
Mysticism in Kashmiri Poetry

¹Dr. Asghar Ali Ansari

School of Languages, Literature & Society, Jaipur National University, Jaipur, Rajasthan.

²Miss. Anmol Bhat

School of Languages, Literature & Society, Jaipur National University, Jaipur, Rajasthan

Article Received: 06/02/2026**Article Accepted:** 07/03/2026**Published Online:** 08/03/2026**DOI:**10.47311/IJOES.2026.8.03.48

Abstract:

Mysticism in Kashmiri poetry represents a profound exploration of the human quest for the divine, rooted in the region's unique confluence of cultural and philosophical traditions. Drawing heavily from **Kashmir Shaivism** and **Islamic Sufism**, Kashmiri mystical poetry embodies themes of divine love, unity, and transcendence. The works of poets such as **Lal Ded**, **Nund Rishi**, and **Habba Khatoon** serve as the bedrock of this tradition, blending metaphysical inquiries with deeply emotional and experiential insights. In this paper we propose to explore major philosophical underpinnings that shape Kashmiri mystical poetry, highlighting the interplay of **non-dualistic Shaivism**, with its focus on self-realization and universal consciousness, and **Sufi metaphysics**, characterized by love and devotion as a path to God. The synthesis of these traditions fosters an inclusive spiritual discourse that transcends religious boundaries, reflecting a shared human longing for the divine. The paper also examines how nature, metaphors of longing, and themes of unity resonate in Kashmiri poetry, creating a timeless literary tradition that continues to inspire. This exploration underscores the universal appeal of Kashmiri mysticism, rooted in the region's pluralistic ethos and its enduring vision of spiritual harmony.

Keywords: Divine Love, Human Quest, Mysticism, Shaivism, Sufism.**Introduction**

Mysticism refers to a spiritual belief or practice that seeks direct, personal experience or union with the ultimate reality, divine truth, or God. It often transcends conventional religious doctrines and rituals, focusing instead on inner experiences, transcendence of the self, and the pursuit of a deeper connection with the sacred. Mysticism is found across various religious traditions, philosophical schools, and spiritual practices.

Mysticism is a universal quest for a deeper understanding of existence and a direct encounter with the divine. While it takes different forms across traditions, its essence remains the same: transcending ordinary experiences to connect with the profound, eternal, and infinite.

In contemporary thought, mysticism is studied not only within religious frameworks but also in psychology and philosophy. Thinkers like William James explored mystical experiences as a universal aspect of human consciousness, while modern spiritual movements often blend mystical concepts with secular practices like mindfulness and self-awareness.

Mysticism has found a profound and enduring voice in Kashmiri poetry. Rooted in the region's cultural and religious fabric, Kashmiri mystical poetry reflects an intricate blend of Islamic Sufism, Hindu Shaivism, and the unique spirituality of the Kashmiri ethos. This chapter explores the mystical dimensions of Kashmiri poetry, focusing on its themes, philosophical underpinnings, and notable poets who have enriched the literary tradition. Thus Mysticism in Kashmiri poetry is a reflection of the valley's rich spiritual heritage and its quest for universal truth. Through the profound works of poets like Lal Ded and Nund Rishi, Kashmiri mystical poetry transcends religious divides, offering a message of love, unity, and spiritual awakening. In a world often divided by boundaries, the mystical verses of Kashmir serve as a reminder of our shared humanity and the eternal pursuit of the divine.

Historical Context of Kashmiri Mysticism

The evolution of mysticism in Kashmiri poetry can be traced back to the medieval period, a time of religious and cultural syncretism in the Valley. The poetry of this era drew heavily from the teachings of Sufi saints, Shaiva philosophers, and local spiritual traditions. Mystical poets used their verses to transcend religious and social boundaries, fostering a shared language of spirituality. The coming of Islam in the 14th century brought Sufism, which profoundly influenced Kashmiri culture. Sufi saints like Sheikh Noor-ud-Din Wali (Nund Rishi) and Lal Ded (Lalleshwari) became pioneers of mystic thought in Kashmiri poetry, blending the esoteric philosophies of Islam and Shaivism into a universal spirituality.

