Chapter 3

Sheikh-ul-Alam: Self and Society

One of the most influential personalities that the Kashmiri society produced towards the end of the 14th century was Sheikh Nuruddin, the famous saint-poet, also known as Nund Rishi and popularly called Sheikh-ul-Alam. He was born in village Kaimoh, 60 kms from Srinagar (Rafiqui, 2009). The ancestors of Sheikh-ul-Alam were actually Rajputs from Kishtwar (a district in the Jammu region) but because of the local feuds and inter-community wars, the family had to leave the place. The Sheikh’s great-grandfather, Ogra Teg took refuge in Kashmir. Ogra settled down in Tilsara, a village in district Budgam, 10 kms from Srinagar and took refuge under a feudal lord, Khumni Wanoo. He gradually, with hard work, rose to the position of a commander
and acquired an estate in a village Rupawan (Tak, 1996). Ogra Teg’s grandson was Salat Sanz, but he was not interested in working under a feudal system. So, in search of peace, he left the place and encountered Yasman Rishi, a sufi saint. He accepted Islam at his hands and was named Sheikh Salaruddin. After embracing Islam, he met Sadra, who also had the same origins and Yasman Rishi got the two married. The couple stayed at Kaimoh and Salar worked as a watchman in a nearby village. A story goes that one night, he overheard a *sadhu* (saint) telling his wife about a bouquet of roses that would arise from the soils of Khajigipora, an adjacent village and any lucky woman to smell the fragrance of it would give birth to a great saint of the universe. Salar went home, told his wife and they followed the same (Gauhar, 2009). After sometime, Sheikh-ul-Alam was born to her. There is another famous legend surrounding the birth of the Sheikh. It is said that when he was born, he would not take milk from his mother. Some days after, Lal Ded, the Shaiva saint-poet spoke to the child and immediately after it, he took milk (Khan, 1994).

From the very childhood, the Sheikh was a blessed and a unique child. It is said that his mother took him to a village *maktab* (elementary religious school) once and he refused to recite the second letter of the Arabic language i.e. ‘bey’ saying that ‘aliph’ was the only letter that implied Allah and ‘bey’ would only create duality (Parimoo, 2007). The mother was disappointed and the second time, she took him to a weaving centre in order to acquaint him with the skill. The Sheikh, here also, refused to work and instead found a symbolic meaning in the movement of the shuttle used for weaving. He remarked:

*ota chhu dapaan diuu kann daari*

*muk chhu dapaan mo bar patsh*
khraav chhai dapaan tsaamu qabre

maali maaji dopum honarei gatsh

The reed enjoins to listen carefully

The shuttle warns not to rely on the world

Shrivel up in the grave, does the paddle say

My parents have sent me to learn the craft

(Parimoo, 2007, p. 34)

He further said:

adam vop dovun metse

metsi handit kaar gandith keth

sareyn aamats vopdaaven metsey

ranaan metsven baanan keth

zuv tsali nirith mor motsi metse

metsiy metsgatshi meelith keth

Man was made out of earth

And his frame was cast in clay

Out of the earth grow all the bounties

In earthen ware do we cook food

Body is consigned to earth, when life goes out

And earth gets mixed with earth for good

(Parimoo, 2007, p. 36)

The master tried to teach him, but the Sheikh didn’t agree with the explanations of the weaver (master) and spoke of the hidden meanings. After observing the Sheikh’s
attitude, the master refused to teach him saying he wasn’t fit for the worldly professions and the mother was again, disappointed. Gauhar (2009), however, opines that in his youth, the Sheikh used to cultivate a big landed estate of Khai village and with sincerity, hard work and labour, he was able to raise his family. After improving his economic condition, he got married to a girl named, Zai. From Zai, the Sheikh had three children—two sons and a daughter, however, none of them survived (Gauhar, 2009)

Sheikh-ul-Alam was a mystic of higher rank. Like many other mystics, he also used poetry to communicate his thoughts. His poems are also called *shruks* in Kashmiri. The Sheikh received no formal education and also didn’t leave behind any written legacy. However, all his teachings have been carried down the generations through an orally transmitted tradition. In this way, he carried forward the legacy of Lal Ded by using Kashmiri language as the medium of expression. Fayaz (2011, p. 3) writes in this regard:

> Carrying down the legacy of Lal Ded by using Kashmiri language as a medium of expression, Sheikh Nuruddin not only offered intellectual foundation to his socio-cultural movement, but attempted to provide respectable space for unlettered folk in a new religio-cultural environ… Sheikh Nuruddin through his poetic compositions attempted to make people aware that Islam stands exclusively for the good of humankind. Living amid environ of feudal glamour and social divide, Sheikh Nuruddin voiced the concerns of commoners and this sort of behaviour made him themost cherished leader of Kashmiri masses.

