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Sheikh Noor-ud-Din Rishi: Poet and Saint*** Dr. Khawaja Zahid Aziz****** Ambreen Khawaja****Abstract:**

Sheikh Noor-ud-Din was born in the latter half of the fourteenth century. He lived a perfectly saintly life. He remained devoted to the noble principles of oneness of all religions and universal brotherhood of man till the end of his life. He has exerted enormous influence on the beliefs and mental thinking of the people of Kashmir as a saint, revolutionary, patriot and poet. The simplicity and purity of Sheikh's life have deeply impressed the Kashmiris who show the highest veneration for the Saint.

Keywords: Sheikh Noor-ud-Din, Zain-ul-Abidin, Kashmir, Kashmiri language, Muslim, Poetry,

Kashmiri art, culture and social life witnessed a great change during the 14th century when Muslim rule firmly established its roots in the valley and Zain-ul-Abidin, emerged as the harbinger of new thoughts and ideas and sufism stuck its roots in Kashmir. The culture of sufism attracted poets, thinkers and philosophers. Mysticism emerged as the marked feature of socio-religious life of medieval Kashmir. This resulted in the synthesis between the new and old traditions which the people of this land have inherited from ages together. It was during this particular phase of Kashmir's cultural and spiritual transition that the famous saint and poet Sheikh Noor-ud-Din Rishi was born.

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He was born in the latter half of the fourteenth century. In spite of being a purely historical personality, who lived in a specific time frame of 14th and 15th centuries, his life is shrouded in myths and legends. There is no general agreement among the sources about the date of his birth. However, majority of scholars agree that he was born on 10 Zil Hijja / 9th April, 1378.(1)

He had no formal education. He spent most of his time in solitude. He had hardly any interest in worldly affairs and was mostly absorbed in deep thought and meditation. He lived a perfectly saintly life and remained devoted to the noble principles of oneness of all religions and universal brotherhood of man till the end of his life.(2) As a saint, revolutionary, patriot and poet, he has exerted enormous influence on the beliefs and mental thinking of the people of the Happy Valley. His thoughts have moulded the minds of generation for more than five centuries, establishing a culture of utmost religious tolerance with an abiding faith in the omnipresence of God.

The Sheikh was married to Zia Ded in his early age and had two children, Haider and Zoon. But he soon became sullen with worldly life. He had come to believe in a life of self-denial in order to attain divine pleasure. He took to the life of recuse. As a patron-saint of this region, he provided the guiding light to seekers to absolute truth; as a popular mass leader, he made non-violence and religious tolerance the basic characteristics of our national thinking and as an able organizer, he built cadres of his organization in every part of Kashmir. He proved a saviour of Kashmiri language at a time when Persian posed a potential threat to its very existence.(3)

With the message of monotheism, Noor-ud-Din Wali went from village to village. People from all sects were attracted towards him by his preaching. During the Sheikh's own life time eminent missionaries like Shah-i-Hamdani (1340-1385), Mir Mohammad Hamadani (1372-1450) and Syed Hussain Simnani (1421) all developed contacts with him. There were many eminent local saints and sadhus too, who joined the galaxy of his disciples with pride and pleasure. Even some foreign saints became his followers.(4)

He voiced against worldly allurements, vanity, hypocrisy, jealousy and misuse of religion for petty mundane gains. He vehemently criticised social discrimination, ritualism and polytheism. The most vibrant tool which the saint used to make his movement pervasive throughout the valley was the language of the masses. He used common man's language Koshar as the piercing mode of expressing poetry.(5) In Kashmiri poetry, he holds a very important position. He was younger contemporary of Lal Ded. His early poetry was strongly influenced by

her. In his verses there is a deep sense of mystic thought and philosophy. Love and intense devotion to God forms the basis of his poetry.

The serious study of his poetry reveals that through his poetic compositions, Sheikh intended to give expression to the people's sentiment shaped by new religious cultural information. On the one hand, it provided an enlarged space in the changing socio-religious landscape of Kashmir to accommodate wide variety of people within the fold of Islam, on the other hand, the saint's open-air contacts with men and women folk at different places offered him enough chances to understand the nature and character of Kashmiri society.(6) During his stay at different places, he had a chance to enter into direct encounter with the people belonging to different rungs of Kashmiri social pyramid. It included officialdom, landed aristocracy, religious elite, rural artisans, professional peasantry and cultural practitioners.

