

# A SOCIO-RELIGIOUS AND ECONOMIC PERSPECTIVE OF TRANSFORMATION OF MEDIEVAL KASHMIR BY SAYYID ALI HAMADANI

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the pivotal role of Sayyid Ali Hamadani (Shah-i-Hamadan) in reshaping the religious, social, cultural, and economic landscape of medieval Kashmir. Arriving in a period marked by political instability, religious confusion, and economic decline, Hamadani introduced Islam not merely as a creed but as a comprehensive way of life grounded in tawheed, taqwa, ikhlas, and social unity. Through peaceful missionary activity, personal example, and the support of a learned and skilled entourage, he facilitated large-scale conversions while maintaining harmony with existing social groups and rulers. His influence extended beyond spirituality to concrete reforms in governance, education, trade, crafts, architecture, and agriculture, notably through the introduction of the karkhana system and handicraft industries such as shawl-making. By reviving ethical conduct, reducing social exploitation, and fostering economic self-reliance, Hamadani filled a profound ideological and socio-economic void in the valley. The paper highlights how his balanced approach—combining spiritual guidance, moral reform, and material development—laid the foundations of an enduring Islamic society in Kashmir, the impact of which continues to resonate more than six centuries later.

## Keywords:

Mir Sayyid Ali Hamadani; Kashmir; Sufism; Islamization; Socio-economic reforms; arts and crafts; shawl industry; khanqahs; Rishism; medieval Kashmir; Central Asian influence

## Introduction:

Mir Syid Ali Hamadani (Shah-i-Hamdan/ Amir-i-Kabir) (1314–1384 CE), a renowned Islamic Sufi reformer who visited Kashmir three times between 1372 and 1384 (Hassan, 1959). Accompanied by around 700 scholars, artisans, and missionaries, he introduced a holistic vision of Islam rooted in spirituality, ethics, and social responsibility. Shah-e-Hamdan intensify *Tawheed*, *Taqwa*, *Ikhlas*, and communal unity, while consciously keeping away from political office to preserve spiritual autonomy. His penned books, especially *Dhakhirat-ul-Muluk*, exhibit his engagement with governance, ethics, and social order, reflecting the integration of moral philosophy with practical life (Bashir, 2013). Out of this, Sayyid Ali Hamdani gave unusual importance to the Kashmir valley. It is said that due to the history of Kashmiri rulers, which included Mauryas, Kushans, Sultans, Mughals, Afghans and so on, the religious order of the valley was highly disturbed (Stein, 1900).

Before the advent of Mir Sayyid Ali Hamadani in Kashmir, the valley was engulfed in Brahmanical idolatry and other non-Islamic practices. Although Islam had reached the valley long ago, it was not practically followed anywhere (Hassan, 1959; Khan, 2004).

Narratively, Mir Sayyid Ali Hamadani was a sightseer and historians like Muhiud Din Sufi and Muhibul Hassan agreed with this, both relying on Miskin, agree on the fact that Mir Sayyid Ali Hamadani visited Kashmir three times, in 774/1372-73, 781/1379-80 and 785/1383-84. However, there is no mention of any activity of Hamadani during his first two visits.

The initial reason, which is broadly acknowledged, details that Shah-i-Hamadan was highly influenced by the Naqshbandi order from birth. However, Naqshbandis keen interest and participation in politics mark a compulsion before the Saiyyids of Hamadan to reject Timur's rule. Consequently, Timur, with his rising power, crushed all who appeared in his way, and somehow Shah-i-Hamadan, along with his 700 Saadat, fled for safety and entered Kashmir in 1379 as refugees (Rafiqui, 1990).

It is also said that Shah-i-Hamadan had earlier sent one of his Saadats, Taj al-Din, to proceed to visit for the visit of Shah-i-Hamadan himself so that they could enlighten the people of the valley with the message of Islam.

R.K.Parmu 1969 records the second important reason for the escape of many, including Saiyyids from Persia, due to fear of a disease. The Muslim ruler Sultan Qutb ud-Din received the group warmly and made all enjoyable arrangements for them in his Sultanate.

Shah-i-Hamadan was recognised for his outstanding spiritual energy, which was so strong that he could bring all the people of the Valley into the fold of Islam.

