

Madigas' Role in The Vachana Movement in Karnataka: A Study of Their Social, Religious and Literary Contribution

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Abstract

The Vachana movement of twelfth-century Karnataka represents one of the most significant socio-religious and literary movements in medieval South India. Led by Basavanna and other Sharanas, the movement challenged caste-based discrimination, social inequality and religious orthodoxy and emphasized equality, ethical conduct, devotion and dignity of labour. An important but comparatively less explored dimension of this movement is the contribution of Madigas and communities socially associated with them. Madara Channayya, Dohara Kakkayya, Madara Doolayya and Samagara Haralaiah occupy an important place in the history of the Vachana movement. They participated not merely as followers but also as thinkers, vachana composers, workers and agents of social transformation. Their lives and writings demonstrate the capacity of marginalized communities to question social hierarchy and contribute to Kannada literary traditions. This paper examines the role of these Sharanas in the Vachana movement, with particular attention to their social philosophy, devotion, dignity of labour, literary contribution and opposition to caste discrimination. The study is based primarily on literary and historical sources concerning Vachana literature, Dalit Sharanas and medieval Kannada society.

Keywords: Madigas, Vachana Movement, Basavanna, Madara Channayya, Dohara Kakkayya, Madara Doolayya, Samagara Haralaiah, Social Equality, Vachana Literature, Karnataka

Introduction

The twelfth century occupies a significant position in the social, religious and literary history of Karnataka. The movement associated with Basavanna and the Sharanas brought about important changes in the social and religious thought of the period. The movement questioned social inequality and emphasized a society based on equality, devotion, ethical conduct and dignity of labour. One of the most important outcomes of the movement was the development of Vachana literature. The Vachanas provided an accessible literary form through which Sharanas expressed their religious experiences, social observations and philosophical ideas. The movement also created space for people belonging to socially disadvantaged communities and women to participate in religious and intellectual discourse. The source material emphasizes that members of lower castes and women participated in the movement and contributed to the enrichment of Vachana literature through expressions based on their own experiences.

The participation of Madigas and communities associated with them is particularly significant. Sharanas such as Madara Channayya, Dohara Kakkayya, Madara Doolayya and Samagara Haralaiah challenged prevailing social assumptions through their lives, occupations and religious expressions. Their contribution demonstrates that

Vachana literature was not exclusively the product of socially privileged groups but also reflected the experiences and intellectual contributions of marginalized communities. This paper therefore attempts to examine the contribution of these Sharanas to the Vachana movement and to understand their significance in the social, religious and literary history of Karnataka.

Objectives of the Study

1. The major objectives of the study are:
2. To examine the participation of Madigas and associated communities in the Vachana movement.
3. To study the contribution of Madara Channayya to Vachana literature and social thought.
4. To examine the literary and social contribution of Dohara Kakkayya.
5. To analyse the contribution of Madara Doolayya and his emphasis on dignity of labour.
6. To study the role of Samagara Haralaiah in the Sharan movement and the issue of inter-caste marriage.

Methodology

This study follows a **descriptive and historical-literary approach**. It is primarily based on secondary sources, including books and scholarly works dealing with Vachana literature, medieval Kannada literature, Dalit Sharanas, caste and untouchability, folklore and the cultural history of Karnataka. The study examines the available descriptions of the lives, occupations, Vachanas and social activities of selected Sharanas. Particular attention is given to Madara Channayya, Dohara Kakkayya, Madara Doolayya and Samagara Haralaiah because of their prominent place in the source material. The study does not attempt to reconstruct all aspects of the Vachana movement. Rather, it focuses specifically on the contribution of Madigas and closely associated communities to its literary, social and religious dimensions.

Historical Background of the Vachana Movement

The Vachana movement emerged in twelfth-century Karnataka as a major socio-religious and intellectual movement. Basavanna and other Sharanas sought to challenge social divisions and emphasize equality and individual spiritual experience. The movement's importance lies not only in its religious dimensions but also in its social criticism. The Sharanas questioned inherited status and emphasized personal conduct, devotion and work. Vachana literature became an important medium for communicating these ideas. The participation of socially disadvantaged groups was one of the distinctive features of the movement. Their involvement enabled the Vachana tradition to incorporate experiences arising from occupations and social conditions that had previously remained outside elite literary traditions. Consequently, the contribution of Madiga Sharanas should be understood as an integral part of the broader social and literary transformation associated with the Vachana movement.

Madara Channayya: A Pioneer among the Dalit Sharanas

Madara Channayya occupies an important position among the Sharanas of the twelfth century. According to the source material, he belonged to the Madiga community and is regarded as one of the earliest Dalit Sharanas associated with the movement. He challenged caste distinctions and emphasized human values through his Vachanas. His social philosophy was based on the rejection of caste

hierarchy. His Vachanas questioned the division of human beings into hierarchical categories and emphasized conduct rather than birth as the basis for judging an individual. This idea was revolutionary in the context of a society characterized by strong caste distinctions. By placing human conduct above inherited status, Channayya questioned the ideological foundation of caste-based discrimination. His significance is also evident in his relationship with Basavanna. The source material records that Basavanna referred to Channayya in several Vachanas and expressed considerable respect for him. This suggests that Channayya occupied a respected position within the Sharan tradition.

