

UNIVERSAL RELIGION AND EDUCATION: PRACTITIONERS' PERSPECTIVES



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SPIRITUAL FREEDOM AND HUMAN RIGHTS: A LINGAYAT RELIGIOUS PERSPECTIVE

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The Virashaivism, which was flourishing from 12th century A.D is a significant sect of Shaivism in South India. Through the introduction of this faith, the great social reformer Basavanna and his fellow Sharana's has brought an inordinate transformation in the society. Recognized by the historians as a major Bhakti movement, this faith was not only confined in the religious aspects, but it also extends its role in Humanism. Basavanna and other mystic poets generally called as the 'Sharana's' deliberately fought against evil rituals in the society and foremostly rebelled against the social inequality through a hierarchic system of casts.

This Virashaiva religious revolution introduced monotheism and also provides adequate religious liberty to its followers. It gives authority of question anything in the religious matters to the masses. The Sharana's demonstrated that, every human being is equal and divine. One of the major revolutionary step taken by Basavanna was initiating 'Deeksha' or religious ordination to women. They adored impeccable equality and spiritual freedom in Virashaivism. Sharana's has given ample importance to human rights. They never taught complete renunciation of worldly life, like most of all other Indian philosophers.

The Virashaivism condemns violence in life. Sharana's were opposed the violence in *Karmakhanda* and meaningless rituals and discriminations of Vedas. The Lingayat Sharana's proposed an innovative philosophical path. Their theory to attain salvation is very much original and practical. The theories of *Shatsthala*, *Ashtavarana*, *Panchachara* and *Ekottara Shatasthala* were not only mystic in nature, but also

very simple to follow.

A common feature in the world history is the revolutions. Throughout the history, when a society was completely occupied by some upper classes exploitation of the masses - politically, religiously, economically and mainly intellectually, then we have always witnessed a certain revolution. That revolution ends all chaos and contradictions of the society, meanwhile bringing a bright future for the people. The Indian history observed several revolutions through the ages. In those, two revolutions are very significant – The Buddhist revolution in north India and the Bhakti movement in South India. They both fought against anarchy and paradoxes of society and brings an immense transformation in social and religious order. They fought against exploitation of Brahmanic Sanatana Dharma.

This is a fact that, after the decline of Buddhism in medieval India the reestablished Sanatana dharma has perceived several changes in its form and structure. Some insolent systems like *Varnashrama*, position of women etc. were became improved. But at the later medieval times once again the malicious systems re-entered in to the society. The status of *Shudra's* and women became most awful. The insistence upon the socio-religious cult of *Varnashrama* of Vaidika Dharma led to the domination of certain casts in society, which resulted in the exploitation of lower castes and women. They have rejected by upper classes from religious and social privileges. The caste distinctions continued to exist and the untouchability again surfaced in the system. At the time of Basavanna, conditions of the society was deteriorated and he was the first individual who rebelled against the system. Besides Basavanna, numerous religious and social reformers have taken birth in India from time to time. But the mission initiated by him has not been performed by anyone except the Buddha. Though several Acharya's like Shankara and Ramanuja

gave 'Deeksha' to the people of lower casts, they didn't confer upon them equivalent status, rights and obligations in society.

Nevertheless Basavanna born in an Upper class Shaiva-brahmin, he saw this evilness in the society and rebelled against it in his very young age. He rejects the 'symbol' of a Brahmin – 'Upanayana' and moves to 'Kudalasangama', a pilgrimage of North Karnataka. Later he was served as the chief minister of the King Bijjala of Kalachuri dynasty. At the time he instigated his new vision about society through his literary works, called as 'Vachana' literature. Thousands of people from upper to lower classes, from Gandhara, Kashmir, Gujrat - North India to South India joined this colossal movement to build an innovative religion based prosperous society without any discriminations. The contributions of this socio-religious movement is infinite, only some of them are illuminated here.

1. According to Sharana's every human being is equal and divine. Sharana's gave '*lingaDeeksha*' to everyone in society. They told whoever takes the *IshtalingaDeeksha* will become Lingayata or Virashaiva and he has every religious rights. This *Deeksha* was offered to everyone, without any caste or creed discriminations including women. *Ekottarashatasthalaa* Virashaiva Sanskrit work condemns *varnashrama* system –

Varnashrabhimanena Shruterdaso Bhavennarah |

Abhimanavinirmukthovartate Shrutimurdhani ||

In the history of religions this is a unique incident, that Basavanna is the only one leader who was fought for religious rights of women. He started his revolution from initiation of *IshtalingaDeeksha* to women. Before Basavanna no religious leader, including the Buddha were not in the side of women rights. The Sharana's were mainly responsible for bringing into existence, women was enfranchised. Women is adored perfect equality and freedom in Virashaivism. Sharana's exploded sexual inequality in not only in religion, but also in social,

literary and other matters. Several women mystics like AkkaMahadevi, Nilambika, etc. were very creatively participated in the debates and disputations on religious and social matters in Sharana revolution.

