Chapter 1

Mysticism: A Journey from self to Self

Mysticism has existed as an essential element in the human existence since ages. In its pure form, Mysticism is the science of the Ultimate and the union with the Absolute. Through it, the human spirit moves towards complete harmony with the transcendental order. Generally described as the art of union with the Supreme Reality, Mysticism is also an intuitional experience with the Supreme that one achieves through love and devotion:

Mysticism is the eager, outgoing activity whose driving power is generous love, not the absorbent, indrawing activity which strives only for new
knowledge that is fruitful in the spiritual as well as in the physical world… Mystic love is a total dedication of the will; the deep seated desire and tendency of the soul towards its source. It is a condition of humble access, a life-movement of the self.

(Underhill, 1911, p. 85)

Mystics in all cultures apprehend a truth that is beyond the grasp of the rational intellect. They attain the capability to grasp the unity of all things and perceive the co-immanence of the eternal and the temporal. This apprehension leads to the direct experience of God. The mystics realize God to be the reason of their existence and pass out of all that is merely phenomenal and achieve an understanding of the higher forms of Reality. An individual, in the mystical domain, transcends the worldly limitations and barriers and takes on to the path of the Supreme. It is in this domain that the synthesis of the self and Self takes place—the union of the finite and the infinite, respectively. The mystic tradition had its roots laid in the Hellenistic domain where religious rituals carried about secretly were the norm (Gellman, 2004). The earlier Christian tradition saw the domain as having hidden allegorical interpretations related to the scriptures and practices. This later expanded in thought and brought in the direct experiences with the Divine, thereby initiating the “mystical practices” (Gellman, 2004). According to William James (1902), Mysticism possesses certain important features which include immediacy, ineffability, passivity, transience and noetic certainty. The mystic experience is always immediate in the sense that it brings in a direct awareness of some other reality—the reality other than that of one’s ordinary self. It is the quick participation in the thing rather than a secondary experience. The mystic experience also differs from other human experiences, making it ineffable. Most mystics admit their failure at describing the experience, attributing it to the lack of language. That’s why, the language employed by mystics is, generally,
symbolical. They make use of metaphors and similes to convey their experiences. Mysticism defies expression; no contents related to it can be adequately reported in words. The experience is a direct one and it can’t be transferred to others. The mystical experience is passive in the sense that it comes on its own accord, once its conditions are met. The mystic doesn’t bring it out or cause it to occur. Upon entering the realm, the mystic feels his own will to be as if in abeyance and held by a superior power. The mystical experience is transient in the sense that its stages of illumination and ecstasy last for a short time. It may take a lot of time to reach the stage, but once this state is attained, the experience stays for a limited time. It is momentary, though its memory may last longer. Bertrand Russell writes:

The mystic insight begins with the sense of mystery unveiled, of a hidden wisdom now suddenly become certain beyond the possibility of a doubt. The sense of certainty and revelation comes earlier than any definite belief. The definite beliefs at which mystics arrive are the result of reflection upon the inarticulate experience gained at the moment of insight.

(Quoted in Inge, n.d. p. 24)

Mystic states are of illuminating and insightful nature. For the ones who experience them, they are also the states of knowledge making the experience noetic in quality. They are the states of an insight into the depths of the truth uninfluenced by the intellect. These experiences include, illuminations and revelations, full of significance (James, 1902). Victor Cousins opines that “Mysticism is the pretention to know God without intermediary, and so to speak, face to face. For Mysticism, whatever is between God and us hides Him from us… Mysticism consists in substituting direct inspiration for indirect, ecstasy for reason, rapture for philosophy” (quoted in Inge, n.d.).

Mysticism is generally divided into two categories—unitive Mysticism and the Mysticism of emptiness and void (Browning, 1979). The unitive Mysticism sees
the mystical experience, primarily as the experience of union or identity, either with God, persons, or objects in the world or nature. The Mysticism of emptiness or void sees it as the dissolution of the self or ego and attainment of a state of nothingness. This nothingness-state is also known as the nirvana or nirodha. Joseph Goldstein opines that all the meditation systems aim for one or zero i.e., union with God or emptiness (quoted in Browning, 1979). Daniel Goleman (1977, p.xix) states that “the path to the One is through concentration on Him, to the zero is insight into the voidness of one’s mind”. The Bhakti, Jewish Kabbalah, Patanjali Yoga and transcendental meditations are the examples of unitive Mysticism and the last stages of Visudhimagga Buddhism and Zen are the examples of Mysticism of the void (Browning, 1979). In the unitive Mysticism, in spite of the individuality and separateness, the persons are actually identical with the Self, the Whole or God. The worldly identity doesn’t allow an individual to distinguish the self from the Self and it is the mystical experience that brings about the union and the fundamental state of beings into consciousness. In the domain of emptiness and void, all the parameters of ego and self are abolished. The self-centeredness, egoism and selfishness vanish altogether and all that remains behind is love.

