

## Political Thought of the Scholars of the Deobandi Movement in India

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The Deobandi movement is one of the most influential currents of Sunni Islam in the Indian subcontinent that, from the second half of the nineteenth century, developed an intellectual framework concerning the relationship between religion and political authority. This intellectual system was founded upon the Hanafi legal tradition, the legacy of Islamic mysticism (Sufism), and the experience of confronting colonial rule, thereby producing a distinctive perspective on governance and legitimacy. The present study aims to elucidate the intellectual and epistemological foundations of the political thought of Deobandi scholars and to analyze its evolution from the colonial era to the contemporary period. This research was conducted using a qualitative methodology and a descriptive-analytical approach. Data were collected through documentary and library-based research and were examined through qualitative content analysis within the framework of Weber's theory of social action. The findings indicate that Deobandi political thought is rooted in the intellectual legacy of Shah Waliullah Dehlawi, Hanafi jurisprudence, and ethical Sufism, and on this basis prioritizes epistemic and moral reform over the acquisition of political power. By distinguishing between religious legitimacy and political legitimacy, Deobandi scholars conceptualized power as an instrument for the implementation of Sharia and justice rather than an end in itself. Furthermore, the political thought of this school has undergone a continuous process of transformation, evolving from its engagement with colonialism and nationalism to accommodation with the secular state and, subsequently, to a cautious response toward Hindu nationalism. The findings suggest that the Deobandi movement's distance from formal political power should not be interpreted as passivity; rather, it constitutes a value-oriented and indirect form of action aimed at preserving the spiritual authority and cultural continuity of Indian Muslims.

**Keywords:** Colonialism, Political Thought, Deobandi Movement, Sharia, India.

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### 1. Introduction

Since the second half of the nineteenth century, the Deobandi movement has become one of the most influential intellectual currents of Sunni Islam in the Indian subcontinent and has left an intellectual legacy that cannot be understood without careful attention to the political layers of its thought. This movement emerged with the establishment of the Darul Uloom Deoband seminary in 1866 in northern India and gradually created an extensive network of scholars, texts, and educational institutions that shaped the

religious discourse of South Asian Muslims (Metcalf, 1982). Deobandi thought was founded upon a mujtahid-oriented perspective that directed the scholars of this school toward ijthad in newly emerging issues and toward active engagement with the transformations of their time (Azad, 2023). What distinguishes this thought from other Islamic currents is its particular understanding of power, government, and the relationship between religion and politics; an understanding rooted in the Hanafi legal tradition, the mystical heritage, and the historical experience of



confrontation with colonialism (Modarresi, 2006). Deobandi scholars defined political power not as an ultimate end, but as an instrument serving religious and ethical objectives, and this definition consolidated the foundation of their intellectual system in the public sphere (Rahmani, 2011). Understanding Deobandi political thought is important because this movement, despite its apparent avoidance of party-political competition, has always possessed a coherent view of the nature of government, legitimacy, and the duty of the religious scholar in relation to power (Zaman, 2002). Thinkers of this school, from Muhammad Qasim Nanautavi and Rashid Ahmad Gangohi to Husain Ahmad Madani, each sought to delineate the boundaries of the relationship between religion and politics within a specific framework and to provide an appropriate response to the fundamental questions of their age (Abdolrashid Arshad, 2018). The prominent figures of this current were not only jurists and hadith scholars of their time, but also social actors who played a role in shaping the political consciousness of Indian Muslims (Ansari, 2011). This intellectual system took shape in a historical context in which Indian Muslims faced the collapse of their political authority and the expansion of Western cultural domination, and this background gave Deobandi political thought a defensive and identity-oriented character (Ingram, 2018). The transformation of this thought from the colonial period to the post-independence era itself indicates the internal dynamism of the Deobandi school. In the final years of British rule, some Deobandi scholars entered the sphere of national discourse by advancing the idea of Muslim-Hindu coexistence within the framework of a single nation and opposed the plan for the partition of the subcontinent (Madani, 2005). After India's independence in 1947 and the establishment of a secular and democratic system, this thought was redefined once again, and the scholars sought to stabilize their position within a new structure in which Muslims had become a dispersed minority (Robinson, 2001). In recent decades, with the rise and consolidation of Hindu nationalism, Deobandi political thought has once again faced a new test (Jaffrelot, 2021). Increasing pressures on the Indian Muslim community, particularly after the enactment of controversial citizenship laws, have provoked new reactions in the discourse of Deobandi institutions (Mahmudabad, 2020). Understanding this trajectory of transformation

