

SPIRITUAL INDIVIDUALISM AND SOCIAL AWARENESS IN THE VACHANAS OF BASAVA AND ALLAMA

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks into the complex connection between spiritual individualism and social awareness as shown in the Vachana writings of two key figures from the twelfth-century Sharana movement in Karnataka: Basava and Allama Prabhu. Most existing research has mainly focused on the social reform aspects of the Vachanas or their devotional qualities, but this study suggests that the Vachanas present a unique way of thinking. In this view, a strong focus on personal, direct mystical experiences serves as the base for a strong critique of social structures and a vision of an equal community. By closely looking at selected Vachanas, the paper shows that while both Basava and Allama Prabhu share this common approach, they each follow different paths within it. Basava's poetry shows a way of thinking that tries to turn spiritual understanding into real social changes, especially through the Anubhava Mantapa, and promotes a sense of shared responsibility through the idea of Kayakave Kailasa (work is heaven). On the other hand, Allama Prabhu's Vachanas are mysterious and full of contradictions, challenging all social and language-based categories from the perspective of non-dual awareness (sunya), with the main goal of destroying the ego-self as a necessary step for real social change. By comparing these two poets, the paper highlights the dynamic relationship between the spiritual and the social that is central to the Vachana movement, giving a deeper understanding of its lasting influence on Indian literature and social ideas.

Keywords: Vachana Literature, Basava, Allama Prabhu, Spiritual Individualism, Sharana Movement, Bhakti, Social Reform, Kannada Literature

1 INTRODUCTION

In the 12th century, the Karnataka region of South India saw a lot of exciting spiritual and social changes. A movement called the Sharana movement started in the city of Kalyana, centered around a man named Basava. This movement created a body of writings that are very special because they mix deep spiritual feelings with strong social ideas.

These writings are called Vachanas, which means "what is said." They are short, poetic pieces written in the Kannada language. They express the spiritual feelings and social thoughts of a group of people called sharanas, who came from all levels of society, including those who were often ignored and many women. Among the many poets who wrote Vachanas, two stand out: Basava, who started and inspired the movement, and Allama Prabhu, who was the spiritual leader and main teacher of the Anubhava Mantapa, or "the hall of spiritual experience."

Scholars have often looked at these poets separately. Basava is mostly seen as a social reformer who helped create a kind of early democratic group and stood against the caste

system. Allama is usually viewed as a great mystic, with his verses seen as deep spiritual insights. But this paper argues that looking at them separately misses the bigger picture of the movement and doesn't fully show what each poet contributed. The main idea of this paper is that both Basava and Allama shared a similar view of spiritual individualism. This means that the most important religious truth comes from personal, direct experience of the divine, not from religious books, priests, or rituals. This view supports a deep understanding of social issues.

For the Vachana poets, spirituality and social life were not separate. Criticizing caste, gender roles, and empty rituals wasn't an extra part of their spiritual journey—it was part of the same experience. Knowing God as "the lord of the meeting rivers" or "the lord of the caves" meant seeing the false nature of social classes and the sacredness of work. However, Basava and Allama had different ways of showing this spiritual idea. Basava focused on building communities and institutions, while Allama used paradox and questioning to challenge everything, including the idea of God.

This paper is structured in four parts.

First, it explores the background of the Vachanas and where they fit in history and literature, pointing out where current studies fall short.

Second, it looks at Basava's poetry and how he criticized traditional religion and saw the body as a temple.

Third, it examines Allama's use of paradox and questioning to challenge social and spiritual norms.

Finally, it brings Basava and Allama together to show how their different approaches worked together in the Anubhava Mantapa to create a vision of spiritual community that is still relevant today.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

The body of academic work on Vachana Sahitya is quite large and covers various fields such as literary analysis, historical research, philosophical thought, and social studies. This review explores the main directions taken by scholars in this area, highlighting the different ways of interpreting Basava and Allama, and places the current study in the context of what is still not well understood.

