



Islamization and Mysticism in Kashmir

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ABSTRACT

This study attempts to analyse the the historical evolution and spiritual influence of Islam and Sufism in the Kashmir Valley. Tracing the roots of Islamic thought and Sufi mysticism from Central Asia and Persia to Kashmir, the study examines how these faith traditions shaped the region's cultural, religious, and socio-political landscape from the 14th century onward. The paper highlights the peaceful propagation of Islam through the missionary zeal of Sufi saints like Bulbul Shah and Mir Sayyid Ali Hamadani, emphasizing the non-coercive, inclusive, and spiritually rich nature of their teachings. It also explores the emergence of indigenous Sufi traditions, particularly the Reshi order, which merged local beliefs with Islamic mysticism, giving rise to a uniquely syncretic Kashmiri spiritual identity. Drawing from historical sources, religious texts, and scholarly interpretations, the study analyses the roles of khānqāhs, Sufi poetry, and spiritual networks in fostering communal harmony and religious pluralism. The research underscores how Sufism promoted love, humility, and unity in a diverse society, leaving a lasting legacy visible in Kashmiri art, literature, and devotional practices.



INTRODUCTION

The Kashmir Valley, nestled amidst the majestic Himalayan Mountains, has long been renowned for its picturesque landscapes, rich cultural heritage, and deep spiritual resonance. Central to this tapestry of tradition and belief are the twin currents of Islam and Sufism, which have permeated the region's ethos for centuries, leaving an indelible imprint on its people, customs, and collective consciousness. This introductory exploration aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the historical evolution and profound impact of Islam and Sufism in Kashmir. From the early waves of Islamic expansion to the flourishing of Sufi mysticism, the journey of these faith traditions in the valley is as diverse as it is captivating. We delve into the genesis of Islam in Kashmir, tracing its introduction and assimilation into the socio-cultural milieu of the region. Furthermore, we unravel the mystical dimensions of Sufism, which found fertile ground in the fertile valleys and snow-capped peaks of Kashmir. Sufi saints and mystics, with their emphasis on spiritual introspection, love, and universal brotherhood, carved a distinct spiritual path that resonated deeply with the Kashmiri ethos. Their teachings and practices not only enriched the spiritual landscape but also fostered a unique synthesis of Islamic and indigenous Kashmiri traditions.

Moreover, this introduction sets the stage for a deeper exploration of the key themes and narratives that define the interplay between Islam, Sufism, and Kashmiri society. It invites readers to embark on a journey through the annals of history, where the convergence of faith and culture has sculpted a rich tapestry of religious pluralism, artistic expression, and social cohesion in the valley. The valley of Kashmir is one of the most prominent Muslim majority areas in South Asia with no less than 96% of the Muslim population. Being a predominantly non Muslim state in ancient times, this phenomenal change in the religious demography of Kashmir occurred due to the mass conversion to Islam during the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. It is worth noting that the overwhelming majority of Kashmiri Muslims trace their origins to Hinduism, with a smaller number coming from Buddhism. Only a small fraction of the community can be traced back to immigrant populations. The important aspect of spread of Islam in Kashmir is that it did not occur as a result of any military conquest or occupation by Muslim forces in the valley.

Methodology

The foundation of this overview was built upon extensive historical research, drawing upon primary sources such as historical texts, religious scriptures, and archival documents. In addition to historical research, this overview benefited from scholarly analysis and interpretation, incorporating insights from academic studies, peer-reviewed articles, and scholarly monographs. By engaging with the works of eminent historians, scholars of religious studies, and experts in Sufi mysticism, we gained a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between Islam, Sufism, and Kashmiri culture.

DISCUSSION AND RESULT

Kashmir owns one of the leading Muslim cultures of South Asian region that has a prestigious legacy and an unavoidable religio-spiritual contribution. The sources and chronicles of Kashmir mention and narrate this legacy that has been a part of socio religious setting from fourteenth century onwards. This religio-spiritual legacy has been progressive and a vibrant force for restructuring demography, society and political scenario in this region. The change didn't occurred abruptly rather through a gradual process that worked at different levels resulting in conversions in the valley .The introduction of Islam to Kashmir is attributed to the dedicated work of 'Ulemas' and 'Sufis' who arrived in the valley from Persia and Central Asia. The mystical tendencies and transmission of Islamic tradition prevailing in Central Asia and Persia got introduced here due to the migration and the influx of Muslim missionaries during fourteenth century, connecting the valley with Muslim world. These Muslim missionaries settled and introduced diverse socio-religious institutions alien to the Kashmiri Society.

