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The Biswa Ijtema

Introduction

The Tablighi Jama'at has not, until recently, been the focus of much research, despite its almost 80-year history. Moreover, the Tablighi authorities themselves discourage writing about the movement, since Islam is seen as a practical activity first and foremost, not something that can simply be written or read about (Sikand 1999: 102). For this article I have sought out material about the Tablighi Jama'at in Bangladesh and the *Biswa Ijtema* in particular. Literature, however, has been hard to come by. The book *Travellers in Faith* by Muhammad Khalid Masud (2000) deals primarily with the ideological background of the Tablighi Jama'at, its growth in India and the transnational aspect of the movement. Unfortunately it does not contain information about the movement's development in the rest of South Asia. Yoginder Sikand, however, has written an article of great relevance for mine: 'The Tablighi Jama'at in Bangladesh' (1999), which briefly also discusses the *Biswa Ijtema*. In addition to this and other academic writings on the Tablighi Jama'at and Bangladesh I have relied mainly on articles in local newspapers to try to get a clearer perception of the *Biswa Ijtema*.

Tablighi Jama'at was founded by Mawlana Ilyas in Mewat as a reaction against the decline of Muslim political power in India and the increasing British influence on the subcontinent. While different authors place the foundation of the movement in the late 1920s, probably based on reports of Mawlana Ilyas beginning his *tabligh*¹ work after his return from *Hajj* in 1926, the authors of the book *Travellers in Faith* consider the true launching date for the movement to be much later. According to them the official date was in 1934, after a meeting held in Mewat. (Masud 2000: 9.)

The *Biswa Ijtema* is the annual congregation of the Tablighi Jama'at, held in the district of Tongi, just outside Dhaka in Bangladesh. The term *Biswa Ijtema*

1 *Tabligh* is often equated with *da'wa*, meaning to communicate the call (Masud 2000: xxi).

(or *Viswa/Bishwa Ijtema*) translates as ‘world congregation’. *Biswa* is Sanskrit for ‘world’. *Ijtema* is Arabic and means ‘public gathering’. (Jaffor Ullah.)

Tablighi Jama‘at in Bangladesh

The establishment of British rule in Bengal in the late eighteenth century brought with it the emergence of a number of Islamic reform movements. The Tablighi Jama‘at shares the aims of these movements to cleanse ‘popular’ Bengali Islam from its syncretistic heritage, and instead uphold a strict adherence to the *shari‘a*. According to Yoginder Sikand’s article, ‘The Tablighi Jama‘at in Bangladesh’, the available literature sheds very little light on how the Tablighi Jama‘at was first launched in Bengal. Most Bengali Tablighi texts available are translations of texts originally written in Urdu and are of little historical value. The only source that mentions the early developments of the Tablighi Jama‘at in Bengal, a biography of a renowned Tablighi leader, reveals that while Tablighis had reached Bengal prior to the partition of India in 1947, it was only after the independence of Pakistan that Tablighi work actually spread over the region. Several disciples of the founder, Mawlana Ilyas, apparently moved to both wings of Pakistan, where they began to do Tablighi work among the local Muslim population and Muslim refugees from India. A *markaz* (headquarter) for the coordination of the Tablighi work was initially set up in Raiwind, a township just outside Lahore in Pakistan. (Sikand 1999: 102–4.)

Prior to 1947 Tablighi activity seems to have been concentrated largely in Calcutta. Initially most of the leading Tablighi activists in East Pakistan were refugees from West Bengal, Calcutta in particular. The most senior among them was Haji Mohsin Ahmad, also called Dada Bhai, who would come to play a leading role in the spread of the Tablighi Jama‘at in East Pakistan. Mohsin Ahmad spent a lot of time and effort doing *tabligh* work among Muslim government employees and the Muslim students of Dhaka University. Thanks to his efforts Dhaka’s Engineering College gradually emerged as a major centre of Tablighi activity in East Pakistan. Members of the newly-emerging Bengali Muslim middle-class struggled to make a place for themselves in the face of what they perceived as Hindu upper-caste opposition and bonded together in the *jama‘ats* and *Ijtemas* provided by the Tablighi Jama‘at. Striving for upward mobility and faced with resistance, the Muslim middle-class found a natural expression in religious terms—greater participation in Islamic activity and stress on the Islamic identity. (Sikand 1999: 105–6.)