is the key to grasping the internal logic of Deobandi political action in contemporary India. Previous studies have mainly focused on the historical origins and educational role of the Deoband movement and have paid less attention to the systematic analysis of its political-intellectual system (Metcalf, 1982). Studies conducted on Deobandi scholars and their relationship with power have mostly had either a historiographical character or have described the social behavior of this group without placing the theoretical and epistemological foundations of their political thought at the center of analysis (Sikand, 2005). Some contemporary studies have also focused on the political and social condition of Indian Muslims and their marginalization without addressing the intellectual roots of the positions adopted by religious currents (Jaffrelot & Therwath, 2022). This deficiency is especially evident in Persian-language sources, where the analysis of Deobandi political thought has been neglected in comparison with its jurisprudential and mystical dimensions (Abedi, 2019). The existing gap in the research literature reveals the necessity of a systematic rereading of the intellectual foundations of Deobandi political thought, and this is precisely where the present study finds its scholarly position. The aim of this study is to explain the intellectual and epistemological foundations of the political thought of the scholars of the Deobandi movement in India and to analyze its evolution from the colonial period to the contemporary era. Accordingly, the research questions are as follows: 1) What are the intellectual and epistemological foundations of the political thought of Deobandi scholars, and from which jurisprudential, theological, and mystical traditions do they originate? 2) How are the concepts of power, government, and legitimacy defined and formulated in the intellectual system of Deobandi scholars? 3) What evolution has Deobandi political thought undergone in its encounter with the colonial, secular, and nationalist power structures of India? The innovation of this study lies in the fact that, instead of focusing on political behavior or the historical origin of the Deoband movement, it systematically examines the political-intellectual system of this school in the context of transformations in contemporary India. In what follows, the theoretical foundations, research background, research method, and findings will be examined.

## 2. Theoretical Foundations and Research Background

### 2.1. *The Relationship between Religion and Politics in Islamic Political Thought*

The analysis of the political thought of any religious current requires an understanding of the framework within which the relationship between the sacred and the political is defined. In the Islamic intellectual tradition, politics has not been regarded as a domain independent of religion, but rather as a branch of practical wisdom whose ultimate aim is to secure human felicity in this world and the hereafter. According to this perspective, government is considered an instrument for implementing Sharia and preserving social order, and its legitimacy is tied to the extent of its adherence to religious norms (Modarresi, 2006). Within this intellectual system, the religious scholar occupies a central position, because he is the bearer of religious knowledge and the authority responsible for determining the boundaries of the legitimacy of power. This very position has made the relationship between the institution of knowledge and the institution of power a permanent issue in Islamic history and has produced different patterns of cooperation, interaction, or distancing between these two institutions (Ansari, 2011).

In Islamic political thought in South Asia, this relationship acquired a particular character, because Muslims moved from the position of a ruling majority to that of a dominated minority and were therefore compelled to redefine the concept of power and the duty of the religious scholar. In such a context, a tendency emerged that prioritized the internal reform of society and the preservation of religious identity, while regarding political power as subordinate to ethical and religious ends (Rahmani, 2011). This approach shifted political thought away from an exclusive focus on the seizure of power toward the protection of religious authenticity and provided a framework in which political action acquired a broader meaning than party participation. Understanding this framework is necessary for analyzing the intellectual system of Deoband, because this school inherited precisely this intellectual tradition in the subcontinent (Safari Foroushani, 2011).

### 2.2. *Weber's Theory of Social Action and Value Rationality*

Max Weber was among the first thinkers who sought to explain social behavior on the basis of the subjective meanings of actors and to show that human action is not merely the product of external structures, but is rooted in the values and beliefs that individuals attach to their behavior. Within this framework, understanding the behavior of a religious group requires attention to the worldview, value system, and meanings that the group attributes to its own action (Weber, 1978). Weber divided social action into four types: instrumentally rational action, value-rational action, affective action, and traditional action. This typology provides a methodological tool through which the internal logic of actors' behavior can be elevated from the level of description to the level of semantic explanation (Bourdieu, 2005).

Among these types, value-rational action is particularly important for analyzing the behavior of religious currents, because in this type of action, the individual organizes his behavior not on the basis of a calculation of profit and loss, but on the basis of commitment to fundamental values and principles. A religious scholar who establishes his political position on the basis of Sharia and the interest of religion is a clear example of this type of action; an action that is pursued because of its intrinsic value even when it may appear fruitless from the standpoint of material interests (Weber, 1978). Alongside this, the element of traditional action also plays a role in the behavior of religious institutions, because adherence to educational and jurisprudential traditions constitutes part of the identity of these institutions. The combination of these two types of action provides a theoretical framework through which Deobandi political thought can be analyzed as a meaningful and value-based system rather than as a passive reaction (Teorell, 2006).

