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FROM DEVOTION TO DIVISION: THE EVOLUTION OF RADICAL AND EXTREME VIEWS

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INTRODUCTION

KASHMIR RIGHTS FORUM | MONTHLY THEME
FROM DEVOTION TO DIVISION -
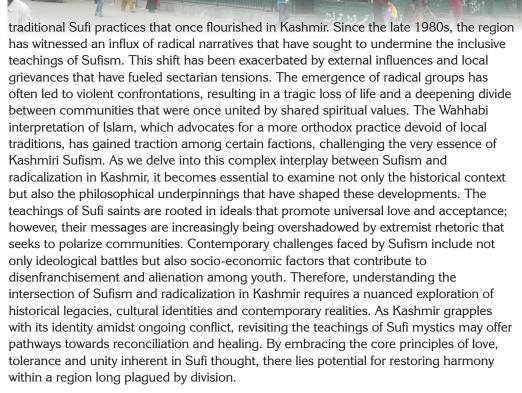**THE EVOLUTION OF RADICAL AND EXTREME VIEWS**

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From Devotion to Division:
The Evolution of Radical and Extreme Views

The Kashmir valley, often celebrated for its stunning landscapes and rich cultural heritage, has been a complex tapestry woven with threads of spirituality, history and conflict. At the heart of this intricate narrative is Sufism, which represents the true interpretation of Islam as originally conveyed by Prophet Muhammad [pbuh]. Historically it has played a pivotal role in fostering peace and unity among the region's diverse communities. Sufism in Kashmir is characterized by its emphasis on love, tolerance and the transcendence of religious boundaries, promoting a sense of belonging and shared identity among Muslims and Hindus alike. The arrival of Sufi saints like Hazrat Bulbul Shah and Mir Sayyid Ali Hamadani in the 14th century marked a significant transformation in the spiritual landscape of Kashmir, as they introduced a version of Islam that was deeply intertwined with local customs and beliefs. This syncretic approach not only facilitated the conversion of many to Islam but also enriched spiritual fabric of Kashmir, leading to the emergence of Kashmiriyat, a unique cultural identity that celebrates religious pluralism. Historically, Sufism has acted as a unifying force in Kashmir. The teachings of Sufi mystics emphasized common humanity over sectarian divisions, encouraging interfaith dialogue and cooperation. This was particularly evident during periods when communal harmony prevailed, allowing both Kashmiri Muslims and Hindus to participate in shared rituals and visit each other's shrines. The Sufi ethos promoted values that transcended mere religious observance; it fostered an environment where compassion, altruism and community welfare were paramount. However, the socio-political landscape began to shift dramatically towards the end of 20th century, particularly with onset of armed conflict and radicalization in the region.

The rise of extremist ideologies has posed significant challenges to the traditional Sufi practices that once flourished in Kashmir. Since the late 1980s, the region has witnessed an influx of radical narratives that have sought to undermine the inclusive teachings of Sufism. This shift has been exacerbated by external influences and local grievances that have fueled sectarian tensions. The emergence of radical groups has often led to violent confrontations, resulting in a tragic loss of life and a deepening divide between communities that were once united by shared spiritual values. The Wahhabi interpretation of Islam, which advocates for a more orthodox practice devoid of local traditions, has gained traction among certain factions, challenging the very essence of Kashmiri Sufism. As we delve into this complex interplay between Sufism and radicalization in Kashmir, it becomes essential to examine not only the historical context but also the philosophical underpinnings that have shaped these developments. The teachings of Sufi saints are rooted in ideals that promote universal love and acceptance; however, their messages are increasingly being overshadowed by extremist rhetoric that seeks to polarize communities. Contemporary challenges faced by Sufism include not only ideological battles but also socio-economic factors that contribute to disenfranchisement and alienation among youth. Therefore, understanding the intersection of Sufism and radicalization in Kashmir requires a nuanced exploration of historical legacies, cultural identities and contemporary realities. As Kashmir grapples with its identity amidst ongoing conflict, revisiting the teachings of Sufi mystics may offer pathways towards reconciliation and healing. By embracing the core principles of love, tolerance and unity inherent in Sufi thought, there lies potential for restoring harmony within a region long plagued by division.