Sheikh-ul-Alam observed the socio-religious situations from a very young age. He possessed a very keen sense of observation and understood the socio-religious sensitivities. From the very childhood, however, he distanced himself from the social linkage. This wasn’t guided by any external dictates, but was motivated by his desire
to seek the truth (Tak, 1996). He had a dislike for the worldly glamour and in order to attain peace of mind and Supreme bliss, he sought refuge in a cave at Kaimoh. He says:

\[
\begin{align*}
&andvan ruzith kand kopavum \\
&a val me na banovum gophei \\
&unda mal kadith darshan dyovum \\
&qabri hunz lahad havum gophei \\
&konga ta kofur tan navum \\
&ashvanich prakath saavum gophei
\end{align*}
\]

Living in backwoods I made my body tremble in fear
First I made a cave
After removing inner impurities, I made Him reveal Himself
I turned the cave into my grave
With saffron and camphor I purified my body
My desire for good things I put to sleep in cave

(Kak, 2013, p. 77)

At the age of twenty, he is believed to have expressed his desire to live alone, in total privacy. For the Sheikh, involvement in family was a useless exercise. He had, therefore, decided to keep away from the domestic engagements. His mother, along with her daughter-in-law (Sheikh’s wife) tried to motivate him many times but he refused to return. “She (the mother) left no stone unturned to persuade him to come back home… but the entreaties and appeals of the mother cut no ice with him. Like
granite, he stood firm on the path he had chosen…” (Parimoo, 2007, p. 48). Reacting to his mother’s perseverance on his not taking care of himself, he said:

\[
\text{maji boh kyah kara annas} \\
\text{me beni huunis brahmano ditto} \\
\text{bo par layith hekana panas} \\
\text{me gara trov ta zion kas kito}
\]

What shall I do with the food, my mother?

Offer it to a dog or Brahman whose hunger it can satisfy

I have crushed ego by renouncing the world

Having renounced home why should I care to live

(Parimoo, 2007, p. 51)

After taking refuge in the cave, he took to full methods of worship. Parimoo (2007, p. 47) writes in this regard:

With unfaltering faith in one God, as the giver of everything and redeemer of mankind, the Sheikh finally left his hearth and home for good… He started his penance in a cave, at Kaimoh. Seclusion, night vigils and prayers were among the basic constituents of penance.

The Sheikh would pray all time in seclusion:

Having thus secluded himself in the cave in the manner of the Rishis, the Sheikh 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.

(Khan, 1994, p. 101)
According to him, the greatest enemy on the path of God-realization was one’s uncontrollable mind. He referred to it as a horse that needed to be taken control of in many of his poems. He continuously prepared himself for the ordeal of spiritual experiences. It was a journey that demanded many stages to be crossed and Sheikh-ul-Alam started with seclusion. For him, the entire world was nothing but an illusion. So, he would continuously talk about it as being futile. He says:

\[
\textit{majj bo kyah mangay chasnis kreyas} \\
\textit{yiy haras khvash aav tiy me voto} \\
\textit{nahqa bram borum yath samsaras} \\
\textit{me gara trov ta zion kas kito}
\]

O mother, of what avail are thy deeds to me?  
I receive whatever God is pleased to give  
Wrongly did the illusion attract me to the world  
Having renounced home, for whom should I live?

(Parimoo, 2007, p. 52)

Through his poems, he clearly differentiated between the illusion of worldly life and the truth of God realisation. He always had a firm belief that whatever God did was for our own good and that the worldly desires, lust, anger and all other temptations were the worst enemies that had to be put under control. According to him, life without a spiritual goal wasn’t worth living. He believed that the creator and the creation were actually one in essence but it was a difficult task to recognize the same (Kak, 2013). Since all the living beings get ensnared in the world of attractions and it becomes difficult to swim across to the shore of immortality and bliss. Therefore, in order to arrive at this ultimate realization, a persistent effort was needed. This began
with a mind control and subjugation of the organs of sense which later on led to the disappearance of duality and the Self and self got recognized as one. An individual, therefore, reached the ultimate state of being. He says:

*zeth peth ta basta daji*

*militth boh ta molaji chhei*

*sva yemi gand tas olud tsaji*

*akharatas kats tas phratsi chhei*

*dil yemi gond ta prakash tsaji*

*tas dargah vath mokaji chhei*

After birth, the body joined with I becomes precious

He who controls the body, his impurities are removed

In the end, it becomes auspicious

He who controls the mind, purifies his nature

For him, the door to the inner sanctuary is open

(Kak, 2013, p. 119)

Like any other mystic, he too suffered moments of weakness, vacillation and despondency. Many of his verses talk about his struggle of being pulled in different directions and he, being unable to focus the attention or senses (Parimoo, 2007). While he gets drawn on the one side to the spiritual domain, on the other end, the worldly life draws him to its course. He expresses this despair saying:

*navi vasakh kin vokhlai pakakh*

*dutsyut karne lasakh mo*

*yudwai aki watti mahkam rozakh*
duur panthanann losakh mo

yam ne dunyihchi zanjeer kasakh

taam zuu sokh aasakh mo

To sail by boat or to walk on foot?

If you are in a fix, how can you arrive?

Walk steadily on the straight path

And you won’t tire on endless paths

If the earthly chains you cannot break

How can you my soul have inner peace?

