



BASAVESHWARA AND HIS SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY

Dr. Aravind Kumar

Professor and Head

Dept of History, Archaeology and Culture
Dravidian University, Kuppam

Shri Basaveshwara was a 12th century philosopher, statesman, Kannada poet and a social reformer during the reign of the Kalachuri-dynasty king Brijjala I in Karnataka, Indiaⁱ. Basaveshwara also known as Basavanna spread social awareness through his poetry, popularly known as *Vachanas*. Basavanna rejected gender or social discrimination, superstitions and rituals such as the wearing of sacred threadⁱⁱ. He Introduced *Ishtalinga*, necklace with an image of the Shiva Lingaⁱⁱⁱ, to every person regardless of his or her birth, to be a constant reminder of one's bhakti (devotion) to Shiva. As the Prime Minister of his kingdom, he introduced new public institutions such as the *Anubhava Mantapa* (the "hall of spiritual experience"),^{iv} which welcomed men and women from all socio-economic backgrounds to discuss spiritual and mundane questions of life in open^v. A full account of Basava's life and ideas are narrated in a 13th-century sacred Telugu text of Lingayat community, the *Basava purana* by Palkuriki Somanatha.^{vi} Basava was born about 1105 CE^{vii} in the town of Bagevadi in north Karnataka, to Madarasa and Madalambike, a Kannada Brahmin family devoted to Shiva^{viii}. He was named Basava, a Kannada form of the Sanskrit *Vrishabha* in honor of Nandi bull (carrier of Shiva) and the local Shaivism tradition^{ix}.

Basava grew up in Kudalasangama (northeast Karnataka), near the banks of rivers Krishna and its tributary Malaprabha^x. Basava spent twelve years studying in a Hindu temple in the town of Kudalasangama, at Sangameshwara then a Shaivite school of learning, probably of the *Lakulisha-Pashupata* tradition. As Prime minister of the kingdom, Basava used the state treasury to initiate social reforms and religious movement, focussed on reviving Shaivism, recognizing and empowering ascetics who were called *Jangamas*.^{xi} One of the innovative institutions he launched in 12th century was the *Anubhava Mantapa*, a public assembly and gathering, which attracted men and women across various walks of life, from distant lands to discuss openly spiritual, economic and social issues of life. He composed poetry in local language, and spread his message to the masses. His teachings and verses such as *Káyakavé Kailása* (Work is the path to Kailash(bliss, heaven), or Work is Worship) became popular^{xii}.

Several works are attributed to Basava, which are revered in the Lingayat community. These include various *Vachanas* (literally, "what is said") such as the *Shat-sthala-vachana* (discourses of the six stages of salvation), *Kala-jnana-vachana* (forecasts of the future), *Mantra-gopya*, *Ghatachakra-vachana* and *Raja-yoga-vachana*^{xiii}.

Basava grew up in a Brahmin family with a tradition of Shaivism. As a leader, he developed and inspired a new devotional movement named *Veerashaiva*, or "ardent, heroic worshippers of Shiva". Basava championed devotional worship that rejected temple worship and rituals led by Brahmins, and replaced it with personalized direct worship of Shiva through practices such as individually worn icons and symbols like a small linga. This approach brought Shiva's presence to everyone and at all times, without gender, class or caste discrimination. Basava's poem, speak of strong sense of gender equality and community bond, willing to wage war for the right cause, yet being a fellow "devotees' bride" at the time of his or her need.^{xiv}

A recurring contrast in his poems and ideas is of *Sthavara* and *Jangama*, that is, of "what static, standing is" and "what is moving, seeking" respectively. Temples, ancient books represented the former, while work and discussion represented the latter^{xv}.

The rich will make temples for Shiva,

What shall I, a poor man do?



My legs are pillars,

The body the shrine,

The head, a cupola of gold,

Listen, O lord of the meeting rivers,

Things standing shall fall,

But the moving ever shall stay.

