Healing Beyond Medicine: Shrines as Therapeutic Spaces

Sajad Ahmad Mir*

This paper traces the roots of Kashmir's long tradition of healing beyond medicine by looking at the region's past. From early times, Kashmir came to be seen as a special spiritual land where mountains, rivers, springs, and shrines were believed to carry healing power. This belief shaped how people understood illness, suffering, and recovery. Disease and epidemics were often explained not only in physical terms but also as events linked to divine will, moral order, or spiritual imbalance. In this setting, shrines as healing spaces became central to everyday life. When formal medical treatment was limited or failed to attract, people turned to shrines for relief, hope, and comfort. Stories of saints, miracles, and healing experiences spread widely, and were passed down through generations through songs, stories, and local legends. These shared memories strengthened the belief that shrines could heal both the body and the mind.

Drawing on sources from different periods, this paper shows how such beliefs were deeply rooted in Kashmir's social life and medical culture. It argues that shrines functioned as important spaces of healing care, especially during times of illness, crisis, and uncertainty. Healing in Kashmir, therefore, cannot be understood through medicine alone. It must also be seen through faith, memory, and the everyday practices that turned shrines into trusted places of healing in Kashmiri life.

Keywords:

Shrines, traditional healing, memory, narrative, *hakim*, medicine.

Introduction

Kashmir has long been known by names that point to its deep spiritual character. It has been called *pirwār*, (valley of saints), *Rishwār* (valley of Rishis), and *jādu-e-Kashmir* (land of sorcery).[1] These names were not merely poetic labels, but reflected how people understood and lived in this land. From early times, Kashmir produced many saints, sages, and spiritual guides who shaped the region's religious life, moral values, and literary traditions. Their teachings and lives left a lasting imprint on society, and helped build a culture in which faith

* Sajad Ahmad Mir holds a Ph.D from the Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

played an important role in everyday life. Even before the arrival of Islam, Kashmir was regarded as a sacred land. Its mountains, rivers, springs, and forests were surrounded by myths and sacred stories, making the landscape itself appear holy and alive. People believed that the land carried spiritual power, and could offer protection, guidance, and healing.

Over time, this belief transformed natural spaces and shrines into places where people turned during moments of illness, fear, and uncertainty. As a result, shrines gradually became more than places of worship. They functioned as spaces of care, comfort, and healing, especially when medical help was limited or absent. People visited them seeking relief from disease, peace of mind, and strength to endure suffering. Through repeated visits, prayers, and shared stories of recovery and miracles, shrines became closely linked with healing in public memory. In this way, Kashmir's spiritual traditions shaped a unique healing culture in which faith and medicine existed side by side, and healing was understood as something that went beyond the body to include the mind and the soul. This paper argues that shrines have played a significant role in shaping how Kashmir is lived and felt as a medical space. In Kashmir, shrines are not distant or formal religious places meant only for worship. They are part of everyday life. People go there when they are sick, worried, grieving, confused, or simply tired of life's hardships. Shrines in Kashmir are associated with local saints, and have historically offered comfort and reassurance. People visit them to seek peace of mind, relief from suffering, and strength to face difficulties. What matters more than religious labels is the belief that these places listen, care, and heal.

The image of Kashmir as a sacred space was crafted by the historical and oral traditions of ancient times, a theme that was picked up by medieval and modern literature.[2] For instance, the *Nagas* (snake or serpent), earliest inhabitants of Kashmir, are considered one of the 'supernatural races' with no concrete human form. Residing in the water, sometimes they would come out as snakes, and other times as humans, and this species 'appears to have had supernatural powers, making it easy for them to change their form'.[3] The Naga story has made its way into Kashmiri folklore, with *Hemaa*l *Nagrai*, a classic romantic folk tale in which Nagrai, a snake hero, takes on human form, and falls in love with Hemaal, King Baldeva's daughter.[4] Much of this literary and folk depictions continue what Diana Eck in Indian context has called 'imagined landscape', where stories and associations are connected with supernatural elements like mountains, rivers, lakes, and saints, which create a sense of place and region, and a rootedness in the land.[5] Associating Kashmir with such sacred and

supernatural features or stories has allowed it to emerge as a 'spiritual landscape' besides in developing a sense of belonging among its natives from ancient times.

