

“I Drank The Wine Of My Own Verse”

-The Life And Work Of Lal Ded, Kashmiri Poet And Mystic

This article has been constructed by Manushi from Jayalal Kaul's book Lal Ded, Sahitya Akademi, 1973, by a process of restructuring material and simplifying language. An effort has been made not to violate the spirit of the original, but some shift in emphasis may have taken place. Lal Ded's verses have been translated into English 'by Manushi from the Hindi version by Shiban Krishan Raina. The translation attempts to convey the spirit of the original rather than to be literally exact.

“IN the cradle of the earth, absorbed in god, was she, Lalla Arifa, constantly aware. She was one of those who wander in the wilderness of love wailing and lamenting—and she was a knower of the path of the valley of truth.”

Shaikh Nasir-ud-din, has written in praise of her :

*Passion for god set fire to all she
had,
And from her heart rose clouds
of smoke,
Having had a draught of 'ahd-e-
alast',
Intoxicated and drunk with joy
was she.
One cup of this god-intoxicating
drink
Shatters reason to bits.
A little drowsiness from it is
headier than
Intoxication of a hundred jars
of wine.*

Oral Tradition

There is not a Kashmiri, Hindu or Muslim, who does not reverence Lal* Ded, the fourteenth century mystic poet, and who has not some of her *vakh* or verse sayings on his or her tongue. Her work is enshrined in the loving memory of generation after generation of Kashmiris.

She did not write for publication nor was her verse an academic exercise. It was the spiritual outpouring of her soul. Her devotees heard the verses,

*In Kashmiri, her name may be pronounced both as Lal and as Lalla



memorised them and circulated them by word of mouth only to those who were fellow seekers. Someone, perhaps, recorded them, not all of them, but only the few he or she happened to hear or learn from somebody who had heard them. Someone else recorded some of these verses as well as some others he or she happened to have heard or learnt from others And so on and on till they became part of the repertoire of the itinerant village minstrel and, later still, of *sufiana kalam*, Kashmiri classical music, to be

sung as a sacred invocation at the start of an assembly of *sufis* or spiritual seekers.

As time passed and the language imperceptibly underwent change, many words became difficult to understand. The musicians and minstrels, therefore, took liberties with the text of Lalla's *vakh*, patching them up, adding to them, and substituting words of their own for the original words which had ceased to have any meaning for them or for the majority of their listeners.

In later times, verse composed by other pious people began to circulate as Lal Ded's verse.

Therefore, there is no one indisputable authentic text of Lalla's verse. Various scholars have collected her works by putting together the verses found in manuscripts as well as by transcribing verses recited by pious villagers who have learnt them by family tradition. However, the authenticity of some of these verses is still disputed.

Ignored By Historians

Lal Ded is not mentioned in well known Sanskrit historical chronicles like *Rajatarangini* in which Kalhan recorded events up to 1151 AD and which Jonaraj extended up to 1445 AD and *Jaina Rajatarangini* which chronicles events from 1459 to 1486 AD. Nor do the chronicles written in Persian during succeeding centuries until about 1746 make any mention of her.

It may be that because all these were chronicles of kings and narratives of political events, their scope was limited. They were not history in the modern sense. Lalla too, in her verse, does not mention contemporary political or court events. Probably, as a village woman, she did not know or care about what went on at the palace.

Or it may be that Sanskrit chroniclers were disinclined to give Lal Ded a place in their books. She had thrown conventional respectability to the winds and roamed about, careless of dress and decorum. She did not observe the formalities of ceremonial piety. She was vehemently critical of orthodoxy, its dogma and ritual, its hypocrisy and exclusiveness. And they would certainly not have approved of her speaking the secret doctrine in the vulgar language of the masses to all and sundry, disregarding the strict injunctions as to difference in meditative possibilities for people of different mental and moral calibre.

Or, perhaps, it took time for her fame to spread and it was only long

afterwards when she became a legend that chroniclers felt it necessary to mention her in their annals.

However that may be, we have no record, contemporary or near contemporary, of Lal Ded in any chronicle. The earliest recorded mention of Lal Ded is in Baba Dawud Mishkati's *Asrar-ul-Abrar* 1654 AD, a theological document.

