

Socio- Historical Dimensions in Shaykh Nuru'd-Din: An Analysis

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Abstract

The valley of Kashmir is also known as Rashi-Vatika or Reshvar on account of the fact that it has served as an abode for the rishis from the ancient times. But this fact needs to be given due consideration that before the advent of Islam in Kashmir the rishis of Kashmir could not demonstrate any social activism owing to the verity that they preferred to live a secluded life in the forests or in the caves and as a consequence many forests are named after them. However, with the emergence of the rishi order of the Muslim sufis, founded by Shaykh Nur-ud Din, who was born on the threshold of a significant period of Kashmir History, the social authenticity of the rishi tradition came to be established for the first time in the valley. Under the influence of Nur-ud-Din, the rishis undoubtedly emerged as a socio-historical force that attracted the attention of such keen observers as Abul Fadl and the Mughal Emperor Jahangir. A number of Kashmiri folk songs, Persian hagiographical works and chronicles which are abound in the praise of rishis also testify to their socio-historical role. The present paper is a humble attempt to uncover dispassionately the socio-historical dimensions in the Sirah and thought of Shaykh Nur-ud Din. The methodology adopted will be of objective and historical nature.

Key words:- Rishis, social, valley, Kashmiri, sufis, history, works

Introduction

Shaykh Nuru'd-Din (10th Zul-Hijjah, 779 AH/ 9th April, 1378¹--26th Ramadan, 842/ 12th March, 1439²) yearned for a society, based on high ethical values. There are many anecdotes associated with the life and doings of Shaykh Nuru'd-Din, which not only reveal his disapproval of the established social evils but also provide an ample evidence about the medieval Kashmir society. On the eve of the birth of Shaykh Nuru'd-Din certain developments on the socio-political scenario of Kashmir made a profound impression upon the sensitive minds of Kashmiris. These included the decline of the 'Hindu Rule'; the founding of the Sultanate by Shahmir in 1339; the proselytizing activities of the Sufis from central Asia and Persia and, above all, the spirit of change and reform demonstrated by gnostics like Lalla, a Hindu woman mystic of Shavite sect, against the manifold abuses of the prevalent social order. It is however, sometimes tempting to draw a comparison between Lalla and several Bhakti saints of India on the ground that they all played a positive role in

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fostering common values among Hindus and Muslims in some appreciable degree. Their approach to religion was fundamentally humanistic. Lala's poetry like that of Bhakti literature expresses dissent and protest against the exploitation of social norms and institutions.

Socio-historic Dimensions

This point is worthy of credence that while such a trend revitalized Hindu religion in other regions of India but in Kashmir it marked the beginning of Islamic acculturative process under the mystical movement founded by Shaykh Nuru'd-Din Rishi. Here, it seems in place to suggest that Lalla's denunciation of idol worship, casteism, and exploitative nature of the dominant social section stirred the minds of the people and set in motion such forces in Kashmiri society as led to the gradual adoption of practices and values of life as advocated by the Muslim Sufis. The contribution of Lalla in this regard is reflected by the position accorded to her in Muslim hagiological literature and Chronicles who used to describe her reverentially as 'Lala 'Arifa' and 'Rabi'a Thani.'³

Nuru'd-Din, talks from the level of the one who has attained the state of *Wisal* (mystical union with God). Nuru'd-Din's poetry became the only vehicle for influencing the masses, who have had and still have an incredible memory of verse. Such an interpolation also indicates that Nuru'd-Din gave a meaning to the life of Kashmiri people and provided the framework for the formation of a culture which drew its vitality from a conflict, a division, a torment and a struggle created in the individual psyche by the challenges posed to the caste-ridden social order by him.

Nuru'd-Din's poetry is relevant to the concerns of history considering the fact that his life and the indigenous mystic order of the rishis founded by him illustrate something of the nature of the crisis through which he was passing and its impact on the social norms and meanings of Islam in the regional context. Nuru'd-Din's mystical verses imply to convey not only certain basic facts about his life, but also certain ideas and concepts which have remained *weltanschauung* (world-view) of Kashmiris, even generation after his death. So central is the sense of crises and self awareness evident in his verses that his poetry assumes the pervasiveness of a vital tradition.

For understanding the basic components of Kashmiri tradition, it is important to remember that its flowering in the real sense took place in the midst of the traditions set in vogue by the legendary *rishis* mentioned by Nur al-Din in his verses, and the mystics like Lalla, Sayyid Hussain Simnani, Sayyid 'Ali Hamadani, and Sayyid Muhammad Hamadani.⁴ It was also in the midst of these traditions that the formation of the religious thought of Nur al-Din took

place and for Nur al-Din religion was a matter of experience; it was the ‘real’ rather than mere ‘notional.’

Nur al-Din warns that the worldly pleasures should not detract our attention from God, “who is our home.” Life can become meaningful only when “we are able to ‘ascend back’ into His presence.⁵ He brings to light the piercing longing of his soul seeking direct intervention of divine action to sanctify the human creature through a love that transfigures, not only the soul, but also the body through constant prayer.

