

# Mystical thought of Kashmir

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## **Introduction:**

Kashmir's unique identity and essence can be delineated by identifying and foregrounding its metaphysico-mystical traditions: Rishism, Saivism and Sufism are ideal frameworks to give it a locally rooted global identity.

From the sixth century to the eleventh century A.D, Kashmir was considered to be the seat of learning and knowledge, in this part of the world. Throughout the Indian subcontinent it was known as S'ardapith, that is, the abode of Sarasvati, goddess of knowledge. The fourth Buddhist Council was held here during the third Century A.D. Holding of this council in the Valley is evidence that Kashmir held the position of centrality from the point of view of the development of knowledge and learning, although geographically it happens to be on the margins of the subcontinent. The objective of this council was to reach a consensus regarding the basic tenets of Buddhism. It is said that the famous scholar Ashvaghosh played a very significant role in the conduct of this Council.

## **Buddhism:**

One of the most influential philosophers of the twentieth century, Ludwig Wittgenstein, concluded his epoch making book *Logico philosophicus-Tractatus* published in the year 1922 with the proposition:<sup>1</sup>

What we cannot speak about, we must pass over in silence. We in India have inherited this wisdom from centuries. About 2500 years earlier Buddha taught us the significance and importance of silence. The realms that transcend linguistic categories cannot be

articulated in the discourses of language. But to postulate the possibility of such realms has been the characteristic feature of human quest for the absolute truth.

The principle of Nirvana as propounded by Buddhism is an instance of such a realm. Nirvana is postulated as a state of being that is possible only by removing wrong knowledge about the self and realizing the principle of non-self or Shunya. Buddhism highlighted the negative aspect of the Divine. To be Divine is to realize the state of non-being or shunya. The way to the realization of this absolute state is via negation which implies denial of all specific qualities and attributes in order to reach the ultimate nothingness of the absolute, as Max Muller has rightly pointed out:<sup>2</sup>

Nirvana . . . Is a name and thought but nothing can be predicated of it. It is what no eye hath seen, and what hath not entered into the mind of man.

Since nothing can be predicated of it, it is quality-less being and a quality-less being is non-being. To elucidate the point further let me quote from A.B. Keith's *Buddhist Philosophy*:<sup>3</sup>

It follows from the fact that we are not concerned with relative knowledge that any definition of suchness is utterly impossible; to apply to it empirical determination is wholly misleading; to say that it is void is to ascribe to it the character which belongs to the phenomena of this world; to say that it exists is to suggest something individual like ourselves which, however, leads to an eternal existence. It is necessary, then, to content ourselves with silence or to choose the simple term suchness or suchness of being, an idea which in its simple form is known to the Hinayana. Suchness is above existence or non-existence or both or neither. It can, therefore, be most easily expressed by negations like the "Not so, not so" of the Upanishads, and hence it is natural to treat it as the void. But we must not make the error of thinking this a real definition; the void is as void as anything positive.

As a matter of fact this way of approaching and realizing the Divine can be discerned even in the modern mystic tradition of Kashmir. An early twentieth century Sufi poet of Kashmir Sings:<sup>4</sup>

**Chu aura kehnai te yaura kehnai  
Bau kehnai kas wanai kehnai**

On either side there is Non - Being, nothingness is all pervading. I am mere Nothingness. How can nothingness be communicated, and to whom?

From this we can validly infer that the Buddhist approach of realizing the Divine has significantly informed the spiritual consciousness of Kashmiri people. Buddhism was divided into two sects: Hinayana and Mahayana. Hinayanees are of the view that an individual should concern himself with his own Nirvana and that is possible if he follows the righteous eight-fold path as shown by Buddha. But Mahayanees (Kashmiris were Mahayanees) are of the view that individual Nirvana is of little significance unless and until the realized one aims at and attempts for the Nirvana of all his fellow beings. They advocate that although Gautama had attained enlightenment, he came back to his fellow men as Buddha to assist them in attaining enlightenment. The tenth century Tibetan thinker Jé Gampopa in his book *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation*, differentiates the Hinayana and Mahayana approaches, in the following manner:<sup>5</sup>

