

### **Lal Ded and Akka Mahadevi: Role of Women in Social Reform Movement**

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#### **Abstract**

*The social reformers believed in the principle of individual liberty, freedom, and equality of all human beings irrespective of sex, colour, race, caste, or religion. They attacked a number of traditional, authoritarian, and hierarchical social institutions and launched social reform movements to liberate the Indian women from their shackles. Though many of the reformers were mainly men, the reform movement aimed at improving the status of Indian women. The Bhakti movement in the south and Shaivism in Kashmir were such movements where women saints like AkkaMahadevi and LalDed emerged not only as ascetics but also role model for many women as they both broke the stereotypical image of women where they are only confined within the four walls of their houses. Both of them stood against the patriarchal society and opposed the religious dogmas. Both the religious leaders, who are popular among the masses as the social reformers, played a significant role by exposing the exploitative machinations of caste-conscious Brahmans. For this purpose they used the common man's language to patronage message to the common masses. In this paper, we shall be discussing that how the poets outlined above represent a panorama of female poet-saints within the Bhakti movement and Shaivism. Both were extraordinary radical in their rejection of social norms and values, leaving families and society behind, in order to extol their love for God and how they both expressed their thought in the simple language of his people, clothing their ideas with similes and examples familiar from their experience.*

**Keywords:** Bhakti movement, religious dogmas, patriarchal society, Shaivism.

#### **Introduction**

The social reformers believed in the principle of individual liberty, freedom, and equality of all human beings irrespective of sex, colour, race, caste, or religion. They attacked

a number of traditional, authoritarian, and hierarchical social institutions and launched social reform movements to liberate the Indian women from their shackles. The main principle of Bhakti faith was 'selfless love' or 'devotion'. Rather than supplicating to God for materialistic needs or desire, the saints of this movement stressed that the only means of salvation was selfless love or devotion. This was uninterrupted, single-minded, extreme devotion to God without any material motive. These saints believed in oneness with God, and that union with God was the highest stage of Enlightenment, which could be achieved through love of God. To attain such a state, one was required to go through certain stages and the changing psychological conditions. Sufi saints asserted that for an individual to attain a closeness with God, which paves the way to salvation, one should do so through service to humanity.

Since these saints wanted to reach the masses or the downtrodden strata of society who were not accepted by the Brahmins. So they used local dialects as a means of communication, preached in the form of couplets rather than traditional prose. The mystics of the movements were not appreciated by the orthodox Brahmins, as they defied them. Bhakti movement discarded idol worship, blind faith in scriptures, and discriminations of individuals in the name of gender, caste and creed. As rituals were not considered important, service to human beings had much higher spiritual significance than mere formal adherence to rituals and practices.

Most of the Bhakti saints had one ultimate goal, realisation of God for the individual. Bhakti *gurus* had a strong dislike of 'blind faith' in sacred scriptures, and did not believe in the discriminatory restrictions of caste and creed. For them, rituals and ceremonies were not important, rather the individual's relationship with the True Master (*gurus*) who could give them the right Knowledge to realize God through their personal devotion to Him. Condemning polytheism, this movement was monotheistic, believing in one God who was the Supreme Being and the Creator.

### **Akka Mahadevi and Bhakti Movement**

Throughout the centuries, men as well as women have contributed equally in the spread of this movement through their words and poems. But for many reasons, in many places, the women have been less visible than men, less verbal, less demonstrative in society at large, but nevertheless active participants. Within some religious circles that developed over the centuries, women were integrated with men in ceremonies. In other orders women gathered in their own circles of remembrance and worshipped apart from men. Some women devoted themselves to spirit ascetically, apart from society. Few important names are Lal Ded from Kashmir and Akka Mahadevi from Karnataka, others chose the role of benefactress and fostered circles of worship and study.

