

# The Unity and Solidarity among the Deobandi ‘Ulama’ in Bangladesh: Problems and Prospects

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## ARTICLE INFORMATION

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## Abstract:

The Deobandi school of thought has a significant presence in the religious landscape of Bangladesh, and the influence of its ‘Ulama’ has far-reaching implications for the Muslim community and society at large. The Deobandi ‘Ulama’ share common goals and objectives, but their methods and programs differ. Within this trend, scholars have varying opinions on their involvement with the government of Bangladesh. Some choose to engage in politics, while others remain uninvolved. This study examines the factors contributing to the need for greater unity among Deobandi scholars. It explores the complex dynamics at play, highlighting the obstacles impeding their unity and harmony. Additionally, it considers the possibilities for strengthening their unity and harmony, emphasizing the crucial role they can play in advancing Islam and benefiting the Muslim community. The concept of strong unity can pose various challenges for the Deobandi ‘Ulama’ in Bangladesh, including theological rigidity, exclusivity, the potential for radicalization, a lack of adaptability to changing societal conditions, and limited engagement with broader societal issues. It is crucial to balance unity with openness to dialogue, adaptation to changing circumstances, and a commitment to the broader well-being of society. Thoughtful consideration of the dynamics of unity among the Deobandi ‘Ulama’ is essential in the religious and social contexts of Bangladesh.

## Introduction

Islam is the religion of all of humanity, and Allah has commanded us to convey it to all people. This can only be achieved if we are strong, and strength is based on faith

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and unity. Therefore, Allah has commanded all believers to adhere to His religion, be united, and not be divided. Allah says (interpretation of the meaning): “And hold fast, all of you together, to the Rope of Allah (i.e. this Qur'an), and be not divided among yourselves. (Aal ‘Imraan 3:103). Division, differences, and disputes are the Primary causes of the ummah’s defeat, as Allah says (interpretation of the meaning): “And obey Allah and His Messenger, and do not dispute (with one another) lest you lose courage and your strength departs, and be patient. Surely, Allah is with those who are *As-Saabiroon* (the patient)” (al-Anfaal 8:46). Similarly, the Prophet (SAW) said: “The believers, in their mutual love, mercy, and compassion, are like a single body: if one part of the body feels pain, the whole body responds with sleeplessness and fever” (Sahih Muslim). Unity is a fundamental principle of Islam, emphasizing one Lord, one Book, one Prophet, one religion, one *qiblah*, and one *ummah*. Islam encourages adherence to the *jamaa’ah* (the group following the Qur’an and Sunnah) to achieve this unity. The Messenger (peace be upon him) stated that the hand of Allah is with the *jamaa’ah*, warning that those who deviate will face consequences. Worship should be performed collectively to foster unity, and Allah addresses the *ummah* as a single entity, highlighting their oneness in commands and prohibitions.

The Darul ‘Uloom Deoband, founded in 1866 in Uttar Pradesh, India, produced notable scholars like Ashraf Ali Thanwi, Husain Ahmad Madani, and Muhammad Ilyas Kandhlawi, who, despite their shared background, had differing political and religious views. Madani opposed the Pakistan Movement, supporting a united India, while Thanwi backed the idea of Pakistan. Kandhlawi remained apolitical, focusing on religious reform through the Tablighi Jama‘at, established in 1925. After Bangladesh gained independence, the Qawmi society largely stayed apolitical until the 1980s when Maulana Mohammad Ullah (Hafezzi Huzur) led the Khilafat Andolon. Following his death, various leaders formed independent parties, leading to a decline of the Khilafat Andolon. This gave rise to Islamic political groups like Jamiat ‘Ulama’e Islam, Nezami Islam, and others, alongside the apolitical Hefazat-e Islam. While these organizations share common goals, they often struggle with disunity. Scholars within the Deobandi framework debate their involvement in Bangladeshi politics, with some choosing to engage and others opting for detachment. (Islam; 2022).

The Qawmi Ulama in Bangladesh has encountered divisions due to various causes. It is crucial to identify the obstacles to forming unity among them and propose effective solutions. The ultimate goal is to establish a cohesive force that can enhance Islam and support the Muslim community with self-reliance and passion. This paper is essential for helping the Deobandi movement remain united and positively impact the complex religious and societal challenges of today.

### **Literature Review**

A number of studies have been conducted to provide a deeper understanding of the various aspects of Islamic unity and ‘Ulama’ in Bangladesh. These studies have shed light on several crucial topics, including the Unity of Islam, the role of ‘*Ulama*’ in politics, the significance of Qawmi Madrasah, and the impact of Hefazat-e-Islam. Through these studies, researcher has gained valuable insights into the beliefs, practices, and social dynamics of the Muslim community in Bangladesh. These insights are essential for policymakers, scholars, and the general public to better comprehend the complex religious and cultural landscape of the country. Examples of such revealing works are: ‘Unity of ‘Ulama’ Community: Hurdles and Process in the Perspective of Bangladesh by Ali, A. (2023), Unity of Muslim Ummah, It’s Need, Importance and Suggestions by Hassan, D. (2015), Unity in Diversity in Bangladesh: The Contribution of Sheikh Azizur Rahman Nesarabadi by Haque, M. S. (2019, Creating a practicing Muslim: A study of Qawmi Madrasah in Bangladesh by Al-Hasani, et., al, (2017), Faithful participation: the ‘Ulama’ in bangladeshi politics, by Islam, M. N. (2022), and Safeguarding Islam in modern times: Politics, piety and Hefazat-e-Islami ‘Ulama’ in Bangladesh by Raqib, M. A. (2020).

Hassan (2015) stated that the question of disharmony among Muslims is a major and unquestionable dispute of our time. The increasing separations based on sectarian and cultural association have marked the basic tradition of Islam. The current Muslims are struggling with a huge amount of questions, and the major grounds of their dilemma are deep-seated in sectarian hostility, religious prejudices, power-seeking, fanaticism, and diverse earthly benefits. These causes have equally contributed to the decay of Muslim community, corroding their reputation, pride, and weight. On the contrary, the rival oppositions of Muslims are united, distinguishing that their vigor conquers prospers the Muslim flaws. Accordingly,

they plot to encourage separation among Muslims, notwithstanding the Holy Quran rebuked to set unified and to continue detached from such manipulations. Attaining harmony within the Muslim society is only achievable through the main beliefs of Unity of Allah. Allah, the Almighty also guides the Muslims to the way of patience and solidarity by holding fast the values of morality and brotherhood. Concurrently, it is the basic obligation of influential Islamic scholars and celebrities to dynamically contribute to this ground.

