
Kashmir's Composite Culture: Sufism & Communal Harmony - Kashmiriyat

Introduction

The Brahmanical social domination coupled with unsteady economic order in the Kashmir Valley created room for Sufism, which appeared as a reaction of the spirit, against the letter, by preaching the doctrine of love, compassion, humanity and an ideology where caste hierarchy, individual's financial standing did not matter; Followed by introducing novel crafts, offering people with the means of livelihood and thereby supporting them in their fight against poverty and social policies.

Sufism is a mystic sect of Islam. Sufi Saints won over the hearts of Kashmiris on account of their piety and sincerity by employing methods of persuasion, humanity and discourse. The people of Kashmir, initially started to convert to Islam under the influence of peaceful Sufis and at a later stage by forceful means employed by Muslim invaders who ruled Kashmir for five centuries till Islam became the dominant religion in the State, however the popular religion could never acquire a dogmatic form in Kashmir. Kashmiri Pandits and Muslims were indubitably aware of their religious differences while Sufism served to promote a common way of understanding the world, thereby forming the cornerstone of the unique Kashmiri culture that transcends religious boundaries. During current times, when the people of Kashmir are going through ineffable yet palpable miseries, both inside and outside Kashmir, the magnificent metaphysical and mystical ethnicities enriched by Sufi saints do bring solace, though facing their greatest challenge due to the Wahabi brand of Islam designed to destroy Kashmir and its eons old ethos.

Sufism in Kashmir

Sufism is a path of spiritual advancements, an expansion of consciousness, leading to awareness of self and the universe. The substance of Sufism is selfless experiencing and actualization of the truth. The practice of Sufism leads to the development of innate spiritual and intuitive abilities. Sufis are divided into different orders of mystical brotherhood, although they share certain core beliefs. Some Sufis believe in '*wahdat-al-wujud*' (*unity of all existence*), finding God in everything, while some Shariah-centric (Shariah: Islamic law), believe in '*wahdat-al-shuhud*' (*unity of all witness*), all creatures observing one faith, God being transcendent. Some Sufis preach an extreme passivity to the point of renouncing the world, while some stress on worldly-involvement. In Kashmir, the major orders are the Naqshbandi, the Qadris, the Suhrawardi, the Kubrawi and the Rishis. All except for the Rishis, are said to have their origins in Iran and Central Asia. The people of Kashmir refer to their land as '*Pir Vaer*' or '*Rishi Vaer*', meaning, *The Valley of Saints*.

One of the earliest known Sufis in Kashmir is said to have been from Turkistan belonging to Suharwadi order in the 13th century. Sayyed Sharfuddin Abdur Rahman, fondly remembered as *Hazrat Bulbul Shah*. He is said to have made transformations in the strictly caste-ridden

Brahmin dominated society of Kashmir and is believed to have arrived during the reign of King Suhadeva (1301-20) and was the first Saint who sowed the seeds of Islam in Kashmir. Bulbul Shah was instrumental in the conversion of the Buddhist Prince from Ladakh, Lhachan Gualbu Rinchana, who revolted against his uncle, the ruler of Ladakh, and when defeated fled to Kashmir, finding shelter with the King of Kashmir, who appointed Rinchana as a Minister. Raja Suhadev fled to Tibet after he was defeated by Mongols who invaded Kashmir with 70,000 soldiers. His Prime Minister, Ramachandra occupied the throne after the departure of the Mongols and appointed Rinchana as an administrator, who in turn, planned Ramachandra's killing and became the ruler of Kashmir. In order to gain local sympathy, Rinchana married Ramachandra's daughter, Kota Rani and aspired to convert to Hinduism which Brahmin priests did not allow as they were not sure as to which *varna* (caste) he would adopt, as he was involved in the killing of Ramachandra.

Shah Miri, one of the Ministers of Raja Suhadev, advised him to embrace Islam, after which he took his Muslim name of Sultan Sadruddin. Ten thousand of his subjects, including his brother-in-law, Ravanachandra converted with him. After conversion, he renamed Srinagar as '*Rinchanpora*' and built a mosque known as '*Bud Masheed*', on the site of a Buddhist temple. He built a cloister in honour of his spiritual mentor Bulbul Shah, and attached to the *khanqah* (cloister) was a *langarkhana* (public charity kitchen) known as Bulbul Lankar, where the poor were fed, free-of-cost, twice a day.

