



## Biography and contribution of 20<sup>th</sup> century Kashmiri folk artist ‘Ustad Ghulam Ahmad Sofi’ towards music

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### Abstract

Kashmir which is known as the Paradise on earth, has been the abode of various Vocal virtuosos, music maestros, and poet, who have time to time contributed a lot in the field of Kashmiri folk music and melody. Such singers do not sing songs alone, they are the torch bearers who spread culture & heritage through music. The folk singers of Kashmir are governed by the traditions and customs of the people.

Ustad Ghulam Ahmad Sofi popularly known as “Ama Sofi” was the most talented folk artist of Kashmir. He was the most renowned, talented and prominent folk singer & musician of Kashmir. He visited various metropolitan cities like, Delhi, Mumbai, Calcutta, Chennai, Bangalore etc, where he performed his art and receive laurels besides been honored with many awards, certificates of merit and gold medal for his excellent work & talent. He was well versed in playing on Sarangi, Noat (earthen pitcher) and Hornonium.

**Keywords:** sofi, folk, sarangi, noet, hornonium

### Introduction

Ustad Ghulam Ahmad Sofi popularly known as “Ama Sofi” is a name that finds special mention & great respect among the folk music circuits of Kashmir. He was the most renowned, talented & prominent folk singer & musician of Kashmir, who sings a wide repertoire of traditional folk & Sufi songs. Before his death on September 14, 2005 at the age of 68, he had dominated Kashmiri folk music for four decades & remained an undisputed exponent of ‘Chekri’ folk form. Ustad Sofi was best known for his creative & innovative skills besides also for his distinctive, resonant, melodious & powerful voice with complex & dark emotional expressions, which lead many critics to state his voice as the greatest & most distinctive they have ever heard. He is infact an artist of that repute who has realized his search for excellence & is often regarded by many experts as the best ever Kashmiri folk singer & musician. Ustad Sofi is one among the rare folk artists of Kashmir who played a vital role for promoting & popularizing the essence & glory of the rich cultural heritage of Kashmiri folk music. He is among such folk artists of Kashmir who has firmly stuck to his roots & not caved into the pressures of the ever westernizing Kashmiri folk music. Being a pioneer & torch bearer of Kashmiri culture & tradition, Ustadji was a folk singer of such a caliber & competence, that he always kept himself deeply rooted in the basics of Kashmiri folk music. His folk music is representative of the traditional folk heritage of Kashmir & usually sings accompanied by native folk instruments like Sarangi, Rabab, & Noat (earthen pitcher). He was also famous for the stage performance which had a mesmerizing effect on the audience & always makes them spell bound with his amazing & mesmerizing performances. His songs gained immense popularity amongst music listeners and has created a number of new listeners & lovers of

Kashmiri folk music.

Ghulam Ahmad Sofi was not a professional singer but was driven to this field by his deep inclination, interest & love towards music from a very young age, which was recognized by his friends & he was encouraged to peruse it. He neither inherited music from any one nor any body in his family was ever affiliated to the art of music. In the beginning he was guided by Ghulam Mohammad Churoo, one of the reputed & talented folk musician of his time. He recognized his interst & immense talent & taught him the intricacies & preliminaries of folk singing, with intense care to make him perfect with all the aspects about and taught him everything he knew. In order to start with this delightful & ever ending journey of music, Sofi like all other artists formed his own folk party & started singing for small neighborhood folk oriented programmes and gained experience & popularity as the years went by. He adopted the folk instrument Noat (matka) as his main instrument while performing and with the time his performance during weddings, festives, & other social & religious gatherings became one of the most celebrated ones. There after he got various major platforms & secured highly acclaimed respect & popularity through his heart touching & soulful performances. Ustad Sofi was gifted with an amazing voice quality & his singing had the capacity to bewitch his listeners & could sing for hours on end. His stage performances include the most illustrious national platforms. Ustad Ghulam Ahmad Sofi has been the pioneer in establishing some innovations, amendments & modifications in the style & rendition of traditional folk singing “Chakri & Ruff” & shaped it according to the modern trends in music, without affecting the basics of Kashmiri folk music & this attempt was a good & fruitful venture & was highly acclaimed by the folk music lovers & admirers of Kashmir. In this way

Sofi has made the Kashmiri folk musical work much easier, interesting & most appealing. Sofi always sings in a powerful & manly voice & his ability & inspiration to show his extempore while performing was outstanding & extremely graceful. He has left significant & prominent imprints on the Kashmiri folk culture. This folk maestro had a deep knowledge of folk & traditional music & a thorough grasp over Kashmiri Sufi poetry that enable him to tackle any composition with elan. He is in fact an artist of that repute who has realized his search for excellence.

