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# Lal Ded: Kashmiri rebel saint-poetess and her legacy<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The study provides an analysis of the legacy of Lal Ded, Kashmiri mystic and poetess, in the broad context of historical and social changes in medieval, XIV-century Kashmir. It was a significant period of time in the history of Kashmir, marked by shifts in power, social ferment, the beginning of gradual decline of Hinduism in Kashmir Valley to the advantage of Islam, transformation of Kashmiri society and its identity. Lal Ded is a unique phenomenon. This saint-poetess, who strongly rebelled against caste system, social and religious discrimination in medieval Kashmir, has been subsequently cherished as a saint and spiritual leader by Kashmiri Hindu and Muslim communities alike. Over the last six centuries, she has become a symbol of indigenous culture of Kashmir with its traditions of inter-faith and cross-cultural connections and influences.

The paper is particularly focused on her contribution to enriching mystic, spiritual traditions and cultural heritage of Kashmir and her profound impact on shaping Kashmiri society. The article approaches the topic in four major parts. The first part provides quick glance into Lal Ded's life in the early stage, the

reasons for abandoning her family, starting the life of sage wanderer, and her influence on shaping the mindset of common people. The second part analyses historical background of the XIV century Kashmir with its ongoing political and social turmoil which had direct impact on Lal Ded's life and thought. The third part provides an insight to her thought and poetry in the context of social relations in Kashmir and the widely understood idea of syncretism in Kashmir. The fourth part looks at Lalla's influence on Rishi order with its founder Nund Rishi (Sheikh Nur-ud-Din), who is considered to be another important pillar of Kashmiri identity. To what extent has Lal Ded contributed to the propagation of Islam among Kashmiri followers of the Rishis? The conclusion summarizes the role and importance of Lal Ded's legacy in terms of relations between different religious communities with reference to contemporary Kashmir.

### Introduction: the birth of a mystic

Lal Ded, Kashmiri medieval poetess and representative of mystical thought, is called by a number of names. She is Lalla-Arifa (Lalla, the Realised One) for Muslim scholars, Lalla Yogishwari (Lalla, the adept in Yogic practices), Lalleshwari or Lalla Yogini for Hindus (Kashmiri Pandits) or simply Lalla or Mother Lalla – as lay Kashmiri people of all faiths like to call her. I will mostly refer to the name Lal Ded, her most recognizable, non-sectarian appellation. Her immense influence on shaping collective identity and popular religious thought of Kashmiri people makes her the most important indigenous poetess in the history of Kashmir.

There is no precise date of Lal Ded's birth. The sources differ and it is generally assumed that she was born around 1320-1335<sup>2</sup> into a Kashmiri Pandit (Brahmin) family. Her place of birth was Pandrethan, a village located few miles to the southeast of Srinagar, in Kashmir Valley, which today constitutes crucial part of Indian Administered Kashmir. All her life passed into a legend and along with her verses became a part of local storytelling and oral performance tradition, handed down from generation to

generation<sup>3</sup>. She received brief education in religious texts, but very soon she was married off at the age of 12, in accordance with the customs of her community. She was unhappy in the bridegroom's house as her husband and mother-in-law mistreated her. According to a popular legend she never complained, even when she was humiliated and did not receive proper food which made her constantly half-fed. There is even a Kashmiri saying: "Whether they killed a goat Lalla had always a stone for her dinner" as her mother in law used to put a flat stone on her plate and cover it with rice so it would look as a bigger heap of food. It can be assumed that she did not want to complain as she gradually turned to ascetic exercise which required deeply rooted self-imposed discipline. Being unable and unwilling to withstand constant control and limitations resulting from rigid rules of family life, Lal Ded abandoned her marriage and material life and became a shelterless mystic without any possession, wandering in rags and reciting poetry. For a woman it was an unprecedented courage to renounce the culturally imposed traditional role of self-sacrificing wife, abandon the family and enter the patriarchal world of metaphysical/poetic experiences. It was also an exceptional proof of dauntless spirit when she openly questioned the authority and unassailable position of the then educated elite of Sanskrit academia. Without any doubts she consciously chose a life of a rebel, addressing her words to a man in the street. By doing so she became a rebel against the tradition and elite/clergy on one hand – and the other – a significant contributor (and even the founder) of Kashmiri cultural, religious and social heritage. She most probably did not consider herself a poet. According to her words, the *vaakhs* were merely mantras, chants, aimed at praising the God: *whatever work I did became worship of the Lord*. But in the eyes of contemporary reader or/and analyst of non-Kashmiri background, she can be perceived as a poetess.

