

Shri BASAVESHWARA

(Basavanna's Life sketch- Excerpts from 'Sunya Sampadane' by Guluru Siddaviranna volume II translated into English and published by Karnatak University. Some material is paraphrased by Nayantara Swamy as indicated).

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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 where documented history is a late growth, this ambiguous tissue must all be too common. One has, therefore, to tread

warily in attempting a biography of an Indian saint; for the greater the saint, the greater is the assertion of legendary material upon bare facts.

On the life of Basavanna 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 the lives of saints everywhere.

The most important source for the life of Basavanna can be grouped under four heads:

1. Vachanas of Basavanna and his contemporaries,
2. Virashaiva Puranas, or Biographies,
3. The Jaina Puranas,
4. Inscriptions

Since the most significant aspect of a saint's life are his beliefs, doctrines and personality, Basavanna's own vachanas and those of his contemporaries and immediate successors should constitute the most authoritative source for the 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 Virasaiva Puranas on the main facts of Basavanna's life, the differences if any, being only minor. Palkuruike Somanatha (1195 C.A.D) author of Basava Puranam (in Telugu), Bhimakavi (1369 A.D) author of Basava Purana, Sadaksaradeva (1655 A.D.) author of Vrisabhendravijaya, and some other writers give almost identical accounts of Basavanna's life. Harihara (1200 C.A.D.) author of Basavarajadevara Ragale, is a category by himself, and has a version of his own. From Lakkanna Dansesa (1428 A.D.) author of Sivatatva Chintamani, Singiraja (1500 C.A.D.) author of Singiraja Purana, and some other writers we have a third and yet another version.

The Jaina Puranas, Bijjalarayara Carite of Dharani Pandita (1650 C.A.D.), and Bijjalarayara Purana of Candradagaravarni (1810 A.D.),

form a fourth category of source material. The hero of these Puranas as the titles suggest, is Bijjala and not Basavanna.....

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

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

Basavanna was born in a respectable and cultured family of Saiva Brahmins at Ingalesvara Bagevadi, in the District of Bijapur (Karnataka), about 1131-1132 A.D. His parents were Madarasa and Madalambike, though they were also called Mandigeya Madiraja and Madambe. They held a high position in society. Madarasa was a chief, or head-man of Bagevadi.... According to the Puranas, Madambe was an extremely pious lady, who had devoted her life to religious vows and practices. Madarasa too was a learned Brahmin who meticulously observed religious rites and rituals. We are told in the Puranas that Basavanna was born of Madambe as the fruit of a vow made to Nandikesvara. The biographies and Vachanas confirm that he had an elder sister named Akkanagamma. Basavanna grew up to be a fine boy and showed signs of intellectual brilliance and freedom of thought. Singiraja tells that Basavanna, even as a boy, was up against religious rites and rituals and was inclined towards Shivabhakti (devotion). When he openly repudiated other creeds and systems there seem to have been clashes with his classmates. When Madarasa (his father) made preparations for the Upanayanam (initiation) ceremony in accordance with the Brahminic tradition, Basavanna revolted against this ceremony. 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 (devotion). To the great disappointment of the assembly Basavanna left his home....

(His elder sister Akkanagamma took him to her home in Kudala Sangama. Here he met Isanya Guru, a learned scholar, who understood young Basavanna, and under whom he studied Vedas, Agamas, the Shastras and other religious literature).

Accounts differ regarding the time and place of the initiation. According to Singiraja it (Ista-Linga Diksa) was performed by Jataveda Muni at Bagevadi at the time of birth. Bhimakavi agrees with Singiraja with the time and place of the ceremony but says it was Sangamesvara Himself who performed the rite.” *(Harihara’s description later in 1200 AD describes ‘Ishta Linga Diksha’ by Nandikeshwara, the vehicle of Lord Shiva, who represents Lord Sangamanatha himself).*

Biographers differ on the timeline of Basavanna’s marriage. According to Bhimakavi he is said to have married Gangambike, daughter of Baladeva a Minister at Bijjala’s court. According to Sunyasampadane and Singiraja, Basavanna also married Bijjala’s foster sister Nilalocane at his capital Mangalwada, when he was working as ‘bhandari’ head of treasury.

Sources reveal that Basavanna went to Mangalwada and worked with Siddhadandadhupa, initially as Ganaka (accountant) and later succeeded him as Head of Treasury. However other sources tell us that Basavanna went straight to Kalyana, and after his uncle Baladeva’s death, succeeding him as King Bijjala’s Minister.

The Purana narrates an incident years later, when a strange script was found in the royal court and none of the scholars could decipher it. Only Basavanna was able to read it, and accurately trace the place of a large hidden treasure. It was buried under the throne of the Chalukya King Taila III, which Bijjala had usurped in 1155-56 A.D. The account of the Purana is collaborated by one on Chennabasavanna’s vachanas.

From this day on Basavanna rose in esteem in the eyes of Bijjala as well as the whole court. His twelve years service clearly suggests that Basavanna enjoyed the Kings admiration, respect and even friendship. Basavanna was now about 25 years old and in the prime of his youth. He was at the height of his energy and enthusiasm on one hand, and on

the other he had the resources at his disposal for the great mission he felt called upon to fulfill.

