

INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH JOURNAL OF MANAGEMENT SOCIOLOGY & HUMANITIES



ISSN 2277 – 9809 (online)

ISSN 2348 - 9359 (Print)

An Internationally Indexed Peer Reviewed & Refereed Journal

www.IRJMSH.com
www.isarasolutions.com

Published by iSaRa Solutions

Sacred Spaces through Time: Historical Continuity and Transformation of Shrines in Kashmir

Dr Gousia Khan

Senior Assistant Professor in History

GDC for Women, M. A. Road, Srinagar

gousiakhan@gmail.com

Jammu & Kashmir Higher Education Dept.

Abstract

This paper traces the historical evolution of sacred spaces in Kashmir from the ancient tirtha tradition to Buddhist and Shaiva centres, and subsequently to Sufi khanqahs and Muslim ziyarats. The history of Kashmir shrines is best understood through the concepts of continuity, adaptation and transformation rather than absolute rupture. Ancient Kashmir possessed a dense sacred geography of springs, mountains, temples and pilgrimage sites. The arrival and expansion of Islam from the fourteenth century introduced new religious institutions, particularly the khanqah, which gradually became important centres of spiritual instruction, social welfare, education and patronage. Following the death of prominent Sufis, many khanqahs and their surrounding spaces acquired the character of shrines. These sites subsequently became repositories of manuscripts, relics, architecture, genealogies and collective memory. Shrines thus constitute important historical sources for understanding Kashmir's religious, social, political and cultural transformations.

Introduction

The history of Kashmir has frequently been presented through major political and religious transitions: the ancient Hindu and Buddhist periods, the establishment of Muslim rule under the Shah Mir dynasty, the Mughal annexation, Afghan rule, Sikh rule and the Dogra period. Such periodisation is useful for political history, but it can sometimes obscure continuities in the everyday cultural landscape. Shrines provide an especially valuable lens through which these continuities can be examined.

A shrine is not simply a structure built over a grave. It is a historical space in which architecture, ritual, memory, patronage and community experience intersect. The contemporary Kashmiri shrine often contains traces of several historical periods. Its architecture may preserve traditional Kashmiri craftsmanship; its associated mosque reflects Islamic religious practice; its manuscripts

may preserve Persian texts; its oral traditions may recall generations of custodians; and its annual ‘urs may connect the present community with a Sufi who lived centuries ago.

The historical role of shrines is therefore not limited to religion. They have functioned as centres of social interaction, education, patronage, charity and political legitimacy. This paper examines the historical evolution of these institutions and argues that Kashmir’s sacred landscape demonstrates transformation without complete discontinuity.

Ancient Kashmir and the Formation of Sacred Geography

Long before the emergence of Islam, Kashmir possessed a highly developed sacred geography. The Rajatarangini of Kalhana, composed in the twelfth century, provides valuable evidence of temples, sacred springs, pilgrimage places and religious institutions throughout the Valley. Kalhana’s famous statement that there was scarcely a space in Kashmir without a tirtha conveys the extraordinary density of sacred places in the region.

Sacred geography was not restricted to temples. Springs, lakes, mountains, caves and rivers could acquire religious significance. The association of natural features with Nagas, deities and legendary events transformed the physical landscape into a sacred one. Buddhism added its own institutional and architectural forms, including monasteries and stupas, while Kashmir’s later Shaiva traditions produced important centres of philosophical and devotional activity.

Consequently, when Islam began to establish a permanent presence in Kashmir from the fourteenth century onwards, it encountered an already deeply sacralised landscape. The significance of this fact is crucial. Islam did not arrive in an empty cultural space. Sufis, Muslim rulers and local converts encountered communities whose understanding of sacred geography had developed over many centuries.

The subsequent Islamic sacred landscape should therefore be studied as a historical development within an already sacred environment. This does not mean that every Islamic shrine replaced an earlier temple or tirtha. Rather, in some locations, older traditions of sacred geography continued to influence patterns of pilgrimage, while new Islamic meanings and institutions emerged alongside them.

