

## **PERSIAN PRESENCE IN KASHMIR BEFORE THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE MUSLIM SULTANATE**

A profuse literature has been written on Kashmir's contacts with Iran and the consequential influence of Iranian culture on Kashmir. But so far only a part of this fascinating story has been unfolded: the scholars have almost exclusively focused on medieval period, as if the history of Kashmir's contacts with Iran starts only with the arrival of the famous Muslim da'i (missionary), Sayyid Sharafal-Din Bulbul Shah around 1315. What is, therefore, little known is that Kashmir had very intimate relations with Iran since the hoary past. And it is this big gap which I intend to fill with the help of whatever little crumbs of information we have on the subject.

Outside of Africa, the presence of the Anatomically Modern Man is established around 1000,000 years ago in Palestine; but within South Asia there is good fossil evidence for him no earlier than 31,000 years ago in Sri Lanka. One can therefore assume that the modern human arrived in India including Kashmir through Iran. The earliest evidence of Modern Man in Kashmir does not go beyond 18000 years before present as is shown by the finds of blade and burin industry unearthed from Sombur.

A major shift in the social evolution in the old world occurred with what V. Gordon Childe called the Neolithic Revolution, marked by the arrival of agriculture and pastoralism. In Kashmir the Neolithic period began from 2800 B.C. The

Neolithic culture of Kashmir is marked by some important features namely. Dwelling pits, stone and bone tools, cultivation of wheat, barley and lentil, domestication of sheep, goat and cattle, painted floors, handmade and wheel made thrown pottery, artistic activity and burial customs.

Among other places dwelling pits have been found in Tape Asiab and Tape Sarab – both in Iran. Floor decorated with ochre have been found in Turkey and Iran. Bone tools in Iran, Central Asia, China and Russia. The cultivation of wheat and barley originated in Iran where from it travel to different parts including India sub-continent. The cultivation of these crops dates back to the 7600 B.C. in Ali Kosh (Iran). The domestication of sheep and goat began in northern Iran around 2500 B.C. The use of potters wheel was made in Sumer and Iran simultaneously a little before 3000 B.C. It is significant to mention that according to a renowned archaeologist, B.D. Sankalia the motif of a wild goat with long curved horns, which the Burzahom wheel made red ware pot carries, has greater resemblance to the one from Hissar (Iran) than to the other from Sindh. The channel spouted vessel found from Gutkral has a long history in western Asia and Iran. The copper hair pins discovered from Gutkral, originated in Aegean Anatolian region wherefrom they spread to north Persia and onwards to Indus including Kashmir. After Russia the largest number of painted burials have been reported from Iran. And as in Kashmir, we find in Khuzistan (Iran) dead been buried under the house floor, and the burials were both of primary and secondary types.

Naga kuh which is the earliest known belief of Kashmir transmitted to the west of Kashmir and the Valley from Iran. Budda Prakash, the author of Political and Social Movements in ancient Punjab, has traced deep rooted similarities of serpent symbology between pre-Aryan people living in the west of Kashmir and the people of Middle East – Akkadians and Persians

suggesting that they belonged to a common social and cultural stock.

After the Neolithic period, there starts a new phase in Kashmir marked by menhirs, cist graves, iron, rice and millet cultivation and rubble structures. The Megaliths have been found in lands bordering upon the Mediterranean and the Altante in the Caucasus and in Iran. In the India sub-continent peninsular India was a strong hold on the Megalithic culture. However, in the contest of Kashmir, the nearest most places where megaliths have been found are Baluchistan and Yasin and Chitra!: suggesting that both Iran and Caucasus played an important role in the diffusion of Megalithic culture in Kashmir and its neighbourahood.

The nearest parallels of the Cist graves of Kashmir are found in Swat and in many neighbouring Valleys collectively called Gandhara Grave Culture. Tracing the origin of Gandhara Grave culture, the celebrated archaeologist. Allchin and Allchin asserts "The obvious comparisons for these objects and for the graves themselves are not be in India or Pakistan, but in Iran and the Caucasus".

The immediate source of cooper bronze culture of Kashmir was Swat and Gilgit. As the first ever cooper-bronze culture evolved in Sumer in B.C. 3500 and it was well established culture in Persian around B.C. 2000. Iran was probably the big disseminator of Bronze Age in Indus an the border lands, though it had direct contacts with Mesopotamia making the matel common around B.C. 3000.

