



Research Paper

Lal Ded and Roopa Bhawani : The Two Famous Poets of Ancient Kashmir

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ABSTRACT: In the fourteenth and the seventeenth centuries, the women writing in any language was a rarity, but it happened in Kashmir. A voice, which set off a resonance heard with clear tone till today, spoke directly to the people and what is more, was heard with all seriousness, recorded in collective memory and later, the words put down on paper. It was the import, sonority and direct appeal of their utterances that reached out to the peasant and the priest, the prince and the plebeian and stayed printed on their minds and travelled down the ages by word of mouth. These are the women known simply as Lal Ded and Roopa Bhawani, the mother figures to the common men and women of Kashmir. The objective of the paper is to highlight the contribution of these two doyens towards the development of poetry in Kashmir region and its impact on the common mass of Kashmir. Moreover this paper will discuss the lives and background of these two women poetesses in detail.

KEY WORDS: Collective Memory, Mother Figures, Resonance, Plebeian, Kashmir

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I. INTRODUCTION:

a. Lal Ded as a Great Poetess of Kashmir:

Lal Ded, a poet, a sufi, a yogi and a devotee of Shiva was born on 1355 in Pandrethan, a village in the suburbs of Srinagar to a Kashmiri Pandit (Brahmin) family. From childhood, she was wise and religious-minded. She seems to have been given some education in religious texts by the family priest, who has been identified as a learned scholar and yogic practitioner Siddha Srikanth. He is the Guru to whom she refers in her vaakhs frequently, sometimes asking him questions, sometimes even playfully pointing out his inadequacies as a spiritual mentor. When she was twelve years old, she was married in Pampore, a place in Kashmir, where her in-laws gave her the name Padmavati. It is said that her mother-in-law was very cruel. She never gave her any peace. It is claimed that her mother-in-law used to put a stone on Lalla's plate (thaal). She would then cover the stone with rice so that people would get the impression that Lalla had a plateful of rice. The marriage, as is the case with most where the woman dares to steer an independent course, was doomed from the very beginning. The couple was ill-matched. The husband had none of the sensitivity or subtlety of mind to appreciate Lal Ded's deeper expectations from life. Besides, the mother-in-law was typical, oppressive and unable to understand that even though performing all the duties of a traditional daughter-in-law. Lal Ded's concerns lay beyond those a mere householder lived and that she thought at a higher plane. Her mother-in-law would miss no opportunity to find something to complain about in her behaviour. Lal Ded was thus a double victim-of an inimical mother-in-law and a jealous husband. There are innumerable stories of how cruelly she was tormented and the Kashmiri language is full of proverbs connected with Lal Ded's legendary patience, wisdom, deep insights and spiritual power. The best known story of her life concerns the patience with which she put up with her mother-in-law's treatment, who did not even give her enough to eat. She would remain half fed, but would never complain about her mother-in-law. Her father-in-law was a good man and he was kind to her, but her mother-in-law made her miserable. She would even speak ill of Lalla to her husband. Poor Lalla knew no happiness either with her husband or with her mother-in-law. Kashmiris consider her a wise woman and every Kashmiri has some sayings of Lalla on the tip of his tongue. The Kashmiri language is full of her sayings. Kashmiri Hindus and Muslims affectionately call her "Mother Lalla" or "Granny Lalla". She is also called "Lallayogeshwari". Some people call her Lalla, the mystic.

When Lalla was twenty-six she renounced the family and became a devotee of Shiva. Like a mad person, she would go around naked. She would only keep the company of sadhus and peers. She did not think in terms of men and women. She would claim that she had yet to encounter a man, and that is why she went about

naked. But when she saw Shah Hamdan, she hid herself saying: "I saw a man, I saw a man." The "Vaakhs" of Lalla number around two hundred.

The exact date of the death of Lal Ded is not known but it is said that she died in Bijbehara . Lal Ded is alive in her sayings and in the hearts of Kashmiris.

