



A Constructivist Explanation of India's Soft Power in Central Asia Through Sufi Diplomacy During the Prime Ministership of Narendra Modi

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ABSTRACT

In the contemporary international system, states increasingly draw on soft power resources to achieve foreign policy objectives through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion. Possessing a rich civilizational and cultural heritage, alongside diverse soft power instruments, India has actively sought to deploy “Sufi diplomacy” towards the Central Asian republics. Employing a qualitative methodology with a descriptive–analytical approach based on library and documentary sources, this study addresses the following central question: how has the government of Narendra Modi utilised Sufi diplomacy to advance India’s national interests? In response, the study tests the hypothesis that India emphasises shared elements of tolerance and diversity between ancient Indian culture and Sufism, foregrounding the principles of compassion and forbearance in their mutual heritage. By doing so, New Delhi attempts to construct a shared identity discourse that serves as a “counterweight” to political Islam and religious radicalism in the secular states of Central Asia, thereby enhancing the appeal of its governance model to the region’s secular regimes. Framed within the conceptual boundaries of soft power and constructivist theory, the findings only partially confirm this hypothesis: while India’s Sufi diplomacy has found resonance among Central Asian political elites, its overall efficacy remains constrained by the growing contradiction between New Delhi’s external pluralist rhetoric and its domestic Hindu nationalist shift.

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1. Introduction

As one of the earliest nations to establish diplomatic relations with the newly independent Central Asian republics following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, India has consistently—albeit with fluctuating momentum—sought to expand its geopolitical and cultural footprint in the region. The inaugural state visits of Central Asian leaders to India between 1991 and 1993, followed by the landmark visit of then-Indian Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao to Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan in May 1993, established the foundational bilateral frameworks for regional engagement. However, these relations were considerably constrained during the early 2000s, owing primarily to domestic factors, the absence of direct geographical connectivity, and a lack of adequate transportation networks. Yet, given that India had defined the Central Asian region as part of its extended neighbourhood, it could neither remain indifferent to the developments unfolding in the region nor stand aloof from it.

On the one hand, India's rapidly growing economy necessitated sustainable access to the vast hydrocarbon and mineral resources of Central Asia. On the other hand, the intensification of major-power rivalries within the paradigm of the "New Great Game" heightened New Delhi's strategic focus on the region. Concurrently, the shared geographical proximity of both India and Central Asia to Afghanistan—a historical epicenter and transit corridor for transnational terrorist networks—and mutual anxieties regarding the proliferation of religious extremism forced Indian strategists and Central Asian regimes to view regional security shifts with deep concern. This shared strategic vulnerability compelled India to deepen its institutional and security cooperation with Central Asian states. Consequently, New Delhi initially formulated the "Look North Policy," which was subsequently updated into the "Connect Central Asia Policy" in 2012 to institutionalize relations.

Following the ascension of Narendra Modi to power in 2014, India's engagement with Central Asia gained unprecedented momentum. New Delhi adopted a revitalized foreign policy paradigm anchored in the development of connectivity corridors, robust security cooperation, active participation in multilateral forums (such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization), and the dual deployment of economic and soft power diplomacy.

From the outset, it was structurally evident that due to the assertive presence of major powers—particularly China's massive hard infrastructure investments through the Belt and Road Initiative and its exercise of hard power—India faced formidable structural barriers to expanding its geopolitical influence. Nevertheless, India possesses distinct comparative advantages in the realm of soft power. Specifically, the shared civilizational and cultural matrix, most notably the historical legacy of Sufism, provides a unique cultural bridge that New Delhi currently seeks to exploit to redefine its regional influence. Indeed, India arrived at the conclusion, more than ever before, that within the framework of the Extended Neighbourhood doctrine and the Connect Central Asia policy, the strengthening of cultural ties and the deployment of soft power are of equal importance to economic relations and hard power for the advancement of India's interests in the region. Given that this specific cultural variable has been under-researched within the existing literature on India's cultural diplomacy in Central Asia, this article aims to investigate the following research question: How has India

utilized the Sufi factor as a strategic instrument to secure its national interests during the Prime Ministership of Narendra Modi? To address this, the study evaluates the hypothesis that "India deliberately underscores the structural alignment between the tolerance and pluralism of ancient Indian civilization and the spiritual tenets of Sufism. By highlighting the shared civilizational baseline of compassion, India aims to construct a common identity discourse against radical political Islam, offering a stabilizing counterweight for Central Asian secular states while augmenting the normative appeal of its own democratic governance model.

