



## Rereading Lal Ded from Classical Perspective

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**Abstract.** This paper undertakes a re-evaluation of the 14th-century Kashmiri mystic-poet Lal Ded (Lalleshwari) through the lens of classical literary theory, particularly Sanskrit poetics. By applying key concepts such as Rasa, Dhvani, and Vakrokti, the study explores how Lal Ded's vakhs transcend their immediate devotional and mystical contexts to achieve aesthetic universality. Her utterances—rooted in the experiential depth of Shaiva mysticism and vernacular expression—are reinterpreted through Sānta Rasa, the aesthetic of tranquility and detachment, while the suggestive power of Dhvani reveals multilayered spiritual meanings beyond literal interpretation. Additionally, the paper draws upon classical hermeneutics to demonstrate how her minimalistic, aphoristic style enables complex philosophical communication. This classical approach not only enriches our understanding of Lal Ded's poetics but also positions her within a broader, pan-Indian literary tradition, bridging bhakti, mysticism, and classical aesthetic theory.

**Index Terms-** Mysticism, Shaivism, Vaakh, Classical

### I. Introduction

Lalleshwari, the revered 14th century Kashmiri mystic poet, saint and scholar, is famous for the Hindu philosophy known as Shaivism. Kashmiri Shaivism represents the spiritual and religious ideology and her mystic poetry is referred to as 'Vaakhs' which embody the assortment of Kashmiri culture and tradition. The variant shades of her poetry carry the historical import like social, economic and political conditions which were prevalent at that time. The "Vaakhs" delineate the transition to first Muslim dynasty as well, apart from other historical realities. The vaakhs represent her wisdom and the spiritual bent of mind and can certainly pave the way for mysticism for the seekers. Lal Deds, 'Vaakhs' contain many Sanskrit words which shape up the indigenous language and provide us with a comprehensive picture of the human civilization at that time. Persian language had not entered Kashmir at the time of Lal Ded and was evolving from mother Sanskrit. Therefore, Kashmiri language through her 'Vaakhs' has reached to its ultimate glory. And translation has acted as an impetus which has made regional literature acceptable on a global level. Almost 277 'Vaakhs' are attributed to her that act as a reservoir of her scholarly knowledge and pristine spirituality. The present paper intends to study Lal Ded from a classical perspective. It will attempt to analyse the historical dimension of the 'Vaakhs' with the aim to revive the study of indigenous language and the belief system that must have influenced the author during that time. The paper will be analysed in the backdrop of Classical Literary theory in general and Historical Literary theory in particular. Historical Criticism looks and analyzes the text in the same way as the historian looks at the historical documents. The historical and socio-cultural condition



of the time is unfolded by analyzing the text. The 'Vaakhs' will be analysed in the light of historical evidence including facts about the author (Lal Ded) and social circumstances of the time.

Lal Ded – the flag bearer of Kashmiri Shaivism lived during the 14th century to spread the myriad shades of mysticism. There are many names which are attributed to this divine figure; Laleshwari, Lal Mauj, Lalla Aarefa. She is held by the Kashmiri's in enormous passionate clone and reverence. A contemporary of Nund Resh, Sheikh Noor ud Din (RA), Lal Ded serves both as his mentor and as well as a mirror. Some scholars believe that she was the surrogate mother of Nund Resh. Both the mystics project the same spiritual and didactic philosophy. Lal Ded's utterances are known as 'vaakhs' and her literary work is known as Lalla Vakhya- which has been translated from times immemorial. Born in a Brahman family and wed in a Brahman family too, she carried the essence of Brahmanism within. The intrinsic philosophy of Brahmanism is vivid in her vaakhs. The vaakhs have a peculiar conversational style and ooze with the Brahman thought, the belief in one God. She states:

My guru said just one thing: "Turn within, turn within!" This was Lal's sole education: To learn to leap inside herself. I rejected every false belief,

Immersed in my inner voice alone.  
Ultimately I saw myself looking deep into myself  
And knew it to be you, God, in every speck."

The utterances of Lal Ded point to 'within'. As she says: "when the inner light lit up within me, off went the light outside." Her discourse points primarily to the practical purpose of divinising the human nature. The emotional and materialistic attachments lead to chaos and confusion and the panacea to all problems is "the search". The search and the realisation will be better understood by placing Lal Ded in her times and analysing her doctrine against the backdrop of historical literary criticism.

