(Re)reading *Gongol-nama*: Reflections on Shaikh Noor-ud-Din, his Intellectual Milieu and Islam in Kashmir

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Abstract

Shaikh Noor-ud-Din, or Nund Rishi, is arguably one of the most famous pre-modern local saints of Kashmir and is widely known as the founder of a local Sufi order, the Rishis. Modern works on Kashmir have understood the intellectual milieu of pre-modern Kashmir as dominantly Sanskritic in nature. As such, Noor-ud-Din's poetry, composed as it is in a dominantly Islamicate frame, with frequent use of Arabic and Persian vocabulary is understood as a 'miracle' which otherwise defies a historical explanation. Besides, the spread of Islam in Kashmir is mainly understood with respect to either the missionary activities and miracles of Persianate Sufi saints or the inherent liberating impact of Islam, or alternatively seen as intimately connected to its political patronage by the Shahmiri and Chak Sultans of Kashmir. With respect to its various manifestations, Islam is subsequently divided into mutually exclusive categories of Rishi, Sufi and orthodox Islam, a schema in which personalities such as Noor-ud-Din are pigeon holed into a certain reductive role. It is with these issues in mind that I propose to use Noor-ud-Din's poetry, particularly *Gongol-nama* for an intervention into three historio-graphical debates about pre and early modern Kashmir. I would be focusing on three inter-related points; one, debates about Kashmir's links with the larger Persianate world, two, the spread of Islam in Kashmir, and three, the binaries of Rishi, Sufi and scriptural Islam. I conclude with three main points: one, a need to do away with Noor-ud-Din's image as a local saint and relocate his intellectual milieu by highlighting his connections to the Persianate world, two, re-interpret the spread in pre-modern Kashmir as a philological encounter, and three, revisit with the highly-problematic binaries of Rishi, Sufi and scriptural Islam.

Key-words: Shaikh Noor-ud-Din, *Rishi*, pre-modern Kashmir, Islam, Persianate.

Introduction

Noor-ud-Din was born in a village in south Kashmir in a family which had recently emigrated from the neighbouring region of Kishtwar. Already by the time of Noor-ud-Din's birth, Kashmir was frequented by a

number of travellers from the Persianate world,[1] including Sufi saints and religious notables, some of them settling down and establishing Sufi orders in the region. There are indications that Noor-ud-Din may have emerged as a prominent saint-poet within his own lifetime. This is in spite of the fact that he was not patronised by the contemporary ruler, Sultan Zainul Abidin (r. 1420-1470), even as the Sultan is well-known for his patronage of a galaxy of diverse scholars in his court.[2] It has been suggested that Noor-ud-Din's poetry was penned down in his own lifetime by one of his contemporaries even as none of the works are extant anymore.[3] The currently-available poetic verses are preserved in a wide range of texts called the *Nur-nama*/*Rishi-nama*, a new genre primarily associated with the collections, commentary and translations of Noor-ud-Din's poetry.[4] Among the existing ones, the earliest can be traced to Baba Nasibuddin Ghazi, (17th century) and followed by those of Baba Kamal (1785) and Baba Khalil (17th century).[5]

Noor-ud-Din's poetry spanned a wide range of compositions, as many as twelve of them identified.[6] Among other longer poems is included the *Gongol-nama* translated as the 'harvest poem'. Even as there are debates about whether the poem was actually composed by Noor-ud-Din or whether it is a later addition, there is a larger scholarly consensus about the authenticity of *Gongol-nama* as a poem originally composed by Noor-ud-Din himself.[7]

Out of the many different ways of interpreting the history of pre-modern Kashmir in light of Noor-ud-Din's poetry, two stand out as the most common: one, the framework of syncretism, and two, that of spread of Islam. Within the framework of syncretism, Noor-ud-Din's poetry is interpreted as a rather passive representative of the larger already-existing syncretic intellectual milieu in pre-modern Kashmir.[8] Alternatively, it is seen as an active bringing together of multi-religious intellectual strands, mostly from Buddhism, Shaivism and Islam, for a 'translation' of Islam.[9] Within these frameworks, Noor-ud-Din is labelled as either a poet-first-Sufi-later or alternatively Sufi-first-poet-later.

