

Kashmir's Cross-Cultural Convergence and Development of its Syncretic Personality

Prof. Noor Ahmad Baba

Kashmir is unique in a number of respects. Its cultural personality in its multifaceted dimensions has been shaped through an interface between two factors during its long history.¹ The mountainous surroundings have helped it shape up differently from its neighbouring areas.² Very few ethno-regional and cultural communities of any significant size globally have had so very directly marked, manifest and discernible relationship between people and the place of their habitation with defined geography as that in Kashmir.³ But along with this during the last five thousand years of its history, it has remained at the crossroads of civilizational interface and a meeting point of some of the greatest cultural traditions, religious currents and economies found in its neighbourhood. This factor also has had tremendous contribution in enriching its personality in ethno-cultural and spiritual terms.

Therefore, any discussion on the identity formation of people of Kashmir in its socio-cultural and spiritual dimensions needs to be contextualised in their evolution in history, in interface with the place they live in and also in relation to its surrounding peoples and cultures.⁴ Having surroundings is not unique to Kashmir as all socio-cultural groups are surrounded by different ethno-cultural communities. But what is unique about Kashmir is the variety and the richness of these surrounding traditions and the fact that it could still evolve and retain the distinctness of its own cultural personality. Kashmir as we know has been surrounded by some of the most magnificent civilizations that mankind has ever produced in the Indian subcontinent, China, Central Asia, Iran along with various other smaller ethno-cultural communities in its northern and north-western vicinity with an enriching impact on the place and its people. Even as we will see below Kashmir also has had a beneficial impact on these places and cultures right from the earliest times. This multifaceted

interface with surrounding regions had begun several millennia back right from prehistoric times.⁵ This impact particularly becomes more clearly discernible with the establishment of the Neolithic communities in Kashmir around 5000 (B.P.).⁶ It was with the warming of its earth surface that the Neolithic communities, initially settled in the neighbouring areas of Gilgit, Baltistan, Chilas, Swat, Kohistan and Punjab plains, were attracted to the place and began to settle here as well. These communities are reported to have originally come from central Asia and from north and central China.⁷ Once settled in Kashmir these communities at various stages of their development remained connected with these sister communities in the neighbourhood and continued to be at some level part of the larger cosmopolitan ethno-cultural spectrum spread over west, central and east Asian regions.⁸

Kashmir is located at a cross-cultural junction. Traditionally under the colonial context this area was referred to as the Sub-continental North-West. In some discourses it has been referred to as Indo-Iranian borderlands. It is also referred to as borderland between Subcontinent and Central Asia or as in some contemporary parleys as a meeting point between the South and Central Asia.⁹ However, none of these expressions is comprehensive enough to capture the nature of multi-directional linkages that Kashmir has had in its long history. It has been, at the intersection of East, West, Central and South Asia. Thus, it has remained connected in all the four directions. In that sense Kashmir has been a converging point of human migrations, traders, cultural and spiritual cross-currents.¹⁰

Thus, with this borderland or intersectional location Kashmir has remained connected in spite of the surrounding mountains, helping it shape up differently and secure it as a distinct identity.¹¹ Nature has allowed several (even though difficult) mountain passes and routes through which across-borders contacts remained active and alive.¹² Through these linkage points, people here have historically continued to come and go from here as immigrants, traders, travellers, missionaries and

for learning and exchange of knowledge and faith traditions.¹³ In addition to its very close links with North and more particularly North and North Western Indian sub-continent, it has had continued close trade and cultural relations with places in the present day China, Greater Tibet, a number of cities in Central Asia, Afghanistan, Iran and, via Silk Route, to places in West Asia and Europe. Kashmir, with archaeological evidence of early Greek contacts, even to this day retains the imprints of Hellenic influences.¹⁴ It is suggested that Kashmir with different variations of its name finds mention in various Greek accounts.¹⁵ Several Chinese (and other) scholars are also reported to have visited Kashmir during 6th and 7th century to study Buddhist learning.¹⁶ Among the prominent travellers to Kashmir was the famous Chinese traveller Hiuen Tsang (602-664) who is reported to have spent two years in the valley as “an honoured guest.” During his stay “he studied Sutras and Sastras and acquainted himself fully with the country.” He describes Kashmir which he calls Kia-shi-mi-lo as a country surrounded on all sides by very high mountains which have very narrow passes for entry. According to him these “natural bulwarks have protected the country from neighbouring states” who have never succeeded in subduing it. He describes its climate as cold, the soil as very fertile with abundance of fruit and flowers. For him the “people here are handsome in appearance, but are given to cunning. They love learning and are well instructed”.¹⁷

