Chapter 2

Lal Ded and the Dynamics of Self

In the cradle of the earth, absorbed in God, was she, Lalla Arifa, constantly aware (of God)…she was one of those who wander in the wilderness of love wailing and lamenting (for the beloved); and she was a knower of the Path of the Valley of Truth (haqq).

Jay Lal Kaul

Lal Ded, popularly known as Lalla, also called Lalla Arifa, was born in Kashmir in the early fourteenth century. She was married into a Brahmin family of Pampore (10 kms from the city centre) at a very young age. Her married life, however, was utterly disastrous owing to a tyrant mother-in-law and an ill-tempered husband. The tale that her mother-in-law “would serve food to her spreading a thin layer of cooked rice so as
to cover a lump of stone which was placed in her plate” (Kaul, 1973, p. 10) hangs even today as an example of the torture that Lal Ded had to face. Owing to a constrictive and an orthodox environment, she took on to the mystic realm and narrated her experiences as poetry, thereby, emerging as the first woman poet of Kashmir. Lalla’s verses have existed as an integral part of the Kashmiri culture for centuries. Her vaakhs have been transmitted orally and the ways they are in use today also illustrate the influence she has on the folk memory. Her life is shrouded in myth, miracle and legend like lives of saints living across the world. Tor Andrae (2008, p. 63) opines in this regard, “We need to become acquainted with the greatest personalities of the world religions in those garments in which the pious faith of their followers have clothed them…something of the magic of their personalities which we might not understand in any other way, speaks to us through the poetry of faith”. Various legends and miracles have been associated with Lal Ded from her very birth. Baba Dawood Mishkati, a renowned sufi talks about Lalla as an advanced mystic who renounced her home and became an ascetic (Kaul, 1973). He also relates the water pitcher legend about her that marks the time when she renounced her home and became a wanderer. According to the legend, Lalla would get up before dawn everyday and walk to the river in a nearby village to fetch a pitcher of water. She would visit a nearby shrine also across the river to meditate. Her husband followed her one morning to the river bank to check out why it took her so long to return home. He was angered at her diversion and when Lalla reached home, he hit the pitcher with a stick; the pitcher broke into pieces but the water stayed intact on her head. Lalla calmly went inside the house, poured water into smaller vessels, throwing the left over water outside. It was this water which turned into a pond and got the name pond of Lalla or Lal Trag. This was the time which, according to many scholars, marked
the time of renunciation for her and she became a wandering ascetic. Lal Ded was affectionately called as Lal *mouj* (mother) also. She would sometimes be teased and mocked at and was even called various names like Lal *Mats* (mad Lalla) but she would never pay heed to the street urchins (Parimoo, 1978). A famous legend goes in this regard:

Once a shop keeper, a cloth dealer, reprimanded a group of such street urchins and drove them away. Thereupon, Lal Ded asked him to give her a long piece of cloth which he did. She cut it into two equal lengths and placed each length on either of her shoulders and went her way tying knots on one of them when people bowed to her, and on the other when they showed disrespect to her. In the evening, she came back to the cloth dealer and asked him to weigh the two lengths of cloth. They weighed the same, irrespective of the number of knots in either of them. Lal Ded smiled and said:

*aesa bol parinem sasa*

*me manivasya khed na heye*

Let them hurl a thousand curses at me

My heart will pay no need to them

Lal Ded is known as a pioneer of Kashmiri literature. She uttered her verses in Kashmiri and they are also known as *vaakhs* or *Lallavakhs*. Vaakhs are poems in the form of four lines. Her vaakhs are the outpourings of her soul, the expressions of her inner experience and also the comments on social situations around her. Nearly all her poems are packed with images drawn from common life. Her poetry was primarily mystic in orientation and it is through the mystic domain only that she arrived at a larger consciousness. She spoke not only of the love of God but also preached the primary human qualities like those of universal brotherhood, humanism, truth and a general love for mankind. As a poet, she gave space to all elements like esotericism and humanistic Mysticism (Kak, 2007). Her verses emblematized the implicitness of
expressions and also a dependence on the spoken idiom which flourished later on. Her poems are representative of the intellectual environment of the 14th century also where in the two separate realms of faith—Islam and Shaivism—intersected on the common grounds of humanistic beliefs. Shaivism was already in practice at that time and Islam reached people through Sufis who visited Kashmir at that time, thereby, developing a rapport with the native saints and scholars.

Lal Ded, as a poet, was primarily Shaiva in orientation. She was a follower and a preacher of the Shaiva philosophy of thought. Therefore, her affinity with the Trika doctrine (discussed in Chapter 1) is clearly reflected in her vaakhs. Her poems carry the mystic, philosophical, social, religious and womanly resonances. She aimed at awakening the latent faculties of the soul in order to facilitate its leap into the Ultimate reality. Lalla was a yogini (wanderer) and her vaakhs reflect the strength that she possessed and also the spirit with which she adhered to the yogic doctrine.

