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Kashmiriyat: The Pluralist Culture of Kashmir

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Abstract

Kashmir is best known for its rich cultural heritage and for being the birthplace of numerous poets and sages. The Valley and the neighbouring areas offer an exceptional sociological setting with a wide range of intricate cultural practices. People of all faiths and lifestyles live in the majestic mountainous region passed by the Jhelum and countless rivulets and streams. Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Christians and Sufis bow their heads in homage to providence and are inclined to accept daily life as it is because they believe that a greater power determines their fate.

Despite being present in every part of Kashmiri life, Kashmiriyat has a significant influence on how the people of that region live their religious and cultural lives. One of the most common forms of Kashmiriyat is Rishi-Sufism, which was formerly a socio-cultural religious centre where both Muslims and Hindus once practised their religions. The Rishi-Sufi practices influenced the concepts of transcendence of God and the spirit of the "Five Pillars" of Islam in order to launch the syncretic socio-religious space for inter-religious interactions. These concepts included the concept of immanence of God, respect for all religions, beliefs in miracles, reincarnation, meditation and asceticism from Hinduism. They also included the spirit of the Eightfold Paths from Buddhism.

For the past few decades, political unrest, militancy, intolerance and theological disagreements have all posed challenges to the concept of Kashmiriyat. The purpose of this paper is to trace the development of Kashmiriyat within a historical framework. The study will centre on a symbiotic society devoid of bigotry, discrimination and religious extremism.

Keywords: Kashmiriyat, Rishi-Sufism, Syncretism, Religious Harmony, Spirituality.

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Introduction

The "Kashmiriyat," in fact, served as a social space for inter-community interaction as well as a value that broadened the Hindus' and Muslims' horizons of intercommunity tolerance and coexistence in Kashmir. However, in recent years, the "Kashmiriyat" has come under attack from the communities of Kashmir for various reasons. Both the anti-Hindu propaganda of the separatist Kashmiri Muslims and the anti-Muslim prejudice of the Hindu-Buddhists have complicated the character of the present conflict. However, one thing about the Kashmiriyat should be mentioned. The Kashmiriyat ideology, in other words, goes beyond the tenets of Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism. In addition, contrary to what Kashmir's Buddhists and Hindus believe, Kashmiriyat is not a means of converting people to Islam. Therefore, it is important to view the current struggle in Kashmir as an interreligious political conflict in which members of various communities want the right to choose Kashmir's political future.

Kashmiriyat

The phrase "Kashmiriyat" refers to the strong feelings, communal peace, hospitality, attitudes, non-violence, reciprocal accommodation, goodwill and love that Kashmiris have for one another. Due to the mutual efforts towards cohabitation, embraced by followers of both religions, a tradition of syncretism arose. T.N. Madan, define Kashmiriyat as:

> "Kashmiri identity, cutting across the religious divide and defined by, above all, the key elements of the love for the homeland (Kasheer) and of common speech (Koshur). Besides, similar customs and practices for example distribution of cooked or uncooked food as a token of goodwill, visit to Sufi shrines, common folklore and folk music, the sense of mutual recognition and togetherness that was both physical and cultural" (Hassan, 2010).

Pandits and Muslims continued to coexist peacefully until 1989, when Pakistan incited the communal feelings of Kashmir's majority Muslim population and turned a passive, otherwise secular, movement for greater political rights into a violent religious movement. This occurred despite the administration changing many times and minorities suffering in the name of the State's dominant religion at each turn. The inspiration behind Kashimiriyat's concept can be found in Kashmir's ancient past. The two primary religions of the valley (Hinduism and Buddhism) first encountered Islam in the 13th century. Many of the locals who converted to Islam seemed to find the new religion appealing. By

incorporating numerous ethno-religious practices and beliefs that were shared throughout the many groups, such religious and cultural encounters helped to establish a new culture. The movement known as "Rishi-Sufi" was started by Hindus and Muslims to share their traditions. The 14th and 15th centuries saw the most significant portion of this movement. In Kashmir, there was a noticeable degree of sociocultural assimilation during this time.

