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Cultural Syncretism, Poetic Contributions and the Spiritual Historiography: Lal Ded's Conception of Morality on Modern Interfaith Relations

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Abstract:
Considering the importance of communal harmony and advancing interfaith dialogue in the present-day Kashmir, this paper attempts to locate an almost absent interstitial nexus between Shaivism and Sufi mysticism with an intent to further our understanding of the philosophical values—the values that form much of the foundations of India. It is intriguing to find a synthesis of doctrinal traditions, the hermeneutics of cultural syncretism and poetic contributions, in which Lal Ded, an extraordinary 14th century Kashmiri poet and mystic, occupies a pivotal locus in the region's spiritual and cultural historiography. The paper argues that Lal Ded's conception of morality and flexibility to enjoy and experience the spiritual realities in mundane world, through her Vakhs (aphoristic verses), the most influential medium for the expression of devotion, is adept enough of resisting fragmentation while affirming a shared heritage.
Keywords: *Harmony, Vakh, Inclusivity, Interreligious Conversation, Ethics, Morality, Renunciation, Self-realization*

There is a great tendency among us to be attached to the transient desires, and renunciation is rare. In light of this relatively challenging practice, it becomes evident that Lal Ded's poetic oeuvre is largely dealt with the scholarship of cultural and philosophical syncretism. Scholars would have not resisted the chance to take a note on Lal Ded's significance, as Bazaz unfolds that, "Lalla was fully conscious of her historic role as the prophet of resurgence in Kashmir. She knew that the dynamic philosophy she was preaching and the composite culture that she was founding were bound to open an era of human brotherhood in Kashmir in which the differences of caste and creed, birth and position would be meaningless" (Bazaz Prem 261). For this reason, one may be more interested to inquire into her poetry that harmonize the ascetic rigor of Shaivism as well as the ecstatic devotion characteristic of Sufism, particularly a synthesis which seems a turgid example of the ethos of Kashmir. One of the incredibly celebrated *Vakhs* of Lal Ded falls into area that prioritize a meditation on the entanglement of the self in worldly attachments.

I will weep and weep for you, O Mind;
(my Soul) The world hath caught you in its spell.
Though you cling to them with the anchor of steel,
Not even the shadow of the things you love
Will go with you when you are dead.
Why then have you forgot your own true Self? (Lal Ded's *Vakhs* 2)

The above oft-cited *Vakh* involves a series of investigation by personifying the mind a wayward entity, trapped into the *maya* (illusion). Most particularly, the rhetorical question, "Why then have you forgot your own true Self?" shares psychological realities of humanity and arbitrary binaries between individuality and universality. Now in a certain way, there is an urge for spiritual introspection, and a reorientation towards self-realization—at the most obvious level, the realization of the individual self (*Jiva*) and the universal self (*Brahman*). The universality of such themes—detachment, self-realization, and spiritual awakening—renders Lal Ded's works timeless and particularly resonant in contemporary discourses on communal harmony. The tone, style and richness of thought also reminds non-sectarian attitudes of Sufism. As Rumi, in the *Masnavi-i Ma'navi*, recognizes one's essential unity with the divine. His famous assertion— "I died as animal and I was Man./Why should I fear? When was I less by dying?" (Whinfield)—is perfectly clear, involving the individual's endeavour to make a break for worldly layers and achieve oneness with the Divine.

The famous instruction of the *Chandogya Upanishad* is impeccably instructive in regard of Lal Ded's attribution to the 'Self.' If one examines the rhetorical questions of Uddalaka, his analogies, and repetition, one would find his mastery of pedagogy. Through the familiarity of all levels of reality—clay, honey, trees, and salt—the intellectual doyenne bridges the abstract with the tangible, and makes the infinite reality principle of Brahman accessible to his son. The father's instruction to his son— "That Being which is this subtle essence, even That all this world has for its self. That is the true. That is the Atman. That thou art, O S'vetaketu." (*The Chandogya Upanishad* 6.13.3) —becomes a universal allegory for the human quest to comprehend the infinite within the finite.

