

FROM CENTRAL ASIA TO KASHMIR: A Holistic View of Mysticism

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Abstract:

Persian spirituality exerted a profound influence on the religious culture of Kashmir. The local Hindu Shaivite monism that went back to the ninth century was propagated by the Rishi ascetics. This paper aims to examine the influence of Sufism on the popular Islamic culture in Kashmir, in particular the role of the fourteenth-century figure of Nund Rishi or Shaykh Nūruddīn. The findings will be based on the qualitative analysis of the historical sources pertaining to the period concerned, with a focus on the Sanskrit epic of Rajatarangini and the poetry of Nund Rishi which explicitly refers to famous Persian mystics. This study has valid implications for the research on the causes of the socio-cultural transformation of Kashmir that were not only initiated but also taken to its completion and fruition by the local Rishi order.

Keywords: Transformation; Monism; Central Asia; al-Hallāj; Mevlāna Rūmī.

A. Introduction

For centuries, Central Asia and Kashmir have enjoyed a strong relationship and cooperated in political and cultural affairs, but also religious and spiritual matters. Consequently, both the regions have a profound influence on each other. In fact, the cultural influence of Iran and Central Asia¹ on the region of Kashmir is so profound that it is called *Irān-i ṣaghīr* (Little Iran). This socio-cultural ‘transformation’ of Kashmir, to use the term of Kalhana the twelfth-century historian of Kashmir,² owes much to the Sufi influences from the Persian part of the Muslim

¹ Central Asia is a region in Asia which stretches from the Caspian Sea (west) to China and Mongolia (east) and from Afghanistan and Iran (south) to Russia (north), including Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

² Kalhana (sometimes spelled Kalhan or Kalhan'a) was the author of *Rajatarangini* (*River of Kings*), an account of the history of Kashmir. He wrote the work in Sanskrit between 1148 and 1149. It is a metrical legendary and historical chronicle of the north-western Indian subcontinent, particularly the kings of Kashmir. The work consists of 7,826 verses that are divided into eight books called *Tarangas* (waves).

world. However, this does not mean that those spiritual tendencies, which had emerged as the offshoots of the main trunk of the teachings of Islam, were only an insignificant part of this cultural transformation. Persian spirituality did influence the socio-cultural and religious milieu of Kashmir, but the main contributor to this transformation was the Central Asian ‘brand’ of Sufism.

Kashmiri culture already had its own mystical tradition based on monism³ propounded by Hindu philosophers and aesthetics such as Abhinavagupta (ca. 950–1016) and popularised by famous mystics and poets such as Lalleshwari (1320–1392; also known as Lal Ded or Lal Arifa). This particular form of (Hindu) monism is more precisely called Shaivite monism and goes back to the ninth century.⁴ This type of mysticism had reached the grassroots level through the adherents of the Rishi tradition.⁵ They were about 2,000 ascetics whose peacefulness, humility, and simplicity had a significant impact on Kashmiri culture.

This paper aims to examine the influence of Sufism on the popular Islamic culture in Kashmir, in particular the role of Shaykh Nūruddīn (1377–1438) and the Rishi mystics. The findings will be based on the qualitative analysis of the historical sources pertaining to the period concerned, with a focus on the Sanskrit epic of *Rajatarangini* (*The Story of the Kings of Kashmir*) authored by Pandit Kalhana in 1149 and the collection of poems inspired by the teachings of Shaykh Nūruddīn, the most celebrated Sufi figure of Kashmir. This study has valid implications for the research on the causes of the socio-cultural transformation of Kashmir that were not only initiated but also taken to its completion and fruition by the local Rishi order.

What all cultures have in common is that all are eager to know the truth or the reality behind existence. Inquisitive minds always pondered the cause of existence and to find the meaning of life. These individuals, whether philosophers or mystics, took great trouble to find the meaning to life; they were aware that most people were taking life for granted, at least those of average understanding and insight. However, the means and ways to which these few select resorted were many, and also to varying degrees of intensity concerning the approach they adopted to reach this lofty goal. As such, different cultures have given different names to such seekers of the Truth, although all tried to reach the same goal. The holistic approach of these sages (wise men and women) helped in the transformation of those societies in which they lived and served. Their efforts in awakening the spirituality in the people they met,

³ Monism attributes oneness or singleness to existence. All existing things have their origin in the One. It is the belief that there is no distinction or duality in any particular sphere, such as that between matter and mind, or God and the world.

⁴ Kashmir Shaivism, or Trika Shaivism, is a nondualist tradition of Shaiva-Shakta Tantra that originated sometime after 850. Though this tradition was very influential in Kashmir and is thus often called Kashmir Shaivism, it was actually a pan-Indian movement.

