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The Politics of Dreams: Religious Imagination and the Making of Political Communities in South Asia

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ABSTRACT

A dream is the most personal aspect of a being which cannot be seen, measured, or verified. This paper examines the process of a personal, unprovable dream becoming part of the public sphere. The question this paper addresses is: How does the dream, as a socially constructed legitimization narrative in religion, influence the nature of political legitimization and authority? This paper adopts religious constructivist theory. It suggests that dreams are not observed but can be given political relevance. They become politically meaningful through socially and religiously constructed meanings. This study employs qualitative methodology, using primary sources of hadith literature, books of Islamic History, historical texts on the Deobandi traditions, social media lectures, speeches, Durus, and anthropological literature on Islamic dreams. This article analyzes three case studies that shape multiple Islamic Identities in modern South Asia: dreams in the Sufi tradition and the making of Deoband (Making of Deoband Madrassa); dreams and Barelwi Politics in Pakistan; and Mullah Omar and the beginning of the Taliban, all grounded in religious dreams. In these cases, political authority grows out of shared belief rather than force alone. This paper seeks to contribute to the literature on religious authority and religious dreams.

Keywords: Dreams, Religion, Political Authority, Deoband, Barelwi, Hadith, Taliban

INTRODUCTION

People consider a dream to be the most private possession of a person. No one else can see someone's dream, measure it, or determine whether it happened at all. At various times in the history of religions, and primarily in the history of Islam, dreams overflowed from private life to the public domain. A dream told at the right time and to the right people endowed kings, supported movements, stopped wars, and sent people to death. The paper investigates the peculiar journey of dreams from personal experiences to becoming significant political phenomena.

The argument formulated in the paper is easy to understand, but scarcity and fragmentation of literature have made it difficult to interpret in the right way. The paper does not claim



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that dreams make predictions or give people information about upcoming events. This statement belongs to the field of theology and is not considered in the present paper. The main point of the present research is that a dream obtains political meaning only when the community recognizes and interprets it. In those cases when a dream is not known, it has no impact on politics. A dream which the community hears, believes, and narrates turns out to be an instrument to obtain authority, to rally followers, and to bring about a feeling of destiny to the movement.

Pakistan provides an everyday example of how important dreams and other unverifiable religious experiences have become for everyday life. In Pakistan, a person who is making a difficult decision, whether it is related to marriage, starting a business, or a disease, often resorts to *istikhara*.¹ When an individual sees such a dream, he usually does not keep it as a private matter. Instead, he tells his family, *pir* (spiritual guide), or local *alim* (Islamic Scholar) about it. It is the narrative of the dream, and the faith of listeners that make it as valuable as it is.

The following three episodes from Pakistani politics show how dreams are revealed and brought into the public sphere. In 2013, President Asif Ali Zardari twice postponed a formal ceremony. Foreign envoys were to present their credentials to Zardari during a formal ceremony, which, according to sources who spoke with Dawn, due to a decision by the *Pir* to stay close to the seashore to prevent bad luck and unspecified evil influences.² Another example comes from Maulana Abdur Rahim, an alim and pir from Shangla, Swat, who claims that he, in his dream, saw Abu Bakr Siddique in the guise of JUI-F's Maulana Fazl-ur-Rehman, wearing the same yellow turban wore by Maulana Fazl Ur Rehman. He narrates that while performing *Umrah*, he approached JUI-F's chief asking to share the dream, and as they reached the tomb of Abu Bakr Siddique, he shared the dream. He was overcome with emotion, an account that seems to be factually true but serves to place Fazl's religious and political authority in the lineage of the first caliphate.³ The third one is a recounting of Maulana Fazl ur Rehman's own dream he had during his time in Bannu several years ago, when he claims he spoke by phone with Hazrat Adam, the first Prophet. When asked what he wanted, he says that he asked for peace, then a long pause, due to his reverence, for which he was afraid to press further, but finally overcoming he asked again. Adam replied, "Can't you wait?". Then, Fazl-ur-Rehman explained to his audience that "Abba"⁴ himself had instructed them to be patient in the face of the difference in approach of his party, but once the army and state institutions had gone out to restore peace, everyone should rally behind the government.⁵ In each scenario, not the dream itself but its re-telling, and the public's, or the followers', or the family's acceptance of it, make the nocturnal experience public, a public instrument of political and religious authority.

The same reasoning applies when it comes to larger affairs. All that helps you manage a personal wedding or recover from a disease or taking decision on political issues also helps lead something as big as a religious institute or an entire country. A single dream may give birth to a school (religious school/seminary/madrasa) and lead to a new community or even an army, provided it is shared and received positively by others. This paper traces these

¹ A prayer recited before going to sleep to receive guidance through dreams.

² Shahzad Raza, "Superstitious" Zardari Delays Diplomatic Formalities', Dawn, 25 June 2013, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1020705/superstitious-zardari-delays-diplomatic-formalities>.

³ Apna Battagram News, 'Maulana Abdur Rahim Sahib Recounts His Dream about Maulana Fazlur Rehman', Facebook, 21 March 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=305488011674641>.

⁴ Abba is urdu meaning father, used to recall father in respect. Hazrat Adam (A.S) is considered the father of mankind in Islamic lore.

⁵ 'Abba Ne Keh Diya Hai Ke Intezar Karo Kyunkay...', Daily Pakistan, 21 January 2018, <https://dailypakistan.com.pk/21-Jan-2018/717363>.



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upward movements through the modern history of religion in South Asia, where the dream has been a good example of the proper application of authority. This place is well suited to the argument, as the major religions of the region paid special attention to keeping records of dreams and, thus, have left plenty of materials to analyze.

