

**DARUL ULUM DEOBAND: PRESERVING
RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL INTEGRITY OF
SOUTH ASIAN MUSLIMS THROUGH
STRUCTURAL AND STRATEGIC INNOVATIONS**

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Abstract

The end of Mughal Empire in the wake of War of Independence 1857 left the Muslim community of South Asia political orphans; desperately facing religious and cultural assaults, political as well as economic victimization and marginalization under British Raj. At this time of vulnerability of the Muslim society, it was the educational institutions established by Muslim ideologues which took up the task of strengthening, reforming and revitalizing the Muslim society to cope with the challenges pushing them down to the bottom, they also helped them regain the lost confidence and integrity. These institutions were not merely educational bodies but the movements endeavoring for Muslim renaissance in South Asia. Among them, one was Darul Ulum Deoband which, from its inception to date, played a historic role in confronting the politico-cultural challenges to the South Asian Muslims by adopting dynamic political strategies and accommodating modern structural innovative modifications in the institutions. This, indeed, helped it be a popular movement and achieve its objectives. The present paper goes into some of important historical developments such as: socio-political circumstances which led to the origination of *madrasah* Deoband, lofty vision and objectives envisaged by its founders, administration of educational-cum-institutional paraphernalia, nationalist stance and struggle for freedom carried out by the Deobandi veterans, strategies and policies it adopted to deal with political challenges faced by the Indian Muslims during British Raj and after

partition of India. It explores and discusses the factors which helped this school of thought be popular and become one of the major sects of Islam. Moreover, it also brings in the much debated issue of its stance on *jihad*, militant struggle and terrorism. By bringing to light the historical developments, vision of its founders, objectives they determined to achieve and strategies they devised to tackle the challenges, the paper argues that the main concern of Darul Ulum Deoband's activities was and has been to preserve the Muslim culture in South Asia and to restore the confidence of the Muslim community which they lost after the First War of Independence in 1857 and decline of Mughal Empire, and the modernist and innovative strategies it adopted to achieve its objectives, despite the criticism from within and outside, led to it emerging as one of the dominant sects of Islam.

Keywords: South Asia, British Imperialism, Nationalism, Deoband Movement, Religious Education, Jihad, Muslim Renaissance, Madrasah.

1. Introduction

After Muslims lost their political might in South Asia, the Muslim educational institutions played an immensely significant role in uplifting the moral of the community and rescuing them from their political decline and socio-cultural degeneration. Indian subcontinent witnessed almost a millennium of Muslim rule from Arab conquest of Sindh in 711 AD to the ousting of last Mughal Emperor Bahadar Shah Zafar (r. 1837-57) by the East India Company after the War of Independence 1857. The Muslims, after establishing political dominancy over the course of such a long period, went into serious political decline and found themselves a minority population and in worst economic and political conditions. They suffered from socio-economic insecurities, as the British held them responsible for the initiation of the Great Mutiny 1857. Consequently, they were banned from acquiring government jobs and their institution were denied funds, those found guilty of participating in the war were arrested and severely punished. Besides this, the British Raj began a process of modernizing the society and culture of South Asia, by introducing modern education, democratic political structure, installing new technology such as railway and telegraph, and a new structure of civil-military bureaucracy as well as judiciary. These technological developments, although, beneficial for Indian societies in many ways, were perceived as hazardous for the society and culture of South Asian Muslims by the most of Muslim ideologues, particularly theologians. They consequently showed great resistance against them by opting for wider range of channels including *inter alia*: the militant

resistance, formation of educational institutions, reformation of the society by missionary activities, founding organizations for socio-economic wellbeing of the society, and forming political parties to participate in the mainstream politics to defend their rights and interests. These movements included Aligarh Movement founded by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan (1817-98) in 1875, Darul Ulum Deoband by Maulan Qasim Nanautavi (1832-80) in 1866, Anjuman-e-Hamayat-e Islam by Qazi Khalifa Hamid-ud-Din (1842-97) in 1884, and Nadavatul Ulema by Maulana Muhammad Ali Mungeri (1846-1927) in 1894. Although all of these movements and their exponents were highly motivated to preserve the Islamic culture in India, they were also anxious of the new socio-cultural changes in the region under British rulers. The Darul Ulum Deoband aimed at doing this by reforming the society on orthodox lines. Its exponents were gradually convinced to participate in the modernization process initiated by the British Raj and established the *madrrasah* based upon modern and innovative paraphernalia, but they never shed off the orthodox ideology and faith system.

This paper discusses the Deoband strand of Islam which adopted evolving innovative strategies and developed a vast network of other associated political and proselytizer organizations—such as Jamiat Ulema-e Hind, Majalas-e Ahrar-e Islam, Jamiat Ulema-e Islam, Tablighi Jamat, and Darul Ifta (Department to issue fatwa)¹—,extended its influence and attracted the larger Muslim population not only in South Asia but across the Muslim World and emerged to be one of the dominant sects of Islam.

Over the course of its history, Darul Ulum Deoband has been a burning subject matter of scholarly debates and studies for multiple reasons; the participation of founding fathers in Great Revolt of 1857 against East India Company, Reshmi Rumal Tehrik (literal meaning Silk Letter Movement) attempting at overthrowing British Raj in India, its adherence of religious orthodoxy, its nationalist stance and support for Indian National Congress against Muslim League and creation of Pakistan. Since the last two decades, Darul Ulum Deoband has attracted attentions of international scholarly forum because the militant or jihadist Taliban operating in Afghanistan or elsewhere belong to this very version of Islam. This paper, nonetheless, argues that although Darul Ulum Deoband has a controversial historical background as to its support for militancy and jihad as well as the nationalistic stance in the mainstream politics of South Asia, its consistent intent and strive has been for preservation of Muslim cultural identity and renaissance of Muslim community in the region. This argument further extends, explaining that

Darul Ulum Deoband always adopted multiple options, often contradictory in their nature, and dynamic strategies to deal with the challenges and to achieve its goals, which not only insured its long-standing survival and successes, but also turned it into one of the major sects of Islam in the Muslim World, or elsewhere.

