

Sri Basaveshwar as Poet of Social Reform

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Abstract

Sri Basaveshwar is the forerunner of the Sharana Movement in Kalayna and present day Basavakalyana. He was born in Bagewadi, an agrahara and grew up and there and got education in Kudalasangam. He later migrated to Mangalaveda where he met his father-in-law who brought him to the court of King Bijjala II and made him a cleric. He discovered the hidden treasure and gained the King's respect and love. Later he became a minister and initiated the Sharana Movement for focusing on the principle of Kalyana. He brought a revolution in Kalyana for a changed society of equality, justice and love for work-human values, for all irrespective of gender, caste and creed. He wrote his vachanas and through them he spread his moral and spiritual message to the world.

Basava¹ (1131–1170), also called *Basavēśvara* and *Basavaṇṇa Bhatt*, was an Indian philosopher, poet, in the Shiva-focused *bhakti* movement, and a Vishwakarma Brahman² Shaivite social reformer during the reign of the Kalyani Chalukya and the Kalachuri Dynasty. Being active, he condemned injustice, discrimination of gender and caste and exploitation in the society and spread social awareness through his poetry, popularly known as *vachanaas*. During the rule of both dynasties, but his influence peaked during the reign of King Bijjala II in Karnataka, India. He introduced *Ishtalinga*³ necklace to tie around the neck with an image of the *lingam*, to every person regardless of their birth, to be a constant reminder of one's *bhakti* (devotion) to Lord Shiva. A strong promoter of *ahimsa*, he also condemned animal sacrifices by *yagna*. As the chief minister of his kingdom, he introduced new public institutions such as the *Anubhava Mantapa* (or, the "hall of spiritual experience"), which welcomed men and women from all socio-economic backgrounds to discuss spiritual and mundane questions of life, in open.

The traditional legends as well as hagiographic texts state that Basavanna to be the founder of the Lingayatism. However, the Kalachuri inscriptions state that Basava was the poet philosopher who revived, refined and energized an already existing tradition. The *Basavarajadevara Ragale* (13 out of 25 sections are available) by Harihara, the Kannada poet (c. 1180) is the earliest available account on the life of the social thinker-reformer and is considered important because the author was a close contemporary of his protagonist. A full account of Basava's life and ideas are narrated in 13th-century sacred Telugu text, the *Basava Purana* written by Palkuriki Somanatha. His literary works include the Vachana Sahitya in Kannada language. He is also known as *Bhaktibhandari* (lit. 'the treasurer of devotion').

The Arjunavada inscription of the Seuna King Kannara, dated 1260 CE. An inscription related to Basava and his family details. The names reference Basavaraj and Sangana Basava. Basava was born in 1131 CE in the town of Basavana Bagewadi in the northern part of Karnataka, to Maadarasa and Madalambike, a Kannada Orthodox Brahmin family devoted to the Shaivite Vishwakarma Brahman

couple. He was named Basava, a Kannada form of the Sanskrit *Vrishabha* in honor of Nandi (bull, i.e., animal-carrier of Shiva).

After a quarrel with his parents over the ceremony of *yagnopaveet*,² Basava left with his elder sister Nagamma, the house at the age of 16 and spent twelve years studying in the Hindu temple in the town of Kudalasangama, at Sangameshwara then a Shaivite school of learning, probably of the *Lakulisha-Pashupata* tradition. He grew up in Kudalasangama (south-west to Bagewadi), on the meeting of the rivers Krishna and its tributary Malaprabha. By this time, he developed hatred towards the Go-Brahmins and their Vedic culture and worship of the *Sthavara Linga* in the temple. Later, he went to Mangalaveda where he married Nilambike (alias-Neela Gangambike). Her father -in-law was the provincial prime minister of Bijjala, the Kalachuri king. So he brought him in 1160 CE to the court of King Bijjala and made him an accountant. As the chief minister of the kingdom, he used the state treasury to initiate social reforms and religious movement focused mainly on reviving Shaivism, recognizing and empowering ascetics who were called *Jangamas*. One of the innovative institutions he launched in the 12th century was the *Anubhava Mantapa*, a public assembly and gathering that attracted men and women across various walks of life from distant lands to openly discuss 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 *Kailasa* [bliss, heaven], or "work is worship") became popular.

Several works are attributed to Basava, which are revered in the Lingayat community. These include various *vachana* 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*. The *Basava Purana*, a Telugu biographical epic poem, written by Bhima Kavi in 1369, is another sacred text for Lingayat. Other hagiographic works include the 15th-century *Mala Basava-raja-charitre* and the 17th-century *Vrishabhendra Vijaya*, both in Kannada. The scholars state that the poems and legends about him, were written down long after his death. This has raised questions about the accuracy and creative interpolation by authors who were not direct witness but derived their work relying on memory, legends, and hearsay of others. A critic, states, "All 'Vachana'collections as they exist at present are probably much later than the 15th-century [300 years post-Basava]. Much critical labor needs to be spent in determining the authenticity of portions of these collections".

