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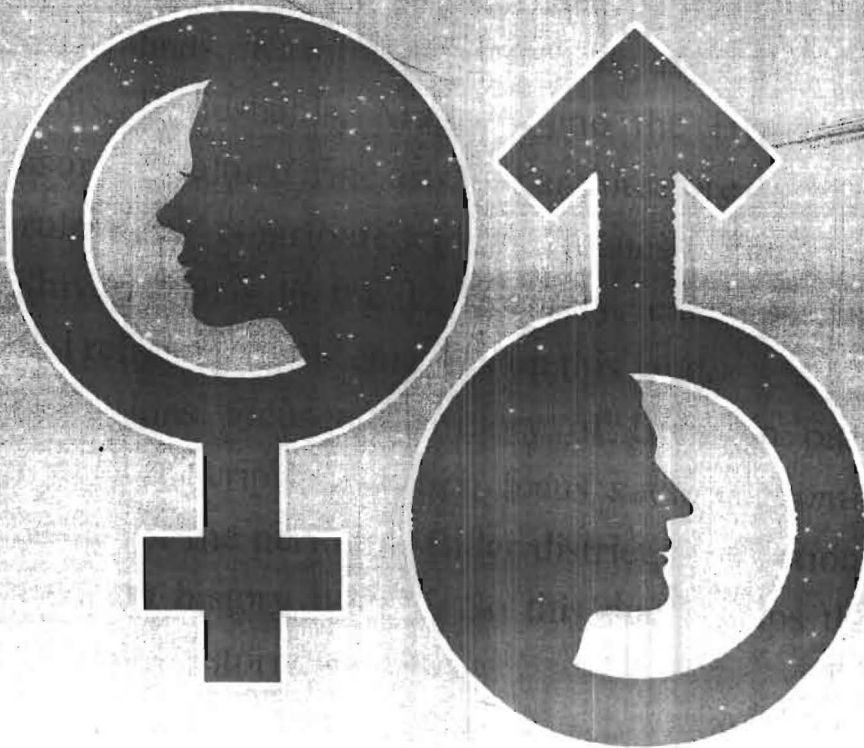
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GENDER IN VIRASAIVA RELIGION

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Abstract:

The religion which Basaveshwara practiced and propagated is called Virasaivism. 'Vira' generally means a hero. Virasaivism insisted that its followers should develop single minded devotion to one God, Shiva. The spirit of the Virasaiva movement was democratic in the sense that people of all castes and callings had access in the shaping of society and religion. The discussion and discourses, the dialogues and debates were conducted in the religious academy called Anubhava Mantapa at Kalyana.

Virasaiva movement advocated the idea that the soul has no sex. Virasaivism condemned the hierarchy of gender as much as it condemned the hierarchy of caste and class. It made no distinctions between men and women in regard to the soul or consciousness. Basaveshwara believed in giving equal status to women and argued that the men should encourage women to become strong. He advocated that women should be made strong and independent. Only then her status will improve. The attitude of men towards women and realization of social and moral responsibility towards women is given in Basaveshwara's philosophy, which is very necessary in the present world.

Vachana literature was a by-product of the great revolution. Almost all saints who took lead in the revolution were poets who poured out their souls in Vachana, a unique literary form in Kannada. The advent of as many as 33 women saints, who were also Vachana writers, at one and the same time was an unprecedented phenomenon.

Virasaiva women's are in every walk of the main stream of life; they are working as professors, doctors, politicians, literary figures, lawyers, engineers etc. this is the direct outgrowth of the achievements of our 12th century Sharaneyaru. Women become the pillars on which the super structure of Virasaiva religion could stand. This is no mean an achievement. The preaching of Virasaiva women saints a guiding principle for new generation.

Introduction:

Karnataka occupies a unique position in the history of India as it became the meeting place and refuge of many religions in their various forms of development which produced a rare fusion of a truly universal culture. Basaveshwara was the founder of Virasaiva religion.⁸ He was not only a religious reformer but also a socio-

⁸ R.C.Hiremath (ed) Bhakti Bhandari Basavannanavara Vacanagalu, Karnataka University Dharwad, 1968, p.256. (Kannada)

economic, political and cultural reformer of the 12th century. His Vachanas guided many people not only in the 12th century but in present time also. But it must be admitted that the movement was activated in Karnataka in the 12th century by the Sharanas, or Virasaiva Saints, headed by Basavanna who gave a new dimension and vision to the religion. Basaveshwara rejuvenated and vitalized Virasaivism and made it a handy instrument for the uplift of the people. This school came to be popularly known as Lingayata.⁹

Women in Pre- Basaveshwara period:

The Pre-Basaveshwara women were under the total domination of men. They had neither the freedom to read and write nor to worship. They were treated worse than the human beings; just like the outcasts, indented maid-servants of the house-hold and sexual objects meant for the pleasure of the male and always at the back and call of their husbands. They were told and treated as unfit for salvation and *aikya* with Shiva.