## Historical Background

Lal Ded lived in the time of unprecedented political and social turmoil which characterized XIV-century Kashmir. At that period

of time the Valley, famous for its scenic beauty and fertile soil, was a hotbed of violence and bloodshed as politically disrupted Hindu kingdom became the target of attacks carried out by foreign adventurers. It was a reflection of gradual decay of long-lasting period of Hindu rule in Kashmir. Economic and political decline during the weak dynasty of Damra (1286-1320) enabled the invaders to take advantage of this situation and plunder the Valley. In 1320 Kashmir was subjected to wide disturbances as it was invaded and looted by Dulacha, a Mongol warrior from Turkistan, who entered the Valley from Baramulla side with seventeen thousand horsemen and some foot-soldiers<sup>4</sup>. Kashmiri king, Suhadeva proved to be unable to protect his subjects from the continuing onslaught and cowardly fled the Valley. His chief minister, Rama Chandra, proclaimed himself a king. Dulacha ruthlessly plundered and burned villages, killing men, enslaving women and children. Mongol invasions devastated Kashmir but it was prince Rinchana, a Ladakhi Buddhist, who seized power in Kashmir after deceitfully killing the king Rama Chandra. He further strengthened his power by marrying Rama Chandra's daughter (or wife as some sources say), Kota Rani<sup>5</sup>. Rinchana wanted to appease his newly conquered subjects by embracing their Shaivite Hindu faith. To his surprise, he was rejected by proud Brahmin priests. Shortly afterwards he approached Sufis led by Sayyid Sharduddin Rahman, popularly known as Hazrat Bulbul Shah (a disciple of the Suhrawardi Sufi, Shah Nimatullah Wali Farsi, Bulbul Shah is considered to be the first known Muslim missionary in Kashmir<sup>6</sup>). As a result, Rinchana embraced Islam, the faith which had already gained popularity among his newly conquered subjects. Undoubtedly, it was both politically and spiritually motivated conversion. Bulbul Shah managed to convert several thousands of people; one of them was Rinchana's brother-in-law, Rawanchandra. At the request of Bulbul Shah, Rinchana build a *khanqah* and a mosque near his palace. There was also a large kitchen (Bulbul Lankar), where poor people received free food twice a day. Many of them converted to Islam. The next decades witnessed the influx of other Suhrawardi Sufis to

Kashmir, including Sayyid Muhammad Isfahani, the disciple of the famous Sayyid Jalaludin Bukhari of Uch (Uch Sharif is currently in South Punjab, Pakistan). Isfahani came to Kashmir later, during the rule of Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin.

Back in 1320 the newly converted ruler, Rinchana assumed the title of Sultan Sadr-ud-Din (granted to him by Bulbul Shah) and Kota Rani assisted him in ruling the country. For the first time in the troubled history of Kashmir its inhabitants were subject to a Muslim rule. After Sultan's death three years later, Kota Rani made an attempt to restore her Hindu dynasty, by marrying Udayaneva, brother of the last Hindu king, Suhadeva. She was successful only for over a decade. When Udayaneva died in 1339, the Sultanate of Kashmir was established under Sultan Shamas-ud-Din who took over the control of Kashmir. Queen Kota Rani refused his offer of marriage, and in order to avoid humiliation she committed suicide.

