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From Renunciation to Socialization: A Study of Sheikh Nooruddin's Poetry

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Abstract:

Sheikh Nooruddin is a mystical poet of the fifteenth century whose poetry has been a source of inspiration for the people all over the world. 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 Shirazi and Dr Iqbal. Sheikh Nooruddin laid the foundation of Rishi movement in Kashmir the purpose of which was the betterment of society. His poetry belongs to classical Indian culture and reverberates in the collective psyche of the people and his verses have become proverbs of common folk. Living the early part of his life as an ascetic, sheikh Nooruddin had those mystical experiences which in the later stage compelled him to adopt a group of disciples and propagate through them the gospel of otherworldliness, piety, fear of God and love for humanity. The present paper will focus on the transformation of Shaikh Nooruddin from an ascetic who renounces the world into a social reformer who partakes of his share of familial and social responsibility while living among the people within his society.

Keywords: mystical poet, social change, ascetic, meditation, renounce, reformer.

The name of Sheikh Nooruddin, also known as Nund Rishi, the celebrated saint of Kashmir, stands out prominently in the list of those godly people who preached through verse the gospel of spiritual enlightenment and social reformation. 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.

The most dominant influence on Kashmiri society and literature in terms of their religious and cultural heritage has been of Rishiyat or Sufism. Rishiyat is an independent Sufi order of Kashmir. The term Rishi is "a derivation of Sanskrit and Indian traditions, though some medieval scholars have tried to show that it is derived from Persian word Raish or Rish meaning feathers". (Rifiqui: 2003). Prof Rafiabadi includes Sheikh among those Rishi saints in Saints and Saviours of Islam who, according to him, transformed the life of the people of Kashmir valley. (Rafiabadi:

2005) The poetry of sheikh Nooruddin is spontaneous expression of his spiritual experiences and observations. He in fact has poured his very soul in his verses. His poetry reveals the grandeur of the saint as a great soul and poet of higher order. He made his poetry the message of his faith, love and brotherhood, peace and respect for all creeds and beliefs. His poetry has soothing effect with something deep to communicate. It has a glow of spirituality in it and one feels refreshed after reading or listening to it. "A born ascetic sheikh Nooruddin 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 Nooruddin adopted some disciples and undertook an extensive tour of valley, living for long stints at different places and preaching his simple gospel of other-worldliness, purity, piety, fear of God and love for humanity."(Criterion: 328)

Notwithstanding the fact that sheikh Nooruddin had a glaring personality and his contribution has been immense but still historical evidences prove that he underwent a drastic change at some crucial juncture of his life, the reasons for which have been given differently. Sheikh "Nooruddin's religious career falls into three main stages; 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". (Khan: 97). There could be many reasons why the Shaikh renounced the world and adopted the life of an ascetic in his young age. It was mainly the Rishi affiliation which moulded sheikh's character and his decision was voluntary. "Nooruddin's decision to lead an ascetic's life which marks the beginning of the second stage in his religious career seems to have been voluntary. It was influenced by his craving for seeking the truth" (Khan: 99). Since Sheikh Nooruddin was the main proponent of Rishi movement, therefore the Rishi trait of adopting a secluded life overcame his youth as he himself expounds:

"In the pursuit of mundane affairs my desires became limitless;
So I retired to the jungle, early in life,
May the Lord saturate the Rishis mind with longing for Thee;
For I remember with gratitude how kind Thou art". (Khan: 99).

While remaining aloof from the society in the Manner of the Rishis, "the Shaikh combined the daunting series of recitations of God's name with extremes of asceticism, self-mortification, long fasts, and sexual abstinence. In order to discipline his soul, he followed extreme ascetic practices to free himself from his sensual self. The Shaikh subsisted on wild vegetables and did not touch meat...The ethics of asceticism finds a systematic exposition in the conversation which the Shaikh had with his mother and wife in the cave". (Khan: 101). When his mother appeals the sheikh to leave seclusion and return to ordinary life, he replies:

"Mother do not pester me;
Nund has already buried himself.
Mother the world is mortal;
Therefore I have retired to the cave.

Reacting to his mother's insistence on his taking enough food, the Shaikh remarks:
How can (good) food satiate (my spiritual thirst), mother?
Give it to a dog or a Brahman.

Can't I crush my ego?

Having renounced home, why should I care to live". (Khan: 101).

