

DAUGHTERS OF THE DIVINE: EXPLORING THE HIDDEN LIVES OF KASHMIRI SUFI WOMEN

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Abstract

Sufism, the mystical aspect of Islam grounded on the Quran and the life of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), represents the pursuit of divine love, self-purification, and ultimate communion with God. Although early Islamic mysticism has mostly been chronicled via male saints, the impact of female mystics is as significant, influencing spiritual traditions throughout the ages. Figures like Rabia al-Adawiyya, Fatima of Nishapur, and Jahanara Begum defined avenues of divine devotion that surpassed gender constraints, providing models of piety, wisdom, and asceticism. In the setting of Kashmir, female mystics significantly influenced the spiritual landscape of the Valley. Kashmiri women, shown by Lal Ded's global monism and the mystical experiences of Sham Ded, Shanga Bibi, Bahat Ded, Taj Khatun, and Bibi Baria, epitomized perseverance, compassion, and spiritual authority, often maintained via oral traditions and local shrines. Their shrines and teachings exemplify the gender-inclusive principles of Kashmiri Sufism, whereby women engaged as searchers, mentors, and guardians of spiritual knowledge. Restoring their narratives enhances the comprehension of Sufi traditions as a collective journey for both men and women, while underscoring the profound foundations of egalitarian spirituality within Kashmir's cultural and religious legacy. This study underscores the significant influence of women mystics on the development of Islamic spirituality, spanning from Rabia al-Adawiyya to Kashmiri saints such as Lal Ded and Sham Ded. It emphasizes how their commitment and doctrines enhanced Sufism, validating its inclusive and egalitarian nature.

Keywords: Mysticism, saints, Spirituality, Devotion, Syncretism, Resilience, Asceticism

INTRODUCTION

Blessed is he who belongs to God, and God belongs to him. Sufism (Tasawwuf) represents the spiritual and esoteric aspects of Islam. Its philosophy and practice are fundamentally grounded on the Holy Quran and the life of the Holy Prophet (PBUH), originating from his Prophethood (Nur-e-Rishalat). Ultimately, it is the synthesis of Shariat, Tariqat, and Haqiqat that enables the enlightened souls to attain the gnosis of God (Marifat). Tasawwuf is fundamentally the essence of Islam, embodying the elevated spiritual aspirations of individuals seeking Truth. It is a process of heart purification, self-purgation, soul enlightenment, and ultimately achieving a unitive existence with His Essence. A drop that falls into the water becomes part of the ocean.¹

Since the inception of Islamic history, Sufis have recognized certain extraordinary women as unique representations of sanctity, morality, and spiritual power.² The message of oneness conveyed by the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) had both masculine and feminine aspects. Khadija (RA) served as the first foundation of support, while their daughter Fatima (RA) perpetuated the mystical legacy, emerging as a spiritual paradigm for future generations. Her relationship with Ali (RA) profoundly deepened the inner path of Islam.

Rabia al-Adawiyya (RA), an emblem of divine love, transformed the seeker's path not by fear or reward, but through altruistic devotion to God as the Beloved. Her legacy asserted that God should be adored not for the promise of heaven, but for God's intrinsic worth. Throughout Islamic history, mystic women such as Fatima (RA) of Nishapur, Aisha (RA) of Damascus, and Jahanara (RA) appeared, possessing profound spiritual insight. They composed, instructed, envisioned, and lamented in sacred yearning, reflecting the Sufi principles of truthfulness (Ikhlas), inner purity, and self-annihilation (Fana). Figures such as Shawana (RA), with eyes moist from the flames

of love, and Fedha (RA), with hearts brimming with joy, illustrate the many ways women embraced the Beloved via silence, poetry, scholarship, and passionate tears. Their contributions, sometimes obscured by history, urge us to reassess Sufism not just as a male-centric tradition, but as a collective odyssey of souls where heavenly females continue to impart secrets of unity and submission. Jalaluddin Rumi (RA) eloquently articulates the feminine and portrays women as the quintessential embodiment of God's creative force on earth. In his Mathnawi, he states, "Woman is a ray of God." She is not only the worldly adored; she is imaginative, not fabricated."³

