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SPIRITUALIZING LIFE: A STUDY OF THE VACHANAS OF AKKAMAHADEVI

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ABSTRACT

India has witnessed several socio-religious movements in its history. One such was the Virashaiva movement of Karnataka in the 12th century. The movement, led by Basavanna, had a great impact over the social structure of the society of the time. Akkamahadevi, a staunch follower of Basavanna, has written many Vachanas on topics of social relevance. Rejecting King Kaushik, she went in search of God to various places and forest. Akkamahadevi is regarded as one of the first women saints of India. Akkamahadevi opposes the false worship of God. She is not happy with the world in which people worship God without caring for the real meaning for worship. People have forgotten the real Bhakti in which one worships God with mind and not with hands. For her, working hands are more important than praying lips. Akkamahadevi says that people give more importance to their physical well-being rather than their spiritual wellness. Everyone wants to be strong physically whereas there are only a few who want to become strong spiritually. The present paper studies the Vachanas of Akkamahadevi related to Spiritual wellbeing.

Keywords: Vachana, Socio-religious movement, Basavanna, Spirituality, Illusion, Virashaiva, Sharana.

India is a country with rich cultural diversity. Throughout its history, it is known for various historical, political and social changes. As an ancient civilization, India has a rich socio-religious culture which has been the product of great thinkers, philosophers and reformers. As a vibrant country, it witnessed changes in all spheres of life from time to time. Whenever the society needed a necessary change, it happened to correct the erring generation. Such a socio-religious movement was witnessed in the 12th century in Karnataka. The movement led by Lord Basaveswara is said to have brought the first revolutionary social change in the world. Popularly known as 'Virashaiva Movement' or 'Sharana Movement', it awakened the world from its deep slumber of dead practices. It was even greater than the Reformation in Europe which concentrated more on the correction of bad practices of the Church. The movement started by Basaveswara was not just a religious reformation, but also the transformation of human minds to love all and let others live happily. India's Later-Vedic caste-ridden society was given a major surgery by the altruistic and pacifist ideas of Basavanna and the other Sharanas of the time. Many scholars opine that it was the greatest social movement which brought inter-caste marriages and establishment of new social order. Most interestingly, Basavanna was not the only one in this fight; there was a group of Sharanas which included AllamaPrabhu, Channabasavanna, Akkamahadevi and others from all sections of the society. Although the movement was opposed by the priest class and fundamentalist elements, which led

to the tragic death of many Sharanas, the spirit of the movement created a big social change in the country. Many Sharanas and Sharanes made Kalyana their home and worked together irrespective of their caste, class and gender. They fought against the prevailing caste system and used Vachana, a unique literary medium, to reach the common man. Dr. C. R. Yaravintelimath comments,

“In the history of India, the socio-religious revolution witnessed by the 12th century Karnataka was a rare phenomenon. Rarer still was its by-product, a unique body of literature called Vachana literature, which was a literature of the common people written in the language of the common people. What William Wordsworth and S.T.Coleridge did to the English language and literature suffocated by the classical stoicism of the 18th century, Basavanna and his colleagues did to Kannada language and literature, which also suffered a similar fate at the hands of the writers of the classical school of Champu epics who wrote for the learned scholars in their pedantic language.” (CRY, Preface)

The Sharanas dream was to create a casteless society in which all were treated equal by eradicating age old caste system from the society. The other major goal of the Sharanas was to bring about gender equality by providing equal opportunities to women. They wanted woman to come out of the four walls in which she was imprisoned till then. In this they achieved success to a great extent through their discussions at Anubhava Mantapa, a hall of spiritual experience in Kalyana.

As many as thirty three women saints came to light at one and the same time. All of them wrote Vachanas on various issues of social importance. The women saints scaled equal heights with their male counterparts. They practiced detachment, worshipped Guru, Linga and Jangama and did Kayaka. Among all the women, Akkamahadevi is the one who could even surpass many of her male contemporaries.

The present study focuses on this famous woman saint Akkamahadevi who is not only regarded as the first great woman writer of India but also known for her mature rendering on spiritualism. Akkamahadevi was a staunch devotee of Shiva. She followed ‘Sharana Sati, LingaPati’ concept throughout her life. That is why she did not want to get married. But the forced marriage made her to leave her home and go in search of her soul God Chennamallikarjuna.

