

EXPLORING THE SPIRITUAL LEGACY OF SHAIKH AL-‘ĀLAM: A COMPREHENSIVE *SUFI* ANALYSIS

MOHMAD ILHAM SHIEKH¹
SAMEEULLAH BHAT²

ABSTRACT

This research delves into an in-depth exploration of the spiritual legacy of Shaikh al-‘Ālam from a Sufi standpoint. The study meticulously examines the life, teachings, and impact of Shaikh al-‘Ālam, placing his contributions within the broader spectrum of Sufi traditions. Through an analysis of his spiritual doctrines and an investigation into the influences that shaped his Sufi worldview, the paper endeavors to uncover the intricate connections between Shaikh al-‘Ālam’s teachings and the diverse domain of Sufism. Additionally, it scrutinizes the historical and cultural elements that influenced his spiritual perspective, offering a nuanced comprehension of his significance in the Sufi tradition. The research aspires to enhance our understanding of Shaikh al-‘Ālam’s spiritual odyssey and illuminate the enduring relevance of his teachings in contemporary Sufi thought.

Key Words: Islam, Kashmir, Rishi, Shaikh al-‘Ālam, Spirituality, Sufi.

1. INTRODUCTION

Shaikh Noor ud-Din (1379-1442 CE, commonly known as Shaikh al-‘Ālam), a luminary in the realm of spiritual guides, emerges as a figure of profound significance within the rich historical and cultural context of Kashmir. Distinct from his contemporaries, particularly Hindu ascetics of the time, Shaikh Noor ud-Din’s life and teachings encapsulate a dynamic and inclusive approach to spirituality. In navigating the delicate balance between the worldly and the divine, he actively engaged with society, imprinting his legacy with the essence of Sufi principles.

This exploration look into the multifaceted persona of Shaikh Noor ud-Din, shedding light on his unique role as a bridge between the spiritual and social realms. By comparing his methods with those of Hindu ascetics and finding common ground with

¹ Faculty Member, Shaikh-ul Aalam Centre for Multidisciplinary Studies, University of Kashmir, Hazratbal Srinagar, Email: mrilham@gmail.com

² Faculty Member, Shah-i-Hamadan Institute of Islamic Studies, University of Kashmir, Hazratbal Srinagar, Email: bhatsamiullah121@gmail.com

the profound visions of the renowned scholar Shah Waliyyullah of Dehlvi, we uncover the essence of Noor ud-Din's teachings. He propounded the message of Islam in a Kashmiri language in the form of poetry commonly known as '*Sbruks*'. His warnings against hypocrisy, stress on the fleeting nature of worldly life, and unwavering tireless efforts to reform society reflect a holistic understanding of spirituality that transcends conventional boundaries. As we embark on this journey through the life and teachings of Shaikh Noor ud-Din, we unveil a narrative that goes beyond religious and cultural confines, offering insights into a universal path of intense spiritual devotion and active societal engagement. The basics of his experiences and wisdom serves as a timeless guide, inviting us to explore the harmonious coexistence of the temporal and the eternal in the pursuit of a meaningful and balanced existence.

2. NAVIGATING IDENTITIES: RISHI OR SUFI?

Numerous accounts and narratives have portrayed Shaikh Noor ud-Din as a revered figure, both socially and spiritually, among the people of Kashmir. However, current dialogues have sparked a substantial debate over his identity—was he predominantly a poet, a saint, a Rishi, or a Sufi? The intricate exploration of his life reveals an amalgamation of influences, sparking controversy regarding his classification.

Some argue that describing him as a Rishi, in alignment with Hindu ascetics of Kashmir during his era, presents logical contradictions. This perspective seems incongruent with the comprehensive career and mission that Shaikh Noor ud-Din ardently pursued throughout his life. Unlike the Hindu ascetics of his time, who formed mystic orders and lived communally with strict rules of abstinence, Shaikh Noor ud-Din chose a path of strict asceticism, remaining vegetarian, refraining from onion and honey, and ultimately leading a celibate life. Baba Dawood Khaki mentions him in this way:

*Shaykh Noorud-Din Rishi Peer-e-jama' risban
Zabid-e-kebush bood ba Haqq dasht bisyar ishtighal
Bood ba tajreed wa tafreed abl-e-sawm-e-dabr neez
Tarik-e-lahm-o-basal sheer-o-asal bisyaar saalⁱ*

While these choices may draw parallels with Hindu ascetics, it is crucial to recognize his closer affinity with Sufi practices. Shaikh Noor ud-Din's lifestyle aligns with a Sufi state known as *Zubd*, wherein the practitioner, referred to as a *Zabid*, not only avoids unlawful acts but also refrains from otherwise lawful pursuits hindering spiritual progress. By abstaining from sumptuous dishes, leading a simple life focused on wild vegetables, donning humble attire, and avoiding earthly attachments, Shaikh Noor ud-Din demonstrated a commitment to *Zubd*.ⁱⁱ This alignment is evident in the characterization of him as a *Zabid* by Mir Muhammad Hamdani, a renowned Sufi and scholar.

