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Contribution of Sufisim to Kashmir: Historical Perspective

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Contribution of Sufisim to Kashmir: Historical Perspective

Amrik Singh [α] & Jaspreet Kaur [σ]

Abstract- This paper focuses on the perception of Kashmiri Pandit participants on Sufism and Rishi culture of Kashmir. This generation of Kashmiri Pandit have lived significant years of their lives in Kashmir and have remained closely associated with the Sufi and Rishi traditions of Kashmir. They have had immense faith in the shrines of Sufi saints. The shrines of Sufi saints were revered by Kashmiri Pandits not only in a similar manner but more than their Kashmiri Muslim compatriots as told by the older generation of Kashmiri Muslims participants. Kashmiri Muslims had deep faith in these shrines. That has also contributed towards strengthening the of bond of brotherhood/*bahichara* between Kashmiri Muslims and Kashmiri Pandits, as both had close association with these practices irrespective of their own religious faiths.

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I. Introduction

Kashimiriyat´s idea can be traced to the historical past of Kashmir. In the 13th century, the main religions of the valley (Hinduism and Buddhism) encountered Islam[1]. The new religion seemed appealing to many of the inhabitants of the region who converted to Islam. Such religious and cultural encounter created a new culture by assimilating various ethno religious traditions and beliefs that were shared among the different communities.

This idea of sharing traditions came to be called the Hindu-Muslim "Rishi-Sufi" movement[2]. The most important part of such movement was experienced between the 14th and 15th century. It was during this period that there was a clear socio-cultural assimilation process in Kashmir.[3] Certain characters such as Lalla Ded influenced this concept. Ded was a Sufi mystic (born in a Hindu household) from the 14th century. She managed to prove that there could be an in between among Hindu Vedic traditions and Muslim mysticism. Among her legacy relies the foundation of Kashmir's biggest Sufi order[4].

Indeed, the success of Islam in Kashmir is strongly linked to the fact that Sufi Saints were able to cope with the cultural differences and managed to live collectively together[5].

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Also, Sufism is a division of Islam which does not preach strict orthodox values. Hence, this facilitated cultural assimilation. Just as Ahmed and Saklani state:

> "So, the Islam practiced by the people of Kashmir has been predominantly Sufi in nature rather than orthodox, that led to the development of the composite culture and more a kind of society in which people were well aware of their religiosity, but never let come in between their relationships with each other.[6]"

For some scholars, *Kashmiriyat* was a synonym of cultural void and religious significance. For a long time, this term became a binding force between the peoples of various religious and cultures. Yet, now it is less encompassing because some of the groups (the Pandits) that were part of the notion *Kashmiriyat* have fled the valley after the first set of violent episodes[7]. Just as Kashmiri historian Mohammad Ishaq Khan explains:

> "Our earnest participation in each other's festivals and marriage ceremonies was proverbial until the mass exodus of Pandits from their homeland, following the onset of militancy in Kashmir Valley in 1989.[8]"

For other scholars, *Kashmiriyat* was the mainstream definition of shared religiosity between Hindus and Muslims. Kashmir was always portrayed as the best example of a place where Hindus and Muslims could coexist in a peaceful way. Indeed, the region's essence is a mix of religious Hindu and Muslim costumes, beliefs, manners and rituals.[9] In fact, this idea is strongly supported by the Indian government as a mean to justify unity among Kashmiris.

In his piece, Hangloo cites the work of T. N. Madan (a Kashmiri himself) who elaborately describes the term Kashmiriyat.[10] Other authors such as M. I. Khan believe that *Kashmiriyat* was the gradual outcome of mutual adaptation of various pre-Islamic religious traditions and the great tradition of Islam. To him, the *Rishis* (holy Vedic Hindu sage, saint or inspired poet) were the main exemplars of the developing of such a dialectic process. In fact, the spirit of this dialectic was mystical religious experience and universal love.[11]

Regardless of the different opinions aforementioned, they all designate *Kashmiriyat* as an "ideology" (an ideology is composed of three key elements: body of doctrine, myth and belief)[12].

Another view is that *Kashmiriyat* is not an ideology, but rather a behavior pattern shared by Pandits and Muslims in the region[13]. Besides,

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Kashmiriyat is also perceived as the sense of mutual support which still not wholly free of tensions. In other words, this notion refers to a pluralistic culture of tolerance, but does not represent syncretism.[14]

As mentioned before, defining *Kashmiriyat* can be extremely complex because of its vagueness. Everyone can use the term according to their own view and interests while claiming jurisdiction on Kashmir.