Basava grew up as a leader, he developed and inspired a new devotional movement named Lingayathism, or "ardent, heroic worshippers of *istalinga*", opposite to the worship of *sthavarlinga* by the Go-Brahmins. 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 *vachana*, (no 703), speaks 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 their need. A recurring contrast in his poems and ideas is of *Sthavara* and *Jangama*, that is, of "what is static, standing" and "what is moving, seeking" respectively. Temples, ancient books represented the former, while work and discussion represented the latter.

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.

—Basavanna 820, Translated by Ramanujan

Also he emphasized constant personal 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 approach to existing religion is akin to the protestant movement of Martin Luther King, states Ramanujan. 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). He established, in 12th-century, *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 a fire?

How can I feel right
about gods you sell in your need,
and gods you bury for fear of thieves?

The lord Kudalasangama,
self-born, one with himself,
he alone is the true god.

—Basavanna (no.558), Translated by Ramanujan

While Basavanna rejected rituals, he encouraged icons and symbols such as the wearing of *Istalinga* ⁴(necklace with personal linga, symbol of Shiva), of *rudraksha*, the 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. Another aid to faith, he encouraged was the six-syllable mantra, *Shivaya Namah*, or the *shadhakshara mantra* which is *Om Namah Shivaya*. *Basava Purana*, in Chapter 1, 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 favors the tradition of rituals, while Basava favors the path of direct, personal devotion (*bhakti*). According to Velcheru Rao, Basava describes the path of devotion as "beyond six systems of philosophy. *Sruti* has commended it as the all-seeing, 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-syllabled *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."

In 1168-69, an inter-caste marriage between Samagara⁵ (cobbler) Haralaiah's son Sheelavanthaiah, and Go-brahmin Madhuvarasa's daughter-Lavanyavathi became the main cause of 'a bloody revolution'. The Go- Brahmins who were against Basava, condemned this marriage and spread the news that Basava is destroying peace and harmony in the society. King Bijjala ordered them to be tied to the legs of the elephant and kill. All *sharanas* ran away to save their lives from Basavakalyan including Sri Basaveshwara who came to Kudalasangama in 1170. The *Go-brahmins* complained to King Bijjala against Basava that he is spending royal money for his *anna dasoha* in his residence named, Mahamane. They spoiled the good relationship between the King and Basava and pictured him as a traitor.

Basava's *aikyasthala*⁶ is located Kudala sangama in Bagalkot district. The modern scholarship relying on historical evidence such as the Kalachuri inscriptions state that Basava was the 12th-century poet-philosopher who revived and energized an already existing tradition. The community he helped form is also known as the *sharanas*. The community is largely concentrated in Karnataka, but has migrated into other states of India as well as overseas. Towards the end of the 20th century, a historian estimates, one-sixth of the population of the state of Karnataka, or about 10 million people, were *Lingayat* or of the tradition championed by him. A necklace with pendant containing *linga* symbol of Shiva are worn by devotees of the tradition championed by him. *Rudraksha* beads (shown above) and *Vibhuti* (sacred ash on forehead) are other reminders of one's principles of faith. Basavanna taught that every human being can attain salvation, irrespective of caste, and that all forms of manual labor was equally important. The main focus of his social philosophy was on equality of gender and caste.

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. Basava insisted on non-violence and vehemently condemned all forms of animal sacrifices, during *yagna* coinducted by Go-Brahmins. A *lingayat* scholar, explained Basava's philosophy in *Srikara Bhasya*, using the Vedanta Sutra, suggesting Basava's *Lingayat* theology to be a form of qualified nondualism, wherein the individual *Atma* (soul) is the body of God, and that there is no difference between Shiva and *Atma* (self, soul), Shiva is one's *Atma*, one's *Atma* is Shiva. An analysis places his views that are close to in Vedanta school, 11th century *Vishishtadvaita* philosopher Ramanuja, than to *Advaita* philosopher Adi Shankara. However, the scholar's analysis has been contested in the Veerasaiva community.

An individual's spiritual progress is viewed by Basava's tradition as a six-stage *Satssthalasiddhanta*, 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 their 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 advocated the wearing of *Ishtalinga*, a necklace with pendant that contains a small Shiva *linga*. He was driven by his realization; 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".

REFERENCES:

1. Basava is also called 'Basavanna Bhatt', as mentioned in an inscription.
2. R.I. Badiger. *Basavannana Mula Kula (The Original Caste of Basavanna)* Gadag: Twarith Press, (1994)
3. This is the sacred thread worn by the Vishwa Brahmins and Go-Brahmins alike.
4. This is against the worship of *sthavara linga* by the Go-Brahmins in the temple of Lord Shiva. Basava was against the worship of *sthavaralinga*.
5. *Samagara* means '*madigas*' that work on the dead animal's skin and make *chappals* (i.e., foot wear).
6. The place of Basava's death that is still mysterious. But it happened around 1170 in Kudasangama.