Mysticism is categorized into various other forms also, based on the approaches taken on the basis of experiences, ideologies and religions. The distinctions made on the basis of approach one takes in order to reach the Divine or the Supreme state of being include the domain as introversive or extroversive, theurgist or non-theurgist, theistic or non-theistic, apophatic or kataphatic (Gellman, 2004). The search of self for the Self takes on different forms. While at places this search is sense-based (extroversive), at other times, it is directed more inwards (introversive). From a theistic perspective, many mystics perceive God as unique and
matchless prevailing over His creation. Mysticism becomes the relation between God and the human soul, aiming at a complete union and identification with the Supreme. The seeker, according to this school of thought, is one with the Supreme in spirit as well as body. According to the non-theistic mystic schools of thought, there exists something in the universe which is indescribable—beyond comprehension, existence and non-existence. The self is also an outcome of the unnamed from which all other things take birth. In the apophatic tradition of Mysticism, negation is the norm where no symbols, no images, no words can express the Divine (Egan, 1984). From the apophatic point of view, God is indescribable. The Supreme transcends all categories and the existence is beyond human ideas and thoughts. The kataphatic tradition, on the other hand, views all things as a manifestation of God. The colours, images and beauty, all are believed to be the expressions of His diversity (Egan, 1984). All the approaches in the mystical domain lead to the oneness and union of self with the Self. The journey that the self undertakes encompasses a series of oscillations between the states of pleasure and pain (Underhill, 1911). All the metaphysical aspects get revealed with their truths during the mystic experiences and every mystic seeks to attain a loving and everlasting relationship with the Divine.

Every soul that takes to the divine path experiences the sunshine as well as the shade. Pain and pleasure are the constants of the transcendental life. As Blake says, “[T]he spiritual states of the soul are all eternal” (quoted in Underhill, 1911, p. 168). The whole experience as such consists of phases in a single process of growth and it involves the movement of consciousness from lower to higher standards of reality—from self to the Self. This phenomenon is found in nearly all religious traditions—Christianity, Islam and Hinduism being the main. The story of Christian mystics, Ursula King (Retrieved, 2015) opines:
is one of an all-consuming, passionate love affair between human beings and God. It speaks of the yearning, a burning desire for the contemplation and presence of the divine… This yearning is a candle by the fire of divine love itself, which moves the mystics in their search and leads them, often arduous journeys, to discover and proclaim the all-encompassing love of God for humankind.

In the Christian domain, the mystical life is divided into various phases—the first phase being the awakening of self. The awakening is psychologically believed to be an intense form of the phenomenon of conversion. “It is a disturbance of the equilibrium of the self, which results in the shifting of the field of consciousness from lower to higher levels, with a consequent removal of the centre of interest from the subject to an object now brought into view: the necessary beginning of any process of transcendence” (Underhill, 1911, p. 176). The conversion is primarily unselfing. It is the larger world-consciousness that presses in on the individual consciousness. It often breaks suddenly and becomes a new revelation merging an individual’s life with a larger whole (Starbuck, 1901). This phase leads to the understanding of presence of a divine consciousness. This experience is accompanied by joy and exaltation. After this stage, follows the purification wherein the self realizes its limitations and imperfections and attempts to eliminate all that stands in between it and the Self. Purification is known to be the necessary corollary of conversion. This state of purgation comprises of pain and effort:

By false desires and false thoughts man has built up for himself a false universe: as a mollusk, by the deliberate and persistent absorption of lime and rejection of all else, can build up for itself a hard shell which shuts it from the external world and only represents a distorted and unrecognizable form the ocean from which it was obtained. This hard and wholly unnutritious shell…makes as it were a little cave of illusion for each separate soul. A literal and deliberate getting out of the cave must be for every mystic…the first step in the individual hunt for reality.
The self must therefore be cleansed of all that stands in the way between it and the goodness. After purgation, the self becomes detached from the material things and takes on to the path of Supreme or spiritual awareness though the stage of illumination. **Illumination** forms the third stage in the mystic quest and grants the soul a certain apprehension of the Absolute and a presence of Him. “In illumination, we come to that state of consciousness which is popularly supposed to be peculiar to the mystic: a form of mental life, a kind of perception, radically different from that of “normal” men” (Underhill, 1911, p. 232). The simplest and commonest form of illumination is to attain a radiant consciousness of the otherness of things in nature or to see God in nature. After this stage, follows the mystic death or the mystic pain. The self completely surrenders the individuality and its will. The desires are killed and curbed and the self becomes passive leading to the ultimate stage of union. Union of the self with the Self is the true and ultimate goal of the mystic quest. This is the final stage wherein the self merges with the Self and a balance is achieved. This is a stage of equilibrium, of purely spiritual life and it characterizes peaceful joy, enhanced powers and intense certitude (Underhill, 1911). Union is the true goal of mystical growth, it is here that mystics attain God. Delacroix writes:

The Christian mystics move from the infinite to the definite; they aspire to infinitize life and to define infinity; they go from the conscious to the subconscious and from the subconscious to the conscious. The obstacle in their path is not consciousness in general, but self-consciousness, the consciousness of the Ego. The Ego is the limitation, that which opposes itself to the infinite: the states of consciousness free from self, lost in a vaster consciousness, may become modes of the infinite, and states of the Divine Consciousness.

(quoted in Underhill, 1911, p. 172)
This union, however, in the Islamic (sufism) domain has another stage beyond it—the stage of total annihilation or reabsorption of the individual soul in the Infinite.

