

Allegoric Vachanas of Allama Prabhu

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The establishment of Anubhava Mantapa - the philosophical learning and discussion center - by Basavanna in the 12th century invited many yogis, intellectuals and spiritual giants from various corners of India, including Kashmir - the center for Shaivism in those days. But the crowning glory of Anubhava Mantapa was Allama Prabhu , the great sage who was also the president of this wonderful ‘Pedestal of Wisdom’ addressed in Kannada as “Shunyapeethada Shunyamurthy”. His vachanas depict the deepest philosophical thoughts of Veerashaiva philosophy that appear to be the cream of the Agamas, Vedanta, Sankhya and Yoga – the sum total of India’s spiritual knowledge. Apart from this, he is also well known for his allegoric vachanas, known as “beDagina vachana” in Kannada.

What are Allegoric Vachanas ?

Shivasharanas have used a new style to epitomize the concept of divinity. In these vachanas, the deepest philosophical thoughts are eulogized using symbols from day-to-day life. Every aspect of human faculty such as the physical body, the mind, the senses, the Self (atma) and the higher Self (paramatma) are presented in these vachanas using metaphors. Apart from the symbolic representation of the most difficult metaphysical concepts of life, these allegoric vachanas also use sarcasm, irony, and paradoxes to build emphasis and persuasiveness into the teachings. These allegories also add to the poetic and literary grandeur of the vachana literature.

A farmer is taught Shivayoga through the use of symbols such as a farm to represent the human faculty, pickaxe to represent the sharp will power that removes weeds from the mind, plants to represent good character, etc. Similarly, when a constructor is advised about Shivayoga, terms of construction such as body as the pond, mind as the levy and six types of worship as the steps to the pond are used. Allama advises Shivayogi Siddharama who was constructing a huge lake at Solapur (Sonnalagi) at that time, to instead build the lake of spirituality and fill it with the waters of bliss. Such a pond, he says will be an eternal one and the rest are temporary.

When Allama says “A devil-mother has two children and five are in the cradle the mother swallowed the cradle and the children¹” it simply means Maya - the temporal world with all its shimmering beauty is the devil-mother. The two faculties (children) of humans, the body and mind forms the cradle, the five children in the cradle are the five senses. As we cater our senses to desires and lose ourselves in the material world, the poet in Allama metaphorically states that we are swallowed by the material world – the Maya, just as a cradle with all its children would be swallowed by the mother herself.

¹ Rakkasigibbau makkaLu, toTTilamelaivaru

A Peek into Vachanas

The only way to understand Allama's allegory is by studying his vachanas. The ideal way to learn any literature with all its grandeur is in its original mother language. However, translations and interpretations help in educating people who are interested in understanding the concepts of any deep philosophy without having to spend their lifetime learning the language in which it is written. An attempt is made here to bring the concepts of some of Allama's vachanas in spite of language barriers between the East and the West and the culture differences between them.

Below are some of the vachanas:

**1. rasada bāviya tuḍukabāradu
kattarivāṇiya dāṇṭidavangallade |
paruśavide kabbunavide sādhisaballavange
siriśailadudakava dharisalu bāradu
guheśvarā nimma śaranangallade ||**

Standing at the brink, they know not how to enter the honey well
Only he who crosses the chilling oceans drinks the elixir !
He has the philosopher's stone, and the lead too;
Having a pot of holy water, they know not how to bathe
Only your sharanas can, O Guheshwara !

In this vachana, Allama Prabhu mocks the mere mortals who are subdued by the materialistic world. Although we know sensual pleasures only lead us to more and more wants and will never satisfy us, we still are lost in the web of desires, asking for more and toiling for more. To be happy, one has to ask for less and simply look within oneself, which is perhaps too simple for us to understand. Allama implies that we are so close to the bliss or Ananda within ourselves, but we do not know how to enjoy happiness. Hence he says we are standing at the edge of the well of honey and yet we do not know how to get this honey. Only those who can cut through the chilling waters called samsara, sensual pleasures, can enjoy the abidance in themselves, he says.

And when that happens, says Allama, getting to know Ananda or bliss is as simple as holding both philosopher's stone and lead in your hands. All you have to do is to bring them in contact with each other and lo and behold! lead turns into gold. In the first line of the vachana "Standing at the brink of the honey well, they do not know how to enter" - Allama is mocking us for our ignorance of how close we are to our own truth and yet, how far we have chosen to remain. In the second line - "Only he who crosses the chilling oceans drinks the elixir" - he dares us to break through the sharp barriers we have created for ourselves to stay away from this eternal truth. In the third line - "He has the philosopher's stone, and the lead too" - he shows us how easy it will then become for us to enjoy life. This way of teaching is just as any parent would do to a stubborn child when she is not listening. Allama goes on to say that we have holy waters (Sirishailada

udaka) in our hands and we are still not pouring it on ourselves. Not only are we carrying the burden of the heavy pot all along, we are also not cleansing off our dirt and mud using these holy waters. Allama uses this metaphor to show us that we have it all within us and all we have to do is exercise the will to begin the journey towards happiness. That is when we become Sharanas. Allama ends this vachana beautifully – “Only your Sharanas can, O Guheshwara ! “. He is inviting all of us to join the stream of Sharanas that attained Shivayoga through this daring endeavor!

