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MYSTICS SPECIAL

Lal Ded and Her Spiritual Journey

S. S. Toshkhani

Lal Ded: The Voice of the Marginalised

Neerja Mattoo

A Reappraisal of Lal Ded

A. N. Dhar

Nunda Rishi: A Brief Introduction

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The Inscrutable God-Man

G. N. Raina

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Editor : **K. WARIKOO**
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CONTENTS

Editor's Page		1-3
Lal Ded and Her Spiritual Journey	<i>S. S. Toshkhani</i>	4-34
Lal Ded: The Voice of the Marginalised	<i>Neerja Mattoo</i>	35-48
A Reappraisal of Lal Ded	<i>A. N. Dhar</i>	49-58
Nunda Rishi: A Brief Introduction	<i>A. N. Dhar</i>	59-69
The Inscrutable God-Man	<i>G. N. Raina</i>	71-76
 BOOK REVIEW		
A.N. Dhar, <i>Mysticism Across Cultures: Studies on Select Poets and Saints</i>	<i>K. Warikoo</i>	77-79
 HRCF File		
Religion, Culture and Harmony in South Asia (Seminar Report)		80-83
HRCF Documentary <i>Shrines and Pilgrimages of Kashmir</i> Selected for International Film Festival (June 2007)		84-88
Index/Contents of <i>Himalayan and Central Asian Studies</i> , 1997-2006		89-109

Editor's Page

It is not abstract metaphysical speculation or deluding dialectic of learned discourse but the soft strains of a mystic's song fragrant with the idea of the divinity of man that lifts world-weary souls above the sorrows and sufferings and conflicts and contradictions of life. The beauty of such outpourings lies in the tender feelings of self-transforming human love, compassion and benevolence they evoke inspired by the notion of oneness of existence. The philosophy of mysticism keeps us attuned to the divine presence of God as a totality which transcends everything but of which all beings, nature and the infinite diversity of the world are integral parts. A mystic's utterances induce in us a sense of participation in eternal life, stimulating our enthusiasm towards higher human values of compassion, fellowship and sharing. His message of universal love helps us to rejoice in our identity with an all-pervasive consciousness that is present everywhere. Suddenly we begin to discover a new meaning in life.

The truth of this can perhaps be best illustrated by reference to the poetry and personality of the medieval woman mystic poet Lalleshwari, or Lal Ded as she is popularly called, the great Shaiva yogini from Kashmir. Her verses, known as *vaakhs*, pour out for us the distilled essence of the Shaiva philosophy of Kashmir which stresses non-duality between man and God as the highest principle. Lal Ded asks us to turn our gaze inward and look into the innermost core of our being to recognise our real identity as inseparable from the consciousness that vibrates in every atom of the universe. Her sensibility is assailed by the harsh realities of the human condition and she feels that the final solution to existential question lies in the release from limited individuality and merger in the infinity of existence. Lal Ded's poetry pulsates with the ecstasy that such merger brings and its expression in simple but touching words correlates with the rhythms of our heart.

It is indeed unfortunate that despite her dazzling mystic insights as a saint and dizzying heights of attainment as a poet, we know very little about Lal Ded's life. Her real personality is concealed in a haze of myths, legends and hagiographical accounts. But we certainly know that she rose above her personal tragedy to which numerous legends refer and played a momentous role at a crucial juncture in the history of Kashmir – her native land when cataclysmic events were shaking the foundations of its millenae old belief and value-systems. By bringing the essence of Kashmir Shaivism to the common masses in their own native language, Lal Ded ensured continuity and managed to save indigenous structures of culture from collapsing. From this point of view she was much more than mere itinerant woman mystic poet. She was a symbol of the civilizational ethos that shaped the peculiarly Kashmiri sense of values and ideals.

But though Lal Ded is quintessentially Kashmiri, her poetry has dimensions which have universal relevance. Her broad catholicity of outlook, her deep understanding of the human condition, her strong proclivity towards self reflectiveness, her existential anguish, her spiritual egalitarianism, her insistence on accepting as authentic only the truth of one's personal experience, her struggle against oppressive structures of patriarchy – all hold a powerful appeal for the modern man. The vigour and vitality of her idiom is related to the strength she derives from self-realisation. For her stunningly beautiful imagery, she draws an everyday experience which to her is as valid as spiritual experience. All this compels us to look at Lal Ded as a poet-saint of exceptional genius and extraordinary importance, not only for the Kashmiris who regard her as one of their greatest icons, but for the entire world.

It is with this in mind that this Special Issue of *Himalayan and Central Asian Studies* is devoted to Lal Ded. We have in this issue articles from distinguished scholars whose study of the great poetess bears a stamp of authenticity, unfolding different aspects of her creative and spiritual genius. Her mysticism ofcourse is one, which transcends all cults and castes and creeds and takes us to a realm where the finite and infinite meet in an abiding union with love as the load-star.

Her vision of the Ultimate Reality has its roots in the non-dual Shaivite philosophy emphasising on absorption in undifferentiated Shiva-consciousness as the ultimate experience that the individual soul can long for. It is a life-affirming philosophy that rejects the otherness of God and regards the world as an extension of one's own inner consciousness. Yet another aspect covered in this Special Issue takes us to the edge of Lal Ded's sensitivity for human suffering where she emerges as the voice of women and the marginalised. It is a voice that awakens and reaches out to those who are on the periphery of social attention. The articles not only point to the basic features on which the foundations of Lal Ded's immense popularity rest, they also offer fresh perspectives and incisive insights into dimensions of her creativity and spirituality.

Lal Ded's world-view as reflected in her verses has fed and nurtured the Kashmiri society for generations and forms the foundation of Kashmiri ethos and culture. We fully hope that this Special Issue will further stimulate the growing interest in analysing and understanding Lal Ded's genius. The beauty and depth of her poetry is without doubt exceptional, but what is even more important is to know that it takes us to a higher plane where conflict and confrontation get resolved in the realisation that the whole world is a manifestation of one divine consciousness. And it is this realisation alone that can bring permanent peace and joy to humanity in today's troubled times.

S. S. Toshkhani

LAL DED AND HER SPIRITUAL JOURNEY*

S. S. Toshkhani

What is it in the *vaakhs* or poetical utterances of Laleshwari, the great 14th century mystic woman poet of Kashmir that continues to move and inspire and enthrall generations of the Kashmiri speaking people centuries after they fell from her lips? Is it her profound mystic insights into reality, her existential angst and anguish, her deep understanding of the human condition or the power and beauty of her imagery? Or is it her compassionate vision for spiritual liberation of mankind rooted in her Shaiva worldview? Or all these put together that constitute her poetic image? For me personally, she remains the greatest poet-saint that the Kashmiri language has ever produced. Every time I read her, I feel the joy and excitement of having explored a new world of meanings, of having ventured into what lies at the core of the peculiarly Kashmiri sense of values and ideals.

Known more popularly as Lal Ded or Mother Lalla, this venerated and celebrated Kashmiri Shaiva poetess seemed to be herself conscious of the power that she wielded over the minds of people. In one of her most poignant verses she says:

Dress yourself in the clothes of knowledge
And on your heart inscribe what Lalla said in verse
For through meditation on the sacred syllable Om
Lalla became absorbed in the light of consciousness
And thus she overcame the awe of death.

These lines also reveal that this power had its source in her spiritual egalitarianism derived from her non-dual Shaiva vision of reality which sees the whole universe as a manifestation of pure consciousness vibrating at every level and in every atom. She lived in times which were most critical and turbulent in the history of Kashmir, with two

* *This paper is based on a lecture delivered by the author at India International Centre, New Delhi on March 14, 2007*

LAL DED AND HER SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

belief and value systems – one indigenous and the other alien – clashing ominously when Islam made its advent into the Valley. Playing a momentous role, Lal Ded saved the indigenous cultural structures from collapsing and ensured continuity by taking the essence of Kashmir Shaivism to the masses in their own native speech. Her choice of colloquial Kashmiri to pour out her heart's devotion for Shiva was perhaps the greatest statement she made in those times of political and cultural upheaval that had torn Kashmir apart, her advocacy of the devotional path reinforcing the tremendous impact this had on the common people. It struck an immediate chord with them, enlarging her reach and tremendously magnifying the range of her appeal. And today, when cataclysmic events have again shaken the land of Kashmir and its cultural face lies battered and bruised and bloodied beyond recognition, Lal Ded's words of immense wisdom offer spiritual solace and succor to the wounded psyche of its people.

One thing that has been completely overlooked and, therefore, needs to be pointed out here is that it was Kashmir Shaivism which encouraged the use of the regional language for spreading its teachings. The very beginnings of Kashmiri literature are a consequence of this encouragement as can be seen in works like the *Chhummaa Sampradaaya* verses and *Mahaanaya Prakaasha*, which provide the earliest written evidence of the Kashmiri language. Lal Ded's decision to express herself in Kashmiri could well have something to do with this factor. However, it is in her *vaakhs* that we hear the first distinct heartbeats of Kashmiri poetry whereas the earlier works cannot be strictly called literary compositions.

Lal Ded's choice of *vaakh* as the medium for her poetic outpourings was indeed most appropriate. The crisp, aphoristic, cryptic four-line verse-form was quite suitable for the rhythm of thought that marked her poetic expression and was also easy for the common man to adapt to his ear and to memorize. It was no random choice, for it is around the term *vaakh* that the whole logos of Kashmir Shaivism revolves, according to which language can be a liberating force if it mirrors the reality of our life as a manifestation of universal

consciousness. Abhinavagupta defines *vaakh* as *vimarsha* or “reflective awareness of the Self” – *vakti svarupam vimrishatiti vaakh*.¹ Thus, viewed from this perspective, *vaakh* is the most appropriate term for a verse form which could be used for the kind of reflective poetry that poets like Lalla composed. Before her we find Shitikantha also composing his *Mahaanayaprakaasha* in a similar metrical form. Later Rupa Bhavaani too adopted it as the medium to express her mystical experiences. But the rich suggestiveness of meanings with which Lal Ded infused it to communicate her deep intuitive experience of reality at various levels remains unsurpassable. The question whether *vaakh* as a verse form is patterned after the Rigvedic metres, the *Shloka* of Sanskrit, the *Aaryaa* of Praakrit or *Gaahaa* of Apabhramsha or whether it is a purely indigenous genre may have academic relevance, but the fact remains that she extended the limits of its possibilities to the farthest horizons.

What gave her poetry its distinctive flavour, its power and punch was the vigour and vitality of her idiom, the effect being reinforced by her use of imagery taken from everyday life. The non-dual Shaivism of Kashmir, it must be noted, sought to internalize the forest rather than asking us for renunciation of the world and enjoined upon spiritual aspirants to carry on their meditative practices in the midst of the daily flow of life. It was perhaps because of this that the images evoked by her verses “sunk” in ordinary people’s consciousness and became an aesthetic delight for them even though the speculative and esoteric content must have eluded the grasp of many. What Lal Ded’s *vaakhs* really did was to provide them with a spiritual vision and moral strength with which they could arm their souls to meet the tremendous challenge that the times posed for them. From this point of view, Lal Ded was not a mere itinerant woman poet-saint of the 14th century, but a symbol of the continuity of five thousand years of Kashmir’s civilisational ethos.

Everything about Lal Ded suggests that she was extraordinary – a spiritual and a creative genius who “had a special personality, spoke in a special voice, left a special imprint on the minds of later generations”, to borrow words used by Linda Hess to describe Kabir² who bears

LAL DED AND HER SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

many similarities to her. Yet, for all her brilliance as a poet and greatness as a saint, her dazzling mystic insights and intellectual attainments, we know very little about Lal Ded's life which is lost in a haze of numerous legends and hagiographical accounts that surrounds it. This has resulted in blurring her actual biographical profile, leaving us with little if any material that is objectively verifiable and, therefore, credible. To grope for kernels of truth in the no-man's land between fact and fiction is obviously an unenviable task that can hardly be expected to take us far.

While the Sanskrit chronicles are totally silent about Lal Ded's existence, perhaps because she lived and moved about in a milieu that had little to do with the kings and their courts, and their wars and intrigues, the Persian chronicles too say nothing about her till Muhammad Azam Dedamari refers to her as *aarifaa-kaamilaa Lalla* in his *Waaqiaat-i-Kashmir* as late as in 1746. Earlier, Dawood Mishqati had mentioned her name in his hagiographical work *Asraar-ul-Abraar* (1654). But what is forgotten is that the first, the very first, reference to her is by Rupa Bhavani (1620-1720), who in her *Rahasyopadesha* very clearly acknowledges Lal Ded as her guru:

Shuddham atyant vidyadharam

Lal naam lal param gvaram

(I have as my supreme guru Lalleshwari, who is pure and greatly learned.)

This is a very significant statement coming from someone who is herself regarded as a great Kashmiri woman mystic poet and is even revered as an incarnation of the Goddess Bhavani by a section of Kashmiri Pandits. The parallels between her life and that of Lal Ded are numerous, including ill treatment by the husband and his family. Not only does Rupa Bhavani refer reverentially to Lal Ded as her guru along with her own father Madhav Dhar, we find her even adopting the same poetical style and using the same verse form, *vaakh*, used by Lalla. And yet this fact, which has significant ramifications as it demolishes many a myth floated about Lal Ded, is almost completely ignored, deliberately or otherwise. What it proves beyond any shadow of doubt

is that Lal Ded was not suddenly discovered by the Persian chroniclers while others had completely forgotten her. The fact is that Lal Ded has all along remained alive in folk memory and folk imagination, her orally transmitted verses making her virtually a wisdom tree for generations of common Kashmiris.

She must have already become a revered icon of the Kashmiri society when Rajanaka Bhaskara penned down sixty of her *vaakhs* for the first time in the Sharada script and translated them into Sanskrit sometime in the 18th century. Yet, her phenomenal popularity, even during her own lifetime, and the tremendous reverence she commanded due to the exalted stature she is said to have attained as a saint, led to determined and sustained attempts to build false image constructs around her with the sole object of appropriating her for ideologies totally alien to her and incompatible with the non-dual Kashmir Shaiva tradition that forms an integral part of her mental and intellectual make-up.

What has further complicated the situation and unleashed storms of confusion and controversy is a frenzied campaign to link her with protagonists of proselytizing Sufi orders. Orchestrated claims of interpenetration of stray Sufi elements into her poetry are made by those who profess to be scholars but are actually very uncomfortable with the fact that someone who is regarded as a symbol of whatever Kashmir stands for belongs to a different religious reality than theirs. Acting on their religious reflexes they use these so-called Sufi elements as a ploy to snatch away Lal Ded's real identity from her. There is nothing in the text of her verses to support their fabrications as whatever Lal Ded has said falls absolutely within the framework of the non-dual Shaiva philosophy of Kashmir. How else would have Rupa Bhavani accepted her as a spiritual preceptor and even imitated her style or Shams Faqir used Sanskrit yogic terms to pay a glowing poetic tribute to her? Attempts to re-slot her into conventions and systems other than to which she really belonged are motivated by intentions to subvert historical facts so that the real Lal Ded is lost to us and replaced by an unauthentic shadow. To say, for instance, that the use of wine by her as a metaphor reveals a decisive Persian mystic and, therefore,

LAL DED AND HER SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Sufi influence is to betray utter ignorance of the poetic traditions to which she belonged. It has been profusely used by her predecessor, the celebrated author of *Shivastotraavali*, Utpaldeva to describe his state of God-intoxication. At one place, for example, he exclaims:

“Drunk am I by drinking the wine of the Elixir of Immortality (*rasaayana*) which is Your worship, perpetually flowing through the channels of the senses from the goblets, full [to the overflowing] of all existing things.”³

In the other Shaiva texts too it has been used to describe the aftermath of self-realization as a result of spiritual practice. In *Tantraaloka*, for instance, Abhinavagupta visualizes the yogi emerging after the practice of the “internally enacted” *mahaayaaga* (Great Sacrificial Rite) in the following ritual gesture:

“[The yogi’s] Ritual gesture (*mudraa*) is whatever bodily posture the yogi may assume when fully absorbed in consciousness, he moves, staggering about (*ghurnita*), as it were, drunk with the wine of self realization.”⁴

This being the case, it is necessary to arrive at an authentic Lal Ded – a flesh and blood one or at least a credible poetic version of what she could actually have been. And for this false constructs of her image shall have to be discarded and dumped. These, in fact, can be discredited on the grounds of chronology and historical plausibility alone. Need it to be stressed that stories fabricated for this purpose, like the so-called miracle of the oven telling us about a “nude” Lal Ded scurrying to hide herself in a baker’s oven on seeing “a man for the first time”, are an insult to Kashmiri womanhood. There is no way, it must be realized, that the Paramashiva of her poetry can be morphed into a Semitic Godhead, however much you may try. As Prof. B.N. Parimu puts it, “the key to Lalla’s mysticism is the Shivadvaita or Trika philosophy of Kashmir”.⁵ And while monotheism is all exclusive, not allowing any other than a master-servant relationship between God and man, the monism of the Trika Shaivism of Kashmir is all inclusive.

It is indeed a great irony that a poetess whose verses aim to bring us face to face with our real selves should herself continue to be seen

through false lenses. With those engaged in falsifying the facts of her life showing no signs of giving up, whatever their motivation, the only way left for us to arrive at an authentic Lal Ded lies through the text of her verses. Even though this text itself is marred by vicious interpolations, her verses, in their present corrupted state also, are packed with real biographical material. In them we can discover the course of her spiritual and poetic journey and identify the various ports of call she touched and the destinations she arrived at. The risks in this approach are many as the verses have come to us through oral transmission, and certainly not in the language in which they originally were. Then of course they have been randomly recorded, giving us no clue to the actual chronological order in which they must have been composed. Yet, all these risks are worth taking.

We will not try to reinvent the events of Lalla's outer life or disregard everything that the legends say about her for the sake of it, for some of them may contain a modicum of truth while others may belong purely to the realm of hagiography and imagination. But to reclaim her not as a mysterious abstraction but as a real persona, we can pick up the biographical threads scattered in her *vaakhs* and reconstruct with their help facts of her mystic life, her experiences as a woman, her views about the relationship between God, Man and the World.

Let us begin with the story of an introvert village girl interested more in answers to existential questions than in mundane matters. Her trauma began the day she was married to a nincompoop husband insensitive to her spiritual needs and a mother-in-law who used innovative methods to starve and torment her. Though this seems to be in line with the typical mother-in-law-daughter-in-law stories current in Indian folk lore, it may not necessarily be totally fictitious. As tradition believes, Lal Ded finally put her foot down and walked out of her unhappy marriage, snapping all ties with her husband and the tyrannical mother-in-law. The flashpoint came when, according to the legend, the husband broke with his stick the pitcher of water she had carried home all the way from the river bank. This was one of Lalla's daily chores,

LAL DED AND HER SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

but that morning she was somewhat unusually late as she took a little more time in her meditations at her favourite temple of Nattakeshava Bhairava, making her husband suspect her fidelity. The pitcher broke to smithereens but the water is said to have remained as it was and she is said to have filled all the vessels in her kitchen with it. The remaining water she threw outside where it formed a pond that came to be called as *Lalatraag* (situated in Pampore, near Srinagar), says the legend. This became a decisive moment for her and she revolted, making it plain to the tyrant duo that she could take it no longer. Refusing to play the gender-determined role of an obedient daughter-in-law any more, she said that she was going to take her own decisions and choose her own way of life. Leaving her husband's home for ever, she became a wandering ascetic. It was in no way an easy decision for a woman to take in her time, as it left her socially unprotected and insecure.

Living her life on her own terms as an individual now, she had no one to look to for guidance or help except the old Siddha Shrikantha, an adept in Kashmiri Shaiva yoga who belonged to the lineage of the sage Vasugupta. Earlier in her life also she had received spiritual direction from him. On the evidence provided by her verses, one can safely come to the conclusion that she must have studied a wide range of the seminal texts of Kashmir Shaivism with the venerable Shaiva master, including the *Tantraaloka*, *Shivasutra* and *Vijnaana Bhairava*.

One cannot but wonder, therefore, to find modern Lal Ded scholars like Jaishree Kak Odin accept on the one hand that "Lalla's verses reveal her deep knowledge of the esoteric practices of Kashmir Shaivism"⁶ and on the other hand use all the shrill feminist jargon at her command to make statements in her otherwise excellent study of the saint-poet, that have really no relevance: "Her oral transmission can be seen as a subversive act to the written discourse to which she and other people did not have access"⁷; and, "Her life in many ways represents a challenge to the prescriptive ideology of brahminical texts, including the Gita..."⁸, etc. One does not know on what evidence she describes Lalla as "an outsider to the written Kashmiri Shaiva

tradition”⁹. In making such sweeping observations, Jaishree Odin seems to be toeing the line of the colonial historians of yore and their present day successors, the Marxist-liberal scholars who reduce everything Hindu to “Brahminism” — a bogey some dyed-in-wool feminists also find fashionable to flaunt. Arun Shourie has aptly summed up this left-lib-feminist approach to Hinduism in the following words: “In a word, both corruption and evil on the one hand and exploitation on the other are germane to, they are inherent in Hinduism: Hinduism is Brahminism; Brahminism is that ‘ism’ which serves the interests of the Brahmins; these interests can only be served by the exploitation of and oppression of people of lower castes. Hence Hinduism is necessarily an arrangement for the exploitation and suppression of the mass of people.”¹⁰

Jaishree Kak Odin certainly knows, or should have known, that Kashmir Shaivism does not discriminate on the basis of caste, creed or gender and that the Tantric worldview it is rooted in holds the ultimate reality as feminine in essence. Her pettifogging, therefore, over whether the impersonal and transcendent reality called Shiva is male or female is inconsequential; whatever her feminist reflexes may make her to say. She surely knows that Kashmir Shaivism had its female adepts much before Lal Ded appeared on the scene, *Yoginis* like Keyuravati, Madanika and Kalyanika having imparted the knowledge of the doctrines of its *Krama* school to male aspirants Yogaraja, Bhanuka and Eraka, who in turn spread it to areas as far as the Chola kingdom.¹¹ As for oral transmission, that was how disciples were actually introduced to the theory and practice of non-dual Shaivism by their preceptors. Odin should have also remembered that the great Abhinavagupta gave priority to direct experience over knowledge of what she calls the “prescriptive texts”; and if Lal Ded did so it was not just because she was a woman, but because she was a mistress of Shaiva yoga.

