

Contribution of Sufism in Growth of Composite Culture in Kashmir: A Case Study on Lal Ded

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ABSTRACT

The paper is an attempt to find out the social and cultural implications of the philosophy of Sufi saints which contributed to the growth and development of the communal harmony and the pluralistic culture of the Kashmiri society. The contribution of the Lal Ded in Kashmir in the establishment of the channels of communication between the local traditions and the larger Islamic tradition which facilitated the acculturation of the Kashmiris will be also analyzed. This paper would also look into the resistant nature of the Sufi philosophy which started protesting against social norms inimical to the ethnical and spiritual development of the Kashmiri society, in which Lal Ded played a significant role. Apart from it, the impact of her Vaakhs on collective psyche of the two communities and in shaping the Kashmiri language as the identity of Kashmiris would be essentially discussed.

KEY WORDS:

*Sufism
Acculturation,
Unity
Communal
harmony
Kashmiriyat.*

INTRODUCTION

A widespread popularity of shared religious traditions which brought all communities together is a remarkable feature of Indian Sub-continent. The State of Jammu and Kashmir has a unique and rich Sufi tradition which is an integral part of the Kashmir's civilizational ethos. The teachings of Sufi saints still inspire the people of Kashmir. In Kashmir, the growth of composite culture reflects the shared experiences of its people; the Hindus and the Muslims who worship in common shrines and revere common saints. It became an integrally harmonized culture due to the attempts of various Sufis and Rishis of the time. The main dominant influence of the Sufism on the Kashmiri society is evident from the identity of Kashmiris i.e. *Kashmiriyat*.

With the advent of Islam in Kashmir, which was an outcome of the movements of Muslim traders, craftsmen and the soldiers as early as the middle of the eighteenth

1. Hasan, Mushirul, *Kashmir under the Sultans*, Aakar Books, Calcutta, 1959, (reprint) 2005, p.232.
2. Rafiabadi, H.N, *Saints and Saviours of Islam*, Sarup and Sons co., New Delhi, 2004, p.20
3. Kalhana, *Rajatarangini* (eng. tr. by M.A.Stein), Vol I, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, Delhi, 1961, p. 130.
4. The Zaina Rajatarangini reveals the penetration of the Persian and Central Asian influences in Kashmir during the sultanate period. It also talks about the cultural changes of the Kashmiri people. See Dhar, Kashi Nath, *Srivara's Zaina Rajatarangini*, People's Publishing house, New Delhi, 1994
5. Buhle, George, "Tour in search of Sanskrit Manuscripts" *Journal of Royal Asiatic Society*, Bombay Branch, 1877, p.20. Ahmed, Aziz, "Conversion to Islam in the Valley of Kashmir", *Central Asiatic Journal*, XXIII, 1979, p.10

century, the Kashmiri society felt new changes and transformation in their social organization.¹ Since the time, the valley of Kashmir received the eternal message of Islam; it had witnessed influx of highly learned Sufi saints particularly from Central Asia and Persia, who had left an indelible influence on the social organization of the evolving Muslim community of Kashmir.²

In the early fourteenth century, it was the Suhrawardi order which was first to be introduced in Kashmir among all the Sufi orders. Sheikh Sharaf-uddin was the first to introduce this order in Kashmir. He was popularly known as Bulbul Shah. Another order which gained a widespread popularity in Kashmir was Kubravi order in which Saiyid Ali Hamadani, popularly known in Kashmir as Shah-i-Hamadani was prominent Sufi Saint. He did not come all alone but he was accompanied by so many others Sufi saints. Islamisation through Sufism gained momentum in the fourteenth century, due to which a large number of people got converted to Islam in the search of liberation from the shackles of the caste system and the Brahmanical religion. It is also worth mentioning what M.A.Stein says, "Islam made its way into Kashmir not by forcible conquests but by the gradual conversions, for which the foreign adventurers both from the south and central Asia prepared the ground."³ It was the philosophy of Sufi saints which revolutionized and brought about a great transformation in the lives of the Kashmiri people, both the Muslims and non-Muslims.

