

Chapter 2

Accessing the Tablighi Jamaat

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss the methodology that I applied in the research. The chapter provides an overview of the situation I went through in the field. My fieldwork involved participation in multiple sites. The chapter also provides a detailed account of the idea of multi-sited ethnography and its implication in my research. Since the Tablighi Jamaat is a transnational religious movement, a multi-sited ethnographic method was essential in order to get a comprehensive understanding of the Tablighi Jamaat movement both in various parts in Bangladesh and in the UK. The tools used were participant observation, informal discussion, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions (FGD).

In my research, I employed participant observation to observe the day-to-day activities of the Tablighi Jamaat during *ijtema*, *gasht* and *chilla*. I participated in a *chilla* with a Tablighi Jamaat team for a consecutive forty days in the northern part of Bangladesh. I spent the entire time with them participating in every activity of their *dawah*. During the *chilla*, I had the opportunity to engage myself in informal discussions with participating team members. This provided me with the socio-economic background and individual perspective of Tablighi Jamaat followers. My participation in this Tablighi Jamaat team helped me to identify followers with whom I could carry out in-depth interviews to get more detailed and individual perspectives of the Tablighi Jamaat.

This chapter provides an overview of how I went through and negotiated situations in the field in order to get a detailed understanding of everyday activities of Tablighi Jamaat followers. The chapter begins with the discussion of justification of employing ethnographic methods to understand the Tablighi Jamaat. It also provides a detailed account of multi-sited ethnography and its implications in the current research. It might be expected that as a native researcher (in the context of Bangladesh), I would have relatively easy access to the people with whom I conducted fieldwork. In reality, the situation was not straightforward. In the beginning,

I was regarded as an outsider by most of the followers of the group, although my Muslim identity made it easy to participate with the group. At the initial stage, I had to meet many Tablighi Jamaat followers to build rapport. Attaining trust and building rapport was the beginning of my fieldwork, and afforded me a good entry into the group. I now turn to discuss how I selected the ethnographic methods used in conducting my fieldwork.

2.2 Why Ethnographic Research?

Bronislaw Malinowski¹ set the standard of fieldwork by his ethnography on the Trobriand Islanders. It has been treated as the classic example of ethnography that is read and followed as a model of doing ethnography. By spending a lengthy period in the field, a researcher can acquire substantial knowledge about a community. For Geertz, ‘ethnography is like trying to read (in the sense of “construct a reading of”) a manuscript—foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries, but written not in conventionalized graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behaviour’ (1973: 10). For him, ethnography is not just an approach, techniques and procedures. This is a process of bringing out the hidden meaning that he calls, ‘thick description’. Thus, the purpose of ethnography is not merely describing something but to analyse and construct the realities that are not visible. This statement of Geertz shows the significance of ethnography, at the same time it also points out the challenges of conducting ethnography, which is not just describing.

The significance of ethnographic research is the ability to interpret and represent ‘another culture’. As Marcus and Fischer (1999: 18) state:

Ethnography is a research process in which the anthropologist closely observes, records, and engages in the daily life of another culture - an experience labelled as the fieldwork method - and then writes accounts of this culture, emphasizing descriptive detail.

In comparison with other methodologies, the strength of the ethnographic approach is its ability to uncover reality. In this context, participant observation has the greater benefit of exploring *dawah* in both the locality and *chilla*. Continuous observation was helpful to understand the internal dynamics of the Tablighi Jamaat. Without participating with the Tablighi Jamaat, especially in the *chilla*, it would not have been possible to get a holistic view of their *dawah* activities. Senior Tablighi Jamaat followers instructed me several times to go out for a *chilla* in order to know about the Tablighi Jamaat. When I met one of the senior Tablighi leaders in Dewsbury in the UK, he sat on the floor holding my hands and told me:

¹‘Argonauts of the Western Pacific’ was published in 1922, which is considered as one of the influential ethnographies.

I am not going to tell you much about Tabligh. You are an intelligent boy; you will be able to understand. Look, I had studied Nuclear Physics during the Pakistan period and got a scholarship to study in the UK. I worked for the nuclear energy plant in Pakistan. I had studied aeronautical engineering in the UK. What I am doing now? This is what Allah wants us to do. If you study about swimming, you could know everything about swimming. You could have become an expert on swimming. If you jump in the water, what would happen? Can you swim? In a similar way, it would not be possible for you to understand the Tablighi Jamaat from the outside; you have to get inside it. I am suggesting to you to go for a *chilla*, and you will be able to know everything about the Tablighi Jamaat.

His comment in a way provided the logic of selecting participant observation. He might not have been aware of participant observation as a research method, but he pointed out that without participating in Tablighi *dawah* I would not be able to learn about the Tablighi Jamaat. At the same time, the nature of the study defines the method. Later on, I decided to go for a *chilla* in Bangladesh. It provided a holistic understanding about the Tablighi Jamaat. I told them in the beginning of the *chilla* that I was participating in the *chilla* as part of my research study in a UK university. They treated me as an ordinary Tablighi follower during the *chilla*. Senior followers of the *chilla* wanted me to learn everything about the Tablighi Jamaat, so that I could internalise the principles of the Tablighi Jamaat to practice it in my life. They expected me to be converted to a dedicated Tablighi Jamaat follower. Maybe this is the reason why they provided me with easy access to their group.

