

Sheikh Nur-ud-Din Wali (RA) as an Environmentalist

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Abstract

Kashmir has history of conservation of environment¹. Nund Rishi or NundReshi, also known as Sheikh Noor-ud-Din Wali, Sheikh Noor-ud-Din Noorani and popularly known as Sheikh ul-Alam in the 14th century talked about conservation of environment in general and forests in particular. According to him forests are sustainers of life. He laid thrust on cultivation and supply of good material for which forests play a great role. Sheikh Noor-ud-Din Wali took no interest in worldly affairs. At the age of 30 he felt a revulsion for material life and retired to live in the lap of nature. Kashmir is highly indebted to Sheikh as far as development of environment friendly attitude in the valley is concerned. His sayings in Kashmiri are full of wisdom. No environmentalist can guide better than Sheikh. The present study is an attempt to highlight his role in conservation of environment.

Keywords: Sheikh Noor-ud-Din Wali, rishi, religion, environment, forests

(R.A) Rahmatullah Alaih means Allah has blessing on him

1. Introduction:

Everywhere people are facing environmental issues every day which makes us vulnerable to disasters, calamities and tragedies, now and in the future. Some of the environmental problems are Pollution, Global Warming, the over consumption and use of plastics, the Ozone layer and the challenges of feeding a growing population. Most of them are relatively new but our religious traditions do offer us worldviews and principles that aid us in finding solutions to our contemporary problems in general and environmental problems in particular. God has created everything in this universe in due proportion and measure both quantitatively and qualitatively.

Verily, all things have We created by measure. (Quran, surah 54, verse 49)

Everything to Him is measured. (Quran, surah 13, verse 8).

And We have produced therein everything in balance. (Quran, surah55, verse7)

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Everything God has created is full of meaning and a sign of his greatness.

He Who has spread out the earth for you and threaded roads for you therein and has sent down water from the sky: With it have We brought forth diverse kinds of vegetation. Eat and pasture your cattle; verily, in this are signs for men endued with understanding. (Quran, surah 20, verse 53-54).

The relationship between man and environment is of care and nurture for man's good works and are not limited to the benefit of the human species, but rather extend to the benefit of all created beings; and "there is a reward in doing good to every living thing." (Al-Bukhari).

Man is entrusted with the maintenance and care of environment, and must use it as a trustee, within the limits dictated by his trust. The Prophet declared:

The world is beautiful and verdant, and verily God, be He exalted, has made you His stewards in it, and He sees how you acquit yourselves. (Muslim).

The Prophet declared:

If any Muslim plants a tree or sows a field, and a human, bird or animal eats from it, it shall be reckoned as charity from him. (Al-Bukhari and Muslim)

If anyone plants a tree, neither human being nor any of God's creatures will eat from it without its being reckoned as charity from him. (At-Tabarani, 2003).

Religion and environmentalism is an emerging interdisciplinary subfield in the academic disciplines of religious studies, religious ethics, the sociology of religion. Any policy change or development should give primary focus on environmentalism and ecological principles. The best asset religion offers is the moral framework by which practioners must abide. Most of the environmental problems eminate from human activity and religion is the best solution to mitigate the destructions caused by human activities. Very less research highlights the role of religion in the conservation of environment. The present paper has made a significant attempt in this regard through the teachings of Sheikh.

2. Objectives:

- To understand Rishism vis-à-vis Environment.
- To highlight the role of Sheikh Noor-ud-Din Wali (R.A) in conservation of environment in the Valley of Kashmir.

3. Methodology:

The historical method is used for the present study. The role of Sheikh Noor-ud-Din Wali (RA) in conservation of environment in the Valley of Kashmir has been highlighted through secondary data collected from standard historical research papers and books on Sheikh available at Jammu and Kashmir Academy of Art, Culture & language. Moreover, help has been taken from Kashmiri Pandit Network, a complete repository of information on saints and sages of Kashmir in general and Kashmiri Pandits in particular. *Alamdara*², A *Journal of Kashmiri Society & Culture* is consulted extensively for meeting the required objectives of the present paper. Shaikhu'l-Alam Chair³, University of Kashmir, has been consulted for getting sound literature on Sheikh.