According to Hoque (2019), the fundamental teachings and tradition of Islam rotate in the region of the concept of *Ittihad* (unity and solidarity). The proper Muslims are not capable to ignore any dealings that weaken the harmony and solidarity of Muslim community. Hoque also referred to Sheikh Azizur Rahman Nesarabadi's viewpoints of unity in diversity, which highlights forbearance, honesty, and compassion towards persons with reverse attitudes and arguments. Nesarabadi dreamed of an earth where people could coexist peacefully through love and harmony, and now is the time to concern his thinking to deal with the challenges of contemporary global perspective. or realize his dream to reality.

Islam (2022) argues that in the Indian subcontinent, including Pakistan and Bangladesh, the '*Ulama*' have undergone a trials for nation in their contributions all over historical phases. During the period of Muslim reign under the Moghul Empire, they achieved authoritative governmental arrangements. However, with the beginning of the British reign, their sequential pressure reduced, prompting a redirection of their pains toward transforming Muslim community as informal leaders. The '*Ulama*'s political standpoint in the colonial period was immensely inspired by their perspectives of the founding of Pakistan. Following Pakistan's independence in 1947, the '*Ulama*' required framing an Islamic Constitution but bumped into barriers, resulting in the approval of a mostly secular constitution in 1956. Political separations among the Islamic scholars, especially in the East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), were exaggerated during debates on language preferences. Consequent to a military takeover in 1958, the Islamic scholars from both the East and West Pakistan dynamically took part in democratic activities in opposition to the military command, joined forces with secular political parties. Regardless of facing setbacks in elections, the '*Ulama*' in Bangladesh have played a crucial role in influencing political change and development. Contrary to the

perception of being uniform and regressive, they demonstrate diversity within their religious and ideological frameworks. The ‘*Ulama*’ have actively participated in socio-religious and political movements, garnered public support, and contributed significantly to notable sociopolitical and religious transformations, leading to their recognition as ‘custodians of change’ in Bangladesh.

Ali (2023) asserts that keeping the unity and harmony of the Ummah stands as a primary duty in Islam, with no room for disunity. The Qur’an and Hadith highlight that isolating oneself from the Muslim community amounts to disbelief, and engaging in quarrels is deemed *haram*, constituting the gravest sin. Given their role as the main guardians of the Ummah, the ‘*Ulama*’ bear a unique responsibility to exert maximum efforts in establishing and maintaining unity within the Ummah, actively working to eliminate disunity and factions. Notably, Ali highlights the strategic efforts of the enemies of Islam, who employ a ‘divide and rule’ approach to undermine the religion and the unity of the Muslim Ummah.

According to Raqib (2020), when the traditional Islamic scholars Perceived supposed a warning to the ethical frameworks in the Bangladeshi Muslim society, they unified under a present policy, which was a new progress. Their reaction to discursive clashes with the government and civil society confirmed that they observed tradition as the main authoritative resource. Even if modernity has indisputably impacted the ‘*Ulama*’, the Hefazate Islam is not naturally opposing up to date transforms; instead, they look for positive transforms while opposing others. Their main goal is to conserve the holistic traditional Islamic culture in current situation. As a result, while acclimatizing to contemporary environment and operating modern technology, the ‘*Ulama*’ dealt with the contemporary questions aiming at defending the ethical customs and morals of the Muslim society.

Regrettably, Ali (2023) laments that the ‘*Ulama*’, despite being the principal custodians of the Ummah, have not taken significant steps to bridge their differences in opinions and approaches. Consequently, Islam finds itself guided by diverse perspectives and paths, with scholars unable to overcome their disparities even on significant issues, irrespective of party affiliations. Ali identifies several reasons for the disunity among Islamic scholars, including conspiracies by oppressive ruling classes, misunderstandings or differences of opinion, following personal desires, and

ignorance of *fiqhul ikhtelaf wal ijtema'* (definition of differences and disagreement, types, legal provisions, causes, etiquettes, rules, and regulations; definition of unity, foundations, principles, scope, types, rules, and regulations, etc.).

To address the current state of disunity, Ali (2023) proposes potential strategies for fostering unity among Islamic scholars. These include organizing various meetings and conferences to enhance self-reliance and elevate moral standards, promoting unity and coordination of thoughts and beliefs, fostering sectarian unity, enhancing political coordination among scholars, discouraging mud-slinging arguments, encouraging regular exchange of views and mutual evaluation, and cultivating a mindset of mutual concessions. These measures, Ali argues, hold promise for the future prospects of unity among Islamic scholars.

A notable gap persists within the current scholarly dialogue regarding the analysis of barriers that impede the fostering of unity and solidarity among the Deobandi 'Ulama' in the specific milieu of Bangladesh, compounded by a dearth of forecasts concerning their future trajectories. This study aims to fill this gap by carefully examining the various challenges that hinder unity and solidarity among the Deobandi 'Ulama' in Bangladesh and proposing effective solutions to promote cohesion and collective effectiveness within this esteemed group.

### **Research Methodology**

The current research endeavors to attain a comprehensive understanding of the challenges associated with unity and solidarity within the Deobandi "Ulama" community in Bangladesh, while also exploring potential future prospects. In pursuit of this objective, qualitative data is analyzed through conducting in-depth interviews with seven experts from different categories, including three university faculties of political science (Respondent I), Islamic history (Respondent II), and Islamic studies (Respondent III); young journalist (Respondent IV) and one graduate of Qawmi Madrasah (Respondent V), one local leader of Hefazat-e-Islam (Respondent VI) and one teacher of Qawmi Madrasah (Respondent VII).

Through the open-ended questionnaire; that is written responses, the researcher identified the perceptions, views and understandings of these participants, which touch on issues of unity and solidarity among Deobandi 'Ulama' in Bangladesh. In their interrogative framework, they probed how unity existed among the

Deobandi ‘Ulama’, and what its role was in the broader context of Islam and the Muslim community. Additional questions were asked about the ‘Ulama’s obstacles in achieving and maintaining unity, and possible areas for their future unification.