Perhaps this is a digression, but it became necessary to set the perspective right. Coming back to Laleshwari, she began a new life as a liberated woman with the quest of the divine taking her from place to

LAL DED AND HER SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

place as a wandering ascetic. We do not know anything specifically about these wanderings of hers, but she renounced only the householder's life and not exactly the world as that was not the Shaiva way of approaching existential problems. All we can say is that she got Siddha Shrikantha's guidance and sympathy in full measure as she set out on her spiritual quest, even though legends say that she could not resist taking occasional potshots even at him. This is how we find her when she started her spiritual journey: tormented by loneliness, uncertainty, anxiety, self-doubt, inner conflict, yet restless to find out the deep secrets of life and death. We have no means to know what the first *vaakh* she composed must have been, but poetry must have surely come to her as a medium to express her agony and anguish, to connect her with the eternal, the transcendent, the divine. It must have helped her to retain her equipoise amidst mental turmoil. To survive! Here is how she depicts her state of mind in probably one of her earliest though most memorable *vaakhs*:

With a rope of untwisted thread I tow my boat upon the ocean
Will my God hear me and carry me across?
Like water in vessels of unbaked clay, I am wasting away
Oh, how I long that I would reach my home!

This verse evokes the image of a forlorn and frail woman fighting rising waves to tow her rickety boat across a perilous sea with a prayer to God on her lips and restlessness in heart to reach the other shore where her home is. Sounding more like an anguished cry, it shows how vulnerable and weak Lal Ded must have felt when she embarked on her God-ward journey. How unsure of herself. How helpless. Towing boats in turbulent waters is a common scene in Kashmir and the metaphor of crossing *bhavaasaagar* or the sea of existence is often used by Bhakti poets. But how touchingly personal it has become here, the words "untwisted thread" creating a tremendous effect. And how untouched and beautiful is the associated image of being wasted like water in vessels of unbaked clay. This is typical Lalla - original and extremely creative. The feeling of frustration and utter fruitlessness of all efforts that this metaphor expresses is really moving.

In fact, Lal Ded's verses are an intimate record of her sufferings and struggles, her aspirations and achievements. Sometimes they show her beset with lack of self-confidence and overcome with despair and frustration. Sometimes they depict her restlessness to establish a personal relationship with Shiva, the pangs of separation that torment her mind and the intense desire of absorption in Him. There are also times when she realizes that it is her own imperfections and weaknesses, her own un-preparedness and follies which are hindering her progress towards her destination. But the most memorable of her verses are those that reveal her heart's wounds from under the saffron robes of detachment:

I Lalla went forth in the hope of blooming like a cotton flower
Many a blow did the ginner and the carder give to me
And the spinning woman spun me into a fine yarn
The weaver stretched me on his loom with a kick
But when the washerman dashed me on the washing stone
And rubbed me hard with fuller's earth and soap
And the tailor's scissors cut me piece by piece
Then did I, Lalla, obtain the way of the Supreme.

Here Lalla uses the analogy of the process of manufacturing a garment from a cotton pod to illustrate the suffering she has endured at various stages of her spiritual development. At each stage the progress is extremely slow, but there is no way but to go through this entire excruciating process to reach the final stage of perfection.

In another verse she tries to say that she is well aware that she is ill equipped for pursuing her spiritual goals. She simply does not have the wherewithal for it, she feels:

For my wooden bow, I have a reed for an arrow!
An unskilled carpenter for building my royal mansion!
In the marketplace, a shop unguarded am I
A body uncleansed by waters holy
Oh how can I tell my plight!

How can she expect to hit the target when the arrow she has on her bow is but a blade of rush grass. The carpenter she has got to build

LAL DED AND HER SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

her royal mansion is totally unskilled, she laments, referring to her body. Her physical and mental faculties, she feels, are hardly developed to help her transcend her limitations. She is just not in shape to go for the ultimate goal. And whatever little merit she may have already acquired, she is in the danger of loosing in her unguarded moments, like a shop without a lock in a busy marketplace which can be easily burgled. Her mind is like a flock without a shepherd with its thoughts like sheep running in all directions.

The feeling of being “suspended in the emptiness between two worlds, one which she has just left and one whose threshold she has not yet crossed but whose door, soon to close again had opened slightly”¹², overtakes her. That is what she seems to express in this verse:

The sling of my candy load is loosened
Bent is my body like a bow
I don't know how to carry this burden?
My guru's words have pained me like a blister of loss
Like a flock without a shepherd I have become

The weight of worldly pleasures, “sweet and enticing as candy” has begun to hurt as the “shoulder knot” that holds it on her back has loosened a bit “because of her entry into the mystic life”, but the burden has now become more unbearable. Even her guru's words are proving of little help as he has told her to give up allurements of worldly things and concentrate on meditating on her inner self. And this she is not able to do because she finds that materiality still distracts her.

In yet another verse we find Lalla assailed by self-doubt and feelings of uncertainty and helplessness. The fear of loosing direction and being stranded midway between what she has given up and what she is yet to achieve overtakes her:

I came by the highway but by the highway I did not return
Stranded I am now halfway on the embankment
And the light of the day has already faded
I searched my pockets but not a penny did I find
What shall I now pay to the ferryman for ferrying me across?

Desperateness seizes her as she feels that she does not have the means to reach the other shore of transcendence. In terms of Shaiva praxis, the problem with Lalla as a questing mystic is that she is disempowered because forces operating outside her consciousness are crippling her. To move towards empowerment, she needs to undergo more rigorous discipline and strenuous practice. *Gururupayah*, the guru is the means, says the *Shivasutra*.¹³ So she approaches her guru for guidance, and the first thing he tells her is to withdraw from the external world and turn her gaze into the inner core of her being:

My Guru said but one thing you must know,
How, from within, still further in to go
The words became my precept and my chance
And so it is, I Lalla, naked dance.
(Translation by Nila Cram Cook)

What the guru is stressing here is interiority, or inwardness, which is one of the fundamental features of practice in Kashmir Shaivism. It is important for the Shaiva aspirant to realize that everything resides within our own consciousness and nothing exists outside it. As Mark S.G. Dyczkowski writes:

“This all embracing inwardness is only possible if there is an essential identity between the universe and consciousness. The events which constitute the universe are always internal events happening within consciousness because their essential nature is consciousness itself.”¹⁴

In Kashmir Shaiva terminology, this is called *atmavyapti*. Shaivism suggests two methods to realize non-duality between the self and the universe: *atmavyapti* and *Shivavyapti*. In *atmavyapti* or self-expansion, the universe is seen as an expansion of the self and the seeker merges the external world into his/her inner consciousness to realize the self within himself/herself. In *Shivavyapti*, the process reaches its fruition “when the inner knowledge gained is applied to the external world in extrovert meditation” and “the outer is looked upon as a gross form of the inner”, as Dyczkowski puts it.¹⁵

LAL DED AND HER SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Yet, ignoring what it actually seeks to convey, the meaning of this verse has been completely mutilated. The connection of the last line is severed from the context provided by the first three lines and her emphasis on the ecstasy of inwardness is treated as Lal Ded's self-confession of wandering in the nude. The word used in the original Kashmiri is *natsun*, which means "to dance" and also obliquely "to wander". So it is subjected to willful distortion and taken to mean that Lalla actually disrobed and went about in that state without caring for social conventions of decorum or decency. This is hardly credible as wandering naked in the freezing temperatures of Kashmir winters is just not possible. Besides, Lal Ded herself in several of her verses talks of the necessity for feeding and clothing the body. Trying to explain things, Georg Feurestein expresses the view that "the nudity attributed is a symbol of her profound surrender to Shiva, which stripped her of all egoic motivation"¹⁶. I personally feel that that Lal Ded's statement about her so-called disrobing could well be a reference to discarding the *panchakanchukas* or the five coverings of Maya that conceal the real nature of the self. And of course the word *natsun* could be literary taken to mean dancing in the ecstatic state of God-consciousness. But even if she did move about scantily clad, challenging the orthodoxy and throwing the rigid conventional codes of dress and decorum to the winds, like the Kannada saint poetess Mahadeviakka, it can be taken as her last act of defiance against an oppressive social system whose gender discriminatory rules she just could not accept.

Lal Ded was in a greatly disturbed state of mind after she turned her back to her husband's home and took a leap into the dark to set out on the unexplored path to mystic realization. Rejecting a socially protected life, she finds herself vulnerable and exposed to every kind of insecurity and anxiety, including that of staving off hunger, as this verse seems to suggest:

O restless mind, do not be afraid!
The Eternal One is taking care of you
You may not know it, but He will satiate your hunger
To Him alone you must cry for help.

In another verse she says:

Do not torment your body with pangs of hunger and thirst
When it feels weak and weary, take tender care of it.

While she faces the harsh realities of life like hunger and poverty with a sense of surrender before the divine will, and is intensely aware of the agony and anguish of existence, she is greatly excited about the tremendous possibilities of transformation as she passes through various phases of her mystic life. As her verses reveal, her sensibilities are constantly assailed by the immensity of human suffering at all levels – existential as well as spiritual. But for her its solution lies in the benevolent grace of Shiva, for mystic union with whom her craving and longing intensifies day by day:

I, Lalla, set out with burning longing
And seeking, searching passed the day and night
Till lo, I saw to mine own house belonging
The Pandit, and seized my luck and star of light.
(Translation by Nila Cram Cook)

In some English translations the word *pandith* (Pandit) of the original Kashmiri has become “a learned man”, but here it refers to “the master of the house”, a sense in which it is still used in common Kashmiri parlance. Symbolically, it means the Self, while the word “house” symbolizes the human body. Interestingly, the Kannada *Vachana* poet Basvanna also invokes the symbolism of “the master of the house” in a similar sense.

We now see Lalla expressing her mystic feelings – the pangs of separation, the pain of ecstatic love, the burning passion of the desire for communion, the frustration of losing the direction, the total surrender of ego before His will, the determination to surmount all difficulties in love’s way and the ecstasy of the final beatitude. Her efforts to overcome the limitations and weaknesses that “bind her to the material reality” and impede her progress intensify. She realizes that the great agony she has endured has its roots in innate ignorance. She tries to arm herself with a clearer vision and a greater awareness and sets out in a frantic search of Shiva:

LAL DED AND HER SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

I, Lalla wearied myself searching and seeking
Straining my every nerve I looked for Him
But found His doors slammed and bolted
My longing became all the more intense
And I stood there keeping a watchful eye for Him.

To express her personal mystical awareness of the Supreme Reality, Lal Ded takes the route of devotion, laying bare the wounds of her soul to Shiva, though her devotion is laced with speculative knowledge. As her *vaakhs* reveal, she combines her quest for gnostic illumination with the depth of her emotional experience. The ease with which she establishes an emotional relationship with Shiva, the ineffable, impersonal and formless God of Trika metaphysics, making him look personal, points to her genius both as a saint and a poet. In fact, mystical traditions “have sought and affirmed the possibility of such a relationship”. Lal Ded tries to make it compatible through her splendid imagery which she takes from her everyday experience. Kashmir Shaivism, it must be noted, does not regard this experience to be different from spiritual experience. Through her simple but spontaneous utterances she attunes our mind to the presence of the divine as the one consciousness pervading the whole universe.

Translating her spiritual experience into soul-stirring poetry, Lalla makes her entry into another phase of her mystic journey. It is a crucial phase marked by profound devotional fervour, with love for the divine helping her overcome depression and despair. But it would be wrong to give this mystic strain a Sufi context as it is located in the Shaiva Bhakti tradition represented by great poets like Bhatta Narayana and Utpaldeva who preceded Lal Ded, although they expressed themselves in Sanskrit.

It is Bhatta Narayana, a direct disciple of Vasugupta (9th century), who can be considered as the first poet of devotional non-dual Shaivism in Kashmir. He authored *Stavachintamani* or “The Wishing Jewel of Praise”, a poem of 120 verses dedicated to love directed towards Shiva. It has as its main theme the union of Shiva and Shakti in the form of *prakasha* and *vimarsha* or light and self-awareness. Utpaldeva

S. S. Toshkhani

(10th century), a brilliant thinker and theologian besides a great poet, who followed Bhatta Narayana, wrote the *Shivastotravali* or “The Series of Hymns to Shiva”, which in the words of Paul E. Murphy is the “most beautiful of Shaiva love songs”¹⁷. In this work he expresses himself in an impassioned form of devotional verse in a personal and touching style.

Together, the three of them - Bhatta Narayana, Utpaldeva and Lalleshwari - can be regarded as the foremost representatives of Shaiva bhakti poetry of Kashmir, with the difference that Lalleshwari chose to express herself in Kashmiri, the language of the common masses, as we have pointed out earlier, while the former two poets wrote in Sanskrit. All of them display a sense of harmony between rigorous metaphysical thought and mystic experience, self-awareness and devotional fervour. Though Lal Ded appeared on the scene nearly four hundred years after these two predecessors of hers, she shared with them a sharp feeling of the immediate presence of Shiva, the Divine Being, and a mind inflamed by a powerful longing for him. Her poetry, like theirs, stems from an intense sense of resignation to the divine will and reflects her vivacity, vitality and deep sincerity. Lalla approaches Shiva yearning intensely to attain mystic communion with Him. There are times when He seems to elude her but she refuses to give up the search and appears more determined to find Him and even possess Him:

I diffused outside the light that lit up within me
And in that darkness I seized Him
And held Him tight!

Images and metaphors relating to the concept of Shiva’s self-luminosity abound in Shaiva devotional poets. The ‘darkness’ that Lal Ded talks about is the dark ‘Mystical Night of Differentiation’ accompanied by anguish and suffering, but it ultimately leads to the bright ‘Night of Un-differentiation’. The image that Lalla evokes here bears a striking similarity to some of Bhatta Narayana’s images. In one such image Bhatta Narayana shows himself clenching Shiva and holding Him in his fist with an impassioned cry:

LAL DED AND HER SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

“Here you are, I am holding you in my fist!
Here you are, I’ve seen you, where are you fleeing?”
(*Stavachintamani*: Translation by Paul E. Murphy)

Utpaladeva too describes this Mystical Night, and calls it the Night of Shiva:

Let this inexpressible Night of Shiva reign supreme
Shiva whose radiant essence spreads its own brightness
It is in it that the moon and the sun as well as other (dualities)
Penetrate when they set.
(*Shivastotravali*: Translation by Paul.E. Murphy)

Abhinavagupta describes this Night of “undifferentiated and ineffable” Shiva as “Light of all Lights, darkness of all darkneses”. Lal Ded uses this symbolism of the Mystical Night in several other verses also, as in the following one:

The day will be extinguished and the night will come
The earth will be extended to the sky
On the day of the new moon, the moon has swallowed up *rahu*
Realization of the self as consciousness is the true worship of
Shiva.

The Kashmiri Shaivite aspirant believes that suffering and sorrow will continue to depress the individual soul unless it achieves *samaavesha* or complete absorption with Shiva, the undifferentiated reality. This is possible only by elimination of mental states and thought constructs (*vikalpas*) through yoga. The soul has to rid itself of all the impurities and limitations that are the root cause of its predicament. In Shaiva terminology the limiting factors that give rise to the perception of duality are known as *malas* and there are three of them – *aanava mala*, *kaarma mala* and *maayiya mala*. *Aanava mala* or “pollution of the miniscule” as Wagish Shukla calls it, is innate ignorance which conceals the individual soul’s real nature and metamorphoses it into a limited being devoid of universal consciousness. From this primary impurity arises *kaarma mala* or the impurity of action, which implies “pseudo knowledge” that entangles the soul in the karmic cycle of birth and death, and *maayiya mala* or the psycho-physical limitation caused

S. S. Toshkhani

by association with the evolutes of *maayaa* - *kalaa* or division, *niyati* or determinancy, *raaga* or attachment, *vidyaa* or limited knowledge and *kaala* or time, also known as the *panchakanachukas* or five coverings - which cause the world to come about according to Shaiva theory of comogenesis . These impurities bring into play the process by which pure, undivided consciousness or Paramashiva concretizes into the universe covering 36 categories of limited, material existence. For overcoming these limitations and liberating the individual soul from bondage, Triadic mysticism offers a whole range of meditative techniques or methods known as *upaayas*. Laleshwari appears to be fully aware of these and claims to have purified herself of all the impurities caused by Maya and its evolutes through intense practice and yogic discipline. She claims:

Impurities were wiped away from my mind
As from a mirror
Then only did I attain knowledge of the Self
And when I beheld that He was near me
I realized that He is all and I am nothing.

Here the use of mirror as a metaphor needs particular attention. It is through the analogy of external objects reflected in a mirror that Shaiva thinkers of Kashmir explain how manifestations of consciousness are “separated from the Self”. In several other verses also Lalla claims that she has purified her mind by burning the dross that had gathered around it and prevented the self from revealing its true nature. As, for instance, in this one:

My heart I parched as farmers parch the grain
And from that fire there came a wondrous light
And Shiva in a flash I did obtain.
(Translation by Nila Cram Cook)

Lal Ded, it is said, attained enlightenment by practicing the *kundalini* or *layayoga* which involves “meditative recitation of the sacred syllable Om combined with breath control and concentration”. The practice is actually known as *uchchaara* and is included under *aanava upaaya* in Shaiva praxis. There are several *vaakhs* in which

LAL DED AND HER SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Lalla clearly refers to it. For instance, we have the following verse:

Having crossed the six forests, I awakened the moon
By controlling my breath I appeased nature
With the fire of love, I scorched my heart
And in this way I found Shankara.

The “six forests” are obviously the six *chakras* or centres of energy (plexuses) which the yogis seek to ‘pierce’ by arousing the coiled energy *kundalini*. The ‘moon’ in esoteric Shaivism symbolizes “enlightened consciousness” or “the Heart of reality”, as Paul Eduardo Ortega-Muller explains, quoting Abhinavagupta.¹⁸

The yoga that Lal Ded practiced appears to have encompassed the various *upaayas* - *aanava*, *shaakta*, *shaambhava* and also *anuttara* or *anupaya* - described in the Kashmir Shaiva texts as means to liberation. Her verses are replete with references to her intense *saadhanaa*. However, it is not just her impressive use of the terminology of Shaiva yogic techniques that makes Lalla what she is. It is the “fire of love” burning within her heart and denoting intense mystical fervour that animates her *vaakhs*. Purifying her body and mind in this fire of spiritual passion, Lalla now acquires the mature poise of a soul who has arrived on the threshold of mystic realization.

Yogic experiences, we find, have exorcised the fears and tensions lurking in Lalla’s mind and uplifted her from the state of despondence and depression into the realm of divine grace. Trying to put her imperfections and limitations behind her, she moves decisively in her spiritual journey from gross to subtle, from object to subject, from outer to inner, experiencing higher and higher ranges of consciousness. It is a journey in which the infinite is reached by discarding the trappings of finitude and recognition of one’s true nature as Shiva – the transcendent absolute whose infinity pervades everything. The vision of Shiva being apparent everywhere is a transforming vision that frees a person from assertion of ego and one no longer sees oneself different from others. It is to this emancipating vision we see Lalla referring to in her poetry when she says:

One who sees no difference between oneself and others
Who regards the day and the night as the same
Whose mind is free of all duality
S/he alone has the vision of Shiva, the lord of the gods.

You will see different people in this theatre of the world
Tolerate this difference and you will find happiness
If you root out anger, resentment and ill-will
Then alone you will see Shiva's face.

It is thus the unique spiritual egalitarianism of non-dual Shaiva philosophy which celebrates life and rejects the otherness of God that shapes Lalla's outlook. Inspired by this mystic vision, she sees Shiva as a universally pervasive principle of consciousness. In a verse she emphasizes the oneness of all existence beautifully by using the three states of water as a metaphor:

Cold changes water into snow and then into ice
It looks as if the three states are different
But on reflection we find there to be no difference
And as the sun of consciousness shines
All this diversity is dissolved into unity
Then the entire universe, animate and inanimate, seems to us to be Shiva Himself.

Lal Ded finally attains the rapturous state of illumination. It is supposed to be an experience that is inexpressible and indescribable, but she tries to share it with us in several of her verses:

In seeking 'me' and 'Thee' I passed the day
Absorbed within Thyself Thou hadst remained
When I beheld Thee in myself, I gained
For Thee and me that rapture unrestrained.
(Translation by Nila Cram Cook)

At the end of moonlight to the mad one did I call
And soothe his pain with the love of God
Crying 'It is Lalla, it is I Lalla', my loved one I awakened
And by becoming one with Him my mind and body became pure.

LAL DED AND HER SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

“The end of moonlight”, of course means the early dawn when the night of ignorance is over. “The mad one” is none else but the mind, “intoxicated and maddened by worldly illusion”. “The loved one” who is “awakened” by Lalla is the self.

The first step in this mystic progression is “self-annihilation or destruction of all doubt and dualism”, and the culmination is one’s Shiva nature. It is an inexpressible and indescribable state in which nothing remains except Shiva-consciousness.

In telling images Lal Ded tries to describe the state of her mind as she attunes herself to feeling Shiva’s presence everywhere and in everything, naturally and freely. As one ineffable and undifferentiated reality, He transcends all polarities and yet is immanent as Shakti, making Himself known through the world of phenomena which She unfolds as His creative power. The two, in fact, are not separate from one another but two aspects of the one absolute reality. Lalla experiences the bliss of their union as she enters the garden of her own heart. And it is there that she finally quenches her thirst for the “nectar of un-differentiation”:

Through the door to the garden of my mind
I, Lalla, entered and lo what bliss!
I saw Shiva in communion with Shakti
There I became immersed in the lake of nectar
Now what can Death do unto me?
For I shall be dead even though alive!

