



Modernity and Islam in South-Asia: Approach of Darul Ulum Deoband Movement

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1st Author

Dr. Muhammad Naveed Akhtar

Assistant Professor
Department of Pakistan Studies,
Abbottabad University of Science
and Technology,
Abbottabad (Pakistan)
mnaveedakhtar@gmail.com

2nd Author

Dr. Abul Rasheed Qadari

Associate Professor
Department of Arabic and
Islamic Studies,
University of Lahore, Lahore
(Pakistan)
Email: Driirc2010@gmail.com

3rd Author

Dr. Muhammad Rizwan

Associate Professor,
Department of Pakistan
Studies,
Abbottabad University of
Science and Technology,
Abbottabad (Pakistan)
drmuhammadrizwan_hu@yahoo.com

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR

1st Author

Dr. Muhammad Naveed Akhtar

Assistant Professor
Department of Pakistan Studies,
Abbottabad University of Science and Technology,
Abbottabad (Pakistan)
mnaveedakhtar@gmail.com

Abstract:

The response of South Asian Muslims to the British occupation of India and the socio-cultural and institutional reforms that they induced were manifold. The attempts by the British to inculcate modernism in Indian societies was taken up by the Muslims as a political and cultural challenge. Unlike the Muslim ideologues such as Sir Syed Ahmad Khan (1817-18), who launched Aligarh Movement adopting progressive and loyalist approach, the exponent Deoband Movement showed militant resistance towards British imperialism and by sticking to their religious dogmas attempted to reform the society along with orthodox lines. Yet, they afterwards modernized their educational institutions which appeared to be one of the dominant set of Islam and made seminary second largest religious educational institution in the Muslim World. This paper discusses the formation of Deoband Madrasah, its response and approach towards British imperialism and process of modernization, and its philosophy to reform the Muslim society at time when it was suffering from severe political decline. Furthermore, it gives an evaluation to their conception of composite nationalism, and adherence to coexistence of different religious communities. It also sheds light on its networking with Jamiat Ulema-e Hind and Tablighi Jamaat in the wake which Deoband appeared to be one of great set of Islam. The methodology employed to in the discourse is descriptive, analytical and critical. This undertaking establishes that Darul Ulum Deoband has not merely been an educational institution but mulita-dimensional movement which contributed a lot in provide distinct trends the Muslim society and culture in South Asian

Keywords:

British Imperialism, Modernism, South Asia, Orthodoxy, Nationalism, Education, Islam, Reformation, Militancy, and Madrasah

Introduction:

In the mid nineteenth century CE, India witnessed drastic political changes: the British East India Company succeeded in crushing the Indian uprising in 1857, and secondly the subcontinent that became the Dominion of Great Britain and Mughal Empire vanished with the wind of change. It was the Muslims community of South-Asia who suffered the most in the upheavals. The British after coming into power initiated the process of reforming the political, administrative, and educational structures in accordance with modern ideals obtainable in Europe, evolved since the age of Renaissance in the West. The reaction of degenerated Muslim society in India towards the British colonization and introduction of modernity was multidimensional. The Muslim ideologue, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan (1817-1898) attempted to reform Muslim society by establishing educational institutions and writing literature advocating liberalism, progressivism, rational thinking and the loyalty towards the British Raj. Contrary to these developments, some of the *ulema* associated with Deoband Madrasah showed militant resistance towards British imperialism in India and they disliking the modernity remained assertive on departing traditional religious educations to the Muslim masses. However, gradually the structure of educational institution was reformed and developed two-fold networking emerged which helped Deoband school of thought prevail to be one of the major sects of Islam. Deoband Madrasah is the second largest educational institution, after Al-Azhar University founded by the fourth Fatimid Caliph Al-Mu'izz li-Din Allah (r. 953-975 CE) in Cairo, Egypt, in 975 CE.