When one brings several factors to advancing interfaith dialogue, it comes as no surprise that Lal Ded's legacy, inspired from such Vedantic realities, leaves a large corpus of poetry that can be absolutely incorporated while fostering communal harmony in Kashmir. As with the following magnum opus:

My Guru gave me but one percept:
'From without withdraw your gaze within
And fix it on the Inmost Self.'
Taking to heart this one percept,
Naked I began to roam. (Lal Ded's *Vakhs* 21)

In trying to arrive at a sense of what Lal Ded advocates through the phrase 'Inmost Self' is the foundational idea of the Indian philosophical tradition of *tattvamasi* (That thou art) and the Sufi principle of *wahdat al-wujud* (Unity of Being). This seems to imply a straighthood understanding that both the traditions affirm a shared heritage, a connected element that is rooted in universal truths. One sees that there is a sheer call to explore these intersecting philosophies so as to foster mutual understanding across spiritual traditions.

What is noteworthy here in, "Naked I began to roam," is precisely the hiatus that requires a practice for renunciation—a shedding of material attachments, ego, and worldly concerns. One can equally well understand this call for spiritual minimalism and a return to the essence of existence—of course, not at all simple but make us free from the veils of societal constructs. It is the foremost requirement if one goes for an interfaith dialogue; and, there is no denying that such nakedness can be interpreted as a call to strip away external identifiers—religious, cultural, and material, to name a few. The significance of renunciation in the pursuit

of spiritual liberation makes the point as follows:

> "Renunciation alone is, verily, the best of all the means to liberation. Only by a person who has renounced all, that (Brahman) can be known. A person who renounces attains the Self, the supreme abode. (Smṛti says): "Renounce dharma as well as adharma, and likewise the true and the false." In the same way, the Taittirīyā Śruti also says: "Renunciation is Brahman" *(The Taittiriya Upanishad* 2.10.11).

Obviously, the latter argument holds substantial merit more than a bit of it as the poetic expressions of renunciation and spiritual introspection advocate a dialogue, understanding, and unity in Kashmir that serves as a bridge between the metaphysics of Trika Shaivism and the mystical ethos of Sufism. The entire structure subscribes to an incredible framework for reconciling diverse identities and fostering a practice of coexistence. One might get a picture of seemingly civilized society based on a principle, rooted in introspection and detachment from external differences, capable enough to counteract fragmentation and affirm Kashmir's shared spiritual heritage.

And here is a *Vakh* that identifies a conception of morality and spiritual realities—a reflection on the conditions through which one can liberate from societal exceptions:

When can I break the bonds of shame?
When I am indifferent to jibes and jeers.
When can I discard the robe of dignity?
When desires cease to nag my mind. (Lal Ded's *Vakhs* 43)

Indeed, one of the most vivid vignettes of this *Vakh* is a desire for liberation from the expectations and judgments of society. Not surprisingly, as legends of the traditions elucidated, the true spiritual freedom is achieved when one becomes indifferent to the external criticisms and the approval or disapproval of others. It is not hard to see that the metaphorical use of the "robe of dignity" speaks of the societal expectations and the constraints imposed by external perceptions. The sanctity of discarding this false robe involves a critical rejection of pseudo fundamentalism and a quest for authenticity.

Let us now turn to another *Vaakh* that makes an apt case of realignment, involving an extraordinary virtue, named morality and the integration of spiritual experience, as a matter of the mundane world.

When the dirt was wiped away from my mind's mirror,
people knew me for a lover of God.
When I saw Him there, so close to me,
He was All, I was nothing. (Hoskote 46)

