



NEW

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Kanaka Dasa

Saint-Poet Kanakadasa (c 1509-1609 A.D.) belongs to the tradition of Haridasa literary movement which ushered in an era of devotional literature in Karnataka. Scores and scores of Haridasa have composed songs in praise of Krishna (incarnation of Vishnu). 'Haridasa' stands for 'servant of Hari', is another epithet of god Krishna. Right from 14th century to 19th, we find several Haridasas who wrote devotional compositions which could be set to music with simple instruments like Tanpura, and Tala (cymbals). They wrote kirtans, bhajans, prayers, lullabies, festival songs and house-hold-chore songs. Written in simple and spoken Kannada, they had universal appeal.

Life

Thimmappa Nayaka was his original name and he belonged to chieftain (Kuruba) family of Kaginele in Haveri district. He was born to the Kuruba gowda couple Biregowda and Beechamma at baad. Kanaka Nayaka being of the warrior community (Kuruba) his defeat in the field of battle, directed him to the path of devotion. He came to be called Kanaka Nayaka as he found a treasure-trove of gold (kanaka means gold in Kannada). Kanaka Dasa was well educated and capable of analyzing the society microscopically. Based on one of his compositions it is interpreted that after he severely got injured in a war and was miraculously saved, he gave up his profession as a warrior and devoted his life to composing music and literature with philosophy explained in common man's language. It appears that he started traveling to places a lot to gain more knowledge. At a young age he authored poetries Narasimha stotra, Ramadhyana Mantra, and Mohanatarangini.



Writings

His writing started showing his innovativeness in using day to day activities of common man. He joined Haridasa movement and became a follower of Vyasaraaja who named him as Kanakadasa. His poems and krithi deal with many aspects of life and expose the futility of external rituals. They stress the need for cultivation of moral values in life. Similar to Purandara Daasara, Kanaka Daasaru's compositions addressed social issues in addition to devotional aspect. Kanaka Daasa was very aggressive and straight forward in criticizing evils of society such as superiority claims using caste system. His poem "Kula Kula Kula vendu hodedhada dhiri" asks humans not to segregate themselves from one another, because every human is born the same way, everyone eats the same food and drinks the same water, hence none is superior or inferior to one another.

The deity he worshiped was Adhikeshava of Kaginele, presently in Haveri district of Karnataka. Kaginele, now a village, was a prosperous place and trading center in the Middle Ages. All his Karnataka Music compositions end with mudra (signature) Kaginele Adhikeshava. In addition to being a poet he worked as a social reformer by down playing dogmatic communities that were suppressing the disadvantaged communities. Kanakadasa made extreme effort in reforming the disadvantaged communities by convincing them to give-up their age old obsolete social practices and adapt to the changing world. He effectively used music to convey his philosophy. He lived at Tirupathi in his last days. He is one of the greatest musician, composer, poet, social reformer, philosopher and saints that India has ever seen.

Major works

1. Nalacharitre
2. Haribhaktisara
3. Nrisimhastava
4. Ramadhanyacharitre, a rare work on class struggle
5. Mohanatarangini

Kanakadasa wrote about two hundred forty Karnataka Music compositions (Kirtane, Ugabhogas, padas and mundiges or philosophical songs) besides five major works. His writings were unique in style. In Ramadhanyacharitre, an allegory on the conflict between the socially strong and weak castes and classes, presented as an argument between two foodgrains, rice and ragi, is a most creative literary piece with a powerful social message. In the work, rice represents the socially powerful and ragi (millet) represents the working people. The two grains come before Rama to argue their case and establish their superiority. In the end Rama sends both of them to prison for six months. At the end of the period, rice has turned rotten while the hardy ragi survives, earning Rama's blessings. This shows the intelligence of Kanaka Daasa in trying to reform the society. He was blunt in criticizing those who opposed the good practices. In one his compositions he says, "Eternal hell is for those who criticize noble men, for those who condemn teachings of jagadguru Madhvacharya...".

His Nalacharite is based on the famous love-story of Nala and Damayanti, which appears in Mahabharata. Though a great devotee of Lord Krishna, Kanakadasa gives his own interpretation. Nala who is in love with

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Damayanti, exercises restraint svayamvara (choosing bride/bridegroom) ceremony to win over Damayanti by allowing Indra and other gods a chance to win over her. When he loses everything in a dice-game and gets exiled to the forest, stubbornly followed by Damayanti, he deserts her in sleep, hoping that she may go back to her parents and have a better life. He later drives king Rituparna to the second svayamvara of Damayanti, to see his wife married to a suitable person and be happy! Lord Krishna appears only once casually to rescue the caravan in which the hapless Damayanti was traveling and was attacked by wild elephants.