Clinging to the well-being of mere peace' signifies the lower capacity [Hinayana] attitude wherein the longing to transcend suffering is focused on oneself alone. This precludes the cherishing of others and hence there is little development of altruism. [...] When loving kindness and compassion become part of one, there is so much care for other conscious beings that one could not bear to liberate oneself alone. [...] Master Manjushrikirti has said: "A Mahayana follower should not be without loving kindness and com-

passion for even a single moment," and "It is not anger and hatred but loving kindness and compassion that vouchsafe the welfare of other."<sup>6</sup>

Ananda Coomaraswamy is of the view that, "The most essential part of the Mahanyana is its emphasis on the Bodhisattva ideal." Being a bodhisattva implies possessing a mind full of compassion conjoined with insight into reality, realizing emptiness (shunya), or the essence of all things. The Saivistic approach to liberation is informed by the principles of Mahayana Buddhism. The enlightened one has to come back to the society for the enlightenment of his/ her fellow beings and this is corroborated by the life and message of all the known saints and saint poets of Kashmir.

### **Saivism :**

Kashmiri Buddhist scholars achieved great excellence in logic which informs almost all the schools of Indian philosophy especially the monistic Saivism of Kashmir. With the erosion of Buddhism in Kashmir, Saivism re-surfaced in the Valley during the ninth Century and gradually became popular among the masses. Prior to Buddhism, Saivism was prevalent in Kashmir, but it was not a monistic creed. The Saivism that became popular after the decline of Buddhism and which is also known as Trikamat, is based upon various Agamic tantras. The etymological meaning of the word "Shiva" is "good." According to Saivism the ultimate and eternal reality is "Absolute Good." The Universe is the manifestation of the Absolute Good or Shiva. This Absolute Good is an infinite, eternal and conscious light, which is also manifested through space and time and all that is contained within space and time. So, the Universe is a manifestation of the absolute reality and this reality is absolute conscious light. Man is also a ray of the same light. The goal and purpose of human life is to recognize this absolute and eternal reality. One of the basic texts of the school is Vasu Gupta's Siva-

sutras and it articulates strictly a monistic doctrine, in which there is no scope for any kind of duality.

Siva-sutras comprise 77 sutras. These sutras are more like riddles and coded statements and need interpretation and de-codification. They have aptly been called by some scholar as frozen pieces of enlightenment. The first two sutras are quoted here to illustrate the point. The first sutra reads:<sup>7</sup>

Chaitanyamatma

Which means:

Consciousness is the nature of reality

Or

Consciousness is the self or soul

Or

Consciousness is the essence of reality which is the self or soul

The 2nd Sutra is:<sup>8</sup>

Jñanam Bandhah.

If this Sutra is read in conjunction with the earlier one, it reads:

Chaitanyamatmajñanambandhah.

This means:

Consciousness is the essence of reality and the ignorance of this truth implies bondage.

If read separately it means:

Knowledge is bondage

Or

Empirical & discursive knowledge leads to the  
bondage of the agent.

Of all the commentaries written on the Siva-sutras, Khemaraja's commentary is considered to be the most authentic. Khemaraja was a disciple of Abhinava Gupta, so the commentary must have been written some time during the eleventh Century.

The literature of monistic Saivism consists of three parts: Agama Śastra, Spanda Śastra, and Pratyabhijña Śastra.

1. Agam Shastra:- It comprises revealed books; these books are not the product of human intelligence or experience; their origin is believed to be spiritual in nature. Among them Siva-sutra is considered to be the most significant; and it is also called Saiva-upanishada.
2. Spanda Shastra:- These are the treatises wherein the Agama Shastras are interpreted and commented upon; the two important books belonging to this segment are Spanda Karika and Spand Sandoha.
3. Pratyabhijña Shastra:- Literally it means the discipline of self-recognition. This part consists of works wherein Saivism is presented as a school of thought as well as a world view. The fundamental principles of the system are analyzed and an effort is made to prove their validity through rational and logical arguments; and arguments based on the experience of the agent himself. The most significant works belonging to this segment are:

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| 1. S'iva Drishti                          | Somananda       |
| 2. Ishwar Pratyabhijña Karika             | Utpalacharya    |
| 3. Ishwar Pratyabhijña Vimarshini         | Abhinava Gupta  |
| 4. Ishwar Pratyabhijña Vivarti Vimarshini | Abhinava Gupta. |

Even after Abhinava Gupta right up to the time of Lal-ded (fourteenth century), the debate regarding the principles of Saivism continued among scholars and many works were also produced. On the other hand, those interested in spiritual well-being continued practicing the discipline for their spiritual growth and evolution. But the fact remains that no scholar or practitioner could match the achievements of Abhinava Gupta. And even today Abhinava Gupta is considered to be the chief exponent of Kashmir Saivism.

The ultimate reality, according to this system, is non-relational consciousness. It is the cause of all change but does not itself undergo any change. In it there is no distinction of subject and object. Ultimate Reality is not only universal consciousness but also

supreme spiritual energy or power, which is called prakashvimarsamay. It is both transcendental (Visvottirna) and immanent or (Visvamaya). In its transcendental aspect it is called Anuttara, and in its immanent creative aspect it is called Siva tattva. It is Svabhava or the nature of ultimate reality to manifest itself. This manifestation takes place through a process of descent. The first five stages of descent are called the perfect or pure order; up to this stage all experience is ideal; and the real nature of the Divine is not yet veiled. These stages are as follows: Siva, Sakti, Sadasiva, Isvar, Sadvidya, or Suddhavidya

The following thirty-one stages are called imperfect or impure order because the ideal nature of the Divine is veiled. This order consists of thirty one tattvas which are as follows:

- (1) Maya and its five Kañcukas --- Kala, Vidya, Raga, Kala, Niyati
- (2) Purusa and Prakrati
- (3) Buddhi, Ahamkara, and Manas.
- (4) The Tattvas of sensible experience, five Jñanendriyas, five Karmendriyas, Five Tanamatras
- (5) The Tattvas of Materiality (a) Akasa (b) Vayu (c) Teja (Agni) (d) Apas (e) Prthivi.

Self-recognition is the ultimate intrinsic value for Saivism. Since all creation has only one origin and source, there is no question of inequality among humans on the spiritual plane. But to realize this value man has to strive very hard. Saivism as propounded and propagated during the medieval times in Kashmir is not only an academic and intellectual pursuit but essentially a spiritual course of action for seekers of the truth and self-knowledge. This is amply proved by the very person of the saint poet Lal-Ded, who transformed her earthly existence into Heavenly Being by treading the path of the spiritual discipline. Her poetry forms the foundation not only of contemporary Kashmiri literature but also of Kashmiri

culture as a whole. As stated earlier Kashmir produced great thinkers and spiritual practitioners from the sixth century A.D. to the twelfth century A.D., but all their works are in Sanskrit. After the advent of Islam in Kashmir around this time Kashmiris gradually lost their hold on the language (Sanskrit) due to various political, social, religious, and linguistic reasons; and whatever intellectual heritage their predecessors had bequeathed to them became inaccessible to them. With the passage of time a gulf emerged between pre-Islamic Kashmir and Islamic Kashmir; but Lal-Ded is the most significant historical bridge that connects the two shores of this gulf very effectively. She was the product of the creed preached by Vasugupta in the ninth century and the philosophy propounded by Abhinavahgupta in the tenth and the eleventh centuries. Her poetry was not written down during her life time. It was because of her power to impact her listeners that people heard her and formed her sayings or vaakhs into chants and mantras which continue to be sung even today. She revolted against all the oppressive structures that stifle and kill the human spirit and critically interrogated practices of inequality and injustice that were current during the times. Lala's poetry is not only a continuation of the tradition, it is also simultaneously a break or rebellion against the tradition. Lala rejected wholly the ritualistic aspect of the saivitic spiritual discipline. This rejection is articulated and expressed with great force in her poetry\*\*. On the one hand, Lala gave a new lease of life to Kashmiri Saivistic spiritual tradition but on the other hand, she demystified Saivism by articulating its tenets in the language of the common people and deconstructed its ideology of being a Rahasya Sampradaya (a secret sect) by making all the Upayas (means of realization) available to all those interested in the realization of their true identity, thus making it a viable and effective tool not only for individual emancipation but also for social unification. There is an inbuilt dynamic reciprocal relationship between the



two, and each reinforces the other.

