
Magnanimity of an Indian Saint: The Portrait of an Apostle of God: A Focus on Basavaraj Naikar's Religious Play *The Golden Servant of God*

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ABSTRACT

This article offers a detailed analysis of Basavaraj Naikar's religious play, *The Golden Servant of God* in terms of its dramatic conflict between worldliness and spirituality that takes place in the soul of Kanakadasa, a great saint of Karnataka. It shows how he, born in a shepherd caste, grows from the level of an Administrator of Bada and Bankapura villages (appointed by Emperor Sri Krisnadevaraya of Vijayanagara Empire) to that of a renunciate, fighting all through his life against the social evil of caste discrimination, especially against brahmanical orthodoxy and articulates the same in his innumerable musical compositions known as *kirtanas*. It also shows how Kanakadasa, being disillusioned by the meaninglessness of material life, seeks shelter and salvation in the holy feet of Lord Adikesava of Kaginele, a tiny village in North Karnataka.

India is universally recognized in the global sphere as a nation of glorious cultural heritage based up on its spirituality. Her reputation as a spiritually advanced country is attributable to phenomenal contributions rendered by numerous saints, sages, seers, monks, mendicants and prophets. These religious personalities have enriched this nation morally, spiritually and culturally and imparted a distinct identity to it. All these figures illuminated the moral and spiritual paths as torch bearers and beckoned to the bewildered humanity to traverse along those pre-trodden paths so as to idealize their lives and spiritualize their sentiment and sensibility.

In the galaxy of these luminaries, one who shines luminously as a saint is Kanakadasa, as ardent devotee of God of the 16th century. He was consistently and perpetually pursuing for realization of God. His entire life centres round his philanthropic services and his dedication to contemplation and chanting of God. He is gifted with strikingly noblest qualities by virtue of which he ascends to a great height of celebrity.

If we focus on his personality, his virtues and noblest deeds are surfaced in his activities. He is considerably liberal, broadminded, generous, munificent and a compassionate forgiver. In view of his exemplary conduct and character he is reckoned as a symbol of magnanimity.

Many incidents of his life depicted in different scenes of the play *The Golden Servant of God* authenticate his magnanimity. These incidents are presented in various episodes, which are illustrated below.

The first incident that reflects on his magnanimity is his munificent dispersal of gold ornaments and coins among the poor. One day when Kanakadasa was digging the

earth he discovered and got a potful of gold ornaments and coins. He gave away this treasure munificently to the poor and utilized without avarice a part of it for the renewal of the temples. Such unprecedented noble services rendered by Kanakadasa were lavishly lauded by the inhabitants of the village Kaginelli. They admired his generosity and selflessness for the productive utilization of the treasure. In the conversation between the villager 1 and villager 2 in the Act – II- SC-I, the latter comments “He is a very generous man. Any one in his place would have used it for selfish purpose but this youngman has been spending that gold on poor people and on renovating the temples in the village” (GSG 15). Thus, it is axiomatic that such generous distribution of wealth among the poor is certainly a deed of magnanimity which is rarely noticed in human society.

Another incident that evinces Kanaka's noble mindedness is his noblest tendency towards forgiveness. Once this social activist was assailed and assaulted violently by Mallanayaka, a deadliest enemy of his father and was grievously wounded. It took him two months to recover but he did not nurse grudge and anger against the miscreants. He did not contemplate vindictive retaliation against his enemy. Any other man in his position would have revengefully counter attacked the assailants.

When Lakkamma, the daughter of the assailant met Kanakadasa and divulged her remorse and grief of frustration in cherishing futile aspiration for her marriage with him, he consoled her soothingly and compassionately to alleviate her mental agony that resulted from her disappointment. Any other man would have avenged her for the attack upon him by her father but Kanaka is so phlegmatic and insouciant that he did not mind the past incident of vandalism.