In order to support the primary data from interviews, the researcher drew on extensive library research and examined office documents from various sources. This study adopted the qualitative approach of research method, which utilized a descriptive and critical analytical framework. By synthesizing perspectives from primary and secondary sources, this study aims to offer a nuanced account of existing problems as well as possible means to inter-Ummatic unity among the Deobandi ‘Ulama’ in the political landscape of Bangladesh.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This research therefore develops a theoretical framework that acts as the foundational lens through which unity and solidarity among the Deobandi ‘ulama’ in Bangladesh are viewed. It combines theories and concepts that analyze the dynamics of unity, identify challenges, and proffer solutions. The Deobandi ‘ulama’ in Bangladesh are Islamic scholars, clerics, and leaders who adhere to the teachings and principles of the Deobandi school of thought. This movement originated from the Darul Uloom Deoband, an Islamic seminary in Deoband, India, established in 1866. The Deobandi school places a high value on the traditional interpretation of Islam, adherence to the Quran and Hadith, the Hanafi school of jurisprudence, and the teachings of the great Islamic scholars of the past, especially with regards to maintaining Islamic identity under colonial and modern pressures. In Bangladesh, the Deobandi ‘ulama’ are a leading group that plays a very important role in religious education, Islamic thought, and socio-political activities. The theoretical framework of this article includes several key aspects:

Firstly, this research presents the theories of Religious Unity and Collective Identity, rooted in Quranic teachings and Prophetic traditions. The Quran stresses unity with verses such as, “Hold firmly to the rope of Allah all together and do not become divided” (Surah Al-Imran, 3:103), in addition to Prophetic traditions that highlight the Ummah as a unified body: “The believers, in their mutual love, compassion, and sympathy, are like one body.” This paper attempts to comprehend how these

theological principles of unity influence the collective behavior of the Deobandi ‘ulama’.

Secondly, it includes social cohesion theory, which explains that social cohesion is the cement of a group, facilitating cooperation and mutual support. The factors that influence cohesion include shared goals and values, effective leadership, and trustful communication. The research will analyze how these factors strengthen or weaken the unity among the Deobandi ‘ulama.’

Thirdly, the conflict theory is included in the study, both internally and externally. Conflicts within may be induced by power struggles, ideological disagreements, and institutional rivalries. External conflicts may arise because of pressures exerted by political actors, societal challenges, or competing religious ideologies. The research tries to find out how these internal and external conflicts are inhibiting unity and what instruments could be used to try to resolve these tensions.

This theoretical framework integrates Islamic principles, sociological theories, and organizational dynamics in analyzing the unity and solidarity of the Deobandi ‘ulama’ in Bangladesh. These theories are applied in the study as it systematically explores factors of unity, challenges faced, and potential pathways toward strengthening cohesion within this influential religious group.

## **Discussion And Findings**

### **A Brief Introduction to the Contributions of Deobanid ‘Ulama**

The Deobandi ‘ulama have made significant contributions across various fields, demonstrating their impactful influence on Islamic scholarship, education, social reform, and politics. Below is an overview of their contributions in different domains:

***Islamic Education:*** Deobandi ‘ulama established an extensive network of madrasas (Islamic Educational Institutions), with Darul ‘Uloom Deoband being the pioneering institution. These madrasas have educated millions of students in Islamic sciences, focusing on Quranic studies, Hadith, Fiqh, Islamic jurisprudence-and theology. The Deobandi tradition refined the Dars-e-Nizami curriculum in order to preserve the



classical teachings of Islam while addressing contemporary issues. Consequently, Deobandi madrasas have turned out generations of imams, muftis, and scholars who serve as spiritual leaders around the world. (Moj; 2014).

***Preservation of Islamic Tradition:*** Deobandi 'ulama have always defended the traditional Sunni creed, especially the Hanafi school of jurisprudence, against the onslaught of various ideologies and sects that have risen since then. They have contributed to Hadith literature in its study, teaching, and commentary. Among such works is “Fazail-e-Amaal” by Maulana Zakariyya Kandhlawi. The Sufi practices were also incorporated into the Sharia framework of Deobandi scholars and therefore necessitated a balanced approach toward Islamic spirituality. (Qasimi; 2016).

***Social and Moral Reform:*** Deobandi 'ulama have struggled to imbibe Islamic ethics and values amongst the people through public preaching, literature, and community programs. They have spoken against practices perceived to be un-Islamic or cultural excesses (shirk-bid'at) and implored a return to the Quran and Sunnah. With relatively inexpensive education, they have elevated innumerable destitute communities. (Moj; 2014).

***Political and Anti-Colonial Activism:*** Deobandi 'ulama were at the forefront in opposing the British colonial incursion into India. Leaders such as Maulana Mahmood Hasan, commonly known as Sheikhul Hind, led various movements, one of which was the Silk Letter Conspiracy, for Indian independence, and later supported the idea of a civil, pluralistic polity. In countries such as Pakistan and Afghanistan, the Deobandi scholars have had a strong impact on political discourse, with several of them identifying with movements like Jami'at 'Ulema-e-Islam. (Haroon; 2008), (Hameed & Bibi; 2023)

***Contributions to Global Islamic Movements:*** The Tablighi Jama'at represents a global movement for grassroots Islamic revival, founded by Maulana Muhammad Ilyas Kandhlawi. It maintains roots with the Deoband tradition of Islam but focuses on personal piety and da'wah, or Islamic outreach. Various Deobandi madrasas have been established in countries such as South Africa, the UK, and the US, which serve

as centers for Islamic learning and community leadership. (Ali; 2003 & Qasimi; 2016).).

### **A Brief Overview of the Different Subsections of Deobandi ‘Ulama’ in Bangladesh**

Al Hassani et. al. (2017) asserts that the Deobandi Ulama of Bangladesh, who were trained by Qawmi Madrasahs and followed the Dars-i-Nizamiyyah style of teaching, are well-educated scholars nurturing pious Muslims. Their syllabus emphasizes matters of the hereafter, faith, religious deeds, ethics and morality and is punctuated by an encouragement to maintain Islamic jurisprudence. The Qawmi Madrasah aims to preserve Islam and promote a clearer image in every Muslim’s mind by explaining the overall guidelines of Islamic law. The ‘Ulama aim to reinforce the practice of Islam among its students, allowing them to be Da’ee of Deen. Their ultimate loyalty though is in the search for divine contentment and heaven. This deep knowledge and ability to debate allows students from Qawmi Madrasah an advantage when challenging people of other religious backgrounds on many religious issues.

