

MYSTICISM IN THE POETRY OF LAL DED (LALLESHWARI)

Dr. Shashikant Mhalunkar

P.G. Dept. of English,
B. N. N. College, Bhiwandi,
Dist. Thane (Maharashtra)

ABSTRACT:

India has a long tradition of saints, poets, devotees, mystics and religious traditions and the changing patterns of devotion from time to time and from sect to sect. The hybridity in cultures, languages and religions in India has produced abundant material in the course of time that has been attracting scholars all over the world. Man has been worshipping god, nature or virtues. Mysticism is a record of man's worship of god, almighty or the nature. History is evident that man has been taking refuge of religion to express his mysticism. Similarly, women who could not express their discontent against the parochial codes openly embraced mysticism. Religion provides them the courage to attack the pompous patriarchal and religious practices, as well as the solace and escape from the tyranny of the cryptograph of man dominated society. This paper attempts to explore the mysticism in the poetry of Lal Ded, the fourteenth century Kashmiri female poet. Her poetry is a confluence of Saivism and Sufism. The religious ecstasy in her Vakhs exhibits the mysticism that is captured by a female poet of the fourteenth century wherein the impact of Muslim intrusion was very strong in the valley. Her poetry not only celebrates the power of the Almighty but also attack inhuman treatment that she gets from the contemporary society due to her religious conviction. The man dominated society attempted to suppress Lal Ded and her poetry. Even the historians seem biased as they do not write about Ded. Still, Lal Ded emerges as one of the dominant voices in the tradition of Indian female mystics.

KEY WORDS: Religion, mystic, mysticism, Vakhs, society.

The parochial cryptograph in India in the fourteenth century enslaved women by the strong chains of orthodox traditions and marriage which pushed them in the social, political, religious and familial peripheries. Many suppressed female voices are evident in history who either rebel against the parochial dominance or escape into religious conviction. Religion

catered them solace and freedom from the parochial suppression and the frustration that they experienced in the society. In his scholarly book, *Comparative Indian English Literature*, Pathak rightly articulates the flight of women to religion by cutting loose from the household responsibilities and the forced sexual slavery:

Religious escapism was the only way out for many women who were frustrated with life inside the home. They chose to join the Buddhist Sangha (religious communities) in their attempt to break away from the social world of tradition and marriage. Thus emerged poems and songs about what it meant to be free from household chores and sexual slavery. (Pathak: 2008: 184)

Mysticism became a prominent tool for women who were not interested in the culinary and domestic domains. Like the Marathi female poet, Bahinabai of the seventeenth century Maharashtra and the medieval Kannada female mystic, rebel and saint poet, Akkamahadevi in the twelfth century, Lal Ded is also known for her mystic poetry. Lal Ded, also known as Lalla, Lalleshwari and Lal Arifa, the mystic female poet was born 1301 or between 1317 and 1320 near Srinagar in a Brahmin family. Her familial life was troubled one due to her meditative absorptions. At the age of 26, she abandoned her family and home and became a disciple of a Saiva saint, Siddha Srikantha. It is at this stage, she started composing her *Vakhs* (short poems). Forsaking the institutes of marriage and family in fourteenth century, Lal Ded projects herself as a rebel. Consequently, this act brings her much social criticism and humiliation in the contemporary orthodox parochial society. She seems to be disinterested in the mundane pleasures. The spiritual aspirations force her to renounce her comfort zone of domestic and culinary duties and embrace the Saivite mysticism.