4. Rishi Thought vis-a vis Environment

Rishi⁴ thought is itself another name of mystical and metaphysical⁵ worldview cultivated in Kashmir from centuries under the banner of Buddhism, Kashmir Saivism⁶ and Sufism. Rishis assimilated all the diverse currents of thought that were present at the time of advent of Islam and gave it an Islamic orientation. Rishism is the unifying mystico-metaphysical thread of Buddhism, Saivism and Sufism that have moulded the Kashmiri religious heritage. All these three-major religious /metaphysical traditions have ecocentric⁷ dimension. Versus of Nund Rishi and Lal Ded appropriate the ecological wisdom of all the traditions that Kashmir has hosted historically.

Metaphysics of Rishism transcends limitations of both anthropocentrism⁸ and biocentrism⁹. Mysticism¹⁰ shows the way to talk about human freedom without eclipsing, depreciating and objectifying the non-human world. The ultimate reality according to all the religions in Kashmir is supra personal Absolute rather than personal God of Semitic theology¹¹. Buddhism is transtheistic¹² but like Saivism and Sufism grounded in Absolute Undifferentiated Essence. The supreme principle is not the personal God of theism in any traditional religion but Reality, Absolute, Godhead which is Infinite and All-Possibility.

In Saivism the first Principle is the undifferentiated Essence, the pure consciousness. In Sufism the Essence or Zat designates the first principle. It is Beyond –being, the totality or the All.

According to Buddhism, world is adjoined cosmologically, morally and existentially and greed, hatred and ignorance are the basic cause of all problems. Inner peace and outer peace are inseparable. Imbalance between the two gives rise to crisis. There are environmental crisis because of this very disequilibrium i.e. disequilibrium between inner and outer peace. Had we realized this Buddhist philosophy environment would not have been in bad state. It is Buddhism that has been hailed as the ecocentric religion par excellence because of its devastating critique of personal self centric philosophies that have precipitated the present environmental crisis. The ethics of nonviolence which forms inalienable part of almost all religions, especially Buddhism, is of central importance for environmentalists.

Universe has no material cause except consciousness as per Kashmir Saivism. Universe is consciousness and created out of consciousness as per Shavists. Saivism, especially the non dualistic Kashmir Saivism, has ample resources from an environmental perspective. Saivism in its attempt at transcending the desiring self and mind is making pro-environmental move. Sufi¹³ emphasis on fana¹⁴ is similar pro- environmental move. It is the man as ego, as an animal with unlimited wants and greedy desires who is the basic culprit in ecological destruction. The fall of man is because of rise of separative consciousness that insists on living outside Divine Environment that is paradise. The earth belongs to God not to man as a desiring ego and thus can't be looted, exploited indiscriminately. Man-environment relationship becomes I-Thou rather than I-It and this is the key to Saivite perspective on environment. How Sufi experiences environment is revealed in the following quote of Shaikh Saadi:

I am joyous with the cosmos for the

Cosmos receives its joy from Him

I love the whole world for the

World belongs to Him.¹⁵

It was Sheikh Noor-ud-Din Wali (R.A.) who revived and Islamized Rishism in a rare feat of absolute ijthad¹⁶ in theology and mysticism in the history of Islam. He quotes:

Oh God You are all Pervading

You are The Self in our body.

When man's heart lights up with the flame of love,

Then shall he reach La-Makaan.

