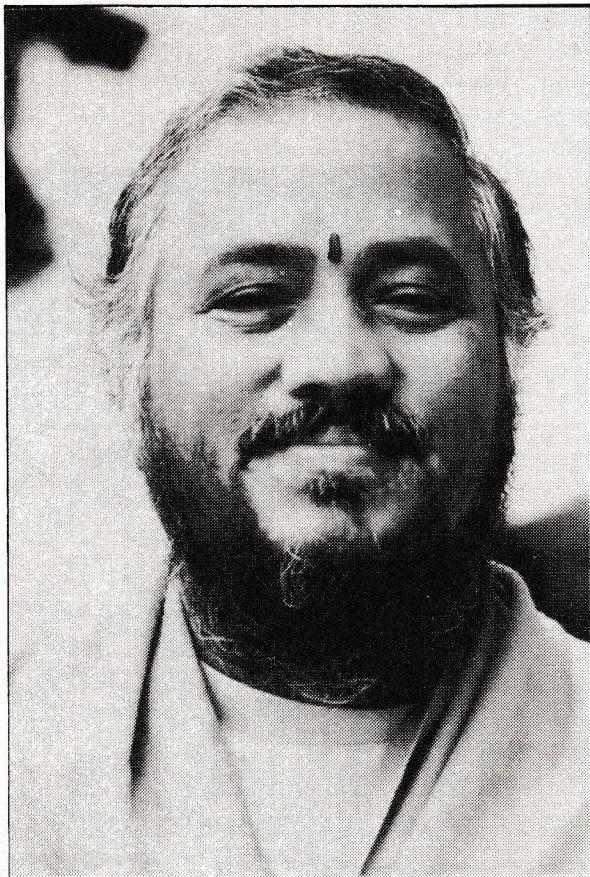


Bhakta Kanakadas

by
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If one remembers the lives of the great saints of India, the head bows, the body bends, tears gush and the hair stands on end. One of these saints is Bhakta Kanakadas, who lived during the reign of King Krishnadevaraya of Vijaya Nagara. Birappa, the father of Kanakadas, was a shepherd leader and was also a revenue collector for the king in a village called Bada in Dharwar District which is in South India. Bacchamma, his wife, was a chaste woman devoted to God and saints. The couple had but one worry; they had no children. So both of them decided to visit Tirupati, the sacred temple of seven hills. On an auspicious day, they arrived there and sincerely performed the necessary worship and the Lord was pleased with their devotion. After partaking the holy Prasad (santified food), they returned home happily, after a few months Bacchamma conceived a devine child.



Hindus believe in the incarnation of God and saints and in reincarnation of souls. In the great epic of India, the Mahabharatha, there is a reference to the incarnation of Yama, the God of Death, as Vidura, a great devotee of Lord Sri Krishna. It is believed that Vidura himself incarnated as Kanakadas.

So the child was born and on the twelfth day after his birth was put into the cradle and named Thimmappa. Playing, fighting and swimming were of greater interest to him than studying and reading scriptures; thus he grew up and became a leader of men. His father died peacefully and handed his work over to the son; after a few years, his mother followed her husband.

For everything there is a time and a place; the hidden powers of the saint were dormant and waiting to manifest. One day Thimmappa was busy with his friends digging a well when, to his astonishment, he found a treasure of a large amount of gold.

With traditional belief, he thought of building a big temple for the Lord Adi Keshava image which was in a small dilapidated temple in the Village of Bada. With all determination, he carried the image to a nearby village called Kaginele and built a big temple and installed the image. Even though he did this noble act as a gesture of love toward God, he never thought nor dreamed that he would become a dedicated saint or servant of God; his burning desire was to acquire more and more wealth and property so that he might rule over men. Every day he prayed for more wealth.

However, God wanted it otherwise, and He came in the dream of Thimmappa, who was then called "Kanaka Nayaka," or Lord of Gold. In the dream, God appeared and asked: "Kanaka, will you become My servant?"

Kanaka retorted: "To become Your servant and renounce everything? Impossible! Bless me with kingdom and wealth."

Then the shining Lord smiled and disappeared. Kanaka was frightened, thinking it a bad omen that God should ask him to renounce everything and become His servant. So he performed a big Puja (worship), hoping that God would not ask him to renounce the world. But after a few days, the same divine form appeared again with the same voice: "Kanaka, will you become My servant now?"

Kanaka gave a definite, "No!" The dream continued night after night, but Kanaka was stubborn. He forgot, however, that God has His own ways to turn men toward Him.