Though the earliest known occurrence of iron used as a human artifact are from West Asia (North Syria and Iraq), Iron Age begin not earlier than 1300 B.C. The evidence of the use of Iron in Iron is very crucial for the study of emergence of Iron in Indian sub-continent. Iron Age started in Iran in 1300. And in India Iron working began around 1000 B.C. and became common around 800 B.C. For Kashmir the evidence of iron working in Gandhara region is very crucial as it was the immediate source of

Iron culture in Kashmir. Iron objects have been found in Gandhara graves assigning to the opening of the first millennium B.C. It is around the same period that we find Iron in Kashmir.

From 2000 B.C. streams of Aryans penetrated in Iran and India including Kashmir. As both Indo-Aryan and Indo-Iranians belonged to common heritage which they imposed upon the conquered people, it is easy to understand many common features of their beliefs and rituals, in name as well as in essence.

In 516 B.C. Darius, the Achaemenian ruler of Iran, extended empire upto India by annexing Sind, North – West Frontier and the parts of Punjab. These territories continued to be a part of Iranian empire till Alexander's invasion in 326. We learn from the Greek sources that at the time of Iranian invasion. It is therefore quite probable that Kashmir too might have remained under the Achaemenians during their long rule of about two hundred years over Gandhara and a part of Punjab, paving the way for Iranian influences in Kashmir, which received further impetus on account of Mauryan occupation of Kashmir as their polity, architecture, script, construction of royal roads and methods of propagating dharma bear deep imprints of Iranian influences.

Around 180 B.C. Kashmir came under the Bactrian Greeks. In the context of Iranian influences the rule of the Bactrian Greeks is significant in many ways. Having been thoroughly assimilated by Bactrian culture, they brought with them Zoroastrianism, an Iranian language called Bactrian and maintenance and development of irrigation – a thing cultivated by Zoroastrianism.

In 75 B.C. Kashmir came under the control of Sakas and then around 25 B.C. under the Parthians. The Saka was the name of a tribe, belonging to Andronovo culture, an ancient Iranian civilization. Besides belonging to the Iranian race, they spoke a language which was related to the North Iranian group which includes Sogdian and Pahlavika (Parthian Pahlavi). That they spoke an Iranian language comes through from the terms that

appear in their inscriptions such as the name of their country 'Sakastan'. The suffix proclaims the Sakas affinity to the Iranians. Their fondness for the Iranian word Kshetarapa or Kshaharata (ruler) further underlines the affinity. Harmatta has historically tried to reconstruct their dialects from words and names found in their inscriptions in India, and he points to close links with the Khotanese Saka, which too was an Iranian language.

Around A.D. 20, an ethnic group belonging to the Parthian of Iran founded Indo-Parthian empire on the borders of Kashmir, spreading over a vast including Kandhar, Seistan, Sindh, Gandhara and the Kabul Valley. That Kashmir formed a part of Parthian empire is evidenced by the presence of Parthian coins in Kashmir, Parthian place names and enormous impact of Parthian civilization on Kashmir. So far the coins of these Parthian rulers have been found in Kashmir. They are gondaphares, Abdagases and Zeionenes. Besides there are at many places names which are related to either the Parthian rulers of Parthian cities or Parthian religion. For example, Gund (after gondaphares, Gous (after Abdagases), Zewan (after Zeionenes), Dur (after the famous Parthian city Dura-Europos). Ash Muqam, Ash Pur, Ash Much (after the pre-eminent Zoroastrian goddess Asi), Hari Parbat, Harwan, Harwath (after the sacred Zoroastrian mountain Hara) etc. However, the most revealing information of the profound impact of Parthian civilization is presented by the Harwan ruins, particularly by the motifs stamped on their tiles. The over all plan of Harwan is informed by Parthian influence. The great Parthian fire temple at Surkh Kotal, is like Harwan a terraced structure with a courtyard surrounding the main temple and is located upon the highest level Both Surkh Kotal and Harwan originally had a stairway leading through the centre of each Terrace. The Harwan tiles are stamped with some well known Parthian motifs namely 'Parthian short' and Parthian dress – leggings (trousers) and long skirts, diaphanous garments and prominent ear rigs. The motifs like intertwined serpents and two winged lions locked in a fierce

combat found in Lidder and Hoiner titles have parallels in Parthian sites in Iran.

