

Sheikh Noorani's Poetry: Ilm-e-Ludni; Treasure beyond Measure

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Abstract: Sheikh Noorani is one of the greatest stalwarts of Kashmiri literature. Sheikh Noorani also known as Nund Rishi, a patron saint and a mystic who is regarded as icon of Kashmiriyat along with Lal Ded. The paper endeavors to explore his poetry that foregrounds the mystic ideology based on the Quran. Sheikh's poetry is in the form of *shruks* that he shared with the inhabitants in common parlance that is *Koushar*. He grasped the eternal truth that we belong to one family. The poetry of Sheikh reflects poetic adeptness and unflinching faith in the ideology of Islam that corresponds to the narrative of interfaith harmony and cosmic vision. The paper aims to expound the poetry by delving into the Quranic wisdom that fall in with the fundamentals of his poetry. The concepts of *tahara*, *murshid-taalib*, *nafs*, and *baga* are core concepts of Rishiyat. The narrative of his poetry addresses the issues that are of contemporary relevance and forms continuity by remaining alive from generation to generation thus, constitutes the element of immortality and timelessness.

Keywords: Mystic Poetry, Ilm-e-Ludani; Shruks, Koushar Quran, Nafs, Unity, and Love

Introduction: Literature plays a significant role as an agent of transformation varying from personal and social to literary realm. Poetry has its roots down the human history in the form of folktales and was transmitted orally from one generation to another before the inception of writing. Since time immemorial, poetry has acted as a vital genre in the literary domain and served multitude of purposes, for instance- as a means to instruct, to express personal feelings and emotions, and to convey divine knowledge etc. The paper aims to explore and expound the poetry of Sheikh Noorani as a vehicle of spiritual verities under the rubric of Islamic mysticism and its impact in mending the society through the Rishi order.

The marvel of nature in the Himalayas, also known as the crown of Bharat is called Kasheer in the common parlance. The first mention of Kashmir is in the geographical reference by Ptolemy who called Kashmir as Kasperia. In the past, Kashmir was known throughout the world as important center of learning and significantly contributed in the development of Sanskrit. All major schools of Indian Aesthetics were founded by Kashmir theoreticians. Mir Mohammad Hanif, in his book *Imprints of English on Modern Kashmiri Poetry* posits that “the written records of the literary tradition in Kashmir show that, even in the tenth century there was a well-developed poetic tradition, grounded in mystic philosophy” (24). Mystical writing have been explored and expounded from numerous vantage points, for example- psychology, philosophy, sociology and literature. Mysticism is spiritual quest for union with the divine with a vision of unifying love. There are two important types of mysticism: “transcendental and immanent” (Dhar 60). It aims at purification of lower self (*nafs*) to synthesize with the higher infinite Self and it is a direct intuitional experience with the Divine. E. Underhill defines it as:

Mysticism is seen to be a highly specialized form of that search for reality, for heightened and completed life, which we have found to be a constant characteristic of human consciousness. It is largely prosecuted by that “spiritual spark,” that transcendental faculty which through the life of our life, remains below the threshold in ordinary men. (69)

The *Merriam Webster* defines the term ‘mysticism’ as “the belief that direct knowledge of God, spiritual truth, or ultimate reality can be attained through subjective experience (such as intuition or insight).

Mysticism spread worldwide in the medieval period. “Sufism as it is known in the Muslim World, is Islamic mysticism” (Lings 15). Islamic mysticism or Sufism is the heart of Islam that includes submission to the will of Allah. “Between the 8th and 13th century, Central Asia, Iran and Arabia witnessed mystic movement, known as Sufi order” (Hassnain 88). Sufism is called as *Sufi-gari* in Persian and *Tassawuf* in the Arabic. Islamic mysticism had its origin in the teachings of Prophet Mohammad, and had no connection with either Greek or Aryan influences. Broadly, two origins of the word Sufi have been suggested, that is, *safa* meaning purity, and *wool* referring to the woolen garments the Sufi wore. “These men are known by the term *Muqarrabin* (friends of God), *Sabirin* (Patient Men), *Abrar* (virtuous men), *Zuhhad* (pious

