

Haridasas of Karnataka

Shrimati Galagali avva : Life and Works

-- Prof. D. V. Potdar

1. Life (1670-1760 A.D):

Among the Madhwas, there have been a few woman contributors to Madhwa lore, but Galagali Avva is the foremost among them. She is the first well-known poet saint. The Galagali family has distinguished itself for its valour and scholarship for centuries. It has been honoured in the past, and the honours continue even today.

Galagali avva was named Rama, and was the daughter of a village accountant. Mudgal acharya, a scholar and a pretty old man was once returning from the Mysore king's court after participating in religious discussions and receiving honours. While staying in a temple, by chance he saw Rama and wished to marry her. Even though it was a winter spring affair, he received the consent of all after paying a heavy fee. But unfortunately he passed away after a few days.

Even literacy was a rare thing among women in those days, but the scholarly step-sons coached the young widow. The intelligent girl was quick in learning, so much so that within a short time, she was well-versed in all the shastras especially in nyaya. She helped her tutors to defeat their opponents! The fact sounds like a story, but there is proof, she was honoured by the Peshwas, and the princes of Mysore, by land grants.

When we consider avva's works, dedicated to Ramesh we find that even in the hymns both the parties, Pandavas and Yadavas pray for success in competitions. In one poem, Avva speaks about the themes of her works—the encounters between the two royal families, and the description of the glories of Rama's spouse. We find very fine, unusual insights into the minds of mythological figures, especially women. Examples are, the embarrassment that Krishna feels for having married so many women; the rivalry between his sisters and his wives, and among themselves. There is a variety in the poetic forms also, muyya hadu (sort of song competition), kolata pada (sort of apparatus drill with two sticks, but more artistic), which have a mythological background.

In those days, entertainment did not come out of "boxes", men and women danced, sang to amuse them selves. One party of women paid a surprise visit to another house, to test the physical and mental resources of the other family, to receive and entertain it. During the visit there were these contests in singing. In kolata, women (some times men also) stood in a circle, finely dressed, and moved round, touching the ends of the sticks, held in their hands (or their neighbour's) . They sang, strictly following a rhythm. The songs narrated pleasant stories like Subhadra and Draupadi going to meet Satyabhama and Rukmini, (for muyya). There is plenty of humour and ready wittedness, in both types of

poems. The style is simple and flowing. The literary creations are popular even today, and sung by women in groups.

As noted above, in those days when even literacy was a rare thing among women, one belonging to an orthodox family, studied the shastras and composed poems in Kannada, is a rare achievement.

Her last days were spent at Shurpali, her ancestral home, and she passed away there. She had a disciple Bhagavva by name.

2. Works - Devotional lyrics, selected & abridged:

1.

If you argue--
in-laws, mothers, sisters, aunts
are all the same to you,
then why arrange a wedding,
and get married ?

If you believe--
master servant, the hen and the cuckoo,
the plain and the mansion are the same,
why spend money, and build a home ?

It's silly, like saying flour and ashes,
bread and the wrapper, and sugarcane and a stick,
are the same !

2.

In the lord's city,
There are no needy, for the lord doles
out measures full of pearls to all.
The wish-yielding tree, and string of beads,*
hide saying "We have no business here".

In the bazaar there are rows of elephants,
horses,
the roads are neat, and on both
sides stand, mansions,
with marble pillars, glass walls,
inside fair damsels move about,
while men throw dice, play chess,
gamble.**

In some places there are pools for bathing,
and charming women vendors sell milk, curds,
and fruits.

* kamadhenu, chintamani ** casinos (!)

3.

“‘Tis long since we’ve* been waiting
outside,
but the doors remain shut.
We came to meet mother,
but the in-laws* fear us and keep hiding !”

(they knock on the door)

“Open please, no taunts from us,
we assure you.”

Rukmini listened, smiled,
got up and threw the doors open.

* Subhadra, Draupadi ** Rukmini , Satyabhama

4.