Excepting a few, the Deobandi ‘Ulama’ are united in their level of ‘Aqidah (theological creed) and Fiqh (jurisprudence) – which is another acute necessity for fighting a successful battle. They mostly follow the ‘Aqidah of Imam Abul Hasan ‘Asha’ari and Imam Abul Mansur Al Muturidi, abide by Hanafi Madhhab in Fiqh, and usually attach themselves with different Sufi orders such as Naqshabandiya, Chistiya, Qadiriya, and Suhrawardiya for spiritual guidance (Ali, 2023: p.158)

Nonetheless, despite this underlying unity, the Deobandi ‘Ulama’ do not have a coherent platform due to their division over political issues and varying religious interpretations at specific times. According to Professor Ali (2023), there are six main sub-categories based on their activities.

#### *(1) Acquiescent Dawat and Tablighi Subsections*

Currently, Tablighi Jama’at is to be considered the largest organization in the Deobandi school of thought. Its founder was Maulana Ilyas Kandlbi (Rahimahullah) who lives in Delhi. The scholars in this group are by and large apolitical, non-confrontational. Very recently, Tablighi Jama’at has split into two sub-sects based

on some religious issues in Bangladesh. The first denominational team, referred to as WajahatiTabligh and guided by Maulana Zubair, is predominantly led by a Deobandi ‘Ulama’ in Bangladesh. The second sub-sect with the name ‘Ita’atiTabligh’, influenced by Maulana Saad Kandalabi, is commonly led by generally educated people from Bangladesh. These communities had sharp clashes and splits, "in many mosques, madrasas and tablighcentres", reported Professor Ali (2023). He also noticed that sometimes fights and even bloodshed have occurred between these two factions. (Ali, 2023: 162)

The Majlis-e-Da’watul Haq, Bangladesh, the second fraction of the subsection was established by Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanvi (Rahimahullah). The main objective of the organization is to offer a full understanding of Imaan, Kufr, Shirk and Bid’ah with their evidence from the Quran and Sunnah. They further intend to learn how to pronounce the Quran properly, follow the complete Sunnah from every nook and cranny and abstain from all types of haram that are unlawful which have been proscribed by the Shari‘ah. (Ali, 2023: 162-3)

## *(2) Political Subsection*

Scholars of this sub-group are typically involved with political activities and actively participate in organized political movements. This sub-group also suffers from fissures taking the form of political, material, and ideological factors. Included in the groups are Islami Andolan Bangladesh, Jami’at ‘Ulama’-e-Islam Bangladesh, Bangladesh Khilafat Movement, Khilafat Majlis, Bangladesh Nezame Islami, FaraeziAndolan Bangladesh, Islamic ShashontantraAndolon Bangladesh, and Islamic Oikyazot. Among these, Bangladesh Nezami Islam is the oldest traditional Islamic political party in Bangladesh, established in 1952. For its positive contribution on many fronts, the political dynamism of the party has fallen considerably. Unfortunately, it was divided into two sub-sects: Bangladesh Nazam Islam Party (Nizami) and Bangladesh Nezam Islam Party (Izhar). (Ali, 2023: 164)

In the Islamic political arena of Bangladesh, Bangladesh Khilafat Andolon led by Maulana Hafezzi Huzur received high attention during the 1980s following independence. The organization gradually reduced and almost broke down its activities for internal fractionation. Islami Andolan Bangladesh is another very influential and popular Islamic political organization pressing the Deobandi method.

Notably, it earlier labelled itself as the Islamic ShashantantraAndolon instituted by Maulana Syed Fazlul Karim Pir Saheb Charmonai. (Ali, 2023: 164)

It is to be mentioned here that the Islamic Oikyajot was the only platform for political unity in the Deobandi method. All political parties following the Deobandi method united under this umbrella. It is a matter of great sorrow that this unity has broken down bit by bit over time, and different factional leaders like Maulana Azizul Haque, Maulana Mufti Amini, Maulana Nizami, Advocate Abdur Rakib, Maulana Mufti Izhar, Maulana Misbahur Rahman, and so on have been moving singly. (Ali, 2023: 164-9)

### (3) *Sufi Sect*

The Deobandi sect is known for being very staunch in their belief in Tasawwuf and hence are keen followers of it. Due to this very reason, the sect has been tagged with various Sufi orders which include Nakshabandiya, Chishtiyah, Qadiriya, and Suhrawardiyah. Bangladesh has become a centre where many such centres propagate Sufi-centric sub-sections of the Deobandi sect, and the main mentions are that of Charmonai Markaz, Bahadurpur Markaz, Ujani Peer Markaz, and Nanupur Markaz. Still, though the thoughts and mentality of followers might slightly differ among all these centres, their tendency would spring from the same origin: Sufism. Charmonai and Nanupur Markaz gained greater significance in the Deobandi sect because their activities spread out widely over the country. Apart from all the centres discussed above, some Deobandi scholars developed individualistic Sufi sects. Some of the ‘Ulama’ also formed their autonomous Sufi groups. Some examples of names include Maulana Mohammad HafizziHuzoor, Maulana Shamsul Haque Faridpuri, Mufti Azizul Haque, and Mufti Shafi. Their Sufi sects have attracted a small but devoted following. (Ali, 2023: 169-72)

### (4) *Non-political Protesting Subsection*

Recently, several non-political protest groups have emerged amongst Deobandi scholars in Bangladesh. Though they are not involved with direct political activities, these organizations protest and send memoranda about issues related to religious and Ummah interests. Particularly, the notable example is Hefazet-e-Islam Bangladesh. This is a non-political organization that was founded on January 19, 2010, which means preserving Islamic education and traditions, headed by the director of

Hathajari Madrasah, Shah Ahmad Shafi, to save the Islamic education, tradition, and culture - tahajib-tamddun from within the country. The followers of this influential non-political organization are split into two groups, whereby one group supports Junaid Babu Nagari and another for supports Ahmad Shafi.

