

# Sufism in South Asia: Tracing the Role of Sufi Missionaries in the Islamization of Kashmir.

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## Abstract:

*Sufism is derived from the Arabic word “Suf” which means “wool”, refer to the garments worn by early Sufis. The Sufis trace the roots of mysticism or Tasawwuf to the life of Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H). They believe that Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H) himself led a life of poverty and asceticism. The history of evolution of mystic ideas can be studied into two periods, from the earliest times to the beginning of the ninth century; Sufism was merely tendentious and possessed no system. After ninth century it developed metaphysical systems and monastic orders. From the eleventh century Sufis were organized into Silsilas. Although they differed from each other in their devotional and ascetic practices, they agreed in the fundamentals of Islam. Thus, the Sufis do not constitute a separate sect, but can be found within both the Sunni and Shia sects of Islam. When the Saiyyids penetrated in Kashmir, they brought along with them some Sufi orders also. This paper is an endeavour highlight the role of these Sufis in the spread of Islam in Kashmir.*

**Key words:** Bulbul Shah, Saiyyid Ali Hamdani, Mir Muhammad Hamdani, Sultan Shah Mir, Sultan Qutbud-Din, Sultan Sikander.

## Introduction:

Sufism, according to the *Dabistan-i Mazahib*, belongs to all religions and its adherents are known under different names among the Hindus, Persians and Arabians.<sup>1</sup> But S.A.A Rizvi says that it represents the esoteric or inward side of Islam and has been described as the mystical dimension of Islam.<sup>2</sup> The term Sufism has been discussed by several scholars. These scholars have forwarded different opinions on the derivation of the word Sufi. Some declare its derivation from *suf* (wool), one who wears a woolen garment. Others assert that it is because the Sufis claim to belong to the *Ashab-i Suffa* (people of the bench), with whom may God be well-pleased.<sup>3</sup> Some assert that the name is derived from *safa* (purity) and this derivation is praised universally. These explanations of the Sufism did not satisfy the requirements of etymology, although each of them is supported by many subtle arguments.<sup>4</sup>

Kashmir, especially the valley is generally known as “*pir-vaer*” that is the land of *pirs*. It is unique not only for its natural beauty but for the fact that it had remained the seat of Buddhist, Hindu and Islamic culture over the last thirty centuries. Besides three major religions, Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam, many other cults that worshipped natural forces were also present in Kashmir.<sup>5</sup>

Sufism reached Kashmir almost simultaneously with the foundation of Muslim rule in Kashmir (1320). This does not mean that before the arrival of Sufis, Muslims were absent in Kashmir. From 8th century AD we find presence of Muslims there.<sup>6</sup> However, after the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Hinduism started to fade off. Afterwards, Islam had made inroads into the land locked territory. The religious class of the Muslims was composed of a number of groups who differed with one another because of their different approaches to religion and the way of life. These groups were the Ulama, Sayyid's, Sufis including the Rishis. Muslim adventures had trickled in and were employed in their armies by local Hindu rulers.

During the 11th and 12th centuries we find rulers of Kashmir Harsha (1089-1101)<sup>7</sup>, and Bhiksachara (1120-28)<sup>8</sup> employing Muslim soldiers in their army and their successors followed the footsteps of predecessors. Marco Polo, the Venetian traveler remarks towards the end of 13th century that colony of Muslims was present in Kashmir. He further remarks " people of the province do not kill animals nor spill blood ,if they want to eat meat they get Saracenes (Muslims) who dwell among them to play the butcher."<sup>9</sup> The question arises who acted butcher before Saracens, the answer would be local group performed this task. Therefore, it is enough to say probably the entire section of local butchers had embraced Islam by the end of 13th century.

Saiyyid Sharaf-al-Din (popularly called Bulbul Shah) was the first Sufi, who entered Kashmir during the reign of Suha-Deva (1301-1320).<sup>10</sup> Saiyyid Sharaf-al-Din Turkistani was a disciple of Shah Nimatullah Farsi who belonged to *Suhrawardi* order of Sufi's<sup>1</sup>. Bulbul Shah introduced *Suhrawardi* order there, his most important contribution is that he converted Rinchina (1320-1323), the Buddhist ruler of Kashmir to Islam, but there is controversy among scholars regarding his conversion.<sup>11</sup> According to Jonaraja, Rinchina begged Brahman Devaswami to initiate him into Hinduism but he refused.<sup>12</sup> According to popular version, Rinchina accepted Islam because of Divine grace. After holding discussion with Hindus and Buddhists he finally decided to accepted religion of that person whom he should see first in the morning; the person was Syed Sharaf-ud-Din.<sup>13</sup>

