

BASAVA-

A SOCIAL REFORMER OF UNIVERSAL

SIGNIFICANCE

By

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Basava's is a many-splendoured personality. In him met, mingled and merged many facets of faith, reason and action to produce 'a wonder of creation' as aptly described by Prof. K.S. Srikantan.

Scholars have categorized the various roles of Basava as those of a prophet and path-finder, ~~wise~~ Savant and Seer, religious leader and social reformer, rebel and free thinker, mystic and man of action, liberator of the down-trodden and emancipator of women, liquidator of untouchability and harbinger of equality, messenger of the dignity of labour and the Messiah of the masses, herald of a new literary renaissance and leader of a great people's movement and so on and so forth. Basava is, in fact, all these and much more. One thing is, however, evident - the spirit of social reform and a burning desire to bring about a new social order based on individual freedom for self-fulfilment and collective good permeate all fields of his thought and action. Hence, many regard him as essentially a social reformer of universal significance and relevance for all times and ~~all~~ times.

Now, what sort of a society Basava had before him which he wanted to reform from within according to his vision and heart's desire instead of denouncing it from without? Surely, it was Hindu society shorn of all its former greatness and glory. It had lost the lustre of the Upanishadic age; it had lost the vigour and vitality of the epic age; it had lost the pomp, power and pelf of the imperial age; it was

reeling under the blows of two rebel faiths - ^dBudhism and Jainism; it was tottering under the destabilising impact of external invasions and interval convulsions and resultant political instability; it was falling apart due to the loss of its centre of gravity; it was groping in the dark owing to the emergence of heterogenous cults and creeds - some crude, some grotesque and some sensible; it had not yet found the final answer to the old agonizing question - "Kasmai Devaya Havēisha Vidhema?" and was ^{desperately} clutching at every idol, image or symbol which passed for a new God or Goddess - in addition to the three and thirty crore Gods and Goddesses of mythology; it had reached the stage of emotional chaos, intellectual stagnation and spiritual starvation; it was riven by deadening differences in social status based on caste, class, birth, sex, avocation, language etc; and it was mostly steeped in ignorance, penury, misery, squalor, superstition, fatalism, blind beliefs and meaningless rites and customs !

Someone has compared such societies to Egyptian Pyramids turned upside down ! The base is so slender and the superstructure it has to support is so staggeringly stupendous in such a hierarchial society that sometimes the mere breath of a new awakening appears enough to blow it off its track ! Luckily, efforts to broaden its base are made in time by those who are gifted with the vision to see the impending danger and Basava did this ~~same~~ ^{same} work in the twelfth century and saved Hindu society from a possible collapse.

Before attempting to assess the significance of

Basava's work as a social reformer, let us see how a hierarchical society functions. In such a society all thinking is done by the privileged classes and the vast majority of the unprivileged masses has to accept unthinkingly, unquestioningly and unreservedly the outcome of their thinking although it is invariably coloured by their vested interests and selfish motives. What else can these dumb millions do? Everything is in favour of the exploiting classes. Deprived of all access to knowledge, power and opportunities for self-development and advancement, they must accept the overlordship of the formidable alliance between the priest and the prince at the top and the supremacy of the money-spinner in the middle of the hierarchy and suffer silently - deriving solace from the benumbing belief that they deserved this suffering as a punishment for their sinful acts in their previous births! What a solace!

If we analyse this social spectrum more critically, we will not fail to find that the privileged classes have many potent and powerful weapons in their armoury which they use to perpetuate their overlordship and likewise, the underdogs have many make-believe contrivances in their repository which they use in order to forget their endless misery. The former have the scriptures, sacred laws, mythologies, books of sacraments, sacrifices and rituals, concepts of Karma, hell and heaven, sacred space and sacred time, the caste-system and the system of prayers and promises, offerings and rewards etc., to hold the mass mind under thralldom and to lure the masses into the belief that their salvation lies in servitude alone! As against this, the toiling millions sans opportunity have their local deities, mythologies, legends, myths, systems of magic and

and superstition, animal sacrifices, wakes, vigils, fairs, festivals and folk arts to drown their worries in the waters of their own unmitigated misery!

The net result of this net-work of enslavement and exploitation of the many by the few is the deplorable degradation of the human spirit and the lamentable extinction of initiative and drive in the vast majority since all powers of decision-making and decision taking are concentrated in the hands of an utter minority! How sad it is to contemplate that for thousands of years the huge reservoir of the latent powers and faculties in these fallen and forsaken millions had remained untapped and unharnessed! What a loss to humanity and human destiny!

Faced with this sorrowful spectacle, Basava decided to dedicate his life - not for the furtherance of the status quo, but for evolving a better, juster, saner and more humane social order to ensure a fuller and more meaningful life to the individual. Though born in a privileged ruling Brahmin family, he refused to join hands with prestige and privileges and prerogatives and decided to oppose the injustices, inequities and inequalities perpetrated by the establishment in the name of God, religion and righteousness. He quits his family while he was not even in his teens and went in search of 'fresh woods and pastures new.' He probably mastered all available scriptures and other texts and was disappointed to find that his mind was still restless. It had not found that enlightenment which would enable him to evolve his new social order. His penetrating study of the society around him convinced him that neither ~~his~~^{by} aligning himself with the arrogance of

him the 'holier-than-thou' attitude of those at the top and the abject and unthinking attitude at the bottom were both repulsive.