A war ensued. Kanaka received blessings from the priest of his temple for a triumphant victory and went with his troops to the battlefield. He was stabbed in the back and fell unconscious from his horse; the enemy troop returned victorious. Kanaka, left to his fate, slowly gathered his senses after many hours. Then, to his wonder, he saw a dark figure bending toward him questioning him with the same voice he had heard in the dream: "Kanaka, will you become My servant now, at last?"

The enraged, wounded Kanaka cried out in anguish: "Don't you have any other time to ask me to become Your servant than now? Don't you see that I am on the verge of death?"

The dark figure smiled and said, "I have saved you from the jaws of death; now you can become My Dasa (servant)."

"But why are you after me! Can't you find some other man?" said Kanaka.

The figure replied, "You have served Me in the past; you have incarnated to serve Me now."

The clouded intellect and the confused mind of Kanaka retorted: "If you have saved me from death, why don't you save me from this terrible pain?"

The dark one said, "If I restore you to your original health and beauty just by a touch, will you then become my servant?"

The dazed Kanaka stared at the dark figure and said, "Yes, I will, I will!"

God's alchemic touch made Kanaka strong and healthy. A light permeated his being and he stood in awe and wonder. He wanted to make obeisance to the dark figure, but he had already disappeared. When one is ignorant of God, He appears; the moment His glory is known, it is difficult to comprehend Him. Such is His Lila (play)!!

Possessed with divine frenzy, Kanaka ran to the temple of Adi Keshava. It was midnight and the temple was locked. He could easily have called the priest to unlock the door, but he thought that Keshava, who had unlocked his heart's door, was capable of opening the temple door also. In anguish, he began hitting his head against the main gate as his heart melted. As if some great pain had escaped from his heart and had found its way in overpowering strains and words, he burst into a song divine, which says:

"Open the gate and give me Thy service
O God; can't you hear my fervent cry?"

When You were in a reclining posture on the soft coiled bed of the serpent god Shesha with Lakshmi, Thy spouse, kneading Thy feet on the ocean of milk, didn't You hear the cry of the king of elephants caught by the alligator and rescue him?"

When the demon king Hiranyakashipu took his son Prahlada to task, compelling him to show his God in the court pillar by discharging blows with his sword and fist, O God, didn't you hear the cry of that child devotee and issue forth from the pillar as the man-lion God to destroy the demon and protect the child?"

When the chaste wife of the Pandavas was dishonored by Dushyasa, didn't you protect her honor by blessing her with inexhaustible robes?"

Did you think at all about the convenience of time? You just appeared, hearing their cry. If this is true, O Kaginele Adi Keshava, how can You not hear my cry?"

When God heard the appeal of Kanaka, the main gate burst open, the bells of the temple began ringing spontaneously and the lights waved before God's image automatically. This was the mystic vision which Kanaka had, and he ran into the sanctum and stood face to face with the great Lord. Tears gushed in torrents and his hair stood on end, for the lights which he saw in his mystic vision could only be compared to thousands of suns and moons.

He saw God standing before him with full-moon-like face, curly locks and rich diadem; the mark of musk on his forehead, lotus eyes, shapely nose and ruby lips; a wide smile, conch-shaped neck, alligator shaped earrings; the Kaustugha gem, Tulasi garland and the footprint of Sage Bhringu on His bosom; the most beautiful navel lotus with three golden lines, the yellow silken robe wrapped around His waist, the moon-shaped toe and red lotus-like soles of His feet; and in the four arms of the Lord were the conch, discus, mace and lotus. Again the same voice asked him, "Kanaka, will you become My servant now?"

Kanaka wept for joy and said: "Yes, Yes! I will become Thy servant and pray only that you accept me as Your humble child. Many times out of ignorance and arrogance, when You appeared in a dream, I rejected becoming your servant. Now the thunderbolt of Thy grace has shattered the mountain of pride I had, and I crave only to become Your servant."

God said, "Kanaka, to be My servant is not an easy task, for you may have to sacrifice and renounce everything."

Then Kanaka burst into a great and moving song:

"Can anyone live in forgetfulness of Thy lotus feet?
These are no mere words, O God, I say with conviction:
if need be, one can forsake his parents; one can forsake
one's own cousins and relatives; one can give up his
country if the king is angry. Come what may, one
should never give up even for a moment the service to
Thy lotus feet. If someone demands one's life, one can
definitely give up life. One can give up honor, dignity
and all else, but O Lord of all souls, Adi Keshava, Sri
Krishna, none should forsake Thy lotus feet."

