

A vakh from Bhaskara's
Lalla Vakh in Sharada script

*I traversed the field of void alone
And I, Lalla, lost consciousness of
myself
I found the secret of my Self
Then, the lotus bloomed in the mud
for Lalla (v 55)*

A great deal of controversy exists as to precisely when Lalla was born. Some writers give the date of her birth as the middle of the fourteenth century while other sources indicate that Lalla could have been born somewhere between A.D 1317 and A.D 1320 (even as early as 1300-1301), and that she died in the 1370s or 1380s. Lalla was given in marriage to Nicha Bat of Pampore at a young age. Her in-laws gave her a new name—Padmavati. The custom of naming a new bride when she is accepted into her husband's family still exists among Kashmiri Hindus. It symbolises a married woman's new identity as a wife and daughter-in-law. However, in her verses, she always refers to herself by her maiden name Lalla and it is this name that has come down to posterity.

Maltreated in Marriage

Legends speak about her mother-in-law as a tyrant who filled her marital life with suffering. Lalla was not given enough to eat. Her mother-in-law would give her small servings making them look larger by hiding a stone underneath the food on her plate. Lalla would quietly eat whatever she was served. A special

A Lotus Blooms in the Mud

Life and Verses of Kashmir's Lalla

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Lalla, also known as Lal Ded and Lalleshwari, was a fourteenth century mystic poet from Kashmir. Her verses, transmitted orally for centuries, have been an integral part of Kashmiri literature and culture. Legends about her life abound, but it is her verses that reveal the trials and tribulations of a woman who had the courage to renounce her home and family and set out on a journey of self-realisation.

grahashanti ceremony (a prayer for bringing peace into the house) was once held at her house. As she went out that day to fetch water from the river, one of her neighbours teased her that she would have a feast that night. Lalla's reply that has become a famous proverb in Kashmiri was "*hund maritan kinah kath noshi nalvat tsalih nah zanh*" which means whether a lamb or a sheep is killed at her house; the daughter-in-law will always get a stone.

Some legends describe that her marriage was not consummated, while others say she was a disobliging wife who preferred to keep to herself. The famous water pitcher legend describes the incident that finally sets her on the path of renunciation as she adopts the life of a wandering ascetic. According to the legend, Lalla would get up before dawn every day and walk to the river bank in Zinpura village to fetch water in a pitcher. Instead of filling the pitcher with water and returning home, she would cross the river to visit the shrine of Natta Keshava Bhairava by the river bank. Suspecting her of infidelity, her husband followed her to the river bank one day where he found her

sitting alone in a meditative posture. He went home and waited for her to come back. Soon Lalla returned with an earthen pitcher full of water on her head. Filled with rage, her husband hit the pitcher with a stick. While the pitcher broke into pieces, the water stayed miraculously intact on her head. Lalla calmly went inside the house and poured the water into smaller vessels until all vessels were full. She threw the leftover water outside the house where a pond is believed to have formed. Later on, this pond was named *Laltrag* (the Pond of Lalla), which remained full for many centuries.

The Broken Pitcher

Without seeking for the literal truth in these legends, they can be seen as providing a series of frieze frames that capture the reality of Lalla's life from multiple perspectives: her role in the family, her family ties, especially with her husband, her spiritual attainment, and the heritage that she leaves behind. The frame that overshadows all others is the one that depicts Lalla with shining water intact on her head despite the broken pitcher. Commentaries have mostly focused on the intact water a metaphor for her

spiritual attainment—ignoring the reality of the broken pitcher or, in other words, her material life or physical body. Just as Lalla’s pitcher breaks into pieces due to violence from the outside, so does her body which gets negated in a social climate where, as a woman, she has no way to channel her creativity. In spite of her remarkable insights into the nature of reality, which she attains as a Kashmiri Shaiva practitioner, she can only experience them in a disembodied fashion, without integrating them into her lived reality.

Journey of Self Discovery

According to legend, Lalla comes across as a gentle wife who does not in any active way try to resist the ill treatment that she suffers at home. Instead, she withdraws into her own space and seeks refuge in spiritual practice. The Lalla of the verses, however, comes across as a woman who has feelings, thoughts and desires like any other human being. She not only feels the injustices of the social system of which she is a part, but also has a deep understanding of the prescriptive ideology of religious narratives which privilege some and at the same time oppress others. Some of her verses even reflect her awareness of societal constraints and traditional gender definitions as they affect her life. Her verses thus tell us as much about the woman who was the originator of these compositions as they reveal the mystic who succeeded in her quest.

