

EARLYKHANQAHS IN KASHMIR: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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The *Khanqah-i-Mu'alla* is the first major shrine in the Valley. It is a place of great holiness for the enthusiastic devotees of Saiyid Ali Hamadani.¹ But the *Khanqah* that first came into existence in the valley of Kashmir is that of Sultan Sadruddin.² It was built in honour of his spiritual teacher, Shaikh Sharafuddin Suharwardi, alias Bulbul Shah³, at Bulbul Lankar in Srinagar.

My paper will focus on reasons why this *Khanqah* could not attract as many devotees as the *Khanqah-i-Mu'alla* of Saiyid Ali Hamadani:

First, Bulbul Shah was the spiritual preceptor (*murshid*) of Sultan Sadruddin and a small number of political elite including the Sultan's brother-in-law Rawachandra. This must be the reason for the mosque of Sultan Sadruddin and the *Khanqah* of Bulbul Shah, located on the right bank of the river Jehlum, being constructed adjacent to one another. Moreover, the mosque was in close proximity to the Sultan's private apartment.⁴ In view of their location and small size, the mosque and the *Khanqah* must have remained a place of worship and meditation for Bulbul Shah himself and a small number of Muslims (especially the king and his supporters) during the earlier phase of Islam in Kashmir. For that reason it did not attract the commoners as pilgrims either from the city or the villages.

Second, although some modern writers⁵ talk about the conversion of many Kashmiris at the hands of Bulbul Shah, no source is quoted to support such a view. As a matter of fact, no earlier chronicler refers to the visit of Bulbul Shah either to the villages of Kashmir or the environs of Srinagar. It seems that Bulbul Shah had come to Kashmir without any purpose of converting the local population to Islam through his disciples. This also explains why no source refers either to his missionary activity or his disciples who accompanied him to Kashmir.

Third, the popular conception of Bulbul Shah in Kashmir is that of a Sufi itinerant who came to Kashmir from Turkistan⁶ and established his fame by converting the Buddhist ruler of Kashmir and his adherents to Islam. No other major event or a miracle is associated with him.

Fourth, Bulbul Shah has not been remembered in the folk songs of the Valley either. But it is interesting that a Ladakhi folk song refers to the association of a Buddhist ruler of Ladakh with the *Khanqah* of Bulbul Shah.⁷

Further, there is not a single ritual, holding significance in the Kashmiri Muslim society, whose origin can be traced to the *Khanqah* of Bulbul Shah. The *Khanqah* of Bulbul Shah essentially assumed the importance of a religious place with the king's and his *murshid*'s name attributed to it in the folk remembrance. Until the advent of Mir Saiyid Ali Hamadani in Kashmir in 783 A. H. / 1381 A. D., the *Khanqah* of Bulbul Shah⁸ and the mosque of Sultan Sadruddin⁹ served as a place of Islamic worship for a minuscule minority of Muslims living near them. It is noteworthy that the *Khanqah* did not attract women devotees during the earlier period of Islam in Kashmir. This is evident by the fact that even now it does not have many women pilgrims unlike the later shrines of Kashmir. Though the 'urs of Bulbul Shah is now celebrated in Srinagar by a small number of devotees, interestingly enough, the *Khatmat* and *maulud* that first originated at *Khanqah-i-Mu'alla* and other shrines of Kashmir are recited fervently.

However, what set the *Khanqah* of Bulbul Shah apart was its philanthropic character thanks to the benevolent first Muslim ruler of Kashmir, Sadruddin. The *langar khana* (public kitchen) that was set up by him was annexed to the *Khanqah*. It was through such an institution of social importance that an attempt was made to establish a meaningful contact with the lower sections of Kashmiri society. The historical importance of the *Khanqah* of Bulbul Shah thus lies in its being the first centre of subtly disseminating the egalitarian teachings of Islam among the common people. This is illustrated by the fact that the name of the locality where Saiyid Sharafuddin is entombed came to be popularly known as Bulbul Lankar (actually *langar*).

After the death of Sultan Sadruddin in 1323 A.D.¹⁰ and that of Saiyid Sharafuddin in 727 A.H./1326 A.D.,¹¹ the *Khanqah* does not seem to have played a significant role in promoting the cause of Sufism or the poor. This must have been due to the political intrigues and instability¹² that did not allow any breathing place to the sultans of Kashmir to develop the *Khanqahas* a centre of their philanthropic activities. Also, Bulbul Shah did not leave behind him a group of devoted disciples or a *khalifa* who would have exerted a sobering influence on the political elite. On the other hand, the Buddhist connection with the original site of the mosque of Sultan Sadruddin seems to have remained firmly etched on the memory of Ladakhi Buddhist wayfarers.¹³

References:

1. Mir Saiyid Ali came to Kashmir during the reign of Sultan Qutubuddin (1374-89).
2. Sadruddin ruled Kashmir from 1320-1323.
3. Though popular among the people by the name of Bulbul Shah, Shaikh Sharafuddin is also called Saiyid Abdur Rahman Shah.
4. Sultan Sadruddin had constructed his palace towards the western direction of this mosque.
5. Mufti Muhammad Shah Saadat, *Bulbul Shah Saheb* (in Urdu), 1941, Lahore.
- Mohibbul Hasan, *Kashmir under the Sultans*, 1974 (2nd edition), Srinagar: Ali Mohammad & Sons, p.235.
- G. M. D. Sufi, *Kashir: Being a History of Kashmir_ from the earliest times to our own*, 1, 1996 (reprint), New Delhi: Capital Publishing House, p.83.
6. Hailing from Turkistan, Bulbul Shah proceeded to Kashmir and reached the Valley during the reign of Lohara King Suhadeva (1301-1320 A.D.). This Suharwardi Sufi was a disciple of Shah Niamatullah Farsi.
7. The Ladakhi 'Song of the Bodro Masjid' speaks of the great Sufi Bulbul Shah as king's friend. *Bodro* means Tibetan. A. H. Francke, *Antiquities of IndianTibet: personal narrative*, vol. 1, 1992 (reprint edition), New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, pp. 108, 109.
8. In the northern part of Srinagar, as we walk from Aali Kadal towards a little west, on the right bank of the river Jehlum, lies the *Khanqah-i-Bulbul Shah* in the ward of Bulbul Lankar. Soon after embracing Islam, Sultan Sadruddin got this *Khanqah* constructed. However, the original *Khanqah* was rebuilt after it had been destroyed by fire (1604 A.D.). This wooden *Khanqah* existed in a dilapidated condition till 1872 A.D. Trees were found growing through the roof of the ruined building. Quarter Master General in India in the Intelligence Branch (compiler), *Gazetteer of Kashmir and Ladakh*, 1992 (reprint edition), Delhi: Manas Publications, p. 780). In 1885 A.D., the *Khanqah* and its premises were brought under the purview of the State Archaeological Department. A little later it was carefully restored. The *Khanqah-i-Bulbul Shah* is a single storey structure made of wooden blocks. Its roof has four layers and the level of each rises one above another. Turrets have been raised on four corners. In its centre are two cupolas. Of the two, the one on the right is slightly higher.
At the present time, Bubul Shah Trust has been formed to rebuild the shrine on the traditional Tsrar-i-Sharif pattern. The Intizamia Committee has taken up reconstruction work to mend cracks the building developed over the past years. In addition, adjacent houses will be acquired for the plan is to widen the roads leading to the shrine. Provisions for parking will be made to avoid any sort of inconvenience to the visitors. (This is being done in connection with the 700th 'urs' celebration commencing after a few years). The foundation stone was laid in a ceremony attended by many people. On the occasion, *durud* and *maulud-i-sharif* were recited and *fatiha* offered. Later, sweets (*shirni*) and almonds were distributed among those present.
9. On the right bank of the river Jehlum at Aali Kadal (near the present shrine of Wusi Saheb), Sultan Sadruddin got the first mosque constructed in the ward named Malchimar. As already mentioned, his private chamber stood on its west. The mosque was a congregational one. The confines of its premises stretched up to Bodhgir. However, after some time the mosque was scorched by fire. Consequently, it underwent restructuring and a small stony structure was raised in its place. Its style of construction resembles that of the typical old houses dotted over the downtown Srinagar. The mosque is presently in the charge of the State Archaeological Department.
10. Sultan Sadruddin was interred in the precincts of the *Khanqah-i-Bulbul Shah*.

11. Saiyid Sharafuddin preferred to stay in Kashmir till his last breath. He departed this life during the rule of King Udayanadeva (1323-1328), the brother of Suhadeva. He was laid to rest next to the Sultan. It has been wrongly recorded in the *Gazetteer of Kashmir and Ladakh* that the first mosque Bulbul Lankar was erected to 'contain the *ashes* (italics mine) of a fakir named Bulbul Shah' (Quarter Master General, op. cit., p.781).

12. The mosque built by Sultan Sadruddin seems to have retained its Buddhist character in the folk consciousness of Buddhist travelers from Ladakh. The Ladakhis and the Kashmiris call this mosque Bodro Masjid and Rainten Masheed respectively. According to Ladakhi traditions, a Buddhist temple occupied the original site of the mosque. The pictures of Buddhist saints beneath the whitewash evidence this (*Indian Antiquary*, July 1908, p.192). A stone was found on the western wall of this mosque. It bore a peculiar inscription in the Nagri character, probably Buddhist (Quarter Master General, op.cit., p.781). No wonder the Buddhists of Ladakh continued visiting the site as pilgrims long after the construction of a mosque.

13. It was a period of great turmoil in Kashmir. Though invader Zulju's attempt to plunder had been thwarted by the inspiring Queen Kota Rani and the local chiefs, people of the Valley were still reeling in shock from the chaotic event.