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## RELIGIOUS REFORM AND SHARED SHRINES

During his regular Thursday visits to the Sufi tomb of the saint Shah Chokha,<sup>1</sup> Ram Singh, a schoolteacher of the Baniya caste from the town of Punahana, never forgot to donate money to Tablighi Jamaat volunteers. He believed that visiting a Sufi *dargāh* and providing funds for Islamic education and mosque renovation were acts of service to God.<sup>2</sup> Ram Singh lived close to the Laldas temple in Punahana (Figure 5.1). He or a member of his family visited the temple daily, either in the morning or evening. Ram Singh openly regarded Laldas as a Muslim, saying, *hamāre bābā musalmān the par hamen unki pahcān se koi lenā denā nahī* (our saint was Muslim, but we do not have any problem with his identity).

In 2015, the new temple of Laldas was built on the premises of an Arya Samaj school. The school building also served as a regional centre for the Arya Samaj. An open courtyard was located in front of the temple. Visitors arrived daily and waited in the courtyard while the Brahmin head priest,<sup>3</sup> made the required arrangements for Laldas's morning and evening prayers. Most of the devotees were shopkeepers in the nearby central market in Punahana and came to the temple for quick prayers to the saint. This market was dominated by Hindus, particularly the Baniyas who owned shops for selling items of daily use. On the outer circle of this market, which separated Punahana from Nakanpur (a very old Meo village that is today part of the Punahana town municipality), there were shops for selling garments, mobiles, and vegetable and fruits, among other items. These shops were predominantly owned by Muslims.



**FIGURE 5.1** Laldas temple in the premises of the Arya Samaj in Punahana

*Source:* Photo by the author.

The town was also home to considerable populations of Hindu ‘low castes’ such as Valmikis, Jatavs, Sainis (Malis), Nais and Punjabi immigrants from Pakistan. The everyday dynamics of social life in this town were significantly influenced by the presence of these communities. The demographic numbers of Hindus and Muslims were almost nearly the same, but the region had a Muslim majority. Hindus and Muslims interacted with one another, but there was a sense of insecurity among the Hindus, especially the Baniyas, due to the Muslim majority in the area. Hindu caste communities built strong networks with right-wing organisations such as the RSS, the Bajrang Dal and the Arya Samaj in response to their minority status, anticipating potential conflicts in the future. The more militant of these organisations—for instance, the Bajrang Dal and the RSS—had recently consolidated their political influence in the area. The Arya Samaj participated in political matters but directed more attention to social issues and practices such as marriages ceremonies, establishing temples and schools, and criticising non-Vedic practices. It claimed to be actively involved in the social sphere rather than in politics, though its work undoubtedly had political implications.

The Arya Samaj was historically opposed to worshipping idols in temples. Since its foundation in 1875, the Arya Samaj engaged in aggressive religious proselytising.<sup>4</sup> Initially, the Samaj exclusively targeted Hindus, denouncing practices such as idol worship and calling for a return to the teachings of the Vedas. For Arya Samajis, true Hinduism consisted of only those practices and customs mentioned in the Vedas (Jones 1976, 1995; Fischertine 2013). All other forms of religious behaviour were considered to be erroneous additions to Hinduism. Influenced by the colonial knowledge of orientalist scholars, Arya Samajis came to believe that 'Hinduism' in the late nineteenth century had become degraded and needed revival.<sup>5</sup> In terms of politics, the Arya Samaj has been known for its nationalist and anti-colonialist views. The Arya Samajis believed that Hinduism was under threat from foreign influences, particularly from the British, and advocated for the revival of Hindu culture and traditions. They also played an active role in the Indian independence movement, with many of their leaders participating in political activism and civil disobedience (Jones 1976, 1995). The idea of a Hindu *Rashtra* (nation) is central to their ideology, and they believe that India should be a Hindu-majority state with a government based on Hindu principles.<sup>6</sup>

The Laldas temple was situated within a complex that housed several other interconnected temples. Adjacent to the narrow entrance of the complex stood the temple of Jaharpir, also known as Gogapir or Goga Medi,<sup>7</sup> which also contained a small temple dedicated to Lord Shiva. Parallel to the Laldas shrine and on the right side of the Jaharpir temple, there was a temple devoted to the goddess Durga, separated by a thick wall from the Arya Samaj school building. Around 50 meters away, there was an Arya Samaj temple, and behind the complex, there was a Vishnu temple.

Among the temples within the complex, the Laldas temple stood out with its striking red sandstone structure. The walls of the Jaharpir temple, painted white in the past, had faded, creating a gloomy ambience inside. Similarly, the newly constructed temple dedicated to goddess Durga had brown cement plastered walls that remained unpainted. This temple, too, appeared to be dull at the time of my visit. Unlike the Laldas temple, the other temples received little money as donation, leaving them in a poorer economic situation. Almost all visitors to Laldas bowed to Jaharpir and Durga Mata but seldom entered their temples (Figures 5.2 and 5.3). Within the temple complex, most former members of the Arya Samaj had begun following the saint, Laldas. However, the Arya Samajis present on the temple premises could not openly express their resentment against this change. The fact that Laldas and Jaharpir were



**FIGURE 5.2** The temple of Jaharpir

*Source:* Photo by the author.



**FIGURE 5.3** Goddess Durga's temple

*Source:* Photo by the author.

'Muslim' saints venerated by Hindus constituted an even greater offence in the eyes of the Samaj and the priest of the Durga temple.

The elder brother of Ram Singh, called Shyam Singh, who was an uncompromising Arya Samaji, said, 'All who live in India are Hindus; therefore, we should not think much about Hindu and Muslim except their respective praying methods.'<sup>8</sup> He continued, 'Muslims pray rightly to one God though their books and praying methods are wrong'. Astonishingly, he also lamented, '... the Arya Samaj has not succeeded in bringing our Muslim brothers onto the right path but at least Muslims do not worship idols like Hindus'.<sup>9</sup> Unhappy with his own family members and their new god Laldas, he maintained a distance between his own 'religion' and that of his family. Shyam Singh's uneasiness was evident when his family decided to host a *laldas kirtan* (devotional musical singing) in their house. Shyam Singh was anguished by what he saw as his family's fallen religious values. He himself lived according to the Arya *dharm* (doctrines)—using earthen vessels for cooking, chanting Vedic mantras (couplets) and using Ayurvedic products. He did not make a substantial distinction between Hindus and Muslims and considered that members of both religious communities are following faulty religious paths. In fact, he admired textual Islam for its emphasis on monotheism and for forbidding idol veneration.

In a similar vein, the priest who officiated at the goddess Durga's shrine complained that Hindus were deserting their own 'religion' in favour of Muslim saints. He was bitter about the decrease in the number of visitors coming to the temple: *log apnā dharam bhūl rahe hai* (people are forgetting their religion) was his recurrent concern.<sup>10</sup> This priest was aware that the charisma of the Laldas and Jaharpir saints was a major reason for their wide following. He tried to compete with the rising popularity of the Muslim saints by telling stories about the power and charisma of the goddess Durga. The traditions of these Muslim saints had historically developed on the basis of their miraculous powers. The priest of the Durga temple often invoked the same logic to tell stories to match the miracles of Laldas and Jaharpir.