(Amin, 2008, p. 28)

The worldly existence would bother him every now and then and he would look for a higher meaning, a higher Self. For him, the higher Self was like fragrant sandalwood, a tree that had the capacity to heal and the lower self or ego was like the head and unyielding wood, good for nothing. He found this world as nothing but evil and lamented his having taken birth here saying:

ayaas sodah karith dyovhaaras

watti logus ath bazaars kyeth

wuchte kateth tsolum pokhte karas

kyah zyunum samsaras zyeth

The deal struck, here I came to act

But was lost into the thick of the fair

How I was stumped, brainy though I was
What a loss I have suffered taking my birth here

(Amin, 2008, p. 62)

The Sheikh had an unflinching faith in the oneness of God. He saw Him as the giver and redeemer of all. For him, God was one and embedded in all things. There was a continuous unity that pervaded everywhere and through his verses, the Sheikh explained the same. He says:

\[
\begin{align*}
kuner hai bozakh kuni no rozakh \\
emI kuneran kotah dyut jalaaw \\
aql te fikir tor kot sozakh \\
keem maali cheth hyok su dariyaav
\end{align*}
\]

Were you to grasp His Oneness, where would you be?

The splendour of His Oneness is welling up everywhere

Your reason and reflection won’t help you in this—

Is there one, dear, who can drink up that ocean?

(Amin, 2008, p. 4)

From the above poem, it can be inferred that there is a unity that surrounds everything and every being. It is a glorified unity that requires a lot of efforts to make itself comprehensive and the biggest obstacle to this realization is one’s ego or the lower self. Ego was to Sheikh-ul-Alam a petty thing that needed to be controlled and its desires to be channelized properly. Sheikh-ul-Alam believed that the carnal desires, the material tendencies of the lower self led an individual on to the path of deceit and corruption (Gauhar, 2009). In the following poem, he compares the self to a senseless elephant which crushing him underneath, breaks away all its chains by madness and then, ruins everything. He knew the power of worldly splendour and experienced
himself being overpowered by the lower self. The continuous desire for material things pulled him away from his spiritual aspirations and he knew that it was very difficult to escape the clutches of ego. He says:

\[
\textit{nafsai myoun chhu mada hostui} \\
\textit{amiy hasiti dyutnas tal} \\
\textit{krei karnovnas rostui} \\
\textit{rotnas kya chhum chal} \\
\textit{saasas manz akha lostu} \\
\textit{nat saeri hetin tal}
\]

My ego is a mad elephant
The elephant has crushed me underneath
Emptying me of good deeds
Caught am I-powerless
Only one in a thousand escapes
All others are trampled

(Kak, 2013, p. 69)

The one who controls his inner self (nafs) is the only person to attain divine grace. Sheikh-ul-Alam compares his self to a dog which is always after a person (Parimoo, 2007). He talks about it as the hard side of the apricot tree which in spite of being nursed well never blooms. He finds the self always difficult to satisfy or take control of. It is this self only that derails and loots away the achievements/efforts put in by the prayers. He says:

\[
\textit{nafs myane tservi aggo}
\]
detme daggo pholham n zahn

manden muhith tsolham thago

hapeti sago tsolham ne zahn

O my self, the gnarl of apricot wood!
Even through my nursing you never bloomed
You duped me, swindler, in broad day light!
O you cur! You’ve never let me be.

(Amin, 2008, p. 93)

He labels the self as a murderer too, something that demanded of him what he wasn’t meant for. He wants to take control of it and to redeem himself. The uncontrolled desires/self takes him away from one corner to another. He, therefore, connects self to Satan, who causes impediments in the path one takes to the Supreme (Parimoo, 2007). He says:

nafsi karim adal te wadal

nafs myoun shetaan badal aaw

nafsi yirim kreyi hind kadal

nafs myoun dozkhas badal aaw

My ego has caused me confusion
My ego has taken the place of devil
I wish my ego accepted the path of good deeds
My ego has taken the place of hell

(Kak, 2013, p. 70)
In the following verse, Sheikh-ul-Alam relates the self to a straw in the eye, causing persistent distraction, pain and a lot of trouble. This self finds delight in the misery of human soul and it is this ego which encourages one towards all evil and wrong doings. He says:

\begin{align*}
  \text{nafs patte lagun chui aech manz saran} \\
  \text{gashich womedd bari zini zahn} \\
  \text{nafs patte lagun chui aare maenz yirun} \\
  \text{halis te mendnis kari wah wah} \\
  \text{Chasing the self is straw in the eye} \\
  \text{Don’t ever expect a sight thereon} \\
  \text{Chasing the self is swaying in the water} \\
  \text{Will rejoice in your going astray}
\end{align*}

There is a constant reiteration of the fact that in order to reach out to the Self, modesty has to be cultivated. There is a persistent address to the inner self by Sheikh-ul-Alam that gets expressed through his verses. Addressing the self, he says:

\begin{align*}
  \text{nafso harneni tsale chukh niwaan} \\
  \text{kyah sana karakh marneni garre} \\
  \text{wasunn chui metsital kath kath chukh chiwaan} \\
  \text{kath kitsh lazith wavegani larre} \\
  \text{patte bronh yani hisaab hevaan} \\
  \text{dapte jawaab dikh kemi butre} \\
  \text{O self! You are jumping like a dear} \\
  \text{What would you do when death comes?}
\end{align*}
You have to go under the earth, why are you so happy?

What for have you constructed huge buildings?

You have to account for your past and present deeds?