That Zoroastrianism spread in Kashmir owing to the constant contacts with Iran is substantiated by the place names, beliefs and rituals which continue down to our times. Of the place names mention may be made of Mitar gom (the habitation of Mitar - the Iranian divine being), Mir (Mihr) aur and Akhur (Ahura). Anich Dur (Anahita Durra), Hari Parbat or Harwan (after Ham) etc. Other significant examples of Zoroastrian presence in Kashmir are belief in water deities, the popular festival frov after the Avestan frov and the ritual of roohan posh. Buddhism was also influenced by Zoroastrianism. The concept of Buddha Mitreya, the most famous of the Bodhisattvas who has messianic features is reminiscent of Soshyant, the Zoroastrian saviour.

Sun worship was introduced in Kashmir by a group of Magians who accompanied the Saka invaders and were priests.

Kushan's who integrated Kashmir with their vast empire extending from Central Asia to Mathura and ruled over the Valley for more than three hundred years were greatly influenced by Iranian culture. At the time they entered Kashmir their language was an Iranian one called Bactrian by modern historians. They used the Iranian title Shaonanao Shao (Sassanian) Shahan Shah alongside Prakrit/Sanskrit Maharaja rajatiraja and Greek Basileus Basileon. What is more their coins carry Zoroastrian symbols such as increase bumer and fire alter namely Miro, Mania, Atsho, Manabago, Moo, Mithra and Anahita.

Towards the late 4<sup>th</sup> century Kushans were replaced by Central Asian nomadic tribe known as Kidarites. As they had close alliance with the Sassanians besides having occupied Khushano - Sessanian territories the Kidarites were greatly exposed to Persian influences. This is well documented by their coinage and sculpture which bear their strong commitment to Zoroastrianism.

From the second half of the sixth century AD. there was revival of Saivism and Vishuism in Kashmir. However the strong traditional links which Kashmir had with Gandhara and Kabul and through these regions with Iranian and Central Asian territories remained intact. The best example, in the absence of written evidence, is provided by art and architecture of Ancient Kashmir. For example the foreign styles which played a major role in the development of Kashmiri stone architecture filtered through West Asia. Not only this but Kashmir owes to Iran for a very important architectural feature namely formation of intersecting cross members best known as "lantern" ceiling, derived from wooden models introduced by the Parthians in the North-West. Similarly writing about the origin of the variety of motifs carved on the pilasters of Avantiswamin temple built by Avantivarman (855-883 AD), Robert E. Fisher says "nearly all the pilasters are decorated with a rich variety of motifs, some native of India, other reflecting West Asian tastes, as found upon Sassaman silver: roundels that enclose lotuses, geese, mythical creatures, paired humans, birds and flowers as well as numerous geometric patterns....."

As per the extant evidence, Muslims and with them Islam started penetrating in Kashmir from 8<sup>th</sup> century, we know that a fugitive Arab commander and his crops received a territorial assignment from the Kashmiri raja. As the territory was situated on the borders of Kashmir, it would have served as a caul de sack for the muslim adventurers and fortune seekers of the neighbouring territories.

In the 9<sup>th</sup> century AD. Kashmir was thronged by the scholars belonging to different religions and the Kashmiri Hindus and the Buddhists mingled with them. What is more significant that we find the Muslim divines visiting Kashmir. At least we come to know of two great Muslim personalities of the time making a sojourn of Kashmir. They are Mansur al Hallaj, the great mystic of Islam and Abu Sa'id Ghanim bin Qasim. The latter has also left an account which besides showing that Kashmir was open

to all religions in the 9<sup>th</sup> century makes a mention of the debates held on different religions, each of which was perhaps making a powerful case for itself. The religious texts over which the debates were held at that time were Thura (Torah), the Injil (Gospels) and the Zabur (Psalms). Since this information is contained in the account of a Muslim scholar who visited Kashmir, he perhaps recorded it on purpose: to attract the Muslim missionaries to take benefit of the free and frank environment of religious discourses in Kashmir. Hallaj, in-fact, was attracted by this scenario of Kashmir.

The Muslim immigrations into Kashmir and the contact of Kashmiris with the Muslims of the neighbouring world was disrupted for a brief period towards the beginning of the eleventh century, when the Turkish armies were swooping down on the bordering territories of Kashmir. For fear of mohammad Ghaznavi's invasions, who made two abortive bids to conquer Kashmir, the rajas of Kashmir fastened their doors and windows and did not allow anyone to enter the Valley. Writing about this policy of Kashmiri rulers al-Biliini says, "In former times they used to allow one or two foreigners to enter their country, particularly the jews, but at present they do not allow even a Hindu whom they did not know personally to enter, much less other people".