men) in the Quran” (Shah 12-13). Islam has two aspects; one is external (*dhair* or *zahir*), that is Divine law represented by Sharia and the second is the inner dimension (*batin*) represented by Tariqa; the spiritual path. Titus Burckhardt in *Art of Islam: Language and Meaning* states that, Sufism is the “Inward dimension of Islam” (223). The Holy Quran, Hadith, and Sunnah along with the Nahj-al Balaghah are the primary sources of Divine knowledge (*marifat*) leading to spiritual awakening. Sufis believe that both the domains; exoteric and esoteric contribute in comprehending the true message of Islam. Thus, Sufis propagates the essence of Islam by adhering their inner spirit to the word of Allah handed down through the Holy Quran and the Hadith. A. Q. Rafiqi in *Sufism in Kashmir*, quotes R. A. Nicholason view on introducing Sufism and Sufis as:

The Sufis are not a sect, they have no dogmatic system, the tariqas or paths by which they seek God “are in number as the souls of men” and vary infinitely, though a family likeness may be traced in them all. Descriptions of such a protean phenomenon must differ widely from one another, the impression produced in each case will depend on the choice of the materials and the prominence given to this or that aspect of the many sided myth. (xlii)

Advent of Sufism in India and Kashmir: Sufism was systematized by Al- Ghazali in the 6th century and “the term was invented at the end of eighteenth century” (Ernst 27). In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, Sufism had a definite form before coming to India. There are distinct Sufi orders based on the approach towards the Divine, the means of attaining the Truth (*Al-Haq*), and have varied forms of music, poetry, dance, and art. Sufis of the Chisti order dominated medieval India. In India, the union territory of Jammu and Kashmir comprises of Jammu province and Kashmir valley which is known for its heterogeneous nature in terms of its culture and is amalgamation of Hinduism and Islam. Sufis played a great role in the history of the Muslim world during its time of stress and strife. Islam entered the strong ring of mountains towards the beginning of 8th century. “Islam made its way into Kashmir not by forcible conquest but by gradual conversion” (Parimoo viii) and was consolidated under the rule of Ladakhi Prince Lha Chen Gyalbu Rinchan; the first Muslim ruler of Kashmir, who was converted under the spiritual guidance of the first Sufi from Central Asia, Sayyid Sharaf-ud-din alias Hazrat Bulbul Shah Qalandar, “who ushered a religious evolution in Kashmir, by conquering the heart of the ruler as

well as his subjects” (Hassnain 34) as the society was pierced under the Brahmanical rule. Mir Sayyid Ali Hamadani added feathers in the cap of Muslim Rule by convincing the caste ridden Kashmiris into enlightened people by propagating the meaning of true faith based on the Holy Quran. Seven hundred craftsmen from Iran accompanied Mir Ali Hamadani and contributed in enhancing the economy of Kashmir by teaching the natives the art of carpet making, shawl-weaving, silk-weaving, and architecture and making them self-sufficient. As Sufi variant of Islam was preached and propagated in Kashmir, thus, Islam was popularized as a mystic order in Kashmir.

Rishi Order in Kashmir- Universal Spirit of Mysticism: The indigenous mysticism in Kashmir was known by the name of Rishi order that emerged in the beginning of fifteenth century. “It developed amidst the traditions of Buddhist renunciation and Hindu asceticism” (Rafiqi 178). The word Rishi is of Sanskrit origin. “In Rig-veda, it is used in the sense of the singer of sacred hymns” (Rafiqi 179). Rishi order was of local origin and existed in Kashmir prior to the advent of Sufism from Central Asia and Persia into the valley. In pre-Islamic times, there existed Rishis like “Khalasman, Plasman, and Yasman” (Rafiqi 180) to name a few. The Rishi-cult with an aim towards promoting syncretic culture of Kashmir was founded by Sheikh Noorani against the back-drop of extremism of Brahmanical society and the destructive rule of Sultan Sikander. “Nund Rishi’s approach was more down to earth and it not only made impact of new culture soft and meaningful, but also guaranteed the continuance of very Kashmiri way of life” (Parimoo viii). The disciples of Sheikh included both men and women who made notable contribution to save the Kashmiri culture. The teachings of Rishism originates from the Holy Quran and the hadith of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) and was one of the important schools of philosophy of Islam in Kashmir. It is the esoteric and pragmatic aspect of the religion. Rishi-Sufis represent the true spirit of Islam. They believe in devotion to Almighty and purification of the soul by self-denial. Rishi-Sufi stressed that the true love for God is in love with the God’s creation as the core belief of Rishism. Rishi-Sufi way of life includes gnosis (*marifat*) of the Divine, nearness (*qurb*) to Divinity by purification of the soul. The Rishi –Sufis practiced yoga along with mortification of the soul following imprints of the Buddhist monks and achieved illumination.

