

Sufi Women and Conflicting Histories: A Biographical Study of Behat Bibi and Dehat Bibi

Tooba Towfiq,^{*} Irtiza Farooq[†]

This paper constructs the lives of two female disciples of Shaikh Nuruddin: Behat Bibi and Dehat Bibi, who are popularly known as Chhat Kori, i.e., girls trained under Nuruddin's spiritual guidance. It does so by bringing together varied accounts from hagiographical texts, and other historical works as well as a study of their shrine to construct a comprehensive biographical narrative of the two women saints. In the context of Kashmir, exhaustive studies on women mystics remain scarce. Existing works provide only cursory details about Behat Bibi and Dehat Bibi. This paper critically examines these fragmented accounts, using primary sources including Baba Nasib's Nurnama, Baba Kamal's Rishinama, Baba Khalil's Rauzat ul Riyaz, and Hassan Khoihami's Tarikah-i-Hassan. By analysing these texts, the study seeks to present a more nuanced understanding of the lives and legacies of these two prominent Sufi women in Kashmir.

Keywords: Sufism, Sufi women, Shaikh Nuruddin, Scholarship, Kashmir

Introduction

Throughout the history of Sufism, the understanding of the mystical path, or *tariqa*, has evolved into increasingly complex concepts. This path typically involves a Sufi seeker, guided by a spiritual master, following a disciplined process of self-purification and refinement. As the seeker progresses, they undergo various spiritual states (*ahwal*) and stages (*maqamat*), which lead to deeper revelations of the divine truth (*haqiqah*).¹ However, as Minlib Dallh argues, our understanding of Sufism, as outlined by Shaikh, will remain incomplete as long as it marginalizes the participation of Sufi women. To comprehensively grasp the complexity and significance of the Sufi tradition, it is essential to recognize and include the contributions of the women, who have played a vital role in shaping the mystical path.²

Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya, an eighth-century saint from Basra,³ exemplified this evolving understanding of Sufism by being one of the first to promote

^{*} Shaikh-ul Aalam Centre for Multidisciplinary Studies, University of Kashmir

[†] Shaikh-ul Aalam Centre for Multidisciplinary Studies, University of Kashmir

the doctrine of selfless love for God, challenging the conventional Sufi focus on worship driven by hopes of reward or fear of punishment.⁴ Rabia, as Annemarie Schimmel points out in *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* played a significant role in shaping the image of the ideal pious woman in Islamic culture— an ideal often admired for defying typical expectations of women. The expression “a second Rabia” became common among Muslims to describe a virtuous woman. However, Rabia was not the only woman saint in early Islam; other women of her time, such as Maryam of Basra and Rihana, known as “the enthusiastic” (*al-waliha*), were also notable for their spiritual devotion.⁵

Women have historically played crucial roles as spiritual guides and teachers for some of the revered male Sufi masters of their times. Ibn Arabi (1165-1240) was greatly influenced by two elderly women mystics, Shams of Merchena and Fatima of Cordova, the latter of whom he described as a “Gnostic” and served as a disciple for several years.⁶ Moreover, Women in Sufism made significant contributions through poetry and mystical theology. A’ishah al-Ba’uniyyah (d.1517) was a notable figure in this regard; as Emil Homerin pointed out, she “wrote more works in Arabic than any other woman prior to the twentieth century.”⁷

In the context of South Asia, particularly India, Annemarie Schimmel’s *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* highlights the significant, yet often overlooked, presence of women saints throughout the Islamic world, especially in Muslim India, despite their limited representation in historical records.⁸

The Kashmir region, with its rich history of mysticism, has a notable tradition of female spirituality as well. According to M. Ishaq Khan in *Kashmir’s Transition to Islam*, “Kashmir is the only region in the sub-continent which has a deep-rooted tradition about the spirituality of women.”⁹ Lal Ded, a prominent female mystic and wandering ascetic of the fourteenth century, was instrumental in shaping the region’s spiritual landscape. Khan highlights the reverence for Lal Ded in Persian hagiographical sources, where she is accorded esteemed titles such as ‘*Rabia Thani*,’ ‘*Maryam-i Makani*,’ and ‘*Arifa*’.¹⁰