### 2.3. *Research Background*

Research on the Deoband movement and its intellectual and political dimensions has expanded considerably in recent decades and has encompassed a range of historical, sociological, and discursive studies. These studies range from examining the institutional origin of Darul Uloom Deoband to analyzing the role of the ulama in the political transformations of the subcontinent, and

each has illuminated one aspect of the movement's action. Despite this diversity, most existing works have remained focused on the historical or educational dimension and have paid less attention to the systematic formulation of the political thought of this school (Ingram, 2018).

Among domestic studies, Malekzadeh (2013) examined the role of the Deoband movement in reconstructing the Islamic identity of Indian Muslims and showed that this movement, through educational institution-building, was able to reproduce the religious identity of Muslims in the face of the cultural domination of colonialism (Malekzadeh, 2013). Abedi (2019) explored the relationship between suluki Sufism and Deobandi thought, and the results of his study indicate that the mystical-ethical orientation provided an important epistemological foundation for the social and political positions of the scholars of this school (Abedi, 2019). Among foreign studies, Zaman (2002) paid attention to the role of contemporary ulama as socio-political actors, and the results of his work show that Deobandi scholars, despite their apparent distancing from power, possessed significant social influence over collective actions (Zaman, 2002). Ingram (2018) also examined the diversity of the Deobandi experience on a global scale, and his findings indicate that this movement has not had a homogeneous mode of behavior and that the expansion of educational networks has produced different currents of social and at times political action within it (Ingram, 2018).

Despite the richness of this background, a clear gap can be observed in the existing literature. Previous works have either examined the historical origin and educational function of Deoband or described the political behavior of this movement in particular periods, but few studies have analyzed the political-intellectual system of this school as a coherent system with specific epistemological foundations. This gap is especially prominent in the Persian-language literature, where Deobandi political thought has been overshadowed by its jurisprudential, historical, and mystical dimensions and has rarely been independently formulated. The present study seeks to address this deficiency by focusing on the intellectual foundations, the concept of power, and the historical evolution of Deobandi political thought, and to provide a systematic analysis of this intellectual system in the context of contemporary India.

### 3. Research Method

The present study is qualitative in nature and examines the political thought of the scholars of the Deobandi movement in India through a descriptive-analytical approach. The nature of the subject, which deals with the concepts, beliefs, and intellectual system of a religious current, requires that, rather than quantitative measurement, the focus be placed on understanding and interpreting the meanings embedded in the texts and positions of Deobandi scholars. Accordingly, the data of the study were collected through library-based and documentary methods and include the works of Deobandi thinkers, historical texts, academic studies on Islam in India, and analytical sources related to the relationship between religion and politics in the subcontinent. Data collection was carried out by referring to primary and secondary sources and by taking notes on materials related to the intellectual foundations, the concept of power, and the historical evolution of Deobandi political thought.

At the analysis stage, qualitative content analysis with an interpretive approach was used in order to extract the concepts and themes related to the political outlook of the Deobandis from the sources and organize them within the theoretical framework of the study. This method makes it possible to reveal the fundamental meanings and values that underlie the political action of this current and to understand Deobandi political thought not as a scattered set of positions, but as a coherent intellectual system. In addition, the study has a historical-comparative character in temporal terms, meaning that the evolution of Deobandi political thought in the colonial and post-independence periods has been examined and compared in order to clarify the continuities and transformations of this intellectual system over time.

### 4. Research Findings

#### 4.1. Intellectual and Epistemological Foundations of Deobandi Political Thought

##### 4.1.1. The Legacy of Shah Waliullah Dehlawi and the Theoretical Foundations

Deobandi political thought is rooted in the intellectual tradition of Shah Waliullah Dehlawi, who, in the eighteenth century, sought to establish a connection

between the revival of the religious sciences and the social reform of the Muslim community. Dehlawi lived in a period when the political authority of Muslims in the subcontinent was declining, and he regarded this decline not merely as the result of external factors, but as the consequence of society's distance from the authentic teachings of Islam (Modarresi, 2006). From his perspective, the reconstruction of Muslim society depended on the revival of religious knowledge and the training of a generation of scholars capable of assuming the intellectual and moral authority of the community. This perspective provided a foundation on the basis of which cultural and epistemological reform was given priority over the direct seizure of political power, and this order of priorities was transferred to the intellectual legacy of Deoband (Azad, 2023).

The founders of Darul Uloom Deoband considered themselves the intellectual heirs of the Waliullahi school and organized their theoretical framework on the basis of his teachings. They learned from Dehlawi the principle that the preservation of the religious identity of the Muslim community depends on the independence of the institution of knowledge from the institution of power, because the dependence of scholars on rulers can damage the purity of religious authority (Metcalf, 1982). This teaching became one of the fundamental principles of Deobandi thought and directed the intellectual path of this school in relation to political power. On this basis, Deobandi scholars defined their primary mission as safeguarding the scholarly heritage and providing religious education to the community, not as competing for the possession of governmental institutions (Safari Froushani, 2011).