One such miracle story shared by the priest drew on events in 2011, when a small idol of the monkey god Hanuman in the courtyard of the Laldas temple was damaged in a Hindu-Muslim skirmish, following violence in the nearby town of Gopalgarrh, in which about 10 people lost their lives (Iqbal 2011; Chakrabarty 2011). The Hindus of the town and the priest believed that Muslims were the perpetrators of the damage. Around the time of this incident, the priest of the Durga temple claimed that some men attempted to

damage the Durga idol but were repelled by the power of the goddess, who blinded them: *ye durgā mā bahut camatkārī hai* (this mother Durga is very miraculous).<sup>11</sup> The priest's claim that the goddess was miraculous parallels the narratives of miracles performed by the Muslim saints. The powerful religious order of Laldas had an adverse impact on the popularity of these traditional centres of Hindu religious beliefs and worship.

In Punahana, the volunteers of Arya Samaj adopted a strategy of avoiding direct confrontation with the followers of Laldas, whom they perceived as idol worshippers. This observation was made based on conversations I had with the headmaster of the Arya Samaj school. He engaged in respectful discussions with the followers of Laldas but did not actively try to persuade them to join the Samaj. In his statements, he skilfully employed a compartmentalised logic, distinguishing between 'us' (Arya Samajis, non-idol worshippers) and the 'others' (Hindus who worship idols), demonstrating a clear separation of beliefs. The headmaster's tone conveyed a sense of superiority for the Arya Samaj. During my observations, I noticed that he would occasionally engage in conversations with temple visitors, attempting to convince them that one could achieve success in life through good actions rather than by worshipping an idol. However, he struggled to debunk stories of the saint's miracles or provide guidance to individuals seeking assistance from Laldas to address their everyday challenges. The headmaster was frequently asked by temple visitors whether Dayanand Saraswati, the founder of Arya Samaj, aided people in need by performing miracles.<sup>12</sup> The worshippers in this context had a desire to have a direct visual encounter with the saint or *pīr*, to engage in *darśan* (the act of seeing and being in the presence of a revered image or deity). In Brahminical Hinduism, there is a strong emphasis on the visual aspect, where devotees seek to see the divine image (as noted by Eck [1998]). However, the Arya Samaj, with its emphasis on the textual aspect of worship, did not offer this visual and sensory perception of God to Hindus.

Since Hinduism is a mosaic of different traditions, Hindus may move from the worship of one God to another depending on their context or stage of life; they may also worship multiple gods simultaneously. Such religious behaviour often led devotees in multiple religious directions, what could be described as 'polytropy' ('poly' = many, 'tropy' = direction) (Carrithers 2000), mainly to seek divine assistance from many religious figures.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, the Baniyas and other Hindus in Punahana were inclined to follow different religious beliefs and worshipped numerous gods according to their practical requirements and life stages. The local Arya Samaj had serious reservations

about this cluster of temples but was unable to build an anti-idol and anti-Muslim consensus because of the fragmented and polytropic nature of Hindu religiosity. Many of Laldas's new devotees had to relinquish their previous devotion to a particular goddess in order to embrace their newfound affiliation with Laldas and receive his blessings and miracles. People often turned to Laldas when their expectations were not met by other Hindu gods or religious figures. The Arya Samaj's insistence on strict adherence to ritual texts contrasted with the dynamic and mobile nature of Hindu devotion, making their messages less appealing to the wider Hindu population.

To maintain their relevance and influence among Hindus in Punahana, the Arya Samaj took an assertive stance on various socio-political matters. One such instance highlighted their position on an inter-religious marriage. When a Hindu woman from a 'lower-caste' background decided to marry a Meo Muslim man against the social norms, the situation quickly took on the familiar dynamics of a Hindu-Muslim dispute. The local Arya Samaj insisted that for the couple to have a future together, the man must convert to Hinduism. In a meeting, local Hindu organisations came to a consensus that unless the man converted, the Hindu community would not accept the woman living with him. Meo Muslims responded by citing legal frameworks and regulations that protect the rights of individuals to choose their own faith and enter into interfaith marriages.

This incident revealed the tensions and complexities surrounding inter-religious relationships and the differing perspectives of Hindu and Muslim communities in Punahana. The Arya Samaj's insistence on religious conversion reflected their commitment to maintaining the Hindu identity and protecting what they perceived as the sanctity of 'Hindus'. However, it also highlighted the clash between personal choices, religious freedom and societal expectations in a multi-religious context.<sup>14</sup>

There was also the question of what the Arya Samaj understood by conversion in recent decades. For them, it was not a matter of 'honour', since the woman belonged to a 'lower-caste' community and her body, they presumed, was already 'defiled'. Therefore, Hindus transformed the issue of caste honour into religious honour by subsuming caste into a grand discourse about saving 'Hindus' and 'Hinduism', shifting the entire matter to the religious domain. Local Muslim and Hindu organisations debated the issue from the perspective of their own religious interests. However, the Arya Samaj's insistence on conversion resonated with their historical *śuddhī* campaigns to which many organisations, including the Tablighi Jamaat, had

once furiously resisted.<sup>15</sup> Historically, both reform organisations interacted in a peculiar manner to counter each other's claims. The Jamaat hoped that the whole world will become Muslim in the future while the Samaj wanted Muslims to become Hindus. They expected Hindus and Muslims to not only know the truth but to embody it in behaviour. The Tablighi Jamaat has attained success among the majority of Muslims, whereas the Arya Samaj has failed to reach its objective.

Undoubtedly, fundamental differences between Hindu and Muslim social structures and religious practices have impacted the success or failure of these reform movements. The failure of the Arya Samaj to remain a dominant movement can be attributed to the 'Hindu' mode of devotion, despite its long history and initial political success. Its concept of ideal Hinduism is not reflected in the behaviour of Hindus, the majority of whom do not adhere to its principles. However, their agenda of converting Muslims has been appropriated by other right-wing Hindu groups such as the VHP and the RSS. There are striking parallels between the teachings of the Tablighi Jamaat and those of the Arya Samaj. Both organisations want to create ideal prototypes of Muslims and Hindus. The Arya Samaj and its *dharma* mirrored Abrahamic religions (Jones 1976) and preferred its adherents to know and use the sacred scripture (the Vedas) to guide their lives, comparable to the Tablighi's emphasis on the Quran (B. Metcalf 1993; Noor 2012). Members of the Arya Samaj and the Tablighi Jamaat also held similar opinions about the role of saints and shrines in one's life, eschewed idol worship and preached monotheism.

