Sufi Model Of Peace And Extremism

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Abstract:
Islam is the second most followed religion in the world. The spread of Islam from Arabia to other places has been influenced and shaped by the cultural contexts where it made its inroads. Same stands true for Kashmir where local cultural landscape shaped its various aspects and a local Sufi tradition emerged to characterise the Islamic practices. This paper attempts to outline the main tenets of Sufism, reasons for decline of Sufism in Kashmir and how they serve as antagonistic to the extremism tendencies. It also suggests certain measures to counter extremism.

The use of primary data (in the form of participant observation) and secondary data available were processed to find out the dynamics of Sufism vis-a-vis extremism. The paper reaches to the conclusion that popularisation and reinvention with strengthening of the institution of Sufism can serve as an effective tool to curb the extremist tendencies.

Key Words: Sufism, Extremism, Islam, Kashmir, Participant Observation.

Introduction:
Islam is one of the major monotheistic religions in the world besides being second mostly followed religion in the world after Christianity. After its origin and establishment in Arabia, it spread to other corners of the world, shaping the social structure all across. Its beginning in Kashmir dates back to ‘eighth century and accelerated after the shah Mir dynasty came to power in 1339’(Abdul Qaiyum Rafiqi 2015). Rise of islam in Kashmir is itself a unique phenomenon, given its exogenetic nature and primary role in its spread being played by sufis.

The Islam as practised by masses was never divorced from the context of its growth and development in Kashmir. So the brand of Islam was somewhat different from Arabian one in so far it was placed in a local context and certain unique traits came to characterise it like Khanqahi (Monastery) System, recitation of collective litanies and initiation into orders or Silsilas of Sufism etc.

The Teachings of Sufism were mainly centered around devotion to God, love, compassion, and peaceful coexistence. The impact of Sufis and their teachings came to have a stronghold on masses so much so that Kashmir came to be known as “Pir Waer” or land of Sufis and Saints.
It was only latter periods where deteriorating circumstances started rearing their ugly head, seeds of which were sown in 1930s. However, remarkable and rapid deterioration of socio-political environment in Kashmir is a post 1947 phenomenon, when it became a bone of contention between India and Pakistan and several wars were fought over it in subsequent years. It is here that we see a shift away from tolerant teachings of Sufism towards a radical and extremist ideological framework.

This paper seeks to identify the values of Sufism and extremism, genesis of extremism in Kashmir with a corresponding degeneration of Sufism and how Sufism and its revival can be seen as an effective antidote to religious extremism. It also attempts to chart a brief framework of how to employ the institution of Sufism to dethrone extremism and construct a peaceful atmosphere.

**Sufism in Kashmir:**

Islam came to Kashmir mainly due to missionary activities of early sufis who immigrated to Kashmir along with their followers purely for religious purposes (Khan 1986; Zaidi, n.d.). It is this legacy of Sufism that remained dominant in the valley for centuries to come and defined the brand of religion to be practised by masses. The first Sufi who came to Kashmir was Hazrat Sayyed Sharfuddin Abdur Rahman popularly known as Bulbul Shah (Iqbal Ahmad, n.d.). He was followed by other eminent sufis like Hazrat Mir Hussain Simnani, Hazrat Mir Sayyed Ali Hamdani and Hazrat Mir Ali Hamdani (ibid).

Islam in Kashmir became dominant religion through the peaceful preaching by the Muslim Sufis, who not only brought religion but helped to usher a new innovative revolution in social, economic, political, cultural and literary spheres too (Sikander 2010).

Almost all religions have same core principle i.e. belief in the existence of some supernatural forces and it is this “unity of core principle” that finds expression in the doctrines of all Sufi orders of Kashmir. Sufi’s concept of divinity cuts across religious identities despite the fact that Sufism is regarded as mystical aspect of Islam. For Sufis as long as you love the divine, you are playing safe, no matter what name you ascribe to that central principle or God and whatever your religious affiliation- call the rose by any other name would smell as sweet. A Sufi is concerned with fulfilling the obligations enjoyed upon him by virtue of love. Sufism or Tasawwuf means “unbounded love of God and selfless service of His creation under Sharia,” (Bilqies 2014)

Fulfilling these obligations arising out of love constitute true worship, as worship is essentially encompassing and being encompassed by love of divine principle-ishiq-i-haqiqi.

Sufism being mystical in nature has little interest with material reality. Though for Sufis material world exists, it has least importance for spiritual progress.