Her poetry showcases the spiritual and metaphysical ruminations. Her poetry strikes the readers like brief and blinding bursts of light: epiphanic and stimulating. Encyclopaedia Britannica significantly captures mystic and the subject matter of a mystic by illustrating them as, “What does appear, however, is the experience of religious ecstasy, which bears unmistakable analogies to the transport experienced by the mystic.” (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*: 1965: 1129)

Lal Ded’s poetry transfer between the vulnerability of doubt and the promise of an insight gained through enthusiasm and expression. Her poems are as likely to stipulate that

the Divine reveal Itself, as to complain of Its perplexing and variable ubiquity. They prize clarity of self-knowledge above both the ritualist's mastery of observances and the severe's professional championship. If they laugh at the scholar who surrogates experience with scripture and the priest who cages his God in a routine of prayers, they also reject the renouncer's rigorous degradation of the body. Across the expanse of her poetry, the author whose signature these poems carry evolves from a wanderer, uncertain of herself and looking for haven in a potentially unfriendly landscape, into a questor who has found belonging beneath a sky that is continuous with her mind. Her poetry fabricates a fine conduit of poetic experience and religious experience. Amos Wilder rightly captures in his essay, "Modern Poetry and the Christian Tradition" as, "Poetic experience and religious experience are profoundly and intimately related to each other if not consubstantial, and religion requires poetry in discourse." (Wilder: 1965: 688)

To the outer world, Lal Ded is arguably Kashmir's best known spiritual and literary figure. But within Kashmir, she has been celebrated both by Hindus and Muslims for nearly seven centuries. For most of that period, she has successfully avoided the claims of religion monopolists. Since the late 1980s, however, Kashmir's hybrid culture has ragged thin under the pressure of a prolonged conflict to which transnational terrorism, state repression and local militancy have all contributed. Ranjit Hoskote in his scholarly book, *I, Lal Ded: The Poems of Lal Ded* captures the religious confluence of Lal Ded's poetry in his introduction to the book. He chronicles:

Religious identities in the region have become harder and more sharp edged, following a substantial exodus of the Hindu minority during the early 1990s, and a gradual effort to replace Kashmir's unique and syncretically nuanced tradition of Islam with a more Arabocentric global template. It is true that Lal Ded was constructed differently by each community, but she was simultaneously Lallesvari or Lalla Yogini to the Hindus and Lalarifa to the Muslims; today, unfortunately, these descriptions are increasingly promoted at the expense of one another. In honour of the plural sensibilities that Kashmir has long nurtured, I will refer to this mystic poet by her most celebrated and non sectarian appellation 'Lal Ded'. In the colloquial, this means 'Grandmother Lal'; more literally, it

means 'Lal the Womb', a designation that connects her to her mother goddess whose cults of fecundity and abundance form the deep substratum of the Indic religious life. In writing of her in this book, I will also use the name by which she is most popularly and affectionately known, across community lines: Lalla. (Hoskote: 2011: x)

Lalla's poems are among the earliest known manifestations of Kashmiri literature, and record the moment when Kashmiri language began to emerge. Ranjit Hoskote has translated nearly 285 *vakhs* (short poems) of *Ded* which are circulated widely and continuously in Kashmiri popular culture between the mid-fourteenth century and the present, variously assuming the form of songs, proverbs and prayers.

The line of transmission by which Lalla's poems achieved publication may be traced as a three stage relay. It begins in the realm of the oral, with the text of *vakhs* being woven by Kashmiri village reciters, both Hindu and Muslim, using Kashmir in a space of relative freedom and play. These semiotic recitations dramatise Lalla's importance as a manifestation of empathy, commonsense knowledge and divergence to authority. The relay then passes to the realm of the scribal with the oral text being subordinated to the more annotative and hieratic approach of Kashmiri Brahmin compilers and commentators who, using Sanskrit and Hindi, emphasise her philosophical convictions and teachings. Her poetry is the first-hand experience of illumination. The *Vakhs* exhibit the confluence between the Yogic and the Sufi traditions of spirituality in fourteenth century Kashmir. Her poetry exhibits Lalla as an incarnation of compassion, commonsense knowledge and resistance to authority.