2. Research Questions and Methodology

This study addresses some of the following important research questions:

1. What was the socio-political milieu of India which gave rise to renaissance movements like Darul Ulum Deoband in South Asia?
2. How did it respond to the British imperialism in India and the process of the modernization introduced by the colonial masters?
3. What are the historical landmarks in the struggle of Darul Ulum Deoband movement against British imperialism in India?
4. What role did this movement play to reform and uplift the Muslim masses of South Asia?
5. What kind of innovative strategies were adopted by the proponent of this movement to extend its mission and it achieved a popularity as much as that it appeared to be a one of the dominant strands of the Islam not only in South Asia but in rest of the world also.
6. Lastly, it also deals with the question: how did Darul Ulum Deoband tackle the blame that the terrorist groups operational in Afghanistan and Pakistan are adherent to by the philosophy of Deoband school of thought?

The methodology employed in construing the present discourse is descriptive-cum-analytical. The episodes having historical significance are narrated with descriptive methodology, yet the cause and effect relationships between distinct events, issues and phenomenon require analytical methodology so as to provide the discourse a meaningful construction.

3. Review of Literature

This segment provides a critical evaluation of the existing literature, highlighting their major concerns and scope of the study and showing their limitations. Further, it would provide an insight into that how the present work is distinguished from them.

Barbara Daly Metcalf's enterprise *Islamic Revivalism in British India: Deoband, 1860-1900* (originally published in 1982)² goes into the response of Muslim religious scholars, particularly Deobandi *ulema*, towards the British imperialism and their struggle for political uplift of the Indian Muslims. Her undertaking explains how the struggle for protecting Indian Muslims' right which, earlier was carried out by the rulers of Muslim princely states was transformed in 19th century and that every task was taken up by Muslim religious scholars. Although, it explores and discusses the broader spectrum of Deoband movement with respect to socio-political conditions of Northern India and the schism within the Muslims community, the temporal scope of her discourse is quite narrow, i.e. first forty years of this seminary and movement, from 1860 to 1900. It, nevertheless, pays no attention to the political strategies that Darul Ulum Deoband adopted to increase the extent and intensity of the movement over the course of freedom struggle and post-colonial political history of South Asia.

Muhammad Moj's narrative *Deoband Madrassah Movement: Counter Cultural Trends and Tendencies* (2015) is mainly focused on the countercultural ideology, philosophy and political vision that the representatives of Deoband movement evolved against folk Islam and socio-cultural tradition popularized dominantly by Sufi saints in South Asia. It further puts its emphasis on Pakistani socio-religious culture developed by the contribution of other sects such as Barelwi (which comprises of 60 percent of Pakistani Muslim population), Shia (10 to 15 percent) and Ahle Hadith (less than 5 percent).³ It therefore explains the militant and jihadist phenomenon provoked by Taliban or other militant groups operating in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Since it replicates the Theory of Counterculture, it provides mono-logical and unilateral understanding of the historical episodes and ideological phenomenon.

Rashid Ahmad has penned a book in Urdu language, titled as *Darul Ulum Deoband: Bartanvi Hind mein Muslamano ka Nizam-e Talim* [Darul Ulum Deoband: The Educational System of Muslim in British India] (2004),⁴ which examines the stature and necessity of religious scholars in Islamic world by discussing it historically and more specifically, during colonial period in India. Further, it presents an evaluation of the role of the founding fathers of the Darul Ulum in Great Revolt of 1857. This work provides with details on the traditional education of Madrassahs in post-colonial and the transformation brought by Darul Ulum Deoband. However, it thoroughly overlooks the administrative and structural strategies adopted by this seminary to pursue its objectives.

Darul Ulum Deoband ki Jami'e-o Mukhtasir Tarikh [The Concise and Comprehensive History of Darul Ulum Deoband] (2016)⁵ by Abul Qasim Naumani provides an insider perspective of history of Darul Ulum Deoband movement as well as core issues debated on the ideologies and activities of the legendaries associated with it. This book provides details on the historical background of this institution and services of the founders, working of sub-institutes of this seminary, ideological strand-points and conflicts with Christian and Hindu missionaries, academic programs and curriculum, official and administrative structure of the organization, small biographic details on dignitaries from India and Pakistan representing this school of thought.

Another book of same genre and almost similar content matter is *Tarikh-e Darul Ulum Deoband* [History of Darul Ulum Deoband] (n.d.)⁶ by Maulana Tayyab Sahib, who has been one of the principals of Deoband madrassah. As these works provide insider-view of history and issues, they come up with descriptive and apologetic mode of narration and methodology, lacking critical understanding and the objectivity of the discourse.

There is another type of literature which discusses the nationalist standpoint of the Deoband movement. Zia-ul-Hassan Faruqi's account titled *The Deoband School and Demand for Pakistan* (1963)⁷ explains why Deoband Ulema opposed the demands of Muslim League for separate states recounting the reasons, that it suspected the western educated leadership of the League, showed concerns over the potential bad treatment of Muslims who would be left behind in India as a minority. They thought Muslims would be divided even further. Their missionary objective of spreading Islam peacefully would be in danger. Islam proposes to absorb the non-Muslim rather than rejecting them. All of these reasons led the Deoband School to oppose the League's demand of a separate Muslim state. Deoband scholars from Pakistan defend themselves against the blame by maintaining that Deoband *ulema* had played a vital role in the Pakistan movement and had supported Qaid-i-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah and Muslim League. For instance, Muhammad Umar Tohidi in an article "Qiyam-e Pakistan Aur Ulema-e Deoband ka Kirdar" [The Formation of Pakistan and Role of Deoband Theologians] (2021)⁸ explains that Shaykh al-Hind Maulana Mahmood long before Pakistan's creation had declared India "Darul Harab". Similarly, he praises Deoband leadership including Ashraf Ali Thanvi and Shabir Ahmad Usmani for being Jinnah's companions and partaking in the struggle for Pakistan. In his undertaking *Tehrik-e Pakistan aur Ulema-e Deoband* [Pakistan Movement and Theologians of Deoband]

