

Introduction

On May 25, 1995, at the end of a two-month-long siege, the shrine and tomb complex (*astān*) of Nund Rishi (1378–1440), Kashmir’s most revered Sufi and the founder of a fifteenth-century Kashmiri Sufi order called the Rishi Order, was destroyed in a gun battle between the militants of the Ḥizb al-Mujahidīn, a pro-Pakistan Kashmiri guerilla group, and the Indian Army.¹ The Ḥizb al-Mujahidīn and the Indian Army kept accusing each other of destroying one of the most popular Sufi shrines of Kashmir even as most Kashmiris retreated into shocked silence and mourning. The gratuitous destruction of a revered Sufi shrine, a center of Kashmiri Rishism, epitomized the everyday fate of Kashmiris in the early 1990s at the receiving end of a low-intensity war between India and the different Kashmiri nationalist, pro-Pakistan, and Islamist groups over the future of the disputed territory of Jammu and Kashmir. The central Kashmir town of Charar was also destroyed in the gun battle.² The shrine at Charar symbolized the distinctive history of Islam in Kashmir for some (in a less academic and more political variant, it was seen as a symbol of the multireligious, even syncretic, Kashmīriyat, or Kashmiriness) and the beginnings of Islam and Islamic culture in Kashmir for the others. But for most Kashmiris, the shrine evoked the everyday life of faith in Kashmir across different religious traditions. The Charar shrine was, and remains, clearly one of the most sacred religious spaces for Kashmiris and one of the few that commands respect across the sectarian divide. It is no surprise then that the pro-independence Kashmiri nationalists (as well as Kashmiri nationalists who are pro-India), pro-Pakistan Islamists (as well as the supposedly “apolitical” Islamists), and the Indian state (with its official ideology of secularism at the cornerstone of its claim on Kashmir) all lay claim to Charar as a center of Rishi thinking and philosophy.³ For the Kashmiri nationalists (secessionist or subnationalist), the Rishi thinking and philosophy is the Kashmiri way of life. For the Islamists, the Rishi thinking and philosophy is merely the precursor of a pure Islamic culture

that is yet to be fully instituted. But neither the Kashmiri nationalists nor the Kashmiri Islamists have articulated any serious understanding of the religio-political movement of the saint who lies buried at Chrar. His movement, known in Urdu scholarship as the *Rishī tabrīk* and in English scholarship as the Rishi movement, has been a unique phenomenon in the history of religion in Kashmir after the advent of Islam there in the fourteenth century. What makes Nund Rishi, and his movement, so fundamental to Kashmiri ideas of self and sovereignty? We will attempt to answer this question in this book through a close reading of the mystical poetry of Nund Rishi.

Kashmir, as is well known, is a disputed territory, and the region remains divided between India and Pakistan.⁴ The claims of both India and Pakistan on Kashmir depend on the way these two nation-states approach its status as a Muslim-majority region (for India, the inclusion of Kashmir as a Muslim-majority region in the union ratifies its official ideology of secularism; for Pakistan, a country created as a homeland for South Asia's Muslims, the state's Muslim-majority status is essential to the political claim it advances on the region). It is not at all surprising then that the history of Islam in Kashmir is a controversial subject. The Rishis, central to Kashmir's transition from a Hindu–Buddhist society to an Islamic society from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century, are fundamental to that history. Nonetheless, most accounts of the Rishis in Kashmir have focused on religious and political history, and few have examined the thinking of Nund Rishi. There have been only a few book-length studies of the history of the Rishi Order of Kashmiri Sufism; of these, Mohammad Ishaq Khan's *Kashmir's Transition to Islam: The Role of Muslim Rishis* remains the most influential, even if controversial.⁵ The collections of Nund Rishi's mystical poetry have also been published since the arrival of the printing press in Kashmir in the early twentieth century. But there has been no detailed critical study of the mystical poetry of Nund Rishi beyond a few confessional commentaries that situate Nund Rishi's mystical poetry within the Qur'anic hermeneutic.⁶ Nund Rishi left behind no written records or mystical theology other than his mystical poetry. The task I set myself in this book is to explore certain dominant themes in the mystical poetry of Nund Rishi. I focus, in particular, on the themes of death, the Nothing, the apocalyptic, and the meanings of Islam in the mystical poetry of Nund Rishi in order to trace a complex history of the relations between mysticism and politics in the region that complicates our understanding of the beginnings of Islam in Kashmir (the possibility of reading I retrieve here, it is hoped, is one that

