

Lal Ded: Re-defining the Socio-Religious Realms of Kashmiri Culture

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Abstract

Lal Ded is an iconoclastic 14th century Kashmiri saint poetess whose life and works mark the beginning of the modern period in Kashmiri language and literature. Her poetry is an amalgamation of multifaceted and heterogeneous culture of Kashmir. Her works provide a fertile ground for studying and critiquing the existing norms and ways of life in Kashmir. The present paper attempts to understand the ways in which Lal Ded's entry into the realm of religious poetry disrupts the dominant socio-religious order and lays down a foundation for a new understanding of the self, of the individual and the society, and that of the self and the cosmos. The two of the most important aspects of her social identity that the paper would focus on in order to study the contemporary social structure and its gradual growth are her gender and her religious philosophy. Her creation marks a radical break from the traditional roles associated with women as well as saints. In creating a space for herself and being true to her spirit, Lal Ded, left us a legacy that transformed the landscape of Kashmiri culture, language, and literature forever. She transcends the human constructed boundaries of gender, caste, age, and education. She asserts her individuality in an idiom and language that takes shape through her experiences and hence speaks to the hearts of millions. The present study provides a critical reading of her life and works through theories of feminism, marxism, and deconstruction.

Keywords: Bhakti movement, Female saint poetess, Kashmiri culture and literature, Subversion

Introduction

One of the most fertile periods in the history of Indian literatures has been the Bhakti Movement that rejuvenated the imagination and creativity of the populace gifting almost every region of the subcontinent with saints and poets. This was the period of renaissance that liberated religion and literature from the stranglehold and monopoly of the Brahmin class. The Bhakti Movement was a process of decentralisation wherein the marginalised sections of the society began to give voice to their ambitions, hopes, and fears in a language, form, idiom, and diction that truly belonged to them. Poetry, music, and other forms of art witnessed for the first time the fresh, original, and authentic voices of artists belonging to the lower castes and women. One of the most unique and powerful voices that emerge from this movement and stand out for its originality is that of the fourteenth century Kashmiri poetess Lal Ded. With her works she contributed to the religious, spiritual, and linguistic corpus of Kashmir. She is also known as the inventor of the genre called *vaakhii*.

Text

It is interesting to note that Sanskrit chronicles of the time do not mention Lal Ded's name at all. The reasons for the absence of her name from historical documents or the chronicles could be aplenty. One of the reasons might be the

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How to cite this article: Kumari P. Lal Ded: Re-defining the Socio-Religious Realms of Kashmiri Culture. *J Adv Res Eng & Edu* 2017; 2(3&4): 28-32.

Digital Object Identifier (DOI): <https://doi.org/10.24321/2456.4370.201703>

ISSN: 2456-4370

fact that she was a woman, the gender bias was evidently prevalent during the times. Being a married woman she was said to have roamed around naked shedding off with her clothes not merely the sense of worldly shame and guilt but also all her identities which connected her to this world of material beliefs and yearnings. But she nevertheless transgressed the boundary of decency, and this along with her radical philosophy which ridiculed and provided a critical evaluation of the ritualistic aspects of both Hindu and Islamic religion must have made it difficult for the people of the times to accept and comprehend her. She might have also come in direct conflict with the authorities and guardians of institutionlised religion.

Lal Ded in more than one ways can be seen as interpreter of the lived realities from an unique and new perspectives. A realm that had been closed to women for centuries was opened up with the advent of the Bhakti movement. Undoubtedly the idiom and language that the discipline of religion and spirituality expressed itself in. Because the field was dominated by a particular gender and caste it interpreted the lived world only in exclusive terms that marginalised the perspective of the majority of the people. In many ways the realm of spirituality imitated the hierarchical and authority-centric perspective of the patriarchal and caste based society in general. Lal Ded's entry into this realm was a disruption of this dominant order. She redefined these hierarchies and in most cases she actually did away with these hierarchies.

Born in a Brahmin family, she was married of as soon as she reached puberty. Here as was the Kashmiri tradition she was re-named Padmavati, again emphasizing the radical change and alteration of her identity. Interestingly none of these identities or the consequent alterations in them based on the change of her central role as a daughter or a wife included her active participation. These identities were simply forced upon her, they were not conscious decisions made as a result of self-affirmation. They were attempts to reiterate her social roles. As Padmavati, Lal Ded remained an adhering woman. The woman was expected to devote herself in her entirety to her husband forgetting or being oblivious to any other identities which would demand her time and attention. Construction of ideal femininity in the Indian, dominantly patriarchal society lies in her self-sacrificing attitude. As Ramanujan has put in his book *On Women Saints*, "The upper-caste male's battle is with the system as a whole, often internalized as the enemy within, whereas the woman saint's struggle is with family and family values. She struggles not with her own temptations, but with husband and priest, and with her wifely and maternal roles."

