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The *Ulama* as a Pressure Group during the Indian Freedom Struggle: An Analysis

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Abstract: *Ulama-Islamic scholars and religious leaders-acted as a pressure group during the Indian freedom struggle, a crucial but untapped aspect of South Asian anti-colonial politics. This study investigates how the Ulama mobilised religious authorities and community networks to resist British colonial rule and promote nationalist ideology. The research shows the Ulama's dual dedication to religious revivalism and national freedom by examining their engagement in the Khilafat Movement, the Non-Cooperation Movement, and constitutional reform debates between 1937 and 1947. The study places the Ulama's activism in the context of Islamic political theory and growing nationalist currents using archival documents, political pamphlets, and contemporary literature. The findings suggest that the Ulama mediated between the masses and political elites and affected public opinion by promoting Islamic and nationalist principles. They balanced faith, identity, and politics to preserve religious liberty and support anti-imperialist objectives. The paper also claims that Ulama's influence transcended religion, contributing to the independence movement's moral and ideological foundations even as it later exacerbated communal polarisation. This study highlights the Ulama's deliberate use of religious legitimacy to influence public policy, exert political pressure, and redefine Muslim engagement in the independence movement by reinterpreting their role as a pressure group rather than just religious reformers. The analysis enhances understanding of religion, politics, and colonial resistance in contemporary Indian history.*

Keywords: Indian, Islamic, Political, Pressure Group, Study, Ulama

INTRODUCTION

The role of the *Ulama*-the Islamic scholars and custodians of religious authority-during the Indian freedom struggle constitutes a crucial yet unexplored dimension of anti-colonial politics. While mainstream historiography has predominantly focused on the political contributions of the Indian National Congress, the Muslim League, and secular nationalist leaders, it has often overlooked how the *Ulama*, through institutions such as *Darul Uloom Deoband* and the *Jamiat Ulama-i-Hind*, functioned as an influential pressure group that mobilised public opinion, shaped nationalist discourse, and negotiated with both colonial authorities and emerging political elites. This study seeks to address the research question: In what ways did the *Ulama* operate as a pressure group during the Indian freedom struggle, and how did their religious and political interventions influence the trajectory of nationalism and communal politics? The significance of this inquiry lies in recognising the *Ulama* not merely as theological figures but as organised socio-political actors whose efforts bridged religious authority and political activism. Existing scholarship has documented their participation in movements such as the Khilafat and Non-Cooperation but has seldom examined the mechanisms, networks, and ideological frameworks through which they exerted sustained political pressure. By filling this gap, the present study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the *Ulama's* agency as mediators between the state, the nationalist leadership, and the Muslim community, thereby enriching the broader historiography of India's freedom movement.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The existing literature on the *Ulama* in late-colonial India provides a complex foundation for understanding them as a cohesive pressure group. Key institutional studies, particularly those focused on *Darul Uloom Deoband,* have thoroughly documented the development of scholarly networks, seminaries, and educational reforms that enhanced *Ulama's* organisational influence and moral authority. However, later research has nuanced this perspective by highlighting doctrinal and regional diversities, including *Deobandi, Barelwi, Nadwa,* and Aligarh-linked elites, as well as varying political paths-some *Ulama* aligning with Congress-style nationalism, while others engaged with separatist or provincial religious movements. Recent political-sociological analyses convincingly reconceptualise certain *Ulama* as agents who transformed religious authority into political influence via *fatwas,* madrassa alumni networks, legal petitions, and public sermons. Research on the Khilafat movement, *Jamiat Ulama-i-Hind,* and regional uprisings documents distinct episodes of mass mobilisation and constitutional engagement. Despite these advancements, the literature remains predominantly episodic and descriptive:

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ongoing debates concern whether *Ulama* interventions were primarily theological or strategically political, the extent to which they functioned as a cohesive pressure bloc versus a disjointed collection of actors, and—critically—their effectiveness in influencing central constitutional outcomes rather than merely local social behaviour. There is a lack of research on the ways in which institutions have remained unchanged from the colonial era to *Ulama* activism after 1947, as well as a lack of quantitative or prosopographical methods for mapping alumni and patronage networks. Additionally, there is a lack of studies that systematically compare the influence of different regions or organisations on each other. This study synthesises institutional histories with political-sociological analysis, emphasising comparative mechanisms of pressure, such as *fatwas,* networks, legal strategy, and coalition-building. It addresses existing gaps and offers a complex view of the *Ulama,* not solely as religious authorities but as organised political mediators whose strategies and efficacy significantly influenced communal dynamics and the broader context of the freedom struggle.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative and historical-analytical research design to investigate the function of the *Ulama* as a pressure group during the Indian freedom movement. It primarily relies on the critical examination of both primary and secondary sources, including political resolutions, speeches, pamphlets, *fatwas,* and correspondence from prominent *Ulama* associated with institutions such as *Darul Uloom Deoband* and the *Jamiat Ulama-i-Hind.* The contemporary newspapers, official imperial records, and legislative assembly proceedings are also examined to ascertain the *Ulama's* involvement in political affairs and their reactions to colonial policy. Secondary data is derived from established scholarly publications, biographies, and historiographical analyses that elucidate their ideological and political frameworks. The research uses content and discourse analysis to examine the writings and public remarks of the *Ulama,* evaluate the strategic use of religious rhetoric to mobilise adherents and shape nationalist discourse. Comparative research investigates regional variations and organisational distinctions among diverse *Ulama* groups, whereas thematic analysis elucidates recurring patterns of political involvement, alliance formation, and ideological negotiation. This multidisciplinary and interpretive methodology seeks to recreate the *Ulama's* collective agency as a pressure group and contextualise their contributions within the overarching socio-political and intellectual framework of the Indian freedom movement.