The influence and impact of Deoband, as reformist traditions and philosophy, have always been a subject of discussion in the Islamic world and beyond. There is a growing interest among academic, religious and political forums in contemporary era to apprehend Deoband and its teachings in the wake of 9/11, when the Taliban and numerous other militant groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan were considered to be the most notorious adherents of the school of thought. The present research study, however, attempt at discussing the initiation of Deoband Movement and its impact over the lives of the common Muslim masses of South-

Asia during the British Raj. It recounts the factors that contributed to the transformation of the Deoband Movement into one of the biggest sects of Islam in the world. It examines the socio-political challenges against which Darul Ulum Deoband was founded. Other issues considered in the paper are the impact of the movement on social structure of Muslim community, its political philosophy and activities, its affiliations and strategy convincing the masses and its relationship with the colonial power, the British Raj.

Establishment and Organization of Darul Ulum Doeband

In the pre-colonial times, the educational institution in India, known as *maktab* or *madrasah* was given patronage by both, the courts and the people. The *ulemas* (scholars), *pirs* (teachers of mysticism) and *qazi* (jurists) were provided mainly by Sultans of Delhi, Mughal Emperors, the *nawabs*, princes with *Jagirs* (land grants) or kinds of gifts in return to the services they offered [Riaz \(2011\)](#). Reflecting upon the development of *madrasahs* in Mughal era, Ali Riaz in his enterprise *Faithful Education: Madrasahs in South Asia*, puts it thus:

“Two other factors contributed to the growth of the educational institutions under the Mughals, especially in the 16th century; first, the political stability owing to the consolidation of power at one center, resulting in a centralized bureaucracy; and second, the growing influence of the *ulama* vis-à-vis the Sufis as the dominant religious figures. Overall, *madrasahs* received patronage and respect from the emperors and common people alike [Riaz \(2008\)](#).”

During Sultanate and Mughal periods, the education disseminated among the people through those institutions was on the style which was introduced by the similar institutes in rest of the Muslim World, i.e. the Middle East and Central Asia [Babar and Ishaq \(2002\)](#). There were no western-style classes, but students used to learn from one teacher by an oath of allegiance. These institutions had no proper classroom, syllabus, or test. This model has been followed by various institutions in South Asia until very recent past; the celebrated Firangi Mahal at Lucknow is one of its examples.

The British responded to the Mutiny of 1857 ruthlessly. It were particularly the Muslims who suffered the wrath of the British Raj, the thousands

of the Muslims mutineer were shot dead and several mosques and madrasahs were treated violently or razed [Moj \(2015\)](#). The Mughal Empire had officially been collapsed and the Madrasahs and the education of the Muslim students of Delhi also suffered severely. Owing to these developments, the finance and development of Madrasahs were affected. Under such conditions, the Chatta Mosque of Deoband opened classes in 1866 with only one teacher, Mullah Mahmud (d. 1886) having one pupil, Mahmud Hasan Deobandi alias Shaykh al-Hind (b. 1851-d. 1920), who eventually led the Madrasah itself [Nisar \(2008\)](#), [Metcalf \(1978\)](#). The towering personalities accredited to be the founder of Darul Ulum Deoband include, Rashid Ahmad Gangohi (b. 1826-d. 1905), Muhammad Yaqub Nanautawi (b. 1833-d. 1884), Shah Rafi al-Din (b. 1836-d. 1890), Sayyid Muhammad Abid (b. 1834-d. 1912), Zulfiqar Ali (b. 1819-d. 1904), Fadhl al-Rahman Usmani (b.1831-d. 1907) and Muhammad Qasim Nanautwi (b. 1832-d. 1880). [Muhammad Moj \(2015\)](#), an author of *Deoband Marassah Movement: Structural Trends and Tendencies*, describing the mission and working of the Darul Ulum Deoband narrates:

‘Since the founder’s vision was to protect and preserve Muslim culture in India, one madrasah was not enough to achieve this goal. Therefore several new *madaris* were set up initially in the Upper Doab region of North India. By the end of 1880, at least fifteen *madaris* were operating on the pattern of mother school at Deoband. By the end of nineteenth century more than fifty *madaris* had been established under DMM [Moj \(2015\)](#).’

