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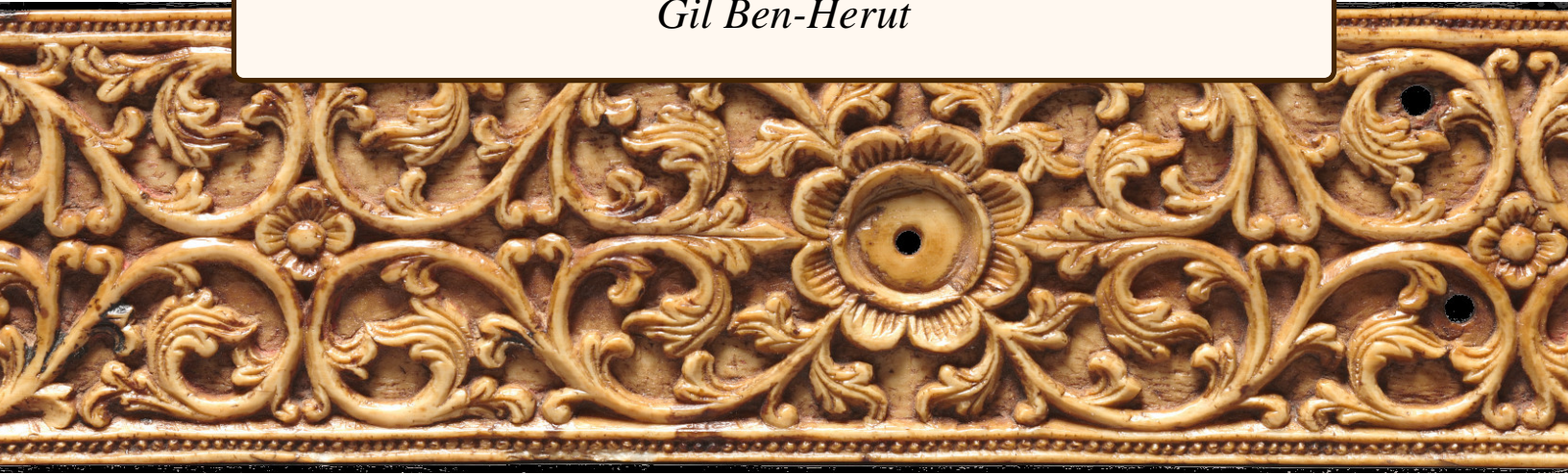


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NEW EXPLORATIONS IN SOUTH ASIA RESEARCH

## Early Traces of *Vacanas* in Kannada Literature

*Gil Ben-Herut*



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# Early Traces of *Vacanas* in Kannada Literature

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## 1 Introduction

Many people see the *vacanas*, short devotional poems in the Kannada language that started to be composed in the twelfth century, as *the* major vehicle of the attitudes, values, and practices of one of the region's most prominent religious traditions, known as "Vīraśaiva" or "Liṅgāyat" (the relationship between the two terms being historically complicated). The *vacanas* are central to the identity of this tradition, and as such they play a major role in the ongoing controversy about whether the tradition is a part of "Hinduism" more broadly or stands apart from it.<sup>1</sup> But even outside of this religious tradition the *vacanas* are enormously popular among the Kannada-speaking public.<sup>2</sup> The translations of selected *vacanas* into English by A.K. Ramanujan in 1973 presented them to a global audience as evidence of spiritual and social rebellion against oppression by the religious mainstream in a way that anticipates modern and Western values.<sup>3</sup> Ramanujan did not invent this reception of the

1. See articles in this volume.
2. See an example in [Boratti \(2013\)](#).
3. [Ramanujan \(1973\)](#).



*vacanas*, however; since the late colonial period they had been mobilized for various social and political movements. Today, people quote them in support of a range of positions: for individual devotion and against blind ritualism and superstition; for personal spirituality unfettered by religious orthodoxy; for social upliftment and against the oppression of marginalized groups; for women’s rights, and more.

Examples of invoking *vacanas* as a premodern precursor to modern and progressive values abound.<sup>4</sup> But there are also those who read *vacanas* differently. Against the movement to separate the Liṅgāyat tradition from Hinduism, some scholars quote *vacanas* to emphasize the tradition’s continuity with other Hindu traditions; some claim, too, that the *vacanas* quoted in support of progressive values are inauthentic.<sup>5</sup>

A handful of scholars have pointed out the open-endedness with which *vacanas* are read and the interests that have shaped the multiple interpretations mentioned above.<sup>6</sup> But some part of the *interpretive* controversy of what the *vacanas* are “really” about — although clearly not the entire controversy — rests on the philological question of the “authenticity” of the texts themselves. When we experience a *vacana*, either in Kannada or in translation, either printed in a book, or performed to Hindustani or Carnatic music, how, if at all, do we account for the history of the text that we are experiencing? The uncritical attribution of the entire corpus to poet-saints of the twelfth century has led to a certain complacency, even on the part of scholars, as if the texts have come to us (or our eyes) directly from the twelfth century. Yet it is readily acknowledged that they have come to us through a long and winding journey across time and media. We are still learning about the *vacanas*’ textual history, and already it is clear that this body of songs has undergone heavy editing and reformulation at different points.<sup>7</sup>

To read *vacanas* critically means to consider their complex history of transmission and dissemination over roughly eight centuries or so. This history is punctuated by dramatic shifts in how *vacanas* were handled. For example, they were collected, edited, and written down as texts for the first time only in the fifteenth century. Until that important moment, the *vacanas* were transmitted from one generation to the next in oral recitations

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4. Rajghatta (2018: 18–19, 28–29).

5. *ibid.*, 28.

6. Ben-Herut (2018: 9–12).

7. I am spending some portions of research time between 2023 and 2025 to study the literary history of the *vacanas* with the support of the Fulbright-Nehru Academic and Professional Excellence Award and the Senior Short Term Research Grant, funded by the American Institute of Indian Studies (AIIS) and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH).

and performances, perhaps with the aid of written notes — a practice that inherently implies textual malleability and that apparently went on for a period of about three hundred years.<sup>8</sup> Another important moment in the history of the *vacanas* started from 1870, with their early print publications: these publications involved the heavy-handed work of culling, reframing, and even rewriting that was guided by contemporary political, social, and cultural agents in the colonial and, later, the post-colonial, periods.<sup>9</sup> Paradoxically, such historical interventions in the textuality of the *vacanas* — starting with recording them in manuscripts, then fixing them in printed books, and now making them available in digital media — have contributed to the widespread presumption that *vacanas* are and have always been an integral and natural part of what we think of as “premodern Kannada literature,” independently of cultural and religious practices, of performances, and of the various interpretations of and responses (or lack thereof) to the *vacanas* throughout this circuitous history.

Whether intentionally or not, *vacanas* are almost always presented to their readers and audiences without the apparatus of textual criticism and as the *ipsissima verba* of twelfth-century poet-saints. This is true not only with regard to translations of *vacanas* but also to publications in Kannada.<sup>10</sup> In many of these publications, issues such as textual sources and manuscript variation are briefly dealt with in the introduction, if at all, while the *vacanas* in the body of the publication are rendered without the apparatus of alternative readings. This practice speaks of the exceptional popularity of the *vacanas* and their unique appeal to large audiences, but it also contributes to the general obfuscation of complexities in the history and textuality of the *vacanas*. A good case in point for this is the extensive edition of the *vacanas* edited by Eṁ. Eṁ. Kalaburgi, called *Samagra Vacanasāhityada Janapriya Āvṛtti* (The Popular Edition of the Complete *Vacana* Literature), which contains fifteen volumes. This popular edition was reprinted several times and is commonly used for accessing *vacanas*. In the introduction to the first volume, Kalaburgi lists the sources he used for this publication and provides examples of text variations in fourteen *vacanas*, adding an explanation for why a specific variation is, to the editorial board, the “correct one.”<sup>11</sup> But the 1,414 *vacanas* in the body of this publication have no indication of these editorial choices. Fur-

8. Chandra Shobhi (2005).

9. Boratti (2012); Boratti and Ben-Herut (forthcoming).

10. As exception to this rule, some of R. C. Hiremath’s publications of *vacana* collections from the second part of the twentieth century have a critical apparatus. An example of the disregard for textual criticism issues in translations of *vacanas* can be found in Ramanujan’s short and general statement about the study of the *vacanas*’ textuality in a footnote to the “Translator’s Note” section of his translations (1973: 11 n. 2).

11. Kalaburgi (2001a [1993]: xxvii–xxxiii). Complete list of sources is provided in pp. 428–436. See also Basavarāju (2001 [1960]: 29–38).

thermore, the historical possibilities embedded in the existence of the variations are never considered, and questions about the textuality of the *vacanas* before they were collected in manuscripts are absent altogether.

*vacanas* are thought of by many today as an outstanding form of Kannada literature. But this appreciation appears to be a late one. In the first centuries after the appearance of *vacanas*, very few Śaiva authors minimally refer to them and the literati outside the circle of Śaiva devotees never make any mention of them.<sup>12</sup> The idea that the *vacanas* were not considered a literary event in their own time was articulated in 2005 in an unpublished dissertation by Prithvi Datta Chandra Shobhi that locates the textualization of *vacanas* in the rise of the Viraktas of the fifteenth century, during the Vijayanagara period. Chandra Shobhi writes:

Even in the pre-*virakta* narratives on the lives of the *vacanakāras* [*vacana*-composers], nowhere are *vacanas* mentioned or quoted. It appears as if until the fifteenth century, neither Śaiva authors nor for that matter others recognized and valued *vacanakāras* as the authors of *vacanas*.

