



Lalla: Life, Legend And Spiritual Quest

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Abstract: Lalla, also known as Lal Ded, a fourteenth century mystic and saint poetess, stands as a radiant beacon in the history of Kashmir. She is revered by both Hindu and Muslim communities to this day and holds a cherished place in the region's cultural and spiritual legacy. In this paper, we have humbly attempted to explore various aspects of her life, including how the circumstances of her early years significantly influenced her later teachings. This paper also studies how her religious and philosophical beliefs, as well as her social perceptions, were shaped. Furthermore, a modest endeavor is undertaken to examine the legendary narratives associated with her life, which possess social significance and historical relevance.

Index Terms: Kashmir, Lalla, Mystic, Vaakh, Hamadani

Introduction

She was a celebrated mystic, revered equally by Hindus and Muslims in Kashmir.¹ Enlightened with the truth, she propagated monotheism, social justice, and is described by some Persian hagiographers of possessing a deep insight into *marifat*.² Once questioned about the distinction between unity and plurality, she eloquently likened it to the transformation of ice, snow, and hailstones into water. In their frozen states, they represent plurality, but when melted, they converge into one, symbolizing unity.³

Parmu posits that Lalla was influenced by Islam and preached the Islamic precepts 'in the Brahmanic way'.⁴ She advocated for a straightforward ethical monotheism, vehemently criticized social disparities, idol worship, empty superstitions, and rituals, and confronted the 'particularism' and oppression perpetuated by the Brahmans. She emphasized the unity of humankind, surpassing caste and religious boundaries.⁵

Abul Fuqra Naseeb-u-Din Ghazi has stated that, despite having read many books, he had never encountered anything that could rival the *kalam* (speech or sayings) of Sheikh-ul-Alam and Lal Ded.⁶ Lal Ded conveyed her philosophical thoughts to the common people through her poetic expressions known as *vaakhs*. These *vaakhs*, in old Kashmiri, were passed down orally and thus experienced corruption over time.

Lalla's Early Life

Lalla's early life remains largely shrouded in mystery. Sanskrit chronicles and earlier Persian records lack any unambiguous reference to her.⁷ She was initially documented by Muslim Persian hagiographical texts long after her death.⁸ Baba Nasib documented her family life for the first time, and subsequently Dawood Mishkati, Muhammad Azam, and others borrowed these details in their accounts.⁹

In *Asrar-ul-Abrar* and *Waqiat-i-Kashmir*, the encounter between Prince Shihab-u-Din and Laleshwari is recorded. According to these texts, when Shihab-u-Din went hunting in the jungle, he met a pious woman (*kamil-i-majzooba* or *Majzooba Lal Arifa*) who offered him a bowl of milk and conveyed her felicitations, predicting that he would become king and that his two friends, Chanderdad and Dashrawal, would become his ministers. This pious woman is believed to be Lal Arifa, who was wandering in the forest at the time.¹⁰

Interestingly, the earliest account of this episode comes from Jonaraja, who associated it with Ali Shah, also known as Alla-u-Din (the father of Shihab-u-Din), rather than Shihab-u-Din. In his version, Jonaraja described the encounter between Ali Shah and a chief *Yogini* without naming her. Remarkably, the names of the ministers, Chandra Damara and Udyashri, are in resemblance across the accounts.¹¹ It is likely that Persian writers borrowed these names from Jonaraja's Sanskrit work. Hussain b. Ali might have been the first to record this story, which was later adopted by Dawood Mishkati. Kaul states, that while recounting this episode, neither Jonaraja, Baharistan-i-Shahi, Tarikh-i-Kashmir of Malik Haider Chadura, nor Nwadir-ul-Akhbar mentioned her by name. She was first identified in *Asrar-ul-Abrar*.¹² Surprisingly, she was contemporary to sultan Ali Shah and died during the reign of Shihab-u-Din. Coincidentally, the episode which Jonaraja has recorded falls in the same time period. This might have been the reason that Persian chroniclers have associated that episode with her.

