CHAPTER TWO

RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND

The religious history of India goes back to the pre-Christian era, and in a background Chapter, it may not be relevant to consider the details of every religious movement that took root in the Indian soil. Consequently, a strictly chronological order of succession of the various religious movements is not traced.

Further, different geographical regions of the country have not come under the influence of a similar set of religious impulses. Each region has maintained certain uniqueness in the way in which it has been exposed to a specific set of religious impulses.

Historical time is also a factor to be reckoned with. Each region has reacted in its own way as successive waves of diverse religious movements sought patronage at different historical periods.

The southern region of India, where Karnataka is situated, has been exposed to the influence of
several religious movements as other regions were also similarly exposed. Among them, Buddhism and Jainism, may be reckoned as the most predominant ones. But, there were other religious movements which took their birth in this region. Among them may be reckoned, the Advaita doctrine of Sankaracharya, qualified monism of Ramanujacharya, and Dvaita of Madhavacharya. These arose in different periods of history.

Karnataka, with its favourable geographical location, came under the influence of not only the movements that arose in the southern region, but also the movements that arose elsewhere in the country. As a meeting-point of various religious traditions, the southern part of the country wielded considerable influence over the rest of the country.

"... the religious south turned the whole country into a vast cathedral-city with gorgeous temples and spectacular sites, and the year into a round of festivals and pilgrimages." 1

In a similar vein another author points out —

"As the gateway to the south, Karnataka was the first to receive the influence of Aryans with the Vedic faith pushing its way to the south in pre-historic times, and of Jains in later times. In medieval times, as wave after wave of religious reform arose and swept over South India, Karnataka transmitted them on to the north."\(^2\)

The Vedic religion is the earliest religious tradition of India. It was characterized by sacrificial rites, and Varnashrama Dharma. As the influence of this Vedic religious tradition was on the wane, new ideas and principles of religious life took its place, leading to the emergence of strong religious movements which were generally opposed to the ceremonialism and the sacrificial rites of the Vedic religion.

Buddhism, based on the doctrine of Ahimsa, emerged during this period. Jainism, as a religious movement, followed Buddhism. Buddhism gained its

foothold in different parts of the country. But, the influence of Buddhism reached Karnataka rather late, principally during the time of Asoka, Kanishka and Harshavardhana. Under Asoka, Buddhism received strong royal patronage, and he sent out missionaries to different parts of the country to strengthen the movement. The missionaries sent out by Asoka reached Karnataka also, and they seemed to have been successful in their mission, for they were able to gain for Buddhism a large number of converts. One of the strongholds of Buddhism in Karnataka was the Banavasi territory, and in support of this, we come across references to many Buddhist monasteries in this part of Karnataka.

The minor edicts of Asoka were found in Raichur, Chitradurga, and Bellary districts of Karnataka, which provide evidences of Buddhist influence in Karnataka upto the 7th century. The most important centre of Buddhist religion in the 11th century Karnataka was Belgame (Balligame) in Shimoga district. It is curious that this place is also associated with the name of Allama Prabhu, one of the leaders of the Virasaiva faith in the 12th
The Buddhist Vihāra (monastery) of Belgaum received royal grants for the distribution of food to the inmates of the monastery. Allama Prabhu who hailed from this place was possibly influenced by Buddhism, many features of which are found in Virasaivism. Basava, who also lived during the 12th century, might have had a similar experience of Buddhist faith, as he lived close to the Indi territory and Baudhavadi, where Buddhism had flourished. Desai mentions that Buddhist Vihāras were established at Dambal, Kolivad and Lakkundi of Dharwar district.

The Buddhistic Vihāra or Sangha was a congregation of Bikkus (monks). It was a well organised institution at the time of Ashoka (274 B.C.). Geden opines that "in its inception and intention the monasteries were not the established homes of the monks. To the monks no permanent abode was assigned, but they were to follow the life of an ascetic or beggar.”

4. Ibid., p. 120.
5. Desai P.B., Basaveshwar and His Times, Kannada Research Institute, Karnataka University, Dharwad, 1968, p. 112.
depending for their livelihood upon the gifts of the laity." However, the monks used the Viharas as abodes only during rainy season. A notable feature of Sangha is that it formed a brotherhood of man. No room was provided for caste, or age distinctions; learning and seniority formed the only title to authority and respect.

The Viharas were the main educational centres. "Buddhistic education and learning centred around monasteries. All education, sacred as well as secular, was in the hands of the monks. They had the monopoly of learning and of leisure to impart it. They were the only custodians and bearers of the Buddhistic culture." There was mutual dependence of the Sangha and the laity; the latter helped in the maintenance of the Sangha, and the former helped in the spread of religious education among the leity.