Chandra Shobhi (2005: 126)

Chandra Shobhi argues that we do not have access to the *vacanas* before the fifteenth century — supposedly the first time they appeared in writing — and that the silence by earlier Śaiva authors is indicative of their lack of recognition or appreciation of the *vacanas* and of the *vacanakāras*, their composers, as such. Chandra Shobhi presents a radical alternative to the popular reading of the *vacanas* as authentic testimonies of the twelfth century, arguing that the absence of any textual source before the fifteenth century means there is no direct access to *vacanas* of the twelfth century. Accordingly, Chandra Shobhi goes on to analyze in his dissertation the massive textualization of the *vacanas* in the fifteenth century as the earliest moment for making a cultural sense of these poems, one which reflected communal anxieties of Vīraśaiva communities of that period.

In this article I probe a portion of the early Śaiva narratives that Chandra Shobhi refers to in the above quotation, specifically life stories of *vacanakāras* and their associates. I show that, contrary to Chandra Shobhi's claim, these texts *do* contain descriptions and quotations of

12. D. R. Nagaraj comments on the absence of *vacanas* from a thirteenth-century anthology of Kannada literature that “professional intellectuals did not consider the *vacanas* literature” (2003: 364), but he does not consider this observation in his overall treatment of the *vacanas* as a watershed mark in the history of Kannada literature.



what we recognize today as *vacanas*. Significantly, however, these references are infrequent in the examined set of stories and are sometimes incomplete, inconclusive, or obscure. These findings do not sit well with the popular wholesale embrace of the *vacanas* as products of the twelfth century nor with the categorical doubt that Chandra Shobhi casts regarding the possibility of having a “direct access” to the *vacanas* before the intervention of the Viraktas. Instead, the findings presented in this article lead to a more fine-grained understanding of the *vacanas*’ textual reception before the fifteenth century, according to which the *vacanas*, though certainly present in the early hagiographies, remained very much in the narratives’ margins, and were associated with only few of the saintly figures. Put differently, while the *vacanas* certainly reverberated in the early written texts about the local devotional culture, they did not receive a significant amount of attention from the early Śaiva authors who recorded in their works the emerging devotional (*bhakti*) tradition in the Kannada-speaking region.

A recognition of the liminal status of the *vacanas* in the earliest devotional texts opens up a new set of historical questions. Above all, it raises questions about the *vacanas*’ presence and role in the early history of Śaiva devotion in the Kannada-speaking region. If the *vacanas* were indeed the harbinger of a new local devotional culture, as commonly thought of today, why did the authors who wrote about it in the proceeding decades and centuries dedicate so little space to them in their writings?<sup>13</sup> Given the fact that the saints of the twelfth century are today thought of primarily as *vacanakāras*, “composers of *vacanas*,” how do we account for the fact that the first authors who wrote about these saints did not think of them in this way? And what might this apparent lacuna indicate about the reception of the *vacanas* and the historical circumstances of the devotional community in its earliest stages?

The body of the earliest Kannada and Telugu narratives referring to the twelfth-century model devotees this article focuses on dates to the early thirteenth century. It contains a variety of authors and styles, but at its core we can clearly identify three poetic mavericks among the group of early hagiographers. Each of these authors introduces in his works radical departures from contemporaneous works in terms of literary practices and religious

13. There is a need for a separate study on the presence of *vacanas* in contemporaneous epigraphy. I was only able to locate a few inscriptions from the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries that quote *vacanas* by Siddharāma, a saintly figure who operated at the northern borders of the local tradition, in the Marathi-speaking region (Upadhyaya 2005: cviii–cx). I wish to thank Tony Evensen for his help in locating these materials and thinking about them. Siddharāma was credited with *vacanas* by Harihara’s nephew Rāghavānka (Devadevan 2016: 14 n. 50), and there is room to speculate about the relation of this particular saint and the later use of the word *vacana*. Harihara mentions Siddharāma several times in his *Raḡales* about other saints, but he apparently never dedicated a *Raḡale* to this figure.



visions, departures that would have a lingering effect in succeeding centuries. The first two of the three — Hampeya Harihara and his nephew Rāghavāṅka — wrote in Kannada, and the third, Pāḷkuriki Sōmanātha, wrote mostly in Telugu (but also in Sanskrit, Kannada, and other languages). Considered together, these three poets represent a major shift in regional literature that undoubtedly echoed a larger historical process: the introduction of devotional religion as a major cultural and social force.<sup>14</sup>

In general, the *vacanas* were not what Harihara, Rāghavāṅka, Sōmanātha, and their immediate followers wanted to highlight about these saints. In their writings, the saints' devotional sentiment was communicated not via lyrical utterances or public discourses but through religious *action* that included public and private worship, miracle making, and care for the devotional community. This article will focus on the work of Harihara. Judging by a casual examination of the other extant works, his treatment of *vacanas* is similar to that of all his near contemporaries.<sup>15</sup>

## 2 Hampeya Harihara's *Ragale* Stories

Harihara was a prolific author who composed his poetic works in Hampi in the early thirteenth century (close to two hundred years before the establishment of the Vijayanagara Empire in the same place).<sup>16</sup> In terms of its content, his poetic oeuvre is devotional, and for this reason he can be considered an innovator against the prevailing trend of courtly narrative poetry. Stylistically, the genres and styles that he used involved both traditional practices and new ones. Harihara composed several *śatakas* (hundred-verse poems), one *aṣṭaka* (eight-verse poem), and one acclaimed *mahāprabandham* (court epic).<sup>17</sup> Although these compositions were written in familiar pan-Indian styles, they nevertheless present stylistic and thematic innovations in a clearly articulated and self-confident devotional voice. They do not, however, directly address the historical appearance of the twelfth-century saints

14. In the opening to his most appreciated work the *Hariścandra Cāritra*, the author Rāghavāṅka offers homage to major Śaiva poets (who composed in Sanskrit) as well as to his uncle Harihara, but he does not mention any local devotee who is recognized today as a *vacana* composer. See *Hariścandra Cāritra* 1.12–13 (Viswanatha 2017: 12–15). In his *Siddharāma Cāritra*, there are sporadic references to utterances by Siddharāma that might be considered as *vacanas*. See Devadevan (2020: 307 n. 5).
15. See comparison of *vacanas* and *ṣaṭpadis* verses in Bhīmakavi's Kannada version of the *Basava Purāṇam* (Vidyāśaṅkara 2008: 104–109).
16. This dating is conservative. It is possible that Harihara was writing a few decades earlier, in the second half of the twelfth century (Devadevan 2020: 307 n. 4).
17. Ben-Herut (2018: 45).



in the Kannada-speaking region, their remarkable exploits, or the poetry associated with them. It is another work by Harihara — a collection of stories written in the *ragaḷe* meter and conventionally referred to as the *Śivaśaraṇara Ragaḷegaḷu* (*Ragaḷe Stories of Śiva's Saints*, eponymous of the meter) that presents for the first time in writing the early Śaiva cohort of devotees from the Kannada regions, including major figures such as Basava, Allama Prabhu, and Akka Mahādēvi.<sup>18</sup>

The fact that the *Ragaḷe* stories were the first written account of the Kannada saints contributes to this collection's high ranking in the list of extant textual sources about these figures. Harihara composed these stories shortly — perhaps as little as a few decades — after the times of these saints, and in the same region of today's north Karnataka.<sup>19</sup> The lives of the saints are presented in a linear and straightforward manner, from before the figure's birth to after his or her passing away, with obvious highlighting of significant moments in the saint's religious career. The portrayal of the saints in the *Ragaḷe* stories is remarkably lucid, and it conveys the poet's deep familiarity with the local, recently formed devotional culture.<sup>20</sup>

Considering Harihara's careful narrative crafting of these stories, one might expect to find a profusion of detail about the *vacanas* and the contexts in which they were created. However, the *Ragaḷe* stories have little to say about the *vacanas*, and what they do say is uneven and does not fully cohere with later configurations of the *vacanas*' history. In this sense, Harihara's treatment of the *vacanas* further problematizes our historical understanding of them. His view regarding the marginality of the *vacanas* is made evident in the generally minute space they occupy in the saints' lives; the majority of the saintly figures in Harihara's text, including those whose *vacanas* became their main claim to fame, are mostly appreciated for devotional exploits and not for composing poetry.

Above all other aspects of their lives, the *Ragaḷe* stories celebrate the saints' unwavering determination to remain exclusively devoted to the god Śiva. This determination is expressed in myriad forms, of which the most apparent is their impassioned worship of the god. In addition, they are remembered for exceptional acts and miracles, and these occur mostly in the context of public competition against agents of other religions or in situations of social crisis. Another recurring feature of these life stories is the saints' support of the

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18. See [Ben-Herut \(2018\)](#) for an in-depth analysis of the early Kannada Śiva-devotion culture based on this work.
  19. Many *Ragaḷe* stories mention Hampi as the place where the author lived, while the twelfth-century saints are associated with different towns, including Kalyāṇa.
  20. A separate project of *Ragaḷe* translations by R. V. S. Sundaram and the author of this article was recently completed. See [Ben-Herut and Sundaram \(forthcoming\)](#).

local community of devotees by, for example, providing them with money, jewelry, clothes, and food, and organizing collective worship events.