Historical criticism concerns itself with all the factors associated with the time period in which the 'text' is written and the experiences author has gone through while narrating the text. Looking at Lal Ded, she was directly under the influence of Brahmanism and the same elements echo in her poetry:

"Ami pana sodras navi ches laman Kati bozi day myon meyti diyi tar Ameyn takeyn poney zan sheman Zuv chum Braman para gatshaha" With a rope of loose spun thread am I Towing my boat upon the sea Would that God heard my prayer And brought me safe across!  
Like water in cups of unbaked clay

I run to waste  
Would God I were to reach my home!

The principle of monastism gets reflected in her other vaakhs like the below one too:



“Gwaran vonam kunuy vatsun Nebry doupnam anndaray atsun Suy gav lali vaakh ta vatsu  
Tavay may hyotum nangay natsun”.  
My guru gave me but one percept:

“From without withdraw your gaze within And fix it on the inmost self”.  
Taking to heart this one percept, Naked I began to roam.  
The vaakhs like these reveal that Lal Ded was not happy with the worldly life and had given herself to the spiritual world. She had found relief in religion which guides one towards absolute enlightenment.

During Lal Deds times, the old culture was vanishing and the song of revolution was heralded by many kings like Shahabud Din and sultan Sikander. Honorable atmosphere was hovering all around and Lal Ded found refuge in the shades of spiritualism. This experience found expression in her vaakhs and it became a discourse of sanctifying and divinizing human nature. This particular school of thought propounded by Lal Ded came to be known as Trika School of Kashmir

Shaiva mysticism or devotional Shevadvaitha, which originated no later than the 8th century CE.

For her, vaakh is the mantra which she uses to worship lord Shiva:  
“Whatever work I did became worship of the lord  
Whatever word I uttered became mantra What this body of mine experienced became  
The sadhana of Saiva tantra  
Illumining my path to parma Shiva”

The above vaakh and some other vakhs hint at the worship of shiva. The worship of shiva dates to at least second century CE, as glimpsed in the gold coins of the period engraved with shiva. The shivalingas and the scriptures of Mahaveshvara as Bhuteshvara, and the member of Shiva’s divine family such as Durga, Ganesha and Kartikeya are found in the valley from at least 5th century CE. The historical backdrop of the vaakhs of Lal Ded reveal the earliest account of Kashmir’s origin and sacred geography. Even Kalhans Rajtarangini (12th century CE), state the valley of Kashmir is parvati herself and the king of Kashmir is shiva. During the times of Lal Ded, there developed a monist strand of philosophy in Kashmir that identified Shiva as pure conscious. And it was this school of thought which came to be known as pratyabhijna (recognition) or Trika (triad of Shiva, Shakti and Nara). As Lal Ded puts it:  
“Shiva is the sole reality and witness in whichever direction you look.  
Don’t distinguish the Brahmin and the muslim then If you’re a Trika, go within, know only yourself”!

The influence of Trika on Lal Ded is quite evident and these vaakhs emerge as a socio- historical product. Her innumerable vaakhs are replete with the same doctrine, which preach that all creation is bound together with one indivisible supper consciousness called ‘parama shiva’ (the supreme principle). But human beings fail to



realize it because their vision is clouded by amnesia induced by materialism. Jeromme Mc Gann quotes about the influence of socio historical factors on author in the following words:

“Poems are social and historical products and the critical study of such products must be grounded in a socio-historical analytic”. He adds, “Poems are not just linguistic compositions. They are also social and historical compositions. That is it’s not just words that goes into the writing of a poem- there are social values, historical circumstances, and even economic issues that go into the writing of a poem. These things may not be ‘obvious’, but they are there nonetheless. And our job as literary critic is to analyze that historical context”.

Mc Gann is pointing at the utmost importance of the socio-historical times to which the author belongs and that leave an indelible mark on the literary work. Likewise Lal’s vaakh’s urge that Shaivism was everywhere and it was the religious philosophy which resounded in her Vaakhs.

