

Dr. Hafeezur Rahman

An Indian Muslim Speaks



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www.khusrofoundation.org

khusrofoundation.del@gmail.com

📞 +91 9318431341

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An Indian Muslim Speaks

By:

Dr. Hafeezur Rahman

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Finally, I extend my heartfelt appreciation to everyone who has inspired, supported, and believed in my work.

Preface

My book, *An Indian Muslim Speaks*, is the culmination of my observations and experiences over the past three decade. It offers a reflective exploration of the intersections of faith, society, the rule of law, politics, education, and spirituality through the lens of an Indian Muslim, with history providing an essential backdrop.

In a world marked by clamorous voices and deepening divisions, this book seeks to present a perspective that is firmly grounded in reality while engaging with some of the most pressing issues of our time. It aspires to offer the soothing balm of cultural harmony and spiritual fellowship, where, as Rumi taught, love transcends boundaries, and where the timeless spirit of Kashi reminds us that peace can outlive kingdoms, ideologies, and creeds.

This is more than a collection of essays. It is a sincere attempt to challenge entrenched stereotypes, examine extremist interpretations, celebrate India's syncretic heritage, and encourage thoughtful reform within the Muslim community. Through these chapters, readers are invited to question the narratives of victimhood, sectarianism, and isolation that too often dominate discussions about Muslims in India and beyond. Instead, the book advocates a path

rooted in constitutional values, reasoned dialogue, mutual respect, and shared nationhood.

I am grateful to the **Khusro Foundation** for publishing this work and helping bring it to a wider audience across India. This publication reflects the Foundation's continuing commitment to promoting peace, tolerance, and interfaith dialogue through literature.

I would also like to express my heartfelt gratitude to my dear friend, Dr. Jalis Akhtar Nasiri, an eminent columnist and Arabic scholar, who has shared the same journey with me for more than three decades. Having known me so closely over the years, he graciously read the complete manuscript and penned an insightful introduction to this book. I remain deeply appreciative of his invaluable contribution.

It is my sincere hope that this book will encourage reflection, foster meaningful conversations, and contribute, in its own modest way, to a more harmonious and inclusive society.

Dr. Hafeezur Rahman

Convenor,
Khusro Foundation

Foreword

It is both a privilege and a deeply personal pleasure to introduce *An Indian Muslim Speaks*. My association with its author, Dr. Hafeezur Rahman, spans almost three decades. We first met in 1997 at an educational institution, long before either of us entered the world of higher academia. Our paths later converged at Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, where he pursued his undergraduate studies, and subsequently at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), where our intellectual companionship matured through years of debate, discussion and shared inquiry. He later had the privilege of teaching Persian at the School of Language, Literature and Culture Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University. During these years, I came to know not only a gifted scholar but also a person of unwavering conviction, intellectual honesty and independent thought.

Those who witnessed the vibrant intellectual culture of JNU during the early years of this century will remember Dr. Hafeezur Rahman as an independent voice who refused to be confined within established political frameworks. At a time when student politics was overwhelmingly dominated by organised student wings, he contested the Jawaharlal Nehru University Students' Union presidential election as an

independent candidate. It was a courageous decision that reflected his confidence in ideas rather than organisational strength. More importantly, his participation in the presidential debates over successive years demonstrated his remarkable command over public discourse. His speeches were distinguished not by rhetoric alone but by clarity of thought, depth of scholarship and the courage to articulate concerns that many preferred to ignore. Whether discussing minority rights, women's dignity, educational reform or national integration, he consistently sought dialogue instead of confrontation. It was therefore unsurprising that his interventions attracted attention from leading national newspapers, including *The Times of India*, *The Indian Express*, *The Pioneer* and *The Asian Age*. His participation in an international UNESCO conference further reflected the wider recognition of his intellectual engagement.

Over the years, Dr. Rahman has travelled extensively across India and abroad, including Turkey, Iran, Iraq, France and several countries in Central Asia. These journeys have enriched his understanding of Islamic civilisation, comparative cultures and the shared historical connections that have long linked India with the wider world. His observations are never those of a distant traveller; they are those of a careful student of history who seeks to understand how civilisations evolve through dialogue rather than isolation. His experiences across diverse societies have reinforced his belief that genuine religious faith is strengthened – not weakened – by openness, learning and human interaction.

As Convenor of the **Khusro Foundation**, Dr. Rahman has continued to promote dialogue on India's composite heritage, linguistic traditions and civilisational history. The

influence of Amir Khusro upon his intellectual outlook is unmistakable. Like Khusro, he believes that love for one's faith need never diminish one's love for one's country or one's respect for other traditions. Alongside Khusro, he draws inspiration from Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi, Allama Iqbal, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam and other reformist thinkers whose lives demonstrated that knowledge, patriotism and spirituality can exist in harmonious balance.

Having read every chapter of this book with great care, I can say without hesitation that *An Indian Muslim Speaks* is neither a polemical manifesto nor an exercise in apologetics. It is a thoughtful and deeply reflective work that invites readers to engage with complex questions honestly and without prejudice. The essays combine historical analysis, theological reflection, personal observation and contemporary commentary into a coherent narrative that speaks not only to Muslims but to every reader concerned with India's democratic and civilisational future.

One of the book's greatest strengths is its refusal to accept simplistic narratives. At a time when public discourse frequently reduces Indian Muslims either to objects of suspicion or to perpetual victims, Dr. Rahman presents a far more nuanced perspective. He neither denies the challenges confronting the community nor allows those challenges to become excuses for intellectual stagnation or social withdrawal. Instead, he consistently redirects the conversation towards responsibility, education, constructive participation and civic engagement. His central argument is both simple and profound: Indian Muslims are not spectators in the nation's journey; they are among its active builders and equal stakeholders.

Equally significant is his uncompromising rejection of religious extremism. Throughout these essays, he carefully distinguishes between the ethical teachings of Islam and the ideological distortions that have too often been propagated in its name. He examines how selective readings of scripture, weak or disputed traditions and political manipulation have contributed to violence and sectarian conflict in different parts of the world. Yet his purpose is not merely to criticise. His greater concern is to recover the moral and spiritual foundations of Islam that emphasise justice, compassion, coexistence and human dignity.

Readers will also encounter thoughtful discussions on subjects that remain sensitive within contemporary Muslim discourse. Dr. Rahman argues that Islam is fully compatible with constitutional democracy, civic participation and modern education. He interprets concepts such as *jihad*, Ghazwa-e-Hind, cow slaughter within their ethical and spiritual dimensions rather than through the narrow lens of violence. He discusses the importance of women's education with conviction, advocating not merely equal opportunity but meaningful empowerment. His long-cherished vision of establishing a modern girls' institute reflects his belief that religious values and contemporary education can complement one another in preparing young women for leadership in every sphere of life.

Another recurring theme throughout the book is education as the primary instrument of social transformation. Dr. Rahman repeatedly reminds his readers that no community can progress through emotional rhetoric alone. Lasting reform demands knowledge, discipline and intellectual courage. His emphasis upon expanding quality education, particularly in

rural India, reflects both his own life experience and his enduring commitment to social upliftment.

The essays are equally remarkable for their celebration of India's shared cultural inheritance. Figures such as Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti, Amir Khusro, Dara Shukoh, Mevlana Rumi and Allama Iqbal appear not as distant historical personalities but as living representatives of an inclusive spiritual tradition that continues to inspire humanity. The recurring image of Kashi, with its timeless message of coexistence, serves as a powerful reminder that India's civilisation has long flourished through dialogue between diverse faiths and cultures. These reflections are enriched by the author's extensive travels across Central Asia and the broader Islamic world, allowing him to place India's experience within a wider historical perspective.

What distinguishes this book above all is its tone. In an age when public conversations are increasingly shaped by outrage, suspicion and ideological certainty, Dr. Rahman's voice remains measured, reflective and humane. He does not write to inflame emotions but to stimulate thought. He does not seek victory over opponents but understanding among fellow citizens. His pen consistently serves the cause of dialogue rather than division.

As someone who has shared a long intellectual journey with the author, I recognise in these pages the same qualities that have characterised him since our student days: intellectual independence, moral courage, scholarly discipline and an unwavering faith in the transformative power of education. Time has refined his ideas without diminishing his convictions. The values that shaped our conversations nearly three decades ago – reason, moderation, inclusiveness and

respect for human dignity – continue to animate every chapter of this work.

An Indian Muslim Speaks is therefore much more than a collection of essays. It is an invitation to reflect on faith, identity, citizenship and our shared responsibility for building a more just, harmonious and confident India. Whether one agrees with every conclusion is ultimately less important than engaging honestly with the questions the book raises. Those questions concern us all.

I have no doubt that this volume will find readers among scholars, students, policymakers and thoughtful citizens alike. More importantly, I hope it will encourage conversations that are informed by knowledge rather than prejudice, by empathy rather than fear, and by a shared commitment to India's pluralistic and democratic ethos.

It is with great pleasure that I commend this thoughtful and timely work to every reader.

Dr. Jalis Akhtar Nasiri

CHAPTER - I

Identity, Nationhood & Contemporary India

An Indian Muslim Speaks

Beyond Fear, Towards Faith and Nationhood

A persistent narrative has been imposed upon Indian Muslims – that they live in constant fear, expecting disaster to strike at any moment. I reject this perception. As an Indian Muslim, I have never lived in fear, because when one is connected to God Almighty, abides by the Constitution of India, and nurtures good relationships with those around them, there is little reason to be afraid.

It has often struck me how dramatically the rhetoric of certain political leaders changes as elections approach. Public speeches directed at Muslim audiences frequently become more emotive, portraying Muslims as an endangered community. At the same time, some of these very leaders maintain cordial relationships with those in power whenever political circumstances require it. This contradiction raises an important question: if Muslims are truly living in constant fear, why does this concern become most prominent only during election campaigns?

Populist politics often depends upon capturing the emotions of ordinary people. By convincing communities that only a particular leader or party understands their suffering, such politics can gradually alienate citizens from the larger

national identity. Unfortunately, sections of the Muslim community have repeatedly become victims of this political strategy.

Having observed Indian politics closely over the past three decades, particularly since the 1990s, I have noticed a recurring pattern. During elections, some religious leaders with political ambitions frequently resort to provocative speeches that inflame communal passions. These speeches reinforce the perception that Islam itself is under threat, generating fear among Muslims while simultaneously provoking anxiety within the Hindu community. Such narratives foster mistrust, deepen social divisions and ultimately weaken the idea of a united nation.

A respected Indian journalist once argued that many Muslims have gradually allowed the broader concept of the *Ummah* to overshadow their sense of national identity, raising the question of whether religious affiliation should take precedence over citizenship and constitutional loyalty. In response to his article, I argued publicly that Islam itself emphasises loyalty to one's homeland and obedience to the law of the land. The Constitution of Medina, established by the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), recognised a shared political community in which people of different faiths lived together as equal citizens, demonstrating that nationhood and civic responsibility were fully compatible with Islamic principles.

The Constitution of Medina remains one of history's earliest written political covenants founded on coexistence, justice and shared citizenship, guaranteeing equal rights to all residents regardless of religion. It shows that patriotism, social responsibility and respect for the law were integral to

the Prophet's political vision. Unfortunately, this model was gradually displaced after his passing as hereditary monarchies replaced the consultative ideals of the early Muslim community, while politically motivated interpretations that emerged over the past two centuries have further obscured these foundational Islamic principles.

Commentators have observed that some Indian Muslims have become so preoccupied with distant political conflicts that they risk neglecting their own national responsibilities. As one columnist remarked, Indian Muslims can express solidarity with the Palestinian people without necessarily endorsing organisations such as Hamas.

This distinction is important. During the Gaza conflict, demonstrations in different parts of India sometimes blurred the line between humanitarian support for Palestinians and political endorsement of Hamas. Such ambiguity can unintentionally expose Indian Muslims to allegations of sympathising with extremist organisations, thereby harming both the community's image and the legitimate Palestinian cause.

A similar trend has appeared elsewhere in South Asia. Religious leaders in neighbouring countries have publicly expressed support for Hamas, describing its members as *mujahideen*. Whatever one's position on the Israel–Palestine conflict, support for organisations accused of violence against civilians inevitably complicates the moral position of those who advocate justice for the Palestinian people.

The overwhelming majority of the international community has historically supported the legitimate aspirations of the Palestinian people. Under the leadership of Yasser Arafat, the Palestinian cause was widely understood as a national

struggle for self-determination. As the conflict has increasingly acquired religious overtones, however, international sympathy has become more divided. Across different regions, organisations such as Hamas, ISIS, Al-Qaeda, Hizbullah and other militant groups have arguably caused immense suffering not only to others but also to Muslim societies themselves.

No religion is endangered when its followers sincerely practise its ethical teachings. Every faith seeks to deepen humanity's relationship with the Divine while encouraging compassion, justice and mutual respect among people.

Fear weakens both human relationships and one's spiritual connection with God. It creates insecurity, suspicion and isolation. By contrast, faith strengthens trust, confidence and hope. When individuals live according to the Constitution, fulfil their civic responsibilities and maintain harmonious relationships with both God and society, fear gradually loses its power over them.

Instead of dwelling upon narratives of victimhood, we should celebrate the remarkable contributions of Indian Muslims to the nation. Figures such as **Amir Khusro** – the celebrated Indo-Persian poet, musician, scholar and Sufi – embodied an enduring love for India. Famously known as the "Parrot of India", Khusro praised India as one of the finest lands in the world. His life continues to exemplify the Sufi ideals of love, tolerance and cultural harmony.

The life of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) also offers enduring lessons for peaceful coexistence. During his years in Mecca, when Muslims were a persecuted minority, he responded to hostility with patience, restraint and prayer rather than revenge. After establishing the community in

Medina, where Muslims held political authority, he guaranteed equal rights and legal protection to all citizens irrespective of religion or gender.

These two periods provide complementary models for Muslims living in different circumstances. As minorities, Muslims can emulate the Prophet's patience, dignity and constructive engagement. Where Muslims exercise political authority, they should uphold justice, equality and the rights of every citizen without discrimination.

Unfortunately, these principles have rarely been fully realised. Many states that describe themselves as Islamic have functioned more as hereditary monarchies or authoritarian regimes than as societies embodying the Qur'anic values of justice, consultation, equality and compassion. Likewise, democratic societies where Muslims form minorities continue to face their own challenges in ensuring equal citizenship for all.

Recent international incidents also demonstrate how religious intolerance fuels further violence. The public desecration of the Qur'an in Sweden provoked widespread protests across the Muslim world. Equally, retaliatory attacks on churches, the burning of Bibles or violence against innocent Christians – as witnessed in parts of Pakistan – cannot be justified within Islamic ethics. Responding to one act of intolerance with another only deepens hatred and moves society further away from justice.

Islam teaches respect for all prophets and recognises the revelations contained in earlier scriptures. Muslims share with Jews and Christians a belief in one God, His prophets, His angels and the Day of Judgement. Mutual respect among

faith communities is therefore not merely desirable but deeply rooted in Islamic belief itself.

The great Persian Sufi poet **Rumi** beautifully captured this timeless truth:

"When you incline towards something, fear arises. If you surrender to that fear, you will continue to crawl through life; if you overcome it, you will spread your wings and fly as you were born to do."

That, perhaps, is the greatest lesson of all. A life rooted in faith, constitutional responsibility, compassion and mutual respect leaves little room for fear.

Engaging Indian Ulema in Nation-Building

It was perhaps the first time in the history of modern India that an intergovernmental dialogue was convened to highlight the role of **ulema** in fostering interfaith peace and social harmony between India and Indonesia. This landmark initiative was organised by the India Islamic Cultural Centre (IICC), New Delhi, on 29 November.

The dialogue was inaugurated by India's National Security Advisor, **Mr. Ajit Doval**, who delivered a thoughtful and statesmanlike address on the conference theme. His Indonesian counterpart, **Professor Dr Mohammad Mahfud MD**, Coordinating Minister for Political, Legal and Security Affairs, delivered an equally compelling keynote address. The shared expectation was that the ideas discussed during the conference would extend beyond the meeting hall and positively influence wider society.

Religious scholars and representatives of several influential faith-based organisations from both countries actively participated in the day-long deliberations. In his opening remarks, Mr. Ajit Doval emphasised the responsibility of religious scholars in addressing the growing challenge of extremism:

"Indian ulema have a leading role in educating people about the original tolerant and moderate principles of Islam and in countering extremism through progressive ideas and thought... We need to work together to develop common narratives on de-radicalisation."

This message was reinforced by Dr Mahfud, who reflected on Indonesia's pluralistic traditions. He observed that the country's people are united by the national ideology of **Pancasila**, founded upon five fundamental principles: belief in God, humanity, national unity, democracy and social justice.

Throughout the conference, delegates from both countries repeatedly highlighted Islam's pluralistic and inclusive traditions as powerful foundations for peace and interfaith harmony. They referred to historical precedents such as the **Constitution of Medina**, relevant Qur'anic teachings, authentic Hadith, and the life and example (*Sirah*) of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

The principal outcome of the dialogue was a shared recognition that ulema, faith leaders and academics from India and Indonesia should work together to build an international consensus against religious extremism. Among the key recommendations were:

- developing joint initiatives to counter radicalisation and terrorism;
- rejecting extremist ideologies across all schools of Islamic thought;
- modernising madrasa and Islamic educational curricula; and

- incorporating the sciences, humanities and social sciences into religious education.

Participants also acknowledged the important role played by ulema in both countries in promoting peaceful coexistence and social harmony. Because they remain closely connected to local communities, religious scholars are uniquely positioned to guide society and promote moderation among the millions of Muslims who look to them for leadership.

History offers many examples of Indian ulema serving not only as religious authorities but also as defenders of national unity and social cohesion. During the struggle against British colonial rule, numerous scholars sacrificed their lives in the cause of India's freedom.

The uprising of 1857 marked a defining moment in this tradition. One of the most respected Islamic scholars of the period, **Allama Fazl-e-Haq Khairabadi**, issued a fatwa declaring resistance against British colonial rule. As an adviser to **Bahadur Shah Zafar** and a contemporary of **Mirza Ghalib**, he also proposed practical measures to strengthen the resistance.

Among his recommendations were increased financial support for the freedom fighters and the imperial forces, who faced severe shortages of resources and weaponry. Equally significant was his advice to prohibit cow sacrifice during **Eid al-Adha**, recognising the sacred status of the cow within Hindu tradition. This decision reflected a conscious effort to preserve communal harmony and prevent religious tensions at a critical moment in the freedom struggle.

