

IV

BASAVAṆṆA

The lives of saints are, too often, a mingled yarn of history and legend, of fact and fiction; and the fiction is no less fiction for being pious. In our country, particularly, where carefully documented history is a late growth, this ambiguous tissue must be all too common. One has, therefore, to tread warily in attempting the biography of an Indian saint; for the greater the saint, the greater is the accretion of legendary material upon the bare facts.

On the life of Basavaṇṇa the available material is abundant, if not unwieldy. But much of it is naturally controversial. This is hardly surprising, and follows the familiar pattern associated with lives of saints everywhere.

The most important sources for a life of Basavaṇṇa can be grouped under four heads:

- 1 Vacanas of Basavaṇṇa and of his contemporaries.
- 2 Vīraśaiva Purāṇas, or Biographies.
- 3 The Jaina Purāṇas.
- 4 Inscriptions.

Since the most significant aspect of a saint's life are his beliefs, doctrines and personality, Basavaṇṇa's own vacanas and those of his contemporaries and immediate successors should constitute the most authoritative source for an appraisal of the man; although, it must be admitted, this important source throws but scanty light upon the material circumstances of his life or upon the details of his secular activity.

There is considerable agreement among the Vīraśaiva Purāṇas on the main facts of Basavaṇṇa's life, the differences, if any, being only minor. Pāṅkurike Sōmanātha (1195 C.A.D.), author of Basava Purāṇamu, (in Telugu), Bhīmakavi (1369 A.D.), author of Basava Purāṇa, Ṣaḍakṣaradēva (1655 A.D.), author of Vṛṣabhēndravijaya, and some other writers give almost identical accounts of Basavaṇṇa's life. Harihara (1200 C.A.D.), author of Basavarājadēvara Ragale, is a category by himself, and has a version of his own. From Lakkaṇṇa Daṇḍēśa (1428 A.D.), author of Śivatattva Cintāmaṇi, Siṅgirāja (1500 C.A.D.), author of Siṅgirāja Purāṇa, and some other writers we have a third and yet another version.

The Jaina Purāṇas, Bijjaḷarāya Carite of Dharaṇi Paṇḍita (1650 C.A.D.), and Bijjaṇarāya Purāṇa of Candrasāgaravarṇi (1810 A.D.), form a fourth category of source material. The hero of these Purāṇas, as the titles suggest, is Bijjaḷa and not Basavaṇṇa. The underlying conviction of these writers is that King Bijjaḷa of the Kalacūris of Kalyāṇa (1155–1167 A.D.), under whom Basavaṇṇa served, was a Jaina. Recent research, however, has shown that this King Bijjaḷa was a Śaiva and never a Jaina.¹ These factual inaccuracies are perfectly understandable. The gap between the time of Basavaṇṇa and Bijjaḷa on the one hand and the Jaina poets on the other is very wide. Dharaṇi Paṇḍita lived about 500 years, and Candrasāgaravarṇi more than 650 years, after Bijjaḷa and Basavaṇṇa. There is also religious prejudice to be taken into account, and it is not unnatural that the accounts of the Jaina poets should have been coloured by this *odium theologicum*. Modern historians, particularly Fleet, Bhandarkar and Dasagupta, who have based their accounts on such material, have naturally gone completely wrong.

As for inscriptions, there are some, most of which either just mention the name of Basavaṇṇa or give a very meagre account of Basavaṇṇa's life, while the others have no bearing at all on Basavaṇṇa. On the whole, they establish the historicity of Basavaṇṇa and testify to the magnitude of his personality.

The following account of Basavaṇṇa's life is based on evidence about which there is the maximum agreement, but also upon reasonable inference and continuous tradition.

Basavaṇṇa was born in a respectable and cultured family of Śaiva Brahmins at Iṅgaḷśvara Bāgewāḍi, in the District of Bijapur, about 1131–1132 A.D.² His parents were Mādarasa and Mādālāmbike, though they are also called Maṇḍigeya Mādirāja and Mādāmbhe. They held a high position in society. Mādarasa was the chief, or head-man, of Bāgewāḍi. The term 'Rāja' or 'Arasa' appended to his name is suggestive of his high office and preeminent position. According to the Purāṇas, Mādāmbhe was an extremely

1 (a) BP (T), Intr. pp. 42, 46.

(b) JSI, pp. 400–401.

(c) MU, pp. 76–79.

2 (a) STC, Ch. XXX. II. P. 236.

