

Noorbakhshi Sufi Order and its Role in Promoting a Unique Islamic Architectural Heritage

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Abstract:

One of the contemporary Sufi Orders in South Asia is the Noorbakhshi Sufi Order which is active in the areas of Baltistan, Kargil and Ladakh. This Order is named after its eponym Shah Syed Muhammad Noorbakhsh, a 9th century Hijri Sufi saint and Muslim jurisprudent. He played significant role during 820-869 AH to promote Sufism and Muslim unity. The Order gained tremendous popularity in Kashmir during the early decades of 10th century AH as a result of missionary efforts of Mir Shamsudin Iraqi a top ranking disciple of Noorbakhsh. The unique aspect of Noorbakhshia is that it has both the identity of a Sufi Order as well as an Islamic sect. Islam was spread in this region by Noorbakhshi Sufi saints. Shah Hamdan, Mir Shamsudin Iraqi, Shah Nasir, Mir Abu Saeed, Mir Mukhtar and Mir Yehya are some of the pioneer Sufis who came here from central Asia and Kashmir. Besides developing a peaceful and tolerant society, they introduced a unique Islamic architecture in the form of wooden mosques, khanqahs and shrines. In this regard, the first and foremost building is the Khanqah-e-Moalla Srinagar founded by Shah Hamdan in 783-786 AH. Majority of the later mosques and tombs is the replica of that. During 11th and early 12th century AH Mir Mukhtar Akhyar, took this Islamic architecture to its glory by constructing a large number of mosques and khanqahs in Baltistan, Kargil and Ladakh. The most important feature of these buildings is profuse use of wood in almost every part of the buildings. The art of fine wood carving and decorative geometric patterns make these buildings master pieces of architecture and a great legacy of mankind. Several mosques and shrines have been preserved with the support of UNESCO.

The spread of Islam in South Asia is mainly due to the efforts of Muslim Sufis who came from Iran and Central Asia. Many Sufi orders thus got promoted in the region and they played a key role in transforming a society based on mystic values of piety, respect, brotherhood, peace and tolerance. One of the important contemporary orders among them is the Noorbakhshi Sufi Order which is active in the areas of Gilgit-Baltistan in Pakistan and the adjacent Kargil/Ladakh region in occupied Kashmir.

The Noorbakhshi Order is named after its eponym Mir Syed Muhammad Noorbakhsh, a 9th century AH Sufi Saint and Muslim jurisprudent. Born in 795 A.H in Khurasan (now Iran), he played a significant role to promote Sufism and Muslim unity. After a period of learning in the schools of Khurasan, he went to Khatlan (Tajikistan) and made allegiance to Hazrat Khwaja Ishaq Khatlani, the Preceptor of Hamdania-Kubrawia order in Central Asia at that time. Khwaja Ishaq was the khalifa of Amir Kabir Syed Ali Hamdani popularly known as Shah

Hamdan who was instrumental in promoting the order in the region. Mir Noorbakhsh himself describes this relationship as under:

*Pir eym wa murid e Khwaja Ishaq
An Sheikh e Shahed wa Qutb Afaq
Ko bood muride Pir e fani
Shah e Hamdan Ali Sani*

As Mir Noorbakhsh was a genius in learning and piety he earned a great reverence among the people. The number of his disciples and followers reached hundreds of thousands, during his life time in the then Iraq, Khurasan and Transoxiana.

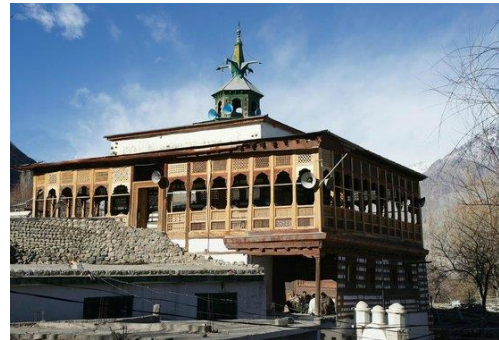
The Order gained tremendous popularity in Kashmir and Baltistan during the early decades of 10th century AH as a result of the efforts of Mir Shamsuddin Iraqi a top ranking disciple of Shah Qasim Faizbakhsh, son of Mir Syed Muhammad Noorbakhsh. He came to Kashmir in 888 A.H and later settled down there for the rest of his life promoting the Noorbakhshi teachings and Sufi practices based on the four stages of Shariat, Tariqat, Haqiqat and Marifat. The unique aspect of Noorbakhshia is that it has both the identity of a Sufi Order as well as an Islamic sect. A large number of Noorbakhshi Muslims are, now a days, living mainly in Gilgit-Baltistan and occupied Kargil-Ladakh.