This is the height of mystic experience that Lalla now attains – the state of becoming a *jivanmukta* or liberated while still alive. In such a state death ceases to have any meaning.

Lalla’s tremendous sense of wonder at the blissful union of Shiva and Shakti that she experiences within her own self finds expression in the words “*ta wah*”. Her unifying vision of the simultaneous unfolding of the harmony of both evolution and involution, the transcendent and immanent aspects of the Ultimate Reality is what constitutes absorption of one’s consciousness in the infinite vastness of the void. This sense of

S. S. Toshkhani

wonder is the yogic plane of self-realization, as the Shiva Sutras say – *vismayo yoga bhumikah*.¹⁹ The “lake of nectar” she refers to is the same as the “ocean of nectar of enlightenment” (*bodhasudhaa sindhu*) which Kshemaraaja alludes to in his explanation of another aphorism — “*aasanastham sukham hrade nimajjati*” (“Abiding in this posture he plunges easily into the lake”) in his *Shiva Sutra Vimarshini*. The imagery of immersion (*lay gayas*) is to be particularly noted here with implications of absorption, submersion, dissolution which all point to the wondrous delight of *samaavesha*.

Yet, even in the state of rapturous union with Shiva “full of incomparable sweetness” which has “filled the abyss of separation”²⁰ as Utpaldeva says, the ecstasy may last only for a moment like “a flash of lightening”.²¹ It is *samaavesha* or total immersion in the Lord that the Shaiva mystic craves for. Like Utpaldeva, Lalla too is apprehensive that she may not after all be able to drink from the “cups of nectar” full to the brim that she sees tantalizingly before her:

Absorption in the Self led me to that house of nectar
There were cups filled to the brim but no one was drinking.

Eventually, Lalla reaches a stage where she acquires an uninterrupted and unmediated awareness of the Ultimate Reality. This is *anupaya* or ‘no-means’ in which there is direct experience of reality without recourse to any means. If all is Shiva, then there is nothing for the seeker to do but to remain as he or she is. Here all contradictions resolve and all opposites merge. The difference between subject and object, liberation and bondage disappears. It is an experience of the absolute beyond transcendence and immanence (Shiva and Shakti), existent or non-existent. It is about this state that Lalla speaks in this verse:

Nothing exists there --
Word or mind, manifest or transcendent
Nor vow of silence, nor yogic gestures
Have any admission there
Nor Shiva, nor His Shakti there reside
If anything remains then take that as the precept.

LAL DED AND HER SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

At another place we find her saying:

Neither you, nor I, nor meditation or its object exists
All actions are forgotten automatically
The blind could make nothing of it
But the wise became one with this supreme state.

Lalla attempts to express her experience of immersion into the ineffable reality called Shiva, whose essence is inconceivable and beyond contemplation except in terms of the concept of *shunya* or emptiness. She takes us along this difficult metaphysical terrain with relative ease. Her favourite expression *shunyas shunyah milith gav* (emptiness has merged with the emptiness) is widely relished by her readers though its actual meaning evades the understanding of most of them. The term *shunya* has actually been taken by Kashmir Shaivite philosophers from Maadhyamika Buddhism (or is it *vijnanavaada* of Yogaachara School?), but interpreted in their own way by them to denote 'fullness' of the Absolute. Lalla often uses it to point to her state of absorption into the Supreme:

When the sun disappeared, there remained moonlight
When the moon vanished, only mind remained
When the mind too disappeared, then nothingness was left
Then earth, ether and sky merged into vacuity.

When the Tantras disappeared, the mantras remained
When mantra disappeared, the mind remained
When mind too disappeared then nothing remained
Emptiness merged with the emptiness.

The vicissitudes that Lal Ded goes through to arrive at the threshold of this experience are many. She traverses, in fact, a reverse journey from manifestation to undifferentiated awareness, from the categories of existence to the supreme subjectivity of Paramashiva, from the gross to the subtle and subtler. It is a process that involves piercing of the veils of Maya and expansion of consciousness to include the entire universe as one's own self. It does not take place in any external realm but in one's own mind.

Though He was within, I searched for him outside
The control of breath soothed my nerves
Through meditation, I realized that the world and God are one
The manifest world became one with the unmanifest.

Kashmir Shaivism is a life-affirmative philosophy that regards the human body as an abode of the divine. It validates the reality of the material world and considers consciousness to be the substratum and ground of everything. “As it is there so it is here”, *yathaa tatra tathaa anyatra*²², says the *Shivasutra*. As such, what is outside is not different from the core of one’s own inner being. And that is what is integral to Lal Ded’s thinking also.

Lalla’s mystic journey to realization was by no means an easy one. She attained the spiritual heights she came to scale after straining every nerve. She tells us of her excruciating experience in quite a few of her verses:

The soles of my feet tore off and smeared the paths I walked
Then the One alone showed me the one true path.

But she emerges from this ordeal unscathed and brimming with self-confidence. It is a new Lalla, transformed in both body and mind. And she talks about this transformation with a new sense of self-assurance and in an unusually ecstatic tone:

The soul is ever new, the mind is new,
The waste of water I saw new and new!
Since body, mind I scoured through and through
I, Lalla, too, am ever new and new.
(Translation by Nila Cram Cook)

Her illumination to her is a real experience and she begins to see things in a new light. Her journey, she realizes, has been actually a journey of self-discovery in which it is Shiva who sets out in search of Shiva for Shiva is All – *ora ti paanay yora ti paanay* (“It is he Himself on this side and He Himself on the other”).

As a spiritual genius whose face radiated all the wisdom of an enlightened Shaiva sage (I diffused my inner light in the world outside),

LAL DED AND HER SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Lal Ded now starts wandering from place to place to share her insights with everybody who cared to listen. Displaying a Bodhisattva like compassion, she tries to reach out to the common people and engages in discourse with them. Shiva is not someone out there, she tells them, Shiva is everywhere. Shiva is everyone's innate nature.

This must have certainly had a great impact on all those who came to Lal Ded for spiritual guidance. She seems to have known her audience well to which she explained the Triadic (*trika*) vision of oneness of God, man and the world in an idiom it could easily understand. And surely, despite her occasional admonishments and ruing that she is wasting her time "feeding molasses to asses", it seems that she shared rather eagerly with admiring and appreciative groups of people her insights into the secrets of existence.

However, a non-conformist as she was, a rebel in , her total rejection of outer ceremony, animal sacrifice, fasts and other shams and pretences, sacred dates and sacred places, and other forms of religious shams and pretences against which we find her lashing out in her *vaakhs*, must have offended some sections of the society of her times. To her these were mere "orthodox ritual genuflections", to borrow an expression from A.K.Ramanujan²³, but her scathing attacks evoked hostility from the orthodoxy for which religious formalism was an accepted way of life. Not taking it kindly, they reacted sharply and in turn subjected her to mocks and jeers. She, however, remained unruffled, taking all the slander in its stride and refusing to get provoked, her humanistic impulses anchored in her Shaiva ethos, a way of looking at the world (*Shivadrishhti*) without othering it, guiding her even in her relations with her detractors:

Let them hurl thousands of abuses at me,
I will not entertain any grievance in my mind
If I a true devotee of Shankara be
How can ashes stain the mirror, after all?

Here Lal Ded unambiguously affirms her status as a Bhakta of Shankara, and it is in this capacity that adoration or abuse does not

disturb her equanimity. This is an important assertion as Bhakti for her is not “just a simple attitude and an unthinking act of faith”, to put it in the words of Krishna Sharma which she uses in while talking of Kabir, “but a well reasoned and individual act of spiritual striving.”²⁴ Indeed it is her intense longing to be immersed in the love of the divine that gives her poetry the distinct flavour it has. But the Shankara she pines for is not the popular anthropomorphic deity of the Puraanic pantheon, determinate and personal. He is the transcendental reality with no name or form or attributes, the ground and support of all animate and inanimate beings – “the void of absolute consciousness” as Swami Shankaraananda describes Him²⁵. Yet the Kashmiri Shaivite devotional poet has no difficulty in experiencing Him in intimate and personal terms as we have already pointed out earlier. Lalla, and before her Bhatta Narayana and Utpaladeva, echo the paradox in their poetry which is as charged with love as the best of devotional verse addressed to any personal deity. Lalla says:

My guru I asked a thousand times
What is the name of Him who has no name
Again and again I asked till I became weary and tired
Out of this nothing something has come out.

He is nameless as he is beyond thought, but his name is All-Names, to use the words of Mark S. G. Dyczkowski.²⁶ “It is a man who gives It a name to aid in his quest for enlightenment”, Dyczkowski writes, “and endear it to his own heart.”²⁷ Thus, he is called Shiva, Bhairava, Maheshvara, Parameshvara, Shambhu and so on by the great Shaivite sages like Vasugupta, Utpala, Kallata, Somaananda, Abhinavagupta, Kshemaraaja and others, Shankara being the name mostly preferred by the preceptors of the Spanda School, and Bhairavanaatha and Parameshvara by Abhinavagupta. Lalleshvari too calls Shiva by a host of names, some of them like *Shyaamagalaa* (the Blue-throated One), *Surgurunaatha* uniquely her own. However, what is quite interesting is that like the Sahjiyaa Siddhas or the Naathapanthis she has used the term “*sahaj*” at a few places to describe the Ultimate Reality:

LAL DED AND HER SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

For realizing the Ultimate one does not need
restraint or self-control
The door to liberation will not open through mere wishing.

Into this universe of birth I came,
By yoga gained the self-revealing light.

The Sahajiyaas practiced a form of Taaantric yoga as the most natural or easy way to attain the experience of *sahaja* or the Ultimate Reality. And like them the Kashmiri Shaivites too believe in attainment of *sahaja samaadhi* or mystical trance as the natural state of liberation for the *siddha* yogis. The term *sahaja* is frequently used by them to denote the highest state of enlightenment which they regard as synonymous with *anupaaya* which comes naturally and directly as intuitive realization annulling the requirement for any kind of practice. Lal Ded's rejection of restraint and austere practices is perfectly in keeping with the six-limbed (*shadaanga*) yoga propounded by Jayaratha and Kshemaraaja. The point sought to be made here is that the two *vaakhs* of Lalleshvari quoted above help in confirming the link between the Sahajiyaas and Kashmir Shaivism. Paul Muller-Ortega quotes Mircea Eliade to show that such links did indeed exist not with the Sahajiyaas alone but also with the Hatha Yogis and the Naatha Panthis.²⁸ The synthesis that Eliade says took place among elements of Sahajiyaas taantrism (both Hindu and Buddhist), Naathas and the Hatha yogis between the seventh and the eleventh century, "deserves close scrutiny" says Muller-Ortega, pointing out that "the Kaula lineage (in Kashmir Shaivism) is one of the important sources for this synthesis."²⁹ The question is was Lal Ded directly aware of these "sources"? Did she have any links with the elements that were components of this synthesis?

Lalla gives this yearning of oneness with Shiva as the transcendent reality a unique twist by expressing her desire to be one with His immanent aspect also. If "Shiva is all" then how can He be different from the ordinary man -- the man on the street who laughs and sneezes and coughs and yawns, she says in a powerful yet totally ignored verse:

Yes He it is Who laughs and coughs and yawns
He, the ascetic naked all the year,
Who bathes in sacred pools in all the dawns
But recognize how He to you is near.
(Translation by Nila Cram Cook)

There are dimensions of Lal Ded's personality and creativity which have to be explored before we can understand the entire range of her attainments. So far not much has been done in this direction with most studies of the great medieval saint-poetess remaining hardly any thing more than clichéd statements full of oversimplifications, vague generalizations, contradictions or distortions that tend to strip her of her real glories. There are some who have tried to link her humanistic concerns and her acute social awareness with superficial issues of present day political debates. Looking for communitarian ideas in her verses, they have twisted her spiritual humanism and interpreted it in an arbitrary manner to suit their ideological predilections. Though she is deeply troubled by the sorrow and suffering that prevails as a part of the human condition, she sees its solution only in the realization of man's essential divinity – 'Shivahood' to use the term of Kashmir Shaiva philosophy in which her worldview is anchored. Everything is Shiva and therefore Shiva is everything. Nothing is separate from the eternality of existence. Creation and dissolution, life and death are aspects of a process that never ceases. Human life is an eternal flow of consciousness, a stream that flows onwards and onwards:

We have been there in the past
And in the future we shall be
Forever the sun rises and sets
Forever Shiva creates and dissolves and creates again.

It is this view of reality that is at the core of Lalla's mystic realization. Lal Ded's poetry continues to dazzle us with its million watt incandescence, its meaning unfolding at several levels. She started her spiritual journey as a tormented soul but attained a stage where self-realization and self-awareness gave her inner strength and the confidence that derived from that strength. If Lal Ded's immense impact

on the Kashmiri mind has practically remained undiminished despite the passage of almost seven centuries, it is essentially because of the fusion of the poet and the saint in her. Or, to borrow the words of Dileep Chitre, which he has used for the great Bhakti poet Tukaram, it is because of “a poet’s vision of spirituality and a saint’s vision of poetry” which she presents in her *vaakhs*.

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S. S. Toshkhani

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LAL DED: THE VOICE OF THE MARGINALISED

Neerja Mattoo

Literature and human society feed upon each other: the ideas that great literature throws up in an aesthetically satisfying form, generate a ferment in society, touch the lives of its members and lead to their intellectual, even moral and spiritual growth. While writers take their subjects from it, they still look at humanity with a questioning gaze as well as an affirmative gaze - disapproving and approving at the same time, reaffirming stereotypes as well as breaking them. Though writers are circumscribed by the times they live in - the very themes they choose must place them in that context - yet there is a prophetic quality in the work of great writers, a certain timelessness and universality. And this is what makes a canon. In general it is male writers who establish it and formulate a value system to judge literary works. But the interesting thing about Kashmiri literature is that its first great litterateur was a woman, Lal Ded and she set a standard in the 14th century that the best in the following generations are still trying to match.

The Nobel Prize winning Turkish novelist, Orhan Pamuk says that a writer must have the power to become the spokesperson of those who cannot speak for themselves, whose anger is never heard and whose words are suppressed. No one illustrates this truth better than Lal Ded. Her's is a voice of proto-feminism, who refused to stay trapped in a power hierarchy with a mother-in-law and husband in total control, relinquished home, went on a spiritual quest, but came back to the people and was then known as a saint, perhaps the only way in which a patriarchal society accepted 'abnormal' behaviour in a woman!

The most significant contribution of Lal Ded is that she brought the difficult Shaiva philosophy out from the closets of the Sanskrit scholars to the wide, open spaces of the Kashmiri speaking common people. In the process of translating its highly evolved, subtle concepts and her personal mystic experiences into the language of the masses,

she not only made these accessible to them, but also enriched the Kashmiri language. The mystic's dilemma of how to communicate the uncommunicable personal vision, seems to have been effortlessly resolved by her through the use of common idioms, images and metaphors to which people could easily relate. Thus she is able to explain ideas and experiences which would otherwise lie beyond the reach of ordinary people. The medium of the mother tongue and the use of the easily recitable verse form of the *vaakh*, made her utterances pass into common parlance and secured for them a place in collective memory.

What gives her words authority even though as a woman she might have lacked it in that society and time, is that she has a personal experience of a journey towards Self-Realization and forging a direct relationship with Shiva, without the aid of an intermediary male figure. In this we can compare her to the mediaeval Christian women mystics. For them too the only way to validate their words, and to get out of the all-pervasive, constricting presence of male authority, was this claim of a personal relationship with God. After all, it was from God Himself that all the authority of the Church, all of whose top functionaries were male, was drawn. These women were thus able to establish an authority of their own. We can say that in this 'confession', they did not need a 'Confessor', they could be alone.

Lal Ded was a mystic poet, no doubt, whose quest led her to understand the human predicament and discover the truths, but by her choice of metaphor, image and diction, she became the voice of the marginalised. When I talk about Lal Ded as the voice of the marginalized, I deliberately call her a voice, as in the past her poetry was not even written down. It was only because of its power to move that people heard it, heeded it and formed the verses into chants which continue to resonate even now.

This paper looks at the *vaakhs*, the accepted text that has come down to us and which, in spite of the mutilations and distortions they might have suffered in their oral journey and which many serious

LAL DED: THE VOICE OF THE MARGINALISED

modern readers are trying to re-write according to their own hearts' desire, is still the only reliable source of information we have on what she observed and experienced, and how she communicated to us.

Let us first take a look at the mechanics of the verse form she used, the *vaakh*. When written down, it consists of four lines, each of which is a loose tetrametre. The first syllable is stressed and then the stress falls alternately, the last syllable being generally unstressed. In fact, after beginning with authority, the end of the line is like a fade out. But this does not jar, the soft touch at the end soothes the ear and makes the message go down even more easily to the uninitiated. The gravity of tone suits the seriousness of the message conveyed. The gentle cadence of these solemn numbers is like a warm, breath of air on a cold night. But at the same time, this medium - slow moving and thereby allowing the thought to develop and come to a resolution in the four lines of the stanza - is well able to convey, in a finely condensed way, the subtle, sometimes elusive thought processes involved in a mystic experience. And the great advantage of the rhythm of this form of verse is that it makes it easily recitable, which is one of the reasons for the survival of these works in an oral tradition through unlettered ages. Whether Lal Ded herself forged this metre or it was already in existence and her words naturally fell into its musical mode is difficult to know. But in Kashmiri, it was certainly she who first honed and fine-tuned it to serve as her voice.

Let me now quote a few of Lalded'd *vaakhs* to show how her poetry forces us to alter our way of looking at three important pillars of society. The first two are women and the working classes including artisans, on whom its well-being depends, but whose importance was rarely acknowledged in traditional texts. By bringing their work centre-stage through her choice of word and metaphor, she endows the marginalized with dignity, never ceases to interrogate attitudes, nudges us to question and even reject established practices and conventions. In her role of agency and advocacy, I think that long before the word became fashionable, Lal Ded actually took a subaltern view of history! The third pillar is religious practitioners, whose mindlessness, hypocrisy

Neerja Mattoo

and inability to supply answers to primal questions she critiques. In the process she takes us to the roots of all conflict: inequality and oppression, lack of respect for one another's works, beliefs and dogmatic thought. No wonder then that the historians of the time did not even mention her in their records!

Let me begin with a well-known and oft quoted *vaakh* as an example of the inclusiveness of Lalded's thought :-

*Shiva chhuy thali thali rav zaan,
Mov zaan Heund ta Musalman,
Trukay chhukh ta panun paan prava zaan,
Soy chhay Sahebas suti zainezaan.*

(Shiva is everywhere - know Him as the sun.
Know not the Hindu different to the Muslim.
Know yourself, if wise, as a ray of that sun
That alone is the way to know the Saheb).

Apart from the obvious idea of breaking down barriers between one religion and another by invoking the image of the sun shining upon everyone without distinction, and going on to emphasize the ideal of Re-cognition, notice how seamlessly Lal Ded hangs the Islamist valance of 'Saheb' to the apparent Shaivite reference to Shiva. The verse enacts, in its own syncretic idiom, the religious, mystic and linguistic synthesis it advocates.

While confirming patriarchal norms in her proverbial fortitude and patience, whether the authority is wielded by a man or woman (in her case the mother-in-law), in later life she did walk out of the system that enforced them. And we find her re-writing philosophical ideas into a domestic idiom, a characteristic of proto-feminism in modern critical theory. In this context we find her often referring to home and the various activities within it, which have great importance in a woman's life, cooking food, for instance, using them as domestic metaphors. This is her way of acknowledging women and their role. Home in the following *vaakh* is used as a symbol of security from the buffets of the world:

LAL DED: THE VOICE OF THE MARGINALISED

*Aami pana sodras naav chhas lamaan
Kati bozi day myon meti diyi taar
Aamen taaken poni chhum shramaan,
Zuv chhum bramaan gara gathsaha.*

(With thread untwisted my boat I tow through the sea,
Would the Lord heed and ferry me across?
Water seeps through my bowls of unbaked clay,
Oh how my heart longs to go back home!)

Or let us look at the ‘domesticity’ of the metaphor of food in this *vaakh*, while driving the idea of moderation home:-

*Somuy khe maali, somuy aasakh
Somuy khena mutsuranay taari baran,
Yava tuer tsali tim ambar heta
Kheud yava gali tim aahar an.*

(Eat with temperance, and temperate you will be,
The doors shall be thrown open to the temperate!
Wear but enough to keep out the cold,
Eat but enough to kill the pangs of hunger)

The interrogative, ironic, irreverent voice in the next *vaakh* sounds so modern that it is hard to believe that it spoke in the 14th century:-

*Tala chhuy zyus tay petha chhukh natsaan
Vanta maali khen kitha patsaan chhuy
Soruy sombrith yeti chhuy motsaan
Vanta maali ann kitha rotsaan chhuy*

(A yawning pit at your feet and you dance?
How, my dear, do you digest your food?
All you accumulated, you’ll leave behind,
Tell me my dear, how can you relish your food?)

The detailed descriptions of artisans’ work in several of her *vaakhs*, which make us linger over them in order to absorb their full import and relish the beauty of their poetry, show how closely she must have observed the minutest details of their craft. For instance this *vaakh*:-

Neerja Mattoo

*Damadam kormas damanhaale
Prazalyom deeph ta naneyam zaath.
Andaryum prakash nebar thsotum
Gati manza rotum ta karmas thaph.*

(The bellows pipe I pressed gently, muffling its breath,
The lamp lit, in its radiance I stood revealed.
I let the inner light burst out in the open,
Through the darkness caught hold of Him and would not let go.)