However, this policy of sealing the borders was a temporary affair. When the permanent presence of the Muslim power on the borders of Kashmir became a ground reality, with the successive Muslim conquest of Hindu Sahi kingdom (whom territories extended from modern Afghanistan up to Punjab) and the petty principalities bordering the northern frontier of Kashmir, the Hindu rajas found no other alternative but to give concessions to pragmatism. With powerful Muslim kingdoms on its borders, any hostile policy against the Muslims was incongruous with the changing circumstances and therefore, counter-productive. The Kashmiri rajas, therefore, revived their old policy – the policy of



friendliness towards the Muslims. And pursuant to the new policy, they threw the borders of Kashmir open to adventurous and fortune-seeking Muslims. It is, therefore, not surprising that towards the end of the eleventh century we find an unprecedented increase in the influx of Muslims in Kashmir and consequently a sizable Muslim population in the Valley. More interesting, however, is that we see the Muslims holding high positions in the state apparatus and that too in a sensitive wing of the government, namely military. To top it all, their number was incredible. Thus there is profuse evidence of Muslim captains being in the army of Ananta (1028-1063 AD), Harsa (1089-1101 AD), Biksacara (1120-21 AD) and Jayasimha (1128-1149 AD) and that too in a large number. Kalhara talks of "Turuska captains of hundreds" in the army of Harsa. The number further increased with the passage of time when civil wars became rampant in Kashmir and the Kashmiri rulers and the rival claimants to the throne became more and more dependent upon the support of the Muslims. That is why we find the Muslims forming an indispensable element of the army of the Hindu rajas of Kashmir; and this is why the rulers as well as the rival factions constantly sought and received the support of the neighbouring Muslim rulers.

The employment of 'hundreds of Muslim captains' in the armies of the Kashmiri kings at the turn of the eleventh century alludes to the presence of a sizable Muslim population in Kashmir more than two hundred years before the establishment of the Muslim Sultanate. It is quite natural to presume that these Muslim captains would have either brought their families along with them or married local girls, both pointing to the presence of a larger Muslim population in Kashmir than is adumbrated in Kalhana's *Rajatarangini*. As these Muslims belonged to a different religion and culture, it is tempting to infer that these settlers would have brought with them different professionals to cater to their daily needs.

While these early Muslim settlers may have settled down at various places in the Valley, they, however, seem to have taken up abode at a particular place in Srinagar, which came to be called as Mlecch Mar (the place of Mlecchas) – the name obviously given to this habitation by the local population. Since this place was called Mlecch Mar for many centuries before the establishment of the Muslim Sultanate, it became its permanent place name although the Muslims ruled Kashmir for about five hundred years.

Apart from the fact that there were permanent Muslim settlements in Kashmir, there was also continuous movement of people between Kashmir and the Muslim – ruled neighbouring countries, particularly for trade purposes. It is important to mention that Central Asian horses were in considerable demand in Kashmir and this trade was mainly in the hands of Central Asian Muslims whom we find frequently visiting Kashmir. Similarly, Kashmiri merchants greatly benefited by trading in Central Asia and other neighbouring countries.

Given the fact that the Muslims who settled in Kashmir and with whom Kashmiris came into contact (both inside and outside the Valley) belonged to the upper echelons of an advanced society, the impact of Islam on Kashmiri Hindus and Buddhists, especially on the ruling elite and trading class, was a natural corollary. There is clear evidence that in the process of hob-nobbing with the neighbouring Muslim rulers some nobles were greatly assimilated into Islam. True, they had political motives in identifying themselves with the muslim culture. But more than that it was Islam's prestige as a superior culture and the prestige of a successful man's religions which drew them to it. It is, therefore, not surprising to find the fugitive nobles of Lavanya tribe eating "cow's meat in the lands of the mlecchas" where they had fled to escape from the wrath of Harsa (1089-1111). And it is also not difficult to understand Harsa remodeling the court etiquettes after the luxurious Iranian courts.

