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Social Concerns in Mystical Poetry: A Study of Sheikh Nooruddin Wali

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Abstract:

The mystical poetry is generally believed to deal with the theme of search for the ultimate Reality and the ways and means to have a communion with that Reality, i.e. the creator of this universe. It conveys the experiences of a seeker of truth while on his way to get united with his transcendental beloved. A mystic will sing hymns in praise of the creator and would crave for union with his Master who is the ultimate Truth and the ultimate Reality. All the poems in *Gitanjali*, a collection of mystical poetry of Rabindranath Tagore bear a testimony to this fact.

But it goes beyond doubt that all mystical poets have used their verses for propagation of social values and for outright condemnation of evil practices prevalent in the society which divide people on the basis of caste, creed, region or religion. Poetic works of great mystics like Kabir, Lalla Ded, Sheikh Nooruddin and Tagore testify to this fact that social commitment has remained a dominant theme in their poetry. In the present context when there is an ever increasing interest in revisiting the past heritages in order to alleviate the sufferings of the violence torn humanity, this paper will attempt to focus on the social concerns depicted in the poetry of Sheikh Nooruddin. He was a famous 14th century Kashmiri saint-poet who played an important role in educating the masses of the valley through his verses and preached the message of equality, fraternity and respect for one another. He has also condemned openly all the evil practices prevalent in the society which divided people and exhorted them to remain united and follow a righteous path that will lead them to a successful life in the world and salvation in the hereafter.

Keywords: mystic, communion, social commitment, heritage, sufferings.

Preaching for social reformation and spiritual enlightenment is a missionary endeavor undertaken by many godly people besides prophets and seers. But preaching it through verse, that too in a simple and layman's language, is a task which only a few selected men have successfully performed. It is a formidable enterprise as Evelyn Underhill in his introduction to Tagore's book *Songs of Kabir* says, "The poetry of mysticism might be defined on the one hand as a temperamental reaction to the vision of Reality: on the other, as a form of prophecy. As it is the special vocation of the mystical consciousness to mediate between two orders, going out in loving adoration towards God and home to tell the secrets of Eternity to other men; so the artistic self-

expression of this consciousness has also a double character. It is love poetry, but love-poetry which is often written with a missionary intention.¹”

The name of Sheikh Nooruddin, also known as Nund Rishi, the celebrated saint of Kashmir, stands out prominently in this list. He propagated Islam in Kashmir in the fifteenth century through his verse in the manner of the Rishis who spoke to the people in Kashmiri language as against the dominant Persian. Sheikh Nooruddin employed the verse as an effective instrument which popularized Islam among the common people and the Rishiyat emerged as the peoples’ movement. His poetry is deeply rooted in his personal experiences and is aimed at the elevation of a common man to higher levels of piety. The concern for social reformation is the principal theme of his poetry. He vehemently criticizes all corrupt religious and non-religious institutions which hinder common people in their spiritual and moral growth. Guided by the moral precepts of Islam, Sheikh Nooruddin employed his poetic talents fearlessly to denounce all the decadent and spiritually enervated practices. His verses are preserved in the *Nur-namas*, commonly available in Kashmir, which were written in Persian about two centuries after the death of Sheikh Nooruddin.

Choosing poetry as a means for social change and expressing his Islamic philosophy and ideals through poetic forms, Sheikh Nooruddin employed the same art effectively practiced by poets like Sheikh Sa’adi and Iqbal. A renowned historian Mohammad Ishaq Khan in his highly acclaimed book *Kashmir’s Transition to Islam, The Role of Muslim Rishi* credits Sheikh Nooruddin with the primary role in the Islamic acculturation of Kashmir. Arguing that it was the Rishi movement, founded by Sheikh Nooruddin, which played the pivotal role in the Islamization of Kashmir, Khan presents Sheikh Nooruddin as the greatest medieval poet-saint of Kashmir.

Mohammad Ishaq Khan writes, “Sheikh Nooruddin’s poetry represent not only certain basic facts about the gradual transition of Kashmir to Islam, but also something on the crisis through which he was himself passing and its impact on the social norms and meaning of Islam in the regional context.... The history of Islam in Kashmir is in fact bound up integrally with the mystical, moral and aesthetic sensibilities and even philosophical insights of Nooruddin... There is hardly a verse of Sheikh Nooruddin which has not a social, cultural, and more importantly, topographical context”². Different traditions related to Sheikh Nooruddin’s life and his illustrious character are so popular in the whole valley that even small children repeat them in their day to day life. Therefore E.E. Evans-Pritchard rightly remarks, “Traditions which are the collective representation of past events form part of the study of the society to which they belong. The poetry of sheikh is not a survival of something hackneyed and socially irrelevant but something of abiding value.”³”

Sheikh’s poetry is replete with those maxims of life which concern every one belonging to all age groups but still the impact of different stages of life on his poetry has deftly been taken up by

different scholars. According to Prof. Mohd Ishaq Khan, “Sheikh Nooruddin’s religious career falls into three main stages: the first is that of an orphan struggling to eke out his mundane existence; the second is that of an ascetic who withdraws himself from worldly affairs in order to know the religious truth; and in the third and final stage he gives up the life of a recluse to advocate ethics of a dynamic and positive nature”⁴.

Sheikh Nooruddin was a firm believer in the oneness of mankind. According to him, all people are family of God and their creator is one; though He is called by different names. Therefore it is unjustified to discriminate people on the basis of caste, colour, race or religion.

