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# Factors and Consequences of Political Avoidance in the Deobandi Movement of India

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## ABSTRACT

The Deobandi movement in India, as one of the major intellectual and religious currents within Sunni Islam, has maintained a complex and cautious relationship with politics throughout the country's contemporary history. The central problem of this study concerns the reasons for and the mechanisms behind the movement's political avoidance after India's independence. The primary objective of the article is to explain the social, cultural, historical, and ideological factors that have led the Deobandis to distance themselves from the sphere of political power and instead concentrate on religious reform and the moral cultivation of society. The main research question asks: What factors have contributed to the formation and persistence of political avoidance within the Deobandi movement in India? The article's hypothesis posits that Deobandi political avoidance is the result of interaction among three key variables: their historically negative experience with colonialism and political engagement; the multicultural and sensitive structure of post-independence India; and their jurisprudential-theological worldview, which defines politics as subordinate to religious ethics. The present research employs a descriptive-analytical method and draws on historical sources, official documents, and sociological studies. The findings indicate that Deobandi political avoidance does not signify political passivity; rather, it reflects a form of conservative action aimed at preserving religious identity in the face of the challenges posed by modern politics and India's cultural diversity. Consequently, political avoidance in Deobandi thought and practice is less a negation of politics and more a strategy for survival and continuity within India's multiethnic and secular society.

**Keywords:** Deobandi movement, Indian National Congress, Bharatiya Janata Party, political avoidance, India

## Introduction

The Deobandi movement in India, which emerged in the late nineteenth century with the establishment of the Darul Uloom Deoband seminary in northern India, is considered one of the largest and most influential intellectual and religious currents of Sunni Islam in the subcontinent. This movement arose in response to the cultural and religious challenges of British colonialism and aimed at preserving the Islamic identity of Indian Muslims, gradually developing into an extensive network of religious schools and centers across the subcontinent (1, 2). However, one of the fundamental and distinguishing features of the Deobandis is their avoidance of politics—an attribute that has persisted from the beginning to the contemporary era and has become one of the core components of their intellectual and social identity (3, 4).



In fact, throughout their history—both during the colonial period and after India's independence—the Deobandi movement has adopted a cautious and at times negative stance toward direct political engagement and participation in struggles for power. This political avoidance is not only a strategic choice but also a reflection of the movement's religious worldview, social structure, and historical experiences. Before independence, Deobandi leaders, when confronting British colonialism, emphasized the preservation of Islamic identity and cultural resistance. Unlike some other Muslim groups, they refrained from entering nationalist and independence-seeking politics, believing their mission lay not in seizing power but in “internal reform of the ummah.” Therefore, instead of political activism, they devoted themselves to religious education, moral training, and combating doctrinal deviations (5, 6). In addition, the negative experiences of Muslim religious groups in political activism during the colonial period alerted Deobandi scholars that entering politics could lead to division, instability, and the weakening of Muslim unity (7, 8).

After India's independence in 1947, with the transformation of the political structure and the rise of a secular and democratic system, the Deobandi movement distanced itself even further from formal politics. It preferred to focus on training a new generation of religious scholars and strengthening the cultural identity of Muslims rather than engaging in partisan competition or interreligious tensions. In this period—given India's complex, multiethnic context where religious and communal tensions could easily escalate into political crises—this cautious approach was reinforced, becoming part of the Deobandis' strategy for survival and continuity within secular India (9, 10).

The central question of the present study is why and how the Deobandi movement, despite its broad social presence, has refrained from direct participation in Indian politics and instead consolidated political avoidance as part of its intellectual identity and religious practice. Based on this, the study asks: which historical, social, cultural, and ideological factors have shaped and sustained political avoidance in the Deobandi movement after independence, and what consequences has this avoidance produced? Our premise is that Deobandi political avoidance results from the interaction of three essential variables: first, the bitter historical experiences of encountering colonial and non-religious authorities; second, the multicultural and sensitive structure of Indian society, where the political participation of religious groups risks conflict and accusations of extremism; and third, the Deobandi jurisprudential–theological worldview, which conceives politics not as a tool of power but as a moral domain subordinate to Islamic law (11-13).

The purpose of this research is to examine these factors within the context of India's social and political transformations and to show how the Deobandis, through adopting political avoidance, have in fact chosen a form of “conservative action” aimed at preserving their religious and cultural identity in a secular society. Thus, political avoidance here does not imply passivity but rather a strategy of survival and maintaining cultural independence in response to India's political and social pressures (14, 15).