Lalleshvari's poetry is primarily mystical and philosophical, though she uses a lot of domestic imagery. The philosophical insights do not only relate to her extensive reading, but emerge from her life experience as a woman of her time. Since Lalleshvari is our most loved and remembered poet. Lalleshvari is not easy translate. Part of the difficulty is due to her terse style and part due the type of Kashmiri syntax she uses. It is a type of syntax in which it is not uncommon for the verb phrase to precede the noun or pronoun phrase, or in some contexts for the noun phrase to precede the verb phrase in ways that is not the norm in English (instances are expressions like 'wrote I' instead of 'I wrote', or 'ate I' instead of 'I ate,' and 'snake killed she' rather than 'she killed [the] snake'). It is not grammatically impossible to reverse the order, of course, in ordinary spoken Kashmiri, yet, in poetic and epigrammatic Kashmiri, the 'ate she' and 'snake killed she' type of syntax is frequently used. Here is a transliterated Vakh 5. Kashmiri is an inflected language, the case of the verb indicates the pronoun reference.

Came [I] to this place following a path; from here went [I] wandering over pathless knolls. Beside the embankment, my day ended. [My] pocket [I]searched for a cowrie, found nothing. What can [I] pay for my passage ?

b. Lalla, who gave a Voice to Women:

In the fourteenth century, a woman writing in any language was a rarity, but it happened in Kashmir. A voice, which set off a resonance heard with clear tone till today, spoke directly to the people and what is more, was heard with all seriousness, recorded in collective memory and later, the words put down on paper. It was the import, sonority and direct appeal of her utterances that reached out to the peasant and the priest, the prince and the plebeian and stayed printed on their minds and travelled down the ages by word of mouth. This is the woman known simply as Lal Ded, the mother figure to the common men and women of Kashmir. Lal Ded became, what is known in modern feminist critical idiom, a Subject Woman, or-to use the current jargon, an Empowered Woman, one who through her mystic poetry, set in motion a cultural, linguistic, social and religious revolution. Her work reveals that she conversed and discussed with the most learned scholars-all men-of her time on an equal footing, without a trace of gender inequality, self-consciousness or the so-called womanly reserve, yet her vocabulary is that of the common man. Her poetry is a woman's work and in the process she gives a voice to women. As an example, here is a popular vaakh:

ami panu sodras navi chhas larntt kati bazi day mayon me ti diyi tar amyan takyan pony zan shramanzua
chhum braman garu gatshuha

(With thread untwisted my boat I tow through the sea,Would the Lord heed and ferry me across? Water seeps through my bowls of unbaked clay, Oh how my heart longs to go back home!)

Lal Ded's choice of metaphor is drawn from the lowly boatman and the potter and the emotional climax of the vaakh, the cry of an unhappy woman caught in a bad marriage who longs to return home. Of course she uses these to convey her mystic quest, but it is interesting to note that even when talking about abstract concepts, it is the woman's voice that rings out true.

The fearless confidence of self-reliance such verses exude makes Lal Ded stand out not only among mystic poets, but among women and all other enslaved beings. To admit of human shortcomings in a Guru is rare, and then go on to say that ones own resources have helped finally is rarer still. Lal Ded appears as an individual voice unfettered by norms, ritual obeisance or conventions. In this respect she is a precursor to the later, better known Mirabai. It is also a pointer to the fact that Lal Ded had effortlessly transcended gender and struck a blow at the prevalent patriarchy even as early as the fourteenth century. The so-called liberated woman of the twentieth century appears much smaller in comparison. The total absence of the gender factor or any feeling of regret at being barred from seeking or following her own wishes because of her femininity or without the intervention of patriarchy, is a striking feature of her art. Hers is no weak, helpless voice appealing for succour or aid from a mere man. In fact, it is the powerful voice giving expression to the wishes of all those men and women who wish to find a way out of the labyrinth of the human situation in life. Perhaps to a real mystic like Lal Ded, the body which is responsible for male and female duality, is important not to emphasize the different ness between genders, but as a vehicle to carry the spirit in which there is no difference. It is believed that Lal Ded, after she left home in a final break with material ties, went about unclothed. This suggests that the life of the spirit rather than that of the flesh became real for her. It is not out of a desire to shock, nor in a mood for self- mortification, nor even as self-flagellation in the manner of the mediaeval women Christian saints, that she exposed herself to the elements. It is just that in her 'fine madness', she seems to have become completely unself-conscious, almost unaware of her body. She was thus happily,effortlessly able also to transcend the gender factor that occupies so much of the mental space of women intellectuals, thinkers and writers today. She