Another important focus of attention for the pioneers of Tablighi work in East Pakistan was students and teachers at the local *madrasas*. The *ulama* had great influence as local spokesmen and religious authorities, and it was seen as an important part of the Tablighi agenda at this early stage to bring them into the movement. Having roots in the Deobandi tradition seems to have helped the Tablighi Jama'at establish a strong base in a number of Deobandi *madrasas* in East Pakistan at the time. The affiliation of leading *ulama* with the Tablighi Jama'at must have had a substantial impact on their followers as well, considering how religious experts were often not only respected, but held in awe in Bengali society. (Sikand 1999: 107–8.)

After the independence of Bangladesh in 1972, the Tablighi Jama'at witnessed an even more remarkable expansion in the region. A major cause for this seems to have been the changing role of Islam in public affairs after the 1971–2 Bangladeshi Liberation War. In the years following 1975 there were also a number of attempts by ruling elites to use Islam as a political means to help legitimize unstable regimes. (Sikand 1999: 112.)

Different Islamic political groups, such as the Jamaat-i-Islami,² were actively involved in the large-scale massacre of freedom fighters during the Liberation War. This had a strong impact on many Bengalis who, when independence was won, felt a strong resistance towards Islamic political groups and Jamaat-i-Islami in particular. When Bangladesh was declared a secular state, religious political parties, including Jamaat-i-Islami, were banned. These things combined proved to be working in Tablighi Jama'at's favour. By staying aloof from the conflict they earned the trust and respect of the Bangladeshi people who, when the war was over, turned to the Tablighi Jama'at in growing numbers. Several Jamaat-i-Islami activists were also reported to be participating in Tablighi activities, perhaps in fear of arrest or persecution. This, however, does not mean that they necessarily changed their allegiance. In the long run the Tablighi Jama'at's disassociation from politics allowed it to continue its activities while other groups were banned. As a result it witnessed a rapid growth in the years following the Liberation War. (Sikand 1999: 113–14.)

Today the Tablighi Jama'at is active all over Bangladesh, with a *markaz* in every district and most sub-districts. The movement is weaker in the north and the south eastern parts of Bangladesh, which are naturally cut off from the rest of the country by large rivers. The north also has a tradition of strong peasant movements, which may present a challenge to the Islamic movements.

2 The descendant of an Islamic movement founded by Abul Ala Mawdudi in 1941 (Sfeir 2007: 271).

The largest centre for Tablighi activity in Bangladesh is Mymensingh, followed by Dhaka, Noakhali, Comilla, Sylhet and Chittagong. Yoginder Sikand claims that Chittagong has been a challenge for the Tablighi Jama'at due to its strong Sufi presence. The movement openly opposes popular Sufism. (Sikand 1999: 117–18.)

According to Yoginder Sikand the Tablighi Jama'at has been particularly strong among peasants and rural entrepreneurs. The central role of the oral tradition within the Tablighi Jama'at is obviously a big reason why it appeals to lower middle class Bangladeshis who have poorly developed literacy skills, if any at all. The claims for higher social status also often take religious expression; indigenous names are changed to more 'Islamic' ones and both women and men take on the 'Islamic' dress. When one makes enough money one goes on *Hajj* and, upon returning, is held in respect as a *haji* or *haja*. Also, when one makes a little more money one can afford to take time for Tablighi activities. (Sikand 1999: 118.)

Mumtaz Ahmad notes that the Tablighi Jama'at is increasingly popular also among the educated classes in urban areas. He claims that the Tablighi Jama'at is the only Islamic movement that has managed to cut across socio-economic class barriers. (Ahmad 2008: 63.) The more highly educated people who are actively involved in Tablighi work also tend to hold high positions in the hierarchy (Sikand 1999: 119).

Yoginder Sikand accounts the pan-Islamic appeal as one of the main reasons for the successful spread of Tablighi Jama'at in Bengal, and India as a whole (1999: 105). Mumtaz Ahmad adds the dedicated *da'wa* work performed by the Tablighi members, the non-sectarian Islamic message and the person-to-person approach of the Tablighis to the list of reasons to why the movement has gained so much success (Ahmad 2008: 62).

Today Tablighi Jama'at works largely as a silent element within Bangladeshi society, in particular among those who do not want to take the risk of being associated with any Islamic political party. Many prominent Islamic leaders of Bangladesh have been attracted to Islam through the Tablighi Jama'at, for instance the former *amir* (leader) of Jamaat-i-Islami in Bangladesh; Professor Golam Azam (Islam-bd.org). The chiefs of all three wings of the Bangladeshi armed forces: the Army, the Air Force and the Navy, usually also take part in the Biswa Ijtema (Sikand 1999: 120–1).

