The Development of Islāmic Culture and Civilization in Kashmīr and the Contribution of Muslim Ṣūfīs during the Medieval Times

*Tajamul Ahmad Sheikh

Doctoral Candidate, Shab-i Hamadan Institute of Islamic Studies, Faculty of Social Science, University of Kashmir, Srinagar, India

Abstract

Kashmīr has a long unique structure and identity due to its geographical beauty, natural resources, and traditional spiritual ethos since antiquity. In ancient times, although most Kashmīris were followers of Buddhism and Hinduism, in addition to these traditional religions, there was also an influential group ascetic mystics called Rishis in Kashmīr. They devoted their entire lives to abstinence (Nafs Kashi) and various spiritual struggles in order to control their desires of carnal self (Mujāhida’s). From the beginning of medieval times which is known as the golden age of Islāmic civilization and culture, the message of Islām spread rapidly throughout the world. In this regard, the group of Ṣūfīs played vital role in the whole Islāmic world. In Kashmīr, as in the rest of the subcontinent, Ṣūfīs made significant contributions to the propagation of Islām. The present article will examine the historical events of the medieval times, which are considered a milestone in the spread of Islām and the promotion of Islāmic civilization in Kashmīr. Moreover, the works of those Ṣūfī masters will be reviewed who have sacrificed a lot and done commendable works on the history of Kashmīr.

Keywords: Kashmir, Buddhism, Hinduism, Ṣūfīs, Islamic

Introduction

The Kashmīr valley known worldwide for its natural scenery and beauty, is also famous for its cultural and spiritual traditions from ancient times. Since medieval age the region has been the abode of religious scholars, Ṣūfīs, religious preachers, due to which it is known as “pirwari.” In the Medieval times, a large group of Ṣūfīs from Irān and Turkestān spread Islām in the Kashmīr Valley. They dedicated their lives here by presenting theoretical and practical examples of Islāmic teachings, and the people of Kashmīr got impressed to see the same. The history of Kashmīr bears witnesses to the fact that the Ṣūfīs were the most prominent contributors to the promotion of Islāmic culture in Kashmīr, and it was through them that Islāmic civilization and culture flourished in Kashmīr. It is a historical fact that the rays of Islāmic light in Kashmīr are spread through Ṣūfīs. However, Islāmic influences began to flourish in Kashmīr valley as early as 711-13 AD, but Islām began to prosper in the early fourteenth century AD in this region with its beauty and elegance. Thus, the first Muslim government was started in Kashmīr valley, and due to the civilization and culture of the Muslims, the people of this region became very bright and exemplary.

The First Impressions of Islām in Kashmīr

In ancient times, Kashmīr, like the rest of the subcontinent, had an abundant number of followers of both Hinduism and Buddhism. Hinduism was at its peak in Kashmīr when the propagation of Islam in seventh century

1 Kashmīr, claimed by both India and Pakistan, is a part of the Indian subcontinent’s north western corner.
2 “Pirwari” in Kashmīri language means the valley of holy saints.
CE began to spread outside the Arab world. The political, social, and religious control of Kashmir was also in the hands of the proponents of Hinduism. Hindus have owned the region for almost four thousand years, and almost twenty-one families of other Hindus have ruled the state in particular, and it is only because of this supremacy and dominance of these Hindu kings in the state their people, i.e., Kashmiri Brahmins and other nations continued to live a comfortable and prosperous life in those days. Therefore, with time, the policy of the Hindus did not succeed for a long time. With the changing times, the conditions of the country also began to change. The growing power and rise of Muslim countries forced the Hindus to establish relations with the Muslim majority countries and then reconsidered the strategy adopted by the Hindus in this regard and lifted all restrictions on the entry of Muslims into their country.3

