

**Shah-i-Hamadan's Contribution to Learning and Society
(Key Note Address)**

Muhammad Ishaq Khan*

It is a matter of honour, to be invited to present a keynote address at an august gathering like the present one. Although Shah-i-Hamadan Institute of Islamic Studies has been in existence for over two decades, an opportunity for attending an International Seminar under its auspices today is the first of its kind. It is encouraging to see the participation of a large number of scholars, including some non-Muslims, in this seminar.

Having accepted the responsibility of presenting the keynote address, I will endeavour to provide some kind of framework for your discussions and share with you some of my ideas on the contemporary relevance of the teachings of Shah-i-Hamadan. What has promoted me to revitalize my thinking on the subject of such vital significance is somewhat exaggerated importance given to job-oriented course in our universities in view of the rapid strides in both global and domestic market. While I am fully aware of the importance of such courses, I feel a need to revamp the marketopian thinking about the university degrees that has for the last two decades or so begun to exert a peculiar hold over the higher authorities of our universities. Somehow we have grown to believe that market disciplines could solve our problems. The economic development of a society is of no use in the long run, if in the new globally competitive environment young boys and girls are only trained to mint money at the cost of higher spiritual and ethical values. Does not our growing obsession with mere material needs and comforts pose a serious challenge to the very concept of university? Is it that our universities should only reorient their courses to include a sustainable material development focus without a focus ethical education? While I may sound traditional to some, nevertheless, my lifelong infatuation with the subject

* Prof. M. Ishaq Khan was a distinguished scholar of history and served as Head, Department of History and Islamic Studies, Dean, Faculty of Social Science and Academic Affairs at University of Kashmir. He passed away on 5th April, 2013 and his death is great loss to scholarship in history especially Indian and Kashmir history. Present key note address was delivered by him in the inaugural session of our three-day international seminar on "Shah-i-Hamadan's Contribution to Learning and Society" held from 13th to 15th March 2012. The address is published here posthumously.

known as Sufism provides the perspective for the need to develop true human personalities. Does our university's timeless motto "From darkness to Light" have any bearing on my address?

Sufism, it must be stressed, is mysticism in one sense in that its primary aim is spiritual apprehension of the truths that are beyond the understanding of a rationalist. Consider what Bertrand Russell aptly remarks: 'You cannot be a mystic and a rational person at one and the same time.'¹ Certainly a mystic or a Sufi who seeks "mystical union" or 'communion' with God by contemplation in relative seclusion experiences something which is beyond description and any logical explanation. Long back, in what was termed a "hard-hitting critique" of Sufism in India,² I had pointed to superficiality of making the two kinds of mystical experiences, *wahdat-al-wajud* and *wahdat-al-shuhud* the tools of historical analysis. The point I had strongly made was that mystical experience is intrinsically a subjective experience; hence beyond the explanation of rationalist philosophers, historians and scholars. It is no surprise, therefore, that the great matters of Sufism have been misunderstood and misinterpreted, thanks to a rational or even superficial understanding of their mystical experiences by some Muslim scholars as well as Western Orientalists. Among such Sufis must be particularly mentioned Husain bin Mansur Hallaj and Ibn Arabi. It is another matter that ecstatic utterances of such Sufis under the influence of a mystical experience were best understood by the Sufis themselves with a burning love for Allah, and, in fact, inspired a vast production of Sufi literature concerning divine love in prose and poetry. Leaving aside, therefore, the abiding contribution of Sufis in deepening our understanding of Allah as *Haqq* alone through personal devotion, passion and communion, there is a need to understand, besides mystical, the historical dimension of Sufism.

It must be stressed that Islam in its various historical manifestation is not a single or monolithic entity.³ Islam's initial role in shaking the very foundations of societies notwithstanding, there is strong reason to argue that Islam did not radically transform or revolutionise societies in one go. Apart from certain individual conversions, the transition of societies to Islam over long centuries past was, by large, a matter of social conversion rather than religious in the strictest sense. Given the fact that various cultures in South Asian context had a vast potential for countering the influence of Islam either in the revival of Hinduism in the form of Bhakti movement, or the emergence of syncretistic beliefs among the "converts" to Islam, historical and regional contexts contrasting the pagan society of the 7th century Arabia. Little wonder that Islam in its historical manifestations has been designated as "Indian Islam," "Indonesian Islam," "African Islam," "Kashmiri Islam" and so on. And

in the context of ongoing debate concerning the so-called “Sufi Islam” versus “Wahhabi Islam,” or the so-called “Arab Islam,” versus “Sufi Islam,” misconception arise about a multiplicity of phenomena, or, if one may assert, many Islam.⁴ In order to dispel such misconceptions, it is necessary to assess the significance of the historical role of Mir Sayyid ‘Ali Hamadani, popularly known as Shah-i-Hamadan, as a case-study.