The inquiry is based on three cases that comprehensively represent the different forms of dream-based authority in the region under study. The first case concerns the establishment of the Deoband Madrassa as an alternative educational system to Lord Macaulay and resistance to colonial power. Dreams of the Prophet and of previous religious masters, interpreted in a Sufi context, validated the creation of a new school and the system of madrasas it established. Later, these dreams served as the inspiration for an anti-colonial movement, Tehreek-e-Reshmi Rumal (Silk Letter Movement), and the formation of the religious-political party Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind (JUH). Most Muslims in the subcontinent followed Sufi-Barelwi Islam⁶, as the second case illustrates Barelwi political spirituality and its role in creating Pakistan, with religiosity centered on the Prophet and visions of the Prophet enabling the creation of a mass religious movement that demanded the formation of a territory that would serve as the fortress of Islam. The third case, which examines the emergence of the Taliban, in which Mullah Omar's dream of the Prophet was transformed into a source of charismatic authority, giving birth to the movement and subsequently the emirate. A century later, Deobandi resistance persisted but this time in a more violent form. The cases differ in scope: they cover a school, a country, and a state. But in each, for the dream to gain a sense of authority, a community must "verify" the dream and must admit its truth.

Literature Review

The current study lies at the crossroads of two academic fields: On the one hand, the study of dreams in Islam and, on the other, the study of spiritual politics and legitimization of power. A third is more specific literature on religion in South Asia that links the two and finds the paper's cases.

All major religions consider the dream to be a way in which the divine communicates with human beings, and the Prophet Muhammad's tradition of dreaming is among the most extensive of any religion. The very Qur'an itself is opening that door. In Chapter 12, Surah Yousaf, *Yousaf* (Joseph) reveals to his father the dream in which he saw the sun, moon, and eleven stars bowing down to him. This one dream is the driving force of the entire chapter, as Joseph's ability to interpret dreams ultimately leads to his rise to power in Egypt and spares the country from famine. Chapter 37, Surah As-Saffat, gives the location of this event, placing it at the very heart of the Muslim text, a dream, stating that this is as valid as if God had spoken to Abraham. In fact, Muhammad's own prophetic experience was dream-like, and, according to Islam, the first glimpses of Islam itself were dream-like with dreamlike lights before Gabriel appeared to him bodily in the cave of Hira.⁷

This theme is continued in the hadith literature and has been given a political dimension that is hinted at in the Qur'an. According to one source, Muhammad had multiple visions of his companion Umar, and this vision is recalled as a kind of forerunner to Umar's eventual ascension to caliphate.⁸ The rule that has guided the Muslims after that is based on another hadith: "Whoever sees me in dreams, then he sees me in wakefulness, and Satan

⁶ Muhammad Ibrahim Shah and others, 'Religious Biopolitics and Public Health: Analyzing Ulema's Role in Politicizing Polio Vaccine among Pashtuns in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP)', *Review of Education, Administration and Law* 9, no. 1 (2026): 273–82, <https://doi.org/10.47067/real.v9i1.485>.

⁷ Kelly Bulkeley, *Dreaming in the World's Religions: A Comparative History* (New York University Press, 2008).

⁸ Bulkeley, *Dreaming in the World's Religions: A Comparative History*.



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cannot take my likeness. That is why, when a ruler, scholar or militant dreams of the Prophet, the dream must be true, as Satan could not impersonate the Prophet.⁹ A dream of Muhammad is treated as automatically true, which supports the argument that dreams carry so much authority whenever a ruler, a scholar, or a militant reports one. The saying “Good dreams are one forty-sixth of prophecy” completes the picture: dreaming is defined as a minor, but real form of revelation, accessible in principle to all believers, and not only to prophets.¹⁰

From a religious basis emerged the science of *tabir*, or dream interpretation, initially associated with Ibn Sirin, who said that the same image in a dream may have two different interpretations depending on the dreamer’s personality. Later philosophers such as Ibn Arabi and Ibn Khaldun created detailed frameworks distinguishing between dreams from God, dreams needing interpretation, and dreams that are nothing, but confusion sent by Satan. Ibn Khaldun even claimed that sleep was created by God to serve these purposes. While this scholarly tradition existed, ordinary Muslims used *istikhara*.¹¹ The Sufi orders developed their own tradition of dreams based on the one presented above. Ottoman chronicles preserve a parallel political version of the same practice: the founding dream of Osman I, ancestor of the Ottoman dynasty, and a later, strikingly similar dream of Sultan Osman II, in which the Prophet himself appears to judge the ruler’s conduct. In each case, the dream becomes historically significant only when it is told to someone else and accepted as true. As one modern scholar of Ottoman dream narratives notes, a dream that is never communicated, orally or in writing, simply disappears from the record and from politics.¹²

This tradition was uniquely manifested in institutions in South Asia, and a contemporary literature can be mobilized to demonstrate how dreams have undergirded specific seminaries, movements, and states. The three cases used in the present paper are found in this regional literature. The most obvious is the Deobandi tradition. Barbara Metcalf’s *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860–1900* is the book that sets the framework for the role of a network of reforming ulama that lacked a state Islamically from 1857 onward and re-established religious authority around the seminary of Deoband. It shows that the movement’s founders, Muhammad Qasim Nanautvi and Rashid Ahmad Gangohi, were trained on the Sufi path by Hajji Imdadullah Muhajir Makki, who carried a Sufi inheritance in which dreams of the Prophet and of departed masters counted as valid spiritual evidence.¹³ The founding narratives themselves preserve this pattern: early Deobandi accounts record that Sayyid Muhammad Abid, the seminary’s first principal, saw the Prophet in a dream before the school was established, a vision later remembered as part of its sacred charter.¹⁴ Qari Muhammad Tayyab’s *Dar-ul-Uloom Deoband kī Sad Salah Zindagī* documents the seminary’s institutional history while focusing on the key role of dreams in its founding narrative.¹⁵ The work illustrates how visionary experiences were incorporated into the religious memory and moral legitimacy of one of South Asia’s

⁹ Bulkeley, *Dreaming in the World’s Religions: A Comparative History*.

¹⁰ Bulkeley, *Dreaming in the World’s Religions: A Comparative History*.

