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Sheikh ul Alam's Role in Eradication of Social Evils from Society

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Society either past, present or future is polluted by evil deeds of its respective population and generation but at every crucial time many prophetic personalities arise for the upliftment of society, who can relieve the society from all damages and frustrations. Many Movements arise, like as *Bhakti* Movement of India, which produced devotional luminaries like Guru Nanak, Kabir, Meera Bai, Baba Bulleh Shah, Namdev etc. Similarly in Kashmir the *Rishi* Movement started for the betterment of society, Sheikh ul Alam laid its foundation, who first practiced himself then he preached. He made poetry as a means of propagation of his thought/preaching. His poetry belongs to classical Indian Literature and penetrated in our collective psyche and his verses have become proverbs of common folk. It is high time to concentrate on his poetry and follow his teachings in this modern and fragmented society as he has found the solution of all social problems.

Sheikh-ul-Alam and Rishi Movement

Sheikh Noor ud Din, commonly known as Sheikh ul Alam, Nund Rishi, Alamdar-e-Kashmir, Taj ul Awliya, (the crown of saints of Kashmir) whom Kashmiri Pundits call Shahzanand. (Khyuihami, 1954), was undoubtedly a blessed and true proponent of pure and virgin message of God, although of a Muslim affiliation this great saint of Northern India is revered and respected by both Hindu and Muslim communities in a predominantly Muslim society. Sheikh ul Alam owes the credit for laying the foundation of an indigenous order of in the fifteenth century the *Rishi* order. He was born in a village called Qaimoh (some sixty kilometers South-East of capital Srinagar) in 1377 C.E of a pious couple, Sheikh Salar ud Din and Sadra, known for their piety God-fearing ways (Aafaqui, 1998). A born ascetic, Sheikh ul Alam busied himself completely in meditation, remembrance of God, prayers and ascetic practices. In his late teens, he chose a cave as his abode near his birthplace for all his practices and meditations. After twelve years of retirement, Sheikh ul Alam adopted some disciples and undertook an extensive tour of valley, living for long stints at different places and preaching his simple gospel of unworldliness, purity, piety, fear of God and love for humanity. He died in 1438 C.E at a place called Rupawan, and Zain ul Abidin himself led the funeral prayers. He was buried at Charar-e-Sharief where his final resting place has become an object of pilgrimage for all Kashmiris regardless of their religion, caste and creed.

The most dominant influence on Kashmir society and literature in terms of their religious and cultural heritage has been of Sufism or *Rishiyat*. *Rishism* is an independent Sufi order of Kashmir. The term *Rishi* is itself clearly a derivation from Sanskrit and Indian tradition, though some medieval scholars have tried to show that it is derived from Persian word "*Raish or Rish*, meaning feathers" (Rafiqui, 2003). Consequently, then, the *Rishi* Movement, in spite of its local origins vis-à-vis its distinctive characteristics- extreme ascetic discipline, vegetarianism, celibacy

and non-violence began to be looked with favor by the standard-bearers of the *Shari'ah* and *Sunnah* including the revered Sufis and hagiographers belonging to the *Suharwardiya*, *Kubrawiya* and *Naqshbandiya* orders. So important was the *Rishi* Movement in the traditional Kashmiri society that several of its unique social and religious characteristics were not regarded as an alien. The strength of its social authority not only lay in its denunciation of the *Brahmanic* notions of caste but, also, in the satisfaction that it gave to the spiritual instincts of the people in the Hindu-Buddhist environment of the valley. It is pertinent to say that *Rishism* had struck strong holds in Kashmir prior to the advent of Islam in the region. The anti-caste crusade was most forcefully articulated by the founder of the Muslim *Rishi* order, Noor ud Din Noorani (Sufis of Kashmir, 2011). It is clear that the beliefs of the *Rishis* were not incompatible with Islam. We have not allowed a misconception to enter our minds that the *Rishi* Movement was somewhat outside the pale of the so-called "orthodox" Islam. Liturgical development among the *Rishis* was within the mainstream of Islam; in fact, the *dhikr* was immensely valued as early as the foundation of the order by Sheikh ul Alam along the lines of *Kubrawi*, *Suharwardi* and *Naqshbandi* traditions. Thus the *Rishis* proved to be the cultural mediations of the Islamic tradition. They not only pulled down language barriers but also made the Islamic tradition more comprehensible to the common folk in meaning rather than in outwardly syncretistic forms. It is true that the *Rishis* retained elements from the traditional Hindu-Buddhist religious culture, but it would be wrong to conclude on that reasoning that this development led to the growth of syncretic religious sociology among Kashmiris. As a matter of fact, the evolution of the *Shari'a* bound structure of thought and the concomitant enfeeblement of such elements as celibacy, vegetarianism, extreme ascetic practices, and seclusion in caves is to be viewed as a natural sequel to 'the cult of saints.' The fact is that the *Rishis*, while apparently accommodating local Hindu-Buddhist practices to the Islamic framework, gradually paved the way for the assimilation of the people in the Islamic identity. In the changed environment, traditional religious scheme of thought was gradually abandoned, and no longer remained the basic frame of reference of the people, as they were swept by the wave of Islamic acculturation. It is indeed hard to escape the conclusion that the *Rishis* were largely responsible for influencing the environmental, institutional and linguistic forms which ultimately created conditions for the never-ending process of Islamization in both religious and social terms (Kashmir's Transition to Islam, 2005).

