

REIMAGINING WOMANHOOD: MAHATMA BASAVESHWARA'S VISION OF GENDER EQUALITY

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
Article History: Received: 20th February 2026 Accepted: 01st March 2026 Published: 07th March 2026 Keywords: <i>Basaveshwara; vachanas; emancipation of women; gender equality; AnubhavaMantapa; Bhakti reform, etc.</i>	This research study seeks to examine the ideas held by Mahatma Basaveshwara concerning women which is expressed in his vachanas and the broader reformist praxis of 12th century Karnataka. With women as reliant and ritual other beings in a highly patriarchal social structure, Basaveshwara redefined them as entirely human beings, spiritually qualified and social beings, in a righteous community. The same ethic that he has criticized scriptural prescriptions which forbade women worship, learning and public functions accompanies a positive one, which requires men to train their own gaze and behavior and perceive every woman (except his wife) as mother or sister. The vachanas and historical narratives that have been explored in the paper are thematic and strongly close reading of womanhood with respect to spiritual equality, moral responsibility, labour and participation in institutions through the AnubhavaMantapa. It claims that Basaveshwara views of gender are ahead of the time on a modern interpretation of the rights of women and at the same time it is based on bhakti-based spirituality, and that it still presents a powerful contribution to the current arguments about gender justice in India.

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INTRODUCTION

The saint-poet, philosopher and social reformer of Kalyana in the 12th century known as Mahatma Basaveshwara (*Basavanna*) is mostly remembered because of his uncompromising critique of caste hierarchy and ritualism and his contribution to the formation of the Lingayat movement. Less often foregrounded, but no less important is his contribution to the sphere of gender. In a society where women were regarded as slaves and chattels, who had no independent ritual agency and their gender roles were restricted to domestic and reproductive ones, the demand by Basaveshwara to honour, dignity and equality was revolutionary to say the least. This study explores the thoughts of Mahatma Basaveshwara about women in two respects. First, it re-creates his gender vision by a thematic analysis of the selected vachanas and stories by taking into consideration the subject of spiritual equality, moral responsibility and the role of women in the life of the community. Second, it contextualizes these ideas in terms of their socio-historical background and cogitates about their relevance to the current discussion of women rights and social justice in India. In the methodological section, the paper precedes the close reading of the vachanas and the reformist practices that Basaveshwara was thought to have developed by citing the scholarly interpretations that were made of the vachanas in the contemporary world to understand how the latter questioned the existing gender hierarchies and created space to enable women to act.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS:

Social and Scriptural Context of Women Subordination:

By the medieval period, and more precisely, post-Vedic Brahmanical society had progressed to such a state that women were under life-long male protection and were denied many ritual and educational rights. There are various prescriptive verses used to support this order, which include that a woman is safeguarded by father during childhood, husband during youth and sons during old age, and has no right to pray, observe penances, go on pilgrimage, recite Vedic mantras or worship deities.

This model was very effective to deprive women of autonomous spiritual subjectivity. It also justified such social aspects like child marriage, harsh limitations on widows, and the status of women as property in patriarchal families. The very hagiography of Basaveshwara contains a scene in which he declines the upanayaka ritual due to his sister being refused the ritual, indicating at a very young age that he rejects the gendered exclusionary rituals.

Spiritual Equality and Woman Humanisation:

One of the most important lines of thought of Basaveshwara is the insistence as to the complete equality of all men in the presence of God, irrespective of caste, class or gender. Within his scheme of a Lingayat society, every follower bears the personal *ishtalinga*, worships without mediation of priests and is evaluated by the bhakti and ethical conduct and not by birth. This has certain implications to women. In allowing them to approach linga-worship directly, Basaveshwara is renouncing the concepts of ritual pollution of female bodies. When a woman is capable of working with *linga* and worshipping on the same level as a man, then her physiology could not be a hindrance to spiritual achievements.

Furthermore, the point on *kayaka* (dignified labour) as well as *dasohabhava* (service-based sharing) as the key worship forms are applicable to both women and men. Women work, be it their weaving, spinning, farming or housework can be sold as *kayaka* and therefore become spiritual. This subverts the sacred/profane activities that traditionally put women in the underdog situation by classifying them as simply doing the household chores. According to commentators, Basaveshwara brought an era of honour, economic and social equality of women, who were challenged to emerge out of family shackles and contribute to religious and social activities. The direction of his thinking therefore transcends his abstract assertions of spiritual equality to visualize structural reforms in the social location of women.

Replacing Moral Responsibility: The Gaze and the Code of Conduct:

It is also important how Basaveshwara handles the issue of sexuality and interpersonal ethics. In several of his vachanas, he denounces the yearning to acquire the wife of another man as a great sin and states that a person must consider all the women, other than his/her wife, as a mother or sister. On the one hand, this code of morality can seem conservative: mother and sister metaphors leave the women in the

position of relationships, and do not necessarily envision them as subjects outside the family arrangement. But when we consider it in the context of a society where women were frequently suspected of tempting men and put under multiple control and seclusion, it is subversive on the part of Basaveshwara. Rather than police the bodies of women, or dress or movement, he puts the blame of morality squarely in the pool of male gaze and male desire. The moral responsibility lies on the gazing man, and not on the gazed woman. This reversal weakens a wide-spread victim-blaming logic and states an ethic in which men have to rein in on themselves instead of insisting that women retreat out of the social arena. His basic words on lust and exploitation can be therefore interpreted as an effort to save the dignity and safety of women in a man-dominated society. Summarising the views of one commentator, he was sickened by the criminal treatment of woman--the denial to accord her the status of a human being.

