

The Lingayat Philosophy and Women: A Study of the Vacana Tradition and the Colonial Archive

Akash Jain

Research Scholar, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi

M.A. History, University of Delhi, New Delhi

Email – askhistory1@gmail.com

Abstract: *The Lingayat movement was a powerful socio-religious movement that originated in north-western Karnataka in the latter half of the 12th century. Later, it spread to the rest of Karnataka and also to parts of Andhra Pradesh. The Lingayat movement strongly critiqued discrimination based on caste and gender. Alongside this, they also critiqued the existing ritualistic aspects of orthodox Brahmanical religion. However, the most significant aspect of this movement is its unique conceptualisation of religion and advocacy for equality among men and women. This research paper tries to explore and analyse some aspects of the lives of Lingayat women during the colonial period in light of the strong pro-women Lingayat tradition. The paper analyses the core philosophical aspects of the movement and the extent of its influence on the Lingayat community during the colonial period. The primary sources utilised for this purpose suggest that Lingayat practices were influenced by the process of colonial knowledge production and reflect a deviation from the core aspects of Lingayat philosophy. This change in their practices shaped the lives of young girls and women of the community. This paper is a humble attempt to initiate a serious discussion on the colonial history of the Lingayat community with a gender lens.*

Key Words: *Lingayat, Census, Sanskritisation, Vacana, Child Marriage, Menstruation, Purdah.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

The Lingayat movement was a significant intervention in the existing socio-religious order of the early medieval period in the Indian subcontinent. It initially challenged certain orthodox Brahmanical notions and provided a space for the marginalised sections of society to effectively negotiate their identity. However, in the subsequent period, it lost its unique character in an urge to attain a larger social base. It came to be associated even with the idea of 'impurities,' which were considered a symbol of conservatism by Lingayats initially. Recent movements of Lingayats for retaining their distinctive religious identity and a demand for a minority status for themselves are quite noteworthy. It shows how they are tracing their distinct identity in history by pointing out their differences with other Saiva sects but with a selective approach towards their philosophy, as they are not generally seen attacking the existing caste and gender-based inequalities.

In our brief survey of their philosophy through a study of existing historiography and the Vacana tradition, we observe that Lingayats strongly opposed the idea of impurity, and the movement created space for women to assert their views on individuality, love, and spiritual union. However, as we explore and analyse the data from colonial archival material, we get a different picture of the status of Lingayat women. The widespread practice of child marriage before the passing of the Sarda Act 1929 and the acceptance of the idea of menstruating women's impurity among Lingayats suggest a change in the community. In a complex movement of identity assertion to ensure a higher status in official records (Bairy, 2010), Lingayats selectively approach their past and ignore certain aspects of their philosophy regarding women. This research paper is an attempt to analyse the place and value of an egalitarian philosophy in the process of identity assertion among Lingayats. It also tries to explore the influence of Brahmanical practices on the Lingayat community during the colonial period.

2. PRIMARY SOURCES AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY :

This research study is based on significant historical methods used to explore and analyse archival materials. Both the primary sources and secondary sources have been useful to approach the research questions. The primary sources include the Lingayat texts and the archival sources from the colonial period. The method of close textual analysis and critical textual reading is being utilised to explore the textual material. The texts have been approached both 'along the grain' and 'against the grain'. While the former method helps in approaching the narrative of the historical events and processes, the latter helps in retrieving neglected voices and agencies. These methods are especially helpful to analyse the complexities of archival material shaped by the colonial authority and power. The Methodology used in this paper is influenced by the research works of Ranajit Guha (1983 & 1987), Ann Laura Stoler (2009), Jaya Tyagi (2014), Uma Chakravarti (1993), and Kumkum Roy (1999).

In this paper we try to explore the core aspects of Lingayat philosophy and the extent of its influence on Lingayat practices during the colonial period. We have used a comparative framework to juxtapose Lingayat philosophy and Lingayat practices in relation to women. This helps in identifying the key problems in existing historiography that has considered the Vacana tradition as a fixed ideal for the Lingayat community. The paper thus argues to look for new sources and new methods to analyse the existing ones.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW:

3.1 Historiography on the Origin(s) of the Lingayat Movement

Early studies on the origins and history of Lingayats were published during the colonial period. In these works, scholars tried to trace the life of Basava, one of the earliest leaders of the Lingayats, but they lacked a deep understanding of the Lingayats. With the publication of J.F. Fleet's essay in 1899 on two inscriptions, new interpretations came into being. Fleet suggested that the founder of the sect was Ekant Ramayya and not Basava. Another scholar, R.E. Enthoven, accepted his suggestion, but he suggested that the "early history of this sect was capable of further elaboration." (Hastings, 1915, pp.70-71)