It is now historically established that Mir Sayyid ‘Ali Hamadani visited Kashmir only once in 1384 A.D. and stayed there for not more than six months. Far from asserting in the manner of Persian chroniclers and hagiographers that the wholesale conversion of Kashmir took place during his short sojourn in the Valley, I would make a strong plea for re-examination of the latter-day Persian sources written over 175 years after the death of the Sayyid. The emphasis of these sources is more and more on his miraculous achievements rather than on his historical role. It is somewhat intriguing that the Sanskrit chroniclers, Srivara and Jonaraja, who were near contemporaries of Sayyid ‘Ali Hamadani did not refer to him at all in their works, notwithstanding their useful account of the inroads of Islam in the cultural life of the Kashmiri Brahmans. But more surprising than the silence of the Brahma chroniclers regarding the Sayyid is the lack of information with regard to his so-called ‘proselytizing’ activities in a plethora of works of the Sayyid himself, or that his contemporary biographer and *khalifa*, Naurddin Ja‘far Badakshi. True, Ja‘far Badakshi’s khalifa, Haidar Badakshi, in his biography of the Sayyid in a brief passage describes his role in Kashmir. But beyond referring to the Sayyid’s encounter with a Brahman ascetic in Srinagar, his close ties with the reigning sultan Qutbuddin in piri- muridi relationship, of the general statement that he brought Islam to Kashmir, Haidar Badakshi has nothing more to say. So this lacuna in the contemporary sources of the Sayyid gives enough leeway to the latter-day chroniclers, even Sayyid ‘Ali, the author of *Tarikh-i-Kashmir*, to indulge in fancies and exaggerated description of Shah-i-Hamadan’s role. The chronicler even credits him with having demolished temples. A thumping lie, indeed. Had it been a fact, the aforementioned Brahman chroniclers would not have failed to record the sacrilege caused to their religious institutions as they did in the case of Sultan Sikandar’s minister, Suha Bhatta, named Saifuddin after his conversion to Islam. It is the zealous convert’s discriminatory attitude towards the Brahmans that has received acute and critical attention of the Sanskrit chroniclers. How should then a historian seek to understand the role of Shah-i-Hamadan in the history of Kashmir?

Far from taking the hyperbolic statements of the latter-day Persian chronicles about mass conversions on their face value, there is a need to

understand Shah-i-Hamadan not merely in terms of his interaction with the reigning sultan and the ruling elite in Kashmir, but more importantly, in terms of what I would call a seamless continuum of his legacy in Kashmiri Muslims' everyday life. Seen from this perspective, categorization of the historical experience of Kashmiris as "Kashmiri Islam" appears to me misleading. The historical fact least emphasized in Persian chronicles, hagiographies, and regrettably, modern works is that Shah-i-Hamadan "introduced Islam to Kashmir is not as the so-called "Islamic revolutionary" or "Islamic radical" or "Islamic ideologue" in the modern sense of these confusing terms, but as a Sufi with the ennobling mission of presenting Islam in the Hindu-Buddhist environment of Kashmir as the religion of love. Deeply rooted in the Qur'an and the Sunnah of Muhammad (SAAS), Shah-i-Hamadan's writings⁵ bore the impress of the teaching of Imam Ghazali and Ibn Arabi, both widely remembered and respected to this day in academic centres of excellence across the globe for promoting an understanding of Islam in consonance with the spiritual ethics of the Qur'an. But this fact does not warrant the assertion that he had nothing to do with the Shar'ia. As a matter of fact, his advice to the reigning Sultan was to strictly adhere himself to its implementation in respect of good governance. But what must be significantly stressed is that far from imparting the knowledge of the Shar'ia within the frame work of an ideology,⁶ Shah-i-Hamadan, like most leading figures of the major Sufi orders, understood the Shar'ia in terms of its eternal significance for the spiritual and moral uplift of a society on the crossroads. It is no surprise therefore that his emphasis that the sultan of Kashmir should rule his subjects within the widening horizons of the concept of justice (*'adl*) enshrined in the Shar'ia did not bring him in conflict with the policy of religious tolerance followed by Sultan Qutbuddin in his kingdom in which Muslims formed a tiny minority. It did not matter to the Brahmans that if the king adhered to the Shar'ia in personal life, or for that matter, ruled his subjects in consonance with its spiritual and social ethics. This explains that Shah-i-Hamadan commanded respect of the Brahmans in the heart of their hearts, let that alone their silence about him. But the Kashmiri Brahmans, known from the time of the Hindu rulers for their protests, would have certainly raised hue and cry had they felt any threat to their religion in the wake of the advent of Shah-i-Hamadan in the Valley. As a matter of historical reality, the Brahmans better understood the role of Shah-i-Hamadan as a teacher par excellence than a radical Muslim bent on a converting Kashmir *en masse*. And nothing explains this phenomenon than the emergence of two distinct religious identities in the Valley, Kashmiri Muslim and Kashmiri Pandit, following the advent of Shah-i-Hamadan, significantly, prior to his