**Sufism vs Shariat:**

Though to most of the scholars, there is no dichotomy between these two aspects of Islam- being two sides of the same coin. Both have same underlying source i.e. Quran and the...
traditions of the prophet (hadith). These two aspects become contrary and rival in nature once interpretations of Quran and hadith vary from commentator to commentator. Commentaries are goal oriented, suited to serve particular interests mostly political. The group ardently advocating Sharia seem to confine the Islam to its formalistic and ritualist aspect only, considering everything else as innovation (biddah). The advocates of this view leave no room for negotiating on multiple meanings which may be ascribed to a particular commandment therefore its anti postmodernist stance becomes apparent. It is pertinent to mention that advocates of postmodernism assign multiplicity of causes and multiplicity of meanings rather than a singularity of cause and meaning to a social entity or phenomenon. Shariat essentially constitutes the observance of laws of Islam to be followed for a stable social order to prevail. However, it is not this “observance of laws” and the struggle to get it established that is problematic but advocating radical means to attain the goal remains one of the most important factors breeding extremism. However the paradox observed on the ground is that even basic obligations of Islam which can be observed by people in Kashmir, are voluntarily excluded in daily conduct of social life. This confirms that advocating extremism rather than moulding behaviour to fit the frame of sharia, remains politically motivated and religious sentiments are manipulated for profane purposes.

On the other hand Sufism despite recognizing the importance to formalistic and ritualistic aspects of Islam (Sharia), concentrates mainly on the mystical dimension or the inward aspect of Islam. Sincere devotion to God, seeking his pleasure through his love and philanthropist attitude are its guiding principles. Since these principles are purely human, unbiased and accommodative in nature, they are in essence apolitical thus contrary to extremist theology. Sufis attribute this paramount importance to inward aspect to the teachings of the prophet where “Qalab” and its state is deemed to be superior to every form of worship. Here “Qalab” is interpreted not as the material heart but a divine faculty present innately in every human being. It is this emphasis of Sufis on such attributes of Muslims that they are more often than not subject to scathing criticism by orthodox scholars, lebelling them as “otherworldly” people.

**Rise of extremism in Kashmir and decline of Sufi Thought:**

Extremism is conceived by scholars in both secular and religious meanings. It may or may not have religion as the source of its origin but religious extremism is inevitably located in the womb of religion, the two cannot be divorced from each other. In other words religious extremism can never be secular in origin. Whenever and however born religious extremism finds genesis in the institution of religion. Extremism essentially is a motivated interpretation of religion. Islam has been interpreted both politically as well as a politically. Whenever political interpretations of islam are resorted to the motivation is invariably provided by values of power. Whatever the socio-historical context of rise of religious extremism in Kashmir and its evolution through ages, religious extremism is a direct outcome of situating religious commandments in particular socio-cultural context followed by motivated interpretations oriented towards goal attainment. It is also the result of ‘Emotional or unilateral arguments’ which ‘give rise to circumstances for the occurrences of Extremism’(Ushama 2014). It gets perpetuated only once allowed to institutionalise because social currents cannot reproduce at very micro level. Institutionalization as a social process operates at meso and macro levels,
only internalization has to operate at micro level. However, I find it imperative to clear that extremism is a phenomenon characterizing all religions (Frazer and Jammers 2018), though the intensity of manifestation varies from community to community. Thus, we may speak of Christian extremists, Muslim extremists, Hindu Extremists, etc. (Pratt 2019; Devare 2009; Davies 2008).

Given the partition of Indian sub continent in 1947 and consequent birth of nation building processes of newly born states, a disputed territory—Kashmir—emerged to direct religious discourse towards political vested interests, sought to be achieved by mass indoctrination of extremist thought and the corollary of suppression of tolerant teachings of Sufis followed naturally. Though this paper attempts to situate its analysis mostly in the socio-political context of post 1947 era, the genesis of extremism and radicalisation may be sought in the period of maharaja rule (Copland 1981) with gradual evolution an intensification in the coming regimes.

Though “The religion of Islam pays special attention to the principles of humanity, the high moral values and the progress of society.......it encourages tolerance and harmony with representatives of other religions and faiths” (Karamatilloevich, Abduvaliyevich, and Kudratullayevich 2020), religious organisations were either formed afresh or reoriented (in case of already existing organizations) in Kashmir to propagate a particular interpretation of religious commandments to suit separatist appetite. Though the pre 1947 organizations like jammat-i-islami were formed with reformist intentions of the society which in their view, had gone bankrupt, it gradually turned anti India and pro freedom owing to various reasons. It was however another organisation namely Ahli Hadith which became least tolerant to the institution of sufism than Jammat (Sikand 2002). The concepts of Tahammul [Persian - Tajik - tahammul an important condition of "حمولة" Arabic means “tolerance” derived from the verb mysticism{ibid} and moderation i.e avoiding from taking extreme positions (Ibrahim 2018) were so ignored as if these are teachings alien to islam. A time period of 3-4 decades of institutionalized indoctrination was sufficient for deviant norms to get reproduced and ingrained into very nature of social life. During the course of participant observation, the extent of socialisation of extremist thought was manifest in the slogans of children below 5 years of age. The children while playing, cry almost instinctively “We want freedom” the meaning of which they hardly know. When something is heard repeatedly, it gets fed into the subconscious and directs overt behaviour without letting the actor know why he behaved the way he did. All these processes manifested in the decay, if not death, of the institution of Sufism. The rise of pseudo-Sufis (Aboki 2019) who under the guise of Sufism practised many practices in clear contravention of Islamic teachings, has also to be blamed for the decline and mistrust placed on this institution.

