

ASCENDANCY OF RULERS AND MYSTICS OF MEDIEVAL KASHMIR (14TH TO 17TH CENTURY): A STUDY ON KASHMIRIYAT

Abstract

The encounter between Hindus and Muslims in Kashmir is deeply ingrained in the concept known as "Kashmiriyat". Kashmiriyat, a pervasive aspect of the lives of Kashmiri people, significantly influences their religious and cultural beliefs. A prime manifestation of Kashmiriyat during the 14th to 17th century was the socio-cultural religious sphere called Rishi-Sufism, where adherents from both Hindu and Muslim backgrounds practiced their respective faiths in harmony. The consciousness of "ethno-cultural symbiosis" and inter-religious symbiotic spiritual consciousness between Hindus and Buddhists further propelled the evolution of Kashmiriyat.

The socio-political landscape, notably under the leadership of Sultan Ghayas-ud-Din, Zain-ul-Abidin, and Akbar, was marked by peaceful interactions between Muslims and Hindus. This not only facilitated a spiritual symbiotic consciousness among religious groups but also contributed to the advancement of Kashmiriyat. In the current ongoing scenario, the conflict has been exacerbated by separatist propaganda among Kashmiri Muslims against Hindus and prevailing Hindu-Buddhist prejudices against Muslims. However, it's essential to acknowledge that Kashmiriyat's philosophy transcends the teachings of Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism. Contrary to fears harbored by Hindus and Buddhists, Kashmiriyat is not a tool for religious conversion through Islam.

Keywords: Kashmiriyat, Koshur, Mysticism, Tradition, Belongingness.

Author

Dr. Gulzar Ahmad Dar
Contractual Assistant Professor of History
Government Degree College
Beerwah Budgam, Jammu and Kashmir,
India.
raasgulzar924@gmail.com

I. INTRODUCTION

The history of Kashmir reveals encounters between various ethnic and religious communities, often resulting in opposing and dialectical relationships within the socio-religious fabric of the region. Historically, these encounters led to differentiation, competition, confrontations, and conflicting interactions among these communities [1]. The encountering religions deepened the respect for one's own beliefs while fostering animosity towards the beliefs, practices, and rituals of other communities [2].

However, amidst these encounters, there were instances where people from different religions created a syncretic social space, facilitating peaceful interactions. For example, the Buddhist-Hindu encounter in the 3rd century B.C. led to the development of a socio-cultural space known as "Kashmiriyat," where individuals from both religions coexisted harmoniously. Over time, this socio-cultural space blended religious belief systems of Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism, incorporating the Hindu Rishi tradition into the Islamic Sufi tradition.

Several factors contributed to this blending of traditions. Firstly, the close proximity of Islam with Buddhism and Hinduism, owing to the syncretistic Hindu-Buddhist culture of Kashmir, played a significant role. Secondly, the historical presence of the Rishi tradition among Hindus, which was utilized by Muslims during their conquest attempts in the 14th century, contributed to the integration of Rishi practices into Sufism. This fusion gave rise to the syncretic socio-cultural Rishi-Sufi practice [3]. Thirdly, this Rishi-Sufi practice evolved into a movement, serving as a mechanism to ease inter-religious tensions, particularly between Muslims and non-Muslims, like Hindus and Buddhists.

"Kashmiriyat" functioned not only as a social space for inter-community interaction but also as a value system that broadened the horizons of inter-community tolerance and coexistence among Hindus and Muslims in Kashmir. However, in recent times, "Kashmiriyat" has faced opposition from various communities in Kashmir. Fundamentalist Muslims seeking autonomy from India view Kashmiriyat as a deviation from Islam, while Hindus in Jammu and Buddhists in Ladakh, striving for autonomy from the dominant political control of the Kashmir Valley, see Kashmiriyat as a tool for the Islamization of the region.