With what face will you answer?

In order to keep the material desires in control, he reflected on the life and its changing stages. He used various metaphors to illustrate the progression of life. In a poem, he compares the progression from youth to old age with the passing of seasons from spring to winter (Parimoo, 2007). The spring season brings on with it beauty and bloom but it then grows into winter. He says:

\[
prenis badnas malyun daag goum
\]

\[
zag goum nirith baga andrerei
\]

\[
harni garimiy poh ta mag goum
\]

\[
phal goum nirith hara bandarei
\]

\[
zazarani chhoka hani hani dah goum
\]

\[
gonah gaem tsaeri ta kahi ubrei
\]

\[
myuth ta modur kheth unda syah goum
\]

\[
nah goum panas rah kas karei
\]

Stained with impurity is my fair body

The bird has slipped out of the garden

The hot summer has turned into mid-winter

Drained of warmth is my body

Old age has wasted me slowly

Bad deeds have I piled up—how will I rise?
Eating the delicious and tasty has turned my insides black

I am lost—who can I ask for help?

(Kak, 2013, p. 71)

In youth or when one is in full bloom, one tends to forget the race of spring and summer towards autumn and then to winter and in youth only, one tends to forget about old age and remains engrossed in the desire for beautiful things. The verses of Sheikh-ul-Alam are packed with these instances. In another poem, he compares old age to the chill of mountain glacier and a turbulent storm as hitting the Wular, a famous lake in Kashmir. He calls his lower self a robber which he could have controlled or caught had he not indulged in his desire for the material things. He says:

\[
\text{sondari kamadivun chaav goum}
\]
\[
yavun yam goum poshanmotu
\]
\[
sangaruk shin ta woluruk vay goum
\]
\[
muhith thag goum akahotu
\]
\[
wulagi batas kana tat oh goum’
\]
\[
garibas doh goum variyas yotu
\]

Filled with desires was my fair body

Beguiled by beautiful things I spent my youth

My experience now is like that of

The chill of a mountain glacier and a turbulent storm in the wular

The robber has robbed me of all

The fragrant rice tastes like the unhusked grain and chaff
A day stretches into a year for my poor self

(Kak, 2013, p. 72)

In another of his verse, he compares his soul to a bird and his body to a cage. Upon death, the soul leaves the body which gets reduced to dust and mixes with the dust further. He says:

\begin{verbatim}
shoga tsali nirith panzer motsem
lot lot tulnam hahakaar
vodur tati vili posh zan hatem
bar khudaya paph nevar
\end{verbatim}

When the parrot escapes, the cage will remain
Gently will they lament for me
My body will wither away
Great God! Absolve me of sins

(Kak, 2013, p. 73)

For him, however, the reality of death was more complex than merely exiting the door of life (Gauhar, 2009). The actual destination lay in the domain of Supreme. So, in the verses of Sheikh-ul-Alam, we find that he talks about his wishes getting him involved in sinful deeds and there is a constant effort from his side to mend those for he finds that the real solace lies in worshipping God. He says:

\begin{verbatim}
nafasi logum narav krotshu
dama dama mongmam kotsh ho
sarahan bugi dih goun otshu
samsaras ayaas pantsh doh potshu
\end{verbatim}
gaam yira gav tir votsh ho
My ego is like a poker for shoveling out hot coal
Every moment it asks for more
My body is too weak to remember God
Remember God I must
As a transient guest I have come to the world
I have lost all.

(Kak, 2013, p. 74)

Sheikh-ul-Alam’s verses are also emblematic of the conflict that goes on between faith and doubt. The material desires and the worldly splendour does take hold of an individual and it is a pretty difficult task to let go off the glamour. It becomes evident from Sheikh-ul-Alam’s poetry that there was a deep desire burning in his heart for the spiritual attainment of things (Khan, 1994). He would often introspect and take note of his derailed self. There is a note of reprimand found in his verses. At one place, he says:

kyah kar kyah kar nani hani dih goum
pap gayam tsari ta kati vobra
myuth te modur khey khey veh pyom
daah goum panas te rah kas kara

Alas! What shall I do? My body has been pining away
Too heavy my sins; how may I be buoyant?
Sweet and dainty dishes have turned poisonous
I am consumed with fire; whom shall I blame?

(Parimoo, 2007, p. 69)
Sheikh-ul-Alam constantly expressed the despair that he was beset with through his poems. He knew his limitations as a human soul and also that it was very important to keep oneself immune and away from all sins. He says:

\[ \text{toba yod kara kh bavasara tarakh} \]
\[ \text{toba chhuy vuniken tarvun nav} \]
\[ \text{toba ros pano tati kaahi ubrakh} \]
\[ \text{yeti chhai turi ta bushun vav} \]

If you repent, you will cross the worldly river

Repentance is the ferry boat at this time

Hey self, without repentance how will you ascend there?

Here it is cold and no warmth

(Kak, 2013, p. 148)

Sheikh-ul-Alam had dedicated his whole life to the Almighty. He believed in cultivating a spiritual goal and then, working at it. For him, once the path was identified, one could then take on to the journey and reach the Supreme abode. However, one’s mind is generally caught up in a duality of things and one remains quite unsure of the decisions whether to be taken or not and it is for the erasure of this duality that Sheikh-ul-Alam advised people to let go off the worldly glamour and devote the self to His path. For him, religion was a bond between the creator and his creatures. It was a strongly personal spiritual experience (Gauhar, 2009).

