

SUFISM – A PANACEA FOR BURGEONING FUNDAMENTALISM, STRIFE AND SECTARIAN VIOLENCE IN THE PRESENT TIMES

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the immense potential that the holistic and transcendent philosophy of Sufism contains in providing the world with an alternative approach that can help to counter the serious challenges to global peace and order in present times when almost every region in the world is facing grave problems of violence, interminable conflicts, sectarian divisions, political upheavals, burgeoning extremism and fundamentalism. It has been accepted that the universal secular visions and ideologies of the past have failed to forge a peace culture for humanity and therefore, it is the emergent need of the hour to draw upon the harmonizing and syncretizing impact of Sufism, to counter disruptive and divisive forces that have threatened the very fabric of global society

Apart from referring to the history and influence of Sufism in the Middle East, North Africa and Asia in general, there is specific reference in this paper, to the enduring wisdom and invaluable contribution of this non sectarian, inclusive spiritual universalism in bridging communal divides in Indian society from Medieval to present times. This Sufi based approach that has helped to confront stringent and narrow ideologies, can serve as an antidote to the current malady of violence and disequilibrium in today's chaotic world. While the Sufi vision of 'Tawhid' stands for 'oneness of God', belief in human wholeness, spiritual elevation and inner freedom, the Sufi doctrine of 'Wahadut-ul-wujud', meaning 'unity of being', implies deep respect for oneness of mankind and all elements in the universe. Together they hold great promise of serving as a vehicle that can eventually bring about social cohesion and world order.

While the present study examines the influence and reach of Sufism in the world today, it begins with briefly tracing the changes and developments that have taken place within and outside the scope of this spiritual tradition- from the growth and expansion of Sufism in the 11th and 12th centuries to its subsequent marginalization in the 18th and 19th centuries as a result of the increasing influence of Wahabis, muslim modernists and revivalists, who condemned Sufi practices and masters. Even western social scientists till the mid 20th century felt that Sufism was on the wane, without any scope for affecting a lasting impact on world societies.

But far from fading into oblivion, there is rising interest and enthusiasm all over the world today to understand Sufism, which is now being increasingly seen as that spiritual tradition which served to keep civilizations intact and immune from dogmatic discourses in the past. There is clear evidence that as a collective movement, Sufi orders and brotherhoods have been continuously expanding in countries like Indonesia, Turkey and Iran, and that the popularity base of Sufism has broadened, especially among educated

urbanites, modern professionals and rational individuals, in many other countries too. Modern Sufi heads are increasingly speaking in favour of Sufism that goes beyond organized religion, and refer to its deep intellectual aspects that had, in the past, helped to instill a spirit of tolerance, solidarity, inquiry and expression in a diverse population. This study also examines the significant changes being in the activities of Sufi groups, which now emphasize on educational, social and vocational programs for upwardly mobile youth, apart from conducting religious studies. That the humanistic doctrines of Sufism can serve to be a panacea for the scourge of rising fundamentalism in the world, is increasingly being felt even in the west.

Thus, through this paper I strive to emphasize that Sufism, with its deeply ecumenical spirituality, has the capacity to inspire human solidarity and harmony, and can help to stall disruptive forces bent on fostering conflict and destroying global peace.

Keywords: Sufism, global peace, inclusive spiritual universalism, 'Wahadut-ul-wujud'.

1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of undertaking this study is to emphasize the present day relevance of Sufism (Tasawwuf), a unique spiritual and psycho-historical phenomenon, which has through its non sectarian, inclusive spiritual universalism, impacted not just the Muslim community all over the world, but has, like in India, managed to transcend religious and communal distinctions, finding acceptance and meaning in a large cross section of society because of its liberal, multicultural and unifying ideology. In the modern global perspective, there is increasing effort to understand Sufi Philosophy as being independent of the limits of any particular religion or faith, region, historical period, society or language, and to be considered as a pure essence of all beliefs and ideals -an enduring wisdom that has always existed, with only its outer appearance changing according to contemporary cultural historical environment. In the present paper the main stress is on highlighting the deeply ecumenical spirituality and immense unifying potential contained in Sufism which has the capacity to inspire human solidarity and expedite the emergence of a unified peace culture in the present turbulent times. There is also a brief discussion on the genesis, ebb and flow of Sufism through history, its impressive geographical presence and impact in India even today, increasing interest of people towards Sufism, from diverse faiths and backgrounds in every part of the world, as well as on the innovations in activities and institutional arrangements, frequently termed as 'repositioning' of Sufism in present times.

