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Vīraśaivism, Caste, Revolution, Etc.

ROBERT J. ZYDENBOS
MYSORE

A review article of: *Revolution of the Mystics: On the Social Aspects of Vīraśaivism*. By J.P. SCHOUTEN. Kampen, Netherlands: KOK PHAROS, 1991. Pp. xiii + 331 pages.

One of the rare modern studies of the Vīraśaiva movement of medieval and modern Karnataka is here examined and shown to be unsophisticated and tendentious in its determination to see many Christian or other recent Western values in Basava's teachings.

Western understanding of what Vīraśaivism is and of its place in Indian religious history and modern South Indian society is rather limited, in spite of its socio-religious relevance in southern India. In recent years it has become better known to a wider public in the English-speaking world through translated selections of *vacanas*, the typical, often fascinating short prose-poems in the Kannada language through which Vīraśaiva religious thinkers spread their ideas from the twelfth century onwards.¹ The Vīraśaivas are also known for their practice of wearing a small, personal *liṅga* as a representation of God on their body, usually in a small metal container on a cord or chain around the neck, which also serves as an object of worship, so that they have no need of temples as the majority of Hindus do. There is also a widespread notion that Vīraśaivism opposes the caste system and gender discrimination.

Lengthier studies of Vīraśaivism by scholars in the West are very rare, hence the publication of J. P. Schouten's doctoral dissertation² demands the attention of Indologists, religious scholars, and social scientists. After a short introductory chapter, in which the author gives an outline of Vīraśaiva history and teachings, he deals in four large chap-

¹ The best known is the Penguin book *Speaking of Śiva* by the late A.K. Ramanujan. We may also mention the translated selection from the *vacanas* of Basava by K.V. Zvelebil, *The Lord of the Meeting Rivers* (Paris: UNESCO, 1984). In India several translations have appeared, most of them in English, but also in other European languages.

² It was submitted by the Rev. Schouten in the faculty of theology of the University of Utrecht, after earlier studies of sociology and theology at the Free University in Amsterdam. It is amusing to note that the first mention of the Vīraśaivas by a Western author was by another Dutch clergyman, Abraham Rogerius, in 1651, as Schouten tells us (pp. 16-7).

ters with social issues, on which the Viraśaivas have taken a remarkable stand in Indian history: caste, labor and property, the position of women, and education. The book ends with a short evaluation of Viraśaivism, a twenty-two-page bibliography, an index of technical terms, and an index of Viraśaiva personalities who are mentioned in the book.

While on the one hand we should welcome such a new study, we must regret that the representation of Viraśaivism and the socio-religious environment in which it developed has some fundamental flaws. While Schouten has obviously devoted a good deal of time and energy to the work, it sets out from certain preconceptions about Indian society and about the nature of Viraśaivism and of religion in general which lead to a faulty interpretation of facts. The author's knowledge of the general religious background in which Viraśaivism arose is limited and has led to some untenable conclusions. The appearance of such a study in print suggests that some fundamental matters concerning the study of southwest India, of Hinduism, and of Indian society are in need of a review, and I will attempt to give one in the following pages.

The title of the book explicitly sums up the author's interests as well as his findings. His bird's-eye view of Viraśaivism is as follows: Orthodox Hinduism is a religion which supported a rigid system of social discrimination based on a division of labor, as a result of which the highest caste, the brahmins, arrogated to themselves social, financial and religiously ritual privileges. Higher education was withheld from other castes and from all women. In the twelfth century, a brahmin named Basava began the Viraśaiva movement in what is now northern Karnataka, and he declared that all humans are equals, irrespective of gender or social background. Belief in the rules of ritual purity and pollution, which had been an instrument of social discrimination, was abolished, as was temple worship, which was another means of brahminical cultural oppression. Similarly, the classical study of Sanskrit, another brahmin monopoly, was discarded in favor of the use of Kannada, the common language of the people. But already very soon, already under the man who succeeded Basava as leader of the Viraśaiva community, the community consolidated itself within the larger society around it, and under the influence of brahminical culture lost its revolutionary idealism. By the fifteenth century, the movement had thoroughly degenerated, but during the last one hundred years there has been a revival of the original values and a return to the original teachings of Basava, which we see, for instance, in Viraśaiva activities in the field of education. In upholding the dignity of all labor, cultivating a work ethic, abolishing ritualism, and stressing the equality of all people, Viraśaivism differs from orthodox Hinduism and resembles Christianity,³ particularly Calvinism.

Research in the social sciences in India without constant recourse to Indology tends to be superficial to the point of being meaningless. Here we must credit the author that he has used a two-pronged approach in his study of Viraśaivism: he has used data from colonial records and recent research in the social sciences, but has also used Viraśaiva lit-

³ Cf. various remarks and references on pp. 105 n., 118, 125, 141, 212, 214, 222.

erature as an invaluable source of information. However, the literature which he quotes does not support some of his conclusions. While writing about the social aspects of Viraśaivism, Schouten has largely disregarded its theological and mystical background and has replaced it with a modern myth of partly Indian, partly Western origin. One cannot escape from the impression that he wanted, perhaps unconsciously, to see parallels between Viraśaivism and modern protestant Christianity where they do not really exist.