Moreover, in the passages in which Harihara refers to the saints' devotional poetry, he does not focus on their exceptional messages, their unique mode of expression, or their conversational contexts — all the distinguishing characteristics of *vacana* literature that came to be most recognized and appreciated and continue to be so today.<sup>21</sup> Rather, Harihara usually mentions devotional poetry as a stock ingredient in a fixed grammar of ritual that takes place either in private worship or in public communal worship, but even this reveals very little about the performance of *vacanas*. Despite Harihara's sensibility for composing devotional poetry in Kannada, attested to in the *Ragaḷe* stories and in his other works,<sup>22</sup> his mentioning of devotional songs, with a few exceptions discussed below, is short and general, even offhand. Thus, for example, when Harihara describes the devotional gatherings in which Kōvūra Bommatande participates, songs are mentioned nominally to explain the saint's excitement with no reference to their content or to their performative or dramatic context:

*sukhadim purātanara gītadoḷu bāḷutuṁ  
mukhav' alaru bhaktirasa sindhuvinoḷ āḷutaṁ  
gītakke mecci meccugaḷan olid' īvutaṁ  
ōtu nūtanavastrakanakadim taṇiputaṁ  
śaraṇara padaṅgaḷaṁ bigiy' appi taṇivutaṁ*

He lived happily by the joyful songs of the elders,  
and with a beaming face he was immersed in the nectar of devotion.  
Inspired by the songs, he praised them,  
affectionately appeasing the devotees with gold and new clothes,  
and himself by tightly embracing their feet.

*Kōvūra Bommatandeya Ragaḷe* 3.3–7 (Suñkāpura 1976: 371)

21. Definitive testimony to the appreciation of *vacanas* for their exceptional messages, their unique mode of expression, their conversational contexts, and other features is provided by A. K. Ramanujan in the introduction to his translations of *vacanas* (1973: 19–55).
22. Ben-Herut (2018: 25–27).

It is difficult to know from this passage whether the songs Bommatande heard were what later became known as *vacanas*, since Harihara refers to them as *gīta*, which means simply “song,” and attributes them to the *purātanaru*, or “elders,” a label that might refer to earlier devotees from other regions.<sup>23</sup>

Harihara does occasionally use the word “*vacana*” in the eighteen *Ragaḷe* stories about saints from the Kannada-speaking region but never in relation to any recognizable *vacana*.<sup>24</sup> Read in context, the word “*vacana*” in the *Ragaḷe* stories most likely means an “utterance” and not “*vacana*” in the sense that we know the term today.<sup>25</sup> Another set of related terms Harihara uses are *gadya* (“prose”) and *padya* (“verse”), which he sometimes invokes as a pair when relating to verbal expression. In Kannada poetics, the former term overlaps with *vacana* in the general sense of “prose,” while the latter signifies a versified text.<sup>26</sup> The poems we call today *vacanas* are, with few exceptions, not metrically arranged, and therefore correspond to the general meaning of *vacana* and of *padya* in the sense of “prose,” although many are rhythmically patterned.

With these general observations in mind, we now approach specific *Ragaḷe* stories in Harihara’s collection that bear upon the question of the presence and significance of the *vacanas* in the early period of the tradition.

23. Ben-Herut (2015: 278).

24. I was able to locate a total of thirteen mentions of the word *vacana* in this group of *Ragaḷe* stories. They include: *Rēvaṇasiddhēśvarana Ragaḷe* ch. 2, prose (Suñkāpura 1976: 163); *Kēśirājadaṇṇāyakara Ragaḷe* ch. 2, prose (Suñkāpura 1976: 193); *Vaijakavveya Ragaḷe* v. 104; twice in *Ādayyana Ragaḷe* (ch. 2, prose page 324, and v. 3.221); *Ēkāntarāmitandeya Ragaḷe* v. 39, and *Jommayyana Ragaḷe* ch. 2 (prose page 389). Five mentions merit special attention: *Kōvūra Bommatandeya Ragaḷe* 3.44; *Mahādēviyakkana Ragaḷe* v. 3.197; and thrice in *Basavēśvara Dēvara Ragaḷe* ch. 6 (prose pages 50–51). In the first occurrence of these five, Bommatande instructs his son on devotional conduct that includes performing rituals, protecting the Śiva settlement, and heeding the *vacanas* of Śiva devotees (without further detail). In the second occurrence, Akka Mahādēvi quotes the truthful *vacanas* of the elders to always take care of other devotees. The latter three occurrences appear with regard to Basava’s words addressed to King Bijjaḷa and to devotees, but these words do not match any known *vacana* and lack a signature line at the end. In addition, two manuscripts of the *Mahādēviyakkana Ragaḷe* have the expression “words of the saintly devotees” (*śaraṇavacana*) in v. 5.133, while the other manuscripts have “[words from the] mouths of the saintly devotees” (*śaraṇavadana*). The above list is based on searches in an uncritical digital version of the relevant *Ragaḷe* stories that was created with the help of Poorvi Acharya (June 2022).

25. See also Devadevan 2016: 14 n. 50.

26. Cidānandamūrti (1966).

### 3 Not *Vacanas*: Kēśirāja's Devotional Songs

As noted, in specific cases in which Harihara mentions saints' poems, he usually describes them in a conventional manner. Missing is any reference to the *vacanas*' style and themes as well as any definite sense of how they came to be known with time. A case in point is found in the story about Koṇḍagūḷi Kēśirāja, a Śaiva poet who is described as a prominent leader of the Śaiva devotional community and an important political figure in Kalyāṇa, presumably several decades prior to Basava's tenure at Bijjaḷa's court. Kēśirāja's poetry is not a central theme in the *Ragaḷe* about him. It is referred to in only eight verses in the opening section of the text. There, Harihara writes:

*niccal eṇṭum padyamaṁ sōmanāthaṅge*  
*accari migalke pēḷvaṁ śivānāthaṅge*  
*pañcākṣarānubandhaṁ chandav' anuv' āge*  
*pañcamukhanāmad' abhidhāna buddhiy' ad' āge*  
*śivavākya śabdauddhi vyākaraṇam āge*  
*śivabhakti vṛttakk' alaṅkārad' ant' āge*  
*padyaṅgaḷam śivaṅg' anudinam pēḷutam*  
*cōdyav ene śaṅkarastōtradoḷe bāḷutam*

Every day he blissfully composed eight verses to Śiva Sōmanātha,  
 the moon-bearer and Pārvati's husband:  
 his meters were all made up of five syllables;  
 his lexicon came from the names of the five-faced god;  
 his grammar was the purity of speech in the Śiva mantra;  
 devotion to Śiva served as the ornaments of his verses.

Composing every day, creating verses for Śiva,  
 he lived a most wondrous life of praise of Śaṅkara, the peace-making god.

*Kēśirājadaṇṇāyakara Ragaḷe* 1.23–30 (Suṅkāpura 1976 184)

This passage is remarkable in the context of early sources about devotional poetry in Kannada in terms of the details it provides. Astonishingly, the rare passage is markedly *not* about the *vacanas*. The terms Harihara uses, such as “verse (*padya*),” “meter (*chanda*),” “grammar (*vyākaraṇa*),” and “ornaments of his verses (*vṛttakk' alaṅkāra[m]*),” are all con-

ventional technical terms in Sanskrit that associate Kēśirāja’s songs, even if only generally, with conventional composition in traditional styles, which is very different from the way in which the style of *vacanas* has come to be considered.<sup>27</sup> None of Harihara’s descriptions in these verses is associated with what distinguishes the *vacanas*, such as the absence of meter and other poetic conventions, the poet’s signature line (*aṅkita*) at the end, the poem’s lyrical content, biting social critique, and so on.

Further evidence of the disconnect between Kēśirāja’s poetry and the *vacanas* is found at the beginning of the above passage with the phrase: “his meters were all made up of five syllables (*pañcākṣarānubandham chandav’ anuv’ āge*).” The five syllables are of course *namaḥ śivāya*, the most important mantra of Śaivism. In its six-syllable form (*ōm namaḥ śivāya*), it corresponds with the title of Kēśirāja’s most famous composition, the *Ṣaḍakṣara Kanda* (“Treatise of the Six-Syllable Mantra”).<sup>28</sup> The treatise, dated to the early twelfth century, is among the earliest Śaiva devotional works in Kannada, but unlike the *vacanas* it is lengthy and composed in a traditional style and meter, and therefore cannot be regarded a *vacana*. It should also be noted that no *vacanas* are attributed to Kēśirāja by the later tradition.

The only additional mention of Kēśirāja’s songs in this *Ragaḷe* can be found a few dozen lines further, in a passage that describes a devotional assembly led by Kēśirāja. Harihara writes:

*kuḍigoṇḍu korbut’ iral iral ondu devasadoḷu*  
*eḍegoṇḍu śivagōṣṭhiv urbut’ ire candadoḷu*  
*hāḍuva purātanara gītadoḷ karagutaṁ*  
*kūḍe jaṅgamada caraṅakk’ eṛagi nerevutaṁ*  
*śivana padyavan oḍi mige bīgi birivutaṁ*

Thus did Kēśirāja grow and develop when one day, a Śaiva gathering was in full swing: he felt he was melting in the songs of elder devotees being sung. He bent

27. Compare Harihara’s description of poetic elements with [Ramanujan](#)’s discussion about the *vacanas*’ style in the introduction to his translations of *vacanas* (1973: 37–47). A famous *vacana* by Basava, which emphatically presents itself as nonpoetic, begins with the following line: “I don’t know anything like timebeats and metre” (ibid.).
28. The *Treatise of the Six-Syllable Mantra* is composed in the *kanda* meter, traditionally used for discursive texts. For more details about this text, see Ben-Herut (2018: 166 n. 28) and further references there.

low at the feet of the Jaṅgamas who gathered there. He broke out into reciting verses for Śiva, with great jubilation.