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O fool! The right action is not observing fast and rituals.  
Right action is not caring for your body,  
It is not to adorn your body,  
Meditation on the self is the appropriate course of action,  
It is not wise to torture  
One's body with hunger and thirst  
One should take care of one's body when the care is needed  
Fasts and religious ceremonies do not add to one's spiritual merit.  
The real good action consists in doing good to others

Checking the flow of water, cooling fire,  
Walking in the air, contrary to natural laws,  
Getting milk from a wooden cow,  
All this in final analysis is fraud and deceit

Without discernment they read the holy books,  
Just as the parrot repeats "Rama! Rama"! from its cage;  
To them reading of the Gita is just pretence;  
I have read the Gita and I am reading it (every moment of my life)

A Sanyasi (religious mendicant) goes on pilgrimages to all the holy places:

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\* In this regard following verses of Lalla may be considered@  
Idol is but stone, so is the temple,  
Above and below it is joined in one mass;  
O ignorant Brahmin! Whom would you offer worship to?  
Bring about the communion of the mind and the vital air (prana)

He is in search of his Lord.  
O mind: Lose not the path even after receiving education;

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 The grass looks greener from a distance
 

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Some renounced their hearth and home; some took to living in the forest hermitages.

All in vain! So long as the mind is not tethered at home;

Counting your breath day and night, as you are, so shall you be

@Tr. B.N.Parimoo, *The Ascent of Self* (1978) Delhi; Moti Lal Banarasidas

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Abhinava Gupta in his *Tantaraloka* admits the possibility of attaining self-realization and self-recognition without following the ritualistic path prescribed by the tradition. But he devotes almost half of the *Tantaraloka* (2637 sholaks out of a total of 5859) to a minute and detailed description of the various rituals prescribed by the scriptures; this clearly shows that these rituals were considered a basic and significant constituents of the saivistic religious creed. According to major saiva scriptures there can be no valid Saivism without ritual. One of the postulates of these scriptures is to the effect that the impurity (*malah*) that prevents the soul's liberation is a substance (*dravyava*) and to remove it; action (*kriya*) is needed and not *jñānam* (Gnosis). This effect can be produced only by the ritual of initiation performed by saiva himself through the person of the officiating Guru or teacher. But Abhinava Gupta does not totally agree with this view. For him *malah* or impurity is the consequence or result of ignorance of one's true nature or identity and what is required for its removal is knowledge (Gnosis) not action. But at many places Abhinava Gupta is so thick and convoluted that even his thirteen century commentator Jayratha seems to have faltered in comprehending his texts properly as has been most ably demonstrated by Prof. Alexi-Sanderson in his article: "Swami Lakshman Joo and His Place in the Kashmirian Saiva Tradition."<sup>9</sup> At many places, Abhinava Gupta has not explained things to the satis-

faction of his readers due to the fact that he considers the matter under consideration to be too secretive to be deliberated upon beyond a certain limit. But when we come to Lal-Ded all this secretiveness and thickness disappears and there is complete semantic transparency. There are no hidden corners in Lal-Ded. She adopted ritual free Trika as propounded by Abhinava Gupta as the norm. She liberated the doctrine from any sectarian, local, or regional colour, and made it a Universal message for mankind in general. Lal-Ded is Saivism made easy for the layperson irrespective of his/ her caste, creed, colour, religion, or sex. This is the reason for total acceptance of Lal-Ded by almost all Kashmiris. With the passage of time there was a schism in the Trikamat of Kashmir Saivism. On the one hand, we have the branch that maintains the rituals, although not much of the traditional rituals detailed by Abhinava Gupta have survived the ravages of the time, and now these rituals are restricted to smart observances only, as the elaborate and complex trika rituals had died down by the fourteenth century. On the other hand, we have the ritual free Trikamat of Lal-Ded which merges with the Sufi mystic tradition of Islam and becomes a forceful movement in the hands of the so-called Sufi poets of Kashmir.

