

## Engaging with the Local Narrative of Hagiography in Kashmir

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### Abstract

Local narratives when they contradict dominant episteme of the age may not be academically respectable. They may be discussed as something curious or interesting or for purely historical reasons or as a species of antique collections dumped into the wastebasket of history. And when these are about local beliefs and mythopoetic experiences they are more incredible to the scholarly. And historians today are trained not to take note of local narratives at face value and somehow appropriate their queerness. Often people's gullibility or hagiographer's zeal or faith is invoked to explain what appears to be scandalous to reason or received understanding of science. Once upon a time the world of angels, fairies and djinns were part of experience or explanatory framework to which people naturally subscribed. But in the secular age it is no longer a case. All these things appear relics of a bygone age of faith. Today hagiographers too have mostly succumbed to the fashions of the age and write as if ordinary stories of

ordinary men. Engaging with traditional hagiographic accounts in the face of all these epistemic shifts resulting in either skewed reading in light of what appears as distorting mirror of rationalist framework and casting doubts on the claims of hagiographers may well be questioned on account of greater sensitivity shown, in the postmodern era, to other forms of rationality that better accommodate local narrative not fitting in the Grand Narratives of Enlightenment and Secular Humanism. Taking the test case of local narrative of belief in saints and their miraculous performances in Kashmir we argue that modernist historiography as practiced in Kashmir seems to be guilty of epistemic violence while applying modernist tools to a traditional culture.

Keywords: Local Narratives, Miracles, Saints, Kashmir, Hagiographers

## Prelude

Modern historiography is based on very different presuppositions or worldview as compared to traditional/medieval historiography. They are almost incomparable. Modern man is predisposed to believe in the autonomy of Nature and refuses on principle to see it as a symbol of something else, as demanding an explanation in terms of hierarchy of existence, as having anything to do with teleology and he thus refuses to acknowledge any metaphysical significance of the universe. Even many modern theologians concede this. The medieval world view is condemned for its credulity towards the notions of miracles, fairies, djinns, spirits, magic, angels etc. Modern

rationalism rejects suprasensible and suprarational phenomena on a priori grounds. Pre-modern man could not write history objectively according to these modernist rationalist historians because he believed in miracles, “myths” and “legends” connected with supernatural happenings or performances of saints or miracle workers. Thus many medieval historians are supposed to have succumbed to the temptation of writing exaggerated, fanciful, incredible stories and legends. However, continued presence of certain accounts respectfully mentioning or invoking miraculous performances of saints in certain traditional cultures warrants revisiting such reductionist dismissal of much of traditional hagiographic material. To illustrate our case we briefly present an account of belief in mystics and their extraordinary powers in modern Kashmir and then proceed to locate the hagiographic accounts replete with such accounts in the context of traditional attitude towards such things and engage with certain accounts of modernist historians.

## **1. Rule of Mystics in the Age of Reason**

There are some cultures which have largely resisted the inroads of demythologizing secular modernism. Somehow they seem to live in medieval times in terms of faith in the supernatural. The supernatural seems part of their daily lives and gets invoked in key decisions. Local mystics are consulted by rulers and many life’s decisions are not taken without

consulting family mystic. Mystics can enter any home and are received warmly and reverentially although in this guise many charlatans and insane people are also carving a space or livelihood for themselves. Some of the popular phrases or proverbs like “In *Adam’s* skin are hidden great secrets” are often invoked while the question of dismissing a claimant of mystical powers arises. Mystics’ residences or shrines are thronged by all and sundry including the educated elite and ruling class. Almost every other day there is some *urs* celebration commemorating some local mystic’s anniversary. People claim to be in touch with their dead Masters. And every Thursday Sufi music in which mostly the verses of the master are sung by disciples are held. One could see the shrines in Kashmir everywhere and today the most visited spots happen to be shrines. And many people before coming to courts to attend hearing of their cases come to shrines as they believe cases are decided here. Almost every person has a story to narrate of an encounter with a realized or powerful mystic. Here mystics are seen roaming naked in the freezing temperature of winter and some are seen with a fire pot in the midst of hot summer. Some have been noted to take so little food that people are led to believe that they are fed by God. And some are believed to share food with some otherworldly beings. Childless couples seek the help of mystics and everywhere there are narrated some success stories! And some children are well known in localities to be begotten by mystics’ prayer and almost consecrated to his memory and they receive

special treatment. Mystics have been seen publicly predicting downfall of a government and result of new elections and key figures of all ruling parties seek appointment with them at key moments. And I have seen some mystics drawing maps of roads they are yet to be built and claiming that we are making master plans and these will be the future road links. People invoke traditional Sufi belief in the hierarchy of power that is occupied by saints of different categories. The belief in the authority of a mystic is so popular that all kinds of charlatans disguising themselves as mystics loot people. Mysticism is sold as a commodity for faith healing and shortcut to worldly success and its traders are not easily picked. Pseudo-mystics are everywhere contributing to decreasing reputation of mystics in the newer generations.

Despite strong theological criticisms of certain popular beliefs and practices lately from Salafis and Jamaat-i-Islami ideologues (Muslim revivalist groups) the popularity of cult of mystics and shrine culture along with all its paraphernalia like prayer food culture, loud recitations of mystical or devotional hymns, *khatam/niyaz* parties (in which local community and some religious figures are invited to read certain chants and are served sumptuous food) has not lost its sheen. Many houses invite 11<sup>th</sup> century Sufi Abdul Qadir Jeelani on every 11<sup>th</sup> of every month by arranging a tea party.

