



World Sufi Forum: India's Outreach to Global Community

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The World Sufi Forum was held in New Delhi from 17-20 March 2016. The Forum succeeded in sending to the international community a message of peace, tolerance and harmonious coexistence at a time when the world is once again witnessing a surge in violence. The conference was encouraged by the government and public institutions as the theme of the conference was to convey India's message of peace and harmony.¹ First World Sufi Forum² in India was organized by All India Ulama and Mashaikh Board (AIUMB), a group of Sufis functioning as a non-political entity. The group aims to propagate Sufi culture globally through mosques and Sufi shrines. It may be noted that there have been a series of conferences in the run-up to the Forum in Delhi. AIUMB had organized several conferences and public meetings on the theme, including Sunni Conference in Bhagalpur, Bihar, on 10 May 2010; Moradabad, Uttar Pradesh on 3 January 2011; and a Muslim Maha Panchayat in Moradabad, Uttar Pradesh, on 16 October 2011 and Mashaikh-e-Tareeqat Conference in Bareilly on 26 November 2011. The forum was attended by a large number of Sufis, scholars and academia; however, some sections of Sufis abstained from the event citing Sufi traditions of maintaining distance from power.

The world has been suffering from extremism, terrorism and violence not only at the individual or group levels, but several states have also waged wars against different nations in different regions, creating widespread discontent and anger. The 9/11 attacks in the US, wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya, the killing spree of 'Norwegian mass murderer Anders Breivik',³ and

intermittent campus shootings in American educational institutions are some of the examples of violent acts performed by groups, states and individuals. The world is now grappling with a dreaded terror group called the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq (ISIS). Religion-based extremism and terrorism is taking the world backward. There is a concern that mobilization along religious lines can unravel the centuries-old social and economic structure, particularly in West Asia, besides changing the state and physical structures in the region. The prospect of long-lasting peace, tranquillity, stability – social, political as well as economic – seems far at this juncture. People are moving towards spirituality to seek an answer and find solace.

Therefore, the world is moving towards the East for spiritual contentment and it is not surprising that Jalaluddin Rumi, a Persian poet and Sufi master born about 800 years ago in the 13th century, has become 'the most popular poet' in the US.⁴ Sufism became popular in the 13-14th centuries when the world was facing the Mongol onslaught. Again, the world is faced with violent threats in the form of state and alleged non-state actors and Sufism is gaining popularity. Rumi's writing, *Mathnavi*, is selling in millions across the world.⁵ India has been the place of congregation of Sufis of different traditions coming and propagating their ideas. Delhi itself is called '22 Khwajaon ki chaukhat' – threshold of 22 Sufi saints, including Khwaja Qutubuddin Bakhtiyar Kaki who was the disciple and spiritual successor of Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti of Ajmer.⁶ One of the earliest and most prominent books on Sufism is *Kashful-ul-Mahjoob* and it was written in Indian subcontinent by Ali Hujwairi, popularly known as Hazrat Data Ganjibakhsh.

India has been a leading light from the East and it has provided spiritual leadership to the global community for millennia; hence, the emergence of the unique concept of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* [world is one family] in Vedic era and then the concept of *Wahdat-e-Adyan* [unity of religions] and Akbar's Deen-e-Ilahi. Indian civilization has evolved through centuries and it represents a synthesis of all major thought processes that the world has so far experienced. Its religious and spiritual traditions stretch from Harappa days to the Vedic period, to Buddhism, Jainism, Sikh traditions to Sufi traditions. It has been a mosaic and melting pot of civilizations, concrete ideas, and intermingling of diversified cultures, different religions and hundreds of languages.

The Sufi thoughts were popularly accepted by the Indian masses as these traditions have similarities with India's Bhakti traditions. Sufi traditions spread all over the Indian subcontinent

and its philosophical, ritual and literary influence has left a deep impression on Indian minds and souls and helped South Asia to develop a syncretic culture. The Sufi ideas consist of tolerance, respect and service to humanity and welfare of the last person of the society. India has been an abode of great Sufi traditions – a land where Sufis arrived from all over the world and spread the message of peace and humanity without any consideration of faith, colour, caste and region and transcended language barriers. Some Sufi traditions used music and singing as a medium to express the love for humanity.