Anubhava Mantapa and Women Voices:

The institutional location of the ideas of equality that Basaveshwara had was Anubhava Mantapa which was sometimes called a type of spiritual parliament of *sharanas*. In this case, individuals of different caste, professions and sexes would get together to deliberate on moral and religious issues. There is historical and literary evidence that women were not peripheral spectators, but vocal members of this group. Research on the vachana literature has recognized close to thirty women poets- starting with Akka Mahadevi, Gangambike and Neelambike up to Bontha Devi and SuleSankavve whose works are a part of the movement. Their poetry stops not only on the devotional themes but also on the social traditions and expectations, corporal autonomy and gender roles. As an example, the choice of Akka Mahadevi not to marry but live the life of a wandering devout person, dressing in her long hair, confronts the Patriarchal conventions governing the bodies and feminine sexuality of women directly. The fact that Basaveshwara agrees to accept her as a *sharane* and give her a respect she deserves in her vachanas shows that he is receptive to the radical female agency. Equally, the vachanas of women such as Kadira Remavve or Sule Sankavve, who find metaphors in spinning or prostitution to express their devotional sentiments demonstrate that the movement did not keep women limited to sanitized, respectable idioms. Their presence indicates that Basaveshwara community believed in the experiential reality of the lives of women which could not be reflected in lady's manner. So, his ideas about women cannot be narrowed down to prescriptive verses; they existed as a practice of life in the institutions, which permitted women to think, speak and argue on a par. Their developed personalities and abilities in thinking and acting independently are the testaments of the enabling environment that was created with the help of him (as one scholar mentions).

Women, Economic participant Labour:

The concept of Basaveshwara that work is worship (*kayakavekailasa*) has far reaching consequence on the economic status of women. Sacralizing labour, denying parasitic dependence, and dignifying all honest occupations, he did not differentiate caste or gender.

The women of the *sharanacommunity* are depicted as having participated in various types of labour: agriculture, weaving, spinning, trade and service. Vachanas written by women tend to refer to instruments of their trade that spin wheel, grinding stone, rice baskets, as images of spiritual knowledge, and they are meant to state that their daily labor is part of their religious life and is not independent of it. The social vision as understood by contemporary theorists of Basaveshwara therefore extended to economic emancipation: he believed that women would be able to access education, economic opportunities and decision-making power equally and believed that the oppression of women was detrimental to the development and welfare of the whole society. He associates gender justice with the development of the human and the well-being of people in the present day. Tensions, Critical Appraisal and Limits.

There are also the boundaries and tensions in the ethics of the genders in Basaveshwara that should be identified in a historically sensitive analysis.

First, although he insists that women are equal spiritual agents and are worthy of honour, in his metaphors most of them remain in the frames of the family, namely mother, sister, wife. These are not emancipatory images, however, in a contemporary sense of acknowledging women as self-determining

subjects with independent wishes and life pursuits.

Second, the given textual and historical record is biased towards prominent women *sharanas* whose voices were recorded. The extent to which his egalitarian ideals changed the life of ordinary, in particular, lower-caste, women in practice is more difficult to evaluate. Just as in most reform movements, the discrepancy between the doctrine and the social reality might have existed.

Third, the institutionalization of the Lingayat tradition in the future did not necessarily maintain the radicalism of the moment of its establishment. The following centuries saw the revival of caste and gender hierarchies in action, even though the early *vachanas* was thrust in an egalitarian direction. This indicates that Basaveshwara did not have a gender vision that was above being coarse with time.

These restrictions do not in any way undermine his work but warn us that we should not be hagiographic about him. They encourage modern thinkers and professionals to use his thinking as a collection of resources to engage in a critical discussion, and not a flawless, ready-to-follow plan.

Contemporary Relevance:

The medieval origin of Basaveshwara notwithstanding, his thoughts about women are quite eloquent in the context of the modern issues. His emphasis on the fact that men need to train their gaze and lust but not to fault the bodies and dress of women is very timely in an environment where domestic violence against women and crimes conducted in the name of honour are notably disturbing. His moral dilemma criticizes the victim-blaming discourses and agrees with modern demands to emphasize the responsibility of the perpetrators.

His concept of the role of women in education and economic life as well as decision-making is reminiscent of modern demands of gender-inclusive policies and representation. To communities whose roots can be traced to Basaveshwara, putting his legacy into consideration would entail questioning and changing the practices that continue to marginalise women, be it within the religious institutions, family set up or within the communities at large. Lastly, his fusion of *bhakti*, social equality and gender justice provides an example which fills the perceived gap between the religious and secular perspectives of feminism. The basis of equality, which he bases on devotion and ethical self-development, offers the language and imagery to help believers become mobilized to more equitable gender relationships.

CONCLUSION:

The ideas of Mahatma Basaveshwara regarding women constitute an important, although, paradoxically, under-emphasized part of his greater work of creating a society of equal opportunities, without caste, or exploitation. In a backdrop of the scriptural and traditional norms that relegated women to non-humans, he gave women spiritual equality, confronted their non-participation in worship and education and institutionalized areas where women could speak, argue and lead. His *vachanas* redefine moral responsibility to defend the dignity of women whereby men are required to tame their eyes instead of asking women to leave public life. His progressive view on labour and communal sharing acknowledges the importance of economic contribution of women to the societal welfare and the religious practice. Simultaneously, the critical approach shows the historical constraints to his conceptual language and unequal execution of his ideals. To the modern thinkers and activists, the gender ethics provided by Basaveshwara are inspirational and challenging. They also challenge us to apply current practices, in religious communities, in educational practices and families, to the egalitarian criteria first proposed by him eight centuries ago. By doing this, they maintain hope that devotion and justice, faith and feminism, do not have to be enemies but can collaborate in order to liberate the females and change the society.

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