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**BOOK REVIEW**

***Ecstatic Wonder of Allamaprabhu*** (Select *Vacanas*: Translation with Critique)

Translated by Basavaraj Naikar

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**In the Inner Sanctum of Consciousness: Comprehending  
Allamaprabhu's Mysticism**

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Professor Basavaraj Naikar, a noted academic, poet, critic, and translator, has rendered the timeless *vacanas* of the 12th-century Karnataka saint-poet Allamaprabhu from the original Kannada into English with crystalline clarity in his most recent book *Ecstatic Wonder of Allamaprabhu*, subtitled 'Select *Vacanas*: Translation with Critique'. With these translations, Professor Naikar connects ancient spiritual wisdom with present-day readers, adding to his acclaimed series of translations from Kanada into English. With each of his translations, he has attempted to preserve the original *vacanas*' lyrical cadence and philosophical flair while revealing their universal truths to a global audience. His brief analysis of each verse makes it intelligible to the readers. This poetic as well as scholarly work is more than just a translation and explanation; it is also a guide to the splendid landscapes of spiritual wisdom, devotion, self-realisation, and inner liberation.

Allamaprabhu, a significant revolutionary saint-poet in Karnataka's Lingayat movement, is known for his radical contributions to spiritual and social thought. Born in Balligavi and initially working as a temple drummer, he eventually renounced material possessions to pursue deep self-realization. As a member of the *Anubhava Mantapa*—a vibrant spiritual academy in Basava-Kalyana—he was instrumental in redefining faith by advocating for a spiritual practice that went beyond traditional rituals, caste distinctions, and dogmatic beliefs. His teachings are primarily conveyed through *vacanas*, powerful Kannada verses that serve as the basis for Lingayat philosophy.

Allamaprabhu's *vacanas* stand out not only as poetic expressions, but also as intense spiritual provocations. These verses, distinguished by their stark, unembellished style, use paradoxes,

riddles, and vivid imagery to question established conventions about God, temples, and religious rituals. They accentuate the concept of *Sunya*, or the Void, which Allamaprabhu sees as the ultimate reality beyond physical forms and intellectual understanding. His devotion to Guheswara, also known as the "Lord of the Caves," symbolizes an inward journey in which seekers are encouraged to uncover their inner divinity in order to discover truth. In a bold rejection of Vedic hierarchies and societal hypocrisy, Allamaprabhu democratized spiritual insight, making enlightenment available to everyone, regardless of social standing or birth. His verses resist passive interpretation, demanding active engagement and inviting readers to push the boundaries of language and logic. His work uses the *Sunya Smpadane* technique to deconstruct illusions and highlight the futility of ego and material attachment.

Allamaprabhu's words are not very comforting; rather, they provoke and unsettle, revealing a transformative beauty through radical honesty. His enduring legacy is not in formal institutions, but in a profound call for self-inquiry, inner transformation, and the relentless pursuit of ultimate truth. He remains a symbol of spiritual independence, social equality, and the unwavering quest for divine realization within. Verse 102, for example, critiques ritualistic religiosity, lamenting the futility of worshipping inert idols—"the stone-symbol"—as if they were the living divine. Allamaprabhu believes that the Absolute (Siva) is an immanent, formless consciousness that transcends physical representation rather than an external entity to be propitiated through form or ritual. By likening idol worship to "breast-feeding a baby that is yet to be born," the saint-poet employs a startling metaphor to highlight the absurdity of external devotion sans inner awakening. The act is not only ineffective, but also logically and spiritually incongruous. How can nourishment be given to a non-existent being? Similarly, how can a soul commune with the Infinite while clinging to the finite? The stone, cold and breathless, cannot answer prayers or bestow grace. According to Allamaprabhu, true realization arises not from ritual but from self-dissolution in the divine—*jivanmukti* or liberation while living. Addressing "Lord Guheswara" (the dweller in the cave of the heart), Allamaprabhu takes divinity from temple altars to the inner sanctum of consciousness. The criticism is not of devotion, but of a misplaced focus—urging the seeker to transcend symbols and awaken to the living, formless Siva within.