The Sufi Forum held in Delhi has been a spiritual intervention from India for the benefit of the global community. It attempted to reconnect Indian culture with the international community through the spiritual message Indian Sufis were known for. The Forum was well attended by people from all walks of life from Sufis to academia, theologians, policymakers, international issues experts and Islamic scholars from more than ten countries (see annexure), including neighbouring Pakistan and West Asia.

The Forum consisted of academic sessions in which nearly 200 academicians and scholars presented their perspectives and contributed to the debate to evolve the idea how Islamic teachings can prevent the rise of religious extremism and terrorism in the name of religion. It was noted that in the 21st century, materialism and extremism have 'captivated the young' and that Sufis should reach out to the common people to help in overcoming the challenge.⁷ Speaking from different spectrums, some speakers criticized the role of governments, Islamic groups, policymakers and lack of proper research in the field of Islamic knowledge as the main reason behind the use of Islam by certain group to justify acts of extremism, exclusion and violence. The resolution passed by the forum clearly rejected the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) group and its ideology of violence and extremism. It termed ISIS and Taliban as anti-Islam.⁸

Probably, the most well received speech globally was made by Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi, who spoke not just to the audience in attendance, but to the entire global community and carefully chose the issues he wanted to convey through this conference, which included projecting India's soft power and glorious traditions of spirituality. He said, "Delhi's heart has place for every faith, from those with few followers to those with billion believers." He called Sufis the hope and *Noor* (light) in the time of darkness of violence and terrorism and showed great respect for Sufi tradition and Islamic civilization, "You represent the rich diversity of

the Islamic civilization that stands on the solid bedrock of a great religion.” He also maintained that when we recall the ninety-nine names of Allah, none of them stand for violence. He said that the ideals of Islam have always rejected the forces of terrorism and extremism. He is both Rahman and Rahim, i. e., most beneficent and merciful. Quoting Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti of Ajmer he said, “In the words of Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti, of all the worships, the worship that pleases the Almighty God the most is the grant of relief to the humble and the oppressed.”

Apart from Hinduism and Islam, the presence of other faiths in the country including Zoroastrianism, Christianity, Sikhism and Buddhism etc. provide important links to connect with the world. The Government of India also inaugurated in March 2016 the months-long cultural spectacle, ‘The Everlasting Flame International Programme’ celebrating the multicultural ethos of the Parsi community.⁹ Earlier, on 10-12 September 2015, the Ministry of External Affairs of India organized the 10th World Hindi Conference in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh. Recently, Delhi hosted the World Culture Festival 2016. All these developments indicate a concerted effort on the part of the government authorities and the civil society to promote India's inclusive culture and traditions and connect with the world to help in overcoming the social and spiritual crises it is faced with.

Recommendations and resolutions made by the World Sufi Forum propose including Sufi literature and practices in schools and Madrasas. They also recommended establishing Sufi centres in New Delhi and regional Sufi centres in all capital cities to promote Sufi literature, Sufi culture and music. Establishing a university and Sufi studies chairs in different universities was also recommended. Since most of Sufi literature is in Persian and Urdu language, they also advised that these languages be promoted.

Nevertheless, such conferences, including the World Sufi Forum, though officially recognized and encouraged as they contribute to India’s intellectual standing against extremism, terrorism and violence in the world, at policy level, their contribution to policy making probably needs to be increased. To assert India’s spiritual leadership in the time of serious crises that the world is facing from terrorism, only a few conferences may not well build a strong policy response to the challenge. The success of International Day of Yoga has shown that using similar methods strong Sufi narratives can be developed at the global level to counter the extremist ideologies. Turkish Sufi Jalaluddin Rumi has more international recognition than any other Sufi in the world

though India is the centre of world's largest number of Sufis, who are considered as the *Murshid* (Spiritual Guide) of major Sufi orders in the world.

India has been projecting its spiritual leadership in an inclusive manner. However, more efforts are needed. One should not be surprised that despite his popularity among all sections of Indian society, Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti could not receive much attention among the global community beyond the subcontinent.