During the reign of new dynasty, Islamic practices were propagated with fervor and gradually adopted across the Valley<sup>7</sup>. Sufism was introduced almost simultaneously with the beginning of Muslim rule in Kashmir, but systematic, well-organized Sufi activities began towards the end of XIV century<sup>8</sup>. New converts were awarded with privileges and more Sufi missionaries came to the Valley. One of them was Mir Sayyid Ali Hamdani, an Iranian famous charismatic Sufi scholar and philosopher, who came to Kashmir in 1384 with approximately 700 of his Iranian disciples. They had major role in securing numerous conversions to Islam and instructing new converts across the Valley about the practices of new religion. It should be emphasized that until fanatical Sultan Sikandar took power in Kashmir in 1389, immediately starting persecution of Hindus and forced Islamization of the Valley<sup>9</sup>, the Sultans (such as Shah Mir or Shihab-ud-Din) took humane and tolerant approach to the Hindus majority<sup>10</sup>.

The preachers (Sufis or Sayyids) who came to Kashmir from Central Asia and Persia brought new philosophy and successfully (and peacefully) spread Islam among Kashmiris<sup>11</sup>. It has to be mentioned here that there had been some attempts to conquer

Kashmir in XIth Century by Mahmud of Ghazni who invaded North India at that time. It was the time of first Muslim influences in Kashmir. Soon after Kashmiri Hindu kings started to employ in their armies Muslim warriors, who were famous for their unprecedented courage.

One of the reasons for growing popularity of new religion two centuries later was the fact that Brahmanical socio-political order of medieval Kashmir became increasingly elitist, hierarchical, privilege-based and deeply grounded on unjust caste system. The contacts with Muslim preachers paved the way to gradual conversions to Islam merely among the unprivileged masses. These cross-cultural interactions were not a new phenomenon in Kashmir, which had already been a confluence of different philosophies. The region was also a hub for trade between the East and the West and the destination point of missionaries, travelers or scholars who had their impact on shaping Kashmiri culture and identity and contributing to unique religious syncretism. Buddhist influences could be noticeable in Kashmiri Shaivism based on Trika philosophy, which emphasized the idea of experience, reason and comprehension in the course of realization of ultimate reality. Importantly, this philosophy was intended for everybody, without restriction of caste, creed, or colour<sup>12</sup>. The Trika Shaivite culture which was restored after decline of Buddhism in Kashmir by the V-VIth Century, developed from a blending of the Vedanic and Buddhist philosophies<sup>13</sup>. Sufis with their benevolent attitude were also influenced by ascetic and meditative practices of Mahayana Buddhism.

The advent of Sufi saints and missionaries marked the beginning of new order in Kashmir, based both on Islam, and on former practices. Taking into consideration local historical heritage, ethnic identities, specificity of traditions and customs and their impact on social changes, this process can be perceived both as Islamization of Kashmir and as Kashmirization of Islam. The syncretic Hindu-Muslim culture with Buddhist influences led to the development of distinct characteristic Kashmiri self-

awareness reflected through its indigenous thought, practices and customs which differentiated both religious communities from their counterparts in other parts of Asia<sup>14</sup>. Lal Ded witnessed the injustices of the Brahman –elite social order and then the advent of Islam through the activities of the Sayyids of Persia. She observed all these political and social changes exerting an impact on ordinary peoples' lives. She managed to express it in her sayings, poetry and philosophy.

### Lal Ded's output and heritage

Lal Ded's verse-sayings are timeless and deeply embedded in Kashmiri culture. Her devotional poetic compositions –called *vatsuns*, *vaakhs* or *Lalla-vaakhs*, literally meaning Lalla's speeches –perfectly reflect socio-political upheavals in Kashmir on one hand, but also depict her mystic experiences, show her poetic genius and deeply compassionate look at human existence with its everyday hardship. She was a wanderer, speaking directly to the people, reaching the peasants across the Valley and "sharing her universal message, liberating the doctrine from any sectarian, local or regional colour"<sup>15</sup>. In one of her well known *vaakh* she emphasizes that there is no distinction between people of different faiths as "the sun know not the Hindu different to the Muslim"<sup>16</sup>.