The Waliullahi legacy was not merely theoretical; it also provided a practical model for confronting the crises of the age. The disciples of Dehlawi's school played a role in the political events of the nineteenth century, including resistance to the expansion of colonial domination, and this experience entered the collective memory of Deobandi scholars (Rahmani, 2011). The defeat of these resistances and the widespread repression of scholars carried a historical lesson that influenced the formation of Deoband's cautious approach toward political power. Thus, Dehlawi's legacy nourished both the epistemological foundation and the experiential framework of Deobandi political thought and connected

it to a current that pursued reform through culture and education (Ahmadian, 2016).

The continuity of this legacy in the intellectual structure of Deoband shows that the political thought of this school was the product of a continuous historical tradition, not a temporary reaction to colonial conditions. Relying on the Waliullahi framework, Deobandi scholars were able to construct an intellectual system in which the relationship between religion and politics was defined on the basis of the priority of epistemological reform (Malekzadeh, 2013). This intellectual continuity gave Deobandi political thought a coherence that distinguished it from reactive Islamic currents and gave it a fundamentalist character in the sense of returning to principles, not in the sense of extremism. From this perspective, understanding Deobandi political thought without taking this historical foundation into account would remain incomplete (Robinson, 2001).

#### 4.1.2. *The Place of Sharia and Hanafi Jurisprudence in the Definition of Power*

The Deobandi intellectual system is founded upon Hanafi jurisprudence, and this foundation directs the school's definition of power and government. In the Hanafi view, Sharia is a comprehensive framework that encompasses all dimensions of individual and social life, including political order, and the legitimacy of any power is assessed according to the extent of its conformity with religious norms (Modarresi, 2006). On the basis of this principle, Deobandi scholars regarded political power as a subordinate and instrumental matter whose value lies not in power itself, but in the service it provides to the implementation of Sharia and the preservation of the religious interests of the community. This understanding lowered government from the position of an end to that of a means and tied the criterion of judgment about it to ethics and Sharia (Rahmani, 2011).

Deoband's emphasis on Hanafi jurisprudence was not merely a sectarian choice, but also had an identity-forming and epistemological function. In an environment where different intellectual currents competed over the interpretation of Islam, adherence to the Hanafi tradition gave Deoband internal coherence and a clear authority, distinguishing it from both modernist currents and Salafi tendencies (Ingram, 2018). This jurisprudential commitment provided a framework in which political issues, like other issues, were answered through *ijtihad*

and religious deduction. Thus, Deobandi political thought was formed not on the basis of abstract theorization about the state, but on the basis of jurisprudential rulings concerning the behavior of the individual and society (Abedi, 2019).

Within this framework, the concept of legitimacy occupies a central place. From the perspective of Deobandi scholars, the legitimacy of the ruler does not stem from military power or political domination, but from justice and adherence to Sharia; a ruler who violates these norms loses his religious validity (Ahmadian, 2016). This view provides a kind of independent judgment for the religious scholar, because he could assess the legitimacy of existing power according to religious criteria and, if necessary, refuse to accompany it. It was precisely this capacity for critical evaluation of power on the basis of Sharia that gave Deobandi political thought an active, though indirect, character and kept it away from mere passivity (Zaman, 2002).

The link between Sharia and the definition of power in Deoband had an important practical consequence. Because legitimacy was tied to Sharia, participation in the structure of power was considered justified only when it led to the strengthening or preservation of religious norms, not because it possessed value in itself (Rahmani, 2011). This logic explains why Deobandi scholars, under different conditions, sometimes turned to political participation and at other times withdrew from it; their criterion was not political interest, but the interest of religion. Therefore, Hanafi jurisprudence was not only the basis of rulings, but also the compass of this school's political orientation and provided a coherent framework for decision-making in the public sphere (Malekzadeh, 2013).

#### 4.1.3. *The Relationship between Ethical Sufism and Political Thought*

One of the epistemological pillars of Deobandi thought is its deep connection with ethical and suluki Sufism, which has given this school's intellectual system a distinctive character. Deobandi scholars, while opposing popular and superstitious forms of Sufism, remained firmly committed to its ethical and pedagogical essence and followed the Chishti and Naqshbandi orders in the path of purification of the soul and self-discipline (Abedi, 2019). This mystical orientation caused the internal

reform of the human being and the ethical refinement of society to be placed at the center of their mission, while political transformation was regarded as the consequence and extension of ethical reform, not as prior to it. Thus, ethical Sufism gave Deobandi political thought an inward-looking and pedagogically oriented direction (Safari Foroushani, 2011).

