

### **AIIS and Five Centers Join for “Sufi Shrines” Workshop**

On August 1-4 2014, fourteen scholars from eight countries met near Aurangabad, Maharashtra, in a workshop sponsored by six American Overseas Research Centers (AORCs), organized and hosted by AIIS. The theme of the workshop, “The Practice, Performance, and Politics of Sufi Shrines in South Asia and Beyond,” was collaboratively conceived by four South Asian AORCs (the American Institute of Bangladesh Studies, American Institute of Pakistan Studies, and American Institute of Sri Lanka Studies, together with AIIS), and its proposal was written by Carl Ernst, noted Islamic studies scholar at UNC Chapel Hill. The Centers provided modest seed money from their Council of American Overseas Research Centers programming budgets, which was then supplemented by a generous grant from the Cultural Affairs Section of the US Embassy in Delhi, whose Cultural Counselor, David Mees, took enthusiastic interest in the workshop, eventually attending it in its entirety. In planning the workshop and inviting presenters, Prof. Ernst was assisted by two other organizing committee members, Dennis McGilvray (University of Colorado, Boulder) and Scott Kugle (Emory University). Participants included scholars from Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, as well as five South Asia specialists based in the US and Canada. A welcome comparative perspective was offered by scholars from Morocco and Senegal, whose participation was sponsored by two other AORCs, the American Institute of Maghrib Studies and the West African Research Association.

Conceived as an intimate workshop for the exchange of new research, the event was held at the small Hotel Kailas, a group of cottages set in a garden and located near the entrance to the Ellora Caves, one of India’s UNESCO World Heritage Sites, and the workshop schedule offered time for attendees to visit its extraordinary Buddhist, Hindu, and Jain rock-cut shrines created between the sixth and twelfth centuries. (As a generous gesture, the Archaeological Survey of India waived the foreigner’s admission fee for all workshop participants during the four days.) But equally important, the ridge into which these shrines are carved is topped by hundreds of Sufi tombs, hospices, and mosques that constitute Khuldabad, also known as the “valley of the saints,” for the reputedly fourteen hundred Sufis who came here in the early fourteenth century. Their shrines represent a number of spiritual lineages, but particularly document the spread of the Chishtis, India’s most influential order, into the Deccan and South. Since the history of the Khuldabad Sufis was the subject of a book by Prof. Ernst (*Eternal Garden: Mysticism, History, and Politics at a South Asian Sufi Center*, 1992), an August 3rd tour of some of its holiest shrines, guided by Ernst, was an additional highlight of the workshop. The tremendous respect and affection shown to Prof. Ernst, and, as his companions, to the whole group, by the *dargah* committees and shrine-keepers, was a striking demonstration of how much impact the work of a single foreign scholar can have on a local community on the other side of the world. The tour was followed by a late-night and high-energy *qawwali* performance in the shrine of Zaynuddin Shirazi (d. 1369 AD) by the famed Warsi Brothers Party

from Hyderabad, arranged by Prof. Kugle, who is currently conducting research on this Sufi musical genre. The fact that recent monsoon showers had turned the usually arid Deccan landscape verdant green (Islam's color of life) and made Ellora's streams and waterfalls flow, contributed to an atmosphere that, participants agreed, was not just intellectually stimulating, but aesthetically and emotionally rich.

Although several presentations invoked Sufism's rich history and multiple contributions to South Asian and African cultures, the majority had a contemporary focus and drew attention to the often contested nature of Sufi authority and sacred sites, which, despite enduring popularity and patronage, have recently come under attack both by advocates of a puritanical, "reformist Islam" and by firebrand activists of other religious traditions—such as the Bodu Bala Sena ("Buddhist Strength Army") in Sri Lanka, whose extremist monks preach hatred of Muslims and seek to demolish shrines and mosques that they claim were built on Buddhist sites. Another recurring theme was of the varied roles of women—at times, either comparatively empowered or disenfranchised—in the Islamic teaching and practice of both Sufis and their critics. A generous schedule that allotted fifty-minute blocks of time to each presenter (with 25 minutes each for presentation and then discussion) as well as ample opportunities to interact over tea and coffee breaks and family-style buffet meals, encouraged rich and stimulating exchange, and participants and organizers are now considering a possible publication of workshop-generated essays.

The AIIS thanks its collaborating AORCs and the US Embassy for their financial support, the Archeological Survey of India for its courtesy to participants, and the tomb-shrines of Burhan ud-Din Gharib and Zaynuddin Shirazi in Khuldabad for their generous hospitality. All participants expressed their warm thanks to the Director-General, Purnima Mehta, and her staff in Delhi, to Elise Auerbach at AIIS Chicago, and to Mr. Anil Inamdar of the AIIS Pune office, for excellent advance planning, assistance with visas and travel, and thoughtful arrangements for the workshop. Mrs. Surekha Shah, owner and manager of Hotel Kailas, and her staff provided good service, delicious meals, and homey and heartwarming Indian hospitality.

#### **Workshop participants and their presentation titles:**

- Golam Dastagir (University of Toronto, Canada, and Jahangirnagar University, Bangladesh), "Controversies over Forms and Practices Centered at Sufi Shrines in Bangladesh: Sifting the 'Pure' from the Traditional Folk Islamic Tradition"
- Carl W. Ernst (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, USA), "The Localization of Spirituality: Critical Themes and Issues Relating to Sufi Shrines"
- Kashshaf Ghani (Nalanda University, Bihar, India), Discussant
- Farzana Haniffa (University of Colombo, Sri Lanka), "Maintaining Difference: Varied Orientations to Religious Practices among Middle-Class Muslim Women in Urban Sri Lanka"

- Aditya Kapoor (University of Hyderabad, India), “Beyond Discourses and identities: Ambivalence, Contestation, and Accommodation in a Sufi Shrine”
- Frank Korom (Boston University, USA), Discussant
- Scott Kugle (Emory University, USA), “Spirituality of Qawwali: Lyrics and Ritual in Dargah Music”
- Penda Mbow (Université Cheikh Anta Diop, Dakar, Senegal), “The Tomb of the Saint: A Place of Pilgrimage and Commemoration for Muslims in West Africa”
- Dennis McGilvray (University of Colorado, Boulder, USA), “Daftar Jailani: A Sufi Shrine in Sri Lanka Confronting the Threat of Militant Buddhism”
- Afsar Mohammad (University of Texas, Austin, USA), “Mapping a ‘Classical’ Pilgrim Network: Urban Muslims Search for a ‘True Sufism’”
- Atia Nizami (co-written with Mumtaz Khan, Jamia Millia University, Delhi, India), “The Role of Mythologization in the Sacredscape of Ajmer Sharif: A Geographical Interpretation”
- Rukhsana Qamber and Rubina Qamber (Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad, Pakistan), “Seeking Solace at the Shrine”
- Hassan Rachik (University Hassan II, Casablanca, Morocco), “Saint Shrines, Ideology, and Public Policy in Morocco”