¹¹ Muhammad ibn Sirin, *Ta’bir al-Ru’ya* (al-Matba’ah al-’Ilmiyyah, 1893).

¹² Gottfried Hagen, ‘Dreaming Osmans: Of History and Meaning’, in *Dreams and Visions in Islamic Societies*, ed. Özgen Felek and Alexander D. Knysh (State University of New York Press, 2012).

¹³ Barbara D. Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860–1900* (Princeton University Press, 1982).

¹⁴ Syed Mehboob Rizvi, *Tarikh-i Dar al-Ulum Deoband*, vol. 1 (Idarah-i Ihtimam Dar al-Ulum Deoband, 1977).

¹⁵ Qari Muhammad Tayyab, *Dar Al-Ulum Deoband Ki Sad Salah Zindagi* (Daftar-i Ihtimam Dar al-Ulum Deoband, 1965).



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most influential Islamic institutions. The Urdu history *Nasheeb o Faraz* by Muhammad Ismail al-Husni, though written mainly about recent factional conflict within the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (F) between Muhammad Khan Sherani and Fazl-ur-Rehman, documents a century of internal disputes reaching back to Deoband and the Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind, and it preserves many of the dream-narratives that circulated within these circles.¹⁶ SherAli Tareen's *Defending Muhammad in Modernity* places the Deobandi self-understanding within the long doctrinal contest with the Barelwis over the status and presence of the Prophet, the same contest in which dream-claims often carried argumentative weight.¹⁷

The Barelwi movement forms the devotional counter-current, and in this context dreams and visions of the Prophet are even more central. Usha Sanyal's studies of Ahmad Riza Khan Barelwi and the Ahl-e Sunnat movement describe a piety organized around love of the Prophet, his intercession, and his felt presence, in which seeing the Prophet in a dream is recognized as a mark of spiritual standing.¹⁸ Recent scholarship shows that these devotional practices continued to influence the political identity of Barelwis in postcolonial Pakistan. Ahmed argues that Barelwi religiosity stems from Sufi traditions where emotional bonding to the Prophet is focused and the sanctity of saints is emphasized, and later the formal politicization of the people into political movements with names like Jamiat Ulema-e-Pakistan (JUP), Sunni Tehreek (ST), and Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP).¹⁹

The third strand is the most recent and the most violent. Iain Edgar's work on "true dreams" in contemporary Islam, including his case study of the Taliban leader Mullah Omar, shows how a reported dream of the Prophet became the charismatic foundation of an armed movement. Building on a conversation with journalist Rahimullah Yusufzai, Edgar recounts how Omar's rule over his commanders and followers depended mostly on their understanding that his decisions were divinely provided to him in his sleep.²⁰ This is perhaps the most transparent example of the mechanism discussed in this paper whereby a private vision, once told and believed, becomes a political mandate.

There is a separate body of scholarship dedicated to political theology, the general question of how the religious ideas lend or contest political authority. Typically, this literature addresses the question from the perspective of ideology, doctrine and institutions and charismatic leadership. Since the times of Émile Durkheim, sociologists of religion have demonstrated the importance of religious symbols for cohering a group together and distinguishing them from other people. Anthropologists of Islam, such as Talal Asad, have questioned the easy Western habit of drawing a firm line between religious and secular reasoning, arguing that the categories themselves were produced by a particular historical and political process rather than given in nature.²¹ Charles Taylor's study of social imagination is concerned with how the average individual sees their world and its moral system, often not through theoretical frameworks but through the images and stories they encounter and their emotional state.²² Giorgio Agamben has shown that religious notions of God's governance and glory were preserved in modern secular governance, so that state

¹⁶ Muhammad Ismail al-Husni, *Nasheeb o Faraz* (Dar ul Baseerah, 2022).

¹⁷ SherAli Tareen, *Defending Muhammad in Modernity* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2020).

¹⁸ Usha Sanyal, *Devotional Islam and Politics in British India: Ahmad Riza Khan Barelwi and His Movement, 1870–1920* (Oxford University Press, 1999).

¹⁹ Arslan Ahmed and Bilal Zafar Ranjha, *Salafising Barelwiyyat: Salafi Doctrine of Al Wala' Wal Bara and TLP Politics in Pakistan*, 2021.

²⁰ Iain R. Edgar, 'The "True Dream" in Contemporary Islamic/Jihadist Dreamwork: A Case Study of the Dreams of Taliban Leader Mullah Omar', *Contemporary South Asia* 15, no. 3 (2006): 263–72.

²¹ Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford University Press, 2003).

²² Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Duke University Press, 2004).



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machinery still bears a religious signature even when it is not so named.²³ Hent de Vries and other scholars of religion in the public sphere have likewise pushed back against the assumption that modern politics has left religion behind, showing that religious reasoning keeps reappearing in supposedly secular debate.²⁴

What this literature on political theology rarely does, however, is look closely at the dream as a specific unit of religious experience with its own political career. Political theology studies sermons, doctrines, and institutions. Studies of dreaming, by contrast, mostly come from psychology, anthropology, or the history of mysticism, and they look at dreams from inside the individual mind or inside a single ritual tradition, without asking how a dream travels outward into a political movement. Patrick McNamara's work, for instance, is representative of the psychological and evolutionary approach: he treats dreaming as a biological function of REM sleep that religion has recruited to solve problems of cooperation and trust within small groups, a genuinely useful insight, but one that stops at the level of the individual brain and does not ask how a dream becomes a shared political fact for thousands of people who never dreamed it themselves.²⁵

A gap therefore exists between these two literatures. Scholars of political theology explain political identity without paying much attention to dreams. Scholars of dreaming explain the experience of dreaming without paying much attention to its downstream political life. Very few studies ask the question this paper asks: how does a dream, which begins as a private and unverifiable experience, become a shared political resource that can crown a ruler, launch a movement, or send a young man to die? Religious Constructivism, set out in the next section, is offered here as a way of closing that gap. It shows how a personal experience is transformed, through interpretation and social acceptance, into a shared political reality.