As we have seen in the previous chapter, many of the elements belonging to the concept of *Kashmiriyat* are cultural aspects. *Kashmiriyat* was the result of shared religiosity and cultural practices between Hindus and Muslims. Even though many centuries have passed (and there is a religious difference among the diverse ethnic groups in Kashmir) most of the Kashmiri traditions remain very close to their original form. Indeed, modernization is transforming costumes and rituals at a fast pace. However, the whole of the native people (who call themselves Kashmiri) are trying to stick with their traditions.

Just as aforementioned, most of this cultural legacy can be traced back to the early 13th century in Kashmir. It was during this period that Islam finally reached the Kashmir region. There were several previous attempts by the Arabs and other Muslim people to conquer the Kashmir region. However, the mountains served as natural barriers to keep away foreign Invaders.[15] In truth, there were invasion trials done during the Caliphate of Walid I (705- 715), yet, the Umayyad offensive fell short.[16]

During the 11th century, the Turks also attempted to invade India and failed. Some soldiers decided to leave the army and remain in the Kashmir region[17]. These new inhabitants began to give military assistance to Kashmiri rulers. In return, the authorities would allow them to practice their own traditions freely, which were generally linked to the Sufi traditions from Turkistan [18]. This also gave rise to having intra religious interactions.

Indeed, the transition process from a Hindu kingdom to the first sultanate happened in 1339[19]. This came out after the death of Hindu King Suhadeva and subsequently his brother. Since he did not have any heir to the throne, he appointed a loyal Muslim servant as his successor: Shah Mir [20]. The outcome of the arrival of a Muslim to the throne was a massive conversion of the region into Islam.

The Muslim practices became quite appealing to the Kashmiris in a very short amount of time. This was mainly linked with the fact that Islam was a suitable alternative to the ongoing Medieval hierarchical Brahmanical society[21]. The central problem of the Brahmanical society was that its socio-political order was incredibly elitist, hierarchical, privilege-based and deeply grounded into an unjust cast system[22]. The fact that Islam did not have any hierarchy among the different people composing the society, made the religion appealing for those without privileges and for the massas.

The interactions of the distinct cultures and religions with Islam changed completely the cultural dynamics of the Kashmiri region. Indeed, we cannot deny the fact that Islam came soon to be the dominant religion in the area. However, cross-cultural interactions were not unusual for Kashmiri people. Buddhist traits among Kashmiri Shivaism are easily distinguishable based on Trika philosophy[23]. This Buddhist thinking process emphasizes the idea of experience, reason and comprehension in the course of realization of ultimate reality[24].

Likewise, Sufi practitioners were influenced by the ascetic and meditative practices of Mahayana Buddhism[25]. The arrival of Sufi saints and missionaries marked the creation of a new Sufi order within the sect. In this division, Sufi people would integrate traditions based on Islam as well as former Buddhist and Hindu practices[26]. This assimilation and adaptation mechanism can be interpreted as the Islamization process of Kashmir as well as the Kashmirization of Islam.

Therefore, just as Webb states, the resultant syncretic Hindu-Muslim culture did not exclude the presence and influence of other religions, but rather led to the development of indigenous philosophies, practices and traditions of Hinduism and Islam that differentiated both religious communities from their counterparts elsewhere[27].

With the advent of Islam in Kashmir, which was an outcome of the movements of Muslim traders, craftsmen and the soldiers as early as the middle of the eighteenth century, the Kashmiri society felt new changes and transformation in their social organization.[28] Since the time, the valley of Kashmir received the eternal message of Islam; it had witnessed influx of highly learned Sufi saints particularly from Central Asia and Persia, who had left an indelible influence on the social organization of the evolving Muslim community of Kashmir.[29]

In the early fourteenth century, it was the Suhrawardi order which was first to be introduced in Kashmir among all the Sufi orders. Sheikh Sharaf-ud-din was the first to introduce this order in Kashmir. He was popularly known as Bulbul Shah. Another order which gained a widespread popularity in Kashmir was Kubravi order in which Saiyid Ali Hamadani, popularly known in Kashmir as Shah-i-Hamadan was prominent Sufi Saint. He did not come all alone but he was accompanied by so many others Sufi saints. Islamisation through Sufism gained momentum in the fourteenth century, due to which a large number of people got converted to Islam in the search of liberation from the shackles of the caste system and the Brahmanical religion. It is also worth mentioning what M. A. Stein says, "Islam made its way into Kashmir not by forcible conquests but by the gradual conversions, for which the foreign adventurers

