



International Journal of Advanced Academic Studies

E-ISSN: 2706-8927

P-ISSN: 2706-8919

www.allstudyjournal.com

IJAAS 2024; 6(5): 46-48

Received: 18-03-2024

Accepted: 21-04-2024

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A study of women Bhaktas, with a special focus on Lal Ded of Kashmir

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33545/27068919.2024.v6.i5a.1170>

Abstract

Women *bhaktas*, or devotees, played a significant role in the history of medieval India. They exhibited their devotion and spirituality through various means, thereby challenging the established standards and social norms of the period. To show their dedication and spirituality, they defied social conventions and gender stereotypes through renunciation, singing, and poetry. Lal Ded, simply known as Lalla, stood out as one of the most notable examples, particularly in the context of Kashmir. Lal Ded's life and poetry exemplified a profound spiritual journey marked by devotion, wisdom, and liberation. Born in the 14th century, Lal Ded challenged the societal norms of her time by renouncing her privileged background and embracing a life of austerity and devotion to God. Her teachings emphasized the importance of inner purity, love, and surrender to the divine. Her verses, composed in the Kashmiri language, reflected her deep mystical insights and her experiences of union with the divine. Through her poetry, she explored themes of love, devotion, and the quest for self-realization. In the male-dominated society of medieval Kashmir, Lal Ded's life and teachings were revolutionary. She asserted the spiritual equality of men and women. Her legacy as a woman *bhakta* is thus not only one of devotion and mystical wisdom, but also one of empowerment and liberation.

Keywords: Lalla, women, devotion, Kashmir, poetry, social

Introductions

The historical trajectory of the female devotional voice and the feminine connection to God is extraordinary. The feminine voice embodies a certain emotional state, conveys a specific social dynamic, and signifies a combination of modesty and influential subordination. The use of this particular vocal tone and the process of feminization in expressing devotion help to individualize not only the act of worship, but also the entire social structure. It allows for transcendence that surpasses and goes beyond gender boundaries. Women *bhaktas*, or female devotees, greatly influenced the religious and cultural milieu of medieval India. Their contributions to the Bhakti movement enhanced Indian spiritual traditions and cleared the path for more female empowerment and equality in society. Women poet-saints were influential figures in the Bhakti movement. However, numerous women encountered difficulties in gaining recognition within the predominantly male-dominated movement. They were begrudgingly recognized and included in their group only after they demonstrated unwavering commitment to the divine, showcased exceptional poetry, and persistently asserted their spiritual equality with their peers. Their fight demonstrated the enduring influence of patriarchal beliefs in society as well as in religious and social movements that aimed to promote equal access to the divine. Female devotees documented the challenges they faced in their domestic lives, such as the burdens of managing a household, dealing with family conflicts, the absence of their husbands, mundane household tasks, and the limitations imposed on them as married women. They often opposed conventional gender roles and cultural expectations by abandoning their husbands and houses, opting instead to become roaming *bhaktas*. Their entire focus shifted to complete devotion and adoration of their divine husbands. The social hierarchy based on caste and the traditional concept of masculinity were perceived as obstacles to achieving freedom in their cases. As a result of their rejection of traditional conventions and principles, female devotees encountered formidable obstacles. As the bhakti movement progressed northward, an increasing number of women participated in it. Notable female *bhaktas* in different regions of the Indian subcontinent included Akka Mahadevi, Mirabai, Bahinabai, Pandita Ramabai, and Lalla.

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This essay aims to assess the role of Lal Ded, or Lalla of Kashmir, as a female *bhakta*. Her life is buried in myth and tradition, making it difficult to separate historical truth from fiction. The reconstruction of the legacy of Lal Ded depends on a variety of sources, such as academic research, hagiographies, and oral traditions.

Discussion

During the fourteenth century, it was uncommon for women to engage in literary composition. However, this occurred in the Kashmir region under Lal Ded. Lal Ded was a mystic bard and saint from Kashmir who lived in the fourteenth century. It is believed that she was born in the village of Pandrethan, near Srinagar, in what is now known as Kashmir, around the mid-14th century ^[1]. A Brahmin by birth, her given name was probably Lalla Arifa. She was referred to by other names, including Lalla Yogeshwari, Laleshwari, Lalla Arifa, Lal Ded, or simply Lalla. According to legend, Lal Ded experienced social pressures and familial strife during her formative years. At the tender age of twelve, she entered into matrimony with a Brahmin named Nica Bhatt from the Pampur region ^[2]. However, her spiritual tendencies and reluctance to adhere to societal norms led to discord in her conjugal life. Her husband lacked the discernment or sophistication of thought to comprehend Lal Ded's profound aspirations in life. Her mother-in-law also subjected her to pain and anguish ^[3].

