

A Young Man's Crusade against Casteism and Untouchability: A Study of Basavaraj Naikar's Play, *Light of Humanity*

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Abstract

Indian English Drama is very poor as compared to the Indian English Fiction for a variety of reasons. And the Indian English Religious drama is poorer still. Basavaraj Naikar's *Light of Humanity*, which happens to be the first Indian English play ever written on the life and mission of Basaveswara, a great mystic and revolutionary of 12th century Karnataka. It is especially important because it compresses the epic material of Basava's vast and complex life into the dramatic form and offers a panoramic though synoptic view of his life and achievement by removing the all the legendary, miraculous and improbable element that has accrued to his life over the last nine centuries. He has presented the great mystic's life in a modern realistic style, which appeals to the modern reader and spectator greatly.

Key Words: Casteism, untouchability, Basavaraj Naikar, Light of Humanity

Indian English Drama is very poor as compared to the Indian English Fiction for a variety of reasons. And the Indian English Religious drama is poorer still. Basavaraj Naikar's *Light of Humanity*, which happens to be the first Indian English play ever written on the life and mission of Basaveswara, a great mystic and revolutionary of 12th century Karnataka. It is especially important because it compresses the epic material of Basava's vast and complex life into the dramatic form and offers a panoramic though synoptic view of his life and achievement by removing the all the legendary, miraculous and improbable element that has accrued to his life over the last nine centuries. He has presented the great mystic's life in a modern realistic style, which appeals to the modern reader and spectator greatly.

From time immemorial, India has been suffering from social diseases like casteism, conservatism, orthodoxy, untouchability and gender discrimination, which have adversely affected and vitiated the socio-cultural life of India. The concept of these social abuses was implanted in the mind of the Hindus by the ancient sages and saints who have built the citadel of irrisistance with a view to securing them against opposition and remonstrance. The Brahmins who advocated adherence to these practices perpetuated them in the face of opposition. These social evils persisted vigorously in this sacred land till independence after which they began to wither away and pave the path for socio-political integration and achievement.

In the past many religious personalities were born in the golden soil of India to crusade against these maladies.

They have launched campaigns from time to time to demolish the fort that fortified the security of these social abuses. They have partly succeeded in their efforts but failed to exterminate them as a result of which these abuses still exist in Indian community with the support of the people of the upper-class societies. After independence many social organizations have emerged with a commitment to root out them and they inspire social activists to revolt against them and awaken consciousness among the people to oppose them for the sake of social peace and national integration.

Among the social reformers, immortal in history for their struggle against casteism and untouchability is a young man of Karnataka of the 12th century. He is Basava, the son of Madarasa, the Mayor of the town Bagewadi. He is born to a South Indian Brahmin family of conservatism and orthodoxy. He is a charismatic personality for his iconoclastic objective and activities. He becomes a pioneer of social reformation from his boyhood and undertakes actively and enthusiastically various works of reformation in his youth. He is rebelliously a revolutionary and a social activist who resolves to rebel against casteism and untouchability by overthrowing the supremacy of the orthodox Brahmins who resist their opposition. He sets up a Mystic Academy known as *Anubhava Mantapa* with an objective of converting the *Sudras* to *Saranas* which presupposes castelessness and emotional integration among them and democratization of their castes. It further aims at spiritualizing the devotees by way of discourse and exhortation. The *Saranas* identify themselves as men of casteless society of touchable *Sivayogi*. They enjoy free movement in the society without

inhibitions and prohibition because of the congenial social situation brought about by Basava.

Basavaraj Naikar's play opens with a discussion and argument between father Madarasa and his son Basava. His father one day reveals an incident in the course of his discussion with his son and states that an untouchable man named Keta one day listens to the incantation of the Vedic mantras and once he looks into the temple of Lord Siva. These two trivial affairs inculcate the *Sudras* for having defiled the community of the Brahmins by violating the forbidden practices. It is a heresy propounded by the Brahmins that the Vedic mantras are polluted if they are listened to by a *Sudra* and another belief is ingrained in the conventions that the temple is desecrated on account of a *Sudra's* glance into it. On the basis of these two issues the Brahmins remonstrate against such sacrilegious offence committed by Keta who profanes the mantras and the temple. They complain to Basava's father as he is the mayor and pester him to punish the offender, but the mayor restrains himself from punishing him but warns him against such act of desecration. Basava after listening to these allegations challenges the justifications of such views in support of the *Sudra*. He refutes the statements that they are superfluously blind and irrational beliefs. He disagrees with such views in the following words: "my reason does not allow me to accept such age-old belief" (P.79). His father, however, continues to convince him of the justification of untouchability of the *Sudras* who according to him are predestined to suffer social segregation and humiliation for their prenatal misdeed of previous life. They are looked down upon