Extremist forces have attempted to undermine the syncretic nature of Sufism, seeking to impose a more rigid and divisive approach to religion. This presents a potential threat to the unity and cultural diversity for which Kashmir has been known.
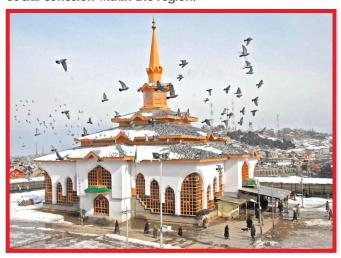
FROM DEVOTION TO DIVISION - THE EVOLUTION OF RADICAL AND EXTREME VIEWS

HISTORICAL ROOTS OF SUFISM IN KASHMIR: FROM DEVOTION TO DIVISION

Sufism's historical roots in Kashmir can be traced back to arrival of Islam in region during the 14th century, a period marked by significant cultural and spiritual transformation. The early Sufi saints, notably Hazrat Bulbul Shah and Sheikh Nooruddin (Nund Rishi), played a pivotal role in shaping the spiritual landscape of Kashmir. Their teachings emphasized profound love for God, compassion towards fellow beings and importance of personal experience over rigid dogma. This approach resonated deeply with the local populace, fostering a sense of belonging and spiritual awakening among both Muslims and Hindus. The emergence of Rishi order, a distinct Sufi tradition in Kashmir, exemplified this syncretic approach. The Rishis integrated local beliefs and practices from Hinduism and Buddhism into their teachings, creating a unique spiritual framework that transcended religious boundaries. This blend of traditions not only facilitated communal harmony but also laid the groundwork for a unique cultural identity known as Kashmiriyat. This identity celebrated both Islamic and Hindu traditions, emphasizing shared values and mutual respect. The Rishis were revered not just as spiritual guides but also as community leaders who advocated for social justice and moral integrity. The impact of Sufism on Kashmiri society was profound. It fostered a composite culture characterized by humanism, spirituality and tolerance. During the height of Sufism's influence, it was common for Muslims to attend gatherings hosted by Hindu Pandits, while Hindus would visit the shrines of Sufi saints. This intermingling of communities created a rich tapestry of cultural exchange that defined the ethos of Kashmiriyat. Moreover, the teachings of Sufi saints promoted ideals that transcended sectarian divisions, encouraging a collective identity rooted in love and compassion.

The late 20th century saw a pivotal shift in Kashmir's political landscape, particularly with the onset of insurgency in 1989. A significant factor contributing to this instability was the growing influence of Jamaat-e-Islami, an Islamist organization rooted in the teachings of Abul Ala Maududi. Maududi's reformist ideology, which emphasized the need for a reformed pure Islamic state, resonated deeply in Kashmir. Through its extensive network of schools, mosques and social institutions, Jamaat-e-Islami spread radical Islamic ideals, fostering an environment conducive to terrorism. By interpreting Islam as a comprehensive political and social system, rather than solely a spiritual guide, Jamaat-e-Islami's ideology legitimized the use of violence as a means to achieve its goals, ultimately fueling the insurgency and shaping the trajectory of Kashmir's separatist movement. Its radical ideology sought to erase this cultural legacy, replacing it with a concocted and exclusivist interpretation of Islam that would fit their narrative. The Jamaat-e-Islami's (JeI) influence in Kashmir significantly threatened the region's traditional Sufi teachings, which had long harmonized Hindu, Buddhist and Islamic cultures. By spreading radical Islamic ideals through literature like 'Al-Jihaad Fil Islam', Jamaat-e-Islami's ideology undermined the moderate and inclusive nature of Sufism, labeling its practices as 'Shirik' or polytheistic. This not only challenged the syncretic culture of Kashmir but also legitimized violence as a means to achieve its goals, further destabilizing the region.

