Shaikh Yaqub Sarfi of Kashmir: A Case Study of his literary and political contribution

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Abstract- Kashmir since the establishment of Muslim rule had remained an important Centre of Sufism. It acquired fame as Raeshwar (Valley of Rishis). Among the sufi saints of Medieval Kashmir, Shaikh Yaqub Sarfi occupies an important place. He was a man of international repute for his learning, scholarship and piety. The present paper throws a brief light on the life and times of Shaikh Yaqub Sarfi and his literary contribution and apart from that the paper discusses in detail the role of sufis particularly Shaikh’s role in the Mughal conquest of Kashmir.

Index Terms- Conquest, Kashmir, Learning, Mughal, Poet, Shaikh, Sufism,

I. INTRODUCTION

The history of Sufism in Kashmir is spread over a long period of time starting from Bulbul Shah to the Sufi poets of modern age. Kashmir is known as Reshwaer (Valley of Rishis). Sufi saints had always been the inspiring people of Kashmir by their subtle mystical insights. Among the well-known sufi saints of Kashmir, Shaikh Yaqub Sarfi has been the distinguished figure not only among his contemporaries but among all the Sufis of his age. He was displayed with the accomplishments of learning and the perfect qualities which distinguished him as a pious man. Modern scholars call him ‘Shaikh-ul-Islam.’ He was a man of international reputation for his piety, scholarship and learning. He had occupied an important place in the history of Kashmir and during the time Akbar he was given the title ‘Haji Sani’.

Shaikh Yaqub Sarfi was the most prominent Sufi saints of sixteenth century belonging to the Kubawriya order. The Kubawriya order had its remarkable influence on the different aspects of the life of Kashmiris. People in the various walks of life used to practice Sufi-value system including sama as ascribed by this famous order and work for the betterment of humanity irrespective of any consideration.

Shaikh Yaqub Sarfi belonged to the Ganai family of Kashmir. He was born in 928 A.H/ 1521 A.D in Srinagar. His father’s name was Shaikh Hassan Ganai who belonged to the Asami clan. The Asami clan traces its descent from Asim, A son of Caliph Umar (PBUH) and it was because of this he was also called as Asmi. Shaikh Yaqub Sarfi studied under Mulla Aini who came to Kashmir from Sialkot and the latter breathed here the last and is buried in the graveyard of Shaikh Bahauddin Ganjbaksh. Mulla Aini was the pupil of the great Mulla Abdur Rahman jami (Jami due to his literary imminence and will acquire the fame as ‘Jami Sani’) and it was because of this he was also called as Asmi.

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After Mulla Aini, Shaikh Yaqub Sarfi studied under Mulla Basir Khan Khandbhavani. Thereafter Sarfi Travelled throughout the world to quench his thirst for acquiring knowledge. He visited the places like Sialkot, Lahore, Kabul, Samarqand, Mashhad, Mecca, Medina etc.

Shaikh Yaqub Sarfi became the spiritual successor of the great master Shaikh Hussain of Khawarizm and acquired honour

2 Peerzada Muhammad Tayyab Hussain Kashmiri, Auliya e Kashmir, Nazir Publishers, Lahore, 1988, p. 38
3 Auliya e Kashmir, op. cit., p. 38
4 A.Q.Rafiqi, Sufism in Kashmir from the Fourteenth to the sixteenth Century, Bharatiya Publishing House, Delhi, 1984, p. 114
5 Khwaja M. Azam Diddamari, Wakiat-i-Kashmir (Urdu translation by Hameed Yazdani), Srinagar, 1998, p. 224
6 The literal meaning of Ganai is learned man, His family was since centuries well learned and that is why they came to be known as Ganai, for details, see, Shaikh Yaqub Sarfi, Dewan-i-Sarfi, With an introduction by Mir Habibullah Kamli, S.P.College Library, Srinagar, (1387 A.H), p. 2.
7 Ibid
8 Diddamari, op. cit., p. 224; Dewan-i-Sarfi, op. cit., p.3;
9 Dewan-i-Sarfi, op. cit., p. 3
10 Diddamari, op. cit., p. 224; Dewan-i-Sarfi, op. cit., p.3;
11 Dewan-i-Sarfi, op. cit., p.3; G.M.D Sufi, Kashir : Being A History of Kashmir from Earliest Times to Our Own, p. 360

