
Kashmir: Recovering Its Shared Heritage

M. Maroof Shah*



Introduction

Kashmir is famous for its scenic beauty and handicrafts but in the informed academic circles it is most prized for two things viz; *Kashmir Saivism* and *Sufi poetry*. It is strange that even ordinary Kashmiris are not fully cognizant of this and in Kashmir's textbooks on history and culture both appear only on margins. It implies that we can't meaningfully talk about uniqueness of Kashmir culture or its unique contribution to world culture as long as we don't foreground both of them. It is hardly recognized that *Reshi* movement was an attempt to preserve the best in Kashmir's intellectual and spiritual heritage and for achieving this it made a reconstructive and reinterpetative move that is unparalleled in the medieval world. It apposed Islam and preIslamic traditions and

without diluting theological content of the latter brought forward a "synthesis" that has been accepted by the masses although it is yet another quirk of fate that *Reshi* movement didn't survive long in the form originally envisaged although it does continue to influence Kashmir through its later incarnations such as Sufi poetry. In this paper an attempt to highlight contribution of these two thought currents shall be made in order to pave way for cultural redefinition of the genius of Kashmir and its identity.

As the Geeks are world famous for their philosophy and Persians for epics, the Sufi poetry Kashmir deserves to be known by a school of philosophy which is its own and a tradition of aesthetics and literary criticism which it nurtured to perfection. It is evidenced by the fact that nothing substantial has been added to Abhinav. It will recognized

* M. Maroof Shah, a scholar on Religions with a focus on Islam is working in Department of Sheep Husbandry, Government of Jammu and Kashmir, Srinagar.

any that Kashmir Saivism is a unique school of philosophy that can be compared to any major philosophical school which developed in the world in terms of rigour, consistency, breadth and applications. Its greatest figure, Abhinavgupta, can arguably be put in the list of top 10 philosophers and top 3 aestheticians of all times. He is the Plato of Kashmir. He combines logical dexterity of Nagarjuna, subtlety, breadth and saintliness of Ibn-i-Arabi and brilliance of Sankara. As a system maker, he can be ranked with the greatest figures of different traditions. He is amongst the most prolific philosophers of history.

Kashmir Saivist philosophy is intellectually a robust dynamic approach that bypasses typical deconstructive and other criticisms that spell the death knell of Western theology and philosophy. The problems in understanding the Fall, the Sin and Guilt in the Christian West during last two or three hundred years are also dissolved by turning to refreshing metaphysical approach of nondualistic Saivism. The path to salvation in the age of skepticism through the aesthetic or artistic route is made more comprehensible by turning to treasures of Kashmir Saivist metaphysics and aesthetics. The formula of bhog is yoga as expounded in Tantric Saivism, so

dear to modern mindset that has suffered from the campaign against flesh and body would offer alternative path to transcendence or religion.

What has been our legacy seems to have been either forgotten or rejected without examination and what we are losing is something that appears to me a catastrophe. It is instructive to compare Saivist-Sufi heritage that was part of our culture to current situation. I shall focus on certain concrete issues and attempt to show how colossal a cultural loss has been inflicted.

Loss of Philosophical Culture

Once upon a time Kashmir was a cradle of philosophical culture and we produced some of the greatest philosophers – or more precisely metaphysicians – of India. In my reckoning, the contribution of Abhinavgupta was the culmination of Saivist tradition in philosophy which is the greatest contribution of early middle ages in Kashmir to the world of philosophy. Why is that Platos or Socrates' birth places or academies are world tourist sites but even a common Kashmiri doesn't know anything about Abghinavgupta. We have no academic institute devoted to his name. We do not have

Abhinavgupta Chair in any of States' universities. Even academic elite have been guilty of ignoring or neglecting him. There have hardly been any seminars or indigenous studies or even M. Phils or PhDs on him in academic institutions of Kashmir. How sad to note that he has been assiduously read, translated and discussed by foreigners. We can't boast of a single local Abhinavgupta Scholar. We find leading publishers publishing short and long introductions to major thinkers of the world but the name of Abhinava is missing in them showing our failure to introduce him to the world. However it is another matter that the power of his ideas has got him some great admirers who are now popularizing him.