The next major Sufi to enter Kashmir was the fourteenth century Iranian Kubrawi Saint, Mir Sayyed Ali Hamadani, popularly known as *Shah-i-Hamadan*. He was a well-travelled scholar who entered Kashmir along with 700 of his disciples, who eventually settled down in various parts of Kashmir, spreading Islam and the principles of the Kubrawi Sufi order. The Muslim ruler Sultan Qutub-ud-Din made comfortable arrangements for Shah-i-Hamadan and his disciples out of his Sultanate. Shah-i-Hamadan was a prodigious scholar, credited with having 37,000 conversions to Islam in Kashmir; owing to his outstanding spiritual charisma. He is popularly remembered as '*Amir-i Kabir*' (The great leader) and '*Bani-i Musalmani*' (The founder of Islam [in Kashmir]).

"The leader of the leaders, Commander of the non-Arab Muslims: his hands were the builders of the fate of Islamic Communities"- Sir Muhammad Iqbal, poet, philosopher, British India.

Shah-i-Hamadan's teachings were based on the pillars of '*Tawheed*' (oneness of God) '*Taqwa*' (God-fearing piety), '*Ikhlas*' (purity) and Unity. After the Mongol invasion, the economy of the Kashmir Valley was on a constant decline and the socio-political equilibrium was profusely disturbed, making survival difficult for the inhabitants. The prevailing socio-, economic and political situation of the Kashmir Valley worked in favour of Shah-i-Hamadan and he filled the existing void with his ideology that he carried from Iran, in the form of Islam.

Shah-i-Hamadan took keen interest in the economy of the Kashmir Valley and introduced the arts and craft technique of Central Asia, and suggested ways and means to improve upon the irrigation system in the Valley. He urged the ruler, Sultan Qutub-ud-Din to start the shawl industry in Kashmir on the pattern of Central Asian *Karkhana* (factory), reorganizing the

industry system in Kashmir, thereby improving the economic conditions of the common man and restructuring the Kashmiri society under the influence of Islam. He introduced the concept of '*division of labour*' and apart from employing skilled labour, these *Karkhanas*, imparted training to Kashmiris in various techniques of manufacturing goods, which necessitated the launch of markets further intensifying the process of urbanization and providing the required impetus to trade and commerce. Shah-i-Hamadan introduced the concept of Muslim architecture by constructing *Khanqahs* (monasteries), mosques and tombs on a pattern, which was totally new to Kashmir, enhancing the opportunities for employment. Canals were dug to meet the irrigational requirements which otherwise had made people to quit agriculture. People of Kashmir benefitted from his strategies and involvement in socio-economic activities, which helped the common man to elevate his standard of living and thereby also accepting Islam as his faith. The privileged class of the society including Sultans, Nobles and Brahmins were equally attracted to him and held him with great reverence. Its noteworthy, that he employed no means of supremacy or ferocity to spread the message of Islam. In spite of his following, he rejected the idea of charity for religious men. He was an expert in needle-work and earned his living by cap-making and encouraged his *mureeds* (followers) to do the same. Some prominent members of his team included Khwaja Ishaq Khatlani, Shaykh Qawam-al-Din, Sayyed Hussain Simnani, Sayyed Kamal and Muhammad Kazim - all intellectuals, technicians or experts in various forms of art.

The local response to Hamadani's teachings came in the form of development of an indigenous religious order, *Rishism* or *Rishi* order. Kashmiris used the Hindu epithets Rishi or Baba to describe these Sufi saints. *Rishism* was rooted within the broader Islamic tradition, stressed upon the universal values such as peace, harmony, love and fraternity between all creatures of God, irrespective of a particular religion. Owing to inherent universal appeal, their shrines grew into popular places of pilgrimage for both Muslims and Pandits, bringing them together in common participation at shrine rituals as well as in helping to build bridges between people of different castes and faith, thereby contributing to communal harmony.

The origin of the Rishi order goes back to pre-Islamic times, when during Vedic period, hermits renouncing the worldly pleasures retired to caves in forests and mountains to meditate subjecting themselves to severities. However, in Kashmir the *Muslim Rishi movement* was started by, Nuruddin Nurani (1377-1440), by moulding the pre-existing Rishi tradition for the spread of Islam, using local institutions to make Islam more comprehensible to the people of Kashmir. The Hindu followers commonly remember him as *Nund-Rishi* or *Sahazanand* (The blissful one). Nund Rishi's teachings can be described as thoughtful critiquing the society and his loyalty was with the Kashmiri peasantry, the poor lot and his *Shruks* (taken from the Sanskrit word slokas) consistently attacked the caste system. He attached importance to yogic practice and breath control for communion with God. He preached a disciplined life like:

"Desire is like the knotted wood of the forest. It cannot be made into planks, beams or into cradles; He who cut and tilled it, will burn it into ashes".