Ksemandra, the famous polymath of 11<sup>th</sup> century Kashmir makes a casual but intriguing mention of the presence of Muslim singers (mleccha gayanah) in Kashmir. It is intriguing because the writer refers to the Muslim singers in the context of a courtesan who refuses to accept fee from her clients 'for fear of who wandered the streets'. These singers were in all probability the manaqib Khawans or fada'il Khawans, who besides signing in praise of Allah extolled the virtues of 'Ali (in case of being Shi'is) and the other companions of the Prophet (in case of being Sunnis) in the streets and bazaars of Iran and Central Asia as a propaganda technique to spread their belief and influence. The manaqib Khawans, it may be noted, existed in 'Iraq since the Buyid period (932-1055 AD). These mleccha singers of the Sanskrit scholar had gained so much prestige and influence because of their exemplary piety that the courtesans (who otherwise feely indulged in prostitution under the very nose of local religious and state authorities) refused to entertain the clients at their sight.

The use of Sanskritized Persian technical terms like divara, (Pr. Dabir), ganja (Pr. Ganj) and ganjavara, (Pr. Gangwar) by Kalhana (D. 1148-49) to whom everything non-Brahmanic was abominable, unmistakably points to profound Islamic influence upon Kashmir owing to the considerable Muslim presence and the intimate relations between Kashmir and the neighbouring Muslim-ruled lands.

That by the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century Muslims formed an important section of the Kashmir Population and that Islamic culture had made great strides is further borne out by a recently discovered copy of the Qur'an written by one Fatha Allah Kashmiri in 1237 AD. It is written in such a fine style and form that according to Mohammad Yousuf Teng, "it would have taken hundreds of years to the Kashmiri Muslims to attain such a proficiency in Arabic script. "What is more significant about this copy of the Qur'an is that it also contains a Persian translation. The Qur'an with Persian translation, interalia, unmistakably proves

the increasing presence of Muslim preachers and their activities in the Valley many centuries before the establishment of the Muslim Sultanate.

Significantly enough, of a very few facts which Marco Polo chose worth recording about Kashmir, is the existence of a section of Muslims in Kashmir who worked as butchers for Kashmiri non-Muslims:

The people of the province [Kashmir] do not kill animals, nor spill blood, so if they want to eat meat they get the [Muslims] who dwell among them to play the butcher.

The streaming of Muslims into Kashmir continued unabated till the Muslim Sultanate was finally established in 1339. One among the lately arrived immigrants was Shah Mir, the future founder of the Muslim Sultanate in Kashmir. Coming from the royal family of Swat, he and his tribe entered Kashmir around 1313 and was bestowed with a land grant and an important position in the administration by the then ruler, Suhadeva (1301-1320).

Since the hindu rulers greatly depended upon the support of the Muslim commanders and the neighbouring Muslim rulers, Islam did not encounter of hostile political climate in Kashmir. This naturally encouraged the Muslim preachers, (who were watching intently for a favourable land to extend the frontiers of Islam) to enter the beautiful vale of Kashmir. As the Valley was quite favourably disposed towards Muslims especially Horn the mid eleventh century, it is little wonder, then, to find mention of Muslim saints in the Valley around the same time. However, for want of any contemporary record that would cuddle the Muslim preachers or consider the masses any force to reckon with, only the name of a Suhrawardi saint, Sayyid Sharaf al-Din commonly known as Bulbul Shah, has survived to us. He came to Kashmir during the reign of Suhadeva. His name was rescued from falling into oblivion by one of his most extraordinary achievements. He was instrumental in converting the reigning Buddhist ruler of

Kashmir, Rinchana ( 1321-1323) to Islam. And in order to pay tribute to his memory rinchans (now Sadar al-Din) constructed a Khanaqah after his name and endowed it with aren't-steen land grant. The Khanaqah, which is the first known Khanaqah of Kashmir, because so famous that the muhalla, where it was built came to be known as Bulbul Langar. Besides the Khanaqah, Sultan Sadar al-Din also constructed a Jami' mosque in his newly built capital, Rinchanpura (Srinagar).

Considering that Sayyid Sharaf ai-Din came all the way from Turkistan trekking through the difficult and inhospitable mountainous terrain to propagate Islam in an alien and Non-Muslim land also bearing in mind that he belonged to the institutional phase of Sufism characterized by pir-murid relationship, it can be safely inferred tht the Suhrawardi saint would have been accompanied by a big group of (disciples) and (ancillary staff) as was commonplace with every religious mission of the time.