As a benevolent man, Kanaka enthusiastically embarked upon some constructive enterprises for public welfare without any evil motive. He constructed a barrage across a river and a canal for providing irrigational facilities to the inhabitants. Besides, he was impelled by his intensity of devotion to God to initiate a car festival and a fair for Sangameswara and another fair for Lord Narsimha at Kaginelli. Over and above he built a rest house for homeless and helpless villagers. As we notice Kanakadasa devotes himself actively and selflessly to execute some beneficial works with the objective of ameliorating the rural life of the inhabitants. He accomplishes all his predetermined tasks with philanthropic enthusiasm. Furthermore, he employed guards to patrol the village at night with a view to eliminating robbery in the area. It is creditable that he himself solicitously comes out at night for patrolling in order to ensure safety to the villagers. Apart from these personal services, he undertakes repair and reconstruction of reservoirs in the interest of the villagers. He provides scopes for the livelihood of farmers. In this context, the remark made by villagers is worth mentioning “On the whole the people in his regime enjoyed peace and happiness” (GSG 21).

Another instance of his noble intention can be cited of his inclination towards celibacy. When Kanaka lost his wife, his mother proposed to him a second marriage but he declined and turned down her proposal. Such is the noble attitude of Kanaka who overcomes the temptation of conjugal enjoyment and decides to lead a celibate life. Any man in his situation would have readily consented for remarriage in order to re-enliven his marital life but Kanaka resists this pressure in consideration of transitoriness of life. Such a consideration testifies to the nobleness of the character.

Kanakadasa has exemplified his magnanimity in obviating another incident of attack upon him by some miscreants. While Kanaka was sauntering in the village by way of patrolling for its safety, some ruffians belaboured him fatally and left him wounded. As it came to the notice of the villagers, they nursed him and brought him round in two

months. In this case of assault, he compromised with the situation impassively and did not betray any reaction and provocation.

We can relevantly cite another instance of his greatness certified by his old friend Vadiraja Tirtha. When Kanaka met his old classmate at Chennakeshava temple at Beluru the latter complemented him “My dear Kanaka I am deeply impressed by your poetic talent and mystical height which is very rare in the human being” (GSG 55).

One day Chennappa the chairman of the temple of Lord Venkateswara was bidden by God in a dream to receive Kanaka with due honour. Kanaka was sleeping in the temple of God at Tirupati but Chennappa and his assistants searched for him around the temple but failed to trace out him. Finally, they found him in the temple corridor and begged him pardon guiltily. On hearing their confession of guilt Kanaka said to them liberally “It is all right dear brother, mistakes happen quite unintentionally. Don't worry about them” (GSG 49). He spoke these words compromisingly with a sense of magnanimity.

On one occasion when Kanaka sought the permission of a Brahmin to enter the Sosale Monastery of Vyasraya Swami at Tiruma-Kudalu, he was ridiculously denied entrance on the ground of his low caste. The Brahmin haughtily said to him “Our Monastery does not allow non-Brahmin in to its precincts. It is strictly meant for pure Brahmins like us” (GSG 29). Kanaka was rudely ill-treated by the Brahmin. At this juncture, there came Vyasraya Swami, the spiritual guru of the Monastery and welcomed him cordially. As he had heard the rude voices and misbehaviour of his disciples, he asked Kanaka sympathetically not to feel hurt by the insolent behaviour of the Brahmins. On hearing his consolatory advice, he respectfully told him with a liberal mind “Holy Sir I am not hurt at all by the behaviour of the people here” (GSG 30). This reply signifies his tolerance and insouciance.

Next day when Kanaka attends the class taken by Swami he sits in the corner of the room segregated from all other disciples lest he should outrage them for his low birth. His guru taunted all other disciples for discriminating against him contemptuously on the ground of caste. Swami Vyasraya admires Kanaka being impressed by his magnanimity and says “Oh my dear Kanakadasa you are really a golden and godly man. Our orthodox disciple will understand your greatness at the appropriate time” (GSG 33). He further overestimated his personality in the following words “Dasa Supreme you are really a great soul. We deem ourselves lucky to have had you amidst us in the sacred complex” “you are a spiritual expert” (GSG 39).

On another occasion, Kanaka was subjected to much emotional and psychological torture in the temple of Lord Krishna at Udupi. As he stepped towards the sanctum of the temple he was rudely debarred from entering and ill-treated. Brahmin-1 rebuffs him “How can you dare enter the temple” (GSG 60). Then Brahmin-2 also misbehaved with him and said to him haughtily “Beggarly people are not allowed in to the temple. Do not defile the holy atmosphere here” (GSG 60). As Kanaka further asked them for food out of hunger, they denied him inhumanly. A Brahmin growled at him “Fellow we have no food for the dirty people like you” (GSG 60). However, Kanaka did not feel affronted by their misbehaviour and denial of food. This incident authenticates his magnanimity.