Although the Madrasah departed from conventional religious education, but it is evident that its organization was both visionary and modern in outlook. In her article, ‘The Madrasa at Deoband: A Model for Religious Education in Modern India,’ [Barbara Metcalf \(1978\)](#) comments that it really was a split from the traditional Indian system of education and was strongly structured in the English bureaucratic model. The teachers associated with it were highly professionals. The Deoband Madrasah established separate classroom building, libraries and hostels as soon as it was feasible. It was first ever that a set curriculum and timeframe for the course has been implied. The annual performance assessment was indeed one of the breakthroughs in

the history of religious educational institutions in South Asian Muslims [Metcalf \(1978\)](#). The details on the point of departure from hardline stances and militant activities against British Raj to modernizing the paraphernalia of the institution and entering into mainstream politics are discussed in forthcoming segments of this paper.

Public Finances for Darul Ulum Deoband

This was the first instance almost any educational institution had been built in South Asia with the aid of public contributions. Prior to this only royal grants from rulers and landowners was used such projects. Application of idea of raising funds from common masses seems to have had significant impact not just on religious education, but also on several other institutions concerned with contemporary western schooling. On the same lines within six months, another Madarsa Mazahirul Ulum in Saharanpur was established by Ahmad Ali Saharanpuri (b. 1852-d. 1927), Mazhar Ali Nanautawi (b. 1823-d. 1885) and Sa’adat Ali Faqih on 9 November 1866. In addition to educational institution build through this model of public donation was Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College founded by Sir Syed Ahmad Khanin 1875 which later on promoted to be Aligarh Muslim University in 1920.

It was a public donation collected by Darul Ulum Deoband that made it possible for the general masses to associate with it more than the institutions previously established by royal funding. The people from all corners of society contributed to it no matter how big or small it was. This however generated a sense of ownership that they had their own institution. Furthermore, the public financing to the *madrasah* from all segments of the society made it possible that none among privileged, wealthy and influential class could interfere into the academic and administrative matters this educational institution, which indeed enhanced the prestige and standardization of it. Those nonetheless were *ulema* only who were solely authorized to administrate and run the affairs of the Madrasah.

Popularization of Religious Education

The indigenous language and nomenclature play a key role in dissemination of knowledge. Moreover, it is sometimes strongly associated with identity formation and social status [Edward \(2009\)](#), [Sengupta \(2018\)](#), [Nunan and Choi \(2010\)](#), [Parkash](#)

and Kumar (2020), Iner and Yucel (2015). This would be the first instance Urdu became a medium of communication rather than Arabic and Farsi (i.e. Persian); the former was mainly dominated by the religious elites and the later by bureaucracy of the court Majumdar (1951), Bose (2017). An introduction of Urdu as medium of instructions by the administrators of the Madrasah was mostly a strategy that made theological education intelligible and easy to attain for the general public. While Persian and Arabic were languages assumed to be out of the grasp of the non-Elite, Urdu was the language of the common people Moj (2015).

The books authored by a popular Deobandi scholar, Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanvi (b. 1863-d. 1943) are noted to be the first theological discourses produced for the general masses and he while authoring them, he adopted Urdu as medium of communication. Intended to reform Indian Muslim society, he wrote on exigencies of Holy Quran titled *Bayan-ul Quran*, as well as book on daily routine matters and mannerism titled *Bhahishti Zewar* Thanvi (1999). Several of books have, until now, been used as a guide by the majority of South Asian Muslims as they were unable to comprehend 'Arabic texts as contained in the original.' The works thus played an immense significant role in introducing Islamic education to the common Muslims masses of South Asia. Furthermore, this strategy of Deoband *ulema* to adopt Urdu as a medium of communication also helped spread it outside of the area the language originated such as Delhi, Hyderabad, Lucknow and Banaras.

Recognizing the standards of education it gives students, the Muslim community from all over the subcontinent come to learn and are still showing great interest in studying the Darul Ulum which emphasize Urdu as means of instructions after Arabic Millia (1967). For this, the contribution of Darul Ulum Deoband in popularizing Urdu language is far more than that of Aligarh Muslim University.

In short, creating texts and offering education only in Arabic and Persian allegedly made the Muslim elite perpetuate their dominance. Thus, the adoption of Urdu brought to the for the common people of the South Asian Muslim community in the sphere of Islamic education, otherwise the dominance of Arabic language for religious

instructions gave elitist stature to Syeds, Shaikhs and the ulema educated from the religious educational institutions of Middle East and Central Asia. Adoption of Urdu, thus, became a strategy of the madrasah to mobilize backward sections of Muslim community in South Asia, politically and educationally. By opening various madrasahs of similarly administrative and educational pattern and vision all over the South Asia and accepting oversea students, Darul Ulum succeeded in spreading its reformist version of Islam across the world.