After two weeks, the team decided to assign new followers to take the lead in preaching in the community in the afternoon (*gasht*). In a meeting, they divided followers into six small groups. Each group had two new followers and one experienced member. The experienced member was our mentor and guided us in learning the process of *dawah*. It involved updating religious knowledge and skill to talk and motivate non-*tablighi* members. Moulana Abdul Khalek was my mentor and one day in the morning just after *fazr* prayer, he told me to lead the *gasht*. In the *gasht*, we had to spread out in the nearest area of the mosque and had to find Muslims who do not go to the mosque to pray or do not pray at home. Our task was to speak to them about the importance of praying and following Islam. In the process, we invited them to meet with us in the mosque, to spend time with our activities. The following example clarifies how I participated with Tablighi activities during the *chilla*.

Moulana Abdul Khalek	Assalamualaikum, How are you <i>vaijaan</i> [brother]?
Emdadul Haque	Good.
Moulana Abdul Khalek	This <i>vaijaan</i> ² [pointing to me] has come from London to meet you. Please listen to him, all right? Is this your son?
Emdadul Haque	Yes.
Moulana Abdul Khalek	Stay with us son, your father will talk to us for a minute.

²In Bangladesh, the general trend to call someone with honour as *vai* or *vaijaan*. *Vaijaan* is relatively formal and represent the humbleness.

- Bulbul We have come to your mosque from Dhaka with a *jamaat*. Who is he? [There was another older person with him].
- Emdadul Haque *Dadu* [granddad].
- Bulbul Mashallah [whatever Allah wills], You just have completed *fazr* prayer, haven't you *dadu*?
- Dadu Yes.
- Bulbul What do you do for your living *vai* [brother]?
- Emdadul Haque I am a motorcycle mechanic.
- Bulbul So you have the flexibility in your job, haven't you?
- Emdadul Haque Yes.
- Bulbul So you are not busy all the time with your work, are you?
- Emdadul Haque No.
- Bulbul *Vai*, if we follow the rule of Allah and lead our life as our Prophet advised, it would bring happiness, peace, and success in our life. We all want happiness, peace and success (*sukh, santi ebong safolota*), don't we?
- Emdadul Haque Yes.
- Bulbul We do many things for this-worldly affairs, but we have limited time in our life. We have limited *hayat* [life]. How many years will we survive? 60, 70, or 80, 90 years maybe. For this short life, we give all our efforts to make our life nice and better. We have so many dreams, plans to implement these dreams, haven't we?
- Emdadul Haque Yes.
- Bulbul Everything we do, we do it for our family, wife and children. Sometimes we forget about ourselves. We love our family so much that we ignore our own interest. Every activity becomes a benefit for the family. We dedicate our life to fulfil the need of the short life of the world. But we have another life, life after death, that everlasting life, *akhiraat* [Day of Judgment]. Don't we want happiness, peace, and success in *akhiraat*?
- Emdadul Haque Yes, certainly we want that.
- Bulbul Assalamualaikum, please come. [Another person named Fazlul joins in our discussion on the street] So how much time do we need to spend to get success in that everlasting life? Allah will give us everything in that everlasting life, whatever we want. Allah will fulfil every demand. So, *vai*, don't we think that we need to work hard to achieve this happiness?

- Emdadul Haque
Bulbul
- Definitely, we have to.
To make this effort successful we have to pray regularly in the mosque and have to engage with *dawah*. We have come from Dhaka just to invite you to come to the mosque for your prayer. Have you spent any time with *dawah* and Tabligh?
- Emdadul Haque
Bulbul
- Yes, I have spent three days in *dawah*.
Sometimes we see that we could not pray regularly. That is why we need to spend a longer period in *dawah*, for example three *chillas* or *chilla* to learn *dawah* and get it into our heart. That helps to pray regularly, it will become your habit to pray.
- Emdadul Haque
- Yes, I will try. [He was smiling and hesitating to agree to go for the *dawah*]
- The *Rahbar*³
- Please make a *dua* [ask a favour of Allah] to Allah to complete three *chillas* soon. *Mashallah, mashallah* [whatever Allah wills].
- Bulbul
- If you do not go to *chilla*, it does not mean that you do not have to pray. A single *neki* [good deed] will become so precious in the time of judgement. No one will remember and help you, even your family members. Everyone will become selfish that day. Then we will realise, what have we done? I have done everything for my family, and now they do not know me. I am alone. Therefore, *vai*, it is for ourselves, for our own good, we have to pray regularly. We have to spend time in the name of Allah. It has been two days now in your area, please come to join us in the mosque. When do you join us *vai*?
- Emdadul Haque
- In *esha* time.
- Bulbul and Abdul Khalek
- Can you come to pray in the *magrib* time.
- Abdul Khalek
- We will leave tomorrow *vai*.
- Bulbul
- We have come to your area as your guest, we request you to join us in *magrib* please.
- Emdadul Haque
- I work in a workshop; he is a builder [pointing to another person]. We will try to attend the *magrib* prayer.
- Bulbul
- We will have a beneficial *boyan* [religious speech] after *magrib* prayer. Try to attend it *vai*. Come to see us in the *magrib* time and try to attend *fazr* prayer tomorrow to say goodbye to us, okay brothers.

