

Role of Sufi Saints and Poets vis-à-vis the Composite Culture of Kashmir

SHEERAZA AKHTER

PhD Research Scholar

Department of Persian,

University of Kashmir, Srinagar, J&K, India

Keywords: Sufism, Sufi, Saint, Kashmiriyat, Culture, Muslim, Pandit

Sufism is a path of spiritual advancement and an expansion of consciousness which leads to awareness of self and the universe. The practice of Sufism leads to the development of innate spiritual and intuitive abilities. Sufism is a mystic sect which appeared as a softer version of Islam and promoted the concept of religious humanism. Sufi-mysticism made great progress in Central Asia, assuming the character of a sect there. The Sufis entered Kashmir, when people were passing through a period of political volatility, casteism, hefty taxation and severe burdens of feudalism. People were divided into several castes, and treated accordingly by the self-proclaimed high-caste Brahmins. Sufism, an amalgamation of humanism, spirituality and tolerance, promoted Islam- the doctrine that there is only one God, without any caste and class system. Sufi Saints won over the hearts of Kashmiris on account of their piety and sincerity by employing methods of persuasion, humanity and discourse. The people of Kashmir started to convert to Islam under the influence of peaceful Sufis who preached the doctrine of love, compassion, humanity and an ideology where caste hierarchy, social status and financial well-being did not matter. Kashmiri Pandits and Muslims were undoubtedly brought together by the strong thread of Sufism, which served to promote a common way of understanding the world, thereby forming the cornerstone of the unique Kashmiri culture, popularly known as “*Kashmiriyat*”.

The word “*Kashmiriyat*” itself designates the pluralism and composite culture of Kashmir. In such a culture, people share a cooperative, combined, and mutual relationship. This culture transcends and blurs the boundaries of religion, caste, creed and colour. It makes the heterogeneous identities look like homogeneous. It aspires for regular interaction between people and has been a lived reality of Kashmiris belonging to different faiths and religions. Their close interaction and connection formed a culture that became a crucial part of Kashmiri ethnic identity without taking the religious affiliations into consideration. Thus the word “*Kashmiriyat*” has evolved out of the harmonized togetherness of Kashmiri Muslims and Pandits. “*Kashmiriyat*” is a term attached with deep emotions, communal harmony, hospitality, behaviours, non-violence, mutual accommodation, goodwill and love that people of Kashmir have for each other. A tradition of syncretism flourished due to the mutual efforts towards coexistence, embraced by adherents of both religions. Kashmiri Muslims and Pandits share several common customs and beliefs. For example, numerous Sufi shrines that dot the Valley are held in high devotional esteem by people from both these religious communities in large numbers. The people of Kashmir, bound together by their unique Kashmiri language, celebrate their seamless culture and collective identity, which transcends the religious boundaries, further strengthening the bedrock of exquisite bond between Kashmiri Muslims and Kashmiri Pandits. In the words of noted Kashmiri Historian, Chitrlekha Zutshi:

“The fluidity of religious boundaries and the presence of syncretic religious culture are both integral parts of Kashmiriyat .”

In Kashmir, the major Sufi orders are the *Naqshbandi*, the *Qadri*, the *Suhrawardi*, the *Kubrawi* and the *Rishis*. All except for the *Rishis*, are said to have their origins in Iran and Central Asia. The people of Kashmir refer to their land as ‘*Pir Vaer*’ or ‘*Rishi Vaer*’, meaning ‘*The Valley of Saints*’. One of the earliest known Sufis in Kashmir is said to have been from Turkistan belonging to *Suhrawardi* order in the 13th century, namely Sayyid Sharfuddin Abdur Rahman, fondly remembered as Hazrat Bulbul Shah. He is said to have made transformations in the strictly caste-ridden Brahmin dominated society of Kashmir and is believed to have arrived during the reign of King Suhadeva (1301-1320) and was the first Saint who sowed the seeds of Islam in Kashmir. Bulbul Shah was instrumental in the conversion of the Ladakhi Buddhist Prince, Rinchana, who later became famous as Sultan

Sadrudin. Bulbul Shah died in 1327 and lies buried in the first mosque in Srinagar called, Bulbul Lankar. However, his mission of spread of Islam was carried forward by his lieutenant Mulla Ahmed and other Sufis like Sayyid Jalal-ud-din of Bukhara, Sayyid Taj-ud-din, Sayyid Mas'ud and Sayyid Yusuf. Yet, the most prominent among the Sufi missionaries was Mir Sayyid Ali Hamadani who established Islam in Kashmir on a mass scale.