(n.d.), Hafiz Muhammad Akbar Shah Bukhari states that the towering personalities representing Deoband school of thought—such as Maulana Zafar Ahmad Usmani, Maulana Shabbir Ahmad Usmani, Maulana Muhammad Shafi, Maulana Athar Ali, Maulana Ihteshamul Haq Thanvi, and Maulana Idris Kandlawi—not only became a source of Quaid-i-Azam’s religious grooming but also, even before the creation of Pakistan, started convincing the leader of the League to frame an Islamic constitution for the newly born state, i.e. Pakistan.⁹

Going through the discussion above on the literature as to the history of Darul Ulum Deoband, it becomes evident that all of the sources have presented distinct concerns and focus of discussion, with certain limitations. Nonetheless, the present article recounts the innovative strategic and structural maneuvering of Deoband movement to preserve the religious and cultural integrity of Indian Muslims and emerged as one of the dominant sect of Islam in South Asia.

4. Discussion

4.1. The Foundation of Darul Ulum Deoband

The ruthless British response to the Mutiny of 1857, thousands of Muslim mutineers were shot dead, and many mosques and madrasahs were destroyed as a result of brutal attacks of the British Raj. The Mutiny and consequent fall of the Mughal Empire caused termination of financing to the Muslims’ education and *madrasahs* in Delhi. Worried for the financing and growth of Madrasahs, the founders of Darul Ulum Deoband initiated classes in the Chatta Mosque of Deoband in 1866. The first tutor was Mullah Mahmud (d. 1886) and his first student was Mahmud Hasan Deobandi alias Shaykh al-Hind (1851-1920), who later on played a key role in administering *madrasah* affairs.¹⁰ The prominent figures revered as the founding fathers include: Rashid Ahmad Gangohi (1826-1905), Muhammad Yaqub Nanautavi (1833-84), Shah Rafi al-Din (1836-90), Sayyid Muhammad Abid (1834-1912), Zulfiqar Ali (1819-1904), Fadhl al-Rahman Usmani (1831-1907) and Muhammad Qasim Nanautavi (1832-80). Reflecting on the growth and functioning of Darul Ulum, Muhammad Moj in his undertaking *Deoband Madrassah Movement: Structural Trends and Tendencies* states that one *madrasah* was not enough to fulfil the founders’ goal of preserving and protecting Muslim culture in India, they consequently founded many others on same pattern in the Upper Doab area of North India. By the end of 1880, at least fifteen *madaris* comprehensively following the model of the mother

school were working in Deoband, and by the end of the nineteenth century the fifty-plus *madaris* were functional in India.¹¹

4.2. The Vision and Objectives of the Establishment of Darul Ulum Deoband

In the Muslim world, Darul Ulum Deoband has been a pragmatic example of religious intellectual manifestation, knowledge production and political struggle against the oppressor and imperialist forces. The failure of Great Revolt 1857 in India left Muslims in a state of extreme despair and political decline, the enthusiastic religious luminaries *madrasah* set up a new religious center at a small town of Deoband aimed at preserving the socio-religious values and culture of the Indian Muslims under British Raj. They intended to bring renaissance of the glorious and great past of the Muslims by the means of educational empowerment, opting for militant struggle while finding it necessary and feasible, participating in modern political mechanism introduced by the British Raj in South Asia, and developing the institutions of providing religious guidance as to social, economic and cultural affairs of day-to-day life.¹²

Syed Mehboob Rizvi writes that at this time of Muslims' predicament, the theologians basically felt it essential to establish a religious as well as scholarly seminary which could imperatively contribute in awakening of the religious consciousness of the Muslims and their nationalization. Therefore, it was decided that such a seminary should be established in Deoband instead of Delhi.¹³ A veteran of War of Independence 1957 and a renowned religious scholar, Haji Imdadullah Muhajir Makki (1817-99) when informed that a madrasa had been established in Deoband, exclaimed and replied:

“Subhan Allah! You say we have established a madrasa. It is unknown fact that how many foreheads, at times of dawn, kept on prostrating and grumbling that God forbid! Create the means of survival of Islam and protection of knowledge in India. This madrasa is the fruit of those dawn prayers.”¹⁴

This statement by Muhajir Makki shows how deeply the religious leadership of the Indian Muslims felt about Muslims' predicament and survival of their religio-cultural entity. They were looking for a way to preserve Islamic values and culture and to uplift their socio-political status by empowering them through knowledge, which they found they could do by establishing a Deoband seminary. The basic principles and objectives of the method devised by Maulana Muhammad

Qasim Nanautavi (1833-80) considering the unfavorable conditions after the War of Independence or the Great Revolt of 1857 were: inspiring people to acquire the knowledge of religious sciences and arts, popularizing the philosophy and teaching of Shah Wali Allah Muhaddith Dehlavi (1703-62), responding to objections on Islam raised by Christians and Hindus, spreading the message of the Book and Sunnah among both the Muslim and non-Muslim classes, shedding off the dependency of the institution and mobilizing the resources from within the Muslim community to materialize the envisaged objects,¹⁵ adopting the language of ordinary Indians as a medium of instructions except for the Islamic disciplinary and philosophic lexicons, promoting scientific and intellectual awareness, and adhering to the principle of non-violence.¹⁶

The above argument displays well that Dar-ul-Uloom was not merely a formal academic institution but it intended to attain lofty political and cultural goals. It was shortly after the demise of Maulana Muhammad Qasim Nanautavi that among the leading exponents of Darul Ulum its objectives became a subject of disagreement. Some of its dignitaries considered it appropriate to confine the mission and activities to education and learning only, recognizing it a fundamental cause of its establishment.¹⁷ Whereas, some overwhelmingly argued that the purpose of Deoband seminary was not merely confined to imparting education but reforming the society and offering organized struggle to tackle serious national and political problems faced by South Asian Muslims, and gaining independence from the oppression of British Raj.¹⁸ The ground realities of contemporary political arena has made its goals and objectives controversial among the scholars and students of the *madrasah*, divided on two opposing directions. Anxious about the *madrasah* being blamed of supporting jihadist activities and being dubbed as the promoter of violence, the exponents intended to confine the scope of its activities to the teaching and learning. Others who opposed it opined that its establishment was not merely for academics, but to restore the lost Islamic grandeur and dignified status of India Muslims through a practical struggle against the oppressors. They considered the earlier ones to be straying away from the path of the founding fathers of the Deoband movement, even guilty of misrepresenting their jihadist contribution.