³*Rahbar* is a Tablighi term. Generally, the person from the local Tablighi Jamaat group who guides the team for *gasht* is called *rahbar*.

Emdadul Haque Sure, we will try.
 Bulbul You promised *vai*. It is for Allah, not for us. See you soon *vai*. *Assalamualaikum*.

I had this opportunity to lead a session because of my active participation with Tablighi Jamaat group. Without participation with them, it would not have been possible for me to get this role. It also helped me to understand the Tablighi process of talking to non-Tablighi people to motivate them. Tablighi Jamaat has a distinctive way of talking to non-Tablighi that is shown in the above conversation. Tablighi Jamaat follower always begins with a positive approach and start with the discussion of the greatness of Allah. They leave an open question to the person they speak. It forces a non-Tablighi person to think about the Tablighi Jamaat. Without active participation, it might have been difficult for me to understand much of the unseen realities of the Tablighi Jamaat, which participant observation made possible for me. In the process of participation, I did not have any privilege with my researcher identity in the team. I had to go through with all the decisions made in the team meeting. I had to follow everything as any other follower did, for example, *dawah*, *gasht*, cooking, cleaning plates, and doing grocery shopping, etc.

After the end of the *dawah* journey, the team leader appreciated me a lot because of my quick learning. Shamsur Rahman and I did the *boyan*, organised the *gasht* and led respective teams in the last ten days of the *chilla*. We achieved the basic competencies during the *chilla* and acquired confidence in speaking about Islam with non-Tablighis. A Tablighi follower has to be competent about the content of the conversation. Close guidance, instruction, and regular practices in mosques helped me to be competent and confident. Without an ethnographic approach and participant observation, it would not have been possible to have access to such practical involvement. In this process, the experienced members of the team have to be convinced by the expertise gained by new members through their everyday learning. Once they are convinced that a new Tablighi Jamaat follower can lead *dawah* or *gasht* they employ the new person to lead. Without active participation, no one would get this access. However, in the beginning of the *chilla*, I was nervous and concerned about how they would treat me in the group. In the end, it worked out well for me.

2.3 Multi Sited Ethnography: Field, Site, and Location

In anthropology, fieldwork is the primary means to generate knowledge. Fieldwork based knowledge made anthropology a distinctive discipline. At the same time, it also maintains the boundary with other disciplines in the social sciences. As Gupta and Ferguson (1997: 2) states, 'fieldwork thus helps define anthropology as a discipline in both senses of the world, constructing a space of possibilities while at the same time drawing the lines that confine that space'. The primary orientation of the field was to concentrate on the single, isolated, native or primitive community

predominantly not touched or influenced by the characteristics of ‘civilisation’ that remains as a natural site or ‘laboratory’ of gathering data.

During the post Second World War era when the global political economy began to change and many of the colonial states had become independent, the debate on the classical idea of ‘fieldwork’ began. ‘Field’ in anthropology stands for the most important element, in the changing and interconnected world, it was necessary to reformulate the anthropological fieldwork tradition that would decentre and defetishize the concept of ‘the field’ (Gupta and Ferguson 1997: 5). Gupta and Ferguson propose the need to redefine the field; for them, in an interconnected world we are never really ‘out of the field’ (1997: 35), the field as a form of motivated and stylized dislocation (1997: 37). They view a research area less as a ‘field’ for the collection data than as a site for strategic intervention (1997: 39). In this sense, the idea of ‘field’ moves from its single site location to be more flexible, virtual, wide and interconnected, not only with various locations but also with the global socio-political context.

The notion of ‘fieldwork’ has transformed in many ways with the transformation of global culture and change in the world system. With the changes in the global political system, everything has become connected, and the classic example of the ‘field’ has become scarce in the new world order. The kinds of ‘native’ or ‘primitive’ society, which were treated as the ‘natural laboratory’ in the past no longer exist or are hard to find. The wave of globalisation has connected the ‘local’ everywhere with the ‘global’. Global and local or centre and periphery are no longer isolated from each other as they were in the past. In such a context, Appadurai (1991) suggests that ethnography must confront this changing world. Appadurai states:

Central among these facts is the changing social, territorial, and cultural reproduction of group identity. As groups migrate, regroup in new locations, reconstruct their histories, and reconfigure their ethnic ‘projects,’ the *ethno* in ethnography takes on a slippery, non-localized quality, to which the descriptive practices of anthropology will have to respond (1991: 191).

