

GREAT POETS OF THE PEOPLE

DR. G. APPA RAO, M.A., Ph.D.,
Department of Telugu



UNIVERSITY OF MADRAS
MADRAS-5, INDIA.

1974

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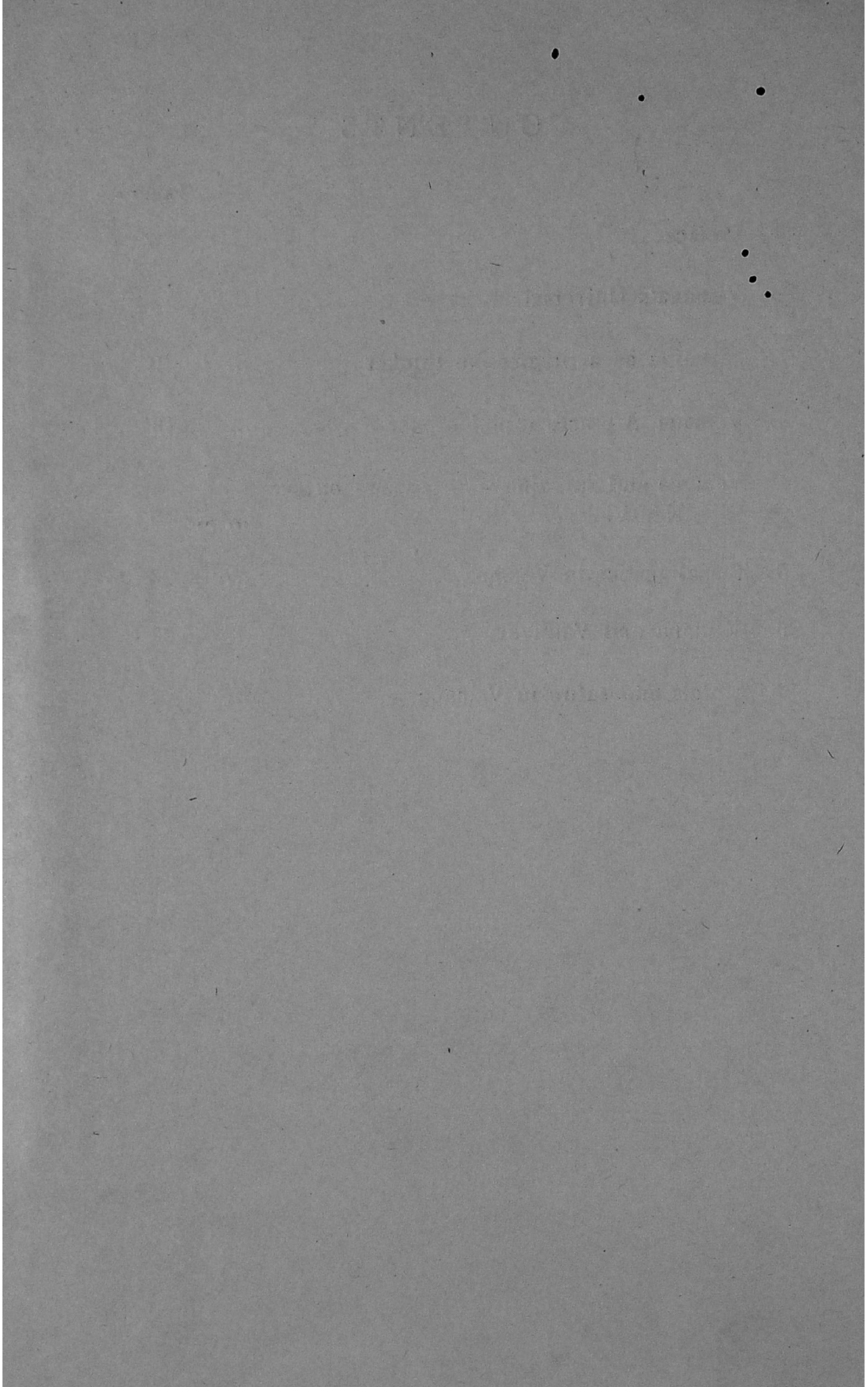


University of Madras

Price Rs. 1.50

CONTENTS

	Pages
Preface	v
1. Vemana's Universal Message	1
2. Sarvajna as a progressive thinker	9
3. Vemana, A practical philosopher	13
4. Vemana and Sarvajña—Their views on Non-Violence	19
5. Social justice in Vemana	23
6. Vemana and Valluvar	27
7. Morals and satire in Vemana	35



P R E F A C E

This book is a collection of my articles published in the Annals of Oriental Research of the University of Madras and in other literary journals. These articles have a common theme, and are, as such, eminently fit to be published together as a book.

The Karnatak University awarded me, in 1971, the degree of Doctor of Philosophy for my thesis on "A comparative study of Vemana and Sarvajna." When I was engaged in that research work, I had to write these articles as occasion demanded. Though they contain some aspects of my research work they are really independent articles.

Vemana has been my favourite poet ever since I was a boy. The reason was the delightful brevity of his utterance and his progressive outlook. As the late Dr. C. R. Reddy has truly said, it was the great Vemana that exalted rational literary criticism to the throne of the world of Telugu letters. And there is no doubt at all that in the Kannada literary world, Sarvajna occupies a similar pre-eminent position.

A great deal of research work has been done on Vemana by scholars, literary historians and critics like Sarva Sri Vanguri, Rallapalli, Bandaru, Narla, Tekumalla and Marupuri, and they have all published their works. Before them, Campbell, Brown, Macdonald and other Western scholars wrote some critical essays on Vemana. It is needless for one to say that these books and essays have been of immense help to me in my research.

All the books that have been so far published on Vemana depict him, on the one hand, as a great social reformer, as a rationalist and as a moral teacher, and, on the other, as a mystic and a 'Yogi.' In support of this view of theirs, the authors, have quoted some verses as having been Vemana's own utterances. Rationalism and mysticism cannot go together. The path of a rationalist and that of a mystic are incompatible. The same individual cannot tread both paths. On account of such conflicting views, it becomes difficult for all much more so, for the non-Telugus, to get a clear picture of the true Vemana. The present collection of articles, I am sure, will help readers understand the true philosophy of Vemana.

Two other great people's poets who like Vemana, have shown the path of human progress, are Valluvar and Sarvajna. With a view to helping the Telugu-speaking people understand the progressive outlook of these brother poets, I have included three short articles in this collection. It is very essential that we should understand and appreciate the similarities of these brother poets. Such understanding and appreciation will go a long way in bringing about linguistic amity and national integration.

I take this opportunity to express my sincere thanks to the Vice - Chancellor, Padmashri N. D. Sundaravadivelu, and the authorities of the University of Madras for kindly taking up the publication of my work.

2nd July 1973

DR. G. APPA RAO,
Department of Telugu,
University of Madras.

- ° Words of wisdom, replete with rational thought,
Brilliant beams of the Rising Sun illuming the realm of
imagination,
- Inestimable boons for practical living,
- ° Friendly counsels for everyday problems,
- ° Imbibe Vemana's Teaching to live as true Human Beings!



హేతు వాదముతో వెలసిన సూక్తులు
భావలోకమున భానూదయములు
వాస్తవ జగతికి వరప్రదాతలు
నిత్య జీవితపు నెయ్యపు పల్కులు
వేమన బోధలు వినరండి!
మానవత్వమున మన రండి!

VEMANA'S UNIVERSAL MESSAGE

Vemana did not produce long literary works like those produced by the puranic or the 'prabandha' poets. Nor was he, like them, a profound scholar well versed in grammar and poetics. Yet he wrote great poetry, adopting a simple nativemeter, 'ataveladi,' and in a language that common people spoke in their everyday lives.¹ His poetry was the result of his genuine humanism and of his rationalistic approach to all human problems and, as such, it has a universal appeal. We can, therefore, rightly place Vemana among the great poets of the world.

Tolstoy taught men through his writings, to respect moral and spiritual values and to lead responsible lives, and it may be said that Vemana performed a similar function by means of his verses. As in Tolstoy's works, so in Vemana's poetry, we find nothing that is narrow. Vemana's poetry transcends time and place. Even though his teachings and critical utterances related to the social, economic and religious problems of his time, there is the quality of universality in them. In spite of differences of nationality, of language, of religion, economic and political institutions, man's fundamental problems are the same everywhere—problems regarding his humanity and the growth of his mind.

What does man need to live a long, happy life? This is not a question of recent times. It arose even when man was in the earliest evolutionary stage. The mental development that modern man has attained is tremendous. He has conquered nature. Time and distance are no longer barrier to him. He is able to move with incredible speed, and is visiting other heavenly bodies. Nothing can check his progress. He goes freely wherever

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1. Viswanatha's definition of poetry that it is language producing aesthetic pleasure "Vakyam Rasatmakam Kavyam" and Mathew Arnold's definition that poetry is a criticism of life—both these definitions are true in respect of Vemana's poetry.