Lalla Ded and Sheikh Noor-ud-din had an influence on the concept of Kashmiriyat. Ded was a Sufi mystic from the fourteenth century who was born into a Hindu family. She was able to demonstrate that there may be a middle ground between Muslim mysticism and Hindu Vedic traditions. Does her legacy include the establishment of Kashmir's largest Sufi order? In reality, the Sufi Saints' ability to navigate cultural divides and maintain communal living is directly related to the success of Islam in Kashmir. Additionally, Sufism is a branch of Islam that does not advocate rigid orthodox ideals. As a result, this promoted cultural blending. As Ahmed and Saklani put it:

> "So, the Islam practised by the people of Kashmir has been predominantly Sufi in nature rather than orthodox, that led to the development of the composite culture and more a kind of society in which people were well aware of their religiosity, but never let come in between their relationships with each other" (Loan 2020: 26).

Hangloo references the work of T. N. Madan, a Kashmiri himself who provides a detailed definition of the term Kashmiriyat in his article. However, it is now less prevalent because several of the ethnic groups (the Pandits) that were considered to be a part of the Kashmiriyat have left the valley since the beginning of the violent incidents. According to Kashmiri historian Mohammad Ishaq Khan: "Our earnest participation in each other's festivals and marriage ceremonies was proverbial until the mass exodus of Pandits from their homeland, following the onset of militancy in Kashmir Valley in 1989."

As a devout Muslim, Sheikh Noor-ud-din made a great effort to use his religion as a means of fostering Hindu-Muslim interaction. He taught and preached Islam using indigenous institutions and practices, which helped the Kashmiris understand Islam. He was regarded as a Rishi by Hindus and a Sufi by Muslims because of his unconventional Islamic teachings and commitment to religious tolerance. All classes, communities and sects of people in the valley grew to love him. Hindus gave him the name Sahazanand and recorded

his sayings in Kashmiri Sharda script in the book known as Rishinama because they thought he was a saint of great order who was nominally a Muslim.

To get his point across, he wrote poetry in the popular Kashmiri language. It is important to emphasise one of Sheikh's lines that supported his humanist philosophy, which reads, "among the brothers of the same parents, why did you create a barrier? Muslims and Hindus are one, when will God be kind to his servants?" In Kashmir, Sheikh Noor-ud-Din preached the humanist concept while Iranian and Turkish missionaries were occupied with spreading the Quran's orthodox interpretation. He made an effort to unite Kashmir's native culture with the rich Islamic legacy. In order to popularise the cult of religious Humanism, he began a Sufi-Rishi movement by enabling his beliefs to blend with the rich traditions of Hinduism. As a result, he is still adored by Kashmiris of all castes, creeds and religions.

When millions of people were killed in different parts of undivided India during communal riots in 1947-48, Kashmiri Muslims and Pandits did not react because they were Kashmiriyat believers in accordance with their rich religious and cultural collectivism. This is the glorious example of Kashmiriyat displayed by Kashmiri Muslims and Pandits in modern times. It was a particular brand of tolerance displayed by Kashmiri Muslims towards Pandits and by Pandits towards Muslims that is referred to as Kashmiriyat.

The scholar therefore claimed, based on the debate above, that the term "Kashmiriyat" had a secular quality. After the turmoil and widening religious and cultural identity gaps, however, this has become more debatable. Furthermore, it is important to note that Kashmiriyat is a conduct pattern that Pandits and Muslims in the area share rather than an ideology. Kashmiriyat is sometimes thought of as a spirit of mutual solidarity, yet tensions are still present. The peaceful coexistence of Muslims, Hindus and other minorities was made possible by the traditional communal concord that formerly prevailed in Kashmir. Due to the influence of Islamic Sufis and Saints of the Rishi order, Kashmiri society has become more tolerant of other religions.

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Socio-Religious and Cultural Landscape of Kashmir

In Kashmir, interactions between religious communities were highly widespread, especially between the 15th and the 17th century. The relationship between Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims provides one of the most significant examples of the reciprocal adoption of culture and tradition in terms of "Kashmiriyat". By the 17th century, many members of the ethnic communities had converted to Islam or Buddhism. Even after becoming Muslims and Buddhists, the ethnic converts to Islam and Buddhism kept a significant amount of their traditional practices and beliefs.