In essence, Shaikh Noor ud-Din's life and choices elicit a complex image of influences, challenging simplistic classifications. The debate surrounding his identity underscores the rich interplay of cultural, religious, and spiritual elements that defined his legacy. During the time when Islam was recently introduced to Kashmir, its influence had not yet permeated the hearts and minds of the local populace entirely. The general masses lacked a profound understanding of Muslim ascetics, the *Zubbad*, but were well acquainted with the ways of the Rishis. Consequently, Noor ud-Din was recognized as a Rishi by the common people, while the *Mashaikh* (Muslim spiritual mentors) acknowledged him as al-'Ālam. The Muslim *Da'is* referred to him as *Waiz*, and the *Mufassir* designated him as an exegete of the Holy Qur'an. Simultaneously, the Rishis and the common folk referred to him as a Rishi, a title he accepted, even though within an Islamic paradigm.ⁱⁱⁱ

In contemporary discussions, some may categorize him as a Rishi, aligning him with the prevailing cultural stream during the Vedic and Upanishadic eras in India. However, this analysis aims to understand Shaikh Noor ud-Din from a Sufi perspective, emphasizing key aspects of his life and behavior, portraying him as an exemplary Sufi.

Widely regarded among the greatest *walis* (friends of Allah) in Kashmir, Shaikh Noor ud-Din's profound influence is traced back to the Muslim Sufis from Central Asia and Iran who had journeyed to Kashmir. The Shaikh, in his poetic verses, traces his spiritual lineage within the family tree of the Rishis, attributing his Rishism to none other than the messenger of Allah himself, Prophet Muhammad ^(saw). In one *sbruk*, he states:

The first Rishi was Ahmad Rishi (i.e., Prophet Muhammad ^(saw)); The second in order was Hazrat Uways; The third Rishi was Zalka Rishi; The fourth in order was Hazrat Palas; The fifth Rishi was Rum Rishi; The sixth in order was Hazrat Miran; People miscalled as the seventh Rishi; Do I really deserve to be called a Rishi? What is my name?

Shaikh Noor ud-Din's apparent denial of being a Rishi in these verses reflects his humility, a characteristic prominent among Sufis. Instead of claiming a connection with ancient Hindu ascetics, he, in true Sufi fashion, traces the origin of his spiritual order back to the Prophet of Islam.

Further elucidating this point, it is emphasized that Shaikh Noor ud-Din, although separated from a spiritual master by several centuries, exhibits a synchronicity with those Sufis who received spiritual guidance directly from Prophet Muhammad ^(saw), akin to the *Uwaysis*. The term *Uwaysi* refers to Sufis who, despite being separated chronologically, consider themselves direct disciples of the Prophet Muhammad ^(saw) without a visible guide.^{iv} This spiritual connection sheds light on the deep implications of Shaikh Noor ud-Din's association

To designate Shaikh Noor ud-Din more as a Sufi than a Rishi is further substantiated by the assertion that he was a member of the *Uwaysi* order of *tasawwuf*, as mentioned by Baba Dawud Khaki:

Sabib-e-kashf-o-karamat bood-o-nutq-e-kboob baash Ham Uwaysi bood guft ein dawoodi sabib maqaal^x

Understanding Shaikh Noor ud-Din's life as a Sufi requires a brief exploration of Sufism and the behavioral attributes exhibited by a Sufi. In Islam, theory and practice, doctrine (*‘aqidah*), and method (*‘amal*) are inherently interconnected. Doctrine involves intellectual discernment between the 'real' and the 'unreal,' while method pertains to the will and centers around *dhikrullah* (remembrance of Allah). Islam engages both the mind and the will, manifested in the *Shabadah*, emphasizing the *Tawhidic* perception that “Only Absolute Reality is Absolutely Real.”

Shaikh Noor ud-Din's inclination towards Sufism is underscored by the acknowledgment that he was a member of the *Uwaysi* order of *tasawwuf*, as noted by Baba Dawud Khaki. Understanding Sufism and its essence is crucial to evaluating various dimensions of Shaikh Noor ud-Din's life as a Sufi.