Response towards British Imperialism

One of the most striking questions about Deoband Darul Ulum's movements is how active it was politically during the period of British Raj and what kind of ideology it promoted? The exponents of the Deoband school of thought were severely against the East India Company and the British Raj in India. Their anti-imperialist politics may be comprehend in three phases: first, the phase of militant activism in the Indian Uprising of 1857. Secondly, Silk Letter Movement to overthrow the British Government from India; and finally the era of nationalist politics characterized with formation of Political Party Jamiat Ulema-e Hind and by collaborating with Indian National Congress.

1. Jihadist Engagement of the Founding Fathers of Deoband Madrasah in War of Independence 1857

The militant participation of two founding fathers of Darul Ulum Deoband Maulana Qasim Nanautwi (b. 1832-d. 1880) and Mualana Rashid Ahmad Gangohi (b. 1826-d. 1905) in War of Independence 1857 is subject of controversy among historians. Historian like Maulana Muhammad Tayyab in his enterprise *Tarikh-e Darul Ulum Deoband* [History of Darul Ulum Deoband] admiringly mentions the jihadist activities of these notable founders Tayyab (1972). They rebelled against the British forces under the leadership of their teacher Imdadullah Muhajir Makki (b. 1817-d. 1899). These insurgents captured the town of Shamli in Muzaffarnagar from the British troops. Nonetheless, after the failure of rebellion they were arrested, trialed and imprisoned. This suggests that the exponents of Deoband madrasah were not stoic in the politics of the subcontinent, rather they right from the very beginning retained an anti-colonial sentiment. Muhammad Tariq Moj regards Deoband Movement

as the continuity of Shah Walli Allah movement that deemed to establish an Islamic state in India [Moj \(2017\)](#).

Contrary to the above perspective, some of the scholars negate it that Qasim Nanuatwi and Rashid Gongohi really participated in militant struggle against the British. Mawlana ‘Abd al-Hayy al-Hasani in his essay “The Proof of Islam: Shaykh Qasim al-Nanotvi” gives an expression that it was merely an accusation that Qasim Nanautwi rebelled against the British. He, thus, states:

“When the great civil war erupted in India in the year 1273 H, they [the British] accused him [Shaykh Qasim Nanutawi] of rebellion against the English government. Thus, he hid from the people for a period of time. Then he emerged, and Allah (Glorified is He) saved him, and proved his innocence from what they said [Al-Hasani \(2013\)](#).”

In the same vein, vindicating Rashid Ahmad Gangohi from the accusation of his participation the war, in a biography titled “The Epitome of Shari’ah and Tariqah: Shaykh Rashid Ahmad al-Gangohi”, he notes that:

“He [Rashid Ahmad] then took up teaching in Gangoh and was accused of participating in the rebellion against the English in the year 1276 AH. So, the authorities arrested him and imprisoned him for six-months in the town of Muzaffarnagar. When his innocence became clear, they released him from captivity. He then, for a short time, occupied himself with teaching and imparting knowledge [Al-Hasani \(2009\)](#).”

Denouncing details of eminent historians which reject his participation in the Great Rebellion of 1857, Maulana Muhammad Tayyab comments that:

“The people who intended to conceal their political and jihadist services either for their unawareness or for their some other foresighted justification. Their foresightedness, nonetheless, is irrational and their unawareness is absurdity [Tayyab \(1972\)](#).”