The importance and necessity of this research may be viewed from several perspectives. First, despite the wide influence of the Deobandi movement in the Islamic world and its role in shaping Sunni intellectual trends in South Asia, few studies have analyzed its political behavior sociologically in the context of contemporary India. Second, Deobandi political avoidance in India differs significantly from the more politicized orientations of their counterparts in Pakistan and Afghanistan—differences that may help better understand religion–politics interaction in multiethnic societies (16, 17). Third, analyzing Deobandi behavior can contribute to debates on “non-political Islam” or “cultural Islam” and assist in redefining religious action in secular societies. Therefore, this article seeks to explain Deobandi political avoidance and its consequences in India through historical data, educational texts, and relevant research

literature, demonstrating that this avoidance is not a sign of weakness but an expression of value-oriented rationality and religious conservatism in the face of a secular power structure (18, 19).

## Literature Review

Classical studies on the emergence and formation of the Deobandi movement have emphasized the works of Barbara Metcalf, who presents a comprehensive study on the establishment of Darul Uloom Deoband and its role in the religious revival of Muslims in northern India. Metcalf shows that Deoband was a response by the scholarly community to colonial pressure and cultural transformations, and she analyzes its institutional educational framework as the primary instrument of this religious reconstruction (1).

Continuing this scholarly tradition, Muhammad Qasim Zaman, focusing on the role of religious scholars in the contemporary era, analyzes the ulama not merely as religious thinkers but as socio-political actors. He explains that although Deobandis have sometimes distanced themselves from formal politics, their social influence on collective action should not be overlooked—an insight that contributes to understanding the complexity of their relationship with politics (4).

More recent studies emphasize the diversity of Deobandi experiences across South Asia. Brannon Ingram shows that the Deobandi movement is not monolithic; rather, the expansion of school networks and short publications has enabled the movement's diversification and the emergence of varying social—and at times political—orientations. Ingram particularly highlights globalization and the transnational spread of Deobandi models beyond India (3).

Regional studies such as Sana Haroon's work on the role of Deobandis in frontier provinces show that local factors (tribal structures, colonial policies, or new state formations) significantly shaped the political tendencies of Deobandi institutions. In other words, political avoidance or participation must be analyzed within specific historical–geographical contexts (5).

Studies such as those by Francis Robinson (2001) demonstrate that Deobandi scholars, emphasizing traditional teachings and jurisprudence, replaced political legitimacy with religious legitimacy. On the other hand, works by scholars like Badruddin (2015) describe Deoband as a movement situated between the two poles of “religious reform” and “avoidance of political power” (2, 6).

From a historical–political perspective, documents on early movements (such as those related to anti-colonial activism) and research on Deobandi leaders' roles in resistance movements show that at certain moments, Deobandis actively participated in politics. Therefore, distinguishing between “political avoidance” as a fixed pattern and “political-conservative avoidance” as a strategic response requires deeper analysis (7, 8).

Persian-language studies have also examined the role of Deobandi educational institutions and their social–cultural consequences. Some Iranian academic works analyze the educational system, fatwas, and Deoband's relationship with Salafism and other currents, providing helpful comparative regional insights. These studies allow comparative evaluation of Deobandi behavior in India relative to similar experiences in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Works by scholars such as Ha'eri and Safari Foroushani highlight the Deobandi connection to Naqshbandi–Chishti mystical–jurisprudential traditions, which emphasize “self-reform and community reform” rather than political activism (8, 18).

In recent years, analyses by Sikand (2005) and Farish Noor (2014) have emphasized that with the rise of Hindu right-wing governance after 2014, Deobandi discourse has maintained distance from party politics to avoid accusations of fundamentalism (10, 20). Reports by BBC News (2023) and political analyses on Hindu nationalism

likewise show that pressures on Indian Muslims—especially after the rise of the Modi government—have strengthened isolationist tendencies among traditional seminaries such as Deoband (21, 22).

A critical synthesis of this literature indicates that while classical works provide a strong historical foundation and contemporary studies emphasize the diversity of Deobandi experiences across regions, there remains a gap in analytical–sociological research that examines political avoidance as a meaningful strategy (rather than mere passivity) in the socio-political context of post-independence India. Addressing precisely this gap is the aim of the present study.

### Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The present study is qualitative in nature and, using a descriptive–analytical approach, seeks to explain the causes and consequences of political avoidance in the Deobandi movement within the historical and social context of contemporary India, since the research problem is interpretive and meaning-oriented and requires a deep understanding of the cultural and religious background of Deobandi action. The data have been collected through documentary research and the analysis of historical texts, works of Deobandi thinkers, sociological studies on Islam in India, and historical reports.

