



Vachanas of Śiva's Devotees of the 12th Century Karnataka

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Abstract

The Vachanas have an enormous influence on the Kannada language and culture. The deep devotional commitment to God, and humanism, are so universal in spirit that they eminently deserve attention outside their traditional sphere of influence among Kannada-knowing people in Karnataka. Common themes in the Vachanas are Devotion to *Guru*, *Liṅga*, and *Jaṅgama*; Ethics – ethical behaviour, truthfulness, and compassion; Censure of hypocrisy; Censure of *Bhavi*; Emphasis on work, and integrating bhakti and knowledge with it; Advocacy of Equality and Censure of the caste system and impurity rules; Emphasis on *Dāśoḥa* or charity in terms of food, wealth, and service; Advocacy of respect for women. Interestingly one of the vachana has an explicit reference to *Bharata Deśa*, clearly indicating *vachanakaras* had clear the concept of Bharata as a country.

Keywords: Vachanas, Kannada, Viraśaiva, Bhakti, Allama Prabhu, Basavaṇṇa, Upanishads

Introduction

Śiva Śaraṇas (Śiva's Devotees) of medieval Karnataka have left a rich legacy of what is called *Vachanas* or, 'Sayings' in Kannada, numbering some twenty thousand. Though the Vachanas are in prose, they are really poems in free verse. Their ethical teaching has a universal appeal, and astounding relevance to even the present times. They are remarkable for their social concern, free-thinking,

advocacy of equality, criticism of the caste system and related ideas of pollution, and respect for women and manual work, apart from the expression of intense bhakti, advocacy of combining work with bhakti and Jnana, and ethics of giving without ego. They staunchly believed in one God, whom they called Śiva. This God is a combination of the impersonal Brahman of the Upanishads, and also of a personal God, one could relate to. Though the composition of *Vachanas* began

in the 11th century itself, it reached a climax in the 12th century under the leadership of Basavaṇṇa or Basaveśwara. Hundreds joined him actively in his socio-religious movement of drastically reforming society and cleansing religion. Most of them came from the working class and so-called low castes. They ranged from Brahmanas to untouchables, uniting themselves under one umbrella of bhakti to Śiva, and equal dignity of all. Remarkably, the working class members also composed vachanas, and what is more, their vachanas were no less sophisticated in thought, expression, and even in the use of Sanskrit words and quotations. Their social concern and critical thinking was far ahead of their times. Hence, the Vachana literature is not for Viraśaivas/, Liṅgāyats alone, but meant for all Indians, even for all humanity, though the credit for giving birth to this rich literature goes to Viraśaivism.

Since, however, the *Vachanas* are not well known outside Karnataka due to the language barrier, M V Nadkarni, has translated 255 selected Vachanas by 32 composers of Vachanas, both in Sanskrit verses (*Ślokas*) and English free verse simultaneously, along with explanatory notes in English where needed. This collection under the title - '*Vachanamritam*' or Nectar of Sayings - is under publication. Since the publication will take some time, a few selected ones are being introduced here for the Mythic Society Journal with English translation only.

The Vachanas were spontaneous expressions of the revolutionary socio-religious movement in North Karnataka. Similar movements, known as the Bhakti movements, had started in Tamil Nadu earlier, and spread to Karnataka, and then to Maharashtra, North India, and many other parts of India including Assam. All of them had some common characteristics, despite the great diversity of their regional and linguistic background. Their consensus was that the essence of

religion is Love, not ritual! The religion of Bhakti movements was quite straightforward and simple; all that was needed was the intense feeling, love and adoration of God, and thereby of all humanity. Basavaṇṇa expressed this simply as 'what is religion without compassion (*Dayavillada dharmavādayya*)?' The adoration for God did not need to deny the world and our duty in it, but it was also not consistent with the obsession with selfish pleasures of the mundane world. God was not external to us, we do not need to go to distant places of pilgrimage to seek him. We can find Him among the poor and serve Him by serving the poor and the mendicants. To realize him, we do not need metaphysical speculations; we only have to make our hearts and minds pure and honest, without hatred against anyone, and dedicate ourselves to truthfulness. Since an intense love for God needs single-minded devotion, the leaders of bhakti movements preached strict monotheism, irrespective of whether the loved form of God was Śiva, Durgā, or Viṣṇu. Unfortunately, the last point was not well understood, and there were conflicts and mutual recriminations between believers of Śiva and Viṣṇu as if there were two different Gods. Almost all the bhakti movements emerged as protests against notions of impurity and domination by upper castes, and the major participants in them were the lower castes including untouchables despised and marginalized for centuries. The social and class background of the vachanakāras, for example, was amazingly diverse, from plain untouchables to Brāhmaṇas. The magnetic personality of their leaders was of course a uniting factor, but the egalitarian ideology and democratic functioning of the protest movement was also very relevant. Naturally, their thoughts found expressions through local or regional languages, which gave a huge boost to the creation of rich literature in these languages all over India. The bhakti

movements were also a protest against cruel practices of religion like animal sacrifice. Karnataka witnessed a bhakti movement in the name of Viṣṇu also, but that was later. This movement also led to the creation of new literature in Kannada known as *Dāsa-sāhitya*, which was in the form of songs. Most of the literature under the bhakti movements in India was in the form of songs or poetry. The Vachana literature appears to be unique in this respect, though Vachanas also can be considered poems in their own right, even if in free verse. Several of them are in fact set to classical music and sung.¹

Nandimath has made an apt observation on the content of the Vachanas: 'The primary aim of the writers of Vachanas is, not to propound a religious or philosophical system, but to show to the people the existing social and religious evils in their nakedness'(1942:20). Yet, the Vachana literature became the main source of Vīraśaivism. It overshadowed the earlier Vīraśaiva literature because the Vachanas were in Kannada, and directly appealed to the masses because of the frank criticism of social discrimination they were subjected to. Nandimath says further that 'Vīraśaivism lays more stress on ethical and spiritual, rather than on the philosophical aspects of religion' (ibid: 91). This does not mean, however, that Vīraśaivism did not have a philosophy; in fact, Nandimath himself devotes Chapter V of his book to the discussion of its philosophical background.