⁵ The Rishi order is a religious tradition, concept for the mystical teaching or spiritual practices associated with religious harmony of Sufism in the Kashmir Valley. The prominent Rishis include Resh Mir Sa’ib and Nund Rishi, also known as Sheikh Nūruddīn Walī.

irrespective of their status in society, did not go unnoticed. The spiritual teachers succeeded in shaping the philosophical and mystical moorings of their community. However, the approaches followed by Hindu monists and the adherents of the Abrahamic faiths differed considerably, even though they often had similar goals.

In ancient Arabia, a member of the progeny of Isma‘il (Banū Isrā‘īl) who affirmed the inner voice of his conscience (*fiṭrah*) was commonly known as a *hanīf* (upright, rightly guided). In the Qur’an⁶ Prophet Abraham (Ibrāhīm) is called عَلَيْهِ السَّلَام⁷ a *hanīf* in the sense that he did not partake in the corrupt practices of his community, in terms of morals and faith. Some of these early seekers were known as *hunafā’* (pl. of *hanīf*), and the Prophet Muhammad صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ⁸ followed in their spiritual footsteps before he was appointed a Messenger of God. One of these early *hunafā’* was Zayd ibn ‘Amr ibn Nufayl.⁹ Even before Islam he was a staunch critic of the corrupt practices and rituals of the Arabs. He is said to have visited Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Jordan in search of true faith.

During his journey, he met a Jewish scholar (*rabbi*) and asked him about his religion. Zayd said to him, “I intend to embrace your religion, so tell me something about it.” The *rabbi* said, “You will not embrace our religion unless you receive your share of Allah’s anger.” Zayd said, “I do not run except from Allah’s anger, and I will not bear a bit of it if I have the power to avoid it. Can you tell me of some other religion?” He said, “I do not know any other religion except that which is *hanīf*.” Zayd enquired, “What is *hanīf*?” He said, “*Hanīf* is the religion of (the Prophet) Abraham عَلَيْهِ السَّلَام — he was neither a Jew nor a Christian, and he used to worship none but Allah.” Then Zayd left and soon met a Christian scholar and told him the same (as before). The Christian said, “You will not embrace our religion unless you get a share of Allah’s curse.” Zayd replied, “I do not run except from Allah’s curse, and I will never bear any of Allah’s curse and His anger if I have the power to avoid them. Will you tell me some other religion?” He replied, “I do not know any other religion except *hanīf*.” Zaid enquired, “What is *hanīf*?” He said, “*Hanīf* is the religion of (the Prophet) Abraham عَلَيْهِ السَّلَام — he was neither a Jew nor a Christian, and he used to worship none but Allah.” When Zayd heard this he left and raised both his hands and said, “O Allah! I make You my Witness that I am on the religion of Abraham.”¹⁰

This was the genuine spiritual quest of Zayd ibn ‘Amr ibn Nufayl who decided to follow the monotheism of Abraham instead of accepting any theological doctrine. He kept away from the polytheistic and superstitious ways of his people in Makkah but also refused to join any of the established monotheistic religions. It is testified by a

⁶ Qur’an 6:79; 16:123.

⁷ ‘*Alayhi al-salām* (Peace be upon him).

⁸ *Ṣalla ‘illāhu ‘alayhi wa sallam* (Blessings of God and Peace be upon him).

⁹ He died in the year 620 and was a cousin of ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, the second caliph.

¹⁰ Muhammad ibn Isma‘il Bukhari, *Sahih Al-Bukhari* (Riyadh: Darussalam, 1997), vol. 5., Hadith 169.

report narrated by Asmā' bint Abī Bakr that she once saw Zayd ibn 'Amr ibn Nufayl standing with his back against the Ka'bah saying, "O people of Quraysh! By Allah, none amongst you follows the religion of Abraham except me."¹¹ Moreover, he used to rescue little female infants from being buried alive by their fathers.¹² And if an Arab was about to kill his newborn daughter, Zayd would tell him, "Do not kill her, for I will feed her on your behalf." So he would take the female infant, and when the infant had grown a bit, he would say to her father, "Now if you will wish, I will give her to you, and if you will wish, I will (continue to) feed her on your behalf."¹³

No wonder then that Kashmir also witnessed mystical stalwarts who chose a path quite contrary to the culture prevalent in their days. Many charlatans were trading in spirituality and asceticism. Among the sincere seekers and honest servants of God were the members of the Rishi order. Even though they also practiced an extreme form of asceticism, they did not abandon society altogether and live in complete social isolation. It is worth noting that Rishi is a Sanskrit term for a 'singer of sacred hymns.' However, the term was later applied to any saint or a sanctified sage.¹⁴ The Rishis were known to believe in One True God and worshipped Him alone. Lawrence wrote, "The most respectable people of this country are the Rishis, who, although they do not suffer themselves to be fettered by traditions, are doubtless true worshippers of God. They revile not any other sect, and ask nothing of anyone; they plant the roads with fruit trees to furnish the travelers with refreshments."¹⁵ It is this Rishi tradition that reached its pinnacle during the first half of the 15th century in the figure of Shaykh Nūruddīn, who, by the aura of his sublime persona and the active support of his many disciples, spread his teachings to the farthest corners of Kashmir.

