

## As a tradition harmonizing religious diversity of Kashmir

### Discerning *Parakh*<sup>1</sup>

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#### Abstract:

*Parakh*<sup>1</sup> is the name of a week long tradition of abstaining from non-vegetarian diet practiced by Kashmiri Muslims against their traditional Non-Vegetarian dietary habits to commemorate Urs, either birthday or some other important event of a saint. It is an age old tradition that has roots in the composite religio-cultural milieu of Kashmir. This paper is aimed at understanding the practice, its possible origin and its contribution in bringing religious harmony to Kashmir. For folk tradition and oral sources which find a wider space in context to present study, southern Kashmir has been selected.

**Keywords:** *Parakh*, vegetarianism, Rishis, religious harmony, innovation, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism.

#### Introduction:

*Parakh* is the tradition of abstaining completely from non-vegetarian food for a week or more, prevalent in the Muslims of Kashmir since long. This practice is ascribed to *Rishi* saints of Kashmir who abstained from non-vegetarian food throughout their life. In their honour, the practice is still observed across Kashmir especially in South Kashmir. During these days the only dish that is cooked is the radish chopped in special rectangular geometric design (*kaele*) preferably by a carpenter.<sup>2</sup> Any violation during these days is believed to invite divine wrath and many such incidents are revealed in the local tradition. Rise of Islamic revival movements in Kashmir like

Jamat-e-Islami, Deoband School, Jamiat-e- Ahle Hadith etc. declared this practice as an innovation in Islam. They argue that as per Holy Quran, it is prohibited for a Muslim even a Prophet to abstain from a thing conferred legal by Quran which applies to the non-vegetarian food as well (Holy Quran with English Translation, 1982). From even a peripheral analysis, this tradition seems an innovation in Islam but still the practice goes on. On the other hand, *Rishis* are held in higher esteem by even the

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<sup>1</sup> *Parakh* is the Kashmiri name for the tradition followed by Muslims of Kashmir during the 11<sup>th</sup> month of Lunar Calendar (Ze Qada) for a week or two weeks during this period they completely abstain from non-vegetarian food. <sup>2</sup> In Marhama village of Anantnag district, one of such *Rishis* was Ala Dad *Rishi* who according to oral traditions belonged to a carpenter family. Ghulam Qadir Idoo, a retired headmaster who is presently the attendant of his shrine in Marhama recalls... *Albab* (the revered nickname of the saint, ordered his disciples to let only carpenters to mold the vegetable perhaps for the reason that he himself belonged to the same class. Interview was recorded on 23<sup>rd</sup> of June 2019 )

Islamic reformation movements in Kashmir. The persistence of a practice that goes against the literal meaning of Quranic verse but still is connected with the Islamic concept of earning merit is really dilemmatic. Rishis like Sheik ul Aalam, Harud Rishi, Zaina Rishi, Baba Rishi from extreme north to south of Kashmir valley are not only held in high esteem by the people but they are considered as the icons of Islam and are believed to be the chief propagators of the Islamic creed across the valley. All these Rishis were men of compassion. They are known and famous in the masses for their simple living. Sheikh ul Aalam is known for his dietary habits. He used to eat dried up leaves of dandelion *Taraxacum platycarpum*.

### **Review of literature on the theme:**

Most of the books written on the life and achievements of *Rishis* in Kashmir are mostly biographic in nature. The primary sources about *Rishis* are either their own compilations like that of Sheikh ul Aalam which are couplets commonly called *shruks* (a complex knot) which have been assembled recently by Aziz Hajini as *Noor Nama* and *Kalam e Sheikh* with both English and Urdu translations. *Tazkirat ul Salikeen* is another work which tells about the mystic life of some *Rishis*. Mostly the secondary source give a brief description of such practices without revealing the historical background. *Auliya e Kashmir* is another work, mostly concerning the spiritual achievements of various saints of Kashmir with special focus on the saints of *Rishi* order. But some famous saints like *Ala Dad Rishi* do not find a mention in these works and are known only from their tombs and the local traditions ascribed to them.

### **Research Questions:**

The Primary Research questions that are supposed to be addressed in the present study can be broadly divided into two parts. First part related to the religious credibility of such practices, their importance and the reason from Islamic perspective. Secondly the historical background of such practices like is there any relation between the concept of *karuna* of Buddhism which encouraged such practices. The influence of preceding religions like Buddhism and Hinduism may not be ignored altogether in this context.