First I forgot myself and yearned after

God then I reached La-Makaan (Amin,2008)

Rishism as a mystical discipline advocates transcendence of self and all those passions that trap man in this world in forgetfulness of the rights of Spirit, of the other and environment. Lust, anger and greed are ecocidal traits that Rishi mystical discipline curbs. As Lal Ded says:

Slay the murderous demons,

Lust, anger and greed;

Sheikh says the same thing:

I ferried my boat without an oar,

I slayed Vanity, Greed and Attachment.¹⁷

Bodily comforts, ease, lavishness which reflect better living standards of capitalist consumerist societies are disapproved by Rishis. According to them comforts, ease and lavishness destroy nature. Sheikh says:

The One There, is the One Here;

Omnipresent, he occupies all space.

The pedestrian and the charioteer are one,

The Invisible He, behind the scenes.

After Sheikh and LalDed, a galaxy of mystical poets continued the tradition. They are Rupa Bhawani, Pir Pandit Padshah (Rishi Pir), Riche Ded, Swami Jeewan Shah, Swami Parmanand, Swami Ramji, Swami Vidhyadhar, Bhagvan Gopinathji, Swami Kashkak, Swami Nath Babh, Swami LakshmanJoo, Swami AftabJooWangnoo, Swami Ashokhnanda, Swami Govind Kaul, ShriSarada Devi, Swami Govindananda, KrishnaJoo Razdan, Swami Kish Bab, Mathra Devi, Swami Anandji Maharaj of Villagam, Pandit Sathal Siboo, Pandit Raghu NathKukiloo, Swami Mast Ram Ji, Posh Bub, Swami Man Kak, Swami Grata Bab, Khwaja Lassa Sahib, sufis like Hubbi ,Momin Sahib, Swaachi Kraal, Shah Guffoor, RehmanDar, Rahim Sahib, Niyam Sahib, Shah Qalander, Wahab Khaar, Shamas Faqeer .

Krishnamurti rightly says:

Drink the nector of love sip by sip

And the heart will bloom lotus like

Thoughts of duality will melt away

And never will your mind restless be.

Abu'lFazl is of the view that "The most respectable class in this country (Kashmir) is that of the Rishi's. They employ themselves in planting fruit trees and are generally a source of benefit to the people."

5. Contribution of Sheikh Noor-Ud-Din Wali (R.A) in the conservation of Environment:

The poetry of Sheikh Noor-Ud-Din Wali(R.A), has been highly valued by medieval chroniclers. Many historians and translators attempted to translate his versus and failed desperately. DawudMishkati who wished to translate his versus into Persian writes:

'I Dawud Mishkati, wished to translate the Kashmiri poetry of the Sheikh into Persian. But I could not experience what the Sheikh experienced. Without this state of inner experience (hal) I could not get the sweetness of this Kalam.

Whatever the Sheikh said was uttered in a state of hal. Since I am devoid of that hal this is why I could not dare translate his poetry.'

Baba Nasib regarded the poetry of the Sheikh as not merely the utterance of deep and heart-felt truths but even an act of worship. According to Mohammad Ishaq Khan the metaphoric resonance in Sheikh's poetry is unmistakably audible.

During Sheikh's time in 14th century environment was virgin as it was least disturbed by human activities. Kashmir undoubtedly resembled a paradise. Forests surrounded the valley. The stories carried in historical works and chronicles about the extensive tour of the sheikh makes us call him proudly the best environmental scientist world can ever witness. Sheikh cautioned his disciples and companions about the conservation of the environment at the time when environment was not polluted. During his tour when he reached near present Dalgate he stopped his disciple Nassar and cautioned him not to proceed. On enquiring about this move of sheikh Nassar was answered in these lines 'It is Paradise and we are yet to make ourselves entitled to enter the heaven'. After two centuries later Mughals came and discovered this paradise on earth. These remarks of sheikh depict his visionary outlook.