4.3. New Strategies and Trends in Imparting Religious Education

Undoubtedly, the Darul Ulum Deoband was established to impart traditional religious education to the Muslim of India and it has never been faltered in its commitment. However, it adopted modern means to facilitate its mission and to attract the people towards its cause of

preserving Muslim culture and traditions in South Asia. In his *Revival from the Below: The Deoband Movement and Global Islam*, Brannon D. Ingram include a chapter “A Modern Madrasa” wherein he attempted to establish it that:

“[I]t is too simple to view Deoband as “traditional” in some respect (for instance, in terms of accentuating Hadith and Islamic law) and “modern” in others (institutionally and administratively resembling a British college more than a classic madrasa, for example). It proposes, rather, that tradition and modernity are so co-constitutive that Deoband’s traditionalism *is* what makes Deoband modern. Deobandi valorization of “tradition—seen, for instance, in its privileging of “transmitted” knowledge above its “rational” counterpart (*ma’qulat*)... is hard to conceive before colonial modernity and attendant discourses of the Indian secular gave new meaning to tradition itself. Moreover, while the texts that Deobandi scholars study are not modern, the idiom through which that learning to the public *is*, in part because “the public” itself is largely (though not exclusively) modern...”¹⁹

To excel in educational standards and popularization of the Islamic education, Darul Ulum’s three distinct strategies are mention worthy: first, the public fund raising; second, emulation of English bureaucratic organization of the educational institution; and third, adaptation of Urdu as medium of instruction. These initiatives express enough about the structural modernist tendencies of the *madrasah*.

4.4. Fund Raising Strategy and Its Implications

It was during the Sultanate and Mughal eras that the religious seminaries were granted patronage by the courts of the Muslim rulers and aristocrats. They were consequently bound to abide by the state’s religious policies and to endorse them, which more often than were to serve the vested interests of the rulers than collective society.²⁰ Another impact of such kind financing to *madrasahs* was the alliance between the rulers and the *ulema*, among whom the fanatic ones often sought to find the opportunities to influence the behavior and mindset of the rulers to adopt the aggressive religious policies towards the non-Muslim communities under their rule. Diverting from this tradition of financing of educational institutions, Darul Ulum Deoband, instead of collecting funds from royal or noble families, preferred to receive the public donations,²¹ which brought about twofold impact: it enabled the *madrasah* to take its decisions independently on the one hand, and the

general public to identify themselves with it on the other.²² The people coming from all segments and all walks of life contributed with what they could for the foundation. These factors indeed enhanced its reputation among the people as well as the standardization of the education and merit.

4.5. Modern Organization and Bureaucratization of the Madrasah

The establishment of the Deoband madrasah was a watershed event in the history of Islamic religious educational institutions. The founders and administrators emulated English structure of organization to run its educational, academic and administrative affairs. The madrasah was not adjunct to home or mosque. Gradually, it attained classrooms and central library with possible facilities and in accordance with immediate requirements. The professionally trained staff was appointed to educate and train the students, and to deal with the administrative functions. The students were enrolled to study well-defined curriculum during a fix time period, and after the completion of their courses they were awarded with prizes in the convocation ceremonies. The madrasah was unique in its strategic planning as compared to the prior ones, as it issued annual printed reports highlighting and evaluating the progress and achievements. Reflecting on these distinguished characteristics of the *madrasah*, Barbara Metcalf admires it as “unusual” and “a distinctive institution” and its system as “novel.”²³ Showing its moderate behavior, Darul Ulum has always welcomed non-Muslim students, its policy was to accept Hindu students as well.

4.6. Adoption of Urdu as Medium of Instruction

In the history of Islamic religious education in South Asia, it was a groundbreaking decision on the part of Darul Ulum Deoband that the language of the common people and indigenous nomenclature should be given a high importance for delivering religious educations. This was, in more than one way, a major development towards uplifting the confidence and social status of the people belonging to the lower classes. It was first time in the history of South Asian *madaris* that Urdu as a medium of instruction was given preference over Arabic and Farsi (Persian). Arabic then was a language of religious elites, whereas Persian was adopted by court bureaucrats. The promulgation of Urdu by administrators of the institution as a medium of instruction was primarily a tactic of making theological education more intelligible and accessible for the general public. Persian and Arabic had symbiotic significance for the elites, while Urdu evolved to be the lingua franca of South Asian

Muslims mainly belonging to the lower ranks and social status. The most terrible cultural repercussion of providing education in Persian and Arabic was that it created a sense of alienation between the ruling migrant—from Central Asia and Middle East to India—and native subjects. Urdu being a language which originated and evolved in India helped express positive gesture and bring both social segments closer which, so far, had deeply distinct cultural legacy. It can also be observed that contemporarily Darul Ulum is no more critical of the use of English in educational pursuits.

4.7. Three Historical Phases and Pertinent Strategies of Struggle against British Imperialism

One of the most intriguing issues pertinent to the Darul Ulum Deoband Movement was the way it responded to British imperialism and what kind of political philosophy it espoused to confront with this challenge. It appeared to be a staunch opponent of the East India Company and the British Raj in India. The anti-imperialist struggle and strategies may be divided into three dominant trends:

- 1) The militant struggle against East India Company in Mutiny of 1857
- 2) The Reshmi Rumal Movement to overthrow the British rule in India;
- 3) The nationalist politics marked by the founding of a political party Jamiat Ulema-e Hind and collaboration with the Indian National Congress.