Thus, the present Kashmir conflict should be seen as an inter-religious political conflict, wherein different communities demand their right to determine the region's political future. This study aims to delve into the emergence and development of "Kashmiriyat" as a shared social consciousness and sense of belonging among Kashmiri residents. By examining the Kashmiriyat concept and its manifestation in ethnic-religious and inter-religious interactions, particularly with Buddhism and Hinduism, as well as its role in the Rishi-Sufi movement, this paper seeks to explore its nature and its relevance in the recent inter-religious political dispute in Kashmir.

II. KASHMIRIYAT

In this section of the discussion, we delve into the 'question of Kashmiriyat' as perceived by various scholars. In the pre-British colonial period of Kashmir, irrespective of

religious and ethnic backgrounds, people expressed their traditional sense of belonging through the term "Kashmiriyat". Several studies by scholars have explored this concept, yielding two contrasting viewpoints [4].

The first scholarly perspective regards Kashmiriyat as an integral element of Kashmiri society. T.N. Madan, a prominent proponent of this view, defines Kashmiriyat as a sense of Kashmiri identity that transcends religious divisions, embodying a love for the homeland and a shared language. On the contrary, the second perspective perceives Kashmiriyat as an Islamic Sufi movement aimed at converting Hindus and Buddhists to Islam [5]. Representative proponent Pravez Dewan asserts that the Sufi movement showcased that "Islam did not need the sword or even state patronage to flourish in Kashmir."

Historically, Kashmiriyat is believed to have developed during the rule of Sultan Ghayas-ud-Din Zain-ul-Abidin (1423 to 1474 A.D.) and Mughal emperor Jalal-ud-Din Mohammad Akbar (1542 to 1605), who fostered a sense of brotherhood among the diverse communities of Kashmir. This social consciousness of brotherhood continued beyond the rule of these kings, becoming a cherished personal value among Kashmiris despite their religious differences.

Scholars argue that Kashmiriyat not only embodies brotherhood but also represents a social space that encourages interactions beyond religious and cultural boundaries [6]. This enduring sense of unity is reflected in the shared surnames among Muslims and Hindus in Kashmir, symbolizing Kashmiriyat. Even amidst the conflict and claims of Kashmiriyat being diminished after the 1989 insurgency, there remains a level of trust and brotherhood among the people of Kashmir. Instances like separatist leaders seeking medical treatment from Kashmiri Pandit doctors emphasize the enduring essence of Kashmiriyat [7].

Some scholars propose that Kashmiriyat is the gradual outcome of mutual adaptation of ethnic and religious traditions. The reciprocal adoption of culture and tradition is evident in the interactions between various ethnic and religious communities [8], where members retained traditional practices and beliefs despite conversions, indicating a new religious identity without losing the previous ethnic one.

In summary, the various scholarly perspectives allow us to conceptualize Kashmiriyat as an expression of solidarity, resilience, and patriotism among the people of Kashmir. It represents Kashmiriness and can be defined as a secular ethno-national, socio-cultural consciousness, and/or a cultural value that binds the people of Kashmir together [9]. Our research during the 2019 unrest in Kashmir revealed that Kashmiriyat is founded on humanism, and tolerance is ingrained in the way of life for many Kashmiris. Notably, the constituent communities of Kashmir embrace the idea of Kashmiriyat without relinquishing their original identities, and inclusiveness characterizes their interactions across different communities in their social lives. Examples like Muslims retaining Hindu family names after conversion and the shared folklore and folk music of Hindus and Muslims contribute to the mutual recognition of cultural togetherness in Kashmir [10].

1. The Kashmiri Language: The indigenous Dardic tribes of Kashmir initially developed their language, known as Koshur. However, with the arrival of the Vedic Aryans, the language, rooted in Dardic origins, underwent transformation influenced by Indian-Aryan

or Iranian languages. Over subsequent centuries, the language underwent Sanskritization while retaining unique Kashmiri pronunciation. Present-day Kashmiri language still contains original Kashmiri words, idioms, and proverbs, amalgamated with influences from languages such as Aramaic, Sanskrit, and Persian [11].

