

# Stages in the Mystical life of Shaikh-ul- Aalam<sup>R.A</sup>

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**Abstract:** *Mysticism in Islam is named "Sufism" or in Arabic it is called "Tasawwaf". Some trace its etymology to Greeks and others to Turkey but Sufism and Tasawwaf is akin to Islam. The word 'initiate' serves to indicate that in order to embark on the spiritual path, a special rite of initiation is an indispensable prerequisite. It is known as 'Biat' or surrender to the Peer. Presently, there is a wide agreement that Sufism is the animated spirit of Islamic tradition and its origin is in the Quran and the teachings of the Prophet (SAW).<sup>1</sup>*

*Mysticism is a concept of spirituality that makes its appearance, as an inward dimension and attempts to separate the mystical element from the religion, which is its outward support. It is a spiritual path that stands on two dimensions. The two dimensions are exoterism and esoterism. Both enjoy a relationship that is independent and also dependent. The relationship is described by Nicholson as the outward religion, known in Islam as 'Sharia' and inner truth may be likened to 'Haqiqa'. Thus the mystical or 'initiatic' path (tariqa) may lead from outward observance to inner conviction, from belief to vision, from potency to act<sup>2</sup>.*

**Keywords:** *Sufism; Tasawwaf; Mysticism; Islam.*

## Introduction:

Shaikh Noor ud Din, commonly known as Shaikh ul Aalam, Nund Rishi, Alamdar-e-Kashmir, Taj ul Awliya, (the crown of saints of Kashmir) whom Kashmiri Pundits call Shahzanand<sup>3</sup>, was undoubtedly a blessed and true proponent of pure and virgin message of God, although of a Muslim affiliation this great saint of Northern India is revered and respected by both Hindu and Muslim communities in a predominantly Muslim society. Shaikh ul Alam owes the credit for laying the foundation of an indigenous order of in the fifteenth century the Rishi order. He was born in a village called Qaimoh (some sixty kilometers South-East of capital Srinagar) in 779/1378 A.D of a pious couple, Shaikh Salar ud Din and Sadra, known for their piety God-fearing ways<sup>4</sup>. A born ascetic, Shaikh ul Aalam busied himself completely in meditation, remembrance of God, prayers and

ascetic practices. In his late teens, he chose a cave as his abode near his birthplace for all his practices and meditations. After twelve years of retirement, Shaikh ul Aalam adopted some disciples and undertook an extensive tour of valley, living for long stints at different places and preaching his simple gospel of un-worldliness, purity, piety, fear of God and love for humanity. He died in 1438 A.D at a place called Rupawan, and Zain ul Abidin himself led the funeral prayers. He was buried at Charar-e-Sharief where his final resting place has become an object of pilgrimage for all Kashmiris regardless of their religion, caste and creed.

The most dominant influence on Kashmir society and literature in terms of their religious and cultural heritage has been of Sufism or Rishiyat. Rishism is an independent Sufi order of Kashmir. The term *Rishi* is itself clearly a derivation from Sanskrit and Indian tradition, though some medieval scholars have tried to show that it is derived from Persian word "*Raish or Rish*, meaning feathers<sup>5</sup>". Consequently, then, the *Rishi* Movement, in spite of its local origins vis-à-vis its distinctive characteristics- extreme ascetic discipline, vegetarianism, celibacy and non-violence began to be looked with favor by the standard-bearers of the *Shari'ah* and *Sunnah* including the revered Sufis and hagiographers belonging to the *Suharwardiya*, *Kubrawiya* and *Naqshbandiya* orders. So important was the *Rishi* Movement in the traditional Kashmiri society that several of its unique social and religious characteristics were not regarded as an alien. The strength of its social authority not only lay in its denunciation of the *Brahmanic* notions of caste but, also, in the satisfaction that it gave to the spiritual instincts of the people in the Hindu-Buddhist environment of the valley. It is pertinent to say that *Rishism* had struck strong holds in Kashmir prior to the advent of Islam in the region. The anti-caste crusade was most forcefully articulated by the founder of the Muslim *Rishi* order, Noor ud Din Noorani<sup>6</sup>.

Shaikh Noor ud din's mystical career falls in to three main stages: the first is that of an orphan struggling to eke out his mundane existence. The second is that of an ascetic who withdraws himself from worldly affairs in order to

know the religious truth and in the third and final stage he gives up the life of a recluse to advocate ethics of a dynamic and positive nature.

