

Shaikh-Ul Aalam's Contribution to the Mystic Tradition of Kashmir

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Abstract

Shaikh-ul Aalam or Nund Rishi was one of the famous spiritual personalities of Kashmir who was bestowed with many appellations such as Alamdaar, Sakhi Nuruddin, Shaikh-ul Aalam and Nund Resh. He is a household name in Kashmir and people remember him with reverence even now. Shaikh-ul Aalam, believed to be bestowed with the highest spiritual powers, played a pivotal role in awakening, educating and reforming the common masses of Kashmir and helped in evolving a spiritually and culturally uplifted society, to the extent that Afghan Governor Raja Sukh Jeewan Mal nominated a renowned Persian scholar and poet to write Alamdaar's biography. The present paper will highlight how Shaikh-ul Aalam became an epitome of spiritual and cultural ethos of Kashmir by using local vernacular language of Kashmir. The paper will bring forth how Shaikh-ul Aalam paved way in understanding the mystic tradition of Kashmir through Kashmiri language.

Keywords: Kashmir, Shaikh-ul Aalam, Vernacular.

Introduction

Shaikh-ul Aalam or Nund Rishi was one of the famous spiritual personalities of Kashmir who was bestowed with many appellations such as Alamdaar, Sakhi Nuruddin, Shaikh-ul Aalam and Nund Resh. He is a household name in Kashmir and people remember him with reverence even now. Shaikh-ul Aalam, believed to be bestowed with the highest spiritual powers, played a pivotal role in awakening, educating and reforming the common masses of Kashmir and helped in evolving a spiritually and culturally uplifted society, to the extent that Afghan Governor Raja Sukh Jeewan Mal nominated a renowned Persian scholar and poet to write Alamdaar's biography. The Afghan Governor Ata Muhammad Khan struck gold and silver coins in Alamdaar's name. In this regard, G.M.D. Sufi in his book *Kashir* writes:

In fact, the Afghan Governor, *Ata Muhammad Khan*, gave as it were, expression to public sentiment when coins were struck by him in the name of *Shaikh Nur-ud-Din* in 1223-25 A.H, 1808-103 A.C. No other saint perhaps in "Human History" has ever had coins struck in his honour (101).

Shaikh-ul Aalam is widely remembered across the Valley of Kashmir because of his poetic expressions which are wise and pithy sayings called *Shruks*, rendered in native Kashmiri language. These sayings are popular to the extent that people remember them by heart. G. R. Malik states:

The Shaikh had a multi-dimensional personality and left an impression on every aspect of Kashmiri life and culture. As a saint and a *Reshi* of uncommon purity and devotion, a poet of great caliber and above all as a messenger of love, purification and piety, his achievement is unparalleled. (142).

Thus, "He is many in one. He is Sufi and a Rishi, a missionary and an ideologue of sulhikul, a mystic and a moralist, social reformer and ecological visionary"(Shah.107). Hazrat Shaikh Habibullah Nowshehri, disciple of Hazrat Shaikh Yakub e Sarfi, praises him in these verses as:

*Nuruddin Reshi ast mard padshahi reshiya
Andareen Kashmir qabrash neak daarad ishtihar
Darr riyazat saneesh naamad kasi darr mulke ma ast
Chu nishaane baatenash andar kalaame khushgavar* (Bukhari 170).
Nuruddin Reshi is the king of Reshis
Across the vale of Kashmir is his mausoleum famous
In meditation could one name his equal in this land?

For the symbol of his inmost reflects in his pleasant verses. (Trans.Rashid, Gulzar)

There are varied opinions among the scholars regarding Shaikh-ul Aalam's birth Baba Nasib-ud Din Gazi, the compiler of *Reshinama*, mentions his dates as 779 - 842 AH, which correspond to 1378 - 1438 AD. A historian of Kashmir, Hassan Shah Koihami, gives his dates as 757-820 A.H. that corresponds to 1357-1417 A.D. Shaikh-ul Aalam was born in Kaimuh and his resting place is at Charar-i Sharief where scores of people throng daily to seek and earn the blessings of the revered saint who devoted his whole life only teaching the ways which lead to oneness with God.

