

## **A STUDY ON-PHILOSOPHICAL ELEMENTS IN KANNADA VACHANA LITERATURE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Vachana literature is one of the most important spiritual and philosophical traditions in Kannada literature. It development during the 12<sup>th</sup> century in Karnataka as part of the Lingayat or veerashaiva movement. Vachanas are short, powerful prose-poems that express deep philosophical thoughts about God, Life, society and Spirituality. Prominent vachana writers includes Basavananna, Allama Prabhu and Akka Mahadevi. Their writing questioned social inequality and emphasized devotion, morality and spiritual freedom.

**Keywords:** Spirituality, equality, Kayaka, Dasoha, poetry.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

It was a movement through literature or vachana sahithya composed by common people. Vachana sahitya is a type of Kannada rhythmic composition (also known as Kannada poetry) which originated in the eleventh century and thrived throughout the twelfth century as element of the Sharana movement. Madara Chennaiah, an eleventh century cobbler-saint who lived in the time of the Western Chalukyas' rule and is considered as the "father of Vachana poetry" by certain researchers. "That which is spoken" is the literal meaning of the term "vachanas." These are easy-to-understand prose works.

Vachanas: Sharanas have chronicled their experiences and path towards divinity in unique literature known as Vachana. The word Vachana means 'Speech'. It also means a verbal promise. Vachanas of the Sharanas are the means to purify one in word, action, and vision. Composed in simple language, yet carrying profound philosophy and thought provoking ideas, Vachanas form the backbone of the path of Guru Basavanna Typically small verses/poetry of 4-8 lines, they prescribe to a format-free writing, not imposing any grammatical or literary restrictions on the authors. Yet, Vachanas possess musical and emotional quality.

It is interesting to see how Sharana s convey complex concepts in simple Vachanas. Often, they draw examples from familiar day-to-day experiences and use them as similes and metaphors to drive home profound ideas. Some Vachanas convey different meaning based on the level of an aspirant. Some Vachanas state the message and follow it with an example or explanation. Yet others use common images and experiences to orient the minds of the reader to the proper context and then deliver the message. Vachanas are the first hand narrative of Sharanas and were also seasoned by the scrutiny of fellow mystics.

Guru Basavanna realized the value of chronicling and organizing Vachanas. Each Sharana has used a penname that seems be drawn from his/her first divine connection. These divine insignia are incorporated towards the end of the Vachana clearly identifying the author. For instance, Guru Basavanna has used Kudalasangamadeva as his penname drawing from the place where he first realized his divine mandate. He seems to have anticipated the confusion that would arise about the authenticity of Vachanas and formulated this system to retain the genuineness of the mystic sayings. Sharanas have also classified and categorized the

Vachanas of major Vachanakaras into step-by-step levels, giving us a framework to absorb the concepts of the path of Basavanna.

Written in simple language and drawing graphic examples from day-to-day life, Vachanas form the basis of a unique mystic literature that was penned by the mystics themselves. Often, using examples from everyday life, Sharanas have conveyed abstract concepts and mystic experiences. Vachanas cover a wide spectrum of subject matter with the idea of guiding aspirants towards experiencing divine bliss. It covers the philosophical, cosmological, scientific, and theological aspects with the same ease as it handles the interpersonal relationships, emotional turmoil, instincts, and shortcomings of human beings.

It takes an extremely scientific and logical approach in dealing with the cosmology, universe, and its creation. Vachanas are the blue print left behind by Sharanas that help us transform our day-to-day by making it more purposeful and meaningful.

Vachanas are short paragraphs that conclude with one or more local names by which Shiva is called or Pooja is performed. They are epigrammatical, parallelistic, as well as allusive in style. They reflect on wealth's vanity, the meaninglessness of ceremonies or book study, life's unpredictability, and Shiva Bhakta's spiritual advantages (worshiper of lord Shiva). The Vachanas urge men to abandon their desire for material prosperity and comfort, to live a lifestyle of serenity and dissociation from the world, and to seek shelter in Siva.

The rise of Lingayatism heralded a new chapter in the annals of Kannada literature. Basavanna and other saints communicated their beliefs and ideas in Kannada which was the commoners' language unlike Sanskrit which was understood only by the Brahmins at that time. It saw the birth of the Vachana style of literature with the Lingayat philosophy at its core.

The Vachanas were pithy poems of a devotional nature that expounded the ideals of Lingayatism. Saints and Sharanas like Allama Prabhu, Akka Mahadevi, Siddarama and Basava were at the forefront of this development during the 12th century. Siddarama (Siddarameswar) of Solapur (Sonnalagi) is considered to be one of the five prophets of the Lingayat (Veerashaivism) religion and a Kannada poet who was a part Basavanna's Veerashaiva revolution during the 12th century.

