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Role of Sufi Philosophy in the Formation of the Composite Culture of Kashmir: An Analysis

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Abstract

Kashmir is known throughout world by its unique culture of brotherhood and religious toleration (Kashmiriyat). From centuries people of Kashmir valley are living together peacefully and harmoniously despite having different religious beliefs. In the medieval period the introduction of Islam in the Kashmir valley by Muslim Sufi saints resulted in a large scale conversion of local people to the new religion. This way Islam and Hinduism became two main religions of the valley, which was earlier dominated by Hindus and Buddhists. The encounter of Islamic and Hindu traditions, ideas and culture gave birth to new indigenous culture by assimilating various ethno-religious traditions and beliefs that were shared among different communities. This new cosmopolitan culture was based on the noble principles of universal fraternity, love, peace, equality, religious toleration and humanism. The best feature of this culture was that religion was in no way a hurdle in life as far as communal harmony is concerned. But this culture did not exist itself as natural phenomena rather it was build and strengthened by Muslim Sufi saints and Shavaite Hindu saints by their philosophy of religious humanism. All Sufi saints and silisilas of Kashmir valley especially Shaikh Noordun Noorani [RA] and Hindu Shaviate women Lala Arifa (Laleshware) played an important role in developing such attitude. From the writings and sayings of Lal ded and Shaikh-ul-Alam [RA] the toleration and pluralism is depicted very well. This paper is an endeavour to explore and analyze the pluralistic vision of Sufi philosophy. Furthermore the role and contribution of Sufi philosophy in the formation of this unique culture of Kashmir known as Kashmiriyat in world will also be highlighted.

Key Words: religious toleration, kashmiriyat, religious humanism, sufi philosophy, harmony

Introduction

Medieval Kashmiri Society was heterogeneous in character in which adherents of various religions and cultures were living together peacefully and harmoniously. Before the advent of Islam, Kashmiri society was dominated by Hindus of different categories. Although the origin of Islam in Kashmir was traced back considerably before the arrival of Sayyed Bul Bul shah [RA] and Mir Syed Ali Hamdani [RA] by many historians.(Rafiabadi,2007:46-47) but the introduction of Islamic teachings by Sufi

Missionaries of central Asia chiefly in the 12th and 13th century C.E changed the complete scenario of Kashmiri society. However, at the turn of the sixteen century Hinduism was replaced by Islam as the mass religion of the valley.(Wani,2004:54-57) The basic reason behind this mass-conversion of Hindus to Islam had been said by historians unanimously, the rigidity and caste and class discrimination of Brahmanism. The people of lower castes were treated inhumanly. People were discriminated on the basis of caste, religion, sex etc. Buddhism was vehemently condemned by Hindu writers, so there was an internal dissension between the Hindu and Buddhist religion which had entered Kashmir in 3rd century B.C. Apart from these causes there were also some other reasons responsible for the spread of Islam in Kashmir valley. Under such worst conditions people of valley wanted relief from this nuisance. The Islamic message brought by Sufi's was based on love, equality, social justice, toleration, brotherhood and humanism. It was the actual healing touch which the people of valley were looking for. The spirit of Sufi philosophy connected the hearts of people and in this way filled the vacuum created by Brahmanism, thus, paving way for large-scale conversion of Hindus to Islamic fold. The integration of Islamic and Hindu cultures gave birth to new composite culture of Kashmir (Kashmiriyat). Religious toleration, universal fraternity, mutual respect and cooperation were core elements of that composite culture. Kashmir valley is known as the land of Sufis and Saints, who have contributed enormously to our composite culture, which is unique in the world. History reveals how Kashmiri Muslims, Hindus and other minorities used to respect each other's religious differences, protect one another's religious places and scriptures, participating in religious ceremonies of each other. Sufism basically connotes renunciation of worldly pleasures, complete devotion to God and healing of human hearts and sufferings through spiritualism and service towards humanity.(Hussain,2007:87-89)In medieval times Kashmir had great religious and Sufi movements like Shaiva movement to which Laleshwari belonged and Rishi movement



whose founding father Sheikh Noorudin Noorani [RA] contributed considerably through their teachings of religious humanism towards the formation of this rich Kashmiri legacy (Kashmiriyat), by promoting positive inter-actions of Islam and Hinduism on certain grounds. Sufism reinforced an Islamic vision of the world, which substantially differed from the rulers and the other 'Ulam's vision of Islam, that is where it brought about changes. (ibid...:97) Tyndale Bisco, the famous Christian Missionary and social reformer who keenly observed the Kashmiri society during late 19th and early 20th centuries wrote, "In Kashmir anyway religion and life have nothing to do with one another". (Wani,2004:66) In other terms a true model of modern secularism was found in Kashmir during those days. In this paper an attempt will be made to explore the underlying pluralistic vision of Sufi philosophy besides highlighting the contribution of Sufis and Saints, which enriched the composite culture of Kashmiri society especially during medieval times through an analytical perspective.