Almost every region of the world today is facing problems of violence, interminable conflicts, sectarian divisions, burgeoning extremism and fundamentalism. While humans tend to forget ravages caused by natural disasters, memories of carnage caused by war, terrorism and other forms of political violence rarely fade. The emergent need of the hour is to provide a counter narrative to this plague of negativity, hatred and apathy, by taking recourse to the age old spiritual values that have, in the past, helped to create just social orders.

2 DISCUSSION

During the course of the last century, ideological vacuum was created when 'universal visions' and previously tested ideologies, such as nationalism, communism and socialism lost their public appeal for having failed to deliver what they had promised. They could neither bridge global material and cultural divides nor stem widespread ecological damage and disintegration. All this precipitated the need to draw upon the spiritual resources and lasting profundity of world's great contemplative traditions that could lead to achievement of a unifying global consensus and provide lasting solutions.

Increasingly it is being accepted that the holistic and transcendent philosophy of Sufism can provide an alternative approach for countering the serious challenges to global peace in present times. While the Sufi vision of 'Tawhid' stands for 'Oneness of God', belief in human wholeness, spiritual elevation and inner freedom, the Sufi doctrine of 'Wahadut-ul-Wujud', meaning 'Unity of Being', implies deep respect for 'Oneness of mankind' and all elements in the Universe. Together they form the cornerstone of Sufi Philosophy and hold great promise of serving as a vehicle that can eventually bring about new social cohesion, world order and conflict resolution.

Though there are several theories, most commonly, it is believed that the Sufism emerged from the practice of Islamic asceticism in the Middle East around the 8th Century. These ascetics focused on introspection and austerity and withdrew from the world to concentrate on prayer to 'Allah'. However, in the mid 9th Century, Sufi mysticism began to burgeon and there was a shift from asceticism to 'Divine love' or complete surrender to God, which captured the attention of masses and elite alike. Soon Sufism began to flourish in Baghdad,

spreading then to Persia, the Indian subcontinent, North Africa and parts of Spain. From the 12th to the 15th Century, Sufism experienced an era of increased activity in various parts of the world as Sufis dispersed throughout the Middle East particularly in areas previously under Byzantine influence and control. The practice of '**Pir Muridi**', (relationship between a spiritual master and his disciple) '**Khanqahs**', (Sufi hospices) and '**Turuqs**' (Sufi Order or brotherhood) flourished during this period. As Sufism grew and as the Mongol Empire expanded from Persia through Central Asia, Sufis absorbed ideas from local people who followed Zoroastrianism, Vedanta, Gnosticism, Buddhism, Shamanism. Thus Sufism came to bridge gaps between the Muslim population, the rulers and the local people they ruled over.

However, the increasing influence of Islamic revivalists and scripturalist piety movements and their condemnation of certain Sufi beliefs, rituals and practices, led to marginalization of Sufism in the 18th, 19th and early decades of the 20th Century. Some western social scientists like the renowned orientalist A.J. Arberry, and Clifford Geertz even opined that Sufism was on the wane. But far from fading into oblivion, Sufism has not only survived into the 21st Century but has experienced a considerable resurgence throughout the world. The movement in present times demonstrates a vitality that has immense contemporary appeal for the educated, urban and rational societies. There is rising interest and enthusiasm all over the world today to understand Sufism which is now being increasingly seen as that spiritual tradition, which served to keep civilizations intact and immune from dogmatic discourses in the past.