The story of Bhakti follows a peculiar pattern. The narrative begins by attributing to the individual bhaktas personal qualities which allow them to recognise the problems in their social milieu; problems that are not necessarily solved or addressed by the bhaktas. As

Heimsath had suggested, the 'primacy of spiritual concerns' along with the 'leanings towards mysticism', which encouraged a 'drawing away from worldly concerns' allowed the salvation of the individual but not that of the society or the group. (Heimsath 1964: 37) The narrative of reform continues to inform all accounts of Bhakti. The female bhakta is first located within her 'oppressive social milieu' (Heimsath, 1964).

Female poet-saint had to struggle for acceptance within the largely male-dominated movement. Their struggle attests to the strength of patriarchal values within both society and within religious and social movements attempting to pave the way for more egalitarian access to the Divine. Women bhaktas wrote of the obstacles of home, family tensions, the absent husband, meaningless household chores, and restrictions of married life, including their status as married women. Caste status and even masculinity were understood as barriers to liberation. Women bhaktas faced overwhelming challenges through their rejection of societal norms and values, without having the ability to revert back to their normative roles as wives, mothers and in some cases, the privileges of their original high-caste status. (Johnsen, 1994)

While it is tempting to see women's participation within the bhakti movement as a revolt against the patriarchal norms of the time, there is little evidence to support this perspective. Injustices and the patriarchal order itself were not a major focus of these poet-saints. Women bhaktas were simply individuals attempting to lead lives of devotion. Staying largely within the patriarchal ideology that upheld the chaste and dutiful wife as ideal, these women transferred the object of their devotion and their duties as the "lovers" or "wives" to their Divine Lover or Husband. (Johnsen, 1994)

This explains the continued existence of the problems bhaktas struggled against. It does so by suggesting that the bhakta in some ways 'failed' to address the problems they were apprised of. This is actually a serious accusation against a bhakta. Within the society in which she exists the bhakta is surrounded by individuals who do not have 'egalitarian attitudes' and who do not see the problems with oppressive hierarchies of caste and patriarchy. However, by suggesting that the bhakta, through her individual effort recognizes these problems, the narrative lays the bhakta wide open to the charge of hypocrisy. The suggestion is that the bhakta finds 'devotion' of more value even though she recognizes the problems of caste and gender. Such a position is very difficult to defend without naming the bhakta a failure.

In his article, 'On Women Saints' (1982), A.K. Ramanujan has made some excellent points to help analyse the lives of women saints in the Hindi devotional (bhakti) tradition. He shows how the life of these saints can be divided into five or six stages and sets them out in a chart as follows: early dedication to God, denial of marriage, defying social norms, initiation and marrying the Lord. From the second stage, as Ramanujan demonstrates, various options were open to these women devotees, all of whom from childhood chose God exclusively as their beloved. Some of them were married nevertheless, while others somehow escaped marriage. (Ramanujan, 1982)

The religious path which the women chose is known as *prapattibhakti*; that is single-minded devotion to God and total dedication to God's service. And it was exactly this point that the struggle started. In the normative Hindu tradition, which is dominated by the lawgivers, women is utterly subservient to her guardian, the male head of the family. After her marriage, her husband is for her in the position of God. A women is not allowed a separate identity. In marriage, she must totally submerge herself in the identity of her God-husband. A husbandless woman is a social anomaly. So parents did not keep their daughters long unmarried, for fear of losing face and social position. Sonless widows too were a social burden and, in noble families, they were encouraged to perform *sati*. (Ramanujan, 1982)

In the theology of *prapattibhakti*, the devotee's single-minded love of God and ecstasy on seeing God- be it in a temple image or in her or his mind- and the depression ensuing in the absence of that experience, are all described in terms of erotic love. In Sanskrit, God is called *pati*, a word meaning 'lord', 'master' and 'husband'. As emotional bhakti spread through India, this erotic symbolism became pan-Indian. Therefore, as Ramanujan points out, women saints of devotional movements had no existential problem in changing their social or biological roles (Ramanujan, 1982:316). The husband of a married woman is her 'lord' and 'master' and, ideally, should be her sole object of devotion. The problem was to replace one's mortal husband with God.