Lalla's life and conditions are surrounded by myriad controversies since her very birth. For instance, there is no credible evidence about her birth year or the exact place she was born. Abdul Wahab Shayiq, who compiled his work during Afghan rule, states her birth year as 1334-35, while in *Tarikh-i-Hassan* and *Tarikh-i-Kabir* it is recorded as 1300-01.¹³ Anand Kaul and Bamzai suggest her birth year to be in the middle of the 14th century during Alla-u-Din's reign.¹⁴ Kaul, however, rejects this date, asserting it was not later than 1320, most likely between 1317 and 1320.¹⁵

There is a no consensus regarding her birthplace, with some identifying it as *Sempora*¹⁶ and others as *Panderthen*.¹⁷ However, it is widely agreed that she belonged to a Brahman family, received a liberal education, studied the *Bhagavad Gita*, the *Upanishads*, and other similar works as also reflected in her *vaakhs*.¹⁸

She had been married in a Brahmana family in *Pampore* at a very tender age in accordance with the customs of the land and led a domestic life for many years. She was cruelly treated by her mother-in-law, who nearly starved her.¹⁹ Didmari and Mishkati has mentioned that she was attracted and held ascetic feelings secretly inside her even during these days.²⁰ Consequently, she left her home and roamed the forests semi-naked, engaging in severe austerities and meditation.²¹ Temple and Grierson understood the word *natsun* from her verses to imply that she danced semi-naked.²² However, it more accurately means to roam without a destination, not dancing.²³

There are various opinions about the origin of her name 'Lalla.' Some believe it was given to her by people²⁴ due to her enlarged belly (*lal*), which hung loose to cover the pubic region.²⁵ Others suggest it derived from a corruption of *Lila* or *Lol*.²⁶ However, the most plausible explanation is that *Lalla* was an ancient name²⁷ she adopted as a pseudonym, possibly her maiden name. For instance, her following utterance indicates that meanwhile using it in her *vaakhs*, she was still a housewife, not an ascetic;²⁸

Hund maertan kin kath

*Lalle nilvath tchalni zah*²⁹

Amidst feasting on sheep or cattle,

Lalla starves, with stone beneath her meal.

Moreover, there is no credible evidence regarding her actual spiritual guru. Some modern scholars believe it was Sidh Mol (Sidh Srikanth) who guided her to spiritual realms,³⁰ while local lore suggests she was deeply influenced by the Sufis of her time.³¹ The Sufis who guided her on the spiritual path have been variously identified as Syed Ali Hamadani, Syed Hussain Simnani, and Jalal-u-Din Makhdoom Jahaniyan in different accounts.

The Legends Associated with Lal Ded

While the legends surrounding Lalla's life may have embellished historical facts, but they effectively convey her social and domestic experiences, evolving intellectual milieu, spiritual journey, revered status among Kashmiri people, and spiritual state. Some of them are outlined below.

Once, Lalla went to fetch water for domestic use. As she was returning home, her husband struck the water pot on her head, causing it to break. Despite this, the water miraculously remained intact upon her head. She used this water to fill all the pots at home and poured the excess into a nearby field, where a significant pond subsequently formed. This pond became known as *Lalla Trag* or *Lalla Talab* (Lalla's Pond). This incident revealed Lalla's ascetic or saintly nature. She then renounced all worldly attachments and began to wander naked in the forests.³²

On a different occasion, Lalla was sitting naked by the roadside, seemingly oblivious to the passersby. However, she abruptly huddled and scrunched her body to shield herself from the gaze of one particular man. When he inquired about her sudden action, she responded that all other men were akin to women and questioned, "Why would a dusty woman veil herself from ignoble women?" She further explained, "You are a true man; thus, it became necessary for me to cover my body."³³ While the accuracy of this episode is questionable, it hints at a significant shift in Lal Ded's religious practices and beliefs following her contact with Syed Ali Hamadani and other Sufis.

Although the original text did not mention a name, several historians have linked the mysterious man to Syed Ali Hamadani.³⁴ Diddmari, however, denies any possibility of her being a contemporary of Hazrat Syed Ali Hamadani, as he records her death during Sultan Shihab-u-Din's reign.³⁵ Instead, he identifies Syed Hussain Simnani as her contemporary, noting that he visited the valley before Syed Ali Hamadani during Shihab-u-Din's time.³⁶ Kaul follows the same narrative and refutes any possibility of her meeting with Syed Ali Hamadani.³⁷

According to another legend, there lived a *jogi* or priest named Sidda Srikant in Pampore. One day, Lalla entered his temple naked and attempted to desecrate the idols. He stopped her, saying that she could not disgrace a place where God resides. Lalla replied, "Then show me a place where God is absent." She then accused him of being a hypocrite with a skewed vision, saying, "You associate plurality with His essence, divide Him into male and female genders, and confine Him to a particular place, while He is one and omnipresent." Her words left the priest speechless.³⁸ We might align with Kaul, who argues that the defecation of idols was inconsistent with the behavior expected of such a saint and likely represents a later variant or corruption influenced by the narrator's personal aversion to idol worship.³⁹ Nonetheless, according to Khan, the recording of this episode signifies the shifting intellectual milieu of the time.⁴⁰