Early Scholarship and Canon Formation

The revival of Vachana literature in modern times is greatly owed to scholars like P. G. Halakatti, who worked hard in the early 1900s to collect and edit thousands of Vachana manuscripts. These texts had survived through oral storytelling and were kept in homes. This effort wasn't just about preserving old documents; it happened during a time of colonial rule and growing awareness about caste, especially among Lingayat people who wanted to define their own religious identity. A notable event was the "Shubhodaya controversy" in 1919, when a newspaper article raised doubts about the historical accuracy of certain stories about Basava and Allama, leading to a major court case. This controversy highlighted how important it was to interpret these texts correctly, forcing scholars and community leaders to think about historical methods, the truth of the texts, and how religious stories differ from actual history. The choices made during the creation of Vachana collections have had long-term effects. Michael points out that many of these collections are probably from after the fifteenth century, which brings up questions about their authenticity and whether they were altered over time. The way poems are arranged using the shatsthala framework—a six-stage

model of spiritual growth created by later religious thinkers—gives a structured religious order to texts that might have originally been more free-flowing and not organized. This study takes these complexities into account, viewing the Vachanas not just as straightforward historical records but as literary works that have been changed and shaped through different stages of copying and editing over time.

The Translational Turn: Ramanujan and Global Reception

The release of A. K. Ramanujan's **Speaking of Siva** in 1973 was a big turning point for how Vachana literature was seen around the world. Ramanujan's translations introduced the Vachanas to people outside India, showing them as powerful poetry rather than just old religious or social texts. He put the Vachanas in the context of the larger Indian bhakti movements, pointing out how they challenged traditional structures and institutions.

His interpretation focused on the poets' use of everyday language, their rejection of high-class Sanskrit traditions, and their emphasis on personal spiritual experiences. But Ramanujan's way of looking at things, while very insightful, often highlighted the universal and mystical aspects, sometimes missing the specific historical and social situations that shaped the poetry. His quote about Allama's work—"the butterfly has no memory of the caterpillar"—shows the saint's ability to rise above personal history, but it might also make us forget the social and political backgrounds that made such transcendence possible. Later scholars have worked to add more depth, paying more attention to the social and political factors behind Vachana poetry.

Social-Historical Approaches

Some scholars, like K. Ishwaran, have mainly looked at the Vachanas as a way to understand Lingayat religion and culture, focusing on the new religious practices of the Sharana movement. The Anubhava Mantapa has been a big topic, with scholars arguing whether it was a kind of early parliament, a spiritual school, or a place for discussing religious ideas. Recent studies highlight how inclusive this organization was, bringing people from all castes and genders together.

The view of Basava as a social reformer is very popular in Kannada studies and in events like Basava Jayanti. His criticism of the caste system, his belief in the value of all types of work, and his efforts to build a community where everyone is equal are seen as early signs of modern democratic and socialist ideas. Although this perspective shows important parts of Basava's ideas, it can sometimes be too modern, applying today's political terms to texts from the 12th century. This study aims to respect the social-critical messages in the Vachanas while also recognizing their unique religious and mystical expressions.

Philosophical and Mystical Readings

The deeper ideas in Vachana literature have been studied a lot, especially when it comes to Allama Prabhu. Researchers have pointed out how Allama's poems share similarities with the ideas of Kashmiri Shaivism, as well as with other forms of Indian mystical thought. In Allama's poetry, the idea of sunya, which means emptiness or void, has been understood in many different ways. Some see it as a realization of non-duality, a state that goes beyond words and shapes, or as a complete breaking down of all ideas.

D. R. Nagaraj's book, *Allama Prabhu and the Shaiva Imagination*, which was published after his death, is an important work in this area.

Nagaraj places Allama within several different intellectual traditions, such as the medieval Shaiva philosophy, the bhakti movement across India, and the wider world of Indian

mysticism. He also looks at Allama's poetry through the idea of postcolonial theory. Nagaraj describes Allama as someone who challenges how we know things and pushes the limits of language and thought, which is the main idea explored in this paper.

The Question of Human Rights

A recent strand of scholarship has sought to read the Vachanas through the lens of human rights discourse. Renuka S. G. argues that the Vachana philosophy represents a significant contribution to universal humanity, articulating principles of human rights and social duties that remain relevant in the era of globalization. While such readings risk anachronism, they point to the enduring relevance of Vachana ethics and the need for interpretive frameworks that can bridge medieval and modern concerns.

1.3 Research Gap

Although there is a lot of existing research on Basava and Allama, most studies treat them separately or mix them together. Some focus on Basava because he is known for social reform, while others look at Allama because of his work in mysticism. However, the way these two poets interact—how their different ideas create a dynamic relationship—has not been explored enough.

This paper fills this gap by reading Basava and Allama together, showing how their different views on spiritual individualism form a more complete picture than either could on their own. The main question this paper asks is: How do the Vachanas of Basava and Allama connect spiritual individualism with social awareness, and what do their differences tell us about the possibilities and limits of a spirituality based on social critique?