Sheikh-ul-Alam as a Poet

Sheikh ul Alam is one of those distinguished philosophers, Sufi poets, preachers of Kashmir's history who have exercised the most tremendous influence on the life and literary cultural of Kashmir. It is certainly no exaggeration to say that no one else has so far gained such a universal popularity with the Kashmiri people including scholars as to become a household name. Sheikh ul Alam is among the first to use creatively, Kashmiri language in which he has incorporated many of his pithy and wise sayings and aphorisms. Such luminaries and beacons of spiritual literary knowledge comprehend the whole gamut of life or at least the centre around which life revolves, and if they happened to be artists, their art is always subservient to their main table (Malik, 2013). The poetic ardor and accent of Sheikh ul Alam is vitally significant and salutary in its effect. The articulation of the great work of Sheikh ul Alam has made the linguistic and cultural mystery acceptable to us. He has been the only great among a few where the imprint of his influence is so deep on Kashmir's culture, literature, language that he becomes an integral part of our identity. His whole life and work provides an opportunity for a discussion on religious, social, moral poetry, its categorization, evaluation, admiration and impact with all

its facts and in all its manifestations. One of the renowned Kashmiri historians Ishaq Khan illustriously says, “I must confess that no translator can reproduce the sublimity and comprehensiveness of the words used by the Sheikh, which means so much in a single symbol.” He further says “Sheikh did inherit wanderlust from the Buddhist and Hindu ascetics, but what is remarkable about him is that even while practicing renunciations he did not keep himself aloof from his contemporary faith. His composition in the popular Kashmiri dialect, particularly addressed the peasants and artisans point to the plebeian character of his movement.”

Shouq says, “culture and literature like proteus, change with every slight stir in the socio economic order and intellectual ambience and new advancement in science, yet there are certain constants in both culture and literature of the community that are shaped and strengthened by the contribution of some individuals who are remembered as the architects of the identity of that community. Shah-e-Hamdan, Sheikh ul Alam, Bulbul Shah, Ghani Kashmiri and Iqbal are some of the great minds whose impact on the identity of Kashmiri people cannot be ignored.”

Sheikh ul Alam was multidimensional personality as his verses do not simply share the common traits; but he was an environmentalist, botanist (for example, in one of his verses he said; Food is subservient to forests) as well as mystic. There is hardly a verse of Sheikh which has not a social, moral, cultural and more importantly topographical context. He was determined to mend the society from being worst to best. He toured too many places of Kashmir, even he prescribed the names to some unknown villages, and he became successful in his mission of spreading the teachings of Islam to common people through their mother tongue so that they could understand the religion of Islam properly.

The thought content of his poetry may be divided into the following broad categories:

- (a) Devotional poetry (b) *Naat* (c) Morality (d) Monotheism (e) Life after death (f) Ethical Poetry (g) Religious (Islamic) Poetry (h) Love for the Humanity (i) Communal Harmony (j) Lyricism (k) Descriptive (l) Satire and Sarcasm and (m) Mysticism. Being a saint, most of his poetry revolves around the themes of love for his creator and devotion to Him (Kashmir Mystic Thought, 2009).

Revolutionary poetry

Through his verses he protests against the evils of society and played an important role of reconstructing the society. His verses concerning the end of human life should not be described as an emotional expression of the fear of death; rather they seem to have functioned as an effective medium of satire and social commentary on inequality, injustice and repression in the masterly use of metaphor and allegory. Some of these verses are worth quoting:

*[By] displaying the caste in the world,
What will thou gain?
Into dust will turn the bones,
When the earth envelopes the body;
To utter disgrace will he come,
Who forgetting himself jeers at others.*

Against social inequality

From the view point of social history, Noor-ud-Din's description of the social inequalities existing in the contemporary society is important. Apart from the caste system, his criticism of the rich people is also rooted in the social ethics of the Quran. He regarded hunger as the most degrading of diversities. The exploitation and sufferings of the weak at the hands of the strong is evidenced by his verses (Kashmir's Transition to Islam, 2005). The rich people busy themselves in the enjoyment and forget their responsibilities towards society, to help the poor and needy people and uplift the society. He says:

*One amuses oneself by organizing in a musical concert,
Although aware, yet pretends innocence (about human sufferings),
(While) the other is being scourged,
(Has) God Himself willed it so?*