B. Seekers of the Universal Truth

We are tempted to compare the ideas of such pre-Islamic *hunafā'* Zayd ibn 'Amr ibn Nufayl and "a Shaivite yogini of the fourteenth century Kashmir"¹⁶ by the name of Lal Ded would be quite interesting, especially since both are known to have composed poetic verse. This is some of the verse attributed to Zayd ibn 'Amr ibn Nufayl in which he condemned the false and distorted beliefs of the Arabs:

Thy servants err, but Thou art the Sustainer;
In Thine hands are placed the deaths and the destinies;
One single Lord or a thousand of them should I serve,
When all matters diverge?
I eschewed Lat and 'Uzzā altogether!

¹¹ Bukhari, *Sahih Al-Bukhari*.

¹² Female infanticide had become a common practice at the time.

¹³ Bukhari, *Sahih Al-Bukhari*, vol. 5., Hadith 169.

¹⁴ Monier Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 226–27.

¹⁵ Walter R Lawrence, *The Valley of Kashmir* (Srinagar: Chinar Publishing House, 1992), 287.

¹⁶ Muhammad Ishaq Khan, *Kashmir's Transition to Islam* (Srinagar: Gulshan Books, 2005), 52.

For that is what a wise man ought to do.¹⁷

Zayd ibn ‘Amr used to taunt his compatriots for their senseless animal sacrifices to lifeless idols. He would say: “Allah has created the sheep and He has sent the water for it from the sky, and He has grown the grass for it from the earth, yet you slaughter it in others than the Name of Allah.”¹⁸ Some seven centuries later Lal Ded of Kashmir is reported to have said almost the same thing about the idol-worshipping practices she witnessed in her own community. However, her verse takes a less belligerent and confrontational tone:

It covers your shame;
Saves you from cold;
Its food and drink,
Mere water and grass;
Who counselled you, O Brahmin,
To slaughter a living sheep, as a sacrifice,
Unto a lifeless stone?¹⁹

C. Al-Hallāj’s Sojourn in Kashmir

It does not seem a coincidence that the female mystic and saint Lal Ded protesting against the ritualism of her society echoes the voice of a seventh-century Arab who considered himself a monotheist in the Abrahamic tradition amidst the multitude of other Arabs²⁰ who had sunken deep into the grip of polytheism. It seems that the monotheistic teachings of Islam had already struck the psyche of the Saivite mystics of Kashmir, probably long before there was a reaction against the ritualistic and exploitative practices of the Hindu Brahmin caste on the part of Lal Ded. However, it seems quite unlikely that this is due to any activity directly connected to Muslim mystics. Nevertheless, there is some evidence that suggests some indirect encounter of the two trends of monism, one professed by the Kashmiri Shaivites and the other held by Muslim Sufis. The historical textual evidence suggests that Ḥusayn ibn Mansūr al-Hallāj, the premier monist among the Persian Sufis had made Kashmir one of the destinations of his Indo-China itinerary. We learn that

Mansur al-Hallaj, the great mystic of Islam, visited Kashmir in A.D. 895 and stayed there for about a year, making inquiries of a doctrinal nature and participating in the religious debates besides looking for more or less miraculous techniques.²¹

¹⁷ Abū al-Faraj ‘Alī ibn al-Ḥusayn Al-Iṣbahānī, “Kitāb Al-Aghānī,” in *Selection From Hujjat Allah Al-Balighah* (New Delhi: Adam Publishers and Distributors, 2006), 106.

¹⁸ Bukhari, *Sahih Al-Bukhari*.

¹⁹ Khan, *Kashmir’s Transition to Islam*, 75.

²⁰ Bukhari, *Sahih Al-Bukhari*.

²¹ Muhammad Ashraf Wani, *Islam in Kashmir: Fourteenth to Sixteenth Century* (Srinagar: Oriental Publishing House, 2004), 47. vide *The Passion of al-Hallaj*. The French Original of this Treatise on al-Hallāj is entitled *La Passion d’al Hallaj, martyr mystique*; see Mian Mohammad Sharif, ed., *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, vol. 1 (New Delhi: Adam Publishers & Distributors, 2001), 346–49.

