

SOCIAL REFORM, EQUALITY, AND SPIRITUAL DEMOCRACY IN THE THOUGHT OF BASAVA: AN INDIAN-CENTRIC CRITICAL ANALYSIS

¹Mr. Kiran Shahaji Varhade, ²Dr. Dattatray G. Magar

¹Research Scholar

²Research Guide

Shankarrao Mohite Mahavidyalaya, Akluj

Article Info	ABSTRACT
Article History: Received: 20th February 2026 Accepted: 01st March 2026 Published: 07th March 2026 Keywords: Basava, Basaveshvara, Lingayat movement, social equality, Bhakti movement, caste reform, Kayaka, Dasoha, Anubhava Mantapa, medieval Deccan.	Basava (1105–1196), also known as Basavanna or Basaveshvara, stands among the most transformative social reformers in medieval India. As a philosopher-statesman in the Kalachuri court of Kalyana and the central figure of the Lingayat movement, he articulated a radical vision of social equality grounded in devotion to Shiva, ethical labour, and community sharing. This paper critically examines Basava's thought as an indigenous Indian response to entrenched caste hierarchy, ritual orthodoxy, and gender exclusion in the twelfth-century Deccan. Using textual analysis of Vachana literature, historical records, and modern scholarship, the study explores Basava's doctrines of Kayaka, Dasoha, Anubhava Mantapa and rejection of caste and priestly mediation. The findings demonstrate that Basava's movement constituted not merely a religious reform but a comprehensive socio-ethical revolution rooted in Indian philosophical traditions while anticipating modern democratic ideals. The paper argues that Basava's thought represents one of the earliest indigenous models of egalitarian social order in South Asia.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Twelfth-century India witnessed significant socio-religious ferment, particularly in the Deccan region. Amid rigid caste stratification, Brahmanical ritual dominance, and patriarchal norms, Basava emerged as a visionary reformer who sought to reconfigure both religion and society. Serving as chief minister (Mahamantri) to King Bijjala II of the Kalachuri dynasty at Kalyani (present-day Basavakalyan in Karnataka), Basava used his political position to foster a new spiritual community based on equality, ethical conduct, and devotion to Shiva. Unlike earlier reform traditions that primarily addressed spiritual concerns, Basava's movement directly confronted social injustice. His teachings, preserved in Kannada poetic aphorisms known as Vachanas, rejected caste hierarchy, ritualism, temple-based priesthood, and gender discrimination. Instead, he proposed a direct, personal relationship with the divine through the wearing of the Ishtalinga, symbolizing spiritual autonomy.

The Lingayat movement that arose under his leadership was not merely devotional but deeply socio-political. It created new institutions, most notably the Anubhava Mantapa often described as the world's first spiritual parliament where individuals from all castes, occupations, and genders participated in philosophical dialogue. This paper examines Basava's thought as an indigenous model of social reform emerging from Indian philosophical traditions rather than Western liberal frameworks. It argues that Basava's vision represents a uniquely Indian articulation of equality grounded in ethical spirituality.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly engagement with Basava spans hagiographical narratives, philological studies of Vachanas, and socio-historical analyses of the Lingayat movement.

Early colonial scholars tended to interpret Basava primarily as a religious sect founder. However, modern historians and sociologists emphasize the movement's social radicalism. Scholars such as M. M. Kalburgi, A. K. Ramanujan, and R. Blake Michael highlight the anti-caste ethos and vernacular intellectual tradition of the Vachanas.

Ramanujan (1973) characterizes the Vachanas as "speaking poems" that democratized spirituality by using everyday language rather than Sanskrit. This linguistic choice itself constituted a social intervention, bringing philosophical discourse into the domain of ordinary people. Sociologists view the Lingayat movement as a challenge to Brahmanical hegemony. Michael (1992) argues that Basava's rejection of hereditary status and ritual authority undermined the ideological foundations of caste society. The principle of Kayaka elevated manual labour to sacred duty, thereby subverting notions of ritual purity.

Gender historians have emphasized Basava's support for women's participation in spiritual life. Women saints such as Akka Mahadevi and Neelambike played central roles in the movement, producing influential Vachanas that challenged patriarchal norms.

Recent scholarship situates Basava within the broader Bhakti movement while noting his distinctive institutional innovations. Unlike many Bhakti traditions that remained devotional communities, Basava's movement attempted to create an alternative social order.

Despite this extensive scholarship, there remains a need for a comprehensive Indian-centric analysis that foregrounds indigenous philosophical concepts rather than interpreting Basava solely through modern Western categories such as "revolution," "protest," or "reform." This study seeks to address that gap.

3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To analyse Basava's teachings on social equality within the context of twelfth-century Indian society.
2. To examine the philosophical foundations of Kayaka, Dasoha, and Anubhava Mantapa.
3. To evaluate Basava's challenge to caste hierarchy, ritual orthodoxy, and gender discrimination.
4. To assess the relevance of Basava's thought for contemporary debates on social justice in India.

4. METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative, interpretative approach grounded in historical and textual analysis.

4.1 Primary Sources

1. Vachana literature attributed to Basava and other Sharanas
2. Lingayat hagiographical texts such as Basava Purana
3. Epigraphic and historical records from the Kalachuri period

4.2 Secondary Sources

1. Scholarly monographs on medieval Deccan history
2. Sociological studies of the Lingayat community
3. Comparative analyses of Bhakti traditions

5. DISCUSSION: ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS**5.1 Rejection of Caste Hierarchy**

The rejection of caste hierarchy constitutes the central pillar of Basava's socio-religious philosophy and marks one of the most radical egalitarian interventions in medieval Indian history. In twelfth-century Deccan society, caste was not merely a social classification but the organizing principle of political power, economic opportunity, ritual status, and everyday interaction. Birth determined occupation, social mobility was virtually non-existent, and notions of purity and pollution governed access to education, temples, water sources, and even public space. Against this deeply entrenched structure, Basava articulated a vision of spiritual and social equality that undermined the very foundations of caste ideology.¹ Basava's critique of caste was rooted not in abstract political theory but in a devotional understanding of the divine. As a devotee of Shiva, he asserted that all human beings are equal before God because the divine resides within each individual. The wearing of the Ishtalinga symbolized this radical idea: every person, regardless of birth, could directly access the sacred without priestly mediation.² This portable emblem of divinity effectively desacralized hereditary privilege and democratized religious experience. In Basava's framework, spiritual worth derived from devotion and ethical conduct rather than lineage.

The Vachanas attributed to Basava repeatedly attack the assumption that ritual purity or social status confers moral superiority. He dismissed caste distinctions as human constructs that obscure the unity of existence. For Basava, the true division in society was not between high and low castes but between those who lived ethically and those who did not. Thus, a person of humble origin engaged in honest labour could be spiritually superior to a ritual specialist who exploited religion for social dominance. This inversion of values destabilized the hierarchical worldview of Brahmanical orthodoxy. Institutionally, Basava operationalized his anti-caste philosophy by creating an inclusive community of Sharanas. Membership in this community was open to individuals from all social backgrounds, including artisans, agricultural workers, merchants, and those considered "untouchable" within the prevailing system. Historical accounts describe cobblers, washermen, weavers, and even former outcasts participating as respected members of the movement.³ Such integration was unprecedented in a society governed by strict rules of commensality and social segregation.

One of the most remarkable aspects of this inclusivity was the equal recognition of occupational diversity. Rather than abolishing work itself, Basava reinterpreted labour through the doctrine of Kayaka, which held that all honest work is sacred. This principle directly challenged caste-based occupational hierarchy, wherein manual labour was stigmatized while ritual functions were privileged. By sanctifying labour, Basava restored dignity to professions historically deemed inferior and thereby attacked the economic basis of caste stratification. The rejection of caste hierarchy also manifested in social practices that violated orthodox norms. Communal dining, inter-caste interaction, and marriage across caste boundaries became possible within the Sharana community. The most famous historical episode associated with the movement the inter-caste marriage that provoked severe backlash from conservative forces ultimately contributed to the political suppression of the movement at Kalyana.⁴ This reaction demonstrates how profoundly Basava's ideas threatened the existing order.

Basava's opposition to caste was not merely social but epistemological. By promoting spiritual discourse in the vernacular Kannada language rather than Sanskrit, he dismantled the monopoly of the learned elite over religious knowledge. The Vachanas employ simple, direct language drawn from everyday life, making philosophical reflection accessible to ordinary people. This linguistic democratization paralleled the social democratization of the movement, reinforcing the idea that wisdom is not confined to

hereditary scholars. The Anubhava Mantapa, often described as a deliberative spiritual assembly, further embodied the rejection of hierarchical distinctions. Participants were recognized as authorities based on personal experience of the divine rather than birth or institutional position. In this forum, individuals from diverse backgrounds engaged in dialogue as equals, producing a collective body of spiritual literature.⁵ Such a space challenged not only caste hierarchy but also authoritarian modes of knowledge production.

Basava's critique of caste must also be understood within the broader context of the Bhakti movement, which emphasized personal devotion over ritual formalism. However, his approach was distinctive in its systematic attempt to reorganize society along egalitarian lines. Whereas some Bhakti saints challenged caste primarily through devotional poetry, Basava sought to create concrete social institutions that embodied equality. His movement thus combined spiritual reform with socio-economic transformation. Despite its radicalism, Basava's rejection of caste was not framed as an assault on Indian tradition itself. Rather, it drew upon indigenous ethical concepts such as compassion, non-violence, and the unity of all beings. By grounding his critique in familiar cultural and religious idioms, he made his message both accessible and authoritative. This strategy allowed the movement to attract widespread support while maintaining a distinct identity.

