

Vachana Literature: Resistance Through a Unique Genre

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ABSTRACT

Literature, as an art form, is affected not only by external determinants but by dynamism within art itself that promotes or impedes change. -Rene Wellek

The history of mankind is replete with resistances to various societal norms especially when the social milieu impinges the liberty of its people, creates a suffocating atmosphere even to lead normal life. However the newer governances after a passage of time turn out to be another government with newer weaknesses leading to another kind of governance. It is a vicious circle with no eternal solution. During such critical times literature has shown the way out of it, sometimes through its revolutionary concepts and at other times through healthy practices for the well-being of its people.

Literature is a mirror of prevailing society. Through literature, one can discern the resistance to the unhealthy/unfair previous societies owing to its rigid practices, atrocities on subaltern communities, hegemony of certain communities. During the 12th century Karnataka the Vachana literature endeavoured in all possible ways to sensitize the people about various blind and unfair practices of the previous epochs: caste system, superstitious beliefs, materialism, and denial of lower caste people to places of worship, belittling women, belief in Karma theory (or fatalism) and the like. The paper explores the resistances through Vachana literature, a unique literature which meant 'promise' or a 'word'. Saint Akkamahadevi' perspectives, who was known for the confluence of *Bhatki*, intense devotion, *Jnana*, spiritual knowledge and *Vairagya*, renunciation are emphasized. Vachanas related to attainment of spiritual knowledge would be discussed in Anubhava Mantapa, a religious academy, verified and documented to propagate its precepts to make the society rational and healthy.

The Vachana literature is an offshoot of Bhakti Movement which spread across India with certain variations and the unique genres: *Vachanas* (Karnataka), *abhangas* (Maharashtra), *Tevaram* (Tamilnadu), '*Sataka*' (Andhra Pradesh). Society across India had the conviction that unless the priests mediate between the devotees and the Almighty one will not be bestowed with His blessings. However, the proponents of Bhakti Movement in general and Vachana Movement in particular through their resistance literature preached the laity to practise universal brotherhood which would ensure the eradication of various evil practices and spread universal brotherhood: inequalities between castes, materialism, denial of entry to lower caste people to temples and the like. The following Vachanas exemplifies the practice of universal brotherhood:

Father is our Maadara Chennayya,

Elder uncle is our Dohara Kakkayya,

Uncle is Chikkayya,

Elder brother is our Kinnar Bommayya.

Why do you not know me as such Koodalasangayya? (Yeravintelimath 14)

The Vachana composers never belittled the hereditary occupations of the people. Instead they respected every occupation on par with each other. They even respected the jobs which were considered menial hitherto. Thus they upheld dignity of labour. The proponent of Vachana literature, Viz., Lord Basaveshwara reckons the

cobblers, washermen, and other people who would earn their livelihood through their occupations as his uncles and relatives. The modern poet, Nobel laureate, Rabindranath Tagore also acknowledges dignity of labour in one of his poems, 'Leave This Chanting and Singing and Telling of Beads' states:

Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads!

Whom dost thou worship in this lonely dark corner of a temple with doors all shut?

Open thine eyes and see thy God is not before thee!

He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground

and where the pathmaker is breaking stones.

During the 12th century the seeds of materialism were being sown. People were after more and more wealth, trade and commerce were flourishing, and earning wealth was rampant. The Vachana composers had a bounden duty to guide the laity and show the way to simplicity which was a stepping stone to attain spiritual knowledge. They would preach that one has to earn whatever one needs for the day. If one earns more than that one's spouse would admonish him.

The excess grain was supposed to be distributed through *Dasoha*, feeding the needy. The present day Lingayat Mutts in Karnataka are practising this concept till today thereby providing food and enabling thousands of downtrodden students to acquire education. Women in 12th Karnataka had the power to admonish if her husband would go astray or if he is not a devotee of Lord Shiva. This reflects the status of women and the power they could wield over the wrong doers, including their husbands. The spiritual space was kept open to women to such an extent that they could come and participate in the religious discussions held in Anubhava Mantapa, a religious academy. There were as many as 33 women Vachana composers in the *Sharana* Movement, another name for Vachana Movement. Saint Akkamahadevi was one such *Sharane*, a staunch devotee of Lord Shiva who has composed 367 Vachanas in which most of them are expressions of resistance.

Saint Akkamahadevi, one of the prominent women Vachana composers resisted many societal issues: monarchy, the rigid practices mentioned in Vedas and Upanishads, materialism, the institution of marriage. However she accepted eternal master, humane practices, simple life as alternatives to the above mentioned practices/institutions. She considered nature as her confidante and thereby propounded divinity of nature. The concept which is found in American Transcendentalists like H.D.Thoreau, Walt Whitman and Ralph Waldo Emerson prominently. She is a rare confluence of *Bhakti*, devotion, *Jnana*, the spiritual knowledge and *Vairagya*, the renunciation. At a very young age she was compelled to marry King Koushika lest her parents were threatened to be beheaded. However the spiritual inclination she had would never allow her to enjoy the conjugal pleasures like an ordinary woman.

The social milieu of Vachana Movement also came to her rescue. The movement although would permit the wedded devotees, would also permit the devotees to come out of wedlock if he/she wished to go in search of spiritual knowledge or if one's spouse was not a devotee of Lord Shiva. This unique feature enabled Akka, (she is called so popularly, meaning elder sister in Kannada) to resist monarchy and to come out of wedlock with King Koushika. The Vachana Movement also believed strongly in eternal master, the Almighty. All other masters were considered as earthly, bound by death. Even Lord Basaveshwara states that he was serving King Bijjala as Finance Minister for his earthly life. In the later stage of his life he quit serving Bijjala since he wanted to serve his personal God, Lord Koodalasangamadeva, the eternal master.