Mc Gaan is clear that new historicists pay attention to all the issues that surround the text. Culture, is an important element that shapes the literary work of art. Her vaakhs form an important part of kashmiri culture and contemporary kashmiri literature. Sanskrit lost its importance as a language after the advent of Islam in Kashmir around the 11th century AD because of various social, political, linguistic and religious reasons. Lal Ded bridges the gap and acts as a representative of kashmiri culture which reflects in her sayings (vaakhs). Vasugupta Rishi, Acharaya Somanand, Acharaya Utpal Dev and Acharaya Abhinavagupta are her immediate predecessors and Nund Rishi is her immediate successor who was influenced by her philosophy. Abdul Ahad Azad in his book Kashmiri Language and Poetry has pointed at the parallel religious ideology of the duo.

He quotes from Lal Ded :

“When I heard the sound of the violin I offered my own flesh as Kebabs Beneath His tent I watched I swam in the tears of sadness

Neither shall stay the winter, nor the summer Nor shall sing the dove after the rains Neither shall stay happiness nor grief Nor shall stay forever song and music Negation and affirmation, I, did right, That I did to my own self Leaving existence, I held presence

Thus I Lalla reached the absolute”.

Abdul Ahad Azad locates the use of words like violin, kabab, happiness, grief, song, music and notices the same stance in the ‘shrukhs’ of Nund Reshi:

“Don’t shield yourself from his arrows, don’t

Turn your face from the digger injuries Sacrifice yourself for his ordeal, Thus here and there you’ll gleam’ Turned me here inhuman, filled me with ash from head to toe Hopeful I am, there, here, when to lead there is a guide I am happy with being born and dying I am your slave, you are my God”.



Abdul Ahad has pointed at the same cult of religious philosophy which is common in both poets. Nund Reshi has himself stated about Lal Ded:  
“It was Lalla of padmanpur

Who drank in long draught nectar Divine She was the divine manifestation for us, May thou lord bestow a similar boon upon me”. The customs, beliefs and ideas of Kashmiri culture are quite conspicuous in Lala vaakhs. She has stood like the stone of Gibraltar against all the oppressions and inequality. She states:  
“I hoped not in it for a moment, I trusted it not by a hair.  
Still I, Lalla, drank the wine of mine own sayings. Yet, then did I seize an inner darkness and bring it down.  
And tear it and cut it to pieces”.

Sir George A Grierson and Lionell O Barnett state in their book “Lalla Vakyun”: “She found by their help she became enabled to dissipate the inner darkness of her soul. Or perhaps ‘it’ is the vanities of the world. Feeling distrustful and fearful of the dark mysterious world of phenomena, she drank the wine of her verses to give herself courage to fight against it [Barnett 129]. And Lal Ded finds relief against oppression through her vaakh:

“At the end of moonlight to the mad one did I call,  
And soothe his pair with the love of God. Cry it is I, Lalla- it is I, Lalla, the beloved I awakened”.

Lal Ded’s personal life was full of sufferings and mental anguish. Her husband and inlaws were oppressors and Lal states:

“hund marithan ya kath, noshi nilvat czali neh zan” “Whether they slaughter a big/small sheep, it is all the same for the daughter in law, who is used to the round heavy stone.”

It is told that her mother-in-law used to treat her cruelly and used to place a stone, heavy one, under the heap of rice. Her husband suspected her of infidelity which added insult to her injuries. Her marriage was miserable and she remunerated the world in order to seek truth:

“My guru gave a single precept  
Turn your gaze from outside to inside Fix it on the hidden self  
I, Lalla, took this to heart  
And naked set forth to dance”.

Religion plays a vital role in the cultural identity of people and so it helped Lal Ded to shape her practice of religion. Religion acts as the way in which humans experience and comprehend the world and is hence a prime source of cultural expression. And, she finds liberation in turning to divine by renouncing the worldly desires:

“If, in flux of time, thou hast destroyed the whole



body of thy desires, Choose ye a home-life, or choose ye a hermitage If thou wilt come to know that the lord is all pervading and without taint,

Then, as thou wilt know, so will thou be”. Lal ded finds absolute freedom by negating ‘self’ and accepting the fact that material life is full of dross. She relates ‘material’ with ‘mud’ in her famous vaakh:

“The livelong day I passed seeking for mud. When I beheld the ‘mud’ upon my body.