#### *(5) Peer-oriented Political Sub-group*

Islami Andolan Bangladesh is an important sub-group of Deobandis, which is organized around Charmonai Pir. The faction was formed by Maulana Syed Ishaq and is now headed by his son Syed Fazlul Karim. In addition to Sufi Tariqat rituals, the group is deeply connected to politics as well. The followers claim to be the holders of the ideology of Deobandi, but most of the Deobandi scholars do not consider them devout followers of the Deobandi school of thought. (Ali, 2023: 1734)

#### *(6) Jihadist Subsection*

This sub-category forms a small part of the Deobandi ideology, which in the past was heavily influenced by the spirit of jihad in Afghanistan. Compared to this highly organized following, the present exponents have been extremely subdued in their operations. Of the organizations associated with this sub-sect, the most well-known is the banned government organization called Harkatul Jihad. (Ali, 2023: 174)

The Deobandi ‘Ulama’ has played an enormous role in both the religious and political spheres in Bangladesh. However, despite their importance, this group has faced division into factions due to various reasons. In this research, we are going to find out what barriers exist that create obstacles in the way of unity and harmony among the Deobandi scholars in Bangladesh and the ways to discard those barriers effectively. It is our ultimate expectation to unite this force to develop a sense of faith in engaging in the upliftment and improvement of Islam and the Muslim world.

### **Problems for Unity and Harmony among the Deobandi ‘Ulama’ In Bangladesh**

Chatgami (2022; 194) suggested that in Pakistan, all sects of ‘Ulama united to oppose anti-Islamic issues such as Qadiyaniyah. Even Shi‘i, Jama‘ati and other Sufi sects like Bralawi ‘Ulama are found joining with Deobandi ‘Ulama’ in terms of sensitive issues of politics and Shari‘ah. Unfortunately, he added that in Bangladesh, unity and solidity among ‘Ulama’ is deemed impossible (Chattgami, 2022; 203). Therefore it is noteworthy that several hurdles and challenges to unity

among the Deobandi ‘Ulama’ in Bangladesh were identified. The arguments of various respondents have been taken as evidence, and tons of in-depth interviews with experts from different areas have unravelled these threads.

### *(1) Worldly Interest and Personal Rivalries*

The Deobandi ‘Ulama’ community in Bangladesh is no different in facing challenges in their unity efforts. The overriding sentiment amongst respondents related to economic and political synergies masks as the key cause of disunity among the Deobandi ‘Ulama’ in Bangladesh. That obligatory unity requires the strengthening of their number, which many feel would be discouraged by what are seen as competitors for worldly goals and personal interests. The primary cause of the current climate of disunity is often phrased as a deepening of the inherent human nature.

This schism has defined itself visibly in the political arena — not only because of the loud claims to honour (honorific titles are also much in demand) but due to that corrosive enterprise it nurtures mutual animosities. This collection of factors has gone a long way in fostering division amongst the Deobandi ‘Ulama’ and preventing the formation of a united front.

Both Respondents I & II opined that personal rivalry is one of the biggest obstacles in the way to unite them. Sometimes these rivalries develop because of different leadership styles, other times due to divergent growth strategies, and last but not the least there is always an element of personal ambition. According to respondent IV, some of base sections may be power-based and they often struggle for leadership, which causes competition eventually resulting in factions. In return, this could slow down the consensus of the group. In addition, when some may attempt to solidify their position as key experts or influencers in a community based on personal rivalries, the community can end up divided and this undermines collective decision-making. ‘Ulama’ can also confront one another for control of resources (educational institutions, religious centres or financial assets). Respondent VI strongly argued that sometimes, personal rivalries may be fueled by ego and a desire for personal prestige, leading to internal discord. Previous disputes or individual conflicts,

genuine or conceptual, may similarly add to opposition. Old animosities can bubble back to the surface to undermine the attempts at harmony.

### *(2). Political Differences*

Respondents I & III argued that the Deobandi ‘Ulama’ in Bangladesh have different political understandings similar to other Islamic groups, making it difficult to maintain a community united. Additionally, they argued that differences in attitudes towards religious concepts in politics, the relationship between religious organizations and authorities, and other political ideologies can turn internally into debate. At times, Awami League receives support from Deobandi Islamic political groups while Bangladesh Nationalists Party (BNP) is also a usual ally of them. Additionally, all respondents highlighted how the difference of opinions on government policies — especially in areas such as religion and education policy — could further fragment society. Respondents IV & VI revealed that external political factors such as international and geopolitical events can also sometimes affect the views on politics so they will have different views in facing these kinds of external influences which drive inter-division among them.

### *(3). Qawmi Education Boards in diverse form*

The majority of respondents opined that the Qawmi institutions function under different Qawmi education boards which are linked up with separate factions or groups involved in the greater Qawmi ‘Ulama’ (Islamic scholars) community. The different nature of these boards has been a cause of difficulting in consolidating the Qawmi ‘Ulama’ behind a single banner in Bangladesh. That being said, things might have changed since that situation in 2017. According to the information of respondents V, VI & VII, Befaul Madarisil Arabia Bangladesh, abbreviated as Befaq, is the largest board of Qawmi Madrasahs in Bangladesh. It is also known as the Bangladesh Qawmi Madrasah Education Board. According to their statement, more than 16,000 Qawmi Madrasahs are run under them. They also affirmed that even though Befaq is the largest education board, it does not stand for all portions of the Qawmi society. Because there are 6 other Education Boards apart from Befaq. For examples:

1. Qaumi Madrasa Education Board is under Al Jamia Al Islamia Patia - AnjumaneIttehadul Madaris Bangladesh. Presently, under this board 600 Madrasas are running.
2. Azad DeiniEdaraye Talim Bangladesh is a Qoumi Madrasa Education Board based in the Greater Sylhet division. It consists of approximately 768 male and 120 female Madrasas.
3. Al HayatulUlaya Lil JamiatulQawmia Bangladesh is a govt. recognized Islamic Education Board of Qawmi Madrasah in Bangladesh. Similarly, on 11 April 2018, the government also notified Dawarae Hadith (Islamic Studies and Arabic), as an equivalent degree to Masters under this board.
4. QaumiDeeni Madrasah Education Board Bangladesh is the newest addition to the list of Qaumi Madrasah Education Boards in Bangladesh. Approximately 800 Madrasas are under this board.
5. TanzeemulMadarisidDiniya Bangladesh is a North Bengal-based Qaumi Madrasa Education Board in Bangladesh functioning under the Bogra Jameel Madrasah, and there are about 1563 madrasas under this board.
6. BefakulMadarisilQawmiaGauhardanga Bangladesh is a board of Qawmi Madrasahs in Bangladesh, and more than 500 Qaumi Madrasahs work under this Board.