Theoretical Framework: Religious Constructivism

Berger and the Social Construction of the Sacred

Religious Constructivism, as used in this paper, is an extension of the constructivist tradition in the study of politics and international relations. Ordinary constructivism takes a look at what appears to be a reality of political life—borders, sovereignty, the national interest—and asks that we regard them as constructions of a common set of beliefs and repeated practices. Religious Constructivism is built on this starting point with religion not at the periphery but in the center. It is based on only a few assumptions. Reality, political reality as well as other realities, is not a given but socially created. Symbols that have religious significance are created collectively, not discovered as ready-made objects. Prophecy, dreams, and visions are of political significance only as people of faith come to the conclusion that these are of significance. Such accepted narratives can be effectively used by religious leaders to create legitimate narratives. Political authority, in short, can arise out of a sacred story much like it can out of coercion or an army.

In Peter Berger's book *The Sacred Canopy*, the sociologist provides the working machinery for this argument. "Society is not the place where people are just born into, rather it is something that people construct." (Berger 129) He divides this building process into three consecutive stages. The first step of externalization is that man, unlike the other animals, is an underdetermined being because he has to externalize his thoughts and actions in the

²³ Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, trans. Lorenzo Chiesa (Stanford University Press, 2011).

²⁴ Hent de Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan, eds, *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World* (Fordham University Press, 2006).

²⁵ Patrick McNamara, *Dreams and Visions: How Religious Ideas Emerge in Sleep and Dreams* (Praeger, 2016).



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shared world, which is not determined by nature itself.²⁶ Objectivation is the second step, this external, human-constructed world feels like reality, it feels as if it's a thing, a thing that confronts everyone in a certain way, and the way it confronts everyone is the way it feels like a thing, created by generations of human speakers. The third step is the internalization, when the individual brings this world inside himself in the process of upbringing and socialization, so that it no longer feels invented, but rather real.²⁷

For Berger, religion is the most potent instrument created by humans to accomplish these three steps. It is “the human enterprise by which a sacred cosmos is constituted”, a nomos so complete that nobody remembers that they have created it and they live as if it was the natural order of the world. To maintain its force, such a nomos requires ongoing social support, and Berger refers to this social support as a plausibility structure, which is a network of individuals, institutions and rituals that routinely reinforce the shared belief as “true”. If the plausibility structure is robust the sacred canopy above a community is not without question. If it is weakened, however, through scandal or defeat and by the obvious emergence of competing beliefs, the entire nomos is unstable and vulnerable to attack.

Why Religious Constructivism Fits the Study of Dreams

The study of political dreaming is a near perfect fit into Berger's framework since a dream is the smallest scale example of the externalization-objectivation-internalization cycle. When a person is asleep, he has a personal experience. He externalizes it by talking about it to others, typically to a scholar or a family member or a religious official who is responsible for receiving, and judging, such reports. Once the dream is accepted as a “true dream” in the language of the hadith, it becomes an objective, actual fact, to which the community can refer, to retell, to build, as a language or a law is a fact once many people treat it as one. Last but not least, a dream is internalized (re-enacted, preached, remembered) by those who never even had it, until it becomes a familiar, rather than an unprovable part of community history.

It is for this reason that the case of Mullah Omar's cloak, so extensively discussed in later, is so well suited to the constructivist reading and can be given no other. No one can confirm that Mullah Omar was given a true vision or dream to restore peace and order to Kandahar. What can be established, and what did the political work, is the stance of a council of over a thousand mullahs accepting the claim and coupling it to the sacred object of the cloak of the Prophet, and the issuance of Omar amir al-mu'minin, commander of the faithful, based on this acceptance.²⁸ But there was no proof to the dream, or the vision. The folks in the community made the decision that it did.

Dreams as Sacred Knowledge in Early Islam

Its origin is the practice of the Prophet's (s) own Companions. The hadiths report that when the companions of the Messenger of God saw their dreams while he was still alive, they would bring them to him and he would interpret their dreams as God willed, meaning, he would interpret them as God had ordained.²⁹ The entire logic of Religious Constructivism is already encapsulated in this one sentence. There is no intrinsic meaning to the private dream of a Companion. It was only when Muhammad, the most trusted among the community, said something about it that it became meaningful, and from there on it became authoritative. His dreams of Umar are remembered by later generations as a precursor to Umar's fitness to lead the community after the death of Muhammad, a

²⁶ Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Doubleday, 1967).

²⁷ Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*.

²⁸ 'Mullah Omar', *Diplomat Magazine*, 3 November 2021.

²⁹ Bulkeley, *Dreaming in the World's Religions: A Comparative History*.



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testimony to the power of the dream reported by one man to settle a question of succession which would otherwise be settled in tribal politics and personal rivalry.³⁰

It was an inherited and expanded practice by the Sufi orders and among the Sufis the dream was a routine instrument for establishing spiritual ranking. A disciple who dreamed of the Prophet, or even his own deceased shaykh, giving him the permission (ijazah) to teach could offer that dream as proof of his ability, to a community who had no means of verifying what was going on in his heart.³¹ As Sufism is, by definition, an authority on an invisible inner state, dreams filled a gap not to be filled by any worldly certificate. A Sufi order was unable to open a disciple's heart to look inside, but it was able to listen to his dream, judge as to whether it resembled any known pattern of a "true dream" and accept or reject his claim to succession on this basis. This made the dream one of the most effective legitimization mechanisms in the inner, unofficial life of Sufi institutions, as it turned the private experience of the dream into the public narrative that people can check in their interaction with it.