Kashmiri mysticism is a rich and unique spiritual tradition shaped by the interplay of diverse religious and philosophical influences over centuries. Rooted in the natural beauty of the Kashmir Valley and the region's cultural syncretism, Kashmiri mysticism emerged as a fusion of indigenous spirituality, Shaiva philosophy, Buddhist traditions, and later, Islamic Sufism. In the following section of our paper we will delve into the historical development of mysticism in Kashmir, its defining periods, and the key figures who shaped its course.

1. Shaivism and Trika Philosophy

Kashmiri Shaivism, particularly the Trika school, forms the earliest mystical tradition in the region. Flourishing between the 8th and 12th centuries CE, it emphasized the unity of the individual soul (*atman*) with the universal consciousness (*Paramashiva*). Philosophers such as Abhinavagupta (c. 10th century) articulated a deeply mystical vision of life, focusing on self-realization and the recognition of the divine within. His seminal works, such as *Tantraloka*, explored spiritual practices to achieve liberation.

Before the rise of Shaivism, Buddhism was a dominant tradition in Kashmir, particularly during the rule of Emperor Ashoka (3rd century BCE) and the subsequent Kushan Empire. The Mahayana and Vajrayana schools of Buddhism, with their focus on meditation, inner transformation, and the mystical concept of *Bodhisattva*, left an indelible mark on the spiritual landscape of the region. The coexistence of Buddhist and Shaiva traditions fostered a spirit of inclusivity and dialogue, laying the groundwork for the syncretic mysticism that later characterized Kashmiri spirituality.

2. The Arrival of Islam and the Rise of Sufism

The arrival of Islam in Kashmir in the 14th century, brought by Persian and Central Asian missionaries, introduced Sufism to the region. The Islamic mysticism of Sufis harmonized with the existing mystical traditions of Shaivism, creating a unique spiritual culture. Sufi saints like Mir Sayyid Ali Hamadani (commonly known as Shah Hamadan) and Sheikh Noor-ud-Din Wali (Nund Rishi) became central figures in Kashmiri mysticism. Shah Hamadan, a Persian scholar and mystic, played a pivotal role in spreading Islam while respecting and integrating local spiritual traditions. Nund Rishi, often referred to as the patron saint of Kashmir, adopted and adapted the Sufi tradition to resonate with the region's Hindu and Buddhist heritage. His verses emphasized simplicity, self-purification, and love for humanity.

A 14th-century mystic and poetess, Lal Ded epitomized the blending of Shaivism and Sufism. Her *vaakh* (sayings) captured profound spiritual truths, advocating personal experience over ritualistic religion. Lal Ded's philosophy of universal love and her critique of orthodoxy resonated across religious lines, making her a revered figure for Hindus and Muslims alike.

3. Mughal Era and Continued Syncretism

During the Mughal rule (16th–18th centuries), Kashmir became a cultural hub where mystical poetry and music flourished. Mystics and poets, inspired by both Sufi and Shaiva traditions, used their art to express spiritual longing and divine love. Poets like Habba Khatoon, Rasul Mir, and Wahab Khar carried forward the mystical legacy, weaving themes of divine love, separation, and union into their verses. The use of Kashmiri as the poetic

medium ensured that mystical ideas reached the common people, fostering a shared spiritual ethos.

4. Colonial and Modern Period

During the Dogra rule (19th century) and subsequent British influence, Kashmiri mysticism continued to thrive as a form of spiritual and cultural identity amidst political changes. Mystical poetry and practices offered solace and resistance to the people during times of hardship. In contemporary times, Kashmiri mysticism remains a source of inspiration, particularly in literature and music. The teachings of mystics like Lal Ded and Nund Rishi are celebrated as symbols of Kashmir's pluralistic heritage. Amidst modern challenges, including conflict and social change, Kashmiri mysticism serves as a unifying force, emphasizing peace, harmony, and spiritual transcendence.

The historical context of Kashmiri mysticism reveals its rich and inclusive spiritual heritage. Rooted in ancient Shaivism and Buddhism, transformed by Islamic Sufism, and carried forward by poets and saints, Kashmiri mysticism embodies the valley's ethos of harmony and transcendence. It remains a testament to the enduring human desire for unity with the divine and the universal pursuit of peace and enlightenment.