As such, there must have been some exchange of ideas between the monists of Kashmir who flourished in this period, especially Somananda and Vasugupta,²² and al-Hallāj. The latter might have been astounded by the spiritual insights of the Hindu monists, which he perhaps had not expected to find. It is reported in the traditions that there was a significant change in the attitude of al-Hallāj after he returned from his journey. In this regard we are told:

[He] proceeded to China via India. On his return, he made a secret pilgrimage to Mecca. A great change had taken place in him. His words were replete with esotericism and few could fathom him. So he has turned away from the places he visited and was much tortured.²³

This, however, does not suggest that there was any kind of agreement between the Kashmiri monists and the Persian mystic, despite their shared belief in One God. Al-Hallāj probably appreciated the concept of monism, but only theoretically and at best “on the idea, but not about the ways of life, customs [and] traditions.”²⁴ Nevertheless, we learn that such interreligious discourse had indeed taken place at the time:

Kashmir under Karkota, more correctly Utpala dynasty, had become an important center, where Hindus and Turkish Buddhists of the neighboring and allied state of Gandhara ... mingled with foreign scholars. [And] there were religious debates held on Thura (Torah), the Injil (Gospels), and Zabur (Psalms), in the same period as the visit of Hallaj.²⁵

One cannot overemphasize the effect of this visit; however, it might have remained confined to the local monists. The majority (lower and middle strata) of the population of the society continued to practice the ritualistic form of Shaivism. However, Kalhana’s chronicle of the *Rajatarangini* suggests that Muslim practices and etiquettes of life were already affecting the lifestyle of the Kashmiri people. According to Kalhana, the presence of Muslims in Kashmir can be traced to the reign of Vajraditya (Bappiyaka), the younger and second successor of Lalitaditya-Muktapida.²⁶ Kalhana deplores that “he [Vajraditya] sold many men to the *Mlecchas*, and introduced to the country [Kashmir] practices which befitted *Mlecchas*.”²⁷

²² Shri Jagdish Chandra Chatterji, *Kashmir Shaivism* (Government of Jammu & Kashmir, India: Research & Publication Department, 1962), 25.

²³ Fariduddin Attar, *Tadhkira-Tul-Auliya (Memoirs of Saints, Selected & Abridged)*, ed. Bankey Behari (New Delhi: Taj Company, 2002), 143.

²⁴ Shamboo Nath Kaul, *Saiva Philosophy of Kashmir* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 2008), 90.

²⁵ Wani, *Islam in Kashmir: Fourteenth to Sixteenth Century*, 48.

²⁶ Ghulām Muhyi’d Dīn Sūfī, *Kashir, Being a History of Kashmir*, vol. 1 (New Delhi: Capital Publishing House, 1996), 77.

²⁷ Ranjit Sitaram Pandit, *Kalhana’s Rajatarangini: The Saga of the Kings of Kashmir* (Srinagar: Gulshan Books, 2007). Commentary and appendices by M.A Stein, Book VII, 1095 & 1149 [nn. 1095 & 1149]. Cf. 113.

D. Convergence of Cultural Traits

Kalhana also seems very averse to the policies of King Harsa (1089–1111) and calls him a *Turuska*,²⁸ an epithet which he uses for an ‘impure outsider.’ He also accuses Harsa of “continually supporting hundreds of *Turuska* captains with money.”²⁹

Now, who were these *Turuska* or *Mleccha* captains? It is most likely that they were the remainder of the force sent by Mahmud of Ghazna as part of his second fruitless attempt to enter Kashmir in 1016.³⁰ The famous Persian scholar and polymath al-Bīrūnī (973–1048), took part in this military expedition and explained the reason for the sultan’s failure to enter Kashmir. He wrote: “After a while, when the snow began to fall and the season became intensely cold, and the enemy received reinforcements from Kashmir, the Sultan was obliged to abandon his design and return to Ghazni.”³¹

No wonder then that the Venetian trader and traveler Marco Polo (1254–1324) noted the presence of a Muslim colony in Kashmir towards the close of the thirteenth century. According to him, “the people of the province [Kashmir] do not kill animals nor spill blood; so if they want to eat meat; they get them [the Muslims] to play the butcher.”³²

Thus, long before the arrival of Shaykh Nūruddīn, Kashmir was being influenced both by Muslim cultural practices which, to quote Stein, must have been the “customs from the Muhammadan [Muslim] West.”³³ Shaykh Nūruddīn, on one hand, recognized Lal Ded as the *avatar*³⁴ or an incarnate divine teacher, while on the other hand, he declared Mīr Muḥammad Hamadānī, the illustrious son of Mīr Sayyid ‘Ali Hamadānī (1314–1384) as the preceptor³⁵ or instructor of the Kashmiri people, thereby fusing the monistic concept of the Kashmiri Shaivites and the Central Asian Sufis. It was possible only because “the philosophical school of Trika (Pratyabhijna-Recognition of Shaivism) assisted the seeker in recognizing that his or her essential nature is non-different from that of Paramasiva [Absolute].”³⁶ This, in essence, is similar to

²⁸ Pandit. Book VII, 1095 [n. 1095]. Cf. Book VII, 1232 [n. 1232].

²⁹ Pandit. Book VII, 1149, vol. 1, 357.

³⁰ Abdul Qaiyum Rafiqi, *Sufism in Kashmir: Fourteenth to the Sixteenth Century* (Srinagar: Al-Rafiq Publishing House, 2003), 3.

