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ISSN 2278-9529
Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

The same eyes and ears
 Yet they are unequal
 In their intellectual capacities

(P 197, Phil. of Vedas)

In his series of lectures on the Rgveda Balshastri Haridas has pointed out “Its (Rgveda’s) vision passes beyond the changing horizon of good and evil, judges lucid and serene the flood of souls that goes by, indulgent to the frailties of the weak, and severe only with the strong----” (P 64)

When Damodara Shastri states that “Vedic tradition can absorb and accommodate all differences, from Kashmir to Kanyakumari. And even those said to be its victims have embraced its logic of inequality”, he refuses to take cognisance of the fact that Rgvedic tradition also upholds the basic idea of equality and brotherhood.

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Rgveda 10/191/4 (P 151, Phil. of Vedas)

May our hearts be in unison

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†‡Ö¼ÖÖ ¼Öêü 3-303 (P 156, Phil. of

Vedas)

Ye men of the earth !
 Ye are brothers to one another
 Hence hate not each other

Damodara Shastri is critical of Basavanna and feels that (Basavanna) ‘he cannot bear differences. He wants uniformity – and one that will fit his prejudices. He loves work, so to be idle is sinful. He abhors violence so you can’t eat meat. He believes in a formless, single God. So idolatry is damned. For him the Brahmin

Is like Jackal
 Who eats the vomit-nut
 Get dizzy
 And thinks all creation is whirling.
 Why talk to these thrice
 born who caste mark
 their bodies with mud?’

(P. 56, Tale Danda)

While Damodara Shastri cites the *Vedas* to support the *Varnashrama* he shows no inclination to follow the responsibilities and duties (*dharma*) prescribed for the Brahmins. In Manusmriti it is stated that,

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The body of a Brahmin is not meant to enjoy the sensuous pleasures in this world but through painful Tapa (intense concentration in which man may go without food and water for several days) try for unending happiness in the other world. Though scholarly, if a Brahmin indulges himself sensually without accepting certain prohibitions he is inferior to a Brahmin who knows little but is restrained and lives a disciplined life.

(P 80, 81, Balshastri Haridas' Lectures)

It has also been mentioned in Sage Gautama's sutras that a Brahmin who works for the King is not a Brahmin. In other words a Brahmin is expected to lead an austere life of self denial. Damodara Shastri prefers inequality for he feels that, "a hierarchy which accommodates difference is more humane than an equality which enforces conformity". (P 57, Bal. Har. Lectures)

He also does not believe in the kind of equality proposed by the *Vedas*. In the book on Human rights Published by the Indian Institute of Human Rights, "The right to equality (Samata) or Samya is regarded as an important right (in Indian culture) without which happiness is not available. --- Vedas Preach dharma and a character of equality is incorporated in the Rgveda and also in the Atharvaveda". In the Rgveda it has been rightly said, "No one is superior or inferior. All are brothers and all should strive for the interest of all and progress collectively."(P.20, Intro. to Human Rights) We find, these egalitarian tenets lost in the 'dharma' practised by the likes of Damodar Shashtri.

In the play Haralayya the cobbler is unhappy with the practises he has been forced to accept and due to which his people have had to sacrifice their women to the greed of the upper castes, their sons to their cosmic theories of rebirth-----'. (P. 39, T.D.) Naturally he finds Basavanna's idea of equality very attractive Basavanna prophecies that, "someday this entire edifice of caste and creed, this poison house of *Varnashrama* will come tumbling down. Every person will see himself only as a human being. As a bhakta, as a sharana. That is inevitable...' (P.39, T.D.)