Lal Ded left her home when she was accused of infidelity. The nature of the accusation is significant here as patriarchy lays unprecedented emphasis on the chastity of a woman.

For a woman ceases to have any social function without her husband, more so if she does not have sons. Because apart from being a loyal wife if a woman can find any social functionality for herself it is in her role as a mother. The parallel can be drawn between Sita in Ramayana. Wherein she left social life having lost her husband's faith and not having borne sons yet had lost her social functionality. In order to be a part of a socially acceptable identity they either had to be mothers or wives. Both these conventional roles were either consciously renounced or the circumstances made them give them up. So, what other option did these socially marginalised women who no longer had a purpose to their lives according to traditional perception and construction of female identity had? They were forced to search for an alternative identity, for an alternate centre for their universes, and alternate tools of meaning-making. Lacking any other opportunity to be accepted in the public sphere, having transgressed the domestic boundaries these women turned to spirituality.

It made sense, for as socially normative women their identities were reduced to their bodies, they had so far neglected intellectual and spiritual dimensions of their own beings. That is what they decided to focus on. Her transition from Padmavati to Lal Ded is an affirmative act where for the first time she asserts her identity and rejects the one forced on her. This is an iconoclastic act, where she completely does away with all preconceived notions about her as a woman and as a social being. In the act she transcended her individual identity based on material, social, gender, cultural, religious, and geographical location and context and attained an identity which was one with the essence of the creation.

Several legends suggest that Lal Ded wandered in a semi-nude or nude condition. However according to M. Ishaq Khan, these verses have been read and interpreted out of social context. Rather, he suggests that this reference is a sense of revolt by iniquitous social order, above all her spiritual preceptor Sayyid Husain Simani. Furthermore, the story of wandering nudity is attributed to various different female saints misunderstanding of her *vaakh* that speaks about her naked dancing. Instead of wandering naked, Kaul suggest that Lal Ded was rather roaming aimless, naked or not—we cannot confirm. But we can be certain that Lal Ded did not care about how her exterior looks, so she would not care for clothing just as much as she would not care to be naked.

Nudity though can be seen as a very powerful trope. Clothes are not merely associated with the act of covering oneself in order to protect oneself against the harsh weather. They are symbolic of many other things. Many religious cults see clothing as unnatural and an offshoot of the material world in general. The way one dresses asserts, confirms and denotes one's identity. Clothes are gender specific,

they are also specific to a culture, certain region, one's class and caste. Renouncing clothes would mean renouncing all these identities altogether. This also means accepting oneself in its natural form. The concept of clothing is closely associated with the concepts of shame and guilt which translate the body as a site of social, cultural, and political power play. The sense of shame attached to one's naked body in the our society along with the sense of guilt attached with "bodily pleasure" formulate the basis of civilisational beliefs where one is alienated from oneself. The way we perceive our body and its existence is through the gaze of the society.

Clothing can also be prescribed to the act of performance of a role. One dresses up according to the role one has taken up. More than often we do not decide the roles we want to take up for ourselves, or create new ones. We are born into an already set up stage, where our role is pre-defined. We have to mould our being and learn to fit into those roles. In rejecting the clothes Lal Ded resists the idea of Performativity at both the gender and religious level. The religious rituals and ceremonies are a form of Performativity, hollow and shallow carrying no inner meaning, just like the clothes create an image for us, which might or might not be true. The rituals and ceremonies then just create an illusion of devotion, which is far from the truth. This understanding would also go against the idea of external, culturally and socially mediated gaze which constantly tries to construct or de-construct us. It becomes a tool of appropriation for seeking external validity for the self.

Just like her life before completely devoting herself to Siva is abound in legends, so is her life once she began her spiritual journey towards discovering the ultimate truth of all existence. The legends which naturally grew with time and her popularity are manifestations of her teachings.

One such legend given to us by Anand Kaul talks about how one day Lal Ded went to the temple where her guru Siddha Srikantha was praying. He asked her why she had come there. To this Lal Ded replied that she had come to the temple to find some peace and ease herself. Siddha Srikantha on hearing this took her out of the temple and showed her an abandoned space where she could find peace, for according to him temples were meant to pray. To his amazement Lal Ded dug that place up and unearthed idols of God. This is significant, for through this folklore Lal Ded establishes the fact that God is omnipresent, you need not build temples and external, material manifestations of his image in idols to pay homage to him. That would be denying the truth that god is everywhere.