(b) HB, pp. 14–15.

pious lady, who had devoted her life to religious vows and practices. Mādarasa, too, was a learned Brahmin who meticulously observed religious rites and rituals. We are told in the Purāṇas that Basavaṇṇa was born of Mādāmbē as the fruit of a vow made to Nandikēśavara. The biographies and the Vacanas confirm that he had an elder sister named Akkanāgama. Basavaṇṇa grew to be a fine boy and showed signs of intellectual brilliance¹ and freedom of thought. Siṅgirāja² tells how Basavaṇṇa, even as a boy, was up against religious rites and rituals and was inclined towards Śivabhakti. When he openly repudiated other creeds and systems there seem to have been clashes with his classmates. When Mādarasa made preparations for the Upanayana ceremony in accordance with the Brahmanic tradition, Basavaṇṇa revolted against the ceremony.³ There must have been arguments and counter-arguments between father and son. The young rebel, however, remained unconvinced and discoursed at length on the importance of Bhakti.⁴ To the great disappointment of the assembly, Basavaṇṇa left his home and, along with his elder sister Nāgāmbike, went to Kūḍala Saṅgama,⁵ also known as Kappaḍi Saṅgama, about 35 miles away from Bāgewāḍi and at the confluence of the Kṛṣṇa and the Mala-prabha, in those days perhaps the holiest place in that part of Karnatak. At Kūḍala Saṅgama there was then a learned scholar, Īśānya Guru,⁶ under whom it is possible that Basavaṇṇa studied the Vēdas, the Āgamas, the Śāstras and other religious literature, only to be confirmed in his early distrust of ritual. He was now convinced of the fruitlessness of all metaphysics. His heart was crying for God, and his day-to-day worship of Lord Kūḍala Saṅgama brought him peace of mind and spiritual fulfilment. Harihara,⁷ who gives a brilliant account of Basavaṇṇa's devotion, tells us how Basavaṇṇa was bidden by Kūḍala Saṅgamanātha to go to Maṅga-

1 BP (K), Ch. III. 42. p. 44.

2 SP, Ch. V. 91. p. 75.

3 According to Harihara and Siṅgirāja, however, Basavaṇṇa did undergo the Upanayana ceremony but later on discarded the sacred thread. (BDR, Ch. II. LL. 40-48. pp. 10-11, & SP, Ch. V. 81-90. pp. 73-75).

4 BP (K), Ch. III. 43-83. pp. 45-55.

5 BDR, Ch. II. LL. 49-50. p. 11.

6 Ibid, Ch. II. L. 65. p. 11.

7 Ibid, Ch. IV. LL. 22-23. p. 21.

wāḍa. This command was a great shock to Basavaṇṇa, as he had absolutely no intention to leave Kūḍala Saṅgama. However, Basavaṇṇa was assured Lord Kūḍala Saṅgama would always be with him. In fulfilment of this promise Saṅgamanātha Himself came to Basavaṇṇa's palm in the form of 'Iṣṭa-Liṅga', through Nandikēśvara,¹ the vehicle of God Śiva, who is identical with Saṅgamanātha. This incident represents what Vīraśaivas call the Liṅga-Dīkṣa.

Accounts differ regarding the time and the place of the initiation. According to Siṅgirāja,² it was performed by Jātavēdamuni at Bāgewāḍi soon after the birth of Basavaṇṇa. Bhīmakavi³ agrees with Siṅgirāja regarding the time and the place of the ceremony but says that it was Saṅgamēśvara Himself who performed the rite.

Biographers differ on Basavaṇṇa's marriage. According to Harihara,⁴ Basavaṇṇa married Gaṅgādēvi and Māyidēvi at Maṅgaḷawāḍa, Bijjaḷa's capital, when he worked under him as Bhaṇḍāri, or Head of the Treasury. Regarding the parentage of Gaṅgādēvi and Māyidēvi Harihara is silent. According to Bhīmakavi,⁵ Baladēva, Bijjaḷa's Minister and Basavaṇṇa's maternal uncle, gave him his daughter Gaṅgāmbike as token of his admiration for Basavaṇṇa's bold revolt against meaningless traditions. According to Siṅgirāja,⁶ Basavaṇṇa married Nilalōcane, Bijjaḷa's foster-sister. The *Śūnyasampādane* confirms the latter name.

When Basavaṇṇa came to Maṅgaḷawāḍa, he stayed with Siddhadaṇḍādhipa, Head of King Bijjaḷa's Treasury, worked as Gaṇaka, or Accountant, and succeeded Siddhadaṇḍādhipa as Head of the Treasury.⁷ According to the same source, all his later activities—social, religious and political—were confined to Maṅgaḷawāḍa to the end of his life. However, Bhīmakavi and Siṅgirāja tell us that Basavaṇṇa went straight to Kalyāṇa from Kūḍala Saṅgama. Basava

1 BDR, Ch. IV. LL. 69–95. pp. 23–24.

2 SP, Ch. V. 54–61. pp. 67–68.

3 BP, Ch. III. 24–29. pp. 40–41.

4 BDR, Ch. VI. LL. 1–3. p. 34.

5 BP, Ch. IV. 1–43. pp. 56–67.

6 SP, Ch. VII. 53. p. 107.

Cf. Lakkanna Daṇḍēśa tells us that Nilāmbike (i.e. Nilalōcane) was Bijjaḷa's own sister. (STC, Ch. XXXI. 67. p. 265).