Objectives

- To analyze the underlying the pluralistic vision of Sufi philosophy.
- To highlight the contribution of Sufism in enriching the composite culture of medieval Kashmiri society.

Methodology

This work is purely based on analysis of available literature on the contribution and philosophy of Sufism and Bahkti traditions in the form of books, journals, research papers, online sources, historical accounts authored by various researchers, academicians, philosophers and Sufi accounts of various Sufis accessible to the researcher.

Pluralistic Vision of Sufi philosophy

The underlying vision of Sufi philosophy is thoroughly eclectic in nature. In the words of Harbans Mukhia, Sufi and Bhakti movements believed on the principle of religiosity than on religion which is sectarian identity. While religiosity is universal which accepts difference of religion and it also accepts that the concept of God is universal, which can bind people. (Hussain,2007:96) Sufism (Islamic mysticism) is the inner mode of Islamic religious life. In this dimension of religion much emphasis is laid on esoteric teachings of *Qurān* related to the activities of the inner-self. (Subhan,2016:25-31) This unique Sufi way of understanding Islam was essentially different from the traditional understanding of *Qurān*. This made them the people of *Tariqah* or

the way, their particular goal was to understand and introduce the esoteric aspect of Islam. (Angha,1991:115-117) The esoteric foundations of Sufi philosophy gave it accommodative nature, which absorbed number of identical thoughts, beliefs and practices of various cultures and philosophies. According to R. A. Nicholson (1991), the earliest ascetic and quietist tendencies of Islamic Sufism were in great harmony with Christian theory of doctrine of divine love. (Nicholson,2015:113) As opinioned by Muhammad Ashraf (2017), the message of Sufism in multiple languages attracts adherents of various religions, ideologies; philosophies and this way obtain a foundation of hope for reconciliation between different nations and cultures. (Ashraf,2016:76) Sufis have derived the guiding principles from the teachings of *Qurān* and *Sunnah*. Sufi understanding of the Universe and creation is different from orthodox *Ulma*; their approach is holistic in character. There are two different kinds of speculations found in the two major schools of Sufism *Shuhūdiyya* and *Wujūdiyya*. In the opinion of *Shuhūdiyya* School the real existence is only God's, all other existences in the universe are mere reflections of real existence (i.e. God's). While the *Wujūdiyya* School believes that God is omnipresent, meaning everything is God. (Subhan,2016:35) Generally they considered entire creation as a composite whole. While as rest of Sufi orders besides above two have a common belief regarding the concept of God i.e., God is one, eternal, knowing, mighty, merciful, compassionate, generous etc. He is beyond time and space. (Arberry,2018:17) The *Shuhūdiyya* and *Wujūdiyya* perceiving of God's relation with universe is almost same in Buddhism and Hinduism. The elasticity of this concept broadened the horizon of Sufism and attracted divines of other faiths towards Sufi vision of Islam, hence opening doors for exchange of spiritual practices between divines of Hindus and Islam. This new vision of Islam by Sufis resulted in the formation of new amalgamated culture, in which Muslims and Hindus continue to live together peacefully and harmoniously in India. (Subhan,2016:32) One more important point of mystic philosophy is that it is Universal in the way that in all the great religions of world, such type of spiritual dimension is found; this way promotes integration of religions. The development of various Sufi orders in the world is due to different interpretation and understanding of esoteric teachings of *Qurān* especially in relation to the development of spiritualism in one way and because of the influence of Greek, Hellenic and Indian philosophy on Islamic Sufism on the other.