God was pleased with the total surrender of Kanaka and accepted him as His Dasa (servant). From that day he was known as Kanakadas.

Kanaka wanted to touch the feet of the great Lord and lay his head on them, but the Lord wanted to play and asked Kanaka to sing a Kirtan. The saint composed the song of praise which contains the twenty-four names of Lord Vishnu. A few stanzas are translated as:

"O Lord of the Universe, let me sing Thy glory with all
my heart; kindly reduce all my errors to ashes, O Lord
Keshava.

I surrender myself totally unto Thee, O God; do not fail
me at the time of death in appearing before me and
engaging my tongue in repetition of Thy holy name, O
Narayana.

Let me take birth after birth as Thy Dasa to sing Thy
glory, O Vasudeva."

The compassionate Lord advised Kanaka to go to the great guru Vyasaraya Swami for initiation. This is one of the rare examples where a man had the vision of God first and went for initiation later. In nearly all cases, Darshan comes after initiation from the Guru. This was possible in Kanaka's case because he was an incarnation of Vidura.

When the vision disappeared, the happy saint went to the Ashram of Swami Vyasaraya who, at that time, was engaged in some construction work. He was with two main disciples Purandaradas and Vadiraja. "Gurudeva!" Kanaka cried when he arrived.

The great swami lifted his head and asked, "Who is there?"

"It is I, your servant," said Kanaka.

"Is it the same Kanaka of the golden treasure?" queried the masyer.

"Not any more; now it is only Kanaka, the shepherd."

Then the swami asked, "Why have you come?"

"Lord Keshava sent me to you to receive the Mantra," was the reply.

"What Mantra can I give to a shepherd? Repeat the Mantra of a buffalo!"

"Thank you, Gurudeva," said Kanaka, who then and there sat and began chanting the buffalo Mantra. He chanted, "Buffalo, Buffalo," in all seriousness, and after a few hours, a huge, strong buffalo appeared before him. Kanaka led it to the guru, who was astonished to see the implicit faith of his humble disciple. Vyasaraya asked that the buffalo remove a big rock which was obstructing the flow of water in order that this miracle might be recorded for all times. After removing the rock, the buffalo disappeared. Even today this place in Madanapalli Taluk in Andhra Pradesh is called "Kanakana Tubu," which means "the passage created by the buffalo at the behest of Kanaka." It is believed that the buffalo which appeared to Kanaka was the vehicle of Lord Yama, the god of death.

Vyasaraya took Kanakadasa to his Ashram to initiate him into the Dasa Order (Dasa Diksha). The happy disciple sat at the feet of his guru who, with his great spiritual power, whispered the most sacred Mantra to him. This was such a powerful experience that it was as if a tornado of spiritual force had overwhelmed him. His thoughts were electrified and lifted to the lofty peaks of spiritual experience. The secret of the universe was revealed to him, and when he opened his eyes he was a completely changed man. He made obeisance to Guru Vyasaraya and then expressed his experience in a most beautiful song:

"Oh, I am saved! Oh, I am saved! The waters of the ocean of rebirth are totally dried for me!

The lotus-naveled Vishnu's grace filled me with intense love for His lotus feet."

"Lord Sri Hari's Thirtha (the water that washed His lotus feet) and offering I received from the guru, and my senses have been purified.

The divine name of Sri Hari whispered by the guru I drank through the cup of my ears, and the great Haridasas, the servants of God, became my relatives.

The stamps of God imprinted on me by the guru are my permanent ornaments. Ah, I am saved! I am saved!

No sooner was I initiated as a Haridasa than all my ancestors attained Mukti. (If one becomes a dedicated servant of God, he saves his whole clan.)

I was made perfect to walk in the path of liberation. Lord Sri Hari was pleased with my devotion to Him.

I feel the response of Rukmini's spouse, Krishna, who is at my beck and call, for I am holding Him firmly in my heart.

Today, by the grace of the guru, I received all the wealth one could expect for his soul.

All the rest of my life is completely blessed, for I see the goal and purpose of life.

Kaginele Adi Keshava, my Father, came running to me and will stay in my heart forever. Ah, I am saved! I am saved!"

Bhakta Kanakadas traveled around India preaching the gospel of Bhakti. Filled with devotion to God, he visited many pilgrimage centers and composed thousands of Kirtans. When the priests would not allow him to enter the shrine at a spiritual center called Udipi, Lord Krishna's image turned from east to west and gave Darshan to Kanakadas through the window! Spreading the message of love, detachment and peace, the great saint merged into Lord Krishna's feet.

Victory to God and saints!