As seen above Kashmir’s ethnic, cultural, economic contacts with the outside world have been deep all through its history. In particular the Central Asian & Iranian cultural and literary contacts with and influences on Kashmir have always been strong even in ancient times. These contacts and influences go back to antiquity much before the beginning of Muslim period in Kashmir.¹⁸ As a very powerful civilisation their influence has always been multifaceted. These influences seem to have become more pronounced particularly during the medieval times and remained so almost till the middle of the 20th century. Kashmir became an important centre of Persian learning, art and literature and continued to have economic and other linkages with several other important places in what was

traditionally and broadly known as Turkistan (Central Asia).¹⁹ These relations in cultural and economic spheres continued even during the Dogra Period (1846-1947) within the broad colonial umbrella.²⁰

Walter Lawrence affirms that Kashmir enjoys tremendous advantage over other parts of (what was then united) India. As compared to those it is much easier to construct a general account of country's history.²¹ One important reason for this is the people of valley possess a "genuine historical sense in which the Indian mind is so conspicuously deficient".²² Various historians attribute the presence of historical sense and history writing tradition in Kashmir to its proximity and "contact with central and west Asian peoples" that possessed "a stronger sense of history than did India".²³ In fact there are some scholars who have even attributed Kahana's 800 verses account (*Rajtarangni*, A Chronicle of the Kings of Kashmir) to his inspiration from Firdouse's (940-1020) *Shahnama* (940-1020) (60000 couplets/verses) the story of King (of Persia).²⁴

Along with this economic and cultural interface, Kashmir also has been at the crossroads of transition of many important spiritual and religious traditions like Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam, and must have been also impacted by other religious traditions that evolved in its proximity like that of Zoroastrianism in Iran and Confucius tradition in China.²⁵ Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam are the three discernible major religious traditions that have had an important contribution in the making of Kashmiri identity. All the three religions evolved gradually and developed the distinctive strains of spiritual and intellectual traditions.²⁶ During ancient times, Kashmir became an important centre of Buddhist faith. It is generally believed to have become dominant in Kashmir in the time of Emperor Asoka even though it as a faith had got introduced here much earlier. In spite of certain setbacks in between it remained as a dominant faith tradition here for about seven to eight hundred years. It continued its significant presence for few centuries even after Hinduism began to replace it as the dominant faith here. Kashmir contributed significantly its bit in its intellectual and theological evolution. It is from

here that Buddhism spread in places in Central Asia, Greater Tibet, China and beyond.²⁷

At a somewhat later stage, particularly around the 6th century, alongside the presence of Buddhism, Brahmanism also began to gradually gain ground. What was significant about the new faith is that it also eventually evolved a Theo-philosophical position that is distinct. During the course of religious transition, Kashmir formally experienced the introduction of Shaivism as a distinct strain of Hinduism.²⁸ It is assumed to have evolved through convergence of Vedic faith with that of Buddhism. This happened through a process of religions assimilation whereby the two faiths exerted influences on each other. Whereas Hinduism exported poly-theistic and Tantric beliefs to Buddhism, it instead borrowed scriptural form of art from Buddhism.

While the Brahmanism was gaining ground in Kashmir, Islam was getting established as the dominant faith in its western and northern vicinity. Islam had established in almost entire of its surroundings in central Asia and Iran as a part of a globally ascending political, economic, spiritual and civilizational power and had reached to its western borders during the first quarter of the eighth century. Therefore, Kashmir could not remain immune to its impact and influence particularly because of its continued commercial and other contacts with regions that had become centres of Islamic faith and culture. That is why there is evidence to indicate the Muslim presence within Kashmir right from the 8th century, much (three centuries) before Muslim power got established here.²⁹ Because of being part of already globally dominant cultures, these visiting Muslims are reported to have been treated well. This presence would include initially mainly traders and gradually later an increasing number of Sufi missionaries visiting the place.³⁰ Some of the Muslim settlers were given *jagirs* (land grants from state) and employment, by local kings in army and administration.³¹

It was through such routine and peaceful interface particularly because of the Sufi missionary activity that in a matter of few centuries