See his verse "*Nikkamaina Manchi Neelamokkaticalu*" Verse 928.
(One sapphire is enough if it is genuine)

he wants to. Notwithstanding all this wonderful progress, he is not happy, What is the cause? It is not far to seek. • His selfishness, his self-deception and his indifference are the cause.

Vemana was a humanist, a progressive thinker and a psychologist who could discern the depths of the human heart and mind. Man should exercise his reasoning powers, develop his sense of judgement and perform his duties and responsibilities. He should never forget his humanity and his duties as a human being. This is the substance of Vemana's teachings. The following stanza is remarkable in as much as it contains a true definition of man.

“అన్యులకును వచ్చు నాపద తనదిగా
నెన్నువాఁడు భువిని నున్నవాఁడు
ఎన్ని దానిలోన నిహ పరంబులు తెస్స
గన్నవాఁడు మిగుల ఘనుఁడు వేమ !”

“Only that man is a living man who feels the sufferings of his fellowmen as his own. And when such a living man meditates upon the meaning of this life and the life hereafter, he becomes a supreme human being. Vemana implies that all the others may be considered as dead so far as the duty of man as man is concerned. How well he has pointed out man's first duty: What great meaning is contained in four short lines: Unless man cultivates this attitude, he can never solve his problems. There can never be peace and happiness in his life.

Who can overcome fate? There is no help against fate. What man suffers now is the result of his past 'karma.' Nothing can be done to ward off the blows of fate. Things happen according to God's will. The human problem can never be solved, for no sooner is one problem solved than another arises. Who are we, either to help others or to harm them? Such beliefs and questions are frequently given utterance to by our so-called philosophers, of whom there are any number in the society of our time. There have been, too, some extreme fatalists who look on calmly doing nothing even when their neighbours are being robbed

in front of their eyes. They ascribe everything to man's 'karma' or fate. What sort of men are these pseudo-philosophers?

Vemana was a bitter enemy of this kind of fatalistic philosophy. He was a great optimist and believed in man's creative effort.²

“ధూమిలోన పుట్టు ధూసారమెల్లను
తనువులోన పుట్టు తత్త్వమెల్ల
శ్రమములోన పుట్టు సర్వంబు తానాను.”

All the articles essential for man's existence have their source in the earth. All philosophies arise out of the human mind. It is human labour that produces everything.

Man's history reveals to us the progress that he has achieved through the ages since the time he was living on trees. We can find there have been incessant efforts at progress in the different fields and in the different stages in his development. Man's will to live better is the one dominant factor that has brought about all revolutions, reforms and scientific inventions and discoveries. He has achieved almost all that he could wish for.

While, on the one hand, man must strive to achieve higher and yet bigger things, he should, on the other hand, always remember his duty as a man. This is the greatest rule of conduct. Man cannot afford to forget that he is a social being. He has to be aware of the inseparable link between his welfare and that of the society in which he lives. Everything in the universe obeys certain natural laws, and man, being the pinnacle of evolution, should not disregard the duties enjoined upon him by his moral sense. If any man looks at other man's wives with lustful eyes, will not his wife be looked at in the same way by other men? If you rob others, it is but just that others should rob you. The golden rule is to consider your neighbour's difficulties as your own

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2. He recognises the distinction between the Supreme spirit and the individual self, and assigns to the human will a place and an importance which prevents him from considering men as mere puppets in the hands of some superior power.

and to do what you would want them to do to you. This one principle is enough as foundation for the creation of a really cultured society. It is utterly useless merely to quote rules of conduct from 'dharma-shastras' in which, very often, principles praised in one place are condemned in another place.

'Dharma' and justice do not originate in books; their real place of origin is the human heart.³ They depend upon place, time and circumstances. Only that ethical (dharma) is the best which is conducive to the progress and happiness of society.⁴ Anything that causes the disintegration of society is 'adharma,' even if it is found in the 'dharma shastras.'

There is, in our country, no lack of 'dharma shastras,' 'niti shastras' and works of good counsel. Most of these books repeat the same things, though in different words. And they are: Speak the truth. Do good deeds. Revere your parents and teachers as you would revere the gods. Character is the best of man's adornments. Do not covet others' possessions. Do good to others. Maintain your self-respect and dignity—And one can go on adding to this list endlessly.

Though it may be argued that Vemana, too, taught the same things, there is a fundamental difference. There is a certain uniqueness in his telling them. His sayings are full of rationalist thoughts and a remarkable realism pervades them. One must possess a keen sensibility and a sympathetic understanding to see the greatness of Vemana's utterances. Look at the following highly thought-provoking and practical suggestion he has given us with regard to speaking the truth:

“ నిజములాడువాని నిండించు జగ మెల్ల
నిజములాడరాదు నీచుతోను
నిజమహోత్తుఁగూడ నిజమాడవలయురా ”

3. See his verse: "*Valasina punyambu valadanna papambu.*"

4. శ్లో॥ ప్రభ వార్థాయ ధూ తా నాం ధర్మ ప్రవచనం కృతం
యత్ స్వాత్ ప్రభవ సం యుక్తః సధర్మ ఇతి నిశ్చయ.

The purpose of duty (Dharma) has been the onward progress in evolution of all living beings. Therefore, it is certain that whatever promotes this progress is Dharma.

—Mahabharata.

“Mean people look down upon a man who tells the truth. Truth must never be spoken when dealing with such people.⁵ Tell the truth only when you are in the presence of truthful men.” This is very sound, worldly-wise advice. We are told how to avoid trouble from hypocrites. I am afraid, people who believe in truth as Harischandra practised it, will not like what Vemana has said here with regard to truth.

As Dr. C. R. Reddy has said, whenever Vemana was in doubt with regard to the righteousness or otherwise of an action, he did not refer to ‘dharma shastras’ but applied his naturally unerring commonsense, and took a decision. It was this great poet who set rationalist criticism on its throne.⁶ Here is another of Vemana’s verses in which he speaks about giving charity.

“దోషకారియైన దూసరికాడైన
పగతుడైన వేద బాహ్యుడైన
వట్టిలేని పేదవాని కీడగు నీవి
ధనికునకు నొసంగతగు వేమ ”

During Vemana’s time, the disparity between the rich and the poor was very great. The poor had to depend on the rich for their existence and they invariably lived in misery. But the rich people, in accordance with the injunctions in the ‘Dharma Shastras’, gave charity only to the high-caste people and those were always Brahmins. And even among the Brahmins only certain sects were worthy of receiving charity. It was immaterial whether the recipient was really in need or not. It is enough if he belonged to a caste specified in the sacred books. And even

5. Play the wise in a council of the learned but effect the fool in an assemblage of fools. Kural, p. 191, verse 714.

6. See his book Kavitra Tatva Vicharamu, P. 10, 11.

7. During Vemana’s time, the caste—system was more rigid than it is today. The ‘mala’ (Panchama caste) had no caste. They were thought to have been excluded from the Vedas. And they were not allowed to live within the village: Even today we see them living outside villages in segregation: They were not deserving of charity even when they were starving because they had no caste. It was believed that one was born as a ‘chandala’ in consequence of his bad ‘karma’ in the previous life. Vemana used the expression ‘Vedabahya’ only because it was in vogue in his time.

that charity was done for prestige. It was mere showing off. Both the giver and the receiver were hypocrites. It was like a game. We see this sort of game being played even today. We very rarely find a sincerely generous person.

Vemana's heart was filled with genuine love for the poor. There was no vagueness in his statement. His ideas are to the hearts of thoughtful people as the sun's rays are to the lotus.

He asked the rich to give relief to those who starved, whoever they might be. The starving must be fed, whether they were good or bad, high-caste or low-born, friends or foes; even if they were 'chandalas' (untouchables). A rich person, however worthy he may be, by virtue of his birth, does not deserve charity, Vemana declared.

Vemana's heart went out to the indigent, and his words are full of significance. One must have a really feeling heart to understand their full import. We thus see that Vemana was a great humanist and a sincere friend of the poor.

"Give freely to the starving poor and save their lives. Love all living beings. The 'jeeva' is God. Man is born to live, to live long and in peace and happiness, and not to die soon because one has to die sometime or other. The adage: (He who is born has to die) should not be misunderstood. Its purpose is that we should live without fear of death. It does not mean that we should think of death constantly and die long before death actually comes. If man had given way to despair because death was inevitable, what could he have achieved? There would have been no progress of any kind. It is a truism to say that man has to die sooner or later. But he has to live happily and peacefully as long as he lives. He should not suffer injustice in a spirit of fatalistic resignation. The good things of life produced by his labour are meant for him, too, not only for the affluent.

They should be shared by all. Such is Vemana's practical philosophy, born out of his humanism. The rich in his days lived most selfish lives thinking that the poor suffered as a result of their past 'karma', and that it was but just punishment. They did not feed the hungry even though they had plenty of

food. They were indifferent spectators of misery, starvation and death. Addressing such heartless richmen, Vemana said :

“ జీవి పోకముందె జీవ వస్తువు లిచ్చి

జీవి నిలుప వలయు జీవనముగ

జీవి తొలగు వెనుక జీవ వస్తువు లేల ? ”

“Give the life-sustaining things when there is life in the body. No charity can help once the life ceases. Of what avail can the good things of life (Jeeva Vastuvalu) be after death ? ” This is the direct question that Vemana put to the indifferent rich of his time. Even today this is the most pressing of man's problems all over the world.