With a focus on *Gongol-nama*, and references to the larger corpus of his poetry, this paper analyses how Noor-ud-Din's poetry can be used for an intervention into three larger debates about the pre-modern history of Kashmir: One, links of Kashmir, more specifically those of its intellectual traditions, with the larger Persianate world, two, debates about the actual process and manner of spread of Islam in Kashmir, and three, the modern binaries between scriptural and folk Islam on the one hand and Sufi and Rishi Islam on the other. I begin with a critical review of modern historiography with a focus on three points and in light of Noor-ud-Din's poetry, highlight the need to re-visit the historio-graphical premises. I conclude with three main points: one, a need to do away with Noor-ud-Din's image as a local saint and relocate Noor-ud-Din's intellectual milieu by highlighting his connections to the Persianate world, two, re-interpret the spread in pre-modern Kashmir as a philological encounter, and three, revisit with the highly-problematic binaries of Rishi, Sufi and scriptural.[10]

Towards Relocating Pre-modern Kashmir, Noor-ud-Din and a Reconceptualization of the Spread of Islam

The peculiar geographical location of Kashmir, surrounded by mountains from all sides, has meant that different intellectual developments in the region have often been viewed as essentially local development. This has also meant that attempts to trace the possible impact of broader trans-regional trends on intellectual traditions within Kashmir have not been taken very seriously. This is also true about pre-modern Kashmir and its Islamic tradition, especially the local Rishi order. Founded by Noor-ud-Din, the Rishi order has dominantly been understood as a local phenomenon, with both its beliefs and practices related to and understood as heavily indebted to the regional Buddhist-Shaivite traditions.[11] Noor-ud-Din's awareness of and strong grounding within the Buddhist-Shaivite tradition is not very surprising, since by his time in the fourteenth-century, Kashmir had already seen a flourishing of both the traditions. In more concrete terms, Noor-ud-Din's association with local Buddhist-Shaivite traditions is attributed to his association with his

contemporary Shaivite mystic Lal Ded. However, a close reading of Noor-ud-Din's poetry, and in this case the *Gongol-nama* reveals that Noor-ud-Din was equally well-grounded within the intellectual traditions of the larger Persianate world as well. This is demonstrated by the many instances in the poem in which Noor-ud-Din seamlessly brings together Qura'nic terms in Arabic language, often within a single stanza, along with their counterparts in the local Kashmir language:

Lizmisatiy rokuvas vastai
Hama chhuy khahas kadith trav
Roza, nemaz, hajj, zakat hvaravtsa kartai
Yus kari gongol suy kari krav

In all humility, bend thou in prayers,
Weed out the field and throw them away.
Do perform well *Roza*, *Nemaz*, *Hajj* and *Zakat*,
One who celebrates the *Gongol* will surely celebrate the *Kraav*.[12]

Instances such as these stand out as indicators of his poetic credentials, and at the same time point to his relation with linguistic traditions of the larger Persianate world. As such, it becomes important to relocate Noor-ud-Din's intellectual world from a constricted local Buddhist-Hindu milieu to a larger canvas of Persianate world. However, this is a rather difficult territory to tread into, mainly because of two reasons; one, that Noor-ud-Din is never believed to have travelled outside Kashmir and as such there are no recorded instances of his travels to parts of the Persianate world or his interactions with any of the prominent intellectuals for instance and two, the fourteenth-century intellectual milieu of Noor-ud-Din's time is still believed to be a dominantly Sanskritic one, with little traces of influences from the Persianate world. Within this framework, it becomes difficult to explain the phenomenon of Noor-ud-Din's multi-lingual poetry, replete with Qura'nic phrases and references to some of the most prominent Persianate mystics such as Mansur al-Hallaj (d. 922) and Jalaluddin Rumi (d. 1273).[13] As a result, Noor-ud-Din's poetry is seen as a linguistic and intellectual 'miracle', which cannot be otherwise explained as a historical phenomenon. In light of a re-reading of Noor-ud-Din's poetry, this paper attempts to raise

