

PATRONAGE OF LEARNING AND THE ARTS IN MEDIEVAL KASHMIR: SULTAN ZAIN-UL-ABIDIN AND THE CULTURAL RENAISSANCE OF THE VALLEY

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Abstract

Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin (1420–1470 A.D.), popularly known as Budshah, is regarded as the most enlightened ruler of the Kashmir Sultanate. His long reign marked a decisive phase in the political stability, cultural florescence, and socio-economic development of medieval Kashmir. This study examines the multidimensional contributions of Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin, focusing on his administrative efficiency, public works, educational reforms, patronage of arts and crafts, and policy of religious tolerance. Drawing upon Persian chronicles such as Rajatarangini Dvitiya by Jonaraja and Rajatarangini Tritiya by Srivara, the paper situates his governance within both historical documentation and popular memory. The Sultan adopted a welfare-oriented approach to governance by initiating extensive public works, including irrigation canals, bridges across the Jhelum River, artificial islands in Dal Lake, hospitals, dispensaries, caravanserais, and planned urban centres like Zainapura. These measures significantly strengthened agriculture, trade, and public welfare. His commitment to education was equally remarkable; he established schools, colleges, hostels, and a royal library, sponsored translations of classical Sanskrit texts into Persian, and encouraged learning across social groups. Under his patronage, Kashmir emerged as a major centre of scholarship, attracting scholars, poets, and intellectuals from Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent. Zain-ul-Abidin also played a pivotal role in reviving and institutionalising arts and crafts such as carpet weaving, shawl making, papier-machie, wood carving, metalwork, papermaking, and bookbinding, laying the foundation of Kashmir's renowned handicraft tradition. His religious policy, marked by tolerance and inclusivity, abolished discriminatory practices against non-Muslims and fostered interfaith harmony, contributing to the evolution of Kashmiriyat. Despite facing natural calamities and internal political challenges, his reign remained a model of benevolent and just kingship, the legacy of which continues to inspire Kashmiri society.

Keyword: *Kashmiriyat, public works, Education, Religious tolerance, Arts and crafts*

Introduction

Shahi Khan, better known as Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin, occupies a distinguished place in the history of the Kashmir Sultanate as one of its most enlightened and popular rulers. From the outset of his reign, he pursued policies aimed at strengthening the economic foundations of the state while fostering social harmony among its diverse religious communities. His inclusive outlook and commitment to tolerance enabled people of different faiths to coexist peacefully, earning him widespread acceptance among both Hindus and Muslims. The reign of Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin was marked by significant progress in administration, culture, and public welfare. He was a capable and reform-oriented administrator who introduced measures to improve governance and curb corruption. To ensure accountability among officials, he established an efficient intelligence system that kept him informed of administrative conduct at all levels. Contemporary chronicler Srivara observed that the Sultan was aware of all matters concerning his subjects “except their dreams,” reflecting the effectiveness of his administration. He was assisted by loyal and competent officials such as Helmat Raina and Ahmad Raina, and he appointed his brother Mohammad Khan as chief minister to strengthen the administrative machinery. In order to maintain law and order, he introduced strict measures holding local headmen responsible for

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Shabir Ahmad Lone

crimes committed within their jurisdictions. Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin also demonstrated political acumen and military preparedness. Though not an aggressive conqueror, he remained vigilant in safeguarding his territories against external threats. He led and supervised military expeditions to regions such as Gilgit and Baltistan and is credited with extending his authority over parts of Punjab and Western Tibet during the later years of his reign. His intervention in Western Tibet, where he reportedly saved a golden image of Buddha from destruction, reflects both his political reach and his spirit of religious tolerance. His diplomatic skills further enabled him to maintain cordial relations with neighbouring states in Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent, with historical records suggesting contacts extending as far as Mecca.

A patron of learning and culture, Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin actively encouraged the growth of arts and literature, attracting scholars, poets, and artisans to Kashmir. He is also remembered for commissioning several public works, including mosques, gardens, bridges, hospitals, and dispensaries, all aimed at enhancing public welfare. The construction of religious and civic institutions symbolised his vision of a just and compassionate state. Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin ruled for nearly fifty years, a period largely characterised by peace, prosperity, and benevolent governance. The first thirty-five years of his reign are documented by Jonaraja in the *Rajatarangini* Dvitiya, while the later years are recorded by Srivara in the *Rajatarangini* Tritiya. He passed away in 1470 A.D. and was succeeded by his son, Sultan Hasan Shah. Remembered fondly as Budshah (the Great King), his legacy continues to resonate strongly in Kashmiri historical memory. Historian Mohibul Hasan has rightly described him as the greatest among the Sultans of Kashmir, a testament to his enduring impact on the region's political, social, and cultural life.