For Kashmiri historians, the question of propagation of Islam and its consolidation in Kashmir has been a matter of debate since times immemorial. However, most historians agree that the first wave of Islam in Kashmir started from the Hindu era.4 When Islam spread with full force in the Kashmir region, the mighty armies of Islamic thought, literature, science, culture, and civilization also rose from the different parts of the subcontinent and began to enter the Kashmir valley. Dr. Faruq Bukhari, in his book “Kashmir mein Islam Manzar aur Pas-e-Manzar,” while describing the historical development of Islam in Kashmir states that The presence of Islamic influences in Kashmir is found in ancient times, when Muhammed bin al-Qasim’s5 contemporary ruler Lalitaditya’s6 successor Vajraditya,7 according to Kalhana,8 introduced many Islamic traditional customs/practices of the Islamic community (called mlecchas) in his country (Kashmir) and also sold many Kashmiri men to the Arab Muslims (mlecchas) [of Sindh] which continued for a longer time. Even in the last decade of the eleventh century CE, Raja Harsh Dev,9 inspired by Islam, embarked on a vigorous religious reform campaign in Kashmir. He did not hesitate to sacrifice his own life in this way.10

From the very beginning of Medieval times, the golden age of Islamic civilization and culture began. In the same period, the message of Islam spread all over the world at a rapid pace, and in this regard, the contribution of the Sufis is considered phenomenal throughout the Muslim world during the medieval times. Thus, from the eleventh century AD onwards, when the separate Sufi orders (sikilabs) began to establish in tasawwuf (Sufism), the idea of mystic hospices (khángās) came into view as a result abundant number of these hospices (khángās) began to be built for the stay and training of Sufis. These monasteries (khángās), besides providing practical spiritual training to the Sufis, also trained them to serve common people and impart spiritual light in them. As the number of seekers of truth increased with time, the Sufis left their areas and migrated to different areas for the service of people, travelled only for the knowledge of the truth and especially for the propagation of Islam. They aroused the spirit of purification among people. As a result, innumerable people in every region, influenced by the character of these Sufis, converted to Islam without any compulsion or violence. This way, Islam continuously spread throughout the world through the immense sacrifices of these Sufis, these services of them are not only acknowledged but also historically overviewed by the famous orientalist T.W. Arnold in his book “The Preaching of Islam.”11

---

4 Khan, Professor Mohammad Ishaq, Kashmir’s Transition to Islam: Role of Rishis, Gulshan publishers, Srinagar, 2005.
5 Muhammed bin al-Qasim was an Arab General of the Umayyad Caliphate who successfully invaded and conquered Sindh and Multan by defeating the last Hindu ruler, Raja Dahir in the conquest of Aror. He was the first Muslim to conquer Hindu lands and establish the early Islamic India in 712 CE.92 AH
6 Lalitaditya Muktadipa (ruled c. 724 CE -760 CE) was a powerful ruler of the Karkota dynasty in the Indian subcontinent’s Kashmir region.
7 Vajraditya was the youngest son of Kashmiri ruler L.’Alitaditya, who ruled from 762 CE till 770 CE.
8 Kalhana was one of the great historians of Kashmir who wrote Rajatarangini (River of Kings), an account of the Kashmiri History in Sanskrit.
9 Harsh Dev (ruled 1089 CE-1111CE) was a Hindu king of Kashmir India.
The spread of Islam in Kashmir was nurtured by these Şâlife. Thus, the imprint of Islam in Kashmir can be traced back to the Ninth century CE, but the process of spreading Islam at the grassroots level in Kashmir began with the arrival of Central Asian Şâlife in Kashmir. This process started from Ḥadrat Syed Sharaf-ud-Din Shurawardi (رحمة الله عليه) and continued for centuries, with time not only became more effective, but this process of propagation of Islam became a permanent part of Kashmiri's individual and collective identity. Therefore, as mentioned earlier, there was a group of abstinent and God-seeking people in Kashmir from antiquity who were looked upon with great reverence by people of Kashmir, so it would not be wrong to say that the people of Kashmir were already inclined towards spirituality due to which they got easily impressed by the teachings Şâlife who came from Persia and Central Asia. The fourteenth century AD is a significant century for the spread of Islam in Kashmir in general and the foundation of Islamic civilization in Kashmir in particular.