Some people have a misunderstanding that Basavaṇṇa was the founder of Vīraśaivism. In fact, as Nandimath says, it has great antiquity, and each successive Yuga or epoch is believed to have had five teachers for it. The present Kali-yuga also had five ācaryas – Revāṇa, Maruḷa, Ekorāma, Panditārādhyā, and Viśweśwara (ibid: 14). Thus Vīraśaivism is said to have been prevalent centuries before Basavaṇṇa. According to Nandimath, even the Vachana literature

in Kannada started about a century before Basavaṇṇa. Even then, Basavaṇṇa's contribution to Vīraśaivism cannot be undermined. He gave an unprecedented boost and social orientation in favour of the underdog to it and also to Vachana literature. Had it not been for his visionary and energetic leadership, Vīraśaivism would not have gained its present mass base and influence in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh.

The Vachanas have an enormous influence in Karnataka both in rural and urban areas, not only among the Liṅgāyats or Vīraśaivas who are their official followers but among others too. They have become popular in classical and devotional music concerts too attended by Liṅgāyats and others alike. Their intense devotional fervour for God, and humanism, are so universal in spirit that they eminently deserve attention outside their traditional sphere of influence among Kannada-knowing people in Karnataka. Yet, as far as I know, there have been only two published translations of selected Vachanas into English, one by Ramanujan (1973) and the second by Rao (2007). But the former selected only four vachanakāras, though prominent ones. The latter focused mainly on Allama Prabhu since his book was on this particular saint's philosophy. He has also translated selected Vachanas of Allama Prabhu subject-wise, including a few related Vachanas by seven other vachanakāras too. There have been probably no translations in other Indian languages. Partly this has been due to the unique literary style of the Vachanas, with a lot of technical words relevant to Vīraśaivism, not easily amenable for translation.

Yet, the problem is not so intractable, because the Vachanas liberally use Sanskrit words, though often with different or special connotations. Many vachanakāras including even those from the working class have quoted from the Vedas and Upanishads, though

not accepted as scriptures. Paradoxically, it is often the Kannada words used by them that are difficult to interpret. But the language of the Vachanas has a significant continuity, which can be understood by even speakers of contemporary Kannada. Moreover, dictionaries explaining the meaning of words used in the Vachanas are also available (Mahādevappa Ed. 2001; Savadattimath 2021; Mahadevaiah et al Ed. 2014). The first two of these dictionaries are from Kannada into Kannada, while the third is from Kannada into three languages – Kannada, English, and Hindi. I would like to clarify, however, that my translation of Vachanas is not literal or word-for-word. It is a *bhāvānuvāda*, as they say in Kannada (and Sanskrit), which means translation of the intent. A literal translation is impossible particularly if it is into Sanskrit verses bound by a metre. But I have tried my best to honestly reproduce the original intent of the Vachanas. My translations are done independently of those by Ramanujan (1973) and Rao (2007), not influenced by them. I would like to add that I do not claim to have captured the beauty of expression of the original Vachanas in Kannada in my translations. Those who know Kannada may read the original Vachanas themselves with the help of the dictionaries mentioned above. Though this book is meant essentially for those who do not know Kannada well enough, even Kannadigas and Lingayats can benefit from reading these translations.

The original Vachanas have been made easily available now, thanks to their publication in 14 volumes under the overall Series - '*Samagra Vachana Sampuṭa*', by the Kannada Pustaka Prādhikāra or the Kannada Books Authority, Bengalūru, the 15th volume in the Series being a dictionary of difficult or technical words. They are included in the Reference pages here at the end. The Chief Editor of the overall Series was M M Kalaburgi. The 14 volumes together

contain some twenty thousand Vachanas by 249 vachanakāras. The first four volumes in the Series present the Vachanas of very prominent individual vachanakāras, - Basavaṇṇa/ Basaveśwara, Allama Prabhu, Cennabasavaṇṇa, and Siddha Rāmeśwara respectively. Each of the succeeding volumes contains many vachanakāras. The fifth volume presents the Vachanas of as many as 35 women vachanakāras. It is to the great credit of Basavaṇṇa that so many women were actively involved in his revolutionary movement as back as the 12th century. It shows the importance he gave to women. Volumes from the 6th onwards constitute a subseries called '*Sankīrṇa Vachana Sampuṭa*', or, Miscellaneous Vachanas. The first nine volumes in the overall Series volumes present the Vachanas of vachanakāras who belonged to the 'Basava-yuga' or the Era of Basavaṇṇa. Volumes 10th to the 14th present the Vachanas of the post-Basava Era. I have selected for translation the vachanakāras of only the Basava-Era. I went through the last five volumes of the post-Basava era also but felt that they did not have the same social concern and appeal as the Vachanas of the Basava-Era. Their main interest was in the spiritual and metaphysical aspects of their experience.

Many, though not all, of the original Vachanas published under the Chief Editorship of M M Kalaburgi, and even those published earlier, have followed a system of classification based on the Six-Phase system (*ṣaṭsthala*). A devotee is supposed to pass through six phases in his or her spiritual progress, and the Vachanas of each are classified in terms of the phase of spiritual progress during which they were composed. These phases are known as (i) Bhakta sthala, (ii) Māheśwara sthala, (iii) Prasādi sthala, (iv) Prāṇaliṅga sthala, (v) Śaraṇa sthala, (vi) Aikya sthala. In the first phase of bhakti, the devotee is still under a vision of dualism,

that is, under a feeling that he or she is different from Liṅga or Śiva and worships Him, following at the same time very strict ethical conduct and rituals prescribed and doing charity work serving other devotees, the ascetics, and the poor. In the next phases, he or she tries to establish control over the mind, keeping it pure, and achieving greater intensity in devotion. There is a greater emphasis on 'doing' or working (*kriyā*) during the first three phases, and greater emphasis on enhancing knowledge or awareness (*jnāna* or *arivu*) in the later three phases, but work or service does not stop even in the later phases. There is an increasing *samavaya* or harmony between bhakti, *kriyā*, and *jnāna* during this spiritual progress. The last phase, *Aikya*, is one of union with Śiva or accomplishment of *Advaita-bhāva*, even while alive. Work is not done as an obligation or duty during the later phases, but done spontaneously and with pleasure. The source for this six-phase system is a holy book of Viraśaivas, called *Siddhānta Śikhāmaṇi*, composed in the 9th Century CE by Śrī Śivayogi Śivacarya (Ingalalli 1998:101). In fact, the book further classifies each phase into the same sub-phases, making a total of 101 phases. Though interesting in the first stage of classification, the system becomes very complicated when further classified into sub-phases. My selected translations avoid this classification but follow the same order in which the original Vachanas are presented.²

My translations of the selected Vachanas here follow the same numbers as given in the overall Series '*Samagra Vachana Samputa*', the first indicating the volume number and the second indicating the serial number of the Vachana within the concerned volume.

