

Review: A refreshing word-view

Reviewed Work(s): *The Word in the World: Essays and Lectures on Indian Literature and Aesthetics* by H S Shivaprakash and Kamalakhar Bhat

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A refreshing word-view

Umesh Kumar



The Word in the World: Essays and Lectures on Indian Literature and Aesthetics by H S Shivaprakash; Ed. Kamalakhar Bhat; Manipal: Manipal University Press, 2019; 292 pp, Rs 255

H.S. Shivaprakash's *The Word in the World* is the most accessible, reader-friendly and jargon-free book that I have read in recent times. The troubling question for me was to excavate the author's object of inquiry. For in this book, Shivaprakash isn't addressing one single question nor is he foregrounding a monolithic set of material for analysis. The food for thought that he provides here is not the routine meal. It is the occasional buffet – a collection of his essays and lectures written over many years – that attracts, provokes, makes one aware of the many options available and of course demands a fine digestive tract! Edited ably by Kamalakhar Bhat, the book is a selection of his speeches, lectures and writings centered on Indian literature and aesthetics.

H.S. Shivaprakash is one of the most authoritative and decorated literary voices in contemporary India. An eminent bilingual poet, playwright and translator across multiple languages, he emerged as a fresh and powerful force in Kannada literature from an early age. It is a good thing that a large body of what he has written in Kannada is now available in English translation as well – a luxury very few Indian writers have. A poet at heart, Shivaprakash brings the poetic license and sensitivity to his essays and lectures. I consider this an important practice for the academe, especially in humanities and languages. Under the garb of being systematic and objective, jargon-ridden contemporary academic writing could leave its recipients cold. Shivaprakash speaks back and forth to the intellectual-academic tradition from the perspective of a practitioner. He challenges the monopoly of critical response over creative response. He seems to assert its performative aspects as against the normative prescriptive aspects. Being a writer-academic Shivaprakash attempts to communicate with everyone, pushing the boundaries of established academic protocol.

The editor has divided the book into 'four worlds' namely that of Bhakti, Kannada, Drama and Indian Cultures and Literatures beside an

insightful forward by Manu V Devadevan and a comprehensive introduction by Kamalakar Bhat. Bhat makes it clear in his introduction that the four-fold division is according to the thematic focus. It seems to me that the classification into ‘four worlds’ here is more for convenience than clarity – the predicament of a book form. The thirty-five essays, with their gaps and continuities, could have existed without such categorization. But the editor may argue that the thematic chronology attempts to provide coherence (for there are charges of this ‘quality’ being elusive to him!) to Shivaprakash’s thoughts – keeping in mind the requirements of today’s readers.

Although subjected to a wide range of influences from the West, Shivaprakash inevitably returns to the indigenous knowledge systems. Developing a fresh perspective on the idea of the Bhakti traditions, the author makes us aware of the faultlines in its scholarship. For example, he rues the near neglect of poetics and aesthetics of the Bhakti poets by scholars, and seeing bhakti only through the *saguna* or *nirguna* lense. Using Kannada *vachanas* as tropes, Shivaprakash formulates Bhakti poetry as a syncretic tradition.

The second section of the book gets into the specifics of Kannada literature. Calling for a nuanced understanding of Indian literatures (in this case Kannada) Shivaprakash critiques our over-dependence on chronological histories. Probing indigenous traditions like that of *Veerashaivism*, he talks of material autonomy and the radical potential of religious orientations.

Shivaprakash’s encyclopedic knowledge of the world of drama enriches us not only about our own theatrical traditions but also about the influences of European theatre – especially Shakespeare. Though in a random interspersed mode, Shivaprakash acquaints us with medieval Indian theatre and its varied traditions. His remarks on our cultural self-apprehension, globalized commodification of theatre and Manipuri theatre deserve attention by scholars.

The final section, in the space of twelve essays, explores different facets of Indian cultures and literatures. Here Shivaprakash further problematizes the hazy notion of Indian literatures and cultures by speaking from the signposts of different debates, interactions, translations, and transactions. Being the former editor of *Indian Literature*, a bridge of sorts among most Indian literatures, gives him the vantage point to formulate his open-ended submissions.

Currently, there is a belief that most Indian scholars have reduced themselves to mere imitators and foot soldiers of ‘knowledge’ that comes from elsewhere; turning a blind eye to our own social and human conditions

including literary. Attempts like *The Word in the World* are impactful enough to alter this growing allegation. They provide us hope. Touching upon diverse genres and issues in Indian literature and aesthetics, Shivaprakash comes before us with a ‘provoking axe’ attempting to cut through our frozen consciousness especially in relation to our own traditions, strands and cultural practices. Most of the essays are short outbursts testifying to the author’s ‘inflammatory intellectual restlessness’. Bereft of pompous academic jargon, the book is a compelling and enjoyable read. With fine editorial skills, Kamalakar Bhat displays his labour of love and dedication to a fine cause. The book definitely deserves to be translated into other Indian languages. □

Songs of the void

Kamalakar Bhat



God Is Dead, There Is No God: The Vachanas of Allama Prabhu, by Manu V. Devadevan; Delhi: Speaking Tiger Classics; pp 299, Rs 499

The first two centuries of the second millennium have fascinated historians and literary enthusiasts of Kannada. At the center of this interest is the ‘*vachana* movement’ with its unparalleled political, social and literary implications. *God Is Dead, There Is No God: The Vachanas of Allama Prabhu* brings together 250 *vachanas* or poetic compositions of the 12th century saint-poet from Karnataka.

There are diverse views about the total number of compositions by Allama Prabhu, as there are, indeed, about him and his life. Between 1200 to 1700 poems are attributed to him, so 250 poems constitutes a fraction of his work. But translating these 250 *vachanas* is a momentous task nevertheless. These poems are compiled under 18 thematic categories in this book.

The first important translation of Kannada *vachanas* into English was by A.K. Ramanujan: *Speaking of Siva* (1973) which presented selections from the major saint poets of the *vachana* movement. In 2010 H.S. Shiva Prakash published *I keep the Vigil of Rudra* which too was a selection of poems of a few saint poets. Then in 2017, Vinaya Chaitanya brought out a book dedicated to a single poet, *Songs for Siva: Vacanas of Akka Mahadevi*. Manu Devadevan’s is the second book that translates selections of a single saint poet from the *vachana* movement.