This period marked a departure from the harmonious coexistence that had characterized earlier times. The rise of terrorist groups espousing radical ideologies posed a direct challenge to the inclusive teachings of Sufism. These groups often rejected the syncretic nature of Kashmiri spirituality, promoting instead a narrow interpretation of Islam that alienated many within the community. Key historical events contributed to this transformation. The political dynamics in Kashmir shifted dramatically as violence escalated, leading to increased polarization among communities that had once coexisted peacefully. The influence of external radical ideologies began to overshadow the teachings of Sufi mystics, resulting in a decline in the practice of Sufism as it had been traditionally understood. This shift not only affected religious practices but also had broader implications for social cohesion within the region.

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PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF KASHMIRI SUFISM AND ITS PLURALISTIC NATURE

Kashmiri Sufism is characterized by its emphasis on love (Ishq), selflessness (Fana) and unity with divine (Wahdat-al-Wujud). These philosophical tenets advocate for an understanding of God that transcends sectarian boundaries, promoting an inclusive worldview where all human beings are seen as part of a single divine creation. The teachings of Kashmiri Sufi saints, such as Sheikh Nooruddin (Nund Rishi) and Shah-i-Hamadan, reflect these principles, emphasizing the importance of personal experience and direct communion with the divine over concocted rigid dogma that was misinterpreted over years by scholars who hadn't allegiance (Bayat) to experience the true and hidden meaning of Quran and Prophet's sayings. They rather took the word meaning of the holy verses of Quran, rather than its figurative meanings (in-depth understanding). This approach resonates deeply within the local populace, fostering a sense of belonging and spiritual awakening among both Muslims and Hindus.

The concept of Kashmiriyat embodies this pluralistic nature, representing an ethos that values coexistence among different religious communities. It reflects a shared cultural identity that celebrates the intermingling of Islamic and Hindu traditions. Sufi poetry often encapsulates themes of universal love, compassion and spiritual awakening, serving as a bridge between diverse cultural identities. For instance, the verses of Lal Ded, a revered female mystic, convey profound messages about unity and the oneness of existence, urging followers to recognize the divine presence in all beings;

[1] Brighter Kashmir, Journey of Sufism in Kashmir
[2] EFSAS.ORG, Study-Papers/Kashmir, Composite Culture Sufism and Communal Harmony Kashmiriyat
[3] History Journal, Article/32/2-2-11-986.pdf
[4] The Print, Sufi Mystics from 1370s Changed Kashmirs Identity but Orthodoxy Of 1970s is the Challenge
[5] EFSAS, The Mysticism and Glory of Sufism and Kashmiriyat

"Shiva abides in all that is; then do not discriminate between a Hindu or a Muslim. If thou art wise, know thyself; that is true knowledge of the Lord." Such teachings underscore the essence of Kashmiri Sufism as a force for harmony and understanding.

However, with the rise of extremist ideologies that reject pluralism in favor of rigid interpretations of Islam, these foundational principles have come under threat. Groups like Jamaat-e-Islami have sought to undermine the inclusive nature of Sufism by promoting a narrow view of Islam that alienates those who do not conform to their beliefs. This ideological shift has led to a decline in the appreciation for Sufi teachings that advocate love and tolerance. The radicalization narrative often labels Sufi practices as 'Shirk' or polytheistic, further entrenching divisions within society. These activities foster a spirit of unity and remind participants of their common heritage, which is vital for nurturing a sense of nationalism. The writings of Nund Rishi highlight his commitment to social justice and communal harmony, advocating for a society where class distinctions are irrelevant and everyone is treated with dignity. His teachings emphasize that true spirituality lies in selfless love for others and in recognizing the divine within all individuals. Moreover, the teachings propagated by various Sufi orders in Kashmir — such as Naqshbandi, Qadri, Suhrawardi and Rishi—have historically contributed to a rich tapestry of spiritual thought that encourages unity over division. The Rishi order, in particular, exemplifies this synthesis of beliefs drawn from both Islamic and pre-Islamic traditions, fostering an environment where people from different backgrounds could come together in mutual respect. While Kashmiri Sufism has historically served as a unifying force promoting love and inclusivity, contemporary challenges posed by extremist ideologies threaten to overshadow these vital teachings. By revisiting the philosophical foundations laid down by Kashmiri Sufi saints, there exists an opportunity to reclaim these messages and restore their relevance in today's socio-political context. Emphasizing the values inherent in Kashmiriyat can help bridge divides