Mahadevi was born in the 12th century in a village called Udutadi in Shimoga district of Karnataka. Her father Nirmala Shetty and mother Sumati were ardent devotees of Shiva. Her parents were very much cultured who belonged to Veerashaiva sect. They begot Mahadevi after many years of their marriage. So, obviously she was the apple of their eyes.

As a child, Mahadevi was very clever and much liked by others. Right from her childhood, she had a spirit of questioning. She never accepted anything blindly. She did not like to play with her friends. Worshipping Shiva was itself a game for her. Unlike the other girls of her age, she wanted to go to school and learn new things. Accepting her wish, her parents sent her to a school wherein she found a Guru named Gurulinga Deva who became an inspiration for her later achievements. At the age of ten, Mahadevi was given Linga Diksha, in which the Guru told her that it is her marriage with the God. Mahadevi took it seriously and later, refused to marry anyone because she has already married God Himself.

One day, Kaushika, the King of Udutadi saw Mahadevi incidently and got fascinated by her beauty. He sent his ministers to Nirmala Shetty to mediate the marriage. But Mahadevi rejected the king because she could not think about any other person except her beloved Chennamallikarjuna. Moreover, her parents also did not want her to get married to a Jaina king. However, the king threatened them that he would put them into prison, for which Mahadevi had to surrender. However, she consented to marry on the condition that the king should convert himself to Veerashaivism. It is told that though the king accepted her condition, he did not practice it. Kaushika was tyrannical in his behaviour. His lustful advances made Mahadevi to quit the palace. Accusing him of lustfulness, she threw away all her clothes and walked out of palace naked.

Crossing many dense forests and villages, Mahadevi reached Kalyana, where she wanted to meet Basavanna and the other Sharanas. Before entering Anubhava Mantapa, she had to answer the questions raised by Allama Prabhu, the President of Anubhava Mantapa. J.P. Schouten says,

“The whole sixteenth chapter of the Sunya Sampadane is devoted to an extensive dialogue between Allama and Mahadevi in which the former proves to be a strict interrogator. The naked woman saint has to produce convincing evidence that she is not a fraud or a lunatic, but a real devotee and a bride of God. Only after long hesitation, the Veerashaiva community accepted her and honoured her with the title Akka (elder sister).” (JPS, 169)

Akkamahadevi spent some time in the company of the devotees at Kalyana which proved to be a fruitful time for her spiritual development. In her Vachanas, she regularly expresses her gratitude towards Basava, Allama and Channabasava for their teachings and their spirituality. But finally she chose her way and left Kalyana. To quote J.P. Schoten,

“Akkamahadevi was too much of a solitary seeker to find satisfaction in such a large and turbulent community. She went on foot to the holy mountain of Srishaila, an old Shaiva centre of pilgrimage with a famous monastery. There, she expected to find her divine lover and to realize the consubstantial union with him. The heavenly plantain-grove of Srishaila is said to have been the end-point of her quest. According to the legends, she died there in her early twenties in complete surrender to her Lord.” (JPS, 169)

The Vachanas of Akkamahadevi deal with various subjects related to the meaning of God, life, death and goals of life. The study of some of her Vachanas provides knowledge of her beautiful understanding of life. Akkamahadevi says that it is very difficult to find people who trust God. She is in fact of the belief that the human life is just a play. So, she insists on having complete faith in God to lead a good life. Akkamahadevi believes that man is a favoured child of God, for whom the impossible is possible. Being a daughter of God she says:

“I put fetters on the feet of

Lust, anger, greed,

Infatuation, pride and jealousy.” (CRY- 90)

For the Sharanas, Anga (body) was just a frame, a facilitator. Again she asks not to trust this body.

“Let this body be burnt.

It is a pot of excretion,

A cup of urine

A skeleton of bones,

A bag of pus.

Do not ruin yourself by trusting it.” (CRY -92)

Akkamahadevi wants to conquer all these evils by applying the perfume of Guru’s grace, adorning her forehead with the Tilaka of humility and using a sword called Shivasharana. For her the company of Shivasharanas is equal to the company of God.