Vemana's message, therefore, is for the entire humanity. He has taught us what man's highest duty is, and reminded us again and again that our welfare is dependent on how well we perform this duty. A similar philosophy is the basis of all Tolstoy's novels and short stories. Vemana was a believer in one God, a great humanist and a practical philosopher. There is no ambiguity anywhere in his writings.

1

SARVAJNA AS A PROGRESSIVE THINKER

Sarvajna shines, like Vemana in Telugu literature, resplendently, in the firmament of Kannada letters. He was a pre-eminently progressive poet and a poet of the people. It is no exaggeration to say that there is hardly any Kannadiga who has not heard of his name, hardly any Kannada literate who has not read his 'Vachanas'. Sarvajna's 'Vachanas' are on the lips of one and all—the scholar, the layman, the peasant and the labourer. They (the vacahanas) suggest effective solutions to all the problems that man has to face in his day-to-day life.

Sarvajna was a rationalist, endowed with a broad vision. He possessed an endless fund of worldly wisdom. He was never indifferent to society and its problems. He thought of every human problem as his own, and tried to find a permanent solution to it. There is no field of human activity into which he did not enter. There is no mystery of human existence that he did not unravel. No human pain or pleasure escaped his examination. The name 'Sarvajna' is eminently fitted to him in every way.

Sarvajna's 'vachanas' reveal to us that his cherished goal was the establishment of a social order in which all differences of class, caste, creed or religion disappeared totally, and which was built on the basis of voluntary co-operative socialism. He condemned all forms of superstition, including blind idol worship. He affirmed that the right path to salvation was that of devotion coupled with knowledge (jnanabhakti). He exhorted the people again and again to exercise their reasoning powers and follow the path of truth, virtue and compassion.

Sarvajna's teachings are rationalistic and pragmatic and provide excellent food for thought to all serious minded persons. The following 'vachanas' on birth and caste reveal to us his critical insight.

“ನಡುವುದೊಂದೇ ಭೂಮಿ ಕುಡಿಯುವುದೊಂದೇ ನೀರು
ಸುಡುವಗ್ನಿಯೊಂದೇ ಇರುತ್ತಿರುಲು
ಕುಲಗೋತ್ರ ನಡುವೆಯುತ್ತಣದು ಸರ್ವಜ್ಞ ”

“ಅವಯವಗಳೆಲ್ಲರಿಗೆ ಸಮನಾಗಿ ಇರುತ್ತಿರುಲು
ಭವಿ ಭಕ್ತಶ್ವಪಚ ಶೂದ್ರರಿವರಿಂತೆಂಬ
ಕವನವೆತ್ತಣದು ಸರ್ವಜ್ಞ ”

“ಜಾತಿ ಹೀನನ ಮನೆಯ ಜ್ಯೋತಿ ತಾ ಹೀನವೇ
ಜಾತಿ ವಿಜಾತಿಯೆನ ಬೇಡ
ದೇವ ನೊಲಿದಾತನೆ ಜಾತ ಸರ್ವಜ್ಞ ”

“We all walk on the same earth, drink the same water, and, in the end, are burnt into ashes by the same fire. Whence then, do distinctions of caste and pedigree arise?”

“All human beings possess identical bodies consisting of identical organs. How then, can it be said that one is a ‘Bhavi’ and the other a ‘Bhakta’; that this man is a ‘swapacha’ and that man a ‘sudra’?”

“Is a lamp less bright in the house of an outcaste? Never speak of high and low caste. He who is dear to God belongs to the highest caste.”

All men are equal in the eyes of God. It is sheer ignorance to think that one is superior and the other inferior on account of birth, and that one caste is noble and the other ignoble. I cannot see where lies the superiority of the high caste individual. Natural forces do not act differently on different castes. God has made all men alike and has given them the same faculties. Why, then, do people fight against each other in the name of caste and birth? Of course, there are some good men who rise above all differences. They are full of compassion, and ignore the meaningless distinctions of class, caste, creed and birth, and live a spiritual life with a deep sense of responsibility. Such men are dear to God. They are of the noblest caste even though they were born in the lowest caste. Sarvajna has thus struck down all artificial barriers of class, caste, creed and birth with the thunderbolt of his rationalism,

In addition to dealing with morality, righteousness, devotion to God, renunciation, and the four 'purasharthas' Sarvajna has given us practical, worldly-wise advice on how to get on in this difficult world without departing from fundamental virtues. He warns us against bigots and fanatics and asks us to be tactful in our dealings with them. It is no use trying to teach the ignorant fanatics. It may endanger our lives.

“ನೆಲವನ್ನು ಮುಗಿಲನ್ನು ಹೊಲಿವರುಂಟೆಂದರೆ
ಹೊಲಿವರು ಹೊಲಿವರೆನಬೇಕು
ಮೂರ್ಖನಲಿ ಕಲಹವೇ ಬೇಡ ಸರ್ವಜ್ಞ ”

“If a bigot affirms that there are people who are capable of sewing the earth and the sky together, it is advisable not to contradict him. It is futile to make him see reason. Moreover, it is asking for unnecessary trouble.”

“Pretend to agree with a fool. You must be as wary in dealing with him as you would be in moving your tongue between the two rows of teeth. It is not everywhere that one should tell the truth. There are circumstances when truth may not be spoken out.”¹ We can understand from these 'vachanas' that Sarvajna was fully aware of the necessity of being practical and worldly-wise. Let us now see what kind of domestic life he wanted to live.

“A cosy cottage, sufficient money for the necessities of life, a pair of bullocks, a milch cow, five sons, a daughter-in-law who does not shirk work, a wise grandmother, and a wife who knows the husband's mind-if you have these, you can very well set fire to heaven”²—says Sarvajna. We find there his preference for the joint-family system of the former times when co-operative labour and loyalty to the family resulted in domestic happiness and prosperity. Those were days of agricultural village economy when joint families flourished in the

1. The same practical advice has been given both by Vemana and Valluvar. See Vemana's verse No. 928. See Kural-verse No. 714, page 191.

2. Bedchana Manayagi. Ettugalu..... etc.

village, every member contributing his share of honest labour for the common good.³ The basis of a socialist society is, the sharing of labour in co-operation, and Sarvajna believed that a family or society organised on the basis of honest, co operative endeavour could easily become a heaven on earth. We may conclude from this view of Sarvajna's that he was a man of the village, cent percent.

The poet may be likened to the Creator. He is a seer, a social reformer and a sincere teacher. Sarvajna, the poet of the common man, has proved to us by his example that there is nothing that a true poet does not concern himself with. It is Mother Kannada's great good fortune to have had such an illustrious son.

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3. At one time (long before the advent of the British) an ideal rural life existed in our country. Willing co-operation and mutual help formed the basis of village life, and the farmer, the labourer, the carpenter, the blacksmith, the washerman, the barber, the cobbler, the merchant and the priest—all worked in a spirit of give-and-take, and life was smooth and contended. Families engaged themselves in some cottage industry in their spare time, and villages were self-sufficient. The joint family system worked very well, and a family's reputation increased with its size. Everyone in the family, both the young and the old, toiled for the welfare of the family, and peace and prosperity reigned. But by Sarvajna's time this system seems to have started breaking up.

VEMANA, A PRACTICAL PHILOSOPHER

It is generally belived that Vemana was born in an atmosphere of Veerasaivism, that he was cloyed with sexual and other wordly pleasufes, that he came into contact with Saivite yogis as a believer in alchemy, that he renounced the world and practised Hathayoga, that, later he became a Rajayogi, and that finally he attained the unique bliss of union with Brahman through 'Sagunopasana' (worship of the God with attributes). This is what has been said by Sri Vanguri Subba Rao, Sri Rallapalli Anantakrishna Sarma and other scholars who have written about Vemana. Some have depicted him essentially as a yogi and even a modern writer like Sri. V. R. Narla has given credence to these conjectures.¹ Some writers have averred that he discarded all clothes and was a 'digambara', and it has become a common practice to print a nude Vemana on the covers of all books written about him, quoting a stanza² supposed to have been his. They have gone to the extent of founding and propagating a distinct cult called the Vemana cult. Some scholars, Sri Vemuri Viswanatha Sarma being one of them, have thought him to be a 'tantrika', a man who possessed powers of magical incantation.

The chief reason for this kind of uncertainty about Vemana's life is the large number of spurious verses that have been included in all collections of Vemana's verses. And matters have been

1. Two of the Western scholars, Campbell and Macdonald, have expressed the opinion that Vemana was not a 'Yogi.' They have shown ample evidence in his verses that he, in fact, had great aversion for ascetics. See--*VEMANA, Through western Eyes*, by V. R. Narla, page 33, 62.

