The Quiet Power of Presence: Habitus and the Ethics of Insider Madrasa Ethnography

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Abstract

This article examines how an alumnus-researcher achieves and ethically sustains ethnographic access to a Deobandī *dār al-ʿulūm* in contemporary Britain. Challenging models that frame access primarily as a matter of verbal negotiation or formal gatekeeping, it argues that access is often conferred through *embodied ethics*—moral alignment, vocational congruence, and relational presence. Drawing on fourteen months of insider ethnography, the article introduces the concept of the Quiet Power of Presence to describe how companionship (*ṣuḥba*), imitation (*tashabbuh*), and immersion within the *maslak* generate trust and legitimacy before methodological performance. Situating this dynamic within theories of habitus, insider ethnography, and Islamic pedagogical traditions, the study shows that knowledge, authority, and ethical formation are transmitted relationally rather than solely textually. It further challenges reductive portrayals of British madrasas as insular or epistemically rigid by documenting the practical integration of *dīn* and *dunyā* knowledge. The article contributes empirically by foregrounding the lived lifeworlds of British *ʿulamāʾ* and methodologically by theorising embodied presence as a critical but underexamined condition of access in religious ethnography.

1   Introduction

This paper examines how an alumnus of a *dār al-ʿūlūm*—a traditional Islamic seminary—gained access to conduct ethnographic research in contemporary Britain. Access to these institutions is rarely straightforward, even for former students. In my case, it was facilitated through a triad of engagement: companionship with teachers (*suḥba*), immersion in their normative and pedagogical world (*maslak*), and the subtle yet compelling influence of presence. While being a graduate may provide initial recognition, the assumption that alumni can integrate seamlessly as researchers is complicated by ethical, social, and political negotiations. Access is often framed as a dialogue between researcher and community, a negotiation of trust and legitimacy. Yet this perspective can overemphasise verbal negotiation; much of what enables access is embodied ethics—what remains unspoken yet is actively experienced through moral alignment, imitation, and relational presence.

Dār al-ʿulūm, or madrasas, aim to cultivate individuals who exemplify piety, possess moral knowledge, and contribute meaningfully to society. Alumni are embedded in a shared salvific purpose and a network of relational authority. However, my identity as an academic operating within secular frameworks introduces what might be described as disruptive "noise": the risk that research outputs could be misinterpreted, misrepresented, or weaponised against the seminary. Early in the fieldwork, one teacher warned me:

> You have to be careful. They [researchers] have been trying to get in for a long time but haven't managed it. Now they might be using one of our own people to get in.

From the perspective of some *ʿulamāʾ*, pursuing secular higher education may challenge the sanctity of the madrasa's domain, rendering my return as a researcher potentially intrusive, even a decade after graduation. Another teacher asked:

> What are you going to write? How can you be sure that someone won't use your work to attack us?

This situation raises a central question: How can an insider navigate the tensions between moral accountability to the community and academic inquiry? I employ the metaphor of viruses to illuminate this tension. Like viruses, which carry both the potential to disrupt and to transform, a researcher may introduce new perspectives that unsettle existing norms, yet also catalyse renewal and growth. For instance, the human placenta, derived from ancient viral integration, illustrates how incorporation of novel elements can generate reproductive and evolutionary innovation. Similarly, my positionality as an alumnus-researcher can serve as a productive force: fostering understanding, challenging stereotypes, and elucidating the complex social, ethical, and political dimensions of madrasa life. One teacher captured this potential:

> This is excellent. And you are the person to do it. We need to explain to people what we do here. There is too much negativity about Islam, Islamophobia, and the madrasa can help.

This paper explores how access to a madrasa is achieved, maintained, and ethically navigated. It examines the interplay of companionship (*suḥba*), normative immersion (*maslak*), and presence, arguing that access is as much an embodied and relational phenomenon as a procedural or verbal negotiation. In doing so, it provides insight into the moral, pedagogical, and social structures that shape Deobandī madrasas, the negotiation of insider–outsider positionality, and the broader dynamics of religious education in contemporary Britain.