The motive behind his writing poetry was to expose the evils of society which rooted in the society, and his determination to uplift the poor community in the society. He wanted that they should live their life with honor and respect; they should not under estimate themselves by having the tag of Poverty, as our beloved Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W) said that He (S.A.W) felt proud of poverty. Sheikh ul Alam under these verses encourages the poor people by saying:

*Poverty is a shield against Hell,
Poverty is the virtue of Prophets,
Poverty is the wealth of this and the next world,
Poverty is sweet and fragrant,
One who is steadfast in the path of Poverty,
So will be honored here and the Hereafter.*

So, poverty is not any stain of being ashamed or curse but it is a blessing and the path which leads to Paradise. He described the injustice, inequality and social disorder in that way that a sensitive person hardly stop his tears. In one of his longer poems 'God has nothing to do with all this' he reveals:

*There are people who have hoarded enormous quantity of food grains.
Food grains of various tastes and colors.
There are people who long for a morsel of food.
Their infants wail and weep of hunger.
This state of affairs is manmade and man created.*

God has nothing to do with all this.

We can compare this poem with Jane Taylor's poem 'Poverty':

*I saw an old cottage of clay,
And only of mud was the floor;
It was all falling into decay,
And the snow drifted in at the door.
Yet there a poor family dwelt,
In a hovel so dismal and rude;
And though gnawing hunger they felt,
They had not a morsel of food.
The children were crying for bread...*

Thus Sheikh ul Alam used his poetry as a tool to revolutionize the society, he advises rich people to be generous, to give *sadqah* to poor people that will not lessen their income but doubles it and which is the best way to live in peace here and hereafter. Comparable to Kabir's verse: "if a sparrow quenches its thirst from a brook, the volume of water will not decrease!" Kabir says, by donating in charity; your coffers will not become empty. Sheikh ul Alam addressed to people:

*Be delighted to feed the poor and needy around thee.
Such costs wilt not incur a loss to thy income and trade.
Be sure! Thou hast to accost thy account in jot and dot.
Why of thy behaviors wilt thou display on resurrection day.
In ballast wilt be nothing but achievements conciliatory.
Let not volatile thy excellence in negligence but default.
O ye the Hindu brethren in trait and custom my trio neophytes.
Be not devoured with twits but to attain knowledge and faith.*

Inculcation of values of modesty

The other evil which dominates the whole society and make it hollow and dark is its administration. How can nation develop when its administration is under the thumb of corruptive and ignorant politicians? In one of his verses, he beautifully and sarcastically

presents the realistic picture of ignorant and selfish politicians who enjoy the power and debunk the wise ones who are competent to organize the administration. He writes:

Hollow hoots while solids art mum and low.

Stammered be a parakeet while lyric the crow.

Aerial is a populous while shoots budded bow.

Phoenix is confined to woods while kite wilt runs the show.

Against caste system

During the time of the poet Hindu society had already faced devastation due to caste discrimination. Some *Ulemas* who were fond of worldly pleasures and official privileges also felt the indirect influence of this local malaise and started an undercurrent division of Muslim society on such basis. The Sheikh came out vehemently against such social evils. He stressed his viewpoint by elucidation of Islamic conceptual environments:

The Aazar who carved idols all his life,

Gave birth the son Abraham.

He broke those idols into pieces,

And fought the Holy war against evil.

Built Ka'ba with his own hands.

Royal is the descent of Quraish dynasty

Stone hearted was its condemned son Abu Lahab.

His own nephew was the last among the Prophets

Abu Jehal (father of ignorance) died a dog's death,

Who expelled his own nephew from Mecca.

Momentary is the base of this universe,

But immortal are the deeds in His name.

The nearest does boast of his descent,

Alas! He has neither wit nor wisdom.

It has already been stated that the confrontation to which some interested elements tried to expose the two communities during the time of Sheikh posed a potential threat to our values. It required timely intervention of some prophetic persuasion. Hence the Sheikh with the miracle of his sweet verse averted the crisis and laid a permanent basis of religion harmony;

Ice, snow, the glacier,

All the three are water.

Two children from the same parents,

The Muslims and the Hindus.

Why this gulf of hatred between the two?

Be pleased with thy servants, of my Lord (Kashmir Mystic Thought, 2009)

Against Mullahs and Brahmans

Sheikh ul Alam's main target was to reveal the real face of fake *Mullahs*. He advises to beware of those fake *Mullahs* who wear the mask of being pious, and take the advantage of their fake identity. He not only ridicules the *Mullahs* but Brahmin as well;

These talkative Mullahs,

With long dyed beared,

Deceitful is their sweet speech,

They are author-minded liars.

Mullahs have become merchants of mosques,

The Pandit steals the idols from the temple.