resists either an easy nationalist or an Islamist appropriation of the complex legacy of Kashmiri mysticism). My reading of the themes of death (Chapter 2), the Nothing (Chapter 3), and the apocalyptic (Chapter 4) in Nund Rishi's mystical poetry is preceded by a long reflection on the meanings of Nund Rishi's Islam (Chapter 1) that disclose his thinking as an irruption of a negative political theology in the religious and political firmament of medieval Kashmir. We shall return to this critical dimension of Nund Rishi's thinking toward the end of this Introduction.

The history of Islam in Kashmir, including the role played in it by the Rishi Order of Kashmiri Sufism, has attracted some attention in recent years because of the persistence of violent conflict in Kashmir. Kashmir is the site of the oldest and most dangerous political conflict in South Asia. The nuclear-armed states of India and Pakistan have already fought two wars over the future of Kashmir (in 1948 and 1965) and came perilously close to a third war (in 1999 and 2002). The genesis of the conflict and its trajectory is in itself a complex subject.⁷ The dispute over Kashmir can be traced back to the moment of the birth of the two nation-states of India and Pakistan in 1947. The modern State of Jammu and Kashmir, a princely state of British India, had emerged at the end of the Anglo-Sikh war with military help from the British.⁸ This was hardly the coherent political entity it appears in retrospect. Many of the Muslim subjects of this new princely state challenged the legitimacy of this rule and agitated against the Jammu-based ruling Dogra monarchy from the early twentieth century. But it was only in the 1930s, after a massacre of protesting Kashmiri Muslims by the Dogra state, that Kashmiri Muslims launched a popular movement for sovereignty that also received support from many Kashmiri Hindus and prominent Indian nationalists agitating against British colonial rule. This movement was interrupted by the Partition of British India and the rapidly unfolding events in its aftermath (communal strife that spread from Punjab into the Jammu region, the revolt against the Dogras in Poonch, the arrival of the Indian Army on October 26, 1947, in Kashmir to ward off infiltrating Muslim tribal irregulars from West Pakistan backed by the Pakistan Army, the first India–Pakistan war of 1947–48, and another war in 1965).⁹ The princely state of Jammu and Kashmir ended up divided between India and Pakistan (India retained control over the scenic Kashmir Valley). Generations of Kashmiris faced routine political suppression since the 1930s as the anti-Dogra movement metamorphosed into a nationalist movement demanding self-determination. Even though there were tensions in the region

in the 1950s and 1960s, things settled into an uneasy calm by the late 1970s and early 1980s with the defeat of Pakistan in the India–Pakistan war of 1971. But the barely suppressed unrest in India-administered Kashmir, catalyzed by the widespread allegations about rigging in the 1987 Jammu and Kashmir Legislative Assembly elections and riding on a wave of new Islamist sentiment after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989 as well as the euphoria around national self-determination after the end of the Cold War, exploded into a violent anti-India insurgency in 1990, which continues unabated and has already claimed more than 60,000 lives.¹⁰ The killings, extrajudicial executions, rape, torture, and disappearances are the more visible signs of death and destruction that have haunted contemporary Kashmir in endless cycles of insurgency and counterinsurgency.¹¹ Most of Kashmir's Hindu minority has been displaced from the Kashmir Valley by the violent conflict and lives in difficult exile in different regions of India and scattered across the world in the Kashmiri Hindu diaspora.¹²