'Akka' (older sister), as AkkaMahadevi came to be known, was admired by her contemporaries for the stature of her personality, the excellence of her *vachanas*, and her mystic heights. The *vachanas* author Chennabasavva has said about her that others might be senior to her in years and might have performed a variety of penances and feats of asceticism, but Akka had really communed with god. Other leading personalities of the movement, such as its founder Basavanna, Allamaprabhu, Siddharama and many others have remembered Akka with affection and respect, literature written about Akka grew enormously in the following centuries. There is no other woman personality in Kannada who has drawn so much attention from historians, poets and authors of puranas.

AkkaMahadevi was the daughter of devotees of Shiva in the village of Udatadi. The ruler of that region, Kaushika was enamoured of the beauty of young Mahadevi. It became impossible for Akka, for whom only mystical aspirations were important, to live with worldly desires. She wrote in one of her *vachanas* about this:

*Husband inside,  
Lover outside,  
I can't manage them both.*

*This world  
And that other  
Cannot manage them both  
O Lord white as jasmine*

*I cannot hold in one hand  
Both the round nut  
And the long bow. (Ramanujan, 1973:127)*

The conflict between her inner spirituality and the worldliness around her reached a peak. Literature says that when leaving Kaushika, she stripped off all her clothing and walked out of the palace naked. Nudity is mentioned in her *vachanas* too.

After leaving Kaushika, Akka had to experience various hardships. According to Harihara, Kaushika was still so infatuated with her that he bribed the religious dignitaries of two maths which lay on her way in an attempt to make her turn back, but the attempt failed. In one of her *vachanas*, she has written about the outside world which kept pursuing her:

*When I entered a rock, you too  
entered the rock;  
When I entered a mountain, you too  
entered the mountain;  
Hurray for life! You came following  
me,*

*Lord, who is as white as jasmine,  
what else shall I do?(Ramanujan, 1973: 128)*

Although Akka immersed her thoughts about Shiva and was detached from the outer world around her, it is not surprising that the world was aware only of her outer presence. This is indicated by some *vachanas* which may have been reactions of the beautiful young woman to the gazes of numerous lechers. After having rejected Kaushika's sensualism and left him, she must have explained many times, with pain and anger, her rejection of the world to those who approached her with sensualist purpose. Many of her *vachanas* show the hardships she had to experience when she became detached from the world and acted in opposition to the commonly held view that a woman's body should always be available for sensual pleasure. Akka looked upon all men besides 'Chennamallikarjuna' (her name for Shiva) as her brothers. The *vachanas* below stands as a testimony to the sufferings she endured.

*You have come seeing the beauty  
Of rounded breasts and the fullness of  
youth, brother.  
Brother, I am not a woman!  
Brother, I am not a whore!*

*Brother, seeing me again and again  
For whom have you come?  
Look, brother, any man  
Other than the lord who is as white as  
jasmine  
Is a face I can't stand.* (Ramanujan, 1973:122)

Where on one hand we have AkkaMahadevi who broke all the stereotypes and emerged as role model for several other women, here on the other hand we have Lalleshwari or commonly known as LalDed, who not only served as the spiritual mother of famous Sheikh Noor-ud-Din or commonly known as Nund Rishi<sup>15</sup>, but also broke the stereotypical image with which women were always looked down upon.

### Shaivism in Kashmir and Lal Ded

The history Kashmiri Shaivism is shrouded in mystery (Singh, 2013). Archaeologists have discovered traces of Shiva worship in the proto-historic Harappa culture. The Shaivits in Kashmir were divided among dualists and monists. The former conception was closer to pantheism whereas the Monists were to a great extent aligned to the teachings of *tawheed*. The emergence of Lalleshwari or LalDed, a Kashmir Shaivite poetess, is considered to be as the popular exponent of monotheistic practices.