Lal Ded has no hesitation in choosing a metaphor from a blacksmith's forge to explain a subtle practice of *Trikasastra*, thus bringing the task of this worker into focus. Apart from the sheer power of the image, the underprivileged are acknowledged as it is to them that she turns for tools to explain her ideas to the general populace. A similar spirit is at work in the well-known verses:-

*Lal ba drayas kapas poshi satsuy
Katsi tu dooni karnam yatsay lath
Tuy yeli khaernas zaeviji tuye
Vovuri vaana gayam alaenzey lath,*

*Dwobi yeli chhaevnas dwobi kani pethay
Saz ta saaban mathsnam yatsuy
Sutsi yeli phirnam hani hani kaetsuy
Ada Lali me praevum param gath.*

(I, Lal, set out, hoping to bloom like a cotton flower,
But was beaten and trampled by ginner and carder,
Shredded and spun into so fine a yarn,
And hung and hit by the weaver on his loom,

Thrashed and kneaded on the washerman's stone,
Pasted and plastered with soap and clayey earth,
Till the tailor's skilful scissors worked on my limbs,
And I found my place in the Highest Abode!)

Literally a chronicle of the blows and buffets of life which mould and shape a personality, this *vaakh* works out the metaphor chosen, in an easily comprehensible idiom. This is no voice of a mystic who only

LAL DED: THE VOICE OF THE MARGINALISED

lives in ethereal realms of the spirit, alienated from the ordinary life around her. Here is someone who sees, notices, appreciates and gives importance to the role of everyone involved in the job, right from the peasant who reaped the cotton crop, to the skilled artisans like the weaver and the tailor. The usefulness of everyone in this saga of creative evolution is duly acknowledged while tracing the journey of a fluff of cottonwool from the stage when it emerged from the safe cocoon of the closed seed to the final one when it is fashioned into protective clothing. It seems thus to have realized its full potential: that of serving a useful purpose in the natural scheme of things. It is through these images and metaphors from manual labour that she communicates to people directly without the agency of cerebral Brahminism.

With her spirit free from slavery to custom, she shows nothing but contempt for dogmatic religion, its rituals and practices, and often uses the adjective, ‘stubborn’ or ‘dense’ for a Brahmin. For instance this *vaakh*:-

*Deev vatta divar vatta
Petha bon chhuy ikavaath
Pooz kas karakh hutta Batta
Kar manas tu pavanas sangaath.*

(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.)

It is a forceful condemnation of a self-delusion where a symbol becomes more important than what it is meant to represent. Fearlessly she confronts the priest, interrogates his practice and voices protest, on behalf of the poor, ignorant, voiceless masses.

We must remember that in spite of using domestic metaphors, Lal Ded’s is no so-called ‘effeminate’ voice. In describing her experience of the struggle that a spiritual journey is, Lal Ded never hesitates to use images of violence in her poetry. Here are two *vaakhs*, which are also a good example of the English critic and poet T.S. Eliot’s ideal of a

Neerja Mattoo

great poet's ability to separate suffering itself from the actual act of an artistic creation, in other words, describing an emotion in clear, dispassionate terms rather than indulging in an emotional outburst:-

*Lolaki wokhala vaalinj pishim,
Kwokal tsajim ta roozas rasa,
Buzum ta zaajim paanas chashim,
Kava zaana tava suti mara kina lasa.*

(In love's mortar I pounded and ground my heart -
Evil passions fled and I was at peace -
Roasted and burnt and consumed it myself,
Yet know not whether I die or live!)

Pounding or roasting or eating up of the heart, it is all done through love, as in the way of the Sufi. It should not be mistaken for the self-flagellation of the mediaeval Christian monks or nuns, nor of the prescription of a bed of nails for the Hindu ascetic, but the similarity of idiom in all these different schools of mysticism demands our attention. Or look at this:-

*Tsaalun chhu vuzmala ta tratay,
Tsaalun chhu mandinyan gatakaar
Tsaalun chhu paan panun kadun gratay
Heta maali santoosh vaatiy paanay.*

(Be ready to endure lightning and cloudbursts,
Or a sudden pall of darkness at noon,
Or the body crushed between two grindstones,
Accept it all with patience and contentment will come.)

Once again the powerful imagination of a poet is at work here. The strong metaphors are certainly not from the stereotyped idea of the repertoire of a woman's vocabulary. Lal Ded is constantly confounding one with such dramatic turns of phrase that force one to revise traditional notions of women as caught in mere domesticity in those days in our history. The repetition of the word *tsaalun* (to endure), emphasizes the toughness of the test which demands great reserves of endurance from a candidate who seeks admission to world of self-realization.

LAL DED: THE VOICE OF THE MARGINALISED

In this context I quote two powerful *vaakhs*, which give a lyrical expression to the primal dilemma of choice, the tug between the love for the material and the spiritual. Trying to reach the Trikaite ideal of accepting the world of material as true and real and at the same cultivating detachment from it, can lead to frustration at the inability to strike a balance between the two. Here Lal Ded reaches out to those who are in the same situation for various reasons, by using the metaphor from the plight of the lowliest of labourers—a load-carrier:-

*Lalith lalith vaday bo vaay
Tseta muhich peyiy maay
Roziy na pata loha langruchi thsaay
Niz swaroop kya mothuy haay.*

(Gently I will weep, my soul,
Fallen in love with the world you are!
Not a shadow of household possessions will stay,
How *could* you forget your real self?)

*Nabadi baaras atagand dyol gom
Dih kaan hol gom heka kaho
Gwor sund vatsun raavantyol pyom
Pahali ros khyol gom heka kaho.*

(The load of sugar-crystal on my back is loosened,
The body bent like a bow, how do I bear it?
The guru's word hurts like a weeping blister,
A flock without a shepherd am I, how do I bear it?)

The lightness of touch in the first *vaakh* is in sharp contrast with the second verse, where the subject is dealt with in much greater poetic 'weight'. At first she would just weep at the thought of attachment to the material world, which she knows, must not be allowed to enslave the seeker into truth. But then, in the next *vaakh* the complexity of the problem of attachment-detachment is brought into sharper focus. The dearly beloved worldly possessions are a load, yet it is not easy to let go of them, ones attachment makes it a sweet load, even though the back may be bent under its weight. Therefore the guru's word to let

Neerja Mattoo

the weight fall off, galls like a suppurating blister, strong as the yearning for bodily pleasures remains, even though with advancing age and decaying powers, enjoyment of luxuries may no longer be possible, suggested by the image of the bent body. The agony such a predicament brings with it has been described in a sharply jolting metaphor of a blistering wound. The sense of bewilderment and loss is beautifully summed up in the picture of a shepherdless flock. The need for the healing touch as well as guidance of a shepherd in these circumstances is quite understandable. Apart from its aptness as a metaphor, the image of a shepherd and the flock of sheep is also a reminder of Christian religious poetry, which is often dressed in similar pastoral imagery. Instances of such cross-cultural phrases and figures of speech come up with pleasant regularity in a study of literatures from different languages pointing to the universality of the images used. While her images coincide with those used by mystic poets in the west on the one hand, they also occur in the poems of the Hindi Bhakti poets, Mirabai and Kabir.

To come back to her choice of figures of speech from ordinary life, here is another *vaakh*:-

*Hachivi haerinji petsiuv kaan gom
Abwokh chhaan pyom yath razdane
Manzbaag baazras kuluph ros vaan gom
Teertha ros paan gom, kus maali zaane.*

(For my wooden bow, a rush for an arrow!
An unskilled carpenter for a royal mansion!
In the marketplace, a shop unguarded!
A body uncleansed by waters holy am I, Oh who can know my
plight!)

The string of metaphors to describe the plight of someone, whose plans and ideas are too powerful for the tools for action she is equipped with, is vivid. All these are images which even the unlettered can easily understand, as they are taken from within the ambit of ordinary life and its activities. Of course the import can be understood and appreciated differently by people with different levels of intellectual development.

LAL DED: THE VOICE OF THE MARGINALISED

For the mystically orientated, of course, they unfold a much higher message, that of the whole Body-Soul-question.

Even though she has respect for her Guru, she does hesitate to express her dissatisfaction with him when he fails to answer her questions:-

*Gwaras prithsiam sasi late
Yas na kenh vanaan tas kya naav
Prithsaan prithsaan thachis ta loosus
Kenh nata nishi kyahtaam draav.*

(A thousand times I asked my guru,
Pray how name Him who has no name?
I asked in vain, exhausted and sunk,
Till out of nothing something emerged)

Vaakhs like this also go to show how well-aware Lal Ded was of varied philosophies. Here we are reminded of one of the conversations between the sage Maitreya and his wife Gargi, mentioned in the *Vrihadaraanyaka Upanishad*. Gargi wants to know how God can be described and the sage replies, What cannot be described is Shiva. Such verses exude confidence.

In the *vaakh* I am quoting now, we see her again at her frank best, admitting once again how she flouted traditional notions :-

*Mithya, kapat, asath trovum
Manas korum sui wopdeesh:
Zanas andar Keeval zonum,
Anas khenas kus chhum dweesh?*

(I let go of appearance, deceit and untruth,
To my mind I gave but this advice:
See Him alone in every one,
Why shun the food offered by man?)

The last line is a direct answer to the prevalent Brahmin practice of not eating food prepared by a non-Hindu or a low caste. As said earlier, Lal Ded's is an all-embracing creed, which does not believe in race, religion or caste as a factor to determine superiority of one to another.

Neerja Mattoo

Sometimes Lal Ded dispenses with figures of speech altogether and with just one suggestive stroke, succeeds in conveying a hard truth to the sensitive listener. For instance, notice the irony while she expresses her disapproval of the sacrifice of a sheep at a temple thus:

*Laz kaasi, sheet nivaariy,
Trin zal karaan aahaar.
Yi kami wopdeesh koruy Batta,
Atseetan vattas satseetan dyun aahaar?*

(Hides your shame, saves you from the cold,
Eats but grass and drinks just water,
Who taught you this lesson, O Batta,
To feed a lifeless stone with a living food?)

She draws attention to the role a sheep plays in protecting a man from the cold, which someone living in the severe winter of Kashmir can well appreciate. After all it is a woollen *pheran* that saves the Kashmiri from the biting, icy winds of December and January. So one can well see the absurdity of offering the source of such bounties to an inanimate stone idol to appease it. Of course, this *vaakh* is also a clear indication of Lal Ded's disapproval of a mindless ritual worship of idols. It is interesting to note that her words are bolder than those of better privileged men endowed with authority by society and tradition.

Images from daily life, things that we see around us all the time, are used effectively to make a subtle mystic point:-

*Taari salil khot tay ture
Hemi tre gay binabin vimarsha
Tseyatani rav vaati sab same
Shivamay tsaraatsar zag pasha.*

(The cold works on water and hides it -
Snow and ice - a triple delusion!
But the Consciousness-sun shines and all are one!
See how the whole world becomes one in Shiva!)

The phenomenon of water freezing in the severe winter of Kashmir, is a familiar sight to her listeners and they can easily comprehend how

LAL DED: THE VOICE OF THE MARGINALISED

an object can change its appearance. Thus we must guard against being misled by appearance and use our mind to look beyond it to the underlying reality, is the lesson Lal Ded seems to want to teach us.

Something that shines through all of Lal Ded's work is its remarkable honesty and fearlessness. She makes no extravagant claim about her own mystic achievements, but at the same time she cannot let pretence and chicanery on the part of so-called godmen pass. There is moral strength and firmness of purpose in her plain-speaking approach to problems of the most complicated metaphysical kind. It is totally free from the insecurity and bashfulness associated with a woman daring to speak in a world dominated by men teachers and seers.

What she has to say about the so-called 'miracles', performed by charlatans in the guise of saints, merely to impress and gather a following after them, in her own time, is so well applicable to similar practitioners today:-

*Zal thamavun hutavah turnaavun,
Urdagaman parivarzith chareth
Kaathdeni dwad shramanaavun,
Antih sakalay kapat chareth.*

(Stilling the waters or quenching a fire,
The cursed practice of seeming to fly,
Or to make a wooden cow yield milk,
In the end it is but deceit and fraud!)

Such sleights of hand are not worthy of a true devotee, Lal Ded says with contempt. To the Trikaite, the aim is not to win converts by showing off supernatural powers, but the aspiration to merge with the Supreme Consciousness. Lal Ded is not only interested in her personal salvation, she is ready to share the secret of it with whoever is ready to listen. These are not prescriptions, but gently revealed truths through the medium of pure poetry.

We must consider ourselves privileged to have been allowed by Lal Ded to share her mystic experiences in words of such uncommon beauty and ability to move - a double privilege indeed. There is no art

Neerja Mattoo

of the poet, whether from the east or the west, that is not known to her. Her imagination is tempered by a down-to-earth practicality, so that no matter what rarified regions it soars to, it never loses touch with the human beings to whom her poetry is addressed. She travels the whole length and breadth of a poet's art in her search for the right medium and finding it, tempers it to suit her purpose. Hers is a living presence among the Kashmiris who have through successive generations quoted her phrases as proverbs to suit all occasions and through all seasons of their lives.

A REAPPRAISAL OF LAL DED

A.N. Dhar

Reappraising Lal Ded as a saint-poet and mystic is the need of the hour. Perhaps this task has to focus first on exploring what the genuine poetic outpourings or *vaakhs* of the great saint are (to be sifted from the spurious ones). Then a reinterpretation of the genuine utterances is to be attempted with a view to removing a number of misconceptions and erroneous notions about Lal Ded, some of them obviously based on deliberate distortions and even lies spread to serve a vested interest. All this will call for rigorous research – that is a challenging task in view of our present inaccessibility to the relevant and some indispensable materials lying unused in the State Research Library, that was years back shifted to the Kashmir University campus at Hazratbal, Srinagar.

In spite of the severe handicaps of Lal Ded scholarship, fresh research studies on the saint-poet can take off from the pioneering work in the background accomplished by such scholars as Bhaskar Razdan, Grierson and Barnett, Sir Richard Temple and Pt. Anand Kaul. To my mind, Prof. Jayalal Kaul's *Lal Ded*, a subsequent publication, is a monumental little volume that can serve as a guide-book to the prospective researchers. Compact and packed as it is with documentary details, it has to be tapped with care as a rich resource, being highly useful as a secondary source-material. Professor Kaul has also done a pioneering job in raising sensible and legitimate questions about the authenticity of Lalla's *Vaakhs* – how best to establish it through a stylistic study of the utterances as they have come down to us by word of mouth. His intelligent grasp of what linguistic change over a period of time, in its bearing on the *vaakhs*, involves in a cross-cultural context is praise-worthy. Some of the crucial observations he has made further on the so-called evidence of various influences on Lal Ded are valuable too. And his forceful rebuttal of the claims some scholars have made

about the fusion of various schools and creeds in her *vaakh*, as if consciously attempted by her, deserves to be specially complimented. His total rejection of the evidence put forward by a couple of scholars that Lal Ded at a later stage of her life came under the decisive influence of Islam, followed by her conversion to the new faith, is based on sound and convincing arguments.

Prof. Jayalal Kaul's outstanding contribution to Lal Ded scholarship in his book titled *Lal Ded* has been followed by another accomplished work on the saint-poet authored by Prof. B.N. Parimoo, which too is a significant contribution in terms of his detailed literary translation and interpretation of the *vaakhs*. Its chief merit lies in the chapter-wise sequencing of the verse-sayings aimed at demonstrating Lalla's spiritual ascent to the plane of supreme consciousness and her union with Param Shiva as a yogini. Both Prof. Parimoo and his predecessor, Prof. Jayalal Kaul, have maintained that Lalla followed the Shaivite technique of meditation based on Kundalini yoga.

Subsequent works on Lal Ded brought out in the past three decades or so include Nilakanth Kotru's *Lal Ded: Her Life and Sayings* published in 1989, a special 'Lal Ded' number of the *Koshur Samachar* brought out in the year 1971 and Prof. R.N. Kaul's *Kashmir's Mystic: Poetess Lal Ded alias Lalla Arifa* published in 1999. Nilakanth Kotru too has attempted his own English translations of the *vaakhs*, falling in line with the *vaakh*-sequence adopted by Jayalal Kaul before him. His meanings and explanations are plain and simple, reflecting, at the same time, a good grasp of the doctrines of Kashmir Shaivism. As regards Prof. R.N. Kaul's recent book on Lal Ded, it has some novel features that cannot escape the attention of the thoughtful reader. It is readable and enjoyable in view of its literary charm and lucidity of expression. The interpretation of the *vaakhs* points very much to a perceptive and assimilative mind behind the book – inasmuch as the content of the *vaakhs* is made intelligible to the average reader, appealing, at the same time, to the scholar through the author's beauty of expression. The book would have gained further in value if the author had provided adequate details about the essentials

of *Trika* or Kashmir Shaivism and mysticism in general in his account of Lalla as *Kashmir's Mystic* (which is the main title of the book).

The special number of the *Koshur Samachar* mentioned earlier is a very useful source-material for the Lal Ded scholar who cannot, in the prevailing circumstances, have an easy access to the materials available in the State Research Library. Besides providing English translations of Lalla's verse-sayings in a separate section, the journal contains useful and learned articles in English and Hindi contributed by many competent writers and also by some well-known writers like Abdul Ahad Azad, Amin Kamil and Prof. Rehman Rahi. It also contains two short write-ups in English contributed by Swami Laxman Joo and J. Rudrappa.

I should like to mention two more materials on Lal Ded. I was able to lay my hands on the small volume titled *Lalleshwari: Remembered by Swami Mukhtananda* published in 1981. The Preface by Swami Prajnanand and the Introduction by Joseph Chilton Pearce, both thoughtfully written, are valuable as informative pieces on Lal Ded and her sayings. Then follow English renderings of the sayings in the form of poems attempted in the free-verse pattern. These poems capture the essence of the *vaakhs* without observing accuracy in keeping close to the form and content of the original text. They could be described as "transcreations" rather than translations. Joseph Chilton Pearce justifies this feature by observing that "A true translation is always a re-creation".

The other book I acquired recently was published in early 1999. It bears the title *Voice of Experience: Lall Vaakh of Lall Ded/ Lali Shori of Kashmir* and contains English translations of 154 *vaakhs* attempted by the author, B.N. Sopori. The *vaakhs* are grouped under five headings chosen as the titles of individual chapters – 'Sadhana', 'Adventure in Space', 'Fortitude', 'Precepts' and 'Discourses with Guru (Master)'. In the Foreword, the author himself, as translator and commentator, describes his particular approach to the study of the *vaakhs* – involving scientific terms and concepts such as 'vibration',

‘frequency’, ‘wave-length’ etc. which, interestingly it seems to me, are drawn from his professional vocabulary as a former employee of the Department of Telecommunication. Since he is not a man of any special literary expertise, he has not been able to develop his ideas into a coherent and systematic theory sustainable throughout the study. He manages somehow to communicate intelligibly in English though his command of the language is faulty at places. All the same, he seems knowledgeable about the import of the *vaakhs* in terms of actual yogic practice. As he informed me himself, he plans to bring out a second volume as a sequel to the present one, which will contain another 150 *vaakhs* or so. I wonder if all the *vaakhs* the author has collected are authentic as Lal *vaakh*.

That Lalla was a rare genius – as a saint and poet in one – is disputed by none, and is acknowledged by all the Kashmiris, Hindus and Muslims alike. It is essentially through the *vaakhs*, which she uttered as direct outpourings from her heart rather than as consciously wrought poetic compositions, that Lalla became very popular as a saint-poet in Kashmir. As Professor Jayalal Kaul very aptly observes, there was no polarization between Kashmiri Hindus and Muslims in her time; the *vaakhs* made a tremendous impact on the collective psyche of the two communities. Perhaps most Muslims being only fresh converts to their new faith were as receptive to the wise sayings of the saint-poet as the Hindus who then must have still been in the majority as the natives of the Valley. Even after the latter got reduced to a minority in consequence of conversions, Lalla continued to be held in reverence as ‘Lal Ded’ by both the communities. She was also called ‘Lalleshwari’ by one community and ‘Lalla Arifa’ by the other, showing that both thought very highly of her spiritual attainment in accordance with their religious perceptions. If a Muslim hailed her as an ‘Arifa’, he did not mean to convey that she had been influenced by Islam in any remarkable way or had accepted a new faith. Later, some Muslim scholar made deliberate distortion of facts in asserting that Lalla had experienced inward “illumination” only after coming into contact with Sayyid Hussain Somnani and had then got converted to Islam.

This wishful “myth” can’t stand the test of reason and must be exploded. It has, however, done the mischief: I recall having read in a secondary source-material on Lal Ded that the saint-poet has been mentioned as a convert to Islam in some encyclopaedia. If Muslim scholars draw a parallel between Rabia and Lalla as love-mystics, this seems a befitting comparison and should be acceptable to us. But to distort history and try to perpetuate a lie about Lalla’s faith should be rebutted with convincing arguments as Prof. Jayalal Kaul has already done on the basis of his sound Lal Ded scholarship.

Significantly, it is Lalla’s younger contemporary, Nunda Rishi or Sheikh Noor-ud-Din Wali, acknowledged by the Kashmiri Muslims as well to have been blessed by her at his birth, who has paid her this befitting and glowing tribute:

That Lalla of Padmanpora (Pampore) – She drank
Her fill of divine nectar;
She was indeed an *avatar* of ours (dearly loved)
O God, grant me the same boon!

There are three crucial sacred terms used in the Kashmiri text of the tribute that are obviously derived from our *shastras*: *Deeva* (God), *avtaar* (incarnation) and *var* (boon). The words confirm that Nunda Rishi held Lalla in great esteem and looked upon her as a saint of remarkable achievement, having all the qualities of a divine incarnation. Evidently, he aspires to emulate her, craving to have “his fill of nectar” too as a boon from God. Keeping in view the content of the verse quoted above, the responsive reader when informed of the following remark about Lalla made by Sir Richard Temple in his book titled *The Word of Lalla* (1924) will hardly give any credence to it (the remark) but reject it as a piece of misinformation:¹

Lalla is said to have been influenced by the great national patron saint of the Kashmiris named Noor-ud-Din Wali of Tsrar-i-Sherif.