Kashmir, renowned for its natural splendor and hallowed terrains, also has a subtle but potent spiritual heritage influenced by female mystics. Kashmiri women have historically found both refuge and expression inside the sacred confines of Sufi shrines, where the divine is experienced via ritual, prayer, and the master-disciple relationship. Lal Ded, while grounded in Shaivism, served as a spiritual conduit to Sufism via her monistic philosophy, acquiring titles such as Lalla Arifah and Maryam Makani from Muslim mystics who esteemed her. In the ethereal realm of Kashmiri Sufism, saints such as Shanga Bibi, also known as Yawan Maech (RA), Sham Ded (RA), Sanga Bibi (RA), and Ganga Bibi (RA), shine as luminous embodiments of spiritual elegance. Beyond the constraints of their time, they epitomized divine love, compassion, and resilience, subtly intertwining devotion and knowledge into the essence of the valley. Their legacy endures via shrines and mountains, serving as a perpetual reminder of the feminine spirit's strength on the journey to the Divine.

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Sufism, which came to Kashmir from Central Asia and Persia, not only included women, but also let native orders like Rishism include female mystics from the beginning. Bahat Ded (RA), Bibi Baria (RA), and Taj Khatoon (RA) are examples of this spiritual agency. However, there aren't many historical records of them since there aren't many written sources, therefore oral traditions and folklore are important ways to remember them. Bibi Baria's (RA) 14th-century shrine in Kralpora is only for women, which is different from limitations based on gender.⁵ Women played a significant part in the movement, both as Sufis and as the mothers of prominent Sufis. Shaikh Nizam-ud-Din Auliya (RA) stated: 'When the lion emerges from the jungle, no one enquires about its gender.' The descendants of Adam need to embrace piety and obedience to God, regardless of gender.⁶

Early Sufi women

Rabia al-Adawiyya (RA), sometimes referred to as Rabia of Basra, is recognized as the first advocate of the Sufi perspective of God as the Beloved. In her book *Rabia (RA) the Mystic and Her Fellow-Saints in Islam*, Margaret Smith observes that the elevated status achieved by women Sufis is further corroborated by the Sufis' designation of Rabia al-Adawiyya (RA) as the foremost among the earliest Islamic mystics, selecting her as the emblematic figure of the initial evolution of mysticism in Islam.⁷

Rabia Al-Adawiyya (RA), a prominent Islamic saint and a pivotal figure in Sufi tradition, was born in 717 C.E. and passed away in 801. "In an era marked by a significant decline in the sense of values, it was her vocation—indeed, her mission—due to her greatness, to embody at the highest level, within the realm of the Spirit, the prioritization of God over Paradise, and the Absolute over the relative." "Narratives and poems concerning her have been transmitted to us through numerous Sufi authors, notably Attar (RA), her principal biographer, and al-Ghazali (RA).⁸ the central pole where Sufi lore and orthodox Islam meet."⁹ Sufyan Thawri often approached Rabia (RA) with enquiries, seeking her counsel and prayers. One day, Sufyan enquired, 'What is the most effective means by which a servant attains proximity to God Most High?' She said, "Only God is aware that the servant loves nothing in this world or the next, except for God."¹⁰

I love God: I have no time left

In which to hate the devil.¹¹

Maryam of Basra (RA), a colleague and student of Rabia (RA) who assisted her, also emphasized the primacy of divine love. She had spoke on the topic of love (Muhabbah), and as-Sulami recounts that whenever she listened to discussions on the philosophy of love, she would enter a state of ecstasy. As-Sulami recounts that Maryam (RA) said, "I have never been consumed by concerns for my sustenance, nor have I exerted myself in its pursuit since

the day I heard the declaration of God, the Glorious and Mighty, 'For in heaven is your sustenance, as is that which you are promised.' [Qur'an 61:22]."¹²