The influence of this mystical foundation on Deoband's view of political power was significant. From the perspective of ethical wayfaring, attachment to power and worldly prestige was one of the obstacles to purification of the soul, and unrestrained entry into political competition could threaten the spiritual purity of the religious scholar (Azad, 2023). This view caused Deobandi scholars to approach the sphere of power with caution and to regard it as a field filled with ethical trials through which safe passage is difficult. As a result, ethical Sufism created a kind of critical distance between the religious scholar and political power, not in the sense of indifference, but in the sense of constant vigilance against the corruption of power (Abedi, 2019).

The connection between Sufism and political thought in Deoband produced a model of social action based on influence from below and through spiritual education. The scholars of this school believed that a society whose members have been ethically reformed will itself create the conditions for a more just order, even if this process is slow and gradual (Ahmadian, 2016). This approach distinguished Deobandi political thought from revolutionary and power-centered models and connected it to a current that pursued social change through the inner transformation of human beings. Such a perspective brought politics closer to the domain of ethics and blurred the boundary between individual reform and social reform (Sikand, 2005).

The combination of ethical Sufism with jurisprudential foundations gave Deobandi political thought a particular balance. While Hanafi jurisprudence determined the framework of rulings and legitimacy, ethical Sufism shaped the motivation and spiritual orientation of action, and the two together produced an intellectual system in which political power always remained subordinate to ethical and religious ends (Modarresi, 2006). This combination explains why Deobandi political thought cannot be assessed solely by the conventional criteria of political science; this thought emerged at the intersection of jurisprudence, ethics, and mysticism, and

defines political action within a horizon beyond the acquisition of power. Therefore, the relationship between Sufism and politics in Deoband is the key to understanding the inward-looking and ethically oriented character of this school (Rahmani, 2011).

#### 4.2. *The Concept of Power and Government in the Thought of Deobandi Scholars*

##### 4.2.1. *Religious Legitimacy versus Political Legitimacy: Nanautavi and Gangohi*

In the intellectual system of the founders of Deoband, there is a fundamental distinction between religious legitimacy and political legitimacy, and this distinction forms the basis of the school's view of power. In his formulation of the concept of imamate, Muhammad Qasim Nanautavi linked the legitimacy of government to religious justice and religious knowledge and separated it from military domination or political control (Modarresi, 2006). From his perspective, a ruler who lacks adherence to the norms of Sharia, even if he sits on the throne of power, is deprived of religious validity. This understanding turned political power into a conditional matter whose validity was not derived from power itself, but from a source outside it, namely Sharia and justice (Azad, 2023).

Rashid Ahmad Gangohi also moved in the same direction, emphasizing the distinction between the domain of religion and the domain of politics, and believed that true scholars should distance themselves from entanglement with men of power and the world in order to preserve the purity of religion (Metcalf, 1982). This position did not mean denying the importance of politics, but rather expressed concern over the contamination of religious authority by the interests and conflicts of power. Gangohi believed that the spiritual authority of the religious scholar is a form of capital that becomes eroded and weakened when it enters the game of power. Thus, maintaining distance from political power became a means of protecting religious legitimacy, and this principle became one of the enduring components of Deobandi identity (Rahmani, 2011).

This distinction between the two types of legitimacy had a profound consequence for Deoband's political orientation. The scholars of this school derived their legitimacy not from participation in the structure of power, but from religious authenticity and adherence to

the scholarly tradition, and this freed them from dependence on governmental institutions (Ahmadian, 2016). As a result, Deoband's authority was built on a foundation that was protected from political fluctuations and remained intact even in the absence of political power. This independence of authority enabled Deoband to maintain an independent position toward various powers, from British colonialism to post-independence governments (Safari Foroushani, 2011).

The focus on religious legitimacy rather than political legitimacy explains Deoband's cautious approach to the sphere of formal power. Since the validity of scholars was secured from a source independent of power, entering political competition was not only unnecessary, but could also endanger this spiritual capital (Modarresi, 2006). This logic forms the intellectual basis of the very approach that in practice led to Deoband's distancing from party politics; an approach chosen not out of indifference, but out of a value-oriented calculation aimed at preserving religious authority. Thus, Nanautavi and Gangohi's distinction between the two forms of legitimacy clarifies the intellectual origin of Deoband's enduring strategy in relation to power (Robinson, 2001).

##### 4.2.2. *Husain Ahmad Madani's Theory of Composite Nationalism*

Husain Ahmad Madani, one of the most prominent Deobandi scholars, presented one of the most important formulations of this school's political thought through his theory of "composite nationalism." Against the two-nation theory, which formed the basis of the plan for the partition of the subcontinent, Madani argued that Muslims and Hindus could coexist within the framework of a single nation and a shared homeland without the religious identity of Muslims being compromised (Madani, 2005). From his perspective, the distinction between "nation" in the sense of a religious ummah and "homeland" in the sense of a territorial unit made it possible for Muslims, while preserving their religious identity, to be active citizens in a shared country. This formulation produced a novel understanding of the relationship between religion and nationality in the Indian context (Ahmadian, 2016).