**Sufism:**

The unitary human mystical experience has been interpreted and articulated by different cultures and religions in their own particular way. But there are striking similarities among these interpretations. Shaykh-ul-Islam Zakariyah Ansari defines Sufism in these words: <sup>10</sup>

Sufism teaches how to purify one's self, improve one's morals and build up one's inner and outer life in order to attain perpetual bliss. Its subject matter is the purification of the soul and its end or aim is the attainment of eternal felicity and blessedness. This doctrine of spiritual evolution which emanates from the Holy

Quran has informed the spiritual quest of the seekers of truth all over the world. This is a well known historical fact that Kashmir was converted to Islam not through the brute power of the sword but through the word of love; the sages and saints right from the great Bulbul Shah and spiritually evolved Syeds to indigenous Kashmiri Rishis, all were messengers of peace, love and harmony. Because Kashmir had strong spiritual and mystic traditions, seekers of truth found the atmosphere quite conducive to their quest. Indigenous mystic traditions were refined and recast in new moulds and a new spiritual lexicon with a mixed terminology was developed. This can be evidenced by the writings of various Kashmiri Sufi poets, right from Nund Rishi (fourteenth century) to Ahad Zargar (twentieth century). The point can be illustrated by citing some verses from the two poets. Just consider this Shaluk (verse) of Nund Rishi: <sup>11</sup>

**Poz yod bo:zakh pa:ntsh namu:rakh  
Nata ma:z namu:rakh dapakh nema:z  
Shivas ta Shunyahas yod myul karakh  
Seduy soy chhay vahantar nema:z.**

**If you listen to truth, curb the five; (Five Senses)  
Otherwise, you bend the body and call it "Nemaz"! (Prayer)  
If you unite Siva (being) and shunya (non-being),  
That is the inner Nemaz, indeed.**

One cannot but appreciate the way Nund Rishi preserves and enriches the mystic and spiritual traditions of Kashmir. He does not reject the sharia, which is fundamental to Islamic Sufism, but comes up with a new and creative interpretation of it in the light of his own intense spiritual experience. To unite Siva (Being) and the Shunya (Non-Being --void) is the real Nemaz. With what ease have the concepts belonging to different spiritual traditions been inter-

mingled and what a fantastic rhythm they create! The spiritual experience of the saint has highly recharged these concepts and the terms connoting them appear to be dancing. A divine light emanates from this dance which is so sharp that it pierces not only one's eyes but also the heart. In one of his poems, with the refrain;

**Su ma var dita mou devo!  
Oh! God grant me the same bone.**

Nund Rishi pays tribute not only to Lord Buddha, but to some other Buddhist and saivist saints also. In each of the shaluks (verses) the Rishi describes the spiritual attainments of the saint concerned, pays his tribute, and makes a fervent prayer to God to bless him (Nund Rishi) the same way. He had blessed the noble soul, and he be granted the same bone as the referred saint. Regarding this poem one of the contemporary scholars in the field writes:<sup>12</sup>

This didactic poem is read collectively and loudly in particular meditational congregations during the "Night of Power" in Khanqah-i-Moula and Charar-i-Sharief. I say this with all certainty that Kashmir is the only place in the Muslim world where in the mosques the names of Non-Muslims are recited as syllables of prayer. Such evolved traditions provide basis for gradual evolution of a spiritual culture and emergence of a blended mystic Philosophy.

