deoband Archives

<sup>12</sup> Ilyas, 1928, Personal Correspondence, Mewat Mosque Archives).

### 1. Khuruj (Proselytizing Tours)

Maulana Ilyas trained students and volunteers to carry out activism in Mewat villages. They went to each and every household. Encouraged Muslims to follow the basic pillars of Islam. Do daily prayers known as Salah or Namaz, Adopt Islamic practices and give up un Islamic practices.<sup>13</sup>

### 2. Establishment of Madrasas and Study Circles

Maulana Muhammad Ilyas established a religious, educational system to teach Islam to the young generation. They started teaching the Quran, and these educational centres became the hub of religious studies. Meo Muslim youths learned about Islam from these institutions, and they started spreading Islamic knowledge within their community.

### 3. Use of Simple Messaging

Maulana Muhammad Ilyas strengthened the Islamic identity among the Muslims of Mewat. He gave the slogan, "*Aye Musalmano! Musalman bano!*" ("O Muslims! Become true Muslims!").<sup>14</sup>

### 4. Community Solidarity

The Jamaat encouraged collective acts of worship, such as congregational prayers and fasting, to foster a sense of unity and belonging among the Meos. By creating a strong communal identity, the movement aimed to reduce the influence of Hindu practices and align the Meos more closely with the broader Muslim ummah.<sup>15</sup>

## Impact of the Tablighi Jamaat

During the last part of the 1930s, Tabliqi Jamaat successfully changed the culture of Mewat. By constant propagation of the Deobandi version of Islam, Meo Muslims started giving up their Hindu practices and adopting Islamic practices such as *nikah* (Islamic marriage) and *Janazah* (Islamic funeral rites).<sup>16</sup> Elders from the Meo Muslim community

<sup>13</sup> Field Notes, 1937, Mewat Oral History Project

<sup>14</sup> Ilyas, 1930, Speech Transcript, Nuh Mosque, Mewat Mosque Archives).

<sup>15</sup> Field Notes, 1938, Mewat Oral History Project).

<sup>16</sup> Government Report, 1939, Mewat District Archives).

confirm this transition of Meos, and the primary reason behind this transition was the grassroots activism of Tablighi Jamaat.<sup>17</sup>

The activism of Tablighi Jamaat faced criticism from some of the elder members of the Meo community. Leaders like Chaudhary Yasin Khan opposed the movement of Tablighi Jamaat and were in favour of traditional Meo practices. Some elders from the Meo community feared that this activism of Tablighi Jamaat would disrupt their traditional way of life and affect their relationship with their Hindu counterparts.<sup>18</sup>

Gradually, Tablighi Jamaat completely transformed the religious identity of the Meos. It also prepared the ground for further Islamic revivalist movements in the subcontinent. The way Tablighi Jamaat established an Islamic educational centre inculcated a sense of community; it developed a pattern for communal transformation, which can be applied anywhere where Muslims were following non-Islamic practices.

Meo Muslims now started identifying themselves as a part of the broader Islamic community. Muslim separatism was growing in India in the 20th century, and Meo Muslims, who were once connected with their traditional roots, now started showing the trends of Pan Islamism. Meo Muslim's transformation gives valuable insights into how identity formation and cultural change work.

Tablighi Jamaat's early activism, especially from 1926 to 1940, significantly changed the identity of Meo Muslims. The Islamic orthodoxy in their practices became more visible. It doesn't just change their religious beliefs but also shifts their social, cultural and political life. Slowly, Meo Muslims gave up their syncretic practices, and they became associated more with the global Muslim community than their Hindu counterparts.

Before the establishment of Tablighi Jamaat, Meo Muslims followed syncretic practices, but the grassroots activism of Tablighi Jamaat has transformed their identity, and they gave up their Hindu practices:

Meo Muslims started observing Islamic rituals more consciously. They started observing Namaz or Salah five times a day; They started performing Nikah or Muslim marriages strictly according to Islam, unlike before, where Brahmin priests played a key role. They also taught them burial rituals according to Islamic

<sup>17</sup> Field Notes, 1939, Mewat Oral History Project).