THE ROLE OF SUFI SAINTS IN PROMOTING COMMUNAL HARMONY

Sufi saints have historically played a crucial role in promoting communal harmony, particularly within the context of India's diverse religious landscape. Their teachings and practices emphasize love, tolerance, and unity, effectively transcending sectarian divides. Central to Sufi philosophy is the concept of Wahdatul Wujud (Unity of Being), which posits that all human beings are manifestations of the same divine essence. This belief encourages followers to see beyond religious differences and recognize their shared humanity. Prominent Sufi figures, such as Hazrat Ameer Khusrau, articulated the idea that love transcends religious boundaries, fostering a sense of belonging among diverse communities. Sufi saints have been engaged in social work, focusing on the welfare of marginalized individuals. Their commitment to selfless service (Khidmat) promotes social equality and helps bridge gaps between different communities. The khanqahs (Sufi lodges) continue to serve as inclusive spaces where people from various backgrounds could gather, providing education, food and spiritual guidance that reinforce communal ties. For instance, the Chishti Order, which emerged in India during the 12th century, emphasized simplicity and direct engagement with the community rather than seeking conversions. They communicated in local dialects and adopted musical recitations called Sama, which created a mood of nearness to God and attracted followers from different backgrounds.

Interfaith dialogue is another significant aspect of the Sufi tradition. Sufi shrines have historically acted as meeting points for people of various faiths. The Ajmer Sharif Dargah, for example, is a prominent site that attracts both Hindus and Muslims, symbolizing a shared spiritual heritage. These shrines not only impart religious teachings but also foster compassion towards other faiths. The Dargah tradition shares close connections with Hindu beliefs; many Hindus visit these sites to seek blessings and guidance from Sufi saints. In regions like Kashmir, Sufism has contributed to communal harmony by promoting universal values such as peace and fraternity among diverse communities. The Rishi order in Kashmir emphasized love and compassion without regard for caste or religion. This tradition helped build bridges between Muslims and Kashmiri Pandits through shared rituals and festivals.

In contemporary society, the teachings of Sufi saints offer a counter-narrative to extremist ideologies that often seek to divide communities. Their focus on love, tolerance and dialogue is essential for peacebuilding efforts in today's context of rising communal tensions. There is growing recognition of the need to revive Sufi principles to promote harmony among diverse communities. These saints have significantly contributed to communal harmony through their teachings, social engagement and promotion of interfaith dialogue. Their legacy continues to inspire efforts toward peace and unity in an increasingly divided world. By embracing the values espoused by these spiritual leaders, societies can work towards fostering a more inclusive and harmonious environment.

[6]   Deccan Herald, India the Birth of Sufism in Kashmir
[7]   Kashmir Root Stock, 2020/09/23 Kashmirs Divinity in its Lost Sufism
[8]   Brighter Kashmir, Sufism in Kashmir and Cultural Harmony
[9]   EFSAS, Composite Culture Sufism and Communal Harmony Kashmiriyat
[10] EFSAS, The Mysticism and Glory of Sufism and Kashmiriyat
[11] Awaz The Voice, Culture News, Kashmir's Sufi Traditions Need to be Revived for Lasting Peace Harmony
[12] History Journal, Article, /32/2-2-11-986.pdf

CURRICULUM REFORMS FOR PEACE EDUCATION

The political landscape of Kashmir began to shift dramatically in late 1980s with rise of armed insurgency backed by Pakistan. This period was marked by escalating violence and societal upheaval, leading to significant changes in community dynamics. As terrorist groups gained influence, they portrayed Sufism as an aberration from 'true' Islam due to its syncretic nature and perceived leniency towards non-Muslims. This perspective was rooted in a desire to impose a more orthodox interpretation of Islam that rejected Sufi practices. Since insurgency was based on Jamaat e Islami's radical literature, anything that supported communal harmony was termed anti-Islamic, marking the lens of members of terrorist organizations quite narrow. Consequently, many Sufi shrines became targets for extremist sentiments aimed at purging what was seen as heretical practices. For example, shrines like Shah-e-Hamdan faced threats from groups seeking to eliminate elements of Sufism they deemed incompatible with their understanding of Islam. The rise of Wahhabi ideologies further exacerbated these tensions, challenging the long-standing traditions of tolerance that had defined Kashmiri society.

