

LAL DED AND THE MYSTIC THOUGHT

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Abstract

Since ages, mysticism has acted as a highly empowering domain of thought. Not only has it provided a spiritual enlightening to people but it has acted as a source of emancipation also for many. While for some, Mysticism has acted as a way leading to God, for many others, it has been, in addition to salvation, a source of refuge, freedom and escape from the conventions and orthodoxy. The Mystic domain has acted as a powerful agency of liberation for many women of the world. Methchild, Joan of Arc, Meerabai, Ammaiyyar, Akka and many women saint poets in spite of the regional differences ultimately landed in the same domain of liberation. An important woman poet saint who revolutionized the concept of womanhood and rebelled against the conventions at multiple levels, as back as the 14th century, was Lal Ded. Lal Ded was a woman poet saint from Kashmir who used her poetry as a means of defiance directed at the religious, social and gender oriented authorities. By seeking refuge in the Shiva praxis, she created a separate realm for her. Her mysticism granted her the power to act and come out of clutches that bind. The paper attempts at exploring her mystic bent of mind and see how her poems are actually emblems of her beliefs and practises.

Mysticism is known to be the direct experience with the Supreme. It is further recognized as the art of union with the Reality and the movement of heart towards the higher being. It is a movement of the heart seeking to surpass the restrictions of individual opinions and to surrender to the ultimate Reality (Underhill, 2007). Mysticism refers to the complete dedication of will towards the Supreme. According to Evelyn Underhill:

Mysticism is seen to be a highly specialized form of that search for reality, for heightened and completed life, which we have found to be a constant characteristic of human consciousness. It is largely prosecuted by that “spiritual spark,” that transcendental faculty which, through the life of our life, remains below the threshold in ordinary men. (1911, p. 69)

As a school of thought, mysticism has had an old and a vast tradition and varied connotations starting from the Hellenistic world itself. Be it the Western mysticism or the Eastern

mysticism, the world has witnessed a widespread flourishing of mystics. It has existed as a highly influential domain of thought that has influenced and continues to influence masses today.

The mystic domain in addition to the fulfillment of an eternal quest has acted as a site of refuge also for many people and has, thereby, granted them a provision to stay in a separate world of their choice devoid of the differences and stereotypes of the material world. The mystic domain came as a special sphere of empowerment also especially for women. Not only have many women escaped the ordeals of the conventional world but they have created their own rules and a completely independent sphere of existence also owing to the mystic bent of mind. They created a third world for themselves that denied any distinction whether at the physical, social, gendered or the religious level. This initiation emerged on the Indian scene back in the 6th century when the woman poet Ammaiyar came to the forefront with her mystic poetry. After Ammaiyar, many poets like Akka, Bahina Bai, Jana Bai, Meerabai came on the scene. One important woman poet who made a say and created a third space for her was Lal Ded. She hailed from Kashmir and established the very contemporary trend of women literature back in the 14th century.

Lal Ded, also known as Lalla and Lalleshwari, was a mystic woman poet born to a Brahmin family in Pandrethan, Kashmir. At a very young age, she was married to Nica Bhatta of Pampore. Her married life, however, was traumatic because of the harsh treatment that she received at the hands of her mother-in-law and the ill-temperament of her husband. Her being a Brahmin, however, worked various advantages for her. It facilitated for her an access to education but in spite of this, the constraints placed on her were huge whether at the religious, social or at the level of gender. The subordinate position that she was subjected to within her family and the society at large affected her at multiple levels.

Lalla has always received attention and mention as a humble, meek, submissive woman but actually she had far back trespasses these conventional tags. The world of spirituality had granted her the strength to transgress the orthodox boundaries and set into motion an altogether new trend of emancipation and freedom. She didn't try to stop the ill-treatment that she received but withdrew in her own space and created a separate realm of Mysticism for her where she could control everything. The journey that she undertook was lonely and she was quite uncertain of things at the beginning. However, she was later able to land in a world of fulfillment and completion and it was her Lord whom she considered to be her sole refuge and whose love helped her achieve liberation and become a *jivan-mukta* (liberated soul).