The parochial dominance does not allow Lalla to come forward as an intellectual entity even after her death. She is a victim of the sexual textual politics as the historians erase her from the historical records. For instance, Ranjit Hoskote makes it clear in the introduction of his book, *I, Lalla: The Poems of Lal Ded*:

Although Kashmiri historians produced numerous records of their country's recent past between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries—this roster includes Jonaraja, Srivara, Prajyabhatta, Shuka, Haider Malik Chadura, Tahir and Hasan bin Ali Kashmiri—none of them mentions Lalla. (Hoskote: 2011: xv)

Lal Ded experiences much humiliation and trials from the orthodox society in which lived for revolting against the set norms. She must have been criticised and humiliated by the parochial society. She, therefore, says in her poem 92:

They lash me with insults, serenade me with curses.
Their barking means nothing to me.
Even if they came with soul-flowers to offer,
I couldn't care less. Untouched, I move on. (Hoskote: 2011: 94)

Lal Ded's poetry glitters with her mystic experiences which exhibits her spiritual discipline and devotional practice. She celebrates spiritual flight by contrasting her physical agony in her poetry. Further, her poetry is equipped with a first-hand experience of illumination. Therefore, she attacks the parasitic forms of organized religion, pseudo-scholarship, ritualism and animal sacrifice. In poem 59, she bravely attacks the priests, animal sacrifice and idolatry. Lalla articulates:

It covers your shame, keeps you from shivering.
Grass and water are all the food it asks.
Who taught you, priest-man,
to feed this breathing thing to your thing of stone?
(Hoskote: 2011: 61)

Here, Lal rises as a mystic who does not believe in worshipping the idols. On the other hand, she believes strongly in the Divine. The central and the transfiguring experience of enlightenment in one's own self is evident in her poem 15. She says:

Wrapped up in Yourself, You hid from me.
All day I looked for You
and when I found You hiding inside me,
I ran wild, playing now me, now You. (Hoskote: 2011: 17)

For her, body is the site of all her experiments in self-refinement. It is the arena of both physical and cosmic experiences. With the help of meditation and the Yogic cultivation of breath, Lalla experiences the mystic and the Divine. Richard Lannoy, a cultural theorist and historian showcases the fusion of Indic philosophy and the spiritual practices of the mystics and philosophers. He rightly points out:

Each successive school of philosophy, each mystic, sage, or saint, sought by one means or another to appropriate the external world to the mind-brain. He enhanced, expanded, intensified, and deepened his sensory awareness of colours, sounds, and textures until they were transformed into vibrations continuous with his own consciousness. In this state of enhanced consciousness induced by special techniques of concentration, the inside and the outside, the subject and the object, the self and the world, did not remain separate entities but fused in a single process. (Lannoy: 1971: 273-74)

Lalla had no successors and no school or movement of her thoughts. Casually, she scattered her poems among her listeners. And thus, she left a profound influence on Kashmir's religious life. Further, her influence is traced on later Kashmiri mystics, teachers and devotional poets like Parmanand (1791-1879), Shams Faqir (1843-1904), and Krishna Joo Razdan (1851-1926). Further, her poetry has undergone a sectarian polarization between Kashmiri Pandits and Kashmiri Muslim scholars. The Kashmiri Pandits consider her as a Kashmiri Saiv, Yogic poet, whereas the Muslim scholars treat her as Sufi poet. The debate still continues. Her poetry, in reality, exhibits the confluence between the Yogic and the Sufi traditions of spirituality. However, Lalla stands on the threshold between an old Hindu-Buddhist Kashmir and a new Islamic Kashmir. In fact, she is the forerunner of the Rishi order of Sufism founded by Sheikh Nur-ud-din Wali, the alamdar-i Kashmir.

Lal Ded's poetry exhibits both poetic as well as religious experiences of the poet. These experiences are intricately depending on one another which facilitate Ded to express her mysticism. It will be apt to evoke the views of Amos Wilder. In his scholarly article titled, 'Modern Poetry and the Christian Tradition,' he ponders, "Poetic experience and religious experience are profoundly and intimately related to each other if not consubstantial, and religion requires poetry in its discourse." (Wilder: 1965: 688) To support this opinion one can see an array of saint poets of the Bhakti Movement who echoed the ideas of Lal Ded.

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