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The Spiritual Path of Devotion

The Viraśaiva Perspective

Dan A. Chekki

I

The religion and philosophy of India, with a focus on the goal of God realization, suggests three main spiritual paths, namely the path of devotion (*bhakti*), the path of knowledge (*jñāna*), and the path of action (*karma*). Among these, the spiritual path of devotion involves passionate longing for the great Divine from one's whole heart and a passionate outburst of loving devotion towards a personal God. This emotional approach to God has a widespread appeal to a large majority of devotees. It is considered to be the most natural way to make our body, mind, and heart directed towards God, and it implies commitment, loyalty, love and respect, reverence, and worship oriented towards God.

The sacred scriptures of India, such as the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita, Bhagavat Purana, and numerous other Puranas, reflect the way of devotion marked by the worshipper's spontaneous and intense emotional feelings of an intimate relationship with the Divinity. The way of devotion denotes one's single-minded devotion, attachment, and personal surrender to God. One's selfless love, without expectation of rewards, is considered to be an ideal end in itself. The path of devotion – a matter of the heart – has exerted a profound influence on the followers of the Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva religious traditions.¹

The devotional school and socioreligious protest movements, which encompass various religious and philosophical streams, have emerged in different regions spanning the subcontinent of India. One of the outstanding characteristics of the devotional movement is its mass appeal, which, through regional language, is aimed at raising spiritual consciousness and changing people's traditional beliefs and behaviour. Through their devotional lyrics, saint-poets such as Tulsidas, Caitanya, Manikka-Vacakar, Mirabai, Tukaram, Guru Nanak, and Kabir – just to name a few – conveyed their loving devotion to God and their intense longing for God vision. Whereas the sacred scriptures in Sanskrit were confined to the minority of the priestly and elite class of learned scholars, the saint-poets, in simple regional language, disseminated the spiritual path of devotion directed towards God.

Although many seem to be familiar with the saint-poets from northern India and their devotional lyrics, the devotional reform movement, initiated by the twelfth-century Viraśaiva saint-poets in Karnataka, remains largely unknown, both in India and abroad. Here, an attempt is made to provide an overview of this Viraśaiva reform movement which demonstrates a strong devotional and spiritual element.

II

The Viraśaiva philosopher-poets and revolutionary mystics preached and practiced the values of monotheism – that is, Lord Śiva is the supreme primordial source of energy and the creator of the infinite universe. Furthermore, the principles of equality of all humans, a strong work ethic (*kāyaka*), community service and sharing (*dāśoha*), compassion, nonvio-

lence and peace, and social justice are all characteristics of this community of Śiva worshippers. Today, the followers of the Viraśaiva, or Lingāyat, religious tradition² constitute more than fifteen million people who reside in Karnataka, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and elsewhere in India, and also as significant minorities in North America, the U.K., Australia, and New Zealand.

In order to better understand the spiritual path of devotion, which was pursued by the Viraśaiva philosopher-poets and mystics, it is necessary to have some acquaintance with the Viraśaiva philosophy. The following presents the essence of the Viraśaiva concept of God, its spiritual system, and process.

Lord Śiva has neither form nor is he formless. He is the eternal, the changeless, and the imperishable; infinite in form; self-subsistent Void (*śūnya*, *baya-lu*); the effulgent light of billions of suns; incomprehensible and invisible, yet all-pervasive. Śiva is a blend of male and female principles, the source of primeval energy (*śakti*), and the creator of the entire universe. Śiva, though formless, manifests in the form of a spiritual mentor (*guru*), as the symbol (*iṣṭalinga*), or as an itinerant religious instructor (*jangama*).

Lord Śiva (*linga/iṣṭalinga*) is the universal soul and the devotee is the individual soul (*anga*). The Linga is the soul of the devotee. The individual soul of the devotee is not different from the Supreme Soul or the universal soul (*Śiva/linga*). The Viraśaiva philosophy is based upon the belief that the devotee (individual soul) – though a part of the Supreme Soul – initially remains wrapped with impurity and worldly attachments, is deluded by material and sensual experiences, and lives in ignorance of the Divine.

It is through self-realization – or through the Guru's grace – that the consciousness of, and aspiration for the Divine dawns, and the spiritual desire of the devotee to unite with the Supreme Reality emerges. The Guru initiates the devotee into the Viraśaiva code of conduct and the six-phase spiritual system (*saṣṭhala*). This spiritual journey begins with the stage of being a devotee and eventually culminates in the devotee's union with Lord Śiva. The devotional element, however, remains a major component throughout the devotee's spiritual journey.