It is not that mystics have failed to stamp their indelible prints in cultural consciousness of people. There are countless

trees and stones and springs whose special features are attributed to certain mystics. Almost every locality has some miraculous relic in the form of these things. For Kashmiris such key modern statements like “God is dead” are simply incomprehensible. They bear witness to Him and his men (saints). Nothing is more real than a man of God and his experiences. It is considered a life’s treasure to find a true Master. A Kashmiri’s own travels are mostly in search of a Master. And in almost every village there is someone, famous or hidden who claims or is thought to be a Master. Faith healing is a big business and is an evidence of the power of or faith in mystics. Faith healing attributed to mystics is differentiated from the one attributed to occultists. More accomplished mystics don’t resort to amulets and other objects of faith healing trade but just bless water or cast a glance or even to what are thought to be coded slangs to achieve objectives. And people vie for the sputum or slaps or slangs of the mystics to get their objectives. Special threads are tied in shrines for achieving particular objectives. Birth hair of children is mostly cut under the feet of some mystic in some shrine. People throng to move relics of saints displayed on special occasions in the shrines. And people wish goodbye to near and dear ones with the clause “I leave you in *Pir’s* (Master’s) custody.” These constitute some aspects of local narrative of mysticism in Kashmiri culture.

## 2. The Problem of Situating Local Narrative of Hagiography

Our historians trained in modern academies can't assimilate all this when they begin to write on hagiographic literature. They create an account in which the supernatural or extraordinary feats are explained away as products of credulous imagination of the gullible, vested interests of traders of mysticism and zeal of the faithful. But this rather elitist dismissal of vast data and popularly accepted interpretation of life of saints is largely dismissed by more vocal and sophisticated scholars who are sympathetic to mysticism. We thus find in contemporary hagiographic literature some very powerfully argued accounts of the Masters. The local narrative that puts the Master at the centre of the universe (seeing in him nothing short of image of God) is what has currency today for vast majority of Kashmiri people. The question is how do we account for this for a secular modern audience? The task of questioning or puncturing received understanding or appropriation of this local narrative that modernist historiography has undertaken is fraught with great danger of distorting/ignoring certain aspects of traditional experience. However the success of this modernist rationalist account has meant that local narrative may not be retrievable at all through this methodology. So how to argue against this methodology without necessarily granting the particular supernaturalistic interpretation that traditionally is put forward is what we propose to do in this paper.

Our problem gets complicated making the question of retrieving original experience or “true” history all the more intractable by certain theological voices seconding this demythologizing account. So how do we talk about traditional Kashmiri culture in which nothing can be explained except in light of mysticism without buying what we might consider more imaginative interpretation of the same that was traditionally upheld is an important question calling for more nuanced and respectful understanding of traditional milieu in which our accounts are located. We can also deploy resources of what could be termed as postmodern historiography to approach the issue. This is what has been attempted in the following pages.

The local narrative about saints is to be understood in the larger context of other narratives that include narratives about Gods, angels, fairies, our fellowship with variety of cosmic beings, our participation in cosmic rhythms through special holy personages and all of them are linked by allegiance to traditional outlook.

### **3. Presuppositions of Modernist Historiography**

Wedded to reductionist scientific logic modernist historiography assumes that pre-modern man could not write history objectively because he believed in miracles, “myths” and “legends” connected with supernatural happenings or performances of saints or miracle workers. Their logic is simple.

Since miracles are inadmissible on naturalist rationalist assumptions so they could not happen and if someone (like medieval man and historian) reported repeatedly about such things, and wrote whole chronicles and histories based on them or presented them as indubitable historical facts, he is considered as deluded, subjectivist, credulous and naïve recorder of events who did not know how to doubt (evidence of the senses). Thus medieval historians are supposed to be too pious and devoted believers to have perceived the objective, unadorned, unembellished historical facts or narratives. They are supposed to have let their imagination run wild and having no sense of the facts, down to earth realities. Thus almost all of our medieval historians are discredited on very spurious grounds, as will be argued later. Middle ages are considered to be dark not only in the Europe but everywhere by post-enlightenment modernist historians (except a few important dissident figures). The light of Reason was yet to illumine the foggy, cloudy traditional atmosphere where myths, legends, mystery cults, the “mad” people and the occult sciences were important. The age of Faith, as Will Durant characterizes middle ages, was the age of gullible credulous and superstitious men who believed in the miracles and the like. The miraculous accounts of saints’ lives were quite popular and till late *The Lives of the Saints* was one of the most popular and read texts in English world. Kashmir was called *pir waer* (land of saints). And then the modern man was born and everything that smacked of

the supernatural or supersensible, intuitive, the mad or irrational was banished. They only accepted miracle was science and the only praiseworthy miracle worker was scientist. So good-bye to the age of miracles, spirits, djinns, fairies, angels, magic, the like and hurrah for the dawn of glorious age of reason. As miracles became incredible the whole edifice of Christianity got problematized by modern rationalist critique of history. Theology had to be reconstructed and reinterpreted and even transformed into its exact antithesis – secular theology. Modern man found it hard to believe in the literal truth of miracles of Jesus as modern scientific rationalism became fashionable. And this transformed the whole Christian religious tradition. No history could be considered modern or timely that did not reject the literal truth of miracles. This forms the context of modern historiography and its treatment of hagiological literature. Modern Kashmiri historians, generally speaking, uncritically accepted this context and saw medieval Kashmir from this particular perspective. This results in gross distortion of traditional history and nothing short of crude caricature of traditional ethos. What becomes of the traditional history at the hands of our historians due to this rationalist modernist perspective will be discussed in this paper.