Women in Basaveshwara period:

During the 12th century Basaveshwara and other Shivasharanas made an attempt for the emancipation of women, Basaveshwara condemned the suppression of women and the excluding of women by all activities. Basaveshwara wanted to establish a society, based upon the democratic principles like, liberty, equality and fraternity. He wanted to give more and more opportunities to women to come out of family bondages and equal position on par with men. Women should participate in religious and spiritual spheres on equal footing.¹⁰ Exploitation and discrimination of women on the basis of sex was strongly condemned by Basaveshwara. It is these lofty thoughts that inspired and motivated the 12th century Virasaiva Women. Thus, it is the Virasaiva women were the first to enjoy equal status with men and also were the first to be offered religious freedom, not only to worship but also to conduct worshipping ceremonies. The Virasaiva religious movement was and is by far the most progressive religion on this blessed planet of ours. The credit must also be given to women pioneers like Akka Mahadevi, Akka Nagamma, Muktayakka and others for blazing the trail and convincing their male counterparts that the women are equal to them in every respect.

Anubhava Mantapa:

The spirit of the Lingayat movement was democratic in the sense that people of all castes and callings had access in the shaping of society and religion. The discussion and discourses, the dialogues and debates were conducted in the religious academy called Anubhava Mantapa at Kalyana.¹¹ Basaveshwara, Allama Parbhhu , Chennabasava, Siddharama, Madiwala Machideva, Bacarasa and a host of other saints were discussing the fundamentals of Virasaivism-thus evolving a new faith.

⁹ M.Chidananda Murthy, Basavanna, National book Trust, India, 1991, p.32

¹⁰ See for detail Lohit D.Naikar, Basava and Human Rights, Basava Samithi, Bangalore, 2007, pp175-176.

¹¹ V.S.Caharantimath-Anubhava Mantapa And Veerashaiva Culture, .Basava Samiti, Bangalore 1995, pp.17-25.

Even women saints alike Akkamahadevi, Satyakka, Akka Nagamma, Gangambike, Rani Mahadevi, Sambhavi Devi took part in the deliberations of the religious academy.¹² The Anubhava Mantapa was democratic in its outlook because it was mainly based on democratic principles in its nature and functioning.¹³

Women in Vachana literature :

Almost all saints have sung their realization in different strains and expressed their views and opinions on men and society in varied sayings. The collection of these sayings is known as the Vacana Shastra-the scripture of the Virasaiva faith.¹⁴

Generally, the 12th century is considered to be the period of Vacana literature. But the compositions of some major thinkers and philosophers who belonged to the period upto 18th century are also considered as the Vacanas. It means that the personalities from Devara Dasimayya to Sarvadnya are considered to be the Vacanakaras in general.¹⁵

Vachanas contain in the noblest of human thoughts. They range from most ordinary manners and courtesies of social life to highest moral and spiritual values. In vachanas we see yearning for divine, prayer, modes of bhakti, universal human values, code of conduct, righteousness love and compassion, non-violence, peace, universal brotherhood.

Despite the differences in physiological and natural shape of men and women, spirituality they are one. In the twelfth century, at one and the time women rubbed shoulder with man in all walks of life. The twelfth century Vacana literature was enriched by more than thirty-five women writers. Their contribution to Vachana literature is immense. It is all time world record that seven hundred and seventy men and women writers who composed philosophical literature lived at a time the twelfth century.

In this era alone women grew up on the basis of equality with men religiously, spiritually, socially and educationally. During the revolution of Kalyana also they fought on equal footing with men¹⁶. They also participated in were them as Gurus, Jangamas and religious heads of monastries. They also granted Dixas Neelambike, Akkamahadevi, Gangambike, Satyakka, Lingamma, Danamma, Muktayakka, Rayamma, Satyakka, Lingamma¹⁷, Danamma, Masanamma, Akkamma etc. belonged to different profession and class. But they become the pillars on which the super structure of Lingayat religion could stand. This is no mean an achievement.

¹² C.R.Yaravintelimath (trans), Vachanas of Women Saints , Basava Samithi, Bangalore, 2006, pp.5-35.

¹³ Uttangi C.D (Ed). (Trans) by Gunjai S.R., Anubhava Mantapa The Heart of the Lingayat Religion, reverend C.D.Uttangi Centenary Commemoration Committee, Gulbarga, 1982, pp.15-25.

¹⁴ See for detail M.M.Kalburgi (ed), Samagra Vacana Samputa , Department of Kannada and Culture, Bangalore, 1993, 15 volumes.(Kannada)

¹⁵ M.M.Kalburgi (ed), Vachana, Basava Samithi, Bangalore, 2013, p.2-13.

¹⁶ See for detail article by Poojy Mhanta Swamiji –Basava Journal Vol.15, issue No.2 December, 1990, Basava Samiti Bangalore, pp31-42.

¹⁷ See for detail R.C.Hiremath (ed),Sivasaraneyara Vacanagalu, KUD, 1968, Vacana 71., p.377 (Kannada).

