

Religious Pluralism in Contemporary Kashmir: A Study of Shaikh al-‘Ālam^(RA)

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Abstract

Kashmir is known for its rich cultural heritage and Sufi traditions. It is a land that witnessed the Sufis of highest order who directly influenced the lives of common folks. As far as Shaikh Noor-ud-Din Wali^(RA) is concerned, he was an outstanding Sufi saint who served Kashmiri Sufi culture in a Kashmiri dialect. Shaikh Noor-ud-Din Wali^(RA) as a Sufi preached them the way to absolute in a common language. For Shaikh, Religion was not a theoretical subject, but an object of experience. His experience while he was in his ascetic state, bridge the gap between the ultimate goal that was to realize the Absolute. The mysticism that was taught by Shaikh Noor-ud-Din^(RA) was the outcome of his life-long experience that is why he left footprints on Kashmir's religious and cultural identity.

Keywords: Religious pluralism, Shaikh Noor-ud-Din, Kashmir, Religious Experience.

Introduction

First of all it is important to realize the fact that Shaikh Noor-ud-Din's^(RA) religious career and the construction of Kashmiri religious-social identity are integrally connected in both its historical and theological contexts. It is also of no less importance to recognize that during Shaikh's own time Muslims were but a small part of the larger non-Muslim population of the valley comprising the followers of Hindu and Buddhist traditions.¹ Islam with all its revolutionary teachings, had not radically transformed, had even barely touched the belief-system and socio-ethical structure prevalent in the Kashmiri Muslim society - the evidence for which comes from no other source than the verses of Shaikh himself. The verses written by Shaikh, in a way, mirror the gradual transition of Muslim society from the baggage of its pre-Islamic past to its present and future which was more germane to the value-system based on *Qur'an* and *Sunnah*.

In his own career as a Sufi, Shaikh himself was undergoing a crisis arising

out of the twin factors of his largely non-Islamic milieu and his convictions rooted in basic Islamic sources that were not exactly in harmony with each other. His approach to come to terms with this conflictual situation was not to reject one side in favour of the other. Taking the matter in a more positive way, he attempted to reconcile and integrate the two sides. And it was this integrationist approach that became in both short and long term, the basis for the construction of Kashmiri religious identity. This integral approach also constituted the key for the understanding of his poetry as well as his larger world-view. It goes without saying that an understanding of Islam's historical manifestation in Kashmir, would require a prior understanding of the man who influenced the Kashmiri mind more profoundly than any other religious leader.² It is thus not merely the mystic Noor-ud-Din^(RA) whom we seek to discover here but also the maker of Kashmiri Muslim identity, and the protagonist of Islamic human values. Indeed it can be safely argued that it is because of him that the ideas of religious tolerance and more than this, of *Tawhidic* universalism are still the dominant part of attitudes and beliefs of contemporary Kashmiri society. The history of Islam in Kashmir is, in fact, bound up integrally with the mystical, moral and aesthetic sensibilities and even philosophic insights of Noor-ud-Din^(RA). It also goes without saying that he influenced the course of Islamic development in the Valley by communicating it through local language and idioms as well as more refined cultural emblems of Persian and Arabic traditions.

The many tales told about Noor-ud-Din's^(RA) life need to be understood in the context of a society saturated with the beliefs in supernatural and what goes in the name of the miraculous, even superstitious. What is more important is, however, is that his poetic and his other writings have, through centuries, made decisive influence on the attitudes of a people living in the particular geographical environment of the Kashmir Valley. His poetry not only became the cultural heritage of an ethnic group, but by being the direct outcome of the growth of Islamic civilization in the Kashmir Valley, it also became identified with its expanding frontiers. In assessing the value of his verses as source material, we must, however,

remember that their psychological function and aesthetic qualities have not distorted the historical facts contained in them. The kind of historical information transmitted by his poetry actually reflected the moral and social ethos of the society he lived in.

His poetry is, therefore, not merely a historical source but it also conveys the attitudes and behavioural patterns which influenced a number of adherents of his mystic order in a period of great social crises in Kashmir's history. The Shaikh's poetry is not something that can be said to have become, with the passing of time, something socially irrelevant but is something of abiding value. There is in his life and works certainly a lot of material that is legendary. Certainly, it has many parts which are historically authentic. They, indeed, blend and represent indistinguishable aspects of a whole experience. According to a tradition, quoted in several hagiographical works, for three days after his birth in 779/1379 A.D.³ Noor-ud-Din^(RA) did not take milk from his mother. But, then, Lal Ded visited the house of Salar Ganai, the father of the newly-born, and addressed the latter:

*Thou wast not ashamed of being born; why then art thou ashamed of
sucking (at the mother's breast) ⁴*

The baby started taking milk and thereafter Lal Ded's visits to the parental house of Noor-ud-Din^(RA) continued. It was Lal Ded, indeed, who was the earliest source of inspiration for Noor-ud-Din^(RA).