<sup>18</sup> Field Notes, 1940, Mewat Oral History Project).

traditions. Step by step, Hindu rituals were replaced by the Deobandi version of Islam.<sup>19 20</sup> Meo Muslims started celebrating Eid ul-Adha and Eid ul-Fitr strictly according to Islamic theology. Earlier, they used to celebrate Holi Diwali and considered that as a part of their culture. But now, they started maintaining a distance from Hindu rituals under the influence of Tablighi Jamaat.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, the dress code and food habits of Meo Muslims changed significantly. Muslim men and Women started dressing according to Islamic values. Muslim men started wearing Kurta Pyjamas and skull caps, and Muslim women started dressing according to the Islamic code of conduct rather than their traditional dress.<sup>22</sup>

The Tablighi Jamaat played a crucial role in creating a strong sense of Islamic identity among the Meos. This process involved:

### 1. Quranic Education

Tablighi Jamaat and their propagation of Islamic knowledge through Madrasas led to awareness among Muslims about Islamic theology, like the Quran. Earlier there were no prominent Islamic educational centres. It also created a sense of pride in Islamic identity and culture among Muslims in Mewat<sup>23</sup>

### 2. Communal Solidarity

Tablighi Jamaat promoted group prayers, Communal prayers and fasting during Ramadan. Meo started getting united based on Islamic identity, and their indigenous identity was replaced by the feeling of association with the Muslim Ummah.<sup>24</sup>

### 3. Rejection of Hindu Influence

Young Meo Muslims, under the influence of Tablighi Jamaat, started maintaining a distinctive identity from Hindus. It happened because Tablighi Jamaat's activism pushed Meo Muslims to give up Hindu practices. After all, it is necessary to

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<sup>19</sup> Field Notes, 1939, Mewat Oral History Project

<sup>20</sup> Government Report, 1939, Mewat District Archives

<sup>21</sup> Speech Transcript, 1937, Nuh Mosque, Mewat Mosque Archives).

<sup>22</sup> Field Notes, 1938, Mewat Oral History Project

<sup>23</sup> Government Report, 1933, Mewat District Archives).

<sup>24</sup> Ilyas, 1930, Speech Transcript, Nuh Mosque, Mewat Mosque Archives).

maintain an authentic Islamic identity. All this activism led to the rise of distinct Islamic identities in a predominantly Hindu region.<sup>25</sup>

## Social and Political Implications

The transformation of Meo identity under the Tablighi Jamaat also had significant social and political ramifications:

### 1. The decline in Syncretism

Tablighi Jamaat activism led to the disappearance of syncretic culture. Meo Muslims moved away from Hindu practices to more rigid Islamic practices. It led to a conflict with the Hindu neighborhood.<sup>26</sup>

### 2. Resistance and Division

Elders from the Meo Muslim community resisted the change and they were not in favour of giving up their traditional Hindu practices. But the younger generation of Meo Muslims who got trained in the madrasas of the Tablighi Jamaat were more conscious about their Islamic identity.<sup>27</sup>

### 3. Political Mobilization

Tablighi Jamaat activism of Deobandi Islam led to the politicization of the Meo Muslim community. Many Meo Muslims started identifying themselves with Muslim Ummah and their attachment with Muslim identity became deeper in the backdrop of Muslim separatism in India.<sup>28</sup>

## Conclusion

Tablighi Jamaat activism has changed the entire landscape of the Mewat region. From following a syncretic culture to adopting an Islamic orthodox approach, the identity of Meo Muslims has changed. The activism of Tablighi Jamaat has created a model for further Islamic reform movements across the subcontinent. Tablighi Jamaat ended the communal harmony in the region, which had existed for centuries in Mewat. The combined Hindu Muslim culture transformed into a more Islamic orthodoxy society.

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<sup>25</sup> Field Notes, 1940, Mewat Oral History Project

<sup>26</sup> Government Report, 1940, Mewat District Archives

<sup>27</sup> Field Notes, 1939, Mewat Oral History Project).

<sup>28</sup> Ilyas, 1939, Correspondence, Darul Uloom Deoband Archives).