for their dirtiness and untidiness and forced to live outside the human habitation. Even their shadows are also viewed as sacrilegious. His calumnious remarks against the *Sudras* are crystallized in his pronouncement. These assumptions are contentious and controversial. Basava flouts his father's assertion and disregards his contention against the *Sudras* as misconception of the Brahmins. He states that the *Sudras* like other men and women are created by God. He denies the justification of caste discrimination on the ground of equality of birth. He reacts sentimentally to his father's derogatory remarks on the *Sudras* and vindicates them by way of logical arguments. Basava does not betray any inhibition for his association with them.

One day he visits the *Sudra*'s colony to meet an untouchable man named Keta in order to give him medicine as the latter was suffering from fever.

As regards his disregard for the Brahmins he is predisposed to deprecate their discriminatory tendency and deprecatory attitude towards the *Sudras*. They contemptuously ostracize them on the ground of their low birth and uncleanness. Basava attributes such unfair treatment of the Brahmins to their blind adherence to *varnasarama*-system. He further denounces them for their autocratic and arbitrary imputation of guilt to the *Sudras* whom they conventionally debase them and treat them disdainfully. The Brahmins are further censured for depriving the *Sudras* of their right to study Sanskrit. Besides, he further betrays his despondency on the issue of temple culture: "I am disappointed here also by temple culture" (P.96).

The Brahmins invariably maintain their supremacy in the society because of their social superiority but they conceal their moral weaknesses by way of double dealing. This double dealing is a strange contradiction that evinces their hypocrisy and notoriety. Basava highlights their profligacy and depravity by exposing their nefarious activities. The Brahmin priests who despise the *Sudra* scornfully in daytime go to their houses furtively at night in order to enjoy the *devadasi*. In this context Basava comments: "The Vedic Priests and Pundits who preach the high moral violate them stealthily or openly for their secret pleasure and aggrandizement" (P.96). Basava externalizes his resentment against them and highlights their moral turpitude.

He shifts his attention from his criticism against the Brahmin towards the misconception of the ancient sage Manu who implanted the concept of casteism and untouchability in the mind of the Brahmins who conventionalized it and perpetuated it till the end of the 20th century. Basava criticizes Manu's irrational conceptualization of vicious social practices which divide the society into touchable and untouchable and disintegrate it irreconcilably. The embedment of these vices in the social life is intended to elevate the position of the Brahmins and augment their dignity.

Basava opposes the convention of thread ceremony. He even pleads his reluctance to undergo this performance and wear sacred thread on the ground of his having put on the *istalinga*, which represents classlessness and social indiscrimination. As the priest directs him to wear the thread he disinclines and refuses: "I do not want to

wear it” (P.84). He argues against the conventional practice of thread ceremony and disappoints the priest who brings this matter to the knowledge of the Council of great Brahmins of Bagewadi. As a result, the Council excommunicates the family of the mayor in the cause of his son’s association with the untouchables and his relinquishment of thread ceremony. Basava as an iconoclast disparages vehemently the Vedic practice of conducting thread ceremony, caste discrimination, animal immolation and fire services which according to his contention are prejudicial and misanthropic to the communal interest. He, therefore, meditates to subvert them iconoclastically and re-formatively.

After getting the news of excommunication he departs from his father’s residence at Bagewadi and rushes to Isanyaguru’s hermit to undergo the initiation of *lingadiksa*. At this institution he proves his talent as an extraordinary scholar, by thoroughly digesting all scriptures of the Vedic literature. He acquires the knowledge of the Upanishads and Saivism of different states of India. In the course of teaching and questioning, he embarrasses his teachers by arguing rationally and irrefutably with them.

Basava contemplates a utopian scheme of social reformation and conceptualizes a new practice to democratize the *Sudras* and socialize them by characterizing them as *Saranas*. *Saranas*’ Association is conceived as a new socio-religious institution that welcomes the people of lower caste to assemble at one place and associate with one another. He, however, continues to undertake the task of reformation and sets on to initiate the

lingadiksa at *Anubhava Mantapa*. He wishes to universalize the study of Sanskrit and the practice of religious performances. He insinuates the *Sudras* to acquire this Vedic language.