Mir Sayyid Ali Hamadani was the 14th century Iranian *Kubrawi* Saint, popularly known as Shah-i-Hamadan. He was a well-travelled scholar who entered Kashmir along with 700 of his disciples called *Saadaat*, who eventually settled down in various parts of Kashmir, spreading Islam and the principles of the *Kubrawi* Sufi order. Shah-i-Hamadan was a prodigious scholar, credited with having 37,000 conversions to Islam in Kashmir owing to his outstanding spiritual charisma. He is popularly remembered as '*Amir-i Kabir*' (The great leader) and '*Baani-e Musalmani*' (The founder of Islam in Kashmir). Even the great poet-philosopher, Dr Allama Muhammad Iqbal gives due credit to the splendid achievements of Shah-i-Hamadan, in his Persian work *Javednama* in these golden words:

*"Syed-us-Sadaat, Salaar-e-Ajam, Dast ou ma'maar-e-taqdeer-e-umam;
Murshid-e-aa'n Kishwar menu nazir, Mir o darwesh o salatin ra masheer;
Khitah ra aa'n shah-e darya aasteen, Daad ilm o sanat o tahzib o deen;"*

*"Shah-i-Hamadan is the leader of the leaders, Commander of the non-Arab Muslims;
His hands were the builders of the destiny of the Islamic Community;
Guide of the country known as Paradise; Advisor of the nobles, the saints and the kings,
With his inclusive approach and oceanic vision, provided us knowledge, industry,
culture and religion"*

Shah-i-Hamadan's teachings were based on the pillars of '*Tawheed*' (Oneness of God) '*Taqwa*' (God-fearing piety), '*Ikhlās*' (purity) and Unity. He took keen interest in the economy of the Kashmir Valley and introduced the arts and craft technique of Central Asia, and suggested ways and means to improve upon the irrigation system in the Valley. He urged the ruler, Sultan Qutub-ud-Din to start the shawl industry in Kashmir on the pattern of Central Asian *Karkhana* (factory), thereby improving the economic conditions of the common man and restructuring the Kashmiri society under the influence of Islam. People of Kashmir benefitted from his strategies and involvement in socio-economic activities, which helped the common man to elevate his standard of living and thereby also accepting Islam as his faith. The privileged class of the society including Sultans, Nobles and Brahmins were equally attracted to him and held him with great reverence. It is noteworthy that he employed no means of supremacy or ferocity to spread the message of Islam. Some prominent members of his team included Khwaja Ishaq Khatlani, Shaykh Qawam-ud-Din, Sayyid Hussain Simnani, Sayyid Kamal and Muhammad Kazim - all intellectuals, technicians or experts in various forms of art.

In Kashmir, the local response to Hamadani's teachings came in the form of development of an indigenous religious order, *Rishism* or *Rishi* order. Kashmiris used the Hindu epithets Rishi or Baba to describe these Sufi saints. *Rishism* was rooted within the broader Islamic tradition which stressed upon the universal values such as peace, harmony, love and fraternity between all creatures of God, irrespective of a particular religion. Owing to its inherent universal appeal, their shrines grew into popular places of pilgrimage for both Muslims and Pandits, bringing them together in common participation at shrine rituals as well as in helping to build bridges between people of different castes and faith, thereby contributing to communal harmony. Some of the festivals in Kashmir which had originated in the Hindu mythology attained a secular character and both Pandits and Muslims celebrated like the festival of river *Vitasta* (Jhelum). The King, Zain-ul-Abidin, also known as '*Bud Shah*' (Great King) used to function as a high priest on such occasions promoting a collective identity of '*Kashmiriyat*'. This further evolved as a representation of religious tolerance, with saints like Lal Ded and Nund Rishi further helping the cause by spreading the message of oneness and sowing seeds of the concept of religious humanism. The humanistic philosophy of Kashmiri Sufis and *Rishis* has played a prominent role in building the Kashmiri ethnic identity. In the words of Baba Nasibuddin Gazi, a 17th-century Sufi poet:

*"The candle of religion is lit by the Rishis, they are the pioneers of the path of belief;
The heart-warming quality of humble souls emanates from the inner purity of the hearts of the Rishis;
This vale of Kashmir, that you call a paradise, owes a lot of its charm to the traditions,
set in vogue by the Rishis"*

As times progressed, in spite of varied political leanings and conflicting attitudes to history of Kashmir, Kashmiris (Pandits and Muslims), continued to have a remarkable degree of tolerance, respect and concern for each other in day to day life. Pandits and Muslims celebrated the onset of spring by celebrating a festival called '*Badamwari*' (Almond festival) as flowers blossomed in almond gardens. In many areas Muslim '*Asthans*' (shrines) and Hindu shrines stood facing each other while people together made pilgrimages to shrines and also visited living Sufis. Kashmiri Pandits and Muslims, together attended gatherings where Kashmiri Sufi poetry was sung at the abodes of living Sufis.