Religious Beliefs of Lalla

Scholars' views are divided on her religious beliefs; some consider her a Hindu Saivite mystic,⁴¹ while others associate her with Islam, especially during her later years.⁴²

However, it is worth noting that early medieval Kashmiri Pandit accounts conspicuously omit any mention of her, suggesting she was viewed as an outsider to Brahmanical society due to her vocal opposition to its beliefs. Even until the nineteenth century, early Hindu writers consistently omitted any mention of her.⁴³ A question arises: If she was a Saivite mystic, why did only she attract the attention of Muslim Persian hagiographers and no other Saivite mystics of her time?⁴⁴

Kashmir in the 14th century, deeply rooted in Hindu-Buddhist traditions, argues Khan witnessed its first passionate embrace of Sufi egalitarianism through Lal Ded, a wandering Saivite mystic.⁴⁵ She was initially mentioned by Mulla Ali Raina in *Tazkirat-ul-Arifin*⁴⁶ and subsequently by other medieval Muslim Persian writers. She was honored with illustrious titles such as *Lal Arifa*, *Lal Majzooba*, *Rabia-i-Thani*, *Maryam Makani*, etc. These sources point to her acceptance of Syed Ali Hamadani, Syed Hussain Simnani, and Jalal-u-Din Makhdoom Jahaniyan as her spiritual guides. This could suggest, as believed by many Kashmiri Muslims, that she embraced Islam in her later years, or at the very least, was profoundly influenced by Sufis.⁴⁷ However, her conversion to Islam is a topic of debate: while some believe Syed Ali Hamadani influenced her decision,⁴⁸ others argue she converted on the hands of Hussain Simnani.⁴⁹ Another perspective credits Jalaluddin Makhdoom Jahaniyan as instrumental in her adoption of Islam.⁵⁰ Kaul, however, refutes the assertion that she converted to Islam.⁵¹

Moreover, the *Suharwardi* Sufis held her in great respect and granted her a leading position. Baba Haider Tulmulu even asserts that no one can achieve her spiritual status except for the disciples of Sheikh Makhdoom.⁵² It is also noted that her Hindu or Saivism-inspired *vaakhs* were composed before her encounter with Syed Ali. Subsequently, her *vaakhs* began to reflect Muslim thought.⁵³ Due to the strong resonance between her *vaakhs* and the fundamental principles of Islam, later Sufis regarded her as among the eminent

female Sufis.⁵⁴ In his work *Habba Khatoon Tawarikh ke Aaine Mein*, Bhat associates Lalla with Islam, citing her mention by Noor-u-Din in his *shruks* as his spiritual teacher.⁵⁵ While Lal Ded's poetry incorporated Saivite concepts and Noor-u-Din's verses were abundant with Sufi terms related to austerities, meditation, and the love of God, believes Sikand, they both pursued the same goal.⁵⁶

In his comprehensive examination, Khan has examined her religious beliefs in three ways: she might have embraced Islam, although definitive proof is lacking in texts. Alternatively, she could have sought to reform Hindu society, but her historical role indicates a closer association with Islam than Saivism. Finally, she could likely have rebelled against the caste-ridden social order of her time, and substantial evidence of this protest is found in Lalla's verses.⁵⁷ Lal Ded's antagonistic stance towards the Brahmins led to her being remembered by those undergoing Islamic acculturation as not just a convert to Islam but also a defiant rebel against Brahmanical creed. Lalla's mystic approach to religion emphasized humanism and individualism.