I gave my body the unrestrained rupture (of union) with the mud”. and becoming spiritually one with divine is the only way out which helps her to heal from the trauma she had gone in her marital life.

The degeneration of culture is the reality of post modern world. Dehumanization and fragmentation is the sad reality. Demoralization and spiritual inconsistency is hovering over the heads. Lal Ded was no less than a seer who has projected this cultural degradation in her famous vaakh:

‘teli ha mali, asan kiyamatak keran  
Yeli tsuth papan tseran-sul’

As Grierson and Barnett state about this fact “Time will become more and more evil and there is none to warn or to guide to the true knowledge”. He continues “Human nature will change for the worse, as if pears and apples, whose ripening time is the late autumn, were to change and ripen with the apricots in rainy season. All women will be unchaste. Mother and daughters, hand in hand –that is pumping for each other, -well go abroad in search of strange men.” One is reminded of T.S Eliots famous lines from ‘The waste land’: Madame Sosostri famous clairvoyant

Had a bad cold, never the less  
Is known to be the wisest woman in Europe with a wicked pack of cords.....  
Unreal city,  
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,  
A crowd flowed under London Bridge, so many I had not thought death had undone  
so many.

The way the wasteland is representative poem of brokenness and loss in modern times. Likewise, Lal Ded’s above vaakh projects the same psychological and emotional void.

Lal Ded has given many vaakhs which resound with the rich socio-cultural aroma of Kashmir. Kashmir is known as ‘paradise on earth’ and there are certain things/features which represent the iconic beauty of Kashmir. There is mention of saffron, fields, boats, fruits, onion, garlic, in her vaakhs. As stated below:

“Helpless and wretched made I cry in the market,  
Here for you lotus stalks will ye not buy?

Then again I returned and behold, how will I cried.



Onions and garlic will ye not buy”?

Also,

“Let not the ass loose to stray from the guiding hand,

Or, of a surety, will it devour thy neighbour’s saffron-garden”.

During Lal Ded’s times, mostly earthen pots were used. There is abundant use of ‘clay’ and ‘potter’ in her vaakhs. She says:

“Now I saw the hearth ablaze Now I saw not fire not smoke Now I saw the pandava mother Now She was but a potter’s aunt

O man, why do you trust a rope of sand? You cannot tow your boat with it What god has written in karma line’s Cannot be altered or reversed”.

Lal Deds vaakhs are representation of the culture of her times. Her vaakhs bestow meaning and value artifacts. The diction of her vaakhs reflect the different ways of living life during that time.

Concluding, Lal Deds vaakhs carry exceptional self-awareness, fortitude and social reality of her times. Her greatness and qualities such as exceptional courage, invincible perseverance and awful intellect is reflected in each vaakh. She was an extraordinary lady who was able to remain untouched and unmoved by the ordinary worldly concerns in search of her real self- self realization. As she says: “Even if they come with soul-flowers to offer, I could not care less. Untouched, I move on.” Her vaakhs when interpreted correctly reflects norms and values, as revealing the ethos of culture, the processes of social change, and certain types of social facts. The social stability, instability and cultural ideals are involved. Lal Ded’s knowledge of the true nature of reality and intuitive sacred self is projected in her vaakhs and she is the one who came from the paradise on earth that is Kashmir.

## II. Conclusion

Rereading Lal Ded through the framework of classical aesthetics reveals a nuanced poetic sensibility that transcends the apparent simplicity of her vakhs. Far from being spontaneous mystical utterances alone, her verses embody the principles of Sanskrit poetics—particularly Rasa, Dhvani, and Śānta aesthetic experience. The suggestive layers of meaning in her language align closely with the dhvani theory of Ānandavardhana, while her emphasis on detachment and inner realization resonates deeply with the emotional landscape of Śānta Rasa.

Moreover, her ability to evoke profound metaphysical insight using sparse, vernacular idiom reflects a unique fusion of folk expression and philosophical depth. In this light, Lal Ded’s poetry does not merely belong to the margins of mystical or regional literature but occupies a significant position within the larger framework of classical Indian literary discourse. This classical rereading opens new avenues to understand her work not just as spiritual testimony but as refined, philosophically rich poetry that continues to invite layered interpretation across time and tradition.



## References

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