The long-term impact of Basava's anti-caste philosophy is evident in the continued prominence of the Lingayat community and its emphasis on social equality. Although historical developments led to varying degrees of institutionalization and stratification over time, the foundational ideals of equality and dignity remain central to Lingayat identity. Basava's teachings have also inspired modern social reformers and movements advocating justice and inclusivity in India.⁶ Basava's rejection of caste hierarchy represents one of the earliest and most comprehensive critiques of social inequality in Indian history. By redefining spiritual authority, sanctifying labour, democratizing knowledge, and fostering inclusive institutions, he offered a holistic alternative to a stratified society. His vision demonstrates that profound social transformation can emerge from within indigenous philosophical traditions, guided by ethical spirituality rather than coercive power. In an era still grappling with issues of inequality and discrimination, Basava's message of universal human dignity retains enduring relevance.

5.2 Kayaka: Dignity of Labour

The concept of Kayaka, meaning dignified and devoted labour, occupies a foundational position in the socio-spiritual philosophy of Basava (1105–1196), the pioneering reformer of the Lingayat movement in twelfth-century Karnataka. In a society rigidly structured by caste hierarchy and occupational stratification, Basava's doctrine of Kayaka represented a profound revaluation of work, human worth, and spiritual practice. By asserting that all honest labour is sacred, he not only challenged prevailing notions of ritual purity but also articulated an ethical vision that integrated economic activity with spiritual fulfillment and social equality.⁷ Medieval Indian society was deeply shaped by the hereditary occupational system associated with caste. Certain forms of labour, particularly manual or artisanal work, were stigmatized as impure and assigned to lower castes, while ritualistic and scholarly functions were monopolized by upper castes and accorded higher status. This division created a hierarchy in which dignity was linked not to the quality of work but to birth. Basava decisively rejected this structure by redefining labour itself as a path to divine realization.

For Basava, Kayaka was not merely an economic necessity but a spiritual discipline. Every individual, regardless of social origin, was expected to engage in productive work suited to their abilities. Work performed honestly and selflessly became an offering to Shiva. In this framework, the distinction between sacred and secular collapsed: daily occupation itself became worship. Such an understanding subverted ritual-centered religiosity that privileged temple ceremonies, priestly mediation, and ascetic withdrawal from worldly life.⁸ The Vachanas of Basava and other Sharanas repeatedly emphasize that devotion without labour is incomplete. Idle religiosity especially when sustained by exploitation of others was sharply criticized. Basava himself, though a high-ranking minister in the Kalachuri court, is portrayed in tradition as living simply and valuing honest earning. This example reinforced the idea that social status should not exempt one from productive contribution to society.

Kayaka also functioned as an instrument of social equality. By sanctifying all forms of honest work, Basava undermined the caste-based hierarchy of occupations. Professions traditionally considered low

such as leather work, weaving, agriculture, or manual service were elevated to the same spiritual level as scholarly or administrative roles. Members of the Sharana community included individuals from diverse occupational backgrounds, each respected for their devotion rather than judged by their profession. In this way, Kayaka attacked the economic foundations of caste discrimination.⁹ Closely linked to Kayaka was the principle of Dasoha, the ethical sharing of surplus earnings with the community. Basava envisioned a moral economy in which individuals worked diligently not for personal accumulation but for collective welfare. Wealth earned through Kayaka was to be used responsibly, ensuring that no member of the community suffered deprivation. This integration of production and redistribution fostered social cohesion and mutual responsibility, contrasting sharply with systems that concentrated wealth and privilege.

The philosophical depth of Kayaka lies in its affirmation of human agency and responsibility. Rather than advocating renunciation of the world, Basava emphasized active participation in social life. Work became a means of self-realization, discipline, and service. This orientation reflects broader Indian ethical traditions that value duty performed with sincerity, yet Basava's formulation was distinctive in its explicit rejection of hierarchical distinctions. Kayaka also had profound psychological implications. By recognizing the intrinsic worth of labour, it restored self-respect to individuals marginalized by social prejudice. Those engaged in manual or service occupations could view their work not as a mark of inferiority but as a sacred vocation. This transformation of consciousness was crucial for building an egalitarian community, as dignity arises not only from external recognition but also from internal acceptance.¹⁰

Furthermore, Kayaka discouraged parasitism and exploitation. Basava condemned those who lived off others' labour while claiming religious superiority. True spirituality, in his view, required ethical engagement with the material world, not withdrawal from it. This stance challenged both ritual elites dependent on offerings and ascetic traditions that rejected productive work.¹¹ The institutional life of the Lingayat movement reflected these ideals. Members were expected to sustain themselves through honest occupation and contribute to communal welfare. The Anubhava Mantapa, the movement's deliberative assembly, included participants from varied professional backgrounds, symbolizing the unity of labour and spirituality. Knowledge and authority were not monopolized by a single class but emerged from collective experience. In the broader context of Indian intellectual history, Kayaka can be seen as a precursor to later movements emphasizing the dignity of labour and ethical work. Yet Basava's articulation remains unique in its integration of economic ethics with devotional spirituality. Kayaka did not advocate uniformity of occupation or abolition of work differentiation; rather, it affirmed diversity while denying hierarchical valuation. Each individual's work, when performed with sincerity and devotion, possessed equal spiritual merit.¹²

