

GOD HAS SIGNED

Nature, Divinity and Mysticism in the Poetry of Kuvempu

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Abstract: Kuvempu wrote a large number of poems on the mysteries of nature. Kuvempu hails from the heart of Western Ghats and he spent his childhood and youth exploring the forests around his house. Untrammelled nature was both mysterious and beautiful; hence nature turned out to be a primary inspiration to write poetry. Kuvempu looks outward, seeking to comprehend the oneness of all in nature through his senses. But he is also struck by the inability to comprehend and explain nature through senses. Often he expresses his awe at natural sights such as dawn (which appears to him as a God's signature) or the greenery of Western Ghats (which seems to have painted everything in nature in green, including poet's soul and the blood in the stomach). This leads Kuvempu to resort to mysticism in order to relate, comprehend and sing about nature. He sees in nature the divine presence. The paper will analyze poems such as *Devaru Rujumadidanu*, *Ba Phalguna Ravidarshanake*, and *Prakriti Upasane*, and explore the poetic perception of nature as divine through mysticism.

Keywords: Nature, Mysticism, Divine, Poetic vision, Civilisation, Dawn

1. Introduction

Kuppalli Venkataiah Puttappa, popularly known as Kuvempu, is the foremost modern Kannada literary figure. He is an accomplished novelist, playwright and social commentator but his reputation largely rests on his poetry. Kuvempu was a prolific poet and wrote poetry for more than four decades. Apart from his epic poem, *Ramayana Darshanam* (1957), he published more than thirty collections of poems. *Ramayana Darshanam* is a modern retelling of an ancient epic, *Ramayana*, inspired more by the values of the anti-colonial nationalism and Gandhian India. Sarvodaya (welfare of all) is the value Kuvempu advocates through his epic poem. Written in a flowing free verse poetic form, which Kuvempu innovated

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and called Mahachandas, this epic poem is more than 22,000 lines in length. While *Ramayana Darshanam* is tangentially relevant to my theme here, I focus more on his shorter lyrical poems, which explicitly focus on nature and environment.

Before I analyze how Kuvempu engages environment in his poetry, a brief discussion of his poetic sensibility will be helpful for the reader. Despite his centrality to modern Kannada literary sensibility, and substantial literary criticism in Kannada, there is very little written on Kuvempu in English. Even the Kannada literary criticism (especially by modernist critics) of his poetry often focuses on his use of language, specifically of old Kannada vocabulary and idioms, which is unusual in modern Kannada poetry. In contrast, his novels and social writings are lauded as exemplary. My own approach here is to focus on Kuvempu's attitude towards nature, an understudied theme.

2. Kuvempu's poetic vision and influences

Kuvempu's poetic vision was inspired by a curious mix of two elements. First, his social vision was inspired by a modern western critique of Indian society, which highlighted the backwardness, superstition and the hierarchical nature of caste society. Yet Kuvempu did not uncritically accept the West. Thus the second element of his poetic vision, his civilizational understanding of India came from Indian intellectual traditions, in particular from Upanishads and Advaita Vedanta. While he is dismissive of caste society and its practices, Kuvempu is far more receptive of Indian philosophical traditions. His notion of the divine is Advaitic. Note his engagement and subsequent acceptance of Indian culture is also a critical one. Interestingly, unlike many other modern Indian poets, Kuvempu's engagement with pre-modern aesthetic traditions of India, notably the *rasa* theory, is minimal. In fact, he appropriated the statement *Raso Vai Saha* (that which is nothing but *rasa*) from *Taittiriya Upanishad*; this statement has been often cited by various Indian thinkers as a description of the 'divine present in all things and beings.' Similarly, his poetic craft is a mix of western poetic influences, (especially English Romantic poets as well as epic poets like Milton) and Kannada epic poetry traditions (specifically the Jain poets like Nagachandra).