### **MAKING MUSLIMS 'MORE MUSLIM'**

The Tablighi Jamaat defined the collective Muslim self of the Meos in the twentieth century by engendering the belief in them that adherence to 'proper Islam' was the only way to deal with their present degenerative condition. According to the Tablighi Jamaat, every Muslim in Mewat had a duty to subscribe to the meaning of 'true' Islam. The sudden success and popularity of the Tablighi mission should be located in the context of the fear, intimidation and communal divisions of the period, as well as theological interpretations and identity transformations underway. Many scholars consider that the Tablighi Jamaat reform movement, which played a crucial role in shaping the Meos' Muslim identity in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, is a purely



Islamic movement (Mayaram 1997a: 53–84, 2004b; Sikand 2002a, 2004, 2006). On a closer analysis, the religious preaching of the Tablighi Jamaat movement maintains continuity with a form of peasant religiosity first articulated by Bhakti and Sufi saints. I argue that the Tablighi Jamaat's closeness to ascetic religious values helped to make it a highly successful movement among the Meos, as it allowed Meo Muslim peasants to maintain continuity with their previous religious-philosophical world. However, on a symbolic level, the Tablighi Jamaat completely negate any faith association with saints like Laldas, arguing that associating faith with such saints may force Meos to desert Islam once again. The Tablighi logic assumes that only purifying one's religious belief can help save a Muslim from the ills of the worldly life.

In the local context of Mewat, the influence of the Tablighi Jamaat was pervasive across various aspects of life. One could observe men of different age groups dressed in white kurtas and pyjamas, with Muslim skullcaps, regularly traversing the horizontal L-shaped metalled road (as depicted in Map 2). These Tablighi activists engaged in soliciting donations from pedestrians, seeking financial support for the construction of a new mosque, the repair of existing ones or to cover the expenses of *madrassa* education for children.

It was not uncommon to witness these activists carrying a substantial bundle of rupees, despite the fact that the region was economically impoverished and characterised by low income households. This indicated the presence of a generous enthusiasm among the local population for contributing to religious charities. The act of soliciting donations for religious purposes seemed to resonate with passers-by, symbolising religious piety and inspiring their willingness to contribute. The Tablighi Jamaat's activities in seeking financial support reflected their commitment to religious causes and their ability to mobilise resources for the development and maintenance of Islamic institutions in the area.

Such observations also pointed to the growth of religious consciousness among the Meo and other Muslims in Mewat. 'Religion' had an overwhelming presence here. For instance, roadside bookstalls sold books written in Urdu that told stories of Muslim kings, discussed ethics in Islam and outlined the duties of a Muslim wife towards her husband. There was an exponential growth in the number of new mosques in various parts of Mewat. A Google Maps search shows the preponderance of mosques—many newly constructed—in the area. The Tablighi Jamaat controlled almost all the key *madrassas* and mosques in the area, including those in Alwar and Bharatpur.

As far as its style of functioning was concerned, the Tablighi Jamaat in Mewat and elsewhere worked through a network of mosques. The concept involved the voluntary participation of fellow Muslims contributing their money and time. In order to learn about the life of a Tablighi follower, I asked my informant Islamuddin to help me get in touch with the main centre, or *markaj*, of Tablighi activities in Punahana. The duty of this *markaj* was to recruit local Tablighi volunteers for proselytising, receive *jamaats* (groups of adherents) from outside Mewat and send reports to the Tablighi Jamaat headquarters at the Banglewali Masjid in Delhi. This local *markaj* also organised a communal weekly meeting on Friday, where a large gathering of Muslims prayed together. The prayer meetings were generally followed by a process of recruitment of volunteers for Tablighi work in the area and elsewhere in India. Muslims were encouraged to devote time to living a religious life full of piety, honesty and care for fellow human beings.

Four main spheres of Tablighi life—household, mosque, *markaj* and proselytising—were governed by the ideals of the Quran and the Hadith, frequently told and reminded by the Tablighi preaching. I wanted to participate in Tablighi life, so I asked Islamuddin, who promised to take permission from the head *maulavi* of the *markaj* after the Eid *namāz*. My journey with a Tablighi group, thus, began with an Eid *namāz* in the *markaj* of Punahana in July 2016. On that day, there were at least 10,000 people for the Eid prayer at seven o'clock in the morning. The faces of the *namāzīs* looked elated since the tedious, stomach-turning and thirst-driven summer days of Ramzan were over. After the prayers, Islamuddin conveyed my intentions to the *maulavi* when we were exchanging greetings. The *maulavi* smiled and granted permission for us to visit the neighbouring village mosques on Saturdays, but not to stay overnight with the Tablighi workers.

During my day visits to the mosques where the Tablighi proselytisers usually stayed, I found that the main emphasis of the Tablighi mission was to make Muslims aware of the 'true' religious practices of Islam. The notion of *tawhid*, meaning 'oneness of God', is the fundamental tenet of the Tablighi activities based on *dāvāh* work (premised upon inviting people to pray together). The most important among the six principles (*chhe bātein*) of Tabligh is the *kalimā shahādā* (the Islamic declaration of faith, 'There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is the messenger of Allah') (Sikand 2006: 180).<sup>16</sup> In its theological approach, the Tablighi Jamaat aims to persuade Muslims of the importance and centrality of the tenet, one God and the supremacy of Allah. Consequently, Tablighi preaching often encouraged Muslims to ignore Sufi

and other shared shrines like that of Laldas in Mewat because it leads to a pervasive association of faith with an entity other than Allah. It is considered a sin/crime of equating a human, object, image or a saint with Allah. My Mewati Muslim interlocutors repeated these views in their narratives.

Tablighi itinerant groups frequented the Muslim villages and spent several days in mosques of villages and towns on spiritual retreats. The mode of functioning of the organisation was based on the support of religious volunteers who were willing to share their money and time for the cause of Islam. Several groups often arrived at the same time in a village to undertake proselytising work. As soon as a new group of *jamaatis* arrived in the village, they were taken on a tour by the village headman. These Tablighis then invited the Muslim residents to accompany them to *dāvāh* (invitations for theological discussion) at a mosque.

The Tablighi volunteers were not interested in making new converts from other religions. Rather, they only wished to make Muslims adhere to a proper Islamic life. No Tablighi ever interacted with any Hindu villager to impart the teachings of Islam. In fact, some Hindu villagers used to ask them the importance of living a simple life away from home, to which they often responded with a smile. Male Muslim villagers and itinerant Tablighis usually prayed together every evening and then discussed various aspects of Islam. Sometimes, the discussions dealt with the nature of a particular religious practice of the Muslims in Mewat. The veneration of saints like Laldas, Shah Chokha and others was a common topic. For these itinerant Tablighis, mosques were temporary residence. They cooked their own food and took care of their daily necessities so as to give little trouble to their host villagers. They brought their own food items, cooking utensils, quilts and bed sheets and other necessary equipment for their stay. The Tablighi volunteers were detached from their normal household lives and encouraged to live simple and ascetic lives, eschewing luxuries, living on a meagre diet and choosing to communicate very little (Noor 2012).