The Sufi saints had influence not only on the social and others aspects of Kashmiri society but on the administration as well as it was the political necessity to make a concord between the Kashmiri people. With this, there started an era of Persianisation of the Kashmiri administration in addition with the cultural conquest.⁴ The Hindu society was split into two groups; the Persian speaking Hindus who were called *Karkun*, and the Sanskrit speaking who were called *Pandits*.⁵ It created a type of gap between them as some of them learnt

Persian for economic reasons. And the rest were devoid of the jobs or work in administration. They lost their previous status in the society. It resulted in the change in their entire culture after the coming of Islamic culture.⁶

In fourteenth century, there emerged a kind of hostility between the two communities due to the rise of a new Islamic culture which was posing a threat to the age old local Kashmiri culture inherited by Kashmiris, especially the Hindus.⁷ A product of this initial encounter between Islam and local traditions in medieval period was the Muslim Rishi movement, the only indigenous Sufi order in Kashmir. Rishism represented the challenge to the orthodoxy in both Islam and the Brahmanical establishment. It stresses the universal values such as peace, harmony, love and fraternity between all creatures of god, irrespective of religion. With this emerging deficit between pre-Islamic Kashmir and Islamic Kashmir, a need to counter such situation arose.

Lal Ded, also known as Lalla Arifa, Lalleshwari and many other names has had a profound effect on the people of Kashmir as her sayings are an everyday occurrence which has been passed down through the generations orally, revered by all Kashmiris. With the help of his Vaakhs and the lore that has been passed on through the generations, it is found that she was a practicing Yogini from the Kashmiri Shaivite tradition. She had the astute knowledge of core practices and philosophies of this tradition. According to so many legends, her abusive marriage became a turning point in her life and she became a wandering ascetic after renouncing her married life. During this phase in her life, she came in contact with so many Sufi as well as Rishi saints, such as Nuruudin Rishi, also known as Nund Rishi, the founding Sheikh of the Kashmiri Sufi order known as the Rishis, and the Saiyid Ali Hamadani, of the Kubrawayyia Sufi order. It is said that she influenced Nund Rishi and was also his teacher. But according to a legend, she was herself influenced by Saiyid Ali Hamadani in her later life and got introduced

6. Ahmed, Aziz,
“*Conversion to Islam
in the Valley of
Kashmir*”, *Central
Asiatic Journal*, XXIII,
1979, p-10

7. Singh, N.K.,
*Islamic Heritage of
Kashmir, Vol II*,
Gulshan Publishers,
Srinagar, 2000, p.2

to Sufism by him. This event in her life is also evident from her Vaakhs that after meeting Saiyid Ali Hamadan, she felt that she met a true human being in real sense.

Lal Ded was the most significant historical bridge that connected the two shores of this gulf effectively. Lalla urged the people of all communities to rise above caste, creed and color and then see the light. She is supposed to be a bridge between Hindu mysticism and Sufism.⁸ She talked about the unity of two communities in her Vaakhs as below:

8. Kaul, Jayalal, *Lal Ded*, Sahitya Academy, New Delhi, 1973, p.107

9. Khan, Mohammad Ishaq, *Kashmir's transition to Islam: the role of Muslim Rishis, fifteenth to Eighteenth century*, Manohar Publications, New Delhi, 2002, p.181.

10. Kaul, Jayalal, *op.cit.* p.99

Shiv chuy thali thali rozan;

Mo zan Hindu La Musalman.

Trukay chuk pan panun par zonav;

Soy chay Sahibas sati zaniy zan.

It means Shiva lives everywhere; do not divide Hindu from Muslim. Use your sense to recognize yourself; that is the true way to find God.