In analyzing the data, qualitative content analysis with a critical orientation has been employed, so that concepts and themes related to Deobandi political and religious attitudes can be extracted from texts and sources and explained within the theoretical framework. This method makes it possible to uncover the meanings and values embedded in Deobandi religious discourse and practice, which form the basis of their social actions. From the perspective of temporal design, this study is historical–comparative; that is, Deobandi political behavior in two main periods—British colonial rule and post-independence India—is compared and analyzed in order to identify the continuity or transformation of their political avoidance.

In terms of theoretical framework, this article draws on Max Weber's theory of social action. Weber was one of the first sociologists to attempt to explain the relationship between religion, culture, and social action. He believed that human social behavior is not merely the result of external structures but is also the product of the subjective meanings and values that individuals attribute to their actions. Therefore, in order to understand the behavior of a religious group, one must attend to that group's worldview, beliefs, and value system (11).

Weber classifies human behavior into four main types: instrumentally rational action, value-rational action, affective action, and traditional action. Within this framework, Deobandi action can be understood primarily as "value-rational"; that is, they determine their behavior and positions not on the basis of political interests but on the basis of religious values and principles. At the same time, elements of "traditional action" are also visible in their behavior, since adherence to religious and educational traditions plays a central role in Deoband's social structure. The combination of these two forms of action has meant that Deobandi political avoidance is not a form of passivity but a kind of religious rationality aimed at preserving Islamic identity in India's multiethnic and secular society.

Therefore, Weber's theoretical framework helps this study to move the analysis of Deobandi political behavior from a structural level to an interpretive and meaning-centered level. In this way, their political avoidance is understood not as a refusal of politics but as a form of "meaningful action based on religious values." This framework also provides the basis for comparing the Deobandis with other Islamic movements in South Asia and shows how a religious worldview can give rise to a distinct form of rationality in political and social action.

## **Socio-Political Context of the Emergence of the Deobandi Movement**

The Deobandi movement is one of the most important intellectual and religious currents in the Indian subcontinent, emerging in the second half of the nineteenth century, especially after the Muslims' defeat in the 1857 uprising against British colonial rule. Rooted in traditional Islamic madrasas, the movement constituted a cultural, juridical, and identity-based response to Western political and cultural domination as well as to the internal weaknesses of Muslim society (9). India, as one of the largest and most diverse democracies in the world, contains numerous religious and ethnic minorities. Muslims constitute the largest religious minority; according to the 2011 census, about 14 percent of India's population—roughly 200 million people—are Muslims. Nevertheless, this large population faces structural problems and challenges in the social, economic, and political domains, which have provided the background for the emergence of movements such as the Deobandi movement, as some reports indicate (21).

### *Economic and Educational Conditions*

One of the most important dimensions that define the situation of Muslims is economic and educational backwardness. Some studies show that while Muslim enrollment at the primary level in Indian schools is relatively acceptable, their enrollment and success decrease as they move toward secondary and higher education. Factors such as poverty, family responsibilities, lack of adequate educational resources, and the absence of structural support in the education system play a significant role in this pattern (23). In the sphere of employment, Indian Muslims are largely concentrated in informal jobs or unpaid/part-time work. One study demonstrates that, compared to other religious minorities and the Hindu majority, Muslims are less likely to be employed in jobs with job security, stable income, and social benefits and are more active in low-technology industries, transport work, street vending, and construction (24).

### *Political Representation*

Political representation is another area in which a significant gap is visible. In India's 2024 general elections, only a small share of the seats in the Lok Sabha (the lower house of parliament) were won by Muslim representatives, even though Muslims constitute around 14 percent of the population, meaning that their representation is far below their demographic proportion (25). In many cases, ruling parties do not nominate Muslim candidates at all, or those candidates who are nominated are defeated. This decline in representation has intensified since the rise to power of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the consolidation of Hindu nationalist policies, as various analytical platforms on Indian politics have noted (26).

### *Laws, Policies, and Legal Discrimination*

In the legal and policy arena, changes have occurred that, according to critics, have specifically and negatively affected the situation of Muslims. The "Citizenship Amendment Act" (CAA), passed in 2019, facilitates the path to citizenship for non-Muslim refugees from neighboring countries but excludes Muslims, and is regarded as a turning point in the political status of Muslims in India (27). Another discriminatory practice is the National Register of Citizens (NRC) process in Assam, which has resulted in the removal of citizenship status from hundreds of thousands of people, most of them Muslims (21). In addition, there has been a rise in hate speech, bans such as

the hijab ban in some schools, the imposition of majority cultural norms on minorities, and the demolition of homes and places of worship without due legal process—factors frequently reported by Muslim communities as forms of discrimination (21).

### *Social, Cultural, and Identity Dimensions*

Indian Muslims also grapple with identity issues and interreligious relations. On the one hand, historical religious–ethnic tensions have shaped relations between Muslims and Hindus; on the other hand, Hindu nationalist politics has challenged Islamic historical legacies. In mixed cities and regions, everyday discrimination—especially processes of “othering”—has palpable social consequences (22).