2. " తల్లి గర్భమందు తా బుట్టి నప్పుడు
మొదట బట్ట లేదు తుదను లేదు
నడుమ బట్టఁ గట్ట నగుఁ బాటు కాదుకో ? "

When we are born in the womb of our mother, at first, we had not clothing, nor shall have it at our later end. Is not it then a joke for us to wear clothing in our intermediate life?

(c. p. Brown).

made worse by the many stories invented by writers like Sri Purnayacharyulu, who have had no historical background. They said that he was the brother of a king, and that as a youth he led a life of debauchery. Moreover, many of our traditional pundits have certain beliefs. A great man must have certain attributes, otherwise he cannot be great. And the pundits will have no peace until they have ascribed such attributes to him. A great man must be able to tell the future, that is, he must be a 'Kalajnani'. He must know the secret of turning base metals into gold. He must have been favoured by supernatural beings. And it is essential that he should have visions of God. If, in addition to all these, he is ascribed powers of mystic poetry, the picture will be complete. Even the great Kalidasa has not escaped such mis-representations. They said it was Goddess Kali who did everything. If the Goddess alone was responsible for Kalidasa's great poetry, wherein does Kalidasa's greatness lie?

Man cannot progress unless he depends on his own powers and on his own efforts. He can march forward only when he believes that it is labour alone that brings success. The stupendous achievements of modern man are a clear proof of this truth. Fatalism is an enemy to progress. Man will lose all his vigour and become impotent if he believes in the false philosophy of ascribing human failures and successes to God's will. God can help only those who help themselves.

It was such false philosophers who added their own verses and increased Vemana's verses to about five thousand. And like the tail of Sri Hanuman, the number has continuously been growing, and learned men have been writing appreciations of the work of those who have been responsible for such irresponsible enlargement.

Vemana was a great believer in the economy of words. He said: "One real Sapphire is enough. What is the use of thousands of false, glittering stones?"

“ నిక్కమైన మంచి నీల మొక్కటె చాలు
తమకు తెమకు రాళ్లు తట్టె డేల ?
చదువఁ బద్య మరయఁ జాల వా యొక్కటెన ? ”

A poet who said this would never have reeled off verses by the thousand without any restraint whatsoever. — Sri Rallapalli Anantakrishna Sarma was fully aware that Vemana's chief merit consists in brevity and restraint, and yet he said that Vemana composed verses by the thousand, too fast and too numerous to be put in writing.

The plethora of interpolated stanzas makes it impossible for non-Telugus to see the essential Vemana, revealed in his genuine verses. It is my earnest request to scholars that they should do all they can to examine carefully and separate the genuine Vemana verses. Let us now see what sort of man was the real Vemana. What was his religion? What were his ideals? The only one way of answering these questions is by a careful study of the genuine Vemana verses—by looking at their language, their thought, their metre, the sayings and proverbs so frequently used in them and his characteristic way of dividing words. After such a careful study, scholars of all schools of thought have admitted a certain number of verses to be undoubtedly Vemana's. We can learn a good deal about the poet's life, his religion and his ideals from such verses. They are our only help.

We see Vemana as a practical philosopher who had firm faith in constructive human endeavour. We see him as a humanist, and as a believer in human progress. As he belonged to a ryot (peasant) family, he was used to working hard, and therefore, he exhorted his fellowmen to live a life of peaceful industry. He said: "The source of all things is effort."

“శ్రమమలోన బుట్టు సర్వంబుదానౌను.”

He thought God was present in all creatures, and wanted people to love living beings. What use is it to worship stones? He asked.

“జీవులందె కాక శిలల నే మున్నది?”

He said that man is born to live, and not to seek death because whoever is born must die. So one must feed those who are hungry and help them live. He said:

“ జీవి పోక ముందే జీవ వస్తువు లిచ్చి ;
జీవి నిలుప వలయు జీవనముగ ”

He reiterated that only that man is a real man who sympathises with those in trouble. Only that man is a living man who can feel for others.

Vemana told people to cultivate the virtues of compassion and discrimination and live a life of devotion coupled with knowledge. God is impartial. He does not accept bribes. Man can receive His grace only through purity of living.

“ రాతిబొమ్మ కేల రంగైన వలు వలు ;
గుడ్లు గోపురములు కుంభములను
కూడు గుడ్డ తాను కోరునా ? దేవుడు.”

Why deck stone images with rich clothes and jewels? Why build temples and towers and give offerings? Does God want food and clothes?—thus questioned Vemana.

Vemana wanted a society where differences of caste, religion, and race did not exist. Destroy caste, he said:

“ ఉర్వి వారి కెల్ల నొక్క కంచముపెట్టి ;
పొత్తు గుడిచి కులము పోరియఁ జేసి ;
తలను చెయ్యి బెట్టి తగ నమ్మ జెప్పరా ; ”

Poverty is like a dreadful fire that burns man to death. One should, by all fair means, try to save oneself from it. The problems of caste and class will all disappear if men are economically prosperous. Wealth is of greater importance than, caste, he said.

“ కులముకన్న నెన్న కలిమి ప్రధానంబు.”

“Give up boasting of the greatness of your religion and your caste. Forget all false pride,” he preached. He condemned strongly the people who worshipped the stone Basava (bull), but tormented mercilessly the living Basava.

“ బసవ భక్తులెల్ల పాపులు తలపోయ,”

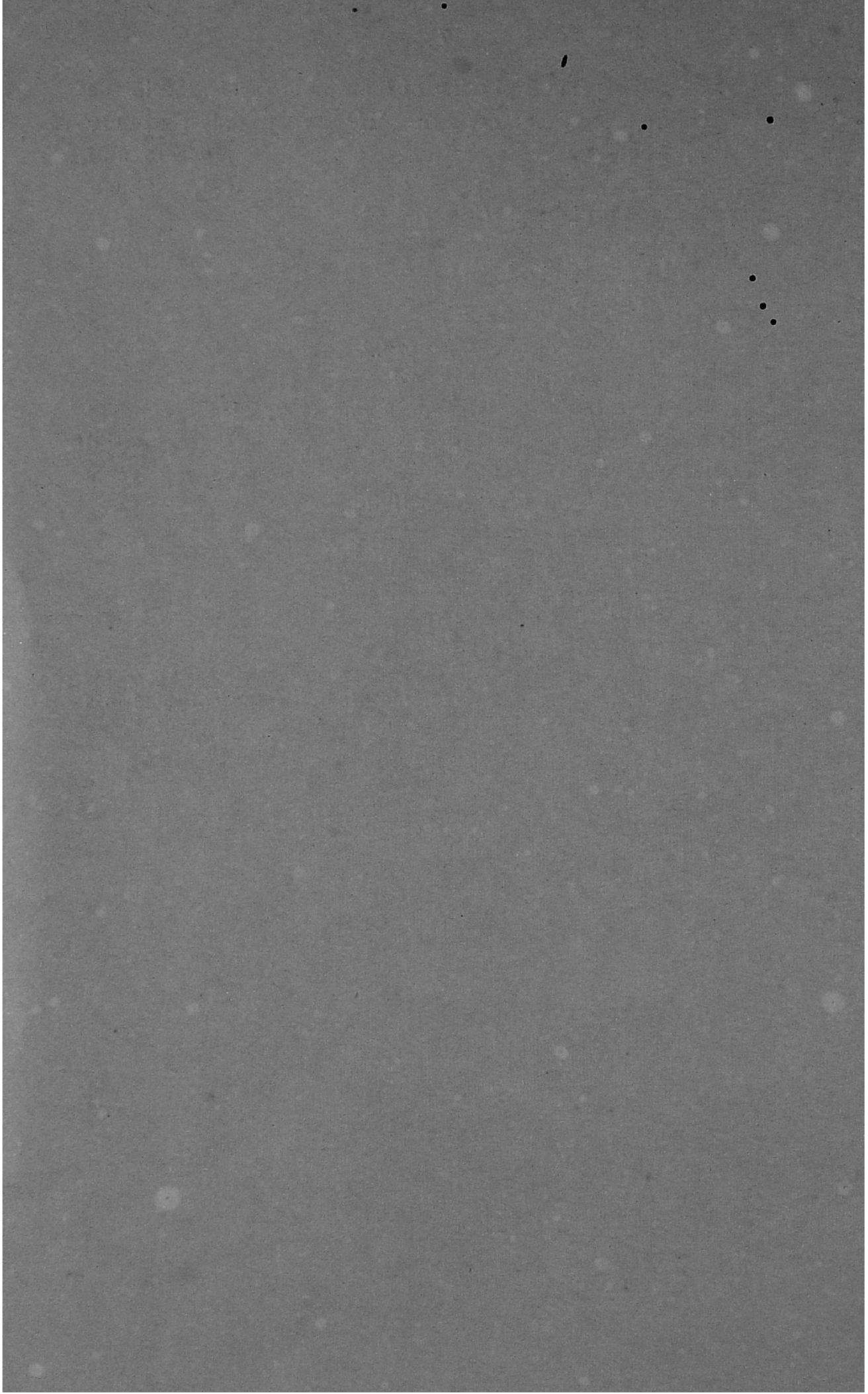
The atrocities that the Brahmins of the time perpetrated in the name of sacrifices were also exposed. He said strongly that only those were Brahmins who did their best to uplift the ignorant and downtrodden masses by imparting them education. "Such Brahmins deserve all honours," he agreed.