Among the several spiritual luminaries in Basra during the eighth and ninth centuries was Hafsa bint Sirin (RA), sister of Muhammad ibn Sirin (RA) (d. 729 C.E.), an early authority on dream interpretation. He would direct them to his sister for interpretations of the Qur'an. Their virtuous mother nurtured them both with meticulous attention. "A visitor once observed Imam Ibn Sirin (RA) in the company of his mother and commented on his exceptional reverence for her." Upon departing, the guy said, 'Is Muhammad unwell?' Someone said, "He is well, yet he holds his mother in such high esteem that he nearly dissolves in her presence." Hafsa (RA) was an expert in asceticism and meticulousness, exhibiting remarkable signs and wonders. It is said that she would ignite her lamp at night and thereafter rise to pray throughout the night; sometimes, the lamp would out, but her house would stay aglow until daylight.¹³

Umm Ahmad bint Aisha (RA) was one of the first Sufi women. She spent much of her time alone in prayer. She resided in her home for fifty years and was known for being very spiritual. As-Sulami says that she remarked, "Knowledge (Ilm) is the essence of humanity, spiritual practice (Amal) is its medium, intellect (Aql) is its embellishment, and gnosis (Marifat) is its light and understanding."¹⁴

Some people cried because they missed God and knew they weren't perfect. Others were so happy to be in God's presence that they couldn't stop being happy. Many people may have reacted as Habiba Adawiyya (RA) did. People say that when she was really devoted, she would go up on her roof and pray:

Deity! All the stars have down, and all eyes are closed in slumber. Monarchs have closed their gates, while Your gateway remains ajar. Every companion has sought solitude with their beloved; I remain solitary before Your Presence.¹⁵

During the early age of Islam, the most notable married Sufi woman is undoubtedly Fatima (RA), the wife of Ahmad Khidruya from Nishapur (d. 849). She associated with Dhun-Nun Mesri (RA) and Bayezid Bistami (RA) and seems to have directed her spouse in both theological and practical affairs. Dhun-Nun (RA) reportedly declined a present from her due to its origin from a woman; she conveyed to him that a genuine Sufi focusses not on secondary factors, such as gender, but on the Eternal Giver. Abu Yazid al-Bistami (RA) said, "Throughout my entire life, I have encountered only one genuine man and one authentic woman." The individual was Fatima (RA) from Nishapur. There was no station I mentioned to her that she had not previously encountered herself.¹⁶

Jahanara Begum (RA) (1614–1681), the daughter of Emperor Shah Jahan and Mumtaz Mahal, was a prominent woman in the Mughal court and a significant influence in the spiritual and cultural milieu of her era. Similar to her brother Dara Shikoh, she was profoundly attracted to Sufism and wrote biographical accounts of notable Sufi saints, notably (Munis al-Arwah) and (Risala-i Sahibiyya), documenting her spiritual initiation under Mulla Shah of the Qadiriyya order. Jahanara (RA), a proponent of Islamic architecture and literature, played a pivotal role in the establishment of Mughal gardens and holy edifices, while also advocating for intellectual and spiritual endeavors among wealthy women. Her legacy contrasts with the silence of several non-elite Muslim women, highlighting the capacity of courtly women as cultural and spiritual benefactors. Buried humbly beside the shrine of Nizamuddin Auliya (RA) in Delhi, her open-air tomb bears a poignant inscription:

"He is the Living, the Sustaining. Let no one cover my grave except with greenery, for this very grass suffices as a tomb cover for the poor. The annihilated faqir Lady Jahanara, Disciple of the Lords of Chisht, Daughter of Shahjahan the Warrior (may God illuminate his proof)."¹⁷

Women Sufis of Kashmir

Islam was spread in Kashmir not via coercion or force, but rather through the peaceful endeavors of Sufi missionaries. Sufism in Kashmir has deep-seated origins, existing since the introduction of Islam. Consequently, the Kashmiris refer to their homeland as "Pir Vaer," meaning the Valley of Saints.¹⁸

The dissemination of Islam in Kashmir is currently seen as a peaceful, natural, and progressive alteration of the mental and behavioral characteristics of the Kashmiris, for which the word 'conversion' is inadequately relevant. T. W. Arnold states, "All evidence suggests that the Islamization of Kashmir can primarily be ascribed to a prolonged missionary effort initiated and executed chiefly by faqirs and dervishes."¹⁹