In the Great Revolt of 1857, under the leadership of their teacher Imdadullah Muhajir Makki (1817-99), two dignified figures among the founding fathers of Darul Ulum Deoband Maulana Qasim Nanautavi and Maulana Rashid Ahmad Gangohi, rebelled and fought against the British forces. They, defeating the British troops, captured the town of Shamli in Muzaffarnagar.²⁴ Following the foundation of Darul Ulum, its major proponents and ideologues, decided to distance themselves away from active politics for the time being in order to avoid British hostility. They had realized that the Muslim community needed to be strengthened first, lest they lose the battle against the British and their objective of grabbing political control from them could not be materialized.

Shaykh al-Hind Mahmud Hasan observed World War I as a chance to transform the Deoband movement to militancy. He reached Makkah on October 9, 1915, where he met Ghalib Pasha, who was one

of the Ottoman Empire's most powerful governors. The Governor pleaded with him to lend his assistance to the Allies in their fight against the British Empire in the course of World War I. He sent a long message to the Indian Muslims, urging them to keep fighting against British imperialism and assuring them that they will regain power from their oppressors. The conflict was viewed as a great opportunity by the freedom fighters to strike at the heart of British interests. They prepared themselves once again for militant uprisings against the British forces. Maulana Obaidullah Sindhi (1872-1944) was sent by Shaykh al-Hind Maulana Mahmud Hasan to Kabul as a delegate, meanwhile he himself went to Arabia.²⁵ Maulana Obaidullah Sindhi wrote a letter to Shaykh al-Hind Mahmud Hasan in Arabia, explaining to him the activities he performed in Kabul. He narrated the plan of the exiled freedom fighters and mentioned names of persons directing the campaign against the British from India. They expected to launch popular mobilization and agitation campaigns as well as a tremendous armaments drive from all corners of the country. The message they intended to spread among their supporters was written on a piece of silk cloth. The British administrators intercepted this secret plot in time, and dubbed it as a "Silk Letter Conspiracy."²⁶

Following the unveiling of the Silk Letters Conspiracy and the downfall of Ottoman Empire (Khilafat) at the end of World War I, the *ulema* of Darul Ulum Deoband actively participated in the Khilafat Movement and backed Mahatma Gandhi's Non-Cooperation Movement. This was the third watershed phase in the history Darul Ulum Deoband Movement's anti-imperialist politics, when it strategized to work closely with the Indian National Congress (INC), by recognizing, adopting, and participating in the democratic process introduced by the British Raj in colonial India. At this juncture, the veterans of Deoband school of thought including Husain Ahmad Madani (1879-1957), Kifayatullah Dehlawi (1875-1952), and Maulana Ahmed Ali Lahori (1887-1962), Anwar Shah Kashmiri (1875-1933), Abdul Haq Akorwi (1912-88), Abdul Halim Siddiqui, and Abdul Bari Firangi Mahali (1878-1926) formally formed a political party in 1919, giving it a name; Jamiat Ulema-e Hind (literal meaning, the Party of Indian Theologians)²⁷ intending to pursue their political interests as a part of mainstream politics. After the partition of India, the political activities were carried out by the leadership of the party inside Pakistan under the name Jamiat Ulama-e Islam. Another political party which promoted socialist tendencies and closely worked with Indian National Congress, but was immensely inspired by religious philosophy and ideology of Deoband school of thought, was Majlis-e Ahrar-e Hind.²⁸ Jamiat Ulama-e Hind and Majlis-e Ahrar working in

South Asian political environment, played a vital role in the freedom struggle and anti-communalist politics.

4.8. Nationalist Politics: Divergence from ‘Two Nations Theory’

The fact that Darul Ulum declared self-independence as its political goal in 1917, much before the Indian National Congress, reveals enough about the nature of its political concerns, future strategy and activity. Jamiat Ulema-e Hind supported the Indian National Congress’s nationalist philosophy and opposed the Two Nations Theory along with the concept of India’s division. It instigated Indian Muslims to vote for the Indian National Congress endorsing the freedom of United India and denying creation of Pakistan in 1947.

Jamiat Ulema-e Hind although, no longer a significant political force, still continues to exercise its political strength and force to help Muslims resolve communal issues. Darul Ulum has always seen Muslims as a community which has to be reinforced, but it does not support the notion of an Islamic state, which was promoted by the All India Muslim League in the 1940s. It advocates for a secular government system that allows people to practice their religion freely. It advocates for a secular governmental state that would allow all religious communities to practice their faith freely.

If one overlooks those Deoband *ulema* who supported the cause of All India Muslim League to attain a separate Muslim state, i.e. Pakistan, an inaccurate picture of the Darul Ulum Deoband’s role in the freedom movement is portrayed. These included Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanwi, Maulana Shabir Ahmad Usmani, and Allama Zafar Ahmad Usmai. Acknowledging the services of these *ulema*, Shabir Ahmad Usmani was honoured to raise the flag of Pakistan in Karachi and Zafar Ahmad Usmani, in Dhaka. Once, the Quaid-i-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah was asked whether there was any Islamic cleric who authenticated the division of India on religious bases. Jinnah replied that there was Arshraf Ali Thanwi, and his support to the cause of Muslim League was enough.²⁹ Shabir Ahmad Uman and Maulana Zafar Ahmad Usmani, because of their different approach as compared to the Indian nationalist approach of Jamiat Ulama-e Hind, formed another political part namely Jamiat Ulama-e Islam in 1945. After the partition of India, it along with other politico-religious parties such as Jamaat-e Islami in Pakistan, endeavored to affect the legislative and constitutional framework of the country.³⁰ It thus appears that the political parties formed by Deoband theologians based upon different political standings somehow became

instrumental in promoting and popularizing Deoband strand of Islam in South Asia.