The ideological background of the movement was a significant issue surrounding its origin. While scholars such as L.D. Barnett and S.K. Ayyangar suggested an influence of other contemporary Saiva schools on this sect, there were some who considered it a self-initiated and original movement. Historians also widely perceive its origin as a component of the broader non-conformist movement opposing traditional orthodoxy. Romila Thapar, for instance, argued that Jain, Buddhist, and Islamic ideas influenced this movement. (Nandi, 1986, pp. 169-185)

Till the 1960s, by and large, concerns of historians regarding the origins and roots of this movement were confined to the ideological background and behaviour of the sect itself. However, in recent decades, with a new shift in the general historiographical patterns itself, the roots of the Lingayat movement are being located in the socio-economic situations of the period in which it originated. R.N. Nandi is one of the main proponents of this idea. Nandi (Nandi, 1986, pp. 141-161) understands the Lingayat Movement in its particular socio-economic context. He emphasised that from the tenth century onwards, Karnataka witnessed a process of progressive commercialisation. Large-scale production of consumer goods for export purposes is clearly visible during this period. This, in turn, promoted internal markets and a revival of the money economy in the region. Nandi further points out that these developments coincided with a new political structure in which the priestly class became the beneficiary of land estates and certain administrative rights. This priestly class, according to Nandi, was consuming luxurious goods and was also exploitative in its character. On the other hand, various categories of producers, traders, and artisans were also rising in these circumstances. However, these groups were now doubly exploited by the state and the priestly class. The priestly class, along with the state, was collecting taxes from them and exploiting them in the socio-religious realm too. Therefore, as Nandi suggests, the lower classes, in a strong reaction to this kind of exploitation, joined the Lingayat Movement, which denounced temples and the priestly class.

Nandi has further shown that the social base of this movement mainly consisted of priests, traders, peasants, and craftsmen. Even some of the leaders of the Lingayat movement also came from families of traders and hereditary officers. This suggests that the movement had a deep connection with the rising urban economy. However, Nandi's suggestion that the movement had an 'urban elitist background' has been questioned by Vijaya Ramaswamy, who argued that except Basava and a few others, the majority of Lingayats were not urban elites. However, she confirms at the same time that the urban merchants played a significant role in patronising the votaries of the sect. (Ramaswamy, 1996, p.5)

3.2 Socio-religious philosophy of the Lingayats

The social and philosophical aspects of Lingayats are known to us mainly from the literature belonging to this sect. Some important texts, such as Basava Purana, Chennabasava Purana, and Shunyasampadane, are instrumental in reconstructing ideological underpinnings of the Lingayat movement. Vacanas, or the prose poems, written by the Virasaiva saints, both men and women, reflect their notions around the question of religion, work ethics, caste, and gender. One can clearly observe certain radical, heterodox, and even iconoclastic elements in their philosophy.

The main principle among Lingayats was their acceptance of a single universal power, i.e., the ishta linga, which they carried along themselves. They were strong critics of temples and priests, as they were the centres of corruption. Both Basava and Allama Prabhu, the leading Lingayat saints, advised that the body itself is a temple. Basava, for instance visualised a moving temple within the body in opposition to the sthavara, the static temple. The dictum “Kayave Kailasha” (“the body is the temple”) became famous among Lingayats. However, one can point out here that despite their critique of temples, Lingayats themselves could not completely reject the notion of a temple. Lingayats were also radical in their emphasis on the necessity to work and self-reliance. By this principle it was also meant that the Lingayat saints were also supposed to sustain themselves. In one instance, even the prostitutes, while talking about work ethics, reveal that demanding more than the predecided amount of money from their clients is unethical for them. The early Lingayat philosophy also condemned the tendency to hoard and store.

Vijaya Ramaswamy (1996) has pointed out an intriguing aspect of Lingayat religious philosophy. She suggests that two divergent trends are present in the Virasaiva philosophy, viz., the Vedantic Sanskrit tradition, or the high tradition, and the desi tradition, or the popular tradition. The influence of Buddhism can also be seen in their religious ideas. She further argues that even within a single vacana writer, confluence and tension between different traditions can be seen. Another important characteristic of early Lingayata philosophy was their anti-caste and anti-patriarchal attitude in some instances. Since, according to their philosophy, one who wears a linga becomes pure, at least theoretically all the Lingayats, by this logic, were equal. However, a critical analysis of the Lingayat movement and its growth in the later times would clearly reveal its limitations on this front.