refused to be bothered by what the world would say when she went about naked. When she was asked whether she felt no shame at showing her body to all the men around her, she asked whether there was a man around! To her the ordinary mass of people was no better than sheep or other dumb animals. This story is similar to that of Mirabai, whom Tulsidas is supposed to have refused to meet because he only met men and not women, to which she is said to have retorted in the same way, asking who, apart from the Lord, was a real man?

The two following vaakhs are illustrate, gwaran vonunam kunuy vatsun,nebra dopnam andar atsunsuy me lali gav vakh tu vatsuntavay hetum nangay natsun

(The Guru gave me but one word of wisdom-From the outside bade me turn within That word for me, Lal, is the surest prophecy, And that is why I dance in naked abandon!)

lyakh tu thwakh pethu sheri hetsumnyanda sapnyam path bronthu tanylal chhas kal zanh nu thsenimadu yeli sapis vyepe kyah?

(Abuse and spit I wore like a crown,Slander followed or preceded my steps;But Lal I am, never swerved from my goalMy being suffused with God, where is the room for these?)

c. Lal Ded as a Mystic:

The most significant contribution of Lal Ded is that she brought the difficult Shaiva philosophy out from the cubicles of the Sanskrit-knowing scholars into the wide, open spaces of the Kashmiri-knowing common people. In the process of translating its highly evolved, in fact highly subtle, concepts and her personal mystic experiences into the language of the masses, she not only made these accessible to them, but also enriched the Kashmiri language. The mystic's dilemma of how to communicate the incommunicable personal vision, seems to have been effortlessly resolved by her through the use of common idioms, images and metaphors with which people could easily relate. Thus she is able to explain ideas and experiences which would otherwise lie beyond the reach of ordinary people. The medium of the mother tongue and the use of the easily recital verse form of the vaakh, made her utterances pass into common parlance and secured for them a place in collective memory. What gives her words authority even though as a woman she might have lacked it in that society and time, is that she has a personal experience of reality, a direct relationship with Shiva, without the aid of an intermediary male figure. In this we can compare her to the mediaeval Christian women mystics once again. For them too the only way to validate their words, and to get out of the all-pervasive, constricting presence of male authority, was this claim of a personal relationship with God. After all, it was from God Himself that all the authority of the Church, all of whose top functionaries were male, was drawn. These women were thus able to establish some authority of their own. We can say that in this 'confession', they did not need a 'confessor', they could be alone.

II. RUPA BHAWANI: A SEVENTEENTH CENTURY SAINT AND A GREAT POETESS

The mystic poet, Mata Rupa Bhawani was born on 1621 in Navakadal, Srinagar. Her birth name was Alakheshwar, also known as Sharika Ansha Roopa. She was a 17th-century Hindu saint who lived in present-day Kashmir. She was the daughter of Pandit Madhav Joo Dhar, a resident of Khankah-i-Shokta, Nawakadal, a place in Srinagar Kashmir in the early 17th century. Her father Madhav Dhar, a staunch devotee of Bhagwati Sharika, whose sacred hill he went round every morning bare footed would be seen holding discourses and discussions with the Muslim saint Thag Baba just across the river opposite his residence at Nawakadal, Srinagar. Roopa was the Goddess Sharika incarnate, and thus she maintained the tradition that Yaiva Uma-Saiva Kashmira. She who is Uma is Kashmir. He introduced her to the practices of yoga. Oral and written legend has it that Madhav Joo Dhar was an ardent devotee of Mata Sharika (Kali's). He visited her temple daily at Hari Parvat to pray for hours. In 1620, on the first day of Navratra, pleased by his devotion, Mata Sharika gave him a boon. Madhav Joo Dhar asked for a daughter, and Alakheshwar was born to Joo's wife on Poorna Amavasya in the month of Jeth (Jyesta) in 1621. The exact year of her birth varies in a different account between 1620 and 1624. Alakheshwar followed her father in pursuit of God and spirituality.

