

# A Literature Perspective of Constitutional Ideals in Vachana Literature

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<sup>1</sup>*Date of Receiving: 01 December 2025;*

*Date of Acceptance: 02 January 2026;*

*Date of Publication: 08 January 2026*

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## Abstract

This paper aims to explain the constitutional ideals in Vachana literature. Vachana literature of the 12<sup>th</sup> century Karnataka represents one of the earliest movements advocating equality, dignity, social justice, and rational thought in Indian society. Led by Basavanna and supported by Sharanas like Allama Prabhu and Akka Mahadevi, the Vachana movement challenged caste hierarchy, gender discrimination, superstition, and social exclusion. Many of these principles later became central constitutional ideals in modern India, including liberty, equality, fraternity, secularism, and dignity of labour. This paper examines the relationship between Vachana literature and the constitutional values enshrined in the Constitution of India. It argues that Vachana literature anticipated democratic and humanistic ideals centuries before constitutional democracy emerged in India.

**Keywords:** *Equality; Freedom; Social Justice; Women's Dignity; Gender Equality,*

## Introduction

The Indian Constitution came into force on January 26, 1950. Built upon the foundational principles of liberty, equality, fraternity, and justice, it guarantees fundamental rights to every citizen. However, such profound ideals did not emerge solely from modern thought. Centuries before the Constitution was drafted, the Vachana literature of the 12<sup>th</sup> century passionately articulated these very ideals. Vachana literature is not merely an expression of devotion; it is the clarion call of a social revolution. Vachanakaras (Vachana composers) such as Basavanna, Akkamahadevi, Allama Prabhu, Siddharama, and Kinnari Bommaiah raised their voices against caste, gender, and economic discrimination, and championed equal human dignity. This paper analyses the remarkable parallels between the core principles of Vachana literature and the ideals enshrined in the Indian Constitution.

## Objectives of the Study

1. To understand the social philosophy of Vachana literature.
2. To identify constitutional ideals reflected in Vachanas.
3. To examine the relevance of Vachana principles in modern India.

## Methodology

This paper is analytical and descriptive in nature. It is based on secondary sources including books, journal articles, constitutional studies, and translated Vachanas of Basavanna and other Sharanas.

## Vachana Literature

Vachana literature arose in Karnataka during the 12<sup>th</sup> century CE as part of the Lingayata movement. The city of Kalyana was the epicentre of this movement. Under the leadership of Basavanna, a deliberative forum called the Anubhava Mantapa (Hall of Experience) was established arguably the earliest model of a democratic institution

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<sup>1</sup> *How to cite the article:* Kariyanna E (January 2026); A Literature Perspective of Constitutional Ideals in Vachana Literature; *International Journal of Law, Management and Social Science*, Vol 10, Issue 1, 1-5

in India. People of all castes, classes, and genders were free to participate and debate here. The distinctive features of Vachana literature include:

- Composition in simple Kannada (to reach ordinary people)
- Direct opposition to the caste system
- Honour for labour and Kayaka (righteous work)
- Equal participation of women

### Freedom of Rational Thought

#### Constitutional Ideal- 1: Equality

**The Constitutional Perspective:** Article 14 of the Indian Constitution declares that 'all persons are equal before the law'. Article 15 prohibits discrimination on grounds of caste, religion, sex, or place of birth. Article 17 abolishes untouchability.

The Vachana Perspective Basavanna states clearly:

*"No need for the distinction of caste and sub-caste, No need for the noose of lineage and clan, Shiva alone is our lineage, Shiva alone is our clan, O Koodalasangamadeva."*- Basavanna

Madivala Machideva was a washerman - a person from a lower social class - yet he became a Vachanakara and was accorded a place of honour at the Anubhava Mantapa. Haralayya, Dohara Kakkayya, and other Sharanas (devotees) from Shudra and so-called untouchable communities attained high standing in the movement.

*'What if it is a stone - within the stone there is water, What if one is human - if there is devotion within, that is enough; Without looking at caste or lineage, one who says 'Sharana' Is approved by Koodalasangamadeva.'* — Basavanna.

