
UNIT 25 MEDIEVAL RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS I — VEERASHAIVISM

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25.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you should be able to

- define the social movement of the Veerashaivas of the 12th century A.D
- describe the socio-historical background of Veerashaivism list and elaborate the basic features of Veerashaivism
- point out the dilemmas and contemporary developments within Veerashaivism.

25.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous unit (Unit 24) you looked at the **Sufi** and **Bhakti** movements. In this unit we are going to describe the social movement of the Veerashaivas. We will begin section 25.2 with a simple description of what the movement is all about. This will be followed by section 25.3 which traces some important aspects of the socio-historical background of Veerashaivism. In the next section (25.4) we will list out and elaborate the essential features of Veerashaivism. The organisational framework of the movement will be described in section 25.5. This will be followed by a brief observation on developments within the movement and a note on the contemporary status of Veerashaivism.

25.2 WHAT IS VEERASHAIVISM ?

Veerashaivism was a socio-religious movement which emerged around the middle of

the 12th century in north Karnataka. This movement of the Veerashaivas (meaning heroic Shaivas) challenged certain traditional Hindu beliefs and practices relating to caste, ritual pollution, and status of women. The movement projected for its followers a new social order which was based on ritual equality (in terms of worship and belief), sanctity of all work, and universal ritual purity i.e. purity of all followers irrespective of sex, age and occupation. This movement utilised Kannada, the spoken language of the masses, to communicate its ideas. The movement is closely linked with the name of Basaveswara (1105-1167) who is identified by many as the founding father of the movement. He was instrumental in popularising it in the Kannada speaking region of south India. Veerashaivas are also popularly known by another name, the Lingayats. Lingayats means bearers of the “Linga”, the symbol of Lord Shiva. The Veerashaivas or Lingayats worship only Lord Shiva in the form of a **Linga**. Veerashaivism holds that all Linga worshippers were equal and gained equal access to salvation. Salvation according to the Lingayats, came through hard work and dedication to remove social evils. In the following sections of the unit we will elaborate these aspects in a more detailed manner.

25.3 SOCIO-HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF VEERASHAIVISM

In the previous section we described Veerashaivism in a nutshell. In this section we will describe the origin and social conditions and factors associated with the emergence of this social movement. We will also point out the common grounds covered by Veerashaivism and the **Bhakti** movement.

25.3.1 Origin of Veerashaivism

Veerashaivism claims to have an ancient origin. It is believed to have emerged from Shaivism which centres around the worship of **Lord Shiva**. There is uncertain information about Veerashaivism until about the 12th century A.D. when Basava entered the scene. Many believe that it was he who propounded the ideas and practice of Veerashaivism as distinct from Shaivism, and other religious systems. It was since his time that Veerashaivism also came to be known as Lingayatism because the most important component of the faith was the **Ishtalinga** (phallic image of Shiva worn on the body). Veerashaivites were also called Lingayats since the 12th century, as every Veerashaivite wore a **Linga**, the image of Lord Shiva on his/her body.

Box 25.01

Some claim that Veerashaivism is much older than Basava. They insist that Basava was only reviver of the faith. They claim that Lingayat traditions were founded by five ascetics — **Ekorama, Panditaradhya, Revana, Marula and Viswaradhya** — who were held to have sprung from the head of Lord Shiva. Since there is little information about Veerashaivism as a broad social movement until about the 12th century, we can, for all practical purposes, say that Veerashaivism emerged around the 12th century during Basava's time. Since the 12th century, the terms Veerashaivism and Lingayatism became interchangeable. In the next sub-section we will look into the condition and factors which helped this movement to emerge in a big way.

25.3.2 Social Conditions Prevailing in Medieval Times

Hinduism was the dominant religion in the Deccan Plateau (which included Karnataka) in medieval times. The Hindu religion had its own distinctive characteristics in every area of life and experience. Worship of numerous Gods and

Goddesses, idol worship, complex religious rituals, visits to temples and pilgrim centres, and an elaborate system of life-cycle rituals were an important part of Hindu social life.

A caste system that was based on unequal rights, status, duties privileges and obligations prevailed. The high castes exercised authority over the low castes. Magico religious practices perpetuated by Brahmin priests helped in building up a system of exploitation of groups and individuals who were placed in low status and esteem. Brahmins by and large had access to both material resources and spiritual knowledge.