“ బ్రాహ్మణులకు సకల భాగ్యంబులీ వచ్చు
గౌరవింప వచ్చు గోరి వారి
జ్ఞాన మొసగి జనుల గడ తేర్పు గలిగిన.”

Vemana believed that there was only one God. He was never partial to this or that god, to this or that religion. 'The essential truth of all religions is the same,' he taught. The following verse of his brings out this idea very beautifully.

“ పశుల వన్నె వేలు పో లేక వర్ణ మా
పుష్పజాతి వేలు పూజ యొకటి
దర్శనములు వేలు దైవంబ దొక్కటి.”

This is the picture of real Vemana. Humanism was his religion, and all human problems were his problems. And his life's goal was to seek solutions of these problems.



• VEMANA AND SARVAJNA—THEIR VIEWS ON NON-VIOLENCE

Vemana was an optimist who believed in the constructive and creative faculties of men. He was an embodiment of compassionateness who said that the individual soul (Jivātma) and the universal soul (Paramātmā) were inseparable and that the best way to salvation was through compassion towards all life. He was a great humanist who declared that service to humanity was the noblest of religions. He condemned rigorous ascetic practices, rituals and sacrifices and looked upon ostentatious, pilgrimages and worship of hypocritical priests with the greatest contempt.¹ He wanted man to live a pure disciplined and responsible life, always exercising his reason. Only then could he shine as a true human being. Only then would he be able to fulfil his life's purpose.

In Vemana's conception of non-violence, we find a completion of the non-Violence of Lord Buddha. His heart was full of sorrow when he saw animals being killed during sacrifices. He could not tolerate the wickedness of some of the Brahmins performing the sacrifices. He said :

జీవి జీవిఁ జంప శివుని జంపుటె యగు
జీవు డరసి తెలియ శివుఁడు గాడె
భావ మందు వేగ పరికించి చూడరా...

జీవి జీవిఁ జంపి జీవికిఁ బెట్టంగ
జీవి దాన బలిని చెలగుచుండు
జీవ హింసకులకుఁ జిక్కు నా మోక్షంబు ?

-
1. “అకు లెల్ల తిన్న మేక పోతుల కెల్ల
.....వేటి పోకళ్లు పోదురు.”

“సకల యజ్ఞంబుల సకల శ్రీరంబుల
.....మంగలి జల మెప్పు. మొ॥

“If one living being kills another, it is like killing God himself, Ponder over this, and you will realise that ‘Jīva’ and ‘Śiva’ are one. The human being kills other living beings and fattens himself on their flesh. How can merciless murderers attain salvation?”

He addressed those who performed sacrifices (Somayājīs) thus :

“You desire the loving embraces of the damsels of heaven (Svarga), kill goats and make your sacrificial altars bloody and foul. How can the like of you ever find true peace and happiness? Do you think God will be pleased with this inhuman killing of yours?”

“God is all loving. Therefore follow the path of love and deserve the blessing of God.”

Vemana went further. He said that giving up violence was not enough. Men must learn to love even their bitterest enemies. They could be called complete human beings only when their hearts were filled with compassion. One of his verses tells us :

చంపక దగిన యట్టి శత్రువు తనచేత

చిక్కనేని కీడు చేయరాదు

పాపం మేలు చేసి పొప్పునుటే చాలు...

“Even if you have worst enemy in your power, do not kill him. Render him the necessary help and send him away.”

Thus we see that Vemana's non-violence was of the most exalted kind and that he wanted it to be the supreme guiding principle of man's life.

Lord Buddha taught his disciples that, to attain perfect bliss, man had to practise the five ‘Samādhis.’ He spoke about the first of them, the ‘Maitrī’ samādhī in this way :

“O! Monks, transform your hearts so that they are capable of compassion for all living creatures, and seek the happiness of even your foes. It is only such

compassion that can give you perfect bliss. That is the path of salvation (Nirvāṇa)."

Vemana had such a compassionate heart, and the verse quoted above was an expression of the feelings of such a heart.

Sarvajña, the great Kannada poet, had entirely different views on non-violence. They were quite contrary to Vemana's. Though Sarvajña said here and there that the human body is a temple and the human soul is the God in it, he thought that it was utterly impossible for man to live without hurting other living creatures. He went to the extent of saying that there was no such thing as death, therefore, no killing of life (Jīva-himsā). Here are two of his Vacanas in which he ridicules the doctrine of non-violence of the Jain :

చర జీవవసు తిందు చరిసిహుదు జగవర్ధ
చరిసదిహ జీవి గళతిందు జగవర్ధ
చరిసువుదు నోడ, సర్వజ్ఞ.

జీవ జీవయ తిందు జీవపదు జగవల్ల
జీవ దిం హొరగె తింబువర నా కాణె
జీవనీ జగవు సర్వజ్ఞ.

"One half of the living creatures on the earth subsists on living things that can move, and the other half on living things that cannot move. Life subsists on life. I do not know of any living creatures that live on lifeless things. When one creature eats another creature and perpetuation of life."

In his attempt to analyse the doctrine of non-violence, Sarvajña went into the origin and continuity of life. Whether we agree with Sarvajña's views on non-violence or not, we cannot but admire the rationalism of his argument.

When one looks at non-violence from a rationalist point of view, it may appear to be impracticable. But there is no doubt

that non-violence is very essential if man has to develop in himself, Compassion and humanity; for only through them could he promote universal peace. Man needs both rationalism and compassion. Neither of them alone can make him complete.

Both Vemana and Sarvaīṇa were great progressive poets similar in many respects. But on this one question of non-violence, they thought differently and expressed directly opposite views.

SOCIAL JUSTICE IN VEMANA

In the world of Telugu letters Vemana shines resplendently as a progressive poet of the people. We see him not only as a poet but also as a humanist and social reformer. His poetry reflects his humanity and his ideal of social justice. Humanism was his religion, and social equality was his life's goal. He proclaimed that distinctions of race, religion and caste should be rooted out and that humanity should become one family. He condemned idol worship and all superstitious practices. He desired that people should develop a critical and rationalist outlook. There is an inseparable relationship between man's economic and social problems, he said. He asked men to work hard and earn money by right methods and live contented lives. It was labour that produced everything, he said emphatically.

Whatever be the subject that Vemana discusses, he discusses it with a remarkable clarity and in a most rational manner. "Races and castes must go. Religious distinctions must be effaced. Social equality should be established. But these tasks cannot be accomplished by mere talk. The one essential factor is man's economic independence. His social problems can be effectively solved only when he is economically prosperous," said Vemana. In the following two verses, he shows us how superiority of caste is dependent on wealth, and how the wealthy man is worshipped by all.

“కులములేని వారు కలిమిచే కలయును
కలిమి లేని వారు కులము దిగును
కులముకన్న నెన్న కలిమి ప్రధానంబు”

“కులము గలుగువారు గోత్రంబు గలవారు
విద్య చేత విట్టి వీగు వారు
పనిడి గల్గువాని పానిస కొడుకులు”

“Society respects the rich man even though he is of a low caste by birth. And men belonging to a high caste

lose their caste if they are poor. Wealth brings greater respectability than caste."

"There are many who brag about their high birth and learning. 'Ours is a high caste. We belong to a noble line. Our ancestry can be traced back to a great Rishi. We are a family of Scholars'—such are the claims they make. But very often these descendants of Rishis are no more than sons of servants in the presence of the wealthy men."

Vemana wished that all humanity should live in world of freedom, peace and happiness. The glaring disparity between the rich and the poor made him very unhappy. He felt that there could be no peace in society until that disparity ceased. To remove economic inequalities, he suggested a number of ways. He exhorted people to adopt his suggestions for the sake of social justice. While he asked the poor people to make every effort to achieve economic independence, he also desired the wealthy to share their wealth with the poor and the needy. He, however, wanted them to do so with discrimination. He said that help should be given without considerations of caste or creed. The only criterion must be real need.

"If a few rich persons live lives of luxury while millions suffer for want of food and clothing, there will be discontent in society. Realising that this discontent will lead to anarchy, the rich must act generously towards the poor," said Vemana again and again. But the heartless rich men did not pay heed to Vemana's teachings. The naturally emotional Vemana could not contain his righteous anger. He condemned the callousness of the rich in the strongest terms. He said, "These sons of strumpets throw away thousands and lakhs to please the prostitutes who satisfy their carnal passions, but will not give a handful of rice to a man dying of hunger." He did not stop there; he went further and said "seize the wealth from the wealthy, through violence if need be, and distribute it among the poor." Vemana was thus a revolutionary.

Besides this, this revolutionary poet suggested another wise method to bring about an egalitarian social system.