With globalisation, when the mobility of people becomes a common phenomenon, the idea of territorial identity starts to disintegrate. Various levels of communication with different parts appear as a new social reality that people maintain. The field of study thus becomes interconnected with different parts. This new social reality initiated a method to conduct ethnography in changing social context where sites of study are no longer single and isolated. The idea of multi-sited ethnography evolved in a context where sites are connected with each other. Especially in the migration and diasporic situation, this idea of a ‘multi-site’ has become an effective way to conduct ethnography.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the methodological debates of Clifford and Marcus (1986) and Marcus (1995) opened up a new discussion in anthropology about the direction of new ethnography. Marcus (1995) used the term ‘multi-sited ethnography’ systematically as an alternative solution of the ongoing methodological debate. This new concept of ‘field’ has started to break down the hierarchy and

stereotyped idea of the ‘field’. It remains the core methodological issue now. The question is what would be the methods of conducting fieldwork that involves multiple sites and locations.

2.3.1 What Is Multi Sited Ethnography?

Multi-sited ethnography constructs its field as a combination of several interconnected sites. Compared to the traditional ethnographic approach, multi-sited ethnography attempts to connect with other sites to understand a culture and community. Marcus (1995: 96) describes this new form of ethnographic research as ‘self-consciously embedded in a world system’. For Marcus, the world system is an essential element that forces anthropologists to come out from the boundary of a single site. As he further argues, ‘... it arises in response to empirical changes in the world and therefore to transformed locations of cultural production’ (Marcus 1995: 97). According to Marcus (1995), multi-sited ethnography requires the ethnographer to follow the people in their interconnected world. It also helps to understand the world system, which a single-sited ethnography is unable to do.

In his study on news media foreign correspondents, Hannerz (2003) points out some of the practical implications of multi-sited ethnography. For him, ‘the sites are connected with one another in such ways that the relationships between them are as important for this formulation as the relationships within them; the fields are not some mere collection of local units’ (Hannerz 2003: 206). Hannerz (2003: 208) was clearly not trying to study the entire culture and social life of three sites in his research. It might not be possible even in single-sited ethnography to cover every aspect of social and cultural life of a local community.

Although it has become a popular method for many anthropologists, at the same time, some argue that it is not the appropriate way of doing ‘fieldwork’ (Hage 2005). Hage (2005) in his four-year long multi-sited ethnographic study on migration of Lebanese points out some of the inadequacies of a multi-sited ethnographic approach. For him, as he describes, time limitations make it unfeasible in practice to keep travelling around many places:

I was constantly suffering from jet lag. Multi-sited ethnography was unhealthy, especially for (most) people who have teaching and families to go back to and therefore cannot take all the time they might wish to take. They need to cover the various sites in a limited amount of time. The body of the anthropologist, even a post-modern one, simply cannot cope with such fast and intensive travelling for a very lengthy period of time (Hage 2005: 465).

In practice, Hage could not gain the in-depth familiarity, which is necessary for an ethnographer with more than two sites, at the most. A degree of immersion is also necessary to produce a good ethnography (Hage 2005: 466). If we go back to the work of Malinowski in the Trobriand Islands, we can see that he did follow the Kula ring (Hannerz 2003; Hage 2005). In this sense, he is again the first person who used multi-site approach in his ethnography. Hage (2005) does not prefer to define this new ethnography as ‘multi-sited’; rather, for him it is ‘neo-Kulan ethnography’.

Since my research did not follow a traditional single site approach, in what sense, can it be defined as a multi-sited ethnography? The next part of this chapter clarifies this through a discussion based on my fieldwork experience in Bangladesh and the UK. The religious community that I studied is the Tablighi Jamaat and the main principle of the Tablighi Jamaat is to move across the country and the world to propagate their religious belief to others to revive religiosity among the Muslims. For a certain amount of time, a year and a month, they stay outside their home to propagate Islam. In order to understand the process of propagation, I decided to take part with them on many occasions. I had to choose a multi-sited ethnographic approach, because the main activity of the Tablighi Jamaat involves travel, and with a single-sited approach, it would not be possible to understand the nature of the movement completely. Therefore, the adoption of a multi sited ethnographic approach was the most effective way to conduct my research.

2.4 Introduction to the Field: Bangladesh and the UK

In Bangladesh, the sites of my fieldwork were in four districts, which are Dhaka, Manikganj, Faridpur, and Kurigram. I was based in Dhaka and regularly participated in the weekly *dawah* and *gasht* of the Tablighi Jamaat in two mosques. In Dhaka, I visited 12 different areas to participate in various activities of the Tablighi Jamaat, including *gasht*, *ta'leem*, to take in-depth interviews, observation, and FGDs. I carried out fieldwork in three national universities in Bangladesh, namely BUET (Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology), Dhaka University, and Jahangirnagar University. These are thought to be the influential centres of the Tablighi Jamaat for the students. In Manikganj and Faridpur, I conducted in-depth interviews and FGDs. I carried out participant observation at Nageswary in Kurigram district. This is situated in the northern part of Bangladesh. Nageswary is a relatively poverty prone area and known for its contemporary *manga* (famine). I spent forty days in a *chilla* and stayed in 13 mosques in various parts of Nageswary. *Chilla* provided me with an opportunity to observe Tablighi Jamaat activities in a rural part of the country. While some scholars believe that the Tablighi Jamaat is predominantly organised mainly by educated urban people (Ellickson 2002), my fieldwork in Nageswary and three other districts shows that the Tablighi Jamaat is equally strong in rural areas of Bangladesh. That is why many senior leaders of the Tablighi Jamaat mentioned that the Tablighi Jamaat is a strong organisation in Bangladesh because of the sacrifice and the dedication of rural people.