The spiritual stage of the devotee (*bhakta*) is characterized by the aspirant's intense devotion to Lord Śiva, adherence to the Viraśaiva codes of conduct (*pañcācāra*), tranquility of mind, dedicated

1 For a detailed description of the path of loving devotion, and the theory and practice of devotion in Hinduism, refer to Klostermaier (1994: 221–237).

2 An introduction to the Viraśaiva or Lingāyat religious tradition and social system, in its various dimensions, can be found in Chekki (1997: 3–24 ff.).

work (*kāyaka*), and community service (*dāśoha*). The devotee holds a firm belief in the supremacy of Śiva as the only God. This stage of devotion is expected to purify the soul by disciplining, or erasing, material desires and biological urges and passions. The sacred symbol (*iṣṭalinga*), representing Lord Śiva, is the object of concentration, contemplation, meditation, and worship for the devotee. The devotee works in the spirit of selfless service to humanity with no expectation of rewards, and accepts both pleasure and pain as God's grace. The devotee, by virtue of his sustained self-awareness in spiritual enlightenment, knows that he/she is a particle of the Divine.

When the individual soul of the devotee finally merges with Lord Śiva (the universal or Supreme Soul), there is neither devotee nor God, neither worshipper nor worshipped. This state of union (*aikya*) is a blissful ecstatic experience of beatitude and peace. It is the stage beyond meditation, as there is none to meditate upon. There is no word, no sound, just absolute silence; the Void or Space that is limitless. This stage of union signifies the ultimate depersonalization of the individual soul, now free from the cycle of births and deaths. Though beyond description, the final stage of the union with Lord Śiva is compared to a process of milk mixing with milk, breeze absorbed by breeze, rivers merging into the sea, light merging with the effulgent light, space merging with the infinite space, and so forth.³

III

During the twelfth century in Karnataka, a band of philosopher-saint-poets attempted to build an egalitarian community composed of the devotees of Lord Śiva. This Vīraśaiva movement is generally associated with the devotional movement because of the intense devotional character of thousands of lyrics that were addressed to Lord Śiva by several Vīraśaiva saint-poets. Saint Basava,⁴ a Brahmin by birth, spearheaded the Vīraśaiva movement and revolted against all forms of inequality and injustice. This social and religious reform movement was supported by a host of saint-poets such as Prabhu, Chennabasava, sister Mahadevi, Siddharama, and many others who professed and practiced the principle of equality of all, irrespective of caste, class,

gender, and power. The Vīraśaiva saints emphasized the necessity of devotion to God and of being of service to fellow human beings. The Vīraśaiva philosophy stresses the importance of all the spiritual paths of knowledge, action, and devotion for God-realization. Śiva knowledge without action, and action without knowledge, are not encouraged. However, the devotional element remains a major component of the devotee's spiritual journey. Let us now illustrate and illuminate the spiritual path of loving devotion to God that was pursued by some outstanding Vīraśaiva philosopher-poets.

The Vīraśaiva saint-poets, through their devotional lyrics (*vacanas*), expressed a profuse devotion to God. Saint Basava⁵ was an embodiment of devotion – a supreme devotee par excellence. He was indeed a treasure house of devotion. Though he was aware of his shortcomings and often engaged in self-criticism, he strongly believed that Lord Śiva is pleased with nothing but true devotion – even more than music, scriptures, and elaborate rituals and worship. Basava addressed Lord Śiva as his father, mother, kith and kin, and appealed for God's grace and blessings. When he meditated and sang the glory and majesty of Lord Śiva, his joy and jubilation knew no bounds.

Basava revealed his initial anguish, divine discontent, and pain of separation from the Lord. He believed that true devotion is very difficult to achieve. According to him, a true devotee should have purity of body, mind, and heart; freedom from egoism; disinterest in material wealth; and the qualities of humility, hospitality, courtesy, and virtue. A devotee should exude happiness and peace to his associates, and should also make no caste, gender, or occupational distinctions among the devotees of Śiva.

Basava's devotion to God was incomparable. He earnestly appealed to God to free him from mundane desires, and he expected to be fed with the nectar of devotion. He wished to always be within the cage of devotion. Moreover, he was committed to the principles of equality, dedicated work, community service and sharing, truth, love, and justice. He followed the path of loving devotion directed towards the goal of a union with God. Basava's intense love of devotion, and his deep faith, evolved and assumed a cosmic dimension. In the mystic path of Basava, the intimate relationship with God emerged in the form of service, friendship, filial affection, and spiritual love as with a devoted spouse.