According to the Shaiva school of thought, consciousness is the fundamental ground of the reality both, subjective and objective, and the process of unmesa and nimesa, expansion and contraction, respectively, lead to the appearance and disappearance of the phenomenal reality (Kak, 1999). Lallavaakhs reflect the same philosophy. Lal Ded arrived at this understanding by crossing stage after stage. Her verses describe the advanced stages of practices that helped her tread the ego-consciousness and arrive at a universal consciousness by bringing the activities of the body and mind to rest. She realized that her essential nature was the basis of the outside world also. She took to the role of instructing others to tread the path to Divine and also preached the means to overcome obstacles and achieve higher levels of awareness. Her vaakhs are packed with numerous metaphors, similes and illustrations from day to day life and they also reflect the mixed group of audience that she was addressing (Mattoo, 2002). While
some of her poems talk about her devotion to God, others either describe Shiva as the transcendental reality or talk about the need to do away with the dualist beliefs in order to create an altogether new space for self-actualization ultimately arriving at a state beyond constructs.

Lalla was the follower of Advaita (non-dualist) doctrine and she opposed the Dvaita (dualist) doctrine to the core (Temple, 2005). For her, everything was a manifestation of the Supreme. Nature and Supreme were one to her. The individual self was always one with the Universal self. She believed that one who recognized this fact that He was in all could transcend the world. For a non-dualist, all customs are but modes of the Supreme and a devotee has the ultimate aim in gaining release from the rounds of rebirth and the way to escape it is to achieve a pure and perfect understanding and knowledge of Him (Temple, 2005). Lalla also stressed upon the same and those who failed to understand these truths were labelled by her as fools and their failure to understand the Divine as the reason for their re-birth. She says:

*tsidanandanas gyane prakashas*

*yimav tsyun tim zivan mokht*

*vesamas samsaranis pasyas*

*abodh gandah sath sath ditiy*

Those who glow with the light of the Self

Are freed from life even while they live

But fools add knots by the hundred

To the tangled net of the world

(Hoskote, 2011, p. 127)
What Lalla emphasized was that every individual required attaining and arriving at the true state of being. She started with her focus on the attachment to the objects of senses. According to her, an individual is always imprisoned in the worldly constructs and the self gets attached to these (Parimoo, 1978). The states of pleasure further bind it to a material world. For Lalla what was needed was a control over the carnal desires. Many of her vaakhs talk about the five principles of experience of the physical world—solidity, aeriality, vacuity, liquidity and formativity (Grierson, 1999). According to her, achieving self-knowledge becomes easier once the five organs of perception as well as action are brought under control. The first step to it is the withdrawal from ego consciousness or individual consciousness and embracing the Shiva consciousness or the Universal consciousness. It is with extreme will-power that a control is achieved on the five senses and with a sustained contemplation on the self; a path to the Self is found (Kotru, 1989). In order to reach the Supreme abode and attain divine grace, Lal Ded would often try to get away with the material bindings. In the following vaakh, she relates the spiritual illusions to a load of candy that she carries and is despaired at the loosening of the knot. The load has bent her back and she finds it a too heavy burden to carry. The guru reprimands her and instead of being relieved, she becomes more miserable (Parimoo, 1978). The control seems to have gone off her and the load heavier. She says:

\[
\begin{align*}
nabid baras ate gand dyol goum \\
dih kan hol goum hyaka khyoho \\
gvara sund wanun ravan tyol pyom \\
pahali ros khyol goum hyaka kyoho
\end{align*}
\]

The knot of the candy load is loosened
My backbone is bent now, how will I bear the weight

The saying of my priest pained me

My condition is like the flock of sheep without a shepherd

How will I carry this load?

However, in spite of all odds, she kept a vigil at her ultimate destination and the faith she had was completely unflinching. Lalla trained her mind and body to take on to the Divine path. The spiritual soil laid by her was very fertile and rich. She just had to take on to it with full practice. Lalla was, in her verse, both mystical as well as transcendental and her Mysticism along with her transcendentalism is filled with the terms of yoga philosophy. Yoga came naturally to her (Temple, 2005). The aim of yoga as a discipline is to emancipate or free an individual soul (purusa) from its bondage to the material universe (prakriti) (Grierson, 1999). This emancipation, however, requires a mental and bodily discipline that leads to a spiritual transformation. Along the path, comes the understanding which reveals the essential distinction between the two and facilitates salvation. In the yogic domain, human body is seen as a replica of the world. The forces that control the microcosm function outside also in the macrocosm. The yogi, therefore, by certain physical and mental processes can win the supernatural powers for himself and can have a miraculous control over the universe ultimately leading to the absorption of his soul into the larger Reality (Grierson, 1999). Lalla also employed the yogic methods and trained herself to achieve the higher end. She adopted it, received the word from her guru and focused on it with all her might. The mystic syllable OM was the point of focus and in the domain of yoga, the first step is that of concentration. According to her, Supreme could not be reached by the Yoga discipline alone but by persistent bodily exercises
and the contemplation undertaken by it. By the repeated practice of the yoga, the wide expansion of the universe is recognized and this recognition leads to the re-absorption in Him (Temple, 2005). In many of the Lallavaakhs, the concept of void is very predominant. Temple (2005, p. 168) writes in this regard:

Lalla constantly harps on the transcendental Void…this void is the imaginary body in which one feels oneself in dreams, a vague, indistinct and undefined something which is practically Nothing, not unlike the nothing of the experience of the really dream less deep state of life. The void may therefore be looked upon as the first stage in limited consciousness; and in the reverse order of the soul becoming united with the Supreme, it is the last stage of limited consciousness before the soul becomes conscious of universal experience as one with the Supreme.