In the UK, I have regularly taken part in *gasht* and *dawah* activities in the three mosques in Cardiff; these are the Shahjalal, Umaar, and Uthman Mosques. The Shahjalal mosque is a predominantly Bangladeshi community mosque, while Pakistani and Indian Muslims in Cardiff mainly dominate the other two. The Tablighi Jamaat is particularly strong in the Umaar and Uthman mosques. The

Shahjalal mosque does not allow Tablighi Jamaat groups to stay overnight, but it permits them to perform *dawah* and *gasht* during the day.

I carried out participant observation with a mixed group consisting of Bangladeshi, Pakistani, and Indian Muslims in Cardiff. Apart from Cardiff, I have conducted interviews, observation and participant observation on Bangladeshi ethnic groups in London, Luton, Dewsbury, and Nottingham. Almost all in-depth interviews in the UK were conducted among British Bangladeshi and Bangladeshi students in the UK. I have conducted five in-depth interviews with non-Bangladeshis (Indian, Pakistani). However, when I participated in *ijtema* in Dewsbury and the weekly *gasht* in Cardiff, I participated with a mixed group of Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Indians and other Muslims (Somali, Arabs and some Malaysians). During this phase of participation, I carried out informal conversations with them on many occasions. I attended the annual three-day *ijtema* in Dewsbury with local Tablighi Jamaat followers from Cardiff who were mainly British Pakistanis and British Indians.

My sample of informants was recruited through two methods; personal contacts and meeting with Tablighi Jamaat followers in local *gashts*. Once I participated in a *gasht*, it provided me with further contacts of three-day *dawah* trips, *ijtemas* and *chillas*. Most of the informants in both countries were from lower, lower middle, middle-class, educated urban background. Many interviewees were students in various universities and colleges; this group made up 37.5% (12) in Bangladesh and 45.45% (10) in the UK. The remainder in both countries was engaged in various professions, including doctors, engineers, self employed and retired.

A breakdown of the interviewees is given in Tables 2.1 and 2.2.

I started the fieldwork from Cardiff with the help of one of my colleagues at Cardiff University, Ramin Ahmed, who knew some Tablighi followers in Cardiff, informed me about a Tablighi Jamaat group who came from Malaysia to preach among Malaysian students in various universities in the UK. There, I met Abdul, who is a British Bangladeshi, who later on became my key informant, and provided access to the Tablighi Jamaat group in Cardiff. I did not have much time spend with them at that time because of my plan to travel to Bangladesh for data collection.

Table 2.1 Individual interviewees

	Interviewees								Total
	Unmarried				Married				
	F		M		F		M		
	20 ≥	30 ≥	20 ≥	30 ≥	30 ≥	50 ≥	30 ≥	50 ≥	
Bangladesh	1	–	14	3	–	–	12	3	33
UK	–		7	2	1	–	7	5	22

Table 2.2 Focus groups

	Focus groups
Bangladesh	8
United Kingdom	1

The main purpose of the trip to Bangladesh was to find a suitable field site. As I already knew some of the Tablighi Jamaat activists, I thought it would be easy to find a Tablighi Jamaat group for participant observation. Shumon was the first Tablighi follower who I spoke with and interviewed. He was a second year student from Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET). I spent some time with him and his friend at his university hall of residence. My brother in law Tonmoy, who was also a student from the same university, helped me to establish frequent contacts with them. This provided an opportunity to build rapport with them and helped to go back to BUET to conduct in-depth interviews with some of them. BUET was the first site of my fieldwork in Bangladesh. Some of the early Tablighi Jamaat followers were academics at BUET. BUET is the pioneer institution for Tablighi Jamaat activities in Bangladesh. It has a positive effect on many other engineering universities in Bangladesh. That is why engineering students have a significant number of Tablighi Jamaat followers among the students in Bangladesh.

During the first field trip to Bangladesh, I met my old friend Dr. Mashiur Rahman, who decided to consider Tablighi Jamaat seriously, when he was doing his internship in a renowned medical college in Bangladesh. His residence is a 10-min walk from my family home in Badda, Dhaka. He suggested to me that I participate in his group's weekly *gasht*, so that I could meet some regular Tablighi Jamaat followers in his area. This was the first time I attended a *gasht*, which is known as the backbone of *dawah*. I spent the entire time participating in the *gasht* and evening prayer. The *gashts* and the in-depth interviews or informal discussions gave me some initial ideas about the Tablighi Jamaat. Everyone I met advised me to go for a three days' *dawah* trip. I was waiting to go with the same group because I had established a relationship with them. The main organisers of this mosque were young. I met five to ten followers who had just completed their B.Sc. in engineering from various engineering universities in Bangladesh. My idea was to carry out participant observation on a *dawah* trip and then to participate in their local area to observe the process of *dawah*.