There are many widely prevalent legends associated with Lal Ded. All of them may not be factually accurate but they do throw light on the social and communal beliefs of her time and of later times.

The Legend Of Her Life

Lal Ded was born around 1317-1320 at Sempor or Pandrethan, although the date of her birth is much disputed. All legends agree that she was born in a brahman family, where she imbibed an atmosphere of piety and came under the influence of Siddha Mol, her *guru*, from whom she learnt certain spiritual disciplines.

She was married to Nica Bhatt, a brahman of Pampor. She was cruelly treated by her husband and mother-in-law. It is sometimes said that her mother-in-law was the stepmother of her husband. According to a custom of the brahmans of Kashmir, a bride is usually given a new name on her marriage, therefore, Lalla was known as Padmavati in her husband's home, but her maiden name continued to be used by her natal family and friends.

According to the legend, Lalla's mother-in-law used to taunt, scold and insult her on the slightest pretext. She was accused of not knowing how to spin yarn, even though she, in fact, spun yarn as fine as the lotus stalk. She was also reproached for being introverted and reserved. She did not mix with the young daughters-in-law of the neighbourhood, and did not join in their fun and frolic.

Lalla's mother-in-law used to put a stone in Lalla's plate and then cover it with a thin layer of rice so that it looked as if she had been given a heap of rice,

Lalla would quietly eat the little rice, wash the stone and put it in the kitchen. This had become a daily routine until one day, when she as usual went with her earthen pitcher to fetch water from the river. Her neighbours teased her about the feast which was to be held that day in her house to invoke peace and blessings on the family. "What nice dishes Lalla will have today!" they said. "Surely she will not forget to invite her friends."

Lalla replied : "*Hand ma'rytan kina hath Lalli nalavath tsali na zanh.*" (Whether a ram is killed or a lamb, Lalla will not fail to have her stone). This saying of hers has now become proverbial in the Kashmiri language. Lal's father-in-law over-heard her remark and that day, when food was served to her, he verified the truth of it.

When Lalla went to fetch water from the river each morning, she used to meditate at a quiet spot away from home. The legend has it that she even used to cross the river without wetting her feet and used to visit the shrine of Nata Keshav Bhairav at the village on the other bank. She used to be scolded for loitering and was even accused of infidelity to her husband.

It is possible that her husband was already angered by her sexual coldness towards him. It may be mentioned that there is another saying ascribed to her : "I did not become pregnant or give birth, nor did I eat the food given to a pregnant woman."

Recording the legend about how Lal left her husband's home, Baba Dawud Mishkati, mentioned earlier, writes : "She, mad with love for god, but wise, had, in her early years, been married to a certain man and the members of his family were amazed to see her state. Her husband too was angry with her every now and then, not knowing the truth of her state. One day, when she returned home from the river with the pitcher of water on her head, he struck it with a stick. The pitcher broke into pieces but the water

stood frozen on her head. From that water, a pond was formed which has not yet dried up. It is known as the pond of Lalla. Since many such incidents became known, she set her foot in the deserts and began her wanderings in the wilderness—”

Once, an open air performance was held at Pampor and it attracted a large crowd. Lal Ded’s father-in-law was there and he saw her standing nude among the spectators. He reprimanded her, and took her into the house to make her put on clothes. She protested, saying there were no human beings there, only goats and sheep, and asked him to look out of the window. He was astonished to see a crowd of goats and sheep outside. Thus, she showed him that those who are engrossed only in material pursuits are no better than animals.