She uses the expression, “a void became merged in the void” (Temple, 2005, p. 173). According to her, when the soul transcends the stage of the void and becomes absorbed in the Supreme as the unlimited pure consciousness and nothing else, only the sense of well being remains. This is the ultimate goal of the devotee and the aim of yogic exercises. Upon acquiring the true knowledge, the actual reality is recognized and the apparent reality disappears in the transcendental void.

Lalla initiated herself into the Shaiva yoga domain starting with Pranayama which related to the control over breath (Parimoo, 1978). The control over breath helped in awakening Kundalini (the latent energy in body). The path to the Supreme and the union with Him was a difficult terrain to cross and attain. It was not a simple move from the temporal state of mind to a spiritual state. To manage and control the senses and the vital nerves was a difficult task for her. Lalla explains this metaphysical feat in many of her vaakhls. She uses various metaphors to express her struggle. She says in a vaakh:
How I wish I were to know how to bring my Nadis into my grip
Tearing into shreds, collecting and pulverizing the klesas
Then would I learn, by and by, how to pound and prepare the potion
Shiva is difficult to attain and this is the lesson thou shouldst bear in mind

(Parimoo, 1978, p. 69)

The whole bunch of mystical vessels is brought into one grip (Parimoo, 1978). The klesas refer to the veritable chains and ropes that had to be torn apart and then, fixed, wound up and all the attachments powdered in the mortar of the mind with the pestle of the will. She further says:

When OM I brought under my control
Made my body burn like coal
Traversing six paths, I gained the seventh
And then, I, Lalla reached the place of illumination
By securing union with the Supreme, she aimed at achieving the escape from re-birth. This objective, according to her, could be achieved by contemplation of the yogic doctrines combined with the yogic exercises which ultimately lead to the absorption into the Supreme (Temple, 2005). The meditation was to be directed at the Supreme and the main exercise was the breath control. Release from rebirth was not possible unless a release from desires was achieved. The aspirant must be, therefore, devoid of all the attractions and desires as all the desires are the evil working against Release.

The journey of every mystic involves the exploration of the inner recesses of the being. The initial stages appear fragmented, and it is towards the end that stability is achieved (Kak, 2007). The Lallavakhs clearly reveal the ordeal that Lalla had to pass through in her life directed towards the Supreme. Some verses deal with the beginning of her quest as she struggles to train and channelize her body and mind. Other verses of hers specifically deal with the experiences and her introspective contemplation. Some other groups of verses project her outward inclination, and she takes on the role of a teacher instructing others to free themselves of the worldly attachments (Kak, 1999). At the beginning of her quest, the worldly life to her appeared as a river which she needed to sail through in order to reach at the desired end. She found herself adrift in the material world and needed to cross the river in order to reach the other shore. She relates the self to a boat towed about on the ocean of life and compares the body to a leaky vessel. Since the world was a temporary residence for her, it was necessary to reach the permanent abode and for it, she needed rigorous training of the mind in order to sustain her thoughts and the perilous journey. She says in a vaakh:

\[ ami pan sadras navi chas lamaan \]
Her soul yearned for its eternal destination. Parimoo (1978, p. 12) writes in this regard:

Deep down her soul, there was a burning desire to meet her Lord, the eternal home...her social environment was not congenial for her spiritual practice. Her efforts at concentration and yogic practice appeared to her as difficult and vain as the attempt of a sailor to pull a boat across an ocean with an untwisted yarn...her efforts seemed to go to waste as water poured into an unbaked earthen dish. In that condition of despondence, she seeks God’s benign grace to ferry her boat of spirit across the ocean of existence. Fain would she merge her little self in the cosmic Self which was its home.

Lalla prayed all day and night and upon entering the mystic domain, achieved union with the absolute. She started her journey with an uncertain fervour and ultimately merged with the Divine. Upon withdrawing from the world and devoting herself completely to God, she realized the true Nature which was oneness of the Self and self (Kaul, 2009). She believed in the unity of Supreme with all things and explained it by quoting examples from daily life. For this purpose, she used varied metaphors and similes to bring out the lessons she intended to teach. In the following vaakh, she uses water as metaphor to explain the holistic sustenance of the Universe. She uses
the other two forms of it also as metaphors—ice and snow—which exist in nature saying:

\[
\begin{align*}
turi & \text{ salila khota tay ture} \\
hemi & \text{ tre gay byon abyon vemarsa} \\
tsaitani & \text{ rav bati sab same} \\
sivamay & \text{ tsaratsar zag pasya}
\end{align*}
\]

Cold changes water into ice or snow

Discernment shows the three different states

Are not really different

When the sun of consciousness shines, the plurality is dissolved into oneness

The universe appears throughout permeated with Shiva

(Kak, 2007, p. 100)