2   Literature: Lacuna in the Study of *'Ulamā'* Lifeworlds

Despite the significant role that madrasas and the *'ulamā'* play in shaping Islamic thought and practice in Britain, these institutions and their members have received comparatively little scholarly attention. While South Asian *'ulamā'* and seminaries have been extensively studied, their British counterparts remain under-researched (Minan 2022; Moosa 2015). This has contributed to fragmented and often simplistic understandings of these vital institutions. There is a clear need for studies that engage with madrasas on their own terms, grounded in theoretically informed, empirical, and field-

based research. Although some scholars have addressed the British madrasa, no comprehensive ethnographic account currently exists.

Few studies have documented the origins, curriculum, or culture of madrasas and other Islamic colleges in Britain, let alone the complex social and religious processes that lead young people to enrol (Gilliat-Ray 2005). Among the early research, Lewis's (1993) study, *Bradford's Muslim Communities and the Reproduction of Islam,* explored the relationship between religion and ethnicity in Bradford. Together with Yahya Birt, Lewis conducted the first quantitative survey of madrasas in Britain, identifying the professional roles assumed by *'ulamā'* following graduation (Birt and Lewis 2011), and providing a broader overview of the diversity of Islam in Britain (Lewis 2015). In a co-authored work with Sadek Hamid, Lewis cited Mufti Saiful Islam to assert that all Deobandis constituted a monolithic, unthinking group (Lewis and Hamid 2018).

Ron Geaves has also conducted research on madrasas in Britain. Like Lewis, his focus is primarily on sectarian influences rather than the lived experiences of the *'ulamā'* (Geaves 1996, 2013). His studies, based on brief fieldwork periods—typically two weeks to a month—relied on interpreters to translate conversations from Urdu into English. While his research sheds light on curriculum and pedagogical approaches, his position as a relative outsider limited his ability to explore the nuances of social and religious life in the madrasa.

Hamid Mahmood's master's thesis remains the most comprehensive study to date (Mahmood 2012). Drawing on his own experience as a graduate, Mahmood developed a questionnaire, conducted interviews with twelve fellow graduates from a madrasa in Dewsbury, West Yorkshire, and spent a day at the institution. Like Geaves, his focus was primarily on curriculum and pedagogy, particularly perceptions of rigidity. Beyond curricular matters, Gilliat-Ray's (2010a, 2010b) research on British Muslim chaplains—many of whom were madrasa graduates—demonstrates the diversity of worldviews and behaviours among graduates from the same seminary. She concludes:

> This is a powerful counterargument to the homogenising, generalising and de-humanising portrayals of Deobandi ulama in Britain today, and the assumptions that are often made about their alleged extremism and conservatism in media and think-tank reports.
>
> GILLIAT-RAY 2010a, 428

Abdullah Sahin (2013) similarly argues that discussions of Islamic education must be grounded in the experiences of those directly involved. Yet, as Alam (2012) notes, accessing *dār al-ʿulūm* is complex, shaped by the socio-historical

origins of Muslim minority communities in India and their insularity. Gilliat-Ray further identifies factors such as Islamophobia and the *'ulamā'*'s cautious attitude toward social science research. One participant in her study questioned the need for extended ethnographic inquiry:

> What is the need? I don't understand why you would need to do this for three years. You could just write it all up without doing a PhD.

This situation is gradually changing. Gilliat-Ray (2018) notes that some madrasas are increasingly adopting outward-facing approaches, engaging with civic organisations and universities. Some graduates now seek to benefit from both religious and national education (Scott-Baumann and Cheruvallil-Contractor 2015, 42). These developments challenge the assumption of a strict *dīnī-dunyawī* binary, which will be discussed in the final section of this paper, and suggest that British madrasas are beginning to cultivate a broader, more integrated epistemic ethos.

Overall, research on madrass and *'ulamā'* in Britain remains limited, often based on small samples, fragmented data, and unfounded generalisations. Compared to studies of South Asian *'ulamā'*, investigations of British *'ulamā'* are less developed, leaving a significant gap in the literature that warrants rigorous, field-based ethnographic inquiry.

3 Ethnography, Embodiment, and Insider Positionality in British Madrasas

My study employed ethnography as its primary methodology, emphasising insider research to explore the lived experiences of madrasa students and *'ulamā'*. The research examined not only curriculum and pedagogy, but also the ethical, social, and relational processes that shape life in these institutions. This section outlines the theoretical foundations, methodological challenges, and practical steps of the fieldwork, reflecting critically on my positionality and explaining how access was gained.