The Advent of Islam and the Emergence of the Khanqah

The fourteenth century marked a decisive transformation in the religious history of Kashmir. Figures such as Bulbul Shah and Mir Sayyid Ali Hamadani, together with numerous other Sufis, contributed to the expansion of Islam in the Valley.

The khanqah became one of the most important institutions associated with this process. Unlike the later shrine, the khanqah was primarily a living centre of spiritual instruction and Sufi fellowship. It could accommodate disciples, travellers and seekers and provide a setting for prayer, zikr, teaching and charitable activity.

The most celebrated example is Khanqah-i-Mu'ala in Srinagar, traditionally associated with Mir Sayyid Ali Hamadani, popularly known as Shah-i-Hamadan or Amir-i-Kabir. Its importance extends far beyond its architectural beauty. It represents the propagation of Islam in Kashmir and the emergence of Islamic intellectual and spiritual traditions.

The khanqah also became an institution through which Islam interacted with Kashmiri society. Persian language and literature, Islamic jurisprudence, Quranic learning and Sufi teachings were transmitted through these centres. In this sense, the khanqah was simultaneously religious, educational and social.

Khanqahs, Patronage and State Formation

The historical importance of the khanqah increased through royal and elite patronage. Under the Shah Mir rulers and subsequent Muslim dynasties, religious institutions received forms of endowment and patronage. Land, agricultural revenues and other resources could support religious establishments.

The concept of waqf was particularly important in sustaining religious institutions. Endowments enabled khanqahs, mosques and related establishments to support scholars, Sufis, students, travellers and the poor.

This economic foundation transformed the khanqah from a purely spiritual centre into a significant institution within Kashmiri society. Its custodians could acquire considerable moral and social authority. The relationship between rulers and Sufi establishments also contributed to the political legitimacy of successive regimes.

The khanqah could perform several functions:

1. Religious instruction: Quranic studies, jurisprudence and Sufi teachings were imparted to disciples and visitors.
2. Spiritual discipline: Practices such as zikr, meditation and devotional gatherings formed part of Sufi life.
3. Charity: Food and assistance could be provided to travellers, students and the poor.
4. Social mediation: Religious figures could exercise moral authority and mediate disputes.

5. Cultural transmission: Persian language, literature, calligraphy and Islamic intellectual traditions were disseminated through these institutions.

Thus, the historical role of the khanqah extended well beyond worship. It became part of the institutional structure of medieval Kashmiri society.

Sufi Networks and the Expansion of Sacred Institutions

The development of Sufism in Kashmir did not occur through a single lineage. Various Sufi traditions influenced the Valley, including the Kubrawiya, Suhrawardiya, Qadiriya and Naqshbandiya traditions. Each contributed to the formation of particular spiritual networks and centres of devotion.

The spread of these traditions created a network of sacred places across Kashmir. Shrines associated with different Sufis subsequently became markers of these spiritual lineages.

The historical importance of this network is particularly visible in Srinagar and other major centres. Dastgeer Sahib at Khanyar, associated with the Qadiri tradition and the spiritual legacy of Sheikh Abdul Qadir Jilani, became an important site of devotional practice. Naqshband Sahib, associated with the Naqshbandi tradition, represents another major strand in the history of Kashmiri Sufism.

Outside Srinagar, Tsar-i-Sharif, associated with Sheikh Nuruddin Rishi, occupies an exceptional place in Kashmir's religious history. The Rishi tradition represented by Nuruddin Rishi developed distinctive expressions of spirituality that became deeply embedded in Kashmiri cultural memory.

Similarly, Aishmuqam, associated with Sheikh Zain-ud-din Wali, demonstrates how Sufi sacred centres developed beyond the major urban institutions of Srinagar.

Together these sites demonstrate that Kashmir's sacred landscape was transformed through a network of Sufi institutions rather than through a single centralised process.