The most important thought that underlay his philosophy was this control of ‘nafs’ or the carnal self as mentioned earlier also. For Sheikh-ul-Alam, this carnal self was rebellious and ignorant. It was wholly evil and had to be taken control of. This required a lot of effort and in pursuit of it, one had to endure every kind of hardship.
In order to reach the Self, one had to leave hold of the self. After taking control over the carnal self, Sheikh-ul-Alam found the ultimate truth. He understood the essence of his existence. So, he found God as the ever existing presence. He says:

\[
yus \ os \ yeti \ suy \ chhuy \ tatei
\]
\[
suy \ chhuy \ prath \ shayi \ ratith \ makaan
\]
\[
suy \ chhuy \ pyada \ ta \ suy \ chhuy \ rathei
\]
\[
suy \ chhuy \ soruy \ gupith \ paan
\]

He who is here is also there

He is omnipresent

He is the soldier and he is the chariot

Himself hidden—He is omnipotent

(Kak, 2013, p. 92)

The Supreme was above all the things existing to Sheikh-ul-Alam. It was His will, His support and His everlasting presence which helped him stand and surpass the tough times (Kak, 2013). He talks about Him as the matchless merchant who showered numerous gifts upon His believers. In fact, he saw God as the inspiring spirit for himself enabling him to cherish the existence in the ecstasies of life. For him, Lord was a panacea for all illness. He saw Him as the blooming spirit of his life. With His presence and blessings, he believed the venom to turn sweet. He says:

\[
saehbo \ mahre \ har \ karakh
\]
\[
sahras \ sabdem \ nabad \ te \ kand
\]
\[
saehbe \ kahar \ hai \ karakh \ soun \ kyah \ lave
\]
\[
shrake \ te \ mazas \ cha \ waad \ waad
\]
O Almighty, if you bless me

The poison would turn into sweet nectar

O Almighty if your wrath befalls even gold will turn useless

Can there be any escape?

There is a mention of benevolence in many of his verses. He says:

*sahab chu sauv dukanas*

*saeri mangaan kaenstha dee*

*rot no kaense reach no dukanas*

*ye bhaie gachi te bhayine*

God is seated in a shop

All asking for something

He stops none

All take what they need

Sheikh-ul-Alam traces his lineage to various Sufi-Rishi traditions and the Sufi-Rishi tradition was an Islamic mystic movement which upheld the doctrine of asceticism, vegetarianism and celibacy (Khan, 1994). The Sheikh belonged to the Rishi school of thought. He was, in fact, the founder of this tradition. As discussed in the Chapter 1 also, Rishism was a movement in Kashmir, which comprised of various mystics living in solitude and striving to attain self-mortification through different ascetic exercises. However, the Sheikh renewed this tradition by taking Rishi philosophy into the public domain and doing away with the earlier ways of renunciation. Khan (1994, p. 38) writes in this regard:

Nuruddin...renewed the Rishi tradition by doing away with the ways of renunciation of the Hindu ascetics. This view is substantiated by the fact that
even during the life time of Nuruddin and many years after his death when the Rishi movement was in full swing there were ascetics among the Brahmans of Kashmir who enjoyed considerable popularity among the unlettered masses...Thus the Rishi movement though essentially characterized by elements of social protest also provided the cover under which the surviving remnants of the conquered Hindu ascetic tradition could continue to exist in Islam.

The Rishi tradition retained the local ethos, emphasized upon the oneness of God and preached vegetarianism. Self-denial, non-attachment, and purity of life were the basic tenets of the Rishi philosophy as elaborated upon in Chapter 1 also. All the verses of Sheikh-ul-Alam, in addition to the rishi philosophy, are embedded with the themes of death, mortality, union with God, the world as a community, non-violence and universal love. The direction of attention inwards by withdrawing from the external world in order to open up the inner life and facing the austerities and hardships are important aspects of this mystic journey and these nearly exist in all mystic traditions. The Sheikh made the Islamic mystic tradition comprehensible to the masses. His verses served an important job of imparting knowledge of religion and God to people. Through his verses, he urged people to cultivate primary human qualities like those of submission, compassion and dedication (Gauhar, 2009). He used straight and simple language to preach these values. He critiqued through his poetry the caste system and the orthodox customs and worked for the freedom of society from the clutches of conventions. In spite of being a mystic, he taught people the true values of humanity. In one of his verses, he addresses people saying:

\[
\text{kol mo lagi rangan te sangan} \\
\text{kol mo hangan lekhanai aav} \\
\text{kol mo ashud lagi angan}
\]
Caste is of no use in fancy gatherings
Caste is not written on one’s face
Caste won’t make your body parts impure
If you perform your duties—there is no caste

(Kak, 2013, p. 125)

He would address the masses directing them to shun off the garbs of hypocrisy. The false practices, ostentatious activities and conventions needed to be taken control of.