Traditional religions and civilizations are inconceivable without taking into consideration the notion of hierarchy of existence. And this can be understood or appreciated only when distinction between Nature and super nature, rational and para-

rational and scientific and mystical realms are no longer respected and one term privileged and the other silenced as in modernist humanist discourse. Miracles form the important constituent of traditional religions, Islam included. The pre-modern pre-renaissance world may be defined with respect to its “credulity” towards miracles. Kashmir and Persia are classic examples of traditional *Weltanschauung* and Kashmir still retains that very unfashionable and anachronistic (to modernist sensibilities) ambience and identity as land of *Pirs* or land of miracle workers (two terms are almost synonymous for a traditional Kashmiri). It is only at the great cost of ruthless marginalization/suppression of the Realm of Unreason, the intuitive, the mystical, the “mad,” that modern scientific worldview has come to dominate as Foucault has pointed out. And it has penetrated very deep into historiography and our view of history. History has to be distorted to appropriate or append traditional world history in modern secular scientific paradigm.

#### **4. Place of Miracles in Local Narrative of Saints**

To make really objective study of history of traditional pre-modern world of which medieval Kashmir embodied important elements miracles have to be reckoned with seriously and not to be explained away, demythologized, marginalized or just ignored as if they are nothing but fairy tales, legendary mythological

accretions around some spiritual truth and having at best some social role only. It is not to argue for conceding literal truth in the traditional accounts of saints that make many references on miraculous events. What we propose is to ask if we need necessarily to challenge literal truth of such events. Why not question the paradigm that is not comfortable with their literal truth? Perhaps we need not dispute their objective reference and still retain key methodological commitments of a historiographic tradition that requires a phenomenological inquiry into the data presented. This data includes references to miracles. We can concede miracles without necessarily conceding that this constitutes decisive rejection of traditional and modern understanding of intelligibility and consistency of the order of nature. Miracles are those events that ordinarily would not be expected. But does this warrant their a priori impossibility and thus our embarrassment at the references in traditional hagiographic literature? Yes according to many influential modern Kashmiri historians like Ishaq Khan, A. Q. Rifiqi, G.M.D Sofi. They are compelled to explain away reference to the miraculous adventures reported in abundance in traditional hagiographic accounts. If one is faithful to modern secular thought, as they are like most modern historians, one has to marginalize historical evidence of miracles and deny their literal historical truth and appropriate them in some functionalist perspective and that is what they have done. Popular belief in *karamaat* (miracles) has been seen mostly as a problem and

hardly approached with empathy. The terms miracles and legends are used interchangeably by many historians. This approach is here criticized on traditional religious, parapsychological and postmodern grounds.

## 5. Khan's Approach

Ishaq Khan's widely influential work on account of local saints or Rishis has attempted to push what can be called the social at the center leading to marginalizing of transcendental reference in the local account and traditional hagiographic account. The very title of Ishaq Khan's eighth chapter in *Kashmir's Transition to Islam* as "The Societal Dimensions of Miracles and Legends." speaks of the author's modernist intention. It emphasizes societal dimension and is either silent over or suppresses their literal historical cognitive phenomenological truth. It also brackets miracles with legends and negative connotations (in terms of cognitive validity) of the term legend are thus implicitly appended to miracles also. Khan seeks to "establish a purely historical view of the supposedly supernatural phenomena."<sup>1</sup> However the author is cautious, unlike G.M.D Sofi in Kashir, not to dismiss the occurrence of miracles purely on the basis of reason to avoid committing

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1) Ishaq Kahn, 1994. *Kashmir's Transition to Islam: The Role of Rishis*, New Delhi: Manohar Publishers.

“violence upon the forces of a strong tradition.”<sup>2</sup> To me it is not just committing violence upon tradition but also upon latest developments in sciences like parapsychology. In fact modern reason has been violent as postmodern critique of Enlightenment reason shows. Khan repeats modernist Muslim apologia regarding very unambiguous reference to miracles in Quran and Prophetic traditions. Taking recourse to the thesis of exaggeration in the narration of miraculous experience in hagiographical literature, as Khan does, will not solve the problem. The author wants to be agnostic with respect to historian’s onus to authenticate existence of miracles. He says, “It is outside the domain of history to determine which of the miracles that are said to have occurred is true or false.”<sup>3</sup> So a historian, according to him, may be allowed to be non-committal with respect to this. Biographical work of Baba Dawood Khaki for instance, is, by this standard, not a work of history and modern historian cannot allow it much historical value. Many modern biographers of contemporary saints have recorded inexplicable (in currently dominant rationalist paradigm) happenings. It is also sometimes possible to carefully weigh historical evidence in favor of supposed supernatural events narrated in biographies of saints. Thus it is within the domain of history to determine which of the miracles is true or false. Most of these miracles are as “natural”, as “ordinary” events as other

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2) Ibid.