These actions demonstrated that many religious scholars regarded national unity as inseparable from the struggle

against colonial rule. They understood that maintaining harmony between religious communities was essential to counter the British policy of divide and rule.

The period was also marked by important theological debates within the Muslim community. Allama Fazl-e-Haq Khairabadi criticised interpretations that he believed encouraged sectarian division and challenged several contemporary reformist movements. Later generations of Muslim scholars likewise engaged in vigorous intellectual debates while continuing to advocate moderation, scholarship and social responsibility.

Many other Sunni, Hanafi and Sufi scholars also participated courageously in the First War of Independence and the broader national movement. Among them were **Maulana Ahmadullah Shah, Mufti Sadruddin Azurda, Maulana Abdul Bari of Firangi Mahal, Maulana Hasrat Mohani**, and, in later decades, **Maulana Mohammad Ali Jauhar** and **Maulana Shaukat Ali**, whose leadership during both the Khilafat and freedom movements remains widely recognised.

The contribution of the ulema did not end with India's independence. During Partition and its aftermath, many leading scholars belonging to Sunni, Shia, Deobandi, Barelvi and Sufi traditions worked tirelessly to preserve communal harmony, remain close to the people and encourage peaceful coexistence during one of the most turbulent periods in the nation's history.

Today, Indian ulema face a challenge different in form but equally significant. As in earlier generations, they have an important responsibility to confront religious extremism, reject violence unequivocally and promote an authentic

understanding of Islam rooted in compassion, justice and coexistence. Dialogue among religious leaders remains valuable, but it should be accompanied by coordinated public initiatives that clearly reject terrorism and all forms of ideological extremism.

A joint declaration by respected religious scholars from India and Indonesia condemning extremist ideologies could become an influential document for Muslim communities in both countries. Such an initiative would reinforce the message that no school of Islamic thought should provide legitimacy to organisations that promote violence or hatred.

In this context, Mr. Ajit Doval's initiative assumes particular significance. By bringing together religious scholars, policymakers and community leaders from two of the world's largest Muslim populations, the dialogue marked an important step towards strengthening interfaith understanding, encouraging educational reform and promoting a tolerant, peaceful and intellectually confident interpretation of Islam.

CHAPTER -II

Spirituality, Sufism & India's Shared Civilisation

Why Khwaja Gharib Nawaz Still Rules Millions of Hearts

Every year, millions of devotees from across the world gather in Ajmer to commemorate the Urs of Hazrat Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti, lovingly known as Khwaja Gharib Nawaz – the Benefactor of the Poor. More than eight centuries after his passing, his message of love, compassion and service continues to inspire people across religious, cultural and national boundaries.

Born on 1 February 1143 CE in Sijistan (in the present-day Sistan region on the Iran–Afghanistan border), Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti belonged to a noble Sayyid lineage tracing its ancestry to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). He received his early upbringing in Khorasan, but following the death of his father at the age of fifteen, his life turned increasingly towards spiritual discipline and inner awakening.

He studied in the great centres of learning such as Isfahan, Samarqand and Bukhara, and later travelled to Baghdad in search of a spiritual guide. There, he became a disciple of Hazrat Khwaja Usman Harooni, under whose guidance his spiritual training deepened. His journeys eventually took

him to Mecca and Medina, and later to the Indian subcontinent via Lahore, where he finally settled in Ajmer, Rajasthan.

It was in Ajmer that he established the foundational khanqah of the Chishti Order in South Asia, laying the groundwork for one of the most influential spiritual traditions in the region. He passed away on 15 March 1236 CE (6 Rajab 633 AH) in Ajmer, attaining what Sufi mystics describe as *wisal-e-ilahi* – the ultimate union with the Divine. In Sufi tradition, this is commemorated not as death, but as *urs*, meaning “wedding”, symbolising eternal union with God Almighty.

For this reason, his passing is not mourned but celebrated. The Chishti silsila places great emphasis on unconditional love, humility, service to humanity and devotion to God through remembrance and music (*sama* and *qawwali*). Within this tradition, death is not an end but a return to the Divine Beloved.

Over the centuries, Khwaja Gharib Nawaz became known not for political authority or military conquest, but for his extraordinary compassion and service to humanity. While rulers and emperors built empires and monuments, his legacy was built in human hearts. For nearly eight centuries, dynasties have risen and fallen in the Indian subcontinent, yet his spiritual presence continues to grow stronger with time.

He earned the title *Gharib Nawaz* – the Benefactor of the Poor – because of his unwavering commitment to serving the marginalised. His teachings emphasised both *Huqooq Allah* (the rights of God) and *Huqooq al-Ibad* (the rights of humanity), holding them as inseparable dimensions of faith. He served all people without distinction of caste, creed,

gender or religion, offering food, shelter and compassion to anyone who came to him.

Unlike systems of authority built on power, his influence grew through love, humility and selfless service. It is for this reason that he is often referred to as *Sultan-ul-Hind* – not in a political sense, but as a recognition of his unparalleled spiritual sovereignty over hearts.

The Chishti Order that he introduced to the Indian subcontinent emphasised acceptance of local traditions and cultural sensitivity. This inclusiveness allowed it to resonate deeply with the people of India, making it one of the most widely followed Sufi traditions in the world.

The message of the Chishti saints was simple yet profound: love all, harbour malice towards none. Their khanqahs became centres of refuge, where people of all backgrounds gathered without fear of discrimination. Food was offered without question, and no inquiry was made into a visitor's religion or social identity.

One of the most enduring symbols of this tradition is the Dargah of Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti in Ajmer, located at the foot of the Taragarh Hills. Even today, it stands as a powerful symbol of unity, devotion and shared humanity, attracting millions of pilgrims from across the world every year.

The spiritual legacy of Khwaja Gharib Nawaz is further enriched by the teachings of other great Sufi masters. As **Mevlana Rumi** beautifully expressed:

“One heart is better than a thousand Ka‘bas.”

This reflects the central Sufi idea that the human heart, purified of ego and hatred, is the true abode of the Divine.

His most famous disciples, including Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya of Delhi, carried forward this message with great devotion. Nizamuddin Auliya often recited the Persian couplet:

*If people place thorns on your path, place flowers in theirs;
otherwise the entire path will become filled with thorns.*

The Chishti tradition, as carried forward by saints such as Baba Farid, Nizamuddin Auliya and others, continued to emphasise love, humility and service as the highest forms of worship. Their influence extended across the Indian subcontinent, shaping a culture of shared spiritual heritage.

The Chishti saints also demonstrated remarkable cultural openness. They engaged deeply with local traditions and practices, allowing spirituality to be expressed in forms that resonated with ordinary people. Through poetry, music and compassion, they built bridges between communities.

The legacy of this tradition can still be seen in the great network of Sufi shrines across South Asia – from Ajmer to Delhi, Pakpattan to Gulbarga, Kichhauchha to Bengal. Each shrine carries forward the same message: that love is greater than division, and compassion is greater than power.

From Ajmer to Delhi, Pakpattan to Gulbarga, Kichhauchha to Bengal, the shrines of the great Chishti saints continue to attract millions of devotees every year. Their enduring influence cannot be explained by political power, wealth or military conquest. It rests upon a far more enduring foundation: unconditional love, selfless service, compassion and respect for every human being.

More than eight centuries after Khwaja Gharib Nawaz's passing, these timeless values continue to unite hearts across

religions, cultures and nations. That is why his spiritual legacy has outlived the fame of kings and the power of empires.

Amir Khusro

The Timeless Voice of India's Cultural Unity

Amir Khusro (1252–1325 CE) was an iconic Sufi musician, poet, historian, soldier and mystic, widely regarded as the creator of *qawwali*, a devotional form of Sufi music that continues to resonate across South Asia. He was a remarkable cultural synthesiser who absorbed local traditions and created a unique fusion of Sanskrit, Prakrit, Khari Boli, Awadhi and Braj Bhasha, while incorporating the richness of Persian, Turkish and Arabic vocabulary, effectively *Indianising* them into a new literary expression.

In the modern era, the legacy of Amir Khusro remains profoundly relevant. In a fast-paced world shaped by digital disruption and cultural fragmentation, one is compelled to ask why a figure from the 13th century still matters today.

His devotional musical tradition continues to be performed widely in Sufi shrines across the Indian subcontinent. Khusro was closely associated with the courts of the Delhi Sultanate, and many of his most significant works were composed during the reign of Alauddin Khilji.

While World Urdu Day is celebrated globally on 9 November, coinciding with the birth anniversary of Allama

Muhammad Iqbal, there is a strong case for recognising Amir Khusro as one of the earliest and most foundational figures in the development of Urdu. He is widely regarded as an early custodian of the language and, in many respects, one of its earliest poetic voices.

Long before Iqbal, Khusro was composing in what he called *Hindavi* – a vernacular blend of local Indian dialects enriched with Persian influence. His linguistic contribution represents one of the earliest systematic attempts to bring together diverse linguistic traditions into a shared expressive medium.

Khusro was a master of multiple languages, including Turkish, Persian, Arabic, Sanskrit and Braj Bhasha. He skillfully combined elements of Khari Boli, Awadhi and other regional dialects, while incorporating Persian, Turkish and Arabic vocabulary, creating a distinctive cultural and literary synthesis. Over time, this linguistic blending laid the foundations for what would later evolve into Urdu.

As contemporary writer Javed Akhtar has observed in discussions at *Jashn-e-Rekhta*, the differences between Hindi and Urdu today are largely minimal at the spoken level, reflecting their shared linguistic heritage.

The relevance of Khusro extends far beyond language. In an age marked by conflict, polarisation and identity-based divisions, he remains a powerful symbol of unity, harmony and cultural integration.

He stands as an enduring example of how intellectual and artistic brilliance can transcend boundaries of faith, geography and social identity. His works reflect a deeply

inclusive worldview shaped by love for his homeland and its people.

Khusro proudly identified himself as *Turk-e-Hind*, reflecting both his paternal Turkish lineage and his deep emotional and cultural connection to India. His father, Amir Saif-ud-Din Mahmud, was of Turkish origin, while his mother, Bibi Daulat Naz, was Indian. Her influence was profoundly significant in shaping his emotional attachment to India. He wrote movingly of her, expressing that wherever the dust of her feet was found, it felt like a relic of paradise to him.

Khusro frequently expressed admiration for India, which he described as a land of extraordinary cultural and intellectual richness. In his poetic reflections, he presented India as a kind of earthly paradise, suggesting that even Adam, after his descent from heaven, would have found solace here.

He also praised India's natural beauty and cultural diversity. He spoke of the peacock as a uniquely beautiful bird, suggesting that if paradise existed elsewhere, such a creature would have belonged there.

Khusro is also associated in tradition with early discussions on the concept of zero (*śūnya*), which is believed to have originated in the Indian intellectual tradition around the fifth century. He admired India's contributions to mathematics, logic (*mantiq*), astronomy (*tanjim*) and philosophy (*kalām*), recognising its significant intellectual heritage.

He observed that scholars from across the world travelled to India in pursuit of knowledge, while praising the depth of Indian intellectual traditions. He also noted the linguistic and philosophical richness of Sanskrit, describing it as a language of extraordinary literary sophistication,

comparable in grammatical precision to Arabic and superior in certain respects to Persian.

Khusro expressed deep admiration for the cultural and philosophical traditions of India, celebrating its diversity of thought and expression. His reflections consistently elevated India as a land of knowledge, beauty and intellectual refinement.

He also drew upon a well-known tradition attributed to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him): *“Love of one’s homeland is part of faith”* (*hub al-watan min al-iman*), to express his deep affection for India. This sentiment became an integral part of his cultural and spiritual identity.

He contrasted India with other civilisations, including Greece, Iran and China, asserting the richness of its intellectual and cultural life. He also admired the aesthetic and physical diversity of its people and landscapes, celebrating its fruits, flowers and seasonal beauty with poetic intensity.

He described mangoes, bananas and sugarcane as among the finest fruits, and praised aromatic spices such as cardamom, cloves and camphor. He also highlighted the cultural significance of the betel leaf, noting its uniqueness in the world.

Khusro further reflected on the resilience of ordinary life in India, observing how peasants endured harsh winters with simplicity and dignity, and how Brahmins and common people alike embodied a close relationship with nature and daily ritual life.

He shared a close spiritual bond with his mentor, Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya, the great Chishti Sufi saint of Delhi.

Nizamuddin Auliya is reported to have said of him, “*I grow weary of everyone except this Turk Khusro.*”

His mentor also frequently recited the Persian couplet of Abu Saeed Abul Khair, which emphasises responding to hostility with kindness rather than retaliation: if others throw thorns in your path, you should place flowers instead, so that the entire path becomes walkable and free of harm.

Today, it would be highly valuable if a leading central university were to establish a dedicated Chair or Department of Khusro Studies to further explore and promote his intellectual, linguistic and cultural legacy for future generations.

Ultimately, Amir Khusro’s greatest contribution lies in his ability to bridge cultures and communities. His life and work continue to symbolise the possibility of harmony between Hindu and Muslim traditions, and more broadly, between diverse cultures united through language, art and shared humanity.

Dara Shukoh

The Mughal Prince Who Reimagined Faith as Unity

In the broader landscape of medieval Indian history, Prince Dara Shukoh, the eldest son of Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan, emerges as a figure of remarkable intellectual depth and cultural vision. His life and thought continue to hold relevance in contemporary discussions on pluralism, interfaith understanding and spiritual syncretism.

Far more than a royal heir, Dara Shukoh represented an extraordinary synthesis of roles and identities. He was a statesman navigating the complexities of imperial politics; a scholar deeply engaged with Islamic theology, Sufi mysticism and Hindu philosophy; a philosopher with a pronounced inclination towards universal spiritual truths; and a translator whose work bridged linguistic and cultural worlds. He was also a poet of refined sensibility, whose writings reflected both emotional depth and metaphysical inquiry. Above all, he is remembered as one of the earliest and most significant advocates of interfaith dialogue in the Indian subcontinent.

This intellectual and spiritual breadth set him apart from many of his contemporaries within the Mughal court and positioned him as a distinctive voice for a more inclusive understanding of religion and society. His legacy is often seen as representing a potential alternative trajectory for Mughal India – one grounded in openness rather than exclusivity.

Dara Shukoh's intellectual formation was shaped through sustained engagement with a wide spectrum of spiritual traditions. He maintained close interactions with Sufi masters, Hindu yogis, sadhus, sanyasis and Buddhist monks, alongside Islamic scholars. This exposure enabled him to develop a comparative and inclusive approach to religious thought, unusual for his time.

He received early education in Arabic, Persian, Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsir*) and Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), while also cultivating a deep interest in *tasawwuf* (Sufism). His spiritual outlook was significantly influenced by prominent figures such as Hazrat Mian Mir of the Qadiri Sufi order, Baba Lal Das and other respected sages of diverse traditions. These interactions played a decisive role in shaping his commitment to interfaith understanding.

Although he was one of the principal contenders for the Mughal throne, Dara Shukoh remained more inclined towards intellectual exploration and spiritual inquiry than political ambition. His vision of governance was deeply influenced by ethical and spiritual considerations rather than purely strategic or military concerns.

A central aspect of his intellectual legacy is his commitment to interfaith dialogue. He consistently advocated harmonious relations between religious communities and sought to

identify common philosophical foundations between Islam and Hinduism. His work *Majma-ul-Bahrain* (The Confluence of the Two Seas) stands as his most important contribution in this regard and is widely regarded as a landmark text in the history of comparative religion in South Asia.

Born on 20 March 1615 to Shah Jahan and Mumtaz Mahal, Dara Shukoh was initially educated under the guidance of Hazrat Akhund Mirak, a respected scholar associated with the Qadiri Sufi tradition. From an early age, he was trained in Islamic disciplines as well as spiritual philosophy, which nurtured his inclination towards mysticism and ethical universalism.

His spiritual journey evolved in two broad phases: an early immersion in Sufi thought, followed by a deeper engagement with comparative religious studies. This intellectual progression ultimately culminated in *Majma-ul-Bahrain*, where he sought to identify conceptual convergences between Islamic and Hindu philosophical traditions.

At the core of *Majma-ul-Bahrain* lies the proposition that different faiths, when examined at their metaphysical essence, point towards a shared understanding of ultimate reality. Dara Shukoh argued that apparent differences between religions often arise from external practices and interpretations rather than fundamental spiritual truths.

In his interpretation of the Qur'anic invocation "*Bismillahir Rahmanir Raheem*", he deliberately adopted a more universal phrasing, referring to "the one who has no name", thereby emphasising an inclusive theological perspective. This approach reflects his broader attempt to transcend

linguistic and doctrinal boundaries in pursuit of spiritual unity.

His worldview was also shaped by philosophical influences such as Ibn al-Arabi's doctrine of *wahdat-ul-wujud* (unity of existence) and elements of Vedantic non-dualism. These intellectual traditions contributed to his concept of *wahdat-i-adyaan* – the unity underlying diverse religious expressions.

In the preface to *Majma-ul-Bahrain*, Dara Shukoh explains his motivation for studying non-Islamic scriptures, particularly those of the Indian philosophical tradition. He expresses his conviction that deeper engagement with these texts reveals shared metaphysical insights across religious boundaries.

Through extensive dialogue with scholars and systematic study of religious texts, he concluded that Islam and Hinduism, at their core, share essential spiritual principles centred on monotheism and inner realisation.

A defining feature of his thought was his emphasis on reason (*'aql*) and independent interpretation (*ijtihad*). He encouraged intellectual inquiry over blind imitation, advocating a reflective approach to religious understanding grounded in reason and ethical insight.

He attributed much of the misunderstanding between communities to ignorance of each other's scriptures. In response, he initiated the translation of key Sanskrit texts into Persian, most notably the Upanishads. His translation, titled *Sirr-i-Akbar* (The Greatest Secret), marked a historic milestone in intercultural intellectual exchange.

Completed with the assistance of scholars from Varanasi in 1657, this translation sought to make the philosophical essence of the Upanishads accessible to Persian-speaking intellectual circles. Dara Shukoh interpreted these texts as expressions of profound monotheistic truth, aligning them with his understanding of divine unity.

He further proposed that the Upanishads corresponded to the Qur'anic concept of *Kitab al-Maknun* (the Hidden Book), a bold interpretative claim that reflected his commitment to intellectual synthesis across traditions. While controversial, this position underscores his willingness to challenge prevailing orthodox boundaries in pursuit of a universal spiritual framework.

Dara Shukoh's vision was not merely theoretical but deeply ethical in nature. He believed that religious hostility could be reduced through knowledge, dialogue and mutual recognition. By fostering familiarity between traditions, he sought to replace suspicion with understanding and division with harmony.