7 BDR, Ch. V. LL. 69–188. pp. 28–33.

Purāṇa relates that, after the death of Baladēva, Bijjaḷa's Minister, the King in consultation with the relatives of Baladēva invited Basavaṇṇa to hold Baladēva's post and that Basavaṇṇa accepted the offer.¹

One day, some time later, a strange event took place. A mysterious script was found to have fallen in the royal court and none of the learned scholars could decipher it. Only Basavaṇṇa could read it and so trace and unearth a vast treasure hidden under the Cālukya throne² which Bijjaḷa had usurped from the Cālukya King, Taila III in 1155-56 A.D. The account of the Purāṇa is corroborated by one of Cennabasavaṇṇa's vacanas.³

From this day on Basavaṇṇa gained in importance in the eyes of Bijjaḷa as well as of the whole court and city. Basavaṇṇa, we are told, lived on terms of equality and even friendship with Bijjaḷa. His twelve years' service clearly suggests that the relations between King Bijjaḷa and Basavaṇṇa were of the most cordial and harmonious in spite of occasional differences natural in such relations.

Basavaṇṇa was now about 25 years of age and in the prime of his youth. He was at the height of his energy and enthusiasm on the one hand, and on the other he had the necessary resources at his disposal for the great mission that he felt called upon to fulfil.

But Basavaṇṇa was, obviously, not the kind of man who would be satisfied with merely breaking away from the faith of his fathers. He had the courage of the rebel, but the temperament of the reformer. So he plunged into a movement to reform the new Faith from within. His efforts were largely oriented in two directions: towards religion and towards society; and, perhaps, towards a closer approximation of the two. He saw that the purity of the Faith was marred, on the one hand by a multitude of gods and minor deities, by spirits, totems and taboos, and on the other by a variety of rites and observances, penances and sacrifices, most of which were too often devoid of any meaning and were pursued in a spirit of superstition at the cost of true devotion. His task was to purify and revitalise the Faith and lead it in the direction of Bhakti. There was to be no longer any division between religion

1 BP (K), Ch. V. pp. 76-94.

2 Ibid, Ch. V. 52-61. pp. 89-91.

3 SS, Ch. VIII. 12. pp. 146-147.

and life in the world, but the Divine was to flow into all activities of man's life.

It was in a similar spirit that Basavaṇṇa strove for social reform. The community was riddled with caste. Basavaṇṇa would see no difference between man and man, between rich and poor, between a pariah and a Brahmin. And he embedded this principle of social equality in his religion. He also refused to recognise any difference between the social and intellectual status of man and woman. And he insisted upon the dignity, even the necessity, of manual work: all work was equal in his eyes, as in the eyes of God. A Mādara Cennayya or a Ḍōhara Kakkayya was no way inferior to a Gupta Mañcaṇṇa¹ or a Śivaleṇka Mañcaṇṇa²; personal property had no place in his system—only the labour of one's hands, and of that no more than sufficed for the passing day. But the work was dedicated work, a form of worship. *Dāsōha*, or the surrendering of all the fruits of one's labour for the welfare of humanity, is one of the essential tenets of his faith.

These reforms were rooted in a profound humility. Humility, as is evident from Basavaṇṇa's vacanas, is his most conspicuous virtue. Though, as an administrator, he was accustomed to power and independent decisions, Basavaṇṇa was not the man to lay down the law in matters of religion and philosophy. Hence came into existence the Anubhava Gōṣṭhi, popularly known as Anubhava Maṇṭapa, at Kalyāṇa, where a large number of Śaraṇas and seekers would foregather to participate in learned discussions on the highest ends of life.

These came from all parts of India, even from the most distant. While Uriliṅgadēva came from Maharashtra and Nannayya from Orissa, Śivaleṇka Mañcaṇṇa, a learned scholar, came from Kashi, and Mōḷigeya Mārāyya, with his queen, from as far off as Kashmir, an enormous distance in those days. Women, too, were welcome to the Maṇṭapa; and, among others, Mahādēviyakka came from Uḍutadi, a village in Shimoga district, and Bontādēvi, of royal lineage, from Kashmir.