It is said that on the first day of the Navaratri (the nine days dedicated to the worship of the Divine Mother Durga) in the month of Ashwin, in the year 1620, Madhav Joo arrived for worship at midnight, to uninterruptedly worship on this most auspicious occasion. He commenced his worship and, with all reverence and attentive detail, he glorified the Supreme Goddess, his heart filled with adoration. When his worship was complete, the Divine Mother is said to have appeared before him in the form of a radiant girl child. On seeing this divine child, Madhav was so filled with intense joy and bliss that he lost all consciousness of his external surroundings, and tears of joy and devotion flowed from his eyes. He understood that the mother of the Universe, Mahamaya, was Herself in front of him in the form of this child. Thereupon he worshipped the girl, placing flowers at Her feet and incense before Her. With fatherly love he offered Her sweets. The Mother was pleased with the simplicity and love of Her devotee, and granted him a boon. Madhav requested Mother, 'Since you have appeared before me in the form of a child, take birth in my house as my daughter.' The Divine Mother granted the boon and vanished. So goes the legend of the birth of Roopa Bhawani.

In the following year 1621, in the month of Jyeshtha, on the Poornima Tithi (full moon), in the early morning a daughter was born to Madhav Joo's wife. He named his daughter Alakshyeshvari, which means one who is imperceptible and indescribable; it refers to the Goddess in the formless non-dual aspect. In her father's house, Alakshyeshvari's years of childhood were passed in the company of devotees. Madhav Joo was held in high esteem, and spiritual seekers came from far-away provinces to meet him. Alakshyeshvari's spirituality blossomed early in these favourable conditions. As she grew older, the spiritual tendencies within her became increasingly manifest. Her father, Madhav Joo, himself became her guru and gave her spiritual initiation. Nevertheless, in accordance with the prevailing customs of the time, her father arranged her marriage to a young man of the nearby Sapru family.

a. Married Life of Roopa Bhawani:

However, Alakshyeshvari's married life was unhappy. Her husband, Hiranand Sapru, totally lacked all understanding of Alakshyeshvari's spiritual nature; and her mother-in-law, Somp Kunj, had a cruel disposition. Alakshyeshvari's life in this house was difficult and joyless. Her mother-in-law was always finding fault with her. Once she accused Alakshyeshvari of going out at midnight, and made Hiranand suspicious of his wife's fidelity.

The truth was that at midnight Alakshyeshvari would go to perform her sadhana (spiritual practice) at the shrine of Mother Sharika on Hara Parvat. One day Hiranand followed her to see where she went at night. Alakshyeshvari knew this. When she had nearly reached the shrine, she turned around and asked Hiranand to join her. However, as he was steeped in ignorance, he is said to have beheld a vast expanse of water, impossible to cross, between himself and her and disheartened, he was forced to return home.

Yet another incident is related of her life in her in-laws' home. One day, on the occasion of some festival, Madhav sent his daughter a pot of rice pudding (kheer). Alakshyeshvari's mother-in-law, on seeing the kheer spoke sarcastically, 'What will I do with this small pot of kheer? I have so many relatives; this is hardly sufficient for them.' Alakshyeshvari replied, 'Please give this kheer to as many persons as you like, but don't look inside the pot.' Somp Kunj began to ladle out the kheer and gave it to everyone she knew. But the supply of kheer seemed endless! Finally, furious with anger, Somp Kunj looked inside the pot to find just a few grains sticking to its sides.