With the conversion of the ruler, Islam now not only received political patronage, but also became a reference group culture "a status improving way of life". Therefore his conversion was followed by a large number of people including his Hindu Prime Minister Ravan Chandra.<sup>14</sup> When Bulbul Shah died in 1326, in order to pay him tribute Rinchina constructed a *Khankah* (first known *khankhah*) after his name in the area presently known as Bulbul Langar. The speed at which the Islam spread could not last long because throne again passed into the hands of Hindu ruler Udayanadeva(1323-39) but he proved himself as incompetent and unworthy ruler. In 1313, Shah Mir who was the descendent of the rulers of Swat arrived in Kashmir and entered into the service of Suhadeva. With the passage of time by his ability and tact which he showed during the foreign invasion of Zulqadar and Uchala, he became so prominent that Jonaraja called him "a lion among men".<sup>15</sup>

Shah Mir's accession to throne after the death of Udayanadeva without any resistance speaks volumes about disillusionment of Kashmiri people with their leadership. Sultan Sham-sud-Din (1339-1343) and his successor Alaud-Din (1343-1354) did not pay much attention towards the spread of Islam, as they were interested in consolidating their political authority for which they entered into matrimonial relations with Hindu nobility.<sup>16</sup> The reign of Sultan Shihab-ud-Din (1354-73) is marked by the arrival of four *Kubravi* Sufi's — Saiyyid Hussain Simnani, Saiyyid Tajal-Din, Saiyyid Hassan Bahadur and Saiyyid Haider. Sultan received them warmly and made arrangements for their maintenance. These Saiyyid's were sent by Mir Saiyyid Ali Hamdani to examine whether the conditions were in favor of their mission or not.<sup>17</sup> After taking their abode at different places, Tajal-Din and Hassan in capital city, Hussain Samnani and Haider in Kulgam, they put forward their noble mission.

During the reign of Sultan Qutub-ud-Din (1373–1389) Mir Sayyid Ali Hamdani, the great Sufi, entered Kashmir along with 700 Sayyids. Mir Saiyyid Ali Hamdani was born at Hamdan on 22 October 1314, he is known in Kashmir by various titles as Amir Kabir, Shah-i-Hamdan, Bani-e-Islam. He was an erudite scholar, prolific writer and widely travelled missionary.<sup>18</sup> Sultan Qutub-ud-Din received Mir Sayyid warmly and he took up his residence at Alau-Dinpora, in Srinagar. As a *Kubravi* Sufi he initiated the mission by bringing all his energies to bear upon the ruler as a symbol of Islamic life. It was a sign of Sayyid Ali's success that Sultan Qutub-din divorced both the (sisters) later younger sister was remarried to Sultan.<sup>19</sup> No doubt, emphasis on the Islamisation of royal family as a pre-requisite for Islamizing the people was an important *modus operandi*, but Sultan Qutub-Din was not able to implement *Sharia*, because majority of subjects were non-Muslims. It was due to this policy of Sultan that Saiyyid Ali left Kashmir via Baramullah, with intention of performing pilgrimage. On reaching Kunar he died, his body was carried to Khuttalan and was buried there on 14 July 1385.<sup>20</sup>

One Anecdote reveals that Sayyid Ali resorted to miracles in order to obtain converts. It is confirmed by the fact that when Brahman of Kali Mandir became convinced of Sayyid Ali's superiority, he along with his followers accepted Islam.<sup>21</sup> Sayyid Ali Hamdani by his learning, piety and devotion is said to have made 37000, converts to Islam thus practically established Islam in Kashmir. Mir Sayyid concentrated first on rulers and people of cities because, he had belief that cities act as catalyst of social change and common people imitate the culture of rulers. Prof. Ishaq Khan argues that the activities of Mir Sayyid Ali remained confined to royal circles and cities, as he had not established any mass contacts.<sup>22</sup> This argument of Ishaq Khan is contested by Walter Lawrence, who remarks that considering the small size of the valley, even an extreme village can be visited in a day's (horse) ride.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, it was not difficult for Sayyid to whom travel and preach was God's command.

