

Lal Ded and Her Vaakhs: Revisiting the Mystic's Perspective

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Abstract

The paper aims to explore the vaakhs of Lal Ded under the framework of mysticism. Lalleshwari, the mystic saint-poet, a moral guide, popularly known as Lal Ded (Granny Lal), is one of the greatest litterateurs who hailed from medieval Kashmir. Lal Ded is remembered for her vaakhs that reflect her wisdom of Trika philosophy which she shared with the natives in the vernacular. Vaakhs are a priceless possession, and the wisdom underlying the vaakhs marks as the legacy for the posterity. Lal Ded is still alive in the heart of the natives through her vaakhs, and the very language of the region is indebted to her as she enriched it with her proverbs. The paper aims to examine the mystic elements in her vaakhs and the wisdom for the immortal soul in the mortal frame. Also, the paper explores how the narrative of the vaakhs is still pertinent in contemporary times prompting one to look within and cherish the holy gift of life, and at the same time serves to establish an eternal bond of love among all Kashmiris. In today's world, where differences are valorized, her vaakhs corresponds to interfaith dialogue by surpassing all religions through the doctrine of mysticism.

Keywords: Mysticism, Vaakhs, Divine Love, Unity, and Interfaith Dialogue

A person of the reason is never satiated with the observances of the phenomenal world as he has an inner quest to know the unknown, to comprehend the unfathomable, that is, far beyond his grasp. He has an unquenchable thirst to probe the mystery of the universe as his urge does not cease at the theoretical and the empirical. Besides, being a person of reason, she is bestowed with a soul that makes her a conscious being who has the propensity to reflect and introspect and to love. Love, in its higher form, stands for man's urge for communion with the Divine. The love which the mystics around the world speak of is Divine Love and the Divine for the mystics is the Transcendent Being.

Mysticism involves a person's spiritual quest for seeking communion with the Divine through unifying love. It is man's direct experience of the Divine, which is described as imageless by all the mystics. B N. Parimoo, in *The Ascent of Self: A Re-interpretation of the Mystical Poetry of Lalla Ded*, states that:

Mysticism sums up the recognition and realization of the self in man and the Macrocosmic Self and the identification of the two as one. Self-realization and God-realization are one and the same thing. The mystic aims at dissolution of the individual self into the Universal Self so as to attain Truth-Consciousness- Bliss. Mysticism is a practical discipline and the goal is achieved after a hard struggle. (xii)

Mysticism has its roots down the human history especially as a religious experience. The medieval period marks the inception of mysticism worldwide. The word 'mysticism' comes from the Greek word *mycin* meaning 'to close the eyes', is also the root of 'mystery' (Faizili 9). Mysticism, as a separate subject, is the product of the west. "It has intermittently appeared in Christianity notably in the writings of St. Augustine, and St. Avila..." (Fazili 7).

In the Indian context, it dates back to the Upanishads. "Hindu mysticism was always regarded as part of philosophy and religion.... Tat tvam Asi, Ayamatra Brahma, Aham Brahma Asmi are an eloquent indication of how much Upanishads are imbued with mysticism" (Abraham 6).

There are various meanings and connotations of mysticism. The Encyclopedia Britannica defines the term 'mysticism' as "the practice of religious ecstasies (religious experiences during alternate state of consciousness), together with whatever ideologies, ethics, rites, myths, legends, and magic may be related to them." A.N Dhar in his *Mysticism across Cultures*, quotes the poet Coventry Patmore who describes mysticism as "the science of the ultimate" (2). All the religions of the world have the belief in the unseen. Mysticism is the esoteric aspect of the conventional religion. Mysticism and religion are integrally related as every religion aspires towards experiencing the Divine. Thus, mysticism has different connotations in different religions. Gershom G. Scholem posits that there is no mysticism but mysticisms:

"... there is no such a thing as mysticism in the abstract, that is to say, a phenomenon or experience which has no particular relation to the other religious phenomena. There is no

mysticism as such, there is only mysticism of a particular religious system, Christian, Islamic, Jewish mysticism and so on” (Scholem 6).

Literature represents culture and tradition of a society and also serves multitude of purposes. Besides, being the blueprint of the society and a cultural artifact, it serves as an introduction to the world of imagination, ideas, and experience in the form of art. Poetry is a higher form of an art as it is used to communicate higher truths since time immemorial. Poetry of faith or religious poetry is marked by the element of sacredness. A. N. Dhar quotes Donal Davie in *Mysticism in Literature*, that, “the very act of poetry implies religious view of the world” (6).

Mysticism and poetry are interrelated. The basis of mysticism is conviction of unity: semblance of all the things. Mystics teach us how to value one another and cherish the holy gift of life and promotes humanity, brotherhood among different religious affiliations. Rabindranath Tagore in his book *Gitanjali*, defines unity as “He who sees all human beings as himself, who realizes all beings as himself, knows truth” (99-100). The paper aims to revisit the medieval mystic’s perspective and endeavors to explore and expound the ethical teachings of Lal Ded under the rubric of the wisdom of Kashmir Shaivism which falls in with the fundamentals of her poetry.