Basava emphasized constant personal and spiritual development as the path to profound enlightenment. He championed the use of vernacular language, Kannada, in all spiritual discussions so that translation and interpretation by the elite is unnecessary, and everyone can understand the spiritual ideas. His philosophy revolves around treating one's own body and soul as a temple; instead of making a temple, he suggests being the temple. His trinity consisted of *guru* (teacher), *linga* (personal symbol of Shiva) and *jangama* (constantly moving and learning). Basava established, *Anubhava Mantapa*, a hall for gathering and discussion of spiritual ideas by any member of the society from both genders, where ardent devotees of Shiva shared their achievements and spiritual poems in the local language. He questioned rituals, dualism and externalization of god, and stated that the true god is "one with himself, self-born".

How can I feel right about a god?

Who eats up lacquer and melts?

Who wilts when he sees fire?

How can I feel right?

About gods you sell in your need,

And gods you bury for fear of thieves?

The lord of the meeting rivers,

Self-born, one with himself,

He alone is the true god.^{xvi}

— Basavanna 558,

While Basava rejected rituals, he encouraged icons and symbols such as the wearing of *Istalinga* (necklace with personal linga, symbol of Shiva), of Rudraksha seeds or beads on parts of one body, and apply *Vibhuti* (sacred ash on forehead) as a constant reminder of one's devotion and principles of faith^{xvii}. Another aid to faith, he encouraged was the six-syllable mantra, *Shivaya Namah*, or the *shadhakshara mantra* which is *Om Namah Shivaya*.

Bhakti marga as the path to liberation : The Basava Purana, presents a series of impassioned debates between Basava and his father. Both declare Hindu Sruti and Smriti to be sources of valid knowledge, but they disagree on the *marga* (path) to liberated, righteous life. Basava's father favours the tradition of rituals, while Basava favours the path of direct, personal devotion (bhakti).



According to Velcheru Narayana Rao and Gene Roghair^{xviii}, Basava calls the path of devotion as "beyond six systems of philosophy. Sruti has commended it as the all-seeing. Its subtle form is beyond praise. Its eternally blissful form is the beginning of the beginning. The form of that divine linga is the true God. The *guru* [teacher] of the creed is an embodiment of kindness and compassion. He places God in your soul, and he also places God in your hand. The six-syllable mantra, the supreme mantra, is its mantra. The dress – locks of hair, ashes and rudrashaka beads – place a man beyond the cycle of birth and death. It follows the path of liberation. (...) This path offers nothing less than liberation in this lifetime^{xix}.

Roots in the Vedanta philosophy: Basava advocated that every human being was equal, irrespective of caste, and that all forms of manual labour were equally important. He stated that, it wasn't birth but behaviour that determined a true saint and Shaiva bhakta in the view of Basava and *Sharanas* community^{xx}. This, writes Michael, was also the position of south Indian Brahmins, that it was "behaviour, not birth" that determines the true Brahmin^{xxi}. One difference between the two was that *Sharanas* welcomed anyone, whatever occupation he or she might have been born in, to convert and be reborn into the larger family of Shiva devotees and then adopt any occupation he or she wanted.

Synthesis of diverse Hindu traditions:

Basava is credited with uniting diverse spiritual trends during his era. Jan Peter Schouten states that *Veerashaivism*, the movement championed by Basava, tends towards monotheism with Shiva as the godhead, but with a strong awareness of the unity of the Ultimate Reality. An individual's spiritual progress is viewed by Basava's tradition as a six-stage *Satsthala-siddhanta*, which progressively evolves the individual through phase of the devotee, to phase of the master, then phase of the receiver of grace, thereafter Linga in life breath (god dwells in his or her soul), the phase of surrender (awareness of no distinction in god and soul, self), to the last stage of complete union of soul and god (liberation, mukti). Basava's approach is different than Adi Shankara, states Schouten, in that Basava emphasizes the path of devotion, compared to Shankara's emphasis on the path of knowledge – a system of monistic Advaita philosophy widely discussed in Karnataka in the time of Basava^{xxii}.

Icons and symbols



The bust of Basaveshwara, unveiled in London in 2015, facing the UK Parliament

Basava advocated the wearing of *Ishtalinga*, a necklace with pendant that contains a small Shiva linga. He was driven by his realisation; in one of his Vachanas he says *Arive Guru*, which means one's own awareness is his/her teacher. Many



contemporary Vachanakaras (people who have scripted Vachanas) have described him as *Swayankrita Sahaja*, which means "self-made".