The theory of composite nationalism was rooted in the same intellectual foundations of Deoband that regarded political power as subordinate to religious and ethical ends. Madani believed that the preservation of the

religious identity of Muslims was not secured through the establishment of a separate state, but through steadfastness in Sharia and religious institutions, and that this could be achieved within the framework of a plural nation as well (Modarresi, 2006). This position placed Deobandi political thought against the separatist discourse of the Muslim League and showed that this school gave priority to preserving the social and cultural fabric of Muslims in their homeland rather than attaining independent political power. Thus, Madani's theory reflected the same priority of religious authenticity over political interest (Rahmani, 2011).

This theory can also be understood from the perspective of political realism. Madani, recognizing the structural limitations of Muslim political participation in India and the dangers arising from partition, found the path of coexistence and the preservation of territorial unity to be more rational (Zaman, 2002). In his view, the partition of the subcontinent could place the Muslims who remained in India in a vulnerable position and disrupt their social cohesion. This prediction, parts of which later became reality, indicates the depth of Deobandi political thought in assessing the long-term consequences of political decisions. Thus, the theory of composite nationalism contained a combination of religious commitment and realist calculation (Ahmadian, 2016).

Madani's emphasis on coexistence and loyalty to a shared homeland provided an important intellectual foundation for Deoband's political behavior in the post-independence period. This theory provided Deobandi scholars with a framework according to which they could emphasize equal citizenship and peaceful coexistence with the majority within India's secular system (Azad, 2023). Consequently, the idea of composite nationalism was not only a position regarding partition, but also a guideline for the cultural survival of Muslims in plural India. This intellectual legacy continues to be reflected in the positions of contemporary Deobandi institutions and forms the basis of their emphasis on loyalty to the constitution and religious coexistence (Sikand, 2005).

#### 4.2.3. The Distinction between Religiosity and Political Practice

Deobandi political thought, although theoretically considering politics to be part of religion, draws a clear practical distinction between "religiosity" and "political practice." This distinction enabled scholars to separate their religious mission from everyday political action

and to keep their spiritual authority above party conflicts (Modarresi, 2006). On the basis of this distinction, the primary duty of the religious scholar was defined as the spiritual guidance and ethical education of society, not the assumption of offices of power or involvement in political competition. This view provided a framework within which religious and social activity could continue without being mixed with formal politics (Abedi, 2019). A prominent example of this distinction can be observed in the intellectual trajectory of Husain Ahmad Madani, who defended participation in political struggle during the colonial period but, after independence, emphasized the guiding and educational role of the scholars (Metcalf, 1982). This shift in position was not a sign of contradiction, but reflected the same fundamental logic that regarded political participation as subordinate to the interest of religion; under conditions in which struggle against colonialism was considered a religious interest, political presence was justified, and under the new conditions, focus on religious education became the priority. Thus, the distinction between religiosity and political practice gave Deoband a strategic flexibility that enabled it to readjust its orientation as circumstances changed (Rahmani, 2011).

This practical distinction had important institutional consequences. Deobandi institutions were able to operate as educational, social, and charitable organizations without being recognized as formal political actors and without becoming entangled in the costs of entering the structure of power (Ahmadian, 2016). This separation guaranteed the independence of the religious institution and protected it from dependence on the state or political parties. As a result, Deoband was able to establish an extensive network of madrasas and religious centers that provided this school with a stable source of social influence; an influence founded upon spiritual authority rather than political power (Safari Foroushani, 2011).

Ultimately, the distinction between religiosity and political practice explains what may be called a particular form of indirect political action. By shifting the center of its activity from the field of power to the field of education and culture, Deoband pursued a kind of ethical politics whose aim was not to seize the state, but to shape the religious and moral conscience of society (Zaman, 2002). This approach turned Deobandi political thought into a current that, despite its distance from formal

power, left a deep impact on the social and cultural life of Indian Muslims. From this perspective, the distinction between religiosity and political practice is not a sign of passivity, but a conscious strategy for preserving spiritual authority and cultural continuity (Azad, 2023).

#### 4.3. *Deobandi Political Thought in Encounter with the Contemporary Power Structure*

##### 4.3.1. *Position toward Colonialism and Nationalism*

Deobandi political thought took shape in the context of confrontation with British colonialism, and this encounter determined its defensive and identity-oriented character. Deobandi scholars regarded colonialism not only as political domination, but also as a cultural and epistemological assault on the Muslim community that targeted the foundations of its religious and educational life (Modarresi, 2006). Therefore, their strategy against colonialism was based on rebuilding religious institutions and reviving the Islamic sciences, not merely on direct military or political confrontation. This approach turned cultural resistance into the main method of endurance against foreign domination and connected Deobandi political thought to a current that gave priority to preserving identity over acquiring power (Azad, 2023).