7. Ibid., p. 797.
Buddhist Vihāras might have influenced the ancient Indian institutions like the Gurukulas in establishing the monastic order. But, the Gurukula was headed by a Grahasta (the second stage in the scheme of Ashramas), whereas the Vihāra was headed by a Sanyāsī (the fourth stage in the scheme of ashramas), who was given a predominant position in Buddhism.

However, the revival of Brahminism, and the spread of Jainism curbed the extension of Buddhism in Karnataka. And with the revival of Vīraśaivism, Buddhism was almost extinct in Karnataka.

Jainism:

As Buddhism, Jainism also was based on the principle of Ahimsa. The principle of spiritual self-reliance in Jainism, particularly, appealed to the people greatly. It had more influence than Buddhism on the life of the people in Karnataka owing to the striking contributions made by Jain authors to the Kannada literature. The Jain temple built at Aihole in Bijapur district by Raviṅṭi in the reign of Pulakēśa II, is said to have been the abode of all
excellences. Hence Jainism found a congenial home in Karnataka from the period of the Mauryan empire and received ample support from all the Kings of Karnataka in the course of history. The Satavahanas, the Kadambas, the Gangas, the Chalukyas, the Rāṣṭrakūtas and the Hoysalas extended their willing patronage to the Jain religion. It spread all over Karnataka and attained the status of an almost universal religion. It was at Shravanabelagola, Karkala and Koppan (or modern Koppal) that the strongholds of Jainism. However, it began to lose ground from the 11th century onwards.

The Jain monasteries — basadis, chitrālayās and temples became the centres of education. They were supported by kings and through the liberal donations of philanthropic people of those times. The Jain faith prospered in Karnataka owing to its missionary activities which were based exclusively on persuasion.

The Vedic religion, reacting to the spread of Buddhism and Jainism, was trying to hold its own.

Shri Sankara's appearance on the socio-religious scene in the 8th century and that of Shri Ramanuja and Shri Madhva in the 12th and 13th centuries respectively, was a happy augury for Brahminism and Vedic culture. All these three persons were religious and social reformers of South India, and Karnataka came under their influence.

According to Shri Sankara, Sanyāsa did not mean an escape from life's responsibility but, on the other hand, implied dedicated service to humanity. He was opposed to ritualism and viewed with disfavour some of the Hindu customs. He recognised the ascetic order of Hinduism on the model of the Buddhist order. Though opposed to Buddhism, Sankara was in favour of the ascetic ideal the Buddha preached, and established monastic institutions, i.e., the maths, on the model of Buddha Vihāras or Sangha but under the Vedic garb.

Sankara was a lifelong celibate. He perhaps thought of giving a well-structured organisation, i.e., math, to the order of Hindu asceticism, which maintains a close relationship between monks and the laity. He propounded the theory of absolute monism, that is,
advaita philosophy, while combating Buddhism, and Jainism, renewed the religion of Vedas and Upanishads. In order to spread his ideas on religion and philosophy, he founded four maths in different parts of India — namely, the Sharada Peeth at Sringeri (Karnataka) in the South, the Jotirmath at Badrikaasram (Himalayan region) in the North, the Govardhan Peeth at Jagannatha Puri in the East, and the Kalika Peeth at Dwaraka (Gujarat) in the West.

Sankara established these maths in all the four directions in order to meet the spiritual needs of the people of India. He placed in these maths sanyāsins well-versed in Vēdas and Agamas so that they could organise the disciples for the pursuit of spiritual development. "In course of time the Sanyāsins evolved a sort of a genealogy, according to which one's Guru was the father, and the Guru's Guru, the grand father, and so on."¹⁰

Advaita tradition has been continued by a number of saints and scholars. One among them was

Vidyaranya, who occupied the pontifical seat at Sringeri in the 14th century and is famous in the history of Karnataka as the founder of Vijayanagara empire. The others include Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa and Swamy Vivekananda in the 19th century. The Smarthas of Karnataka are the followers of Sankara. They are the worshippers of Siva but they do not lay such special emphasis on it as do the Suddha Saivas or the Virasaivas.11

Shri Ramanuja is the greatest exponent of the philosophy of Visishtādvaita, that is, qualified monism. He converted the great Hoysala ruler, Bittideva from Jainism to the path of Visishtādvaita and also a large number of local people to join Vaishnavism. This marks the turning point in the religious history of Karnataka, since the influence of Jainism which was on the ascendance till then, began to wane by slow degrees.12 But Bittideva, who called himself Vishnuvardhana after conversion, was remarkably tolerant towards other religions. He continued his patronage to the Jains and built many

Jain Bastis. The building of Vaishnava temples received
great impetus in his reign.