The Ottoman material discussed by Gottfried Hagen is of a material form that brings the same argument, from religious to explicit dynastic power. The initial dream of the Ottoman founder, Osman I, ancestor of the entire Ottoman dynasty, was to combine religious sanction with political succession, and that was exactly what happened - from the start of the dynasty the dream became a fixed scene in the Ottoman chronicles.³² A century and a half later, Sultan Osman II is said to have had a dream in which the Prophet himself descended from his throne and scolded him, a dream which he told to his tutor, at a time when he had a serious political crisis and two days before he was deposed and murdered in a riot.³³ Hagen makes the constructivist point straightaway: the dream is presented in the chronicles as an objective reality, there is no trace of doubt about its veracity or about the authority of the ruler to interpret it because it was he, the representative of the state, who had to be instructed in this way.³⁴

Dreams, Darul Uloom Deoband and Pragmatic Politics

The history of Darul Uloom Deoband illustrates that dreams can bolster religious authority without directly influencing political initiatives. The madrasa was established in the wake of the 1857 war of independence, which failed and ended Muslim political rule, forcing the ulama to rethink their role under British rule. Rather than going the way of armed resistance or the immediate quest for political power, the founders chose to take the institutional route for religious education, scholarly continuity, and moral reform. Dreams validated the institutional legitimacy, and political decisions were based on the evolving political landscape. Spiritual symbolism and political pragmatism merge in this Deobandi experience and provide a fascinating example of Religious Constructivism.

The founder members of Darul Uloom Deoband, Muhammad Qasim Nanautvi and Rashid Ahmad Gangohi, inherited the Chishti-Sabiri Sufi tradition from their spiritual guide Haji Imdadullah Muhajir Makki.³⁵ Thus, although the movement was characterized by a reformist emphasis on the scripture, it never completely abandoned mystical aspects of Islamic spirituality.³⁶ Dreams were still seen as a form of the sacred that could give individual comfort and moral orientation, and particularly those of the Prophet Muhammad

³⁰ Bulkeley, *Dreaming in the World's Religions: A Comparative History*.

³¹ Hagen, 'Dreaming Osmans: Of History and Meaning'.

³² Hagen, 'Dreaming Osmans: Of History and Meaning'.

³³ Hagen, 'Dreaming Osmans: Of History and Meaning'.

³⁴ Hagen, 'Dreaming Osmans: Of History and Meaning'.

³⁵ Rizvi, *Tarikh-i Dar al-Ulum Deoband*, vol. 1.

³⁶ Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860-1900*.



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and respected saints were recognized as true. The Deobandi scholars, however, took care to differentiate between revelation (waḥy) and true dreams (ru'yā ṣāliḥah), dreams that could inspire believers, but that could not provide the basis for law or change Islamic teachings, for this was a kind of revelation that had come to an end with the Prophet Muhammad. This separation enabled the movement to hold on to its Sufi traditions while clinging to the law and textual study.³⁷

The origins of Darul Uloom Deoband explain the institutionalization of dreams. It is recorded in history that the seminary's first principal, Sayyid Muhammad Abid, witnessed the Prophet Muhammad in his dream before the seminary was established.³⁸ This vision would later be recalled as proof of divine acceptance of Deoband's educational mission by later generations. Significant, however, is that the dream did not serve as the grounds for the foundation of the seminary, but rather was given meaning after the fact, in a collective interpretation. The visionary experiences in the institutional history of the Madrasa also reveal the process of integrating dreams in the narrative that reinforced the moral authority and history of the institution under the leadership of Qari Muhammad Tayyab. From a Religious Constructivist standpoint, the significance of these dreams from both a political and religious perspective is not related to their actual occurrence but to the common understanding among the Deobandi scholarly community of what meaning is given to them.

The symbolic role of dreams became particularly important in view of the fact that Deoband was deprived of state patronage. The seminary, unlike previous Islamic institutions that had been supported by Muslim rulers, relied on public trust, the reputation of its scholars and voluntary contributions.³⁹ The dream stories thus helped to establish the impression that the institution was divinely blessed, even though it lacked political power. These accounts helped build trust of students as well as scholars and lay Muslims and helped shape a group identity that was grounded in scholarship and spirituality. Dreams served as such as legitimizing devices, not as tools for doctrinal innovation.

Deobandi scholars, on the contrary, repeatedly adjusted to new political situations, while never losing or changing their institutions. In fact, many of the Deobandi ulama during British rule were involved in anti-colonial politics through Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind (JUH) and advocated composite Indian nationalism rather than a separate Muslim state. After Partition, however, many JUH scholars began to influence Pakistan's political system through constitutional politics, parliamentary activities, and religious activism. These changes were not theological or merely dream-based, but political. In this sense, dreams were more about symbolic continuity than politics, which was more responsive to historical reality.

This relationship is further reflected by the recurring of dream narratives in Deobandi political discourse. In that era when Deobandi organizations were not in harmony, many dream accounts are found in the *Nasheeb o Faraz* of Muhammad Ismail al-Husni. Such visions typically bolstered the political authority of religious leaders or helped unite the community, but they were not necessarily used as the primary criterion for making political decisions.⁴⁰ Instead, they strengthened old networks of scholarly authority and institutional legitimacy and made them even more powerful and credible. Political decisions continued

³⁷ Brannon D. Ingram, 'Deobandis Abroad: Sufism, Ethics and Polemics in a Global Islamic Movement'. PhD Dissertation, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2011

³⁸ Rizvi, *Tarikh-i Dar al-Ulum Deoband*, vol. 1.

³⁹ Tayyab, *Darul Uloom Deoband Ki Sad Salah Zindagi*.

⁴⁰ al-Husni, *Nasheeb o Faraz*.



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to be made through consultation, juristic reasoning, and strategic calculations about the evolving political landscape.

In the case of the Deobandis, then, the dreaming and the pragmatic political are not mutually exclusive. Dreams did not directly lead to political action but rather helped to shape the symbolic world that mediated the understanding of religious power, the continuity of institutions, and the reinforcement of the group's collective identity. Political behavior, however, was still determined by pragmatic issues that came out of colonialism, nationalism, state formation, and electoral competition. This distinction makes clear a key point in Religious Constructivism: dreams become meaningful because of the meanings religious communities give them, and the political power they derive from them depends on how the meaning of the dream is mobilized within other institutional and historical contexts. In the case of Darul Uloom Deoband, visionary experiences did not supplant pragmatic political thought, but they did give a symbolic validation to a religious movement to weather the storm of political change in more than a century.