Rukmini and Bhama rival for the
lord’s love.

Bhama keeps the doors shut,
lest Rukmini snatch her lord away,
Rukmini turns into a leaf, a bed on which
her lord rests !

This is silly women,
the world laughs at you,
how can you keep watch on the lord,
who protects the whole world ?

Best way, confine him in your hearts,
Rukmini, see how the lord hugs Laxmi ,
and guards her.
Rukmini listened and bowed.

5

Krishna heard his wives planning a visit,*
called them and said “ No rivalry with
Draupadi please,
for your talk’ll be commonplace,
and theirs’ll** be learned, full of quotes,
you sure’ll be humiliated before the audience,
better stretch a hand of friendship”.
The wives listened, and humbled by the lord’s words,
went to meet the sisters,
accompanied by thousands,
swinging garlands.

The lord watched and smiled !

* see note above **Draupadi and Subhadra . Note the subtle hint of difference between
Yadavas (cowherds) and the Pandavas (warriors)

6.

Draupadi , you fear the darkness,
impossible, for a villain tried to disrobe you,
and you dared to marry five husbands,

But you’re a sparrow, don’t try to be a parrot!
The lovelorn Keechaka you fooled,
and had him killed,
you made your husbands gamble,
turned them into beggars,
you made, the mighty Bhima a cook,
a brave warrior wear bangles,*
the princes a cowboy and a stable boy,**
and your doting brother a charioteer !+

* Arjuna ** Nakula, Sahadeva + Krishna

7.

Rukmini said,
“Subhadra don’t pick a quarrel with me
saying,
“You fooled your brother

and ran away with a cowherd,
If I did, it wasn't with a mendicant like you.
I kept mum so far because I respect my in-laws,
Now here's my retort,
"You better go back,
for elephants, horses don't suffer
goats and sheep to graze with them,
but kick them out, and such may be your fate !"

8.

Krishna asked--
"Sister, moon face,
I see happy faces all around,
Why are you so woe begone?"

Satya, proud one,
should you hurt this delicate flower with
harsh words,
not minding what people say ?

Remember, we care for flowers,
not because of their shape or size
but for their fragrance,
you don't stand comparison with my
beloved sister!"

Subhdra heard, and was consoled,
happy.

9.

Hearing of Dwaraka's glory all
the gods came,
but not the sun , not the moon,
fearing they would be outshone !*

* by the refulgence of the lord

10

They make fun of you, Rangayya,
Say "See he rides a bird,
someday may fall down

and break his neck.”

You dwell on the sea,
They jeer “He stays with in-laws”

11.

We* brought presents to all,
Princes, queens, maids, cats and birds,
But still the lord is not happy,
For we forgot the hunchback * and the cowgirls !

* Draupadi and Subhadra ** Kubji

12.

Farewell, goddess Laxmi,
please return the visit.

Seeing your Durga form,
the people’ll applaud, sure.
Forget not to bring,
the prancing herd of monkeys,
Sita’s favourites,
and bears, queen Jambavati’s
relatives.

Let drummers play,
and announce Rambha’s arrival,
and mewling cats Bhama’s !

You come riding a tiger,
while crows caw,
and act as your bards !

13.

During Dharma’s rule,
passions did not affect people,
love reigned,
cats lived with mice, and rabbits with
tigers,
frogs rested in the shade of the
serpent’s hoods,
and tigers under elephants,

and jealousy was a rare phenomenon !

14.

Dharma wanted to meet Krishna,
and pay his respects.
But his brothers stopped him and said,
“ Please don’t, for we are warriors,
whereas the Yadavas are cowherds,
moreover Krishna washes dishes, floors,
and is just our charioteer !”

15.

When challenged to a fight,
you ran away, hid in water brave Krishna !