In India, following the entrance of Islam in the early 8th Century, Sufi mystic traditions became increasingly visible in the 10th and 11th Centuries and gained popularity during the time of the Delhi Sultanate (1206- 1526 CE). Sufi thought, values, literature, education and its humanist universal ideology helped to build a syncretic medieval culture, during this period and in the subsequent centuries in India. Sufism, through its tenets of divine spirituality and cosmic harmony, set into motion a process of social rapprochement and philosophical synthesis, and seeped into the psyche of Indian masses, irrespective of religious affiliations. By preaching, practicing and personifying simplicity, tolerance and human wholeness, and by adopting the local idiom, customs, traditions and languages, Sufi saints managed to gain veneration of Indian society in almost every region of the subcontinent. One important factor that helped in the spread of Sufism in India was the establishment of '**Khanqahs**' (a hospice or community center) of various Sufi Orders, which became social, cultural and theological institutions providing spiritual guidance, shelter to the needy and opportunities for spiritual interaction. By the 14th century, a close spiritual parallel to Sufism emerged in India-The Bhakti movement within Hinduism. There are a number of similarities and near unanimity of conception in the doctrines of both these schools of philosophy. Both were based on the all consuming goal of complete surrender to God and both emphasize on devotion, charity and simplicity while rejecting elaborate rituals, outward religiosity and falsehood. There was a rich exchange of practices and beliefs between the followers of both these movements, which along with several other glowing examples of assimilation and absorption of diverse ideologies, gave rise to a distinct cultural synthesis that became the basis of the composite culture of India.

The invaluable contribution of Sufism in bridging communal divides in Indian society during the past centuries, its continuing popularity among people from different faiths and economic backgrounds, and the fact that Sufism enjoys tremendous popularity in almost every part of India even today, goes to prove the significance and impact of Sufism. Today, when we are facing grave challenges of intolerance, violence and communal frenzy across the globe, taking a cue from Indian history and referring back to Sufi philosophy, can serve as an antidote to the malady that has threatened to destroy the very fabric of society.

Over 210 historical Sufi sites, scattered across the length and breadth of India, are officially enlisted in the 'Sufi Circuit' released by the Government of India, making India a contemporary epicenter for Sufi culture today. These Sufi sites draw thousands of visitors and believers from different communities, and the numbers have increased steadily over the years. Among the most important Sufi Orders which gained prominence in India from the 13th Century onwards were the Chishtiyya, Naqshabandiyya, Suhrawardiyya, Kubrawiyya, Qadiriyya, Shattariyya and Firdausiyya Orders. Of these the most profound impact and farthest reach was that of the Chishtiyya Order, introduced in India by Hazrat Moinuddin Chishti in the 13th century with its center at Ajmer in Rajasthan. Today it is the most revered and deeply respected Sufi shrine of the subcontinent. Also a highly venerated saint of this Order was Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya whose '**Dargah**' (an Islamic shrine built over the grave of a Sufi saint) in Delhi is among the most frequently visited shrine by people of all religions, with utmost reverence. This Sufi Order is known for its practice of '**Sama**' or musical invocation of God through the medium of '**Qawwali**' (an energetic musical performance showing complete devotion to God); the concept of '**Muta'addi**' (devotion to God that brings happiness to others).

Sufism and its immense popularity in India can be well understood by the fact that almost every state of the country has Sufi centers and shrines of different Orders, still held in high esteem and to which followers and believers still flock for spiritual solace. Each of these sacred centers is replete with Sufi philosophy of universal spiritualism, oneness of being, love and devotion. However during the course of history, regional socio- cultural influences slowly seeped into the practices and activities of these Orders giving each of them their unique identity and character. Some of the highly venerated Sufi shrines of India are – Shrine of Hazrat Bande Nawaz in Gulbarga(Karnataka), Azan Faqir in Guwahati (Assam),Dewa Sharif in Barabanki (Uttar Pradesh),Maner Sharif in Patna(Bihar), Shah Abdullah Kermani in Khustigiri (West Bengal),Nagore Dargah (Tamil Nadu),Haji Ali in Mumbai(Maharashtra) Hazrat Abdullah Shattari Dargah in Dhar (Madhya Pradesh),Mamburam Makham Shrine (Kerala) and Dargah of Ghazi Masud in Bahraich(Uttar Pradesh) among many others.