3. ESSENCE OF SUFISM: BEHAVIOR AND CONDUCT

On the practical side, Islam encompasses morality and worship. Morality involves the performance of *awamir* (things that ought to be done) such as faith, purity of intention, truthfulness, and humility, as well as avoiding *nawahi* (things that ought not to be done) like disbelief, hypocrisy, and pomp. Knowledge of *awamir* and *nawahi* is termed *‘ilm al-qalb* (knowledge of the heart).

Sufism, as the esoteric realm of Islam, complements the Shari'ah, serving as its esoteric dimension. The character of the Prophet Muhammad ^(saw) is hailed as “exalted,” highlighting his elevated and sublime behavior. The holy Qur'an says about the Messenger of Islam:

“Verily you have an exalted character”.^{vi}

Sufism, according to the Sufis, manifests the true spirit of Islam, emphasizing compassionate behavior, contempt for worldly passions, and adherence to the Shari'ah, representing the hallmark of a true Sufi. Prominent Sufi, Abu al-Hasan Nuri asserts,

Tasawwuf is neither tradition nor knowledge, but it is good conduct.^{vii}

This underscores that a true Sufi aligns their outward actions with their intentions, both in accordance with the Shari'ah. Mawlana Jalalluddin Rumi explains this fact in these terms:

Tu baraae wasl kardan aamadii nai baraae fasl kardan aamadii^{viii}

“You have come to unite, not to disunite.

He again says:

If you win a heart it is as if you have performed great Hajj for winning a heart is better reward than thousand Ka'bas.^{ix}

Thus a Sufi always remains humble and down to earth. The Holy Qur'an Says:

And the slaves of the most gracious are those who walk on the earth in humility and sedateness^x

Hazrat Murta'ash Says:

“Tasawwuf means exalted character.”^{xi}

Regarding the practical side of Islam, worship takes two forms: performing religious rituals and engaging in social service. The Hadith of the Prophet Muhammad^(saw) emphasizes the multifaceted nature of faith, with the highest branch being the testimony of God's oneness and the lowest involving picking up a harmful thing from the road. An esoteric understanding of this Hadith suggests that a *Salik* (a seeker of the path of *tasawwuf*) must begin their spiritual journey by serving God's creation before progressing to higher stages of gnosis (*ma'arifah*). Mawlana Jalalluddin Rumi eloquently captures this notion, stating, “You have come to unite, not to disunite.”

4. SUFI PRACTICES AND SHAIKH NOOR UD-DIN'S ALIGNMENT

Sufism, as the esoteric realm of Islam, complements the Shari'ah, forming the inner dimension of Islam. The behavior of a Sufi is characterized by humility and compassion, aligning with the Qura'nic directive for the slaves of the Most Gracious to walk on the earth in humility and sedateness (Al-Furqan 25:63). Hazrat Murta'ash defines Sufism as exalted character, classifying exalted conduct into practicing Shari'ah commandments with a pure intention, treating God's creation with respect and equity. The Hadith emphasizes the importance of respecting elders and showing mercy to youngsters, reinforcing the Sufi values.

A cardinal tenet of Sufism is *Rada bi al-Qada*, signifying that a Sufi does not believe in coincidences but firmly trusts in divine decree (*taqdir*). This belief, aligned with *qada wa al-qadr* in Islamic *Shari'ah*, does not imply inaction but underscores personal responsibility for one's actions and outcomes. Thus does the Qur'an say:

Whatever misfortune happens to you is because of things your hands have wrought.^{xii}

Harith Muhasibi says:

Rida means that whatever commandment God sends (i.e. whatever good or bad happens to a Sufi), his heart accepts it and rests with peace in every case.^{xiii}

The Sufi experience is encapsulated in the concept of *Ihsan*, involving the practice of virtues. The Hadith encourages "Worship of God as if you see Him, for if you do not see Him nevertheless, He sees you."^{xiv} fostering a state of *Mushabadab* (perceiving the truth with the eye of the heart) or *Muraqabah* (permanent awareness). Imam Bukhari quotes that angels once came to the Messenger while he was asleep. They remarked:

"(His) eyes are sleeping but (His) heart is waking."^{xv}

Thus meditation in Sufism is a background for *Dhikr*, the principal means of spiritual realization,

When self will vanish in the world, contemplation is attained and when contemplation is firmly established, there is no difference between this world and the next.^{xvi}