In the village, there was a consistent presence of Muslim residents who eagerly extended invitations to Tablighi groups for communal meals. This feast, known as *dāvāt*, held great significance as it encompassed the notion of inviting individuals for theological discussions and debates in accordance with the Islamic concept of *dāvāh*. Throughout the Quran, there are numerous references to Islamic *dāvāh*, emphasising the importance of inviting both Muslims and non-Muslims to engage in philosophical dialogues and discussions about Islam. However, in places like Mewat and

other parts of India, these invitations were restricted solely to Muslims. The Tablighis typically initiated the invitations by first inviting Muslim men in the village, and then a resident, based on their financial means and capacity, would request the travelling preachers to dine with their family. Islamuddin, my informant and an active member of the Tablighi movement, consistently extended invitations to the *jamaatis* (members of Tablighi groups) in his village for dinner, intending to delve into religious matters during these gatherings.

The life that the Tablighi Jamaat workers and other Tablighi Muslims lived in mosques while on *tabligh* (proselyting) depicts the continuation of religious behaviour common in the practice of Bhakti and Sufism. Even though the Tablighi Jamaat is an Islamic revival movement, there is a close structural parallel between the organisation's approach regarding producing a 'pure' form of Sunni Islam among Muslims and the Meos' devotion to Laldas and other Sufi and Bhakti saints. Both religious traditions advocated asceticism and frugal living practices, as is the case in *tablighi* missions. In fact, Ilyas, the founder of the Tablighi Jamaat, was initially promoted as a charismatic Chishtiya Sufi master. The Tablighi movement inherited certain Sufi practices, which they then modified for their purposes (Gaborieau 2006; Troll 1985).<sup>17</sup> Similarly, the Deoband school is concerned with reformism, but the mode of life and the preaching of major Deobandi advocates have revolved around the Chishti form of Sufi Islam (B. Metcalf 1982). It is possible to find an ascetic theme and belief in a mystical experience in all the sayings and correspondence of the first *āmīr* (meaning 'head' or 'commander') of the movement, Maulana Ilyas (Troll 1994). Although the Tablighi Jamaat rejects institutional Sufism completely, numerous of its practices derive from Indic spiritual and philosophical values of austerity and asceticism advocated by saints of Bhakti, Sufi and other monastic backgrounds. In particular, the mode of piety, worship and retreat on a spiritual *tabligh*, the time spent in the mosques and the forms of preaching by its adherents are some of the commonalities. In fact, the Tablighis often adopt Sufi forms of preaching, vocabularies and modes of communication (Gaborieau 2006; Troll 1985).

There are structural and sometimes unrelated parallels between the Tablighi Jamaat, Sufism and Bhakti ideals. The success of the organisation among the Meo peasants is, to a large extent, a product of the combination of these practices. Despite acknowledging the connection between Sufism and the Tabligh, many scholars do not acknowledge that the Tablighi movement is essentially rooted in an Indic form of spiritual mysticism and the close

similarities between Islamic Sufism and the Bhakti and Nath doctrines. Specifically, for the Meos, as discussed in Chapter 2, the Bhakti religion of Laldas was as important as Sufism in Islam. It is reasonable to assert that the success of the Tablighi Jamaat among Meo peasants can be attributed, at least partially, to the organisation consciously or unconsciously incorporating some vestigial doctrines of both *nirgun bhakti* beliefs and Sufism into their preaching. In a more precise sense, the Meos' religious experiences and the transformation of their religious world from a Hindu–Muslim one to a more marked Muslim one even now is not in complete contradiction with a rustic form of peasant and Indic religiosity. Rather than looking at the peasant world and their religiosity from a Hindu–Muslim perspective, it is more useful to look at the shared religious life which the Meos still cherish even after undergoing radical religious transformation at the hands of the Tablighi Jamaat in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. For instance, the kind of an itinerant life a Tablighi Meo Muslim lives while preaching Islam to fellow Muslims is not in a complete contradiction with Sufi and Bhakti values that Meos once imbibed in everyday religious and cultural practices like the ones associated with Laldas.

The book does not delve into the transnational success of the Tablighi Jamaat among Muslims outside of India. However, it is worth noting that the success of the Jamaat can be reasonably attributed to the organisation's implementation of meditation and spiritual retreat programs, such as *dhikr*, within mosques. These programs provide opportunities for Muslims to engage in contemplative practices and deepen their spiritual connection, thus contributing to the appeal and effectiveness of the Tablighi Jamaat on a global scale. For instance, Tablighi practices include Islamic-tinged asceticism, such as retreats of 40 days or longer in a mosque, obligations to perform prayer, the remembrance of Allah (*dhikr/dhyān*) and keeping one's heart pure. All of these practices are reminiscent of the traditional spiritual-religious ways advocated by saints across religious orientations.

Tablighi Jamaat philosophy may also provide an ideology of resistance to the worldly life of ordinary Muslims in India by exhorting them to turn away from material concerns. Given the low socio-economic condition of Muslims on the one hand and the political dominance of Hindus on the other, the Tablighi teachings about the importance of the afterlife become significant. In terms of politics, the Tablighi Jamaat has historically been apolitical and has avoided direct involvement in political activities. However, the movement has been known to have conservative views on certain social issues, such as

gender roles, and has been criticised for its exclusionary practices towards Muslim women, non-Muslims and its narrow interpretation of Islam.

How, then, is the Tablighi Jamaat different from the older traditions? For one, most of the differences are in symbolic arenas. The Tablighi Jamaat emphasises the idea of ‘Muslimness’ in a uniform sense, rather than the idealism of the saintly traditions (*sant paramparā*). Essentially, without altering the religious-philosophical world provided by Sufism and Bhakti beliefs for Meos and other Muslims, the Tablighi Jamaat’s main concern is to create a neo-Muslim whose identity and being are rooted purely in Sunni Islamic traditions. The impact of such continuous activities across the region was to create and reinforce a powerful religious discourse of purity. This working method of the Tablighi Jamaat has currently transformed the organisation into a powerful transnational movement. However, its success in Mewat has created a rift between two groups of Muslims, the Tablighis and the Sufis. My fieldwork gave me some ideas of the practices that the Tablighi Jamaat considered particularly non-Islamic including visiting a shrine by Muslims.

### **LOCAL NON-ISLAMIC PRACTICES OF SHIRK AND BIDĀH/BIDAT**

The term *bidāh/bidat* refers to heresy or innovation in theological Islam, and believers in the Sufi or other saints are called *bidati* (innovators). The phenomenon of *bidat* emphasises the nature, character and importance of Islam developed after Prophet Mohammed’s life. It emphasises that Muslims should not follow or introduce any new change in their life other than lived and told by the Prophet and his sayings which are contained in the Hadith. Sufi practices are, thus, considered a later addition in Islam and are hence discouraged as *bidat* because they are not derived from the ‘Islam’ told and lived by the Prophet. For example, celebrating *urs* (the yearly festival) of the Sufi saints, sacrificing animals in the saints’ name, praying to or supplicating the dead or the saints or anyone else besides Allah (this includes slogans like *ya dādā Laldas madad kariyo*, ‘Please help grandfather Laldas’) fall into the category of *bidāh* and *shirk*.