*Kēśirājadaṇṇāyakara Ragaḷe* 1.81–85 (Sunkāpura 1976: 186)

It is difficult to determine whether Harihara refers in this passage to two different bodies of poetry — songs of the elders and Kēśirāja’s own verses — or whether the two belong to the same collection. The first reference is to songs of elder devotees (*hāḍuva purātana nara gītā[m]*), while the second reference is to verses to Śiva that Kēśirāja recites (*śivana padyavan ōdi*). But the use of “recites” in the second reference is noteworthy, because it implies that these verses were pre-composed — not extemporaneous, which is how the tradition usually understands the composition of *vacanas*. In addition, in both passages quoted here from the *Kēśirājadaṇṇāyakara Ragaḷe*, Harihara refers to “verses” (*padyas*), and this formally distinguishes them from *vacanas*, which, with the exception of a small subset composed in triplets (*tripadi*), are written without meter. Finally — and this is characteristic of Harihara’s reports of the saints’ songs or verses — we learn next to nothing about their outstanding content or message beyond devotional conventions that are ubiquitous in the text.

Thus, although the passages about Kēśirāja’s poetry are among the most pronounced sections of Harihara’s writing about devotional singing by the saints in the Kannada-speaking region, these are by any measure brief and do not shed light on the early reception of *vacanas*. They simply describe devotional poetry that was composed in traditional forms and was not recognized for groundbreaking messages or exceptional discursive quality, nor for the poetic features that distinguish the *vacanas*. Based on these passages, it is reasonable to assume that, in the devotional culture of the Kannada-speaking region of the period under discussion here, devotional poetry and its performance did not narrowly imply *vacanas* as they are imagined today: at the very least, devotional songs in more traditional forms were being composed and appreciated. The remaining sections of this article discuss the three most celebrated saint-poets of this tradition: Allama Prabhu, Basava, and Akka Mahādēvi. We will see that Harihara’s treatment of the poetic oeuvre of each of these saints complicates the historical understanding of *vacanas* in a different way.



## 4 A Eulogy (and not *Vacana*) by Allama Prabhu

As I argue elsewhere, Allama Prabhu, who is today considered among the most prolific and prized composers of *vacanas*, is not recognized as such in Harihara’s version of his life story.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, in contrast to the later tradition, in which Allama is portrayed as a staunch and polemical spiritual leader of the nascent devotional community, Harihara’s portrayal of Allama as a saint focuses on his wandering as a reclusive mendicant who shuns the company of other. Harihara’s approach to Allama’s solitary sanctity leaves limited scope for presenting his celebrated lyricism or for describing at length his dramatic encounters with other spiritual figures, both of which are hallmarks of his later biographies.<sup>30</sup>

In the *Ragaḷe* story about Allama there is only one passage that quotes a poetic utterance by this saint. This utterance, consisting of words of praise for Allama’s guru, is extemporaneous, just as *vacanas* are supposed to be, but in terms of form it is organically woven into the text using the *ragaḷe* meter and hardly resembles a *vacana*, which should be in rhythmic prose and include a “signature”:

*siddhaśivayōgiyaṁ*  
*mige mōkṣalakṣmiy oḍagūḍirda bhōgiyaṁ*  
*dēva nirmaḷa nitya nirupama mahāyōgi*  
*dēva nirmaḷa nijānandakara śivayōgi*  
*śivanan occatav’ āgi kaikoṇḍa ḍṛḍhayōgi*  
*bhavana mūrtige sōltu kaṇṇiṭṭ’ acalayōgi*  
*nōṭadoḷu liṅgavaṁ seregeyda śivayōgi*  
*kūṭadoḷu kaṇṇe tanuv’ āda beḷagina yōgi*  
*madananaṁ mardisiye sandird’ abhavayōgi*  
*hṛdayadoḷu bhaktiyaṁ taḷedirda śivayōgi*

The accomplished yogi of Śiva,  
 who enjoys Lakṣmi in the form of liberation,  
 Lord! Great yogi, pure, eternal, and unparalleled,  
 Lord! A yogi of Śiva who generates pure, innate bliss,

29. Ben-Herut (2018: 70–71).

30. Those considered today as the most authoritative biographies of Allama are the fourth version of the *Śūnyasampādane* and the *Prabhuliṅgalīle*.

the firm yogi dedicated to holding Śiva in his hand,  
 the unmoving yogi watching closely the image of the root of existence,  
 the yogi of Śiva who captured the *liṅga* in his glance,  
 the illuminating yogi who, with eyes only,  
 has attained integration of his entire self,  
 becoming a yogi of the unborn god only by crushing lust.  
 The yogi of Śiva, fastened to devotion in his heart.

*Prabhudēvara Ragaḷe* 265–74 (Suṅkāpura 1976: 13)

Allama's other direct speeches in this *Ragaḷe* are not lyrical and in general are terse and descriptive.<sup>31</sup>

In contrast to Allama himself, other figures in the *Ragaḷe* are quoted expressing their wonderment at the sight of him, but their appreciation focuses on Allama's renunciation, his practice of carrying of the *liṅga* in the palm of his hand, and his spiritual merits, without making any mention of his poetic acumen or verbal skills.<sup>32</sup> Although in this text Allama is claimed to have met with two other important devotees, Basava and Siddharāma, Harihara's report of these important encounters is minimal, consisting in total of just six short lines, and he does not quote any direct conversation.<sup>33</sup> This can be put in sharp relief against the elaborate drama in the much later *Śūnyasampādane* ("Reaching Nothingness") works about Allama's stay in Kalyāṇa during his tenure there next to Basava, which is replete with *vacanas*.

## 5 Two *Vacanas* (and a Fragment) by Basava

The *Ragaḷe* story about Basava stands out in the collection as the longest and most developed piece, even in its extant form, which is about half the length of the original. The sheer length of Harihara's version of Basava's life offers a profusion of details about his remembered story. Fortuitously, this also includes references to Basava's poetic compositions, although the space allotted by Harihara to this aspect of Basava's life is quite limited:<sup>34</sup> Of the thirteen

31. See, for example, *Prabhudēvara Ragaḷe* 389–90 (Suṅkāpura 1976: 18).

32. See *Prabhudēvara Ragaḷe* 291–324 (Suṅkāpura 1976: 14–15).

33. *Prabhudēvara Ragaḷe* 373–78 (Suṅkāpura 1976: 17).

34. Compare with *Mahādēvayya* (1999: 122–25).

chapters, containing together about 1,200 lines, direct quotations of *vacanas* consist of only two short lines in chapter 12, and perhaps another short fragment in chapter 13.<sup>35</sup>

To complicate things further, the actual task of identifying what might be considered a *vacana* quotation in the text is not an easy one. A few verses scattered throughout this long work quote Basava addressing his god or a fellow Śaiva with a devotional appeal, but these verses are difficult to identify as recognized *vacanas*. To illustrate: a passage in chapter 3 with a quotation of Basava praising Śiva reads more like traditional devotional poetry with stock descriptions of the god and a refrain at the end of every line; it does not meet the expectations of a *vacana* in terms of either structure or content.<sup>36</sup> Five other short quotations addressed to the god could be read like *vacanas*, but I was not able to find any similar statements in the published corpus of *vacanas*.<sup>37</sup> Three words of praise to Allama appear to correspond with the concluding line of a known *vacana*, although the verb is different.<sup>38</sup>

Harihara's own description of Basava's songs in the end of chapter 9 and beginning of chapter 10 is telling in terms of Harihara's appreciation of them. The passage comes immediately after a miraculous feat: Basava's resuscitation after his life breath has left his body in his sleep to follow roaming devotees. The following passage celebrates Basava's recovery:

*nenenenedu puḷakisute gītamaṃ pāḍutaṃ  
munidu saṅgaṅge posagītamaṃ pāḍutaṃ  
mūdalisi pāḍutaṃ muddisute pāḍutaṃ  
ādarisi pāḍutaṃ mēregeḍe pāḍutaṃ  
gītaṅgaḷoḷaḡ' ēkaniṣṭhe hoḷe hoḷevut' ire  
gītaṅgaḷoḷaḡ' abhavabhakti beḷebeḷevut' ire  
gītadoḷu saṅgan' ādhikyav opputtam ire  
gītadoḷu śaraṅara samagravē jigilut' ire  
gītadoḷu paradaivaśōṣaṅam tōrut' ire*

35. The count is approximate, since about half of this story is in prose. The count is taken from [Saudattimath \(1988: 133\)](#).
36. *Basavēśvara Dēvara Raḡaḷe* 3.85–98 ([Suṅkāpura 1976: 35](#)).
37. The five quotations in the *Basavēśvara Dēvara Raḡaḷe* appear in the prose of chapter 6 (one in p. 50 and one in p. 51), in the prose of chapter 10 (p. 76), at the end of chapter 12 (p. 91), and in chapter 13 vv. 53–55 (p. 94). The former two include the word *vacana*, probably in the general sense of “saying” or “uttering.”
38. See the discussion of the section on Allama below.