Despite this emphasis on cultural resistance, Deobandi scholars also engaged in active political action at certain moments. The participation of some leaders of this school in anti-colonial movements shows that distancing from power did not mean absolute passivity, but was subject to religious prudential judgment and historical conditions (Metcalf, 1982). At these moments, struggle against colonialism was understood as a religious duty that justified the political presence of the scholars. This flexibility shows that Deobandi political thought had the capacity, depending on the requirements of the age, to move between active action and strategic distancing without abandoning its fundamental principles (Rahmani, 2011).

In relation to the emerging nationalism of India, Deobandi scholars adopted a distinctive position. A large segment of them, especially within the framework of the theory of composite nationalism, defended cooperation with the Indian national movement and coexistence with Hindus, and opposed the plan for the partition of the subcontinent (Ahmadian, 2016). This position placed

Deobandi political thought against separatist discourse and showed that this school preferred territorial unity and the preservation of the social fabric of Muslims to the establishment of an independent state. Understanding structural limitations and the dangers arising from partition turned this choice into a realist decision based on an assessment of long-term consequences (Madani, 2005).

Deoband's encounter with colonialism and nationalism produced a model of political action in which religious principles and political realism were connected. The scholars of this school were able, while adhering to their intellectual foundations, to offer a flexible reading of historical conditions and adjust their positions accordingly (Safari Foroushani, 2011). This ability to adapt to changing conditions without abandoning foundational principles was one of the enduring features of Deobandi political thought and continued in later periods. Thus, the experience of the colonial period provided an important intellectual and practical foundation for Deoband's political behavior in the post-independence era (Robinson, 2001).

##### 4.3.2. *Political Thought in the Post-Independence Secular System*

India's independence in 1947 and the establishment of a secular and democratic system placed Deobandi political thought before new conditions. Muslims, who had once been part of the ruling power, had now become a dispersed minority in a Hindu-majority country, and this transformation made it necessary to redefine the relationship of the scholars with power (Robinson, 2001). In this context, Deobandi scholars realized that entry into party-political competition within a structure in which Muslims lacked collective power was not only ineffective, but also risky. Accordingly, they focused their attention on preserving religious institutions and the cultural cohesion of the Muslim community (Modarresi, 2006).

This approach can be regarded as a form of strategic accommodation with the constraining structure of power in India. Under the new conditions, Deobandi political thought gave priority to preserving spiritual authority and the independence of the religious institution, and avoided involvement in formal power structures that could endanger this capital (Azad, 2023). At the same time, this distancing did not mean complete

withdrawal from the public sphere; scholars continued their presence in society through educational, charitable, and social institutions and preserved their cultural influence. Thus, Deobandi political thought pursued a form of indirect action that operated in the field of culture and education rather than in the field of political competition (Rahmani, 2011).

Within the framework of the secular system, Deobandi scholars emphasized principles such as equal citizenship, loyalty to the constitution, and peaceful coexistence with the majority. These positions, reflected in the statements of institutions such as Jamiat Ulama-i-Hind, were the logical continuation of the theory of composite nationalism and provided a framework for the cultural survival of Muslims in India's plural society (Ahmadian, 2016). This approach was not the result of compromise, but a conscious effort to preserve social security and religious legitimacy within a structure in which any form of religious political activity could lead to the label of extremism. Thus, Deobandi political thought adapted itself to the requirements of the secular system without abandoning its religious foundations (Zaman, 2002).

The focus on cultural and educational action in the post-independence period reflected the same value-oriented logic that had shaped Deobandi political thought from the beginning. With a realistic understanding of the minority position of Muslims, the scholars of this school considered influence through education and ethical reform more rational than entry into political competition (Safari Ferooshani, 2011). This choice consolidated Deoband's spiritual authority among Muslim masses and turned it into an ethical authority whose influence was independent of political power. From this perspective, Deobandi political thought in the secular system was not the absence of politics, but a specific form of informal cultural politics with defensive and identity-oriented functions (Sikand, 2005).

#### 4.3.3. *Reaction to Hindu Nationalism and the Contemporary State*

The rise and consolidation of Hindu nationalism in recent decades has placed Deobandi political thought before a new test. The expansion of Hindu majoritarian discourse and policies that challenge the position of the Muslim minority have created a new environment in which traditional religious institutions have been

compelled to reconsider their positions (Jaffrelot, 2021). In this context, Deobandi scholars have adopted a cautious approach aimed at avoiding direct confrontation with the state while preserving the religious identity of the Muslim community. This caution is a continuation of Deoband's long-standing logic of protecting the religious institution against political risks (Azad, 2023).