The crime of *shirk* is a crime against God. The word *shirk* in Arabic means ‘regarding someone as the partner’ or ‘ascribing a partner or rival to Allah’. This term was used by the Tablighi Jamaat to discredit the beliefs and actions of Sufi Muslims, especially their association with saints which they

translated as 'acts of idol worship and polytheism'. The veneration of Laldas or other saints was conceived as a challenge to the monotheism of Islam and the sole authority of Allah, who alone is responsible for bestowing mercy and blessings and forgiving sins. One of the major disagreements between the Tablighi Jamaat's view of Islam and Sufism was therefore in regard to the place of Sufi saints in Islam. The main aim of all Islamic reformist organisations since their emergence in the eighteenth century in India<sup>18</sup> has been the promotion of *tawhid* (the unity of God) and the criticism of *shirk* (actions that compromise the idea of one God) (see Robinson 2008). As a consequence of this, all Sufi beliefs and customs have currently come under intense criticisms by the Tablighis. In Robinson's words, 'at their most extreme, these attacks aimed to wipe out Sufism altogether' (262).

This debate in Islam is an old one. The famous rivalry between the two schools, Barelavi and Deobandi, has historically contributed to the emergence of such debates about Islam in India.<sup>19</sup> In Mewat, the Tablighi Jamaat, a loosely connected missionary offshoot of the Deoband School, and its workers generally assumed the role of Deobandi *ulemās* in this context. At the local level, the tensions between two factions of the Meos also reflected their respective loyalties to Alwar and Delhi.<sup>20</sup> Alwar is home to a renowned *majār* (tomb) constructed of striking white marble, dedicated to the Sufi saint Ruknuddin Shah. Followers of Sufism in the region were frequently referred to as *alwariya*, signifying their practice of visiting Alwar to pay homage to the saint. Today, this term has taken on a derogatory meaning, indicating a sense of shame. This shift in connotation is a testament to the success of Tablighi discourse not only in Sherpur but also in other parts of Mewat.

During fieldwork, observations of popular practices and everyday conversations and materials collected from *ulemās* and the village residents showed that *shirk* was a recurring theme. Many Muslim villagers, usually men, gave the impression that the Tablighi Jamaat considered saint veneration a severe form of religious blasphemy. Many academic interpretations privilege the syncretic veneration of saints, usually as a reaction to the anti-syncretism preached by purist reform movements. Nonetheless, *tawhid* is the foundational principle in Islam that the Jamaat wished to restore. All of the movements in Islam, whether Wahhabism, Sufism or the Tabligh, insist on the oneness of God. The debate is about the authenticity of subsidiary Islamic symbols and practices associated with saints. Different strands within Islam have contested these for centuries, and they continue to do so. For the sake of ethnographic situatedness and

because of the complexity of this issue in Muslims' lives, it was imperative that I look for locally rooted debates of *shirk* and *bidāh/bidat* 'without privileging the idea of "many Islams"' (Osella 2015: 5).

In Mewat, I learned that the Tablighis are taught to control their bodies, desires and worldly lusts, and encouraged to focus more on self-discipline, piety and honesty. While travelling from one mosque to another, Tablighis strived for 'the prophetic mimesis' (Noor 2012: 149), that is, to emulate the ideal Prophetic type. Followers tried to adopt the teachings of the Hadith—the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad—in their daily life. Since it was impossible to replicate the life of the Prophet, the Tablighi followers paid more attention to their intentions (*niyat*) (Noor 2012: 149). There were many mimetic prototypes which the Tablighi Jamaat recommended to Mewati Muslims, including adopting 'proper' Islamic sartorial practices. The common Tablighi apparel of white kurta-pyjama and skull cap was not unique in the area, and the discourses around this form of clothing are significant. For instance, my landlord Imran, who was of a Tablighi background, rebuked his younger son for his fashionable attire when he invited me to have dinner with his family. As we were enjoying the food and discussing the future marriage of his elder son, he yelled at his wife and the younger son: 'I see, no discipline in this house. One wears what he wants as if this is Bollywood and I am making films here.' He was complaining about the young man's bracelet, shiny shirt and long hair. Imran's concerns about his son went beyond mere worries about his future; they stemmed from a deep preoccupation with adhering to proper religious behaviour. He expressed his anxieties by drawing a parallel between his son's actions and those of Hindus, suggesting that his son's engagement in acts of *bidāh* (religious innovations) resembled behaviour that Imran associated with Hindus. Imran's fixation on religion and his commitment to purist Islamic discourse played a significant role in shaping his personal and family life. Imran believed that both Hinduism and modernity posed a threat to the Islamic faith. As a result, he saw his son's clothing choices as an indication of the growing sense of danger to Islamic identity and faith. Many common Muslims had similar feelings due to the religious discourse of the Tablighi Jamaat. Another event clarifies the Tablighis' fear of threats to 'proper' Islam. I met a 20-year-old man who was an alleged thief with a history of drug addiction. He grew up as a motherless child and, when his father remarried, he was left to struggle on his own. He visited the shop in front of my landlord's house frequently.



Every evening, the space in front of the shop was lively with people cracking jokes and bursting into laughter. His sudden appearance always increased the merriment of the gathering. Mocking questions were often directed at him or somebody would taunt him for committing un-Islamic acts like stealing. This contempt frequently brought him to tears. He would usually try to defend himself in religious terms, citing the model of conduct for an ideal Muslim in Mewati society. Typically, he would say, 'I will become a better person, attend the Tablighi Jamaat's *cillā* [a 40-day retreat in a mosque], and eventually go on the Hajj, if Allah wishes'. He also considered, like many other Muslims, that the Tablighi way was synonymous with 'pure' Islam and the only one through which he could purge his sins.

In everyday life, Muslims in Mewat were aware of theologians' (*ulemās*) views and enjoyed debating, discussing and repeating them. Opinions about 'pure' Islam were formed within these spheres of civil society, such as the spaces where day-to-day interactions took place, where people gossiped and exchanged news, at chai stalls, shops, mosques and other sites of everyday life. To my surprise, the Tablighi theologians generally avoided engaging in or discussing issues that were tied to the state or political authority in the public sphere.

However, this expectation that common Muslims in Mewat should behave according to Tablighi teachings put unseen pressure on Muslim individuals of Sufi and saintly inclination. Munis, a poor scrap worker, felt guilty for not reading *namāz* regularly when he was approached by Tablighi Jamaat workers. His excuse was that, although he wanted to pray regularly, his work kept him busy. Despite not being a regular *namāzī*, he understood *shirk* doctrines. He became angry when he noticed that his wife had put an amulet around their child's neck and tied a thread in his hand as emblems of the *barkat* (blessing) of the Sufi saint, Shah Chokha. He warned her not to do so again as the Tablighis would consider it the act of unscrupulous and unauthorised charlatans. When his wife asked, 'How do you know it does not work?' he replied, 'The power of the saint I do not contest, but the Tablighis do not like it so don't do it for their sake.'