Monuments and recognition: The then President of India Abdul Kalam inaugurated Basaveshwar's statue on 28 April 2003 in the Parliament of India. Basaveshwara is the first Kannadiga in whose honour a commemorative coin has been minted in recognition of his social reforms. The former Prime Minister of India, Dr Manmohan Singh was in Bangalore, the capital of Karnataka to release the coins. On 14th November, 2015, The Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi inaugurated the statue of Basaveshwara along the bank of the river Thames at Lambeth in London. Basava Dharma Peetha has constructed 108 ft (33 m) tall statue of Basavanna in Basavakalyan.

The contributions of Basaveshwara: Shri Basaveshwara stands out as one of the most outstanding personalities in our religious history, inspiring millions of people from 800 years - till today. He, as an independent original thinker shows a very high order of life which has influenced and moulded many lives. He was a mystic by temperament, an idealist by choice, a statesman by profession, a man of letters by taste, a humanist by sympathy and a social reformer by conviction. An architect of a new classless and casteless society based on equality and social justice. His teachings and socio-religious thoughts which he practiced and preached have been a source of great experiment in history which upheld his views from decades. He is well known as a socio-religious reformer, a champion of social equality, an advocate of "Kayaka" and a prime leader of "Veerashaiva Movement" who spoke in terms of Social equality, Caste and Class equality, Occupational equality, Religious equality, Equality of Sex and so on which acted as a major message of Basavanna --the highlighted elements we find in today's social philosophy. Basavanna strove hard to bring about reformation in Hinduism into which social evils had crept. The social and cultural conflicts of the Indian society including the Karnataka state of ancient days were stimulating a new foment within the Hindu society. There was a wide-spread of disparity among people. Differences such as higher Varna -lower Varna, higher caste-lower caste, man woman, dignified higher occupation and ignorable lower occupation and other differences had damaged the growth of social unity and solidarity. The caste system had divided the Hindu Society into different hostile segments. Social Equality which was prevalent in India during the Vedic times had disappeared giving way to inequality. Self oriented thinking was the supreme and Society oriented thinking was relegated to the background. The prevalence of wide spread social disparity had disturbed the mind of Basaveshwara and so he carried an untiring struggle against the social inequality which intended to bring about a peaceful revolution that would change the minds of the people to accept his message of social equality. "All should be treated as equals. All should be pure and devoted to God. Everyone should work". Liberal views such as these took shape in the mind of Basavanna even in his childhood. He revolted against Vedic Brahmanism which he believed was one of the factors adding to the existing social disparity and so he made up his mind to minimize the same. He preferred a peaceful method of persuasion, a non violent method to achieve his goal of establishing a society based on social equality. It was indeed God's grace; Basavanna put forth his mission for the formation of a new society, through "Anubhava Mantapa"- a spiritual parliament at Kalyana. He was a practical minded man yet liberal and democratic in his approach so also he adopted the democratic method of meeting together for discussing and for laying down the path of social reconstruction and reformation and later the outcome of the discussions was recorded in the form of "Vachanas" in Kannada language. These Vachanas contain ideas about spiritual, social, ethical and economic issues or subjects. They contain the essence of Veerashaiva thought including the thoughts of Basavanna. The Vachanas contain lofty ideals relating to man's individual as well as social life. They are respected more for the social and moral values than for their literary value. He used the Vachanas to point out the deficiencies of the society and wanted to correct them. Through his constructive approach he defined the good life as a sure way to God. His Vachanas acted as a catalyst for social change. It's a must to understand and follow such Vachanas His another Vachana says: Do not say "who is he", "who is he" and "who is he"? Say that he is ours, he is ours, and he is ours; Say that he is the son of Thy own house, O Kudalasangamadeva. Which means (Do not say who is he? who is he? need to treat all human beings as sons and daughters of God's home; we need to welcome them just like our brothers and sisters since we all are children of GOD). These Vachanas speak about the economic equality wherein he says the people are socially and economically equal. He taught his followers not to be enamoured of wealth instead asked them to love the poor and to serve them. Basavanna declared that poverty was not a sin and that the poor man is no where inferior to anyone. Basavanna showed social equality in many other dimensions such as Equality of Caste: He believed that all human beings are equal by Birth; no one is noble