Knowing that the world was an illusion, Lal Ded took on to the journey of the real Self and desired a union with it. Her path, however, wasn't easy. She had to put in a lot of efforts in order to reach the abode of Supreme bliss. She adopted the path of Shaivism and considered Lord Shiva as her Supreme and saviour. Shaivism, as a school of thought, regards Lord Shiva as the Supreme Self- the creator, the preserver and the destroyer and the followers of this school are known as Shaivas or Shaivites. In order to reach the ultimate destiny, Shaivas take on to the path of *jnanayoga* (path of knowledge). Various practices from tantra and yoga are put to use in order to ignite and sustain the proper spirit of desire. Lalla, too, did

the same. Giving up her family, she took to the mystic domain starting with the practise of *Pranayama* (breath control). Her poetry is an embodiment of all her efforts, beliefs, practises and teachings. Her poems, also known as *Vaakhs* are packed with the desire and search for attainment of Supreme bliss.

Lal Ded started her journey with a note of uncertainty as mentioned earlier also. She compares herself to a boat towing on the sea of world not knowing where to go but seeking help from the Supreme, she ultimately achieves the union. She says in a *Vaakh*:

aami pana sadras naavi chas lamaan
kati bozi dai myon meti dee taar
aamen taken poni zan shaman
zuv chum bramaan garre gatshaha
I'm towing my boat across the ocean with a thread
Will He hear me and help me across?
Or am I seeping away like water from a half-baked cup?
Wander, my poor soul, you're not going home anytime soon
(Hoskote, 2011, p. 6)

In the above *vaakh*, she compares herself to a boat tossed on the ocean of life and she compares her body to a leaky vessel which doesn't possess the power to contain (Hoskote, 2011). She sees herself as a wanderer who is lost and far from the ultimate destination and without having the knowledge of where the real home is. The world was a temporary place for her and therefore, what she continuously aimed at was to drive this boat to the actual home/destination. Therefore, she trained her mind and channelized the energy in her towards the ultimate destination. She made efforts and put her body to varied tests in order to strengthen it and sustain the journey. She started meditating with all her might, night and day and established full control over her body and the energies of her body. A main practise that she followed was of practicing the syllable, OM with a full control over breath. She herself says in a *vaakh*:

lolaki vokhlai vanij peesim
kvakal tsajim te ruzis rasa
buzim ta zaejim panas casim
kava zana tava satya mara kina lasa
I ground my heart in the mortar of love
Evil thoughts left me
And I became calm
I burned and roasted it
And tasted myself (Kak, 2007, p. 47)

She says that she burnt herself in the fire of love and awakened Shiva within her. The pain that she had to forebear with and the endurance that was demanded by the path she had undertaken is revealed from the above *vaakh*. She spoke of all the efforts that she had to put into practise in order to reach the other shore. The first step on the path she had chosen was the presence and cultivation of an unconditional love followed by channelizing the love through a proper mind control and directing it towards the proper destiny. After controlling

the mind, another important thing to be taken care of was the breath. Most of the Lallavakhs discuss the practise of breath control also known as Pranayama. In order to attain the basic well-being, mental purification, for meditation and other spiritual attainments, breath control was an important practise. In her poems, Lalla beautifully expresses her personally executed exercise of breath. The proper concentration of the mind with continuous exercise of breath led to an awakening of the Self. She speaks of many of the secrets that she caught hold of and preserved them for all times to come. She managed to attain her desired destiny by a systematic exercise- taking the breath in, retaining it and releasing it out. This facilitated a well-controlled spiritual development of both body and soul. Gradually, she was lifted to the spiritual existence transcending all the worldly barriers and the worldly existence at large. She merged her self with the Self.

