

Embodied Textual Authority in the Tablighi Jamaat: Living Hadith, Collective Recitation, and Transnational Piety

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Abstract

The Tablighi Jamaat (TJ) poses a significant question for the study of Islamic authority: how does a transnational revivalist movement with limited formal bureaucracy sustain a recognizable repertoire of belief and practice across diverse settings? This article examines how the movement's foundational literature, especially the Tablighi Nisab, widely known as Fazail-e-Amaal, mediates the relationship between hadith-based textual authority and embodied piety. Methodologically, it is a qualitative conceptual study using an adapted, purposive critical interpretive synthesis of published historical, textual, and ethnographic scholarship. The textual repertoire is reconstructed from scholarly representations of core works rather than from an edition-defined multilingual corpus. The analysis argues that the TJ's prioritization of fazail, or virtues and spiritual rewards, over masail, or jurisprudential disputes, functions as a pedagogical hermeneutic. The article develops embodied textual authority as a process model in which textual selection provides normative orientation, collective recitation and affective activation enable uptake, embodied rehearsal and social reinforcement support enactment, and contextual modulation conditions transnational recognizability. The model explains recurring forms of piety without implying uniform reception. The controversy over weak (da'if) hadiths is examined as a contest over epistemic authority and pedagogical legitimacy rather than as an attempt to adjudicate hadith authenticity. Because the evidence is limited to published scholarship and documented settings, the study does not establish causal effects, measure global uniformity, or undertake edition-based takhrij. Its contribution lies in clarifying how texts, human mediators, emotions, bodily discipline, and social environments jointly produce religious authority.

Keywords:

Tablighi Jamaat; living hadith; embodied textual authority; collective recitation; transnational recognizability; Islamic revivalism

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Introduction

The Tablighi Jamaat (TJ), founded in 1926 by the Deoband-educated scholar Maulana Muhammad Ilyas Kandhlawi (1885-1944), emerged in the Mewat region of India amid concerns about Muslim religious practice, Hindu revivalist Shuddhi campaigns, competition among Islamic groups, and the political disorientation that followed the Khilafat movement (Ali & Amin, [2020](#); Ali & Minking, [2021](#); Gulzar, [2020](#); Kuiper, [2016](#); Lone, [2018](#); Siddiqi, [2018](#); Wario, [2012](#)). The movement sought to reform Muslims through face-to-face preaching (dawah), ritual discipline, and participation in itinerant preaching tours, rather than through the capture of state power or formal political mobilization (Ali et al., [2024](#); Howenstein, [2006](#); Khattak et al., [2023](#); Pieri, [2019](#), [2021](#); Timol, [2019](#)).

Published accounts describe the movement as operating through transnational networks in more than 150 countries, although estimates of its following vary widely because the TJ does not maintain formal membership records (Ali & Amin, [2020](#); Ali et al., [2024](#); Debata, [2022](#); Lone, [2018](#); Pieri, [2019](#); Reetz, [2014](#)). Its senior figures also retain international religious visibility (Schleifer et al., [2025](#)). The analytically important issue is therefore not the precise size of the movement, but the mechanisms through which a decentralized network sustains a recognizable religious vocabulary, reading practice, and model of ethical conduct across heterogeneous social contexts.

Scholarship on the TJ has developed from historical reconstruction toward ethnographic and conceptual analyses of transnational organization, piety, and everyday practice. Haq ([1972](#)) and Masud ([2000](#)) established major historical foundations, while subsequent studies traced the movement's Deobandi genealogy, inter-religious origins, and cross-border expansion (Janson, [2014](#); Kuiper, [2016](#), [2017](#); Noor, [2012](#); Siddiqi, [2018](#)). This literature shows that the movement is not only an organization but also a dispersed pedagogical environment in which recurring texts, terms, routines, and journeys shape religious subjectivity.

Comparative accounts distinguish the TJ from revivalist movements that emphasize party organization, political transformation, or doctrinal polemics. Existing studies commonly characterize its approach as grassroots, generally nonpartisan, and oriented toward reforming Muslim conduct and ritual life (Abid, [2024](#); Ali & Amin, [2020](#); Hamdi et al., 2021; Khattak et al., 2023). These distinctions are not merely organizational. They also concern how the Qur'an and Sunnah are interpreted and applied, particularly the TJ's preference for exhortation, exemplary narratives, and practical repetition over sustained jurisprudential disputation.