Early Ijtemas

In the years after the independence of India in 1947 the Tablighi Jama'at grew at a steady pace in various parts of East Bengal. This called for setting up centres from where the Tablighi activity could be organized. During the years immediately following independence activists would meet at an Ijtema held on the first Sunday every month at Dhaka's Lalbagh Shahi mosque. As the numbers of participants increased the centre was shifted, first to the Khan Muhammad Mosque and then to the Kakrail Mosque in suburban Dhaka. The Kakrail Mosque had an open space around it that could accommodate the large number of participants at the Ijtemas. A new, three-storey mosque was then built nearby the old building. The first Biswa Ijtema is reported to have taken place at the Kakrail Mosque of Dhaka in 1948, with only a few followers of Hazrat Mawlana Yusuf present. (Sikand 1999: 104; Banglapedia.) According to the opposition leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman it was her father, Bongabadhu who took the initiative to permanently allot the area for the new Kakrail Mosque (Bdnews24.com, 26.1.2006/1).

In 1953 a large all-Pakistan Ijtema was held at Sukkur in Sind, Pakistan. Here it was decided to spread the Tablighi work all over Pakistan, East Pakistan included. To achieve this, three Tablighi headquarters were set up in East Pakistan: in Dhaka, Chittagong and Khulna, along with seven in West Pakistan: in Karachi, Rawalpindi, Lahore, Multan, Hyderabad, Peshawar, and Quetta (Sikand 1999: 104). Three main Ijtema centres developed in different parts of the subcontinent: Raiwind in Pakistan, Bhopal in India and Tongi in Bangladesh. In terms of attendance the Ijtema at Tongi is the largest.

Annual Ijtemas began being held at the Kakrail Mosque in 1954, with an estimated 15,000–20,000 people attending the first year (Sikand 1999: 111). In the same year a large Tablighi gathering is reported to have been held at the camp of the *Hajj* pilgrims in Chittagong.

To spur the Tablighi work in East Pakistan Mawlana Yusuf (d. 1965), son and successor of the founder Mawlana Ilyas, paid several visits to the region to attend the large Ijtemas held there. There seem to be some differences of opinion as to when and where these Ijtemas were held. Yoginder Sikand reports that the first Ijtema was held in Dhaka in 1954 and was presided over by Mawlana Yusuf. On the following visits made by Yusuf to East Pakistan, in 1956, 1959, 1960 and 1962, Ijtemas were held and *jama'ats* (groups) were formed and dispatched to spread the Tablighi message. At these early Ijtemas *jama'ats* were reportedly formed that went all the way to Mecca for *Hajj*, doing Tablighi *da'wa* work along the way. (Sikand 1999: 104.) Another source

informs us that in 1958 an Ijtema was held in the city of Narayanganj, near Dhaka, and in 1960, 1962 and 1965 at the Ramna Race Course in Dhaka.

Again, the source material differs on where the Ijtema was held in 1965—either at Ramna Race Course, or at Kakrail Mosque. Nevertheless, it became clear that the venue for the annual Ijtema had become too small for the vast crowds. This resulted in a decision being made by the Tablighi authorities to shift the venue of the Ijtema to Tongi, a township just outside Dhaka. The *markaz* remained at the Kakrail Mosque where leading elders of the movement resided, coordinating the work of *jama'ats* all over East Bengal. By the late 1960s the Tablighi Jama'at had established a firm foothold in the province. (Sikand 1999; 111; Banglapedia.)

According to A. H. Jaffor Ullah the Tablighi Jama'at Ijtemas used to last five days at some point, but to boost attendance the programme was shortened to three days. Apparently, in the past business used to suffer during the week the Ijtema was held and even government used to shut down due to attendance problems. (Jaffor Ullah.) According to a source from 2010, the centre of Dhaka was deserted on the last day of the Ijtema. Sunday is a working day in Bangladesh, but many left their jobs in order to attend the event that poorer Bangladeshis equate with the *Hajj*, which they cannot afford to attend (Muxlim.com).

