INTRODUCTION
CHAPTER ONE
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This Chapter is broadly divided into two sections. The first section, (A), contains a brief survey of Vīraśaivism. This is necessary because, we cannot speak of Vīraśaiva mysticism unless we are acquainted with the main features of Vīraśaiva philosophy and religion. The second section, (B), introduces us to the statement of the problem proper, namely, Vīraśaiva mysticism.

(A) A BRIEF SURVEY OF VĪRAŚAIVISM

The basic philosophical, religious, ethical and social doctrines of Vīraśaivism seem to be much older than Basavaṇṇa (c.1156 A.D.). Many saints of the twelfth century Karantaka, inspired and led by Basavaṇṇa undertook to reform the socio-religious face of the society in which they lived. The movement which was initially small and confined to the place where it began soon acquired the proportion of a revolution and began to attract people from various parts of India and spread to neighbouring states. This was able not only to change the face of the twelfth century Karnataka but that of the later as well, on many fronts – literary, philosophical, religious, ethical and social.

Earlier, people used to write in Sanskrit, because to write in Sanskrit was regarded as greater and more honourable than to write in one’s mother tongue. But Basavaṇṇa and his companions
broke away from this tradition and produced a wealth of expression, called vacanas (sayings), poetic in style and yet simple enough in conveying the deep philosophical and religious message even to the unlettered. The intention of these saints to write in Kannada was that the message which they wanted to convey would easily reach the people if it was conveyed in Kannada which all knew rather than in Sanskrit which only a few Pundits knew. They continued this tradition of writing in simple Kannada even after twelfth century and this has resulted in the enormous growth of vacana literature. It grew till as late as the end of nineteenth century. Even if we take into consideration the number of the extant vacanas and the number of saints and mystics who have authored them, it is astounding.

The Vīraśaiva saints and mystics have unanimously condemned the traditional Hindu practice of caste discrimination and denial of the right of worshipping to others than the Brahmans. The Brahmin priests performed sacrifices and rituals, and performed worships in temples for others and others could only watch the worship and partake of the holy food offered by them. This implies that only Brahmins had the right to enjoy the fruits of religion and others, if they had to enjoy those fruits, had to be reborn as Brahmins in their next life. Even the Brahmin women did not have the prerogative of worship. Basavaṇṇa who was himself a Brahmin, was totally displeased with this practice and began to
condemn it whenever and wherever possible. He decided to take the reins of reformation in his hand and was eventually supported morally and substantially by a few of his like-minded associates, notably, Cennabasavaṇṇa, his nephew, Allama Prabhudeva, Siddharāma, Akka Mahādevi, Maḍivāḷa Mācayya, Dhohara Kakkayya, Mādāra Cennayya, etc. To begin with, he visited the homes of the outcastes (which were situated as the practice then was) at the outskirts of the village or towns, separated from the localities of the caste Hindus. He developed friendship with some of them and even dined with them, thus courageously throwing away the traditional customs to winds.

The most noteworthy thing that he did in the direction of giving the right of religion to everybody was that he offered īṣṭaliṅga (a thumb-sized black shining object) to all those who wanted to convert themselves to Vīraśaivism. He preached that everybody, irrespective of caste, class or sex has an equal right to religion and its fruits. He taught that all those who wear īṣṭaliṅga on their person are Śiva-bhaktas (devotees of Śiva) and that there should be no discrimination amongst them on the basis of caste, class or sex.

Vīraśaivism teaches that the highest reality is infinite consciousness (Arivu or Jñāna) which is neither masculine nor feminine nor neuter. Only for want of a better term it is described as he. But this conventional description has no philosophical
justification. In philosophical and religious parlance, the Cit or Arivu is called Śiva or Paraśiva or Liṅga. Similarly, Vīraśaivism does not endorse the mythological description of Paraśiva as God wearing a garland of skulls, with the Kailāsa mountain as his abode, moving about on Naṇḍi, the sacred bull, dancing, etc.

For the Vīraśaiva saints and mystics Paraśiva is simply Sat-cit-ānanda having śakti (energy) as his attribute. It is this śakti which, on the one hand, becomes the world at his will and his guidance, and, on the other, enables him to act in various ways. The world is inextricably related with Paraśiva, such that it is often regarded as his body. Just as our living body is fully pervaded by the soul, so also the whole world is fully pervaded by the world-soul, Paraśiva. In other words, Paraśiva, the world with living and non-living beings and conscious and unconscious beings are ontologically one and only logically different, even as the waves and foams which are but the modes of the sea, are ontologically identical with, but logically different from, the sea.