In his five decades of dedicated work he has explored various dimensions of "Chakri" music & became the founder of modern folk music "Chakri" in Kashmir. This new trend & style of Chakri music not only became his own individual style & standard but it has become so popular that many young & energetic singers & musicians adopted & adhered to this style & for the coming generations he is a bench mark to be followed.

Though illiterate Sofi's immense talent, amazing voice quality & untapped potential helped him to get an employment in the state information department where he served as a folk artist from 1964 to 1995 for about 31 years. During his span of service he got ample chance to display his art in various towns & villages of the state, where he showed his singing talent beyond belief. His captivating sweet voice always creates a magic all around & makes the listeners spell bound. In this way he gained more experience, popularity & reputation & very soon became a household name in the state of J & K. After this he exhibited his talent in Radio Kashmir Srinagar, which also played a vital role in shaping & popularizing him as one of the highly reputed & leading folk singer & musician of Kashmir. For being an extremely talented in this field soon he was approved as "A" top grade casual folk artist by Radio Kashmir. Having joined the Radio Kashmir Srinagar he gained the full momentum & was deeply involved with the folk musical activities & programmes of Radio Kashmir & this proved to be a turning phase for him for his future course of time. Besides Radio Kashmir he also performed his art from Doordarshan & Cultural academies as well, & in this way gained much more experience, reputation & secured great respect among quality listeners.

Ustad Sofi's recitals are well known for their high degree by technically combining various musical aspects & embellishments like intricate laykari, command over the three octaves, interpretation & expression of wordings of the song with music & a soulful melodious alap. His every composition done to perfection from every aspect whether selecting of poetry, perfection in handling & lacing the words with music & perfection in delivery. His Sufi compositions have an extra blend of spiritualism & Sufism, which is the heart and soul of mystic poetry & he gained considerable prominence among the qualitative listeners. Sofi's music is as seductive as it is rhythmically complex & embodies the rich melodic & sophisticated rhythmic traditions of Kashmiri folk music. Throughout the state of J & K people have always applauded & appreciated Ustad Sofi's unique contribution to the development of a revolutionary style of singing Chekri folk form.

Ustad Ghulam Ahmad Sofi added more feathers & crown to his name & fame besides also attained maximum heights &

zenith of splendor when he devised and innovated a totally new style for singing "Shash-Rang" & "Haft-Rang" of the famous Kashmiri Sufi poet "Rehman Dar" which is absolutely his own creativity & innovation. This unique & different style of folk singing not only engraved "Shash-Rang" on hearts & minds of people but also highlighted the mystic poet "Rehman dar" in particular. This musical innovation certainly did not evolve overnight, it came from years of devotion & rigorous hard work and perseverance. These achievements further increased his artistic repertoire & at one point of time he had become almost a cult and prominent figure in the vast field of Kashmiri folk music. This new innovation in Kashmiri folk music "Chakri" made Sofi as one of the most fascinating performing artists of Kashmiri music & also created such waves in the Kashmiri music world, that people still talk about it. True to his restlessness & deeply spiritual in his outlook he has to his credit several original & remarkable contributions to the Kashmiri folk music. Besides this his music has always been a part & parcel of Kashmiri culture & tradition and it has a unique status. One of the most successful & heartwarming songs of Ustad Sofi, "Sar Ho Wandai Padan" song was the hymn of the region at a point of time & is still retaining its beauty & charm in the hearts & minds of every folk music lover of Kashmir. Not only people love his 'Chekri & Ruff' songs but his Sufi songs are equally loved & liked by three generations of Kashmiri music lovers. His Sufi recitals have a unique solemnity, serenity & dignity of its own. Indeed music was so highly & deeply dominant in his mental makeup that it virtually defines his personality. Ustad Sofi was the most loved & respected artist of the state of J & K. A living legend & a musical Genius Sofi was more than an individual performer & composer par excellence & an extraordinary human being. He had been given the title of "Ustad" by the state academy of art culture & languages Srinagar, & except Sofi no one in the field of Kashmiri folk music has attained such a great honour to his credit. He is one among the folk artists of Kashmir who has contributed & raised the Kashmiri folk music to the level of appreciation & applaud not only on national level but also on international levels & also received applause & acclaim from the President & Prime minister of the country. He made "Chakri & Ruff" singing evergreen through his scores of unforgettable songs which he churned out during his illustrious career.