Methodologically, this study relies on a qualitative, descriptive-analytical design, drawing extensively on primary official documentation, including state speeches, executive policy briefs, and parliamentary declarations. Structurally, following the theoretical and literature review, the paper explores the historical position of Sufism as a shared heritage between India and Central Asia. It then analyzes the operational mechanisms through which the Modi administration has converted Sufi diplomacy into a soft power asset and a counterweight against religious radicalism. Finally, the paper delineates the primary systemic challenges confronting India's Sufi diplomacy in the Central Asian region.

2. Theoretical Framework: From Soft Power to Constructivism

The concept of soft power, introduced into international relations discourse by Joseph Nye, denotes an actor's capacity to co-opt and shape the preferences of others through non-coercive means rather than hard power coercion or economic inducements. Unlike hard power, soft power relies on attraction and persuasion, drawing primarily on three core resources: a nation's culture (where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority)

To differentiate between soft and hard power dynamics, Nye highlights two dimensions: power behaviors and power resources. Power behaviors span a spectrum from command power (the ability to change what others do through coercion) to co-optive power (the ability to shape what others want). Power resources, conversely, are divided into tangible assets (population, military technology, economic scale) and intangible assets (culture, ideology, normative values, institutional credibility). From this perspective, soft power resources (intangibles) are naturally aligned with co-optive behaviors, whereas hard power resources (tangibles) are structurally tied to command behaviors. Nonetheless, this correlation is not absolute; tangible assets can sometimes be leveraged to achieve co-optive outcomes, and intangible values can occasionally reinforce command structures (Zahran and Ramos, 2011: 47–48).

In this study, the concept of soft power serves as the foundational architecture, illustrating how the Indian state utilizes an intangible asset to achieve a hard strategic objective: neutralizing the security threat of radical Islamist terrorism. However, to evaluate the core hypothesis comprehensively, this study integrates Constructivist theory as a framework for understanding how national interests are defined through intersubjective discourses and constructed identities.

Constructivism, acting as a *via media* between mainstream rationalist theories (Neorealism and Neoliberalism) and post-structuralism, operates on three core tenets:

1. Human association is determined primarily by ideas and shared understandings rather than purely material forces;
2. The most critical ideational factors are intersubjective meanings that are widely shared among actors; and
3. These shared beliefs construct the identities and interests of the actors themselves.

In sharp contrast to rationalist frameworks that treat state identities and interests as exogenously given and static, constructivism argues that state preferences are endogenously constructed through domestic and international social interactions, which subsequently dictate state behavior (Finnemore and Sikkink, 2001: 398). The consequence of this conceptualization is that—unlike the rigid structural determinism of neorealism—states possess a broader horizon of potential choices, though these choices are simultaneously constrained and enabled by prevailing social structures (Hopf, 1998: 176). Accordingly, constructivism maintains that dominant national interests are neither natural nor immutable; rather, they are subject to constant redefinition across time and within evolving ideational structures (Finnemore, 2001: 398).

Furthermore, regarding security dynamics, Ted Hopf argues that a "threat" is not an objective, pre-given material reality. Instead, threats are socially constructed through the delineation of identity and difference ("Self" versus "Other") and cannot be understood outside the process of identity formation. In other words, what constitutes a threat is never historically fixed; it is continuously redefined in relation to the constructed "Other." Consequently, states alter their threat perceptions and security interests depending on the social relationships they construct with external actors (Hopf, 1998: 199). Thus, the operationalisation of soft power requires a pre-existing intersubjective structure. States deploy their soft power resources to build a shared sense of identity—a collective "We." Because identities are inherently relational and often forged in opposition to an external actor, the social construction of a shared threat significantly reinforces collective identity cohesion. This is precisely where soft power is understood not simply as a tangible tool, but as a dynamic process of co-constituting a collective identity.

As observed below, the 'Extended Neighbourhood'—as a macro-framework for justifying India's relations with the countries of Central Asia—also reflects the constructivist understanding of India's own regional identity. Within this perceptual framework, India defines its identity not merely on the basis of geography and geographical proximity, but rather on the basis of cultural and civilisational ties. Moreover, from a constructivist perspective, Sufism is not an end in itself for India, but rather a shared semantic structure. By deploying this cultural symbol, India seeks to co-articulate the identities of India and the Central Asian states, asserting that both are grounded in a tradition of tolerant Islam, positioned in contradistinction to a more radical and orthodox form Islamism.