Shaikh-ul Aalam's father's name was Salar Sanz whose ancestors were from a Hindu Rajput family of Kishtwar and immigrated later to Kashmir. He embraced Islam when he came in contact with Yasman Rishi and was named as Shaikh Salar-ud Din. His mother, Sadra Mauj, was also a descendent of Rajput family. They begot a son who was named as Nund. About his ancestral lineage Shaikh himself states:

Sanzay chum mol ta Sanzaymajiy
Tavay rudus Sanzay hav
Deka likhit phyorah pyom syoduy
Tatiy boh nund ta yeti dram nav
Sanz is my father and Sanz my mother too.
Very much of a Sanz am I, therefore:
The right way was it ordained for me:
Beautiful was I there they named me so (Trans. Parimoo 7).

The Shaikh, therefore, through this *Shruk* asserts that his ancestors belonged to the Sanz dynasty and he himself was the forerunner of the Sanz dynasty. He belonged to the family the members of which were long separated from one another by misfortune and were drawn together again by union of their parents and later it was Nund who was born to them and which meant the "virtuous".

Traditions say that he refused to suckle the milk when he was born but it was Lal Arifa (Lal Dyed) who appeared on the scene and suckled the milk to the new born mystic and said the following verse:

Yina mandchhukh na chane kithe chhukh mandachhan!
Ashamed thou wert not of being
Shouldst thou fight shy of suckling, Now? (Trans. Parimoo13-14).

The new born mystic refused to suck the milk of his mother. Meanwhile the mystic poetess Lal Arifa came into scene and put her own breast in his mouth which he avidly sucked. In this way, Shaikh got his spiritual initiation from this mystic poetess and became the forerunner of the mystic tradition. Therefore, it is evident that she was the earliest source of inspiration to Nuruddin. In *Kashmir's Transition to Islam*, it is stated that:

The popular tradition about Lal Ded's influence on Nuruddin, though enveloped in legendary material, contains a kernel of historical truth. It not only conveys some information about the early influence on the Shaikh's mind, but also reveals the dynamic relationship, a creative tension that existed between the local and Islamic mystic traditions. There is thus need to understand clearly the formative influence exercised by Lal Ded on Nuruddin. And, like Ibn 'Arabi's veneration of Fatima of Cordova, who was a spiritual mother to him (qtd. in Khan 97).

In the later years of life when Shaikh attained sainthood, he paid glowing tributes to Lal Ded in the following verses:

Tas Padmanporichi Lalei
Tami gale gale amrit chow.
Sva sani ti avtar Lalei
Tithuy me var dite Diva
It was Lalla of Padmanpora

Who drank, in long draughts, nectar divine;
 A beloved Avtar she was to us, too;
 May Thou, Lord, bestow a similar boon upon me! (Trans. Parimoo 105-106)

Shaikh-ul Aalam describes the charms of the mystic poetess Lal Arifah who was bestowed by the spiritual grace of Divine being and requests the Divine being to bestow him with similar grace.

Shaikh-ul Aalam was a child of extraordinary caliber. He married Zai Dyed at the age of thirteen and had two children Zooni and Hadir. But later he adopted ascetic mode and meditated for long hours in order to attain union with the Supreme Being. He meditated for twelve years and thereafter came out of the cave and became a Saint of great repute. Shaikh-ul Aalam grew up when the religious atmosphere in Kashmir was highly complex. Pertinently, Islam entered Kashmir long before the Shaikh was born. Moreover, old aged tradition of *Rishism* continued to inspire the people of Kashmir. It was under these circumstances, he grasped the basic tenets of Islam and consolidated it with the *Rishi* tradition. Ishaq Khan opines in his book *Kashmir Transition to Islam* as:

Religion for Shaikh was a matter of experience; it was “real” rather than merely ‘notional’. In Kantian terms his knowledge began with experience that arose out of experience. An understanding of Islam’s historical manifestation in Kashmir, therefore requires a prior understanding of a man who influenced the Kashmiri mind more profoundly than any other religious leader (95).

Again, G. R. Malik states about the mystical aspect as:

The Sheikh was essentially a mystic with a mission. His cult was not borrowed or accepted on authority from without but the fruit of an intense personal experience. He had not merely inherited Islam from forefathers but had entered into its spirit and made it his own. So strong was his dedication to his cause; and so pure and sincere was his faith that he could not express his experience but in the language of poetry- the language of soul and emotion (145-146).