Lalla talks about the changing states of water and through that, explains the unity of being. The way water changes states and in spite of turning into snow and ice ultimately returns to its original state. In the same way, the plurality of the universe is dissolved into oneness and in spite of having different forms is ultimately permeated with Shiva (Kaul, 2009). The state of water is a reflection of the universal state of individuals and the shining of the sun is the realization of one’s association or oneness with the self when the duality of subject/object is erased and the nature of self is revealed in its full (Kak, 2007). Hoskote (2011, p. 210) writes in relation to this vaakh:

As the action of the sun on ice and snow reveals, water, in all its avatars, remains essentially water. Lalla employs this metaphor to expound a central
teaching of Kashmir Saiva philosophy. In this account, all things are manifestations of the Supreme Consciousness: they are created in the playful spirit...the differentiated forms of the universe dissolve back into unity

In another vaakh, she relates the metaphor of grindstone and axle to the self and compares the self with the axle of the grindstone. The moving axle becomes the driving force which brings about the motion of flat stones that grind the wheat to fine flour (Hoskote, 2011). She says:

grata chu pheraan zere zere

uhukui zani gratuk tsal

grata yel phere te zavyul neri

gu vati panai gratabal

The grindstone moves on its axle.

Only axle knows the grindstone’s mystery.

When the grindstone moves, fine flour can come out

The wheat will move itself towards the grindstone.

In the above vaakh, grindstone acts as the metaphor of human existence. To live an illumined life, the self aware individual takes control of axle of life in order to reach the higher self. Hoskote (2011, p. 163) writes that in the above vaakh:

The secret central to all wisdom teachings, as simple in the telling as it is difficult in the doing, appears here as the shifting and unpredictable balance between labour and grace, the questor’s effort and the unprompted abundance of the Divine. The mill symbolizes the slow, sustained rhythms of spiritual practice; the grain is the self, and the wheel is the Self.

Lalla spoke about the continuity of Self and self and to her, individuals weren’t islands but waves in the oceans as their existence was bound with the reality out of which they emerged (Kak, 2007). For her, it was also continuity, a net spread
over the entire universe as a manifestation of Shiva which enabled the sustenance of existence. She says in a vaakh:

\[
\text{shiv chuy zavyul zaal vahraevith}
\]

\[
\text{kranzan manz chuy tarith kyath}
\]

\[
\text{zinda nay vuchahan ada kati marith}
\]

\[
\text{pana manz pan kad vetsarith kyath}
\]

The Lord is a subtle net spread across

Inside your body; unlike your skin

If you can’t see Him while you are alive

How can you see Him when you are dead

The Divine pervades the universe and also permeates the individual self. In the above vaakh, “[t]he Divine is seen as a recovery net that spreads out to trap and trawl back all the manifestations of itself…This vision of wholeness and re-integration waits to disclose itself to the prepared consciousness…” (Hoskote, 2011, p. 212).

Lallavaahks also reveal the loneliness and the solitude that Lalla had to suffer from. She felt herself alone, helpless and lonely like a traveler on a directionless road. However, she finally caught hold of the way that led her to the ultimate destination which she was craving for. The desire for union with the Ultimate never let her rest and made her step ahead tracing him out:

\[
\text{lal bo drayas loh lare}
\]

\[
\text{tshaandaan lusis dyen kyo raath}
\]

\[
\text{wichum pandit panne garre}
\]

\[
\text{sui rotmas nechtur tai sath}
\]
Lalla, I, set out full of love.
Day and night I spent searching.
Met the Pandit in my own home
Caught I him, at that auspicious moment

In the above vaakh, Lalla talks about her passionate quest. “The quest is presented as a returning curve; crazed by the love of God, the questor goes out into the field of experience but returns to the space of the self, finding at home what she thought to find in the world…”(Hoskote, 2011, p. 158). Lalla was never fit in this world. She was other-worldly in her demeanour (Parimoo, 1978). She had chosen her path and whatever obstacles/incidents she came across were used by her as a way to reach up. She desired naturally to back off the bonds of attachment of the self with the worldly things. She would observe the dynamics of this world and the imbalances and injustices prevailing saddened her and further encouraged her to break off with the worldly matter. In a poem, she says:

\[
\text{gatulah akh vuchum bocchi seeth maraan}
\]
\[
\text{pan zan haraan puhni vavlai}
\]
\[
\text{nesh bod akh vuchum wazas maraan}
\]
\[
\text{tan lal bo chas praraan tshenem na prah}
\]

A learned man saw I dying of hunger
The way leaves die of the autumn wind
A fool saw I beating his cook
Since then I, Lalla, am waiting for the worldly ties to be severed

In relation to the mentioned poem, Hoskote (2011, p. 169) writes:
Lalla expresses her exasperation in the face of the world’s inexplicable cruelty and manifest injustice, the transience of all that was loved and cherished: a wise man may die of hunger, a cook may be brutally mistreated by his whimsical master… and yet she both hates and loves this world, and hopes that a miraculous surgery of wisdom may sever the umbilical cord that keeps her attached to it.