The Most Common Themes in the Vachanas

Though there are hundreds of vachanakāras and some twenty thousand vachanas, there is significant unanimity on several important issues. They are listed here as the most common themes occurring in the Vachanas roughly in order of their incidence as follows:

1. Devotion to *Guru*, *Liṅga*, and *Jaṅgama*;
2. Ethics – ethical behaviour, truthfulness, compassion;
3. Censure of hypocrisy;
4. Censure of *Bhavi*;
5. Emphasis on work, and integrating bhakti and knowledge with it;
6. Advocacy of Equality and Censure of the caste system and impurity rules;
7. Emphasis on *Dāṣa* or charity in terms of food, wealth, and service;
8. Advocacy of respect for women.

Devotion to Guru, Liṅga, and Jaṅgama constitutes the heart of Viraśaivism. Devotion or bhakti is basically towards the Supreme God, named Śiva (the Auspicious). But Śiva in ultimate reality is inaccessible and ineffable. Since it is difficult even to name Him, He is called simply *Bayalu* (the Void) or *Śūnya* (Zero/Nothing). It is stressed by all vachanakāras that there is only one God for the whole universe. A Vachana by Ghaṭṭivālayya (7.440) says: 'There is nothing to say what; there is nothing to speak so that It (the Supreme) may be heard. ... The Void (*bayalu*) about which there is nothing to say, does not search for anything; nor is it to be found after a search. It is not in the front; it is not. Siddhaliṅga, dear to Chikkayya is not; It is not.' (Tr. by Nandimath 1942: 108). Nandimath says that the whole Vachana appears to be a reflection of the Upanishadic description of the Absolute Brahman or *Neti, Neti* (It is not, It is not). (Ibid: 109). Several Vachanas of the great Mystic, Allama Prabhu, also speak of God in such terms (see for example Vachana 2.1558). Several vachanakāras have tried to narrate

their experience of God's realization in such terms. They try to explain how they experienced oneness with Śiva, extinction of duality, liberation from mundane temptations and narrowness, and pure bliss in the course of this God's realization. This constitutes the highest point in spiritual progress, and is achieved while living as Allama Prabhu says in Vachana (2.1566):

If you have said that the union with Śiva comes only after death, you are dead before death.

How is the union with the Liṅga possible then? Merging within Guheśwara happens with your body alive, not otherwise.

Contrary to the general view of the union with the Liṅga or Siva taking place only after death, Allama Prabhu takes the stand that this takes place when alive. Liṅga is present in the living body already. He scoffs at the idea of attaining liberation after death; it has to be attained in life itself. But such a mystical realization is difficult to have for a beginner on the path of spiritual progress. A devotee has to begin with devotion to what is accessible. The wonder is that though God in ultimate reality is impersonal, he is personal too and responds to his devotees and their devotion. It is thus that, Śiva is believed to be expressing Himself in this world through Guru, Liṅga and Jaṅgama to receive bhakti or devotion.

All the vachanakāras have written emotionally about their bhakti, but Basavaṇṇa and Akka Mahādevi excel. The former is called Bhakti Bhaṇḍārī (Treasurer of bhakti). He calls God and talks to Him fervently believing He is there in person around him. In Vachana 1.56 below, he calls out in distress:

*I called you many times 'Ayyā! Ayyā!' Listen to my distressed lament.
How can You keep quiet? Respond, please.
You are known as one loving Your devotees.*

But I will not rest, Oh Kūḍala Saṅgama Deva!

An essential point of intense bhakti is the complete surrender of 'Tanu, mana, dhana' (body, mind and wealth) to God, as mentioned by many vachanakāras. There is no place for selfishness, no question of using bhakti to seek wealth or honours for oneself. Hāvina Hāḷa Kallayya, addressing God, says in Vachana 9.1153 below:

Let the highest honours be with you; You can wear them around your neck yourself!

Give me only the opportunity of serving You, nothing else whatever, Oh Lord Kalleśwara!

An emotive expression of self-surrender can be found in Basavaṇṇa's Vachana 41(1.499) below:

*Use me as your veeṇā, my body as its long neck,
my head as its gourd, my nerves as its strings;
embrace me at your chest, and play many tunes, Oh Kūḍala Saṅgama Deva!*

Guru is essentially a spiritual guide who leads a person from the bondage of the mundane world to Mokṣa or liberation, which also means a union with Siva, the ultimate supreme God. Guru initiates people by bestowing the Liṅga, to be worn around the neck, after a due ceremony of consecration. Liṅga worn without this ceremony which is not bestowed by a Guru has no sanctity and is not worship-worthy. A Guru's role is not limited to this act. He also gives moral advice and leads people on the path of sadācāra or good, truthful conduct. He has also the authority to award punishment to persons who deviate from the moral path and bring them back on the path of righteousness. He also teaches how to make spiritual progress. Usually, Gurus are male ascetics or monks or Jaṅgamas. Jaṅgamas are essentially wanderers from place to place, covering both towns and villages, and are easily accessible to people. All Jaṅgamas are not necessarily Gurus.

It depends on one's spiritual confidence in having reached a high phase in spiritual ascent. But a person who has not reached such a stage and yet pretends to act like a Guru is soon found out as a hypocrite by the community and is rejected. A Guru has to have high moral as well as spiritual standing in the community. Jaṅgama and Śaraṇa are not synonyms. The latter is not necessarily a wanderer like the former. In the strict sense of the word, a Śaraṇa is a person who has reached the last but one phase in spiritual progress and is a highly evolved person morally as well as spiritually. But in practice, the word is loosely applied to any person who is a sincere devotee of Śiva, including those who are in the first phase of their progress. All Śaraṇas are not qualified to be Gurus, just as any devotee cannot be a Guru. Those who are qualified to be Gurus have to be acknowledged Jnānis, who have acquired the necessary spiritual awareness and are also exemplars of moral integrity. That is why a Guru is regarded so highly.

