

The Vachana Tradition and Teachings of Guru Nanak Devji: A Comparative Note

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Abstract of the paper

In this paper an attempt is made to understand and discuss both the philosophies and life styles of the followers of Sikhism and Lingatism or Vachana Tradition while trying to take up a Comparative Study of both in the light of Bhakti Movement and an inveterate and indomitable zeal for Reformation and Enlightenment though they reside in the provinces existing poles apart and opposite (South and North) in our country. Further it is interesting to note that Guru Nanak Devji who was a relentless traveler visited Bidar, a district head quarter in my state in which district Basava Kalyana- the field of action (*Karma bhoomi*) of Basavanna and his troop of enlightened *sharanas* is situated. There is Guru Nanak Jira Sahib in Bidar, where the holy soul set his feet hallowed the land and thus Karnataka has long association with Sikhism and even one of the five beloved ones (*Panj Pyare*), Bhai Sahib Singh also belonged to Bidar.

Key Words: *Linga, Dasoha, Bhakti, Seva, Kaayaka, Kailasa, Sarbat da Bhalla, Waghe guru, caste less society, Equality, Rationality, Supr*

Twelfth century in the history of Karnataka and Kannada Literature is a period of transition and an important epoch. It was during this period that a new religion cropped up. It was known as Lingayatism. Lingayatism means a religion the members of which wear a '*linga*' or '*lingam*', an icon of Lord Shiva, their body. Such a cult of worshippers had their own philosophy of life. In order to popularize their philosophy of life, they introduced the new form in the world of Kannada Literature known as Vachanas. The word '*vachana*' literally means a saying. Such vachanas were in vogue during the 11th century itself. But during the 12th century the vachana movement gained momentum. Basaveshwara is regarded as the pivotal personality of the vachana movement. He was born in a Brahmin family in Bagewadi, an *agrahara* (a village donated by the king to the learned brahmins exclusively for their stay) of Vijayapura district. His parents were Maadarasa and Maadalaambe /Maadalaambike. Being disgusted by the *agrahara* culture of his birth place he refused Brahminism and went away to Kudalasngama and soon became tired of the temple culture that was in vogue there. Then he travelled to the city of Kalyana where King Bijjala of Kalachurya dynasty ruled. It was a city where monarchy prevailed. Basavanna became a clerk in the secretariat of King Bijjala and then he was promoted to the position of the Finance Minister. They were the youthful days of Basavanna. In Kalyana Basavanna witnessed the ignorance, superstition tyranny of the king, merciless exploitation carried out by the pontifical section of the society, exploitation of women by men that were eating into the bones of the society. He was greatly moved by the pitiful predicament of the society and thought of bringing a new wave of reformation. During those days, the minds of the masses were muddled as they were sans any learning and light of letter in their life. He dreamed of an egalitarian society. In order to materialize his ideology, he introduced the concept of '*ishtalinga*' (wish fulfilling *linga* tied around in the neck by a devotee) which he made all his

followers to wear and called them the '*bhaktas*' or '*sharanas*' irrespective of their castes. Apart from this, he introduced the principles like 'work itself is heaven' (*Kayakave Kailash*), 'practise what you speak' (*Nudidante nade*), gender equality etc. In addition to these he also introduced the concepts like 'the grand house' (*Mahamane*) where all the devotees used to eat together, distribution of the wealth, food etc. earned from honest labour (*Dasoha*). He was also instrumental in founding the 'Hall of Experience' (*Anubhava Mantapa*) where all the *sharanas* used to meet in the evening to discuss whatever public or private problems they faced. The findings and the resolutions, they arrived at after discussion, were documented in the form of *vachanas*.

Vachana means a well worded or pithy statement, it is a promise given or an oath taken by an utterer. Therefore, the Vachana Literature is regarded as the supreme literature. The writers of such *vachanas* were the *sharanas*. They never believed in the caste system, sectarianism, cultism etc. They were always against superstition and vainglory. They followed the path of equality, rationality, monotheism, truthfulness, distribution of wealth, eating together and living in the earning of honest labour -*kaayaka*.

