

## Universal Brotherhood and Socio-Religious Rank in Shaikh al-'Ālam's<sup>(RA)</sup> Poetry

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### Abstract

Kashmir is truly a Paradise on Earth, not because of its picturesque splendor, but for the reason that this place has been an abode of sages and saints for centuries. These saints and the Rishi culture that emerged in Kashmir has constantly promoted universal brotherhood among the dwellers of varied faiths and promoted harmony among them. The Rishis have enriched the land of Kashmir adopting a common mode of communication while narrating their spiritual experiences through poetry. Shaikh al-'Ālam<sup>(RA)</sup> the founder of the Rishi invoked poetic medium to imbibe the significance of love, unity, co-existence and above all the message of the Divine. This paper highlights the socio-religious aspect of Shaikh al-'Ālam's<sup>(RA)</sup> poetry, his life and lineage in his own renderings.

**Keywords:** Alamdar-i-Kashmir, Sanz family, Esoteric, Exoteric, Ritualism.

### Introduction

*We belong to the same parents,  
Then why this difference!  
Let Hindus and Muslims (together),  
Worship God alone.  
We came to this world like partners.  
We should have shared our joys and sorrows together*  
(Nurnama, p. 42)

Shaikh Noor-ud-Din Rishi<sup>(RA)</sup> as a pious and true representative of Islamic thought, aimed at bringing harmony among different sects by invoking the strong message of unity as espoused by this great religion. Islam as a socio-religious order is equipped with a perfect mechanism which the saint of 14<sup>th</sup> century Shaikh Noor-ud-Din<sup>(RA)</sup>, popularly known as Shaikh al-'Ālam or *Alamdār-i-Kashmir*, son of Shaikh Salar-ud-Din, a newly converted to Islam propagated throughout his life. Rishi is a standard term for a mystic who seeks to realise the esoteric characteristic of his religious tradition. The produce of the path that he follows is self-realization.

“Know thyself” is the first commandment of all mystical traditions. Among the non- Muslims who accepted Islam at the hands of Sayyid Husain Simnani <sup>(RA)</sup> was Salar Sanz, father of Shaikh Noor-ud-Din <sup>(RA)</sup>. Despite adopting a Muslim name, Salar Sanz, he retained the tribal family name as illustrated by Shaikh Noor-ud Din <sup>(RA)</sup> in his poetic sayings:

*(My) forefather’s name was Ogra Sanz;  
Who was killed in the battle field;  
His Kin called him Gurza Sanz;  
And he bore but few offspring;  
Drupta Sanz was one born to him;  
And Drupta Sanz’s children were- Salat and Solu;  
One of the son’s Salat Sanz, was my inspirer,  
(He) embraced Islam willingly;  
His Guru was Hussain Simnani;  
Who was a close relative of Haider of Kulgam.*

From his early childhood, Shaikh Noor-ud-Din <sup>(RA)</sup> was endowed with socio-religious sensitivities that eventually provided the substratum for the composite culture of Kashmir, influencing the religio-cultural behaviour of Kashmiris in the process.<sup>1</sup> Under this affirmative cultural influence, religious cordiality and love undermined religious prejudices. While people recognized the value of Shaikh Noor-ud-Din <sup>(RA)</sup> sayings and his syncretic thought, he was as much keen to connect to people of all religious dispositions:

*What qualities hast thou found on the world?  
To allow thy body a free, loose rope.  
The Mussalman and Hindu sail in the same boat,  
Have thy play and let’s go home.<sup>2</sup>*

From the verses of Hazrat Shaikh al-‘Ālam’s <sup>(RA)</sup> one gets a clue of his birthplace Kaimoh but his verses prove that his birthplace is ‘Khei’ in Jogipora village in district Kulgam. He writes:

*Tatie Khaie Hare Mei Zam Detum  
Nund Sanz Be Musalman*

There is a village by the grace of Allah I was born  
I Nund Sanz became Muslim

Hazrat Shaikh al-‘Ālam <sup>(RA)</sup> describes his lineage as:

My father and mother belong to the Sanz family. My household belongs to the same. My grandfather was Sanz too, his son Darapta was Sanz too. After the death of Darapta Sanz, his son Zanga Sanz was active and was killed in a battle and he left one Hamber Sanz who had a son namely Garza Sanz, who had two sons viz; Salar and Salou. And I am the son of Salar Sanz.