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Political developments also led to government crackdowns on terrorism, which often resulted in increased militarization and restrictions on religious expressions. This environment stifled the vibrant communal interactions that characterized pre-1989 Kashmir, where both Muslims and Hindus participated in joint celebrations at Sufi shrines. Events such as the Badamwari Festival, which celebrated the blooming of almond trees, diminished due to rising sectarian tensions. In response to these challenges, many Sufi leaders have actively advocated for peace amidst violence.

Figures such as Mirwaiz Umar Farooq have called for dialogue and reconciliation, emphasizing the need to return to the core Sufi tenets of love and unity. They have organized gatherings aimed at fostering interfaith dialogue and promoting messages of peace, often invoking the teachings of historical figures like Nund Rishi. Moreover, some Sufi leaders have sought to revive interest in traditional practices that promote communal harmony. Initiatives aimed at restoring damaged shrines not only serve as acts of cultural preservation but also symbolize a return to the inclusive ethos that defined Kashmiri society before the onset of conflict. By emphasizing shared values and common heritage, these leaders work towards rebuilding trust among communities. The political turmoil in Kashmir has significantly impacted Sufi traditions, challenging their role in promoting communal harmony. While extremist ideologies have threatened these practices, many Sufi leaders continue to advocate for peace and reconciliation. The resilience of Sufi teachings remains a beacon of hope for restoring communal ties in a region deeply scarred by conflict. By revisiting the principles espoused by these spiritual leaders, there is potential for fostering a more inclusive environment that honors Kashmir's rich cultural heritage while addressing contemporary challenges.

EMERGENCE OF RADICAL IDEOLOGIES: THE SHIFT FROM SUFISM TO EXTREMISM

The emergence of radical ideologies in Kashmir has significantly shifted the religious landscape, moving from traditional Sufi practices to extremist interpretations of Islam. This transformation can be attributed to several interrelated factors, including socio-economic disenfranchisement, political alienation and external influences from global jihadist movements. Below is a detailed analysis of these factors:

1. **External Influences from Global Jihadist Movements:** The influence of global jihadist movements has played a significant role in radicalizing segments of Kashmiri society. After the Soviet-Afghan War, many terrorists trained in Afghanistan returned to Kashmir, bringing with them radical ideologies and tactics. Groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) have successfully exploited local grievances while promoting a narrative that emphasizes jihad against both external enemies (such as India) and internal threats (including Sufi practitioners). These organizations have always rejected traditional Sufi values in favor of strict interpretations of Islam that advocate violence as a legitimate means to achieve their goals.

2. **Vilification of Sufism:** Radical groups actively vilify Sufism, portraying it as antithetical to their vision of Islam. They criticize Sufi practices such as visiting shrines and engaging in communal rituals, labeling them as heretical or un-Islamic. This rejection is part of a broader strategy to consolidate power by eliminating competing religious narratives that promote tolerance and coexistence. By positioning themselves as defenders of "true" Islam, these extremists seek to delegitimize Sufi traditions that have historically fostered interfaith dialogue and communal harmony.

3. **Manipulation of Religious Sentiments:** Radical groups have adeptly manipulated religious sentiments to further their goals. They frame their struggle as a sacred duty, appealing to the religious identity of young men who may feel disillusioned or disenfranchised. By invoking themes of martyrdom and divine reward for participating in jihad, these organizations create a powerful narrative that resonates with those seeking meaning or purpose in their lives. This manipulation extends beyond mere recruitment; it also serves to justify acts of violence against perceived enemies, both within and outside the Muslim community.