Central Asia and Kashmir have enjoyed a long-standing relationship for many centuries, dating back to the early fourteenth century, not only in political affairs but also in matters of religion and spirituality. As a result, both regions have had a profound influence on each other and the cultural and religious values of Kashmir shares many similarities with those of Central Asia and Iran. The impact

of Iran and Central Asia on Kashmir's culture is so significant that it has earned the nickname "Iran-i-Sagir," meaning "little Iran". The 'transformation' of Kashmir's socio-cultural and religious milieu, as described by the 12th-century historian Kalhana, owes much to the influence of Sufism from the Persian part of the Muslim world. While Persian spirituality had an impact, but it was the Central Asian 'Brand of Sufism' that made the biggest contribution to this transformation.

Spreading of Sufism

With the expansion of Islam beyond Arabia in 712 A.D, it was the territory of Mawar-al-Nahr (Transoxiana) including Faras (Persia or Iran) that came into contact with Islam immediately during the Umayyad rule in Arabia (661-750 AD). From Central Asia and Iran Islam entered Kashmir in around 1320 AD. Although some evidences suggest that Muslims had made their way into Kashmir even before the arrival of Sufis, through the invasion of Muhammad Ghazni in the early 11th century. This event is said to have opened the doors for the infiltration of Muslims into the region well before the establishment of Muslim rule in Kashmir. However, it was during the reign of the Shah Mir dynasty and the subsequent influx of Sufis that the process of Islamization in Kashmir gained significant momentum. The prolonged rule of the Muslim Sultanate and the presence of Sufis changes of far-reaching significance transformed the Valley. Hence, Islam's contact with Kashmir has been made possible through the links maintained with Central Asia and Persia. The campaign for Islamization of Kashmir gained more momentum from that point onwards as Kashmiri Reshis took up the cause. These Reshis embarked on long journeys to distant regions, spreading the message of Islam among the local populace. The scholarly treatises on Quranic Alum, Hadith and Fiqh compiled by Central Asian and Persian scholar's, Aurad-o-Wazaif transmitted by eminent mystics like Sheikh Abd-al-Rehman Bulbul Shah, Mir Syed Ali Hamadani and galaxy of Sufis and scholars along with the poetic expressions of Jalal-u-din Rumi, Abd-al-Rehman Jama'i, Sheikh Sa'adi Shirazi have deep penetration into both Kashmir's soil as well as into the souls. As a matter of fact, Central Asia and Iran have enormously contributed to establish a much wider and secure base for the Islamic Sufic Cum Mystic tradition in Kashmir. The efforts and Sufi expressions of Sheikh Nurudin Walias well as of the local renowned Sufis, Reshis and scholars since fourteenth century had been uncouthly significant. This chain of pious souls from and within paved the way for the academic and mystic relationship of Kashmir worldwide.

Islam like Christianity is essentially a missionary religion and every Muslim missionary carries with him the message of Islam to the people of the land into which he penetrates. Reflecting upon the missionary attitude of Islam and thereby it's spread in 'The Preaching of Islam' T.W Arnold writes:

"The spread of this faith over so vast a portion of the globe is due to various causes,

Social, political and religious: but among these, one of the most powerful factors

In the production of this stupendous result, have been the unremitted labours of Muslim

Missionaries, who, with the Prophet himself as their great ensample, have spent,

themselves for the conversion of Unbeliever'

This befits for Kashmir where in third century BC majority of the populace followed Buddhism and in fifth century AD Brahmanism in varied forms like Shaivism, Vaishnavism and Shaktivism reasserted itself, and this assertion continued till fourteenth century. Finally, with the social, political, economic reasons and Sufi intervention, Islam replaced Hinduism in fourteenth and fifteenth century and added a new dimension to the populace faith of people. This was not the result of any forcible conquest writes Auriel Stein, but an outcome of gradual conversion carried by Sufis coming from Central Asia and Persia and the local Reshis. The advent of Sufis induced the non-Muslims to embrace Islam. First name amongst the Sufis is Sayyid Sharaf-ud-Din Abdul Rehman Shah commonly known as Bulbul Shah from Turkistan was the first known Muslim missionary who started the preaching of Islam in Kashmir. He entered the valley during the time of Suhadeva. He played a crucial role in converting the reigning Buddhist ruler, Rinchana, to Islam. After embracing Islam on the hands of Bulbul Shah King choosed the name Sultan Sadr-ud-din, and in his memory Sadr-ud-din constructed a Khanqah, after his name which is the first known *Khanqah* of Kashmir. He is also to be claimed as the

first Muslim ruler of Kashmir. The conversion of King from Buddhism to Islam was a landmark achievement of Sufi saint Bulbul Shah, which paved the way for gradual spread and preaching of Islam.