In Islam, Mysticism is referred to as Sufism also and every mystic/sufi considers it as an all time engagement with the worship of Almighty. The one who follows this path sets himself aside from all the pleasures and worldly attractions/desires, taking them as evil. Sufis exist throughout the Islamic world and represent the mystical dimension of Islam. Sufism is the way of the heart, the way of the pure. It is the path that takes the seeker to Divine presence. Arberry (2000, p.vii) writes:

Sufism is the name given to the mystical movement within Islam; a sufi is a muslim who dedicates himself to the quest after mystical union (or, better said, reunion) with his creator. The name is Arabic in origin, being derived from the word suf meaning “wool”; the Sufis were distinguishable from their fellows by wearing a habit of coarse woollen cloth, in time when silks and brocades had become the fashion of the wealthy and mundane minded, symbolic of their renunciation of worldly values and their abhorrence for physical comforts.

The earliest sufis were solitary mystics who attracted people on the strength of their piety. These illumined beings taught their students the techniques they used to become friends of God. Those students who attained the spiritual realization in turn taught others. By the 9th century, formal sufi-orders were established, each originating from a sufi saint. The cities of Basra, Kufa, Damascus, Cairo, Baghdad, Arabia, Sinnai and Mesopotamia were the centres of the sufi movement (Arberry, 2000). However, the early years of the tenth century witnessed the heightened opposition to individual transcendence from the orthodoxy also. It was also the time when Mansur-al-Hallaj, the Persian born mystic, was executed for declaring himself as the truth. After this, many sufis reconciled with the tradition and accepted theology.
Unity is a core principle in Islam which refers to the monotheistic oneness of God and the intimate relationship between God and creation at all levels. However, for the sufi, unity or *tawheed* in Arabic is a fundamental mystical experience of reality. This means that we arise from God and return to God and this truth can be experienced and known. Therefore, sufis reach for their inner selves to communicate with the Divine. Sufis often use music as a source to connect with God. Although musical experience in Islam is debatable but sufi musical performances have played an important role in creative literature and poetry as well as in spreading the message of Islam throughout the world. The *rubbayi* (quatrain) was the means of expression for mystical thoughts and ideas (Arberry, 2000). The main theme of this early Persian sufi literature was the yearning of the lover for the beloved and a desire for the union which the two shared before creation. Then, by the beginning of the twelfth century, *ghazal*, too, had taken a place as a poetic medium of expression among the mystical lovers of God. Gradually, other forms of poetry also gave space to the mystical themes. The poems dealt with the pangs of separation, the desire for union and also highlighted the hurdles that mystics came across in their journey from self to the Self. The sufi practices like chanting, singing, dancing and meditation are all intended to lead followers towards the experience of annihilation or *fanaa* of ego. Sufism teaches that the ideal state of realization is insubsistence wherein the mystic is conscious of His unity and his own individual identity. The Sufis quest is to experience God within oneself. What is most essential to Sufism cannot be learnt but only be reached by personal experience and inward transformation. According to Nasr (1990, p. 157):

> Spiritual music is the key to the treasury of divine verities. The Gnostics are divided: some listen with the help of the stations (maqamat); some with the help of spiritual unveiling (mukashifat); some with the help of vision (mushahidat). When they listen according to stations, they are in reproach;
When they listen according to spiritual unveiling, they are in union (wisal); when they listen according to vision, they are immersed in divine beauty.

The Islamic mystic path is a well-framed one which a seeker is supposed to cross.

According to Ghazali (quoted in Rafiabadi, 2011, p. 36):

[C]omplete mystic way or Sufism includes both intellectual belief and practical activity and getting rid of the obstacles in the self and stripping off its bad characteristics and vicious morals so that the heart may attain to freedom from what is not God and to constant reconciliation of Him

Every seeker takes on to the endeavour of abstaining from all evil associations and deeds, focusing on the divine Self. Once purification is achieved, the Supreme Himself becomes the guardian and protector of heart of the seeker. In the opinion of Ghazali (quoted in Rafiabadi, 2011, p. 38), the very first step in the divine path sets the stage for revelations and visions. He believes:

In his initial stages, the mystic by concentrating on the perfect, eternal and absolute reality, loses even his self consciousness. He gets empty of feelings and even of ideas. He even ignores himself, as being now inside the divine presence and living together with it and having communication with it. His physical being continues, but, his individuality has departed; though for his fellow men he still has his physical body and appearance. This is a type of an ecstatic stage of contemplation, inspiration and of illumination which is most glorious attainment and very near to the goal of life, a state of concentration, of unification, of liberation, of discovery, of high-end and intensified powers and without a burst of joy of rapture and of radiance.

The sufi mystics spend their entire life in the pursuit of this divine grace and traverse with strong will, the difficult pathway of the divine love. The domain becomes the means of communion with the Lord for them. Fakhry (1971) writes that there are three varieties in Islamic Mysticism differing in terms of the objects they seek or the approach towards that object. The three varieties are labelled as philosophical, visionary and the unitary. For the first category i.e. the philosophical one, a
subordinate entity lying between God and man is the object and a theoretical communication or “conjunction” with the object is its goal. For the visionary and the unitary class, the Divine is the object. However, for the former, the vision or apprehension of the divine is the purpose and for the later, union with the Divine is the goal.