RESULTS

Research Findings

The study indicates that the *Ulama*-Islamic scholars and religious jurists-exhibited a complex and structured function as a pressure group throughout the Indian freedom struggle. Their influence ran via religious authority, institutional networks, and political alliances, which played a crucial role in shaping nationalist and communal mobilisations from 1857 to 1947.

1. Institutional and Organizational Mobilization

Archival documents and secondary literature provide compelling evidence that seminaries like *Darul Uloom Deoband* (est. 1866) and *Nadwatul Ulama* (est. 1894) emerged as pivotal ideological and organisational centres of political resistance. Metcalf (1982, pp. 104–107) illustrates that the founders of Deoband perceived religious education as a means of socio-political rejuvenation, fostering disciplined individuals who would propagate the seminary's ethical and political sway throughout northern India. Robinson (2001, pp. 142–146) elucidates how the *Ulama* from *Farangi Mahall* established intricate networks of correspondence and patronage, effectively connecting religious institutions with reformist and nationalist networks. The present findings demonstrate that these networks functioned as catalysts, allowing the *Ulama* to influence nationalist tactics as well as discussions of colonial policy.

2. Ideological and Theological Framing

Study of *fatwas,* sermons, and pamphlets reveals that the *Ulama* reinterpreted anti-colonialism using Islamic principles of *'adl'* (justice) and *'ummah'* (community). Hasan (1997, pp. 33–36) observes that Deobandi scholars granted moral legitimacy to nationalist participation by framing political activism as an Islamic obligation. This theological framework successfully redefined political disobedience as a type of religious *jihad.* The rhetoric during the Khilafat and Non-Cooperation movements motivated Muslim populations to perceive independence as a moral obligation rather than solely a political objective (Robinson, 1974, pp. 88–90).

3. Political Communication and Mobilization

Primary sources like "Al-Hilal" and "Zamindar" indicate that *Ulama* authorities, including Maulana Abul Kalam Azad (Azad, 1959, p. 29) and Maulana Hussain Ahmad Madani, used the press to disseminate anti-imperial ideas and garner popular support. Qasmi (2015, pp. 112–118) posits that this press activism allowed the *Ulama* to serve as liaisons between elites and the Muslim populace, thereby converting moral persuasion into structured political influence. The findings support this perspective: sermons, religious decrees, and print initiatives served as tools of political influence that extended beyond the mosque into the public domain.

4. Engagement with Communal andConstitutional Politics (1937–1947)

The decade spanning from 1937 to 1947 witnessed a variety of perspectives among the *Ulama.* The *Jamiat-Ulama-i-Hind (JUH),* influenced by Deobandi ideology, advocated for *'MuttahidaQaumiyat'* (composite nationalism) and formed an alliance with the Indian National Congress, while the *Jamiat-ul-Ulama-i-Islam (JUI)* backed the Muslim League's call for Pakistan. Hasan (1997, pp. 37–38) elucidates this division as indicative of ideological adaptability—showcasing the manner in which the *Ulama* adapted their religious logic in response to shifting political landscapes. This division also demonstrates their capacity to influence both secular nationalist and communal agendas as a pressure group.

5. Social and Educational Influence

Quantitative data from madrassa records indicate that by the 1930s, more than 400 affiliated seminaries operated under the ideological guidance of Deoband (Metcalf, 1982,

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pp. 210–212). These institutions provided political education in conjunction with theology, resulting in a generation of activist-scholars who expanded the influence of *Ulama* into both rural and urban communities. The *Ulama* continued to interact with their constituents through welfare, arbitration, and education, maintaining political awareness even during times of persecution.

The findings conclude that the *Ulama* operated as a potent pressure entity by merging religious legitimacy with political organisation. Their impact extended beyond theological boundaries, impacting constitutional politics, nationalist tactics, and communal identities. This underscores their historical importance as both moral and political architects of Muslim involvement in the Indian independence movement.

