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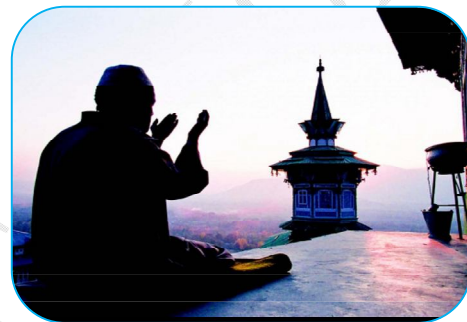
SUFISM AND RISHISM: MARKERS OF KASHMIRI IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT:

Sufi tradition is an important manifestation of Kashmiri identity. Sufis spread message of Islam in Kashmir, which later on shaped the identity of people in Kashmir, using the native idioms. Rishi tradition is an important manifestation of Kashmiri identity. The Rishis spread the message of Islam in Kashmir by using the native idioms. Rishism made unprecedented gains in its founder's quest for union of faiths in Kashmir. The Rishis enjoyed a distinguished position in the traditional Kashmiri society. The individual conversions and certain cases of group conversions accelerated the process of Islamic acculturation of the commoners. The popular belief of the commoners in the Rishis spiritual powers or efficacy in holiness should not be misconstrued as an important factor in their gradual conversion to Islam. Conversion to Islam, by the Rishis, meant a relative advance in the social status of people. The Rishis were able to promote a fresh understanding of Islamic teachings in a different cultural milieu.



KEYWORDS: Sufism, Rishism, Kashmir, Islam, Identity, Culture

INTRODUCTION

The roots of Syncretic tradition in Kashmir can be traced back mainly to the Sufi- Rishi traditions, though there are some traces of inter- religious interactions and influences even in the early history of Kashmir. Hinduism and Buddhism- two major religions of the early history of Kashmir had significant influence on the life of the people. The arrival of Islam, in Kashmir, however, added a new dimension to the life of the people. It is important to note that Islam did not destroy the old religions of the land-

Hinduism and Buddhism. It interacted, influenced, amalgated and became the part of the old culture, civilization and belief and in such a manner that it did not appear as alien but part and parcel of the life of the people. It provided a new identity which was neither alien neither exclusive nor reducible to merely to one only. The arrival and spread of Islam in Kashmir made many significant marks. It provided an alternative to the rigidity of Brahmanical Hinduism and its enslaving boundaries. It not only influenced their faith system but

also had influence on their life in many different ways. The Hindus began to adopt Muslim manners and dress. The caste system which had been earlier weakened by Buddhism became more lax under the influence of Islam. Even the Brahmans did not remain unaffected. In order to retain their government jobs, they began to study Persian and composed hymns and prayers in this language. The Islamic influence on the society can also be found in the teachings of Lalleshwari popularly known as Lal Ded or Lala Arifa. She preached that love and sincerity

were the ore of religion and emphasizes the essentials of all religions. She advocated mutual love and respect between high and low and Hindus and Muslims.

Muslims did not remain completely uninfluenced by Hinduism. The Hindus who embrace Islam did not make complete break with the past. They clung to their old beliefs and practices. While celebrating Eid-ul-Fitr and Eid-Oul-Azha, they also continued participating in the Hindu festivals of Ganga, Chaikra, Chaitra, Vith Truwah and Scripanchmi. They also continued to visit places of Hindu worship. Their faith in some of their old superstitions remained unshaken. The converts were also not prepared to give up their old caste prejudices completely, particularly regarding marriage. The continuing practices added the dimensions of interculturalism which also became the defining feature of Kashmiri identity.

Sufi-Rishi Tradition and Kashmiri Identity

Islam did not come to Kashmir as a revolt against or as a destroyer of established tradition as is the case in any other parts of the country, but as a preserver, consolidator and perpetuator of the tradition. The fact that Islam is rooted in the Kashmiri tradition and the Kashmiri tradition is permeated with the Islamic tradition has enabled Kashmiri Muslims, who constitute 95 per cent of the population of the Kashmir Valley, to reconcile cosmopolitan Islamic affiliations with territorial patriotism. Islam did not cause abysmal destruction to ancient Kashmiri culture but guided the course of its development in such a manner that it eventually emerged out of the narrow waters of Brahmanism into the broad sea of Islamic humanism.