Investigating the Concealed Existence of Kashmiri Sufi Women uncovers a profoundly spiritual but sometimes neglected aspect of Kashmir's religious and cultural heritage. Historically, Sufi tales in the area have mostly focused on male figures, marginalizing the spiritual contributions of women. Kashmiri Sufi women have significantly contributed to the cultivation of devotional activities, the preservation of oral traditions, and the maintenance of the sanctity of Sufi shrines and rites. Frequently functioning within domestic or localized domains, these women have shown mystical piety via acts of service, contemplative contemplation, lyrical articulation, and spiritual guidance. Notwithstanding limited societal systems, some Kashmiri Sufi women ascended as venerated personalities whose spiritual power was acknowledged inside their communities. Their experiences provide

distinctive perspectives on the intersections of gender, spirituality, and resistance within the overarching context of Islamic mysticism in Kashmir. Revealing these narratives not only enhances the discussion on Sufism but also contests the singular representation of Muslim women by emphasizing their agency, tenacity, and spiritual profundity. Consequently, it is prudent to provide a concise overview of their significance in the history of Islam in Kashmir.

The Sufi Tradition, which permeated Kashmir from Central Asia and Persia, has significantly acknowledged the role of women in Mysticism or Sufism. In the 14th century, namely between 1320 and 1390, Lal Ded (Lalleshwari) resided in a secluded region of Kashmir's history. Throughout her life, she became acknowledged as a seer, believed to have arrived on Earth with a heavenly message for humanity. Lal Ded lacked a Boswell to document her life's endeavors, nor did she have a Swami Vivekananda to disseminate her spiritual philosophy to a broader audience. Lal Ded endures in history via the potency of her utterances (*vaakhs*), and she is commemorated in every household in Kashmir, with all communities asserting her blessings.²⁰ She was a nomad, communicating directly with the populace, engaging the peasants across the Valley and disseminating her universal message, emancipating the philosophy from any sectarian, local, or regional influence.²¹ In one of her well known (*vaakh*) she emphasizes that there is no distinction between people of different faiths as "*The sun knows not the Hindu different to the Muslim.*"²² The tributes composed by Para-mananda, Krisnajo Razdaan, and Shams Faqir for her are rooted in popular belief and have rendered her a holy figure. For instance, the renowned Kashmiri Sufi poet, Shams Faqir, pays homage to Lalla thus:

*"Lalla made her soul merge with the skies,
Knowledge emanates from nothing but God,
Swadhiboy lamented over his own self,
For what can a stone seek from a stony God?
Lalla poured water in the icon house,
Knowledge emanates from nothing but God,
Silently Lalla went to the river side for a bath,
She erected a bridge over the world's river
She slew the monster of the desiring self,
Knowledge emanates from nothing but God
The carpenter does not know the craft
She erected a palace amidst a wilderness
Yet she bore a stone to show her belly full
Knowledge emanates from nothing but God
She went to impart instruction to Nund Rishi
The enlightened called it pure wisdom
She played hide and seek with Shah Hamadan
Knowledge emanates from nothing but God".²³*

