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THE CONCEPT OF GOD IN BASAVANNA'S VACHANAS

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ABSTRACT

Vachana is a form of musical writing in Kannada Language in the 11th century and flourished in the 12th century, as a part of the Sharana movement. Madara Chennaiah is regarded by some scholars as the "father of Vachana poetry." The word "Vachana" literally means "that, which is said". These are readily comprehensible prose texts.

Vachanas contain the attention and experience of Vachanakaras who strived for God consciousness through their own vocations. Vachanas are aphoristic in form and musical in words and style. The language was the verbal word of the people. Vachana normally means spoken word or phrase. Now it came neither point out a special type of composition which was neither prose nor verse but concise expression. The Vachanas do have rhythm, though non-metrical. This became enormously popular.

There are Vachanakaras like Basavanna, Devara Dasimayya, Madara Channayya, and Sakalesha Madarasa. The activist courage and social consciousness ushered in by Basavanna gave strong impulsion to the work of Vachanas attracting huge numbers of devotees who belonged to diverse strata of society. They gave appearance to their own environment, depicting imagery and allegory revealing different professions to which he or she belonged.

Keywords: God, Vachana, Basavanna, Almighty, devotion, women and Pure Consciousness

As per record, the exchange of experience of the realization of the God in group discussion has happened only in Karnataka by the sharanas mainly under the guidance of Basavanna. This fact has been attributed to the popularity of the movement. More than 200 Vachana writers (Vachanakaras) have been recorded and more than thirty of whom were women.

God has been described as everything from an impersonal life-force to a benevolent, personal, almighty Creator. God has been called by many names, including: "Zeus," "Jupiter," "Brahma," "Allah," "Waheguru", and "the Great Spirit" to name just a few. Some worship him as "Mother Nature" and others as "Father God." Some religions describe Him without reference to gender, while others use sex-specific terminology. India is the birthplace of four of the world's major religions, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism. According to the

Constitution, India is a secular state with no state religion. Among these religions, Hindus acknowledge multitudes of gods and goddesses, whereas there is no deity for Buddhists. While Muslims believe in powerful God, Christians believe in loving God.

Medieval Kannada literature spans from 12th to 19th century. The major development during this period is the emergence of a new kind of poetry called Vachana literature which was the outcome of Bhakti movement, a movement which influenced both politics and literature of the time.

Vachanas are the best works of medieval Kannada literature. It was written by those who called themselves Sharanas, persons dedicated to Shiva. That is why it is also called the Sharana movement. As they started Virashaiva movement, a new kind of Shaivism, they are also known as Virashaivas. The basic idea of Vachanas was to bring about total change in the social structure then practiced in India. It was against the age-old blind following of the Vedic religion and Varna system.

Vachana literally means 'that which is said' or 'a saying'. The writers of such Vachanas produced one of the best poetry of medieval Kannada literature. Like English Romantics, they brought about liberation of language from artificial conventions of courtly writing. Here was a poetry in which there was no more praising of Kings and Queens. Form was of the least importance to them. The use of correct metre and rhyme was neglected.

Sharanas wanted their poetry to be easily accessible to the common man. Therefore, a simple language used in day-to-day life was chosen. So, it was a literature written by common people for common people. Though it is said to have begun during the 10th century, it reached its zenith only during the 12th century. Vachana was a by-product of the socio-religious movement and Basavanna or Basaveshwara was the leader of the Sharana movement.

Basavanna was born in 1131AD in an Agrahara called Bagewadi of Bijapur district of Karnataka. His father Madarasa was the head of the village in which consisted of 500 houses of Shrotriya Brahmins. His mother Madalamba was an ideal housewife and a strict follower of Vedic religion. He had an elder brother, and an elder sister, Nagamma. As a child, Basavanna was inquisitive by nature, and he used to put a number of questions to his father and his elder sister about mysterious things in nature. At the age of eight he refused to undergo the Upanayana diksha. His question was why only boys should undergo such diksha and not girls. He hated ill-treatment of girl child by the society. He even hated the practice of untouchability and started making friendship with them against the will of his parents.

