

## LAL-DED: The Mystic Poet of Kashmir

Prof. M.H. Zaffar\*

Lal-Ded is a rebel saint, a mystic and a poet of the 14<sup>th</sup> century Kashmir. Her poetry forms the foundation not only of contemporary Kashmiri literature but also of Kashmiri culture as a whole. In the ancient and the medieval period Kashmir produced great thinkers and spiritual practitioners. But all their works are in Sanskrit. After the advent of Islam in Kashmir around the 11<sup>th</sup> century, A. D. Kashmiris gradually lost their hold on the language (Sanskrit) due to various political, social, religious, and linguistic reasons; and whatever intellectual heritage their predecessors had bequeathed became inaccessible to them. With the passage of time a deficit emerged between pre-Islamic Kashmir and Islamic Kashmir. Lal-Ded is the most significant historical bridge that connects the two shores of this gulf very effectively. She was the product of the spiritual creed that had been evolving in Kashmir for centuries and her immediate predecessors were saints and scholars like Vasugupta Rishi, Acharaya Somanand, Acharaya Utpal Dev and Acharaya Abhinavagupta. Her immediate successor and a great saint and scholar in his own right, Nund Rishi the founder of Muslim Rishi order in Kashmir has this to say about Lal-Ded<sup>1</sup>:

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

Her poetry was not written down during her life time. It was because of her power to impact her listeners that people heard her and formed her sayings or *VāKs* into chants and mantras which continue to be sung even

\* Professor (Research) UNESCO Madanjeet Singh, Institute of Kashmir Studies, University of Kashmir

today. She revolted against all the oppressive structures that stifle and kill the human spirit and critically interrogated practices of inequality and injustice that were current during the times. Lala's poetry is not only a continuation of the tradition; it is also simultaneously a break or rebellion against the tradition. Her rebellion was unprecedented. She challenged the validity of all the socio-political and religious structures, and was deadly against maintaining the status quo, thus she was perceived as a threat to the established social order. To neutralise the impact of this rebellion, the elite of the times, the custodians of the tradition declared her to be mad and insane, it is because of these circumstances that we don't find her mention in any of the historical accounts written in Sanskrit during and after her times.

Lal-ded rebelled against the educated elite of Sanskrit academia who were the custodians of knowledge and tradition. She articulated the spiritual path and message she had inherited; in Kashmiri language which was the language of the man in the street. By doing so, she made it available to all the people irrespective of caste, creed, colour, sex, religion or region. It was no more a preserve of the Sanskrit academy. This act on the part of Lala-ded - to make Kashmiri language the vehicle for spreading her message of universal brotherhood through her outpourings- was probably a part of the Divine Mission which she had to fulfil and in recognition of which the great saint Nunda-Rishi calls her, 'the Divine Manifestation for us.' 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.

Lal-Ded also rejected wholly the ritualistic aspect of the *śaivistic* spiritual discipline. This rejection is articulated and expressed with great force in her poetry. She denigrates the ceremonial pieties, and to her most of these rituals are devoid of any spiritual merit and only an uncultivated person will engage in such barren and fruitless activities. She herself had no possessions, not even a shelter but in her 'homeless wisdom' articulated in a language that provides no lulling abodes of thought she tried to dismantle the deeply ingrained hereditary patterns of thought and action. She had her own revolutionary views regarding the rituals like, idol worship, animal sacrifice, fasting, visiting sacred places and reading sacred books. In the light of her own intense spiritual experiences, she re-evaluates these rituals and comments:<sup>2</sup>



*The idol is but stone  
The Temple is but stone,  
From top to bottom, all is but stone  
Whom will you worship, O stubborn Pandit?*

*It covers your shame,  
Saves you from cold,  
Its food and drink, mere water and grass  
Who counselled you, O Brahmin,  
To slaughter a living sheep as a sacrifice  
Unto a lifeless stone?*

*O fool, right action does not lie  
In fasting and other 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 council for you*

*The pilgrim sanyasin goes from shrine to shrine,  
Seeking to meet Him  
Who abides within herself.  
Knowing the truth, O soul, be not misled;  
It is distance that makes the turf look green*

*Some leave their home, some the hermitage  
But the restless mind knows no rest.  
Then watch your breath day and night,  
And stay where you are*

*I have worn out my plate and tongue reading the holy books,  
But I have not learnt the practices that would please my lord.  
I have worn thin fingers and thumb telling my rosary beads,  
But I have not been able to dispel duality from my mind.*

*The thoughtless read the holy books  
As parrots in their cages recite "Ram, Ram"  
Their reading is like churning water,  
Fruitless effort, ridiculous conceit.*

By opposing vehemently the ritualistic aspect of Trikmat, Lalla revolted against the powerful clergy of the times who had transformed these rituals into a means of exploitation and a tool for perpetuating their hereditary hegemony. She also revolted against the objectification of women in Saiva rituals. She totally rejects the secondary dependent status allotted to women in these rituals and emerges and dominates the scene as a subject. On the one hand, Lala gave a new lease of life to Kashmiri Śaivistic spiritual tradition but on the other hand, she demystified

Śaivism by articulating its tenets in the language of the common people and deconstructed its ideology of being a Rahasya Sampradaya (a secret sect) by making all the Upayas (means of realization) available to all those interested in the realization of their true identity, thus making it a viable and effective tool not only for individual emancipation but also for social unification. There is an inbuilt dynamic reciprocal relationship between the two, and each reinforces the other. This is the reason for total acceptance of Lal-Ded by almost all Kashmiris. With the passage of time there was a schism in the Saivistic *Trikamat*. On the one hand, we have the branch that maintains the rituals, although not much of the traditional rituals detailed by Abhinava Gupta have survived the ravages of the time. On the other hand, we have the ritual free *Trikamat* of Lal-Ded which is a syncretic tradition that 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, realising emptiness (*shunaya*) or the essence of all things. In this light we may consider the verse by Lalla:<sup>3</sup>