In this context, the Deobandi movement emerged and expanded as a religious–social response. Several factors contributed to this. First, during the British colonial period, Indian Muslims felt that their educational and cultural structures were being dismantled or weakened and that their madrasas and ulama were being marginalized. This situation led to the establishment of Darul Uloom Deoband as a center for independent religious and scholarly training (19). Second, with the arrival of modern institutions in India, educational and cultural regulations affected language, religion, dress, and lifestyle practices, giving Muslims the sense that their identity was under threat. This defensive feeling fostered the growth of movements such as the Deobandi movement, which sought to shield Muslims from intense social pressures (28). Third, limited representation in structures of power, the politicization of laws that specifically target Muslims, and the lack of support from central or state governments pushed Muslims toward non-political activities or inward-focused religious activism (29). Fourth, Deobandi madrasas succeeded in building an extensive network, training ulama and producing religious texts, and strengthening an emphasis on purification of the self, Shar’i education, and the preservation of tradition among Muslims. These institutions have provided a cultural–social alternative to direct political engagement (30).

Therefore, the socio-political situation of Indian Muslims—combined with discriminatory policies, low political representation, and the risk of losing civil rights and identity—has created highly fertile ground for the emergence of movements that choose political avoidance. In this environment, Deobandis have shown a tendency toward political avoidance not merely as an ideological choice but also out of the necessity of survival, identity preservation, and reaction to political and legal pressures. This situation also indicates that Deobandi political avoidance should not be interpreted as sheer religious isolation or absolute passivity but as one of the strategies for safeguarding identity under unequal conditions. Thus, any analysis of Deobandism must attend to the interplay of structural political pressures, legal and identity-based constraints, and the role of internal religious institutions.

### **Discourse Analysis of the Deobandi Movement in India**

From a discursive standpoint, the Deobandi movement emerged as a response to the crisis of “identity” and “religious authority” among Muslims in the modern era, and its political avoidance must therefore be analyzed in connection with this historical–epistemic context. An analysis of the texts and fatwas of Deobandi scholars—including the works of Muhammad Qasim Nanotwi, Rashid Ahmad Gangohi, and Husain Ahmad Madani—shows that they sought to reconstruct a form of religious authority independent of the structures of colonial power. In their view, colonialism entailed not only political domination but also cultural and epistemic domination over Muslims. Consequently, the way to confront colonialism was defined as a “return to tradition” and a “revival of religious sciences,” rather than participation in power politics (9). In Nanotwi’s well-known fatwa on the imamate, the



legitimacy of government is made contingent on Shar'i justice and religious knowledge rather than on military or political power (15). This outlook, in Fairclough's terms, reflects a "discursive redefinition of power" (31): in Deobandi discourse, power is shifted from the political level to the moral–religious level. Thus, Deobandi political avoidance can be understood not as withdrawal but as a form of "cultural resistance to colonialism."

In Deobandi discourse, politics—especially in its colonial and later secular forms—is construed as a sphere tainted by worldliness and corruption. A discourse analysis of Deobandi fatwas and treatises reveals a clear distinction between "religion" as the domain of truth and ethics and "politics" as the arena of power and expediency. In one of his letters, Rashid Ahmad Gangohi emphasizes that "scholars of truth must remain distant from the world and from politicians so that religion may be preserved," as Metcalf reports (1). This language, to use Norman Fairclough's terminology, exemplifies a strategy of discursive legitimation (31): through linguistic differentiation, a boundary is drawn between spiritual power (knowledge and religion) and material power (politics).

This distinction gradually became the core of Deobandi identity: Deobandi scholars derived their legitimacy not from participation in political power but from "religious authenticity" (32). This, in turn, meant that throughout the twentieth century, unlike political Islamist movements such as Abul A'la Mawdudi's Jamaat-e-Islami, the Deobandi movement did not move toward party-based or revolutionary activity and instead treated politics as something that "contaminates religion" (29).

In reaction to colonial education policies and the weakening of Islamic institutions, the Deobandi movement founded numerous schools. The establishment of Darul Uloom Deoband in 1866 was the first step in reproducing religious authority through institutionalization. As Metcalf and Sikand have noted, this institution became not only a center for teaching fiqh and hadith but also a symbol of Muslim cultural identity in a society under Western domination (1, 10).