Vemana knew that at one time the Telugu villages were prosperous, and that life there was happy and contented. Cottage industries flourished and villages were self-sufficient. The institution of joint family was a binding force that contributed to co-operative endeavour and economic well-being. People firmly believed that living together and working together was the surest way to happiness. Every farmer had enough persons in his own family to do all the agricultural work, and wives and husbands, brothers and sisters and uncles and aunts made the family both strong and prosperous. Heads of such families were regarded as the leaders of the villages. Sometimes the head of a family gave his daughter in marriage to a young man of a poor family and made him a member of his own family. This made the family stronger and richer because the son-in-law sincerely strove for the family into which he came. Such marriages proved very successful, and thus the joint family of those days contributed not a little to social cohesion and co-operation. The rich were considerate towards the poor and the disparity in their styles of living was not abhorrent.

But this social order was crumbling by Vemana's time. The disparity between the rich and the poor grew greater and greater society broke up owing to class distinctions. There were no marriage alliances between the rich and the poor. The rich looked down on the poor, and the poor were sullenly subservient to the rich. The two classes lived in distrust and contempt of each other. Vemana's love of humanity and sense of social justice could not endure this painful division in Society. He strove hard to bring about unity and cordiality. His ideal was a classless egalitarian society. The structure of social equality could be raised only on the foundation of co-operative living, he firmly believed. There should be free intercourse between the rich and the poor, and the two classes must be closely bound by marriage ties, he advised.

“కలిమి జూచియుయ్య రామమిచ్చిన యట్లు

సమున కియ్య నదియ్య గొప్ప భనము

కేద కిచ్చు సుమపు పెన వేసి నట్లుండు”

Marriages should not degenerate into buying and selling. If one marries for the sake of wealth, it amounts to selling

one's body. Marriages between persons of equal status may be desirable, but marriages between the rich and the poor very often prove perfect unions that can never be severed. This suggestion of Vemana's is of the utmost importance for social peace and progress.

Vemana warned the rich repeatedly that unless a classless society was established through voluntary sharing of wealth, there would certainly be a violent revolution causing misery and destruction. He did his best to set things right by persuasion and his poetry became a most powerful means. He was a practical philosopher and a socialist who believed in an egalitarian classless state.

• VEMANA AND VALLUVAR

As a poet of the people, Valluvar is unrivalled in the world of Tamil Literature. His work 'Tirukkural' consists of couplets composed in a native metre. The term 'Tirukkural' means 'sacred stanzas.' No other Dravidian language possesses such a short and attractive stanza-form as the 'Kural.' The Telugu 'dwipada' and the Kannada 'tripadi' may be said to be similar to this to some extent. 'Tirukkural' is a perfect literary work, constructed with consummate skill. The short and sweet words chosen and the remarkable brevity of expression make it a work of great literary beauty.

Valluvar was a saint and it is very likely that he sat in meditation, and composed his great work, according to a regular design conceived of beforehand. Only the first three 'purusharthas,' namely 'dharma' (duty), 'artha' (wealth) and 'kama' (pleasure) have been considered. The last 'purushartha,' 'Moksha' (Salvation), has not been dealt with.

Valluvar's pithy verses teach us all those rules of conduct on which man's physical, moral and spiritual well-being is dependent, and so 'Tirukkural' may properly be considered a compendium of all ethical and moral principles necessary for living a good life.

'Tirukkural' has a universal appeal. Each reader can appreciate it at his own level. The quite ordinary readers as well as the greatest scholars can find in it meaning that is appropriate to their respective power of comprehension and imagination. There is no human problem however hard it may be, to which a solution is not suggested in this great work. The author of "Tirukkural" has a unique place in Tamil literature; his importance is as great as that of religious teachers; social reformers, moralists, humanists, poets and preachers put together.

Unlike 'Tirukkural,' Vemana's verses have no definite sequence or design. They were not composed with any idea of a single literary work. But for a few occasional stanzas, Vemana did not deal methodically with the 'purusharthas' or the duties

of a householder or politics. Yet Vemana's collection of poems also must be considered a great literary work, in accordance with Viswanatha's definition of a 'kavya,' namely, "Vakyam rasatmakam kavyam" (Any utterance that affords aesthetic pleasure is a literary work).

Vemana was a lover of liberty who could tolerate no restrictions to his freedom of thought, of expression and of movement. It is no exaggeration to say that he was omnipresent like Mahavishnu. There was no place he did not explore, no man he did not know, no realm of knowledge he did not visit, no human problem he did not examine. Like Valluvar, he too, wrote his verses in a native metre, in an easy, epigrammatic style. His poetry is a statement of truth; it is imaginative; it is simple. Its language is the natural living language of the common man, the language that he uses in his everyday life. Again like Valluvar, he was a master of the pithy style which packs profound thoughts in short simple words. Clarity and brevity endow his poetry with a unique quality that affords genuine aesthetic delight.

As we read 'Tirukkural' we see Valluvar as a sage possessing a fund of worldly knowledge based on traditional ethical codes. We see him as a political philosopher, as a spiritual teacher, as a humanist and above all as a great poet. We observe in him the aura of deep meditation as in Lord Buddha. His poetic expression is marked not by intensity of emotion but by sublimation and control of emotion. Clarity and brevity are also the hallmarks of his poetry.

We do not find in Vemana's verses much evidence of his having studied the traditional ethical codes (Sampradaya dharmashastras). He was a practical philosopher who said that the noblest rules of conduct are these that contribute to social progress. He believed in constructive human effort. His goal in life was the creation of a cultured, social order in which distinctions of caste, creed, race and religion did not exist. Establishment of social justice was his mission. We notice in his teachings the rationalism of Lord Buddha.

Vemana and Valluvar differ in their temperaments, too. Valluvar was highly pacific, whereas Vemana was highly

emotional. Vemana was a revolutionary, while Valluvar was a moralist. This contrast is clearly visible in their writings.

Valluvar belonged to the 2nd century A.D. whereas Vemana was of the 17th century poets, of necessity, criticise contemporary life. So we find differences in their teachings. The needs and problems of Valluvar's time were different from those of Vemana's. The society of the 2nd century was, perhaps, not as decadent as it was in the 17th century. Consequently, the teachings of Valluvar and Vemana reflect the differences of their times.

Though these two great poets differed in their methods of poetic composition, in their beliefs, in their teachings and in their natural dispositions, yet they worked for the realisation of the same ideal. That ideal was human progress, human welfare. Let us now look at their similarities as revealed in their writings.

Both were poets of the people :

Valluvar adopted the short stanza form 'Kural' for his poetic communication, and his language was the expressive, living language spoken by the common people of his age. Welfare of the people was his ideal, and his statement direct and effective.

Vemana's stanza form was short, too. He chose the fourlined 'ataveladi.' His language also was the easy, natural language of the common people, full of sayings and proverbs. His verses are so simple and memorable that hardly any Andhra exists who does not know atleast a few of his poems by-heart.

Both were worshippers of the one god (Monists) :

Valluvar believed in One God. That can be seen at the very commencement of his work. He did not give the God any name. He prayed to the one universal God, the Creator of the Universe; before beginning to write his great book.

“அகர முதல எழுத்தெல்லாம் ஆதி
பகவன் முதற்றே உலகு.”

Just as akara (the sound 'அ') is the beginning of the world of letters, so is God the beginning of the Universe.

That Vemana too, was a believer in one God is evident from many of his verses. The following is one among them :

“పసుల వన్నె వేటు పా లేక వర్ణ మా
పున్న జాతి వేటు పూజ యొకటే
దర్శనములు వేటు వైవంబ దొక్కటి”.

Cows may be of different colours, but their milk is of one colour. Though flowers differ in their colour, they are all utilised for the same purpose, that is, in worshipping the one God. ‘Darsanas’ (Systems of Philosophy) are varied, but God is one.

What the two poets thought of caste :

Valluvar did not condemn caste as explicitly as Vemana did. There is, however, implied criticism of caste in some of the ‘kural.’ One of the kural (No. 972) reads thus when

“ పிறప్పొక్కటும் యెల్ల యిరిక్కుం శిరప్పొవ్వ
శెయ్యెత్తొల్లెల్ల వేల్పుం యాన్.”

All human beings are born equal. Differences arise only on account of their trades and patterns of behaviour.

This thought of Valluvar’s resembles the adage in Sanskrit “*Janmana Jayathe Sudrah, Karmana Jayathe Dwijah*” All are ‘Sudras’ when born ; their deeds make them Brahmins ; and the line from Bhagavadgita : “*Chathur Varnyam Mayasrustam Gune Karma Vibhagasah*”—Society has been divided into four castes according to qualities and deeds ; Let us now look at the progressive view-point expressed by Vemana. He said that all human race belonged to only one caste.

“కులము హెచ్చు తగ్గు కొడు వలు పని లేగు
సాను జాత మయ్యె సకల కులము
హెచ్చు తగ్గు మాట ఎట్లెఱుంగ వచ్చు ?”

God has created all human beings equal, of whatever caste they may be. Then how can one tell that one is high and the other is low ? Therefore, men should give up all differences of caste and religion and become one caste.

Poverty is the most Terrible of evils According to both the poets :

There is nothing more harmful to man than poverty. He must overcome this evil in order to develop his potentialities to the fullest extent.