A few questions with which we will deal more closely are the position of Basava in Viraśaiva history and religion; the religious precedents of Viraśaivism in Karnataka, and the relation between Kannada and Sanskrit writings; the significance of caste, both in Basava's time and today; Viraśaiva ontology and its significance for work in the world.

Basava is the founder of Viraśaivism, says Schouten.⁴ This comes as a surprise when there is a consensus among the leading scholars in India that Basava was a social organizer and to some extent a reformer of an already existing tradition. All the elements of Viraśaivism existed before Basava: the Sanskrit *āgamas* to which the *vacanakāras* and later authors repeatedly refer for scriptural support; the sixty-three *purātanaru*, i.e. the *nāyanmārs* of the Tamil land, are referred to by Viraśaiva authors as Śaiva forerunners who rejected birth as a criterion for one's status in the *varṇa* hierarchy, just as we find this same rejection in Jainism and Buddhism, as well as in *āgamas* and other older Hindu texts; also the use of a portable, personal *liṅga*, the *iṣṭaliṅga*, existed previously.

Serious historical research about Viraśaiva Sanskrit literature has still hardly begun – hence it is somewhat premature to use the Sanskrit material for establishing the antiquity of the words *viraśaiva* and *liṅgāyata*. But also in Kannada literature we find evidence that these terms predate Basava. In an important article about the twelfth-century writer Koṇḍaguḷi Kēśirāja,⁵ first published in 1981, M. Chidananda Murthy has pointed out that the information we have about this author refutes several preconceptions about Viraśaivism which are commonly held by both Viraśaivas and non-Viraśaivas alike. Some of Chidananda Murthy's conclusions, based on Kesiraja's writings, must be noted here. Viraśaiva literature did not begin with *vacanas*, nor did the earliest Viraśaiva literature mean a rejection of the older language of the Jaina court poets (Old Kannada) in favor of the newer stage in the development of the language (Middle Kannada), which was closer to the language of the common people (Kēśirāja wrote metrical works in Old Kannada, with an admixture of Middle Kannada word forms). The terms *viraśaiva* and *liṅgāyata* were already in use in Kēśirāja's time. There already were Śaivas who disregarded rules of caste purity and "untouchability" in social intercourse. The practice of worshipping the *iṣṭaliṅga* on the palm of one's hand already existed.⁶ And there is epigraphical evidence that Kēśirāja lived half a century before Basava.

These conclusions force us to rethink the position of Basava in Viraśaiva history. Ev-

⁴ E.g., pp. 2, 4.

⁵ M. Cidānandamūrti, "Koṇḍaguḷi Kēśirāja," in his *Liṅgāyata adhyayanagaḷu* (Mysore: Vāgdēvi, 1989. 2nd ed.), 1-29. The article first appeared in the journal *Basavamārga*, vol. 2 (1981).

⁶ About the portable *liṅga* see also M.R. Sakhare in his otherwise somewhat eccentric study *History and Philosophy of the Lingayat Religion* (Dharwad: Karnatak University, 1978), pp. 243-4.

idently, Viraśaivism is not Basava’s creation. However important Basava was, he was only one among numerous *śivaśaraṇas* and *vacanakāras*, devotees of Śiva and writers of *vacanas*, all of whom individually contributed to the further growth of the religion. M.R. Srinivasa Murthy, one of the pioneers of the modern study of *vacanas*, writes that these authors had as much liberty to develop and present their own ideas and theories as the authors of the upaniṣads and the schools of Vedānta had.⁷ Basava was neither a Jesus nor a [527] Calvin, and we must realize that his sometimes beautiful emotional outpourings cannot be taken as the final word on what Viraśaivism is or should be. Only very recently have fundamentalist reformers on the fringe of Viraśaiva society tried to give Basava such a status.⁸ There is very little doctrine in the writings of Basava, and his literarily often highly impressive *vacanas* are tinged with “a definite almost fanatical monotheism and a certain intolerant evangelism.”⁹ It is only against the existing cultural and intellectual background of his time that Basava could organize a community of believers. The depth of his religious fervor and social involvement made him the rallying point of that community; but its religious teachings are clearly older.

