Introduction

Literature has, for ages, served as a powerful platform for the expression of ideas. Whatever be the approach, creative writings have always been embedded with varied and multiple meanings. On the one hand, literature has served the aesthetic purpose and, on the other hand, there are social, religious, political and other aspects of life also highlighted by it. An important purpose that literature has served is that of expressing the self and tracing out the higher Self, also labelled as the Ideal or the Supreme. The search for this Self, also known as Mysticism, has been a concern of many thinkers/writers of the world and poetry, as a genre, has existed as the main
medium of expression for this domain. The world literary tradition has witnessed innumerable mystics in the form of poets or poets in the form of mystics. Roger Housden (2009, Retrieved) opines:

Poetry is the language of choice for mystics in all traditions. If you want to speak of the ineffable and the essential, there is no better medium than poetry. Poetry is the language of the spirit and the soul, not of the discursive mind. It compresses the lived truth of the poet’s experience into a beauty and wisdom that can slip under the skin of the reader and enter their bloodstream. When you don’t know what to say you cry out, and those cries are the beginning of poetry. They are the language informed not only by the mind but by the body and heart as well. Poetry is the language of choice for mystics in all traditions who have tried to communicate their insights and experiences for the benefit of those who will listen.

It is with the poets that we find the most complete and continuous expression of mystical thoughts. Spurgeon (1913, pp. 12-13) writes in this regard:

The essence of Mysticism is to believe that everything we see and know is symbolic of something greater, Mysticism is on one side the poetry of life. For poetry also consists in finding resemblances and universalises the particulars with which it deals. Hence, the utterances of poets on mystical philosophy are peculiarly valuable…the indirect teaching of a poet touches us more profoundly than the direct lesson of a moral treatise, because the latter appeals principally to our reason, whereas the poet touches our “transcendental feeling”. So it is that Mysticism underlies the thought of most of our great poets.

Some poets saw the Divine in Nature and some revered Imagination as the highest manifestation of the actual Reality. However, all arrived ultimately at the larger truth and, that is, unity underlies all diversity. This is the starting point and the goal of the mystic ethos. As Krishna also says in the Bhagvata Gita:

There is true knowledge. Learn thou it is this:
To see one changeless Life in all the lives,
And in the Separate, One inseparable

(Quoted in Spurgeon, 1913, p. 3)

This basic faith in unity leads to the further belief that all things around us are actually forms or manifestations of the one Supreme life and the spirit contained in all the phenomena taking place around us is immortal. This further leads one to the fact that Ideal is the only Real. To a mystic, the spirit is given to humans to make them apprehend the spiritual essence of things. The way intellect is used to comprehend material things, in the same way, the spirit comprehends Divine things. However, the methods of arriving at or attaining this knowledge are different. Whereas the material things can be comprehended by analyzing and defining them, the spiritual things can be known only by becoming the things sought. To know anything in the spiritual domain, we must, therefore, be the thing itself:

We must be the thing itself and not merely talk about it or look at it. We must be in love if we are to know what love is; we must be the musicians if we are to know what music is; we must be godlike if we are to know what God is.

(Spurgeon, 1913, p. 4)

So, for every mystic, whether he is a philosopher, poet, artist or priest, the aim of life is to attain union with the Divine. Life to him/her is a continuous aspiration to achieve this union and the effort comes in from within (Spurgeon, 1913). As Eckhart puts it, “God and I are one in the act of my perceiving Him” (1941, Retrieved). A mystic always bases his belief on the intuitive inner knowledge or feeling and not on logic, reason or the demonstrated facts.

Nearly all religions possess the mystical roots and the scriptures like the \textit{Upanishads} also teach the spiritual consciousness being the source of true knowledge.
However, there are varied roads that one can take to reach out to the Ultimate. One is wonder-struck at the diverse approaches leading to the same destination and taken by different seekers:

“There are,” says Plotinus “different roads by which this end [apprehension of the Infinite] may be reached. The love of beauty, which exalts the poet; the devotion to the One and that ascent of science which makes the ambition of the philosopher; and that love and those prayers by which some devout and ardent soul in its moral purity [moves] towards perfection. These are the great highways conducting to that height above the actual and the particular, where we stand in the immediate presence of the Infinite, who shines out as from the deeps of the soul”.

(Quoted in Spurgeon, 1913 p. 33)

In the English literary tradition, we have had love and beauty mystics like Shelley, Rossetti, Patmore and Keats; Nature mystics like Wordsworth, Henry Vaughan and Richard Jefferies; Philosophical mystics like Donne, Traherne and Tennyson and of course, the Devotional and Religious mystics like Blake, Thompson, Herbert, Crawshaw and many others who used the poetic medium to express their spiritual aspirations. In addition to these, the world reveres mystics like Rumi, Hafiz, Shams Tabrez and Hallaj, who are a blend of the mystical ethos and poetic sensibility. All the mystics are actually devotional in nature. However, the ones whose poetry marks primarily a devotional/religious quest in order to achieve the Supreme bliss are categorized as devotional mystics or religious mystics. All the traditions, whether western or eastern have witnessed such people coming to the forefront, voicing the selves and discussing the varied dimensions of the Self through poetry. The Indian tradition also witnessed the flourishing of various religious movements which, in addition to addressing the masses regarding the true spirit of religion, paid attention to
Various social issues also. Saints used poetry to talk about their search for a higher Self and also to establish unorthodox and unconventional societies.