*gītadoḷu parasamayabhīṣaṇaṁ poṇmut' ire  
gītam śivaṅge karṇābharaṇav' āgut' ire  
gītav' īsana dayākaruṣaṇav' ad' āgut' ire  
hāḍutaṁ śaraṇarolu basavaṇṇan oppidaṁ  
āḍutaṁ bhaktanidhibasavaṇṇan oppidaṁ  
amama daṇḍādhīpakirīṭapadan oppidaṁ  
amama chalināyakara dēvan int' oppidaṁ*

Reflecting on all this, the hair on his body bristled, and he began to sing songs.  
Emboldened, he sang new songs for Saṅga [Śiva].

Chiding, he sang; caressing, he sang.

Caring, he sang, and going beyond all limits, he sang.

In song, as his single-minded dedication blazed forth.

In song, as his devotion to the unborn god grew.

In song, as the greatness of Saṅga spread.

In song, as the bond of the Śaraṇas took over him.

In song, with the downfall of other divinities.

In song, as the horrid nature of other religious traditions was exposed.

The songs became ear ornaments for Śiva!

The songs attracted the Lord's compassion!

Revered Basava sang together with the Śaraṇas and shone.

Revered Basava, the wealth of devotees, danced and shone.

Oh wonder! The one at the top of the chain of command shone.

Oh wonder! The lord of devoted heroes in this way shone.

*Basavēśvara Dēvara Raḡale* 9.195–210 (*Suṅkāpura* 1976: 73)

Chapter 10 continues this theme in three opening verses that quote the devotees' reciprocal eulogy:

*basavana gītav' ambudhiparītadharātaḷadalli sandav' end'  
usirvud' idid' āvud' ond' aridu pannagalōkada dāravaṭṭadoḷ  
desegaḷa bhittiyōḷ digibhad' aṅgadoḷ indrana jihveyōḷ śivā-*

*vasathada bāgilalli bared' ippud' enalk' idum oppad' ippudē*  
*gītām saṅgastuti saṁ-*  
*gītām gītām viśālavasudhāpūtām*  
*gītām gaṇavikhyātām*  
*gītām samprīti nīti gītām nūtām*  
*gītām vēdāntārtha-*  
*vrātām gītām samastaśāstrōpētām*  
*gītām sakaḷāgamakula-*  
*jātām gītām parāparaikasamētām*

“Basava’s songs spread across the ocean-encircled earth!” —  
 By saying this, one confines them to a single place.  
 Wouldn’t it be better to say they are inscribed  
 on the round entrance of the serpentine world,  
 on the outer walls of the eight directions,  
 on the bodies of the elephants that guard the universe,  
 on Indra’s tongue, on the doors of Śiva’s abode?  
 The songs were the music of Saṅga’s praise.  
 The songs were the purity of the broad earth.  
 The songs were famous among Śiva’s attendants.  
 The songs were filled with laudable morals, and they were praised.  
 The songs, encompassing all philosophical scriptures,  
 the songs, replete with all authoritative knowledge,  
 the songs, arising from the collection of all worship manuals,  
 the songs, merging the worldly with the beyond.

*Basavēśvara Dēvara Ragale*, opening verses 1 to 3 of chapter 10 (*Suṅkāpura*  
 1976: 74)

In terms of understanding the reception of *vacanas* in the early period, this passage both reveals and obscures. We learn from it that Basava composed original songs of his own when inspired by the collective worship of the god and the company of fellow Śaivas. We also learn that the songs he composed were devotional in nature and focused on Śiva in his specific manifestation called “Saṅga,” which is a variant of “Kūḍalasaṅgamadēva,” Śiva’s name in many of the *vacanas* attributed to Basava. These descriptions can be easily read as

direct testimony to the fact of Basava’s composing *vacanas*. Furthermore, according to this passage, the songs he composed affirmed the community of devotees, expressed hostility toward other religious traditions, and had a strong ecstatic quality to them. Such descriptions are corroborated by some of the *vacanas* attributed to Basava.

And there is more: the opening verses of chapter 10 tell us that Basava’s songs were disseminated widely, were possibly accompanied by musical tunes,<sup>39</sup> were sung in praise of Śiva, and purported to summarize all mainstream and traditional religious knowledge.<sup>40</sup> This passage therefore appears to confirm that already in Harihara’s time Basava was thought to have composed devotional poetry. Nevertheless, much remains unknown: What was the nature of this poetry and what was its flavor? In what style was it composed and how long was it? And what messages did it convey — were the messages radical and, if so, in what way? As much as the above passage extols Basava’s compositional craft in dramatic ways, it does not reveal much about the form and content of the poetry itself, and it leaves questions such as these unanswered.

There is one additional episode in Basava’s life story in which his songs appear, and it is here that the most pronounced reference to what we recognize today as Basava’s *vacanas* is found in the whole collection. The incident itself, located in chapter 12 of the work, revolves around a Śiva devotee who lives in Kaliṅga, in today’s Odisha. The devotee regularly attends assemblies of worship and recitations.<sup>41</sup> In one of these, while listening to someone publicly singing devotional songs, the devotee hears the following song attributed to Basava:

*bēḍi bēḍida śaraṅarge nīdad’ irdaḍe taledaṅḍa kūḍalasaṅga avadhār’*

If I fail to provide Śaraṅas with whatever they ask for,  
I will offer my head to you!  
O Kūḍalasaṅga, pray hear me!

39. The phrase Harihara uses here, *gītaṁ saṅgastuti saṅgītaṁ* (“song | praise of Saṅga | musical singing”), is minimal and obscure. One possible meaning is “The songs were the music of Saṅga’s praise.”
40. This last claim is commonly shared among many forms of verbal expression that are rhetorically linked to authoritative traditional knowledge, but it gains importance when contrasted with contemporary readings of *vacanas* by some as antinomian. Gauri Lankesh, for examples, writes: “In several vachanas, the sharanas [i.e., Basava and his fellow *vacana* composers] have rejected the Vedas, shastras, smritis and the Upanishads.” From “Making Sense of the Lingayat Vs Veerashaiva Debate,” *The Wire*, September 5, 2017, <https://thewire.in/history/karnataka-lingayat-veerashaive-debate>.
41. I have written at length about Śiva assemblies in the *Ragaḷeḷaḷu* in Ben-Herut (2018 and 2015).



*Basavēśvara Dēvara Ragaḷe* 12, prose (Suñkāpura 1976: 87)

Hearing this, the devotee, whose name suggests he is a merchant, concocts a ruse to extract gold from Basava based on the “blank check” the latter has rhetorically offered in his song.<sup>42</sup>

The line in Harihara’s *Ragaḷe* might accord with what we think of in terms of a *vacana*, both syntactically and semantically. In terms of syntax, the quotation, which addresses the god as many *vacanas* do, culminates with the familiar signature line of Basava, which is the name of his chosen deity Kūḍalasaṅga. Semantically, this quotation presents a dramatic, indeed life-threatening, promise by the devotee to give up his life if he fails in his devotional commitment. Even Basava’s vow in this line, of cutting off his own head (*taledaṇḍa*), corresponds well with the local idiom of this devotional milieu, as a token that is repeatedly woven around the life of Basava and his fellowship.<sup>43</sup>

The passage in which this verse appears identifies the poetic quotation as a song (*gīte*) by Basava that the devotee hears during a performance of “prose and verse composed by the elders.”<sup>44</sup> In the Kannada discourse of poetics, the term “prose and verse” (*gadyapadya*) describes two distinct forms of poetic expression. Indeed, *gadya* and *vacana* both mean “prose” (though the former term is usually associated with longer prose compositions). And, most significantly, even though the term *vacana* is nowhere to be found in the passage, the verse quoted above is a part of a published *vacana* attributed to Basava. The *vacana* is numbered 1053 in Kalaburgi’s publication of *vacanas*.<sup>45</sup> The full *vacana* in this edition reads:

*āne bhaṇḍāra lāyada kudureya bēḍuvar illade baḍav’ āden ayyā  
bēḍuvud’ ēnu dēvā  
munna bēḍide sindhuballāḷana vadhuvanu*

42. The suffix of his name is *seṭṭi*, which denotes a merchant or trader.

43. Ben-Herut (2012: 136–41).

44. *Basavēśvara Dēvara Ragaḷe* 12, prose (Suñkāpura 1976: 87): *purātana viracita gadyapadyaṅgaḷam kēḷisuttam*.

45. See Kalaburgi (2001b [1993]). This is a popular collection of *vacanas* and not a critical one, and it is voluminous, a fact that makes the series very useful for locating *vacanas*. I have consulted it for all the *vacana* references in this article by using the *Vacana Sañcaya* (*Vacana Collection*) and the *Śivaśaraṅara Vacana Samputa* (*Collection of Vacanas by Śiva’s Saints*), two online search engines based on this printed series. Each online project contains close to 21,000 digitized *vacanas* (Mahāsvāmigaḷu 2023; Vasudhēndra and Nāgabhūṣaṇa Svāmi 2014–2019).

*innu bēḍidaḍe niḡaḷavan ikkuve  
bēḍida śaraṇarige nīḍad' irdaḍe taledaṇḍa  
kūḍalasaṅgamadēvā*

Without those who supplicate for an elephant, for coffers,  
or for a stable horse, I have gone bankrupt, O Lord!  
What more is there to ask, dear God?  
Earlier, you asked for the wife of Sindhuballāḷa,  
and if you ask again, I will give my own ornament!<sup>46</sup>  
If I fail to provide the devotees with whatever they ask for,  
I will offer my head to you, O Lord Kūḍalasaṅgama!