Controversial policies in the field of citizenship, including laws accused of discriminating against Muslims, have provoked reactions among Deobandi institutions. While opposing such policies, these institutions have emphasized peaceful and legal forms of protest and have avoided resorting to violence (Mahmudabad, 2020). This position reflects the same intellectual framework that regards political action as subordinate to the interest of religion and the security of the community, and avoids confrontations that could intensify pressure on Muslims. Thus, in its encounter with the contemporary state, Deobandi political thought maintains a balance between defending the rights of the Muslim community and preserving social stability (Ahmadian, 2016).

Under conditions in which structural pressure on Indian Muslims has increased, Deobandi religious discourse has become an instrument of social and cultural reproduction. The scholars of this school, by emphasizing religious education, ethical reform, and the internal cohesion of the community, have sought to preserve Muslim identity against homogenizing policies (Jaffrelot & Therwath, 2022). This strategy, which may be described as a strategy of survival under conditions of structural exclusion, shows that Deobandi political thought continues to be based on the same epistemological principles that prioritize the preservation of religious and cultural authenticity. Consequently, cultural resistance has once again become the main method of endurance against political pressure (Modarresi, 2006).

The analysis of Deoband's reaction to Hindu nationalism shows that the political thought of this school, despite the continuity of its foundational principles, has not been static and has retained its ability to readjust itself under new conditions. In the tense contemporary environment, Deobandi scholars oscillate between preserving religious independence and the necessity of defending the civil rights of Muslims, and this situation raises new

questions about the effectiveness of the traditional approach of distancing from politics (Rahmani, 2011). Nevertheless, what has remained constant is the foundational view that regards political power as subordinate to religious and ethical ends and defines political action within a horizon beyond the acquisition of power. From this perspective, Deobandi political thought in its encounter with the contemporary state represents the continuity of a coherent intellectual tradition in a transformed context (Robinson, 2001).

## 5. Conclusion

Since the second half of the nineteenth century, the Deobandi movement has become one of the most influential intellectual currents of Sunni Islam in the Indian subcontinent and has produced an intellectual system that defines the relationship between religion and power on the basis of the Hanafi legal tradition, the mystical heritage, and the historical experience of confrontation with colonialism. This study was designed with the aim of explaining the intellectual and epistemological foundations of the political thought of Deobandi scholars and analyzing its evolution from the colonial period to the contemporary era. To achieve this aim, a qualitative method with a descriptive-analytical approach was used, and data were collected through library-based and documentary study and organized through qualitative content analysis and Weber's framework of social action. This framework made it possible to understand Deobandi political thought not as a scattered set of positions, but as a coherent intellectual system grounded in religious values. The findings showed that the intellectual and epistemological foundations of Deobandi political thought are rooted in three interconnected sources. The reformist legacy of Shah Waliullah Dehlawi established the priority of epistemological reform over the seizure of power. The Hanafi legal tradition determined the framework of rulings and legitimacy. The ethical Sufism of the Chishti and Naqshbandi orders also gave this thought an inward-looking and pedagogically oriented direction. The combination of these three produced an intellectual system in which political power always remained subordinate to ethical and religious ends. At the conceptual level, the findings clarified that Deobandi scholars distinguished between religious legitimacy and political legitimacy. They defined power and government

as subordinate and instrumental matters serving Sharia and justice, not as ends in themselves. This formulation was reflected in the views of Nanautavi and Gangohi concerning the dependence of legitimacy on religious justice. It also appeared in Husain Ahmad Madani's theory of composite nationalism and in the practical distinction between religiosity and political practice. Thus, the legitimacy of the scholars was established on a foundation independent of the structure of power. Finally, the findings showed that Deobandi political thought has undergone a continuous evolution in its encounter with power structures. In the face of colonialism and nationalism, this school prioritized cultural resistance and the preservation of identity over the acquisition of power. In the post-independence secular system, by emphasizing equal citizenship and loyalty to the constitution, it chose a form of indirect cultural action. In its encounter with Hindu nationalism and the contemporary state, it adopted a cautious and peaceful approach in which religious discourse became an instrument of cultural reproduction and a strategy of survival. This evolution shows that the foundational principles of Deobandi thought remained constant throughout this trajectory, while its practical orientation was readjusted according to conditions. Therefore, Deoband's distancing from formal power was not passivity, but a form of indirect political action aimed at preserving spiritual authority and cultural continuity. On the basis of these findings, it is suggested that Deobandi scholars, while preserving religious independence, reconsider new forms of civic and legal participation in order to defend the rights of the Muslim community more effectively, and that future researchers examine Deobandi political thought comparatively alongside other Islamic currents in South Asia in order to clarify the less explored dimensions of this intellectual system.

## Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

## Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

## Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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The authors report no conflict of interest.

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