In India, the trend of discovering the Self and recreating a self through poetry was started long back in the medieval ages by poets like Amma, Tukaram, Narsi, Meera, Jana, Akka and many others. The entire medieval India witnessed the flourishing of various religious movements which were directed at social transformations too. They gave rise to a number of poet saints who belonged to varied school of thoughts or cults but preached the oneness of God. Lal Ded, Sheikh-ul-Alam and Kabir also belonged to the socio-religious cult and they kickstarted a tradition of poetry which aimed at both the social as well as religious transformations.

The present work undertakes the study of these three poets of India, Lal Ded, Sheikh-ul-Alam and Kabir, who were the proponents of Shaivism, Rishism and Bhakti, respectively. While Kashmir witnessed the Shaiva and Rishi uprising, the rest of India was under the influence of Bhakti. The current study aims at exploring how these individual selves, traced out, through their poetry the higher Self. Lal Ded, Sheikh-ul-Alam and Kabir preached and practised the doctrine of humanity based on true love and selflessness through their poems. They preached the unbiased word of God, the irrelevance of caste, colour and creed in the social dynamics. They emerged as the critics of the then-existing socio-religious orders pleading for a universal unity among the masses. The three chose the medium of poetry to express their experiences and at the same time, relate to people. They derived the power and charm from the images, symbols and situations of daily life, thereby, granting their verses a more colloquial and comprehensive property. Their poems, thus, continue to provide solace and support to the masses even today. The study, therefore, explores and examines the contemporary relevance of the verses of these medieval Indian poets maintained by
their crisp language and plural themes. The way they related to the worldly realities, the tools and techniques they used and the intersecting grounds of their poetry would also be examined.

The thesis, apart from ‘Introduction’ and ‘Conclusion’, is divided into four chapters, each of which aims at exploring the varied dimensions in the poetry of Lal Ded, Sheikh-ul-Alam and Kabir.

In Chapter 1 entitled ‘Mysticism: A Journey from self to Self’, an attempt has been made to discuss the efforts every seeker places in reaching out to the Supreme. This journey undertaken by an individual to attain Supreme bliss is generally described as Mysticism. It has existed as a school of thought for ages and the human life is believed to have its culmination ultimately in the Supreme abode only. This Chapter dwells upon the types, ways and different approaches to Mysticism. The final destination remains the same but the approaches taken vary according to the lineage or the tradition or even the gender that one belongs to. The Chapter, therefore, discusses Mysticism in the three major traditions—Christianity, Hinduism and Islam. Since, the study is primarily rooted in India, therefore, the sub-areas of Hinduism and Islam—Shaivism, Bhakti and Rishism—have also been explored. The Chapter, thus, moves from a general or universal study of Mysticism to a more specific exploration of the concerned areas.

Chapter 2 entitled ‘Lal Ded and the Dynamics of Self’, traces out the life and the poetic journey of Lal Ded. She started her quest in the 14th century and being a Shaiva by orientation took on the Shaivist practices of worship. She saw Shiva as the higher Self, the source of sustenance. Her poems, called vaakhs, reflect the passion that she possessed for Him and for achieving a union with Him. In addition to the
Shaiva thought, there is a social ethos also present in her poems that grants her a space among all sections of the society. This Chapter traces the journey of her true Self from a personal to a social to a universal domain, thereby, establishing her as the pioneer of socio-reformist poetry.

Chapter 3, ‘Sheikh-ul-Alam: Self and Society’ deals with Sheikh-ul-Alam, a junior contemporary of Lal Ded. He was born in the late 14th century and adopted Rishism as his school of thought. He was, in fact, the propounder of the same. For him, Self was the means of survival and self, a means to reach it. Through his poems, called shruks, he welded together the Self and the society. Retiring to a cave, meditating, realizing the Self and ultimately reaching out to the masses are the hallmarks of his poetic craft. His poems are, therefore, emblematic of a journey that he undertook from seclusion to society. The Chapter explores his relation with the Supreme, his way of addressing the masses and also the way he made religion accessible to common people.

Treading the 14th century towards the 15th, we come across Kabir. Chapter 4 takes up an in-depth study of the poetry of Kabir. Kabir is one of the most revered and famous saint poets of India known for his poems called dohas. Living a simple life and finding God everywhere, his poems teach us complacence, universal brotherhood, humanity and perseverance. By calling the higher Self Hari, Ram, Rahim and Allah, Kabir touches upon the very basic principle of humanity: all are essentially One. He emerges, therefore, as a saint-poet and a preacher who went from place to place and made people realize that the greatest religion was humanity.

In ‘Conclusion’, an attempt has been made to make a comparative study of Lal Ded, Sheikh-ul-Alam and Kabir, bringing out the similarities and differences in their
poetry. Lal Ded, Sheikh-ul-Alam and Kabir have never been studied together extensively. Looking at their poetry, one finds a universal spirit of Oneness pervading throughout. Although they belong to different regions and different cults, their poetry grants them space in a common domain; their poetry contains universal elements which hold relevance to all irrespective of their religious, cultural and social differences. They differ in their approaches to the supreme Self but their ultimate aim remains the same.