The origin of the *Rishi* order goes back to pre-Islamic times, when during Vedic period, hermits renouncing the worldly pleasures retired to caves in forests and mountains to meditate there, subjecting themselves to extreme hardships and severities. However, in Kashmir the *Muslim Rishi movement* was started by Sheikh Nuruddin Nurani, by moulding the pre-existing *Rishi* tradition for the spread of Islam, using local institutions to make Islam more comprehensible to the people of Kashmir. The Hindu followers commonly remember him as *Nund Rishi* or *Sahazanand* (The blissful one). Nund Rishi's teachings can be described as thoughtful, critiquing the society and his loyalty was with the Kashmiri peasantry, the poor lot and his Kashmiri poetic verses '*Shruks*' (shlokas) consistently attacked the caste system prevalent in the contemporary society. He attached importance to yogic practice and breath control for communion with God. He preached a disciplined life as is evident from his poetry '*Shruks*':

*“Desire is like the knotted wood of the forest,
It cannot be made into planks, beams or into cradles;
He who cut and tilled it,
will burn it into ashes”*

*“Do not go to Sheikh and Priest and Mullah;
Do not shut yourself up in mosques or forests;
Enter your own body with breath
controlled in communion with God”*

Sheikh Nuruddin Nurani, was a great saint of Kashmir who has left an everlasting imprint on the nature and consciousness of Kashmiris. He lived in Kashmir during the period between 1378 AD to 1438 AD. His *Rishinama* or *Nurnama* were written about two hundred years after his passing away. Mir Mohammed Hamdani recognized Nuruddin as the light of faith. He was revered by Hindus as also the Muslims. He stressed the need for unity among the two communities. In this regard, the noted historian G. N. Gowhar writes:

“The Sheikh's spiritual eminence and his humanistic philosophy made him idol of the people of Kashmir. They flocked around him and some of them modeled their very lives on his pattern. These people, who later came to be known as Rishis, were of great help and assistance to him in the stupendous task that he had undertaken”.

Unlike the saints of mainland India, instead of criticizing Hinduism or Islam, Nund Rishi affirmed his relations with both the Holy Quran and Hindu-Buddhist thoughts, promoting the universal language of love and taught how people of different faiths could live together without any faith-based conflict. Nund Rishi was greatly influenced by a female rebel Saint- Lal Ded or Laleshwari or Lalla Arifa. Lal Ded was a 14th century revolutionary woman mystic of Kashmir, who proved to be the significant historical bridge that connected Kashmir's Hindu and Muslim communities. She revolted against all the oppressive edifices, right from secondary dependent status allotted to women to the educated elite of Sanskrit academia who were the custodians of knowledge and tradition and instead articulated the spiritual path and message in Kashmiri, the language of a common man irrespective of caste, creed or individual belief system. She got immortalized through her Kashmiri poetic verses, referred to as '*Lal-Vaakh*':

*“Oh! fool, right action does not lie in fasting and other ceremonial rites;
Oh! fool, right action does not lie in providing for bodily comfort and ease;
In contemplation of the self alone, is the right action and right council for you”.*

Lal Ded's reputation has become that of a saint who challenged the status quo, and spoke openly against the stagnation and dogma of the prevailing rituals and doctrines of the times. She used Kashmiri language to spread the message of brotherhood through her sayings 'Lal-Vaakh', which makes her the undisputed founder of contemporary Kashmiri literature. This is evident from one of the stanza of the sayings of Nund Rishi about Lal Ded:

*"That Lalla of Padmanpore, who had drunk to her fill the Divine nectar;
She was indeed an avatar of ours; Oh God! Grant me the same spiritual power"*.

In fact, Lal Ded is witness to the traditional communal harmony that existed in Kashmir amid the peaceful coexistence of Muslims, Kashmiri Pandits (Hindus) and other minorities. The Kashmiri society evolved to be more open to various beliefs, under the influence of Islamic Sufis and Saints of the Rishi order. Lal Ded urged the people of all communities to rise above caste, creed and color and then see the light. She is supposed to be a bridge between Hindu mysticism and Sufism. It can also be said that her background as a Hindu and her love for Sufism fused together to form her philosophy of brotherhood between the two communities. It is evident from her *Vaakhs* that how she preached the unity among the two communities. She talked about the unity of two communities in her *Vaakhs* as she earnestly remarks:

*"Shiv chhuey thalli thalli rozaan,
mo zaan Hindu ta Musalman;
truk hay chhuk te paan panun parzanav,
soyy chhay Sahibas sati zaniy zaan"*

*"God is Omnipresent and abides everywhere,
then do not discriminate between a Hindu and a Muslim;
If you are wise, then seek Him (God) within yourself,
That is the true knowledge of the Lord"*

