

Lal Ded : The Voice of Kashmiri Identity and Culture

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The fourteenth century iconoclastic Kashmiri saint-poet Lal Ded had a profound effect on the people of Kashmir. Her poetry is revered by all Kashmiris and has been passed down from one generation to the next, orally. Many say she is synonymous with Kashmir. Her legends, lore, and her vakhs have been celebrated as an essential part of Kashmiri identity. With the passage of time, each generation changes its perception and Lal Ded's spiritual messages have been reinvented too. But her message of secularism remains unchanged. She broke the shackles of rigid social rules and lived the life of a wandering mystic. This research paper makes an effort to connect her verses and philosophy with Kashmiri culture and identity which is above religion and caste.

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Lal Ded was a fourteenth century female mystic poet from Kashmir. Also known as Lalla, Lallesvari, Lalla Aarifa, Lalla Yogiswari- her name is considered synonymous with Kashmiri culture. Treasured by all Kashmiris - irrespective of their religion, she left behind a vast collection of short poetic verses known as vakhs. Composed in the Kashmiri language, her verses are a vital part of modern Indian literature.

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Lal Ded gave expression to her mystic and poetic inclinations through her vakhs in the Kashmiri language. For her secular leanings, she was equally revered by all communities. In her verses, she covers vast areas of spirituality - religion, Shaivism and even Vedanta - where she says that she is reading the Bhagavad Gita every moment of her life.¹ Her vakhs advocate a moral and ethical code of conduct and provide tips for spiritual advancement. They strike us like brief and blinding bursts of light: epiphanic and provocative. They move between the doubtful and the assured, with an insight gained through resilience and reflection. The idea is to fight the inner demons and not fellow humanity. She recites :

“... I wrestled with the darkness inside me
Knocked it down
Clawed at it
Ripped it to shreds.”

In his book “I, Lalla: The Poems of Lal Ded”, Ranjit Hoskote tries to decipher the myth and mystery surrounding Lal Ded. He elaborates: “To the outer world, Lal Ded is arguably Kashmir’s best known spiritual and literary figure; within Kashmir, she has been venerated both by Hindus and Muslims for nearly seven centuries. For most of that period, she has successfully eluded the proprietorial claims of religious monopolists... It is true that Lal Ded was constructed differently by each community, but she was simultaneously Lallesvari or Lalla Yogini to the Hindus and Lal’arifa to the Muslims.”²

There is no exact date or year of Lal Ded’s birth. The sources differ and it is generally assumed that she was born between 1317 and 1320, near Srinagar in a Kashmiri Brahmin family. It is suggested that she died either in 1373 or 1392, although these are tentative years. With the passage of time, her life has passed into a legend; and along with her verses, she has become a part of Kashmiri folklore. Through oral traditions, her vakhs have been carried forward from generation to generation. The details of her early life portray her as a woman with spiritual aspirations. She received brief education in religious texts before she was married at the young age of twelve, as per the custom of her times. After marriage she was renamed as Padmavati, but she thought of herself only as Lalla.

Her married life was a torturous one. She was regularly mistreated by her husband. Her mother-in-law often starved her by

putting flat stone in her plate and cover it with rice, so it would look as a bigger heap of food. A verse attributed to Lal Ded explains her suffering: "Whether they kill a ram or a sheep/ Lalla will get only a stone to eat." It can be assumed that she never complained as she gradually turned to ascetic practices using this experience to prepare herself for self-imposed discipline.

Unable to withstand the rigid rules of marriage, she renounced her family life at twenty-six and became a shelter less mystic wandering in rags and surviving on alms. She eventually became a disciple of a spiritual leader, Sidh Srikanth who was a Shaivite. She too became an ardent practitioner of Shaivism which is also known as Trika Shastra. Following this path, she started reciting proverbs and verses based on her faith and ideology. For a woman, it was an unprecedented move to renounce the socially-accepted, traditional role of a devoted wife and live her life as a mystic and poet without any social security. This decision also shows her exceptional faith and dauntless spirit.