The Noorbakhshi Order has a rich history and a great legacy of a unique Islamic architecture which it promoted in Kashmir and the remote valleys of Karakorum and Himalayan mountain ranges south of Kashgar-Yarkand. This Islamic architecture is still flourishing in the form of wooden mosques, khanqahs and tombs of the Sufi saints. It is worth mentioning that Islam was spread for the first time in these areas by the saints associated with the



Noorbakhshi Sufi order. Shah Hamdan, Mir Shamsuddin Iraqi, Mir Danial Shaheed and Shah Nasir are some of the pioneer Sufis who came here from Central Asia crossing the difficult passes of the Karakorum and Himalayas. Later on, the Noorbakhshi Pirs Mir Abu Saeed, Mir Mukhtar Akhyar, Mir Yehya and others played significant role to consolidate the Islamic society based on Sufi teachings and values. Besides developing a peaceful and tolerant society, they promoted this unique wooden style Islamic architecture which is evident of the Noorbakhshi Order's remarkable history in the region.

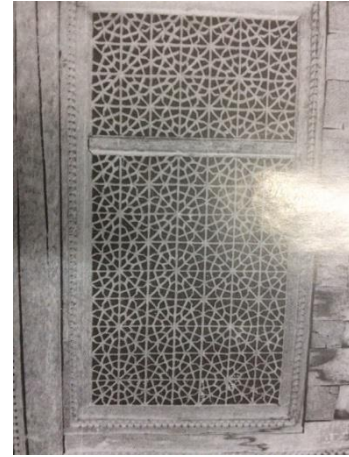
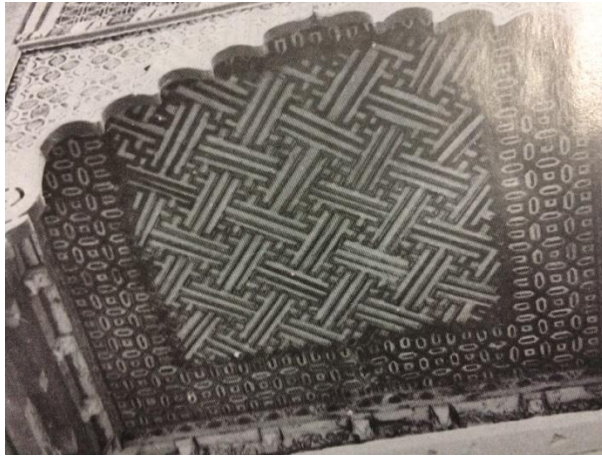
The first and foremost building of this architectural heritage is Khanqah-e-Mualla Srinagar founded by Shah Hamdan when he arrived in Kashmir in 774 AH from Central Asia after differences with Amir Timur. The building of the Khanqah was small and vulnerable to fires. Mir Shamsudin Iraqi during the reign of Malik Kaji Chak, the Minister of Kashmir expanded and reconstructed the Khanqah in around 925 AH giving it the current shape. Similarly, Shah Hamdan founded the grand Chaqchan mosque in Khaplu when he passed through Baltistan and Ladakh on his way from Kashmir to Central Asian region of Khatlan in 783 AH. The mosques of Amborik, Chabrunji, and Khargrong in Shigar valley are also attributed to him and are preserved to this day. In 910 AH, Mir Shamsuddin constructed the glorious khanqah of Zadibal near Srinagar with the help of Malik Musa Rina the Minister of Kashmir and a staunch follower of Noorbakhshi order. This khanqah was named as Khanqah Noorbakhshia and was a magnificent and marvellous piece of architecture, but unfortunately it could not survive in later sectarian clashes during the Mughal and Afghan rule in Kashmir. Similarly, Mir Iraqi was instrumental to complete the khanqah of Chaqchan in Khaplu at the request of the ruler Yabgo Behram. It is worth mentioning that majority of the wooden mosques, khanqahs and tombs of Kashmir and Baltistan are the replica of Khanqah Shah Hamdan Srinagar.