The people irrespective of castes congregate at an open space and listen to Basava’s illuminating discourse that impresses them and motivates them to undergo initiation of *istalinga-diksa*. He exhorts them to consecrate their life by abstaining from non-vegetarian food and drinking liquor. They are further inculcated to repose faith in one God. He instructs them to refresh themselves in the morning and pay respect to one another. In response to his edification the devotees adhere to the practices enunciated by him and pass the eligibility test to assume the personality of *Sarana*.

The devotees come from different states of India such as from Kashmir, Malva, Afghanistan, Gujarat, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra. These devotees consist of men and women from different professional lives such as washer men, needle worker, ferrymen, artist, and cobblers. Among them there were King Mahadeva and his queen Mahadevi, who have renounced their kingly life and come all the way to *Anubhava Mantapa* to derive inspiration from the discourses to be delivered by Basava who successfully brings about a radical change in the way of living and personalities of the devotees. He remarkably spiritualizes them by way of inculcation and exhortation.

In the Scene VI some citizens discuss among themselves the various benevolent services rendered by Basava and admire his selfless dedication to the welfare

of the lower castes. He is credited for his impressive discourses and his remarkable way of convincing and mending the nature of the devotees. His discourses act as an instrument of reforming the manners and ways of living of *Sudras*.

Meantime some changes come over the mind of some personalities like Madhuvarasa, who arrogantly feels himself superior to others and disdains the cobbler, Haralayya. Subsequently he undergoes a temperamental and attitudinal change and becomes extremely sociable and amiable due to moral and spiritual influence exerted upon him by Basava. Madhuvarasa consents to attend the Mystic Academy and undergo *lingadiksha*. The concept of classlessness and social equality impresses him and impels him to be a *Sarana*. Thus, the credit of change that occurs in his personality goes to Basava. They begin to live an immaculate life and consecrate their communal existence being inspired and influenced by Basava. In this regard citizen 2 in the course of his discussion in the Scene 6 admires Basava for his efforts to effect a change in the community of the *Sudras*: “Nowadays the untouchable people have given up their filthy habit and taken to better the way of life” (P.130). Similarly, there occurs a radical change in the life of the *Sudras* who turn over a new leaf and desist from vicious activities. His institutionalization of inter-caste marriage exhilarates the *Sudras* but antagonizes the Brahmins and outrages their sentiment where upon they remonstrate against the newly introduced system. However, the multi-dimensional reformations achieved by Basava for the betterment of the lower castes augment his popularity and instill jealousy in the Brahmins and provoke them to devise a

conspiracy against the protagonist in order to criminalize his personality and activities.

As Basava takes charges of finance as a minister, he devotes himself to providing facilities of living to the untouchables and liberates them to move freely in the society. In the discussion on Basava’s praise-worthy services to the society citizen 2 admires his achievements and comments: “There has been remarkable progress in Kalyan after minister Basava took charge of the finances of the Kingdom” (P.160). His laudable socio-religious activities contribute to improvement in the life of the *Sudras* and conduce to his popularization. In this connection Citizen 2 remarks; “on the whole brother Basava has been growing very popular these days. His reputation has spread far and wide in our Bharat (P.131). His popularity intensifies the jealousy and malice in the community of the Brahmins and antagonizes them against him. Out of antagonistic grudge they hatch two conspiracies against him one after another in order to incriminate him on various charges. The first one is executed after Basava assumes the post of a finance minister. The second one is manipulated after his implication in the solemnization of inter-caste marriage. As the first attempt fails to accuse him, they devise another conspiracy to incriminate him by levelling many allegations on him. As regards their first attempt they machinate to embitter the king’s mind against Basava by accusing him of misappropriation of finance of the state, but their allegation is falsified, after investigation and Basava is exculpated from the charge of misappropriation. Consequent upon his exoneration from the charges levelled on him by the Brahmins they devise a new intrigue maliciously against him in