Shaikh Nuruddin, the founder of the indigenous order of Muslim mystics (*Rishi silsilah*), was deeply influenced by Lalla, from early on in his spiritual journey. Her ascetic practices and teachings significantly

influenced Nuruddin and his followers, including his women disciples. Known for her spiritual devotion and emphasis on a life of poverty and self-control, Lalla's principles resonated deeply with Nuruddin. Her rejection of ritualistic practices and social taboos, such as caste-based dietary restrictions, reflected a spiritual freedom that appealed to the ethos of the Rishi order. Nuruddin's recognition of Lalla as an *avatar* underscores her elevated spiritual status and the impact she had on his religious outlook. This reverence was likely shared among his women disciples, who were inspired by Lalla's example of devotion and her embodiment of spiritual ideals that transcended conventional religious practices. Lalla's life and teachings thus served as a model for a new spiritual order that valued inner purity and direct communion with the divine, significantly shaping the spiritual path of Nuruddin and his followers.¹¹

During his travels across various villages in Kashmir, Nuruddin attracted disciples from non-Muslims, including Hindu women. These women were drawn to his teachings and became known for their ascetic practices, which in turn attracted other female followers. It was on account of Nuruddin's teachings that the religious life of the Kashmiri women came to be held in high esteem so that they were regarded as no less holy than men following the Sufi path. Among the notable Hindu women who converted to Islam under Nuruddin's influence were Behat Bibi, Dehat Bibi, Sham Ded, and Shanga Bibi, who are remembered for their devotion and spiritual contributions.¹²

This paper examines the contributions of two prominent female disciples of Shaikh Nuruddin: Behat Bibi and Dehat Bibi, who are popularly known as *Chhat Kori*, i.e., girls trained under Nuruddin's spiritual guidance. This study brings together varied accounts from hagiographical texts, and other historical works as well as a study of their shrine to construct a biographical narrative of the two women saints.

Contested Sources and Scholarship on Behat Bibi and Dehat Bibi

Sufi women's lives, roles and legacies have been difficult to reconstruct due to the silence, fragmented accounts and the lack of attention given to them in historical sources. Their mention is predominantly tangential and they are rarely mentioned in their own right. Women saint's mention in historical accounts is generally attached to their relations with male Sufis. In many cases, they remain nameless and are mentioned only as daughters,

mothers and wives of prominent male Sufi saints. Such accounts are limited to praising the piety and modesty of these women. There's little to no space given to their personal lives or their public roles.

Nonetheless, recent scholarship has tried to collate fragmentary accounts from historical sources such as *Malfuzat* (discourses of the Sufi saints), *Tazkirat* (records of Sufis deeds), *Tabaqats* (biographical accounts of Sufis), and *Siyar* (biographies of sufis), *Maktubat* (letters of Sufis), political chronicles and other hagiographical as well as hagiological sources.

Globally, scholarship on women's presence in Sufism has gone through various phases. The first stage of work on Sufi women has focused on recovering them from primary sources. Margaret Smith's *Rabia Basri: The Mystic and Her Fellow Saints in Islam*, is one such seminal work which is biographical in nature. More recently, scholarship in the West has also focused on an understanding of gender politics through a reading of primary sources, attitudes of male chroniclers, discourses of Sufi saints and Sufi material cultures.

However, in the South Asian context, exhaustive works on women saints have been fairly recent. Of these, Tahira Aftab's *Sufi Women of South Asia: Veiled Friends of God* is particularly important. Her study of Sufi women is not merely biographical but also offers a feminist reading on the representations, negotiations and contestations in Sufi historiography of South Asia.