According to the doctrine of *shirk* preached by the Tablighi Jamaat, no living or dead person, animal, plant, idol or any material object should be held in religious veneration. Traditional Sufi Muslims or the Muslim followers of Laldas and Shah Chokha gave an unusual response to the remarks, insisting that they were 'praying with' and not 'praying to' a saint (Osella 2015: 8). For example, they generally added the term 'yā Allah' before the traditional

slogan of *yā dada laldas or dada chokha madad kariyo* (O Dada Laldas and Dada Chokha! Please help!). Now, Sufi Muslims exclaim, 'O Allah, O Dada Laldas! Please help!' This invoking of Allah first before the saints was a direct result of Tablighi reaction and led to the creation of a supreme place for Allah in Mewati Islam.

Despite the complexity of the issues at stake in this sectarian debate between Sufis and Tablighis, the most important concern is the ultimate agency of one supreme God, Allah. Even if God bestows power to innumerable saints and objects, the important question for Muslims is their intentionality (*niyat*) when they tie a thread, go to a shrine or call upon a saint (Osella 2015).<sup>21</sup> From my interactions with Muslim interlocutors, it emerged that a range of issues seemed to affect their thinking: social class, caste, religion, needs, desires, education and modernity. However, the fundamental questions remained: How are we different from Hindus? And what should we do to become 'ideal' Muslims?

It is also important to mention here that under the impact of reformist activities, Sunni Islam has assumed an important and positive place in many aspects of the life of Indian Muslims. For example, in Mewat, this form of 'Islam' has been successful in eradicating certain caste discriminations related to access to a worship space (generally mosque), sharing of food with a 'lower-caste' person and annihilating other caste taboos around food and drinks.<sup>22</sup> This was not the case at least 20 years ago. Until then, untouchability was a prevalent customary practice followed by the Meos, especially with regard to the Mirasi bards (Dom caste). Nowadays, as one Meo put it to me, *Islam me hukkā pānī sab jāyaj hai* (Islam allows sharing of food and water-pipes).<sup>23</sup>

Another important feature of these intra-religious debates is that although the point of contention about Sufism in Islam is theological, both Sufi and Tablighi groups drew on the same scriptures, the Quran and the Hadith, to support their respective claims. Within Islam, pluralism is a well-established and commonly accepted fact: the same *surā* (hymn) is generally used by supporters of Sufism and by reformists who rally against it (Osella 2015). In Mewat, both the Tablighi Jamaat and the Sufi Muslims organised religious congregations, or *jalsā*, to prove their respective acts of veneration valid. Maqbul Khan, a friend from a Meo village, extended an invitation for me to attend a Sufi *jalsā* in his village, while Islamuddin accompanied me to a Tablighi *jalsā* on the border of Haryana and Rajasthan. As we set out on a late summer morning, our faces shielded by cotton scarves, the sun's heat was already intense. After an hour's drive, we arrived at a vast enclosure

spanning approximately 15 square acres, resembling a grand wedding canopy. A raised platform stood at one end, facing the expansive open space within the enclosure. Islamic sermons echoed through loudspeakers, emphasising the importance of surrendering to divine commands, leading a simple life and treating fellow Muslims with respect and courtesy. The place swiftly filled up, reaching its maximum capacity. Local newspapers reported the following morning that over 100,000 individuals had attended the event. Such large-scale events were regularly organised by the Tablighi Jamaat.

Despite the attendance of so many people during this *jalsā*, it was not chaotic or unpleasant because of the unprecedented discipline of the crowd. This basic principle of the Tablighi Jamaat's teaching was clearly visible in the way the crowd behaved at this religious congregation. People greeted strangers smilingly and also helped them to navigate the cramped conditions. Such self-discipline is expected from every Tablighi and contributes to the power and efficiency of the organisation. Consequently, the Tablighi Jamaat has been able to function with little controversy until 2020, when many Tablighis were prejudicially criticised by the right-wing-leaning Indian media. They were erroneously accused of organising regular gatherings and preaching tours during the Corona pandemic as an act of purposely spreading the virus.<sup>24</sup> For the first time, the organisation became a topic of (negative) public discussions throughout India.

The Tablighi Jamaat is, however, a peaceful transnational movement, present in over 150 countries. Its annual three-day mass congregation, known as *ijtemā*, is an essential part of its mission. Most of its volunteers try to participate in the *ijtemā* at some point in their life somewhere in the world (mostly in South Asia). The *ijtemā* plays a significant role in the lives of Tablighi Muslims and is the largest congregation of Muslims after the Hajj. The popularity of the *ijtemā* is demonstrated by the fact that the *ijtemā* near Dhaka in Bangladesh in 2009 attracted more than 5 million people (B. Siddiqi 2010) and did so again in 2018 (Hossain 2018).<sup>25</sup>

When I attended the Tablighi *jalsā*, many *maulavis* spoke about the importance of following the path of the Prophet. Quranic verses were cited to show the importance of living a moral life. Metcalf (1993: 590) suggests that the practice of the Tablighi Jamaat is aimed at reviving the past, stating, 'its very program is understood to make the past live'. I heard repeatedly the famous dictum *agar andar imān hogā to bāhar māhaul banegā*, meaning 'if there is faith inside then the outside environment will be better'. The fundamental difference among Muslims was articulated along the lines of

‘our Islam (Tablighi) versus their Islam [Sufis]’. The crowd listened to these discourses intently.

By contrast, at the Sufi *jalsā* in Maqbul Khan’s village, verses from the Quran were cited to counter the notions of the Tablighi Jamaat. The discourse of the main *maulavis* from Bareilly—a centre of Sufism in India—focused on the ‘radical’ religious politics of the Tablighi Jamaat. The issues of religious harmony and a shared religious culture were first invoked and then consolidated by re-telling of the life stories of the famous Chishti saints, Moinuddin Chishti<sup>26</sup> and Nizamuddin Auliya. The *maulavis* pointed out that many people in South Asia became Muslims through the teachings of these saints and emphasised their service to Islam.<sup>27</sup>

In their quest to discipline Muslims, the Tablighi Jamaat preached that any association with saints may make believers stray from the ‘true’ path. The idea of ‘proper’ religious conduct has always been an important theological issue. Modernity and politics have impacted the way in which religious consciousness functions within the uniform notions of religions and religiosity. Such reformist efforts from both the Hindu and Muslim sides work against diverse religious practices to replace it with uniformity. The followers of the Tablighi Jamaat, therefore, mainly attempted to distinguish themselves from non-Muslims and from Muslims on the wrong path such as Sufi believers. The organisation’s negative characterisations of religious behaviour and its overemphasis on one single truth are also attempts to homogenise contemporary Muslim issues and identities. The Tablighi Jamaat believes that a larger transnational *ummāh* (Islamic community) can only come about through creating oneness and uniformity.

