Socio-Religious Reform Movement in Kashmir (Fourteenth to Sixteenth Century)

Sarah Siddiqui*, Shahida

Department of Humanities & Social Sciences, NIT, Kurukshetra, Haryana, India.

*Corresponding Author Email: sarahsidd@gmail.com

Abstract: Indian society has always changed from time to time, which seeks to recover itself from the morass of ignorance, degradation, and decadence due to its transition. For this it has to take resort to reform itself through the educational and socio-religious movements. History shows the emergence of various socio-religious reforms to remove the ignorance and social evil from society. One such movement was Rishi movement of Kashmir. It was an indigenous Sufi movement which started in the valley in the wake of the introduction of Sufi orders from Central Asia and Persia in the fourteenth century. It was founded by Shaikh Noor-ud-Din or Nund Rishi. He played a central role within the framework of a cognitive moral and social order. In this paper, I shall be discussing the emergence of Nund Rishi as an ascetic and how his movement is synonymous with the process of social reform and protest against religious dogma and the contribution of the Muslim rishis in spreading the message of universal love and transcending narrow communal barriers.

Keywords: Socio-religious, Ascetic, Rishi movement, Social reform, Communal barriers.

Introduction

Sufism represents the inward or esoteric side of Islam. It may also be described as the mystical dimension of Islam. As Rizvi mentions in his work quoting Walter T. Stace that mysticism is not to be understood in the sense of the occult or telepathy [1]. He says, “A fully developed mystical experience involves the apprehension of an ultimate non-sensuous unity in all things, a oneness or a One to which neither the sense nor the reason can penetrate. In other words, “it entirely transcend our sensory-intellectual consciousness” [1].

Sufism in Kashmir

When talking about Islam and Sufism, Kashmir have always been the first choice for the saints, ascetics, Sufis and Rishis. In fact the Rishis and Sufis are the main source behind the spread of Islam in Kashmir. Though there are some works which show that the Islamization of Kashmir has been attributed to forcible conversations and there are others who believe the fact that the people was attracted towards the simple living and higher spiritual knowledge of the Sufis from Central Asia and Persia.

The very basis or origin of Kashmir has been based on the oral legends. As Gauhar had mentioned in his text that initially Kashmir was a waterlogged area called Sati-Sar. There was a demon who lived around this area and due to which no human could come and live here and it was due to the deeds of Kashyap Rishi that the demon was killed and human beings found an abode in this place. Thus the very foundation of this place is attributed to the miraculous deeds of a saint. Hence miracles, mythical actions and metaphysical tradition became the key element of this land’s cultural essence. Not only Sufism, but also Buddhism and Shaivism [1] dominated the religious scene of Kashmir for a very long time.

In such a “socio-religious scenario Islam and its mystic teachings found a congenial atmosphere during the fourteenth century” [2]. How Sufism came to Kashmir is a long story. The Islamic missionary activities started with the arrival of Syed Abdur Rehman commonly known as Bulbul Shah during the reign of Suhadeva (1301-20). He is said to be the major force behind the
conversion of Buddhist ruler Rinchan Shah into Islam. Again, it is to be noted that his conversion was thoroughly political as he was dissatisfied by the Buddhist philosophy and the Brahmin dominated caste-ridden Hindu society. So he became the first Muslim sultan of Kashmir, renamed himself and was later known as Sultan Sadruddin. He ruled from 1320 to 1323. It was during these two centuries, Mir Syed Ali Hamdani paid three visits to Kashmir in 1372, 1379 and 1383. Mir Syed Ali Hamdani or commonly known as the Amir was the Persian Sufi of the Kubrawi order.

He was very influential in spreading Islam in Kashmir and had huge influence on the culture of Kashmir valley. He, on his third visit, was accompanied by seven hundred Syeds and Ulemas who established centres of their activities in the various parts of the country. Again in 1393, the Amir's son Mir Mohammad entered Kashmir with three hundred Syeds and scholars and stayed in the valley for twelve long years. He and his scholars established khanqahs in different parts of the valley. Not only this land had mystical and mythical elements since its origin, but also the beautiful and peaceful neighbourhood attracted these Sufis.

It is also to be noted that many Syeds/Sufis had left their homeland due to the repressive measures adopted by Timur against them and resulting their refuge in Kashmir and the local people of Kashmir received them well. With the coming of Sufis and Ulemas from Persia and Iran in Kashmir, a line of difference drew between them and local saints who were already in Kashmir and popularly known as Rishis. In Kashmir, though the majority of Syeds/Sufis which came from Iran and Persia was dedicated, sincere and selfless servants of the humanity.