4. SOME ASPECTS OF LINGAYAT WOMEN’S LIFE IN COLONIAL INDIA :

In the Vacana tradition, the women saints openly express their individuality, desires, and love for their god. At least in the spiritual domain, Lingayat women could find a place as influential as men. Generally, the Lingayat practices during the early medieval and medieval periods reflected differences from the practices of orthodox Brahmins. In the 1931 Census Report for the Mysore region (Iyengar, 1931, p. 150), we notice that the number of females in the Lingayat community per 1000 males is 973. As per the data, the female population proportion among Lingayats is greater than those of several other communities. The Report (1931, pp. 142-143) also lists Lingayats as a community in which women do not observe purdah. The list of such communities shows that this custom is not prevalent among those where the female population per thousand males is greater than 930. Therefore, Colonial records from 1930 onwards show some positive aspects of the Lingayat community but it doesn’t allow us to make a generalised argument on Lingayat Women’s lives in colonial India.

It has generally been argued by scholars (Ramaswamy, 1996; Michael, 1993; Ishwaran, 2019/1992) that the Lingayats did not believe in the concept of impurity inflicted on women during their menstruation period. Basavanna (Kalburgi, 2012, p. 216), the founder of the Lingayat movement, declared in his vacana (saying) that those who believe in impurities pertaining to menstruation cannot be considered the true devotees. He reiterates the same idea in one other saying (Kalburgi, 2012, p. 245) while criticising those who believe in the five impurities declared by the orthodox traditions. However, in one of the vacanas of Basava, he compares the hypocritical behaviour of the Orthodox and conservative community with a menstruating woman bathing in ritual water (Ishwaran, 2019 (1992), p. 208). This vacana doesn’t necessarily reflect that Lingayats practiced the custom of associating impurity with menstruating women, but it shows that the process of deconstruction of the existing norms and beliefs was not undertaken effectively. Michael (1983, p. 367) has noted, for instance, that many of the elsewhere well-attested Lingayata practices regarding women, such as the absence of menstrual and childbirth taboos, widow remarriage, etc., did not find their way into expression in the preeminent Virashaiva (Lingayat) text of the fifteenth century—the Sūnyasampādane. It can also be read as an indication of changes that might have occurred during the period among Lingayats.

During the colonial period, one may note that due to the process of Sanskritisation (Srinivas, 1956, pp. 481-82) various customs of the Brahmanical religion became popular among Lingayats. Enthoven (1922, p. 363) notes that in the Bombay region, Lingayats mostly observe ceremonial impurity during a woman's monthly sickness and after a birth or a death. He has also mentioned that there are regional variations in the observance of this custom, and it is more popular in the region north to Bijapur. From his description, it is clear that in a specific region, Lingayats started believing in the idea of menstrual impurity during this period. Thus, the lives of Lingayat women acquired a complex status during the colonial period. In our discussion on Child marriage, their lives are further explored with the help of archival documents.

5. CHILD MARRIAGE AND THE LINGAYATS:

During the colonial period, the issues of child marriage and age of consent were significant subjects of debate. In late nineteenth century, the Indian public witnessed a serious debate between the conservatives and progressive intellectuals on this issue. These issues took a significant turn in 1928 when an official commission was appointed by the Colonial Government to enquire about the status of child marriage in the subcontinent. The Commission submitted its final report in 1929. This report is an important document for the purpose of our research. One can notice two sweeping statements on Lingayats in the report. It is stated in the report (GoI Report, 1929, p. 36) that early marriage is common among Lingayats alongside other communities in the Deccan districts of the subcontinent. The custom is described as quite prevalent among uneducated classes in the rural areas. The Report (1929, p. 37) further states that the number of married girls under twelve years of age figures in a large number among Lingayats (alongside other communities). However, it is added that the actual consummation is usually postponed until puberty.

The report doesn't provide enough evidence on the status of early marriage among Lingayats. Therefore, we have explored the 'Evidence' volumes prepared by the Age of Consent Committee. Volumes III and IV contain the oral statements and written evidence of the witnesses from whom the data was collected on the issues of age of consent and marriage. These volumes provide a glimpse of the condition of young girls among Lingayats. For instance, a witness, Gopalswamy Mudaliar, informs that in some of the communities in the Ceded districts of Madras Presidency, such as Kapus, Kammars, Lingayats, Boyas, Besthas, Adi Dravadas, and others, the age of puberty is between 15 and 18, as in such classes of society, womenfolk are accustomed to outdoor labour, or hard labour at home (GoI Evidence Vol. IV, 1929, p. 379). He challenges the general belief that only Brahmins and Vaisyas follow the custom of child marriage by emphasising that the non-Brahmins such as Lingayats, Kapus, Kammars, and other higher castes also follow the custom in their eagerness to vie with the higher castes (Vol. IV, 1929, p. 380). These arguments are clear evidence of the process of 'Sanskritisation', a widely discussed concept in the disciplines of history, anthropology, and sociology. One cannot make generalisation on the basis of this description given by Gopalswamy Mudaliar, but one cannot discard them without providing some evidence reflecting a different picture. Mudaliar was a lawyer based in Bellary, a part of present-day Karnataka, and held several positions in his lifetime (Vol. IV, 1929, p. 379). His exposure to the social life of the Bellary region of Karnataka, where Lingayats still have a good population, makes him an eligible person to have an opinion on Lingayats and their customs. One can argue, therefore, that at least in this region of the Madras Presidency, girls in the Lingayat and some other communities became victims of the identity politics.