In the Brahmanical caste system, the ritual status of caste and individuals within the caste depended on a host of criteria. One of the most important criteria was the maintenance of ritual purity, as opposed to 'ritual pollution'. The 'pure' and the 'impure' status of individuals and groups were clearly and rigidly defined. Life crises such as birth and death were considered polluting, hence the need for purification. Castes were graded in terms of purity with the upper twice born castes graded as ritually higher in status than other castes. Large groups of people termed as Shudras were assigned low ritual status and denied access to many things. Women were also considered ritually impure as compared to men, especially due to the pollution arising from menstruation and childbirth. Women were assigned a very low status in society and could not participate in many activities that men could.

Hereditary specialisation of occupations were also noticeable. Some occupations were graded as ritually higher than others. Differential power, prestige and esteem were assigned on that basis. For instance priesthood, ministerial assignments in the kings court were high status occupations. Barbers and sweepers, on the other hand were assigned very low status in society. Reciprocal interactions between members were also dictated by notions of purity and pollution. Interaction between castes was highly restricted and a clearly defined network of rules prevailed, which inhibited interaction and intermarriage between castes. On the whole we can say that inequality — social, religious and economic — prevailed during this time. Exploitation and oppression of high castes over the low castes were witnessed in many areas of life.

25.5.3 Emergence of Veerashaivism

It is not merely in the existence of these social conditions like the inequality created by the caste system, that gave rise to this social movement. A host of inter-related factors aided the emergence of Veerashaivism as an important social movement. Prof. C.N. Venugopal outlines these factors to be i) royal patronage combined with the missionary zeal of the activists ii) the spread of vernacular Lingayat religious literature iii) the enthusiastic response from the low castes to the new life conditions offered by the movement.

Let us examine these factors one by one.

i) Royal patronage

From the 2nd century A.D. to 12th century A.D. Jainism was another major religio-political force in Karnataka apart from Hinduism. Successive Hindu kings had fostered Jain trade religion and architecture. But by the 12th A.D. due to internal conflicts and external aggression in the political area in Karnataka, the Jains lost their political royal patronage at this point of time. Vigorous and effective propagation by the leaders of this movement drew the attention of the royalty which began to give material and moral support and patronage to the leaders. The trading castes in Karnataka also began supporting the movement. Basaveswara (popularly known as Basava) held a key position in the kingdom of Bijjala. Political office backed by

royal support was helpful in promoting the ideology of the movement. Several rules of Karnataka like the King of Vijayanagar, Mysore, the royal family and rajas of Coorg put material and morality to the movement that was emerging.

ii) **Leadership combined with the missionary zeal of the activists.**

As mentioned earlier, the emergence of Veerashaivism as a powerful social movement is mainly ascribed to the leadership provided by Basava. He with a band of loyal followers like Allamma Prabhu, Cennabasava, Siddharama and others gave shape and vigour to the movement. At this point, it is essential that we look in greater detail at what Basaveswara or Basava did for this movement.

Basava was born in 1125 A.D. in a Brahmin family in Karnataka. Right from his early age he was critical of the beliefs and practices perpetuated by high caste Hindus in society. He saw beyond his times. He began articulating the ideology to protest and reform from an early age. He wanted to restructure the social order on an egalitarian basis.

Box 25.02

The Veerashaivite movement seems to have begun in Kalyana in north Karnataka. Basava proclaimed that Lord Shiva was the Supreme Being and all those who worshipped him are equal irrespective of sex, age or caste. In order to become a member of this movement Basava insisted, that everyone must wear a 'linga' on his/her body and worship it daily. Also he said that everyone must give up their caste, sex and community based status differences. Basava also greatly emphasized the devotional element of the faith he was trying to establish. He said everyone was equal in the eyes of God and there must be free interaction in every sphere between all members who believed in Veerashaivism.

One of the most important steps taken by Basava to popularise this movement was the establishment of the Anubhava Mantapa (Hall of Discussion of Experience) at Kalyana. Members drawn from various social and economic backgrounds met here and discussed many things, mainly the various aspects of Veerashaivism. The discussion was carried on under the guidance of leaders and conducted in Kannada, the local language of the people. The ideological format of Veerashaivism was drawn from these discussions held at the Anubhava Mantapa.

Basava's teachings were simple and easily understandable. He wrote, in simple verse form known as **Vachanas** which could be easily memorised. He was assisted by a band of devoted followers like Allamma Prabhu, Cennabasava, Siddharama and others Basava personally initiated newcomers into the movement.

