

Aspects of Kashmir Culture: Change and Continuity

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The classic definition of culture according to E.B Taylor, is "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as members of society". Culture presumes the existence of society and provides the necessary shells for making society to work. To Clyde Kluckhohn "culture refers to distinctive way of life of a group of people, their complete design for living". Sociologists are basically interested in that part of culture which defines the norms and standards for human behaviour, "what must be done, ought to be done, should be done, may be done, and must not be done", says Robin M. Williams. Thus the cultural aspects of special spheres of life pertaining to any society refer to sex code, romantic love, changing and conflicting norms. The aspects of culture involving culture diversity and spread of urbanism are also special aspects of social and cultural life. Acculturation of ethnic groups and Etiquette of race relations is another aspect of culture. Additionally the aspects that pertain to culture include religion and capitalism, legitimate power, the stability of authority and cultural disorganisation and crime rate.

Since times immemorial Kashmir has remained a culture entity and till date it has established its continuity but with change as the Kashmir society deemed it fit in response to its psyche and archetypes. It is representative of its own cultural identity, however, behind it a most luxurious geographic personality. It fully expresses the spirit of ethos of its own self. In this sense the representative personality in mostly and easily integrated into domi-

nant social Institutions.

As early as 274 to 237 B.C, Mauryan imperialism brought with it Buddhism to Kashmir. When it came it harbingered its doctrines of love, piety, universal brotherhood, spiritual discipline, high morals, equality and liberty for all classes and for both sexes. King Asoka allowed the people to practice their own religion and follow their own customs and traditions. However, he directed his missionaries to propagate his faith of Buddhism. Many Kashmiris readily accepted the four Noble Truths eight rules of right conduct propounded by Buddhism. The mass conversions took place and produced revolutionary changes in political, social and cultural life of Kashmir. Jalauka, after the reign of Ashok patronized learning and established constitutional government.

According to a version Buddhism, had led the country of Kashmir in awakening the common people and arousing a spirit of defiance in them against obscurantism and social injustice. A dynamic society of freemen had taken birth which was absorbed in making original contribution to philosophy, literature, arts architecture and science. But in the opinion of P.N. Bazaz, reactionaries were not altogether dead. According to him, among the critics of Buddhism were not only reactionaries Brahmins but also progressive intellectuals who were not prepared to surrender the social and spiritual liberties that Buddhism had ushered in the valley. Consequential upon it, the reactionaries turned the clock back and Hinduism was embraced by the society losing partly Buddhist culture heritage.

Thus the culture adaptation brought by change of faith, demolished many things that were propagated by Buddhism but retained some noble principles of love, piety and spiritual pursuits. Thus, in Hindu Kashmir, culture heritage had to develop to the new temper of the society. However, the culture of the valley has been constantly been influenced by its geography. Our history has usu-

ally been designed by our geography. The festivals in honour of flower, fruits, snowfall and the like had a stamp of the climate of the lush green and happy valley. It is recorded in histories that Kashmir situated on and near the trade routes which connected it with her neighbours in the north and the north-west, Kashmir served as a sales High Mountain passes. The mountain barriers provided Kashmir a security against all invasions. Thought in ancient times there were some invasions, yet unlike plains of India, Kashmir had rare attacks or wars.

Ancient Kashmir, had its indigenous social organizations, it too had a system called *Varnasarama* dhrama, which means the code of conduct for the *Varnas* and the *Asramas*. Nilmata has referred to such *Varnas* but has not touched them in details. However, it describes though briefly the duties of all the four *Varnas*. The association of Brahmans with the sacrifice is indicated the various verses of the *Nilmata Purana*. There is frequent reference to worship of fire to please the Brahmans. On the day of coronation of the king, the priest had to perform special sacrifices, reciting *mantaras* meant for the attainment of the long life, fearlessness, prosperity and the like. The Brahmans according to Nilmata clearly indicate that Brahmans had to specialize in Vedic studies. *Nilmata* uses two epithets for themone "acquainted with history" and second 'reciters of *Kathas*, *Purnas*. It meant that it was the duty of this intellectual class to narrate Purnnic stories on religious functions. This kind of religious preaching was not only prevalent in ancient Kashmir but is followed till date in one form or the other. The Brahmans received gifts also which is frequently mentioned in *Purnas*. The terms used for such gifts are known till date with Kashmiri Pandits as *Dana*, *Dakshina* and *Pratigraha*. However, nature of gifts varied i.e. in kind or in cash.

