

Vachana Sahitya: A Revisitation to the Contribution of Sivasaranes Women Saints to the Literary World

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A Vacana is a religious lyric in Kannada free verse; Vacana means literally 'saying, thing said,' yet in all the length & variety of this literature, there is no body of lyrics more strikingly original and impassioned than the vacanas of the medieval saints. They all speak of Siva and speak Siva

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Abstract:

It was presumed that *writing* was the talent of only the male bastion till the recent past. Women were not to be seen or heard in the scenario of literature. To the contrary, the pages of history give some instances of women's writings, such as hymns from the Rig Veda by Lopmudra, Gargi, Maitreye ; the testimonials of Buddhist nuns from the sixth century BC; body of work by 12th century Vachanakartiyaru (Women Saints) and a number of works by unknown women poets, novelists and so on.

When we look at the status of women during various historical ages, we realise that it is not very satisfactory except during the Rig Vedic period. It was the same during the early 12th century. The women were controlled by the old orthodox traditions and rigid practices with no freedom and no voice of their own. The multi-faceted socio-religious movement called Sarana Movement or Vachana Chaluvali brought huge changes in the society. This movement involved all spheres of life such as social, economic, religious and literary reforms. The movement aimed at establishing a casteless, classless society and sowed the seeds of Gender equality. The movement brought women an honourable existence. Women were not only given opportunities to realize their physical and spiritual potential but also enjoyed equality with men.

A free atmosphere during the 12th century led more than thirty women writers to express their independent and new thoughts. The vachanas became the medium to express their every day experiences. Since the 'Saranas' & 'Saranes' used common regional dialect to compose the poems they were able to reach the people. Through this simple medium called 'vachanas' they were able to bring in changes in the society. Women writers like Akkamahadevi, Bonta Devi Sattyakka, Lakkamma, Nilambike, Gangambike and others wrote about various concerns, mystic experiences, vows, nature, kindness, blind beliefs & other ill practices in the society. This paper is an attempt to revisit the contribution of women saints to the literary world.

Keywords: Vachanas, Social movement, Saranes, Equality, Literary world.

Introduction:

Vacanas are literature, but not merely literary. They are literatures in spite of itself, scorning, artifice, ornament, learning and privilege: a religious literature literary because religious; great voices of a sweeping movement of protest and reform in Hindu society; witness to conflict and ecstasy in gifted mystical men. Vacanas are our wisdom literature. They have been called the Kannada Upanishads. (AKR p.12)

The twelfth century of Karnataka has witnessed a unique and unparalleled kind of literature in Kannada language. It is a new literary genre of its kind, very different from the literature of the previous ages. Such innovative types, evolved by the Vachanakaras, set a new & different trend in Kannada literature. The vachanas seem to be very simple but they have deeper meaning in them. They are like little lamps & twinkling stars which lead us to choose a right path and work to bring in harmony in a diseased society. The literature became a catalyst for changes in the religious life of the common people.

In real terms, the vachanas & the movement gave new direction, new hope & new way of life to those who were in hopelessness & in a pathetic condition. The vachana movement was against the polluted social & religious environment. According to Dr. Ujjawala Hiremath “The aim of the revolution was to emphasise humanitarian values, to spread a religion that was democratic in spirit & practice; to establish a society based on egalitarian values ;a casteless & classless society which included gender equality and lastly, to lift the downtrodden.” According to her, welfare of the human kind was the main aim of the movement.

Thus the movement & the dynamic leader of the movement - Basavanna propagated a form of religion in which everybody could participate without any discrimination of caste, class, colour & gender. He also says the body itself is a temple & was never in favour of temple cult. He also was of the view that renouncing secular life is not needed to attain the mystical experiences.

Sharanas like Allama Prabhu gave importance to the devotion practised by both husband & wife. Through this, they gave importance to the female counter part which was not done in the previous ages.

Thus this movement improved the conditions & status of women as well as gave them an honourable existence. This in return resulted in evolvement of women writers & the unprecedented contribution to the Kannada literary world.

When we go back to the history of Kannada literature, we come across great works like *Kavi Raj Marga*, *Vikramarjuna Vijaya etc*; to name a few great poets there were *Pampa*, *Ranna*, *Ponna*, *Janna etc*. They wrote many works in the *Champu* form. They were scholars & appointed as court poets. Most of their works dealt with the Ramayana, Mahabharata & tales related to Jainism. Moreover the language they used was Sanskrit, which was known only by few scholars & courtiers. Hence the popularity of the works was restricted & failed to reach the common people. When such conditions were prevailing at the dawn of the twelfth century *Vachana* form became popular as a vehicle to convey their day today experiences to the common people.

According to Dr.Ujjawala Hiremath "Vachanas are a unique combination of thought, emotion and experience. The Saranas coming down from the height of their experience poured the nectar of their realization in the form of this type of poetic, prose- or small poetic text whose beauty is enticing and attention grabbing. They are little lamps that lead one to the mystic world of mystic experience. Hundreds of Saranas and Sivasaranes were highly evolved - so that every word they spoke was a word charged with the emotion of love for the supreme. The depth, range, scope and the impassioned emotion expressed in several vachanas of men and women saints is beyond imagination" (p. 31)

There were women writers from varied backgrounds-some with a noble profile as well as belonging to the low caste & many of them, the victims of oppression, poverty & other social evils. The 12th century social movement opened the avenues for such women to voice their protest against the evils of the society. Apart from this, the Anubhava Mantapa gave everybody a chance to talk about their spiritual experiences & share their views towards building a new society.