Thus, Vachana literature ruthlessly rejected the notion of superiority or inferiority by birth - the very principle the Constitution's equality provisions enshrine in legal form.

#### Constitutional Ideal – 2: Liberty

**The Constitutional Perspective:** Article 19 of the Constitution guarantees freedom of speech and expression, freedom of peaceful assembly, and freedom to practise any profession or occupation. Article 25 secures freedom of conscience and the freedom to profess, practise, and propagate religion.

**The Vachana Perspective:** The vachanas of Akkamahadevi articulate an extraordinary stand on women's freedom. In an age when women were bound to domesticity, Akkamahadevi renounced the wealth, authority, and married life of King Kaushika to preserve her spiritual and intellectual independence — making her an enduring symbol of women's liberation in Indian history.

*"I do not want your husbands, O women; I do not want the bondage of your domestic life; to live remembering Chennamallikarjuna is enough for me."*— Akkamahadevi

In the vachanas of Allama Prabhu, freedom of thought and speech is vividly evident. He fearlessly questioned established religious customs, rituals, and superstitions:

*"If you see a stone serpent, pour milk over it; If you see a serpent in a termite mound, kill it — Both of these are foolishness."* — Allama Prabhu

From the perspective of occupational freedom, Vachana literature proclaimed the dignity of every person's labour. Cobbler, weaver, wood-seller — all occupations were declared equal. This is the essence of the constitutional right to choose one's livelihood.

#### Constitutional Ideal – 3: Social Justice

**The Constitutional Perspective:** The Preamble to the Constitution itself pledges to secure "social, economic and political justice" for all citizens. Reservation for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes is the concrete expression of this social justice.

**The Vachana Perspective:** When Basavanna served as Minister of the Kalyana kingdom, he created space for the marginalised and oppressed in governance. The practice of Dasoha — providing food, assistance, and education freely to all — can be regarded as the first experiment in social welfare in the region.

*"Kayakave Kailasa" — "Labour itself is Heaven"*

This proclamation honours the toil of every working person- it is a principle of economic justice. In the vachanas of Siddharama, the concern for the welfare of the last person in society is unmistakable:

*"If one house in the village burns, can the rest remain cool? If one house in the neighbourhood burns, can the other houses remain unaffected? The pain of all is my pain."* — Siddharama

The Directive Principles of State Policy in the Constitution similarly direct the state to promote the welfare of the last person in society — an echo of Basavanna's principle of Dasoha.

#### **Constitutional Ideal – 4: Women's Dignity and Gender Equality**

**The Constitutional Perspective:** Articles 15(3), 16, and 39 of the Constitution clearly establish that women must be given equal opportunity and dignity. The Constitution guarantees gender equality as a fundamental right.

**The Vachana Perspective:** In a 12th-century society where women were confined to the home, the Vachana movement made space for numerous women composers. Akkamahadevi, Rekamma, Satyakka, Muktayakka, Nilambalika, and more than 33 other women Vachanakaras participated in this movement as equals.

Akkamahadevi writes:

*'If hungry, I eat; if thirsty, I drink water, If sleep comes, I lie down on the earth; For this much, why do I need honour and pride? One word from Chennamallikarjuna is enough.'* — Akkamahadevi

#### **Constitutional Ideal – 5: Fraternity and Unity**

**The Constitutional Perspective:** The Preamble to the Constitution pledges to promote 'fraternity among all citizens.' National unity and integrity are foundational constitutional principles.

The Vachana Perspective Basavanna's celebrated vachana:

*'Humanity has emerged from one source, Leave the feeling of otherness, O people; Once the body and the divine are united, There is no need for the illusion of high and low.'* — Basavanna

The principles of Shiva Sankalpa (divine resolve) and Sarva Jeeva Samabhava (equal regard for all living beings) are the very core of Vachana literature. At the Anubhava Mantapa, people of different castes, religions, and professions sat together and deliberated — a living example of fraternity in practice.