or ignorable but equal. He criticized the existing Caste-ridden society which divided people into mutually hostile groups by birth. These all are not to be used for practical lives which separate people based on the, I am a son of Madar Chennayy's family". Basaveshwara also stressed on ----- Occupational Equality—"Kayaka" He says there is no occupation which is high or low, it only matters individual choice and not a hereditary caste-rule. Such divisions if exist are unjust and also is of a great social fraud. He says "Kayakave Kailasa" means "Work is Worship" The importance of dignity of labour in life is neither superior nor inferior and all the jobs are equally respected. Kayaka is a spirit of dedication to lord shiva which has to be undertaken in a moral and a just way. It itself involves a moral commitment. It is free and open to anyone and so Kayaka is heaven or "Kailasa". "Kayaka" theory insists on the honest discharge of occupational responsibilities. He imbibed the "Kayaka" theory. The principles of Kayaka were practiced in daily life by all the members of "Anubhav Mantapa", which became a platform ; bringing people together of different castes and professions on a single social strata. He had a strong belief that occupations only denote particular type of work to be carried on and should not be taken as a criterion for dividing people into higher and lower standards. Basaveshwara identification of occupational equality today should flow in all the streams of life so as to upgrade the society and also our Nation. Basaveshwara is also regarded as the Man of principle of-- -- Equality of Sex. The status of Indian women had declined as they were considered socially inferior to men and all their activities were restricted to their homes. During the time women were considered as "maya" or illusion incarnate and so were considered to be the root of all the evil which was a stigma to women in general. Basaveshwara with his followers protested against the injustice and declared that women should be equal to men. She should have the right to good education, the right to express themselves freely, the right to participate in public discussions and above all the right to take up spiritual practices. He encouraged women to pursue various occupations and to earn for their own families as men did. Conclusion: Basavanna preached equality not in an authoritarian way but in a humble way. His theory of equality never remained at an imaginary level instead became a living and a practicing philosophy. People take pride in praising the philosophy and principles of Basaveshwara but seldom follow them.

. We all need to learn lot of lessons from Basavanna's Vachana literature; we need to rethink about the social inequalities and the social injustice which has created numerous problems in today's society. We all need to follow the Basaveshwara theories of Equality and need to treat all people as equal and to give respect to each and every living being so as to justify social equality and social justices for a better and developed nation or a world. Shri Basaveshwara stands out as one of the most outstanding personalities in our religious history inspiring millions of people from 800 years - till today. He, as an independent original thinker shows a very high order of life which has influenced and moulded many lives. He was a mystic by temperament, an idealist by choice, a statesman by profession, a man of letters by taste, a humanist by sympathy and a social reformer by conviction. An architect of a new classless and casteless society based on equality and social justice. He is well known as a socio-religious reformer, a champion of social equality, an advocate of "Kayaka" and a prime leader of "Veerashaiva Movement" who spoke in terms of Social equality, Caste and Class equality, Occupational equality, Religious equality, Equality of Sex and so on which acted as a major message of Basavanna --the highlighted elements we find in today's social philosophy. Basavanna strove hard to bring about reformation in Hinduism into which social evils had crept. The social and cultural conflicts of the Indian society including the Karnataka state of ancient days were stimulating a new foment within the Hindu society. There was a wide-spread disparity among people. Differences such as higher Varna -lower Varna, higher caste-lower caste, man-woman, dignified higher occupation and ignorable lower occupation and other differences had damaged the growth of social unity and solidarity. The caste system had divided the Hindu Society into different hostile segments and exploitation of the lower castes by the higher ones was the order of the day. Social Equality which was prevalent in India during the Vedic times had disappeared giving way to inequality. Self oriented thinking was the supreme and Society oriented thinking was relegated to the background. The prevalence of wide spread social disparity had disturbed the mind of Basaveshwara and so he carried an untiring struggle against the social inequality which intended to bring about a peaceful revolution that would change the minds of the people to accept his message of social equality. "All should be treated as equals. All should be pure and devoted to God. He revolted against Vedic Brahmanism which he believed was one of the factors adding to the existing social disparity and so he made up his mind to minimize the same. He preferred a peaceful method of persuasion, a non violent method to achieve his goal of establishing a society based on social equality. It was indeed God's grace; Basavanna put forth his mission for the formation of a new society, through "Anubhava