Lal Ded is one of Kashmir's best known spiritual and literary figures. Within Kashmir she has been idolized both by the Hindus as well as Muslims for nearly seven centuries, and for most of that period, she successfully evaded the proprietorial claims of religious monopolists. (Hoskote, 2011) In spite of being so famous among the masses, it is a pity that not much is really known about her life till the twentieth century. In 1920, the Royal Asiatic Society published its Monographs *The Lalla-Vakhyani or Wise Sayings of LalDed (or Lalla): a mystic poetess of ancient Kashmir*. This was the first printed edition of Lalla's poems or *vaakhs*. Hoskote in his book mentions that in 1914 Sir George Grierson came up with the idea of collection of poems of Lalla, but there were no manuscripts of Lalla's poems. Failing to find a copy, he consulted Pandit Dharma-dasa Darwesh who was a storyteller and a reciter, living in Gush, a village situated in Pakistan occupied Kashmir. He dictated 109 of Lalla's poems from memory and they wrote them down. Grierson's *LallaVakhyani* being the first written account of Lalla's *vaakhs* were followed by many other translations by PanditAnandaKaul, Sir Richard C. Temple, Professor Jayalal Kaul and more recently Coleman Barks, Jaishree Odin and many other writers like N K Singh and Jawahar Lal Bhat.

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<sup>15</sup>Nund Rishi was the great Sufi saint from Kashmir. He is also famous for being the one who started the Rishi order which was more liberal, non-missionary and rooted in the local traditions during fourteenth and sixteenth centuries in Kashmir. The two stalwarts of this order were LalDed and Nund Rishi.



Lalla obtained such a hold on the people of country that her verses have become a household word. This is due to her songs illustrates her religion on its popular side, though they are not a systematic exposition of Shaivism on the lines laid down by the theologians who preceded her. As already mentioned above, very little is known about Lalla's life. Though according to popular tradition, she was the contemporary of Sayyid Hussain Simnani and Syed Ali Hamadani. Mulla Ali Raina, who was first to mention Lalla in poetry, says that she was a chosen disciple of Sayyid Hussain Simnani. The tradition of her association with both the Sufis is so strong that not only as Lalla always been remembered as Muslim but even as a great apostle of Islam by Kashmir Muslims. (Khan, 2002)

Lalla was born in Kashmir in the early thirteenth century and was married into a Brahmin family at a young age. Her married life was very traumatic as her mother-in-law always troubled her and filled her life with suffering. Her husband also ill-treated her. She suffered silently as she quietly devoted herself to spiritual practice. When she could no longer endure the pain given by her family, she renounced the material world. She then went to Siddha Srikantha to be accepted as a disciple. He became her guru and instructed her to the spiritual path. On completing her discipleship, she went out into the world as a wandering mendicant. All what she did from renouncing the world to becoming a mystic and gathering spiritual experience, these were not easy for a Brahmin woman to make in the Kashmir of fourteenth century. Hoskote mentions that as a disciple, she had been secure within her guru's house and then she set off on her own with no protection against the full force of social strata. She tells about her experience in one of her *vaakhs* that

*They lash me with insults, serenades me with curses.  
Their barking means nothing to me.  
Even if they came with soul-flowers to offer,  
I couldn't care less. Untouched, I move on.* (Hoskote, 2011:xvii)

Overcoming the trials and humiliations that came her way, she grew in eminence to become a teacher. This transformation into being mature and deepening knowledge is recorded in her *vaakh*. In the following *vaakh* she defies her tormentors and the system of conventions they represents

*Let them hurl a thousand curses at me,  
pain finds no purchase in my heart.  
I belong to Shiva. Can a scatter of ashes  
ruin a mirror? It gleams.* (Hoskote, 2011:xviii)