It is believed that Hazrat Shaikh al-‘Ālam<sup>(RA)</sup> thorough his father was Salat or Salar Sanz or Saman Rishi who came into the ambit of Islam. As far as Hazrat Shaikh al-‘Ālam’s<sup>(RA)</sup> own reference is concerned, it is Sayyid Hussain Simnani<sup>(RA)</sup>, not anyone else, who is credited for his acceptance of Islam.

*Akh Suit Salat Sanz Parvanou Sou Daie Musalaman Gate Pavnīe  
Tas Gore Sayyid Husain SimnaNou Yeis HyderKulghamein Deih*

One that unpoised Salat Sanz who reverted to Islam for the sake of his brother, his Master was Sayyid Hussain Simnani who in the reign of Hyder Kulgami was the denizen of the same.<sup>3</sup>

The verses of Shaikh Noor-ud-Din<sup>(RA)</sup> are copious with intrinsic attraction, hardly leaving anyone, even a non-devotee listener, without nursing the heart. Most of the verses of the Shaikh vividly depict miseries of the oppressed sections of society. There is hardly any verse that is deprived of social, cultural and topographical context. His poetry is deeply rooted in a homogenous body of common experience and cuts across academic compartments of knowledge.

His poetic verses were not only informed by an acute sociological imagination, he also invoked metaphors to help us have a sense of history often bedecked with Rishis, theologians and Imams who appear as important characters in these verses.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, under the influence of Islamic teachings on his thought and personality, archaic words were replaced by Persian and Arabic words, the change in idiom suggesting the growth of Kashmiri language into literature. In other words, Shaikh Noor-ud-Din’s<sup>(RA)</sup> poetry expresses the cultural style of Islamic civilization in a regional dialect.<sup>5</sup>

Shaikh Noor-ud-Din<sup>(RA)</sup> discarded social ranking on the basis of religion. He was conscious of the so called ‘*Ulama* who were keen to exploit

innocent illiterate folk declaring them as hypocrites while exposing their conventional hallow religiosity in the following verses:

*A spiritual guide seems like a pot full of nectar,  
which may be trickling down in drops,  
Having a heap of books beside him,  
He may have become confused by reading them  
On examination one found him empty in mind,  
He may be preaching to others by forgetting himself.*

In fact and like other Sufis of Islam, Shaikh al-‘Ālam <sup>(RA)</sup> was very vocal in condemning the ‘Ulama. In his estimation, the ‘Ulama failed to bring the exoteric (*Zahir*) and esoteric (*Batin*) aspects of religious life into a harmonious and balanced relationship owing to their malicious mind, arrogance, hypocrisy and mundane pursuits at the cost of spiritual wellbeing.<sup>7</sup>

Shaikh Noor-ud-Din’s <sup>(RA)</sup> message was not confined to a particular race or community, but was addressed to the entire mankind. This worked as a cohesive force to bind people while disapproving division on the basis of socio-religious status. Shaikh Noor-ud-Din <sup>(RA)</sup> advocated total surrender before God and to be compassionate to all his creatures.<sup>6</sup> This fellow feeling reminds us of Rabinder Nath Tagore who shares a similar thought in his ‘Song Offerings’:

*Leave this chanting and singing telling of beads!  
Whom dost thou worship in this lonely dark corner of a temple with doors all  
shut?  
Open thine eyes and see thy God is not before thee!  
He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground and where the path maker is  
breaking stones.  
He is with them in sun and in shower,  
and his garment is covered with dust  
Put off thy holy mantle and even like him come down on the dusty soil!*

Tagore like Shaikh al-‘Ālam <sup>(RA)</sup>, presents the core concern of religion and worship. Like the saint of Kashmir, Tagore believes that serving God means serving people and the aim of religion is to humanize society and improve the wellbeing of mankind. In a similar tune, Shaikh al-‘Ālam <sup>(RA)</sup> expresses himself thus:

*The turban bulges of Mullas are beautiful temple adorning,  
They flaunt themselves about wrapped in showy cloths;  
With leathern sandals and flower garlands,  
They carry five kilo bowls under their arms.  
With no appetite they go on eating and  
The remainder is carried secretly home*

