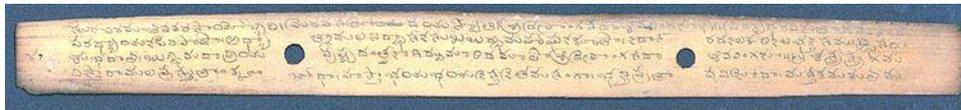


KANNADA DEVOTIONAL POETRY - SIVA

Overview The great shift in Indian literature and culture, known as *bhakti* or devotionalism, began in Tamil, the classical language of south India, in about 500 CE. Over the next few centuries, this devotionalism movement produced a remarkable set of poems in praise of both Vishnu and Siva. When that first burst of energy petered out in Tamil, it stimulated a similar literary movement in the language of Kannada, another Dravidian language (unrelated to Sanskrit), which was spoken in the adjacent region to the north. During the 12th century CE, a group of Kannada poets, who included non-Brahmans and women, created a new and simple form of verse (*vacana*, 'speech') in which they sang songs to Siva. Known as Virasaivas ('Militant/Heroic Saivas') or more commonly today as Lingayats, they used this simple verse form to propagate their spiritual vision and egalitarian social ideals. These poets were reformers, who established an alternative society for themselves, in which caste, creed and even gender was irrelevant in the pursuit of truth and god. Despite this, and like their Tamil counterparts, their verses are underpinned by a complex intellectual system that contributed to Indian philosophy.



(palm-leaf manuscript of a Virasaiva poem, date unknown)

History These Kannada poets who sang in praise of Siva lived in the 12th century CE. We know this because of inscriptions from that period that mention the name of Basavanna, the leader of the group, whom I shall refer to as 'Virasaivas'. Basavanna, in turn, refers to his fellow poets in his poems, and they refer to him. Basavanna and the Virasaivas gained their maximum cultural influence during the reign of Bijjala II (r. 1157–1167). Basavanna was appointed advisor to the king and established a large community of followers in Kalyana, the capital of the kingdom. Later, however, the king rejected the Virasaiva's radical idea and turned them away, leading to a period of persecution. Following Basavanna's death in 1167, some of his followers, still distraught at their mistreatment, killed the king.

After the dramatic events of the 12th century, the movement was led by Basavanna's nephew, who helped shift it toward the Hindu mainstream and set up a number of monasteries. Scholars and writers codified the Virasaiva philosophy, which was similar to the 'qualified monism' (*visista-advaita*). During the Vijayanagar Empire, which ruled much of south India from the 15th to the 17th century, Virasaivas played a role in expanding the territory of the empire, helping to defeat the Sultan of Delhi who attacked from the north.

The social protest of the Virasaivas continued right up to the 19th century, when they objected to their classification by the British authorities as Sudras (lowest of the four castes). Virasaivas considered themselves to be outside the caste system and to occupy a social status as high as that of Brahmins, whose authority they rejected. In 1929, they won a case in the High Court at Bombay, which declared that they were not Sudras; later, their claim of being distinct from conventional Hindus was also recognised in the 1950 Constitution of India. Despite these gains at the national level, at the state level Virasaivas are still campaigning for formal recognition as a separate religion.

From about the middle of the twentieth century, some Virasaivas began to call themselves Lingayats, after the *lingam* (phallic) symbol of Siva. In 1960, a census of Mysore (a Kannada-speaking region of the modern state of Karnataka) found that almost 4 million people (or 16% of the population) referred to themselves as Lingayats. The key fact is that while Lingayat rituals may be identical to those observed by Hindus, they are not performed by Brahmins. but by their own priests (called Jangammas).

Poets

Basavanna Basavanna (1105-1167 CE), the leader of the Virasaiva poets, was born into a Brahmin family in the Kannada-speaking region of south India. He grew up in a small but sacred town of Kudalasangama, located at the confluence of two rivers. This is important because Basavanna devotes most of his poems to a local form of Siva, the 'Lord of the Meeting Rivers.' It was at that place also that he studied with a sage, who taught him the Vedas and other sacred texts. In his adult years, Basavanna embodied and displayed the radical social protest of this poetic movement when he threw away his sacred thread and replaced it with a *lingam* of Siva. He rose to become chief minister of the kingdom under Bijjala II who ruled from his palace in Kalyana. With that royal patronage, Basavanna gathered around him like-minded poets from all strata of society, who formed a sort of alternative society and established an 'assembly of spiritual experience.' This was a new public institution where thinkers, writers and reformers gathered to discuss new ideas. Eventually, however, the king turned against Basavanna and his radical ideas. Basavanna then led his band of unorthodox poets to various towns where they settled and then moved on. There are few details about his later life, although many legends are narrated in a biographical poem (*Basava Purana*), written in the Telugu language in the 13th century CE.