Education

Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin demonstrated a profound commitment to education and learning, making intellectual advancement a central feature of his governance. Having himself received a sound education under the guidance of Maulana Kabir, the Sultan developed a lifelong appreciation for scholarship and was particularly concerned with extending educational opportunities to economically weaker sections of society. One of his most notable initiatives was the establishment of a school near his palace at Naushehar, which functioned under the supervision of Maulana Kabir. The Sultan's personal involvement, including his occasional attendance at lectures, reflects the importance he attached to learning. Beyond the royal precincts, Zain-ul-Abidin actively supported educational institutions at religious and charitable centres, notably at the hospice of Sheikh Ismail Kubrawi, where schools, colleges, and hostels were constructed for poor and deserving students. His patronage extended to the creation of a well-equipped royal library, for which agents were dispatched to India, Persia, Iraq, and Turkistan to procure manuscripts and rare books. In addition, he encouraged the development of allied intellectual skills such as papermaking and bookbinding, thereby strengthening the material foundations of scholarship in Kashmir.

Zain-ul-Abidin was not merely a patron but also a scholar and poet in his own right. He possessed proficiency in Persian, Sanskrit, Arabic, and Tibetan, and under his direction several classical Sanskrit works, including the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana*, and Kalhana's *Rajatarangini*, were translated into Persian, while select Persian texts were rendered into Sanskrit. He is also credited with authoring works in Persian on technical and philosophical themes and composed poetry under the pen name Qutb. His patronage of poetry, music, and painting attracted scholars and artists from different regions, transforming Kashmir into a vibrant centre of intellectual exchange. The Sultan established numerous schools, colleges, and residential learning centres, investing substantial resources to promote literacy across social groups. During his reign, Persian emerged as the language of administration and scholarship, while makhtabs and patshalas imparted instruction in Persian and Sanskrit. Chronicler Srivara vividly describes a society deeply engaged with learning, noting that education had permeated even the humblest sections of society. Students were supported through the provision of teachers, books, lodging, food, and financial assistance, ensuring that learning was accessible across class boundaries.

Surrounded by a distinguished circle of local and foreign scholars—including Jonaraja, Srivara, Maulana Kabir, Mulla Ahmed, Sayyid Mohammad Rumi, and several others—Zain-ul-Abidin fostered an intellectually dynamic court. He arranged residential facilities for scholars in Naushehar and granted them land and privileges, thereby institutionalising learning. As Jonaraja observed, under the Sultan's enlightened patronage, the flow of knowledge in Kashmir, once disrupted, regained strength and continuity. Consequently, Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin's reign is rightly regarded as a golden age in the educational and literary history of Kashmir, the effects of which endured long after his time.

Arts and Crafts

One of the most enduring contributions of Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin was his decisive role in the revival, reorganisation, and expansion of arts and crafts in Kashmir, which transformed the Valley into a major centre of artisanal excellence. Recognising the economic and cultural value of craftsmanship, the Sultan extended generous patronage to artists and craftsmen and adopted innovative measures to institutionalise various industries. Among his most notable achievements was the promotion of carpet weaving and embroidery. Skilled craftsmen from Samarqand, renowned for their mastery in these arts, were invited to Kashmir to train local artisans. This initiative led to the emergence of a flourishing carpet industry, producing high-quality carpets that later gained international recognition. The Sultan encouraged the development of a wide range of crafts, including silver and copperware, papier-machie, wood carving, khatam band (marquetry), glass-making, and silk weaving. A particularly significant innovation was the introduction of pashmina shawl weaving, using the fine wool of the Himalayan mountain goat. These shawls, valued for their exceptional softness and warmth, soon became a hallmark of Kashmiri craftsmanship and continue to enjoy global acclaim. Another landmark contribution was the introduction of papermaking in Kashmir, marking the beginning of the first organised paper industry in India. The paper produced under royal patronage was of superior quality and found widespread demand across the region. To sustain this industry, the Sultan also promoted bookbinding, strengthening the intellectual and literary culture of the Valley.