Dreams, Pirs, and Barelwi Politics in Pakistan

This whole world of devotion, dream, saint and sacred narrative was inherited by Pakistan and in many ways bolstered. As for devotional intimacy with the Prophet Muhammad, the Barelwi school, which is the majority devotional tradition in Pakistan's Sunni community, believes that the person of the Prophet Muhammad is *hazir*. *o nazir* (present and watching), and so devotional intimacy with him, from dreams to ordinary piety, would remain a living and expected part of ordinary devoutness rather than a mere relic of the past.⁴¹ Punjab and Sindh have the most shrines of pirs and Sufi saints, and annual *urs* feasts are held at their graves, and their caretakers, all of which signal to the ordinary faithful that the unseen world is close and accessible, even in the dreams of ordinary people. Beyond doctrine, several Barelwi pirs lent direct organizational weight to the Pakistan movement. Pir Jamaat Ali Shah, president of the All-India Sunni Conference, toured the country urging his Naqshbandi following to back the Muslim League, and the Third All India Sunni Conference of 1946, held under his presidency and attended by roughly two hundred thousand people, formally endorsed the demand for Pakistan.⁴² Other Barelwi mashaikh, such as Syed Faiz-ul Hassan Shah and various shrine-holding pirs across Punjab, similarly lent their spiritual authority to Jinnah's League, though, as Usha Sanyal notes, this support was shaped as much by rivalry with the Deobandi-led Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind as by any settled theological vision of an Islamic state.⁴³

How this devotional culture, nurtured over centuries on the basis of dreams, saints, and proximity to the Prophet (saws), could be channeled toward a completely modern political agenda is evident in the rise of Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) after 2015. TLP emerged from the reverence that was attached to Mumtaz Qadri, the police guard who murdered Punjab governor Salmaan Taseer for his criticism of Pakistan's blasphemy law in 2011, and was defined almost solely by the demand to protect the dignity of the Prophet

⁴¹ Arslan Ahmed and Fakhar Bilal, *Intra-Sunni Polemical Indifferences: Revamping the Barelwi Hermeneutics of Eshq-e-Rasool and Tehreek-e-Labbaik (TLP) Electoral Politics in Pakistan*, 3, no. 1 (2022).

⁴² 'Mullahs and the Making of Pakistan: A Story of Rejection, Realignment and Reinvention', The Friday Times, 22 July 2025, <https://www.thefridaytimes.com/22-Jul-2025/mullahs-and-the-making-of-pakistan-a-story-of-rejection-realignment-and-reinvention>.

⁴³ Sanyal, *Devotional Islam and Politics in British India: Ahmad Riza Khan Barelwi and His Movement, 1870–1920*.



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from any perceived insult on foreign or domestic fronts.⁴⁴ Indeed, the party's founder, Khadim Hussain Rizvi, was himself a qualified hadith scholar, and his sermons were always rich in the emotional tone of prophetic biography and invoked scenes of stoning at Ta'if in the language that would generate tears of anguish and rage more than legal debate.⁴⁵ This has been recently studied as a method of "reframing narratives" which sees the party building its narrative on recognized sources of the audience, such as statements of early Muslim martyrs, but reinterpreting them in such a manner that acts of vigilante violence are not seen as criminal but as heroic and sanctified.⁴⁶

The accession of the party to national status in the 2017 Faizabad sit-in and subsequently in the 2018 protests against the Supreme Court's acquittal of the Christian woman Asia Bibi in a blasphemy case, both had the same underlying pattern as the older Sufi and Ottoman material mentioned above: a claim, not necessarily verifiable, about some offense to the sacred, in this case insult to the Prophet's honor, was told to a devotional community already primed by centuries of shrine culture and prophetic veneration to take such a claim seriously, and it was this community's collective acceptance of that claim, and not any formal doctrinal ruling, which gave birth to Rizvi's political authority.⁴⁷ Rizvi's death, in November 2020, when hundreds of thousands of people flocked to Lahore's Minar-i-Pakistan despite the COVID-19 pandemic, is itself a testament to how far this authority had grown from any state or institutional source, and relied solely upon devotional loyalty to his movement's story built up by a mass following.⁴⁸

Dreams and the Making of an Emirate: Mullah Omar and the Afghan Taliban

Withdrawal of the Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989 did not lead to peace. It provoked a second war amongst the very factions of mujahidin that defeated the Soviet army and by the early 1990s much of southern Afghanistan was under the control of local commanders who extorted, robbed and abused the local population with no one else to hold them accountable.⁴⁹ This void was entered in 1994 by a small band of madrasa students, talibs, many from religious schools on both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, led by a relatively obscure former mujahid who had lost an eye in the fight against the Soviets, known as Mullah Muhammad Omar.⁵⁰ Omar's own account and as the founding legend of the movement goes, he was not just motivated by ordinary political calculation. It was his vision to bring peace and order to a land in chaos, more than any tribal or military prowess of his own, that his early followers pointed to when they gave him an explanation of why they had gathered around him, an unknown, one-eyed village cleric, and not to any of the established warlords of the region.⁵¹

This vision quickly became a movement that grew rapidly in Omar. His army had by November 1994 seized control of all of Kandahar province, and perhaps twelve of the 31

⁴⁴ Ahmed and Ranjha, *Salafising Barehwiyyat: Salafi Doctrine of Al Wala' Wal Bara and TLP Politics in Pakistan*.

⁴⁵ Sumrin Kalia, 'Politicizing Prophethood: Techniques of Far-Right Encroachment on Civil Society in Pakistan', *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Societ*, 2025.

⁴⁶ Kalia, 'Politicizing Prophethood: Techniques of Far-Right Encroachment on Civil Society in Pakistan'.