Given these influences both on poetic vision and craft, Kuvempu explores the great challenges colonial and post-colonial India faced in the 20th century. So his poetry is counted among modern Kannada's most significant poetic response to challenges such as caste inequality, orthodox

religiosity and superstition, and the task of building a new nation, overcoming the divisions and inequities of the past. Kuvempu’s poetic sensibility is a modern rationalist one tempered by the Indian philosophical and spiritual traditions. Unlike his contemporary Kannada writers, who were mostly from Brahmin castes, Kuvempu came from a shudra, peasant family. Hence his response to both Indian past and western modernity is quite different from his contemporaries. He views Indian past as one which denied literacy and cultural autonomy to shudras. Specifically, he often pointed out that in the absence of western education, he would not have become a university professor and a poet. Thus though Kuvempu is quite critical of most forms of Hindu religiosity and Indian culture, he returns to the philosophical and speculative traditions of Vedanta and Upanishads for intellectual nourishment. Similarly, he is quite welcoming of modern science and scientific temper, while being critical of the excesses of modern civilization. Hence in his poetry, Kuvempu offers both a social critique of Indian society as well as a set of new values appropriate for this age.

3. Significance of Nature in Kuvempu’s Poetry

Three themes may be found in Kuvempu’s poetry. First, Kuvempu commented on social, historical and political realities of his times in his poems. Thus his early collections include poems on India’s colonial servitude, caste inequality, anti-democratic princely rule, superstition and temple worship. Kuvempu emphatically states the significance of common people, and often writes on the values appropriate for a new age. Second, a dominant theme of his poems, particularly from the 1940s-1950s, is family and romantic love. Third, Kuvempu wrote a large number of poems on nature. Kuvempu hails from the heart of Western Ghats and belonged to a landowning peasant family. His ancestral village, Kuppalli in Shimoga district, where he spent his childhood, is a pocket of agricultural land, surrounded by dense forest all around. As he claims in a later poem, everything was green all around him. Climbing the hill behind his house, one could not see another village or even a built structure in the valley below. Kuvempu spent his childhood and youth exploring and occasionally hunting in the forests around his house. Since he belonged to a shudra caste, he was not burdened by the limits that a Brahmin youth would have been subjected to. In other words, Kuvempu’s experience of nature was unmediated and substantive.

For him, the untrammelled nature was both mysterious and beautiful. Hence nature turned out to be a primary inspiration to write poetry. In his perception of nature, he is also influenced by the English Romantic poets, and in particular, Kuvempu considers the human spirit as a source of enormous possibility and what interests him is its union with the Universal for which nature is the conduit. Or we may even see the nature as the same as universal spirit. As I noted earlier, Kuvempu seems to be influenced by the conception of the universe as divine. Note that the divine here is not what one finds in sectarian Hindu religiosity like Shiva or Vishnu; it is non-anthropomorphic and unnamed. Kuvempu looks outward, seeking to comprehend the oneness of all in nature through his senses. But he is also struck by the inability to comprehend and explain nature through senses. Often he expresses his awe at natural sights such as dawn (which appears to him as a God's signature) or the greenery of Western Ghats (which seems to have painted everything in nature in green, including poet's soul and the blood in the stomach). This leads Kuvempu to resort to mysticism in order to relate, comprehend and sing about nature. He sees in nature the divine presence. His understanding of divine comes largely from the Upanishads, where the divine is an abstraction and thus he could stay away from the conceptions of divinity in the Hindu religious traditions. My paper will analyze poems such as – *Devaru Rujumadidanu* (God has signed), *Ba Phalguna Ravidarshanake* (Come Witness the Vision of Sun), and *Prakriti Upasane* (Nature Worship) – and explore the poetic perception of nature as divine through mysticism.

4. Worshipping Nature: Divine, mystical

All the three poems I have chosen – *Devaru Rujumadidanu*, *Ba Phalguna Ravi Darshanake*, *Prakriti Upasane* – describe dawn. While the first two poems function as the anchors of poetic imagination, my final selection shows the poet speculating on the human civilizations and the beauty of nature. Can Worshipping the Nature (*Prakriti Upasane*) be considered as interior monologue?

