

Some Reflections on the Twilight Period of Buddhism in the Kashmir Valley

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Institutional Buddhism came to acquire the character of a pan-Indian and politically significant religion from the time of Emperor Aśoka. Apart from this, Aśoka's Buddhist rendition of dharma ostensibly had become, at least for the time being, a matter of implemented public policy.¹ Under such circumstances, the Brāhmaṇical-Brāhmaṇas were left with no choice but to deal with the situation for their own survival. Their response was the formulation of a well-thought out two-pronged agenda. One, to be designedly agreeable and assimilative towards those issues in Buddhist weltanschauung which had become socio-religiously commonsensical.² Two, to slowly and steadily, but systematically, subvert institutional Buddhism. This is clearly visible in the shifting of the theories and political orientation of kingship from Buddhist to Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva rationales. With reference to the shifting of political orientation of kingship, Ronald Inden has proposed an interesting hypothesis.³ According to him, before the eighth century, the Buddha was accorded the position of a universal deity and the ceremonies by which a king attained status were elaborate donative ceremonies entailing gifts to Buddhist monks and the setting up of a symbolic Buddha in a stūpa. However, this pattern, says Inden, changed in the eighth century when generally the Brāhmaṇical-Hindu god Viṣṇu, but sometimes also Śiva and Sūrya (the Sun), usurped the place of the Buddha as the supreme, imperial deities.⁵ Notably, both the incorporation and subordination of the Buddha within the Brāhmaṇical cult of Viṣṇu and his replacement as the Cosmic Man within the mythic ideology of Indian kingship occurred at about the same time.⁶

It has been further suggested that while Buddhism continued to maintain an existence in different parts of India for several hundred years after the eighth century, "royal proclivities for the cults of Viṣṇu and Śiva weakened its position within the sociopolitical context and helped to make possible its eventual eclipse and absorption by the priestly Brāhmaṇical community."⁷ Inden has offered an historical analysis of the particular nature and putative significance of this shift that began to take place from the eighth century onwards and was marked by the building of the first monumental Brāhmaṇical-Hindu temples. According to him, the first imperial dynasty that elevated Viṣṇu, Śiva, and Sūrya to the status of supreme deities (*parameśvara*, *maheśvara*), equivalent to the Cosmic Man, and relegated the Buddha to a secondary position, was Kāraḷa dynasty (625-1003 CE) of Kashmir.⁸ Prior to this, the Buddha had been offered imperial-style worship (*pūjā*). Now as the Buddha was replaced by one of the Brāhmaṇical-Hindu gods at the imperial centre and top of the

¹See J.C. Holt, *The Buddhist Viṣṇu: Religious Transformation, Politics, and Culture*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2004: 11-12.

²Thus, P.V. Kane has indicated that this assimilation of Buddhist ideas was neither a consequence of Brāhmaṇical-Hindu tolerance, nor was it indicative of a Brāhmaṇical-Hindu propensity for philosophical syncretism (*History of the Dharmaśāstra*, vol. V, Part II, 2nd ed., 1977: 913ff).

³Ronald Inden, "Ritual, Authority, and Cycle Time in Hindu Kingship," in J.F. Richards (ed.), *Kingship and Authority in South Asia*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998: 41-91.

⁵See Ibid.67.

⁶Holt, *Op. Cit.*12.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Inden, *Op. Cit.*55. It was the Kāraḷa dynasty that gave given Kashmir its greatest ruler Lalitāditya Muktāpīḍa (724-761 CE). He built his capital near the sacred shrine of Khīrabhavānī, and gave it the name of Parihāspura (city of pleasure). He is famous for having built monumental temples throughout the valley. The famous sun temple (Mārtanḍa) on Māttan Karevā was built by him.

cosmo-political system, the image or symbol of the Brāhmanical-Hindu god came to be housed in a monumental temple and accorded increasingly elaborate imperial-style *pūjā*.⁹ The composition of the *Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa* and other Purāṇas such as the Matsya, synchronized with this change and provided the imperial cults of Viṣṇu and the other Brāhmanical-Hindu gods with rules for erecting large temples and performing temple liturgies with imperial pomp and glory. The Brāhmanical-Hindu king of kings, the earthly pivot of the cosmos, is equipped by the Purāṇas with the new corpus of royal rituals appropriate to his new imperial role, including, of course, a new installation ceremony. The *abhiṣeka* of the king as paramount ruler closely paralleled the even more elegant and complex series of baths by which the image of a Brāhmanical-Hindu god, styled as the cosmic sovereign, was installed by his devoted servant, the paramount king.¹⁰

Inden points out that in its Vaiṣṇava dress, the developing ideology of Indian theories of kingship was undergoing a decisive turn which also generated a major change in the manner in which the Buddha and Buddhism came to be regarded from within a newly regenerated Brāhmanical and Bhakti framework. According to him, within this reinvigorated Brāhmanical-Hindu tradition dominated by the Bhakti cults of Viṣṇu (and in some cases Śiva), the king was considered a ‘partial descent’ (*aṃṣa*) of the great god Viṣṇu, the preserver of dharma, the natural and moral order, and himself a form of the Cosmic Overlord.¹¹ Viṣṇu’s wife, Lakṣmī or Śrī, the goddess of wealth, prosperity, and good fortune, who worshipfully accompanies her husband in different forms when he descends to earth in one of his various forms, was also considered the consort of the king parallel to and obviously closely connected with the land.¹² Like the king, the Buddha was also accorded the status of an avatāra within this developing Brāhmanical-Hindu ideological scheme. The new Brāhmanical-Hindu consecration ceremony (*abhiṣeka*) transformed the king into a this-worldly Viṣṇu, an ideal human being of cosmic significance.¹³ This ritual making-of-a-king offers a very good description of not only the nascent ‘god-king’ construction, but also how an avatāra was viewed in connection with the primordial cosmic being (Viṣṇu). Vaiṣṇava avatāra profile of the Buddha was sculpted largely in the same manner. A number of such structural and substantive similarities between the mythic profiles of Viṣṇu and the Buddha have been noted by J.R. Haldar which appear to have abetted the assimilation and subordination of the Buddha as an avatāra of Viṣṇu in the Brāhmanical-Hindu Purāṇas.¹⁴ Whatever the origins of these shared attributes, Brāhmanical-Hindu ambivalence

