

## Basavanna's Philosophy of Equality and Devotion: A Study of His Life and Vachana Literature

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### Abstract:

*This study explores the life and philosophy of Basavanna, a 12th-century social reformer and mystic poet whose teachings shaped the Lingayat movement in Karnataka. Emphasizing spiritual devotion (bhakti) and social equality, Basavanna rejected the rigid caste hierarchy and ritualism prevalent in his time. Through an in-depth analysis of his vachanas—short, profound poetic expressions—this research highlights his vision of a casteless society grounded in individual dignity, moral conduct, and universal brotherhood. The paper also examines how Basavanna's life experiences and leadership in the Anubhava Mantapa (a spiritual academy) reflected his commitment to democratic spiritual dialogue and inclusiveness. His philosophy continues to inspire contemporary discussions on social justice and ethical living.*

**Keywords:** Basavanna, Vachana Literature, Social Equality, Bhakti Movement, Lingayat Philosophy.

### Introduction

Basavanna, a 12th-century philosopher, poet, and social reformer of Karnataka, stands as one of the most influential figures in Indian spiritual and socio-cultural history. Born in Bagevadi. Basavanna challenged the deeply entrenched caste system and the oppressive practices of Brahmanical orthodoxy through his revolutionary thoughts and actions. He founded the Lingayat movement, advocating a

spiritual path rooted in personal devotion (*bhakti*) to Lord Shiva and ethical living rather than ritualistic worship.

Through his unique and powerful *vachanas*—succinct and accessible poetic compositions in Kannada—Basavanna addressed issues of caste discrimination, gender inequality, and religious hypocrisy. His writings emphasized the importance of inner purity, work ethic (*kayaka*), and

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sharing wealth (*dāsa sāhitya*) as the foundation of an ideal society.

He envisioned a community where dignity and devotion mattered more than birth or social status. The *Anubhava Mantapa*, an assembly he led, became a model for democratic spiritual discourse, inviting men and women from all walks of life to participate as equals. This inclusive and progressive platform laid the groundwork for one of the earliest movements toward social equality in medieval India.

This paper critically studies Basavanna's life, his radical social ideas, and the spiritual philosophy embedded in his *vachana* literature. It also seeks to understand the lasting impact of his teachings on contemporary thought, especially in the context of social justice, devotion, and egalitarianism.

### Historical and Social Background of Basavanna's Time

By the middle of the 12th century, Basavanna emerged as a transformative figure in Indian religious and social history. Unfortunately, we do not have a contemporary biography of his life. Most of what we know comes from hagiographical sources like *Harihara's Basavarajadevara Ragale* (c. 1230 CE), *Basava Purana* in Telugu by Palkuriki Somanatha (c. 1260 CE), and its later Kannada translation by Bhima Kavi (1369 CE). While these works are not strictly historical, they offer insights into Basavanna's personality, values, and the

socio-religious conditions of his time. Additionally, Basavanna's own *vachanas* and those of his contemporaries provide important philosophical and ethical reflections.

The society in which Basavanna lived was deeply hierarchical, rooted in the caste system. Brahmins occupied the highest position, enjoying religious and social authority, while communities like the Holeyas and Chandalas were relegated to the margins. Each caste followed a hereditary occupation, and deviation from caste rules often led to social ostracization. Education and state positions were dominated by Brahmins, who lived in *agraharas*—villages granted by kings—which became centers of learning. Despite preaching equality in scriptures, Brahmins largely maintained ritual superiority and social dominance, often ignoring the ethical essence of religion.

Basavanna strongly criticized the gap between religious ideals and lived reality. He opposed animal sacrifices, blind rituals, and caste-based discrimination. In his *vachanas*, he denounced the hollow devotion of the priestly class and called for a direct, personal connection with God through *bhakti* and moral conduct. He believed in *kayaka* (dignified labor) and *dasoha* (sharing of wealth), promoting spiritual democracy.