What is of significance to us here in recounting the modern tragic history of Kashmir is the persistence of the symbolic centrality of Kashmir to the postcolonial states of India and Pakistan (not only in politics but also in culture), which is one of the fundamental causes of the intransigence of the conflict. If Kashmir is the crowning example for India of its distinctive secularism, for Pakistan it is the unfinished business of India's Partition that paved the path for the creation of an independent homeland for India's Muslims. The political claims of India and Pakistan on Kashmir not only go back to the tumultuous events of the Partition of British India but also pass through the history and memory of the sectarian conflict between the Hindus and Muslims of South Asia. For Kashmiris, negotiating the bitter legacy of this Hindu–Muslim sectarian conflict has involved making sense of a complex history of the religious and the political in Kashmir. Kashmir is one of the few South Asian regions like Punjab, Sindh, and Bengal that had seen large-scale conversions from Hinduism to Islam in the medieval period. The history of Islam in Kashmir as such has been fundamental to the negotiations of the cultural pasts in Kashmir and remains deeply contested. The significance of the Rishi Order to most historical accounts of medieval Kashmir places Nund Rishi, and his Rishi Order of Sufism, at the center of these controversies and contestations about the history of Islam in Kashmir. The Indian state, for instance, has often cast the Rishi Order as the forerunner of its ideology of secularism in discourses that surround such symbolic gestures as the naming

of the Srinagar airport as the Shaikh al-‘Ālam airport (*shaiikh al-‘ālam* – the teacher, or wisdom, of the world – is one among the many epithets with which Kashmiris remember Nund Rishi). For the Pakistani state, Kashmiri Sufism appears in continuity with the practices of imagining a South Asian Muslim paradise.¹³ The role played by the migrant Kubrāwīyyā Sufis in the conversion of Kashmir to Islam in the fourteenth and the fifteenth centuries prompted General Zia-ul-Haq, the former president of Pakistan, to eulogize the work of the Kubrāwīyyā Sufi missionary Mīr Sayyid ‘Alī Hamadānī (popularly also remembered as Shāh-e Hamadān, the King of Hamadan) in a conference organized in Pakistan-administered Kashmir in 1987 (interestingly the year the first few groups of young Kashmiris began crossing over to Pakistan-administered Kashmir to prepare for an anti-India insurgency).¹⁴ As General Zia-ul-Haq reiterated, without men like Mīr Sayyid ‘Alī Hamadānī, “we would have had not Pakistan today nor Azad Jammu and Kashmir.”¹⁵ Most historical accounts of Kashmir are in agreement that the Kubrāwīyyā Sufi missionaries catalyzed conversions to Islam in Kashmir.¹⁶ As we shall see, the Rishi Order of Kashmiri Sufism takes a different approach to Islam in Kashmir than the Kubrāwīyyā Sufis, who remain preoccupied with conversion.

The state of affairs, so far as the representations of the history of Islam in Kashmir is concerned, has been hardly any different in India. In 2009, for instance, Pratibha Patil, India’s then president, invoked Kashmiri Sufism on an official visit to Kashmir as she called Kashmir the abode of the Rishis and a symbol of “liberal values, religious harmony, mutual co-existence and brotherhood.”¹⁷ For India, Kashmir is the trophy of a triumphant secularism and the Rishi movement is one of the many forerunners of Indian secularism. The Kashmiri nationalists, in turn, see Nund Rishi as one of the first Kashmiri spiritual leaders to express the national sentiment of the oppressed in Kashmir.¹⁸ Divided between a loyalty to the Pakistani state and a future, post-*jihād* caliphate, the Kashmiri Islamists, on the other hand, have a complex, but not always uneasy, relationship with Kashmiri Sufism. Yet central to most of these narratives about the beginnings, and the subsequent trajectory, of Islam in Kashmir is the Rishi Order of Kashmiri Sufism.

Much of our information about the Rishi Order, and Nund Rishi, is based on accounts written by the Sufis of the Suhrawardī and Qādirī Orders.¹⁹ None of these are contemporaneous to Nund Rishi. But if the Sufis of other orders (in some sense, the rival orders for the Rishis) held the Rishis in such great esteem, one can only imagine the extent of their popularity in Kashmir.²⁰

The Kashmiri historian Abdul Qaiyum Rafiqi draws our attention to the accounts of awe and veneration inspired by the Rishis among Kashmiris in Mughal courtier Abul Fazl's *Ā'in-e Akbarī* in the reign of Akbar and in *Tuzūk-e Jahāngīrī* by the Mughal Emperor Jahangir (1569–1627). Writing about a century and a half after Nund Rishi's death, Abul Fazl gives us this account of the enduring popularity of the Rishi Order at the time of the Mughal annexation of Kashmir under Akbar (the Mughals conquered Kashmir in 1586):