Brahmana had relations with kings. King used to perform daily sacrifices and other sacrifices on special occasions, a

Samvatsara was expected to possess the qualities of mother, father, instructor and preceptor. In such caste system *Ksatriyas* had duties towards the society and personally enjoyed a social status. *Vaisyas and Sudras* had their duties the former related to agriculture and the later served in the houses of the higher *Varnas*. There existed other castes and *Varnas Sankara*, who related to different occupations, locations, school of education and kindred factors. Thus ancient Kashmir society had source of social organization based on patterned relations of individuals and groups.

In the means of recreations, the ancient Kashmir enjoyed music in its varieties of vocal music and there were professional singers and possessed, according to Purnas, musical instruments like, *vina, venu* and the like. Dancing going hand in hand with music is mentioned frequently in *Nilmata*. Music, dancing and related functionalities were very popular in ancient times. Theatrical performances also were prevalent. We enjoyed Kashmir Theater till recently. We had top dramatic clubs like the companies in Kashmir, Theater till recently. We had top dramatic clubs like the companies in Kashmir, known as *Bhaggats of Syebug*. We had sports, known as garden sports, water sports, wrestling, gambling, hunting, toy playing, arts and crafts, architecture image-making, painting, handicrafts, ornaments, cosmetics and drinks and the like.

Equally remarkable is the school of philosophy called *Madhyamika School*, which is the outcome of the fusion of the ancient Vedic and the Buddhist cultures. This indigenous system of philosophy is markedly different from other known systems of philosophies. It is also called *Trika Shastra*. As the term connotes, it pertains to three vital matters of human life on earth. It is the study of man himself and then his universe and finally the fundamental principles which keep on restoring order, equilibrium and harmony in the universe where it is disturbed and disrupted by constant change. The philosophy is particularly interested in man's person-

ality and complete freedom.

In the third phase of our cultural history of Kashmir, we do not surprisingly witness Islam at its predestal. The oft quoted statement by M.A Stein is relevant here when he says: "The adoption of Islam by the great mass of the population which became an accomplished fact during the latter half of the 14th century but which probably began already towards the close of the Hindu rule, did neither affect the independence of the country nor at first materially changed its political and cultural conditions". Muslims in the valley simply converted and they neither were conquerors nor aliens. According to Bazaz, it was strange and fortuitous combination of circumstances that Shah Mir ascended the throne in 1339 A.C. He had earlier served under Hindu Rulers for more than twenty six years as an official. It was the period of Kashmir history when the Hindu society was under the process of disintegration. Its polity had come to cession and old traditions, customs were moulded under the new religious fervour. Shah Mir did not come to power for the sake of power but he and the Muslim Kings had keen interest in the revival of the cultural life of the people. They did not only inculcate in the masses new values and norms but preserved such values and norms that they could, to follow even after accepting a new faith. Thus they broadened and enriched the cultural heritage of the valley. They introduced the liberating and revolutionary principles on which the social philosophy of Islam stands. It was this noble cause which restored peace, progress and prosperity and firmly established the Muslim Rule in Kashmir which lasts for more than six hundred and seventy years after Shah Mir.

Rinchin ascended the throne of Kashmir with the title of Sultan Saddruddin after his conversion to Islam at the hands of Bulbul Shah. Kota Rani did try to revive Hindu Rule but it was short lived. However, once Shah Mir ascended the throne, the zealous missionaries of Muslim brotherhood poured into the valley and

accomplished the task of spreading Islam. The influx of a large number of preachers of the new faith ensured remarkable ideological, intellectual and spiritual competition in Kashmir society. The Sayyids were expounding principles, tenets, values, norms and philosophy of life that were in crass contradictions to the views held by the Orthodox and conservative sections amongst the non-Muslims. According to Bazaz, it was a challenge to the caste ridden Brahmins who during the period of the spread of Buddhism, fiercely resisted then, then new faith and tried to put back the hands of the clock of progress.

