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Reviving Humanity Through Faith: A Study of Maulana Abul Hasan Ali Nadwi's Socio-Religious Contributions

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Abstract: Post-independence India has witnessed significant political, social, and religious transformations. Amid the evolving landscape of a multi-religious and pluralistic society, Indian Muslims encountered numerous challenges related to identity, education, and communal relations. Maulana Abu al-Hasan Ali Nadwi (1914-1999) was known in South Asia as Ali Mian. He was a profound scholar of Islam and held a prominent position in India and the Islamic world. He was a great Islamic thinker, preacher, writer, and socio-religious reformer of the twentieth century. He had a profound influence on the entire Muslim world and deserves special attention. It is, therefore, essential to be familiar with his significant works on various aspects of Islam, many of which provide reliable analyses of the multiple problems facing the Muslim Ummah. Maulana Abul Hassan Ali Nadwi has written over two hundred books that revive the faith in the hearts of millions of Muslims, addressing diverse aspects. His primary focus was on improving Muslim society, particularly in its social, religious, and educational aspects, and reviving the glorious past of Muslims worldwide. Maulana Nadwi's socio-religious reform works revolutionized the thinking process of post-independent India. By adopting a qualitative approach and revisiting Nadwi's vision, the paper contributes to broader discussions on religious coexistence, minority rights, and the role of Islamic scholarship in democratic contexts.

Keywords: Payam-Insaniyat; India; World Forum of Islamic literature; Maulana Abu al-Hasan Ali Nadwi; Muslims; identity

1. Introduction

India's multicultural, multi-religious, and multilingual identity has been a source of strength and challenge since its independence in 1947. The nation's constitutional framework upholds secularism and equal rights for all citizens, yet religious minorities, particularly Muslims, have faced persistent socio-political and educational struggles. The trauma of partition left deep scars, and in its aftermath, Indian Muslims grappled with questions of identity, security, and integration while striving to preserve their cultural and religious heritage (Yoginder 2024). Despite India's long tradition of pluralism, political narratives have sometimes exacerbated community divisions, creating disparities between the majority and minority populations (Hasani 2014).

In this complex landscape, the intellectual and reformist contributions of Maulana Abul Hassan Ali Nadwi (1914–1999) stand out as a beacon of wisdom and pragmatic leadership. A globally respected scholar and spiritual guide, Nadwi—affectionately known as Ali Miyan—emerged as a unifying figure, addressing communal tensions and advocating for interfaith harmony. His vision extended beyond religious scholarship; he actively engaged in public discourse, proposing solutions to the socio-political marginalisation of Muslims (Hasani 2014; Imran 2024).

Nadwi's approach was rooted in Islamic ethics, emphasising character-building, education, and compassionate engagement with society (Kader 2008). He championed initiatives such as Payam-e-Insaniyat (Message of Humanity), fostering dialogue and moral solidarity across religious divides (Nadwi 1991). Recognising the importance of education, he established the Deeni Ta'limi Council to integrate religious identity within modern secular learning (Nadwi 1992). His literary contributions were equally profound, culminating in the World Forum of Islamic Literature, which sought to counterbalance Western secularism with Islamic intellectual traditions (Nadwi 2000). A prolific writer, Nadwi authored nearly two hundred works, many of which were translated into multiple languages, enriching global Islamic discourse (Anjum and Khalid 2020).

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2. Payyam-e-Insaniyat (The Message of Humanity)

Maulana started a movement known as *"Payam-e-Insaniyat"* (The Message of Humanity). Over this podium, he delivered numerous lectures on interfaith dialogue in major cities of the country, where he convinced people of different faiths to respect each other's religious sentiments. Political interests and electoral compulsions often drove religious divisions. Maulana Nadwi believed that the greatest threat to the country's moral and social fabric was not merely political instability but the erosion of human values and the growth of mutual distrust between different communities (Khalid 2023).