Historical evidence suggests that while certain crafts existed during the earlier Hindu period, many had declined due to political instability and destructive invasions, particularly the invasion of Dalucha in 1320 A.D. This decline was further aggravated during subsequent reigns. Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin undertook the systematic revival of these decaying traditions, restoring lost skills and reorganising craft production on a durable foundation. His efforts were later acknowledged by Mirza Haider Dughlat, who, writing in the *Tarikh-i-Rashidi*, observed that Kashmir possessed a remarkable variety of crafts uncommon elsewhere in Central Asia, an achievement directly attributed to the Sultan's policies. To ensure the sustained growth of these industries, Zain-ul-Abidin adopted a comprehensive training strategy. Foreign artisans were encouraged to settle permanently in Kashmir with their families and were granted land and privileges. Those who wished to return after a brief stay were required to train local craftsmen before departure. The Sultan also sent Kashmiri artisans to centres such as Samarqand to acquire specialised skills in papermaking and bookbinding, which they later disseminated upon their return. Craft specialists were rewarded with jagirs and state support, ensuring economic stability and continuity of expertise.

The Sultan patronised music, drama, and performing arts, reintroducing cultural forms that had earlier declined. Persian musical instruments such as the rabab, sitar, duff, and duhol were introduced, while actors, dancers, and musicians both men and women were invited to perform at festivals held across the Valley, including Pampore, Bijbehara, Anantnag, and Baramulla. The introduction of fireworks technology further reflects the technical diversification encouraged during his reign. Through sustained patronage, institutional support, and cross-cultural exchange, Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin transformed Kashmir into an "industrial garden." His policies strengthened the economic foundations of the region and integrated artistic production into everyday social life. The remarkable expansion of arts and crafts under his rule contributed to comprehensive social, cultural, economic, and political development, the effects of which continued to shape Kashmiri society long after his reign.

Religious Policy

Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin, popularly known as Budshah, was one of the most enlightened rulers of Kashmir, renowned for his policy of religious tolerance and peaceful coexistence during his reign from 1420 to 1470 A.D. Unlike his father, Sultan Sikandar Butshikan, whose rule was marked by religious persecution and forced conversions, Zain-ul-Abidin adopted an inclusive approach that aimed at fostering harmony among diverse religious communities. His reign marked a decisive departure from intolerance and laid the foundations for a pluralistic social order in Kashmir. One of his earliest measures was the abolition of the Jizya tax imposed on non-Muslims. He removed restrictions that had earlier been placed on Hindu religious and social practices, allowing them complete freedom to construct temples, observe festivals, follow their customary laws, apply tilak, wear traditional attire, and educate their children without interference. These policies eliminated discrimination based on caste, colour, or creed and ensured equal treatment of all subjects under the state. Contemporary accounts emphasise that this policy of tolerance was the chief glory of his rule. Zain-ul-Abidin extended generous patronage to Sufi saints and scholars, whose teachings of love, compassion, and spiritual harmony strengthened interfaith understanding. His court attracted learned men from both indigenous and foreign

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Shabir Ahmad Lone

backgrounds, including Mulla Ahmad, Syed Mohammad Rumi, Qazi Syed Ali Shirazi, Syed Mohammad Sistani, Jonaraja, and Srivara. Among the most influential spiritual figures of his reign was Syed Shamsu'd-din Andrabi, who served as the Sultan's spiritual guide. Deeply impressed by his piety and knowledge of Islam, the Sultan constructed a mosque for him near the Khanqah-i-Andrabi at Malaratta, Srinagar, in 850 A.H. (1447 A.D.). The Khanqah, originally established during the reign of Sultan Qutubu'd-din, later emerged as a major spiritual centre of the Andrabi Syeds in Kashmir. The Sultan is said to have visited this Khanqah regularly to seek spiritual guidance. After the demise of Syed Shamsu'd-din Andrabi, his son Syed Mir Mirak Andrabi continued the legacy of religious teaching and preaching. A prominent follower of the Qadriya Sufi order, he played a crucial role in spreading Islamic teachings across the Valley during the Chak period. His efforts strengthened the roots of the Qadriya order not only in Kashmir but also beyond its borders, as his descendants settled in various regions and served society selflessly.