The first preceptor of Sufism in India is believed to be Al-Hujrawi also known as Data Ganj Bakhsh and his greatest work is *Kashaf-al-Mahjub* (1911) or *Mysteries Unveiled*. In this book, he has stated that a seeker or a sadhaka should be for at least three years under the guidance of a proper teacher. In the first year, he should focus on freeing himself from pride and serve humanity. The second year should be directed towards harmonizing all actions with divine idealism and serving God and the last year, he should realize his own true nature and see through his heart or look ‘within’ (Sen, 1929). After Data Ganj Bakhsh, it was the Chistiya school that reached India next, and Khwaja Muinuddin Chisti brought the doctrines of Khwaja Ahmad Abdul Chisti who lived in the tenth century and was the founder of this school (Sen, 1929). The spiritual activities of Muinuddin spread all over India and even the Hindus were not outside his influence. Like Bhakti, Sufism also spread across India and various disciples took the task of spreading the holy messages. Sufis like Khwaja Qutubudin Kaki, Sheikh Faridduddin Shakarkanj and Nizammuddin Aulia spread the religious messages to different parts of India. Khwaja Nizamuddin Aulia preached the religion of love which touched the heart of all and was accepted by a majority of people. The movement of Sufism gave birth to a number of poets also. Sufis like Shah Latif, Taj, Saiyid Ibrahim, Malik Muhammad Tayari, Nur Mohammad and many others used the poetic medium to express this spiritual love and also preach the messages of universal love and brotherhood (Sen, 1929).
The Hindu system of thought has one of the oldest traditions of Mysticism. According to Zaehner, a translator of Upanishads and Gita, “in the family of religions, Hinduism is the wise old all knowing mother” and that its most sacred books, the Vedas claim, “Truth is one but sages call it by different names” (quoted in Harvey, 2002, p. xv). All Hindu philosophies share a firm faith in rebirth and karma, in the recurring nature of time, in the transcendent and immanent presence of the Divine, in the illusory nature of life and in the great value of moksha or liberation. Nearly all schools of the Hindu thought derive their philosophies from ancient bodies of texts—the Vedas which include Rig-Veda along with the Upanishads which form the core of Indian Hindu Mysticism. There are many Hindu traditions but a single spirit that operates in them appearing as one eternal voice speaking in different forms and exploring different ranges of thought. The Hindu mystic tradition, like all other mystical traditions is “essentially practical, concerned with teaching, inspiring and guiding authentic transformation” (Harvey, 2002, p. xviii). At the core of Hindu Mysticism lays the spirit that pervades, creates and transcends all things and also the conscious identity of each soul. This all pervading, creating and all transcending identity is named as Brahmaan. Brahmaan, also recognized as the Supreme Self is the creating and the sustaining force of all existence and every human being is believed to be naturally one with it in his or her soul. This Self is the principle that pervades over everything and the self or the atman in a person is identified with this Supreme Self, also known as Brahmaan of the universe. Mysticism aims at taking a person on the way to recognize and realize the union of self with the Self and live a calm and fearless life radiating from this knowledge. It is also believed that a human being can achieve union with God in all of his aspects through a fusion of contemplation and action:
God is after all both eternal Being and Eternal Becoming; in contemplative knowledge of our eternal identity with Brahman, we rest in God's Being, like a drop of water in the all-surrounding ocean; in enacting the divine will selflessly, we participate in the transforming activity of God, in what a great mystic of another tradition, Rumi, called “God’s perpetual massive resurrection”. Both aspects of the Godhead, then, are open to us to taste, savor, celebrate and enshrine and life itself is the dancing ground of this divine human dance of opposite; the site of a perpetually evolving Sacred Marriage between matter and spirit whose potential possibilities and glories are boundless.

(Harvey, 2002, p. xxiii)

In the Hindu philosophy of thought, Vedanta occupies a significant place. The Vedantic system of philosophy has two broad aspects—the esoteric and the exoteric. The esoteric aspect is metaphysical and abstract in form and the later is rooted more historically and is meant for those who haven’t risen above faith and form. All the divisions of Vedantism deal with the doctrine of God or of the philosophical principle, the doctrine of the world, the doctrine of the soul, and lastly, the doctrine of the fate of soul after death (Robertson, 1916). However, at the heart of this philosophy lies “the identity of the self and the universe, the doctrine of Brahma as the one and sole ultimate reality, the One Eternal Being to which there is no second” (Robertson, 1916, p. 232). The unity of the Brahma and the self forms the base of this philosophy implying there is only one Real being and every individual self is identical with Him. There is an unending desire for union that the self seeks with the Self and it is manifested on the one end as the identification of the individual soul with the Brahman and on the other end, it is the extreme devotion to a personal God through Bhakti. The Hindu mystical thought at large displays four features: the first refers to its base of pure experience, which is a knowable and communicable state of realization. The second feature is the release of spirit of the individual from the bonds
of matter whether real or illusory. The third feature pertains to the focus maintained on proper channelization of energies of both the body and mind and finally, ‘knowing is being’ principle exists at the core of the Hindu mystical thought (Harvey, 2002). Knowledge in the domain means pure and total understanding which can lead to complete transformation. Some schools in Hinduism emphasize upon self-control and others stress devotion and divine grace. The main ways to attain God as laid by the tradition include the Jnanayoga which is the path to Supreme through knowledge; Bhaktiyoga which is the path of love and devotion focusing on imagination and passion; Raja yoga which is the path of psychophysical exercises and Karma yoga which is the path of good deeds and actions dedicated to the Supreme. All paths, however, work including the other paths and each chosen path opens to the realisation of all other paths and gradually fuses with them to give birth to a mature divine human being.