On the one hand, for the first time in this century, the Muslims established an independent empire in Kashmir, which proved to be a golden chapter in the history of Kashmir. In addition, the spread of Islam in this century also began to spread very fast. Sultan Šadar-ud-Din, the first Muslim ruler in Kashmir, whose real name was Rinchan Shâh, converted to Islam due to persuasion and efforts of Syed Bulbul Shâh’s (رحمة الله عليه). Historians write that Rinchan Shâh was initially a follower of Buddhism but was interested in studying other religions, especially the Hindu religion and Islam. He consulted the relevant religious scholars of both religions in order to study about their philosophies. He once invited both of the Hindu and Muslim scholars from Kashmir in his court to deliberate upon the teachings of their respective religions. Among those who had accepted his invitation was Ḥadrat Bulbul Shâh (رحمة الله عليه), whose unique style of speech, religious arguments impressed him to such an extent that he in no time took an oath of allegiance in the hands of Bulbul Shâh (رحمة الله عليه) and converted to Islam. After conversion of Sultan Šadar-ud-Din to Islam, the spread of Islam in Kashmir was pretty smooth. However, very few mosques and hermitages were still built in Kashmiri's political and cultural life. No extraordinary revolution took place except the establishment of Islam, nor was any immediate step taken at the government level connected with the spread of Islam, not either was it patronized. The society of Kashmir was still dominated by Hindu civilization and culture, which was adopted not only by the people but also by those in power. However, the ideas of purity, simplicity, and equality of Islamic teachings began to impress common masses, especially the lower-class Hindus.

The transformational progress in the propagation of Islam in Kashmir took place during the reign of Sultan Qutbuddin Shâh Mîr when an organized caravan of Şâlife from central Asia arrived in Kashmir. The aim of this caravan was neither the acquisition of wealth nor political victories, but this caravan of lovers, full of divine love and the spirit of societal service, came only to enlighten the people of this land of Kashmir with the light of Islam. The leader of this caravan was a great Şâlife thinker, whose name was the Ḥadrat Mir Sayyid ‘Alî Hamdânî.


13 Various theories have been proposed regarding Ḥadrat Syed Sharaf-ud-Din Shurawardi's birth. Some schools of thought claim he was a saintly celebrity from Bukhara, while others believe he was from Samarqand. Others are of the view that he was from Turkestan or Central Asia. However, the majority of people believe he came from Turkistan, hence the name of the great friend of Allah (رحمة الله عليه) has the tag 'Turkestanî' attached to it.

14 Kashmiri writers have given Ḥadrat Bulbul Shâh (رحمة الله عليه) a number of names and titles. The historian, Jonaraj, is hesitant to mention the saint's name. According to the author of the "Bahrātīn-i-Shahi", when the king or others inquired about his identity, the holy saint introduced himself as "Bulbul Qalander" and declared himself a Muslim. In his "Tarikh-i-Kashmiri", Muḥammad Azam refers to him as Baba Bulbul Shah (رحمة الله عليه). In his "Nawadir-ul-Akhirah," another scholar, Râfî-ud-Dîn, refers to him as Sayed Sharaf-ud-Dîn (رحمة الله عليه). In his "Asrar-ul-Akbar," Baba Dâwûd Mishkâtî refers to him as Ḥadrat Bâbâ Bilâl. In his book "Tarikh-i-Kashmiri," Peer Ghalîm Ḥasan Khûlîmî states that his real name was Ḥadrat Sayed Sharaf-ud-Dîn (رحمة الله عليه). Some other scholars like G.M.D Şûfi calls him as Sharaf-ud-Dîn Abdur Rahman Turkestanî (رحمة الله عليه).