Mystical Kashmiri poetry is a profound expression of spiritual longing, divine union, and the transcendent truths of existence. Rooted in the unique cultural and natural context of the Kashmir Valley, it blends elements of Shaivism, Sufism, and the region's indigenous traditions. Here are the defining features of mystical Kashmiri poetry:

The central theme of mystical Kashmiri poetry is the soul's yearning for union with the divine, often depicted as an intimate and personal experience. Poets use metaphors of love, dissolution, and merging to convey this spiritual union. For instance, Lal Ded's *vaakh* often depict the soul merging with universal consciousness, while Sufi poets like Nund Rishi speak of self-annihilation (*fana*) to achieve closeness to Allah. Love, both earthly and divine, is a recurring motif in mystical Kashmiri poetry. The human experience of love is often a metaphor for the soul's longing for the Creator. For example, Habba Khatoon's verses of romantic longing reflect the deeper spiritual yearning for connection with the divine. Mystical Kashmiri poetry emphasizes the journey inward, urging individuals to discover the divine within themselves. Lal Ded and Nund Rishi advocate self-purification, renunciation of ego, and inner reflection as paths to enlightenment.

The natural beauty of the Kashmir Valley profoundly influences its mystical poetry. Mountains, rivers, flowers, and seasons serve as symbols for divine grace, spiritual journeys, and the transient nature of life. Nature often mirrors the mystic's inner state, portraying both the struggle and the serenity of spiritual awakening. Mystical Kashmiri poetry is marked by

its simplicity of language and universal appeal, making its teachings accessible to people of all walks of life. The poets use local idioms, metaphors, and imagery, ensuring their message resonates deeply with common folk while carrying profound spiritual insights. Kashmiri mystical poetry reflects the syncretic spiritual culture of the region, drawing from Hindu Shaivism, Islamic Sufism, and Buddhist traditions. Lal Ded's philosophy bridges Shaivism and Sufism, emphasizing unity, while Nund Rishi's verses often highlight shared values of love, humility, and devotion.

Mystical Kashmiri poetry is also rich in symbolism, using metaphors and allegories to communicate complex spiritual ideas. Common symbols which we find in mystical Kashmiri poetry are:

Light: Light symbolizes enlightenment and divine presence.

Fire: Fire is the symbol of the transformative power of love and spiritual purification in mystical Kashmiri poetry.

Separation and Longing: The soul's estrangement from its divine source and its yearning to return. It is one of the most important and beautiful symbols in the Kashmiri mystical poetry.

Mystical Kashmiri poets often critique blind adherence to rituals, dogmas, and materialism. They advocate direct personal experience of the divine over rigid religious practices. Lal Ded famously rejected superficial religiosity, emphasizing inner truth and authenticity. Mystical Kashmiri poetry promotes universal values like love, compassion, humility, and coexistence, transcending religious and social divisions. This universal outlook has made poets like Lal Ded and Nund Rishi revered by Hindus and Muslims alike.

Mystical Kashmiri poetry is often lyrical and intended to be recited or sung. Its rhythmic quality enhances its emotional and spiritual impact, ensuring its preservation through oral traditions. Traditional Kashmiri musical forms and instruments are often used to bring these poems to life, further embedding them in the cultural fabric. The spiritual journey, often depicted as a path or pilgrimage, is a key theme. It represents the mystic's struggles, growth, and eventual realization of the divine. This journey is depicted as both an external quest and an internal transformation. Kashmiri mystical poetry frequently meditates on the transient nature of life and worldly attachments. The poets urge detachment from material desires, focusing instead on eternal truths and the soul's higher purpose.

Thus we can conclude that Mystical Kashmiri Poetry is a profound fusion of spirituality, philosophy, and cultural expression. Its features—ranging from themes of divine union to its use of nature and simplicity—reflect the deep spiritual heritage of the region. By

emphasizing universal truths and transcending religious boundaries, this poetry continues to inspire and resonate with audiences, offering timeless wisdom for seekers of the divine.

