

Mysticism Without Bounds: Perception of Space

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ABSTRACT

The idea of silence as experience and timely is unique because silence is healing and is essential for the time in which we live. The life and facts as lived by the vachana mystics and expressed in their songs and writings can help people of today dive deeper into their life's mission. This expression of self-mystification has marked the different and distinctive angle of our symbolic world, i.e., its mystical space, and has promoted some concrete movements aimed at transformation in the life's mission of the people. Before being intellectual and cultural, the revolution might have been mystical thanks to the vachana mystics who are able to provoke discussions and debates about important issues in human's life by broadening the life's canvas and calling the devotees to cross the boundaries of space and time. In turn, we will be led towards the writing of the history of silence as the liberating perception of space.

Key Words:

•Vachana tradition •Mystic • Self-mystification •Narrative symbols
•Mystical transformation •Life's mission •Space and time •'metaphysical
exposition' •Void •Silence.

The Veerashaiva school of philosophy also described as southern Shaivism has been enriched by the contribution of mystic thoughts by the poets who have taken on an epic journey for their spiritual quest. Their songs are known as Vachanas and sung soulfully. Importantly, these can be described as the founding texts of modern Kannada writing. Prominent among the poets are Basaveswara, Allamaprabhu, Akkamahadevi Siddharamaiah along with others whose contribution have continued to make immense social impact over generations. It is interesting to see how vachanas can give us the global and local perspectives we need to make the world a better place, liberating us from our cultural straitjacket of prejudice and intolerance. The turning points in the history of vachana mysticism have been accomplished by milestones in social change, deeply affecting our perception of human condition and our exploration of 'being' in this universe and beyond.

The mystical vachana tradition encompasses a wide range of religious opinion traceable to several schools of thought, to Sufi Islam and much that is traceable to man's own view of how he relates to God. The mystics hold this in common : that God is hidden in the heart of man/woman and that neither priest nor prophet not the ritual of any organized religion will help him/her to find the truth, that institutions of religion stand across the path, blocking the search. The search for God is one which everyone must carry out for himself/herself. The vachana poets appear to us as the apostle of mysticism offering to bridge the gap between the life here and beyond speculating that this is just the world needs from him. Neither decorous nor nuanced in their appearances, they remain carefree people, a kind of selfless wanderers in search of an answer to the eternal question, 'who we are'. Not owning any permanent home they wander endlessly without bothering for life's traditions and customs. This restlessness is rather spiritual/mystical in the sense that it wants to infuse the temporal with the eternal represented symbolically as the avowal of an immaterial presence in a material life. The mystic's journey takes him from the world of complex materiality to the arena of transcendental which grows more and more impenetrable and eludes him. While this is also a kind of self-mystification that he chooses to keep at bay the mundaneness which refuses to acknowledge transcendence. They emphasize that despite his/her material achievements his/her material knowledge is an ignorable source that cannot facilitate spiritual achievement in the way that spiritualism does.

The desire for an overwhelming freedom may appear an act of

anachronism or it may seem that the mystic is at the wrong end of the philosophical stick, but then he does not pretend to be an academician to express his theory behind symbols which he profusely gathers from various sources to use them in his songs. We are aware that the symbolic is a prominent category which Lacan proposes, however, there is no effort on the part of the mystics to dispel the mystery expressed through them. For the scriptures and the related discourses are for them, impotent and trivial in comparison to ever expanding non textual/non spiritual approach which ultimately expresses nothing less than the inner quest for truth. Most of the mystics are illiterate belonging mainly to lower class Hindu and Muslim communities. Interestingly, as the Hindus have both teachers and students from the Muslim community so also their Muslim counterparts. Though there are many divisions among them, there are also those who cut across these divisions to deny them vehemently and to travel the path which is comfortably non-mundane.

This latter class does not pursue a theological approach in its sense of a binding belief or the performance of a creed instead their radical interests are in the idea of a relationship between appearance and essence. A man's body for them is the edifice for his soul which becomes more and more impenetrable if the spirit of beauty and love do not dwell in it. The divine in human and in every life has to be related. There is no redundancy in this. The intellectual discourses do not understand this connection and therefore this is redundant for them. That is why the mystic considers the text-less voice as the most authentic voice that does not belong to the domain of rhetoric and ideology. He claims that the spirit of love for truth allows him to keep the mundane at bay and agrees that this process is evolutionary. Steering a path between the mystical and the empirical, he explores for a paradigm that does not intend to be conventional instead it will offer a freedom which would extend into the world beyond conventional and to self-realization. This experience, he says, is ineffable while can only be partially represented through a symbolic language. It may be of interest to note how this experience is expressed by a singer from the mystical Baul tradition of Bengal, he says: 'the goldsmith entered the flower garden and used his touchstone to test the flowers'.