Abhinavgupta could have been one of the key elements in our introduction to the world. He is the glory of Kashmir who single handedly could be presented as our Plato or Nagarjuna or Laozu or Sankara or Aquinas. Abghianvgupta's rich spiritual and philosophical resources are being explored at various universities for evolving an informed response to certain important dilemmas and crises that (post)modernity has unleashed. His arguments for transcendence are so forceful that one wonders how the contemporary

thought that takes anti-transcendentalist standpoint for granted and is suffocating under the burden of its nihilistic implications would engage with it. Modern problem of nihilism is neatly dissolved as the God of Abhinava is something that is the ground of not only aesthetic experience but all experience. Vain attempts at finding meaning in life in the absence of God look unnecessary when we learn to approach the issue with the tools of Abhinava or Ibn Arabi.

Sufism as it developed in Kashmir, fortunately, preserved and continued the essence of spiritual heritage somehow – as all spiritual traditions are fundamentally different expressions of the same transcendent truth – but philosophical or metaphysical approach was lost. However if we want to retrieve the almost dead tradition of Saivism in all its formal dress it may be impossible. One needs to note that the essence of any spiritual and philosophical school be preserved and that seems to have happened in case of Unitarian Saivism through Reshi-Sufi culture. However, the point of concern in Kashmir is later erosion of genuine Sufi culture as the present day incarnations are mostly the degenerated residue and mess of occultism and magic and a lot of charlatans exploiting its name. We

hardly find any major Sufi voice after the great Sufi poet Ahad Zargar. The rise of anti-Sufi elements has further made things difficult for renaissance of Reshi-Sufi tradition. New generation has been, for various reasons, weaned away from literary and spiritual tradition enshrined in mystic poets of Kashmir. It seems that modernism has strengthened anti-Sufi ideologies and there are few respected Sufi scholars available to counter them.

Religious Exclusivism

Today there are debates in Kashmir that were inconceivable during the heydays of great philosophers and Sufi poets. Uniformitarian fallacy has never been traditionally entertained by great Kashmiri Saivist and Sufi thinkers. The question of religious exclusivism, however, hardly arose. Saivism, like other Unitarian traditions current in India, had little difficulty in accommodating the religious other in its nondualistic framework. In Kashmir Saivist framework, a sort of salvation is not denied to anyone and art that is enjoyed by one and all gives a possible route to heaven. Art had the status of 5th Veda that means all are provided access to supertersetial realm and thus none is excluded. Saivists cultivated a tradition of dialogue with other religious/

philosophical schools. As exemplified by Abhinava's engagement with Sankara and other rival thinkers that this glorious tradition of engagement with the religious/philosophical *other* seems to have got into oblivion as Kashmir's unlearned philosophical culture and other factors weakened the general intellectual culture here. Islam's rich intellectual resources too could not stem the tide possibly for want of proper political atmosphere. But it must be remarked that Syed Ali Hamdani who was influenced by Ibn Arabi was a great Sufi metaphysician. Great works on Sufi metaphysics and spirituality were written by Kashmiri scholars though they remain, like much of Sanskrit sources, untranslated or little noticed. Kashmir produced first rate Sufi thinkers and many writers who elaborated Sufi thought. However this tradition suffered a setback when Mughal rule in Kashmir ended. Part of Ibn Arabi's legacy is however preserved in Sufi poetical works. Now the language and tone of engagement with the philosophical/religious other is incompatible with the realities of a pluralistic culture in which we are willy nilly situated thanks to revolution in communication and turning of the world into a global village. Now *we see the self styled advocates of religion busy in dispatching people to hell on trivial*

*theological and even legalistic issues. Sectarism has made deep inroads and could topple the whole structure of shared sensibility that transcended merely theological barriers and has been with us for centuries if not millennia. Kashmir had been a great experiment in inter-religious dialogue but today it seems to be getting increasingly intolerant. Our folk attitude has been Adam gave birth to two sons one opted for burial ground and the other for *shamshan ghat* (pyre). It implied that religious differences would be sorted out by the God and we are not to worry about it. Our folk consciousness also appropriated key concepts of other traditions and thus in a way created a space for the other by interorizing it. One instance is common Kashmiri usage of such phrases as *dunya chu tawan* (samsara is dukkha or the world is abode of pain), *aamali baden henz sakthi* (the curse of bad karma) which stand for key Buddhist concepts. Shared pilgrimage sites and universal respect for mystics means Kashmiris have understood transcendent unity of religions and know that mysticism is the royal road to Transcendent Principle. Kashmir's identity as *pir waer* or garden of saints means that it is not exotericist theological or fundamentalist community though it has deeply religious people. The land of the mystics means the land of silence, the*