The leaders converted many people to **Linga** worship. They advocated and allowed open recruitment to their movement. Most of the energies of the leaders were spent on clarifying and outlining the ideology of protest and reform. They emphasised on Bhakti or personal devotion and insisted that all are equal and pure in the eyes of Shiva. Such as emphasis on equality in worship, equality of salvation, and work, was highly attractive specially to the lower castes. The fact that the leaders spread the message of their faith in Kannada greatly helped in stimulating a positive response from the masses.

iii) **The spread of vernacular lingayat religious literature**

The leaders of the movement wrote and spoke their ideas and beliefs in Kannada. They preferred to write in the prose medium. Even before the emergence of

Veerashaivite literature the Jains had contributed to the development of Kannada language and literature. Basava and his contemporaries brought into existence Veerashaiva literature in simple prose. It was in a language that could be easily understood even by the common man. This greatly helped in popularising the movement. There emerged innumerable writers and many women among them. One of the popular women writers was Akkamahadevi. The composition of the verses in Kannada put vigour and support to the movement. The simple prose lines consisting of not more than three or four lines could be easily memorised by the people. Many of **Vachanas** are collected in the book "**Sanya Sampadava**". They form guides to human conduct from the time the **Vachanas** have emerged till today. Lingayats pay homage to thinkers and saints especially women saints and thinkers by reciting their work during festive and ceremonial occasions.

iv) **Enthusiasm of the low castes for taking to Veerashaivism**

As mentioned earlier, Veerashaivism opened its gates to all. It held no barriers of castes, class, age or sex. The movement waged a fierce battle against those beliefs and practices that discriminated one man from another and a woman from a man. Basava and his followers emphasised that both manual and mental work was equal in status and one must be devoted to work.

The movement attracted and secured many adherents among low castes who were by profession potters, barbers, or washermen. Conversion to this faith did not require that these castes should give up their previous occupation. People from the farmers harding and trading occupations were also drawn towards this movement. The social groups in which the movement was anchored exhibited predominantly lower caste social status. For instance some of the members who were active Veerashaivites were Chennaiya who was a scavenger by profession and **Appanna** who was a barber by professions Basavas three close associates were untouchables. The untiring efforts of activists and the appeal of the new faith which promised a life without restrictions or inequality was instrumental in promoting Veerashaivism in a big way among many groups of people spread across Karnataka and its neighbouring places.

Activity 1

Visit a Hindu matha nearest to the place where you live and compare it with the mathas of Veerashaivism. If you do not have a matha near your place, visit a gurudwara or church or a mosque and list out its activities. Compare them with the activities of the Lingayat mathas. What similarities do you find ?

25.3.4 Bhakti Movement and Veerashaivism

In the context of our discussion of the socio-historical background of **Veerashaivism** it is pertinent to mention a few lines about the **Bhakti** movement. The **Bhakti** movement had come into prominence. It provided a kind of spiritual forum for people from different socio-economic background. The main features of the **Bhakti** movement were (i) cultivation of personal devotion of God (ii) the emphasis on rituals (iii) monotheism and (iv) participation as a collectivity with a feeling of brotherhood and equality. In the previous unit we have described in greater detail the **Bhakti** movement. The movement provided a macro-land link for the Hindus and non-Hindu masses scattered over towns and villages. The **Bhakti** movement also linked the elite and the masses at many levels i.e. intellectual, literary, religious and so on.

Veerashaivism too shared some of these characteristics. It emphasized the element of bhakti to one God, Shiva. It repeats ritualism. Both leaders and followers were

linked together in an equal relationship with God. The social background of the devotees to Lord Shiva also varied. It included men, women rulers, ministers, trading groups, barbers, potters, scavengers and so on. **The emphasis was on dignity of labour and equality was promised to all significant changes in a society which was rooted in inequality and exploitation.**

Now we will turn our attention to the essential features of Veerashaivism in the next section.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Veerashaivism emerged in the 12th century in
 - a) Tamil Nadu
 - b) West Bengal
 - c) Karnataka
 - d) Assam
- 2) Veerashaivites are also popularly known as
 - a) Lingayats
 - b) Nayanars
 - c) Vaishnavites
 - d) Alvars
- 3) The emergence of Veerashaivism as a social movement is associated with the name of
 - a) Nayak
 - b) Meera
 - c) Surdas
 - d) Basava
- 4) What are the four factors which aided the emergence of the movement ? Your answer must be within 8 lines.