Kuvempu describes the dawn in his poem *Devaru Rujumadidanu* (God has Signed). Indeed, the dawn appears to the poet as god's signature. The illustration of the dawn is not a mere description of an awe-inspiring scene of nature; rather the poem unfolds Kuvempu's poetic theory. Kuvempu believed that nature cannot be realized through senses; he attempts to understand the presence of the divine in nature as he sings the beauty of nature in his poem.

The dawn described in the poem inspires ecstasy in the poet.
Against the backdrop of enormous sky,
as the mountains stand tall aligned,
amidst dense jungles
shines the river Tunge,
God has signed,
And the poet looks on it in ecstasy.¹

As the poet witnesses the beauty of dawn amidst nature the mind dwells in the heaven. The birds flying in the sky appear to the poet in the shape of a pen and an unsung meter; thus the poet finds both his subject and poetic form. Further, Kuvempu describes the line of flying birds as the beauty of the creation and as the reminder of the constant presence of the divine. This perception elevates the poem from simply being a mere celebration of nature's beauty into an illustration of Kuvempu's mode of experiencing nature as a force of the divine. Thus the poem does not limit itself to the realm of senses and sensual experience but turns into a source of poetic imagination and identification of the divine. By locating the divine in nature, Kuvempu moves away from the Hindu sectarian religiosity and offers a universal perspective on both nature and god.

Kuvempu further explores the theme of dawn in another poem, *Ba Phalgun Ravi Darshanake* (Come Witness the Vision of Sun). In the eyes of the poet, the mountain range from which he sees the sun is the abode of god Shiva himself; situating Shiva's abode amidst nature, Kuvempu once again removes the god from a religious milieu and creates a secular space; it is important to note that Kuvempu's Shiva is not a sectarian god. The dawn is not just the rising of the sun but a moment when the sun pours the essence of life into the creation. The sunrise also provokes the poet's imagination as he sees the life force in every being.

Kuvempu describes the moment of vision as the moment of interaction between the world of the dawn, the objective world of nature, and the inner world of the poet, which is his subjective world of imagination. This moment of interaction between the nature and man is not achieved through sense perception; the poet declares that the moment can be savoured only as he crosses the boundaries of sense perception and becomes one with the divine. He considers the experience of dawn as the moment of *Saundarya Samadhi* (absolute aesthetic bliss). The poet experiences the divine both as a person and as a poet. In this specific way,

¹Kuvempu, “Devaru Rujumadidanu” in *Pakshikashi*, Mysore: Udayaravi Prakshana, 1975.

Kuvempu differs from western Romantics like Wordsworth, who consider the points of intersection of the objective world of nature and subjective world of the poet as moments that restore the love of humanity among human beings and lead to the regeneration of mores. Kuvempu seeks to move beyond the aesthetic or moral experience of natural beauty of dawn and towards the divine.

Prakriti Upasane (The worshiping of nature) is not about dawn or about the natural beauty of the Western Ghats, where Kuvempu had spent his childhood; the poem focuses on the city of Mysore, where Kuvempu first arrived as a teenage student and then lived for over seven decades. Unlike the earlier two poems, this is not about poet's sense of wonder at the mysterious beauty of nature. Rather, the poem presents a critique of the urban civilization and of man immersed in deriving superficial pleasure from material culture. It begins with a self-description of the poet, as he stands near a small waterfall witnessing the dawn. The beauty of the dawn makes the poet raise a series of questions about the nature of temple, and the efficacy of rituals and worshiping to realize god. He asks:

Which temple is greater than this temple called earth?
Which idol will exceed the beauty of this dawn on the fifth day of
Chaitra,
Of the majestic sun god, who has appeared from a distant horizon?
Which form of worship is equal to the appreciation of this
unparalleled art?
The bliss unachieved in this experience,
In which worshiping and ritual of God
Will you gain?²

These questions once again affirm Kuvempu's vision of the divine in nature and the experience of nature as a means to realize god.