Ustad Ghulam Ahmad Sofi has extensively travelled a facility provided by the State information & Cultural academy & thus visited various metropolitan cities like, Delhi, Mumbai, Calcutta, Chennai, Bangalore etc, where he performed his art & receive laurels besides been honored with many awards, certificates of merit & a gold medal for his excellent work & talent. Ustad Ghulam Ahmad Sofi was well versed in playing on Sarangi and Harmonium. Besides these instruments he would play with comfort the native folk rhythmic instrument like "Noat" (Kashmiri clay pitcher). His style & technique of playing "Noat" was unique & splendid & it was his commitment, perseverance & dedication to this art that he was able to produce any kind of rhythmic pattern on this instrument with ease and comfort, and no one could compete him in this art. A close study of his playing instrument Matka & Sarangi would reveal the development of his music. In addition to this Sofi also possessed mastery in singing chorus

& action songs too with ease & perfection, which reveal his immense God given talent.

One of the most renowned & popular folk artist of Kashmir Abdul Rashid Hafiz, while interviewing categorically says that memories of these great & legendary artistes of Kashmiri folk genre "Chakri" like Ghulam Ahmad Sofi are very close to his heart, as he inspired him taught him & contributed in a big way to making him what he is today & also made a great impression on his life in many ways. All his performances were fabulous & magnificent he says. He gave a new look, new face & direction to Kashmiri folk music & melody. No matter how radical experimentations might have been, he was extremely conscientious about staying within the limits of Kashmiri folk music. He believes that there is a particular beauty & feel in his style & through his soulful & mesmerizing performances he has been able to lift his listeners above earthly concerns. Abdul Rashid also says he truly believes that one can ever live up to his level of success & achievement. On hearing such artists he realized the high quality of talent that lies within them. According to him when they sing one stops merely hearing the music-one can actually feel it. Hafiz says, when ustad Sofi used to perform every one guaranteed an unforgettable melodic experience, a medley of Chakri folk recitals in the purest & deeply rooted Kashmiri folk traditions. He also stated that Sofi was a master in managing to incorporate a lot of emotions & feelings through his playing the folk rhythmic instrument "Noat" which adds further playfulness, depth, energy & beauty for the whole performance. His playing ability was more greater than other players of his age, & his style was full of expression. He also said that Sofi's music is pure & appealing & will always keep alive in the hearts of his admirers & lovers. ustad Sofi has to his credit a number of folk albums & songs. Almost each & every song has turned out to be a huge hit & was highly appreciated by the people of Kashmir.

Some of his best & hit sung songs are:

1. Aadan Chu Yekhna Cham Ladan Taye
2. Shaad Sapdum Dil Mae Bozum Salei Yeye Az Baal Yaar.....
3. Praran Praran Tara Vati Latie Nazar Traav.....
4. Gah Gah Mea Truwum Khuen Te Chenu.....
5. Jis Padhnay Say Sahib Millay Who Padhna Hai Aur.....

Though many folk singers & musicians have tried to follow his Suit & style. To name a few Abdul Rashid Hafiz & Gulzar Ahmad Mir are the distinguished, talented & trustworthy folk artists who regarded Ustad Sofi as a source of inspiration & sings songs in his style too. Ustad Ghulam Ahmad Sofi is no more but his folk music treasure & legacy continues in the scores of evergreen & unforgettable folk songs he churned out during his illustrious career and these songs continues to retain its originality & popularity to this day. His name will always remain as a shining star & symbol in the history of Kashmiri folk music & melody.

May Almighty grant eternal peace to the soul of this man whose songs gives pleasure, peace & tranquility to the worn out & torn out minds of the people.

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