Applying these theoretical insights, this article explores:

- First, how Narendra Modi's administration has instrumentalized Sufism as a cultural resource and soft power asset to secure a hard security objective; and
- Second, how it has structurally utilized Sufism as a "shared semantic structure" to bridge the ideological gap between India (under the dominant domestic framework of Hindutva) and the secular Central Asian regimes that view political Islam with deep institutional suspicion.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive-analytical research methodology. Data has been systematically gathered from primary and official sources, including Indian state declarations, diplomatic agreements, official speeches by senior state executives, and policy briefs from authoritative foreign policy think tanks.

3. Literature Review

Since the structural independence of the Central Asian republics in 1991, India has consistently designed frameworks to project its presence in the region, with soft power acting as a primary pillar of its foreign policy. Consequently, a substantial body of literature has emerged on this topic.

For instance, Mohammad Shaique Hussain (2025) focuses on the Modi government's "Connect Central Asia Policy" (initially framed in 2012), assessing the efficacy of historical-civilizational links, educational exchanges, Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) scholarships, institutional cultural centers, and medical tourism as core instruments of Indian soft power. Similarly, Akhmetzhanov et al. (2023) examine India's soft power footprint within Kazakhstan, analyzing how Indian cultural initiatives, cinema (Bollywood), culinary traditions, and educational partnerships permeate Kazakh society. AKhitmetov (2024) contextualizes the historical links and institutional initiatives within India-Central Asia relations, underscoring the role of cultural diplomacy in fostering regional security cooperation. In a policy report, Shilpa (2023) evaluates how New Delhi uses the multilateral platform of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) to expand its normative and soft power reach. From a broader historical perspective, Aryal and Pulami (2023) outlines the evolution of India's post-Cold War foreign policy toward Central Asia, detailing the systemic variables that facilitated India's cultural entry. Inderjit (2025) maps the long-term trajectory of these interactions, tracing them from ancient trade and spiritual exchanges (the Silk Road and Buddhism) to contemporary strategic partnerships, highlighting the primary structural drivers behind these linkages.

Beyond this general body of literature on Indian soft power, a distinct and specialized subset of scholarship addresses Sufism as a specialized foreign policy tool. Nasir Reza Khan (2024), in a comprehensive volume, conducts a historical and contemporary analysis of India-Central Asia relations through the prism of Sufi networks. Muni (2022) addresses the strategic utility of Sufism within India's broader cultural diplomacy, arguing that a moderate, pluralistic interpretation of Islam must be integrated into the Modi administration's soft power matrix. Muni suggests that by championing Sufism as an inherently tolerant articulation of Islamic

spirituality, India can ideologically counter the radical variants of political Islam that fuel transnational terrorism. Joshi (2010) asserts, in his detailed report, that due to the absence of a shared border with Central Asia, India places a strong emphasis on the exercise of soft power in this region. One of the pillars of India's soft power in Central Asia is the legacy of great Sufis such as Mir Sayyid Ali Hamadani and Khwaja Baha-ud-Din Naqshband. The author contends that the utilization of these symbols serves as a factor in legitimizing India's political presence in the region.

Dave (2016), in his critical study of India–Central Asia relations, first addresses India's emphasis on ceremonial symbols and nostalgic linkages to the Silk Road, Sufism, and the Mughal Empire. He maintains that although Sufism constitutes one of the key instruments for projecting the peaceful nature of India's presence in the region, an excessive focus on these themes has diverted the Indian government from infrastructural cooperation. In effect, he underscores the necessity of backing soft power centered on cultural symbols with economic diplomacy. Khan (2024), in an article entitled "The Role of Sufism in Countering Extremism: A Diplomatic Perspective," highlights how Sufi orders promote tolerance and forbearance in the face of extremism, as well as the formation of a shared semantic framework between India and the Central Asian countries. He argues that these characteristics can contribute to strengthening regional security.

A more careful review of this literature, however, reveals that existing scholarship suffers from three significant limitations. First, the majority of extant studies examine India's Sufi diplomacy alongside other soft power instruments—such as Bollywood, education, and tourism—without treating it as an independent strategy possessing its own internal logic. In other words, within these works, Sufism is typically mentioned as an entry on a list rather than being placed at the centre of analysis. Second, none of the previous inquiries has seriously posed the question of why India—despite its domestic turn towards Hindu nationalism—simultaneously deploys the language of Islamic tolerance and Sufi heritage in its external engagements. This apparent contradiction is not an incidental flaw but rather a conscious strategic choice that demands theoretical elucidation. Third, and most importantly, the current literature lacks an appropriate theoretical framework for analysing this phenomenon. A constructivist approach—which places identity, discourse, and the social construction of interests at the centre of analysis—could explain how India utilises Sufi heritage not merely as a cultural symbol but as a tool for constructing a shared identity with Central Asian regimes. However, no study to date has systematically and specifically applied this framework to India's Sufi diplomacy in Central Asia. This article seeks to fill this gap. By doing so, it contributes to a deeper understanding of India's evolving regional strategy and underscores the growing significance of Central Asia as a geopolitical and civilisational crossroads where major powers increasingly compete for influence.