The next day at dawn, Alakshyeshvari cleaned the pot, and placed it in the flowing current of the Vitasta river, speaking thus, 'My father is doing his morning prayers (Sandhya) at the Diddmar Ghat. Go and stop there.' The pot floated down the Vitasta river and stopped exactly where Madhav Joo was doing his Sandhya. Madhav picked up the pot and took it home.

Even after seeing such miraculous incidents, not just once, but many times, Somp Kunj stubbornly refused to change her ways towards Alakshyeshvari. Hiranand also remained foolish and ignorant. Finally, when living there became unbearable, Alakshyeshvari left her husband's house never to return. It is said that this Sapru family's fortunes rapidly declined thereafter.

Alakshyeshvari renounced her father's home as well, and decided to seek the eternal abode of the Supreme Being. She wanted to become absorbed in sadhana. Seeking a solitary retreat, she selected a location to the north-east of Srinagar, known by its ancient name Jyestha Rudra. Here she did intense tapasya (austerities) for twelve and a half years, and began to glow with the fire of spirituality. At this point, people, attracted by her spiritual radiance, began to come to her in such large numbers that she decided to leave the place for a more solitary retreat.

b. Rupa Bhawani in Search of Spiritual Life and Her Miracles:

She moved to a village Mani Gaon, in north Kashmir, on the banks of the Ganges in the foothills of the Himalayas. On festival days many people would gather at Mani Gaon for a dip in the sacred waters. In these beautiful surroundings Alakshyeshvari chose to do her sadhana. On a forested hill-top, far from the village, she made a hermitage for herself. For a long time she remained in solitude, deep in spiritual practices.

It is said that none of the villagers at Mani Gaon knew of Alakshyeshvari's existence, until a certain miraculous incident revealed her presence to them. A cowherd boy used to take his cows to graze at a place which, unknown to him, was close to where Alakshyeshvari was absorbed in meditation. The boy noticed that a beautiful white cow left the herd every day at noon, and later returned on her own accord. One day he decided to follow the cow to see where she went. Following the cow, he reached a clearing in the forest. There he saw a beautiful woman dressed in ochre robes seated in meditation, her long hair flowing loosely, her face ashine with a heavenly lustre, and her eyes filled with a divine light. The cow, as though under a spell, stopped before the radiant ascetic. The ascetic woman got up and lovingly caressed the cow. The cow of her own accord poured its milk into the ascetic's bowl until it was full!

On seeing this wonderful vision the cowherd boy lost consciousness. When he milked the white cow he found to his astonishment that she gave even more milk than usual.

The cowherd confided his experiences to Lal Chandra, the village head. Lal was filled with reverence and devotion. He visited Alakshyeshvari, and then came daily to serve her in whichever way he could. By this time she had completed another twelve and a half years of spiritual practice in that hermitage.

I will from here refer to her as Bhavani (the Goddess as the power originating the world) or as Bhagavati (the Goddess with the six attributes of supremacy, righteousness, fame, prosperity, wisdom, and discrimination). This is in keeping with the common belief in Kashmir that Alakshyeshvari was an incarnation of the Goddess Durga.

Lal Chandra told the villagers about Bhavani and the miraculous happenings attributed to her. But when she began to receive a great deal of public attention, she left the village, preferring to continue her spiritual practices in solitude. She went to dwell in a hut on the bank of the Shahkol river. Even there she attracted devotees.

Once, a spiritual seeker fascinated by her aura of spirituality asked her, 'What is your name?' Bhavani replied, 'My name is Roopa (one who has realized her own True Self).' The seeker further questioned her, 'Why do you wear this ochre dress?' Bhagavati replied, 'This ochre represents the state of being in which the individual soul has taken the colour of the Supreme Being.' Bhavani lived for many years on the banks of the Shahkol, absorbed in meditation. Finally, when large numbers of devotees again began to flock around her, she once more moved away to a quieter spot, in the village of Vaskora. Legend says that the Naga, (snake) Vasuki, did his tapasya in Vaskora to attain the Grace of Shiva. When his sadhna bore fruit, he asked Lord Shiva for a boon, 'May I always adorn you as a necklace.' Bhagavati greatly liked this spot and began to dwell there.

