

Book Review

The Vacanas of Sarvajna, Tr. Basavaraj Naikar, Delhi: Gnosis, pp.82. | 2010 | Rs. 300.

- Dr. I.K. Sarma

If ever a comprehensive history of Indian literatures in English is written, the name of Professor Basavaraj Naikar should be written in bold letters. During his teaching career he used both parts of his mind with equal efficiency: one part took care of literary criticism, another of translation. In the latter area he endeavoured to project the major works of leading religious figures of his linguistic region i.e. Karnataka.

The book under review attempts to project an all-knowing figure – Sarvajna, a saint and a wandering poet, through his epigrams (*vacanas*). He is a very complex and dramatic character with no air of pretension all along his life. Thoroughly unconventional this sixteenth century versatile genius draped only in Godhead, barefoot, a distaff in hand, and a blanket thrown casually on the shoulder, was his own platform and the speaker. If inspired he would turn out *vacanas* effortlessly, each one a three line stanza – *tripadi*—in Kannada on the spur of the moment and people of the region collected these nuggets of gold for their self improvement or for understanding varied situations of life.

Till this day the present reviewer had known a poet named Jamboul, a 19th century Kazakh poet who had composed about half a million verses. But here is one who claims to have written 'seven crore, seven lakh, seven thousand and seventy *vacanas*.' Surely, an incredible feat! But how unfortunate it is that out of the huge stock only 1200 *tripadis* could be saved! Poets of the world beware! Ever mobile and embarrassingly frank, Sarvajna would mock at people's smallness of outlook, ridicule the mask-wearing faces of common people, question the caste system and its superficial practices, laugh at the character of gold-loving civilization, especially women. By contrast, he would glorify the image of a yogi and define him as one 'who has conquered his senses.' A Sivayogi, who 'burns himself/ To offer spiritual light to the world (p.43). (Persons of this mould, I guess, are their own incinerator, find the baggage of body 'a fabric stitched on bone, and willingly dispense with false accoutrements of sense.). Only such a liberated soul, in his view, is entitled to lead 'The swan from the eight petals/ To the focal point of the lotus' (P. 38). Elsewhere he praises a devotee, a *Sarana*, who considers the Linga/ As his Husband and himself His wife, /Merges into the Formless Lord/Without ever mating' (P.26). With the same amount of fervor he praises the role of a Guru in the life of a seeker.

In the neighbourhood of such a person only Truth stays. Falsehood flies away. At present when violence is noticed in most parts of the world, his

assertion gets extra weight and meaning. He says, "Religions preaching violence and bloodshed! / Throw them all into fire. / Lo. I would place on my head the Jaina religion forbidding violence of any kind' (P.29). Denouncing divisions in religion, he punches hard: 'One and only one is the Lord for the Universe. / One and only is the creator for the Cosmos./ Know you, fool, there are not two, / Sarvajna' (P.47). About the street talk of Heaven his castigation deserves a mention:

Do you think you can go to Heaven,
Without controlling your senses,
Or mortifying your body?
Do you think
Heaven is ruled by a widow?
Sarvajna

In the modern age when all talk centres round bodily comfort and pleasure, persons of Sarvajna's stature are the need of the hour. They are a walking light house; they travel light utterly indifferent to the views and comments of the deluded mankind. (How instructive it would be if his life and character is portrayed in the medium of a film!)

Credit should be given to Professor Basavaraj Naikar who resurrected this casket of jewels from the uncomplaining archives of Kannada literature. He brought it on the surface, burnished it, and made it presentable through the medium of modern English. No glitches in his translation anywhere. With all the 303 *tripadis* in modern garb the translator has virtually opened a closed book for the non-Kannada readers. Honestly, he is conscious of the fact that the only way to send them further and far away from home is creative translation. And he has done that job with rare religious humility and conviction.

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