Vacana no. 1053 in *Kalaburgi* (2001a [1993]: 284)

Another quotation of a *vacana* soon follows. As the greedy devotee arrives at Basava's place to test him, Śiva appears in disguise before Basava and worriedly admonishes him about the morass his song has generated. Basava, however, smiles, tells the god not to be afraid, and then declares unperturbedly:

*añjadir dēva parīkṣege terah' illaṁ kaṭṭiden oreya biṭṭe jannigey ēraṇ oḍad' ir'  
oḍad' iru śaraṇara maneya biridin' aṅkaṅkakke himmeṭṭad' ir' el' ele dēva ele  
tande el' ele hande kūḍalasaṅga.*

Do not cower, my lord, for there is no room for doubt:  
I have fastened my sheath and removed the sacred thread.  
Do not flee, do not flee from the battlefield!  
Do not retreat from the house of a Sharana, an emblem of courage.  
O Lord, O benefactor, you coward. O Kūḍalasaṅgama!

*Basavēśvara Dēvara Ragaḷe* 12, prose (*Suṅkāpura* 1976: 88)

Basava's address to his god is striking in its boldness. We can note the saint's proud refusal to wear the sacred thread, which is a Brahmanical sign of Vedic initiation and social privilege. We can also note Basava's challenging of the god by calling him a coward. (At the

46. Later in the chapter, Basava will indeed offer his wife to the god, disguised as a devotee.

end, Basava's sharp words prod Śiva to arrange for the delivery of gold and precious stones to untangle the financial mess prompted by Basava's earlier *vacana*). As in the case of the previous quotation, Basava's speech here is almost identical to what is today recognized as *vacana* no. 701, with a slight variation in spelling and word choice.<sup>47</sup>

The core message in the two *vacanas* discussed here is Basava's unbounded commitment to provide for the material needs of any Śaiva devotee, and it corresponds well with Harihara's understanding of Basava's life goal as the author presents it in the framing story at the beginning of this *Ragaḷe*. The *Ragaḷe* about Basava opens with his prenatal life in Kailāsa, Śiva's heavenly abode, where the divine attendant Basava, while passing out food graced by Śiva to all those present in the hall, mistakenly skips Śiva's son Skanda. Śiva's punishment for Basava's failure to distribute the grace of the god to one and all is to spend a lifetime as a human on earth, where he will provide for all the devotees of Śiva, without exception. In Śiva's own words:

*koḍade ennaya kumāraṅge  
eseva nijabhaktibhūṣaṇan enipa vīraṅge  
emage koḍad' irdaḍam sairisuvev' āv 'ayya  
vimalaśīśuviṅge husi nuḍiye sairisev' ayya  
idarindav' ondu jananaṁ ninage dorakitu  
mudadinde hōg' ayya janana nī hottu  
dharāṇiyolu vṛṣabhamukha huṭṭu*

How could you deprive my own son — a hero and ornament of true devotion — of the offering, thus slighting this congregation and my presence? Dear man, I would have turned a blind eye had it been me that you skipped, but how can I when it was an innocent child? Because of this, you shall undertake a human

47. See *vacana* no. 701 in Kalaburgi (2001a [1993]: 175):

*kaṭṭiden oreya biṭṭe jannige ara  
muṭṭi band' ir' idade ṅsarisuvaṇ alla  
ōḍad' iru ṅḍad' iru  
nimma śaraṇara maneya biridina aṅkakāra  
ōḍad' iru ṅḍad' iru ele ele dēvā  
ele ele svāmi  
ele ele hande  
kūḍalasaṅgamadēvā*

birth. Go now, and take this rebirth upon yourself with a smile. Be born on earth,  
Vṛṣabhamukha!

*Basavēśvara Dēvara Ragaḷe* 1.59–65 (Suñkāpura 1976: 25)

Indeed, the story Harihara weaves around the life of Basava stresses the saint's commitment to caring and providing for the community of devotees, and Harihara explicitly states this several times in the text. The *vacanas* quoted in Harihara's story pertain to precisely this theme. By contrast, we encounter no *vacanas* on the themes for which Basava, as a composer of *vacanas*, was famous in later periods: his lyrical self-inquiry into the nature of devotional sentiments and his adamant resistance to external and social constraints. These elements can be found in the fabric of Harihara's literary version of Basava's life but are not expressed in *vacanas*.

In chapter 13 there is yet another quotation that perhaps can be linked to a *vacana*. This chapter is the last in the *Ragaḷe* as we have it today, and it appears to be an amalgamation of disparate passages cobbled together. In the beginning of the chapter, Allama pays a quick visit to Kalyāṇa and teaches Basava about the *śivaliṅga*. Basava expresses his admiration to Allama by singing a song, from which Harihara quotes only a few words:

*anuvan allamadēvan aṛupidaṁ tān endu*  
*manavāre gītamaṁ pāḍuttal iral andu*

“The faithful Lord Allama has introduced himself!”

Wholeheartedly he sang this song.

*Basavēśvara Dēvara Ragaḷe* 13.7–8 (Suñkāpura 1976: 92)

This short line is similar in meaning to the end of the four-line *vacana* numbered 1303, although the words are different.<sup>48</sup>

The fact Harihara quotes only two, or perhaps three if we count a fragmented phrase in chapter 13, of what later will be recognized as Basava's *vacanas*, and that these quotations narrowly focus on Basava's care for the material welfare of Śaivas, speaks volumes regarding Harihara's understanding of what is at the core of Basava's historical importance, which is

48. *Vacana* no. 1303 in Kalaburgi (2001a [1993]: 359): *ṛy anuva allama tōridanu*.

his exceptional sponsorship of devotees, and what is not, which is his criticism of social practices or religious rites.

## 6 Three *Vacanas* by Akka Mahādēvi

Of Harihara's portrayals of saints, that of Akka Mahādēvi (also known as Mahādēviyakka) has the most elaborate treatment of the subject's original poetic compositions.<sup>49</sup> This exceptional attention makes sense in the broader context of Mahādēvi's saintly persona, since the poetry attributed to her clearly played a central role in the spread of her fame well beyond the Kannada-speaking region.<sup>50</sup> In general, Mahādēvi's *vacanas* express a woman's rejection of worldly familial ties and longing for physical unity with the god, and the defiant voice in her *vacanas* corresponds with her traditional story — including in its earliest rendition by Harihara.<sup>51</sup>

The first mention by Harihara of Mahādēvi's songs appears in chapter 5 of the *Raḡale* story about her, amid a long lyrical section describing Mahādēvi's emotionally laden worship of the *liṅga*. Here, Harihara writes:

*gītadoḷage nūtna<sup>52</sup> bhakti jātav' āgal oṭu pāḍi*  
*gītadoḷage śarvan' aṛivu terah' uḡuḍade tīvi pāḍi*  
*bhaktirasada nadiya naḍuve gītaratnav uṇmi pāḍi*  
*bhaktiyolu virakti nelasi mukti mundud' oṛi pāḍi*  
*olidu pāḍi ulidu pāḍi maledu pāḍi balidu pāḍi*  
*salugeyinde gelidu pāḍi puḷakavaḍare nōḍi pāḍi*  
*dēva śivane bhaviya saṅgav' endu māṅbud' enna tande*  
*dēva berakey' illad' accabhaktisukhav' ad' endu tande*  
*pūjeyoḷage macci beccamanavan entu tegeven ayya*  
*pūjeyoḷage naṭṭa diṭṭigaḷan ad' entu kīḷven ayya*

49. Basavarāju (2007 [1966]: 29).

50. See Hawley (2015: 335), Ramaswamy (2007: 1996), and Ramanujan (1973: 111–42).

51. Ramanujan (1989).

52. Sic.

In a song, she recited and sang the birth of new devotion.  
 In a song, she sang the knowledge of Śarva,  
 wholeheartedly and continuously.  
 She sang and produced a gem of a song  
 from the river of the sentiment of devotion.  
 She sang, growing into liberation while grounding her renunciation in devotion.  
 She sang pleasingly, loudly, elatedly, wholeheartedly, and unsparingly.  
 Overflowing with happiness, she sang tenderly as she gazed at the god.  
 With the hair of her body standing on end, she sang:  
 “Lord, O Śiva! End my marriage with this worldly person,  
 you who are my benefactor!  
 Lord, the joy springing from pure devotion cannot be adulterated, O benefactor!  
 Subsumed in worship as I am, how can I distract my enthralled mind, O Lord?  
 Caught up thus in worship, how can I turn away my gaze, O Lord?”

*Mahādēviyakkana Ragaḷe* 5.147–56 (*Suñkāpura* 1976: 133)

As in the case of other saints, here too Harihara describes his appreciation of the saint’s poetic oeuvre while divulging little about the nature of the songs beyond their devotional intensity. The four-line quotation at the end of the passage can be read poetically, although it is difficult to determine if this lyrical outpouring is a *vacana*: while it does carry the pleading and lyrical voice recognizable in many of Mahādēvi’s *vacanas*, it is in the *ragaḷe* meter (and not in prose as most *vacanas* are), lacks a concise message, and does not bear a signature line. Furthermore, a few verses earlier we were told about “auspicious songs sung with love by the supreme devotees”<sup>53</sup> to the sounds of conch, drum, cymbal, which is the conventional style of devotional singing to which Mahādēvi’s songs might have belonged.