(a recent statue of Basavanna, Shimoga District, Karnataka)

Mahadevi Akka Like Basavanna, Mahadevi Akka (c.1130-1160) was born in the 12th century and became one of the most influential of the Virasaiva poets in Kannada. Outside of her poetry, which is even more intense than that of her companions, we know little about her life. Legends, however, claim that she was to be married to a Jain king but refused him on the grounds that she was already 'married' to Siva. (Compare this with a similar incident in the legends about the Tamil poet Antal in the essay on Vishnu devotional poetry). Some early hagiographical accounts tell a slightly different story of Mahadevi Akka: she accepted the marriage with the king but only on the condition that she be allowed to carry on her close relationship with other poets. When, after the marriage, the king reneged on this promise, she left him and went to the famous Siva temple at Srisailam. On the way, she passed through Kalyana, where she met Basavanna and the other Virasaiva poets. She stayed with them for some time before completing her journey to the temple, where she became a renunciant and later died. Her 430 poems (*vacanas*) are devoted to Siva as 'Chenna Mallikarjuna', or 'Lord white as Jasmine.' Similar to her Tamil counterpart, the poet Antal, Mahadevi Akka used her poems to express an intense and sensual love for Siva. Several of her poems also cry out against the discrimination she faced as a woman, calling out the sexist behaviour of public officials. Her poems express a gender fluidity, sometimes depicting her (the poet) as female and sometimes as male. All her poems, however, pulsate with an energy that defines the whole corpus of Virasaiva poetry.



(cave temple in which Mahadevi Akka is said to have meditated, Srisailam, Telangana)



(image of Mahadevi Akka, in a memorial at her birth place, Udathadi, Karnataka, date unknown)

Allama Prabhu Joining Basavanna and Mahadevi Akka in a famous trio of 12th- century Kannada poets is Allama Prabhu. Allama was the mystic of the group. If Basavanna was the leader of this band of literary radicals, Allama Prabhu was their guru. Given the honorific title of 'older brother' (*anna*), he presided over the 'assembly of spiritual experience' that the group established during their residence in Kalyana. From contemporary accounts, it appears that he was born into a family of professional temple performers and that he himself became a temple drummer at a young age. Growing up in the Shimoga district of present-day Karnataka, he married while a teenager and was soon widowed. Burdened by grief, he left home and wandered until he ended up in a cave, where he was taught a form of mysticism by a saint. After this, Allama Prabhu was known as 'Lord of the Cave' (*guheshvara*). All his life, it is said, he continued to use his musical skills by playing a fiddle while singing on the road. His poems use a distinct vocabulary or secret code and often employ riddles and questions.

Poetic form These three poets, along with others, developed a new verse form to express their devotion to Siva. They called it *vacana* or 'speech' because, although it borrowed themes and motifs from both classical Tamil and Sanskrit, it was still a departure from Sanskrit literary language and used the regional language of Kannada. It is partly for this reason that Basavanna claims to be a simple poet, ignorant of complex metres, who knows only the language of love:

I don't know anything like time beats and metre
Nor the arithmetic of strings and drums;
I don't know the count of imab and dactyl.
M lord of the meeting rivers
as nothing will hurt you
I'll sing as I love.

These poets rejected the intricate and ornate style borrowed mostly from Sanskrit (but also from Tamil) that put skill ahead of passion. In its place, they advocated a poetics of spontaneity, but also of spirituality. In another poem, Basavanna tells Siva:

Make of my body the beam of a lute
of my head the sounding gourd
of my nerves the strings
of my fingers the plucking rods.
Clutch me close
and play your thirty-two songs
O lord of the meeting rivers!

In other words, the songs are not sung by the poet, but by Siva himself, who uses the poet as his literal instrument. Despite this claim of spontaneous speech, the *vacanas* are carefully constructed poems, built on repetitions, symmetries and parallelism (which have been noted as the hallmark of oral poetry). Another linguistic device favoured by the Virasaiva poets is extended metaphor, as illustrated by the poem just translated above.

Philosophical system Many, though not all, *vacanas* are underpinned by a subtle theology, called the 'six stage system.' Not wholly dissimilar to the Buddhist 'path of perfection', this system describes a mystical process as a ladder of ascent by which a soul reaches union with the divine reality. Overarching this system is the belief that the world is created by god's play (*lila*) using illusion (*maya*), without any real purpose because god can have no desires, which would attach him to the world. The six stages are as follows: 1) the devotee worships Siva; 2) he moves from action to discipline; 3) he moves into peaceful contemplation; 4) he moves from the outer world to the inner, where instead of receiving god's grace, he experiences it; 5) he is in union with the lord and only suffers as a woman suffers the absence of her lover; and 6) he dissolves namelessly into the lord, like 'space joining space and water merging with water.' There is no longer the need or even the possibility of worship because there is no distinction between soul and god.