The madrasa is a respected environment with clear behavioural norms, where students and teachers enact moral and religious habitus. Drawing on Goffman's (1990) dramaturgical framework, I observed both the 'front-stage' performance of pious behaviour and the 'backstage' moments when participants paused or navigated everyday routines. However, the Islamic tradition's emphasis on embodying the Prophet complicates conventional understandings of 'performance'; students aim to internalise and enact ideals rather than

merely perform them. This interplay between outward enactment and internalised habitus was central to analysing embodiment, particularly in moments when participants diverged from ideals, thereby challenging assumptions about the madrasa as a 'total institution'. In line with Scott's (2011) concept of reinventive institutions, students navigate autonomy, self-improvement, and moral formation within a regulated environment.

The research drew on two complementary anthropological perspectives. First, it emphasises earnest engagement with Islamic practices (El-Zein 1977), reflecting Bronislaw Malinowski's argument that each 'Islam' should be taken seriously (McLoughlin 2007, 283). Second, it situates Islam as a discursive tradition, following Asad (2009, 2015), which shapes practice through textual, material, and historical authority. Postcolonial ethnography further foregrounds the researcher's positionality (Denzin et al. 2008), recognising the ethnographer as embedded in social and moral contexts rather than an external observer.

As an insider and former student of the madrasa, I occupied a liminal position between the roles of researcher and participant. I drew on sustained imitation (*tashabbuh*) of my teachers and the maintenance of companionship (*ṣuḥba*) to enact what I will discuss later in this paper as the Quiet Power of Presence. This allowed me to inhabit a morally recognisable role, gain trust, and navigate the complexities of the madrasa environment, all while maintaining critical distance (Coffey 1999). Insider status brings methodological advantages, enabling naturalistic observation and a deeper understanding of social norms (Garfinkel 2002; Atkinson and Morriss 2017). At the same time, it carries risks, including overfamiliarity, blurred boundaries, and potential bias (Jacobs–Huey 2002; Ohnuki-Tierney 1984; Mercer 2007). My ongoing relational ties required reflexive awareness to ensure ethical, rigorous scholarship. Over the course of my research, students disclosed "deviant" practices (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007), such as a third-year student revealing his smoking habit at the madrasa:

> Me: "Oh, so you've carried on smoking? Even though you said you wouldn't? How do you feel about that? Where do you smoke? How do you manage it all? I'm not going to come and check up on you, but..."

> Student: "Don't worry about it. I trust you. Most of the time, I head to the football courts on the corner. I wouldn't just go, you know. I like to be aware of where people are, right? I make sure that all the teachers and staff aren't about."

Access was further strengthened through voluntary teaching and a partnership with a local university. These activities demonstrated alignment with the madrasa's moral and pedagogical goals and showcased my ability to negotiate between secular and religious domains. The principal and teachers acknowledged this as a careful navigation of dual epistemic worlds, which facilitated deeper engagement and observation. This practical alignment reflects habitus in action: embodied dispositions, ethical orientation, and vocational practice generated legitimacy and access without explicit methodological performance.

Fieldwork spanned fourteen months (September 2016 – November 2017) and combined participant observation with semi-structured interviews. Observation alternated between complete participation—attending classes, reading texts, and joining study groups—and a more observational stance during informal interactions, enabling participants to disclose sensitive behaviours. Semi-structured interviews complemented observation, fostering trust and ensuring participant perspectives were accurately represented. This approach enabled exploration of how madrasa students and graduates engage with both religious and worldly knowledge, negotiating what has been framed in scholarship as the *dīn–dunyawī* binary. My presence and positionality allowed me to witness moments in which this binary was bridged in practice, reflecting a Ghazālīan ethos of epistemic openness in which religious and worldly knowledge are complementary rather than opposed.

Through this integration of theory, positionality, and practice, the methodology demonstrates how ethnography in religious institutions can capture relational, moral, and embodied dimensions of knowledge. Insider engagement, underpinned by imitation, companionship, voluntary participation, and institutional negotiation, enables access to nuanced social realities, revealing the madrasa's hybrid, ethically grounded epistemic world.