### **Research Methodology:**

The theme under study envisages various domains like religion, dietary habits, culture, economy etc. and hence an interdisciplinary approach has been applied to conduct the research on the theme under study. In addition to established historical sources, folk traditions have also been incorporated to address the problem to maximum.

### **Origin of *Parakh*:**

While tracing the origin of a tradition, that too specific to a sub-region of a gigantic supregion, it seems necessary to understand the kernel of the tradition initially from a wider perspective which may pave the way to understand the same at a specific or local level. The identifying feature of the *Parakh* is limited abstaining from non-vegetarian food stuff. Vegetarianism, though for a limited span of time seems the superficial aim of the tradition under study though the basic aim is beyond the dietary restriction. In order to understand thus the aims and objectives of *Parakh*, it seems necessary to understand the same in the major term, *Vegetarianism*. Though the term was coined in 1800s, but

the practice was not new as we have ample references at least since the historical period of the human history, where vegetarianism was practiced with spiritual zeal and zest. Vegetarianism is strongly connected to India, through spiritual and philosophical means.

“Hinduism has the most profound connection with a vegetarian way of life and the strongest claim to fostering and supporting it.” (Fox, 1999)

Vegetarianism has not been the religious obligation during early Vedic period, its importance in the religious domain seems sprouting around the *Upanishad* period, when soul emerged as the more important aspect of religion subsiding the rituals and sacrifices. If Hinduism considers nonvegetarian diet irreligious, is mainly due to concept of soul which was imbibed by Jainism as one of its core teaching in the form of *ahimsa*. According to Registrar General and Census Commissioner of India, almost 60 to 70 % Indians consume meat, though it includes 14.3% Muslims who are generally non-vegetarians. According to a report published by BBC, an estimated 20% population of India falls in vegetarian category while the rest 80% falls in non-vegetarian category of varied nature, ranging from beef consumption to poultry.<sup>2</sup> In such a scenario, abstaining from meat for a limited period of seven days depicts the revival, though in fraction of some tradition that might have once been a continued practice. It brings the importance of religious history of the religion which was never stagnant but dynamic with religious evolution, transition and synchronization. In addition to religious historicity, it seems important to understand the ways and approaches of the saints who are considered beacons of the tradition. As most of these saints belong to rishi order and not to Sufi order, the former being close in makeup and the operation to the oldest established religion of the valley, the Buddhism. The monastic order has a code of conduct, the *Patimokha* which negated use of meat by monks. As Kashmir has remained an orchard of Buddhism for centuries, the imbibition of this tradition might have continued at least in the almost ascetic or monkish religious personalities. There may be an economic aspect as well owing to geographical conditions of the valley, which needs to be enquired. But for the present study, the most important factor is the reason for avoiding contact with meat. As there are several oral reasons cited for the *Parakh* and one among them, seemingly the most relevant is that consumption of meat ignites lust or in other words the strongest desire. As per a research in this context published in *Frontiers in Psychology*, says:

"..... meat consumption may have specific nutritional benefits for adult men. Meat contains creatine, (naturally occurring only in animal-sourced foods), which improves muscular strength, size, and physical and neural performance"<sup>4</sup> (Hamish J Love, 2018)

As we find, the crux of the teachings of the saints in whose memory the *Parakh* is observed, was the utmost control over desire. Holding or overcoming desire has been the core concern of Buddhism which survived in Kashmir for almost 10 centuries. Such a long span of time may be considered enough to imprint the essence of controlling desire on the Kashmir. Though there were other religions as well as cults in Kashmir, but none among them stressed upon vegetarianism as a religious obligation. There are other reasons as well which connect *Rishi* moment with Buddhist way of religious propagation. First which seems most relevant is the use of common language. The Hinayana Buddhism is known for its simplicity and the use of a common language against the lofty rituals and use of a God language, the Sanskrit. The *Rishis* propounded about the essence of self and

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<sup>2</sup> Biswas Soutik, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-43581122> Retrieved on 2 July 2021.