land of contemplation, the land that exudes other worldly fragrance, the land that can't be desacralized, the land of wisdom or knowledge. Mystics have been the most evolved amongst humans, the most daring adventurers of human consciousness for whom all barriers of class and creed and anything that ties us to merely phenomenal/fragmentary/divisive idea has to be transcended. Today we can talk of reviving Ibn Arabi's legacy for engaging with the ideological other. Abhinavgupta could continue to be a source of great inspiration but due to disappearance of the formal universe in which he lived and that coloured his approach, it is hardly possible to revive him totally. It should not imply that his magnificent aesthetics and equally his metaphysics should not be relevant and need not widely studied. As a philosopher he can't ever be relegated to the margins of history. As a sage who systematized Saivism as a mystical religion, his legacy has been, to a great extent, lost and can't be easily revived as this requires continuous transmission through a living practicing community. However as Kashmiris continue to be Muslims and Ibn Arabi's universe of forms continues to be relevant it would not be difficult or unwarranted to strive for reviving him in the capacity of a great bridge builder and providing a framework for dialogue

between religions and sects.

Ibn 'Arabî shows why religious diversity is demanded by the very nature of things and why we must welcome it as there is great good in it. His pluralism doesn't entail rejection respect for the parent tradition and even certain exclusivity of the latter which is necessarily associated with all belief systems. We need to build on Ibn Arabi's model of bridging philosophies and traditions to argue for the necessity of dialogue with the religious and philosophical other in the modern world. It seeks to unearth largely unknown or little noticed resources for interfaith dialogue in medieval Muslim philosophy and Sufism. We need to have a closer look at Kashmir Saivism vis-à-vis Ibn Arabi's Unitarian Sufism and foreground detailed comparative study of Ibn Arabi and Abhinavgupta. This will help in illuminating some areas of interaction and appropriation in the history of Kashmir where both Abhinavgupta and Ibn Arabi have been important influences, the former directly and the latter through Syed Ali Hamdani and many other Sufis who subscribed to his Unitarian interpretation.

Sufism and Kashmir Saivism: Convergence

When we talk of continuation of Kashmir Saivism in post-Nuruddin,

Rishi (or Nund Rishi) Islamic heritage of Kashmir we find some objections from theological circles. Not many Saivist or Muslim scholars would countenance the continuity thesis. Their main reservations spring from adopting theological instead of metaphysical approach and simple ignorance of both Sufism and Saivism and their mystical and metaphysical content. One wonders how one can serve one's parent tradition by emphasizing differences instead of commonalities. *The smooth take over of Islam in Kashmir may partly be attributed to the fact that earliest Reshi Sheikh Nuruddin and his immediate disciples appreciated essential similarity and even used Saivist terminology in conveying truths of new religious dispensation.* It is no wonder that till today major Sufi poets have felt little embarrassment in appropriating key terms of Saivism in their poetry. Arguing for continuity thesis is important for making other points like continuity of culture and its foundations in traditional metaphysics and need for comprehensive study of Kashmiri intellectual tradition to counter exotericist and sectarian voices from either side besides foregrounding key formative elements of what could be called Kashmir identity.

Kashmir Sufism and Sufism, (both), share a fundamentally

Unitarian metaphysics. Both advocate similar schemes of descent of the Absolute towards the increasingly grosser or impure states of existence. Both share a realist ontology taking the world of phenomena as real rather than illusory as they share the understanding of Divine Relativity or *Maya*. We see affirmative transcendence in both of them. Both recognize the importance of diverse approaches to realization of the God. Both are against a renunciatory life negating asceticism as they believe in metaphysical transparency of phenomena. Sufistic Unitarian perspective harbours an epistemology that could readily appropriate Kashmir Saivistic doctrine of recognition or *pratibijna*. Both see man as microcosmos. Both employ the key mirror image to explain relation between Unity and Multiplicity. Mystical disciplines or meditational techniques and spiritual anthropology and psychology in both traditions show a remarkable convergence. Exoteric/esoteric division and a respect for exoteric formulations are noticeable in both the traditions. One can also discern convergence in metaphysics of beauty between the two traditions. However, if we approach the two traditions from purely theological viewpoint, certain differences are easily noticeable. Theology and

metaphysics are confusingly mixed in usual expositions of Saivism. A lack of philosophical rigour in theistic appropriations of Saivism is evident as is in certain theological readings of Sufi tradition. Pantheistic reductionist tendency in most of modern expositions of nondualistic Saivism compromises orthodox or traditional character of Saivism.