4 The *Maslak*, Companionship, and the Embodiment of Knowledge

While the intellectual history of angels provides insight into Qurʾānic cosmology, my focus is on their function within Muslims' moral imagination and everyday lifeworld. Angels operate as a "supra-cosmological mystery," informing the moral self through embodied practices that aspire to divine proximity by emulating the Prophet. These aspirational dispositions are not merely theoretical; they shape how students internalise ethical and spiritual norms and, for my research, facilitated access through shared recognition of these values.

Within the Deobandī tradition, closely aligned with the madrasa, the *Maslak* is central to the transmission of a coherent worldview in response to modernity (Moosa 2010). The *Maslak* functions at the intersection of horizontal and vertical dimensions of knowledge and being. Horizontally, it conveys Islamic knowledge and hermeneutics, forming the Three-Fold Intellectual Complex—comprising theology, fiqh, and Sufism—under the guidance of a trained master who shapes moral development through tarbiyyatic pedagogy (Sidat 2023). Vertically, as Shāh Walī Allāh (d. 1762) emphasises, the *Maslak* cultivates an angelic self: the seeker (*ṭālib-i ḥaq*) engages in inner mystical metaphysics, aiming for human felicity (*kamālan*) by subduing base tendencies and nurturing angelic qualities. A teacher summarised this relational and embodied pedagogy:

> It's not just about gaining knowledge; our teachers have truly emphasised the importance of applying that knowledge in real life. If you decide to take the madrasa seriously, it will guide you in both learning and practising. The second part, however, really comes from spending meaningful time with your teachers, learning from their experiences.

This statement highlights the relational dimension of the Maslak: ethical and spiritual formation occurs through sustained companionship (*ṣuḥba*) and imitation (*tashabbuh*) of teachers, not solely through textual study. As Walī Allāh notes, virtues (*akhlāq*) are cultivated through association with virtuous individuals, and angelic qualities must be consistently emulated until they are embodied.

The Prophetic blueprint reinforces this pedagogy. In the renowned Gabriel Ḥadīth, the archangel appears in human form, sits before the Prophet, touches his knees, and poses questions, instructing ʿUmar in religion (Murata and Chittick 1994). This corporeal and emotional encounter demonstrates that angelic qualities remain abstract until embodied. Learning, therefore, occurs through relational and affective processes: emotion, presence, and bodily interaction are central to knowledge transmission. Modern theoretical frameworks—from queer theory to postcolonial critique and phenomenology—underscore the political and epistemic significance of emotion in learning (Schaefer 2015).

Corroborating this, Metcalf (1984) argues that textual knowledge alone cannot confer authority; sustained learning from recognised scholars is necessary. Similarly, Mian (2019) reframes Sharīʿa not as abstract norms but as "shariah-embodiedness," where interconnected bodies and ethical

dispositions transmit wisdom and moderation. The *Maslak*, by its very nature, is adaptive: it enables learners to integrate idealised principles into their lived realities, producing a practical, lived Islam.

In my research, embodying the *Maslak* and cultivating moral and angelic qualities directly facilitated ethnographic access. My presence signalled alignment with the madrasa's ethical and pedagogical framework, fostering trust and participation. This reflects the Quiet Power of Presence: access was granted not through methodological performance but through recognition that I inhabited the same moral and vocational habitus as teachers and students. As I discuss in the next section, as a volunteer imam, I shared the vocational and ethical dispositions of my teachers, inhabiting a shared habitus that signalled alignment with the *Maslak*. Through imitation (*tashabbuh*) and companionship (*ṣuḥba*), my presence fostered trust and access without deliberate methodological performance. This Quiet Power of Presence enabled students and teachers to share insights openly while allowing me to observe the embodied transmission of knowledge.

5   Imitatio Imam

Before my research, I had volunteered as an imam at a local prayer room (*muṣalla*), which made me relatable to many of my teachers, who were imams at larger mosques. My positionality as an imam situates this research within the sociological and anthropological literature's "insider" or "at-home" ethnography. Merton's (1972) classic distinction between insider and outsider perspectives highlights how social location shapes both access to a field and the kinds of knowledge that can be produced within it. In this case, being an imam myself—like the majority of my teachers—meant that my presence in the madrasa was not perceived as external or intrusive, but as morally, ritually, and institutionally intelligible. Access was therefore not negotiated solely through formal gatekeeping but through shared vocational identity and embodied familiarity.