In the ancient and the medieval period Kashmir produced many eminent thinkers, scholar sages and spiritual practitioners. But all their works were in Sanskrit and they constituted an important pillar of elitist Sanskrit academia. Lal Ded spoke and spread her message in Kashmiri language, which was easily understood by the man in the street, accessible to everyone, even illiterate people, irrespective of creed, caste or sex. Due to her exceptional talent it was vernacular, full of idioms, poetic expressions and at the same time flawless and simple. Currently over 89% of population of Kashmir speaks Kashmiri and it is one of the oldest spoken languages of modern India. The beginnings of Kashmiri literature are often debated by scholars, but it is usually emphasized that Kashmiri dialect (or *Kashur* in their native tongue) owes its revival to Lal Ded<sup>17</sup> and that she has unique contribution

as the maker of modern Kashmiri language<sup>18</sup>. Balraj Puri emphasizes that if Lal Ded is considered as the earliest Kashmiri poetess, this language has over 600-year old recorded literary heritage<sup>19</sup>.

Her *vaakhs* were not written down during her life time. They were transmitted orally and down the centuries her popularity is enormous, inspiring millions of people. Based on everyday life metaphors it was easily accessible for everyone and still remains original and full of spiritual fervor. As B. Kachru points out "the first specimens for authentic Kashmiri poetry is provided by Shaivite woman mystic Lalleshwari. (...) Lalla is to Kashmiri what Shakespeare is to English"<sup>20</sup>. It is not possible today to say precisely how many of Lalla's *vaakhs* were preserved. Over the centuries, some of them were changed, some were given interpolations and additions. Its number ranges from 60 to 140 or even to several hundred<sup>21</sup> and her poetry is esteemed as much as that of Rumi or Hafiz<sup>22</sup>.

One of the reasons for her immense popularity among common people was her openness, understanding of their casual problems and renouncing of fraud and deceit. Her ultimate goal was to search for truth as a teacher, a spiritual guide who not only says wise words and quotes books, but also takes lessons from her own real life challenges. She tried to practice what she read and learn what was impossible to be found in the books. By symbolically "wrestling with a lion" she managed to transmit the teachings which were the fruit of her own experiences. She strongly emphasizes it in one of her *vaakhs*:

*"What the books taught me,  
I've practised.  
What they didn't teach me,  
I've taught myself.  
I've gone into the forest and wrestled with the lion.  
didn't get this far by teaching one thing and doing another".*



The traditions of Buddhism, Shaivism and Islam constitute important pillars of identity and intellectual heritage of Kashmir Valley. Lal Ded had significant role on shaping Kashmiri identity and local culture based on multi-faceted traditions, but she cannot be identified solely with any particular part of this tradition. It has not been confirmed that Lal Ded converted to Islam and her poetry never gives any proof that she embraced it<sup>23</sup>, but she was definitely influenced by Islam and had contacts with Sufi missionaries. Rooted deeply in this tradition, her message was highly universal, reaching people of different caste, creed or social position. She managed to embrace the overlapping discourses of Islam, Sufism, Shaivism and Buddhism. Witnessing the gradual disintegration of Brahmanical social order and observing idolatrous practices of priests, she rejected exclusivist, organized religion with its empty, institutionalized ritualism. In such circumstances she was obviously perceived as a threat to the established social order. In one of her most well-known verses she writes:

*“Shiva abides in all that is, everywhere  
Then do not distinguish between a Hindu and Mussalman.  
If thou art wise, know thyself  
That is true knowledge of the Lord.  
I gave up falsehood, deceit, untruth,  
I saw the one in all fellow beings, and  
Preached the same doctrine to the mind.  
What then is the inhibition in eating  
The food offered by a fellow human being?”<sup>24</sup>*

She strongly criticized idol worship and recommended yoga and spiritual meditation as path of self-knowledge, liberation and search for universal truth<sup>25</sup>:

*“Your idol is stone, the temple a stone too,  
All a stone bound together from top to toe!  
What is it you worship, you dense Brahmin?”*

*True worship must bind the vital air of the heart to the mind"*

She confirms this attitude by opposing animal sacrifice and confronting the Brahmin priest with the results of soulless ritualism:

*"It covers your shame,  
keeps you from shivering.  
Grass and water are all the food it asks.  
Who taught you, priest-man,  
to feed this breathing thing to your thing of stone?"*

Rural culture has always played crucial role as repository of Kashmiri identity (Kashmiryat or "Kashmirness"), which is largely syncretic. Many of *Lalla-vaakhs* were preserved in memory of Kashmiri people and carried through centuries without written record. She had profound impact on shaping Kashmiri indigenous collective memory, cultural identity and civilizational ethos. Lal Ded has been viewed not only as a poet, but as a seer, Shiva yogini and a Sufi, influenced by Mahayana Buddhism.