From the perspective of discourse analysis, the focus on education rather than politics amounted to a "semantic displacement of power": instead of seeking to capture the state, the Deobandi movement sought to capture religion and the madrasa as bases of cultural resistance. This redistribution of symbolic power can be explained using Bourdieu's theory of "cultural capital" (12): by accumulating cultural–religious capital, Deobandi scholars consolidated their position vis-à-vis political power.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, the Deobandi movement faced two competing discourses: on the one hand, the "secular nationalist discourse of the Congress," and on the other, the "Islamist discourse of the Muslim League." Deobandi scholars, especially Husain Ahmad Madani, while opposing the partition of India, advanced the idea of a "composite nation" and stressed the coexistence of Muslims and Hindus within a single nation (33). From the standpoint of political opportunity theory, this stance can be interpreted as the result of a realistic assessment of structural constraints on Muslim political participation under colonialism (34). By recognizing the limits of political opportunities, Deobandi scholars refrained from direct involvement in political competition and chose a cultural and social path. In this sense, their political avoidance stemmed not from passivity but from a realistic understanding of the restrictive political environment of colonial India.

After India's independence in 1947, most Deobandi scholars remained in India, while some participated to a limited extent in the politics of the newly created Pakistan. In India, the movement sought to affirm its identity as the representative of "traditional Islam" by maintaining distance from party politics (35). This cautious policy intensified particularly after the 2010s with the rise of Hindu nationalist forces.

Contemporary studies, including the work of Noor and various media reports, show that Deobandi scholars have adopted a conservative stance toward political developments in order to avoid accusations of extremism. While opposing violence and terrorism, they emphasize religious education and moral reform (20, 21, 26). This can be seen as a survival strategy under conditions of structural exclusion: in a context where Muslims are marginalized from political opportunities, religious discourse becomes a means of social and cultural reproduction.

The overall analysis of the data shows that political avoidance in the Deobandi movement is not a sign of weakness but a form of symbolic action and cultural resistance. By emphasizing religious knowledge, piety, and educational institutions, the movement has managed to resist processes of secularization and cultural homogenization. From the standpoint of critical discourse theory, the movement has advanced an indirect cultural politics through the “redefinition of the meaning of power” and the “reconstruction of identity boundaries.” In this sense, the Deobandi movement carries a form of intra-religious politics—a politics that operates not in the arena of party competition but in the field of reproducing meaning, ethics, and identity.

In Teorell’s formulation, a social movement becomes political when structural opportunities for change are available (34). In colonial and postcolonial India, such opportunities have been limited for Muslims. Accordingly, by recognizing these constraints, the Deobandi movement has chosen political avoidance as a strategy for survival and cultural continuity.

In sum, Deobandi discourse is a composite of juridical tradition, moral reform, and cultural resistance formed in the context of colonialism and its aftermath. A discourse analysis of the movement’s texts and practices shows that political avoidance within it is not a type of political passivity but a conscious form of action aimed at protecting Muslim identity boundaries in a society marked by non-Muslim cultural and political dominance. From this perspective, the Deobandi movement should be regarded as an example of a religious–cultural movement which, in a constrained political environment, promotes a kind of non-formal, cultural politics or “moral politics” based on cultural capital and spiritual authority.

### **Political Avoidance in the Deobandi Movement**

In its precise sense, political avoidance refers to the conscious, deliberate withdrawal from participation in the political arena—something fundamentally different from political apathy. Political apathy usually stems from ignorance or lack of interest, whereas political avoidance can be the outcome of a deliberate choice based on religious, ethical, or social motivations (13, 36). Individuals or groups that avoid politics tend to see it as a corrupt or ineffective field and prefer to influence society through cultural or moral reform (34). In this sense, political avoidance can be understood as a form of soft resistance or indirect protest.

The Deobandi movement in India is one of the most prominent examples of this type of political avoidance. From the outset, the movement carried two central aims: religious revival and moral reconstruction of Muslim society. However, historical experiences, cultural conditions, and political developments in India led Deobandis, after independence, to withdraw from formal political participation and redirect their efforts toward cultural reform and religious education. The factors behind this pattern of political avoidance can be analyzed under several headings.

### *Historical Background*

The great uprising of 1857 against British colonial rule, which saw broad Muslim and Hindu participation, ended in bloody repression. The defeat of this uprising and the execution or exile of many ulama, including disciples of



Shah Waliullah Dehlawi, left a deep mark on the collective psyche of Muslims. Deobandi scholars, who regarded themselves as the intellectual heirs of the Waliullahi movement, concluded after this episode that direct political struggle was not only futile but also a threat to the survival of the Muslim community (9). As a result, they decided to redirect their energy from the political sphere to the realm of Islamic education and training—a choice rooted in a kind of “conservative rationality” (1).