Mir Mukhtar Akhyar, one of the most important Noorbakhshi Pir and descendant of Mir Shamsuddin Iraqi promoted this Islamic architecture to its glory by constructing a large number of mosques and khanqahs during the early 12th century AH in Baltistan, Kargil and Ladakh. Among these Khanqah of Keris (built in 1118 AH), Khanqah of Khaplu (built in 1124 AH), Khanqah of Gamba Skardu (built in 1130 AH) and Khanqah of Shigar are most prominent. Similarly, the tombs of Mir Mukhtar in Keris, Mir Yehya in Shigar, Mir Muhammad in Khaplu, Mir Arif and Mir Ishaq in Thagas are important examples of buildings of this great wooden Islamic architecture.

The craftsmen who contributed in building these architectural landmarks in Baltistan seem to be mostly from Kashmir with many having Persian and Central Asian origin. As mentioned earlier, Shah Hamdan was accompanied by several hundred followers and disciples many of whom were religious scholars, craftsmen, and experts in different trades. Their descendants, who were also disciples of the subsequent Sufi masters, played vital role in constructing these wonderful buildings. Renowned researcher Dr. Ahmad Hassan Dani states that the fineness of woodwork seen in the monuments of Baltistan is due to the employment of Kashmiri craftsmen which was mostly done after this region came in direct cultural relationship with Kashmir due to the influence of Islam. This is also evident from the many inscriptions on the mosques and khanqahs indicating the dates of construction

and names of the craftsmen who took part in the work. The high level of expertise and craftsmanship seen in the religious buildings show the deep veneration of the builders for their spiritual leaders. Local ruling families also played their role in bringing craftsmen from Kashmir to Baltistan.



The most important feature of these buildings is the profuse use of wood in the form of pillars, brackets, beams, rafters, doors, window and even mehrabs. Moreover, very rich and finest wood carving has been applied in almost all the parts of the building. Max Klimburg writes in his article titled “Traditional Art and Architecture in Baltistan” that the Islamic buildings of Baltistan are very rich in characteristic woodcarvings. These decorations appear on the horizontal squared beams of the walls, on arcaded verandas, the often corbelled cornices, the cases of doors and windows, the door wings, the columns or pillars with their bases and capitals, on the *mihrab* and so on. In addition, windows and large openings are generally filled with *panjira* latticework, and on the ceilings one often finds *khatamband* work. Consisting of small rectangular wooden pieces joined together according to varied geometric patterns, these art works constitute important decorative and architectural features in their own.



The Kashmiri style tall pyramidal spire erected on the mosque roof acts as a dome and a minaret as well. This structure has been influenced in some aspects by the Islamic architecture of Iran and Central Asia, and partially by the local building style of Bhudists monasteries in neighbouring *Ladakh and Tibet*. Moreover, the southern Tarim basin i.e. Khotan and Yarkand seems to have contributed to the emergence of the large type of *khanqah-cum-veranda* in Baltistan. It is worth mentioning here that majority of the

Khanqahs have small chambers on both the northern and southern sides of the main prayer hall. Such rooms are called *Chilla Khana* and are used by Sufis for the Islamic practices of *Zikr* and *Aetikaf*. The outer styles of architecture of these mosques, Khanqahs and tombs are such that they dominate the skyline of the settlements giving a magnificent view in the backdrop of hills.

The art of fine wood carving and decorative geometric patterns makes these buildings master pieces of architecture and a great legacy of mankind. In the words of Professor Ahmad Hassan Dani:

“It is for the discovery of this rich and smooth wooden style that humans would continue to go to this part (of the world). The architecture of Northern Pakistan has a special appeal to humanity for its harmonious adjustment to the locality where it is created. At the same time it creates a sense of unusual loveliness of forms and decorations that are characteristics of the wooden material. It is this wooden style of Northern Areas (Gilgit Baltistan) that is a great legacy to mankind.”

The credit of this great legacy of mankind – the unique wooden style Islamic architecture goes to the Noorbakhshi Sufi order which played a key role in promoting this for centuries in Kashmir and Baltistan.

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