4. Sufism as a Shared Heritage between Central Asia and India

Sufism, representing the mystical and esoteric dimension of Islam that emphasizes an internal, contemplative relationship with the Divine through spiritual purification, meditation, and the refinement of the heart, entered Central Asia concurrently with the initial Islamic expansions

of the seventh century. As Islam spread, Sufi practitioners integrated local customs, achieving a high degree of synthesis between Islamic theology and the nomadic culture of the steppe. This made Sufism the primary vehicle for the indigenization of Islam in the region. Over centuries, distinct Sufi orders and transnational spiritual movements emerged. Subsequently, at the dawn of the eleventh century, Islam entered the Indian subcontinent via Afghanistan, (Ziad, 2018: 120)

However, in contrast to the rigid configurations of Islam often associated with conquering armies, Sufism was introduced to the daily life of India by ascetics, poets, and merchants. Their primary modes of engagement were not material coercion, but spiritual insight, universal compassion, and divine love. As the prominent Islamic and Sufi scholar Annemarie Schimmel observes, the presence of Sufi mystics in India operated as "the main source for the spread of Islam throughout South Asia" (Schimmel, 1975: 353–356).

Consequently, various Sufi orders—most notably the Chishti, Naqshbandi, Suhrawardi, Qadri, and Yasavi orders, many of which had their foundational geocultural roots in Central Asia—were seamlessly absorbed into the local Indian cultural landscape. Conversely, Sufi sub-orders that developed within the Indo-Islamic synthesis, characterized by distinct ritualistic practices, exercised a reciprocal influence on the spiritual evolution of Central Asian Sufism, cementing a profound metaphysical link between the two regions.

This intellectual and spiritual relationship transformed during the Mongol invasions of Central Asia and Persia. The geopolitical upheaval triggered a massive migration of Sufi scholars, mystics, and literati to India. In subsequent centuries, the institutional patronage of the Mughal emperors played a decisive role in cementing the Sufi continuum between India and Central Asia. This structural cross-pollination manifested in the architecture, music, literature, and artistic heritage of both regions. Renowned Indo-Persian and Sufi poets such as Amir Khusrau deeply influenced Central Asian philosophical thought. Concurrently, South Asian musical genres like *Qawwali*¹ were profoundly shaped by Central Asian rhythmic structures and spiritual assemblies (*Sama*). Despite the historical ruptures imposed by European colonialism and the subsequent geopolitical partition of the subcontinent, these Sufi linkages persisted within the social structures of both regions (Alam, 2026).

In Central Asia, where Sufism has historically formed an indispensable component of societal culture, political behavior, and economic interaction, Sufi practices retained their popular resonance despite the systematic suppression of religion during the Soviet era. In recent decades, post-Soviet Central Asian regimes have invested heavily in restoring Sufi shrines, publishing ancient mystical manuscripts, and integrating Sufi ethics into state-sanctioned Islamic education. By doing so, these regimes seek to preserve national traditions while promoting a moderate, apolitical articulation of Islam to counter radical political Islam (Khan, 2015: 93). This domestic policy environment provides the necessary structural baseline for the reception of Narendra Modi's Sufi diplomacy by regional secular elites. Indeed, the government of Narendra Modi was presented with an opportunity to actively

1. a form of devotional music innovated by Amir Khusrau Dehlavi—

elevate this shared heritage beyond the realm of purely historical actualities, reinterpreting and reconstructing it in accordance with India's national interests.

Among the various spiritual orders or *Tariqas* in the subcontinent, the Chishti and Naqshbandi orders have played the most prominent role in shaping this shared identity. The Chishti order, originating in Central Asia and northern Afghanistan, was brought to Delhi and Ajmer by its most illustrious representative, Moinuddin Chishti. (Schimmel, 1975:345–346). Conversely, the Naqshbandi order, founded by Bahauddin Naqshband in Transoxiana and Bukhara, entered India in the late sixteenth century and reached its theological peak through the works of Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi. The contemporary cultural currency of this order is so pronounced that during his official state visit to Uzbekistan in 2015, Prime Minister Narendra Modi made a highly publicized pilgrimage to the mausoleum of Bahauddin Naqshband in Bukhara, underscoring its diplomatic significance.