the mortal reality of the world, in Islamic perspective using the common language, the Kashmiri. They lived a simple life, mostly on toes from place to place in order to spread their word of love. In addition to it, most of the shrines ascribed to *Rishis* of Kashmir have a sacred tree, may be taken at par with groove concept of Buddhism and their relics are not only preserved in their shrines, rather they are displayed on some special occasions to the devotees with the belief of either transmitting merit or the blessings of the saint to whom the relics belong. A vivid example of it may be seen in the shrine of Sheikh Zain ud Din Wali, at Aishmuqam, *en route* to Pahalgam. Just outside the tomb, which is in a sedimentary rock cave, there is a recently constructed shed with relics including the rosary (*made of pebbles*), Bow, coffin, wooden sandals (*Khraaw*) and staff. These relics are not like antiques, they have a kind of life, acting like a mediator between the devotee and the divine, the *rishi*. On the basis of these seemingly similarities, the origin of the Parakh tradition may have a Buddhist base, not the continuity of a tradition that existed and was the part of Buddhist Sangha, but a way or technique either to understand annually the consequences of clinging to desire or to rejuvenate the soul against the desire. Almost all the *rishis* of Kashmir were vegetarians even they preferred the wilted or dried leaves over the green leaves. The tradition was only a glimpse of the controlling desire technique used by *rishis* and was for the lay folk.

#### **Analysis:**

While the *rishis* were Muslims, their message is full of Unity of God, the main difference between Islam and Polytheistic religions, they had a deep knowledge of the Scripture, the Quran. The short verses of Sheikh Noor ud Din Noorani simply amaze a modern scholar, when we find the crux of the Scripture, he has been able to put into few words. The concept of self, unity of god, compassion, humanity and worldly illusion lay openly explained in a few terms. *Rishis* of Kashmir have following among both Hindu and Muslim communities mostly because of a shared tradition

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they followed as well as propagated. In the *shruks*<sup>3</sup>. It is also a fact that life events of *rishis* revolve around two contemporary religions of Kashmir, Hinduism (*Kashmiri Saivism*) and the Sufi Islam without any mention of Buddhist interference. The applied or practical portion of their life does depict Buddhist practices in absentia without even the tag which makes it logical to include the influence of Buddhist way of negating desire with technique of self-control. In this manner, the domain of *rishis* criss-crosses the three important religions that flourished in Kashmir since its traditional birth from the womb of gigantic lake, Satisar. Another factor that relates the tradition with checking of desire is the presence of the term *nafs* (vaguely translated as self but in Kashmiri directly means the uncontrolled desire).

Thus, the origin of the tradition of *Parakh* was a short period of making the self deprived of its desire, to make it slave and not a master. In Islam, the fasting during the month of Ramadan, the ninth month of Hijri calendar aims at the same theme, almost. The verse about fasting thus states:

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<sup>3</sup> Shruk is the name given to verses compiled by Sheikh Noor u Din which are in a condense form, envisaging the core messages of religions, simplified in a few terms.

"O you who have believed, decreed upon you is fasting as it was decreed upon those before you that you may become righteous. [Fasting for] a limited number of days."<sup>4</sup>

Fasting for a limited period, a month is mandatory with exception for those who are in travel, sick or the women with feminine issues. God clearly mentions the aim of this limited fasting, that is to be righteous or god fearing which in turn means negating the uncontrolled desires. In the following verses, with abstaining from food, water and other edible items, sexual intercourse with wives during the day [from dawn to dusk] is also prohibited, which further stresses that the sole aim of the fasting is to control desire, sexuality being one of the prime in the list. Fasting is in no manner self-mortification, rather it is making the self feel the austerity and deprivation of the others, so that the compassion is awakened and the desire is controlled. As the *rishis* were Muslims by faith, they imbibed the common ways of checking the self from becoming a victim of uncontrolled desire. Among the three strata of *rishis* in Kashmir, the second and third strata almost shunned the practice of non-vegetarianism and practised extremely simple vegetarianism. As fasting is mandatory and directly ordered by Quran, *rishis* seem to have understood the application of total fasting as an innovation, hence they devised a lesser strict replica, negating only the use of meat which as per supra discussion shall check the lust, the libido as per Sigmund Freud.

