



Social Philosophy Of The Rishi Movement And Its Necessity In Contemporary Times

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Abstract

According to the fundamental teachings of Islam, throughout Islamic intellectual history and civilizations two things have remained universal and unchanged. One, faith in the oneness of God (Waḥdat) and; second, one's dealings with others (Mu'amlāt). With reference to the latter, it means a person's religion will be judged on the basis of his/her relationship with the second category in this material world where one needs the other to live in. In other words, in relation to others, a person is known the way he/she treats and deals with others. As such, Islam as a bulk of its contents, has related itself to social interactions and dealings. Because of that, wherever Muslims live, their dealings with others will define their religion. It is historically vindicated that Kashmir has optimized the culture of interfaith peace and understanding in which the Rishi tradition of Kashmir has played a very important role. The person who has approximated and symbolized Kashmiri's identity with all richness of its cultural genius and spiritual ethos was Sheikh Nūr al-Dīn (1377-1440), the founder and the most revered indigenous Rishi/Sufi of Kashmir. As such, this paper, is an attempt to explore the vision with regard to universal social teachings as embodied in the teachings of Sheikh Nūr al-Dīn and how it laid the foundation for a social philosophy based on cooperation and mutual understanding to axe artificial boundaries for broadening the borders of humanity.

Keywords: Sufism, Cultural syncretism, Harmony, Traditions, Diversity.

Introduction

Kashmir constitutes a special chapter in the history of Islam considering the spirited response of its people, living in the Hindu-Buddhist environment, to the egalitarian teachings of the Sufis from Central Asia and Persia who began to pour into the picturesque valley from the 14th Century. According to late Prof. Ishaq Khan, "to such an environment, the first response came from Lalla Ded and then by her spiritual off-spring, Sheikh Nūr al-Dīn - the founder of the indigenous order of Muslim Rishis."¹ At the very outset, let me share with you that Kashmir for many good reasons is also known as Rishvaer- the valley of Rishis. Besides

¹ M. Ishaq Khan, *Kashmiri's Transition to Islam: The role of Muslim Rishi's*, Srinagar: Gulshun Books, 2005, p.xi

other reasons, some of the indigenous historians were of the firm belief that most of the people living in rural areas, owe their entry to Islam to the founder of Rishi movement²- Sheikh Nur al-Din (1377-1440)- .

The story of Islam in Kashmir is one of the most interesting stories in the history of civilizational dialogue. There is hardly any similar example in history of peaceful takeover of one religion and culture by the other. This feat became possible because of the role of Sufis- who are primarily concerned with the internal state of the soul rather than external behavior characterized as ‘the code of the heart (Fiqh al-Bāṭin), purification of the soul (Tazkiyat al-Nafs) or feeling of God’s presence (al-Iḥsān).³ As Ṣufism emerged in the second/eighth century and gradually developed into Sufi orders throughout the Muslim regions for being most inclusive and focused on self-examination (Muḥāsaba).⁴ For such reasons, It is a unique story exemplifying Islam’s resilience and potential to appropriate alien traditions. It shows contours of interfaith dialogue in action. It refutes the dominant perception of Islam as monolithic exclusivist legalistic tradition.⁵ The story of Islam in Kashmir is an interesting case of larger story of cultural transformation brought about by Sufism. The spread of Islam in India took place as an indirect consequence of the peaceful activities of the Sufis as well as acculturation and assimilation spread over several generations. In India, Islam seems to have been “a holy man Islam” where the Sufis acquired an aura of holiness. It was this aura of holiness, which attracted Indians to the Sufis, rather than formal Islam. Well documented research has suggested that a great majority of the Indian Muslims are descendant of converts in which conversion coercion played no role.⁶ In the sub-continent Islam from its inception has seen many fortunes and had always provided an abundant incentive for reformation. The Sufis played an important role in the development and helped to spread the faith of Islam and won enormous following. With the result, Islamic thoughts in subcontinent developed predominantly on the Sufi pattern. One of the most striking features of the spread of Islam in Kashmir, is the key role played by Sufis of Central Asia in general and Rishi’s of Kashmir in particular. Being humans, we live in a multi-cultural society where our lives are bound with the lives of so many, directly or indirectly. We eat the food grown in the same soil, drink the water from the same spring and breathe the air of same atmosphere. Even while staunchly holding our own views, it should be helpful, if for no other purpose, at least to promote proper adjustment to our surroundings, if we also know to some

² Ishaq Khan, *op.cit.*, Srinagar: Gulshun Books, 2005, p.36. It is pertinent to mention here that such statement has created hot debate among the contemporary writers of Kashmir. Interestingly, you will find many books like, A. Q. Rafiqi’s, *Sufism in Kashmir* & M.A.Wani’s, *Islam in Kashmir* favoring mass conversion to Sufis and the author of *Kashmiri’s Transition to Islam*, favoring mass conversion to Rishi’s.