From Khanqah to Shrine: The Memorialisation of Sufis

A major transformation occurred following the death of prominent Sufis. The grave of a revered spiritual figure could become a site of visitation and remembrance. Where the grave was situated within or near a khanqah, the institution gradually acquired an additional commemorative function.

The transition from khanqah to shrine should not, however, be understood as a sudden institutional replacement. In many cases, the two functions overlapped. The living religious institution continued to operate while the tomb became an additional focus of devotion.

Over time, structures were built over important graves, and these became known as mazars, ziyarats or, in Kashmiri usage, asthans. The annual ‘urs commemorating the death anniversary of the saint became an important occasion for religious gatherings.

This process created a powerful mechanism of historical memory. A Sufi’s teachings, genealogy, spiritual lineage and association with particular rulers or communities could all become attached to the shrine.

The shrine consequently became a memorial institution. It preserved the memory of individuals whose lives had shaped the religious history of Kashmir.

Shrines as Historical Archives

One of the most important historical roles of shrines is their capacity to preserve material and intangible records of the past.

Shrine complexes may contain:

- * manuscripts and religious texts;
- * Persian and Arabic inscriptions;
- * genealogical records of custodians;
- * waqf documents;
- * architectural remains;
- * relics and objects associated with saints;
- * oral traditions;
- * records of ‘urs celebrations; and
- * traditions concerning patronage by rulers and local elites.

Dargah Hazratbal provides a particularly significant example of sacred memory centred on the Mou-e-Muqaddas, the revered relic associated with the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. The history of the relic and the shrine demonstrates how a sacred object can acquire enormous religious and historical significance in Kashmir.

Likewise, the architecture of Khanqah-e-Mu’ala is itself a historical source. Its traditional wooden construction, decorative craftsmanship and distinctive architectural vocabulary preserve aspects of Kashmiri artistic history. The building is therefore both a religious institution and a material record of the region’s cultural past.

The historical value of shrines extends beyond written documents. Oral traditions preserved by custodians and local communities frequently contain information about saints, families, patronage, migrations and changing political circumstances that may not survive in formal chronicles.

Shrines and Historical Memory

Shrines also act as institutions of collective memory. The annual 'urs is not simply a religious observance; it is an occasion when historical memory is publicly reconstructed.

At Tsar-i-Sharif, the memory of Sheikh Nuruddin is sustained through recitation, devotional gatherings and narratives concerning his teachings. The Sufi becomes a bridge between generations. Younger Kashmiris encounter the historical personality not simply through textbooks but through participation in a living tradition.

The same process operates at other shrines. The names of Sufis, their spiritual lineages and their teachings become embedded in local geography. Villages, neighbourhoods and roads may themselves be identified through their proximity to particular shrines.

In this sense, shrines function as mnemonic landscapes. They allow history to become part of everyday space.

Continuity and Transformation

The historical significance of Kashmiri shrines lies ultimately in the relationship between continuity and transformation.

It would be misleading to describe Kashmir's religious history either as complete continuity or as complete rupture. The region experienced profound religious and political changes. Buddhism, Shaivism, Islam and different Sufi traditions each contributed to its cultural development.

Yet cultural traditions rarely disappear without leaving traces. Sacred geography, pilgrimage habits, reverence for particular landscapes and forms of communal religious gathering could acquire new meanings under changing religious circumstances.

The emergence of Muslim shrines therefore represents not simply the replacement of one sacred system by another but the creation of new forms of sacred geography within an already historically layered landscape.

This process may be described as re-inscription: an existing landscape receives new meanings while older historical associations may survive, transform or coexist in memory.

Shrines under Changing Political Regimes

The historical role of shrines continued under the Mughals, Afghans, Sikhs and Dogras, although their institutional circumstances changed. Rulers recognised the political and social importance of religious establishments and, at different times, provided patronage or administrative support.

Shrines could thus become points of interaction between state authority and local society. Control over endowments, appointment of custodians and management of religious property sometimes became politically significant.