The most respected class of people in this country (Kashmir) are the Rishis. Although they have not abandoned the traditional and customary forms of worship (*taqlīd*), but they are true in their worship. They do not denounce men belonging to different faiths. They do not have the tongue of desire, and do not seek to attain worldly objects. They plant fruit-bearing trees in order that people may obtain benefit from these. They abstain from meat and do not marry.²¹

This brief portrait of the Kashmiri Rishis is nonetheless striking in its detail. In the memoirs of the Mughal Emperor Jahangir (1569–1627), *Jahāngīrnāmā*, we come across a similar reference to the Rishis:

There is a group of fakirs called *rishis*. Although they have no knowledge or learning, they profess simplicity and unpretentiousness and speak ill of no one. They do not beg or practice mendicancy. They do not eat meat, and they do not take wives. They plant fruit-bearing trees in the wilderness with the intention that people might enjoy the fruits, although they themselves do not derive any enjoyment from the practice. There must be at least two thousand of these individuals.²²

As we shall see, the “lack of knowledge” alludes here to controversies over the relations between Sufism and theology in Kashmir, which I shall discuss in Chapter 1. Abdul Qaiyum Rafiqi also writes that the fifteenth-century Kashmiri Sanskrit chronicler Jonaraja, “who rarely acknowledges the sanctity of any Muslim, describes him [Nund Rishi] the greatest sage of the time.”²³ Even though there is just one contemporaneous reference to Nund Rishi in Jonaraja's *Rajātaranginī*, it is in the *tarikhs* and *tadhkirās* of the different Persian Sufi orders of Kashmir where we come across not only the first detailed accounts of Nund Rishi but also examples from his mystical poetry.²⁴

The history and memory of the Rishi Order are inseparable from its founder, Nund Rishi, and his mystical poetry. Nund Rishi, or Shaikh Nūr

al-Dīn Nūrānī, is one of the most significant figures in the history of religion and literature in Kashmir.²⁵ Many relatively recent historical and political commentators on Kashmir consider Nund Rishi to be Kashmir's "patron saint" or even "national saint," even as "patron saint" and "national saint" remain hard, if not impossible, to translate into Kashmiri.²⁶ For Kashmiris themselves, Nund Rishi is simply *'alamdār* (the standard-bearer, or flag bearer) of Kashmir or *shaikh al-'ālam* (the teacher of the worlds). The Hindus of Kashmir remember Nund Rishi with the honorific Sahajānanda (Innately Blissful One).²⁷ We shall discuss the significance of this epithet in more detail toward the end of Chapter 1. The word *rishī* itself is Sanskrit and means an ascetic or a sage. By choosing a Sanskrit word for Hindu ascetics to name an Islamic Sufi Order, Nund Rishi stressed continuities between Kashmir's past and present in politically turbulent times.²⁸ The popular culture that still surrounds Rishi shrines such as *bhānd pāthu'r* (Kashmiri folk theatre), *zūl* (a festival of lights), and *dambāl* (dervish dance) is also associated with pre-Islamic religious culture in Kashmir. Nund Rishi resisted the sectarian atmosphere created by Sultan Sikandar's chief minister Sūha Bhaṭṭa's violent persecution of Kashmiri Hindus and opened up a philosophical path to thinking, and negotiating, interreligious difference and, in doing so, laid the foundations of a new Kashmiri political spirituality grounded in the lifeworlds of the Kashmiri language.

The historian Chitrlekha Zutshi writes that the mystical poetry of Nund Rishi contributed "to the development of the Kashmiri language, and later to the articulation of a self-consciously Kashmiri culture."²⁹ From the medieval sultanate to the modern Indian state, the rulers of Kashmir have attempted to capitalize on the popularity of the Rishis among Kashmiri masses.³⁰ But the discourse on the Rishis has acquired more of a centrality in Kashmiri public life with the rise of Kashmiri nationalism in the twentieth century. Nund Rishi became a central figure to what Zutshi has elsewhere called the "Kashmiri narrative public" that emerged in the nineteenth century.³¹ The discourse on the Rishis intensified even more in the late twentieth century with the rise of a political conflict around Kashmir. It is against the background of these more recent circumstances that the Jammu and Kashmir Academy of Art, Culture and Languages prepared two editions of Nund Rishi's mystical poetry edited by Amin Kamil and Moti Lal Saqi.³² The new administration of the Kashmiri nationalist leader Sheikh Abdullah celebrated the six-hundredth anniversary of Nund Rishi's birth in 1978 soon after Abdullah's release from prison