Just as the world is regarded as the body of Paraśiva, so are the individual souls regarded as the parts of Paraśiva. In fact, the technical term used by the Vīraśaiva saints and mystics to denote the individual soul is “aṅga” which may mean either “body” or “part” of Paraśiva depending on the context. In the present state it has forgotten its original nature and its eternal relationship with Paraśiva and because of ignorance it wrongly thinks that it is an
independent individual having separate existence from Paraśiva. This ignorance induces it to commit all kinds of moral misdeeds and as a result suffers their evil consequences in the future life or lives. It commits similar deeds in the coming lives also, thus binding itself to a vicious cycle of re-births and re-deaths (bhavacakra). When knowledge dawns on him, he decides to liberate himself from the vicious cycle and, from a competent guru learns the technique of regaining the lost communion with Paraśiva.

In the mystic state the individual soul is liberated from the causes of pain and suffering and unites with Liṅga or Paraśiva, like a river with an ocean. Having united with Paraśiva it does not cease to be, but only ceases to regard itself as being independent of and separated from, Paraśiva, as it used to in the bound state, dominated by ignorance, ego, and other enemies of spiritual life.

The aim of Vīraśaiva spiritual life is to attain this union with Paraśiva. This is not a new status, but an eternal one, only forgotten in the state of bondage. Vīraśaivism as a religion offers certain guidelines for regaining the lost divine companionship. The guidelines can be broadly divided into two groups (a) aśṭāvarana (‘eight shields’), (b) paṅcācāras (‘fivefold acts’) and (c) śaṭ-sthala (‘six-stages’). The ‘eight shields’ coming under the first group are, guru, liṅga, jaṅgama, pādālaka, prasāda, vibhūti, rudrākṣi and mantra. That is, one who is tired of his entanglement in the
saihśāra (cycle of births and deaths) and decides to come out of it, approaches a competent teacher (guru), who initiates him compassionately to Vīraśaivism. He offers him an iṣṭa-liṅga with the instruction that he has to worship it daily thrice or at least once. Jaṅgama is the social and spiritual mentor, who sees to it that everybody treads on the moral religious track prescribed by Vīraśaivism and punishes those who go astray.

It is believed that pādodaka or the water that touches the feet of the guru becomes holy enough to purify the aspirant when it is sipped by him. The aspirant is advised to consume it daily with this belief. The initiate is taught to treat everything he experiences as 'holy food' (prasāda) granted by Paraśiva. This attitude creates in him a sense of gratitude towards Paraśiva, the creator. Devotion is a way of expressing one's gratefulness to Paraśiva for having given him the prasāda called the body, senses, mind, the objects of sense – in fact, the whole world. The result of this attitude is a tremendous change in his style of thinking and living. Just as by offering a food to God one gets it converted into holy food (prasāda), so also by offering mentally everything – form, smell, sound, etc.- to God he gets it converted to prasāda; and just as by consuming the holy food he thinks that he becomes pure (purged of sins), so also by experiencing things which he has offered mentally to God he becomes purged of impurities. The idea behind is that he thinks that everything is God-given (prasāda) and nothing is his – not even
his senses, mind, body, etc. This is the surest way of becoming unselfish and unselfishness is the surest way to become pure.

The aspirant is advised to smear himself with vibhūti (holy ash) in various parts of his body regularly and wear the garland of rudrākṣa beads always. He is also advised to utter the mantra ‘om namahśivāya’ during the entire course of worship, and if possible, always since it is an easy way of remembering God always and concentrating one’s mind on God during meditation.

Pañcacāra is a group of acts which the aspirant is expected to perform in order to achieve the goal. The group consists of five acts, namely, lingācāra, sadācāra, śivācāra, gaṇācāra and bhṛtyācāra. In one of his vacanas Cennabasavaṇṇa says defines these acts. (1) To worship Liṅga and no other God is lingācāra; (2) to observe all moral codes prescribed by the Guru is sadācāra; (3) to treat all Śiva-devotees as equal without discriminating between them on the basis of their caste, family, background, class and to dine with them is śivācāra; (4) to refuse to hear bad or false talks about the Śiva-devotees or Vīraśaivism is gaṇācāra; and (5) to regard oneself as smaller and treat all others as greater with respect is bhṛtyācāra.¹ These acts, which include religious, moral and social, aim at purifying one’s soul and also at constructing religiously and morally cohesive society.