Prof. Jayalal Kaul, quoting the remark in his book titled *Lal Ded*, makes his observation on it in these words:²

As every Kashmiri, Hindu or Muslim, sees it, the truth is the other way round. Besides, Lal Ded should have been sixty, if not more, when Nunda Rishi was born.

Yes, the real truth is that as a saint, Nunda Rishi was greatly influenced by Lal Ded. It was his unqualified veneration for the saint-poetess that had a great impact on the devout Muslims, his followers. That explains why for several centuries Kashmiri Muslims have continued to own her, delighting in memorizing and quoting her sayings as Kashmiri Hindus do, singing the *vaakhs* on appropriate occasions – festive events such as marriage ceremonies and at cultural functions. Another important tribute to the spiritual genius of Lal Ded has been paid by Sharms Faqir in his poem (in Kashmiri) *zaan milnaav Bhagwaanans saite*.

On the basis of the internal evidence from the *vaakhs*, the thoughtful reader is left in no doubt about Lalla's spiritual moorings as a yogini: her Shaivite upbringing in a Kashmiri Brahman family. We have unmistakable clues in some of Lalla's *vaakhs* about her initiation into yoga at the hands of her Guru, Sedamol, who was an accomplished *Siddha* as a follower of the Shaivite path. The very first *vaakh* (from among many *vaakhs*) in which Lalla talks of her initiation into spirituality and of the remarkable effect of the *Guru mantra* on her, convinces us that she immediately experienced "illumination of the Self". She had no reason to roam any more in search of a spiritual guide, as is reflected in her following verse:

The Guru gave me but one precept,
"From without turn inward",
It came to me "Lalla" as God's word;
I started roaming nude.

The *vaakh* explicitly conveys that Lalla experienced instant spiritual transformation and was thrown into a state of ecstasy on receiving the Guru's word. Elsewhere she says "I found the all-knowing Self within – in the sanctuary of my own heart", "I saw Shiva and Shakti conjoined in eternal embrace" and "That's how I attained the abode of Light". A tone of confidence and self-assurance, based on a sense of spiritual fulfillment and an awareness of the ultimate Truth, is clearly reflected in

these utterances of Lal Ded. We are convinced that she has got to the root of the matter and attained self-realisation. Her affirmative statements, such as those quoted, confirm her Hindu faith throughout (call it Shaivite if you see it as a distinct cult within *Sanatan Dharma*). The fact is that she had no reason to seek further direction or spiritual succour from any visiting divine or preacher belonging to a faith other than her own. All the so-called evidences given by the Muslim scholar to prove her conversion to Islam is nothing but an unacceptable tissue of lies.

I would like to mention a few scholars from our own community who have made some observations on Lalla that don't seem tenable. They seem to have supported or imagined that she played the role of a committed social activist, a professional preacher or teacher of spiritual values and brought about fusion of diverse creeds and schools of thought. Forgetting that Lal Ded didn't compose her *vaakhs* as professional poets compose and publish their verses today, they draw their own inferences on which they base very facile and untenable views as if Lalla meant to preach and propagate a philosophy of her own though her *vaakhs*. Here are the two examples that Professor Jayalal Kaul has questioned in chapter 5 of his book *Lal Ded*:

- (i) She brought about a "synthesis of the two philosophies" (The *Trika* and Islamic Sufism) and this synthesis "was given to the world in poetic sermons by the wandering minstrel through the rest of her life".³
- (ii) "The order she founded was an admixture of the non-dualistic philosophy of Shaivism and Islamic Sufism".⁴

Again, in the view of Daya Kishen Kachru "Lalleshwari took the best of Islamic thought and fused it best with her own creed".⁵ This view is also questionable, especially the way it is worded.

Lalla's *vaakhs* convey a message of peace and harmony and one can see that she owes it as much to her educational background in a Shaivite Kashmiri Brahmin family as to her spiritual enlightenment based on her own *sadhana*. There is a definite impress of the Shaivite thought

A. N. Dhar

and terminology on her *vaakhs*. Whatever her background, there is also evidence in the *vaakhs* of a state of awareness and of an outlook far transcending cults. Her teaching is, in fact, in tune with our *Sanatan Dharma* that is exceptionally catholic and all-embracing, acceptable as much to the emancipated Hindu as it should be to the liberal Muslim. It is her direct “encounter” with the ultimate Truth as a true yogini or mystic that explains why Lalla *vaakh* appeals to men of all shades of religious thought (inasmuch as all religious paths lead to the same goal). When scholars read her *vaakhs* with pre-conceived notions, they interpret them to convey that Lalla aimed at achieving a fusion or synthesis of Vedantic philosophy and Islamic Sufism, as if with a conscious purpose (reflective of her outlook as a thinker and intellectual).

Professor Jayalal Kaul has been consistent in his description of Lal Ded as a Shaivite yogini. In this connection, he has been at pains to clarify in what ways *Trika* and *Vedanta* are distinguishable as non-dualistic philosophies. In particular, he characterizes *Shankara Vedanta* as illusionist and praises the Shaivite philosophy of Kashmir for its view of the world as Real. As a student of the *Gita* and on the basis of my reading of some of the *Upanishads* (in English translation), I don't find *Vedanta* altogether distinct from *Trika*. Both philosophies are rooted in the *Vedas* and are complementary to each other. If according to *Trika* the world is Real, a manifestation of the *Swarupa*, doesn't Lord Krishna affirm the same truth in the *Gita*?

बहूनां जन्मनामन्ते ज्ञानवान् मां प्रपद्यते
वासुदेवः सर्वमिति स महात्मा सुदुर्लभः

[sloka 19, chap 7]

At the end of many births (of striving), the knowing one makes Me his refuge, realizing that Vasudeva is All. A great soul of that type is rare to find.

So we see, as the Lord tells us in the *Gita*, वासुदेवः सर्वमिति (All is Vasudeva), implying that God inheres in what we see as the external world, which is as such Real - a manifestation of God. This is what

Trika also emphasizes. In the *Shivastotravali*, Utpaldeva - celebrated Kashmiri Shaivite philosopher and poet - gives equal importance to seeing Shiva as विश्वमय (immanent in the world) as well as विश्वोतीर्ण (transcendent or beyond the phenomenal world). As a devotee of Shiva, he wants to have विश्वाभास (consciousness of the Supreme Self) in the wakeful state - while experiencing the world through the senses, and not merely when he is absorbed in meditation. If there were no compatibility between *Shaivism* and *Vedanta*, Abhinav Gupta (famous Kashmiri Shaivite philosopher after Utpaldeva), would not have attempted an interpretation of the *Gita* in terms of the *Trika* philosophy.

A word about Shankaracharya, who is branded an illusionist by some Shaivites. We must not forget that he is also credited with being the author of the Sanskrit work titled *Saundarya Lahri*. What is *Mayavaad* for the *Vedantin* assumes the form of *Shaktivaad* in the book mentioned as Shankara's point of view undergoes a change. In a Sanskrit poem attributed to him, he uses the line चिदानंद रूपः शिवोहं शिवोहं as the refrain – a statement that a Shaivite believes to be very true of the Self. I feel that the Lal Ded scholar must avoid seeing the saint-poet as an exponent of only a particular school of thought - *Trika*. So long as Lalla is a poet (and she is so pre-eminently), she cannot afford to be rigorously doctrinal as a systematic philosopher. No doubt, many of her *vaakhs* have the preacher's tone. She is a seeker too in a number of the *vaakhs*; her poetry is mystical as the poetry of aspiration as well as of fulfilment. If we over-stress Lalla's being a Shaivite poet, we then overlook her catholicity. In one of her *vaakhs* she says clearly that she sees *Shiva* as no different from *Kesava*. How true she sounds when she says अभ्यासूँके गनिरय शास्तुर म ठिम (I forgot the *sastras* as my spiritual practice gained in depth and intensity). And as Lalla's practice advanced, as she went up the ladder of meditation and crossed all the hurdles - negotiated the *chakras* - her utterances became spontaneous as mystical outpourings, coming straight from the heart. What interestingly cannot escape our attention is that even when she has the preacher's tone in some of her *vaakhs*, she is not overtly didactic; we don't see a "palpable" design in the whole body of her verse-sayings.

That explains why her poetry is soul-stirring.

Finally, it is the *vaakhs* of Lal Ded - that are aphoristic and, as such, replete with wisdom - on which her great popularity as a mystical poet largely rests. And she is a great poet precisely because she is intensely spiritual and, conversely, she is highly spiritual because she is gifted with an extra-ordinary poetic sensibility. The *vaakhs* bear testimony to Lalla's genius as a saint and poet in one. What the American literary critic, Helen C. White, remarks about the mystic poet is unreservedly applicable to Lal Ded as a poet:⁶

It is not a strange hybrid of poet and mystic who writes a mystical poem. It is not a man who writes first as a mystic and then as a poet. It is not even a mystic who turns over to the poet who happens to dwell within the same brain and body the materials of his insight to be made into a work of art by the competent craftsman. It is rather that the same human being is at once poet and mystic, at one and the same time from the beginning of the process to the end.

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4. See P.N.K. Bamzai, *A History of Kashmir* (Delhi: Metropolitan), 1962, p. 498.
5. See Daya Krishen Kachru, "The Light of the Valley" *Koshur Samachar* - Lal Ded Number, 1971, p.7
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NUNDA RISHI: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

A. N. Dhar

We have discussed Lal Ded's pre-eminence as a Kashmiri saint-poet of consequence. She is held in special esteem by the Hindus and Muslims of the Valley. This holds equally true of the saint-poet Nunda Rishi alias Sheikh Noor-ud-Din Wali of Charar-i-Sharif, Badgam (Kashmir), hailed as Sheikh-ul-Alam by the Kashmiri Muslims, who look upon him as the founder of the Rishi order among them. He is specially venerated as *Alamdar-i-Kashmir*, implying the "standard-bearer of Kashmir". His Hindu admirers in Kashmir, preferring to call him Nunda Rishi, mention his name with deep respect; occasionally one hears some of these admirers referring to the saint as "Sahazanand" too. Born in or around the year 1475 A.D, Nunda Rishi exhibited the signs of an extraordinary saint right from the days of his childhood. His parents, Sheikh Salar-ud-Din and Sodermaji, were converts to Islam; Sodermaji did not bear a child for many years and it is believed that through her intense prayers she was blessed with the birth of a child that was named Nunda. It was the fine traits of character that he exhibited as a boy, his precociousness and, above all, his spirit of self-abnegation that very much pointed in advance to his future eminence as a saint-poet.

It is widely believed in Kashmir that as a babe Nunda Rishi refused to suck milk from his mother's breast. Legend has it further that Lal Ded, who was by then advanced in age, made a surprise appearance at Nunda's home and spoke these words to the babe:

When you didn't shy away from being born (into this world),
Why do you feel shy of being breast-fed?

With these words of gentle admonition uttered by Lal Ded, the baby immediately sucked milk from her breast. When Nunda grew up to be a well-known saint with a great following, he paid this befitting tribute to the memory of Lal Ded in these lines:

That Lalla of Padmapur,
She had her fill of divine nectar;
A beloved *Avtar* of ours too (we would fondle in our laps),
O God, bestow a similar boon on me.¹

What is significant in this *shrukh* (meaning a *shloka* or verse-saying) is that the Sheikh conceives of Lal Ded having partaken of divine nectar and thus become adorable as an incarnate Goddess. Holding her in very special regard, he wished to emulate her as his model. Though a Muslim, he is not averse to the Hindu belief in the *avtarhood* of Lal Ded. He is thus in perfect accord with the Hindus of the Valley inasmuch as they hail the saint-poetess as Laleshwari (Lalla, the Goddess Incarnate). The Rishi order founded by Sheikh Noor-ud-Din Wali evolved in the Valley itself after the advent of Islam. It acquired an indigenous character and constituted a “brotherhood” reminiscent of the order of monks called “Buddhist Sanga”, with its cultural roots in the Rishi tradition of the Hindus in the distant background. Even before Nunda Rishi openly renounced his domestic life (at the age of 32 years) and embarked upon his spiritual mission, he was least inclined towards worldliness and had the marks of an ascetic given to meditation. He had the makings of a ‘Rishi’ - a Sanskrit term of immense cultural significance, meaning a spiritual seer who models his life on the Vedic standards.

In view of the early death of his father, Nunda Rishi had to depend upon his mother, Sodermaji, and her two step-sons for his sustenance as a youngster. His step-brothers chose to commit thefts and burglaries; they tried to induce Nunda to join them in their reprehensible business. Nunda Rishi eluded them somehow and outwitted them too, frustrating their designs to make him an accomplice in their crimes. Obviously, cut out for sainthood, he remained untouched by evil. One day Sodermaji took her son to the village religious teacher, the Maulvi. She urged him to introduce Nunda to the Arabic alphabet. The teacher wrote the Arabic letters on a tablet, repeating for the boy each letter with proper articulation. He then directed Nunda to read the alphabet as he had been taught. The boy just pronounced for the Maulvi the first letter

NUNDA RISHI: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

Alif. Beyond *Alif* the young defiant learner would not proceed, however hard the teacher tried to induce him to obey the instruction - through persuasion, admonition, threats, etc. The enigmatic boy offered a logical explanation for stopping at the letter *Alif* itself: the letter stands for the oneness of God, and this is the highest knowledge one can and need attain. All else is redundant. The teacher got dumbfounded hearing this explanation and admitted that the boy did not need any tutoring. It is said that later in life, when Nunda Rishi had taken to the path of asceticism, he had an encounter with a Brahmin who considered the Sheikh unfit for the path on the ground that he was “unlettered and uneducated”. Nunda Rishi’s retort to the Brahmin was his admission that he had got no formal education. In spite of this shortcoming, however, the saint claimed that he had “experienced the presence of God” and also realized “divine unity”. Describing the sky, earth, moon, fire, wind and food as the “gifts of God”, he convinced the Brahmin of his natural wisdom and didn’t waver in his decision to keep to the path of renunciation.²

Most biographical and other details about Nunda Rishi have come down to us through *Noor-namas* or *Rishi namas*. These works suffer from several inadequacies and all that they say cannot be taken as wholly authentic, especially the account of the miracles attributed to the saint. All the *shrukhs* in Sanskrit that the saint-poet is credited with having composed have, it seems, been deliberately left out by the authors of *Noor-namas*. The fact is that although the Sheikh hadn’t received any formal education, he knew Sanskrit and the language had made a great impact on him: as is reflected in his appropriate use of the Sanskrit words or words of Sanskrit origin that one comes across in the *shrukhs*. Such words far outnumber the Persian words used by the saint-poet.

As a saint whose parents were converts to Islam, Sheikh Noor-ud-Din alias Nunda Rishi towers over many of his ilk as far as his spiritual stature is concerned. Among the Kashmiri saints, he stands out as a model of purity, penance, asceticism and moral virtue. A great admirer of the Prophet as an adherent of Islam, his actual religious

practice and his pronouncements in the form of *shrukhs* show amply that he can be classed with other great saints in the country professing different faiths, who have influenced generations of followers. Perhaps true to the Indian tradition of sainthood, he preferred to live single all his life, wedded to spirituality and to the ideal of social service, led a simple life, partook of vegetarian food, donned a woollen *loachh* (a Kashmiri *pheran*, its borders stretching upto the feet and its sleeves being long), and practised penance and meditation. He lived in caves at several places, spending a decade or so at a place, and remained occupied with his mission as a preacher of spiritual values. As a follower of Islam, that stresses *tableegh* (propagation of faith) and encourages proselytisation, he didn't hesitate to convert non-Muslims to Islam, choosing some of them as his disciples. Yet he consistently preached amity among divergent faiths; accordingly he preached harmony between Hindus and Muslims as the inhabitants of the Valley. All through he practised piety, self-control and non-violence. He preached universal brotherhood and non-violence on the basis of his perception of divine unity, in which all diversity is comprehended.

Before we examine some select *shrukhs* of the saint-poet in question in order to have a clear and precise idea of his message, it is feasible to consider briefly how he stands in comparison with his important spiritual predecessor, Lal Ded. Is he to be classed with her as a mystical poet? Perhaps not, not at least in the full sense of the word 'mystical' as distinguished from the word 'religious'. A mystical verse invariably provides a hint of the poet's direct *experience* of the Divine: an awareness of something deeply felt which ordinarily defies expression but is conveyed suggestively through image and symbol, and through other linguistic devices. Lalla's utterances in bulk satisfy this criterion while Nunda Rishi's verses only occasionally approach the standard. The *vaakhs* of Lal Ded and the *shrukhs* of Nunda Rishi, no doubt, share several similarities as aphorisms composed in verse-form; but the content of the *shrukhs* is largely didactic, the preacher's tone being marked in them. However, those *shrukhs* which express the Sheikh's spiritual anguish, his disenchantment with worldliness in general

NUNDA RISHI: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

and his aspiration for deliverance from the ills of this temporal world, do move us by virtue of their lyrical appeal as pieces of self-expression. Leaving them apart, it is only in a small number of the *shrukhs* that we perceive the mystical touch too, but even such utterances do not match Lalla's *vaakhs* in mystical depth and intensity. Yet in some *shrukhs*, here and there, Nunda Rishi too engages our hearts through loftiness of introspection and devotional intensity. On the whole, his message impresses believers as a teaching that is valuable and cherishable.

We now come to select *shrukhs* of the saint-poet Nunda Rishi. Here is the one that he addresses to his two stepbrothers to convey how wrong of them it is to commit the sins of housebreaking and stealing:

The dog is barking in the courtyard, conveying:
"O Brothers, pay heed to me;
What one sows here reaps there (in the world hereafter),
The dog's bark means - sow you (and reap)".

This *shrukh* reminds us of the Hindu belief in the law of *karma* according to which our actions - good and bad - bring forth the results that determine our future destiny in the lives to come. Obviously, the *shrukh* cautions us to refrain from doing evil and, instead, perform virtuous deeds. For a Muslim, the reward of good actions performed is promised as his or her entry into "heaven" after death. The Hindu belief, however, goes a step further and envisages man's deliverance from the cycle of births and rebirths through *nishkaam karma* (disinterested pursuit of action) backed up by self-knowledge - that consists in seeing the witnessing self as not involved in any activity. The *shrukh* in question, as it is worded, appeals to both Kashmiri Muslims and Hindus in spite of their divergent thinking on man's ultimate goal: as the attainment of "heaven" and *mokhsha* (liberation from the cycle of births and rebirths) respectively.

Nunda Rishi had firm belief in the oneness of God even as a youngster and looked upon the realization of this truth as the end of all knowledge. In the *shrukh* that follows, the Sheikh reaffirms what he

had meant to convey as a boy through his insistence on repeating only the letter *Alif* of the Arabic alphabet and having nothing to do with any of the remaining letters:

If you practise oneness (in life), you'll lose your identity,
Behold how the one shines resplendently!
Neither your intellect nor mind can comprehend this,
My dear, who can drink that deep stream (of knowledge)?

We come to know from these lines of Nunda Rishi's understanding of God's transcendence; he is aware of the limitations of the human mind and intellect as the instruments of higher knowledge: of how difficult it is for the seeker to attain God-realization through self-conquest as the *only* means to this end. The saint-poet is close here to the mystical perception of the Real seen as something beyond phenomena.

Having failed to persuade Nunda Rishi, as a boy, to obtain tuition from the Maulvi, Sodermaji got him engaged as an apprentice to a weaver, but he again disappointed her at the end of the day, having watched the loom involved in the process of weaving. The boy bluntly refused to pick up the trade to earn a living that he was not interested in. He summed up the "message" of the loom in a few *shrukhs*, two of which are reproduced below:

The reed prompts one to listen carefully,
The shuttle cautions us not to trust blindly;
The wooden sandal tells you "shrink in the grave"
My mother sent me to learn weaving (as a craft).

The Sheikh, gifted with innate wisdom, was not satisfied with the explanation offered by the weaver: how the alternate upward and downward movements (closely resembling those of the cyclist working the wheels through his feet on the paddles as we can watch today) help him in accomplishing his task. He drew an esoteric meaning from the working of the loom - the right foot pressing the earth hard and shunning it in the act of moving up and the left doing otherwise, coming back to the Mother Earth. The point is elaborated in this *shrukha* :

NUNDA RISHI: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

Man was born of earth,
Cast out of clay, he got his human frame;
Earth itself is origin of all bounties,
We use earthenware to cook our food,
Life is gone, the body is absorbed into earth again,
And this absorption is for our weal.

The Sheikh further expounds the loom's "mystery" : that the shuttle, resembling man, enters through the gate of birth. As man's "thread of life" is exhausted, he leaves through the gate of death.³

We come across many *shrukhs* that depict the saint-poet as engaged in deep self-introspection. Such *shrukhs* are tinged with melancholy: a sense of frustration pointing to the Sheikh's awareness of the spiritual path being beset with obstacles. And the greatest hurdle on the path is 'doubt' contending with one's faith, that lurks Satan-like within the aspirant's mind. This is hinted at in the following *shrukhs* involving introspection or self-analysis on the part of the spiritual seeker (the persona identifiable invariably with the saint-poet himself) :

What am I to do, my body has wasted away by inches,
My sins have piled up and how can I grow spiritually?
I overate sweet dishes, that turned poisonous for me,
No one else is to blame but myself for my bad plight.

The image of despair and desolation is kept up in the *shrukhs* below. It suggests the psychological condition of the spiritual seeker going through the agony of separation from the Beloved, an experience of extreme spiritual anguish:

I became a victim of love:
A beautiful woman captivated by Cupid,
All my youth I got infatuated with flowers;
I suffered as a mountain buried under snow;
Or as the Wolur (a big lake) lashed by a storm;
I felt miserable as if robbed of all I had,
A dish of fine rice (*volag*) turned for me into chaff and
unhusked grain;
The day lengthened into a year for me, poor Nunda !

A. N. Dhar

The *shrukh* that comes next sounds like a *vaakh* of Lal Ded; it too conveys deep spiritual anguish:

O my little self, hard as a knot in wood,
That wouldn't break however hard I hit it,
O my ego, swollen as a log of wood weighing a hundred
mounds,
Your sins are piling up day and night;

What this conveys in brief is that the ego or little self is unyielding, not pliable. All our efforts to tame it do not succeed. The task of bringing our little self under control is really formidable and a big challenge.