In case of Kashmir the development of Sufism was very unique due to its relation with Sufism at central Asia. Sufi missionaries came to Kashmir and spread the eternal message of Sufism from central Asia. But it took different shape in Kashmir due to the influence of local spiritual traditions prevalent at the time. Mir Syed Ali Hamdani [RA] was ardent advocate of *Wahdat-ul-Wujud* (unity of being) of ibn-ul-Arbia. This philosophy has resemblance with Hindu-vedantism (Rafiabadi,2016:22) thus helping Hindus to understand the essence of Sufi message in a best way to which they were familiar in one or the other. Muslim Sufi philosophical teachings started dominating the local Hindu traditional religious beliefs and rituals rapidly. The outcome came in the form of emergence of local Sufi order known as Rishism. In the beginning it was not purely Islamic in character but many old Hindu spiritual practices and traditions were also found in it. But with the passage of time the Muslim Sufis of the time purified the existing Hindu mystic practices which they found in accordance with the spirit of Islam in the light of their own understanding of Islam. Thus they served as a bridge between the mainstream Sufism and Kashmir Rishism. As the time passed, Rishi movement became dominated by sharia oriented asceticism and gained momentum in the society.(Ibid..26) It was essentially the pluralistic tendencies such as universal brotherhood, equality, toleration and humanism as found in Sufi philosophy which helped in promoting the composite culture of Kashmiriyat. This taught people how the hearts of human beings can be won through love and cooperation. Shaikh ul-Alma's poetry is a practical evidence of pluralism. His philosophy of religious humanism is universal in nature as it promotes integration of cultures. The soft approach of Sufi philosophy helps in maintaining socio-religious harmony merely on condition of humanness.

Contribution of Sufis in the Formation of Composite Culture of Kashmir (Kashmiriyat)

The state of J&K has a unique and rich Sufi tradition which is an integral part of the Kashmiri's Civilizational ethos. The growth of composite culture of Kashmir in the form of socio-religious harmony was due to the efforts of various Sufis and Saints of the time. From the time, the valley of Kashmir received the divine message of Islam, it had seen the arrival of great Sufi Saints particularly from Central Asia and Persia, who left everlasting imprint on the social association of the evolving Muslim society of Kashmir. (Sharma,2018:107-114) As mentioned above that before the emergence of Islam as the major religion

of the valley, it was dominated by Brahmans. The rigid Brahman dogmatism and ritualism have given birth to the philosophy of Kashmiri Shaivism as a reaction to its rigidity and discriminative teachings. This philosophy is better known in the valley as 'Trika Shastra (the three fold science). (idem..)According to Prem Nath (1973), the absolute monotheism of Islamic philosophy appealed Shiva philosophers, who found it in no way harmful for age old cultural ethos of the people of Kashmir, hence welcomed it. In such circumstances when on the one side the stiff and strong opposition to Islam by anti-progressive Brahmans was going and on other hand it's critical appreciation by the Shaivite Philosophers finally resulted in the emergence of new dynamic Composite culture in Kashmir, which may be called idealistic, sentimental or religious Humanism. It is eclectic in its essence and contains the noble truths and glorious cultural gains of both Shaivism and Islam which they have achieved in the course of their long histories.(Bazaz,1973:47-49) Some of earliest prominent Sufis include Sheikh Sharaf-ud-din popularly known as Bul Bul Shah [RA] of Suhrawardi order, Syed Ali Hamdani [RA] also known as Ameer-i-Kabir of Kubravi order and among later saints are Shaikh Noorudin Noorani [RA] popularly known as Nund Rish, Sheikh Hamza Makhdumi [sultan-ul-Arifeen][RA], Baba Dawood Khaki, Yaqoob Sarfi and a famous Hindu shaiivite women known by various names in and outside Kashmir Lal ded etc. are the real founders of this unique composite culture of Kashmir known as Kashmiriyat in the world. The most popular Sufi figure of Kashmir from central Asia was Ameer-i-Kabir [RA] whose teachings had great impact on various aspects of Kashmiri society especially on socio-economic and religious life of people. His teachings were based on the pillars of 'Tawheed' (oneness of God), 'Taqwa' (God fearing piety), 'Ikhlās'(purity) and Unity. These teachings of Ameer-i-Kabir gave birth to a local indigenous Sufi order of Kashmir known as Rishism or Rishi order.(EFSAS,2017:47) The quantity of flexibility and toleration of this Silisila in terms of accommodating the old Hindu spiritual practices and customs as in uniformity with Islamic teachings was high to the extent that Hindu sobriquet like Rishi or Baba was used by Kashmiri's to describe these Sufi Saints. The Philosophy of this distinctive Kashmiri Sufi order was universal in quality. The values of peace, love, harmony and fraternity between all creatures of God, regardless of a specific religion forms the fundamental element of this cultural heritage. (ibid...48)The pluralism and toleration is apparent from the teachings, sayings, writings and behavior



of Sufi saints from Lal Ded to Shaikh Noorudin Nurani {RA}). This can be testified from these verses of Shaikhs poetry about communal harmony;

“We belong to same parents,

Then why this differences?