3) Ibid.

natural events despite many secularist modernist historians assertion to the contrary, not only for believers in them but for many former hard core skeptics and scientists investigating paranormal phenomena. Most of the events dubbed as miracles or legends can constitute, as numerous works of parapsychologists show, a legitimate subject matter (data) of any historical work although the author's aim is "neither to establish nor cast doubts on the authenticity of miracles attributed to Nuruddin [the most famous medieval Sufi saint] but to fathoms the meaning of or truth of an objective fact lost in the labyrinth of supra-mundane events.<sup>4</sup> He wants to "correct a myopic oversight concerning nature of miracle."<sup>5</sup> He offers psychological explanation of the miracles performed by Nuruddin on Nasruddin, his disciple and a patient of dyspepsia. Any miraculous element smacking of supernatural interference he seems to reject e.g. he remarks in connection with this story: "The hagiographical literature is replete with *incredible stories* of his breaking fast with ashes mixed with water"<sup>6</sup> (emphasis mine). The naturalist-rationalist's doubts regarding such feats are no longer fashionable. Many yogis and other mystics have performed greater and more incredible *karamaat* (miracles attributed to saints as distinguished from those of prophets in Islamic tradition) in the presence of scientists. The author shows

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4) Ibid.

5) Ibid.

6) Ibid.

his narrow rationalism in his other remarks also. Commenting on the popular stories associated with Nurrudin he says: “one should take the extravagant statements of the hagiographers regarding Nasruddin’s unbelievable feats not literally but figuratively as part of complex psycho-historical process.” This is in lieu with modern demythologizing though. I argue that nothing prevents us to take them literally. Many of us are witnesses to some miracles of local saint and faith healers. Even Jungian approach to miracles to which Khan seems to subscribe without explicitly knowing or referring to him, is agnostic towards metaphysical or supernatural reality of miracles. Modern sensibility has so much conditioned us towards incredulity in higher realms of being, towards all too real world of angels, fairies (with whom Blake shook hands, as did some companions and saints. The battle of Badr shows angels intervening in the battle. This story could hardly be taken figuratively and has been taken literally by traditional Islam. Demythologizing modernist attitude is evident in Khan’s analysis of Nuruddin’s another miracle regarding Rishi’s transformation of into filth. He writes that “the story cited above is an example how an unadorned fact about Nuruddin’s social teaching blossomed into an elaborate legend or miracle within a short span of about 150years after his death.”<sup>7</sup> The author stresses embellishments put by hagiographers on simple facts. Many miracles, contends the author, “seem to have designed by the

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7) Ibid.

common people to place the Rishis at the Pinnacle of sanctity.”<sup>8</sup> This shows how one is forced to distort history by prior commitment to rationalist naturalist assumptions regarding the possibility of miracles.

## 6. Rifiqi's Approach

Rifiqi, another historian who has written much cited works on medieval Kashmir and hagiographic literature, also follows Khan in his treatment of “one of the major drawbacks of historical works has been their author’s conventional readiness to accept antimony between history and poetry and also between folklore and history what is of relevance here is also the historian’s utter disregard for legends.”<sup>9</sup> However, he himself is respectful towards legends only because of their historical value as seen by their affecting the consciousness of people on such a great scale that whether true or false in cognitive or empiricist terms, one must reckon with them at least for the reason that history has been affected by them. He is skeptical of their cognitive or truth claim in empirical terms. The term myth he uses mostly in negative sense, forgetting what psychology and anthropology may have to teach about its “factual” character. Rifiqi is more credulous towards modernist rationalist myths that fantasizes that time honored “legends and myths” are

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8) Ibid.

9) Ibid.

nothing but fictions. One can only feel pity for modern rationalistic credulity towards belief in omniscience of enlightenment reason.

He writes in a typical rationalist modernist tone, for instance, "Biographers, who were only credulous believers, however, in the miracles and supernatural powers of the saints, reveled in describing fantastic legends and anecdotes about Sufis."<sup>10</sup> The author, however, has himself acknowledged that many biographers were trained traditionalists and applied canons used in science of traditions to the tradition of various Sufis. Much of hagiographical literature produced in this connection is dismissed or explained away by him e.g., he seems to dismiss Haider's account of Syed Ali (famous Persian saint and scholar who was instrumental in the spread of Islam in Kashmir) with "its excursions in the realm of myths."<sup>11</sup> He thinks that *Haider* wrote legends. He is incredulous towards Sayyid's claim that the prophet had ordered him to visit Kashmir to convert people there to Islam.<sup>12</sup> He writes that these accretions of legends and myths (like there in Jafar Basakshah's *Khulasatul-Managib* and Haider's *Masturat*) were further elaborated by subsequent scholars such as Wahhab, Hassan and Miskin who transformed Syed Ali into a legendary figure.<sup>13</sup> He criticizes Syed Ali's Tarikhi Kashmir for giving legendry material about Hamdani and Rishis.

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10) Rafiqi A.Q, *Sufism in Kashmir*, New Delhi : Bhartiva Publishing House.

11) Ibid LXXI.

12) Ibid LXXI.

13) Ibid LXX.