The Act-IV SC-II depicts another incident of insult inflicted on Kanaka in the same temple of Lord Krishna at Udupi. As he was staying in the porch of the temple there came a Brahmin who snubbed at him “you old fellow who permitted you to stay in the porch? You better get out of this porch. Otherwise I shall thrash you with a bamboo stick”

(GSG 68). If any other man had been ill-treated so insolently, he would have betrayed violent reaction and embroiled himself in a squabble. But Kanaka is exceptionally magnanimous to ignore such untoward situation.

The outcome of the incidents which befell Kanaka, bears the stamp of his magnanimity. In every incident, he has evinced his tolerance and compromising proclivity. He has never been perturbed and upset by adversity of situation. He overcomes all untoward situations with patience and nobleness. His magnanimity is surfaced in his social and religious activities. The incidents illustrated above, justify his acts of service and sacrifice of magnanimity.

Kanakadasa is a divine figure who consistently pursues for social services and realization of God by virtue of his devotion to Him. He is morally and spiritually an upright and immaculate personality who dreams of God and has a darsan of Him in figure. God graciously appeared to him for his magnanimity that was the keystone of his personality.

Basavaraj Naikar's play, *The Golden Servant of God* approximates thematically to his other play *The Pilgrim of Life* on account of which it is comparable with the latter. From the view point of the humanitarian virtue, both the plays *The Pilgrim of Life* and *The Golden Servant of God* bear a close semblance with each other on account of the similarity in the presentation of objectives and activities of the characters. In the former one devotee of God is portrayed and his social and religious activities are highlighted but in the later play the characters of two awakened youths are presented with their noblest virtues. Kanaka the principal character of the play *The Golden Servant of God* is depicted as a divine being, who devotes himself wholeheartedly to the service of God. He invariably sings devotional songs to propitiate Him.

In Act-II scene-III he asserts his determination to dedicate himself to service of God "So far I served the human work sincerely and as much as I could do. But henceforth I shall be slave of God and spent the rest of my life in the service of Lord Hari" (GSG 23). He perceives God vis a vis by virtue of his piety and religiosity but Govinda and Sarif the characters of the play *The Pilgrim of Life* attain divinity by virtue of their spiritual uprightness and accomplish stupendous task miraculously with ease.

Like Kanaka these two awakened persons are equally magnanimous in disposition and action. Their activities evince their exalted noble quality abiding in them. Govinda the inhabitant of the village Kalasa looks for a worthy disciple who will be compatible with his temperament and attitude. As a matter of fact, he was looking for a spiritually upright one. Govinda speaks to his brothers Bandibhatta, "I have been searching for a flower that will never wilt or fade" (TPOL 12). He further disqualifies his sister's son on the ground of his spiritual bankruptcy. "He is like an empty desert. He is a zero in the field of spirituality" (TPOL 12). This statement testifies to his spiritual integrity.

Naikar's play *The Pilgrim of Life* throws light on the magnanimity of two saintly characters who invariably contemplate to ennoble and idealize their lives on the basis of religious ideology with a view to attaining salvation. They are devoid of all human vices, ego, hypocrisy, dishonesty and iniquity for which they are regarded as saints. Although Govinda is a Brahmin by caste he does not despise the Muslim boy Sarif. He on the contrary looks upon him as his son and treats him as his disciple. His intimate association with Muslim boy evidences his magnanimity. Both of them were the devotees of Lord Shiva and mother goddess Sakambari. Both guru and disciple had mystically gained divine power without practice of penance, meditation and yoga.

Likewise, Kanaka too attained the blessings of Adikeshava, Tirumaleswara and

Lord Krishna by virtue of his magnanimity and righteousness. Since he was devoid of vices and moral weaknesses he was spiritually capable of realizing God by the intensity of devotion. Govinda and Sarif were invariably advancing along the spiritual path to attain salvation and in reality, they achieved their goal. Both these characters often had vision of God and heard divine voices because of their piety and holiness. Just as Kanaka is believed to have been born by the blessing of Tirumaleswara, so is Sarif also born by the blessings of goddess Sakambari and Shiva Putra of Sisunala. Both Govinda and Sarif are innately endowed with spiritual insight and prophetic vision by virtue of which they forecast any imminent untoward situation and predict the future of the villagers. They consistently endeavour to build up their personalities on the basis of moral and spiritual sanctity.