In the context of Kashmir, such comprehensive works on women mystics have not been carried out. Much of the modern scholarship¹³ on Sufism in Kashmir has preoccupied itself with the history of its transition to Islam from the 14th Century. The role of male Sufis, the advent of Central Asian Sufis and the 'syncretic' culture of Kashmir.¹⁴ However, none of these works on the history of Islam in Kashmir have carried out an exhaustive study of women's presence therein.

Seminal works such as GMD Sufi's *Kashir: A History of Kashmir*, a voluminous work on Kashmir's history mention very brief details about women Sufis saints. Similarly, Prem Nath Bazaz's *Daughters of the Vitasta*, which in the author's own words, is a "history of Kashmiri women from early times to the present day" also deals with the biographical details of women Sufi saints superficially.

Muhammad Ishaq Khan's *Kashmir's Transition to Islam* deals with women's presence in the Rishi order in more detail than most works written in English. It has a chapter dedicated to some women of the Rishi order and builds biographical sketches of these women based on various sources. However, Khan's work is also cursory.

A survey of the details mentioned about Behat Bibi and Dehat Bibi, the focus of the present study, exposes this perfunctory approach.

Tahera Aftab, in her extensive work on *Sufi Women of South Asia*, mentions the shrine of 15th-century female mystics Behat Bibi and Dehat Bibi. According to Aftab, the two women met Shaikh Nuruddin Wali while collecting greens and had a lengthy conversation with him regarding the sanctity of the life of grass and vegetables. Aftab's information is based on Ghulam Hasan Khoihami's *Tarikeh-i-Hassan*.¹⁵ The conversation that Aftab mentions is misattributed to Behat Bibi and Dehat Bibi. In fact, Hassan Khoihami's account itself points out that this conversation may or may not have happened with these women.¹⁶

In the section "*Women Sufis of Kashmir*", Ishaq Khan acknowledges that there are conflicting accounts regarding the enrolment of the two sisters. However, he does not elaborate on these accounts to cull out a detailed account of these women. Instead, Khan rests the contradictions by saying, "Whatever be the truth, it is certain that both of them were disciples of Shaikh Nuruddin."¹⁷

Other secondary sources such as GMD Sufi's *Kashir: A History of Kashmir* and Prem Nath Bazaz's *Daughters of the Vitasta* do not engage with these contradictory accounts comprehensively as well.

Similarly, Prem Nath Bazaz dedicates a short paragraph to the two women in his book on the history of Kashmiri women. Interestingly, he used a phonetically similar word *Vyath* Bibi for Behat Bibi. *Vyath* is the name of the river Jehlum in Kashmir. As per Bazaz, the name meant pure as water.¹⁸ There is no explanation for the preference of one spelling over the other, even when it changes the meaning of the name significantly.

In *Kashir: A History of Kashmir*, the 20th Century historian G.M.D. Sufi dedicates only a paragraph to the sister duo popularly known as *Chat Ded* or *Chat Kori* (Disciple Mothers or Women Disciples).¹⁹

Hence, the fragmented and often contested accounts of the lives of Sufi women in Kashmir are not dealt with meticulously in any seminal study on the history of Islam in Kashmir. Instead, historical works tend to be selective and choose one of the many biographical references to Sufi women in primary sources. This perfunctory mention of Sufi women in such works points towards the marginalisation of women in historical narratives.

For the present study, four primary sources were consulted, only two of which have been translated into Urdu or English. Three of these were Persian manuscripts and one was a printed work in Persian. Baba Nasib's *Nurnama* is a seventeenth-century account of Rishis. It mentions biographical details, miracles and legendary tales about Shaikh Nuruddin. The translation of *Nurnama* by Margoob Banihali was also used for this study.

Two *Rishi-Namas* of Chrar-i-Sharif-based hagiographers Baba Kamal and Baba Khalil. Kamal's *Rishinama* (*Nasr*) and Khalil's *Rauzat ul Riyaz* are 19th-century biographical accounts detailing the features of Rishism, the life of Shaikh Nuruddin and his disciples. Of the two, *Rauzat ul Riyaz* is more extensive as it builds on the work of Baba Kamal.