¹ In 1877, Darul Ulum Deoband’s first pupil Shaykh al-Hind Maulana Mahmud Hasan, began his political movement and founded an organization giving it name “Samratut Tarbiyat” (Award of the Training). The object of the organization was to prepare armed rebellion against the British Raj. This campaign persisted at least for thirty years. In 1909, Shaikh al-Hind restructured his followers under a new banner ‘Jamiat al-Ansaar’ which after a short period outlawed by the colonial masters. Shortly after the banning of Jamiat al-Ansar in 1913, with the new name “Nizzaaratul Ma’arif,” freedom

fighters arrived in Delhi. The prominent figures behind this new arrangement were Maulana Obaidullah Sindhi and Shaykh al-Hind Mahmud Hassan. None more than the independence of India was the passion, spirit and intent of this new setup. In 1914, when Germany and Britain launched the World War I, the freedom fighters altered their course of action. They restricted their domestic operations up to a minimal level and focused entirely on endorsing the cause of Germany.

2. Silk Letter Movement 1913-1923

Finding the World War I as an opportunity, Shaykh al-Hind Mahmud Hasan attempted at converting the Deoband movement into that of militancy [Miyani \(2012\)](#).¹ On October 9, 1915, he arrived at Makkah and saw Ghalib Pasha, one of the most influential Governors of Ottoman Empire (Caliphate). The Governor appealed to him to extend support against the British Empire in World War I. To announce his support among the Indian Muslims, he penned a long letter urging the common people to keep struggling against British imperialism, and assured them they will get the power back from their oppressors. The war was seen to be a free header by the Freedom fighters to hit at the foundations of the British interests. There were expected militant insurrections against the British armies. Shaykh al-Hind Maulana Mahmud Hasan sent his representative, Maulana Obaidullah Sindhi, to Kabul, and he himself moved to Arabia [Miyani \(2012\)](#). Maulana Obaidullah Sindhi wrote to Shaykh al-Hind Mahmud Hasan who was staying in Arabia, a letter describing the activities he was performing in Kabul, as well as the design of the exile freedom fight and the names of peoples who are leading the battle against the British from India [Nisar \(2008\)](#), [Miyani \(2012\)](#). It was expected that a massive arms push would be unleashed from all corners of the country, along with mass mobilization and agitation. The note was written on a piece of silk cloth, from which the title of the Silk

fighters arrived in Delhi. The prominent figures behind this new arrangement were Maulana Obaidullah Sindhi and Shaykh al-Hind Mahmud Hassan. None more than the independence of India was the passion, spirit and intent of this new setup. In 1914, when Germany and Britain launched the World War I, the freedom fighters altered their course of action. They restricted their domestic operations up to a minimal level and focused entirely on endorsing the cause of Germany.

Letter Conspiracy was given to the movement by the English.

Consequently, Mahmud Hasan along with his supporters conspired to overthrow British rule from India intending to acquire assistance from Turkey, Germany, Afghanistan and Indian princely states. The conspiracy however met its Waterloo and exposed by the British, and on the other hand Turkey and Germany were defeated in World War I. Mahmud Hasan and Maulana Hussain Ahmad Madani, another exponent of Darul Ulum Deoband, were arrested and sent to jail in Malta [Metcalf \(2012\)](#), [Nisar \(2008\)](#).

3. *From Militancy to Mainstream Politics*

After the disclosure of Silk Letters Conspiracy and the fall of Turkey at end of World War II, the *ulema* of Darul Ulum Deoband made an active participation in Khilafat Movement and supported Non-cooperation Movement launched by Mahatma Gandhi in September 1920 [Hardiman \(2021\)](#), [Jabeen \(2017\)](#). This may be regarded the third phase of the politics of Darul Ulum Deoband Movement, when it came into close coordination with Indian National Congress, accepting, endorsing and making participation in democratic process introduced by the British Raj. Furthermore, during this very period, a group of *ulema* associated with Darul Ulum including Husain Ahmad Madani (1879-1957), Kifayatullah Dihlawi (1875-1952), Maulana Ahmed Ali Lahori (1887-1962), Anwar Shah Kashmiri (1875-1933), Abdul Haq Akorwi (1912-1988), Abdul Halim Siddiqui, and Abdul Bari Firangi Mahali (1878-1926) formally formed a political party giving it a name Jamiat Ulema-e Hind in , intending to pursue their political interests being part of mainstream politics. The fact that it proclaimed a target of self-independence in 1917 in his meeting in Peshawar well before the Indian National Congress suggests the nature of its political design and action. Jamiat Ulema-e Hind adhered to the nationalist ideology of the Indian National Congress and rejected Two Nations Theory and idea partition of India. It therefore urged the Indian Muslims to vote for Indian National Congress during the time of partition in 1947.

