

Rishi Tradition in Sufi Kashmir: Poetics and Praxis

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The Rishi tradition in Kashmir is a deviant form of Sufism. It is believed to have started towards the beginning of fifteenth century and flourished during the reign of Zainul Abidin. The rishis were natives of Kashmir who followed Islam yet they were not engaged in missionary activities. They were similar to Hindu ascetics. They did not forbid idol worship and had limited knowledge of Islam. The Muslim Rishis shared traits with the rishis of the Pre-Islamic period like wandering in the forest, vegetarianism, deep meditation, controlling of breath, etc., like the Hindu and Buddhist ascetics. In this paper I explore the works of muslim rishis and highlight their ideology which was largely liberal and has shaped Kashmiri identity or 'Kashmiriyat.' I shall also attempt to analyse the influence of Pre Islamic period on development of this unique cult- the Rishi cult in Kashmir. The paper concludes with an emphasis on serious study of works of the Rishi poets.

Keywords: *mysticism, Sufism, poetics, Islam, Rishi, Islam, spirituality.*

*Don't rub your body—
the soap will not clean it.
The rosary, staff and the patched robe—
these tricks will not lead you to Him.
Renounce desires, my dear
and become a servant.*

(Nund Rishi)

I

Kashmiri history is arguably a cluster of religious amalgamation. Rishi tradition is its base that once proposed a secular ideal. The Muslim Rishi tradition that began in the fourteenth century is a deviant form of Islam that prevailed throughout Kashmir and it goes by the cult name "Muslim Rishi Tradition." It is an integral part of Kashmiri peace and reconciliation. This movement not only affected everyday affairs of Kashmir valley, it also presented a tradition that is antithesis to forceful Islamic conversion. Despised, humiliated and termed

unorthodox, the movement continued with its own spirit of humane thought and projected cultural assimilations in terms of religious and social ideals.

The rishi tradition in Kashmir has a long history. In fact legend has it that Kashmir is named after Rishi Kashyap. He is believed to be son of Lord Brahma. Rishi Kashyap's son Nil Naga is said to have written the *Nilmata Prana*, the earliest treatise on the Hindu beliefs and legends. Many Rishis followed after Kashyap Rishi. Most of them were ascetics who retired to caves in the forests and mountains to spend their lives in solitary meditation and leading pious lives. Like the Rishis of the Pre-Islamic period, the Sufis of Rishi tradition too retired to the caves for meditation and lived pure lives practicing severe austerities. These Rishis were actually Muslims similar to ascetics or Rishis or sages (e.g., they did not forbid idol worship) with very limited knowledge of Islam. They were not involved in missionary activities of spreading Islam. They did not even claim for any Sufi ancestry and did not even hesitate to borrow ideas and practices of the Hindu ascetics, especially Saivites of Kashmir with emphasis on individual salvation and indifference to the fate of others (Rafiqi, 17). Therefore they were not 'orthodox' Muslims and their Islam was based on principles of love and human values. This digression led to the emergence of two different broad trends in Sufism in Kashmir. The orthodox trend was followed by the immigrants from Persia and Central Asia and the Rishis, mostly natives, practiced a broadly based system of co-existence (Rafiqi, 14).

The members of Rishi Order or *Silsilah* were engaged in spreading the message of love and religious tolerance and opposition of caste discrimination and other evil social practices endeared them to people of all communities. Fighting against social inequalities and superstitions as well as political oppressions, they championed the cause of the poor and the marginalized. This is why they are still looked upon with great regard by all Kashmiris, be it Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs. They have contributed in bringing about awareness related to social dogmas and urged people to connect to nature more closely.¹

Historians are of the view that the earliest known Sufi master who came to Kashmir is Suhrawadi from Turkistan in fourteenth century. He is Sharfuddin Abd-ur Rahman fondly known as Bulbul Shah. He is believed to have spread Islam in Kashmir with the conversion of Buddhist ruler Rinchen Shah. (Sikhand, 2003) Massive conversions among Buddhists and

