

Basaveshwara and Veera Shaivism

Relevance of the topic:

On April 26, 2020 the nation celebrated the birth anniversary of Basavanna or Basaveshwara, the 12th century socio-religious reformer of Karnataka who also was the founding saint of the Lingayat sect.

Introduction:

The 12th century philosopher and the statesman of Karnataka, Basaveshwara founded the Veera Shaivism. Veera Shaivism was spread by his followers known as Sharanas. They are known as Veera (heroic) Shaivaites and also Lingayats meaning bearers of Siva Linga. A pendant which has encased Linga is constantly worn around the neck by the Shaivites. These people are also known by the names Shivasharanas and Lingavantas.

Similar to the revolt against the Catholic authority by the Protestants in the 16th century; the system of four ashramas, authority of the Vedas, caste hierarchy, ritualistic priesthood, plurality of Gods, sacrifice of animals, temple worship etc were rejected by the Lingayat movement.

Basavanna:

According to the Veera Shaiva tradition, Basaveshwara popularly known as Basavanna is said to have developed a deep devotion towards Lord Shiva – Kudalasangama “Lord of the meeting rivers”. Basavanna, at the age of 28, came to realise that the brotherhood of man rests on the doctrine of a personalized, individual Godhood in the form of Ishtalinga ("personal Linga/ Chosen Linga"). Out of this spiritual realization rose the central Veera Shaiva belief that revers human body as a moving temple of God and this temple should be kept in an eternal state of sublimity and purity.

Basavanna travelled to Mangalavede seeking to serve in the royal court of King Bijjala after having completed his studies at Sangama. He rose to the rank of chief officer of the royal treasury in his troubled Shaivite country at odds with Jainism and Buddhism. Basavanna's revolutionary message of the new, visionary religious society swiftly spread across the masses, due to his position.

Every evening, Basaveshwara gave discourses denouncing various social practices such as caste hierarchy, astrology, building of temples, magical practices etc. He urged the masses to develop rational thinking and worship Lord Siva within themselves. Here, he developed a large Shaivite religious movement. He lived and preached here for twenty long years. The “Hall of Siva experience” Sivanubhava Madapa became the function of gathering for

discourse. Basavanna died at the age of 62.

Vachanas:

The Vachanas or prose lyrics of Basavanna and Allama Prabhu contain their doctrines. The Vachanas literally translate to “what is said”. These Vachanas reject the legends of Gods and Goddesses; scorn the Vedas, mock ritual practices. The Vachanakaras or the authors of Vachanas saw religion in its formal way as the establishment, static institution which promise human beings, security and predictability while, they knew that the religion should be spontaneous, dynamic, free of bargain extracted in exchange of salvation. These Vachanas written in Kannada language – central to the life of Lingayats, are filled with humor, ridicule, truth seeking, bristling with monotheism, asking the devotees to enter into the realm of personal spirituality.

Ironically, with the passage of time, Veera Shaivism gradually reabsorbed much of what was rejected by Basavanna. Giving gifts to guru, traditions of ritual purity, temple worship etc began to emerge. Efforts were made to derive Veera Shaiva theology from traditional Hindu scriptures such as Agamas and Sutras - a need rejected by the early Sharanas.

The Lingayats, to this day, reject the Vedas and put themselves out of the mainstream Hinduism. However, with the acceptance of certain Shaiva Agamas, they align themselves with the other Shaiva sects. Faith is regarded as a distinct and independent religion by Veera Shaivites.

The original ideals of Lingayats that are embedded in their scriptures are:

- Vachanas
- Historical narratives and biographies in verse
- Specialized works on doctrine and theology

Mantra Gopya by Allama Prabhu, Vachanas by Basavanna, Karana Hasuge by Chennabasavanna and the collected work called Shunya Sampadane are among the most central texts.

Shakti Vishishtadvaita- is the monistic-theistic doctrine of Veera Shaivism. It is a version of qualified non-dualism. Both difference and non-difference between soul and God are accepted in it. Life’s goal is the true union of Siva (Linga) and Soul (Anga) - known as Shunya or nothingness (which must not be confused as an empty void).

It is described that one merges with Linga/ Siva through a six stage progressive path of surrender and devotion. Each of the phases brings the seeker closer in the path of attaining Shunya i.e, until Siva and Soul are merged in the state of perpetual consciousness of Lord Siva, similar to the rivers merging in an Ocean. The six stage path includes bhakti (devotion),

mahesha (selfless service), prasada (earnestly seeking Siva's grace), pranalinga (experience of all as Siva), sharana (egoless refuge in Siva), and aikya (oneness with Siva).

Panchachara and Ashtavarana:

The means of attainment as described and accepted by the Veera Shaivas depend on the panchachara (five codes of conduct) and ashtavarana (eight shields) to protect the body as the abode of the Lord.

Panchachara or the five codes are:

1. Lingachara (everyday worship of the Sivalinga)
2. Sadachara (paying attention to vocation and duty)
3. Sivachara (equality among members and acknowledging Siva as the one God)
4. Bhriyachara (humility towards all creatures) and
5. Ganachara (defense of the community and its tenets)

Ashtavarna or the eight shields are:

1. Guru
2. Linga
3. Jangama (wandering monk)
4. Paduka (water from bathing the Linga or guru's feet)
5. Prasada (sacred offering)
6. Vibhuti (holy ash)
7. Rudraksha (holy beads) and
8. Mantra (Namah Sivaya)

'Linga Diksha' is the formal initiation into the Veera Shaiva religion. It is a rite performed for both the genders. Here, the sacred thread ceremony is replaced, enjoining the Lingayat (devotee) to worship the personal Sivalinga on a daily basis. Lingayats place great emphasis on this life, on equality of all members (regardless of sex, education, caste, etc.) and social service. Free will is stressed upon in the faith, affirming a purposeful world. It avows pure monotheism.

In a Lingayat family, when a child is born, he/she introduced to the faith on the very same day. A visit is made to a Jangama (monk). The Jangama bestows the child with a small Sivalinga encased in a pendant tied to a thread. This encased Sivalinga is the personal/ chosen Linga which must be worn around one's neck throughout one's life.