Mashiur called me after few days to inform me that there was a *jamaat* preparing to begin a three-day *dawah* trip. Many of its local followers would accompany this group, and I accepted the invitation. The site of the three-day *dawah* was at Shahjadpur in Dhaka, and the name of the mosque was Dokhinpara Jame Masjeed. This was my site for the next three days. I met some Tablighi Jamaat followers from this *dawah* trip. Later, on my second visit, they helped me to find another group to go to *chilla* with. This was a *dawah* trip for 40 days.

After coming back from the *dawah* trip, I attended many sessions of religious speech in Kakrail on Thursday nights. These are known as *shobgujary*.⁴ Tablighi

⁴The word *shob* means 'night' and *gujary* means 'to spend', that means spending night in a mosque. Tablighi Jamaat followers do it on Thursday nights. It is also known as the night of *jummah* (the Friday prayer).

Jamaat organisers held regular religious talks on every Thursday night in Kakrail. People from many parts of Bangladesh attended these sessions; some stayed overnight and some left after attending the *esha* prayer at night. During this field trip, I attended the *ijtema* in January, which was three days long; this was the second largest Muslim gathering in the world outside the hajj. After obtaining an overall idea about the Tablighi Jamaat in Bangladesh, I returned to Cardiff after spending three months in Bangladesh, for my first substantial period of fieldwork in the UK.

In Cardiff, I commenced fieldwork with the help of Abdul, whom I had met before going to Bangladesh. He was cooperative and helpful. He told me to meet him at his local mosque in Plantagenet Street. I met Abdul after *asor* prayer. Abdul introduced me to other Tablighi Jamaat followers in the mosque. Most of them were British Pakistanis and Indians. There were three or four Bangladeshis in this group. Most Tablighi Jamaat followers from this mosque were curious about my research on the Tablighi Jamaat. They wanted to know why I was conducting it and what would be the benefits to Cardiff University. I told them that I chose the subject on my own, and the university did not derive any personal benefit from it. I started to participate in the group's *gasht* once in a week. I attended *ijtema* in Dewsbury with them. I also participated in *dawah* activities of two more Tablighi Jamaat groups at the Shahjalal mosque in Cardiff who came from London.

After six months of fieldwork in the UK, I decided to go to Bangladesh for my second field trip to participate in a *Chilla*. I was fortunate enough to find a group with whom I could go for a *chilla*. The *ameer* for the three-day *dawah* in which I had participated in Bangladesh during the previous November informed me that he was going to attend a *chilla* and that if I was interested I could join this group. I took part in this *chilla*, carrying out participant observation in Nageswary, a sub-district of Kurigram. During the *chilla*, I had to travel to 13 mosques in rural and semi-urban areas in Nageswary. I stayed in each mosque for three days with the *chilla* group to carry out *dawah* and *gasht*. This provided me with the opportunity to understand every activity of the Tablighi Jamaat. This is not something that can be achieved by only interviewing people. My third visit to Bangladesh enables me to carry out qualitative interviews and participate with a local Tablighi Jamaat group near my home in Bangladesh.

I kept following many Tablighi Jamaat followers after I came back from my fieldwork in Dhaka. I kept close contact with some Tablighi Jamaat followers of the *chilla* group in order to conduct interviews and to participate in their local *gasht*. At this point, I could see my entire sites together, and I followed my respondents to attend *dawah* activities in their local communities. One of the key ideas of multi-sited ethnography is to follow the people (Hannerz 2003). I met them several times in their areas after coming back to Dhaka. Many of them maintained relationships with each other over the phone and sometimes they visited each other's area although most of them were not living in the same area. Each of the sites that I visited during my fieldwork provided information on the activities of the Tablighi Jamaat that enhanced my understanding of the movement.

The site of my research is constituted by the combination of multiple sites in Bangladesh and the UK. In my research, it would not have been possible to follow the connections the way Hage (2005) followed them, because Tablighi Jamaat does not always maintain the same group to carry out *dawah*. Hence, it was very difficult for me to follow them when they were back in the community. Furthermore, not all followers in the *chilla* were from the same community; they were from various areas.

The main advantage of this multi sited ethnographic approach was for me to grasp two perspectives (Bangladesh and the UK) on the Tablighi Jamaat. At the same time, I faced serious disadvantages. Managing time for the field research for the two transnational locations was very difficult for me. I also faced language barriers while carrying out fieldwork in the UK. For example, in the UK, most of the Tablighi Jamaat followers were Urdu speaking, and I did not have much time to learn this language during my fieldwork. I managed to overcome this issue, because I mainly focused on Tablighi Jamaat followers from a Bangladeshi background and I interviewed some English speaking Indian and Pakistani followers in the UK. Hindi is similar to Urdu and I was a little familiar with Hindi, which helped me to listen to the *boyan* during the weekly *gasht* in the Uthman mosque in Cardiff.