2. In the time of Sharana's superstitious and blind beliefs were deep rooted in the society. Today also they have strong hold on Indian culture. But Basavanna and other Sharana's tried to root out these evil beliefs from Indian psyche. It is true that they have not completely succeeded in that, however they have achieved some extent. Basavanna completely opposes superstitious about dates and time. He says, "Today is better than tomorrow" -

"Don't say that day, this day, another day!

To one who bows to Shiva, today

Must ever be the day!

To one who bows to Hara

Today is ever be the day!

To one remembering ceaselessly

Our KudalaSangama today

Must ever be the day!!"

The Sharana's also condemned some meaningless beliefs, which were embedded in society. They simply rejects the concept of heaven and hell. According to Basavanna, "To speak the truth is the heaven and to speak the untruth is the hell". Sharana's never advocate complete renunciation of worldly life. They have viewed worldly and spiritual life as two faces of a same coin. Sharana's were not only preached, but also showed a lively example to how to know the art of realizing God while leading an everyday life. Basavanna says, "The mundane life is Gods mint. One who fits into worldly life will be successful in spiritual world also".

3. Another revolutionary step of Sharana's is to vigorously

rejecting the Karmakanda part of the Veda's. Sharana's condemned Veda's for its violence in *Yajna*, sacrifices, meaningless rituals and its discriminations. Sharana's were promoted complete non-violence in Lingayat religion. They also criticized in severe terms the Puranas and Agamas for spreading blind beliefs in society. Thus the Basavanna enlightens the basic substance of all religions –

“What sort of religion can it be

Without compassion?

Compassion needs must be

Towards all living things;

Compassion is the root

Of all religious faiths:

Lord KudalaSangama does not care

For what is not like this!”

However Sharana's gave great importance to the *Jnanakanda* or knowledge part of Vedas. They have also quoted numerous instances from Upanishads. Basavanna started a new way of worshipping through *Ishtalinga*. In this way there is no need of a middle man in between the God and devotee. He upheld the philosophy of “human body is the abode of God” and rejected the temple culture. Basavanna illuminates –

“Those who have money build

Temples to Lord Siva, what can I build

A poor man, Lord, am I

My body is the shrine,

Its pillars are my legs,

The golden pinnacle, is my head

Lord KudalaSangama

There is destruction for what stands

But not for that which moves!"

4. The most significant feature of Indian social structure is its caste system based on birth. This system divides people on their heredity and decides 'The pure and impure' status of them. This so called 'Varna' system was more theoretical than practice. Hence there was a huge numbers of people from particular castes tainted with impurity.

Basavanna and other Sharana's were objected this varna system very vigorously and in order to eliminate casteism they have started several reforms in society. They were oppose social iniquities and the domination of an intellectual aristocracy. The Sharana's forwarded with the objectives of establishing a well-organized society containing the idea of a common Divinity, a common religious status, a common code of behavior and a common social status. Basavanna objects;

There is one earth to hold

God's temple and the pariah colony,

One water for the closet and the bath,

One sect for those who know themselves;

One need for those who are realized,

By means of the six fold mystic way,

One height of those who know Thee, Lord

KudalaSangama!

To achieve these goals Sharana's fought very bravely against the fierce opposition to eradicate the castiesm and untouchability. Evan at last several Sharana's died in the time of revolution in Kalyana to attain their ultimate goal. This is true that, Sharana's were not completely succeeded in elimination of casteism in Indian society, however their work is very much appreciable. We have to remember that, after Buddha the only religious movement, which opposed castiesm is LingayatSharana movement.

5. In the history of Indian religions, Basavanna is the first leader who has given equal religious rights to women. He offered '*IshtalingaDeeksha*' (an initiation where one begin to wear and worship linga on their bodies) to women and also for *Shudras*. He was declared that, no one is superior nor inferior either by caste or by sex. In Indian philosophy often women was called as '*maya*', nonetheless the Sharana'spreached that, "Women is not *maya*, the desire in front our mind is the *maya*". In Sharana'smovement there are several women have equally participated in upbringing of the society. Some of main women Sharana'sare, AkkaMahadevi – wife of a king and renounce everything for spiritual life. She has written more than five hundred beautiful Vacanas, Nilambika – wife of Basavanna and a vachana writer, AydakkiLakkamma, SuleSankavva, MoligeYaMaramma etc.

With all these accomplishments Sharana'salso gave an exclusive type of Vachana literature to Indian literature. Their philosophy and mystic way is unique in every aspects. In present days the scholars from all over the world attracted to their philosophy and literature. Vachana literature has been translated to all most all major languages of the world. The Sharana'sdoes not belong to the Lingayat or Virashaiva's or Indians alone. Their literature and philosophy belongs to the whole world to torch bear the future of human being.

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