The decline of Sufism on account of rise of orthodox thought was put by Iqbal Ahmad thus:

“The classical Persian Islamic culture which was favourable to local Sufism was overshadowed by more orthodox institutions of Saudi Arabia. Moderates could not stand before orthodox scholars, who planted and promoted the political and legal aspects of the muslim doctrine......emphasized the political and jihadi concepts of Islamic sharia and wrote less on its spiritual and social aspects”(Iqbal Ahmad, n.d.).
Though there are various sources of extremism (Coleman and Bartoli 2003), the main sources in Kashmir have been:

(a) Construction of extremist Thought: The conflict between India and Pakistan over Kashmir, is the basic cause of growth of extremism in Kashmir, though not cause of its origin in the first instance. To fulfil pro freedom political agendas, militant ideology was glorified in the context of religion and in the process a more human face of Islam viz, Sufism got sacrificed. In this context what stands true for Pakistan, stands true for Kashmir- “The focus is more on growing a jihadist attitude than offering truly spiritual alignment” (Karamat, Muzaffar, and Shah 2019).

Since tolerant teachings of Sufism were an impediment in the realization of political goals, Sufis became soft targets in the preachings of orthodox advocates of religion.

(b) Grown nature of extremism: Increase in militant thought and activity, attracted counter measures by government forces, which manifested many times in violent forms. Killings, enforced disappearances, torcher and social panic followed dialectically. This also served the cause of religious extremism, which was further capitalized upon by the constructionist forces to justify their propaganda.

Both the above two sources cumulatively gave extremism a pathological expression, shaping the society for times to come.

Values of Sufism vs Values of Extremism.

Values are the desired state of affairs in society, internalised by people and sought to be gratified usually, though not necessarily, through sanctioned means. Sufism attaches prime priority to the values of love, cooperation, tolerance, peaceful coexistence etc. Sufis in Kashmir have lived their lives practising and propagating these values, which led to the inter-religious cooperation and peaceful coexistence for centuries. On the other hand extremism has something contradictory to offer.

Though Religious Extremism as a concept is subject to etymological disaggrement, for the purpose of this study, it is defined as involving “intolerant behavior towards other religions. When someone possessing a certain faith carries a hostile attitude towards the people following other faiths and deliberately causes harm to them that state of aggressive attitude is known as religious extremism”(Huda 2017). Thus intolerance, hostility, aggressiveness and harm are identification marks of Extremism. There is, therefore a clear dichotomy between the values characterising these two phenomena of Sufism and extremism, one being the antidote of the other. It therefore follows deductively that deinstitutionalisation of extremist values can be achieves through re-institutionalisation of values of Sufism.

Implications of Wahdatul Wujud:

The doctrine of Wahdatul Wujud originally propounded by Ibn i Arabi is itself a big antidote to any form of extremist and radical tendency dormant or manifest in any religious form in the world.
Central to the theory of wahdatul Wujud or “Oneness of Being” is the idea that the ultimate reality of everything in the whole of existence is Divine. That is to say, all things in the entire universe is one in as much as it reflects God’s oneness; God’s creatures are merely reflections of his wujud (Being)(Akbar 2016). Reproduction of this central idea of divinity, in every creature, leaves little scope for constructed identities of social groups based on religion, to direct religiously motivated actions including extremism and radicalism. It brings every human on the same plane of sacredness, irrespective of his religious identity. Thus human life, as implied by this doctrine, is in itself sacred, valuable and should be protected and preserved in its own right.