In his many speeches, Nadwi criticized religion for inciting violence and using it for political purposes. He warned that giving a religious color to politics would destroy the country's internal peace and undermine its secular character. His voice was unique because it emanated from a spirit of moral respect and patriotism. He never advocated sectarian division but emphasized the common future of Indians of all religions. For Nadwi, *Payam-e-Insaniyat* was not a reactionary movement but a dynamic spiritual mission that came to awaken the conscience of a divided society (Hasani 2014).

One of the historic speeches given under Payam-e-Insaniyat was the Lucknow gathering, where Nadwi addressed a large interfaith gathering. He appealed to people to see each other first as human beings — creatures of the same Creator — rather than through the lens of a narrow-minded religious identity. His emotional appeal, steeped in Quranic language and poetic style, moved the audience to tears. He often recited verses that emphasized the sanctity, importance, and unity of human life. The charm and sincerity of his personality made him respected even among non-Muslims.

Researchers have noted that Nadwi's movement resembles Gandhian principles in its moral framework and commitment to nonviolence, although it emerged from a clear Islamic theological foundation. Like Gandhi, Nadwi believed that social reform must begin with the moral renewal of the individual. He argued that it was the responsibility of every person to rise above hatred and injustice. Nadwi's call was not limited to religious health but was a model of moral witness and reformation — what the Quran calls "Khair Ummah" (the best community raised for humanity) (Kader 2008). Political parties fighting among themselves for power and control should try to repair the broken structure of humanity. He believed that *the Payame-e-Insaniyat* movement was the manifestation of *Halful Fuzul* (social contract), which was directed by the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) before he declared Prophethood. The objective of *Halful Fuzul* was to assist oppressed individuals in society, regardless of their religion or race, to encourage them towards goodness, and to protect them from evil practices (Yoginder 2024) .

In the same way, Maulana Nadwi launched the movement for the protection of Muslims and the downtrodden in the country. This was also a platform for those who could work with people of other faiths and promote Indian society based on communal harmony, love, peace, and help the marginalised people. He suggested that Muslims, this is an integral and indispensable part of Islam, you are selected for this noble task as you are *Khair Ummah*. His opined was that Muslims need to show empathy for humanity regardless of religion and race, as Islam is the religion of *aman* (peace) and *salamti* (security). (Nadwi 1992) As noted by Jamil Ali, Nadwi's socio-religious philosophy was not developed in isolation; it emerged in dialogue with earlier reformers, such as Mawdudi, and remained grounded in a contextual understanding of Indian pluralism (Ali 2010).

3. Muslim Minority Between Reliance and Nationality

Maulana Nadwi was impatient for the country's good luck and development. In his book, *Al-Muslimoon Fil Hind*, a Muslim in India praises his country and introduces India to the world in a glowing light. Maulana Nadwi consistently emphasizes to his fellow citizens the importance of maintaining brotherhood. Whenever scrap is noticed, he eradicates it from his concerted effort. Maulana described the contribution of Muslims in this book; he asserted that they were the makers of Indian history and culture. In India, there was an abundance of raw materials and roots of knowledge, but it was isolated from the civilised world. Muslims made their debut on the Indian stage because they were, in those days, the most advanced community in the East. They introduced the concept of human equality and brotherhood in the country, leaving a multifaceted impact on nearly all aspects of human activity, including statecraft and administrative systems. (Nadwi, 2018)

For Nadwi, the Indian Muslim community was not an outsider or a remnant of foreign rule but an integral part of the Indian nation—participants in its civilization, co-builders of its history, and contributors to its spiritual and cultural wealth. He emphasized that Muslims had contributed substantially to India's development in fields as diverse as architecture, governance, literature, spirituality, and education. He argued that the arrival of Muslims in India brought a moral and cultural refinement that enriched the subcontinent (Hasani2014).