Ultimately, Prince Dara Shukoh's legacy lies in his courageous attempt to build bridges between religious worlds. His life represents a rare moment in history where political authority, philosophical inquiry and spiritual idealism converged in the service of interfaith understanding. His ideas continue to offer valuable insights in an age still grappling with questions of identity, coexistence and pluralism.

Bridging Faiths Through Shared Sacred Spaces

The Living Light of Sufi Tradition

As a student of Persian at Jamia Millia Islamia and later Jawaharlal Nehru University during post-graduation, I came across the anthology of Hazrat Niaz Be-Niaz Bareilvi in both Urdu and Persian. Years later, I felt a personal desire to pay my respects at the shrine of the great mystic poet Shah Niaz Be-Niaz in Bareilly.

It was Diwali, in the depths of winter. A cold wave swept across the northern plains, wrapping towns and villages in a sharp, lingering chill. Yet, in striking contrast to the weather, the atmosphere at the Sufi shrine was filled with warmth, light and devotion. Endless lines of devotees carrying small clay lamps created a mesmerising spectacle – an ocean of flickering lights glowing in the night.

Dr Neetu Sharma, a family friend and respected academic who lives near the dargah, is also a devotee of the Khanqah Niazia. She regularly participates in *Jashn-e-Chiraghan* and other gatherings. According to her, the lanes of Bihariapur leading to the Khanqah become heavily crowded every Tuesday evening, with thousands of devotees waiting patiently to enter the shrine.

She kindly accompanied me to the Khanqah and introduced me to the descendants of Shah Niaz, as well as to the caretaker, Hazrat Shabbo Miyan, who extended a warm welcome in keeping with the traditional hospitality of the Khanqah. When asked about the annual celebration, he explained that *Jashn-e-Chiraghan* – the festival of lights – has been observed here for nearly 300 years, initiated by Shah Niaz himself in memory of Sheikh Abdul Qadir Jilani of Baghdad. He also noted that while Tuesdays are the main days of gathering, Mondays are reserved for women and elderly devotees.

Dr Sharma, a professor by profession, attends these gatherings regularly with her family. The shrine draws devotees from diverse backgrounds – Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, as well as visitors from across South Asia, the Middle East and the West. At times, the queues stretch for hours, with devotees holding lamps and waiting in quiet devotion.

Jashn-e-Chiraghan, celebrated according to the Islamic lunar calendar, is a luminous tradition at the Khanqah-e-Niazia in Bareilly. As the Hijri calendar is shorter than the Gregorian calendar, the date shifts forward each year, yet the devotion remains constant.

Over centuries, this vibrant Sufi tradition has flourished in Bareilly, a city historically known as a centre of Islamic learning. Popular culture often remembers Bareilly as the city of “jhumka” and “surma”, yet beneath this imagery lies a deep-rooted spiritual culture shaped by Sufi thought, poetry and music. The Khanqah-e-Niazia, associated with Shah Niyaz Ahmad, continues to embody values of openness, humility and shared humanity.

One of the most striking aspects of the shrine is the belief among devotees that walking a few steps with a lit lamp while offering a prayer increases the likelihood of its fulfilment within a year. Such practices reflect a deeply symbolic expression of hope, faith and spiritual connection.

This naturally raises a larger question: why do Sufi shrines attract people across religious boundaries? The answer lies in the inclusive and assimilative philosophy of Sufism itself. Great Sufi masters such as Shah Niyaz, Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya, Amir Khusro and Sarmad Shaheed embraced local cultures and expressed spirituality in forms accessible to ordinary people.

They are often associated with the broader ethos of *Ganga-Jamuni Tehzeeb*, the syncretic cultural tradition that evolved in the Indo-Gangetic plains, blending elements of Hindu and Muslim social and cultural life. Rather than remaining confined to rigid ritualism, they engaged with local customs, languages and traditions to communicate a universal message of love and compassion.

Their teachings emphasised simplicity in devotion and accessibility in spirituality. Many Sufis adopted local customs as a mark of respect for their social environment. It is often noted in tradition that figures such as Khwaja Gharib Nawaz, Khwaja Nizamuddin Auliya and others expressed deep respect for their Hindu contemporaries, even incorporating vegetarian practices in certain contexts as a gesture of cultural sensitivity and harmony.

The spirit of universal brotherhood is beautifully captured in the words of Mevlana Rumi:

*Come, whoever you are... even if you have broken your vows
a thousand times, come again.*

He also reflects on the centrality of the human heart:

Bring your heart in your hand; a single heart is better than a thousand Ka 'bas.

Similarly, the Persian poet Sheikh Saadi expressed a vision of universal human unity that is so powerful that his verses are inscribed at the United Nations headquarters in New York. His message emphasises that humanity is a single body, and the suffering of one part is the suffering of all.

In the Indian context, Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti of Ajmer, known as Khwaja Gharib Nawaz, is remembered for his principle: “*Love for all, malice towards none.*” His disciples, including Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya, carried forward this legacy of compassion and service.

Nizamuddin Auliya often quoted the Persian poet Abu Saeed Abul Khair:

If people place thorns in your path, place flowers instead; otherwise the path will remain full of thorns.

The cultural impact of Sufi thought extends beyond religion into the arts. Even classical Kathak dancers, including legends such as Pandit Birju Maharaj, have expressed reverence for Sufi saints and their spiritual poetry. Similarly, the celebrated *Jahan-e-Khusrau* festival in Delhi, curated by Muzaffar Ali and held at Humayun’s Tomb, continues to bring together musicians and audiences from across the world, including India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran and Turkey.

The evocative poetry performed by artists such as Abida Parveen reflects the mystical philosophy of unity in diversity:

Yaar ko humne ja-baja dekha...

I saw the Beloved everywhere – sometimes manifest,
sometimes hidden;
sometimes a king on his throne, sometimes a beggar with a
bowl;
sometimes in the form of a lover, heart aflame.

Such experiences of spiritual music often leave a deep emotional imprint, drawing seekers towards Sufi shrines such as the one in Bareilly, which is only a short distance from nearby towns like Rampur.

The Chishti tradition, to which Shah Niyaz is spiritually connected, emphasises reaching people of all backgrounds. Its saints prioritised cleansing the heart over external ritual formalism, focusing instead on inner transformation through love, service and humility.

Today, the Khanqah remains a powerful symbol of harmony. During *Jashn-e-Chiraghan*, non-Muslim devotees often outnumber Muslim visitors, reflecting the inclusive nature of the tradition and its wide cultural appeal.

Shah Niaz Be-Niaz is remembered as a major Sufi poet, comparable in influence within devotional literature to figures such as Amir Khusro, Bulleh Shah and Shah Niaz. His poetry continues to be performed in qawwali gatherings and Sufi musical traditions, carrying forward a message of emotional healing and spiritual unity.

Traditionally, the dargah rituals reflect cultural assimilation. In several Sufi shrines, practices such as tying sacred threads resemble similar customs in Hindu traditions, symbolising shared cultural space rather than separation. Likewise, devotional practices and symbolic rituals vary across regions, reflecting the adaptability of Sufi spirituality.

Recalling my first visit to the shrine decades ago, I remember arriving almost by chance as a teenager, more drawn by curiosity and the communal langar than by awareness of its deeper significance. Food served in shared bowls, the atmosphere of openness, and the spirit of equality left a lasting impression that only became clearer with time.

In an era marked by division, such spaces of shared devotion remind us that faith, at its purest, does not divide – it unites.

Echoes Across Eurasia

The Living Sufi Bridge Between India and Central Asia

The spiritual and cultural relationship between India and Central Asia is one of the most enduring civilisational connections in Eurasian history. Shaped over centuries by trade routes, migrations, political exchanges and above all spiritual movements, this relationship has produced a shared heritage that continues to influence both regions even today.

At the centre of this historical interaction lies Sufism – the mystical and inward dimension of Islam – which has functioned as a powerful bridge of ideas, values and cultural practices between Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent. Rather than being confined to theology, Sufism became a living tradition of travel, teaching, music, poetry and human connection, shaping societies far beyond its geographical origins.

The early development of Sufism in South Asia is closely linked to Central Asian spiritual centres. From the 11th and 12th centuries onwards, saints and scholars from regions such as Bukhara, Samarkand and Khorasan travelled southward, carrying with them spiritual traditions that would

deeply influence India's religious landscape. Figures such as Ali Hujwiri, widely known as Data Ganj Bakhsh, represent some of the earliest transmitters of this mystical tradition in the subcontinent.

Over time, major Sufi orders – most notably the Chishtiyya, Suhrawardiyya, Qadiriyya and Naqshbandiyya – took root in India. Many of these orders traced their spiritual lineage back to Central Asia, reflecting a continuous flow of ideas and practices between the two regions. These traditions established *khanqahs* (spiritual lodges) and centres of learning that became hubs of education, social service and spiritual training.

Central Asia, comprising present-day Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan, developed as one of the most important centres of Sufi thought. Cities such as Bukhara, Samarkand and Khiva were not only intellectual capitals but also spiritual landscapes where Sufi ethics and metaphysics flourished.

Sufism itself is rooted in the pursuit of inner purification, emphasising remembrance of God, self-discipline, compassion, and the refinement of the heart. Its universal message allowed it to travel easily across linguistic, cultural and political boundaries, making it a unifying force across diverse societies.

The exchange between India and Central Asia was never one-directional. While Central Asian saints influenced Indian spiritual traditions, Indian Sufi scholars and practitioners also travelled northwards, carrying with them ideas, texts and devotional practices. This reciprocal movement enriched both regions and contributed to a shared spiritual vocabulary.

The establishment of Sufi orders in India marked a turning point in this relationship. Orders such as the Chishtiyya and Qadiriyya adapted to local cultural environments while maintaining their spiritual roots. They embraced regional languages, music and customs, enabling Sufism to become deeply embedded in Indian society.

This cultural flexibility also ensured that Sufism remained accessible to ordinary people. Its emphasis on love, service and humility allowed it to transcend rigid social structures, making it a unifying spiritual force across communities.

A significant phase in this shared history emerged during the Mughal period. The Mughal Empire, founded by Babur – himself of Central Asian Timurid origin – served as a major catalyst for strengthening Indo-Central Asian cultural and spiritual links. Mughal rulers patronised Sufi saints, scholars, poets and artists, creating an environment in which spiritual and cultural exchange flourished.

This era also witnessed a remarkable synthesis in architecture, literature and artistic expression. Mughal monuments, including mosques, tombs and shrines, reflect a blend of Central Asian design principles and Indian artistic sensibilities, symbolising the fusion of two great civilisational streams.

Language played a particularly important role in this exchange. Persian served as the shared literary medium across both regions, enabling the circulation of Sufi poetry, philosophy and theology. Through Persian, ideas travelled freely between India and Central Asia, creating a unified intellectual world despite geographical distance.

Within this shared literary space, poets such as Amir Khusro, Kabir and Dara Shukoh in India, and Jalaluddin Rumi, Saadi,

Hafez and Omar Khayyam in the broader Persianate world, contributed to a vast and interconnected tradition of mystical literature. Their works continue to be read, recited and performed across regions, reinforcing a common spiritual heritage.

Music and performance traditions further strengthened this connection. Forms such as *qawwali* in India were influenced by Central Asian devotional practices, while Sufi musical traditions from Central Asia found resonance in South Asian devotional culture. This shared musical language became one of the most powerful expressions of spiritual unity.

Even architectural traditions reflect this continuity. The design of shrines, mausoleums and religious complexes across both regions reveals shared aesthetic principles, adapted to local contexts while preserving a common symbolic grammar of sacred space.

In the contemporary era, despite the rise of nation-states and shifting political ideologies, the Sufi legacy continues to function as a subtle yet powerful link between India and Central Asia. Pilgrimages, festivals, poetry recitations and musical gatherings still reflect a shared spiritual memory that transcends borders.

In recent decades, there has been a renewed interest in Sufi traditions across both regions. In an age marked by rapid globalisation, identity politics and religious polarisation, Sufism has re-emerged as a voice of moderation, inclusivity and inner transformation.

Its continued relevance lies in its adaptability. Sufi teachings have been transmitted through modern platforms, including digital media, enabling younger generations to engage with

its philosophy in new ways while preserving its essential message of love and introspection.

At the same time, Sufism offers a counter-narrative to extremism and exclusivist ideologies. Its emphasis on compassion, tolerance and unity makes it a powerful framework for interfaith understanding and peaceful coexistence.

Sufi traditions also play an important social role. Historically, *khanqahs* and shrines have served as centres of charity, food distribution, shelter and community welfare. This ethical dimension continues to inspire contemporary approaches to social justice and humanitarian care.

In a world increasingly shaped by fragmentation, Sufism offers a philosophy of integration – between the self and the divine, between individuals and society, and between different cultures and faiths. This makes it particularly relevant in multicultural regions such as India and Central Asia.

Today, the shared Sufi heritage of these regions continues to foster cultural diplomacy and mutual respect. It remains a living tradition, expressed through shared saints, devotional practices and artistic forms that continue to cross borders and generations.

In conclusion, the Sufi connection between India and Central Asia represents a rare example of sustained civilisational dialogue. It is not merely a historical phenomenon but an ongoing process of cultural exchange and spiritual continuity.

Shaped by centuries of movement, migration and mutual influence, this tradition has created a deeply interconnected

spiritual landscape. Despite modern challenges such as nationalism, extremism and global homogenisation, Sufism continues to endure as a philosophy of compassion, unity and inner awakening.

It remains, ultimately, a living bridge between two regions – one that reminds us that culture, faith and spirituality are not confined by geography, but are shared human inheritances.

Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi

Beyond Physical and Linguistic Boundaries – A Dialogue on a Timeless Mystic

In a world increasingly shaped by division and ideological fragmentation, the enduring appeal of Jalaluddin Rumi, the 13th-century Persian mystic, continues to raise a compelling question: how does a poet who never visited South Asia remain so deeply embedded in its spiritual imagination?

Rumi's life, thought and enduring influence reveal a remarkable ability to transcend geography, language and religious identity. Though he was born in Balkh, educated in Damascus and laid to rest in Konya, his spiritual presence extends far beyond the regions associated with his lifetime, finding a particularly deep resonance in South Asia's Sufi traditions, devotional culture and literary imagination.

Rumi's Universal Appeal in South Asia

Although Rumi was born in Balkh, educated in Damascus and laid to rest in Konya, his influence extends far beyond the regions of his life. In South Asia in particular, his poetry and philosophy are deeply woven into the fabric of Sufi traditions, devotional music and literary culture.

Rumi's relevance today lies in the universality of his message. At a time when identities are often defined through exclusion, his emphasis on love, compassion and human unity offers a counter-narrative grounded in inclusivity. His poetry speaks across boundaries of race, religion and gender, allowing him to remain profoundly relevant in the modern age.

A Multifaceted Scholar and Mystic

Rumi is remembered not only as a poet, but also as a jurist, theologian, Quranic commentator, linguist and philosopher. This multidimensional personality is central to understanding his lasting influence.

In South Asia, Rumi's impact is particularly visible within the Chishti Sufi tradition, where his mystical poetry is frequently rendered in qawwali gatherings. His emphasis on love, devotion and spiritual refinement resonates strongly with Chishti ideals. Meanwhile, other Sufi orders such as the Qadri, Naqshbandi and Suhrawardi traditions engage with Rumi through his adherence to the Quran and the Prophetic tradition, viewing him as a model of Islamic spirituality grounded in faith and discipline.

Rather than belonging to any single order, Rumi's thought is absorbed across multiple traditions, shaping them in different ways while resisting formal categorisation.

Sufi Orders in South Asia: A Shared Spiritual Landscape

South Asia's Sufi landscape is shaped by four major orders: Chishtiyya, Qadiriyya, Naqshbandiyya and Suhrawardiyya.

The Chishtiyya order, introduced by Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti, became the most widespread due to its emphasis on

love, tolerance and engagement with local cultural forms, including devotional music. The Qadiriyya order, associated with Shaikh Abdul Qadir Jilani of Baghdad, places stronger emphasis on adherence to Shariah and disciplined practice. The Naqshbandiyya order, shaped by figures such as Khwaja Baqi Billah and Imam Rabbani, is known for its structured spiritual discipline. The Suhrawardiyya order, though less widespread in India, remains influential in regions such as Afghanistan and Bangladesh.

Within this spectrum, Rumi's thought occupies a distinctive position. His philosophy draws from multiple currents of Sufi thought, combining mystical devotion, poetic expression and ethical discipline in a way that transcends institutional boundaries. This universality is precisely what gives Rumi his cross-order appeal.

The Philosophy of Wahdat-ul-Wujood

A key theme associated with Rumi's thought is the doctrine of Wahdat-ul-Wujood (unity of being), a concept that has historically generated theological debate across the Islamic intellectual tradition.

This idea belongs to a broader philosophical lineage that includes Ibn Arabi and later Sufi thinkers in South Asia such as Sarmad Shaheed and Dara Shukoh. At its core, Wahdat-ul-Wujood expresses the idea that all existence is ultimately a manifestation of the Divine, and that spiritual realisation lies in recognising this underlying unity.

In South Asia, this concept also became a bridge for interfaith reflection, particularly in engagements between Islamic and Indic philosophical traditions. It encouraged dialogue between traditions rather than separation, shaping

a shared vocabulary of spirituality rooted in metaphysical unity.

At the same time, Rumi consistently emphasised that mysticism must remain grounded in the teachings of the Quran and the life of the Prophet, reinforcing the ethical and theological foundations of his thought.

Rumi and Muhammad Iqbal: A Spiritual Continuum

The intellectual relationship between Rumi and Muhammad Iqbal, the philosopher-poet of South Asia who regarded Rumi as his spiritual guide, represents one of the most significant continuities in modern Islamic thought.

While Iqbal drew inspiration from several classical thinkers, Rumi remained central to his intellectual and spiritual development. Works such as *Asrar-e-Khudi* and *Javed Nama* reflect Rumi's influence through their emphasis on love, self-realisation and spiritual awakening.

For Iqbal, Rumi symbolised a dynamic and transformative spirituality – one that elevates the self while remaining rooted in divine love and moral responsibility.

A Poetry Beyond Language and Borders

One of the most enduring questions surrounding Rumi's legacy concerns how his poetry, written in Persian, has transcended linguistic and cultural boundaries to achieve global resonance.

This enduring appeal stems from the essential simplicity and universality of Rumi's message. His poetry consistently returns to themes of unity, compassion and divine love,

expressed in a language that speaks directly to human experience.

A frequently cited couplet captures this spirit:

“You have come to unite, not to divide.”

