

Historicizing the *Virasaiva/Lingayat* Tradition

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Abstract

This essay focuses on the pre-modern and colonial narratives of the 12th century tradition of Virasaivism that developed around present-day Karnataka. This tradition, understood as founded by Basava, is popularly perceived to be progressive and egalitarian, in the context of its challenges to Brahmanical norms and rituals. However, one needs to engage in a careful study of the pre-modern texts around Virasaivism to develop a better sense of the complexities and contradictions involved in understanding the tradition today. This paper addresses some of the preconceived ideas about the tradition by closely reading a few pre-modern Kannada texts, and also looks at the colonial motives behind the translation of these texts to English. Ultimately the idea is to locate the historicity of Virasaivism through a study of diverse narratives and thus, understand its changing contexts through time.

Introduction

Virasaivas are the members of the radical saiva sect of the 12th Century. As the name ‘Virasaiva’ suggests, they are the ‘heroes of shiva’ which implies their impassioned sentiment towards the God. In the present Karnataka, Virasaivas comprises somewhere between 10 to 15 million people. The community has a significant political voice in the state. Their beliefs and rituals are distinct from that of the brahmanical beliefs like they worship *linga*, and bury the dead instead of cremating them. However, the focus of the essay is on pre-modern and colonial narratives of Virasaivism in order to understand how they have arrived at this point. I intend to reflect on the complexities involved in understanding the various narratives on Virasaivism. In today’s context, Basava has been looked at as a founder of Virasaivism, and this 12th Century tradition is understood as progressive and egalitarian. However, one needs to carefully study the pre-modern texts to get a sense of some of the contradictions involved in using the modern terms to define the tradition. The sectarian conflicts projected in these texts need to be examined. This paper questions some of the pre-concieved ideas about the tradition by closely reading pre-modern texts on Virasaiva tradition, and also looks at

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certain colonial motives behind the translation of these texts on Virasaivism. My aim is to historicize the Virasaiva tradition and understand its changing contexts.

The enormous popularity of Basava, the 12th Century saint, among the people of present Karnataka, calls for an in-depth study for the strident anti-caste stance taken in the *vachanas* written by Basava and other saints in the 12th Century. These *vachanas* condemn brahminical rituals and signify egalitarianism by the fusing of the voices of people coming from different caste groups. The connection between Basava and a radical Saiva sect called *Virasaivism*, nevertheless, has to be examined in order to better understand the sequence of events in the 12th Century A.D. A further verification is needed to find out whether *Virasaivism* was unique in coming out with strikingly different religious thought. As mentioned in the pre-modern texts like *Basavapuramam*, it is a fact that there was a constant tension between the *Jainas* and the *Virasaivas* during the twelfth century, which continued throughout the 12th Century period. The main contention of the *Virasaivas* in their opposition to *Jainas* was regarding the *Jaina* monastic life and the building of the splendid temples by the *Jaina* followers. Besides, *Virasaivas* were also opposed to *Vaishnava* rituals and customs, which were dominant during the twelfth century.

To begin with, there has to be an examination of the origin of *Virasaivism*. There is a popular belief that Basava was the founder of *Virasaivism*. However, the historical evidence shows that *Virasaivism* predated Basava. S.C. Nandimath argues that *Kalamukhas*, a shaiva sect was dominant during pre-twelfth century period and *Virasaivas* were a part of the *kalamukhas* (Nandimath, 1979). Lorenzen agrees in principle that there were many similarities between *Kalamukhas* and *Virasaivas* like worship of *linga*, which practice was common among *Kalamukhas* and *Virasaivas*. Lorenzen opines that “*Virasaivism* was a reformist schism from the *Kalamukha* church with Basava cast in the role of Luther”. (Lorenzen, 1972:19) However K. Ishwaran believes that *Kalamukhas* were merely the upholders of Brahminism and they had nothing to do with *Virasaivism* (Ishwaran, 1983).