Transcendence of God is not compromised in either Sufism or Trika. The creation of the world doesn't at all infringe on Divine transcendence. However "pantheism" is qualified by simultaneous affirmation of transcendence rather than outrightly negated at its own place. The self realization or Recognition has the prerequisite of self-negation. This is fundamental enunciation of all religions and mysticism. Both dualistic and nondualistic schools assert it although the former does not see merger in God and loss of individuality as the necessary end of the path. However, it hardly matters really because God has been conceived as an Ego, as an "I" (and in fact God alone can say "I") by both Sufism and Saivism. Human ego is a distant reflection of this Divine Ego. Man's perfection demands developing of divine attributes. *Jiva* or limited self, being a microcosmos performs all the activities that Siva does, though in a

limited manner. Dualists aren't wrong in emphasizing that man never becomes God because it is only the spirit that in united with Him and as body in space and time he remains, do what he may, a slave, a limited self. Self realization is realization of the self, the Divine I within us rather than a mere negative process of self-negation.

Most of the Sufi techniques have equivalents in Saiva mysticism. *Japa*, *pranayamas*, *mudras*, night vigils, fasting, *vratas* or vows, disciple-guru (Sheikh) relationship are common to both Sufism and Saivism and within them between their different schools. Svatantra, the absolutely independent and "capricious" or self dependent divine will figures in Islam also. Both Siva and Islamic God are absolved of all conditions and free to do anything He wills. Everything is produced by the mere will of God and that will follows apparently no logic. Asharism, the dominant theological school of Islam and which many Sufis have respectfully followed, can also be characterized as emphasizing Svatantra. However perennialists would question theological voluntarism as being the ultimate position of any integral tradition. We must properly situate the Absolute as Will and Absolute as Knowledge in relation to Absolute or Beyond-Being that can't be

characterized at all. Capriciousness can't be admitted in a system as an Ultimate and unless we read omnipotence as All-Possibility we find ourselves in an embarrassing position.

The epistemologies of Saivism and Sufism taking the direct experience of the divine as the highest knowledge is hardly distinguished. *Pratybjina* and gnosis of Sufis are fundamentally indistinguishable. In Sufism, as in Kashmir Saivism, the only knower and the only known is God. God is veiled in every form and to be an *aarif* (gnostic) is to see God alone everywhere to see him as the essence of everything, as essentially nondifferent from whatever is, to see Him as the Only Knower. God is the Light of the World. God is *Shahid* (Witness). Metaphysically it is God who alone can be a witness and thus it is He who says the declaration by which one enters in the fold of Islam. God is not a common substratum of every existent but that very essence. On this point monistic Saivism and Unitarian Sufism of Ibn Arabi are in agreement. The way to attain the vision of God or Siva is the old and familiar mystical discipline. Here we see yet another important convergence between Sufism and Kashmir Saivism and that concerns exoteric-esoteric division and mutual relationship between them.

Abhinavgupta in *Tantraloka* discusses in detail rituals thus conceding importance of exoterism. According to the Kashmir Saivism a traveler (*salik*) on the way to Siva to observe all Vedic rituals. It also respects ritual observance even for those who have reached the other shore. Sufism too has generally been respectful of law though its relativity has also been emphasized and esoterism, according to the perennialists, is best observed or best fructifies in integral religious traditions which incorporate law or rituals. Libertine spirituality has generally been dismissed by Saivite and Sufi authorities. Properly contextualized Tantricism is only a concrete application of metaphysics of affirmative transcendence. In Kaliyuga ascetic spirituality is not an attractive option for many. So Sufism with its music and dance and dynamic meditations and Tantric Saivism with its positive appropriation of pleasures of the world in the cause of the spirit seem to be efficacious for many. Islam had never endorsed asceticism or rejection of pleasures of the world. Sexual experience gives a foretaste of the Bliss of union with God according to such Sufi authorities as Ghazali. All pleasurable experiences are celebrated as gifts from heaven. Islam rejects traditional soul-body dualism and takes the material world

as symbol (*ayat*) of God. *Purusa-Prakiti* dualism seen in *Sankhya-yoga* is challenged by Tantrism. Islam sees the world as charged with the grandeur of God. It only asks to see everything temporal in the light of Eternity, with the eyes of God or what is called as being a witness. It means enjoying everything in God and not outside God which it sees as sin or transgression. This is not unlike Tantric position as understood by masters like Abhinavgupta. In fact even Christian metaphysicians and mystics like Eckhart would accept all enjoyments if enjoyed in God. Choiceless awareness is what seeing with the *arif's* eyes is. *Zikr* or *Japa* is geared towards developing that contemplative vision. Inward turning that Sufism cultivates is not opposed to lawful enjoyment of senses. Detachment or poverty – the virtue emphasized by Islam is not identical with renunciation and shutting of senses.