Akkamahadevi opposed the false worship of God. She is not happy with the world in which people worship God without caring for the real meaning for worship. People have forgotten the real Bhakti in which one worships God with mind and not with hands. For her, working hands are more important than praying lips. Akkamahadevi says that people are giving more importance to their physical well-being rather than their spiritual wellness. Everyone wants to be strong physically whereas there are only a few who want to become strong spiritually. For Akka, body is not supreme. Instead, one must strive to have spiritual wellness through which one may find peace in this world. God is the only saviour who can be an answer to all our questions. She asks one to be detached from the worldly affairs to be happy. However, she says that all that people have is a palm leaf in their hand, a book in their arm-pit and speech in their mouth. Say asks,

“Unless the eyes stop enjoying the sight,

The fingers stop pressing the fruit

And the heart stops lusting,
 Where is detachment for everybody?" (CRY-98)
 "What if the serpent sways its head
 To the tune of a flute,
 Unless the desire for the inner poison ceases?
 What if one sings or hears songs,
 Unless one sheds the vices lying within oneself?" (CRY 141)

One cannot be treated great based on one's worldly achievements. Right conduct, true devotion, good devotion, good deeds, right knowledge and good behaviour are the qualities that make one really great. One must always be true to one's word and deed. Self-control and humility are the great qualities which Akkamahadevi always wants the people who are in quest for spiritual development.

According to Akkamahadevi there are thirty two nooses of illusion which stop man to achieve spirituality and make man suffer. They include the illusion of class, caste, name, complexion, kingship, money, corn, body, etc. Every man has these illusions by birth which are to be nipped-off, as Akkamahadevi says, at a certain stage of life. One has to come out of these illusions to lead a happy and spiritual life. It is not easy for an ordinary person to do so. One has to have, as Akkamahadevi says, strong determination to gain spiritual bliss.

"The illusion of name, complexion, stage
 Of life, faith and scriptures,
 The illusion of logic, kingship, money,
 Corn, son and friend,
 The illusion of wealth, renunciation and enjoyment,
 The illusion of body, sense and passion,
 The illusion of breath, mind, will, soul and infatuation,
 The illusion that 'I am not He'," (CRY - 100)

Like the other Sharanas, Akkamahadevi was also strongly advocates love for life. Having told all the negative attitudes of man, she tries to find a solution to come out from them. One has to have many good qualities to become a complete man. The company which we keep is very important in deciding our fate. There must always be a company of the intelligent ones who can guide us towards a better understanding of the surroundings. Every person we meet must lead us a step ahead towards the achievement of our spiritual being. Akkamahadevi always aspired for good friends like Sharanas in her life. Only God and the Sharanas had a place in her heart. Having good friends was more than anything else for her. That is why Akkamahadevi could reach those mystical heights.

"Staying in the company of the ignorant
 Is like getting a spark by striking flints.
 Staying in the company of the wise
 Is like getting butter by churning curds." (CRY - 102)
 Again, she says,
 "Playing, singing, telling, hearing,
 Walking and speaking with devotees
 Has been a happy conference.(CRY - 105)

Akka's view on food culture is still very relevant. She focuses on the satvik food. Instead of eating to live people are living to eat. She talks about the kind of food one has to eat to lead a satvik life. For her the food should be simple which keeps your mind and body in control. The eating of spicy and rich food will lead to imbalance in one's physical and mental health. So, she asks us not to over-feed our bodies.

"Reduce food, O brothers, reduce food.

Food causes diseases to grow and spread.

Food leads to sleep which further leads

To darkness, ignorance and forgetfulness.

Ignorance causing distortion

Of desire, body, mind, sense, heart and gas,

Brings one to birth.

Therefore do not over feed your body." (CRY - 111)

Like Buddha, Akkamahadevi too speaks about human desires. To attain spiritual bliss, she advises one to be free from desires. She says there is no body without senses and no senses without body. She asks God to guide her in becoming free from desire. For Akkamahadevi there is only one desire- the desire of becoming one with the God- Aikya. To conquer desires, she again asks one to praise the Lord. However, God for Akkamahadevi and all other Sharanas, was not in temples. She did not believe in idol worship. The worship of Ishtalinga was the real worship for her. There is no need of any ornaments, fragrances, flowers, solitude, etc. for worship. She asks,

"Why need a flower when breath itself is fragrant?