The prevailing belief among Brahmanical circles is that Lal Ded likely embraced and propagated Shaivism ^[4]. However, it is intriguing because none of the Sanskrit sources or the commentaries produced in the Shaivite tradition until the 18th century make any mention of her. It is likely that this was due to her strong criticism of caste, idol worship, and rituals developed by the Brahmins. The egalitarian nature of her ideology is apparent in her lyrics. Mohammad Ishaq Khan posits that Lal Ded's critique of caste and idol worship within Brahminism might have been influenced by her association with Islam, particularly the Sufis of the *Kubrawiyya* order ^[5]. Notably, figures such as Sayyid Husain Samnani and Sayyid Ali Hamadani, who were gaining prominence in Kashmir during that period, could have played a role in shaping her perspective. According to Persian Sufi accounts, she received guidance in a few spiritual practices from Siddha Mol, who was most likely her *guru* ^[6]. Both Hindus and Muslims held Lal Ded in high regard. During her spiritual quest, Lal Ded reportedly learned from a variety of spiritual teachers, including Hindus and Muslim Sufis. Jaya Lal Kaul states that there are differing opinions regarding her religious affiliation, with some referring to her as a *Shaivite* devotee while others argue that she was influenced by *Hatha Yoga*, Buddhism, or Shankaracharya ^[7]. According to Mulla Ali Raina, she converted to Islam and became a disciple of Sayyid Husain Samnani ^[8]. In his book *'Tarikh-i-Hasan'*, Pir Ghulam Hasan noted that the Hindus saw her as one of their own, while the Muslims asserted that she belonged to their community. The reality is that she was one of God's favourites ^[9].

Her Teachings

Lal Ded is reported to have abandoned both her paternal and in-law's families in search of greater spiritual fulfilment. Motivated by her inherent spiritual longing, Lal Ded began a solitary journey in search of truth and enlightenment. She

gave up her material possessions and began living a life of austerity, travelling through Kashmir's mountains and valleys seeking spiritual instruction. This itinerant mystic rejected the male-dominated household structure and chose to pursue her spiritual aspirations independently. She opposed traditional religious beliefs and promoted the idea of having a direct and individual connection with God, going beyond the limitations of religious practices and doctrines. Upon departing from her residence, she made the decision to give up her clothes and "shame" and go semi-nude ^[10]. This implies that she began to prioritize the existence of the soul over that of the physical body. She did not expose herself to her surroundings with the intention of shocking people or as a method of self-mutilation, nor did she do it in the same way that medieval Christian women-saints practiced self-flagellation. It appears that in her state of 'fine craziness', she has become entirely uninhibited and oblivious to her physical self. She thus had the ability to overcome the influence of gender, which is a prominent concern for many female intellectuals, philosophers, and writers today. She didn't care what people thought of her as she went around nude. When questioned about any sense of embarrassment in exposing her body to the males in her vicinity, she inquired if there was indeed a man around ^[11]. In her perspective, the common populace was not superior to sheep or other unintelligent creatures ^[12]. The presence of nudity among several women-saints during medieval times is fascinating because, in the Brahmanical belief system, "shame" is typically viewed as a feminine adornment. Patriarchy, within the framework of gender-based and prejudiced expectations, used feelings of "shame" about one's body as a method to regulate women's sexuality. Although it cannot be definitively proven that Lalla undressed as a way to reject societal norms, it is plausible to suggest that her inclination towards nudity, which was influenced by her mystical beliefs, likely contributed to the questioning of gender-based ideas of "shame."