He considered rosary as a snake and favoured true worship: ***"Do not go to Sheikh and Priest and Mullah; Do not feed the cattle or Arkh or leaves; Do not shut thyself up in mosques or forests; Enter thine own body with breath controlled in communion with God".***

Unlike the Saints of mainland India, instead of criticizing Hinduism or Islam he affirmed his relations with both, the Quran and Hindu-Buddhist thoughts, promoting the universal language of love and taught of how people of different faiths could live together without any faith-based conflict. Nund Rishi alias Sheikh Noor-ud-Din Wali was greatly influenced by a female rebel Hindu Saint; a revolutionary woman mystic of 14th century Kashmir, Lal Ded, who is known through her poetic verses, referred to as '*Lal-Vaakh*'. Lal Ded or Laleshwari was known as Lala Arifa by her Muslim followers.

Kashmir produced great thinkers and spiritual practitioners in the ancient and medieval period whose contributions have been articulated in Sanskrit language. Kashmiris lost their hold on Sanskrit after the advent of Islam around 11th century owing to changing social, religious, linguistic and political arrangements of the society leading to a hiatus between pre-Islamic Kashmir and Islamic Kashmir. Lal Ded proved to be the significant historical bridge that connected the two religious communities. She revolted against all the oppressive edifices, right from secondary dependent status allotted to women to the educated elite of Sanskrit academia who were the custodians of knowledge and tradition and instead articulated the spiritual path and message in Kashmiri, the language of a common man irrespective of caste, creed or individual belief system.

“Oh! fool, right action does not lie in fasting and other ceremonial rites. Oh! fool, right action does not lie in providing for bodily comfort and ease. In contemplation of the self alone is the right action and right council for you”- Lal Ded/Lala Arifa

She used Kashmiri language to spread the message of brotherhood through her sayings (*Lal-Vaakh*), which made Nund Rishi quote that she is, “*The Divine Manifestation for us*”, which makes her the undisputed founder of contemporary Kashmiri literature.

“That Lalla of Padmanpore, who had drunk to her full the nectar. She was an avatar of ours, Oh God, grant me the same spiritual power” - Nund-Rishi

Kashmir has produced several other Rishis like Rupa Bhawani, Parmanand, Rishipir, Jeewan Shah, Lassa Sahib, Anandji, Ramji, Sahib Kaul, Manas Razdan, Zaikak, Kakaji Mastana, Grata Bab, Ramjoo Tabardar, Vidya Dar, Shankar Razdan, Bhagwaan Gopinath Ji, Kashkak, Sona Kak, Nandlal Ji, Swami Lakshman Joo, Sati Devi and Mathura Devi, who transcending the binds of communities and conventions, served masses as their service to God.

Spirit of Communal Harmony

The traditional communal harmony that once existed in Kashmir enabled the peaceful coexistence of Muslims, Kashmiri Pandits (Hindus) and other minorities. The Kashmiri society evolved to be more open to various beliefs, under the influence of Islamic Sufis and Saints of the Rishi order.

“Shiva (God) abides in all that is everywhere, then do not discriminate between a Hindu and a Muslim. If you are wise seek the Absolute within yourself. That is true knowledge of the Lord” – Lal Ded/ Lala Arifa

Some of the festivals in Kashmir which had originated in the Hindu mythology attained a secular character and both Pandits and Muslims celebrated them, birthday of river *Vitasta*

(Jhelum) being one such festival. The King, Zain-ul-Abidin, also known as '*Bud Shah*' (Great King) used to function as a high priest on such occasions promoting a collective identity, often referred to as '*Kashmiriyat*', which further evolved as a representation of religious tolerance, with saints like Lal Ded/Lala Arifa, Shiekh Noorudin/Nun Rishi further helping the cause by spreading the message of oneness and sowing seeds of the concept of religious-humanism. The humanistic philosophy of Kashmiri Sufis and Rishis has played a prominent role in building the Kashmiri ethnic identity.

As times progressed despite of varied political leanings and conflicting attitudes to history of Kashmir, Kashmiris (Pandits and Muslims), continued to have a remarkable degree of tolerance, respect and concern for each other in day to day life. Pandits and Muslims celebrated the onset of spring by celebrating a festival called '*Badamwari*' (Almond festival) as flowers blossomed in almond gardens. In many areas Muslim '*Asthans*' (shrines) and Hindu shrines stood facing each other while people together made pilgrimages to shrines and also visited living Sufis. Kashmiri Pandits and Muslims, together attended gatherings where Kashmiri Sufi poetry was sung at the abodes of living Sufis. Until the year 1989, the year that marked the beginning of a rather political movement for rectification of political grievances, soon taking a violent turn; nobody would have imagined that the soil over which walked the Sufi Saints, spreading the messages of spirituality and oneness, would be one day soaked in the blood of countless people whereby also, a minority community would be forced to leave their ancestral land, all in the name of religion.