³ Abdul Haq Ansari, *Sufism And Sharī‘ah- A Study of Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindī’s effort to reform Sufism*, New Delhi: Markaza Maktaba Islami, 2004, p.31

⁴ Abdulla Saeed, *Islamic Thought- An Introduction*, New York: Routeledge, 2006, P.9

⁵ Muhammad Maroof Shah, *Reshiyyat- Key to Kashmiri religion and philosophy*, University of Kashmir: Institute of Kashmiri Studies, special issue, No.3, 2009, p.8

⁶ T.W.Arnold, *The preaching Of Islam*, Castable: London, 1899, pp. 154-193

extent, the mechanism of our society and what are the main springs of its action. From this angle of vision, it is highly desirable that one should try to know the multi-cultured society he/she lives in, in the proper spirit, to promote mutual understanding and better appreciation of our society.

With the establishment of Sultanate in Kashmir, Islam began to spread rapidly and also transform the life of its people. As a result of their contact with the foreign Muslims, the local converts came to adapt many of their manners, customs, dress etc. but, at the same time, they did not give up all of their old beliefs, practices and traditions. The result was the development of a unique social order in which old ideas and institutions mingled with the new ones.⁷ As in the political and social, so in the cultural field, the history of Kashmir entered a new phase with the spread of Islam. A large number of Sayyids, theologians, artists and literature came here and profoundly affected the existing pattern of art, architecture and literature. But, neither were the changes they brought about sudden, nor these were marked by a separatist tendency. Instead, they lead to a harmonious blending of the new and the old giving birth to a composite culture. The standard of culture in Kashmir during the Sultanate period (1339-1561) was very high. The statement of Srivara, who served the court of many Sultans, that everyone enjoyed poetry and attempted to compose verse is obviously an exaggeration, but there is ample evidence in the chronicles to suggest that there was a general appreciation of arts, letters and music by the people of the valley. The Kashmiri's were extremely witty and intelligent, and were always ready with some appropriate sayings. They were fond of music, and possessed great artistic sense. They loved learning and as in the olden days, they left their homes for distant places in India, Turkistan, and Persia to seek knowledge.⁸

The cultural narratives that are rooted in Sufi traditions of various religions could provide a value system that is outside the purview of technocratic logic which emphasis efficiency and competition in the name of profit making. Whereas religious institutions to some extent focus on the external representation of religious ideals, Sufis go with in for inner transformation before they undertake to change others. They believe in one Allah and follow the path of love which refuses to discriminate amongst people on grounds of religion, caste or creed. It is in their emphasis on self cultivation based on an ethic of love that they have potential for transforming society for the better. Kashmir has its own share of mystics too. The narrative of religious syncretism and communal harmony in Kashmir is closely linked to the life and teachings of two medieval Sufi poets Lalla Ded⁹ and her successor, Shaikh Nur al-

⁷ S.K.Ganjoo, *Kashmir-earliest times to the present day*, New Delhi: Indian pub: 1997, p.328.

⁸ Mohibul Hasan, *Kashmir under the sultans*, Srinagar: Ali Muhammad and sons, 1974, p.353.

⁹ A Kashmiri Mystic poet and a wandering religious singer, whose poems are attributed to God called Vaakhs, literally "Speech."

