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Sheikh ul Alam's Employment of Religion in Mending Society

Sumaya Firdous

Ph.D. Scholar

B.P.S Mahila Vishwavidhyalaya,

Khanpur Kalan

Sonepat Haryana (India)

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Abstract:

Sheikh ul Alam dawned in the valley of Kashmir and emerges as the representative poet and mystic of the Kashmir valley. In his poetry there is a unique kind of amalgamation of various cultural and social practices. He was influenced by the traditions and culture that were prevalent during his time period. Therefore, it is simply not possible to limit Sheikh ul Alam to a particular trend or sect. He was a Sufi; he was a Rishi; and he was a preacher in the Indian tradition. To understand Sheikh ul Alam's poetry and its context, it is imperative to understand the distinctive nature of Sufism with special reference to Kashmir valley. Rishism is a local traditional way of spirituality which is based on Sufism. Sheikh ul Alam put forward his message in a local or Kashmiri traditional flavour that is in Rishi flavour. He was an eye-opener to the society as he preserved both the spiritual and socio-cultural sense of his divine revelation. Like Sufis of the main orders he was aware about the stages of Sufism but he distinguished himself among his contemporaries and the succeeding generations both as a mystic and a social being.

Keywords: Sufism, Society, Social, Kashmir, Caste

Objectives:

The main objective of this study is to find out how Sheikh ul Alam mends and revolutionizes society through his message in the form of poetry. This work will observe the expression of Islamic philosophy and ideals of Sheikh ul Alam in reconstructing society through poetic forms.

Research Methodology:

To complete the research study, incentive came from the study of the poetry of Sheikh ul Alam. The 'Observation Method' was applied successfully for this research work. By using this method, the researcher goes through different literary articles, critical compositions, books and websites to find interrelated study materials. In order to be acknowledged in the allied topics Different critical books composed by– G.N.Gowhar, Ishaq Khan, Khuihami etc. remain supportive for the part of the study on poet's literary life.

Introduction

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) In Kashmir there arise many beacons and luminaries for the social upliftment. Hence, Kashmir became the seat of knowledge, learning and source of Indian literature. Sheikh ul Alam was the contemporary of Lal Ded, a Saint poetess, and the founder of an indigenous order of Sufism – Rishism. Sheikh ul Alam travelled through distant areas of Kashmir valley and met saints, scholars and common people. His Poetry in the form of *Shruks* bears a distinct impact upon Kashmir society. The cross-breeding of Sufi beliefs with those expressed by Lal Ded led to the foundation of the *Rishi* order of Sufis in Kashmir. In popular perception and in the *Rishi Namas*, Nund Rishi is portrayed not only as a venerated Sufi but also a champion of lower castes. Performing some ascetic exercises Sheikh lived in a cave in the village of Kaimuh near Srinagar. He subsisted on wild spinach and leaves. Sheikh ul Alam tried his best to mend society for betterment. Like Sufis, Sheikh ul Alam used regional language for spreading his message to the common people. Although Sheikh ul Alam is confined to Kashmir only, his message is universal.

Sheikh ul Alam as a Sufi:

Sheikh ul Alam was the strict follower of Sufism and raised his voice against all such existing things which could destroy and made the society hollow. He was very anxious about evils around the environment. He was an encyclopedic man with deep knowledge and wisdom. Like a Sufi, he was not restricted to surface meaning of the Quran and *hadith*. Hence he was against the orthodoxy and Mullahs who made the religion a bottle neck. He refused to follow the old version of Rishism which was based on monasticism. Along with it, he was influenced by the traditions of the valley of his time. As it is said, before the emergence of Sufism in Kashmir, it was influenced by Buddhism and other religions. However Sheikh ul Alam was the strict follower of *Hadith* and the Quran. Like Rumi, he delved deep in the meaning of the Quran. Therefore, his poetry is commonly known as the Kashmiri Quran. Sheikh ul Alam was highly revered by both communities of Kashmir, Hindu and Muslims, even Hindus called him Sehjanand. Being popular among Hindus might be because of having liberal outlook and traces of Bhakti movement in his verses and teachings.