The shared heritage

The continuity or shared heritage thesis is not conceived here on the basis of mere abstraction severed from historical reality. It is not to cash on certain similarities between two divergent traditions but to understand how, historically speaking, Sufism came to be accepted by the masses just a century or two after great thinkers of Kashmir

Saivism were busy developing the tradition. *Reshis* of Kashmir assimilated key terms and even many practices of indigenous Saivism and it could do so easily because of inherent catholicity and absorption power of Sufism. To this day the debate whether Lalla (Lalleshwari) was a Savite or a Muslim is not settled. This only shows that saints transcend theological/philosophical labels. The fact that Nuruddin and Lalla could co-exist and the former ask God to give him the same knowledge (and) status that He gave to Lalla shows Saivism and Sufism are, not only metaphysically or esoterically but also in concrete history mutually compatible. In fact Kashmir history shows Saivism fertilizing the culture of Kashmir even after it went in oblivion in history. It is no wonder that for most people the message of Nuruddin and Lalla is hardly distinguishable. Kashmir Saivism comes close to Islamic metaphysical doctrines and "*wahdatul wajood*" thought and that accounts for Lalla being at home in either of them.

Philosophical reduction of metaphysical content is as dangerous and unwarranted as that of theological appropriation or reduction. To discuss Saivism as a philosophical, school in the manner of modern academic discipline of

philosophy, and to use the terms current from Aristotle in the Western philosophical tradition that is largely oblivious of their complete metaphysic which is the prerogative of the East, as has been done in many studies, is a gross error and ends in endless confusion rather than in a meaningful comparative dialogue. Like Indian *darsanas* which again are mistranslated as philosophical schools Saivism represents an alternative *darsana*, fundamentally not different from Vedanta and can't be discussed in the terms of modern Western philosophical framework. Philosophy here is tied to *moksha* ideal and is not a merely rational treatment of the question. Saivism has to be approached as a tradition in the sense perennialists use the term and that will help us to see its continuity with Islamic traditions as all traditions share a unified metaphysical framework and differ only in minor points which relate to particular historical and cultural forces that impact unfolding of a particular tradition. The perennialists have revolted against using such terms as pantheism or even monism in describing different *darsanas*. To assert that Saivism is theistic while as absolute Vedanta is not is to misunderstand both.

Kashmir Saivism has given three hierarchical categories of *sadhnas* or

ways called *upayas* which are alternative possible ways to spiritual realization. These are *anavopaya* or *kriyppaya* which include all physical and external forms of worship and *sadhna*, *shaktpaya* or *jnanpaya* which comprise all mental forms of *sadhna* such as meditation, *sambhavupaya* or *icchopaya*, which contain all spiritual *sadhnas* such as surrender of the ego, realization of universal unity. Sufism, as an integral tradition, combines all these ways. It recognizes the value of *kriyapaya* in its respect for the exoteric discipline and rituals. Its emphasis on devotion, surrender, *fana*, *raza* (acceptance of divine will) and love appropriates *sambhupava*. Its retreats and *zikrs* and different meditational techniques and its result in gnosis constitute *jnanupaya*. Sufism combines in itself bhakti yoga, jnan yoga and karma yoga. All integral traditions cater to different types of mentalities and sensibilities. Advocacy of different methods in both Saivism and Sufism shows their integral synthetic character. It is no wonder that Abhinavgupta had so many teachers of different schools and he could put all of them in perspective. Great sages and traditional philosophers of other traditions have similarly been great assimilators. Ibn Arabi's view of other paths and recognition of truth in every belief – and of course

ultimately arguing for transcendence of all beliefs and actions – is a subtle epistemological move that could be appreciated in Abhinavguptan scheme.

Sufism gives the same reason for the existence of universe that Saivism has given. Abhinavgupta in his *Bodhapanchadashika* seems to echo the Sufi conception of God as a hidden treasure and His wish to be known as the reason of creation. To quote him "The collective state of the universe is His Supreme Energy (*Sakti*), which He created in order to recognize His own nature."

Thus, we have seen how both Saivism and Sufism resist reduction into exclusivist theological shibboleths, are best comparable on mystical-metaphysical planes. Their ethics is hardly distinguishable. Accepting metaphysical reading of key theological notions and eschatological data presented in the scriptures, we can decipher a fundamental transcendental unity between doctrinally divergent universes of Islam and Saivism.