#### First Stage :

In his first stage, some unfortunate circumstances seem to have moulded Noor ud din's outlook towards affairs during the earlier phase of his religious career. He became an orphan at an early age; besides, the death of Lal Ded and Sayyid Husain Simnani deprived the young Noor ud din of their spiritual care. The Sanz family seems to have lived in abject poverty after the death of Shaikh Salar, as is evidenced by the thefts committed by Noor ud din's brothers in order to survive. Noor ud din is also reported to have been asked by his two brothers, Shesh and Kundar, to help in a burglary but he did not come up to their expectations since he showed an abhorrence for the life of a thief. When he entered a village hut in order to commit a theft he "came out empty handed" and ran away after throwing his own blanket over the poverty-stricken inmates of the house. On another occasion he was asked by his brothers to take care of a cow they had stolen. While driving the cow he heard a dog bark, *Wow, Wow*. Suddenly Noor ud din was overcome with a sense of guilt. *Wow* means 'sow' in Kashmir. Thinking that the dog was reminding him that what he sowed in this world would be reaped by him in the hereafter. He let loose the cow;

*The dog is calling from the courtyard,  
My brothers pay heed to (what he says)  
He who sows here shall reap there  
The dog is urging Sow, or Sow<sup>7</sup>.*

Another interesting anecdote regarding the Shaikh's early life is narrated by him in a verse. He was sent to learn the craft of weaving by his mother, but he couldnot become an apprentice since the tools of the weaver inspired his muse:

*One instrument holds my rapt attention.  
The other teaches me renounce the world;  
The paddle points down to the grave;  
This is the craft to which my parents have  
apprenticed me<sup>8</sup>.*

A conversation between the Shaikh and the weaver recorded in the hagiological literature is worthy of notice. The Shaikh is reported to have been dissatisfied with the commonplace answer of the weaver when asked to explain the movement of the shuttle "through the tangle of threads." In the weavers explanation that the cloth was woven because of the to and fro movement of the thread through the shuttle, the Shaikh found an inner meaning. His explanation was that the movement of the shuttle was symbolic of two doors of the

world, the one through which we enter (birth) and the other through which we leave (death). The shuttle thus resembles man who carrying the thread of his destiny, tosses to and fro in this world, and departs when the thread is exhausted<sup>9</sup>.

The other –worldliness of the Shaikh did not permit him to learn the weavers craft. This is why he deprecated the importance of living in the world.

*'Why did I not listen to Death, the friend,  
Who can propitiate him, the great  
Destroyer?  
Few are my pieties but piled up the sins;  
Little have I gained by my birth in the world  
10.*

#### IInd Stage:

The Shaikh retired to a cave at Qaimoh, the place of his birth. He gave various excuses to his mother when she insisted on his returning home. He talks about the insolent riches of the world, human desires, anger and ego, which preoccupy the human mind. He draws lured pictures of the day of judgement and hell to impress upon his mother the futility of paddling one's own canoe in the material world:

*This life is a hollow bubble;  
We are just a drop in its vast ocean,  
An ass like me is unable to bear its brunt,  
Having deserted home, why should I care to  
live<sup>11</sup>?*

Noor ud din himself expounds as to why he took to the jungle early in life, in the true spirit of the rishis:

*In the pursuit of mundane affairs my desires  
became limitless;  
So I retired to the jungle, early in life,  
May the Lord saturate the Rishi's mind with  
longing for thee;  
For I remember with gratitude how kind  
Thou art<sup>12</sup>.*

Noor ud din's decision to lead an ascetic's life which marks the beginning of the second stage in his religious career seems to have been voluntary. It was influenced by his craving for seeking the truth.

The path of renunciation followed by the rishis preceding him and their extreme ascetic habits must have also played an important part in shaping his outlook on worldly life. It is unlikely that the penance in the cave was undertaken at the command of any saint.

*The company of saints I did not keep,  
Till right moment and youth slipped by'  
Wrongly did I attach (myself) to the world;*

*Have the play and let's go home*<sup>13</sup>.