Centred in The Self

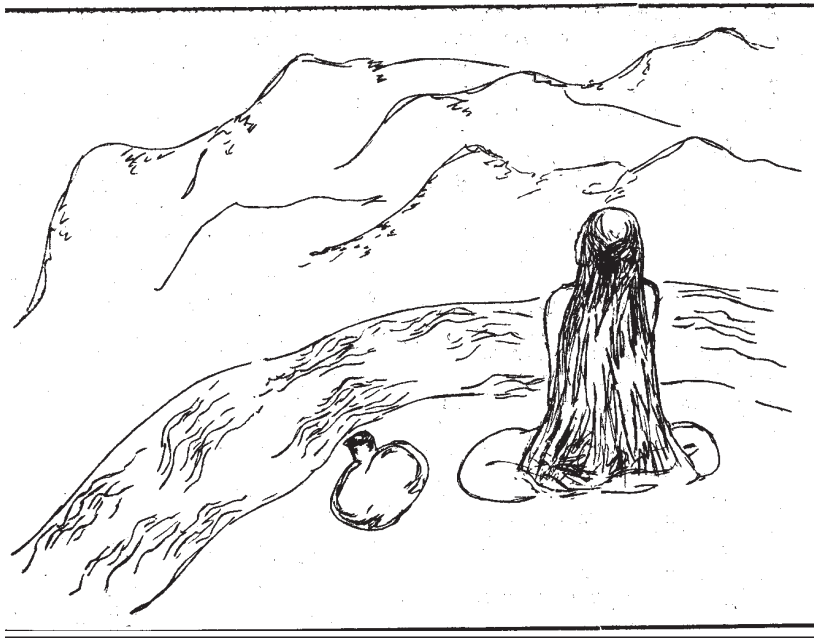
There is a persistent legend that when Lal Ded left her husband’s home, she wandered naked, dancing and singing in ecstatic frenzy. She did not care about her personal appearance because she was convinced that the true self was the spirit within :

The Guru gave me but one precept

*From without, go within,
This saying I took to heart,
And, naked, I began to dance.*

It is also said that Lal’s guru acknowledged that she had outstripped him in meditation. On one occasion, when he was having his bath at the river, he noticed that Lalla was busy scrubbing the outside of a pot that was filled with dirt. He remonstrated with her : “What is the use of scrubbing the outside of the pot when the dirt inside is not removed?” She replied : “What is the use of bathing the body while the inner self is not purified ?”

Lalla had outstripped the need to perform rituals and ceremonies as also the need to worship icons and images. Indeed, she upbraided those who felt satisfied with these externalities of



—Aparna Cour

religion :

O fool! True action does not reside

In fasts or religious rituals.

And again

The god is stone, the temple is

stone.

From top to bottom, all is one,

O priest! Whom do you worship?

Make your mind and your life

one.

And again

Devotee and ascetic

Wander from temple to temple

To find that god

Who is in themselves.

According to another legend, she went to the temple where her guru was engaged in worship. He asked what she wanted. She replied that she had come there because it was a private place where she could defecate. He at once led her to a spot some distance away, but Lalla began to dig there and unearthed some idols. Wherever the guru took her, she unearthed idols, to his amazement. This legend was interpreted by the chronicler Pir Ghulam Hasan to mean that her aim

was to show that god is everywhere hence no place is more sacred than any other. According to another variant of the legend, she actually defecated on the idols in her guru’s home.

Going Her Own Way

While her fame increased, she also had to face much criticism for her unconventional behaviour. Street urchins used to mock her and call her names such as “the mad Lalla.” A legend relates that a cloth dealer once reprimanded such urchins and drove them away to spare her humiliation. Lalla then asked him to give her a long piece of cloth which he did. She cut it into two equal lengths and placed one length on each of her shoulders. Then she went on her way. Every time some one bowed to her, she tied knots in one length and every time someone showed her disrespect, she tied a knot in the other. In the evening, she came back to the cloth dealer, and asked him to weigh the two lengths of cloth. They weighed the same, irrespective of the number of knots in either of them. Smiling, Lalla said to the shopkeeper :

“I shall not feel distressed or hurt

*A Kashmiri saying which means that it is best to be self dependent.

even if they hurl a thousand abuses at me.”

According to another legend, Lalla’s husband went to her guru Siddha Mol, and asked him to persuade her to return home. Both of them went to Lalla and the following dialogue took place.

Lalla’s husband :

*No light like the light of the sun,
No pilgrimage like the Ganga,
None dearer than a brother,
No comfort like a wife.*

Siddha Mol:

*No light like the light of the eye,
No pilgrimage like one’s own
knees*,*

*None dearer than one’s own
pocket*

No comfort like a warm blanket.

Lal Ded :

*No light like the knowledge of
Brahma,*

*No pilgrimage like the love of god,
None dearer than god,*

No comfort like the fear of god.