Important Kashmiri Mystical Poets

Kashmiri mystical poetry has been shaped by several extraordinary poets whose works reflect the spiritual and cultural ethos of the Kashmir Valley. These poets, drawing from Shaivism, Sufism, and the region's unique blend of traditions, have left an indelible mark on the literary and spiritual heritage of Kashmir. Here are the most notable mystical poets of Kashmir:

1. Lal Ded (Lalleshwari) – The Saint-Poetess

Lal Ded is considered the founding figure of Kashmiri mystical poetry. She bridged Shaiva and Sufi traditions, creating a unique spiritual philosophy rooted in introspection and divine realization. Lal Ded's poetry (*vaakh*) emphasizes self-realization, rejection of orthodoxy, and union with the divine. Her verses often critique ritualistic religion and celebrate the inner journey of the soul. Her *vaakhs* are short, profound sayings expressing spiritual truths in simple language. She is revered by both Hindus and Muslims, symbolizing interfaith harmony and universal spirituality.

2. Sheikh Noor-ud-Din Wali (Nund Rishi)

Known as the patron saint of Kashmir, Nund Rishi founded the Rishi order in the region. His teachings reflect a synthesis of Islamic Sufism and indigenous mysticism. His poetry promotes love, compassion, self-purification, and a simple life dedicated to God. He often used metaphor and allegory to convey spiritual messages. Nund Rishi's *shrukhs* (short poetic verses) embody profound spiritual wisdom and critique materialism and societal inequalities. His teachings inspired a spiritual movement that continues to guide Kashmiri culture and spirituality.

3. Habba Khatoon – The Nightingale of Kashmir

Habba Khatoon was a poetess of romantic and mystical sensibility. Her verses often blend themes of earthly love and divine longing. Her poetry uses the metaphor of separation from a beloved to explore the soul's yearning for union with the divine. Her songs and lyrical verses, rich in emotional depth, are still sung in Kashmir. Habba Khatoon's poetry transcends the boundaries between personal love and spiritual devotion, making her a beloved figure in Kashmiri culture.

4. Shams Faqir

Shams Faqir was a Sufi poet who expressed his deep spiritual experiences through Kashmiri verse. His poetry reflects the Sufi ideals of love for God, annihilation of the ego (*fana*), and mystical union (*baqa*). His verses are deeply devotional and are sung in Kashmiri Sufi gatherings. Shams Faqir's work remains a cornerstone of Kashmiri Sufi tradition, blending local spirituality with universal Sufi ideals.

5. Wahab Khar

Wahab Khar is one of the most prominent Kashmiri Sufi poets, known for his deep philosophical insight and spiritual depth. He addressed the themes of divine love, the transient nature of life, and the need for spiritual awakening. His poems are characterized by their simple yet profound reflections on the human condition and the divine. Wahab Khar's works have been integral to Kashmiri mystical thought and continue to inspire spiritual seekers.

6. Rasul Mir

Rasul Mir is often called the Keats of Kashmir due to the lyrical beauty of his poetry. While primarily known for romantic themes, his works also contain mystical understanding. His poetry explores themes of love, both earthly and divine, often blurring the line between the two. His verses evoke intense emotional and spiritual longing, enriched by rich imagery and metaphors. Rasul Mir's poetry exemplifies the synthesis of aesthetic beauty and spiritual depth in Kashmiri literature.

7. Arnimal

Arnimal is another significant female poet of Kashmir, celebrated for her lyrical compositions that weave themes of love and spirituality. Her poetry often reflects the pain of separation, a metaphor for the soul's separation from its divine source. Arnimal's songs, often sung in traditional Kashmiri music, capture the mystical and emotional essence of human experience. Her contribution adds a unique feminine perspective to Kashmiri mystical poetry.

8. Mahmood Gami

Mahmood Gami is a pioneer of Kashmiri ghazals, infusing Persian poetic forms with local mystical themes. His poetry reflects deep Sufi ideals, focusing on divine love, spiritual struggle, and the fleeting nature of worldly existence. Gami's ghazals remain a significant part of Kashmiri literary heritage. He bridged Persian and Kashmiri traditions, enriching the mystical and poetic culture of the valley.

9. Ahad Zargar

A modern mystic poet, Ahad Zargar continued the tradition of Sufi poetry in Kashmir. His verses emphasize love, humility, and the quest for divine truth, drawing from both Sufi and indigenous spiritual traditions. His mystical songs remain popular in Kashmiri devotional gatherings. Zargar's work reflects the resilience of mystical traditions in contemporary Kashmiri culture.

These poets, spanning centuries, have shaped and enriched the mystical tradition of Kashmiri poetry. Their works transcend temporal, cultural, and religious boundaries, offering timeless wisdom and spiritual inspiration. By weaving themes of divine love, unity,

and introspection, these poets have created a legacy that continues to resonate in the hearts of people in Kashmir and beyond.