Further, Kuvempu begins his critique on urban civilization, which has compartmentalized itself. The verbs that are used in this stanza are very effective; they indicate the poet's contempt towards a civilization that ignores the divine presence of nature while immersing itself in compartmentalized living. Kuvempu describes the urban civilization as a demon that has spread without any specific moral or spiritual code. Palatial buildings, temples, churches, mosques, factories, jails, law courts, hospitals, schools, and hotels have become the face of the urban space. He speaks contemptuously of the human affairs that unfold inside these

²Kuvempu, "Prakriti Upasane" in *Pakshikashi*, Mysore: Udayaravi Prakshana, 1975.

buildings. The city houses souls that are not bothered to enjoy the beauty of the dawn. The poet asks: who lives here and what kind of heart (and soul) do they possess? Is anyone watching the dawn like me? He salutes one person among millions who is watching the sun rise because according to the poet no other work that is done at that moment is as important as witnessing the dawn.³

He asserts that life is not life if one fails to experience the beauty of nature with intensity. Kuvempu asserts:

In truth resides shiva

Shiva possesses truth

And they both are merged in beauty.⁴

Kuvempu invokes the Upanishadic saying *Satyam Shivam Sundaram* which equates truth, god and beauty as one and the same; he believes that if people suffer from apathy and suffering today, that's because they have forgotten this basic principle. Kuvempu sees art as a means to get away from the poverty of heart and to realize the divine. Art becomes the means to lift the spirit and the artist is the creator of a new life through his writings. Kuvempu does not restrict the artist and the art to aesthetic pleasure but both have to take the audience to the realization of the ultimate truth. This truth again is not couched in religious overtones but indicate a universal brotherhood.

The poet is not completely taken over by the beauty of the dawn and by his contempt towards the urban, material civilization. He introduces one more voice to question the modern city life and that voice belongs to the factory worker who is engrossed in earning his livelihood as he works with the machines. If he stands and enjoys the beauty of the dawn as the poet does, his family will have nothing to eat for the afternoon. The poet answers the question:

Brother, go ask the worker,

How much time does he spend on untruthful tasks,

In the bar, or cinema halls

Where does the worker find time for scores of such hobbies?

If there is a will there is a way.⁵

The poet leaves the worker and shifts his gaze to the rich people. All of them are absorbed in satisfying carnal pleasures; Kuvempu calls them civilized brutes because none of them can rise above their physical

³Kuvempu, “Prakruti Upasane,” 19-20.

⁴Kuvempu, “Prakruti Upasane.”

⁵Kuvempu, “Prakruti Upasane,” 21.

pleasures to find the truth in either the beauty of nature or in art. He wonders when will all the sufferings on earth end and the human kind will find the divine vision; when will the heaven be created through celebration of poetry, beauty.⁶

5. Conclusion

Kuvempu's vision of divine, realizing divine through nature and poetry, is central to his writing. He firmly believes that by experiencing nature one can reach god. Living with nature, experiencing nature is worshipping god. Every particle of nature nurtures human spirit. What sets Kuvempu apart in his vision of nature and divine is his sense of universal brotherhood and a vision of *samanvaya* (integration). Kuvempu repeatedly asserts that the divine is not realized in any built space (temple/church/mosque) but amidst nature and the nature of that realization is not empirical or experiential. Rather it is mystical.

By the time Kuvempu started writing his poetry romantic age in Europe was technically over and the modernism was in vogue. Influenced by the West, Indian writing was also moving towards urban spaces and was focused on man. At such a juncture Kuvempu considered human spirit as a source of enormous possibility; as a writer who came from the corners of Western Ghats and negotiating the urban space to retain individuality as a poet, nature inevitably becomes the central focus. His perception of nature was never to limit it at the point of negotiation but it was always to recognise the redeeming quality of nature and to use the power of nature to become one with the god.

⁶Kuvempu, "Prakruti Upasane," 21.