⁹J.C. Heesterman, “The Conundrum of the King’s Authority,” in J.F. Richards (ed.), *Kingship and Authority in South Asia*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998: 12.

¹⁰For the *devatā-pratiṣṭhā* or ‘establishment of the god’s image,’ see *Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa: Translated into English from Original Sanskrit*, ed. Priyabala Shah, vol. III, Primal Publications, 2002: 149-197. This text was compiled somewhere between CE 700-800 in northern India.

¹¹J. Gonda, *Ancient Indian Kingship from the Religious Point of View*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1966: 92.

¹²Ibid.92-93. Also see Inden, *Op. Cit.*46.

¹³See Inden, *Op. Cit.*71.

¹⁴For instance, noting the *Paramatthamañjūsā* and the *Dhammapadaatṭhakathā* as classic Theravādin sources of cosmogony and cosmology, J.R. Haldar has pointed out that “the Buddha covered the distance of 6,800,000 *yojanas* in three strides, from the earth to the *Tāvatiṃsa Devaloka*, and reached there (*Tāvatiṃsa*), setting his right foot down on the top of the Yugandhara and his left one on Sineru” (J.R. Haldar, *Early Buddhist Mythology*, New Delhi: Manohar Book Service, 1970: 2-3). He has noted how reminiscent this is of the three strides by which Viṣṇu, in the *Ṛg Veda*, marks off the cosmic spheres. Another significant similarity, he notes, may be seen in the fact that Buddhas seem never to be born in the early phases of a *kalpa*, but only after a critical period of decline has set in and there is a need for dharma to be known among humankind. Haldar sees this as an indication of why “the Buddha may be regarded as an *avatāra*” (Ibid.129) insofar as he functions in the same way as Viṣṇu—appearing in a period of decline in order to uphold dharma. It would be difficult, in fact, to establish the origins of these shared attributes found within both of the mythic profiles of the Buddha and Viṣṇu, whether they have evolved from a common source or have their origins exclusively in one tradition or the other (See also Holt, *Op. Cit.*14).

towards the Buddha and Buddhism is no more clearly seen than in the Brāhmaṇical-Hindu assimilation and subordination of the Buddha. By the time of the eighth century CE, when the political transformations from Buddhist to Brāhmaṇical-Hindu ideology were taking place as many as four Purāṇas had declared the Buddha as an avatāra of Viṣṇu.¹⁵ The avatāra device lends itself quite readily to a religio-cultural process of assimilation, since it so obviously implies that Viṣṇu may take on any number of forms to make his power efficacious in the human world. The reification of Viṣṇu's avatāras, masks a historical process of assimilation in which indigenous religious cults have been brought into the Brāhmaṇical Vaiṣṇava tradition and thereby subordinating them under a Brāhmaṇical Vaiṣṇava umbrella. In this way, the avatāra device of Viṣṇu provided a convenient means of assimilating, subordinating, and legitimating other deities.¹⁷ Thus, the device of Viṣṇu's avatāras was an ingenious and convenient means used to assimilate and then to subordinate the figure of the Buddha and put him in his Brāhmaṇical place thereby undermining his historicity by making him an appendage of the Vaiṣṇava mythic hierarchy.¹⁸

Though the decline of Buddhism in the valley of Kashmir appears to have begun in the post-Kuṣāṇa period, yet it survived in the Kashmir valley into the late medieval period.¹⁹ Thus, when foreign pilgrims such as Hye Ch'o (727 CE)²⁰ and Oukong (759 CE)²⁶ visited Kashmir, they found many monasteries existing there. Śivasvāmī, a Buddhist aficionado who lived in Kashmir during the reign of king Avantīvarman (855-884 CE), uses various Buddhist terms and ideas liberally in his poem *Kapphiṇābhyudaya*²⁷ but towards the end he lauds the Brāhmaṇical ideal of a householder as compared to the Buddhist ideal of monkhood. As suggested by Mitra, this may be an indication of the cultural ascendancy of Brāhmaṇical ideal which as time went by became accelerated.²⁸ During the

¹⁵*Agni Purāṇa*.16.1-4 and 49.8; *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*.X.40.22; *Matsya Purāṇa*.285.6-7; *Varāha Purāṇa*.4.2. The Purāṇas, undoubtedly, played a substantial role in removing the ground from under the very feel of Buddhism "by emphasizing and assimilating some of the principles and doctrines of Buddha such as ahimsā, by accepting Buddha himself as an avatāra of Viṣṇu, by adopting vegetarianism as a high form of austerity, by making use of monasteries and asceticism as stated in such *smṛtis* as those of Manu and Yājñavalkya" (P.V. Kane; *History of Dharmaśāstra*, Vol V, Part II, 2nd ed., Government Oriental Series, Class B, No. 6, Poona: Bhandarkar Research Institute, Poona, 1977: 913-14). F.E. Pargiter also thinks that it was largely through the Paurāṇika literature that Hinduism secured its revival and the downfall of Buddhism. In fact, Pargiter goes to the extent of saying that it was largely through the Purāṇic literature that Brāhmaṇism reestablished itself over the people and secured the revival of Hinduism and downfall of Buddhism (*Purāṇa Texts of the Dynasties of the Kali Age*, 2nd ed., Varanasi: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series, 1962: XVIII fn.2).