questions about this dominant historio-graphical premise about Noor-ud-Din's time and address the possibility of re-contextualising Noor-ud-Din and his poetry by re-defining the intellectual milieu of fourteenth-century Kashmir. Within this schema, fourteenth-century Kashmir can be understood as part of the larger Persianate world where religious and mystic discourses were not solely expressed in a Sanskritic terminology, even as it may have been the dominant one. One of the biggest impediments in an elaborate historical description of this phenomenon is the fact that outside Noor-ud-Din's own poetry, there are no textual sources to support or argue against this line of argumentation. This is especially the case with the earliest Persian sources composed within Kashmir, none of which are extant anymore. There are some leads in this regard though, which if pursued, may lead to some crucial breakthroughs in this regard. Among others, this is more clearly indicated by the recent coming to fore of a thirteenth-century Qura'nic manuscript, further research upon which may be crucially important for revising the chronology of Kashmir's connections with the Persianate world and specifically the Islamicate traditions, so often traced to the early-fourteenth century and associated with the coming to power of the Muslim Sultanate.[14] Stories about the encounter between Noor-ud-Din and Mir Muhammad Hamadani as recorded in the earliest extant Persian texts from Kashmir such as the *Tarikh-i Sayyid Ali* may be understood as anecdotes about the much larger patterns of intellectual interaction between Noor-ud-Din and prominent Persianate intellectuals of his time.[15]

The second point, I, would like to the raise is the possibility of re-conceptualising the process of spread of Islam in Kashmir as essentially a philological encounter. This would mean a critique of the modern historio-graphical theorizations of the earliest manifestations of the process in pre-modern Kashmir at least from around Noor-ud-Din's time, even as ideally speaking, rather than beginning with the establishment of the Sultanate in early fourteenth-century, this need to be pushed further back in time. In modern historiography, the spread of Islam in Kashmir is linked either to the missionary activities or miracles of Persianate Sufi saints or the

inherent liberating impact of Islam, or alternatively seen as intimately connected to its political patronage by the Shahmiri and Chak Sultans of Kashmir.[16] Noor-ud-Din's poetry helped spread Islam by 'translating' its central concepts into a locally familiar agricultural imagery. It represented a combination of the traditions of Islamic mysticism and agriculture and linguistic traditions of Persianate and Kashmiri into a single frame. In many ways, *Gongol-nama*, in its combination of agricultural metaphors in the Kashmiri language with Qura'nic phrases in Arabic language, serves as the paradigm of this philological encounter. The following few lines demonstrate the point:

Alafal gosul taharat kartai,
Ipatchhainiyat kola-kol trav.
Van chhuy qurat sahih partai,
Yuskari gongol suy kari krav.

The ploughshare is thy bath and ablutions, perform them well,
The yoke is thy conscience: abandon the thoughts of the family.
Tilling the land is reading the Quran: read it correctly,
One who celebrates the Gongol will surely celebrate the Krav.[17]

The role played by *Gongol-nama* in the spread of Islam in Kashmir is in many ways comparable to a similar role played by a genre of early-modern Deccani poems variously known as the *Chakki-nama* and *Charkhi-nama*.[18] This also brings to our attention the third point, I, would like to raise in here about the spread of Islam and more specifically its agents. Outside its homelands-and in our case in south Asia, Islam has been dominantly understood as divided between its folk and scriptural form, with the later understood as a defining characteristic of Islam in south Asia. The assumption of course is that the 'foreign' concepts of Islam needed a local vocabulary and imagery for its articulation and as such the originally Arabic version of scriptural Islam is nowhere to be found in case of South Asian Islam. At a larger level, Sufism, even as understood as intimately linked to Islam, is seen as distinguishable in many ways from 'orthodox' Islam.[19] However in case of Kashmir, as is the case with many other regions in south Asia, Sufis are further subdivided into the more orthodox Persianate Sufis and their less orthodox local