Three distinct periods may be identified in the history of the socio religious organisation in the Kashmir Valley. The initial phase can be traced back to the first people who lived in the Kashmir Valley, who most likely held certain ancient beliefs about which it is currently impossible to find out the specifics. The second stage of the socio-religious structure, the snake-cult or Naga-worship, seems to have been developed in the valley from a remote period and was unquestionably one of the first religions of the area. The third phase begins in the third century B.C. when Buddhism appears to have made considerable progress, won over a sizable population and eclipsed the Naga worship, which eventually vanished into obscurity. Since there are no documented records of interreligious contact from the early time of our inquiry, we shall begin in the third century B.C. when Kashmir's socio-religious history saw the introduction of the world religion of Buddhism.

Three periods can be distinguished in the third phase of Kashmir's socio-religious history. Mauryan Buddhist rulers were put to the test. The start of the Buddhist era in Kashmir is regarded as occurring between the years 250 B.C. and 600 A.D., when the king Ashok conquered Kashmir. During the Buddhist period, the state sponsored the promotion of Buddhism. The historical events that followed suggest that Kashmir had a calm life at this time, with a focus mostly on education, religion and city beautification. The Mauryan king Ashok's rule is the first thing that needs to be recognised during this time. This devoted Buddhist ruler is credited for building Kashmir's cities. It is suggested that the Sarvastivadan School may have been dominant in Kashmir under his tenure as a key centre for Buddhist scholars. The second fact is that numerous illustrious Buddhist monks from

East and Central Asia are reported to have travelled to Kashmir around this time. The third important fact is that Kashmir hosted the renowned Buddhist Council during this time.

Around 600 A.D. marks the start of the second era of the third phase and 1390 A.D. marks its end. By embracing monotheism during this time, Kashmir increased its open-mindedness and commitment to tolerance for all schools of thought. In both the pre-Buddhist and post-Buddhist centuries, the great Hindu Kingdom of Kashmir served as the centre for Hindu scholarship. However, the Trika School of Saivite thought was the form of Hinduism that was practised here. It advocated for monism.

From the end of the 12th century to the 18th century's end, the third period of the third phase is in existence. Numerous Buddhists and Hindus embraced Islam during this time. The historical records of Kashmir do not have any conclusive historical information that would explain the exceptionally high number of conversions that occurred there. "The Hindus and Buddhists conversion into Islam was a multifaceted process that included external and internal stimuli with material bases and socio-cultural dimensions contributed to this process of conversion" (Hangloo 2008: 100). The activities of Muslim missionaries contributed to the conversion of Hindus to some extent. Iranian preachers spread the message of Islam. Historical records indicate that Bulbul Shah arrived first, followed by Mir Sayed Ali Hamadani, also known as Shah-i-Hamadan, who brought more than 700 missionaries (Hangloo 2008: 101). They spread the word of Islam, which the native Kashmiris frequently gladly embraced. Buddhists and Hindus were occasionally converted by missionaries through preaching, other times through threats and coercion. With its adherents converting to Islam, the majority of Hindus became the minority.

The last non-Muslim monarch of Kashmir, Rin Cin Shah, converted, making Islam the official religion of the region. Even though they were now a minority, the Hindus accepted their lot and got along well with the Muslim majority. When Islam received particular treatment in Kashmiri society, it occasionally caused Hindus to feel excluded. The Hindus suffered persecution under Sikander, the legendary King Zain-ul-Abdin, also known as Budshah. Hindu temples and idols were destroyed under his rule. The Hindu priests were

tortured. Many Kashmiri Hindus left Kashmir as a result of the forcible conversions carried out under his rule (Dhar 1984: 9-10).

Even during the non-Muslim occupation from the 12th to the 18th centuries, the Kashmir Valley's Muslim identity remained unaltered. It remained a predominantly Muslim area. Furthermore, Muslims continued to practise a number of historical customs that were mostly Hindu in nature even after they converted. The Rishi-Sufi movement, practised by Muslim Sufis, is one of the traditions that have survived in the Kashmir Valley.

Rishi-Sufi Movement

Kashmiriyat is best exemplified by the Hindu-Muslim "Rishi-Sufi" movement. The Buddhist renunciation and the Hindu asceticism known as Rishism were already prevalent in the Kashmir region before the arrival of Islam. The Rishi movement has roots that date back to pre-Islamic times. In Hinduism, Rishis were hermits who renounced the outside world and retired to caves in mountains and forests to meditate and practise strict austerities. Later in the history of Buddhism, Rishis assumed the shape of travelling monks who led austere lives and devoted their lives to helping the less fortunate. Nuruddin Nurani (1377-1440), the leader of the Muslim Rishi movement in Kashmir, aimed to shape the pre-existing Rishi tradition and make it a platform for the interaction of Hindus and Muslims. Islam became more understandable to the Kashmiris thanks to the employment of indigenous institutions and teaching techniques (Dewan 2008: 112-114).