¹⁷Holt, *Op. Cit.*17.

¹⁸Such a development also played an important role in assuring the traditionally-minded Brāhmaṇa that the *Buddhāvātāra* was merely a device used by Viṣṇu to further misguide heretics, here the Buddhists in particular (Holt, *Op. Cit.*18). Interestingly, when one looks into how and to what extent was the Buddha ritually included within the Brāhmaṇical-Hindu tradition, there is not much to find. "Indeed, cultic veneration of the Buddha within Hinduism is virtually absent" (Ibid).

¹⁹*Kalhaṇa's Rājatarāṅgiṇī: The Saga of the Kings of Kaśmīr*, tr. Ranjit S. Pandit, Third reprint, New Delhi: Sahitya Akademy, 2001 (henceforth *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*).I.312-317, III.355, IV.200-203, 259-262. See also K.T.S. Sarao, "Xuanzang to Akbar: An Examination of the Decline of Buddhism in the Kashmir Valley," *The Journal of Kashmir Studies*, A Journal of the Institute of Kashmir Studies, University of Kashmir, Srinagar, vol. IV, no. 1, 2010: 22-38.

²⁰*The Hye Ch'o Diary: Memoir of the Pilgrimage to the Five Regions of India*, eds. & trs., Yang Han-sung, Jan Yün-hua et al, Berkeley, Asian Humanities Press, 1984: 46-47.

²⁶Sylvain Lévi and Edouard Chavannes, "L'itinéraire D'ou-K'ong (751-790)," *Journal Asiatique*, Neuvième Série, Tome VI, 1895: 360 (341-408).

²⁷Pandit L. Gauri Shankar (ed.), *Kapphiṇābhyudaya Śivasvāmin*, Lahaura: Pañcanadiya Viśvavidyālayen Prakāśitam, 1937.

²⁸R.C. Mitra, *The Decline of Buddhism in India*, Santiniketan, Birbhum: Visva-Bharati, 1954: 22.

reign of Nandī Gupta (972-73 CE), Vaiṣṇavite Queen Diddā is known to have built Buddhist viḥāras apart from Vaiṣṇava temples.³⁰ A Kashmiri Buddhist monk, whom the Chinese knew as Tianxi Zai, went from Kashmir to China in 980 CE.³¹ However, from 1028 CE until the end of the First Lohara Dynasty in 1101 CE, Kashmir was faced with economic decline which affected Buddhist monastic institutions. Furthermore, King Kalasa and his notorious grandson Harṣa (r. 1089-1101 CE), who was the last king of First Lohara Dynasty, pursued a policy of iconoclastic destruction directed against both Buddhist and Brāhmaṇical-Hindu places of worship. But during the Second Lohara Dynasty (1101-1171 CE), such a trend was reversed and during the reign of King Jayasimha (r. 1128-1149 CE), there is evidence of a Buddhist viḥāra being erected and the king bestowing an endowment on it and other Buddhist institutions in general.³² Thus, Buddhism which might have languished during the reigns of Kṣemagupta, Kalasa, and Harṣa, continued to survive till at least the middle of the twelfth century. In the thirteenth century, at the time of Marco Polo's travels, the Kashmir valley had become predominantly Brāhmaṇical-Hindu with perhaps Buddhism surviving only in small pockets and there being a small number of Muslim converts.³³

The general experience of cultural anthropologists is that when parallel cults and faiths come in contact with each other, the stronger of the two tends to dominate and assimilate the more recessive one. Many affinities exhibited by both Śaivism and Buddhism in Kashmir facilitated closer approximation between the two leading to their merger in the end. Both reject the authority of the Vedas and are equally forceful in their emphasis on individual effort for attaining salvation. Śiva vanquished Kāma and the Buddha defied the seductions of Māra. Śiva is an otherworldly god and the Buddha began his holy life by renouncing the world. Both Śaivism and Buddhism are also based on the acknowledgement of the unknowable nature of ultimate reality or truth. The Śaiva theory of destruction and reproduction bears strong likeness to the Buddhist concept of dependent origination (*pratityasamutpāda*). In fact, faint echo of the Śaiva influences on Buddhism can be detected in the legend of Mahādeva who conferred the *Pravrajyā* on Mahendra, the first missionary of Buddhism in Kashmir.³⁴ The growth of Tantricism further blurred the differences between Buddhism and Śaiva Tantrism. Predominance of Tantric Buddhism is indicated by the presence of Bhaṭṭa Kallaṭa and other *siddhas* from the period of Avantivarman onwards.³⁵

The building art of the classical period (seventh to fourteenth centuries CE) hints at Buddhism being gradually supplanted by orthodox Brāhmaṇical-Hinduism. The earlier phase of this period was Buddhist, whereas the later phase was entirely Brāhmaṇical-Hindu.³⁶ Interestingly, the architectural remains discovered from the site of Avantipura, founded by Avantivarman (855/56-883 CE) of the Utpala dynasty, who was a staunch follower of Śiva and Viṣṇu, include some images of Viṣṇu, Śiva, and other Brāhmaṇical gods, but no figure of the Buddha or any Bodhisattva.³⁷ Religious milieu was

³⁰*Rājatarāṅgiṇī*.VII.11; VIII.349.

