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## TRANSLATION REVIEW

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### Signs of Inconsistency

#### The Sign: Vachanas of 12th century

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Sometime in 2002 at Neenasam, the cultural centre at Heggodu, S N Balagangadhara and a few others<sup>1</sup> questioned the interpretations of the vachanas of the 12<sup>th</sup> century as anti-caste literature. They had prepared statistics for each of the 14 volumes of vachanas (published by Kannada Pustaka Praadhikaara or Kannada Book Authority) along the following lines -- How many vachanas from each vachanakaara contained vachanas that had the words or speak of 'jaati' and 'kula'? And how did these vachanas speak of *jaati* or *kula*? They argued that the interpretations that modern Kannada scholars have thus far given us were based on a simplistic formula in which anti-brahminism equaled anti-caste (anti-brahminism=anti-caste) and since the vachanas supposedly were anti-brahmin, they were anti-caste too. Contrary to this formula, they demonstrated that vachanas that could count as anti-shudra and those that abused people who did not worship the Linga outnumbered the vachanas that were supposedly anti-brahminical. The anti-shudra vachanas had not been used by the Kannada scholars to make any argument at all and their interpretations were based on selective readings. Possibly, these selective readings were influenced by orientalist scholars. S N Balaganagadara (Prof. Balu) and others working from within his research programme have shown that our understanding of 'brahmin', 'caste system', 'shudra' etc are based in the West's experience of us, while Indian scholars have tended to take the west's experience of us for objective descriptions of our realities. To my mind, any book on the vachanas must engage with this significant breakthrough. Unfortunately the book under review, *The Sign: Vachanas of the 12<sup>th</sup> century*, 2007 does not do this.

It however displays a certain amount of awareness regarding the possibility of anachronistic readings and the preoccupations that influence the selections and readings of the vachanas by its various editors. This awareness is somewhat new with regard to the vachanas and is possibly the most refreshing aspect of the book. Postcolonial critiques like Lata Mani's (1991), Vishvanathan (1989) and even historical criticism of the traditional Literature Studies have all possibly led to this awareness. Also worth recalling here is Tejaswini Niranjana's *Siting Translation* (1991) that showed to us how Ramanujan's translations of the vachanas was shaped by notions of modernist poetry that anticipated a Western Christian appreciation. The introduction demarcates three categories of translations of the vachanas. The first was influenced by linguistic fervour, religious zeal and nationalistic tendencies. The second was a compilation based on the theological point of view and the third gave importance to their 'secular' nature. And,

[d]uring the 20<sup>th</sup> century the vachana discourse was understood from four important standpoints: as an important source of Veerashiavism, as an expression of the main concerns of Hinduism in Kannada language, as the finest example of poetry according to the ideals of the modernist movement in Kannada literature, and as ancient texts inspiring the fight against social inequality and annihilation of caste system (5).

*The Sign* itself, we are told, is guided by, among other things, the preoccupation "to foreground the vachana expressions instead of attempting to bend the texts for the Anglo-American readership." (16-17).

*The Sign* gives translations of about 468 vachanas of 60 vachanakaras along with an introduction and an index of first lines. The selection has vachanas that are rare as well as a few familiar ones and includes vachanas that are socially relevant as well as philosophically so. In this sense, the selection is not biased against including some vachanas or vachanakaras and excluding others, as

have some recent activists; say by asking for anti-shudra vachanas to be boycotted while retaining the anti-brahminical ones. The editorial displays openness towards new readings and different meanings and this is definitely one of the virtues of the book. But one is not sure if this approach has contributed anything new to the translations.

Keeping the Kannada language syntax in the translation is an interesting move, but is more relevant for Indian readers rather than for the international South Asian Studies departments who are part of the readership aimed at. Indian readers, particularly those who are endowed with language syntaxes similar to that of Kannada will benefit from this move. Retaining the Kannada syntax possibly offers the reader a somewhat literal translation and allows for different and new interpretations. This choice is slightly different from saying that translations are always already ideological, wherein meaning cannot be deferred. However, the following quote shows a problem peculiar to the vachanas. We do not understand the vachanas and must begin to do so. “We believe that translation is a process of understanding and interpreting a text, and each act of translation is a creation of a new and tentative text.” (18)

