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Binding Deoband and the Muslim League: Ashraf Ali Thanawi and Muslim Politics in Late Colonial India

One of the important assumptions underpinning Partition historiography is that the ulama – especially the Deobandi ulama- were steadfast in their opposition to the idea of Pakistan, being staunch defenders of a composite Indian nationalism and an undivided India. Given the aloofness and hostility of some leading Deobandi ulama towards the Muslim League (ML), it is further claimed that even the few ulama who finally did come over to the side of the Muslim League did so rather late in the day when Pakistan was almost achieved. This paper challenges both these assumptions. In the first place it charts a longer engagement between the two groups by focusing on the developing relationship between Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanawi and his students and the ML elites in the aftermath of Congress party's victories in the 1937 elections. Secondly, it demonstrates how this collaboration presaged a split among the Deobandi ulama and the Jamiatul Ulama –i-Hind, the premier organization of the Indian ulama by the mid-1940s. In this process the paper explains how a close relationship that developed between an influential section of the Deobandi ulama and ML elites had a critical impact on Pakistan in the republic's early days.