⁴⁷ 'Who Is Khadim Hussain Rizvi?', Dawn, 19 November 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1374182>.

⁴⁸ 'Huge Turnout for TLP Chief Khadim Rizvi's Funeral at Lahore's Minar-i-Pakistan', Dawn, 21 November 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1591590>.

⁴⁹ Bette Dam and Martine van Bijlert, *Looking for the Enemy: Mullah Omar and the Unknown Taliban* (HarperCollins Publishers India, 2021).

⁵⁰ Dam and Bijlert, *Looking for the Enemy*.

⁵¹ Dam and Bijlert, *Looking for the Enemy*.



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provinces of Afghanistan by 1995, and in September 1996, they occupied Kabul.⁵² It was on 4 April 1996 when the clinching moment arrived, that of gaining religious and political control in the aftermath of military conquest. Omar invited some 1,200 mullahs to a grand gathering, known as a jirga, in Kandahar to determine the future course of the movement, including the religious legality of jihad against the Kabul government of the time.⁵³ During this assembly, Omar visited the Shrine of the Cloak in Kandahar, a shrine containing a garment said to be the mantle of the Prophet Muhammad that was brought to the city over 200 years ago by the Afghan Amir Ahmad Shah Durrani.⁵⁴ The most popular account of what happened was that Omar stood before the gathering of mullahs and then wrapped himself in the cloak and held it up for the crowd to see, and then, witnesses say, the shrieking and crying started.⁵⁵ The authenticity of his wearing the cloak and whether he held it up in front of the religious leaders rather than wear it, are disputed by some later accounts based on those who were close to Omar and to the keepers of the shrine, but all accounts agree on the fundamental political fact: the gesture, whatever exact form it took, was the “impetus” that allowed a man without any tribal base of his own to become the undisputed ruler of almost the entire country.⁵⁶

In response, the assembly granted Omar the title *amir al-mu'minin*, commander of the faithful, which had long been out of use since the downfall of the Ottoman caliphate in 1924, but was steeped in Muslim history.⁵⁷ Interestingly, this particular title, rather than any local or tribal label, is the indication of how purposefully the new movement sought to find the language of Islamic legitimacy in order to avoid limiting its claim to power to a narrower Afghan label or even the Pashtun claim. Years later, when Al Jazeera recounted the story, an Afghan analyst said that the whole performance had a political purpose: “If a mass movement is to be created across the divided tribes, it requires something more than political bargaining, and ‘religious zeal’ along with Omar’s charisma in this one dramatic act provided it.”⁵⁸

But Omars claims to divine guidance by dreams did not simply end there. Omars’ dream-based leadership was the subject of the social anthropologist Iain Edgar, who spent much of his career studying it among contemporary jihadist groups. Edgar’s research suggests that Omar did not stop during his leadership of the Taliban, but rather continued to consider military and strategic decisions as guided by dreams which he believed were the classical Islamic definition of a true dream.⁵⁹ A true dream, as the hadith tradition says, cannot lawfully be invented or lies, and a leader’s claim to be led by a dream is already a defense against the common accusation that he is merely concocting convenient excuses for his decisions.⁶⁰ This is exactly what Religious Constructivism says will happen: Even though the dream provides no verifiably true content, the community’s shared conviction that this

⁵² Hassan Abbas, *The Return of the Taliban: Afghanistan after the Americans Left* (Yale university press, 2023).

⁵³ ‘How Did the Illiterate Mullah from Kandahar Suddenly Become Amir Al-Momineen?’, Hasht-e Subh, 24 September 2025, <https://8am.media/eng/how-did-the-illiterate-mullah-from-kandahar-suddenly-become-amir-al-momineen/>.

⁵⁴ Dam and Bijlert, *Looking for the Enemy*.

⁵⁵ Hasht-e Subh, ‘How Did the Illiterate Mullah from Kandahar Suddenly Become Amir Al-Momineen?’

⁵⁶ ‘The Myth of Mullah Omar’, Al Jazeera, 6 June 2012, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2012/6/6/the-myth-of-mullah-omar>.

⁵⁷ Dam and Bijlert, *Looking for the Enemy*.

⁵⁸ Al Jazeera, ‘The Myth of Mullah Omar’.

⁵⁹ Edgar, ‘The “True Dream” in Contemporary Islamic/Jihadist Dreamwork: A Case Study of the Dreams of Taliban Leader Mullah Omar’.

⁶⁰ Iain R. Edgar, ‘The Dreams of Islamic State’, *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 4 (2015): 72–84.



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sort of dream can be true, and that to pretend otherwise is sinful, makes it politically powerful, nonetheless.

Discussion: Dreams as Sacred Knowledge, Legitimacy, Identity, and Mobilization

These four functions of political dreaming emerged from the four cases that are brought together here, and each of them can be directly mapped onto the framework of the Religious Constructivist that was presented in section three.

First, dreams are a source of sacred knowledge, information that is treated as more trustworthy because, by its nature, it is more likely to elude human logic than anything else, than an argument or a policy proposal. The hadith stipulates the theological warrant of this divine communication as being 1/46th of prophecy, which is a fixed and quotable foundation, which a Companion of the Prophet, an Ottoman sultan, and a twenty first century jihadist recruit can all rely on and quote the same.⁶¹

Second, dreams provide legitimacy when there is a lack of or competing claims to legitimate authority, such as tribal affiliation, military prowess, or formal religious affiliation. Mullah Omar did not have any notable tribal power; his claim to power was based on the cloak episode and the vision that came before it.⁶² By contrast, the dream legitimacy of Osman II was no less than he possessed all formal markers of dynastic legitimacy, but it was also necessary to have it interpreted and discussed publicly at a time when his formal authority over the janissaries was faltering, demonstrating that dream legitimacy can complement other forms of authority rather than replace them.⁶³