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25.4 ESSENTIAL FEATURES OF VEERASHAIVISM

To re-emphasise what we have said before, **Veerashaivism was a social movement of protest and reform.** It protested against the beliefs and practices upheld by Brahminical Hinduism. It wanted to reform Hindu society of its social evils like exploitation of the upper castes by the lower castes, of the unjust treatment meted

out to women and so on. It projected a society where all were considered equal in all spheres of life.

The essential features of Veerashaivism are:

- i) rejection of the worship of multitude of Gods and Goddesses;
- ii) anti-ritualism;
- iii) anti pollution ideology;
- iv) **Shasthala ashtavaranas and panchacharas;**
- v) **Kayaka.**

Let us know describe the features.

25.4.1 Worship of the Linga

Veerashaivism did not advocate the worship of idols, and the worship of a multitude of Gods and Goddesses. It emphasised the worship of only one God namely Lord Shiva. Shiva was the only Supreme Being to be worshipped in the form of a **Linga**. Every man or woman who became a Veerashaivite became a Lingayat or a bearer of Lord Shiva. He or she had to wear the image of Shiva on his/her body and worship it daily. This one of the most important features of Veerashaivism consists in the wearing of the personal **lingam** or **Ishtalinga**, the emblem of the God Shiva on the body of member of the faith. This applied to both men and women to all age groups irrespective of their social status.

The utterance of "**Namah Shivaya**" was the most important simple form of salutation to Lord Shiva. The **Ishta Linga** or the personal Lingam was an inseparable part of Veerashaivites life and remained with the devotee till death. For the woman, it was her spiritual husband and for the man his spiritual consort. The Linga was the source and goal of all things. The Linga helped to grant all objects desired and ward off the undesirable.

This emphasis on the **Ishtalinga** can be noted as a symbol of equality of membership in the community. Since both men and women, young and old were required to wear a personal **Lingam**, there was sense of equality of sexes and age groups. Anyone who wore the **Ishtalinga**, irrespective of his occupational subgrouping was regarded an equal. **Linga** was the ultimate reality to one and all in the Veerashaivite community.

25.4.2 Anti-ritualism

Veerashaivism also protested against many of the rituals perpetuated by Brahmanical Hinduism. It was against temple worship sacrifices and pilgrimages. Veerashaivites were forbidden to visit temples where a statue **Linga** had been installed. They were discouraged from participating or undertaking sacrificial ceremonies which involved slaughter, and elaborate offerings to Gods and Goddesses. Endowment to temples were also forbidden because Veerashaivism believed that such acts as these encouraged inequality between one devotee and another. Veerashaivism also discouraged visiting holy places as, such visits did not ensure inner purity according to them. Visiting holy places did not have any ritual significance for the Veerashaivite. To this day, Lingayats as a group do not participate in the Kumbha Mela festivals which are an important attraction to several Shaivite groups in Hindu society. Veerashaivism discouraged its followers from praying to idols of village deities. Meat eating and drinking of liquor was tabooed. Listening to oracles, believing in



Lord Shiva with characteristic trident and snake. Note that there is a variety of Shiva-lingas all around Shiva.

the efficacy of village exorcists and participating in the rites to witchcraft were also forbidden.

The anti-ritualistic nature of Veerashaivism was seen in the simple codes of conduct it laid down for its members. Every Lingayat by offering his daily prayers to Istalinga was expected to find peace and liberation without the help of a priest temple, or sacrifice. Veerashaivism advocated vegetarianism and whatever little rituals it adopted in the course of time which were similar for both men and women belonging to any caste or professing any occupation. All **Linga** wearers were equal free and pure from the taints of birth and death. This point leads us to the next important feature namely the antipollution ideology of Veerashaivism.

25.4.3 Anti-pollution Ideology

The Veerashaivism doctrine enjoined upon its members to desist from observing the "**Pancha Sutakas**" or Five Pollutions namely the pollution arising from (i) birth (ii) death (iii) menstruation (iv) spittle and (v) caste contact i.e. contact with the so-called inferior castes. These five pollutions were an important part of the belief systems and practices of Brahmanical Hinduism. All Hindus have definite obligations to observe during birth and death which includes the performance of purificatory rites. The childbirth of a Lingayat woman however, is free from the pollution of birth; so is the mother who has delivered the child. Death, according to Veerashaivism was considered as a merger with Lord Shiva. It was an event to be rejoiced not

to be mourned, an event which needed no purification for a Veerashaivite who wore the **Linga** on his body was mentally and physically pure. The dead are buried and not burnt among the Lingayat till this date.