Merchants, though economically powerful, were also critiqued for exploiting the poor. Social inequality was

stark, with the rich enjoying privileges while the poor struggled for survival. Untouchables lived outside villages, forced into degrading labor and treated with contempt. Women, too, were largely denied education and confined to domestic roles, with few exceptions like Akkamahadevi

The society was also steeped in superstition. Popular deities such as Mailara, Ellamma, and Banashankari were worshipped, especially among the lower castes, often with violent rituals. Priests, both Brahmin and non-Brahmin, exploited people's fears for personal gain, reducing religion to a profession.

In such a context, Basavanna's teachings emerged as a revolutionary call for equality, ethical living, and devotion free from social barriers. His life and *vachana* literature laid the foundation for a spiritual movement that challenged orthodoxy and offered an inclusive vision of society.

### **Religious Situation in Karnataka in the 12th Century**

The religious landscape of Karnataka in the 12th century was marked by diversity, transformation, and significant philosophical ferment. This period witnessed the coexistence and competition of multiple religious traditions, including Jainism, Shaivism, and remnants of Buddhism. These traditions not only shaped the spiritual lives of the people but also deeply influenced Karnataka's culture, literature, and social structures.

Jainism had a strong presence in Karnataka for several centuries prior to the 12th century. It established itself firmly in the region as early as the 1st century CE and received considerable patronage from dynasties like the Gangas and later the Rashtrakutas. Jain monks and scholars were among the earliest contributors to Kannada literature—figures like Pampa, Ranna, and Ponna exemplify Jain literary excellence. During the 9th and 10th centuries, Jainism was arguably the dominant religion in Karnataka. Jain monasteries (*basadis*) dotted the landscape, and Jain philosophy permeated scholarly and ethical discourses. However, the decline of the Ganga dynasty led to a parallel erosion in Jain political and cultural influence. By the 12th century, Jainism had lost mass appeal and began to be perceived as elitist and rigid in doctrine.

The Digambara sect of Jainism, which was more influential in Karnataka, held conservative views—such as denying salvation to women in their current birth, requiring them to be reborn as men. Its emphasis on extreme asceticism, renunciation, and a non-theistic worldview made it increasingly alien to the emotional and devotional needs of common people, who yearned for a personal relationship with the divine. This doctrinal severity hastened Jainism's decline among the general populace.

Buddhism had entered Karnataka during the reign of Emperor Ashoka in the 3rd century BCE. Though it established a

few learning centers—at Balligave, Dambala, Kadri, and Sannati—it never attained the same popularity in Karnataka as it did in northern and eastern India. Vajrayana Buddhism, a tantric form, found some foothold in the region, but its esoteric practices limited its accessibility. By the 12th century, Buddhism in Karnataka was largely symbolic, with few functioning monasteries or monks. The religion had already entered a phase of decline due to internal stagnation, lack of royal support, and the resurgence of more vibrant and emotionally engaging devotional movements such as Shaivism and Vaishnavism.

Shaivism was the most prominent and widely followed religion in Karnataka during the 12th century. Rooted in the worship of Lord Shiva, it had numerous sects, each with its own interpretations and practices. Prominent among them were the Pashupatas, Kalamukhas, and Kapalikas. The Pashupata sect, founded by Lakulisha, emphasized asceticism, devotion to Shiva, and public ritual performances. The Kalamukhas were known for their scholarship and for running monastic institutions (*mathas*) that served as educational, social, and healthcare centers. These mathas, particularly in places like Balligave (Shimoga district), became powerful institutions, known for promoting the fine arts, Sanskrit learning, and community welfare. The Kapalikas, although more secretive and esoteric, contributed to the diversity of Shaivite traditions. They

practiced tantric rituals and were sometimes viewed with suspicion due to their unorthodox rites. Despite these differences, Shaivism as a whole enjoyed extensive royal patronage and mass following, especially in northern Karnataka. Shaivism was deeply woven into the socio-political fabric of the time, influencing not only spiritual thought but also cultural and educational institutions. However, over time, many of its sects became ritualistic, caste-bound, and exclusionary, leading to dissatisfaction among the socially oppressed and spiritually unfulfilled.