Third, dreams create collective identity by providing a shared origin story for a community—one that most community members may not have dreamt themselves—one they can imagine as their own. It serves the entire Ottoman dynasty throughout the centuries in the founding dream of Osman I.⁶⁴ Today, Mullah Omar's cloak serves the same purpose for the Taliban movement, as they were young children, or even unborn, in 1996.⁶⁵ The preachings and devotional narratives around the honor of the Prophet in the context of Barelwi identity-building serve a similar role for TLP supporters, who, for the most part, had never met Khadim Hussain Rizvi, and had no vested interest in the original Mumtaz Qadri case whatsoever, but were nonetheless compelled to view such a case as representative of their own religious and political identity.⁶⁶

Fourth and most important of the cases discussed here, dreams call forth action, often at the actual physical expense of the believer. Recruits do not accept an abstract doctrine; they accept a dream that to them is a personal and direct communication from God or the Prophet, much more psychologically powerful and compelling than an abstract argument.⁶⁷ This is the most obvious proof that dreams are not simply ornaments of religious politics, but the parts and pieces of the politics itself, that can lead a man from thought to inextricable action.

The constructivist perspective is the same in all four functions. None of these dreams have a self-evident political significance. By nature, none of these images has a fixed political content. By nature, a dream of a woman in a hijab, a dream of the Prophet pulling a sultan down from his throne, a vision urging peace in a war-ruined province: none of these have a fixed political content being written into them. Political content is added later, from an

⁶¹ Bulkeley, *Dreaming in the World's Religions: A Comparative History*.

⁶² Dam and Bijlert, *Looking for the Enemy*.

⁶³ Hagen, 'Dreaming Osmans: Of History and Meaning'.

⁶⁴ Hagen, 'Dreaming Osmans: Of History and Meaning'.

⁶⁵ 'The Taliban Still Depend on Mullah Omar's Legacy', New Lines Magazine, 2 May 2022.

⁶⁶ Paul Rollier et al., eds, *Outrage: The Rise of Religious Offence in Contemporary South Asia*. UCL Press, 2019

⁶⁷ Edgar, 'The Dreams of Islamic State'.



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interpreting community that already has reasons, based on its history, fears and hopes, to listen to the dream in one way rather than another. This is the meaning of the central argument of the paper. Political movements do not have nothing to do with dreams. Aside from scripture, poetry, memory, communities make political movements, and dreams are one of the raw materials.

9. Conclusion

This paper aims to make it clear why, in religious communities, the weight of the dream experience is sometimes so great that it generates enormous political power, when in fact it is not a public, verifiable experience. The paper is based on a Religious Constructivist perspective based on Peter Berger's sociology of religion and has insisted that there is no inherent political power of the dream itself, but solely in the process of community narrating, testing and accepting the dream. Dreams are socially produced political resources. Repeatedly over fourteen centuries of Islamic history, a private nighttime experience has been transformed into public authority, into the basis of an emirate, into the rallying call of a street movement, or even into the final push that sends a young man to commit an act of violence. It does not solve the theological problem of whether or not any specific dream was actually a call from God. It does much, however, to explain why the dream is a tool so convincing to religious and political leaders throughout time and place, why its use is so rare, and why scholars of religion and politics should listen to the sleeping mind more often than they do. These three examples involving the travel decisions of President Asif Ali Zardari, the visionary story shared by Maulana Fazl-ur-Rehman about speaking with Hazrat Adam, and the dream recounted by Pir Abdur Rahim portraying Fazl-ur-Rehman as a reincarnation of Abu Bakr Siddique are not mere isolated curiosities. These three episodes form part of a single political genre of speech that has been functioning in South Asian Islam for more than a century, which is, crucially, read in the light of the Qur'anic story of the dream of Yousaf, for which there are hadiths that state that no one can fabricate a dream of the Prophet of Islam, and the long institutional memory of Deoband, Bareilly and the Taliban.

The main contribution of the paper is the idea that only a dream that is told and believed can be politically consequential; a vision in the sleeper's head has no public life. This is what sets apart the analysis here from both literatures from which it draws. A Durkheimian, Asadian, Taylorian and Agambenian political theology provides the vocabulary as to why religious symbols authorize power but only speaks of the dream incidentally, if at all, as a symbol amongst others. The psychological and anthropological literature on dreaming, as exemplified here in McNamara and in the historians of Deobandi, Bareilly and Taliban dream-culture, delves into the vision but usually leaves off at the edge of the individual mind or a single devotional community. This paper has demonstrated that it is the movement of the dream, from Zardari's private discussion with his Pir and into the national press report of a diplomatic delay, from Pir Abdur Rahim's Umrah and into an assertion of the caliphal descent of the sitting party leader, and from Fazl-ur-Rehman's sleep and into a public call for patience with the state policy, that the real political work happens, rather than the dream itself.

This is not only significant for these three cases but has other implications as well. First, it argues that dream-narratives deserve to be considered as a specific genre of political discourse in South Asian Islam with the sermon, the fatwa and the campaign speech, and not to be indiscriminately grouped under the general category of "religious belief. Second, it suggests that the same mechanism could be at play on far more significant scales of consequence, from a president's travel schedule to the founding charisma of an armed insurgency: the analytical tools developed here for a head of state and a party leader could



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also shed light on more dangerous invocations of dream-authority elsewhere in the region. Third, it is a methodological clue: conventional studies on religious legitimization in Muslim-majority states should not only focus on the content of the vision, but also on who the dream was told to, where, and the circumstances of its public presentation. Further studies should be conducted to expand the scope of the paper. All the three cases come from the Sunni majority, mostly Deobandi-adjacent, political circles of Pakistan; whether the same mechanism is at play with the same force among Barelwi political groups like Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan or Shia political groups is an open question. A comparative study extending this framework across sectarian lines, and across other Muslim-majority states where dream-narratives circulate in public life, would test whether the pattern identified here is a general feature of Islamic political culture or a distinctly South Asian inheritance of the Deobandi and Sufi traditions this paper has traced.

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