Some have studied Lalla in the context of the Bhakti movement in northern India during the 15th to 17th centuries. For example, Fauq has drawn a comparison between her and Guru Nanak.⁵⁸ Khan, however, notes that while both Lalla and Bhakti saints sought God within, their approaches to societal issues differed significantly. Additionally, the Bhakti saints' attitudes towards Islam were fundamentally different from Lalla's.⁵⁹

In the end, it can be said that she transcended the distinctions of Hindu and Muslim, rising above such differences and considerations. Irrespective of her religious affiliation, she continues to be revered by both Kashmiri Muslims and Hindus, for whom her confessional identity appears insignificant. It would be apt to close this debate here by quoting this wise saying of Lalla, 'The differences like male and female, belief and disbelief only exist in this apparent and transitory world (*aalam-i-nasoot*). When one reaches beyond that these differences and complexities vanish and one finds freedom and salvation.'⁶⁰

Lalla and Noor-u-Din

Lal Ded played a crucial role in the development of Sheikh Noor-u-Din's thought and is sometimes credited with his transformation from a thief to an accomplished Rishi.⁶¹ She is believed to have appointed him as her spiritual successor.⁶² Nooruddin even aspired to attain the same station that Lalla achieved, as reflected in his following verses;

Tass padmaan porchi Lalle

Yem galle amrit chov

Tammi Shiv wotch thall-i-thalle

*Tueth mei war dito deva.*⁶³

That Lalla, who hailed from *Padmanpora*

Who have gulped wisdom's nectar, embracing oneness sublime

And beheld Shiva's essence with utmost clarity

Oh God! Bestow me such a station divine.

According to Khan, it was Lalla's association with Simnani that must have prompted the Sheikh to seek inspiration from both. In addition to inspiring Noor-u-Din during his youth, she also influenced some women who later became his disciples.⁶⁴

Death

The year of her death also varies depending on different estimates of her birth year. According to one version, she died at old age in 1400 A.D., while alternative sources point to 1373, near the Jamia Mosque in *Brijbehara*, where her body remained undiscovered.⁶⁵ In another narrative, Muslims buried her, while Hindus cremated her, each adhering to their own religious customs.⁶⁶