Whatever be the religious orientations, an individual’s inner self is always in search or quest of a higher reality and bliss. This quest takes different forms and gets manifested in different ways as discussed above also. All religions encompass within their domains the set paths to higher destinations, Hinduism and Islam being two widespread ones. Both the schools have sub-schools differing in practices and approaches. The present study concerns the poetry of Lal Ded, Kabir and Sheikh-ul-Alam, belonging to two Hindu schools of thought—Shaivism and Bhakti and one Islamic school—Rishism, respectively. The basic philosophy of these schools has been discussed below.
Kashmir Shaivism

Shaivism refers to a group of Hindu religious traditions which regards Lord Shiva as the Supreme power. Shiva, according to them, is the Creator, the Preserver and the Destroyer. It is a very widely followed sect in Hinduism and its followers are known as Shaivas or Shaivites. Shiva is the sole means of sustenance and the entire creation is a manifestation of Him. He is seen as both imminent as well as transcendent. He is present in all that exists and at the same time transcends time as well as space. Pandit (1990, xi) writes in this regard:

They [Shaivas] saw God even in all inanimate entities, as well as in things taken to be good and bad, pure and impure, desirable and undesirable. They saw all phenomena as the outward reflection of the divine powers of the Absolute shining within the psychic light of its pure consciousness.

Shaivism has various sects or schools which reflect certain differences in the philosophy. Kashmir Shaivism, Gorakhnath Shaivism, Pasupata Shaivism and Vira Shaivism are the main schools of Shaivism. All rever Shiva as the supreme Self but differ in their modes of worship and inner beliefs with regard to the relation between soul and the Supreme. Kashmir Shaivism as a school of thought originated in the 8th to 12th century of the Christian era in Kashmir (Singh, 2000). According to it, the Supreme consciousness was everything that existed and it incorporated both things with form and the ones, formless:

Kashmir Saivism is a philosophy which is quite different in many respects…it adopts a pragmatic approach towards all the problems of philosophy on both its sides of theory and practise…the universe according to it is neither like a mirage nor like the child of a barren woman. It is a reality for all practical purposes. But it is not an absolute reality, because it is a creation. It exists in the absolute reality in the form of pure limitless and all containing consciousness…Kashmir Saivism accepts no restrictions based on
caste, creed, sex, etc. every curious and devout aspirant can have access to it both theoretically and practically. It advocates a path aimed at both Bhakti and muktī both of which can be pursued side by side.

(Pandit, 1990, pp. 4-5)

Shaivism flourished under the Lohara dynasty in Kashmir and the early Shaivism was of the *pasupata* sect (Singh, 2000). The *pasupata* form of Shaivism was actually a devotional and an ascetic movement in the Shaiva tradition. *Pasha* referred to the created world or the effect and *pasha* was the cause or the Lord. The followers of this sect never approved of the doctrine of servitude. They believed that dependence could never bring cessation of pain and other desired ends. They, therefore, advocated an intellectual approach to reach the Supreme. Every spirit, according to them, possessed the attributes of the Supreme, and the ultimate connection of the soul with God could be achieved through intellect only. Shiva Srikantha propounded this faith in Kashmir. He also authored *shivaagamas* which are the tantric scriptures carrying all the basic Shaiva philosophy. The early Kashmir Shaivism was also known as *Trika*. Trika was the three-fold science based on the three energies of Lord Shiva—*Para*, *Parapara* and *Apara* (Dczykowski, 1989). These are the supreme, intermediate and the inferior energies, respectively. Trika focused upon teaching an individual how to channelize the cognitive energy and reach the Supreme, being immersed in the infinite energy. There are three ways of directing this cognitive energy on to a proper path—the *Sambhavopaya*, the *Saktopaya* and the *Anavopaya*. The *Sambhavopaya* is the first way and it is the supreme path. It demands absolving oneself of the recitation of mantras and instead demands developing an awareness of the Supreme “I” and dissolving the individual self in it. This brings the union of an individual with the infinite and grants him the status of *Jivan Mukta* (liberated being). *Saktopaya* takes a master to assist a seeker. The master guides and bestows a spiritual thought on the
seeker. The seeker focuses upon the same without any external support and the consciousness is achieved by meditation only. The path of anavopaya resorts to meditating practices like that of Pranayama. The seeker possessing an inferior capacity of mind seeks support of various mantras and other practices to reach the higher level of consciousness (Pandit, 1990).