The experience of Islam in the valley of Kashmir should not be judged through the lens of political regimes of the time, their patronage and promotion of Islam in the region. Though the patronage of the state plays important role in the expansion of religion or language as certain identities could be privileged over the other in the treatment by the state. However, it cannot be very enduring unless it commands respect and reverence by the people at large. At the heat of the acceptance and expansion of Islam in Kashmir could be attributed to the unique experience of Sufi and Rishi tradition in the region.

Sufi tradition is an important manifestation of Kashmiri identity. Sufis spread message of Islam in Kashmir, which later on shaped the identity of people in Kashmir, using the native idioms. Syed Ali Hamadani played an active role in spreading the message of Islam in Kashmir and is popularly known as the marker of Kashmiri identity. Syed Ali Hamadani was not traditional religious preacher who confined himself to the pulpit. He was a great scholar, a great reformer and a revolutionary. He had his hand on the pulse of the situation as it obtained in Kashmir during that period. He was a great missionary and it was because of his zeal that people in hordes embraced Islam and almost entire society got changed. His teachings go a long way in promoting humanism and creating a just society.

Deeply imbued with the Sufism of the age and country from which they emigrated, the Syed's and their followers stimulated the tendency to mysticism for which Buddhism and Vedantism had already paved the way. These Syed's naturally influenced the more pronounced mystics of Kashmir, who as the well-known Rishis or Babas or hermits, considerably furthered the spread of Islam by their extreme piety and utter self-abnegation. Saints and Rishis like Sheikh Noor-ud-Din, Baba Paim-ud-Din Reshi, Baba Bam-ud-Din, Sheikh Hamza Makhdoomi, Syed Ahmad Kirmani and Baba Zain-ud-Din, by their example and precept, smoothed the path of Islam in its slow, steady and systematic conversion of the whole Kashmir valley. Noor-ud-Din Noorani is regarded as the national saint of Kashmir. He is popularly known as Sheikh-ul-Alam, Alamdar-i-Kashmir. His pervasive mystical poetry was one of the finest and systematic expositions of the Tauhidic weltanschauung at the level of regional manifestation. One of the remarkable contribution of Noor-ud-Din Noorani's role as a Sufi reformer is that in spite of being an apostle of Hindu-Muslim unity, he did not fail to visualize the rise of Islam being swamped by the ancient religion of Kashmiris and took special care to urge them to mould their personal life in accordance with the Shariah. In fact Noor-ud-Din Noorani's poetry served as a spiritual guide to the personal ethics of the Shariah of Kashmiris. Its rejection of renunciation in the characteristic style of a Sufi reformer was aimed at imparting dynamism to his order which was closest to the tradition going

back to the sober Junaid-i-Baghdadi and the later exponent of the Wahdal-ul-Shuhud, Ala Al- Dawal Simnani

In fact Islam metamorphosed Kashmiri society and the comity of nations gave Kashmir an identity of its own. This identity is projected as or Kashmiriyat. It emerged as syncreticism of Sufism and Shaivism. The Muslim Sufis and divines like Shah Mir, Syed Abdul Rehman Sharaf-ud-Din also known as Bulbul Shah Spread in the valley of Kashmir the message of peace as preached by Islam. Sheikh Noor ud-Din Noorani founded the order of Rishis which strengthened the roots of tolerance and secularism. The conversion of thousands of Kashmiris through arguments, persuasion and by impeccable rectitude fostered the forces of secularism, and tolerance, bringing about in the process a synthesis of cultures and religions. The Rishi movement was not confined to change of faith of people only but it turned to be all embracing movement bringing within its fold every aspect of life. It also bred local missionaries. The indigenous Rishi Movement drew its name from a local word Reshi used for pious. Sheikh-ul-Alam Sheikh Noor-ud-Din Wali who had accepted Islam at the hands of Syed Hussain Simnani and adopted the name of Sheikh Salar was the founder of the Rishi movement. During the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, Islam became the religion of the great majority of rural Kashmir through Rishis. The message of love and tolerance came to be recognized as another major icon of Kashmiri identity.¹