Din. Both of them were popular with Muslims and Hindus alike because they promoted universal love, religious tolerance and non-violence. Gandhi was the only person who realized a ray of hope in Kashmir during the dark clouds of communal frenzy that overwhelmed the subcontinent in 1946-47. Years later in 1893, Lawrence recorded the “delight tolerance which exist between the followers of the two religion (Hinduism and Islam).¹⁰

In the given context, it will be explored here the vision with regard to universal social teachings as embodied in the teachings of Shaikh Nur al-Din and how it laid the foundation for a social philosophy based on love and mutual understanding. The Rishi order of Sufis that he found in the beginning of the 15th century is of immense significance in the history of Kashmiri culture. It is noteworthy that this order had members from amongst Hindus and Muslims and commanded the respect and homage of all Kashmiri's, irrespective of their cast or creed. Janak Rishi of Aishmuqam (place at Anantnag), Rishi Mol of Anantnag, Bot Mol, Rishi Peer, Thaga Baba Sahib of Srinagar, belonged to the same order. The political, social and economic travail and suffering through which the land had to pass, was considerably lightened by the comforting words and kind acts of these highly advanced souls. To them goes the credit of keeping the people firm to the ideals of love and toleration. They lived among the common people, shared their troubles and pains. No better tribute can be paid to them than that recorded by Abu Fazal (1551-1602) who was a court historian of Emperor Akbar of Mughul Empire (1526-1858) as:

“The most respectable people of Kashmir are the Rishis who although they do not suffer themselves to be fettered by traditions, are doubtless true worshippers of Allah. They revile not only other sect and ask nothing of anyone; they plant the roads with fruit trees to furnish the traveler with refreshment, they abstain from flesh and have no intercourse with other sex. They are two thousand of these Rishis in Kashmir and are generally a source of benefit to people.”¹¹

In the same vein, the fourth Mughul emperor Jehangir (1569-1627) was also highly impressed with their piety and held the same view as already mentioned. Mirza Haider Daughlat (1449-1551)- a historical writer is credited to pass on first information about Sufism and Rishi way of life in Kashmir. The chronicles of Kashmir after Kalhana Pandit have failed to take notice of this tremendous religio-cultural movement of Kashmir. By the end of 16th century, the synthesis had been complete and the Rishi order became the way of life.¹² Linguistically, the word Rishi, is the derivation of the Vedic tradition, which means the seer

¹⁰ Muzaffar Khan, Kashmiri *Musalman*, Chanapora: Humanizer publication, 2012, p.313

¹¹ Ishaq Khan, *op.cit.* p.41

¹² K.L.Kalla, *Eminent personalities of Kashmir*, Srinagar: Discovery publication House, 1997, p.71.

of the supreme truth and keeping in view the status of Rishi in the spiritual field, he was highly venerated. The astonishing fact is that a learned Brahman did not dare to discuss with a Rishi.¹³ The Rishi order established by Shaikh Nur al-Din is a simple code of leading a spiritual and social life. It desires of a man to lead a contented, simple and purposeful life. Its followers abstain from orthodox dogmas and ceremonies. The Rishis preached universal brotherhood, abstain from worldly things and showed a simple way of life, which can lead to the realization of Allah. They did not isolate themselves from the masses but played a role of social reformers. They raised their voices even against oppression and exhorted the rulers to rule with justice for which they even imprisoned. The Rishi order in Kashmir is perhaps a great contribution to the world thought.¹⁴

The Rishi is a Sanskrit equivalent of mystic or inspired person, one to whom vision of Allah has been vouchsafed. It signifies mystical consciousness which precedes or transcends diverse theological formulations or expressions. Reshi is a generic term for mystic or enlightened person or anyone who seeks to realize the esoteric aspect (Bāṭin) of his religious tradition. The fruit of path that he follows is self-realization. "Know thyself is the first commandment of all Sufi traditions, Eastern or Western. So to know fully yourself is to know your true cause and to devote yourself to knowing your ultimate source and abiding therein. To know one's self is then to devote oneself to Him in worship through one's self in pure being. That is why, Spiritual experience and excellence (Iḥsān) is "to worship God as if you see Him not, however He sees you. For such transformation, Shaikh identified true Muslim with the Reshi, explicates attribute of him. A Reshi is the one who longs to live by the sweat of one's mind, who shows fortitude in provocation, who shares meals with the hungry, who is obsessed with the idea of removing hunger, who scorns anger, greed, illusion, arrogance and self conceit. He sacrifices his desires for the good of others. That is the meaning of his vegetarianism and Faqr- a stage of non-possessiveness. Here, the mendicant hardly cares for any material benefits. The material gains or losses of the material world don't make any difference to him. Neither is he pleased nor is he pained by the worldly pleasures and sorrows. He has no self ego and is epitome of altruism. To be a Rishi is a realization that mere credal formulae cannot save. It is to be the object of one's knowledge or belief. It is not merely consent to a proposition but whole hearted effort to submit to the truth that makes one a Reshi.¹⁵ True, Reshi merely means a saint or an ascetic in Sanskrit literature, but in the context of the history of Kashmir between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, it signifies a movement of indigenous mystics within the fold of Islam, erroneously, called an off-shoot of the Bhakti movement- a religious movement in medieval Hinduism which originated in