Spread of Islam in Kashmir

Islam had begun to coagulate itself into an organized 'system' of adherences and formulas by the end of the 9th century. That was when Sufism appeared as a '*softer*' version of Islam which promoted the concept of '*religious humanism*'. Sufi-mysticism made great progress in Central Asia, assuming the character of a sect there. The Sufis entered Kashmir, when people were passing through a period of political volatility, casteism, hefty taxation and severe burdens of feudalism. The general masses in Kashmir were disgruntled with the despotic rule of their Hindu rulers, where Brahmins exploited the common people. People were divided into several castes, and treated accordingly by the self-proclaimed high-caste Brahmins. Sufism, an amalgamation of humanism, spirituality and tolerance promoted Islam, the doctrine that there is only one God, sans the caste- and class system, attracted many people in Valley, especially the so called, low-castes.

The first name associated with the dissemination of this new faith is Hazrat Bulbul Shah of Suhrawadi order, said to have visited Kashmir during the rule of King Suhadev, the predecessor of Rinchana. Rinchana was the first to convert and the first success of Bulbul Shah's mission, followed by many others. Bulbul Shah died in 1327 and lies buried in the first mosque in Srinagar called, Bulbul Lankar, his mission of spread of Islam was carried forward by his lieutenant Mulla Ahmed till his death in the reign of Sultan Shihab-ud-din. After Bulbul Shah, other Sufis like Sayyed Jalal-ud-din of Bukhara and Sayyed Taj-ud-din, who arrived in the reign of Sultan Shihab-ud-din (1354-73) and was accompanied by Sayyed Mas'ud and Sayyed Yusuf and his disciples. Yet, the most prominent among the Sufi missionaries was Sayyed Ali Hamadani who established Islam in Kashmir. For 21 years Hamadani travelled from

one country to another and is said to have returned to Kashmir Valley again in 1372. Many of his followers visited several corners of the Valley, preaching Islam, however majority of the people were still Hindu. Muslims had nothing to distinguish them in attire, demeanours or customs from their compatriots and the new religion had not made a substantial progression in the Valley. Sultan Qutub-ud-din often visited a particular Hindu temple with his Muslim subjects and performed *Yagna* (a Hindu ritual performed in front of sacred fire) to avert the reoccurrence of famines. Sultan held Sayyed Hamadani in great reverence and visited him every day. He also divorced one of his two wives, who were sisters (in accordance with Hamadani's advice); with the other he entered into a new marriage contract (in conformity with Sharia). Sayyed Hamadani's deep scholarly and spiritual aura, eventually attracted masses.

Not all the Sayyeds who entered Kashmir were earnest Sufis and many of them endorsed the orthodox views on Islam, and at several occasions intervened with the politics of the State to gain favours from the ruler. Sultan Sikandar (1389-1413), and his Prime Minister Suha Bhatt indulged in brutal killings, forcible conversion of Brahmins and mass destruction of their temples. He banned all celebrations and would not listen to music. He imposed *Jizya* (tax on non-Muslim subjects) upon Kashmiri Pandits. Sanskrit books and schools were burnt and Kashmiri Pandits were given 2 options: Either accept Islam or die. Whole villages were converted to Islam, by force. To escape the religious violence during his reign, many Brahmins converted to Islam, many moved to other places in India, particularly to the South, and several others were killed.

During the reign of Zain-ul- Abidin (1420-1470), there was a period of relative tolerance and peace. He bought Brahmins back to Kashmir, who were then given responsible positions in the Government; gradually regaining their power and prestige. The history of medieval Kashmir reveals that atrocities on non-Muslims by zealots like Sikandar *But-Shikan* (iconoclast) was resented by the majority of Muslims, who provided the Non-Muslims with shelter and necessary support during their persecution. The people were conscious of the fact that atrocities on the non-Muslims were a rather ugly reflection of the political exigencies of the rulers and did not reflect the oppressor's respect or devotion to faith. Interestingly religious fanaticism and slaughter of minorities seems to have been a regular trend in the medieval times in Kashmir but people have stood together for each other, hence the Afghan ruler who tried to forcibly convert Pandits to Islam did not win the support of Muslims in the Valley who rather joined Pandits in extending an invitation to Ranjit Singh to invade Kashmir and help them get rid of the oppressive rule of the Afghans.

[Genesis of Conversion - Forced and peaceful](#)

King Ashoka, the third ruler of the Maurya Dynasty conquered Kashmir in about 250 BC. He founded the pre-historic city of *Srinagri* (now called Srinagar) and introduced Buddhism in Kashmir. He built many *stupas* and *viharas* and had the credit of establishing the first international Buddhist conference at Srinagri. Buddhist philosophy attracted the Brahmins of Kashmir; Shaivism and Buddhism were dominant till Islam came to Kashmir and became the dominant religion in the thirteen century, altering the religious demography in Kashmir. After the Buddhist and Hindu Kings, Kashmir was ruled by the Sultans, Mughals, Afghans, Sikhs,

Dogras and finally the State of Jammu and Kashmir acceded to the Union of India due to their lack of military strength to desist the invaders from Pakistan in October 1947.