³¹P.C. Bagchi, *India and China: A Thousand Years of Cultural Relations*, rev. & ed. H.P. Ray, New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 2008: 219.

³²*Rājatarāṅgiṇī*.VIII.2402, 2433. Arigoma Sāradā Inscription records the construction of a brick viḥāra to replace an older one which had been burned down during the reign of King Siṃha whom Sten Konow identifies with Jayasimha (See *EI*.IX.300). The viḥāra, dedicated to Lokanātha (Avalokiteśvara) in the inscription, is an incontrovertible evidence of the survival of Buddhism in Kashmir in the twelfth century.

³³*The Book of Ser Marco Polo the Venetian, Concerning the Kingdoms and Marvels of the East*, ed. & tr. H. Yule, 3rd rev. ed., vol. I, London: J. Murray, 1903 (henceforth *Marco Polo*): 175-177.

³⁴H. Kern, *Manual of Buddhism*, repr., Delhi: Indological Book House, 1968: 117.

³⁵*Rājatarāṅgiṇī*.V.66.

³⁶Percy Brown, *Indian Architecture: Hindu and Buddhist*, vol. 1, 3rd ed., Bombay: D.B. Taraporevala, 1956: 185.

³⁷S.K. Ray, *Early History and Culture of Kashmir*, 2nd rev. ed., New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1970: 147.

growing in a manner that both Śaivism and Buddhism were moving towards an ultimate fusion but at the cost of the latter. This process became accelerated with the emergence of the cult of Avalokiteśvara and Tārā with Buddhism borrowing the legends and metaphysical concepts connected to the cult of Śiva and Durgā. However, the available sources do not provide sufficient information to delineate the exact stages through which this fusion of Buddhism with Śaivism finally took place in Kashmir. Moreover, the economic situation of the kingdom as a whole declined even further, continuing through the subsequent succession of rulers. However, by the time of Rinchāna's accession (1320 CE), Buddhism appears to have remained no longer a force to reckon with.

Rinchāna, the son of a Buddhist Ladakhi chief, moved into the Kashmir valley along with his followers and captured the throne of Kashmir towards the end of 1320. Rinchāna accepted Islam under the influence of Sharafuddīn, adopted the Muslim name of Sadruddīn, and established a *khānqah* with a *laṅgar-khānāh* (free kitchen) for the comfort of the travellers and the poor. It has been suggested that Rinchāna's conversion to Islam was neither an isolated case nor was it merely a matter of political expediency.³⁸ A.Q. Rafiqi³⁹ and S.A.A. Rizvi⁴⁰ attribute Rinchāna's conversion to Islam to his political ambitions and associations with Shah Mir. According to Aziz Ahmad, "The very fact of the conversion of the Buddhist Rinchāna to Islam shows that Buddhism was no longer available as a power-base, possibly not even as the religion of any significant number of households, though it might have stayed on in monasteries, whereas a sizeable converted Muslim nucleus had already grown in urban centres."⁴¹ In any case, Islam does not appear to have received any special favours under Rinchāna and the following kings including Shah Mir (1339-1342), Jamshed (1342-1343), Alāuddīn (1343-1354), Shihābuddīn (1354-1373) so much so that when Shihābuddīn's Brāhmaṇical-Hindu minister, Udayasrī suggested the melting of a grand brass image of the Buddha for coining it into money, it was turned down.⁴²

Nūru'ddīn (thirteenth century), the son of a Brāhmaṇical-Hindu convert, was the founder of an indigenous order of Muslim mystics (R̥ṣi Silsilah) who made the R̥ṣi movement socially important in Kashmir. These R̥ṣis developed their ideas in their Brāhmaṇical-Hindu and Buddhist surroundings. The extreme asceticism, self-mortification, long fasts, sexual abstinence, and seclusion, which marked the early life of Nūru'ddīn, and indeed, the lives of his followers, blurred the differences in the minds of common masses between Islam and Brāhmaṇical-Hinduism or Buddhism. Despite the vihāras having become impoverished, there is evidence for some Buddhist activity still taking place till at least the fourteenth century with Kashmiri Buddhist monks and translators travelling to Tibet from time to time. When towards the end of the sixteenth century Abul Fazal paid a visit to Kashmir in the company of Emperor Akbar, there were still some old persons who owed allegiance to Buddhism, though he could not locate any scholars of Buddhism. He could not ascertain the time of the disappearance of the religion but simply observes that it was long ago.⁴³ It is worthy of notice that despite the fact that Kashmir had remained rather weak for over three centuries, neither the Arabs nor the Turks sought to conquer it. This is an indication that the Arabs and the Turks were more interested in gaining riches than proselytizing. Thus, if the Buddhist vihāras were poor, they were left alone.

³⁸See A.Q. Rafiqi, *Sufism in Kashmir: From the Fourteenth to the Sixteenth Century*, Varanasi: Bharatiya Publishing House, 1972: 9-10; S.A.A. Rizvi, *A History of Sufism in India*, vol. I., New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1978: 290; M.I. Khan, *Kashmir's Transition to Islam: The Role of Muslim Rishis, Fifteenth to Eighteenth Century*, Manohar Publishers and Distributors: Delhi, 1994: 63.

³⁹Rafiqi, *Op. Cit.* 9-10.