Kashmir Shaivism as a philosophy was further based upon sacred scriptures or tantras revealed by Lord Shiva (Pandit, 1990). The tantras had three classes—the bhairava tantras, rudra tantras and Shiva tantras. This philosophy was addressed by sage Durvasa at the beginning of Kalyuga. Later, the philosophy of Kashmir Shaivism was taught in four great schools—pratyabhijna, karma, kula and spanda. All the four schools directed the seeker on to the path of attaining universal consciousness.

The Kashmiri Shaiva literature started in the 8th and 9th centuries (Singh, 2000). The literature has been divided into three basic parts—the Agama shastras, the Spanda shastras and the Pratyabhijna shastras. Various saints and sages dealt with these respectively and the most influential sage of Kashmir Shaivism was Abhinavgupta. He brought together all the four branches of Shaivism in his work Tantraloka. It exists as a major synthesis of the whole tradition of monist Shaivism. Jayanatha was another important saint in the Shaiva domain. He added commentary to Abhinavgupta’s Tantraloka. The Shaivite philosophy influenced literature also and the first specimen of Kashmir poetry is Shithkant’s Mahayana Prakasha. It is the first work of Shaivism in Kashmiri language. Kashmiri poetry, however, gained momentum through the vaakhs (poems) of Lal Ded. She was the first poet of Kashmir, Shaiva in belief and she used the poetic means to voice her mystic and social concerns.
Bhakti

Bhakti started as a religious movement in medieval India promoting the belief that everyone could attain salvation and have a personal relationship with God. It threw an open challenge to orthodoxy and casteism, and emphasized upon establishing a direct relationship with God. Bhakti has various forms and every form of Bhakti is determined by a particular mood also known as rasa and every emotion is transformed according to the rasa of the devotee (Bahadur, 1997). In order to seek the divine, every seeker adopts a particular way based on the rasa. The dynamics of relationship vary from one seeker to another. The relationship between the seeker and the sought can be that of a servant-master, parent-child, lover-beloved or a friend to friend. Bhakti generally shares the concern for moksha or salvation. Moksha refers to the release from the finite existence and achievement of transcendence. Alston (1980, p. 9) writes:

The word “Bhakti” comes from the root “bhaj” meaning “to share”. The basic idea is that God (termed “bhagwaan”, also from the root “bhaj”) allows his devotees (his Bhaktas) to share in his own nature and his own consciousness if they offer themselves to him in sincere love. Thus expressed, the term Bhakti implies a distinction between the lord and his devotee… the main tendency in Hinduism is to stress the unity behind the apparent diversity of the objects of the time-space world, and in general the different cults do this, in varying ways and with varying intensity.

In order to reach the divine abode, a seeker generally can take three paths. These paths include the path of knowledge (jnana), the path of action (karma) and the path of devotion (Bhakti). Whatever be the path, the two primary factors to Bhakti are always love and meditation. The love for God symbolizes a feeling of bliss and happiness and the relationship shared with God is of dependence also owing to
complete submission. The meditation in Bhakti is of two main kinds: saguna and nirguna. Saguna Bhakti is the form of Bhakti in which a devotee meditates on God considering Him a separate being and Nirguna Bhakti is the form of Bhakti wherein the God and self merge and the distinction between the two is dissolved. These meditative ways of practice emerged in different cults of Bhakti. The path of Bhakti was generally nine-fold, comprising of nine steps or practices (Nilsson, 2003). The first step on the path was shrava which was a practice of hearing the praise of one’s Lord in the company of religious men and women. The next practice was that of kirtana which related to continuous singing of hymns and praises to one’s lord, highlighting His attributes. Another step was that of smarana which aimed at remembrance and recollection. Another feature or step was that of padasevana which meant being servant to one’s Lord. Then, followed the practices of archana and vandana which dealt with the rituals like pilgrimages or worship of idols. Another characteristic of the Bhakti domain was the development of dasya bhava which was the development of a servile sentiment towards the Lord one worshipped. Sakhya bhava was another step on the path which meant development of familiarity with God. The familiarity developed upon growth of attachment. The last step on the path was atmanivedan which related to the expression of one’s feelings towards God.

Bhakti gained momentum from South India. Alvars and the Shaiva Narayana saints worshipped Lord Vishnu and preached the idea of Bhakti (Pandit & Tyagi, 2001). Alvars were the earliest Brahman missionaries to South and they carried the messages of love and devotion to various parts of India. The medium of communication was the vernacular. Their main ways of preaching included singing and dancing in meditation. Alvars inspired the Vaishnavas also:
The Alvars of the Southern India created a strong following among numerous people mostly Vaishnavas. To them utterances from the Divine mouth of the Alvars (or the Tiru Vaymoli) in spite of their birth in untouchable families were more honoured than the Vedas. Andal, a woman was an Alvar; she and her father Visnuchitta, an alvar too, were from low caste but they were greatly adored by people notwithstanding their very humble birth. On love and devotion which are inherent in the human heart, these alvars based their Bhakti cult.