God is one-with hundred thousand names!

Not a straw of grass-even, is inattentive invoking Him.

Deem not thy life more than a jiffy

See, not even an insect is without sustenance. (Alchemy of Light-I p.21)⁵

Thou art not born to frame factions and federations.

Thou art not born to boost the racial superiorities.

Races and colours art the addictions toxic to humanity.

Wanton wilt be the one not firm in pious work and conduct. (AL-II p.338)⁶

He believed that life demands hard work and physical labour to sustain. A lazy person will spoil himself and his family as well.

Tie not if one his waist, shalt be with no work done.

Not in love one shalt be, if fragrant he is not

Taste not if the bitter poison, truth can’t be attained.

Goal shall not come forward, if motto not desired. (AL-I p.216)

Sheikh Nooruddin stressed on the attainment of knowledge. By sound knowledge alone, one can attain true enlightenment.

Precious gold knowledge is to be preserved in coffers.

Vend it pure as a vender to a vendee

Veracious shalt thou be to vend it

A lamp thy faith is let not be blown out. (AL-I p.226)

Sheikh admits that everyone has a unique nature and one has to be very cautious before choosing one's companion because good company shapes one's behaviour and bad company mars it.

Compare not a pony to a horse

Tub can't be a substitute for a boat

Earthen wares can't turn silvery

A crow can't be replaced for a phoenix. (AL-I p.299)

Sheikh Nooruddin extols qualities like truthfulness, self-control, philanthropy and generosity because these traits cultivate a healthy environment and promote good human relations.

Annoyed shalt be the Lord if false thou art.

Clarified the same is in the sanctified book.

Blissful shalt be the Lord if true thou art.

Showered art thou with bounties from heavenly hosts. (AL-I p.383)

Successful have been I to ferry my boat without a sailor.

Possible it was when I killed my rage, prejudice and dependence.

Devoted myself wholeheartedly to God

Thus could I know my soul own. (AL-I p.310)

Listen not the Lord-Shiva thy oral calls.

Folly it is to fan the blazes with pure butter.

Let thou nourish thy own self with such fat.

Abstainer if thou art then give it in charity. (AL-I p.385)

It is obvious that a saintly figure like Sheikh Nooruddin will focus on all those aspects of a person and a society which deserve attention and their play significant role in proper functioning of a society or an individual. Sheikh Nooruddin emphasizes on proper health and hygiene of an individual because only a sound body will nourish a sound mind.

Nothing is brighter than one's eyes.

None is obedient as one's knees

None wilt act as a slave as one's capital.

Nothing is comforting than one's health. (AL-I p.311)

Sheikh Nooruddin firmly believes that domestic life is important for the spiritual upliftment of a believer. One who is successful in fulfilling his family obligations can prove a faithful servant of God. Renunciation fetches nothing but regrets and mortification.

Imperfection lead me to conifers O, Baba Nasar.

Conceiving that monastic life be the path to extol me.

See not thee a great infamy did it prove

Uprightly, His track routes through human habitation. (AL-I p.327)

Sheikh Nooruddin has a very high regard for womanhood. He strongly rejects gender discrimination as man and woman are complementary to each other and deserve equal respect.

With supplications of thy parents did thee get thy birth.

Devised art thee as a fair complexion by thy Lord.

Firm shalt be thy chastity and virginity.

Rueful wilt ye be O, goody in frenzied youth. (AL-II p.131)

Just as day and night hast a fitness of a pair

Thus did evolve a life of genders opposite.

Granted art they with the power of speech.

Thou cannot insult a picture of thy shape and existence. (AL-II p.347)

Sheikh Nooruddin hates those spurious sermonizers who advise others to adopt righteous conduct but forget themselves. This hypocrisy is detested by Sheikh. Similarly he is against backbiting, prejudice and sheer materialism.

Four directions did I traverse to observe the fragrance of flowers.

Somewhere did I behold the flower and somewhere the thorns.

Fought I the spurious sermonizers with their fellow followers.

Thus successfully did I defeat them all. (AL-I p.318)

As one is be for himself

Thou hast nothing to lose O, impude,

Let not contaminate thy faith in derogation.

Think for another as the most revered. (AL-I p.407)

Well adorned art thy mace and whip but.

Filled art thou with hypocrisy and hatred.

Pallid did thou roam during day timings but

How shalt thou accost thou bona fide conduct, amazed am I. (AL-II p.305)

Deformed art my corporal organics

But complexion fair did I consider.

Baited in worldly mart I'm alike a birdie after grain

Difficult feels I to get exonerated

Life is nothing but breath in and breath out

Majority slide down after filthy riches. (AL-I p.421)

Sheikh Nooruddin tells the reader that the world runs on the maxim of cause and effect and that as we sow, so shall we reap. Therefore in order to get good, we have to do good to others.

Let thou listen to the signals of canine barks from patio.

Wherein it calls O' ye the men inside villa, be attentive.

Varietal wilt soweth here varietal wilt reapeth there.

Yea! The dog tells thee waw-waw i. e; sow-sow (AL-II p.462)

From the above discussion it follows that Sheikh Nooruddin, the saint-poet of Kashmir used his verse to rid the society of all evil practices and superstitious beliefs which had crept into the psyche of the people. His poetry elevated people spiritually on the one hand and led to the social and religious reformation on the other hand. Therefore it can rightly be said that he was a great social reformer and his poetry is primarily concerned about prevailing social issues of his times.

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