

SOCIAL REFORMS AND THE VISION OF EQUALITY IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF BASAVESHWARA

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
<p>Article History: Received: 20th February 2026 Accepted: 01st March 2026 Published: 07th March 2026</p> <p>Keywords: Basaveshwara, Kayaka, Vachana, Literature, Anubhav mantap, Kaykave Kailas</p>	<p>This research undertakes a critical and analytical study of the social reformist and egalitarian philosophy of Basaveshwara, a 12th-century socio-religious thinker and founder of the Sharana movement in Karnataka. Emerging in a socio-political context characterized by rigid caste hierarchy, ritual orthodoxy, and gender discrimination, Basaveshwara articulated a radical vision of spiritual democracy grounded in equality, dignity of labor, and social sharing.</p> <p>The study highlights the philosophical foundations of his thought as expressed in the Vachana literature, focusing on his rejection of caste stratification, opposition to ritual mediation, and advocacy of direct personal spirituality through the concept of Ishtalinga. Particular attention is given to the principles of Kayaka (work as worship) and Dasoha (ethical redistribution), which are analyzed as normative socio-economic doctrines that challenge exploitative structures. The research further evaluates the role of women and marginalized communities within the Sharana movement, arguing that Basaveshwara's inclusivism reflects an early model of participatory spiritual democracy institutionalized through the Anubhava Mantapa.</p> <p>This paper examines Basaveshwara's ideas on caste reform, dignity of labor, economic redistribution, gender equality, and democratic spiritual practice. It argues that his thought represents one of the earliest systematic critiques of social inequality in medieval Indian history.</p>

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INTRODUCTION:

Lord Shiva has been worshipped in India since ancient times. Nandi is the mount and disciple of Lord Shiva. In agricultural India, it is natural that the bull (Vrishabha) should be the focus of the farmers' faith. The practice of worshipping the bull in the form of Nandi has also been in India since ancient times. But in India, not only showing mercy to living beings, but also seeing them as God is an integral part of daily conduct. Mahatma Basaveshwara, who created harmony in society 900 years ago, was considered to be an incarnation of Nandi. Basava is the Kannada form of the Sanskrit word "Vrishabha".

This land of India produced great philosophers like Vyasa, Kapil, Kanada, Gautama, Charvaka, Mahavira and Buddha. Society flourished and later declined. Meaningless idols took over. The practices that held society back like touchability and untouchability were abolished. Unfortunately, all this started under the guise of religion. At that time, Basaveshwara emerged. Basaveshwara (other names: Basava, Basavanna, Kannada: Basaveshwara) (1105 – 1165 CE) was a saint and social reformer from Karnataka. He fought against the caste system and other harmful practices in Hinduism. He advocated a formless, formless monotheistic faith.

Basaveshwara was born in the 10th century in the village of Ingaleshwar-Bagewadi in Bijapur district of Karnataka in 1105 CE into a prominent Veerashaiva family. According to some, he may have been born in the village of Ingaleshwar (Bijapur district). Although there is disagreement about the date of his birth, it is generally believed that he was born on Akshaya Tritiya in Vaishakh. His father Maniraj alias Bhadras was the Bhandarpramukh of the Bagewadi Agar. His wife Madulamba (Madamba) was a great devotee of Shiva. Basaveshwara's brother's name was Devraj and his sister's name was Nagamma. Basaveshwara opposed the rituals of Karma. When he was ready for the munj at the age of eight, he refused to take the munj, saying, "I have already received the lingadiksha" and left home and went to Kudalsangam (Bijapur district). Kudalsangam, at the confluence of the Krishna and Malaprabha rivers, was a major learning center. Basaveshwara lived there for twelve years. At Kudalsangam, he studied different languages, religions, philosophy, etc. He was married to his maternal uncle's daughter. Then he came to Mangalvedha in Solapur. He stayed there for thirty-one years. The 12th century in India was characterized by rigid caste hierarchies, ritual orthodoxy, and widespread gender inequality. Within this socio-religious climate emerged Basaveshwara (Basavanna), a philosopher, statesman, and reformer from present-day Karnataka. Serving as a minister under King Bijjala of the Kalachuri dynasty, Basaveshwara initiated a powerful social and spiritual movement that challenged entrenched systems of inequality. His teachings, preserved in Kannada prose-poems known as 'Vachanas', articulated a radical vision of social justice grounded in spiritual egalitarianism.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES:

- To evaluate his views on gender equality, including the role of women saints in the Sharana movement.
- To study the concept of "Kayaka" (dignity of labor) and "Dasoha" (sharing/redistribution) as socio-economic principles of justice.
- To examine the institutional significance of Anubhava Mantapa as an early democratic spiritual forum.
- To assess the contemporary relevance of Basaveshwara's egalitarian ideas in relation to modern discourses on social justice, secularism, and human rights.

RESEARCH METHOD:

Historical, descriptive and analytical method has been used in the research study. It is based on secondary sources. This includes books, articles, published and unpublished magazines and research papers. By employing historical, hermeneutical, and comparative methodologies, the research situates Basaveshwara's egalitarianism within broader discourses on social justice and democratic ethics. It contends that his philosophy represents not merely devotional reform but a systematic socio-ethical framework with enduring relevance to contemporary issues of caste discrimination, gender inequality, and economic injustice.

Philosophical Foundations of Equality:

Basaveshwara's philosophy rested upon the principle that all human beings are equal before God. He rejected Brahmanical claims of spiritual superiority based on birth and instead emphasized devotion

(bhakti) and ethical conduct as the true markers of worth.¹

In his Vachanas, Basaveshwara consistently criticized ritualism, temple-centered worship, and priestly mediation. He proposed direct devotion to Shiva through the personal 'Ishtalinga, thereby democratizing spiritual access.² This theological shift had profound social implications: if divine grace was available to all, then caste hierarchy lost its spiritual justification.