In 1320, Zaul Qadir Khan, from Turkistan reigned Kashmir for a short period, resorting to loot, plunder and massacre of Pandits. He carried with him thousands of Kashmiris, including men and women as slaves to be sold in Turkistan, but the entire lot perished in snow traversing the mountainous "*Devsar path*", referred to as "*Batta Sagan*" (Death Oven of Brahmins). During the reign of Sultan Sikandar (1389-1413) a massive war of terror was unleashed against Kashmiri Pandits with a target of either proselytizing or extermination. Sikandar broke down Hindu temples, massacred numerous Pandits, while many poisoned themselves. The holy thread (in tons) of the murdered Pandits were burnt and all sacred books thrown into the Dal Lake. Sikandar established a government department to burn and destroy the Temple of Martand, a marvel of Hindu architecture. Over 100,000 Pandits were drowned in the Lake and were burnt at a spot in the vicinity of Rainawari in Srinagar City known as *Batta Mazar* (The grave yard of the Bhattas-Kashmiri Pandits). Crowds of Kashmiri Pandits forcefully migrated to the neighbouring regions of Kishtwar and Bhadarwah via Smithan pass and to various provinces via Batote (Bhatta wath, path of the Bhattas-Kashmiri Pandits).

Sultan Sikandar's son, Zain-ul-Abdin (1420-1470), was famous for his religious tolerance who peacefully ruled for fifty years; historians have described this period "*like the cooling sandal paste after the heat of summer in a desert had departed*". He rebuilt the demolished temples and banned cow slaughter, considered sacred by Hindus. Zain-ul-Abdin was loved by all and fondly known as *Bud Shah* (Great King) or *Batt Shah* (The King of Kashmiri Pandits). During his reign, art and culture flourished, as he visited Hindu shrines, participated in their festivals and convinced many to return and assigned them responsible positions on merit.

Shah Miri, a refugee forced to flee from Swat, ruled Kashmir from (1339- 1342), who recruited well-built Chaks of Shia sect from Dardistan area of Gilgit-Hunza region in his army and placed them in prominent positions. The Chaks carried forward the policy of conversion of Pandits to Islam by force, loot and plunder which earned them eminence and political limelight. In 1506, when Sultan Fateh Shah proclaimed himself as a ruler, he tried his best to reinstate normalcy and rule of law but ended up becoming a tool in the hands of Shams Chak and his three friends, Nusrat Raina, Sarhang Raina and Moosa Raina. Moosa Raina succeeded Shams Chak as the Prime Minister of Sultan Fatah Shah and was a confidant of Shams-ud-Din, Iraqi propagator of Islamic faith and converter of Pandits and Sunnis to the Shia sect of Islam. Shams Iraqi, who had Moosa's support in Kashmir, began terrorizing Kashmiri Pandits, demolishing their temples and converted 24,000 Kashmiri Pandits to Islam. Pandits who refused to convert were eventually murdered.

After Moosa, when in 1517 Mohammad Shah appointed Ghazi Chak as his Prime Minister, who later founded the Chak dynasty rule in 1561, miseries of the Pandits continued. He initiated a systematic and planned crusade for the despoliation and dismantling of Hindu temples and sacred places. The movable and immovable property of Pandits was ruined. Folklore attributes to him, that he used to get 900 Pandits beheaded every day for not having accepted Islam.

This was followed by a rather peaceful period during which Kashmir became a province of Mughal Empire led by Emperor Akbar (1156-1605). Akbar was known for his religious tolerance and initiated several welfare schemes for the people of Kashmir and launched a comprehensive scheme for the rehabilitation of Kashmiri Pandits to return honourably to their native place, by offering them roles in managing and running the administration. After about a span of thirty years, the Kashmiri Pandits having found an atmosphere favourable to practice their faith without any coercion, began to return to Kashmir.

Akbar's son, Jahangir (1605- 1627) selected to follow the footsteps of previous fanatic Muslim rulers, unlike his father. He disapproved and opposed matrimonial relations between Hindus and Muslims and declared that while a Hindu was barred by law to marry a Muslim woman, Muslims had the license to marry a Hindu woman. His son Shah Jahan (1627-1658) proved true to his father and devoted himself to the cause of torturing and persecuting the minorities. Shah Jahan's son Aurangzeb ruled Kashmir between (1658-1707) and appointed 14 atrocious Governors who perused a policy of Islamization alongside cruelties of all sorts to leave the minorities with no alternative but to embrace Islam or get killed. It is during the rule of Emperor Shah Jahan and Aurangzeb that Kashmiri Pandits driven out of Kashmir reached Delhi and settled down in Bazar Sitaram.