14th century Kashmir was going through a time of transition between Sanskritic and Islamic influences. Lal-Ded was a very significant historical bridge that connected the two ends of this divide very effectively. She was the product of faith that had been evolving in Kashmir during medieval times. Her predecessors were Kashmiri scholars and mystics like Vasugupta Rishi, Acharaya Somanand and Acharaya Utpal Dev. Her immediate successor was Nund Rishi (Sheikh Nur-ud-Din), who is considered another pillar of Kashmiri identity. He founded the Muslim Rishi order in Kashmir. Praising Lal Ded, Nund Rishi had this to say about her :

It was Lalla of Padmanpur,
Who drank in long draughts, nectar Divine.
She was the Divine Manifestation for us,
May thou Lord bestow a similar boon upon me.³

As her understanding of mysticism grew, she began to see God as one powerful entity irrespective of religion. Her poetry reflects the peaceful thought of engagement with both Shaivism and Sufism. She imbibed uniformly from all religious influences and languages that made contact with the Indian sub-continent during her life, absorbing from Sanskrit, Islamic, Sufi, and Sikh cultures. She revolted against the oppressive social structures that stifled and chained human spirit. She also questioned practices of injustice that

were prevalent during the times. She did not hesitate to lash out even at priests :

“Idol is of stone, temple is of stone;
Above (temple) and below (idol) are one;
Which of them will you worship O fool?
Cause thou the union of mind with Soul.”

In another vakh, she talks of human beings chasing materialism over good deeds :

“You’ve cut yourself a hide and measured it
But what seeds have you sown that will bear you fruit?
Fool! Teaching you is like throwing a ball at a gatepost
Or feeding jaggery to an ox, hoping for milk.”

In yet another short verse, she minces no words to mock the ceremonies and rituals observed by fundamentalists and ritualists :

“O fool, right action does not lie
in observing fasts and ceremonial rites.
O fool, right action does not lie
in providing for bodily comfort and ease.
In contemplation of the Self alone
is right action and right counsel for you.”

Her rebellion was unprecedented. She challenged the validity of all the socio-political and religious structures. As she gained popularity among the masses, she was perceived as a threat to the established social order by the privileged classes of the times. To neutralise the impact of this rebellion, the custodians of tradition declared her to be mad and insane for abandoning her familial ties. But Lal Ded believed that there is no distinction between a hermit and a family person. What matters is the inner temperament - whether you have ‘dissolved your desires in the river of time’ :

“Some run away from home, some escape the hermitage.
No orchard bears fruit for the barren mind.
Day and night, count the rosary of your breath,
And stay put wherever you are.”

Lal Ded’s sayings, poetry and philosophy are timeless and a true embodiment of Kashmiri culture. She articulated the spiritual

path in Kashmiri language which was the language of the man in the street. This way she made it available to the masses irrespective of religion, caste or region. This act of making Kashmiri language the tool for spreading her message of secularism through her verses- was probably a divine inspiration for her. This act remains the greatest revolutionary act in the cultural history of Kashmir and makes her the undisputed founder not only of the contemporary Kashmiri literature but also of the contemporary Kashmiri culture.⁴

As a wanderer, she spoke directly to the people, reaching the peasants across the Valley and “sharing her universal message, liberating the doctrine from any sectarian, local or regional colour” In one of her well known vakh she emphasizes that there is no distinction between people of different faiths as “the sun knows not the Hindu different to the Muslim.”⁵

Lal Ded popularized the ritual free Trika Shastra which assimilates not only the essence of Buddhist spirituality but also reaches out to the Sufi-Mystic tradition of Islam. In Buddhist tradition being a Bodhi-sattva implies being full of compassion conjoined with insight into reality, realizing emptiness (shunaya) or the essence of all things.⁶ In this light we may consider this vakh by her :

Realization is rare indeed,
 Seek not afar,
 it is nearby you
 First slay desire,
 then still the mind,
 giving up vain imaginings
 Then meditate on self within and lo!
 The void merges in the void.