Siddharama claims to have written 68,000 vachanas, out of which 1379 remain in existence. His philosophy was one of service to mankind, the path of Karmayoga. He shared the worldview of other vachana poets in his rejection of blind conventions and caste and sex discrimination and emphasis on realization through personal experience. He borrowed metaphors from diverse spheres of everyday life. Apart from vachanas, he wrote several devotional works in tripadi. Sarvagna was a later lingayat vachana poet of the 17th century who wrote thousands of succinct vachanas in tripadi style.

Vachanas were primarily targeted at the common person and sought to demystify God, as large sections of society had been deprived of access to the texts. The Jangamas played a central role in the propagation of the Vachanas.

The Vachanas of Basavaadi Sharana were their experiences in the journey of realising God. About 800 sharanas practised the method and recorded their interms of Guru (Unmanifest Chaitanya), Linga (Manifest Chaitanya), Jangama (True consciousness of Lingatattva in one's soul), Padodaka (closeness with the knower/source of Lingatattva), as well as, Prasad (becoming lingatattva). According to records, the sharanas exclusively exchanged experiences of God realisation in group conversation in Karnataka, primarily under the direction of Basavanna, Channa Basavanna Allama Prabhu, and Siddarameshwar.

This has been ascribed to the movement's widespread appeal. There were about 200 Vachana authors (Vachanakaras) documented, with over thirty of them being women.

The manner of invocation of God (Basveshvara summons "Kudala Sangama Deva," whereas Allama Prabhu invokes "Guheshwara," Akkamadevi invokes "Channa Mallikarjuna," Siddhrama (Siddheshwar) of Solapur elicits "Kapilasiddha Mallikarjuna") in the vachana can be used to identify the writer. The majority of current vachana readings are based on European interpretations of Indian traditions. There are over 22,000 vachanas available. Samagra Vachana Samputa was published in 15 volumes by the Karnataka government. Individual vachana authors' compilations have been released by Karnataka University Dharwad. The 'Adya Vachanakara' is Jedara Dasimaiah (The First Vachanakara).

## 2. PHILOSOPHICAL ELEMENTS IN KANNADA VACHANA LITERATURE

### 2.1 Philosophy of equality

The philosophy of equality in Vachana literature is a radical, 12th-century vision of **socialism and human rights** that challenged the rigid caste and gender hierarchies of medieval India. Central to this philosophy is the belief that all individuals are inherently equal because the **soul (Atma) has no gender or caste**; physical differences like a "moustache" or "breasts" are merely physiological, while the internal divinity is one and the same. This egalitarianism was practically implemented through the **Anubhava Mantapa**, a spiritual parliament where people of all backgrounds—including untouchables and women—shared equal rights to voice their experiences. By establishing the principle of **Kayaka** (dignity of labour), the Sharanas argued that no occupation is superior or inferior, effectively dismantling the birth-based varna system and elevating manual work to a form of divine worship.

### 2.2 Concept of kayaka (work as Worship)

The concept of Kayaka is a revolutionary 12th-century socio-economic philosophy that translates to "body-work" or "work as worship." Formulated by Basavanna and other Sharanas, it asserts that any honest physical or mental labor performed with complete dedication is a path to spiritual salvation, encapsulated in the famous aphorism "Kayakave Kailasa" (Work itself is Heaven). Unlike traditional hierarchies that stigmatized manual labor, Kayaka established the dignity of labor, teaching that no profession—be it a cobbler, weaver, or king—is superior to another as long as it is done ethically.

Crucially, Kayaka demands that an individual must earn their own livelihood through effort rather than living off the labor of others or religious charity, even for the most spiritually advanced. This philosophy transformed work from a social burden into a **sacred duty**, fostering a self-reliant and egalitarian society where the fruits of labor are shared through the companion principle of **Dasoha** (selfless service).

### 2.3 Concept of Dasoha ( Service and Sharing)

In Kannada Vachana literature, **Dasoha** is the spiritual and social principle of selfless service and sharing. While **Kayaka** (honest labour) focuses on the production of wealth, **Dasoha** focuses on its ethical distribution, completing the socio-economic cycle of the Sharana movement.

#### 2.3.1 Philosophy of Dasoha

- **Etymology and Meaning:** The word is derived from the Sanskrit *Dāsoham*, meaning "**I am a servant**". Philosophically, it signifies the total surrender of the ego, where the individual views themselves as a humble servant of God and society.