It can also be said that her background as a Hindu and her love for Sufism fused together to form her philosophy of brotherhood between the two communities. It is evident from her Vaakhs that how she preached the unity of the two communities. She not only has always “been remembered as a Muslim saint but even as a great apostle of Islam in Kashmir”, says Prof Khan.⁹

She brought together the two communities by bringing them into the fold of a common language which inherited the features and values of both the cultures: pan-Islamic and local culture. Her role as the maker of Kashmiri, both language and literature can well be illustrated from the language of her Vaakhs. We may here say that though Kashmiri has had a much longer history and Kalhana records for us what is said to be "the earliest specimen" of Kashmiri, yet we can for good reason acclaim Lal Ded as the progenitor of modern Kashmiri.¹⁰ She is the first

among the moderns not only chronologically but in the modern quality of interrogation and expostulation in her poetry. Her poetry is modern because it comes alive for us even today. Indeed she helped Kashmiris, to discover their mother-tongue and soul as a people. The richness in the Kashmiri language which forms an integral part of the Kashmiri identity i.e. Kashmiriyat, is a reflection of her emphasis on it. Her poems, though a vocalization of her spiritually intense experiences, instantly appealed to the masses because she spoke in the common metaphor of their language. She questioned the monopoly of the Sanskrit-knowing scholars over the Shiva philosophy. In the process of translating its highly evolved, in fact highly subtle, concepts and her personal mystic experiences into the language of the masses, she not only made these accessible to them, but also enriched the Kashmiri language. By doing so, she made it available to all the people irrespective of caste, creed, colour, sex, religion or region. This act on the part of Lal-Ded to make Kashmiri language the vehicle for spreading her message of universal brotherhood through her outpourings was also recognized by one of the eminent Sufis of her time- Nund Rishi. This is evident from one of the stanza of the sayings of Sheikh-Noor-ud-din-Wali.11

That Lalla of Padmanpore-

She drank her fill of divine nectar;

She was indeed an avatar of ours

O God, Grant me the self-same born!

11. Ibid.p.85

12. Ibid.p.85

In the words of Jayalal Koul, “Lal Ded helped to discover our mother tongue and our soul as a people.”¹² This act remains the greatest revolutionary act in the cultural history of Kashmir and makes her the undisputed founder not only of the contemporary Kashmiri literature but also of the contemporary Kashmiri culture. The mystic's dilemma of how to communicate the incommunicable personal vision seems to have been effortlessly resolved by her through the use of

common idioms, images and metaphors with which people could easily relate.¹³ The medium of the mother tongue and the use of the easily recitable verse form of the *Vaakhs* made her utterances pass into common parlance and secured for them a place in collective memory. Lal Ded has used the diction of common people connected with various occupations, like the potter, farmer, weaver, shepherd etc. and the similes are also chosen accordingly e.g. 14

13. Temple, Richard Carnac, *The word of Lalla: The Prophetess*, Cambridge University Press, 1924, p.81.

Seki shathas byol vavun

(To sow seeds in a desert (a wasteful effort))

14. Ibid...Many Kashmiri idioms and proverbs have their origin either in Lal Ded's *Vaakhs* or in her life and have become an integral part of Kashmiri language.

Tar dyun [to ferry across]

Loh langar [worldly affairs]

Abakh chhan [an untrained carpenter]

Zuvbramun [too long for something]

Phali ros khyol [a shepherdless flock]

15. Das, Tarakh Nath, "The Kashmir Issue and the United Nations", *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol 65, no. 2 June, 1950, pp 264-282

Her sayings are deeply penetrated in the social sphere of the Kashmiri society. Seldom has history produced such a seer who has shine like a light in the troubled history of over 500 years in Kashmir from 14th century onwards when Pundits were reduced to eleven families at one time, as is recorded in the history of Kashmir.¹⁵ Her *Vaakhs*, or sayings, represent the best teachings for human kind today to seek unity and harmony between people of all religion and races.