Just as Kanaka was subjected to ill-treatment and harassment for his non-Brahmin birth Sarif was also disdained by the orthodox Brahmins but Govinda by virtue of his magnanimity welcomed him to his house and treated him endearingly with love and affection. Bandibhatta the elder brother of Govinda expresses his contempt for the Muslims but the latter defies orthodoxy and caste distinction. Whereas Kanaka is liberated from worldly attachment, Govinda and Sarif too get rid of this attachment. The latter characters are portrayed as morally and spiritually immaculate like Kanaka who is free from any kind of vices and abuses. Sarif too perceives saintly quality in his guru Govinda by his intuitive perceptibility and looks upon him as Parameshwara.

Once Sarif was also accused of stealing the nose-stud from the village deity. He bluffed to absolve himself from the charge of theft and asserted that nose-stud was given to him by goddess herself. Sarif was exonerated from the charge of theft of nose-stud by the goddess herself who appeared compassionately and offered him the ornament in the presence of all to impart credibility to his false statement. Similarly Kanaka was also suspected of having stolen the ornament of the icon of Krishna but he exculpated himself by his candid confession of the incident. Thus, in both the plays Kanaka and Sarif are projected as blessed souls. Govinda and Sarif exhort moral precepts to villagers and so also does Kanaka who delivers discourses and through them he tries to refine and ennoble the lives of the villagers. The life and contributions of Kanakadasa are reminiscent of his magnanimous deeds delineated above.

If we focus on *The Golden Servant of God* with reference to Naikar's other religious play *The Sport of Allama* we notice considerable thematic dissimilarity between these two plays. The former is basically a religious play but the latter is woven with the thread of Indian mythology. The latter play presents the picture of a verbal contest between Girija and Lord Siva regarding the irresistible power of a woman to enchant a man by her passionate approach. She offers presumptuously a challenge to Siva with a confidence to prove it by sending a lady named Maya to the mortal world with her *tamasik* power. She empowered her to captivate a young man Allama an incarnation of Lord Siva. Siva accepts her challenge and sends Allama to the world manifesting Himself in his personality as an artist. In this battle of contest Maya is frustrated and disheartened by Allama who repudiates her sensual approach considering it repugnant. Allama is insusceptible and self-resistant to passion and sensuality. He remains intransigently irresponsive and unconcerned towards sensual temptation by virtue of which he repels Maya's voluptuous advancement. This superhuman quality of Allama is illustrative of his magnanimity. Any other young man in his position would have eagerly reciprocated her love and welcomed her passionate approach. But Allama quits her kingdom being embittered by her persistent amorous trick to entangle him. Thus, Maya's attempts to enchant Allama in her love prove abortive and unfruitful. This self-resistance proves Allama's magnanimity by virtue of

which he overcomes amorous desire and professes his quality of self-restraint.

In another episode of the same play *The Sport of Allama*, Girija discomfits Siva by empowering her incarnated women Mahadevi to achieve success and satiety in marrying Lord Chennamallikarjuna of Srisaila. Although she marries a worldly man yet she abstains herself from sensual enjoyment and perseveres in her attempt to win over God as her husband. In this case of her aspiration of marriage with Mallikarjuna Mahadevi sticks to her self-restraint and exemplifies her magnanimity by virtue of which she accomplishes her spiritual target. Any other woman in her case would have yielded to sensual approach of her worldly husband but she quits the palace of the king and goes to the city of Kalyana being disgusted by his frequent amorous advancement because of her insensibility to erotic enjoyment. Thus, her abstinence from passion and self-resistance against this vice testifies to her noblest quality of magnanimity. Thus, the play *The Sport of Allama* upholds the invulnerability of celestial love and denounces the sacrilege and sinfulness of earthly passion. The play tends to blend material life and spiritual life with mythical implication. It accentuates transcendence of the vice of sensual enjoyment for the sake of attaining the blessings of the Divine.