This hermeneutical orientation differentiates the TJ from movements such as Jama'at-e-Islami, Hizb ut-Tahrir, and Salafi or Ahl-i Hadith networks. Although these movements share commitments to Islamic revival (tajdid), they assign different roles to political action, legal reasoning, doctrinal purification, and individual ethical reform. In the TJ, the injunction that Muslims should first become fully practicing Muslims directs reform toward everyday conduct and participation in dawah (Siddiqi, [2018](#)).

The TJ's transnational recognizability has often been associated with a restricted and repeatable textual curriculum, the Six Principles, and routinized participation in ta'lim and khuruj (Rauf et al., [2018](#); Siddiqi, [2018](#)). Textual standardization, however, should not be equated with identical reception. The same text may provide a common normative repertoire while being interpreted through different languages, institutional histories, and local religious cultures.

Metcalf's ([1993](#)) concept of living hadith remains central to understanding this relationship between text and practice. It identifies how TJ reading practices invite participants to reenact the exemplary lives of the Prophet and his Companions and to experience scriptural narratives as models for present conduct (Janson, [2014](#); Metcalf, [1993](#)). Noor ([2012](#)) complements this approach by showing how movement-specific language establishes a recognizable form of life and distinguishes committed participants from those represented as merely nominal Muslims.

Later research extends this discussion toward hierarchy, discipline, consumption, emotion, and self-transformation. Khan ([2016](#), [2026](#)) examines pious sociality and authority based on spiritual exertion; Rauf et al. ([2018](#)) conceptualize the TJ as a voluntary soft total institution; Pieri ([2015](#), [2019](#)) analyzes the ritualization of daily life; and Sahib ([2022](#)) identifies the emotion work performed by Tablighi texts. These studies identify important components of TJ practice, but they do not fully explain how textual selection, collective reading, affective response, bodily imitation, and social reinforcement operate together as a mechanism of religious authority.

Three strands of scholarship identify relevant but still partially disconnected problems. Studies of hadith controversy discuss the use of weak (da'if) traditions and the reasoning used to defend their pedagogical inclusion (Ali et al., 2024; Kuiper, 2017). Research on locally produced portable literature shows that vernacular pamphlets and booklets extend the movement's textual repertoire beyond canonical works (Noor, 2012). Historical studies also demonstrate that TJ literature developed within an inter-religious environment marked by competition and defensive boundary formation (Kuiper, 2016). What remains insufficiently explained is not whether texts matter, but how they become practically authoritative through recurrent social use. This article addresses that problem through the concept of embodied textual authority, understood as the relational process through which textual selection, collective recitation, affective activation, embodied rehearsal, and social reinforcement orient conduct while remaining subject to contextual variation.

The TJ offers a broader case for examining how religious authority is produced in movements that lack a dense bureaucratic hierarchy. The apparent tension between oral transmission and reliance on a standardized textual curriculum is analytically productive. It shows how a text such as the Tablighi Nisab can circulate a shared vocabulary and repertoire of practice across national and ethnic boundaries without independently determining their local reception (Kuiper, 2016; Siddiqi, 2018; Timol, 2019).

The study also contributes to debates on lived Islam, scriptural authority, and ethical subject formation. Conceptually, the problem concerns how normativity becomes practically authoritative through mediation, agency, affect, and disciplined action. The prioritization of fazail over masail links interpretation to emotion, motivation, and voluntary discipline, while controversy over hadith status exposes competing understandings of authenticity and pedagogical legitimacy (Abdul-Kayum, 2001; Metcalf, 1993; Rofiah, 2010; Sahib, 2022). The TJ case therefore illuminates a wider question: how classical textual traditions acquire authority through social mediation, embodied practice, and the drawing of epistemic, behavioral, and communal boundaries in modern transnational settings.

The study asks: Through what linked mechanisms does the Tablighi Jamaat's collective reading regime enable hadith-based texts to orient embodied piety and support transnational religious recognizability?