Rishism as Marker of Kashmiri Identity

Rishi tradition is an important manifestation of Kashmiri identity. The Rishis spread the message of Islam in Kashmir by using the native idioms. Sheikh Noor-ud-Din Noorani popularly known as Nund Rishi is the first important saint of the Reshi order followed by other Rishis like Baba Bam Din Reshi, Sheikh Zain-ul-Din Rishi, Baba Lateef-ud-Din Reshi, Baba Nasar-u-Din Rishi, Baba Qaim-ud-Din Rishi and Baba Payam-ud-Din Rishi. Hundreds of saints received training under Nund Rishi and were known as Rishis. The teachings of Sheikh Noor-ud-Din rendered in poetry are known as Shrukhs. It was through these quadrants that he very successfully explained the teachings of Islam to illiterate folks. In a subtle way he communicated the teachings of Quran and Sunnah through his poetry. In the spirit of Islam and true to Kashmir personality humanism is the predominant current in the Rishi tradition. As an ardent Rishi, Nund Reshi stressed that a true Rishi must actively intervene in the world, taking the side of the poor and the oppressed and crusading for social justice, based on the recognition of the equality of all human beings in the eyes of the one god. Under Nund Reshi and his deputies (Khulafa), Rishism emerged as a powerful social movement, bitterly critiquing the oppression of the Brahmans and of the Ulama attached to the royal court. Nund Rishi's poetic compositions, replete and motifs based on the everyday life of the toiling people, his denunciation of meaningless ritualism and his scathing attack of social elites attracted larger number of Kashmiris, mainly from among the lower castes, into the Muslim fold. However, for these converts Islam did not appear as a radically new or alien religion and this facilitated the conversion process. The genius of the missionary approach of the Muslim Rishis laid in their successful effort to acculturate their message in a form that ordinary Kashmiris could understand.

Rishism made unprecedented gains in its founder's quest for union of faiths in Kashmir. The Rishis enjoyed a distinguished position in the traditional Kashmiri society. The individual conversions and certain cases of group conversions accelerated the process of Islamic acculturation of the commoners. The popular belief of the commoners in the Rishis spiritual powers or efficacy in holiness should not be misconstrued as an important factor in their gradual conversion to Islam. Conversion to Islam, by the Rishis, meant a relative advance in the social status of people. The Rishis were able to promote a fresh understanding of Islamic teachings in a different cultural milieu. The sentiments of respect and admiration for Islam and faith in its ultimately destiny are reflected in a number of eulogistic verses. Islamic acculturation of the commoners meant a transition from a traditionally defined caste-ridden society to the Islamic community or Muslim Ummah. Having undergone a process of Islamic acculturation, the converts saw their identity in terms of the new religious community of which they had become members. It led to the development of a Kashmiri Muslim society in the

medieval period in which social identity was defined in Islamic terms as opposed to caste. Thus the most significant social change that took place during this period was the gradual development of Islam as the focus of social identity among the people. It was through a variety of didactic songs of Sheikh Noor ud-Din Noorani that the people gradually adapted themselves to the Islamic society.²

The relative change in the status of the converts in the social identification is further testified to by the performances of the folk dancers on the eve of the anniversaries of the Rishis. Their performances had a symbolic significance for assessing the role of Rishis in drawing the peasants and farmers to their fold. This in turn affected the course of Islamic religious development in Kashmir. The impact of the Rishi movement was that through the performance given by Bhands, Dambalis, Islam was brought to the masses in a meaningful way. Though at that time, the only education for the illiterate folk was that which was transmitted orally, there arose groups of acrobats and singers who assumed the role of teachers that is why the festive occasions at the shrines of the Rishi Saints are days of rejoicing and thanks giving. The convert population looked up to them as their role models as well as the custodians of their tombs and of their communal identity. Significantly the people, out of reverence for their Saints, looked to these custodians as surrogate priests.³

The Rishi movement in Kashmir is regarded as a typical example of the prodigious survival of past practices and their bearing on the Muslims. The social purpose of Rishi movement was to promote the harmony between the people, irrespective of creed, colour, and religion, though the stress in what was common in philosophy and common to the achievement of inner space as well as to challenge the priests whose professional aim was the preservation of the power of their class through the promotion of conflict. Even as these great idealists changed their world for the better, they had the wisdom to reject only elements of the past, not to destroy it completely. It was a perfect harmony which set the imagination of the people aflame. The message of harmony, as spread by the Rishis from time to time, created a reservoir of humanism which became the ideological fountainhead of the modern Kashmiri mind, gave a unique quality to the Kashmiri identity. In Kashmir austere Islamic rituals were freely converted by the Rishis into rich & colorful practices derived from the local devotional customs and practices. The Rishis influenced the lifestyle of Kashmiri Muslims. The synthesis of Arabic and Persian cultures produced a new order of Rishis or Rishi culture which is described by Abul Fazl in *Ain-i-Akbari* as, "The most respected people of Kashmir are the Rishi who, although they do not suffer themselves to be fettered by traditions are doubtless true believers of god and were tolerant to other faiths."⁴ There were 2000 Rishis in Kashmir which clearly explains that how Islam was able to convert the Pandits (Hindus). The Rishis also made a significant impact on art and literature.