In her teachings she promotes the middle path as the path of personal liberation, which has strong reference to Buddhist spirit:

*"By pandering to your appetites and desires  
You get nowhere  
By penance and fasting,  
You get conceit  
Be moderate in food a  
You will be moderate  
Your path will surely be illuminated".*

Interestingly, she realized perfectly well her how important was the role she played in the lives of different strata of Kashmiris and impact on local culture:

*Whatever I uttered with my tongue, became a mantra.*

And:

*"I burnt the foulness of my soul;  
I slew my heart, its passions all;  
I spread my garments, hem and sat;  
Just there on bended knees,  
In utter surrender unto Him;  
My fame as Lalla spread afar."<sup>26</sup>*

Almost every Kashmiri, especially belonging to older generations, Muslim or Hindu, illiterate or educated – is able to recite some of her *vaakhs*. Sufi saints, folk musicians in Kashmir Valley say her name with utter admiration and respect, and still sing her poems, even if they are unable to understand all words of her verses. For generations of Muslims and Hindus she has been a symbol of their heritage, for "a succession of saints in Kashmir schooled in particular method of medication and concentration, and forming the loose sort of order of their own have regarded her as their pattern and lodestar"<sup>27</sup>.

Lal Ded played significant role as a symbol of Kashmirihood, the idea of indigenous, separate identity, which later paved the way to the development of Kashmiri nationalism. She enriched the local tradition and deeply influenced the establishment of Rishi movement, led by Sheikh Nur-ud-Din, the only indigenous Sufi order in Kashmir. A renowned professor M.H. Zaffar, Kashmiri Muslim, remembers how his mother used to recite Lal Ded's verses when he was a child. He writes: "Despite being an illiterate Kashmiri, my mother remembered many a *vaakhs* of Lal Ded and many a *shrukh* (verses) of Nund Rishi, which she used to recite me when I was a child. She used to tell me the story of Lal Ded, and how she suckled the newly born Nund Rishi. This was the kind of education I got from my illiterate mother and this gave me my identity"<sup>28</sup>. Richard Temple also points out the popularity and significance of Lal Ded's poetry in creating the atmosphere of harmony and tolerance, understood and accepted by a common

man: "The *vaakhs* of Laleshwari have become part of day to day conversation in Kashmiri households. Her religion is not bookish. Her religion is a mix of people, hopes and miseries"<sup>29</sup>.

Lal Ded passed away around 1376. It is debatable whether she was cremated in accordance with Hindu/Pandit tradition, or buried accordingly to Muslim tradition. She would probably respond in her own way<sup>30</sup>:

*"Alike for me is life and death,  
Happy to live happy to die,  
I mourn for none, none mourns for me".*

### Lal Ded and Rishi movement

In the XIV-century Kashmir Hindus were still in the majority as the natives of the Valley, but to the newly arrived Sufis it was not an unwelcomed territory. On the contrary, they were accepted by Kashmiris. The extensive activity of Sufi mystics resulted in gradual transition of Kashmir to Islam, which led to the foundation of mystical Rishi movement by Nund Rishi known as Sheikh Nur-ud-Din, or Sahazanand ("The Blissful One") as his Hindu Pandit followers call him. According to Riyaz Punjabi "The intermingling of Trika Shaivism with Islam resulted in the emergence of a new cult, which came to be called Rishi cult, a synonym of Bhakti. It was through the Rishis that Islam in its indigenous form became the popular faith of the people"<sup>31</sup>. He also points out that it was Lal Ded who became a torch-bearer of the Rishi cult in Kashmir. As a wandering ascetic, who chose the life of poverty and meditative self-discipline, she was unquestionable spiritual inspiration for Sheikh Nur-ud-Din especially during the formative stage of his mystical quest. He was Lalla's younger contemporary, the revered "great national patron saint of Kashmiris"<sup>32</sup>. He was another patron saint, prominent person in the spiritual heritage of Kashmir. Nund Rishi is popularly presented as the successor, "spiritual son" of Lal Ded. Like her, he rejected injustice and inequality and promoted universal message of tolerance, which was widely accepted by the