Tarikh-i-Hassan by Pir Hassan Khoihami (d.1898) is an extensive historical work in four volumes. The first volume focuses on the geography of Kashmir, the second volume on the political history of the time, the third one on biographies of Kashmiri saints and the fourth one is dedicated to the poets of Kashmir. For the present study, Volume III or *Awliya-i-Kashmir* is relevant as it deals with Sufi saints of Kashmir. It has been translated into Urdu (by Abdul Khaliq Tahiri) as well as English (by A.R. Khan) and the present study has relied on these translations.

For any meaningful engagement with the presence of women in the history of Sufism in Kashmir, it is important to carry out a meticulous study of a diverse range of these primary sources and other historical accounts.

Behat Bibi and Dehat Bibi's First Encounter with Shaikh Nuruddin

Nurnama by Baba Nasib ud din Gazi is one of the earliest known sources which mentions the two women.²⁰ There are conflicting details about Behat Bibi and Dehat Bibi in historical accounts. From their enrolment in

the Rishi order to their sayings, dialogues, and meetings, the sources present inconsistent details about them.

According to Ghulam Hassan Khoihami's *Tarikeh-i-Hassan*, the two women met Shaikh Nuruddin while they were cutting grass.²¹ Some secondary sources base their information of the two women on this modern Persian hagiographical source which has been translated into Urdu as well as English.²²

According to Khoihami, Shaikh Nuruddin overheard a conversation between the two women while they were collecting greens at a village called Duryagam. He interjected and questioned them for taking the lives of the greens and vegetables. However, Behat Bibi responded by reasoning that they were using the greens and vegetables to sustain themselves and the animals. She continued and questioned Shaikh Nuruddin on killing living creatures by striking his staff and sitting. Following this interaction, the saint blessed these women who then embraced Islam.²³

Other hagiographical sources like *Rauzat ul Riyaz* by Baba Khalil and *Rishinama* by Baba Kamal have also documented this elaborate conversation.²⁴ It is also included in Asadullah Afaqi's version of *Kulliyat*, a collection of the sayings of Shaikh Nuruddin. However, these sources do not attribute this conversation to Behat Bibi or Dehat Bibi. In the documented conversation which is in Kashmiri language, the speaker, who is a woman, categorically identifies herself as Sham Maj/Mouj or Shama Maji.²⁵ Shaikh Nuruddin asks her, "Pray tell me what's your name?" She replies, "Truly, Shaam Maej is my name."²⁶ Therefore, it is likely that the encounter that *Tarikeh-i-Hassan* mentions is actually about Sham Mouj and not about Behat Bibi or Dehat Bibi.

Both Baba Khalil and Baba Kamal recount a conversation between a group of five women and Shaikh Nuruddin at Hunchi Pora, Khag.²⁷ However, it is Baba Khalil's *Rauzat ul Riyaz* which offers a relatively detailed account of the first encounter of Shaikh Nuruddin with Behat Bibi and Dehat Bibi. As per Khalil, on one afternoon in the month of May, Shaikh Nuruddin ventured out to survey the wonders of nature at a hill in a village called Khag. At the time of his visit, five women from Sikandarpura were also around the same area collecting firewood. Three of these women were Muslims and two were Hindu. On their way back, they happened to pass by Shaikh Nuruddin. The sun was intense and they could see its rays illuminating drops of sweat on his forehead. Due to the

intense heat, his forehead kept dripping with sweat. Seeing this, the women intervened and used their firewood to provide shade for Shaikh. Overwhelmed with the women's kindness, he cast his gracious glance (*Chasme haq-e-been*) upon these women who then became his lifelong disciples. It is said that this place then became popular with the name *Panch Yaran*.²⁸