### *Preserving the Independence of Religious and Educational Institutions*

Another key factor behind Deobandi political avoidance was concern over the dependence of religious institutions on political power. The founders of Darul Uloom Deoband believed that engagement in formal politics would gradually erode the independence and purity of religious institutions (37). Consequently, the policy of refraining from direct political involvement in order to preserve spiritual authority and religious autonomy became one of the unwritten principles of Deoband. From the standpoint of the sociology of religion, this decision can be viewed as an attempt to safeguard “spiritual capital” and “charismatic authority,” which, had the movement entered the game of political power, would likely have been reduced to bureaucratic or economic capital (12).

### *Emphasis on Religious Reform and Moral Training*

Deobandi scholars regarded the decline of Muslims as the result of their departure from authentic Islamic teachings. In their view, moral and spiritual reform of the people had to precede political transformation (19). On this basis, reform of the individual and the community was considered prior to the reform of power structures. This approach, in contrast to revolutionary or Islamist models, represented a gradual, inward-oriented politics closely linked to ethical Sufism and spiritual training (10).

### *Juridical and Discursive Disagreements on Politics*

Within the Deobandi movement, tensions have long existed between politically inclined scholars (such as Husain Ahmad Madani) and more withdrawn scholars (such as Ashraf Ali Thanwi). Thanwi believed that participation in politics would contaminate the religious class with worldliness and undermine the religious legitimacy of the ulama (30). Madani, by contrast, emphasized the necessity of active Muslim involvement in the independence movement and defended alliance with the Congress Party (1). Ultimately, this disagreement resulted in the dominance of a more conservative orientation, especially after independence, when the new political environment posed fresh threats to Muslims.

### *Experience of Division and Fragmentation after Independence*

With the creation of Pakistan and the support of some Deobandi scholars for the partition of the subcontinent, the political unity of the movement was fractured. Mawlana Shabbir Ahmad Usmani and his followers, who migrated to Pakistan, formed a more politicized branch of Deobandism, whereas the scholars who remained in India chose political avoidance in order to preserve their religious and social cohesion (4). This experience generated a kind of “political fatigue” among Indian Deobandis, who came to see political engagement as not only unproductive but also a source of division and weakening of religious institutions (6).

### *Cultural and Mystical Factors*

Although the Deobandi movement opposed popularized and superstitious forms of Sufism, it maintained a deep connection with ethical and disciplinary Sufism. Deobandi scholars were affiliated with Chishti and Naqshbandi Sufi orders and placed strong emphasis on purification of the self, spiritual discipline, and self-reform (38). This mystical orientation led them to view politics not as an instrument of social change but as a field filled with corruption and worldly attachment. Within this framework, political reform must proceed through ethics and piety rather than through party competition.

### *Transformation of the Political Structure after Independence and the Marginalization of Muslims*

India's independence in 1947 was accompanied by the establishment of a secular and democratic system. Muslims became a dispersed minority in a country with a Hindu majority. From the standpoint of Deobandi scholars, participating in party politics in such a structure was not only unlikely to bear fruit but also potentially dangerous (6). They concluded that under conditions of limited collective power, focusing on education and cultural unity was more rational than entering political contests. In terms of political opportunity theory, Deobandi withdrawal can thus be interpreted as a strategic adaptation to a power structure that severely restricts Muslim influence (34).

### *Practical Separation between Religion and Political Activism*

Although Deobandi thought, at the doctrinal level, considers politics a part of religion, in practice the movement has drawn a line between "religion" and "political activism." Mawlana Husain Ahmad Madani, who had defended political participation during the colonial period, after independence insisted that the primary role of the ulama was spiritual guidance and religious education of society, not the direct exercise of political power (1). This practical separation led Deobandi institutions to operate as social, educational, and charitable organizations without being recognized as formal political actors.

### *Preserving Legitimacy in Pluralistic Indian Society*

In a pluralistic society such as India, Deobandi scholars realized that their survival and influence depended on peaceful coexistence with the Hindu majority. For this reason, the official statements of Jamiat Ulama-i-Hind emphasize religious tolerance, loyalty to the constitution, and equal citizenship (39). This policy is not mere accommodation; rather, it is an attempt to preserve social security and religious legitimacy within India's secular system. In fact, they view political avoidance as a path to survival in a society where any religious political activity can easily be labeled extremism (21, 26).

### *Political Avoidance as "Moral Politics"*

The final analysis indicates that Deobandi political avoidance is, in reality, a form of "moral politics." By withdrawing from power struggles, the movement seeks to preserve spiritual authority and concentrate on the moral training of society. Although this strategy has deprived Deobandis of short-term political gains, it has strengthened their cultural and religious position. In other words, the movement has not denied politics but relocated it to a cultural and ethical plane—a "politics from below" based on values, education, and spirituality (20).