1. First, the study identifies the core texts and pedagogical categories associated with the TJ's textual repertoire.
2. Second, it analyzes how the prioritization of fazail over masail structures textual selection, exhortation, and affective motivation.
3. Third, it explains how collective recitation, embodied rehearsal, and social reinforcement connect textual narratives to everyday discipline and transnational recognizability.
4. Finally, it interprets disputes over weak hadiths and inter-religious boundary formation as distinct but related contests over epistemic legitimacy, communal identity, and the social function of religious texts, without determining the technical authenticity of individual reports.

Theoretical Framework

The analysis uses embodied textual authority as an integrative process-relational concept. It explains how a textual repertoire acquires practical authority when participants repeatedly encounter it through collective recitation, emotional response, bodily imitation, interpersonal guidance, and incorporation into everyday conduct. Authority is therefore neither an intrinsic property of a text nor a uniform effect on readers. It emerges through relations among texts, readers, group leaders, routines, and local social environments. The concept addresses a central problem in lived Islam: how normative claims are mediated through agency, affect, social recognition, and ethical self-formation.

- The primary framework is Metcalf's (1993) concept of living hadith. This perspective explains how texts operate as scripts for performance and historical reenactment (imitatio Muhammadi), enabling practitioners to relate their conduct to narratives of the Prophet and his Companions (Janson, 2014; Metcalf, 1993). Embodied textual authority builds on this insight by specifying the social and affective mechanisms through which reenactment becomes recurrent, recognizable, and collectively validated.

- Rauf et al.'s (2018) concept of the soft total institution clarifies the organizational conditions supporting this process. Participation remains voluntary, but repeated reading and the structured environment of mosque-based activity and preaching tours can normalize shared patterns of dress, conduct, and consumption. This perspective identifies social reinforcement and

patterned settings rather than textual influence alone as conditions of embodied discipline (Rauf et al., 2018).

- Noor's (2012) use of language-games explains how terms such as dawah, jihad, and khuruj acquire movement-specific meanings. These meanings establish interpretive and behavioral boundaries and provide participants with a shared vocabulary for evaluating religious practice.

- The sociology of emotions further explains how exhortative texts can cultivate fear, hope, guilt, sincerity, and religious enthusiasm. Sahib's (2022) analysis of emotion work is used as a mechanism linking textual narratives to voluntary collective action rather than as a separate, competing theory.

Taken together, these perspectives identify a structured process rather than six equivalent themes. Textual repertoire and selection provide normative resources; collective recitation and affective activation enable uptake; embodied rehearsal and social reinforcement support enactment; contextual modulation conditions how these processes operate; and transnational recognizability is the analytical outcome. Embodied textual authority therefore extends living hadith by specifying the linked social, affective, and contextual mechanisms through which textual reenactment becomes recurrent and collectively validated, without presuming identical belief or practice across participants and localities.

Table 1. Analytical architecture of embodied textual authority

Analytical role	Components	Explanatory function
Normative resource	Textual repertoire and textual selection	Define what is repeatedly heard and treated as exemplary.
Activation mechanisms	Collective recitation and affective activation	Convert textual narratives into shared attention, motivation, and emotional salience.
Enactment mechanisms	Embodied rehearsal and social reinforcement	Translate narratives into recurrent bodily and interpersonal practices.
Boundary condition	Contextual modulation	Condition reception across languages, institutions, genders, generations, and local religious cultures.
Analytical outcome	Transnational recognizability	Generate comparable forms of vocabulary and conduct without implying uniform reception.

Methods

This article is a qualitative conceptual study using an adapted critical interpretive synthesis (CIS) of published historical, textual, and ethnographic scholarship. CIS is appropriate when heterogeneous literature is interpreted to generate synthetic constructs rather than aggregated as exhaustive evidence (Dixon-Woods et al., 2006). The study does not report new fieldwork, interview data, participant observation, or an edition-based hadith authentication study. Its purpose is to construct a bounded explanatory account of the relationships among textual interpretation, collective reading, embodied practice, emotion, social mediation, and authority.