and his landmark victory in the 1977 elections, which followed an accord between the Kashmiri nationalists and the Indian leadership.³³ In 1998, as an insurgency which began in 1990 still raged, the University of Kashmir in Srinagar established an independent research center devoted to the study of Nund Rishi called the Centre for Shaikh al-‘Ālam Studies, or Markaz-e Nūr (Centre of Light), with its own dedicated journal in English and Kashmiri called ‘*Alamdār*’.

The centrality of Nund Rishi (and his older contemporary Śaiva saint, Lal Ded) to Kashmiri cultural memory has never been in question. If the Muslim nationalist poet Muhammad Iqbal has dominated the political idiom of Kashmiri Muslim nationalism in the twentieth century, it is the Rishi thought which has been central to cultural and historical narratives of Kashmir’s shared pasts.³⁴ But the politico-spiritual legacy of Nund Rishi is deeply contested in Kashmir in the present between such reformist and revivalist Islamic groups as the Ahl-e Ḥadīth, Deobandīs, and the Jamāt-e Islāmī and the new Sufi-leaning Barelvī groups such as Kārvān-e Islām and the traditional devotees of the Suhrawardī, Kubrāwiyyā, and Rishi shrines. If, for the Ahl-e Ḥadīth, Nund Rishi is one of the early reformers of Islam, the Barelvīs see Nund Rishi as an early exemplar of a distinctively South Asian Sufi practice.³⁵

Nund Rishi was born in 1378 in Kaimoh to a family of recent Hindu converts to Islam and died in 1440 at Chrar in central Kashmir. Nund Rishi’s father, Salar Sanz, had converted to Islam (according to some accounts at the hands of the Kubrāwiyyā Sufi Sayyid Husayn Simnānī).³⁶ Pandit Anand Koul writes that the name Nūr al-Dīn (literally the Light of Faith) was conferred on him by Mīr Muḥammad Hamadānī, the son of Sayyid ‘Alī Hamadānī, who had settled many of the first immigrant Sufis in Kashmir.³⁷ Koul also writes that Nund Rishi’s father was a disciple of Yasmān Rishi, who had converted him to Islam.³⁸ But some other scholars have written that both of his parents were the disciples of Sayyid Husayn Simnānī, a Kubrāwiyyā Sufi and a cousin of Mīr Sayyid ‘Alī Hamadānī, who lived near Nund Rishi’s native Kaimoh in south Kashmir (Sayyid Husayn Simnānī is also connected by popular legends to the Śaiva saint Lal Ded).³⁹ According to popular hagiographical and biographical accounts, Nund Rishi retreated at the age of thirty to a complete withdrawal from social life.⁴⁰ But in 1420, Nund Rishi returned from twelve years of solitary meditation to establish a new Sufi order at a time of deepening crisis in Kashmir.⁴¹ The remaining two decades of his life were spent in intense involvement in the spiritual and political life of Kashmiris.

Nund Rishi traveled all across Kashmir, and Amin Kamil suggests that he took up residence in Drogam for twelve years, Devsar for one year, Beerwah for seven years, and Rupawan for seven years (the locations circumscribe an arc along south and central Kashmir).⁴² Nund Rishi's disciples including Bābā Bām al-Dīn, Bābā Zain al-Dīn, Bābā Latīf al-Dīn, and Bābā Nāṣir al-Dīn – many of them recent converts to Islam – helped popularize and spread the Rishi Order to remote corners of Kashmir. But the Rishi Order faced a crisis of legitimacy as Nund Rishi could not trace his lineage back to either the family of Prophet Muhammad or any of the great Sufi masters, a *sine qua non* for Sufi teaching. Nund Rishi resolved this crisis of legitimation by claiming an Uwaysī initiation, that is, a direct spiritual initiation by Prophet Muhammad (we discuss Nund Rishi's claims of an Uwaysī initiation in more detail in Chapter 1). But it is the relationship of Nund Rishi to the Śaivite saint Lal Ded, who also composed mystical verse in Kashmiri, that has endured in the Kashmiri tradition.⁴³ The spiritual relation between Nund Rishi and Lal Ded is best expressed in the Kashmiri legend about the infant Nund Rishi's refusal to suckle at his mother's breast. Lal Ded is supposed to have taken the infant Nund Rishi into her arms and asked: *Yinu' mandchōkb nu' tu' chanu' chukh mandchān* (You were not ashamed of being born but you are ashamed of being breast-fed).⁴⁴ Dean Accardi, in a recent essay on Lal Ded and Nund Rishi, writes:

Lal Ded and Nund Rishi are two saints who have been venerated in conjunction with each other in Kashmir for nearly five centuries. In fact, these two mystic saints are so significant to notions of Kashmiri identity that poems attributed to them are often recited to begin Kashmiri cultural events and festivals, and a plethora of institutions in Kashmir have been named after them – from schools and colleges to a maternity hospital and even the Srinagar International Airport, officially named the “Sheikh ul Alam Airport.”⁴⁵

Accardi further claims that these two saints were written by the earliest Kashmiri historical sources “into the fabric of Kashmir itself.”⁴⁶ The beginnings of a new Kashmiri literary and religious culture in Kashmir at its moment of “origin” turn out to be the dissemination of the spiritual vitality of a Śaivite ascetic tradition into the idiom of Islamic mysticism.⁴⁷ Many historical accounts also mention that Nund Rishi's mother was known to Lal Ded.⁴⁸ Koul writes that Lal Ded said to Nund Rishi's mother, Ṣadru' Mōj, whose first name meant “ocean” in Kashmiri: *Sodras hay chu mokhtu' nyrān* (Pearls come only

out of the ocean).⁴⁹ The beginnings of a new Kashmiri literary and religious culture in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Kashmir is interwoven with the cultural memory of a relation between Lal Ded and Nund Rishi.

Even though many studies have been published on Lal Ded, there have been few serious attempts to address the poetry and thinking of Nund Rishi.⁵⁰ Jaishree Kak Odin's *Lallā to Nūruddīn: Rishī-Sufi Poetry of Kashmir* is an exception. The studies in English, Urdu, or Kashmiri published on Nund Rishi in the last few decades offer us Nund Rishi's poetry (with approximate translations into English or Urdu if the book is not in Kashmiri) along with some religious exposition and attempts to situate Nund Rishi in relation to the religious and political history of Kashmir.⁵¹ Some isolated efforts do take on a more interpretive task but the thinking of this saint-poet remains largely unexplored.⁵² In the earliest English-language study of Nund Rishi by a Kashmiri (which I have quoted earlier), Pandit Anand Koul, writing as early as 1929 in the *Indian Antiquary*, bemoans that the older works of literature in the Kashmiri language have been neglected.⁵³ Koul calls Nund Rishi "a hermit of the highest order" and adds that "despite six centuries having rolled by since he lived, his name is held in profound respect and veneration by both Muhammadans and Hindus throughout Kashmir."⁵⁴ Koul writes about the poetry of the great sages which shaped the religious history of Kashmir, in particular, the aphoristic style of Nund Rishi: "The Kashmiri repeats such aphoristic lines again and again in his every-day life as current coins of quotation."⁵⁵ The aphoristic also bears a relation to the thinking that irrupted across north India in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, which we now know by the name of *bhaktī*.⁵⁶ Koul also points out the difficulties involved in reading Nund Rishi and Lal Ded from the available manuscripts:

What they had to say they taught orally to their disciples, and their sayings were written after their date in the Persian character, without punctuation or diacritical marks. Thus defectively recorded, they have become inextricably confused and full of interpolations by disciples, imitators and rhapsodists. Whatever was noted by any one person in the margin of his treasured private copy by way of interpretation, was regarded by the next owner or copyist as part of the text: there was no means of distinguishing *addenda* from mere *marginalia*, for they knew not that it was impossible to alter a word in such sayings without altering it for the worse.⁵⁷