These factors collectively contribute to an environment where radical ideologies flourished at the expense of traditional Sufi values that historically promoted peace and communal harmony. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for addressing the root causes of radicalization and fostering a more inclusive society in Kashmir.

[13] New Delhi Times, Role of Sufism in Maintaining Peace and Communal Harmony in India
[14] BYJUS, Sufism Quick Look
[15] EFSAS, Study Papers, Composite Culture Sufism and Communal Harmony Kashmiriyat
[16] Wikipedia, Religious Harmony in India
[17] Sufism in Kashmir and Cultural Harmony
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[21] EFSAS, Composite Culture Sufism and Communal Harmony Kashmiriyat
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[23] Wikipedia, Rishi Order

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EMPOWERING KASHMIRI WOMEN THROUGH EDUCATION

The influence of Wahhabism and Salafism on Kashmiri youth has become increasingly pronounced over recent decades, representing a significant ideological shift away from traditional Sufi practices. Wahhabism and Salafism advocate for a return to what they consider 'pure' Islam, emphasizing strict adherence to the Quran and Hadith while denouncing practices associated with Sufism as innovations (bid'ah). These ideologies reject the syncretic traditions that have characterized Kashmiri Islam for centuries, positioning themselves against the inclusive values of Sufism that promote tolerance and coexistence among different faiths. The spread of Wahhabi and Salafi ideologies has been facilitated by their infiltration into educational institutions across Kashmir. Many madrasas and schools have adopted curricula that align with these puritanical interpretations, often at the expense of traditional teachings rooted in Sufism. Reports indicate that some educators promote exclusivist views, teaching students to reject Sufi practices and embrace a more terrorist perspective on Islam. This shift is evident in the increasing number of students who are drawn to radical interpretations of Islam, viewing them as more authentic or legitimate.

Mosques have traditionally served as community centers for spiritual guidance and social cohesion. However, over recent years, many mosques in Kashmir have shifted from being centers of moderate Hanafi/Barelvi Islam to adopting Wahhabi or Ahl-e-Hadith ideologies. The number of mosques affiliated with these radical movements has increased significantly, leading to a growing influence on local religious practices. Reports suggest that Wahhabi preachers systematically visit villages to propagate their ideology among youth, further entrenching these beliefs within the community.

The proliferation of radical literature through various media channels has played a crucial role in shaping beliefs of Kashmiri youth. Increased access to online platforms and social media has made it easier for extremist groups to disseminate their ideologies. Young people are exposed to a wide array of materials that glorify Jihad & vilify Sufi practices, reinforcing radical narratives that appeal to their sense of identity and purpose. The availability of such literature has facilitated the recruitmentof educated youth into terrorist organizations like Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM). External funding from sources in the Gulf region has also contributed to the spread of Wahhabism in Kashmir. Financial support for madrasas promoting radical ideologies has enabled these institutions to flourish, further marginalizing traditional Sufi teachings. This influx of resources allows radical groups to maintain their influence over local communities while undermining historical practices associated with Kashmiri Sufism. Radical groups exploit these sentiments by framing their struggle as part of a broader jihad against perceived oppression from both external forces (India) and internal ones (Sufi practitioners). This narrative resonates with youth seeking meaning and agency in a tumultuous environment.

CASE STUDIES: KEY INCIDENTS ILLUSTRATING THE SHIFT FROM DEVOTION TO DIVISION

Examining specific case studies provides insight into how devotion has transformed into division within Kashmiri society. Below are key incidents that illustrate this shift:

1.   **The Attack on Dastageer Sahib Shrine:** One notable example of an attack on a Sufi shrine is the Dastageer Sahib Shrine in Srinagar, which was severely damaged by fire in June 2012. This incident occurred amidst a backdrop of rising sectarian tensions and the increasing influence of Salafi ideologies in the region. While investigators found no definitive evidence of arson, however the destruction of this significant cultural and religious site was a part of a broader campaign against Sufi practices, which extremists labeled as heretical. The Dastageer Sahib Shrine, dedicated to the revered Sufi saint Syed Abdul Qadir Jeelani, has long been a symbol of Kashmiri Sufism and communal harmony. The fire that engulfed the shrine led to widespread mourning among local communities, who viewed it as an attack on their cultural heritage. Mourners expressed outrage towards Salafi groups for fostering an atmosphere of hate and intolerance toward Sufi traditions. This incident is emblematic of the challenges faced by Sufi practices in Kashmir, where rising extremism threatens not only individual practitioners but also the very fabric of communal identity that Sufism has historically nurtured.