*Realization is rare indeed, Seek not afar, it is near, by 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*

Or this one:

*Let go the sacred tantra rites  
Only the mantra sound remains  
And when the mantra sound departs  
Only the chitta is left behind  
Then lo! The chitta itself is gone  
And there is nothing left behind  
The void merges in the void*

In the true Buddhist spirit Lalla-Ded advocates the middle path as the path of liberation and we may consider the following Vāk in this regard:<sup>4</sup>

*By pandering to your appetites and desires,  
You get nowhere  
By penance and fasting,  
You get conceit  
Be moderate in food and drink*



*You will be moderate  
Your path will surely be illuminated\**

So far as reaching out to the Sufi tradition is concerned consider this verse:<sup>5</sup>

*Shiva is everywhere---know him as the sun.  
Know not the Hindu different to the Muslim  
Know yourself if wise, as a ray of that sun  
That alone is the way to Saheb.*

Writing about Lalla's poetry Prof. Neeja Mattoo, a contemporary scholar comments on this vāk: <sup>6</sup>

Apart from the obvious idea of breaking down religious barriers by invoking the image of the sun shining upon everyone without distinction, notice how seamlessly Lal-Ded hangs the Islamist valance of saheb to the apparent shaivite reference to Shiva. The verse enacts in its own syncretic idiom, the religious, mystic and linguistic synthesis it advocates.

Here are some of her verses that give us some idea of the path Lal-Ded traversed:<sup>7</sup>

*In life I sought neither wealth nor power,  
Nor ran after the pleasures of sense,  
Moderate in food and drink, I lived a controlled life;  
Patiently bore my lot, my pain and poverty,  
And loved my god.*

*O fool, right action does not lie  
In observing fasts and ceremonial rites  
O fool, right action does not lie*

---

Compare this with the record of the Buddha's first sermon at the Deer Park Varanasi which states:

"Then the blessed one addressed the group of five religious mendicants:

"Mendicants, there are two extremes which should not be practised by any person who has left society to find salvation. What are these extremes? On the one hand there is a realm of desire and pursuit of pleasure which is in accord with desire – it is a base pursuit, boorish, profane, crude and without profit. On the other hand, there is a pursuit of self-mortification which is sheer misery, as well as crude and without profit. Mendicants, Passing through these two extremes and avoiding them both is the middle way, object of the tathagata's perfect awakening, opening the eyes and mind, leading to peace, to omniscience, to complete awakening, and to nirvana"

*In providing for bodily comfort and ease  
In contemplation of the self alone  
Is right action and right counsel for you*

*My guru gave me but one precept  
"From without withdraw your gaze within  
And fix it on the Inmost self."  
Taking to heart this one precept,  
Naked I began to dance.*

These Vāks give us an idea of the spiritual discipline that Lal practiced and prescribed for us. Now let us see the fruit of this spiritual labour:<sup>8</sup>

*Whatever work I did became worship of the lord  
Whatever word I uttered became Mantra.  
What this body of mine experienced became.  
The sadhana! Of saiva tantra.  
Illumining my path to paramśiva*

*I traversed the vastness of the void alone,  
Leaving behind me reason and sense,  
Than came upon the secret of the self;  
And, all of a sudden, unexpectedly,  
In mud the lotus bloomed for me.*

*Like a tenuous web Siva spreads Himself,  
Penetrating all frames of all things,  
If while alive, you cannot see Him,  
How can you see Him after death?  
Think deep and sift the true Self from the self.*

The last two Vāks are a bold statement that absolute reality can and is to be realized in this very life. Notice the interrogative emphasis in the two lines:

*If while alive you cannot see Him,  
How can you see Him after death?*

And relate it to the last line of the earlier Vāk which reads:

*In mud the lotus bloomed for me.*

Through spiritual effort one has to realize the blooming of the flower upon the dirty ground covered with litter, mud and dirt i.e. something valueless (representing human body). One has to begin with



brute matter, the lower prakrti, the manifested universe in order to realize the higher self within (the flower) and thence to immerse in the lake of immortality (lay Ka'rmas amritsars) that is absorption in the Divine (to quote her oft repeated phrase) void merging in the void (shunyas shunyaya millith gav).

No doubt Lal-ded belongs to the spiritual tradition of Kashmir which is in turn informed by Buddhism, Saivism and Islam but she cannot be identified with any particular colour or segment of this multi-faced tradition. She transcends all particularities and her message is absolutely universal. No doubt its form that is its linguistic expression is particular, as it is expressed in Kashmiri Language, but its Kernel, that is its essence transcends all particularities. It is the identification and realization of a spiritual path, shorn of all rituals, for one's self-recognition, that implies the recognition of the Lord.

#### Notes and References:

- <sup>1</sup> B. N. Paromoo: *Nund Rishi Unity in Diversity*, J&K Academy of Art, Culture and Languages, Srinagar 1984, pp. 105-106.
- <sup>2</sup> Jayalal Kaul: *Lal Ded Sahitya Akademi*, New Delhi, 1973, pp.103-110.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 118.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 99.
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 107.
- <sup>6</sup> *Afresh Look at Some Kashmiri Women Poets*, Paper presented by Prof. Neerja Mattoo at an International seminar at Institute of Kashmir studies held in October 2006.
- <sup>7</sup> Op. cit., n. 2, pp. 97- 98.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 134.