Ṣaṭ-sthalas are the six stages through which the aspirant develops his spiritual life. The six steps, in the progressive order,
are bhakta, maheśa, prasādi, prāṇaliṅgi, śaraṇa and aikya. These six stages can be broadly divided into three groups: the first two called, bhakta and maheśa, are based on faith and give importance to the performance of acts. These acts are both technical acts, like worshipping Liṅga, respecting guru and jaṅgama, wearing rudrākṣi, smearing oneself with holy ash, listening to the discourses on how to develop devotion and attain the spiritual goal, and moral acts, like feeding the needy, abstaining from injury, falsehood, stealing and adultery, and being compassionate to animals and to one's neighbours, etc. Moral acts remove selfishness and make the soul pure; similarly technical acts help us to love God and to lead a God-oriented life.

The second group - prasādi and prāṇaliṅgi - installs in us a metaphysical knowledge that not only what we eat and drink, but also the air we breathe, the smell, sound, touch, we enjoy are prasāda (God-given). The concept of prasāda implies that just as what is offered to Paraśiva becomes prasāda and therefore, becomes eligible for a devotee's consumption, so also what we experience and the instruments of experience (senses, mind, ego, etc.) must themselves become prasāda. In order to do this the devotee has to realize that Paraśiva enjoys everything before we enjoy, because he is at the tip of every sense.

This way of thinking makes the soul further unselfish and purer and more eligible for meditation. The third group – śaraṇa
and aikya – is a training in meditation. In the meditation or mystic experience the soul realizes that it is different from body, sense, mind, intellect and ego, and that it is pure consciousness with eternal bliss. Further, it realizes an eternal union with Paraśiva.

Having experienced this union with Paraśiva, the individual later regards himself, not as a separate individual, but as a vehicle of Paraśiva or as a body occupied by Paraśiva. Such loss of personal freedom and ego, makes him immensely happy and creates in him a sense of satisfaction and fulfillment.

The Vīraśaiva mystic is not unsocial. Far from thinking that he should retire to a forest or become a social recluse, he imposes on himself the burden of releasing other men. He wants others to become free like himself. In other words, he becomes a guru or a jaṅgama. It is on the basis of such altruistic ideals that the Vīraśaiva mystics and saints of the twelfth century Karnataka wanted to build their society. Such a society which was a great ideal to the revolutionary saints, was hated by most of the traditional minded people, including the king and many of his ministers. But unfortunately the revolutionary act, namely, marrying a Brahmin girl to an outcaste, led to a great socio-political upheaval and by the order of the king, Bijjala, these revolutionary saints and mystics were hounded out. They scattered in various directions leaving behind, fortunately, the vast wealth of vacanas.
After nearly four centuries perhaps there was an attempt to collect the vacanas which were lost in the oblivion and some saints who were still heads of mathas here and there began to write vacanas and this tradition was kept alive till the end of the nineteenth century.

(B) STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM:

Philosophy in India always begins, not with wonder or curiosity, as it did in the west, but with a firm realization that some of the problems which man both as an individual and as a member of his society faces are interminable. There is no denying the fact that man's existence is so much penetrated by miseries that it is impossible to conceive of it without also conceiving one kind of misery or the other. Indian philosophers, including the Vīraśaiva mystics and saints have classified these miseries into three groups,

a. The natural calamities such as famine, floods, fire, wild animals, etc. are the problems which not only the primitive man but also the modern man is facing now and then. Some other miseries can be mitigated but problems such as floods, etc. cannot be mitigated. The Sāṁkhya philosophers have termed these difficulties adhibhautika (caused by the physical nature).

b. There are certain difficulties which man has to face and these are caused not by nature but deliberately by gods and goddesses. It is believed that when man forgets or ignores or deliberately disrespects gods and goddesses they become angry and
send evils, like great epidemic diseases (for example, cholera, small pox). The Sāṃkhya philosophers have termed these difficulties adhidaivika (difficulties caused by deities).

c. Man has to face certain difficulties which are caused by neither nature nor gods and goddesses, but by man himself. These difficulties which the Sāṃkhya philosophers called ādhyātmika (difficulties caused by oneself) are due to man's freedom of will. Man can use his freedom either for the attainment of sensual pleasure or for the attainment of spiritual bliss (ānanda). But man, according to ancient Indian philosophers, because of ignorance thinks that material (sensual) pleasure is more important than the spiritual bliss. He also thinks that he is more important than others. Therefore, his selfishness and his passion for material pleasure which are caused by his ignorance drive him to perform all kinds of actions for the attainment of sensual pleasures. These actions are overeating, cheating, murder, robbery, war, etc. A man who overeats has to suffer the evil consequences (indigestion); a man who cheats or commits theft or robbery has to reap the consequences, namely, the punishment either by the people or by the court. If his theft or robbery or cheating is not punished by anybody then the law of karma takes care of him. So in any case man's suffering of this type is due to himself.