Cultural significance This corpus of poems written in Kannada in the 12th century was remarkable in many ways. First, it was the initial stage of a long geographical journey that devotionism would complete; after having left the deep south, it ended up in Bengal in the far east in the 17th century. Through their poems, the Virasaiva poets participated in and contributed to this pan-Indian cultural and literary movement that shaped modern-day Hinduism. More than that, the poets whom Basavanna gathered around him used their songs to express a radical vision of society, in which Brahmins played no role and gender was irrelevant. Their poetic movement was at the same time a social reform movement which, at least for a century or two, created an egalitarian society among its members. In this way, the Virasaivas can be compared to other religious movements based on social change, such as early Buddhism in India or Protestantism in Europe. Similarly, the Virasaivas established alternative social institutions comparable to the early Buddhist *sanga* (assembly) or the Christian congregation. Their 'assembly of spiritual experience' only lasted a few decades in the capital city of Kalyana, but they later established monasteries that continue to exist today.



(a necklace worn by Lingayats, followers of the new religion established by the Virasaiva poets in the 12th c. CE. The pendant contains a small lingam and sacred ash. 20th century)

A thousand years after these poets lived, their cultural and religious descendants continue to follow their inspiration. In the 21st century, the Lingayats (the name now used by the followers of the original Virasaivas) form a distinct regional sect of Hinduism. When a child is born into a Lingayat family, a priest ties a small *lingam* on its body. In later life, a Lingayat man wears that tiny *lingam*, about the size of a robin's egg, although it is covered with black tar which hardens. Young men are then initiated into a monastery in a complex, secret ceremony, in which the six syllables of a cabalistic system are whispered in his ear.

Poems and translations

1. Kannada poem by Basavanna, translated by A.K. Ramunujan, 1973

The rich
will make temples for Siva.
What shall I,
a poor man, do?

My legs are pillars,
the body the shrine,
the head a cupola
of gold.

Listen, O lord of the meeting rivers,
things standing shall fall
but the moving ever shall stay.

This could be regarded as the 'poster-poem' of the Virasaivas. In its few lines and simple phrases, it overturns the entire Hindu orthodoxy. Temples are for the rich, where they employ Brahmin priests. True religion is the personal and total dedication of oneself to god. Temples in south India did (and still do) resemble fortresses; they are monuments to the power and ambition of rulers. In the 12th century, and up until the mid-20th century, low caste groups were not even allowed to enter these massive structures, run by committees who were the trustees of vast lands and wealth (in jewels and gold). Against this temple of stone, the poet places his flesh and blood. Notice also that temples are 'made', while the poet's body simply exists. And then comes the final, devastating line, which announces that the made thing will fall (one day), while the fluid body is eternal. Monuments do crumble, while the spirit is indestructible.

2 & 3. Kannada poems by Basavanna, translated by A.K. Ramunujan, 1973

How can I feel right
about a god who eats up lacquer and melts,
who wilts when he sees fire?

How can I feel right
about gods you sell in your need,
and gods you bury for fear of thieves?

The lord of the meeting rivers,
self-born, one with himself,
he alone is the true god

The pot is a god. The winnowing fan is a god.
The stone in the street is a god.
The comb is a god.
The bow string is also a god.
The bushel is a god,
And the spouted cup is a god.

Gods, gods, there are so many
There's no place left to put a foot.
There is only one god. He is our lord of the meeting rivers.

Having attacked temples in the first poem, in this pair of poems Basavanna turns his critical eye to the images worshipped inside and outside them. In poem number 2, the god who 'melts' refers to the practice of making bronze statues in which a wax model is used; those statues are sometimes sold or stored in safe places (as they are today). In poem number 3, the poet is exasperated at the many forms that are worshipped as gods and goddesses. He does not mean that a comb or a bushel is actually worshipped; instead, this is his way of parodying the infinite array of images that are worshipped. The religion of the Virasaivas was a fierce spiritual monotheism.

5. Kannada poem by Basavanna, translated by A.K. Ramunujan, 1973

A snake-charmer and his noseless wife
snake in hand, walk carefully
trying to read omens
for a son's wedding.
But they meet head-on
a noseless woman
and her snake-charming husband,
and cry 'The omens are bad!'
His own wife has no nose;
There's a snake in his hand.'

What shall I call such fools
Who do not know themselves
And see only the others,
O lord of the
meeting river.