Lal Ded's poetry reflects her secular attitude and religious tolerance. This outlook made her very popular among both Hindus and Muslims equally. She eschewed categorizing herself with any sect or religion. She emphasizes on unity, cooperation, tolerance, and pleads for eliminating all the religious differences and hatred in the world. Though she herself seems to have been a Shaivite for most of her life, according to historical accounts she finally became the disciple of a renowned Sufi and converted to Islam. In fact, she has been referred to as a great gnostic and ecstatic by medieval Kashmiri Muslim writers. She brought together the two communities by bringing them into the fold of a common language which inherited the features and values of both the cultures of Kashmir. Her role as the maker of Kashmiri- both language and literature- can well be illustrated from the language of her *Vaakhs*. Her philosophy was a synthesis of mystical Shaivism and Sufism, which went straight to the hearts of the masses as she became Lalla Arifa for Muslims and Lalleshwari for Hindus and beloved Lal Ded for all.

Today, while we live in a multi-cultural, multi-religious and multi-ethnic yet globalized world, where the threat of conflicts and wars is always hanging like a sword of Damocles, the need to rediscover the message of Kashmir's composite Sufi culture becomes all the more important. As such, one can safely argue that the unique tradition of composite culture in Kashmir with its proclamation of love, tolerance and communal harmony among human beings, as well as the emphasis of Islam itself for tolerance and appreciation of other religious traditions, make such a dialogue possible. In this context, the significance of the much-needed inter-religious, inter-caste and inter-cultural dialogue can be put in the words of Sheikh Nuruddin Nurani as:

*"The true lover is he who burns in the fire of love
and emerges like a piece of gold;
He alone can travel in the Infinite,
who is afflicted by the pain of Love."*

In the words of another great Kashmiri Poet, Peerzada Ghulam Ahmad Mahjoor, who created a great vision of peace and harmony among diverse communities, in the following verses:

*“Walo ha baagwano navbaharuk shaan payda kar,
Phollan gull gath karan bulbul, tithee samaan payda kar”*

*“Come O Gardener! Create an aura of a new spring consciousness,
Where multi-colored flowers will blossom and bulbul will dance in unison”*

To conclude, let us listen to the eternal message of the Kashmiri Poet Mahjoor, who, while recalling the unity in diversity of our nation, still beckons us to preserve the composite Sufi culture of Kashmir in these memorable words:

*“Hyend rattan naav, khuur waayan ahl-e-Deen,
Naav yemmi Mulkech chalavow paane waen”*

*“The Hindus shall provide direction to the boat, and the Muslims shall row it;
We shall together steer the boat of our Nation to its desired destination!”*

REFERENCES

1. Ahmad, Mir Shabir. *The History of Kashmiri Literature*. Vol.1. Srinagar: Gulshan Books, 2011
2. Allama Iqbal- *Persian Collection Javednama- Amire Kabir*
3. Bilaal Ahmad Hijazee, Abu Haabeel; *English Translation of Kashmiri and Persian verses*
4. Gowhar, G. N. “Sheikh Nuruddin Noorani and his Nurnama”. Web source.
5. Grierson, George and Lionell D. Barnett. *Lalla Vakyani or The Wise Sayings of Lal Ded: A Mystic Poetess of Ancient Kashmir*. London: The Royal Asiatic Society, 1920
6. Kachru, B.B. “A History of Kashmiri Literature.” *Kashmir and Its People. Studies in the Evolution of Kashmiri Society*. Ed. M.K Kaw. New Delhi: A.P.H. Publishing Corporation, 2004
7. Kak, Jaishree. *Mystic Verses of Lalla: A Journey of Self-Realization*. Delhi: Motilal Banarasidas, 2007
8. Khan, Mohammad Ishaq; *Biographical Dictionary of Sufism in South Asia*. New Delhi: Manohar Publishers and Distributors, 2009
9. Kuszewska, Agnieszka. “Lal Ded: Kashmiri Rebel Saint-Poetess and her Legacy.” *Pakistan Vision*.
10. Madan, T.N. *Non-Renunciation: Themes and Interpretations of Hindu Culture*. New York: Oxford UP, 1987
11. Mahjoor, Peerzada Ghulam Ahmad – the Poet of Kashmir- Web source.
12. Parimoo, B.N. *The Ascent of Self: A Reinterpretation of the Mystical Poetry of Lalla-Ded*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2013
13. Temple, R. C. *The Word of Lalla, the Prophetess*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1924
14. Toshkhani, S.S, ed. *Lal Ded: The Great Kashmiri Saint-poetess*. New Delhi: A.P.H. Publishing Corporation, 2000
15. Zutshi, Chitralekha. *Languages of Belonging: Islam Regional, and Making of Kashmir*. New York: Oxford UP, 2004