

# The Creative Launcher

An International, Open Access, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English  
**UGC Approved-** (Sr. No. 62952)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.53032/tcl.2017.2.4.62>

## Contribution of Lal Ded to the Composite Culture of Kashmir: A Study of her Poetry

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### Abstract

The present paper aims at exhibiting how Lal Ded's poetry depicts a tendency of rediscovering and popularizing the centuries old rich legacy of Kashmir's composite culture which enables people of all races, cultures, creeds, colours, and religions to live in mutual harmony, peace and tranquillity, thus has a universal appeal. For centuries, the valley of Kashmir has nourished composite culture perfected by Bhaktas, Sufis, and Rishis. Kashmir has been a multicultural and multi-traditional society where people of different faiths like Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Shiviasm, Sufism, etc live together with love and affection.

**Keywords-** *Tranquillity, Discrimination, Sumptuous, Harmony*

Lal Ded, popularly known as Laleshwari, is considered one the best poet-saints and seers of Kashmir delivering the message of religious tolerance, peace, and truth. Lived through a very obscure time of Kashmiri history, she emerged with a divine message for whole mankind. She promotes universal brotherhood and peace through her *Vakhs*. Modern world is confronted with a bundle of problems and issues like war, conflict, deception, spiritual vacuum, religious intolerance, immorality, deception, frauds, and what not. Lal Ded, through her poetry, has been successful in promoting universal brotherhood, harmony, and peace. The present world is in dire need of saints like her. She believes in the concept of one God and in blurring the discrimination based on religion and has been successful in establishing a composite Kashmiri culture purely based on religious tolerance. Her role in Kashmiri language, literature, culture, and Kashmiriyat is greatly visible in her poetry. She is the most crucial figure of Kashmir's cultural and civilizational ethos. The paper shall be in two parts— part first shall introduce Lal Ded as an important Kashmiri saint-poet and the part second shall be based on her contribution to the composite culture of Kashmir which is reflected through her poetry.

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The valley of Kashmir, besides being famous around the world for its scenic beauty and charm, is also known for a rich cultural heritage embedded with religious tolerance. It is also well-known for its sumptuous literature. It is said that Kashmiri literature has a history of almost 2,500 years and had a huge influence of Sanskrit language. Patanjali, the author of the *Mahabhashya* and Dridhbala are some early originators. Kashmir Shaivism rose during the medieval times. Vasugupta, Utpala, Abhinavagupta and Kshemaraja were some great masters associated with this school. Among various Hindu philosophies, Shaivism refers to a group of religious traditions which regard Lord Shiva as the highest and the Supreme Self. The followers of this sect are known as Shaivas or Shaivites who believe that Shiva is everything. Kashmir Shaivism is one of the important schools of Shaiva tradition among others. This school of Shaivism is identical with Trika Shaivism which is categorized as monistic idealism by many scholars and researchers. They believe that there is no gap between God and the world. Kashmir Shaivism arose during the eighth or ninth century.

Kashmir is credited to have produced many saints, sufis, rishis, poets, and mystics. Lal Ded is one of the most prominent and arresting among them. She is known by many epithets like, Lalla, Lalla Arifa, Lalleshwari, Lallayogesgwari, and many others. Lalla is synonymous with Kashmir's composite culture. With Lalleshwari (Lal Ded), the use of Kashmiri language began. About her, Sir George Grierson remarks:

There are few countries in which so many wise saws and proverbial sayings are current as in Kashmir, and none of these have greater repute than those attributed by universal consent to Lal Ded of 'Granny Lal', as she is called nowadays. There is not a Kashmiri, Hindu or Musalman, who has not some of these ready on the tip of his tongue . . . .