Akkamahadevi, who scaled mystic height, is known for her poetic excellence. Her literary achievements were great. She wrote valuable works; *Yoganga Trividhi*, *Sristiya Vachana*, *Mantragopya* & *Svaravachana*. Apart from these, more than four hundred vachanas were penned by her. Dr Siddayya Puranik beautifully quotes "... we should ever be beholden her for this priceless literature." (VWS.p.46) Akkamahadevi is known for her love lyrics, imaginative genius, renunciation & spiritual vision. When there was discussion of her marriage at her home she tells her mother that she was already married to an immortal husband. The beauty of her husband Chennamallikarjuna is described in this vachana.

I love the handsome one;
He has no death
Decay nor form
No place or side
No end or birthmarks
I love him O mother Listen.
Further she says, when her mother coaxes her to get married;
Husband inside,
Lover outside
I can't manage both
... And the long bow. (AKR. V.114.p.127)

Akkamahadevi strongly believes that He is all pervasive. For her, nature is the powerful symbol of omnipresence of 'the Lord White as Jasmine.' Her love for nature is evident in many of her vachanas. To quote one here;

You are the entire wood
And the entire divine trees in it
You are all the birds & beasts
...
Show yourself to me,
O Cennamallikarjuna? (VWS. V. 300.p.195)

Gogave another writer questions boldly the society & its practices. She asks how can there be any differences between man & woman, when the knowledge possessed is neither male nor female. She propagates gender equality through her vachana.

In one of her Vachanas Gogavve writes;

Woman it's, if one develops breasts & plaits of hair,
Man it's, if one grows moustache.
Tell me what is
The knowledge of these,
Whether female or male,
O Nastinatha!!(SVS. vol. V, V, 696)

Satyakka, belonging to the lowest rank in the society was a devotee of Siva. She is known for her simple style & practiced what she preached. She wrote around twenty nine vachanas which reveal her devotion to god, the blind beliefs, and ill practices prevailing in the society.

Doing worship is no observance.
Telling sacred spell is no observance.
Burning incense or lighting lamp is no observance.

In telling this, she implies that one has to worship Siva with much awareness and surrender ourselves. She also mentions that there are vows that have to be observed. Such vows refer to

Not yearning for other's wealth,
Woman or other deities.....

She warns.

Look, brothers, there are the daily observances,
In Sambhu Jakkessvara! (VWS. V.959. p.448)

Nilambike was Basavanna's second wife. She was an intellectual companion of Basavanna. In one of her vachanas she said that she was Basavanna's " Vichara patni"-intellectual wife. It is said that she had written eleven thousand vachanas but found only 125 vachanas bearing the signature *Sangayya*. Almost all her vachanas express her praise of Basavanna & the agony of separation from Basavanna.

I am crying like an animal
Lost in the forest, O Sir
While I was weeping with immense sorrow
Devotee Cannanna, knowing my state of suffering,
...
Again & again
In Sangayya. (VWS. V.721. p.370)

Muktayakka, another writer has written thirty seven vachanas. Her signature is Ajaganna. She had the greatest respect for her brother, as a spiritual teacher & guru. Surprised about bother's yoga, she writes

How strange the fire

Has melted away,
The camphor remains
Strange too, indeed;
Ajaganna's yoga (SVS.Vol.1 p.128)

She is compared to Akkamahadevi for possessing intelligence & spiritual enlightenment. Ayadakki Lakkamma is famous for her devotion towards *kayaka* or work. She believes that work is equal to divine state in heaven.

Why do you seek another state?
As long as you have work to do?
Do not aspire for heaven
...
Where Amaresvaralinga is
There is heaven. (VWS v.645.p334)

Bontadevi: She has written five vachanas & the signature is *Bidadi*. In the vachanas below she questions the caste system & insists upon equality among all humans.

Is there such a thing
As a void within a village
And a void outside a village?
Is there a Brahmana's colony within a village?
And a pariah's colony outside a village?
Wherever you go, the void is the same. (VWS, V.848, p.403)

Conclusion:

Prof. M R Sakhare says; "It is a literature of the vacanakaras that is singularly free from all myth & mystification. Vacanakaras refers to historical personages & propounds practicable principles for practical people. In a word, they preach, what may be called, a socio-religious conduct of life as obtained from practical experiences of life. We hardly come across any miracle in the vacanas. All that we find therein is human endeavour that resulted in divine achievement only because it was sincere & unselfish." (Women Saints in search of Truth. p.34)

Vachanas are songs of experience; they belong to all time & place. The literature exceeds the limitations of time & place. They can be applicable to the whole universe. Hence the literature by Women Saints is a great contribution not only to Kannada literature but to world literature.

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