The Hallowed Valley of Kashmir and the Kashmir’s Literary Tradition: The union territory of Jammu and Kashmir is one of the most beautiful regions in the south Asian countries that is bestowed with natural resources by the Almighty. The valley of Kashmir is said to be the crown of Bharat and is called *Kasheer* in the vernacular. It is also called as *Rishwaer*- the Valley of Rishis or *Rishi Vatika* as it was the abode of the Rishis. The genesis of Kashmir has been based on the oral legends recorded in ancient texts like *Nilmatpurana*, *Rajatarangani*, and *Baharistan-i-Shahi* to name a few. *Nilamat Puran* deals with “the ancient history of Kashmir in respect of its creation, its original inhabitants-Nagas, Pisachas, and Brahmins, their style of living, customs, festivals, and topography” (Bhat 5). Kashmir, in the prehistoric times was a deep lake called as *Satisar*, named after *Sati*, the consort of Lord Shiva. When the lake got infested by the demon, the Naga inhabitants could not come and dwell there and sought the help of Sage *Kashyap*. Due to the miraculous deeds of the sage the demon was killed and the land that emerged from the desiccation of the lake water was named after the sage *Kashyap* as *Kashyap mar*. Thus, the name Kashmir also implies “land desiccated from the water,” from Sanskrit ‘ka ’ which means water and ‘shimira ’ which implies to

desiccate (Bamzai 5). Hence, Kashmir's cultural essence is marked by miracles, metaphysical traditions, and mythical actions.

Also, in the past, Kashmir was known throughout the world as an important center of learning and significantly contributed in the development of Sanskrit. All the major schools of Indian Aesthetics were founded by Kashmir theoreticians. P. N. K. Bamzai wrote in his book *Culture and Political History of Kashmir*, "In ancient times Kashmir was the 'high school' of Sanskrit and scholars from all parts of India came to the Valley to study at the feet of great teachers and savants." (233). Kashmir is a blessed land where saints and mystics of all the times have been venerated. Since time immemorial, it possesses a rich literary history. In the valley, poetry has been the most preferred form of artistic expression. Mir Mohammad Hanif, in his book *Imprints of English on Modern Kashmiri Poetry*, posits that "the written records of the literary tradition in Kashmir show that, even in the tenth century, there was a well-developed poetic tradition, grounded in mystic philosophy" (24). He further states that "it is a recognized reality that Kashmiri poetry, from the medieval times to the twentieth century, was 'spiritual' in nature..." (7). *Rajatarangani* in Sanskrit is the masterpiece of ancient Kashmiri literature. In medieval Kashmir, Kashmiri literature was nourished in the vernacular at the hands of two great mystics of the period: Laleshwari and Nur-ud-Din. These two stalwarts of the Kashmiri Language enriched the literary heritage by the richness of their phrases and metaphors from their respective mystical poetry. Thus, it is worth delving into the treasure haul of Kashmir with its great literary tradition along with the mystic Lal Ded.

Lal Ded and her Vaakhs: the Ceaseless Songs of Devotion: The real history of Kashmiri literature began with the mystical verses of the great saint-woman poet, Laleshwari (1320- 1390) in the fourteenth century, the time that also marks the inception of Islam into the valley in a gentle pervasive manner. She was born into a Brahmin family and was named as Lalla. Out of veneration, Hindus called her Laleshwari and Muslims called her Lalla Arifa (Razdan 9). Both the communities endearingly called her Lal Ded which means Grandmother. She was married at a young age, and her in-laws called her Padmavati. Her conjugal life was not blissful as she was always tormented by her mother-in-law, who left no stone unturned to perturb her and also provoked her son who ill-treated her. As a woman, she refused the role assigned to her by the then contemporary society by walking out of her marriage and rebelled against the culture of silence. Thus, giving her spiritual yearnings a voice in the form of vaakhs. Lal Ded has survived through

the oral tradition by her vaakhs: words of profound philosophical value. The first mention of Laleshwari was by Mulla Ali Raina in *Tadhkirat-ul-Arifin* (1587) followed by Asrar ul-Akbar (1654) by Baba Daud Mishkati and *Tarikh-i-Azmi* (1736) by Khwaja Azam Diddamari.

Ranjit Hoskote in his book *I, Lalla: The Poems of Lal Ded* states that “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...Called vakhs, Lalla’s poems are among the earliest known manifestations of Kashmiri Literature...” (x). The word vaakh, applicable both as singular and plural, is cognate with the Sanskrit *vac*, ‘speech’, and *vakya*, ‘sentence’ (xi). “A typical vaakh is a four-line stanza... The word is derived from Sanskrit word *vaakiyaani* which means a cryptic saying” (Hanif 27). Between the mid-fourteenth century and the present, a total of 258 vaakhs attributed to Lalla have circulated variously assuming the form of songs, proverbs and prayers. Her vaakhs have come down to us as a rich legacy and the key themes are the domain of spirituality, the injustices prevalent in the society, and a revolt to conventions, journey of the self to Self through meditation and yogic cultivation of the breath, love, and universal brotherhood. Lal Ded lived through a time of seismic turbulence. The most important object of her mission was the removal of confusion caused among the masses by the preaching of the zealots. The ways of living together adapted by medieval Kashmiri locals to thrive in a composite culture without turning antagonistic to each other in an anti-conflictual manner can be best explained by the mystic insights of Lal Ded.