Apart from comparing *The Golden Servant of God* with Naikar's other religious plays it is also relevant to analyse its theme with reference to other Indian religious plays written in English by Indian dramatists like Tagore, Basudev and Krishnaswamy. In all these plays we have to trace out and point out the quality of magnanimity embodied in the characters portrayed therein.

Tagore's *Chirta* is based upon the mythological story of the *Mahabharata*. It depicts Chitrangada's consistent effort to captivate Arjuna and marry him but the latter remains tenaciously resolute to maintain celibacy and denies her offer. Arjuna professes his magnanimity by overcoming the lure of marital life but his noble quality is dissolved into erotic desire that impels him to submit to her on account of arousal of sensual desire in him. Thus, this play *Chitra* differs thematically from Naikar's play *The Golden Servant of God* which concentrates on Kanakadasa's consistency and steadfastness in spiritual pursuit for realization of God. His inextinguishable desire for attainment of visual contact with God leads readers to construe this experience as an act of magnanimity.

Tagore's another play *Sanyasi* dwells on the theme of purification of soul and pursuit for attainment of salvation. This aspiration highlights Sanyasi's quality of magnanimity. The plot of this play is borrowed from Indian mythology *Vishnu Purana*. Jada Bharat the principal character of this play externalizes his magnanimity by resorting to the path of spiritual purification and attainment of salvation. He abdicates his kingship without any avarice for position and renounces his worldly life in order to persevere in the attainment of salvation. The play *Sanyasi* as a religious play bears some similarity with Naikar's *The Golden Servant of God* in respect of pursuit for realization of God.

A comparative study of these plays leads us to infer identical objectives cherished by Jada Bharata and Kanakadasa in undergoing purification of soul and experiencing realization of God. Thus, their spiritual pursuit testifies to their magnanimity.

Tagore's other play *The King of the Dark Chamber* is also a religious play that tends to focus on the mysticism of God's will towards His appearance and disappearance. The queen of the play persists in tracing out her elusive husband who escapes her sight on account of manifestation of God in his personality. After consistent abortive pursuit, when she fails to have a sight of her husband she construes her husband as manifestation of the Divine. These efforts of the queen in the pursuit of God evince her magnanimity. The play

seeks to awaken in the queen the desire for realization of God and acquisition of mystic knowledge about Him. Like the queen of the play, *The King of the Dark Chamber* Kanakadasa also strives consistently to explore knowledge of mysticism for which he moves from one guru to another for this purpose. First of all he is tutored by Srinivasacarya at his school and then he joins the gurukula ashram run by Vyasaraya Swami of Sosale Monastery at Tirurma-Kudalu with a view to intensifying and widening his knowledge of God and religious principles. In the Act-III Scene-III Kanaka appeals to Swamy to admit him in his monastery in order to infuse him with mystic knowledge "I have come all the way from Kaginelli to seek spiritual knowledge of a higher kind". Just as Kanaka asserts his magnanimity by professing his insatiable desire for acquisition of mystic knowledge, so does the queen in the play, *The king of the Dark Chamber*. She seeks to enlighten herself with spiritual knowledge and perseveres in her attempt to perceive God in the personality of her husband. Thus, her perseverance in the pursuit of God evinces her magnanimity

Another play comparable with *The Golden Servant of God* is the religious play Nala and Damayanti by Basudev Rao who builds the plot on the fabric of the epic the Mahabharata. Since these mythical lovers Nala and Damayanti enjoy the game of love, they are devoid of religious inclination for spiritual pursuit. There is no vestige of magnanimity in them. They are represented as seekers after celestial pleasure but not after realization of God. Hence, they are lacking in the noble quality of magnanimity. The play is therefore not categorised as a religious one.

In the historical past of India many religious preceptors had also given evidence of their magnanimity. Shankaracharya, the celebrated saint served the needy and the downtrodden by virtue of his noble propensity for welfare. Once he went to the hut of a pauper inhabitant to beg alms. As the family was impecunious, it had nothing to offer. The wife of the villager offered Shankaracharya a piece of tamarind and deplored her poverty. Her deploration melted his heart where upon he compassionately prayed to goddess Laxmi to shower riches on the family. In response to his prayer goddess Laxmi blessed the family with affluence. This is how Shankaracharya removed the poverty of the family with a humanitarian feeling of magnanimity.