The persecution and brutalities executed by Aurangzeb in the name of Islam forced Pandits to approach Shri Guru Teg Bahadur at Anand Sahib for rescuing them from Islamic onslaught. A delegation of 500 Kashmiri Pandits led by Kripa Ram, a learned person, called on Shri Guru Teg Bahadur to narrate the tales of Aurangzeb's barbarism. In solidarity with Pandits, Guru Teg Bahadur went to Delhi for redressal of their grievances but was killed by Aurangzeb in 1675.

Not able to tolerate the misrule of the Mughals any further, two Kashmiri noblemen Mir Muquim Kant and Khawja Zahir Didmari, requested Ahmad Shah Abdali of Kabul to bring Kashmir under his rule in 1753. Ahmad Shah, while accepting the offer, dispatched a powerful Afghan Army under the command of Abdullah Khan Aihak Aqasi, to occupy the Valley marking Afghan rule on Kashmir, roughly for a period of 67 years (1753-1820). The Afghans were invited with a hope that they would prove to be better administrators compared to fanatic Mughals, but instead, Kashmir was ruthlessly plundered by the Afghans. The cornerstone of their policy was terror and each sect suffered. As many as twenty-eight Governors governed Kashmir for 67 years and during this period, one such Afghan Governor, Ata Muhammad Khan had earned notoriety for his insatiable lust for beautiful Kashmiri women. Parents of these girls became so apprehensive that they had the good looks of their girls sullied to elude the attention of the Governor's agents.

When the oppression became unbearable, Mirza Pandit Dhar and his son Birbal Dhar secretly sought the help of Sikhs, persuading Maharaja Ranjit Singh to annex Kashmir. In July 1819, Maharaja Ranjit Singh sent his forces and a fierce battle ensued in which the Afghans were defeated. Subsequently Kashmir came under Sikh rule (1820- 1846) putting an end to centuries long Muslim rule. The Sikh rule was generally considered oppressive, as their Governors turned out to be hard task masters. Sikhs endorsed several anti-Muslim laws including issuing death sentences for cow slaughter, closing the *Jamia Masjid* (Mosque) in

Srinagar, and banning the *Azaan*, the public Muslim call to prayer. Sultan Qutb-ud-Din (1373-94) had demolished a Hindu Kali temple on the banks of river Jhelum, to build a shrine to honour Shah-i-Hamadan. Soon after the conquest of Kashmir by Sikhs (1819) the Sikh Governor, Sardar Hari Singh, ordered the demolition of the Mosque, arguing that it was a Hindu shrine, but it was Pandit Birbal Dhar who saved the mosque from getting vandalized. Sikhs were religious but not bigots, and did not force Muslims to convert.

Younghusband, a British Political Resident in Kashmir, who had travelled extensively in Kashmir and other areas around the Himalayas including Central Asia and China, observed, ***“The Sikhs were not so barbarically cruel as the Afghans’ but they were hard and rough masters”***.

The last Governor of the Sikh Rule, Imam-ud-din was made to surrender the possession of Kashmir to Raja Gulab Singh in pursuance of the Treaty of Amritsar signed in 1846. The Dogra dynasty lasted for a little over a century and saw four Maharajas, namely, Gulab Singh (1846-57), Ranbir Singh (1857-85), Partap Singh (1885-1925) and Hari Singh (1925-1952). Modern Jammu & Kashmir State acceded to India on 26th October 1947 in the wake of a Pakistani invasion, but the hereditary rule of the Dogra’s was abolished in 1952.

In 1931, Maharaja Hari Singh was the sovereign ruler of Jammu & Kashmir, which included Ladakh, Gilgit Baltistan, Muzaffarabad-Mirpur, Aksai Chin and Shaksgam Valley. The British wanted him to lease them the Gilgit agency which he refused. However British understood that he was a rare Hindu king who ruled over his predominantly Muslim subjects and they used the status-quo to their advantage pursuing their known policy of divide and rule by instigating newly educated Muslim youth against the literate Pandit minority. Sheikh Abdullah, the most prominent Muslim leader of Kashmir planned a public meeting at Shah-i-Hamadan shrine addressing all Muslims to unite and demand their rights and an end of Hindu Dogra rule, with a sole motive to gain concessions from the ruler in matters of better positions, social recognition and more gains in economic undertakings but the movement attained the form of communal riots on 13th July 1931.