However, Khalil's account does not end here. He goes on to narrate the events that unfolded following the women's association with Shaikh Nuruddin. It is said that when the news reached the families of the two Hindu women, their father, a Patwari by profession, took the matter to the leaders of the village. He cried foul and claimed that a *fakir* from Hunchi Pora had tricked them. It is said that a plan was hatched to kill the Saint at his residence. In the thick of the night, armed men approached the abode of Shaikh but serpents and scorpions emerging from amidst the vegetation prevented them from harming Shaikh. The frightened group of men found themselves trapped with nowhere to go. The men then cried bitterly and repented before Shaikh who then said, "Let go of your anger and enmity and no harm will touch you." Shaikh accepted their repentance and the scorpions and snakes vanished, thus saving the group from danger. The men in the group including the Hindu Patwari then embraced the faith and became his devotees.²⁹

A short poem is also mentioned in Khalil's text narrating this account:

*"The wonders of the King of the faith seek,
A group set out to kill him with their arms,
But serpents and scorpions encircled him,
And the enemies couldn't harm him.
The Sheikh forgave them and they were saved
from their affliction.
When you sit at the door, who can deprive you of his grace?
By Muhammad's honour, even the poor are granted blessings."*³⁰

Spiritual Legacy of Behat Bibi and Dehat Bibi

There are conflicting accounts about the relationship between Behat Bibi and Dehat Bibi, who are buried together at a shrine dedicated to them near Zalusa, Chrar-i-Sharif. Baba Khalil suspects that the two women were the daughters of the Hindu Patwari. Hence, they were sisters.³¹ However,

according to Khoihami, some believe that they were not real sisters but were only related through spiritual association with each other.³²

Nonetheless, there is consensus on their spiritual stature and legacy due to historical and material evidence. According to *Rauzat ul Riyaz*, while one of them was a pious woman (*sahiba mutahara*), the other one was endowed with heavenly grace (*Izdee Faiz*). It is said that the two women vowed to be companions in their worship (*Ibaadat*) and asceticism (*riyazat*). Such was their devotion that they would feed themselves and break their fasts with their legitimate (*Halal*) income.³³ *Tarikeh-i-Hassan* also makes mention of this and states that Behat Bibi would eat only Barley bread out of her legitimate income.³⁴

Sayings Attributed to Behat Bibi and Dehat Bibi

According to Tahera Aftab, “Unlike the accounts of mystic women from other Muslim societies, accounts of the pious women of South Asia do not convey the spoken words of Sufi women, even briefly, though some valuable exceptions exist.”³⁵ These exceptions can be found in the context of Kashmir. Primary sources of Khalil and Kamal, as well as Khoihami’s work on the saints of Kashmir, collate and compile some sayings and conversations of Behat Bibi and Dehat Bibi. Even though the speakers are often confused in primary sources, the conversations are nonetheless recorded.

Khoihami then goes on to compile the sayings (*kalam*) of Behat Bibi highlighting her discourse on *fana fila* (total annihilation of self for a union with the divine).³⁶ Baba Khalil however, attributes these sayings to Dehat bibi.³⁷ These sayings have been translated and collated in secondary sources like Muhammad Ishaq Khan’s *Kashmir’s Transition to Islam* as well as Tahera Aftab’s *Sufi Women of South Asia*. However, they do not engage with the conflicting attributes of the sayings between Behat Bibi and Dehat Bibi.³⁸

Notwithstanding the confusion surrounding the speaker, their sayings are popular nonetheless.³⁹ *Rauzat ul Riyaz* as well as *Tarikeh-i-Hassan* collate these sayings whose translations can be found in various secondary sources. The sayings highlight their spiritual acumen and capture their discourses on spirituality. On the question of existence (*wajood*), it is said that human existence (*wajood bande*) is in itself the greatest veil (*parda-e-azeem*) between the servant and the truth (*haq*). Furthermore, the ones who

free themselves from the concerns of their own existence, ultimately liberate themselves from the concerns of being (*bud*) and non-being (*na bud*). The sayings also highlight the woman's reverence for Shaikh Nuruddin, proclaiming that had Shaikh Nuruddin not been her Pir, it would have been God himself.