Commenting about Rishi Nama of Baba Nasiruddin, Rifiqi writes: “Much of the Nasib’s account is legendary. The legends described by him are frequently colored with romantic touches. They generally ascribe all conversion such as that of Bamuddin and Payamuddin to supernatural power of Nuruddin.<sup>14</sup>

In order to explain away presence of so many of miraculous stories, our authors resort to various unwarranted hypotheses. We need not invoke these entire fantastic hypothesis (which sometimes appear more fantastic than the supposedly fantastic legends which need to be explained away) if we abandon rationalist incredulity towards possibility of what are called supernatural occurrences, especially in connection with saints. Rafiqi imagines that “in order to show the supernatural powers of the Sufis for which the pious memory of later generations remembered them stories were invented” and “it seems that the stories (of miracles, like Lalla’s asking baby to take milk, weaver’s incident) were prepared to show Nuruddin’s piety and innocence. They were intended to serve as a background setting for some of his verses. It is common to stories of saints all over the world, to present them as moved by impulses of virtue even before the light of conversion draws upon them.”<sup>15</sup> Ashraf Wani also tries to explain away the presence of hagiographical literature prior to advent of Islam on fashionable modernist rationalist grounds. He says: “The notion of supposed

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14) Ibid LXXIV.

15) Khan, *op.cit.*, p.164.

supernatural powers of gurus was considerably nourished by the medieval conditions marked by mass gullibility, abysmal lack of communication fuelling rumors ... above all by injections of superstitions and cowardice, injected (through dreaded and fabricated tales and the motivated propaganda by the vested interests), into the masses who did not know doubting and questioning.”<sup>16</sup> He also says that various kinds of environmental stresses or “evil days” breed superstitions and brings the authority of Kalhana for this. He writes “Of how evil days breed superstitions, we have information from Kalhana. He says, ‘When some Kayasthas were suspended from their services by Uccala (1101-1111) they turned to astrologers to examine their nativities, dreams, omens and auspicious marks’.”<sup>17</sup> G.M.D Sofi explains some apparent miracles like the incident of Sayyid’s cap whose burial with dead body of Sultan Fath Shah marked the end of dynasty by recourse to notorious notion of coincidences. He also brings authority of C.E.M. Joad and some others to explain away evidence for miracles through a reductionist strategy.<sup>18</sup> Khan also resorts to same type of strategies, although a bit more sophisticated ones to explain away the evidence for miracles. Rifiqi also brings Islam’s denunciation of or indifference to miracle mongering and the fact that miracles are not evidence of

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16) Wani M. Ashraf, 2005. *Islam in Kashmir*: (Srinagar, Oriental Publishing House.

17) *Ibid* p.140, fn28.

18) Sofi G.M.D, 1996. *Kashir: Being a History of Kashmir from the Earliest Times to Our Own*, New Delhi, Capital Publishing House.

one's sanctity or divinity in Islam to dilute the otherwise highly concentrated mass of evidence favoring the fact of actual performance of miracles by Hamdani and others. Referring to the miracle in Kali Mandir in which a Brahmin is said to have been chased by shoes flown in sky, Rifiqi says that this miracle is similar to one which a Yogi is said to have performed in the court of Mohammad bin Tagluq. Sufi Malfuzaat of the fourteenth century also record similar encounters between Sufis and Yogis. But the performance of miracle was no part of activities of the Sufis. They rejected the supernatural power of Yogis with scorn calling it *istidraj* (conferring of benefits by God on obstinate sinner). All the great Sufi scholars were trenchant critics of such tendencies. In fact Islam came to obliterate all such religious beliefs which were founded merely on miracles and lacked any rational basis. Therefore miracles are not and should not be accepted as the rationale of the spread of Islam."<sup>19</sup> The fact is that, in traditional accounts, miracles have been assumed to have played a part in spread of almost every religion including Islam. The Quran refers to this in its narrative of prophets like Moses and Jesus, Shoaib and Hood. Biographies of many Muslim saints and some stories of conversion refer to the part played by miracles. Even such a hard core skeptic as Josh could see Prophet in a dream – nay almost in physical, form with wide eyes (at least he smelt the scent) Prophet's continuing presence and his dimension as a sort of guide after his death forms a significant

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19) Rafiqi, A.Q. op. cit.

chapter of Muslim life and history. The Sufis have displayed miracles for proving their superiority against rivals almost in the manner of Moses against magicians, as Prof. Wani argues in his *Islam in Kashmir*, quoting convincing wealth of evidence that Sufis did perform miracles, even if under compulsion (from opposite side). Our undying and strong tradition affirms this. Miracles or intersection or transaction between supernature and Nature have always occurred and are occurring every day. Miracles may have a rational basis as many spiritualists argue. So arguing about irrationality of miracles and thus their impossibility is unscientific and irrational. Great theosophist H.P.B who performed numerous “miracles” says there can be no miracles because what are miracles from one level of consciousness or existence appear perfectly normal or ordinary when looked from the higher level.<sup>20</sup> Modernist rationalism only needs to correct its definition of reason and include hitherto marginalized part of intellect – Unreason as Foucault calls it.

Rafiqi finds stories of miracles attributed to saints mostly fabrications. For instance, he says about supposedly miraculous cure of Zain ul Abideen’s boils by Nuruddin Rishi that “the story bears the marks of fabrication and seems to have been concocted in order to glorify the miraculous powers of Zainudin.”<sup>21</sup> He refers to miraculous occurrences or anecdotes as legends. Prof. Wani in contrast uses very guarded language in describing

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20) See H.P.B’s *Isis Unveiled and The Secret Doctrine*.