Islam became a popular faith tradition to which common masses were attracted.³² In the context of political instability following the Avantivarman's death in the 833, ensuing misgovernment, persecution, debauchery of the elite that had continued almost for two centuries, was bound to promote a general discontent among the masses.³³ The social acceptance of Islam was also facilitated by oppressive Brahmanical order that in alliance with the corrupt political elite had pushed common person to tremendous social and economic disadvantage, thereby alienating them from their own faith and increasing their attraction for Islam.³⁴ It seems to have acquired so much of social acceptability and such a popular traction that a ruling King Rinchan Shah, (who happened to be a Buddhist) voluntarily converted to the new faith under the influence of a Muslim saint in 1323.³⁵ In spite of a brief set back after his death, his conversion practically laid the foundation of the Muslim Sultanate (Kingdom) in Kashmir that lasted for about three centuries till Akbar occupied and incorporated it in his empire. Islam also has had beneficial influence in reforming Hindu religion in Kashmir. It is significant to note that Kashmir even up to now continues to be a meeting point of four great religious traditions.³⁶

Thus, as we have seen by and large peaceful and gradual transition of faiths without violent disruptions and the enriching interface with many magnificent civilizational traditions has given Kashmir and its people a culture of inclusivity, a cosmopolitan outlook and creative ingenuity that is reflected in their approach to culture and religion even in very trying situations. This has promoted an intercommunity living with common cultural references. Therefore, Kashmir continued to be defined by the culture of interfaith peace and understanding in which its own unique *Rishi* mystic tradition has played a very important role. The two persons who have approximated and symbolised Kashmir's composite personality with all the richness of its cultural genius and spiritual ethos are Laleshwari (Hindu) better known as Lal Ded (Mother Lala) and Shaikh al-'Ālam Shaikh Noor-ud-Din Wali (Nund Rishi) the most revered saints representing its syncretic legacy.³⁷ Historically speaking both have

occupied the cultural and literary imagination of people in Kashmir cutting across religious lines. They have had tremendous significance in shaping the socio-psychological consciousness and identity of Kashmiri society, symbolizing the intercommunity harmony and tolerant character of its society. The duo has “become synonymous with Kashmiri identity”.³⁸ However, it has been Shaikh Noor-ud-Din who has more significantly approximated and symbolised Kashmir’s identity with all its cultural genius and richness of spiritual personality and has come to be recognized as the national saint of Kashmir.³⁹ He laid the foundation of *Reshi* (Muslim) mystic tradition with syncretic attributes. Historically speaking as the “Patron Saint”, he has personified Kashmir’s national personality and has tremendous significance in shaping the social psychology of Kashmiri society. Thereby he has contributed to promoting attributes of harmony and tolerance within it.⁴⁰ He as a person and as an institution has remained an epitome of Kashmir’s cultural and spiritual personality.⁴¹ He and his legacy continue to inspire the people of Kashmir for peace, reconciliation and harmony.⁴² Through all these influences Kashmiri society, in spite of various challenging situations it was faced with, has by and large remained pacifist, nonviolent and has been abhorring radicalization.⁴³

So, as we have seen Kashmir did change and evolve with and in relation to changing times, challenges and incoming influences from its surroundings, but it absorbed these changes in a manner that did not fragment its social fabric and did not create any noticeable cleavages that would distort its distinct collective personality with which it is still identified. It has been strongly a consensual society that changed together but without uprooting itself from its inherited socio-cultural possessions and legacy. Kashmir has been truly a melting pot that has absorbed various influences from its surroundings without being undermined or overtaken by any one of these dominant civilizations and instead formed its own uniqueness. The strength of Kashmiri personality has been that with all these enriching influences coming from left and right, north and south, near and far, it has retained its personality as a distinct cultural community