Respondents III, IV & VII, argued that the present multiple Qawmi Education boards of Bangladesh, with their different curricula, administrative functions, and leadership management, influence the practices of education. They argued that the absence of a centralized board system indicated a lack of centred operation has fueled fragmentation of understanding, opinion, and pathways in the Deobandi community. The ideological difference among these boards on the interpretation of Islamic teachings and social-political orientation is a major factor that contributes to the disunity within the community. While the principal boards monitor the functioning of educational boards for excellence, Qawmi education lacks this



structured central body. Furthermore, the relationship between government-monitored-working bodies with educational Qawmi Education adds chaos as all Qawmi dislikes vary based on interference. As argued by respondent IV, the decentralized appointment system for *muhtamim* (Principal of Madrasa) and teachers promotes unpredicted perceived ignorance to the young generation. This unjustified recruiting promotes disunity in Qawmi Madrasas. Lastly, all respondents acknowledged that the multiple boards create barriers, as the competition and power struggle makes it harder for all the Qawmi 'Ulama' to work on a unified platform with a common goal.

#### *(4.) Imitation of different Akabeer*

Respondent I mentioned that the diverse imitation of Akabeer among Deobandi Ulama in Bangladesh is a challenge to unity and solidarity. Members of different factions within Deobandi give importance to various teachings and interpretations of particular Akabeer which has created confusion in their views on religious and political matters. Interestingly, Some followers are allied with Imam Abu Hanifa's *Rai* (reason) as well and some are with Shah Waliullah Dehlabwi's *'Aqli-Naqli* (revelation & reason) combination. The responded V suggested that a small group with these beliefs may diminish over time. He also claimed that one Deobandi faction identifies as supporters of Akabeere Deoband but is, in reality, the followers of the Turkish scholar Muhammad Zahid b. Hasan al-Kawthari (1879–1952). Despite Zahid Kawthari's stem Hanafi point of view, his followers prioritize textual replication over intellectual reasoning. He also said that Maulana Abdul Malek and Bangladeshi students of Markazud Da'wah Al Islami are in the same category. For this scholar, the third group of Deobandi 'Ulama', the literalists, is at odds with both the first two groups and calls for armed struggle without much thought about where that could lead. Their ranks are swelling with many Qawmi students subscribing to this ideology.

According to respondents I, III & VI, Political differences among 'Ulama' are traced to the pre-1947 period. They claim that a screen-bloc faction of Qawmi scholars in Bangladesh, largely in Chittagong were associated with Deoband and upheld United India during partition, after Akabeere Deoband Hussain Ahmad Madani (1879 – 1957). Another faction, primarily based in Dhaka, upheld the idea of Pakistan and

followed the teachings of Akabeer-e-Deoband, Allama Ashraf Ali Thanbi (1863 – 1943).

*(5). Absence of Current Political Awareness*

Respondents I, II & VI viewed that the shortage in political wisdom and understanding causes a disturbing obstacle to the harmony and cohesion of the Deobandi ‘Ulama’ in Bangladesh. In the Deobandi ‘Ulama’ issue, a more nuanced perspective has also emerged about where they stand on democracy. As they see it, there are the majority of this community, who are approaching democratic principles and on the other hand, there is a sector with an extremely negative perspective, opposing democracy and its elections. The alternative, one might argue, is the view that democratic processes aggressively serve secularism that is categorically rejected by them. What stands out, in this conflicting opinion within the Deobandi ‘Ulama’, is an intricate mix of religious, political and ideological considerations that inform a many-dimensional discourse on how Islam fares easily with the principles of democracy. Further, the overcontrol of political viewpoints in the Deobandi society also silences unified political activities and consensus in the local, regional and global political perspectives. The respondents show that one shortcoming is the inability to comprehensively understand the complex dynamics and difficult problems embedded in modern-day political settings. Moreover, it is also argued by the respondents that the different factions might be created by domestic and foreign conspiracies against Islamic motives. Therefore, it is their fratricidal attitude that drives all those anti-Islamic conspiracies, which serves only to accelerate these fragmentations from one another and animosities among them. At the same time, almost all respondents acknowledged this void in our collective understanding of political spectra that could breed divisions and cause confusion, resulting in a lack of consensus on political stances.

*(6). Organizational Disputes*

Nearly all respondents agree on the challenge to cultivate unity among Deobandi ‘Ulama’ in Bangladesh due to disputes among their organizations. These disagreements, according to their perspective, can be due to a few other issues taking root within the administration, policies and leadership within Deobandi-related educational and religious institutions. This internal feud had originated from

conflicting hot-seat dispositions and the vision of the organization. Additionally, differences in governance and decision-making can lead to disputes within the organization. Some will prefer more inclusive structures, while others will advocate for centralization. Respondent I and Respondent IV in particular made a compelling case that conflicts could result if resource allocation disputes are financial or madrasah-related. Moreover, respondents II, VI & VII claimed that disputes may arise in case if opinions are different in curriculum, teaching methodologies, and educational reforms as some ‘Ulama’ support pro-modernization while others emphasise traditional forms.

*(7). The Diverse Approach to Modernity and Reform*

Respondents I, II & IV opined that the concept of modernity and reformism can be an obstacle to bringing unity among Deobandi ‘Ulama’ in Bangladesh. The Deobandi tradition is deeply rooted in conservative Islamic scholarship, they said and began that the discussion on modernity or calls for reform has been causing rife and dissension within it. All respondents concurred that the issue was a result of changes related to modernity such as shifts within educational paradigms, technologies and curricula. It led to dissimilar opinions amongst ‘Ulama’ regarding the incorporation of modern knowledge and methods in Deobandi educational institutions alongside their traditional Islamic teachings. They also noted that the rise of technology, like the internet and social media, can inspire disagreement as well. While some ‘Ulama’ might take these tools as good for their outreach and educating listeners, others would be in doubt about how these techs could hamper or affect traditional values. Moreover, modernity can lead to political engagement and activism, while some traditionalist ‘Ulama’ argue for involving the masses actively in political processes with a recourse to a modernized notion of politics in Islam; others might prefer solving societal issues through more traditional methods.