In this very context, Allama Iqbal said about Shah-i-Hamadan, "the leader of the leaders, Commander of the non-Arab Muslims: his hands were the builders of the fate of Islamic Communities". (Iqbal. A) Shah-i-Hamadan based his teachings on the concepts of Tawheed, Taqwa, Ikhlas and Unity.

که خاکِ کشمیر از نفس او زنده شد	سید علی ہمدانی، آن مرد حق
نہ خانقاہ نشین، نہ اسپر شاہ و وزیر	فقیہ و صوفی و سالارِ کارزارِ حیات
نگاہش ملت آفرین، قدم انقلاب	خودِ اش محکم و گفتارِ او قرآن
کہ دین بی عمل افسانہ ای بیش نیست	ز مردانِ خدا آموز رسمِ زندگی

Amir-i-Kabir exerted a profound and multifaceted impact on Kashmir's economy, society and culture. The influence is also enthrall in the lives of the people of the valley, who, even in Kashmir, read and understand the tenets of Islam on the lines marked by Shah-i-Hamadan, which had already been drawn by the Prophet Muhammad (SAWS).

Even before his entry, many other Muslim missionaries attempted to inspire the masses of Kashmir. Bulbulshah, a Muslim missionary of great repute, was not able to popularise the faith; although he succeeded in acquiring state patronage for the new faith by successfully converting King Rinchina to his creed.

It is a recorded fact that due to the single efforts of Hamadani and his Saadats, Kashmiris adopted a new pattern of life. It is also a remarkable fact that in spite of the apparent hardships of the people who emerged in polytheism, he succeeded in spreading the blessings of Islam, and there is no denying the fact that his hands were the builders of the fate of Islamic communities. Credit goes to Shah-e-Hamadan for establishing a model Islamic Society wherever he went, particularly in the Kashmir valley.

Shah-i-Hamadan opened a new chapter in the history of Kashmir with over 37000 conversions to Islam within a short span of time. Since Shah-i-Hamadan was a great scholar, theologian, sociologist, and proved a genius by contributing generously across ethics, science, philosophy, jurisprudence, theology, poetry and prose. His impact is quite clear on the economy and culture, also because the economy was declining due to failed political policies, invalid taxation policies, the feudal system, reduced participation in agriculture and degradation in morals. The rulers and subjects were disintegrated, and foreign forces were intensifying the confusion by forcibly occupying the state land.

At the end of the 10th century A.D., Kashmir countered a socio-political equilibrium that dynamically uneased the valley. Life became extremely difficult after the Mongol invasion: "Kashmir became almost a region before creation; a vast field with few men without food and full of grass". Even after 1320, the newly established Sultanate faced disturbances on all fronts and was unable to devise alternate modes of living, besides failing to renovate the economic system of the valley. Thus, the conditions prevailing in Kashmir were favourable enough for the assertion of Shah-i-Hamadan and his ideology, which he brought from Central Asia in the shape of Islam. His creed filled the religious and ideological void that was created by the frustrating socio-economic situation prevailing in the valley at that time.

Shah-i-Hamadan was quite aware of the benefits of trade, commerce and other means of earning a livelihood. So he introduced the pattern prevailing in Central Asia. Shah-i-Hamadan's keen interest inspired Sultan Qutb ud Din (1374-1389) to introduce modes of life befitting the Muslim court and society. The Sultan, therefore,

earnestly strove to remodel the socio-economic system of Kashmir, which had brought ample material prosperity to that region. This modelling was based primarily on the introduction of arts and crafts, a technique in Central Asia, and secondarily on the mineral resources and modernised irrigation system to improve the livelihood of the masses.

Shah-i-Hamadan enthused Sultan Qutb al-Din to establish the shawl industry in Kashmir on the design of the Central Asian Karkhana. This way, he reorganised the industry system in Kashmir, thereby bringing the economic lines of the people to the growing front and restructuring the Kashmiri society under the influence of Islam. He shaped the economic system on the concept of labour division, and apart from employing skilled labour, these Karkhanas imparted training to Kashmiris in various techniques of manufacturing what was required by the people.