Another important thing that Sheikh-ul-Alam emphasized upon was that people needed to cultivate good hearts and always be ready to help others. He was, in addition to a mystic, a great humanist also (Parimoo, 2007). Through his poems, he left larger than life lessons to be learned for all generations to come. For him, nothing could equate the spirit of goodness. Sheikh-ul-Alam constantly reinforced the doctrine of truthfulness, honesty and righteousness. For him, in order to receive the Supreme bliss, it was important to cultivate purity. He says in a poem:

\[
\text{zaaden manz lal mokholan} \\
\text{zaalen manz jaanwar bolan mo} \\
\text{seki shathan yamberzali mo pholan} \\
\text{katse wanan mokhtehaar molan mo}
\]

Will diamonds be found in marshy lands?
Will birds chirp when caught in meshes?
Will the narcissus bloom in the midst of a desert?
From the above poem, it can clearly be inferred that according to Sheikh-ul-Alam, good deeds and a kind heart were never a waste. In fact, one of the primary conditions of worship is to have a pure heart, always ready for the service of people. Many of Sheikh-ul-Alam’s verses reflect the belief that performing good deeds results in a positive account and negative deeds lead to a negative account for an individual, thereby, deterring the after-life of heavenly bliss or the suffering of hell. So, it was only good deeds that could take a person to heaven and grant him the ultimate bliss. He taught his disciples to surrender to the divine will. He preached his religion in terms of his relationship to God established through love (Kak, 2013). He preferred solitude to interaction with worldly people but he did engage himself in helping people who sought his guidance. He was always ready to help and stand by anyone in need. The Rishi movement, therefore, was not only “an ideology but a way of life characterized by selfless service to fellow humans and belief in dignity of life” (Kak, 2013, p. 16).

Thus, after introspecting and recognizing the Self, the Sheikh bade farewell to the life of seclusion and started a new phase as a cultural practitioner, religious preacher and social reformer. There is a transition observed in the life of the Sheikh. Khan (1994, p. 97) writes in this regard:

Nuruddin’s religious career falls into three main stages: the first is that of an orphan struggling to take out his mundane existence; the second is that of an ascetic who withdraws himself from the 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…this division
helps us to perceive in a clearer light the shifts and changes which are natural
to the evolution of the career of a mystic such as Nuruddin.

Sheikh-ul-Alam emerged as a missionary, too, who travelled throughout the valley
and preached and propagated Islam. Along with many other companions, Sheikh-ul-
Alam left on a tour of the valley and established various centres across the valley to
preach Islam (Fayaz, 2011). He is, therefore, remembered not only as a Sufi but also
as a preacher in Kashmir. He addressed himself to the task of reforming the society
and became a socio-religious missionary preaching people through his poems. The
Sheikh valued very high nearly all sections of the society. He talked about the manual
labour of agriculturists as man’s divinely ordained task in the world and through his
verses, emphasized the importance of cultivation of both soul and the mind (Fayaz,
2011). “He admired the idyllic quality of rural life as against the corruption and
artificiality of urban civilization” (Fayaz, 2011, p. 10). He took the metaphors from
the peasant life and elevated various aspects of their work to the symbols of spiritual
activity. He says:

\[
\begin{align*}
adalaf gosul taharat kartai \\
ipat chhai niyat kola-kal traav \\
vaan chhuy qurat saih partai \\
yusuy kari gongal suyi kari kraav
\end{align*}
\]

The plough share is thy bath and ablution; perform them well
The yoke is thy conscience; abandon the thoughts of family or tribe
Tilling the land is reading the Quran, read it correctly
One who celebrates the Gongal, will surely celebrate the Krav

(Parimoo, 2007, p. 193)
Through the vernacular medium, the Sheikh taught the unlettered masses the fundamentals of religion and humanity. He believed in the oneness of all and through his poems preached all communities—the Hindu as well as the Muslim—to shun off the ostentatious garbs of religions and conventions. As mentioned earlier also, he ridiculed the caste centric orientations of Hindus saying:

\textit{aki hath ta vuh jora vopanuu}
\textit{akh zani ta akh marad aavu}
\textit{tahanz hekamats timan lolanu}
\textit{kvalas hamkval kyah hedivu}

Hundred and twenty pairs were born of them

Of each pair one was male and the other female

God’s wisdom made them talk

How can the members of the same family jeer at one another

\cite{Parimoo2007}

In the same way, the Muslims who would feel proud of their class/clan and consider themselves noble were also targeted by the Sheikh. He also attacked the clergy or the \textit{ulemas} who in the name of religion exploited people. Fayaz \citeyear{Fayaz2011} writes in this regard:

It was a matter of great concern for Shaikh Nuruddin that strikingly against the principle of social brotherhood as preached by Islam, a section of Muslim ulema had fallen victim to worldly greed. It was to eradicate the negative impact of the worldly ulemas and the worldly sufis that forced Sheikh Nuruddin to come out into the field and encounter their activities and mundane mentality.
The Sheikh wanted to preach true religion to people that stood for classless and casteless society, free of any discords whether at the social or the religious level. He never believed in any social distinctions on the basis of religion or power. He knew how people exploited the illiterate masses in the name of religion. He critiqued in his poems the mullahs who had made it a profession to recite the Quran and gain material wealth (Ahmad, 2011). He says:

\[
yimai parith lagan kalaan\\
timan iblees ralan asiy\\
toba chhuy dava tavo chhi balaan\\
toba rost (vath) dalaan asiy\\
\]