In this context, we may note how the discussion on the relationship between beauty and morality in Kant's Critique of Judgment (sec.59) was provocative enough to encourage a whole generation of Romantics to assume a 'beautiful soul'. Some critiques, however, are of opinion that Kant

really did not mean this instead what he said is that the 'symbol' does suggest some unknown (unbekannte) connection between the theoretical and the practical spheres and such connection is implicit in the common language. For Kant , there is a realm that is unbounded, but that is also inaccessible to our entire cognitive power: the realm of the supersensible. In this realm we cannot find ourselves a territory on which to set up a domain of theoretical cognition, whether for the concepts of understanding or for those of reason (Critique of Judgment 14). The contrast between the world described by theoretical reflection and the world experienced through the senses generate the essentially split world embodied in Kant's distinction between noumenon and phenomenon. However, the path of supersensible becomes experientially possible when vachana poets takes to the alternate mode of spiritual being that frustrates the rational when his experience stands revealed to itself confronted by the absolute otherness of the world. The mystic's travel to the state of supersensible may be comparable to the position of Ernst Cassirer who wants to adapt the symbol to an epistemology which is unlike Kant's standpoint. Cassirer is interested in clarifying the sense of an unknown but substantial connection that comes along with the symbol. He wants to put some empirical flesh on Kant's ascetic subjectivism, transforming Kant's merely analyzing symbol into a tool of understanding: man/ can realize only in the world, a world that is ' pure expression of the human spirit ' expressing itself in symbols .

With piercing boldness the symbols convey the thought that one must live constantly mindful of the presence of an inquisitive human spirit. This human spirit is the one thing with many subsets whose variance is not absolute but apparent, ultimately there is a 'totality' holding together the natural and the cultural (Simpson 2009). The bouncy vitalism of the mystic's songs brings a sense of interconnected wonderfulness of everything that inspires life and it's cosmic journey. Allamaprabhu's vachana says:

Look here / the legs are two wheels / the body is wagon / full of things
,/ five men drive the wagon / and one is not / like another. / Unless you
ride it / in full knowledge of it's ways / the axle will break / O lord of caves.

The interconnectedness further explores the mystic's sympathy with his spiritual being which ensures that for all his life he would confess discipleship. For the success of the image of one's pride in defeat , as evident in this vachana represented by the apparently redundant ' wagon,' he says , one cannot be unprepared before riding it. Discovering it for oneself, he also

speculates how it possesses a spiritual surprise. His achievement is not to give us a clearer idea of what he means by poetic beauty but to demonstrate how symbols could be narrative to provide various stages in understanding the world that he wants to communicate. The undaunted ego gets things wrong more viciously the more it tries to be authoritarian. Its failures might be comical because however hard it tries, it does not see the world as it is. Or it might be unendingly painful because it always tries to see the world as it is even when it knows it cannot. There is no end of irony and brilliance and no end of a sense that an infinity of different egos lie out there beyond our grasp . Akkamahadevi says :

Men and women / feel ashamed / when a piece of cloth / defining
their modesty / become loose./ When the Lord of Beings / remains
drowned without a face / how can you be modest?/ The world is His eyes /
looking everywhere / what can you possibly conceal ?

The only solution out of this is to love the Lord (Shiva) , the ultimate Being before whom one is not bothered of modesty but can only expect a reciprocated love. It's just that such a being is not likely to be entirely likable except perhaps by people who are like these mystics combining aspirations to His universal love with doubts their own identities and a fascinated sense of their own singularity.

This singularity can be an advantage as it leaves no room at all for religiosity and hostility to liberty. The mystics appear to have worked out their way of insistence on the universality of altruism and solidarity in human world comparable may be with the 19th century French mathematician and philosopher August Comte, the inventor of Positivism and Altruism and the 'religion of humanity ' the influence of which in later years reflected in the emphasis on social science as human welfare rather than mere set of rules. Many will be skeptical about the mystics' proposition of transcendental knowledge but their influence could clearly be discovered in the humanistic and immanentist strands in other religious thoughts. This perspective of the mystic vachana poets is important in tracing the subsequent development of social change from mere charity and beneficence to the subtly altered ways in which these were reflected to be the means of social justice. Mere words may be the 'engines' of social change as pointed out by Quentin Skinner but the mystics will say that words may remould the concepts to which they refer (Dixon, 2009). The reasons why some people objected to it later is language of altruism may be seen as

evidence of how to wider a new dimension to intellectual and social change. This concept of social justice is more revealing in the context of the Darwinistic principle of the 'Survival of the fittest' but now the emphasis is changed to the survival for one and all and for the collective good which is permeating to different disciplines and institutions to public policy making. Many disciplines have turned away from mere philanthropic attitude to focus on identity, recognition and representation. Yet the names of these mystic vachana poets are unknown to many whose lives and thoughts are impinged on by their perspectives.

