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Basaveshwara's Contribution to Casteless Society

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Abstract:

India is the only country in the world which is based on caste system. This system prevailing in India has not only divided the people of the country but also promoted inequality in the society. From the ancient Indian society till date, on the caste based society, lakhs of the Dalits are being ignored, insulted, boycotted and brutally attacked. Though born in India they are living like second grade citizens in their own country. Social reformer Basaveshwara, born in a Brahmin caste, opposed the "Hindu social order i.e. varnashram dharma". In those days he encouraged common dining and inter caste marriages to build the self respect of down trodden people and fought for the annihilation of the caste system. Being a Brahmin he worked for the downtrodden people which can be termed as an outstanding contribution for their upliftment of Dalits. To understand the content of his philosophical teachings, it is necessary to understand the Indian Society in the Historical Contest. Basaveshwara was a progressive philosopher born in medieval India. Through his teachings and writings, he tried to awaken the Indian Society. In this paper I would like to express my views on the works undertaken by Basaveshwara for the upliftment of Dalits.

Keywords: Dalits, Casteless society, Basaveshwara, varnashrama, Brahmin.

1. Introduction

In India there are a number of religions, dominated by Hinduism with many castes and sub castes. Every caste had its own culture and code of conduct. In Hinduism the Varnashrama prevailed on a hierarchical basis at its peak. In Varnashrama the Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras were in order [1]. Below these four varnas there were untouchables. These untouchables were not allowed into even mingle with the people belonged to other four castes. They were not permitted to enter into temples as such they had to worship lesser known gods and goddesses and demons and developed culture to sacrifice animals and blood. These sections were largely illiterate and education was not at their reach. They were not permitted to walk with foot ware on the main streets of the villages.

The untouchables were forced to live separately far away from villages and townships and even they were not allowed to draw drinking water from wells used by others. Severe punishments were given if they violated and were not permitted to draw water if violated the social order.

In India birth of a person decided the future of the person. If he was born in an upper caste, he enjoyed all the privileges even though he did not deserve them. A person born in the upper caste was alone permitted for higher education and learning and to hold high positions in the society. The Samskara i.e. Upanayana or Brahmopadeshm was only for the first three castes and not for the people born as Shudras. They were not allowed to learn the scriptures which were written in Sanskrit language which was known to a few people. They were deprived of learning the language also.

The shudras despite being majority of population were given the inferior status and were only made to work as labourers and engaged in works of lower cadre. Even the priests in the temples exploited them by taking money in the form of Dakshina to perform vratas and pujas while practicing to overcome the so called sins of the shudras [2]. People believed in superstitions and in the name of religion animal sacrifices were done meaninglessly and considered them as a part of the rituals.

They also believed in the Karma theory very strongly. It is said that if a man is suffering with poverty or in any other way it is all due to his past sins and misdeeds of previous birth and there was no other way than to face them in the present life. By improving his present life there was little scope to bring a change in life.

Basaveshwara was born in the year 1131 A.D. at Ingaleshwara, a village near Bagewadi, which is now in Bijapur District of Karnataka. His father, Madarsa, was a shavite Brahmin and was the leader of the Agrahara (village assigned to Brahmins for their maintenance). He and his wife Madalambike, were great devotees of Nandikeshwara idol at Bagewadi.

Basaveshwara was strongly differed with the caste and its hierarchy system. He worked for a casteless and classless society and believed in liberty, equality and fraternity. Irrespective of caste, creed, occupation, sex or wealth all were equal to him [3]. He struggled to eliminate the varnashrama and untouchability in the society.

Basaveshwara moved among all people and visited the places where the untouchables lived and even had meals with Shivanagamayya who was an untouchable and created sensation and tried to bring a revolutionary change the society.

However, the then society was not in a position to accept a castles system. The staunch believers and orthodox elders felt that the religion was in trouble and feared its danger [4].Kondey Manchanna and his associates, who were jealous of Basaveshwaras rise and his great achievements, seized this opportunity to muster orthodox and traditionalists to carry tales to Bijjala and to urge him to protect Dharma. Some people made all the possible allegations against Basveshwara and abused him of misusing the funds as a minister to feed many of sharanas to oppose the caste based system. Bijjala knew that his allegation was baseless. Nevertheless, after an investigation into this allegation, Basaveshwara was vindicated publicly.

When Basaveshwara got Kalyani daughter of Madhuvarasa a Brahmin by birth married to Haralayya an untouchable and cobbler, people from higher castes raised a crythat it was varanasankarana and also demanded an action to be taken on those responsible for such act and they said it was violation of Varnashrama Dharma[5]. This marriage was attended by other sharanas to bless the couple. The newly wedded couple later became the disciples of Basaveshwara.