The worldly nature to her was a thief that needed to be trapped by focused methods/practises through the practise of Pranayama and meditation. She says:

dilcha lari daari bar troparim
praan tsur rotum te dyutmas dam
hredyich kuthari andar gondum
omaki cobuke tulmas bam
Doors and windows of my body I closed
My *prana*- thief I caught and brought under control
Then I tied it inside the chamber of my heart
And then I whipped it with syllable-OM
(Kak, 1999, p. 119)

Her poetry is the crux of her personal experiences. Whatever steps she took or believed in as being the sources of attaining final bliss find a mention in her vaakhs. Controlling the breath, adopting the systematic recitation of the mystic syllable OM with the beats of her breath with a proper rhythm helped her succeed in her ultimate mission (Parimoo, 1978). She relates the control on breath to the work of a goldsmith who channelizes his mind towards the flow of the current of air directed at the burning coal and facilitates the production of enough heat to separate gold from impurities. The way pure gold is obtained by persistent heat and forces of the wind, in the same way human being is also purified through Pranayama and meditation.

omuk akui akshar porum
sui maale rotum vondas manz
sui maale konye peth gorum ye vechorum
aasus sas te sapis savan
I concentrated on the word OM
I sought for it in my heart
I gave it thought focusing on the central point
Thus, from ash turned to gold
Unheard sound of OM proved like alchemy
(Kaul, 2009, p. 57)

Upon achieving appropriate mastery in the practise of Pranayama along with higher consciousness, the seeker loses the distinction between normal breathing and the meditative breathing. They club into one.

After achieving this mastery and upon arriving at this higher consciousness, there occurred a complete revolution in Lalla and with that, all further requirements ceased to be. Her whole system was tuned into a rich abode of meditation itself. She lost all awareness of her worldly self by experiencing all the contours of the cosmos in her own person. The Divine spirit was awakened in her and nothing remained unrealized for her. She understood that her own person was the dwelling of all aspects of Lord. She says:

omkar yeli layi onum

vuhi korum panun paan

shai vout a traevith ta sath maarg rotum

teli lal bo vaechis prakashsthan

When by concentration of my thoughts, I brought the “pranava”

Under my control

I made my body burn like coal

The six paths I traversed and gained the seventh

And then, I, Lalla reached

The place of illumination

(Grierson, 1999, p. 46)

Lalla sought her Lord everywhere but finally found Him in the recesses of her own self. To her, all the idol worship was a vain practise. Grierson puts it as:

She had wandered fruitlessly far and wide in search of the truth. In other words, she had made pilgrimages to holy places, and sought for salvation through formal rites, but all in vain. Then, suddenly she found it in her own home i.e. in her own soul. There she found her own self, which became to her the equivalent of a guru or spiritual preceptor and she learnt that it and the supreme self were one. (1999, p. 64)

An important belief that Lalla had was that every individual was a manifestation of the Supreme Shiva and it was therefore, a completely futile practise to look for him outside. She believed that one had the potential to see one's Lord or to locate one's Lord within one's own self rather than wandering from temple to temple and praying various idols. For her, the practises of idol worship, temple rituals, and offerings were nothing more than mere appearances/ostentations. What she advocated was a complete control over self and a refrain from the various worldly vices. After becoming one with Shiva, she saw her ultimate destination in Shiva hood and thereafter, worked out the ways for herself. She became an inseparable part of this luminosity and was soaked in it. Her vaakhs reveal the intensity with which she fell into the radiant state of the Shiva consciousness. On becoming one with him, she rose to the status of one who is liberated while living. The knowledge of truth and the Self enlightened her and the spiritual height that she attained led to a revolution in her worldly as well as religious perspectives. She recognized the diversity of Lord and the fact

that it was in essence, a unity. Her vaakhs, therefore, ragged the ignorant that were ritualistic and orthodox in practise. While talking about her love for the Supreme, she preached love for humanity as well. Her mysticism was packed with the humanist philosophy of thought also.

Lalla is among those few medieval women mystic poets who have left behind a legacy which has a contemporary relevance as well. There is a constant reinforcement towards the search for inner vision. Even today, her verses call for a morality based on social responsibility and trigger us to look beyond the veils of prohibition and constraints imposed by the social and religious institutions. Lalla was an extraordinarily spiritual genius. She had a special personality, spoke a unique voice and left exceptional impressions upon the minds of generations that went, that exist and that are about to come. She started her journey as a tormented soul but attained a stage where self-realization and self-awareness granted her the inner strength and confidence. She was a saint and a poet fused together. The poetic vision of spirituality and the spiritual vision of poetry granted her vaakhs the immortality and pluralistic themes. It is believed that when she died, a bright flame shot from her body and she vanished from the sight without leaving any mark (Kak, 2007) but her verses still carry the radiance that amazes and enlightens us even today.

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