*(8). Diverse Islamic Interpretation*

According to almost all respondents, there can be common grounds for the interpretation and understanding of religious principles within any religious tradition including Deobandism. Such diversity of backgrounds leads to differences of opinion on the part of Deobandi ‘ulamā’ at all levels, especially in legal (fiqh) and theological matters. Respondents I, IV & VII suggested that the diversity of Islamic interpretations among Tablighi Jamat in the context of Bangladesh has caused its

fractionation into two groups. Indian Deobandi ‘Ulama’ have allegedly condemned and hugely disputed the explanation to Saad Kandalwi. It is this critique of Deobandi ‘Ulama’ in India, which has started to fragment the Tablighi Jama‘at in Bangladesh into opposing camps, with Maulana Jobaer Ahmad on one side and Maulana Wasiful Islam leading the other. This is Jobair-led Tabligh Jama‘at, inspired by anti-Saad Kandalawi and strongly supported by Hefazat founding chairman Mufti Shafi. They also claimed that Saad Kandalawi made some changes in the process of work in Tabligh as they said that Saad requested some reforms in 2017 AD. Saad claimed the role of the Shura council should be only advisory because the general companions gave him authority to be their Amir. But the Shura Council did not agree. The second point, he said religious training is not commerce, religious da‘wat should not be a source of income. On the contrary, Tablighi Markaz which operates from a shura-based system argues that taking money is permissible as per major scholars' ruling and no ruling has been declared against it in Islam Jurisprudence. Unfortunately, many believe that this statement of Maulana Saad is against taking money in teaching madrasahs, conducting wazmahfil or other religious activities like being an imam or Quran Tilawat. Saad Kandalawi also believed at this time, teachers of madrasahs should come out to the mosque to perform Salah instead of praying inside madrasahs, to enlarge mass connection. These statements immensely aggrieved the followers of Deoband so that some even issued a fatwa against Kandalawi stating his interpretations are against the *aqida* and beliefs of Ahle Sunnah wa al Jama‘at. Saad Kandalawi made mistranslations of the Holy Quran. Some Deobandi ‘Ulama’ wrote that he made irrational remarks about the Prophet and his companions. Therefore, Kandalawi should go and consult with Deobandi ‘Ulama’. On the same note, some Deobandi ‘ulama’ even condemned dhikr practices of the Chormonai Tariqa, a Sufi order because they jump and dance when conducting dhikr exercises.

#### (9). *Anti-Islamic Plot and Conspiracies*

Respondents I, VI & VII argued that the malicious role of Western powers and Geopolitical forces in the fragmentation among the Deobandi ‘Ulama’ in Bangladesh is quite apparat. According to their argument, a highly manipulative and deceitful exercise of strategic deception has seen these external actors – acting through the Deobandi ‘Ulama’, used as ‘useful idiots’ at both local and international levels.

Unfortunately, these Deobanid Ulama do not realize at all when they are being played due to their gross incompetence. One important claim made by Ahmad Ali (2023) that, following post-British rule in the Indian subcontinent; the process of disunity among the 'Ulama' was appeared. Due to Possessing lavish resources the British inverted huge amounts of wealth and money to create adversity among the 'Ulama. They also treated 'Ulama by applying a 'divide and rule policy'. The British, meanwhile, were busy motivating the 'Ulama' with plots and conspiracies to promote their imperialist aims and dilute the influence of Islamic religious scholars as Ali rightly argues. (Ali, 2023: 13-14)

Respondents I, IV & V also pointed out that combined efforts by secular powers and the Indian detective branch were involved in creating divisions among the Deobandi 'Ulama' in the context of Bangladesh. For instance, they often claim that these entities had a role in the creation of rifts within Hefazat-e-Islam.

However, these are not substantive claims and should be taken with a grain of salt. The absence of actual verification requires a careful approach in accommodating such declarations, highlighting the significance of accurate study when featuring causation in the multifaceted trap of geopolitical and religious dynamics.

### **Future Prospects of the Unity of Deobandi 'Ulama' In Bangladesh**

Now the question is whether the Deobandi scholars cannot be united at all? Are they capable of a spiritual, moral and psychological meaning that does not depend on establishing religious self social or political dominance over each other? Is the unity of the larger Deobandi 'Ulama' not possible above worldly personal interests? Many think that scholars can never be united because they agree that they will never be united. But we should not join the pessimists. In the real sense, there is nothing to say that unity among the scholars is impossible. It is possible to rise above group and personal narrowness and work shoulder to shoulder on coordinated issues in order to protect the larger interests and welfare of the Ummah. There is a possibility of establishing unity among the Deobandi 'Ulama' through mutual tolerance and mutual respect. The Deobandi 'Ulama' are one of the largest Islamic powers in Bangladesh. They have thousands of scholars and educational institutions run by them. Henceforth, it is imperative to cultivate a robust interconnection among them at the prevailing circumstances. Considering the perspectives of different

participants, the subsequent viable resolutions will be suggested to encourage a strong unity and harmony among them.

*(1). Enhancing the spirit of unity*

All respondents agreed that to foster a robust sense of unity among Deobandi scholars, it is imperative that influential thinkers and leaders take the initiative to cultivate a spirit of solidarity among them. The decline in the number of scholars prioritizing the collective interests of the Ummah over personal and group agendas necessitates a revival of the sentiment of mutual coexistence and the establishment of sympathy among scholars. The respondents also suggested that to show respect and build harmony, leading scholars should run a number of different initiatives — from translating the work in order to retrain young academics who understand the world more broadly. These people can simply draw the importance of oneness in community. This recommendation seeks to create a bond of togetherness and shared purpose within the Deobandi scholarly community in Bangladesh. The idea is that a united front among the ‘Ulama’ would contribute positively to their collective efforts and endeavors, fostering a more cohesive and effective presence within the religious and social landscape of Bangladesh.

*(2). Organizing Conferences and Seminars*

All respondents proposed that to enhance the sense of unity among the Deobandi scholars, it is essential to regularly arrange gatherings, seminars, and exchange meetings involving scholars from various factions. These forums should focus on discussing the current state of Deobandi scholars, the conspiratorial activities posed by enemies of Islam, the imperative for unity among the scholars, their responsibilities towards the Ummah, and the repercussions of moral decline and factionalism. Delving into the historical context, it is crucial to analyze the past damages inflicted upon the Ummah due to differences and disunity among scholars. To enrich these discussions, it is recommended to invite proficient researchers and renowned scholars of both national and international stature to all such gatherings.