underprivileged people of the Valley who had been witnessing social inequality. As it is mentioned above, the popular legend says that he refused to drink his mother's milk when he was born and Dal Ded came to breastfeed him herself. It is hardly possible because either he lived shortly after Lalla, or she was at least over 60 years old when he was born. However, strong ties between the two saints are strongly imbedded as part of folk story-telling in Kashmir. Another version of this story says that newly-born Nund-Rishi did not want to take his mother's milk, but then Lal Ded visited his house and said to him the following words: "thou wast not ashamed of being born; why then art thou ashamed of sucking (at your mother's breast)". After that the baby started to drink mother's milk and Lal Ded continued visiting his parents' house<sup>33</sup>.

Nund Rishi himself expressed his dedication to Lalla, praising her in one of his *shrukhs* and even elevating her to the role of his *avatar*<sup>34</sup>:

*"That Lalla of Padmanpore,  
Who had drank the fill of divine nectar;  
She was undoubtedly an avatar of ours.  
Oh God! Grant me the same spiritual power".*

Nund Rishi was born in 1378 and died in 1440, so he lived during the reign of Sultan Sikandar, who was followed by two his sons: Sultan Ali Shah and then younger one, Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin. There was enormous difference between two former kings and the latter. During regime of Sikandar (1389-1413) large number of Islamic scholars came to Kashmir. He came to be known as "But-Shikan", destroyer of idols. Hindus were subjected to tremendous persecutions. Their temples and places of worship were destroyed and burnt. It was announced that if a Hindu person does not convert to Islam, he will be killed or he must leave the Valley. Many Brahmans fled away, many lost their lives, some stayed in the Valley, but refused forced conversions and committed suicide. Forced proselytizing was continued Sikandar's son, Sultan Ali Shah (1413-1420). Only after next Sultan, Zain-ul-

Abidin, younger son of Sikandar, took over the throne in 1420, he completely reversed the policy of his predecessors and all restrictions against Hindus were removed. Zain-ul-Abidin allowed rebuilding the demolished temples and recalled Pandits who fled the Valley. Known under the title of the "Great King" or "Badshah", he ruled for 50 years and is regarded as the most benevolent, tolerant and successful ruler of Kashmir<sup>35</sup>. At that time Lal Ded had already passed away, leaving her *vaakhs* to the Kashmiri people and inspiring the Rishis. Nund Rishi is known for providing advice to the king on introducing justice in his kingdom, especially with reference to the lower strata of Kashmiri society.

Just like Lal Ded did before, he combines the idea of unity and role of mysticism as characteristic feature both for Muslims and Hindus:

*"What qualities hast thou found in the world?  
To allow thy body a free, loose rope?  
The Musalman and Hindu sail in the same boat.  
Have thy play and let's go home".*

And other verses:

*"Among the brothers of the same parents,  
Why did you create a barrier?  
Muslims and Hindus are one.  
When will God be kind to His servants?"*

This inspiration of Nund Rishi which came from Muslim and Hindu sources and Lal Ded's poetry, is clearly visible in many of his verses.

## Conclusion

Being a rebel against the existing, unquestionable order requires courage at any time. Without any doubt Lal Ded was such a person. She holds a special position in the cultural history of Kashmir as mystical poetess and the founder of the

contemporary Kashmiri literature and important contributor to the new spiritual tradition of Kashmir. In her life, teachings and outpourings, she went far beyond existing religious boundaries and dared to criticize the corruption of upper echelons of Brahmin society in Kashmir, represented by high-caste Kashmiri Pandits. Born into Pandit Shaivism, she is considered to be a Shaivite yogini influenced by Mahayana Buddhism, and then the patron saint of the Rishi order, deeply linked with Islam. This cross-cultural fusion had direct impact on her outpourings, which is replete with syncretism. She spread her message in Kashmiri language, accessible to everyone, not only privileged intellectual elite. It is utterly important to remember her legacy, the mystic idea of divine unity which was spread in simple language easily understood by a common man. She managed to attract people to humanistic perception of religion, based on equality and challenging and rejecting social discrimination, and revolting against organized religion which was at that time strictly connected with Brahmanical ritualism and superiority.