The essence of Sheikh's teachings is that creation should be protected, cared, nurtured and not destroyed. There he never tolerated any harm towards environment. Sheikh says:

Extensively I toured in jungles through kail trees,

The warmth of June touched adversely the delicacy of jasmine,

Distinct are not the pearls (dew drops) to the moisture,

Mere touch shall damage delicacy of diamond,

Sooner the flame of tulips shall extinguish,

The evening occasions but the drowsiness of slumber (Gowhar, 114)

Rishis did not tolerate any excess upon human being, have protested against such excesses and even have offered sacrifices. They went to the excess of taming wild beasts and animals. They have undergone great hardships to feed animals. Sheikh even carried head load of salt from Poonch area to the meadows and fed the livestock with necessary doze of salt so that they may prevent from diseases. Near Hoonchpora village when Sheikh found group of

girls uprooting with knives various wild forest vegetables like lilac he got angry and warned them not to kill the living beings because by doing so they will be punished in the world hereafter. Such was the prophetic vision of the sheikh about the future. Such was his insight of linking environment with world here and hereafter. We don't find any environmentalist till date who has linked environment with religion so beautifully as done by the Sheikh. He by his better understanding of the creator and creation made it possible to tell people about the advantages of forests through his words of wisdom in the form of poetry using metaphors, similes and symbols.

In his poem *He, Who Ploughs the Field, Reaps the Crop*, Sheikh instructs about wise planning of things:

(a) Be conscientious in doing your duty, man, field, to harvest

Plough the field, to harvest the crop in autumn

And provide for your comforts in the cold month of magh.

He, who sows the seed, reaps the crop!

(b) Blind is the spring, keep't in view,

Be quick to collect the material of seed, and

Store's at home:

Don't you lag behind, for

The spring is elusive, man;

He, who sows the seed, reaps the crop!

(c) Lend no ear to falsehood now;

Winter lies ahead, and freezing cold

Daughters and daughter-in-law,

Children and grand-children regard him,

Who ploughs the field and reaps the crop:

He, who sows the seed, reaps the crop!

(d)Deluding is the hunger;

Yoke it to the plough....

In another poem entitled 'My Darling, why should You Poach on Fish' Sheikh says:

'My Darling, Why should You Poach On Fish'

My Darling understand this truth

Those,whodeavour the living

To nourish their own lives

Would feed on the poison of sin!'

Through his poetry Sheikh warns the society in general and people of Kashmir in particular about the destruction of environment because according to him destroying nature is a sin. His poems are motivating force as far as conservation of environment, reformulation of society and eradication of social evils is concerned. He addressed his disciples, followers and common people in their local language vizkashmiri. Through his poetry he made even a layman understand the importance of environment. Therefore, he truly deserves to be called one of the best environmental scientist of the world.

Sheikh believed that our mindfulness of God must not be reserved for times of prayer and spiritual devotion alone, it must colour all our actions. This mindfulness of God can manifest itself in many ways, such as feeding the poor, helping the needy, struggling against injustice and oppression, conservation of environment, and protection of flora and fauna. He was conscious about the destruction of natural beauty in the valley. By feeling the materialistic lust of the people around him he vehemently raised his voice against the destruction of nature. He says:

Satisfied may not be one in seeing his Symmetry and Style

Though in unity he is unbeatable and unquestioned

Self reliant Noor-Ud-Din yield to his everlasting behavior

Ah! Glorification of Lord did they enjoy and relish' (Adfar, 228 II)

According to Sheikh, forests have a significant role not only in ensuring the environmental stability but also achieving economic benefits. Forest is not just a group of trees, but an ecosystem in itself, comprising all the living and non-components. These components interact with each other so as to balance the ecosystem. Droughts and floods are the most important consequences of the imbalance in forest ecosystem caused by the indiscriminate felling of trees.