4.9. Fatwa Issuing-system and Contribution of Darul Ifta in Establishing Socio-cultural Order

Islam is known to provide its followers a comprehensive code of ethics and conduct through divine legislation—i.e. The Holy Quran and Sunnah—and the knowledge of its interpretation through certain well-defined principle is known as *fiqh*. Over the course of Islamic history, the Muslims have been consulting the Islamic jurists (i.e. *mufti*) for the expert opinion (*fatwa*) to regulate their day-to-day social, economic and religious affairs.³¹ Though the knowledge of *fiqh* originated in the lifetime of the Prophet of Islam *Hadrat Muhammad Rasulullah Khatam un Nabiyyin Sallallahu ‘alaihi wa ‘ala Alihi wa Ashabihi wa Sallam*, its significance grew when the Muslim World expanded through conquests and a big number of non-Muslims entered the fold of Islam. They carried a legacy of their early culture and religions and wanted to regulate their lives according to the guidance of Islam. Ifta or system of issuing, hence, helped those guidance seekers deal with their challenges and norms of Islamic civilization be established and prevailed. Observing these developments, Professor Nazeer Ahmed puts it:

“The new Muslims brought with them not only their ancient heritage and culture, but methods of looking at the sublime questions of life in ways fundamentally different from that of the Arabs. Historical Islam had to face the rationalism of the Greeks, the stratification of the Zoroastrians, the gnosticism of the Hindus, the abnegation of the Buddhists and the secular but highly refined ethical codes of the Taoist and Confucian Chinese. Add to it the internal convulsions in the Islamic world arising out of the conflicting claims of the Umayyads, the Hashemites, the Ahl-al Bait and the partisan and fractious approach of the many parties to legal issues, and one has a good idea of the challenge faced by the earliest Islamic jurists. Fiqh was the doctrinal response of the Islamic civilization to these challenges.”³²

In context to British colonization of India and their attempts at modernizing its society and culture, the exponents of Darul Ulum Deoband perceived these developments as an assault on their cultural and religious integrity and feared about the disintegration of Muslim community. They, thus decided to significantly contribute in simplifying

the socio-cultural order of Muslims in South Asia. They did this by instituting a system of individual Fatwas. In his critical appraisal of the fatwas issued by Darul Ulum Deoband, M. Riyaz Hashami mentions quite interesting facts. He states that Darul Ifta, one of the sub-organization of Darul Ulum Deoband, has been issuing fatwas for the past 125 years and it receives over fifteen thousand fatwa petitions every year from diverse nations to resolve the conflicting status of socio-religious issues, regardless of their purpose or significance. A total of six thousand to seven thousand fatwas concerning socio-religious matters (i.e. duties and rights, what are permissible and what are forbidden by Islam) and politico-cultural challenges (as to disputes, agreements, disagreements, and breach of agreements) faced by Muslims living across the world are being sought online.³³

Historically speaking, the system of issuing fatwa introduced by Darul Ulum Deoband had far-reaching implications. Prior to it, during the Mughal period, the Mufti used to give a fatwa to the *qazi* (or Judges) as a guide, as the rulers did not want the people to have direct guidance. They wanted to regulate the religious affairs through state institutions. This was because they were threatened by direct guidance, or misguidance, which might cause unrest among the people as to the incompliance of their policies with the religious teachings. The contemporarily adopted strategy by Deoband *ulema*, and also followed by other Muslim religious organizations, therefore, contributed to the much-debated issue of individual fatwa in its current form. These fatwas have had a huge impact on the general public seeking out religious guidelines and have prompted individuals to make their self-accountability and to regulate the complexities of their social, marital, cultural and economic affairs of day-to-day life under the expert and well-qualified guidance of the Muslim theologians.

4.10. Emergence of Deoband School of Thought as Major Sect of Islam

Undoubtedly, Darul Ulum Deoband Movement, which began in a little hamlet in North India called Deoband, by adopting dynamic strategies in persuasion of its goals and making immense contribution in socio-cultural and political life of the South Asia Muslims, has grown into one of in-vogue sects of Islam. It has made this possible by expanding the network of sub-institutions or connecting with other institutions having similar ideological orientation across India as well as other parts of the world. The Tablighi Jamaat (literal meaning the Missionary Organization) was founded by Deoband *ulema* with the aim

of spreading Islam all over the world. Originally founded in 1920s by Maulana Muhammad Ilyas who was greatly inspired by the spiritual ideology of his mentor Maulana Rashid Ahmad Gangohi,³⁴ the Tablighi Jamaat though initiated for spiritual development of the individuals,³⁵ intended to counter the activities of the Christian missionaries and Hindu revivalist movements such Shuddhi (literal meaning, purification) launched by Vedic scholar and founder of Arya Samaj named Swami Dayanand Saraswati (1824-83) and Sanghaton (literal meaning unification) initiated by his follower Swami Shraddhanand (1856-1926). Thus, its main objective at the time of its formation was to prevent the Muslims converting to be Christians and Hindus.³⁶ However, It is currently recognized as a transnational nonpolitical organization working to promote Islam's core ideology and belief system. There have been strong arguments in the past over its links and networking with the Taliban and other extremist organizations.

4.11. Darul Ulum Deoband and Question to Terrorism

One of the crucial concerns for which the Deoband Movement has attracted the attentions of heated intellectuals on international scholarly forums over its alleged links with militant groups and its stance about the issue of terrorism. This growing apprehension appeared after the incident of 9/11, as the Afghan Taliban professed the Deoband version of Islam and its top brass leadership received education from the Deoband *Madrasahs*. Added to this, one of the reasons behind this understanding was the involvement of founding fathers of the movement in jihadist activities during colonial period, as is discussed above. From 2006 to 2008, various terrorist attacks were held in major cities of India and consequently the Muslim population had to face witch-hunt and victimization by the police.³⁷ It however, would be a fallacious assumption to associate the ideology of Darul Ulum as militant one, without going into the historical dynamics of the its founding fathers' involvement in revolt against British Raj in India, and ignoring its efforts to reconcile with modernism and the process of democratization of India. Moreover, the emergence of Taliban and other terrorist groups in South Asian states need to be evaluated in a specific context of international political developments as well as the regional socio-cultural constraints and economic deprivations.