Liṅga is the symbol of Śiva Himself and is worn on the body by Viraśaivas to indicate that the body is as sacred as a temple of God, and its sacredness is not to be violated by gross moral lapses on the part of the wearer. Moreover, the person wearing it is made aware of the presence of God in his body itself and need not go to temples to worship Him. Wearing the Cross by Christians is a remarkably close practice, though there is no evidence of any Christian influence as such on Viraśaivism. It is wearing the *Liṅga* on the body which differentiates between a Viraśaiva and a Śaiva, the latter worshipping a larger fixed *Liṅga* in the temples. A Vachana by Dhakkeya Bommaṇṇa, (7.967) explains that people desire to worship a symbol of God, since it is difficult to worship Him in abstraction, and that is why God took the form of *Liṅga* and came down to the Earth for devotees' sake. The monotheism of

vachanakāras is so strict that not only they barred the worship of other deities like Viṣṇu, but also that of Śiva in the form of fixed *Liṅga* in temples. The only worship-worthy *Liṅga* is that which was consecrated and given by the Guru and worn on the body.³ All vachanakāras emphasize that the worship has to be with sincere devotion, otherwise, it becomes a mere ritual and gains no merit. Allama Prabhu says in Vachana 2.179 below that merely wearing the *Liṅga* without devotion is meaningless:

*If a packet of food is borne on the stomach,
even if kept there every day,
does it end our hunger without eating it?
Likewise, how does one become Śiva's devotee,
merely by wearing the Liṅga around the neck?
Mere formality is shameful, Oh Guheśwara!*

Basavaṇṇa says, - an echo of which is found in a few Vachanas by others also, that the worship of God has to be done directly and not through others like priests, just as one has to have a meal oneself (Vachana 1.183). Worship in temples is through priests, while the worship of the *Liṅga* worn on the body is done directly by oneself. Though the *Liṅga* is worn outside the body, it is inside too in spirit, and Allama Prabhu says in Vachana (2.376) that one has to know God essentially from within. His emphasis is on contemplation or meditation, which of course does not exclude *bhakti*. This means that the *Liṅga* is also a symbol of the imperishable Self or Ātman. There is no conflict in taking it as Śiva and/or Ātman, especially in the last phase of spiritual ascent called *Aikya*.

It is clarified by the vachanakāras that though the *Liṅga* is on the body, God is unattached, and not responsible for what the devotee does. Hāvina Hāḷa Kallayya says in Vachana 254(9.1149) (my translation):

*Though living in the body, He is not attached,
like a lotus leaf in water;
He transcends all sorrows but sees everything*

all the while.

*Lord Mahāliṅga Kalleśwara is established
among all people.*

Many vachanakāras have narrated their *anubhāva* – ‘experiencing’ the *Liṅga*. This is different from *anubhava*. *Anubhava* is an experience based on sense perception and can be described in words. *Anubhāva* is beyond sense perception and not possible to describe, and is felt increasingly with spiritual progress. It is most intense when a union with the *Liṅga*, even when alive, is experienced, and when the ego and any dualism between the devotee and *Liṅga* have vanished. In a beautiful Vachana (1.1253) below, Basavanna says:

*By giving away everything, I gained the loss
of my ego.*

*I am immersed in the highest happiness with-
out any duality.*

*I am now one with you, Oh Kūḍala Saṅgama
Deva!*

Allama Prabhu says in Vachana (2.421):

*What can I remember when my mind itself
became You?*

*After our feelings are one, what do I need,
Lord of my heart?*

*After I know you, is there anyone else whom I
need to know, Oh Guheśwara?*

There is no suggestion in any of the Vachanas to the effect that *Liṅga* is a phallic symbol. On the other hand, all the Vachanas are unanimous in asserting that the consecrated *Liṅga* is Śiva Himself, present in the world out of compassion for the devotees. ‘*Liṅgamadhye jagatsarvam*’ (the whole world is contained within the *Liṅga*) is an oft-quoted statement in Sanskrit in the Vachanas. Several Vachanas also point out that Guru, *Liṅga*, and *Jaṅgama* together constitute one divine principle, to be treated alike. Basavaṇṇa says in Vachana (1.421) that just as the root of a plant is its mouth (for watering or manuring), a *Jaṅgama* is the mouth of *Liṅga* and that feeding the former reaches

the latter too. Similarly, the poor too may be considered as the mouth of God.

The second most common theme in the Vachanas is the emphasis on **Ethics – ethical behaviour, truthfulness, and compassion**. Basavaṇṇa was not only a leading exponent of this theme, but he was also a leading exemplar. His simple, but highly evocative Vachana – ‘*Kaḷabeḍa, kolabeḍa, husiya nuḍi-yalu beḍa ...*’, (1.235) below, is an evocative example of this theme, which has proved to be immensely popular:

*Uttering lies, indulging in anger and violence,
theft, self-praise, and condemnation of others,
these have to be avoided to keep one’s soul
pure;*

*thereby are achieved purity inside and outside
too,*

and Your Grace is gained,

Oh Kūḍala Saṅgama Deva!

Apart from the content, the Vachana is notable from the point of alliteration, and the beauty of overall poetic expression. It has, therefore, become popular with singers. Devotion, though important, is not enough for a real devotee. In a famous Vachana (1.247), he asks how there can be dharma without kindness. A devotee should consider others’ happiness and sorrow as one’s own Vachana (1.409)); and be truthful, avoiding anger, violence, deceit, theft, boastfulness, and speaking contemptuously of others. In another Vachana, 5 (1.46), Basavaṇṇa prays to God to keep him away from false gossip, greed, hypocrisy, lust, pettiness, anger, deception, and obstinacy. In simple Vachanas, he has captured most of the ethical values that one has to cultivate to achieve ‘purity inside as well as outside’, as he says. Without such purity, no spiritual progress is possible, as the vachanakāras emphasize. That is, *bhakti* without *sadācāra* (ethical conduct), is meaningless and ineffective; it amounts to mere hypocrisy. Arrogance based on *bhakti*,

wealth, charity, scholarship, family, or caste status is also scorned by vachanakāras. Allama Prabhu singles out the arrogance of intellectuals for his attack in Vachana (2.69) wherein he ridicules their love for argumentativeness, spending their life in dry debates on *Advaita* vis-à-vis *Dvaita* without any grasp of practical matters. Ethics also means that a devotee is not covetous of wealth, women, and even fame oneself. Let alone spiritual progress, ethics is necessary to lead a meaningful, peaceful, and satisfying life. The Vachanas contain jewels of ethical wisdom to enrich one's life. Ethical conduct is expected from all, no doubt, but especially so from Guru and Jangama, as emphasized by Akkamma, a woman devotee (different from Akka Mahādevi), in Vachana (5.481). If they are fallen in conduct, they should neither be followed nor respected, according to her.