My interactions with my teachers were shaped not simply by shared institutional affiliation but by the imitation of their role as imams and the embodied responsibilities that accompany it. As an imam myself, I inhabited many of the same pastoral and communal dilemmas that structured their daily work. This shared vocational habitus created a space in which conversations moved easily beyond formal teacher–student hierarchies and into collegial exchange. During fieldwork, discussions frequently revolved around

the practical and ethical complexities of the imamate, signalling a tacit recognition of sameness in role and responsibility.

One such exchange illustrates this dynamic clearly. A teacher once asked for my thoughts on engaging young people within the mosque. This request was likely shaped by my positionality as a younger, English-speaking imam, familiar with the concerns, idioms, and social worlds of a younger congregation. In turn, I sought his advice on fostering relationships with older congregants, an area in which he had long demonstrated success. This reciprocal exchange did not emerge from methodological prompting, but from an assumed parity grounded in our shared imitation of the imamate. The interaction itself mirrored the very habitus I had absorbed from my teachers: a disposition towards consultation (*mushāwara*), humility, and intergenerational learning.

Given the centrality of apprenticeship and the formation of pious bodies within the Deobandī *maslak*, this dynamic was unsurprising. As one teacher perceptively remarked:

> It is not merely that you studied at the *dār al-ʿulūm*; it is that you maintained *ṣuḥba* with your teachers and attended their gatherings (*majālis*). There is a significant difference—like that between the heavens and the earth (*zamīn aur āsmān kī farq*)—between someone who is simply a graduate (*fārigh*) of a madrasa and someone who maintains *ṣuḥba* with his elders.

This statement constructs a stark distinction between formal educational completion and sustained relational proximity. Yet, analytically, it is precisely this *ṣuḥba* that inscribes a sense of sameness. Through prolonged companionship, ethical dispositions, modes of comportment, and pastoral sensibilities are silently transmitted and embodied. In this way, *ṣuḥba* functions as the mechanism through which imitation (*tashabbuh*) becomes sedimented as habitus, in which recognition, trust, and access arise not from assertion or performance, but from shared formation.

Building on Narayan's (1993) critique of the rigid insider/outsider binary, my position is best understood as one of shifting or "multiple" positionalities, in which I moved between roles as student, colleague, imam, and researcher. In addition to companionship, access was facilitated by the silent imitation of teachers, known in Arabic as *tashabbuh*, a verb that implies active, embodied imitation rather than passive resemblance. This *tashabbuh* was enacted concretely during my fieldwork. I remained an imam at a local prayer room (*muṣallā*) throughout the research period, a role that closely mirrored the

vocational trajectories of many of my teachers, who themselves served as imams in larger mosques. This practice blurred the boundary between observer and participant, reinforcing what Narayan describes as the "partial insider" position rather than a fixed insider status.

There is a tradition attributed to the Prophet, "Whoever imitates a people becomes one of them," a maxim that underscores how imitation serves as a mode of social belonging and recognition. While *tashabbuh* often carries negative connotations in contemporary Muslim discourse, mystically inclined Muslims have historically employed it to "expand the social boundaries of their spiritual communities" (Patel 2022, 144). From an ethnographic perspective, this imitation functioned as a form of cultural and moral alignment that facilitated trust and sustained access.

At the same time, as Alvesson (2003) cautions in his work on reflexive methodology, insider research risks naturalising the taken-for-granted and under-analysing power, authority, and normative assumptions. The ethical authority attached to the imamate endowed my role with a distinct moral tone, shaping expectations of conduct and potentially influencing how participants narrated their experiences. Consequently, this research required sustained reflexivity to prevent proximity from collapsing into uncritical familiarity and to ensure that religious trust and moral capital were not inadvertently instrumentalised for research ends. In this sense, my position as an imam functioned not merely as a point of access but as an ethically charged standpoint that both enabled and constrained the production of ethnographic knowledge.

6   Quiet Power of Presence

This positionality also illuminates what I have called the *Quiet Power of Presence.* While insider/outsider literature often frames access as something actively negotiated through interaction, self-disclosure, or methodological performance (Merton 1972; Narayan 1993), my experience suggests that access can also emerge through ethical and embodied resemblance that precedes deliberate action. The trust I encountered was not primarily the result of what I actively did in the field, but of what I had already become through long-term imitation of my teachers. This silent imitation (*tashabbuh*)—manifested in comportment, vocational choices, and ethical orientation—produced a recognisable presence that aligned me with the to *dār al-ʿūlūm*'s existing moral expectations.