Now, after production, the goods were to be distributed, and the Karkhanas necessitated the establishment of markets, which further intensified the process of urbanisation and gave impetus to trade and commerce. This was the real turning point in history because markets had no existence before, since there were no such commodities available. Steadily, the markets gained popularity because of the highly skilled commodities, and the volume of trade increased with every passing day. This resulted not only in the example material prosperity of the people but also in considerable artistic activity, which, ultimately, especially in the reign of Sultan Zain al-Abidin, attracted the attention of foreign customers. Consequently, the valley began exporting its products to foreign countries, where Kashmir's craftsmanship excited wonder and evoked tremendous praise and appreciation.

Shah-i-Hamadan introduced the concept of Muslim architecture by constructing Khanqahs, mosques and tombs in a distinctive pattern, which was unique for this region. This enhanced the opportunities for employment. Thus, the Karkhana system and the Muslim architecture adopted by the Sultans under the guidance of Hazrat Syed Ali made it easier for artisans and craftsmen to earn their livelihood and sustain themselves more comfortably and honourably than their predecessors in the field.

Not only were new patterns of livelihood taken into account, but the agricultural, irrigation and industrial infrastructure were also revived by introducing new techniques. Canals were dug to meet the needs of irrigation, which led to people abandoning agriculture. Among other land reforms, mention must be made of the reduction in taxes, which was so heavy that even a Kashmiri couldn't afford an essential commodity like salt. It was after Shah-i-Hamadan's successful economic strategies that, unlike other Muslim missionaries, Islam was popularised in the valley with more vigour and enthusiasm. Only when Kashmiris realised these benefits of Shah-i-Hamadan's strategy, directly affecting their day-to-day life by accepting Islam as their faith.

Shah Hamdan's influence in the valley was profound due to the unity he emphasised, which resulted in his team being devoted to Islam.

Some prominent and important members of his team included Khwaja Ishaq Khatlani, an 'alim, to whom Saiyid wedded his own daughter; Shaykh Qawam-al-Din; Saiyid Hussain Simnani who is said to have accompanied Taji-ud-Din before the visit of Shah-i-Hamadan to Kashmir and is said to have influenced Sultan Shihab-ud-Din (1354-73) and Sultan Qutb-ud-Din (1373-89); Saiyid Kamal, who taught Sharia to Sultan Qutb-ud-Din, Saiyid Jamal al-Din who was a Muhaddith; Muhammad Kazim also known as Saiyid Qazi emerged as Chief Librarian; Saiyid Muhammad Baihaqi; Saiyid Muhammad Ainposh, Saiyid Baha-ud-Din and Saiyid Muhammad Balkhi.

Shah-i-Hamadan's team was brimful with intellectuals, Ulama, artisans, craftsmen and other technical personalities who, besides religious ideals, brought economic prosperity to Kashmir.

This team was peaceful, and all historians are sure of the fact that no one used violence or any means of force to spread the message of Islam. Although they were able to maintain healthy relations with the rulers, they never provided military or coercive help, which they could have easily adopted.

With the declining economy of the valley, people were getting involved in morally corrupt practices like the proliferation of castes and sub-castes in the society, exploitation of the common people by the traditional Brahmins, frequent inter- and sectarian civil wars between different sections of the society, vague beliefs and lawlessness, which helped the common people in the society. The common man was eager for a healthy change in the system, and thus the number of converts to Islam was increasing, which was a milestone to achieve in the 14th century, as the tide of Kashmir's history was now in the hands of the Muslims.

Sayyid Ali Hamadani did not confine his assistance and message to the downtrodden and Muslims alone, but he also attracted the privileged classes of society, including sultans, nobles, Brahmins, and some non-Muslims, especially Hindus.

Shah-i-Hamadani was held in great esteem by Sultan Qutb al-Din in and outside his court, but there is no evidence of Shah Hamdan's direct or indirect participation in politics. However, it is said that he exerted a great influence on the sultan through timely teachings, advice, ideas, justifications, decisions and principles of the Holy Quran and Sunnah. According to some authors, this is why Shah-i-Hamadani devoted a major part of *Zakirat-al-Muluk* to the discussion of Islamic politics.

Shah-i-Hamadani's mission was successful because of his personal, practical life, which was full of integrity and truthfulness. He was a great proponent of earning one's own livelihood and rejected the traditional means of patronage and support open to religious men. This is evidenced by the fact that he rejected the idea of charity for religious men or orders because he abhorred the concept of parasitology, and himself earned his living by cap-making and encouraged his followers to do the same. He desisted from staying away from society and feared that isolation would stop him from spreading the message of Islam to the common man. He was also an expert *sozan kari* (needle-worker). He is credited with establishing the handicraft industry in Kashmir. He brought with him hundreds of disciples who were painters, calligraphers, shawl makers, etc. For example, there is no mention of the shawl industry before the Hamadani period.