Essentially prior to the King Sadr-ud-din, Kashmir was passing through political confusion, state and society was totally controlled and divided into caste system by Hindu dominated classes. The highest and dominated caste was the Brahmins (upper class) who were the guardian of religion and beneficiaries of royal sponsorship. The rigidity of caste and class discrimination of Brahmanism created inequality and exploitation of the masses. Therefore, the lower caste society of Kashmir was only on the mercy of Brahmins, who used to treat the lower classes in insensitive manners. In an atmosphere the lower class society of Kashmir valley was ready to accept any religion that could prove to be the alternative to get rid of the exploitation of Brahmanism. To this it was easy for new religion to attract the suppressed class of Kashmiri society and finally Islam achieved it by the devotions of Muslim Sufis.

After Bulbul Shah a number of Sufi saints entered the valley and won conversions to Islam, such as Syed Hussain Simnani, Mir Sayyid Ali Hamadani, Mir Mohammad Hamadani etc. It is worth to mention the Reshis of the valley like Sheikh Nur-al-Din Reshi, who also made significant contribution towards the conversion. "Though these conversions from Brahmanism to Islam in Kashmir did primarily serve the purpose of the medieval state, it would be inaccurate to attribute it entirely to the state's initiative alone, writes Harbans Mukhia. Thus it is not the Sultans, observes Muhibul Hassan, but the Sufis who were mainly responsible for introducing and spreading Islam in Kashmir. But for this they did not use compulsion, because they were neither capable of employing it, nor did they have the sanction of the state behind them. Their methods were persuasion, discussion and discourse and they won over the hearts of the people on account of their simplicity, sincerity, piety, and devotion. The outstanding contributions of respected Sufis and learned scholars in the propagation of Islam in Kashmir were characterized by love and the promotion of peaceful coexistence. They played a pivotal role in nurturing a culture of religio-spiritual values in the region.

Development of Sufism

Sufism or Tasawuf is a technique of lifestyle wherein a deeper self is revealed and lived. This deeper self is in line with all that exists, beyond the already known personality which has capability of awareness, action, creativity and love. Sufism is that mode of religious life in which the emphasis is placed, not on the performance of external rituals as on the activities of the inner self, in other words, it signifies Islamic mysticism. Sufism or Tasawuf has been described by various Sufis one among them is *Abu'l-Qasim al-Qushayri*, the writer of the Super Sufi compendium, *Ras'ul* considers Sufism inside the experience of purity of inner and outer life styles and says that "purity is something praiseworthy in whichever language it may be expressed and its opposite impurity is to be eschewed".

'The term, Sufi, Wali-Allah (protégé of God) Darwesh and Faqir are applied to Muslim Spiritualists who attempt to achieve a development of their intuitive faculties through ascetic exercises, contemplation, renunciation and self denial'. Generally speaking Sufism means love and respect to humanity which will lead us to love for the ultimate truth i.e. God.

Growth of Sufism

The growth and development of Sufism in Kashmir, like in other parts of South Asia, can be viewed as a continuation of the historical progression that had already started in Persia and Central Asia. The Institutional Sufism, which evolved gradually in twelfth century in Persia and Central Asian environment, was characterized by hierarchical orders (*tarīqas*; *Silsila*), charismatic leaders (*pīrs*, *vilāyats*), delineated territories of spiritual jurisdiction center's (*Khānqāhs*) and tombs (*mazārs*) of *pīrs*. While the founder of *Silsila*, the perfected saint was the *pīr* of the *pīrspīr 'ipīran*), *shaikh* of the *shaikhs* (*shaikh 'ishaikhan*), he appointed his front-ranking disciples as the leaders of the missions for propagating Islam and introducing the *Silsila* to the new area. In this way a hierarchical chain of *pīrs* came into existence, and the chain came down to the local and even to the village levels. The organisation of these *Silsilas* and *Khānqāhs* was the last and the most significant phase in the history of Sufism and it was during this phase when Sufism entered into Kashmir.