Here is another *shrukh* that reminds us of a Lalla *vaakh*; addressed to God, there is a tone of earnestness and urgency in it :

It is as if I lost my track in a pitch dark forest,
A fool as I am, I forgot *Soham*, 'the sacred word'
That would have served me as a ferryboat;
If you remain aloof unmindful of my plight,
Who else will come to my help?
O God, absolve me of my sins.

The next *shrukh* also has the tone of a Lalla *vaakh*; it is an aphorism that spiritual seekers must value as helpful in *sadhana* :

Life will be out, then only greed will go,
As the two fall apart, the void will emerge;
What you give now will serve you hereafter,
Oh God, absolve me of my sins.

The *shrukh* that follows now has in it a fine blend of spiritual terminology drawn from Arabic (letters of the alphabet) and sacred Muslim names, and from the *shastras*, as used by Lal Ded in several of her *vaakhs* :

Daal got suffixed to *Alif* and *Hai*,
And the *Hai* destroyed my fear;
I focused the sixth sense on the One,
And attained the One - Ahmad minus the letter *meem*:
A treasure of joy for me;

NUNDA RISHI: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

I roamed the six forests through, every inch,
Then, overcoming all obstacles, I felt relieved.

In this *shrukh*, Nunda Rishi brings in three letters of the Arabic alphabet - *Alif*, *Hai* and *Daal*. These three letters, make up the word *Ahad*, a divine name that symbolizes one God. The saint-poet also mentions the letter *meem* which occurs in the word *Ahmad*; if we knock out the English letter *m* from *Ahmad*, corresponding to the letter *meem* of the Arabic alphabet, we get the word *Ahad* that stands for God. The saint-poet also makes an appropriate use of the terms श शिकल (sixth sense) and 'शेयवन' (six forests) which Lalla too has employed in her *vaakhs*. In line with her, as his spiritual predecessor (who had blessed him at his birth), he claims to have attained union with God after negotiating all the six *chakras* (spiritual centres) and making full use of the sixth sense in reaching Him (as Lalla too talks of her union with Shiva).

In the following *shrukh*, Nunda Rishi uses terms and concepts that are crucial to Islamic mysticism involving *Irfaan* (spiritual *gnosis*) and to Kashmir Shaivism of which Lal Ded has been the best exponent as a saint-poet:

I verified the Quoranic teaching "There is no god but God"
And burnt up my little self,
Going beyond the manifest, I meditated on the Eternal,
Thus I attained the Spaceless.

The term लाभकान (the spaceless) used in this *shrukh* is matched by the term प्रकाशस्थान (the Abode of Light), the ultimate goal of *sadhana*, that Lalla claims to have attained in one of her *vaakhs*.

Here is another *shrukh* of Nunda Rishi that merits our attention:

He (God) does not judge you by your ability to argue or examine
ideas,
He marks your present spiritual condition;
Repeat mentally the divine Name with your tongue held against
the palate,
Then the King Swan will be drawn towards the net.

Herein Nunda Rishi uses the Sufi term जिकिर which means chanting the name of God, but he qualifies this by insisting on silent meditation (with one's tongue held against the palate). This corresponds to the practice of *ajapa gayatri* or repetition of the *gayatri mantra* without chanting or whispering it as followed in some forms of yogic meditation (the tongue held against the palate). The other term used is राजुहोज (king swan) that we find in Lalla *vaakh* too mentioned as राजुहंस and Lalla speaks of her spiritual goal attained through हंसुं गथ (The Way of the Swan). What the two saints claim to have attained through their spiritual practice is the ultimate goal in the shape of union with God.

Let us look at the following *shrukh* that speaks of the saint-poet Nunda Rishi's deep spiritual distress:

My fair body got stained with dirt,
The bird (I cherished) deserted the garden;
Midsummer turned into chilly winter for me,
And warmth left my body - the city of the Lord.

This *shrukh* makes use of several images that suggest spiritual drought. Readers familiar with the poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge, on coming across this *shrukh*, will be reminded of the almost analagous themes of the two English poems *Immortality Ode* and *Dejection Ode* involving meditations on the "declining powers of the imagination". The fair body stained, the absence of the song-bird from the garden, the chill of extreme winter and the loss of warmth from the body conceived as the dwelling-place of the Lord - all these images cumulatively present a vivid picture of the saint-poet's state of mind, projecting an important phase of the spiritual journey. In Christian mysticism, this phase is referred to as the "dark night of the soul". And there are corresponding descriptions given in the Hindu and Sufi accounts of the spiritual adventure. In this phase, the mystic experiences loss of joy and cheerfulness; his soul feels pangs of separation from the Beloved. This experience of pain, however, augurs well for the mystic, who has only temporarily lost the joy of "illumination", holding for him an immediate prospect of the unitive experience, i.e., union with God.

NUNDA RISHI: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

The *shrukhs* reproduced below shows Nunda Rishi's knowledge of the Hindu scripture *Ramayana* and his catholicity in making allusions to it to justify his own conduct as a spiritual seeker:

'Nar' (man) begged and so did 'Narayana',
The Lord himself begged with a bowl in his hand;
Rama, the King, begged in Dandakvana,
If the poor ones, we, also beg, wherein lies disgrace?

The two *shrukhs* that follow are comparable to the *vaakhs* of Lal Ded in both content and tone:

Monkeys and apes inhabit the forests,
And rats occupy caves;
Those who cleanse themselves of *one* impurity five times a day,
And lead household lives,
Are the most refined.

One who lies in wait, looking for God at the door,
Will be served nectar by Him with his own hands,
Various are the plays staged, but the Stage-Manager is one,
He prospers who is blessed by Him.

The *shrukhs* of Nunda Rishi show that they have value for the spiritual aspirants across cultures and creeds - as moral sayings and as practical hints on treading the spiritual path. Studying them with loving care must be rewarding for the religiously inclined.

REFERENCES

1. For the biographical details of the saint-poet Nunda Rishi and the authentic text of the *shrukhs* utilized in this paper, I have largely depended upon the source material in the shape of the research-oriented volume titled *Nunda Rishi: Unity in Diversity*, Translated and Introduction by Prof. B.N. Parimoo, J&K Academy of Art, Culture and Languages, Sri nagar, 1984. I have also mainly consulted the same material in connection with my English renditions of the saint-poet's *shrukhs*, at times even adopting the English translations attempted by Prof. Parimoo - a fact I am mentioning here with due acknowledgements to him.
2. See B.N. Parimoo. *Nunda Rishi : Unity in Diversity*, J & K Academy of Art, Culture & Languages, 1984, pp. 19-20.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 34-41.

THE INSCRUTABLE GOD-MAN

G. N. Raina

“Guides seekers even now as he did in his human form”

A mystic tradition has it that a divine government functions and oversees the working of human affairs always without a break with, of course, a change in the personnel from time to time. This, perhaps, explains why we have had a galaxy of avatars and prophets, saints and sages, thinkers and philosophers blessing our mother earth at particular points of time in the history of our planet..if only to guide humanity and put it on the right course.

In the centuries-old spiritual history of the world, we have had Rama establish the rule of moral law, Krishna expound the fundamentals of perennial philosophy, Buddha emphasize the evanescence of the phenomenal world and compassion for the living, Socrates sacrifice his life at the altar of truth, Christ, the Son of God, live, serve and suffer for mankind, Zoroaster incarnate the never-ending duel between vice and virtue, Confucius enunciate the ethical postulates, Mohammed, the spiritual giant of Arabia, teach us the principle of self-surrender to God and Gandhi advocate the concept of non-violence and passive resistance to evil.

While all countries and nations have had their share of great seers and savants, we have had a long array of mystics, faqirs and god-men grace Kashmir, the northern State of India. The names that come to one's mind, among others, are Laleshwari, Nund Rishi, Rupa Bhawani, Rishi Peer, Anandji, Jeevan Sahib, Sati Ded, Kashakak, Nandlal and last but not the least, Bhagwan Gopinathji.

Jagadguru Bhagwan Gopinathji was one of the most eminent saints who have graced the sacred land of India. With his spiritual power, he did a lot of good to spiritual aspirants and house-holders. Though utterly detached he showed much concern for his country and its people.

THE INSCRUTABLE GOD-MAN

Gopinathji was born in a middle-class Kashmiri Pandit family at Bhana Mohalla, Srinagar, Kashmir on 3rd July, 1898. He inherited spiritual fervour from his religious-minded father and mother. Gopinathji was educated only upto the middle standard but had absorbed well whatever he had been taught at school. Due to financial constraints Gopinath was asked to take up some work at the young age of about 15 or 16 and he started working at a local printing press. He, however, gave up that job after three years and ran a grocery shop where he seemed to be absent minded being absorbed in meditation. The noble feature of his youth was his longing to visit the great saints of that time. He regarded lust as the greatest obstacle to self-realisation and it was noticed throughout his later life.

Bhagwan Gopinathji started with a spiritual discipline known as *Panchangaupasana*, i.e. meditating on the five deities-Ganesha, Surya, Narayana, Shiva, and Shakti. Gradually he shifted to *nirgunaupasana*, i.e., meditating on the supreme reality without a form. Finally, in the early 30s, he took to intense *sadhna* (spiritual discipline), shutting himself up in a room. His concentration was so intense and he grew so unaware of his body that a rat nibbled a hole in a heel of his. The *sadhna* cost his body to swell and made him vomit blood sometimes. During his seven year period of *sadhna* he would take no food for long period extending even to six months. Sometimes, however, he would take food in very large quantities. And he came out of his terrible ordeal with the full realisation of the supreme reality. From that time onwards his life was devoted to spreading of his spiritual message all around.

Few among the contemporary saints of Kashmir left as indelible an impression on the minds of the people as Bhagwan Gopinathji. His pre-eminence as a great spiritual master was duly recognized by two his contemporaries, the highly venerated mystics-Kashakak and Nanda Bab, who described him as “the king of the then divine set-up in Kashmir.

The sage led a simple, austere life. He covered himself with anonymity, never moved out of Kashmir and did not deliver any

sermons. But he did work on the minds of his devotees in a very subtle manner and induced spirituality in them by mere touch or by a mere glance or by sharing with them his smoke. Each received his grace according to his/her capacity.

Bhagwanji would often tell seekers of truth that intense personal effort and the grace of Guru were the essential pre-requisites of God-realisation. He believed that surrender at the feet of the Guru was an indication of God's grace. He abhorred lackadaisical form of worship which he thought was like moving under the shade of willow trees. He wanted the seekers of Eternal Truth to bid good-bye to ego and be face to face with reality.

Believer as he was in formless Brahmin, Bhagwanji approved idol worship for a beginner on the spiritual path to the extent it helped an aspirant to realize the Absolute Reality in all its aspects. He would often say that idol worship was like worshipping only effulgence and not the substance of the Sun.

The very nerves of saints like Bhagwan Gopinathji overflow with inexhaustible energy and their hearts pour out a perennial stream of bliss all around. An embodiment of compassion for all those who sought his grace, Bhagwanji has been and continues to be an unfailing source of comfort to the afflicted souls. Men and women, young and old, the educated and the unlettered, the believers and the agnostics would visit him, in and out of season, to receive blessings which would assuage the throbbing pain of their anguished hearts.

A mystic with a healing touch, Bhagwan Gopinathji brought solace to those stricken with malignant diseases. Often, he would give holy ash from his *dhooni* to cure ailments like diabetes, tuberculosis, brain hemorrhage and mental disorders.

Not bound by the limitations of time and space, Bhagwanji has been munificent in answering sincere prayers anywhere anytime. According to Yoga Shastra, perfect masters like Bhagwanji can materialize and dematerialize themselves and move with the velocity of light and utilize the creative light rays in bringing into instant visibility

and physical manifestation. Swami Yogananda, the celebrated author of the *Autobiography of a Yogi*, points out that “a sage who has merged his consciousness with that of the supreme Reality perceives the cosmic essence as light and being free from the three dimensions of space and the fourth one of time, is able to transfer his physical or cosmic form with equal ease through the light rays of earth, water, fire and air.”

In the light of these observations, one can better appreciate and apprehend the following episode in the life of Bhagwan Gopinath. In 1947, he was heard asking in one of his soliloquies: “What is our army doing? Why are they not opening a direct route to Kashmir for Lamas?” And wonder of wonders, the Indian army did set up a direct link with Ladakh in 1948 after taking over Zojilla pass and Kargil. A military police officer connected with this operation was informed by the Front Commander that a mysterious person directed the operations. Later, the said police officer visited Bhagwan Gopinath in Srinagar and confirmed that the saint exactly answered to the description given by the Front Commander.

A significant aspect of his spiritual life was the continuous emission of well-controlled rhythmic vibrations from various parts of his body. None dared disturb him while puffing his smoke with his eyes turned skyward talking as it were to some invisible forces. Though absorbed in his Self most of the time, Bhagwan Gopinathji would come out of the higher plane of consciousness when his attention was drawn and then he would speak a few words and soon return to the same state. Smoking seemed to symbolize the vehicle of his communication with the Divine.

Nothing happening around was hidden from him. On one occasion, as soon as a devotee bowed before Bhagwanji, he asked him, “Why do you come to bow before lumps of muck? We are not chiseled scholars.” The devotee was perplexed for a moment but was quick to understand the import of this apparently uncalled for observation. Only a day earlier the said devotee had visited a scholar-saint who had asked him, “Since when have you started bowing to

lumps of muck?” The scholar had obviously referred to the devotee’s frequent visits to Bhagwanji.

On this part, Bhagwan Gopinath would never deride anyone. In fact, he looked upon all, big or small, rich or poor, alike. There was no Hindu, no Musalman, no Christian for him. He treated all equally irrespective of caste, creed or colour.

On 28 May 1968 Bhagwan Gopinathji left this mortal world for his heavenly abode. Kashmir has produced a galaxy of saints and sages from times immemorial and in recent past we have had a number of them. But few of them have left as indelible an impression on the minds of the people as Bhagwan Gopinathji. After his death, his disciples and devotees set up at Kharyar, Srinagar, an Ashram which was named after him.

There is, however, a very thin line that can be drawn between his life before and after leaving the mortal coil. Bhagwan Gopinathji is as much alive today as he was in flesh and blood, ever steering the course of our lives. While many of us, like the present writer, have had the good fortune of seeing him in the blissful human form, those who did not need not despair for the saint in his astral form has been appearing in dream or in meditation to the genuine spiritual aspirants and guiding them as he did in the case of Philip Simpfendorfer and Raymond Gordon of Australia.

It is not surprising that a mere glance at his portrait gives to the man of faith the feeling of the presence of a Living Reality. Bhagwan Gopinathji seems to talk through his lustrous and penetrating eyes. His angelic countenance takes charge of one’s afflicted heart, as it were and fills it with imperishable bliss and fortitude. Many a devotee who have never seen him in his life-time testify to this mysterious experience.

We are passing through very critical times. Materialism has taken a firm hold over our minds, particularly the young. The moral and spiritual values are on the wane. The need to move from the outer to the inner life, to coordinate the scientific temper and the spiritual approach and to restore the efficacy of our ancient ethical, cultural and

spiritual perspectives, has never been greater than now. And in this task, only the saints like Bhagwan Gopinathji can show us the way, dispel fear from our minds and inculcate in us the much-needed faith and love.

There is no denying the fact Bhagwan Gopinathji has a divine mission to fulfil. He will shed light and illumine the dark patches of our aggrieved souls. Prof. A.N. Dhar is right when he says that the sage today instills in his devotees what is regarded as the 'Bhagwan Consciousness'. It is this consciousness which is bound to transform men and women into good human beings who, in turn would promote peace and work for the well-being of the world at large.

One may recall Bhagwanji's promise to redeem humanity which he revealed to Philip Simpfendorfer of Australia in meditation on February 15, 1978, ten years after the sage had passed into eternity. "In every land, we seek people who will stand like immovable rocks against the dark ocean of destruction. ...we do not interfere with religions. We want the well-being of the world," he said.

The Department of Posts, Government of India issued on 3rd July 1998 a three rupees commemorative postage stamp in honour of Bhagwan Gopinathji on the occasion of his birth centenary. The birth centenary celebrations of this great saint of Kashmir was a momentous occasion to remember the one who belonged to the genre of people who have moulded the spiritual history of mankind. We bow to this great sage, inimitable, and inscrutable who made Kashmir, nay the entire world, proud.



First Day Cover and Commemorative Postage Stamp issued by Department of Posts on 3 July 1998

**MYSTICISM ACROSS CULTURES: STUDIES ON SELECT
POETS AND SAINTS**

By **A.N. Dhar**

Atlantic Publishers, New Delhi, 2002, 206 pp., Rs.450/-

Mysticism can be defined as the pursuit of achieving communion or identity with the ultimate reality, the divine, spiritual truth, or God through direct experience, intuition or insight. A mystic's spiritual experiences and message of universal love lead us towards higher values of compassion, fellowship, truthfulness and selflessness.

India, a land noted for its rich philosophy and spirituality, has had a galaxy of philosophers, sages, poets and thinkers through ages. What mysticism means in essence was long back set forth in clear terms in the *Upanishads*. The *Gita*, which is characteristically a theistic Hindu scripture, mentions throughout the three well-known ways of approach to Reality – *karma*, *bhakti* and *jnana*. These correspond to the spiritual way of life respectively termed practical, devotional and philosophical mysticism by Christian scholars. This parallelism points to the proximity and compatibility between Hindu and Christian mysticism. Sufism, which flourished in Persia as the “mystical dimension of Islam”, found a fertile soil in India. In fact, it interacted with Vedanta and the Bhakti movement alike. The mingling of various faiths and philosophical schools in India thus gave rise to a synthesis which represents our composite culture. This synthesis is ultimately traceable to the universal basis of mysticism in the East and the West.

Studies devoted to individual saints and mysticism, and to the body of mystical poetry across cultures and religions, can be depended upon to explore the universal dimensions and bearings of mysticism articulated through language in its literary form. That is precisely what the present author has attempted to achieve through the studies undertaken in the chapters that follow. Such studies not only complement but also reinforce the contribution of the scholars and intellectuals engaged in “inter-religious” dialogue.

BOOK REVIEW

It is in this context that the book under review assumes importance as it explores the contribution of the leading mystics of Kashmir, besides examining the vital links between mysticism and poetry. Prof. A.N. Dhar, who is well known as a scholar of English language and literature, established his credentials of scholarship on mysticism through his book *Mysticism in Literature*, which was published in 1985. Thus he has been in a better position to take a balanced approach by relating the Western and Eastern experiences, as are analysed in the present book.

Whereas the present study is essentially devoted to the study of the contribution of eminent Kashmiri mystic poets like Lal Ded, Nunda Rishi, Shams Faqir, Zinda Kaul, Swami Govind Kaul and Bhavani 'Bhagyavaan' Pandit, it also seeks to make a comparative study taking into account the mystic expressions of the British poets - Coventry Patmore and T.S. Eliot and also the 16th Century Spanish poet, St. John of the Cross. The study makes an indepth analysis of their selected verses in order to highlight the universal bearings of mysticism, expressed poetically across cultures and faiths. The author has also included a chapter "Sri Krishna and the Way of Love" in view of its relevance to the main theme of the book.

The present writer had two difficulties to cope with: (i) to attempt acceptable English translation of the bulk of Kashmiri verses used by the mystics and to adopt or modify the translations that were available and (ii) to transliterate the verses into the *Devnagri* script found convenient for use in view of its being very phonetic (in preference to any other script). He has managed to overcome the difficulties to an appreciable extent.

The Kashmiri mystics-whether it is Lal Ded and Nund Rishi of the medieval times and Bhagwan Gopi Nath in contemporary times, preached the virtues of being selfless, compassionate and truthfulness. Knowing no barriers of caste, creed or religion, these yogis and masters were universal in appeal and outlook. When the world today is rife with selfish materialistic attitudes, leading to social and political conflicts at various levels-local, national, regional, global – one needs

BOOK REVIEW

to revisit the wisdom and knowledge expounded by these mystics. The Kashmiri yogis and Rishis brought the philosophy of mysticism and the message of universal love, compassion and brotherhood to the common masses thereby shaping the peculiarity of Kashmiri values, ideals and civilisational ethos. The *vaakhhs* of Lal Ded, *shrukhs* of Nund Rishi, sayings and verses of mystic poets like Swami Govind Kaul, Shams Faqir, Zinda Kaul and Bhawani Bhagyavaan, which have fed and nurtured the Kashmiri society for generations, form the edifice of the Kashmiri ethos and culture, generally termed as *Kashmiriyat*. It is this rich and indigenous heritage which needs to be restored in its original form and content.

K. Warikoo

Religion, Culture and Harmony in South Asia

(Seminar Report)

The Himalayan Research and Cultural Foundation in association with Interfaith International organised a Seminar on the theme ***Religion, Culture and Harmony in South Asia*** at Palais des Nations, Geneva on 23 March 2007. The HRCF documentary film on *Shrines and Pilgrimages of Kashmir* which was screened on this occasion, was highly appreciated by the audience as an objective and a welcome break from the undesirable rhetoric. Prof. K. Warikoo, Prof. Riyaz Punjabi, Prof. Tatiana Shaumian of Moscow and Sardar Shaukat Ali Kashmiri were the main speakers.

Prof. K. Warikoo while giving a background of the work of Himalayan Foundation, discussed in detail the role of religion and culture for promoting social harmony. He stated that “In this era of globalisation and liberalisation of economy, coupled with the invasion of modern media (both print and visual) with deep western influence, it becomes all the more important to have a look at the role of religion, culture and traditions in promoting harmony, peaceful coexistence and peace. As against Samuel Huntington’s thesis *Clash of Civilisations*, we believe that it is inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue, which can help in reconciling and resolving inter-religious, ethnic, sectarian, clan, inter-cultural and regional conflicts.”