In this sense, access functioned less as a negotiated achievement and more as a pre-existing relational condition. As Alvesson (2003) cautions, such familiarity risks rendering power and normativity invisible; yet it also reveals how authority and trust can operate tacitly, through presence rather than performance. The *Quiet Power of Presence* thus names an ethnographic dynamic in which access and legitimacy are conferred not through methodological intervention but through embodied continuity with a moral tradition. This reframes insider research not only as a matter of positionality but also as one of ethical formation over time.

7   Habitus Produces Access

The *Quiet Power of Presence* can be further understood through Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, defined as a system of durable, embodied dispositions acquired through long-term socialisation that generate practices without conscious calculation (Bourdieu 1977, 1990). My access to the madrasa did not arise from strategic action or deliberate methodological intervention but from a habitus formed through prolonged imitation of my teachers. This *tashabbuh* shaped my comportment, speech, ethical sensibilities, and vocational trajectory in ways immediately legible within the madrasa's moral economy. As a result, my presence alone signalled alignment with the field's normative expectations, making formal negotiation of access largely unnecessary.

Framed in this way, the Quiet Power of Presence constitutes a methodological contribution to insider ethnography. It draws attention to access as an outcome of embodied continuity rather than interactional performance, and to trust as conferred through recognisable ethical formation rather than actively cultivated rapport. While insider/outsider literature has emphasised positionality, role multiplicity, and reflexive negotiation, the Quiet Power of Presence foregrounds the pre-reflexive dimensions of fieldwork—forms of legitimacy that operate beneath conscious method and prior to data collection. At the same time, as Bourdieu cautions, habitus risks reproducing the very structures it renders intelligible; accordingly, recognising the Quiet Power of Presence also requires heightened reflexivity to ensure that what feels natural is not left analytically unexamined. In this sense, the concept not only explains access but also offers a methodological lens for identifying how moral authority, trust, and power circulate tacitly within religious fields.

I therefore propose the Quiet Power of Presence as a methodological concept for ethnographic research in moral and religious fields, capturing

how access, legitimacy, and authority may be conferred through embodied habitus rather than deliberate methodological action.

8   Habitus, *Fanā'*, and the Quiet Power of Presence

In Sufism, this process of imitation and ethical alignment assumes a positive, formative character, as the seeker aims to dissolve the simplistic boundary between self and other through disciplined moral and spiritual formation rather than mere identification. The mystic Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (d. 1273) articulates this dissolution of duality as achievable only through *fanā'* (self-annihilation), a process most provocatively expressed in the declaration of the martyred mystic Manṣūr al-Ḥallāj, "I am the Real" (*Ana al-ḥaqq*). Although often misread as a claim to divinity, Rūmī clarifies that Ḥallāj's utterance signified the opposite: the effacement of the self such that no independent "I" remained to stand in opposition to God. As Rūmī explains, it is precisely the persistence of the third-person "He" that signals unresolved duality, for such a pronoun presupposes a surviving ego that observes from a distance. Once this egoic boundary is dissolved, sameness no longer produces rivalry or transgression but intimacy and ethical proximity (Thackston 1999, 202).

Read alongside Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, this Sufi account offers a powerful analogue for understanding how ethical alignment operates prior to conscious method. Just as *fanā'* involves the erosion of self-conscious distinction through sustained practice, habitus emerges through long-term imitation and embodied discipline, producing dispositions that render action uncalculated yet intelligible within a given moral field. My *tashabbuh* with my teachers operated in this way: not as an intentional erasure of difference, but as the gradual formation of a shared ethical grammar that made my presence recognisable and trustworthy without overt methodological performance.

It is in this sense that I describe the research setting as exhibiting a cautiously framed "Ḥallājian" quality—not as an ontological claim of unity, but as an epistemic and relational convergence between researcher and researched. I could assert, without contradiction, "I am an imam" in the same way as my interlocutors, while maintaining the analytic stance of "I am a social researcher." This dual assertion did not collapse difference but suspended it sufficiently to enable what I have described as the Quiet Power of Presence: a mode of ethnographic access in which legitimacy arises through embodied sameness rather than negotiated distance. As with both *fanā'* and habitus, this convergence carried ethical risk, demanding reflexive vigilance to ensure that proximity did not foreclose critique or that intimacy obscured power.

