

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.¹ Modern scholars call him 'Shaikh-ul-Islam'.² 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'.³

Shaikh Yaqub Sarfi was the most prominent Sufi saints of sixteenth century belonging to the Kubarwiya order.⁴ The Kubarwiya 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.⁵ His father's name was Shaikh Hassan Ganai⁶ 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.⁷

زا سفاذ عاسم که آن نیک خو
بده ابن فاروق اعظم نیکو
گنائی لقب داشت ابن عاصمی
کشاده خدایش در محرمی
گنائی است دانا به عرف دیار
به عثمان گنائی شداد یار غار
و کشمیر مثلش کسی بر نخواست
زو صفش مقصر فہوم رسا است

Shaikh Yaqub Sarfi studied under Mulla Aini who came to Kashmir from Sialkot and the later 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 (Jam is a place in Herat). Mulla Aini, on seeing the intelligence and scholarly qualities of Shaikh and power to acquire the knowledge prophesied that Shaikh Yaqub Sarfi would rise to the place of Jami due to his literary imminence and will acquire the fame as 'Jami Sani' (second jami).⁸ About which Shaikh Yaqub has himself given a clue in one of his verse⁹

بعد خسرو بود جامی بلبل باغ سخن
کیست جز صرفی کنوں آن مرغ خوشخوار راعوض

After Mulla Aini, Shaikh Yaqub Sarfi studied under Mulla Basir Khan Khandbhavani.¹⁰ 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.¹¹

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

¹ Abdul Qadir Badauni, *Muntakhab-ut-Tawarikh*, Vol. III (tr. W. Haig), Patna, 1973, p. 200.

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 Khawaja 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

by performing the pilgrimages to the two great holy places of Islam (Mecca and Medina) twice in his life.¹² He received from Shaikh Ibn Hajar a license to give instructions in the traditions of Muhammad (PBUH) and clad in the robes of a Shaikh. 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.¹³ Shaikh also got benefited by his intercourse with the famous sufi saint Shaikh Salim Chasti of Fatehpur Sikri. They both spent a lot of time together during the time of Hajj which was the last Hajj of Shaikh Salim Chasti. They both exchanged the views of their respective orders. Shaikh Salim taught him the teachings of Chasti order and learnt from him the teachings of Kubarwiya order.¹⁴ Shaikh 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.¹⁵ In the Khankah, Mir Syed Ali Hamdani appeared in his dream and asked him to go to Khawarizm and visit Makhdoom Ali Shaikh Kamaluddin Hussain 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.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ 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 Hajar Makki who was a renowned Sheikh and the great teacher of Hadith.¹⁸ Sheikh Yaqub Sarfi also visited many of the cities of Hindustan like Ahmedabad, Surat etc. where he met many of the sufi saints and obtained spiritual knowledge from them about which he wrote.¹⁹

احمد آباد و بہر گوشہ نگارے دیگر
کار این خلق ہمہ عاشقی و معشوقی است
گرچہ این شہر پر از ما ہو شان است ولے
گرچہ فارغ از با ریم آن بے پروا
نتوان یافت باین حسن دیارے دیگر
کس دریں شہر ندیدم بکارے دیگر
جز ابوالفتح نحوایم نگارے دیگر
حاشا لله کہ شوم مانیل یارے دیگر

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.²⁰

Shaikh was a great sufi of his age. At the age of just seven, Shaikh memorized the whole Quran.²¹ Abul Fazl also considers him as the greatest authority on religious matters²² 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.²³

چودر سال ہشتم نہاد دم قدم
ز طبعم رواں گشت شعر عجم

Abul Fazl praised him and says that he was well aquanted with all branches of poetry.²⁴ He wrote with the pen name of "Sarfi"²⁵ 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 brancehes of learning which are treated of in Arabic, such as Quranic commentaries, the traditions of Prophet and Sufism. He was an authorized religious leader.²⁶ 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."²⁷ 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 Faizi'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."²⁸

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 wal Masnavi*'.²⁹ 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.³⁰ Humaiyun and Akbar had a wonderful belief on him and conferred distinction on him by

²⁰ *Dewan-i-Sarfi*, op. cit., p. 5

²¹ *Ibid*, p. 3; Diddamari, op. cit., p. 224

²² Abul Fazl, op. cit., *Ain -i-Akbari*, III Volumes, Vol. I, (tr. Blochman), Low Price Publications, Calcutta, 2011, p. 191

²³ *Dewan-i-Sarfi*, op. cit., p. 3

²⁴ *Ain-i-Akbari*, vol,I, op. cit., p. 651

²⁵ Badauni, op. cit., p. 200

²⁶ *Ibid*

²⁷ Badauni, *Muntakhab-ut-Tawarikh*, p. 202.

²⁸ *Ibid*, p. 203

²⁹ *Dewan-i-Sarfi*, op. cit., p. 6.

³⁰ *Ibid*

¹² Diddamari, op. cit., p. 224

¹³ Badauni, *Muntakhab-ut-Tawarikh*, III volumes, Vol. III, (translated and edited by Sir W. Haig), Academica Asiatica, Patna, 1973, p. 200

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 *taqriiz*/introduction to Faizi's *Tafsir-ul-Quran*), completed a *Khamsa*,³² *Manasik-i-Hajj*,³³ *Sharah-Sahih al Bukhari*³⁴, *Kunz-al-Jawahir*, *Risala e Azkar*.³⁵ Apart from that Sheikh Yaqub Sarfi is also credited with a number of works like *Diwan-i-Sarfi*³⁶, Treatises on the art of composing enigmas and also Quatrains (*Rubaiyat*) on the mysticism of sufi with a *Tafsir/commentary*³⁷

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*, *Makhaḥ un Nabi* and *Muqamat 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-al-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.

³⁹ *Auliya-e-Kashmir*, op. cit., p. 39; see also P.N.K.Bamzai, *A History of Kashmir: Political, Social and Cultural*, Delhi, 1962, p. 346

⁴⁰ P.N.K.Bamzai, Op. Cit., 353

⁴¹ Abul Fazl, *Ain-i-Akbari*, Vol. I, (Blochman), op. cit., p. 479.

⁴² Abul Fazl. *Akbarnama*, vol. III, (tr. H. Beveridge), Low price Publications, delhi, 1939, p. 715

⁴³ Abul Fazl. *Akbarnama*, vol. III, op. cit., pp. 722-23.

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 left 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 Naushahri⁴⁴ 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*.

⁴⁴ *Dewan-i-Sarfi*, p.9

Plate



Tomb of Shaikh Yaqub Sarfi located at Zainakadal Srinagar

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