advent, such identities did not exist in explicit terms; this despite the role played by Shaikh Sharafuddin Suhrawardi in securing conversion of the Buddhist ruler of Kashmir, Rinchana, to Islam. Remarkably, the Khanqah-i-Mu'alla where Shah-i-Hamadan preached Islam to the reigning sultan and the ruling elite as the royal guest became in due course the breeding centre of devotional love in the nerve centre of the Brahmans. Leaving aside modern-day political, or for that matter, even scholarly perceptions of Hindu-Muslim divide in Kashmir, let us not forget the legacy of Shah-i-Hamadan until our times when the two religious communities under reference had learnt the great lesson of living separately in peaceful co-existence while respecting similarities as well as differences.

It follows that Shah-i-Hamadan's role in Kashmir has both mystical and historical dimensions and it is nothing short of an enigma that, instead of talking about his role in Kashmir in his profuse works, Shah-i-Hamadan versifies the religiosity of a Brahman in a letter to Sultan Qutbuddin in the wake of his departure from Kashmir:⁷

If the Brahman peeps into my (inner) condition,
he will turn me to out of his sight;
In that he would not allow a wicked man like me to
present myself before the idol.

The only inference is that the religious thought of Shah-i-Hamadan, as understood in any meaningful sense of the word, has something "mystical" about it. The experience of communion with the Truth (*Haqq*) alone concerns its seekers, and the quest for such communion, has indeed, always motivated the practice of such deeply religious people. This fact is also reflected in an invocatory prayer, *Award-i-Fathiyya*, compiled by Shah-i-Hamadan, and given by him to the Kashmiris as a parting gift. Did the ritual of reciting the award aloud in chorus which first originated at the Khanqah-i-Mu'alla in the Hindu Buddhist surroundings have anything to do with Kashmir's gradual transition to Islam during a course of five centuries of Islamic acculturation? This is a significant issue which I have discussed at some length elsewhere.⁸ It will here suffice to reinforce my point about the force of an Islamic tradition of reciting *dhikr*, though essentially rooted in the Qur'an, assuming the form of what I would call Islamic cultural tradition in a regional setting. Unfortunately, this latter-day development within the fold of Islam is not comprehensible to some; hence they consider it to be an innovation (*bid'a*). Perhaps I may sound more clear by quoting a leading contemporary authority

on Sufism who brilliantly echoes the views which I expressed earlier⁹ in 1997 at the height of militancy in the Valley:

.....modern-day 'Islamism'- that is, ideological posturing and political activism in the name of Islam-agrees with the early Orientalists on the origins of Islamic mysticism. Despite the fact that the Islamists are harshly critical of Western scholarship, they adopt many of its positions. They love Western technological expertise along with its guns and bombs, and they also love the various political theories that justify totalitarian control. By claiming that mysticism derives from outside sources, they embrace the Orientalist myth of a harsh and sterile Islam and ignore the spiritual and intellectual heritage of their religion. They have focused all their efforts on turning people away from the Islamic tradition and establishing authoritarian regimes.¹⁰

When all is said and done, Sufism continues to have pervasive as well as mystique presence in Muslim societies. Several problems of methodology regarding studies on Islam and Sufism, therefore, need in depth attention of the researchers of Islamic Studies. One of these, the most important in my opinion, is whether a complex theme such as Sufism needs to be approached from theological or a rationalist angle. My answer is in the negative in that theology, from the strictest Qur'anic standpoint, as Pickthall observes, is a "childish nonsense." It is imperative that we develop a historical approach to Islamic Studies in comparative perspectives. The great British historian, Sir George Trevelyan, once famously wrote:

"History is not a subject at all but a house in which all subjects dwell."