- The unit of analysis is not an edition-defined corpus of primary TJ texts but scholarly representations of the movement's textual repertoire and its documented reception. The repertoire includes Fazail-e-Amaal, originally titled Tablighi Nisab and compiled by Muhammad Zakariyya Kandhlawi; Muntakhab Ahadith, associated with Muhammad Yusuf Kandhlawi; Hayatus Sahaba; the Six Fundamentals (Chhe Baten); Musalmano Ki Mawjuda Pasti Ka Wahid

Ilaj; and vernacular portable literature (Kuiper, [2016](#); Noor, [2012](#)). Consequently, the article does not claim independent close reading, make philological claims about textual variants, or attribute precise wording across Urdu, Arabic, English, and vernacular editions.

- The synthesis is purposive, concept-led, and non-exhaustive. Sources are retained when they contribute directly to the research question by addressing the texts, historical formation, daily ta'lim, khuruj, pious sociality, consumption, emotion, or self-transformation (Ali & Amin, [2020](#); Janson, [2014](#); Metcalf, [1993](#); Noor, [2012](#); Pieri, [2019](#); Rauf et al., [2018](#); Siddiqi, [2018](#)). Historical studies inform movement formation, textual studies inform the repertoire and pedagogical categories, and ethnographic studies inform documented reception and practice. Movement defenses and polemical criticisms are used only as evidence of contestation, not as equivalent or neutral descriptions.

- The analysis proceeded through four linked stages. First, the study identified the textual repertoire and the pedagogical distinction between fazail and masail. Second, it extracted claims concerning collective recitation, affect, bodily practice, interpersonal mediation, and boundary formation. Third, it compared convergent and divergent interpretations across the cited settings. Fourth, these categories were integrated into the synthetic construct of embodied textual authority. Claims about textual content were distinguished from claims about documented reception, and variation was retained rather than resolved into an assumption of uniform practice.

The contextual evidence spans documented settings in South Asia, Southeast Asia, Africa, and Europe. This range supports cautious analytical comparison of recurring textual and practical forms, but it does not constitute a representative global sample. Transnational recognizability is therefore treated as a cross-contextual inference, with contextual modulation functioning as a boundary condition rather than as proof of global standardization. Because the study analyzes published materials and does not involve human participants or identifiable private data, formal human-subjects ethical approval and informed consent were not applicable.

Analysis and Discussion

Textual Repertoire and Analytical Framework

The Textual Repertoire as Documented in the Scholarship

The TJ relies on a relatively restricted textual repertoire compared with movements that foreground extensive political or ideological publishing. The Tablighi Nisab, now commonly known as Fazail-e-Amaal, provides a central and repeatable resource for ta'lim and preaching activity (Kuiper, [2016](#)). Its analytical importance lies not only in the themes attributed to it, but also in its routinized use as a text read aloud in collective settings.

Fazail-e-Amaal (Virtues of Deeds)

Published scholarship identifies Fazail-e-Amaal as a compilation produced between 1929 and 1940 by Maulana Muhammad Zakariyya Kandhlawi (1898-1982), a nephew of the movement's founder. It includes treatises such as Hikayat-e-Sahaba, Fazail-e-Namaz, Fazail-e-Quran, Fazail-e-Zikr, Fazail-e-Tabligh, and Fazail-e-Ramadan. These sections assemble hadith reports and exemplary narratives around the spiritual merits of religious observance and missionary activity (Kuiper, [2016](#)). Within the present design, their significance is assessed through documented pedagogical use rather than independent classification of the hadith corpus.

Muntakhab Ahadith and Hayatus Sahaba

Muntakhab Ahadith, associated with Maulana Muhammad Yusuf Kandhlawi, organizes selected hadiths according to the TJ's Six Principles (Badriza et al., [2022](#); Noor, [2012](#)). Hayatus Sahaba presents accounts of the lives, sacrifices, and missionary efforts of the Prophet and his Companions. Published studies indicate that these narratives encourage perseverance and provide exemplary frames for interpreting the hardships of preaching tours (Noor, [2012](#)).

Musalmano Ki Mawjuda Pasti Ka Wahid Ilaj

Written by Ihtishamul Hasan Kandhlawi in 1939, this text is described as a movement manifesto. It interprets Muslim decline as a consequence of abandoning dawah and presents grassroots spiritual reform as prior to political or economic solutions (Kuiper, [2016](#)).