Vrata and *ācāra* are recommended as important for helping a devotee to be ethical and gentle. It means following certain spiritual practices like fasting on certain days, doing *japa* (chanting the name of God) and meditation, and regular worship of *Liṅga*. In Vachanas (5.563) and (5.567), Akkamma explains that whatever action contributes to the welfare of all beings is *vrata*; it helps in controlling the mind and spiritual ascent.

Basavaṇṇa observes that ethics is not merely for individual welfare or spiritual progress; if only all people follow ethics, the mundane world itself becomes heaven, and there is no separate heaven (Vachana1.239):

*Heaven and Earth are not separate from each other, so I think!
Compassion, truthfulness, and righteousness,
turn the mundane world into heaven itself!
Good conduct is heaven, and bad one is hell.
You are the witness, Oh Kūḍala Saṅgama Deva!*

Hindu texts have termed ethics as *Dharma*,

and given it tremendous importance. The *Mahābhārata*, in *Kaṇṇa Parva* (Ch.69, verse 58), has famously said that Dharma is so-called because it upholds people or society (*dhāraṇāt dharma ityāhuh dharma dhārayate prajāh*). The word *dharma* itself is derived from the root *dhṛ* which means to uphold. Society cannot last if many people give up ethical behaviour or dharma. Problems arise because some people not following them. Ethical values taught by the Vachanas are not new; they have long been there in earlier scriptures including the Buddhist and Jain. But the Vachanas imparted great sincerity, freshness, and force to their ethical teachings no doubt, in the language of people themselves, backed by putting them into practice.

Censure of hypocrisy closely follows the emphasis on ethics. Hypocrisy is a favourite target of attack by almost all the vachanakāras. Hypocrisy is deception or dishonesty. It misleads, but not for long because people soon find it out. The point, however, is that more than deceiving others, a hypocrite destroys himself first. In Vachana (1.30) below, Basavaṇṇa deplores hypocrisy thus:

*Speaking in one way, and behaving in quite another;
where is purity inside then, Oh Kūḍala Saṅgama Deva?
Allama Prabhu describes a hypocrite in Vachana (2.809) thus:
The one whose true words are rare, whose conduct is corrupt,
who has no good deeds to his credit, no devotion,
and not worthy of noble wisdom; yet attired like a devotee, he is a hypocrite.
Seeing such people, Guheśwara laughs at them.*

Maḍivāḷa Mācideva does not spare even other vachanakāras, as he feels that some of them are not genuine. In Vachana (8.727)

below, he derides them thus:

*Are all the people who entertain by composing
Vachanas, true devotees?*

*Acting in accordance with Vachanas is rare to
find among many.*

*Keeping behind their own conduct, but creat-
ing a heap of words in the front,*

*they behave like a dog beating its tail in front
of its master, Oh Kalideveśa!*

The Vachana seems to ridicule some vachanakāras who compose vachanas merely to please the prominent leaders of the movement led by Basavaṇṇa, without a genuine urge to express themselves. This is also a form of hypocrisy.

The censure of *Bhavi* is also a favourite theme of many vachanakāras. 'Bhavi' is almost a term of abuse, and a much-hated person. Quite a few vachanakāras call for a social boycott of *bhavis*, opposing any visits to them or any association with them. But it is not very clear who a *bhavi* is. A few scholars think that anyone who does not wear a *Liṅga* on the body after a due ceremony was considered a *bhavi*. This is not plausible, because at least at that time Vīraśaivas/Liṅgāyats were not in a majority in their place, and a boycott of non-Liṅgāyats would have resulted in isolating themselves. Many vachanakāras depended on some profession or the other for livelihood and had to interact with people of all faiths. Another interpretation is that non-believers were considered as *bhavis*. But non-believers in what? In God, or ethics, or both? The king, Bijjala, under whom Basavaṇṇa was a minister or Treasurer, was a Jain. There were many Jains around, who had a high stature politically, socially, and economically, even if they may not have constituted a majority. Jains did not believe in God but certainly believed in ethics. Equating a non-believer in God with one not believing in ethics too would have been very unreasonable and even foolish. Jains were

not attracted by Basavaṇṇa's movement. The mainstay of his movement probably comprised the Hindu working class, though quite a few Brāhmaṇas and traders were also in it. Even then, it is unreasonable to interpret that *bhavi* was a word used for a veiled attack on Jains. 'Bhavi' is derived from 'bhava' which means the mundane world. Indian religions have by and large opposed their obsession with *bhava*, and the goal of spiritual progress was to cross the *bhava-sāgara*, the ocean of the mundane. A *bhavi* must have been one who is so obsessed with the mundane, a worldling, that he can be amoral in attitude to ethics. This seems to be the most justifiable interpretation of who a *bhavi* is, and tallies better with the nature of the attack on *bhavis* in most of the vachanas.

Emphasis on work is another important theme commonly found in the Vachanas. Religious work related to rituals or ceremonies or *ācāra* is of a different type. The need for this is also emphasized, but we are not concerned with it here. The emphasis on secular work is on account of at least two factors. Most of the vachanakāras had a working-class background and did not have the privilege of any unearned income. They had to work for their livelihood. A religion that preached total dedication to bhakti and spiritual pursuit, ignoring livelihood issues, would have been impractical. A balance between livelihood and spiritual pursuit was inevitable. The importance of work is so great that continuation of work is insisted upon even after God's realization; even a *jnāni* has to go to the succour of the afflicted, as Basavaṇṇa asserts in Vachana 61(1.977). Allama Prabhu supports this view in Vachana 108(2.1149). Secondly, to achieve equity between different classes, imparting dignity to manual labour was felt to be very necessary. Mahatma Gandhi preached dignity for manual labour for the same reason and followed it up in practice.