2.   **Youth Recruitment Drives:**   In recent years, radical groups have specifically targeted young men attending traditional gatherings at Sufi shrines for recruitment. These youth recruitment drives highlight a direct challenge posed by extremism against established norms of Sufi devotion. For instance, during religious festivals or gatherings at Sufi shrines, extremist elements have been known to infiltrate these spaces to propagate their ideologies. They often exploit the disillusionment felt by young men due to socio-economic disenfranchisement and political alienation, framing their narratives in ways that vilify Sufi practices as un-Islamic or heretical. This recruitment strategy not only undermines the traditional values espoused by Sufism but also contributes to a growing divide within Kashmiri society, as young people are drawn away from their cultural roots toward terrorist ideologies.

3.   **Community Responses:**   Despite the challenges posed by extremist ideologies, instances of resilience among local communities illustrate efforts to preserve Sufi traditions amidst threats. Following the attack on Sheikh Nooruddin's shrine, local residents rallied together to protest against the destruction and to demand justice. Demonstrations erupted across the valley, with thousands marching in solidarity to reclaim their cultural heritage. Community leaders and activists organized events to celebrate Sufi teachings and reaffirm their commitment to peace and coexistence. These grassroots movements serve as powerful reminders of enduring influence of Sufism in Kashmiri culture and highlight the determination of community to resist divisive forces.

These case studies illustrate the transformation of devotion into division within Kashmiri society through key incidents involving attacks on Sufi shrines, targeted youth recruitment by extremist groups, and community responses aimed at preserving Sufi traditions. The ongoing struggle between these opposing forces underscores the complex dynamics at play in Kashmir's socio-political landscape and highlights the need for continued efforts to promote tolerance and understanding amidst rising sectarian tensions.

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[34]   Wikipedia Charar-e-Shareef Shrine
[35]   State Times, Govt Postpones Holiday on Account of urs Sheikh Noor ud din Sahib
[36]   Kashmir Reader, 2023, 14 Oct, Sheikh Noor ud din Noorani Ra, A Mystic Saint of Kashmir
[37]   Wikipedia, Nund Rishi
[38]   EFSAS, Study Papers, Composite Culture Sufism and Communal Harmony Kashmiriyat
[39]   EFSAS, Study Papers, Pan Islamism and Radicalization of Kashmiri Youth
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[42]   Ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu

CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES FOR SUFISM AMIDST RISING TERRORISM

Contemporary Kashmir faces significant challenges for Sufism amidst rising terrorism, as extremist ideologies increasingly marginalize traditional practices. The following points outline the primary challenges that Sufism encounters in this volatile environment:

1.   **Marginalization:**   As extremist ideologies gain ground in Kashmir, practitioners of traditional Sufi practices find themselves increasingly marginalized within their own communities. The rise of radical groups has led to a cultural shift where Sufi teachings, which emphasize love, tolerance and spiritual unity, are often viewed with suspicion or outright hostility. Extremist factions label Sufi practices as 'un-Islamic' or innovations (bid'ah), further alienating Sufi practitioners from their communities. This marginalization is not only social but also spiritual, as many Sufis face pressure to conform to the more rigid interpretations of Islam promoted by radical elements.

2.   **Fear-Based Compliance:**   Fear-based compliance has become a prevalent issue among individuals in Kashmir who may feel compelled to conform outwardly to extremist narratives due to concerns for their safety or the threat of social ostracization. The atmosphere of intimidation created by terrorist groups discourages open expressions of Sufi beliefs and practices. Many individuals may avoid attending Sufi gatherings or visiting shrines out of fear of being targeted by extremists or labeled as heretics within their communities. This climate of fear stifles the rich cultural heritage associated with Sufism and undermines its role in promoting communal harmony.