The observation of menstrual pollution was looked upon by Veerashaivism as a hinderance to the daily worship of Lord Shiva which was obligatory for every Lingayat woman, child and man. Among many orthodox Hindu groups, women were deined access to God and participation in many social activities during their monthly menstrual period. **Veerashaivism did not advocate the observance of segregation of women from religious and other social activities during menstruation.**

The observance of spittle pollution (pollution arising from touch or contact with the spit especially observed by Brahmins) was again looked upon as unessential by Veerashaivism. All were equal in the eyes of Shiva hence one man could not pollute another man in any way. Thus caste contact, pollution, and orthodox beleif and practice was also totally rejected by Veerashaivism.

Veerashaivism believed in mental purity which was essential for the attainment of personal salvation. This mental purity, according to Veerashaivism, was not based on any ritual purity as orthodox Hinduism demanded.

Box 25.03

Many of the **Vachanas** of Basava and his followers point out the limitations placed on the human mind and body by the observation of these five ritual pollutions. For instance, the elaborate purificatory rites related to birth and death observed by the high castes were very expensive and often led to a great degree of economic stress. This economic strain was felt specially by poor and middle class families. The core of the Veerashaiva teachings is their refusal to recognize the concept of ritual pollution basic to Brahmanical Hinduism. The **Ishtalinga** worn by a Lingayat ensured ritual purity. These aspects of Veerashaivism are consistent and fundamental to the faith, and deemed essential for salvation.

25.4.4 Shatsthala, Astavarana and Panchachara

So far, while describing the essential features of Veerashaivism we have focused mainly on those aspects of Brahmanical Hinduism that Veerashaivism criticised and tried to reform. Now let us look at some of the important components of its belief systems from the viewpoint of the individual.

The three most important were **Shatsthala**, **Astavarana** and **Panchachara**. The **Shatsthala** consisted of six steps which an individual had to take in order to attain a merger of his self with Lord Shiva. The **Astavarana** serve as covers which protected an individual from dangers which came in the way of his spiritual pursuits. The eight covers were the:

- i) **Linga** — The emblem of the Supreme i.e. Lord Shiva which was not only an object of worship but also that which had to reside in the body of the devotee for ever.
- ii) **Guru** — the spiritual perceptor who initiated a new comer into the spiritual knowledge of Veerashaivism. Lingayat men, women and children wore Linga through initiation by a Guru. This initiation ceremony whereby an individual took a spiritual birth in the Guru's hands was extremely significant in that the individual was freed from the clutches of caste and entered a society where he was equal to all and inferior to none.

- iii) **Jangama** — devoted person who was endowed with excellent knowledge and he moved from place to place preaching the doctrines of Veerashaivism. The **Jangama** guided the devotee in his spiritual activities.
- iv) **Padodaka** — This meant 'thirtha' or holy water which served to integrate the devotee and the preceptor. The holy water "purified" the devotee who partook of it.
- v) **Prasada** or the returned offerings indicated that those objects offered to God during worship become sacred. The **Padodaka** and **Prasada** were taken with great devotion in same place by devotees coming from different social backgrounds. The distinctions of caste, sex, creed or colour ceased to exist and a sense of fraternity among fellow faith members was promoted.
- vi) **Vibhuti** was the sacred ash that was applied on the forehead of the devotee.
- vii) **Rudraksha** referred to the sacred chain worn around the neck of the Veerashaivite, and
- viii) **Mantra** — the simple form of salutation to Lord Shiva through the utterance of the mantra "Namah Shivya".

Box 25.04

The **Panchachara** were five religious stances or postures which a Veerashaivite had to take in order to protect the faith from disintegration. The five positions were the **Lingachara**, **Sadachara**, **Shivachara**, **Ganachara** and **Brityachara**. The **Lingachara** was the acknowledgement of the absolute equality of all Lingawearers. The **Sadachara** was the adoption of **Kayaka** (toil with a sense of duty, devotion and service) as the guarding principle of life. **Shivachara** was the pursuit of the tenets of Veerashaivism with a pure heart while **Ganachara** was the adoption of militancy to fight off any threats to the integrity of the religious community. **Brityachara** was the implementation of 'dasoha' to sustain the religious community. **Dasoha** implied community sharing of one's labour i.e. an individual rendered service to his community by donating generously from his resources. The service to others was based partly on the income derived from his toil.