³¹ Pandit, *Kalhana’s Rajatarangini: The Saga of the Kings of Kashmir*, 299.

³² Rafiqi, *Sufism in Kashmir: Fourteenth to the Sixteenth Century*, 4. vide H. Yule, *Travels of Marco Polo*, I.

³³ Pandit, *Kalhana’s Rajatarangini: The Saga of the Kings of Kashmir*. Book VII, n. 923.

³⁴ Khan, *Kashmir’s Transition to Islam*, 52; Wani, *Islam in Kashmir: Fourteenth to Sixteenth Century*, 95.

³⁵ See Altaf Hussain Yattoo, “Islam in Kashmir: Role of Sufis –An Analytical Study” (Jamia Millia Islamia University, New Delhi, 2009). Chapters V & VI.

³⁶ Moti Lal Pandit, *The Trika Saivism of Kashmir* (New Delhi: Mushilal Manoharlal Publishers, 2003), xi.

Bayazid's *Subhani* (Glory to me) and al-Hallāj's *Ana al-Ḥaqq* (I am the Creative Truth) and *Ana Hiya* (I am She) of Ibn al-Farīd.³⁷

E. The vocation of Shaykh Nūruddīn

Thus, the two diverse trends of mysticism converged in the person of Shaykh Nūruddīn. The local Rishi Sufi tradition which he represented was soon accepted by the common people of Kashmir as the *Rishivatika* or later *Resh-i Vaer*. It is best described as follows:

The word 'Reshi' is actually 'Rshi' of Sanskrit origin. It has been used in Vedas profusely. It means an inspired poet or a sage. In Kashmiri parlance, it connotes a pious soul more concerned with the 'spirit' than with the 'self'. For this very reason, the most predominant trait of tolerance and Godliness exhibited by Kashmiris has earned the name 'Reshvar' [or] "Reshivatika"—a retreat of savants for this habitat [Kashmir].³⁸

The influence of Rishis on Hindu culture has been so intense that the avid observer and anthropologist al-Bīrūnī recorded it in his *Kitāb al-Hind*. He wrote:

Such was the case with the Greeks, and it is precisely the same with the Hindus. For they believe that their religious law and its single precepts derive their origin from Rishis, their sages, the pillars of their religion, and not from the prophet, i.e., Narayana, who, coming into this world, appears in some human figure.³⁹

So, true to the spirit of the old Rishi mystical tradition, Shaykh Nūruddīn decided to retreat from active life, despite the pleas of his family, especially his mother, against it. While his mother tried to persuade him to rethink his decision, he tried to console her thus:

The ocean of life is undependable, O mother;
We came here to drop into it;
Since I am ass [of little value, thus] cannot carry the load;
I have renounced home;
For whom shall I live?⁴⁰

However, when the Shaykh eventually emerged from his retirement, in his person the two mystic streams converged, one being local and the other being Persian. He succeeded in synthesizing the constituent elements of both spiritual traditions. Thus it has been argued that "although elements in the Sheikh's verses are compatible with the

³⁷ See A. Reynold Nicholson and William Stoddart, *Sufism: The Mystical Doctrines and Idea of Personality* (New Delhi: Adam Publishers & Distributors, 2002), 92.

³⁸ Kashi Nath Dhar, *Nund Rishi: A Rosary of Hundred Beads* (Srinagar: Jammu & Kashmir Academy of Art, Culture & Languages, 2004), 8.

³⁹ Abu Raihan Al-Biruni, *Kitab Al-Hind or India*, ed. Qeyamuddin Ahmad (New Delhi: National Book Trust of India, 1983), 49.

⁴⁰ B.N. Parimoo, *Nund Rishi: Unity in Diversity* (Srinagar: Jammu & Kashmir Academy of Art, Culture & Languages, 2007), 54.

Shaivite aspirations after self-identification with God, the influence of ontological monism of Sufism on his inquisitive mind cannot be ruled out.”⁴¹

This ontological monistic aspect of the Sufi thought was the result of certain Central Asian and Persian elements⁴² that had reached Kashmir through Mīr Sayyid ‘Alī Hamadānī who in turn had been influenced by the teachings of Ibn ‘Arabī. This influence resulted in that orientation in the thought and practice of Shaykh Nūruddīn which is most noticeable in the second stage of his life. This new style in the thought pattern of the Shaykh can be gauged from his *shruks* (special stanzas) like:

Baba Nasr! I erred by resorting to the jungles!
(Though it was not,) I thought it to be a great service (worship, virtue)!
See! It was an act of great shame!
(For I had to) experience just one Thing (the Truth).⁴³

The Shaykh goes on to elaborate the same theme as:

Forest is for monkeys and apes;
(And) the caves for rats (and the like)!
Those who cleanse themselves (by making ablutions) five times (daily);
(And) live with their family (members);
They are the chosen ones.⁴⁴