Basavanna's father sent him to Kudalasangama, a centre for learning, situated at the holy confluence of the rivers Krishna and Malaprabha. Before going there, he cut threw the sacred Janivara and acquired education fit for a gentleman in those times. After getting education, Basavanna went to Mangalwedha where he became an Accountant in the King's treasury. Later through his sincere efforts, and hard work, he was elevated to the position of the Prime Minister in the court of the Kalachuri King Bijjalain the state of Kalyana.

In Kalyana, Basavanna became a favourite of King Bijjala and started doing new experiments in changing the orthodox society. He tried hard to bring about reformation in Hindu religion. The social evils which had crept into the religion were given a surgery by him. There, he established Anubhava Mantapa, a hall in which everyone was free to share their spiritual experiences. Those who took part in such discussions were called the Sharanas, one who surrenders to the service of God. Like Buddha, he organized a mass movement called Virashaivism, where all the sections of society, shedding their castes, came together and worked together for the development of the state.

Basavanna organized the working sections, the untouchables and women who were controlled by the orthodox people. Besides writing himself, he encouraged untouchables to write Vachanas. These Sharanas came out of the restriction of their caste and tend to be called Lingayats because they wore Ishtalinga on their body.

Basavanna observed that the root cause of suffering of the downtrodden was the following of superstitious beliefs. The people blindly believed in the religion and the priestly class made use of it by using

them for their own profit. The Vedic society, controlling the temples, kept the common man under fear. People were threatened in the name of God and were asked to perform some Yaga, Yajna, Pooja to become free from problems. So, he showed them a new God who was very much near to their hearts. A study of some of his Vachanas throws light on his concept of God.

Basavanna says God is impersonal and supernatural power. God is as large as universe. His size cannot be measured even in terms of light-years.

“Wide as the world, wide as the sky,
Wider still, your wideness
Further, further below the underworld
Your sacred feet
Further, further, above the cosmic egg
Your sacred crown
O master Kudalanga, O Linga
Unknown, unfelt, unequalled,
Resting on my palm, you have become so tiny.”(BSV 48)

Basavanna was astonished to know that there were 33 crore Gods and Goddesses in Hinduism. His philosophy was that there was only one God who is formless, invisible to bare eyes. So, Basavanna told them that God is not in temples. In fact he is there inside us.

“The pot is a God. The winnowing fan is a God.
The stone in the street is a God.
The comb is a God. The bowstring is also a God.
The bushel is a God and the spouted cup is a God.
Gods, gods, there are so many
there’s no place left for a foot.
There is only one God.
He is our Lord of the Meeting Rivers.”

Basavanna not only disliked worshipping of several Gods, but also the idol worship. There was only one God for Sharanas. Monotheism was the core of this movement. He says:

“Do not boast, there are two or three Gods.
Note, there is only one God.
To speak of two Gods is false.” (SMH 23)

The God could be seen everywhere. Basavanna could even hear Him in every walks of life.

“Wherever I cast my glances,
There you are my God.
The form of all space you are, my God:
Universal eye you are, my God.”

During ancient period, devotion was limited to the upper castes. Only they were allowed to enter temples thus keeping a major section of the society out of the privilege of worshipping God. So, Basavanna after making it clear that there is only one God, insists the underprivileged class not to go to temple. Instead he urges them to treat their own body a temple. He says in a Vachana:

“The rich will make temples for Shiva.
What shall I, a poor man, do?
My legs are pillars,
The body the shrine,
The head a cupola of gold.
Listen, O lord of the meeting rivers,

Things standing shall fall,
But the moving ever shall stay.”

Telling this, he abandoned going to temples. Instead, he started worshipping the God in the form of Ishtalinga which is a symbol of the universe. The God in the temple is static, whereas the Linga which a Sharana wears on the body is always with him. One need not go to temple in search of God, when one’s body itself has a God installed in it.