Overall, the Deobandi movement, which played an active role in anti-colonial struggles during British rule, consciously withdrew from politics after India's independence. This shift was the product of a constellation of historical factors (the failure of the 1857 uprising), juridical considerations (emphasis on the purity of religious institutions), social dynamics (the experience of Muslims becoming a minority), and cultural elements (mystical and educational orientations). Though Deobandi political avoidance may appear passive on the surface, it is in fact a symbolic form of action and a survival strategy. It has allowed the movement to avoid confrontation with Hindu nationalist governments while preserving religious identity and fostering the cultural development of the Muslim community.

Consequently, Deobandi political avoidance should not be understood as the “absence of politics” but as a specific form of “informal cultural politics” that, within India's multicultural and secular structure, performs defensive and identity-protective functions.

### **Consequences of Political Avoidance in the Deobandi Movement**

As discussed above, instead of adopting a direct political approach, the Deobandi movement chose a cultural and educational strategy to guarantee the social and religious survival of Muslims through the revival of Islamic values. In Deobandi thought, political avoidance was not seen as a sign of passivity but as a conscious choice to preserve religious authenticity in the face of the corruption of power and non-Islamic systems. After India's independence in 1947, this approach was reinforced. A large portion of Deobandi scholars, unlike their likeminded counterparts in Pakistan and Afghanistan, separated their path from state structures by insisting on political neutrality and abstaining from party politics, and they emphasized the continuity of their religious and educational mission. This choice was rooted both in bitter political experiences under colonial rule and in the situation of Muslims as a minority within India's secular system. Under such conditions, political avoidance for Deobandis meant focusing on “religious soft power” in contrast to “hard political power”—a form of power that reproduced Islamic identity through networks of madrasas, mosques, and circles of religious training.

#### *Positive Consequences of Political Avoidance*

One of the positive consequences of political avoidance in the Indian Deobandi movement was the protection of the Islamic identity of Muslims in India's multicultural and secular society. Deobandi madrasas such as Darul Uloom Deoband have played a central role in teaching Islamic sciences and training successive generations of scholars. Their focus on the Qur'an, hadith, Hanafi jurisprudence, and ethical Sufism has not only safeguarded religious traditions but has also helped reproduce an “Islamic cultural space” independent of the influence of secular governments (17). This approach has enabled Muslims to maintain an identity-based resistance to the cultural homogenization policies of Hindu nationalist governments after 2014 (40).

A second positive consequence of political avoidance is that it shifted the focus from party competition to internal community affairs and the consolidation of moral and faith-based values. By promoting asceticism, reliance on God, and independence from the state, Deobandi scholars fostered a shared intellectual framework among their followers, which increased mutual trust and social self-help within the Muslim community (10). This solidarity has functioned as a protective shield in times of crisis—such as the communal riots in Gujarat in 2002 and Delhi in 2020—against episodes of collective violence (41).

Third, political avoidance facilitated the growth of a network of religious schools and charitable institutions that are largely funded through endowments and popular donations. This financial and administrative independence has protected Deobandis from dependence on the state and political parties and has given them cultural bargaining power (37). To this day, more than twenty thousand Deobandi madrasas are active across India, providing free religious and social education (17).

A fourth positive consequence of political avoidance has been the reproduction of moral authority and religious legitimacy. By refraining from entering formal politics, Deobandi scholars have been able to preserve their spiritual legitimacy among the masses. In contrast to politically active clerics, who are sometimes accused of corruption or opportunism, Deobandis have come to be regarded as the “moral conscience” of society, and their spiritual influence among lower-income Muslim groups has increased (6).

### *Negative Consequences of Political Avoidance*

One negative consequence of withdrawal from politics has been the gradual exclusion of traditional Muslims from India’s power structures. While organizations such as Jamiat Ulama-i-Hind have sought to participate in electoral coalitions with secular parties, the conservative wing of the Deobandi movement has, by abstaining from participation, forfeited opportunities for political representation (16). This has weakened Muslims’ bargaining power in the face of discriminatory policies pursued by successive governments (29).

Another negative consequence has been a weakened capacity to defend civil rights. Political avoidance has prevented Deobandi scholars from playing an effective role in human rights and social justice movements. As a result, they have been unable to assume an active political role when faced with issues such as educational discrimination, the demolition of mosques, or discriminatory citizenship policies such as the CAA–NRC (22). This absence has created a vacuum in the civic leadership of Indian Muslims.

A third consequence has been the perpetuation of conservatism within the Muslim community. Excessive focus on religious matters has hindered social reforms among Muslims. Many Deobandi madrasas continue to insist on traditional interpretations regarding women’s roles, class relations, and social jurisprudence (29). This has reduced the community’s adaptability to modern transformations and widened the gap between younger generations and traditional scholars (10).