Nrisimhastava is a work dealing with glory of god Narasimha (half human and half lion).

Kanakadasa's Ramadhanyacharite has quite an unconventional theme. It is about a battle of words between ragi (millet) and rice, each claiming superiority. They go to lord Rama for justice. With the help of the sages, Rama proves the superiority of ragi over rice. Ragi becomes blessed by absorbing the qualities of Raghava, another epithet of Rama. It is interpreted as poverty and humility being upheld by the poet above material wealth. Even today ragi is food of the poor which has high nutrition value compared to rice. Ragi is a good source of nutrition for people with diabetes for its low sugar content and nutrition value.

Mohanatarangini, although a kavya (poem in classical style) written with all conventional eighteen descriptions, deals with eroticism. Pleasure-based eroticism of Shri Krishna with the consorts. The eroticism between Aniruddha and Usha form the main theme. It excels in depicting contemporary life. The description of Shri Krishna's Dwaravati (Dwaraka) is very similar to that of Vijayanagara, under Krishnadevaraya as noticed by foreign travelers. The market place with colorful stalls with various commodities, well demarked lanes brimming with craftsmen, clients and merchants, royal garden parties and glory of the palace find their place in Mohanatarangini. It echoes the contemporary Portuguese travelers' accounts. A drinking bout of men and women of working class is very picturesque. The reader feels as if Kanakadasa is providing a commentary of a live event. It is for such unconventional and down-to-earth descriptions as also for social awareness that the great poet-saint has become immortal.

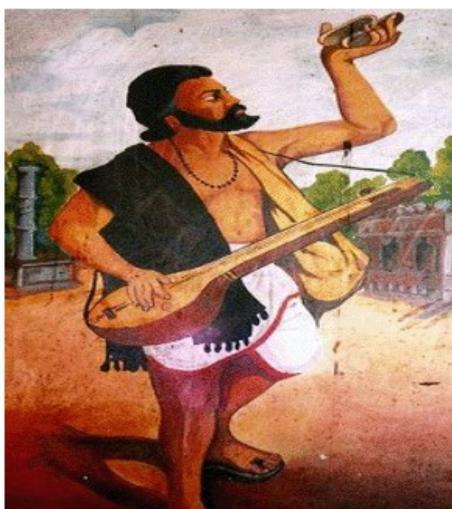
Kanakadasa in Udupi

Kanakadasa has special association with Udupi and as he was the follower of Sri Vyasaraaja Swamiji. On the advice of Vyasaraaja Swamiji he had come to Udupi. He stood outside the matha and was lost in his prayers to Lord Krishna by singing songs in praise of the Lord and had darshan of the lord through a small window. All devotees who visit Udupi Krishna Matha take a peek at Lord Krishna through the small window, wishing to relive the ecstasy of Kanakadasa. It is also a memorial to Kanakadasa and a testimony to the eclectic Hindu belief that devotion, poetry and sainthood are above caste and creed and certainty above orthodoxy. In all Hindu temples the deity and the main door of the temple face the east, but in Udupi the deity faces the west. Kanakadasa once wanted to have a darshan (encounter) of the Lord Krishna in Udupi. He was not allowed into the shrine by castist priests as he was not a higher-caste by birth. Kanakadasa then started singing the praises of Shri Krishna and was lost to outside world in a corner outside the temple. Legend has it that the murti of Krishna, which had previously had been facing east, turned around to face west, as the western wall collapsed so that Kanakadasa could have darshan. A small window was constructed at the breach later. The idol of Lord Krishna is still today worshipped through the window. This window came to be known as Kanakana kindi (Kanakaka's window). The memory of Kanakadasa was permanently etched in the temple of his beloved Lord Krishna. Today that window stands as a tribute to the unique saint of Karnataka.



The Kanaka Window

From that time onward, Kanakadasa could have the darshan of Sri Krishna with his physical eyes as well as his inner eye. To perpetuate this sacred memory, the tradition of looking at the icon of Sri Krishna through this window before entering the shrine started.





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