Influence on Sheikh ul Alam:

Hindu and Buddhist thoughts greatly influenced Kashmiri Sufis and the result was that Sufism in Kashmir came to acquire a distinctive form which somehow was different from the normal interpretation of the term Sufi. These Sufis had a different outlook. They established their own indigenous order which came to be known as Rishism though by and large it remained with the larger frame of Sufi culture. In other words, it was a local traditional way of practicing spirituality based on Sufi ideals. It must be explained that most of his verses composed by the Sheikh in the cave bear an indelible mark of Saivite philosophy. Meanwhile liturgical

development among the Rishis was within the mainstream of Islam; in fact, the *dhikr* prayer, recitation of the Quran was immensely valued. Sheikh ul Alam did not bother about his expressions in the form of Saivism or any other influences. Hence, he openly uses terms of other religion. The following verse is typical of the Saivite way of renunciation.

The universe is the objective manifestation of the essence of Siva,
If you realize it through annihilation of self, you will get merged into Him,
What will you find after death, if you not recognize Him in this world?
Search Him in yourself and give me keen hearing. (Sheikh as quoted by Khan, 102- 103)

Afterwards, Sheikh ul Alam played the main role in diminishing the traces of Buddhism on Rishis as Gowhar in his book *Kashmir Mystic Thought* writes: “there is a wide gulf between the two as Buddha is so committed to *anityata* (impermanence) that he refuses even the permanence of soul and propounds *anatmavada* (non-soulism). On the other hand, the whole gamut of Sheikh’s teachings is that soul is subjected to reward and punishment.” (293) Sheikh ul Alam believed in achieving spiritual growth through an active social life. He therefore focused on survival of the self, and was critical of the concept of annihilation of self-hood that demanded withdrawal from the world.

Sheikh ul Alam and communal harmony:

As a real Sufi, Sheikh ul Alam with his utter desperation spreads the message of peace, love and harmony among people. During the reign of Sikander, Sheikh ul Alam played a revolutionary role to restore peace in the valley. In his sayings it is quite apparent that he was liberal and peace loving as he had not any grudge against Hindus. Against the stratification of society he says:

“We belong to the same parents.
Then why this difference?
Let Hindus and Muslims (together)
Worship God alone.”(Rafiqui, 212)

There is another Shruk which conveys the same sentiment:

“We came to this world like partners,
We should have shared our joys
And sorrows together.”(Rafiqui, 212)

Obviously, the message is not confined to Hindus and Muslims only but is meant for the whole mankind.

Against fake Mullahs, Rishis and Pandits:

Sheikh ul Alam used Islamic teachings in the flavour of Sufism hence people attracted towards him. His shrine is venerated till this time by all communities. He looked at the religion

from all dimensions and did not remain confined to surface meaning, in other words he was restoring peace in the religion and society as well. Such religious thought leads him too far opposite from Mullahs. He openly criticized Mullah's hypocrisy, arrogance and greed of pursuing material gains. He warned common man against such Mullahs and believed that such Mullahs will never get salvation on the judgment day. Such Mullahs instead of spreading light of knowledge and peace they spread darkness of hue and cry and communal disharmony. "In his view there was no more horrifying and utterly convincing representation of deadly evil than the *Ulama* with factious spirit emanating from their false learning and pride." (Khan, 112) Hence, to vent out his anger he remarks:

The true spirit of *Al Hamad Qul-hu-wa'allah* and *Attahiyat*
If practiced in everyday life, is equivalent to learning the Quran.
See, is not it futile to learn like the Satan.
Who was doomed despite his learning. (Khan, 112)

In the above *Shruk* he compares the superficial learning of the Quran with the Satan. Satan was full of wisdom but had pride hence he was doomed because of his pride and arrogance. Mullahs usually consider themselves the descendants of the Prophet's family and remain preoccupied with arrogance of superiority like that of Satan.