This stanza he dedicated to a hermit in the jungle who was shunning human society and had retreated into a cave⁴⁵ also substantiates our point of Shaykh Nūruddīn’s general reorientation. His newfound approach to human society inspired him to confront societal issues emphatically and dynamically. This can be seen from his verses like:

One who doesn’t shun his daily duties;
Who has a genuine desire to earn his livelihood;
Who tames down the lion of his mind;
Who puts up with a harsh word or insult;
Who preaches what he practices;
May verily [be] called a Musalman [Muslim].⁴⁶

Such ideas are indeed in accord with Qur’anic verses such as “O you who believe! Why do you say that which you do not [do]? Grievously odious is it in the sight of Allah that you say that which you do not [do].”⁴⁷

⁴¹ Khan, *Kashmir’s Transition to Islam*, 103.

⁴² A. Reynold Nicholson and Stoddart, *Sufism: The Mystical Doctrines and Idea of Personality*, 92.

⁴³ Qari Saifuddin, *Guldastah-i Kalam-i Shaikh Al-‘Alam* (Srinagar: Maktabh-i ‘Ilm wa Adab, 1999), 202.

⁴⁴ Saifuddin, 5.

⁴⁵ Parimoo, *Nund Rishi: Unity in Diversity*, 231–32; Moti Lal Saqi, *Kulyat-i Shaikh Al-‘Alam* (Srinagar: Jammu & Kashmir Academy of Art, Culture & Languages, 2005), 174.

⁴⁶ Parimoo, *Nund Rishi: Unity in Diversity*, 163.

⁴⁷ Qur’an 61:2-3.

F. In Honour of Mevlana Rūmī

Shaykh Nūrūddīn also invoked the name of Mevlana Rūmī (1207–1273), the most illustrious mystic-philosopher of Islam to single out the spiritual quacks and charlatans of his age who were exploiting the gullible masses. He wrote:

If you want to talk about a *mulla*,
Then mention Maulana Rūmī!
Otherwise, beseech (God's) forgiveness on seeing a (self-styled) *mulla*!
He [Rūmī] crossed the Ocean (of Spirituality)!
He assisted his own self (and succeeded).⁴⁸

Let it be noted here that Shaykh's appraisal of Rūmī is neither hyperbole nor a hollow claim. It is indeed based on the imprint left by Rūmī on the Muslim psyche as a mystic and as a scholar and philosopher. In all his life Rūmī had been neither an escapist nor a pessimist. He is known for facing the challenges of his times head-on, as illustrated in the description below:

[His] is a life-embracing creed. Although one of the greatest mystics of all time, he was not a body-torturing and self-annihilating mystic. In a verse he talks of great souls as great hunters of life trying to capture and assimilate the spirituality of angels, saints, and prophets, finally aiming at capturing the cosmic spirit itself for perpetual and eternal enrichment of the self, actualizing its infinite potentialities. He wants you not to gather your garments to prevent them from getting wet but to plunge a thousand times in the sea of life. Fight for spiritual conquest, and not flight from life's challenges, is the way of life that he preaches and practices. Only for a sleeping soul life is an empty dream; creeds of illusion are the products of lovers of sleep and worshippers of the night.⁴⁹

The Shaykh had neither any personal rivalry with the 'religious elite *mullas*' of Kashmir nor it was a clash of interest between him as the head of the Rishis and other Muslim religious scholars. It was actually his sensitivity towards Islam as a creed to be 'felt' and 'experienced' rather than study. In his correct view Islam had to be practiced to bear fruit, as eloquently stated in the Qur'an verse, "Do you enjoin right conduct on the people, and forget (to practice it) yourselves, and you study the Scripture? Will you not understand?"⁵⁰

No wonder then that the Shaykh's sayings were very soon recognized to be the *Koshur Qur'an*⁵¹ or 'the Qur'an in the Kashmiri Language,' in the same way that

⁴⁸ Saifuddin, *Guldastah-i Kalam-i Shaikh Al-'Alam*, 303; Moti Lal Saqi, *Kulyat-i Shaikh Al-'Alam*, 128–29., no. 376.

⁴⁹ Abdul Hakim Khalifah, "Jalal Al-Din Rumi," in *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, ed. Mian Mohammad Sharif (New Delhi: Adam Publishers & Distributors, 2001), 836.

⁵⁰ Qur'an 2:44.

⁵¹ Wani, *Islam in Kashmir: Fourteenth to Sixteenth Century*, 68.

Rūmī's *Masnawi* was coined as "*hast Qur'an dar zaban-i Pahlawi*"⁵² (Qur'an in the Persian language).