This idea lies at the heart of Rumi’s enduring relevance. His poetry does not merely describe spiritual states; it actively seeks to dissolve barriers between individuals, communities and traditions.

A Voice for a Fragmented Age

Ultimately, Rumi’s significance lies not merely in his historical position, but in his continued ability to speak to the moral and spiritual challenges of the present. In a world marked by fragmentation and ideological tension, his vision of love as a unifying force offers an enduring philosophical alternative.

Rumi stands as more than a mystic of the past. He remains a guide for the present – reminding humanity that spirituality, at its deepest level, is not about separation, but about connection.

Kashi as a Living Bridge of Faith

Devotional Music and India's Composite Spiritual Culture

In the sacred and culturally layered city of Varanasi (Kashi), Uttar Pradesh, my visit to Banaras Hindu University (BHU) – Asia's largest residential university founded in 1916 – became a deeply reflective encounter with India's living tradition of pluralism. Invited as a guest speaker for an international seminar organised by the Faculty of Social Sciences on “*Understanding India's Composite Culture Through the Tradition of Devotional Songs*,” I experienced first-hand how scholarship, spirituality and artistic expression converge in one of India's most symbolically powerful intellectual spaces.

A Seminar on Devotion Beyond Boundaries

During the three-day academic gathering (28–30 October), I presented a paper on “*The Contribution of Non-Muslim Poets in Naat Writing*,” focusing on the remarkable tradition in which poets from non-Muslim backgrounds have composed devotional poetry in praise of Prophet

Muhammad (peace be upon him). This tradition reflects a broader Indian cultural reality where bhajans, kirtans, qawwalis, and naats coexist within a shared aesthetic of devotion.

The seminar brought together scholars and artists from diverse faiths and countries, creating a rare space where academic inquiry merged with lived cultural practice. Sessions extended from morning to evening, filled with presentations, performances, and discussions that revealed the depth of India's syncretic heritage.

Devotional Music as a Healing Force

A defining moment of the seminar was the personal testimony of Professor Binda Paranjape, Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences, who shared the emotional origins of the event. Having experienced a severe illness during the COVID-19 pandemic, she turned to devotional music – both Islamic naats and Hindu bhajans – as a source of comfort and healing. This experience, she explained, revealed to her the shared emotional and spiritual power of devotional traditions across religions.

This insight became the foundation for the seminar, which sought to bring together voices from across India and abroad, including participants from Singapore, the Netherlands, Egypt, France, Sri Lanka, Nepal, South Africa, and the United States. Scholars, artists, and spiritual practitioners from Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian, Jain, and Buddhist traditions contributed to a shared intellectual and cultural dialogue.

Kashi as a Civilisational Continuum

Varanasi itself emerged as the silent protagonist of the seminar. Historically, Kashi has functioned as a crossroads of knowledge systems – from ancient Vedic scholarship to Persian, Sufi, and Bhakti traditions. The city’s intellectual continuity is reflected in figures such as the 6th-century Persian scholar Borzoye, who is believed to have translated the *Panchatantra* into Middle Persian after studying Sanskrit in Kashi.

Centuries later, Mughal prince Dara Shukoh deepened this civilisational dialogue through his study of Sanskrit texts in Banaras and his Persian translations of the Upanishads, which he interpreted as expressions of divine unity and spiritual convergence between Hindu and Islamic thought.

Institutions such as BHU and Aligarh Muslim University (AMU) symbolically continue this legacy of intellectual openness, rooted in the belief that education must transcend sectarian boundaries. The cultural ethos of Kashi is further enriched by figures such as Sant Kabir, Munshi Premchand, and Ustad Bismillah Khan, who exemplify the city’s seamless blending of artistic, spiritual, and cultural traditions.

The Shared Language of Devotion

One of the most striking realisations from the seminar was the universality of devotional expression. Across traditions, music and poetry emerge as shared languages of faith. Whether in Sufi qawwali, Bhakti bhajan, Sikh kirtan, or Christian hymns, the underlying emotional grammar remains remarkably similar: surrender, love, longing, and transcendence.

The performances during the seminar reinforced this unity. A Hindu artist singing naats, Muslim performers rendering bhajans, and collaborative musical expressions demonstrated that devotion in India is not confined by religious identity but enriched by it.

Syncretism in Practice and Memory

India's composite culture is not merely theoretical; it is lived and performed. Historical patterns of mutual cultural exchange are visible in literature, music, and institutional histories. The support extended across communities during the establishment of BHU and AMU reflects this shared commitment to education as a unifying force.

Similarly, devotional figures such as Amir Khusro, Kabir, Guru Nanak, Dara Shukoh, Raskhan, and Bulleh Shah embody a tradition where spiritual expression transcends doctrinal boundaries. Their works continue to inspire both Hindu and Muslim devotional cultures, reinforcing a shared civilisational vocabulary.

Music, Mind, and Spiritual Experience

Another important dimension discussed during the seminar was the psychological and emotional impact of music. Contemporary research, including studies referenced by speakers, highlights how music influences neurological processes associated with emotional regulation, memory, and wellbeing.

In this context, devotional music is not only a cultural practice but also a therapeutic medium that fosters emotional balance and collective harmony. Baul traditions of Bengal, Rabindra Sangeet, and classical Bhakti compositions further

demonstrate how music becomes a medium for philosophical reflection and social unity.

A Living Tradition of Unity

The seminar at BHU reaffirmed that India's strength lies in its ability to integrate diversity into a cohesive cultural framework. The presence of multiple devotional traditions under one academic and spiritual roof highlighted the resilience of India's plural ethos.

The philosophy of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* – “the world is one family” – echoed repeatedly throughout the discussions, reminding participants that unity is not an abstract ideal but a lived cultural reality.

Kashi as an Eternal Bridge

My experience at BHU was not merely academic; it was profoundly reflective. It revealed Kashi as more than a city – it is a civilisational consciousness where faiths, languages, and artistic traditions continuously interact and evolve.

In a world increasingly marked by division, the devotional traditions witnessed in Kashi offer a powerful reminder: music, poetry, and shared spiritual expression remain among the most enduring bridges between human beings.

As Swami Vivekananda, Saadi Shirazi, and Rumi each expressed in their own ways, unity lies at the heart of existence. Kashi, in its living traditions, continues to embody that truth.

India's Mosques as Living Archives of Cultural Confluence

India's civilisational landscape is often described as a vast, layered archive where history, faith, and aesthetics continuously overlap. For centuries, travellers, scholars, and pilgrims have encountered in the subcontinent not only a geographic space but a deeply textured cultural continuum – one shaped by dialogue between traditions rather than their isolation. This enduring synthesis is visible across its monuments, rituals, languages, and artistic forms, all of which reflect a shared imagination of beauty and belonging.

Among these expressions of cultural plurality, mosque architecture in India occupies a particularly significant place. With an estimated three lakh active mosques across the country, each structure stands not merely as a place of worship but as a repository of local memory, artistic adaptation, and historical interaction. Far from being uniform, these mosques embody the remarkable diversity of India's regional aesthetics, construction techniques, and spiritual sensibilities.

Indian mosque architecture, in its evolution, reveals a continuous conversation between indigenous building

traditions and external influences drawn from Persian, Central Asian, and Turkish styles. Domes, arches, minarets, courtyards, and calligraphic ornamentation are often combined with distinctly local materials, motifs, and craftsmanship. The result is not imitation but transformation – an architectural idiom that is recognisably Islamic in function yet deeply Indian in form.

This synthesis is most clearly reflected in what scholars often describe as the Indo-Islamic or Indo-Saracenic tradition, where architectural vocabulary from different civilisational worlds is reinterpreted in local contexts. Over time, this process produced structures that are both regionally grounded and globally resonant, revealing how cultural exchange can generate new aesthetic possibilities rather than erasing older ones.

Historical memory places the early presence of mosques in India within the broader narrative of the spread of Islam through trade, travel, and spiritual engagement rather than a single linear process. One of the most frequently cited early examples is the Cheraman Juma Masjid, traditionally associated with the 7th century and located in Kerala's coastal landscape. Built in the vernacular architectural style of the region, it reflects the early integration of Islamic worship into existing local construction traditions, illustrating adaptation rather than rupture.

In later centuries, especially during the medieval and early modern periods, mosque architecture in North India and the Deccan evolved into highly sophisticated forms under various regional sultanates and imperial powers. The Mughal period in particular produced some of the most iconic expressions of Islamic architecture in the

subcontinent. In Delhi, the grand Jama Masjid stands as a monumental example of scale and urban integration, designed to accommodate large congregations while asserting architectural symmetry and grandeur. Its vast courtyard, monumental gateways, and elevated minarets reflect both imperial ambition and spiritual function.

Within the Mughal architectural repertoire, smaller yet refined structures such as the Nagina Masjid demonstrate another dimension of aesthetic expression. Built in white marble and known for its restrained elegance, it illustrates how architectural refinement could be expressed through simplicity, proportion, and material purity rather than sheer scale.

Moving beyond the Mughal heartlands, regional expressions of mosque architecture reveal equally compelling variations. In Bhopal, the Taj-ul-Masajid represents one of the largest mosque complexes in India, distinguished by its expansive prayer hall, towering minarets, and distinctive façade. Its architectural language reflects both continuity with Mughal design principles and adaptation to later historical periods.

In the Kashmir Valley, the Hazratbal Shrine illustrates another regional synthesis, where mosque architecture is deeply intertwined with the Himalayan landscape. Its serene lakeside setting and understated design highlight a different architectural philosophy – one that emphasises harmony with nature and spiritual tranquillity over monumental scale.

Across western and northern India, smaller mosques in towns and rural areas further demonstrate the diversity of materials and techniques used in their construction. Stone, brick, lime plaster, timber, and locally sourced decorative elements all contribute to a vast architectural vocabulary that

varies from region to region. In coastal Kerala, for instance, wooden mosque traditions reflect indigenous carpentry styles adapted to religious architecture, while in parts of Uttar Pradesh and Gujarat, intricate stone carving traditions dominate.

What emerges from this wide spectrum of forms is not a singular architectural identity but a mosaic of interconnected traditions. Each mosque, whether grand imperial monument or modest neighbourhood structure, reflects the social and cultural environment in which it was built. Together, they document centuries of interaction between communities, artisans, rulers, and spiritual networks.

Equally important is the role these spaces have played beyond architecture. Mosques in India have historically functioned as centres of learning, community gathering, charitable activity, and literary production. They have been embedded within neighbourhood life, shaping and responding to local social realities. In this sense, they are not static monuments but living institutions that continue to evolve with time.

The broader historical significance of India's mosque architecture lies in its capacity to demonstrate how cultural forms travel, adapt, and transform. Rather than existing as isolated or imported structures, these buildings illustrate a process of continuous reinterpretation, where external influences are absorbed into local traditions and re-expressed in new visual languages.

In contemporary India, these architectural legacies remain powerful symbols of shared heritage. They attract scholars, travellers, and devotees alike, not only for their aesthetic and historical value but also for what they represent: the

possibility of coexistence expressed through stone, space, and design. In an era often marked by cultural polarisation, such structures quietly reaffirm a longer history of interaction and mutual shaping.

Ultimately, the story of India's mosques is not only about religion or architecture. It is about the broader human capacity to build meaning together across differences. Seen in this light, these three lakh mosques are not merely scattered across the landscape – they form part of a single, evolving narrative of cultural convergence, where diversity is not an exception but the foundational principle of the built environment itself.

CHAPTER-III

Religion, Reform & the Pursuit of Peace

Can Religion Become a Force for Human Unity?

A Comparative Reflection on Sacred Texts and Shared Ethical Vision

The question of whether religion can become a force for human unity is not merely philosophical; it is deeply practical in a world frequently marked by fragmentation, identity conflicts, and cultural misunderstanding. Across civilizations, religious traditions have often been interpreted in ways that divide communities, yet within their foundational teachings lies a far more expansive message – one that emphasises compassion, moral responsibility, and the essential unity of humankind.

When examined closely, the sacred literatures of different faiths reveal striking convergences. These similarities suggest that while religious languages and symbols differ, the ethical and spiritual direction they point toward is often profoundly aligned. The central idea that emerges from such a comparative reading is simple yet transformative: humanity may express its devotion in multiple forms, but the ultimate reality it seeks is one.

A well-known concept from Hindu philosophical tradition, expressed in texts such as the Chandogya Upanishad and other Upanishadic sources, is the idea of **“Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam”** – the world as one family. This vision extends beyond social ethics into a metaphysical understanding of interconnected existence. In parallel, Islamic tradition emphasises the unity of creation under one divine source, as reflected in the Qur’anic worldview and in traditions that highlight the shared dignity of all human beings as part of God’s creation.

At the heart of Islamic monotheism lies Surah Ikhlas (Qur'an 112), a concise yet powerful declaration of divine oneness: God is singular, eternal, beyond generation or comparison, and unique in essence. Its message is reinforced daily in Islamic prayer life and forms the theological core of worship.

Comparable affirmations of divine unity are found in Hindu philosophical texts as well. The statement **“Ekam evadvitiyam”** – “The One without a second” – from the Upanishadic tradition reflects a similar metaphysical assertion of singular ultimate reality. Likewise, the Bhagavad Gita speaks of the divine as unborn, eternal, and beyond ordinary comprehension, reinforcing the idea that ultimate reality transcends physical categorisation.

The Shvetashvatara Upanishad also expresses this metaphysical transcendence when it states that the divine has no likeness or equivalent. Similarly, the Yajurveda contains verses that reject any physical representation of the Absolute, reinforcing the notion of divine formlessness.

In Islamic tradition, the opening chapter of the Qur’an, Surah Al-Fatiha (Qur'an 1), encapsulates a universal prayer for guidance: seeking the straight path, divine mercy, and moral

clarity. Its recitation in daily prayer underscores its foundational importance, not only as worship but also as a continuous ethical orientation toward righteousness.

A similar spirit of invocation and illumination is found in the Hindu Gayatri Mantra, which seeks divine guidance for intellectual clarity and moral direction. It is fundamentally a prayer for enlightenment, emphasising inner transformation and the pursuit of truth.

Taken together, these texts reveal a shared spiritual structure: the human being as a seeker, the divine as the ultimate guide, and ethical living as the path toward harmony. While theological frameworks differ in expression, the underlying aspiration remains remarkably consistent.

This convergence is also reflected in broader ethical teachings across traditions. The Qur'an emphasises the unity of humankind, reminding believers that diversity of race and tribe exists for mutual recognition rather than division. It also warns against sectarian fragmentation and urges collective moral responsibility and justice. Similarly, Hindu philosophical thought emphasises social harmony and universal belonging through the idea of cosmic unity.

Beyond scripture, this message has been repeatedly echoed by spiritual and literary figures across traditions. The Persian poet Saadi Shirazi famously articulated the interconnectedness of humanity in his well-known verse comparing human beings to limbs of a single body – a metaphor of shared suffering and collective responsibility that continues to resonate globally.

The mystic Jalaluddin Rumi extended this vision further by calling all seekers – regardless of background – to a space of

inclusion, love, and spiritual openness. His poetry consistently dissolves boundaries between identities in favour of a universal experience of divine love.

In the Indian subcontinent, Sufi saints such as Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti and Nizamuddin Auliya carried forward a similar ethical emphasis. Their teachings centred on compassion, service, and humility, often summarised in phrases such as “love for all and malice toward none.” Their spiritual legacy shaped traditions of inclusivity that remain deeply embedded in South Asian cultural life.

Literary voices in Urdu and Persian further reinforced this ethos. Poets such as Jigar Moradabadi expressed the idea that love and compassion are universal messages that transcend political or ideological boundaries.

Modern thinkers have echoed these ideas in different forms. Swami Vivekananda, for instance, emphasised the unity underlying all religious experience, arguing that truth may be expressed in many names but ultimately reflects a single universal reality.

From a comparative perspective, what emerges is not a forced equivalence between traditions but a recognition of shared ethical and spiritual concerns. These include compassion, humility, truthfulness, justice, and the aspiration toward transcendence. When religion is interpreted through this ethical lens rather than as a marker of exclusion, it becomes a powerful framework for social cohesion.

However, history also demonstrates that religious identity can be misused to reinforce boundaries and justify division. The difference lies not in the scriptures themselves, but in

their interpretation and application. When approached as a source of moral refinement rather than superiority, religion has the capacity to act as a bridge rather than a barrier.

In conclusion, religion can indeed become a force for human unity, but only when its emphasis shifts from separation to connection, from dominance to humility, and from exclusion to shared moral responsibility. The convergences found across sacred texts and spiritual traditions suggest that unity is not an external imposition but an intrinsic possibility already present within humanity's diverse religious heritage.

Irja: The Forgotten Theology of Restraint

A quiet doctrine that once restrained conflict still speaks to a divided present

In the long and often turbulent history of Islam, ideas have spread not only through power or conquest but also through reflection, restraint and moral hesitation. Among these quieter traditions stands Irja, the deliberate postponement of judgment. Once a stabilizing force in early Muslim society, Irja offered a way to manage disagreement without descending into excommunication or violence. Today, when Muslim societies remain entangled in sectarian tensions, rigid certainties and mutual accusations of disbelief, its near disappearance raises an urgent question. How did a doctrine meant to preserve unity become marginal within the very tradition it once enriched?

To understand Irja, one must revisit one of the most formative crises in early Islamic history. The assassination of the third caliph, Uthman ibn Affan, did more than end a political tenure. It fractured the moral and political unity of the Muslim community. His successor, Ali ibn Abi Talib,

inherited not just a state but a deeply divided society, where demands for justice, vengeance and legitimacy collided.

What followed were not routine political disagreements but battles of conviction. Muslims stood against Muslims, each convinced of their moral correctness. Theology, in such a moment, could not remain neutral. It was drawn into the arena of conflict.

The most uncompromising response came from the Kharijites. They advanced a stark doctrine that fused belief and morality in absolute terms. For them, committing a grave sin was equivalent to disbelief. A sinner ceased to be a Muslim and could therefore be lawfully killed. This was not merely a theological claim but a political instrument that enabled the excommunication of rulers and communities and justified violence.

The consequences of such thinking were profound. Once faith becomes subject to human judgment of actions, and once that judgment is treated as final, the distance between disagreement and violence collapses. It was precisely in response to this absolutism that Irja emerged.

The proponents of Irja refused to enter the arena of definitive judgment. Their argument was both simple and radical. If fellow Muslims had committed grave sins, their ultimate accountability rested with God alone. Human beings, limited in knowledge and prone to error, did not possess the authority to declare others outside the fold of Islam.

This position was often misunderstood as indecision or passivity. In reality, it was a conscious refusal to weaponize theology. It represented moral restraint rooted in humility, not indifference.