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by performing the pilgrimages to the two great holy places of Islam (Mecca and Medina) twice in his life. He received from Sheikh Ibn Hajar a license to give instructions in the traditions of Muhammad (PBUH) and clad in the robes of a Sheikh. He travelled much and visited most of the Shaikhs of Arabia and Persia and profited much by his intercourse with them and received the authority to assume prerogatives of a religious teacher and spiritual guide and as such he had many disciples both in Hindustan and Kashmir. Sheikh also got benefited by his intercourse with the famous sufi saint Sheikh Salim Chasti of Fatehpur Sikri. They both spent a lot of time together during the time of Hajj which was the last Hajj of Sheikh Salim Chasti. They both exchanged the views of their respective orders. Sheikh Salim taught him the teachings of Chasti order and learnt from him the teachings of Kubarwiya order. Sheikh Yaqub Sarfi was also well versed with the writings of Ibn-ul-Arabi.

Apart from worldly knowledge, Sheikh Yaqub Sarfi was deeply interested in the spiritual knowledge and for this; he spent a lot of time in the Khankah of Mir Syed Ali Hamdani in Srinagar. In the Khankah, Mir Syed Ali Hamdani appeared in his dream and asked him to go to Khawarizm and visit Makhdoom Ali Shaikh and the Khankah, Mir Syed Ali Hamdani appeared in his dream and asked him to go to Khawarizm and visit Makhdoom Ali Shaikh and the Khankah. Sheikh Yaqub Sarfi was left for Khawarizm via Sialkot, Lahore and Kabul and presented himself before Sheikh Khawarizmi. After this Sheikh Yaqub Sarfi left for Khawarizm via Sialkot, Lahore and Kabul and presented himself before Sheikh Khawarizmi. Sheikh Khawarizmi was one of the great sufi saints of Kubarwiya order. He received Sheikh Yaqub Sarfi with great respect and assigned him the work to bring wood for the langarkhana of Khankah. After some time Sheikh Khawarizmi gave him the permission to return back to Kashmir and perform the religious duties and was asked to look after his parents. After some time he revisited Khawarizm for the second time and from there he went to Meshhad, Khotan, Mecca and Medina. From Mecca, he received sannad and the necessary license to give instructions in the traditions of Hadith from Sheikh ibn Hajjar Makki who was a renowned Sheikh and the great teacher of Hadith. Sheikh Yaqub Sarfi also visited many of the cities of Hindustan like Ahmedabad, Surat etc. where he met many of the sufis saints and obtained spiritual knowledge from them about which he wrote.

It is necessary to mention that apart from Sheikh Salim, many other Sufis of Hindustan were closely associated with Sarfi and foremost among them are Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi also known as Mujaddid Alfi Sani (reformer of the second millennium). He studied the traditions of Prophet and Tafsir and also the teachings of Kubarwiya order from Sheikh Yaqub Sarfi.

Sheikh was a great sufi of his age. At the age of just seven, Sheikh memorized the whole Quran. Abul Fazl also considers him as the greatest authority on religious matters. He was also a great poet of his age. He himself writes in his Diwan that he was just eight years of age when he started writing poetry in Persian.

Abul Fazl praised him and says that he was well aquanted with all branches of poetry. He wrote with the pen name of ‘Sarfi’ Mulla Abdul Qadir Badauni who was a close associate of Sheikh Yaqub Sarfi praised him and says that he was among the great personalities of the age. He was illustrious and relied upon as an authority on all branchapes of learning which are treated of in Arabic, such as Quranic commentaries, the traditions of Prophet and Sufism. He was an authorized religious leader. When Sarfi departed from Lahore to Kashmir, he wrote a letter to Badauni from the other side of the river Ravi in which Sheikh writes, “I hope you will not entirely efface the memory of me from the margin of your heart and that you will adopt the graceful habit of remembering the absent. If you should have any need of Kashmiri paper for rough notes and drafts, I hope that you will inform me of the fact so that I may send you from Kashmir, the rough copy of my commentaries, the writing of which can be washed from the paper with water so completely that no traces of ink will remain, as you yourself have seen.”