Unlike many political theorists of minority rights who frame minority identity in purely legal or demographic terms, Nadwi addressed the moral and historical dimensions of the Muslim minority. He challenged the idea that minorities must conform or dissolve into the majority. Instead, he asserted that Muslims have a right to preserve their faith-based identity while participating in the national mainstream. This dual loyalty—to faith and country—was not seen as contradictory but as mutually reinforcing, provided the Muslim community embraced its responsibilities as spiritual guides and moral reformers (Nadwi 2002).

In articulating this role, Nadwi carefully distinguished between secular citizenship and religious compromise. While he affirmed constitutional secularism that protected religious freedom, he warned Muslims against losing their distinctiveness in the face of assimilationist pressures. He feared that Western-inspired secularism if divorced from spirituality and ethics, would erode the core values of all communities. Therefore, he advocated a model of Muslim identity rooted in faith but expressed through service, ethics, and constructive engagement with society (Kader 2008).

Nadwi's engagement with the Muslim minority also drew inspiration from Islamic history. He often cited the early Meccan period of Islam, during which Muslims lived as a minority under a dominant majority yet continued to serve society through their honesty, service, and sacrifice. He proposed that Indian Muslims adopt a similar posture—firm in faith but gentle in conduct, steadfast in identity yet open in dialogue. He rejected both isolationism and reactive militancy as counterproductive and instead urged Muslims to focus on education, character-building, and civic participation.His speeches repeatedly reminded Muslim students and professionals that being a minority did not mean helplessness or despair. Instead, he terms it as an opportunity to put into practice the prophetic bequest and attributes (*Uswah-e Hassana*) of patience, reform, and wisdom.

4. Protection of the Country

Maulana told the Muslims they should be the torchbearers of brotherhood and high character. Our beloved Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) teaches us the value of brotherhood, and the Qur'an has repeatedly commanded us to do so. We should show love and compassion for our fellow human beings and live an obedient and happy life. He believed the majority and minority communities lived as good neighbours and cared for each other like a family. For this purpose, he organised several large public gatherings of different religions and invited their representatives to express their views, allowing them to understand each other's problems better and resolve communal tensions. Such efforts are still imperatively needed today for communal harmony (Nadwi 2002) .

Maulana remained active in this matter; if he saw any rift in society, he immediately worked to repair it with his efforts, and his vision for the country's welfare and development was clear. Maulana said that his country was a garden whose protection and prosperity were the responsibility of every citizen. He depended on the country's habitat and production, so it is not just the majority and minority communities; both protect the country from peril. For instance, every citizen of India has two homes: one is small, and the other is big; in the small home, he stays with family, while in the big home is his country, so the bigger home (country) depends on the small home if the small home is not at security, safety and peace then it will affect the bigger home. Furthermore, he elaborates that both homes are interconnected in terms of peace. So, communal harmony is essential for the Indian community.

On the other hand, the majority community should protect the religious sentiments of minorities as guaranteed by the Constitution of India. The country's progress and strength depended on the people's cooperation (Nadwi 2002). Nadwi consistently emphasized the idea that patriotism and piety were not mutually exclusive. Drawing from Qur'anic injunctions and prophetic traditions, he underlined the importance of loyalty to the land one inhabits, mainly when that land provides safety, dignity, and the freedom to practice one's religion. He pointed to the Prophet Muhammad's love for Mecca, despite the hostility of its leadership, as an example of deep-rooted attachment to one's homeland. Therefore, he urged Muslims in India to serve the country not just out of duty but from the deeper Islamic principle of *ihsan*—doing good with excellence and sincerity. A central aspect of Nadwi's nationalist philosophy was his insistence on interfaith cooperation between different communities, believing that Muslims and non-Muslims could and should work together to build a peaceful society. His life and message will always be a source of guidance for those who seek harmony between faith and modern democratic citizenship.