Shrines as Healing Spaces

Shrines held an important place in the history of Kashmir during both the medieval and modern periods. They were widely seen as sacred places, and were remembered in both oral traditions and written texts. Stories about saints, their miracles, and their healing powers were closely linked to *tirthas* and *asthans*. These stories were mainly passed down through oral traditions such as songs, folktales, and everyday storytelling, which helped to keep the memory of these shrines alive among the people. The strong presence of shrines in oral traditions shows how closely they were connected to everyday life and popular belief. At the same time, shrines were also mentioned in written historical sources. Texts like Kalhana's *Rajatarangini* speak about the importance of *tirthas* (shrines) as sacred places believed to have healing powers. Kalhana notes that rulers often visited these shrines, not only for religious reasons but also to seek good health and inner strength.[6] This shows that shrines were valued as places that offered both spiritual and healing support. Their importance did not come from religion alone but also from the belief that they could heal and protect people. Together, oral traditions and written records helped to shape a shared understanding of shrines as spaces where the body and the spirit could both find relief.

Kalhana describes visits of rulers to these *tirthas* as significant on account of gaining both physical as well as spiritual strength. It metaphorically includes consolidation of the state and the medical well-being of the ruler along with subjects of the state. In medieval Kashmir, *Dastur-us-Salikin*, the sixteenth-century hagiography of Sufi saint Sheikh Hamza Makhdoom, tells us of an instance when he restored the eyesight of his disciple. Similarly, the author of *Tohfat al-Ahbab*, a sixteenth century hagiography of Nurbakshiya saint Mir Shamus-ud-din Iraqi, authored by Muhammad Ali Kashmiri, mentions that the saint was sent to Kashmir to procure rare medical herbs found in mountains of Kashmir for his ailing patron of Herat, the Timurid ruler Mirza Bayaqara (1470-1505 C.E.).[7] Eighteenth-century historical account *Waqiat-i Kashmir* chronicles the history of Kashmir from its origin up to the eighteenth century. This *tarikh*, in addition to its political history, throws light on Kashmir as a religious landscape inhabited by Sufis. While writing the political history of kings, the text simultaneously documents the life and works of spiritual saints contemporary to rulers.[8] The legitimacy of the state's rule was heavily dependent on the ruler's relationship with spiritual

authorities. It is this interrelationship between political and sacred powers that gave birth to the idea of Kashmir as a 'sacred space'.[9] This idea continued to shape later histories of Kashmir. Many described Kashmir as a sacred land whose history was guided and protected by the saints of the Valley. Such a narrative played a key role in shaping the moral and spiritual life of Kashmir.

However, this image of Kashmir began to change with the arrival of colonial writings. European travellers created a very different picture of the Valley. Their accounts often clashed with how Kashmiris saw themselves. Many of these travellers looked at the local people with suspicion, and described them as clever but dishonest, dirty, and deeply superstitious.[10] At the same time, they praised Kashmir's natural beauty, especially its mountains, rivers, and scenery. In contrast, the people of Kashmir continued to present their land as a place of saints and mystics. They believed this image was rooted in a shared tradition that had grown over many centuries. In their view, Kashmir was not just a beautiful region but a sacred land, watched over and protected by its saints.[11] This difference in views created a lasting tension between how Kashmir was described by outsiders and how it was understood by its own people.

When we look at the shrines of Kashmir in their historical setting, it becomes clear that as shrines and *tirthas* became a central part of the Valley's cultural life, their importance went far beyond religion alone. People came to see these places as sources of healing, believed to have the power to cure illness and bring relief. This belief grew stronger during times of disease. Hakims often refused to treat patients suffering from illnesses like cholera or plague. They did so mainly out of fear of catching these deadly diseases themselves. In such situations, when medical help was denied or unavailable, people turned to shrines as places of hope and healing. Writing about the plague in the twentieth century, Qudratullah Shahab recalls the atmosphere of fear that gripped Jammu city. Even the hakims, who were trusted healers, were terrified of the disease. Shahab narrates a personal experience from this period. During the outbreak, he noticed painful swellings on his body and feared that they might be symptoms of the bubonic plague. Anxious and seeking help, he went to a hakim's shop for treatment. Instead of examining him, the hakim panicked. Afraid of infection, he refused to let Shahab sit close, pushed him towards a corner, and kept distance.[12] This incident reveals how deeply fear shaped social behaviour during the plague. The disease did not only threaten physical health; it also broke down trust between people. Hakims, who were expected to provide care