All these three components reflected the principle and practice of equity of worship and salvation that Veerashaivism was trying to promote. The beliefs and practices were/are applicable to all **Linga** wearing men, women and children. Veerashaivism insisted on the sanctity of all work, mental and manual emphasised equal opportunities for all in society to pursue their goals. This was keeping in mind the good of the society. The belief in equality of worship and salvation was also seen in the emphasis on **Kayaka** or toil.

25.4.5 Kayaka

Veerashaivism considered all work as equal and important. **To toil, with a sense of duty and dedication was considered essential for the livelihood and good of the individual and the welfare of the community.** Lingayatism made no hierarchical discrimination between occupations. The social consequences of this ideology relating to toil was a promotion of an affirmative attitude and constructive approach to the problems of work and labour in society. It preached a worldly rational and liberal attitude to work as compared to the attitude promoted by Brahmanical Hinduism. Brahmanical Hinduism did not uphold the pursuit of worldly activities. Veerashaivism advocated that one can attain salvation by finding Heaven in one's work and by devotion to work. No occupation was to be looked down upon and an individual could change his occupation whenever he wanted. By working hard, he could earn wealth, improve his standard of living, and at the same time he

had to contribute some of his earnings to the service of the community. Today there are many educational institutions, and charitable trusts started by the Lingayats for the welfare of both Lingayats and non-Lingayats.

The principle of **Kayaka** was implemented as early as Basava's time. In the **Anubhava Mantapa** built by **Basava** *there was absolutely no distinction between persons holding high office and those earning lower income.* The engagement of **Kayaka** was conceived in two ways. (i) if a person was already gainfully employed he was advised to send physical and social help to support the communal services such as feeding and sheltering needy people (ii) If there was an unemployed person he was encouraged to take up a job.

Thus we can see that Veerashaivism tried to integrate the personal and social aspects of an individual life on the principle of religious and social equality. People from different castes and occupations were attracted towards this movement. The beliefs and practice it stood for served as guides for day to day behaviour. For women, Veerashaivism offered liberation and equality with men. Veerashaivism advocated widow remarriage, discouraged child marriage and encouraged women to be the active participants in the promotional activities relating to the faith. Since both men and women were required to wear a personal **Lingam** and worship it daily, a sense of equality of sexes in the religious sphere was created.

Now we move on to another aspect of Veerashaivism, the organisational framework developed by it in order to propagate uphold and sustain its doctrines.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) List out the essential features of Veerashaivism.
 - a)
 - b)
 - c)
 - d)
 - e)
- 2) Select the correct answer:
Personal **Lingam** is to be worn by
 - a) only men
 - b) only women
 - c) only priests
 - d) men, women and children
- 3) Select the right answer.
All **Linga** wearers were free from the pollution caused by
 - a) birth, death and menstruation
 - b) birth, death, menstruation, spittle and caste contact
 - c) birth and death only
 - d) interaction with inferior castes
- 4) What are the three most important components of the Lingayat religious ideological structure ? Answer in less than 5 lines.

lineage. It was this process of splitting into two divisions that mainly laid the foundations of caste like groupings, within the **Lingayat** community. What is important to remember is that the **Jangama** was not a hereditary priest who enjoyed high status because he was born in a caste that enjoyed high ritual status. He performed both religious and secular tasks and could be drawn from any social and economic background.

25.5.2 Mathas

Mathas or religious centres have always been an important of Hindu religious organisation. Since **Veerashaivism** did not believe or encourage in temple worship, **mathas** served as institutional alternatives to temples. **Veerashaivism** established large **mathas** which had small branches all over Karnataka and neighbouring regions. The heads of the larger **mathas** were celibate and commanded respect among the people. In all matters relating to the **mathas** the people in that area were invited to participate in decision making. This practice of involving people from diverse backgrounds to discuss religious as well as secular matters can be traced to Basava. In his **Anubhava Mantapa** (Hall of Discussion) people from different backgrounds met to discuss ideas relating to **Veerashaivism**.

The notable activities that the **mathas** have been following are, propagation of **Lingayat** doctrine, sheltering and feeding the needy and educating the laity in secular subjects. While propagating the ideas of **Lingayatism** the **mathas** did not specifically recommend celibacy or asceticism (giving up worldly desires and possessions). They emphasised the purity of heart, cultivation of piety and engagement of good deeds as the right steps to reach God. There was supposed to be no show or glamour attached to the heads and members of the **mathas**. The hierarchy within a **matha** was to be kept at a minimum and the succession in the headship of a **matha** was done by nomination or by seniority.

