



## Review Article

# Noorbakshia influence in Kashmir: The chak dynasty's role in its Expansion

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## ABSTRACT

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The Noorbakshia is a particular school of Kubraviya Sufi tradition that had a leading influence on the development of the religious and socio-political life in Kashmir during the late 15<sup>th</sup> -16<sup>th</sup> century. The order was based on the teachings of Sayyid Mohammad Nurbaksh (1392-1464), and reflected a mash-up of Sunni and Shi'ite theological orientations, although it focused on the devotion to the Ahl al-Bayt and the Twelve Imams. Its diffusion in the Kashmir is linked with the work of Mir Shams-ud-Din Araki who, with his spiritual power, changed the several important nobles and enabled the foundation of khanqahs which became the focus of religious and cultural life. The Chak dynasty, which was also in line with Shi, was very essential in motivating the order by the patronage it brought to the political dimension in strengthening its presence in the valley. But the rule of the Noorbakshia was strongly opposed by Sunni ulema and nobles, and subsequent persecution under Mughal interventions, especially during the campaigns of Mirza Haidar Dughlat. Nevertheless, despite such difficulties, the order had a great role in changing the Kashmir religious identity and court politics as part of changes in sectarian orientation, power dynamics, and cultural bargaining. This paper looks into the emergence of the Noorbakshia order in Kashmir, institutional reinforcement, resistance and its legacy in the contentious history of religion and authority in the region.

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## Introduction

The Noorbakshia order maintained a strong affiliation with the Kubraviya Sufi tradition and is often regarded as its extension. It emerged as a distinct Sufi order in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, largely through the spiritual leadership and efforts of the eminent mystic, Sayyid Mohammad Nurbaksh (Trimingham, 1971). The Noorbakshia, also spelled as Noorbakshiya, exhibited significant rheological and doctrinal affinities with Shi'ism; as it laid strong emphasis on the doctrine of Twelve Imams and the love for Ahl-e-Bayt, also the observation of Muharram however accepted the doctrine of Ijma as observed by Sunni Muslims. The sect inclined towards the Ithna Ashariyyah (Twelver) Shi'ism following the declaration of Twelver Shi'ism as the state religion of Persia by its ruler, Shah Ismail. (Aalum, 2015)

### Significance of the study

The research is highly scholarly and socio-cultural in nature since it examines the historical, religious, and political aspects of Noorbakshia Sufi order in Kashmir. Following the formation of the movement, its principles and their diffusion under the patronage of the Chak dynasty, the study sheds light on the sophisticated relations between spiritual movements and political authority in medieval Kashmir. The analysis helps to understand better how Shi'ism had spread in the area, especially, due to the activities of one or another of the figures such as Mir Shams Din Araki and the importance of the impact of religious and political

alliances on Kashmiri society and administration. Historically, this study yields the understanding of the processes of religious diffusion, how the Sufi saints have contributed to socio-political mobilization, and how sectarian dynamics has changed under the Chak rulers. It also illuminates the influence of outside intervention, including that of Mirza Haidar Dughlat and the Mughal rulers, to the religious world and the strength of Sufi tradition in the region. The study focuses on the culturally important elements of the Noorbakshia order in creating Kashmiri identity, spiritual practices and community unity. It preserves the memory of significant religious institutions and the role they played in the socio-religious landscape of the valley by recording the creation of khanqahs, madrasas and disciples' networks. Moreover, this study also has relevance to modern Islamic studies, South Asian history and religious sociology scholars as it fills the gap between the doctrinal and the historical analysis. It gives a context in which to understand how minority religious movements engage with political institutions, negotiate their survival under hostile regimes, and add to the variety of religious experiences in a region. the research can be applied to larger debates around religious tolerance, sectarian co-existence and continuity of spiritual heritage, and the research provides worthy lessons to both academic research and cultural policymaking in contemporary Kashmir.

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## Methodology

The current research presupposes a historical-analytical approach, which was based on primary and secondary sources to follow the path of the Noorbakshia order in Kashmir. The major historical accounts like *Tarikh-i-Hasan*, *Tarikh-i-Rashdi*, *Baharistan-i-Shahi*, and other historical texts and sources in Persian and Kashmiri give some information on the political, sectarian, and cultural aspects of the era. Biography of Mir Shams-ud-Din Araki and others associated with him have been discussed to gain insight into the individual level of spreading the order. These historical accounts have been interpreted and placed within their context by secondary scholarship, e.g., by Hasan (1974), Hussain (2017), and Trimmingham (1971). A comparative prism is also present in the methodology to emphasize the interaction of Sunni and Shi'ite forces, and the effect of Mughal interventions on the sectarian equilibrium in Kashmir. Combining textual analysis and socio-political interpretation, this paper re-creates the dynamic interconnection of Sufism, politics and sectarianism in Kashmir.