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both from the south and central Asia prepared the ground."[30] It was the philosophy of Sufi saints which revolutionized and brought about a great transformation in the lives of the Kashmiri people, both the Muslims and non-Muslims. The Sufi saints had influence not only on the social and others aspects of Kashmiri society but on the administration as well as it was the political necessity to make a concord between the Kashmiri people. With this, there started an era of Persianisation of the Kashmiri administration in addition with the cultural conquest.[31] The Hindu society was split into two groups; the Persian speaking Hindus who were called *Karkun*, and the Sanskrit speaking who were called *Pandits*.[32] It created a type of gap between them as some of them learnt Persian for economic reasons. And the rest were devoid of the jobs or work in administration. They lost their previous status in the society. It resulted in the change in their entire culture after the coming of Islamic culture.[33]

Traditionally, the origins of such intra religious tolerance can be traced to the marvelous works of a Sufi sage. Lalla Ded was one character which played a significant role in the social revolution of 14th century in Kashmir. Ded was born in a Hindu Brahmin household, where she was briefly educated and then forced to get married at age 12 according to the tradition. While she joined the new household, both her mother in law and husband mistreated her.[34]

The legend says she was half-fed and that she never complained about it. Instead of having any sort of confrontation with her family, husband or mother in law, she decided to abandon them and become a shelterless mystic without any possessions, wandering in rags and reciting poetry.[35] Kashmiris consider Ded as the mother of cultural and religious tolerance. Indeed, she was the first registered historical character to have challenged and changed the dynamic in the region. In fact, Lalla Ded is the perfect example of the mainstream definition of *Kashmiriyat.*

The shrines of Sufi saints were integral part of Kashmiri Pandits‟ life and of culture in Kashmir. They used to visit these shrines frequently. However, after the migration, being out of Kashmir, these shrines are absent in their lives. This part would reflect on the impact of migration on their belief system at present. Being out of that cultural context in which various *ziayarat*/shrines of Sufi saints were an important part of their belief system, it is important to know the significance of Sufi practices and belief system for them in the present context and how they perceive Sufi practices now. How Kashmiri Pandits who are still in Kashmir perceive the Sufi Practices and do they still go to these shrines? The part would reflect on the answers to questions like "How did the Sufi practices contribute in developing the bond between Kashmiri Muslims and Kashmiri Pandits in the past?" "If they ever visited Kashmir after migration, did they also visit any of these shrines that they used to visit when they were living in Kashmir?" "Do their children know about these Sufi saints of Kashmir?"

> *"Kashmiri Pandits have given their own name to these saints, but they used to go together [that is with Kashmiri Muslims] in these shrines", "Nund Rishi/ Sheikh-ul-Alam has said that there should be no bifurcation in the name of religion"*

Dev Sopori said that, before migration, he had been to these shrines: "Kashmiri Muslims and Kashmiri Pandits both believed in these shrines…. I had been to Rishi Mol Sahib and Dastgeer Sahib…." Rohini Dhar talked about the contribution of these Sufi saints in developing close bond between people:

> There was one Saint in Kashmir called Nund Rishi, also known as Sheikh-ul-Alam, who believed in equality and he said that no one is Hindu or Muslim. He said that we should improve our ways of thinking. He never believed in bifurcation of the people in the name of religion….

Rohini Dhar‟s narrative describes the role of Sufi Saints of Kashmir in not letting the religious differences come between the people because, these saints did not believe in division among the people in the name of religion. When I asked Suchitra Koul (working as a manager in private sector) if she used to visit shrines in Kashmir, she replied: "Everywhere, everywhere, Kashmiri Pandits used to visit these *dargah*/shrines more frequently than Muslims". When I asked whether her children know about these shrines she said: "My daughter knows everything about these *dargah*/shrines…it is there in our family [curiosity to know]". She also told that her daughter, who was one-year old when they left Kashmir, knows everything about Kashmir because she reads a lot about Kashmiri culture and history. Girdar Koul thinks,

> Kashmir is the land of saints and their influence is still there. Muslims still believe in Nund Rishi and other Sufi saints. We [Kashmiri Pandits] have given our own names to these saints and they [Kashmiri Muslims] have given their own. But we used to go together and celebrate together. People whether Kashmiri Muslims or Kashmiri Pandits, were saintly, because Kashmir is the land of the saints

Somnath Nehru (worked in sheep husbandry department now retired) said:

> Our ancestors did not differentiate in the name of religion. Nund Rishi/Sheikh-ul-Alam was Muslim but Kashmiri Pandits always revered him and called him Nund Rishi. Similarly, Lal Ded was a Kashmiri Pandit, but Kashmiri Muslims revered her and gave the name Lal Arifa. These saints belonged to everyone irrespective of one‟s religious faith. We all used to go to the *ziayarat*/shrines of these saints and celebrate *bada din*/festival related to particular saint.