and treatment, were themselves overwhelmed by fear. Their reaction shows the limits of traditional healing practices in the face of a deadly epidemic. In this atmosphere, shrines became places of comfort and hope. When medical treatment seemed unreliable or unreachable, people turned to faith and spiritual healing in which shrines were seen as safe spaces where sufferers were not rejected but welcomed. They offered emotional strength, reassurance, and a sense of care that was missing in the traditional modes of treatment. Qudratullah Shahab narrates the story of his teacher Maulvi Abdul Khan and his wife Sadika Begum, who were affected by the plague.[13] When hope of recovering from the plague began to fade away, Sadika Begum decided to visit the shrine of Roshan Shah Wali in Jammu city. Turning to the shrine was not just an act of faith, but a response to the lack of medical care and growing fear around the disease. Through such stories, we see how shrines came to be understood as places of healing. Such visits were remembered, retold and cultivated within families and communities. Because of this, shrines gained a lasting place in public memory as places that "saved" people in times of crisis. Over time, they were remembered by people as spaces that offered relief, protection, and hope, and they gradually shaped local traditions of shrine healing.

During several epidemic outbreaks in the late nineteenth century, people believed that saints and shrines served as places of healing. Many felt that these sacred spaces could protect them from deadly diseases. To seek help, people turned to saints in different ways. They visited shrines, took part in *urs* (ceremonies held in memory of the saints), offered gifts, and performed other rituals to show respect and devotion. The cholera outbreak of 1872 proved to be especially severe. At a time when medical facilities were few and often inaccessible, large numbers of people from across the Valley went to the shrine of Makhdoom Sahib in Srinagar. They believed that the saint had the power to protect them and save them from the suffering caused by the epidemic. For many, the shrine became a place of hope in the face of fear and uncertainty.[14] This *astan* (shrine) played an important role in perpetuating the memory of the saint in the minds of the people of the Valley. This sentiment has been highlighted in the texts of Amar Singh Chauhan who states that the natives of Kashmir held a high esteem for these shrines on account of the saints cremated there. The people often paid tributes, held congregations, and distributed items in the name of various spiritual figures buried inside the shrine.[15] The saint protected people from diseases and disaster, and to him, they looked for help in times of distress. The importance of shrines in the Kashmiri socio-cultural ethos is

mentioned in travelogues and the colonial missionary accounts of the time. Ernest F Neve, a medical missionary who arrived in Kashmir in the closing decade of the nineteenth century, on seeing the importance of shrines, expressed his thoughts as,

> The Mohammedan priests of a famous shrine made a proclamation that to avert the pestilence (cholera) the tank in the courtyard of the secret edifice (shrine) should be at once filled with water brought by the worshippers. The people came in the hundreds, each bearing a water-pot which was duly emptied into the tank. Some of the water was drunk as a preservative for cholera.[16]

Epidemic diseases, from their earliest outbreaks, created serious challenges for the administration across the Indian subcontinent. Millions of people lost their lives due to the spread of these diseases in the colonial period. Medical and health facilities were limited, and advances in medical science were slow to reach the wider population. Public health policies, where they existed, were mostly shaped by colonial interests rather than the needs of ordinary people.[17] In such a scenario, indigenous medical traditions of the colonial world reacted to diseases and epidemics in a number of ways. Textual indigenous medical practices responded through mediums of *unani a*nd *ayurveda*, and non-textual ones largely relied on 'spiritual medicine'. On another occasion, Ernest Neve, while touring the countryside, describes shrines as remarkably significant in the lives of Hindus and as well as Muslims. He mentions that a large number of villages have their own shrines.[18] He further asserts that a spring, tank or lake has a Hindu '*asthan*' on one side and a Muslim '*ziyarat'* on the other. Undoubtedly, these shrines emerged as an important agency in the 'spiritual healing' of Kashmir, as evident from Ernest Neve's observation,