On reaching Kashmir, Sheikh wrote another letter to Badauni which was his last letter to him. In this letter Sheikh wrote, “I hope that whenever you sit in Nawab Faiz’s apartment of fragrant grass (khas khana) on the floor, with its matting cooler than the breezes of Kashmir, in the midday heat of summer, drinking the water which, though originally warm, has been cooled with ice and listening to sublime talk and witty conversation, you will think of me, the captive of the hardships of disappointment.”

It is an established fact that Kashmir has never been able to produce a man, a religious scholar, a sufi saint or a poet who can equal the place of Sheikh Yaqub Sarfi in History. He possessed a vast worldly and spiritual knowledge and it was because of this he is famous as ‘Jami al Kalimat Souri val Masnavi’. Although, he was not involved in worldly pleasures, yet the rulers and their nobles had respect for him. They used to listen to his advises and practice over it. Humayun and Akbar had a wonderful belief on him and conferred distinction on him by

12 Diddamari, op. cit., p. 224
14 Dewan-i-Sarfi, op. cit., p. 4.
15 Dewan-i-Sarfi, op. cit., p. 4.
16 Diddamari, op. cit., p. 224; Dewan-i-Sarfi, op. cit., p. 4.
17 Diddamari, op. cit., p. 225
18 For details see, Dewan-i-Sarfi, op. cit., p. 4.
19 Ibid, p. 5.
admitting him to the honour of their society, regarded him with gracious favour, so that he was held in high estimation and much honoured. He was generous and open handed beyond anything that can be imagined of his contemporaries.31

The number of literary works by Sheikh Yaqub Sarfi is not known and neither all of them are available. Some of the famous works include - Sawati-ul-Ilham (it is an Arabic taqriz/ introduction to Faizi’s Tafsir-ul-Quran), completed a Khamsa,32 Manasik-i-Hajj,33 Sharah-Sahih al Bukhari34, Kunz-al-Jawahir, Risala e Azkar.35 Apart from that Sheikh Yaqub Safri is also credited with a number of works like Diwan-i-Sarfi36. Treatises on the art of composing enigmas and also Quatrains (Ruba’iyat) on the mysticism of suf with a Tafsir/commentary37

Sheikh Yaqub Sarfi occupied an important place in the political history of Kashmir. He was the pivotal figure behind the Mughal conquest of Kashmir. In 1557, when Shaikh Yaqub Sarfi was thirty-five, the Shah Miri dynasty was overthrown by the Chaks. The Chaks traced their origins to Baltistan. Being from outside Kashmir, they were not particularly concerned about the welfare of the people of Kashmir. The Chak rulers persecuted the Sunni subjects. This caused several Sunni scholars to leave Kashmir and seek shelter elsewhere.38 As an important Sunni leader and scholar, Shaikh Yaqub Sarfi is said to have been a thorn in the Sultan’s flesh, and therefore, a conspiracy was plotted to have him killed. When the Shaikh heard about the conspiracy, he left Kashmir, and went on a long journey that took him to Samarqand, Iran and then finally to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, where he spent several months in the company of accomplished Islamic scholars, studying various Quranic commentaries (tafasir) and the Traditions of the Prophet (hadith). When he finally returned to Kashmir, the political situation was grim, with the Sunnis labouring under considerable oppression under Chak rule. Sheikh Yaqub Sarfi tried his best to normalize the situation but that was never possible under those circumstances. A royal decree was issued ordering that Azan/ callto prayer should be offered in shia manner and the name of Hazrat Ali should be mentioned. Qazi Musa was killed for not mentioning the name of Hazrat Ali in the callto prayer (azan) and his body was tied to the tail of an elephant and dragged through the streets of Srinagar. This provoked the Sunnis of the town, who rose up in protest. In order to put an end to the persecution of the Sunnis, Shaikh Yaqub Sarfi and a group of his companions