2.5 The Challenges of Accessing the Tablighi Jamaat

My identity (Muslim and Bangladeshi) helped me in accessing the field. Being a native researcher, I had an easy access to the field and sites in Bangladesh. I did not face any language barrier as many anthropologists do when they conduct fieldwork in an exotic ambience, among native, ethnic people, out of the civilised world in a remote and isolated area. My Muslim identity helped me to participate in every part of *dawah* activities during the *chilla* in Bangladesh and the weekly *gasht* in Cardiff. Apart from these benefits, I faced some challenges during the fieldwork process. These began with my father, who is a religious person. He did not find any strong basis for the research on a religious topic that was complex and esoteric. He had always shown concern regarding my research, because I was not educated in Islamic studies. Therefore, there was a fear in his mind that if I misinterpret any of the religious matter this possibly would not bring me anything positive in my 'religious life', and Allah might not be happy with my activities. He repeatedly told me to be careful at every step during the fieldwork. I managed to convince him that I would be careful not to misinterpret any religious aspect.

My father was not the only person who discouraged me. Bokhtiar from London arrogantly told me to leave this research. His logic was different from my father's was. As he stated:

If you take money from anyone to work for *deen*⁵ it will not work. You will not be able to find the real meaning of the Tablighi Jamaat. You have to work on your own, and you are

⁵The word *deen* generally refers to religion and a way of life for Muslim.

getting support from non-Muslims. Leave your PhD; it would not bring any positive result. You are working for the British, and they will use this data against the Tablighi Jamaat and Islam. They are very clever.

Yasin from Bangladesh advised me not to leave my Ph.D. but to follow the Tablighi Jamaat, as it would benefit and help me on the Day of Judgment. Yasin continued:

Yasin How did you select this topic of research?

Bulbul I decided to do research on this issue, and the university is guiding me.

Yasin Why did you think that you had to work on the Tablighi Jamaat?

Bulbul People have various opinions about the Tablighi Jamaat, especially in the west. I am not taking any position, whether it is right or wrong, but the main perspective is to provide a clear idea about the Tablighi Jamaat so that people could understand and know about the Tablighi Jamaat and its activities. I am looking at another issue, that is, without any formal organisational structure, how has the Tablighi Jamaat become such an influential movement around the world? These are the reasons for working on the Tablighi Jamaat.

Yasin Since you are a Muslim, it is your duty to follow the Tablighi Jamaat in your life. It will help you to earn something for the *akhirat*.

Bulbul Definitely.

From these conversations, it seems people were a little concerned about the purpose of my research. This may have been due to the recent global attention on Islamic world. In Bangladesh, people at the grassroots level do not have any idea about what is exactly happening with Islam and in the west. They have questions, but there is no one to answer them. Therefore, when they see someone who can answer their queries, they ask such questions without any hesitation. Some of my respondents assumed in the beginning that Britain sent me to collect information on the Tablighi Jamaat. That is why I came to Bangladesh and had spoken to them. Most of the respondents were convinced that I was doing the research for academic purposes. It had a positive influence on them that 'now students are studying the Tablighi Jamaat in a UK university'. It was something that made them feel proud. Some of them had a feeling that by this type of research, people from other religions would get the opportunity to learn about the Tablighi Jamaat. In return, they accepted me well, and they wanted me to convert to a Tablighi Jamaat follower. This became clear during the *chilla* trip. All the senior followers were extremely keen to motivate me to follow the Tablighi activities. One day, the *ameer* told me that 'you are in a good position [as I was studying in a University in the UK], if you follow the Tablighi Jamaat, you can bring positive changes to many of the people you hang out with. So try to contribute to your religion'. I always acted in a positive way and I never engaged myself in any argument by saying 'no, it is not possible for me'. They were expecting me to continue for three consecutive *chillas*, which would last for 120 days. They motivated me to grow a beard, which is a *Sunnah* (Practices of the Prophet). Shamsur Rahman and I started to grow and keep a beard.

I stopped the *chilla* after 40 days and came back to Dhaka. When I met Shamsur Rahman after his consecutive three *chillas*, his appearance had changed. He decided to keep a beard permanently that was quite long by the time after three *chillas*. He had become calm and quiet and adopted a Tablighi lifestyle that encouraged him to talk slowly and to maintain a low voice and calmness. These are the common characteristics of a dedicated Tablighi Jamaat follower. After the *chilla*, I met him several times, and I called him from Cardiff sometimes to discuss various aspects of the Tablighi Jamaat. Senior followers of the Tablighi Jamaat thought that if I had continued with them to complete three *chillas*, it might have transformed me into a Tablighi Jamaat follower. It was a two-way interaction. I was interested to carry out fieldwork for my research, and they were trying to motivate me to follow the Tablighi Jamaat. I think this was the problem of being a native researcher. One cannot avoid such conversations or the expectation from the community. At the same time, I had to keep in mind that I was there only for the carrying out of fieldwork, and maintain the objectivity of my research.

It was very difficult for me to write notes because young participants was very curious about me and asked me various questions, for example, what was I doing, why I was doing this, how did I feel living in the UK and many more. At some point, I had to stop writing in order to satisfy their curiosity to know more about my life in the UK. I found an alternative way of taking field notes. I brought a voice recorder with me thinking that it might be useful during the *chilla*. When everyone went to sleep in the night, I started to record my experiences and the events of the day. It was easy during the time of *chilla*, but it was time-consuming to transcribe those long recordings later.