Over time, Irja developed into a more structured theological position. At its core lay a subtle but significant distinction. Faith resided in belief and affirmation, while actions, though morally significant, did not define the essence of belief. A Muslim could commit serious sins and yet remain within Islam.

This did not imply moral relativism. Irja did not deny sin or excuse wrongdoing. Instead, it relocated ultimate judgment from the human to the divine domain. It created space for repentance, complexity and moral ambiguity without collapsing everything into rigid binaries.

Among the scholars who articulated this position most clearly was Imam Abu Hanifa. He maintained that a Muslim does not cease to be a Muslim due to sin. Faith, in his formulation, consisted of belief in the heart and affirmation by the tongue, not the perfection of deeds. This distinction introduced a degree of theological flexibility that later shaped large parts of Sunni Islam, particularly through the Hanafi Maturidi tradition.

Yet Irja did not retain its central place. Its marginalization was gradual and shaped by multiple forces.

One reason lay in perception. Because Irja discouraged declaring rulers as infidels, it was seen by critics as politically accommodating or quietist. This reading is incomplete. Many who held Irja inspired views were not passive. They criticized injustice and, in some cases, resisted authority. Their refusal was not against dissent, but against turning theological judgment into a tool of exclusion.

A more decisive shift came with theological currents that insisted on the inseparability of faith and action. Scholars

such as Ibn Taymiyya argued that belief could not be divorced from practice. Failure to implement divine law, in this framework, signaled deficient or even absent faith. While internally coherent, this position narrowed the space for ambiguity and tolerance that Irja had preserved.

Centuries later, this emphasis found renewed expression in the movement of Muhammad ibn Abd al Wahhab. His insistence on doctrinal purity sharpened the boundaries between belief and disbelief. Practices seen as deviations were often labelled as polytheism, and those adhering to them risked exclusion.

In the modern era, the consequences of this trajectory have become stark. Groups such as ISIS took the logic of excommunication to its extreme. Their worldview expanded the category of disbelief to include not only opponents but also large sections of Muslims themselves. Violence was not only justified but sacralized.

In a revealing moment, ISIS explicitly identified Irja as a threat. In a 2015 publication, it described the doctrine as a dangerous innovation. The reason was clear. Irja undermined the ideological foundation of excommunication. By refusing to equate sin with disbelief, it made it harder to declare others infidels and justify violence.

This opposition highlights a broader pattern. The rejection of Irja has often coincided with rigid and exclusionary interpretations of religion. Its presence, by contrast, has historically created space for coexistence, patience and humility.

More concerning, however, is not the critique from extremist groups but the relative silence within traditions that once carried Irja's spirit. The Hanafi Maturidi framework, dominant across large parts of the Muslim world, absorbed elements of this doctrine. Yet over time, its emphasis on restraint weakened.

In many contemporary contexts, scholars and preachers appear increasingly quick to pass moral verdicts and assign labels. Questions that were once left to divine judgment are now addressed with human certainty. This shift has significant consequences.

When individuals or groups begin to decide who is within or outside Islam, the space for internal diversity narrows. Differences that could have been managed through dialogue harden into divisions, and divisions into hostility.

The absence of Irja's spirit is also evident in responses to sensitive issues. Debates around blasphemy, sectarian identity or doctrinal disagreement often provoke immediate and intense reactions. The language of judgment becomes sharper, while the space for reflection diminishes. In such an environment, even minor disagreements can escalate into major conflicts.

Revisiting Irja does not mean lowering moral standards or excusing wrongdoing. It does not suggest that actions are irrelevant. Rather, it calls for a rebalancing. It reminds believers that they are not the final arbiters of faith and encourages a distinction between moral evaluation and existential judgment.

In practical terms, this could foster a more measured approach to contemporary challenges. Instead of immediate

condemnation, communities could priorities dialogue, education and due process. Instead of rushing to define boundaries, they could allow space for diversity within a shared framework of belief.

At a broader level, such a perspective could reshape both internal relations within Muslim societies and their engagement with the wider world. A community grounded in restraint and humility is less likely to be perceived as rigid or exclusionary. It becomes easier to build bridges across differences.

The tragedy is not merely that Irja has faded, but that its absence is felt precisely where it is needed most. The intellectual resources for a more balanced and humane approach already exist within the tradition. What is lacking is not knowledge, but emphasis.

Part of the answer may lie in a human tendency towards certainty. Judgment offers clarity, even when premature. It creates firm boundaries, even when artificial. Restraint, by contrast, demands patience, humility and a willingness to live with ambiguity.

Irja demands exactly this. It asks believers to recognize the limits of their knowledge and resist the urge to deliver final verdicts reserved for God alone.

In an age of loud certainties and deep divisions, such restraint may seem difficult. Yet it may also be necessary. Revisiting Irja is not about nostalgia. It is about reclaiming a principle that speaks directly to the present. It prioritizes unity over division, humility over arrogance and restraint over excess.

For a deeper exploration of these themes, readers may turn to **Khusro Foundation's** latest publication *Muslim Azhaan ki Tashkeel e Nau*, the Urdu edition of Mustafa Akyol's *Reopening Muslim Minds*, which engages with the intellectual and moral challenges facing contemporary Muslim thought.

Islam, Misinterpretation, and the Question of Radicalism

A Critical Reassessment

Islam's foundational sources – the Qur'an and the Prophetic tradition – consistently articulate a moral vision rooted in justice, compassion, human dignity, and peaceful coexistence. At its ethical core lies the affirmation that all human beings share a common origin and equal moral worth before God. This universal principle rejects hierarchies based on race, ethnicity, or social status, and instead evaluates individuals through the lens of character, ethical conduct, and spiritual consciousness.

The Qur'an repeatedly emphasises values such as mercy, fairness, and restraint, while the Prophet Muhammad's teachings reinforce interpersonal ethics grounded in humility and kindness. In one widely cited tradition, he advised believers to remain conscious of God in all circumstances, to respond to wrongdoing with goodness, and to engage others with courtesy and respect. In his final sermon, he further underscored the radical egalitarian message that no group holds inherent superiority over another, whether defined by race or lineage.

Within this interpretive framework, Islam presents itself not as a system of exclusion, but as an ethical orientation toward balance and moral accountability. However, in modern intellectual and political history, certain thinkers have offered interpretations that have been widely debated, contested, and criticised for their emphasis on political exclusivism and rigid conceptions of sovereignty.

Among the most discussed figures in this regard is Abul A'la Maududi, whose political theology framed governance in terms of divine sovereignty. His ideas, developed in the context of colonial rule and post-colonial identity formation, significantly influenced later Islamist political movements. Alongside him, Sayyid Qutb articulated a critique of modern secular systems that would go on to shape a range of ideological currents in the 20th century.

In Egypt, Hasan al-Banna founded a movement that sought social and political reform through an Islamic framework, contributing to the broader emergence of Islamist activism across the region. These thinkers, operating in distinct historical contexts, collectively shaped debates about religion and state, authority and law, and the place of Islam in modern political order.

It is important to note, however, that these intellectual traditions have been interpreted in multiple – and often conflicting – ways. While some readings emphasise ethical reform and social justice, others have been used to justify exclusivist or militant political agendas. Over time, selective readings of these ideas were incorporated into more radical movements, particularly in the late 20th century.

Militant organisations such as al-Qaeda, led by figures like Ayman al-Zawahiri, drew selectively from ideological

frameworks associated with Sayyid Qutb, reinterpreting them in ways that diverged significantly from broader scholarly Islamic traditions. Similarly, individuals such as Muhammad Abd al-Salam Faraj, through writings like *Al-Farida al-Gha'iba* ("The Neglected Duty"), developed arguments that prioritised armed struggle against perceived political adversaries, further contributing to the fragmentation of interpretive approaches within modern Islamist thought.

At the same time, it is essential to distinguish between theological discourse and its political instrumentalisation. Mainstream Islamic theology, across centuries, has maintained strong currents of moderation, ethical pluralism, and jurisprudential restraint. Classical doctrines emphasise balance, consultation, and justice rather than ideological absolutism.

The Qur'an itself provides repeated injunctions against coercion in matters of faith, most notably in the principle that belief cannot be compelled, and that moral truth must emerge through understanding rather than force. It also affirms diversity among peoples as a means of mutual recognition rather than conflict, encouraging ethical engagement across communities. Another foundational Qur'anic principle warns against sectarian fragmentation and urges believers toward unity grounded in shared moral responsibility.

Within this broader ethical landscape, Islam's concept of the "middle path" (*wasatiyya*) becomes central. It represents a rejection of extremes – whether in belief, governance, or social conduct – and instead promotes equilibrium between spiritual devotion and worldly responsibility, individual

rights and collective welfare, authority and moral accountability.

This moderate tradition is also reflected in the Prophet's political and social practice in Medina, where the early Muslim community coexisted with diverse religious groups under a framework of mutual rights and obligations. The resulting social arrangement is often cited as an early model of pluralistic governance grounded in shared civic principles.

Modern debates, however, have often been shaped by selective readings of texts and the politicisation of religious identity. In some cases, contemporary speakers and writers have been criticised for presenting absolutist interpretations that critics argue are inconsistent with broader Qur'anic ethics. Figures such as Zakir Naik have been particularly polarising in this regard, with interpretations that have sparked widespread debate across religious and academic communities.

It is also true that in various historical and geopolitical contexts, religious ideas have been mobilised in ways that contribute to tension or polarisation. Yet such outcomes cannot be attributed solely to theology itself. They are equally shaped by political conflict, social fragmentation, and selective ideological appropriation.

Contemporary responses in several Muslim-majority societies have increasingly moved toward re-emphasising moderation and contextual interpretation, seeking to reclaim ethical dimensions of Islamic thought that prioritise coexistence and social harmony. These efforts reflect a growing recognition that religious traditions must be understood within their broader moral and historical

frameworks, rather than through isolated or decontextualised readings.

Ultimately, Islam's foundational message remains rooted in ethical universality: justice, compassion, and accountability before God. While interpretive differences exist – and have always existed within Islamic intellectual history – the core teachings consistently point toward moderation rather than extremism, and toward human dignity rather than division.

The challenge, therefore, is not in the absence of inclusive principles within Islam, but in ensuring that interpretation, education, and discourse remain anchored in the broader ethical spirit of the tradition. When this balance is maintained, religion functions not as a force of division, but as a framework for moral unity and collective human flourishing.

From Marginal Narration to Political Slogan

Rethinking the Idea of Ghazwa-e-Hind

The idea of *Ghazwa-e-Hind* has circulated widely in contemporary discourse, often presented as a prophetic prediction of an Islamic military campaign in the Indian subcontinent. In recent decades, the phrase has appeared in extremist propaganda, online recruitment material, and politically charged narratives that frame it as a divinely sanctioned historical inevitability. Yet when examined through the lens of classical Hadith methodology, early Islamic scholarship, and historical context, the concept rests on fragile textual foundations and gains its force not from theology but from modern political amplification.

A term misunderstood from its roots

In Islamic tradition, the word *ghazwa* carries a precise technical meaning. It refers specifically to military expeditions personally led by the Prophet Muhammad during his lifetime. Expeditions carried out without his direct participation are classified differently as *saraya* (plural of *sariyah*). This distinction is not semantic trivia; it is

foundational to how early Islamic historians and jurists recorded and interpreted the Prophet's life.

From this perspective alone, the phrase "Ghazwa-e-Hind," if understood literally as a future prophetic campaign led by the Prophet himself, becomes conceptually incoherent within Islamic theology. Mainstream belief across Sunni and Shia traditions holds that the Prophet's earthly mission concluded with his passing. Future historical events, therefore, cannot be classified as *ghazawat* in the technical sense used in early Islamic historiography.

The fragile textual basis

The narrations commonly associated with *Ghazwa-e-Hind* are found in secondary Hadith compilations such as *Musnad Ahmad ibn Hanbal*, *Sunan al-Nasa'i al-Kubra*, and *al-Mu'jam al-Kabir* of al-Tabarani. These reports mention expeditions toward regions identified as *al-Hind* and *al-Sind*, sometimes with references to spiritual reward for participants.

However, what is crucial in Hadith studies is not merely presence in a collection, but the strength of transmission. Classical Hadith criticism evaluates reports through *isnad* (chain of narrators) and *matn* (textual coherence). Across major Hadith scholarship, these narrations are widely graded as *da'if* (weak), and in some cases disputed or inconsistent due to issues in narrator reliability and chain continuity.

They are notably absent from *Sahih al-Bukhari* and *Sahih Muslim*, the two most rigorously authenticated collections in Sunni Islam. This absence is significant, because these works were compiled precisely to preserve narrations meeting the highest standards of verification.

Historical Hadith transmission itself was vast and highly filtered. Early compilations recorded hundreds of thousands of narrations circulating in different regions, but only a small fraction met the strict criteria required for inclusion in canonical works. Within this framework, *Ghazwa-e-Hind* remains on the margins of the tradition rather than at its doctrinal centre.

Silence in classical Islamic scholarship

Perhaps more telling than the weakness of the narrations is the near-total silence surrounding them in classical Islamic intellectual history. Major jurists, historians, and Hadith commentators did not develop any legal, theological, or political doctrine based on these reports.

Indian Islamic scholars such as Shah Waliullah Dehlavi, Shah Abdul Aziz Dehlavi, and earlier Hadith authorities like Abdul Haq Muhaddis Dehlavi engaged extensively with prophetic traditions, including narrations about future events, governance, and moral prophecy. Yet none of them elevated *Ghazwa-e-Hind* into a doctrinal framework or a civilisational prediction.

Similarly, the long tradition of Sufi engagement in the Indian subcontinent – stretching from early khanqah networks in Sindh and Gujarat to major centres in Delhi and Ajmer – emphasised ethical transformation, devotion, and coexistence rather than militarised eschatology. The absence of this concept in such a vast and diverse intellectual tradition underscores its marginal textual status.

From narration to narrative: the modern political transformation

The contemporary prominence of *Ghazwa-e-Hind* is largely a modern phenomenon. Its transformation from a weak and peripheral narration into a symbolic slogan reflects political rather than theological evolution.

During the twentieth century, particularly in the aftermath of colonial withdrawal and the partition of South Asia, religious language increasingly became entangled with national identity formation and geopolitical rivalry. In such contexts, selective readings of religious texts were sometimes repurposed to frame political conflicts in sacred terms.

This tendency was further intensified during the Cold War era and the Afghan conflict of the 1980s, when concepts such as *jihad* were reinterpreted in highly politicised ways by various ideological actors. In parallel, figures such as Abul Ala Maududi and Sayyid Qutb contributed to modern political readings of Islamic concepts, often emphasising governance and resistance frameworks. While their intellectual contributions are complex and widely debated, their ideas were later simplified in some circles into rigid ideological narratives that diverged from classical juristic nuance.

Within this broader environment, *Ghazwa-e-Hind* gained visibility not through scholarly validation but through repetition in political rhetoric, militant messaging, and later digital media ecosystems. Its survival is therefore better explained as narrative momentum than as theological consensus.

Social consequences of theological distortion

When weak or contested narrations are transformed into ideological slogans, the consequences extend beyond theology into social perception. Communities can become subject to external assumptions based on ideas they neither endorse nor derive from mainstream religious scholarship.

For many Muslims in India and elsewhere, religious identity is lived primarily through everyday ethics, worship, education, and civic participation. The reduction of this lived reality to a geopolitical prophecy distorts both faith and citizenship. It also places communities in a double bind: externally associated with ideas they do not affirm, while internally pressured by narratives that do not reflect their social realities.

Such distortions also weaken public understanding of Islam itself. A tradition with deep scholarly disciplines – Hadith criticism, jurisprudence, theology, and ethics – is reduced to isolated phrases detached from methodological context.

Returning to scholarly clarity

A more responsible engagement with such concepts requires distinguishing between authenticated doctrine and marginal narration, between historical scholarship and modern political reinterpretation. Classical Islamic methodology does not treat every reported tradition as normative; it evaluates authenticity, context, and interpretive coherence.

From this standpoint, *Ghazwa-e-Hind* does not function as a doctrinal pillar of Islam. It remains, at most, a weak and contested set of narrations whose historical meaning is uncertain and whose modern political usage far exceeds its textual basis.

The broader ethical message that emerges from Islamic tradition is not one of perpetual conflict, but of moral accountability, justice, restraint, and coexistence. These principles are consistently reinforced in the Qur'an and in the established practices of the Prophet's life.

Conclusion

The persistence of *Ghazwa-e-Hind* as a political slogan illustrates how religious language can be reinterpreted when removed from its scholarly foundations. Its influence today owes more to modern political narratives than to classical Islamic doctrine.

Reclaiming interpretive clarity does not diminish faith; it restores it to its methodological integrity. In a plural and interconnected society, the responsibility of scholarship is not to amplify inherited slogans, but to distinguish tradition from invention, and faith from political imagination.

Faith Beyond Food

Beef Was Never on the Food Plate of Prophet Muhammad

Islam is a progressive faith that places great emphasis on peaceful coexistence, mutual respect and social harmony. At its heart lies a balance between two fundamental responsibilities: the rights of the Creator and the rights of His creation. The rights of Allah require sincere worship in the manner He has prescribed, while the rights of human beings govern our relationships with family, neighbours and society at large. Islam accords equal importance to both. A person may fulfil every act of worship with devotion, yet if he violates the rights of others, he remains answerable before God.

Islamic teachings repeatedly remind believers that justice towards fellow human beings is inseparable from faith itself. On the Day of Judgement, wrongs committed against others cannot simply be erased through acts of devotion. Unless the injured party forgives, accountability remains. This ethical framework demonstrates that Islam is not merely a religion of rituals but a moral system that places human dignity and social responsibility alongside devotion to God.

The same spirit of balance is reflected in Islam's approach to food. Islamic law classifies food into different categories. Some foods are prohibited (*haram*), while others are recommended, discouraged or simply permissible (*mubah*). Beef belongs to the category of permissible food. This classification is significant because it means that eating beef is neither an act of religious merit nor does abstaining from it diminish one's faith. It is simply a matter of personal choice within the bounds of Islamic law.

The distinction is important because a permissible act should not be mistaken for a religious obligation. Many public debates assume that beef consumption is an essential expression of Islamic identity. Classical Islamic scholarship, however, presents a far more nuanced understanding. The celebrated eleventh-century philosopher and theologian Imam Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, in his monumental work *Ihya Ulum al-Din (The Revival of the Religious Sciences)*, discusses the qualities of different foods and observes: "Beef creates diseases, milk has cure and clarified butter has medicinal effect." While modern nutritional science may approach the subject differently, Al-Ghazali's observation illustrates that Muslim scholars have long engaged critically with questions of diet rather than treating every permissible food as equally desirable.