Those who pretend to be learned great
Easily get mixed up with devil himself
Penitence is the medicine bringing recovery
Without repentance thou loosest the way

(Parimoo, 2007, p. 241)

The Sheikh stressed the need for creating a congenial and friendly environment, devoid of any division, bias or distrust. His verses are emblematic of his belief in universal brotherhood and religious unity. He says:

\[
farishtav mor hetsau ladanu\\
asur nahit karhas jay\\
tahanze qvadratas sekh tati vopanu\\
kvalas hamkol kyaah hedivu\\
\]

The angels started building their tenements
Razing them to the ground, the demons made the land plain

Mysterious are the ways of God! nothing but sand was there

How can the members of the same family jeer at one another?

(Parimoo, 2007, p. 154)

He didn’t address a particular class or group of people, but his aim was mankind at large. He advocated total surrender before God and compassion for all creatures (Fayaz, 2011). Wherever he went, he ridiculed the oppressive and sabotaging forces and associated himself with the downtrodden and underprivileged. His tour across the valley, therefore, had a socio-ethical connotation (Fayaz, 2011). During his tour, he witnessed heights of social injustice, feudal oppression and general discontent among masses and through his poetic compositions, the Sheikh gave expression to people’s sentiments. During the days spent at the cave, he had come to know about the feudal oppression through the rural folk who visited him. Upon making a valley-wide tour himself, he got ample opportunities to witness the heights of feudal atrocities (Fayaz, 2011). While visiting a village, the Sheikh once came across a man who was beating a villager with a rod. The Sheikh questioned him and the man replied that the one he was beating was just a lazy and an unskilled tenant to him. The Sheikh ironically praised the man for making his subjects work with honesty. However, he directed him to control his own subjects first which were the organs of sense perception. Ruling and harassing the poor, acquiring wealth and worldly fame served one no purpose in the end (Fayaz, 2011). The Sheikh said to him:

\[
\begin{align*}
dohai svan ta ravaphay zeenim \\
dohai luukh ruudim bandagiyyi \\
dohai suvim kapatim minim \\
patav tsalim sharmandagiyyi
\end{align*}
\]
All the time I earned gold and silver
All the time people remained obedient to me
All the time I got (clothes), measured and tailored
Nothing but disgrace did I find in the end

(Parimoo, 2007, p. 228)

Gauhar (2009) writes that human exploitation and domination has resulted in great socio-economic divisions and this has been a trend since ages. The oppression has always caused agitations, devastations and wars. The era of the Sheikh was no exception to this. The Sheikh voiced such events also through his poems. He says:

*kaentsi aes mangaan timan ne dyutukh*

*kaentsan ditukh ne hyothakh odii*

*kaentsan sorui marith mothukh*

*kaentsan sorui athe hyath modi*

*kaentsan mangaan buth gov kruhno*

*kaenstan ma dyutukh an te hyath keth*

*kaentsi aes pakaan dophakh bihiv*

*kaentsan dith nevukh phirith kyath*

Demands were raised but denied
The denied demands were imposed by force
Some people had to die while agitating their demands
Some people were deprived and they perished in deprivation
Some people so insistently demanded that they got their faces blackened
Some were denied access to sources of livelihood
Some were dynamic in their demands but were made to be static
Some were given but later the domain was snatched from them

(Gauhar, 2009, p. 242)

The Sheikh voiced against such injustices and represented the collective sentiment and genuine aspirations of the people making them believe that they were not all alone in their struggle against injustice and oppression:

In medieval feudal structure, the worst hit at the hands of landed elite was no other category than fleeced peasantry…the Sheikh during the cave days had come to know about the feudal oppression, as the rural folk, who visited the cave to seek the aid and blessings of saint often complained against the inhuman treatment by the agents of feudal chiefs. The valley wide tour offered innumerable opportunities to the saint to witness appalling heights of feudal atrocities.

(Fayaz, 2011, p. 91)

The Sheikh knew that the poor were being exploited and according to him, it was the workers, the labourers and the artisans who actually were emblems of sincerity, hard work and knowledge. He says:

gareeban gatshaan doh naashe
papith thawaan chus haashe naav
zaagnas, laagnas wael waashe
zagtas aehnde seeth gaashi aaw

The energy of the poor gets waste
As his ripened (crop) is dubbed as chaff
He is being targeted and then caged
Alas! It is he who enlightens the world with his hard work

(Gauhar, 2009, p. 258)
Upon seeing the injustices, the Sheikh expressed himself strongly. All the happenings left a grave impact on his mind and he would every now and then ponder over the social injustices and imbalances (Gauhar, 2009):

\begin{quote}
\textit{diithis dhan te daatas tshoner}
\textit{kazlas kyah chui amrith taenith}
\textit{sor rozi waare te harnis woner}
\textit{paez aasi aazaad te paaband azaad gaanth}
\end{quote}