Sheikh ul Alam not only criticized Mullahs but condemned false Rishis, Mullahs and Pandits as well. In other way round he was mending society by sweeping up all such toxins that depressed society. He says:

People under the guise of Rishis wilt roam like street actors,
To display their God fearing in yards and compounds,
Thus people plain and dull wilt they engage to till their lands,
Varyity varied pulse cotton, and cereals wilt they sow and grow,
To harvest crops bumper to fill their carnal desires,
Let thou jot it down to inform the people as a whole. (Adfar, 313:I)

Further in another *Shruk* he says:

Present rishis art nothing but men mundane,
Concerned are they to their appetitive conduct,
Bowls and dishes varied did they receive on dining table,
Greens-many like turnip and kale art they served,
Thus with a filled tummy wilt they forget their Lord,
If they pose to be rishis whom shalt we call the robbers? (Gowhar, 315)

Concern about nature:

Sheikh ul Alam was not only a social activist but was a poet of nature as well. He was conscious about the destruction of natural beauty in the valley. By feeling the materialistic approach of People around him he vehemently raised his voice against the destruction of nature. Along with praising and mesmerizing the beauty of Kashmir he tries to spread his message of ecological balance and environmental conservation through his verses. He says:

Satisfied may not be one in seeing His symmetry and style.

Though in unity He is unbeatable and unquestioned.

Self-reliant Noor ud din yield to His everlasting behaviour.

Ah! Glorification of Lord did they enjoy and relish. (Adfar, 228 II)

“It is these surroundings of thick forests, huge mountains, wider valleys...which provide eternal solace, comfort and concentration for Gnostic practices, aesthetic tastes and initiative for devotional meditation.” (Gowhar, 117)

In desolate, distant and inaccessible forests,

I established basic mission- the cave,

In that dense forest in isolation, washed the dirt,

And had His vision,

There I experienced the existence in the grave,

In that process got washed my being with pure scents,

So I made the sleeplessness conscience,

To lay in rest but in cave. (Gowhar, 115)

Extensively I toured in jungles through *kail* trees,

The warmth of June touched adversely the delicacy of jasmine,

Distinct are not the pearls (dew drops) to the moisture,

Mere touch shall damage delicacy of diamond,

Sooner the flame of tulips shall extinguish,

The evening occasions but the drowsiness of slumber (Gowhar, 114)

Against deprivation of rights:

During his time, people were being disinherited from their rights. He advocates and preaches freedom; freedom of purity of thought, the freedom of soul in warmth of remembrance of God, and everyday living. The deprivation of rights of people of any country or nation is summed up by Sheikh ul Alam:

Demands were raised but denied,

The denied demands were imposed by force,

Some people had to die while agitating their demands,

Some people were deprived and they perished in deprivation.

Against moral destruction in society:

Sheikh ul Alam shows a wrath against all immoral activities around him. At length, Sheikh ul Alam preaches a peace by inculcating the moral and ethical values at individual level as well as at social level. He builds one's character by instilling in him the traits of discipline, hope, doing good deeds etc. The solution of any moral degradation is given below:

Value Muhammad (S.A.W) and his four friends,
By following them all problems will be solved.
Devote thy soul and body to them,
You will be among the elevated in hereafter.

Let thou glaze thy soul like the glass,
Thus reality can thou ascertain.
Stare not thy vile being.
Alive shalt thou mediate thy death. (Adfar, 290 I)

Beautification of inner self:

At an individual level one is required to restore inner peace of soul. One who is at peace inwardly can undoubtedly be the preacher of happiness and love. As Rumi says, "the light which you see on my face is actually the inner light." Hence, Sheikh ul Alam stresses on the purification of inner self against the lower self (*nafs*). He distinguishes two sides of inner world of a person; one is evil self and the other good self. He emphasizes on the inner peace which can be the outcome of obliteration of all materialistic desires like greed, arrogance, hatred, lust etc.

Thy nature is a field of saffron bud,
Greed, lust, wrath, arrogance, allurements and hatred,
All these six constitute water, to destroy it,
By adherence to these vices, one loses bargain,
As if a trader becomes bankrupt,
How in that situation, he can adorn-shop in Bazaar,
(Now what to do at this fog end),
The decay has gripped the perching bird,
How to mourn upon the demise of my youth,
The graveyard is oh! Friend our rendezvous,
The assets are gripped in flames,
How to (at this late hour) dig out earth,
For water to extinguish this fire. (Gowhar, 347-348)

As a guide for scholars:

Sheikh ul Alam provides a peaceful environment for the students and scholars. Instead of stress out life in pursuing education for wealth and money, he believed that the motive behind education should be pure i.e. to serve nation. Present students, instead of taking hold of

knowledge, become the recipients and donors of ego, pride and moral corruption. Sheikh ul Alam's awful reaction against false scholars is prominent in below mentioned verses:

Thou scholars alas!
Acquire knowledge to derive material gains,
You are mad after riches, wealth and position,
And feel annoyed when you are to receive a guest,
Do you consider thyself among the chosen few?
But least thee know that none of thee can get salvation.

