

Classic Poetry Series

Allama Prabhu
- poems -

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Allama Prabhu(12th Century)

Allama Prabhu (Kannada: ????? ?????) is a mystic-saint and Vachana poet (called Vachanakara) of the Kannada language in the 12th century. Prabhu is the patron saint (Prabhu, lit, "Master"), the undisputed spiritual authority, and an integral part of the Lingayata (lit, "Devotees of the god Para-Shiva or Lingadeva") movement that decisively shaped society in medieval Karnataka and forever changed the contour of popular Kannada poetry. He is normally included among the "Trinity of Lingayatism" – Basavanna, the founder of the movement, and Akka Mahadevi, the most prominent woman poet of that time being the other two. The socio-religious movement they pioneered used poetry (called Vachana Sahitya, lit, "Vachana literature") to criticise mere ritual worship and the caste-based society, and gave importance to moral values and love of mankind. It is well accepted that though Basavanna was the inspiration behind the Veerashaiva movement and earned the honorific "elder brother" (anna) at the "mansion of experience" (Anubhava Mantapa), Allama was the real guru who presided over it.

According to the scholars K. A. Nilakanta Shastri and Joseph T. Shipley, Vachana literature comprises pithy pieces of poetic prose in easy to understand, yet compelling Kannada language.[1][6] The scholar E. P. Rice characterises Vachana poems as brief parallelistic allusive poems, each ending with one of the popular local names of the god Shiva and preaching the common folk detachment from wordly pleasures and adherence to devotion to the god Shiva (Shiva Bhakti).

Early Life

Some details of the early life of Allama are available from biographies written about him, such as the writings of noted Hoysala poet Harihara, while other accounts are generally considered legendary. It is however certain he was born in Karnataka, India, in the 12th century, and was a contemporary of the other famous Veerashaiva devotee-poets (sharanas), Basavanna and Akka Mahadevi. According to Harihara's biography of Allama, the earliest account of the saint's life, he was a temple drummer in modern Shivamogga district, Karnataka state, India. He came from a family of temple performers, was himself an expert at playing the a type of drum called maddale, and his father was a dance teacher. Allama fell in love with a beautiful dancer called Kamalathe. They were happily married until the sickness and early death of his wife. The grief stricken Allama wandered aimlessly until he came upon the saint Animisayya (or Animisha, "the one without eyelids", "the open eyed one") in a cave temple. The saint blessed him with knowledge on god , and, Allama was enlightened and transformed into

a seeker of spirituality. Allama's pen name, (ankita or mudra), Guheshvara the god who stay with every one in heart cave (also spelt Guheswara or Guhesvara, lit, "Lord of the caves"), which he used most of his poems is said to be a celebration of his experience in the cave temple.

Poems

Allama Prabhu's poetic style has been described as mystic and cryptic, rich in paradoxes and inversions (bedagu mode), staunchly against any form of symbolism, occult powers (siddhis) and their acquisition, temple worship, conventional systems and ritualistic practices, and even critical of fellow Veerashaiva devotees and poets. However, all his poems are non-sectarian and some of them even use straight forward language. According to the Kannada scholar Shiva Prakash, Allama's poems are more akin to the Koans (riddles) in Japanese Zen tradition, and have the effect of awakening the senses out of complacency. Critic Joseph Shipley simply categorises Allama's poems as those of a "perfect Jnani" ("saint"). Some of Allama's poems are known to question and probe the absolute rejection of the temporal by fellow Veerashaiva devotees—even Basavanna was not spared. A poem of his mocks at Akka Mahadevi for covering her nudity with tresses, while flaunting it to the world at the same time, in an act of rejection of pleasures. The scholar Basavaraju compiled 1321 extant poems of Allama Prabhu in his work Allamana Vachana Chandrike (1960). These poems are known to cover an entire range, from devotion to final union with God. The poems give little information about Allama's early life and worldly experiences before enlightenment. In the words of the scholar Ramanujan, to a saint like Allama, "the butterfly has no memory of the caterpillar".[16] His wisdom is reflected in his poems—only a small portion of which are on the devotee aspect (bhakta, poems 64–112). More than half of the poems dwell on the later phase (sthala) in the life of a saint, most are about union with god and of realization (aikya, poems 606–1321). Allama died in Kadalivana near Srishila (Andhra Pradesh), and legend has it that he "became one with the linga" and achieved Ikya stala which is final step in shatstala.