But there were some exceptions also. Is has been pointed out by the authors like Rafiqi and Gauhar that few Sufis from Iran, influenced orthodoxy. They were duty bound to missionary activities. Also they were fond of ‘pomp and show and worldly position’ and so made efforts to reclaim themselves in Kashmir and wanted the post and prestige which they had in their previous place. As a result, these foreigners thus rose to high official positions and dominated the political scene of Kashmir.

These Sufis broadly came to be known as Sufi as missionary. On the other hand, we have Sufis as ascetic. In Kashmir, they were known as Rishis. These Rishis were the children of the soil. Though they were converted to Islam, were sympathetic to the mystical tradition of the country. They had no knowledge of Arabic or Persian but they drew inspiration from the local environment.

**Kashmiri Rishi Movement**

Though this term, rishi, is of Hindi origin, it has been misunderstood lately. Semantically, Rishi means a saint or an ascetic in Sanskrit literature or a singer of hymns, an inspired poet or sage. But when talk about the history of Kashmir between the fifteenth and eighteenth century, it refers to “a movement of indigenous mystics within the fold of Islam” [4]. Baba Daud Mishkati asserts that Rishi was derived from the Persian word raish or rish, meaning the feathers or wings of a bird.

A bird whose feathers are removed and has no control over its own movements and depends entirely on the wind. In whatever directions the wind blows, the bird is carried. So it is with Rishi. Also, the word rishi, in the sixteenth century Kashmiri usage meant such particular ascetics as on account of their extreme devotion to God, abstained from all worldly desires. Rishis lived in the countryside and usually did not have any formal education. They even refused to do anything with the royal court and administration.

It may also be noted that before the coming of Islam in Kashmir, rishis were there but again they were not socially active and preferred to live a secluded life either in caves or the tops of the mountains. Baba Daud Mishkati points out that before Nund Rishi, the Rishis were actually ascetics among the Brahmans of Kashmir. Ishaq Khan mentions the account presented by Baba Daud Mishkati where he describes Muslim rishis as they are extremely devoted to God, abstaining from all worldly pleasures.

Such men, according to Khaki, were the followers of Nund Rishi. They abstained themselves from eating meat or even green vegetables. They observed fast almost throughout the year and spent their time in
the performance of dhikr (remembrance of God) in their abodes in forests [4]. But for the understanding of the basic components of Kashmiri tradition, it is important to remember that its beginning in the real sense took place in the midst of the traditions set in trend by the legendary Rishis period mentioned by Nund Rishi in his verses, and mystics like Lal Ded, Sayyid Hussain Simnani, Sayyid Ali Hamdani, and Sayyid Muhammad Hamdani.

It was also in the midst of these traditions that the formation of the Religious thought of Nund Rishi took place. It is also important to remember that for Nund Rishi, religion was a matter of experience; it was ‘real’ rather than mere ‘notional’. In Kantian terms his Knowledge began with experience that arose out of experience [4]. An understanding of Nund’s thought therefore requires a prior understanding of his religious career. Shaikh-ul Aalam also called Shaikh Noor-ud Din and Nund Rishi is remarkable Kashmiri saint who belonged to the Rishi order.

He was one of those personalities of the medieval time who had special concern with reforming society and social justice. Born in 1377C.E, corresponding to 799 Hijri in a village called Kaimoh (old name Katimusha). His father was Shaikh Salar-ud Din, his mother Sadra Moji or Sadra Deddi. He was one of those epoch making personalities, who hailed at time, which could be described as a watershed in the history of Kashmir. It was a period when there was Muslim Sultanate in Kashmir and Islam began to spread rapidly, brought about a great transformation in the life of the people.

The cultural contacts that were established with Persia and Turkistan and influx of large number of people from these countries also affected profound social changes. But despite the foreign impact, links with the past were not broken, for the people of Kashmir refused to give up the beliefs and practices completely. This is why throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries there was a constant conflict between those who wanted to cling to their traditional manner, customs and those who were eager to introduce the Perso-Islamic way of life [6].

Nund Rishi’s poetry is germane to the concerns of history considering the fact that his life and the indigenous mystic order of the Rishis founded by him, illustrate something of the nature of the crisis through which he was passing and its impact on the social norms and meanings of Islam in the regional context. Indeed, Nund Rishi’s verses pretend to convey not only certain basic facts about his life, but also certain ideas and concepts which have remained the worldview of Kashmiris, even generations after his death. So, central is the sense of crises and self-awareness evident in his verses that poetry pervasiveness of a vital tradition [2].

The era in which Nund Rishi was born, was the era of socio-political confusion. Thus, Rishi movement arose at a period of great social crisis as it was period of transition from Hinduism and Buddhism to Islam. As Ishaq Khan also mentions that this tradition was, “modelled after a cultural pattern which was in direct conflict with the decadent Brahmanic order, its agent and its doctrines. It would, therefore, be a form of amputation to study the Rishi tradition outside the context of the new cultural trend” [4].