It has to be emphasized, however, that by renouncing idol worship and empty ritualism Lal Ded did not reject the concept of religious affiliations. As Chitrlekha Zutschi rightly points out, "her poetry does not attempt to present the vision of the land where religious affiliations do not matter. Instead, it presents society in a state of flux, with religious and regional affiliations in the process of redefinition". According to this author the ethos and tolerance in Lal Ded's poetry were purposely popularized in the 1930's and 1940's by the adherents of rising Kashmiri nationalism<sup>36</sup>. It only proves how important symbolic meaning is assured for Lal Ded as an important element of *Kashmiryat* idea, even in its purely nationalistic reflection.

In her teachings Lal Ded advocated life of intimacy with God through ascetism and meditation. So was Nund Rishi who devoted himself to ascetism and in mystical elation he wrote:

*"He is near me and I am near Him,  
I found solace in His nearness,*

*In vain did I seek Him elsewhere,  
Lo: I found the Beloved within my own consciousness".*

Mohammad Ishaq Khan the author of the major work on Kashmiri Rishi movement, emphasizes that this verse where we find the intuitive realization of the real self, is typical of the Saivite way of renunciation<sup>37</sup>.

Throughout the centuries, on one hand Kashmiris were aware of their communal differences, but on the other Sufi shrines attracted Muslims and Hindus, and as popular Sufism spread across the Valley, it contributed to promote common way of understanding the surrounding world<sup>38</sup>. Kashmiri Muslims and Hindus used the same shrines but it should be also emphasized that there were divisions between them and one should not perceived Kashmiri society as idealistically unchanging blending of religions. There is no doubt that Lal Ded's outpourings had fierce contribution to promotion of syncretic perception of religion and practically fostered spiritual accommodation between religious groups in her times as well as in the following centuries. Yoginder Sikand emphasizes in pre-British India Hindu and Muslim community identities were often ambiguous and Kashmiri Muslims and Pandits (Kashmiri Hindus) shared several customs and beliefs. Some of them remained till today. Riaz Punjabi acknowledges that beef for example was abhorrent to Muslims and Hindus. Kashmir till today remains the only place in India inhabited by Muslim majority, where cow-slaughtering is forbidden under complete approval of the society<sup>39</sup>.

Political turmoil and armed insurgency that erupted in Kashmir Valley in the late 80's, resulted in sectarian divisions, growing atmosphere of vengeance and disdain between Pandits and Muslims. It was followed by exodus of the Pandit community from Kashmir, which may be comparable to the exodus in the XV century, during the reign of Sultan Sikandar. Over two decades of current political instability has negatively affected the dynamics of social changes in the Valley to an unprecedented scale. Lal Ded has become a part of this rivalry, being more often perceived



through mutually exclusive lens of Muslim/Hindu nationalism. It is an irony and contradiction, which should be considered as extremely unfortunate phenomenon as her poetic legacy had directly opposite purpose: to reconcile, not to feud. Especially today in times of escalating religious conflicts, division along sectarian lines, it is important to remember her exceptional contribution to inter-religious dialogue, tolerance and her philosophy based on understanding the idea of humanity and syncretic creativity. But it is a tremendously difficult challenge – as Lal Ded writes <sup>40</sup>:

*"I could learn to disperse the southern clouds.  
I could learn how to drain out the sea,  
I could learn to heal the source of a leper,  
But I could never learn the art to convince a fool "*

Lal Ded and Nund Rishi live in the memory of Kashmiris, also among the people who belong to younger generation. Ikram Ullah, young Kashmiri poet alludes to this intellectual and spriritual heritage in these words:

*"I belong to a Valley so exquisite.  
She mothered the mystic Nund resh. ....And  
blew breath in the eloquent Lal Ded.  
Whose shrukhs and vaakhs petrify the generations after them... "41.*

## Notes and References

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