Basavanna's idea of equality is not substantial equality. It is purely formal equality (You are a human being and I am not other than one). In other words it is an equality by default unlike the modern equality which is both equivocal and composite. On one hand

it reflects the recognition of the dignity of each human being as such, on the other, it involves a potential subjectivism that leads to the severing of equality from nature as has been pointed out by Ralph Hancock in his book ‘ ‘Equality by Default’ : an essay on modernity as confinement’. According to the author “Equality by default is of a completely different nature..... It is a radical equality that excludes all vital inequality. This kind of equality reduces man to his biology. Default man is liberated from every norm and every model, he no longer forms part of an order that transcends him. He enjoys sovereign independence”. (P. 16)

For Basavanna there is nothing fixed and stable except Shiva of course with whom he shares the relation of a Bhakta. In his devotion to Shiva we find him indirectly acknowledging the need for stability and unswerving faith, something changeless in an otherwise changing world. While doing so he rejects the existing order. He criticises both the Brahmin and the Shudra. The Brahmin for him is like a Jackal and for the Shudra

The pot is a god. The winnowing fan is a god.
The stone in the street is a god. The comb is
a god. The bowstring is also a god. Gods,
gods there are so many there's no place left
for a foot. (P. 57, T.D.)

His men laugh at the faith and beliefs of others. His follower Kalayya tells him, “Basavanna, these tribal have brought their gods with them. You should see that idol. Rolling eyes. A tongue lolling out. It's very funny” (P. 34, T.D.) Basavanna and his people cannot accept any God other than their own. They believe in an essential inequality – people who like themselves are sharanas and those who refuse to become sharanas.

What Basavanna preaches however does not have religious sanction like that enjoyed by the *Varnashrama*. Though subverted by the educated Brahmins and cunning politicians the social order and religions practises of *Varnashrama* are endorsed by the *Vedas*. When the *Vedic* teachings are received through the mouth of a Brahmin there is reduced possibility of dialogism. Quoting Shri Ram Chandra Dixitar, Balshastri Hardas points out that. “The *Varna* system of the ancient Hindus implied the fourfold division of society into *Brahmans*, *Kshatriyas*, *Vaishyas* and *Kshudras*. The *Brahmans* formed the group of philosophers and teachers, the *Kshatriyas* the group of rulers and warriors, the *Vaishyas* the group of agriculturists and traders and *Kshudras* the group of men engaged in various menial services. The idea gained ground that to follow one's own dharma and to sacrifice one's own life if need be, in the prosecution of that *Dharma* was the highest duty expected of a citizen, to whatever caste he belonged. The insistence on *swadharma* is a sound economic concept. It lays the axe on the principle of individual freedom, the

struggle for existence and the survival of the fittest. The individual is made to realise the duty towards himself, his family, country, state and ultimately to God. In short he is a member of a free corporate state. He is a part of it and not separate from it. It is a peculiar concept by which the individual did his duty and yet enjoyed freedom. Every caste realised its dependence on the other caste and thus tended to avoid caste wars. Hereditary callings and the absence of competition helped an orderly movement----". (Shri Ram Chandra Dixitar, quoted by Sahityacharya Balshastri Hardas, P. 64). The imposition of such a system ensured that the society would be regulated and ordered.

If the Vedic Dharma is practised conscientiously we need not hesitate to support F Woodroff who states that – caste system is democratic in the truest sense of the term –

- 1) It insists on spiritual equality of all men,
- 2) It makes for individuality which is attained not through an escape from limitations but through willing acceptance of obligations,
- 3) It points out that all work is socially useful and economically equally important,
- 4) It recognises that while men are all unequal in capacities they have the capacity to contribute to human achievement as far as their capacity goes,
- 5) The essence of democracy is consideration for others. Freedom for individual means restrictions on absolute power. No one class can make unlimited claims,
- 6) The general tendency of men to strive to reach the summit is due to the impression that the position at the top is one of pleasure; profit and power, but in Hindu scheme, life becomes more difficult as we rise. (P. 314, quoted in Balshastri Hardas).

While propounding a new religion Basavanna points out the malpractices and superstitious that have crept into the existing practises through continuous distortion and subversion. But he is unable to give a viable alternative to the existing system. King Bijjala points out the obvious loopholes in his teachings. Bijjala is aware of the need for rootedness in human beings, especially in the Indian social set-up and he warns Basavanna – “Birth, caste and creed mean nothing to you. But you don’t delude yourself about your companions, friend. If you really free them from the network of brothers, sisters, sons, daughters, uncles and second cousins and let them loose in a casteless society, they will merely sputter about like a pile of fish on the sand and die. (P. 20, 21, T.D.)

