



Poems to Shiva

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IN THE course of time, even the noblest of philosophies or religions suffer the effects of decay and misinterpretation. Virashaivism ("heroic faith in Shiva") arose during the tenth century in southern India as a protest movement seeking to stimulate reforms in the worship of Shiva. The Virashaivites were also known as lingayatas or those who wear the linga, a symbolic representation of Shiva, about their necks. In this way the Virashaivites proclaimed the body as a temple of God, a fundamental tenet of mysticism. The linga thus became a symbol of God's constant presence—purifying and penetrating every cell of the devotee's body and mind.

In their poetry they criticized artifice, the privileges of birth, learning, and so forth. They considered the presence and experience of God of prime importance. The Virashaivite poets came from every class; some were educated, others were illiterate. The spontaneity found in their verses characterized their movement as a whole. There are more than three hundred of these Virashaivite poets; the four represented here are perhaps the best known.

Basavanna

BASAVANNA (1106-1167) was a South Indian poet-reformer who served as one of the leaders of Virashaivism. He was also a composer of numerous devotional poems in the *vacana* style. A *vacana* is a religious lyric written in free verse in Kannada, a language spoken in Mysore State in southern India. *Vacana* poetry, all of which is in praise of Shiva, was particularly prevalent during the tenth to twelfth centuries. Much of Basavanna's poetry, as will be noticed from the selections chosen, concerns man's struggle with the temptations and miseries of the world.

I

The rich
will make temples for Shiva.
What shall I,
a poor man,
do?

My legs are pillars,
the body a shrine,
the head a cupola
of gold.*

* Professor Ramanujan comments regarding this poem: "Indian temples are traditionally built in the image of the human body. . . . The names for the different parts of the temple are those of a body. . . . But in history the human metaphor fades. The model, the meaning is unremembered. The temple becomes a static standing thing that has forgotten its moving originals. Basavanna's poem calls for a return to the original of all temples, preferring the body to the embodiment."

Listen, O lord of the meeting rivers,
things standing shall fall,
but the moving ever shall stay.

Like a monkey on a tree
it leaps from branch to branch:
how can I believe or trust
this burning thing, this heart?
It will not let me go
to my Father,
my lord of the meeting rivers.

II

Does it matter how long
a rock soaks in the water:
will it ever grow soft?

Does it matter how long
I've spent in worship,
When the heart is fickle?

Futile as a ghost
I stand guard over hidden gold,
O lord of the meeting rivers.

III

Before
the grey reaches the cheek,
the wrinkle the rounded chin
and the boy becomes a cage of bones:
before
with fallen teeth

and bent back
you are someone else's ward:

before
you drop your hand to the knee
and clutch a staff:

before
age corrodes
your form:

before
death touches you
worship
our lord
of the meeting rivers!

Dasimayya

DEVARA DASIMAYYA (10th C.) was most likely the earliest of the vacana poets. Tradition tells us he was born in Mudanuru, a village noted for its profusion of temples, among them a Ramanatha temple. Dasimayya dedicates all of his vacanas to Ramanatha or "Rama's Lord," a reference to Shiva, who many believe was worshiped by Rama, the hero of the *Ramayana*. Dasimayya practiced a number of severe austerities and many miracles are attributed to him. Despite his reputation as an ascetic, he continued in the profession of a weaver throughout his life, which he practiced as a form of worship to Shiva.

I

Whatever It was
That made this earth
the base,

the world its life,
the wind its pillar,
arranged the lotus and the moon,
and covered it all with folds
of sky

with Itself inside,
to that Mystery
indifferent to differences,
to It I pray
O Ramanatha.

II

To the utterly at-one with Shiva
there's no dawn,
no new moon,
no noonday,
nor equinoxes,
nor sunsets,
nor full moons;
his front yard
is the true Benares,
O Ramanatha.

Mahadevi

MAHADEVI (12th C.) was a contemporary of both Basavanna and Allama—a woman saint who praised Shiva in ecstatic, even sensual, poems of remarkable intensity. Although she married a local king who had become enamoured of her charm and beauty, Mahadevi's heart was continually absorbed in God,

whom she addressed in her poetry as "Lord White as Jasmine." Eventually, life with her husband became intolerable, and she left home as a wandering nun. In a gesture of defiance against a society which refused to understand her, she abandoned her clothes, covering her body only with her long hair. Finally, she arrived at Kalyana where Basavanna and Allama ran a school devoted to Virashaivism. She was accepted by them, and remained there for a while. Then, still restless, she journeyed to Srishaila, a holy mountain. There she at last entered into oneness with Shiva, and left this earth while only in her twenties.

Her poetry is largely symbolic, employing the various phases of human love as metaphors to describe the mystic ascent.

I

you are the forest

you are all the great trees
in the forest

you are bird and beast
playing in and out
of all the trees

O lord white as jasmine
filling and filled by all

why don't you
show me your face?

II

Four parts of the day
I grieve for you.
Four parts of the night
I'm mad for you.

I lie lost
sick for you, night and day,
O lord white as jasmine.

Since your love
was planted,
I've forgotten hunger,
thirst, and sleep.

III

People,
male and female,
blush when a cloth covering their shame
comes loose.

When the lord of lives
lives drowned without a face
in the world, how can you be modest?

When all the world is the eye of the lord,
onlooking everywhere, what can you
cover and conceal?

Allama

ALLAMA (12th c.) is the recognized spiritual master of the vacana saints; both Basavanna and Mahadevi, among others, accepted him as their teacher. It was also Allama who provided the impetus for founding the Virashaivite study center (known as the *anubhava mandapa* or "mansion of experience"), and became its accepted leader. Allama strongly rejected external rituals and religious pretensions of any sort. He teased and ridiculed Basavanna for his attachments to the world in the

guise of doing good works; he taunted Mahadevi for her brazen rejection of clothes, but refusal to abandon her long tresses.

The poetry of Allama reflects a spiritual depth and maturity not found in his contemporaries. He wrote his *vacanas* only when he had reached illumination. Because his poetry issues from this interior world, far removed from the external one, many of his verses are quite obscure. Unlike Basavanna, he left few traces of his early struggle; instead, we meet a sage in full bloom of enlightenment, dispensing his lessons of experience to the world.

I

Look here,
the legs are two wheels:
the body is a wagon
full of things.

Five men drive
the wagon
and one man is not
like another.
Unless you ride it
in full knowledge of its ways
the axle*
will break,
O Lord of the Caves.

II

One dies,
another bears him to the burial ground:

* *i.e.*, the mind.

still another takes them both
and burns them.

No one knows the groom
and no one the bride.
Death falls across
the wedding.

Much before the decorations fade
the bridegroom is dead.

Lord, only your men
have no death.

III

Whoever knew
that It is body of body,
breath of breath
and feeling of feeling?
Thinking that it's far,
its near,
it's out here
and in there,
they tire themselves out.