Seeing a fool, enjoying the delicacies of life and a wise man suffering because of the lack of food acted as an eye opener for her. She desired freedom from the world and the prevailing injustices (Kak, 2007). She knew that the worldly life was futile and that she had a different path in store for her. Nothing was so powerful that could derail or distract her from the path that she had taken up. She strived for the realization of the self and her vaakhs were emblematic of the spirit that she was composed of:

*ayas ti syodui gachi te syodui*

*sedis hol me karem kyah*

*boh tas asas agarai vezay*

*vedis ta vendis karem kyah*

I have come straight and straight shall I go back;

Who can warp me out of my shape?

I knew Him from the source

Oh! Who can harm one acquainted with and familiar to Him?

(Parimoo, 1978, p. 10)

Her desire to reach out to the Lord was not futile in spirit. It wasn’t just fancy but her conviction as well that was very firm. She, therefore, made up her mind to cling to the straight path and make most of her life that she was living. Her self-control and the
belief that she could not be bent by any of the external forces or pressures helped her sail through all odds successfully:

She was conscious of the direction her spiritual boat was to sail in and nothing could deflect the needle of the compass guiding her. She could not be warped out of shape by external forces and pressures, however vehement and antagonist they might be.

(Parimoo, 1978, p. 10)

The belief that an individual continues to be born again and again till he/she attains self-realization holds firm in Lal Ded’s philosophy also. She wanted to keep the life that she was living the last of the cycles and she held the belief firm that one who loved God truly could never be deserted by Him in the hour of need and thus, nothing of the world could bring her harm for she was on the path of the Divine (Parimoo, 1978). She combined her faith and hope and emerged empowered. She wanted to get out of the world of manifestation and embrace transcendence. There was a desire to meet the Lord burning deep down her soul. Lalla was an ardent aspirant of truth. The fire of love burning in her was very strong. Bankey Bihari writes with regard to Amir Khusrao that as a child he would every morning have the part of his shirt, touching his chest, burnt with fire. Such is believed to have been the intensity of the love burning like fire in his heart (quoted in Parimoo, 1978). This also testifies to the fact that it takes a good amount of time in order to turn into a mystic and that it is not something that happens overnight. Same held true for Lalla. The seed of Mysticism was gradually maturing within her over the years and the circumstances also worked well for her as she was able to adopt an attitude of indifference and insouciance towards everything. Her tolerance and stamina grew extremely strong with all the trying events. At a stage, she turned completely indifferent to nearly all things that were taking place outside her domain. In a vaakh, she says:
mud zenith pashith ta in
kol shrutuvun zad-rupi as
yus yih dapi tas tiy bol (boz)
yohoi tattvavidis chuy abhyas

Though thou has knowledge, be thou as a fool
Though thou can see, be thou as blind
Though thou can hear, be thou as dumb
Be thou as it were, a non-sentient block
Tell others what they like you to say

This is the wont if one who knows the tattvas

(Parimoo, 1978, p. 20)

An important stage of Mysticism is passing through the state of despair often known as the dark night of the soul. The evolution from the actual to the ideal requires a lot of efforts to be made by the seeker. William James opines that “in spite of the unquestionable fact that saints of the once born type exist, there may be a gradual growth in holiness without a cataclysm…you must be first nailed on the cross of natural despair and agony…” (1902, p. 228). Lalla, too, passed through this night of despair. For Lalla, aspirations were a huge hurdle to be crossed and it was a difficult task to keep herself away from the material attractions. She would continuously reprimand herself, her soul and heart to do away with the material attractions. She says:

lalith lalith vaday bo vay
tsetta muhic peiy may
I gently lament for you
Mind, you are in love with illusion
Nor a shadow of this worldly splendor will accompany you
Oh! Why do you forget your real nature?

(Kak, 2007, p. 31)

The desires of the heart and the world strike continuously, creating an aura of frustration within the individual. It was a very difficult task to do away with nearly all the desires. Lalla, too, being a human, at times, appears to be shocked by her human weakness and in her poems, we find a continuous feel of reproach (Parimoo, 1978). Her vacillation, however, was momentary and she never lost control over her permanently, neither did she ever lose her way or the sight of her destination. She says:

ha tseta kava chuy logmut paran as
kava goi apazis pazyuk bronth
dushiboz vash koranakh par daramas
yina gatsjana zena-marhanas kront

O mind! Why have you developed attachment for others?
Why have you taken the unreal for the Real?
Your lack of wisdom has ensnared you in a false dharma
You are getting involved in a never ending cycle of birth and death

(Parimoo, 1978, p. 33)
She reprimanded her mind as to why did it attach itself to things that are purely worldly in origin. She castigated herself for mistaking the unreal for the real. No religion of formalities brought her solace or the promise of union with the Lord. It was the Shaiva philosophy which lay a huge influence upon her (Bhat, 2014). Therefore, the Lord was within and outside also, all pervading, all immanent and transcendent. He was the Self in man and realization of the Self was her goal.