Shaikh-ul Aalam adopted the basic tenets of Islam and expressed them in a simple language for the common masses. The mystical content of his poetry include *Shruks* on varied themes including, among others, the following:

Tawheed

Monotheism stands for the belief in one God/eternal being. The term ‘mono’ means one and ‘theism’ belief. The concept stands for Divine Unity. In Monotheism, it is believed that only Almighty possesses unique characteristics in terms of everything as a Creator of the universe and humanity. Shaikh-ul Aalam’s poetry lays utmost emphasis on unity of God. Moreover, he had realized the oneness where self gets dissolved into the ocean of absolute truth. This union of self with the Absolute is what Shaikh-ul Aalam calls *kunyer*, which he explicitly expressed in the following verses:

Kuniray bozakh kuni no rozak
 Ami kuniran kotah dyut jalav
 Aqal te fikir tor kot sozakh
 Kemi mali cheth hyok su dariyav
 If thou realize the I One, thy identity will come undone;
 Behold, how the *One* shines gloriously bright!
 Thou canst not understand That with intellect or mind.
 Whosoever has drunk that fathomless Deep? (Trans. Parimoo18)

The above verses state that Shaikh had realized the transcendental nature of the Absolute being. These verses testify that Divine being is only one and there exists no question of duality. Shaikh-ul Aalam had realised that there is no one other than Him. He goes on to say that ordinary or common intellect of a human being cannot comprehend the Absolute truth, rather it requires the intellect of higher order (intuition)

to delve into the ocean of Absolute Truth. Therefore, in order to delve into this ocean one has to lose one's existence to unite with the Absolute truth. Here again he says

Khuda chu akuy naav ches lacha

Zikri ros akh kacha mo

Umar vanduen akuy pacha

Rizki ros kah macha mo

God's names are many, but....God is One:

No blade of grass not remembering God is!

Think of a life fourteen days in the sun...

Without help of that One not even a fly, is! (Trans. Smith 80).

The poet categorically asserts that there is only one God. He is the only Supreme Being in the universe who is attributed with many names (i.e., His capacity of having different facets). The poet emphasizes that not even a single blade of grass stays without His *Zikr* (remembrance). He explains that life is transitory and one should continuously pray and remember Him by heart or intellect, and curb one's materialistic desires. He is the only Supreme Being who is the giver of everything and provides everything one needs, one should have firm belief in Him as He is the only one capable of not forgetting to feed even a tiny fly.

Omnipresence

Omnipresence refers to presence of Divine Being everywhere. It also refers to the fact that there is no place where God's presence does not exist or extend. God who is manifested everywhere and is able to interact with his creation the way he chooses. In Islam though Divine and universe are separate entities yet God is present everywhere. About the omnipresence of God, it is stated in *Hadeesi Qudsi* "I was the hidden treasure. I desired to be known, I created you all so that I might be known."(qtd. in Hassnain *et al.*, 10).

Shaikh states about God's omnipresence:

Su me nishe boh tas nishe

Me tas nishei qarar av

Nahaqa tshondum me pardishei

Pananei dishei qarar av

Close by me stood He, and I by Him,

Relaxed felt I by His very side;

Wrongly had I looked for Him in alien lands,

(When) I found solace within myself. (Trans. Parimoo 126)

In these verses, Shaikh-ul Aalam expresses that his heart was veiled by the external world and other material needs. This veil was lifted only by his strict adherence to the spiritual practice and attaining strict control on one's sense organs. By observing the spiritual practice, the darkness had destroyed and the truth was unveiled. He affirms that it was futile to find the truth in alien lands that was hidden within one's own self. Shaikh-ul Aalam had realized this unity and had transcended all dualities and dualisms.

Shaikh was left free in nature's lap when he refused to study under the guidance of a teacher. He relentlessly affirmed unity. This he expressed in his verses as:

Panay puj ta panay shrakh

Panay panas yiwana grakh

Yusuy tati suy chuy yeti

Suy chhuy prath shayi ratith makan

Suy chhuy payadah suy chuy rathi

Suy chhuy gupith pan.

Thou art butcher, thou slaughtering blade;
 Thou art the vendor, thou customer too.
 The one *there*, is the One *Here*;
 Omnipresent, He occupies all space;
 The pedestrian and the charioteer are one,
 The invisible He, behind the scenes. (Trans Parimoo18-19)

The above verses show that for the poet the Absolute truth is one. God is the sole reality. He is manifested in his creation. He is the One who is the ruler of both the worlds. One cannot see Him yet He is the One who sees. The poet declares that there is only One Creator who shines gloriously bright and He is the Supreme Being of both the worlds.