The Biswa Ijtema today

The Biswa Ijtema is held every year a few days before Ramadan in the Tongi district just outside Dhaka, on the bank of the river Turag, known as Kahar Daria. The annual Ijtema is said to be the largest congregation of Muslims after *Hajj* in Mecca. The estimated numbers of devotees participating in the Ijtema varies, according to my sources from 1.7 to 4 million. (Sikand 1999: 121; Ahmad 2008: 62; Bdnews24.com, 29.1.2006/2.) What is remarkable about the Biswa Ijtema as a pilgrimage is that the location where it is held, the township of Tongi, bears no connection to a holy person, nor is it a holy place in itself and as such it is not a typical pilgrimage site.

It is customary that the Bangladeshi President, Prof. Dr Iajuddin Ahmed and the Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia make congratulatory statements at the beginning of the event, expressing their hope that the Biswa Ijtema will help to strengthen the unity, harmony and brotherhood of the Islamic *umma* and in the establishment of peace and stability across the world. Other leading politicians from the ruling and the opposition parties also make a

point of attending, especially at the closing prayers, the *akheri munajat*. They then seek blessings from the Tablighi leaders, including someone from the global headquarters at Hazrat Nizamuddin in New Delhi. (Sikand 1999: 121–2; Bdnews24.com, 26.1.2006/2; Bdnews24.com, 26.1.2006/3.) As Yoginder Sikand notes in his article, attending such an event publicly is in itself a strong political statement (Sikand 1999: 122). According one source, diplomats from several Muslim countries have also attended (Bdnews24.com, 29.1.2006/2). The officially non-political stance of the Tablighi Jama'at has helped it recruit members from the Bangladeshi military and among civil servants. It has also been able to avoid the conflicts between rival political camps in Bangladesh (Ahmad 2008: 63).

In recent years devotees from up to 90 different countries have attended the annual Biswa Ijtema. The range of nationalities seems to broaden every year. Participants come from India, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, Afghanistan, Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore, Bhutan, Syria, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Yemen, Jordan, Sudan, Egypt, Nigeria, Kenya, Zimbabwe, Turkey, Spain, Great Britain, Switzerland, Germany, Denmark, Sweden, USA, Canada and Australia. In 2010 the number of foreign participants was estimated at 25,000. (The New Nation, 25.1.2010.)

According to an article in the *International Herald Tribune*, women are not usually allowed to attend (Internet Herald Tribune, 3.2.2007). However, the *Bangladesh Today* and *Daily Star* newspapers report that around 100,000 of the attendants at the last two Ijtemas have been women (Bangladesh Today, 31.1.2009; The Daily Star, 22.1.2010). The information about women attending is supported by pictures on the internet of women gathering in groups in the near vicinity of the Ijtema grounds. Anwar Hussein writes that women have a hard time getting a place in the main Ijtema field (Demotix, 24.1.2010).

In his article 'Women and the Tablighi Jama'at' (2009) Yoginder Sikand discusses the strict *purdah* (seclusion) that Tablighi women live under. Only married women are allowed to travel in a *jama'at*, and they must be accompanied by their husbands or a *mahram* (unmarriageable kin). Their primary responsibility is to educate themselves about Islam and spread the message of the Tablighi Jama'at to their relatives and friends. Taking this into consideration it does not seem unlikely that arrangements are made for women to attend the Ijtema from nearby areas, in order for them not to intermingle with non-*mahram* men.

Getting to the site of the Ijtema can be a challenge; cars queue for miles and many walk instead. The streets leading to the venue are overcrowded with

people. Trains and buses are arranged to ensure transport for the devotees, often taking as many passengers as they can possibly hold on to the vehicle. (BBC 25.1.2008; Bangladesh Today, 31.1.2009.)

Arrangements at the site

The Bangladeshi government makes special arrangements to provide the basic services for the participants at the Biswa Ijtema (Sikand 1999: 121–2). In 2009 the State Minister for Home Affairs said that the government would set up more permanent structures and develop the Ijtema ground in the future (The News Today, 31.1.2009).

In order for the functions at the Biswa Ijtema to run smoothly the Ijtema ground is divided into several sections (*khittas*), each assigned for a region of the country and a foreign geographic zone. Each section has its own entrance and is supervised by a trustee (*jimmadar*), who is assisted by district and *thana* (police station) trustees. Maps of the site are kept at the entrances and devotees are provided with information about their district-based sections and their place of stay. Metal detectors are a recent addition at the entrances, but organizers admit it is impossible to check everyone. All affairs of the Ijtema are coordinated by the central Ijtema management. No paid labour is employed for the Ijtema functions; all work is done by teams of volunteers. A number of mobile courts operate to oversee arrangements and transactions during the event; they also inspect the standards at the many food stalls at the venue. (Bdnews24.com, 2.2.2007; Bdnews24.com, 23.1.2006, Banglapedia; Bangladesh.com.)

