

COMMENT

Challenging 'Deoband'

THE FATWAS THAT THE DAR UL-Uloom, Deoband, India's largest madrasa, dishes out with distressing regularity may or may not be taken seriously by many Muslims, but there is no doubt that they certainly are by the dominant (largely non-Muslim) media. That these fatwas have a curious knack of hogging newspaper headlines might speak more about the media's own in-built biases, being ever on the prowl for sticks to beat Muslims with, than about the Deoband madrasa itself. But, that aside, the fact remains that not an inconsiderable number of the madrasa's fatwas, mainly to do with women and marriage, have, in recent years, been greeted with fierce denunciation by increasing numbers of Muslims themselves, and, that too on Islamic grounds. Such Muslim critics, whose numbers are not inconsiderable, contest these fatwas for their alleged faulty arguments and even more faulty conclusions, insisting, based on their own understanding of Islam, that these juristic opinions have no merit at all.

For one thing the activists of Bharatiya Muslim Mahila Andolan has already condemned the fatwa issued by Darul Ifta, Fatwa department of Sunni Islamic seminary, Darul Uloom Deoband stating that divorce pronounced by the husband on phone is valid even if the wife has not heard it due to network problems. It says that 'for talaak to take place it is not necessary that wife should hear it or witnesses are present.' In October last year they also ruled that talaak pronounced in jest is also valid.

The 'Andolan' has changed the Darul Uloom Deoband to be answerable to Muslim women on the above and many more such pressing issues. They have asked them to stop taking the community and Muslim women for granted.

Although 'traditionalist' and 'orthodox' in terms of theological interpretation (*kalam*) and jurisprudence (*fiqh*), the men who man the Deoband madrasa are not, contrary to what some might believe, wholly anti-modern. They willingly embrace, for instance, modern technology, which they press into the service of propagating their particular version of Islam. Thus, the madrasa has an impressive, tri-lingual website (www.darululoom-deoband.com), which hosts hundreds of articles and thousands of fatwas, dozens of photographs, and a couple of books. Six booklets can be downloaded from the English section of the site, all written by senior Deobandi scholars. One of these, by Ashraf Ali Thanvi (1863-1943), among the pioneers of the Deobandi tradition, is titled *Nikah* [Marriage] in Islam. Thanvi continues to be widely revered in Deobandi circles, a good indication of which is the fact that three of the six English booklets available on the madrasa's website are translations of essays penned by him.

Since Thanvi's booklet that purports to discuss marriage rules in Islam is hosted on the madrasa's official website, one may take the booklet to represent the authoritative Deobandi interpretation of Islamic rules and practices related to marriage. Since the Deobandis assume, and fervently believe, that their interpretation of Islam is the sole authentic one, they do not feel compelled to qualify the title of Thanvi's booklet as being a Deobandi interpretation of Islamic marriage rules. In this way, they conflate the particular Deobandi version of Islam with Islam itself. □□□