

Basavaraj Naikar, trans. *The Frolic Play of the Lord*. New Delhi: Authors Press. 180+x pp. ISBN 9789381030066.

I have just read *The Frolic Play of the Lord*, an English translation of Chamarasa's (A.D. 1450) Kannada classic *Prabhulinga Lile* by Dr. Basavaraj Naikar in two sittings and felt so deeply influenced that I literally waded through each chapter or book in a quick succession. The visuals of the known and the unknown, the phenomena and the Noumena, the mundane and the spirituality, certainty and doubt, attachment and detachment, gross and the subtle and illusion and reality presented here as woof and weft of all the characters are both general and particular. The character of the mighty Allama who literally sculpted and blew life into the great ones like Basava and others sweeps across the work as an unparalleled colossus.

In this work of twenty-five *Gatis* or Books Chamarasa's Allama is the quintessence of the spiritual glory as conceived by the best minds in Virasaiva epistemology. And those who are familiar with Chamarasa's original have enough reason to go on record that this excellent translation by Naikar in the form of exquisite prose-bits reflects the original in all its myriad spiritual colours and hues. In this realistically and imaginatively trans-created work the virtuoso of the translator lies in his perception of the possibility of modern readings and interpretations of this medieval Kannada classic, that too an overtly religious one of which the chief protagonist is Allama.

The second priority of the translator seems to have arisen from his desire to explore the possibility of presenting Allama to our own time with all the facets of his multi-dimensional effulgence and yet simplistic spiritual persona. From this point of view *The Frolic Play of the Lord* is as much a reader's delight as it is of the translator.

Retaining much of the subtleties of the old world aura of Virasaiva religion, philosophy, theology and spirituality, the work as such is a graphic narrative that in the hands of the translator has achieved a rare synthesis in terms of a reflective scripture that in its unhurried pace make a distinctive spiritual sense of the characters portrayed here. The story of *The Frolic Play of the Lord* as told in the Kannada is in itself an innovative one and conceived imaginatively by Chamarasa. He differs considerably from the similar narratives by Harihara, Harishwara, Parvatesha, Marirachavattisha and others. The newness or the novelty that is conspicuous in Chamarasa's work seems to be the result of the shift occurred over the centuries in regard to Allama, who until then was understood to be one who has transformed himself from that of a worldling to the highest level of spiritual eminence. But Chamarasa in tune with the general mood existing in the 15th century was inclined to view Allama as the

incarnation of the incorruptible divine entity that could never be caught in the snares of the worldly entanglements even if it were to be the love of a beautiful princess. And this is where Chamarasa offers a strong contrast with other poets who for historical reasons associate Allama's early life with a woman. Consequently Chamarasa's work is a sort of magical narrative glorifying the *lilas* or the sports of the divine entity in action. The translator in his beautifully minted proso-poetic bits has wrapped up all that in a style that has trans-created those magical moments charged with powerful spiritual overtones unveiling the work's philosophical and spiritual grandeur.

For instance those *Gatis* or Books that deal with the exchanges between Allama and Princess Maya, Allama and Muktai, Allama and Marulusankaradeva, Allama and Siddharama, Allama and Goggayya and Allama and Basava in this translation are not only vivid and sophisticated but as presented in their surreal settings steal the reader's attention. Especially the encounters between Allama and Maya and Allama and Muktai will unfailingly help recall the famous talks that Gargi, Maitreyi, Vachaknavi, Apala and others in ancient India had with their mentors. The moves of Maya, the temptress, whose bids to adhere and seduce Allama, seem to make one thing very clear that the worldly charms are but ephemeral and transient and clinging to them inexorably would only spell doom. The persona of Allama that emerges here is both radiant and luminous suggesting there is everything in rising and nor in falling. In this context each episode is a lesson in spirituality trans-created by Naikar investing his own experimental readings into the Virasaiva lore. In this process he has transformed each *Gati* into a scintillating narrative capable of arousing a higher sense of consciousness in the reader.