Bijjala is himself a victim of the caste system. Yet he accepts the importance of caste. A barber by birth, he and his ancestors have tried hard to transcend their caste but have always been painfully aware of it. He even boasts of having married a *Kshatriya* princess in spite of being a barber by caste. Caste is both empowering as well as delimiting. Bijjala is soft towards the sharanas not just for economic reasons. According to him, “In all my sixty-two years, the only people who have looked me in the eye without a

reference to my lowly birth lurking deep in their eyes are the *sharanas*, Basavanna and his men. They treat me as – as what? (Almost with a sense of wonder) as a human being Basavanna wants to eradicate the caste – structure, wipe it off the face of the earth. Annihilate the varna system. What a vision ! And what prodigious courage! And he has the ability. Look at those he has gathered around him : poets, mystics, visionaries. And nothing airy – fairy about them, mind you. All hard – working people from common stock. They sit together, eat together, argue about God together, indifferent to caste, birth or station (P.15, T.D.) Interestingly Bijjala, who finds caste distinction so offensive heartily supports class distinction.

It is clear that Basavanna can convince the poets, mystics and visionaries of *Kalyan* but the common people who are his followers are not their equals in intellectual capacity. As a result they can only partially follow his views. They want him to become their God and to dictate his terms. They want to be his *bhaktas*. They equate him with Shiva. Much like Bijjala who finds the morality of the *sharanas* insufferable for Basavanna aims at the ideal and not the practical (he preaches that one should not even lie or rage), they would rather fight than accept the path of non-violence prescribed by Basavanna. Jaganna who is ready to lay down his life to defend Basavanna's honour at the Royal treasury, neglecting his family and dying father hopes to achieve sainthood vicariously –

Jagdeva : I led the march to the treasury. Here my father was breathing his last. My mother alone and helpless was banging her head against the wall. And I was at the Treasury? You know why? To make sure that Basavanna's honour remained untarnished. To establish his glory in perpetuity. That's why! Tomorrow I shall be the talk of the town, I told myself. I shall be the hero of the *sharanas*. I could see myself taken out in procession, hoisted on the shoulders of my friends and companions! (P.30, T.D.)

Later on (after the senseless slaughter of Bijjala) Jagadeva, before committing suicide, looks at the *nandi* he had once equated with Basavanna –

“Your are watching, Basavanna?” He says, “Good. I'm not afraid of death like my father. I am not afraid. Even of sacrilege watch. If you are Basavanna, I am Jagannath, the solitary saint”. (P 88, T.D.)

Another follower Madhuvarasa, who does not, hesitate to sacrifice his daughter's life to forward the cause of their (Basavanna and his men) great movement, according to his wife, is inconsistent and perhaps looking for excitement in life rather than any spiritual satisfaction – she points out –

“But ten years ago he found a Pashupata Guru. For months he immersed himself in ash, shouted loudly and danced. And the family had to put up with it. Then one day he discovered the Buddha wanted to give away all our worldly possessions to a monastery-----

Our initiation as Sharanas was not even complete when he saw Sheelavanta and decided he was right for our daughter. But if, Sheela had been a Brahmin boy he wouldn't even have sniffed at him. (P.42, T.D.)

Madhuvarasa 'sacrifices' his 'daughter' for the cause of the great movement in spite of his wife's total and very valid opposition to the marriage, the boy's reluctance to marry the girl and Basavanna's teaching that "No one has a right to sacrifice anyone - not even himself". (P. 39, T.D.)

Through the marriage between Sheelavanta and Kalavati, Sheela's father, cobbler Haralayya wants to settle scores with a society which did not permit him to even 'dream of upper caste women'. He wants to take advantage of the fact that "this one falls right into my son's lap". (P. 42, T.D.)