Manual labour has been given a lower status by all societies in almost all countries and paid for much lower. Gandhi, therefore, called for giving the same remuneration to a lawyer as to a scavenger! Vacankāras may not have gone that far, but did insist that every position – even if considered low - is important in contributing to the welfare of any society, and equally capable of realizing God, and therefore all positions have to be respected equally, as Bāhūra Bommaṇṇa says clearly in Vachana 239(8.277) below. Āydaḱki Mārayya famously declared – *Kāyakave kailāsa* (Heaven indeed is to work). The concerned full Vachana by him is worth quoting (in translation) (6.1170):

*When you are engaged intensely in work,
it's all right if you forget your Guru, or forget
to worship even the Liṅga.*

*Being busy with work is heaven, other things
are secondary.*

Amareśwara Liṅga also is always busy.

Nuliya Candayya says in his Vachana (7.1303) that even God is not exempt from work, and that fulfillment comes through work in the mundane world for the Liṅga, Guru and Jaṅgama too, let alone common people. The Vachanas implicitly ask, when even God is always busy working looking after the world, how can working be considered as of lowly status? Bāhoora Bommaṇṇa says in Vachana (8.277) that each one's position or work is important and has good enough value that it should not be despised:

*Closing the mouth, is it possible to eat through
the nose?*

*Closing the eyes, how can you see through the
ears?*

*Each one's own position is important and
respectable, and*

*always capable of knowing Brahmeśwara
Liṅga.*

*('Brahmeśwara Liṅga' is how the author of
the Vachana addresses his God – Śīva, which*

is also the signature for his Vachanas.)

Krishna says in the *Bhagavad-gītā* that if God did no work, the worlds would simply perish (Ch.3, verse 24), and advises unattached or unselfish work. As is well known, the *Bhagavad-gītā* developed a philosophy of Karma-yoga or unattached work, which seems to have influenced many vachanakāras. In Vachana (1.997), Basavaṇṇa explicitly praises unattached work and calls those doing it as *Nirlepa-jñānis* (unattached knowers) too. When work is unattached, it is not work; it attains *niṣkriyatā*. Such a person is not bound by Karma. Amugi Devayya says in Vachana 199(6.326):

*When one's body itself is dedicated to Śīva,
the work done by such a body is not work.*

The *Bhagavad-gītā* has raised a debate about the relative importance of the three paths to God Realisation (bhakti, jñāna, and karma) among its interpreters, but the consensus appears to be that the three are not substitutes or competitive, but are complementary. The Gita emphasizes all three, and they have to be practised in a synthesis. This appears to be the stand of vachanakāras too. Just as the mere *ācāra* of wearing the Liṅga is not enough, bhakti is also necessary, as observed by Allama Prabhu in Vachana (2.179), and bhakti alone without working is not bhakti at all, according to Uriṅga Peddi's wife Kāḷavve. In Vachana (5.735), she says:

*Those who do not work are not your devotees.
Work purifies our very essence.*

*Similarly, bhakti without knowledge
is meaningless, according to Akka Mahādevi.
In Vachana (5.316), she says:*

*Knowledge is like the Sun, and devotion is like
Sunrays.*

*How can there be devotion without knowl-
edge, just as Sunrays without the Sun?*

How is knowledge possible to have without

devotion or commitment?

Both knowledge and devotion are to be desired, Oh Cenna Mallikārjuna!

Siddha Rāmeśwara also declares that knowledge is the cause behind bhakti, in Vachana (4.552).

There is a close link between work and knowledge too. Work promotes knowledge, both in the secular and spiritual spheres. Siddha Rāmeśwara has perceptively observed in Vachana (4.1669) as follows:

Faultless dedication to work surely leads to beatitude;

it is surely the means to enrich knowledge too;

it surely makes one fit for being close to You.

The greatness of work is limitless, Oh Kapila-Siddha-Malleśa!

The relationship between knowledge and work is briefly explained by Cenna Basavaṇṇa in Vachana (3.1139): *Kriyayā vardhate jñānam jñānasyācaraṇam kriyā* (Knowledge grows through work; knowledge implemented is work) (my translation). He asserts in Vachana (3.877) that awareness (*arivu*) is not enough, activity (*kriyā*) is also necessary, and adds in Vachana (3.875) that awareness inside and activity outside, when combined, lead to God-realisation.

The vachanakāras have thus advocated the need to integrate *bhakti* with *kriya/karma* and *jnana* for spiritual progress, instead of relying only on one of the three.

Advocacy of equality and censure of the caste system and impurity rules also constitute one of the most common themes of Vachanas. They felt that every human being, irrespective of caste and gender, has the right to be respected as a human and also the right to make spiritual progress. Siddha-Rāmeśwara deplores the attitude of excluding some as others, and asserts that all humans are equal, in Vachana (4.300) below:

Don't say they are others;

none should be considered as the other.

Inequality, there is no otherness.

All are ours, not otherwise.

Oh Kapila-Siddha-Malleśa,

for you, all people are yours and equal.

This Vachana reminds us of a famous verse in the *Hitopadeśah*: अयं निजः परो वेति गणना लघुचेतसाम् । उदारचरितानां तु वसुधैव कुटुम्बकम् ॥ (This one is ours; that one is others. Only the narrow-minded think thus. For the broad-minded, however, the whole world is one family.) *Hitopadeśah* was probably composed in the same (12th) or a later century.

Such an ideology of equality appealed to the working class who formed the majority of the population and explains the diverse and democratic base of the vachanakāras. There were so many Dalits among Siva-Saranas then, that Javaraiah(1997) has written a whole book of 300 pages on them. Though Basavaṇṇa was born as a Brāhmaṇa, he detested being recognized as such and appealed to God to remove this burden on him in his Vachana (1.344). He explicitly complains to God for giving him birth in a 'difficult' caste (*'kaṣṭa jāti janmadali janiyiside enna'*) and says that he learned the virtue of *bhakti* from devotees from the 'untouchable' castes (Vachana 1.343). In Vachana (1.589), he bluntly asks people not to be inquisitive about anyone's caste origin or talk about it. In Vachanas (1.591) and (1.605), he tells who actually are low born and who are high born. According to him, murderers and bribe-seekers are low-born, and those engaged in the welfare of all beings, having exemplary character, only are high-born. The distinction is not based on birth or family status.