Meeting of Behat Bibi and Dehat Bibi with Mir Muhammad Hamdani

Yet another important event associated with the Behat Bibi and Dehat Bibi is their presence at a significant meeting between Mir Muhammad Hamdani and Shaikh Nuruddin. Mir Muhammad Hamdani was the son of the Kubravi saint Saiyid Ali Hamdani,⁴⁰ popularly known as "Shah-i-Hamdani" in Kashmir. Saiyid Ali Hamdani introduced the Kubraviya order in Kashmir.⁴¹

Early historical accounts by Saiyid Ali, Baba Nasib and Mishkati record the meeting between Shaikh Nuruddin and Mir Muhammad Hamdani. However, the place of this meeting is contested. Popularly, it is believed that the meeting occurred at Zalusa, Chrar-i-Sharief where the shrine of Behat Bibi and Dehat Bibi is now present. However, some accounts claim that the meeting happened at Qaimoh.⁴²

The earliest source to attest to the presence of two women at the meeting was Baba Nasib. In his *Nurnama*, the author does not name these women. In their hagiographies, Baba Kamal and Baba Khalil also record the presence of two women at this meeting and identify them as Behat Bibi and Dehat Bibi. *Tarikeh-i-Hassan's* account of the meeting also mentions the two.

Kamal, Khalil as well as Khoihami document a detailed discussion between Muhammad Hamdani and the Shaikh. Notable in this conversation is the interjection by the two women present there. In the case of this conversation as well, the sources confuse the woman who participates in the conversation. As per Khoihami in *Tarikeh-i-Hassan*, on which most secondary sources base their accounts of the conversation, the female speaker in the conversation was Dehat Bibi.⁴³ However, as per Kamal in *Rishi-Nama* (Nasr), it was Behat Bibi who intervened and answered the queries of Mir Muhammad Hamdani.⁴⁴

Hamdani questioned Shaikh Nuruddin about his lean and frail body. "Why is your horse weak?" To this, the Shaikh replied that he could not

keep his horse (body) nourished as a strong body would overpower his soul and throw him off. Behat and Dehat Bibi being present at the time of this conversation intervened. According to Baba Kamal, Behat Bibi talked first.⁴⁵ However, as per Khoihami, it was Dehat Bibi.⁴⁶ However, the conversation recorded is similar in both sources. The woman (Behat or Dehat) says, “Those who have reached the destination, have no need of the horse or the saddle.” Mir Muhammad follows it up with another question, “Who has reached the goal?”. To which the woman replies, “Those who have freed themselves from the concerns of the self.” Mir then goes on to ask her if she is one of those liberated souls. The woman replies that if she were not one of those who’d freed their souls, she wouldn’t have been a part of such a revered conversation. The Kubravi saint then asks her another interesting question. She’s asked if she is a daughter/girl or a son/boy (*dukhtari ya pistr?*). The woman gives an insightful reply claiming that if she were nothing, then it did not matter if she was a girl or a boy; if she did exist, then she was nothing. She was then asked about the reason for her confidence and the source of her station. To this, she replied that it was because she was safe from spiritual death. It is reported that her replies made Mir Muhammad Hamadani happy.⁴⁷

The conversation then shifted to meat eating. Mir Muhammad now addresses Shaikh, asking why he had stopped eating meat. As per Baba Kamal, Dehat speaks here, while Khoihami maintains that she’s a speaker all along. To the question of meat eating, Dehat replies that it was forbidden to kill animals and it was legitimate (*halal*) for Prophets and the pious because they had attained a higher station. She then remarks that since she had not attained that rank yet, meat was still forbidden (*haram*) for her.⁴⁸

Shrine of Behat Bibi and Dehat Bibi

In the Indian context, as noted by Kelly Pemberton, there are relatively few shrines dedicated exclusively to women, such as those of Bibi Kamalo and Bibi Fatima Sam.⁴⁹ In Kashmir, the shrine of Behat Bibi and Dehat Bibi, at Zalusa Chrar i Sharief holds notable significance.