## Strengthening of Shi'ism in Kashmir

Mir shams din Araki, a pivot able figure in the spread of Shi'ism in Kashmir, visited the region in 1483 AD at the behest of his spiritual guide, Shah Qasim Faiz Baksh, who was the son of Sayyid Mohammad Noorbaksh, the founder of the Noorbakshia order. He initially travelled to Kashmir not with the intention of religious propagation, but to procure medicinal herbs from a cardiac ailment and undergoing treatment under Shah Qasim. Upon arriving in Kashmir, he discovered the valley was a prominent center of the Kubraviya Sufi order and since Noorbakshia order was an offshoot of Kubraviya Sufi order, he became actively engaged in guiding and educating the people about the principles and teachings of Noorbakshia order; many Kashmiris as such became the disciples of Mir Araki (Hussain, 2017). With the arrival of Mir Araki, the spread of Shi'ism received a further momentum in Kashmir as such this event marks a paradigm shift in Shi'ite history in Kashmir. (Hasan, 1974) Until the close of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the majority of the Muslims in Kashmir adhered to Sunni Islam, with the Shia community exerting minimal political and demographic influence. However, during Mir Araki's second visit in 1502 AD, the Shia population witnessed a significant increase, accompanied by a notable rise in their political prominence (Hasan, 1974). During his second visit, Araki was accompanied by nearly 200 disciples and actively propagated the teachings of the Noorbakshia philosophy, successfully converting several members of the Kashmiri elite, including notable figures such as Baba Ali Najar and Musa Raina. The latter's conversion proved a turning point in the spread of Noorbakshia order as his gave political patronage and provided the land for the establishment of famous khanqah at Zadibal which later became Khanqah-e-Noorbakshia (Hussain, (2017). Besides Kaji Chak became the disciple of Araki himself and these conversions were helpful for the spread of Noorbakshia faith because of their political influence and chaks ultimately came to power in 1554 AD and provided complete political patronage to Noorbakshia faith, although not claiming it to be the state religion. In spite of the initial success, Araki had to face great obstacles later on, as he was opposed by Sunni nobles and ulemas who were hostile to the Shi'ite creed (Khuihāmī, *Tārīkh-i Ḥasan* 1999).

## Rise of the Chaks

Five years into Emperor Akbar's reign over Hindustan, Kaji chak deposed the nominal ruler, Habib Shah, and transferred the crown to his own brother, Ghazi Shah Chak (Khuihāmī, *Tārīkh-i Ḥasan* (1999). The act signifies the end of over two centuries of Shah Mir dynasty's rule and their replacement by the Chak rule,