In Vachana 137(3.1133), Cenna-Basavaṇṇa writes emotionally:

Like a lotus born in muddy waters offered to God,

a devotee born untouchable is also quite respectable.

The Sun who illumines even muddy waters is not for that reason rejected.

The Supreme Himself is manifested on the Earth.

Those who condemn devotees of Śiva only because of low birth

are destined for hell surely, Oh Kūḍala-Cennasaṅgama!

In addition to attacking contempt for untouchables, the Vachana also implicitly conveys that those doing lowly work should not be looked down upon. The Sun shines on muddy waters, and God himself comes down to be busy looking after the mundane world.

Ḍohara Kakkayya, one of the eminent Dalit vachanakāras, declares that God comes to help Dalits. In Vachana (7.983), he says:

The pollution on account of my difficult caste is destroyed by Your Grace.

Through Your divine touch, pollution on account of semen and blood is lost.

Vachanakāras were equally against impurity (sūtaka) rules based not only on caste but also on birth, death, and menstruation. Cenna-Basavaṇṇa vehemently attacks such notions, for example in Vachana (3.119):

Foolish beliefs in pollution for exclusion are many;

Caste, birth, death, and menstruation are excuses for them.

Do those who follow them know devotion to God?

Kūḍala-Cennasaṅga doesn't like foolish beliefs.

Cauḍayya, the boatman, is equally acerbic in attacking such notions. He asks in Vachana (6.145):

Those who out of ignorance say that uncleanness arises due to birth and death, listen thoughtfully:

Countless beings are born and also die on the earth. Is the earth unclean thereby?

Likewise in the ocean and rivers, countless

*beings are born and die;
are they impure thereby?*

That alone is pure which is offered to the Liṅga for Its pleasure and with devotion.

Thus says, Cauḍayya the boatman, dedicated to Śiva.

Colour prejudice closely follows caste prejudice. Though Indians have a mixed colour, having black as well as fair coloured or brown even within a caste, there is generally an obsession with the fair colour. Skin creams are advertised claiming that they make the skin fair. Mōḷige Mārayya, however, attacks this colour prejudice in his Vachana (8.1503). He asks whether Atman – the Self, has a colour, or whether knowledge, compassion, and piety have colours. He asks further why to speak about colour when God Himself has no colour.

Emphasis on *Dāsoha* or charity is also a very favourite theme, lovingly endorsed by all vachanakāras. *Dāsoha* means giving with utter humility with a feeling of 'I am your servant' - दासः अहम् = दासोहम्. It includes any charity, - food, shelter, clothing, education, and any service, but it has to be given with due respect to the receivers and without any hint of arrogance. An ideal donor is one who believes that it is God who gives. Jedara Dāsimaṇṇa explains in Vachana (7.816):

It is You who gives everything, and not a human who is but a pretext.

Entering the human mind, You are the real cause behind what a human gives!

Oh Rāmanātha, Oh the Giver, I surrender to You!

The vachanakāras insist that one's *Tanu*, *mana* and *dhana* (body, mind, and wealth) have all to be employed for *Dāsoha* without any stint. *Dāsoha* blesses both the giver and the receiver. It spiritually elevates the giver and helps society – particularly the needy, to survive and grow. Helping each other in need is the mantra for the welfare of society.

Nuliya Candayya declares in Vachana (7.1303) that nobody is exempt from the service of the moving (service of all beings that move, *cara-sevā*), not even a Guru, not even the Liṅga. Basavaṇṇa says that even a person who has reached the top of spiritual ascent is not exempt from the need to do *dāsoha*. In Vachana 61(1.977), he expresses the need to balance spiritual aspirations with the need to help the needy:

*Even after oneness with You is experienced, if
Dāsoha is not done,*

*how can I be at ease in this mundane world
when devotees of Śiva are in trouble?*

*Oh Kūḍala Saṅgama Deva, help me to be
balanced between the two.*

*Basavaṇṇa explains how dāsoha helped him
spiritually, in Vachana (1.1253):*

*By giving away everything, I gained the loss
of my ego.*

*I am immersed in the highest happiness with-
out any duality.*

*I am now one with you, Oh Kūḍala Saṅgama
Deva!*

*Nuliya Candayya goes to the extent of declar-
ing that a person who does dāsoha sincerely
does not even need to worship God, just as a
fish does not need a boat to move in water, or
as a bird does not need footwear (in Vachana
7.1313).*

Doing *Dāsoha* is a very important part of Viraśaiva/Liṅgāyat religious practice. It is done both by individuals and *Maṭhas* or monasteries run by Liṅgāyats. Liṅgāyat *Maṭhas* have contributed greatly to the spread of education in Karnataka, providing even inexpensive or free hostel facilities for rural students, not confining to Liṅgāyats alone.

Respect for women characterizes the general attitude of not only Basavaṇṇa but also of other Śiva-Śaraṇas. Women were not only welcomed but also given a respectable place in their revolutionary movement. There were as many as 35 women among 214 vachanakāras of the Basava Era. However, there are no Vachanas by them that could be

regarded as feminist, but there are several of them by the male vachanakāras. Allama Prabhu, for example, attacks the notion that a woman is *māyā* (illusion) and says that the problem lies actually within our mind, in his Vachana (2.72). Siddha Rāmeśwara is even more persuasive, in his Vachana (4.618) below:

*Gaṅgā is held on the head (by Śiva); Gauri is
seated on His left thigh;*

Saraswati resides on the tongue.

*Women are worship-worthy, Oh Kapila-Sid-
dha-Malleśa!*

Ambigara Cauḍayya (Chauḍayya - the boatman) asserts that the Atman – our very essence, is neither male nor female, in his Vachana (6.263), and hints that gender discrimination is not justified:

A body is called female when breasts emerge;

*A body is called a male when a beard and
moustache appear.*

*But the Self which is there in both is neither
female nor male.*

*Thus says, Cauḍayya the boatman, dedicated
to Śiva.*

Jeḍara Dāsimayya insists that religious ceremonies like worship of God be done by the husband and wife together, in Vachana (7.861) below:

*If wife and husband meet together to worship,
then it is dear to Śiva,*

not if done separately one by one for sure.