counterparts, the Rishis, who are seen as characterising the folk version of Islam. A number of prominent Persianate Sufis in the pre-modern Kashmir, such as the Kubrawi saint Sayid Ali Hamadani, his son Mir Muhmmad Hamadani and later Shamsuddin A/Iraki have often been described in terms such as '*sharia*-minded' and 'orthodox' with most of the modern works highlighting their alleged 'missionary zeal'.[20] Alternatively, this scheme of a dichotomous folk and scriptural Islam is posited in terms of a larger cultural frame, wherein the Persianate Sufis are seen agents of, representing and actively disseminating essentially non-local Persianate cultural forms, while as the representatives of the folk Islam are seen as their local antithesis. This alleged clash is also seen as having manifested itself in political terms wherein representatives of Persianate cultural forms allegedly sought to promote a Persianate political culture, something that faced opposition from representatives of the local cultural forms. Re-reading Noor-ud-Din poetry and *Gongol-nama* in particular allows us to critically reflect upon this line of argumentation. Noor-ud-Din's poetry needs to be read in light of its historical context of its composition and I argue that the binaries between folk and scriptural Islam on the one hand and Persianate vs local on the other need to be revised since the very representatives of folk Islam and local culture could themselves be understood as agents of Persianization and scriptural Islam. An alternate reading of Noor-ud-Din's poetic composition in general and *Gongol-nama* in particular illustrates this point.

Noor-ud-Din was arguably the first person to use a wide range of Persian and Arabic terms in his Kashmiri language mystic poetry. Given the historic context of this rather novel unprecedented enterprise, this was to have a long-standing impact on Kashmiri language itself. In many ways, Noor-ud-Din was an important agent of Persianization of the Kashmiri language in particular and by extension the Kashmiri culture in general. Similarly, with respect to the spread of Islam in Kashmir, Noor-ud-Din's poetic verses frequently refer to, elaborate and emphasise upon the observance of some of the most fundamental religious obligations in Islam

such as *salaat*, *hajj*, *zakat*, a trait so often seen as a defining characteristic of propagators of scriptural rather than folk Islam.

Besides the fact that Noor-ud-Din chose native Kashmiri for an elaboration of his mystic ideas, two, use of the term *Rishi* for describing himself and his order has often been understood as a subtle reflective of his allegedly larger and much deep-rooted opposition to the spread of the Persianate cultural ethos in pre-modern Kashmir. Noor-ud-Din's poem, *beh kus ruesh tay meh kya naav* famously known for a genealogical elaboration of the *Rishi* order serves as the primary reference point for an elaboration of this idea.

The first Rishi was Prophet Muhammad
The second in order was Hazrat Uwais,
The third Rishi was Zulka Rishi,
The fourth in order was Hazrat Miran,
The fifth Rishi was Rum Rishi,
The sixth in order was Hazrat Pilas,
The seventh (me) has been miscalled Rishi,
Do I deserve to be called a Rishi? Who am I?[21]

The fact that Noor-ud-Din included none of his famous pre-modern contemporary or near-contemporary Persianate saints in this genealogical poem may in fact well be interpreted as an indication of his attempt to distance himself from the existing Persianate Sufi orders with established presence in and around Kashmir at that time.

