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Role of Sufism in Kashmiriyat and communal harmony

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Abstract

Sufism is a path of spiritual advancements, an expansion of consciousness, leading to awareness of self and the universe. The substance of Sufism is selfless experiencing and actualization of the truth. The practice of Sufism leads to the development of innate spiritual and intuitive abilities. Keeping in view, the aim of the study was to explore the role of Sufism in promoting Kashmiriyat, composite culture and communal harmony in Kashmir valley. The investigator found that 'Kashmiriyat' was the gradual outcome of mutual adaptation of various pre-Islamic religious traditions and the great tradition of Islam. The Rishis (holy Vedic Hindu sage, saint or inspired poet) were the main exemplars of the developing of such a dialectic process. In fact, the spirit of this dialectic was mystical religious experience and universal love. Besides, it was found that traditional communal harmony that once existed in Kashmir enabled the peaceful coexistence of Muslims, Kashmiri Pandits (Hindus) and other minorities.

Keywords: Sufism, Kashmiriyat, composite culture, communal harmony

Introduction

The Valley of Kashmir Paradise has always been an attraction not only for the rulers but for the Sufis, merchants', academicians, artisans and other sections of the society since time is mentioned. A study on the Kashmiri society its people and economy looks very interesting and the role played by the Darwishes, Sufis and Walis in special. Their impact on the socio-economic trends of Kashmir has been well assessed in the present study on the basis of contemporary and modern reliable sources.

Sufism is a mystic sect of Islam. Sufi Saints won over the hearts of Kashmiris on account of their piety and sincerity by employing methods of persuasion, humanity and discourse. The people of Kashmir initially started to convert to Islam under the influence of peaceful Sufis and at a later stage by forceful means employed by Muslim invaders who ruled Kashmir for five centuries till Islam became the dominant religion in the State, however the popular religion could never acquire a dogmatic form in Kashmir. Kashmiri Pandits and Muslims were indubitably aware of their religious differences while Sufism served to promote a common way of understanding the world, thereby forming the cornerstone of the unique Kashmiri culture that transcends religious boundaries. During current times, when the people of Kashmir are going through ineffable yet palpable miseries, both inside and outside Kashmir, the magnificent metaphysical and mystical ethnicities enriched by Sufi saints do bring solace, though facing their greatest challenge due to the Wahabi brand of Islam designed to destroy Kashmir and its eon's old ethos.

Sufism Moreover during the 12th century Khanqah system was on its highest peak. And Sufi orders and the shijra spiritual pedigree connecting murid to the Prophet (S.A.W.) the spring head of all religious knowledge. The history of Sufism in Kashmir is spread over a long period of time starting with Bulbul Shah to the Sufi poets and Rishis, inspiring people by their mystical insights. The Suharwadi, Kubrawi orders of Sufism have played a prominent role in the process of Islamisation of Kashmir, taken to a logical conclusion by the founder of Rishi order in Kashmir, Sheikh Noorud-Din, also known as Nund Rishi by his Kashmiri Pandit followers. Rishis, by their words and deeds, attracted not only common people but also high-class Brahmins.

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“The candle of religion is lit by the Rishis, they are the pioneers of the path of belief. The heart-warming quality of humble souls emanates from the inner purity of the hearts of the Rishis. This vale of Kashmir, that you call a paradise, owes a lot of its charm to the traditions set in vogue by the Rishis”Baba Nasib

Objectives of the study: Kashmiriyat was the result of shared religiosity and cultural practices between Hindus and Muslims. Even though many centuries have passed (and there is a religious difference among the diverse ethnic groups in Kashmir) most of the Kashmiri traditions remain very close to their original form. Indeed, modernization is transforming costumes and rituals at a fast pace. However, the whole of the native people (who call themselves Kashmiri) are trying to stick with their traditions. Keeping I view, the aim of the study as to explore the impact of Sufism on Kashmiriyat, composite culture and communal harmony.

Rationale of the study: Kashmiriyat was the mainstream definition of shared religiosity between Hindus and Muslims. Kashmir was always portrayed as the best example of a place where Hindus and Muslims could coexist in a peaceful way. Indeed, the region’s essence is a mix of religious Hindu and Muslim costumes, beliefs, manners and rituals. In fact, this idea is strongly supported by the Indian government as a mean to justify unity among Kashmiris. The composted culture is the brain child of Kashmiriyat. The justification of the study is reported as under:

Kashmiriyat: Kashmiriyat’s idea can be traced to the historical past of Kashmir. In the 13th century, the main religions of the valley (Hinduism and Buddhism) encountered Islam⁸. The new religion seemed appealing to many of the inhabitants of the region who converted to Islam. Such religious and cultural encounter created a new culture by assimilating various ethno religious traditions and beliefs that were shared among the different communities. This idea of sharing traditions came to be called the Hindu-Muslim “Rishi-Sufi” movement. The most important part of such movement was experienced between the 14th and 15th century. It was during this period that there was a clear socio-cultural assimilation process in Kashmir. Certain characters such as Lalla Ded influenced this concept. Ded was a Sufi mystic (born in a Hindu household) from the 14th century. She managed to prove that there could be an in between among Hindu Vedic traditions and Muslim mysticism. Among her legacy relies the foundation of Kashmir’s biggest Sufi order. Indeed, the success of Islam in Kashmir is strongly linked to the fact that Sufi Saints were able to cope with the cultural differences and managed to live collectively together. Also, Sufism is a division of Islam which does not preach strict orthodox values. Hence, this facilitated cultural assimilation. Just as Ahmed and Saklani state:

“So, the Islam practiced by the people of Kashmir has been predominantly Sufi in nature rather than orthodox, that led to the development of the composite culture and more a kind of society in which people were well aware of their religiosity, but never let come in between their relationships with each other”.