The enduring relevance of Kayaka lies in its holistic vision of human flourishing. It recognizes that material production, ethical conduct, and spiritual aspiration are interconnected aspects of life. By dignifying labour, Basava offered a framework for social organization based on contribution rather than privilege. In contemporary societies grappling with inequality, unemployment, and alienation from work, this perspective continues to hold profound significance. Kayaka represents one of Basava's most transformative contributions to Indian thought. By redefining labour as sacred duty and spiritual practice, he dismantled entrenched hierarchies and empowered marginalized communities. The doctrine fostered economic self-sufficiency, social equality, and moral responsibility, forming the foundation of the Lingayat movement's egalitarian ethos. Far from being a mere theological concept, Kayaka was a practical philosophy aimed at creating a just and humane society grounded in dignity, devotion, and shared prosperity.

5.3 Dasoha: Ethical Redistribution

The principle of Dasoha, or ethical redistribution of wealth and resources, constitutes one of the most distinctive and transformative elements of Basava's socio-spiritual philosophy. Emerging in the twelfth-century Deccan within the broader Lingayat movement, Dasoha complemented the doctrine of Kayaka by defining how the fruits of labour should be used. While Kayaka emphasized honest earning through productive work, Dasoha prescribed the moral obligation to share surplus wealth for the welfare of the community. Together, these principles formed an integrated vision of an egalitarian social order grounded in devotion, ethical conduct, and mutual responsibility. In medieval Indian society, wealth and

resources were unevenly distributed along lines of caste, political power, and land ownership. Economic inequality reinforced social hierarchy, enabling privileged groups to maintain dominance over marginalized communities. Charity, when practiced, often functioned as a means of religious merit or social prestige rather than structural reform. Basava's concept of Dasoha fundamentally reoriented this dynamic by framing sharing not as optional benevolence but as a sacred duty arising from devotion to Shiva.¹³

At its core, Dasoha rests on the belief that material resources ultimately belong to the divine and are entrusted to individuals for responsible use. Wealth earned through Kayaka was not to be hoarded for personal gratification but circulated to sustain the community, particularly those in need. This idea challenged both feudal accumulation and ritualized gift-giving that reinforced hierarchical relationships between donor and recipient. In Basava's vision, sharing was an act of solidarity rather than patronage.¹⁴

The ethical logic of Dasoha also addressed the moral dangers of wealth concentration. Excessive accumulation was viewed as spiritually corrosive, fostering greed, pride, and social division. By encouraging redistribution, Basava sought to prevent the emergence of economic inequalities that could undermine the egalitarian ethos of the Sharana community. The emphasis was not on enforced collectivism but on voluntary, devotion-inspired generosity rooted in self-restraint and compassion.

Dasoha functioned practically through communal practices such as shared meals, support for travelers and the poor, and assistance to fellow devotees. These practices dissolved barriers of caste and status by bringing individuals together in acts of mutual care. Communal dining, in particular, held symbolic significance in a society where notions of purity restricted inter-caste interaction. By eating together, participants affirmed their equality and collective identity.¹⁵ Importantly, Dasoha was inseparable from Kayaka. Basava did not endorse passive dependence or indiscriminate charity; every capable individual was expected to contribute through labour. Redistribution applied primarily to surplus generated after meeting one's basic needs. This balance ensured both self-reliance and social responsibility, preventing exploitation in either direction. The ethical economy envisioned by Basava thus combined productivity with compassion.¹⁶

The spiritual dimension of Dasoha is evident in the Vachana literature, which frequently portrays sharing as an offering to God present in all beings. Service to others became a form of worship, dissolving the distinction between devotion and social action. This orientation transformed everyday acts of generosity into expressions of divine love, reinforcing the movement's emphasis on experiential spirituality rather than ritual formalism. Dasoha also challenged existing structures of religious authority. In temple-centered systems, offerings were often mediated by priests and institutional hierarchies. Basava's movement redirected this flow toward the living community of devotees, thereby decentralizing both economic and spiritual power. The sacred was no longer confined to temples but manifested in human relationships grounded in care and reciprocity.¹⁷

From a sociological perspective, Dasoha can be interpreted as an early model of a moral economy a system in which economic practices are governed by ethical norms rather than purely by market forces or coercive authority. It promoted social cohesion by ensuring that material resources circulated within the community, reducing vulnerability and fostering trust. Such a framework was particularly significant in a period marked by political instability and social stratification. The inclusivity of Dasoha extended beyond caste boundaries to encompass gender and occupational diversity. Women and individuals from marginalized backgrounds participated actively in communal life, both as contributors and beneficiaries. This participation reinforced the movement's broader commitment to equality and challenged the patriarchal control of resources prevalent in medieval society.¹⁸ Dasoha reflects a distinctive Indian conception of renunciation within engagement rather than withdrawal. Instead of abandoning the material world, Basava advocated responsible stewardship of resources while remaining active in social life. This approach resonates with broader ethical traditions that value detachment from possession rather than from action, yet Basava's formulation was uniquely oriented toward social transformation. The historical significance of Dasoha lies in its attempt to institutionalize compassion as a social principle. By linking economic behavior to spiritual accountability, Basava created a framework in which justice emerged from internalized values rather than external enforcement. Although the movement faced opposition and eventual suppression in its original political context, its ideals continued to influence the Lingayat community and later reform movements emphasizing social welfare and equality.