In 1947, post partition of British India, Pakistan invaded the State of Jammu & Kashmir and the Maharaja agreed to sign a legal document of the Instrument of Accession, accepting to accede to the Union of India in lieu of military assistance. However, an insurgency began in 1989 in the Valley, supposedly for greater political rights, soon taking a violent turn and once again after ruthless killings, arson, loot and rape of Pandits, the minority community of 350,000 people were hounded out of the Valley and continue to live in exile.

[Loss of Kashmiriyat](#)

The chronicles suggest, ever since Islam arrived in Kashmir, there have been conversions, sometimes peaceful while at times by force. Kashmir witnessed several transitions in administration and transfers of power from one administrator to another. However, neither the conversion, nor forced migrations could erase the mutual love and psychological bond that Muslims and Pandits shared. The people of Kashmir used to participate in each other’s rituals and together celebrate festivals. Kashmiris earnestly participated in each other’s marriage ceremonies and would lend each other help in household chores.

After forced conversions, the converted Muslims did not change their surnames (last names). Kashmir is the only place in the sub-continent where it is hard to differentiate between a Hindu and a Muslim, by only looking at the last name. Kashmiri people take pride in their culture as the society is deeply influenced by Sufi mysticism. The people of Kashmir chose not to mislay their distinct spiritual identity which is neither absolutely Hindu nor Muslim. This culture and spirit of singular identity irrespective of individual religious beliefs, sometimes confuses people outside of Kashmir, but Kashmiris with pride refer to it as '*Kashmiriyat*', in simple words '*Kashmiri-ness*'.

Kashmiriyat is a term attached with deep emotions, communal harmony, hospitality, behaviours, non-violence, mutual accommodation, good will and love that people of Kashmir have for each other. A tradition of syncretism flourished due to the mutual efforts towards coexistence, embraced by adherents of both religions.

While the administration changed many hands and each time minorities suffered in the name of the dominant religion of the State, Pandits and Muslims continued to live in harmony till 1989, when Pakistan aroused the communal sentiments of the majority population of Muslims in Kashmir and changed the course of a passive, an otherwise secular in nature, movement for greater political rights, into a violent religious movement.

Pakistan employed dreadful yet systematic attempts to introduce the ideology of fundamental Islam, an ideology that was alien to the Kashmiri society where Rishism (Sufism) had flourished since immemorial times. People were divided in the name of religion, thereby blurring the ethno-religious identity of Kashmir. For the Pakistani infiltrators from across the border, religion was merely a tool to exploit the vulnerabilities of the masses and tear apart the socio-cultural fabric of Hindu-Muslim unity. Pakistan while pursuing the policy of *Operation Topac*, a brainchild of President Zia-ul-Haq, in pursuance of which the Kashmiri youth were brainwashed and weapon-trained to indulge in large scale subversive activities like bomb blasts and shoot-outs, succeeded in creating an atmosphere of terror in the Kashmir Valley. Jihad oriented insurgency in Kashmir purged Kashmiri society of its indigenous characteristics, as Pakistan funded and propagated radical- and militant Islam made deep inroads into the Kashmiri society, posing a challenge to the pluralistic social order and interfaith harmony gravely obstructing peaceful coexistence among various communities.

A spiteful campaign against the minority community, Kashmiri Pandits, was launched by extremist Islamic terrorist groups using periodic write-ups in local newspapers, sermons through mosques, shouting slogans and referring to the minority community as *Kafirs* (Non-believers). A final ultimatum was given to this community through a press release on 14th of April 1990, asking them to leave the Valley within two days or face death as reprisal. The entire community of about 350,000 Pandits of the Valley was ethnically cleansed and forced to flee their ancestral homeland. There was a sudden heave in the Islamic order becoming prevalent in the Valley, during which the practice of visiting ancient holy shrines of Saints (Sufis/Rishis) was rendered un-Islamic, contrary to the cultural identity of Kashmiris. Many Sufi shrines and mosques were targeted by Pakistan-backed militant outfits; In May 1995, Islamist mercenaries from Afghanistan and Pakistan destroyed the ancient shrine of saint Noor-u-Din (Nund Rishi for Kashmiri Pandits) called Char-e-Sharif. This shrine had been a

centre of pilgrimage for hundreds of thousands of devotees, both Hindus and Muslims, over the past six hundred years. Such brutal practices by Islamist terrorists became prevalent, who exhorted the Kashmiri Muslims to banish these *'un-Islamic practices'*.

Young generations of Kashmiri Muslims are growing up under the umbrella of a single religion, Islam, and constant fear with no memory of co-existence with other communities while the Kashmiri Pandits continue to live in exile since their exodus from the Valley of Kashmir in 1990, scattered future generations growing up outside their homeland, being shaped in a different culture with barely any connection to their roots. The unholy alliance of organized fundamental interpretations of religion and gun culture has led to the weeding out of remnants of the humanistic culture of Kashmir with its roots deeply embedded in the secular and glorious ancient past, perhaps marking the end of *'Kashmiriyat'*.