Let Hindus and Muslims worship God alone,

We came into this world like partners,

We should have shared our joys and sorrows.(Sikander,2010:571-574)

The Rishi Sufi Saints were honored equally by Muslims as well as Hindus. Their Shrines became common pilgrimage centers for adherents of both the communities. This tradition of paying obeisance in shrines irrespective of caste, faith, color brought people together promoting harmony in the society of Kashmir. Some of the festivals of valley which originated in Hindu mythology gained secular color and were jointly celebrated by Muslims and Hindus. The birthday of river vitisa (Jhelum) was celebrated and the great king of Kashmir popularly known as Bud Shah is said to have acted as the chief priest on the occasion. This religious humanism promotes in a very positive way the identity of Kashmir known as Kashmiriyat. (EFSAS,2017:35) Shaikh Noorudin Noorni {RA} was a great mystic who had risen above the courts and the socio-religious belief institutions of the time. His message of non-attachment to materialistic desires, the principle of social justice, equality and importance to the gaining of true knowledge strengthened the very base for universal brotherhood.(Andrabi,2017:86) Such kind of intellectual broadness and toleration in Sufi and other Saints’ teachings encourage inter-religious culture and dialogue. This way taught followers how to respect the differences of others and bridge people of different ideologies and faiths on mutual points hence enriched the age old composite culture of Kashmir. It is such a rich culture that Kashmir is cited as an example or model for socio-religious harmony in the world. In other words, it can be said that it was the practical model of secularism in function.

Results

From the above discussion it was found that the Islamic message of equality, fraternity and humanism resulted as a curative measure to the discriminative and inhuman Brahmanical religious dogmas, rituals and traditions. Brahmins treated the lower caste people as impure and downtrodden. Inhumans treatment was given to them and the other sections of people were exploited in the name

of religion. This Brahman rigidity affected badly the society and prove every decisive later on. People of the valley were in search of real rescuer from all this persuasion. They got that in the form of Islam through various Sufi Saints. The approach adopted by Sufis in general was moderate based on Islamic teachings of *Tawheed* and *Ikhlās* (purity), which tempted thousands of non-Muslims into the Islamic creed. The outcome was replacement of Islam as a major religion of state within one century. The conversion was wholly voluntarily, no military force or political pressure was involved in it. Within the passage of times various Sufi orders and religious movements emerged in Kashmir valley. Sufis didn’t reject out rightly the prevailing Hindu customs and traditions. But they tried to modify them in functions and not in shape. This gave birth to a culture of appreciation of good from all cultures. This way a cultural amalgamation took place based on Glorious Noble truths and best principles of humanism of Islamic and Hindu cultures as a of type of composite culture. Hindus and Muslims revered many saints equitably, took part in one another’s festivals, celebrations and money more customs and traditions which are found common in Kashmiri Muslims and Hindus. This unique culture is known to the world as ‘Kashmiriyat’

Conclusion

Concluding the discussion by arguing that the socio-religious Harmony in Kashmir valley in the form of such a rich unique Composite culture known as Kashmiriyat especially in Medieval period was the product of real philosophy of humanism promoted by Sufis and Shaivite Hindu Saints in their times. The vision underlying in Sufi philosophy is universal pluralistic in character, hence promotes integration of thoughts, cultures and traditions. It has the great potential to assimilate and unite different religious beliefs, customs, traditions and people of diverse faiths on grounds of collective interest. The Sufi teachings of equality, fraternity, justice, religious toleration etc. contributed substantially to the Composite culture of Kashmir valley. One of the most important features of Kashmiriyat was the principle of religious toleration which is prerequisite in strengthening the socio-religious Harmony in a state or country. The scope of this theme is beyond in the sense modern world is dominated by religious fundamentalism and radical communal forces are found everywhere posing a great threat to the peace of the planet. The philosophy of Shaikh-ul-Alam [RA] and Lal Ded is a best solution to curb the communal forces, constituting threat to the secular nature of our country. Sufi



philosophy is multi-dimensional and visionary. It is also significant in many other ways for the society which need to be researched and explored. It is

even gainful to the administrators while framing policies in order to strengthen the secular nature of our country.

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