5. India's Soft Power and Sufi Diplomacy in Central Asia

As established, soft power is structurally rooted in a state's intangible assets, such as its culture, normative values, historical prestige, and civilizational depth. Viewed through this lens, India—by virtue of its ancient history and cultural continuity—is potentially one of the most resource-rich soft power actors in the international system. India's traditional soft power repository includes ancient traditions like Buddhism, classical philosophy, Yoga, and Ayurveda, alongside modern political tenets such as Gandhian non-violence (*Ahimsa*) and Nehruvian pluralism. Coupled with modern instruments like Bollywood, its advanced information technology sector, and a globally influential diaspora, these assets form a powerful toolkit. The Indian state has systematically deployed these resources to enhance its international prestige, cultivate long-term diplomatic alignments, and secure strategic economic objectives (Patani, 2026: 27).

In the Central Asian theater, the Indian government enjoys unique civilizational advantages that allow it to transition from a generic soft power strategy to a tailored, civilization-centric paradigm. These specific regional resources include the legacy of the Silk Road, historical Buddhist footprints, the artistic heritage of the Mughal era, and the pervasive memory of Sufi networks. Since the beginning of Narendra Modi's tenure, Sufism has been prioritized as a primary shared identity construct within India's cultural diplomacy toward Central Asia.

To understand its current deployment, it is necessary to examine the evolution of India's regional cultural diplomacy across two primary phases. However, since these developments are understood within a broader policy framework—namely "Extended Neighborhood" in India's foreign policy—we will first address this policy framework.

Extended Neighborhood

This concept, first formally proposed by the Indian Ministry of External Affairs in the early 2000s and subsequently established as an overarching macro-framework in India's foreign policy, refers to strategic regions beyond South Asia's immediate borders. It includes multiple regions such as the Indian Ocean, Southeast Asia, West Asia, and Central Asia—the latter being the focus of this study (Scott, 2009: 108). Theoretically, this term reflects a

constructivist reimagining of India's perception of its regional identity. That is to say, unlike in the past, India has redefined its regional identity not on the basis of direct geographical proximity, but on a constructed environment rooted in historical, cultural, and civilizational ties (Roy and Roy, 2020: 304). On this basis, India can establish its presence as a legitimate and interested actor in Central Asia, despite lacking a shared border with the region and facing access constraints (due to Pakistan's landlocked obstruction). This framework explains why India—despite its domestic Hindutva orientation—chooses to publicly champion Sufism as a counter-radicalization tool in Central Asia.

It should be noted that the "Look North" policy doctrine, introduced in the 1990s, temporally precedes the concept and framework of the Extended Neighborhood. However, in terms of conceptual hierarchy, the Extended Neighborhood is broader, more strategic, and more comprehensive than the "Look North" and "Connect to Central Asia" doctrines. In fact, the latter two doctrines represent the operational and executive dimensions of the Extended Neighborhood in Central Asia. Accordingly, in what follows, we will examine India's cultural diplomacy in Central Asia within the framework of these two foreign policy doctrines.

1) Cultural Diplomacy under the "Look North Policy" (1990s–2000s)

Formulated in the 1990s under the administration of India's Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao, this policy sought to build a shared identity discourse centered on "pluralism, tolerance, and secularism" to counter the rise of political Islam. For example, during his address to the Parliament of Uzbekistan on May 24, 1993, Narasimha Rao stated:

"India and the newly independent republics of Central Asia share a common spirit and discourse. Both sides believe that stability, development, and social progress can only be achieved under the aegis of secular governance, pluralism, and democracy. We are deeply concerned by the emergence of fundamentalist forces and religious extremism in the region, which exploit the pure sentiments of the people and threaten the stability of our borders. India's secular model has proven that religious diversity can be a source of peace, not conflict; and this is precisely the model that our region requires today." (Rao, 1993).

Similarly, on November 1, 2006, the then Indian Minister of Defense, Pranab Mukherjee, echoed these sentiments during a speech at the Kazakhstan National Defense University: "India's security is inextricably linked with stability in Central Asia. The threat we face today does not stem from regular armies, but from radical, transnational ideologies that target the pluralistic fabric of our societies. India, as a large pluralistic society, and Kazakhstan, as a country with a diverse fabric and a leader in Central Asia, are successful examples of secular coexistence. Strengthening these democratic values and tolerance is our strongest line of defense against Islamic extremism and terrorism" (Mukherjee, 2006). This prioritization of secular governance as a bulwark against extremist ideologies was reinforced in a September 2, 2009, joint statement issued by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Tajik President Emomali Rahmon:

"The leaders of the two countries reaffirmed their shared commitment to global peace based on democracy, pluralism, and religious tolerance. India and Tajikistan unequivocally declare that terrorism and religious radicalism have no justification. Both sides pledge to counter, through

cultural exchanges and the strengthening of secular discourses, the extremist intellectual structures that seek to destabilize our pluralistic societies." (Singh and Rahmon, 2009).