also the transition of power from Sunni affiliated dynasty to a Shia affiliated rule (Khuihāmī, *Tārīkh-i Ḥasan*, 1999). In his *Tarikh*, Kuihami laments this transfer as a loss of Sunni temporal authority; for after two centuries the rule moved from descendants of Shah Mir to the descendants of langar chak. This evident Sunni-ness of the Shah Mir Sultans is effectively contrasted with the Shi'ite-ness of chak (Deedmar). The chaks who were the servants and foster brothers of this dynasty (Shah Mir's), progressively acquired power and dominance, due to which the government (sultanate), Deen (religion) and Millat (nation) affairs were disrupted (Hussain, 2017). The rise of chaks is primarily a case of how a nomadic non-native group emerges from Kashmir's borderland and then, over the course of time, navigates itself to power and how both Araki and chaks labored to bring Noorbakshia order into limelight (Sajid, 2002). As dissidents, both Araki and chaks were at a disadvantage vis-à-vis more established power centers, namely the political religious establishment. The opposition Araki encountered from bayhaqi Sayyid's, Magrey's and other nobles at court, as well as portions of the kubravi order and the court mull, demonstrates the intensity of this hostility (Hasan, 1974). By forming a spiritual alliance with Iraqi, the Chaks were able to increase their visibility at the court through a charismatic, if contentious, Sufi sheikh who commanded a great deal of attention. Iraki's biographer mentions in a single reference to the Chaks that the dynasty attributed their property in the city to Irak's generosity (Hawal-i Sarkar-i Wala Madar Maharaja Ranbir Singh dar Maramlah Gharat-i Ahl-i Tashi). Chaks could not be Irak's only means of advancing his own objective, which consisted primarily of expanding his community of disciples and court patronage. In addition to the chaks, he was able to win over Malik Raina, a member if the old court elite preceding Sultanate rule who upon assuming the position of wazir, would offer Iraki the official royal patronage. Much more than the chaks, Musa Raina was the first among the nobles and monarchs of Kashmir to gain Iraki's special favour (Hamdani, *Tārīkh-i Shīyan-i Kashmir*). The Chaks were able to acquire new followers gradually by demonstrating people bravery and resource management. The majority of manuscripts suggest that the chak's early development was more like that of a tribe united under a charismatic leader than that of a single family, albeit we have no idea of their exact number. The rise of the Chaks at the court also coincides with the Shahmir sultans' authority and reputation steadily eroding after Sultan Hasan Shah's death in 1472. The court politics of Kashmir in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries depict a quicksand of hopes realized and dreams crushed, with various claimants to the throne staking their chances on the support they could garner and, more critically, sustain among the contending Amir's. And in this struggle for dominance, it didn't take long for erstwhile allies to convert become lethal rivals, where participants' family ties were just as irrelevant as their sectarian affiliations. Additionally, it is during this time that Delhi's involvement in Kashmiri affairs began to grow, as numerous Kashmiri court politics constituents cried out to the Delhi court for assistance or safety. Fortunately, the Lodi sultans (1452-1526) of Delhi were more interested in enlarging their realms southward into Jaunpur and Bihar than getting mired in a Himalayan territory at the time when Kashmir was at its most vulnerable (Pandit Hargopal, 1986). Shi'i amirs are seen tying themselves to their political fortunes rather than forming sectarian organizations to advance the fortunes of faith in the contest for the throne between Muhammad Shah and his uncle Fateh Shah. Sunni amirs exhibited a comparable level of political savvy, and in order to protect their own financial interests, both Shi'i and Sunni amirs would establish alliances, get married, and then turn on anyone who got in their way of power. And it was in this constantly shifting environment of high stakes that Kaji Chak

(d. 1544) rose to prominence as a fierce warrior and significant figure during Fateh Shah's reign (1515–17) as sultan of Kashmir. Under Muhammad Shah, Kaji soon gained the coveted position of wazir, which he held for a lengthy but turbulent period from 1517 until 1527. Kaji was the personification of a certain sense of "Kashmiri-ness"—a connection to the land—more so than any other rival noble. Even though Kaji was exiled and dismissed when the Mughal army sent by Emperor Babur (r. 1526–30) invaded Kashmir, he gathered his forces and routed the Mughal soldiers (Bates, *Gazetteer of Kashmir*, 215 to 216)

However, neither Kashmir nor Kaji's first meeting with the Mughals was to be their last. We find Kaji returning from exile to command Kashmiri forces in their battle against the Mughals who had invaded the city of Srinagar during 1531 after being driven out of the position of wazir once more owing to palace intrigue. The Chak ascendancy was however curbed when a different Mughal army led by Mirza Haidar Dughlat (d. 1551), an uncle of Emperor Humayun (r. 1530–40, 1555–6), attacked Kashmir twice, once in 1533 on behalf of Sultan Sa'id Khan and once in 1540 on Humayun's behalf. Dughlat's second attempt at an offensive proved successful, in contrast to his previous assault, which ended in a hasty retreat. A concerted attempt was made in the second part of Dughlat's (1540–51) ten-year rule in Kashmir to establish the territory's confessional identity—as a Sunni land under Hanafi mazhab control—and this effort is what defines the region today. Dughlat explains his stance on this matter in his memoirs *Tarakhi Rashid*, which he wrote in part while living in Kashmir: In Kashmir right now, the Sufis have legalized so many heresies that they have no idea what is right or wrong. They hold that keeping watch over the night and refraining from eating constitute piety and purity. They criticize and despise science and learned people, and they place the Holy Law under the True 'Way'. Thank God that no one in Kashmir currently has the courage to publicly declare their faith; instead, everyone outwardly presents themselves as nice Sunnis. They are aware of my harsh treatment of them and are aware that any sect member who shows up will be executed.