But no other Sufi Shrine of India can exemplify the rich composite culture of the country better than 'Charar-i-Sharif', in the Budgam district of Jammu and Kashmir, India. Founded by Hazrat Nooruddin Noorani (1379-1442 CE), it is the center of the 'Rishi' Order of Sufism, which evolved in the valley indigenously, unlike other Sufi Orders which had arrived in India from Central Asia and other places. It may be regarded as the Islamic expression of the Kashmir 'Rishi' tradition, the word 'Rishi' having a clear Sanskrit derivation, meaning a 'sage'. It is said that Hazrat Noorani, or 'Nund Rishi', received 'ma'rifat' or spiritual knowledge from a female mystic saint of the Hindu Shaivite sect, Laleshwari, whose famous 'Vaakhs' or poetic renditions are popular among Kashmiris of all communities even today. Though in present times Kashmir faces several challenges to its historical cultural and religious synthesis, a recent survey has shown an increase in the number of pilgrims and visitors to this shrine, venerated by both Hindus and Muslims, which symbolizes the pluralistic nature of Indian society.

Whatever might have been the origin of Sufism outside India, it was profoundly transformed in India by influences that were operative in various spheres of life such as religious, philosophical, intellectual, ideological and even aesthetics. So it can be safely asserted that liberal Islam as represented by Sufism that, detached from the more orthodox Islam, raised a new voice in Medieval India. Islamic mysticism moulded by the Sufis became all inclusive and herein lies its present-day relevance. In an age that perceives growth of extremist fundamentalism, the teachings of these Sufis are of utmost importance to maintain the liberal, multi-cultural and secular nature of religious policy and polity anywhere in the world.

The profound awareness and sincere belief that the Sufi concepts of love, adaptation, accommodation, piety and universal brotherhood have immense relevance in the present global scenario and specially with the aim to fostering a composite Indian culture, '**The World Sufi Forum**' was organized by the All India Ulama and Mashaikh Board in New Delhi in March, 2016, and was attended by the Indian Prime Minister, Mr. Narendra Modi. The role of Sufism as a truly unique and immaculate spiritual theory which can enlarge the ambit of modern approaches to peace, non-violence and conflict resolution, was the central theme of this Conference. The Conference was attended by distinguished Sufi scholars, luminaries, Ulema and peace activists, who reiterated that reviving and conceptualizing Sufi heritage can go a long way in repairing the ethical and cultural values that are fast eroding all across the world.

Shifting the focus to the global canvas, there is clear evidence that the popularity base of Sufism has expanded in various countries of every continent, in the past few decades. Sufi ideals and beliefs have helped in perceiving harmony and potential complementarities amid great cultural diversity in different parts of the world. This has been possible, due to the contemporary manifestation and adaptations to changing environments, because of which Sufism is no longer considered just a medieval concept of mystical beliefs that is confined within organized Sufi Orders or just a traditional phenomenon of the past. Carl W. Ernst, Professor of Islamic Studies at the University of North Carolina, U.S.A., is of the view that the study of historical Sufism needs to be juxtaposed with the exploration of Sufism's current manifestations, so as to best understand its immense contemporary significance. It has been seen that some Sufi orders and associations have adapted their traditions to new circumstances, by transforming into new forms of collective action such as cultural and educational associations, social movements and political parties. Modern Sufi Heads are increasingly speaking in favour of Sufism that goes beyond organized religion, and the study of 'Tasawwuf' (Sufi philosophy) outside the Sufi Orders is gaining increasing adherence and popularity.