Nurnama, along with the account of Baba Khalil, and *Tarikeh-i-Hassan*, provide detailed information about their spiritual roles, the significance of their shrine, and the gendered practices surrounding its visitation. The shrine of Behat Bibi and Dehat Bibi at Zalusa, situated in close proximity to the shrine of Shaikh Nuruddin at Chrar-i-Sharief, attests to the presence

and recognition of Sufi women in the region and the role they played in shaping the spiritual landscape of Kashmir.

Baba Nasib's *Nurnama* provides an account of the meeting between Shaikh Nuruddin and Mir Muhammad Hamdani, during which two female disciples of Shaikh Nuruddin were present. One of the disciples expressed a desire to be buried at the spot where Mir Muhammad Hamdani was seated, a wish that was honoured after her passing. Similarly, the other disciple wished to be buried at the location where Shaikh Nuruddin was sitting, and her request was also fulfilled.⁵⁰ *Tarikeh-i-Hassan* also corroborates this account, detailing the same burial preferences of the female disciples, and adds that both of them are buried at Zalusa.⁵¹

Baba Khalil in *Rauzat ul Riyaz* recounts that the two women, Behat Bibi and Dehat Bibi, prayed for their memories to be eternally preserved. They wished for their graves to be placed in close proximity to each other, separated by no more than the length of a hand, ensuring that neither grave would be elevated above the other.⁵²

Baba Nasib in *Nurnama* further notes that the graves of these two women became a prominent site of *ziyarat* for the general public. As a result, a wall was built around it, and people would usually stay outside the enclosure to recite *Fatiha* for the deceased. It was reported that men who tried to enter the *rouza* to perform the *Fatiha* often encountered difficulties or discomfort. In contrast, it was considered acceptable for women to enter and visit the graves without any issues.⁵³

Baba Khalil, in *Rauzat ul Riyaz*, emphasized this practice by advising that men who visited the sacred site of Behat Bibi and Dehat Bibi should refrain from entering the shrine and instead recite the *Fatiha* from outside the enclosure. He warned that if a man were to enter the shrine, he would risk bringing difficulties upon himself.⁵⁴

During our visit to the shrine, we observed that notable changes have taken place over time. Historically, access to the shrine was limited by gender; however, we encountered a male caretaker. After speaking with him and some local residents, we discovered that the shrine is now accessible to both men and women.

This shift contrasts with Annemarie Schimmel's observation in her book *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, in many provinces of Muslim India and

Pakistan, as well as in other parts of the Islamic world, there are shrines dedicated to women where men are not permitted. This highlights how gender-based restrictions at such religious sites can vary significantly and evolve over time, reflecting broader cultural and social changes.⁵⁵

Shrines function as vital public spaces for women, providing them with a unique environment where they can engage in religious, social, and cultural activities. At the shrine of Behat Bibi and Dehat Bibi, we found that women had tied votive rags, known locally as *D'ash*, at the interior door of the shrine. This ritual is performed with the belief that these knots will facilitate the fulfilment of their wishes. Additionally, we observed that women had placed monetary offerings on the *chadar* (the ceremonial cloth) that covered the graves, further indicating their reverence and the importance of these acts in their devotional practices. We also observed the presence of a large mosque and an institution named *Shaikh ul Alam Darul uloom* situated on the same sacred grounds as the shrine of the female disciples. The mosque is managed by the local community, while the shrine itself falls under the administration of the Waqf Board.

Conclusion

Biographical narratives about Behat Bibi and Dehat Bibi allow for an opportunity to explore women's negotiations and contestations within Rishism. A study of hagiographical texts provides a chance to explore the nature of women's textual presence in these texts. Additionally, they can be critically examined to study the attitude of the writers of historical scholarship – medieval as well as modern – towards women.