The scholar who reads for worldly pleasure,
Is externally proud but shallow inside,
He preaches to others, himself is devoid of values,
His actions contradict his theories always.

Sheikh ul Alam take the spiritual knowledge in higher esteem. Self and deep knowledge beyond words in the books will draw out the best humility and peace. Students should have the practical approach of education. It is pertinent to quote Sheikh ul Alam:

Vain knowledge without effects thawing.
As donkey's jack art loaded with book-shelves.
Learners-true art inspired with perception-real.
Thus blissful depart they to destiny-eternal. (Adfar, 452 I)

Let not display thy haughtiness on achieving degrees-doctorate.
As a turnip bulky is unpalatable owing to abscess formation.
Penitent wilt thou be after elevations thus.
Elated wilt thou be as a sprouted seed under soil. (Adfar, 453 I)

Against any type of killing:

He spread the message of non-violence even he refused to kill any plant or animal. During his spiritual journey he gradually left eating delicious food instead he ate bitter vegetables – *kasnee* and *handh*. In his old age he was living just on a glass of water. Sheikh ul Alam directs towards one of his would-be disciples who was cutting grass for cattle:

Life it has, so why should it be cut.
Never shouldst thou feed life on life;
However, who can undo the writ of Fate?
All that I wanted to find was the pious motive. (Khan, 123)

Women empowerment:

Women play a vital role in the society as it is said to teach a woman is equal to teach whole family. Sheikh ul Alam believes that women are endowed with virtues like chastity,

modesty etc. But at the same time he criticizes the bad traits in women – selfishness, wickedness etc. So, it is up to woman to make heaven or hell of the family as well as of the nation. He says:

Woman wicked wilt be like a polar bear and a craggy pussy,
Opaque wilt she be to lustrous and radiant advises and admonitions,
A blessed thrifty home wilt get ruined due to her inaptitude,
Hence a weed inferior wilt not be coequal to fragrant one!

Love parlance of a spouse wilt enthrall thee like starling melodies,
In dubiety wilt she record thy cardiogram alike a pussy,
Kill not they someone nor were killed by somebody.
Who have not married and departed as bachelors.

Sheikh ul Alam advises that women should inculcate powers of wisdom, knowledge and should be an emblem of honesty, truth, beauty and rare. He directs women folk by stating a perfect example of Hazrat Fatima (R.A).

Daughter great with wit and wisdom did the Prophet of God beget,
Humanity whole glamour owing to Her existence.
Shared She the bed and board with monarch Ali (R.A).
Incomparable lads but two did She beget.
Familiar to mankind by the name Fatima (R.A).
Sacrificed shalt be one to her system and style.
Intercessor wilt she be to humanity on doomsday.
Unbalanced would have been the civilization of unbegotten.” (Adfar, 129 I)

Embodiment of peace:

Sheikh ul Alam stressed not only on mystical union between man and God but sympathetic behaviour towards other living creatures. His religion was religion of love and non-violence considering the Quranic knowledge, for him, the Islam is religion of love. His non violence stance towards other beings is actually the illuminating Quranic knowledge. For instance, he stresses on helping poor, to control anger, to be kind towards all and condemnation of lust, greed and pride are stated in the Holy Quran. Thus his non violence approach towards humankind illustrates his observance to the Quran as well as Rishis' inclination towards non violence and peace.

Conclusion:

Sheikh ul Alam has greatly succeeded in portraying a positive message of life with a strong practical approach for progress and development of mankind. He shuns any kind of human slavery in the name of religion and priesthood. He appeals loudly for a communion with God without the intercession of any human agency. His Islam is so pure, simple and conspicuous that it hardly stands for any elaborate ritualism. His message appeals to the heart and the reason

equally. He has left hardly any issue relating to the development of humankind. He was an encyclopedic man embedded with all fields of knowledge of life. Thus, he provides a climate for the blossoming of the ideas of Islam for their fruition and realization at religious, social, moral, intellectual, cultural, political, environmental and international levels.

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