Having thus secluded himself in the cave in the manner of the rishis, the Shaikh combined the daunting series of recitations of God's name with extremes of asceticism, self mortification, long fasts, and sexual abstinence. In order to discipline his soul, he followed extreme ascetic practices to free himself from his sensual self. The Shaikh subsisted on wild vegetables and did not touch meat. The ethics of asceticism finds a systematic exposition in the conversations which the Shaikh had with his mother and wife in the cave. The doctrine of negation of the wordly life is emphasized when his mother urges him to return home:

*Mother donot pester me;  
Nund has already buried himself,  
Mother the world is mortal;  
Therefore, I have retired to the cave*<sup>14</sup>.

Reacting to his mother's insistence on his taking enough food, the Shaikh remarks:

*How can (good) food satiate (my spiritual  
thirst), mother?  
Give it to a dog or a Brahman  
Can't I crush my ego?  
Having renounced home, why should I care  
to live*<sup>15</sup>.

And when His wife, Zia Ded implores her Husband to give up the path of renunciation, the Shaikh says;

*Zia, have love for the next world;  
Groping in the dark will lead you  
nowhere*<sup>16</sup>.

Most of the verses composed by the Shaikh in the cave bear an endelible mark of Saivite philosophy. According to Sivadaita or the Trika philosophy of Kashmir, the *atman*, meaning the true and innermost self, is present everywhere and is in every being. It "is a changeless reality of the nature of a purely experiencing principle, as distinguished from whatever may assume the form of either the experience or the means of experience"<sup>17</sup>.

### **Third Stage:**

In the prime of his youth the socio-cultural tradition represented by Noor ud din was purely mystical rather than of this world. His conception of the universe and things around him was such as could have led to a separation of himself from these phenomena. The self-image of man, according to such a view, was that of a quasi-divine being whose only aim was to attain a mystical union with God. The crystallization of such a process began when Noor ud din came in contact with Sayyid

Muhammmad Hamadani<sup>R.A</sup>, who is reputed to have played an important role in the spread of Islamic teachings in Kashmir along with a number of his disciples. The Sayyid became the spiritual preceptor of the Shaikh when the later was in his early 30's is attested to not only by documentary evidence, but also by a new trend in his thought. It will suffice to say that from now on, the mystic Noor ud din addressed himself to the task of reforming society by becoming a conscious missionary. After meeting Sayyid Muhammad Hamadani<sup>R.A</sup>, Shaikh changed his philosophy of life completely and no more followed seclusion in the cave. In addition to his routine activities, he became a preacher and a social reformer and toured almost all parts of valley to spread the message of universal truth and brotherhood. Infact it was his association with the Kubrawi Sufis that lead to a great change in his thought.

Thus, after spending twelve years in the cave, the Shaikh realised that physical seclusion associated with asceticism, however useful it may be in the inculcation of self-discipline, does not make up its essence. Rather, it lies in emulating the example of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW):

*There are jackals and monkeys in the  
forests;  
The caves are infested with rats;  
Those who offer prayers five times a day to  
wash off the dirt of their heart;  
Those who lead a family life, they are  
privileged.  
A dutiful House holder will be crowned  
(with success on the day of judgement);  
The messenger of Allah (Muhammmad ) led  
a marital life and won the Divine grace*<sup>18</sup>.

Social obligations towards children, the wife and other members of a family thus appear in the Shaikh's thought as the most important manifestations of the religious duties enshrined in the Shariah of Muhammad (SAW). His denunciation of his own wanderings in the jungles during his early days points to the cardinal feature of his thought that basic social obligations are not to be neglected even after a complete surrender to divine obligations. While addressing his disciple, Nasr Baba, the Shaikh recollects an earlier time of spiritual ebb and flow, when his love was not perfect, and how he sought to assuage his anguish by retiring to the cave;

*Nasr Baba, it did not behove me to retire to  
the jungle,  
I thought it was a supreme act of worship;  
Lo: it was an ignominy;  
But the truth was revealed only after  
instrospection*<sup>19</sup>.

After meeting Sayyid Muhammad Hamadani<sup>R.A</sup>, Shaikh was not opposed to the world and its social system but rather moved within the social order so qualitatively informing his personal relations with men as to enter into the contentment of God. True, he was indifferent to political institutions, but even so his greatest achievement lay in ennobling the conduct of the reigning Sultan, Zain-ul-Abidin, who richly deserved the title of the 'Great King' or *Badshah*. It is remarkable that when *Badshah* first sought the guidance of the Shaikh, he was advised to make sustained efforts for administering justice in his kingdom<sup>20</sup>.

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