In the above composition Lal Ded articulates the philosophical and devotional depth; the core message lay emphasis on the dynamic moral framework and her affirmation of the interconnectedness of human existence. And what more is involved here is her resistance for fragmented identities while celebrating a shared cultural and spiritual heritage. The idea through the metaphor "mind's mirrors" deeply resonates with the long-standing message of Indic traditions. With this collective consciousness what comes to the fore is an Advaitic notion of self-realization and the Sufi emphasis on divine love. Here Lal Ded's *Vakh* reflects a moral philosophy which is predicated on internal purification rather than adherence to externally imposed dogma. The notion of morality in Lal Ded's compositions is imbued with a confidence that invites introspection, and certainly this very aspect elevates her poetic opus beyond the

confines of individual sectarian identities. Here the authorship of morality is not prescriptive but rather dynamic, urging individuals towards self-realization through introspection and ethical living. Scholars have long noted that in each of the Lal Ded's *Vakhs*, there occupies a unique space of Kashmir's cultural memory and the pedagogical applications where spirituality and morality converge to form an inclusive worldview. As rightly observed, "by whatever name the worshipper may call the Supreme, He is still the Supreme, and He alone can give release" (Grierson and Barnett 9). It would be appropriate to claim that each of Lal Ded's *Vakhs* is rooted in universal ethos that challenges rigid social hierarchies and sectarian divides—and such universality gives a new dimension to our understanding of diverse traditions, including Shaivism, Sufism, and later Bhakti movements. These seals eloquently testify Lal Ded's continued relevance in contemporary discourse—the audience burdened by the anguish of fragmented identities.

One cannot resist one's temptation to analyse the second half of the *Vakh*. What sets her apart here is her emphasis on the complete termination of the ego and the realization of divine omnipresence. So, it is fitting to find the apparent dichotomy between the sacred and the profane. This realization, firmly grounded in the everyday, illustrates her flexibility in experiencing spiritual realities within the mundane. Rather than advocating ascetic withdrawal, Lal Ded affirms that divine presence can be recognized and celebrated in ordinary life. One gets the impression that this perspective challenges hierarchical notions of spiritual attainment, proposing instead that divine union is universally attainable through introspection and complete devotion. This inclusivity is further reinforced by Lal Ded's rejection of rigid orthodoxy, which she critiques through the simplicity and directness of her aphoristic style. Indeed, this kind of analysis positions Lal Ded not merely as a mystic but an erudite thinker whose work embodies the intersections of morality, spirituality, and cultural unity.

Whether the contemporary Kashmir's pressing need for communal harmony or interfaith dialogue, Lal Ded's desire is totally geared towards capturing the essence of shared spiritual and philosophical values. In several ways, her position at the confluence of Shaivism and Sufi mysticism highlights the fluidity and interconnectedness of these traditions; anchoring through a framework to the cultural syncretism, which is deeply embedded in the region's history. One can find easier to lodge such authority in the synthesis of doctrinal traditions in her work that demonstrates the possibility of reconciling diverse worldviews without erasing their distinctiveness. The profusion of such harmonizing approach, expressed through her aphoristic poetry, which is similar to "Siddha Shrikantha, a Saivite, as her teacher," (Schelling 60), positions Lal Ded as a bridge between communities, advocating for a shared ethos rooted in introspection, love, and unity. The implication of such an ability lies in the integration of spiritual realities with the mundane world, symbolizing a philosophy that is not only adaptable but also transformative. Hence, it is easier to grasp this blueprint for coexistence and mutual respect, fostering harmony between the spiritual and the worldly. Historical accounts suggest that there have been wonderful interactions and a unique form of dialogues between diverse religious traditions in Kashmir, which is a demonstration of the willingness to cross boundaries and accept shared cultural expressions. As Bazaz points out: "The cultural memory of a relation between Lal Ded and Nund Rishi and the promise of "a tongue that can be shared," a Kashmiri language to come. Such an "interreligious conversation" could not have taken place without risks or even courage" (Bazaz 28). Now, in a certain way what can be understood from this cultural memory is that tolerance is not merely an ethical virtue but a practical necessity for coexistence in a pluralistic society, as Bhat notes, "tolerance and forbearance is the virtue required most in the field of spirituality" (Bhat 422). At the most obvious level, our shared legacy demands introspection on its relevance in fostering solidarity amidst growing fragmentation. By realigning national priorities with such inclusive wisdom, societies can

overcome superficial divides, paving the way for sustainable development rooted in mutual respect and spiritual harmony.

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