Hence, we see that even though Lal Ded concerned herself with the realm of the spiritual and the religious she broke the traditional icons within this realm. She was a true

iconoclast. She rejected all those ritualistic and ceremonial aspects of all religions which focused on the external. For her the true homage is paid through internal surrender to god. She was rebellious, her vision and her thinking far ahead of her times. She did not care about what the society made of her, how they appropriated or interpreted her. She listened to her conscience which she believed was abode of the supreme self himself and led her life according to what felt right to her.

Established norms in any field are paradigms which are accepted because the majority tends to believe them. The belief of the majority does not prove the relevance or logical plausibility of those beliefs. Lal Ded's guru himself fell a victim to these blind beliefs. This complicates and makes the guru-student relationship very interesting. The guru does guide Lal Ded towards her spiritual path but sometimes one requires a fresh untrained and un-institutionalized outlook to see the truths which are too close to us. Things which an adult, worldly wise might miss or overlook often formulate the realm of the obvious for the innocent, unconditioned vision of the children. Lal Ded does that for her guru, they shift their positions at various points of time. Sometimes Lal Ded becomes guru of Siddha Srikantha as in the legend related above.

So, it is quite evident that even after joining the religious cult of Saivismiii she did not blindly or unquestioningly follow the rituals. She interrogated and judged them against the "touchstone" of how they helped her to evolve spiritually or help her to sense the lord, and if that did not happen she would without any inhibition give them up, shed them like she had shed her clothes and her identity for she knew they were unnecessary and binding.

Lal Ded was a very significant religious figure of her times. This is proved by the fact that chroniclers describe her meetings with various religious saints and gurus during the times. Pandit Anand Kaul relates that sometimes Mir Sayyid Ali Hamadani, Lal Ded and Nund Rishi would meet in order to contemplate and discuss religious and existential issues. The cause of her anguish and loneliness is also the world that surrounds her. A world that is full of illusions and falsehoods, categories and names that tend to bind and limit you. Her greatest tragedy was the constant gap between her inner self and the external expectations. There was a constant battle between the internal and the external. She unlike the popular belief about the yogis doesn't turn her back and become oblivious of the injustices, discriminations, and inequalities that are abundant in the society. Her vaakh are not a complete renunciation but a deep and clear engagement with the materialistic world. This engagement is objective for it has been mediated by the clarity of vision obtained through deep knowledge and transcendence above these socially and culturally created categories. The vaakh also exemplify her empathetic and

human side, they represent her as a compassionate and deeply sensitive being aware of and capable of feeling the pain and anguish of others. For example the following vaakh demonstrates the pain felt by Lal Ded on witnessing the sufferings of fellow human beings:

*I have seen a learned man die of hunger,
A sere leaf drop in winter wind;
I have seen an utter fool beat his cook
(who could not make a toothsome dish).*

*Since then I, Lalla, anxiously await
The day when the lure of the world will fall away. (Kaul,
1973:93)*

In the vaakh we hear not the voice of a saint or poet who has cut him/herself completely from the world but of one who is deeply concerned and is affected by the conditions that surround her and plague her society. Lal Ded has seen the world from a close proximity and her heart is battered by what she sees around herself. Now, one can also observe in her vaakh a disillusionment and sense of meaninglessness regarding the world that she inhabits. But this meaninglessness or emptiness that she sometimes feels inside herself might superficially appear similar to that of western existentialists. The world around appears absurd and unresponsive. Nature too might at times appear cruel and insensitive. But to the western existentialists there was no escape from these harsh realities. To Lal Ded these kinds of behaviour is a deviance from the natural behaviour of the human beings. For their real selves were above and beyond these boundaries of greed, profit, and self centeredness.

There is also a deep sense consciousness regarding the dichotomy between the body and the soul. How the soul has been entrapped by the materialistic concerns of the body. There is something peculiarly charming about Lal Ded, throughout her vaakh she repeatedly refers to herself in the first person but she also has the ability to transcend this self and become an observer of the self. She is able to see herself and her present condition from an objective and distant point of view. This can be termed as the highest form of human intelligence achievable by a person. This is exemplified in the following

vaakh:

I will weep and weep for you, my Soul.

The world has caught you in its Spell.