Shri Ramanuja established Srivaishnava centres
in Karnataka including a math at Melkote. He ordained
that panchamās should be allowed to worship at the
temple one day in a year. This act of Ramanuja was
a great service done to the underprivileged. "Ramanuja
is depicted as a friend of the lower classes trying to
uplift them in social and religious life. He is said
to have risen above caste and status and had non-
Brahmana disciples like Pillai Urangavillidāsa. He
gave them a place in Vaishnavism by allowing them to
wear set-marks; to dress themselves like Vaishnavās,
to imitate their customs and habits, and to study the
Prabandham." Shri Ramanuja is thus the forerunner
of 'Brahmanisation' of the members of the lower caste.

Shri Madhva, the third of the Vedantic
reformers after Sankara and Ramanuja, lived in the
13th century. He taught the Dvaita doctrine which is
characterised by unqualified dualism and devotion to

13. Rangacharya, V., "Historical Evolution of
Sri Vaisnavism in South India" in The Cultural
Heritage of India, (ed.), Haridasā Bhattacharyya,
Vol. IV. The Ramakrishna Mission Institute of
Culture, Calcutta, 1956, p. 176.
Vishnu as the highest deity. He established Sri Krishna Temple at Udupi in South Kanara district. The arrangements he made there by ordaining eight monks (Sanyasis) to worship at the Shrine by bi-annual turns is a unique achievement of Shri Madhva, for, by arranging this, he initiated an experiment of doing away with the monopoly of a single priest. He could stop animal sacrifices at yajnas.

The movement of Vaishnavism started by Madhva, within a century and a half, spread to all parts of Karnataka and into the neighbouring states. His successors like Tikacharya, Vyasaraja and Raghavendra Swamy propagated his tenets and devotees as Purandharadasa and Kanakadas popularised the school of Bhakti through the institution of dāsekula (Kannada bards). They composed many songs and kirtan in Kannada to teach morals and to decry many superstitions.

Islam:

The religion of Islam was introduced in Karnataka in the 14th century. Since then, Mussalman kingdoms like Bahamini, were established in Bijapur, a neighbouring district of Dharwad, tending to the permanent settlement of a Mussalman population in the
Among all the South Indian Provinces, it is only in Karnataka that Islamic religion and culture took some root and flourished. When Hyder and Tippu were controlling Mysore Kingdom, the Islamic faith received royal patronage. Religious toleration was demonstrated by Tippu who showed reverence to the head of Sringeri Math. Mosques were built and schools were maintained in the Provinces. The building of mosques with attached schools and colleges could be regarded as a pious act.

Mujeeb states, 'in Islam, spiritual merit has been assigned to solicitude for the orphaned, the disabled and the victims of circumstances. For certain historical reasons, the organisation of welfare activities has been inextricably bound up with religious observances and the political and social organisation of the Muslim community.' An essential feature of Islam is to render help to the less fortunate brethren.

by the payment of Zakāt, the annual legal alms of five things, namely, money, cattle, grain, fruit and merchandise, which are obligatory for every Muhammadan. The Quran emphasises Salāt and Zakāt, i.e., prayer and charity. When contributions are made towards charity, the money so collected is to be utilised for the poor, the needy and for the promotion of education. On festive occasions, religious contributions were also made.

Majumdar's general observation that endowments for religious and educational institutions, construction of temples and mosques, and the establishment of rest-houses and dharmaśalas, where travellers got free food and lodging, are referred to in the records of all ages. The practice of creating waqfs or trusts had started very early among the Muslims and the expenditure of most of the philanthropic establishments was met from the income of a waqf, which invariably took the form of an assignment of land.

Christianity:

Doubts are expressed regarding the introduction

17. Majumdar, R.C., op.cit., p. 22.
of Christianity in South India by St. Thomas, one of the apostles of Jesus Christ, in the first century A.D. However, the earliest historical evidence regarding the existence of a church in South India dates back to the 6th century A.D. An active propagation and spread of Christianity began only after the arrival of the Portuguese. St. Francis Xavier who visited Goa in 1542 during the Portuguese regime, was also instrumental in the spread of Christianity in that part of the country. Goa was the headquarters of the Portuguese. A large number of missionaries came with them for the propagation of Catholic religion.