Vaishnavism, particularly the Sri Vaishnava tradition led by Ramanujacharya, gained popularity in Karnataka during this period. A brilliant philosopher and theologian, Ramanuja promoted the doctrine of Vishishtadvaita (qualified non-dualism), which emphasized personal devotion (*bhakti*) to Vishnu and salvation through grace and surrender (*prapatti*).

Facing persecution by the Chola rulers in Tamil Nadu, Ramanuja fled to Karnataka, where he was warmly received. He converted Hoysala King Vishnuvardhana to Sri Vaishnavism, thereby gaining royal support. His inclusive theology recognized the spiritual dignity of all beings, including the marginalized. He is credited with calling the untouchables "Tirukula" (divine lineage), highlighting his commitment to spiritual equality, though he remained conservative in social practices.

Ramanuja's emphasis on temple worship, devotional rituals, and community-oriented religion made Vaishnavism appealing to a wide range of people. His doctrine bore several similarities to the later teachings of Basavanna—particularly the idea of emotional surrender to God—though the former centered on Vishnu and the latter on Shiva.

### **Pre-Veerashaiva Shaivism and Its Sects**

Before the rise of Veerashaivism under Basavanna, Shaivism in Karnataka had developed into a complex network of ritualistic and caste-bound sects. Sects such as the Nath, Margasaiva, Adisaiva, and Suddhasaiva flourished, but many of them became increasingly inaccessible to the lower castes and women. The Nath sect, also known as Kapalikas, practiced rigorous asceticism and meditation. They followed a lineage of spiritual teachers known as the “Nine Naths.” The Kalamukhas and Pashupatas, while more mainstream, still held on to caste distinctions and emphasized Brahminical rituals. Despite their philosophical richness, these Shaiva sects largely failed to create an inclusive spiritual community. The rigid structure and emphasis on external rites alienated large segments of the population, especially those from the working and oppressed classes.

### **Religious Exploitation and Ritualism**

By the 12th century, much of organized religion in Karnataka had become formalized and entangled with

political power. Temples were not only places of worship but also centers of economic control and caste hierarchy. Priests (both Brahmin and non-Brahmin) wielded enormous influence, often exploiting common people's fears through superstitions and complex rituals. Animal sacrifices, astrological rituals, and tantric practices were prevalent, often justified through scriptural interpretation. Religion, for the majority, had become a system of fear and transactional faith rather than one of enlightenment and ethical living. It is against this backdrop of spiritual stagnation and social inequality that Basavanna's Veerashaiva movement emerged.

### **Role of Basavanna in Reforming Society**

Basavanna, a 12th-century saint, philosopher, and social reformer, played a revolutionary role in reshaping the religious, social, and cultural landscape of Karnataka. At a time when the caste system, untouchability, and ritualistic practices dominated Indian society, Basavanna introduced a radical vision of spiritual democracy, moral uprightness, and social equality rooted in devotion to Lord Shiva (in the form of *Ishtalinga*).

One of Basavanna's most significant contributions was his outright rejection of the caste system. In a society stratified by *varna* and *jati*, where birth determined one's dignity and occupation, Basavanna argued that spiritual worth was not inherited but earned through righteous living and devotion. He accepted people

from all castes—Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, Shudras, and even those labelled as untouchables—into the fold of Veerashaivism. In his words: "*Jaati beda, kula beda, gotra beda, mata beda... alli antaranga shuddhi iddare Shiva bhakti sadhyavagi*"

(No caste, no lineage, no sect or religion matters if inner purity is present; only then is devotion to Shiva possible.) Basavanna established the Anubhava Mantapa in Kalyana, considered the first spiritual and democratic parliament in India, where philosophers, saints, women, and people of all castes gathered to discuss religious, social, and ethical issues. It served as a think-tank of spiritual egalitarianism and ethical living, producing an immense body of *Vachana* literature—short, free-verse poems expressing devotion, equality, and moral insight.