Hamadani is also said to have influenced the famous Kashmiri poet and mystic Lala Ded, who was born in the mid-14th century CE. It is recorded that due to Hamadani's influence, she rejected the caste system and criticised adulation. Hamadani's influence is evident in her assertion that asceticism was not necessary for intimacy with Allah; a householder could achieve this as well as a hermit, provided he performed his duties selflessly.

Hamadani's influence is evident in his assertion that Sunnah was not necessary for closeness to Allah. A householder could achieve this as well as a hermit, provided he performed his duties selflessly. Hamadani introduced the concept of *dhikr* in the valley, fostering unity across social classes by transcending differences in wealth and property.

It is also noted that Sultan Sikander (1389-1413 A.D.), under the influence of Hamadani (born in 1372 A.D.), banned all intoxicants, the customs of *Sutee* and other evil social practices in Kashmir.

Historians also note that Sultan Qutubud Din (1373-1389), who had married two sisters in contravention of the Shariat, went to the extent of divorcing one of them at the urging of Hamadani. Moreover, on the orders of Shah Hamdan, Sultan Shahabuddin established the first *Madrasatul Quran*. Schools were also established to teach the basics of Islam in important villages of Kashmir. According to Sufi, "under the influence of the great Syed, the Sultan (Qutubuddin) devoted time to meditation and prayer and became a great Sufi poet. Farishta says that Sultan Qutubuddin was remarkable for his keen interest in public business, which he personally transacted in person and generally with justice and moderation".

We also know that Sultan Sikander (1389-1413), who succeeded Qutubuddin, was, as a result of Hamadani's writings, more inclined towards religion than many of his predecessors. He attempted to introduce Sharia law in his Sultanate. Hamadani was, at the same time, careful about keeping a personal distance from the state to preserve his independence. When Sultan Qutubuddin invited him to stay with him in 1378, he declined and stayed in a *sarai* (resting place) till such time as his *murids* (followers) built him a *suffa* 'plinth. After which, he began living there. Hamadani's *Dhakhirat ul-Muluk* was a favourite book with the scholars during the pre-Mughal period in India". This arises from the fact that most Orientalist libraries typically hold manuscript copies of *Dhakhirat ul-Muluk*, unlike *Fatawa-i-Jahandari* or *Fatawa-i-Firoz Shahi*. The copy available in the National Museum, New Delhi, bears the seal of Aurangzeb's Qadiul Qadat, which shows that the Qadi had the book in his personal collection. Its importance is illustrated by the number of languages in which it was translated.

One of the Hamadani's recognised impacts of great significance was the emergence of a network of *Khanqahs* that served as centres of proselytisation, especially at Hindu-rich centres like Pampore, Awantipora, Bijbihara, Shahabad and Tral, which still exist at these places (Rafiqi, 1990).

The local response to Hamadani's teachings took the form of the emergence of an indigenous religious order, the Rishism. The following verses of Shaikh Nur ud-Din (Nund Rishi), the founder of this order, bear testimony to the influence of Hamadani and his son Mir Muhammad Hamadani.

The first rishi was Prophet Muhammad (SAW)

The second in order was Hadrat Ovai.

The third Rishi was Zulkhi Rishi.

The fourth in order was Hadrat Pilas.

The fifth was Rum Rishi.

The sixth in order was Hadrat Miran.

The seventh (me) is miscalled a Rishi.

Do I deserve to be called a Rishi?

What is my name?

Allama Iqbal pays a beautiful tribute to Hamadani, proclaiming him the leader of the Sadats and the architect of the Muslim Ummah's destiny.

### Conclusion:

In fact, the increased cultural contacts between Central Asia and Kashmir during the medieval period were largely a result of the missionary activities of Sufi saints from Persia and Central Asia, like Saiyyid Ali Hamadani, Bulbul Shah, Mir Shamsuddin and many others. Hamadani's singular achievement was to rescue Sufism in the valley from other worldliness and quietism. His influence continues to be felt more than six hundred years after his death.

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