The British rulers in India and the Christian missionaries who came to India during the British rule, witnessed many evil customs and practices like child marriage and the sati system, existing not only in Karnataka, but all over India. People were too ignorant and illiterate to understand the social implications of such practices. Christian missionaries, before they took up their main objective of religious conversion, first thought of providing education to the people by establishing a number of educational
institutions, right from nursery and primary schools to the collegiate level, in many parts of Karnataka.

Syrian Christian missionaries started educational activities in the coastal districts of Karnataka at the end of the 18th century. In the early part of this century dispensaries and schools for the orphaned were opened in South Kanara district and in other places. In the known history of Syrian Christians in Karnataka, Lewis mentions the names of Rev. Fr. Noronha, Rev. Fr. Lewis, Rev. Fr. George and Rev. Fr. Koshy as outstanding in the field of religion, education and social welfare.

The Protestant mission, likewise, founded many educational, medical, charitable and other welfare institutions in Karnataka. Some of the Protestant missionaries made enduring contributions to Kannada language and literature. In Dharwad district, a number of educational institutions, hostels, hospitals, homes for the destitutes and the aged were established by the Protestant mission.

Saivism:

Saivism, which emphasises the worship of Siva, is one of the most ancient and dominant religious movements in India. It gave rise to many schools of religious thought. Among them, Virasaivism of Karnataka, Saiva-Siddanta of Tamilnad, Siva-Dvaita of Kashmir, Saivism of Bengal and Pasupat of Gujarat deserve mention.

Before the advent of Virasaivism some of the sects like Kapālika and Kālamukha, were already prevalent in Karnataka: "these sects were following heinous and horrible practices which were repugnant to the tenets of the faith. They deviated considerably from the bounds of real Bhakti."\(^{19}\) As D.K. Bharadwaj describes, "the devotees of Kapālika worshipped Siva as Kālabhairava, wore a necklace of skulls, offered bloody sacrifices, and approximated to what has been known as Vāmāchāra."\(^{20}\) Nilakanta Sastri describes some of the common practices of the Kālamukhas as "smearing the body with ashes from a burning ghat, eating food in a skull, keeping a pot of wine. This


\(^{20}\) Bharadwaj, D.K., op.cit., p. 141.
sect had considerable influence in Karnataka of the 9th to 15th century.\textsuperscript{21} However, they produced great educationalists and religious teachers. They constructed temples, established monasteries which were repositories of learning and centres of education. Sudi and Hombal in Dharwad district were the main centres of this sect. Balligave in Shimoga district, was the stronghold of the Kālamukha teachers.

Of the institutions built by Kālamukhas, none was more famous than the math attached to the temple of Kēdārēshwarā, popularly known as Kodiya math. This math

(i) afforded opportunities for the worship of Sivalinga,

(ii) had some quarters attached to it in which Saiva ascetics could live and pursue their religious observances,

(iii) had a hospital in which all diseased persons were treated,

(iv) distributed food free to all who asked for it, and

\textsuperscript{21} Nilakanta Sastry, op.cit., p. 433.
(v) gave instructions in many branches of learning to students.\textsuperscript{22}

This math served both religious as well as social purposes.

In the 12th century when \textit{Vīrasaivism} made its appearance, society in Karnataka was split into innumerable sects, castes and communities and the interrelationships among them was by no means harmonious. Each was claiming superiority over another and, in this process, inter-group rivalries and animosities were generated. The four-fold division of society into Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaisya and Sudra along with numerous sub-divisions established rigid caste barriers. Those who were outside the pale of caste were thrust to the lower-most position in society. Ritualism and superstition reigned supreme. Spirits of different kinds, both benevolent and malevolent, held their sway over the minds of men. Ideas of high and low, superior and inferior were dominant. Similarly, ideas of purity and pollution were considered to be guiding factors in social

\textsuperscript{22} Epigraphia Carnatica, \textit{Vol. VIII, SK.No. 102.}
interaction. The distinction between one caste and another was maintained through the practice of commensality and connubium among members of the same caste. Women were relegated to the background and were never considered on par with men in religious as well as in social activities. "Religion", Tipperudraswamy comments, "instead of giving life, strength and illumination turned out to be, now and then, an instrument of exploitation, discrimination, inequality, corruption, superstition and dogmatism."23 It was in the context of these conditions that the reformist movement of Virasaivism took roots in Karnataka in the 12th century.