¹ So strong is the association between Nund Rishi and the vision of this uniquely Kashmiri cultural identity that while most shrines in Kashmir became centres of dispute between rival factions of Kashmiri Muslim religious leaders, and between Kashmiri Pandits and Muslims in the twentieth century, the shrine dedicated to the memory of Nund Rishi at Charar-Sharif remained the only uncontested sacred space in the Kashmir valley. When the shrine was burnt down in 1995, Kashmiri political groups alleged that it was an act of arson by the Indian state, and a direct attack on *Kashmiriyat*. For more see Chitrlekha Zutshi's *Languages of Belonging: Islam, Regional Identity, and the Making of Kashmir* (London: Hurst, 1988).

lower caste Hindus followed after Rinchen Shah's conversion to Islam, and with the arrival of many Sufis and Sayyids from Persia towards the end of the fourteenth century, many converted to escape the oppression of Timurlane. Moreover, Islam was acceptable to Kashmiris for several reasons. Philosophically it did not present such a diametrically different idea. It was imported not from centers of the orthodoxy, but from Persia and Central Asia, the areas of contact of Islamic and Indian thoughts, and was impregnated with the teachings of Sufis. It was introduced to the people among whom mysticism was already well established. Socially, Islam, democratic in principle, offered better status to the lower classes and was accepted by all castes except Brahmans, who until now constitute a separate group called Pandits. There were several orders of Sufis active in Kashmir such as Suhrawardi, Naqshbandi and Chisti. These Sufi saints influenced tremendously the local religion and lives of the inhabitants. For instance Mir Syed Hamdani hailed as *Amir-i-Kabir* (great leader) and *Bani-i-Musalmani* (the founder of Islam in Kashmir). He had come along with his disciples from Iran who settled in Kashmir and spread Islam and principles of Kubrawi Sufi order and so on. Thus, it was under the influence of these immigrant Sufi orders, there was growth of an indigenous Sufi order called "The Rishi Order" or "Silsilah" in the beginning of fifteenth century. The pioneer of this movement was Nund Rishi. These Rishis were mystics who bore close resemblance to the Rishis of the pre-Islamic era. Sufism and 'Rishi Silsilah' itself is paradoxical and can be understood in context of both Islamic Sufism and the pre-Vedic tradition prior to the advent of Islam. Regarding the etymology of the word Rishi, there are many speculations since Rishi Order had developed amidst the tradition of Buddhist renunciation and Hindu asceticism. It is believed that the term is derived from Sanskrit which means "a singer of hymns, an inspired poet or sage." (Muir, 243) As per Hindu belief, Rishis "are inspired personages to whom these hymns were revealed." (Muir, 245) In common usage the term Rishi means a saint or sanctified sage; an ascetic anchorite. On the contrary, some medieval Muslim scholars have tried to Islamize the term 'rishi'. For instance Baba Daud Mishkati suggests it to be derived from the Persian word 'raish' or 'rish' which means feathers of a bird or plumage. He writes just like a bird "whose feathers are removed, has no control over its movement and depends entirely on the wind. In whatever direction the wind blows, the bird is carried by it." (Rafiqi, 246) So it is with Rishi. He is alienated from the world and lives alone buffeted by fate. Abdul Wahab sees 'rishi' as "warmth" and asserts that with the warmth of his heart a Sufi reaches his goal (Rafiqi, 246). These explanations seem to be fanciful and imposed. It seems the "Rishi Order" of Sufis in Kashmir was actually inspired by the Rishi tradition of the Vedic times.

II

The land Kashmir has been very unique in its ability to imbibe multiple cultures and ethnic diversities. Located in a valley in the Western Himalayas, scholars believe that it has existed

for more than 3000 years and has been a meeting ground of diverse ideas and religious movements.² Equipped with a high degree of intellect and a store of knowledge, Kashmir received every new creed without discrimination and enriched it with its own contribution without discarding its earlier acquisitions. A few significant phenomena emerge during this period. First, religious ideas—Islamic preaching and subsequent Hindu unity—form a strong base in Kashmir valley as opposed to a secular ideal that prevailed for centuries. The following lines from the verses of Nund Rishi, composed during this period, clearly demonstrate his role in uniting people of Kashmir: *Hazrat baba adam molu / mama hava tati avo / ada kati vopun dumb, vatal tsrohu / kolas ham kol kya hedivu*” (Odin, 143). A literal translation would be: “Adam was the father and mother eve followed him. Where did lower castes come from? How can members of the same family ridicule one another?” Nund Rishi was strongly against caste discrimination and in the above verse he refers to the story of Adam and Eve in order to convey to people that we are from the same lineage and therefore discrimination based on caste or religion is intensely detestable. Not only did he admonish caste discrimination, he also vociferously condemned corrupt religious leaders. In the following verse he rebukes the Mullah for dividing people on the basis of religion, caste and creed. It is the Mullahs who lack true knowledge and have been misguiding innocent masses. Nund Rishi’s verses had deep impact on the minds of the local population as he says:

*Malo chholukh ta malo chhokukh
malo dyunhmai na ‘alimuk nav
malo tati bona bartal dolukh
malo laz ravaruth mala nav*

(You have been cleansed by Mullahs and
you have been scattered by Mullahs.
Mullah, I don’t see a trace of knowledge in you.
Mullah, you lost your way at the door.
Shame on you, Mullah-
you don’t deserve to be called Mullah) (Odin, 114)

Another important issue raised by Nund Rishi and his disciples was on leading an austere life. External rituals cannot lead to enlightenment. Leading a simple life without pretensions, purity of heart and moral uprightness were some basic principles of his teaching. Most

² The history of Kashmir is unique because according to Sir Aurel Stein Kashmir is the only region of India which possesses an uninterrupted series of written records of its history. The archaeological excavation of Bourzahama in 1960s, 15 kms from Srinagar, establishes its antiquity to beyond 3000 BC. Although it was contemporaneous to Mohenjodaro civilization, Kashmiri civilization was characterized by some independent features. For more on history of Kashmir see Nyla Ali Khan’s *The Parchment of Kashmir: History, Society and Polity* (New York: Palgrave, 2012).

importantly, the Muslim Rishi cult emphasised on self-realisation, building good character, love for all creatures, and conservation of forest resources.

For instance, in the following verse Nund Rishi has strictly forbidden cutting down of plants and trees. It is actually based on an anecdote once Nund Rishi comes across a group of women cutting grass. Nund Rishi questions them as to why are they cutting grass, one of the women replies that she is cutting grass to feed her cow. Nund Rishi acknowledges that dependency on nature cannot be avoided but mindlessly destroying nature should be strongly condemned:

Yiha maji zuv chhus ta khetha tsatize
zuvas zuv dizina zath (zanh)
lanis lekhitis kyah karize
asi ha maji vuhhav chon sandbhav
it has life-why do you cut it?
Do not sacrifice life for nothing
Nothing can be done about one's lot.
I just wanted to find out
your true intention. (Odin, 109)

There are numerous social issues upon which Nund Rishi has commented and initiated corrective measures. Regarding the corruption that was prevalent among the religious orders in the Islamic community, Nund Rishis mocks at Mullahs, Sheikhs and Sufis who relish good food and have forgotten the real essence of Islam:

The Mullah is happy with gifts and feasts
the Sheikhs are mad after greed and lust,
The Sufis are happy to cheat others,
Their one time diet is three seers of mutton and a maund of rice. (Gauhar, 104)

The Sufis lead a life of austerity. In the above verse Nund Rishi does not spare Sufis and probably he is hinting at the fake Sufis who misguide people by performing miracles just to cheat the innocent masses. The verses of Nund Rishi express his opposition to the corruption that had seeped in the religion practiced by Hindus and Muslims. He had an unbiased opinion and he mocked the fake Mullah with equal disgust as a Hindu Pandit. In the following verse Nund Rishi has raised an important sociological issue. The issue of widow remarriage:

The old and infirm Pandit shall search,
A virgin girl as his wife,
Even if he may be very near to his pyre.
He will never prefer a widow as his life partner. (Gauhar, 104)

The poems and sayings of Nund Rishi revolve around themes of *Tawhid* (monotheism), omnipresence of God, life after death, love for humanity, accountability of worldly deeds, human values and communal harmony. Being a mystic poet, most of his poems deal with

praises of Lord and observance of Islamic rituals. In his prayer poems, he has made references to philosophy of prayer and fasting during Ramazan:

Oh, the servant of the Lord, love the Nimaz and Ramzan,
these are keys to thy salvation.
Listen attentively to the verses of the Quran and Hadis,
Therein lies your valour
this universe has seen more brave people than you,
You, like all of them, shall feel the pangs of death (Gauhar, 103)

On the one hand, Nund Rishi's poems have been instrumental in imparting Islamic values and are commonly known as Ka'shur Quran or Kashmiri Quran. This is because his poems directly emphasize on the teachings from *Quran* and *Hadis*. The Quran stresses on the concept of monotheism, strict adherence to righteous path, regularly offering of namaz, payment of zakat, and pilgrimage of Haj. On the other hand, not only did he admonish caste discrimination but vociferously condemned corrupt religious leaders. His verses emphasize on the need to engage in good deeds in order to approach closer to God. In the context of Nund Rishi's poetic discourse good deeds refer to building of a good character through renouncing base traits like pride, anger, greed and assuming noble traits like compassion, love, purity, and generosity. Such a transformation becomes foundation for engaging in selfless acts. There are many such examples of Nund Rishi's verses that can be located in the vocabulary of a Kashmiri. Except for few book length studies and a handful of critical articles govern the field of Rishi movement and they focus only on Islamization of Kashmir. In reality such scholars have failed to depict the original voice of these Rishis in socially mobilizing mass of people towards religious tolerance; by living a Kashmiri life and at the same time composing songs/tales on the same.

During this period, the Muslim Rishi ideal propagated a human understanding based on assimilation of religious ideals, true to the spirit of Kashmir. Nund Rishi and other Rishis challenged the basic principle of Islam and presented a Sufi ideal for a pan-religious tradition. Ishaq Kahan in his article entitled "The Rishi Tradition and the Construction of Kashmiriyat" (2004) brings out the role of Sufi Rishis in establishing a more secular religion in Kashmir. Similarly Chitrlekha Zutshi in *Languages of Belonging: Islam, Regional Identity and the Making of Kashmir* (2004) argues that the mystic tradition in Kashmir has been central to expressions of *Kashmiriyat*.

Several poets and singers including Nund Rishi and Lal Ded have presented an alternative reality of the amalgamation of this neo-culture when Islam advanced being orthodox. Religion got specificity whereas Rishi movement showed a difference. In poetry and practice it was done. These Rishis were actually Muslims similar to ascetics or sages of the pre-

Islamic era with very limited knowledge of Islam. They were not involved in missionary activities. They did not even claim for any Sufi ancestry and did not hesitate to borrow ideas and practices of the Hindu ascetics, especially Saivites of Kashmir with an emphasis on individual salvation and indifference to the fate of others. Therefore in approach they were not 'orthodox' Muslims and their religion was based on principles of love and human values. This digression led to the emergence of two different trends in Sufism in Kashmir. The orthodox trend was followed by the immigrants from Persia and Central Asia, and the Rishis, mostly natives, practiced a system of co-existence and social harmony. Among these Rishis the status of Nund Rishi is very significant. He is the founder of Rishi tradition in Kashmir and is hailed as *Alamdari* Kashmir (the Standard Bearer of Kashmir). He is one of the poets who have preached religious peace and tolerance. Modern scholarship, in the absence of archival and oral narratives, has projected an alternative yet prerogative account of this historicity and consequently, there is a serious misunderstanding that spreading of Islam in Kashmir is synonymous with the spread of the Sufi culture.

III

In spite of the fact the Muslim Rishis have created history as social workers for the masses, they appear to be a heroes of legends. Unfortunately contemporary material about their life have disappeared in intriguing circumstances and a good number of the biographies and anthologies written or edited after their death provide us only confusing data and twisted tales. The facts have merged with the mist of digressions and anecdotes bordering on miracles and supernatural narrations. Though volumes have been written about Sheikh Nuruddin's life and teachings, yet there is no authentic biography of the saint available. This is the basic shortcoming of the study. Also besides Sheikh there were similar 1000 other Muslim Rishis whose works and life remain obscure and unknown. Except for few passing references in certain historical documents, largely the historians have remained silent focusing only on achievements of kings and in other cases documents are lost.

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