Bhavani's grace now began to shower on her numerous devotees. Many miracles are attributed to her. There was a young boy, blind from birth, who served her with great devotion. Bhavani's compassionate heart was moved by his sad condition. She gave him a stick and asked him to dig the earth with it. He immediately obeyed her. Many devotees gathered nearby, watching. Soon water began to appear from the hole that was dug. Bhavani said to the young boy, 'Wash your eyes with the water that has come forth.' As the boy did so, his sight was restored and the crowd of devotees were amazed.

Bhavani had a brother, Lal Joo, who was very devoted to her and took her as his guru. Lal's son, Bal, began to stay with her in her service. Once, Lal requested Bhavani to educate his illiterate son. Bhavani gave the boy a pen and some paper and ordered him to write. Thereupon, miraculously, the boy began to write fluently like a highly educated person. The devotees were overwhelmed by this transformation.

In Vaskora, Bhavani began to give spiritual instruction to Bal Joo Dar and Sadanand Muttoo in the form of poetical verses, called Vakhs. One hundred and forty-five of her Vakhs have been transmitted to us. After twelve and a half years (periods of this length seem to recur in Bhavani's life) had elapsed in Vaskora, Bhavani returned to Srinagar on the entreaties of her numerous devotees, and began to live in Saphakadal.

Many years had elapsed, and Bhavani now yearned to be released from her earthly body. On the Saptami Tithi, in the month of Magha, in the year 1721, Bhavani's soul took flight forever. The legend relates how her devotees, filled with grief, carried her body towards the cremation ground. On the way they met the village head who, on seeing the funeral procession, asked whom they were carrying. On hearing that it was Roop Bhavani, he was very startled, for he had just seen Bhavani walking down the road by which he came! The devotees looked inside the coffin and found nothing there but some alak (locks-of hair) and some flowers. The alak are even today worshipped with great reverence.

c. Rupa Bhawani as a great mystic poet of Kashmir:

Rupa Bhawani was the second great mystic poet of 17th century. She had a great and deep experience of ups and downs of life. The worldly sufferings showed her the path of spiritual life. Her spiritual 'Guru' was her father Pandit Madhav Joo Dhar who initiated her into the mysteries and practices of yoga. She gave rich mystic poetry to Kashmiri language. In her poetry, we can find the influence of both Kashmir Shaivism and Islamic Sufism. Roopa Bhawani's Vakhs are so vibrant with her presence that on reading them one feels that she is very near, giving knowledge to her children with powerful words of renunciation, and dispelling ignorance with the weapon of Eternal Truth.

III. CONCLUSION:

Lal Ded and Roopa Bhawani became, what is known in modern feminist critical idiom, the Subject Women, or-to use the current jargon, an Empowered Women, one who through their mystic poetry, set in motion a cultural, linguistic, social and religious revolution. Their works reveal that they conversed and discussed with the most learned scholars-all men-of their times on an equal footing, without a trace of gender inequality, self-consciousness or the so-called womanly reserve, yet their vocabulary is that of the common man. Their poetry is a woman's work and in the process they gave a voice to women. Yogeshwari Lalla and Roopa Bhawani were the first Saraswat Saints and Poetesses of Kashmir. Born in the first quarter of the 14th and 17th Centuries respectively, they were the harbingers of the unexpected overall politico religious change of

Kashmir, and in accordance with the will of the Great KALA (Time) thousands of years old Hindu Kingship had to yield place to the Islamic dynastic rule. With this change they however preserved the ancient Cultural heritage of the Kashmiri by preaching in the common man's tongue the high principles and teachings of Shaivism. In this universe nothing happens without a purpose underlying it. Religious fanaticism had to be tempered; the ideal of secularism-for the Kashmiris are basically one race of Saraswats, tolerance, co-operative understanding and had to be spread far and wide.

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