21) Rafiqi, *op.cit*, p.199.

miracles. He seems to believe in their literal truth as against Khan, Rafiqi, Sofi, Mohbibul Hassan and others. Khan is expert in sifting the grain of historical truth from the chaff of what he calls legendary accretions that have surrounded hagiological literature e.g., he writes about milk incident in the life of Nuruddin. “The popular tradition about Lal Ded’s influence on Nuruddin though enveloped in legendary materials – contains kernel of historical truth.”<sup>22</sup>

There is incontrovertible evidence showing occurrence of many seemingly supernatural events and miracles unearthed by parapsychologists, theosophists etc. and the only question is to give a rationale for them. Granting their truth or factual character from empiricist point of view mechanism of miracles may be debated but not their existence *per se*. Calling them legends and myths and then trying to make sense of history amounts to sheer distortion of facts and history. And one is then forced to invent rationalist mechanist myths to explain away their continued presence. Parapsychology, now a developing branch of science, takes apparently supernatural occurrences for granted on pure empirical grounds and then proceeds to account for them. Our historians are compelled to reject medieval historians of Kashmir (indeed almost any historian before the 20<sup>th</sup> century) who were almost unanimous in their attesting to the literal truth of miracles. They are duty bound to reject the numerous Sufi *Malfuzaat*, biographies and autobiographies of

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22) Khan, op.cit.

Sufis and their trusted disciples e.g. Khakhi's biography of Sheikh Hamza Makhdoom, numerous contemporary sources that attested to their truth or factuality, and lastly the memory of countless people who have passed this fact of medieval culture from generation to generation. It is hardly a contested fact that on the eve of penetration of Islam in Kashmir the writ of Tantric gurus ran large in the valley. They performed mind boggling magical feats. Lalla says, disdaining miracle performance by yogis (thus granting their factual or empirical or literal truth, condemnation of certain practice follows only when it is already existing. Rifiqi reiterates that Sufis were trenchant critics of miracle performances, thus implying that miracle were performed and the Sufi's criticism was not directed at literal fictions.)

To stop a flowing stream, to cool a raging fire  
To walk on feet in the sky; to milk a wooden cow  
All these in the end are but base jugglery.<sup>23</sup>

Kalhana mentions widespread use of witchcraft in Kashmir where Tantric gurus were revered because of fear.<sup>24</sup> It is impossible to concede that these stories of miracles were invented because they occur in such biographies of saints as that have been attested by Masters themselves and most biographers

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23) Schuon Frithjof, 1969. *Dimensions of Islam*, London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd.

24) *Ibid*, pp.155-156.

were not credulous fools but accomplished scholars and historians who did not reject empirical evidence at their hands. There is hardly any logical or scientific basis for calling the whole tradition of miracles a legend, a myth, especially in case of Kashmir because it is identified as *pir waer*.

## 7. Understanding Some Miracles in Medieval Hagiographic Literature

Some supposed “myths” and “legends” about Hamdani are as follows:

1. That he was simultaneously present in 40 houses to dictate his famous work *Chahal Asrar*. Now this is reported about other Sufis like Abdul Qadir Jeelani and Rumi which have been seen in 72 and 17 houses by people at the same time respectively. It is reported of many saints like Habibullah Nowsheri that they used to offer some prayers in Mecca. Now this “myth” is reported about many purely secular men in history also that they were simultaneously seen at two different places. Every one of us can perform this feat, including Rafiqi, provided we know how to delink consciously our astral bodies and send them anywhere in the Universe. HPB in her *Isis Unveiled* quotes many such actual performances. Our spiritualist, occultist or general parapsychological literature is replete with such case

histories. We just need to suspend our disbelief.

2. That he defeated Brahman of *Kali Mandir* (local temple) by what parapsychology would call levitating technique. Even a street magician can levitate shoes and hurl them on anyone. Why not the saint who does possess genuine knowledge of occult science?
3. That he was often guided by Prophet to do this or that. There is no ground for criticizing it on scientific ground. Parapsychology and even psychology offer numerous parallels to this kind of guidance from both living and dead people to even ordinary people, not to speak of psychics or mediums.
4. That he was recognized by many saints without either of two parties having ever met. He says that Sheikh Burhan ud din Sagar ji, Jibril Karvi, Nizamudin Gauri, and Abu Bakr Tusi had seen him (his soul) in this world prior to his birth. Again this story is made credible in the light of occultist and spiritualist evidence.
5. That he could telepathically know of Burhan ud din Haqqani's death. Now this is too commonplace a fact to be discussed.
6. That he guided Rupa Rishi through *jismi-barozi* (a sort astral body). For a modern student of occult science this is very simple and need not be dismissed as legend or myth.
7. That he had power of precognition. Precognition is well

known capacity to foretell many details of future and many men, not only saints do possess this.