Thou existed and Thou (alone) will exist,
Continue to remember Thou, none, but Thou,
Thou alone will allay the anguish (of my soul),
O my soul, recognize thyself.⁶

It follows that, at the prime of youth, the socio- cultural tradition represented by Nur al-Din, was purely mystical rather than this worldly. His conception of universe and things around him was conducive to develop a relationship of differentiation with these phenomena. The self-image of man according to such a view was that of a quasi- divine being whose only aim was to attain mystical union with God. But how did the norms of this worldliness which lead to the realization of a substantive mode of relationship between man and his environment and between man and man emerge in Nur-al-Din’s thought is an important question now worthy of examination.

In fact, the crystallization of such a process began when Nur al-Din came in contact with Sayyid Muhammad Hamadani, a prominent Sufi of the Kubravi order, who is reported to have played an important role in the spread of Islamic teachings in Kashmir along with a number of his disciples. That Sayyid Mir Muhammad Hamadani became a spiritual preceptor of the Shaikh when the latter was in his early thirties is attested to not only by documentary evidences,⁷ but also by a new trend in his thought which undoubtedly bears the deep imprint of Islam. It must, however, be noticed that in spite of the standards of the *Sunnah* moulding his behaviour, the Shaikh’s understanding of Islam, ultimately, came to be modelled on *tasawwuf* and local traditions. This is reflected in the following verses in which the Shaikh seeks to legitimize the term *rishi* by emphasizing its Islamic origin:

The first Rishi was the Prophet Muhammad(SAW),
The second in order was Hazrat Uways

The third Rishi was Zulka Rishi
 The fourth in order was Hadrat Miran,
 The fifth Rishi was Rum Rishi,
 The sixth in order was Hazrat Pilas,
 The seventh (me) is miscalled a Rishi!
 Do I deserve to be called a Rishi? What is my name?.⁸

While the Shaikh describes the Prophet as the first *rishi*, and Uways-i-Qarani⁹ as the second, significantly enough, the ‘legendary’ rishis of the Valley have been treated in the same category in order of merit. Not surprisingly, the disciples of the Shaikh who were spread in every nook and corner of the Valley also came to be known as Uwaysis.¹⁰

Although the final stage of Nur al-Din’s religious career is also marked by the absorption of his Kashmiri identity into Islam, he nowhere gives proof of anti-Hindu sentiment. Significantly, he addresses Kashmiri Pandits as brothers¹¹ and nowhere as infidels (*Kafirs*) or heretics (*Mushrikin*). Nur al-Din did not preach organized and institutionalised religion; he concentrated on the individual faith and practices. By affirming personal link founded on love that joins the worshipper to God, he seems to have absorbed the religion of the masses in the form of his mystic order. Thus he remarks:

In all directions, at all gatherings
 Thou art worshipped by all,
 I, a seeker of Thine, beseech Thy help.
 I remember (with gratitude) how kind Thou art.¹²

Social obligations towards children, wife and other members of family thus occupy due importance in the Shaikh’s thought. His self-denunciation of wanderings in the jungles during his early days point to the cardinal feature of his philosophy that basic social obligations are not to be neglected even after a complete self-surrender to the divine obligations. While addressing his

disciple, Nasr Baba, the Shaikh recollects an earlier time of spiritual ebb and flow, when his love was not perfect, and how he sought to allay his anguish by retiring to the cave:

Nasr Baba, it did not behove me to retire to the Jungle,

I thought it was a supreme act of worship:

Lo! It was an disgrace

But the truth was revealed only after introspection.¹³

Nur al-Din undertook a series of long apostolic journeys throughout the length and breadth of the valley.¹⁴ There are a number of villages in Kashmir which still preserve the memory of his visit. During his roving visits the Shaikh attracted the humble and those who were ignored or held in contempt in the caste-ridden society.

Adam came as the first ancestor of man,

Mother Eve followed suit.

Wherefrom were the low castes born then?

How can members of the same family jeer at one another.¹⁵

In his verses the Shaikh linked external actions with the spiritual well-being of the individual. Study, submission, dependence on God, obedience, contemplation and repentance must go hand in hand with endeavour and dedication, altruism and fulfilment of the duties of fellowship. And those can only be shown forth and have a meaning in the context of the individual's behaviour to, and relations with, others. What one does, as well as what one is, therefore, is of significance. What is apparent in one's actions is intimately related to the profoundest inner reality of one's essence, a premise upon which ultimately the practice of the confession is based.¹⁶

Nur al-Din was not opposed to the world and its social system but rather moved within social order, so qualitatively informing his personal relations with men as to enter into the contentment of God. True, he was not inclined towards political institutions, but such an outlook seems to have been generated by the fact that these institutions had no relevance for his individual

faith. He did not totally cut himself off from the world, but his evaluative analysis of it, and of his own experience was drawn from spiritual criteria.