Assimilation of Buddhism in Reshi-Sufi culture

Buddhism penetrated into the heart of Hinduism and transformed it from within so much so that the

greatest Vedantic philosopher Shankara is accused to be a cryptobuddhist. Buddhism changed its guise and continued to flourish in Saivism of Kashmir. Similar remarks could be made and applied in case of Islam. Neither Buddhism nor Saivism died here. Their essential spirit and many peripheral practices continued to be, in one or the other form, in *Rishiyat* or post-Nuruudin Islam in Kashmir. *Risshiyat* has appropriated key Buddhistic elements in its practice. A poem composed in honour of Buddha by Sheikh Nuruddin is ample evidence of impact of Buddhist tradition. Buddhist metaphysics of Void, its eightfold path, its four noble truths, its silence towards speculative metaphysical theological issues, its emphasis on orthopraxy rather than any particular view of Ultimate Reality, its pragmatism, its monkish culture, its ahimsa and vegetarianism all could be traced in *Risshiyat* of Kashmir in the Muslim period. Kashmiris continue to use, both consciously and unconsciously key Buddhist concepts and formulations in their discourse. Kashmiris blame their karma rather than any external factor or force for their suffering. Whenever something untoward happens he cries '*panien gunah*', '*aamali baden hienz shamat*' (My bad karma, bitter fruit of bad actions).

Many proverbs and folk stories have possible connection with Buddhism. Many traditional Kashmiris seek refuge in God and in *Pir* (spiritual guide) which seems to echo Buddhist practice of talking refuge in the Buddha. The world is described as a place of suffering by common Kashmiri as *dunya chu tawan*. Impermanence of everything is asserted by such common sayings as *dunya chu napayidar, yaet kya chu rozwun* (the world is mortal and nothing stays long in the world). "Permanence" is attributed to Spirit or Absolute only, to Void in Buddhist terms. That "*Rozuwun chu bas tamsund naw*" (God's name or Essence alone is permanent) is a common saying in Kashmir. One can cite many more similar expressions used in different contexts of which we can find equivalent in Buddhism.

Kashmir remains a land of the Buddha despite centuries of oblivion of Buddhism. Buddhism never really disappeared in Kashmir. It impacted on deeper structures and in subtle ways on Kashmir's history, religion and culture and its impact continues. It continues to live in Muslim Kashmir, not to speak of Leh etc. Contemporary Muslim Kashmir is not understandable without appreciating impact and living presence of Buddhism.

Islam in Kashmir is a fulfillment of socially engaged egalitarian Buddhist project rather than a new faith that negated the spirit of Buddhism and usurped its throne by force. Buddhism is not history here and its study is not of merely historical importance. It lives in archetypes and as a metaphysical and mystical *darsana*, thus, it can't be exiled from the collective unconscious of Kashmiris. Of course, its distinct identity may be nonexistent now but it doesn't bother about its distinct identity. Wherever people attempt to conquer suffering and identify desire, the desiring self (*nafsi amara*) as the culprit and seek the light (*nur* in the Quranic terminology) out of existential darkness. Buddha will have nothing new to teach our Sufis and Sufism, properly understood and shorn of its theological dress, is living and authentic expression of timeless wisdom of which historical Buddhism was one expression.

Buddhism has a very sublime conception of *tawhid*, understood metaphysico-mystically. Originally it rejected image worship. It completely rejected anthropomorphism in its theology. It guarded against *shirk* (creating images akin to Creator) so successfully that even now after centuries of development and even

distortion, Buddhism refuses to allow any human conception of the Ultimate Reality any validity and strictly advocates silence. Kashmiri Sufi poets have appropriated essential Buddhism in their conceptions of *fana*, devotion to Unitarianism, and sublime conception of divine transcendence. To put an illustration, Qadir Sahib Keyna is a Sufi poet who has specifically composed verses on void. "I am the Void, you are the Void/ What shall I speak of the Void." Lalla's *vaakhs* too have echoes of the Buddhist formulation regarding the Void. Nuruddin Reshi, popularly called the Sheikhul Alam (world teacher) has emphasized mingling of the Void and Shiva and thus foregrounding Islamic integral metaphysical formulations that take care of both the positive and the negative divine. Negation of all gods in Islamic terminology is what Buddhism asserts in its doctrine of impermanence of all manifested things. Kashmiri Sufi vision is strongly centred on this negative view of divine. A Kashmiri is fond of using *tasbeeh* (beeds) and forms of collective meditation such as *durood* and *azkar*. Relic culture has Buddhist origins. Keeping photographs of pirs and parents and grandparents is a substitute for image culture which flourished from Buddhist times in Kashmir.