Valerie Hoffman who has conducted studies of Sufi orders in Egypt has concluded that since the 1970s there has been a revival of interest in Sufism in Egypt and the number of 'Turuqs' has increased over the course of the last 50 years, with middle and upper class urbanites who are educated and informed, becoming associated with Sufism in large numbers. Today roughly, 15% of Egyptians are either members of Sufi brotherhoods or participate in Sufi practices. There are 77 recognized Sufi Orders (Turuqs) and popular

Sufi practices include the recitation of litanies (**Zikr**) collectively and individually, participation in '**Mowlids** (festivals held in honour of Prophet Mohammad, his descendents and several holy men and women) and visitations to tombs of Sufi Saints (**Ziyarat**). Sufis in Egypt thrive with more than 15 million followers despite attacks by hardliners in recent times. But this has not dampened the Sufi spirit, rather has paved the road for the Sufi current to take over the political scene in Egypt, 'which is reflective of its growing impact.

In Indonesia too, Sufism has become a conspicuous aspect of urban middle class religiosity. One of the significant features has been the emergence of Islamic ritual groups identified as '**Majlis Zikr**' and '**Majlis Salawat**', popular both in rural and urban areas. The locus of these groups, especially in rural areas, has been the '**Pesantrens**' (Islamic boarding school) which have contributed to Islamic education and maintaining of traditions in Indonesia. Recently they spread out to urban areas with the help of '**Majlis Taklim**', which grew out of the 'Pesantren', and is an educational institution that imparts Islamic religious spiritual and moral education. In the last three decades there is increasing influx of educated, white collared modern Indonesian elite into classical Sufi orders like Orders like Qadariya Nagshabandiya Order (TQN Suryalaya). TQN Suryalaya has established its socio-cultural importance by delivering a variety of services under the supervision of professional experts-school and university education, agricultural extension services, drug addiction therapy centers etc.

A significant contribution in resocialising Sufism in Indonesia has been played by Habib Luthfi Yahya, who is the leader of JATMAN, an association of various '**Tarikat**'. Through the '**Kanzus Shalawat**', the congregation he leads, Luthfi has emphasized that Sufis can play a significant role in interfaith dialogues and socially important activities. One leading spiritual center in Yagyakarta, Indonesia, the 'Bioneregi' is a hybrid Sufi group fulfilling spiritual needs of urban spiritual seekers. In order to engage with secular mindset of modernizing people, this Sufi Center modulates Sufi teachings in a manner that encourages ordinary people to engage in activities that help to gain worldly prosperity. In fact religious movements that are not Sufi Orders in the strict sense, but share many characteristics with Sufism, are experiencing significant growth in countries like Indonesia and Turkey. Hamka, a prominent modern reformer of the 20th Century encourages Sufi teachings and some practices without recourse to Sufi Orders.

In Turkey, voluntary religious associations that draw selectively from Sufi precepts and have a set of distinctive devotional and disciplining practices have steadily been gaining ground. The Gulen Movement headed by Fetullah Gulen (born 1938), is one such association that does not function under the structured form of an Order, and recognizes only loose affinity with the Naqshabandi Sufi teacher Said Nursi, who had founded the Nurcu Movement in Turkey. Like Nursi, Gulen's message is to substitute the Sufi '**Tariqa**' mode of religiosity, which he considered obsolete, and to introduce an ideology that combined a religious, humane and scientific approach to life, without dependence on a Sufi Order. The Sufi ideals of this group, service (**Hizmat**) and spiritual collectivity (**Shaksi Manevi**) have attracted over 6 million people thus proving that Sufism is vibrantly alive in contemporary Turkey. Instead of '**Tekkes**' or Sufi lodges, much of the Sufi activity occurs in university dormitories and student apartments, thus indicating the rising popularity of these ideals among the educated and upwardly mobile youth of Turkey. Thus Gulen's interpretation of Islam is a balance between mysticism and rationalism, materialism and spiritualism and also between worldliness and asceticism. He emphasizes on a strong grounding in Islamic textual knowledge, as well as on ideas of reasoning and modernity.