order to calumniate him and involve him in incriminating offences. This time they contemplate to prejudice the king against him. With this evil motive they bring to his notice many allegations against him. One of them is his profanation of the Brahmin caste by having his lunch at the cottage of an untouchable cobbler Nagimayya. They accuse him of defilement of their caste in the following words: “Damodara says the worst thing that Basava has done is that he has desecrated our holy Hindu religion by partaking of his lunch at the hut of Nagimaya the cobbler in the untouchable colony. He has contaminated the community of the Brahmins” (P.161). As regards their second allegation, he is accused of having enthroned a *Sudra* Allamaprabhu on the Chair of Divinity. Besides, the Brahmins offend him on the ground of having solemnized the inter-caste marriage between the daughter of Madhuvarasa, a Brahmin and the son of Haralayya, a cobbler. They denounce Basava for having desecrated their community by violating the conventions and practices of *varnasrama* which he defies and thereby commits an unforgivable sin. They further add to his offences that he has encouraged and enthused the *Sudras* to behave arrogantly with them regardless of their superiority and dignity. Their disrespectful behaviour towards them tells upon their social position and dignity. All these charges levelled on Basava are contradicted logically and rationally by him. Basava asserts: “I strongly believe in social equality, religious equality and gender equality. I do not think Nagimaya to be an untouchable low caste cobbler, as he has already embraced *Sarana*-hood” (P.161). He further justifies his reformatory action as beneficial to the people. He asserts that he

has never done anything detrimental to the society. This stratagem fabricated by the Brahmins is intended to demoralize him and get him punished. Their mischief embarrasses the emperor, as the allegations are found unsubstantial, exaggerated and distorted. Although he confesses his acts of profanation as alleged by the Brahmins yet asserts vindictively the justification of his deeds to convince them of his uprightness and rectitude. This conspiratorial plotting of their diabolic plan disheartens Basava so much so that he is overwhelmingly mortified and agonized. Out of mental agony, he decides then and there to resign his post of Minister from the royal services and resolves to quit the city of Kalyana and proceed to Kudala-Sangama. With this resolution in mind, he surrenders his crown before the Emperor and departs from the place with the following statement: “I hereby relinquish my position of a minister” (P.1630). His abandonment of ministership upsets the Emperor Bijjala who believes in Basava’s innocence, genuineness, uprightness and integrity.

Before his departure from the Mystic Academy, Basava makes an appeal to all the *Saranas* to stay back at *Anubhava Mantapa* to carry on his missionary propaganda so as to perpetuate the trend of conversion of the non-Brahmins to *Saranas*. The departure of Basava from Kalyana eclipses all religious campaigns on account of upheaval of anarchy and chaos in Kalyana. In the wake of his migration to Kudala-Sangama there ensues a virtual reign of terror in the town concomitant with alarming events that jeopardize the existence of the *Saranas* and impel them to flee to different places of Karnataka. The Emperor Bijjala was assassinated by his enemies in the disguise

of the security guards. With the exception of this incident Madhuvarasa and Haralayya were arrested and sentenced to death on the ground of their having desecrated the convention and tradition by solemnizing inter-caste marriage. Besides, the assassination of emperor is attributed to the innocent *Saranas*. With this assumption of their implication in the crime, the Prince Sovideva orders the soldiers to slaughter them. Consequently, the *Saranas* migrate to different places being apprehensive of their massacre. They resolve to devote themselves in their new places to disseminate the philosophy of *Sarana* Faith. They decide to explain and accentuate the theological significance of *Sarana* Faith and carry-on the indoctrination of its principles.

The flight of these *Saranas* with manuscripts of *vacana* poetry to different places of Karnataka is reminiscent of the upheaval of Renaissance in Europe in the 14th century. The scholars who abided in Constantinople fled from the city to different places of Europe being dreaded by the attack of the Ottoman Turks. These scholars who migrated to different cities of Europe devoted themselves to enlightenment and dissemination of their knowledge as a result of which Europe was enlightened by an awakening of renaissance. This historical event bears similarity with the evacuation of the *Saranas* from Kalyana and their propagation of the doctrines and philosophy of *Sarana* Faith at their migrated places.

These incidents are followed by the occurrence of the death of Basava and his wife. The death of Basava brings about a cessation in reformatory activities in Kalyana and Kudala-Sangama. Thus, the

chapter that reflects on Basava's crusade against social evils is closed.

History reveals that reformers are generally victimized for their struggle for extinction of social evils. Sometimes, they are either killed by their opponents or subjected to persecution by their enemies. A few references to reformations undertaken by the social activists are cited below for the sake of illustration. In this context the dedication of Swami Dayananda to eradication of social maladies is mentionable.

Swami Dayananda Saraswati founded the Brahma Samaj as a vehicle of effecting reformation. He vehemently opposed casteism and other social evils and proclaimed their abolition. He however upheld the significance of the Veda and opposed idol worship as superstitious. As a result, his opponents conspired against him and poisoned him to death in order to put an end to his reformatory campaign.