But Basavanna was, obviously not the kind of man who would be satisfied to 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 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 the multitude of gods and minor deities, by spirits, totems and taboos, and on the other hand by the variety of rites and observances, penances and sacrifices, and most of which were too often devoid of any meaning, and were pursued in the spirit of superstition at the cost of true devotion. His task was to purify and revitalize the Faith and lead it in the direction of Bhakti (devotion). There was to be no longer a division between religion and life in the world, but the Divine has to flow into all activities of man's life.

Basavanna strove for social equality in religion. He saw all people as equal. He saw no difference between man and man, between man and woman, rich and poor. He did not recognize any difference in social and intellectual status between men and women, or hierarchy in castes and sub caste. All work (professions) were equal in the eyes of God, he proclaimed dignity of all labor, manual or otherwise. He preached that doing (Kayaka) honest, sincere work that was good for society was a form of worship. Using the fruits of one's labor for the welfare of society (Dasoha) was one's duty. These reforms were rooted in profound compassion and humility as is evident in his 'vachanas' (a style of writing he popularized in Kannada) Though as an administrator he wielded power, he did not lay down commandments in matters of religion and philosophy. He conveyed his message with logic, argument, discussion, debate and compassion. He created 'Anubhava Mantapa' where a large number of seekers from all walks of life, would gather

and freely participate in the discussions. His followers came from all over India like Maharashtra, Orissa, Andhra, Kashi, and even Kashmir. The themes and level of discussions are evident in the Shunya Sampadane. Anubhava Mantapa was a place where religious democracy flourished. Here sharanas met, discussed and exchanged views, doubts and experiences, challenged and debated ideas and their practical implementation. It was believed that Shivabhakti (devotion and faith in Shiva) was of paramount importance, and this was always enhanced by real knowledge- the knowledge of self. Allama Prabhu presided over the Anubhava Mantapa, and was the leading light in these discourses, and Shunya Sampadane bears witness to his towering intellect and to the success of his mission. But it is Basavanna who is undoubtedly the key figure in the Virasaiva movement.

Basavanna lead by example. He practiced what he preached. Many of his ideas were considered revolutionary at the time. One incident seems to have triggered outrage among his jealous opponents and critics. They had been witnessing the sweeping changes advocated by Basavanna, and his rise in esteem, influence and popularity in the kingdom (which encompassed parts of Karnataka, Maharashtra and Andhra). Madhuvarasa's daughter (a Brahmin), was married to Haralayya's son (a cobbler), both of whom had embraced the Virasaiva faith with Basavanna's blessings. This could not be tolerated by the critics. They succeeded in poisoning Bijjala's mind and convinced him to sentence both Haralayya and Madhuvarasa to death by cruel and horrific means. This provoked a violent reaction among Basavanna's followers. Basavanna tried to calm his followers. Horrified and heartbroken he leaves Kalyana for Kappadi Sangama, and in 1167 A.D becomes one with Lord Kudala Sangama.

In the revolt and chaos that followed, King Bijjala was killed. The details of the encounter are varied. The first is that King Bijjala abdicated his throne in favor of his son, Shivabijjana, with Basavanna as his guardian. Some accounts blame Bijjala's brother Karnadeva and his minister Kasapayya, who took advantage of the unrest to assassinate king Bijjala

for their political gains. Other accounts hold some headstrong followers of Basavanna responsible. Details are obscure in the various accounts. Recent research has shown, that at the time of the assassination of King Bijjala, Basavanna had already left Kalyana.

Basavanna was the charismatic leader of a great religious movement. He had to infuse new spirit into the religion, which he visualized to be universal in scope. According to the author (of Sunya Sampadane - Guluru Siddaviranna) Basavanna fought successfully against the prevailing castes and creeds, as well as sects and religions that had almost lost their vigor and vitality, even their very meaning...

At a time when Shivabhakti, or Virasaiva Sadbhakti, had fallen into decay, Basavanna made his appearance on earth and restored it to its original luster and beyond!

Many followers believe “ Basavanna was sent down to establish Shivabhakti on earth; that he was the gross principle of Parasiva come down to earth to fulfill his mission. We may or may not believe in the idea of incarnation, but (the author) Guluru Siddaviranna...firmly believed in Basavanna’s avatarhood. ...The glorious achievements Basavanna had to his credit could not be the work of an ordinary mortal.”

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“If the truth and living value of a faith is not to be measured by the numerical strength alone. Virashaivism is one of the world’s great religions, and the philosophy on which it is based, should have a valuable contribution to make, to world thought and culture.

Apart from the utmost scholastic vigour required in editing such a text (Shunya Sampadane), in which religion and philosophy illuminate and enrich each other, it is equally necessary, though without

sacrificing the exigencies of true scholarship, to avoid offence to popular susceptibilities and to steer clear of sectarian controversies. This it is hoped is achieved in this present volume.”

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