The mystics' protests against the revival of reactionary traditions geared by fear seem to be wholly convincing when they speak of human vulnerability and brutality from a vantage point which is their unique mission while revealing the elusive way with which many of the traditional texts juxtaposed with artfulness to emphasize such revivals. Akkamahadevi's vachana instills a wound, spiritual and physical of this artfulness intends nevertheless to change us in subtle ways :

What is the use of knowing all / know yourself first / when you really know / why ask others / O Chennamallikarjuna / you led me to knowledge / I reached you through you .

Such assertions were decisive when at a difficult juncture powerful forces were imperiling the cultural, economical and social wisdom of people. It was the time of political and social unrest . People were exploited yet their pain had not still overlaid their oral memory and songs. The communities were torn down by caste-class feud but the mystics put forward a bold vision that will transform many lives. In fact they set in motion an intellectual and cultural revolution that will change the way we think about ourselves and much more.

One of the important aspects of the vachana bring out the way people go from being seen only through the eyes of the victims of caste to reach at least a phase for some part of their lives where they are different once they are freed from their existing conditions because of the transformation through love for God. Though one should not assume that the caste antagonism , the ultimate source of ideological deviance is since been eradicated , nevertheless it has been seen as a possibility for many to not to take this as a serious reason to divide society. It is true that many of the vachana poets being themselves dissidents too, drew universal moral imperatives from their own experiences of indignity at the hands of the forces that were counter-productive. Petitioning to people to solve their own grievances, to condemning a despot for his oppressive rule and further

to a co-ordinated and organized socio-cultural movement for systemic reform, the vachana poets both mystics and non-mystics had an unshakable faith in their redeemer Shiva and in historical progress of their movement that was going to be shockingly transformative. The increasing official apathy, its pomposity and victimization turned these poets to their own appraisal of the ruling despot by showing dissent through public gathering, petitioning through their songs which caught the ruling power off guard, reluctant to contemplate the possibility that these devotees of Shiva would publicly criticize the royal administration and its way of work.

The vachana writing is, no doubt the most influencing evidence of the monarchy's abiding malevolence expressed both in mystic and common language which had later assumed a key position as the source material for analyzing social and ideological deviance, contributing to a public manifestation of dissent that finally took the form of a movement. This was almost similar to the trajectory of the Bhakti (devotional love to God) movement that had gripped almost all parts of India. The poets' sense of alienation from the sordid reality, the ethos of a 'pure life' requiring the application of moral principle to every aspect of life, the belief in the love of Shiva, enabled them to offer resistance providing a model of protest narrative, the influence of which could only be felt in the future time to come. The mysticism in the vachans therefore, provoke discussions and debates about the issues, the issues we should be reflecting about. It gives a very broad canvas, the impact that shortness of perspective has had on humanity across history, using the symbols to tease out the complex nature of how we perceive us in natural and contrived situations. The mystics contribute to our thinking about the ultimate goal in life drawing on the best available knowledge in mythology, religion, history and culture elaborating with a cultivated meditation on the question of how we are to understand our life's mission in our existential context. It would however, be difficult to overstate the wonders of the vachana masterpiece of radical humanism that connects us to nature and traces our greed to its root in the rise of the mass consumption which is an antidote to cultural and spiritual progress. The mystic confesses to a weariness with such behaviour and as a corrective he turns his gaze to love and to exploration of the Self resulting into a loss of his own identity. He says:

Dazed was I / thinking of you / I mistook the rustle of wind /
for your foot-steps O Lord / I was lost... (Siddharama).

The mystic does not allow to create the basis for a conceptual system that

is revealed as the very opposite of an emotional and metaphorical ones in every sense of the word. Thus, sometimes the distinction of the synthetic and the analytic of Kant appear to collapse in the *vachana*.

However, the relationship between the mystic and the truth he seeks, may not be always based on complete incorporation of one within the other. Gabriel Motzkin argues that the symbolic forms are not finally unified –there is no 'collapsing into one world', and human knowledge is not finally integrated into the natural world – but the energy that works through history does seem to suggest greater and greater complexity in what Cassirer calls a 'close fusion' of history and system. The cognitive and the imaginative are brought together as symbols whose convergence it is the task of philosophy to demonstrate. In 'Language and Myth' he writes that symbols must be understood not in the sense of mere figures which refer to some given reality by means of suggestion and allegorical renderings, but in the sense of forces of each of which produces and posits a world of its own (Simpson 2009). The *vachana* mystics speculate this through 'space' and 'time'.