Verse 87 turns the human frame into a sacred cosmos. The legs as pillars represent stability, grounding the seeker like a temple's columns; the body becomes a shrine for the divine presence. The tongue-as-bell represents the mantra of awareness, while the crowned head represents awakened consciousness shining like gold. "Omkar" resonating within transforms breath into a throne, presided over by Guheswara (Siva as Lord). The saint-poet declares interior consecration: every organ reverberates with cosmic vibration, and the practitioner settles, deeply, ever, truly, not in an external shrine, but in the luminous, self-realised sanctum of their being. The translator's critique is noteworthy: This *vacana* compares the human body to a temple in all its details like bells, crown, cosmic sound, and the divinity of the inner soul. It reiterates the sacralisation of human thought, feeling, and being" (p. 140).

Verse 91 weaves a metaphysical fabric of cosmic and inner realms. He defines the five elements (earth, water, fire, air, sky) as external scaffolding, the four internal organs (mind, intellect, consciousness, ego) as cognitive layers, and the three *gunas* (*sattva*, *rajas*, *tamas*) as dynamic forces. Nevertheless, these realms are transient and unaware of the soul's abode. The "breath-god," a vital link between body and spirit, becomes the locus of realization—a metaphor for *prana*, the

life-force as divine vessel. Spiritual awakening here is achieved through seeing the soul's indwelling rather than transcending matter. The thousand-petalled lotus, a symbol of the heart's crown chakra, represents unity with Lord Guheswara (Siva), embodying omniscient peace. Through breath-awareness, the seeker dissolves dualities, transcending *gunas* and elements to achieve eternal bliss. This verse, which incorporates Siva-Yoga synthesis, emphasises the journey from ignorance to integration, in which the self merges with the infinite.

Verse 105 challenges institutionalised worship by emphasising inner spirituality over external ritual. The rhetorical question, "Why do you need an external temple," dismisses physical structures as unnecessary when divine consciousness exists within. By equating the body to an "inner temple," he advances a radical non-dualistic vision—God is not separate apart, but intrinsic. The final question to Guheswara (Lord of the Caves) adds to the paradox: if the devotee becomes inert "stone," what role does the deity play? This inversion subverts idolatry by implying that both worshipper and worshipped dissolve into transcendental unity. The *vacana* thus promotes self-realization as the ultimate form of worship, making form and temple obsolete.

In Verse 310, Allamaprabhu's paradoxical chant disrupts the customary sequence of worship, urging the seeker to invert the ritual ladder.

Who do you meditate upon,  
After your mind is merged  
With the Absolute Linga?  
Whom do you desire  
After your desire is fulfilled  
By your union with the Lord?  
Whom do you understand  
After you realise the Truth  
By dissolving the illusion?  
O Lord Guheswara!  
(p. 371)

By asking "Who do you meditate upon, / After your mind is merged / With the Absolute Linga?" he reveals that true meditation ends when identification with the divine is complete; the object of focus vanishes. The second line repeats this inversion of desire: once union satisfies longing, desire evaporates. The third question challenges the seeker-subject dichotomy, arguing that realising Truth eliminates all conceptual understanding. Addressing Guheswara, the hidden Siva, he depicts the final stage in which the devotee becomes indistinguishable from the divine, a paradox.

Verse 506 flashes like a kaleidoscope of paradoxes, with each image re/representing a riddle that disrupts conventional logic. The "offspring of a camel" birthing three baby-camels overturns the expected linear reproduction, hinting at spontaneous multiplication of consciousness beyond natural law. The phrase "ant swallowed the darkness" compresses infinity into the minute, implying that even the smallest attention can engulf ignorance. The "white heron swallowing a mountain" reverses the usual weight hierarchy, portraying the pure spirit lifting the heavy world into the realm of the divine. The burnt thing that "revived itself and sat up" evokes the phoenix, a symbol of cyclic renewal; its subsequent dissolution into "Lord Guheswara" (the hidden Siva)

signals that every rebirth ultimately merges with the inscrutable source. The concluding exclamation, “Look at the wonder!” forces the reader to abandon analytical certainty and sit in awe, acknowledging that truth is beyond the reach of conventional discourse: deep, timeless, and endless mystery.

Verse 532 addresses the fundamental distinction between spiritual realization and intellectual posturing. The saint-poet dismisses mere discussion as pointless for those immersed in divine union. He suggests that words are tools for the unenlightened—those who continue to navigate duality through debate. For the realised soul, union with Lord Guheswara (the “Lord of the Cave,” who represents the inner sanctum of consciousness) transcends language.