In chapter 6, Harihara again quotes Mahādēvi singing:

*ayō śivane uḷiva kareva nēhav’ uṇṭe saṁsārakkam nimmallig’ eḍeyāduva  
 bhaktiy uṇṭe, ēnayya śivane, ēnam pēḷyen ī lajjeya mātan*

53. *Mahādēviyakkana Ragaḷe* 5.134 (*Suñkāpura* 1976: 132): *bhaktar olidu pāḍut’ irpa maṅgaḷaṅgaḷaḷage.*



Alas, O Śiva! Is there any love left out there to receive me?  
 And is there any room for devotion in marital life and away from you?  
 O Śiva, what shall my fate be?  
 What more can I say beyond these humiliating words?

*Mahādēviyakkana Raḡaḷe 6, prose (Suñkāpura 1976: 135)*

In contrast to the previous quotation, this one is almost identical to and clearly identifiable as *vacana* no. 88 in the published version.<sup>54</sup> A few minor changes in that version stand out: (1) the pronouns appear in a different order, (2) the language register is slightly updated (e.g., from *pēḷven* to *hēḷuven*), and (3) the name of the deity whom Mahādēvi addresses has changed from “Śiva” to “Mallikārjuna.” This latter change is telling in the sense that it might point to an editorial need in modern times to fix the signature phrase of a *vacana* composer in more hermetic ways than in Harihara’s time (although in other parts of the text Harihara does identify Mahādēvi with the specific manifestation of Śiva as Mallikārjuna).

A bit further along in the same chapter Harihara again quotes Mahādēvi’s words:

*śivalāñchanavan ērisikoṇḍu manege bandavarām kaḍegaṇisi eṇtu nōḍut’ ippem  
 avarge satkāravām māḍal illad’ irdaḍ’ ennan ī dhareya mēl’ irisuva kāraṇav’  
 ēn’ abhavā ninn’ aval’ end’ enna muddu tanavam salisuvaḍ’ irisuvud’ allā  
 kailāsakke koṇḍoyvud’ endu cennamallikārjunaṅge gītamaṅ pāḍut’...*

How can I remain idle, having seen  
 those who came to my home carrying Śiva’s emblem being treated with contempt?  
 If I cannot show these people hospitality,  
 what reason is there for me to remain on this earth?  
 O you who are beyond existence,  
 if you consider me yours,

54. See *vacana* no. 88 in Rājūra (2001 [1993]: 31):

*uḷuḷuva karava nēhav’ uṅṅe nimmalli  
 saṁsārakk’ eḍey’ ā bhaktiyōḷave  
 enna dēva cennamallikārjun’ ayyā  
 ēna hēḷuven ayya lajjeya mātanu*

and if you love me,  
do not keep me in this body!  
Take me to Kailāsa!

*Mahādēviyakkana Ragaḷe* 6, prose (Suñkāpura 1976: 137)

*Vacana* no. 350 in the printed corpus is shorter than what we find here, and there are certain differences between the two renditions, but the two texts generally correspond in letter and in spirit.<sup>55</sup> One major difference is that in the version transmitted as a *vacana*, Mahādēvi asks the god to lead her to Srisailam, the famous Śaiva temple complex in Andhra Pradesh, while in the *Ragaḷe* version she asks to be taken to Kailāsa. As noted earlier, such a variation could be explained by a need in the later tradition to align more strongly Mahādēvi's *vacanas* with her life story, in which she travels to Srisailam to unite with her god.

Another relevant passage appears toward the end of the same chapter, at the climactic moment of Mahādēvi's desertion of the palace and her married life. Forced to remain disrobed in front of her husband, parents, guru, and fellow devotees, Mahādēvi formally announces the termination of her marriage agreement. She places her personal *liṅga* in the palm of her hand, bids farewell to her parents and guru, hands over her jewelry to the Śaiva devotees who stand there, and walks away naked. At this point, Harihara quotes Mahādēvi saying:

*āśanad' āseyam̐ tṛṣeya tṛṣṇeyam̐ besada bēgeyam̐ viṣayada vihvāḷateyam̐*  
*tāpatrayada kalpanegaḷam̐ geliden inn' ēn inn' icchey' ādudu*  
*cannamallikārjunā ninag' añjen añjen*

I have overcome hunger and thirst,  
the fire of craving and the delusion of sexual desire,  
as well as the three defiling and unreal torments.

55. See *vacana* no. 350 in Rājūra (2001 [1993]: 104):

*lāñchana sahita manege bandaḷe*  
*tatkālavan aridu prēmava māḍad' irdadaḷe*  
*nīn irisida maneya tottalla*  
*tatkāla prēmava māḍuv' ante enna mudda salis' ayyā*  
*alladaḷe oyy' ayya siriśaila cennamallikārjunā*

What other desires are left for me to relinquish?  
 O beautiful Mallikārjuna,  
 because of you I have no fear,  
 no fear at all.

*Mahādēviyakkana Ragaḷe 6, prose (Suñkāpura 1976: 139)*

This passage can easily be read as *vacana*, among other reasons because of the concluding line in this utterance (“O beautiful Mallikārjuna...”), which is identical to the format of signature line found at the end of many *vacanas*. The signature line usually presents a reflection that brings home the preceding statements in the body of the *vacana* and is addressed to the devotee’s chosen manifestation of the god. In this passage the concluding line indeed captures the message that pervades in the body of the passage with the proclamation addressed to Śiva Mallikārjuna: “I have no fear.” In spite of this and other indications that what we have here is a *vacana*, I was not able to locate a *vacana* that resembles this passage in Kalaburgi’s publication.

In chapter 7, Mahādēvi is confronted by Kauśika, her non-Śaiva husband, who pretends to have had a change of heart and become a Śaiva devotee. Harihara quotes Mahādēvi’s response in the form of a reflecting song:

*biṭṭappen endadaṁ biḍ’ adu ninnaya māye*  
*oṭṭayisi bandad’ oḍavand’ appud’ ī māye*  
*jōgigaṁ jōgiṇiy’ ad’ āytu ninnaya māye*  
*rāgadiṁ savaṇaṅge kantiy āyitu māye*  
 ...  
*karuṇākarā ninna māyeg’ aṅjuven ayya*  
*paramēśvarā mallinātha karuṇipud’ ayya*

Illusion: you say you abandoned her, but she never left you.  
 Illusion: as she has accompanied you here, so she will remain with you.  
 Illusion: she has become the wandering partner of a wandering ascetic.  
 Illusion: she has become the panhandler lovingly accompanying you, a mendicant.  
 ...

Pray, O ocean of mercy! I fear your illusion!  
O Supreme Lord, Mallinātha! Please have mercy on me!

*Mahādēviyakkana Ragaḷe* 7.89–92, 99–100 (Sunākāpura 1976: 143)

Here, Mahādēvi expresses her deep frustration and the difficulty she experiences in facing the lingering shadow of her previous married life. Her words conform to the *vacana* traits we mentioned earlier, and indeed *vacana* no. 303 in the popular edition is similar to what is quoted above.<sup>56</sup> There are also marked differences: after the first four lines, the two versions diverge, until they converge again with the concluding two lines (right after “Pray, O ocean of mercy!”). However, in Harihara’s version, Mahādēvi asserts “I fear your illusion!” (*añjuven*) while in the published version she states the opposite: “I am not afraid of your illusion!” (*nān añjuvaḷ’ alla*). Also, in the last line of the *vacana* in Harihara’s version, Mahādēvi beseeches the god for mercy (*karuṇipud’*), but in the published version she exclaims that this is the command of the god (in second person, *nimm’ āṇe*). Although the degree of variation between Harihara’s text and the published version is considerable, the two versions share enough of the *vacana* content and form to recognize them as the same *vacana*.

Finally, very close to the end of the chapter and of the *Ragaḷe* as a whole, Harihara mentions in two verses a meeting between Mahādēvi and another famous devotee named Kinnara Bommatande. Mahādēvi sings a song for the occasion, but the author does not provide any further details.<sup>57</sup>

Unlike the *Ragaḷes* about Kēśirāja and Allama, but with some similarity to that about Basava, the *Ragaḷe* about Mahādēvi conveys Harihara’s genuine appreciation of her original songs and their inherent role in her life story. And yet, these *vacanas* appear in only a few, very specific moments. This limited appearance is nothing like the voluminous body of *vacanas* attributed to Mahādēvi in later texts. Considered together, Harihara’s sparse treat-

56. See *vacana* no. 303 in Rājūra (2001 [1993]: 90):

*biṭṭen endadē biḍad’ ī māye*  
*biḍad’ iddaḍe bembatt’ itu māye*  
*yōg’ ige yōg’ iniy’ āyittu māye*  
*savaṇaṅge savaṇiy’ āyittu māye*  
*yatiḅe parākiy āyittu māye*  
*ninna māyege nān añjuvaḷ’ alla*  
*cennamallikārjunadēvā nimm’ āṇe*

57. *Mahādēviyakkana Ragaḷe* 7.193–96 (Sunākāpura 1976: 147).

ment of the *vacanas* in the lives of Allama, Basava, and Mahādēvi, as compared to what we might expect given their later reputation as “authors of *vacanas*,” compels us to reconsider our understanding of *vacanas* in their early history.

## 7 Conclusion

In concluding this article I would like to reflect on the *vacanas* as they were received during the first centuries of their appearance based on the evidence I have presented above.