When his wife Zai Ded implores her husband to give up the path of renunciation and join his family, the Sheikh refuses to return and exhorts her to make preparations for the next world like her husband:

“Zai, have love for the next world;

Groping in the dark will lead you nowhere”. (Khan: 102)

The socio-cultural tradition represented by Nooruddin in the prime of his youth was purely mystical rather than of this world and the only aim before him was to attain a mystical union with God. Therefore “while withdrawing his mind from all objective activities, the Sheikh turned towards the subject, that is, the real self, and gradually got wholly absorbed into it.

Having forsaken all I sought you,

While searching you the prime of my youth passed away,

When I found You within my own self,

I remained in safety because of your luminations”. (Khan: 102)

One more reason for his ascetic life could be that his two close associates with whom he had a spiritual relation and who happened to be his mentors namely Lalla Ded and Sayyid Hussain Simnani passed away when he was a young man. Their death deprived the young Nooruddin of their spiritual care. Sheikh Nooruddin and Lalla Ded had, according to many scholars, close association as both of them shared the same path of mysticism (Temple: 2005). Nooruddin speaks highly of Lalla Ded and respects her teachings “oriented towards a life of intimacy with God. No wonder, therefore, the general theme of the verses composed by the young Nooruddin under the influence of Lalla Ded is mainly the necessity of a period of asceticism during which an aspirant can wean himself from the world”. (Khan: 97). Shafi Shouq in his introduction to Sir Richard Temple's *The Word of Lalla* translates one of the Shrukh of sheikh Nooruddin thus:

“Lala, who was born at Padmaanpore,

Quaffed elixir to her satiation;

She was a woman-saint with God in her bosom,

O God bless me too as you did her”. (Temple: 2005)

Sheikh Nooruddin not only extols Lalla Ded but inherits her mystical vision which instills in him a zest to strive for social reformation because “The influence of her Vaakh was deep on Nooruddin during the formative stage of his mystical career.”(Khan: 77) Sheikh became an orphan at an early age which deeply hurt him. This too could have paved way for his renouncing the world. Another reason may be that “the Sanz family seems to have lived in abject poverty after the death of Sheikh Salar, as is evidenced by the thefts committed by Nooruddin's brothers in order to survive(Khan: 98). Once, the sheikh was driving a cow which his brothers had stolen. On his way he heard a dog bark producing a ‘wow’ sound which in Kashmiri means ‘sow’. Suddenly Nooruddin felt a sense of guilt as he took the dogs bark for reminding him of the eternal law of cause and effect and that what he sowed in this world will be reaped by him in the hereafter.

“The dog is calling from the courtyard,

My brothers pay heed to (what he says)
 He who sows here shall reap there
 The dog is urging sow, or sow". (Khan: 98)

Yet another reason for his renunciation could be deduced from the anecdote referred to in some verses. "Nooruddin was sent to learn the craft of weaving by his mother, but he could not become an apprentice since the tools of the weaver inspire his muse;
 One instrument holds my rapt attention
 The other teaches me renounce the world;
 The paddle points down to the grave;
 This is the craft to which my parents have apprenticed me". (Khan: 98)

During his long stay of many years in a cave at Kaimoh, the place of his birth, Sheikh Nooruddin remained in utter seclusion and devoted his whole time for meditation. Many of his relatives including his mother approached him and requested him to return to his family but the sheikh showed no interest in worldly affairs. "He talks about the insolent riches of the world, human desires, anger and ego, which preoccupy the human mind. He draws lurid pictures of the day of judgement and hell to impress upon his mother the futility of paddling one's own canoe in the material world:
 This life is a hollow bubble;
 We are just a drop in its vast ocean,
 An ass like me is unable to bear its brunt,
 Having deserted home, why should I care to live?" (Khan: 99)

Then he goes on praising those Rishis of yore who had renounced the world like him and adopted an austere life style:
 Rishis real were the old time rishis O, Baba Nassar.
 Wearings tattered with hemp stitches did they use.
 Appetite did they kill with borrowed barley bran.
 Thus worshippers of Lord did they remain in dense woods. (Alchemy of Light -II p.308)

After spending a long time in isolation in the cave, the Sheikh was ultimately persuaded to return to his social life and fulfill his social obligations. It is said that the arrival of Sayyid Muhammad Hamadani in Kashmir proved to be the main reason for Shaikh to give up the life of seclusion. "When Muhammad Hamadani set off to meet Nooruddin owing to the latter's fame, the Sheikh came out of his abode to meet the distinguished guest."(Khan: 83) This meeting changed the course of events for Sheikh as he came in contact with Sayyid Muhammad Hamadan, who is reputed to have played an important role in the spread of Islamic teachings in Kashmir along with a number of his disciples. Now the Sheikh felt regret for spending many of his years in the cave distancing himself from all worldly affiliations and relations.
 Imperfection lead me to conifers O, Baba Nasar.
 Conceiving that monastic life be the pat to extol me.
 See not thee a great infamy did it prove.
 Uprightly, His track routes through human habitation. (AL-II p.327).
 Worship mundane wilt be fatal to sacred life.
 Thus confined to woods remained I in the beginning.