Another negative consequence of political avoidance is the weakness in building interreligious coalitions. Political avoidance has, to some extent, produced a climate of mistrust toward non-Muslim groups and secular parties. While the political situation in India after 2014 requires cross-religious alliances to confront Hindu majoritarianism, Deobandis’ reluctance to engage politically has hindered the formation of such coalitions and increased the isolation of the Muslim minority (42).

In light of the above, Deobandi political avoidance in India must be understood as a dual phenomenon: on the one hand, it has played a positive role in maintaining religious independence, sustaining Islamic traditions, and preventing the cultural dissolution of Muslims; on the other hand, it has contributed to political marginalization and weakened collective Muslim action. By emphasizing internal reform and spiritual training, Deobandis have replaced power politics with a form of “moral politics.” Yet in the tense atmosphere of contemporary India, rethinking this political avoidance and moving toward civic participation and intercultural dialogue could help revive the social role of Muslims.

## Conclusion

An analysis of political avoidance in the Deobandi movement in India shows that this approach cannot be interpreted merely as a passive reaction to political developments; rather, it must be understood as the product of a combination of historical, cultural, and structural factors that have played a decisive role in shaping Deobandi identity and strategy. Historically, the bitter experience of the 1857 uprising and the severe repression of Muslims by British colonial authorities, combined with internal disagreements among Deobandi scholars and the experience of political failures after independence, led much of the movement to distance itself from formal politics and instead concentrate on education, religious reform, and the strengthening of cohesion within the Muslim community. In other words, political avoidance did not stem from indifference or lack of knowledge but from a conscious choice to safeguard the independence of religious institutions and preserve the spiritual and moral legitimacy of Deobandi scholars.

The findings of this study indicate that Deobandi political avoidance has had significant positive and negative effects on India's Muslim community. First, the focus on religious education and the expansion of independent schools has ensured the continuity of Islamic intellectual and educational traditions and created a robust network of cultural and pedagogical institutions that continue to serve as the primary bases for training Muslim scholars. Second, internal cohesion among Muslims—grounded in moral values, independence from the state, and strengthened relations of trust and cooperation among Deobandi followers—has increased, enhancing the community's capacity to cope with social and cultural pressures and crises across different periods. Third, the spiritual and moral legitimacy of Deobandi scholars within society has been preserved; by not entering politics directly, they have remained relatively insulated from the dangers of corruption and state dependency and have continued to be recognized as moral and religious authorities among Muslims.

Nevertheless, Deobandi political avoidance has also entailed negative consequences. First, reduced political participation and the absence of active engagement in decision-making structures have limited Muslim influence at both national and state levels, leaving some of their social and legal demands unanswered. Second, distance from reformist and justice-oriented currents has meant that Deobandis have played a smaller role in issues such as women's rights, social justice, and struggles against discrimination, and traditional conservatism has been reinforced in some domains. Third, isolation from like-minded political groups and potential allies, including secular currents, has diminished the capacity to form intercultural coalitions and to collectively resist discriminatory policies, depriving the Muslim community of opportunities to shape outcomes in the national arena.

Therefore, the impact of Deobandi political avoidance should be seen as a double-edged strategy: on one side, it has contributed to the preservation of religious and cultural identity and the independence of educational and spiritual institutions; on the other, it has imposed structural and political constraints on the Muslim community. The data suggest that the positive effects of political avoidance are most evident in cultural, educational, and spiritual spheres, whereas its negative effects are more visible in the domains of political influence and civic participation.

From the perspective of future studies and policy-making, the results of this research show that maintaining a balance between religious independence and political participation is essential for the Deobandi movement. Historical experience suggests that political avoidance, although an effective tool for cultural preservation at a time when Muslims were a vulnerable minority, has limited effectiveness in today's context of complex legal, social, and security challenges. In the coming decades, rethinking the concept of "politics" and embracing new forms of civic

and legal participation may help strengthen the position of Muslims in India without undermining the religious independence and legitimacy of Deobandi scholars. In other words, combining strong religious education with intelligent civic engagement could serve as a strategy for empowering the Muslim community and creating conditions conducive to the realization of citizenship rights, social justice, and cultural security.

Overall, the findings of this study suggest that the conscious and strategic nature of Deobandi political avoidance, while subject to structural limitations in the political sphere, has had a protective and reinforcing role in cultural and identity-related domains. For the future, it is recommended that Deobandi scholars, while preserving religious independence, reconsider innovative pathways for civic and political participation so that, by drawing on educational and cultural institutions, they can strengthen the influence and effectiveness of India's Muslim community within legal and political structures.

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### Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

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The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

### Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

### Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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