Rejection of the Caste System:

Basaveshwara openly condemned caste discrimination and untouchability. He admitted individuals from all backgrounds into his spiritual community, including artisans, laborers, and marginalized groups.³

The most dramatic challenge to caste orthodoxy occurred when an inter-caste marriage was performed among members of his movement, provoking severe backlash from conservative elites.⁴ This event illustrates the practical dimension of Basaveshwara's reforms; equality was not merely theoretical but actively implemented.

Kayakave Kailas: Dignity of Labor:

A cornerstone of Basaveshwara's thought is the doctrine of 'Kayakave Kailas' (work as worship). He insisted that every individual must engage in honest labor and that no occupation is inherently superior or inferior.⁵

This principle directly undermined hereditary occupational divisions prescribed by caste ideology. By sanctifying labor, Basaveshwara elevated manual and artisanal work to spiritual significance, thereby redefining social dignity.

Dasoha: Economic Redistribution And Social Welfare:

Basaveshwara's ideology (Dasoh) shows that he was a socialist and egalitarian, as he proposed the idea of distributing wealth according to need along with the dignity of labor. In the Dasoh theory, he proposed the concept of using the money we earn not only for our own needs but also for the benefit of society. Complementing Kayaka was Dasoha, the ethical obligation to share surplus wealth with the community.⁶ Wealth, in Basaveshwara's view, was not for personal accumulation but for collective well-being.

Dasoha anticipated modern principles of social welfare and distributive justice. It fostered a community structure based on mutual responsibility and economic equality.

Anubhava Mantapa: Establishment of the Indian Spiritual Democratic Parliament:

Basaveshwara established the 'Anubhava Mantapa', an open forum for spiritual dialogue and ethical debate. Often described as a "spiritual parliament," it welcomed participants from diverse castes and genders.⁷

Among its prominent members was Akka Mahadevi, whose participation symbolized the movement's progressive stance on women's spiritual agency.

Basavanna established the 'Anubhav Mantapa' at Mangalvedha also. In this Anubhav Mantapa, people of all religions used to come together and discuss how to overcome social problems. Basavanna created a new system that opposed the customs and bad customs of the society and implemented the beneficial things of the society. (Mahatma Basaveshwara is known as the ideal administrator of the 12th century and the pioneer of equality. It is evident from the scriptures that Mahatma Basaveshwara first started the democratic value through the Anubhav Mantapa in the 12th century. Overall, he has given detailed explanations in his scriptures on equality, value, justice, brotherhood, unity as well as freedom, rights, control and discipline, good governance and administration. If these ideas are adopted in the current state of governance and administration, the problems of inequality, violence, discrimination and caste politics etc. arising in the country will definitely be curbed. As a result, good governance and administration system will be created.

Basavanna knew that the unity of this society means the unity of the spiritual powers here.

He established the organization "Anubhav Mandap" to achieve the unity of spirituality in India.

No one was banned from joining this organization. Women could also become members of the organization. There was no discrimination against caste. Every person should get an equal opportunity to live a religious life. In that religious life, there should be no discrimination on the basis of birth, caste, profession, gender.⁸

The Mantapa embodied deliberative equality centuries before the emergence of modern democratic institutions.

Women's Empowerment:

Basaveshwara's teachings encouraged various professions, especially village industries, and created equality among all professionals. During Basaveshwara's time, women were considered Shudras, outcasts in the social system. Women were being treated unfairly, so he did a lot of work for women. He gave women the right to freedom of speech. He gave them religious and spiritual rights. He freed women from the idea of impurity and from Panchasutaka..

Empowerment of women, gave religious and spiritual freedom to women. It removed social restrictions (idea of impurity) on them and gave them equal rights, which gave women a place of respect in society. Basaveshwara's movement granted women unprecedented visibility in religious discourse. Female saints composed 'Vachanas' and engaged in philosophical debates alongside men.⁹

By rejecting ritual purity taboos and affirming women's spiritual autonomy, Basaveshwara challenged deeply rooted patriarchal norms. His recognition of women as equal seekers of truth marked a significant departure from dominant medieval practices.¹⁰

Ethical Humanism and Social Vision

Basaveshwara's thought may be described as ethical humanism grounded in devotion. He combined spirituality with social responsibility, insisting that devotion without ethical conduct is meaningless.¹¹

His critique of hierarchy, emphasis on labor dignity, and advocacy of communal sharing collectively formed a coherent social philosophy. These ideas resonate with modern democratic values such as equality, justice, and fraternity.

CONCLUSION

In short, Mahatma Basaveshwara laid the foundation of a modern and socialist social structure by proclaiming the superiority of karma, the results of which are still visible in Indian society today.

Mahatma Basaveshwara changed the minds of the greedy people. He explained to them the importance of hard work. Kayakakwe Kailash, work is God. Basaveshwara stands as a pioneering advocate of social equality in Indian intellectual history. Through the principles of Kayaka and Dasoha, the establishment of the Anubhava Mantapa, and his unwavering opposition to caste and gender discrimination, he articulated a transformative vision of society.

Though centuries have passed, Basaveshwara's philosophy continues to inspire movements for social justice and human dignity. His integration of spirituality with equality represents a unique and enduring contribution to global ethical thought.

Many Shivsharans, that is Shaiva saints, followed Basavanna. These verses were propagated among the people. Through the verses, various aspects of society were highlighted. It was told how society should be structured morally and religiously. Basaveshwara gave the society principles that would guide everyone to live an honest and spiritual life while earning their living.

Basaveshwara's verses are still remembered by the people in the villages of Karnataka and South Maharashtra.

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