According to the Advaita Shaiva philosophy, the atman that is the true and the innermost self in every being is a changeless reality of the nature of a purely experiencing principle. The only way to escape re-birth was the union of the macrocosmic self with the microcosmic self (Temple, 2005). No religion as understood or practised was able to take her to the destination and finally it was the domain of yogic Shaiva practices as mentioned earlier also that she took to. Lalla would find herself in a state of despair and grope in the dark. She longed for a ray of light passing through the dark caves of human existence. Her vaakhs reveal her sadness and discomfiture. She says:

```plaintext
ayas vate gayas na vate

suman svathimanz lustum doh

chandas vuchum ta har na ate

navi taras dim kyah boh

My path to this world was direct, the road back is not

The day passed by the riverside

Not a penny in my pocket

What would I pay to be ferried across?
```

(Kak, 2007, p. 27)
She had an intensely burning desire to reach the ultimate spiritual abode and make the most of her earthly days. Her efforts were directed at finding out the higher road to salvation. In the above vaakh, she ponders upon her desperation to cross the stream but being unable to do so owing to a lack of sources (Parimoo, 1978). Metaphorically speaking, this desperation can be related to her inability to cross the path or the obstacles that she came across in her mystic path. She was yet to inculcate the qualities that could take her higher in life. The road to spiritual perfection was yet to be formed. Parimoo (1978, p. 36) writes in this regard:

She was trudging along an unfrequented embankment broken by a stream which cut across it and over which stood not even a rickety, ramshackle wooden bridge...in the mystical parlance, it was a bleak prospect...she had not as yet earned a penny-worth of spiritual wages to pay the boatman to carry her across the river of existence, so that she might fulfill her ambition of reaching her destination where the individual soul gets merged with the Universal Soul...she longs for a favourable wind of enlightenment to lead her on to the high road of mystical perfection.

The vaakh confirms that she was in a state of mental agony and she feared that the life that she lived was running to waste. Her helplessness gets voiced in her vaakhs clearly. She says:

*hachvi harinj petsiv kaan gom*

*abakh chan pyom yath razdane*

*manzbag bazras kulfa ros wan gom*

*tirth ros paan goum kus mali zane*

A grass arrow fitted on a wooden bow I am

My palace is in the hands of an ignorant carpenter

In the midst of the market place I am
Like a shop without a lock
My body has become bereft of sanctity
Who would understand my plight?
(Kak, 2007, p. 34)

Lal Ded, in the above vaakh, bemoans her lot. She had nobody who could understand
her plight. Her spiritual pangs and yearnings remained unnoticed. She relates her
spiritual stamina to a strongly built wooden bow but the arrows were like baseless
weeds. Her body was like a palace but it had been taken over by a witless carpenter
(Kaul, 1973). She saw herself as a shambled soul deprived of spiritual healing. She
was at a loss to understand what to do with her and her mood of wretchedness,
therefore, was becoming poignant for her suffering remained unnoticed. In another
vaakh, she says:

\[
yi kya asith ye kyuth rang goum\]
\[
cang gom tsaith hudhudne digay\]
\[
sarinay padan kunuy vakhun pyom\]
\[
lali me trag goum, laga kami shathay\]

In spite of being different, what a dye have I been dyed in!

Adverse winds are tearing holes in me as does the hoopoe peck
holes in the ground

All my verses have the same burden (of despair)

A large hole has been dug in Lalla’s heart: I know not the
sandy shoal on which my bark may wreck

(Parimoo, 1978, p. 40)
She knew that she was born different. She was aware of the course she had chosen but on the way, she had to face a lot of adversity and obstacles. Her condition was like the sails being tossed off by adverse winds and she was afraid of getting wrecked on the shore. Lal Ded was a child of light but she had limitations also. She had taken to the path of redemption but had to pay a high price for it. She was scandalized, tortured and rendered helpless (Kotru, 1989). Her disgust at the world, therefore, took a space in many of her vaakhs.

After utter despair and yearning, however, followed a determination to take on to the route head on and with it came hope. The dark night of despair was, therefore, followed by a radiant hope. After utter desolation, she began to console her mind and it was the unshakable faith in the benignity of the Lord that succoured her out of the dark recesses. She says:

\[
\text{tsal tseta vondas bhayi ma bar} \\
\text{con tsatith karan pana anad} \\
\text{tse ko zanana khyod hari kar} \\
\text{keval tasunduy taruk nad}
\]

Fickle mind, don’t be overcome by fear
You are cared for by the beginning less source
You do not know when your hunger is satiated
Meditate only on the all permeating unobstructed sound

(Kak, 2007, p. 114)

She encouraged her heart not to give way to fear and misery. She did have fits of failure and restlessness but her strong faith in her Lord acted as a shield against all odds for her. It was hope and faith that helped her progress upwards and with all
strength in place, she chalked out the strategy to defeat the enemy—the fickle mind (Kotru, 1989). She looked forward to the divine call and believed it to be the source of illumination within her.