1.4 Research Methods

This study uses a qualitative, text-based approach that involves detailed reading and comparison of literary works. It uses methods from literary studies, intellectual history, and religious studies.

Primary Sources

The main sources for this study are the collected Vachanas of Basava and Allama Prabhu in Kannada, as found in standard scholarly editions, along with reliable English translations.

For Basava, the study mainly uses the Vachanas from Ramanujan's "Speaking of Siva," which includes both Kannada text and English translations, as well as more complete collections published by the Karnataka government. For Allama, the study uses poems from Basavaraju's "Allamana Vachana Chandrike" (1960) and translations found in Ramanujan's and Subramanian's works on Allama Prabhu's Vachanas.

The choice of poems for analysis is based on how well they relate to the research questions. Poems that directly address spiritual experiences, social structures, rituals, and community are chosen. Special attention is given to the concluding lines (ankita or mudra) of each Vachana, as these phrases—such as "Kudalasangamadeva" for Basava and "Guheshwara" for Allama—are not just formal parts of the poems but are essential to their meaning.

Analytical Framework

The analysis follows three key ideas:

First, the study treats the Vachanas as poetry rather than just as philosophy or social statements. This means paying attention to literary techniques like metaphor, paradox, inversion, and repetition, which are central to the poems' meaning, not just extra details.

Second, the study uses a dialogic approach, seeing Basava and Allama not as separate figures but as part of a shared conversation within a wider tradition. Their differences are not treated as problems to solve but as useful tensions that help reveal the potential of their shared tradition.

Third, the study considers the historical context without being overly focused on it. The Vachanas are seen as texts that came from a specific time and place—twelfth-century Karnataka, with its particular social structures, gender roles, and power dynamics—but also have a broader relevance through their literary and spiritual power. The goal is to understand the complex relationship between the text and its context, without reducing the poems to just their historical setting or removing them from it entirely.

LIMITATIONS

This study has a few limitations. First, it depends on English translations, which can't fully capture the original Kannada's rhythm and sound. Where possible, key terms are given in transliteration, and their meanings are explained. Second, the issue of whether the texts are authentic or have been altered, as noted in the literature review, means that any interpretation must be cautious, since the texts we have are the result of many years of transmission and selection. Third, this study doesn't look at the wider Vachana literature beyond Basava and Allama; a more complete study would include other poets like Akka Mahadevi, Chennabasava, and Siddharama.

FINDINGS

The study of selected Vachanas from Basava and Allama Prabhu shows how these poets express a unique but connected understanding of the relationship between personal spiritual freedom and awareness of society. The key points are grouped into three main themes: the criticism of formal religion, the body as a place for spiritual and social meaning, and the idea of a united community.

The Critique of External Religion

Both Basava and Allama Prabhu strongly criticize rituals, temple worship, and the role of priests. But the way they express and target this criticism is quite different.

Basava's critique is based on his analysis of economic and social issues. One of his most famous Vachanas compares the temples built by the wealthy with the body of a poor person as a living temple:

"Rich people / will build temples for Shiva. / What can I, a poor man, do? / My legs are pillars, / my body is the shrine, / my head is a golden cupola. / Listen, O Lord of the meeting rivers, / things that stand still will fall, / but what moves will remain."

This Vachana has several layers. It criticizes economic inequality, where rich people can afford to build temples, while the poor cannot. It also criticizes material religion, where physical things like buildings and statues eventually decay. And it celebrates the body as the real place where the sacred is found—the devotee's own body becomes a temple. The contrast between sthavara (the static, fixed) and jangama (the moving, fluid) is central to Basava's view.

The jangama, whether it refers to a wandering ascetic, a devotee in motion, or a growing community, represents a way of being that goes beyond the limits of material religion. Allama's critique is even more radical and philosophical. While Basava contrasts true and

false religion, Allama seems to question the very idea of religious language and practice. Take this Vachana:

"I saw the fragrance flee when the bee came, / What a wonder! / I saw intellect flee when the heart came. / I saw the temple flee when God came."

In this, each real experience replaces a lesser one. The arrival of the bee makes fragrance unnecessary; the arrival of the heart (possibly meaning true feeling or intuition) makes intellect unnecessary; and the arrival of God makes the temple unnecessary. This is not just a more intense version of Basava's critique. While Basava replaces the stone temple with the body as a temple, Allama suggests that even the body-temple may need to be left behind. His name, "Guheshwara," meaning the Lord of the caves, hints at a divine presence that exists in the deepest part of the heart, beyond any external means of access. dwells in the innermost cave of the heart, inaccessible to all external approaches.