One may argue that these difficulties, whatever their nature and intensity, ought to come to an end with our death. But the
ancient Indian philosopher believed in rebirth. This means that, not some man, but the same man has to face these difficulties in one form or the other.

Man has not passively suffered this threefold misery (tāpatraya). He has found out remedies to these difficulties. For example, when there are earthquakes, floods, etc., he receives early warnings such that he leaves the place of calamities. He knows how to overcome famines. He has successfully wiped out such dreaded epidemic diseases as small pox, influenza, pneumonia, etc. He also knows how to cure diseases like, typhoid, TB, malaria, etc. Similarly, he knows that by performing certain rituals, which include certain offerings in honour of gods and goddesses, he can pacify the gods and goddesses who as a result withdraw evils which they had sent. Similarly for self-caused difficulties man has discovered remedies. For example, when he suffers from indigestion he goes to a doctor. When A cheats B, B becomes alert next time while dealing with him or punishes him. Similarly, for theft, robbery, war, etc., man has his own remedies.

This means that man has discovered mundane remedies for the mundane problems he suffers. But there is no guarantee that these difficulties will not recur. One may be free from certain diseases today; but he may have it or some other disease tomorrow; one may not have flood today but tomorrow he may have it or some other natural calamity. This means that the difficulties of one kind
or the other are permanent and the solutions are temporary. Thus the difficulties are inseparable part of human existence. No wonder that Buddha concluded that the whole world is full of suffering (sarvāṁ duḥkhamayaṁ jagat).

But it is the unique feature of the ancient Indian thinkers including the Vīraśaiva philosophers that, instead of being driven to a hopeless pessimism, they were engaged in finding a permanent solution. Having realized the temporariness of the remedies offered by science they turned to philosophy for help. In other words, they stopped asking, By what remedy can we cure this ill or that, etc, and began to ask such philosophical questions as, Are these miseries a tragic tricks played on man and animals by a supernatural agency? Or are they just natural consequence of heredity and environment to which they are by chance related? Or they a result of a just requital in accordance with a non-natural moral law? Does man's aim consist in mitigating them as and when they come or can they be terminated completely? Is man destined to suffer them, or is there any blissful freedom from them? If there is, what are the ways and means of accomplishing it?

This philosophical approach to the worldly problems leads him to the conclusion that only knowledge saves him from them. By knowledge is meant neither scientific knowledge derived from observation and experiment nor inferential or demonstrative knowledge, like logic or mathematics. The ancient Indian thinkers
knew as well as we do now, that neither of these two modes of
knowing would help us in redeeming mankind. This does not,
however, imply that they had no respect for knowledge of medicine,
mathematics and logic. They did have respect for them as well as
other practical and theoretical sciences. But they held that they
were unable to solve the ills permanently. If our question is, How
can we solve the problem of small pox, science, and only science,
can come to our aid. But if our question is, How can we free
ourselves from suffering as such, philosophy, and not science, is
useful.

Though by knowledge the Vīraśaivas mean philosophy, the
philosophy that guides us to a blissful life must be distinguished
from other kinds of philosophy. The word ‘philosophy’ has meant
different things to different people. The ancient Greeks who
expected a philosopher to unravel the secrets of the world thought
that philosophy is a kind of science. Thales, Anaximander,
Empedocles, Democritus, were all philosophers, because they
claimed that they knew the secret of the world, that is, they knew
that the world is made up of some substance, like water or air or
four material elements or qualitiless atoms. Philosophers of the
Medieval period expected philosophy to prove the existence of God,
soul, immortality, necessity of religion, etc. Contemporary
philosophers expect philosophy to logically analyze language or
concept. But none of these kinds of philosophy will solve our
existential problems. So for the ancient Indians, including the 
Viraśaivas, philosophical knowledge means Jñāna or Arivu.