Lalla didn’t believe in any rituals or ascetic practices, or for that matter, any works done for any profits whether spiritual, secular or formal worship. She attached importance to the intention not the ritual as being important for attaining release (Temple, 2005). According to her, all work or labour must be undertaken without any hidden motives of profit. In her vaakhs, she narrated her journey and her experiences. She began with saying that she had wandered far and wide in search of truth and had made pilgrimages to many places but she ultimately found her Lord residing in her own soul. She found her own self was one with the Supreme Self. As stated earlier also, Lal Ded didn’t consider herself as separate from the Ultimate. She found the self as being a realization of the Supreme and therefore, in her poems constantly talked about arriving at the Ultimate truth by peeping into her own being. She says:

*shaye aesis te shaiy chaes*

*lal bo panai paanas chaes*

*neerith gachaan te teelith yivaan*

*lal bo panai dayee chaes*

I was hopeful of my lords benevolence and continue being as such

I am one with Him and acquainted with all His mysteries

I traverse at my will the whole cosmos and return instantly to my current state

I am a divine spirit in the garb of a human being

(Bhat, 2014, p. 65)
Many great philosophers and thinkers have elaborated upon the concept of self as being a manifestation of the Supreme. Iqbal, one of the greatest philosophers of the world has also emphasized upon the fact that self is the source through which one can bring oneself close to the ultimate Self. He says:

\begin{quote}
apne man mai doob kar pa ja suraag-e-zindagi
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
tu agar mera nahi banta na ban, apna tou ban
\end{quote}

Delve into your soul and there seek our life’s buried tracks

Will you not be mine? Then be not mine, be your own right

(Jibril, 2011, Retrieved)

It is important to delve deep into one’s being in order to realize the real state of the soul. In order to understand God, understanding the self first is most important and according to Iqbal, the place of God is the human heart. The way of approaching Him is therefore, communion with one’s own self. Iqbal gave the concept of Khudi which relates to the fact that knowing oneself is an immediate perception of God. The ultimate goal of attaining Supreme bliss is achieved by the absorption of divine attributes. Upon being deeply related to God, the self attains its highest goal leading to a union of the temporal and the eternal.

Lalla devoted herself passionately to the doctrine of oneness of the individual self with the Supreme Self. She too at the early stage of her journey was ignorant of the real nature of the Self. She had attached herself with the personal identity knowing not the real nature of the Self as the only manifestation of the Supreme. Upon attaining this knowledge, Lalla understood that there was only one Supreme reality that pervaded over all. She, therefore, cared nothing by what name the Supreme was
called or worshipped (Kak, 2007). For her, only one reality pervaded irrespective of different names. She says:

\begin{quote}
\textit{shiva wa keshav wa zin va}
\textit{kamalaza nath nama darin yuh}
\textit{me abali kasitan bavaroz}
\textit{suh va suh va suh va suh}
\end{quote}

The Self may be named Siva
Kesava or Mahavira
Or the lotus born Buddha’
Whatever name it may have
May it set free a weakling like me
From worldly afflictions

(Kak, 2007, p. 39)

Many of the Lallavaakhs talk about the former births and lives and thus, Lalla enforces the importance of the doctrine achieving final Release. She had taken many births but in her earlier lives, she had not attained salvation and it was in this birth that she decided to put in all needed efforts and emerged a \textit{jivanmukta} (liberated soul). By her yogic practices, she reached the ultimate place of illumination. She brought the breath under control and meditated on the syllable OM (Parimoo, 1978). Thus, she was able to suppress her vital airs and emerge empowered.

In order to reach the desired end, however, Lalla obviously had to pass through a great deal of ordeals, spiritual as well as social, which she was ever ready to bear with. She was a part of society which had at its core orthodoxy and pre-
constructed norms. The times that she lived in were beset with a lot of religious and social changes. Sectarian loyalties to different formalities of worship led often to controversies. Kashmir witnessed a lot of changes with regard to the religious thoughts and practices. Buddhism had stayed as a religion for a long time and after it, Sankaracharya brought in Advaita Mayavada (Parimoo, 1978). Vedanta, too, had made a place and all religions preached their own conventions. So, Lalla was living in a society beset with a lot of cross-religious ideologies. However, for herself, she had identified the path long back. So, the formal institutional religions could cause her no drifting. In a vaakh, she says:

\[
\text{tsalun chu vuzmal te tratai} \\
\text{tsalun chu mandyani gatkaar} \\
\text{tsalun chu paan panun kadun gratai} \\
\text{heta mali suntosh vati panay}
\]

Endure lightening and thunder

Endure darkness at noon

Endure passing through the grinding mill

If you are content, dear, He will come to you

(Kak, 2007, p. 129)

In the above vaakh, she talks about cultivating enough tolerance to be able to reach the higher state of being. She believed in cultivating patience and through it attaining contentment and peace. She speaks of patience as being the ground between two mill stones; the lower one being the immovable strength of faith and the upper one, the force bent upon an individual crushing and pulverizing him/her. She had turned a completely deaf ear and a blind eye to the sarcasm that she was faced with (Hoskote,
According to her, an aspirant of truth couldn’t afford to waste breath or energy on trivial things. There needed to be a control over all senses. Lalla did away with all the pleasures of the world and nourished the thoughts of Lord within her but the path to God wasn’t that easy. She stood firm in her beliefs and instead preached tolerance and forbearance. She resisted all the rival demands. For her, name didn’t matter at all and any name would suit Lord. For her, it was the direct awareness of the Lord which mattered. It was the be-all and end-all of her life. She did not believe in any compartmentalization of religions (Kak, 2007). Lalla was a mystic to the core and she, therefore, did away with all the worldly distinctions and her vaakhs clearly reveal this thing. The formal religious practices and rituals were insignificant and meaningless to her. In the true state of knowledge of the Lord, all the forms of worship take a secondary seat. The primary need and focus is upon knowing Him and that’s what Lalla strived to achieve.