**2. nīrillada neḷalillada berillada giḍa huṭṭittu
taleyillada mruga bandu meyittā mṛugava
kaṇṇillada kuruḍānu kaṇḍānā mrugava
kaiyillada vyādhanu eccanā mrugava
kiccillada nāḍigoudu suṭṭu bāṇasava made
lingārpitavāyittu guheśvara**

Behold a waterless, shadeless, rootless plant !
headless animal grazing on the plant;
The creature, spotted by a blind man,
killed by a disabled man with no hands,
baked in the fireless pit
Guheshwara accepted this as prasada!

At the outset, this vachana seems, strange and perhaps even crazy. But when one studies the symbols and metaphors, one understands the depth and the beauty of the vachana. “A waterless, rootless plant was eaten by a headless animal“- Here the tree represents the mad world that is unsteady and temporal (without roots), and superficial (without water). Animal represents the desire that is never satiated and hence is busy grazing. “A blind man saw the animal and a man without hands killed it “- The blind man represents a yogi that is not interested in seeing and engaging in the outside world (eyes represent the organs of senses, also called Jnanendriyas). Hands represent organs of actions – the karmendriyas. The yogi is detached from the actions in this temporal world. The yogi has killed the desire in him (animal) using his calm and peaceful contemplation (fireless pit). Such a yogi is acceptable to the Lord. With its beautiful narration, the irony and the paradoxical nature of this allegory makes it all the more interesting to read, learn and perhaps follow.

**3. tanuva tonṭava māḍi
manava guddaliya māḍi
agedu kaḷedenavva bhrāntiya bera ||
vaḍedu samsarada henṭeya
bagedu bittidenayya brahma bijava ||
akhanda madalakaravemba bāvi**

pavanave rāṭaḷa
śuśumna nāḷadinda udakava tiddi |
paśugaḷu aidu hasanagedisihavendu
mamate sairane emba beliyanikki
sasiya salahidenu kāṇa ḡuheśvara ||

In the farm of my body,
with mind as my pickaxe,
digging into the farm;
I removed the roots of my delusion ||
Breaking the dirt and rocks in my mundane farm,
I sowed the seeds of divinity ||
In the well of this wide wild world
Using my breath as a rope, and my chakras as a pulley,
drawing buckets of spiritual waters,
I nourished my farm |
Chasing the five invading animals,
with compassion and forbearance to guard my farm,
Staying awake day and night, I raised the plant of Self, O Guheshwara! ||

In this beautiful metaphoric vachana, Allama Prabhu is explaining spirituality to a farmer. He compares his body to a farm filled with dirt, mud, weeds and wild plants. With all our attachments, aversions and negative tendencies, we are likened to a dirty farm that needs work. He goes on to say how he cleansed himself using his mind as a tool. Mind has two components, the emotions and the intellect. With proper intellect and will power, the negative emotions can be removed or replaced with positive emotions such as love and devotion. Allama is implying that in the above vachana, when he says he removed the roots of delusion by digging into the farm, using mind as his pickaxe. Once the farm is clean of all the dirt and weeds, he then sows the seeds of spirituality – the knowledge of Brahman. He then explains beautifully how he grew the plant that sprouted from the seeds of spirituality. He describes the techniques of pranayama and kundalini yoga in the next few lines.

In kundalini yoga, the spine consists of two nadis – the energy channels called ‘ida’ and ‘pingala’. In the center is the hollow space called ‘sushumna nadi’, which is the core of the channels for spiritual potential to rise. There are seven chakras or energy centers in our body/mind complex. The yogi has to open up and transcend all these centers to reach the highest state of Kaivalya or Aikya Sthala as per the Shatsthala philosophy of Veerashaivism.

Allama Prabhu connects this philosophy with a simple well used for irrigating the farm. He compares this mundane world to a well (baavi). He compares the pranayama and kundalini practice with all its chakras to a rope and pulley. This is a apt comparison since the ensemble required to draw water from a well is similar to the pranayama and yoga

practices that a yogi uses to raise his kundalini energy that lies dormant at the bottom of the spine as a coiled serpent.

Allama then refers to the predators that attack the farm – the five animals. These are the five senses that are always engaged in the material world outside, catering to our desires and disturbing the spiritual poise of the meditating yogi. Unless we shut off these five senses and journey inwards, one cannot touch the Self that is blissfully ever present within us. Allama says he used compassion and forbearance to guard the doors to the mind and keep the five senses away from the inner farm of tranquil self-existence. Love and compassion are key ingredients in practicing spirituality. Different texts or yoga, vedanta and agamas have referred to love and compassion as “Parama prema” or “Bhakti” and Allama refers to it as “Mamate”. Fortitude or forbearance is also referred to in these texts as “Tapas”, ‘Titiksha’, etc which Allama refers to as “Sairane”. These positive qualities of love, compassion and fortitude alone take the shivayogi on a arduous task of reaching Aikya Sthala. Staying awake day and night means the shivayogi must develop and maintain constant awareness to reach the ultimate Shivatva to become Shiva himself.

This is just a glimpse of Allama’s vachanas with their beauty and depth!