

## *Lalla—Mystic Poet of Kashmir*

*Dr. Jaishree Kak*

Kashmir valley, a land of lakes and forests nestled in the Himalayan Mountains, has contributed substantially to various mystic traditions throughout its history, and of these it is most famous for Shaivism. Beginning with the eighth century, it became a great center of the Shaiva philosophy and spirituality and many original texts were written on it in Sanskrit in the following centuries. This tradition found its expression in the vernacular Kashmiri language in the poetry of the fourteenth century mystic Lalla, also known as Lal Ded, Laleshvari, and Lalla 'Arifa. Her verses were transmitted orally for centuries.

Legends tell us that she was married at a young age, and her married life was very unhappy. She had to suffer both her mother-in-law's ill treatment and her husband's harsh behavior. Lalla was initiated into Shaiva yoga by Siddha Sri Kanth. The story goes that she used to go to a nearby stream to fetch water every morning. Her husband notices that she takes too long to return. One day he follows her and finds her by the riverside lost in contemplation. He goes home in anger and waits for her to return. As she arrives, he hits the pitcher with a stick in order to punish her for returning late. The pitcher breaks but the water stays miraculously intact on her head. This incident is regarded as the time when Lalla renounces her home and family, and it perhaps symbolizes her ability to find integrity and wholeness within the meaninglessness of ordinary existence.

While the legends describe her supernatural powers, it is her poetry that reveals her as a woman of flesh and blood who works hard to achieve her spiritual goals. Some verses portray her struggle to let go of her desires for

worldly objects so she may make progress in her spiritual journey. Thus she says:

I gently lament for you.  
Mind, you are in love with illusion.  
Not a shadow of this worldly splendor  
will accompany you.  
Oh, why do you forget your real nature?

She must cultivate self-discipline in order to train her mind as well as body. The path is long and arduous and only her faith in the final goal keeps her going. She rejects social conventions as she carves her own solitary path. She is subjected to ridicule which causes a great deal of pain to her. In a verse, she says:

Both good and bad I must endure.  
My ears don't hear,  
and my eyes don't see.  
When the inner Self  
awakens in my heart,  
the lamp will shine  
even in the midst of a tornado.

Lalla develops a thick skin for insults and abuses that are hurled at her and she learns not to lose her equanimity. A story relates how street urchins would sometimes hurl insults at her. Once a kindhearted shopkeeper, a cloth merchant, scolds these young urchins for their behavior and sends them away. However, Lalla calmly asks him to give her a long piece of cloth after he cuts it into two equal parts and weighs them separately. Then she drapes one piece on her left shoulder and the second piece on her right shoulder.

She ties a knot in the piece on her right shoulder as soon as someone calls her a bad name and ties a knot in the other piece as she is shown respect by somebody else. In the evening she brings back the two pieces of cloth to the shopkeeper and asks him to weigh them once again—both weigh exactly as they had before. Thus, she demonstrates to the shopkeeper her equanimity in the face of praise or insult.

As Lalla progresses on her journey, she communicates her spiritual insights through her verses. Her journey of self realization begins by letting go of the ego in order to experience the universal Self or Shiva.

Impurities of the heart I burned.  
Desires I killed.  
Lalla, my name, shone only  
when I surrendered completely.  
Awakening in the early dawn,  
I summoned the restless mind.  
Enduring the pain,  
I devoted myself to god.  
Saying "I am Lalla, I am Lalla"  
I awakened my darling.  
On becoming one with him,  
I purified my mind and body.

Lalla compares the Self to the salt dissolved in water. Evaporation of water leaves behind salt; similarly, contemplation on the Self when worldly thoughts, desires and preoccupations are left behind leads to self-realization. Kashmiri Shaivites conceive of universal consciousness as active. When the individual consciousness realizes its oneness with the Self, the subject/object

duality is erased and the Self, which is the quintessential nature of both, is revealed in its fullness.

Thus, she says:

Cold changes water into ice or snow.

Discernment shows the three different states  
are not really different.

When the sun of consciousness shines,  
the plurality is dissolved into oneness.

The universe appears throughout permeated with Shiva.

When I was attached to the self,  
you remained hidden from me.

Time passed as I searched for you.

When I saw you within—

you and I were united in ecstasy.

Traversing the field of void alone,  
I, Lalla, lost consciousness of myself.

On finding the secret of my Self,  
a lotus bloomed in the mud for Lalla.

Many of Lalla's verses were uttered as teachings to her community. Her verses were addressed to common people in the countryside who most probably would have had a hard time understanding the highly esoteric vocabulary of Kashmiri Shaivism. For this reason, she used metaphors and similes from day to day life that were directly accessible to the common people. Accordingly, some of her verses speak about the need for devotion to Shiva and then there are others that describe Shiva as the transcendental reality that permeates the physical reality, and yet others focus on the need to do away entirely with duality of all kinds in order to find a totally new space for the actualizing self.

Lalla critiques the prescriptive religious practices of all kind. Thus, renouncing home in itself is not enough to achieve self-realization and neither is reciting prayers, chanting mantras, or turning rosary beads. Reading religious scriptures is beneficial for the beginners, but those who make a religion of recitation of scriptures are chasing illusion. The real temple, she says, is within each individual and the deity one is seeking is Shiva that is one's own true nature. She regards people who are consumed by their quest for deeper answers as fully awake and those immersed only in material reality as asleep. Using vivid metaphors and images, she urges people to control lust, anger, and desire as they are obstacles in achieving enlightened vision.

Kill your mortal enemies—

lust, anger, and desire.

Otherwise they would kill you with their arrows.

Calm them with self-restraint and good thoughts.

Recognize their nature and their power.

Lalla emphasizes religious tolerance. She refrains from identifying herself with any sect, or religion. Shiva consciousness, she says, is beyond these artificial divisions. People might call this state as Shiva, Keshava, Mahavir, or Buddha, but these are just different names assigned to the same reality.

The Self may be named Shiva,

Keshava, or Mahavir

or the lotus born Buddha.

Whatever name it may have,

may it set free a weakling like me

from worldly afflictions.

Shiva is omnipresent.

Don't differentiate between Hindus and Muslims.

If you are wise,

you will recognize your true Self—

that is your real acquaintance with the lord.

Since Shiva permeates the world, according to her, it is not wise to exclude those who are not part of one's religious community. Even though people might differ based on caste, religious creed or the level of attainment, they all are permeated with the Self or Shiva which is like a bright sun that shines equally everywhere. It is the clouds of ignorance that stop the ever present illumination. Once the clouds disappear, the Self reveals itself in its fullness. She says:

Like a fine net spread everywhere is Shiva

Subtly permeating the physical manifestation

If you don't see him when you are alive,

how can you do it when you are dead?

Through self-introspection get rid of the self in yourself.

Lalla is one of the few medieval women mystic poets worldwide who have left behind a legacy of great relevance to contemporary society. She urges people to have courage to seek their inner vision, instead of leading a life governed merely by social expectations. She brings their attention to the need for a morality based on honesty and personal responsibility, and provokes them to look beyond the veil of prohibitions and constraints imposed by social and religious institutions. The oral transmission of Lalla's verses over centuries testifies to her perennial appeal for people of all faiths. She has inspired both women and men to model their lives on a vision of

reality that has potential for creating a better society through promoting equality, mutual respect, and caring.