

"HOW DID YOU BECOME A SERVANT, CREATURE? — A REFLECTION"

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The *Keertane* (devotional song) of Kanakadasa, when interpreted beyond the spiritual and devotional framework, draws us toward a social consciousness concerned with social well-being. A notable feature of Kanakadasa's poetic vision is how it embeds a critique of social health within a spiritual context. The multidimensional personality of Kanakadasa as poet, thinker, reformer, and saint finds expression most vividly through his *keertanes*.

A key element in his devotional compositions is **social satire**, often articulated through **animal metaphors**. In his poetic works such as *Nalacharitre*, *Mohana Tarangini*, and *Ramadhanya Charite*, Kanakadasa subtly critiques the caste and class-based hierarchical structures of society. He offers a clear dissent against the condescending attitudes of the upper castes towards the lower ones.

For instance, in *Ramadhanya Charite*, through a dialogue between rice (*bhatta*) and finger millet (*ragi*), Lord Rama ultimately declares *ragi* superior. Here, *ragi* symbolizes the lower castes or marginalized communities, and Kanakadasa elevates its status through allegory. The underlying message promotes love and mutual respect among social strata, while also asserting his philosophical stance in favor of the oppressed.

Similarly, in *Mohana Tarangini* and *Nalacharitre*, Kanakadasa departs from orthodox narrative traditions, presenting alternative perspectives that challenge rigid social structures. Much like the 12th-century *Vachana* poets, his language and style are simple, accessible, and aimed at the common people.

In this context, it becomes imperative to understand Kanakadasa's *keertanes* in terms of content, language, and style, particularly their contemporary relevance. One such *keertane*, "**How Did You Become a Servant, Creature?**", deserves close examination. The use of animal imagery is a distinctive feature of this song, where the concept of **becoming a 'servant' or 'dasa'** is not mere servitude, but a deeper **spiritual transformation**.

To truly become a *dasa* (servant of God), one must renounce the ego or *ahamkara*. Kanakadasa, like Basavanna, promotes the idea of **humbling oneself**, not as an act of humiliation but as a transformative gesture:

"Bow down like the banana tree that bends under the weight of its fruit; then you are worthy of grace," says Basavanna.

Kanakadasa's message echoes this sentiment **to bow or to surrender** is not a symbol of weakness, but a path to inner greatness. The renunciation of ego leads to a heightened, more refined state of self.

Satirical Reflections on Human Life

"How did you become a servant, creature?

How did you fall into this worldly trap?

You fell like a monkey, facing the ruin of rebirth..."

In these lines, Kanakadasa mocks the human tendency to degrade oneself like an ignorant animal entangled in worldly illusions. He portrays man as enslaved by material desires, obsessed with money-making, ultimately landing in a metaphorical hell. The poem guides the reader to awaken from this ignorance.

He further warns that messengers of death are not compassionate; death cannot be postponed. A life spent in addiction to worldly temptations without spiritual discipline leads to spiritual ruin. As with the *Vachana* poets, Kanakadasa reminds us that **how one faces death is more important than how long one lives**.

"Before your cheeks sag,

Before the body gives way,

Remember Kudalasangama (God)."

Here, Kanakadasa underscores the importance of divine remembrance before the decline of the body and death set in.

The Danger of Hypocritical Devotion

"Begging from the wicked for a living,

Leaving behind your arrogance,

Criticizing the elders, you claim to be a Haridasa (servant of God),

Without even knowing the sacred mantra

You're just a foolish creature."

Here, Kanakadasa likens such people to headless dogs, blindly chasing desires without contemplating the meaning of life. He also critiques **ritualistic devotion**—ankle bells, hand cymbals, mantras muttered without understanding, and dry scriptural study labeling them as *hypocritical devotion*.

True worship, he insists, must arise **from the heart**, not from show or compulsion. Otherwise, it becomes nothing more than superficial display misleading and meaningless.

"If you do not sow, the river will not yield crops..."

"What use is a long life,

If you spend it merely chasing wealth,

Without crossing over to the other side?"

These lines emphasize **hard work and integrity** one must sow and toil to reap meaningful fruits. Just as laborers must soil their hands to grow food, so must we be diligent in our spiritual and worldly duties. It's not the length of life that matters, but the **quality and purpose** of one's life.

A life spent merely hoarding wealth, devoid of spiritual awareness, ends in vain. The true tragedy is not death itself but dying without having realized one's higher purpose.

"Surrounded by darkness, worry, and fear,

Unable to find the Lord of the Mind..."

"Wearing the mask of piety, yet filled with sin,

If you desire support then who will support you?"

These lines depict a life spent in pretense and fear collecting wealth while remaining spiritually bankrupt. The hypocrite, Kanakadasa warns, faces death surrounded by darkness and dread, without any inner light to guide him.

He contrasts such individuals with the **true devotee**, who bridges the gap between self and God, between worldly and spiritual, and ultimately **attains the Supreme State** through self-realization.

Final Message

Ultimately, this keertane that begins with:

"How did you become a servant, creature?"

ends with a call to divine remembrance:

**"Without worshipping the Lord's feet with love,
You've turned into a scarecrow in the field..."**

Like Purandara Dasa's famous line,

**"When you've been born a human and have a tongue,
why not sing Krishna's name?"**

Kanakadasa also emphasizes the **power of human speech**, urging us to use it for divine remembrance rather than idle talk.

True devotion, he insists, must integrate body, mind, and love only then is it meaningful. A life not driven by money, but by **spiritual and ethical values**, can lead to both personal liberation and collective well-being.

In today's globalized world where money is glorified, where people are obsessed with "how to get rich quickly," and billionaires dominate the narrative Kanakadasa's songs **expand the meaning of life**, grounding it in humility and awareness of death.

More than how to win at life, this keertane teaches **how to face death victoriously**, and thereby turn away from transience toward the **eternal**.