Bahat Bibi (RA) and Dahat Bibi (RA) were the daughters of a rural Patwari. The two sisters were inspired by Sheikh Nur-ud-Din (RA) and became his followers, significantly progressing in their spiritual journey under his tutelage. They lived a modest existence, forgoing even the consumption of vegetables. They collected wild plants that had fallen to the ground after ripening, with their primary food source being cakes made from barley flour. In 1393 A.D., Mir Sayyid Mohammad Hamadani (RA) engaged in discourse with Sheikh Nur-ud-Din (RA) upon his arrival in Kashmir. At that moment, the two sisters were in present. They participated in the conversation and succeeded in impressing Mohammad Hamadani (RA). Several of their responses to the enquiries posed by Mir Hamadani (RA) need documentation. During the encounter, Mir Mohammad Hamadani (RA) asked of Sheikh Nur-ud-Din (RA) on the reason for the deterioration of his horse (body). Sheikh expressed his fear that, as a novice rider, the horse would become uncontrollable and unseat him. At this juncture, the two sisters interjected and informed him (Hamadani (RA)) that for an enlightened being, a horse or saddle was unnecessary. Mir Hamadani (RA) enquired, "Who are those who have reached their destination?" One of the sisters said that they were individuals who have self-control. Such a confident response startled him, prompting him to enquire once again if she had reached that level, to which she swiftly replied that if she had not acquired that ability, she would not have had the audacity to disclose this secret. She was once again enquired whether she could disclose her sex, specifically whether she identified as a male or a girl. The response was "Nothing." Bahat Bibi (RA) was an erudite woman who expressed her thoughts in Persian. The primary barrier between the Master and the servant is the presence of humanity. To believe that every human deed culminates only from individual effort is the gravest kind of shirk. One who annihilates their ego is liberated from the afflictions of life. Redemption from hope and

distance resides in the obliteration of the self. If not for the Shaikh (Nur-ud-din) (RA) being my spiritual mentor, Allah Himself would have been my Guide.²⁴

Taj Khatun (RA) was the descendant of Sayyid Hasan Bahadur, the leader of Sultan Shihab-ud-Din's military troops. Sayyid Hasan hailed from a prominent family and was the progeny of Sayyid Taj-ud-Din Hamadani (RA). Shah Hamadan (RA) facilitated peace between the Kashmir and Ohind armies. On this occasion, as stipulated by the treaty, two princesses from the royal line of Ohind were wed to two prominent figures from Kashmir. Bibi Taj Khatun (RA) was the daughter of Sayyid Hasan from this union. Meticulous efforts were devoted to her schooling. She was wed to Mir Muhammad Hamadani (RA), the progeny of Shah Hamadan (RA). Bibi Taj Khatun (RA) had a virtuous disposition. She spent the most of her time meditating in the garden constructed for her, next to which Path Kadal was later established. She was buried in the same garden.²⁵

Sham Ded (RA), like to the majority of Rishis, sustained himself on wild vegetation from the forest. Following the death of Nur-ud-Din (RA), she traversed every area of the Valley in the manner of her mentor. She ultimately established her residence in Pushkar, next to the dwelling of Baba Latif-ud-din (RA), whom she served for an extended period. During her travels, Sham Ded seems to have popularized the mystical poetry of Nur-ud-Din (RA) among the populace. This may explain why some elderly ladies in Kashmir continue the custom of safeguarding the legacy of Nur-ud-Din (RA) and Sham Ded (RA) by memorizing the mystical words and teachings of both the master and the disciple. Below are some of the sayings of Sham Ded (RA)

The teacher is the source of wisdom. He who imbibes profoundly from this source will never perish. Revealing the mysteries of God is more egregious than the slaughter of a thousand innocent individuals. In this universe, the position of man surpasses that of woman; nevertheless, in 'Malakut,' status is contingent upon bravery. A cowardly guy is inferior to a woman. Indeed, a valiant woman surpasses a man. In my pursuit of unity with God, I was enraptured, oblivious to my own existence; but, in acknowledging my own self, I was imbued with the awareness (Marifah) of His presence. Numerous more expressions of esoteric insight are attributed to Sham Ded (RA). Shams Ded (RA) was a follower of the Suhrawardiyya Sufi, Shaikh Nasir Bengali (RA). Her religiosity (Taqlaw) was such that she refrained from exposing

herself to strangers in Kashmir throughout her life. Shanga Bibi, also known as Yawan Maech (RA), a prostitute of captivating beauty, was reportedly solicited by several Brahmans of Srinagar to entice Shaikh Nur-ud-Din Rishi (RA). The Shaikh (RA) reproached the captivating courtesan so persuasively that she experienced humiliation and, upon making repentance (Taubah), was admitted into the Rishi order. Due to her dedication and ascetic practices, Shanga Bibi (RA) was bestowed the exceptional honor of serving as a (Majawir) at the grave of her spiritual mentor in Kashmir. The elevation of a prostitute to sainthood, after donning the attire of faith and sincere remorse, serves as compelling evidence of Islam's egalitarian allure for the general populace in Kashmir. Shanga Bibi (RA) is buried next to the grave of Shaikh Nur-ud-Din (RA) at Chrar-Shariff. The latter name unequivocally indicates that Loli was widely commemorated as Baba Nasib (RA), who refers to Shanga Bibi (RA) as both Loli and Yawan Mach (RA). The captivated spirit upon her induction into the Rishi order. Baba Khalil (RA) said that after the act of repentance (Taubah), Loli was designated as Shanga Bibi (RA).²⁶