Basavanna's philosophy of 'all are human beings' and therefore equal is put to severe test. Neither women nor children are treated as equals, children are treated as patriarchal property. Their marriage is not an affair arranged for their happiness but as a great social experiment. The children are merely guinea pigs. The opinion of the girl's mother or women in general is of no consequence. To fulfil his own momentary whim Madhuvarasa is ready to push his daughter into a family whose profession is explained by Haralayya as "The holeyas skin the carcass. The madigas and dohas tan the hide. Only then it comes to us". (P.40, T.D.) These details are so distasteful to Madhuvarasa that his immediate reaction is "Please, I beg of you, don't take umbrage. All this is rather unfamiliar territory to us. All these details----'. (P.40, T.D.) By supporting the marriage Basavanna himself fails to follow what he preaches. He knows full well that "all those involved in the marriage have not been given the right to decide for themselves".

Bijjala at one point accuses Basavanna of being, "the most selfish person I've even met. Nothing matters to you – not friendship, not loyalty, not love – nothing except your society of sharanas---' (P. 50, 51 T.D.). Basavanna feels that in following the same cause all will automatically become equals.

The *sharana* theory proposed by Basavanna soon deteriorates into a system of anarchism or a political system which dispenses with the government in all ordinary meanings of the word. The issue of the marriage between a cobbler boy and a Brahmin girl is a political one. Everybody including Basavanna knows this. When Haralayya and Madhuvarasa approach him for his blessings for the marriage he observes –

Until now it was only a matter of theoretical speculation. But this – this is real. The orthodox will see this mingling of castes as a blow at the very roots of Varnashrama dharma. Bigotry has not faced such a challenge in two thousand years, I need hardly

describe what venom will gush out, what hatred will erupt once the news spreads. (P. 38, T.D.)

The threat of violence precedes the marriage. When Kakayya points out that people will not be patient witnesses to such inter-caste marriage Haralayya says, “They’d better. We’ll see to it that they do”.(P.38, T.D.) The result of the marriage is total anarchy involving the death of Haralayya, Madhuvarasa, King Bijjala, hundreds of sharanas. Kalyan burns, people rush through its streets howling and screaming, the royal guards go on a rampage and loot the city, temples are sacked, trading houses torched and the city reels under gruesome tales of rape, murder and rioting.

Bijjala had warned Basavanna about such possible consequences of the marriage in reply to which Basavanna had threatened to leave Kalyan with his followers. As a result Sovideva gets an opportunity to establish a totalitarian system of administration which is the other extreme of anarchism. Politics in this sense submerges legitimate public controversy and everything is assimilated to the governmental. Sovideva makes his King’s declaration –

The King is father to his people and the people shall love him and obey him like his offspring. No tongue shall wag against the King or his family or his retinue or his officers.

From this moment all sharanas, foreigners and free thinkers are expelled from this land on pain of death. Women and the lower orders shall live within the norms-prescribed by our ancient tradition, or else they’ll suffer like dogs. Each citizen shall consider himself a soldier ready to lay down his life for the king. For the King is God incarnate

The order that Sovideva wishes to establish is of the kind prescribed by the *Vedas* –

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- Manu

(P. 137, Bal. Har. Lectures)

When the entire mankind (Manu) was terrorised by anarchy and was running helter skelter God created King to protect all of them. For this King and for the protection of all living beings has God created from his own being lustrous punishment (*danda*) which is the incarnation of *dharma*.

In other words the King has the sole authority to punish. He is divinely authorised to do so. But at the same time the Rgveda also prescribes –

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People should wish that you should be the King.

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(P. 144, Bal. Har. Lectures)

i.e. there is no provision for a rule of terror as is unleashed by Sovideva and the authority of punishment has to be used with great caution. The duty of the King is to protect his people.

The Vedic idea of equality aiming at bringing about stability, stasis and changelessness in the society is in binary opposition to Basavanna's idea of equality in movement in life which is in a state of constant flux. Both these ideas of equality are beyond the comprehensive ability of common people resulting in various forms of subversion in both cases. Inequalities assert themselves in various ways and equalities are used for convenience. The quasi-democratic system which Basavanna seems to believe in [People may follow him if they like, he has no disciples, whether others come with me or not, this is my last night in the house (P. 69, T.D.). None has a right to sacrifice anyone, not even himself, 'To tell any sharana what to do would be to insult him (P.68, T.D.). Let such sharana listen to his inner self and follow its dictates (P. 68, T.D.)] also fails. Search for 'equality' depends mainly on how one chooses to define the term.

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