The popular tradition about Lal Ded's influence on Noor-ud-Din^(RA), though enveloped in legendary material, contains a kernel of historical truth. It not only conveys some information about the early influence on the Shaikh's mind, but also reveals that dynamic relationship: a creative tension that existed between the local and the Islamic mystic traditions.

Noor-ud-Din's^(RA) religious career falls into three main stages: the first is that of an orphan struggling to eke out his mundane existence; the second is that of an ascetic who withdraws himself from worldly affairs in order to know the religious truth; and in the third and final stage he gives up the life of a recluse to advocate ethics of a dynamic and positive nature.

As he became a recluse in the second stage of his, the Shaikh, following the practice of the Prophet Muhammad ^(SAW), retired to a cave at Kaimuh,⁵ the place of his birth. He gave various excuses to his mother when she insisted on his returning home. Like a Buddhist monk he spoke about the transient riches of the world, human desires, anger and ego, which preoccupy the human mind. He drew lurid pictures of the Day of Judgement and hell to impress upon his mother the futility of seeking a life of wealth and power in the material world:

*This life is a hollow bubble;
We are just a drop in its vast ocean,
An ass like me is unable to bear its brunt,
Having deserted home, why should I care to live?*⁶

Noor-ud-Din ^(RA) himself explains why he went to live in the forest early in life, in the true spirit of the Rishis:

*In the pursuit of mundane affairs my desires became limitless;
So I retired to the jungle, early in life,
May the Lord saturate the Rishi's mind with longing for Thee;
For I remember with gratitude how kind Thou art.*⁷

Noor-ud-Din's ^(RA) decision to lead an ascetic's life was voluntary even as it reflected the mindset at that stage of his life. It was influenced by his craving for seeking the truth.⁸ The path of renunciation followed by the Rishis preceding him and their extreme ascetic habits must have also played an important part in shaping his outlook on worldly life.⁹ It is unlikely that the desire to practice penance in the cave was induced by any saint he might have met in his spiritual search.

*The company of saints I did not keep,
Till right moment and youth slipped by,
Wrongly did i attach (myself) to the world;
Have thy play and let's go home.*¹⁰

It is certain that the Shaikh chose the 'legendary' Rishis as the earliest models of holiness. This is borne out by the unqualified praise for them in his poetry:

*Zulka Rishi of Dandakvan*¹¹
Who subsisted on (wild) fruit of shrubs,

*Was a true lover to attain salvation,
May God grant me the same spiritual power.*¹²

What inspires the Shaikh about the lives of the Rishis is not only their penance, meditation, abstemious habits, but above all, their devotion to God and burning love for the Creator:

*Miran Rishi of Reshivan*¹³
Who lived for a thousand lunar months
In a state of union with God did he leave for his heavenly abode.
*May God grant me the same spiritual power.*¹⁴

Other Rishis of yore to whom the Shaikh looks for inspiration are Rum Rishi¹⁵ and Pīlas Rishi.¹⁶

The Rishis are, undoubtedly, Noor-ud-Din's^(RA) refuge at the earliest stage of his mystical career. He frequently refers to the term Rishi whose meaning was familiar to the common folk; but it meant to him not merely an ascetic of this world, as in common parlance, but one who is a man of piety. The company of such men was sought by him, since he thought it was like heaven. This term was used by him for all believers with some quality more rarefied, designating a special state of grace. All his references to the local Hindu saints in the days of his youth indicate a generally understood social environment; it is not the Rishis as such that are essential for Noor-ud-Din^(RA), but the presence of the Creator that they make possible for the earnest seeker even in an oppressive Brahmanic society. The ultimate object of Noor-ud-Din^(RA) is, therefore, to follow the Rishis of yore, and he expresses a longing to rise to the heights of their spiritual glory by means of fervent prayers.

Having thus secluded himself in the cave in the manner of the Rishis, the Shaikh combined the daunting series of recitations of God's name with extremes of asceticism, self-mortification, long fasts, and sexual abstinence. In order to discipline his soul, he followed extreme ascetic practices to free himself from his sensual self. The Shaikh subsisted on wild vegetables and did not touch meat.¹⁷ He considered *vopalhak*¹⁸ and chicory to be the favourite dish of the chosen of God.¹⁹ He wore ragged garments but used the *kangri*²⁰ to protect himself against the rigours of

cold.²¹

The ethics of asceticism finds a systematic exposition in the conversations which the Shaikh had with his mother and wife in the cave. The doctrine of negation of the worldly life is emphasized when his mother urges him to return home:

*Mother do not pester me;
Nund has already buried himself,
Mother the world is mortal;
Therefore, I have retired to the cave.*²²

The Shaikh does not draw formal and verbal parallels between Hindu and Muslim ideas of unitive experience but he elaborates fully the spirit that animates the mystical movements in Hinduism and Islam.