Rumi has said: “Water, air, earth and Fire and all the four elements of universe are put under the control of saint.” In light of this statement nothing is impossible for a Sufi. The literal truth or historical veracity of these incidents need not be doubted on purely rational or scientific grounds. Magicians, mediums and other evidences from parapsychology clearly suggest probability of such incidents. However it should not be implied to mean that Hamdani or saints are magicians or mediums or simply have developed ESP. I only point out that it is one’s ignorance of empirical facts that modern methods of research has helped to bring to our notice and even understand better that one is needlessly led to question literal truth of these stories. In all ages and climes and civilizations reports of inexplicable occurrences or events have come to us and it is absurd and inadmissible to refute all of them in order to fit our narrow rationalism and empiricism. In fact religions have not made much of these miraculous stories. Rather dabbling with them or actively seeking to perform or display miracles has been discouraged. Also a sharp distinction is made between the psychical and the spiritual. Most of these miraculous stories happen in the psychical realm and spirituality is primarily concerned with the spiritual realm. All these points strengthen the contention of this paper that historians need not be embarrassed with hagiography

or stories of miracles but they should broaden their explanatory framework in order to account for them and respectfully treat them. Miracles do happen and are happening now and then and the only thing to be considered is how to account for them. One may also remember that genuine miracles can't be accounted for in terms of modern scientific theories. They point out inadequacy of purely secular account of reality. Any attempt to deny historical truth of miracles to save secular account is simply ignorance or anti-empirical attitude. The possibility remains that we may not need to invoke supernatural actors to explain most such things that pass for miracles and about which historians are needlessly embarrassed or wish to hide.

## 8. Theological Disbelief

Semitic theologies have been anxious to guard against the claim of miracles from all and sundry. It might be attributed to preeminent place that Prophetic figure has in them. Thus there is espoused a distinction between *karamat* – supra-normal event accruing from a saint and *mu'jiza* – supra-normal event exclusively reserved for the Prophet. Salafi movement in Islam has taken strong objection to most of claims of saints. But their argument to dent the epistemic claims of local narrative tied to centrality of a saint figure and its supernatural halo. For Salafis many such claims of miraculous events associated in popular imagination with the saintly figure may well contravene Islam's

emphasis on divine unity and transcendence. However, one can ask if occurrence of such miracles which smack of *ilm-al-gayb* (knowledge of the unseen) traditionally reserved for God only, defying of belief in *taqdir* (destiny), assuming some attribute of God etc., are contrary to *Tawhid* then the Quran too is contrary to antitawhidic which is an absurd conclusion for it. *Tawhid* is not incompatible with any fact, any miracle or karamat and God's omnipotence is not qualified thereby. the Quran is full of the accounts of miracles of earlier prophets and saints. Sir Syed, a modernist Muslim thinker of India, whom our historians, especially Rifiqi follows, is definitely wrong in his view that the Quran does not support the happenings of events or occurrences that are against the law of nature or those that violate the usual course of things. In the Quranic worldview God is the First and the Last, the Hidden and the Manifest, the Alpha and the Omega of being and as such there is no duality or opposition between the natural and the supernatural. The entire cosmos is a portent of God, pointing beyond to divine activity. The Quran and for that matter, all revealed scriptures know nothing of nature as a closed self-regulating system of law. The divinely given autonomy and integrity of nature does not contradict the fact of God's ceaseless activity and "interference" in nature. There is a continuum as one moves from the natural to the supernatural. The hierarchy of existence forms important postulate of traditional Islamic world view. For the Quran, all nature is a miracle which shows divine or supernatural imprint. When

asked to show miracles, the Prophet of Islam referred to nature as miracle par excellence.

We now need to examine more closely the rationalist disbelief in miracles that constitutes legacy of grand narrative of Enlightenment to round off the discussion.

## 9. Rationalist Disbelief

The term miracle covers a wide spectrum of events – odd, unusual to rare – and in a weaker sense “miracle” connotes extraordinary coincidence of a beneficial nature. But the senses of miracle that are of philosophical and methodological interest are stronger and less subjectively oriented, consisting in the overriding of the order of nature. They are events which cannot be explained in terms intelligible to the natural scientist or observer of the regular processes of nature. Aquinas gave a perfectly clear and unequivocal definition of miracles in *Summa Contra Gentiles* where he says “those things are properly called miracles which are done by divine agency beyond the order commonly observed in nature” A classical definition of miracles given in these terms also comes from Hume who wrote his famous critique of them in his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. A miracle, says Hume, “may be accurately defined as a transgression of a law of nature by a particular violation of the deity or by the intervention of some invisible agents.” Dr. Eric Mascall in his article in *Chambers Encyclopaedia* that the word

“miracle” signifies in Christian theology a striking interposition of divine power by which the operations of the ordinary course of nature are overruled, suspended, or modified. According to the Quran miracles are not only overriding but also signs and portents for all those who ponder and reflect.

None of our critics of hagiographical literature take great care to explicate the term miracles. There are senses of the term miracle that allow us to call everything miraculous and see whole existence as a great miracle. Mystics and perennialist religionists see the whole realm of manifestation as miraculous, as perpetual miracle that displays unerring signs of divine interference. Bacon famously wrote that only fools ask for miracles or disbelieve in miracles. Being is miraculous par excellence. Why is there anything and not nothing is the greatest mystery or miracle and a portent for God for most religionists. Mystics emphasize the mysterious and thus miraculous nature of existence, of life. Religion, in this sense, is nothing but accepting and living this mystery of existence, this miracle of life. Religion is essentially a celebration of this miracle. Miracle in this sense is undeniable. However, miracles as specifically defined by Hume and Aquinas are also undeniable as facts for historical and empirical reasons also. The only contestable question is how to explain them and whether orthodox naturalist explanation that denies the hierarchy of existence is tenable. Our historians seem to deny the fact that miracles have occurred.