The songs quoted in this article might appear substantial when read in sequence, but they are in fact a minute portion of Harihara’s voluminous *Ragaḷe Stories*. When examined against the full breadth of the work, which is a collection consisting of more than ten thousand lines in its current form, the references to what can be ascertained as *vacanas* are astonishingly brief, few, and casual.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, the only two figures to whom Harihara clearly attributes what can safely be considered *vacanas* — Basava and Mahādēvi — also have the longest stories in the collection (with 26 and 7 chapters, respectively). The fact songs by these two figures are not major in the respective texts again highlights the limited importance of *vacanas* in Harihara’s rendering of the saints of that period. Notably, we find in Harihara’s text nothing like the celebration of *vacanas* in the much later *Śūnyasampādane*, where long conversations between devotees (Mahādēvi included) are uttered in *vacanas*, and the story is itself a dramatization of the *vacanas*.

It is meaningful that Basava and Mahādēvi are the only model devotees in Harihara’s work who are directly linked to *vacanas* as we have them today, especially when considered against the absence of *vacanas* associated with Allama Prabhu, who since the fifteenth century has been regarded as a leading *vacana* composer and an important figure in the tradition but receives only limited attention from Harihara.<sup>59</sup> It is no less than astonishing that Harihara mentions nothing of this saint’s prolific *vacana* composition, the subject of much attention in later periods, including today.<sup>60</sup>

When we look closer into the few instances of *vacana* quotations in the *Ragaḷe* stories, several additional features emerge. One is the fact that because Harihara does not label

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58. A minimal count of only *Ragaḷe* stories that involve Kannada-speaking figures and whose authorship is not contested amounts to eighteen texts and a total line count of close to twelve thousand. See [Ben-Herut 2018](#): 59 n. 41 for the list of the eighteen stories and [Saudattimath 1988](#): 133 for respective line counts.
59. The *Ragaḷe* to Allama, with only one chapter, is considerably shorter than those of Basava and Mahādēvi.
60. See, for example, [Nāgarāj \(1999\)](#).

the quoted lines as *vacanas* and refers to them only as “songs” (*gūtegaḷu*), it is difficult for the *Ragaḷe* listener/reader to tell them apart from traditional styles of devotional poetry that are referred to in the text, such as in the case of Kēśirāja or in descriptions of public singing by crowds of devotees. Harihara seems to acknowledge some newness in the songs of Akka Mahādēvi (*nūtana*), but he reveals little about their qualities beyond devotional merit, which he describes in very general terms. This point is significant, I believe, because it suggests a lack of appreciation of the *vacanas*’ uniqueness by Harihara or more broadly during this period, and even a lack of distinction between *vacanas* and other popular forms of devotional expression. The widely accepted understanding of *vacanas* as an ingenious and indigenous style in Kannada, unique in both its form and content, an understanding that has been so essential since the fifteenth century and is so even more strongly today, and which is captured by the label *vacana*, highlights the absence of such an appreciation in the early period.

A more technical aspect of *vacanas* as they appear in the *Ragaḷe* stories is that *vacanas* quoted in this text are not easily distinguishable from Harihara’s own prose. With the exception of one *vacana* by Mahādēvi, the *vacana* quotations appear in the prose chapters and not in those written in the *ragaḷe* meter.<sup>61</sup> Harihara’s literary prose is often styled with repetitions, syntactical patterns, metaphors, and so on, and it is possible that Harihara felt that *vacanas* fitted better in his prose. In any case, this highlights the meter-less structure of *vacanas* and the fact that, as utterances, they were closer to “prose” than to “verse,” very much in accordance with one meaning of the word *vacana* as “prose.” Further, this coheres with the fact that until the nineteenth century and the advent of print, *vacanas* were written as continuous prose text without line breaks.<sup>62</sup> Harihara’s referring to *vacanas* as “songs” complicates their labeling as “prose” (or even as “*vacanas*”), since the word “songs” traditionally connotes singing to music while the word “prose” does not.<sup>63</sup>

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61. The outlier *vacana* appears in *Mahādēviyakkana Ragaḷe* 7.88–103 and is discussed in the previous section of this article.
  62. Ramanujan writes: “Medieval Kannada manuscripts use no punctuation, no paragraph-, word-, or phrase-divisions, though modern editions print the *vacanas* with all the modern conventions” (1973: 13). Halkatti (1922) translates *vacanas* in prose form as they appeared in manuscripts. Verse was also rendered without line breaks in the manuscripts, but the verses themselves were separated by punctuation marks, and the metrical form itself would have been recognized by most readers.
  63. There is a subgroup of *vacanas* called *svaravacanas*, written in local meters. They are meant to be sung according to a particular rhythm, but it is difficult to determine if these evolved out of meter-less *vacanas* or out of meters such as *tripadi*.

A matter related to the absence of meter is the malleability of the language used in the *vacanas*, which becomes evident in a word-to-word comparison between Harihara's quotations of *vacanas* and how they appear in current publications. The amount of language change found in these comparisons is, in my view, greater than that which would be expected in routine manuscript variation. It not only testifies to the importance of oral performance and of the performer in the transmission of *vacanas* but also foregrounds the textual malleability of these poems in terms of spoken registers through the ages. Above all, it reminds us that *vacana* literature, like any devotional poetry in India, is a lived genre that is experienced in performative and other live settings, which is very remote from the Western notion of premodern literature as frozen in its time. Put differently, we must change our expectations of "literature," as a fixed form of text, when we deal with *vacanas*.

Returning to the starting point of this article and the larger question regarding the status of the *vacanas* in the early centuries of the Kannada tradition, it is possible to say that the authors trained in Kannada literature who first began writing about the devotional culture promulgated by the twelfth-century saints did not see the *vacanas* as something that required "textualization," that is, their being written down and collected for posterity. In order to communicate devotional attitudes and behaviors to their audiences in *written* form in their own compositions, the authors chose not to record *vacanas* by saintly figures but to tell their life stories.<sup>64</sup> In light of this remarkable but quite apparent conclusion, we might ask: What was the status of the *vacanas* during this period?

The most radical possibility, both historically and politically, is that the *vacanas* were marginal for the emerging tradition during the early period and/or that the corpus of *vacana* literature was dramatically expanded after its moments of origins in the twelfth century. Although such a claim has been suggested by some historians, I find it farfetched, as it rests on the idea of a wholesale "fabrication of tradition" starting from the fifteenth century, an idea that seems improbable in light of the vastness of the *vacana* corpus, its originality, and its spectacular success and influence, even on the early authors, albeit indirectly.

64. A case in point for comparison in this regard is devotional literature in Tamil, for example in the case of the poems and life story of Cuntarar (aka Sundarar) in the early Tamil Śaiva canon. David Shulman (1980: xxxv–xlii) addresses questions that are related in nature to those raised in this article, and from his analysis it appears that: (1) the earliest Tamil hagiography of this saint-poet (written in the twelfth century) was thematically more closely aligned with the poems attributed to him than what we find in Harihara's text, and (2) in contrast with the *vacanas*, the Tamil devotional poems were highly formulaic and apparently underwent textualization *before* the writing down of the saints' life stories. These features perhaps contribute to the relative cohesiveness of the Tamil canon, in comparison with the Kannada Śivabhakti materials. Richard Davis current project of the solidification of the Tevaram canon will surely shed more light on this subject.



Another unlikely possibility is that *vacanas* were performed, transmitted, and appreciated largely by a different audience than that of literary works. We do not know much about the public context in which literary works were composed nor about the *vacanas*' performative context. The Kannada authors Harihara and Rāghavāṅka are only tenuously associated with political centers, and even less with religious ones, and we are ignorant about how their written texts, too, were performed.<sup>65</sup> Notwithstanding this lacuna, one could argue that the *vacanas* in this period won appreciation elsewhere, perhaps in less literate circles where oral performance of *vacanas* was distinct from that of written literature. But making such claims on the basis of the canon of devotional literature as we have it today, or even as we inherited it in writing since the fifteenth century, seems precarious. In addition, the style with which Harihara composed his *Ragaḷes* betrays his fascination with oral and popular forms, and from the analysis in this article it is evident that he was not averse nor ignorant of (at least a few) *vacanas*.

Another explanation, and one that is most compelling in my view, is that the *vacanas* were circulated orally in the same communities for which the devotional authors composed their written texts, but that these authors did not feel compelled to write them down or to elaborate on them. The early authors saw the *vacanas* as part of conventional songs performed by devotional communities; they could not, and did not, recognize or acknowledge the *vacanas*' unique significance *as written literature*. Such a hypothesis should not be read as radical in any way, because devotional poetry in a larger sense was circulating and available, and the poems we recognize today as *vacanas* were to some extent indistinguishable within a larger body of oral devotional poems, sung or recited in performative contexts in different parts of South India, perhaps as early as the sixth century in the Tamil region.<sup>66</sup> What was missing in this period was not the *vacanas* themselves but a literary recognition of their uniqueness and a public appreciation of their messages, vision, literary form, and performative context — all the elements that are signified by the much later label *vacana*. This possibility opens up new ways of imagining the development of an original literary form over time, in this case originating as an organic part of a pre-existing oral culture of devotional songs and evolving into a clearly identifiable and distinct textual corpus that is

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65. That is, beyond what is described in later hagiographies. The most direct testimony we have is the opening section of the *Basava Purāṇamu* in the Telugu language, which clearly associated itself with the institutional form of Śaivism in Srisaillam, but this setting is not directly connected with the Kannada authors. See Fisher (2019).
66. The basic incongruence between the meters used in devotional songs and the non-metrical style of the *vacanas* requires further consideration.

celebrated and argued over by different religious traditions, literati, and social agents in later periods.

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