Mantapa" - a spiritual parliament at Kalyana. He was a practical minded man yet liberal and democratic in his approach so also he adopted the democratic method of meeting together for discussing and for laying down the path of social reconstruction and reformation and later the outcome of the discussions was recorded in the form of "Vachanas" in Kannada language. . The principles of Kayaka were practiced in daily life by all the members of "Anubhava Mantapa", which became a platform ; bringing people together of different castes and professions on a single social strata. A Vachana is a self contained unit of free expression of Sharanas on spiritual, social, ethical and economic aspect. According to the Vachanas, all men are equal. No man is high or low either by birth, Sex or occupation. There is no discrimination in man woman. Woman has equal rights with man to follow the path of self-evolution. Women can also take p kayaka(occupation). Untouchability has no place in the society. every human being is free to think in all spiritual and social subjects.

Basava's concept of social justice: in the general sense Justice has been used as virtue in various contexts to make variety of political and moral points. In a situation to make judgement we have to examine the circumstances of men, their relations as they stressed to each other compared to the relative moments of benefits enjoyed and burden suffered each man. Always the benefits and burdens are distributed equally; this is called "Distributive Principle". He was a true model of perfect human being. He was universal and preached universal brotherhood, and practiced equality. He was the first person who gave the message of humanity coupled with compassion. He declared that there is no religion without compassion; compassion is the result of religion.

References

- ⁱ Encyclopædia Britannica (2012), Quote **Basava** : "Basava, (flourished 12th century, South India), Lingayat religious reformer, teacher, theologian, and administrator of the royal treasury of the Kalachuri-dynasty king Brijala I (reigned 1156–67)."
- ⁱⁱ Carl Olson (2007), The Many Colors of Hinduism: A Thematic-historical Introduction, Rutgers University Press, ISBN 978-0813540689, pages 239–240
- ⁱⁱⁱ Fredrick Bunce (2010), Hindu deities, demi-gods, godlings, demons, and heroes, ISBN 9788124601457, page 983.
- ^{iv} Jan Peter Schouten (1995), Revolution of the Mystics: On the Social Aspects of Vīraśaivism, Motilal Banarsi Dass, ISBN 978-8120812383, page 4
- ^v SK Das (2005), A History of Indian Literature, 500–1399: From Courtly to the Popular, Sahitya Akademi, ISBN 978-8126021710, page 163
- ^{vi} Velcheru Narayana Rao and Gene Roghair (2014), Siva's Warriors: The Basava Purana of Palkuriki Somanatha, Princeton University Press, ISBN 978-0691604879, pp. 1–14.
- ^{vii} Op Cit, , pages 239–240.
- ^{viii} Op Cit, Jan Peter Schouten (1995), pages 2–3
- ^{ix} Op Cit, SK Das (2005), pages 161–162.
- ^x Op Cit, Jan Peter Schouten (1995), pages 2–3.



^{xi} Edward Rice (1982), *A History of Kannada Literature*, Asian Educational Services, ISBN 978-8120600638, pages 52–53.

^{xii} R Blake Michael (1982), Work as Worship in *Vīraśaiva Tradition*, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 50, No. 4, pages 605–606.

^{xiii} Op Cit, Edward Rice (1982), pages 53–54.

^{xiv} Op Cit, AK Ramanujan (1973), page 29.

^{xv}Ibid pages 19–22.

^{xvi} Ibid, page 28.

^{xvii} Op Cit, Carl Olson (2007), pages 243–244.

^{xviii} Op Cit, Velcheru Narayana Rao and Gene Roghair (2014), pages 57–58.

^{xix} Ibid

^{xx} Op Cit, R Blake Michael (1992), pages 7–9.

^{xxi} Ibid

^{xxii} Op Cit, Jan Peter Schouten (1995), pages 111–112