Activity 2

In your own family or neighbourhood or community, look out for those individuals who have departed from traditional caste rules and expectations. To what extent have they succeeded in being a deviant — an outcaste — a rebel ? Keeping in view the dilemma faced by newcomers in **Veerashaivism**, list out the dilemmas faced by the individuals you have observed.

The **Lingayat mathas** all over Karnataka became a source of help to people in despair. While grants were often received from the patronage of rulers and local chieftains, there were also voluntary donations made by the public. The resident guru of a **matha**, known as the **ayya** (elder) not only provided shelter and food but also maintained discipline in the local community. Those who were attached to **mathas** had to follow his instructions. The **mathas** provided help not only to **Lingayat** groups but also to **non-Lingayats** on different occasions. They were closely associated with the political processes in Karnataka right from the 12th century.

Especially during turbulent times, the **mathas** were used as sounding boards for assessing public opinion. This was so particularly between 15-18 centuries A.D.

In the next sections we will focus on some of the dilemmas and lapses which developed within the **Veerashaivites** community in the subsequent periods after its emergence. We will also outline the contemporary status of **Veerashaivism**.

25.6 SUBSEQUENT DEVELOPMENTS AND CONTEMPORARY STATUS

We now turn to developments which have taken place since medieval times in Veerashaivism.

25.6.1 Dilemmas and Divisions within the Veerashaivite Community

From the 12th century to the 16th century, Veerashaivism grew as a powerful social movement in Karnataka, winning numerous followers. The quick conversions, it brought about gave rise to frequent lapses amongst its members. New converts found it difficult to give up their old ways of thinking and acting specially relating to caste and worship. They were caught between the old and the new values. Within a single household some converted to Veerashaivism while other did not do so. This led to interpersonal fractions within a family. At a larger level, Veerashaivism faced strong opposition from orthodox sections of Hinduism, specially the Brahmins whose position and power came to be challenged by the new faith. In spite of these pressures, due to the writing efforts of the activists and the appeal of its ideas and practices, Lingayatism became a force to reckon with in Karnataka. According to Professor Venugopal the greatest numerical expansion of the **Lingayats** was in the 15th and 16th centuries. Many feudal chieftains of Karnataka specially south Karnataka converted to the **Lingayat** path. This feudal patronage while adding prestige and economic strength to the faith also introduced divisions within it.

After the 16th century **Veerashaivism** slowed down its conversion activities. The closing the boundaries to outsiders began and rifts within the community emerged. Hereditary status groups of washermen, barbers, artisans and traders began to develop and these groups became endogamous. Their loyalties were given to different **mathas**. The device to acquire power and control over the vast resources accumulated over the years, led to divisions within the **Veerashaivite** community.

Many departures from the ideals and practices propounded by **Veerashaivism** began to be seen. For instance, there was no provision for a priestly group as found in Brahmanical Hinduism, among the Lingayats. The **Lingachara** was the acknowledgement of equality of all **Linga wearers**. But in course of time the Guru and the Jangama order among the Lingayats began to assume hereditary class characteristics which was not foreseen by the early Lingayats. The growing number of **mathas** provided a convenient place for recruiting the desired members into the **Guru** or **Tangama** order. Control over monasteries, properties attached to them such as buildings and educational trusts created by the charities of the public, became an important source of hereditary succession. The existence of a priestly group not only created inequality among worshippers but also led to a neglect of the principle of **kayaka**.

As mentioned earlier in sub-section 25.5.1 **mathas** were divided into **Guru** and **Virakta mathas**, and each **Lingayat** had its own set of followers. The **Guru** order claimed that their traditions were much older than the 12th century **Lingayat** creed. This order blamed Basava and his followers for hastily converting low castes into **Lingayatism** and thereby **weakening** its discipline. The **Virakta** followers claimed that Basava and Allama Prabhu were of divine origin. They claimed that the **Guru matha** were encouraging Brahmanical traditions which led to the oppression of castes and priestly dominance. By the 17th century the Guru and Jangama amity felt apart in the struggle for power and control. Though these internal divisions did weaken the community strength, Lingayats became a powerful community in Karnataka's political, social and economic life.