(Kulliyat; p.126)

His verses stand for both transcendence and the immanence of God. For understanding the message of the *Qur'an*, he thinks one must evolve a desire to understand the principle of close correspondence between the esoteric and exoteric elements of religious life. In an attempt to make the *Shariah* structured social relationship intelligible to the unlettered folk, he praised the undaunted spirit of the four illustrious companions of the Prophet Muhammad <sup>(SAW)</sup>. Hazrat Abu Bakr <sup>(RA)</sup> is mentioned as a lovable person by Shaikh al-'Ālam <sup>(RA)</sup> in his verses, while Hazrat Uthman <sup>(RA)</sup> who in compiling the *Qur'an* enabled men to distinguish between right and wrong. Hazrat Umar <sup>(RA)</sup> is praised for his courageous spirit in subduing the snares of ego and Hazrat Ali <sup>(RA)</sup> for his generosity and compassion in treating the hungry as his guests.<sup>8</sup>

There are pieces of evidence that suggest that Shaikh al-'Ālam's <sup>(RA)</sup> thought is plentiful with *tawhidic* humanism and universalism. His verses are the very content of the *Qur'an* embedded with metaphors drawn from society. In fact he draws upon the imagery of flowers and foliage, of mountains and landscapes, of birds and animals, of fish and fowl, of seasons and weather, of rivers and springs to make us understand the poetic approach of dealing with a natural phenomenon as essential for understanding the purpose of creation. For Shaikh al-'Ālam <sup>(RA)</sup> the entire world was suffused with meaning as referred to: "Symbolic pregnancy" by Cassirer. His teachings are grounded with the *Qur'anic* ethics of humanism and reciprocal love. According to Shaikh, it was the cosmic love of nature that constituted the key point for understanding the key message of *Qur'anic* universalism.<sup>9</sup>

After spending twelve years in the cave, the Shaikh al-'Ālam <sup>(RA)</sup> realized that physical seclusion associated with asceticism does not make up its

essence, rather it lies in emulating the example of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW):

*There are jackals and monkeys in the forest;  
The caves are infested with rats;  
Those who offer prayers five times a day to wash off the dirt of their heart;  
Those who lead a family life, they are privileged  
A dutiful household will be crowned;  
The Messenger of Allah <sup>(SAW)</sup> led a marital life and won the Divine grace.<sup>12</sup>*

During his long stay at Kaimoh cave, he came to know about the multiple sufferings of common masses, especially the unlettered folk at the hands of religious elites and feudal chiefs, besides the notion of social ranking and ethnic superiority among the new converts of Islam. This new socio-cultural order which seemed akin to the Brahmanic socio-religious order, made the saint come out of seclusion to diffuse his teaching into the society while combating the new order evolved by Kashmir's religious elites.<sup>10</sup> While he was opposed to the prevailing social system, nevertheless he moved within the social order informing his inmates and those around him to seek the contentment of God.<sup>11</sup> Shaikh al-‘Ālam <sup>(RA)</sup> not only sustained and enriched the Islamic tradition of Kashmir, he also enjoined upon people of various communities to follow the right path without falling prey to ritualism. The religious thought that the verses of Shaikh al-‘Ālam <sup>(RA)</sup> unfold, has both the precision of discourse and coherence of a system.

### Notes and References

1. Farooq Fayaz, *Shaikh-ul-Alam Kashmir Revisited*, p.1
2. B. N. Parimoo, *Unity in Diversity*, p. 89
3. M. Asad-ullah Wani, *Shaikh-ul-Alam: Ek Mutala*
4. M. Ishaq Khan, *Kashmir's Transition to Islam: The Role of Muslim Rishis*, p.106
5. Ibid., p. 107
6. Farooq Fayaz, *Shaikh-ul-Alam Kashmir Revisited*, p.17
7. M. Ishaq Khan, *Kashmir's Transition to Islam: The Role of Muslim Rishis*, p. 112
8. Ibid., p. 119
9. Ibid., pp.122-123

10. Farooq Fayaz, *Shaikh-ul Aalam Kashmir Revisited*, p. 60
11. M. Ishaq Khan, *Kashmir's Transition to Islam: The Role of Muslim Rishis*, p. 134
12. *Ibid.*, 133