In her verses, Lal Ded, symbolically refers to her trials and tribulations :

/, Lal, came into the world,

Joyful, like a cotton flower

When it blooms on the stem.

*But the cleaner and the carder¹
Gave me hard blows and
fragmented me into fine strands.*

Then I was taken to the weaver,

*And hung, helpless, upon the
loom.*

After this, the washerman

*Beat me on the stone, scrubbed
me with soap,*

*And the tailor cut me to pieces
with scissors.*

So, finally, /, Lal, ,

Reached the high estate of god.

In another vakh she says ;

The soles of my feet were cut

And shredded on the roads

As I wandered in search of truth.

*Finally, the One showed me the
way.*

*Those who hear the name of that
One,*

*Why should they not be mad with
joy?*

From a hundred words

*Lal has derived the one word, the
essence.*

There is a great deal of controversy as regards Lal’s philosophy. Some scholars call her a follower of the Kashmir branch of the Shaiva religion. Others have tried to establish that she was influenced by Hathayoga, Buddhism or Shankaracharya. There are also longstanding legends, recorded in Persian chronicles, that she accepted Islam, and was a follower of Shah Hamadan who took refuge in Kashmir from Timur’s persecution. Many remember her as a *sufi* and a *wali*.

In 1885, Pir Ghulam Hasan summed up the argument in his *Tarikh-i-Hasan* : “The Hindus say that she is one of them. The Musalmans claim that she belongs to them. The truth is that she is among the chosen of god. May god’s peace be upon her.”

So Lal Ded lived as a wandering ascetic, seeking and seeing god everywhere. She was a seer in the literal sense of the word, and laid great stress upon direct seeing and experience : “I have seen the lord”; “I have seen Shiva and Shakti sealed in one”; “I have seen the universe pervaded by Shiva.”

She often refers to god or the supreme principle as *Sahaj* which means consciousness of the self. A number of her verses point out that god is to be found only within the self:

One who knows the heart

To be the abode of god,

Who has experienced

The self created in the life breath

Rising from the heart,

Whose worldly fancies have fled,

Such an one is god.

*Whom, then, should such an one
worship?*

Persistent Search

The search is described as difficult and the need for persistence is emphasised :

Searching and searching

For that One,

I, Lal, withered away.

Yet, I persisted in the search,

Gathering together

All my strength.

When, finally, I reached there,

I found the doors bolted.

*My curiosity continued to
increase*

And I sat down outside, to wait.

There are a few verses which express a state of desolation and isolation. She feels alone, towing her boat upon the sea with a rope of untwisted thread. She wastes away like water in cups of unbaked clay, she dances on the edge of a yawning chasm. She feels helpless and lonely, like one who, at dusk, finds herself on a causeway with rickety bridges and not a coin in her pocket to pay the ferryman to take her across the broad river. The images make a direct impact unlike the usual sad generalities about this vale of tears, this house of pain and so on.

Against Injustice

She is oppressed at the sight of inequality and injustice. She sees a rich man beating his cook for some fault in preparing a dainty dish while, on the other hand, a man of learning drops dead of starvation, like a sere leaf in the winter. She points obliquely to various kinds of injustice :

*Can the sun light only certain
great lands*

Instead of lighting up every place?

*Can water refrain from entering
certain houses?*

*It is hard to understand that One,
Know this, O mortal!*

And, even more subtly :

You managed to be born

Hale and hearty,

*But caused your mother’s womb
great pain.*

*Yet, on growing up, you seek that
door again!*

It is hard to attain Shiva, O man!

Listen carefully to my words.

She condemns unnecessary cruelty. She abhorred meat eating, unlike the brahmans of Kashmir, and,

unlike both Hindus and Muslims, spoke vehemently against the killing of innocent animals:

The poor goat lives on grass and water

*But shelters you from cold
And hides your shame (with wool)
O priest! Who taught you to
Sacrifice a living goat
To a lifeless stone?*

She saw no reason to discriminate between individuals, between Hindus and Muslims:

Mav zan Hyond ta Musalman, and did not care by what name god was called:

*su va su va su va su.
(or this or this or this)*

Oppressed also by the transience of all things and the certainty of death, she underwent various spiritual disciplines. The details of these are not recounted in her verses but the effect on her is described:

*/ crushed my heart
In the mortar of love
My evil desires were destroyed,
I was at peace-
Then I roasted my heart
And tasted it.*

Now I do not know whether by so doing

I will die or remain alive.