One among thousands of them may deserve salvation,

Others are all the disciples of Satan.

Mullah is found of beef and mutton,

Dubs vegetable as rejected grass,

Reluctantly swallows sweet cakes,

Warns followers: "Beware; of mosques – Jins dwell therein.

In this quatrain *Mullahs*, *Sheikhs* and *Sufis* are collectively exposed:

The Mullah is happy with gifts and feasts,

The Sheikhs are mad after greed and lust,

The Sufis are happy to cheat others,

Their one time diet is three seers of mutton, a mound of rice.

Similarly Pandit is ridiculed in this couplet:

*The old and infirm Pandit shall search,
A virgin girl his wife.
Might be on his pyre,
But will never prefer a widow as his partner*

Then who is real and worthy Mullah in Sheikhs perception, it is only Maulana Rumi:

*Else! Seek refuge of God in seeing a Mullah.
Apparently gaudy but malignant at heart art the Mullahs.
Pulpits did they attend to deliver sermons- emotive.
Debatable be none but Maulana Rumi in scholastic rank.
Oceans abysmal in knowledge – great did He traverse.
Thus fused He the psyche – candid with pulsative beats.*

Denunciation of Materialism

The society should be built on such values which broadly respect the rights of fellow creatures. There are certain ills as the cause root for deterioration of the society and so greatly fatal for humanity. In this selected list the truth is considered the foundation of the edifice of morality and falsehood is dubbed as the destroyer of a value based society. The lust for worldly pleasures is declared a root cause of individual strife and national confrontations. Sheikh ul Alam stresses the condemnation of the greed, lust, anger and jealousy which destroy the society;

*Without the aid of a sailor, I did sale my ship,
By suppression of greed, jealousy, arrogance,
Lust, pride and anger,
Then I realized what I am.
U crave to embrace lustly wives of others,
What madness!
U cannot purchase for any price,
(The commodity which you thus put on auction).
Oh! Fool why you go to give thy rare diamond,
In exchange of broken pieces of a glass.*

Against Hypocrisy

The other cause of destruction of society is hypocrisy which has been condemned by all preachers, activists. Sheikh also condemns both hypocrite and the pretender. He says;

*Though hast deceived none but yourself
 Pretended as if a priest though hast opened,
 A shop (for medication of souls),
 Carrying rosary in thy hand,
 Did hide knife under thy long sleeves to kill others.
 Pretended a falcon soaring in high heaven,
 Alas! Though hast deceived none but thyself.
 Adorning the veranda of carved,
 Projected out of the edifice of delicacy.
 Though hast grown fat by the sumptuous diet.
 Sooner like the fuel though will be put to flames.
 Alas! Though has deceived none but thyself.*

Sheikh-ul-Alam on Education

He laid great emphasis on education and learning particularly the knowledge of theology without which no seeker of the ways of God could understand the commands of *shariat*, *fiqh* and *tariqat*. Side by side he insisted upon putting all in practice which has been learnt. He said

*Who has the courage and guts to lighten up a lamp against this wind storm?
 And will fuel the lamp with his knowledge and faith,
 Will abandon the false message and look after the true one,
 All the knowledge is alif, laam and meem (Quran).*

Sheikh ul Alam shows us how to live life free from evils and corruption, and these principles are mostly based on the teachings of Islam because his poetry revolves round the circle of Quran and *Hadith*. The principles of lifestyle according to Sheikh are as under;

*Realize though art in confrontation with contradictions,
Beware though art sandwiched between contradictions and conflicts.
While thinking (about thy goal) the goal has become farther,
The bride of destination has fallen in oblivion of darkness.
Impossible is to defend the acquisitions of sins there,
Beware though art sandwiched between contradictions and conflicts.
Those who sneak opportunities to grab rights of others,
They shall never achieve success.
Alas! Useless is their birth on this earth.
Beware though art sandwiched between contradictions and conflicts.
(Successful are those) who confine to their own rights,
Who strictly protect their own rights.
And shall treat usurpation of,
The rights of others strictly forbidden,
And those who adhere to truth,
They only are liberated from conflicts.
Beware though art sandwiched between contradictions and conflicts.
They who feed hungry, respect the others,
Readily take upon themselves the misfortune of the needy,
They alone are brave and valiant lions,
Beware though art sandwiched between contradictions and conflicts*

Sheikh ul Alam's poetry is full of warnings, and advises us how to eradicate these evils from being particular to general. Now, it is up to us how much advantage we shall take from his valuable poetry as he proved himself to be our real guide to develop our personality. Although his poetry is written in seventeenth century but it is applicable to our present society, if we follow the rules of Sheikh, which are completely based on Islamic teachings, our all problems will be solved without any toil but unfortunately we ignorantly abhor them. The teachings of Sheikh are based on love, equality, communal harmony and honesty which can eradicate all evils and will be replaced by love and peace.

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