Deoband's Idea of Nationalism

Jamiat Ulema-e Hind is not a discernable political power now, but still utilizes its influence in political matters to cater for Muslims. Darul Ulum from the

beginning viewed Muslims as a group that must be strengthened, but it does not endorse an idea of the Islamic State, which All India Muslim League campaigned for during 1940s [Madani \(2005\)](#). It is therefore evident that Darul Ulum had been open to non-Muslim students since its foundation, and its policy was equally to accommodate its Hindu students. Currently, Darul Ulum neither denounces English language, nor modern education for the Muslims. It supports secular political state that could ensure a complete freedom of practicing religious doctrine to all religious communities.

Shaping Socio-religious Order

Darul Ulum Deoband has immense contribution in streamlining the socio-cultural order of the South Asian Muslims. For this, it introduced a system of individual Fatwa. Giving the critical assessment to the fatwas issued by Darul Ulum Deoband, M. Riyaz Hashami mentions the following facts:

“The Darul Uloom, established in 1892, has a wing called the Darul Ifta, which has been dedicated for the past 125 years to issuing fatwas. Never mind their purpose or relevance, the Darul Ifta receives nearly 15,000 fatwa requests from various countries every year. Of these, some 6,000-7,000 fatwas are sought online. ‘Solutions’ are sought on issues pertaining to faith, duty, agreements/ settlements, what is permissible or forbidden in Islam... [Hashmi \(2017\)](#).”

Contrarily, during the Mughal era, the Mufti used to issue a fatwa to the *Qazi* or Judges as a guide, because the rulers did not want the people had direct guidance. The greatly debated problem of individual fatwa in its present form, thus, is a contribution of the Deoband movement, which now is followed by others *ulema* and religious institutions as well. Fatwa has had a tremendous influence on the general masses and has sometimes motivated people to organize economically and socially.

Deoband Networking and Its Emergence to Be One of the Dominant Sect of Islam

There is no denying in that Darul Ulum Deoband Movement initiated in a small town of Deoband in North India has emerged to be one of the major sects of Islam. It becomes possible through extending network to affiliated institutions beyond India to other parts the world. Established by Deoband *ulema*, the Tablighi Jamat is a missionary

organization aims at preaching Islam across the world. This organization is acknowledged to be nonpolitical and endeavors to promote basic philosophy and teachings of Islam. In recent past, there has been heated debates on its affiliations and networking with Taliban as well as other militant groups. Scholars mostly associate these developments with the jihadist activities and philosophy of earlier exponents of Darul Ulum contradistinguished in militant discourse. During the waves of terrorism in the recent past, it issued a Fatwa denouncing “all kinds of unjust violence and breaching of peace Majumdar (2008).” The efforts of the Darul Ulum Deoband, now, are in direction to declaring disowning the militant insurgences, unjust violent activities, and the groups committing it, in order to promote peace and harmony in the societies.

Conclusion

In summing up the discussion, it becomes evident that Darul Ulem Deoband Movement was imitated by the Muslim religious scholars as reaction to British imperialism in Indian and its modernization. It aimed at persevering the culture and religious traditions of South Asian Muslims. Though its earlier exponents denouncing British modernism and imperialism had actively been engaged in militant insurgency during the Great Revolt of 1857 and against the British Raj during the times of World War I, they later came in to mainstream politics coordinating with Indian National Congress and adhered to the idea of composite nationalism (co-existence with other religious communities of South Asia). It modernized its educational paraphernalia by opening number of *madrasahs* on the lines of mother institution and extending network by forming Jamait Ulema-e Hind and Tablighi Jamat that substantially influenced the Muslim masses across the world and appeared to be one of the largest sect of Islam in the Muslim world. One of the important inferences of above discussion is that the historical and socio-political role and contribution of the different movements like that of Darul Ulum Deoband is needed to be understood in accordance with the challenges that South Asian Muslims confronted over the course of time since collapse of Muslim rule in India and that the focal point of these movements has been the rebuilding confidence and dignified status of declined and

degenerated Indian Muslim community of South Asia.

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