However, as this paper argues, there is an uncritical generalisation which if read in the larger corpus of Noor-ud-Din's own poetry does not stand. The same poem which is understood to support the idea that Noor-ud-Din attempted to fashion his Rishi *silsila* as an exclusively local order and a polar opposite to other Persianate Sufi orders in fact contains references to the manner in which Noor-ud-Din sought to place himself within the larger history of Islam and the Persianate world. Noor-ud-Din traces the origins of the Rishi order not to some local personality but the Prophet of Islam himself, followed by another well-known contemporary of Prophet Owais-al Qarni. Besides serving as a possibly legitimational purpose, this discursive alignment of Rishi order with the larger Islamic

history by Noor-ud-Din again reflects his awareness of and reliance upon the intellectual currents within his contemporary Persianate world. By Noor-ud-Din's time in the fourteenth-century, claims of allegiance to the Uwaysi order was a well-known practice in the larger Persianate world even by prominent associates of some of the well-known Sufi order and thus was not exclusively used a marker of distinction from the existing Sufi orders.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to focus on three things. One, highlighting the Persianate connections of Kashmir's pre-modern intellectual milieu; two, arguing that the spread of Islam in Kashmir was essentially a philological encounter of different knowledge and linguistic traditions, and three, questioning the assumed binary between scriptural and folk Islam on the one hand and Sufi and Rishi Islam in the other. In view of the points raised above, this paper is a humble attempt to highlight the need to revisit the very foundational assumptions which serve as the basis of our understanding of the history of pre-modern Kashmir. It is intended as an addition to the already-existing corpus of works which seek to critically re-assess the modern historiography on pre-modern Kashmir.

Notes and References

[1] Within the definition of the term Persianate is also included what is known as the Islamicate world. For a definition see Richard M. Eaton, *India in the Persianate Age: 1000-1765*, California: University of California Press, 2019.

[2] Born in 1377 in a village of Kulgam, Shaikh Noor-ud-Din's is said to have been associated with a number of saints right from his the marriage of his parents, to his nursing and early childhood. For details about his early life, see G N Gauhar, *Mo'tabar Kalami Shaikh-ul-Aalam: ma'akahvet*, Srinagar: Ali Mohammed and Sons, undated, pp. 91-121; Shafi Shouq, *Shaikh ul Alamtetems und zamana*(Shaikh ulAlam and his Time), Kapran: Bazm-e Adab, 1978, pp. 35-38.

[3] Kati Pandit is said to have written down Noor-ud-Din's poetry in his own lifetime and that soon after his death in the reign of Sultan Zain-ul Abidin, this work was translated into Persian by Mulla Ahmad in the reign of Sultan Zain-ul Abidin by one of the one of more famous chroniclers of his time, Mulla Ahmad. See Moti Lal Saqi, *Kulliyat-i*

Shaikh ul Aalam, Srinagar: J&K Academy of Art, Culture and Languages, 1985, p.17. Others have argued in favour of slightly later date. A K Rahbar mentions that the poetry was first compiled somewhere in between 1420 and 1470. Besides their translation and commentary in Persian, the poetry is said to have been translated in Sanskrit in the fifteenth century. See AK Rahbar, *Kaeshri Adbech Taerikh*, 1965, pp. 177-180.

[4] Bashar Bashir, "Editor's Preface" in Margoob Banihali, *Nur-Nama: Urdu Translation of Baba Nasibuddin Ghazi's Persian Nur-Nama*, Srinagar: Markaz-i Nur Centre for Shaikh-ulAlam Studies, 2013, p. iii.

[5] It has been argued that the poetry had already been written down well before. On the basis of references in Dawud Mishkati's *Asrar-ul Abrar* and Baba Khalil's *Nurnama*, it has been argued that the there already existed written corpus of Noor-ud-Din's poetry from which others like Abdullah Baihaqi claimed to have copied. The same is implied in *Nur-nama*'s from Chrar.See Moti Lal Saqi, *Kulliyat-i Shaikh ul Alam*, Srinagar: J&K Academy of Art, Culture and Languages, 1985, pp.18-20.

[6] Afaqui, *Kulliyat*, pp. 47-51.