about which its people remained strongly conscious possessive and persistent.⁴⁴

Notes and References

-
- ¹ See Balraj Puri, *5000 Years of Kashmir*, Ajanta Publication, Jammu, 1997, pp. 128-137. For a detailed discussion on the distinctive aspects of Kashmir see also Christopher Snedden, *Understanding Kashmir and Kashmiris*, Speaking Tiger Publishing, New Delhi, 2015, pp. 7-35.
- ² For a reasonably comprehensive description of Kashmir in its different facets, contours and features see Walter R. Lawrence, *The Valley of Kashmir*, Kesar Publishers, Srinagar, 1967, pp. 12- 63. See also Stein's note in *Kalhana's Ancient Geography of Jammu & Kashmir*, translated by M. A. Stein, Verinag Publications, Mirpur, n.d., p. 388. For a description of its surrounding mountains see, Frederick Drew, *The Northern Barriers of India and Jammu and Kashmir Territories* (originally published in 1875, reprinted City Book Centre, Srinagar, 2008), pp. 113-132, 133-143.
- ³ Lawrence, *ibid*, pp. 12-28 and Stein *ibid*. pp. 388, 429. Drew, *ibid*. p. 174.
- ⁴ See Puri. n. 1 and Lawrence, n. 2, pp. 12-28.
- ⁵ S. L. Shali, "Cultural Ecology of Prehistoric Kashmir and Central Asia" in B. K. Kaul Deambi, (ed). *Kashmir and Central Asia*, Centre of Central Asian Studies, University of Kashmir, Srinagar, pp. 1-15.
- ⁶ That is about 3000 B.C. see Mohammad Ashraf Wani & Aman Ashraf Wani, *Prehistory of Kashmir*, Oriental Publishing House, Srinagar, 2017, pp. 94-98, 107-110
- ⁷ Wani, *ibid*. pp. 93-94.
- ⁸ These included, Gilgit, Hunza, Nagar, and communities towards the central and eastern China etc. *ibid*. p. 94, 98 and pp. 109-110.
- ⁹ The issue has been dealt with from various perspectives, see, Shonaleekha Kaul, *The Making of Early Kashmir*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2018, pp.103-107. Kashmir is culturally thought to belong to a regional formation which is essentially non-Himalayan and non-Indic. *Ibid*. 104. See also, Chitrlekha Zutshi, "Rethinking Kashmir's History from a Borderlands Perspective" in *History Compass*, 8/7, 2010, pp. 594-608.
- ¹⁰ "Kashmir was a major trading junction in the Indo-Central Asian commerce...." Monidia Dey, "Silk Route: Traversing the trade and cultural route of ancient times" *Financial Times* January 1, 2020 <https://www.financialexpress.com/lifestyle/travel-tourism/silk-route-leh-ladakh-tour-kashmir-travel-chitral-uttarakhand/1808776/> Other aspects of relation and exchange like cultural, religion etc will figure in discussions below.
- ¹¹ For mountains surrounding Kashmir see Drew, n. 2. pp. 133-145, 145-48.

-
- ¹² More significantly four routes are reported to have historically facilitated this flow of people, trade and cultural contacts with the outside world. These routes are through Baramulla, Kupwara, Bandipora and Zojila. See, Wani, n. 6. p. 110.
- ¹³ These contacts expanded into larger inter-civilisation exchange and dialogue with Hellenistic, Persian, Tibetan, sub continental, Central Asian, West Asian, and Chinese peoples and cultural and faith traditions Wani, *ibid.* pp. 93-117.
- ¹⁴ Ajaz A. Bandy, "A Recent Discovery of Hellenistic Image of Gaja-Lakshmi from Kashmir: Style and development. *The Journal of Central Asian Studies*, Volume XVIII, No. 1, 2009, pp. 75-86.
- ¹⁵ Among these include Herodotus, known as the "father of history", See G.M.D. Sufi, *Kashir: Being A History of Kashmir*, Capital Publishing House, 1996, pp. 12-15.
- ¹⁶ "The earliest Chinese reference to Kashmir is dated 541 A.C. which calls Valley Kushihi- mi." Sufi, *ibid.* p. 13. See also Stein, n. 2. pp. 254-258.
- ¹⁷ Stein, *ibid.* p. 355.
- ¹⁸ There are historians who attribute some of the features of Kashmir's uniqueness of earliest history writing tradition within South Asia to its contact with the Central and West Asian peoples who already had a developed history writing tradition. See. Kaul. n. 9. p. 105.
- ¹⁹ These contacts were also contributing factor to cultural and technological renaissance in Kashmir during the medieval times. It is because of the cultural proximity that Kashmir began to be referred as *Iran-e Sageer* (Smaller Iran).
- ²⁰ K. Warikoo, Trade relations between Central Asia and Kashmir Himalayas during the Dogra period 1846-1947, *Asie Centrale* 1/2 1996 . pp. 113-124.
- ²¹ Lawrence, n. 2. p. 179.
- ²² *ibid.* p. 180. His reference to India is to pre-colonial Sub continental India as he wrote this in 1895 when he first published his book the valley of Kashmir.
- ²³ See Shonaleeka Kaul, *The Making of Early Kashmir*, note.11, p. 105.
- ²⁴ According to Jesse Knutson, the poetic format of the RT was modelled on the famous Persian account of Firdouse's (940-1020) *Shahnama* (977-1010) (60000) couplets/verses. Jesse Knutson "Poetic Justice: On Kalhana's Historical Aesthetics", *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, Vol. 35, No. 2, p. 283.
- ²⁵ For traces of Zoroastrian influence in Kashmir see Gulshan Majeed, "The Frove: A Connecting Link between Zoroastrianism and Kashmir", *The Journal of Central Asian Studies*, Vol. VII, No. I, Centre of Central Asian Studies, University of Kashmir, Srinagar, 1996, pp. 61-66.
- ²⁶ M. A. Kaw "Central Asian contribution to Kashmir's Tradition of Religio-Cultural pluralism," *Central Asiatic Journal*, Vol. 54, No. 2, pp 237-255.
- ²⁷ Prem Nath Bazaz, *The History of Struggle for Freedom in Kashmir*, Srinagar, Gulshan Publishers, 2003, pp. 23-24 and Kaul, n. 9. p. 131 and pp. 154-155.
- ²⁸ Bazaz, *ibid.* pp. 24-29.