Why go into a trance,

When there is forgiveness,

Self-control, peace and patience?

Why need solitude

When one becomes one with the world,

O Chennamallikarjuna?" (CRY - 116)

Most of her views on material life hold good with the present scenario. Man is so much busy with the affairs of the world that he is unable to find time to think about God. He is so much with the world that he does not think about himself. According to Akkamahadevi man is wasting time by thinking about useless things. The inner thinking is important for our spiritual growth. Akka's concern for such worldly men is that they are neither able to concentrate on God nor on his own self. She asks,

"What use knowing everything?

Unless one knows oneself

When consciousness becomes

One's own passion,

Why ask for it?" (CRY - 122)

Another negative attitude that Akkamahadevi recognises in men is the aspiration for honour. She agreed with Basavanna on the Kayaka culture. For him work was the real worship. Likewise, Akkamahadevi also considered honour to be a waste. One of the best ornaments for a Shivasharana is to work only for self-satisfaction and not for the sake of name.

“Do those who are united by love look for caste?

Do those who are mad with love know shame?

Do those who are loved by Chennamallikarjuna,

Care for worldly honour?” (CRY - 126)

According to Akka, spirituality is not a born quality; one has to acquire it by persistence. One has to make efforts to earn it through the guidance of a Guru.

“Like sowing seeds,

After scanning the fertility of the field,

The Teacher makes his disciple

Attain Reality through initiation,

After purifying his inside and outside.

Dispelling all doubt of In and Out,

Making him glitter like a crystal shaft,

And retire from worldly affairs.” (CRY - 126)

Spiritualism can be achieved by any person irrespective of colour. No one is superior or inferior in respect of one's colour.

“What if my body is burnt pitch black, O Sir?

What if my body radiates light, O Sir?

When once the heart is purified,

And the body is loved by you,

What matters how the body is,

O Chennamallikarjuna?” (CRY 135)

Akkamahadevi speaks about five kinds of purity – that of conduct, speech, body, mind and heart. As all our sorrows start with ‘I’, one must shed ‘I’ to lead a happy and contented life. Maya, which includes Woman, Wealth and Land, is the thing which destroys one's life. So, one should not become a slave to Maya. Spiritual bliss embraces that person who is free from Maya. If one achieves these spiritual heights, one is sure to become a happy person with a changed outlook. One feels light at heart after doing so.

“Within my body there is

A bodiless state.

Within my life there is

A lifeless state.

Within my will there is

Will-lessness.

The Absolute has filled my mind.” (CRY - 136)

Akka's renderings on acquisition of spirituality are remarkable. For her, scaling the spiritual heights is not very difficult. On the other hand, it is very difficult not to be spiritual. Thus, in one of her Vachanas, Akkamahadevi encourages others not to be afraid that they cannot become spiritual beings.

“It is difficult to be small

But not difficult to be great, mark!
It is difficult to be a Bhavi
But not difficult to be a Bhakta, mark!
It is difficult to be a sign
But not difficult to be formless,
O Chennamallikarjuna!" (CRY 138)

"What use is there of
Words without deeds,
Valour without fight,
Decoration of a woman in picture?
What use are these –
A leafless tree,
A dried up river,
And company of a vicious person?
What use are these –
Religion without compassion,
Devotion without the sense of twain
And speech without courtesy,
O my Lord Chennamallikarjuna?" (CRY - 160)

Akka's Vachanas beautifully explain the need for the acceptance of the present. She neither requests God to change her future nor to make it a happier one. In fact, she is ready to face anything, anytime. The focus on the immediate present is felt in Akka's Vachanas. She reiterates the sentence told by Sri Krishna in The Bhagavad Geeta.

What is to come tomorrow
Let it come today.
What is to come today
Let it come this very hour.
Do not say this time or that time,
O Chennamallikarjuna!" (CRY - 164)

Akka's Vachanas lay a greater emphasis on personal righteousness. One must do good things in life. Then only people will appreciate that person. Right conduct and speech are most important for a person. Her Vachanas remind us Buddha's preaching.