Lalla’s verses have been orally transmitted for centuries. The evocative-ness of her verses arises from the vivid and concrete images she uses to convey her experiences. For example, she uses the

expression “twisting ropes of sand” for describing ineffectual efforts in spiritual practice or “water leaking from unbaked clay saucers” for describing unfocused attention. The power of her verses can partly be attributed to creating concrete and accessible imagery. Common people could relate to these images and understand immediately what Lalla was attempting to convey, even when the concepts were highly esoteric. Most of her verses thus use vivid metaphors, without resorting to any explanations. It is left to the listener to make the connection and suggestively experience their import.

Cotton Flower Turns Yarn

In one of her verses, she says she came to the world like a blooming cotton flower full of enthusiasm and potential for growth. However, society acted as a crude ginner and carder reducing her to a miserable state and turned her into an object of utility, that is, full fine yarn, which is hung on the weaver’s loom to be turned into cloth. Her social self is the creation of others to be used by them. She compares overcoming this conditioning to a washerman washing a piece of cloth thoroughly and rubbing it with soap and washing soda and the tailor cutting it into bits so that the roles of the daughter, the daughter-in-law and the wife are torn

into shreds and her true identity emerges. Both washerman and tailor in this verse are Shiva or the Self within herself, whose realisation finally helps her overcome the socially defined “feminine” self, which she experiences as oppressive:

I, Lalla, set out in the hope of blooming like a cotton flower

Ginner and carder gave me hard blows

The female spinner spun me into fine yarn

In the weaver’s shop I was stretched on the loom (V13)

The washerman then dashed me on a slab of stone

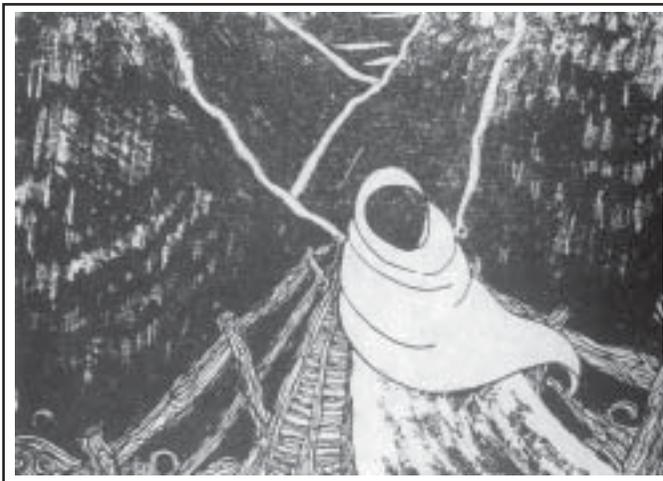
Rubbing me with much soap and washing soda

Then the tailor cut me into bits with scissors

And only then I, Lalla, attained supreme bliss (V 14)

Lalla’s use of the female gender in referring to the spinner who transforms her into fine yarn is probably because women have been traditionally regarded as the bearers of culture and reproducers of gender roles for the next generation. The washerman and the tailor, both of male gender, are her liberators whose actions lead to the disintegration of the socially constructed gendered self. Lalla rejects the traditionally defined attribute of feminine self

effacement that is often accompanied by a devotional and supplicant approach towards spiritual experience. She takes control of her experience as a self-contained subjectivity, identifying more with Shiva than with Shakti. This approach is associated with extreme austerities, self-containment and self-absorption. Lalla’s refusal to perform in conformity



with the usual female gender role is illustrated by the legends that describe her roaming in a nude state after she renounces her family. Such legends are based on the following verse:

*My guru gave me only one advice—
From outside transfer the attention within
That became my initiation
That is why I began to wander naked (v 15)*

Lalla's wandering in a nude state could refer to her divesting or disrobing herself of all worldly attachments, including her family, friends and the comforts of a home. It could also point to her refusal to perform her gender role in that she pays no attention to traditional feminine modes of dress or behaviour. This interpretation is in line with the content of other verses, which use a great many analogies and metaphors to convey highly esoteric ideas and experiences.