Other Indian spiritualists have also rendered benevolent services to the people as benefactors and evinced their magnanimity. Saint Gyaneswar one day justified his statement in a controversy with the Brahmins by objectifying the omnipresence of God. He was subjected to an ordeal to prove the embodiment of God in a buffalo where upon Gyaneswar directed the animal to sing out the doctrines of the Veda. As the buffalo recited some of the lines from the *Veda*, the Brahmins were disgraced and they apologetically begged him forgiveness. Gyaneswar ignored their guilt and forgave them with clemency and compassion. He demonstrated the authenticity of his belief in the omnipresence of God and adduced his magnanimity. In like manner Kanakadasa too forgave the Brahmins, when they apologized to him for their offence in denying him entrance into the sanctum of the temple of Lord Krishna at Udupi.

Unlike Chaitanya and Gyaneswar who have only shown their magnanimity in their religious activities but not in social activities other religious preachers like Dayananda, Vivekananda, Sivananda and Chinmayananda have rendered social and religious services to the people for the upliftment of the community. Dayananda reformed Hindu religion by combating the evils of superstition, untouchability, idolatry and casteism and long enduring convention of child marriage. He introduced a new pattern of education based upon the gospels of the *Vedas*. Like Dayananda, Vivekananda also brought about social and religious reformation and launched a campaign to eliminate

illiteracy, poverty and the convention of caste discrimination. Besides, he sought to illuminate people's mind about utilitarian value of the Vedanta and the Upanishad. By way of discourses he contributed to the promotion of spiritual knowledge and consecration of religious activities. Thus, Vivekananda was impelled by virtue of magnanimity to serve the society ungrudgingly and selflessly. Sivananda too served the poor patients as a benevolent doctor. He even treated the patients at his residence free of cost. One day he lifted a pregnant woman who was left deserted by her relatives and brought her home for her safe delivery. This is an act of magnanimity that is reflected in his biography as a laudable service. Thus, all other religious luminaries have, philanthropically served humanity with humanitarian serviceability.

The Golden Servant of God is conclusively established as a religious play for predominance of religiosity therein. This play is nevertheless thematically disharmonious with Naikar's other religious play. The Sport of Allama for its assimilation and association with mythological sequences. The former, however, contributes to the evocation of reader's interest and faith in God. It also tends to motivate people to ennoble their lives spiritually and to promote philanthropic services for the amelioration and upliftment of Indian social life.

The play *The Golden Servant of God* deserves profuse encomium for skilful presentation of different episodes and characters. It serves to instil moral and ethical sense in people by way of exploitation of the theme of moral and spiritual value which is the key note of the play. The pervasion of religious atmosphere in the play contributes to the evocation of religious interest in readers who eulogize this play in the moral and spiritual perspective.

With the exception of the playwrights mentioned above there are many more contemporary dramatists like Sri Aurobindo, Harindranath, Girish Karnad, Vijay Tendulkar, and Mahesh Dattani. All these playwrights have written on the contemporary social issues and not on religious themes but Karnad has produced a few plays which are tinged with Indian mythology. His plays are nevertheless much dissimilar from religious plays because of their assimilation with mythology. Hence these are excluded from the comparison and contrast with modern religious plays.

Although a number of religious plays have been written in English by Modern Indian dramatists they can hardly surpass the excellence and the superiority of Naikar's religious plays for exuberance of religiosity in them. They tend to assert their identity and magnitude for unprecedented conception of theme and skilful presentation of the theme in the form of dramatization. This play *The Golden Servant of God* gains enormous popularity among religious-minded persons who consider spiritual pursuit as the summum bonum of their lives. This play serves as a source of inspiration for conquest of vices as a stepping stone towards transcendentalization of worldly life and attainment of salvation. This play *The Golden Servant of God* has to be widely reckoned as magnum opus in the spiritual perspective. In the annals of Indian drama written in English such religious plays are rarely produced by modern playwrights and hence it has to be treasured as a literary monument of enduring value for its embodiment of exalted theme of religious significance. This book imperatively necessitates its wide publicity for promotion of its readability and literary venture for academic pursuit.

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