At the same time, shrines remained rooted in local communities. Their survival depended not only upon rulers but also upon devotees, custodial families, local donors and religious networks.

This explains their remarkable endurance. Political regimes changed, but many shrines continued to function because they were embedded in social life.

Conclusion

The historical role of shrines in Kashmir extends far beyond their function as places of entombment or pilgrimage. They represent the accumulated history of Kashmir's sacred landscape and provide important evidence for understanding the interaction of religion, society, politics and culture.

From the ancient tirtha tradition documented by Kalhana to the emergence of Buddhist and Shaiva sacred centres, and from the establishment of Sufi khanqahs to the development of ziyarats and mazars, Kashmir's sacred geography has undergone profound transformation while retaining important elements of continuity.

The khanqah became a major institution of religious instruction, charity, social interaction and cultural transmission. Following the deaths of prominent Sufis, many of these institutions developed commemorative dimensions and became shrines. In the process, they preserved genealogies, manuscripts, architecture, relics, oral traditions and collective memories.

Major sites such as Khanqah-e-Mu'ala, Dargah Hazratbal, Tsar-i-Sharif, Dastgir Sahib, Naqshband Sahib and Aishmuqam demonstrate the diversity and historical depth of Kashmir's shrine tradition.

Shrines may therefore be regarded as living archives of Kashmiri history. They preserve the past not only in stone, wood, manuscripts and relics, but also in ritual, memory and community practice.

Their conservation is consequently important not merely for religious reasons but for the preservation of Kashmir's broader historical and cultural heritage.

Bibliography

1. Kalhana. Rajatarangini. Translated by Aurel Stein.
2. Khan, Muhammad Ishaq. Kashmir's Transition to Islam: The Role of Muslim Rishis, New Delhi: Manohar.
3. Khan, Gousia. "Role and Significance of Shrines in Kashmiri Culture." The Journal of Kashmir Studies, University of Kashmir.
4. Hassan, Mohibbul. Kashmir Under the Sultans.



EARN YOUR MBA

WWW.IIMPS.IN



Accreditation & Ranking



UGC / NCTE Approved.

INFO@IIMPS.IN

☎ 011-41005174

RESEARCH
GATEWAY

STOP PLAGIARISM



Arogyam Ayurveda
Holistic Healing through herbs



AROGYAM
ONLINE

PARIVARTAN PSYCHOLOGY CENTER

परिवर्तन

COLOR PSYCHOLOGY : HOW COLOR AFFECT YOUR CHILD



BLUE

Calms your Child's
Mind & Body

YELLOW

Promotes Concentration,
Stimulates the Memory

PINK

Evokes Empathy,
makes your Child Calm

RED

Excites and energizes
your Child's body

GREEN

Improves Reading speed
and Comprehension

www.parivartan4u.com



परिवर्तन

Confuse about your children's future?

भारतीय भाषा, शिक्षा, साहित्य एवं शोध

ISSN 2321 – 9726

WWW.BHARTIYASHODH.COM



**INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH JOURNAL OF
MANAGEMENT SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY**

ISSN – 2250 – 1959 (O) 2348 – 9367 (P)

WWW.IRJMSST.COM



**INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH JOURNAL OF
COMMERCE, ARTS AND SCIENCE**

ISSN 2319 – 9202

WWW.CASIRJ.COM



**INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH JOURNAL OF
MANAGEMENT SOCIOLOGY & HUMANITIES**

ISSN 2277 – 9809 (O) 2348 - 9359 (P)

WWW.IRJMSH.COM



**INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH JOURNAL OF SCIENCE
ENGINEERING AND TECHNOLOGY**

ISSN 2454-3195 (online)

WWW.RJSET.COM



**INTEGRATED RESEARCH JOURNAL OF
MANAGEMENT, SCIENCE AND INNOVATION**

ISSN 2582-5445

WWW.IRJMSI.COM



**JOURNAL OF LEGAL STUDIES, POLITICS
AND ECONOMICS RESEARCH**

WWW.JLPER.COM

JLPE