This however can be noticed that the *ulema* representing this school of thought, realising the seriousness of such blames, convoked a large scale All India Anti-Terrorism Conference on 25th February, 2008; wherein the *ulema* issued the verdicts against the all kinds of terrorist

activities, unjust violence, brutalities and killing of innocent people.³⁸ *Ulema* from all corners of India representing myriad sects participated in the conference and a joint verdict on condemnation of terrorism was unanimously ratified by *ulema* representing Nadwatul Ulama Hind, Jamat-e Islami Hind, Jamaat-e Islami, All India Muslim Law Board and Rabta Madaris-e Islamia (All India Madrasah Association). On 31st May 2008, Islamic clerics who were more than 100,000 in numbers issued similar ‘fatwa against terrorism and unjust violence’ in public rally held in Delhi, led by Darul Ulum Deoband based in Uttar Pradesh.³⁹

The venerated *ulema* of the Muslim community of India expressed their grave concerns on ‘sinister campaign’ to malign Islam by associating it with terror, and on wrong interpretations of Quranic verses or *ahadith* (the traditions of the Prophet *Hadrat Muhammad Rasulallah Khatam un Nabiyyin Sallallahu ‘alaihi wa ‘ala Alihi wa Ashabihi wa Sallam*) to give any justification for the bloodshed of the innocent people. Mufti Habibur Rehman acknowledged as the Grand Mufti of Darul Ulum Deoband, stated that “Islam rejects all kinds of violence, breach of peace, bloodshed, murder and plunder and does not allow it in any form.”⁴⁰ Condemning terrorist acts anywhere in the world, President of Jamiat Ulama-e Hind Maulana Arshad Madani expressed it that “the voice we raised here will not be confined to Deoband. We will oppose terrorism to every nook and corner of India. We will take this anti-terrorism initiative to every state, every city and every town of the country.”⁴¹ The conference, according to Maulana Madani, was “beginning of a country-wide movement against terrorism and injustice.”

Convening of All India Anti-Terrorism Conference (2008) has appeared to be a historical event leaving immense impact on socio-cultural and political identity and status of South Asian Muslims, and particularly vulnerable Muslim minority community in India. Through this platform, Darul Ulum disseminated the message of disowning and divorcing all those the individuals and organizations involved in terrorist activities either in India or elsewhere. This led to improve the confidence of the Muslim masses who felt themselves alienated in multi-religious society, and contributed in mitigating the impression of Muslims’ peaceful coexistence with other religious communities. This has also improved the image of the Deoband *madrasahs* in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh; the clerics associated with them thoroughly denounce unjust violence and any of its form in the name of Islam. Darul Ulum’s initiative for spreading peace and rejecting means of terror to gain political dominancy is welcomed by the largest Muslim population, non-Muslim

communities and the states which felt compelled to restructure their policies of witch-hunt and shootout. The states, nonetheless, need to devise more comprehensive policies to involve the *madrasahs* in the national solidarity programs and inter-faith harmony initiatives.

5. Conclusion

It is evident that Darul Ulum Deoband movement was established by the Indian Muslim theologians in the wake of the failure of War of Independence 1857 which had caused the abolition of Mughal Empire and politico-economic predicament of the South Asian Muslims. This movement emerged in reaction to British imperialism and modernist policies of the British raj in India. It aimed at reforming and uplifting the Muslim society on orthodox lines, and preserving the Muslim culture from the influence of modernism, Christian and Hindu missionary activities.

Although Darul Ulum Deoband disseminated orthodox and traditional education among Indian Muslim, yet it advised innovative administrative and structural strategies to appeal to the common masses. Fund raising from the common public instead of engaging elitist social segment, organizing the curricula, academic and administrative paraphernalia replicating the English bureaucratic model, and adopting Urdu as a medium of instruction, all were the measure which were unprecedented in the educational history of the Muslims of South Asia. These strategies helped introduce a new educational and literary culture: breaking up the monopoly of those recognized to be the religious elites, stressing upon the necessity of Arabic and Persian languages; attracting the common people towards acquiring religious knowledge; promoting the Urdu language and spreading it out in the areas other than where it had evolved.

As to the anti-imperialist struggle of the Darul Ulum, it went through three historical phases: first, was the participation of its founding fathers in War of Independence 1857; secondly, it conspired to overthrow British Raj from India collaborating with Turkey, Germany, Afghanistan and Indian princely states, which is said to be Reshmi Rumal Movement. After the disclosure of this plan of staging rebellion at the hands of British government, the third phase came when Deoband theologians decide to enter the mainstream politics and formed a political party called Jamiat Ulama-e Hind demanding freedom of India. During Khilafat movement, its veterans collaborated with Indian National Congress and endorsed Indian nationalist ideology. Majalas-e Ahrar-e Hind, another political

organization which closely worked with Congress, was also religiously inspired by Deoband ideology. The theologians who differed from Indian nationalist approach of Jamiat Ulama-e Hind and supported All Indian Muslim League formed separate political party namely Jamiat Ulama-e Islam which has rendered great deal of services in political and constitution development of Pakistan. These political parties along with other proselytizing organization like Tablighi Jamaat and Darul Ifta has been instrumental in promoting and popularizing the ideology and philosophy of Deoband school of thought. It is one of the major sect of Islam in the contemporary world. Darul Ulum Deoband holding a conference against issue of terrorism in 2008 has projected the softer image of Islam declaring that Islam condemns all sort of unjust violence and killing innocent human beings.

Notes and References

¹Darul-Ifta is a one of highly significant department of Darul Ulum Waqf Deoband dealing with distinct aspects of a Muslim's life. The people from all across the world ask questions about their religious and social matters and the qualified experts of Islamic jurisprudence (i.e. *mufties*) provides them the answers. "Darul-Ifta has always been center of attraction and held great respect and trust in public and court circles, accessed August 30, 2022, <https://dud.edu.in/index.php/en?id=16>; Also see, [دار الافتاء، دارالعلوم دیوبند، انڈیا، \(darulifta-deoband.com\)](http://darulifta-deoband.com) accessed August 30, 2022).

²Barbara Daly Metcalf, *Islamic Revivalism in British India: Deoband, 1860-1900* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2016).

³Muhammad Moj, *The Deoband Madrassah Movement: Countercultural Trends and Tendencies* (New York: Anthem Press, 2015), ix.