> Devotion, reverence and implicit trust in the village shrine play a much larger part in the religious life of an average Kashmiri Mohammedan than any special regard for its teaching. And though the name of Mohammed is revered by the people [but] they know little about him. It is the shrine which protects [them] from disease and disaster and to it they look for aid in any enterprise or in times of distress.[19]

During times of epidemics, many people in Kashmir looked to saints as protectors and saviours. This belief strongly shaped the way people thought and felt, especially in moments of fear and suffering. Such practices began in ancient times and continued through the Dogra period. The idea that divine forces could intervene in human life influenced how people understood their past. History was often seen through stories of saints, miracles, and sacred places. As a result, religion and the region became closely linked in popular thinking. Shrines and *tirthas* came to be viewed as powerful spaces where divine help was possible, shaping a particular way of remembering and explaining Kashmir's past. For example, the story

regarding the emergence of the famous Saffron plant and its healing power is mentioned in the twentieth-century traveler account. The birth or the coming of this plant on the soil of Kashmir has been ascribed to a *Nag* (water god) that dates back to the time of King Lalitadatiya (724-760). The story runs as, in the city of Padmapur (Pampore, where Kashmir saffron is grown), there lived a famous physician. A *Nag* (water god) who fell sick with eye disease went to the physician to be cured. The physician tried all the known medicines, but the trouble remained. The physician was baffled and asked his patient whether he was a man, and on learning that he was a *nag* realized that all the remedies he had applied to his eyes had been incurable. The physician applied ointment again and covered it with a piece of cloth as a precaution, and the eyes were cured. In his gratitude, the nag then presented to the physician a saffron seed which led to its birth in Kashmir.[20] The divine stories connected with Kashmir as a landscape finds a special place in the historical tradition of Kashmir. When one goes through the historical accounts of Kashmir from the eleventh to the twentieth century, they are replete with various divine stories. This divinity demonstrates deep rooted inter-connections among the Sanskrit texts from twelfth-fifteenth the Persian as well as Urdu *tarikhs* from sixteenth-nineteenth century.[21] Similarly, the power of shrines as divine or sacred sites, possessing healing powers, got consolidated with the production of biographies of Sufi and *Rishi* saints. These hagiographies contained miracle stories operating from the divine realm. As Zutshi asserts, "what endowed Sufi saints [of Kashmir] with their power, of course, was their hagiographies, which were replete with stories of their supernatural feats and miracles, written in their praise by their disciples and descendants. As a result, these texts cannot be read and dismissed purely as straightforward biographical history; rather they have to be understood as politically motivated stories regarding saints, usually as a means to define the communities by connecting them to the saintly generations."[22] These hagiographical accounts were full of mystical and supernatural stories which allowed immortalizing memory of the saint in the minds of the people and legitimizing the spiritual authority of his shrine after his death. Other than the hagiographical accounts, the oral narratives deeply embedded in the Kashmiri culture also narrate mystical stories associated with *pirs*. At the popular level, stories associating supernatural powers with *pirs*/ *fakirs* carried down through collective memory influenced the psyche of the masses. With the result, over a period of time, people have come to believe in them.

Conclusion

The gradual transformation of the Kashmiri landscape into a sacred space deeply shaped the region's historical experience. From the medieval period onwards, shrines became central to people's understanding of life, suffering, and recovery. This strong belief in shrines influenced how people explained calamities such as diseases and epidemics, particularly during the Dogra period (1846–1947). Illness was often seen not only as a physical problem but also as something connected to spiritual causes and forces beyond human control. Stories about saints and their healing powers played an important role in strengthening this belief. Accounts of miracles and acts of healing were widely shared and remembered. These stories did not survive only in written texts but were mainly passed down through oral traditions such as songs, folktales, and local myths. In this way, oral tradition became a major source for preserving Kashmir's cultural values[23] and healing practices across generations. As a result, faith healing occupied a central place in these narratives. People believed that calamities could be reduced or overcome through rituals and prayers performed at shrines, either individually or as part of the community. Shrines were not visited only to fulfil personal spiritual needs; they were also approached as spaces of care during times of sickness and widespread epidemics. As this paper has shown, shrines functioned as trusted places of healing, offering hope and comfort when medical help was limited or uncertain. In this sense, healing in Kashmir went beyond medicine and became deeply tied to faith, memory, and everyday life.