Nevertheless, it illuminates how monism—understood here sociologically rather than metaphysically—can function as a condition of access, trust, and shared meaning in religious ethnography.

9 From Imamate to Partnership: Multi-Layered Access in Religious Fieldwork

In addition to my role as an imam, I undertook voluntary teaching at the madrasa, which further reinforced my positional credibility and facilitated ethnographic access. By contributing to the educational life of the institution, I demonstrated practical commitment to its religious and pedagogical mission, aligning myself with the routines, responsibilities, and ethical expectations of the teachers. This active participation complemented the silent, habitus-driven form of access described previously, adding a layer of recognisable investment in the community's moral and intellectual enterprise.

My engagement extended beyond classroom teaching. I was able to establish a formal partnership between the madrasa and a local university, designed to bridge secular and confessional knowledge frameworks. This initiative was recognised by both the principal and the madrasa's teachers as an exercise in careful negotiation between different epistemic worlds, one that respected the integrity of the religious curriculum while creating pathways for broader educational exchange. The success of this collaboration reinforced my legitimacy in the eyes of the madrasa staff, illustrating that I could operate across multiple spheres without compromising the institution's ethical or religious norms.

From a methodological perspective, these combined roles—as imam, voluntary teacher, and facilitator of institutional partnership—created layered forms of trust and legitimacy. They enabled access that was simultaneously relational, ethical, and structural: relational, because it was grounded in shared moral and vocational identity; ethical, because it respected the madrasa's norms and hierarchy; and structural, because it aligned with institutional priorities. Together, these factors illustrate how ethnographic access in religious educational contexts can be shaped by both embodied presence and practical contribution, highlighting the interplay between personal habitus, relational ethics, and institutional negotiation.

10   Bridging Confessional and Secular Knowledge in Madrasa Ethnography

My ethnographic experience also illuminates the limitations of the often-invoked *dīn–dunyawī* knowledge binary in Islamic studies (Abbasi 2021). Whereas this binary frames madrasas as strictly otherworldly spaces, resistant to worldly knowledge, my position as an imam, volunteer teacher, and institutional partner allowed me to witness how knowledge in madrasa worlds is relational, ethical, and pragmatic. Through sustained imitation of my teachers (*tashabbuh*) and the maintenance of *ṣuḥba*, I inhabited a form of habitus that was simultaneously recognisable within religious hierarchies and capable of bridging secular frameworks, as evidenced by the university partnership I established. In this liminal space, access and legitimacy did not depend on performing a separation between religious and worldly knowledge, but on ethical alignment, practical engagement, and relational trust. The Quiet Power of Presence—emerging from shared vocational identity, embodied dispositions, and relational continuity—enabled me to navigate both spheres without collapsing one into the other. This suggests that in madrasa worlds, knowledge is not inherently divided into worldly and otherworldly domains; rather, it emerges through participation, mentorship, and ethical formation, highlighting the fluidity and hybridity of epistemic practices that are often obscured by reductive binaries.

11   Best of Both Worlds

My experience in the madrasa also highlights how the so-called *dīn–dunyawī* binary is historically contingent and negotiable in practice. The Quiet Power of Presence, sustained through imitation (*tashabbuh*), *ṣuḥba*, voluntary teaching, and institutional partnerships, positioned me to witness a more nuanced epistemic ethos than the rigid binary often assumed in Islamic studies. In this context, epistemic openness was not an abstract principle, but a lived orientation embedded in the madrasa's pedagogical and ethical formation.

Thinkers such as Ghazālī argued that epistemic openness is at the core of civilisational flourishing, sustaining the vitality of religion itself (Moosa 2005). Conversely, the religious zealot—by narrowing the scope of knowledge—erodes the foundations of the very faith they seek to protect. The commentator Murtaḍa al-Zabīdī (d. 1790) summarises this point about communal knowledge: what is necessary for human well-being is obligatory to learn, and

its content varies across geography and culture. There is, therefore, no fixed limit to human knowledge.

This Ghazālīan ethos contrasts sharply with modern discourses that rigidly separate "useful" secular knowledge from "religious" knowledge, a separation intensified under colonial modernity. In this period, the role of the *ʿulamāʾ* shifted from worldly state-employed professionals to "otherworldly" religious experts, and madrasa education was recast as exclusively religious and, by implication, less "useful" (Ingram 2018, 48). Ironically, those who uphold this strict *dīn–dunyawī* distinction may, in fact, be enacting a more modernist posture than they realise.

