

INTRODUCING VACANAS



Sherly M.D

Throughout the centuries religion and religious devotion had played a very important role in shaping and enriching the literature of a country and that of a race. Hebraic literature is nothing without the Songs of Solomon, the Psalms and Proverbs. Without the poems of Kabir, Sur Das and Tulasi Das, Hindi literature will be incomplete. With its origin in religion and social reform Vacans became a household name to each and every Kannadiga and has contributed much to Kannada literature.

The turbulent days of ancient India, starting from Aryan dominance, had much to contribute to the varied Indian culture. The Bhakti movement of the tenth and eleventh centuries connotes a reawakening of the religious ardour of the people by the songs of the saintly poets. Their verses which were precise but had volumes of meaning. Vaishnavism, a product of the Bhakti movement in northern India had a reciprocal reaction in the south, especially among the Dravidians in the form of Saivism. If Vishnu is the worshipping deity of the Vaishnavities, Siva, is worshipped by the Saivites. At a time when religion and scholarship went hand in hand, the Saints, especially the Virasaivas of Karnataka found a centre for kindred spirits in Kalyan, under the leadership of Basavanna and Allama Prabhu, both virasaiva saints and also poets or vacanakaras. They took the name Virasaivas from the militancy at the heart of bhakti.

The poems of the Virasaiva saints are named vacanas, which means 'what is said', and stands in contrast to the Smriti or 'what is remembered' and Sruti or 'what is received' or 'heard', of the ancient Sanskrit texts. Though the earliest of the vacana poets is Devara Dasimayya, it was under Basavanna that vacanas became popular and had a significance which lasted more than a century. Mahadeviyakka and Allama Prabhu are the other two important vacanakaras of the country. These saintly poets accepted and worshipped Siva, the androgynic god. Their personal signature in their works show the form of deity each of them worshipped; 'Kudalasangamadeva' as in the case of Basavanna, meaning, Lord of the meeting rivers; 'Ramanatha', or Rama's Lord i.e. Siva worshipped by Rama was the favourite deity of Devara Dasimayya in the tenth century; while Mahadeviyakka worshipped Siva as 'Cenna mallikarjuna' i.e. the lovely Lord white as Jasmine and uses it as a signature for her poems. Allama, who is regarded as the Prabhu or 'the Master' of all the

Vacanakaras has chosen 'Guhesvara' or Lord of the caves as his favourite name for Siva and signs his vacanas with this name.

The socio-cultural aspect of vacanas and vacanakaras assumes gigantic proportions when the Virasaivas revolted against caste system and formed a formidable force to be reckoned with in spite of the Vishnavite opposition. The result was that for a time they were able to overthrow the existing system; later the Saivites themselves seemed to defeat the purpose of their religion by re-assuming the socio-cultural division in a different manner. Their later actions seemed to resemble the fate of lesser animals in Orwell's allegorical novel, Animal Farm where, with the advent of democratic rule instead of equality there was the slogan "some are more equal than the others".

The vacanas were neither prose nor poetry; they were religious renderings of a devotee's mind. In a way it was also a literary revolt against the existing poetic form of Kannada. It has neither the laxness of prose nor the inflexibility of the verse. It is precise writing, which conveys a depth of meaning expressing the personal religion of the poet. Moreover no deliberate thinking had gone into the making of these vacanas; rather it is like Wordsworth's theory of poetry, a 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings'. This accounts for their lack of regular metric pattern and the irregularity of the lines. The didactic role of exclaiming in ecstasy with love for the Lord Siva and renouncing the world in no uncertain terms, the vacanakaras set a model of pure aestheticism in their bhakti. This is illustrated vividly in the vacanas of Mahadeviyakka, the only woman among the vacanakaras. Mahadeviyakka, 'the respected elder sister', recognized by her absence of clothing, except for her tresses covering her nudity, expresses her abandonment through her vacana 88

He bartered my heart

looted my flesh

claimed as tribute

my pleasure,

took over

all of me.