16 The ruler of Kashmir whose reign (r. 1373-89 CE) is remembered only for the arrival in Kashmir of a Muslim traveller named Syed 'Ali Hamdani. Qutb’din died in 1380 CE, and his son Sultan Sikander, also known as Sikander Butshikand, took over as his successor.
The Rise of Islamic Civilization in Medieval Kashmir and the Services/Contributions of Śūfīs

Culture is such a broad term in which all aspects of society or ways of life come; that is, it is the name of all the thoughts and deeds of a nation's intellectual, emotional and spiritual life. When a nation sets its own style of development, it becomes its own culture. Therefore, culture is the name of the whole collection, including religion, beliefs, sciences and arts, ethics, habits, customs, and all the tendencies and affairs that man performs in organized way. It is as if the concept of the term culture is the name of the whole collection, including religion, beliefs, sciences and arts, ethics, habits, customs, and all the tendencies and affairs that man performs in organized way. As already mentioned, the fourteenth century AD is a milestone in the history of Kashmīr. Apart from an organized movement for the promotion of Islām, the promotion of Islamic civilization also started in a very organized manner in the same century. It is pertinent to mention here that the same era has witnessed the immense religious services, sacrifices, and contributions from revered Šūfī saint Ḥaḍrat Mir Sayyid 'Alī Hamadānī (رحمة الله عليه). Apart from being a Šūfī and a dā'ā, the person who rendered historical services in the field of da'wah în Kashmīr is the patron saint of Kashmīr Valley, Sheikh Noor-ud-Din Noorānī (رحمة الله عليه). He prepared a large group of his followers and carried out the work of spreading Islām with great sincerity and devotion.24

As already mentioned, the fourteenth century AD is a milestone in the history of Kashmīr. Apart from an organized movement for the promotion of Islām, the promotion of Islamic civilization also started in a very organized manner in the same century. It is pertinent to mention here that the same era has witnessed the immense religious services, sacrifices, and contributions from revered Šūfī saint Ḥaḍrat Mir Sayyid 'Alī Hamadānī (رحمة الله عليه). Apart from being a Šūfī and a dā’ī, Ḥaḍrat Mir Sayyid ‘Alī Hamadānī was a distinguished researcher and author. Historians are of the view that Ḥaḍrat Mir Sayyid ‘Alī Hamadānī (رحمة الله عليه) authorized almost one hundred sixty works, among them most are written on the subject of the spirituality. Apart from them, many books have been written on various aspects of Islamic civilization and culture. Ḥaḍrat Mir Sayyid ‘Alī Hamadānī’s (رحمة الله عليه) prominent works include Zakhīrat-ul-Muluk, Chahal Isrā'ī (Fārsī Ghazz‘-‘Alīyāh),

17 Ḥaḍrat Mir Sayyid ‘Alī Hamadānī (رحمة الله عليه) was an eminent Sufi scholar and poet from Iran. He travelled across Central and South Asia and was instrumental in preaching Islam and practicing Sufism throughout his life. Reverently Ḥaḍrat Mir Sayyid ‘Alī Hamadānī (رحمة الله عليه) was also as known King of Hamadan ("Shāh-e-Hamadān"), The Great Commander ("Amīr-i-Kabīr") and Second ‘Alī ("Ali Thānī"). For further study about his remarkable contribution towards development of Islamic civilization in Kashmīr see, Dr Altaf Hussain Yatoo, Islamic Civilization of Kashmir, Gulshan Books, Srinagar, 2012, Shams-Ud-Din Ahmad, Shah-i-Hamadān: Hayat Aur Karnamey, Haji Sheik Ghulam Muhammad And Sons, 1995, Syeda Asrar Zafar, Syed Mir Ali Hamadani, Sheikh USman and Sons Srinagar, 2007.


19 The Šūfīs came and settled in different parts of Kashmīr only to enlighten people there with the teachings of Islām.

20 The act of inviting or calling people towards Islām.

21 Most historians have written the number of these comrades as seven hundred.

22 He brought some carpet and shawl weavers with him, who taught the local community how to make pashmina textiles and carpets.

23 Also known as Nund Rishi and Alamdar-e-Kashmīr. He was among the founders of the Rishi order, a Šūfī tradition of the Kashmīr region.


26 ‘Alī is a Muslim who propagates the message of Islām and invites the people towards the same.
The revolutionary contribution of Sayyid Ali Hamadani and others mostly confined to the Brahmins. Thus, the services of Ḥadrat Mir Sayyid ‘Ali Hamadānī (رحمه الله عليه) had an impact not only on the rulers of Shāh Mīrī but also on the people, the scholars and especially the Ṣufis of Kashmīr and Rishis.