He promoted the idea of Kayaka (work) and Dasoha (sharing). He believed that every honest occupation was equally sacred—whether it was a washerman, cobbler, goldsmith, or king. This was a revolutionary break from the Brahmanical notion that only certain "upper" castes could perform religious duties.

#### **"Kayakave Kailasa"**

(Work itself is Kailasa, the abode of Shiva.)

Through this, he dignified labor and abolished hierarchy in occupation, insisting that everyone should earn their living through their work and share the surplus with the needy. Basavanna

championed the spiritual and social upliftment of women in an era when they were denied education, property rights, and temple entry. Women saints like Akkamahadevi, Neelambike, and Mahadeviyakka were welcomed as spiritual equals. Akkamahadevi's *Vachanas* are some of the most profound expressions of bhakti and philosophical insight. Basavanna believed that gender should not be a barrier to spirituality, a rare and progressive view in 12th-century India.

#### **Critique of Ritualism and Temple Exploitation**

Basavanna criticized meaningless ritualism, idol worship, animal sacrifices, and priestly exploitation. He advocated for internal devotion over external rituals. Instead of elaborate temple offerings, he proposed that wearing the Ishtalinga (a personal symbol of Shiva) and meditating upon it was sufficient. He questioned temple-centric religion which had become corrupt and exclusionary. He said:

**"Temple is not God, God is in the heart that has truth and compassion."**

Basavanna stood for social justice and human dignity. He supported inter-caste marriages, as in the celebrated marriage between the daughter of Madhuvarasa (a Brahmin) and the son of Haralayya (an untouchable). This bold act triggered a fierce backlash from orthodox sections, leading to the execution of the couple's parents by Bijjala's regime, a turning



point that marked increasing hostility towards the Veerashaiva movement.

Despite these setbacks, Basavanna refused to compromise on his principles and continued to fight against the unjust societal order. Basavanna's philosophy and reforms were disseminated through Vachana literature, a unique form of spiritual expression in Kannada. His vachanas are direct, honest, and often iconoclastic, speaking against dogma, pride, and spiritual hypocrisy. Through simple, accessible language, he democratized spirituality, allowing even the unlettered to engage with profound truths. Basavanna's ultimate goal was the establishment of a classless, casteless, and exploitation-free society, united through spiritual brotherhood. He called his followers Sharanas, who lived ethically, shared resources, and renounced ego, greed, and violence.

**Bhakti-Bhandari Basavanna: A Living Embodiment of Devotion**

Basavanna, while holding the secular office of *Bhandari* (Chancellor of the Treasury) under King Bijjala in Kalyana, was more significantly recognized as Bhakti-Bhandari—the custodian of boundless devotion (*Bhakti*). In this dual role, Basavanna seamlessly combined worldly responsibility with spiritual leadership, becoming a beacon of divine love, ethical living, and social transformation. While he was politically respected, his true eminence lay in his position as a spiritual leader among the

*Sharanas*—a diverse community of saintly devotees. Each of these *Sharanas* manifested a unique spiritual personality. Allama Prabhu was an ascetic philosopher, whose radical insights challenged orthodox thinking. Channabasavanna, Basavanna's nephew, embodied sharp intellect and theological depth. Siddarama emphasized the *karma marga*, or path of righteous action. Meanwhile, Madivala Machayya, Akkamahadevi, and others contributed their own distinct dimensions to the collective spiritual ethos of the movement. Amidst them, Basavanna stood as the embodiment of Bhakti itself—an unending stream of pure devotion.

As Siddarama declared:

***“Basavanna is the rich harvest of  
Bhakti incarnate and joy incarnate.”***

— Siddarama in *Thipperudraswamy*, p. 12

Madivala Machayya poetically captures this essence in a symbolic vachana:

***Whichever way you look  
Behold the creeper Basavanna;  
You pick it up—and lo!  
A cluster, the Linga.  
Pick up the cluster—and ah!  
The juice of Bhakti overflows from it.***

This powerful image underscores how every fiber of Basavanna's being exuded the essence of devotion—he was not merely a preacher of Bhakti, but its personification.