- **Beyond Charity:** Unlike conventional charity (*Dana*), which can sometimes involve an air of superiority or pride, Dasoha must be performed with absolute **humility and servitude**. It is not considered a "gift" to the poor but a "returning" of what originally belongs to the Divine to His devotees.
- **Prerequisite of Honest Labour:** A critical rule of Dasoha is that the resources being shared must have been earned through **pure and honest Kayaka**. Earnings from cheating, violence, or exploitation are considered unfit for Dasoha.

### 2.3.2 Social and Spiritual Impact

- **Economic Equality:** By encouraging individuals to retain only what is necessary for their basic survival and contribute the surplus to society, Dasoha acts as a mechanism to prevent the **accumulation of wealth** and reduce social disparities.
- **Annasoha (Communal Dining):** One of the most visible forms of Dasoha was the establishment of a **common kitchen**, where people of all castes and backgrounds sat together to eat, effectively breaking down the rigid barriers of untouchability.
- **Jnyana-Dasoha:** The principle extends beyond material food to include the **sharing of knowledge**. The Sharanas used the *Anubhava Mantapa* to distribute spiritual insights and education to everyone, regardless of their social standing.

## 3. KEY PHILOSOPHICAL INSIGHT

Basavanna famously used the analogy of a crow or a hen: just as a crow calls its flock to share a crumb, a true devotee of Shiva should not enjoy success alone but must share it to build a harmonious society

### 3.1 Mystical philosophy

The **mystical philosophy** of the 12th-century Sharana movement represents a profound shift from external ritualism to an internal, experiential realization of the Divine. At its heart lies the concept of **Linga-Anga-Samarasya**, the ultimate union between the individual soul (*Anga*) and the infinite Divine (*Linga*). This mysticism is not a withdrawal from the world but an integration of everyday life with spiritual awareness. Unlike traditional asceticism, Vachana mysticism suggests that the human body is not a hindrance but a "living temple." This is best articulated in Basavanna's famous verse, "My legs are pillars, the body the temple, the head a cupola of gold," implying that the seeker does not need to visit stone structures to find God; the **Antaryami** (Indwelling Lord) is accessible through the purification of one's own consciousness.

The path toward this mystical union is systematically outlined in the **Shatsthala Siddhanta** (The Six-Stage Path). This progression begins with *Bhakta-sthala* (devotion) and moves through stages of intense discipline and experience, culminating in *Aikya-sthala*, the state of unitive consciousness. In this final stage, the duality between the seeker and the sought vanishes. **Allama Prabhu**, the supreme mystic of the movement, often described this state using **Bedagu Vachanas**—metaphorical and paradoxical poems designed to shatter logical thinking and provoke direct spiritual insight. His poetry speaks of "a light that swallowed light," illustrating a state of Sunya (Emptiness/Fullness) where the ego is completely extinguished in the brilliance of the Divine.

Furthermore, this mysticism is uniquely characterized by its **radical subjectivity** and gender-transcending nature. For a mystic like **Akka Mahadevi**, the relationship with the Divine was envisioned as *Madhura Bhakti* (nuptial devotion), where she viewed Lord

Chennamallikarjuna as her only true husband. Her poetry describes a state of "unclad" honesty, where she sheds not just clothes but social conventions and bodily shame to merge with the Infinite. Ultimately, Vachana mysticism is **democratic and practical**; it asserts that the highest mystical heights are reachable not through secret mantras or complex Sanskrit rites, but through a life of moral purity, honest labor (*Kayaka*), and a heart filled with "Anubhava"—the direct, gut-level experience of Truth.

### 3.2 Spiritual freedom and devotion

Vachana literature emphasizes personal devotion to god without rituals or intermediaries. Akka Mahadevi, devotion was not a quiet ritual but a radical, all-consuming "marriage of the soul" to her Lord, Chennamallikarjuna (Shiva). Her spiritual freedom was won through the literal and metaphorical shedding of all worldly "coverings"—possessions, status, and even clothing—to stand "nude" before the divine.

#### Themes in Her Vachanas

- **Conjugal Devotion (Madhura Bhakti):** She viewed Shiva as her only true husband, rejecting mortal marriage as a "worldly circumstance" that wrapped her in illusion.  
*"I loved the limitless... My husband, Cenna Mallikarjuna."*
- **Transcending the Body:** To Akka, the physical body was often a "darkness" or an "encumbrance" to be overcome. However, she also saw the world as "the eye of the Lord," making modesty before Him impossible.
- **The Pursuit of Aikya (Union):** Her journey concluded at Sree Shaila, where she sought total dissolution of the self—like "hailstone melting in water" or "milk mixing with milk".