Exploring the concept of space the mystic poets use different arguments that are executed with different degrees of success. If space appears as an original, formative power that energises both natural and the mythical, it also suggests a whole world / one world theory and other dimensions. The terms used in different contexts are *shunya*/void ; *bayalu* , *akasha* / space and *kala* / time. Chennabasavanna says :

The void assumed the form of a devotee / Brahma was born of his knowledge and wisdom / Vishnu, of his peace and patience / Rudra , of his ire .

Let alone these three / knowing that devotee / I say 'Hail' to him / O Lord Kudala-Chennabasavanna.

This void, an originally structured 'spiritual reality' assuming forms of "Brahma", 'Vishnu', 'Rudra' each having an individual assignment to carry out co-operatively for the odyssey of mind which can operate only by 'way of devoted work', is significant. The devotee is hailed at the point of an enlightened development suggesting a continuing belief in the positive power of his devotion. He feels , he is given access to the intimate presence of God as he travels through a naturalistic world while simultaneously encountering this structure of space which is not just a geometry and which appears to function in this context as his/her habitat. Since objects cannot be inhabited unlike the neutral space, it becomes the new hallway for the

devotee to resort to without bothering about the symmetry and rhythm that an enclosed object possesses, nor getting disturbed by the smell, sound and colours of the landscapes, an understanding of what renders space meaningful through acts of losing his/her identity.

Interestingly, Kant's views on space is his 'metaphysical exposition' that appear to acknowledge tacitly the intellectual allegiance to some of the vachana mystics. Space, as he views is not discursive or, as we say, universal concept of things as such; rather it is pure intuition. For, first, we can present only one space; and when we speak of many spaces, we mean by that only parts of one and the same unique space. Nor,, second, can these parts precede the one all-encompassing space, as it's constituents, as it were (from which it can be assembled); rather, they can be thought only as 'in it'. Space is essentially one; the manifold in it, and hence also the universal concept of spaces as such, rests solely on (our bring in) limitations (78). "You are the form of boundless space..." says the vachana poet (Basavanna), where the affirmative and emancipatory moment is the 'space'. In yet another description, the apparent given-ness of spatial divisions –buildings, nations, continents etc. are pure construct but can be open to deconstruction though. When the concept of space favours identity over difference, the difference is engendered through desire to participate in a primary mode of interaction but when it sets forth into the realm of unknown the 'contradictory other' is no more there and the realm of space is transcendental.

The concept of void is symbolic in yet another dimension which the mystic explores by re-inventing him/herself. One is supposed to immolate him/herself to generate him/herself anew and to realize that through violent appetites of mortality, he/she may be led to the abstract beauty of the universe, "If you possess the sense of void, it is deliverance...", (Siddharama). The mystic believes that it represents the unity of consciousness, in other words Lord Shiva himself, whom the mystic takes as 'being there' in it's un-negotiable factuality while encouraging endlessly to human creativity and spontaneity. He is engagingly open in his admission that God is deliverance, an instance of an exemplary achievement however impossible it might appear as an ideal. This void is acceptable to the mystic as long as it passes through and does not go around the 'logician's mill' and is willing to make a space for silence. For him/her, the inherited ritualistic tradition seem like an encumbrance, as does the whole practice of rituals and other irrational behaviour. Hence, purging his/her way of life of all such

baggage he/she desires to embrace void , the silence never-to-be-apprehended into the empirical world creating his/her own narrative by listening to the same silence ; in the poet's words : ' like the wordlessness in word' (shabdada volage nihshabdada hage) , which functions as a mechanism of both sensing a word and snatching moments from their contents creating a framework for the world's temporary arrest, and also for reflection.

This silence is the real object of all mediation, it is thought/ word itself and interestingly finds a parallel in Jean-Philippe Toussaint (2009), the French author through the symbol of water / rain : Rain seemed to me to represent the course of thought, transfixed for a second in the light and disappearing the very next second to give way to itself. For , what is the act of thinking—if it is not the act of thinking about something ? It's the flow of thought that is so beautiful, yes, the flow, and it's murmurs that travels beyond the world's clamour.

Word and silence go hand in hand like the water that falls on a still point and drops fall past it (like a strategy that does not convey any idea of finality) , then following each drop as it moves ineluctably towards the ground (which demonstrates that motion) , however, swift it may seem, tends essentially towards immobility and thus , however slowly it may sometimes appear to do so, to stop , towards restlessness. Life is a Heraclitan flow that thought / word constantly negotiating terms with time , tries to freeze-frame, however briefly, before releasing it once more to run it's course into oblivion.

The mystics' discourse on the pleasure of silence while going through their spiritual journey may well provide a cultural history of silence. Their discovery of silence as experience and timely is unique because silence is healing and is essential for the time in which we live. It is an imperative for our existential mode of being.

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