The principle of love for the Almighty and his creation, peaceful co-existence through the spirit of tolerance and above all humanity are ingrained in Rishism as the Rishi-Sufis made no distinction between the followers of different faiths. Rishism can be called as a study of brotherhood among different faiths.

Commodore D. S. Sodhi states in his article, “Kashmiriyat and Composite Culture” that:

People affiliated to different faiths have lived together in Kashmir since centuries and the religious affiliations never affected their sense of belongingness to each other as a Kashmiri. Immense contribution was made by noble Sufi saints, Peers and other blessed souls in enriching, elevating, and refining the lives of the people. Their influence was a huge contributor towards building this culture.

Nund Rishi- Patron Saint of Kashmir: Sheikh Noorani alias Jagat Guru Nund Rishi was born at Kaimuh, a village two miles to the west of Bijbihara in Kashmir in 1377 and his tomb exists in Charer-Sharif. Out of great veneration, Kashmir Muslims named him Sheikh-al-Alam and Kashmiri Pandits titled him as Sehjananda; Sehj signifies perfection and Ananda stands for Beautiful vision. His ancestors belong to the progeny of Sannz; Suraj-Vansi clan of the Rajputs. “His poetry is in the form of *shruks* bears a distinct effect upon Kashmiri society” (Razdan 12). “A ‘*shruk*’ literally means a knot or a puzzle” (Hanif 34). *Shruks* have “the rhyme structure of A-B, A-B” (Smith 24). His sayings called *shruks* are collected and preserved in two volumes called as Rishi Nama and Nur Nama...” (Bamzai 69).

Lalleshwari; a Kashmiri Shaivite is regarded as his spiritual mentor and foster mother because as an infant he denied taking milk from his mother’s breast for three consecutive days. Lalleshwari unexpectedly appeared at their house and uttered these words to the infant: “Ashamed thou wert not of being born! Shouldst thou fight shy of suckling, now?” (Parimoo 13-14). Murshid and Taalib is a principle of the mystic world and has genesis in the Muslim teachings itself. Sheikh shared this relationship with Lal Ded and paid reverence in the following words:

That Lalla of Padmanpore,

Who nourished me with nectar of life,

She is our Autara

Who nourished me with milk! (Hassnain 49)

Nund Rishi advises one to introspect one's heart as introspection reveals the darkness inside one's heart. He had divine experience after passing through many Sufi stations (*maqams*). Through poetry, he advises one to control one's lower self (*nafs-i-Ammara*) as this evil self is an obstacle in the spiritual enterprise. Says Nund Rishi:

Scandalized am I, through my baser self.

Disgraced have been I, through my carnal appetites.

Unconscious thy soul is, allow not it to trample thy conscience.

Divinity attained he, who subdued it, by & by. (Adfar 277)

Another *shruk* pertaining to the same theme:

Perplexed am I of my baser self.

Surely it is the devil in me.

Lest it may not demolish the cawsey of my virtuous deeds.

Lured am I to inferno because of it. (Adfar 282)

Sheikh emerged at a time of religious-moral fermentation in Kashmir during the reign of Sultan Sikander who did not treat his subjects on equal terms especially Kashmiri Pandits. He saw the essence of the conflict and endorsed the Pandits of the valley with a conducive environment so that they do not suffer sense of insecurity in their own homeland. He raised his voice against bigotry and says:

The angels start building their tenements;

Razing them to the ground, the demons made the land plain,

Mysterious are the ways of God! Nothing but sand was there?