However, his dissent was never seditious or inflammatory. Nadwi's critique was always couched in the language of constitutionalism and moral accountability. He believed challenging unjust laws or discriminatory practices was patriotic because it aimed to preserve the nation's ethical core. He frequently reminded Muslims that while they must stand up for their rights, they must also be model citizens—honest in trade, faithful in their promises, upright in their conduct, and generous in their service. He asserted that true love for the country must manifest not merely in slogans but in concrete actions that uphold justice and compassion.

One of Nadwi's most powerful metaphors was his comparison of the country to two interconnected homes: the small home, representing the family, and the large home, symbolizing the nation. He stressed that the larger home would inevitably suffer if peace and values were not cultivated in the smaller home. Conversely, if the larger home—i.e., the country—were unstable or unjust, it would endanger the smaller home.

5. World Forum of Islamic Literature

Following India's independence, Western secular ideals began exerting a strong influence on intellectual circles across the globe, including in the East. In particular, the separation of religion from politics in the West gave rise to a system where public morality and spiritual values were often sidelined. As this influence expanded, Maulana Abul Hassan Ali Nadwi and other Muslim thinkers grew increasingly concerned. They feared that younger generations of Muslims, especially those immersed in modern education, were beginning to adopt ideas that conflicted with core Islamic principles (Hasani 2014). The influence of Western secular modernism on South Asian Muslim thought has been a recurring theme since the 19th century (Ahmed 1967), and Nadwi's efforts can be seen as a response to this ongoing intellectual challenge.

Nadwi argued that Islam offers a holistic worldview that integrates personal ethics, social conduct, and political responsibility within a unified framework of religion. He believed that detaching faith from practical life leads to moral decay and spiritual confusion. At a time when Western literature and secular education were becoming the dominant sources of thought and culture, he felt there was a pressing need for an alternative rooted in Islamic teachings.

In response, Nadwi advocated for a body of Islamic literature that could intellectually and spiritually counterbalance Western narratives. He stressed that such literature must reject Western thought and present a constructive life vision grounded in the Islamic intellectual tradition. He saw education and the production of Islamic knowledge as crucial to the survival and growth of the Muslim Ummah. He further believed that Arabic, the primary language of Islamic scholarship, must be taught and promoted to strengthen the connection between Muslim youth and their spiritual heritage (Hasani 2014). Maulana Nadwi produced a significant amount of literature for the coming generation. Sheikh Syed Sulaiman Nadwi wrote *'Darus al-Lughat al-Arabiya'* on language; after that, Maulana Abul Hasan Ali Nadwi wrote books like *'Qasas al-Anbiya'*, which consisted of five volumes on language, and another book was 'Al-Qarat al-Rasida', which consisted of three volumes, and *'Mukhtarat min Adab al-Arabi'*, which was on Arabic literature in two volumes; these books were of high quality in both style and content and were written to promote correct Islamic behaviour and character among the students. Maulana Nadwi believed that our literature offers a better alternative to Western literature, in line with Islamic thought and spirit. (Nadwi 2000)

Maulana and his associates produced a substantial body of literature that highlighted the differences between Islamic and Western ideas and objectives. Maulana Nadwi published an article that urged Muslim scholars to produce literature promoting the Islamic spirit and behaviour among students. He presented his article when he was nominated for the International Literary Academy for Arabic Education in Damascus in 1985, where many people were waiting to work for him; this idea became a strong movement among several scholars of Arabic literature from universities in several Islamic countries, who met Maulana Nadwi in Makkah. He also proposed holding a conference to form such an organisation. In 1986, an international conference organisation called the *Rabat-e-Adab al-Islami al-Alami* (International Forum for Islamic Literature) was formed. Its head office was established in *Nadwat al-Ulama* and Riyadh to coordinate efforts in different countries. In this movement, Maulana Nadwi's pioneering contribution was

widely acknowledged in India and all over the Islamic World. Maulana had cleared the way for Indian Muslims who had lack of Islamic knowledge (Nadwi 2000). Nadwi's role in this movement was not merely administrative but deeply intellectual. He clearly articulated how Islamic literature should reach the hearts and minds of the current generation without abandoning its moral and spiritual foundations.