Besides being a spiritual aspirant, Basava was also involved in changing a traditional society which

³ For an extensive discussion of the cosmology, philosophy, mysticism, and the six-phase spiritual system of Vīraśaivism, the reader may refer to: Chekki (2003: 3–61 ff.).

⁴ A detailed study of the life and legacy of Basava is presented in Wodeyar (1967: 3–30 ff.). For a brief biography of Basava refer to Chekki (2009).

⁵ For a lucid translation of more than nine hundred lyrics of Saint Basava, refer to Basava (2007: 2–321).

was based on inequality and injustice and socioreligious institutions. Furthermore, Basava served as a finance minister, and later as the chief minister, for a medieval political dynasty. In the midst of these opposing forces of the material and spiritual, Basava felt helpless and resorted to God for grace and blessings. He eventually experienced spiritual enlightenment as a devotee and realized God within himself. His spiritual journey culminated in the ultimate sublime union with Lord Śiva, and he experienced the spontaneous outflow of mystic ecstasy. Like a river merging into the sea, his devotion merged with Lord Śiva, culminating in the state of ultimate silence; light mingled with the Supreme Light. According to the Viraśaiva philosophy, at the final stage of the spiritual journey there is no difference, in reality, between Lord Śiva and a true devotee.

IV

A remarkable saint-poetess, sister Mahadevi's ardent love for, as well as devotion to, Lord Śiva stimulated her poetic genius⁶ and aroused her to explore the mystical bond between the soul and God. Her life underwent a metamorphosis from a life of sense to a life of spirit. Mahadevi embraced a strong belief that her soul was already spiritually married to Lord Śiva. To her, Śiva is beyond time and eternity. He is greater than the Great. Śiva is everywhere – all powerful and incomprehensible to the scriptures; unintelligible to logic; beyond rites and rituals; and beyond thought, sound, and imagination.

Mahadevi referred to Śiva as her best friend and companion. As she was spiritually married to Śiva, she addressed Lord Śiva as her lover, bridegroom, and husband. She gazed ceaselessly at her Lord and became absorbed in the Supreme Reality as his lover, bride, and wife. Sister Mahadevi manifested the nature of her conjugal relationship of her love of God, which was essentially spiritual. She appealed to God to dispel her sensual desires and to liberate her from worldly entanglements. She dedicated and surrendered her body, heart, and soul to the Divine.

Sister Mahadevi's love for Lord Śiva knew no limits. She sang: "I love him whether he loves me or not ... In love of Thee, I quite forget my hunger, thirst, and sleep." Furthermore, her intense devotion to Lord Śiva is expressed in another of her poems: "Though, O Lord, you may slay me, I will never cease to love the hand that slays!"

Mahadevi's longing for the divine vision and her pangs of separation from, and quest for God are superbly articulated in many of her lyrics. She daydreamed and waxed, waned, and withered in her fantasy of love for the Divine. She worshipped, prayed, meditated, sang, and danced for the glory of God. Nobody could understand sister Mahadevi's intense love for Śiva: "What do the barren women know of birth pangs? What do stepmothers know of an affectionate caress? How could anybody know my grief and the misery of separation from my Lord?"

Sister Mahadevi discerned God everywhere in the forest – in all the great trees in the forest; in the birds and the beasts; and in all the natural environment around her. She firmly believed that there should be no gender inequality because the soul is neither male nor female. In her view, there is no religion without love and devotion. Furthermore, there could be no devotion without knowledge and no knowledge without devotion.

Obsessed with her intense devotion to Śiva, nothing else mattered to Mahadevi except completely immersing herself in the service of her Lord. Her love affair with God knew none of the limitations of the traditional roles of marriage and family life. In fact, she rebelled against traditional women's roles and social expectations.

While manifesting a cosmic romance with Lord Śiva, the life of sister Mahadevi provides a glorious illustration of a devotee's transition from the ephemeral to the eternal, and from the terrestrial to the celestial echelon. She is one of the celebrated mystics and saint-poetesses of the Viraśaiva religious tradition. Her entrancing devotional lyrics suggest the spiritual heights she attained by sublimating her worldly desires.