In the twelfth century there emerged a new religion known as the *Lingayatism* under the leadership of Basavanna in Karnataka. It consisted of a host of followers known as the *sharanas* who enriched the world of Kannada Literature with a new genre known as the *vachanas*. The *sharanas* dreamed of a society which was free from casteism, cultism, superstition etc. They believed in the philosophy of *kayaka*, *dasoha* and equality of gender. Such community- oriented ideas appear quite akin to and apparently compatible with the principles and philosophy of Sikhism. It is well known a fact that Guru Nanak Devji founded this religion. Nanak Devji was a great visionary and a glorious mystic. He, "was born on the 15th April 1469. However, the Sikhs celebrate this auspicious event each year on the full moon day in November. Thus, the date changes from one year to the next."¹ Like Basavanna who refused the *upanayanam* and the sacred thread Nanak Devji also refused the sacred thread and embraced the philosophy of simple living away from all forms of ritualistic performances. He too taught the principles like submission to the will of God (*waghe guru*), Monotheism, Good will for all (*Sarbat da Bhalla*), Speaking the Truth (*Sach sunaisi sach kee Bela*), *Seva* and *Simran*, Sharing with others (*Vand Chako*), Earning or making a living with Honesty (*Kirat Karo*), continuous devotion to God and meditating on His name (*Naam Japna*), Eradication of Five Evils namely Ego, Anger, Greed, Attachment and Lust which lead to illusion (*Maya*), Idea of Casteless Society, Refusal of Rituals and Superstitions, Emphasis on Devotion (*Bhakti*) etc. are the hall marks of teachings of Nanak Devji.

During the twelfth century the *Sharanas* who dreamed of an ideal and egalitarian society formed a platform called *Anubhavamantapa* (hall of experience resembling our contemporary assembly where enough discussion regarding the implementation of new rules and laws takes place). The architect behind the formation of this *Anubhavamantapa* was Basavanna. In the hall various elderly and experienced persons assembled and discussed the ways to evolve a social system, life style etc. based on absolute equality. The *Anubhavamantapa* underscored the individual freedom and respect, and thereby paved way for the individual development. The main object of the members of *Anubhavamantapa* was to shear off the bad qualities and wickedness from the personality of the individuals. This does not mean that only the virtuous, respectable and socially elite people were allowed the membership of *Anubhavamantapa*. There were members like Sankavve who led her life by practicing prostitution, Marayya who led his life by selling the wine, Urilinga Peddy who was a notorious robber. The *Sharanas* of the *Anubhavamantapa* welcomed these and many such other persons of socially lower rank and refuse. But once such persons entered the *Anubhavamantapa* there was a sea change in their lives. They were all transformed into valuable pearl like personalities. Thus, the *Anubhavamantapa* took the most wicked persons into its fold and advised them most affectionately and changed them completely. This assembly never discriminated among the members on the basis of their caste creed or profession. Allamaprabhu was the first and founder president of such an honorable center. In the *Anubhavamantapa* women were also treated equally with men. For instance, we may quote some names of famous women saints like Akkamahadevi, Muktayakka, Aaydakki Lakkamma, Amuge Rayamma and many others. They underscored the inner purity of the personality. Here are the words of Jedara Dasimayya, who belonged to the earlier phase of the Vachana Movement regarding the equality of man and woman.

If there is appearance of breasts and tresses

They call that person female,

If there is appearance of moustache and whiskers
 They call that person a male;
 But the soul that soars between
 Is neither male nor even female O Ramanatha²

(translation: self)

They were the days when a woman was looked down upon and was held at bay from participating in public performances including the religious ceremonies. She was confined to the kitchen and hearth. The Sharanas opposed this kind of view and said that woman was in no way less to man. Like the Sharanas, Guru Nanak Devji also said that man and woman are like two wheels of a cart. As a cart cannot move with only one wheel in the same way a man's life is incomplete without a woman. By saying so he also showed the equality of man and woman. Guru Nanak Devji "permitted women to join religious gatherings and openly sing their praises of God."³