The cunning enjoy luxuries and the pious are paupers

Such imbibed black scars can hardly be washed

There (in such environ) the pig is safer, the deer is blind

Though we may use nectar to wash

The falcon is caged, the crow soars freely in high heavens

(Gauhar, 2009, p. 259)

As stated earlier also, undertaking a valley tour, thus, marked a turning point in his socio-religious career. After isolation and alienation, he emerged as a socially conscious individual who through his poetry established a direct accessibility to the masses living across the valley. The experiences that he gathered upon interacting with the varied sections of the society found expression in his poems. He communicated his thoughts, feelings and also talked about his mystic experiences through his poems. Poetry was, therefore, not only a medium of expression but also a means to reach out to the masses and convey or impress upon them varied lessons of life. His poetry was the manifestation of his prolonged meditations, his faith in the Supreme Lord, his devotion to Him, his humanism and various other socio-religious concepts (Tak, 1996). All his verses are symbolic expressions of his spiritual thinking
and his lessons are conveyed through artistic use of language couched in metaphors
drawn from everyday life in the guise of flowers, animals, birds, rivers and other
entities of Nature. “Sheikh Nuruddin’s poetry reveals a language that flows
effortlessly and it is a succinct demonstration that he had instilled into his
mind…translated his thoughts into his mother tongue of which he was a unique
master” (Tak, 1996, p. 29). He situated Islam in a regional setting to engulf all
communities and commoners into the same setting. He transcended nearly all the
barriers—social as well as cultural. He subsisted on wild vegetables, preferred
vopalhaakh (a herb found in Kashmir) to dishes, wore ragged clothes, used kangri
(earthen pot) and survived in the ordinary domain (Fayaz, 2011). He preached
religious cordiality, human love and also social, cultural and religious tolerance. He
says:

\[
\begin{align*}
dunyahas kam gvan vendith \\
tse tati kandi thovuth ravai \\
yiy musalmaan kyaho hendi \\
ito gindith gara gatshavai
\end{align*}
\]

What qualities hast thou found in the world?
To allow thy body a free, loose rope
The Muslamaan and Hindu sail in the same boat
Have thy play and let’s go home

(Parimoo, 2007, p. 90)

His poems are emblematic of the fact that his new religious formations along with the
sentiments of people got expressed through his poetry. His open contact with
everyone gave him enough chances to understand the nature of society that he was a
part of. He got to know about all the forces at work that had a role in shaping the behaviour and mental make-up of people.

Another important contribution of Sheikh-ul-Alam was the involvement/admittance of rural girls within the fold of Rishi order in a patriarchal era. A legend goes that the Sheikh, during his stay at Beerwah, came across a group of village women who were cutting grass with sickles to feed their livestock. Sheikh-ul-Alam advised them to develop a friendly attitude towards all things, including plants and asked them not to cut or kill any of the nature’s objects. He addressed them as:

\[ kandi maaji chiva nyul katraan \]

\[ tranan divan drotui \]

\[ kona maji chiva paluk svaran \]

\[ tati horun barun kotu \]

Why O ladies are you cutting the grass?
Why are you striking the grass with sickle?
Why don’t you think of the other world?
You may have to pay for the same

To his address, one of the maidens replied:

\[ havasa drayas na hata-dond heth gasas \]

\[ chham vasuri dvashan kuniy gaav \]

We did not come with a sickle for pleasure
But to provide fodder to these cows that give milk

She further said:
Hearing this, Nuruddin sensed her as someone endowed with mystic qualities and called her rattan mani (hidden jewel) and she, instead, requested him to admit her as his disciple. She adopted Rishism and came to be known as Sham Ded. Another lady known to have joined and followed the Sheikh’s cult was Shung Bibi. She also served the Rishi domain and attained a high mystic stature. This was a time when the entire socio-cultural landscape of Kashmir was dominated by men and Kashmiri women didn’t enjoy much freedom. Sheikh-ul-Alam, at that time, opened schools for girls and also admitted many women to his Rishi cult. “So great was the influence of the Rishis social role on the consciousness of the people that even women joined their ranks with a view to building up a healthy society” (Khan, 1994, p. 230)

Sheikh-ul-Alam accepted everyone irrespective of the colour, caste, creed or gender. What he was against was the hypocrisy of the people claiming to be custodians of religion. So, throughout his life, he made it a priority to make people understand the real religion and for this purpose, he used the common poetic language. It is the ever-relevant ethos contained in his poems that grants him a significant place in the consciousness of the masses. His poetry expresses the cultural style of a great civilization in a local setting and also portrays the quality of the human spirit that flourishes within it (Khan, 1994). His poetry enriches the individual as well
as the social ethos of the world at large and thus, attains an immortal and an everlasting existence.

While poetry served various socio-religious and reformative purposes in Kashmir, a similar trend prevailed in other parts of India also. The medieval India witnessed the emergence of the Bhakti movement and it gave birth to a number of saints who used poetry as the medium of social and religious revolt as well. One of the most influential poets who, through his poetry, set into motion huge social and religious transformations was Kabir. He was quite in tune with Lal Ded and Sheikh-ul-Alam in his ways of critiquing the orthodoxy and preaching the oneness of God. The following chapter will aim at discussing Kabir as a saint-poet and a preacher. It will also dwell upon varied themes embedded in his poems.