The narrative of Ekanta Ramayya and the rise of *Virasaivism*

Not much ethnographic details are available to study the evolution of *Virasaivism* during the middle ages, and neither is their much information available to follow the developments prior to the rise of *Virasaivism*. Therefore, it is difficult to establish the direct relationship between *Kalamukhas* and *Virasaivas*. However, there is prominent inscriptional evidence in a city called Abbaluru, which is situated- in today’s North Karnataka region that talks about the origin of early *Virasaivism*. The inscription gives us a hint about a heroic figure named Ekanta Ramayya, who seemed to have established *Shaivism* in the geographical area which was predominantly ruled by the *Jainas*. It is believed that Ekanta Ramayya was a *Kalamukha* priest who was also an acquaintance of Basava. There are versions which claim that there was no contact between Ekanta Ramayya and Basava as they belonged to different territories. However, the role

of Ekanta Ramayya in the establishment of *Virasaivism* is quite evident. The same narrative of Ekanta Ramayya finds mention in two other popular historical works of the pre-modern era apart from the *Abbaluru*-inscription namely; *Ekantaramitandeya Ragale*, a Kannada epic written by Harihara and *Basavapuramam*, an epic written by Palkhuriki Somanatha. These two narratives give vivid portrayal of Ekanta Ramayya in a slightly different way.

The narrative of Basava and Kalyana revolution has consistently caught the imagination of the people in later periods of time. On the other hand, the greater importance accorded to Basava led to the narrative of Ekanta Ramayya not gaining popularity during colonial and post-colonial period. It is to be noted that Basava does not get mentioned in *Ekantaramitandeya Ragale* as well as *Abbaluru* inscription. However, Ekanta Ramayya and Basava are mentioned in *Basavapuramam*. This shows that importance was given to all the *Saiva* saints and Basava was not a central figure in the pre-modern works. One needs to look at the narrative of all the three works – *Abbaluru* inscription, *Ekantaramitandeya Ragale* and *Basavapuramam* - in order to notice interpretations regarding the decline of *Jaina* tradition and the rise of *Shaiva* tradition in the parts of North Karnataka.

Ramayya's Self-beheading as depicted in Abbaluru Inscription

The narrative in *Abbaluru* inscription begins with god's appearance in Ramayya's dream who instructs him to go to a village called *Abbaluru* to pick a quarrel with Jainas and wager his head during the argument with them. So, Ramayya goes to *Abbaluru*, and start praying to lord *Shiva*. Then, the Jainas interrupt his prayer shouting "*Jina* is the true divinity". This act of *Jainas* provokes Ramayya and in turn, he ridicules *Jina* rituals. As the result, the Jainas are incensed and they wager in order to decide whose god is mightier. A promise is made by the Jainas to Ramayya in the written form that the *Jainas* will hand over the temple to *Shiva* worshippers, if Ramayya is to cut off his head and place it before the idol of *Shiva* to be rejoined by Lord *Shiva*. So, Ramayya cuts his head off and keeps it in front of the idol of *Shiva*. The devotees of *Shiva* worship his head for seven days and at the end of the period, his head is rejoined with his body without any mark or scar on the body. Naturally, the delighted *Shiva* worshippers start celebrating the act of God. However, the *Jaina* worshippers refuse to keep their promise and hand over their temple to *Shiva* worshippers. The betrayal of the *Jainas* anger Ramayya who goes inside the temple to replace the *Jina* god with *Shiva* idol. Later, *Jaina* worshippers approached Bijjala, the King of Kalyana, to get the matter settled by the King. Initially, Bijjala becomes furious to know that Ramayya has tried to convert the *Jaina* temple into *Saiva* temple. However, Ramayya produces the evidence that the promise has been made by the *Jainas*, which is written on a palm leaf. The incensed Ramayya is prepared to cut his head off again in order to prove his point. Ramayya challenges *Jainas* to convert all the 800 *Jaina* temples if he comes back alive. However, *Jainas* refuse to accept the challenge which makes Bijjala laugh at them. Subsequently, king Bijjala hands over a certificate to Ramayya

stating that he has won the wager and he is the rightful owner of the *Jaina* temple. The inscription ends with a eulogy dedicated to the King for granting a village to Ramayya and for having patronized the *Shiva* temple.