DISCUSSION

Interpretation and Implications of Research Findings

1. Interpreting the Findings in Light of the Research Question

The research findings directly address the main research question, which is how the *Ulama* operated as a pressure group during the Indian freedom movement and what their socio-political impact was. These show that the *Ulama* were dynamic players who combined political activism with religious authority. Their involvement manifested in the form of *fatwas,* intricate organisational networks, and strategic alliances that significantly influenced the trajectory of Muslim political thought during the era of colonial domination. According to traditional conceptions of political pressure groups (Truman, 1951; Almond & Powell, 1966), the *Ulama* were a collective interest organisation that used religious legitimacy to exert influence over political systems. Their ability to galvanise widespread sentiment via sermons, religious assemblies, and publications corresponds with the functional dynamics of interest articulation and aggregation, as discussed in political science discourse. Their power, however, was based on moral legitimacy derived from their faith rather than institutional lobbying, which set them apart from contemporary secular pressure entities. This hybrid paradigm pushed the limits of colonial India's traditional group politics.

2. Synthesis with Relevant Literature

2.1 Political Agency and Religious Authority

Barbara Metcalf (1982, pp. 87–138) highlights that institutions such as *Darul Uloom Deoband* played a crucial role in preserving Islamic scholarship while also functioning as centres of reformist engagement during the colonial period. This study substantiates her interpretation by illustrating that the *Ulama* employed theological discourse to motivate anti-imperial resistance. Francis Robinson (1974, pp. 41–69) posits that the *Ulama* of *Farangi Mahall* and other centres fostered a unique Islamic intellectual identity, which in turn contributed to the political consciousness of Indian Muslims. The findings support Robinson's thesis by demonstrating that religious education served as a mechanism for political socialisation. The study supports Gail Minault's (1982, pp. 52–78) analysis of the Khilafat movement, depicting the *Ulama* as moral liaisons between nationalist elites and the Muslim masses. This analysis reinforces Minault's insights by demonstrating that the *Ulama* functioned not only as intermediaries but also as a deliberate pressure group, aiming to influence policy and public conduct through religious endorsement.

2.2 Public Sphere and Institutional Politics

Mushirul Hasan (1991) characterises *Ulama's* involvement as a manifestation of "religious public politics," highlighting its impact via education, media, and reform networks. The data corroborates this perspective, demonstrating that institutions like *Darul Uloom Deoband* and *Nadwatul Ulama* operated as both theological academies and centres for political mobilisation. Their publications, particularly "Al-Hilal" and "Comrade", served as venues for nationalist discourse articulated through Islamic ideals. This institutional aspect embodies Jurgen Habermas's (1989) concept of the public sphere, wherein communicative engagement promotes political legitimacy. The *Ulama's* use of mosques, madrassas, and print cultures as instruments of public influence aligns with this theoretical paradigm, indicating that their moral authority converted religious spaces into political arenas.

2.3 Nationalism, Internal Divisions, and Communalism

Ayesha Jalal (1985), in "The Sole Spokesman", highlights the fragmentation of Muslim political representation, a theme reflected in the findings of this study. The differences among *Ulama*-between *Deobandi* nationalists associated with the Congress and pro-League scholars supporting Muslim separatism-highlight the clash between composite nationalism and communal politics. This study contends that, contrary to earlier historians, such as S.A.A. Rizvi (1982), who characterised the *Ulama's* actions as moral reformism, they operated as functional pressure groups. They utilised theological legitimacy and coordinated political action to confront colonial power structures. Thus, the findings enhance and expand on previous historiography by reinterpreting the *Ulama* as strategic players who deliberately used religious authority as political capital, rather than just as moral guardians.

3. Critical Interpretation of the Findings

3.1 The *Ulama* as Moral and Political Intermediaries

The research confirms that the *Ulama* served as a link between religion and politics. Their ethical leadership converted abstract theological ideas into anti-imperial political discourse. Maulana Husain Ahmad Madani's adoption of composite nationalism (Metcalf, 2009) and Maulana Abul Kalam Azad's endorsement of Congress secularism both exemplify this synthesis. Nonetheless, their activism generated contradictions. During the Khilafat–Non-Cooperation period, they fostered Hindu-Muslim harmony; nevertheless, they eventually unwittingly led to sectarian polarisation. This conclusion supports the finding of Farhat Hasan (2004) that in colonial contexts, religious mobilisation frequently strengthened identity barriers, even when it was politically empowering. As a result, the *Ulama's* action can be considered both a unifying and a divisive force, promoting religious self-definition and national liberation at the same time.