Conclusion

The history of Sufism in Kashmir is spread over a long period of time starting with Bulbul Shah to the Sufi poets and Rishis, inspiring people by their mystical insights. The Suharwadi, Kubrawi orders of Sufism have played a prominent role in the process of Islamisation of Kashmir, taken to a logical conclusion by the founder of Rishi order in Kashmir, Sheikh Noor-ud-Din, also known as Nund Rishi by his Kashmiri Pandit followers. Rishis, by their words and deeds, attracted not only common people but also high-class Brahmins.

"The candle of religion is lit by the Rishis, they are the pioneers of the path of belief. The heart-warming quality of humble souls emanates from the inner purity of the hearts of the Rishis. This vale of Kashmir, that you call a paradise, owes a lot of its charm to the traditions set in vogue by the Rishis"- Baba Nasib, 17th-century poet

Kashmiri Muslims and Pandits share several common customs and beliefs; numerous Sufi shrines that dot the Valley are held in high devotional esteem by people from both these religious communities in large numbers. While Pandits and Muslims lived in harmony for certain periods of time, several Muslim rulers of Kashmir were bigoted and intolerant of other faiths. Sultan Sikandar Butshikan (1389–1413) is often considered the most tyrannical among the Muslim rulers in Kashmir. Ironically, Sikandar's son, Zain-ul- Abidin (1420-1470) was known for his religious tolerance. The administration changed several hands in Kashmir, after the Mughals, Kashmir was ruled by Afghans (1753-1820), who were known for harassment and persecution. There are plentiful accounts of oppression during the Afghan rule, and especially the women of Kashmir were subjected to invasive and humiliating treatment.

Though forced conversion of minorities was a regular trend during the Muslim rule that continued for five centuries in Kashmir, people from different religious communities stayed united. Atrocities by zealots like Sikandar or forceful conversions during the reign of Sultans or Mughals were resented by the majority of Muslims who at several occasions provided refuge and essential support to minority communities. During the Muslim rule in Kashmir, the most peaceful times were witnessed during the reign of Sultan Zain-ul- Abidin and Akbar. However, it would be interesting to imagine, had Brahmins allowed Rinchana to convert to Hinduism, what the course of history would have been.

The Dogra period began with distress, Pandits held many responsible positions in the administration that caused discontent among the Kashmiri Muslims. Owing to the socio-economic disparity between the two communities, religious element of identities began taking its ground in Kashmir, which gave rise to mass uprising of 1931 under the leadership of prominent Muslim leader, Sheikh Abdullah. After 1947, when the State of Jammu & Kashmir acceded to India in the wake of a Pakistani invasion, the political developments started drifting away from secular, progressive and nationalist framework, but the common masses irrespective of being aware of their separate identities, continued to cherish their common beliefs, feasts, values and reverence for Sufis and Rishis. The people of Kashmir, bound together by their unique Kashmiri language, celebrate their seamless culture and collective identity, '*Kashmiriyat*', which transcends the religious boundaries, further strengthening the bedrock of exquisite bond between Kashmiri Muslims and Kashmiri Pandits.

The fluidity of religious boundaries and the presence of syncretic religious culture are both integral parts of Kashmiriyat – Chitralkha Zutshi, Kashmiri Historian.

Kashmiriyat received a major blow since the outbreak of Pakistan sponsored terrorism in 1989. There was mass destruction and massacre of innocents by the Kashmiri youth armed and trained by Pakistan, subsequently leading to the mass exodus of Kashmiri Pandits and thereby rupturing the secular soul of Kashmiri society by using religion as a catalyst. The Islamic terrorist organisations worked in line with Pakistan's objectives of destroying the secular and pluralistic fabric of Kashmiri society, and thereby inducing religious extremism.

Today's Kashmiri youth are a product of turmoil while the Pandit-Muslim dissonance has engulfed the Valley and a major trust deficit, emotional upsets, grudges are felt by both the communities. The Kashmiri Pandits have historically left Kashmir on numerous occasions, when confronted with despotic Muslim rulers, but the recent exodus of 1990 has no comparable precedent. Quarrying on the History of Kashmiris - Religion always had a strong presence in the Valley but people from different faiths were bound together by their mutual and unique '*culture*'.

With the rise of Pan-Islamism and almost three decades of violence, religious extremism, uncertainty and instability, the national ethos of Kashmir has been altered and one wonders whether the same culture will ever prove to be a binding force for the people of Kashmir again and thereby, perhaps, be the stimulus for the resurrection of '*Kashmiriyat*'.



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