Slight changes in the description of the events can be noticed among the three works – *Abbaluru* inscription, *Ekantaramitandeya Ragale* and *Basavapuranam*. A great deal of historical and geographical details replete the narration in Harihara's *Ekantaramitandeya Ragale*. Minute details of the event have been captured in Harihara's work, whereas the details are more graphic in nature in *Basavapuranam*. The act of violence and the clash between *Jainas* and *Virasaivas* are quite explicit in *Basavapuranam*. Romila Thapar in her book *Cultural Transaction and Early India* writes "according to the inscription, Jain images were destroyed and *Jains* were killed" (Thapar, 1987). A scholar Julia Leslie refers to this incident in her essay *Understanding Basava: History, Hagiography and a Modern Kannada Drama* as a "clash between the *Virasaivas* and the *Jains* instigated by Ekanta Ramayya and recorded so fulsomely in the *Abbaluru* inscription" (Leslie, 1998). Although there is clear evidence regarding the clash between *Jains* and *Virasaivas*, it is clearly mentioned in *Basavapuranam* that *Jainas* are the ones who instigate Ramayya by going back on their promise to give up their temple. However, in *Abbaluru* inscription and *Ekantaramitandeya ragale*, there are no details available about acts of violence between the two communities. It is only in the *Basavapuranam* that there is a mention of explicit violence on the part of *Virasaivas* shown towards *Jainas*. It is mentioned in *Basavapuranam* that *Jainas* accept their defeat and they are ready to apply *vibuthi* (sacred ash) on their foreheads as a symbol of conceding defeat. It is worth noting that *Virasaivas* grew in strength though they did not have political power at that period of time in the region. On the contrary, the *Jainas* dominated the region and they were in control of more than 800 *Jaina* temples. Therefore, the statements by Romila Thapar and Julia Leslie need to be analyzed in a critical way.

The portrayal of Basava in the pre-modern texts

Both *Abbaluru* inscription and *Ekantaramitandeya ragale* do not make any explicit reference to Basava or any *Virasaiva* saint of a city called Kalyana where Basava was born. The only indirect reference to Basava in Harihara's *Ekantaramitandeya ragale* is limited to his association with geographical places like Kappadi, where it is believed that Basava had been around that place. However, the relationship between Basava and Ekanta Ramayya is clearly established only in *Basavapuranam* written by Palkhurikhi Somanatha. It is mentioned in the work that Ramayya comes to meet Basava in Kalyana where the incident of Ramayya's self-beheading takes place. It is also mentioned in the work that this incident takes place in Kalyana and not in *Abbaluru*. The work describes that Basava appears only in the penultimate scene, where he blesses Ramayya for his heroic act. Pre-modern texts like *Ragalegalu* written by Harihara in the early 13th century on the *Virasaiva* saints show that *Jaina* domination was evident in the places like *Abbaluru* and not in Kalyana (Herut, 2009).

The role of King Bijjala, who ruled the place in the 12th Century is given prominence in the narrative of *Abbaluru* inscription. The description suggests that he is impartial. However, there is no reference to Bijjala in the narrative of *Ekantaramitandeya Ragale*. Bijjala's description is very passive in nature in *Basavapuranam*. All the three narratives on Ramayya are silent on the association of Basava with Ekanta Ramayya or other *Virasaiva* saints. However, Ekanta Ramayya's contribution to the rise of *Virasaivism* is well documented in these narratives.

Colonial Narratives

In this section, I consider studying the translations of *Basavapuranam* written by Palkhuriki Somanatha in the 13th Century. Two important colonial scholars – Philip Brown and G.A Wurth - take up the text of *Basavapuranam* for translation in the early 18th Century. The intentions behind both the translation works is different. Brown wanted vernacular literatures to come into the limelight to show that the literature in Kannada is of equal importance when compared to literature produced in Sanskrit (Boratti, 2013). He was of the view that western oriental scholars so far had concentrated only on literatures written by Brahmin scholars produced to understand India. However, Wurth believed that the colonial literatures lacked absolute faith and sense of rationality. He was thus, of the view that natives should reject the illogical religion and accept Christianity. It is to be noted that there were many interactions between the local scholars and the western orientalist on the process of production and translation of a text.

Brown found that taking up translation of the literary style of *Basavapuranam* was difficult. So, he did not bother much about the style and translated the traditional poetic style of *Kavya* into the modern prosaic form (Boratti, 2013). By doing this, he compared the *Virasaiva* literatures with the western literatures to show egalitarian principles present in the non-Sanskrit writings. The comparison of fables was taken up by Brown to prove his point. Brown was quite discontent with the works written by upper caste writers in Sanskrit which led him to compare vernacular literature with Sanskrit writings showing up the latter's repulsive features. He pointed out the significance of anti-Brahmin and anti-ritualistic attitudes of Basava and concluded that "the *Jangams* or *Virasaiva* is the modern anti-brahmanical creed" (Boratti, 2013). However, Brown's glorification of *Virasaivas* is not without ambiguity. Despite there being many instances in several parts of *Basavapuranam* that depict the violence and murder that *Jangamas* exhibit, Brown describes them as 'peaceable race of Hindu puritans'. This shows that he had selectively chosen the lines from the *Virasaiva* texts and showed *Virasaivism* in a positive light.