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- ³ Baba Dawood Mishkati, *Asrar-ul-Abrar*, MS. Acc. No. 5 (Srinagar: Research Section, S. P. S. Library), f. 324.
- ⁴ R. K. Parmu, *A History of Muslim Rule in Kashmir 1320-1819* (Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1969), 428.
- ⁵ Mohammad Ishaq Khan, *Kashmir's Transition to Islam: The Role of Muslim Rishis (Fifteenth to Eighteenth Century)* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1994), 1. Yoginder Sikand, "The Role of Women in Kashmiri Rishism," in *Speaking Peace: Women's voices from Kashmir*, ed. Urvashi Butalia (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2002), 46. Muhibbul Hasan, *Kashmir Under the Sultans*, (Calcutta: Iran Society, 1959), 238.
- ⁶ Mishkati, *Asrar-ul-Abrar*, 324.
- ⁷ Jayalal Kaul, *Lal Ded* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1973), 2, 3.
- ⁸ Sikand, "The Role of Women in Kashmiri Rishism," 43.
- ⁹ Khan, *Kashmir's Transition to Islam*, 71. Muhammad Aslam Abul Qasim also mentions her in his work *Gauhar-i-Alam*. See Kaul, *Lal Ded*, 4.
- ¹⁰ Mishkati, *Asrar-ul-Abrar*, 321. Khwaja Azam Didmari, *Tarikh-i-Kashmir or Waqiat-i-Kashmir*, MS., Acc. No. 6175 (University of Kashmir: Iqbal Library), f. 37. ¹⁰ Haider Malik Chadurah, *Tarikh-i-Kashmir*, trans. Raja Bano (History of Kashmir) (Srinagar: Jay Kay Books, 2013), 97-98.
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- ¹² Kaul, *Lal Ded*, 22-23.
- ¹³ Ibid., 4-5. Sikand, "The Role of Women in Kashmiri Rishism," 43. G. M. D. Sufi, *Kashir: Being A History of Kashmir, Vol. II* (Lahore: University of Punjab, 1948), 383. Fauq, *Khwarein-i-Kashmir*, 33. Jawahar Lal Bhat, *Lal Ded Revisited* (Vision Creative Services, 2014), 29, 30. Some scholars record 1335 while others 1317-20 as her birth year.
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- ¹⁵ Kaul, *Lal Ded*, 7.
- ¹⁶ Fauq, *Khwarein-i-Kashmir*, 33. Sikand, "The Role of Women in Kashmiri Rishism," 43. Bhat, *Lal Ded Revisited*, 30.
- ¹⁷ Sufi, *Kashir: Being A History of Kashmir, Vol. II*, 384. Bhat, *Lal Ded Revisited*, 29. Kaul, *Lal Ded*, 5.
- ¹⁸ Fauq, *Khwarein-i-Kashmir*, 33. Sikand, "The Role of Women in Kashmiri Rishism," 43. Bhat, *Lal Ded Revisited*, 29-30. Kaul, *Lal Ded*, 9.
- ¹⁹ Richard Carnac Temple, *The Word of Lalla the Prophetess: Being the Sayings of Lal Ded or Lal Diddi of Kashmir* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1924), 7. George Grierson and Lionel D. Barnett, *Lalla-Vakyani or The Wise Saying of Lal Ded* (London: The Royal Asiatic Society, 1920), 2. Kaul, *Lal Ded*, 9. Fauq, *Khwarein-i-Kashmir*, 37. Sikand, "The Role of Women in Kashmiri Rishism," 43. Bhat, *Lal Ded Revisited*, 31. Sufi, *Kashir: Being A History of Kashmir, Vol. II*, 384.
- ²⁰ Mishkati, *Asrar-ul-Abrar*, f. 322. Didmari, *Tarikh-i-Kashmir*, f. 38.
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- ²² Temple, *The Word of Lalla the Prophetess*, 1, 7. Grierson and Barnett, *Lalla-Vakyani*, 2.
- ²³ Kaul, *Lal Ded*, 12-13.
- ²⁴ Fauq, *Khwarein-i-Kashmir*, 32-33.
- ²⁵ Sufi, *Kashir: Being A History of Kashmir, Vol. II*, 384. Sufi, *Islamic culture in Kashmir*, 168.
- ²⁶ The word *lila* means 'divine play' or the nature or way of describing reality, while *lol* means 'love.'
- ²⁷ Lalla name is also recorded by Kalhana, see M. A. Stein, trans. *Kalhana's Rajatarangini (Vol.I)* (Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass, 1979), 241. Temple states that Lalla means darling, see Temple, *The Word of Lalla the Prophetess*, 1.
- ²⁸ Kaul, *Lal Ded*, 13.
- ²⁹ Abu Nayeem, *Kalam-i-Sheikh-ul-Alam*, Urdu (based on Nur Nama) (Srinagar: Sheikh Muhammad Usman and Sons, 2006), 515. Kaul, *Lal Ded*, 10. J. Hinton Knowles, *A Dictionary of Kashmiri Proverbs and Sayings* (Bombay: Education Society's Press, 1885), 82.
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- ³¹ Sikand, "The Role of Women in Kashmiri Rishism," 43-44.
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- ³³ Mishkati, *Asrar-ul-Abrar*, f. 322. There is another version of this episode associated with the meeting of Lal Ded with Syed Ali Hamadani, see Temple, *The Word of Lalla the Prophetess*, 8. Grierson and Barnett, *Lalla-Vakyani*, 2-3. Sikand, "The Role of Women in Kashmiri Rishism," 44.
- ³⁴ Fauq, *Khwarein-i-Kashmir*, 46. Sufi, *Kashir: Being A History of Kashmir, Vol. II*, 384-85. Sufi, *Islamic culture in Kashmir*, 168.
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- ³⁶ Ibid., f. 39.
- ³⁷ Kaul, *Lal Ded*, 22.
- ³⁸ Mishkati, *Asrar-ul-Abrar*, f. 323.
- ³⁹ Kaul, *Lal Ded*, 17.
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- ⁴¹ Temple, *The Word of Lalla the Prophetess*, 2, 6. Grierson and Barnett, *Lalla-Vakyani*, 1, 7. Bhat, *Lal Ded Revisited*, 26.
- ⁴² Sikand, "The Role of Women in Kashmiri Rishism," 47.
- ⁴³ Ibid.
- ⁴⁴ Khan, *Kashmir's Transition to Islam*, 71.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid., Preface VII.

- ⁴⁶ He mentions her as a chosen disciple of Hussain Simnani, see Khan, *Kashmir's Transition to Islam*, 70. Bhat, *Lal Ded Revisited*, 30. Fauq, *Khwatein-i-Kashmir*, 45.
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- ⁴⁹ Kaul, *Lal Ded*, 23-24.
- ⁵⁰ Sikand, "The Role of Women in Kashmiri Rishism," 44.
- ⁵¹ Kaul, *Lal Ded*, 72-73.
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- ⁶⁴ Khan, *Kashmir's Transition to Islam*, 64, 70, 76.
- ⁶⁵ Mishkati, *Asrar-ul-Abrar*, 324. Didmari, *Tarikh-i-Kashmir*, 38. Bhat, *Lal Ded Revisited*, 30.
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