Portable Literature

Beyond the canonical repertoire, locally produced pamphlets and booklets translate movement ideals into accessible vernacular forms. Noor (2012) describes this portable literature as a means through which concepts and model dialogues circulate among new participants. Its existence cautions against treating one canonical volume as the movement's only source of textual authority and demonstrates that portability also depends on vernacular adaptation.

Mechanisms of Embodied Textual Authority

Textual Selection: Fazā'il over Masā'il

The TJ's emphasis on fazail, the virtues and spiritual rewards of actions, rather than masail, jurisprudential and theological disputes, structures a distinct form of textual selection (Metcalf, 1993). This emphasis does not eliminate jurisprudence from Muslim life. It narrows the movement's collective teaching agenda toward exhortation and practices that can be shared across legal and social differences. In this sense, fazail over masail functions as a pedagogical hermeneutic that selects what should be repeatedly heard, remembered, and enacted.

Fazail-e-Namaz, for example, emphasizes the merits of prayer rather than adjudicating differences in ritual mechanics (Metcalf, 1993). Targhib, or encouragement, and tarhib, or warning, connect textual interpretation with emotional motivation (Metcalf, 1993; Sahib, 2022). The Six Principles provide a recurring interpretive grid: kalima, salat, ilm-o-zikr, ikram-e-Muslim, ikhlas-e-niyat, and dawat-o-tabligh (Kuiper, 2016; Ma'mun, 2019; Pieri, 2019). Within this vocabulary, jihad is commonly redirected toward struggle against the self and exertion in dawah rather than militant political action (Kuiper, 2016; Metcalf, 2003).

Collective Actualization and Affective Activation

Published ethnographic studies describe collective ta'lim as the setting in which textual authority is socially actualized. Participants read Fazail-e-Amaal aloud in mosques and homes, turning a portable text into a recurrent communal event (Metcalf, 1993). Narratives of the Companions provide exemplary frames through which hunger, fatigue, sleeping in mosques, or travel during khuruj can be interpreted as meaningful forms of religious exertion (Janson, 2014; Metcalf, 1993).

Recitation does not mechanically produce action. Its practical force depends on affective activation through promises of reward, warnings, narratives of sacrifice, and the emotional atmosphere of collective participation (Metcalf, 1993; Sahib, 2022). These elements connect textual meaning with hope, fear, sincerity, and enthusiasm, thereby making prescribed conduct motivationally available without demonstrating that every listener responds identically.

Embodied Rehearsal, Social Mediation, and Reciprocal Validation

Textual narratives are rehearsed through repeated practices involving prayer, travel, eating, drinking, dress, sleep, and interpersonal conduct (Pieri, 2019; Reetz, 2003). Texts do not exercise authority autonomously. Local readers, senior participants, group leaders, and peers select passages, frame their significance, model conduct, and reinforce expectations within mosque-based activity and preaching tours (Rauf et al., 2018; Timol, 2019). Embodied textual authority is therefore co-produced by textual, interpersonal, and organizational mediation.

This relationship is reciprocal. Narratives orient practice, while practices experienced as meaningful can reinforce the perceived relevance of the narratives. Repeated reading of a shared repertoire consequently supplies comparable forms of speech and conduct across documented settings (Kuiper, 2016; Noor, 2012; Siddiqi, 2018). The resulting outcome is transnational recognizability rather than complete uniformity because language, institutional history, gender, generation, and local religious culture can modify reception and enactment.

Contextual Modulation and Transnational Recognizability

The recurrent repertoire does not travel independently of context. In South and Southeast Asia, it is mediated through local institutional histories and vernacular adaptations (Khan, 2016; Noor, 2012). In African settings, youth trajectories, mobility, and existing religious cultures shape how Tablighi discipline is understood (Janson, 2014; Wario, 2012). In Britain and Europe, organizational authority, minority status, and mosque governance further condition participation and reception (Pieri, 2015; Reetz, 2014; Siddiqi, 2018; Timol, 2019). Abrar's (2021) study of TJ responses during the COVID-19 pandemic additionally shows how public regulation can expose tensions between shared religious routines and changing social conditions.