### The Journey of Devotion through Vachanas

Basavanna's approximately more than 1,000 vachanas, composed in simple yet profound Kannada, serve as windows into his inner spiritual evolution—from moments of despair and self-doubt to the heights of divine realization and serenity. His vachanas document not only philosophical reflections but also intimate emotional struggles and unwavering surrender to Lord Kudala Sangama.

In the early stages of his journey, Basavanna's voice echoes the spiritual anguish and existential confusion of a seeker grappling with worldly entanglements:

***"Lord, this world  
has caught me in its snare;  
Save me, or save me, Lord!  
All worth is gone...  
Your mercy, Lord, your mercy!  
Kudalasangama"***

— (Thipperudraswamy, p. 13)

Such expressions reflect what mystics across traditions describe as the "Dark Night of the Soul"—a phase of deep inner struggle where the soul, although craving for union with the divine, feels utterly lost. This feeling intensifies in metaphors drawn from nature and daily life:

***"I am like a frog under the hood of a  
snake...  
My own mind obeys me not—  
It leaps like a monkey on a bough!"***  
(Thipperudraswamy, p. 14)

### From Despair to Divine Realization

Yet, Basavanna's journey does not remain stuck in despair. Through grace, meditation, and self-inquiry, he gradually moves toward clarity, surrender, and mystical union with the divine. As his faith ripens, his tone transforms:

***"This mortal world is but the Maker's  
mint;  
Those who earn merit here, earn also  
there."***

This realization is rooted in the idea that earthly conduct and divine fulfillment are interlinked, and ethical life is not separate from spiritual progress.

Later vachanas show him embracing complete self-surrender or *Sharanagati*:

***"My father thou, my mother too;  
Thou also all my kith and kin...  
Do with me as Thou please,  
O Kudala Sangama Lord."***

In a rare expression of total ego-effacement, he declares:

***"Thine are my weal and woe;  
My loss and gain are Thine;  
How can the creeper feel the weight  
Of its own fruit?"***

These vachanas represent a purified Bhakti, free from ritualism, caste, and dogma—a Bhakti rooted in humility, universal compassion, and personal accountability.

### Faith in Divine Will and Mystical Union

Basavanna also proclaims the omnipotence of God's grace, revealing a deep trust in the Divine Will:



*“If it’s thy will, O Lord,  
A log may sprout;  
A barren cow may give milk;  
Poison turns to nectar.”*

Such verses reflect a mystic’s quiet confidence in the unseen workings of divine power—an acceptance that transcends logic and sees *leela* (divine play) in everything. This marks Basavanna’s entry into the final stages of spiritual realization, where the individual ego merges with the divine, and worldly concerns no longer disturb the equanimity of the soul. Basavanna’s Bhakti was not passive or escapist, but revolutionary and transformative. It not only awakened the individual soul but reshaped society, tearing down barriers of caste, gender, and ritual authority. His Vachanas remain one of the most powerful bodies of Bhakti literature, comparable to the devotional works of the Tamil Alvars, Marathi saints, and Sufi mystics. He was a Bhakti-Bhandari in the truest sense: the protector and distributor of divine love, whose words continue to illuminate paths for seekers across centuries.

### Conclusion

Basavanna was not just a mystic or poet, but a **visionary social architect**. His reform movement was rooted in **compassion, reason, and ethical living**, which sought to **create a just and inclusive society** long before ideas of democracy and equality became mainstream. His teachings continue to resonate in modern India, inspiring

movements for social justice, Dalit empowerment, women’s rights, and spiritual integrity. In a deeply hierarchical society, Basavanna’s message was radical: “All human beings are equal before Shiva.” He laid the foundation for a religion of equality, a society of justice, and a literature of liberation.

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