For from providing an exact definition of Islam or Sufism, historical approach to Islamic Studies calls for an understanding of Islam and historical circumstances in totality. On the level of theology, we may always find religion fixated on an opinion supposed generally to be final. But on the level of history, there is always a variety: local responses in the form of understanding Islam and misunderstanding it, individual choices and predilections, and varied perceptions and disagreements about what is Islam and what is not and so on. What is however, remarkable about Sufism is that it is associated with many thousands of teachers who as embodiments of divine love proved themselves to be the creative sources of emotional, intellectual and social stability in adverse historical situations despite diversity of opinions. Not the least, numerous institutions, and a vast literature associated with Sufism gives it a pride of place as an important branch of Islamic learning. The intrinsic merit of Shah-i-Hamadan's historical legacy in

Kashmir can be better understood from this perspective alone. His role as a spiritual teacher is about the dissemination of ideas and the battle for hearts and minds. The emerging point is that we need to seek knowledge beyond the marketopian theories, competition, and enchantment masquerading as knowledge.

References and Notes

- ¹ Bertrand Russell, *Mysticism and Logic*, London: Allen and Unwin, 1963.
- ² Peter Jackson on my article "Sufism in India," earlier published in *Muslim Shrines in India*.ed. Christian W Troll (Oxford University Press. 1987) in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain & Ireland*, Third Series, (1992).2. pp. 100-100.
- ³ Three of my articles published in reputed international journals between 1986 and 2000 and focussed on varied aspects of Islam in the regional context of Kashmir have, in view of being "selections from the most accomplished modern research on South Asia," been reprinted in the prestigious volumes of the Oxford University Press together with the masterpiece of such scholars as Burton Stein, Peter Hardy, Aziz Ahmad, Romilla Thapar, Simon Digby, David Lorenzen, Satish Chandra, Richard Maxwell Eaton, TN Madan etc.
- ⁴ Although I have discussed this issue in my *Kashmir's Transition to Islam: The Role of Muslim Rishis* (Manohar, New Delhi, 3rd ed. 2002; Srinagar ed. Gulshan, 2005), I am presently exploring it in greater depth for my future work sponsored by an International publisher outside in India.
- ⁵ Ishaq Khan, *Biographical Dictionary of Sufism in South Asia*, Manohar, New Delhi, 2009; *Sufis of Kashmir*, Gulshan, Srinagar, 2011.
- ⁶ There is no equivalent word that one may find for ideology in Ibn Manzur's authoritative dictionary of classical Arabic, *Lisan-al-Arab*. Nor is there any corresponding term for it in the Qur'an or *Hadith*. Neither the *Salaf* nor any of the scholars for the past 1300 years of Islam have used this term. In fact, the term Islamic ideology was used by the Islamic ideologues, under the influence of Marxist philosophy, during the Muslim resistance movements against colonialism. It is pleasing to note that some contemporary Muslim scholars have begun to challenge more seriously the notion of regarding Islam as an ideology that I did, probably pioneeringly, in my *experiencing Islam* (Sterling: University Press, Dacca; Oxford University Press, Karachi, 1997).recently, Hamza Yusuf, "the Western world's most influential Islamic scholar" in *The 500 Most Influential Muslims*, edited by John Esposito and Ibrahim Kalin, has brilliantly argued how Americans use the term "ideology" pejoratively or for that matter, how Marx used it in pejorative sense. A series of my articles titled "Is Islam an Ideology?" contributed to *The Kashmir Monitor* can be accessed online.
- ⁷ For greater details, see my article "Shar'ia, Conversions and State in Medieval Kashmir," in Aparna Rao, ed., *The Valley of Kashmir* (Manohar, New Delhi, 2009).
- ⁸ Ishaq Khan, "A Study of Ritual Behaviour and its Impact on the evolution of Kashmiri Muslim Society" in *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, Vol. 5, No.1, 1994 (Selley Oak Colleges, Birmingham, United Kindgom). See also my forthcoming book *The Merited Invocation: Award-i- Fathiyya of Mir Sayyid 'Ali Hamadani Translation with Introduction and Annotations*, Gulshan, May 2012).
- ⁹ *Experiencing in Islam*
- ¹⁰ A lecture delivered at the David M. Kennedy Centre for International Studies, Brigham Young University, May 2003, William C. Chittick.