By the time we come to the end of our reading of the work we invariably feel that we had heard at length an enlightening socio-spiritual sermon sitting at the feet of a great master. The mighty Allama has unfolded a sure path to self-realisation and the work in the process being turned into a celebration of the Allamystique by Dr. Naikar subjects us into introspection about our own multilayered individual identities. In the *Gati* 13, where we read about the epistemological clash between Allama and Siddharama it was the latter who with his self-aggrandised demonic fury tried to reduce the former to ashes, who triumphs in the ultimate was Allama, the effulgent symbol of knowledge. Siddharama concedes his defeat with these words: "I bow down to your feet. Kindly, therefore, show me the path of liberation and teach me the way of conquering death and attaining the Reality. I do not want to argue any more" (*Gati* 13, 57).

In the recent decades modern scholarship has demonstrated that the *vachana*-centric Virasaiva or Lingayat literature produced in the last eight or nine centuries is no longer studied as purely a religious one or in isolation of its social relevance. Its genuine secular and spirito-people-centric credentials have

been widely recognised. In this context the episodes depicted in *The Frolic Play of the Lord* can offer refreshing readings into human psyche and its complex interiors. These stunningly portrayed instances in their trans-creation stand comparison to the best of their kind in world literature, thus placing the *vachana*-centric literature on a platform for view by one and all. For this the characters of Princess Maya and Muktai, Siddharama and Goggayya stand testimony. These distraught men and women troubled by their own desires, worries or angst finally see the light at the end of the tunnel. For Princess Maya, who sought to be one with Allama amorously but failed Allama was revealed thus: “Allama, the divine dissembler, who teases the humankind by his tricks, pretended to be in the company of Princess Maya, but yet not allowing her to indulge in the amorous sport. Nobody could ever understand the mystery of his nature” (*Gati* 5, 48). These words seem to reaffirm the incorruptibility of the divine entity that was inseparably lodged in Allama and that was what Chamarasa desired most to glorify in his work, which in *The Frolic Play of the Lord* is astoundingly recreated.

Allama’s approach to human predicament is humane and rational. Being a tangible ford to cross over the ocean of doubt and dilemma Allama tells Muktai: “Although a baby is used to mother’s breast-milk, it is weaned from it by being fed gradually on other items of food. Similarly you should learn to forget the external world and try to dwell in your inner being” (*Gati* 12, 16).

Readers of Kannada *Prabhulinga Lile* usually carry the impression that the spiritual elements that go into the making of Allama are not borrowed; rather they are conceived and developed by Chamarasa’s genius only to alter and influence the notions about Allama held sacrosanct till then. In this context all the encounters depicted in this work are justifiably enough defining moments in Allama’s life as much as they are in the lives of others. Therefore each *Gati* or Book is crafted with a great spiritualist’s romance and a practitioner’s appetite. In the process Chamarasa’s Allama is turned into an abiding metaphor for the highest kind of spiritualism. And Basavaraj Naikar’s trans-creation of all this is intense, lyrical, excellently communicative and never at once missing the magic artistry of a seasoned trans-creator promising a delectable reading throughout.

What emerge finally in this work are the mighty Allama’s concern, generosity and sympathy in a spiritual crisis. This is the echo that the readers of this translation hear reverberating in their ears. Allama resembles the Sun and all other characters revolve around in his light doubting, prodding, questioning, sometimes in their submissive tender voices and sometimes exhibiting combative spirit in their quest for reorientation of their already chosen spiritual path. In this context *The Frolic Play of the Lord* is bound to move and affect the readers to a better understanding of their own spiritual self in contrast to their worldly existence. The lived experiences of Virasaivism, though regional, seem to have accomplished a status of universal appeal in this work fully qualified to

be termed as an excellent contribution to Oriental literature. Dr. Basavaraj Naikar's is a daring attempt at retrieving an invaluable Kannada classic in English. His prudence, erudition and his distinguished background have enabled him to delve deep into the subject and the result being the recreation of a seamless work of literary art that blends the real and the surreal magnificently.

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