

REVISITING PREMODERN AUTHORSHIP: A STUDY OF VACHANAS

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ABSTRACT

The 12th-century vachana movement in Karnataka is one of the most revisited cultural phenomena in Kannada. At the heart of this revolution lies the “vachana”-a unique composition employed by the leading figures of the movement. While traditional scholarship often views these compositions through the lens of modern literary authorship, the vachana phenomenon is far more fluid, functioning as a living archive of a collective spiritual consciousness. By examining the vachanas not merely as static poems but as socially embedded utterances, we can begin to unpack the complex transition from oral tradition to organized textual community.

KEYWORDS: *Authorship, Vachanas, Sharanas, Kannada Literature.*

The Vachana Phenomenon

The twelfth-century world of the shivasharanas-devotees of Lord Shiva-is a complex and layered phenomenon, challenging to access and understand as historical truth. This world has been transmitted to us partly through hagiographical and mythical imagination and partly through historical records. The primary source for understanding the shivasharana phenomenon is the archive of vachanas-short, free-verse compositions that

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encapsulate the worldview of the shivasharanas (also called vachanakaras). While undertaking a practical criticism of vachanas is one approach, understanding them as socially embedded utterances is far more complex.

The twelfth century marks a significant shift in the history of the Kannada world, particularly in terms of political order, belief systems, and socio-cultural dynamics. It also witnessed a social and spiritual movement arise, challenging orthodox practices. This movement is believed to have been centered in Kalyana, the capital of the Kalachuri king Bijjala, an erstwhile feudatory of the Chalukyas. At the forefront of this movement were figures like Basavanna, Akkamahadevi, Allama Prabhu, and Channabasavanna. Their chosen mode of expression was unique-closer to colloquial speech and more prosaic in form. Earlier vachanakaras like Jedara Dasimaiah had perfected this genre and called it 'sulnudi', wise speech, the precursor of vachanas. Vachanas available to us now number over 20,000 and are attributed to 249 identified vachanakaras.

Kannada critical and literary scholarship often perceives the vachana movement as a resistance to the varnashrama systems upheld by Vedic Brahminism (Udachana 360-361). That the vachanakaras led a rebellion against the existing orthodoxy under the leadership of Basavanna and envisioned an egalitarian social order is now a prominent narrative in the cultural memory of Kannadigas. Though this interpretation is contested (Jalki), one has to agree that 12th-century Kalyana remains a locus mysterium for the Kannada imagination. As Girish Karnad famously observed in his introduction to Taledanda, the Kannada imagination frequently returns to this period, much like the tongue visits an aching tooth (Karnad 1). Numerous works on the lives and times of the shivasharanas, from Harihara's writings to contemporary scholarship, exemplify this fascination.

Vachanas are generally perceived as free-verse compositions, defying conventional literary norms with regard to thematic and formal concerns. If Shaiva poets like Harihara, who lived a generation after the vachana movement, found the lives of the shivasharanas deeply engaging and worth retelling,

later generations discovered equal significance in the vachanas attributed to these figures. This led to numerous compilations of vachanas and the creation of narratives incorporating them. The Shunyasampadane texts are excellent examples, where vachanas were woven together to construct narratives that sought to authenticate a belief system. The textualisation and compilation of vachanas likely began in the 15th century. In Shunyasampadane texts, the Kannada literary tradition saw one of the most innovative uses of vachanas-individual compositions were assembled into a spiritual narrative in an attempt to form a textual community. According to Kannada critic Kirtinath Kurtakoti, by embedding vachanas in their narrative, the Shunyasampadanas have turned them into a literary phenomenon. As he further observes, vachanas, expressions of shivasharanas, may have lost the meanings their composers gave them, but these expressions have remained in our cultural memory waiting for newer interpretations and meanings (Kurtakoti 237-238).

Before the print age, vachanas survived both in oral tradition and in manuscripts. As already noted, the first manuscript of vachanas available to us was composed in 1480 approximately (Shivanna). We do not have any idea how they survived until then and the transformation they underwent while copies were made. Therefore, one may surmise that perhaps 40 to 50 percent of them were composed during the 12th century, the rest being later additions. It is worth noting here that the practice of classifying vachanas on the basis of authors is a modern practice. Earlier, manuscripts were categorised on the basis of sthalas (six stages of spirituality in Virashaivism) or other themes.