In my fieldwork from 2016 to 2019, however, this binary appeared far less pronounced. Students routinely excelled in GCSEs and A-levels alongside formal Islamic studies, suggesting a revival of a Ghazālīan or cosmopolitan epistemic ethos. The shift is captured linguistically in the Urdu *aur*—translated as "and"—signalling a complementary relationship between religious and worldly knowledge rather than an oppositional one (Scott-Baumann and Cheruvallil-Contractor 2015). Prophetic exemplars, as conveyed by teachers in the madrasa, routinely combined knowledge for practical human welfare with religious guidance, emphasising the ethical and applied dimensions of learning:

> Prophets before Noah, and after him, generally brought this kind of knowledge (both worldly and religious). They taught human beings how to farm, make clothes, and perform various other tasks. In other words, they imparted whatever was beneficial. Therefore, if worldly knowledge is pursued for the hereafter, it is regarded as knowledge.

Epistemic openness is thus inseparable from ontological performance: graduates are trained in a moral framework that cultivates ethical action across knowledge domains. My own similarity to this ethos—embodied through imitating my teachers, participating in voluntary teaching, and negotiating secular partnerships—enabled me to explore the madrasa with credibility and access. Through these practices, I could witness firsthand a pedagogy in which worldly and religious knowledge were not in conflict, but mutually reinforcing, offering a lived model of "the best of both worlds."

12   Conclusion

This paper has examined the processes through which an alumnus-researcher gains access to a *dār al-ʿulūm* in contemporary Britain, highlighting the interplay of ethical, relational, and embodied factors that underpin participation and observation. Access was achieved through a combination of companionship (*ṣuḥba*) with teachers, immersion in the normative world of the Maslak, and the subtle influence of presence—a phenomenon I have conceptualised as the Quiet Power of Presence. These dynamics illustrate that ethnographic access is not solely a matter of negotiation or formal permission; it emerges pre-reflexively through moral alignment, vocational congruence, and sustained relational engagement.

The study situates the Deobandī *Maslak* as both an intellectual and ethical framework, encompassing the Three-Fold Intellectual Complex of theology, fiqh, and Sufism, while simultaneously fostering the cultivation of angelic virtues through embodied practice. Companionship with teachers, imitation (*tashabbuh*), and the observation of ethical comportment serve as conduits for the transmission of knowledge and moral disposition. My experience as a volunteer imam provided a practical bridge between the researcher and the community, reinforcing shared habitus and moral legitimacy, while enabling observation of the lived, relational, and performative dimensions of the madrasa.

This research also challenges reductive framings of madrasas as insular, hierarchical, or solely textual environments. By attending to embodied learning, relational pedagogy, and ethical formation, it demonstrates that access to and understanding of madrasa life require engagement with the moral and social infrastructures that underpin knowledge transmission, rather than relying solely on textual or institutional analysis. Furthermore, the study highlights the hybrid negotiation of *dīn–dunyawī* knowledge, showing how secular and religious epistemic frameworks coexist and are actively integrated by students and teachers, echoing a Ghazālīan ethos of epistemic openness and practical ethical application.

Finally, the paper underscores the methodological implications of insider ethnography. By combining autoethnography, participant observation, and semi-structured interviews, and by situating the researcher within the ethical and vocational structures of the community, this study provides a model for understanding how moral, spiritual, and pedagogical formations shape access and observation in religious institutions. The Quiet Power of Presence, derived from embodied alignment with the *Maslak*, demonstrates that relational and ethical congruence can serve as both a methodological tool and an

analytical lens, offering insight into the lived realities of Deobandī madrasas and the subtle mechanisms through which knowledge, authority, and morality are transmitted.

In sum, this research advances the study of British madrasas by illuminating how access is secured, how knowledge and virtue are embodied and transmitted, and how insider positionality—carefully navigated through imitation, ṣuḥba, and ethical alignment—enables ethnographers to understand the moral, pedagogical, and social life of these institutions. Beyond providing an ethnographic account, it offers a framework for studying religious educational spaces in which presence, morality, and relationality are central to learning and participation.

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