The Devil of Poverty comes into this world and destroys this world as well as the other. It deprives man of peace not only in this life but also in the life after death. (Kurals 1041 and 1042).

“ இன்மையின் இன்னுதது யாதெனின் இன்மையின்
இன்மையே இன்னு தது.”

“ இன்மை எனஒரு பஃவி மறுமையும்
இம்மையும் இன்றி வரும்.”

Vemana has compared poverty to a forest fire that consumes everything.

“ ஧்ந஡ு லே஡ி ய஡ுட ஡ா ஡ா஡ ல஡்஡ு
த஡ு஡ ஡ே஡ு஡ ஡ி஡ி ஡ா஡ு஡ ஡ே஡ு஡
஧்ந஡ுலே஡ி ஡஡ி஡ி ஡ல஡஡ ஡ா஡஡ு ”.

Want is like forest fire. It destroys both the person himself and those who approach him. Even to think of poverty is a great sin. It is, therefore, the duty of everyman to acquire wealth.

The rich should help the poor, said both the poets :

“ The wealthy people must consider it their duty to help the deserving poor. Charity should be given to those who are really in need. Help should not be rendered to others expecting something in return. Help must be altruistic,” said Valluvar (Kural 221).

“ வறியார்க்கொன்று ஈவதே ஈகைமற் றெல்லாம்
குறியெதிர்ப்பை நீர துடைத்து.”

Vemana, too, emphasized this. He said : Give to the man who is in real need.

Both the poets considered anger is a deadly enemy :

Anger is the root of all sins. It is best to give up anger even against your worst enemy. Is there a greater to man's laughter (and happiness) than anger ?

Any man who wants to save himself must keep his anger under control. Otherwise, his anger will lead him to his own destruction. (Kural 303, 304, 305):

“மறத்தல் வெகுளியை யார்மாட்டும் தீய
பிறத்தல் அதனான் வரும்.”

“நகையும் உவகையும் கொல்லும் சினத்தின்
பகையும் உளவோ பிற.”

“தன்னைத்தான் காக்கின் சினங்காக்க காவாக்கால்
தன்னையே கொல்லும் சினம்.”

Vemana also expressed the same thought in a slightly different way.

“கீழ் மூலம் ஸுதரீ கோச்சுமே வீழ்வு
கீழ்மூலம் மிசுல நீடுரு தீண்டு
கீழ் மூலம் நீடுரு கீடுரு தீண்டு”

வீடுரு

A man will lose his dignity on account of his anger. It will cause him misery. He who conquers anger will achieve all that he desires.

Both believed in non-violence:

Valluvar says:

What is good ‘karma’? It is non-violence—being compassionate to all living creatures. Violence destroys man’s virtues. Men should live without any thought of violence. Only then can they attain salvation in this life (Kural No. 321). And Vemana questioned; How can killers of life ever attain salvation?

“அறவினை யாதெனின் கொல்லாமை கோறல்
பிறவினை எல்லாந் தரும்.”

Both the poets have given us practical ethical principles that should guide us to purer lives:

Men should live responsible lives and work for the progress of Society. Virtue and morality are of the utmost importance. At the same time, commonsense and worldly wisdom are also necessary.

Valluvar says :

Unless the virtuous people are wary, they will be suppressed by the vicious crowds, just as the white-wash is absorbed by the wall to which it is applied. The virtuous must strive to preserve their individuality.

Vemana has said : It is not necessary to speak the truth when dealing with the wicked. But never utter falsehood in speaking to good people.

Worldly wisdom is essential for man to live happily in society. Its lack will bring him suffering.

To conclude, Vemana and Valluvar were not only great poets, but also great teachers. Their poetry and their teachings have earned them a permanent place in the hearts of lovers of literature and the good life.

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MORALS AND SATIRE IN VEMANA

Rules of conduct and moral principles, as we all know, have been formulated in accordance with the conditions of contemporary society. Only those ethical laws and moral precepts are of the noblest order as will result in a society where people live happily and peacefully in a disciplined manner - a society based on mutual goodwill and co-operation. These, however depend on time and place; they are not unalterable. Changing conditions and needs of society determine them.¹ Barring the eternal varieties, most of them are subject to change, and Vemana brings home this point in the following stanza in his own inimitable way:

“ మేనమామ బిడ్డ మెరసి పెండ్లామయ్యె
అరవలందు చెల్లెలాయె నదియు
వలసిన పుణ్యంబు వలదన్న పాపంబు ”.

In the Telugu Country, the practice of marrying the daughter of one's maternal uncle is prevalent. But a Tamilian looks upon his maternal uncle's daughter as his sister. This is especially true in the Nattu-Kottai Chettiars. A particular action is virtuous if it suits men and it is sinful if it does not suit them. Virtue and sin are, therefore, determined by men's needs and suitability.

Vemana's moral precepts and satire are based on reason. They are realistic and are totally free from orthodox traditionalism and doctrinaire bigotry. They were spontaneous and situated to the times and circumstances that brought them forth. His language was the living language of the people, and his teaching appeal to one and all because they contain beautiful similes, illustrations and proverbs. They are like the 'parijata' flowers that delight all the lay man as well as the scholar.

The moral principles of a person are dependent on his mental and psychological attitudes. Vemana was a practical philosopher and a revolutionary. Nowhere in his moral teachings and

1. At one time Kings were worshipped as God, That was 'duty'. But now, there are no kings. The Caste-system was strictly observed till recently. Now it is 'adharma' to observe caste differences.

satirical statements do we see any trace of vagueness or artificiality or unnaturalness. He is always natural, realistic and direct.

We can classify Vemana's moral sayings and critical observations under four heads. Some are (1) deliciously humorous making experience the delights of the 'nandanavana'; some are (2) sharply critical, piercing our hearts like acutely pointed daggers; some are (3) highly thought-provoking and instructive, providing thoughtful readers with intellectual feasts; and some are (4) affectionately exhorting, to be practised in our daily lives.

Humour and satire in Vemana

“ సకల శ్రీరములను సకల యజ్ఞముల
తలలు గొరుగకున్న ఫలము లేదు
మంత్రజలము కన్న మంగలి జలమెచ్చు ”.

At all holy places, and in all sacrifices one has to have his head shaven. Or else he does not derive any benefit. It looks as if the water used by the barber while shaving is of greater sanctity than the holy water of the 'teertha'. The last line in the verse is felicitously humorous.

“ గుహల లోన జొచ్చి గురువుల వెదకంక
క్రూర మృగ మొకండు తరసిలిన
ముక్తి మార్గ మదియె మందుగాఁ జూపురా ”.

Thinking that great teachers do not live in the midst of people and that they live only in caves, foolish persons go in search of 'gurus' in mountain caves. They believe that they can learn the path of salvation only from such men. If, unfortunately (or fortunately?) they meet with a wild animal, that animal will undoubtedly show them the path of salvation long before they find their 'guru'. How amusingly has Vemana exposed the stupidity of such people!

“ మేక కుతుకఁ బట్టి మెడ చున్న గుడువగా ! అక లేల మాను నాశ గాక
లోభివాని నడుగ లాభంబు గలుగునా ? ”.

“ The goat has two teat-like growths under its throat. Can any one suck milk out of them? Attempts to do so will be fruitless.

Likewise it is fruitless to ask a miser for anything." The simile is remarkable for its aptness, and it makes us smile as we think of it.

“లోభివాని జంప లోకంబు లోపల
మందు లేదు వేటై మతము కలదు
పైక మడిగి నంత భగ్గున పడి చచ్చు”.

“There is no poison on this earth that can kill a miser. There is only one sure way of killing him. Just ask him for a loan. At once he falls down dead, burnt by the flames of his anger.”

This satire of Vemana's must have really killed all the misers in the world.

He criticised blind idol worship by asking :

“రాయి దేవుడైన రాసులు మ్రొగడా?”.

“If a stone image is God, will not heaps of offerings be swallowed by Him?”

“వెచ్చు మాయె ననుచు వెక్కి-వెక్కి-ద్దురా”.

He mocked at misers saying : “He weeps and sobs whenever he has to spend.”

“తలలు బోడులైన తలపులు బోడులా?”.

He denounced false Sanyasins when he said :

“Will shaving head clean remove unclean thoughts?”

“రాతి బసవని గని రంగుగా మ్రొక్కుచు.....”

He laughed at bigoted Basava devotees saying : “They worship decorated stone ‘basawas,’ but torment the living ‘Basawa’.”

There are many more stanzas containing similar humorous satirical observations :

Observations that penetrate our hearts like pointed knives :

“ చాకివాడు తోక చీకాకు పడఁ జేసి
మైలఁ దీసి లెస్స మడిచి నట్లు
బుద్ధి చెప్పు వాడు గ్రుద్దిన నేమయా ? ”.

“The washerman beats the cloth and wrings it to make it clean. What does it matter if the teacher chastises us to remove our ignorance? We should welcome such chastisement as it is intended to benefit us.”