⁴⁰Rizvi, *Op. Cit.* 290.

⁴¹Aziz Ahmad, "Conversions to Islam in the Valley of Kashmir," *Central Asiatic Journal*, vol. XXIII, 1-2, 1979: 6.

⁴²Mohibbul Hasan, *Kashmir Under the Sultans*, Calcutta: Calcutta Iran Society, 1959: 43-48.

⁴³Abu'l-Fazl `Allami, *A'in-i Akbari*, trans. H. Blochmann, 1948-49 (rpt. Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1977), vol. 3: 212.

When Islam arrived in the Kashmir valley, Buddhism had already become utterly supine, completely marginalized, and politically entirely insignificant. In fact, whatever remained of Buddhism in Kashmir at this time became gradually assimilated into Islam largely as a result of the activities of the R̥ṣis and Ṣūfīs who in the minds of common masses blurred the differences between Islam and Brāhmanical-Hinduism or Buddhism.

Ṣūfī mysticism and Buddhism have several commonalities in terms of metaphysical doctrines as well as practical training. Thomas Cleary has identified some of them. According to him, both Buddhism and Ṣūfī mysticism lay emphasis on the usefulness of meditation for spiritual growth and meditation themes common to both include the powerlessness and nothingness of the self, the inevitability of death, the impermanence of all phenomena, and the inconceivability of truth. In addition to silent meditation, recitation and incantation of sacred writ, and invocations and litanies, and mnemonic formulae also form common grounds between the two.⁴⁴ The role of the Ṣūfīs in proselytization was rather indirect, in the sense that such commonalities and the work as well as life-style of the Ṣūfīs went a long way in gaining Indian people's sympathy towards Islam. Otherwise, the Ṣūfīs were much happier when they helped one who was already a Muslim to become a better Muslim than when they saw a non-Muslim become a Muslim.⁴⁵ The most important contribution made by the Ṣūfīs was that they furnished Islam's philosophical point of contact with religions of Indic origin.⁴⁶ It was through such contacts, fostered by the simplicity and broad humanism of the Ṣūfīs that Islam obtained its largest number of free converts and it is in this sense that they may be considered missionaries.⁴⁷ In India, as pointed out by Trimingham, Islam seems to have been "a holy-man Islam" where the Ṣūfīs acquired an aura of holiness. It was this aura of holiness which attracted Indians to the Ṣūfīs, rather than formal Islam.⁴⁸ Well-documented research has suggested that a great majority of the Indian Muslims are descendants of converts in whose conversion coercion played no role.⁴⁹

Conversion to Islam in India can be put into three different categories: individual conversion, group conversion, and assimilation and acculturation. The first category consisted of those individuals— including pious Buddhist and Brāhmanical ascetics— who embraced Islam voluntarily as a matter of conviction, for personal benefits, or under the influence and moral persuasions of the Ṣūfīs. It has been correctly pointed out that Islam was no champion of egalitarianism, or for that matter, of the cause of so-called suppressed people of India. It is manifestly incorrect to say that the people belonging to lower ranks of the caste-hierarchy in Brāhmanical-Hinduism embraced Islam for the sake of social justice. It is also patently wrong to say that Buddhists were attracted towards Islam because they saw Islamic egalitarianism as being compatible with the Buddha's views on caste system and other forms of inequality. There is neither any evidence of a direct assault either from the state or the Muslims upon the caste system nor is there any evidence of a revolt from within.⁵⁰ As pointed out

⁴⁴Thomas Cleary, "Buddhism and Islam," *Transactions of the International Conference of Orientalists in Japan*. No. 27, 1982: 37.

⁴⁵S.M. Ikram, *Āb-i-Kauṣar*, Lahore, 1946: 189-190. Quoted at Peter Hardy "Modern European and Muslim Explanations of Conversion to Islam in South Asia: A Preliminary Survey of the Literature," *JRAS*, 1977: 195.

⁴⁶Particularly interesting is the comment of al-Shahrastānī (c. 1076-1153) that the Buddha's teachings "can be very near to the teachings of the Sufis." (See D. Gimaret, "Bouddha et les Bouddhistes dans la tradition Musulmane," *Journal Asiatique*, 267, 1969: 277-278).

⁴⁷A.B.M. Habibullah, *The Foundation of Muslim Rule in India*, Lahore: Sh. M. Ashraf, 1945: 282; Peter Hardy, *Op. Cit.*, 90.

⁴⁸J.S. Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971: 22.

⁴⁹Thomas W. Arnold, *The Preaching of Islam: A History of the Propagation of the Muslim Faith*, London: Constable, 1896: 154-93.

⁵⁰Irfan Habib, "Economic History of the Delhi Sultanate- An Essay in Interpretation," *The Indian Historical Review*, January 1978, vol. 4, no. 2: 297.