The Gulen Movement has developed a range of activities and a vast network of schools, business enterprises, publishing houses, television networks and media outlets throughout the Turkic world. Gulen educational institutions are aimed at helping enterprising youngsters to prepare for careers in business and professions in engineering and science. Gulen has also dedicated a series of sermons to the discussion of Prophet Mohammad and emphasized the need to internalize the spiritual meanings of his teachings. On the other hand he has described Sufism as the moral dimension to one's existence which can be purified through practice of Sufi concepts like '**Tauba**' (repentance) and '**Tafakkur**' (reflection). Discussion circles, journals and books have helped to disseminate Sufi ideas of this movement to larger audiences within and outside Turkey. An essential element of this movement is a close collaboration between religious tradition and Western Inspired rationalist culture. Gulen Movement's significance is recognized within Turkish politics and economy, as well as at the global level.

In Syria too, Sufism enjoys a significant presence as a source of meaning and identity in Syrian society. The last three decades have seen an increase in Sufi communities and informal social movements which have Sufi inspired organizational models. The '**Khalidiyya-Kuftariyya**' is one of the largest Sufi organizations in Syria which works within the '**Tariqah**' form, and has transformed Sufism as a rationalist culture in the modern context. While upholding the immense importance of spiritualism, the 'Kuftariyya' emphasizes

equally on modern education and technological advancement. Abu al Nur Islamic Center established by this sect is the most recognized center for preaching a peaceful, ecumenical interpretation of Islam. The Kuffariyya Sufi message has taken the form of a global inter faith dialogue, that continues to inspire hope for peace and harmony in the present troubled times of Syria.

In recent times, Sufism has gained immense popularity in the West, with increasing enthusiasm among Europeans and Americans, to understand its deeply ecumenical spirituality. UNESCO declared 2007 as the 'International Year of Rumi', to coincide with the 800th birth anniversary of this renowned Persian scholar and Sufi mystic. There is a surge in Sufi inspired literature and research of its various facets in the west, especially in the field of Sufi music and poetry, understanding of which has facilitated easy percolation of Sufi thought. The first major Sufi figure in U.S.A. was Hazrat Inayat Khan, a Indian musician who was inspired by Chishtiyya Sufi Order, with a mission to harmonize the East and West with the music of his soul. The Inayati Order, now several decades old, is infused with a revolutionary vision of unity of religious ideals and the awakening of the human spirit to its inherent divinity. This and several other important Sufi organizations in the west, like Universal Sufism Movement, The Mevlevi Order of America, The Golden Sufi Center, Sufism Reoriented, The Sufi Foundation of America, Sufi Order(UK), Sufi Ruhaniat International, have been working towards disseminating Sufi ideals of love, purification of the inner self, harmony and piety. They have also been undertaking socially beneficial activities that reflect an understanding of Sufism which is capable of assimilating modern tools and acculturating to differing socio-economic environments.

3 CONCLUSION

In contemporary times Sufi teachings can serve as the best remedy for the obliteration of communalism, fundamentalism and religious bigotry that is responsible for the disintegration of social bonds all over the world. As intolerance rears its ugly head time and again, the humanistic teachings of the Sufi Saints are needed to alleviate suffering, promote harmony and contribute to the process of social healing. Sufism must be reborn, as a thought and belief, if it is to respond to the contemporary context of the global scenario. It is a known fact that the liberal ideology of Sufism has, in the past, played a seminal role in developing a secular and tolerant society with faith in ideas of service to mankind, unity and peaceful co-existence. Sufism can help to stall disruptive forces in their tracks and make our era the most creative, progressive and harmonious epoch of human history.

By virtue of their high spiritual beliefs and relentless pursuit of human ideals the Sufis of the past left an indelible imprint on several world societies. Now is the time to resurrect their message of harmony and service to mankind, which can serve as a balm for arid materialism, fundamentalism and strife of today's times.

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