The imagery seen in *Bhakti* poetry is rooted in the vernacular language commonly used by ordinary people in their daily lives. Lalla wrote hundreds of songs throughout her life. However, they were not contemporaneously collected and transcribed in a manuscript. These writings primarily expressed her intense yearning and affection for her beloved Shiva. Lal Ded's mystical experiences and profound understanding were articulated through her poetry, which she produced in the Kashmiri dialect. Her poetry, known as "*Vakyas*," holds significant importance in the Kashmiri language. Her poetry, also referred to as "*Vatsun*" or "*Vakhs*," is filled with profound knowledge that reflects her tremendous comprehension of both the nature of ultimate reality and the human predicament. The songs of Lal Ded are distinguished by their straightforward nature, profoundness, and deep sagacity. Her choice of words resembles that of an ordinary person. There is no exclusive or highbrow selection of words, phrases, or metaphors; these were chosen from a woman's realm of household affairs. The teachings of Lal Ded placed a strong emphasis on the value of devotion, inner purity, and submission to the divine. Her work demonstrates that she engaged in conversations and debates with highly educated persons of her day, all of whom were men, on an equal basis, without any indication of gender inequity, self-awareness, or the traditional notion of feminine restraint. She engaged in deep meditation and reflection, aiming to surpass the constraints

of the self and achieve a state of unity with the divine.

Contribution

The people of Kashmir revered Lalla as a prophetess, a moral mentor, and a source of practical wisdom. She was an authoritative voice who communicated directly with the public and commanded the utmost attention^[13]. Through her mystical poetry, she triggered a significant transformation in the cultural, linguistic, social, and religious spheres. Roop Krishen Bhat highlights the significant role of Lal Ded's *vakyas* (poems) in the development of the Kashmiri language. According to him, Lal Ded not only assimilated Sanskrit vocabulary into the Kashmiri dialect but also appears to have coined new terms in the language^[14]. Lal Ded emerged as a distinct and independent voice, free from the constraints of societal standards, religious rituals, or established practices. She deftly overcame gender limitations and challenged the prevailing male-dominated society as early as the fourteenth century. Her creative works stand out for their complete absence of a gender component or any sense of remorse for her femininity, which prevented her from pursuing her own desires due to patriarchy. Indeed, it was her resounding voice that articulated the desires of all those individuals who sought to discover a solution to the complexities of human existence. For a true mystic like Lal Ded, the physical body, which represents the distinction between male and female, is significant not to highlight the contrast between genders but rather as a vessel to transport the spirit, where there is no differentiation. Her poetry became a vital part of the Bhakti movement, and it is very important and motivating to many who see these exceptional women as the perfect representation of a life overwhelmed by affection for the divine. The spiritual magnetism and poetic genius of Lal Ded drew a sizable following even in the face of criticism and harassment from religious leaders. Her spiritual teachings transcended religious boundaries, appealing to both Hindus and Muslims, and her message of universal love and compassion continues to resonate with people across different faiths.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the available evidence does not fully support the interpretation of female participation in the Bhakti movement as a challenge to the patriarchal social mores of the day, even though a few women *bhaktas* did challenge the patriarchy of their contemporary period. The poet-saints did not prioritize *addressing* injustices or challenging the patriarchal order. Women *bhaktas* were merely individuals striving to live lives dedicated to devotion. These women adhered to the patriarchal ideology that promoted the concept of a virtuous and obedient wife as the ideal. They redirected their devotion and responsibilities as "lovers" or "wives" to their divine lover or husband. It is interesting to note that, despite the fact that there are many instances of female *bhaktas* portraying themselves as the beloveds of male godheads in bridal mysticism, there are no cases of male *bhaktas* expressing a longing for union with a goddess. In this asymmetrical relationship between God and his devotee, the patriarchal framework of male or female inequity remains uncontested at its core. The life and teachings of Lal Ded epitomize the universal ideals of love, compassion, and spiritual emancipation, which have earned her great reverence not only in Kashmir but also in the

broader realm of mysticism and spirituality. Her poetry is a reflection of her spiritual development and her profound understanding of the essence of the divine, the self, and existence. Her poetry remains widely read and revered in Kashmir and elsewhere. She has encouraged countless men and women to pursue their own spiritual paths with bravery, integrity, and devotion through her life and poems. Today, her teachings persist in motivating individuals worldwide to pursue the divine essence within their own beings. She continues to be regarded as an icon of Kashmiri spirituality and culture. At present, Lal Ded is a prominent figure in contemporary feminist discourse, embodying the concept of a 'Subject Woman' or, in modern terminology, an 'Empowered Woman'.

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