Sometimes, as here, the poet unleashes his scorn against the foolish behaviour of ordinary people. Although the Virasaivas were egalitarian, and criticised elite institutions and ideas, that did not mean that they accepted all local practices and attitudes. They saw themselves as special, as visionaries whose search for the truth was incandescent.

6. Kannada poem by Basavanna, translated by A.K. Ramunujan, 1973

See-saw watermills bow their heads.
So what?
Do they get to be devotees
To the Master?
The tongs join hands.
So what?
Can they be humble in service
To the Lord?
Parrots recite.
So what?
Can they read the Lord?

How can the
slaves of the Bodiless God,
Desire,
Know the way
Our Lord's men move
Or the stance of their standing?

Basavanna's satirical take on Hindu customs continues in this poem, in which he likens worshippers, with their bowed heads and folded hands, to watermills and tongs. The comparison of mindless repetition with a parrot was as familiar to medieval Kannada-speakers as to modern Europeans. Only in the final lines does the poem reveal its distinct Virasaiva origins: How can people who are full of desire (*kama*, known as the bodiless god) understand the Virasaivas?

7. Kannada poem by Mahadevi Akka, translated by A.K. Ramunujan, 1973

Having vanquished the six passions and become
The trinity of body, thought and speech;
Having ended the trinity and become twain – I and the Absolute
Having ended the duality and become a unity
Is because of the grace of you all.
I salute Basavanna and all assembled here
Blessed was I by Allama my Master-
Bless me all that I may join my Chenna Mallikarjuna
Good-bye! Good-bye!

In this poem, Mahadevi Akka explains her path to spiritual realisation, resolving dualisms and trinities into a transcendental unity with Siva (whom she calls Chenna Mallikarjuna). She also pays tribute to her fellow poets Basavanna and Allama (Prabhu). The final line in which she says farewell is usually interpreted to refer to her decision to leave the city of Kalyana, where the poets had gathered, and retire to a temple at Srisailam. It also announces her departure from the external world and entry into the inner reality of meditation.

8 & 9. Kannada poems by Mahadevi Akka, translated by A.K. Ramunujan, 1973

People,
male and female,
blush when a cloth covering their shame
comes loose

When the lord of lives
lives drowned without a face
in the world, how can you be modest?

When all the world is the eye of the lord,
onlooking everywhere, what can you
cover and conceal?

You can confiscate money in hand
But can you confiscate the god's glory?
Or peel away every strip you wear, but can you peel the Nothing,
the Nakedness that covers and veils?

To the shameless girl
Wearing the White Jasmine Lord's light of morning
You fool,
Where's the need for cover and jewel?

This pair of poems has a backstory. Legend says that Mahadevi Akka did sometimes throw off conventional clothing and walk half-clothed through the streets. For this, she was reviled and even some of her poet friends, who were men, did not wholly approve. In these poems, she answers her critics and exposes their ignorance of true spirituality. In the second poem, the poet ironically refers to herself as 'the shameless girl,' who wears the light of Siva (the 'White Jasmine Lord'). In both poems, she says that, in the divine gaze, all social categories and attitudes are seen for what they are: illusion.

10. Kannada poem by Allama Prabhu, translated by A.K. Ramunujan, 1973

Looking for the light,
I went out:
it was like the sudden dawn
of a million million suns,
a ganglion of lightnings
for my wonder.

Oh, lord of the caves
If you are light,
There can be no metaphor

This poem must be one of most vivid and concise expressions of religious transcendence in world literature. It certainly displays the mystical dimension of many Virasaiva poems, but especially those composed by Allama Prabhu. It is a poet's poem, focusing on the impossibility of finding a metaphor with which to describe or even suggest the reality of Siva. And it is fitting that the translator, A K Ramanujan, was himself a poet and a Kannada-speaker. He has transferred the sense of this medieval poem in a Dravidian language succinctly into contemporary English. A triumph in both languages.

10. Kannada poem by Allama Prabhu, translated by A.K. Ramunujan, 1973

Feed the poor
tell the truth
make water-places for the thirsty
and build reservoirs for a town—

You may then go to heaven
after death, but you'll get nowhere
near the Truth of our Lord.
And the man who knows the Lord
he gets no results.

This poem takes us even farther into the radical vision of the Virasaivas, and (again) particularly of Allama Prabhu. It is hard to accept that philanthropy—feeding the poor and providing water for people—should be scorned in this way. How can we disparage helping others in need? The poet gives us an answer: we can scorn anything if we are so committed to an inner truth that the external world falls away. And who does not know of people who use 'good works' as a way of improving their public image? The genuine truth seeker does not care about 'results'.

Reading

A.K. Ramanujan (trans.), *Speaking of Siva*, 1973

V. Narayana Rao (trans.), *Siva's Warriors: The Basava Purana*, 1990