¹³ M. Amin Pandit, *Alamdar-i Kashmir: Standard bearer Patron Saint of Kashmir*, Srinagar: Gulshun Publication, 2003, pp. 26-27

¹⁴ Fida M. K. Hasnain, *Historic Kashmir*, Srinagar: Gulshan Publication, 2002, p.60

¹⁵ Abu Naim, tr. *Nur Namah*, Srinagar: Shiekh Muhammad Usman and sons, 2012, pp. 309-310.

South India during the Seventh to Eighth century CE. Kashmiri Muslims, who form majority of the population of the valley, for the most part in the rural areas, owe their entry into Islam to Nur al-Din and a host of his disciples and their followers called Rishis, so much so that they take pride in calling their vast mountainous region the Rishwaer-the valley of Rishis.¹⁶

Sheikh Nur al-Din was born in a village called Kaimuh, two miles to the west of Bijbehara which is 28 miles South-East of Srinagar, in 779/1377 A.C. Hindus call the saint Nund Rishi or sahananda. His sayings are preserved in the Nūr-Nama. It was written by Baba Nasib al-Din Ghazi in Persian about two centuries after the death of Shaikh Nur al-Din.¹⁷ In his very childhood, Shaikh Nur al-Din gave proof of his saintly nature. He held himself aloof from the daily affairs of the family and through apprenticed to several trades, showed no inclination for any of them. Finally, he gave up the world, lived in a cave for 12 years practicing penances which reduced him almost to Skelton. His fame as a saint and the glory of his spiritual attainments travelled far and wide, attracting to him a great number of followers. Though unable to read and write, he gave utterance to hundreds of beautiful sayings which furnish the Kashmiri literature with gems having both a terrestrial as well as celestial meaning. Concise and objective in their approach, they have been stamped in people's memories.

Sheikh preached his message by going from place to place and having discussions with the people. The most effective means which made his message pervasive throughout the valley was the language and genre, he used to bring home to the people his message. He used common man's language "Koshur" and piercing mode of expression "poetry".¹⁸ Someone has rightly said that the poetry is a result of increased knowledge and understanding. It is for this reason that Wordsworth (1770-1850) considers poetry superior to history, philosophy and science. To him poet is a man of greater sensibility, observation, reflection and imagination and of greater powers of communication. Shaikh Nur al-Din is no exception to this fact.¹⁹ Poetry flew from his mouth like a fountain of water gushing from an unknown source and bringing it with the voice of the soul, the heart and the head. It became the medium of communication between the perfect and the imperfect, immortal and the mortal and between the secrets of the soul and the humdrum life of a common man.²⁰ In his multi-dimensional life, Nur al-Din marched ahead from an illiterate ignorant village boy to the stage of a seer and a scholar, having had tutoring direct from the sources. A poet of nonpareil sort, who enriched the Kashmiri language with scores of new idioms and proverbs that shine forth

¹⁶ M.Ishaq khan, *op.cit.* p.36.

¹⁷ G. M.D.sufi, *Kashir*, Srinagar: Ali Muhammad & Sons, 2009, p.100

¹⁸ M. A.Wani, *Islam in Kashmir*, Srinagar: Oriental Publishing House, 2004, p.67

¹⁹ Farooq Fayaz, Shaikh Nuruddin Rishi: A Study in Tales and Traditions' in " 'Alamdar" Markaz-i Nur-Shaikh u'l Alam Chair, University Of Kashmir, vol.2, 2008, p.73