I'am the woman of love

For my Lord, white as jasmine

Devara Dasimayya's vacana 87 goes much further

Whatever It was

that made this earth

the base,

the world its life,

the wind its pillar,

arranged the lotus and the moon,

and covered it all with folds

of sky

With itself inside,

to that Mystery

indifferent to differences,

to It I pray,

O Ramanatha.

[SS 103]

Allama Prabhu's lament about the state of not being with the lord, inspite of the knowledge and sensual pleasures offered by the Lord, is that of a void.

It's ark above the clutching hand

It's dark over the seeing eye

It's dark over the remembering heart

It's dark here

with the Lord of Caves

out there.

[SS 154]

and Basava `anna' or `the elder', proclaims the immortality of Siva, over even death itself

Before

the grey reaches the cheek,

the wrinkle the rounded chin

and the body becomes a cage of bones;

Before

with fallen teeth

and bent back

you are someone else's ward:

Before

you drop you hand to the knee

and clutch a staff:

Before

age corrodes

your form:

Before

death touches you:

worship

our lord

of the meeting rivers!

All the vacanakaras express their devotion to their lord in a highly musical tone evoking a kindred spirit in the readers and listeners with their touch of utter sincerity. Vacanas are recited in almost all the houses in Karnataka as a sort of devotional hymns and also for pure aesthetic pleasure.

It is understood that vacanas are indeed devotional songs. The devotee, the vacanakara, considers himself as a Saivite and worship Siva as Pasupati and also as Rudra. Both Pasupati and Rudra are two aspects of Siva which is mentioned in Sivapurana. Pasupati means the lord of beasts, where Pasu in Kannada means cove or beast or creature. In Tamil, another Dravidian language, Pasu is taken to mean creature or creation, Pati the lord or creator, and Pasam, the attachment or love of the two. Basavanna uses these three meanings in his vacana 52.

Like a cow fallen into quagmire

i make mouths at this corner and that,

no one to look for me

or find me

till my lord sees this beast

and lifts him out by the horns

[SS 69]

Rudra Siva, is the Lord who is the destroyer and lord of violence as opposed to Pasupati. The twin aspects of Siva, as destroyer and, preserver are accepted by the Virasaiva Saints.

Siva Bhakti is synonymous with Sakti and both has six phases or steps. A Virasaiva goes through the six-phase system before finally achieving oneness with his Lord.

The six phases of Sakti are:

1. Kariyasakti - power of action
2. Jnanasakti - power of knowing
3. Icchasakti - power of will
4. Adisakti - primal creativity

5. Parasakti - ultimate power
6. Citasakti - Supreme Intelligence

[SS 170]

And the six phases of Bhakti are:

1. Sad bhakti - feeling, 'bhakti proper'
2. Naistika bhakti - discipline
3. Avadhana bhakti - reception
4. Anubava - mystical experience
5. Ananda bhakti - bliss
6. Samarasa bhakti - Oneness

[SS 171]

A devotee of Siva goes through the two sets of six phases in order to attain moksha or oneness with the lord. The vacanakaras, ardent devotees of Siva, goes through an all six phases as is seen in their vacanas. The going is never a smooth ride for them; they lash out as Basavanna does at the undue delay, in his eagerness to be one with the lord.

Siva, you have no mercy

Siva, you have no heart.

Why why did you bring me to birth,

wretch in this world,

exile from the other?

Tell me, lord,

don't you have one more

little tree or plant

made just for me?

[SS 71]

And Akka Mahadevi, who has renounced the world and had accepted Lord Siva as her husband, is also impatient in her bhakti.

Husband inside,

lover outside.

I can't manage them both

This world

and that other,

cannot manage them both

O lord white as jasmine

I cannot hold in one hand

both the round nut

and the long bow

[SS 127]

Also as the philosophical Allama Prabhu concludes

With a whole temple

in this body

where's the need

for another?

No one asked

for two

O Lord of caves,

if you are stone,

what am i?