These official pronouncements illustrate how India, throughout the post-Cold War era, deployed the discourse of secularism as a soft power tool. By framing itself as Asia's largest secular democracy and linking this status to a shared threat perception of transnational terrorism, New Delhi aligned itself with Central Asian regimes that were deeply worried about religious radicalism. This allowed India to indirectly project its governance model as an optimal regional standard without relying on hard power metrics.

The absence of direct reference to Sufism in the aforementioned statements is not a weakness in this paper's argumentation; rather, it in itself constitutes evidence of the gradualist logic underpinning India's cultural diplomacy. During the era of the "Look North" policy, India possessed neither the sufficient institutional capacity nor the coherent strategic foresight required to introduce Sufism as an independent instrument into its diplomatic apparatus. The shared legacy of Sufi networks had, of course, long been in existence; however, it had yet to be translated into the vernacular of foreign policy. Consequently, New Delhi chose to rely upon concepts that were more familiar and tangible to the elites of Central Asia—who had only recently been extricated from the Soviet orbit—namely, secularism, pluralism, and democratic governance. This phase ought to be construed as the foundational groundwork upon which Modi's later Sufi diplomacy was subsequently erected; for it was precisely during this era that the mutual threat—namely, radical political Islam—became firmly entrenched in the perceptions of the regional regimes, thereby facilitating a normative alignment between India and these countries. In other words, the "Look North" policy prepared the terrain; Sufi diplomacy in the Modi era represented an opportunity that arose organically from that very same groundwork.

At the operational level, this discourse was supported by the popularity of Bollywood cinema, state-sponsored cultural centers (such as the Lal Bahadur Shastri Centre for Indian Culture in Tashkent), the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) program, and educational scholarships provided by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) (Stobdan, 2015: 59).

2) Cultural Diplomacy Under the "Connect Central Asia Policy" (2012–Present)

Following the election of Narendra Modi and the operationalization of a more assertive regional policy, the focus on democracy and pluralism remained, but the ideational resources of Indian soft power were reframed. The Modi administration transformed Sufism from a historical, purely mystical phenomenon into an active cultural diplomatic discourse tool within India's foreign policy matrix. Because the primary security concern of post-Soviet Central Asian regimes remained the growth of radical political Islam, Indian policymakers—including Prime Minister Modi himself—began framing the shared Sufi heritage as a strategic ideological shield against extremism.

During his visit to the Naqshbandi shrine in Bukhara on July 7, 2015, Prime Minister Modi remarked:

"I began my journey to Uzbekistan by paying tribute to the shrine of one of the world's greatest Sufis, Khwaja Bahauddin Naqshband. Sufism is a deep civilizational link and a shared heritage of Transoxiana and the Indian subcontinent. The teachings of Sufism, built on peace, love, tolerance, and harmony, are the most powerful antidote and response to the dark forces of radicalism, hatred, and religious extremism in the contemporary world." (Modi, 2015).

Later that day, in an address at Nazarbayev University in Kazakhstan, Modi explicitly characterized Sufism as an Islamic heritage shared by India and Central Asia that is fundamentally opposed to violent extremism:

"The Islamic heritage of both India and Central Asia is defined by the highest ideals of Islam: knowledge, piety, compassion, and welfare. This heritage is built on love and devotion, and it has consistently rejected the forces of extremism." (Modi, 2015).

This effort to build a shared Sufi identity was not limited to bilateral meetings. During the annual summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) on September 17, 2021, Prime Minister Modi formally proposed using Sufi heritage as the foundation for a regional counter-radicalization model:

"If we look at history, we will see that the region of Central Asia has been a stronghold of moderate and progressive cultures and values. Traditions such as Sufism have flourished here over centuries... Based on this historical heritage of Central Asia, the SCO should develop a shared template to fight radicalization and extremism." (Modi, 2021).