-
- ²⁹ Even Rajtarangni confirms it. See Muhammad Ashraf Wani, *Islam in Kashmir*, Srinagar, Orient Publishing House, 2004, p. 44.
- ³⁰ Wani. *ibid.* pp. 44-76.
- ³¹ It is recorded that King Harsha (1089-1101) had employed Muslims on important positions in his army. Bazaz, *The History of Struggle for Freedom in Kashmir*, n. 27. p. 43.
- ³² Wani, *Islam in Kashmir*, n. 29, pp. 44-76 and Mohammad Ishaq Khan, *Kashmir's Transition to Islam*, Manohar Publications, Delhi, 1994.
- ³³ The Rajtarangini records "the bestiality and savagery of the low-born adventurers who misgoverned the country." "The history of two succeeding centuries is a sordid record of short reigns, murders, suicides, plots, conspiracies, rebellions, oppression and extortions" Bazaz, *The History of Struggle for Freedom in Kashmir*, n. 27, p. 38. For more details see pp. 38-48.
- ³⁴ Rattan Lal Hangloo, "Mass conversion in Medieval Kashmir..." in Aparna Rao, (ed.). *The Valley of Kashmir: The Making and Unmaking of a Composite Culture*, Manohar Publications, Delhi, pp. 97-138, more particularly pp. 109-118.
- ³⁵ Bazaz, n. 27. p. 43.
- ³⁶ "Four great religious traditions that meet here and extend across stretches of land with continental proportions. It is here in Kashmir, Islamic tradition moves from valley in the north into central Asia and in the west across Pakistan into Middle East and beyond into North Africa up to the extremes of *Maghrib* into Morocco as a contiguous stretch of land dominated by the Islamic faith. In the east Buddhist tradition spreads from Ladakh, Tibet, China into South East Asia and towards east into extremes of the East Asia up to Japan inside the Pacific Ocean. Birthplace of Sikh faith and the place of its largest concentration Punjab is linked to Jammu and Kashmir in its south. Hinduism stretches from Jammu, across India through the Indian Ocean into the Northern Sri Lanka and Mauritius." Noor Ahmad Baba, "Cultural Contours of Kashmir's identity" in *Sheeraza: A Quarterly Journal of Culture and Literature*, Jammu & Kashmir Academy of Art, Culture & Languages, Vol. XII, No. 3. July -Sept, 2016, pp. 4-11.
- ³⁷ Zutshi, *Languages of Belonging*, pp. 18-19.
- ³⁸ For a comprehensive account of the two and their impact and influence see, Dean Accardi, "Embedded Mystics: Writing Lal Ded and Nund Rishi into the Kashmir Landscape" in Chitrallekha Zutshi, *Kashmir: History, Politics, Representation*, Cambridge University Press, New Delhi, 2018, pp. 247-264.
- ³⁹ Lawrence, n. 2. pp. 287-288. See also Noor Ahmad Baba, "From Conflict to Reconciliation: The Relevance of Shaikh-ul Alam", *Alamdār: A Journal of Kashmir Society & Culture*, Shaikh-ul Alam Chair, University of Kashmir, Vol. III, No. 3, 2009, pp. 51-58.
- ⁴⁰ Puri, n. 1.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*
- ⁴² Baba, n. 39.

⁴³ For elaboration of the basis of this assertion see Noor Ahmad Baba, “Kashmir’s Syncretic Tradition and Challenges of Radicalization in a raging Conflict” in Mubashir Hassan, Kengilsezaki, Samir Yassir (Editors), *Radicalization in South Asia*, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 2019, pp. 27-52.

⁴⁴ Ibid. See also Puri, n. 1.