One of the major reasons for Wurth to take up translations of *Lingayat* literature is the numerical dominance of the *langayats* in the northern Karnataka region. Besides, he felt that the community was accessible and approachable for Christian missionary activities. Wurth was a member of the revision committee of the Bible in India and had

translated the Old and New Testaments into Kannada. It can be inferred that translations were used as means for propagating their missionary activities. Therefore, he constantly tried to portray *lingayat* literatures as illogical. The tensions between *Jainas*, *Virasaivas* and *Vaishnava* sects were constantly ignored and considered childish by him.

Wurth violates the basic rule of translation i.e. faithfulness to the original and inserts critical viewpoints in the translation of *Basavapuranam* (Lorenzen, 1971). He even establishes a nexus between Bijjala and Basavanna for the sake of power. These interpretations about Basava's motivation come from *Jaina* fables like Lingana's *Rajavali Kathasara*, which contains a derogatory history of Basava. Throughout the translation, he constantly underestimates the importance of Basava and establishes that there was distrust between *Jainas* and *Lingayats*. Also, he tries to highlight contradictions in the various texts of *Virasaivism* in order to expose *Lingayat's* primitive way of life. Boratti writes that "the intention of such comparisons was to persuade the *lingayats* that it was indispensable for them to overcome such divisive hostility and find redemption in Christianity" (Boratti, 2008). Wurth's explanation for translating the *Basavapuranam* was its significance for the *Lingayats*. So, Wurth wanted to ridicule the work and tried to prove the profanity in the *Basavapuranam*. He wanted to promote the Christian religious works by proving its insignificance. Therefore, we can see different approaches while taking up the translations of the same text twice by the two scholars namely Wurth and Brown around the same period of time.

***Lingayat* identity and the role of Vachanas**

During the late nineteenth century, a few land-owning elites of the *Lingayat* community felt the need to claim their identity as never before. They wanted their community to have a high status and thus, highlighted their religious identity and heritage (Boratti, 2013). However, they had a very ambiguous historical lineage. For instance, they did not know who the founder of their sect was and were unaware of the existence of their sacred texts. Being aware of this lacuna, "they responded by making crucial interventions into their scriptural heritage directed at canonizing certain historical, religious, literary works and icons into a rigid and totalized system. Pride in community's Sanskrit heritage also stimulated the canonization process as did the claim for Brahmanic status" (Boratti, 2013).

Nevertheless, the 12th Century texts did not get the required attention by these scholars. They did not consider Basavanna as the one who had established *Lingayat* sect. Instead, they looked upon him as the second avatar of Shiva and a revivalists of the sect. His *vachanas* also did not get adequate attention. Scholars like Ramaswamy Shastri and Munsri Shrinivasaiah have argued that anti-caste ideals are present in the *vachanas* of Basava (Boratti, 2013). But, the *Lingayat* elites were unhappy about these arguments and went on to justify the presence of Varna system in the community. They were also dissatisfied about projecting Basavanna as the champion of the downtrodden. A scholar named Kari Basava Shastri mentions that the word '*Lingayat*' came to be

coined only during the reign of Muslim rulers. So, he insisted on the recognition of *Virasaiva* sect instead of that of *Lingayat*, and claimed that the *Virasaiva* tradition existed prior to the advent of Basavanna. According to him, *Virasaivism* was grounded in the tradition of Vedas and Agamas. He quoted many Sanskrit verses in support of his thesis (Boratti, 2013).

Although 12th Century *vachanas* did not get much recognition, many shaiva texts, *kavyas* and *puranas* got compiled, collated, edited, translated and published in the late 19th century. This was done majorly to create “community consciousness among *Lingayats*” (Lorenzen, 1971). According to Jan Peter Schouten, “All Indian Virasaiva Mahasabha, which was founded in the year 1904, played an important role in the emancipation process of the *Lingayat* caste. The leaders claimed a glorious place for their community in the history of India and they usually tried to demonstrate that lofty *Virasaiva* tradition was closely connected to the most orthodox Sanskrit schools of philosophy” (Schouten, 1995).