Lalla's actual date of birth is unknown. Based on some evidence, many scholars believe that she was born between 1300-1320. She is believed to have been born to a pious Shaiva family to the southwest of Srinagar in Pandrenthen Sempore. Her family origin is not exactly known, her *vakhs* (sayings) exhibit that she had a deep knowledge of Kashmiri Shaiva tradition. Siddha Srikantha was her Guru and she learnt yoga from him which she propounded in her *vakhs*. Her immense influence on Kashmir's composite culture makes her the most brilliant poetess in the valley's history. At the age of twelve, Lalla was married to a young man in Pampore. Her married life did not prove to be fruitful to her. She received a huge amount of abuse from her mother-in-law. Some scholars say that she met the same treatment from her husband. Her in-laws always starved her to which she never complained. It is said that her mother-in-law used to put a stone on her plate and cover it with rice to give an impression to others that Lalla always ate a plateful of rice. Despite her father-in-law's generosity and good nature, her mother-in-law made her life hard and miserable. The sufferings and ill-treatment she received from her in-laws resulted in her deeper spiritual realization. She left her home at the age of twenty six, became a devotee of Shiva, and would

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go around completely naked. Having abandoned her marital life, she became a shelterless mystic. It was due to her unprecedented will-power and courage that she could think of renouncing the traditional cultural roles. After that she developed connections with other spiritual personalities like Nund Reshi and Sayid Ali Hamdani. She had long discussions with them and proved to be an inspiration for Nund Reshi. Her *vakhs* reveal that she believed in truths which are common to all religions. She held the belief that all religions are but mere paths which lead to the same goal and God. Her date of death, like her birth date, is also not exactly known. It is claimed that she died in Bijbihara. However, she is alive in her *vakhs* and sayings. Unfortunately, there has been no mention of Lal Ded until seventeenth century. Her name got a mention for the first time in 1654 by Baba Dawud Mushkati in his *Asrarul- Abrar* (The Secret of the Pious).

Lal Ded lived during the most turbulent, tumultuous, and critical time of Kashmir's history. Islam made its advent into the Kashmir valley during that period. Lal Ded played a very potent role in saving and maintaining the cultural heritage of the valley and made use of colloquial Kashmiri to make her heart's desires manifest. She used *vakh* as the medium of her poetic outpourings. "The crisp, aphoristic, cryptic four-line verse-form was quite suitable for the rhythm of thought that marked her poetic expression and was also easy for the common man to adapt to his ear and to memorize" (Ahmad 75). Lalla made use of beautiful idioms and imagery taken from everyday life. Her *vakhs* enlightened people with a spiritual vision and morality and enabled them to face the huge challenges of the turbulent time. Her *vakhs* depict that she is a true representative and symbol of Kashmir's culture. Kuszewska comments, "There is no doubt that Lalla Ded's outpourings had fierce contribution to promotion of syncretic perception of religion and practically fostered spiritual accommodation between religious groups in her times as well as in the following centuries" (16).

The word "Kashmiriyat" itself designates the pluralism and composite culture of Kashmir. Composite culture is also called shared or popular culture. In such a culture, people share a cooperative, combined, and mutual relationship. This culture transcends and blurs the boundaries of religions, castes, creeds, or colours. It makes the heterogeneous identities look like homogeneous. It aspires for regular interaction between people. Madan has said that composite culture has been a lived reality of Kashmir which came into being with the interaction between people belonging to different faiths and religions. Their close interaction and connection formed a culture that became a crucial part of Kashmiri ethnic identity without taking the religious affiliations into consideration. Thus the term "Kashmiriyat" has evolved out of the harmonized togetherness of Kashmiri Muslims and Pandits. Mohammad Ishaq Khan remarks about Kashmiriyat:

The concept of *Kashmiriyat* has evolved out of the yearning of the Kashmiris, both Hindus and Muslims, to situate their motherland (*Mouj Kashir*) in

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something unique . . . for Kashmiri Pandits Valley is the land of *tirthas* or Pilgrimages . . . Kashmiri Muslims devotion to the shrines of the *Sufis* and *Rishis* is deep-rooted in the local context rather than Islam alone. (63)

Lal Ded continues to remain the greatest poetess and the most influential personality in Kashmiri literature. She represents the Trika philosophy and is an appealing figure of the Shaivite tradition. Her *vakhs* were discovered four centuries after her death and compiled in the Sharda script by Bhaskar Razdan. Sir George Grierson and Lionel Barnett took the responsibility of tracing more of her *vakhs* and got them published in 1920 in a book named *Lalla Vakyani*. Regarding this fact, Mir Shabir Ahmad remarks:

The great poet who in reality inaugurated Kashmir's proud poetic tradition was Lal Ded (C.1335-1376). Her *vakhs* have come down to us through the oral tradition and it is certain that many of them must have been lost. In the eighteenth century Lalla's *vakhs* were rendered into Sanskrit by Rajanaka Bhaskara and the first English renderings were made in the twentieth century by G.A Grierson and L. D. Barnett (*Lalla Vakyani*) and R. C. Temple (*The Word of Lalla*). (37)

Lal Ded, through her *vakhs*, inspired people of Kashmir to live peacefully and harmoniously and worked laboriously for promoting peace, tranquillity, love, and spirituality. Scholars like Khan have said that Lalla was highly influenced by the Islamic notion of "*tauhid*." When Shah-i-Hamdan visited Kashmir, she met him and discussed many issues of religion, philosophy, and spirituality. This interaction enabled her to combine Islamic and Shaivite thoughts. "She is credited with having introduced and given substance to the idea of Kashmiriyat through her verses which have formed the cultural repertoire of generations of Kashmiris" (Khan 19).

Her teaching and philosophy is simple. According to her, God-realization is self-realization which reflects upon the fact that human beings are same and made of the same stuff. She believes in the One Universal Spirit and urges people to rise above the tendentiousness and seek true knowledge. This will help them in eliminating narrow-mindedness and discrimination based on religion, race, caste, or creed. The distinctions of caste and religion became superfluous and supererogatory for Lalla. She said:

Shiva chhuy thali thali rozan  
Mo zan Hyond ta Musalman  
Trukhay chukh ta pananuy pan parzan  
Ada chhai sahibas satiy zanizan  
Shiva resides everywhere, do not distinguish  
The Hindu from the Muslim;  
If you are wise, know thy true self,  
Which indeed is to know the Lord! (Parimoo xviii)

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Lalla's poetry reflects her secular attitude and religious tolerance. This outlook made her very popular among both Hindus and Muslims equally. She eschewed from categorizing herself with any sect or religion. Kak says about her that, "Lalla's emphasis on religious tolerance is in agreement with the monist Shaiva philosophy which is secular in its orientation" (182). She emphasizes on unity, cooperation, tolerance, and pleads for eliminating all the religious differences and hatred in the world. As she says:

Rangas manaz chuy byon byon labhun  
Soruy tsalakh barakh svakh  
Tsakh roosh ta vair ay galakh  
Ada deshakh shiva sund mvakh  
The world is full of differences  
If you are tolerant, you will be happy  
You will end anger, hate, and animosity  
Then only you will see Shiva's face. (Kak 183)

She advised people to follow the doctrines of love, humanity, cooperation, and harmony. She also suggested them to be pure and true to each other no matter whatever difficulties and hindrances come their way. She says:

Gal gandinem ta bol parinem  
Dapinem tiy yas yih rotse  
Sahaza-kusamav puz karinem,  
Boh amalon ta kas kyah motes.  
Let them approach and call me names,  
Let them say whatever suits their individual inclination;  
Let them even worship me with flowers,  
Since I am pure and faultless, let them reap whatever benefit they may? (Parimoo 78)

Lalla's *vakhs* are timeless and reflect Kashmiri culture deeply. Her *vakhs* were not written down during her lifetime and were transmitted orally down the centuries. Kachru remarks, "Lalla is to Kashmiri what Shakespeare is to English" (367). Lalla requests people not to pay heed to what others say. She pleads to people of all faiths to believe in one God and leave all the differences and prejudices. As she says:

A'ssa bol pa'ddiy-nyam sasaa  
Mey mani waasaa khiid na heaye;  
Boh youd sahaza Shankar-baktas aasaa,  
Makris saasa mal kya peyye.  
Let them mock at me and call me names.  
I shall not feel distressed nor hurt.  
If a true devotee of Siva I be,

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Can a few ashes a mirror befoul? (Kak 6)

Lalla objected to differentiate between individuals, between herself and others. She believes that there is only one God who is called by many names and knows everything. She says:

Siv va Kishav va Jinn va  
Kamalajanath namadharin yuh,  
Me abali kastan bavaroz,  
Su va su va su va suh.  
Shiva or Kishav or the Buddha,  
Call Him what you may!  
Let Him release me from the yoke of worldly afflictions,  
Weak and helpless as I am. (Parimoo 68)