As her fame spread through the valley, miracles were attributed to her life like many other saints. Some of these anecdotes depict the legend of Lal Ded attaching incredible powers to her. One such tale narrates that even before she left home to become a mystic, her powers were unmistakable. It is said that she left home very early every morning to fetch drinkable water and spent time there in seclusion to meditate and pray. One day when she returned with an earthen pot full of water, her jealous husband was hiding to spy on her. Unable to find any proof, he lost his temper and struck the pot

with a stick. The pot broke into pieces, but the water did not spill. Lal Ded filled all the pots with this water and then threw remaining water outside the house. A pond sprang up where the water touched the earth. This pond is known as Lal Tang and is said to have been filled with water till early 20th century.

Another myth shares the anecdote of first meeting between Lal Ded and Shah Hamdan. Shah Hamdan was her contemporary and a famous saint, who had greatly influenced her ideology. Folklore says that Lal Ded used to wander in semi-naked condition. One day Shah Hamdan came to meet her. Trying to hide from him, she jumped into a baker's heated oven saying 'He is a man, who fears God, and there are very few such men about'. The baker thought that the woman must have surely died in the hot oven. But much to his surprise, Lal Ded appeared from the oven clad in her finest clothes and hastened to meet Shah Hamdan.

Another anecdote is associated with her death. Both Hindus and Muslims staked a claim to her body. To settle the dispute her spirit asked to bring two large pots. The body was placed inside one with the other inverted over the head. The body began to shrink slowly till the two pots overlapped. When her followers lifted the inverted pot, they found it filled with water. Half of the water was taken by Hindus and other half was claimed by Muslims.

There is no doubt that Lal Ded's outpourings fostered spiritual accommodation between religious groups in her times as well as in the coming centuries. Political turmoil and terrorism that erupted in the Kashmir Valley in the late 20th century resulted in growing atmosphere of distrust and hatred between Kashmiri Pandits and Muslims. It was followed by mass exodus of the Pandit community from Kashmir. These dynamics of social change have tried to divide the culture of Kashmir through the prism of narrow religion and sectarianism.

Lal Ded's poetry and personality has become a part of this rivalry where both religions have tried to stake a claim on her. This stand is in exact contradiction with her ideology and poetic legacy. She celebrated unity, peace and simplicity and not acrimony and bitterness. Especially today in the times of rising conflicts and divisions on the basis of religion, it is important to remember her contribution towards inter-religious dialogue and tolerance. Her philosophy propagated the idea of integrated humanity. But She knew it was a tremendously difficult challenge. In one vakh, she says:

“I could learn to disperse the southern clouds.
 I could learn how to drain out the sea,
 I could learn to heal the source of a leper,
 But I could never learn the art to convince a fool”

Today, Lal Ded lives in the memory of all literature loving Indians. Young or old, each generation has found a reason to revel at her verses that celebrate Kashmiri identity and culture. In the 21st century, her poetry is read and recited by Kashmiris to each other and to friends. It is collected in poetry books and anthologies. It is shared on the internet, told in stories and shown gloriously in media. Ikram Ullah, a young Kashmiri poet, voices our admiration and alludes to her heritage in these words:

“I belong to a Valley so exquisite.
 She mothered the mystic Nund resh...And
 blew breath in the eloquent Lal Ded.
 Whose shrukhs and vakhs petrify the generations after
 them...”

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(The verses/vakhs, quoted in the research paper, are taken from Ranjit Hoskote’s book ‘I, Lal Ded: The poems of Lal Ded’ (sourced from Google archives) and from M H Zaffar’s article ‘Lal Ded: The Mystic of Kashmir’). ★