Historical records describe Kashmir as part of Gandhara, a cultural or political unit extending from Anantnag to Peshawar, with Taxila as its center. The Naga civilization preceded the rise of Buddhism, with figures like Kapila, Patanjali, and the author of Paramaratha-Sara noted as Naga scholars. Notable Buddhist figures like Naga-Arjuna and Naga-Bodhi were also of Naga descent, hailing from Dardistan, an area rich in natural beauty, earning Kashmir its reputation as a land of prosperity and good kings—a testament to the region's ancient tales.

Koshur, the language spoken by Kashmiris, serves as a crucial aspect of their identity. Within its literature, diverse forms of expression are found, including proverbs, riddles, folk tales, mystical compositions, love lyrics, and folk songs. Over 8000 years, this language has preserved Kashmir's history, reflecting the essence of its land and the resilience of its people. It encapsulates their emotions, struggles under foreign rule, and aspirations, serving as a unifying force among all Kashmiris. The term "Koshur" refers to both the inhabitant of Kashmir and their language, representing the symbol of Kashmiri nationhood or "Kashmiriyat."

- 2. Historiography:** As Kashmiris, we proudly possess a documented historical legacy spanning over six millennia. In the realm of historiography, our written histories, ranging from ancient eras to the contemporary century, are penned in languages such as Sanskrit, Persian, Urdu, and English. Renowned figures in the field of historiography, including Ratnakara, Kalhana, Suka, Srivara, Jonaraja, Mulla Ahmad, Mulla Nadri, Mohammad Mehdi, Mohsin Fani, Narayan Koul, Muhammad Azam, Birbal Kachru, Ghulam Hassan, Bamzai, G.M.D. Sufi, and Fauq, have significantly contributed to this rich historical tapestry [11].

III. HAZRAT BULBUL SHAH

Hazrat Bulbul Shah, a Sufi mystic, arrived in Kashmir around 1320 during the reign of Lha Chen Gyalbo Rinchana, the Buddhist king of Kashmir. During this time, the king faced agitation as Devaswami, the chief priest of the Brahmins, declined to admit Rinchana into the Shaiva fold. Frustrated, the king invited Hazrat Bulbul Shah to his court, seeking enlightenment. With interpreters present, Hazrat Bulbul Shah explained his Sufi beliefs and Islam to the king, sparking his interest and leading to a month-long discussion. Ultimately, Rinchana chose to embrace Islam [12].

This historical account suggests that Islam was introduced to Kashmir through the Buddhist king, who became the first Muslim ruler of Kashmir. Following his example, many, including Queen Kota Rani, councilors, such as Ravachandra, Laddakhi Buddhist retainers, bodyguards, Kashmiri Buddhist nobles, and government officials, embraced Islam under the influence of Hazrat Bulbul Shah. This peaceful transformation represented a unique and silent revolution, where a large populace, including their ruler, peacefully transitioned to a new religion [13].

This transition marked the amalgamation of three cultures: Buddhist, Shaivism, and Islam, giving rise to a unified culture now known as "Kashmiriyat." This significant event is symbolized by the tomb of Hazrat Bulbul Shah at Bulbul Lankar in Srinagar, embodying the essence of Kashmir's composite culture [14].

The Sultanate Period (1320-1586): The period of the Sultanate in Kashmir, up to the late 16th century, stands as the illustrious era of Kashmiriyat. This epoch witnessed Kashmir under its own rulers, who were not just remarkable builders but also considerate toward their subjects. They actively worked to improve the living conditions of the populace, focusing on initiatives like constructing canals to enhance irrigation. Moreover, this era marked the introduction of various arts and crafts, including paper mache, shawl and carpet weaving, Namda-sazi, and woodworking. It was during this time that Kashmir established crucial trade and commercial ties with Central Asian countries, Punjab, Afghanistan, and Tibet, cementing its position as a key hub along the Silk-Route [15].