It is evident that for Nur-al-Din love does not merely signify a mystical union with God, but also an active and sympathetic attitude towards all living creatures. His faith in the acceptance of the equality of all creatures in the Kingdom of God is thus an attempt to reconcile the Islamic ethics with the concept of non-violence. Taking into consideration the Shaikh's emphasis on help to the poor and needy, mercy and kindness towards all¹⁷ and the condemnation of lust and anger,¹⁸ it can be safely said that the value system of non-violence as contained in his philosophy, illustrates not only his adherence to the Qur'anic emphasis on mercy, but it also shows the richness and positive commitment of the *rishis* to the traditions of non-violence.

Notwithstanding the dominant mystical tone in Nur al-Din's poetry, it also helps us to reconstruct the social history of the medieval Kashmir. In particular his description of the social inequalities existing in the contemporary society are important in this respect. While the picture of the hoarding of different varieties of grain in the rich families is graphically depicted, the plight of small children in a permanent state of hunger is also forcefully reflected in his verses.¹⁹ It seems that he regarded hunger as the most degrading of adversities and, therefore, according to him, true blessedness consists in satisfying the subsistence needs of the poor. The Shaikh also describes the exploitation and sufferings of the weak at the hands of the strong. He refers to rich men who owned jewels, horses and elephants. While they enjoyed themselves by arranging musical concerts in their residences the Shaikh is, however, pained to note, that some poor persons were condemned to be cruelly treated at their gates.

The value system of humanism, as advocated by the Shaikh implies this-worldliness, co-existence with men of other religions and a deep commitment to the sanctity of human life and its artistic manifestation on earth. He also describes the ideal virtues that man should cultivate in his personality. According to him the hallmarks of a true Muslim are virtues such as forgiveness, kindness, tolerance, mercy, generosity, compassion, patience, humility and above all the earnest desire to earn honest living. He condemns the negative norms of behaviour such as anger, jealousy, intolerance and malice.²⁰

Conclusion

It goes without saying that Shaikh Nur al-Din played a central role within the framework of a cognitive, moral and social order. He redefined and reordered the life-world of followers of the *Rishi* order, requiring of them not only devotion to God but patterns of social behaviour. True, his poetry is mystic to the core, but it also has all such attractions as we generally associate with secular verse. Even in moments of mystic ecstasy the Shaikh affirms the brilliance and radiance of life in physical, flagrant detail. This harmony of spiritual and the secular, ineffable and the concrete, is the outcome of his humanist vision. Although he emphasizes the transcendence of life, he is, at the same time, passionately conscious of its actuality and splendour. In fact, love of life, love of God, and love of His creatures are deep-rooted in most of his verses characterised by all-embracing perspective.

References and Notes

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- ¹ Baba Nasib, *Nur Nama*, F. 129 A, Abdul Wahab Nuri, *Futuh al-Kubrawiyah*, F. 86 B, Baha al-Din Mattu, *Reshi Nama*, F. 12 A, Muhy uddin Miskin, *Tarikh-i-Kabir* p. 92.
- ² Baha al-Din Mattu, *Reshi Nama*, F. 71 A, Muhy uddin Miskin, *Tarikh-i-Kabir* p. 99, Baba Nasib, *Nur Nama*, F. 155 B, Muhammad Azam Didamari, *Waqat-i-Kashmir*, p. 64.
- ³ Baba 'Ali Raina, *Tadhkiratu'l 'Arifin*, R.P.D No 592, ff. 37b; 41a.
- ⁴ Sayyid 'Ali, *Taikh-i- Kashmir*, R.P.D. No. 739, ff. 33b-34a.
- ⁵ B.N. Parimoo, *The Ascent of Self*, Delhi, 1978, p.xix.
- ⁶ *Kulliyat-i-Shaikhul 'Alam*, II, C.A. P; 1981, p.79.
- ⁷ Sayyid 'Ali, op.cit; p. 34ab.
- ⁸ *Kulliyat-i-Shaikhul 'Alam*, I, C.A. P; 1979, p.19
- ⁹ Cf. Farid al-Din 'Attar, *Tadhkiratu'l Awliya*, Tehran, A.H. 1336,p.27
- ¹⁰ Baba Dawud Khaki, *Rishinama*, ff. 41b.42a.
- ¹¹ *Kulliyat*, I,p.100
- ¹² *Ibid*,II,p.14
- ¹³ Asadullah Afaqi, '*Ain-i- Haque*, Srinagar, p. 197
- ¹⁴ *Kulliyat*,II, p.11.
- ¹⁵ Parimoo, op.cit; pp.154- 55
- ¹⁶ see *Kulliyat*,,II,p.82-85; 92-93,111,118,120.
- ¹⁷ Parimoo, op.cit; 271-72;275
- ¹⁸ *Kulliyat*,II,p.83
- ¹⁹ *Ibid*;p96
- ²⁰ *Kulliyat*,II, p.82-85