With the spread of Islam, the Islamic atmosphere in Kashmīr embellished its culture. As soon as Ṣufism entered here, they urged the Muslims to pursue education, which was earlier mostly confined to the Brahmins. Thus, the Hindu language of Sanskrit began to decline, and Persian and Arabic began to rise. At the same time, religious tolerance became an integral part of Kashmīr civilization and the most prominent feature of Kashmīri history. People of different religions came together in Firdaws-e-barī to live in unity and breathe in the atmosphere of unity and solidarity. It seems that after the spread of Islam in the medieval times, religious tolerance, literature, economy, clothing, architecture, food and drink habits, fine arts, architecture, etc., are typical examples of tolerance and interconnectedness in every field and level.

Although Ṣufi services to the spread of Islam and the evolution of Islamic civilization in Kashmīr are unparalleled, historians have always praised the services of Muslim Sultans (Kings), as the Sultans of Kashmīr have always been fond of the Ṣufis. Dr. Aijaz Farooq said in an article reviewing the services of both Ṣufis and Sultans, he writes it is challenging to determine whose efforts in both classes are more effective in this regard. At the same time, the efforts and role of Ṣufis, Shaykhs, and Ulama [religious scholars] are not only more significant but also crucial, at the same time the efforts and intense struggle of the Sultans of Islam and the patronage of the efforts of preaching Islam and their cooperation is also no less important. It would be fair to say that the two classes, with the cooperation and guidance of each other, did a great job of introducing Islam in Kashmīr and revolutionizing the political, social, cultural, and religious life of the people of Kashmīr that by the end of the fifteenth century CE, ninety-five percent of the people of Kashmīr had converted to Islam and enlightened their lives with the light of Islam.

Conclusion

From time immemorial, at different times in the history of Kashmīr, the civilizations and cultures of different nations have gone through stages of rising and fall. For the first time in the history of Kashmīr, Rishi30 and Sannyasis31 camped and laid the foundation of their civilization in their own way in the BC era. Then, with the arrival of the Aryans, a new civilization overcame the already existing civilization and culture in mutual mixing, a

---

28 Used as similitude for Kashmīr, meaning the highest heaven.
29 Akram, Dr Aijaz Farooq, Kashmir: Ishāt wa Farūgi Islām mein Ṣāfiyya wa Salaten Ki Masāī, n.d., p. 240.
30 The word “Rishi” is specifically derived from Sanskrit and Indian traditions, although some medieval scholars of Islam have stated that it is derived from the Persian word “Raśīh” or “Rish,” which refers to a bird’s feathers or wings. One such example is a Baba Dawūd Mishkātī, who gives a complicated and twisted explanation. A bird without feathers has little command over its own movements and is completely reliant on the wind. And similar is the circumstance with a Rishi; he is cut off from the rest of the world and lives alone, beaten by fate. This and similar interpretations, on the other hand, have failed to convince the average Kashmīri Muslim, who, for the most part, supports the Sanskrit derivation and uses it interchangeably with his Hindu counterparts as a synonym for a sage. Actually, many Kashmīris do not connect the word with any particular order of Ṣūfī, instead using it to refer to any Ṣūfī saint.
31 Sannyasis are the Brahmins who have ‘renunciated’ all materials aspects of life only to gain truth.
new civilization came into being. In the same way, with time, different nations settled here and paved the way for their religions and their own culture, which included Hindu and Buddhist nations. Fourteenth-century AD, the spread of Islām in Kashmīr began to spread rapidly in Kashmīr when Šūfīs from central Asia and Irān came to Kashmīr. After visiting Kashmīr, the Šūfīs along with preaching Islām, came here to acquaint the people with social principles and social laws and to build a united society based on Islāmic society. Šūfīs and preachers came to Kashmīr and introduced to the Kashmīri people the Islāmic social system, which later took the form of an organized civilization and further matured its culture in other civilizations of the world in the name of a universal civilization. This civilization also had the trait of universal Islāmic civilization, but it also had its own character of Kashmīriyat.