Sultan Shihab-ud-Din (1354-1373) exemplified significant leadership during this era, expanding Kashmir's influence by subjugating regions like Kashgar, Badakshan, Kabul, and Sind. Another notable ruler, Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin, embraced a benevolent rule for his people, setting a precedent for religious tolerance long before the Mughal emperor Akbar. The Sultanate period saw the development of a humanistic philosophy known as the Rishi Order, founded by the revered figure Hazrat Nund Rishi, the saint patron of Kashmir. Muslim Rishis played a vital role during this period, preaching love, justice, social reforms, piety, and Islamic principles of peace and brotherhood [16].

These sultans served as patrons of culture, fostering an era where Kashmir not only remained independent but also thrived in terms of material prosperity and cultural advancement. However, with the onset of the Mughal reign in India, Kashmir lost its independence, gradually fading into obscurity.

IV. LALLA DED

Lalla Ded, also known as Lalleshwari, lived during the years 1320-1389 and was a prominent figure expressing her thoughts in her native language, Kashmiri. This is particularly notable as she was a Hindu devoted to Shaivism, yet chose to convey her ideas using the language often associated with Muslim Sufis. This choice can be seen as a representation of the resurgence of Kashmiriyat, embodying values of tolerance, secularism, and brotherhood.

In her poetic verses known as Vaakhs, Lalla Ded advocated for the eradication of distinctions among individuals based on their religious beliefs. Instead, she encouraged introspection to realize the presence of God within [17]. One of her significant contributions was the mentorship of Hazrat Nund Rishi, elevating him to the revered position of the saint patron of Kashmir.

1. Silsila-I-Rishian (Rishi Order): With the arrival of the Sultanate period in 1320, Kashmiris witnessed the emergence of a novel humanistic philosophy termed as Silsila-I-Rishian or the Rishi Order. This philosophy was established by the revered patron saint of Kashmir, Jagat Guru Shaikh-ul-Alam, known as Hazrat Shaikh Noor-ud-Din Wali,

originally named Nund Rishi. His disciples, coming from diverse faiths, became champions of values such as secularism, brotherhood, and peace. All mystic movements fundamentally aim for the purification of the heart and the attainment of inner bliss.

The Silsila-i-Rishian served as a meeting ground for various such movements, uniquely born within the realms of Kashmir. The torchbearer of this order was Shaikh Noor-ud-Din Wali, also known as Nund Rishi or Shahajanunda, and his other titles included Alamdar-i-Kashmir, signifying the standard bearer of Kashmir. The quintessence of Kashmir, represented by its flag or banner, is encapsulated in Kashmiriyat, denoting the fear of God, love for humanity, compassion for the underprivileged, and service to fellow human beings [18].

Shaikh Noor-ud-Din Wali crafted a composite philosophy that has defined Kashmiris for centuries. Indeed, Kashmiri identity is intricately intertwined with the Silsila-i-Rishian. The esteemed Rishis of Kashmir ardently sought peace and harmony, dedicating their efforts towards achieving this end. Shaikh Noor-ud-Din Wali not only emphasized the spiritual equality of humanity but also aspired to extend it into the realms of economic and social life. He advocated for everyone to champion the unity of mankind, harboring love and respect for all faiths. His teachings transcended the boundaries of any particular religious terminology [19].

The poetic compositions of Nund Rishi are termed as *Shruks*. In these, he expresses what is best and noble for human beings. He says:

*“There is one God
But with different names”!
“We belong to the same parents:
Then why this difference
Let Hindus and Muslims (together)
Worship God alone”*

- 2. An Icon of Kashmiriyat:** Sultan Zin-ul-Abidin, commonly known as Sultan-al-Azam Budshah or the esteemed ruler of Kashmir, stands out as one of the most progressive Muslim rulers in Indian history. Described by the contemporary historian Jonaraja, Sultan Zin-ul-Abidin possessed remarkable qualities: proficiency in numerous languages, mastery in various fields of knowledge, benevolence, approachability, tolerance, kindness, virtue, merit, and liberality.