6. Deeni Ta'limi Council

The Council of Religious Education in 1959 was a significant chapter in the post-independence efforts to preserve and reform religious education for Muslims in India. After India's independence, the education system implemented went against the religious beliefs of other communities. Particularly, the Muslim community had taken steps toward its reformation as every citizen of the country had participated in the freedom struggle. The Constitution of India explicitly recognizes that every citizen has the complete freedom to follow the religion and way of life of their choice. Those Muslim scholars who firmly opposed this education system included Qazi Adeel Abbasi and Maulana Manzoor Numani. One of the foremost voices in this movement was Maulana Abul Hassan Ali Nadwi. Alongside other respected figures, such as Qazi Adeel Abbasi and Maulana Manzoor Nomani, he advocated for an Islamic education system that was relevant, accessible, and rooted in faith. These scholars were alarmed at what they saw as attempts to impose cultural symbols and historical narratives that did not align with Islamic beliefs. They viewed this not just as an educational issue but as a matter of preserving both religious identity and constitutional rights (Hassan 2024).

The decision to create an autonomous educational institution came about when state-run schools, such as those in Uttar Pradesh, began to include religiously problematic measures for Muslims, such as the 'Vande Mataram'—a song that reflects Hindu devotion—and proposals such as the Hindu-Puruj ideal, which were perceived as attempts at cultural assimilation of minorities. In response, Nadvi and others wrote letters to government officials, expressing their concerns and arguing that such measures were contrary to the spirit of India's secular constitution (Nadwi 1992). A key concern was that there was pressure to accept Hindu symbols and figures as cultural ancestors, which conflicted with the monotheistic principles of Islam. Nadwi argued that respect could not be forced, especially when it came to religious figures of other traditions, and that mutual respect and harmony should guide educational policies. He also stated that no child should be forced to compromise their religious conscience for the sake of national unity (Nadwi 1998).

Muslim scholars raised their voices and stressed upon the government to run the country properly, protect their religious sentiments, and implement secular education that would benefit all the communities without any discrimination of caste, color, creed, or faith. Qazi Adeel Abbasi, a renowned freedom fighter from Uttar Pradesh, India, spearheaded such efforts (Nadwi 1992). Muslim scholars in India have launched an after-school program for Muslim children who attend government schools during the day. Muslims started this program to maintain their Islamic identity and the identity of their new generation by providing them with basic Islamic education.

The Deeni Ta'limi Council was officially founded during a conference held on 30–31 December 1959 to counter these developments. Qazi Adeel Abbasi was appointed as the general secretary, and Maulana Nadwi served as its founding president—a position he held until he died in 1999 (Nadwi 1992). Under their leadership, the Council began developing an extensive network of schools to provide Islamic instruction outside the state education system. These schools emphasized religious fundamentals and were fully funded and managed by the Muslim community. The purpose of these institutions was to ensure that Muslim children, particularly those attending government schools, could receive instruction in Islamic principles and practices simultaneously. Programs were established for before- and after-school sessions, where children learned the Qur'an, Islamic ethics, and foundational religious knowledge. This dual-education model became a practical and widely adopted approach to safeguarding Islamic heritage without disengaging from the larger society.

The Deeni Ta'limi Council played a pivotal role in raising awareness nationwide. The Muslim community became more conscious of its rights and responsibilities through conferences, publications, and mobilization. The Council's schools were not merely centers of rote learning; they aimed to produce morally upright individuals with a sound Islamic worldview. Educators were trained not just in content delivery but also in pedagogical methods tailored to young learners.