Women saints in Sunyasampadane:

Some of these distinctly Virasaiva characteristics are discernible within the Sunyasampadane¹⁸, a fifteenth century Kannada compendium produced by the resurgent Virasaivism of the Vijayanagar Empire. In format, the text consists of numerous Kannada Vacanas, or prose-poems, attributed to several important persons in the twelfth-century beginnings of the movement. The text traces the coming of Allama Prabhu to the center of Virasaiva activity. Kalyana, and his numerous religious and spiritual debates with others there-pre-eminently with Basaveshwara and Chennabasava. While relating events which transpired between his first arrival and his eventual coronation as the head of the Virasaiva spiritual society, the Sunyasampadane chronicles many other interesting and important Virasaiva saints whose stories are interwoven with that of the central figure-Allama Prabhu.

Five of these tales have women as important characters and are helpful in understanding fifteenth century Virasaiva views on the role of women in the faith. Lesson Two tells the story of Muktayy akka's independent spiritual progress after the death of her saintly guardian brother. Lesson Twelve tells the story of Aydakki Marayya, the rice gleaner, and his wife Lakkamma. Lesson Thirteen deals with Molige ya Marayyya, the wood cutter, and his wife Mahdeviyanima. Lesson Sixteen focuses on Akkamahadevi's¹⁹ rejection of marriage and family in favour of a life of pure, unfettered devotion to the Lord. In Lesson Twenty-one Nilamma²⁰, late in life, chooses to tread her own spiritual path though it diverges from that of her illustrious husband, Basava. These five tales then provide valuable insights into the role and position of women within Virasaivism.

A retelling of the stories of these five women will make apparent their three basically distinct responses-militant rejection, reluctant independence, and accommodation-to the tension between social expectations and the call to spiritual perfection.

The text emphasizes gender-free exaltation of service to the Lord in whatever may be one's ascribed role and proclaims the equal availability of spiritual advancement to male and female alike, but it does not attempt to promote an egalitarianism in the social or economic realms. Rather it promotes, within an ascribed status, the pursuit of a spiritual perfection.

Virasaiva women given importance to Kayaka (Work):

They liberated women from the bondage of their husbands and showed that they are equal to their male counterparts in every respect and can achieve *aikya* on their own. They had a better appreciation and understanding of the principle of

¹⁸ S.C.Nandimath, pavate and A.S.Adke-Sunyasampadane, Karnataka University, Dharwad, 1965, p.30.

¹⁹ Ramanujan, P. K. The Speaking of Siva, Penguin Books, New Delhi, 1973, pp.111-142

²⁰ P.B.Desai, Basavesvara And His Times, Kannada Research Institute, Karnataka University, Dharwad, 1968, pp.263-264.

kayaka (physical labour or *Kayaka*) than the males.²¹ They did their *kayaka* expecting any reward(s).

Kottananda Somavve pounded paddy (thrashed un milled rice) at *saranas* houses; Remmavve was an agriculturist ; Tengina Mahadevi visited the houses of the *saranas* to wake them up in the early hours of the morning so that they did not miss their Sivapuja ; Gauravve arranged and cleaned the Sivanubhava Mantapa ; Bansiga Mallarasi helped in cooking the Prasad (food) to be served to the *Saranas* visiting Basava's abode ; Sivamayidevi read the Puranas to those who couldn't read; Bacale played the maddale (musical instrument) in the temples ; Huvinallamma delivered flowers and *bilwapatri* to the *Saranas* for use in their *Puja* ; Goggavve burned in sense in the temples ; Siddhadevamma played musical instruments in the temples ; Rati Revamma did the spinning, Sivamayidevi and Vimaladevi conducted Anubhava Ghosti and preached religion ; and Kamama made ropes. These are some of the examples of the *Sivasaraneyaru* of the 12th century and their *kayakas* we come across infrequently. Nonetheless, they achieved *aikya* with Siva through their *kayaka*. There are some names whose *kayaka* was a secret. They liked to keep it a secret and not to boast of it. Bontadevi is one such person. Just as Akka Mahadevi did, Bontadevi considered God as her spouse. She kept her *kayaka* secret from others.²²

Conclusion:

The renaissance and revival of the Virasaiva religion during the 12th century was primarily responsible for liberating Virasaiva women in particular and Indian women in general from the bondage of male domination, by affording them the opportunity to come to the socio – economic forefront, by giving them a chance to become educated (prior to this, they were denied educational opportunities and were simply treated as outcasts) and by enabling them to make monumental contribution to the religious movement. The proceedings of the Anubhava Mantapa reflected and reveal that their contribution and participation which were equally important as those of their male counterparts. Akka Mahadevi and Muktayakka stand shoulder to shoulder with any of the male participants of the Anubhava Mantapa. The preaching of Virasaiva women saints a guiding principle for new generation. Akkana Balaga have sprung up all across Karnataka. The preaching of Virasaiva women saints a guiding principle for new generation.

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²¹ . Article by Sarojini Shintri ,Basava And Womenhood:, Sri Basaveshwara : A commemoration volume, Govt of Mysore, 1967, p.153.

²² Ramaswamy, Divinity & Deviance women in Virasaivism, Oxford University Press, Madras ,1996.p.22-27.

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