Lalla firmly believed in the oneness of the self in man and the Cosmic self. She rejected the notion of duality and stressed for yoga which demolishes the barriers of caste and creed automatically. Being highly critical of the multitudinous religious faiths, she believed that they would surely crumble down and says:

Azapa-Gayatra Hamsa-Hamsa zapith,  
Aham travith suy ada rath,  
Yemi trov aham suy rud panai,  
Bohn a asun chuy vopadish.  
Chant the Ajapa Gayatri (mantra) with every breath as Hamsah  
Give up the Ego (I-ness) and be absorbed in Him;  
Whosoever abandoned his Ego, verily became He.  
The lesson is to be learnt is to efface the sense of separateness.  
(Parimoo 159)

Lalla immensely stressed on the integrity, unification, and unity of all the people irrespective of religion, sect, or faith. According to her, people should tie up cooperation and mutual trust which would help them in achieving every goal. As she says:

Kyah Kara pantsan dahan te kahan,  
Vakhshun yath leji karith gay;  
Sariy samahan yethi razi lamahan,  
Ada kyazi ravihe kahan gav.  
What shall I do with the five, ten or even eleven?  
They have upset and disturbed the contents of this pot.  
Could they come together and tow this same line!  
Then the cow would not have been lost to the eleven.  
(Parimoo 134)

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Lalla's *vakhs* reflect her selflessness, generosity, and bounteousness. She wants people to follow her footprints. As she says:

Omkar yeli layi onum,  
Vuhi korum panun pan;  
Shiv-vot travith sath-marg rotum,  
Teli Lal boh vatsas Prakashasthan.  
Focusing on the pranava and making it yield to me,  
It was a process of burning myself to white-heat;  
Forsaking the six crossroads, I took to the path of Truth,  
Thus I the seeker, reached the Abode of light! (Poorva 117)

Lalla believed that one can find God by serving humanity and shunning the evils of fraud, deceit, and cheat. She puts it as:

Ye'my luub manmath mad tsurr morun  
Vata-naash maerith ta logun daas;  
Tamiy sahaza Ishwar gorun'  
Tamiy soruy vyendun saas.  
Who slays the highway robbers three,  
Greed, lust and pride,  
And yet, in utter humility, serves his fellow men—  
He truly seeks the Lord,  
Disregarding as worthless ashes all other things. (Kak 83)

Hindus, Muslims, and people of other faiths utter Lalla's name with great honour and reverence. She believes that Shiva shines like the sun on the high and the low alike, so how can one differentiate between people on the basis of sects or religion. She says:

Rav matuthali thali taapitan  
Taapitan uttam-uttam dish  
Varun matu lotu garu atsytyan  
Shiv chhuy kruth tu tsen vopadish  
Does the sun not shine everywhere alike?  
Or does it shine only on the best places?  
Does not the water god "Varuna" enter every home?  
Or does it enter only the homes of the fortunate? (Toshkhani 26)

She urged people of all the faiths to have patience in difficult situations as the fruits of endurance are always sweet and appealed people to understand each other. She says:

Tsaalun chu vzmala ta trattay  
Tsaalun chu mandinyan gattakaar  
Tsaalun chu paan-panun kaddun grattay  
Heyti maali santuush vaati paanay.

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Patience to endure lightning and thunder,  
Patience to face darkness at noon,  
Patience to go through a grinding mill—  
Be patient whatever befalls, doubting not  
That He will surely come to you. (Kak 5)

Every Kashmiri—Muslim or Hindu, educated or illiterate—is capable of reciting many of Lalla's *vakhs*. Her name is held with admiration and she has been a great symbol of Kashmiri heritage. S.L.Kaul says about her that, "a succession of saints in Kashmir schooled in particular method of medication and concentration, and forming the loose sort of order of their own have regarded her as their pattern and lodestar" (45). Thus after having studied her *vakhs*, it is clear that she played a pivotal role to strengthen the notion of Kashmiriyat and Kashmiri nationalism. She became successful in enriching the local composite culture and greatly influenced the Rishi movement. She created an ambience of harmony, unity, understanding, and cooperation. Regarding this, Richard Temple comments, "The *vakhs* of Laleshwari have become part of day to day conversation in Kashmiri households. Her religion is not bookish. Her religion is a mix of people, hopes and miseries" (18).

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