Another important aspect to Lalla’s poetry was the critique of religious practices of all kinds. It was not just by renouncing homes, reciting prayers, chanting mantras or using rosary beads that one could attain the higher bliss. The habitual religious practices could provide apparent solace to the individual but in reality, they would do nothing to expand their vision to bring them closer to God (Toshkhani, 2002). Lalla advised people to cultivate compassion and refrain from being a part of any ostentatious practice. The real practice was introspection which involved controlling one’s mind and one’s breath. It also included renouncing negative characteristics and performing good deeds for the larger benefits of humanity. Acquiring knowledge and opening up the self to divine consciousness was a living act requiring inner transformation. The acquisition of knowledge also differed from the general accumulation of religious knowledge. She says at many places that she learnt
a lot of things from books but there were many other things that she learnt through
direct experience (Kak, 2007). She says:

\begin{quote}
\textit{avetsari pothen chiho mali paran}
\textit{yitha tota paran rama panjaras}
\textit{gita paran ta hitha labaan}
\textit{param gita ta paran ches}
\end{quote}

Those without discernment dear

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

(Kak, 2007, p.160)

For her, therefore, direct experience was more important than elaborate scholarly
studies. She critiqued people who had scholarly achievements for they were
intellectually sound but very hollow as humans. Lalla’s vaakhs contain many
messages regarding religious tolerance. She preached that in spite of having different
castes, names and religions, people were essentially the same. They were sustained by
the same divine consciousness and it brightened everyone with equal intensity. Once
the ignorance leaves hold of an individual, the divine consciousness illuminates the
visible and the invisible world (Kotru, 1989). She talks about this by referring to the
stones having a single source but serving various functions. While some stones serve
as parts of the grinding stone, others take place in temples where people go to fulfill
their spiritual needs. Many others are used to make pavements for people to tread
upon. However, all the stones have their origin in earth only. In the same way, the
ultimate source of existence is One in spite of having different forms or
manifestations (Parimoo, 1978). That’s what Lalla preaches and therefore, refrains
herself from identifying with any caste or religion. According to her, God was the
ultimate truth without any artificial divisions. The state can be named anything but the
reality remains the same. She says:

shiv chuiy thali thali rozan
mo zaan hyond tai musalmaan
trukh hai chukh te panun paan prav zaan
soi chaiy zatas seeti zaan

Shiva is watching you constantly
Consider not Hindus and Muslims apart
If you are intelligent, know yourself
That’s knowing your Lord.

Many of the Lalla’s verses focus on the need to do away with the negativities as they
strengthen the ego and stop one from gaining the enlightenment. They make a person
preoccupied with satisfying the worldly desires. For her, it was the within that needed
to be changed. She urged people to cultivate moral values based on honesty and
responsibility instead of being hypocrites at the religious and social level. She says:

yuh yi karm kari petrun panas
arzun Barzun beyis kyut
antih lagi rost pusirun svatmas
ada yuri gatsha ta turi chum hyot
Responsibility for your actions, you must bear

Others share their fruits without attachment

I offer my actions to the higher self

Wherever I go is all right with me

(Kak, 2007, p. 123)

Lalla’s verses testify that she was immune from the worldly, religious or caste based biases. Her poems are emblematic of a liberal outlook. “Her poems move seamlessly between the metaphysical realm of the cultivated breath, the opened lotus of consciousness and vatic ecstasy on the one hand, and the domain of objects, tools, social relationships and human emotions on the other” (Hoskote, 2011, p. lxv). Lalla’s life was based upon a vision for peaceful co-existence, compassion and love for all. She urged people to improvise their character and strive for attaining moral perfection. She brought the scholarly Sanskritised Shaiva philosophy out from the orthodox clutches into the wide open public domain. She communicated the incommunicable using the idioms, images and metaphors from the ordinary daily life. This gave her a huge space and popularity among the masses and through her verses, she lives today also. She has left behind a legacy that holds relevance in the contemporary times also. She doesn’t remain a mystic only but through her Mysticism, conveys much deeper and wide meanings and realities of life. Her vaakhs act as a source of strength for people in their fight against all the challenges posed by the world. She is not only a woman poet saint but exists as a symbol of the continuum of poetic sensibility across centuries. Her poems carry all themes ranging from religious to social and in her journey towards the Supreme, she was able to leave messages for all generations to come. Her verses, therefore, still radiate the light that brightens the hearts and souls.
In consonance with Lal Ded was her junior contemporary, Nund Rishi, also known as Sheikh-ul-Alam. He was a late fourteenth century Kashmiri mystic who used poetry as the medium to communicate his socio-religious thoughts. The next chapter will trace out his poetic journey from solitude to society. It will also explore the religious and social overtones as expressed through his poems.