There are obviously advantages and disadvantages to retaining the Kannada syntax; however mistranslations or good translations are not issues that can be fully discussed until one has a theory about the vachanas. Unfortunately, the scholarship available thus far has so many inconsistencies that they can hardly be called theories. The ideas about spirituality/bhakti and the claims about the caste system are two areas where one can clearly see the lack of rigor. The lack of a theory of vachanas is somewhat recognized when in the introduction we are the following: “All that one can safely state here is that 12<sup>th</sup> century Karnataka was a site where differing ideologies and philosophies were in dialogue and vachanas reflect this dialogue” (6). But do we really know what the dialogue was about? For example, in the famous Akka-Allama conversation is it clear to us that Akka has ‘answered’ Allama’s question? Or how is Akka’s mere saying-so, with the help of a metaphor, proof enough

of her knowledge? Exactly how is it that Allama is convinced? We do not have answers to these questions and therefore it is not clear if we know that these were *dialogues* or if there were *ideologies* and *philosophies* then in the same way in which we understand them now, as if they continuous in time and space, from then and now and from India and the rest of the world.

The introduction to the Series says, “The new occupation-based communities seem to have been the backbone of the movement for an egalitarian society based on monotheism, i.e., worshipping of Shiva” (xii) and then proposes that it is a decentralized monotheism where different personal gods exist. Incomplete speculations about the caste system and the 12<sup>th</sup> century society influence the conclusions about occupation-based communities, while ethnographies have revealed for at least two decades now that caste system was not based on occupations. And monotheism was anyway a reading imposed on the vachanas by the oriental scholars. We would not be able to say what is different between a Basava encouraging the worship of Shiva only and a Shankara encouraging the worship of six gods only. And then again, the assumption that Indian society was a barbaric one and needed egalitarianism is direct pull-off from oriental scholarship that was, in mapping the time lag of India’s civilization, saw bhakti as a protest movement parallel to the protestant revolution in the history of the West. Thus one can see that theses that claim that bhakti was about the triumph of the regional language versus Sanskrit and the ‘lower-caste’ versus the ‘upper-caste’ unthinkingly pursue an orientalist preoccupation that is irrelevant to Indian society and scholarship. One will find it shocking to see the numerous Sanskrit words and descriptive phrases in the vachanas and numerous critiques of ‘lower-caste’ people, as of ‘upper-caste’ people. Part of this book acknowledges the problem but not entirely, because the introduction to the vachanakaras is caught up in labeling them along very problematic frameworks. So it could be said that in the actual translation, this awareness has been futile. See for example this

quote where we are told that the vachanas do reject discrimination based on caste, but consist prejudices. Thus the speculation about caste system is saved while the vachanas themselves are sacrificed and declared inconsistent!

Though vachanas unambiguously reject discrimination based on caste and uphold social equality, we also find in the vachanas intolerance about those who are not within the sharana fold, prejudices against gods and religious practices of ‘other’ communities (8)

There is also inconsistency in so far as the vachanas are considered as “personal reactions to this-worldly life brief utterances” and then are also “didactic” in nature and then again also as that which “evolved as a distinct mode of expression as part of the Veerashaiva followers’ desire to propagate a new philosophy, and through it effect social change, in the process foregrounding their subjectivity and personal experience in their utterance” (1). And then all over again, we are told that the vachanakaras, “...have expressed themselves in these vachanas using their every-day experience to communicate their thoughts on religion, philosophy and society” and that “their Vachanas express the trauma of change of faith” (2). If the vachanas are all of these at once, then do we have the critical resources required to differentiate each? The answer is no. All of these are merely speculations floating around, none of which we need to believe, unless we can arrive at a sociological elucidation of what enlightenment is, without mystifying it wherever we lack understanding.

The questions I am raising can be best illustrated through an examination of the translation of Basava’s vachana “Kalabeda, Kolabeda...” which sounds like the laws of Moses. The translation has rendered normative what is only ethical or instructional.

You shall not steal  
you shall not kill  
you shall not lie

you shall not get angry...(122)

**NOTE**

1. Vivek Dhareshwar, J S Sadananda and Rajaram Hegde were scholars who were part of this group.

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