Nafs

Nafs is the integral aspect of every individual. For attaining the path of spirituality this *Nafs* or evil self or *Nafsi Ammara* needs to be disciplined. Bakhrizi states: “The lower self is like a flame both in its display of beauty and its hidden potential for destruction though its color is attractive, it burns” (qtd. in Fadiman, Farger 66). Shaikh-ul Aalam equates *Nafsi Ammara* (evil Self) to Satan and *Nafsi Mutmaina* to God. These both lie within the individual. One has to curb the evil self or *Nafsi Ammara* i.e., greed, lust, jealousy to reach the state of *Nafsi Mutmaina*. Shaikh-ul Aalam, being a *Reshi*, effaced this ego or evil self to reach the transcendent being. He suppressed his lower self to attain a unity with God. About the evil self, Shaikh says:

Nafasiy morus ti vay
Khatith rudum gatei
Athei yiyihem ta kay
Kartal tshanahas hatei
 Alas! I have been done for my ego,
 Concealing himself in darkness,
 Could I but catch hold of Him,
 With a scimitar would I slash his throat. (Trans. Parimoo 73).

Nafs is the part and parcel of an ordinary human being. The desire to achieve the worldly possessions, has been the tendency of every individual. Since the birth of Adam, this lower self is the greatest obstacle in the union with the Beloved. For an individual, it is very important to control his evil self and shun all the base desires as one cannot achieve the stage of the subsistence till one’s self is free from it. It is in the same context, the poet is very much perturbed. He begins by saying that the lower self or *Nafsi Ammara* has made his life like hell and time and again it is a hurdle in the path leading to the Absolute. Every now and then he is struggling to keep this lower self away. He says that if he had a chance to catch it, he would slit its throat and destroy it once for all.

According to Shaikh-ul Aalam “self-conceit” is the greatest hurdle in the spiritual path and it is only by dint of one’s rigorous meditation, one gets control over it. He says:

Jor rustui jahaz torum
Mairith chakh rash ti moh
Shud wandii rahith gorum
Adi prazluem panun ruh
 By killing anger, jealousy and lust,
 My ship safely sailed to the shore.
 With contended heart I endeavored to achieve Him,
 It is only thereby, I did recognize my soul. (Trans. Gowhar 346).

The above verses state that anger, lust, pride, and greed are the greatest enemies of an individual. One has to struggle with these evils in the way to reach the Absolute Truth. Shaikh who was a *Rishi* practiced strict self-discipline and self-control to attain the unity with the Absolute. He waged a war against his *Nafsi Ammara* and purified his self to the extent where he attained the peace of *Nafsi Mutmainna*. His heart attained the *Tazqiyatul Nafs* or purification of soul only after curbing the evil Self. After attaining this state, he got purification of soul from the evil self. In the following lines, he says:

Nafas ditith oray minith
Gatshakhai tsinith karakh na fot
Dam diu haqas Lal ikh zenith
Nata chhiy kuli nafsa zayaqatul mot.
 Our breaths are measured out to us,
 Realize that and thou shalt not die.
 Dive into the Truth, the Pearl will be thine:
 Otherwise, all smack of death (Trans. Parimoo 73).

In the above verses, the poet deliberates that every individual's breath in this world is counted by God and one should not waste the single breath without His *Zikr* or remembrance of God. It is important for an individual to keep his soul purified by the invocation of God. One who realizes His Oneness will gain this pearl of the true divinity.

Shaikh-ul Aalam had realized his Oneness to God and had delved into the Ocean of Divine being. He therefore proclaims that one has to purify his soul from all evil things which obstruct one's union with God. One who invokes the name of God will attain *Nafsi Mutmainna*.

On the whole, the paper discusses the biographical account of Shaikh-ul Aalam followed by the thematic analysis of the poems that clearly show his artistic excellence clothed in mystic backdrop. This chapter not only fully depicts Shaikh's poetry is heavily loaded with mystic strains but also reveals his matchless artistic and spiritual merit which paves a clear way to compare him with the other poets of great repute and acknowledgement.

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