(Sen, 1929, p. 46)

Bhakti gained a strong character and a popular base through this. After gaining popularity in the South India, it began to be defended at the philosophical levels by various scholars. Ramanuja, a 12th century Brahman scholar was the first to provide a justification for Bhakti. He defined Bhakti as contemplation of God and compared it to the smooth and ceaseless flow of oil (Alston, 1980). It was he who tried to establish the balance between Brahmanism and popular Bhakti. Bhakti was adopted as a mode of worship and it made God accessible to all including shudras or outcastes. “In the caste ridden southern India of the twelfth century, Ramanuja preached devotion to Vishnu and gave a high status even to members of low castes” (Sen, 1929, p. 47). Madhava (13th century) was another scholar who considered Bhakti as an alternative avenue of worship for those who were denied the right to formal worship. The schools of Ramanuja and Madhava presented a sort of sectarian aspect in a practical form.

Ramananda and Vallabhacharya were two other important saints who stayed in North India mostly and belonged to Bhakti orientations like Vaishnavism. Vaishnavism arose in the North India as a school of thought that revered Lord Vishnu as the Supreme and preached love, non-violence, peace and mercy to all. In the North, it first affected the lower section of the society and then, gradually expanded. Northern India was the land of Lord Krishna and the scholars like Ramanuja carried
the message of Bhakti from South to North striking a Vaishnava renaissance in the North (Singh, 1934). Ramananda was a follower of Ramanuja and he also travelled widely all over India least caring about the maintenance of the orthodox conduct:

Ramananda realized that for him who had taken to the path of Bhakti, rules of caste and various other worldly rules had become meaningless. So he should accept food from anyone…thus, from his artificial height Ramananda descended to the natural field of prema and Bhakti and began to preach his spiritual doctrines to all people irrespective of their caste and creed…according to Ramananda, any bhakta taking shelter in God merges his previous identity in Him. Hence, he is no longer different from his brother bhakta who might have come from a so called higher caste.

(Sen, 1929, pp. 71-73)

The Vaishnava schools of worship were divided into three groups in the North—those of Ramananda, Vallabhacharya and Chaitanya (Alston, 1980). Ramananda found his sect asserting the efficacy of Rama (incarnation of Lord Vishnu) and did away with the caste bias. Vallabhacharya and Chaitanya revered Krishna and Radha as the Supreme deities. All the sages promoted the worship of their respective Gods. Bhakti, thus, engulfed entire India from the 6th century to 12th century and the best literature in India is believed to have been created by the Vaishnava devotee poets.

Whatever form of Bhakti arose, it always found expression in accordance with the period, place and personality of the devotee and the devoted. The Bhakti tradition comprised of many schools like the Shaiva and the Vaishnava and almost all the bhaktas were at one level or the other defiant towards the society and transgressed the domains found on orthodox philosophies. Bhakti, therefore, gave rise to a number of saint-poets like Kabir, Namdev, Tulsidas, Akka, Meera, Janabai and many others who revolted against the orthodox practices and struck the drum of devotion throughout
India. Kabir was the most influential fifteenth century Bhakti poet who challenged the fundamentalist views prevalent in the society and preached love and universal brotherhood through his poetry.

**Rishism**

The word *Rishi* at the very root of Rishism is originally a Sanskrit word which in the pre-Islamic sense, referred to the wandering ascetics who had renounced the world. They would take refuge in forests and caves and seek union with the Supreme through stern practices. “In common usage among Hindus, however, the [R]ishi meant a saint or a sanctified sage…an ascetic, anchorite” (quoted in Rafiabadi, 2011, p. 49). There are varied opinions, however, with relation to the origin of this word. Some scholars try to Islamize the word and see it as a derivation from the word Persian word *raish* or *rish* meaning the feathers of a bird. The way a bird whose feathers are removed has no control over its body and is carried by the wind in whichever direction it takes, in the same way, a rishi is alienated from the world and lives alone. Another scholar Abdul Wahab associates the word with warmth and attributes it to a sufi (Rafiqui, 2009). However, these explanations don’t have validity. In the medieval Kashmir, the word rishi, like many other words, was assimilated into Rigveda and it meant a singer of ‘sacred hymns’. The word is now generally accepted to mean an ascetic or anchorite of a high reputation for sanctity (Rafiqui, 2009).

As far as the origin of Rishism as a movement is concerned, there are varied opinions. Some trace its genesis to the Aryans before their invasion of India. According to some scholars, rishis existed among the Zoroastrians of Persia and the pre-vedic inhabitants of the Indus Valley Civilization. Regarding the origin of Rishism in Kashmir, very few reliable sources exist. Kashmiris are believed to have
199 lineages, each claiming descendence from a particular vedic rishi (Ahmad, 2011). Pushp writes that the rishis of the vedic period weren’t ascetics/world renouncing mendicants but later in the Upanishad period, rishis set up ashrams that monks and shramans took refuge in and roamed the country sides (quoted in Ahmad, 2011). The Kashmir Rishism that we know today is, therefore, traced to the Buddhist period. Rishism as a school of thought is believed to have laid its roots in Kashmir prior to the advent of Islam and it gained immense popularity because of its anti-caste stance/crusade led by Nur-ud-din also known as Sheikh-ul-Alam and Nund Reshi. According to Ishaq Khan (1994, p. 107):

The rishi movement was a synthesis of universally accepted human purposes vis-à-vis the brahmanic ethnocentrism. Although the movement was essentially rooted in the local traditions, nevertheless, it became an important aspect of dimension of the Islamic civilization consequent upon the previous adoption of cultural traits or social patterns of Muslim immigrants-Sufis, ulama, artisans from central Asia and Persia by masses.