Dohara Kakkayya: Labour, Literature and Courage

Dohara Kakkayya was another important Sharana associated with the Madiga community. The source identifies him with the Dohara caste, a community related to the Madigas, and notes that he worked as a leather tanner. His professional identity was not separated from his religious and literary life. Kakkayya is described as a contemporary of Basavanna, and the source records that Basavanna praised him in several Vachanas. The references to Kakkayya alongside Channayya and other Sharanas indicate the recognition he received within the movement. Four Vachanas are identified in the source under Kakkayya's name. His contribution is significant because he combined his occupational identity with participation in literary and religious activity. His life also demonstrates that manual and stigmatized occupations did not prevent an individual from attaining spiritual and intellectual recognition within the Sharan tradition. The source also associates Kakkayya with military courage. Thus, his personality is presented through multiple dimensions: worker, poet, devotee and warrior. His contribution demonstrates an important principle of the Vachana movement—the dignity of labour and the rejection of the assumption that social or occupational status determines a person's spiritual or intellectual worth.

Madara Doolayya: Dignity of Labour and Vachana Literature

Madara Doolayya was another contemporary of Basavanna who belonged to the Madara community. He was associated with the profession of making footwear. His contribution to Vachana literature is particularly notable because the source identifies him as one of the most prolific Dalit

Vachana writers. According to the source, 102 Vachanas are attributed to Doolayya. His Vachanas deal with social issues and reflect his occupational experiences. His work demonstrates how everyday labour could become a subject of literary and spiritual expression. The significance of Doolayya lies in his attitude towards his profession. He did not regard his occupation as a source of shame. Instead, his work became an important element of his identity and expression.

His Vachanas connect occupational experience with broader questions of social morality. Through this approach, he transformed the experience of a marginalized occupational group into a legitimate subject of literary and philosophical expression. Doolayya therefore represents the principle of **Kayaka**, or dignity of labour, in an especially direct manner. His contribution shows that spiritual worth and literary creativity could emerge from everyday work.

Samagara Haralaiah: Equality and the Question of Inter-Caste Marriage

Samagara Haralaiah is one of the most prominent figures among the medieval Sharanas discussed in the source material. He belonged to the Samagara community associated with the Madigas and worked as a footwear maker. Along with his wife Kalyanamma and son Shilvantha, he participated in the Sharan movement and became associated with the Anubhava Mantapa. Haralaiah's life illustrates the importance given to dignity of labour. He made footwear for the Sharanas and accepted a fair and honest price for his work. His livelihood was therefore presented as an honourable activity rather than an inferior occupation. His significance in the history of the movement is particularly associated with two incidents. The first concerns the making of footwear for Basavanna, and the second concerns the inter-caste marriage involving his son Shilvantha and Lavanyavati, the daughter of Madhuvarasa.

According to the source, the proposed marriage was discussed in the Anubhava Mantapa and accepted on the principle that the Sharan religious community was based on equality rather than caste hierarchy. The marriage challenged prevailing caste boundaries and became a major source of conflict with traditional social forces. The consequences were severe. Haralaiah, Madhuvarasa and Shilvantha were subjected to brutal punishment. The episode subsequently became associated with the rebellion at Kalyana. The importance of Haralaiah

therefore extends beyond his literary contribution. His life represents a direct challenge to caste-based restrictions on social relationships. The inter-caste marriage episode symbolizes the radical social implications of the Sharan movement.

Conclusion

The Vachana movement occupies a distinctive place in the social, religious and literary history of Karnataka. Its importance lies in its challenge to established social hierarchies and its attempt to create a community based on equality, devotion, ethical conduct and dignity of labour. The contribution of Madiga and associated Sharanas is an essential part of this history. Madara Channayya challenged caste hierarchy through his emphasis on conduct and human values. Dohara Kakkayya demonstrated that a person engaged in a socially stigmatized occupation could simultaneously become a respected Sharan and literary contributor. Madara Doolayya transformed occupational experience into literary and philosophical expression. Samagara Haralaiah became an important symbol of dignity of labour and resistance to caste-based restrictions, particularly through the inter-caste marriage episode. These personalities demonstrate that Vachana literature was not merely a religious literary tradition but also a record of social experiences and aspirations. The participation of marginalized communities enriched its intellectual and literary dimensions. Therefore, the study of Madiga Sharanas is important for developing a more inclusive understanding of medieval Kannada history. Their contribution illustrates how marginalized voices participated in questioning social inequality and in shaping one of Karnataka's most influential literary and socio-religious traditions.

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