Shrines (Khanqahas, Asthans) as basis of Kashmiriyat:

Having acquired the character of pilgrimage centers (Ziyarats) for the commoners after the Rishis death, Khanqahas became focal points of Islam in the Kashmir valley not merely centers of spirituality, religion fervor, ascetic exercises and Sufi training but agencies for the diffusion of Islamic teaching among the rural population. Consequently, it was through the Ziyarats of the Rishis that Islam gained a firm footing in the valley of Kashmir. The Islam that had come to stay was clearly shown by the network of Mosques and Madrasas which sprang up everywhere round the tombs of the Rishis in due course. Mir Syed Ali Hamadani established the first khanqah or cloister of mystics in Kashmir and it was called Khanqah-i-Mohalla or the chief cloister. The Khanqah was a convent for the Rishis. The Ziyarats and mosques were institutions contributed by the Sufis that were peculiarly Islamic and through these institutions the conversion to Islam was secured through a peaceful and orderly evolution. While the tombs of the Rishis are cultural symbols of Islam in Kashmir, the Mosques adjacent to their premises are true symbols of a universal faith.

Ziyarats or shrines, many of which remain to present day, attesting in their traditions their founders' virtues and forming local schools of holy men or priests whose influence was beneficial to the people as promulgating the principles of humanity and moral virtues. The shrines associated with acts of piety and self-denials are pleasant places of meeting at fair-time and the natural beauty of their position and surroundings afford additional attraction. Khanqahas or Ziyarats played a

legendary role in the religious, social and economic life of Kashmir valley. In fact, it forms the basis for assertion of Kashmiriyat, an interpretation of Kashmiri cultural identity that emphasizes the harmonious blending of religious cultures and absence of conflict. The close association of Kashmiri Islam with shrines has rendered it syncretistic. It is believed that shrine worship was an accepted and integral part of the Kashmiri Islam. Shrines were and are central component of Kashmiri society in general and Kashmiri Islam in particular.

The shrines emerged as symbols and sites for the evolving ideological and political definitions of Kashmiri Islam and by extension the Kashmiri Muslim community. Kashmiri people visited the shrines for health, procreation, longevity and relief from floods, famine or disease. Furthermore, shrines provided a venue for Muslims to come together during prayers and preaching and on more festive occasions such as periodic fairs at shrines to celebrate the birth and death, anniversaries of the saints entombed therein. Such occasions were key sites for rural-urban political and economic change.⁵ Thus the Ziyarats and Khanqahs became the centers of superstition and charlatanism. They began to be worshiped by the credulous masses who came there as pilgrims to beseech the aid of the saint. The saint worship still plays an important part in the life of a Kashmiri, who is being constantly exploited by the Pirs and their disciples.

Sufi – Rishi Tradition as the basis of Inclusive Kashmiri Identity

Kashmiriyat is the elective & syncretic nature of the spiritual belief of Kashmiri Muslims. It is the impact of Sufi and Rishi vision of Islam that have helped him synthesize the message of Prophet Mohammad with the earliest prophets of Islam that constitute the core beliefs of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. The most important influence on the Kashmiri Muslims in terms of their Kashmiriyat is that of the Rishi order of Sufis. While the Sufi orders like Kabravi, Naqasbandhi and Qadri, arrived in Kashmir from Persian, Central Asia and Central and North-India, the Reshi order evolved in the Kashmir valley itself in the beginning of the 15th century. The Kashmir valley was already permeated with the tradition of Hindu asceticism and Buddhist renunciation. The Rishis consistently preached complete harmony among different religions, peace and understanding among their followers. This was not always easy. One of the foremost Rishis Sheikh Noor-ud-Din Noorani, also known as Nund Rishi, faced restrictions during the reign of Suha Bhatt who had started persecuting non-Muslims in this new found Islamic zeal after conversion to the new faith. Aware of the tensions created between Hindus and Muslims during the reign of Sultan Sikandar, Sheikh Noor-ud-Din wrote, *“we belong to the same parents. Then, why this difference? Let, Hindus and Muslims together worship god alone. We came to this world like partners. We should have shared our joys and sorrows together.”*⁶