Her *vaakhs*, symbols and allegories can be cryptic and yet the honesty of her poems or *vaakhs* deeply moved the people. She celebrates the "perseverance in the quest, contrasting physical agony with spiritual flight and dwelling on the obdurate landscapes that the questor must negotiate." (Hoskote, 2011: 12)

It is to be noted that there were no mention of LalDed in any of the historical content, but Baba DaudMishkati is said to be among the first ones to mention her in *Asrar-ul-Abrar* (The Secrets of the Pious), a hagiographic document written in 1654 (Rao, 2008). He described her as *LallaArifa* and relates the water-pitcher legend<sup>16</sup> which was the marker of the time of her renunciation. The first Persian chronicle to mention her name was *Waqi'at-i-Kashmir* written by Mohammad AzamDedamari. Other Persian chronicles to mention her are *Majmu'a-al-Tawarikhi* (1835-6), *Tarikh-i-Hasan*(1885) and *Tarikh-i-Kabir* (1909-10) among others. Ishaq Khan in his work mentioned that it was Mulla Ali Raina being the first one to mention Lalla saying that she was the chosen disciple of Sayyid Hussain Simnani (Khan, 2002). He also mentions that according to popular tradition, she was said to be the contemporary of Sayyid Ali Hamadani and Sayyid Hussain Simnani. He also mentions that “the tradition of her association with both these Sufis is so strong that not only has Lalla always been remembered as a Muslim but even as a great apostle of Islam by Kashmiri Muslims” (Khan, 2002:70). Her reference to Persian hagiographic documents and chronicles has led a few scholars to conclude that she adopted Sufi mysticism. Richard Temple mentions that Lalla deeply absorbed Islamic thoughts as she was “not only contemporary, but a friend of the Persian Sayyid Ali Hamadani” (Temple, 1924:80). G.M.D. Sufi states that even though “originally a Hindu, she was greatly influenced by Islamic Sufistic thought” (Sufi, 1974:383). Similarly P.N.K. Bamzai writes about her founding an order which was “an admixture of the non-dualistic philosophy of Saivism and Islamic Sufism” (Bamzai, 1962:542). Jayalal Kaul puts aside all these assumption arguing that all these similarities is due to the fact that mystic traditions all over the world show some common features (Kaul, 1973). There is also no concrete evidence available as to whether Lalla met Sayyid Ali Hamadani, who visited Kashmir in 1381 during the reign of Sultan Qutb-ud-din (1373-89) But there is a very famous folk tale attached to their meeting. It is to be said that Lalla after renouncing the worldly life, became a wandering ascetic. While becoming so, she even gave up her clothes and roamed naked. One day while she was sitting, she saw Sayyid Ali Hamadani coming her way and immediately starts to run in order to cover herself shouting, “I have seen a man.” She then runs into baker’s shop with a red hot oven ready for baking. She jumps into the oven and came dressed in golden clothes and hastens after Shah Hamadan (Hoskote, 2011). It is also mentioned by various scholars that it was Shah Hamadan himself who asked Lalla to give spiritual guidance to Nund Rishi (Gauhar, 1988).

The relation between Lalla and Nund Rishi is that of *pir-murshid*, where Lalla also serves as a spiritual mother to Nund Rishi. A very famous folklore is attached to this. After

<sup>16</sup> According to this legend, Lalla used to go fetch water daily and usually takes longer than usual to return. Seeing all this, her husband began suspecting her of infidelity. One day he followed her and found her sitting by the river bank lost in meditation. He went back and when Lalla returned, in anger he hit the pitcher with the stick. The pitcher broke into pieces but the water remained intact miraculously. After this incident, she finally left her home and family to become a wandering ascetic.



birth, when infant Nund Rishi refused to suck milk out of her mother's bosom, it was Lalla who told him, "Thou wast not ashamed of being born; why then art thou ashamed of sucking (at the mother's breast)" (Khan, 2002:97). After listening to this, baby Nund Rishi started sucking milk from Lalla's bosom. Thus the infant tasted the first pleasure of the world under the guidance of a matured mystic. A later-day Kashmiri poet has summed up the incident in the following lines:

*Oh thee, the full moon of the universe,  
Immediately after thy birth, Lalla Arifa  
Did adorn in her lap a cradle for thee.  
She made you drink the nector of life.  
Bravo! My Lord, Oh generous Noor-ud-Din* (Gauhar, 1988: 20).