The impression that conversion of masses require the teaching of esoteric and exoteric version of Islam contrasts with the fact that conversion required practical demonstration of difference between what the masses were made to believe in—inequality, caste rigidities, social evils and what the new religion was all about—equality, justice, freedom from the social evils. Therefore Saiyyid Ali who preferred rags to

riches preached against social evils, ill treatment towards parents, wives, children's, servants, slaves, championed for the cause of poor and crusaded to build a just society.<sup>24</sup>

The son of Mir Sayyid Ali Hamdani, Mir Mohammad Hamdani arrived Kashmir in 1393 along with 300 Syeds. Sultan Sikandar in earlier years of his reign showed signs of tolerance towards officials such as Suha Bhatta, Lad Raja, Shankara. It was on account of his persuasive teachings Sultan Sikandar (1389-1413) adopted an orthodox Islamic policy. On one hand the selling of wine, dancing of woman, music, sati were prohibited, Jaziya was imposed on non-Muslims for the first time, temples of Martand, Chakraphrit, Vijabror all in Anantnag were demolished.<sup>25</sup> On the other hand Islamic institutions such as madrasas, legal schools, fatwa organizations, mosques and *khanqas* were built.

Jonaraja penned down the role of Mir Mohammad Hamdani in Islamizing Kashmir in following words: "It was perhaps owing to the sins of subjects that the king had fondness for Yavanas, even as a boy has a fondness for mud. Many Yavanas, left other sovereigns and took shelter under this king who renowned for charity, and even as bees leave the flowers and settle on elephants. As the bright moon is among the stars, so was Mohammad Hamdani of Mera country among these Yavanas; and although he was a boy he became their chief of learning. The sultan waited him daily, humble as a servant, and like a student he daily took lessons from him. He placed Mohammad Hamdani before him and was attentive to him like a slave. As the wind destroys the trees, and locusts the shali crop so did the Yavanas destroy the usages of Kashmir".<sup>26</sup>

In fact the zeal of preachers looks simply pale before the zeal of converts won by these missionaries. Saif-ud-Din in this regard is the indicative figure. However, the vital success which Mir Mohammad Hamdani achieved was that he won many nobles to Islam, the most important being Suhabhatta (now Saif-ud-Din), the prime Minister of Sultan Sikander. According to Jonaraja Suhabhatta who disregarded the acts enjoined by the *Sastras* and was instructed by Mlechas, instigated the king to break down the images gods.<sup>27</sup> During the reign of Ali Shah (1413-20) Saif-ud-Din became the virtual ruler, he imposed jaziya upon Brahmans, forbade ceremonies during the new moon, reviled the *Sastras* and left no option for Brahmans to flee from the country.

There is evidence that many Brahmans gave up their religion to obtain favor of king. Prior to Sufi's the Brahmans were the main beneficiaries enjoying economic privileges through *Agraharas*, immunity from taxation, punishments and forced labor, non-escheatment of their properties even after dying heirless. But the presence of Sufis led gradual decline in their authority in political, social and economic fields. Masses deserting their own religion and opting another assumes social and economic dimensions. They not only desire to come out from the shackles of caste rigidities, but also from economic repressions. There is evidence that the ruler Tarapida (721-725) derived pleasure in oppressing subjects.<sup>28</sup> Jayapida (753-782) employed every means to plunder cultivators share through tyrannical exactions.<sup>29</sup> During Parthas reign (906-21) when famine took a heavy toll of life, his officials were busy in amassing wealth by selling grains at the rate of 1000 *dinars* for one khari to people, Kalhana calls him —wicked parthala.<sup>30</sup> The policy of rulers

continued under Harsha and his successors which show that subjects were oppressed each and every time so they always look at the alternative which would free them from the shackles of oppression and repression- which they saw in the form of Islam.

The tradition of mixing with the rulers and taking part in political affairs was established by early *Suhrawardi* and *kubrawi* saints.<sup>31</sup> They had a belief by associating themselves with royal courts, they could change the outlook of rulers. *Sufis* were not only appointed to religious positions such as *qazi* and *shaikul-islam* but also occupy high posts in administration, served as ambassadors and establish matrimonial relations with nobles. The influence of *Sufis* on administration was because; on many occasions defeated princes and nobles approached them for their blessings.<sup>32</sup> They established *Khanqahs* and *Madrassaa* which helped in dissemination of Islamic spiritual and intellectual values.<sup>33</sup>

*Sufis* especially Mir Syed Ali Hamdani whom Iqbal calls the maker of minor Iran, brought all arts and crafts in Kashmir. These *Sufis* were not only preachers, but also well versed in many arts and crafts which resulted into carpet weaving, shawl weaving, paper Mache etc. Agriculture oriented economy shifted to market oriented economy. In this way *Sufis* served humanity and helped local economy to grow substantially.