A large jute canopy is erected over the 1 km long prayer ground. Special arrangements are made for foreign devotees in the North West corner of the Ijtema ground. In 2009 the prayer ground was further expanded to the West by dumping earth in the riverbed. This now poses a threat to the natural flow of the already mistreated river Turag. Several floating bridges are set up across the river for the duration of the Ijtema. (Bangladesh Today, 29.1.2009.)

The Department of Public Health and Engineering, in collaboration with UNICEF, has arranged portable tanks to facilitate access to drinking water for participants on the road. Several deep-tube wells have also been set up. (Bdnews24.com, 2.2.2007.)

Many private social and religious organizations set up facilities to provide free medical treatment around the clock for the devotees. A large number of medical teams as well as numerous sanitation teams work the Ijtema

grounds, and the Tongi hospital is equipped with additional facilities. Several fire brigade teams are also on standby in case of emergency. (Bdnews24.com, 2.2.2007; Bangladesh Today, 31.1.2009.) Generators and transformers are reserved to ensure uninterrupted supply of electricity at the venue (News Today, 31.1.2009).

In 2010 the government's promise of better facilities was kept, at least in part, when a three-storey building with sanitation and bath facilities for the devotees was set up (Daily Star, 15.1.2010).

Security arrangements at the site include observation towers for the more than 20,000 members of the Rapid Action Battalion who oversee the whole event (Bangladesh Today, 29.1.2009; Bdnews24.com, 29.1.2006/2). Surveillance cameras are also set up at the entrances and at especially important points across the Ijtema ground (Bdnews24.com 28.1.2006).

In 2005 most districts in Bangladesh were struck by simultaneous bomb blasts arranged by clandestine Islamic groups belonging to the Ahl-e-Hadith (Ahmad 2008: 49–50). Hence in 2006 the organizers expected a lower presence of foreign and local devotees than previous years. Law enforcers seized large amounts of arms and explosives prior to the event. The intelligence service security measures were tightened at Tongi, and new residents renting houses were kept under strict surveillance. There are at least 20 slum areas considered to be crime dens in the near vicinity of the Ijtema venue. (New Age, 14.1.2006.)

The programme

The Ijtema rejects politics and focuses on reviving the tenets of Islam and promoting peace and harmony. The devotees discuss the Qur'an, pray and listen to *bayans* (sermons) by Islamic scholars from around the world on fundamental issues of *tabligh* (Internet Herald Tribune 3.2.2007).

The opening sermon of the Ijtema is delivered after *fajr* prayers at dawn on Friday (News Today, 31.1.2009). Sermons are delivered by Tablighi Islamic scholars, usually including someone from the headquarters in Delhi. The son of the former *amir* of the Tablighi Jama'at, Maulana Jobayer Hasan,³ has led sermons in recent years, along with others such as Ahmed Lart, Maulana Ismail Hossain and Mohamed Sad, also from Delhi, Maulana Mosharrif from Bangladesh, and Shamim Ahmed and Maulana Abdul Wahab from Pakistan

3 Also referred to as Mawlana Zubayrul Hassan.

(Bdnews24.com 29.1.2006/1; Bdnews24.com, 29.1.2006/2; News Today, 31.1.2009; News Today, 1.2.2009). The lectures and sermons held by various Islamic scholars are being simultaneously translated into several different languages, including Bangla, Arabic, Urdu, Tamil and Malay. The three-day programme also includes solemnizing marriages without dowry with the permissions of brides and bridegrooms with their guardians (New Nation, 25.1.2010). Despite the enormous crowds of people attending the Ijtema only few deaths occur every year. In most cases they are related to old age or traffic accidents. The funeral prayers for the devotees who die during the event take place on the Ijtema grounds. (Bangladesh Today, 2.2.2009.)

To enable the vast crowds attending the Ijtema from outside the main grounds to hear the sermons and prayers, thousands of loudspeakers are set up along highways and in nearby areas. People sit on roads, by-lanes, rooftops and tree branches in order to see and hear as much as possible. (Bdnews24.com, 29.1.2006/2.)