Supreme Experience

It is through this long and hard process that she attains self knowledge :

*/ burnt the impurities
From my heart
I killed my desires
I settled myself at the doorway
And spread out my anchal
(a gesture of supplication)
Only then did I become
Famed as Lal.*

Although she recommends non attachment and desireless action, indifference to praise and blame, joy and sorrow, she never displays the disgust of the ascetic towards the human body. She does not recommend mortification of the body but counsels moderation:

*Wear clothes to ward off cold
Eat to get rid of hunger
She speaks of the body as a vehicle for spiritual growth ;
/t is the abode of god;
I saw my lord in my own home,
“This body” says she, “has splendour and light.”*

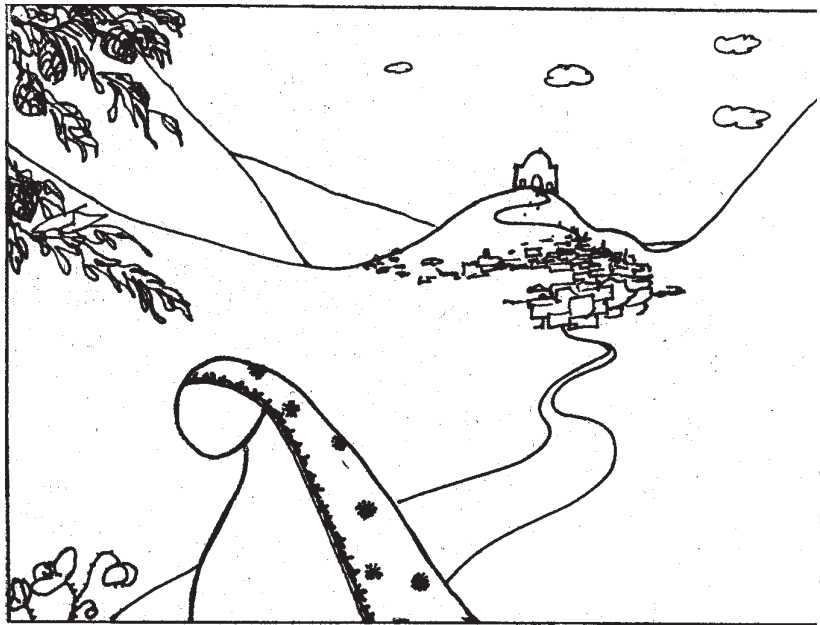
The English scholar Grierson translated one of her verses :

*Lord, I have not known myself
or other than myself
Continually have I mortified this vile body*

*while awake .
Some remain impure even after bathing
But some are untouched by action ,,
While leading a householder's life.*

The experience of illumination of self is the central fact of Lal Ded's life. She realises the oneness of the individual consciousness with the universal consciousness:

*One who looks upon the self
and the other as the same*



—Sue Darlow

But Rajanaka Bhaskara's translation seems more accurate:

*Lord, I have not known myself
nor Thou
I have known onlyth is one body
(of mine)*

Orientalist scholars like Grierson have translated Lal's verses to show that she regarded the world as illusory and human life as unredeemed wretchedness and sin. However, this view is not substantiated by an exact translation. In fact, Lal Ded does not believe that self knowledge is attainable only by renunciation :

*Some there are who wake even in sleep
Some there are who sleep even*

*One who looks upon day
and night as the same,
One whose mind is freed from duality,
Such a one has had a vision of god.*

.She celebrates this experience with great joy :

*A new consciousness and a new moon,
I have seen the nature within,
Eternally new, like a mirror
Ever since Lalla washed her body
and soul,
Lal too is eternally new.*

Life In Death

However, this experience has next to be carried out into the experience of

the outer world. From the external she moves inwards, and then from the internal she moves outwards. She lives in the world but views it in the light of transcendent experience :

*/ came to the world a tapasvi
And by the light of wisdom
I gained self consciousness.
For me, no one dies
And I die for no one.
To die is wonderful /
And to live wonderful !*

She is said to have died around the age of 71, behind the wall of Juma Masjid at Vejibror, on the highway to Jammu, 28 miles from Srinagar. Pir Ghulam Hasan writes: "A flame of sharp light shot forth from her body and vanished from sight."