The literary study of Lal Ded is based on the interpretation of her vaakhs. Her vaakhs were responsible for molding the character of her people and setting up a tradition of love and tolerance. She conveyed the essence of Kashmir Shaivism in a simple way. She was initiated to embark the spiritual enterprise at the hands of her Guru Siddha Srikantha. She acknowledged the teachings of her spiritual mentor as the eternal message of the Divine and practiced it. Her Guru instructed her to focus her energy from the outside world to the lotus temple inside her as the first step in *Sadhana*. Says Lal Ded:

The Guru gave me but one percept,

“From without turn inward”,

It came to me ‘Lalla’ as God’s word:

I started roaming nude (Dhar 175).

Love is another important factor that emerges out of the vaakhs. Love matrix is complex as it is physical as well as metaphysical. Her vaakhs provide horizon of Divine love. Divine love means the love for God and his creation irrespective of different religious convictions. LaL Ded acknowledged that different religions corresponds to different paths leading to the ultimate goal of seeking the Divine. The devotion to God and love for his creation is characterized by transforming of love from the lower self to higher self. Her love for Shiva is so intense that she finds him all-pervading and bewildered, she asks, what she should offer who is one in all. She professed pure Love for the Divine in the following vaakh:

You are the sky and the earth
Day, wind-breath, night.
You are grain, sandal paste, flowers, water.
Substance of my offering, You who are All,
What shall I offer you? (Hoskote 62)

The Love of the Divine is marked by self-knowledge and a man can sail through the sojourn on the Earth through Self-knowledge. Inner enterprise is vital to eradicate the nafs (lower self). Says Lal Ded, Shiva is realized not through rituals and observances, but through the knowledge of radiant mind. "Shiva is worshipped best when thought lights up the Self" (Hoskote 39). Says Lal Ded:

Fool, you won't find your way out by praying from a book.
The perfume on your carcass won't give you a clue.
Focus on the Self.
That's the best advice you can get (Hoskote 43).

Lal Ded as a mystic is not a world negating seeker rather, she treats the body playing an important role in bringing self-refinement. Self-knowledge abets in resolving the inner and outer conflicts leading to a universal vision. Self- knowledge through self-discipline dispels the darkness from

one's inner self and promotes love and unity for the divine creation as we all are manifestation of God:

Shiva lies in many places.

He doesn't know Hindu from Muslim.

The Self that lives in you and others:

that's Shiva. Get the measure of Shiva (Hoskote 104).

The mystic poet Lal Ded, intoxicated by divine love redefined herself, and the world around her as the manifestation of God through symbols, images, and conceptual ideas in her poetry. The poet have left a legacy of vaakhs that propagates spiritual discourse for the progeny to gain insights: how at individual level one can be liberated and also, gave place to the marginalized by propagating the concept of one God. Her vaakhs are a testimony to her mystic experience. Her vaakhs are addressed to men of all faiths. Lal Ded realized the essence of the Universal and the one religion that belongs to all, that is, humanity.

Mysticism in Kashmir is a counter-discourse that reiterates the message of peaceful co-existence. A close scrutiny of the medieval poet: Lal Ded connects us with the past that stood for Unity in Diversity, connects us to our forgotten roots of Self. "The chronology of her existence testify to her being the pioneer and forerunner of the Bhakti movement of India" (Razdan 22). It is important to recognize, comprehend, and evaluate mystical poetry of the medieval mystic as her poetry responds to the needs of modern human beings. In today's world, where differences are valorized, her poetry corresponds to interfaith dialogue by surpassing all religions through the doctrine of mysticism. The poetry of Lal Ded focuses on the lost identity of unity and oneness due to change in the narrative and how lost identity of oneness could be revived by application of the insights provided by the poet, in the vaakhs from spiritual vantage point.

Conclusion

Today, mysticism is garnering renewed interest and understanding as it aims towards human beings 'inward transformation. Although the modern world is on the path of technological

advancement, the possibilities that lie beyond the empirical cannot be rejected. Spiritual vacuity has plagued man's psyche because of rampant ongoing violence and conflict in many parts of the world. Mystics of all ages and climes emphasize man's inherent Divinity and the goal of spiritual life is the human pursuit of the Divine where the soul yearns for the communion with the Celestial. The mystic is the most legitimate custodian of religion, and their poetry is the poetry of aspiration and fulfillment. Mysticism is a positive trend and mystics promotes mutual understanding and interfaith dialogue. The narrative of the vaakhs of the most revered mystic saint poetess: Lal Ded, states the ascent of the self from the lower to the higher plane of consciousness. As quoted by a famous Lithuanian-American Poet and Filmmaker, Jonas Mekas, "In the very end, civilizations perish because they listen to their politicians and not to their poets," (Goodreads).

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