G. In Honour of al-Hallāj

Shaykh's high estimation of Mansūr al-Hallāj is also worth mentioning. It seems that he was very much aware of the position of al-Hallāj among the Sufis as the 'martyr mystique.' He says:

Who has separated me from Mansūr?
He and [I] myself pursued the same goal!
He slipped in saying "I" [*ana al-Haq*].
But blessed was he when "I" became grace.⁵³

Shaykh Nūruddīn knew the difference between the states of mystic intoxication (*sukr*) and sobriety (*sahw*) and was aware of the importance of maintaining a balance between them. Nevertheless, he was well aware of the sacrifice of al-Hallāj:

I was aware of his (Mansūr's) secret!
I (also) knew the truth (therein).
(However,) when he kept (it) secret;
Why should I expose (it)?
(Still) it is known to the Gnostics.⁵⁴

In a verse, al-Hallāj explained the feeling of his expression *Ana al-Haq* as "Oh! The secret of my heart is so fine that it is hidden from all living beings."⁵⁵ To the Shaykh, al-Hallāj's willingness to die showed lovers of the Truth the way:

When the Beloved got manifest;
Mansūr has had the gaze.
When he drank the nectar of love;
He was killed like a culprit!
(There) he sprinkled the fragrance of musk and saffron;
(Thereby) the gallows became fragrant!
He showed the way to the lovers and Gnostics;
And (left) a precedent for the world!⁵⁶

The Shaykh was thus much advanced in recognizing the essence of al-Hallāj which has been attested to by the modern scholarship. Al-Hallāj's crucifixion has been rightly described "as the height (*mi'raj*) of sainthood and the seal of a most saintly vocation."⁵⁷ This vocation has been explained by a modern scholar as:

⁵² Ghulam Nabi Gowhar, *Sahifah-i Nur*, vol. 2 (Srinagar: Gulshan Books, 1998), 600.

⁵³ Khan, *Kashmir's Transition to Islam*, 115–16; Moti Lal Saqi, *Kulyat-i Shaikh Al-'Alam*, 78. no. 180.

⁵⁴ Moti Lal Saqi, *Kulyat-i Shaikh Al-'Alam*, 78.

⁵⁵ Sharif, *A Hist. Muslim Philos.*, 1:347.

⁵⁶ Moti Lal Saqi, *Kulyat-i Shaikh Al-'Alam*, 67. no. 139. Cf. 76, no. 175.

⁵⁷ Luis Massignon, "Al-Hallaj," in *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, ed. Mian Mohammad Sharif (New Delhi: Adam Publishers & Distributors, 2001), 347–48.

The words *Ana 'l-Haqq* were not an ejaculation of visionary enthusiasm but the intuitive formula in which a whole system of mystical theology summed itself up. And this system is not only the first in time, it is also profoundly original. The power and vitality of this man's [Mansūr's] ideas are attested by the influence which they exerted upon his successors. His ashes were scattered, swept away, as he prophesied, by rushing winds and running waters, but his words lived after him and we see them, all through the Middle Ages, rising like sparks and kindling to new life.⁵⁸

The Shaykh understood al-Hallāj's ecstatic outbursts as him 'internalizing' the message of the Qur'an. He thus placed him back into mainstream Islamic culture, albeit with a more sublime function and vocation. He wrote:

Why didn't, ye [O Muslim!] die while reciting the Qur'an?
Why didn't ye turn to ashes, while reciting the Qur'an?
How did ye remain alive while reciting the Qur'an?
[Didn't ye know that] Mansūr was burnt [while doing so]!⁵⁹

H. On the Old Kashmiri Rishis

Nevertheless, the Shaykh was witty and intelligent enough to put the mystics of local origin in the right perspective as he recognized the Truth as an inclusive and integrated whole. This is what he said about Lal Ded:

(It was) Lalla of Padmanpora [now Pampore];
Who drank, in long draughts,
Nectar divine!
A beloved Avtar she was to us, too:
May Thou, the Lord, bestow a similar boon upon me!⁶⁰

However, at the same time, he did not forget to highlight the role played by the local mystics of yore. About Zulka Rishi he wrote:

Zulka Rishi of Dandakvana;
Who subsisted on the fruit of shrubs wild,
Was a perfect devotee and attained salvation!
May Thou, the Lord, bestow a similar boon upon me!⁶¹

And he described Miran Rishi as follows:

Miran Rishi of Rishivana;
Who lived for a thousand lunar months,
Full of [the fear of] God did go to his heavenly abode. May Thou, the Lord, bestow a similar boon upon me!⁶²

⁵⁸ A. Reynold Nicholson and Stoddart, *Sufism: The Mystical Doctrines and Idea of Personality*, 93–94.

⁵⁹ Saifuddin, *Guldastah-i Kalam-i Shaikh Al-'Alam*, 207.

⁶⁰ Parimoo, *Nund Rishi: Unity in Diversity*, 106.

⁶¹ Parimoo, 109–10.

⁶² Parimoo, 110.