Muhammad Din Fauq in *Khawatin-i-Kashmir* (women of Kashmir) relates a legend according to which Lal Ded sat in a large earthen vessel and placed another such vessel over herself, so that she was completely concealed. Those who saw her do this were puzzled and when, a short while after, the upper vessel was removed, nothing was to be found. And, says the legend, this was the manner of her passing away. The legend is probably symbolic of the fact that there is no monument of any kind where her body was cremated or buried. In fact, there is no shrine set up for her anywhere in Kashmir:

*To me, life and death are one.
I will weep for none
And none shall weep for me.*

She lives in the hearts and on the lips of the people :

Engrave, on the tablet of your heart,

The words that Lalla spoke.

Maker Of Kashmiri

Lal Ded's *vakh* are a significant landmark in the linguistic transition from old to modern Kashmiri. Grierson even claims that they are the oldest known specimen of the Kashmiri language. Even if this is disputed, we

may be justified in regarding them as the earliest specimen of modern Kashmiri.

Lal Ded has, however, not merely the chronological distinction of being placed first in time in the order of modern Kashmiri poets. She is, more significantly, the maker of modern Kashmiri language as well as literature. As poet, in her own genre, *vakh*, she remains unsurpassed. The full import and impact of her *vakh* does not come across in translation. Such is the power of her poetry that some of them do act as *mantras* fulfilling her claim :

"Whatever this tongue uttered, became a *mantra*."

Some people recite her verses as a religious duty and reflect and meditate upon them.

Lal Ded's *vakh* have helped to make Kashmiri an adequate vehicle for the expression of philosophical thought. She adapts and modifies Sanskrit forms of words to the use of modern Kashmiri, coining new words in the process. She draws her images from the Kashmiri countryside : the ferry across the river, the creaky bridges on the causeway, the bloom of a cotton flower, the saffron field, water, snow and ice, the washerman, the shepherds with their flock, the sowing and the harvesting.

The *vakh* is usually a four line stanza, complete and independent in itself, a sententious gnomic verse. The sense seldom runs on into another stanza. There are, however, several *vakh* that have a common refrain and a few are in the form of questions and answers.

Path Of Knowledge

The *vakh* of Lal Ded can be sung but are not meant to be sung like the hymns of Guru Nanak or Mira and other Bhakta poets. They are more in the nature of verse sayings, intended to make the hearer look within, think and reflect. It is important to point out that while using the language and

idiom of the people, she does not give them a religion made easy. She is not what we may call a "lowbrow saint poet." Her *vakh* are more like the Upanishads than the songs of the Bhakta poets. They are aphoristic, even cryptic at times, embodying rare spiritual experiences. They are not intended to carry away the hearers on a flood of emotion, and to encourage them to burst into song.

Lal Ded's contribution is to the body of spiritual experience rather than to the poetry of *bhakti* or devotion.

She has consistently been called by chroniclers a second Rabia. Rabia was satisfied with nothing god would give her short of god's self. Shankar Lal Kaul in his essay "Mother Lal Of Kashmir" (*Visva bharti Quarterly*) says : "She is, as a modern psychologist would put it, of the cerebrotonic type. Even Muktabai, the famous thirteenth century Marhatta poetess, is not as austere supersensuous. She is a contrast in this respect to brides of Krishna, like the South Indian saint Andal and the Rajputana princess Mira, and brides of Christ like St Gertrude..."

Lal Ded helped Kashmiris to discover their mother tongue and their soul as a people. She opened new channels of communication between the elite and the common people and, what is more important, among the common people themselves. Her *vakh* and their spirit pervade the countryside, and poets and mystics, both Hindu and Muslim, over the last four centuries, have paid tribute to her in their writings.

Lal Ded is the first among the moderns, not only chronologically, but in the modern quality of interrogation and expostulation in her poetry. Her poetry is modern because it comes alive for us even today.