P.B. Halakatti, who belonged to *Lingayat* community, and was an advocate, found nothing significant in the way *Lingayat puranas* and *kavyas* had been depicted (When and why? Give reference.) Vijay Boratti mentions that “Halakatti’s acute sense of community and his angst over the low status accorded to the *Lingayats* by the ‘outsiders’, propelled him to establish a cohesive image of the *Lingayat* literature” (Boratti, 2011). He was not happy with the fact that modern education was giving an impression that there was nothing worthy about *Lingayat* literature. Moreover, a legal factor was bothering Halakatti. It was not possible to fight cases related to *Lingayat* heritage because of the lack of scriptural evidences to claim their identity. They had a heterogeneous culture. Hence, Halakatti proposed an authentic textual heritage for establishing a homogeneous legal, theological, philosophical, and cultural framework for the *Lingayats* (Boratti, 2011). This was a bold attempt and it enabled them to introduce *vachana* publications to the public which started shaping subjectivity of the *Lingayats*. Halakatti mentions in his autobiography that “we can notice explanations applicable to modern matters in the *vachana shastra*. That is why I brought all the *vachanas* together which are related to these matters. These *vachanas* are about resistance to caste discrimination, religious superstition, about work ethics, equality of women, etc.” (Boratti, 2011).

Vachanas changed the perspective of the way *Lingayats* were looked at and gave a more coherent image about the community. Halakatti observed that “*vachanas* are huge in number and it contains precious string of ideas which are not found in any other literature of the Hindu religion” (Boratti, 2011). He considered *vachanas* as an integral part of Hindu religion with rational ideas. Further, he added that *vachanas* were born out of the zeal for social reformation and hence, they are relevant for contemporary socio-religious reformation too. Halakatti was excited to introduce his discovery of new form of writing called *vachanas* to the large audience, which led him to translate the *vachanas* from Kannada into English. The translation began in

and went on till year 1916. Halakatti was excited about this project as he believed that it added a new knowledge system which was not present in any other religion. Along with introducing *vachanas* to the western world, he was also able to convince the local Kannada readers by providing them the new ethos and experience of reading.

Non-Lingayat Narratives

The historical struggle of the 12th Century was later transformed into a myth in the hagiographic poetry and prose. The myth of the city Kalyana has become a matter of prime importance not only in the works of *Lingayat* Literatures but in the works of the oppressed communities as well. The city of Kalyana has been portrayed in diametrically opposite ways by these communities. H.S. Shivaprakash writes that “... all accounts of the movement and the city given by neo-brahmanical scholars and poets supported by the state, from the 15th Century onwards. By this time, *Lingayatism* had become frozen into a caste; it absorbed the hierarchic aspects of the hegemonic Hindu society” (Shivaprakash, 2007). On the contrary, narratives of the oppressed castes tell us a different story. Many of the stories portray that the ancestors of the city of Kalyana belong to oppressed castes and hegemonic *lingayats* of the region. In one of the stories of *Male Mahadeshwara Kavya*, a shepherd named Revanasiddayya tries to enter Kalyana but he is stopped by *Jangama* priests because of his caste background. Basava tries to resolve the issue but his supporters insist that Revanasiddayya perform a miracle to show his spiritual greatness. He is asked to revive a dead buffalo and while he successfully completed the task, Basava’s supporters are forced to accept his status and Basava himself welcomes Revanasiddha into Kalyana. These conflicts between the caste groups are found in many stories of *Mante Swamy* and *Male Mahadeshwara Kavya*, the two folk epics associated with the untouchables of South Karnataka. All these myths have continued to haunt people even in the modern times, and this can be seen in the works of fiction, drama and poetry produced by a number of writers.

Conclusion

In the essay, it has been observed that the Virasaiva history of the 12th Century is multi-faceted in nature. On the one hand, it talks about the ideas of equality by fighting against caste discrimination and on the other, it fails to provide the rationale to justify their violence against other sects. Therefore, as mentioned in the beginning, the modern terminologies fail to describe the Virasaiva tradition in its entirety. The sectarian conflicts during the 12th Century A.D make us realize that their fight was not just against Brahmanism as projected in the modern texts. The decline of Jaina tradition and the ascendance of *Virasaivism* are interpreted in many ways depending upon the political, cultural and social contexts in the pre-modern texts. The role of Basava, Ekanta Ramayya and other saints in the development during the 12th Century A.D and the period that followed it is a matter of importance considering the excessive focus on these texts in the modern era. The need to take up translations of the works like *Basavapuranam* by the writers during the colonial period had different motives.

For instance, Brown wanted to establish the fact that the idea of egalitarianism was present not only in the Sanskrit works of the period but mainly in the vernacular literatures. On the other hand, Wurth wanted to show Lingayat literatures in poor light as he considered them illogical in order to spread the Christianity. The study aims to highlight some of these significant departures in the corpus of Virasaivism that shapes up how it is understood today.

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