But what is the meaning of ‘jñāna’ (‘Arivu’)? Jñāna means 
both śaṁyaga-jñāna and tattva-jñāna. (metaphysical knowledge). 
Śaṁyaga-jñāna means the second hand knowledge which is 
impacted to an aspirant by a teacher. The teacher (guru) who 
impacts it may himself be a seeker and might have acquired that 
knowledge from another guru like himself. In any case, 
śaṁyaga-jñāna, which is intellectual and discursive, consists of 
certain deeper metaphysical truths. For example, that the essence 
of man is soul and man is an inseparable part of Paraśiva, is one 
such truth; that man’s forgetting (marevu) of this truth is the root 
cause of all suffering, is another piece of śaṁyaga-jñāna.

Tattva-jñāna, on the other hand, means direct perception of 
tattva (the essence). In other words, the first guru who imparts the 
metaphysical truth of śaṁyaga-jñāna to his disciple, must have 
himself perceived them directly in his mystic state. Thus, the 
contents of both śaṁyaga-jñāna and tattva-jñāna are the same the 
difference being only in the mode of knowing them. While 
tattva-jñāna is directly attained by the mystic, śaṁyaga-jñāna is a 
report, or a philosophical version of direct perception, tattva-jñāna; 
while śaṁyaga-jñāna is a map, tattva-jñāna is the goal.

Now the question is, What is the significance of tattva-jñāna ? 
The significance of tattva-jñāna lies in not merely discovering a
truth; not merely knowing that Paraśiva is the highest reality and the individual soul is a part of it, but in something else. If it were a discovery it should have been a means to some end. But according to Vīraśaivism tattva-jñāna itself is the end. One who has arrived at the end has solved the perennial problem of existence. He has no pain and suffering in this life nor hereafter; in fact, he does not have next birth. All his karmas have been reduced to ashes and he leads an eternally blissful communion with Paraśiva. If jñāna means tattva-jñāna, then one must attain it, if one is interested seriously in solving the perennial problems of human existence. And he must attain such a knowledge while he is alive. In other words, the goal conceived by the Vīraśaivas is not something that is attained after death but something attained when one is alive.

Now, the question is, What is the nature of tattva-perception, or in other words, What are the defining marks of mystic experience as conceived by the Vīraśaivas? What are the ways and means of acquiring mystic experience? Or, in other words, what are the beliefs and practices that make a man a śivayogi (Vīraśaiva mystic)? How does Vīraśaiva mysticism differ from other forms, if any, of mysticism?

The present thesis undertakes to answer these questions in the following manner. Chapter Two deals with the problem of Vīraśaiva concept of God and his relation to world and soul. This issue is important because the Vīraśaiva mysticism claims that
man perceives God and becomes one with him; because he claims that he perceives God not only in mystic intuition, but also, when he returns to the waking state, in every particle of the world, including his body-mind complex.

In Chapter Three, characteristics of mystic experience in general and those of Vīraśaiva mysticism in particular are studied. Without resorting to apply the model conceived by Stace, in which mystic experiences are recognized distinctly as extrovertive and introvertive, this thesis simply lists the main characteristics which are regarded as the core of mystic experience. Thus it is concluded that

(1) mystic experience is supra-sensory and supra-intellectual;
(2) mystic experience is an experience of the noumenal something or infinite consciousness or Paraśiva or God;
(3) mystic experience is a vision of unity;
(4) mystic experience involves loss of ego;
(5) mystic experience is spaceless and timeless;
(6) mystic experience is blissful;
(7) mystic experience is ineffable;
(8) mystic experience results in a transformed life.

The Chapter Four, entitled “Means to Mystic Experience” takes up the problem, What are the ways and means advocated by the Vīraśaivas in order to attain mystic experience? As an answer
to this question, the Chapter deals with the three important Vīraśāiva doctrines, regarded as often as the life and soul of Vīraśāivism, namely, āstāvaraṇa, pañcācāra and ṣaṭ-sthala. An attempt is made here to show how the different elements of mystic education at its six stages help the aspirant to become pure, thus becoming eligible for mystic experience and how in the last stage his purged soul attains communion with Paraśiva.

In the fifth and final chapter, entitled “Conclusion”, Vīraśāiva mysticism is compared with other types of mysticism based on such philosophical schools as Advaita of Śaṅkara, Śāṅkhya and Mahāyāna Buddhism. The comparison aims at showing that Vīraśāiva metaphysics is coherent with mystic experience.

REFERENCES: