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Biography and Charisma as Cultural Capital in Traditionalist Educational Reform in Colonial India: The Case of Madrasatul Iṣlāḥ in Azamgarh

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Abstract: A range of reformist ideas have been studied in Islam over the past 200 years, yet few studies have focused on moderate traditional-reformist efforts in South Asia. A few important traditional ʿulamā in South Asia had taken seriously the need to articulate the message of Islam in a world changed by colonial and Western modernity, yet they have received little scholarly attention. Change and reform in some societies occur at the hands of exemplary and charismatic scholars who can persuade audiences about the need and necessity for change in the interest of the common good. A select sample of such pioneering thinkers exercised their influence to realize their goals. Their biographical histories not only shed light on the nature of their persons, their visions and their effects on society but served as cultural capital to advance Islamic education along a moderate reform-minded traditional agenda. The article concludes by pointing to these efforts as contributing indirectly to the emergence of one seminary (madrasa) belonging to this genealogy of thought, established in colonial India, known as the Madrasatul Iṣlāḥ, now in Sarā-yi Mīr, near Azamgarh in India today. Featured prominently is the figure of Nawāb Ḥabībur Raḥmān Shervānī. One impetus for this trend has been the religio-political movement in the first quarter of the nineteenth century known as the Ṭarīqa Muḥammadīya and its charismatic pioneers. This movement cast long shadows on the understanding and practice of Islam in South Asia which promoted a Qurʾān-centered interpretation of Islam, subtly separating itself from the complex hermeneutical tradition that informed the understanding of the Qurʾān and the persona of the Prophet Muḥammad in history in line with the altering experiences of the Muslim community over time. This paper argues that these reform-minded traditional ʿulamā in a sense also reduced the influence of the classical tradition and veered towards a more scriptural bent. Although they do not abandon the classical interpretative tradition and its apparatus, they do not allow the historical tradition to have the final word. The meanings they freshly derive from the Qurʾān and the Sunna set the parameters and limit the authority of the historical tradition. This framework decides which interpretations are permissible and the grounds for their existence. In another sense, it is a tradition within a tradition, less complex, easily accessible and transmissible, and very persuasive to modern educated Muslims, but at the cost of complexity.
Keywords: Muslim educational history, Islamic theology, madrasa(s), Tarīqā Muḥammadīya, Madrasatul Iṣlāḥ, Ḥabībur Raḥmān Shervānī, Shiblī Nuʿmānī, Ḥamiduddīn Farāhī, Sakhāwat ʿAlī Jaunpūrī, Islamic pedagogy, Islamic theological curriculum.

Zusammenfassung: In den letzten 200 Jahren wurde eine Reihe von reformistischen Ideen im Islam untersucht, doch nur wenige Studien haben sich auf gemäßigte traditionell-reformistische Bemühungen in Südasien konzentriert. Einige wichtige traditionelle ʿulamā in Südasien hatten die Notwendigkeit ernst genommen, die Botschaft des Islams in einer durch die koloniale und westliche Moderne veränderten Welt zu artikulieren, doch haben sie wenig wissenschaftliche Aufmerksamkeit erhalten. Wandel und Reformen in einigen Gesellschaften gehen auf vorbildliche und charismatische Gelehrte zurück, die ihre Zuhörer von der Notwendigkeit eines Wandels im Interesse des Gemeinwohls überzeugen können. Eine Auswahl solcher Vordenker hat ihren Einfluss

geltend gemacht, um ihre Ziele zu verwirklichen. Ihre biografischen Geschichten geben nicht nur Aufschluss über ihre Person, ihre Visionen und ihre Auswirkungen auf die Gesellschaft, sondern dienen auch als kulturelles Kapital, um die islamische Bildung im Sinne einer moderaten, reformorientierten traditionellen Agenda voranzubringen. Der Artikel schließt mit dem Hinweis, dass diese Bemühungen indirekt zur Entstehung eines Seminars (madrasa) beigetragen haben, das zu dieser Genealogie des Denkens gehört und im kolonialen Indien gegründet wurde, bekannt als Madrasatul Iṣlāḥ, heute in Sarā-yi Mīr, in der Nähe von Azamgarh im heutigen Indien. Im Mittelpunkt steht die Figur des Nawāb Ḥabībur Raḥmān Shervānī. Ein Anstoß für diesen Trend war die religiös-politische Bewegung im ersten Viertel des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts, die als Ṭarīqa Muḥammadīya und ihre charismatischen Pioniere bekannt ist. Diese Bewegung warf lange Schatten auf das Verständnis und die Praxis des Islams in Südasien, die eine Koran-zentrierte Auslegung des Islams förderte und sich auf subtile Weise von der komplexen hermeneutischen Tradition trennte, die das Verständnis des Korans und der Person des Propheten Muḥammad in der Geschichte im Einklang mit den sich im Laufe der Zeit verändernden Erfahrungen der muslimischen Gemeinschaft prägte. In diesem Aufsatz wird argumentiert, dass diese reformorientierten traditionellen ʿulamā in gewissem Sinne auch den Einfluss der klassischen Tradition verringerten und sich einer stärker biblisch geprägten Richtung zuwandten. Obwohl sie die klassische Auslegungstradition und ihren Apparat nicht aufgeben, lassen sie die historische Tradition nicht das letzte Wort haben. Die Bedeutungen, die sie frisch aus dem Qurʾān und der Sunna ableiten, legen die Parameter fest und begrenzen die Autorität der historischen Tradition. Dieser Rahmen entscheidet darüber, welche Interpretationen zulässig sind und welche Gründe für ihre Existenz sprechen. In einem anderen Sinne ist es eine Tradition innerhalb einer Tradition, weniger komplex, leicht zugänglich und übertragbar und sehr überzeugend für moderne, gebildete Muslime, aber um den Preis der Komplexität.

Schlagwörter: Muslimische Bildungsgeschichte, Islamische Theologie, Madrasa(s), Tarīqā Muḥammadīya, Madrasatul Iṣlāḥ, Ḥabībur Raḥmān Shervānī, Shiblī Nuʿmānī, Ḥamiduddīn Farāhī, Sakhāwat ʿAlī Jaunpūrī.

1. Introduction

Islamic religious education has a complex and circuitous history in late nineteenth and twentieth-century South Asia. This complexity is marked by the struggles internal to the Muslim community during colonial times in relation to their anxieties about the role of modern secular education, on the one hand and their desire to retain their commitment to their faith and their tradition in the public sphere, on the other. In colonial India, Muslims agonized about their pathways to social flourishing. While there were many crucial players in this debate, in a nutshell the chief protagonist of modern education for Muslims was Sir Sayyid Aḥmad Khān (d. 1898), and the group of people he inspired to journey with him, he was by no means the only one. (Lelyveld, 2019, 7) Khān's initiative was not entirely modernist, since he also fostered certain select notions of tradition and increasingly argued for the centrality of the Qurʾān in all Muslim endeavors, especially in theology. Hence, many of Khān's followers, although admiring his vision, differed with him on the *modus operandi* of how to engage with the intellectual currents within the Muslim community and those outside it. The forces that represented tradition and modernity surrounding Muslims in South Asia during the colonial period were both complex and demanding. Key to understanding what triggers the dynamic of change and resistance in colonial India centers around issues of education. More important is the fact that charismatic individuals across faith traditions and secular orientations initiated transformative educational initiatives.

This paper will at first provide a select genealogy of a group of religious scholars of a particular intellectual orientation: they could be called moderate reform-minded traditional or traditionalist religious scholars (ʿulamā). Through their educational projects and initiatives with specific reference to Islamic theological education, they have initiated new directions in Islamic pedagogy, education, and religious thought. A feature of their work is their dedication to the educational reform of Muslim theologians especially, those inhabiting the madrasas of South Asia as well as those serving the Muslim

community. Scholars discussed in this paper have not enjoyed much scholarly attention within the study of South Asian Islam, and less so in debates about the reform of Muslim theological education. They were focused on the education of religious scholars, with visionary proposals while simultaneously encouraging Muslims to embrace modern secular education in twentieth-century South Asia, but not at the cost of their faith commitments. What this paper undertakes is to focus on at least one key thinker, among the group, whose civilizational vision was internalized in an indirect manner by the founders of the Madrasatul Iṣlāḥ seminary. But several intermediate figures also played a crucial role in this stream of thinking. Apart from the founding ideas, successful seminaries are always associated with charismatic religious figures who provide the cultural capital and impetus for a variant understanding of tradition.

2. Methodology

This paper adopts a historical-contextual analysis informed by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural production and fields of power. Bourdieu's concepts provide ways to understand how Islamic educational reformers positioned themselves within overlapping fields of religious and colonial authority. The concept of 'cultural capital' helps us to analyze how charismatic figures and ideologues of a moderate reform-minded traditionalists and their educational vision like Shervānī and Farāhī, to be discussed later, cultivated symbolic resources through their mastery of traditional Islamic sciences while selectively incorporating modern knowledge. The notion of 'habitus' illuminates how these scholars embodied certain dispositions that allowed them to navigate between tradition and modernity. Analyzing madrasas as contested 'fields of power' or microcosms, reveals how different educational visions competed for legitimacy in colonial India, each representing different strategies for maintaining religious autonomy while negotiating modern challenges.

Several understudied, yet key figures in Islamic educational reform, enjoyed a pan-India prominence and visibility. Each constituted a microcosm in their network of relationships, for which we rely on Bourdieu's reading of Max Weber's theory of religious agents (Bourdieu, 1993, 181). Each scholar trades in religious doctrines, that constitute their 'cultural capital' through religious education in a complex web of crisscrossing linkages over time. In each network one can find interdependencies, organic solidarities and tensions between distinct and disparate powers. How these microcosms of accumulated cultural capital result in one understudied institution, known as the Madrasatul Iṣlāḥ in early twentieth century colonial India, is an account we explain. We analyze rarely studied primary sources and trace the intellectual genealogies of figures in the microcosm who are related to moderate traditional Islamic reform. Furthermore, madrasas are a form of vernacular education that to some extent, but not entirely, resist colonial models of education. Arabic, Urdu, and Persian constitute the cultural economy or language politics of madrasas, including Madrasatul Iṣ lāḥ. Yet, it is exceptional in so far that from its inception scholars associated with it were not opposed to modern knowledge but preferred to adopt modern learning on their own terms.

Education and the cultivation of societal vision(s) have always been the work of charismatic personalities from time immemorial as Ibn Khaldūn argued (Fromherz & Fromherz, 2010, 167). Charismatic individuals as Max Weber confirmed, in all instances routinize their charisma, meaning they transform it into an authority, as we demonstrate in the practices of a group of Muslim scholars in colonial India (Weber & Tribe, 2019, 336–337). While Weber's thesis has been challenged from certain perspectives, it remains compelling in the context of religion. It is the courage, vision and determination of charismatic and visionary individuals that remade entire worlds. In Weber's words: "Charisma … may involve a subjective or internal reorientation born out of suffering, conflicts, or enthusiasm. It may then result in a radical alteration of the central system of attitudes and directions of action with a

completely new orientation of all attitudes toward the different problems and structures of the 'world'." (Weber & Parsons, 1965, 363) Long before Weber, the jurist, scholar of prophetic traditions (ḥ adīth) and spiritual leader and Ṣufī shaykh Ibn ʿAṭ ā ʾ Allāh al-Sikandarī (d. 1309) wrote: "Competitors in aspiration do not violate the boundaries of destiny." (Ibn ʿAṭā ʾ Allāh al-Sikandarī & Ibn ʿAjība al-Ḥasanī, 2018, 26) Persons of high aspiration do not violate destiny rather they author their own destinies. In other words, God empowers them whether psychologically or through direct inspiration to realize their hopes and aspirations by allowing their talent to flourish and realize their objectives. In the Muslim experience personal responsibilities were contractual in the sense that "an independent position of authority was legitimized to appeal to personal charisma or to explicit law or to custom," wrote Hodgson assuming mutual obligations (Hodgson & Burke, 1993, 148). Mobility across social milieus, geographical and political boundaries made possible by the sharīʿa and "the freedom of inner interpretation … ensured a wide range of personal liberty" that enabled prominent religious figures to take on transformative responsibilities (Hodgson & Burke, 1993, 152)

In the modern experience notable figures by dint of their charismatic authority impacted educational initiatives. Notably, the educational initiatives of people like Savitribai Phule (d. 1897), Rabindranath Tagore (d. 1941) and Mahatma Gandhi (d. 1948) had a transformative impact on the lives of millions in India. Rudolf Steiner (d. 1925), founder of Waldorf education, John Dewey (d. 1952), founder of the University of Chicago Laboratory School in 1896, Maria Montessori (d. 1952) and bell hooks (d. 2021) left deep educational imprints in the United States. Paulo Freire (d. 1997), Ivan Illich (d. 2002) were all high-visibility, influential and charismatic international figures whose legacies are associated with innovative models of education and whose educational pedagogies were adopted around the globe. Long before them the philosophers Plato and Aristotle too took charge of education along philosophical lines.

French sociologist and public intellectual Pierre Bourdieu shed a nuanced light on how culture is shaped by a schooling system, especially when the educational system is regulated by the state.

> … [I]n a society where the handing on of culture is monopolized by a school, the hidden affinities uniting the works of man (and, at the same time, modes of conduct and thought) derive from the institution of the school, whose function is consciously (and also, in part, unconsciously) to transmit the unconscious or, to be more precise, to produce individuals equipped with the system of unconscious (or deeply buried) master-patterns that constitute their culture. It would no doubt be an over- simplification to end our efforts at explanation at this point, as though the school were an empire within an empire, as though culture had there its absolute beginning; but it would be just as naïve to disregard the fact that, through the very logic of its functioning, the school modifies the content and the spirit of the culture it transmits and, above all, that its express function is to transform the collective heritage into a common individual unconscious. (Bourdieu, 1967, 345)

Bourdieu is careful not to oversimplify, noting that school is not "an empire within an empire," yet he recognizes that schools don't operate in isolation from broader social forces. However, he insists we cannot ignore how public schools transform culture in the process of transmission. Educational reform movements like the one at Madrasatul Iṣlāḥ are often sites of resistance to state power, as they challenge the monopoly on cultural transmission by the state or any other entity that Bourdieu identifies.

Muslim religious educational networks, especially madrasas, are no novelty in both the premodern and the modern world. Like Islamic educational networks over the centuries, in the modern era, the Jesuits too established a global educational network since the 1540s by creating an alternative system emphasizing humanistic education alongside Catholic doctrine. Under the impetus of Lutheran pietism, August Hermann Francke (1663–1727) initiated the pedagogically innovative Schulstadt (or city of schools) albeit more associated with scientific education. (Britannica, Accessed 12 May 2025.; Whitmer, 2009, 545). Pietism in eighteenth-century Germany became associated with personal religious renewal, resembling the advocacy of piety and fidelity to Islamic teachings proposed by the traditional

ʿulamā associated especially with the Deobandī and Ahl-i Ḥadīs movements in colonial India to be discussed later.

Like the charismatic figures who shaped discrete educational projects noted above, generations of Muslim theologians in colonial and post-colonial India provided a comprehensive and complex moral and theological vision that directed the cultural capital fostered in traditional Islamic education (Moosa, 2015). And multiple theological visions were crafted by individuals and communities, not so much by the state. In colonial South Asia, successive colonial and post-colonial states were unsuccessful in displacing the Muslim religious leadership in crafting a theological vision for those sectors of Muslim communities who are educated in the madrasas. The moral and pedagogical formation of Muslims who were educated in modern schools, occurred along different patterns and is not the focus of this paper.

To understand the educational and pedagogical goals fostered by Muslim reformers of a traditionalist bent in South Asia, it is vital to grasp their backgrounds, biographies, their discursive genealogical as well as socio-political networks. The historian must grasp these essential questions of context related to the advocates of reform. Who are the figures they uphold as their role models? Which aspirations do they wish to realize? It is important to understand their anxieties and the moral vision they fostered as scholars, public figures, and advocates of educational and religious reform.

The Muslim actors discussed in this article, long before the advent of postcolonial theory, were already thinking of creating a dialogue between Islamic knowledge traditions and knowledge of a Western provenance. As Vanessa Andreotti, an educational theorist put it: what could a non-coercive relationship and dialogue between different knowledge traditions look like? (Andreotti, 2011, 1) The quick answer is Madrasatul Iṣlāḥ. However, it has been overlooked. Post colonial theorist Leela Gandhi has identified the Cartesian philosophy of identity as the cause for "the unsustainable omission of the Other." (Gandhi, 1998, 39)

Yet, Muslim traditionalist thinkers across the spectrum in South Asia and elsewhere, with rare exceptions, have been completely excluded from any serious discussions of 'self' and 'other'. For the Cartesian anthropocentric world view in its narcissistic desire always sees "the world in its own self-image" and thus it is "ultimately deficient on account of its indifference to difference … ." (Gandhi, 1998, 39) In other words, not only were the traditional ʿulamā viewed as the 'other' in terms of Western humanism, but they were also the 'internal other' in Muslim modernist, secular, and, to some extent, in relation to Islamic revivalist discourse. Only a few traditional religious figures who were in some ways shaped into a certain identity (Althusserian interpellation) by society such as Muḥammad ʿAbduh in Egypt and Abul Kalām Āzād in India, received some attention in the broader discourse of Islam, religion and politics.

3. Differences Within Islamic Traditionalism

Often Sunnī Islamic traditionalism, otherwise also called Sunnī orthodoxy, in South Asia is seen as a monolith, apart from some internecine sectarian differences among Sunnīs of varying stripes (see Metcalf, 1982; Sanyal, 1999). They are not a monolith, but we cannot go into all the geneaologies of traditionalism in this paper. However, we will only focus on one group among them and a number of leading figures among them, as well as one institution. We do so to demonstrate how individual biographical accomplishments and the affiliation of scholars to influential networks contribute to their cultural capital to effect social and religious change in both ideational and organic ways.

One group that has had some qualified success in sharing their vision with fellow Muslims is what we call the 'moderate reform-minded traditionalist.' While each nineteenth century Muslim group in colonial India always asserted its credentials for 'improvement,' 'reform' and 'pious reformation' with

the use of the polyvocal term *iṣlāḥ*, 'to make good': each articulated a different sensibility of reform. Moderate reform-minded traditionalists remain committed to orthodoxy, but it has an air of being *avant-garde*, that requires some amount of trespassing, or what Bourdieu calls "a form of a heretical break' but not in the strict theological sense of excommunication (Bourdieu, 1993, 31) but rather in a creative fashion. This group can with relative ease engage non-ʿulamā audiences as well as the lay public by their very accessible advocacy that the totality of authority in Islam lies in adherence to the Qurʾān and the authority of the Prophet only. Publicly they refrain from engaging in the inaccessible, complex discursive and interpretative tradition as well as authority structures that the majority of traditional ʿulamā do advocate. The latter are proponents of a thick and complex Republic of Letters that was cultivated over centuries under different historical conditions (Moosa, 2015). It requires specialized expertise to explain doctrines to audiences in a convincing manner. Traditionalist reform and Islamic revivalist tendencies have paradoxically and unintentionally distanced themselves from this large territory of Islamdom's complex and rich historical discursive tradition. This has surreptitiously contributed to an alienation from the tradition and partly undermined the sophisticated literacy of Islamdom's thick intellectual traditions. This is not a blanket charge. Some reformist traditionalists have tried to salvage some part of that complex tradition, but in doing so they also jettisoned other parts.

Key figures in the articulation of moderate reformist Islam are figures like Nawāb Ḥabībur Raḥman Shervānī, a central figure in this paper, as well as his two close interlocutors and friends, Shiblī Nuʿmānī and Abul Kalām Āzād. What distinguishes them is a strong element of cosmopolitanism, what the world historian Marshall Hodgson called "culture": one centered on a lettered tradition, that was historically distinctive of Islamdom as a society—namely in which Muslims and their faith was dominant in one sense or another—and, one in which Muslims and non-Muslims naturally shared and fully participated in the society of Islamdom. (Hodgson, 1974, 158) As Bruce B. Lawrence wrote: "Islam is radically cosmopolitan…Islam born in an Arabian niche, became a cultural and trade entrepôt linking the Mediterranean world to the Indian Ocean via the Red Sea." (Lawrence & Mian, 2021, 78) One could also think of these figures tapping into "Muslim networks," both institutionalized social relations and phenomena that are distinct yet involve a choice to be connected across recognized boundaries, such as the socio-political movements in colonial India in the early nineteenth-century *umma* (Cooke & Lawrence, 2005). The *umma* provides a bond of both faith and practice.

Ḥamīduddīn Farāhī and Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāḥī are also in the camp of reform-minded traditionalists who were closely involved in the advancement of the Madrasatul Iṣlāḥ. While attempting to stay in the web of traditionalism their idea of traditionalism is very much streamlined into a Qurʾān-centered idiom. With these two there is a turn towards a more insular sensibility where only the formulaic Qurʾānic sensibility of the *umma* is valued exclusively.

The reform-minded traditionalists like Shervānī might have in some sense inherited elements from the nineteenth century traditionalist Islamic revivalist movements on the Indian subcontinent like the Ṭarīqa Muḥammadīya. This movement propelled the political and intellectual, as well as knowledge agendas fostered by one genealogy of traditionalist reformists such as the Deobandī movement. But the Ṭarīqa Muḥammadīya had a greater imprint on the Ahl-i Ḥadīṯ movement to which the Madrasatul Iṣlāh and its founder were unequivocally aligned. But the moderate reformist traditionalist genealogy enjoyed the cross-over currency to navigate between different threads of traditionalism. It is this group in the persons of Nuʿmānī, Farāhī, and Iṣlāḥī who in their association and affiliation with the Madrasatul Iṣlāḥ made it a magnet for a cross-section of persons affiliated with traditionalism, broadly speaking. A key understudied figure of this moderate reformist tradition is Ḥabībur Rāḥmān Shervānī, even though he was not directly affiliated to the Madrasatul Iṣlāḥ, but had strong and indelible ties to Nuʿmānī's network of scholars.

4. Ḥabībur Rāḥmān Khān Shervānī: An Unsung Hero of a Moderate Traditional Reform

In recent scholarly accounts of traditional Islamic education, the name of Nawāb Ṣadryār Jang Ḥabībur Raḥmān Khān Shervānī (1867–1950) would be rare to find, yet he played a prominent role in multiple pan-Indian educational institutions, organizations and in governance in the early twentieth century. The reason for this anonymity is that late nineteenth and twentieth-century historiography of traditional Muslim South Asia in vernacular and European languages is a work-in-progress with large lacunae. Ḥabībur Raḥmān Shervānī belonged to a prestigious north Indian landholding and aristocratic family as his title Nawāb indicates. With his inherited and acquired 'cultural capital.' Shervānī played an influential role in advancing a broad-gauged vision of education in Indian Muslim circles with his influence spanning the modernist movement of Sayyid Aḥmad Khān to engaging side by side with the leading establishment figures of the Nadwatul ʿUlamā seminary in Lucknow, established in 1898. To be able to straddle those two camps is an indication of Shervānī's erudition and ability to span and connect to a prolific intellectual landscape.

He was meticulously trained in the classical Indo-Persian literary tradition with a distinction for not only his mastery of Persian but his grasp of its enduring value to Islamic and religious thought in South Asia. In the immortal words of the renowned Indian scholar and writer, Abul Ḥasan ʿAlī Nadvī (d. 1999), who personally interacted with the great man, "Mawlānā Shervānī was the last traveler of the caravan of a bygone culture and civilization." (Nadvī, 1975, 2:42) Shervānī was described as "an exemplar of Eastern traditions, its ancient culture, its grace and decorum." (Nadvī, 1975, 2:33) His scholarly prominence, together with his elevated social and political standing in twentieth-century South Asia makes him among the towering figures of his time and a leading figure in the circle of tradition-based Islamic reform with an openness to modern learning, that he deemed indispensable for India's religious leadership and Muslims (Khān, 1392/1972).

Educational and cultural capital is not bestowed upon individuals, rather they are acquired. Shervānī trained in Islamic ethics is fully aware of the making of his disposition and capacity (malaka) and how he internalized his way of being (habitus). Despite his reformist disposition, the effects of his training continued (hysteresis) despite changes in his own thinking in other areas, applying Bourdieu's theory, when he prefers to adhere to older practices with respect to his unusual reverence for his teacher (Bourdieu, 1984, 80; Tayob, 2022, 11). Few people honored their teacher the way Shervānī did, in keeping with the commitment of the ideals of the old tradition. Educated people, Bourdieu reminds us, belong to culture as much as culture belongs to them, and therefore they are susceptible to applying inherited categories, even though in other areas of cultural practice they might favor newness (Bourdieu, 1993, 226). Mawlānā Luṭ fullāh Alīgarī (d. 1916) (meaning Luṭfullāh of the town Aligarh) was renowned by his honorific as, ustāẕ al-ʿulamā 'the scholar's scholar' (Nadvī, 1975, 2:26). In a short monograph on the biography of his teacher, Shervānī captures the genius of Luṭ fullāh and offers snapshots of discipleship in the waning period of classical Indo-Persian scholarship (Shervānī, 1937). Luṭfullāh spent over three decades teaching first at the renowned madrasa, Faiẓ-i ʿĀm in the city of Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh. Luṭfullāh's own teacher, Muftī ʿInāyat Aḥmad Kākorvī (d. 1863) known for his prodigious memory, scholarship and anti-colonial resistance, established this well-known institution in Kanpur (Badāyunī, 2018, 682–684). Later, Luṭfullāh taught at Madrasa-i Jāmiʿ Masjid in the city of Aligarh. The bio-biographer ʿAbdul Ḥayy al-Ḥasanī (d. 1923) mentions that students from as far away as Iran attended Luṭfullāh's lectures (al-Ḥasanī, 1413/1992) and his imprint on Shervānī was unmistakable.

Luṭfullāh was among the earliest of the ʿulamā who courageously proposed that those learned in Islam's teachings should themselves learn modern science in order to engage afresh and examine with new eyes the historical Arabic-Islamic knowledge tradition (Nadvī, 1950, 5). This was not the attitude of a figure in thrall of British colonial benevolence but rather the posture of the universal Indo-Persian intellectual

tradition. Surprisingly, Luṭfullāh learned English and had a decent grasp of modern astronomy. He was a rarity among his peers and possibly became marginalized because of this gallant step to venture beyond the epistemological practices favored by traditionalists. He is rarely recalled in the twentieth and twenty-first century historiography of Muslim South Asia, both in the vernacular and in European languages. Flaunting his new insights he reportedly told Shervānī, his student, that "God's omnipotence shines forth in modern astronomy, while traditional astronomy confined the entire universe to nine or ten spheres! (Shervānī, 1937, 39)." Luṭfullāh adopted a very brave position at a time when most ʿulamā resisted modern European learning in a display of anti-colonial resistance. With his teacher as a role-model, Shervānī also studied English with a tutor ʿAbdur Rashīd Khān from 1883–87 and even took admission in Agra College in 1888 to study English literature but discontinued that effort after one year of enrolment.

Shervānī gained renown as a cultural and literary critic: he was both a poet and an author. He was clearly influenced by stalwarts like Sayyid Aḥmad Khān and worked closely with the leading religious intellectual who once was close to Khān, namely, Shiblī Nuʿmānī (d. 1914), who was a leading light associated with the Nadwatul ʿUlamā madrasa initiative. His other close associate was Abul Kalām Āzād (d. 1958), a religious scholar, anti-colonial activist and politician. Āzād was one of Shervānī's closest friends and they shared a common intellectual tradition and literary taste. Shervānī's mastery of Urdu and Persian literature is memorialized in a series of correspondences with Āzād who later became the first education minister of post-independence India, in a publication aptly titled Kārvān-i Khayāl (c. 1947), Caravan of the Imagination. Āzād, in turn, addressed his letters from Ahmednagar Fort prison in Maharashtra to Shervānī, later collected as Ghubār-i Khāṭir-The Dust of Memories, published in 1946 (Āzād, 1983).

Shervānī performed a crucial role in the development of various educational and reformist movements. One such organization that gained a great deal of his attention was the All-India Mohammedan Educational Conference (AIMEC), also remembered as the Muslim Educational Conference, established in 1886 by Sayyid Aḥmad Khān with a purpose to bridge the gap between traditional forms of learning and modern European learning when Shervānī was merely a youth of nineteen (Esposito, 2003). Khān also founded the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College in Aligarh established in 1875, which later became the Aligarh Muslim University in 1920 some two decades after the founder's death. Shervānī led AIMEC as chairman from 1911–1915, an organization that continued till 1937 and was closely connected to the educational advancement of the Aligarh Muslim University.

He served as one of the founding members of the Nadwatul ʿUlamā Movement that culminated in the madrasa, known as the Dārul ʿUlūm Nadwatul ʿUlamā, hereafter Nadwa, and served as chair of its Management Council-Majlis-i Intizāmī as a lifetime member (Khān, 1392/1972, 142)

His most prestigious appointment was, of course, as the Ṣadruṣ Ṣudūr, the Head of Religious Affairs, of the princely State of Hyderabad where he served for almost twelve years (1919–1930). Among his notable achievements in that position was to be part of a three-member committee that approved the proposal to establish a modern university, which came to be known as Jāmia ʿUsmānīyā, now known as Osmania University. With the Urdu language as the medium of instruction, Shervānī briefly became its first Vice-Chancellor between 1918 and 1919 (Khān, 1392/1972). His predecessor in the post of head of religious affairs, Mawlānā Anwārullāh Fārūqī (d. 1918), was opposed to the establishment of a university, ostensibly on the grounds that he deemed the establishment of a modern educational institution harmful to religion (Gīlānī, 1950, 413–414). Fārūqī was a traditional scholar, the majority of whom feared that modern European education could only produce harm to Muslims and their faith. Unlike many other traditionalists, Shervānī was not opposed to Muslims acquiring European education.

Rather, he advocated that modern education, and traditional Islamic education should be integrated just as his senior colleague Shiblī Nuʿmānī advocated. Another traditionalist scholar who favored integration Mawlānā Manāẓir Aḥsan Gīlānī (d. 1956) confirmed that Shervānī insisted that Osmania University promote the Eastern intellectual and cultural tradition, Islamic ethics, and that it would foster religious sensibilities along with Western sciences and arts, by inscribing these specific elements into the charter of the institution. (Gīlānī, 1950, 414). The amalgamation of Eastern and Western learning within a single institution theorized a non-coercive relationship between a plurality of knowledge traditions. Shervānī's educational vision represents a sophisticated strategy of cultural reproduction and transformation.

Shervānī advocated serious reforms to the traditional madrasa syllabus taught in hundreds of institutions in which future Muslim theologians and scholars were trained. He favored new pedagogical approaches and was thus drawn to the Nadwatul ʿUlamā for supporting such initiatives. He promoted the 'Arabic sciences' which to his mind referred to a vast intellectual corpus covering a range of disciplines that Muslim scholars (ʿulamā) of the past cultivated. He lamented that Muslims during his time lost touch with this sparkling intellectual legacy, implying that there is a need to selectively incorporate elements of the past. "The past also holds shining pearls," he remarked even though, "they are soiled and hidden from our sights." (Shervānī & Shervānī, 1365/1946, 169) Shervānī's criticisms of madrasa education were directed at both the syllabus and the pedagogy. "It is necessary," he asserted, "to introduce a thorough reform of the syllabus and adopt a teaching method so that it can produce ʿulamā who can intelligently understand worldly issues (muʿāmala faham) and be well-informed." (Khān, 1392/1972, 144)

Shervānī, like some of his contemporaries who studied the classical curriculum of the Indo-Persian tradition, was critical of the texts used in the madrasas promoting Greek-influenced Islamic logic and philosophy. Written in a terse style these texts frequently required equally impenetrably written glosses and commentaries that were written in the classical and post-classical Islamic period. In his view these texts did not really advance their subject matter, he argued, but were preoccupied with irrelevant minutiae, relevant only as historical value, but irrelevant to the development and needs of Muslims in the twentieth century (Shervānī & Shervānī, 1365/1946, 209). Despite studying many texts in Arabic and Arabic literature, he complained, graduates of the traditional madrasa curriculum were unable to command this vital scholarly language. (Shervānī & Shervānī, 1365/1946, 209) He strongly advocated for a return to the core Islamic sciences especially the study of the Qurʾān, prophetic traditions (ḥadīth), Islamic law and theology. He wanted to lift the spell of outdated Greek thought, that in his view, hung like a millstone around the neck of the inherited Islamic tradition. "Dīn (religious obedience)," he stressed, "should be rescued from the burden of the Greek sciences in order to fill the hearts of students from the lamp of prophecy, mishkāt-i nubuwwat." (Shervānī, 1931, 16) These are hallmarks of a traditionalist scholar who fostered a reformist predisposition.

In Shervānī's view a curriculum based on core Arabic sciences should also include modern European education. Modern education, in Shervānī's view, provided the resources to uplift Muslims in colonial India in terms of their socio-political and cultural status. Addressing an annual gathering of the Nadwatul ʿUlamā in 1902, he echoed similar concerns previously raised by Sayyid Aḥmad Khān. Shervānī stated: "It is necessary to acquire Western education and adopt its discipline and work ethic in order to be eligible to gain positions in public life and pursue progress, in order to compete with other native communities in human development." (Khān, 1392/1972, 150)

While mindful of the need for modern education, Shervānī was also passionate and obsessed in his efforts to adhere to the Islamic tradition and a life of faith. Aware that the power of modern education

could beguile the next generation of its faith and tradition, he insisted that both Islamic and modern traditions be affirmed, fearing that alienation from both could be catastrophic to the future of Muslims in India (Khān, 1392/1972, 150). He once posed this dilemma of dual education as a rhetorical question: if students only excelled in modern education, but were ignorant of religion or were not serious about it, then all this [meaning, their efforts] were in vain (Khān, 1392/1972, 157). His position-takingʿ is clear, to signal his relationship to other producers of symbolic goods as an author of symbolic authority amid colonial challenges to his cultural capital.

Unlike many modernists and traditionalists, Shervānī's expansive conception of education aimed at cultivating two virtues among students: a curiosity for knowledge and to instill discipline. Shervānī understood the need for epistemic virtues without which the inculcation of knowledge could be futile. Knowledge was about the making of a virtuous self (Shervānī & Shervānī, 1365/1946, 257). Without a serious commitment to knowledge people pretending to be virtuous scholars, in his view, only ended up treasuring mediocrity in which futile polemics took center stage (Shervānī & Shervānī, 1365/1946, 206).

Shervānī circulated freely within orthodox traditionalist circles. What gave his views further force was that he tapped into a thread of Arabic thought, which gave centrality to the revelation and the prophetic tradition together with a sophisticated literary palette in Persian, Arabic, and Urdu. The latter formed the source of his Islamic humanism and allowed him to take a leadership role on vital issues such as the future of theological education, the place of modern education for Muslims, the role of religion in the formation of communities and how to cultivate a modern Muslim identity. This line of thought was not entirely unknown on the South Asian subcontinent since it resonated with aspects of the teachings of Shāh Walīyullāh (d. 1762) that had gained significant cache among a portion of traditionalist scholars and intelligentsia. Shervānī and his generation cast a shadow of moderate reformist traditionalism on late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Islamic thought in South Asia. Some of his ideas found resonance and echoes in an unlikely stream of traditionalism, known as the Ahl-i Ḥadīs movement (Preckel, 2007).

5. Madrasatul Iṣlāḥ in Sarā-yi Mīr, district of Azamgarh

5.1 Muḥammad Shafiʿ: Founder and Visionary (1866–1945)

Born one year earlier than Shervānī was the founder of the Madrasatul Iṣlāḥ. *Mawlānā* Muḥammad Shafīʿ (1866–1945) in Sīdhā Sultānpur, a village in the district of Azamgarh some 26 kilometers from the regional capital city by the same name.[1] Orphaned during childhood Muḥammad Shafīʿ, hereafter Shafīʿ, came under the care of his uncles, Ḥāfiẓ Qādir Bakhsh and Ḥāfiẓ Faẓl-i Karīm. His cultural capital stems from his family's distinction of boasting an impressive line of scholars in traditional Islamic education. His guardian uncles had each memorized the Qurʾān, as indicated by their attribution as ḥāfiẓ, in their names.

Shafīʿ had an unusual educational journey in terms of geography. Normally, the state of Uttar Pradesh had ample madrasa institutions to educate someone of his caliber. But family circumstances took his uncle and guardian Ḥāfiẓ Qādir Bakhsh to a madrasa in Dānāpūr, in the Patna district, also the capital of the state of Bihar. In Dānāpūr the seven-year-old Shafīʿ, received his primary education in Urdu and Persian as all children at this age did. Later, Shafīʿ also memorized the Qurʾān. After completing his primary education, Shafīʿ was admitted to Madrasa Dānapūr in an area called Nāriyal Ghāt in the Patna

[1] The chronogram of his name, 'Abul Barakāt Muḥammad Shafīʿ Khān, indicates the year of his birth, to be 1283 AH/1866 AD.

District (Salafī, 1984, p.126).

The Dānapūr Madrasa was patronized by a well-known scholar, known as Mawlānā Fayżullāh Mauvī (d. 1306/1888), from the district of Mau some 44 kms from Azamgarh (Salafī, 1984, 126). Fayżullāh was the major figure at the Dānāpūr Madrasa together with some other ʿulamā from the villages of Mau in the Azamgarh district and the rural area of Sādiqpūr, near Patna in Bihar. Originally Fayżullāh was from Mau but later settled in Bihar. In an earlier part of his career Fayżullāh taught at the Madrasa ʿArabīya in Azamgarh, which was established by Shaykh Ḥabībullāh (d. 1900), the father of the famous Shiblī Nuʿmānī. Fayżullāh is believed to have taught Shiblī Nuʿmānī, the close associate and confidante of Shervānī, some elementary Arabic texts (Nadvī, 2008, 71–72). No publications are attributed to Fayżullāh.

5.2 Shafīʿ Shaped by the Ṭarīqa Muḥammadīya via Sakhāwat ʿAlī Jaunpūrī

Shafīʿ received his foundational education and orientation at the Dānāpūr Madrasa which is part of the Ahl-i Hadīs franchise. Through Fayżullāh his scholarly genealogy (isnād) connects him to the influential Mawlānā Sakhāwat ʻAlī Jaunpūrī (d. 1858), who was the pre-eminent jurist-theologian of Jaunpūr. Credentials of being indirectly associated to Jaunpūrī, who is reputed for his scholarly rigor and reformist activism, cannot be underestimated and played a critical role in Shafī's cultural capital as a reformer.

Jaunpūrī spent most of his life teaching, writing legal responses to questions in law, known as fatwās, and penned multiple polemical tracts. The polemics were directed at those practices, customary, social and religious ones, that were deemed un-Islamic by the ideologues and followers of the Ṭarīqa Muḥammadīya (hereafter, Ṭarīqa). Sayyid Aḥmad (d. 1831) and Shāh Muḥammad Ismāʿīl (d. 1831), two luminaries spearheaded the Ṭarīqa as a religio-political reform movement. (Nadvī, 1941, 396; Tareen, 2020) This movement allowed for an element of non-conformism in Islamic law, abjuring taqlīd, meaning following the authority of the law schools. They believed that Muslims had direct access to the teachings of the Qurʾān and the Sunna, instead of the need to follow a specific historical law school, if they chose not to elect one. This made it a controversial doctrine and anathema to most of the followers of the Ḥanafī school in North India and the Shāfiʿī school followed in South India.

Jaunpūrī, for instance, in his fatwās relied on the opinions of the previous juristic authorities only if they were corroborated by authority from the Qurʾān and the sound (saḥīḥ) prophetic traditions (Nadvī, 1941, 396). This practice of Jaunpūrī differed from the conventional practice of fatwā-writing by Ḥanafī jurists in South Asia. Normally, they strictly followed a hierarchy of authorities (taqlīd) and were charged on more than one occasion to have adopted weak prophetic traditions baked into the authority structure of their law schools. What lent Jaunpūrī additional distinction was that he followed the view of the foremost ideologue of the Ṭarīqa, Shāh Muhammad Ismāʿīl. The latter rejected taqlīd, the notion of following authority without soliciting the evidence for it. Such taqlīd, he asserted, was heresy (bidʿa) and prohibited (ḥarām), because it came dangerously close to equating the mortal authority of jurists and that of Ṣūfī masters, to be on par with the authority of God (Ismāʿīl, 1999, 223).

Neither Jaunpūrī nor the Ahl-i Ḥadīs were in the early stages of the Ṭarīqa non-conformists in the strict sense. In response to a question, Jaunpūrī said,

> The sound form (saḥīḥ) of taqlīd is to follow a statement (qawl) of a jurist (imām) only when an unabrogated, sound, and clear precept (naṣṣ-i ṣarīḥ saḥīḥ ghayr mansūkh) from the Prophet is not evident. Proper imitation of the Prophet (ʿayn-i ittibāʿ) is when one finds a tradition (qawl) of the Prophet, then under such conditions one should not follow anyone (discard following human authority taqlīd). This was the discursive approach (mazhab) of Imām Aʿzam [Abū Ḥanīfa, the

> eponymous founder of the Ḥanafī school], and all the scholars (aʾimma) of the faith. (Khān, 1992, 371)

Jaunpūrī fostered strong anti-Shīʿa sentiments as evident in his polemical epistle, *ʿArẓ-i-Nēk* (*Virtuous Entreaty*) attacking the Shīʿī doctrine of hereditary spiritual leaders (*imāma*) (Badāyunī, 2018, 208). His biographers record that he took pride in wresting the Jāmiʿ al-Kabīr, the historical congregational mosque of Jaunpūr from the control of the Shīʿa community. He established the madrasa al-Qurʾānīya at the mosque (al-Ḥasanī, 1413/1992). In *ʿAqāʾid Nāmā* (*Book on Creeds*), he sought to educate the masses on the fundamental beliefs of Islam in ordinary accessible Urdu. Jaunpūrī deemed the belief that prophets and saints could possess the knowledge of the unseen (*ʿilm-i ghayb*) as polytheistic in nature and deemed the benedictory rituals (*fātiḥa)* performed for the souls of the deceased, as heretical (*bidʿa)*. In *ʿAqāʾid Nāmā*, he defended Shāh Muḥammad Ismāʿīl's controversial doctrine on the impermissibility of humans interceding with God (*shafāʿat)* on behalf of other humans (Jaunpūrī, nd).

5.3 More Influences on Shafiʿ: Miyān Nazīr Ḥusayn

Shafīʿ the founder of Madrasatul Iṣlāḥ was not only informed and shaped by the genealogy of scholarship in which the teachings and influence of Jaunpūrī loomed large (Aʿẓamī, c. 1976, 345) but there were other influences too. After graduating from the madrasa in Dānāpūr, Shafīʿ went to study ḥadīth with the firebrand and influential reformist scholar in Delhi, Miyān Nazīr Ḥusayn (d. 1902). Nazīr Ḥusayn also known as Miyān Sāḥib or Shaikhul Kull, assumed the revered seat of scholarship that was left vacant by a very significant figure in piety and scholarship in Delhi, namely Shāh Muḥammad Isḥāq (d. 1846), maternal grandson of the renowned Shāh Walīyullāh.[2] Nazīr Ḥusayn transformed the momentum of the Ṭarīqa Muḥammadīya into a fully-fledged Ahl-i Ḥadīs tradition and successfully marshalled his influence through his myriads of students over a career spanning six decades.

As a disciple of Nazīr Ḥusayn, Shafīʿ started teaching in the madrasa of Dānāpūr from where he graduated. Despite a tryst with poetry and visitations to a spiritual retreat (*khānqāh*) hosted by the Ṣūfī master, Chānd Shāh, he surrendered to his strict ḥadīth-centric training and reformist orientation (Aʿẓamī, c. 1976, 345). Shafīʿ quickly turned to issues of social and religious reforms of Muslim society such as discouraging visitations to shrines, their associated festivities and ceremonies. He delivered sermons in the villages of Azamgarh and addressed communities on the need to adhere to the sound teachings of Islam. One biographer noted that he did get drawn into Ṣufī teachings neglecting his efforts at social reforms. However, his master Chānd Shāh reassured his disciple:

> My dear, Shafīʿ do not get yourself overwhelmed by these Ṣūfī affairs. You do not need to exceed whatever you are doing already. God is going to take a different kind of work from you. You will bring about social reforms among Muslims. Such a spring of religious knowledge (ʿilm-i dīn) will issue forth from you, whose grace (faiẓān) will bless places far and wide. (Aʿẓamī, c. 1976, 347)

After Chānd Shāh's death in 1899 Shafīʿ sought out another Ṣūfī master, Mawlānā Muḥammad Amīn Naṣīrābādī (d. 1930), who authorized him as qualified to induct spiritual disciples (*khilāfat-i mujāz)*. Chānd Shāh's prophecy, predicting that Shafīʿ would be the source of advancing religious knowledge was realized in the establishment of the seminary, Madrasatul Iṣlāḥ, in c. 1908. Shafīʿ's decades-long activism, as an itinerant reformist preacher was later consolidated into an association and then transformed into a madrasa.

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[2] Miyān Sāhab was an illustrious title given to the scholars of the famous Walīyullāhī family of Delhi. The fact that Nazīr Ḥusayn was addressed by the same title indicates to the outstanding position he had had in the intellectual circle of Delhi. Another title, Shaykhul, was given to him after his visit to the two holy cities in Islam, where he was sought to receive the *sanad* of hadīth by pilgrim scholars from various countries. He was also awarded the title, Shamsul 'Ulamā' by the British government. (Ḥusayn, nd, 11–12)

5.4 From Reform Movement to Educational Institution (1904–1908)

In 1904, Shafīʿ established an association known as *The Association for the Reform of Muslims- Anjuman Islāḥul Muslimīn*. An early document reported the first meeting of the *Anjuman* gained the overwhelming support of the people of Azamgarh who were devoted to reforming their society (Signatories, c. 1904). As the leader of the Anjuman, Shafīʿ viewed marriage ceremonies as the taproot and breeding ground for un-Islamic practices, extravagance and waste in the communal lives of Muslims. Therefore, the Anjuman aimed its efforts at reforming Muslim marriage practices as a matter of priority. In Shafīʿs view it meant lowering the extravagant amount of the marital present (*mahr*) to be promptly gifted to the bride, followed by a wedding ceremony and a feast after the nuptials known as the *walīma*. To reduce the extravagant practices, he proposed certain austerity reforms by seeking the support of Ḥājī ʿAbdul Karīm, a local landholder who endorsed his endeavors. It was the latter's son, Ḥamīduddīn Farāhī, an eminent Islamic scholar, who would a few decades later become a director and mentor at the Madrasatul Iṣlāḥ. Shafīʿ also sought the help and authority of Muftī Kifāyatullāh (d. 1952), a famous Deobandi jurist, to authorize and endorse his social austerity measures by eliciting a legal opinion (*fatwā*) stating that practices contradicting the teachings of the sharīʿa were clearly heresy (*bidʿa*). Kifāyatullāh validated Shafīʿs reforms and argued in his *fatwā* that even permissible actions could be subject to restrictions if such austerity measure served the public good (Shafīʿ & Kifāyatullāh, 1904). The collaboration between a Deobandī scholar and an Ahl-i Ḥadīṯ scholar was a unique one, since these two perspectives are otherwise hostile to each other, but on this issue, they found common ground.

At the fourth annual gathering of the Anjuman in 1908 a decision was taken to establish a madrasa in Sarā-yi Mīr, a village some 30 kms from the city of Azamgarh. The land was donated by local landholders in the village. It was the first madrasa ever to be built in the district of Azamgarh. The exact year in which the physical madrasa was established is unclear. In its early years, the madrasa was popularized as Madrasa Anjuman Iṣlāḥul Muslimīn or Madrasa Iṣlāḥul Muslimīn, taking the name of its patron association. It was later changed into Madrasatul Iṣlāḥ, *The Madrasa for Moral and Social Reform* on February 20, 1927 (Iṣlāḥī, 2001, 424). Mawlavī ʿAbdul Aḥad, and Mawlavī ʿAbdul Ghanī Phūlpūrī, all graduates from the Deoband Seminary, joined the madrasa as the first teachers. ʿAbdul Ghanī was an authorized disciple *(khalīfā-i mujāz)* of the illustrious Ṣufi master and scholar, Ashraf ʿAlī Thānvī (d. 1943) (Iṣlāḥī, 2001, 355).

6. The Curriculum of Madrasatul Iṣlāḥ

What set the Madrasatul Iṣlāḥ apart from other madrasas? Its serious commitment to a moderate form of Ahl-i Ḥadīṯ teachings, without creating any hostility against those who followed a law school and without alienating Ṣūfī circles. Hence, several Deoband graduates taught at the Madrasatul Iṣlāḥ. Shafīʿ himself was deeply invested in Ṣūfīsm. In the early twentieth century the idea of following the Ahl-i Ḥadīṯ tradition did not mean to neglect the injunction of attaining moral and spiritual purification (tazkiya).

The academic program of Madrasatul Iṣlāḥ was at the beginning very unclear. By all indications it followed the Nizāmī curriculum broadly speaking, but its mission was driven by the socio-religious reformist goals of the Anjuman and inspired by the founders of the Ṭarīqa Muḥammadīya. However, Shafīʿ could not devote all his energies to the madrasa and around 1919 the illustrious Ḥamīduddīn Farāhī (1863–1930) became the nāzim—the equivalent of a provost and administrator of the institution. According to the 1912 guidelines prepared by Farāhī the primary purpose of the madrasa is to "advance both religious and worldly education" (Farāhī, 1912, 2).

However, the syllabus, while retaining elements of the Dars-i Niẓāmī curriculum such as the emphasis

on the study of prophetic traditions (ḥadīth), Arabic literature, and the study of the Qurʾān, it also departed in significant ways. Mastery of Arabic was critical to the syllabus since a deep knowledge of the language made the nuances of the Qurʾān and the prophetic traditions more accessible. Shiblī and Shervānī's views on the Arabic language, the latter's concept of the nature of Islamic discourses are all resonant in the spirit of Madrasatul Iṣlāḥ's curriculum. Innovative was the inclusion of the study of the English language. Madrasatul Iṣlāḥ introduced 'new classics' of the Mālikī jurist and philosopher, Ibn Rushd (d. 1198) and the historian Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1406), as part of the curriculum, an unprecedented move in India. Yet, the selection was indicative of a more inclusive approach to Islamic thought. In subsequent decades since its founding, new subjects were introduced like social science, mathematics, science, Hindi, politics and history. This makes it an unparalleled madrasa curriculum compared to its peers in South Asia.

6.1 Ḥamīduddīn Farāhī: Intellectual Architect (1863–1930)

Farāhī was the real intellectual driving force of the revamped Madrasatul Iṣlāh which was then intimately organized around his authority as well as his scholarly orientation. Born in the village of Farīha in the district of Azamgarh, Farāhī memorized the Qurʾān and studied Persian at home. He excelled in Persian to such a high level that at the age of sixteen, he could compose poetry in the style of the 12th-century Persian poet, Khāqānī Shīrvānī (died c. 1190) (Nadvī, nd, 113–114). He also had an unsurpassed mastery of the Arabic language and its literature. Arabic, logic and philosophy were subjects he studied with his maternal cousin the renowned Shiblī Nuʿmānī in Azamgarh. Later he continued his studies with the doyen of Arabic scholars on the subcontinent at the time, Mawlānā Fayżul Ḥasan Sahāranpūrī (d. 1887) in Lahore. Sahāranpūrī was the Professor of Arabic language at the Oriental College in Lahore. The list of Farāhī's illustrious teachers also includes the renowned jurist and ḥadīth scholar ʿAbdul Ḥayy al-Lakhnavī (d. 1886), affiliated to the Farangī Maḥall seminary in Lucknow.

Shiblī Nuʿmānī's role in Farāhī's education was significant. Farāhī took admission at the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College (later Aligarh Muslim University) where Shiblī taught. Farāhī benefited from the inspirational environment of Aligarh where he had access to scholars like the poet and biographer Alṭāf Ḥusayn Ḥālī (d. 1914), the historian T.W. Arnold (d. 1930), and many distinguished figures. Around 1892, Farāhī acquired a BA degree from Allahabad University.

From 1897–1906 he taught at the Madrasatul Islam in Karachi. After a brief one-year spell teaching Arabic at Aligarh, he went on to teach at Muir Central College in Allahabad (1908–14), and then went on to serve as the principal at the Dārul ʿUlūm of Hyderabad (1914–19), which later became Osmania University, in which Shervānī had a significant role in its founding. In 1919, Farāhī resigned from the Dārul ʿUlūm and returned to Farīha, where he stayed till his death in 1930. Farāhī devoted the last 12 years of his life to administering Madrasatul Iṣlāḥ in Sarā-yi Mīr, which was located at a short distance from his village.

6.2 Curriculum Reform and Ideological Reorientation (1911–1930)

Since Shiblī Nuʿmānī's ideas of reform resonated with the leadership of Madrasatul Iṣlāḥ, he was a frequent visitor to the Anjuman's annual meeting. It was Nuʿmānī who inspired his cousin Farāhī to take an interest in the Madrasatul Iṣlāḥ. About a year before Nuʿmānī's death, Farāhī with his intellectual gifts and experience in education at first, gave long-distance advice to the leadership of the madrasa and later became fully involved. Nuʿmānī and Farāhī together proposed a new curriculum in 1911 and a structure for Madrasatul Iṣlāḥ, abandoning the Dars-i Niẓāmī curriculum. However, this change caused some offence to some faculty which then had ramifications that unfolded over time.

One faculty member ʿAbdul Ghanī Phūlpūrī, the disciple of Thānvī protested the new curiculum at Madrasatul Iṣlāḥ and parted ways. More than a decade later he established his own madrasa, Bayt al-ʿUlūm, in 1930 in the same village of Sarā-yi Mīr, which continued to follow the Dars-i Niẓāmī curriculum as taught at the Deoband seminary to this day. The leadership of the new Baytul ʿUlūm now also charged the new leadership at Madrasatul Iṣlāḥ of being committed to the necherī doctrine, meaning followers of natural philosophy and by implication their openness to subversive modern learning. Originally, the charge of being a necherī was levelled at Sayyid Aḥmad Khān to discredit him and his project of a modern Islamic College that later became Aligarh Muslim University by Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī also a traditionalist modernizer (See al-Afghānī & Keddie, 1983; Qāsmī, 2022, 45). A fatwā endorsed by prominent religious figures was later issued around 1936 to condemn, in the words of the illustrious Ashraf ʿAli Thānvī, the suspicion that "people in the madrasa [Madrasatul Iṣlāḥ] were being corrupted by new thoughts" resulting in a charge that both Nuʿmānī and Farāhī who were by then deceased, had not adhered to authorized mainstream theological doctrines (Daryābādī, 2015, 435; see 430–444). Merely adopting a new syllabus was itself a controversial act with myriads of implications.

6.3 Distinctive Educational Legacy and Continuity: Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāḥī and Beyond

One should consider Shafīʿ to be the spiritual founder of Madrasatul Iṣlāḥ and Farāhī as the intellectual and ideological architect of its ultimate promise. Later, Farāhī's student, Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāḥī (1904–1997) continued his teacher's orientation, but he also injected an element of revivalist politics into the orientation of the madrasa given his high-profile role as an ideologue in the Jamāt-i Islāmī, a religio-political movement. Iṣlāḥī also started a journal titled al-Iṣlāḥ in 1936 which gained a great deal of prominence, advanced the mission of the madrasa and spurred public debate but was discontinued in November 1939 (Iṣlāḥī, 1427/2007). After the partition of the subcontinent Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāḥī moved to Pakistan and continued his work in the newly formed state but resigned from the Jamāt-i Islāmī in the 1950's because of his differences with founder of the Jamāt, Abūl Aʿlā Mawdūdī (d. 1979).

Farāhī's goal was that the Madrasatul Iṣlāḥ should be an institution that provided both religious and secular education, but religious education would remain a high priority. "The reform and the prosperity of Muslims depend on religious education," stated a publicity document ("Ibtidā awr Naṣb," nd, 7). Its objectives included pre-eminent attention to the study of the Qurʾān, the study of prophetic reports (ḥadīth), Islamic law (fiqh) and the Arabic language. The curriculum, the founding documents said, should be effective, designed to create talented, as well as competent scholars; individuals who upheld a high standard of Islamic morality and spirituality. In Farāhī's view all other subjects would be subordinate to the "deliberative teachings" of the Qurʾān ("Ibtidā awr Naṣb," nd, 5). Ḥadīth and fiqh would be taught while irrelevant texts on logic, philosophy and dialectical theology were removed from the syllabus and replaced with a focus on the Arabic language and Arabic literature as the medium of the Qurʾān.

Farāhī argued that the Madrasatul Iṣlāḥ will be open to all groups under the banner of the theological orientation of the Ahl al-Sunna. This meant that those following the Ḥanafī school and the Ahl-i Ḥadīs would also be welcome. Farāhī very much railed against the trivial disputes among Muslims that generated futile polemics and dissipated constructive energies.

As much as the teaching of English and European learning were encouraged in the madrasa, the administration was ironically caught on the horns of a dilemma. For the administrators themselves were not entirely convinced about the Islamic character of learning a foreign European language like English as required in their syllabus. They debated, for instance, whether religiously mandated charity monies from the annual religious tax (zakāt) and voluntary donations (ṣadaqāt) could be expended for the study of English and secular subjects (Iṣlāḥī, 2001, 412–413)! The ethos of the institution stipulated that the

Muslim community would meet its expenditures and needs, and that it would take no government funds. The institution was also required to stay above the political fray, and it required that faculty be content with salaries that were sufficient for their needs.

Madrasatul Iṣlāḥ prized its genealogy to the Ṭarīqa Muḥammadīya as a social and political movement that advanced righteousness in society. The reformist impulse provided the right recipe for social and spiritual transformation to stop the decline of Islamic civilization and the waning fortunes of Muslims in colonial India. Only a proper and sound education anchored in the teachings of the Qurʾān could stop this rot and decline ("Ibtidā awr Naṣb," nd). In the words of Farāhī:

> History had witnessed that when the world was blanketed by widespread darkness, God brought light through the Qurʾān. Today, when Islam is rendered an exile and a stranger (gharīb), and the path offered by God is lost on His people, then only the light of the Qurʾān can open this closed door. Redress of the condition of the umma in this later period, can only be restored by the very thing, namely the Qurʾān, that made it flourish in the first instance. ("Ibtidā awr Naṣb," nd, 8)

Madrasatul Iṣlāh critiqued the curricula offerings provided by rival madrasas as not being sufficiently authentic and critiqued those institutions for lacking in presenting an authentic Islamic education. Their reasoning is obvious: the historical intellectual tradition taught in the other madrasas were an amalgam of historical and epistemological experiences of Muslims over time. The partisans of Madrastul Iṣlāḥ felt that those other madrasas were insufficiently tied to the Qurʾān in word and spirit. Advocates of the Madrastul Iṣlāḥ are rhetorically very effective in their claim that their educational model would restore religious and theological education, if only it were adopted by others. They also charged that religious scholars were engaged in reading and debating the commentaries and glosses of the past scholars without effectively and directly grasping the message of the Qurʾān. They particularly reserved their ire for the use of the Biblical tradition (Isrāʾīlīyāt), an Islamic genre of literature used to fill the back stories to cryptic Qurʾānic references of Biblical events and figures. That genre of literature, Farāhī claimed, was unreliable and detrimental to the understanding of the revelation of the Qurʾān. This was tantamount to the renunciation of the Qurʾān, his criticism continued, that resulted in the fragmentation of the Muslim community into warring and rival sects.

Even though the advocates of the Madrasatul Iṣlāḥ promoted modern education, they were opposed to an exclusive colonial education since it was a sure way to make Islam and Muslims subordinate to modern trends and practices. Instead of Muslims viewing the Qurʾān as the eternal standard, instead the achievements of modernity was being brandished as a measure of success—an unacceptable standard and which its advocates largely rejected. Muslims, in Farāhī's view must strive to cast the times in which they lived into the mold of the likes and dislikes of God and the Prophet, no one else. Muslims achieved this goal during the time of the Prophet and even after his passing, a move which brought them great success. It was time to re-implement that vision, in Farāhī's view. In so doing, the institution carved out a third position to generate a unique form of cultural capital. Cultural fields can strive for autonomy in ways that economic and political fields are unable to do.

7. Conclusion

This case study thus illuminates broader theoretical questions about educational autonomy, the curriculum as cultural politics, and the role of educational institutions in preserving cultural identity under colonial conditions. The reconceptualization of the curriculum at Madrasatul Iṣlāḥ did have the salient effect to produce religious scholars who cultivated a critical, historical and autobiographical approach to knowledge and learning.

The various religious figures involved in the Madrasatul Iṣlāḥ and beyond, like Shervānī, adopted

several position-taking strategies. This allowed them to maintain religious authenticity. At the same time, they could selectively engage with modernity and demonstrated that educational institutions can function as sites for both cultural reproduction and transformation.

Islamic education, especially the education of the religious leaders (ʿulamā) has been a complex challenge to the Muslims of South Asia, now divided between India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. A segment of the ʿulamā is deeply committed to a complex discursive tradition that the generic madrasa promised to inculcate. But it would be fair to say that the madrasa did not always live up to the promise of the Muslim Republic of Letters to successfully deliver a meaningful and complex education for theologians in the twenty-first centuries.

However, a group of scholars that we have identified as moderate reform-minded traditionalists or traditionalist reformists have made a slightly different hermeneutical intervention in the tradition. This has resulted in a Qurʾān and ḥadīth-centered approach, one iteration of which was launched at the Madrasatul Iṣlāḥ in Azamgarh. Several key figures in this Qurʾān-centered approach coupled to the ḥadīth movement, might have had Nuʿmānī and Āzād as figureheads, but it was largely amplified by Farāhī and Iṣlāḥī. The contemporary successor to both is Javed Aḥmad Ghāmidī of Pakistan who is now located in the United States, where this version of tradition is gaining appeal in Pakistan and elsewhere. This tradition has emerged as possessing a resilient sense of self-belief and confidence in its discourse to have ready-made answers to all kinds of complex questions. The more complex intellectual tradition as part of the ancient madrasa tradition is obviously unable to articulate its viewpoint with sufficient clarity and sophistication, given a decline in the intellectual capacity of dyed-in-the-wool traditionalists.

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