Baba Dawood Mishkati writes that Hindu rishis were in existence before Nur-ud-din and therefore, he is seen as the renewer of the ancient Hindu tradition which he Islamized (Gauhar, 2009). As far as the philosophy of Kashmir Rishism is concerned, it differed in many ways from other sufi trends. Rishis didn’t abandon traditional worship or the customary forms of worship but they were true in their forms of worship. They didn’t denounce men belonging to different faiths. They kept themselves aloof from the ruling class and differed in their approach with the sufis and their methods of teaching. Rishis stayed away from all worldly attractions. They didn’t even marry. Rafiqui (2009, p. 237) writes in this regard:

The rishis of Kashmir offer worship and penance only for god’s pleasure and salvation hereafter. Constant fasting is the chief characteristic (marsum) of the Rishis; they do observe this only to please the Almighty. There are many
hypocrites who do such things but only for worldly ends and not Allah’s pleasure. Such people are accursed and invite god’s wrath. The ultimate goal of the penance of the Rishis is to control carnal desires. They eat and drink such type of things as are bitter in taste. They eat less, they talk less and they sleep less. They do not like the company of worldly people and are always engaged in the struggle of controlling their carnal self. They do not exhibit their forms of worship, such as prayers and fast, before anyone.

Rishism in Kashmir had certain marked features. It was prevalent in Kashmir for a long time and the policy that it followed was living in solitude in the midst of the natural environment. A constant meditation was needed and simple vegetarian diet was the essence of rishi practice. The Muslim rishis refrained from eating flesh. They were strict in their refusal to take the life of any sentient being and survived simply on dry vegetables and grass. Rishis never got married (Khan, 1994). While they were criticized by various religious clerics for these things, in their defense they would say that marriage and non-vegetarianism weren’t forbidden for them but were actually meant for ordinary mortals. The Prophet of Islam had adopted the practices to show people a way of living and enjoying life. However, for the ones on spiritual path, according to them, all these things were a distraction and barriers to transcendence. These things would get them engrossed in the snares of self (nafs) while true faith was actually cleansing one’s heart and removing from it everything. The rishis followed the path of self-mortification in order to reach their destination (Khan, 1994).

According to rishi ethics, anger, greed, lust, pride and jealousy are unpardonable sins and the main aim of humans was to be of help to other creatures. They propagated the teachings of Islam, preached monotheism and cultivated love for the prophet of Islam (Rafiqui, 2009). Before Sheikh-ul-Alam, many other rishis lived in Kashmir. He mentions in his poetry various rishis who preceded him. Miran Rishi survived on water for eighty years and more, and Ruma Rishi spent his long life in meditation.
Palasman, Khalasman and Yasman Rishi were immediate predecessors of the Sheikh but Rishism, at this time, was localized and individualized and thus, had least effect on socio-economic life (Rafiqui, 2009). It was only under Sheikh-ul-Alam that Rishism became a movement also known as Reshut. It evolved into a cadre based movement of dedicated rishis, devised a mystic cult which though difficult to practise, was no less than a monitoring squad for society. In Kashmir, Rishism was largely a people’s movement. The rishis did not only propagate values but also implemented them in personal life. They served humanity with all their might. Their main aim was to provide comfort to all those who were in need. They would dig wells and canals to facilitate the supply of water and would carry water to far flung areas for people. Not only this, the rishis were responsible for exposing “tyranny, hypocrisy and falsehood and fought against religious interference of any kind” (Gauhar, 2009, p. 284).

Through rishis, the message of love and tolerance transcended barriers of caste and creed. Their general teaching of love made them acceptable to all communities. They advocated the cause of the poor and downtrodden. For rishis, religion was a bond between the creator and the creature. It was a spiritual experience and rishis believed in infinite attachment to God and an important thought underlying the rishi philosophy was the control of nafs—carnal desires. For rishis, desires were the greatest enemies to human self and needed to be controlled. The rishi school of thought laid huge emphasis upon building a society on values that supported and respected the rights of all fellow creatures. As a school of thought, Rishism had various proponents who used the poetic medium to communicate the messages and as mentioned earlier also, Sheikh-ul-Alam was the most influential of them all. He adopted ‘shruks’ as the poetic form to convey multiple messages. More than a saint, he was a poet, a critic, a reformer and also the founder of Rishism.
Nearly all religious movements have shared a strong bond with literature. Be it Bhakti, Shaivism or Rishism, all these, in addition to being religious in orientations, had a social dimension also. The saints associated with these schools used poetry as the medium of communicating and teaching their ideas. Their poems carry serious social issues and thereby, grant them a space both in the literary and social world. Lal Ded, Sheikh-ul-Alam and Kabir, all the three have, through their poetry, taught lessons that hold relevance even today. They stand as immortal emblems of purity, divinity and humanity. Their individual journeys have granted them a universal space and their poetic themes bear relevance in the contemporary times also. The following chapters will trace their poetic journeys and also highlight the themes embedded in their poems.