by Irfan Habib, there is no sign of commitment to any such equality in the writings of Islamic theologians and scholars of the period. While Brāhmanical-Hindus were often denounced as ‘infidels,’ polytheists, and image-worshippers, there is in the entire range of medieval Islamic literature no word of criticism of the caste system, the theory of pollution, and the oppression of untouchables that characterized medieval Brāhmanical-Hinduism. “Indeed, the sanction for full-fledged slavery in Islamic law should strongly modify any attribution of equality to historical Islam.”⁵¹ R.M. Eaton has also rejected the ‘religion of social liberation’ theory on the ground that not only the Muslim intellectuals had not stressed the Islamic ideal of social equality as opposed to Brāhmanical-Hindu caste but also because the converted Brāhmanical-Hindu communities had failed to improve their status in the social hierarchy and that, on the contrary, “they singly carried over into Muslim society the same practice of birth-ascribed rank that they had in Hindu society.”⁵² But nevertheless the lower castes did not have much to lose by switching over to Islam, if nothing else than simply for various opportunities that this label of being a Muslim may have offered to them, especially the opportunities that were particularly getting diminished within the Brāhmanical-Hindu environment. The pursuit of patronage is one of the most cited incentives to religio-cultural conversion. A person directly dependent on the state for a living might see it beneficial to join the cultural group. Thus, converting to Islam enhanced one’s chances of advancement in the job. Muslim control of commercial activity also created favourable conditions for Islamization. A businessman could feel that being a Muslim would not only lead to better contacts and cooperation with other Muslim businessmen both within the country and overseas, but he would also enjoy the benefits of Islamic laws that regulated commerce and also the amiable conditions extended by Muslim officials to their co-religionists.

In the second category may be included those people or groups of people who embraced Islam nominally in the light of their leaders’ conversion. Such a commitment to Islam may also have been made possible by economic and political considerations. The third category consisted of a large majority of commoners who experienced the gradual impact of Islamic acculturation on their social life through their contact with Muslim settlers or the Sūfīs. Syncretism appears as a crucial stage rather than as the culmination of the process *vis-à-vis* Islam.⁵³ Islamization took place most profoundly (and irrevocably) in the succeeding generation, since the convert’s children in principle were raised within the father’s new community, instead of his original one.⁵⁴

The most crucial hurdle in conversion from Indic religions to religions based in Judeo-Christian tradition appears to be social rather than spiritual— the opposition of the prospective converts’ brethren and the hesitation in giving up kinship ties and caste-based affiliations.⁵⁵ Moreover, most of the converts were initially at least, ill-grounded in Islamic religious precepts, practices, and traditions, and remained attached to and rooted in their pre-existing non-Muslim traditions. The change from one religious tradition to the other was a slow and prolonged one taking many bypaths

⁵¹Irfan Habib, “Medieval Popular Monotheism and Its Humanism: The Historical Setting,” *Social Scientist*, Vol. 21, Nos. 3-4, March-April 1996: 80.

⁵²R.M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1706*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993: 117-118. See also Imtiaz Ahmad, *Caste and Social Stratification among the Muslims*, Delhi: Manohar Book Service, 1973.

⁵³Mohammad Ishaq Khan, “Islam, State and Society in Medieval Kashmir: A Revaluation of Mir Sayyid Ali Hamadani’s Historical Role,” in Aparna Rao (ed.), *The Valley of Kashmir: The Making and Unmaking of a Composite Culture?*, Delhi: Manohar, 2008: 154 fn 15.

⁵⁴See Richard Bulliet, “Conversion to Islam and the Emergence of a Muslim Society in Iran,” in Nehemia Levtzion (ed.), *Conversion to Islam*, New York: Holmes and Meier, 1979: 30-51.

⁵⁵See Peter Hardy, “Modern European and Muslim Explanations of Conversion to Islam in South Asia: A Preliminary Survey of the Literature,” *JRAS*, 1977: 195-196.

and extending over several generations.⁵⁶ Such a gradual process of acculturation and gravitation began as a loosening of old religious and social ties rather than forsaking these ties right away by adopting the new religious tradition.⁵⁷ Thus, as far as Islam was concerned, the process of Islamization at the social level was a process of Islamic acculturation in which individuals and groups gradually broke ties with their traditional beliefs following a road that eventually ended with their adherence to the *Shari'ah*-bound structure of Islam. Such a hypothesis is supported by R.M. Eaton,⁵⁸ who has argued that the singing of *Ṣūfī* folk songs by women at their household tasks suffused non-Muslim family life with *Ṣūfī* values. By taking human psychology into account, the *Ṣūfīs* established their *khānaqāhs* (hospices) and *dargahs* (shrines) at places which had acquired a reputation for sanctity prior to the arrival of Islam in India.⁵⁹ Indian ascetics travelling in pairs and staying not more than three days at one place were directly known to the Muslim adepts, who took from them their fourfold vows of cleanliness, purity, truth, and poverty and *Ṣūfī* features such as the monastic strain, use of rosaries, the attainment of *karāmāt* or *m'ujjā* (miraculous powers), *su'lūk* or *Tarīqah* (spiritual path), *murāqabah/marāqabah* (meditation), the doctrine of *fanā* (nirvāṇa), and the system of *māqāmāt* (stages) on road to being an *al-insānul-kāmil* (perfect man) indicate influence of Buddhism.⁶⁰

In the long run, the *dargahs* and *khānaqāhs* played an important role in proselytization as their appeal went far beyond the divisive walls of caste and creed. They acted as an effective syncretic force integrating the non-Muslims into the Islamic community in a land that was characterized by multifariousness in terms of religion, belief, and custom.⁶¹ Moreover, as pointed out by E.A. Mann, the *dargahs* owned, and their administration controlled, considerable economic resources in the forms of property, land, and cash income. They became a symbol of power both spiritual and secular² spiritual in the sense of association with God and fulfilment of earthly desires through acceptance of prayer (*du'a*), secular in the sense that economic wealth and social status could be transmitted to the individuals concerned with their administration.⁶² *Khānaqāh* was the humble rest house where wandering *Ṣūfīs* could lead a devotional life under the tutelage of some master. The village *khānaqāhs*, howsoever humble they might have been, offered lodgings and refreshments to travellers and helped the more religious villagers to sharpen their spiritual awareness through *zīkr* (invocation of

⁵⁶A quintessential example of such a phenomenon is the present day case of the Mehrat, Kathat, and Cheeta communities of central Rajasthan. These 'in-betweeners' adopted the three Islamic practices of *dafan*, *khatma*, and *zabīḥah* (burial, circumcision and eating *halal*) towards the end of the fourteenth century. However, the rest of the lifestyle of many members of these communities- names, marriage rituals, dressing styles- still continues to be that of the Hindus (Namita Kohli, "Muslims, and Hindus as Well", *The Hindustan Times*, Delhi edition, 28 June 2009: 13; Jyotsna Singh, "Islam and Hinduism's Blurred Lines," BBC website http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7473019.stm (accessed 30 June 2009).