The cow itself occupies an honoured place in the Qur'an. One entire chapter bears the name *Al-Baqarah* (The Cow), recounting the story of the Israelites in which the sacrifice of a cow becomes a means of obedience and atonement. The Qur'anic narrative does not glorify beef consumption or encourage it as a religious practice. Instead, it uses the cow within a broader moral and spiritual lesson.

It is equally noteworthy that the Arabian Peninsula, where the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) lived, was not a land known for cattle in the way the Indian subcontinent is today. The cow was not a characteristic desert animal, and beef never formed part of the Prophet's regular table. Consequently, the assertion that eating beef is a necessary or defining Islamic practice finds little support in the Prophet's own example. Islam permits its consumption, but it nowhere elevates it into a religious obligation.

History offers several remarkable examples of Muslim rulers and scholars recognising the importance of respecting the cultural and religious sentiments of others. Among the earliest was Zahiruddin Muhammad Babur, the founder of the Mughal Empire. In his advice to his son Humayun, Babur urged him to refrain from cow slaughter, observing that the cow was revered by the majority of India's population. He believed that a ruler who wished to govern successfully should respect the deeply held beliefs of his subjects rather than disregard them.

Babur's advice found perhaps its fullest expression during the reign of Emperor Akbar. Widely remembered for his inclusive approach to governance, Akbar imposed a ban on cow slaughter across his empire in order to avoid offending the religious sentiments of his non-Muslim subjects. His decision reflected not theological compulsion but political wisdom and social sensitivity. He understood that harmony among communities required mutual respect and that responsible leadership sometimes demanded voluntary restraint.

The same spirit emerged during one of the most turbulent periods of India's history. In 1857, as the country rose against

British colonial rule, the eminent Islamic scholar Allama Fazle Haq Khairabadi, associated with the Chishti Sufi tradition and remembered for issuing the famous *jihad* proclamation against British rule, advised the last Mughal emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar, to prohibit cow sacrifice during Eid al-Adha. His objective was not to alter Islamic teachings but to preserve communal harmony and strengthen Hindu-Muslim unity at a critical moment in the struggle against colonial domination. So deeply did he value social cohesion that he recommended the strictest punishment for anyone whose actions threatened that unity.

This willingness to place communal harmony above personal preference has deep roots within the Sufi tradition. Many of India's great Sufi saints consciously adopted practices that fostered goodwill among the communities they served. Figures such as Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti, Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya, Bu Ali Shah Qalandar and Sarmad Shaheed are remembered not only for their spirituality but also for their remarkable sensitivity towards the beliefs of others. According to the tradition, many Sufis adopted vegetarianism out of respect for their predominantly non-Muslim visitors, believing that such restraint helped build trust and strengthened human relationships.

The fifteenth-century mystic Kabir, revered across religious boundaries, also expressed strong opposition to cow slaughter. His poetry consistently challenged outward displays of religiosity that ignored compassion and moral responsibility. He questioned the value of fasting if it was accompanied by conduct that inflicted pain upon others, reminding believers that true spirituality is measured not by external observance alone but by the purity of one's heart and actions.

A well-known narration from the life of the Prophet also deserves careful reflection. According to Islamic tradition, a Jewish woman served the Prophet poisoned meat in an attempt to kill him. One of his Companions died after consuming it, while the Prophet became seriously ill and continued to suffer from its effects. The incident is remembered as part of the historical account of his final illness. Rather than serving as an argument against meat itself, it illustrates the circumstances surrounding one of the most tragic episodes in the Prophet's life.

More recent history offers further examples of Muslim scholars advocating restraint in the interest of social peace. Maulana Ahmad Raza Khan of Bareilly, the renowned twentieth-century scholar and founder of the Barelvi school of thought, is widely believed to have abstained from beef. His great-grandson, Maulana Tauqueer Raza Khan, likewise called for a complete ban on cow slaughter during the years of the United Progressive Alliance government, arguing that such a measure could help strengthen communal harmony and reduce social tensions.

The experience of Kashmir has also been cited in discussions surrounding this subject. Despite being a Muslim-majority region with a long and rich Sufi heritage shaped by saints from Central and West Asia, the region has traditionally been known for a preference for mutton, goat and, in certain areas, yak meat. This historical dietary pattern illustrates once again that Muslim societies have never been uniform in their food habits and that beef has not occupied a central place in Islamic civilisation across all regions.

Taken together, these historical examples reveal an important principle. Islamic teachings distinguish clearly

between what is permitted and what is obligatory. A Muslim may lawfully consume beef, yet the religion does not require him to do so. Equally, where social harmony, public peace and respect for the deeply held sentiments of fellow citizens are at stake, history records numerous Muslim rulers, scholars and saints who voluntarily chose restraint.

In a diverse country like India, where religious communities have lived together for centuries, peaceful coexistence cannot be sustained by legal provisions alone. It also depends upon empathy, mutual consideration and the willingness to respect one another's beliefs, even when the law grants us certain freedoms. This has been one of the enduring lessons of India's composite culture and one repeatedly demonstrated by the country's Sufi saints, enlightened rulers and thoughtful scholars.

Faith is ultimately measured not by what appears on one's dining table but by the values one embodies in everyday life. Compassion, justice, humility and respect for fellow human beings lie at the very heart of Islam. When these virtues guide personal choices, religion becomes a force for harmony rather than division. In this spirit, Muslims, together with all their fellow citizens, can continue to strengthen the bonds of trust and coexistence that have long defined India's pluralistic civilisation.

CHAPTER- IV

Society, Education & Intellectual Renewal

The Disappearance of Civilisational Muslim Greatness

Spirituality, Knowledge, Power, and the Crisis of Moral Leadership

From the emergence of Islam in the seventh century until around the eighteenth century, Muslim civilisation stood among the world's greatest centres of intellectual, spiritual and cultural achievement. It was far more than a religious community; it was a civilisation that shaped mathematics, astronomy, medicine, architecture, philosophy, literature, governance, trade and social welfare across an immense geographical expanse stretching from Spain to India and from Central Asia to Africa.

Historians often describe the period between the eighth and thirteenth centuries as the Golden Age of Islam. During these centuries, cities such as Baghdad, Cordoba, Cairo, Damascus, Nishapur, Bukhara, Samarqand, Konya and Delhi became renowned centres of learning, spirituality and innovation. Muslim scholars translated the intellectual heritage of Greece, Persia and India into Arabic, critically examined these works, expanded upon them and, in time,

passed this knowledge to Europe, helping to shape the foundations of the Renaissance.

Yet the greatness of Muslim civilisation did not rest on scientific advancement or political power alone. It was equally defined by its moral vision. Alongside philosophers, physicians and jurists stood saints, mystics and scholars whose lives demonstrated that knowledge without character was incomplete. They believed that learning should refine the soul before it transformed society.

It was this remarkable balance between intellect and spirituality that produced some of history's most enduring personalities. The names of Shaikh Abdul Qadir Jilani, Junaid Baghdadi, Rabia al-Basri, Khwaja Gharib Nawaz, Ibn Arabi, Shams Tabrizi, Maulana Rumi, Imam Abu Hanifa, Imam al-Ghazali, Ibn Sina, Ibn Rushd, Mansur al-Hallaj, Shibli and Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya continue to inspire people across continents and centuries. Their influence did not arise from wealth or political authority but from scholarship, moral courage, spiritual discipline and an unwavering commitment to serving humanity.

This naturally raises an important question. If Muslim civilisation once produced such extraordinary thinkers and spiritual guides, why are comparable personalities so uncommon today? Why do Muslim societies continue to honour their shrines, celebrate their anniversaries and preserve their writings, yet struggle to nurture individuals possessing the same intellectual independence, ethical integrity and spiritual depth?

The concern is beautifully captured in the famous Urdu verse:

"Zamana bade ghaur se sun raha tha, hami so gaye dastan kehte kehte."

The world was listening with great attention; it was we who fell asleep while narrating our own story.

The verse is more than poetry; it is a reflection on a civilisation that once led the world in learning and moral leadership but gradually lost the qualities that had made such leadership possible.

This chapter explores how Muslim civilisation reached its remarkable heights and why that momentum weakened over time. It examines the relationship between spirituality and knowledge, the contribution of Sufi traditions to ethical and social life, and the historical developments that gradually diminished the production of great scholars, saints and intellectual leaders, particularly in the Indian subcontinent.

The Making of a Civilisational Ethos

The foundations of Muslim civilisation were laid not through military strength alone but through a profound moral and intellectual transformation. The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ reshaped the tribal society of Arabia into a community founded upon justice, compassion, accountability and the pursuit of knowledge. The very first revelation of the Qur'an began with the command, *"Read"* (Surah Al-'Alaq 96:1), establishing learning as a sacred responsibility rather than merely an intellectual exercise.

Knowledge in early Islam was never viewed simply as a means of acquiring influence or wealth. It was understood as a path to understanding God's creation and serving humanity. This vision inspired generations of scholars who

regarded learning as an act of worship and teaching as a public trust.

This spirit reached new heights during the Abbasid period. Baghdad became home to the celebrated *Bayt al-Hikma*, or House of Wisdom, where scholars from diverse backgrounds translated and studied works from Greek, Persian and Indian civilisations. Rather than merely preserving earlier knowledge, Muslim scholars refined it, challenged it and made original contributions in fields ranging from astronomy and medicine to mathematics and philosophy.

The historian **George Saliba**, in his influential work *Islamic Science and the Making of the European Renaissance*, argues that many scientific developments commonly associated with the European Renaissance were built upon foundations laid centuries earlier by Muslim scholars. Their achievements were not isolated discoveries but part of a vibrant intellectual culture that encouraged observation, debate and critical inquiry.

What distinguished this civilisation, however, was that intellectual brilliance rarely existed in isolation from moral discipline. The greatest scholars often lived lives of simplicity, humility and public service. They regarded knowledge as a means of drawing closer to God rather than gaining prestige. Scholarship was expected to cultivate wisdom, self-restraint and compassion, not merely academic excellence.

Sufism and the Moral Imagination of Islam

No account of Muslim civilisation is complete without recognising the profound contribution of Sufism. While

rulers expanded territories and scholars built centres of learning, Sufi saints transformed hearts and communities. Across South Asia, Central Asia, Anatolia and Africa, they spread Islam not through coercion but through kindness, service and exemplary character.

One of the earliest and most influential figures was **Rabia al-Basri**, whose life transformed the language of Islamic spirituality. According to **Farid al-Din Attar** in his celebrated work *Muslim Saints and Mystics (Tadhkirat al-Auliya)*, Rabia taught that true worship should arise neither from fear of Hell nor hope for Paradise, but from pure love of God. Her understanding of divine love profoundly influenced generations of Sufi thinkers, including Jalaluddin Rumi.

Another towering figure was **Junaid Baghdadi**, often regarded as one of the founders of classical Sufism. He insisted that genuine spirituality could never be separated from moral discipline and faithful adherence to Islamic teachings. For him, mystical experience without ethical conduct was nothing more than self-deception.

Perhaps no Sufi saint achieved greater global influence than **Shaikh Abdul Qadir Jilani**. His reputation did not rest upon political authority or worldly success but upon scholarship, generosity and fearless criticism of corruption. His sermons consistently urged sincerity, humility and independence from the temptations of power, reminding both rulers and ordinary believers that true honour lay in serving God rather than seeking worldly influence.

In India, **Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti** became one of the most beloved spiritual figures in the country's history. Known affectionately as *Gharib Nawaz* – the Benefactor of

the Poor – he welcomed people regardless of their religion, caste or social status. His khanqah became a sanctuary where compassion mattered more than identity, and service outweighed status.

His spiritual legacy was continued by **Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya**, whose influence extended far beyond the Muslim community. Rather than seeking favour with rulers, he deliberately kept his distance from royal courts, choosing instead to devote himself to the welfare of ordinary people. The historian **Simon Digby**, in *The Sufi Shaikh as a Source of Authority in Medieval India*, observes that the Chishti saints derived their extraordinary influence precisely because they maintained moral independence from political authority. Their refusal to become instruments of power earned them the trust and affection of society.

The enduring appeal of these saints lay not in miracles or legends alone but in the authenticity of their lives. Many possessed little material wealth, yet commanded immense moral authority. They spoke truth to rulers, comforted the poor, healed social divisions and demonstrated that genuine leadership begins with humility and selfless service rather than political ambition.

Knowledge and Spirituality as One Tradition

One of the defining features of classical Muslim civilisation was that it rarely separated intellectual excellence from spiritual refinement. The scholar was expected to cultivate not only a sharp mind but also an upright character. Knowledge was regarded as a trust from God, carrying with it the responsibility to promote justice, humility and the common good.

This integrated approach produced individuals whose achievements crossed the boundaries of science, philosophy, theology and spirituality. They did not see these disciplines as competing with one another but as complementary paths towards understanding both the Creator and His creation.

Among the finest examples was **Ibn Sina** (Avicenna), one of history's greatest physicians and philosophers. His *Canon of Medicine* became the standard medical textbook in many European universities for several centuries. Yet Ibn Sina's intellectual pursuits extended far beyond medicine. As **Jon McGinnis** explains in his book *Avicenna*, Ibn Sina also made significant contributions to logic, metaphysics and ethics, reflecting a worldview in which scientific enquiry and spiritual reflection were closely connected.

Similarly, **Ibn Rushd** (Averroes) became renowned for defending the role of reason within Islamic thought. At a time when philosophy was viewed with suspicion in some circles, he argued that revelation and rational enquiry were not enemies but partners in the search for truth. According to **Majid Fakhry**, in *A History of Islamic Philosophy*, Ibn Rushd's writings profoundly influenced both the Islamic intellectual tradition and medieval European scholarship, demonstrating that faith and reason could strengthen rather than undermine one another.

Perhaps no scholar better embodied the union of intellect and spirituality than **Imam Abu Hamid al-Ghazali**. A celebrated theologian, jurist and philosopher, he eventually turned his attention to the purification of the heart, believing that knowledge without sincerity could become a source of pride rather than wisdom. In his monumental work *Ihya Ulum al-Din* (*The Revival of the Religious Sciences*), Imam

al-Ghazali criticised scholars who sought fame instead of truth and rulers who pursued luxury while neglecting justice. He reminded readers that learning should lead to humility, compassion and accountability before God.

This harmony between scholarship and spirituality produced individuals whose influence extended far beyond the Muslim world. Their writings were studied across civilisations because they addressed universal questions concerning ethics, justice, human nature and the pursuit of knowledge. Their authority rested not merely upon intellectual brilliance but upon lives shaped by discipline, simplicity and moral integrity.

Today, knowledge is often measured by academic qualifications, professional success or public visibility. In the classical Muslim tradition, however, the true scholar was recognised as much for personal conduct as for intellectual accomplishment. Wisdom was expected to transform the character before it transformed society.

The Beginning of Decline

The decline of Muslim civilisation cannot be explained by a single event or a single cause. Historians continue to debate the idea of decline itself, pointing out that different regions experienced different historical trajectories. Nevertheless, few dispute that from around the seventeenth century onwards many Muslim societies experienced a gradual weakening of intellectual vitality, political stability and moral independence.

Rather than resulting from one dramatic collapse, this transformation unfolded over several centuries through a combination of internal weaknesses and external pressures.

Colonialism and the Disruption of Muslim Institutions

Among the most significant external forces was European colonialism. Across large parts of the Muslim world, colonial administrations dismantled traditional educational systems, weakened charitable endowments (*awqaf*), redirected local economies and reshaped institutions to serve imperial interests.

The Indian subcontinent provides a striking example. Following British educational reforms in the nineteenth century, Persian gradually lost its status as the language of administration, while many traditional centres of Islamic learning found themselves deprived of state patronage and financial support.

The historian **Francis Robinson**, in his book *Islam and Muslim History in South Asia*, explains that colonial rule disrupted the social foundations upon which Muslim scholarly and spiritual life had long depended. Madrasas, Sufi institutions and networks of independent scholars were forced to adapt to a completely different political and intellectual environment.

Colonialism affected more than institutions; it also altered the psychological outlook of many Muslim societies. Communities that had once regarded themselves as leaders of a flourishing civilisation suddenly found themselves politically subordinate. This loss of confidence often encouraged defensive attitudes, intellectual fragmentation and disputes over identity.

During this period, Sufi traditions also came under increasing pressure. Some reform movements criticised them as obstacles to progress, while others reduced them to cultural symbols detached from their original ethical and

spiritual purpose. In both cases, the deeper values of compassion, humility and service that had characterised classical Sufism were often overshadowed.

When Religious Authority Became Dependent on Power

One of the striking characteristics of many classical Muslim scholars and saints was their independence from political rulers. While they advised kings when necessary, they rarely allowed themselves to become instruments of government.

Many modern religious institutions, however, developed a far closer relationship with political authority. In several Muslim-majority countries, governments sought legitimacy by controlling religious establishments, appointing official scholars and regulating public religious discourse.

As religious institutions became increasingly dependent upon political patronage or wealthy benefactors, their ability to speak truth to power was often diminished. Fear of losing influence, financial support or institutional privilege discouraged independent voices.

This marked a significant departure from the example set by figures such as Shaikh Abdul Qadir Jilani, Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya and many other saints who earned public respect precisely because they remained free from political control. Their authority rested upon moral credibility rather than official position.

Throughout Islamic history, people instinctively trusted scholars who appeared detached from worldly ambition. They believed that those who had little to gain personally were more likely to speak honestly. Once religious authority became closely linked with political interests, that trust inevitably weakened.

Material Success and the Loss of Spiritual Simplicity

Another important factor in the changing character of Muslim societies has been the growing influence of materialism. Classical Islamic spirituality encouraged *zuhd* – a life of moderation and detachment from excessive worldly ambition. This did not require poverty but called for self-restraint and the recognition that wealth should serve higher moral purposes.

Many of the great saints deliberately chose lives of simplicity. They avoided luxury, gave generously to the poor and regarded public service as more valuable than personal comfort.

Modern society, however, measures success very differently. Wealth, public recognition, political influence and social media popularity have increasingly become indicators of achievement. This trend is by no means unique to Muslims; it reflects a wider global culture. Nevertheless, its impact on religious life has been profound.

In some cases, religious celebrity has begun to replace quiet scholarship. Public visibility is rewarded more readily than patient learning, while controversy often attracts greater attention than thoughtful reflection.