The Body as Site of Meaning

The body plays a very important role in Vachana poetry, but there are big differences in how the two poets view it. For Basava, the body is where work and social connections happen.

He says, "Work is heaven" or "Work is the way to freedom," which makes physical labor a spiritual activity. This idea has big social meaning. If a cobbler's job and a Brahmin's job are both paths to freedom, then the old system that sees some jobs as clean and others as dirty falls apart. Basava's poems often praise certain jobs—like a washerman, a farmer, or a trader—as places where God can be found. For Allama, the body is more about confusion and mystery.

His poems often use body images that are hard to understand. For example:

"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".

The body as a wagon and the senses as drivers is a common image in Indian spiritual writing. But the lines about "one man not being like another" and the axle breaking suggest something more troubling.

The body is not just something to control, but a mystery to be understood, a complicated system that's hard to fully grasp. Allama's approach is about understanding the body's inner workings rather than trying to shape it into a certain way.

The Vision of Community

The main differences between Basava and Allama show up clearly in how they saw the role of the community.

Basava's poetry is full of the language of connection. His Vachanas speak to other devotees, praise their good qualities, and show sadness for their hardships. The Anubhava Mantapa, the group he started, was a real example of this view — a place where people from all walks of life could come together to share their stories and talk about spiritual matters. Basava's way of seeing spirituality doesn't make him feel alone; it actually brings him closer to others. Since every devotee's experience is real and important, the community becomes a place where different ideas can mix and grow together.

Allama's connection to the community is more unclear. Even though he was the main leader of the Anubhava Mantapa and took part in guiding the group of devotees, his poetry often

steps back from the community, sometimes even questioning its goals. His Vachanas criticize the false pride of devotees, including Basava, and push for a type of realization that goes beyond social rules. Where Basava built a sense of togetherness, Allama broke things down. Where Basava brought people together, Allama spread them apart. But this breaking down actually helped the community by stopping it from becoming stuck in a new set of rules that would repeat the same problems the movement tried to change.

DISCUSSION

The findings discussed earlier show that Basava and Allama represent two different but complementary styles of spiritual individualism, each with its own strengths and weaknesses. This discussion looks into what this means for understanding the Vachana movement and why it matters today.

The Dialectic of Construction and Deconstruction

The relationship between Basava and Allama can be seen as a balance between building and breaking down.

Basava's strength was in creating institutions, turning spiritual insights into real social structures. The Anubhava Mantapa, the ethic of Kayakave Kailasa, and the practice of Istalinga diksha are all examples of how he tried to create a society that goes beyond caste divisions. However, every institution and form has the risk of becoming rigid and lifeless. What starts as a living practice can turn into empty rituals, and a community of equals can develop new hierarchies.

Allama's role in the movement was to prevent this from happening. His poems, his insistence on a realization that goes beyond forms, and his criticism of complacency in devotion all helped keep the movement open to its original vision. The "lord of the caves" lives in a space that is beyond all names, social positions, and structures. Forgetting this can turn the movement into just another religion with its own set of rules and exclusions.

The Anubhava Mantapa, when viewed this way, was not just an institution but a space that brought these two forces together. Basava's building and Allama's breaking down were both essential for the movement's life. The sharanas who gathered there were not just a group of mystics without structure or a rigid organization, but a community held in the balance between form and formlessness, building and breaking down. and deconstruction.

Spiritual Individualism and Social Critique

The idea of spiritual individualism, as discussed here, needs to be clearly understood. It doesn't mean being isolated or rejecting community. On the contrary, for both Basava and Allama, the claim to personal spiritual authority is the basis of a new kind of community — one where people are equal and connected through mutual respect rather than through hierarchy.

This has important implications for understanding the social critique in the Vachanas. The critique of caste in Basava's poetry is not primarily a political one in the modern sense. It comes directly from his spiritual experience. If the divine is present in every body and every occupation is a path to liberation, then caste distinctions are not just unfair but fundamentally untrue — illusions that hide the real nature of reality. The social critique is rooted in what things actually are, not just what they appear to be. Allama's critique goes even deeper. By questioning the very ideas of devotee, guru, and God, he challenges any social order that claims ultimate authority. If the difference between self and God is ultimately transcended, then the distinctions between high and low, pure and impure, are just social conventions.