⁵⁷See I.H. Qureshi, *The Muslim Community of the Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent (610-1947)*, 'S-Gravenhage: Mouton & Co, 1962: 75-78.

⁵⁸R.M. Eaton, "Sufi folk literature and the expansion of Indian Islam," *History of Religions*, XIV, 2, November 1974: 117-127.

⁵⁹Qureshi, *Op. Cit.* 74.

⁶⁰See H.C. Ray, *The Dynastic History of Northern India (Early Medieval Period)*, Calcutta: Calcutta University Press, 1931: 24; Tara Chand, *Influence of Islam on Indian Culture*, Allahabad: The Indian Press, 1976: 53.

⁶¹Davis Gilmartin, "Shrines, Succession, and Sources of Authority," in Barbara D. Metcalf (ed.), *Moral Conduct and Authority: The Place of Adab in South Asian Islam*, California: University of California Press, 1984: 221-240; R.M. Eaton, "The Political and Religious Authority of the Shrine of Baba Farid in Pakpattan, Punjab" in Barbara D. Metcalf, *Op. Cit.* 333-356; R.M. Eaton, *The Sufis of Bijapur, 1300-1700: Social Roles of Sufis in Medieval India*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978; Peter Hardy, *Muslims of British India*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972.

⁶²E.A. Mann, "Religion, Money, and Status: Competition for Resources at the Shrine of Shah Jamal, Aligarh," in Christian W. Troll (ed.), *Muslim Shrines in India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989: 169-170.

God through recitation, singing, instrumental music, dance, costumes, incense, meditation, ecstasy, and trance). The *khānaqāhs* also provided both Muslim and non-Muslim villagers with amulets, talismans, and charms designed to prevent sickness, disease, misfortune, damage to crops by natural calamities, and other catastrophes. The mutual interpenetration of Ṣūfī ethics and the non-Muslim way of life took place more intensely in the *khānaqāhs* of villages and small towns than in large urban centres, where Muslim and non-Muslim communal groups led a more self-centred and exclusive life, coming into contact with each other mainly because of their mutual economic and political needs.

Ṣūfīs, who within the framework of Islam attempted to achieve direct communion with God, were the natural religious guides of the people whom men and women from cross-sections of the society solicited for spiritual guidance and worldly advice. Their miraculous powers and social values attracted non-Muslims towards them. Interestingly, social interaction between the Ṣūfīs and the local population worked towards slow and steady conversion to Islam in the framework of different Ṣūfī orders as this kind of interaction intended to break down social and communal barriers. For their poetical compositions, majority the Ṣūfī saints as well as poets derived and acquired images and similes from daily life. Their ample and appropriate use made it further convenient even for the unlettered people to understand their content and grasp their meanings easily. Emphasizing equality of the Muslims and non-Muslims and refuting the concepts of *kufar* so far as it applied to dealing with people of other faiths became a common theme for many Ṣūfī poets. The Ṣūfī mystics played an extremely important role in reaching past the inhibitions and prejudices and building bridges of communication and understanding between conflicting faiths. The anti-particularistic, anti-clerical, and anti-ritualistic thrust of the teachings of the Ṣūfī poets laid the foundations of bringing non-Muslims into the Islamic fold.

Kashmir's transition to Islam took place gradually over a period of nearly five centuries. During this period, Brāhmanical-Hindu population and the last vestiges of Buddhism adopted Islam through a gradual process of acculturation at the centre of which were the Ṣūfīs and Ṛṣīs. Thus, as far as Buddhism was concerned, it may be said with certainty that the decline of Buddhism had begun long before king Rinchāna, the son of a Buddhist Ladakhi chief, laid the foundations of first Muslim dynasty in Kashmir in 1320 CE. After having moved into the valley, Rinchāna, a soldier of fortune, captured the throne of Kashmir and embraced Islam. His establishment of a *khanqah*, the first of its kind in Srinagar, may be seen as an indicator of his keen interest in the diffusion of Islamic culture in Kashmir. The Buddhist followers of Rinchāna who had accompanied him from Ladakh to Kashmir also appear to have adopted Islam after Rinchāna's assumption of political power and subsequent conversion.⁶⁵ It has been suggested that Rinchāna's conversion to Islam was neither an isolated case nor was it merely a matter of political expediency.⁶⁶ In fact, this event is seen as an indicator of the fact that though Buddhism may have still remained in monasteries, it was no longer available as a power-base, possibly not even as the religion of any significant number of households, whereas a sizeable converted Muslim nucleus had already appeared in the urban centres of Kashmir.⁶⁷ Moreover, Rinchāna may have taken into consideration the possible political and economic benefits of being a Muslim king at a time when kings with Islamic affiliations were ruling in the plains of northern India.