I saw
The fragrance fleeing
When the bee came,
What a wonder!
I saw
Intellect fleeing
When the heart came.
I saw
The temple fleeing

When God came.

—Allama Prabhu, Shiva Prakash (1997), pp. 179–180

The tiger-headed deer,

The deer-headed tiger,

Joined at the waist.

Look, another

Came to chew close by

When the trunk with no head

Grazes dry leaves,

Look, all vanishes, O Guheswara.

—Allama Prabhu in bedagu mode, Shiva Prakash (1997), p. 180

If the mountain feels cold,

What will they cover it with?

If the fields are naked,

what will they clothe them with?

If the devotee is wordly,

what will they compare him with?

O! Lord of the caves!

—Allama Prabhu, Subramanian (2005), p. 219

Look here,

the legs are two wheels;

the body is a wagon

full of things

Five men drive

the wagon

and one man is not

like another.

Unless you ride it

in full knowledge of its ways

the axle

will break

O Lord of Caves

—Allama Prabhu, Ramanujan (1973), p. 149

one of the his vachana's (in kannada language) goes as follows:

"Adi Anadi illadandu Ajanda brahmanda kotigalu udaya vagadandu guheshwara
lingadalli ninobbane maha jnani embudu kanabanditthu kana chennabasavanna".

English translation of this is given below:

When the "beginning" or "no beginning" of time had not existed, when millions of universes or millions of wombs of life had not yet come into existence (were not yet raised), at that instant, in the guheshwara linga, it appeared that, oh Chennabasavanna, you were the only being who was the great wise one.(Chennabasavanna was another prominent contemporary of Allama Prabhu)

It is interesting to note that the vachana above bears remarkable resemblance with the Big Bang Theory and Parallel Universes Theory.

Writings on Allama Prabhu

Allama Prabhu was the protagonist of some important writings in the Kannada language. The Vijayanagara poet, Chamarasa, wrote Prabhulingalile (1430) in the court of King Deva Raya II, giving an account of the life and teachings of Allama Prabhu. In this work, Allama is considered an incarnation of the Hindu god Ganapati, and Parvati, the consort of the god Shiva, takes the form of the princess of Banavasi to test his detachment from the material world. So popular was the work, that the king had it translated into Tamil and Telugu languages. Later, translations were made into Sanskrit and Marathi languages.

With the intent of re-kindling the spirit of the 12th century, the Sunyasampadane ("Achievement of nothingness" or "The mystical zero"), a famous anthology of Vachana poems and Veerashaiva philosophy was compiled during the Vijayanagara era. It was compiled in four versions starting with the anthologist Shivaganaprasadi Mahadevaiah in c. 1400. Other versions by Halage Arya (1500), Siddhalingayati (1560) and Siddaveerannodaya (1570) are considered refinements. With Allama as its central figure, these anthologies give a vivid account of his interaction, in the form of dialogues, with contemporary saints and devotees. The quality of the work is considered very high.

For All Their Search

For all their search
they cannot see
the image in the mirror.

It blazes in the circles
between the eyebrows.
Who knows this
has the Lord.

[English version by A. K. Ramanujan
Original Language Kannada]

Allama Prabhu

If It Rains Fire

If it rains fire
you have to be as the water;

if it is a deluge of water
you have to be as the wind;

if it is the Great Flood,
you have to be as the sky;

and if it is the Very Last Flood of all the worlds,
you have to give up self

and become the Lord.

[English version by A. K. Ramanujan
Original Language Kannada]

Allama Prabhu

Light

Light
devoured darkness.

I was alone
inside.

Shedding
the visible dark

I
was Your target

O Lord of Caves.

[English version by A. K. Ramanujan
Original Language Kannada]

Allama Prabhu

Looking For Your Light

Looking for your light,
I went out:

it was like the sudden dawn
of a million million suns,

a ganglion of lightnings
for my wonder.

O Lord of Caves,
if you are light,
there can be no metaphor.

[English version by A. K. Ramanujan
Original Language Kannada]

Allama Prabhu