The Prophet's state, where his eyes were asleep but his heart awake, exemplifies the significance of meditation in Sufism as a background for *Dhikr*, the principal means of spiritual realization. *Faqr* (spiritual poverty) in Sufism is synonymous with emptying the soul of the ego's false reality, emphasizing humility and love for one's neighbor. The journey from *Muraqabah* to *Mushabadab* culminates in *Ma'rifa*, the stage of recognizing reality. The Sufi, in the highest degree, is called *Arif bi-Allah* (knower by Allah), bridging the gap between rational and revealed knowledge. True faith, rooted in Sufism, adds depth to theoretical knowledge, engaging believers in meaningful action. A faithful Muslim, by nature, exhibits Sufi behavior in thought and action, embracing the spiritual principles that guide and enrich their lives. In one of his *shruk*, he says:

Faqr chuy dozakhas wurun thoru
Faqr chuy ambiyaban hinduy kbouy
Faqr chuy ulag ti pulug cxxooru
Faqr chuy mushq ti beyi kbushboy
Faqras paeth yus ruduy doruy
Tas chuy yeti kebo tati aabiroy^{xvii}

Poverty is a shield against Hell,
 Poverty is the virtue of Prophets,
 Poverty is the wealth of this and the next world,
 Poverty is sweet and fragrant,
 One who is steadfast in the path of Poverty,
 So will be honored here and the Hereafter.

The distinctiveness of Shaikh Noor ud-Din's behavior, particularly in his approach to societal responsibilities, becomes apparent when contrasted with Hindu ascetics. Unlike the latter, who often placed themselves outside the historical process during their quest for union with God, Shaikh Noor ud-Din engaged with society, recognizing the importance of social cooperation and mutual understanding between individuals. While Hindu mystics tended to remain highly individualistic even after periods of withdrawal and contemplation, Noor ud-Din exhibited a dynamic inner-worldly asceticism, seeking mastery not only over his individual self but also over the world around him. He deliberates and expounds the mortal preaching as a base for the enrichment of harmonious life. His impact on all sections of Kashmiri society was primarily due to the integrity of his personal life. His social and religious passion has played an inevitable role in the framing and changing of the human behaviour.

A critical aspect of Shaikh Noor ud-Din's teachings involved admonishing scholars, mullahs, and religious preachers, urging them to abandon hypocrisy. His verses reveal a deep engagement with the struggles of the human soul, emphasizing the temporary nature of worldly life and the significance of the hereafter. Simultaneously, he cautioned against considering oneself superior to others in this world. He says,

Mala chey masbeedan ache dru
Yeti bata chey potlan path
Saas manz akha toro
Nata saarny shaitaan go baeth^{xviii}

Müllāhs have become merchants of mosques,
 The Pandit steals the idols from the temple.
 One among thousands of them may deserve salvation,
 Others are all the disciples of Satan

*Mala deenthim moshi kbewaan
 Hakas dapaan yi chu kach
 Baekir kbewaan Dakar travaan
 Masbeedan dapaan yeti chu watch^{xix}*

Mullah is found of beef and mutton,
 Dubs vegetable as rejected grass,
 Reluctantly swallows sweet cakes,
 Beware; of mosques – Jins dwell therein.

This two-dimensional attitude in Noor ud-Din's teachings is akin to the *mukashafah* (unveiling of secrets) experienced by Shah Waliyyullah. The imagery of the triangle and rectangle, as described by Shah Waliyyullah, illustrates the Prophet's profound connection with both humanity and the divine. Shaikh Noor ud-Din, as a follower of the Prophet's example, exhibited a similar attachment to both realms, emphasizing intense love for humanity and an equally profound love for God.

In acquiring a stage of perfection, Shaikh Noor ud-Din exemplified the rare quality of having intense love for both humanity and God. His life was characterized by love, compassion for people, and a disdain for worldly pursuits. Traveling from place to place, he tirelessly preached against hypocrisy, lust, jealousy, showmanship, greed, and unlawful practices.

Despite advocating religious tolerance, Shaikh vehemently opposed customs and superstitions prevalent in the social life of Muslims. He contended that the hallmarks of a genuine Muslim include forgiveness, tolerance, kindness, compassion, generosity, humility, patience, mercy, and, notably, a sincere aspiration to lead a successful and honest life. Shaikh (RA) denounced negative behavioral norms such as jealousy, anger, pride, malice, arrogance, greed, and excessive attachment to worldly pursuits. He emphasized the strict adherence to the injunctions of Islam, both in their literal and spiritual sense, as essential for creating an ideal Islamic society. He says,

*Musalmaan yim hinduyt pakan
 Shakni kya karan kya karan bouy
 Yaqeen chukh kufruk musalmaani thekan
 Seeni chukh ni saaf chukh bad kboy
 Gobi yim lewan ti nemach chakan
 Tim qayamat doh wothan siyah rouy^{xx}*