Though none can deny differences at theological plane: the question is what differentiates Islam from Buddhism in such sharp terms at metaphysical or ethical plane? Metaphysical unity of diverse traditions which claim to be founded on religious experience of its founders has been amply demonstrated by various scholars, most importantly and most cogently and forcefully by perennialists. Theological differences when translated in terms of more foundational metaphysical or esoteric principles (of which theologies are distant and inexact or crude translations) get dissolved and can be easily reconciled. Let us analyze differences between Buddhism and Islam of which some critics make much fuss.

The doctrine of rebirth, *anatta*, absence of theism or "agnosticism," different doctrines concerning hell and heaven, asceticism or world negation, which are part of Buddhism are found to be irreconcilable with Islam according to most scholars. But a deeper analysis of all these doctrines reveal remarkable convergence with Islamic doctrines. A very brief explication of these doctrines has been attempted in the following paragraphs.

There is no such thing as rebirth

understood in animistic sense of transmigration of soul or personality in integral traditions according to Comaraswamy. God is the only transmigrant as Shankara put it. There is no reality behind the façade of ego/personality which could survive and transmigrate according to all religions. As long as man is trapped in the illusion that there is really *a person So and So* he is condemned to suffer and in the symbolic language of Scriptures to rebirth. Really there is no birth, no autonomous soul or self, no death. The Buddha taught that suffering bred from illusion of desiring self and a way of escape from it. About the whither and whence of souls he is not concerned. His problem is salvation or conquest over suffering and ignorance. Islam too has not entertained discussion over those questions which have no bearing on human salvation. Discussion of divine Essence, destiny, eschatological states, origin of the world of manifestation are not encouraged. The only problem is correct knowledge or right view which leads to right conduct, to God or Truth.

It must be acknowledged that Buddhism is less open to the graces emanating from the world of hue and colour. Islam takes a more positive view of the world, of women and

sexuality, of secular pursuits. However Buddhism too, according to Mahayana school, declares samsara and nirvana as one. It too is compatible with worldly pursuits taken up in the spirit of detachment.

Attachment to doctrines, to rituals, to forms is to be transcended for attaining the ultimate goal. Buddhism has no quarrel with any religion, no truck with identity problem. The dispute for superiority of a doctrine or creed is vain from a Buddhist viewpoint that is committed to no-view or transcendence of all views. Buddha is a mirror with no form of its own. It is the plain light of Spirit that shines inside all of us. Kashmiri Sufis have often used the metaphor of mirror for the arrived souls and for expressing the mystery of creation. The only significant question from Buddhist viewpoint is how free we are from the bondage of desires and attachments to perishing things. All other questions are secondary. For Islam this is something which is at the heart of it. "*There is no permanence except in the Permanent*" is how Islamic *kalimah* has been translated by Sufi metaphysicians. Buddhism can enter into a dialogue with world traditions so readily because it has no views of its own to impose. Kashmir as a land of Rishis has been a land of Buddhist Reshis. Reshi movement of Kashmir

has appropriated Buddhist wisdom and made it a part of Kashmir culture and heritage. What emerges from the above discussion is that there is little divergence at deeper mystical-metaphysical plane between Buddhism and Islam. It is no wonder that Islam found a receptive audience in the Buddhist world. I wonder why some Buddhist leaders of Kashmir should be pained at Rinchana's conversion and see it as betrayal of Buddhist community.

Most of these remarks apply to Reshi encounter with Saivist tradition as well. Our Reshis and Sufis at their ethical and metaphysical planes (the latter subsumes the theological plane that differentiates them) have assimilated and continued thus the best or timeless dimension of preceding traditions. 'By living Islam fully I have lived all other traditions as well' remarked Rene Guenon, perhaps the greatest metaphysician of the twentieth century. Kashmiri Muslims, as inheritors and assimilators of the best of religious and philosophical culture that it had been nurturing, have best resources for addressing the issue of multiple religious identities. Kashmir Saivism or Buddhism or Islam, all have sought to assert their "exclusive" truth claims but have not fought over the issue. Sufi poets have been keeping open their treasures for all and the