In the early days of Islam, female mystics who practiced asceticism and celibacy were significant figures in Sufism, and several of their graves became pilgrimage sites; among them is the shrine of Bibi Baria (RA) in Kralpora, where males were barred. Bibi's shrine, located a few miles from Srinagar in Kralpora Village, is exclusively for women. The 14th-century shrine restricts male access to the burial. These ladies show the transforming influence of Sufism in empowering women, promoting social cohesiveness, and significantly changing the region's spiritual environment. Kashmiri women in the area have a unique chance to participate in a spiritual place that belongs to them.²⁷

Sala Bibi I (RA) and Sala Bibi II (RA) were mentored by the Shaikh (RA). The hagiographers refer to them as Gnostics because to their dedication, meditation, and austere practices. Their burials are located in Chrar-i Shariff next to the tomb of the Shaikh (RA).

Sanga Bibi (RA) From her early upbringing, she pursued the truth, however she gained recognition as a Sufi only upon her introduction into the Rishi order by Baba Shukr-ud-din (RA). Despite her ancestral home being in the pargana of Hamsal, she isolated herself on a mountain in the hamlet of Buthu in Kuihama at the behest of her spiritual mentor. She practiced prolonged fasting and endured sleepless nights in profound concentration. Despite her austere lifestyle, she remained connected to society. Her many pupils contributed offerings, which were entirely allocated for the impoverished. Baba Neki Rishi (RA), her Khalifa, demonstrated his genuine discipleship to the esteemed lady via his humanitarian endeavors. He dispersed the domestic animals, owned by the brotherhood of the Rishis, to the destitute and impoverished.

Ganga Bibi (RA) attained the status of a Rishi after her husband, Lankar Mal, entering the Silsila of Rishis under the guidance of Baba Luda Mal (RA). The Bibi maintained her fasting regimen and, despite her ascetic practices,

did not evade hard labour. She gave her modest earnings, acquired through hard work, towards the construction of bridges and mosques. During Baba Lankar Mal's (RA) seclusion in the Dandakvan jungle, Ganga Bibi (RA) demonstrated her unwavering dedication as a wife. She would provide her spouse with water for his ablutions. It is said that anytime she encountered wild creatures while carrying water, they would flee upon seeing her.²⁸

CONCLUSION

The spiritual experiences of women mystics demonstrate that Sufism transcends a male-centric tradition; it is a collective journey in which women have significantly contributed as seekers, mentors, poets, and ascetics. Rabia al-Adawiyya's idea of divine love and Fatima of Nishapur's spiritual understanding illustrate that proximity to God is dictated not by gender, but by sincerity, dedication, and purity of heart. Their voices provided alternate avenues for expressing piety via poetry, pedagogy, and asceticism that persistently echo through the ages. By transcending traditional limitations, these women mystics not only enhanced Sufi philosophy but also expanded the realm of Islamic spirituality. The contributions of personalities such as Lal Ded, Sham Ded, Shanga Bibi, Bahat Ded, Taj Khatun, and Ganga Bibi in Kashmir exemplify the integral role of female mystics within the Valley's holy terrain. Their shrines, oral traditions, and lived practices function as lasting reminders of women's leadership in Kashmiri Sufism, where devotion and service superseded bloodline or rank. The acknowledgement of these women challenges limited interpretations of history and strengthens the inclusive, egalitarian principles of Sufism. Their lasting legacy inspires, confirming that the route to the Divine is accessible to all who pursue truth with love, bravery, and humility.

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