⁴Rashid Ahmad, *Darul Ulum Deoband: Bartanvi Hind mein Muslamano ka Nizam-e Talim* [Darul Ulum Deoband: The Educational System of Muslim in British India] (Lahore: Idara-e Thaqafat-e Islamia, 2004).

⁵Maulana Abul Qasim Naumani, *Darul Ulum Deoband ki Jami'ah-o Mukhtasir Tarikh* [The Concise and Comprehensive History of Darul Ulum Deoband] (New Delhi: Shaykh al-Hind Academy, Darul Ulum Deoband, 2016).

⁶Maulana Tayyab Sahib, *Tarikh-e Darul Ulum Deoband* [History of Darul Ulum Deoband] (Karachi: Dar al-Ishat, n.d.)

⁷Zia-ul-Hassan Faruqi's, *The Deoband School and Demand for Pakistan* (London, New Delhi: Asia Publishing House, 1963), 95-105.

⁸Muhammad Umar Tohidi, "Qiyam-e Pakistan Aur Ulema-e Deoband ka Kardar" [The Formation of Pakistan and Role of Deoband Theologians] *Jang* (August 1st, 2021).

⁹Hafiz Muhammad Akbar Shah Bukhari, *Tehrik-e Pakistan aur Ulema-e Deoband* [Pakistan Movement and Theologians of Deoband] (Karachi: H.M. Saeed & Company, n.d.), 274.

¹⁰Barbara Metcalf, "Madrasa at Deoband: A Model for Religious Education in Modern India," *Modern Asian Studies* 12, no. 1 (1978), 112; Rafiya Nisar, *Shaikh-ul-Hind Maulana Mahmud Hasan and Indian Freedom Movement* (India: Jamiat Ulama-e Hind Publications, 2008), 55-67.

¹¹Moj, *Deoband Madrassah Movement*, 43.

¹² Farhat Tabassum, *Deoband Ulema's Struggle for the Freedom of India* (New Delhi: Jamiat Ulema-i-Hind, 2006).

¹³ Syed Mahboob Zivi, *Tarikh-e Darul Ulum Deoband* [History of Darul Ulum Deoband], vol. 1, (Lahore: Al-Mizan, 2005), 169.

¹⁴ Manazir Ahsan Gaillani, *Sawaneh Qasimi* [Biography of Qasimi], vol. II, (Lahore: Maktaba-e Rehmaniya, n.d.), 223.

¹⁵ Moj, Deoband Madrasah Movement, 29-44.

¹⁶ Maulana Ans Hasaan, "Darul Ulum Deoband Kay Qayyam ka Maqsad aur Majodah Madaras ka Kardar: Tarikhi-o Tajziyati Mutaliya" [The Objective of the Establishment of Darul Ulum Deoband and the Character of Contemporary Madaras: A Historical and Analytical Study], vol. 25, no. 6, (June, 2014) at: [دار العلوم دیوبند کے قیام کا مقصد اور موجودہ - مولانا محمد انس حسان مدارس کا کردار - تاریخی و تجزیاتی مطالعہ - مولانا محمد انس حسان \(alsharia.org\)](http://www.alsharia.org) accessed May 29, 2021.

¹⁷ In favor of their standpoint, they mention that once Maulana Muhammad Qasim Nanautavi himself said: "We have covered the real purpose of Darul Uloom, teaching, Islamic sciences."

¹⁸ The proponent of this point of view quote Hazrat Shaykh-ul-Hind Maulana Mahmud Hassan's statement, who was the first student of the *madrasah* and once stated it: "Why did Hazrat Ustad [our teacher] establish this madrasa? Was it merely for teaching, learning and learning? The madrasa was set up in front of me, as far as I know, after the failure of the riots of 1857, the intention was to set up a center under which people would be prepared to compensate for the failures of 1957."

¹⁹ Brannon D. Ingram, "A Modern Madrasa," in *Revival from the Below: Deoband Movement and Global Islam* (California: University of California Press, 2018), 32-33.

²⁰ Mubarak Ali, *Ulema aur Siyasat* [Ulema and Politics] (Lahore: Fiction House, 2012), 14-15; Mubarak Ali, *Ulema, Sufis and Intellectuals* (Lahore: Fiction House, 2005), 53-55; Ali, *Bare Saghir mein Musalman Mu'ashray ka Almiya* [The Dilemma of Muslim Society in Subcontinent] (Lahore: Tarikh Publishers, 2012), 40, 64-67.

²¹ Metcalf, "The Madrasa at Deoband," 112.

²² Tayyab, *Tarikh-e Darul Ulum Deoband*, 16-17.

²³ Metcalf, "The Madrasa at Deoband," 112.

²⁴ Tayyab, *Tarikh-e Darul Ulum Deoband*, 53-54

²⁵ Maulana Muhammad Miyan (Comp.), *Silken Letters Movement: Accounts of 'Silken Handkerchief Letters Conspiracy Case' From British Records*, trans. Muhammadullah Qasimi (New Delhi: Shaikhul Hind Academy, 2012) 3-4.

²⁶ Mahmud Hasan and his associates plotted to overthrow the British from India, acquiring the help of Turkey, Germany, Afghanistan, and Indian princely kingdoms. The conspiracy, yet, failed when the British revealed it, and Turkey and Germany were defeated in the war. Mahmud Hasan and Maulana Hussain Ahmad Madani, were captured and imprisoned in Malta.

²⁷ Farhat Tabassum, *Deoband Ulema's Movement for Freedom of India* (New Delhi: Jamiat Ulema-I Hind, 2006), 148-151.

²⁸ Tahir Kamran, "Majlis-i-Ahrar-i-Islam: religion, socialism and agitation in action," *South Asian History and Culture* (2013), 3-4, At: [Full article: Majlis-i-Ahrar-i-Islam: religion, socialism and agitation in action \(tandfonline.com\)](http://www.tandfonline.com) accessed September 2, 2022.

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³⁵Moj, *The Deoband Madrasah Movement*, 75.

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