The changes in Meos’ religious culture had a noticeable impact on their shared sacred spaces, including Laldas’s and other shrines. I regularly visited the Shah Chokha tomb (as depicted in Figure 5.4) to observe the Tablighi perspectives on saints and shrines. This particular tomb served as a prime example of the Tablighi approach to utilising Sufi shrines, as it had recently undergone a transformation from being a Sufi site to becoming a Tablighi centre for ‘Islamic’ preaching. The teachings of the Tablighi Jamaat primarily revolve around disciplining Muslims’ behaviour and reinforcing their Muslim identity. These teachings could be conveyed through various means, ranging from religious narratives and theological debates to even violent confrontations.<sup>28</sup>

I also spent a considerable amount of time with the head *maulvi*, sitting around in the courtyard of the *dargāh* waiting for visitors. One day the



**FIGURE 5.4** The tomb of Shah Chokha

Source: Photo by the author.

*maulvi* made a request. He said, ‘Doctor Sahib, you know, our children are lagging behind in modern education. We cannot afford to hire an English teacher; would you kindly teach our *madrassa* children some lessons while you are here?’

While I initially agreed to offer English lessons, I realised unforeseen situations, meetings and events arose more frequently than I had anticipated. As a result, I had fewer opportunities than expected to engage in this teaching endeavour. Nevertheless, the limited interactions I had during the few English lessons were valuable in helping me establish connections with the children. These children were mostly clad in kurta-pyjamas and Muslim skull caps. Most of the time, they were either reciting verses from the Quran in high-pitched rhythmic voices or playing rough and rustic-style games, including spinning whirligigs, kicking soccer balls made of clothes or simply chasing each other. The interaction with these children helped me to understand the early socialisation of a Tablighi Muslim.

Initially, the children were suspicious of my presence. At the beginning of my fieldwork, any attempt to photograph them met with an unpleasant collective stare. This hostility soon disappeared, and we bonded cheerfully after a few English lessons. Later, whenever I entered the *dargāh*, somebody would always welcome me with a bottle of water. At other times, such as during the Thursday rush of visitors, many children would encircle me asking the purpose of my visit and my progress with the book they presumed I was writing about *dādā* (Shah Chokha). Even though the *madrassa* children were playing near the saint's grave, it gradually became clear to me that they had strong opinions about it. They barely went inside the *sanctum*. These interactions with the children first directed my attention towards the ideological tension brewing on the issue of saint veneration among Muslims. Every Thursday, when children of the village gathered to receive offerings such as sugar balls from visitors to the *dargāh*, the children of the *madrassa* were forbidden to take such edibles. Their self-control was often breached when delicious sweets (*ladoo* or *rasgulla*) or rice pudding (*khīr*) were on offer and sometimes caused chaos. The children and teachers of the *madrassa* missed no chance to enjoy such occasions. Their ideological objections to the offerings seemed fragile in the face of temptation.

Within a 30-kilometre radius of the shrine, some villages and houses are identified as either *bidatī* (Sufi) or Tablighi. The strong influence of this reform organisation on Meos had, thus, divided the Mewati society along the line of pro-Sufi and anti-Sufi theologies. Most Meo men strongly advised their family members against visiting the shrines of Laldas and other similar saints, resulting in newer religious trends within South Asian Muslim communities. Since the majority of the Meos no longer actively participated in or encouraged the traditional practices of shared devotion, the saintly

shrines were considered places of apostasy. At some places, Sufi graves were completely neglected or reportedly destroyed so that Muslims can no longer pray there. The Tablighi Jamaat was focused on discouraging Muslims from any form of worship other than that of Allah so that believers were not led into *fitnā* (chaos) or *irtidād* (apostasy). On the other hand, Sufi Meos also countered Tablighi Meos by mocking them as the new Mullahs of Islam:

*sānp ne chhoḍī kānchli, khet ne chhoḍo leo,  
barkhā mandī par gaī, jab se hue mauvi Meo,  
hue mauvi Meo, pīron ki kare kain gillā,  
bhar bhar kundā khaye leven na kisī kī sallā,  
naktī unki khusnī, mathe unke syāh,  
jaise cuḍahrān kā fatihā, aise unke byāh.*

The snake has shed its skin, the wall is stripped of plaster,  
The rain has failed since Meos became Islamic scholars [*maulvi*],  
These Meo scholars criticise the *pīrs*,  
They eat vessel full of food and don't take advice from others,  
Their trousers are short, their heads are black,  
Like the death rites of sweepers ['low caste'] are their weddings.<sup>29</sup>

The Tablighis were also constantly trying to persuade the Sufis to follow their path. This concern to discipline Muslims' religious behaviour was deeply rooted in Muslim responses to the activities of the Hindu reform organisation, the Arya Samaj and others. These days, one of the principal identifications of a Muslim is whether a person is a Sufi Muslim or a Tablighi Muslim. Their deep-seated animosity is often evident in their everyday conversations. Those with a leaning towards Sufism commonly label the Tablighis as 'terrorists' due to their perceived promotion of a radical conformity in Islam, while the Tablighis, in turn, refer to the Sufis as *bidatīs* (innovators).

At various shared shrines, this call for ignoring the saints helped the rival group to incorporate a Muslim saint within their own system of beliefs. For instance, Laldas and Shah Chokha are neglected by the Tablighi Jamaat, and it encouraged other Muslims to do so, at the same time making it easier for Hindus to fully claim the saints as a part of the 'Hindu' religion. Tablighis have a vested interest in asserting their control over these shrines, driven not only by the economic value of these spaces but also by the belief that it is crucial to impart 'pure' Islam in locations visited by Muslims who may have

deviated from the right path. The Tablighi Jamaat sees these shrines as an opportunity to educate and guide individuals who may have strayed from the principles of the faith, ensuring that they receive teachings aligned with their interpretation of authentic Islamic practices. As a result, competitive battles unfolded, not only between Hindus and Muslims but also among the two Muslim groups, the Sufi and Tablighi. At the Laldas shrines this battle was indirectly won by Hindus leading to a complete Hinduisation of the shrines.

Presently, the rise and success of the Tablighi reform movement in Mewat has created visible and invisible pressures which have important social, political and cultural implications. One of the major effects of Tablighi preaching, especially for Muslims, is the creation of a situation of political aloofness in which only 'pure' Islam in the form of the Tablighi mission can rescue them from their degraded life. The Tablighi Jamaat appeals to members of the *ummāh* all over the world to forego unacceptable Islamic behaviour such as the veneration of Sufi saints with the slogans like 'O Muslims! Become Muslims!' The reason behind the religious transformations of the Meos and other Muslims of the area was connected with the influence of the Tablighi's work. While there may not have been significant philosophical differences between the teachings of the Tablighi Jamaat and the devotional practices that people were already attached to, a significant shift was occurring in how individuals defined their Muslim identity. The Tablighi Jamaat played a central role in this transformation by emphasising the importance of certain practices and behaviours that were seen as integral to being a devout Muslim. This shift in focus was redefining the parameters of Muslimness and influencing the way individuals understood and expressed their religious identity. In the Tablighi Jamaat narratives, Muslim identity was linked to following 'pure' Islamic religious practices.