Sister Mahadevi belongs to a fervent band of female devotees who expressed, in radical ways, their lofty love of the Divine; the uncompromising nature of a conjugal and loving relationship; a yearning for the Supreme Reality; the pain of separation; and the ecstasy of a spiritual union with the Lord. Mahadevi's lyrics enunciate her transcendental vision of Lord Śiva and are known for their deep devotion, picturesque and poetic imagery, metaphor and melody, and elegance and spiritual resilience.

Mahadevi's astounding asceticism and poetic genius converged for her to experience the majestic and exalted love of the Divine. Sister Mahadevi is indeed one of the world's most prominent female mystics, and perhaps the youngest – a mystic who, more than eight centuries ago, rebelled against gender inequality and traditional social restraints.

6 Menezes and Angadi (1973: 1–148) have provided a readable translation of sister Mahadevi's lyrics. See also Chekki (2006).

V

As a devotee, Saint Siddharama gratefully acknowledged Śiva's grace: "How bounteous is your grace, O Lord!" According to Siddharama⁷ one becomes a real devotee after sublimating the taints associated with the body, mind, and wealth. He proclaimed that the devotee must heartily worship Lord Śiva. In fact, his heart was rapt in love, his body was dissolved, and the Lord permeated his soul. His mystical ecstasy knew no bounds. Siddharama stated that a devotee of Śiva is all compassionate and, as he is enriched with Śiva knowledge, perceives all living beings as being on a common footing.

Furthermore, the devotee is expected to lead a life of righteousness. Saint Siddharama strongly suggested that the ideal devotee who surrenders everything (body, mind, and wealth) to Lord Śiva becomes a saint (*sarana*) by sublimating his lust, anger, greed, pride, jealousy, and so forth. He then becomes a great soul, devout and virtuous. He is the one who practices what he preaches and preaches what he practices. He is unaffected by joys and sorrows or praise and censure. He accepts, with equanimity, whatever fortune or misfortune occurs as Śiva's grace. The *sarana* is beyond thought and speech. In other words, he is the embodiment of Śiva himself.

Saint Prabhu was another great Viraśaiva philosopher and mystic who affirmed that divine knowledge and right action or behaviour without devotion are fruitless. He contended that a devotee is he who has realized the Supreme Reality by severing the knot that knits the body and soul together and lives a life that is all dedicated to God. For Prabhu, pride and devotion never go together. Furthermore, Prabhu asserted that it is only through the harmonious blending of a unitive Śiva knowledge, love and devotion, and discipline and action that one can attain the holistic experience of the Divine. Prabhu⁸ described the essential nature of spontaneous love and devotion toward God by comparing it, through poetic metaphors and images, to the love between the tortoise and her young; the covenant between the cuckoo and the crow; and the discrimination of the swan in sorting out milk from water. Prabhu argued that when the Divine consciousness dawns, then devotion, knowledge, and discipline merge into the Supreme Reality.

7 See Menezes and Angadi (1978b: 1–529). For a succinct summary of Siddharama's philosophy, the interested reader may refer to Chekki (2002).

8 Saint Prabhu's dialogues with his cohorts on philosophical and social issues can be found in Chekki (2003: 77–96, 117–123 ff.) and also in Nandimath et al. (1965: 137–198, 199–360 ff.).

Saint Chennabasava⁹ was one of the stalwarts of the Viraśaiva movement who made a major contribution to the Viraśaiva philosophy and metaphysics. He emphasized the importance of both devotion and knowledge of the Śiva principles, and maintained that knowledge without action is lame while action without knowledge is blind. Both Basava and Chennabasava observed that true devotion is very hard to attain. It is like a double-edged sword. In speaking of the relationship between the Guru and the devotee, Chennabasava indicated that such a bond should be like light hidden in light; like an image hidden in a mirror; and so forth. He submitted, referring to himself as a devotee of those devotees who offer their body, mind, and wealth to Lord Śiva.

Saint Siddalingeshwara (15th century), another eminent Viraśaiva philosopher-mystic,¹⁰ dealt with the concept of an ideal devotee and true devotion. To Siddalingeshwara, a devotee should be free from lust, anger, greed, pride, jealousy, and delusion. A devotee is one who lives in holy discipline, identifies with Śiva through piety, and lives in the spirit of service. Siddalingeshwara believed that a true devotee, by offering wealth, a sense of self, and his life, can assimilate Lord Śiva into his body, mind, and soul. The real devotee is pure bliss, having both Śiva discipline and a pure heart. According to Siddalingeshwara, the spirit of Śiva itself is embodied in a true devotee, and the spirit of devotion itself is Śiva. In other words, Śiva is the devotee, and the true devotee is Lord Śiva.