In his piece, Hangloo cites the work of T. N. Madan (a Kashmiri himself) who elaborately describes the term Kashmiriyat. Yet, now it is less surrounding because some of the groups (the Pandits) that were part of the notion Kashmiriyat have fled the valley after the first set of violent episodes. Just as Kashmiri historian Mohammad Ishaq Khan explains:

“Our earnest participation in each other’s festivals and marriage ceremonies was proverbial until the mass exodus of Pandits from their homeland, following the onset of militancy in Kashmir Valley in 1989.”

Hence, from the above discussion, the investigator argued that there is a secular trait in the nature of the term Kashmiriyat. Yet, this has become more contestable after the unrest and growing division of religious and cultural identities”. Besides, it is imperative to mention here that Kashmiriyat is not an ideology, but rather a behaviour pattern shared by Pandits and Muslims in the region. Besides, Kashmiriyat is also perceived as the sense of mutual supports which still not wholly free of tensions. In other words, this notion refers to a *pluralistic culture* of tolerance, but does not *represent syncretism*. Shah-i-Hamadan’s teachings were based on the pillars of ‘Tawheed’ (oneness of God) ‘Taqwa’ (God-fearing piety), ‘Ikhlas’ (purity) and Unity. Therefore, the impact of Sufism has remained significant on propagation of Kashmiriyat.

Communal Harmony: The traditional communal harmony that once existed in Kashmir enabled the peaceful coexistence of Muslims, Kashmiri Pandits (Hindus) and other minorities. The Kashmiri society evolved to be more open to various beliefs, under the influence of Islamic Sufis and Saints of the Rishi order.

“Shiva (God) abides in all that is everywhere, then do not discriminate between a Hindu and a Muslim. If you are wise seek the Absolute within yourself. That is true knowledge of the Lord” – Lal Ded/Lala Arifa

Some of the festivals in Kashmir which had originated in the Hindu mythology attained a secular character and both Pandits and Muslims celebrated them, birthday of river Vitasta (Jhelum) being one such festival. The King, Zain-ul-Abidin, also known as ‘Bud Shah’ (Great King) used to function as a high priest on such occasions promoting a collective identity, often referred to as ‘Kashmiriyat’, which further evolved as a representation of religious tolerance, with saints like Lal Ded/Lala Arifa, Shiekh Noorudin/Nun Rishi further helping the cause by spreading the message of oneness and sowing seeds of the concept of religious-humanism. The humanistic philosophy of Kashmiri Sufis and Rishis has played a prominent role in building the Kashmiri ethnic identity. As times progressed despite of varied political leanings and conflicting attitudes to history of Kashmir, Kashmiris (Pandits and Muslims), continued to have a remarkable degree of tolerance, respect and concern for each other in day to day life. Pandits and Muslims celebrated the onset of spring by celebrating a festival called ‘Badamwari’ (Almond festival) as flowers blossomed in almond gardens. In many areas Muslim ‘Asthans’ (shrines) and Hindu shrines stood facing each other while people together made pilgrimages to shrines and also visited living

Sufis. Kashmiri Pandits and Muslims together attended gatherings where Kashmiri Sufi poetry was sung at the abodes of living Sufis. Until the year 1989, the year that marked the beginning of a rather political movement for rectification of political grievances, soon taking a violent turn; nobody would have imagined that the soil over which walked the Sufi Saints, spreading the messages of spirituality and oneness, would be one day soaked in the blood of countless people whereby also, a minority community would be forced to leave their ancestral land, all in the name of religion. Kashmiri Muslims and Pandits share several common customs and beliefs; numerous Sufi shrines that dot the Valley are held in high devotional esteem by people from both these religious communities in large numbers. While Pandits and Muslims lived in harmony for certain periods of time, several Muslim rulers of Kashmir were bigoted and intolerant of other faiths. Sultan Sikandar Butshikan (1389–1413) is often considered the most tyrannical among the Muslim rulers in Kashmir. Ironically, Sikandar's son, Zain-ul- Abidin (1420-1470) was known for his religious tolerance. The administration changed several hands in Kashmir, after the Mughals, Kashmir was ruled by Afghans (1753-1820), who were known for harassment and persecution. There are plentiful accounts of oppression during the Afghan rule, and especially the women of Kashmir were subjected to invasive and humiliating treatment.

Conclusions

Hence from the above discussion, the investigator argued that there is a secular trait in the nature of the term Kashmiriyat. Composite culture among different communities was the part and parcel of valley. Yet, this has become more contestable after the unrest and growing division of religious and cultural identities. In context to same, the investigator found that Kashmiriyat was the gradual outcome of mutual adaptation of various pre-Islamic religious traditions and the great tradition of Islam. To him, the Rishis (holy Vedic Hindu sage, saint or inspired poet) were the main exemplars of the developing of such a dialectic process. In fact, the spirit of this dialectic was mystical religious experience and universal love. Kashmiri Muslims and Pandits share several common customs and beliefs; numerous Sufi shrines that dot the Valley are held in high devotional esteem by people from both these religious communities in large numbers. While Pandits and Muslims lived in harmony for certain periods of time, several Muslim rulers of Kashmir were bigoted and intolerant of other faiths. Additionally, it is imitative to mention here that prevalence of Kashmir conflict has added fuel into fire by collapsing the communal harmony and Kashmiriyat.

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