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The narratives of Girdar Koul and Somanath Nehru explain that, though Kashmiri Pandits and Kashmiri Muslims have given separate name to these Sufi saints both have similar devotion towards them. Religion never impedes their fondness and devotion towards these saints and their shrines. Somanth Nehru also thinks that "Kashmiri Pandits are very secular in nature. They would first visit shrines of Muslim Sufi saints and then they would visit their own temples".

Similarly, Vishan Dhar also talked about the respect Muslims gave to Hindu saints and religious places. He said,

Lal Ded was given the name of Lal Arifa. She was Hindu, but there was no difference. Kashmiri Muslims used to respect our religious places also because that time there was no friction as such. But, during militancy, they set temples on fire. Might be earlier also some friction was there, but it was not explicit. The extract explains the rise of conflict and its impact on Sufi and Rishi culture of Kashmir.

"Gun culture destroyed Sufi culture"

Pankaj Mattoo said, "We still go to these shrines. The last time when I visited Kashmir, I went to Baba Rishi. I have full faith and I think that is still there". When I asked that if the same kind of Sufi culture prevailed there, he replied,

> That composite culture, that kind of Sufism has vanished now. Fundamentalism has crept in. Both of us have become fundamentalists... Kashmir was the place where there was normalcy, but when gun culture came into place; ... in the name of religion everything can be destroyed.

"After the Kashmiri Pandits migrated where was Sufism left?/That Path is left behind somewhere"

Vrinda Koul said that there was Sufi and Rishi culture that Kashmiri Muslims and Kashmiri Pandits followed together, but only before the latter‟s migration. She explains:

> There was Sufism in Kashmir because we [Kashmiri Pandits] were there and we believed in that. It is not important to go to the shrine, but to grasp what these Sufi saints have conveyed through their thought process that is more important. After the Kashmiri Pandits left Kashmir, where is Sufism? I would never go to these shrines, but my Kashmiri Muslim friends used to visit our temple Kheer Bhavani every year. However, I never went to these shrines [Shrines of Muslim saints she meant here] but some Kashmiri Pandits used to go to these shrines.

Vrinda Koul‟s narrative explains that migration has affected the Sufi culture of Kashmir a lot. Although she never went to these shrines, she believes in the preaching and thought process of these Kashmiri Sufi saints that she feels is no more now because migration and conflict have affected the Sufi culture of Kashmir to a large extent. Rita/Sharika Mattoo (teacher) has not migrated and has been living in Kashmir with her family, not in her ancestral house, but in a security zone area. She said,

> There was Rishi tradition in Kashmir. Kashyapa Rishi established Kashmir and because of that goodness prevailed there. But I do not know anything about Sufism.

KB: Have you visited Sufi saints‟ shrines in Kashmir ever?

Sharika Mattoo: Yes I did during 1984-85, after which I never went to that side. It is not that my belief system has changed. There is also a Ganesh temple near the shrines, I do not go to even to that temple. We do not go to those pathways. I remember we used to live in Hubbakadal and that time my father used go to Hari-Parbat every day, but now those paths are left behind somewhere [sad]. Once in a blue moon, when Kashmiri Pandits do *Havan* [Hindu rituals of fire offerings], then we go there, otherwise we do not go to that side and in those lanes. But the faith is the same as it used to be.

Sharika Mattoo‟s faith has not altered, but she does not tread the old pathways. The location where she used to live earlier has changed. Even though she is living in Kashmir, she has stopped visiting these shrines. Various shrines are situated especially in downtown area (old city) of Srinagar where Kashmiri Pandits used to live with Kashmiri Muslims together. Because of the conflict and the circumstances Kashmiri Pandits faced during the peak of turmoil in those places, it seems they still hesitate to go to those areas. This ultimately affects the composite Sufi practices; although faith may be there, but practices of going to the shrines together are left behind.