When Nund Rishi grew up to be a well-known saint with a great following, he paid his befitting tribute to the memory of Lal Ded in the following lines:

*The Lalla of Padampur,  
She had her fill of divine nector;  
A beloved Avtar of ours too (we would fondle in our laps),  
O God, bestow a similar boon on me* (Parimoo, 1984:188).

As already mentioned Lalla was born in Kashmir in the early thirteenth century and was married into a Brahmin family at a young age. Her married life was very traumatic as her mother-in-law always troubled her and filled her life with suffering. Her husband also ill-treated her. She suffered silently as she quietly devoted herself to spiritual practice. When she could no longer endure the pain given by her family, she renounced the material world. She then went to Siddha Srikantha to be accepted as a disciple. He became her guru and instructed her to the spiritual path. On completing her discipleship, she went out into the world as a wandering mendicant. All what she did from renouncing the world to becoming a mystic and gathering spiritual experience, these were not easy for a Brahmin woman to make in the Kashmir of fourteenth century. Hoskote mentions that as a disciple, she had been secure within her guru's house and then she set off on her own with no protection against the full force of social strata. She tells about her experience in one of her *vaakhs* that:

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Her *vaakhs*, symbols and allegories can be cryptic and yet the honesty of her poems or *vaakhs* deeply moved the people. She celebrates the “perseverance in the quest, contrasting physical agony with spiritual flight and dwelling on the obdurate landscapes that the questor must negotiate” (Hoskote, 2011:11).

She revolted against all the oppressive structures that stifle and kill the human spirit and critically interrogated practices of inequalities and injustice that were current during the times. In one of her *vaakhs*, she says

*When can I break the bonds of shame?  
When I am indifferent to jibes and jeer.  
When can I discard the robes of dignity?  
When desires cease to nag my mind (Khan, 2002:75).*

Her *vaakhs* are not only a continuation of the tradition, it is also simultaneously a break or rebellion against the tradition. Her rebellion was unprecedented. She challenged the validity of all the socio-political and religious structures, and was deadly against maintaining the status-quo, thus she was perceived as a threat to the established social order. To neutralize the impact of this rebellion, the elite of the times, the custodians of the tradition declared her to be demented. These could be the reasons why we do not find any mention of her in any of the historical accounts written in Sanskrit during and after her time. She also rebelled against the educated elite of Sanskrit academia who were the custodians of knowledge and tradition. She did all these while attacking the parasitic forms of organized religion that have attached themselves to the spiritual quest and choked it. She criticized the idolatry in one of her *vaakhs*. She says:

*It covers your shame, keeps you from shivering.  
grass and water are all the foods it asks  
who taught you, priest-man,  
to feed this breathing thing to your thing of stove? (Hoskote, 2011:14)*

Lalla’s emphasis on religious and social equality as reflected in her verses shows that she was quite secular in her outlook, which is perhaps the reason why both Hindus and Muslims have held her in such high reverence. She preaches tolerance towards religious practices other than one’s own and refrains from identifying herself with any sect, or religion.