He used his poetry as a tool to bring the role of religion in the conservation of environment. His poetry commonly known as *Shrukhs* reflects his devotion to Allah and his concern over the environment. *Tawhid, Risala, Ma'ad*, human greed the main subjects of his poetry. He has symbolically used plants to convey higher message of morality and environmental conservation. There is no verse of him which doesn't convey social, religious, historical, cultural, environmental, moral and ethical messages and lessons. One of his most famous couplets reflects the most important environmental fact. He quotes: '*Ann Poshi Teli Yeli Wann Poshi*' meaning 'Food will last as long as forests last'. These environmental pearls were uttered by sheikh seven centuries ago even when the subject of environmental science was not fully developed and even before the present concept of ecological balance, ecological sustainability and ecosystem was born. For sheikh forests temperate the climate, help cool the atmosphere and maintain the parabolic cycle of water, clouds, rain and snow, rivers, lakes and oceans. For him forests check the rapid flow of rain water down the slopes, enabling it to seep in, only to reappear in the form of springs elsewhere. They make the snows melt gradually by regulation, keeping them cold and frozen and thus, ensuring a regular supply of water all the year round. Thus, they help the irrigation, food production and other modern scientific, medical, industrial and technological pursuits. If the forest areas are denuded gushing rain waters would erode the slopes and plain areas, much land would be lost and also the grain. He pointed out that plants are living things which are born, grow and die in due course. He says: '*Let us avoid harming plants in any way as far as possible. Let us not*

unnecessarily trample over green grass. For, each plant has a purpose in life and use for others.'

Sheikh says:

'Sowing seed in barren land is no wisdom-

You might as well chisel iron pots

Councillng a dunce is scratching an elephant-

Or baking bran-cakes in rich oil.' (Gleanings from Shaikhu'l-Alam,2008)

Manzoor Ahmad Shah (2008) argues rightly that we have long back shown exit gate to the sheikh and have consciously ignored Rishi thought while formulating our values and attitude towards ourselves and the environment. By ignoring Sheikh's contribution and Rishi thoughts towards environment how can we expect environmental solutions in our valley. There is a need for a paradigm shift from scientific /reason based approach to nature based approach. And there is no denying the fact that nature based approach has its roots in religion. The teachings of Sufism in general and the Sheikh in particular provide a corrective measure to aggressive, artificial, manipulated and alienating treatment of man towards environment. Need of the hour is to go back to the conceptual and fundamental framework of Sufism and Rishism in Kashmir. The present paper argues that Sufism in general and Rishism in particular provides a corrective measure for all environmental crisis. We are involved in ecocidal activities like Water Pollution, Air Pollution, Noise Pollution, Deforestation, Soil erosion, Depletion of biodiversity, Urbanization, despite the fact that our valley is not industrialized in the true sense. Tourism is one of the major industries in the state. It is the backbone of the economy of the state. The state has been earning lots of money by way of foreign exchange. Hoteliers, houseboat owners, transporters, travelling agencies, traders, guides, porters, ponymen, boatmen, handicrafts and small scale industry units and many others earn their livelihood because of this industry. As many as 6 lac tourists visit the valley every year. All the sectors which are back bone of our economy are dependent upon nature and destroying nature implies closing all such sectors and making the economy good for nothing. There is mismanagement in every field. People are in mad race of building hotels, huts, restaurants. Our forests are suffering badly because of

encroachments. Also we find shifting cultivation in certain areas which leads to depletion of forest cover. Livestock sector must not neglect environment. Overgrazing must be avoided.

The state of J&K has lot of problems so far as sound economic structure is concerned. The main problems which are responsible are as under:

- 1) Faulty education sector
- 2) Weak domestic structure
- 4) Traditional Agrarian economy
- 5) Stereo-type mindset of rural people
- 6) Political turmoil

Manzoor Ahmad Shah (2008) while discussing forest ecology highlights the important trend in our valley. There is mad race for private vehicles and nobody is ready to make good use of public transport. We have become fond of luxurious cars, big gadgets, smart tablets and phones. Duesenberry effect¹⁸ fits our society. There is hardly any proper environmental impact assessment (EIA) of tourism in our valley. When such is the state of our very society how can we expect environmental solutions.

Sheikh explains:

‘Will diamonds be found in marshy lands?