**Virasaivism**

One can entertain certain doubts about the antiquity of Virasaivism, but it suffices to take account of the fact that Virasaivism as it has come to be known today can be dated back to the 12th century. More than matters pertaining to its origin, what concerns us here is the way in which Virasaivism

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introduced the ideas of social reform and social service without deviating from the prescriptions of true religious life.

The Anubhava Mantapa of the 12th century is a characteristic institution identified with Vīrāsaivism. It provided an opportunity for men and women of different shades of religious faith to come together, to listen to religious discourses, and to participate in learned discussions. In the words of Kumarewamy, the Anubhava Mantap "is responsible for introducing important religious practices, ..... for undertaking activities of social amelioration, such as the elevation of the status of women, the abolition of caste distinctions, and the removal of untouchability, and for inculcating the dignity of manual labour and simplicity of life in the community."24

Thus, among the concerted efforts to usher in a welfare society, three important social reform activities could be pointed out as part of the programmes of social welfare as pronounced and carried out by

Basava, the social reformer of the 12th century. They are:

(i) Elevation of the status of woman,

(ii) Abolition of caste distinctions, and

(iii) Maintenance of dignity of labour
     or philosophy of Kāyaka.

(i). Elevation of the status of woman:

In the post-Vedic ages, the status of woman seems to have declined to an appalling extent. Women appear to have lost all their ancient grace in life and place of honour in society. Manu said, a woman must be kept in subordination, day and night, by the males of the family. It is emphasised again that a woman's father protects her in childhood, her husband in youth and her sons in old-age; she is never fit for independence (Na Strī Swatantryam Arhati). 25

Woman was systematically relegated to a lower position of society. The orthodox Hindus believed that

women were unfit to receive education and participate in any serious discussions. She was denied the religious rights.

Until Basava, the emancipator, came on the social scene her social position and status was not improved. He discarded the unjust idea of inferior status traditionally accorded to women. He poignantly asked the orthodox Pandits: "of what sex is the soul?" ("Atmakke Yava Linga"). The soil, in the existence of which Hindus believe, is one whole and indivisible in man as well as in woman. Hence Basava pleaded for equal status for women and encouraged them to participate fully in all religious and social activities and thus helped them to live a fuller life. It was on account of the emancipatory movement of Basava that there were a host of women mystics, philosophers and Vacanakārs like Akka Mahādevī, Muktāyakka and so on who enriched Kannada literature and Karnataka culture.

(ii). Abolition of Caste distinctions:

A free thinker and a champion of human rights as Basava was, he thought of establishing an egalitarian society in Karnataka. He rebelled against caste distinctions and, in fact, he undertook the momentous
task of eradication of untouchability, a social evil that we are facing even today. He tried to liberate the so-called "untouchables" from social tyranny. To him all men (including women) were equal by birth. No distinction was to be made on the basis of caste, creed, colour, race or occupations. That was why one could find in his Anubhav Mantap, among many celebrities, devotees or Saranas like Dōhar Kakkayya, a tanner; Mādar Chennayya, a cobbler; Jēdar Dasimayya, a weaver; Mādiwālā Machayya, a washerman; Hadapada Appanna, a barber; and Mēdāra Ketayya, a basket-maker, who came from different parts of the country. Basava was a pragmatist. He arranged for commensality and inter-caste marriages in order to bring about the kind of social transformation that he desired to bring about in establishing an egalitarian social order.

(iii). Dignity of Manual Labour:

The third important aspect of Basava's scheme of a welfare state is the doctrine of kāyaka. Literally, kāyaka means bodily labour. As enunciated and practiced by Basava and his followers it means a vocation, labour, work, duty or anything undertaken as a means of self-realisation. Its underlying principle is that man
should not live an idle life; no one has any right to eat his bread without earning it.

There is nothing like superiority or inferiority in work; every work is as great as any other work. Basava gave a new meaning to work. He said Kayaka is dedication, it is worship; it is heaven itself ("Kayakave Kailasa"). Every one, right from Basava, who was a Prime Minister under King Bijjala, to Haralayya, a cobbler, were required to work with the same sense of dedication. Thus, eight hundred years ago, dignity of labour was not only advocated but was put into practice by Basava. He treated all men as equals and held them in esteem, whether one was a carpenter, or a washerman, or a goldsmith or a woodcutter. He advocated the freedom of occupation, i.e., one is free to choose one's occupation without being tied to an occupation prescribed by caste.

Kayaka is to be done with a sense of Nishkamakarma, as a duty, and not as a means of amassing wealth. There is no place for begging in the philosophy of Basava. Kayaka discourages begging. If all men work, there can be no poverty in the country. Thus economic betterment can be brought about in society through Kayaka.