### Military Resistance Against the Mughals

Dedhmar praises Dughlat for his promotion of Islam, or rather the Sunni understanding and practice of Islam: He spread knowledge, trained ulema, and honored Islam and the people of Islam with great beneficence, while also briefly mentioning some of the atrocities associated with Dughlat's reign, including the graphic details of his execution of a Shi'i Reshi, Shanghli Reshi. Dughlat was in charge of the murder of the Noorbakhshi shaykh's son, Shaikh Daniyal, in addition to putting an end to the Chak threat to his reign and razing the Iraqi khanqah or shrine structure at Zadibal (*Hamdani*, *Tarakhi-i Shiyani Kashmir*). The Noorbakhshiya order was outlawed, but Dughlat also killed notable elders who were connected to it. Ali would have us believe that only Shiites were targeted, but the author of *Baharistan-i-shahi* refutes this by mentioning Sufis who were not part of the Noorbakhshi order, particularly those who belonged to the Kubrawi order, as well as Sunni ulema who belonged to the Shafi School who were either deported or slain. Despite his support for Hanafi orthodoxy, Maulana Shams Pal, one of the Shaykh Hamza's students, is known to have engaged in discussions with the Dughlat and his colleagues. Due to Dughlat's increasing atrocities and, more crucially, his failure to blend in with the local cultural ethos, Kashmiri nobles came together once more, leading to his downfall and eventual death. The portrayal of Dughlat's death in a sectarian context is once more left to Dedhmar, who writes: The news of this untimely death of Mirza (sounded) pleasant tiding of victory for his foes. Particularly the "Ahl-i Tashi," to whom he had meted out just punishment (qarar-i waqeyi) was overjoyed (s. khawaja 1903). Ghazi Chak (r. 1561–3) assumed the throne of

Kashmir ten years after Dughlat's passing without much resistance from the nobles, Shi'i or Sunni. A small rebellion from within the Chak clan was swiftly put down without much of a battle, demonstrating once more that political disputes were more common than sectarian ones. As vizier before taking the throne, Ghazi was in charge of putting down a Mughal army that Akbar had dispatched to take over Kashmir in 1561 (*Hamdani*, *Tārikh-i Shiyani-i Kashmir*). The kind of victory attained by Ghazi Khan was never attained by any of the great rulers (*Khawāqin*) of the globe. During his reign, he took over all of Khuistan-i Hind and ruled over Pakhli and Bhimber. Ghazi Chak was courageous and intelligent, but he also had a harsh, inflexible character that was tempered by a strong sense of justice. In retribution for his uncle's death, the sultan had his son and heir apparent, Aidar Khan, hung at the city's major Maidan, Idgah. Ghazi Chak, who was raised in a turbulent environment of war, struggle, and intrigue, ruled with a firm hand but an obvious lack of compassion. Ghazi developed order and justice as the cornerstone of his Sultanate, in contrast to Dughlat, who had relied on confessional compliance to solidify his power; nonetheless, the sultan's retributive justice was devoid of mercy. While respecting Ghazi's battle to defend Kashmir's geographical sovereignty against Akbar's repeated Mughal assaults, the Shi'i author of *Baharistan* denounces the sultan as a despot who delighted in meted out cruel penalties. The first Chak sultan is described as the great leader, the life of the world, the giver of good to the humble, the accomplished [...] the one skilled in literature and the benefactor of the people (*Biyāz*, Private collection, Munshi Nazir Afimad, Srinagar).

### Conclusion

By the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Kashmir had already embraced Islam due to the missionary activities of various Sufi orders, such as the Kubrawiya and Suhrawadiya, however, the Noorbakhshia Sufi order, a distinct branch of the kubrawi tradition founded by by Mohammad Noorbakh, began to gain influence in the valley during the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. Its blend of mysticism, asceticism and strong spiritual disciple appealed to a segment of Kashmiri's population, particularly among the elites in its initial stages and later to local masses as well. Under the Chak sultanate, the Noorbakhshia network expanded and shrines and khanqahs and madrassas were built to propagate the teachings of the order. This close association not only reinforced their legitimacy but also created a unique social-political synthesis of spirituality and governance in Kashmir.

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