Though you cling to them with the anchor of steel,

Not even the shadow of the things you love

Will go with you when you are dead. (Kaul, 1973:91)

We can clearly perceive in this vaakh and in several others a preoccupation with the theme of death. There is she

recognises a constant fear of death in man. But death is a powerful symbol because death also reminds human beings of the transitory nature of all that surrounds them. Death also becomes the great equaliser for the hierarchies and definitions through which we identify ourselves in this world and carve out meaning and significances of our actions would cease to matter the moment we die. Hence death potentially puts an end to our illusory and transitory identities.

She appears to be overwhelmed by the mystery of this world and how inaccessible and unintelligible it is to the roving human eye without the vision. These mysteries that confuse Lal Ded make her reason and argue with the self. Also at times with her guru, but then there is also this recognition that these answers can be found within oneself for the self is nothing but a fragment of the eternal Soul who she recognises as Shiva.

This is an extremely empowering realisation for a woman in the fourteenth century. The empowerment comes from self reliance and self dependence. Also one is able to forget the differences based on gender and caste for this perspective depends on an identity which is beyond such limitations. Where the self is the embodiment of the universal truth. The truth or the meaning of existence doesn't lie outside of the self but rather within it. Knowing the self is key to knowing and unlocking the mysteries of this world and beyond.

Her vaakh unlike several other religious writings are not didactic. They are not based on blind following of tradition and authority figures they depend highly on personal experience. They are in forms of argument and the reader or the listener of these vaakh is shown the way towards that divine light but it is also made clear that one would reach there only through personal and inner realisation. The tongue-in-cheek satire and sarcasm over ritualistic practices propagated by institutionalised religions make them extremely relatable and pleasant to read.

She transformed the literary realm in rejecting the monopoly of the dominant literary language that was Sanskrit. She chose to express herself in the language which was accessible to all and was used in the everyday lives of the ordinary men and women. Her metaphors and idioms are straightaway from the mundane realities that surrounded her. Therefore, in her vaakh we find a coming together of the divine and the profane. Her usage of language is reflective of her philosophy that she did not consider this world an illusion. For she considered it rich enough to express those mystic visions and divine insights that she had experienced. Her literature rather than turning away and renouncing this world employed it as media of expression of spiritual upliftment and enlightenment.

This is a political statement for so far the language and

the reality was relegated as deviation from the path of spiritual revelations and journeys again created a hierarchy between the prophets and the laymen. Lal Ded made that language of economics, materiality, and sensory pleasures capable of carrying meanings that were divine in nature. This did away the supposed hierarchy between the 'chosen' few who dominated the spiritual and religious milieu and the rest of the world.

Lal Ded established that it was not in renunciation of the world that would lead to salvation but a deeper and greater engagement with it. A true understanding of this world and its reality devoid of the mediation of presumptions and perceptions perpetuated by institutional religions was required to know its true form. Just as the everyday language became medium of revealing truths about the universe and cosmos the world of physical forms and names becomes manifestation and expression of the existence of that divine energy.

Therefore unlike religious poetry at large her metaphors are not abstract or obscure they are solid matter with physical forms that can be touched, sensed, and hence felt by the reader. The obscurity of the religious teachings is what makes them distant from the comprehension of an ordinary man. For he/she might not understand and relate with this world of abstractions and concepts. No denying that the concept of soul is abstract and it is a divine creation but so is the human body. If an ordinary man finds it difficult to see the manifestation of the divine in form of his soul he/she can definitely witness that in form of their physical form, that is their body and it would not be wrong.

Lal Ded hence can be seen as one of those translators who want a text to reach a wider audience. A text that only those few who knew the language and had the formal training had access to so far in the history. To make it accessible she translates that knowledge in a vernacular language using images that can be comprehended by one and all. The secrets of the route to salvation was opened up by the guru only for those select few who joined his cult and whom he considered worthy. Lal Ded became a guru to all and sundry in the respect that she revealed these secrets to one and all. She did not make her knowledge exclusive. This is exactly what Ranjit Hoskote implies when he says, "Lalla's preferred informality of address could be seen as strategy of democratisation. We could speculate that the historical Lalla used colloquial and demotic forms

to share the wopdeshiv with an expanding community of interlocutors." (Hoskote, 2011:lxiii).

¹A religious movement that originated in southern India around 7th century and then spread throughout the sub-continent.

²Vakya in Sanskrit; Sentence in English.

³One of the predominant religious cults of the Bhakti movement. The followers worship Lord Shiva.

⁴Teachings.

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