Philosophical Underpinnings

Kashmiri mystical poetry is deeply rooted in the region's philosophical traditions, primarily influenced by **Kashmir Shaivism** and **Islamic Sufism**. These two schools of thought, although originating from different cultural and religious backgrounds, have found a profound synthesis in Kashmiri mystical expressions. Let's explore these traditions:

1. Kashmir Shaivism

A non-dualistic and monistic school of Indian philosophy, Kashmir Shaivism forms the bedrock of many mystical themes in Kashmiri poetry. It emphasizes the unity of the individual soul (*Atman*) with the universal consciousness (*Paramashiva*). The universe is not separate from the divine but is its manifestation. This aligns with mystical poetry that often celebrates the unity of existence. The idea that the universe arises from the pulsation or vibration of consciousness, reflecting the constant interplay between creation and dissolution. The path to self-realization is through recognizing one's inherent divinity. Lal Ded's poetry, for instance, often explores this journey of self-discovery:

"You won't find him in the skies,
Nor in the scriptures deep.
Search for him in your very self—
That's where Shiva does sleep."

While Shiva is transcendent, He is also immanent, present in all aspects of life, a recurring theme in mystical verses.

2. Islamic Sufism

Sufism entered Kashmir through Persian and Central Asian influences, blending seamlessly with local traditions. Its emphasis on love, divine union, and inward reflection significantly shaped Kashmiri mystical poetry. Sufi mysticism revolves around the idea of unity, which parallels the monistic themes of Kashmir Shaivism. The poet Nund Rishi, for instance, frequently invoked the interconnectedness of all creation in his verses. Love is both the means and the end of the spiritual journey, as seen in poetry that likens the divine to the beloved. The Sufi path (*Tariqa*) involves purifying the self (*Nafs*) to achieve closeness to God, much like the Shaivite journey of recognizing divine consciousness. Chanting and remembering God is a practice reflected metaphorically in many mystical poems.

3. Synthesis in Kashmiri Mysticism

The interplay between these traditions created a unique philosophical landscape in Kashmir, where poets used metaphors, symbols, and narratives that resonate with both Shaivism and Sufism. Kashmiri mystical poetry often transcends religious boundaries, emphasizing shared spiritual truths. This is evident in the works of Lal Ded and Nund Rishi, whose verses appeal to both Hindus and Muslims. The use of rivers, mountains, and seasons

in Kashmiri poetry symbolizes the divine's immanence, a shared vision in Shaivism and Sufism. The poetic expression of yearning for the divine mirrors the Shaivite search for unity with Shiva and the Sufi longing for union with God.

Bhakti Movement: The Bhakti movement's focus on devotion and love for God resonates in the works of poets like Habba Khatoon.

Thus Kashmiri mystical poetry is an elegant amalgamation of **Kashmir Shaivism's metaphysical depth** and **Sufism's emotional devotion**, reflecting a philosophical tradition that bridges cultural and spiritual divides. It represents a universal quest for transcendence, self-awareness, and divine connection, making it timeless and profoundly relevant. The mystical tradition of Kashmiri poetry has left an indelible mark on the region's culture and continues to inspire contemporary poets and spiritual seekers. The universality of its themes and the depth of its spiritual insights make it a timeless treasure, transcending linguistic and geographical barriers.

References:

- Kaul, Jaideva ,Kashmir Shaivism: The Central Philosophy of Tantrism, Motilal Banarsidass, 1994
- Rafiqi, Abdul Qadir ,Sufism in Kashmir: Fourteenth to Sixteenth Century,Bharatiya Publishing House, 1972
- Grierson, George A Lal Vakh: Sayings of Lal Ded, The Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1920
- Hassnain, Fida M.The Fifth Gospel: The Poems of Lal Ded, Khyber Publishers, 2013
- Bhatt, P. N. K. Bamzai Culture and Political History of Kashmir, MD Publications Pvt Ltd, 1994
- Siddiqi, A. R, Islamic Mysticism: Its Essence and Impact on Kashmiri Literature, Aligarh Muslim University Press, 1985
- Bierce, Ambrose Echoes of the Divine: Kashmiri Mysticism in Context, Heritage Books, 2005