May thee exalt me with divine love, O, Lord!
 For I remember how Gracious Thou art! (AL-I p.46)
 Sternly shalt be dealt the one with no contract to the worldly affairs.
 It's the laborious who shalt get the divine vision.
 Voluntarily and impatiently do the lovers, run to Him-did I observe.
 Waiting restlessly for them is the beloved-God in reciprocation. (AL-I p.217)

Now the mystic Nooruddin set off to reform society by becoming a conscious missionary. "He toured different parts of the valley in the hope of teaching Islam to the unlettered folk... He is remembered to this day, not only as a Sufi but also as the greatest local teacher of Islam in Kashmir." (Khan: 104). Henceforth, the Sheikh not only realized the importance of home and family but also emphasized the importance of domestic life and familial responsibilities:
 A royal cushion wilt be offered to a dweller in Hereafter, as.
 God Himself liked the wedlock of His Chosen one (SAW).
 Householders shalt always be engaged in their livelihood, as.
 Venturesome is to live a family life.
 If thou dwell without attaching to filthy riches
 Thou shalt achieve the spiritual elevations. (AL-I p.331)
 Fair trade of life is thy kitchen.
 A virtuous wearing it is with thee.
 Insignificant is the one, without bed and board.
 Why has bachelors born on this globe. . (AL-I p.340)

Sheikh Nooruddin shifted his focus on the society and insisted on all to work for the common good. He preached mutual compassion and generosity. He insisted that people should live in mutual harmony and share their joys and sorrow. He spoke against oppression, exploitation and black-marketing:
 Listen not the Lord-Shiva thy oral calls.
 Folly it is to fan the blazes with butter pure.
 Let thou nourish thy own self with such fat.
 Abstainer if thou art then give it in charity. . (AL-I p.385)

Sheikh Nooruddin considered trials and tribulations as a part and parcel of life and praised those who showed patience and perseverance in the times of adversity:
 Resistant shalt thou be to thunder bolts and horrifying hoots.
 Tolerant shalt thou be to stygian darkness at noon.
 Persistent shalt thou be to mountainous loads and burdens.
 Patient shalt thou be to hold embers in thy palm.
 Renitent shalt thou be to grinding forces of a mill stone.
 Prepared shalt thou be to quaff venom bitter in a sip! (AL-II p.21)

As a social reformer, he insisted on hard work and dedication. He was against indolence and escapism now. While emphasizing the importance of trade and business in life Sheikh says:
 If the wheel of life wilt not be overturned by death.
 Cramped wilt be the globe vexatious and annoyed.
 If the trade and commerce wilt not be in great vogue.

In jam wilt be the cycle of life without food and dainties. (AL-II p.186)

Sheikh Nooruddin was no longer a believer in a renounced and solitary life the sole purpose of which was to serve the God and abstain from worldly pleasures. He now firmly believed that a person has to contribute to his society by whatever way one can do it. Devoting whole of one's time to the worship of God and neglecting rest of the duties and obligations was no longer acceptable to him. In this material world, he believed, even the prophet Moses could not get along without the rod (the worldly support).

Mace be an aid to immolate a reptile and to cross a brook.

A friend indeed wilt it prove for fruits to book.

Can prop me in mounting a hill alike a gear hook.

Indeed wilt be an extra limb safe and sure to look. (AL-II p.54)

Although the Sheikh was illiterate, it seems that he had gained enough knowledge from the sources available in his time as his poetry testifies it. After all, he was a keen seeker after truth. "It was not by meditation and penance in the cave and forests alone, but also through extensive discussions during the long course of his travels in different parts of the valley with the Hindu ascetics, the Brahmans, the theologians, the commoners, including even peasant girls, and above all, Sufis like Muhammad Hamadani... that Nooruddin was able to quench his thirst for a knowledge which would lead to the solution of the difficulties and problems of his faith." (Khan: 84-85)

From the above discussion it is clear that sheikh Nooruddin was initially interested in a life of complete renunciation and thought it the only way to get close to his Lord. But later he changed his views and admitted the importance of social and family life also because it is here that a person gets a chance to contribute to his society and the saintly people like him strive to bring about social reforms.

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