The accounts about the events that led up to Behat Bibi and Behat Bibi's enrolment into Rishi order also hint at a distinct femininity in the context of Kashmir which showcased women's agency. In the case of Behat Bibi and Dehat Bibi, as with many other women saints in Kashmir, their spiritual acumen preceded their formal association with a Sufi silsila. They are enrolled on their own merit and are often not revered due to their association with a male saint. Moreover, the sayings as well as the conversation of these women saints can open up a new horizon of scholarship on gender politics in the context of Sufism in Kashmir. Moreover, the afterlives of these women in memory and material cultures could help trace the evolution and status of the tradition of female spirituality in Kashmir.

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- ¹⁸ Bazaz, P. Nath. *Daughters of the Vitasta*, Gulshan Books: Srinagar, 2011, p. 160.
- ¹⁹ Sufi, G.M.D. *Kashir: A History of Kashmir*, Vol. II, University of the Panjab: Lahore, 1949, p. 388.
- ²⁰ Nasib, Baba. f. 105; See also Banhali, Marghob, *Nurnama*, Urdu tr. Crown Printing Press: Srinagar, 2013, p. 224.
- ²¹ Khoihami, op.cit., pp. 123-124.
- ²² Aftab, op. cit., pp. 254-255.
- ²³ Khoihami, op.cit., pp. 123-124.
- ²⁴ Khalil, Baba. *Rauzat ul Riyaz*, ff. 463-465; see also Kamal, Baba. *Rishinama*, f. 308.

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- ²⁵ Afaqi, Asadullah. *Ain i Haq kuliyyat i Shaikh ul Alam*, Life Foundation Iqbal Basti Rauzabal Chrar i Sharief: Kashmir, 2008, pp. 477-478; Afaqi calls her Sham Bibi in *Guftugu Nama* section of *Kulliyat*,
- ²⁶ Ibid., p. 478; ‘Paez kath bavitam, kyah chuy nav’; ‘Mae chuy paez kath Sham maji nav.’
- ²⁷ Khalil, op. cit., ff. 470-471; Kamal, f. 16.
- ²⁸ Ibid., ff. 470-471.
- ²⁹ Ibid., ff. 471-472.
- ³⁰ Ibid., f. 473. Translation was provided by the Persian department, University of Kashmir.
- ³¹ Ibid.
- ³² Khoihami, op.cit., p.123.
- ³³ Khalil, op. cit., f. 473.
- ³⁴ Khoihami, op.cit., p. 123.
- ³⁵ Aftab, op. cit., p. 23.
- ³⁶ Khoihami, op.cit., p. 123.
- ³⁷ Khalil, op. cit., f. 474.
- ³⁸ Khan, op. cit., p. 246. Aftab, op. cit., p. 255.
- ³⁹ Sufi, op. cit., p. 388.
- ⁴⁰ Rafiqi, op.cit., p.161.
- ⁴¹ Ibid., p. 88.
- ⁴² Ibid., pp.35-43; A.Q. Rafiqi discusses the contested accounts of the meeting’s location in detail.
- ⁴³ Khoihami, op.cit., p.124.
- ⁴⁴ Kamal, op.cit., f. 337.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid.
- ⁴⁶ Khoihami, op.cit., p. 124.
- ⁴⁷ The translation is a paraphrase of Baba Kamal and Tarikeh-i-Hassan's narration of the conversation.
- ⁴⁸ Kamal, op.cit., f.338; Khoihami, op.cit., p.124.
- ⁴⁹ Pemberton, Kelly. *Women Mystics and Sufi Shrines in India*, University of South Carolina Press: Columbia, 2010, p. 2.
- ⁵⁰ Banhali, op. cit., p. 224.
- ⁵¹ Khoihami, op.cit., pp. 124-125.
- ⁵² Khalil, op. cit., f. 474.
- ⁵³ Banhali, op. cit., p. 225.
- ⁵⁴ Khalil, op. cit., f. 474.
- ⁵⁵ Schimmel, op.cit., p. 434.