Ahad Zagar is one of the most significant signatures of contemporary Kashmiri Sufi poetry. He has great command over the language. Like his other contemporary Samad Mir he is well versed in the spiritual ethos of Kashmir and by his contribution has definitely enriched the tradition. Some of his poems have ignited controversies in conservative religious circles of the valley, and some clerics even issued fatwas against him. But threats and fatwas notwithstanding he continued to articulate and express himself in the same controversial but piercing idiom. Here are some extracts:<sup>13</sup>

I am the hidden secret of both the interior as well as the exterior.  
To whom shall I bow, and for whom shall I perform the "Nemaz."

**I am the ultimate grace of both the mosque and the temple.  
I am the worshiper, but I am the one worshiped.  
I am the chain of birth and death.  
And it is me again who is to play the game of love.**

**In the absence of Nothingness, there is no possibility of Being.  
Nothingness is all pervading.  
But if Nothingness is mere Nothingness,  
Who has deluded me?  
Realize Nothingness within yourself,  
Dance round nothingness like a moth.  
Keep your heart awake with Nothingness.**

By examining this kind of poetry even at the linguistic level, we can probably identify the sources from which the poet draws inspiration. To paraphrase the above verses in rational prose would be mere sophistry. The poet has attempted to express an experience that transcends the rational and empirical categories. This kind of experience can be comprehended only at the level of Faith and not at the level of Reason. Ahad Zargar is a genuine and true representative of the mystical ethos of Kashmir.

Going back to the Sufism that originated from the Holy Quran, let me quote from the well known book *The Quranic Sufism* by Dr. Mir Valiuddin, a practicing Sufi and a student and teacher of Philosophy. In the chapter entitled "On the Descent of the Absolute" he writes:<sup>14</sup>

Now, the same Absolute Being that in the stage of transcendence is unknown and unknowable reveals Himself in multiple manifestations and different forms, or in the terminology of eminent Sufis, descends in these forms, or individualises Himself

in different forms. This is of such a nature that in spite of expressing Himself in different manifestations and multiple forms the Absolute Being maintains His immutable state, and no change of any kind does necessarily take place. The stages of descent are innumerable but the most marked of these are but six and these are termed the Six Descents by the Sufis. The first three of them are called Maratib-i-Ilahi (Divine ranks) which are "Ahadiyyat" (Abstract Oneness) i.e., the state of Essence, the Infinite, the Indeterminate. The second is "Wahdat" (Unity) and the third "Wahidiyat" (Unity in Plurality). The remaining three are called Maratib-i-Kawni (worldly ranks) which are "Ruh" (Spirit) "Mithal" (similitude) and "Jism" (body).

Without making any comparisons, let us remind ourselves that while discussing the process of manifestation from the perspective of Kashmir Saivism we came across some similar formulations, although not identical ones.

Delineating the essential features of Sufism, Syed Hossein Nasr in his book *Living Sufism* writes: <sup>15</sup>

The Sufi teaches this simple truth that the basis of all faith or iman is unity. For as Shaykh Mahmud Shabistari writes in his *Gulshan-i-Raz*:

**Yakay been, yakay gouy, yakay daan  
Badeen khatam aamad asal wa farah eemaan**

See but one, say but one, know but one, In this are summed up the roots and branches of faith.

The integration of man means the realization of the one and the transmutation of the many in the light of the one.

Right from pre-Buddhist times Kashmiri spiritual consciousness has been pursuing this goal of realization of the oneness of Being, of course with varying degrees of success, and a Kashmiri

Sufi poet sings:<sup>16</sup>

**Akh cha ti bayi bo ganzar maba  
Habā ye chuy gumanai.**

Any consideration of thou and me is all but delusion.

It would be appropriate to conclude this paper with a quotation from the already mentioned book by Syed Hossein Nasr, *Living Sufism*:<sup>17</sup>

He who has gained a vision of that mountain top that touches the infinite rests assured that the climbers who are following other paths are nevertheless his companions on this journey which is the only meaningful journey of life itself. His certainty comes not only from the Vision of the peak, but also from his knowledge that those paths that have been chosen for man by God Himself do ultimately lead to the top, Whatever turns they may make on the way.

**Note:**

1. Where otherwise not indicated the translations from Kashmiri into English are by the author himself.

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