As Lalla rejects social conventions, she is subject to ridicule, which causes a great deal of pain to her. At the same time it makes her focus even more intensely on her spiritual quest, now that she occupies a space outside the system. She says in a verse:

*The chain of embarrassment will only break
When I can tolerate taunts and mocking words
Robe of self-pity will burn away
When the inner unbridled horse (restless mind) is brought under control (v 23)*

Lalla's refusal to conform to her gender role is not taken kindly by community members who gossip

about her and find her lifestyle scandalous. She endures it by ignoring what people say about her. Thus, she says:

*I endured verbal abuse as well as slander
Scandals broke out about my past and present
I am Lalla and my yearning never stopped
When I achieved my goal, nothing affected me (v 25)*

Lalla develops indifference to insults and abuses that are hurled at her and she learns not to lose her



equanimity. A story about her relates how street urchins would sometimes hurl insults at her. Once a kind-hearted shopkeeper, a cloth merchant, scolds these young urchins for their behaviour and shoos them away. Lalla calmly asks him to give her a long piece of cloth, which she tells him to cut into two equal parts and weigh separately. Then she drapes one piece on her left shoulder and the second piece on her right shoulder. She ties a knot in the piece on her right shoulder as soon as someone calls her a bad name and ties a knot in the other piece the moment she is shown respect by someone. In the evening she brings back the two

pieces of cloth to the shopkeeper and asks him to weigh them once again—both weigh exactly as they had before. This incident is meant to show the shopkeeper her equanimity in the face of respect or ridicule shown by others towards her. It also reveals her belief in her selfhood and her commitment to the new quest she has undertaken despite what people say about her. This legend also indicates how resistance to patriarchal norms has not been easy for women even when they have devoted themselves to spiritual discipline.

As Lalla continues on her path, she exercises rigorous self-discipline that involves clearing her mind of desires because these would otherwise bind her to the world of transitory things. The new path that she chooses is not an easy one. Some verses express her vulnerability. She is overwhelmed as she finds herself alone without any family or community support. She compares her body to an unlocked shop in the midst of a marketplace and as such, vulnerable to attacks from the outside. She struggles with her desires,

experiencing them as a burden as they bind her to worldly things. Thus, she says,

*Loosened is the shoulder knot of my candy load
Bent like a bow is my body
How can I carry this burden?
My guru's words to achieve detachment are painful
Like a flock without a shepherd am I
How can I carry this burden? (v 4)*

In another verse, she reflects on the transitoriness of worldly things:

*I will gently lament for you
O mind, you are in love with illusions*

*Not a shadow of this worldly
splendor will accompany you
Oh, why do you forget your real
nature? (v 7)*

Lalla's verses reveal her deep knowledge of the esoteric practices of Kashmiri Shaivism, which were traditionally part of its tradition. Siddha Shri Kanth initiated her into Shaiva yoga. The teachings were imparted only to a select few. Lalla was the first woman we know of who openly spoke about these practices to common people. Her oral transmission was a subversive act to resist the written discourse to which ordinary people did not have access. In one of her verses she says that she learned some things from books, but others she learned through direct experience. Thus, she emphasises direct, personal experience as being a superior teacher to any elaborate study of texts.

*What I read, I followed, and the
unreadable I got through direct
experience I brought down the
lion from the forest like a jackal
My teachings for others, I followed
myself*

*Only then I attained knowledge
and achieved my goal (v 53)*

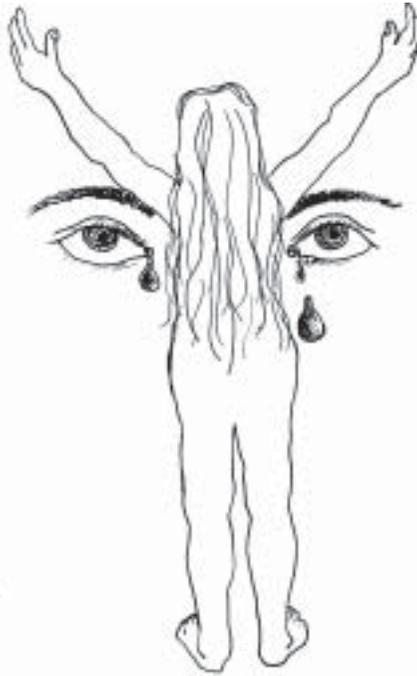
The House of Nectar

Opting out of society makes her focus even more intensely on her spiritual practice. Lalla describes her journey in this unexplored territory as perilous and she feels the need to train her mind as well as body in order to survive. This world where she has rejected all social bonds now becomes a temporary residence; her real home lies in the other world. The solitariness of her new life is expressed in the following verse:

*Arduous was my search for the Self
Nothing compares to the hidden
knowledge*

*Self-absorption led me to the
house of nectar*

*Cups I found filled to the brim but
nobody was drinking (v 17)*



Lalla is thus aware of her isolation not only in the secular world, which she has renounced, but also in the spiritual world, where, as an outsider to the written Kashmiri Shaiva tradition, she has no way of sharing her experiences with those who could understand her. She is also without any role models. In contrast to her, the seventeenth century Kashmiri mystic poetess Rupa Bhavani specifically mentions the sustenance that she derives from Lalla's life and her verses. In spite of leaving home for brief periods of time, Rupa does not feel the need to reject her family and community by turning herself into a wandering ascetic. Thus, Lalla says:

*I did not pause for the right
moment*

I did not trust anything

*Lalla drank the wine of my own
verses*

*I caught the inner darkness,
gathered it*

Tearing it into shreds (v 148)

In most of her verses, Lalla's choice of images and metaphors point toward disenchantment with worldly

things. A few, however, illustrate the joy of liberation. In a verse, she says:

*In the midst of being lost, I lost the
sense of being lost*

*After being lost I found myself in
this worldly ocean*

*Laughing and playing, I attained
all-pervading Self*

*This philosophy became a part of
me (v 29)*

Transcending the Body

Her most profound verses reflect her desire to lose herself in mystical experience. Lalla's spiritual journey thus is only a one-way journey to the other world. She depicts this world as a river, which she must cross in order to reach the other world. Both the boat (representing the body) and the river (representing the world) are only important in so far as they provide a medium in which to live out one's bodily existence. While at one level there is a need to transcend dualism, at another level her words are marked by a dualism of mind and body, where the former is privileged and the latter presented as solid opaque matter to be worked on and even discarded. For her, the ultimate quest, then, is to transcend her embodied existence, even as it is her embodied self that enables her to seek transcendence.

Real Temple is Within

Even while leading the life of an ascetic, Lalla was very concerned about the welfare of the people and her verses are a living testimony to this. She compares the path of wisdom to a kitchen-garden that needs to be nurtured with self-restraint and good actions performed with detachment:

*Responsibility for one's actions
one must bear*

Others share their fruit

*Without attachment, I offer my
actions to the Self*

*So wherever I go, it is good for me
(v 80)*

Lalla criticises the practices of the Brahmin elite who take great pride in

their scholarly achievements, which does not necessarily mean that they have true insight into the subject they write about. Thus, she says:

*You have a charming face but a heart of stone
The truth never penetrated you
Reading and writing wore out your lips and fingers
But the inner confusion never left you (v 108)*

She suggests that external worship or rituals are of limited use in a spiritual journey. Objects used for ritual worship like *kusha* grass, sesame seeds, lamp or water, are unnecessary in the same way as is making animal offerings to idols. In yet another verse, she says, self-knowledge cannot be acquired by merely going to temples or going on pilgrimages:

*A religious mendicant goes to every holy place
Seeking to attain self-knowledge
O, mind, in spite of learning do not be directionless
From a distance the grass looks greener (v 88)*

The real temple, Lalla says, is within each individual and the deity one is seeking is Shiva that is one's own true nature. Reading religious scriptures, according to her, is beneficial for the beginners, but those who make a religion out of mere recitation of scriptures are chasing illusions. She regards people who are consumed by their quest for deeper answers as fully awake and those immersed only in material reality as asleep:

*Some though asleep are awake
Some while awake have fallen asleep
Some are dirty after a bath
And some even as householders are totally detached (v 130)*

Lalla thus preaches that one's lived life or actions performed are not in themselves a guarantee for attaining enlightenment. Parrots can

be taught to recite the name of Rama, so repetition in itself does not lead to knowledge. Similarly, reciting the *Gita* daily may give the aspirant the satisfaction of being engaged in spiritual activity, but this in no way means that any progress is being made toward attaining the desired goal.