Today we witness the glorification of various gods, temples and the places of pooja built in the names of gods. Thus, men get hedged in particular set of rituals relating to one or the other religion or center of worship get divided. During the days of Vachana Movement also the society was groaning at its roots with the load of institutionalization of religion and exploitation of common men by the priestly class because of the strict rituals. The Sharanas hated this multi-theistic system and tried to introduce and strengthen mono-theistic ideas. The Sharanas hated the system of restricting the God only to the temple and temple culture. In one of his vachanas Basavanna avowedly speaks:

The rich build temples
 What can I build?
 The poor man am I, O sire!
 Lo! My body is the shrine,
 My legs are its pillars,
 My head its golden pinnacle!
 Look at my temple, O sire
 The moving one!
 Hark'n ye, O Kudalasanga
 The static perisheth
 The moving surviveth!⁴

Like the Veerashaiva saints Guru Nanak Devji also hated this kind of system and struggled hard to popularize the ideas of rejection of ritualism and temple culture. Always he used to say that there is one God. He asked the people not to quarrel over the differences relating to Gods and philosophy. He said God is "*Nirankar, Akar, Alakh*"⁵

The Sharanas held the view that compassion is the essence of life and it must be the core of religion. A man may be a follower of any cult or sect he must always practice clemency and compassion towards his fellow beings and creatures. In one of his vachanas Basavanna underscores the importance of clemency and kindness. Here are his words:

O Sire-
 What Sort of religion it's
 Devoid of compassion?
 Compassion shall be

Towards being all,
 For, the compassion
 Is the very source of religion!
 Liketh not God Kudalasanga
 That lacketh compassion! ⁶

Like the Sharanas Guru Nanak Devji also taught his disciples to develop an attitude to show compassion for all. He repeatedly spoke of it in his teachings. This can be seen his teaching of the principle of “*Sarbat da bhalaa*”⁷

The Sharanas who dreamed of an ideal society attached more importance to the purity of personality both inward and outward. In order to attain purity at both the levels observance of and adherence to certain values is very essential. Leading the life based on certain ethical values which elevate the individual as well as society often gets alluded to in the vachanas of many saints. In one of the popular vachanas Basavanna observes:

Steal not, kill not, speak not untruth,
 Be angry with none, nor repugn others,
 Nor exalt thyself, nor revile others;
 This is the purity inward
 This is the purity outward;
 Manner this is the to win the grace
 sOf God Kudalasangama!⁸

Guru Nanak Devji also preached the same principles almost like the resonance of the philosophy of the Vachana Tradition. He too advised his disciples to be always strictly on the path of “*Sach sunaisi sach kee bhela*”⁹ (to speak the truth) and he also underscored the shunning of Five Evils namely Ego, Anger, Greed, Attachment and Lust. For these five evils eat away the very essence of man. These can be seen in the vachana quoted above.

Thus, the philosophy of *Kayaka* to which the Veerashaiva saints attached importance to becomes “*Kirat karo*” (earning/making a living honestly without exploitation or fraud)¹⁰ in the teachings of Guru Nanak Devji. The concept of *dasoha* (distribution of one’s earning including the food with the members of the society) preached by the Veerashaiva saints becomes the principle of “*Vand Chakho*: sharing with others, helping those with less who are in need.”¹¹ The submission of everything and every happening in life to the will of God preached by the Veerashaiva saints gets fashioned as “*Wagheguru*”¹² in the teachings of Guru Nanak Devji. The concepts ‘guru’, and ‘*jangama*’ occupy a prominent position in the discussion of the philosophy preached by the Veerashaiva saints. In the same tenor run the teachings of Guru Nanak Devji in this connection. He used to say, “that no can save anybody else. It is only Guru who guides us to safety, and be saved, one has to follow the right path of *seva* and *Simran*”¹³ He also strictly laid down the rule to his followers that they must be devoted to *GURBANI* and the Sikh way of life.

Thus, based on observations made it goes to show that there are number of aspects which are strikingly similar and almost alike between the Vachana Tradition and Sikhism founded by Sri Guru Nanak Devji, though the religions made their mark remarkably in the regions geographically opposite. A deep and detailed comparative study of both the traditions will surely prove a fruitful addition to the domain of knowledge.

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