In 2008 the Biswa Ijtema was cut short due to rainy and cold weather. By Friday morning several thousand devotees had already arrived at the site and many were on their way to the event. The elders managing committee decided to hold the closing *akheri munajat* prayers on Friday night and call an early end to the event. (Bdnews24.com, 25.1.2008/1.) Many devotees left the Ijtema ground and took shelter in nearby schools, mosques and other buildings. It was the first time in history that the Ijtema was cut short. (Bdnews24.com, 25.1.2008/2.)

Although the Biswa Ijtema is an event that focuses on prayer and meditation and is not open for political discussion, many have questioned the attendance of high ranking political and other officials who are otherwise known not to be particularly religiously active (Bangladesh.com).

The Tablighi Jama'at is generally seen in a favourable light by Bangladesh's political elite, in great part owing to its detachment from party politics. Neither the government nor the different political parties can afford to contest the Tablighi Jama'at, so they all make efforts to maintain good relations. Although the Tablighi leaders claim not to have any political ambitions, their silence on worldly matters, especially state-related matters, plays straight into the hands of the present political establishment. The Bangladeshi political elite has recognized the Tablighi Jama'at as an effective counterbalance to Islamist political groups such as the Jamaat-i-Islami and individuals from within the elite have tried to use this to their own advantage. (Sikand 1999: 121–2.) The Tablighi Jama'at's avoidance of direct involvement in political questions has, however, led critics to accuse the movement of cultivating an indifference to secular affairs (Sikand 1999: 103).

Tablighi Ijtemas in Pakistan and India

The Tableeghi Ijtema in Raiwind, Pakistan is held in October every year, from Thursday to Sunday, two weeks in a row. According to one local newspaper the Ijtema in 2008 was attended by one million devotees from all around the world (The News, 19.10.2008). According to another, however, the participants were mostly from the city of Raiwind itself (The Nation, 18.10.2008). As in Bangladesh, public figures often attend the Ijtema; in 2008 several federal ministers and religious leaders attended (The Nation, 13.10.2008).

The three-day long Ijtema in Bhopal, India is known as the Aalami Tablighi Ijtema. It takes place on the outskirts of Bhopal at Einthkedi village. Ijtemas have previously been held at the Shakur Khan mosque and the Taj-ul-Masajid, which is one of the largest mosques in Asia. In 2006 the Ijtema surpassed previous records with over half a million devotees attending. Apart from India the participants at the Ijtema come from many different countries, including Iran, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Canada, the United States, Great Britain, Russia, Kazakhstan and Turkey. The sermons and prayers at the Ijtema are generally translated into Arabic, Urdu and Hindi. The Aalami Ijtema is also often visited by committee members of the Tablighi Jama'at headquarters at Hazrat Nizamuddin in New Delhi. After the concluding prayers *jama'ats* are formed and dispatched to different parts of India and abroad. In 2006 as many as 200 *jama'ats* were sent out. Many *nikahs* (wedding contracts) are also signed during the Ijtema. (Bari 2006.)

Another large congregation of Tablighi members in India takes place in Mamidipalli outside Hyderabad. In 2007 up to 1.5 million people were expected at the Ijtema. There have been violent encounters with the Vishwa Hindu Parishad⁴ due to the Tablighi tendency to do *tabligh* work among non-Muslims also, which is not seen favourably by the organization (Andhracafe.com).

Conclusion

The magnitude of the Biswa Ijtema is difficult to explain, much less comprehend, without having attended the event. The vast numbers of pictures posted on the internet do, however, give us some kind of perception. But pictures of

4 The Vishwa Hindu Parishad is an international right-wing Hindu organization founded in 1964.

the event can only tell us so much, which is why I have made an attempt to gather the information available in other sources in order to illustrate both the historical background of the Tablighi Jama'at in Bangladesh and the importance of the Biswa Ijtema.

If the estimates of nearly 4 million devotees in attendance are accurate, the Biswa Ijtema in Bangladesh would in fact draw more people than the *Hajj* in Saudi-Arabia, making it the greatest Muslim congregation in the world, not in significance but in attendance. This is in itself remarkable, considering where the event takes place and how it is arranged. Although the number of foreign participants at the Biswa Ijtema seems to be increasing, the gathering is still much more of a national event than the *Hajj* to Mecca.

The significance of the Biswa Ijtema is, however, of a different character than that of the *Hajj*. Although I haven't found any particular source that would shed light on the number of *jama'ats* dispatched from the event, we can, based on reports about *jama'ats* dispatched from other events, assume that they are many. Hence the Biswa Ijtema works very much as the core of the Tablighi missionary work. Devotees come here to strengthen their faith, and when they leave, go out to spread the message.

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