²⁰ M. Amin Pandit, 'Alamdar-i Kashmir: Standard bearer Patron Saint of Kashmir, Srinagar: Gulshun Publication, 2003, p.3

with the brilliance of a true jewel, and have become the treasure house of our cultural heritage, one who rose to the position of a narrator of the Qur'an, in Kashmiri.²¹ Nunda Reshi used symbols and metaphors which evoked ideas mingled with spiritual ambitions. Though these intellectual symbols his poetry achieved greatness of indefinable wisdom.²² His message was not confined to one race or to one class, but addressed to mankind as a whole.²³

He preached a simple ethical monotheism bitterly critiquing social inequalities, meaningless superstitions, rituals and challenged the exploiters of religion especially pseudo 'Ulama, Mullahs, and Brahmans as well. He led a crusade against those who discriminate people on the basis of birth, caste and race or gender. It was because of his universal teachings that leading Brahmans of his times accepted Islam by becoming his disciples such as, Baba Bam al-Din, Baba Zain al-Din, Baba Nasr al-Din and Baba Latif al-Din. Like the men who became his disciples many women experienced a radical change and transformation of their lives in joining Rishi order, such as, Sangha Bibi, Sham Bibi, Sala Bibi, Ganga Bibi etc. He created a band of disciples and missionaries who spread in all directions, preaching and practicing the message of love and brotherhood regardless of one's caste, creed, color or social status. They were peace loving. The Shaikh and his disciples influenced Kashmiri masses to the extent that they become tolerant of others creed and views and developed aversion for cruelty and intolerance.²⁴

The position of the shrine variously referred to as Khanqah or Ziyarat, in the religious, social and economic life of the Kashmir valley is legendary. In fact, it forms the basis for assertion of Kashmiriyat- an interpretation of Kashmiri cultural identity that emphasizes the harmonious blending of religious cultures and absence of conflict in the history of region- on the grounds that Kashmiri Islam's association with shrines has rendered it syncretistic.²⁵

The principle of universal brotherhood and the doctrine of the equality of mankind which Shaikh Nur al-Din proclaimed represent very great contribution to the social uplift of humanity. He has not only preached the same doctrine, but his theory into actual practice. Its value will be fully recognized, perhaps sometimes hence, when international consciousness is being awakened, racial prejudice would disappear and stronger concept of brotherhood of humanity comes into existence. He believed in complete harmony among different sections of the society and preached peace and understanding in them. He strongly pleads for tolerance, fellow feeling, love and universal brotherhood among all sections of the

²¹ M. Amin Pandit, 'Alamdar-i Kashmir: Standard bearer Patron Saint of Kashmir, Srinagar: Gulshun Publication, 2003, p.6

²² Ibid., p.66

²³ A. Q. Rafiqi, Sifism in Kashmir, Sydney: Goodword Media, 2003, p.188

²⁴ M. Amin Pandit, op.cit., p.13

²⁵ Aparna Roa, ed., *The Valley Of Kashmir- the making and unmaking of a Composite Culture*, New Delhi: Manohar Publicationn, 2008, p. 235

society.²⁶ While interpreting and elaborating the Quranic verse 49:13, related to oneness of mankind (Waḥdat-i Ab), despite diversities in color, race and language etcetra,²⁷ Shaikh says that even though water appears in three different forms, frozen water, icicles or snow, but once the sun shines over it, all these forms are transformed into the same water. Similarly, when the awareness arises, the multiplicity dissolves into oneness.²⁸

What is needed is a life of piety and purity, no matter what faith one follows. The prolonged course of penance and meditation upon which he embarked, have convinced him, apart from other things, of the truth of this fundamental basis, of a good life and this also provided a solution to the riddle of his times. He seems to have realized that the Kashmiri's precious heritage dear to him, which was sought to be destroyed by the outsiders, could be saved only by a happy marriage of the best in the old and the new, in the union of Hindus and Muslims into a common brotherhood, in their co-existence and cooperation and not in confrontation. The Shaikh's spiritual eminence and his humanistic philosophy made him the idol or favorite of the people of Kashmir. They flocked round him and some of them, molded their lives on his pattern. These latter came that came to be known as Rishis after him were of great help and assistance to him in the stupendous task he had undertaken.²⁹ Further, he says that it is unfortunate that people are fighting in the name of Allah, when He is one with different names. The misfortune is that the people are fighting each other on account of differences of the terms that they employ. If the veils of these externals and terms can be lifted so that truth and reality comes before all unveiled, then at once, all those who fight will see that what all seek is one and the same.³⁰ Nunda Reshi was one of the Sufis who lit the lamps of ethical knowledge for the benefit of the humanity. His aim was to illuminate the world with his philosophy, based upon his conviction i.e., faith in Allah and brotherhood of mankind. He preached the philosophy of communal and religious harmony. According to his philosophy, both "Ram and Rahim" are different names of the supreme power who guide the destiny of the whole creation. Different religions are merely different paths leading to the same goal. He had always stressed on the essence of all religions that is to do good and to think of good thought.³¹