Although without any doubt, given the ordinary Muslims' conditions in India, the Tablighi Jamaat may also be considered 'a resistance and withdrawal movement from worldly affairs against a dominant consumerist culture and politics' (Metcalf 1999: 1283). But the Tablighi Jamaat has also produced an inflexible hierarchical situation between the powerful and the powerless, such as between the Meos and other low-caste Muslims (the Jogis and Mirasis), between men and women, and has widened the rift between the Sufi and anti-Sufi theology in Mewat. Such a change has put shared shrines and the faith of followers under a lot of pressure. The examples of concealment in Chapter 6 show how devotees negotiate with the rising reformist pressure



in their personal lives that illustrate passive resistance to a certain extent in line with the discussion in Chapter 7.

## NOTES

1. The tomb of Shah Chokha is located 3 kilometres away from the Laldas temple in Punahana. I often visited the tomb to observe the reformist impact of the Tablighi Jamaat on this shared worship space.
2. In Hinduism, giving money, regardless of the religious beliefs of the receiver, is considered to contribute to one's *punyā* (reward). Similarly, itinerant Muslim ascetics would, in the past, receive alms in the form of grain from Hindu households. Many of these Muslim ascetics belong to Muslim ascetic orders such as wandering *fakirs* (beggars) or Jogis. Even in the present, the distinction between Hindu and Islamic symbolism and beliefs does not affect the giving and receiving of alms. Religious distinctions do exist, but they are not the only factor affecting the interaction between Hindus and Muslims in the public sphere.
3. Having a Brahmin priest in new temples is a strategy of fully incorporating Laldas as a Hindu religious figure as discussed in Chapter 4.
4. The Samaj expanded its influence through various social endeavours, such as promoting women's education, agitating for the eradication of untouchability and advocating reform measures for equality among Hindus.
5. Colonial oriental scholars produced knowledge that claimed India was in a degraded situation and blamed Muslim rulers for it. For instance, James Mill (1817) divided the history of India into three parts: Ancient Hindu India, Medieval Muslim India and Modern British India. He considered that late eighteenth-century India was going through a 'dark age' as a result of Muslim rule. The Arya Samaj was a product of this *milieu* and followed this line of thought.
6. However, it is important to note that the Arya Samaj is a diverse movement with a range of opinions and perspectives. Some members advocate for a more liberal and progressive interpretation of Hinduism, while others emphasise a more conservative and traditionalist approach.
7. Like Laldas, Jaharpir is a famous saint of Rajasthan who also has a dual religious identity of a saint and a *pīr*. He was an ardent follower of Shiva.
8. Informal conversation with Shyam Singh, Ram Singh's elder brother and a staunch Arya Samaji.

9. Shyam Singh spent most of his time in the Arya Samaj temple. Whenever I visited the Arya Samaj temple, the attendance was very low compared to other temples. I did not see more than two or three people each time.
10. Informal conversation with the priest of the Durga Temple.
11. Ibid.
12. This reasoning often came from devotees of Laldas who recounted several stories, while talking to the headmaster, from their personal lives centred around experiencing miracle due to their belief in Laldas.
13. Diana Eck (1998: 22) terms it a 'polytheistic imagination' of Hindus.
14. It was quite harrowing to notice this kind of oppression of women by men of both religions. Both religious sides practice gender, caste and class discrimination, asserting the right to make decisions about the lives of others.
15. The matter of the couple remained unresolved for some time. Later, I was informed that the woman and the man were separated.
16. The six *kalimās* in South Asian Islam refer to the six parts of a Muslim's belief derived from the Hadith (words, actions and the sayings of the Prophet Mohammad). They are *tayyibāh* (word of purity), *shahādā* (declaration of faith in oneness of God), *tamjeed* (Allah is the greatest), *tawhid* (oneness of God), *astagfār* (forgiveness for sins) and *radd-e-kufar* (seeking in Allah refuge from disbelief).
17. The success of the Tablighi Jamaat has attracted many scholars to study its organisational structure and mode of functioning (Gaborieau 2006; Masud 2000; Mayaram 2004b; B. Metcalf 2000; B. Siddiqi 2018; M. Siddiqi 2014; Sikand 2006). Scholars differ on the nature of the Tablighi Jamaat movement. One group denies the influence of Sufism on the Tablighi Jamaat (for instance, Ernst and Lawrence 2016; Masud 2000), while the other finds a connection between Sufism and the Tablighi Jamaat (Gaborieau 2006; Reetz 2006; Sikand 2007; Troll 1994).
18. The first such attempt was carried out by a *maulavi* Shah Wali Allah (1703–62), who believed the root cause behind the Indian Muslims' decline or loss of power was their ignorance of the Islamic sacred scripture.
19. The two divisions, Sufi and Reformist (orthodox school), in Muslims among many differ from each other on the issues of ways of worshipping Allah, the place of Sufi saints in Islam, haram-prohibitions (music, painting, eating meats cut in one stroke and so on). One of the contestations between the two ideologies in India finds expressions in the traditional rivalries between Bareilavi and Deobandi schools of thought; see B. Metcalf (1982, 2002).

20. Delhi is the centre of the Tablighi activities organised from the Banglewali Masjid.
21. Osella (2015) has observed the same reaction among Muslims in Kerala, South India.
22. Muslims in Mewat generally intermingled with everyone except the caste of 'sweepers' who were considered 'impure' for eating 'pork'.
23. Quoted to me by an elderly Meo and brother of one of my informants. I used to spend evenings at their *addā* (gathering place) in front of their home, joined by other villagers. Our regular leisurely conversations were very informative.
24. The majority of Indian media spread the (fabricated) news as Corona-Jehad.
25. Visit <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/inpictures/millions-attend-world-largest-muslim-gathering-180123064824287.html>, accessed 23 March 2018.
26. Moinuddin Chishti (1141–1236), the twelfth-century Islamic Sufi saint, was the founder of the Chishti order whose *dargāh* at Ajmer in Rajasthan in India is a famous place of pilgrims among Hindus and Muslims.
27. Eaton (2004) considers the role of Sufis in conversion. Also see Eaton (1993).
28. The example of another type of violent confrontation can be seen in Pakistan, where the Sufi groups of Barelavis have killed many non-Muslims over blasphemy charges and sued Muslims to discipline their behaviours.
29. This couplet is also cited by Aijaz Ahmad in his paper; see A. Ahmad (2015: 76).