Vachanas and the Question of Authorship

Including vachanas in the language curriculum of elementary and secondary education in Karnataka has almost become a rule. Even if one picks up a Kannada textbook from a random class, there is much chance that vachanas are printed in the poetry section along with the details of their 'authors'. This seemingly unproblematic representation of these twelfth-

century compositions leads to several questions related to the nature of pre-modern compositions like vachanas and authors ascribed to them. The first question would be, can vachanas be understood in the same lines as modern texts, for instance, a poem by Da. Ra. Bendre or a novel by Kuvempu? This leads to another question, can vachanakaras like Basavanna, Akkamahadevi, or Allama Prabhu be equated with a modern author who authenticates the text and claims its ownership? A student learning about vachanas through textbooks would assume so and will not make any distinction between pre-modern and modern compositions as well as authors.

An act of ascribing the authorship of a vachana to an author needs to address two issues which haunt the study of pre-modern compositions. First, ascertaining the historicity of the author would be problematic since one has to rely on hagiographical narratives, inscriptions and vachanas themselves. Even if the historicity of an authorial figure is proved beyond doubt, modern notions of authorship and textuality fall short of capturing the complexity of a text's relationship with an author. To draw instances from the West, what we read as Aristotle's works are in fact lecture notes and draft manuscripts never intended for general readership (Humphreys 2023). The fact that their intended function was different is very crucial to understand the nature of these texts. Accordingly, the idea of Shakespeare the author is very different from the idea of Salman Rushdie, the author. Second, attributing the authorship of texts to certain personalities is not an act completely innocent of the cultural politics of the time. The practice of attributing the authorship of Mahabharata and Puranas to Vyasa and the authorship of vachanas to figures like Basavanna and Allama do not suggest merely the labelling of a pre-modern work but point towards different conceptions of authorship at work in different stages in history.

Therefore, the modern categories of a historical figure as an author and an authentic/original text do not offer much assistance in understanding the pre-modern world. This vacuum necessitates a fresh approach towards the premodern texts such

as vachanas. Incidentally, a fifteenth-century work on Allama Prabhu Prabhulingalile by Chamarasa puts forth an interesting perception on the matter. Chamarasa, in this work, proclaims to narrate the story of Allama 'Sampradaya' (Chamarasa 19), tradition of Allama. Instead of seeing Allama as an individual author, Chamarasa sees him as a tradition. Therefore, unlike a modern author who is legally and ethically bound to the text, the premodern figures are seen as authors of a field.

Michel Foucault, in his seminal essay, 'What is an Author?' opines that, certain authors, [Foucault includes Homer, Aristotle, and Church Fathers in the list] occupy a position which one can call "transdiscursive" when they are authors of "much more than a book--of a theory, for instance, of a tradition or a discipline within which new books and authors can proliferate" (Foucault 113). Premodern texts like vachanas acted more as a growing organism under a tradition than a rigid entity, where successive generations have contributed to the 'making' of the text as per the need of the age. At present, the number of recorded vachanas exceeds twenty-thousand, and not all of them are composed during the twelfth century. The vachana corpus is handed down to us through a tradition. Considering the above aspects, a different theory of authorship and textuality is required to study premodern compositions.

In modern Kannada literary studies, the historical authenticity of an author is often taken for granted. This tendency has been extended to the study of premodern texts as well. However, the idea of an "author" is deeply intertwined with modern print capitalism, publication systems, and relationships with institutional power-factors that are frequently overlooked or understated in an analysis. In the case of vachanas, while the existing scholarship highlights the differences between the notions of kavya in Indian poetics and the creation of vachanas, there has been little or no attention given to the journey of vachanas from their conceptualization as "spoken word" to their eventual textualization as "literary texts."

Ultimately, the vachana phenomenon defies the rigid boundaries of modern literary criticism. To treat a vachanakara

as a “modern author” is to ignore the transdiscursive nature of the tradition, where the text functions as an evolving organism rather than a fixed intellectual property. As the vachanas moved from the radical, colloquial “wise speech” of the 12th century to the institutionalized manuscripts of the 15th century and beyond, they underwent a profound transformation in both form and function. Recognizing this shift-from the immediacy of the spoken word to the permanence of the printed page-is essential for any true understanding of the movement. Only by looking past modern notions of authorship can we appreciate the vachanas for what they truly are: a persistent, echoes-across-centuries tradition that continues to offer new meanings to the Kannada cultural memory.

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