The World Sufi Forum was criticized by some Muslim groups and intellectuals and by some Sufi sects as well for certain reasons. The Forum became a focus of attention within Muslims of Indian subcontinent because it was organized almost in parallel to other such conferences. The Jamiat Ahle Hadees organized a two-day International 33rd All India Ahle-Hadees Conference on 12-13 March 2016 at New Delhi, which was addressed by Imam of Holy Mosque of Prophet, Madina, Saudi Arabia.¹⁰ Jamiat Ulama-e-Hind organized "National Solidarity Conference" on 12 March 2016 in New Delhi and another conference "Husool E Insaf W Islahe Muashira Conference" on 28 March 2016 in Godhra, Gujarat. Both the conferences also addressed the issue of extremism and terrorism. Organizations like Jamat-e-Islami Hind, Nadwatul Ulama and other political groups remained neutral and they did not support or oppose such events.

However, it can be observed that these parallel and competitive conferences may signal the emerging approaches on the terrorism discourse in India limiting it within "pro-Saudi" vs. "anti-Saudi" and "pro-Iran" vs. "anti-Iran" narratives. Some speeches made at the Sufi Forum were critical of Saudi Arabia and its Wahhabi¹¹ ideology while the conference of Ahle Hadees maintained a non-political approach towards Saudi Arabia while indirectly criticizing Iran for its policies towards Arab countries.

Soon after the Sufi Forum, the Imam of the Holy Mosque of Makkah, Sheikh Saleh visited India and repeated in his speeches, "Saudi Arabia always stood against terrorism" and many a time, it faced the brunt. He added, "The country has strived in maintaining peace all over the world and would continue with it."¹² Probably, it was an effort to control the damage the World Sufi Forum might have caused to Saudi Arabia's image.

Perhaps, the most interesting speech at the Forum was of Syrian Mufti Badreddin Hassoun, who despite delivering many speeches, avoided directly taking on Saudi Arabia and its Wahhabi ideology, although he is closely affiliated with the Syrian President Bashar al Asad, an arch rival of the Saudi regime.

The question which must be of concern for Indian policymakers is that the terrorism discourse should not become a controversial and dividing line among Indian Muslims. It is well known that both Iran and Saudi Arabia have historical linkages with India's Muslim communities but these linkages have remained largely non-political and non-divisive. If these linkages were used for their oppositional policies in Syria and Iraq, there is a real threat that the World Sufi Forum can be accused of taking sides in this discourse, which the conference has not done.

The World Sufi Forum provided an inclusive platform to diverse views to speak on terrorism and extremism and build greater consensus to address the challenges.

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The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.

Endnotes:

¹ "In Display of Indian Soft Power, Sufism to be Showcased as Counter to Radical Islam", 14 March 2016, <http://thewire.in/2016/03/14/showcasing-sufism-as-a-counter-narrative-to-radical-islam-24744/>

² "PM Modi may attend the first World Sufi Forum in Delhi", *Economic Times* 1 March 2016, http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/articleshow/51208012.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst (Accessed 2 May 2016)

³ BBC, "Anders Breivik, Norway murderer, wins human rights case," 20 April 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-36094575>, (Accessed 20 April 2016)

⁴ Jane Ciabattari, "Why Rumi is the best-selling poet in the US?" 21 October 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20140414-americas-best-selling-poet> (Accessed 6 April 2016)

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ "City List – 22 Sufis, around Town," *The Delhi Walla*, 4 October 2013, <http://www.thedelhiwalla.com/2013/10/04/city-list-22-sufis-around-town/> (Accessed 6 April 2016)

⁷ Priyanka Mogul, "World Sufi Forum 2016: What you need to know about Muslim event inaugurated by Narendra Modi," *All India Ulama and Mashaikh Board*, 1 March 2016, <http://www.aiumb.org/tag/aiumb/page/3/> (Accessed 20 April 2016).

⁸ Ambika Pandit, "IS, Taliban anti-Islam, says Sufi forum; tells government Muslims scared," *Times of India*, 21 March 2016, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/IS-Taliban-anti-Islam-says-Sufi-forum-tells-government-Muslims-scared/articleshow/51486357.cms> (Accessed 12 April 2016).

⁹ Press Information Bureau, Government of India “Shri Arun Jaitley opens the Everlasting Flame International Programme,” 19 March 2016, <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=138176> (Accessed 16 April 2016).