Come ready to battle, you panicked, Arjuna !
Karna had a shot at you, and your crown flew away,

Driven out of your kingdom, you went to Bali, a beggar,

Your promises to the Brahmin went phut,

You claim to be present everywhere
how come your wife was kidnappt ?

Brave husbands, you sat head bent,
when a villain to insult your wife went,

Your kingship to you is no good,
for you have to go, steal your food,
laughed at being naked, you rode a
horse and galloped,

An ascetic you kidnapped a dame,
and ran while people laughed and clapped !*

* Krishna and Arjuna, an amusing conversation. I hope all the references
are clear.

16.

Arjuna said—
“ Krishna, why did you fool the gentle cowgirls

and run away ?
You played on your flute during night,
charmed them out of their homes,
and they ran leaving behind, kids, husbands
and in- laws,
to find you had disappeared.

It was cruel,
like offering a morsel of food
to the starving,
and a sip of water to the thirsty,
or like the mother pretending to feed
the child and then withdrawing.

17.

Bhama and Rukmini saw pictures on the wall,
ordered by little Subhadra,
laughed and clapped hands !

For,
In one a fish swims in water,
in another a tortoise groans under a load,
in the next a boar snarls, paws the ground
and in another a man goes a begging,
in the next a man chases his ma, hatchet in hand,
and in another a man rejects his wife,
in the next we see a naughty kid, and a bare body in
another,
in one a man rides a horse,
and in the last a fine dame singing the praise of the lord.*.

* the ten incarnations

18.

Listen to my story,
of wonderful Draupadi!

I touched her feet,
but found ten not two,
she served me food,
with hands three plus two,
I trembled, looked up,

saw five faces in a group
Bharati flashed first, made way
to Shachi,
Shyamala came next,
and Usha was last,
eyes dazzled, as one by one
I watcht !

19.

Scriptures say,
Youre self content, amuse yourself,
then why did you run after cowgirls,
why play pranks ?

20.

Ranga paid a visit to his mom,
brought presents to all,
but,
for Dharma he didn't bring a he- buffalo, dice,
for Bhima a ladle, and a bangle to Partha !
(and a horse and a cow for the princes)*

* Nakula and Sahadeva

2. Narrative poems - abridged:

Both poems are written in quartets, in the latter there are short run-on lines which give an edge to the narration. Here the metre and rhythm are more regular.

a) Lullaby:

(It narrates the details of Krishna's birth, and the cradle and naming ceremonies.)

In utter darkness,
sleeping on a leaf, afloat on water,
you must've spent sleepless nights.

People don't build houses on water,
birds cant be vehicles, nor hissing serpents beds,
Now have no fears, rest on the soft bed,

Relax !

The mother fearing the influence of evil eyes on
the child,
brought a pestle* and kept it by his side,
while the gods gathered in the sky,
showered flowers on their creator !

The father gave generous gifts to the Brahmins,
received their blessings,
and was happy.

* believed to ward off evil

b) Building a bridge:

In the course of his tour of holy places, Arjuna meets Hanuman singing the praise of his
master. He cant tolerate it, and a duel in words and deeds follows.

Arjuna says “ If you monkeys are skilful,
Why didn’t you build a bridge with arrows ?
I’ll build one now, to show my strength,
destroy it.”

(He builds the bridge)

“Jai Ram” shouted Hanuman
and came down heavily upon the bridge.
A thousand thunders were heard,
and flashes of lightning seen,
as the bridge crashed, and sea creatures perished.
And Arjuna, ready to keep his word, lighted a fire.

But Achyuta came in the guise of an old man,
listened to their stories, and said “Arjuna build once more”.
Arjuna did so, and the old man placed an emblem,
a disc in the middle and said “Hanuman try now”.
Hanuman did so, and just rolled down,
The bridge remained intact !

Dejected he began to pray.

Now the old man began to clap and dance,
and lo ! in his place they saw Rama.
Truth* dawned on both, they smiled,

greeted each other and departed !

* the identity of Rama and Krishna

Om Tat Sat