Basavanna once saw a large number of women pouring milk over the ant-hills and the images of snake carved in stone. It was Naga Panchami festival. While they were pouring milk, a live snake came out of the hole and the women ran helter-skelter. A passerby came and killed the snake. Basavanna suggests that one may find God by giving food to the needy people and not by wasting milk over a stone:

“When you look at a stone snake
‘Give it a drink of milk’, they say O Friend.
When they see a real snake
‘Kill it’, they say, O Friend.
When a Jangama comes, ready to eat,
‘Get out’, they say.
For the Linga which cannot eat,
‘Bring rice’, they say, O Friend.
When they see the Sharanas of Kudalasangama
And show neglect
They will become like a lump of earth
Smashed by stone.”

The traditional rules of purity have no meaning for Basavanna. According to him, the one who wears Linga is free from all kinds of pollution. In one of the Vachanas he says,

“What kind of people they might be,
if they wear the holy Shivalinga on their bodies,
I shall chew the quid from their mouths
I shall put on their worn-out clothes
I shall live by guarding their sandals-
Of those who remember the Lord of the Meeting Rivers,
never separating Him with their bodies.”

The poet is ready to eat the betel leaves mingled with another person’s spittle. He does not hesitate to wear the old clothes used by others. Being the Chief Treasurer of the State, he is even ready to guard others’ sandals. All these he is ready to do on one condition, that is, such persons must wear Linga on their body. He wants us to know that by wearing Linga (God) one is purified.

Basavanna was afraid that people may be distracted from their duties of this world in search of the other world. So he did not support the idea of going to hell or heaven after death. He knew that innocent people were being fooled by the priestly class. To make them aware of the reality, he told that one need not go to holy places to see God. Instead he said, “The devotees courtyard is Varanasi”, “Body is heaven” and “Work(Kayaka) is worship”.

“Is the world of men
Different from the world of god?
Within this very world
Endless worlds-
Shiva’s world means
Shiva’s virtues.
The world of god is

Where the devotee is
The devotee's courtyard
Is Varanasi.
The body, Kailasa
This is the truth
O Kudalasangamadeva." (BSV 47)

After having told about the existence of one God, Basavanna shows us the path to win His favour. One need not do Yaga, Yajna, sacrifices, etc., to get God's attention. He says:

"Steal not, kill not
Be not angry, insult not others
This is the way of keeping your
character and conduct pure and
is the only way of winning
the favour of Kudalasangama". (SMH 54)

The ancient Karma theory, which advocated that those who do good in this life will get good results in the next birth, was severely attacked by Basavanna. For him there in nothing called re-birth. One should be a good human being so that one finds heaven in this world only. One must not follow the path of vice which affects the health of the society. By being virtuous, one may have a cleaner society and find God in this world only.

"Speaking truth is the world of God
Telling lies is the world of humans
Virtue is heaven
And vice, hell." (VK 47)

Basavanna's spiritual discovery was that devotion can also be practiced being married. One need not renounce family life to attain mystical heights. In fact, he himself married two wives, Gangambika and Nilambika. He showed that one need not stay away from family life achieve spiritual bliss.

Basavanna was a mass-prophet like Mohammed and Jesus Christ. He examined and analyzed several religions and practices before coming to the conclusion that there was only one God. Like Buddha, Basavanna also championed the cause of the oppressed masses, especially the untouchables. Basavanna fought against the Brahminic hegemony in the society and upheld the rights of the masses.

Liberating the masses from the shackles of superstition and ignorance was one of the main aspects of the Vachanas of Basavanna. Both male and female wore Linga on their body. There was no distinction of class, creed, sex, position to worship God. It was a simple idea that God loves those who are really devoted towards Him. There is only one simple Mantra "Om Namah Shivay", to reach God. All other classical scriptures were neglected. No other restrictions were put on the devotees. This simple and scientific concept of God led to an egalitarian society which was based on dignity of labour. The dream of creating a casteless, classless society was achieved to a great extent by Basavanna.

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