VI

In the Viraśaiva philosophy and practice, emphasis is placed on both devotion and dedicated work (*kāyaka*) and service (*dāsoha*). Devotion, Śiva knowledge, and action should go hand in hand. Devotion should never be pursued for applause or admiration. The pride of wealth and egoism eat into the heart of devotion. A devotee should put his best effort into his work since he is trying to express the Divine in himself through his work (*kāyaka*), which is itself dedicated to God.¹¹

Devotion has been an integral part of the Viraśaiva spiritual system and process. However, what distinguishes the Viraśaiva religious tradition from

9 For the life and philosophy of Chennabasava refer to Hiremath (1978: 25–54 ff.).

10 A good translation of the lyrics of Saint Siddalingeshwara, devoted to the six-stage Viraśaiva spiritual system, can be found in Menezes and Angadi (1978a: 1–385).

11 For a comparative analysis of Hinduism, Śaivism, and Viraśaivism, see Chekki (2008).

the various *bhakti* movements found in other parts of India is its unique spiritual path of Śiva yoga, which is a blend of devotion (*bhakti*), knowledge (*jñāna*), and action (*karma*) yogas. Above all, the Vīraśaiva reform movement revolted against all forms of inequality and injustice based on one's status at birth, gender, heredity, occupation, power, and privilege, and created an egalitarian community of Śiva devotees. The Vīraśaiva revolutionary¹² saint-poets, through thousands of exquisite devotional lyrics, not only expressed their mystic experience but also revealed, more than eight centuries ago, their radical ideas of a democratic and just society.

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The Kirschbaum Collection of the Missionary Ethnological Museum in the Vatican

Joachim G. Piepke

On May 20, 2011, the Museo delle Culture in Lugano, Switzerland, organized a conference titled “L'illustre sconosciuta. La Collezione Kirschbaum del Museo Missionario Etnologico Vaticano” (The Famous Unknown. The Kirschbaum Collection of the Missionary Ethnological Museum in the Vatican). Present were 20 directors, respectively curators, of the most important museums which contained significant collections of Oceanic art (Lugano, Zürich, Bern, Basel, Geneva, Milan, Udine, Rome, Stuttgart, Berlin, Sankt Augustin, Barcelona, Paris, Canterbury, and New York). The one leading the conference was Dr. Christian Kaufmann, former curator of the museum in Basel and president of the Scientific

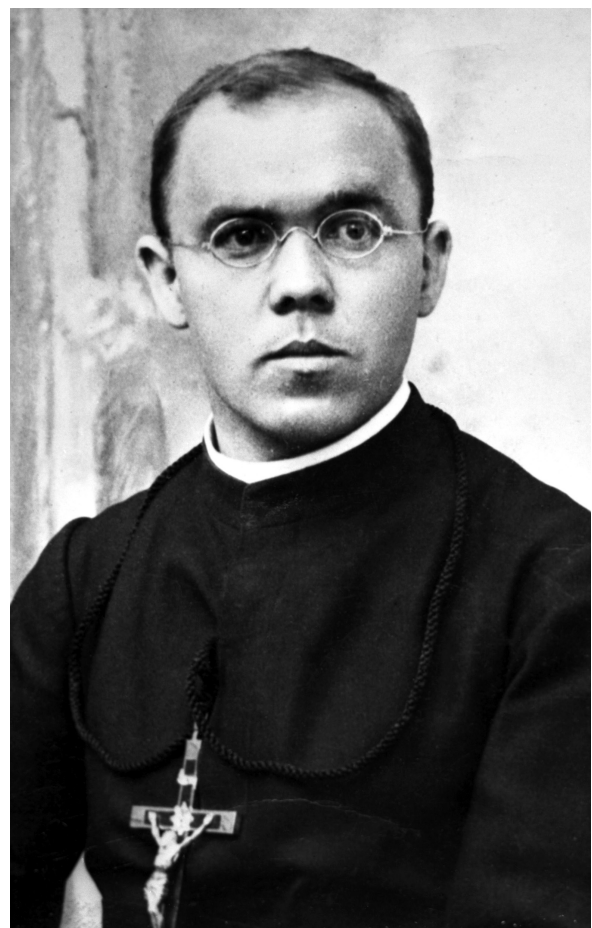


Fig. 1: Fr. Franz Kirschbaum, SVD ca. 1912.

12 A clear analysis of the social aspects of the Vīraśaiva revolutionary mystics is presented in Schouten (1991: 21–97 ff.).