What is the necessity  
Of mere discussion for a man,  
Who enjoys the ecstasy  
Of union with God? . . .  
What is the necessity of a debate  
With the jugglers of words?  
Let the fifty two alphabets  
Talk among themselves,  
But he, who has realised Lord Guheswara,  
Has no necessity of words and speech.  
(p. 596)

The reference to the “fifty-two alphabets” anthropomorphises language itself, mocking scholars who prioritise syntax over content/substance. Such textual acrobatics are likened to “jugglers of words”—skillful, but spiritually void. The repetition of “what is the necessity” emphasises urgency and disdain for verbosity. True knowledge, according to Allamaprabhu, is experiential rather than discursive—a silent presence. When one lives in the immediate presence of the divine, speech becomes irrelevant. This *vacana* thus serves as a radical critique of ritualised discourse, claiming that enlightenment is found not in argument, but in the wordless ecstasy of being.

Verse 578 breaks down the illusion of linguistic and spiritual possession. “A devotee’s mystic union / Could not be expressed in words”—this is the essence of radical non-duality: experience transcends articulation. Even sacred language can become inadequate and deceptive. The “expression” fails not due to lack of skill, but because the Self dissolves in union, leaving no subject for realization. Even “subtle ego,” the final whisper of “I have known,” is “shamed into silence”—not crushed, but rendered irrelevant. The consciousness of Lord Guheswara—Guheswara, the dweller in the cave (of the heart)—does not vanish, but rather “becomes barren”: no longer fertile with effort, ritual, or assertion. It is not negation, but fulfillment so complete that knowing ceases, being remains. This barrenness is not emptiness, but plenitude beyond grasp—where devotion consumes itself in the fire of oneness.

In Verse 579, Allamaprabhu’s succinct *vacana* breaks down the paradox of mystical experience into a single breath. He lives “egoless in the perfect reality,” but the act of living negates subject-object duality. The lines “I could not see... even if I wanted to; I could not hear... even if I wanted to” echo the Advaitic claim that the ultimate, the “Light Immaculate,” lies beyond the senses and

intellect, which are tools of the ego. By invoking Guheswara—Siva as the hidden master—Allamaprabhu acknowledges that language cannot capture that luminous void, as any description would impose form on the formless. The verse highlights the futility of conventional discourse and emphasises the need for awe-filled surrender to see the unfiltered truth.

Similarly, Verse 581 presents a profound spiritual paradox: the ego’s annihilation in divine union. The speaker “experienced the wonder” but denies claiming it, which is an affirmation contradicted by humility. This tension reveals the essence of Virasaiva mysticism: true realization goes beyond personal assertion. Saying “I united with God” upholds the ego, undermining the very dissolution required. With the body-sense conquered, the self dissolves into Caitanya (Divine Awareness), where speech falters. The shame expressed or confessed is not regret, but awe at language’s failure. “O Lord Guheswara!” becomes surrender, rather than a boast: the soul speaks loudest when the mind is silent. As Naikar explains: “After the union with God, there is no consciousness of subject or object.” (p. 649)

Thus Allamaprabhu beckons the earnest seeker to turn inward, leaving outward form for inner soul or spirit, abandoning ritual for deep meditation, replacing endless noise with silent contemplation, and leaving idolatry for personal revelation. *Ecstatic Wonder of Allamaprabhu* is a massive collection of 582 *vacanas*—each a compact poem demanding careful reflection to get at its hidden meaning. In this review I could only elucidate ten of those verses, but the translator’s insightful commentary, coupled with a thorough glossary and a rich introduction, provides indispensable guidance, allowing readers to grasp the subtle nuances and fully appreciate the transformative power embedded within each line for those who seek authentic spiritual insight.

In all, Professor Basavaraj Naikar’s English translation of the ancient Kannada *vacanas* is his *tour de force*, capturing the essence of a centuries-old spiritual legacy in a language far removed from its roots. Translating poetry—particularly the profound, devotional and mystical verses of ancient and medieval saint-poets—is really an arduous task that necessitates not only linguistic proficiency but also a deep sensitivity to cultural nuances. In *Ecstatic Wonder of Allamaprabhu*, the core of each verse resonates with raw emotional power, transcending barriers of language, time, and space to stir the souls of contemporary readers. This achievement demonstrates Professor Naikar’s painstaking dedication to transforming timeless wisdom into a format that is accessible to a worldwide audience. His work not only preserves India’s philosophical heritage, but also elevates it as a beacon for current and future generations, welcoming both Eastern and Western seekers of truth. This monumental collection, which spans 662 pages, is an irreplaceable treasure for libraries, scholars, and anyone seeking a deeper connection to spiritual wisdom.