Divisions of Sufism

Sufism in Kashmir has been divided in two wide trends i.e the orthodox trend which was usually followed by *Sufis* who migrated from Central Asia and Persia and on the other hand *Rishis*, mostly inhabitants of the valley, with *Sheikh Nurud Din* as it's founder. Sufism in Kashmir developed through its various orders which were introduced here, such as the *Suhrawardi* order, *Kubrawi* order, the *Naqashbandi* order, the *Reshi* order, *Qadriya* order and the *Nurbakhshiya* order. The first among these to be introduced was the *Suhrawardi* order in the early fourteenth century by Sufi saint *Bulbul Shah*, disciple of Shah Niamatullah Farsi(RA). The Sufi saints starting from *Bulbul Shah* to Sufi Poets are still inspiring the people of the valley by their subtle mystical insights. In the development of Sufism, *Bulbul Shah* and the great wave of immigrants associated with the work of Sayyid Ali Hamadani, his son Mir Mohammad Hamadani, Sayyid Jamal-ud-Din Bukhari, Sayyid Ismail Shami, etched made significant contribution. The valley has played an important role in the representation of the interests of the large number of people including the Sufis, Reshis, Sayyids and ulema, poets, learned men and travelers. *Bulbul Shah*, as already mentioned, his main contribution was the conversion of the reigning king which changed the course of Kashmir history. His conversion helped Islam and Sufism to go on a long way in Kashmir. By grace of *Bulbul Shah* not only *Rinchana* accepted Islam but along with ten thousand other people came under the flag of Islam.

The Islamization of Kashmir was further developed at faster rate by influx of the host of Sayyids, well known amongst the mare Sayyid Jalal-ud-din Bukhari, Sayyid Taj-ud-din, Sayyid Mas'ud, Sayyid Ali Hamadani. Among all of these Sufis, preacher's and missionaries, it was Mir Sayyid Ali Hamadani, founder of the *Kubravi Silsila* in Kashmir, who put an extra ordinary influence in spreading Islam. He visited the valley during the reign of *Qutub u din*. He is considered as the real founder of Islam in Kashmir. He is also known as *Shah-e-Hamadan* (lord of Hamadan), *Amir -i-Kabir* (the great Amir), *Ali-i-Thani* (Second Ali). He had gained a great influence on the people of Kashmir as well as the ruler *Sultan Sikandar* that he brought many reforms, such as, he banned many evil practices prevailing at that time in society like drugs and sati system and it was *Shah-e-Hamadan* who raised voice against the oppression faced by the people of the Valley. He brought with him an enormous treasure of books, also established a library in Kashmir, he left his deputies at number of places and came out with a set up of *Khānqāhs*, which served as the great centers of proselytization and preaching of Islam and development of Sufism. All these activities were done with peaceful means not by force which became an attractive force for the people to accept Islam. Further development of Sufism took place with the influx of Mir Mohammad Hamadani, many changes took place in Kashmir because of him which paved the way for the development of Sufism and contributed to the development of socio-religious and educational awakening among Kashmiris.

Over time, Sufism in Kashmir developed and flourished through the dedicated efforts of Sufis and Reshis. Since the introduction of Islam, the valley has produced a multitude of revered Sufis and Reshis, and it is through their influence and teachings that Kashmir has earned the monikers "Reshi Vaer" and "Pir Vaer". These honorific titles serve as a testament to the profound impact of Sufism on the cultural and spiritual heritage of Kashmir.

CONCLUSION

Our exploration of Islam and Sufism in Kashmir has illuminated the intricate tapestry of spirituality, culture, and tradition that defines the region. From the early advent of Islam to the flourishing of Sufi mysticism, Kashmir has been a melting pot of diverse religious influences, each leaving an indelible mark on its landscape and collective consciousness. Through the lens of history, we have witnessed the dynamic interplay between Islamic teachings, Sufi practices, and indigenous Kashmiri traditions, resulting in a unique synthesis of religious expression that transcends sectarian divides and fosters a spirit of inclusivity and tolerance.

Moreover, our exploration has underscored the enduring relevance of Islam and Sufism in Kashmir, not merely as religious doctrines but as guiding principles that imbue every facet of Kashmiri life, from literature and music to art and architecture. As we reflect on the legacy of Islam and Sufism in Kashmir, we are reminded of the profound resilience of the human spirit in the face of adversity and

the capacity of faith to transcend barriers and unite hearts in a shared quest for truth and enlightenment. Ultimately, the story of Islam and Sufism in Kashmir is not merely a historical narrative but a living testament to the enduring power of faith, love, and resilience in shaping the destiny of a land where the divine and the human intersect in sublime harmony.

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