

Shoonya Sampadane

By **Saroja Ullagaddi**

In the history of south Indian literature there have been a few prominent movements. First was the Sangam Sahitya (literature) at the beginning of Christian era; second was the 7th-8th century Bhakti literature in Tamil Nadu by the **Alvars**; and third was the Jain literature in the 10th century. The fourth of these important literary movements was vachana literature of the 12th century by the prominent sharana **Basavanna** and his contemporaries.

The vachana literature distills the philosophy, feelings and teachings of the Veerashaiva movement sharanas (devotees) in stylized prose-poetry form. It is estimated that over 20,000 vachanas have been written by over 150 prominent sharanas. Individual vachanas speak of the importance of moral values, service to society and the uselessness of empty rituals void of true feelings or practice. They also focus on the importance of the need to understand and experience God in one's life.

The *Shoonya Sampadane* is considered the cream of that literature. Written in the form of question and answer-style debates, the *Shoonya Sampadane* is actually a collection of key vachanas of the most important religious leaders of the movement. While the individual vachanas may be found in other literature or collections, the author/editor of the *Shoonya Sampadane* has woven the discrete vachanas into a cohesive structure of a story narrative. This format provides a context for the individual vachana and allows the common man to understand the difficult subjects of spirituality, morality, theology, and philosophy and to take inspiration to follow that path.

The historical context for the origins of the *Shoonya Sampadane* is important to note. The 13th-16th centuries saw the rise and consolidation of power by the Muslim Sultanates in the northern part of India. The Muslim rulers tried to establish their culture and religion in the conquered lands. It was in this context that the *Shoonya Sampadane* was compiled in the famous Hindu Vijayanagara Empire of south India. Founded sometime in the early to mid-fourteenth century, Vijayanagara became a unified Hindu barrier to the expansion of the Muslim Sultans. Its kings patronized the Hindu arts and encouraged literary works in Sanskrit, Kannada, and Telegu, reflecting the values, cultures, and ideals of non-Muslim India. Among the important groups comprising the Vijayanagara Empire were the Veerashaiva philosophers, thinkers, and writers. Under the patronage of Devaraya II (1419-1447) and his two ministers, Jakkanyarya and Lakkanna Dandesh, the compilation and editing of vachana literature started. Veerashaiva vachanas, and the *Shoonya Sampadane*, found a receptive audience. Besides the Shoonya Sampadane, other important Kannada literature of this period includes the *Basavapurana*, the *Padmaraja Purana*, the *Shivatatwa Chintamani*, and the *Veerasaivamrita*.

There are actually four different clearly distinguishable versions of the *Shoonya Sampadane*, compiled by four different editors. The first version is believed to be compiled by **Shivagana Prasadi Mahadevayya** around 1420 C.E. He took vachanas from each of the major Veerashaiva sharanas and edited them into a form of debates as they may have occurred in the twelfth-century Kalyana. Sometime later, probably around 1495 C.E., either **Haligeysa Deva**, or his student **Kenchavirannodeyaru**, compiled the second version, adding a new section on **Siddharama's** initiation at the hands of **Chennabasava**. A third version was produced around 1500 C.E. by **Gummalapurada Siddhalingayati**, who mainly added more vachanas to each of the sections, as well as adding new episodes to the hypothetical debates. The fourth and last known version of the *Shoonya Sampadane* was edited by **Goolur Siddhaveera**. While all four versions follow the same basic format and outline, each shows significant variations in interpretations by their selection of which vachanas to include and which ones to leave out of the stories. The fourth version, by **Goolur Siddhaveera**, is the most well known and most published. This version was edited and printed by P.G. Halakatti in 1930 and was republished by S.S. Bhoosanurmah in 1958 with some revisions. The 1958 edition is also the only version translated into English.

'Anubhaava,' or collection of experiences, is the foundation of *Shoonya Sampadane*. "Shoonya" in Kannada is zero or nothing. In the vachanas of sharanas, shoonya is 'balayu' – void or nothingness. However, shoonya encompasses everything. Shoonya here is equal to **Shiva**, the Universal Soul, the Absolute. 'Sampadane' means to earn (as in earn a living). In the context of this literature, then, sampadane is the building of experiences to merge in sublime union with the Ultimate Soul. That is the entire purpose of jiva or individual soul according to the Veerashaiva philosophy. It is the union of individual soul and the Ultimate soul that is Shiva --- the Absolute, the Void, the Shoonya. The earning (sampadane) of that union with shoonya then, is Shoonya Sampadane. *Shoonya Sampadane* is the record of this attainment by the 12th century sharanas.