25.6.2 Contemporary Status

Keeping in view the belief and respect **Lingayats** had for the principle of **Kayaka**, we find that till about the first quarter of the twentieth century, **Lingayat** groups did not make any drastic change in their occupations. In the 1970's the Miller Committee set up by the King of old Mysore classified **Lingayats** as backward in some respects and recommended reservations for them in education, government service, and other professions. The **Lingayats** made use of these opportunities and today we find them in many high-status positions in the Karnataka government. The Miller Committee did not consider them economically backward as capital was available to the community for many occupations like agriculture and trading. There was a concern for the political future of the **Lingayats** and till today old and new occupations exist side by side within the community as there is little inferiority attached to occupations.

After Independence in 1947, there was a movement to reorganise Indian States on a linguistic basis. Even before Independence, the **Lingayat mathas** of north Karnataka were actively involved in Kannada speaking districts. In 1956 when the Kannada speaking districts were incorporated into the State Karnataka, the **Lingayats** took great initiative in the political integration of the State. Till date the **mathas** play an active role in State politics. **Lingayats** have become chief ministers in Karnataka and the resources of the **mathas** are used during elections.

Today **Lingayats**, according to Professor Venugopal are a weakly knit aggregate of status groups and individuals. A number of **Lingayat** writings point out the discontinuities and contradictions within the community. The writings, conferences and the **Sabhas** organised by the **Lingayats** appeal at reform of the contradictions within the sect. The Liberal approach of the leaders, has appeal both to **Lingayat** and non-**Lingayat** men and women.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) What are the two important elements in the **Veerashaivite** organisational framework ? Answer in 2 lines.

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- 2) Select the right answer:

The **Tangamas** could be recruited

- a) only from the Brahman priestly caste
- b) from any socio-economic background but they should be converted to **Lingayatism**
- c) only from low castes
- d) only from the royalty.

- 3) What are the two important weakening factors in the development of **Veerashaivism** ? Answer in about 8 lines.

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25.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have discussed the socio-religious movement of the Veerashaivas which emerged in Karnataka during the medieval period. We first defined it in terms of “where, what and who” components of the movement, then we described the socio-historical background of the movement in terms of origin, social conditions and factors associated with its emergence. We also pointed out the common grounds **Veerashaivism** covered with the **Bhakti** movement. The bulk of our discussion was then shifted to the essential features of **Veerashaivism**. This was followed by a description of its organisational framework. We concluded the unit by outlining the subsequent developments within **Veerashaivism** since its emergence and its contemporary status.

25.8 KEY WORDS

- Ishtalinga** : the phallic image of Lord *Shiva* worn on the body of the *Lingayat*.
- Vachana** : a saying in simple verse form.
- Shatsthala** : the six steps which helped the individual to progress towards the attainment of merger of his soul with Lord **Shiva**.
- Astavaranas** : the eight protections or covers essential to **Veerashaivites**.
- Panchachara** : the five postures or stances adopted by every Veerashaivite to protect the disintegration of the faith.
- Ideology** : a system of beliefs.
- Kayaka** : toil with a sense of dedication, devotion and service.
- Tangama** : a person who spreads and consolidates the tenets of Veerashaivism. As a collective term it refers to the priestly order among the Veerashaivite.
- Mathas** : religious centres or monastic centres.

25.9 FURTHER READINGS

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25.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) c.
- 2) a.
- 3) d.
- 4) The four factors which aided the emergence of the movement were royal patronage, charismatic and committed leaders, spread of Kannada religious literature and the enthusiastic response from low castes.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) The essential features are
 - a) Rejection of worship of numerous Gods and Goddesses and worship of **Linga**
 - b) anti-ritualism
 - c) anti-pollution ideology
 - d) **Shatsthala, astavarana and Panchachara**
 - e) **Kayaka**
- 2) d.
- 3) b.
- 4) The most important components of the **Lingayat** ideological structure are **Shatsthala, Astavarana and Panchachara**.
- 5) **Kayaka** meant hard work or toil in **Veerashaivism**. A person who is gainfully

employed was expected to serve others also with the fruits of his labour. Idleness was not encouraged by **Veerashaivism**. Devotion to work was emphasised.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) The two most important elements are the **Jangama** and the **mathas**.
- 2) b.
- 3) The two most important weakening factors are
 - 1) inability of the individual to accept the new faith totally when he is still under the group of old values and practices.
 - 2) internal divisions and feuds within the mathas and members of the faith.