sundry asking them to share their love and joy. All religions are invitations to share the joys of the spirit and not conceding some propositional claims. Interreligious dialogue is best carried by saints of different traditions and that first demands great ethical standards from a would-be saint or respective communities. Aggressive proselytizing that we find in the religious history of Kashmir after Muslims came here has to be understood in the historical context where we see historical forces paving way for ascension of one community. The very logic of religion militates against the idea of imposing it by either political or other forces. It is freely given to us and one may refuse to receive the grace emanating from it. Kashmir's religious history should not be seen as a variant of the power games that different religions represented at a given time. Religions fade and ascend for reasons that have nothing to do with campaigns for winning votes for God's chosen people. Saints win converts (Kashmir was converted by saints) by being able to attune to the dynamic dialectical movement of history at a given movement. Religions or saints have no interest in deflating the other but as channels of grace offer themselves for vivifying us. It is left to our free choice to take or reject them and it is

history's relentless march that dictates which religion triumphs at a particular moment. Religions are not ideologies interested in power. Power has its own logic and it may appropriate religion for its interests. *The implied argument here is that dividing history of Kashmir into pre-Islamic and post-Islamic periods is misleading.*[Emphasis added. Ed.] This periodization gives the impression of some sort of change in power regime, some forced displacement or marginalization of certain community or culture at the hands of some invading culture. There are still bitter memories and narratives of exile, betrayal, loss as it is assumed that a change in religion is some sort of dethroning of a community's interests. It is simply relentless change in history that traditions, philosophies, communities have to suffer. To borrow a phrase from Sankara in another context 'Lord is the only transmigrant'. Absolute manifests itself in the processes of historical change and God is the only Agent ultimately according to traditions. Religions are the dialectics of the Self and in their historical manifestations are always mixed with human element. We need to distinguish the human and the divine in every religious form. Only the Absolute is absolute. It is Buddha's argument against attachment to views, Abhinava's

metaphysics and Sufi poetry that best put forth the thesis of relativity of forms. Historical forms are no argument against incorruptibility of the Spirit or Transcendent. We need to understand this point when judging religions in their historical unfolding.

Decline of Tradition

Today common Kashmiris are as ignorant of their great tradition of art and aesthetics as they are of philosophy. They have taste for most forms of art. Even they have not evolved the theory of Sufi music. Mass entertainment industry has further degenerated tastes of people, especially new generation. Most art forms are now only history. One can see certain elements preserved in the dying tradition of handicrafts. Here art had been part of the culture as in traditional societies but as Kashmir is going through the transition in economy, its traditional base is fast eroding. There is abysmally low standard of education today and that partly explains why little attention is given to art education. Education is best imparted through arts but this too is still unheard of in Kashmir. One wonders that is it the same Kashmir that produced the greatest aesthetician of medieval times, Abhinava. Not to speak of art forms

of other traditions Islamic art tradition is in oblivion today. One finds street debates on permissibility of certain art forms and that is all. The magnificent art tradition of Islam that produced some of the most aesthetically accomplished art objects seems to have been dead for Kashmiris. One can't expect an average student to be familiar with Islamic art tradition or modern developments in art. As is the state of classical and Sufi music, so is of classical art forms in general and of literary criticism. We are importing both art theory and criticism and teaching that to students. Our own art theory and principles of literary criticism that bank upon metaphysical traditions are largely forgotten and seldom talked about. Cultures die for want of better art and that is happening in Kashmir. The culture industry of which Adorno talks has affected Kashmir resulting in current chaos and crisis of values among the new generation. The art that transports one to transcendental heights is restricted to certain functions organized by local Sufis or to certain handicrafts or occasionally used in architecture. Rest of life and culture is severed from the life giving founts of art. Impoverished culture breeds sectarian and some other kinds of violence, disorients people and trivializes life's more serious

pursuits that give meaning to it.

Conclusion

Kashmir has a shared intellectual cum spiritual heritage and the best of it is preserved in the living tradition of post Nuruddin Islam. The debates over Reshis versus Sufis or Islam vs. pre-Islamic traditions are put in proper perspective if we foreground the metaphysical instead of theological approach to religions that help us to see how the different religious/ philosophical traditions cultivated in Kashmir are part of a single Tradition and that continues to live in its Islamic form. However, we need to guard against threats to our cultural identity from forces of cultural modernity that are complicit with what Adorno calls culture industry, jolts from shifting

paradigms for structuring economy, oblivion of traditional resource base of philosophy and arts and that contributes partly to growing fundamentalism and sectarianism and primitive system of education that has little interest in either philosophy or art education or education through art. It is a huge challenge to intellectual leadership to raise awareness of loss of traditional heritage that made us the glory of subcontinent in good old days. Present crisis of values needs not only restructuring economy and resisting the empire of Capital through strengthening local economy and reviving the Cooperative spirit that once characterized not only our economy but other social structures but also reorienting education to assimilate the best in world cultures while retaining our core values. ■