*What qualities hast thou found in the world?
To allow thy body a free, loose rope?
The Musalman and Hindu sail in the same boat.
Have thy play and let's us go home.*²³

And while transcending the barriers of theological ethnocentrism the Shaikh remarks:

*Among the brothers of the same parents.
Why did you create a barrier?
Muslims and Hindus are one.
When will God be kind to His servants?*²⁴

The Shaikh warns that the worldly pleasures should not detract our attention from God, "who is our home." Life can become meaningful only when "We are able to 'ascend back' into His presence."²⁵ He brings to light the piercing longing of his soul seeking direct intervention of divine action to sanctify the human creature through a love that transfigures not only the soul, but also the body through constant prayer.

*Thou existed and Thou (alone) will exist.
Continue to remember Thou, none, but Thou.
Thou alone will assuage the anguish (of thy soul).
O my soul, recognize thyself.*²⁶

It follows that in the prime of his youth the socio-cultural tradition represented by Noor-ud-Din ^(RA) was purely mystical rather than of this

world. His conception of the universe and things around him were such that could have led to a separation of himself from these phenomena. The self-image of man, according to such a view, was that of a quasi-divine being whose only aim was to attain a mystical union with God. How the norms of the material world which lead to the realization of substantive modes of relationship between man and his environment and between man and man emerged in the Shaikh's thought is an important question requiring examination.

In fact, the crystallization of such a process began when Noor-ud-Din ^(RA) came in contact with Sayyid Muhammad Hamadani ^(RA), who is reputed to have played an important role in the spread of Islamic teachings in Kashmir along with a number of his disciples. The Sayyid indeed became the spiritual preceptor of the Shaikh.²⁷ Although, it is difficult to say whether the Shaikh fully succeeded in imparting the tenets of Islam to the commoners in his lifetime, it can hardly be denied that for generations after his death his teachings remained the Weltanschauung of the common folk. And it is chiefly for this reason that he is remembered to this day, not only as a Sufi but also as the greatest local teacher of Islam in Kashmir. So indelible has been the influence of the Shaikh on Kashmiri society that people have preserved to this day not only the memory of his visits in every nook and corner of the Valley, but have turned the habitats of the Shaikh in several villages into places of veneration. It is also significant that many proverbs reflecting the attitude of the Shaikh towards the responses of the rural folk to his teachings are said to have gained currency in the aftermath of his visits. The fact is that the Kashmiri peasants' life has been closely interwoven with the Shaikh's teachings and their impact on the development of a new cultural trend.

The Arabic and Persian words used by the Shaikh seem to have become an integral part of the Kashmiri language even during his lifetime. But for this, he would not have become the best and greatest representative of Kashmiri Sufism. His selection of key words from *tasawwuf*, intended for the common folk, presupposes full knowledge of the *Qur'an*, full

comprehension of its meaning structure and full participation in its linguistic consciousness. This explains why he was able to impart a clear exposition of the *Qur'anic* verses. He also plunged into the depths of the *Qur'an's* emotional currents, was at home with its reasoning and felt his way into its symbols explain why he earned the title of Shaikh al-'Ālam.²⁸

The verses of Noor-ud-Din^(RA) had an intrinsic attraction to a non-zealot listener like the average Kashmiri peasant. Most of the verses of the Shaikh, depicting the miseries of the oppressed sections of society in simple terms, must have led to their preservation and dissemination among the common men. Significantly, our study of various manuscripts reveals that the versions are not so divergent as would lead us to doubt their authenticity. There is, undoubtedly, sufficient written information about these verses to enable the historian to estimate their value as historical evidence, which of course, is also corroborated by the oral traditions preserved in the collective consciousness of the common people. Noor-ud-Din's^(RA) verses are not simply anonymous oral traditions sharing the common characteristic of being transmitted spontaneously from one person to another; rather they were transmitted from the residents of one locality to another. There is hardly a verse of Noor-ud-Din^(RA) which has not a social, cultural, and more importantly, topographical context.

Conclusion

It may be said in conclusion that Kashmir is heavily indebted to the ideas and mystico-ethical practices of Shaikh Noor-ud-Din^(RA) in so far as it was the path shown by him that determined the collective mind-set and life-style of the people of this geographical region. The ideas of Shaikh and the lives of Kashmiri people intersect and through this interplay of forces of ideas and life-pattern there emerge the forms and structures of Kashmiri identity. It is true that in recent time there has been a strong and aggressive trend to partly abandon the Shaikh's legacy but that is only indicative of history on the march where new ideas come to the fire and shape a new the cultural forms of a people. But the Shaikh's legacy is alive and kicking and is not going too soon from the Kashmiri scene.

Undoubtedly the mystic ways of Shaikh were influenced by its cultural setting and even influenced the latter in a decisive way. But the need of hour is to chart a course wherein the apparently conflicting value-systems coalesce and reconcile to achieve a balance acceptable to all sides having stake in this debate.

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