“ ఉర్వి వారి కెల్ల నొక్క కంచము పెట్టి
పొత్తు గుడిపి కులము పాలియ జేసి
తలను చెయ్యి బెట్టి తద నమ్మ జెప్పరా ”.

“Universal brotherhood should be established by making all human beings eat out of one plate. Caste distinctions must be eradicated. Every man should swear never to observe caste differences.” The intensity of feeling in this exhortation is extremely sincere.

“ పట్టు పట్టరాదు పట్టు విడువరాదు
పట్టేనేని బిగియ పట్ట వలయు
పట్టు విడుచు కంటే పడి చచ్చుటే మేలు ”.

“One should not start doing a thing without proper consideration. Once it is taken up, it should never be given up. One should rather die in the attempt than given up any task because of obstacles.”

Vemana believed in constructive human endeavour. Nothing was impossible for a determined and confident worker.

“ ధనికునకు నొసంగ తగదు వేమ ”.

“Nothing should be given to those already rich.”

“ రాచ మూక నమ్మరాదు రన్న ”.

“Never trust the tribe of rulers.”

“ పుట్టనేమి వాడు గిట్ట నేమి ? ”.

“ Whether such a person lives or dies is totally immaterial.”

There are any number of such incisive statements.

Some ideas that reflect Vemana's progressive philosophy and rationalism :

“ రాతి బొమ్మ కేల రంగైన వలు వలు
గుడ్లు గోపురములు కుంభములును
కూడు గుడ్డ తాను కోరునా దేవుడు ? ”

“ Why decorate stone idols with rich, colourful clothes? Why construct temples for them? Why build towers? Why oblations and offerings? Does God ask for food and clothes? Or do people think they can bribe God thus and obtain salvation ? ”

Pointing out this empty show, Vemana ask people to exercise their reasoning and discriminating faculties in everything that they do.

“ న్యాయ శాస్త్ర మరయ నన్యాయ మొనరించు
ధర్మ శాస్త్ర మొసగు దుర్మతంబు
జ్యోతి పంబు జనుల నీతులు తప్పించు.”

Legal Pundits do not utilise their knowledge of laws to fight for justice. By means of their clever arguments they make an elephant look a pig and a pig an elephant. Establishment of truth is not their ideal. Winning their case, just or unjust, is what they want. If we look at ‘dharma shastras,’ they are full of foolish doctrine and dogmas. And astrology destroys man’s creative endeavour. Blind belief in astrological forecasts kills people’s confidence in self-effort. We may reasonably say that astrology has done more harm than good to man-kind.

The following stanza is remarkable for its irrefutable logic. He refers to the belief that Rama is God and pertinently questions it.

“ అగ్ని బాణమునను నంబు ధింకి నపుడె
రాము డవల కేగ లావు మఱచె
వరుస కొండ్ల మోసి వారి ధేటికి గట్టె ? ”

Rama looked at the rough sea between him and Lanka. He was angry with 'Samudra,' for the rising waves prevented their reaching Lanka. He struck 'Samudra' with his Firearrow. The whole sea sank into the earth. If Rama had been capable of such a mighty deed, why did he have to build a bridge across the Sea?

The following are three more of the most telling of his verses :

“ జీవి తొలగు వెనుక జీవ వస్తువు లేల ? ”

“What avail are food and clothes for a dead person?”

“ బడుగునకు నొసంగ బాగు వేమి.”

“It is but right to give to the poorest and the weakest.”

“ శ్రమము లోన నుండు సర్వంబు —.”

“All wealth is the product of labour.”

Friendly Advice valuable in everyday life :

“ అనువు గాని చోట నధికుల మనరాదు
కొంచె మందు కెల్ల గొడువగాదు
కొండ యద్దమందు గొంచెమై యుండదా ? ”

“When one is not in the right place, one should not tell of his greatness. It is no disgrace to appear small in such a place. Does a mountain lose its size because it appears small in a mirror?”

Vemana has compressed a mountain of meaning in this verse-mirror.

“ తప్పు లెన్ను వారు తండ్రోప తండంబు
లుర్వి జనుల కెల్ల నుండుఁ దప్పు
తప్పు లెన్ను వారు తమ తప్పు లెరుగరు ”

“This world is full of people who find fault with others. They do not realise their own defects. One should know one's own defects before pointing out other people's lapses.”

- “ అల్పం డెపుడు బల్కు నా డంబరము గాను
 సజ్జనుండు పల్కు చల్లగాను
 కంచు మ్రోగినట్లు కనకంబు మ్రోగునా ? ”

“ The fool boasts of his greatness. The sage speaks softly. Empty vessels make much noise. Gold does not sound as loud as bell-metal.”

- “ గంగి గోవుపాలు గంటె డైనను జాల
 గడవె డైన నేమి ఖరము పాలు ?
 భిక్తి గల్గు కూడు పట్టె డైనను చాలు ”

“ The pure milk of a cow is valuable even if it is a spoonful. Of what use is ass's milk even if it is a potful ? Even a morsel of food given with real affection will afford perfect satisfaction? ”

- “ ఉప్పు గప్పురంబు నొక్క పోలిక నుండు
 చూడఁ జూడ రుచుల జూడ వేఱు
 పురుషులందు బుణ్య పురుషులు వేఱయా ! ”

“ Salt and comphor look alike. Both are white but they taste different. In the same way, men may outwardly appear to be alike, but their inner natures will be revealed only on closer examination.”

- “ మేడిపండు చూడ మేలి మై యుండును
 పొట్ట విచ్చి చూడఁ బురుగు లుండు
 దిటికి వాని మతిని బింక మీ లాగురా ; ”

The fig looks fine from outside. But open it and you see it full of worms. A coward is like a fig. He talks brave but runs away in terror when he sees danger.

- “ అనఁగ ననఁగ రాగ మతిశ యిల్లుచు నుండు
 తినఁగ తినఁగ వేము తియ్య నుండు
 సాధనమునఁ బనులు సమకూరు ధరలోన ”

A musician perfects his music (raga) as he signs more and more. Even the bitter neem leaf will be tasty as you go on eating it. Things, however hard, can be perfected by practice.

“ పదుగు రాడు మాట పాటి యై ధరఁ జెల్లు
నొక్క డాడు మాట యెక్క చెందు
నూర కుండు వాని కూ రెల్ల నోపదు.”

What many say is accepted. What is said by one alone, even if it is true, is rejected. The person who remains silent is frowned upon by all.

“ కులములోన నొకఁడు గుణ వంతుఁ డుండెనా
కులము వెలియు వాని గుణముచేత
వెలియు వనము లోన మలయజంబున్నట్లు ”

“ Even if there is one virtuous person in the family, the entire family acquires fame. A sandal tree, be it only one, spreads its sweet smell to the whole forest.”

“ ధనము గూడఁ బెట్టి దానంబు నేయక
తానుఁ దినకఁ లెస్స దాఁ చుఁ గాక
తేనె టీకఁ కూర్చి తెరు వరి కియ్యదా ?”

The honey-bee stores honey, but it is any chance wayfarer that eats it. Likewise, the wealth that a miser hoards passes into the hands of others.

“ ఇనుము విటిగె నేని యిను మాలు ముమ్మాలు
కాచి యతుక నేర్పుఁ గమ్మ రీఁడు
మనసు విటిగె నేని మఱి కూర్ప రా దయా, ”

The blacksmith can join together several times by heating the broken parts of iron implement. But no one can repair the human mind (heart) once it breaks.

“ తామసించి చేయఁ దగఁ బెట్టి కార్యంబు
వేగి రింప నదియు విషమ మగును
పచ్చి కాయఁ చెచ్చి పడ వేయ ఫలమానె ?

However hard one may try, it is impossible for one to ripen a fruit that has been plucked too early. Instead of ripening, it will only rot. Likewise, if one too hasty in doing things, his efforts will end only ruin.

అల్ప బుద్ధివాని కథి కార మిచ్చిన
 దొడ్ల వారి నెల్ల దొలగఁ గొట్టుఁ
 జెప్పుఁ దినెడి కుక్క చెఱకు తీపెఱుగునా ?”

If a petty-minded person is placed in a position of authority he will dismiss all honest workers. How can the dog that knows only the taste of the leather of a discarded shoe, know the sweetness of sugarcane?

నీళ్లలోని మొసలి నిగిడి యేనుగుఁ బట్టు
 బైటఁ గుక్క చేత భంగ పడును
 నాన బలిమి కాని తన బల్లి కాదయా !

As long as the crocodile is in water, it has the strength to seize even the strong elephant. The same crocodile once it comes out of water on the land, may however, be seized by a common dog. Similarly a man may be uncommonly strong in his own place, But this strength is not his own; he has only in virtue of his position.

“తల్లి దండ్రు అందు దయలేని పుత్రుండు
 పుట్ట నేమి నాడు గిట్ట నేమి ?
 పుట్ట లోన జెదలు పుట్టవా ? గిట్టవా ?”

Of what consequence are the white ants that multiply and perish in their mound? Similarly a son who has no affection for his parents is worthless and his existence is of no use to them.