Now we can still defend the belief in miracles rationally,

logically, scientifically (empirically). There have been attempts recently made largely by analytical philosophers to show that there are circumstances in which it is not irrational to believe that some events are miraculous. Absar Ahmad in his article 'Miracles – A Philosophical Analysis (Al-Hikmat Vol.23(2003)) refers to Steve Clark's article 'Hume's Definition of Miracle Revised' and Paul Dietl's article 'On Miracles' as admirable attempts in this direction. Clark has argued that we can construct a set of circumstances under which it would be rational to believe in miracles, more rational indeed than any alternative account of the anomalous occurrences, Hume's probability objection not holding. Believing in miracles under such circumstances has also the advantage of putting the anomalous occurrences within a theological framework, thus, protecting the well-established law of nature by securing its universality over naturally caused events. As Absar puts "Following this strategy the defense of the belief in miracles is not bogged violation of the natural law or alternatively, no violation of a natural law as it applies to naturally occurred events." we quote Absar again: "All the objections raised by Hume against the possibility of miracles are conjectural, hypothetical or at least tentative and based on whimsical opinion – As a matter of fact contained within the general idea of believing in miracle are many different ideas, such as the law of nature, the "transgression" of such a law by a supernatural agent or God. When it is rational to believe something, and, so on, each with its own logical structure. It is

not surprising at all, rather it is quite conceivable that opportunities exist for adjusting the structures of the constituent ideas to render the belief in miracles rational – for instance, Richard Swinburne has argued that the notion of “transgression” can be understood in such a way that miracle is not a violation of any law of nature. Alternatively, laws of nature can be conceived in such a way as to allow for miraculous violation of them. Similarly Brain Davies, Antony Flew and J.C.A. Gaskin make strong and convincing criticisms against the Humean rejection of miracles. For example, Brain Davies presents an elaborate critical review thus: “Hume’s treatment of miracles is often echoed by modernist naturalist apologetic. Hume could not provide an adequate account of the logical character of a law of nature. Hence, he could not offer any sufficiently persuasive rationale for employing propositions which express, or which are believed to express, such natural laws. The way may thus seem to be open for a historian who holds different presuppositions, yet still remains, truly a historian to endorse as veridical stories of events which had they occurred, would have been truly miraculous. A historian need not commit himself to agnosticism in relation to belief in miracles.

From a strictly scientific view point (as represented by Einstein, Bohr, Plank and Heisenberg) there is room in a rational universe for incomprehensible wonders although dogmatic rationalism that many scientists and science inspired world view is axiomatically closed to the supersensory dimensions of the

real. Frithjof Schuon's remarks in this connection apply to this dogmatic rationalism that also seems to colour modernist historiography... He writes: "modern science axiomatically closed to the suprasensory dimensions of the Real, has endowed man with a cross ignorance and thereby warped his imagination. The modernist mentality is bent on reducing angels, devils, miracles – in a word all non-material phenomena which are inexplicable in material terms – to the domain of the "subjective" and the "psychological," when there is not the slightest connection between the two, except that the psychic itself is also made but objectively – of substance which lies beyond matter."<sup>23</sup> Modernist scientific rationalism is invalidated by the monotonous and besetting ignorance of the suprasensible degrees of reality, or of the five Divine presences. Schuon's explanation of miracles and their "natural" character is highly relevant and a corrective for modernist scientism that finds it difficult to believe in miracles on account of their fidelity to certain modern prejudices. He writes "The denial of the five degrees of reality [cosmic and extracosmic or human and suprahuman] precludes an understanding, not simply of magic, but also of miracles; and it is not for nothing that the church declares anathema whosoever rejects the one or the other. The first argument which one must set against or animistic state exists, it cannot but irrupt – when certain more or less exceptional conditions are fulfilled, into the realm of material or sensory phenomena and since the supra-formal world the world

of essences and incorruptibility, also exists (and does so even before the formal world), it cannot but intervene 'vertically' and contrary to the so called, natural laws- in the world of forms and matter. To avoid every possibility of misunderstanding, it is necessary to be quite clear about the meaning of word 'Natural'; what transcends' nature is no wise 'irrational' or 'absurd', but simply that of which the causality escapes the measures and laws of the world of matter and sensations. If the natural coincided with the whole realm of the 'logical' or of the 'possible', one would have to say that God too was 'natural', and a miracle, likewise, but this would be an abuse of language which would take away every means of distinguishing verbally between causality in a horizontal sense and causality in a 'vertical' sense. Be that as it may, when scientists have the 'supernatural' spoken of they imagine that basically what is involved is a belief in phenomena which have no cause, or more precisely, which have no real and possible cause.<sup>24</sup>

## Conclusion

Local narratives of traditional cultures continue to be entertained by masses and the intellectual elite alike though many scholars trained in modern academies have tried to question their received understanding. We can deploy certain insights from postmodern and other critical movements that

question epistemic chauvinism of enlightenment rationality for better appreciation of what has been the key element – belief in transcendence and its irruptions in history – of traditional cultures. For giving local narratives regarding the supraphenomenal a sound epistemic grounding we must be prepared to transcend grand narratives of Secular Modernity.