3.2 Pressure Group Dynamics and Limitations

From a political science standpoint, the *Ulama's*

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engagement exhibited the essential characteristics of effective pressure groups-broad outreach, moral credibility, and organisational structure-yet failed to achieve enduring legislative influence. They put moral pressure on the British Raj through their petitions, conferences, and resolutions (particularly through *Jamiat-Ulama-i-Hind),* but they only received modest administrative concessions. This restriction highlights their distinct character as a symbolic pressure group, which is limited by institutional exclusion but strong in moral conviction. The *Ulama* exercised their power through unofficial networks, similar to what E. E. Schattschneider (1960, p. 35) referred to as "semi-organised politics", rather than through official policies.

3.3 Legacy and Continuities in History

The study also finds long-lasting parallels between the *Ulama's* colonial-era activism and South Asia's current religious lobbying. Following colonial-era traditions, organisations like the *All-India Muslim Personal Law Board* and *Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind* still use lobbying, public advocacy, and moral persuasion to affect socio-political issues (Ahmad, 2011). This consistency implies that the *Ulama's* pressure politics have left a lasting impact, turning Islamic learning into a means of negotiating socio-political issues in post-colonial democracies.

4. Consequences of the Findings

4.1. Research Implications

a. Comparative Analysis: Future research may juxtapose the techniques of the *Ulama* with those of Hindu reform groups (e.g., Arya Samaj) to delineate inter-religious dynamics of pressure politics (Jones, 2019).

b. Gendered and Subaltern Perspectives: The lack of Muslim women's voices in *Ulama*-led politics constitutes a significant gap in contemporary historiography. Investigating the influence of *Ulama*-inspired movements on women's involvement in anti-colonial politics would enhance future academic research.

c. Transnational Framework: The *Ulama's* affiliations with Ottoman and Arab reformists indicate that their political theology was integrated into a worldwide Islamic intellectual network. Future transnational studies may situate their activity within the broader anti-imperial Muslim milieu.

4.2 Implications for Practice

a.Faith-Based Mobilisation: The *Ulama's* capacity to link moral conviction with group political participation can serve as a model for contemporary civil society movements.

b.Civic Leadership and Educational Reform: Madrassas' dual role as religious and political educational institutions emphasises how moral education may serve as a basis for civic engagement.

c. Interfaith Cooperation: The *Ulama's* brief but significant alliance with the Indian National Congress during the Khilafat period exemplifies the capacity of religious organisations to unite in pursuit of common moral and political objectives beyond sectarian divides.

4.2 Implications for Policy

a.Incorporation of Religious Leadership in Policy Dialogue: In plural societies, policymakers ought to include religion experts as valid participants in social development and community welfare initiatives.

b. Encouraging Intra-Faith Discussion: The internal conflicts among the *Ulama* in the latter stages of colonialism highlight the value of organised intra-faith forums for promoting collective representation and minimising fragmentation.

c.Archival and Research Policy: Governments and universities should make it a priority to keep *Ulama*-related archives, such as letters, pamphlets, and fatwas, safe so that people can do important historical research and learn about religious politics in a way that is useful for making decisions.

It is clear from analysing the results that the *Ulama* actively contributed to the development of Indian political modernity rather than serving as passive stewards of orthodoxy. Their conversion of theological capital into political clout reshaped the anti-colonial movement's parameters. Despite their limited ability to directly influence policymaking, their symbolic power had a significant impact on nationalist ideology, identity formation, and mass consciousness. Thus, this research contests secular historiographies that minimise the political influence of religion by situating the *Ulama* within a broader narrative of resistance movements rooted in religious foundations. In terms of contemporary research and policy, *Ulama's* experience highlights the lasting influence of ethical authority and community-based organisation on the formation of political legitimacy and democratic participation in plural societies.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the research demonstrates that the *Ulama* held a crucial, albeit frequently undervalued, position as a pressure group throughout the Indian freedom movement, skillfully intertwining religious authority with political engagement to shape both nationalist and communal narratives. The initiatives undertaken by institutions like *Darul Uloom Deoband* and the *Jamiat Ulama-i-Hind* exemplified the capacity of religious leadership to galvanise the populace, express anti-colonial sentiments, and engage with nascent political entities, all while upholding the moral and spiritual authority that secular figures frequently failed to achieve. The interventions of the *Ulama* in movements such as the Khilafat and Non-Cooperation highlighted their capacity to convert religious sentiment into political momentum, thereby influencing the nature of Muslim engagement in the struggle for freedom. Nonetheless, the research underscores the presence of internal schisms and diverse ideological perspectives that occasionally constrained their unified political effectiveness. The findings indicate that the *Ulama's* impact extended beyond theological domains, influencing the socio-political reconstruction of colonial India, thus deserving increased acknowledgement in nationalist historiography. Future research ought to concentrate on regional case studies, comparative analyses of *Ulama* networks throughout South Asia, and the protracted evolution of their political role in post-independence India. This approach will deepen our comprehension of the ongoing interplay between religious authority, democratic politics, and civil society.

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