#### Conclusion

To conclude we may say that the people of Kashmir were predominantly non-Muslims before the turn of the fourteenth century. On one hand in Society Brahmins occupied important administrative offices, revenue grants. While on the other hand masses were exploited both socially as well as economically, a factor which offered opportunity for Islam to act as a great riddance. In Kashmir Islam came not as a result of conquest, as in India but through traders, soldiers and *Sufis*. In fact Islamization of Kashmir had already dawned before the arrival of *Sufis* their presence stimulated the process. The *Sufis* preach an ideology where differences based on caste hierarchy, purity, pollution mattered least.

#### Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> Anonymous, *Dabistan-i Mazahib*, Eng.tr. David Shea and Anthony Troyer, Paris, 1843, p.clviii

<sup>2</sup> Syed Athar Abbas Rizvi, *A History of Sufism in India*, vol. I, New Delhi, 1978, p. 18 ; See also Martin Lings, *What is Sufism*, Suhail Academy Lahore, Pakistan, 1983, 1999, 2005, p. 15

<sup>3</sup> Ali Bin Usman Al-Hujwiri (R.A), *The Kashfal-Mahjub*, tr. R.A Nicholson, 1911, Zia-ul-Quran Publications, Lahore, ed. 2001, p. 101

<sup>4</sup> *The Kashfal-Mahjub*, p. 101 ; *Dabistan*, vol. III, p.220

<sup>5</sup> Khalid Basher Ahmad, *Kashmir Exposing The Myth Behind The Narrative*, Sage Publishers, New Delhi, 2017, pp. xiii-xiv

<sup>6</sup> Ali bin Hamid Kufi, *Chachnamah*, Eng. tran. Mirza Kalichbeg Fredunbeg, rep. Idarh-i-Adabiyat, Delhi, 1979, p.160

<sup>7</sup> P.N.K. Bamzai, *History of Kashmir (Political-Social-Cultural)*, Brama Vira Gupta Publishers, Delhi, 1962, p.143

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, p.149

<sup>9</sup> H.Yule, *Travels of Morcopolo*, Cf. A .Q. Rafiqi, *Sufism in Kashmir*, Bhartiya Publishing House, Varanasi, 2009, p.3



- <sup>10</sup> G.M.D. Sofi, *Islamic Culture in Kashmir*, rep. 2007, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2013, p.43
- <sup>11</sup> Anonymous, *Baharistan-i-Shahi*, Eng.tr. K.N.Pandit, Calcutta, India.1991, p.22
- <sup>12</sup> Jonaraja, *Rajatarangni*, Eng. tr.J.C.Dutt, Vol.III, under title *Kings of Kashmira*, 1898, p.30
- <sup>13</sup> Anonymous, *Baharistan-i-Shahi*, Eng.tr.K.N.Pandit, Calcutta, India, 1991, p.22
- <sup>14</sup> *Baharistan-i-Shahi*, f.7b ,Cf.Mohammad Asshraf Wani, *Islam in Kashmir*, p.64
- <sup>15</sup> Jonaraja, *Rajatarangni*, Eng.tr.J.C.Dutt, Vol. III, 1898, p.34
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 35
- <sup>17</sup> Sayyid Ali, *Tarakhi-Sayyid Ali*, Eng.tr.Zubida Jan, Jay Kay Book Shop, Srinagar.2009, pp.28-29.
- <sup>18</sup> A.Q. Rafiqi , *Sufism in Kashmir*, pp.31-34
- <sup>19</sup> *Baharistani-Shahi*, p.35
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, p.40
- <sup>21</sup> *Tarikhi-Hassan*, p.15, Cf. *Sufism in Kashmir*, p.37.
- <sup>22</sup> Mohammad Ishaq Khan, *Kashmir's Transition to Islam* ,Monohar Publishers, 1994, pp.67-68
- <sup>23</sup> Walter Lawrence, *The Valley of Kashmir*, Henry press Warehouse, London 1895, pp.2-6.
- <sup>24</sup> Mir Sayyid Ali, *Dakhiratul-Mulk*, Urdu tr. Delhi, p.130
- <sup>25</sup> Jonaraja, *Rajatarangni*, Eng.tr.J.C.Dutt, Vol. III, p.54.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, p.52.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, p.54
- <sup>28</sup> Kalhana,,*Rajatarangni*, Eng.tr.Dutt, Vol.I, low price publication ,Delhi.first pub.1879, Reprinted 1990 p.67.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, p. 98.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, p.135.
- <sup>31</sup> Shihabuddin Suhrawardi had dedicated two of his works to Caliph Al-Nasir (1180-1255), Cf. *Encyclopedia of Islam*, Vol. IV, p. 506
- <sup>32</sup> Jonaraja, *Rajtatangini*, p. 67
- <sup>33</sup> Srivara, *Rajtarangini*, pp. 334-335