How can members of the same family jeer at one another? (Parimoo 154)

Sheikh and his disciples believed in living the essence of Islam. He admonishes Mullahs who do not live true to their faith and said:

O Mulla, why you have become a wall among people?

Why are you like each one?

What Kind of Jushie it is?

Your knowledge fake only a show!... (Hassnain 52)

He attacked hypocrites; who preached at mosque but did not abide by the words of the Holy Quran in the following words:

Your rosary to a snake could be likened:

You bend it upon seeing those disciples.

You've eaten six platefuls, to the end...

If you are a mullah then who're the robbers? (Smith 20)

Love is the basis of spiritual awareness and is a repeated theme in his poetry. To be in love with God means love for his creation irrespective of the dogmas. The Love for the divine leads to build trust in God ways and his remembrance (*zikr*). The Love of the Almighty is beyond words and imbibes the concept of persistence of God (*baga*) by self-annihilation (*fana*). Says Nund Rishi:

O hearts, O worlds!

Let love your master be,

The leader of our round goes out

Beyond the Sun and Dawn. (Hassnain 51)

Darkness and doubt is dispelled through intense penance and devotion leading to ultimate goal of God-realization. Sheikh attained the realization of Almighty's omnipresence. Love for the Divine leads to unity among all as we all are divine manifestation. Says Sheikh Noorani:

There is no god but God, did I verify and confirm;

My little self I quite burnt away,

Ignoring the manifest, I meditated on the everlasting:

So was the Spaceless realized by me. (Parimoo 125)

Mystics cannot be bound within the framework of a dogma. His poetry draws wisdom from The Holy Quran and central to his poetry is gnosis, the mystical knowledge (*ilm-i-Ludni*) revealed only to the selected few. Today, young minds are captivated by the high sounding slogans of the nationalist as the religious sentiments are easy to manipulate. Mystics propagate the true message of religion. Current scenario of Kashmir is well known but its history is relatively unknown to the world as the present scenario in Kashmir poses a challenge to its previous secular image. Albeit battles, and conquests make history of a region but also, contributes in the making, and unmaking of cultural and literary traditions. To comprehend Kashmir as a land known for its composite culture, it is important to acquaint oneself with the philosophy and multi-dimensional attainments of Sheikh Noorani. Nund Rishi is one of the greatest stalwarts of Kashmiri literature who through his poetry tried to fill the spiritual vacuity in man by restoring man's faith back to God and religion. His poetry abounds with divine messages, aspiring one towards God-realization through repentance from sin, annihilation of ego, purging lower self (*nafs*), and reviving one's spirit in the love for Divine and his creation. He did not craved for status quo and is a remarkable figure in framing the cultural ethos of Kashmir. By imbibing the essence of his poetry the valley of mourning can be revived as the lush green valley as it was once. Thus, he was the true propagator of *Kashmiriyat*, *Jhamuriyat* and *Insaaniyat*. The great saint Sheikh Noorani himself exclaimed:

“I broke the sword and forged sickles out of it.” (Parimoo viii)

Conclusion: Poetry transcends time and place of origin and the narrative of Nund Rishi's poetry is not circumscribed to people of one particular religion and region. It is of utmost importance to acquaint oneself with the poetry and the Rishi order of Kashmir as it revives the true spirit of Islam that is overshadowed by the extremist media. He is a cementing link among different religions in the world. *Shruks* survived the oral tradition and had a journey from the memory to manuscript. Sheikh Noor-ud-din influenced the cultural life of Kashmir and became symbol of Kashmiriyat. Alienation and disenchantment has become synonym of modernity. In times of

communal crisis, the principles of Rishi order of Nund Rishi is perennial example of communal harmony in Kashmir and world at large. The essence of his poetry fulfills the spiritual vacuity leading to experience bliss. The beliefs of the people and their behavior is determined by the role of religion. Let this religion be of humanity (*Insaaniyat*) addressing real human condition and propagating peaceful co-existence through the wisdom disseminated through *shruks* known as Koushar Quran.

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