[SS 153]

The four Virasaiva Saints taken here for study produced musical poetry and its quality was not excelled by the later vacanakaras. The vacanas of Basavanna, Devara Dasimayya, Mahadeviyakka and Allama Prabhu were their offerings for their lord and master, Siva. All four had renounced the world, their time and the worldly pleasures in favour of the lord, taking pleasure in his worship. But their path towards attaining the union with the lord is obstacle-ridden; for human beings endowed with mind and body, feels the sensations and the sensuality of the body which just cannot be suppressed to suddenly. Control and practice are needed for this. The restless distracted heart or mind is compared to a monkey by the vacanakaras. Controlling the mind is a process that requires exerting enormous self control. Prayer and meditation achieves this. While prayer is man speaking to God, Meditation is God speaking to man. J. Krishnamurti's words on meditation, makes clear the purposeful intention of the four saints who left everything and assembled in Kalyan. Krishnamurti spoke of meditation as

. . . . the absolute stillness of the mind, the absolute quietness of the brain. The foundation for meditation has to be laid in daily life; in how one behaves, in what one thinks. One cannot be violent and meditate; that has not meaning...one behaves, in what one thinks. ... For the stillness of the mind, its complete quiet, an extraordinary discipline is required; not the discipline of suppression, conformity, or the following of some authority, but that discipline or learning which takes place throughout the day, about every moment of thought; the mind then has a religious quality of unity; from that there can be action which is not contradictory.

[Beyond Violence 156]

The country which had become dark because of the prolixity of the Brahminical rites must be freed; instead of the idolized gods there should only be a personal god. With these intentions the Virasaiva saints worked together and gathered spiritual strength by meditation to lash out. Their vacanas were truthful outpourings of equally truth loving mind. The defiance against the established Vedic religion and Vedic puranas was the common factor for these Virasaiva Saints. It took courage to ignore such a formidable opponent and get the approval and acceptance of the people of the country. Their strength was their bhakthi and the moral courage with which these great people were endowed; this formed the basis for stories that circulated about them as performers of miracle. Denouncing all types of ritualistic forms these Virasaiva saints offers themselves as objects of sacrifice. This idea also can be seen in their vacanas.

Allama Prabhu:

Light

Devoured darkness

I was alone

Inside

Shedding

The visible dark

I was your target

O Lord of Caves

[SS 164]

Firmly believing that they are indeed chosen by the lord, the virasaiva saints denounced all the worldly pleasures and moved away from the crowd to a secluded place so that they can spend their time with the Lord. Resembling the ancient rishis, this retreat from the world, provided them with the silence to listen to the lord and prepare for the oneness with Him. Meditation created various imagery with which they compared their mind and its waywardness and lamented the difficulty in controlling the five senses. Thus a monkey without brains is the mind, cat is supreme knowledge, the rooster is the worldly knowledge, the black koil bird is the kriyasakti or the power of action. The physical body is the city with its nine gates or nine openings.

A saint devotee experiences three obstacles that account for the alienation. One is the physical obstacle to knowledge, the second is the Karma and the third is the experience of a primitive darkness which is almost equivalent to egoism in man. The quest for the citaasakti or supreme intelligence is often hindered by these obstacles. Hence the dilemma of the devotee, as V. Ramakrishnan expresses in his book Perspectives in Saivism:

The Saiva is interested in discovering why he is provided with a physical frame work and why he has experiences of various kinds. The inner essence of the self as an eternal intelligent or conscious entity is seen as subject to the limitations of a physical body thus limiting its inherent capacity for knowledge.

[[Perspectives in Saivism](#) 49]

To overcome the three obstacles the mind-sakti, born of Siva-consciousness, is necessary. Allama Prabhu speaks of such a devotee who has conquered that past, future and the present in his vacana 550 establishing the relationship with the lord.

Poets of the past

are the children of my concubines

Poets to come

are infants of my pity

The poets of the sky

are babies of my cradle

Vishnu and Brahma

are my kinsmen and sidekicks.