In one of his speeches, Maulana Nadwi compared basic Islamic education to the human need for air and water—fundamental, essential, and non-negotiable. He emphasized that the community's future depended on its youth's spiritual formation. He famously recalled the example of Prophet Yaqub (PBUH), who gathered his children at the time of his death and asked, *"Whom will you worship after me?"* (Al-Quran). Nadwi believed this question remains central for every Muslim generation (Hasani 2014). Maulana frequently addressed the Muslim community with appeals for proactive engagement in the educational movement. He emphasized that preparing for the next generation was a collective duty, not an individual burden. He urged Muslims across India to contribute financially, intellectually, and spiritually to the development of an autonomous, values-based education system. He cautioned against relying on government support and instead stressed self-sufficiency and community ownership (Nadwi 1986) .

The Council also prioritized Urdu as the preferred medium of instruction. Nadwi believed that, in the Indian context, Urdu provided the most efficient and culturally appropriate means of transmitting Islamic teachings to young minds. As a result, curriculum materials were developed in Urdu, focusing on fundamental Islamic beliefs, rituals, character-building, and everyday ethics (Nadwi 1998).

In a major speech in 1985, Maulana Nadwi presented a comprehensive roadmap for the future of Islamic education in India. He proposed three basic steps:

1. To develop a standard curriculum incorporating religious requirements and moral training that aligns with educational principles and is age appropriate.

2. To train dedicated teachers who are knowledgeable and passionate about raising children in an Islamic environment.

3. Widespread accessibility ensured that every locality, town, and village had facilities to impart basic Islamic education, whether through schools, madrasas, mosques, or homes.

Zafar notes that Nadwi's approach to Western civilization was not entirely oppositional but sought to critically assess and filter elements through the lens of Islamic ethics (Zafar 2023). Under Nadwi's stewardship, the Council grew into a movement, not merely an institution. Its success lies in its grassroots model, ethical clarity, and the moral authority of leaders like Nadwi. Dr. Masud-ul-Hasan Uthmani later documented this legacy in his book *Takbeer-e-Musalsal*, compiling Nadwi's speeches and writings highlighting his visionary leadership in Islamic education (Hasani 2014).

7. Conclusions

Maulana Abul Hassan Ali Nadwi is a beacon of Islamic scholarship and moral leadership in post-independent India. His vision was deeply rooted in the principles of Islam, yet he was equally conscious of the socio-political realities of a pluralistic and democratic nation. At a time when the Muslim community faced uncertainty, identity crises, and marginalization, Nadwi provided direction through his words, actions, and institutions. He remained unwavering in his belief that Islamic values could coexist with secular governance and that Muslims could live as loyal, productive citizens without compromising their faith. Nadwi emphasized Muslims' moral and spiritual responsibilities toward their community and society throughout his life. Like his contemporary Wahid Uddin Khan, Nadwi maintained a reformist yet tradition-rooted position, aiming to reconcile Islamic values with democratic citizenship. Historically, Islam has protected the rights of minorities, safeguarded their religious sites, and provided equal opportunities in all fields of life. Nadwi called upon Muslims around the globe to be true to their religion and sincere in the service of Islam, moderate in their thoughts and actions, and never be enticed by the dazzling and materialistic culture of the West. He was very enthusiastic about the propagation of Islamic teachings. With this aim, he travelled to the East and West, visiting capitals and cities, meeting leaders and scholars, and establishing contact with them to promote the development of Muslims and find solutions to their problems. Speaking in favor of peace, Nadwi pointed out that Islam makes it clear that humans, regardless of religion, race, caste, and class, are the most precious part of God's creation and are an expression of God's mercy. He sought to establish a just, humane, and tolerant society worldwide. Abul Hasan Ali Nadwi had a profound belief in Islam, and the development of Islamic thought, both in letter and in spirit. His scholarship encompasses every aspect of Muslim life and the revitalization of the Prophetic model in modern times. He was a well-balanced scholar of the 20th century who contributed to reforming the Muslim *Ummah* from Western influence.

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