The Rishi cult of Islam goes a long way in synthesizing different cultural ways of life. According to B.N. Parin, *“Lal Ded and Nund Reshi have come down to us, over the centuries as apostle of true knowledge. They had a message to give and could not, perhaps, help as an inspired compulsion. They touch the deepest core of human sensibility. It is for nothing that we recite the Vakhs of Lal Ded and Shrukhs of the Sheikh with gusto and feeling, the meaning comes home, mixes with the blood and becomes part and parcel of our being. A cultural rejuvenation takes place.”*⁷

Influence of Islam on Kashmiri Identity

Religion in general and Islam in particular contributed in a decisive manner in the formation of Kashmiri identity. Islam gave Kashmir a new super culture that recognized no nationality or sub-nationality. It enriched Kashmiri language. It changed Kashmiri architecture by blending old with new influences that over a period emerged as distinctive Kashmiri architecture. It made deft Kashmiri hands to create master pieces out of wood and stone and weave dream out of threads of silk and wool by introducing crafts from Central Asia and Arabia. It gave Kashmiri literature both form and content. Majority of Kashmiri literature forms have their origin in Persian and Arabian languages. In fact Islam metamorphosed Kashmiri society and gave Kashmir an identity of its own.

Islam in Kashmir was not imposed but accepted by choice, neither was it a revolt to destroy old culture, religion or traditions. As a matter of fact in spite of conversion to Islam, Kashmir never forgot

its old culture and traditions. On the contrary it preserved, consolidated and perpetuated the traditions. Kashmiri Muslims after conversion did not abandon the way of life and mental outlook of their forefathers, cultivated through thousands of years of history. A Kashmiri Muslim shares in common with his Hindu compatriots many inhibitions, superstitions, adulations, practices as well as social liberties and intellectual freedom. According to Lawrence, "I attribute much of the delightful tolerance which exists between followers of the two religions to the fact that the Kashmiri Muslim never really gave up their old religion of the country." ⁸ Similarly, Islam influenced the attitude and perceptions of the Kashmiri Hindus. The Kashmiri Brahmins were different from the orthodox Hindus. They had no reservations in sharing water and food with their Muslim brethren.

Islam brought about great changes in Kashmir but it itself underwent a transformation in the course of time. This was because, although the people of Kashmir changed their religion, they did not make a complete break with the past, but carried with them many of their old beliefs and practices to the new faith. Thus while they celebrated the Muslim festivals of Idul Fitr and Idul Zuha, they did not cease to participate in the Hindu festivals of Chaitra, Vithtarwh and Sripancama. They also continued to regard the Hindu places of worship as sacred. Similarly they maintained the old superstitions that seeing of a comet, hearing of the barking of dogs, hooting of owls during the day and crossing of the path by a serpent all forbade disaster. Under the impact of Islam the rigors of the caste system were reduced. The converts were reluctant to give up their customs, their caste rules regarding marriage and sometimes even their private functions.⁹

CONCLUSION:

The above exposition outlines the distinctive experience of Islam and its interactions with the two major religions of the time- Hinduism and Buddhism. While interacting, with dominant religions of the land, Islam in Kashmir had, had adopted with the cultural specificity of the land. The distinctive experience of Islam had adapted with the cultural specificity of the land. The distinctive experience of Islam mediated through the teachings and practices of the Sufis paved the way for the development of a syncretic tradition. This tradition had a strong element of transcending the boundaries and the sense of otherness. This, in turn, shaped the thinking, life ad practices of the people at large. As s result of syncretic tradition and intermingling of different cultural practices resulted into the development of composite cultural identity of the people popularly referred as Kashmiriyat. Over a period of time it became the marker of identity of the Kashmiri people. It acted as a cementing force between the people belonging to different faiths. Social cohesion got its strength from an all embracing cultural identity of the people of Kashmir

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