He, therefore, decided to launch a movement with the twin objectives of purging the privileged classes of their greed, insolence of birth and other vices, and to cleanse the mass mind from its superstitions and blind beliefs. It was a simultaneous assault on the citadels of status queoism and parasitism on the one hand and on the centres of stagnation and ignorance on the other. Herein lies the universal significance of the social reformation movement led by Basava. Fortunately for humanity, he refused to adopt the line of least resistance, shunned the methods of cheap popularity and preferred to fight on two fronts despite the odds against him.

The Odds were really awesome. This is not the place to narrate them in detail. Suffice it to say that any one with a weaker will would have called off the movement in the teeth of mounting opposition from the orthodoxy. But Basava was built differently and was made of sterner stuff. He decided to continue the great movement - come what may. Says h²:

"Whatever tomorrow hath in store
Fore me, let come today;
And let today's share come at once!
Here is no coward heart! "

A brave heart - Basava - braved all dangers in his mighty struggle for putting his basic beliefs into practice. His basic beliefs are -

- 1) The living should take precedence over the non-living;
- 2) Among the living beings, primacy of man is undeniable;

social obligations;

- 4) Equality of opportunity should be ensured for all - whether a prince or a peasant, man or woman, legitimate issue or illegitimate offspring, high-born or low-born.
- 5) Inequalities, distinctions, differences and discrimination based on birth, avocation, sex, caste or creed should be abolished completely.
- 6) Bhakti and morality should become the law of life and the foundation of all social relationships;
- 7) A self-reliant and self-sufficient economy should be the aim and object of all economic endeavour;
- 8) All work is sacred; every avocation is honourable;
- 9) Total involvement in the life here is more important than the yearning for the hereafter;
- 10) The individual's social awareness and sympathy should be as extensive as society itself;

The relevant vachanas in support of the above

beliefs and articles of faith are as follows :-

- 1) "The non-living perishes,
But not the living, Lord of the
meeting rivers!"

" The root in the mouth of the tree;
Pour water there at the bottom
And look, it sprouts green at the top.
The Lord's mouth is his moving men, feed them.
The Lord will give you all.
You'll go to hell, if, knowing they are the Lord,
You treat them as mere men."
- 2) " Thy ~~mit~~ illusion surrounds the world.
But my mind surrounds ~~These~~!"

" Should I say that the sea is great?
The earth holds it!
Should I say that the earth is great?
The jewel in the snake-God's hood holds that!

Should I say the snake-God is great?
He is contained in the signet-ring
on the small finger of Parvati !

Is then Parvati great ?

She is Parameshwara's better-half !

Is this Parameshwara great, then ?
He's contained within the point of points
of our Kudala Sanga's Saranas' minds !

- 3) " Gradually I make myself
Reputed as a devotee;
Gradually I make myself
Reputed as a worthy man;
By clearing hurdles gradually I make myself
Reputed as a man at one with Thee!"
- 4) " The Vedas quaked, the Sastras stepped aside;
Logic, ~~unable~~ to infer, fell dumb;
The Agamas, swerving, stood ~~unmoved~~ apart -
Because our Lord ate at Channayya's house!"
- " Man, O man, you who committed the sin,
Man, O man, you who slew the saint,
Do say ~~that~~ once, 'I bow' !
All sinning flees away!"
- 5) Unless the flow of blood appear,
There is no harbourage
Wherein the embryo may dwell.

The function of the seed is ever the same.
Greed, lust, anger and joy -
All other passions are the same.

Whatever you read or hear, what doth it avail?
What is the rule to judge a caste?

" The embryo needs the seven elements;
It is the same birth out of the same womb;
Same the alliance of self and soul;

What, then, is the usefulness of caste?"
You are a blacksmith if you heat;
A washerman if you beat;
A weaver, if you lay the warp;
A Brahmin, if you read the Books !

Is anybody in the world
Delivered through the ear?

Therefore, O Lord, the well-born is the man
who knows the nature of Divinity !

- 6) He is a devotee who greets with folded hands
Each devotee he meets;
Your gentle speech is worth
All counting of beads;

Your gentle speech is worth
All penances;

True modesty is worth
Sadasiva's grace;
Lord Kudala Sangama spurns those
who'er not like this."

" Thou shalt not steal nor kill;
Nor speak a lie;
Be angry with no one;
Nor scorn another man;
Nor glory in thyself, nor others hold to blame;
This is your outward purity;
This is your inward purity;
This is the way to win our Lord."

7) "If rising at dawn and rubbing my eyes
I worry for my belly, for my goods,
For my wife and children,
Let my head pay for it !

I am prepared to go into the lowest Paraih's house
And will do the lowest service well
for Thy sake !"

" I practice husbandry
To be able to worship Guru;
I follow trade
So that I may perform service to Linga:

I am another's drudge
So that I may save for the Jangama"

8) " If I ask a devotee coming to my door -
'What avocation do you follow,
let my head pay for it."

9) " This world is God's mint;
He is minting mankind on this earth;
He who is accepted as genuine on this earth
is accepted there also.
He who is not accepted here is not
accepted there also, Lord Sangama."

10) Can there be a Dharma without compassion?
Compassion there must be towards all beings
in the world."

Guided by these great and golden basic beliefs,
Basava reformed, reorganized and restructured the Hindu
society around him and lo, the miracle of miracles
happened : out of the ignored, suppressed, oppressed,