The Muslim Rishi movement and its counterparts in the Buddhist and Hindu renunciation movements share a number of ideas, customs and methods. First of all, all three movements supported the notion that real "knowledge of the self" could lead to "knowledge of God". The Muslim Rishis followed strict austerities and frequently withdrew to the mountains and caves to meditate, just like the Hindu and Buddhist Rishis. Most of them continued to be single. The belief in God's immanence is the second cultural aspect that Sufis inherited from Kashmir Rishi. Though Islam holds that God is a transcendent deity, Muslim Rishis, like other Hindu Rishis, held that God is both transcendent and immanent. Many Muslim Rishis held this viewpoint, considering God to be everywhere and not limited to any one location (Kak 2008: 186).

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The Sufis brought the concept of respect for other religions into Islam as their third cultural element from Kashmir. Respect for various religions and even reincarnation beliefs were encouraged by Kashmiri Sufism. In this aspect, Islam traditionally discourages the concept of rebirth as it is presented in Hinduism. Many Rishi-Sufi-influenced Muslims in Kashmir held the Karma and related reincarnation doctrine to be true (Kak 2008: 188).

The "eightfold path" given by Buddhism was the fourth cultural component that the Sufis brought to Islam. The "eightfold path" that Buddhism teaches as the "right path" is emphasised in Kashmiri Sufism. Islam regards submission to God as the path to salvation. For many Kashmiri Muslims, salvation is also dependent on wisdom, moral behaviour and intellectual growth.

Meditation is the fifth cultural component that the Sufis brought to Islam from Kashmir. Sufis used a practise known as paas-e-anfaas, which is similar to Hinduism's practise of meditating on one's breathing and is a type of "pranayama" (extension of the breath), to expand the capacity of the mind through meditation and absorption.

However, Kashmiriyat has been attacked since 1989. Sufism is considered a deviation from Islam by hardline Muslims who demand a separate state in Kashmir for Muslims. It should be emphasised that in recent politics, hardline Muslims have sought to Islamize Kashmir in order to preserve the religion's original teachings. They believe that the Rishi-Sufi-built Kashmiriyat tradition is an obstacle to their goals. However, Sufism and Kashmiriyat are seen by Hindus and Buddhists as Muslim tools for Islamizing Kashmir, and they call for Kashmir Valley's political secession from the Muslim-majority region. These requests for autonomy from different communities show how successfully intercommunal interactions in Kashmir have transitioned from a socio-religious to a political domain.

Conclusion

Kashmiriyat is the finest outcome of centuries of interaction between Kashmir's old ethno-religious traditions and Islam. It is a blend of Islamic, Buddhist and Hindu teachings. The

Sufis created the social religious space known as "Kashmiriyat" through the cultural appropriation of Hindu-Buddhist religious concepts such as the immanence of God, respect for other religions, belief in reincarnation, the right path developing mind's potential through meditation and absorption, belief in miracles and love of idols of gods and goddesses. Thus, without the contact between Muslims and the spiritual symbiosis that existed between ethnic communities, Buddhism and Hinduism, "Kashmiriyat" would not have been conceivable. Also to be kept in mind is the fact that, despite the influence of religious beliefs on how Kashmiriyat has developed, it is still fundamentally a secular movement. Above importantly, cultural and psychological changes occurred in both religions as a result of contact between Islam and Hinduism. These changes have been seen in the culture, traditions, and religious practices of the tribe.

Regarding its political future, Kashmir is currently involved in an intercommunity political conflict. In this light, it is also important to keep in mind that the political conflict in Kashmir, where Muslims make up the majority, stems from their political supremacy. For Kashmir to flourish further, the Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim communities must continue to live in peace with one another. A balance of political power amongst the communities is required in the context of the intercommunity conflict for the administration of the Kashmir region. Recall that this demand might be satisfied by returning to the Kashmiriyat ethos and by establishing a federal legislature for power sharing along communal lines with a democratic spirit and affection for one's own region.

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