In contemporary terms, Dasoha offers a compelling alternative to both unrestrained capitalism and coercive redistribution. It emphasizes voluntary sharing grounded in ethical consciousness, recognizing that sustainable equality requires transformation of attitudes as much as structures. In societies marked by widening economic disparities, this principle retains profound relevance as a guide to humane and inclusive development. Dasoha represents a cornerstone of Basava's vision of a just society. By mandating the ethical redistribution of surplus wealth, it complemented the dignity of labour embodied in Kayaka and helped construct a community based on mutual care, equality, and spiritual unity. Far from being merely an act of charity, Dasoha was a transformative social ethic aimed at dissolving hierarchy and fostering collective well-being. As part of Basava's broader philosophy, it demonstrates how deeply rooted indigenous traditions can generate sophisticated models of social justice that continue to resonate across centuries.

5.4 Anubhava Mantapa: Spiritual Democracy

The Anubhava Mantapa stands as one of the most remarkable institutional innovations associated with Basava (1105–1196) and the Lingayat movement of twelfth-century Karnataka. Often described as the world's first spiritual parliament or academy of experiential wisdom, it functioned as a deliberative assembly where seekers from diverse social backgrounds gathered to discuss spiritual, ethical, and social questions. In an age dominated by hereditary privilege, scriptural authority, and rigid caste hierarchy, the Anubhava Mantapa embodied a radically inclusive vision of community grounded in equality, dialogue, and lived experience. It represents a unique model of what may be termed "spiritual democracy" within the Indian intellectual tradition. Medieval Indian society was structured around hierarchical institutions in which knowledge and authority were concentrated in the hands of Brahmanical elites. Access to sacred learning was restricted by caste and gender, and philosophical discourse largely occurred within scholastic circles using Sanskrit, a language inaccessible to most people. Basava's movement challenged this monopoly by creating a public space where spiritual insight derived from personal experience rather than birth or textual mastery determined authority. The very name "Anubhava Mantapa" literally, the hall of experience underscores this epistemological shift.¹⁹

Situated in Kalyana (present-day Basavakalyan), the capital of the Kalachuri ruler Bijjala II, the Mantapa brought together a diverse community of Sharanas (devotees). Participants included artisans, farmers, traders, women, ascetics, and individuals from communities considered untouchable under orthodox norms. Figures such as Allama Prabhu, Akka Mahadevi, Channabasavanna, and numerous others contributed to the discussions and composed Vachanas articulating their spiritual insights. The assembly thus functioned not merely as a religious gathering but as a vibrant intellectual forum.²⁰ A defining feature of the Anubhava Mantapa was its rejection of hierarchical authority. Unlike traditional councils governed by seniority or scriptural expertise, leadership within the Mantapa was based on recognized spiritual attainment. Allama Prabhu is often regarded as its presiding figure, yet his authority stemmed from ascetic wisdom rather than institutional power. Basava himself, despite his political position as chief minister, participated as one among equals. This ethos of equality fostered open dialogue and mutual respect, enabling participants to challenge prevailing norms without fear of repression within the community.

The Mantapa also served as a site for the articulation of the movement's core doctrines, including Kayaka, Dasoha and the rejection of caste hierarchy. Through collective deliberation, these principles were refined and disseminated, demonstrating the role of dialogue in shaping social reform. The emphasis on experiential knowledge meant that philosophical reflection was grounded in everyday life rather than abstract speculation.²¹ Language played a crucial role in this democratization. Discussions and poetic compositions occurred in Kannada, the vernacular of the region, rather than Sanskrit. This linguistic choice made participation accessible to ordinary people and contributed to the development of a rich body of vernacular literature. The Vachanas produced in this context are characterized by directness, emotional intensity, and ethical clarity, reflecting the lived realities of their authors.