In reality, these performative acts were not merely ceremonial; They were calculated diplomatic gestures designed to signal India's commitment to moderate Islam and served as catalyst moments for translating Sufi diplomacy into operational initiatives. The Indian government subsequently launched several practical programs designed to strengthen this shared identity framework:

- **Diplomatic Curio Diplomacy:** During his 2015 tour, Prime Minister Modi presented a specially commissioned reproduction of the *Khamsa-e-Khusrau* Uzbek President Islam Karimov (Prime Minister's Office, 2015). The selection of the Divan of Amir Khusrau—a poet whose father was born in contemporary region of Uzbekistan and who himself was raised in India—as a diplomatic gift, was not a mere ceremonial formality, but rather an astute choice aimed at redefining the boundaries of identity and reaffirming the shared civilizational roots between the two nations.
- **Institutionalizing Global Forums:** At the 2016 World Sufi Forum in New Delhi, which hosted prominent Sufi scholars and *Tariqa* leaders from Central Asia, Modi emphasized the structural compatibility between ancient Hindu philosophy and Sufism. By rejecting any intrinsic link between religion and terrorism, he positioned India as a historical custodian of the Sufi tradition: "*Just as it once came to India, today Sufism spreads from India across the entire world.*" (Ministry of External Affairs, 2016).

In this regard, it should be noted that Narendra Modi, on the one hand, sought to position India as the epicenter and normative reference point for tolerant, Sufi-oriented Islam by institutionalizing the World Sufi Forum—which had previously convened in various other

parts of the world—and relocating its central hub to India, while extending invitations to Sufi order leaders from Central Asia. This initiative assumes particular significance from a constructivist perspective, insofar as identities are consolidated and stabilized within institutional frameworks. On the other hand, through his address at this forum, Modi engaged in a discursive polarization between "Sufi Islam as an endogenous and acceptable articulation of Islam" and "radical/Wahhabi Islam (constructed as the other/threat)," thereby redefining India's identity in conjunction with the states of the region. In the same speech, Modi characterized Sufis as "hope" and "light" in an era darkened by violence and terrorism, and as "representatives of the rich diversity of Islamic civilization, built upon the solid rock of religion," while noting that none of the ninety-nine names of God signify violence, and that "the ideals of Islam have consistently repudiated the forces of terrorism and extremism" (Zafar & Anas, 2016: 3). These pronouncements can be interpreted as an endeavor to construct a new identity of Islam and to establish a shared semantic field that, rather than emphasizing sectarian differences, accentuates common mystical values in opposition to extremism. Through this discursive bridge-building between the two societies, Modi seeks to unite them into a cohesive front against the violent terrorism engendered by radicalism

Pilgrimage Tourism Infrastructures: The Indian state extended diplomatic and financial assistance for the development of the Bahauddin Naqshband complex in Bukhara, while allocating significant budgetary resources to upgrade infrastructure around major Indian Sufi shrines, such as the Ajmer Sharif Dargah (Moinuddin Chishti) and the Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya Dargah in Delhi. Concurrently, the introduction of targeted e-visas facilitated the participation of Central Asian pilgrims and religious elites in annual *Urs* festivals (Ministry of Tourism, 2018, 2024; CSEP, 2025). These initiatives are significant not only in material terms, but also establish a channel for cultural exchange between India and the regional nations, which serves to reinforce this shared identity. Furthermore, they contribute to the discursive construction of "India as the cradle and custodian of Sufism."

- **Archival Digitization and Academic Chairs:** To preserve this shared legacy, the Ministry of External Affairs, in coordination with the India International Centre (IIC) and the Khuda Bakhsh Oriental Public Library (Patna), launched a major project to digitize, preserve, and exhibit ancient Persian and Chagatai Sufi manuscripts that migrated from Transoxiana to the subcontinent. Furthermore, the ICCR established several Indo-Islamic and Indian Studies research chairs at key regional institutions, including the Tashkent State University of Oriental Studies and the Tajik National University (Indian Council for Cultural Relations, 2024; Ministry of External Affairs, 2024). In other words, through these measures, India not only fulfills its need for authoritative reference resources to consolidate its discourse, but also, beyond representing itself as the custodian of the shared heritage, institutionalizes the appeal of its intellectual model within the scientific and educational structures and institutions of these countries.

Through these interconnected discursive, operational, and institutional efforts, the Modi administration has sought to build a coherent identity framework based on Sufi heritage.

However, because the efficacy of a state's soft power depends heavily on its domestic political environment, this strategy faces several structural challenges.