²⁶ A. Q.Rafiqi, Sufism in Kashmir, op.cit., p.186

²⁷ *We belong to the same parents; then, why is this difference, Let Hindues and Muslims worship God alone; We came to this world like partners, we should share our joys and sorrows together*, see Farooq Fayaz, Shaikh Noor ud-Din's valley wide tour: A study in concept and causation, cited in "Alamdar" ed. Noor Ahmad Baba, Markaz-i Nur- Shaikh al-Alam Chair, University of Kashmir, Hazratbal, Srinagar, 2010, P.69. For text see , Qari Saif al-Din, "*Kalam-i Sheikh al-'Alam*," Srinagar: Ashraf Book Depot, 2006, p.204

²⁸ B.N.Parimoo, tr. *Nund Rishi: Unity in Diversity*, Srinagar: J & K Academy of Art, Culture and languages, 2007, p.xxix

²⁹ G.M.Shad, *Kalam-i Shaikh al-Alam*, Srinagar: Kashmir Book Depot, 2013, p.390

³⁰ Qari Saif al-Din, *Kalam-i Sheikh al-'Alam*," op.cit., p.205

³¹ Abu Naim, *Nur Namah*, Srinagar: Shaikh Muhammad Usman & Sons, p.223

Nur al-Din's Shrukh (poetic verses) were permeated with social consciousness. He went into darkness of caves to get his soul enlightened and in turn to illuminate his dark surroundings into oblivion, in order to get eternal bliss, immortality and nearness to Allah himself. He threw over the accepted norms of relationship and created a world of his own where the bonds of love and brotherhood extend beyond the boundaries of religion, birth and geography. He mastered rebellious senses, and entered into the arena of supra-sensory perception became a man of vision and learnt and saw what the ordinary mind and eyes cannot comprehend and perceive. In fact, after spending several years in a cave to achieve self-realization, he spent the rest of his life in his community spreading the teachings of ethics and universal brotherhood to the farthest corners of Kashmir. Great ends need great sacrifices. At an advanced age after accomplishing and attaining the desired objectives, Shaikh felt sorrow for the poor souls whom he had felt in anguish and misery. To his devoted disciple Nasr Baba, he made the confession by saying that it had been his folly that he had left his hearth and home and had taken to caves and jungles, because the best course would have been to follow the footprints of the Prophet Muhammad (SAAS), who has desired a believer to live with his family but with heart and head devoted to righteousness and love of Allah.³² He was very much aware of the contradictions and injustices of the world. According to his vision, rendering of service to poor and down-trodden is the greater service in the way of Allah and that service to the humanity is the passport to heaven. Thus, he says that some people have granaries packed with rice while others do not have anything to feed their children. So our duty and responsibility is to distribute. He, thus promotes compassion and advice people to help others in the community and share with them what they have.³³

The essential condition, of course, is that there should be perfect fairness, justice and respect for the highest principles. Defamation may consist in speaking ill of others or in acting in such a way as to suggest a charge against some person whom we are not in a position to judge.³⁴ An offensive nick name may consist to defamation, but in any case there is no point in using offensive nick names. They ill accord with the serious purpose which we should have in life. For example, even if a man is black, it is wrong to address him as "O black man". In the same way, most kind of suspicion are baseless and to be avoided, and some are crimes in themselves, for they do cruel injustice to innocent men and women. According to Sheikh, backbiting also is a brood of the same genius. It may be either futile, but all the same mischievous, it may be poisoned with malice, in which case it is a sin added to sin.³⁵ Nur al-Din's philosophical vision is not an abstract representation of reality but a practical philosophy. He lived with what he preached to his community. Perhaps, it is for this reason that he vigorously critiques religious scholars who accumulate worldly knowledge and then