Gender inclusivity within the Anubhava Mantapa was particularly noteworthy. Women saints such as Akka Mahadevi participated as respected voices, expressing profound spiritual insights and challenging patriarchal constraints. In a society where women's access to education and public discourse was severely limited, this participation represented a significant departure from prevailing norms. The recognition of women as spiritual authorities reinforced the movement's commitment to equality.²² The concept of

spiritual democracy embodied in the Mantapa did not imply the absence of discipline or shared values. Participants were united by devotion to Shiva and adherence to ethical principles, which provided a framework for constructive dialogue. However, within this framework, dissent and diversity of perspectives were not only tolerated but encouraged. This openness distinguished the Mantapa from dogmatic institutions that enforced conformity.²³

From a sociopolitical perspective, the Anubhava Mantapa can be seen as an experiment in participatory community governance. By enabling individuals from marginalized backgrounds to voice their concerns and insights, it challenged the exclusionary structures of medieval society. The collective nature of decision-making also strengthened solidarity among members, facilitating coordinated action in pursuit of social reform. The historical impact of the Mantapa was profound but also contentious. Its egalitarian practices provoked opposition from conservative forces who viewed the movement as a threat to established order. The famous episode of an inter-caste marriage within the Sharana community led to severe backlash and political repression, ultimately dispersing the assembly. Nevertheless, the ideals it represented continued to influence the Lingayat tradition and inspired later movements advocating equality and social justice.²⁴ The Anubhava Mantapa reflects a distinctive Indian approach to knowledge grounded in direct realization rather than purely textual authority. While Indian traditions have long valued experiential insight, Basava institutionalized this principle within a collective framework. The Mantapa thus bridged the gap between personal spirituality and communal life, demonstrating that enlightenment need not be pursued in isolation.²⁵

In modern terms, the Mantapa's emphasis on dialogue, inclusivity, and shared responsibility resonates with democratic ideals. However, it differs from secular political democracy in that its foundation was spiritual rather than legal or institutional. Authority derived from moral and experiential authenticity, not electoral mandate or bureaucratic position. This synthesis of spirituality and egalitarianism offers a compelling alternative model of community organization. The Anubhava Mantapa represents one of Basava's most enduring contributions to Indian social thought. By creating an inclusive forum grounded in experiential wisdom, he challenged entrenched hierarchies of caste, gender, and knowledge. The Mantapa exemplified a form of spiritual democracy in which every individual, regardless of background, could participate in the search for truth and justice. Its legacy continues to inspire discussions on participatory dialogue, social equality, and the transformative potential of community rooted in ethical spirituality.

5.5 Gender Equality

Gender equality constitutes one of the most progressive and transformative dimensions of Basava's socio-religious philosophy. In the rigidly patriarchal context of twelfth-century Indian society, women's roles were largely confined to domestic life, and their participation in education, religious discourse, and public decision-making was severely restricted. Customs such as child marriage, denial of property rights, limited access to learning, and strict codes governing female conduct reinforced male dominance. Against this backdrop, Basava's movement articulated a vision of spiritual and social equality that recognized women as autonomous individuals capable of profound religious experience and intellectual contribution.²⁶ Basava's commitment to gender equality derived from his fundamental belief that the divine resides equally in all human beings. If spiritual realization depends on devotion and ethical living rather than birth or social status, then distinctions based on gender lose their theological justification. In the Lingayat framework, the wearing of the Ishtalinga symbolized a direct relationship between the individual and Shiva, independent of priestly mediation or gendered restrictions. Women, like men, could worship directly, interpret spiritual truth, and participate fully in communal life.

The most compelling evidence of this egalitarian ethos is the prominent role played by women saints within the Sharana movement. Figures such as Akka Mahadevi, Neelambike, Gangambike, and many others composed Vachanas that remain central to Lingayat literature. These women were not passive followers but authoritative voices articulating independent spiritual insights. Their poetry addresses themes of devotion, detachment, social critique, and personal autonomy, demonstrating intellectual depth and emotional intensity equal to that of their male counterparts.²⁷ Akka Mahadevi, perhaps the most renowned among them, exemplifies the movement's challenge to patriarchal norms. Rejecting conventional expectations of marriage and modesty, she pursued a life of spiritual devotion, asserting her identity as the bride of the divine rather than of any earthly man. Her Vachanas express a powerful critique of worldly

attachments and social constraints, emphasizing inner freedom over external conformity. The acceptance of such a figure within the community indicates the extent to which Basava's movement transcended traditional gender roles.

Participation of women in the Anubhava Mantapa further illustrates this commitment to equality. Women engaged in philosophical discussions alongside men, contributing to debates on ethical conduct, spirituality, and social reform. In a period when public discourse was overwhelmingly male-dominated, this inclusion represented a radical departure from established norms. Authority within the Mantapa was based on spiritual experience rather than gender, allowing women to be recognized as teachers and guides.²⁸ Basava's approach also redefined the social status of women within family and community structures. By emphasizing ethical conduct and devotion as the basis of worth, he undermined the notion that women were inherently subordinate or dependent. Marriage was not presented as the sole or ultimate destiny of women; instead, spiritual fulfillment and personal integrity were portrayed as universal goals. This perspective expanded the horizons of female identity beyond domestic roles.²⁹ Importantly, the movement's egalitarian ethos extended to women from diverse social backgrounds, not only those of elite status. Women engaged in various occupations participated as Sharanas, reinforcing the principle that dignity derives from Kayaka honest labour rather than social position. This inclusivity challenged both gender and caste hierarchies simultaneously, creating a more holistic framework for equality.³⁰