The strong opposition to Islam in its incipience sage and defence of it by Shavite philosophers on the other hand, finally headed to comprising situation. Each community had to accommodate the other. Historians and intellectuals have coined nomenclature for it. Some term it composite culture in Kashmir and others call it an idealistic, sentimental or religious Humanism. To some it is eclectic and in its essence it contains the noble truths and glorious gains of both Shavism and Islam which they have achieved in the course of their long histories.

The standard of culture in Kashmir during the Muslim period till 1947 was very high. Everyone enjoyed poetry and attempted to compose verses and became poet. This trend continues even today. You find poets who out number prose writers. There is ample evidence in the chronicles to suggest that there was a general appreciation of arts, letters and music by the people of Kashmir. They were found of music and possessed great artistic sense. They loved learning and traveling to seek knowledge. The Muslim rulers were patrons of art and culture and some of them were themselves poets and musicians. The courts of these rulers were adorned with scholars, musicians, painters, artists, architects and that was the reason that Srinagar happened to decorate itself with magnificent palaces, mosques, monasteries and gardens.

The cultural scenario of Kashmir is greatly influenced by its relations with Persia, from ancient times. However, these ties were strengthened during Sultanate period, on account of missionaries like Sayyids, who visited Kashmir from Persia and Central Asia. Persia, from ancient times. However, these ties were strengthened during Sultanate period, on account of missionaries like Sayyids, who visited Kashmir from Persia and central Asia. Persian became official language and much of the literature was contributed by Persian poets and prose writers. Most of the historians during this period were written in Persian. Poets and prose writers. Most of the historians during this period were written in Persian. Hasan Khuaihame, has given details of one hundred five poets, who contributed to Persian language with eminent poets like Gani and Sarfi. Kashmiri language turned to be a vanguard for the expression of philosophy and religion for the masses. Mother tongue usually expresses the ethos of a society and the first votary of religious humanism was the hermitess Lalla. She was a rebel against established traditions, dogmas and rituals of Brahmanism. On account of domestic ill-treatment, she abandoned home and roamed about from place to place in rags. Her prolonged discussions with Shah-i-Hamadan on philosophy religion and spiritualism. She became harbinger of the resurgence movement in Kashmir. She had already known Shaivism and under the influence of Shah-i-Hamadan, she assimilated it into sublimated essence of both Islam and Shavism, making it known as religious humanism. She turned to be a blend of both the philosophies and preached peace, equality, liberty and self-purification and love.

She thus sang:

“All impurities within me I burnt away,
All I did slay my heart,
I came to be known as the pious Lalla.
Only when I cleaved into him there,

Only when I sat just there, waiting for His grace

Trs. By P.N Bazaz

Lalla suffered at the hands of her family members, worldly people, in the beginning, who ridiculed her and even teased her. Ultimately she was her own and for her own people and became popular figure in her homeland. She is dead nearing seven hundred years but people of Kashmir, elite and intellectual and the illiterate, worker or rural masses even to this day sing the songs of Lalla. The literary doyen Lalla was still alive when another Kashmir poet Sheikh Noor-ud-din Wali^(RA) emerged as an intellectual leader for them. Bazaz says: "while Noor-ud-din was undergoing the terrible mental and spiritual turmoil, he sought the guidance of Lalla who initiated him into the secrets and the mysteries of the cult of religious Humanism. It at once deeply influenced him and he attained the inner peace, calm and poise for which he had been pinning for years". Thus he sang:

"The love is he who burns with love
Whose self doth shine like gold
When man's heart lights up with the flame of
love,
Then shall he reach the infinite.

Trs by (Bazaz)

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Love is death of an only son to ad mother
Can the lover have any sleep?
Love is venomous strings of a swarm of wasps
Can the lover have any rest?
Love is a rope dripping with blood
Can the wearer even utter a sigh?