We get a slightly different picture from the evidence of witnesses from the Bombay Presidency when compared to the evidence collected in the Madras Presidency volume. (GoI Evidence Volume III, 1929) One witness from West Khandesh (Kanara District) argued that the resentment against increasing age of consent within marriage is mostly evident among orthodox Brahmanas. He claimed that the Jains and Lingayats, the other two prominent communities, did not hold the same opinion (GoI Evidence Vol. III, 1929, pp. 410-411). In another instance, the president of the Bar Association from Bijapur claims that people in his district have advanced their notions of marriage already, and they do not need a change in the law. He mentions Lingayats as one of the dominant castes in the rural areas of the district (Vol. III, 1929, pp. 487-88). One witness from the Belgaum region, however, opines that backward Lingayats still contract marriages of girls at the age of 10 or 11. However, once the reformed law is implemented, the community will not resist much, and the law will be proper for them (Vol. III, 1929, pp. 470-471).

The evidence from the Bombay Presidency indicates a slight variation in comparison to the evidence from the Madras Presidency. However, before making any judgement of the status of marriage practices among Lingayats, it is essential to look for more data on the issue. The information related to sex ratio, age of marriage, and marital status is available in the census documents from the colonial period. The 1931 Colonial Census data (Iyengar Report, 1931, pp. 173-175) from Mysore region suggests that the instances of Child Marriage were declining when compared to the data of past 40

years. The number of married males per 1000 Lingayat males under the age range 0-6 was zero, and under the age range 7-13 was only 1. The number of married males per thousand males for the age range 14-16 was 12. Similarly, the number of married females per thousand under the range of 7 to 13 was 65. However, the number of married Lingayat females per thousand under the age range of 14-16 was 550. If we add the number of widows under this age range to the number of married women then the final number would be 564. The data suggests that the number of child marriage was declining but it was still in practice to an extent. Moreover, data from other regions may help in deciding the exact condition of the Lingayat Community.

The colonial period records clearly show that the custom of child marriage was widely prevalent among various communities in colonial India. The Lingayats also followed the practice widely before the passing of the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929 but they also quickly adapted to the new law imposed by the colonial authorities. It would be wise to approach the practice of child marriage among Lingayats in the larger context of the history of this particular custom. To adopt a single framework of either Sanskritisation (Srinivas, 1956) or Modernisation (Bairry, 2010) to reflect upon the practices of Lingayats is not enough. It is necessary to engage with the regional and temporal variations in their ideas and practices. It is only with this approach that we can further analyse the history of Lingayat women.

6. CONCLUSION:

Our survey of the Vacana tradition and the colonial archive has shown that the Lingayats practices in the colonial period were inspired from a wide range of ideas and customs prevalent in the society. The women of the Lingayat community face numerous challenges in their daily life as the community is being shaped by the colonial experience, especially the impact of colonial knowledge production. The Lingayat dissent and resistance against their categorisation as Sudras in the Colonial censuses of 1871 and 1881 took various forms (Bairry, 2010, p. 143). This resistance claimed equality with the Brahmins and contested the legal categorisation of Lingayats by the colonial authorities. Lingayats started imagining themselves as a group refining the meaning of a modern caste. Their resistance and imagination influenced and shaped their practices. These practices, in turn, shaped the lives of their women. Historically we have observed that women are expected to bear the markers of a culture or community. In the case of Lingayats, one may witness the existence of same phenomenon. The historical reality is however much complex and its impact on contemporary societies need a careful analysis. While the colonial past of the Lingayats remains a relevant area for debate and discussion, it is equally significant to explore their contemporary status. For instance, Prakash Desai (2019), a researcher working on Lingayat community, has noted the waning away of egalitarian ideals of Lingayat philosophy among the present-day Lingayats. We need to further explore this area of research, and to raise relevant questions on the subject. It would help us not only to understand the complex relationship between Sanskritisation and Modernisation but also to challenge the generalised notions regarding Lingayats.

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