Baba Daud Khaki, Baba Ismail Anchari and Baba Mehdi Suharwardi went to the court of the Mughal Emperor Akbar at Agra, requesting him to send an army to Kashmir and overthrow the Chak rule.39 In their audience with Akbar, Shaikh Yaqub Sarfi and his companions insisted that after Akbar took over the administration of Kashmir, he should ensure full freedom of religion to all its people; That there should be no interference with local commerce and trade; That no Kashmiri should be enslaved; That the practice of beggar or compulsory labour be abolished and that those who had been associated with the Chak regime should be divested of their powers.40 Akbar gave his consent to these conditions, and then dispatched an army under Mirza Shah Rukh against Chak ruler, in December 1585.41 Sheikh Yaqub Sarfi himself accompanied this army.42 The Mughal invasion was more a reaction in anger than a seriously thought-out plan, neither the season was suitable nor was the internal conditions suitable for launching such an attack. The leaders of the army had urge to wait for some months till the roads are cleared of snow and should enter Kashmir through Bhimber which was relatively a better route but Akber in haste ordered them to march through the Pakhli route.43 The Chaks fought valiantly and defeated the Mughals. Then, in 1586, Akbar sent a larger army to Kashmir, under Mirza Qasim Khan, which inflicted a decisive defeat on the Chaks, and Yaqub Shah Chak was forced to flee to Kishtwar, where he died in 1592. In this way, the last independent Kashmiri dynasty came to an end, and Kashmir was made a part of the Mughal Empire.

With the Mughal takeover of Kashmir, some Sunnis are said to have launched stern reprisals against the Shi’as. Shaikh Yaqub Sarfi is said to have bitterly protested against this, and is credited with having made efforts to restore peace and communal harmony.

II. CONCLUSION

Sheikh Yaqub Sarfi occupies a place of prominence in the history of Medieval Kashmir. He had acquired international reputation for his learning, scholarship and piety. He was displayed with the accomplishments of learning and perfect qualities that distinguish him as the greatest sufi of his age. He was the greatest authority of religious matters. He traveled throughout the world to quench his thirst for knowledge. He was the author of many sublime and beautiful works including Khamsa, Commentaries of Quran and Hadith, Treatises, Quatrains etc. He devoted his life to normalize the sectarian tensions between the Shias and Sunnis of Kashmir. When the situation was out of control he himself along with his companions went to the court of Akbar and assured him of necessary support for the invasion of Kashmir and when Akbar

31 Badauni, op. cit., p. 201.
32 Khamsa is a series of five Masnavis also known as Panj-Gunj which includes Masalik ul Akhyar, Wamiq-i-Uzra, Laila-Majnun, Makhaz un Nabi and MQgmat Murshid. These five works were written in imitation of Khamsa-i-Nizami Jami, See Badauni, Muntakhab-ut-Tawarikh, p. 200 n., Diddamari, op. cit.,p. 226.
33 Manasik-i-Hajj, It is written in Arabic prose and explains the rules and regulations of the pilgrimage.
34 It is a Persian commentary in prose on the Sahih-ul-Bukhari of Muhammad bin Ismail Bukhari.
35 This work is devoted to the importance of the Zikr and to the legality of Zikr-i-Jahr.
36 It is a collection of Ghazals and Ruba’iyat
37 For details see Dewan-i-Sarfi, p. 6
38 Diddamari, op. cit., p. 225.
40 P.N.K.Bamzai, Op. Cit., 353
dispatched the army Shaikh accompanied and guided them. Above all Shaikh Yaqub Sarfi was a man for which Kashmir feels proud. Though he did not leave behind his successor because his only son ‘Muhammad Yousuf’ died in infancy, yet Shaikh had Khalifas/disciples throughout India and Kashmir like Mir Muhammad Khalifa, Shah Qasim Hakkani, Arif Billah, Habibullah Naushahri\textsuperscript{44} etc. He died at the age of seventy-five in 1594 AD, in Srinagar. The tomb of Shaik Yaqub Sarfi attracts visitors and is known as Ziyarat-i-Ishan.

\textsuperscript{44} Dewan-i-Sarfi, p.9
Plate

Tomb of Shaikh Yaqub Sarfi located at Zainakadal Srinagar

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