Without discernment, O, dear, they read religious books as parrots recite "Rama" in a cage

Reading the *Gita* becomes an excuse
I have read the Gita and I am still reading it (v 96)

Breaking Social Barriers

As a wandering ascetic, Lalla relies on the food offered to her by others, many of whom belonged to communities other than her own. In the following verse, Lalla critiques the social practices of her time when upper caste Hindus did not consider

the food cooked by Muslims or by Hindus of lower casts as clean enough to be consumed:

*Renouncing cheating, deceit and hypocrisy
Is the teaching I told my mind to follow
Only One I found in everything
Then what is wrong with eating with people from different castes or religions (v 56)*

The message she conveys to people is to be tolerant of differences and to regard the self and others as equal. Lalla's emphasis on religious tolerance is in consonance with monist Shaiva philosophy that is secular in its orientation, though it could also be a result of her interaction with Sufi mystics. For Lalla, all people, irrespective of their caste, religion or gender, are equal as far as their aspiration, potential and success in self-realisation are concerned. They should, however, possess a burning desire for self-knowledge. Lalla refrains from identifying herself with any sect or religion. The Shiva consciousness, she says, is beyond these artificial divisions. People might call this state as Shiva, Keshava, Mahavir or Buddha, but these are just different names assigned to the same reality.

*The Self may be named Shiva, Keshava or Mahavir
Or the lotus born Buddha
Whatever name it may have
May it remove worldly attachments of a weakling like me (v 20)*

*Shiva is omnipresent
Don't differentiate between Hindus and Muslims
If you are clever, you will recognise your true self
That is your real acquaintance with the Lord (v 83)*

She preaches tolerance towards religious practices other than one's own. Since Shiva permeates the world, according to her, it is

narrow-mindedness and fanaticism that lead to religious conflicts. Even though people might differ based on gender, caste or religious creed or at the level of attainment, all are permeated with the Self or Shiva, which is like a bright sun shining equally everywhere in every being. It is the clouds of ignorance that stop the ever-present illumination. Once the clouds disappear, the Self reveals itself in its fullness and Shiva or the ultimate consciousness is seen to pervade both the material and the non-material world. She says:

Like a fine net spread everywhere is Shiva

Subtly permeating the physical manifestation

If you don't see him when you are alive,

How can you do it when you are dead?

Through self-introspection get rid of the self in yourself (v 102)

Lalla critiques prescriptive religious practices of all kind. Thus, renouncing home is not enough to achieve self-realisation and neither is reciting prayers, chanting mantras or turning prayer beads.

Some renounce their home and some their hermitage

All this is futile if the mind is not brought under control

Meditate on your breath day and night

And stay where you are (v 104)

*Continuous reading and reciting turned my tongue and palate sore
Yet I did not find a practice appropriate for you*

Turning the prayer beads have worn out my thumb and finger

Yet my mind's confusion, my dear, did not leave me (v 9)

Moderation and Compassion

Lalla describes moderation as an important aspect of attaining enlightenment. One must be moderate in drinking, eating and clothing oneself. She does not approve of



starving the body through fasting or performing religious rituals or austerities to attain spiritual goals. The real religious practice is to engage in actions that benefit others and that are performed in the spirit of detachment:

Don't torture your body with thirst and starvation

When the body is exhausted, take care of it

Cursed be your fasts and religious ceremonies

Do good to others, for that is the real religious practice (v 116)

Using vivid metaphors and images, Lalla thus teaches people to resist following blindly what is written in religious scriptures. Performing religious practices as a mere habit might give the individual satisfaction in engaging in something spiritual but in reality would do nothing to expand the limited vision that leads to religious bigotry and non-tolerance. She brings people's attention to the need for a personal morality based on honesty and responsibility rather than on rules of conduct based on religious commandments. Through her verses, Lalla has inspired both women and men for centuries to model their lives on a vision that has the potential for creating a society based on equality, mutual respect and compassion. Lalla's verses can be seen as an instrument of inner change that must go hand in hand with any meaningful external social change. For that reason, then, Lalla's verses are as relevant today, as they were more than six centuries ago.

The translations of Lalla's verses are from Odin's *To the Other Shore: Lalla's Life and Poetry*, Vitasta Publications, New Delhi, 1999. □

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