6. Challenges Confronting India's Sufi Diplomacy in Central Asia

The primary strategic barriers limiting India's Sufi diplomacy in the region include:

1) The Contradiction between Domestic Politics and Foreign Policy

According to constructivist theory, international norms do not operate in a vacuum; they are consistently filtered through a state's domestic normative structures, which can radically alter their interpretation and legitimacy (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998: 893). For a state's identity projection to remain credible internationally, it must maintain a degree of "internal-external consistency."

The most significant vulnerability in India's Sufi diplomacy is the visible disconnect between its external cultural rhetoric and its domestic political trajectory. While New Delhi praises Sufism abroad as an exemplary, tolerant articulation of Islam, the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) actively derives its domestic legitimacy from *Hindutva*—a right-wing Hindu nationalist ideology.

Domestic policies such as the 2019 Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the National Register of Citizens (NRC), which explicitly exclude Muslim refugees from expedited naturalization pathways; the revocation of the semi-autonomous status of Jammu and Kashmir (India's only Muslim-majority state); anti-conversion and "Love Jihad" legislations; the extrajudicial demolition of Muslim-owned properties during public protests; the renaming of historically Indo-Islamic cities; and the reduction of the Mughal-Islamic era within official history textbooks all contrast sharply with its external messaging. This domestic record complicates efforts to build deep trust with external Muslim audiences and undercuts the credibility of India's pluralistic narrative.

2) Central Asian Apprehensions Regarding Religious Mobilization

While Central Asian regimes welcome the anti-radicalization dimensions of India's Sufi diplomacy, their highly authoritarian governance structures make them deeply suspicious of any form of independent religious mobilization. Fearing that any expansion of religious discourse into civil society could destabilize state control, these secular regimes tightly regulate all religious practices. Consequently, they are hesitant to allow external religious diplomacy to operate autonomously within their societies, limiting the societal depth of India's initiatives.

3) Asymmetric Material Resources and Geopolitical Competitors

India's soft power initiatives face structural constraints when measured against the massive material and infrastructure investments of China's Belt and Road Initiative, which limits India's overall strategic leverage. Furthermore, New Delhi faces direct competition from other regional actors—most notably Turkey—which deploys its own well-funded, pan-Turkic, and Hanafi-Sufi institutional diplomacy across Central Asia, contesting the unique space India seeks to occupy.

Conclusion

The findings of this study suggest that India's Sufi diplomacy under Prime Minister Narendra Modi operates along two parallel tracks—one discursive and the other operational. At the discursive level, the Modi administration has sought to construct a shared identity with Central Asian states by foregrounding the common values of tolerance, pluralism, and compassion embedded within the Sufi tradition, while simultaneously consolidating this collective identity by framing religious radicalism as a mutual threat. In this way, Sufism has been transformed from a historical spiritual current into a discursive instrument specifically calibrated to appeal to the secular regimes of the region. At the operational level, this strategy has materialized through a range of concrete initiatives—from pilgrimage diplomacy and the digitization of manuscripts, to the establishment of research chairs in regional universities and the institutionalization of a Global Sufi Conference in New Delhi.

This evolution marks a conceptual departure from earlier Indian foreign policy doctrines. Previous administrations also identified religious radicalism as a serious concern, but their response remained anchored in the Western-inflected vocabulary of institutional secularism and democratic governance. The Modi government, by contrast, has pivoted toward a civilizational and faith-inflected idiom—and this shift carries particular weight from a constructivist standpoint: India has deployed Sufism not as a passive historical symbol, but as an active semantic structure that redefines the "self" (India and Central Asia as heirs of moderate Islam) against the "other" (radical political Islam).

That said, the central hypothesis of this paper is only partially borne out. While India has managed to resonate with Central Asia's political elites—who are themselves deeply concerned about religious radicalism—the strategy grapples with a structural contradiction that, from a constructivist perspective, is far from incidental: the very state that waves the banner of Islamic tolerance and Sufi heritage abroad simultaneously anchors its domestic political identity in Hindu nationalism. The credibility of soft power feeds on coherence between domestic conduct and external claims; once that coherence fractures, the very discourse meant to attract becomes a source of skepticism. Moreover, competition from actors like Turkey—who are pursuing the same space with stronger institutional resources—poses another constraint, limiting the strategy's effectiveness in the deeper strata of Central Asian society, beyond the elite level. Indeed what India's experience in Central Asia reveals is that identity-based soft power is a double-edged sword. As long as there is continuity between the identity a state projects and the identity it lives, this form of power can exert deep and lasting influence. But once that continuity is ruptured, discourse shifts from being a source of attraction to one of doubt. This is a lesson worth reflecting upon—not only for India, but for any middle power seeking to convert its civilizational assets into diplomatic tools.

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