The great spiritual teachers of earlier centuries usually spent decades cultivating knowledge, discipline and character before becoming widely recognised. Today's digital culture often values immediate influence over lifelong formation.

The result is that the qualities which once produced enduring moral leaders – humility, patience, silence, self-examination and service – receive far less public attention than charisma, publicity and personal branding.

Extremism and the Shrinking of Islam's Spiritual Vision

Another challenge confronting the Muslim world has been the rise of extremist ideologies that reduce a rich and diverse religious tradition to rigid slogans and political confrontation. Such movements often reject centuries of Islamic scholarship, philosophy, spirituality and artistic expression, presenting Islam primarily as an instrument of power rather than a path of moral and spiritual transformation.

This narrow understanding stands in sharp contrast to the civilisation that once produced scholars, scientists, philosophers and saints who saw faith as a means of cultivating justice, mercy and wisdom.

The American scholar **William C. Chittick**, in his book *Sufism: A Short Introduction*, argues that when Islam is stripped of its spiritual and metaphysical dimensions, it loses much of its ethical depth. Sufism, he explains, has historically reminded Muslims that the outward practice of religion must always be accompanied by the purification of the heart. Without compassion, humility and self-discipline, religious observance risks becoming little more than ritual or ideology.

For centuries, Sufi saints acted as bridges between communities. Their khanqahs welcomed travellers, fed the poor and offered refuge to people irrespective of their social or religious backgrounds. Their emphasis on mercy helped reduce communal tensions and encouraged peaceful coexistence.

Extremist movements, however, often replace this inclusive vision with an exclusive one. They define religious

commitment primarily through opposition to others rather than service to humanity. In doing so, they diminish one of Islam's greatest civilisational strengths – its ability to inspire moral transformation.

The Decline of Intellectual Culture

The remarkable achievements of classical Muslim civilisation were possible because knowledge was held in the highest esteem. Scholars enjoyed social respect, libraries flourished, translation projects received patronage and public debate was encouraged. Intellectual curiosity was not feared but celebrated.

Baghdad's House of Wisdom became a symbol of this openness, bringing together scholars from different cultures, languages and religious traditions. Similar centres of learning emerged across Cairo, Damascus, Bukhara, Cordoba and Delhi, creating an atmosphere in which ideas could be exchanged freely.

The historian **Marshall G. S. Hodgson**, in his monumental work *The Venture of Islam*, observes that one of the defining characteristics of Islamic civilisation was its remarkable cosmopolitan outlook. Muslim societies absorbed knowledge from Greek, Persian, Indian and other civilisations, enriching it through original scholarship rather than merely preserving it.

Over time, however, that intellectual openness gradually weakened. Political instability, economic decline, colonial intervention and internal stagnation all contributed to shrinking spaces for independent thought. In many places, education became increasingly centred on preserving inherited knowledge rather than encouraging fresh enquiry.

Today, several Muslim societies continue to struggle with inadequate educational infrastructure, limited investment in research and restrictions on academic freedom. Critical thinking is sometimes viewed with suspicion rather than welcomed as part of a healthy intellectual tradition.

As a result, many of the great figures of Islamic civilisation are admired more as historical icons than studied as living sources of intellectual inspiration. Their shrines continue to attract visitors, but their methods of scholarship, ethical discipline and openness to learning are less frequently emulated.

The Indian Muslim Experience after Independence

The crisis of civilisational leadership has been particularly visible among Indian Muslims in the decades following Independence. This is not because the community lacks talent or commitment, but because it has faced a unique combination of historical, social and political challenges.

The trauma of Partition left deep psychological and institutional scars. Many distinguished scholars, administrators and intellectuals migrated to the newly created Pakistan, while those who remained in India suddenly found themselves as a minority grappling with questions of identity, security and representation. Much of the community's energy was understandably directed towards survival and preserving its institutions.

Economic hardship further complicated this situation. Educational opportunities remained uneven, and many Muslim communities struggled with poverty and social exclusion. The **Sachar Committee Report**, commissioned by the Government of India, highlighted significant

disparities in education, employment and public representation, confirming that many Indian Muslims continued to experience socio-economic disadvantage decades after Independence.

These circumstances inevitably affected the production of scholars, researchers and public intellectuals. Communities facing economic insecurity often find it difficult to invest consistently in higher learning and long-term intellectual development.

Sectarian divisions also played a damaging role. Instead of nurturing leaders capable of commanding respect across schools of thought, many religious institutions became preoccupied with internal disagreements. Debates over doctrine and identity frequently overshadowed broader concerns such as education, ethics, social reform and nation-building.

At the same time, some historic shrines and religious institutions gradually became entangled in administrative disputes, financial interests and hereditary control. While many continue to perform valuable religious and charitable work, the moral authority associated with the great saints of earlier centuries cannot simply be inherited. It must be earned through personal sacrifice, integrity and service.

Modern life has also transformed the public role of religious leadership. The saint who once quietly served travellers in a khanqah now exists in a world dominated by television debates, social media platforms and twenty-four-hour news cycles. Public visibility has become easier to achieve, but moral authority remains as difficult as ever.

Were Muslims Themselves Responsible?

It would be unfair to attribute the decline of Muslim civilisation solely to colonialism or other external forces. History rarely unfolds in such simple terms. Great civilisations usually weaken from within before external challenges expose their vulnerabilities.

More than six centuries ago, the celebrated historian **Ibn Khaldun** offered a remarkably perceptive explanation for the rise and fall of civilisations in his masterpiece *The Muqaddimah*. He argued that societies flourish when they possess strong moral purpose, social cohesion and disciplined leadership. Decline begins when luxury replaces simplicity, justice gives way to oppression and public service is overshadowed by personal ambition. His analysis remains strikingly relevant today.

Long before European colonial expansion reached its height, parts of the Muslim world had already begun experiencing political fragmentation, weakening institutions and declining intellectual vitality. Some rulers became more concerned with palace intrigues than public welfare. Courtly extravagance expanded while independent scholarship became increasingly constrained.

Religious institutions, too, were not immune from these changes. In certain places, scholarship became closely aligned with political authority, reducing the independence that had once allowed scholars to challenge injustice fearlessly.

Colonialism undoubtedly intensified these weaknesses, but it did not create all of them. The decline of Muslim civilisation was therefore the result of both internal

shortcomings and external pressures working together over several centuries.

Recognising this shared responsibility is not an exercise in self-criticism for its own sake. Rather, it is an essential step towards renewal. Civilisations recover not by assigning blame alone but by honestly understanding the causes of their decline.

The Need for Fearless Moral Leadership

One characteristic repeatedly found in the lives of the great Muslim saints and scholars was their courage in speaking truth to power. Whether advising rulers, defending the oppressed or challenging corruption, they refused to allow political influence to shape their moral judgement. This courage earned them lasting public trust.

People respected figures such as Khwaja Gharib Nawaz, Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya and Shaikh Abdul Qadir Jilani not simply because of their learning but because they lived independently of worldly power. They welcomed everyone – rich and poor, Muslim and non-Muslim alike – with the same compassion and dignity.

Such credibility cannot be manufactured through institutions, titles or media visibility. It grows slowly through years of sacrifice, consistency and service.

Many contemporary religious figures enjoy large followings, yet relatively few command the universal moral respect once associated with the great saints of the past. Audiences may be large, but genuine trust is harder to earn.

History suggests that societies produce exceptional leaders when scholarship is combined with humility, spirituality

with public service and knowledge with moral courage. These qualities cannot be acquired overnight, nor can they be imposed through authority. They emerge from lives devoted to truth rather than personal advancement.

Reviving the Spirit of Civilisational Excellence

The challenges confronting the Muslim world today are not merely political or economic; they are deeply civilisational. The real question is not whether Muslims still possess faith or religious identity, but whether they can revive the ethical vision, intellectual curiosity and spiritual discipline that once enabled their civilisation to contribute so profoundly to humanity.

Throughout history, Muslim civilisation earned global respect not simply because of military victories or prosperous empires, but because it nurtured individuals whose lives reflected knowledge, humility, justice and compassion. Great scholars and saints did not seek influence for its own sake. They understood leadership as a responsibility rather than a privilege, and scholarship as a means of serving society rather than advancing personal ambition.

The names of Khwaja Gharib Nawaz, Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya, Shaikh Abdul Qadir Jilani, Imam al-Ghazali, Ibn Sina, Ibn Rushd, Rabia al-Basri and countless others continue to inspire millions because their legacy rests on character as much as achievement. Their lives remind us that true greatness is measured not by wealth, political office or public recognition, but by the positive impact one leaves on humanity.

The enduring appeal of these personalities also lies in their universality. Their doors remained open to all. They comforted the poor, welcomed travellers, challenged injustice and served people without asking about their religion, ethnicity or social status. Their moral authority emerged naturally because they lived according to the values they preached.

That is why their influence has survived long after the kingdoms and dynasties of their age disappeared. Empires rose and fell, rulers came and went, yet the memory of these scholars and saints continues to unite people across cultures and generations.

The famous Urdu verse serves as both a reminder and a challenge:

*"The to aaba woh tumhare hi, magar tum kya ho?
Haath pe haath dhare muntazir-e-farda ho."*

They were indeed your ancestors, but what are you? Sitting idle, merely waiting for tomorrow.

The verse is not an invitation to live in the past, nor does it suggest that greatness can be inherited. Every generation must earn its own place in history. Reverence for earlier scholars and saints has value only when it inspires renewed commitment to learning, ethical conduct and public service.

The Muslim world does not need to recreate the past exactly as it was, for every age presents its own opportunities and challenges. What it does need is to recover the principles that made earlier generations exceptional: intellectual honesty, moral courage, humility before God, openness to knowledge, compassion for humanity and the confidence to engage constructively with the wider world.

This renewal must begin with education that encourages both critical thinking and ethical responsibility. It requires scholars who are independent in thought, spiritual leaders who remain close to ordinary people rather than centres of power, and institutions that value service above status. It also calls for a rediscovery of the rich intellectual and spiritual traditions that have too often been overshadowed by sectarian disputes and political polarisation.

History demonstrates that civilisations are not remembered simply for their wealth or military strength. They are remembered for the ideas they contribute, the knowledge they preserve, the justice they uphold and the values they pass on to future generations.

The story of Muslim civilisation is therefore not merely a story of past glory or present decline. It is also a reminder that renewal remains possible. A civilisation that once illuminated much of the world through knowledge, spirituality and compassion can once again make meaningful contributions if it rediscovers the moral and intellectual foundations upon which its greatest achievements were built.

The true tribute to the giants of the past is not to celebrate them from a distance, but to follow their example – by seeking knowledge with humility, speaking the truth with courage, serving humanity without prejudice and placing moral integrity above worldly gain. That is the path by which civilisations are renewed, and it remains as relevant today as it was in the age of the great scholars and saints.

Reclaiming the Forgotten Scholarship

Muslim Women, Authority, and the Politics of Interpretation

During an International Conference on Women in Islam of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) countries held in Jeddah, I was struck by the absence of any Muslim woman scholar from India. This was particularly surprising given that India is home to the world's second-largest Muslim population. Several countries from Asia and Africa, including Bangladesh and Morocco, were represented by women scholars. This absence raises a serious question about the structural marginalisation of Indian Muslim women in contemporary religious and intellectual forums.

The persistent underrepresentation of women in Muslim religious institutions in India reflects a deeper disconnect between scriptural ideals and socio-cultural realities. While Indian Muslim women have excelled in fields such as science, entrepreneurship, sports, administration, and public life – figures like ISRO scientist Khushboo Mirza, entrepreneur Shahnaz Husain, and tennis champion Sania Mirza exemplify this excellence – their absence in

theological scholarship and religious authority remains striking.

This contrast raises an important analytical question: if Muslim women demonstrate intellectual and professional excellence across the most demanding domains, why are they largely absent from formal structures of religious interpretation and authority? The answer lies less in theology and more in historically embedded patriarchal interpretations that have restricted women's access to religious learning and leadership.

Yet history itself tells a more complex story. Indian Muslim women have exercised political, intellectual, and cultural authority across centuries. Figures such as Razia Sultana, the first female ruler of the Delhi Sultanate; Nur Jahan, who played a decisive role in Mughal governance; and intellectual and cultural figures like Qurratulain Hyder, Bi Amma, and Abadi Bano Begum demonstrate a legacy of leadership and influence that shaped Indian history.

Within Islamic tradition itself, the intellectual participation of women is well established. The Qur'an affirms moral and spiritual equality between men and women, and repeatedly addresses "believing men and believing women" as equal moral agents. Prophetic traditions also emphasize the pursuit of knowledge as obligatory for all. The wives of the Prophet were central transmitters of hadith and active intellectual authorities in early Islamic society.

Despite this, later socio-cultural developments and interpretive monopolies gradually narrowed women's access to formal religious authority. What is often presented as religious limitation is, in many cases, the result of cultural accretion rather than foundational scriptural principle. This

has contributed to a gendered hierarchy in religious scholarship that is not fully consistent with Islam's ethical emphasis on justice, knowledge, and moral equality.

Across Islamic history, women have contributed significantly to governance, education, spirituality, and reform. In the Indian subcontinent, figures such as Begum Hazrat Mahal, Fatima Sheikh, and Begum Anis Kidwai played important roles in education and the freedom movement. Yet post-independence social structures often reinforced domestic confinement, limiting access to higher education and public leadership for many women.

Contemporary debates around Muslim Personal Law in India further highlight this tension. While Islamic jurisprudence (*usul al-fiqh*) contains mechanisms for contextual interpretation and protection of rights, limited public understanding of these principles has often led to misconceptions about gender justice in Islam. In many cases, cultural patriarchy is mistakenly attributed to religion itself, obscuring the distinction between scriptural ethics and social practice.

Within certain religious circles, resistance to modern education and co-education for women has further deepened educational inequality. Such positions, however, are not universally grounded in Islamic theology but reflect selective and context-bound interpretations. As a result, Muslim women in India continue to face educational and institutional disadvantages compared to national averages.

Internationally, female Islamic scholars such as Asma Lamrabet, Fatima Mernissi, Nahla Al Saeedi, and Henda Ayari demonstrate that Muslim women can and do occupy authoritative intellectual roles in theology, law, and

reformist thought. Their absence in India's institutional religious landscape highlights a gap not in capability, but in opportunity structures.

This issue is also reflected in educational statistics. UNESCO data indicates that female literacy in India remains uneven, and within certain communities, including Muslims, structural barriers persist. Institutional change within major universities and seminaries has been slow, with meaningful inclusion of women in senior leadership emerging only recently.

Historically, Indian civilisation itself offers a broader perspective on gender and knowledge. In the early Vedic tradition, women such as Gargi Vachaknavi and Lopamudra participated in philosophical debates and composed sacred hymns. The concept of Shakti in Indian thought further affirms the principle of feminine creative power as foundational to cosmic order.

Similar affirmations appear across global intellectual traditions. The modern metaphor "Women hold up half the sky" underscores the indispensability of women in shaping society. Likewise, Jalaluddin Rumi's poetic vision elevates womanhood beyond social categorisation, describing woman as a reflection of divine creative light and spiritual reality.

Taken together, these traditions converge on a shared ethical insight: societies flourish when women are recognised not as peripheral participants but as central agents of knowledge, creativity, and moral authority. The marginalisation of women in religious scholarship is therefore not only a theological concern but a broader civilisational question.

Reclaiming the intellectual legacy of Muslim women requires more than inclusion; it requires a re-examination of interpretive traditions, institutional practices, and cultural assumptions that have shaped religious authority over time. Only then can the full ethical and intellectual potential of Islamic tradition – and its women scholars – be meaningfully realised.

Beyond Victimhood

The Rising Muslim Presence in Indian Media and Cinema

Over the past few decades, India's media and entertainment industry has witnessed a steady and visible rise in the participation of Muslim voices. From cinema and music to journalism and digital platforms, Indian Muslims have contributed significantly to shaping the country's cultural imagination. This growing presence stands in contrast to narratives that often portray Muslims as absent or marginal in India's mainstream cultural and creative spaces.

One of the most prominent arenas of this participation is Indian cinema. Bollywood, the world's largest film industry in terms of output, has long included major Muslim contributors at its centre. Actors such as Shah Rukh Khan, Aamir Khan, and Salman Khan have not only become global icons but also among the most commercially successful figures in Indian film history. Alongside them, actors like Nawazuddin Siddiqui, Huma Qureshi, and Gauahar Khan represent a strong wave of talent that continues to expand the industry's creative boundaries.

The contribution of Muslims is not limited to acting alone. Direction, production, and screenwriting have also seen significant participation. Filmmakers such as Ali Abbas

Zafar, known for films like *Sultan* and *Tiger Zinda Hai*, represent a generation of creators who have shaped contemporary Bollywood storytelling with wide audience appeal.

Music, perhaps more than any other cultural form, reflects the depth of this contribution. Indian classical and film music have been profoundly enriched by Muslim artists across generations. The legacy of Ustad Bismillah Khan, the legendary shehnai maestro and recipient of the Bharat Ratna, remains foundational to India's musical identity. Likewise, Zakir Hussain has taken the tabla to global stages, while Amjad Ali Khan has elevated the sarod into international recognition. In contemporary cinema music, A. R. Rahman stands as one of the most globally acclaimed composers, with a body of work spanning multiple languages and international collaborations.

Muslim lyricists have also played a defining role in shaping Bollywood's emotional and poetic language. Javed Akhtar, among the most respected voices in Indian songwriting, has contributed to some of the most iconic films in modern Indian cinema. Irshad Kamil, another influential lyricist, has written extensively for films such as *Jab We Met*, *Rockstar*, and *Tamasha*, adding depth and lyrical richness to contemporary storytelling.

The presence of Muslims is equally significant in journalism and television media. Prominent journalists such as Mariya Shakil, Rubika Liyaquat, Seema Chishti, Arfa Khanum Sherwani, and Javed Ansari have contributed to shaping public discourse through reporting, debate, and analysis. Their work reflects the broader diversity of India's media

landscape and highlights the role of Muslim professionals in national conversations on politics, society, and governance.

Taken together, these contributions illustrate a broader reality: Indian Muslims are active participants in shaping the country's cultural and intellectual life. Their presence across cinema, music, literature, and journalism reflects not exclusion, but engagement within a plural and evolving media ecosystem.

At the same time, it is important to recognise that questions of representation remain complex. While Muslim participation in media and entertainment is visible and influential, broader debates about inclusivity also extend to other communities and social groups. Representation in India's cultural industries continues to evolve, shaped by merit, opportunity, and changing social dynamics.