"Should you not feel ashamed of your state?
Why get bad remarks from others
That your conduct and speech are bad.
Better to die at once than have it said,

'That is not right',
Mark, Chennamallikarjuna!" (CRY - 166)

"What is the use of a tree,
Unless it has shadow?
What is the use of wealth,
Unless one has compassion?
What is the use of a cow,
Unless she gives milk?
What is the use of beauty,
Unless one has virtue?
What is the use of width,
Unless there is sky?
Of what use am I,
Unless I know you,
O Chennamallikarjuna?" (CRY - 185)

"Four quarters of the day
They toil and moil for food.
Four watches of the night,
They burn for sensual pleasure.
Like a washerman, who,
Though standing in water,
Yet goes dry in mouth and dies,
They know not the Great Absolute
Dwelling within themselves,
O Chennamallikarjuna!" (CRY - 208)

While trying to lead a contended life, one may come across many hurdles. People may cause unexpected grief to a person. Akkamahadevi says that it is but natural. One must not get upset with such things in life. Instead one must take life as it comes to us and be patient on such occasions.

"Having built your house on a mountain top,
Why fear wild beasts, Sir?
Having built your house on a sea shore,
Why fear froth and foam, Sir?
Having built your house in the bazaar,
Why blush at words of abuse?

Being born in this world,
Should praise or scorn come to you,
We should be cool and collected,
Allowing no thought of anger
Darken our mind,
Listen, O Chennamallikarjuna Lord!" (CRY - 178)

Fearlessness is what Akkamahadevi preaches us as a great quality. She says that one should not fear for anything in life. One must have complete faith in God and move forward.

"Don't fear, O mind!
Don't be scared, O body!
Knowing the Reality is being free from care.
Millions are there who throw
Stones at the tree full of fruits.
None have I seen who throws stone
At the silk-cotton tree." (CRY - 215)

Akkamahadevi is one of the rare women who could reach the heights of spirituality. More interestingly, she achieved this during a time when woman was restricted to the four walls of the house. It is because of her bold nature that she went to school by convincing her parents. She never considered herself inferior to men, unlike her contemporaries. Although she lived for a short period, like John Keats, her words are to be bound in gold. She is regarded as the first feminist of the world. She sets herself a model by her commitment to life and high moral and spiritual standards. Being the youngest member of Anubhava Mantapa, she not only gained greater attention from the acclaimed Sharanas but also proved herself to be a great practitioner of values of Sharana culture. Basavanna considers Akkamahadevi a real jewel in crown of Anubhava Mantapa. He calls her as his mother and praises in one of his Vachanas. Allamaprabhu, the president of Anubhava Mantapa pours praise on the little genius for her stand on various issues of life. And Channabasavanna lavished praise on Akkamahadevi for her mature comments on life which are beyond her age and experience. Her achievement as a writer rests on her 354 Vachanas which are read even after 800 years for their relevance. Her Vachanas have been discussed by various scholars. What one finds in renderings is her mature reading of human life. Her questions and answers on life show her ability to provide logical and intellectual insights towards life. She created history by her writings both in the field of literature and religion. Dr. C. R. Yaravintelimath rightly comments, "Akkamahadevi, 'the miracle of miracles', 'the Divine Cuckoo', was the first among women Vachana writers both in mystic height and poetic excellence." (CRY 41)

For AkkaMahadevi, Channamallikarjuna is a divine personality in whom she finds the fulfilment of her spiritual endeavour. Mahadevi emphasizes the individual and personal sides of experience; in harmony with this she holds that our ethical and religious value judgements must help to determine our idea of God as the ultimate ground of Reality. She thus discovers the path to the deeper nature of things in what ought to be rather than in what is. Man is a spiritual personality whose life is rooted in an eternal and transcendental life; to become the organ of this renewing and transforming life is the spiritual vocation of man and the true form of his self- activity.

Akkamahadevi stands as a symbol of emancipated soul. She proved to be one of the most mature women of the medieval times. Taking into consideration the age in which she lived and thought, her renderings are astonishingly superior and noteworthy. The feminist discourse of modern times needs to get inspiration from this great spiritual soul.

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