*If done separately, it is like poison mixed with
nectar.*

*Lord Rāmanātha expects mutual love and
confidence.*

Worshipping by husband and wife together is insisted upon in Hindu practice. However, this has not stopped regarding women as unclean during menstruation. Women in periods are not supposed to visit temples or participate in worship. Vachanakāras have, therefore, attacked

impurity rules against women also, in addition to those against untouchables. See for example Vachana (3.119) by Cenna Basavaṇṇa, where he specifically mentions impurity rules about menstruation, calling them foolish.

The practice of giving the husband an unquestionable position, and treating the wife with suspicion, is deplored by Ḍhakkā-Bommaṇṇa, in Vachana (7.975):

*The qualities of the wife have to be watched
by the husband,
but not those of the husband by the wife.
Foolishly it is said like this by a few with a
small mind!
Doesn't an infection of a disease from the
husband affect the wife too?
Are no defects in the husband like thorns for
the wife?
Shortcomings between the two will trouble
both.
If this is understood well, it is liked by
Bhīmeśwara.*

The author of this vachana was only a drum-beater, with a low position. Being associated with Basavaṇṇa's movement gave him the perspective and courage to write like this. It is remarkable indeed that such a vachana was composed in the 12th Century. The vachanakāras were clearly ahead of their times in their concern for social and gender justice.

A Few Unusual Vachanas

Quite a few Vachanas are uncommon, yet interesting, themes that also need to be noted to do full justice to them. Though Basavaṇṇa is known for bhakti, he also gave importance to knowledge, and what is more, said in Vachana (1.1011) that knowledge arose from dialogue, not merely through meditation as is commonly recommended in traditional religious literature. With the help of his friend

and colleague, Allama Prabhu, he started an institution called *Anubhava Maṇṭapa* – the Hall of Experience. Anubhava Maṇṭapa facilitated discussion among Śiva Śaraṇas, where they shared their thoughts and experience with each other freely. Allama Prabhu was the chairman of this institution.

An indication of free and bold discussion among them comes from Manasanda Māritande in Vachana (8.951), where he says that the knowledge about the Transcendental is riddled with doubts. This raises an important epistemological issue about whether uncertain or indefinite knowledge can also be regarded as knowledge. Jains thought so, and usually added a phrase – *syāt* (possibly/probably) – to their statements of knowledge. Allama Prabhu also shows skepticism about accepted knowledge even among Śiva Śaraṇas in Vachana (2.1345). He asks if the world is within Liṅga, and Liṅga within the world as is usually accepted, how *pralaya* (the Great Deluge) took place at all and says only God knows. Allama Prabhu's skepticism does not stop here. In Vachana (2.1579), he asks if there is any credible alternative to *laukika* or the mundane world at all. He was a deep thinking intellectual, not just an emotional devotee, and genuine doubts were natural to him, which others dreaded to raise. Another Vachana which reflects skepticism is Candimarasa (7.556). It asks what or who performs actions if the Self is not the body and is immutable and has no attributes. A body without the Self cannot act intelligently or purposefully; in fact, it cannot act at all. Mere Miṇḍayya is skeptical about the excessive importance given to a Guru; in Vachana (8.1340), he asserts that self-knowledge is itself the real Guru.

Applying rigorous logic to matters of faith can sometimes lead to embarrassing implications. In Vachana (4.1003), Siddha Rāmeśwara asks:

If Śaraṇa is the wife, and Liṅga (Śiva) is the

husband,
how then can Śaraṇa's union with his wife be
considered fit and proper?

He suggests that the only morally valid union is with Śiva and not a union with the wife! 'Śaraṇa sati (wife), Liṅga pati (husband)' was a matter of faith among Śiva Śaraṇas. A similar extreme stand is taken by Kāda Siddheśwara (of the post-Basava Era) in deploring family ties on the part of devotees. It is understandable if an obsession with family to the exclusion of other obligations is deplored as is done in his Vachanas (10.4) and (10.29). It is also understandable if raising a family is barred in the case of ascetics. But in his Vachanas (10.24) and (10.115), family ties are deplored in general. How can any devotion to Śiva necessitate neglect of own family? Is not taking care of family a moral and legal obligation? Is Śiva really so jealous? Allama Prabhu attacks the whole idea of 'Liṅga pati Śaraṇa sati' as nonsense, in his Vachana (2.130). He also attacks verbosity without substance in the same Vachana.

A few vachanakāras oppose associating with those who do not wear the Liṅga or people of other faiths. Uriliṅga Peddi in Vachana (6.1510) and Jeḍara Dāsimayya in Vachana (7.721) are examples of such fanaticism. However, not all of their Vachanas have this trait. In contrast to such fanatical vachanas, there are a few very broad-minded and inclusive types of Vachanas also. Apart from Siddha Rāmeśwara's Vachana (4.300) quoted above, another example of this is a Vachana by Arivina Māritande (6.526), where he says that God is the same for all, just as the Sun and sky are the same for all. When Basavaṇṇa asked what is Dharma without compassion in Vachana (1.247), he did not exclude people not wearing the Liṅga from the scope of compassionate or friendly treatment.

There are two unusual Vachanas by Akka Mahādevi. In almost all her Vachanas, she

considers Cenna Mallikārjuna or Śiva as her spouse, but in Vachana (5.10), she regards herself as a loved daughter of Śiva, His true follower. In another unusual Vachana (5.69), she advises eating moderately or having small meals. It seems to be the only Vachana giving such advice.

Interestingly, there is at least one vachana having an explicit reference to *Bharata Deśa* (India) as a country. It is in Siddha Rameśwara's Vachana (4.1630). It is a very brief and casual reference. Nevertheless, it indicates that there was awareness of the country as a whole, named *Bharata Deśa*, at that time also among people. This is not to suggest that such awareness was seen for the first time in Basavaṇṇa's time; it was there much earlier too.

Notes

1. For a detailed account of bhakti movements in India, see Nadkarni 2013: pp. 203-250; and Nadkarni 2021: pp. 265-330.
2. For further details of the six-phase system, see Śivācārya 2000, Śivakumāra Swāmy 2017, and Ingaḷaḷli 1998: 115-126.

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