When Bijjala protested and questioned the sanctity of the intercaste marriage, Basaveshwara said, both have become sharanas and there was no difference of caste between them and there should be no problem to any one particularly when there was union of hearts of those persons. Caste, Occupation of the individual cannot be a barrier for the marriage.He also advised Bijjala not to make such unreasonable protests in future.

As resentment came from people, the king Bijjala ignored the advice of Basaveshwara and ordered that Madhuvarasa and Haralayya be punished severely. Then the eyes of both were pulled out and they were dragged into the public and were tied to the legs an elephant until they died. Basaveshwara who was very sensitive by nature could not bear this shock and any kind of violence was against his principle. This kind of violence was beyond his sensitive mind to bear. He took the blame on himself for such cruel punishment given to those couple by the king and thought he cannot continue to stay in Kalyana and his mission ended there and left to Kudala Sangama with great sorrow in his heart, where he was nurtured at the formative state of life. He passed away in 1167 A.D.

The uniqueness of his reforms, consisted in their being many sided – religious social, ethical economic, literary and intellectual. Basaveshwara struggled hard to establish a casteless society which is universal in structure. He reformed Shaiva religion. Persons of any caste, social status, occupation, or sex, can join his reformed religion. The basic requirement for joining his religion was monotheism, i.e., belief in one Supreme God as distinguished from polytheism, i.e., worshipping many Gods and Goddesses. The next requirement was wearing ‘Linga’ called ‘Ishtalina’ on one’s body, and worshipping it daily [6]. Ishtalinga is received from the hands of the ‘Guru’ with “Mantropadesha”. Basaveshwara, believes that the human body itself is the abode of God and one can mediate on God in this mind.

Basaveshwara worshipped Isthalinga directly without the mediation of priests. . He said that there is also no need to go on pilgrimage and reformed the way worship to be done and eliminated exploitation by priests. He emphasized on Bhakti (Devotion).For worship of God, Ones feelings and emotion are more important than the form of Madras or their language. Basaveshwara did not believe in “Yaga”, “Yagnya”, “Homa” and said they have no place in his reformed religion.

World is real and not illusion as per Basaveshwara. He says one should not run away from life and should live a responsible life. One should not have a cynical or sickly attitude to life.He says attainment of Moksha is only possible on earth with the co operation of the body and the very essence of his religion is “Live well here to the satisfaction of Shiva and be accepted in the other world”. His religion did not recommend asceticism that is renunciation of this world. Activism is the breath of Basaveshwaras philosophy that is, dedicated hard work to make ones like happy and to make this world prosperous.

Basaveshwara’s was a dedication to the cause of upliftment of the common man. He brought material and spiritual worlds together. He showed a new shape of religion to masses a new look on life. He preached to the toiling masses in their own language. His teachings had great mass appeal and they could understand and follow him [7].He taught that a common man must be relieved from the binding trammels of tradition and give him a hope of a better life.

He was a great champion of the poor, the down trodden and the untouchables and was a great social reformer. He declared that humans are born equal and social inequality based on caste or creed was an unjust imposition [8,9].He fought against the hierarchical Varnashrama and untouchability and demanded respect for all occupations and professions. Basaveswara propagated the ideals of equality and social justice. He resented exploitation of one section by other. He had visualized an egalitarian Society with complete liberty to people from their social & religious bondages [10]. He strived the need to have education among the masses which alone empowers the oppressed to realize their freedom. He lamented the patterns of domination under the guise of caste system.

2. Conclusion

All this was the fact of the 12th century in India. Nothing changed even in 21th century. During the British Rule which was for about 200 years in our country, there was no change in the social or political, cultural or economical conditions. However, there was a democratic awakening of the depressed classes. They became conscious about their basic rights which were a part of general national democratic awakening during the British Rule. After Basveshwara a number of social reformers like Jyothi Rao Phule, Dr.B.R. Ambedkar has worked very hard for the upliftment of the downtrodden. Dr. Ambedkar particularly struggled against the untouchability, social inequality, social and religious evils and malpractices in the country. Despite his great efforts to reform the society, these burning problems still exist even in the contemporary society.

In our society, hatred, anger, domination, jealousy, discrimination, exploitation, injustice has affected the progress of the downtrodden and poor for ages. It will be the social responsibility of every civilized citizen irrespective caste, creed and religion to reform the society. This will create an environment for an equal, casteless and unbiased society with freedom and social justice.

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