In *Shoonya Sampadane* the central figure is **Allama Prabhu** (also called **Prabhu Deva** or **Prabhu**) who presided over discussions at the Anubhava Mantapa – the spiritual assembly of the 12th century sharanas. The discussions are focused on shatsthala philosophy (six-fold pathway to God), aspirant's trials and tribulation, and doubts and difficulties in his journey to attain the sublime union. There are twenty-one lessons or chapters in the **Goolur Siddhaveera** version, containing more than 1500 vachanas. Each lesson contains an episode in the life of a sharana, presenting the arguments in a question and answer form. The lessons lead the reader from understanding a partial spiritual insight to the next higher insight to the next higher more comprehensive insight.

Exploring the *Shoonya Sampadane* is one of the best avenues into understanding Veerashaiva philosophy.

Lesson 1: The editor announces the purpose of the text, which is to record the teachings of **Allama Prabhu**. The essence of shatsthala philosophy is briefly described.

Lesson 2: **Muktayakka** is grieving over the death of her brother, **Ajaganna**. **Prabhu** helps her understand the meaning of death and helps her attain self-realization.

Lesson 3: **Siddharama**, a karma yogi, was engaged in philanthropic work by building temples and water tanks in Sonnaligi. He meets **Prabhu**, who convinces him to concentrate on self-discipline and develop inner spirituality. They go to Kalyana.

Lesson 4: **Basavanna** gives spiritual instructions to his nephew **Chennabasava**.

Lesson 5: **Prabhu** and **Siddharama** come to Kalyana and are received by **Basavanna** and the rest of the sharanas. In this lesson there is a discussion of true devotion or bhakti.

Lesson 6: **Marulu Shankaradeva**: The sharanas of the assembly thought of their fellow sharana **Marula Shankara** just as an ordinary man or a simpleton and they don't care to see who he is. **Prabhu** recognizes **Marula Shankara's** prominence, and reveals his greatness to the other sharanas.

Lesson 7: **Basaveshwara** – **Prabhu** tells **Basavanna** and the other sharanas the mystery of time and eternity. He also shows how **Basavanna** has attained great heights in spirituality through bhakti or devotion.

Lesson 8: **Chennabasava** – **Prabhu** explains to **Chennabasava** the essence of bhakti.

Lesson 9: **Madivalayya** - **Prabhu** explains to **Madivala Machayya** the meaning of Guru, Linga and Jangama, the nature of right knowledge and Union with Linga.

Lesson 10: Guru bestows grace on **Siddharama** - **Chennabasavanna** initiates **Siddharama** and invests him with an Istalinga.

Lesson 11: **Prabhu** is worshipped by other sharanas. Sharanas sing praises of **Prabhu**.

Lesson 12: **Aydakki Marayya** – who lives a humble life on a handful of rice grains with his wife **Lakshmma**, is instructed by **Prabhu** as to the way to attain realization.

Lesson 13: **Moligeya Marayya** – also known as **Mahadeva**, was a king in Kashmir who renounced his kingdom to come to Kalyana, where he earned his living as a woodcutter. The discussion in this lesson is about simple bhakti.

Lesson 14: **Nulilya Chandayya** – a rope maker, demonstrates how dedicated, honest work for one's family and society leads to realization of God.

Lesson 15: **Ghattivalayya** – the true nature of a Jangama, Linga, individual and society are discussed.

Lesson 16: **Mahadevi Akka** – the great sharane of the 12th century and her growing personality is discussed. When **Akka Mahadevi** arrives in Kalyana, **Prabhu** has many questions for her and she answers them all and she is welcomed and is addressed with respect as the older sister.

Lesson 17: **Prabhu's** tour and return – Wherever he travels, he dispels ignorance and spiritual progress begins.

Lesson 18: **Prabhu's** ascension to the throne - Shoonya Simhasana in the spiritual assembly is described.

Lesson 19: **Prabhu's** strange feast - where whatever food is offered is consumed by **Prabhu** and no food is enough. Finally, **Chennabasava** explains to **Basavanna** that if the offering is laced with egoism, that is 'I' am offering, no offering is enough. Only when egoism is removed, then love for God becomes perfect.

Lesson 20: The prophecy of sharanas' end – **Prabhu** has the clear understanding of things to come. He feels that **Basavanna** has accomplished his mission of building a society of devotion and has no more need to live on this earth.

Lesson 21: **Gorakshanath** – **Prabhu** bids farewell to the sharanas and goes to Shrishaila where he meets **Gorakshanath**, who had attained powers and had made his body strong and thought that he had conquered death. **Prabhu** explains the futility of this thinking and initiates **Gorakshanath** in the knowledge and continues his journey. **Basavanna** goes to Kudala Sangama. **Akka Mahadevi** goes to Shrishaila. **Akka Nagamma** and **Chennabasavanna** go towards Ulvi, where all these sharanas merge their souls in the Ultimate soul.

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