Allama's radical non-dualism is, in this sense, the most complete form of social critique possible — one that challenges every category and every hierarchy.

The Limits of Language

Both poets deal with the limits of language, but in different ways. Basava's Vachanas, though powerful, are within the realm of address — they speak to God, to fellow devotees, and to the world. His poetry is meant to communicate, to persuade, and to build.

Allama's relationship with language is more complex. His use of paradox, riddles (bedagu), and images that don't resolve suggests a deep awareness of how inadequate language is for expressing his ideas. The Vachana "I saw the fragrance fleeing, when the bee came" shows a logic of displacement that language itself can't escape. Every word and image must eventually be pushed beyond. Yet Allama continues to write and speak. The paradox of his poetry is that it uses language to lead beyond language, creating rich structures only to break them down.

This difference affects how we read each poet. Basava's Vachanas offer something to be understood and discussed. Allama's Vachanas resist interpretation, working more like Zen koans to stop the mind and provoke a different kind of knowing. A good reading must respect both styles without forcing one into the other.

Contemporary Relevance

The balance described here is still relevant today for discussions about spirituality and social justice. Religious communities today face the same challenge that the sharanas did: how to keep the transformative power of spiritual insight alive without letting it turn into empty rituals. Many of the world's churches, temples, and mosques are filled with the remains of movements that couldn't solve this issue.

Basava's example reminds us that institutions are necessary. Insight that stays purely personal, without taking shape in society, fades away without impact. The Anubhava Mantapa was a remarkable effort — a place where spiritual seekers could come together across caste and gender to share their experiences. But Allama's example shows that institutions must remain open to criticism, remembering the insight that made them possible. A community that can't listen to its prophets, its critics, and its Allamas will soon become a community that worships its own forms.

The Vachana movement's combination of these two approaches offers a model to consider. Not a solution that eliminates the tension, but a way to hold the tension — between building and breaking down, form and formlessness, the temple and the cave.

CONCLUSION

This paper argues that the Vachanas of Basava and Allama Prabhu present a unique way of thinking about spirituality that places individual spiritual freedom at the center of a broader understanding of society and its problems. By closely examining some of their poems, the paper shows that while these two poets share this same basic idea, they each show different and complementary ways of expressing it.

Basava's Vachanas focus on a kind of spirituality that is closely tied to the community and the need for social change. He criticizes traditional religion, celebrates the human body as a sacred place, and imagines a society free from the divisions of caste. All of these ideas come from his belief that real spiritual experiences lead to ethical behavior and a sense of responsibility toward others. The Anubhava Mantapa, a gathering place for people from

different backgrounds, is an example of how this vision was put into practice, offering a space where people could come together as equals to share their experiences and ideas.

Allama's Vachanas, on the other hand, present a more extreme kind of spirituality. His poems use confusing and contradictory language to break down common ideas like devotion, the guru, and even the concept of God. This process of breaking things down helps prevent the formation of new religious rules and hierarchies. Allama's "lord of the caves" lives in a place that no organization or structure can contain, symbolizing a spiritual freedom that goes beyond any fixed system.

Basava and Allama are not opposites, but rather two sides of a single idea that supports and challenges each other. Basava builds, while Allama breaks down. Basava brings people together, while Allama spreads them apart. Basava speaks, while Allama stays quiet. The Vachana movement needed both of these approaches to stay alive and meaningful. Without Basava, there would have been no way to translate spiritual insights into real-world changes. Without Allama, the movement might have become a new kind of religious institution with its own structure and exclusions.

This study adds to what scholars know by looking closely at how these two poets' ideas relate to each other, showing how their visions are connected in a way that creates a deeper understanding. It suggests that the lasting importance of the Vachana movement is not just in its social reforms or spiritual poetry, but in the way it brings together personal and communal life, individual and collective experience, and form and formlessness.

Future research could expand on this by exploring how Basava and Allama fit into the wider group of Vachana poets, especially the women poets like Akka Mahadevi, who expressed a different kind of spiritual individuality. Comparing the Vachana tradition with other forms of radical spirituality, both in India and elsewhere, could also provide new insights. Additionally, the issue of whether the texts are truly authentic, which is only briefly mentioned in this paper, could be explored more deeply.

The Vachanas of Basava and Allama continue to be relevant because they address an ongoing question: how can we live a truly spiritual life in a world filled with social injustice and religious hypocrisy? Their answer, that real spirituality must be both deeply personal and socially responsible, offers ideas that are still worth exploring today.

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