These and many more participated in the discourses. There,

1 A Brahmin convert who served under King Bijjala as personal correspondent. (SSC, Pt. II. pp. 102-103).

2 A Brahmin convert who was a learned scholar. (SSC, Pt. II. pp. 317-321 and BKS.R. MS.)

too, came Prabhudēva of Ballegāvi, an intellectual giant, and Siddharāmayya of Sonnalige (modern Sholapur), an accomplished yōgi and social worker. The themes, the level and manner of their discussions are evident from *Śūnyasaṃpādana*.

It looks as if, as social equality was a theme for pious or learned talk, and men and women of all castes were admitted to the discussions of the Anubhava Maṇṭapa, nobody bothered to challenge the new ideas. But as soon as Basavaṇṇa started putting into practice what he preached and the egalitarian principles began to be put into operation, the fat was in the fire.

A Brahmin maiden, daughter of Madhuvarasa, was married to the son of Haralayya, a cobbler,¹ both having embraced the Vīraśaiva faith. Those who had been watching with alarm the sweeping reforms advocated by Basavaṇṇa now found their chance. King Bijjala's ears were poisoned, and his power was enlisted against the reformers. Haralayya and Madhuvarasa were cruelly executed.² This, in turn, provoked a violent reaction among the more headlong of Basavaṇṇa's followers. The details of this counter-movement are obscured by the wide variety of accounts that have come down to us. Some of these make Basavaṇṇa himself, directly or indirectly, responsible for the death of Bijjala. Even *Śūnyasaṃpādana* seems to accept this version. However, it is now shown that this account, given in two prose passages,³ is a later addition, since they are not found in Śivagaṇaprasādi Mahādēvayya's and Halagedēva's versions,⁴ which are older. While Lakkaṇṇa Daṇḍēśa says nothing on this point, Dharāṇi Paṇḍita states that it was Basavaṇṇa himself that brought about Bijjala's death by means of a poisoned mango. On the other hand, Siṅgirāja relates how Basavaṇṇa pacified his followers and averted the danger to Bijjala's life, and this seems to be more probable.

In confirmation of this we have other accounts. The first is that King Bijjala abdicated his throne in favour of his son, Śivabijjaṇa, with Basavaṇṇa as his guardian.⁵ Another is that Bijjala's death was a result of political intrigue and was the work of his

1 SL, Ch. XXI. pp. 442-445.

2 Ibid, Ch. XXII. p. 481.

3 SS, Ch. XXI. pp. 390 & 394-395.

4 CBV, Intr. pp. 92-93.

5 BB, p. 225.

brother Kaṇṇadēva and his Minister Kasapayya.¹ And, as recent research has shown, Basavaṇṇa had, at the time of the assassination of Bijjaḷa, already left Kalyāṇa.²

But we have more conclusive, because internal, evidence. While Bijjaḷa was, unmistakably, a 'paravādi', a man of a different faith, he was to Basavaṇṇa, at the same time, an Ādigaṇēśvara, one of the heavenly cohorts of saints come down to earth to examine and enhance the glory of Śivabhakti.³ But, more than all this, there is the entire personality of Basavaṇṇa as revealed in his own vacanas and in those of his contemporaries and immediate successors. No man who spoke and lived as he did would be capable of violent action, let alone a treacherous murder.

As already noted, Basavaṇṇa left Kalyāṇa for Kappaḍi Saṅgama and in about 1167 A.D. became one with Lord Kūḍala Saṅgama.

Although Prabhudēva is the central figure of *Śūnyasāmpādane* which bears witness to his towering intellect and to the success of his mission, it would not be wide of the truth to say that Basavaṇṇa is the key figure in the Vīraśaiva Faith. Even in his own lifetime, according to tradition, he was the author of eighty-eight major miracles. One of them, though not a major one, deserves repetition for its utter simplicity and popular appeal. A milk-maid, carrying her pot of milk as offering to the temple, slips on the rain-soaked path and, as her precious pot is toppling over, cries out to Basavaṇṇa. At the same moment, Bijjaḷa, conversing with him on affairs of state, sees with surprise the latter lift up his hands as if he were holding a pot in air. The poor milk-maid's pot did not topple. No wonder that generations have glorified him as 'Dvitiya Śaṁbhu', or the Second God; that poets have, through eight centuries, celebrated him in prose and verse; that all Vīraśaiva works begin with the invocation 'Śrīguru Basavaliṅgāya Namaḥ', or 'Hail to the divine teacher Basava!' His name has even entered into the daily, automatic, habits of people; so that, when one goes to bed or gets up, when one trips or sneezes or finds oneself in some difficulty, the name of Basavaṇṇa comes naturally to one's lips.

1 HB, p. 126-127.

2 Ibid, p. 138 & MU, p. 94.

3 SS, Ch. VII. 33, p. 141.