The rejection of ritual purity norms also had implications for women's status. In orthodox practice, women were often excluded from certain religious activities due to beliefs about impurity associated with biological processes. Basava's emphasis on personal devotion and the portable Ishtalinga rendered such restrictions irrelevant. Spiritual practice became accessible at all times and in all circumstances, affirming the inherent sanctity of the individual body. However, Basava's advocacy of gender equality did not imply the erasure of social roles or responsibilities. Rather, it emphasized mutual respect and ethical partnership. The ideal community envisioned by the Lingayat movement was one in which men and women cooperated in spiritual pursuit and social welfare, guided by shared values rather than hierarchical authority. From a broader historical perspective, Basava's recognition of women as independent spiritual agents anticipates later reform movements that sought to expand female education and rights. Yet his approach differed from modern secular feminism in that it was rooted in devotional spirituality rather than political ideology. Equality emerged as a natural consequence of theological principles affirming the unity of all souls.³¹

The enduring influence of these ideas is evident in the Lingayat tradition's continued emphasis on women's participation in religious and social life. Although historical developments have sometimes reintroduced elements of hierarchy, the foundational teachings remain a source of inspiration for movements advocating gender justice in contemporary India. Basava's commitment to gender equality represents a remarkable intervention in a deeply patriarchal society. By affirming women's capacity for spiritual realization, intellectual engagement, and social leadership, he challenged entrenched assumptions about female inferiority. The active participation of women saints, the inclusive practices of the Sharana community, and the rejection of ritual restrictions together constitute a comprehensive vision of equality grounded in ethical spirituality. Basava's legacy demonstrates that transformative ideas about gender justice can emerge from within indigenous cultural traditions, offering enduring guidance for the pursuit of a more inclusive and humane society.

5.6 Opposition to Ritualism and Priesthood

The opposition to ritualism and hereditary priesthood constitutes one of the most radical and defining aspects of Basava's socio-religious philosophy. In twelfth-century Indian society, religious life was deeply intertwined with elaborate rituals, temple-centered worship, and the authority of Brahmanical priests who mediated between the devotee and the divine. Access to spiritual merit was believed to depend on the correct performance of ceremonies, recitation of Sanskrit mantras, and adherence to complex rules of purity and pollution. These practices reinforced social hierarchy, as ritual expertise was monopolized by particular castes, while the majority of the population remained dependent and excluded. Against this entrenched system, Basava articulated a powerful critique that sought to restore direct, personal, and egalitarian spirituality.³² Basava's rejection of ritualism was rooted in his understanding of devotion (bhakti) as an inner experience rather than an external performance. He argued that genuine spiritual realization arises from sincerity, ethical conduct, and remembrance of the divine, not from mechanical

observance of ceremonies. Rituals, when performed without understanding or compassion, were seen as empty gestures that distracted from the true purpose of religion. In his Vachanas, Basava frequently denounces those who display outward piety while engaging in unethical behaviour, emphasizing that moral integrity is the true measure of devotion.

Central to this critique was the belief that God resides within the individual rather than exclusively in temples or sacred objects. The Lingayat practice of wearing the Ishtalinga a personal emblem of Shiva carried on the body symbolized this theological shift. By enabling devotees to worship at any time and place, the Ishtalinga eliminated the need for temple mediation and priestly supervision. Spiritual authority was thus relocated from institutional structures to the conscience of the individual.³³

The rejection of temple-centered ritual had significant social implications. Temples in medieval India were not only religious sites but also centers of economic and political power, controlling land, wealth, and patronage networks. Priests and temple officials often exercised considerable influence over community life. By encouraging personal worship independent of temple institutions, Basava's movement weakened these structures of authority and redistributed religious agency to ordinary people. Equally important was Basava's opposition to the hereditary priesthood. In the orthodox system, priests claimed exclusive rights to interpret scriptures and perform rituals, reinforcing their superior social status. Basava challenged this monopoly by asserting that spiritual knowledge is accessible to all who cultivate devotion and ethical awareness. The Vachanas composed by Sharanas from diverse backgrounds demonstrate that profound theological insight could emerge outside traditional scholastic circles.³⁴

Language played a crucial role in this democratization. By promoting spiritual discourse in Kannada rather than Sanskrit, Basava dismantled the linguistic barrier that had long separated the learned elite from the masses. This shift enabled ordinary people to engage directly with religious ideas without dependence on intermediaries. The resulting vernacular literature not only enriched regional culture but also served as a vehicle for social reform.³⁵ Basava's critique of ritualism also addressed its economic dimension. Elaborate ceremonies often required costly offerings, making religious participation financially burdensome for the poor. By emphasizing simple devotion and ethical living, he made spirituality accessible regardless of economic status. This approach aligned with the movement's broader commitment to equality and dignity for all individuals. However, Basava did not advocate the complete abandonment of symbolic practices. Rather, he sought to redefine their meaning. The Ishtalinga itself functioned as a symbol, but one that emphasized personal responsibility rather than institutional control. Worship became an intimate act of reflection and gratitude rather than a public display of ritual correctness. This transformation preserved the emotional and cultural significance of religious expression while removing hierarchical barriers.³⁶