Primarily, the importance of the practice seems to be aimed at emancipation by avoiding desire which makes the self astray. Sheikh Noor u Din thus says:

*"Nafsan kernam adal teye vadal, Nafsan kernam zaddal cxeve*

*Nafs choye madhoosh haenkal Cxatti, Yem rot nafs suye woat lamakaan".<sup>7</sup>*

This concept of self control echoes in one of the anthologies of Rumi as well. The narration this goes:

"Once a snake catcher, who used to earn his living by displaying varied species of snakes to his show viewers, decided to catch some strange species of snake, to make his viewers puzzled and to fetch more coins. He left for the hunt, saw a huge serpent almost freezed in a valley. He was extremely happy over his discover, wrapped the serpent in rags and brought it home. Next day, he displayed his discovery to his viewers in the market of Baghdad, people were amazed. The serpent was slowly untied, the warmth brought life to the cold blooded giant, he became active and engulfed his master followed by some viewers."<sup>5</sup>

This concept of Rumi's self control thus echoes in the small couplet of Sheikh which depicts desire as the warmth that can bring to life the gigantic serpent which lies freezed in self. The warmth that brings the serpent to life and engulfs all is provided by uncontrolled desires. The *rishis* seemed to have freezed the serpent forever and to help the masses to freeze the same, they might have initiated the practice of *Parakh* so that like Ramadan, they may be able to practice control over desires, by abstaining from their favourite diet for a limited period and take a keen care of their self from the

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<sup>4</sup> Pickthal, Mohammad Marmaduke, *Holy Quran With English Translation*, 11<sup>th</sup> Ed. New Delhi. Verse 2:183-84. <sup>77</sup> Literal meaning: Self has brought me down and made the thatching pierced, it is a drunk elephant, those who controlled it reached to domain of nothingness. Lamakaan is an Arabic term which means the place where there is no concept of space and time and is considered the highest place where God himself is.

<sup>5</sup> Rumi, *Masnavi*, Tr.Urdu *Masnavi Molvi Manavi*, Vol.III,pp. 102-106

warmth of desires. The legends of wrath might have facilitated the observance of practice seriously in a society more keen to traditions than acquired factual knowledge. The objection to such practices in the contemporary times has proved the same, though *rishis* aimed at mending the self without any intention of dogma propagation. While inspiring masses to practice *Parakh*, there seems no instinct except the spiritual welfare of the masses and thus seems the expression of compassion *rishis* were laden with.

Though, there is no Islamic credibility of the practice, in the sense of being obligatory, but there seems an analogy indeed. As the fasting during the month of Ramadan is obligatory with relaxation for sick and those in travel, the practice of *Parakh* may be considered a replica of the same with consequences for non-observance woven around traditions that increased in size with the passage of time. It may also be assumed that the practice developed as an honest imitation of the practical life of the *rishis* who abandoned luxurious appetite and preferred to live a simple life with higher spirituality. In such circumstances, the origin of the practice may be attributed to followers of the *rishis* and not directly to *rishis* as a command to their followers.

### **Conclusion:**

From supra discussion, it may be concluded that the practice of *Parakh* has roots in controlling desires which are the epithets of almost all the religions that flourished in Kashmir, Buddhism being the chief one and the Sufi Islam the runner up. As long as its relation with Islam is concerned, the relevance may be traced to fasting which aims at developing fear of god which ultimately aims at making the man truly slave of the creator by negating the rise of desires. As long as the origin of the practice is concerned, it is almost blurred as the practice has two possible origins either directly from the *rishis* as a command from them or merely the imitation of their extremely simple living by the followers, so the historical origin is difficult to trace with certainty. Whatever may be the origin of the practice, the consequences may be felt in social, economical and spiritual domain certainly. In social context, the practice, if not evaluated for spiritual elevation, brought all the sections into one with the simplest diet, making the elites to feel the misery of non-havers though for a limited time. It might have developed a feeling of compassion in havers for non-havers of whatsoever degree. In spiritual domain, the consequences of the practice were extremely important as it worked as a catalyst to control the rise of desires which in turn helped in purifying the soul, making it the required soul before the god. Above all, it helped in bringing religious harmony to a region where dietary practices were so diverse that even from the diet the creed of a person could be established. It helped in erasing the traditional distinction lines, merging the many into one, bringing harmony in true sense.

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