³² M. A. Pandit, 'Alamdar-i Kashmir: Standard bearer Patron Saint of Kashmir, Srinagar: Gulshun Publication, op.cit. 2003, p.3

³³ G.M.Shad, op.cit., p.407

³⁴ Qari Saif al-Din, op.cit., P.194

³⁵ Ibid., p.353

dispense advice, but never practice what they preach. Such people are filled with pride and arrogance who are always engaged in competition with one another. And, at the same time, they are also a source of confusion and division amongst the different sections of people, when the reality is that one among thousand could hardly escape the wrath of 'Almighty. Sheikh Nur al-Din as true representative of Islam grinded in regional ethos wanted that the true message of Islam be communicated to people on the basis of its inherent dynamic socio-religious merit as against the basis of political power and authority. This is evident by the fact that Sheikh before bringing some of the strong Hindu Brahmans within the fold of Islam entered into a powerful debate with them and it is only after they were convinced about the Islam's multilayered merit and its genuineness that they entered into the fold of Islam. This seldom gave chance to religious discord. Instead, Sheikh stressed the need for creating a congenial friendly atmosphere, which was devoid of any division and distrust. This is the reason why Sheikh in his teachings, ask for religious amity and universal brotherhood because it stood in tune with the distinct socio-cultured fabric of Kashmiri society. During his tour days, Nur al-Din stressed so penetratingly upon maintaining complete harmony and the Sufi communicated the same message through its verses. Viewed against this background, Sheikh tour across the valley was not to demonstrate his mystic excellence, but it had a deep socio-ethical connotation. Alongside, the job of disseminating true message of Islam based on human dignity, religious universalism, and the unity of Allah, he by his noble deeds sought to paint true color of its social dynamics.³⁶ One major hurdle in the way of peaceful co-existence is the false notion of racial superiority. Race implies group with similarities in Semitic characteristics which are perpetuated according to the laws of biological inheritance, allowing for a margin of individual variation. The classification of human groups are defined by a single or many characteristics, the most prominent being color of the skin and eye, the shape of the skull and nose and the height of the body. Some scholars try to divide mankind on the basis of pure blood or one blood is a meaningless criterion because the elements of heredity have no link whatsoever with blood. It had already caused a great deal of bloodshed among different human races.³⁷ Knowing the consequences of racism, Shaikh Nur al-Din demolished the age old structure of racial superiority by asserting the common origin of all human beings. He recognizes piety and righteousness as the sole basis of nobility and superiority. This concept not only develops in man, an optimistic attitude towards life by inspiring him to attain superiority through noble deeds, but also makes possible the realization of the universal brotherhood of mankind.³⁸

The people of Kashmiri are always cherishing the memory of Sheikh. In Kashmir, only two great personalities were paid homage by kings, who got struck coins with their names

³⁶ M.A.Pandit, 'Alamdar-i Kashmir: Standard bearer Patron Saint of Kashmir, Srinagar: Gulshan Publication, op.cit. 2003, p.30

³⁷ Mohammed Tahir, *Encyclopedic Survey of Islamic Culture*, vol.17, New Delhi: Anmol Publishers, 1998, p.266

³⁸ Abu Naim, *Nur Namah*, op.cit., p.125

inscribed on that. Kanishka got struck coins in honor of Buddha in the first century, after the 4th Buddhist conference held in Kashmir. It was after eighteen hundred years that coins were struck in the name of a Rishi. The simplicity and purity of Sheikh's life have deeply impressed the Kashmiri's who entertain the highest veneration for the saint. In fact, the Afghan Governor 'Ata Muhammad Khan, gave as it were, expression to public sentiment when coins were struck by him in the name of Shaikh in 1223-25 A.H/1808-10. No other Shaikh/Sufi perhaps in human history with special reference to Kashmir has ever had coins struck in his honor. Anecdotes of the life of this 'chief of the Rishis' are on the lips of the people throughout the valley.³⁹ Baba Nasib, a 17th century hagiographer, sums up the impact of the Rishi movement in a long poem, from which, a few lines are worth quoting here :

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.⁴⁰

On a brief note, Nur al-Din's teachings promote an ethic of responsibility for ones relationship to the community and an aesthetic of purity with respect to ones relationship to Allah. For these and other reasons, he has been a powerful and positive force in the history of Kashmiri culture in creating an environment of communal harmony which existed for centuries. He rejected religious dogma and narrow mindedness and aspired for a society based on love, mutual respect, compassion and non-violence. And, it is for this reason that his poetic output has been timeless. His poetry and those who have been influenced by him are relevant for contemporary age because it has potential to uplift the mankind in general and the people of Kashmir in particular.