The opposition to ritualism also intersected with Basava's emphasis on social ethics. He argued that service to humanity, honest labour, and compassion constitute the highest forms of worship. Feeding the hungry, assisting the needy, and living truthfully were considered more valuable than elaborate sacrifices or pilgrimages. In this sense, religion was redirected from ceremonial observance to moral action.³⁷ From a historical perspective, Basava's stance can be seen as part of the broader Bhakti movement's challenge to ritual orthodoxy across India. Yet his approach was distinctive in its systematic effort to build alternative institutions, such as the Sharana community and the Anubhava Mantapa, that embodied these principles. By combining spiritual critique with social organization, he sought not merely to reform religious practice but to transform society itself. The reaction from conservative forces was intense, as these ideas threatened entrenched privileges. The erosion of priestly authority and temple dominance undermined both economic interests and ideological control. The eventual suppression of the movement at Kalyana reflects the perceived danger posed by its egalitarian message.³⁸

In philosophical terms, Basava's opposition to ritualism highlights the tension between form and essence in religious life. While rituals can serve as expressions of collective identity and continuity, they may also ossify into instruments of exclusion and control. Basava's emphasis on inner devotion sought to recover the transformative core of spirituality, ensuring that religious practice remained aligned with ethical values.³⁹ In contemporary contexts, his critique retains considerable relevance. Debates over the role of ritual, institutional authority, and personal faith continue to shape religious communities worldwide. Basava's teachings suggest that authentic spirituality must balance tradition with compassion

and inclusivity, avoiding both rigid formalism and rootless individualism. Basava's opposition to ritualism and hereditary priesthood represents a profound reorientation of religious life in medieval India. By emphasizing direct devotion, ethical conduct, and personal responsibility, he dismantled hierarchical structures that restricted spiritual access. The promotion of vernacular discourse, personal symbols of worship, and community-centered practices created a more inclusive and humane framework for religious expression. Basava's legacy demonstrates that meaningful reform can emerge from within tradition, guided by a commitment to equality, sincerity, and social justice.

6. CONCLUSION

The socio-religious philosophy of Basava (1105–1196) represents one of the most profound and comprehensive movements for social transformation in medieval India. Emerging in the twelfth-century Deccan, his ideas challenged deeply entrenched structures of caste hierarchy, gender inequality, ritual orthodoxy, economic exploitation, and intellectual exclusivity. Through a synthesis of spiritual devotion and ethical activism, Basava articulated an indigenous model of social reform grounded in equality, dignity, and collective responsibility. Central to his vision was the affirmation of the intrinsic worth of every human being. By rejecting caste distinctions and hereditary privilege, Basava undermined the ideological foundations of social stratification. His doctrine of Kayaka elevated honest labour to the status of sacred duty, restoring dignity to occupations marginalized by the caste system. Complementing this was the principle of Dasoha, which mandated the ethical redistribution of surplus wealth, fostering a moral economy based on compassion and mutual support rather than accumulation and dominance.

Equally transformative was the establishment of the Anubhava Mantapa, an inclusive forum that embodied spiritual democracy. Here, individuals from diverse backgrounds including women and those from socially oppressed communities participated as equals in philosophical dialogue. This institution not only democratized knowledge but also demonstrated that collective deliberation could serve as a powerful instrument of social change. Basava's advocacy of gender equality further distinguished his movement. By recognizing women as autonomous spiritual agents and encouraging their participation in public discourse, he challenged patriarchal norms that had long constrained female agency. The contributions of women saints within the Sharana community stand as enduring testimony to this inclusive ethos.

His opposition to ritualism and hereditary priesthood completed this transformative framework. By emphasizing direct devotion to the divine through the personal Ishtalinga, Basava decentralized religious authority and made spiritual practice accessible to all, irrespective of caste, gender, or economic status. Religion was redefined not as ceremonial observance but as ethical living rooted in sincerity, compassion, and service. Taken together, these principles constituted not merely a religious reform but a comprehensive reimagining of society. Basava's movement sought to create a community in which spiritual fulfillment and social justice were inseparable. Although historical circumstances limited the immediate political success of this experiment, its intellectual and moral legacy has endured for centuries, shaping the identity of the Lingayat community and inspiring later movements for equality and reform.

In contemporary India, where issues of social inequality, economic disparity, and gender justice remain pressing, Basava's teachings continue to offer valuable guidance. His philosophy demonstrates that transformative change can emerge from within indigenous cultural and religious traditions, guided by ethical spirituality rather than external coercion. By integrating devotion with social responsibility, he provided a model of human flourishing that transcends temporal boundaries. Ultimately, Basava's vision affirms that a just society cannot be built solely through institutional reform; it requires a transformation of consciousness grounded in respect for human dignity and interconnectedness. His legacy endures as a powerful reminder that spirituality, when aligned with compassion and equality, can become a catalyst for profound social renewal.

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