“The sublime and spiritual ethos which does not recognise religious, ethnic, regional barriers, alone can guarantee respect for cultural and ethnic identities. Every religion and culture visualises in one form or another submission of an individual before the creator, whether one is a believer or a rationalist. We being the citizens of a world abounding with nature’s beauty and human works of heritage, need to have respect for this creation. Mutual respect for and tolerance of different cultures is a necessary pre-requisite for restoration and strengthening peace and harmony.”

“South Asia is home to multiple religions, languages and dialects, values and beliefs, traditions and practices, and an unending chain of

ascetics, mystics, Rishis and Sufis. The people of South Asia, particularly the weavers and artisans, musicians and dancers, sculptors and architects, painters and poets have made their contributions in enriching the variegated heritage of the region. It becomes our duty to see that this repository of heritage and tradition not only remains intact but also blossoms.”

“In the prevailing atmosphere of conflict, terrorism, hate, resurgence of ethnic and regional identities, impact of modernisation and materialism, it would be relevant to recall the famous UNESCO Declaration of 1945, which pronounced that “since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed”. The Declaration further stated, “That peace based exclusively upon political and economic arrangements of governments would not be a peace which could secure the unanimous, lasting and sincere support of the peoples of the world, and that peace must be founded, if it is not to fail, upon the intellectual and moral solidarity of mankind.” So there is the need to restore and preserve the indigenous composite social and cultural edifice of Kashmir.

Prof. Warikoo pointed out that the State of Jammu and Kashmir is marked by the heterogeneity of its physiographic, ethnic-religious, linguistic and cultural characteristics. This repository of heritage and tradition should remain intact and bloom. Revival of indigenous culture, language, literature, festivals and traditions will help in restoring this composite socio-cultural ethos.

Prof. Riyaz Punjabi stated that religion has resurged as a powerful phenomenon in the post-cold war world. The collapse of communism and disintegration of Soviet Union has enhanced the potential of religion in the social lives of people. Therefore, the relevance of religion in the social and political life of people cannot be undermined.

“Religion needs to be reinterpreted and reconstructed in today’s world. It is well recognised that the dogmatic and literal interpretations of religion reduce it to an exclusive entity in which cultural fabric is kept

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completely out of it. This perspective heightens the prospects of clashes and confrontations. However, the inclusive interpretations of religion accommodates culture and historical traditions leading to greater social harmony and human brotherhood. The inclusive perspective of religion bases its interpretation on one and common 'human spirit' which is shared by humanity across the world. Thus emphasis on 'unity of spirit' is the key to harmony."

"The South Asian view of religion is premised on this doctrine of spirituality. The Sufi, Rishi and Bhakti orders incorporating Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim traditions and practices are highly popular in the region. Like other parts of the world there is a contest between the literal and liberal perspectives of religion in the region. However, at the people's level, the liberal and inclusive perspective is highly popular. The close cultural interaction which has gained a high momentum between the people in Indian Punjab and Pakistani Punjab provides an illustration to the point. In conclusion, cultural orientation of religion binds people together and enhances the levels of harmony. The most striking illustration of religion, culture and harmony connectivity is to be found in Kashmir identity popularly known as *Kashmiriyat*. This connectivity is reflected in the Rishi order of Kashmir which incorporates the traditions of Shaivism, Buddhism and Islam. As you have witnessed in the film, the Hindu or Islamic traditions are exclusively Kashmiri. These traditions have been accepted and recognised at the level of people."

Prof. Tatiana Shaumian, Director, Centre of Indian Studies, Moscow expressed her appreciation and happiness over the HRCF film on *Shrines and Pilgrimages of Kashmir*, as it portrayed the positive aspects of rich indigenous and composite cultural heritage of Kashmir. She was critical of those video films, which only depicted violence in Kashmir, as a medium of their propaganda. Prof. Shaumian hoped that peace will be restored in Kashmir so that its heritage, traditions, customs and harmonious social life blossom once again as in the past.

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Sardar Shaukat Kashmiri, Chairman (UNKP), spoke about the rich harmonious tradition in South Asia, including Jammu and Kashmir. He expressed happiness over the true depiction of the *Kashmiriyat* through the HRCF film. He was critical of the obscurantist and fundamentalist forces supported by Pakistan, which created disorder, conflict and turmoil in Kashmir. He stressed that inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue is necessary for reconciliation and resolution of the problem. The sublime ethos of *Kashmiriyat*, based on the recognition of rich, ancient and composite cultural heritage, needs to be resurrected.



From left: Sardar Shaukat Kashmiri, Prof. K. Warikoo and Prof. Riyaz Punjabi



A Section of the Audience



From left: Prof. Tatiana Shaumian and other speakers

**HRCF Documentary *Shrines and Pilgrimages of Kashmir*
Screened at International Film Festival (June 2007)**

Kashmir has been compared with paradise, not only because nature has bestowed this part of earth with all its bounties of beauty and splendour but also because it holds a unique position in the world owing to its rich heritage and centuries old tradition of composite culture and mutual co-existence. The divine sacred places that abound in every nook and corner of Kashmir are living examples of its deep civilizational roots. Divinity flows from its lakes, waterfalls, springs, snow-clad mountains, flowers and majestic chinars. The religious shrines located in every nook and corner of Kashmir valley are also significant in the sense that through these, an effort has been made to preserve and conserve natural resources for environmental sustainability. The pious and sacred places of pilgrimage have deep roots in the socio-religious traditions of Kashmiris. These are an inseparable part of their cultural heritage. Kashmir has been a cradle of spiritual and cultural rejuvenation since time immemorial. The shrines and holy pilgrimage centres located at every nook and corner of the valley are places of devotion and reverence for everyone. They are not only a great source of spiritual inspiration but also the main strength of their faith and devotion.

However during the more than 18 years of armed militancy in Kashmir, most of the Hindu and Sufi shrines have been damaged and desecrated by Islamic terrorists, thus posing a threat to the centuries old tradition of peaceful mutual co-existence. For instance a place of reverence for all Kashmiris irrespective of religion, class, creed or colour, the shrine of Charar-i-Shrief was desecrated by religious bigots in the year 1995. Mast Gul, a dreaded terrorist based in Pakistan, set this holiest of holy shrines on fire in a bid to wean away Kashmiris from their centuries old tradition of praying at holy shrines, which is forbidden in the Wahabi Islam, preferred by these zealots. However, Charar-i-Sharif was rebuilt and holds the same exalted place among Kashmiri masses that it used to hold before its desecration by terrorists. Thousands of hands are raised in prayers every day even today in this

shrine and hundreds of lips seek the blessings of the revered saint.

The documentary *Shrines and Pilgrimages of Kashmir*, produced by the Himalayan Research and Cultural Foundation, an NGO in Special Consultative Status with ECOSOC, United Nations, highlights the glorious tradition of religious tolerance in Kashmir. The focus of the documentary is to showcase the holy places of Kashmir that aim at promoting the cause of religious tolerance and environmental sustainability. The film was made in very difficult circumstances on location in remote corners of the valley of Kashmir. The documentary was screened at International Film Festival for the first time held in Jammu and Kashmir State in June 2007 and later will be shown in other parts of the country and abroad. The documentary has been directed by Mr. Ravinder Kaul, a well known media personality and theatre and film director of Jammu.

The documentary was selected for screening at the Film Festival by a team of experts of Films Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting in New Delhi and later sent for certification by the Central Board of Film Certification, Mumbai which passed it without any cuts. The documentary highlights the ethos of composite cultural heritage and religious tolerance of Kashmir. Most major shrines and places of pilgrimage in Kashmir have been highlighted in the documentary. The destruction of Hindu and Sufi shrines in Kashmir after the onset of militancy also gets adequate coverage in the film. A rare footage of Sharda Temple in Pakistan occupied Kashmir has been included in the film for the first time.

The concept and research material for the documentary has been provided by Prof. K. Warikoo, Director, Central Asian Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi and Secretary General (Hon'y), Himalayan Research and Cultural Foundation- an eminent expert on Central Asia and Western Himalayan region, including Kashmir. The script of the documentary in English has been written by well known author and filmmaker Dr. Sohan Kaul. Music is a very significant ingredient of the documentary and has been designed by noted music director Kuldip Sapru.

Kashmir Images

THURSDAY JUNE 14, 2007

Kaul's documentary screened in Film Festival

ANN
JAMMU, JUNE 13

For the first time in the history of Jammu & Kashmir a documentary made by Jammu based film director has been selected for screening at an International Film Festival.

The documentary titled 'Shrines & Pilgrimage of Kashmir' was screened at the first ever International Film Festival being held in Jammu & Kashmir, which is underway at Abhinav Theatre here.

The documentary has been directed by Ravinder Kaul, a well known media personality and theater and film director of Jammu. The film has been produced by Himalayan

Research & Cultural Foundation in special consultative status with ECOSOC United Nations for Department of Culture, Government of India.

The documentary was selected for screening at the Film Festival by a team of experts of Film Division, Ministry of Information & Broadcasting, New Delhi and later sent for certification by the Central Board of Film Certification, Mumbai which passed it without any cuts.

The documentary highlights the ethos of composite cultural heritage and religious tolerance of Kashmir.

Most major shrines and places of pilgrimage in Kashmir have been high-

lighted in the documentary, besides, the destruction of Hindu and Sufi shrines in Kashmir after the onset of militancy has also been highlighted by the director and includes the shorts of Sharda Temple in Pakistan occupied Kashmir (PoK).

The concept and research material for the documentary has been provided by Prof. K. Wankoo of Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), an expert on Central Asian and Western Himalayan region including Kashmir. The script of the documentary in English has been written by well known author and filmmaker, Dr. Sohan Kaul, while the music has been designed by noted music director Kuldeep Sapru.



THURSDAY, JUNE 14, 2007

daily
Excelsior

Ravinder Kaul's documentary features in global festival

Excelsior Correspondent

JAMMU, June 13: A documentary made by a Jammu based film director has been chosen for screening at an International Film Festival for the first time.



The documentary titled "Shrines and Pilgrimages of Kashmir" is being screened for the first time ever in an International Film Festival being held in this State.

The Documentary has been directed by Ravinder Kaul, a well known media personality and theatre and film director of Jammu, the film has been produced by Himalayan Research and Cultural Foundation, an NGO in special consultative status with ECOSOC, United Nations, for

Department of Culture, Government of India.

The documentary was selected for screening at the Film Festival by a team of experts of Films Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting in New Delhi and later sent for certification by the Central Board of Film Certification, Mumbai, which passed it without any cuts.

The documentary highlights the ethos of composite cultural heritage and religious tolerance of Kashmir. The destruction of Hindu and Sufi shrines in Kashmir after the onset of militancy also gets adequate coverage in the film. A rare footage of Sharda Temple in PoK has been included in the film for the first time.

The concept and research material has been provided by Prof K. Warikoo of JNU, an expert on Central Asia and Western Himalayan region including Kashmir. The Script of documentary in English has been written by well known author and film-maker Dr Sohan Kaul. Music is a key ingredient of the documentary and has been designed by noted music director Kuldip Sapru. The documentary will be screened at Abhinav Theatre on June 14 at 6.30 pm.



Excelsior/Ashok
 Ravinder Kaul and Dharminder Kohli receiving citations from Mahesh Chopra, Director, Jammu Doordarshan and Dr Rafeeq Masoodi, Secretary, J&K Academy of Art, Culture and Languages in Jammu on Tuesday.

International Film Festival citations given away

Excelsior Correspondent

JAMMU, July 17: Citations were given away here today to two well known media personalities with regard to their films selected for participation in the first ever International Film Festival organised in Jammu and Srinagar last month by the Films Division, Government of India, in collaboration with the J&K Academy of Art, Culture and Languages. The citations were handed over to Ravinder Kaul and Dharminder Kohli by Mahesh Chopra, Director, Jammu Doordarshan in a glittering function organised in the K.L.Saigal auditorium.

Ravinder Kaul received the award for directing the film 'Shrines and Pilgrimages of Kashmir'. The film was produced for the Department of Culture, Government of India by Himalayan Research and Cultural Foundation, an NGO in special consultative status with Economic and Social Council, United Nations. The research and concept of the film was by Prof. K. Warikoo and the script was written by Dr. Sohan Koul. Sahaba Bhat was the Production Controller of the film and Kuldip Sapru was the Music Director. The film was edited by Taranjit Singh.

Dharminder Kohli received the

citation for his film 'Saza Begunahi Ki'. The film was produced and directed by him under the banner of D.K.Films. The editing and camera for the film was handled by Mohit Garg and PK.Raina was the script writer. Music in this film also was given by Kuldip Sapru.

Speaking on the occasion, Mahesh Chopra congratulated both the awardees and said that it was a matter of pride for Jammu to have two films selected for international film festival amidst stiff competition.

Dr. Rafeeq Masoodi, Secretary, J&K Academy of Art, Culture and Languages said that the first ever international film festival organised in Jammu and Srinagar had been a resounding success. The participation of artistes and the public at large in the festival in Jammu as well as Srinagar had been very encouraging, he said. He particularly expressed happiness over the encouraging feedback of the viewers about the films made by filmmakers of the State and said that similar Festivals would be organised in the State at regular intervals in future.

Himalayan and Central Asian Studies

(Quarterly journal being published regularly since 1997)

Editor : Prof. K. Warikoo
Assistant Editor : Dr. Sharad K. Soni

1997

Vol.1 No.1 (April - June 1997)

Editor's Page	<i>K. Warikoo</i>	1-3
Indo-Pakistan Trade: Problems and Prospects	<i>I.N. Mukherji</i>	4-29
Central Asia : National, Regional and Global Aspects of Security	<i>O. Kasenov</i>	30-50
Architecture of the Jhelum Waterfront-Srinagar : Images and Impressions	<i>Neerja Tiku</i>	51-72
Ghulam Rasool Santosh : A Tribute-The Triadic Heart of Shiva	<i>Shantiveer Kaul</i>	73-82
HRCF File		
UNEP Sasakawa Environment Award (1996) for Dr. T.N. Khoshoo	<i>T.N. Kaul</i>	83-85
BOOK REVIEWS		
P.N. Pushp and K. Warikoo, eds; <i>Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh: Linguistic Predicament</i>	<i>T.N. Kaul</i>	86-87
M. Mohanty and A.K. Singh, eds; <i>Foreign Aid and NGOs.</i>	<i>Sharad K. Soni</i>	88-90

HRCF FILE

Vol.1 No.2 (July - September 1997)

Editor's Page	<i>K. Warikoo</i>	1-2
The Afghan Factor in Pakistan's India Policy	<i>Marvin Weinbaum</i>	3-17
Human Rights Situation in Afghanistan	<i>Choong-Hyun Paik</i>	18-32
Pakistan's Geopolitical Game Plan in Afghanistan	<i>Jyotsana Bakshi</i>	33-62
The Afghanistan Crisis and its Impact on South Asia	<i>Uma Singh</i>	63-78
United Nations Commission on Human Rights (53rd Session): A Report	<i>Sharad K. Soni</i>	79-92

Vol.1 No.3 (October - December 1997)

Editor's Page	<i>K. Warikoo</i>	1-3
Indian Foreign Policy in the Aftermath of the Cold War: Strategic Challenges	<i>L.L. Mehrotra</i>	4-22
The Nature and Consciousness of the People of Kashmir	<i>S. Bhat</i>	23-38
Uzbekistan on the Threshold of the Twenty-first Century	<i>Islam Karimov</i>	39-65
Central Asia on the Threshold of the Twenty-first Century	<i>Turkkaya Ataov</i>	66-75
HRCF File		
Central Asia on the Threshold of the 21st Century (<i>Seminar Report</i>)		76-79
Uzbekistan on the Threshold of 21st Century and Threats to Regional Security and Stability		80-85

1998**Vol.2 No.1 (January-March 1998)**

Editor's Page	<i>K. Warikoo</i>	1-2
Human Rights and Terrorism: An International Law Perception	<i>V.S. Mani</i>	3-31
Azerbaijan in the Threshold of Post-Soviet Changes	<i>P.L. Dash</i>	32-48
Hans Christian Ostro: A Tribute		49-76
UN Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities (49th Session): A Report	<i>Sharad K. Soni</i>	77-83
DOCUMENT		84-87
Resolutions/Declaration Adopted by the United Nations Commission on Human Rights on Hostage-Taking		
BOOK REVIEW		
S.P. Sinha, ' <i>Jackals</i> ' of the <i>Himalayas: Kashmir Hostages</i> ' Mystery	<i>Sharad K. Soni</i>	88-89

Vol.2 No.2 (April-June 1998)

Editor's Page	<i>K. Warikoo</i>	1-2
Turkey and ECO	<i>Gareth M. Winrow</i>	3-29
Advantages of City States for Cultural and Social Development within Wider Areas	<i>Nick Constantopoulos</i>	30-34
Islamist Mercenaries and Terrorism in Kashmir	<i>K. Warikoo</i>	35-57
United Nations Commission on Human Rights (54th Session): A Report	<i>Sharad K. Soni</i>	58-75
HRCF File		
HRCF Calls for Stoppage of Mercenary Activities in South and Central Asia (<i>Seminar Report</i>)		76-78

HRCF FILE

DOCUMENTS 79-92

- Resolution Adopted by the UN General Assembly on Mercenaries (4 December 1989)
- Use of Mercenaries as a means of impeding the exercise of the Right of Peoples to Self-Determination
- The Use of Mercenaries as a means of violating Human Rights and impeding the exercise of the Right of Peoples to Self Determination

BOOK REVIEW

D.P. Kumar, *Kashmir: Pakistan's Proxy War* *Sharad K. Soni* **93-94**

Vol.2 No.3-4 (July-December 1998)

KYRGYZSTAN SPECIAL

Editor's Page	<i>K. Warikoo</i>	1-3
Kyrgyzstan on the Eve of the 21st Century: Principal Trends of Reforms	<i>Askar Akaev</i>	4-25
Administrative Reforms in the Kyrgyz Republic: Problems and Prospects	<i>K.M. Jumaliev</i>	26-45
India and Kyrgyzstan in Constructive Co-operation	<i>M. Imanaliev</i>	46-50
Formation of Ethno-Political Territory and Boundaries of Kyrgyzstan	<i>N. Karimbekova</i>	51-66
Kyrgyzstan on the Great Silk Route: Cultural Interaction with India	<i>V. Vorapoeva</i> and <i>V. Goryacheva</i>	67-82
On the Trail of Silk Route: Travel Experiences in Kyrgyzstan	<i>K. Warikoo</i>	83-96
Manaschi on the Yenisei in the Narration of Indian Historian of the XIII Century	<i>V. Ploskikh</i>	97-100
The Kyrgyz Uprising of 1916	<i>O. Ibraimov</i>	101-110

HRCF FILE

The Political Culture in Kyrgyzstan: Trends towards Democratisation	<i>A. Dononbaev</i>	111-122
Ozone Holes above Central Asia	<i>S.J. Toktomyshev</i> and <i>V.K. Semyonov</i>	123-137
About the Philosophy of the Mountains	<i>A. Kakeev</i>	139-146
Problems and Ways of Providing Human Activities in the Mountains of Central Asia	<i>A.A. Aidaraliev</i>	147-155

1999**Vol.3 No.1 (January - March 1999)**

Editor's Page	<i>K. Warikoo</i>	1-3
Towards a New Strategic Partnership: India, China, Russia	<i>T.N. Kaul</i>	4-14
Bridging the Himalayan Gap: Viewing Sino-Indian Ties in Long-term Perspective	<i>Swaran Singh</i>	15-40
Socio-Economic Situation of Uighurs in Xinjiang (China)	<i>Sheripjan Nadirov</i>	41-52
India and China: Unknown Aspects in Cultural Intercourse	<i>Priyadarshi Mukherji</i>	53-62
Gandhi through the Chinese Eyes : The Echoes of Gandhian Movement in China	<i>B.R. Deepak</i>	63-88

Vol.3 No.2 (April - June 1999)

Editor's Page	<i>K. Warikoo</i>	1-2
Shared Ecology of the Himalaya	<i>B.K. Roy Burman</i>	3-38
Eco-Cultural Heritage of Kashmir	<i>K. Warikoo</i>	39-49
Crisis of the Aral Sea	<i>A. Nurushev</i>	50-58
Tradition of Water Harvesting in Changar	<i>Piyoosh Rautela</i>	59-69

HRCF FILE

UN Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities (50th Session): A Report *Sharad K. Soni* **70-93**

Book Review

Robert E., Goodin, Ed., *Dr. P.C. Sinha* **94-95**
The Politics of the Environment

Vol.3 No.3-4 (July - December 1999) KARGIL SPECIAL

Editor's Page *K. Warikoo* **1-2**

Politico-Military Dimensions of Operation Vijay *Vinod Anand* **3-27**

Kargil Conflict-View from Kashmir *K. Warikoo* **28-43**

Kargil Conflict-1999 : Human Dimension and Displacement of Population *Bupinder Zutshi* **44-64**

Kargil Conflict : An Eye Witness Account *Paul Beersmans* **65-75**

Kargil Conflict : International Law Perspective *V. S. Mani* **76-86**

US Approach to Kargil Conflict *C. Mahapatra* **87-96**

China's Response to Kargil Conflict *Swaran Singh* **97-116**

Kargil and Beyond *A. K. Ray* **117-125**

HRCF FILE **126-162**

Kargil Conflict: Dimensions and Responses
(Seminar Report)

OPINION

Under Cover of Night *Ghulam Hasnain* **163-167**

2000**Vol.4 No.1 (January - March 2000)**

Editor's Page	<i>K. Warikoo</i>	1-2
Tribal Gujjars of Jammu and Kashmir	<i>K. Warikoo</i>	3-27
Gujjar Lok : Ethno-cultural Heritage of Gujjars of Jammu and Kashmir (<i>Seminar Report</i>)		28-39
Tibetan Rolmo Logarhythmic Structure in Korean Music	<i>Chun In Pyong</i>	41-58