3.   **Loss of Heritage:**   The ongoing violence targeting cultural sites associated with Sufism poses an urgent threat to the preservation of this rich heritage. Incidents such as the destruction of shrines and mosques that have historical significance reflect a broader campaign against Sufi practices and beliefs. For example, reports indicate that numerous Sufi shrines have been vandalized or destroyed in recent years, often under the pretext of combating 'heretical' practices. This loss not only erases important cultural landmarks but also diminishes the spiritual and communal identity that Sufism has fostered in Kashmir for centuries. The need for preservation efforts is critical to safeguard these sites and maintain the legacy of Sufi teachings that have historically promoted peace and coexistence.

    The contemporary challenges for Sufism in Kashmir amidst rising terrorism include marginalization within communities, fear-based compliance among individuals, and the loss of cultural heritage associated with Sufi practices. Addressing these challenges requires concerted efforts to promote tolerance, understanding, and respect for diverse interpretations of Islam while safeguarding the rich traditions that have characterized Kashmiri culture for centuries.

RECLAIMING SUFI VALUES FOR PEACE AND UNITY IN KASHMIR

    Reclaiming Sufi values in Kashmir is not only a cultural imperative but also a crucial strategy for fostering peace and unity in a region long afflicted by conflict and division. Historically, Kashmiri Sufism has acted as a powerful unifying force, promoting ideals of love, compassion, and tolerance among its diverse religious communities, notably between Muslims and Hindus. This rich spiritual tradition has emphasized the importance of shared humanity, encouraging dialogue and mutual respect that transcends sectarian divides. However, the rise of radicalization and extremism in recent decades has severely disrupted this harmony, leading to societal fragmentation and the erosion of cultural identities. In light of these challenges, there is an urgent need to revisit and revitalize the core tenets of Sufism. By emphasizing love and compassion, communities can cultivate an atmosphere conducive to open dialogue and understanding, while the promotion of tolerance can help alleviate the sectarian tensions that have escalated over time. Effective strategies for revitalization may include educational initiatives aimed at informing younger generations about the historical significance of Sufism in promoting communal harmony, as well as organizing interfaith cultural festivals that celebrate Kashmir's shared heritage through Sufi poetry, music, and art. Additionally, creating safe dialogue platforms where individuals from diverse backgrounds can share their experiences fosters empathy and understanding among communities. Protecting and promoting access to Sufi shrines can serve as vital focal points for community gatherings, reinforcing the shared spiritual legacy that binds Kashmiris together. Ultimately, embracing these Sufi values offers a powerful counter-narrative to extremism and provides a meaningful pathway for healing the deep-seated wounds inflicted by years of conflict, urging Kashmiris to rediscover their commonalities amid ongoing strife and work collectively toward a more peaceful future.

WAY FORWARD

In examining the historical roots and transformations of Sufism in Kashmir, it becomes clear that this mystical tradition has significantly shaped the region's cultural identity, fostering a legacy that continues to resonate today. The teachings of Sufi saints, which emphasize inclusivity, love and communal harmony, serve as a powerful reminder of Kashmir's rich spiritual heritage and its potential for reconciliation amidst ongoing socio-political tensions. As valley grapples with consequences of radicalization and violence—issues that have forced many to flee their homes and abandon traditional ways of life—there is an urgent need to revisit the inclusive teachings of Sufism. This revival could provide essential pathways toward healing and reconciliation, allowing communities to reconnect with their shared values. Understanding the historical context of Sufism is crucial for grasping how political dynamics have influenced religious practices and contributed to contemporary challenges faced by Sufism in Kashmir. The ideological shift towards extremism has had devastating consequences, tearing apart the once-peaceful fabric of Kashmiri society. Therefore, as the region seeks to recover from these traumas, it is imperative to prioritize the preservation of Kashmir's cultural heritage and promote a return to its moderate roots. By embracing the teachings of Sufi saints and fostering interfaith dialogue, Kashmir can work towards rebuilding its identity as a place of spiritual unity and cultural inclusivity, thus paving the way for a more harmonious future.