Sufis in Kashmir call the concept of Wahdatul Wujud as “Hama Oust”. While interpreting “Hama Oust” Rajab Hamid, one of the eminent Sufis of Kashmir, said, “‘hama oust’ means we all are him”, thereby defying the notion of independent existence of creatures from the creator and stressing the unity of human race in their essence and sharing of the divine quality. This in other words is the end of duality of existence, though there remains duality in terms of worshiping and being worshiped. Emanating from this doctrine of unity of existence, is a sense of commonality running through all beings-created or one eternal being. Once this Principle is materialised in the social world and allowed to reproduce in institutionalized manner, all dichotomies vanish and the concept of universal brotherhood comes to hold collective conscience leaving no scope for extremist or even radical social currents to characterise the social system. Viewed from the lens of Wahdatul Wujud, extremism is clearly erected on the notion of “dangerous diversity” rather than “functional unity”. Religious extremism stands on the principle of multiple religious identities, existing in mutually exclusive manner and contradictory in substance and direction. The doctrine of Wahdatul Wujud strikes at the concept of multitude of identities as it argues in favour of one unifying force penetrating all living as well as non living things. Therefore, the use of different names to persons or religions or even God is of little divine value to advocates of this doctrine. It is the deliberate attempt of extremists to exclude this doctrine from their preachings, to foster radical tendencies and create fissiparous attitude among the followers of religion in pursuit of personal goals at the cost of harmony and brotherhood. Interestingly Extremism need not be practiced by followers of one religion against another, it is also practiced intra-religiously among the sects of a particular religion (Suleman 2018).

How Sufism can recede Extremist tendency:

Scholars and think tanks have advocated Various approaches which can be used to contain extremist tendencies like elimination, isolation, expanding the middle strategy, covert negotiation chains, and direct overt engagement etc(Coleman and Bartoli 2003).However, most of these strategies fall in the domain of ‘security and law enforcement responses’(Nasser-Eddine et al. 2011) and the upliftment of institution of Sufism falls in the ‘broader strategies to enhance social cohesion and resilience that lessen the appeal of extremist ideologies that fuel terrorism’ (ibid).From the Sufi point of view “expanding the middle strategy” is also a solution to be promulgated at government and overall societal level. This strategy involves, “an active attempt to establish the conditions which grow the more moderate (and even hard-line) segments, thus attracting the more moderate members of extremist groups toward a position of
tolerance and away from a commitment to the destruction of the other” (Coleman and Bartoli 2003). However, the question still remains about realizing the conditions favourable for growth of the moderate middle section of society. Though, there are various strategies and measures that could be employed to curb the extremist hangover, however, all these measures don’t fall within the scope of this study. We shall be exclusively concerned with employing Sufi thought to curb extremism.

The most important step to counter extremism through Sufism is to reengage the youth with religion wherein they shall be introduced to the tolerant teachings and oneness of mankind advocated by Sufis. This shall constitute an effective tool to counter at least ‘ideological extremism’. This in effect involves re-socialization of youth oriented towards cultivating accommodative attitude as opposed to conflict, exclusion and repulsion propagated by extremism. In this process a more proactive role has to be played by preachers and religious leaders since these leaders enjoy Trust, credibility, and loyalty (Lemu 2016) of the community. Thus they can act as key actors to counter and manipulate the radical and extremist thought through reinterpretation of canonical texts (ibid). ‘Outcomes of several conferences, summits, symposia, dialogues, and reports aimed at policymakers have highlighted the nuanced roles of religious actors and shed light on ways in which they can be effective partners in collaborative approaches to preventing and countering violent extremism’ (Mandaville and Nozelle 2017).

Since religion is deployed as an instrumental tool to do extremism and religious language ie employed as a mobilising tool (Frazer and Jambers 2018), reinterpretation of religious commandments in moderate terms would counter mobilization through language. The preachers should especially be trained and motivated to build a tolerant society. This approach consisting of reinventing sufi thought, propagation of it and reproducing it at societal level can be called a ‘locally designed approach’ (Thomas 2009), which needs a strong political will power in order to be effective.

Secondly, there is urgent need to utilize the interfaith dialogue to check extremist tendencies especially among the mystics of various religions. This would also send a positive message to society since these dialogues should revolve around communality rather than differences. Though orthodox preachers are mostly hostile towards their counter parts from other religions being dogmatic in outlook, mystics across all religions are more tolerant, accommodative, cooperative, apolitical and anti-dogmatic.

Thirdly, government at both central level and UT level has to take a lead to reverse the extremist tendencies. Since there cannot be overnight solutions and treatment to this pathology, a strategy has to be framed with short-term, medium term and long term goals, taking lessons from Musharraf’s strategy to contain extremism in Pakistan. Establishment of National council for promotion of Sufism (Suleman 2018), Organising conferences and seminars to popularise Sufi thought, Sufi advisory council (ibid) etc were some pragmatic steps taken by Pakistan government to use Sufism as an antidote to extremism.

Conclusion:
Sufism in general and Kashmir in particular, is a more culturally accommodative institution which offers a great scope for existence of multiculturalism characterised by peaceful coexistence. This central tendency of Sufism, its teachings and values have the potential to
dilute the extremist propaganda and prevent its percolation into the younger generations. However an active effort needs to be directed towards implementation of strategies presented here, to come to terms with the evils of extremism. The efforts need to be taken both at government level as well as overall societal level, the lead to be taken by religious elites.

References


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