16. Kaul, Anand, *The Kashmiri Pandit*, Srinagar (1924) Utpal Publications, New Delhi, (Edn) 1991, p. 49

Lal Ded rebelled against the educated elite of Sanskrit academia who were the custodians of knowledge and tradition. Lal-Ded also rejected wholly the ritualistic aspect of the *Saivistic* spiritual discipline. This rejection is articulated and expressed with great force in her poetry. It is well evident that most of the Sufi Rishis made an effort to clearly distance themselves from certain Hindu practices. Some were farmers, and Nunda Rishi himself is said to cultivated land in order to demonstrate the spiritual and social importance of manual labour, abhorred by the Brahmins.¹⁶

She had her own revolutionary views regarding the rituals like, idol worship, animal sacrifice, fasting, visiting sacred places and reading sacred books. More than the style thus, it was the content that was wholly revolutionary. For instance, she minced no words in expressing her revolt against the traditional ways of worship or offering sacrifice to the deities and idols. I will offer one striking example which says it all, and more. Lamented she in a much quoted *Vaakhs* against animal sacrifice offered to stone idols thus: "This animal, the sheep, gives you wool to protect you from cold and cover your privacy, and for itself it subsists just on God-given grass and water. Who then has ordained you, O ignoramus Pandit that you slaughter it to offer to a stone?" In the light of her own intense spiritual experiences, she re-evaluates these rituals and comments. It can well illustrate from her *Vaakhs* as below:

O fool, right action does not lie

In fasting and other ceremonial rites

O fool right action does not lie

In providing for bodily comfort and ease

In contemplation of the self alone is right action and right council for you

Her reputation has become that of a saint who challenged the status quo, and spoke openly against the stagnation and dogma of the prevailing rituals and doctrines of the times.¹⁷ She sang –

Dance, Lalla, with nothing on but air:

Sing, Lalla, wearing the sky.

Look at this glowing day!

What clothes could be so beautiful, or more sacred?

The traditions of Buddhism, Shaivism and Islam constitute important pillars of identity and intellectual heritage of Kashmir Valley. Rooted deeply in this tradition, her message was highly universal, reaching people of Different

17. Khan, M. Ishaq,
*Perspectives on
Kashmir: Historical
Dimensions*, Gulshan
Publishers, Srinagar,
1983, p.12

caste, creed or social position. She managed to embrace the overlapping discourses of Islam, Sufism, Shaivism and Buddhism. But with this she rejected exclusivist, organized religion with its empty, institutionalism. In such circumstances she was obviously perceived as a threat to the established order. Interestingly she realized perfectly well her how important was the role she played in the lives of different strata of Kashmiris and impact on local culture. Rural culture has always played a crucial role as a repository of Kashmiri Identity as a whole.

Lal Ded played a significant role as a symbol of Communal harmony and tolerance as her 'Vaakhs' or verse-sayings contributed to resolve the crisis of her times caused by a clash of two belief and value systems- one indigenous and the other alien. It signifies her contribution towards the common brotherhood which prevailed before the advent of Islam and it later paved the way for the emergence of a common identity of the Kashmiris- Kashmiriyat. It was her intervention that ensured continuity and saved indigenous cultural structures from a total collapse at a time when the advent of Islam in Kashmir was accompanied by an unprecedented political and social upheaval. She transcends all particularities and her message is absolutely universal which found its essence, as it is expressed in Kashmiri Language. More than anything else, we are indebted to her for shaping the Kashmiri language in a way that it formed the basis for the Kashmiris to forge their indigenous cultural identity. In their context, the *Vaakhs* represent human brotherhood, harmony, goodness, service to mankind. Her message of Universal brotherhood still inspires the people today and it signifies the relevance of her philosophy which dates back to fifteenth century. The greatest contribution of Lal Ded was her efforts to promote and preserve the age old culture of tolerance and communal coexistence which in turn led to the growth of pluralistic culture of the Kashmir. She facilitated the close and constant interaction between the people of different faiths in Kashmir which developed a culture that became an important component of the Kashmiri ethnic identity irrespective of their religious affiliations.

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