Another attitude of the Tablighi Jamaat followers put me in an uncomfortable situation. Several times when we were trying to motivate local people, the senior followers of the Tablighi Jamaat treated me as an example of dedicated Tablighi follower by saying that 'look at him [me], he came all the way from the UK to carry out a *chilla*'. This was not entirely true, because the primary purpose of carrying out the *chilla* was for my research. They were trying to use my participation in the Tablighi Jamaat to motivate others. It might motivate people to think about the greatness of the Tablighi Jamaat, so I did not request them to stop using my example.

Finally, I was very concerned to see various impacts of participating in the *chilla* on me, which was a major challenge of being a native researcher. When I came back from the *chilla*, I felt different. I was thinking about the Tablighi Jamaat. Should I follow the Tablighi Jamaat? The Tablighi Jamaat and the *chilla* made an enormous impact on me that influenced me even after coming back to Dhaka. I was in a dilemma because as a researcher, I knew, I should not be biased in relation to the Tablighi Jamaat. During the forty days' journey (*chilla*), I followed everything a Tablighi follower should follow. I prayed five times a day, and tried not to engage myself with any worldly affairs as guided by the Tablighi Jamaat. My wife was concerned about me and she was worried that it might transform me into a Tablighi Jamaat follower. After coming back from the *chilla*, I did not stop praying. I kept praying regularly five times a day.

Surprisingly, I started to follow *ta'leem* in my home like a Tablighi Jamaat follower. It is the standard process of beginning the Tablighi Jamaat at home. Tablighi Jamaat has to begin from your home. Therefore, I started to introduce its teachings into my home. I called my mother, sister, and wife every afternoon and started to read the Tablighi book. Everyone in my family was surprised with my activities. In the meantime, I did not shave. I trimmed my beard, because I was thinking at this point that if I shave, it would not look good if I meet *chilla* members again for the purpose of my fieldwork. They might not be friendly if they see me without a beard. I decided to carry on with a beard. I did not encounter any problem with that; rather, it was helping me to continue my fieldwork in Dhaka. My father was happy to see me like this. All of my relatives and friends were surprised, as if I had converted to the Tablighi Jamaat while doing my fieldwork. Finally, it was time to come back to the UK. At this time, I was a little bit worried about my beard because I wanted to keep it. I thought it might be difficult at the airport with a beard as in my passport I do not have a beard. I decided to shave. After coming back to the UK, I slowly came back to my regular lifestyle.

2.6 Conclusion

As a native researcher (in Bangladesh context), I was able to make friends quickly. Furthermore, I did not face any difficulties accessing the Tablighi Jamaat in both Bangladesh and the UK. This was particularly notable for the *chilla*. Since I had a limited period for forty days in the *chilla*, I had to get into the group quickly. In the *chilla*, I knew only one person whom I had met on a three-day *dawah* trip. Building rapport is the key fact of participant observation. The more familiar and close one can be during the fieldwork, the more it helps the researcher to get into the hidden realities of the subject. This was the main strength of the ethnographic methods in the current research. During the entire fieldwork time and intervals, I always kept communications with some of the key informants and friends that helped me a lot not to feel isolated each time I have visited my field.

I also had to face some challenging factors in the field. The most challenging factor was to keep connection with various sites of my field research. Ideally, I planned to find a Tablighi group in Bangladesh so that I could participate with them locally and go for a *dawah* trip with them. The reality was different to my plan. When I was ready to go out for *dawah*, I could not find a group. I had to wait for my second visit to Bangladesh to be able to find a *chilla* group. When I came back to Dhaka from the *chilla*, I kept participating in *dawah* activities with some of the *chilla* members in their local mosques. These various locations and sites therefore constituted my entire research site. Regular visits and participation in Tablighi activities helped me to maintain a close link with all sites of my research. My participation and regular meeting with the *chilla* members helped me to understand their everyday life when they are not in *chilla*. Methodologically each site of my field becomes a valuable source of acquiring knowledge about the movement.

However, the context in the UK was not the same. The process of finding a Tablighi Jamaat group was difficult compared to Bangladesh. Bangladeshis and the Muslim community helped me to find local Tablighi Jamaat groups. Once I had met some Tablighi followers, it surprised me when I found that they were all connected with other Tablighi followers in Cardiff and South Wales. In Cardiff, they all knew each other, as the number of Tablighi Jamaat followers was not very high compare to Bangladesh. Therefore, they preferred to keep close contact with each other for the betterment of the movement and their individual gain in religious aspects. I then started to participate with them in mosques every week. Participation in *ijtema* in Dewsbury provided me with a different perspective than the *ijtema* in Bangladesh.

However, the main context and principles were the same in both countries. In the UK, my field was also the combination of various sites. It was not feasible to learn about Tablighi Jamaat using a single-sited ethnographic method, because a distinctive feature of the Tablighi *dawah* is to move from one place to another. The study would have been incomplete if I did not participate in their *dawah* trip. Obviously, the process of *dawah* of the Tablighi Jamaat helped to define the research methods of the current research and the multiple interconnected sites and locations made it a multi-sited ethnography.

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