Will birds chirp when caught in meshes?

Will the narcissus bloom in the midst of a desert?

Will pearls be available in glassware stalls?

(Gleanings from Shaikhu'l-Alam,2008)

It is difficult to understand that when all the solutions lie in our religion and religious scriptures why we have alienated ourselves from them. Rishis and Sufis preferred to live in forests away from urbanized centres. We have consciously come out of nature's lap and settle near cities and pressurize these

very places and polluted them. It is very unfortunate that processes like urbanization and migration are undertaken by literates, qualified people, scholars, intellectuals. If they are doing such things how can we expect any solution to any problem.

Conclusion

There is a need for a paradigm shift from scientific based approach to nature based approach which has its roots in religion. We need to revisit the religious texts of sufis, rishis. Our faith needs to be made strong enough to bring equilibrium in all state of affairs. Extravagance must be avoided and the canon of simplicity and economy be followed by heart. Emphasis needs to be put on Islamic Ecological Ethics which encourages man to take all necessary measures to protect environment. Concept of man in Islam needs to be understood in order to understand man-environment relationship.

Notes and References

- ¹ The word 'Environment' is derived from a French word 'Environner' which means 'to encircle or to surround'. All the biological and non-biological entities surrounding us are included in the environment.
- ² Alamdar is a research journal aimed at promoting an objective understanding of Kashmiri society and culture with special reference to Sufism and Rishi movement. It is published by Shaikhul Alam Chair, University of Kashmir.
- ³ A research centre established in 1998 by Kashmir University. It aims at promoting the understanding of Sheikh, the social significance of his spiritual placement, his poetry, message and the spiritual tradition that followed him in broad sociological perspective.
- ⁴ The word Rishi is of Sanskrit origin. In its pre-Islamic sense it refers to wandering ascetics who had renounced the world, taking refuge in caves in the mountains or in the forests, and who sought to commune with the Divine through the practice of stern austerities. In common usage among the Hindus, however, the Rishi meant 'a saint or sanctified sage.'
- ⁵ Relating to a reality beyond what is perceptible to the senses.
- ⁶ A sect comprising the worshipers of the god Siva.
- ⁷ Having serious concern for environmental issues. Ecocentrism is a philosophy that recognizes that the ecosphere rather than any individual organism is the source and support of all life.
- ⁸ A viewpoint or theory that places human beings at the center of something, giving preference to human beings above all other considerations.
- ⁹ The view or belief that the rights and needs of humans are not more important than those of other living things. Biocentricists argue that human needs do not come before environmental needs.
- ¹⁰ Belief that direct knowledge of God, spiritual truth or ultimate reality can be attained through subjective experience (such as intuition or insight).
- ¹¹ The study of truthfulness of religion.
- ¹² Transcendentalism is a term coined by either philosopher Paul Tillich or Indologist Heinrich Zimmer referring to a system of thought or religious philosophy which is neither theistic nor atheistic but is beyond them. Zimmer applies the term to Jainism. The term has more recently been applied to Buddhism, Advaita Vedanta & Bhakti movement.
- ¹³ The term Sufi (Arabic, 'man of wool') was coined in the early 9th century as a name for mystics whose ascetic practices included wearing coarse woolen garments, orsufu; soon the term referred to all mystics, whether or not they followed ascetic practices.
- ¹⁴ The first big movement or journey in Sufism is disappearing into God, allowing all the attributes and qualities of yourself to wash away, revealing the deeper light of your soul. We call this Fana.
- ¹⁵ One of the major Iranian poets and literary men of the medieval period.
- ¹⁶ Ijtihad is an Islamic legal
- ¹⁷ A 14th century Kashmiri Saivite woman and contemporary of Sheikh who vehemently attacked caste system, idol worship and rituals evolved by the Brahmins.
- ¹⁸ Also called demonstration effect. These are effects on the behavior of individuals caused by observation of the actions of others and their consequences.