Ultimately, the growth of Muslim participation in India's entertainment and media sectors underscores a larger truth about Indian cultural life: it is diverse, competitive, and continuously expanding. Talent, creativity, and perseverance remain central to success, and individuals from varied backgrounds continue to find space to contribute meaningfully.

In this sense, the story of Muslim participation in Indian media is not one of absence or exclusion, but of sustained engagement and creative contribution within a shared national cultural framework.

The Pen Over the Sword

Muslim Thinkers Who Reclaimed Islam for Peace

In the vast spectrum of intellectual traditions within the Muslim world, public discourse is often dominated by polarised voices and simplified narratives. Yet, alongside these extremes exists a long-standing and influential tradition of moderation – rooted in the Qur’anic principle of *wasatiyyah* (the middle path, Qur’an 2:143). This tradition has been carried forward by scholars, writers, and thinkers who have used the written word not to divide, but to educate, reconcile, and build bridges between communities.

These figures do not stand on the margins of Islamic thought; rather, they represent its ethical core – grounding their work in the Qur’an, the Sunnah, and historical precedents such as the Charter of Medina, which established a pluralistic and rights-based social order under Prophet Muhammad. Through books, lectures, legal opinions, and public engagement, they have consistently argued that Islam, when understood in its fuller intellectual tradition, is fundamentally aligned with peace, justice, and coexistence.

The Intellectual Tradition of Moderation

Moderate Muslim thinkers have historically played a stabilising role in both religious interpretation and social reform. Their contributions span theology, jurisprudence, philosophy, and public ethics. They engage with contemporary challenges such as democracy, human rights, pluralism, and interfaith relations, while remaining anchored in classical Islamic sources.

This tradition is not a modern invention. It draws inspiration from the intellectual openness of the Islamic Golden Age, when scholars engaged with Greek philosophy, Persian thought, and diverse religious traditions. In the modern era, however, these voices have become even more significant as counterweights to ideological rigidity and politicised readings of religion.

Scholars Who Shaped Reformist and Peace-Oriented Thought

A number of influential scholars have used their pens to promote reform, moderation, and intellectual renewal within Islamic thought:

- **Gamal al-Banna (Egypt)** argued for a clear distinction between religion and the civil state, emphasising ethical Islam rather than political absolutism.
- **Sheikh Mohammad Al-Ghazali (Egypt)**, author of numerous works, defended a balanced understanding of the Prophetic tradition and strongly opposed literalist distortions.

- **Imam Al-Ghazali (Persia)** harmonised spirituality and Islamic law, shaping Sunni intellectual thought and giving Sufism a structured theological foundation.
- **Dr Osama Sayyid Al-Azhari (Egypt)** has promoted renewed engagement with classical Islamic heritage in ways compatible with modern realities.
- **Khaled Abou El Fadl (Kuwait/USA)** is widely recognised for his work on Islamic law, human rights, and moral interpretation of Sharia.
- **Abdolkarim Soroush (Iran)** has been a leading voice in religious intellectual reform and interpretive openness.
- **Fethullah Gülen (Turkey)** advocated education, interfaith dialogue, and civic engagement as central Islamic values.
- **Javed Ahmad Ghamidi (Pakistan)** has reinterpreted Islamic teachings through a rational and contextual framework, emphasising ethics over legal rigidity.
- **Tahir-ul-Qadri (Pakistan)** issued detailed legal rulings condemning terrorism and ideological extremism in unequivocal terms.
- **Maulana Wahiduddin Khan (India)** consistently promoted non-violence, dialogue, and peaceful coexistence, earning recognition for his reformist outlook.

- **Waris Mazhari (India)** has contributed extensively to contemporary debates on reform, citizenship, and modern Islamic thought.
- **Ed Husain (UK)** works on interfaith understanding and policy-oriented approaches to countering extremism.
- **Hamza Yusuf (USA)** is widely known for his efforts to revive classical Islamic scholarship within a modern ethical framework.

Alongside these individuals, institutions and scholars across South Asia and the Middle East – including reform-minded voices within Deobandi, Barelvi, and Sufi traditions – have consistently challenged extremist interpretations and defended Islam’s ethical diversity.

Countering Extremism Through Knowledge

A defining feature of these scholars is their consistent rejection of violence justified in the name of religion. Their approach is not merely defensive; it is constructive. Rather than engaging in polemics alone, they build intellectual frameworks that emphasise education, civic responsibility, and moral reasoning.

They challenge interpretations that reduce Islam to political ideology or rigid legalism. Instead, they highlight the Qur’an’s repeated emphasis on mercy, justice, and human dignity. In doing so, they provide an intellectual alternative to narratives that exploit religion for conflict or exclusion.

In contemporary times, this role has become even more important. Rapid communication, social media, and political polarisation have amplified extreme voices, making

scholarly clarity and accessible religious education essential tools for communal resilience.

The Responsibility of Contemporary Muslim Societies

In plural societies such as India, the responsibility of rejecting extremism is both religious and civic. It requires engaging critically with all intellectual traditions, including those that have been interpreted in political or confrontational ways. Scholars such as Maududi, Hasan al-Banna, and Sayyid Qutb have shaped modern Islamist discourse, but their ideas have also been variously interpreted and, at times, misapplied by later movements.

Moderate scholars argue that selective readings of such thinkers can lead to distortions of Islamic ethics, particularly when political struggle is placed above spiritual and moral development. The response, therefore, is not rejection of scholarship itself, but careful and contextual engagement with it.

Education as the Strongest Response

Across countries, evidence suggests that education remains the most effective safeguard against ideological extremism. Reforming curricula, strengthening critical thinking, and integrating civic education within religious institutions are key steps in this direction. Madrasas, universities, and community institutions all have a role to play in ensuring that young Muslims are equipped not only with religious knowledge but also with intellectual tools to engage with the modern world.

At the same time, producing accessible literature in local languages – Urdu, Hindi, Arabic, English, and regional

Indian languages – is essential for widening the reach of moderate scholarship.

Reclaiming the Ethical Core of Islam

The legacy of Muslim scholars who used the pen as a tool for peace demonstrates that Islamic intellectual tradition is neither monolithic nor confined to any single interpretation. At its strongest, it is reflective, ethical, and deeply committed to human welfare.

In an era marked by division and misinformation, their voices offer a reminder that faith, when grounded in knowledge and compassion, becomes a force for stability rather than conflict. Reclaiming this tradition is not only an academic exercise but a social necessity – one that reaffirms Islam's enduring contribution to peace, pluralism, and human progress.

CHAPTER - V

Politics, Security & the Modern World

Pakistan and the Enduring Challenge of Sectarian Violence

Over the past several decades, Pakistan has continued to experience periodic waves of violent attacks linked to sectarian tensions and militant activity. Among the most tragic of these are suicide bombings targeting religious gatherings, including processions such as Milad-un-Nabi and Shia Azadari events, as well as attacks on mosques and shrines in regions such as Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. These incidents reflect a deeper and long-standing security and social challenge that has shaped parts of the country's recent history.

At the heart of this issue lies a complex mix of factors, including militant fragmentation, political instability, regional conflict spillovers, and uneven enforcement against banned organisations. In many cases, religious identity becomes the language through which broader political and ideological conflicts are expressed, rather than being the sole cause of violence.

Religion, Identity and Political Framing

Across many societies, religion has historically played an important role in shaping identity and community life.

However, when religious narratives become closely intertwined with political mobilisation, they can sometimes be reframed in ways that deepen social divisions. In such contexts, selective interpretations of religious texts may be used to construct rigid identity boundaries, often reinforcing an “us versus them” mindset.

At the same time, scholars of conflict and extremism often emphasise that religion alone does not generate violence. Instead, violence tends to emerge when ideological narratives intersect with political grievances, socio-economic pressures, and prolonged instability. In this sense, religion is frequently used as a vehicle for mobilisation rather than functioning as the root cause itself.

Attempts at Reform and Institutional Response

In response to the global challenge of extremism, several states have attempted structured religious and educational reforms. In Egypt, efforts associated with President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi have included initiatives aimed at modernising religious discourse through institutions such as Al-Azhar, with a focus on curriculum reform and countering extremist narratives.

Similarly, Saudi Arabia, under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman’s Vision 2030 programme, has introduced a series of social and institutional reforms aimed at reshaping religious messaging, reducing the influence of ultra-conservative interpretations, and promoting what is described as a more moderate religious outlook aligned with national development goals.

While these models are often cited in policy discussions, they are also debated in terms of their long-term

effectiveness and the balance between state regulation and religious expression.

Pakistan's Ongoing Policy Challenge

Pakistan, for its part, has introduced multiple counter-extremism frameworks, most notably the National Action Plan. Yet the persistence of militant violence highlights the challenges of consistent implementation. One recurring concern has been the ability of banned organisations to re-emerge under new names, as well as the continued presence of sectarian narratives in parts of the educational and religious landscape.

These challenges have led to repeated calls for stronger enforcement mechanisms, improved oversight of religious institutions, and sustained investment in educational reform and community rehabilitation programmes.

Towards Understanding and Renewal

Sectarian violence in Pakistan cannot be understood through a single lens. It is the outcome of overlapping political, ideological, and security-related dynamics that have evolved over time. While religious narratives are often part of the language of conflict, the deeper drivers are more complex and rooted in governance, institutional capacity, and broader regional history.

Addressing these challenges requires not only security responses but also long-term investments in education, social cohesion, and institutional reform. Equally important is the continued strengthening of inclusive religious and cultural traditions that emphasise coexistence, restraint, and pluralism.

Four Hidden Power Centres Undermining Global Peace

In an era where the aspirational mantra of “One Earth, One Family, One Future”, drawn from the ancient Sanskrit principle of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* and prominently featured as the theme of India’s 2023 G20 Presidency, continues to echo in global forums as a call for unity and shared destiny, its invocation underscores a profound irony amid persistent fragmentation and strife. This theme, rooted in the *Maha Upanishad*’s vision of interconnected humanity and planetary stewardship, has been reiterated in successive summits and aligns with broader appeals for collective action on climate, equity, and peace. Yet the ideal of global kinship is repeatedly undermined by the realities of division, rendering the pursuit of harmonious coexistence elusive.

A glance at historical antecedents reveals that the 19th and 20th centuries marked epochs of unprecedented institutionalisation of discord by imperial powers, through aggressive colonial expansion, racial hierarchies, and the scramble for resources that sowed enduring resentment across continents – from the partition of Africa to the subjugation of Asia. These systemic divisions escalated catastrophically in the 20th century with the two World

Wars, genocides, and Cold War proxy conflicts, entrenching ideologies of superiority, nationalism, and zero-sum geopolitics that claimed tens of millions of lives and redrew borders through violence rather than consensus.

Far from abating, these legacies have metastasised in the 21st century into multifaceted crises – protracted wars in Ukraine, Gaza, Sudan, Myanmar, and beyond – compounded by rising great-power rivalry, ethnic insurgencies, and resource-driven tensions. By 2025, global political violence remains at elevated levels, shattering post-Cold War illusions of enduring peace and highlighting how entrenched cycles of hostility continue to prevail over unifying visions.

Presented below are four major forces often cited as shaping global conflict dynamics, while the world continues to search for stability and peace.

1. The United States as the World's Largest Arms Exporter

Since the end of the Cold War in 1991, the United States has remained the world's largest arms exporter, accounting for a significant share of global weapons sales. These exports occur through both direct government-to-government agreements and commercial defence contracts.

Critics argue that this global arms trade sits uneasily alongside the United States' public commitment to humanitarian principles and peacebuilding. They also point to the influence of the domestic gun lobby and recurring mass shootings within the country as part of a broader contradiction between domestic realities and international policy positions.

Reports have suggested that the United States continues to supply arms to a wide range of countries, including some with authoritarian governance structures. At the same time, it has provided substantial military and financial assistance to allies and conflict zones, including Ukraine following the 2022 Russian invasion, as well as long-standing support to Israel.

Supporters of these policies argue that such actions are part of strategic alliances and collective defence arrangements. Critics, however, contend that sustained arms flows can contribute to the prolongation of conflicts and regional instability.

In the Middle East, US military involvement and interventions in countries such as Iraq and Libya have been widely debated, with differing assessments of their long-term humanitarian and geopolitical consequences.

2. China as a Global Manufacturing Power

China's rise as the world's leading manufacturing economy has reshaped global supply chains over recent decades. Since its economic reforms and industrial expansion, particularly from the late 20th century onwards, China has become a dominant exporter of goods ranging from basic consumer items to advanced industrial products.

This transformation has delivered lower-cost goods to global markets and supported rapid domestic economic growth. However, it has also contributed to increased dependence on Chinese manufacturing in several sectors worldwide.

Some analysts argue that this dependence has weakened domestic industrial bases in other countries, particularly where manufacturing has declined due to outsourcing and

globalisation. Others, however, highlight that global trade integration has also lowered costs, expanded access to goods, and created interconnected economic growth.

China today remains a central node in global trade, both as a manufacturing hub and as one of the largest consumer markets.

3. Britain and the Legacy of Imperial Strategy

Britain's historical legacy as a colonial power continues to shape perceptions of its contemporary foreign policy. The "divide and rule" approach associated with the colonial era is often cited in postcolonial scholarship as a factor that contributed to long-term political fragmentation in several regions.

In contemporary geopolitics, Britain remains an active diplomatic actor, particularly in relation to conflicts in the Middle East. Its positions on issues such as the Israel–Palestine conflict have been subject to both domestic and international scrutiny, with differing interpretations of its role in balancing strategic alliances and humanitarian concerns.

The Israel–Palestine conflict itself has deep historical roots, including the aftermath of the First and Second World Wars, the end of the British Mandate in Palestine, and the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. These events continue to shape one of the most enduring and polarised conflicts in modern international relations.

4. Religious Extremism and Ideological Polarisation

Across different regions and historical periods, religious identity has at times been politicised, contributing to cycles

of polarisation and conflict. While religion itself is not inherently violent, its mobilisation in political contexts can sometimes intensify divisions, particularly when linked to state power, insurgency, or identity-based politics.

Historical examples of religiously framed violence are not limited to any single tradition. The Inquisition in Europe, sectarian conflicts within Islamic societies, and violence associated with extremist groups across regions all demonstrate how ideology can be instrumentalised in different contexts.

At the same time, numerous religious and political leaders have called for coexistence, reform, and interfaith harmony, emphasising that violent interpretations represent only a narrow and contested reading of tradition.

Tragic episodes such as the Srebrenica genocide in Bosnia, the persecution of the Rohingya in Myanmar, and other instances of mass violence highlight the devastating consequences of ethnic and sectarian polarisation when combined with political breakdown and armed conflict.

The Way Forward: Coexistence and Shared Global Responsibility

In this context, the ancient principle of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* – “the world is one family” – offers a philosophical framework for rethinking global relations. Promoted in India’s diplomatic discourse, including during the G20 Presidency, it reflects a vision of interconnectedness and mutual responsibility.

Strengthening cooperation between regions such as South Asia, Central Asia, the Middle East, and Eurasia has been proposed in various policy and strategic discussions as a way

to enhance economic integration and reduce conflict pressures. However, such initiatives require sustained diplomatic engagement and trust-building among diverse political systems and interests.

Ultimately, the idea of “live and let live” is not merely idealistic rhetoric but a practical principle that has repeatedly emerged in global peacebuilding discourse. In a world still marked by geopolitical rivalry and ideological division, its relevance remains enduring: stability depends not only on power structures, but also on the willingness of societies and states to accommodate pluralism and coexistence.

Khusro Foundation A New Initiative

India is at the cusp of a historic transformation. As an economic, military and cultural superpower, India is making its presence felt in the world. Being a land of tremendous religious, linguistic, and cultural diversity India's distinction is that the civilizational tradition of unity in diversity continues to be celebrated despite gargantuan changes in the world around. As has been rightly said true Indian spirit is that the salvation of the inhabitants of the earth is in love.

However, it is equally true that India's multicultural tradition and the spirit of co-existence have always had its enemies and today is no different. Always efforts were made to sow division between people and communities and misuse religion to create disharmony. But at the same time, India's true strength has been that most of the people of this country have always seen through these conspiracies and maintained the unity and integrity of this diverse nation.

Given the challenges and threats to the fabric of social harmony and mutual understanding, there is a need to revive all the symbols that keep people connected with love and affection. The people of this country should be made to

realize that their religion, language and region may be different but their relationship with this homeland that has been a special home of the Spirit as well needs to be deeply treasured. It is special blessing in a country that it is “mostrichly endowed with all the wealth, power, and beauty that nature can bestow” where the human mind has “most full developed some of its choicest gifts, has most deeply pondered on the greatest problems of life” and which has produced a literature that would help make “our inner life more perfect, more comprehensive, more universal, in fact more truly human, a life, not for this life only, but a transfigured and eternal life.” The traditions, writings, ways of life, thoughts and actions that have held this nation together in the past are our most precious national heritage and we must keep reminding our younger generations about that. We must not lose our connection with the treasures of our past.

The "**Khusro Foundation**" has been founded for this noble cause. Amir Khusro was a versatile genius and universal figure of medieval India who has been and will always be remembered for centuries to come. He was a Sufi, a Soldier, a Musician, a Poet, and a Historian. It is because of his contribution to diverse streams of human endeavour that Amir Khusro continues to be celebrated to this day. Khusro's name and words have always been with us in terms of their attractiveness and universality in our moments of joy or hours of sorrow.

The patriotism of that “Turkish man” is not only exemplary but also enviable. For Khusro, this land of India was a paradise and the people were dear to him. To him, in comparison to the royal palaces of India, the palaces of Iran, Turan and Khorasan were insignificant. The people here

were unique in every field of science, literature, arts and military training. Despite being an orthodox Muslim, the monotheistic cult of the people of India was dear to him. He once said that although the people of India have different religions, most of their beliefs are similar to his own. Khusro, whose mother was a native and father a Turk, was an Indian who not only sang the praises of India's greatness but also wanted to be a part of this great land as it was everything to him. Altaf Hussain Hali expresses his love for this land in his words:

“Teri ek musht-e-khak ke badle,

Loon nahargiz agar behisht miley.”

*(I will never accept even a handful of its dust in exchange
for heaven.)*

True to the teachings of Khusro, the **Khusro Foundation** intends to spread patriotism, non-violence, humanity and harmony among the people of the world by creating literature that celebrates commonalities between all faiths, cultures and civilizations.

According to Sheikh Ibrahim Zauq:

“Gulha-i- ranga rang se hai zeenat-e-chaman,

Ai-Zauq is jahan ko hai zeb ikhtilaf se.”

(This garden is adorned with blossoms of different colours.

O Zauq, the beauty of this world is in its diversity. And the beauty of it is due to differences).