In the spiritual landscape one can observe the spiritual heights Akkamahadevi had scaled. When she was about to enter Anubhava Mantapa, Lord Allamaprabhu, the head of the religious academy enquired her marital status. She states that she is wedded to her personal God, Lord Cennamallikarjuna. Not convinced with her answer Lord Allama insists her to explain how she being an earthly woman can marry the abstract Husband. The woman Saint answers through the following Vachana:

Is there any difference between

Solid ghee and liquid ghee?

Is there any difference

Between lamp and light, Sir?

Is there any difference

Between body and soul, Sir?

Because the holy guru

Transformed my body into mantra,

There is no difference between

The Partite and the Impartite, Sir.

Why do you make me speak?

Who, having merged in Cennamallikarjuna,

Has lost her wits? (143)

She implies that the abstract and the concrete are one and the same. There is no discrimination between the two. The ghee which is hardened changes its form to liquid when it is heated. The two states are different but the original form is one. She is happy that after the initiation ceremony her body is made to be an extraordinary one. Hence, she tells Lord Allamaprabhu in turn that her concrete body has got wedded to the abstract one.

Saint Akkamahadevi expressed her resistance to materialism which was growing like cancerous growth. The Indian philosophy advocates attainment of spiritual knowledge rather than earthly knowledge. She showed how simplicity is a stepping stone to the pursuit of spiritual knowledge through her life. Although she was married to the royal member, the King Koushika, a Jain by faith, she was never enticed by worldly life. Instead she became a role model to the womenfolk of her time by scaling the mystic heights. She showed the way not by preaching but practising what she believed in strongly. Whenever Akka would be perturbed by spiritual dilemma or anxiety about Lord Chennamallikarjuna, she would deem nature as her only confidante. The affliction of her can be discerned in the following Vachana.

O prattling parrots,

You have not seen Him.

O cuckoos, singing loudly,

You have not seen Him.

O bees, swooping and humming

You have not seen Him.

O swans, frolicking on the lake,

You have not seen Him.

O peacocks, sporting on hills and in dales,

You have not seen Him.

Tell me where Cennamallikarjuna is.

O tell me where He is. (151)

Surprisingly, the American Transcendentalists like Henry David Thoreau and his contemporaries also would endorse the divinity of nature which is found in Akka's Vachanas. They too resisted materialism in America and advocated simple life, divinity of nature, realization of the self through their literature of resistance.

During the 12th century many practices preached in the Vedas and Upanishads were distorted to the benefit of the priestly class. The movement realized the detrimental effects of such rigid, irrational and superstitious practices. Although the followers of Vachana movement would consider the merits of Vedas and Upanishads, they resisted the irrational ones.

Veda, Sastra, Agama and Purana,

All are the broken rice and

The Chaff of pounded paddy.

Why pound them again?

Why thrash them again?

If the head of the mercuric

Mind is chopped off,

There is sheer Absolute Void,

O Cennamallikarjuna! (197)

All the Vachana composers emphasized the significance of realization of oneself. When the social milieu was not conducive to lower caste people and which denied them the entry to temples, an alternate solution was shown and it was considered very noble also. They preached the laity that instead of visiting temples and offering their prayers to the concrete idols, they should sincerely attempt to realize oneself: finding the existence of the Almighty in each one of them and worshipping their personal God within one's house. Saint Akka preaches how each one should realize oneself in the following Vachana:

What use knowing everything

Unless one knows oneself?

When consciousness becomes

One's own possession,

Why ask others for it?

Because you revealed yourself

To me as consciousness,

I knew you through yourself

O Channamallikarjuna! (122)

Another related concept during Vachana Movement was ‘body churching’ which was believed strongly. Lord Basavanna preached the masses that one’s own body is a temple, so he did not find any logic in people visiting temples after temples. He depicts this very poignantly in the following Vachana:

Those who have money, build temples for Shiva!

Rich build temples for Shiva

What can I, a poor man, do?

My legs are pillars

My body is the temple

My head makes the golden cupola

Oh, Lord of kudala sangama

The standing will perish

The moving will stay on.

The same concept is expressed in Akkamahadevi’s Vachana as follows;

Sir, can I please you by doing eight-fold worship?

You are away from the external affairs.

Sir, can I please you meditating on you within my heart?

You are beyond both speech and mind.

Sir, can I please you by telling beads or singing hymns?

You are beyond the reach of sound.

Sir, can I please you through knowledge of the heart?

You are beyond reasoning intellect.

Sir, can I lodge you in my lotus-heart?

You pervade all my body.(104)

The Vachana Movement had coined a unique concept called *Saranasati Lingapati*, a master stroke which implied that the Almighty is the only master to the entire universe and one should serve Him as a *sati*, a devoted wife to one’s husband. Lord Basaveshwara also had assumed himself as a devoted wife to his personal God, Koodala Sangama. Through this concept the movement endeavoured to emancipate the status of women and resist monarchy, the earthly masters/Kings. The concept enabled equality to women in the spiritual deliberations held in Anubhava Mantapa. In the following expression, Saint Akka depicts her marriage with the eternal husband Lord Chennnamallikarjuna:

They set a canopy of fire

Over a pavilion of water,

And made a seat of hailstone.

Wearing a tasseled chaplet,

A mad bridegroom came

And wed a crippled bride.

They committed me to an endless wedded life.

They married me to a groom

Called Cennamallikarjuna,

O mother! (176)

Thus the Vachana composers not only resisted the prevailing society through their noble, unique and lucid literature but found a parallel to solve the societal issues. They proved their potential in such a way that the preachings are being practised till today in the present day Karnataka.

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