You are the father-in-law

and I the son-in-law

O Lord of caves.

[SS 161]

S. Arulsamy speaks of Sakti, as one with Siva. Thus

Sakti is not something separate from, and independent of, the Primal one. It is inseparable from Him. The relation between Sivam and Sakti is generally likened to that of sun and the light of the sun.

[[Saivism: A perspective of Grace 46](#)]

Here the devotee is wedded to the mind-sakti, which is born of Siva-consciousness and hence his daughter. This makes Siva the father-in-law and the devotee the son-in-law. The kind of informal often playful irreverence towards the great god, like the barren woman's son, the Unborn Lord without beginning or end, is yet another characteristic feature of the vacanas.

The vacanakaras dispensed with all sorts of ritualistic offering as opposed to the ritualistic worship of the Brahmins-Vedic religions and also the blood sacrifices of the smaller religions. To them ritualistic offering is internalized and they, themselves, were offered to the Lord with all their imperfections and impurities. They shun the popular places and found asylum in the lonely places, so that their interior dialogue with the lord may continue without the word intruding.

The influx of meanings for Siva and his actions show the popularity of the Siva cult. The dance of Siva, taken as the Cosmic Dance itself, is a symbol of the cycle of birth and death. The eminent scientist philosopher Fritjof Capra tries to establish this with the help of an examination of the dance of Siva and the movement of particles in atmosphere. To him dance of Siva,

.... symbolizes not only the cosmic cycles of creation and destruction, but also the daily rhythm of birth and death which is seen in Indian mysticism as the basis of all existence.

[The Tao of Physics 270]

A devotee caught in the flux of the Cosmic Dance, craves for a union with the lord so that the dancer and the dance be one. Vacanas expound this theory to such an extent that their variety symbolizes the myriad impressions of the mind during a dance. Siva, the dancer of the universe of Nataraja is the deity worshipped by the artists. As such he is the inspiration for all art forms including poetry. The vacanakaras are endowed with the blessing of the lord that their verse has a poetic quality in spite of the most unpoetic imagery used in it. Mahadeviyakka's vacana 328 is an example for this.

I have Maya for mother-in-law;
the world for father-in-law;
three brother-in-law, like tigers;

and the husband's thoughts
are full of laughing women;

no god, this man.

And I cannot cross the sister-in-law.

But I will

give this wench the slip

and go cuckold my husband with Hara, my Lord.

My mind is my maid:

by her kindness, I join

my Lord,

my utterly beautiful Lord

from the mountain – peaks

my lord white as jasmine,

and I will make Him

my good husband.

[SS 141]

Here Mahadeviyakka uses as the central image the image of an abhisarika, stealing out of the house of in-laws to meet her lover. The various members of the household stand for various abstractions; Maya, the mother-in-law is the Primal Illusion, the father-in-law is the world, the three brothers-in-law are the three gunas, they are part of nature, hence inescapable. The husband whom the woman cuckolds is Karma, the sister-in-law is vasana or smell or the binding memory of the past, helpful maid is the Mind, who helps her to keep her tryst with the Lord. The whole set up of a married woman's life is portrayed here, thus emphasizing the fact that this is what a woman acquires as a result of a marriage. This social bondage is thrown over for an illicit lover. The shock of reading about a lover in the midst of this social set up is what Mahadeviyakka intended by her vacana. In a moment of defiance, she had thrown off all her clothes, symbolic of throwing away the conventions of the society and accepting the Lord as an illicit lover. The relationship with the Lord is never smooth nor does it conform to the structure of the society. The upsetting of all man made structures is necessary if one is to have an illicit relationship with the Lord. Only if there is a structural build up of a society does this lover become illicit. This vacana of Mahadeviyakka is an open defiance against the then existing social structures, rituals and the code of behaviour expected of a woman. Though a woman Mahadevi attained oneness with the Lord and her quest for ecstasy proved fruitful when death took her while she was hardly in her twenties. During her brief life-span she lived intensely burning with the love for Lord Siva. Such an intensity had its result when her union with Lord Siva

was brought forth much earlier at Sri Saila.