¹⁰ Official Facebook Page of the conference:

<https://www.facebook.com/AhleHadeesConference/photos/a.818055364939177.1073741826.818054821605898/960687524009293/?type=3&theater> (Accessed 2 May 2016)

¹¹ <http://www.catchnews.com/india-news/world-sufi-forum-muslim-leaders-divided-over-pm-modi-s-presence-1458186782.html>

¹² “Terrorists follow no religion: Kaaba Imam”, *The Times of India*, 2 April 2016

<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/patna/Terrorists-follow-no-religion-Kaaba-Imam/articleshow/51665229.cms> (Accessed 4 May)

Annexure¹²

Sl. No.	Name	Country	Position
1.	Dr. Sayed Makhdoom Raheen	Afghanistan	Former Ambassador of Afghanistan to India
2.	Sufi Mohamed Minazur Rahman	Bangladesh	Chief Patron of Allama Rumi Society, Chittagong & Sufi Mizan Foundation
3.	Sheikh Faisal Hamid Abdul Razaq	Canada	Canada
4.	Shaykh-Ul-Islam Dr. Muhammad Tahir-Ul-Qadri	Canada/ Pakistan	Canada based Pakistani scholar and activist
5.	Ustad Haji Nurooddin	China	Renowned master of Arabic calligraphy
6.	Shawki Ibrahim Abdel-Karim Allam	Egypt	19th and current Grand Mufti of Egypt
7.	Shaykh Sayed Hashim Abdul Qader Mansoor Uddin al Gaylani	Iraq	Sajjada nasheen of darbar Sayyadina Shaykh Abdul Qadir al Gailani in Baghdad, Iraq
8.	Shaykh Awn al-Qaddoumi	Jordan	Well-known Sunni Scholar and Preacher, Jordan

9.	Md. Tolegen Mukhamejanov	Kazakhstan	President, International Association “Peace through Culture”, Kazakhstan
10.	Shaykh Afeefuddin Al-Jailani	Malaysia	Founder, Chairman of Al-Wariseen Trust
11.	Shaykh Mohammad Idrees Bouchibti	Morocco	Morocco
12.	Allama Shahzad Mujaddidi	Pakistan	Head, Dar-UI-Ikhlās, Pakistan
13.	Dewan Ahmad Masood Chishti	Pakistan	Descendent of Baba Fareed Ganj Shakar in Pakistan
14.	Maulana Hamid Sayeed Kazmi	Pakistan	Prominent leader of Sunni community and former Federal Minister for Religious Affairs in Pakistan
15.	Mufti Ansarul Qadri	Pakistan	Prominent Sufi Scholar from Pakistan
16.	Shah Pir Taj Hussain	Pakistan	Sufi Scholar from Pakistan
17.	Shaykh Ashraf Mahmood Parker Al-Qaadri	South Africa	Prominent Sufi Scholar from South Africa
18.	Shaykh Tugrul Jerrahi Effendi-Darwesh	Turkey	Sufi scholar, Turkey
19.	Hazrat as-Sayyid ash Shaykh Muharrem Huseyin Cafer-i Tayyar as-Sayyadi ar-Rafa’i	Turkey	Mahmud-i-Hayrani Health and Culture Foundation(Manisa,Turkey)
20.	Pir Muhammad Alauddin Siddiqui	United Kingdom	Founder of Mohiuddin Trust UK

21.	Pir Muhammad Saqib Bin Iqbal Shāmi	United Kingdom	UK
22.	Prof. David Peck	United Kingdom	Professor of History at Brigham Young University, UK
23.	Shaykh Muhammad Imdad Hussain Pirzada from	United Kingdom	Founder Jamia Al-Karam, London, UK
24.	Shaykh Allama Ghulam Rabbani,	United Kingdom	Founder, Kanz ul Huda, UK
25.	Dr. Alan A. Godlas	United States	Director, UGA Virtual Center of Interdisciplinary Studies of the Islamic World (VCISIW), US.
26.	Jonathan Granoff	United States	President, Global Security Institute, and Ambassador for Peace, Security and Nuclear Disarmament of The Parliament of the World's Religions, United States
27.	Richard Helminski Edmund	United States	Sufi scholar from the United States
28.	Sheikh Muhammad Bin Yahya Al Ninowy	United States	Scholar, Georgia USA
29.	Dr. Walter Andersen	United States	Former Chief of the U.S. State Department's South Asia Division, US

30.	Prof. Carl Ernst	United States	Distinguished Professor of Islamic studies at the Department of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina, US
31.	Stephen Suleyman Schwartz	United States	Executive Director of the Centre for Islamic Pluralism in Washington, DC

¹² World Sufi Forum, <http://worldsufiforum.com/speakers/>