*(3). Reforming the Qawmi Madrasa Education Board and Qawmi Madrasah Educaiton Curriculum*

There are several Qawmi Madrasah Educaiton Boards and different types of educational curriculum in Bangladesh. The respondent I, II, III & VI argued that the Qawmi Madrasah education curriculum should be maintained under a single and unique education board. They also proposed that there should be specific course curriculum and text books under a single and unique education board. Few optional and elective courses in addition to the compulsory course curriculum designed by the unified board, can be pursued at various institutes of education. But it is commissionable to modify the syllabus of Qawmi Madrasah by adding the current syllabus of Islamic studies to general and Islamic universities at national and international level. This implies that changing the teaching and curriculum in Qawmi Madrasahs can be a big first step to realize the vision of unity among Deobandi religious scholars in Pakistan. By enhancing the educational framework and curriculum, this recommendation aims to create a common ground that may contribute to greater cohesion and unity within the Deobandi ‘Ulama’ community in Bangladesh.

#### *(4). Promote Common Goals and Values*

All respondents suggested that encouraging unity among the Deobandi ‘Ulama’ in Bangladesh through the promotion of shared goals and values is a significant solution. This policy involves highlighting general religious principles and primary morals to promote a unified and accommodating society. It includes emphasizing the foundational philosophies and discourses of the Deobandi movement and broader Islamic teachings that bind the ‘Ulama’ together. Articulating collective goals and objectives provides a framework for aligning the Deobandi community’s efforts and nurturing a shared sense of purpose. Promoting a shared idea for the prospect provides as a roadmap for the development and expansion of the Deobandi population in Bangladesh. Successful implementation of this approach relies on continuous commitment, effective communication, and collaborative efforts among both the ‘Ulama’ and community members.

#### *(5). Mediation and Conflict Resolution*

The respondent I, II & IV suggested that in Bangladesh, the Deobandi ‘Ulama’ community has long relied on mediation and conflict resolution as the primary means of fostering unity and maintaining peace. They describe this as the creation of

systems that enable community members to engage in dialogue and negotiation in order to resolve disputes and differences. The purpose here is seeking commonality and understanding to create the stronger and more harmonious community. Mediation and conflict resolution are highly valued in Deobandi ‘Ulama’ culture as they enable people to work through their differences in a calm and respectful manner, without resorting to violence or aggression. This has been successful in building trust amongst people and reducing disruptions in society which is very vital for making communities feel they are a part of it.

#### *(6). Media and Communication*

All respondents agreed that in today’s world, media and communication channels play a crucial role in shaping public opinion and promoting social values. To foster a culture of unity, tolerance, and cooperation, it’s important to use these channels effectively to disseminate positive messages that counteract divisive influences. To achieve this, the respondent I, II & IV suggest creating and sharing narratives that celebrate diversity and inclusivity, partnering with influential individuals and organizations, engaging with the audience, and sharing personal stories and experiences through social media and other online platforms. Competing with divisiveness momentum requires them to stay steadfast the course, and not fade away while articulating messages of unity to mobilize help for a joint cause entailing all stakeholders wanted in their domain.

### **Conclusion**

The Qawmi ‘Ulama have a special contribution to the political, social, and religious landscapes of Bangladesh. They adhere to the *Maturidi* and *Ash’ari* School in doctrines of Aqidah and follow the *Hanafi Madhhab* in matters of Islamic jurisprudence. They are known as Hanafi in Bangladesh.

Despite their high devotion to their thoughts, the Deobandi ‘ulama in particular failed in many respects to achieve their internal unity and harmony. Their internal unity and solidarity face various challenges. According to the respondents of the study, the disunity among them is perceived as more political and social than religious. Personal rivalry and ambition towards leadership are severely disrupting the unity among them. Disputes over the fight and wealth of endless power have



created more divisions. Historical allegations and political disagreements have accelerated their internal disputes. The differences among the Qawmi Education Boards, each of which has its own ideologies and schemes, are complicating the attempt to create a united platform. Further, the various religious and political interpretations of the Akabeer and the lack of modern political knowledge are pushing them into more factions and groups. Moreover, the organizational dispute over the administration and the policy as well as the adverse attitude towards modernity is being attached to their disunity. At the same time, disputed Islamic interpretations and intolerant attitudes toward each other are accelerating their internal dispute. For example, conflicts between the two Jamaats in the Tablighs have been caused by conflicting Islamic interpretations. A common phenomenon among the Bangladshi Ulama societies is to cite international and geopolitical conspiracies as the cause of their internal conflicts and disunity. Accordingly they need to move away from external conspiracy theories and emphasize the necessary changes and reforms in terms of their internal factors. Moreover, it is essential to systematically find the ways to identify the problems and the potential suggestions.

It is crucial to consider a scholarly inquiry and in-depth investigation into the field of *fiqhauiliya* or priority-based fiqh. The study furthermore, points out that the future axis of the Deobandi Ulama in Bangladesh depends on various strategies. It is essential to build and promote a spirit of unity through influential leaders and organizing seminars, symposia, and international conferences to address national and international challenges of Deobandi schools and Ulama. Reforms in their education curriculum of Qawmi Madrasa education to align with national and international Islamic studies curricula will take a step forward to face the internal challenges. Moreover, it is vital to develop a common goal, purpose, and values among them, which will contribute to establishing their unity and solidarity. Their unity should be furthered through mutual coexistence, mediation, mutual understanding dialogue, etc. Improved media and communication channels should be utilized to build public opinion in support of Qawmi ideology and promote a culture of unity, tolerance, and cooperation. The study suggests that a combination of these approaches will contribute to establishing and sustaining a strong unity among the Deobandi ulama of Bangladesh. If the Deoband Ulama in Bangladesh modernizes and further reforms its educational scheme, this standard effort will open up new horizons of

possibilities in the socio-economic and political context of Bangladesh. However, if they become involved with ultra-conservative Islamic political movements, social divisions and phobias between secular liberals and other Islamic groups may arise. Therefore, the Deobandi ‘Ulama should create an atmosphere consistent with the larger aspirations of the people of this country through strong unity and solidarity.

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