Muslims who Hinduise their lives
 By adherence to superstitions and customs
 They believe in paganism only boast as Muslims

They are insincere and vicious people
They who paint their houses with cow dung
They who waste the delicious food items
They all shall be presented with blackfaces
On the day of resurrection before the Allāh

Shaikh Noor ud-Din's teachings and actions reflect a holistic approach to spirituality, transcending the dichotomy between the worldly and the divine. His life serves as a testament to the compatibility of profound spiritual engagement with a genuine concern for the well-being of society.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Shaikh Noor ud-Din emerges as a distinctive figure, embodying a dynamic and holistic approach to spirituality that sets him apart from Hindu ascetics of his time. Unlike those who withdrew from society, Shaikh Noor ud-Din actively engaged with the world, emphasizing the interconnectedness of the spiritual and the social realms. His teachings, rooted in Sufism, showcase a profound commitment to both humanity and God, mirroring the balanced and inclusive vision presented by the Prophet Muhammad ^(saw).

Noor ud-Din's admonitions against hypocrisy and his emphasis on the transient nature of worldly life underscore his deep spiritual insights. His life and teachings align with the Sufi tradition, advocating for intense love for humanity alongside a profound connection with the divine. The two-dimensional attitude he exhibited, reminiscent of Shah Waliyyullah's mystical vision, reflects a harmonious integration of worldly engagement and spiritual devotion.

Shaikh Noor ud-Din's relentless efforts to preach against negative aspects of human behavior, such as lust, jealousy, and greed, underscore his commitment to social reform guided by Sufi principles. His life, marked by love, compassion, and purity of thought and action, serves as an inspiration for those seeking a balanced and meaningful approach to spirituality.

In essence, Shaikh Noor ud-Din's legacy stands as a testament to the compatibility of intense spiritual devotion with active societal engagement. His teachings continue to resonate, offering valuable insights into the harmonious coexistence of the temporal and the eternal, and the profound interconnectedness of the human experience with the divine.

NOTES AND REFERENCE

- ⁱ Shaykh Muhammad Ikram, *Ab-i-Kawthar*, Delhi, 1991, p. 381.
- ⁱⁱ Muhammad Ashraf Wani, *Islam in Kashmir*, Srinagar, 2004.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Mirza Arif Beg, “*Nund Risbi: A Multidimensional Personality*” in *Alamdar-i-Kashmir* ed. by M. Amin Pandit, Srinagar, 1997, p.4.
- ^{iv} Muhammad Ishaq Khan, *Kashmir's Transition to Islam*, Srinagar, 2005, p.45.
- ^v Shaykh Muhammad Ikram, *Ab-i-Kawthar*, Delhi, 1991, p. 381.
- ^{vi} Al-Qur'an, 68:4.
- ^{vii} Shaykh Ali b. Uthman Hujwari, *Kashf al-Mahjub*, Delhi, 1992, p.79.
- ^{viii} Rumi, *Mathnawi*.
- ^{ix} Rumi, *Mathnawi*.
- ^x Al-Qur'an, 25:63.
- ^{xi} Shaykh Ali b. Uthman Hujwari, *Kashf al-Mahjub*, Delhi, 1992, p.79.
- ^{xii} Al-Qur'an, 42:30.
- ^{xiii} Shaykh Ali b. Uthman Hujwari, *Kashf al-Mahjub*, Delhi, 1992, p.349.
- ^{xiv} *Sahib Muslim*, Kitab al-Iman, Book 1, Hadith No. 1.
- ^{xv} *Sahib Bukhari*, Kitab al-I'tisam, Volume 4, Book 56, Hadith Number 770.
- ^{xvi} Shaykh Ali b. Uthman Hujwari, *Kashf al-Mahjub*, Delhi, 1992, p. 411.
- ^{xvii} Asadullah Afaqi, *Aayena-i-Haq Kulliyat-i-Shaikh ul Alam*, Life Foundation, Char-i-Sharif, Budgam, 2008, p. 228.
- ^{xviii} Asadullah Afaqi, *Aayena-i-Haq Kulliyat-i-Shaikh ul Alam*, Life Foundation, Char-i-Sharif, Budgam, 2008, p. 321.
- ^{xix} Asadullah Afaqi, *Aayena-i-Haq Kulliyat-i-Shaikh ul Alam*, Life Foundation, Char-i-Sharif, Budgam, 2008, p. 319.
- ^{xx} Asadullah Afaqi, *Aayena-i-Haq Kulliyat-i-Shaikh ul Alam*, Life Foundation, Char-i-Sharif, Budgam, 2008, p. 366.