Shaykh Nūruddīn rounded off the argument by declaring himself a spiritual heir to the Prophet Muhammad صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ through the line of Uways al-Qarnī. The latter lived in far off Yemen during the lifetime of the Prophet صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ. He was not able to travel and meet him in person because he had to look after his aged mother. However, he was always yearning to see the Prophet صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ with his own eyes and be in his presence. It is because of the love, honor, and reverence of Uways al-Qarnī for the Prophet صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ that ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb warmly received him in Madinah when he had finally made his way to the new capital. In the same way, Shaykh Nūruddīn understood himself as one of the lovers of Prophet Muhammad صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ who were not able to meet him in person while he was still alive, thus, as a descendent of the Uwaysi line.

Shaykh Nūruddīn concluded his poetic journey with Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) who had also dived into the ocean of mystical experience. However, unlike al-Hallāj or Mevlana Rūmī, he chose at one point in his life to return from the spirit back to the intellect. He is thus more known as a scholar and philosopher rather than a mystic. Al-Ghazālī wrote about this time in his life:

I spent ten years in this manner. What revelations were made to me during this period of meditation could not be described, but, I must say for the benefit of my readers that I came to know that the mystics were most truly godly, their life most [sis] beautiful, their rules of conduct most perfect, and their morality the purest. It would not be possible to bring forth a more perfect and godly person. The intellect of the rationalist, the wisdom of the philosophers, and the knowledge of the religious doctors made a combined effort for the emergence of Islam. In their actions and practices, whether overt or secret, the mystics drew inspiration from the Holy Prophet, save whom there is no fountainhead of guidance.⁶³

I. Connecting the Local with the Universal

In accordance with his sincerity, selflessness, purity of intent, wit, intelligence, and inquisitiveness, Shaykh Nūruddīn summed up his spiritual life journey by establishing a link between the Prophet صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ and the line of Uways al Qarnī, other famous mystics and himself. He wrote:

The first Rishi was Ahmad [the Prophet Muhammad صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ];
The second in order was Hazrat Uwais!
The third Rishi was Zulka Rishi;
The fourth in order was Hazrat Pilas!
The fifth was Rum Rishi;
The sixth in order was Hazrat Miran!
The seventh (me) is miscalled a Rishi;
Do I deserve to be called a Rishi?
What is my name?⁶⁴

⁶³ Sayyid Abul Hassan Ali Al-Nadwi, *Saviours of Islamic Spirit*, vol. 1 (Lucknow: Academy of Islamic Research & Publications, 1986), 119–20.

⁶⁴ Moti Lal Saqi, *Kulyat-i Shaikh Al-'Alam*, 33. no. 18, tr. vide Khan, *Kashmir's Transition*, 45.

It is interesting to note here that Shaykh Nūruddīn has used the named ‘Aḥmad’ instead of ‘Muḥammad’ for the Prophet صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ. The reason for this is quite obvious. First, the word ‘Ahmad’ literally means ‘the praised one’ which is thus the synonym of the word ‘Muhammad’ and is used in the Qur’an as a direct reference to his person.⁶⁵ Second, being a pure mystic, Shaykh Nūruddīn was bringing home the fact to his fellow mystics that they should not differentiate between the local and the universal versions of the Truth; the former was upheld by the Rishis and the latter was propagated to the humanity by the Prophet Muhammad صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ. It was his way of inviting the local mystics to connect the local with the universal.

J. Conclusion

The role of Shaykh Nūruddīn was to bring out in bold relief his inclusive approach to mysticism. Through this person, the different spiritual and mystic trends were able to converge and offer the Kashmiri people a broader understanding of the reality of life. It is this sensitivity and sincerity in the way of the seekers that helped was transform human society throughout history. The transformation of Kashmir is one sublime example where cross-cultural mystic trends have converged and been assimilated to bring forth a more mystical take on religion.

Thus, having set out with the premise that multifarious mystic trends converged in Kashmir and paved the way for its socio-religious transformation, the study succeeded in illustrating the pivotal role of Shaykh Nūruddīn. He elaborated and interpreted the Islamic mystic lore in such a way that it included both the local as well as the foreign mystics and seekers of the Truth. His role was that of the great harmonizer and synthesizer of Kashmiri's mystical tradition. He acknowledged the local mystical traditions of his own Rishi order while readily accepting the universal version of the Truth shared by the Persian mystics and saints.

The study thus proved that the local Kashmiri and the universal Islamic versions of esoteric traditions converged and produced the socio-cultural ethos of Kashmir for which it is known today. In this process, the Central Asian and Persian Sufi saints worked as the catalysts for the change and transformation in Kashmiri culture. As the Sufis from Central Asia and Persia had introduced the Sufi traditions of Islam to Kashmir, it was Shaykh Nūruddīn who succeeded in assimilating these foreign traditions with the local Kashmiri traditions. He thus made the local Truth compatible with the universal Truth of Islam, thereby making it acceptable to everyone.

⁶⁵ Qur’an 61:06.

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