The conflict of the religious beliefs also made the vacanakaras stand firm in their Lord. Devara Dasimayya was also called as 'God's Dasimaya. Devara Dasimayya's vacanas are all divided according to the six-phase system and an example from the Bhakta phase is worth mentioning.

You have forged

this chain

of eighteen links

and chained us humans

you have ruined us

O Ramanatha

and made us dogs forever

on the leash.

[SS 102]

The eighteen links referred to in the poem are the traditional eighteen links or bonds of the world listed in ancient Indian philosophy. They are the past, present and future acts; body, mind and wealth, substance, life, and self – regard; gold land and woman; lust, anger, greed, infatuation, pride and envy. The one, who has got the strength to break all the bonds and disregard the worldly pleasures, will attain the final stage of the six phase system.

Basava, also familiarly called as 'anna' or brother, was the treasurer of the ruling king and also the treasurer of Lord's Love. Along with Allama Prabhu and Mahadeviyakka, he made Kalyan a Virasaiva centre, and also initiated people who came from afar into the Virasaiva cult. The 'Anubhava mandapa' (The Hall of Experience) was established as a religious centre for the saints to have dialogue and have communion with the new developing section. Though Basavanna's vacanas are divided according to the six phase system, the first phase i.e. that of Bhakta, stretches to nearly half the number of his total vacanas. This again shows the struggle that he went through with the worldly pleasures and its temptations as vacana 350 shows.

a grind stone hung at the foot

a deadwood log at the neck

the one will not let me float

and the other will not let me sink

O times true enemy

O lord of the meeting rivers

tide me over this life at sea

and bring me to

[SS 80]

The world is compared to a sea and the Lord alone is the help there. The poems of the vacanacaras are characterized by its bisexual and double – edged meanings.

Siva, the androgynic god, creates a bisexuality among the devotees as in Mahadeviyakka; Basavama also presents this in his vacana 703.

Look here, dear fellow:

I wear these men's clothes

only for you

sometimes I am man,

sometimes I am woman.

O Lord of the meeting rives

I'll make wars for you

but I'll be your devotee's' bride

[SS 87]

Allama was Prabhu or 'master' of the group of Virasaivas assembled in Kalyan. By his sheer presence alone he was able to point out the imperfections in the worship of the lord in devotees like Basavanna and Mahadeviyakka. By argument, mockery and teasing he was able to bring

enlightenment to laymen. Unlike the other Virasaiva saints, no biographical detail is available on Allama Prabhu, showing that his life after enlightenment is that which matters. He was also presented by the scholars as one who had overcome passions and refused to be tempted by the world. The wisdom and mastery of Allama Prabhu was recognized and accepted by all. Some of his vacanas were set to music. The six phase system followed by the vacanakaras was followed by Allama Prabhu also. His vacana 431 which belongs to the Sarana phase, the fifth of the six phases, is symbolic.

Outside city limits

a temple

in the temple, look,

a hermit woman.

In the woman's hand

a needle,

at needle's end

the fourteen worlds

O Lord of caves

I saw an ant

devour whole

the woman, the needle,

the fourteen worlds.

[SS 157]

The city in the poem is the human body and the temple, the mental form; the old woman stands for power and knowledge, and the needle, the mind on which the fourteen worlds are balanced. When the devotee attains enlightenment, as symbolized by the ant, everything else disappears. The scholarship and precision of the mind are evident in the vacanas of Allama Prabhu.

The Vacanakaras and the vacanas though belonging to the bhakti movement, refuse to be classified as such. What the vacanakaras fought against was institutionalized religion. The religion one is born into becomes one of the obstacles to the attaining of enlightenment. Thus it is that caste and creed had no value for a vacanacara and their vacanas based on white hot truth, could never be

ignored.

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