[1] The most important story being the 'Jalodhbhava-Kashyap story' that deals with the origin of the valley of Kashmir. For Complete Story see, Chitrelekha Zutshi, *Kashmir's Contested Past: Narratives, Sacred Geographies and the Historical Imagination*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2104, p. 1.

[2] Ibid., pp. 3-4.

[3] Khalid Bashir Ahmad, *Kashmir: Exposing the Myth Behind the Narrative*, Sage, 2017, p. 1.

[4] For complete story, see Onaizu Drabu, *The Legend of Himaal and Nagrai: Greatest Kashmiri Folk Tales*, Speaking Tiger Publishing Pvt. Ltd., 2019.

[5] Diana Erick, *India: A sacred Geography*, New York: Harmony books, 2011, p. 1.

[6] Kalhana, *Rajatarangini: A Chronicle of the kings of Kashmir*, Vol I, trans. By M A Stein, Westminister: Archibal Constable and Company, Ltd., 1900, pp. 6-8 & 92.

[7] Muhammad Ali Kashmiri, Taufat al Ahbab, Trans. By Kashinath Pandit, *A Muslim Missionary in Medieval Kashmir*, New Delhi: Eurasian Human Rights Forum, 2009, p. 63.

[8] Khwaja Muhammad Azam Dyadmeri, first written in 1799, translated into urdu By Khawaja Hameed Yazdani, Srinagar: Jammu & Kashmir Research Islamic Centre, 1997, 78-84, 145-155, 224-232, 295-300, and 338-339.

[9] Zutshi, *"Kashmir's Contested Pasts,"* pp. 21-72.

[10] When it comes to describing the inhabitants of the valley of Kashmir, the European travelers and the missionaries in their memoirs are quite cynical about them. They have grossly criticized their behavior patterns and people with no sense of sanitation and hygiene.

[11] Maroof Shah, 'Kashmiriyat and its Metaphysical Grounding in Reshiyat' in *Kashmiriyat through the Ages*, ed. Fida Mohammad Hassnain, Srinagar: Gulshan Books, 2001, pp. 42-47.

[12]Qudratullah Shahab, *Shahabnam*, Delhi: Educational Publishing House, 1999, pp. 20-21.

[13] He writes a whole account about Sadika Begum's visit to the shrine of Roshan Shah Wali in which he accompanied her. Ibid., pp. 23-32.

[14] Hamzah Makhdhoomi Kashmiri (1494-1576) was a famous *sufi* saint in sixteenth century Kashmir. He is sometimes referred as *Mehboob-ulAlam* (loved by all) and *Sultan-ul-Arifeen* (king of those who Know God). Reports on the *Shia-Sunni* Conflict in Kashmir, Foreign Department, Government of India, File No. 12-14/1873, National Archives of India.

[15] Amar Singh Chauhan, *Health Services in Jammu and Kashmir 1858-1947*, New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 1994, pp. 31-32.

[16] Ibid., pp. 81-82.

[17] The scholars of medical history collectively assume that public health measures in India were initially introduced with an aim to benefit the colonial army and the white Europeans. For Further see, Mark Harrison, Mark Harrison, *Public Health in British India: Anglo Indian Preventive Medicine 1859-1914*, Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. 2.; David Arnold, *Colonizing the Body: State Medicine and the Epidemic Disease in Nineteenth Century India*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993, pp. 7-8.

[18] Neve, *Beyond the pir-panjal,* pp. 164-165.

[19] Ibid., p. 165.

[20] Pearce Grevis, *This is Kashmir*, London: Cassel and Company Ltd., 1954, p. 130. https://archive.org/details/dli.csl.6483/page/n1/mode/2up.

[21] For example the land of Kashmir became home to humans and deities together with divine intervention. The story with respect to the origin of Kashmir with multiple variations as told in the

Sanskrit texts, Persian narratives and Kashmir oral tradition continues to be same. See Zutshi, *Contested Pasts*, pp. 1-20.

[22] Ibid., p. 24.

[23] Raoof Mir, "Communicating Islam in Kashmir: Intersection of Religion and Media," *Society and Culture in South Asia* 5(1) 47-69 (2019), p. 51.