"There is decline in Sufi practices among the Muslims also"/ "It is considered as anti-Islam" Phulla Koul explains that mass conversion in Kashmir was the reason behind the development of Sufi and Rishi culture in Kashmir. People in Kashmir adopted Islam but could not leave their habits related to previous faith. With their new faith, they held on to the previous culture also. She explains:

> We have shrine culture. These shrines are of various Sufi saints and all the people used to visit these shrines. In the past people could not differentiate culture from the religion and at present also people are not able to do so. These shrines belong to the Sufi culture. All are not going to the shrines at present. Now the new sects are emerging. They are against the shrine culture. Under the same roof, in the same family you may find people following different sects like one may be *Hanfee*, the other may be going to *Tablighi* or some may be following *Jamaat-i-Islami, Allah-vale*....they are in a confused state of mind.

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Phulla Koul"s narrative suggests that there is emergence of various revivalist movements in Kashmir. This is the reason behind the declining inclination towards shrines among Kashmiri Muslims.

Ashwini Bhatt talked about his father"s visits to the famous shrine of Makhdoom Sahib where nearby there is a temple of goddess Sharika Devi and Lord Ganesha. Kashmiri Pandits used to go to the shrines and temple as well at the same time. But he said that things are not the same as it used to be in the past:

> It has got diluted in the last few years because of the fundamentalism. We had various shrines there. When fundamentalism came into Kashmir, it preached the Kashmiri Muslims that this [Sufi practices] is anti-Islam. Otherwise, Kashmir is the only place where after offering the *namaz* [prayer] they recite Darud Khani;[2] this is much similar to the Hindu practices of reciting sacred *mantra* [chants] or singing *bhajan* [sacred song]. I have listened in the shrine of Dastgeer Sahib also. The tune is the same as Kashmiri Pandits reciting the *mantra*. This is something retained from Hindu practices. Though Kashmiri Muslims are now well read, there is one big section that has moved towards fundamentalism.... Earlier Kashmiri Muslims would not eat beef. Nobody used to sell beef openly, because they knew that they were once Hindus and the impact of Sufi and Rishi culture was there which did not allow them to do so.

Narayan Raina"s narration on Sufism in Kashmir is as follows:

> Basically, in Kashmir, there was Sufi and Rishi culture. We [Kashmiri Pandits] are Shaivite. Lal Ded was also a Shaivite, but Kashmiri Muslims say that she was a Sufi, which is wrong. Kashmiri Pandits used to go to all the shrines of Muslims. Basically, they were non-Muslims. They recite Darud Khani that is anti Islam. Now that is declining in Kashmir, but there is one section that follows this practice and they are suffocated because of the armed struggle.

Ashwini Bhatt said:

> There was Sufi culture. Kashmiri Pandits have reconciled to the fact that they [Kashmiri Muslims] have converted and Kashmiri Muslims have also reconciled the fact that Kashmiri Pandits are minority community so they have to live together. And attainment of the higher path of spiritualism is in Sufism. That has diluted in the last few years because of fundamentalism. We had various shrines there. When fundamentalism came into the Kashmir that preached the Kashmiri Muslims that this is anti-Islam. Kashmir is the only place where after *namaz* prayer they recite Darud Khani, the way Kashmiri Pandits does *bhajan Kertan* [sacred songs]. The tune is also the same, rhythm is the same. Because they were Kashmiri Pandits so they wanted to retain that Hindu philosophy even after conversion. Hinduism is flexible. That time people had this notion that they will accept new faith but they will not leave their own faith.

Pushkarnath Pandit, who is presently living in Kashmir in a rented house, describes the uniqueness of Sufism in Kashmir:

> We have spiritual poetry which we called *sufiayana kalam.* You will not find it anywhere else. This was only in Kashmir. However, it was not permitted in Islam. People of this place did not lose their spiritual identity in any condition which is distinct, neither absolutely Hindu nor absolutely Muslim.... This [Sufi culture of Kashmir] is one factor that is in conflict with the people outside the Kashmir. Even Pakistanis, when they talk about Kashmiri people, say that they do not understand them. We cannot depend on their words... Even Indians say the same thing. I want to be frank enough to say that even the Jammuites [people of Jammu region] do not understand the Kashmiri society. This is the problem and this is going to continue...

II. Conclusion

Pushkarnath Pandit explains that Sufi culture is a very significant part of Kashmir. Pandits and Muslims lived it since the centuries and it represents their "spiritual identity". This notion is not well grasped by the outside world because these specificities of Kashmiri ways of life can be understood only by Kashmiris. It also explains that because of lack of understanding of Kashmiri world view by the outside world these processes are considered as anti-Islam. Here the culture is misunderstood as something against religion.

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