HRCF FILE

T.N. Kaul : A Tribute		59-91
T.N. Kaul : A Homage	<i>Alexander Kadakin</i>	66-67
T.N. Kaul <i>A.K. Damodaran</i>		68-70
Late Shri T.N. Kaul	<i>D.N. Munshi</i>	71-73
He leaves a Void	<i>Abby gail</i>	74-78
Religious Fundamentalism is a very Dangerous Trend (Interview with T.N. Kaul)	<i>Sharad K. Soni</i>	79-82
T.N. Kaul Remembered		83-91

Vol. 4 No.2 (April-June 2000)

Editor's Page	<i>K. Warikoo</i>	1-2
Kargil -Deterrence Revisited	<i>Nirmal Jindal</i>	3-15
Indo-Pak Armed conflict in Kargil: Causes and Consequences	<i>Tatiana Shaumian</i>	16-34
UN Commission on Human Rights (55 th session): A Report	<i>Sharad K. Soni</i>	35-71
Child Labour in Carpet Industry of Kashmir	<i>Ali Mohd. Rather</i>	72-77

HRCF FILE

Child Labour and their Rehabilitation : Some Issues (<i>Seminar Report</i>)	<i>Ali Mohd. Rather</i>	78-98
--	-------------------------	--------------

HRCF FILE

Vol.4 No.3-4 (July-December 2000)

ISLAM SPECIAL

Editor's Page	<i>K. Warikoo</i>	1-2
Islamic Fundamentalism in Central Asia: An Appraisal	<i>Devendra Kaushik</i>	3-23
The Dynamics of Aggressive Islamic Fundamentalism in Central and South Asia: Emerging Challenges	<i>Vijay Kapoor</i>	24-31
Muslim Separatism in Xinjiang	<i>K. Warikoo</i>	32-55
Islam in the Foreign Policy of Pakistan	<i>Kalim Bahadur</i>	56-65
The Jamaat-e-Islami and Pakistan's Foreign Policy	<i>Frederic Grare</i>	66-104
Taliban View of Jihad and the Islamic Precepts	<i>Sultan Shahin</i>	105-121
Fundamentalism in Bangladesh Currents and Cross-Currents, 1972-1999	<i>Abanti Adhikari</i>	122-141
Jamaat-e-Islami of Kashmir: A Background	<i>S. Shah</i>	142-150
UN Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights (51st Session): A Report	<i>Sharad K. Soni</i>	151-180
Book Review		
<i>Kashmir in the Crossfire</i> by Victoria Schofield	<i>Subhash Kak</i>	181-185

2001

Vol.5 No.1 (January - March 2001)

MONGOLIA SPECIAL

Editor's Page	<i>Sharad K. Soni</i>	1-3
Buddhism in Mongolia	<i>Lokesh Chandra</i>	4-14
Connections between Indian, Tibetan and Sanskrit Scripts	<i>G. Tsend Ayush</i>	15-18
Mongolia-India Relations : Some Perspectives	<i>O. Nyamdavaa</i>	19-32
Mongolia, Russia and China: The Geopolitical Perspective	<i>G. Tumurchuluun</i>	33-44
Post-Communist Transition in Mongolia	<i>Baabar Batbayar</i>	45-54
Mongolia's Foreign Policy Priorities	<i>Sharad K. Soni</i>	55-66
Mongolia, New Central Asia and India	<i>Ts. Batbayar</i>	67-79
Mongolia and its Third Neighbours	<i>D. Bayarkhuu</i>	80-90
Documents		91-101
India-Mongolia Joint Declaration		
Speech by the President of Mongolia		
Speech by the President of India		

Vol. 5 No.2 (April - June 2001)

AUREL STEIN SPECIAL

Editor's Page	<i>P.N. Kachru</i>	1-3
Aurel Stein: A Tribute	<i>Lokesh Chandra</i>	5-11
Stein's Search for Codex Archetypus	<i>P.N. Kachru</i>	12-16
Stein in Lahore	<i>Margit Koves</i>	17-22
Csoma Kőrös: Himalayan Hermit or Nationalistic Activist?	<i>P.J. Marczell</i>	23-53

HRCF FILE

Sir Aurel Stein and Kashmiri Scholars	<i>S.N. Pandita</i>	54-60
In Memoriam: Pandit Govind Kaul (1846-1899)	<i>Aurel Stein</i>	61-77

HRCF FILE

Cultural Heritage of Indian Himalayas (Seminar Report)	<i>G.L. Badam</i>	78-97
---	-------------------	--------------

Vol. 5 No.3-4 (July - December 2001)***NORTH EAST SPECIAL***

Editor's Page	<i>Mahendra P. Lama</i>	1-5
Mountain Commons, Underdevelopment and Socio-Political Concerns in the North East : A Policy Perspective	<i>Mahendra P. Lama</i>	6-32
Migration, Identity and Conflict in the North East: The Case of Assam	<i>Anindita Dasgupta</i>	33-53
The Origin and Impact of Small Wars and Insurgencies in the North East	<i>Binalakshmi Nepram</i>	54-95
Whither D G H C : Political Fisticuffs and After	<i>Dhrubajyoti Bhaumik</i> and <i>D.K. Sarkar</i>	64-101
The Toy Train Cynosure of Darjeeling	<i>R. P. Lama</i>	102-106
Food Culture in the Eastern Himalayas	<i>J. P. Tamang</i>	107-118
The United Nations Commission on Human Rights (56th Session) : A Report	<i>Sharad K. Soni</i>	119-164
Book Review		
<i>Human Rights and Insurgency: The North-East India</i>	<i>Sharad K. Soni</i>	166-167

2002

Vol.6 No.1 (January - March 2002)

AFGHANISTAN SPECIAL

Editor's Page	<i>K. Warikoo</i>	1-3
Taliban and the Afghanistan Problem, 1996-2001: Role of the UN	<i>C.S.R. Murthy</i>	4-34
Advent of the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan: US Policy Examined	<i>Apratim Mukarji</i>	35-55
Strategic Significance of Afghanistan after the Cold War	<i>Umashankar</i>	56-77

HRCF FILE

The Afghanistan Crisis : Problems and Prospects of Peace (<i>Seminar Report</i>)	<i>Manmath N. Singh</i>	78-105
---	-------------------------	---------------

Vol. 6 No.2 (April - June 2002)

WATER SPECIAL

Editor's Page	<i>K. Warikoo</i>	1-2
Indus Water Treaty: View from Kashmir	<i>K. Warikoo</i>	3-22
Towards an Optimum Management of Himalayan Waters	<i>J.K. Ray</i>	23-57
Resource Exploitation for Mutual Benefit: India-Nepal Cooperation to Harness Water Resources	<i>Sangeeta Thapliyal</i>	58-76
The River Jhelum Through the Ages	<i>Khalid Bashir Ahmad</i>	77-89
Tawis' of Jammu	<i>P.K. Kaul</i>	90-94

HRCF FILE

Vol. 6 No.3-4(July - December 2002)

GENDER PERSPECTIVES

Editor's Page	<i>K. Warikoo</i>	1-2
Kashmiri Women Down the Ages: A Gender Perspective	<i>Krishna Misri</i>	3-27
Women in Jammu and Kashmir: Status and Situational Analysis of Displaced Widows	<i>Bupinder Zutshi</i>	28-40
Livelihood and Mountain Women: A Case Study of Gender Tourism in Garhwal Himalayas	<i>Mondira Dutta Z.</i>	41-62
Need to Reform Muslim Personal Law: A Gender Perspective	<i>Z.M. Shahid Siddiqi</i>	63-68
Violence against Women in Pakistan: Rape and 'Honour Killings'	<i>Savita Pande</i>	69-83
Women and Sustainability in the Karakoram Himalayas	<i>Farida Azhar-Hewitt</i>	84-89
Political Participation of Women in Bangladesh	<i>Farhana Hashem</i>	90-103
Women of Culture in the Shaping of 20th Century China	<i>Priyadarsi Mukherji</i>	104-124
The Gendered and Geographical Impact of Resettlement on Li Minority Community, Hainan Island, China	<i>Jody F. Decker</i>	125-141
UN Sub-Commission on Human Rights (52nd Session) : A Report	<i>Sharad K. Soni</i>	142-179
HRCF FILE		
Rare International Honour for Prof. Warikoo	<i>Ravinder Kaul</i>	180-182

2003**Vol. 7 No.1 (January - March 2003)****JAMMU & KASHMIR ELECTIONS, 2002**

Editor's Page	<i>K. Warikoo</i>	1-3
Jammu and Kashmir Elections: Ballot Prevails over Bullet	<i>D.N. Dhar</i>	4-79
Empowering the People: Kashmir Elections 2002	<i>Syed Nazir Gilani</i>	20-41
International Response to the Kashmir Elections 2002	<i>Tanya Mohan</i>	42-55
J&K Legislative Assembly Elections, 2002: An Eyewitness Report	<i>Paul Beersmans</i>	56-73
Pakistan Elections 2002: "Roadmap to Democracy" Completed?	<i>Savita Pande</i>	74-94
DOCUMENT		95-100
Kashmiris Reject War in favour of Democratic Means MORI Survey Report dated 31 May 2002		

Vol. 7 No.2 (April - June 2003)**KAZAKHSTAN SPECIAL**

Editor's Page	<i>K. Warikoo</i>	1-2
The Traces of Buddhism in the Semirech'e	<i>P. Stobdan</i>	3-24
Ethnicity and Nation Building in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan	<i>Manish Jha</i>	25-61
Inter-ethnic Relations in Kazakhstan: Role of Presidency	<i>M.B. Kassymbekov</i>	62-77
Environmental Threats to Kazakhstan's Security	<i>Ajay Lele</i>	78-87

HRCF FILE

Uighurs of Kazakhstan: *Sh. M. Nadyrov* **88-99**
Socio-Economic Situation

Kazakhs in Post-Socialist Mongolia *Sharad K. Soni* **100-115**

Vol. 7 No.3-4 (July - December 2003)

BANGLADESH SPECIAL

Editor's Page *K. Warikoo* **1-3**

Regimes, Power Structure and *Redwanur Rahman* **4-28**
Policies in Bangladesh

Indo-Bangladesh Relations *Anand Kumar* **29-40**

India-Bangladesh Bilateral Trade: *I.N. Mukherji* **41-56**
Issues and Concerns

Rise of Religious Radicalism *Apratim Mukarji* **57-80**
in Bangladesh

Discourses on Minority Representation: *Haridhan Goswami* **81-102**
The Case of Hindu Minority *and Zobaida Nasreen*
in Bangladesh

Situation of Minorities in Bangladesh *Ruchira Joshi* **103-145**

Accord into Discord: Conflict and the *Binalakshmi Nepram* **146-168**
1997 Peace Accord of Chittagong Hill Tracts

Demographic Invasion from Bangladesh *B.B. Nandy* **169-176**

India and Bangladesh: The Border Issues *Sreeradha Datta* **177-195**

Bangladesh-Pakistan Relations: *Smruti S. Pattanaik* **196-309**
From Bitterness to Warmth

Book Review **210-212**

Dipankar Sengupta and Sudhir Kumar Singh, eds.,
Insurgency in India's North East: The Role of Bangladesh

2004**Vol. 8 No.1 (January - March 2004)*****NADIM SPECIAL***

Editor's Page	<i>K. Warikoo</i>	1-3
Deodar in a Storm: Nadim and the Pantheon	<i>Braj B. Kachru</i>	4-33
Lyricism in Nadim's Poetry	<i>T.N. Dhar 'Kundan'</i>	34-41
Nadim – The Path Finder to Kashmiri Poesy and Poetics	<i>P.N. Kachru</i>	42-53
D.N. Kaul 'Nadim' in Historical Perspective	<i>M.L. Raina</i>	54-66
Dina Nath Kaul 'Nadim' The 'Gentle Colossus' of Modern Kashmiri Literature	<i>Onkar Kachru</i>	67-77
Vitasta is My Eternal Song: Nadim (Interview by <i>Ravinder Kaul</i>)		78-86
HRCF FILE		87-95
Cultural Heritage of Jammu and Kashmir (<i>Seminar and Workshop-cum-Exhibition Report</i>)		
Book Review		96-98
S.N. Pandita, Western Indologists and Sanskrit Savants of Kashmir		

Vol. 8 Nos.2-3 (April - September 2004)***AFGHANISTAN SPECIAL***

Editor's Page	<i>K. Warikoo</i>	1-2
Afghanistan and Central Asia: Differentiated Challenges and Priorities in the Twenty First Century	<i>Vijay Kapur</i>	3-17
Challenges to Democratization: Peace and Stability in Afghanistan	<i>Apratim Mukarji</i>	18-33

HRCF FILE

Problems and Prospects of Constitutional Government in Afghanistan	<i>Uma Shankar</i>	34-73
The Afghan Presidential Election: Light at the End of the Tunnel?	<i>Ramtanu Maitra</i>	74-86
Parliamentary Elections (2004): Jammu and Kashmir	<i>K. Warikoo</i>	87-100
Democracy at Work: Parliamentary Elections in Mongolia	<i>Sharad K. Soni</i>	101-120
The United Nations Commission on Human Rights (57th Session): A Report	<i>Sharad K. Soni</i>	121-162

BOOK REVIEW

D.N. Dhar, <i>Dynamics of Politics in Kashmir from Ancient to Modern Times</i>	<i>M.L Misri</i>	163-166
“Globalization” and the Indian <i>Nation State: Jurisdiction and Loyalties in Flux</i>	<i>B.K. Shrivastava</i>	167-170

Vol. 8 No.4 (October - December 2004)

Editor’s Page	<i>K. Warikoo</i>	1-2
Continuity and Change in Indo-Pak Relations	<i>Sukhwant S. Bindra</i>	3-20
Recrudescence of Violence in Pakistan’s Cities: Roots in Environmental Scarcity and Degradation of Resources	<i>Narottam Gaan</i>	21-39
Confidence Building Measures Between India and Pakistan	<i>Sudhir K. Singh and Ana Ballesteros Peiro</i>	40-54
The UN Sub-Commission on Human Rights (57th Session): A Report	<i>Sharad K. Soni</i>	55-87

BOOK REVIEW

D.N. Dhar, <i>Kashmir: The Land and its Management From Ancient To Modern Times</i>	<i>K. Warikoo</i>	88-90
---	-------------------	--------------

2005
Vol. 9 Nos.1-2 (January - June 2005)**UZBEKISTAN SPECIAL**

Editor's Page	<i>K. Warikoo</i>	1-3
Political Transition and Parliamentary Elections, 2004 in Uzbekistan	<i>Aftab Kazi</i>	5-16
The Election Experience in Uzbekistan and its Parallels with Indian Experience: Norms and Standards	<i>J.D. Agarwal</i> and <i>Aman Agarwal</i>	17-33
Parliamentary Elections in Uzbekistan, 2004	<i>M.K. Dhar</i>	34-40
Uzbekistan's Experiment with Democracy	<i>John Cherian</i>	41-45
Dynamics of Democratisation and Political Process in Uzbekistan	<i>Nalin K. Mohapatra</i>	46-70
Tradition and Modernity in Uzbekistan	<i>K. Warikoo</i>	71-80
Uzbekistan: Entering A New Phase of Market Economy	<i>R.G. Gidadhubli</i>	81-92
India-Uzbekistan: Emerging Partnership for Peace and Development	<i>Meena Singh Roy</i>	93-123
Challenges of Religious Extremism in Uzbekistan	<i>Ramakant Dwivedi</i>	124-140
DOCUMENT		141-166
Speech of Islam Karimov, President of Uzbekistan at the First Joint Session of Oliy Majlis, Tashkent, 28 Jan. 2005		
BOOK REVIEW		
Nirmala Joshi, <i>Central Asia, the Great Game Replayed: An Indian Perspective</i>	<i>K. Warikoo</i>	167-171

HRCF FILE

Vol. 9 No.3 (July - September 2005)

INDUS WATERS SPECIAL

Editor's Page	<i>K. Warikoo</i>	1-2
Indus Waters Treaty: View from Kashmir	<i>K. Warikoo</i>	3-26
Optimising Hydel Development in Chenab Basin	<i>S.C. Sud</i>	27-40
Baglihar Dispute: A Blessing in Disguise for the People of Kashmir (A Kashmiri View)	<i>Syed Nazir Gilani</i>	41-46
Neutral Expert and Indus Waters Treaty	<i>V.G. Hegde</i>	47-59
Helsinki Rules on the Uses of Waters of International Rivers and Indus Waters Treaty	<i>Muhammed Siyad</i>	60-95
OPINION		
Review the Indus Waters Treaty	<i>M.S. Menon</i>	96-98

Vol. 9 No.4 (October - December 2005)

J & K EARTHQUAKE SPECIAL

Editor's Page	<i>K. Warikoo</i>	1-5
October 2005 Earthquake and its Implications	<i>Savita Pande</i>	6-20
Politics of the Earthquake in Pakistan	<i>Kalim Bahadur</i>	21-26
Terror Throughout Tremors and Tragedy	<i>Anil Bhat</i>	27-37
Earthquake in J&K: A Report	<i>D. A. Mahapatra</i>	38-46
Impact of Climate Change on the Yangtze River Source Region in Tibetan Plateau	<i>Zhang Jijiao</i> and <i>Li Yujun</i>	47-62
REPORT (ICG Policy Briefing Asia No. 46) Pakistan: Political Impact of the Earthquake		63-99

DOCUMENTS **100-106**

- i) Pledges for Relief, Reconstruction and Rehabilitation in Pakistan
- ii) Letter from JKCHR

OPINION

- Earthquake and Game Plan *Shabir Choudhry* **107-110**
of Military Junta

2006**Vol. 10 No.1 (January - March 2006)**

- Editor's Page** *K. Warikoo* **1-2**
- Security Challenges in South and *K. Warikoo* **3-16**
Central Asia
- Quest for New Asian Security: *Sharad K. Soni* **17-28**
Regional Cooperation in Cultural Perspective
- Role of Women in Peace and *Mondira Dutta* **29-40**
Conflict Resolution
- Role of NGOs in Peace Making and *Bupinder Zutshi* **41-51**
Conflict Resolution
- The Shape of Things *Saligram Bhatt* **52-55**
- The UN Commission on Human Rights *Sharad K. Soni* **56-91**
(58th Session): A Report
- HRCF File**
- Network of NGOs for Peace and *Kiran Sood* **92-99**
Conflict Resolution with
Special Reference to Women (Seminar Report)

BOOK REVIEW

- Kuldip Singh, Ed., *South-Central Asia: Emerging Issues* *M.R. Debata* **100-106**

HRCF FILE

Vol. 10 Nos. 2-3 (April - September 2006)

KYRGYZSTAN SPECIAL

Editor's Page	<i>K. Warikoo</i>	1-2
Development of Statehood of Kyrgyzstan in East-West Paradigm: A Comparative Analysis	<i>A.A. Bekboev</i> and <i>K.Ch. Sultanbekov</i>	3-19
Borders and Frontiers in Aitmatov's Works	<i>Rashmi Doraiswamy</i>	20-29
Kyrgyzstan and India: Economic and Trade Cooperation	<i>Saktanbek Kadyraliev</i>	30-34
March 24 'Revolution' in Kyrgyzstan: Causes and Consequences	<i>Jyotsna Bakshi</i>	35-51
Gender Policy in Contemporary Kyrgyzstan	<i>Abalova Nazgul</i> and <i>Rysaliev Zainura</i>	52-58
Monuments of Kyrgyzstan along the Great Silk Route	<i>Vladimir Ploskih</i>	59-63
On the Trail of Silk Route: Travel Experiences in Kyrgyzstan	<i>K. Warikoo</i>	64-75
Fortresses in Kyrgyzstan	<i>E.G. Koreneva</i>	76-81
Classics and Modern Theories: Linkages between Manas and Management	<i>Nisar Ahmad</i>	82-98
Chigu, Shangri La and 'Manas'	<i>Indira Musaeva</i>	99-109
On the Way to India via Kyrgyzstan	<i>V. Voropaeva</i>	110-119
The Kyrgyz as Viewed by American Travellers and Explorers (19 th and early 20 th Centuries)	<i>Cholpon Turdalieva</i>	120-139
HRCF File		
Kyrgyzstan: A Profile		140-145
BOOK REVIEWS		
Rashmi Doraiswamy, <i>The Post-Soviet Conditions: Chingiz Aitmatov in the 90s</i>	<i>Pankaj Bhan</i>	146-148
Amartya Sen, <i>The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian History, Culture and Identity</i>	<i>S. Bhatt</i>	148-156

Vol. 10 No. 4 (October - December 2006)**KAZAKHSTAN SPECIAL**

Editor's Page		1-2
Kazakhstan Today	<i>Kairat Umarov</i>	3-8
The Geopolitical Realities of Central Asia	<i>Aigul Kurganbayeva and Galia Movkebayeva</i>	9-19
Russia's Policy towards Kazakhstan during Yeltsin Period	<i>K. Warikoo</i>	20-34
Kazakhstan-US Relations: Some Perspectives	<i>Fatima Kukeyeva</i>	35-44
Kazakhstan-China Trade and Economic Relations	<i>Alia Akataeva</i>	45-56
Trans-border Nationalities and State Relations: A Case Study of Kazakhs in Altai (Xinjiang)	<i>Xu Qinhua</i>	57-68
Democratization and Political Stability in Kazakhstan	<i>Kuralay Baizakova</i>	69-76
Elections in Kazakhstan	<i>Saifolla Sapanov</i>	77-83
Nazarbayev Emerges Stronger after Polls	<i>Indranil Banerjee</i>	84-90
Kazakhstan and the International Organizations	<i>Mara Gubaidullina</i>	91-106
Kazakhstan and the United Nations	<i>Klara Makasheva</i>	107-115
OSCE Activities in Central Asia	<i>Ailuna Utegenova</i>	116-129
HRCF File		
Kazakhstan Today (<i>Seminar Report</i>)	<i>M. R. Debata</i>	130-134

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