His magnanimity as a ruler professing the Muslim faith is evident in his actions, notably in the reconstruction of the Martanda and Amarnatha temples. Sultan Budshah, who governed Kashmir from 1420 to 1459, can be hailed as a prominent embodiment of "Kashmiriyat." He displayed love and care for all his subjects, regardless of their religious beliefs—Hindus, Muslims, and Buddhists alike. His outstanding qualities led his Hindu subjects to revere him as an incarnation of Narayana [20].

V. GLORIOUS REIGN

Sultan Mohammad Yusuf Shah Chak (1578-1586) tirelessly strived to govern his realm with principles of justice and equity, dedicating significant efforts to the welfare of his subjects, irrespective of their caste or creed. He held a secular mindset and took the commendable step of abolishing the despised Jazia tax imposed on Hindu subjects [5]. Additionally, the king eliminated numerous taxes and levies that had been imposed by his predecessors.

In recognition of the Hindu sentiment regarding cow slaughter, which he deeply respected, Sultan Mohammad Yusuf Shah issued a decree banning such practices. Demonstrating his love for nature, he commanded the prohibition of the cutting of forest trees. Furthermore, he instilled discipline in his army, instructing them to refrain from engaging in unlawful acts.

In historical accounts like the Rajtarangini, written by Prajyabhatta and Shuka, Sultan Mohammad Yusuf Shah's reign is glorified. They eloquently describe how his rule brought prosperity to the kingdom, comparing it to the sun's influence on lotuses when darkness dissipates. His virtues and qualities were numerous, and although his fame spread across the world, he remained bound by his merits, retaining prosperity within his realm [7]. The accounts juxtapose the fleeting nature of prosperity with the enduring nature of fame, portraying the king as a friend to worthy men, unlike the moon, often considered adversarial to the meritorious.

The essence of Kashmiriyat finds its roots in the pride that Kashmiris hold for the greatness of their independent kings. In this context, Sultan Mohammad Yusuf Shah Chak emerges as an iconic figure embodying the spirit of "Kashmiriyat."

Kashmiriyat Invaded: On July 23, 1589, Sultan Mohammad Yaqub Shah faced Mughal Emperor Akbar, and he was subsequently sent to Bihar, where he was to be imprisoned alongside his father. This marked the culmination of Kashmir's independent identity and signified the surrender of Kashmiriyat. A contemporary historian lamented this event, expressing:

"The act of submission was a profound tragedy, tarnishing his reputation. Had he chosen to fight and lay down his life for his country's independence, he would have been remembered as a hero and a valiant fighter for his nation's freedom."

VI. CONCLUSION

"Kashmiriyat" epitomizes the culmination of centuries of interactions between the ancient ethno-religious traditions of Kashmir and Islam. It stands as a harmonious synthesis of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islamic teachings. This cultural fusion occurred through the assimilation of Hindu-Buddhist religious elements by Sufis, embracing concepts such as the immanence of God, respect for diverse religions, belief in reincarnation, the spiritual path of meditation and absorption, miracles, and reverence for idols of deities.

The formation of "Kashmiriyat" was deeply rooted in the Muslim engagement with the spiritual symbiosis existing between ethnic communities, Buddhism, and Hinduism. While it has been shaped by the influence of various religious teachings, at its core, "Kashmiriyat" remains primarily a secular movement. The encounter between Hinduism and Islam brought about profound cultural and psychological transformations in both religions. This interaction had evident effects at both the group and individual levels, impacting religious practices, food, clothing, prayers, daily behavior, and overall well-being of Hindus and Muslims.

Presently, Kashmir is embroiled in an intercommunity political dispute concerning its political destiny. It is crucial to acknowledge that the political dominance of the Kashmiri Muslim majority underpins this conflict. Achieving sustained peaceful coexistence among Buddhist, Hindu, and Muslim communities is vital for Kashmir's continued progress. Addressing the intercommunity dispute necessitates a balanced distribution of political power among these communities in the governance of the Kashmir region. This objective can be effectively pursued by embracing the spirit of Kashmiriyat and implementing a federal legislature that promotes power-sharing along communal lines while upholding democratic principles and fostering love for one's own region.

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