### 3.3 Criticism of ritualism and orthodoxy

In Kannada Vachana literature, the criticism of ritualism and orthodoxy was a revolutionary movement aimed at dismantling the "spiritual apartheid" of the 12th century. The *Sharanas* (devotees) argued that true divinity is found in inner purity rather than external ceremonies or birth-based status.

## 4. REJECTION OF EXTERNAL RITUALS

- ❖ **Empty Ceremonies:** Poets like Akka Mahadevi and Basavanna mocked "blind adherence" to rituals like sacred baths, wearing holy threads, or observing specific fasting days as meaningless without a pure heart.
- ❖ **Intermediary-Free Worship:** The movement introduced the **Ishtalinga**—a personal deity worn on the body—to eliminate the need for temple priests or elaborate public rituals.
- ❖ **The Moving Temple:** Basavanna famously contrasted static, man-made temples (*Sthavara*) with the human body as a living, "moving" shrine (*Jangama*), stating that "things standing shall fall, but the moving ever shall stay".

## 5. CRITIQUE OF ORTHODOXY AND CASTE

- ❖ **Brahmanical Authority:** The *Sharanas* rejected the authority of the Vedas and Sanskrit texts, which they viewed as tools of exclusion used by the priestly class to maintain a monopoly on the divine.

- ❖ **Democratization of Language:** By writing in **simple Kannada** instead of Sanskrit, the Vachanakaras made spiritual knowledge accessible to common people, including marginalized castes and women.
- ❖ **Universal Equality:** They vehemently opposed the **varna system**, arguing that spiritual merit is based on conduct and devotion, not birth or occupation.

## 6. LANGUAGE AND STYLE

The language and style of **Vachana literature** represent a radical departure from the classical Sanskrit-influenced traditions of medieval Karnataka. By choosing the "**spoken word**" over elite literary canons, the *Sharanas* created a genre that was as aesthetically revolutionary as it was socially transformative.

### 6.1 The Language: "That Which is Said"

- **Simple Kannada (Desi Style):** Vachanas (literally "sayings") were composed in the **vernacular Kannada** of the common man. This was a direct challenge to the "Marga" (mainstream) style dominated by complex Sanskrit and the *Champu* metre.
- **Democratization of Knowledge:** By using everyday language, the movement broke the monopoly of the priestly class, making profound philosophical and spiritual concepts accessible to laborers, women, and marginalized castes.
- **Colloquial and Direct:** The tone is conversational and direct, often resembling a **passionate dialogue** with the divine or a sharp critique of societal hypocrisy.

### 6.2 Key Stylistic Elements

- ❖ **Non-Metrical Free Verse:** Vachanas do not follow traditional prosody or rigid grammatical restrictions. They are characterized by a **rhythmic, prose-like quality** that remains musical when sung or recited.
- ❖ **Bedagu (Twilight Language):** While most vachanas are simple (*Sarala*), some (especially those by **Allama Prabhu**) use *Bedagu*—a cryptic, esoteric style filled with **paradoxes, inversions, and metaphors** to communicate deep mystical experiences.
- ❖ **Ankita Nama (Signature Pen-names):** Every vachana traditionally concludes with a specific invocation or signature name of the poet's chosen deity:
  - **Basavanna:** Kudala Sangama Deva
  - **Akka Mahadevi:** Chennamallikarjuna
  - **Allama Prabhu:** Guheshwara

### 6.3 Literary Devices

- **Everyday Metaphors:** Poets drew imagery from their **professional lives**—a cobbler used metaphors of leather, a washerman of cleaning, and a weaver of threads—to explain spiritual truths.
- **Epigrammatic and Allusive:** The verses are typically short (4–8 lines), concise, and dense with meaning, often ending with a sharp moral or philosophical realization.
- **Unity of Speech and Action:** A central stylistic and moral theme is the **rejection of hypocrisy**, insisting that literary expression is worthless without corresponding conduct.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The legacy of Vachana literature represents a foundational shift in Indian philosophy, marking the transition from ritualistic religion to an ethical, human-centric spirituality. By dismantling the barriers of Sanskrit-led orthodoxy and the caste system, the Sharanas established a social democracy where the dignity of labor (Kayaka) and selfless service (Dasoha) were elevated to the status of divine worship. Through the use of simple, rhythmic Kannada, they proved that the most profound mystical truths could be expressed through the imagery of everyday life, effectively turning the human body into a living temple. Ultimately, the movement's conclusion is one of universalism and radical equality, offering a timeless model for spiritual freedom that remains deeply relevant to modern struggles for human rights and social justice.

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