Lalla's emphasis on religious tolerance is in agreement with the monist Shaiva philosophy which is secular in its orientation. In her verses, she says that, "Shiva consciousness is beyond artificial divisions." (Odin, 2012:182) People call this state Shiva, Keshava, Mahavira, or Buddha, which are just different names assigned to the same reality. She says,

*The Self may be named Shiva, Keshava, or Mahavira  
Or the lotus born Buddha  
Whatever name it may have  
May it remove worldly attachments of a weakling like me (Odin, 2012:183).*

She also says:

*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 (Odin, 2012:183).*

Lalla critiques 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, nor turning rosary beads (Rao, 2008). As Odin mentions that according to Lalla, the real practice lies in the deliberate self-introspection, which involves not only strengthening concentration and will, but also refusing to take for granted the received patterns of behaviour as well as world-views. Habitually performing the religious practices might give the individual the satisfaction of engaging in something spiritual but in reality they would do nothing to expand the limited vision that leads to religious bigotry and non-tolerance (Odin, 2012). From here, one can easily speculate that Lalla's intense concern for people as reflected in many of her verses where she advises them to live a life based on inner spirituality rather than outer religious dogma was to a great extent shaped by the missionary outlook of the Sufis. But the path she took with respect to her practise was very much guided by the orally transmitted esoteric practices of Kashmiri Shaivism.

The free mingling of Sufi and Hindu mystics during Lalla's time resulted in the appreciation of genuine spiritual experience over religious dogmas of any kind. Kaul speculated that her verses over the centuries began to be sung by village minstrels and later became part of Kashmiri classical music (*sufianakalam*) as they began to be used as sacred invocations to open the assembly of Sufis (Kaul, 1973:40).

Lal Ded had attained the heroic status among the common masses regardless of her caste or creed or whether she was literate or illiterate. Lal Ded's poetry originates from deeply felt experiences of the soul in ferment or frenzy because of its all-consuming engagement with the ultimate reality (Odin, 2012). This drive her to make language bear the burden of the mystery. She says:

*My guru gave me one single precept:*

*“Withdraw from without to the inner self.”  
That percept became by being, my song  
And I took to roaming and dancing naked (Odin, 2012:92).*

Furthermore she adds:

*I wafted out my inner illumination,  
Catching hold of it in dark and holding it tight (Odin, 2012:93).*

Lal Ded’s poetry is a genuine exemplification of the creative use of language and this is responsible for her impact on the literature. This influence is not confined to her followers like Rupa Bhawani and Bimla Raina. It is also not limited to the presence of the strong undercurrent of a sense of female victimisation in the poetry of HabbaKhatoon and more contemporary Naseem Shafai (Odin, 2012). Her verses were orally transmitted for centuries and have survived religious upheavals and wars. In spite of her presence as an integral part of Kashmiri folk imagination, she has been surprisingly left out of the literature written during her time. It is to be noted that Jonaraja, who wrote *Rajatarangini* during her time, does not mention her. She was not mentioned in other Sanskrit chronicles written by the historians and hagiographers. One reason for this could be because these historians mainly focussed on kings and the political intrigues around them. The other reason for her neglect points towards the fact that she rejected the conventional morality and social norms as mentioned by Jaishree Odin that “she did not observe the formalities of ceremonial piety; she was vehemently critical of orthodoxy, its dogma and ritual, its hypocrisy and exclusiveness; and (what they would certainly not approve of) she spoke of secret doctrine and its disciplines to all” (Odin, 2012:178).

Another reason was that she lived in the countryside and she was very popular among the common people. This made her famous and part of the popular Kashmiri folk imagination rather than the elite Brahmanical tradition and her verses were passed on from one generation to another verbally. As we look into her verses or *vaakhs*, there is no doubt that she was a serious Shaiva practitioner.

## Conclusion

It goes without saying that both Akka Mahadevi and Lal Ded played a central role within the framework of cognitive, moral and social order among the masses. They redefined the reordered life-world of their followers, requiring of them not only devotion to God but patterns of social behaviour. Hence, their messages were not confined to one race or one class, but addressed to mankind as a whole. They belonged to the universe. They expressed their thought in the simple language of his people, clothing their ideas with similes and examples familiar from their experience. Their verses therefore had an immediate appeal to the unlettered masses.

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