Lalleshwari or Lal Ded, Shaivite poetess of twelfth century in Kashmir, is said to be the precursor of Rishi tradition and spiritual mother of Nund Rishi. She gave a unique pattern to the evolution of this new cultural pattern in Kashmir. The influence of her verses was deep on Nund Rishi during the formative stage of his mystical career. She rose to prominence in an age of social ferment when Hinduism in Kashmir was declining and was exposed to the influence of Islam through the egalitarian spirit of Sufis. The relation between Lalla and Nund Rishi is that of pir-murshid, where Lalla also serves as a spiritual mother to Nund Rishi.

A very famous folklore is attached to this. After birth, when infant Nund Rishi refused to such milk out of her mother’s bosom, it was Lalla who told him, “Thou wost not ashamed of being born; why then art thou ashamed of sucking (at the mother’s breast)” [4]. After listening to this, baby Nund Rishi started sucking milk from Lalla’s bosom. Thus the infant tasted the first pleasure of the world under the guidance of a matured mystic. A later-day Kashmiri poet has summed up the incident in the following lines:

• Oh thee, the full moon of the universe,
• Immediately after thy birth, Lalla Arifa
• Did adorn in her lap a cradle for thee.
• She made you drink the nectar of life.
• Bravo! My Lord, Oh generous Noor-ud-Din [2].

When Nund Rishi grew up to be a well-known saint with a great following, he paid his befitting tribute to the memory of Lal Ded in the following lines:

• The Lalla of Padampur,
• She had her fill of divine nectar;
• A beloved Avtar of ours too (we would fondle in our laps),
• God, bestow s similar boon on me [10].

As already mentioned Lalla was born in Kashmir in the early thirteenth century and was married into a Brahmin family at a young age. Her married life was very traumatic as her mother-in-law always troubled her and filled her life with suffering. Her husband also ill-treated her. She suffered silently as she quietly devoted herself to spiritual practice. When she could no longer endure the pain given by her family, she renounced the material world.

She then went to Siddha Srikantha to be accepted as a disciple. He became her guru and instructed her to the spiritual path. On completing her discipleship, she went out into the world as a wandering mendicant. All what she did from renouncing the world to becoming a mystic and gathering spiritual experience, these were not easy for a Brahmin woman to make in the Kashmir of fourteenth century. Hoskote mentions that as a disciple, she had been secure within her guru’s house and then she set off on her own with no protection against the full force of social strata. She tells about her experience in one of her vaakh that:

• They lash me with insults, serenades me with curses.
• Their barking means nothing to me.
• Even if they came with soul-flowers to offer,
• I couldn’t care less. Untouched, I move on. [9]

Overcoming the trials and humiliations that came her way, she grew in eminence to become a teacher. This transformation into being mature and deepening knowledge is recorded in her vaakh.

In the following vaakh she defies her tormentors and the system of conventions they represent:

• Let them hurl a thousand curses at me,
• Pain finds no purchase in my heart.
• I belong to Shiva. Can a scatter of ashes
• Ruin a mirror? It gleams [9].

She revolted against all the oppressive structures that stifle and kill the human spirit and critically interrogated practices of inequalities and injustice that were current during the times. In one of her vaakhs, she says

• When can I break the bonds of shame?
• When I am indifferent to jibes and jeer.
• When can I discard the robes of dignity?
• When desires cease to nag my mind [4].

Lalla critiques prescriptive religious practices of all kind. Thus, renouncing home in itself is not enough to achieve self-realization and neither is reciting prayers, chanting mantras, nor turning rosary beads [5]. As Kak mentions that according to Lalla, the real practice lies in the deliberate self-introspection, which involves not only strengthening concentration and will, but also refusing to take for granted the received patterns of behaviour as well as world-views.

Habitually performing the religious practices might give the individual the satisfaction of engaging in something spiritual but in reality they would do nothing to expand the limited vision that leads to religious bigotry and non-tolerance [6]. From here, one can easily speculate that Lalla’s intense concern for people as reflected in many of her verses where she advises them to live a life based on inner spirituality rather than outer religious dogma was to a great extent shaped by the missionary outlook of the Sufis.

But the path she took with respect to her practise was very much guided by the orally transmitted esoteric practices of Kashmiri Shaivism. The free mingling of Sufi and Hindu mystics during Lalla’s time resulted in the appreciation of genuine spiritual experience over religious dogmas of any kind. Kaul speculated that her verses over the centuries began to be sung by village minstrels and later became part of Kashmiri
classical music (sufiana kalam) as they began to be used as sacred invocations to open the assembly of Sufis [8]. The polarity between Rishis and the Sufis also rest on the assumption that the Rishi movement was influenced very little by Islam and that it was the reaction against, as Ishaq Khan mentioned, the so-called forcible conversions to Islam by Suha Bhatta who was the most influential minister of Sultan Sikander [4].