[7] These are definite concerns about the authenticity of certain portions of Noor-ud-Din's poetry, including the *Gongol-nama*. However, it is important to mention that *Gongol-nama* is not an exceptional case when it comes to debates about the authenticity of modern corpus of Noor-ud-Din's poetry, or for that matter, the modern collections of Noor-ud-Din's contemporary, Lal Ded.

[8] See for instance Yoginder Sikand, *The Role of Kashmiri Sufis in the Promotion of Social Reform and Cultural Harmony: 14th-16th Century*, Mumbai: Centre for Study of Society and Secularism, 1999.

[9] See for instance Mohammad Ishaq Khan, *Kashmir's Transition to Islam: The Role of Muslim Rishis (Fifteenth to Eighteenth Century)*, New Delhi: Manohar, 2000.

[10] For a recent critique of the binary between 'Rishi Islam' and 'scriptural Islam', also see Mufti Mudasir, "Holy Lives as Texts: Saints and the Fashioning of Kashmir's Muslim Identity", *Philological Encounters*, Vol. 1, No. 1-4, 2016, pp. 288-312.

[11] See for instance A.Q. Rafiqui, "The Impact of Sufism in Kashmir", in Saiyid Zaheer Husain Jafri and Helmut Reifield ed., *The Islamic Path: Sufism*, *Society*, *and Politics in India*, New Delhi: Rainbow Publishers, 2006.

[12] Parimoo, Unity in Diversity, pp. 194.

[13] For Noor-ud-Din's 'trans-linguistic' poetry, see Fayaz A. Dar and Zubair Khalid, "*Shaikh Noor-ud-Din's Koshur Quran: Trans-linguistic Poetry of a Fourteenth-Century Kashmiri Muslim Rishi*", in Huda Fakhreddin and Hany Ranshwaned, Oxford University Press and British Academy, forthcoming.

[14] For a brief discussion of the possible implications of this manuscript on the history of Islam in the Kashmir see Muhammad Yusuf Taing, "Editor's Preface", in Syed Muhammad Farooq Bukhari, *Kashmir mein Arabi sha'ar. waadab ki Tarikh*, Srinagar: J&K Academy of Art, Culture and Languages, 1993, pp. 3-6.

[15] See Sayyid Ali, *Tarikh-i Sayyid Ali*, trans. from Persian into English by Dr. Zubaida Jan as *History of Kashmir: 1374-1570*, Srinagar: Jay Kay Bookshop, 2009.

[16] For spread of Islam as combination of political power and missionary activities of 'zealous' Sufis, see Aziz Ahmad, "Conversion to Islam in the Valley of Kashmir", *Central Asiatic Journal*, vol. 23, No. 1-2 , 1979, pp. 3-18; Andre Wink, *The Making of Indo-Islamic World*: *Indo-Islamic Society (14th- 15th Centuries)*, Leiden, Brill, 2004, p. 141. For spread of Islam as a gradual transition see Mohammad Ishaq Khan, *Kashmir's Transition to Islam: The Role of Muslim Rīshīs (Fifteenth to Eighteenth Century)*, New Delhi, Manohar, 1995, p. 2. For emphasis on the liberating impact of Islam, see Rattan Lal Hangloo, *The State in Medieval Kashmir*, Delhi, Manohar, 2000.

[17] Parimoo, *Unity in Diversity*, p.193.

[18] See Richard M Eaton, *A Social History of Deccan: 1300-1761*, Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 144; Eaton, *Sufis of Bijapur, 1300-1700: Social Roles of Sufis in Medieval India*, Princeton, 1978.

[19] Karimov Gasym Mamed Oglu, "Basic principles distinguishing orthodox Islam from Sufism", *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, Vol. 9, No. 2, 1988, pp. 245-250.

[20] See for instance Hakim Sameer Hamadani, *The Syncretic Traditions of Islamic Religious Architecture of Kashmir (Early 14th-18th century)*, New Delhi, 2022

[21] Translated by Ishaq Khan, 1986, p. 260.