After the death of Sheikh Noor-ud-din Wali^(RA) who was bliss and spiritual ecstasy in his own right, the Reshi movement in the form of Reshi order was established in Kashmir. These Reshis or Babas or hermits, furthered vehemently the humanist message of Islam. Their extreme piety and utter self-abnegation influenced the people and spirituality became the essence of Kashmir social life. Accordingly Jehangir had to admit that though the Reshis had no religious knowledge, yet they possessed simplicity without pretence. They were responsible to convert entire society into a social system governed by love for God and piety.

The progress that the people of Kashmir made during the ancient and the medieval times in cultural spheres could not be maintained during the periods of enslavements. Kashmir had many times been under the rulers who were oppressive suppressive and tyrannical. They had advancement during Mughals in cultural spheres, yet the periods under Afghans and that of Sikhs and Dogras, they had insignificant progress in the field of cultural development. However, what the rulers did in the political life, the enslaved people forgot their religious differences and strengthened the religious humanism and composite culture. The people under the influence of saints like Kah Nov, Min Shah, Baba Mol, Zain Shah, Shukur Shah and Resh Mol were attracted to the faith of humanism. These saints till date are revered by the masses. Annual festivals on their shrines and many religious and holy places are attended by all communities. The literary pursuits in the form of poetry, art, literature, architecture, Kashmir prose and philosophy medicine were enriched to some extent during the periods of oppressive rulers. It goes to the credit of Kashmiri people that since dawn of modernism, not only more and more works of literary value were produced year after year, but thought also has emerged in refinement, depth and subtlety.

During the first quarter of the 20th century and the dawn of

struggle for freedom in 1931, new era ushered in literary giants. Amongst them whom the living generations also know, the recognized as the harbingers of peace, liberty and humanism. The moderns, including contemporary Kashmir literature has four distinctive features. Firstly it is mystic philosophy in content and then a vast literature on love lyrics and thirdly didactic and narrative art and finally patriotic poetry. In all the genres, the thought process is deeply influenced by indigenous culture.

From Lalla and Nunda, down through Habba and galaxy of poets, upto Mahjour and Azad, ending at Rehman Rahi, the living Janapieth award winner, Kashmir presents a distinct cultural personality. Kashmir culture as such is significant and important in its form and content. The philosophy, art, literature through which the people of the valley advocated peace and poise, is commendable. In this cultural process, women at times had empowerment to their satisfaction. Our cultural rationale was admirable not only to provide us 'Loll Lyrics' propagating essence of love but resolving our conflicting and changing norms. Had our cultural substance not an intrinsic strength, it would have been impossible to face two conversions, one from Buddhism to Hinduism and finally to Islam. Even today, when the cry for freedom has become part of Kashmiri life it is difficult to explain it, in terms of human psychology. Our culture, had capacity to compromise cultural diversity which we find in our society. We had, in our cultural history acculturated many ethnic groups from ancient to modern age. Our religious attitudes, etiquette of race relations and stability at times of authority, love for learning men and women of repute in knowledge, drama, dance, poetry, proverbs, folk tales, contribution to Persian poetry both by Muslims and Pandits, arts and crafts, civil and military organizations, are hallmark of our cultural history till date.

To sum up, we may recall that the cultural ethos of the society of Kashmir from ancient times to the present is a continuous

struggle for change and continuity. The continuity and change are essential for any political, social and religious organism. Whatever life in nature, even if in embryonic stage must be free to grow, otherwise it will stagnate, decay and die. Our scholars in the seminar are expected to address such issues and problems concerning the dynamics of our culture, shifting models and requirements for preservation of most important expressions of our culture its language and the concerns for mankind. Let me end by reminding you the rhythmic words of the waters of the River, a call for action and revolt against the iniquitous social order by Azad:

I corrode away the heart of hills,
Such is the movement of my flow!
I bathe the (tender) frames of the sweet
Such is the softness of my ways!
"My curves and twists are full of strait word love.
I get the music of love in travels and wanderings
Amidst the flowers and the nightingales
I play upon the sweet Santoor!
Among the rocks the stony hearts
I beat the drum of upheaval".

(Bazaz)