The reign of Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin witnessed profound social transformation. His encouragement of education, crafts, and cultural exchange introduced new values and attitudes within Kashmiri society. The influx of foreign scholars and skilled artisans influenced not only arts and crafts but also brought noticeable changes in the Kashmiri language and cultural practices, impressions of which remain visible to this day. Education emerged as a powerful instrument of social change, reshaping moral standards, fostering intellectual growth, and generating a spirit of progress among the people. Economic life also experienced significant advancement as state support for industries enabled Kashmir to move towards organised production and economic stability. The diffusion of new techniques and skills facilitated social welfare and contributed to the resettlement and prosperity of the population. Through his policies of tolerance, patronage of learning, and encouragement of cultural synthesis, Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin created a stable and inclusive society, leaving behind a legacy that continues to symbolise Kashmiriyat, a shared cultural identity rooted in harmony and mutual respect.

Public Works

Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin, popularly known as Budshah, played a decisive role in transforming the physical and infrastructural landscape of Kashmir through an extensive programme of public works. His reign was marked by sustained efforts to improve irrigation, communication, urban planning, and public welfare. Among his most notable achievements was the construction and restoration of several canals (kul), including the well-known Zainagir Canal, which strengthened irrigation facilities and significantly enhanced agricultural productivity. To facilitate trade and mobility, he built and repaired numerous bridges across the River Jhelum, thereby improving connectivity between different regions of the valley. He also contributed to urban development by founding settlements such as Zainapura, which emerged as important administrative and commercial centres.

Budshah's public works further included the construction of artificial islands, particularly in Dal Lake, with Char Chinar Island traditionally attributed to his reign. In addition, he established dispensaries and hospitals to address public health needs and constructed caravanserais (sarais) to provide shelter for travellers, merchants, and pilgrims. These infrastructural initiatives were complemented by broader advancements during his rule in the fields of education, literature, arts and crafts, and agriculture, reflecting a holistic approach to governance. Despite facing serious challenges, including famine, floods, and political unrest in the later years of his reign due to rebellion by his own sons, Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin remained committed to public welfare and development. His policies and public works contributed significantly to the material prosperity and social stability of Kashmir. Consequently, he is remembered as a benevolent and visionary ruler, whose legacy continues to evoke deep reverence, gratitude, and admiration among the people of Kashmir.

Conclusion

Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin's reign represents a defining epoch in the medieval history of Kashmir, characterised by enlightened governance, social inclusivity, and sustained developmental vision. Through a judicious combination of administrative efficiency, welfare-oriented policies, cultural patronage, and religious tolerance, he laid the foundations of a stable and prosperous society. His approach to kingship went beyond political authority, reflecting a deep commitment to the material and moral well-being of his subjects. The Sultan's initiatives in education, public works, and economic organisation strengthened the structural foundations of the state. His patronage of learning and scholarship revitalised intellectual life in Kashmir, while the systematic revival and institutionalisation of arts and crafts transformed the Valley into a major centre of cultural and economic production. These policies not only enhanced employment and material prosperity but also integrated cultural creativity into everyday social life. Equally significant was his extensive

PATRONAGE OF LEARNING AND THE ARTS IN MEDIEVAL KASHMIR: SULTAN ZAIN-UL-ABIDIN AND THE CULTURAL RENAISSANCE OF THE VALLEY

Shabir Ahmad Lone

programme of public works, which improved irrigation, urban planning, communication, and public health, thereby reinforcing agricultural productivity and regional connectivity. Most notably, Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin's policy of religious tolerance marked a decisive departure from sectarian governance. By abolishing discriminatory practices and encouraging interfaith harmony, he fostered a pluralistic social order that contributed to the emergence of *Kashmiriyat* as a shared cultural ethos rooted in mutual respect and coexistence. His court, enriched by scholars, Sufis, and artisans from diverse backgrounds, became a vibrant centre of intellectual and spiritual exchange. Despite confronting natural calamities and internal political challenges, Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin maintained a consistent commitment to justice, welfare, and inclusivity. His legacy, preserved in historical chronicles and collective memory, continues to serve as a model of benevolent and visionary kingship. As rightly observed by historians, his reign stands as one of the most remarkable periods in Kashmir's history, leaving an enduring imprint on its political institutions, cultural traditions, and social fabric.

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