Contextual modulation is therefore a boundary condition, not an additional causal step. It explains why similar texts and routines can generate recognizable forms of speech and conduct while producing different intensities, meanings, and institutional negotiations. Analytically, this specification extends living hadith by locating textual reenactment within a process that is socially activated, bodily rehearsed, collectively reinforced, and locally conditioned.

Contested Authority and Epistemic Boundaries

The use of Fazail-e-Amaal has generated sustained theological controversy. Some Salafi and Ahl-i Hadith critics characterize parts of the work as dependent on weak (da'if) or fabricated (mawdu) reports and object to Sufi narratives associated with saintly authority and grave practices (Abdul-Kayum, [2001](#); Rofiah, [2010](#)). These sources represent positions within an intra-Muslim dispute and are used here as evidence of contestation, not as neutral descriptions of the entire textual repertoire.

Defenders draw on the classical position that weak hadiths may be used under specified conditions for fada'il al-a'mal, but not to establish binding law or foundational doctrine (Kandhlawi, [2011](#)). Reetz ([2003](#)) further shows how pedagogical usefulness and the cultivation of religious commitment shape the movement's defense of its texts. The controversy marks an epistemic boundary between competing standards of isnad criticism, devotional usefulness, and legitimate authority. The article does not authenticate individual hadiths or adjudicate the theological correctness of either position.

Communal and Behavioral Boundary Formation

TJ literature emerged in an environment in which Hindu revivalist organizations and Christian missions competed for adherents. Kuiper ([2016](#)) argues that this context gave the movement's textual program an inter-religious and defensive dimension. The literature therefore participates in at least three forms of boundary formation: epistemic boundaries concerning valid religious knowledge, behavioral boundaries distinguishing committed from nominal practice, and communal boundaries affirming Muslim identity in an inter-religious environment (Kuiper, [2016](#); Noor, [2012](#)). These distinctions remain historically and contextually bounded and do not establish that all contemporary TJ communities relate to religious others in an identical manner.

Limitations

This study has four limitations. First, it reconstructs the textual repertoire from published scholarship rather than from an edition-defined multilingual corpus of primary works. It therefore cannot assess variation across Urdu, Arabic, English, or vernacular editions. Second, it does not conduct takhrij or authenticate individual hadiths, so its discussion of weak reports is limited to competing positions documented in the cited literature. Third, the purposive synthesis prioritizes conceptual relevance and cannot be treated as exhaustive coverage of all TJ scholarship. It may therefore underrepresent arguments and textual traditions not represented in the selected literature.

Fourth, the account of lived practice is based on published ethnographic studies conducted in particular settings. These studies permit cautious comparison but cannot establish uniform reception across all TJ communities. The findings should therefore be understood as an analytical model of how text, affect, bodily discipline, and social mediation can interact, not as a universal description of every participant or locality.

Conclusion

The TJ case suggests how a relatively restricted textual repertoire can acquire practical authority through linked processes of textual selection, collective recitation, affective activation, embodied rehearsal, and social reinforcement. The prioritization of fazail over masail organizes a pedagogical hermeneutic that directs attention toward virtues, spiritual rewards, and repeatable forms of conduct. Within the documented scholarship, Fazail-e-Amaal and associated literature are therefore best understood as portable normative resources for ethical self-formation rather than as a political blueprint.

The article offers embodied textual authority as an explanatory model that extends living hadith. Textual selection supplies normative orientation; collective recitation and affective activation enable uptake; embodied rehearsal and social reinforcement support enactment; and contextual modulation conditions transnational recognizability. The model proposes neither complete global uniformity nor direct causal determination. Disputes over weak hadiths reveal competing epistemic standards, while movement-specific conduct and the historical inter-religious setting clarify behavioral and communal boundary formation. Comparative research based on specified editions and situated fieldwork should test how these mechanisms vary across gender, generation, language, institutional setting, and locality.

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Ethics approval

This study is a library-based investigation of published sources and did not involve human participants, interviews, observations, personal data, or interventions; therefore, formal ethical approval was not required.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Submission/originality statement

This manuscript is original, has not been published previously, and is not under consideration elsewhere.

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