Today, Islam as the dominant religion of its people is a very important component of the Kashmiri identity. Against the common prevalent notions, Islam has always stood for religious tolerance and interfaith understanding. It is historically vindicated that Kashmir has optimized the culture of interfaith peace and understanding in which the Rishi tradition of Kashmir has played a very important role. The one person who has approximated and symbolized Kashmiri's identity with all richness of its cultural genius and spiritual ethos is Shaikh Nur al-Din Wali, the most revered Sufi of Kashmir. Historically speaking, he had

³⁹ G.M.D. Sufi, *Kashir*, op.cit., p.101

⁴⁰ Baba Nasib's *Nur-Namah*, as cited in, M.Ishaq Khan, Kashmiri's transition to Islam- The role of Rishis, op.cit., p.42

tremendous significance in shaping the socio-psychological character and identity of Kashmiri society and in promoting its inter-communal harmony and tolerant character. He laid the foundation of Rishi mystic tradition that has produced hundreds of spiritual figures who helped in shaping of Kashmiri character of tolerance and interfaith harmony. Therefore, it is right to say that Shaikh Nur al-Din is an epitome of Kashmiri culture and spiritual ethos. He as a person and as an institution personifies Kashmir's national personality as well. There is tremendous scope for building in this tradition and in promoting its interfaith harmony and tolerant character. This is particularly relevant because today we live in a world that is ridden by intolerance and violence. As Kashmiris, we have always exhibited certain degree of civility in our conduct and behaviour. There is tremendous scope for promoting this tradition of inter-cultural and interfaith harmony. We need to see how Shaikh Nur al Din, who was the founder of this great Rishi tradition, contributed to the rich tradition of Kashmir in shaping our character and society. There is no particularly because Kashmir is a meeting point of four great religious traditions that meet and extend beyond stretches of land with continental proportions. In the east the Buddhist traditions spreads from Ladakh and Tibet China into South East Asia and towards East into extremes of the East Asia up to Japan inside the Pacific Ocean. The birth place of the Sikh faith and the place of its largest concentration Punjab is linked to Jammu and Kashmir in its South. Hinduism stretches from Jammu, across India through the Indian Ocean into the northern Sri Lanka and Mauritius. This is a privilege that hardly any other place in the world can claim.

The desire for peace and universal brotherhood is a thread that runs throughout the Shrukh and teachings of Shaikh Nur al-Din. His desire for universal brotherhood cuts across all classes and groups. Today, the tragedy of Kashmir is that while much of its culture of co-existence is gone, the breathtaking beauty of the paradise on earth is belied by the harsh realities, the terror and brutality, the continuing violence, which ordinary people have to live through. It is our hope that the teachings of Shaikh Nur al-Din will go some way towards drawing attention to that reality-for it is only when it is taken into account that any move can be made towards peace and reconciliation. All Kashmiri's whether Muslim's or Hindus, know the wisdom of Shaikh Nur al-Din, the 14th century Sufi continues to be part and parcel of daily life even in the midst of conflict by preachers, leaders and politicians as well as for the promotion of peace and amity in the valley of Kashmir. He has come down to us, over the centuries as an apostle of humanity (Insaniyat) and being a civilized son of the soil (Kashmiriyat). If Nur al-Din's wisdom can live on in theory and practice in such a situation when there is no regard for human lives besetting from moral degeneration and abandoning of ethical principles, there is a hope that global peace will return as natural phenomenon with love and regard, mutual understanding, and cooperation, brotherhood and neighborhood- a hope that every human being cherishes and believes in, for not caring at all for their own life, he taught all the values of human care and concern to broaden the borders of humanity. It is for the given reasons of ethical and spiritual influence and importance, his

shrine holds a very high reputation and the most visited spiritual place by devotees of different religions and belief systems to this day as an ambassador of universal brotherhood.