It is important to bring in light the importance of Rishi movement, as it was against the background of the establishment of the Muslim sultanate in 1320, the influx of Sufi missionaries and the sense revolt manifested by Lal Ded against the manifold abuses of the caste-ridden social order.

**Nund Rishi and the Indigenous Culture of Kashmir**

During the transition period, with the coming of Islam and Sufis in Kashmir, there formed a cleavage between the foreign culture, the Sufis which came from Persia and Iran which formed the high culture, and indigenous culture came to be known as low culture. Khan mentions scholar Ira Lapidus quoting: “Muslim communities commonly have two psychological orientations. One derives from the scripturalist form of Islam which stresses the importance of a complete knowledge of the law and the correct performance of ritual and social duties.

The other orientation derives from what I shall call, for want of a better term, popular Sufi Islam. As the way of religious salvation, this form of Islam minimizes the importance of knowledge and law, and stresses attachment to the Saint, who is the personal guide, the bearer of miraculous and magical powers, the intercessor between ordinary men and God” [4]. Nund Rishi warns that the worldly pleasures should not detract out attention from God he says life can only become meaningful when we ascend back towards Him. He says:

- Thou existed and Thou (alone) will exist.
- Continue to remember Thou, none, but Thou.
- Thou alone will assuage the anguish (of thy soul).
- My soul, recognize thyself [4].

In the following verses he exhibits a sharp religious impulse, inspired by the Hindus and Muslim sources, and “fervently prays for the vision of the transcendent yet immanent God.” [4] He says:

- Nirguna, manifest thyself unto me.
- Thy name (alone) have I been chanting;
- Lord help me reach the acme of my spiritual desires,
- I do not remember gratefully how kind thou art.
- Thou removed all veils between thyself and the Prophet.
- And Thou revealed Quran unto him.
- Lord the one (Prophet) who remained steadfast in Thy way.
- I do remember gratefully; how kind Thou art [4].

Nund Rishi revolted against the social inequalities which was prevalent at that time and they manifested it in his verses. Their criticism of the exploitation and sufferings of the weak at the hands of the strong is evident in his work. The rich people busy themselves in the enjoyment and forget their responsibilities towards society, to help the poor and needy people and in the uplift of the society. This is reflected is his verses in which he says:

- One amuses oneself by organizing in a musical concert,
- Although aware, yet pretends innocence (about human sufferings),
- (While) the other is being scourged,
- (Has) God himself willed it so? [2].

Talking about the social inequalities, he also criticized the class difference which was created by the men for their own selfish reasons. He says:

- Allah, how great are your secrets of indifference,
- These secrets are exposed by your indifferences,
- It is this indifference or care free attitude of yours,
- That a donkey becomes a king,
- And a king is trampled under the feet,
Some beg in order to survive and
A fool is granted respectability by you [2].

He Also Says
Some are born with virtue and grace,
Who have derived generosity of the ocean from a petty stream,
Some under the spell of intoxication gaze into the skies,
Their green fields have been devastated by locusts.
Some have earned huge profits without any investment.
Some run away under frustration.
Their full shops do not attract a single costumer [2].

Nund Rishi believed in complete harmony among different religions and preached peace and understanding in them. He must have been conscious of the hatred and tension which were created during the reign of Sultan Sikandar, and was keen to restore harmony between Muslims and non-Muslims. His own sayings, in which he calls on people to follow the path of peace and harmony, show his strong desire for understanding, love and affection among all sections of the Kashmir.

The society that he represented was divided into two classes, namely neo-converts and old Hindu society. Therefore, the clash was imminent. One class was the new zealots of Muslims and the other traditional Hindu-both competed and outdid each other, in erecting their mosques and temples. Nund Rishi was sensitive to this issue and tried to maintain the social harmony. In one of his verses he says:

Two children from the same parents,
The Muslims and the Hindus.
Why this gulf of hatred between the two:
Be pleased with thy servants, Oh my Lord [7].
We came to this world like partners,
We should have shared our joys
And sorrows together [3].

The realization that Hindus and Muslims were children of the same God, whom they called by various names, served as a powerful message of harmony and reconciliation. Thus, Nund Rishi cried out in anguish: Children of the same parents, When will Hindus and Muslims cut down the tree of dualism? When will God be pleased with them and grant them His grace? We belong to the same parents Then why this difference? Let Hindus and Muslims worship God alone. We came into this world like partners. We should have shared our joys and sorrows together [3].

Conclusion
It goes without saying that Nund Rishi played a central role within the framework of a cognitive moral and social order. He redefined and reordered the life of the people in Kashmir and the followers of Rishi movement through his works and lifestyle. He provided what the worldly ulema failed to provide as a result of crisis in their belief and practices, was offered in abundance by the richly personal and social ethics of Nund Rishi and his followers.

References