Devara Dasimayya says:

*'My feet are the pillars, my body is the temple, My head is the golden finial, O Ramanatha; The immovable has an end, the moving (Jangama) has none.'* - Devara Dasimayya

The idea that the human body itself is a temple affirms the equal divine worth of every person.

#### **Constitutional Ideal – 6: Secularism**

**The Constitutional Perspective:** The Indian Constitution does not privilege any particular religion. Articles 25 to 28 guarantee the freedom to practise religion and the separation of state and religion.

The Vachana Perspective: Vachana literature questioned external religious practices — temples, Vedas, sacrifices (yajnas) and emphasised inner devotion. Basavanna writes:

*"The wealthy build temples of Shiva — What can I do, O Lord, for I am poor? My feet are the pillars, my body is the temple, My head is the golden finial, O Koodalasangamadeva."* — Basavanna

The principle that a temple is not needed to worship God - that sincere faith within the mind is what truly matters - in a sense, promotes the cultivation of a secular personality, one whose worth is not determined by external religious markers. Allama Prabhu says:

"Do not see those who have made God, do not cry out 'God, God'; Look — God dwells within you." - Allama Prabhu

### Constitutional Ideal – 7: The Right to Education and Knowledge

**The Constitutional Perspective:** Article 21(A) of the Constitution guarantees the right to free and compulsory education for children between the ages of 6 and 14. The Constitution believes that knowledge is the root of social transformation.

**The Vachana Perspective:** In an era when reading the Vedas and Shastras was reserved exclusively for Brahmins, Vachana literature opened knowledge and spiritual learning to all, freely and without restriction. The very fact that vachanas were composed in simple Kannada is proof of this intent.

Basavanna says:

*'Letter by letter by letter — the 'superior' said you must not read; But one who has understood the letter of experiential knowledge Becomes superior to all.'* - Basavanna

The Anubhava Mantapa was not an exclusive platform for the upper classes; it was an open forum of education and thought for all people across every stratum of society- anticipating the constitutional right to education by eight centuries.

### Vachana Literature and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's Thought

Dr. Ambedkar himself admired and praised the social principles of Basavanna. There are striking parallels between the Constitution drafted under Ambedkar's leadership and the values Basavanna championed:

| Vachana Literature                                  | Indian Constitution                        |
|---|--|
| Opposition to the caste system                      | Article - 17: Abolition of Untouchability  |
| Dignity of Labour – Kayaka                          | Article – 19: Right to Occupation          |
| Women's Freedom                                     | Article - 15: Gender Equality              |
| Anubhava Mantapa                                    | Parliamentary Democracy                    |
| Dasoha (Community Welfare)                          | Welfare State Policy (Directive Principle) |
| Sarva Jeeva Samabhava (Equal Regard for all beings) | Human Dignity and Worth (Preamble)         |

### Relevance of Vachana Literature in Modern India

Even today, Indian society faces issues such as caste discrimination, gender inequality, communal tensions, and social injustice. The teachings of Basavanna remain highly relevant because they promote:

- Social harmony
- Ethical governance
- Equality
- Human dignity
- Rational thought

Vachana literature can contribute significantly to value-based education and constitutional awareness among citizens.

### Conclusion

Though the Indian Constitution was drafted in 1950, its ideals stand firmly on the ground prepared by the Vachana literature of the 12th century. The four values of equality, liberty, fraternity, and justice were preached by the Vachanakaras through both their lives and their words. Basavanna, Akkamahadevi, Allama Prabhu, and the other

Vachanakaras did not write a constitution — but they had already filled the soul of a constitution into their vachanas. The Anubhava Mantapa was the first experiment in democracy; Dasoha was the first instance of a welfare state; "Kayakave Kailasa" was the first proclamation of the right to dignified labour and equality. Therefore, Vachana literature is not merely a collection of literary works- it is the animating spiritual force that lies at the heart of the Indian Constitution. 'Do and see, listen and see, understand and see — When all three become one, knowledge illumines.' — Basavanna. The constitutional spirit of modern India finds meaningful echoes in the Vachanas. Studying these literary works helps us understand that democratic and humanistic values have deep indigenous roots in Indian culture and thought.

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