Though Kashmir had been the abode of Ṛṣīs long before the advent of Islam, Nūruddīn, the son of a Hindu convert, gave a special direction to the role of Ṛṣīs in the Kashmiri society. He was able to accomplish this through his social behaviour which was more in consonance with local practices than those of scholars, jurists or Ṣūfī missionaries. Nūruddīn, who is known as the founding father of an indigenous order of Muslim mystics (*Ṛṣi Silsilah*), is credited with making the Ṛṣi movement socially significant in Kashmir. It may be pointed out that some scholars consider the Ṛṣi

⁶⁵M.I. Khan, *Kashmir's Transition to Islam...*63. Rāvanacandra, Rinchāna's brother-in-law, for instance, accepted Islam immediately after the king's conversion (Ibid).

⁶⁶Ibid.63; A.Q. Rafiqi, *Op. Cit.* 9-10; Rizvi, *Op. Cit.*, vol.1: 290.

⁶⁷Aziz Ahmad, "Conversions to Islam in the Valley of Kashmir," *Central Asiatic Journal*, vol. XXIII, 1-2, 1979: 6.

movement as only “marginally Muslim” and equate it with the Bhakti Movement⁶⁸ said to have been founded in Kashmir by Lal Ded, the Śaivite mystic of the fourteenth century.⁶⁹ The thinking of these Ṛṣis was nurtured in their Hindu and Buddhist environment which appears to have played an important role in helping the main configuration of pre-existing Kashmiri popular religion to adapt itself to the wider Islamic framework. Even during Nūruddīn’s time and long after his death when the Ṛṣi movement was strong, Brāhmaṇical ascetics had a large following among the illiterate masses of Kashmir. Such people were drawn into the fold of Nūruddīn and other Muslim Ṛṣis since they did not see much difference between the goals espoused by the Muslim Ṛṣis and their own. Thus the Ṛṣi movement, apart from being largely characterized by elements of social protest, became a haven for the surviving vestiges of Brāhmaṇical ascetic tradition to exist in Islam. It is interesting to note that asceticism of the Brāhmaṇical saints converted to Islam was particularly suited to provide a framework for the survival of such residues and the assimilation and reinterpretation of elements as were not totally incompatible with the esoteric dimension of Islam.⁷⁰ Nūruddīn and his followers shared with the Hindu-Buddhist ascetics such traits as wandering in the forests, not taking meat, avoidance of onions and green vegetables, fasting, sexual abstinence, austerities, celibacy, self-deprecation, relative seclusion, altruism, deep meditative exercises, supererogatory prayers and above all, non-injury even to plants, birds, animals, insects etc. Such practices of the Ṛṣis “must have weakened the contrast in the common mind between Islam and Hinduism or Buddhism thereby paving the way for the acceptance of the values of an alien system.”⁷¹ The Ṛṣi concept of ‘peace with all’ was borrowed from Mahāyāna Buddhism which flourished in the Kashmir valley.⁷²

While the role of the Ṛṣis and immigrant Ṣūfīs from Central Asia and Persia cannot be denied in conversions, it would be wrong to attribute the so-called ‘dramatic mass conversions’ of Kashmir to their miraculous exploits. As elsewhere in India, many people appear to have accepted Islam in Kashmir nominally in the wake of their leader’s conversion or due to political and economic motives. Initially, this process generally consisted of the converts’ passive adherence to Islam, but in the end progressed into harmony with the *Shari‘ah*. Such a process is also visible in the religious career of Nūruddīn, whose efforts to bring about reconciliation between Muslim and Brāhmaṇical-Hindu/Buddhist practices opened the doors to the gradual acculturation of the Kashmiri masses into Islamic identity. The survival of pre-Islamic names among the Ṛṣis and continued existence of the pre-Islamic customs and beliefs is also a clear indication of Kashmiris experiencing a gradual cultural and religious shift. Like in East Bengal, as a result of this prolonged and gradual acculturation, extending over a period of at least five centuries, a considerable part of the Kashmiri population either became Muslim or was understood to be so.

On the whole, the role of the Ṛṣis and Ṣūfīs in the conversion of Brāhmaṇical-Hindus and Buddhists in Kashmir was, though quite important, largely an indirect one. Prolonged and slow acculturation and assimilation spread over a long period of time must be seen as the force behind these conversions. The Ṛṣis and the Ṣūfīs basically contributed towards doing away with the distances between the Muslims and the non-Muslims. Moreover, as far as Buddhism was concerned, it must be remembered that it had largely become a spent force in Kashmir by the time the Ṛṣis and the Ṣūfīs began their work. Thus, only remnants of Buddhism were assimilated into Islam as an indirect result of their activities.

⁶⁸Bruce Lawrence, “Lectures on Sufism,” *Studies in Islam*, vol. XVIII, nos. 3-4, July-October 1981: 139; A.Q. Rafiqi, *Op. Cit.*: XVII-XVIII.

⁶⁹For a detailed analysis of Lal Ded’s historical role, see M.I. Khan, “The Impact of Islam on Kashmir in the Sultanate Period, 1320-1586,” *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. XXIII, no. 2, April-June 1986: 187-205.

⁷⁰M.I. Khan, *Kashmir’s Transition to Islam*...38.

⁷¹*Ibid.* 179.

⁷²M.I. Khan, “The Mystical Career and Poetry of Nuruddin Rishi Kashmiri: Socio-Historical Dimensions,” *Studies in Islam*, vol. XIC, nos. 1-2, January-April, 1982: 113-117.