The Sheikh had a mission to make illiterate folk understand the fundamentals of Islam in the simplest form. To address this objective, he used vernacular as a medium of expression and people bereft of any scholastic taste and tongue understood his message very easily.(7) He composed his verses in tune with the Quranic injunctions and the core truth of revealed verses got communicated to common masses without any linguistic or metaphoric twist. Besides, the Sheikh aimed at eradicating all irritants which created false distinction among the humans in the name of caste and lineage. The doctrine of caste struck at the root of human equality and it nursed various tyrannies. But Noor-ud-Din believed in clean sweep of such a doctrine.

The acute social disparity observable at the ground level always pained the saint. Wherever, Sheikh went, he forcefully preached against the highhandedness of those people who acted as the agents to tarnish the doctrine and the value of social harmony and oneness. Sheikh writes:

One harps proudly upon one's caste,
Is bereft of reason and wisdom,
Here the good alone can claim noble descent,
In the hereafter, caste will be extinct.(8)

It is also worthwhile to note that in his sayings Sheikh always called upon the people to follow the path of peace and harmony. He strongly pleaded for tolerance, fellow-feeling, love and affection among all sections of the society. He writes:

We belong to the same parents,
Then why this difference?
Let Hindus and Muslims worship God alone
We came to this world like partners

We should have shared our joys and sorrows together.(9)

Human society is not a unified whole. One finds various shades and levels, representing strikingly opposite behaviour patterns. Kashmiri society of Sheikh Noor-ud-Din's times was full of tension and crises. In such a social landscape, where evildoers dotted predominantly, one could not expect totally flawless social activities. Since Sheikh's period was one of transition and change, people were really in a flux which one to accept and which one to dismiss. The outdoor activity spanned over years provided him enough opportunity to interact with the people possessing different behaviour patterns and mindsets. His mission during his tour was not conditioned exclusively to make people aware about the truth of oneness of God. But it was equally guided by a social objective to keep people away from social evils by cultivating in them the sense and spirit of human ethics and fellow feeling.

Like a true and a pious mystic, Sheikh denounces hypocrisy, both of the worldly-wise and the egoistic unholy saints. Sheikh writes:
 You have acquired knowledge for selfish ends,
 Your endeavour is to see each other fall.
 You consider yourself to be the favourites of the Lord here.

But there, not one per thousand can escape from the punishment.(10)

Sheikh Noor-ud-Din Rishi never compromised with the basic principles of Islam. What Sheikh instead opposed vehemently, was the duplicity of the very custodians of the religion. Throughout his travel, the saint both by precept and example attempted to make unlettered people understand the core spirit of the revealed book the Quran. To make it more simple and intelligible, the saint used the language of the common masses, Kashmiri as a tool of transmission. That is why, his poetry is remembered as Koshur Quran.(11)

Kashmir has produced a galaxy of towering personalities but hardly any other luminary is so eminently multidimensional as Sheikh Noor-ud-Din Wali. His greatness has been widely acknowledged right from his own days. Suk Jeevan Mal (1756-1769), a governor during the Pathan rule briefly succeeded from the central authority and nominated a distinguished Persian scholar and poet to write an exhaustive verified history of the Reshi movement and the biography of its leader. Another governor of Kabul, Atta Mohammad Khan, who declared independence of Kashmir in 1809, struck gold and silver coins in the name of Sheikh Noor-ud-Din to popularise his rule.(12)

Sheikh Noor-ud-Din is one of those outstanding personalities who have had the greatest and the most lasting influence on the culture

of Kashmir. Eversince he illuminated the valley with his effulgent life, he has become a household name, the object of excessive love and veneration of the Kashmiris. The Sheikh's resting place at Charar serves as a centre of pilgrimage for all Kashmiris high and low, literate and illiterate, Muslims and non-Muslims. The simplicity and purity of Sheikh's life have deeply impressed the Kashmiris who entertain the highest veneration for the saint.

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