Another such example can be cited of the struggle launched by Dr. Ambedkar, who consistently remonstrated against casteism and untouchability. He himself became a target of attack by the upper-class society. He has been persecuted and humiliated throughout his life for his opposition to the social evils that predominated in Indian society. Finally, he succeeded in seeking constitutional recognition in favour of the *Sudras* and proclaimed democratization of the lower castes. It was for him that Indian constitution, framed a strict law to protect the lower castes from social humiliation and persecution. Indian constitution has ensured social security to them because of the influence of Ambedkar.

Similarly, the historical figure Martin Luther had to face terrible opposition in his reformative services which motivated his opponents to oppose his activities. Martin Luther a German priest found the Roman church to be absolutely corrupt and monopolistic in religious dispensation. Luther brought their corruption to light and thereby displeased the Pope Leo- X. He challenged his authority and autocracy of his office for which he was excommunicated like Basava and his family. Luther had to face much criticism and social ostracism for his repudiation of church services on the ground of its corruption.

Another illustration of sacrifice can be borrowed from the life of Martin Luther King an American Negro. This leader revolted against oppression upon the Negroes in America who were persecuted and looked down upon on the ground of colour. He protested against apartheid and succeeded in abolishing it, but he was killed by an assassin for his struggle for winning the approval of Govt. for democratic treatment of the Negroes. Martin Luther is immortal for his sacrifice of life for the racial upliftment of his community.

Abraham Lincoln the former president of America was also shot dead for his proclamation against slave trade and his struggle for emancipation of the Negroes. He accomplished his task of abolishing the condemnable practice of slave trade by waging a war against the Southern states of America. This was the most benevolent service rendered by Lincoln for the protection and emancipation of the Negroes.

Another crusader against casteism was a lady revolutionary of Maharashtra named Savitribai Phule, who vehemently

opposed casteism, untouchability and child marriage etc. and rebelled against their existence in the society. She had also to incur the resentment of many men of the upper caste society for her crusade against these evil practices that thrived in the social life.

Another most daring combatant against casteism is Vinayak Damodar Sarvarkar. His name is shining in Indian history as a social activist. He has dedicated his entire life to the task of crusading against casteism and untouchability in the face of serious resistance by the upper-class societies. He had to encounter many oppositions and antagonism for his struggle for extermination of all these social abuses. He succeeded partly in his endeavor but failed to achieve his premeditated target entirely. His rigorous campaign against these social evils contributed considerably to their languishment and extinction in the later years.

Thus, Indian life is mostly afflicted by the hazards of social abuses which have been predominating in the socio-political life and hindering the achievements of national unity and prosperity. However, these maladies have begun to languish and die out in the last part of the twentieth century on account of emergence of many agitational campaigns launched by socialist movements and organizations. The present democratic situation foreshadows the imminent extinction of the evils in future.

Basava has passed away from this world of conflict between the Brahmins and the *Sudras* by accomplishing halfway the stupendous task of revolutionizing Indian social life but has left it incomplete. Nevertheless, the seeds of struggle against

the social abuses sown by him germinate in the last part of the 20th century in the form of widespread rebellion that breaks out preponderantly and assumes gigantic proportion in the socio-political life in India. In other words, this young crusader has inaugurated the opening of an avenue along which the combatants of the evils traverse to grapple with them and give a death blow to the demons of casteism and untouchability which are losing their vitality and longevity. As a result of their persistence in fighting these abuses the citizens of lower castes feel emancipated from the oppression of caste distinction and untouchability and enjoy full freedom of association and companionship of the people of upper castes. These social evils that subordinated and marginalized the *Sudras* till the last part of the 20th century are now buried in the grave of oblivion without resurrection.

World history is a repository of incidents of reformations. One of them is the consistent struggle of a South Indian young

crusader enshrined in Indian history as a martyr for his sacrifice and dedication to the upliftment of the lower castes. In this context Basavaraj Naikar's dramatization of the life and the crusade of the protagonist against social abuses inspires us and reinforces our rebellious spirit to combat these adversaries of social evils and annihilate them for the sake of pacification and national integration.

Light of Humanity is both a historical and a religious play written in the modern realistic style. Hence it is a welcome addition to the rare genre of Indian English Religious Drama and belongs to the galaxy of similar plays like *Mira*, *Chaitanya*, *Siddhartha: A Man of Peace*, *St. Joan* and *Murder in the Cathedral* among others in different aspects. It is only a highly talented and adventurous director of drama, who can dare present this play on the stage. Likewise, this play deserves to be widely prescribed in Indian Universities and widely translated into the world languages.

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