Like any other text, the *vacanas* of Basava and of other *vacanakāras* must be read in the light of the context in which they were written and in the light of their authors’ entire oeuvre. Basava criticized the general brahminhood of his time, but this does not mean that he had broken entirely with his ancestral heritage; and if a *vacanakāra* expressed disdain for bookish scriptural learning and praises personal mystical experience, this does not mean a total rejection of the Śaiva scriptural tradition. Schouten is rather inconsistent in his analysis of *vacanas*: when Cannabasava quotes an *āgama*, it signifies a return to “traditional values”,¹⁰ but when Basava does so, he concocts a reason for preserving the image of Basava as a revolutionary.¹¹ Schouten’s problem apparently arises from his preconceptions that those who use Sanskrit are conservatives by definition and that Basava was a revolutionary leader whose word is Viraśaivism’s law. Such preconceptions have no basis in the historical material at our disposal, and they stand in the way of our arriving at a coherent view of Viraśaiva history.

The discussion of the role which is played by the Sanskrit language in education is an example of how facts are sometimes hammered into shape in order to make them fit those preconceptions. In the introduction, Schouten tells us that the Viraśaivas had discarded the use of Sanskrit because “only the small upper caste of Brāhmaṇas was familiar with the sacred language.”¹² And, he adds, when in the colonial period the Viraśaivas began to give special attention to formal public education, the Viraśaiva *mathas* promoted Sanskrit learning, “which seems to be completely in contradiction with the ideals of the

⁷ M.R. Śrīnivāsamūrti, *Vacanaḥarmasāra* (Mysore: University of Mysore, 1977), 2-3.

⁸ Cf., e.g., p. 230, where Schouten seems insufficiently aware of the status in the Viraśaiva community of the person to whom he is referring.

⁹ K.V. Zvelebil, op. cit., 3.

¹⁰ P. 43.

¹¹ P. 31.

¹² Pp. 10-1.

movement,” but the “important reason” for this was that Sanskrit education “was the monopoly of the Brāhmaṇa community.”¹³ All this is quite incomprehensible. To begin with, Sanskrit never has been a brahmin monopoly, also not in Karnataka, where for centuries before Basava the Jainas had cultivated a highly sophisticated literature in Sanskrit. But even if Sanskrit had been a “brahmin monopoly,” then why would it have been a reason for the Viraśaivas to emulate the brahmins, since (according to the author) theirs is an “anti-Brāhmaṇa tradition”? Sanskrit was, and to some extent still is, the lingua franca of the Indian cultural élite which was not oriented toward a Semitic religious tradition. Viraśaivism in the twelfth century made a great effort to reach and uplift all people who desired to be uplifted; but we cannot interpret this as meaning that it was the crude and sentimental enterprise of a group of simpletons. From the very beginning, Viraśaiva authors (obviously the more highly educated) have referred to works written in Sanskrit as sources of religious authority, particularly the Śaiva *āgamas*.¹⁴ We know that classical scholarship was not at all considered a necessity for high spiritual realization, and when after a formative period (which produced the best known *vacanas*) Viraśaiva thinkers had reached a consensus concerning the doctrine, this doctrine was recorded in Sanskrit writings. After the Jainas, the Viraśaivas were the section of Kannada-speaking society that gave the greatest impetus to the further development of Kannada literature, and the *vacanas* are considered scripture. But to ignore the tradition of Viraśaiva theological and other writing in Sanskrit and to see the Viraśaiva interest in Sanskrit as merely a bit of later petty casteist rivalry, is a distortion of history.

In any religious tradition, it is possible to pick out certain elements of the tradition which are felt to be particularly relevant to a contemporary socio-political situation and to give them a new interpretation. “Liberation theology” in modern South America is an example of this. In a parallel development, certain modern authors in Karnataka cultivate an image of Basava as a successor to the Buddha and a predecessor to Dr. Ambedkar, as a champion of the socially depressed. The political gesture which is thus made towards the Harijanas is clear. Also the idea of abolishing Sanskrit and scriptural and higher philosophical and theological study is attractive when one addresses a disgruntled section of society which traditionally has had no [528] access to such intellectual activity, just as an apparent rejection of a more disciplined lifestyle is to those who do not know the value of such a discipline. There are *vacanas* of Basava which can be reinterpreted in this modern manner, and the sweeping emotionalism of some of his compositions makes such a new interpretation easy.

One of Schouten’s problems is that he believes that such new interpretations are historically correct. The references in his footnotes, and his bibliography, suggest another problem, which may lie at the root of the first: due to a double language barrier he has limited access to primary sources in Kannada and Sanskrit; nor does he seem to have

¹³ P. 269.

¹⁴ Also a few of the Kannada *vacanas* quoted by Schouten contain Sanskrit quotes from those texts, cf. pp. 31, 42, 55, 103.

given much attention to serious modern studies in Kannada, which means that he has largely depended on modern writings in English. Such writings tend to be so apologetic or propagandistic as to be useless: an article on “Basava and Socialism”, meant for the Soviet news agency TASS, is churned out just as easily as one on “The Protestant Ethic in Basava’s Teachings” for a different audience.¹⁵

Schouten’s use of the word *gurusthalada* illustrates the language problem. There are two main monastic traditions within Viraśaivism: one which is associated with a particular class of five *maṭhas* (which we may, a bit loosely, translate as “monasteries”) and another one of which the number of *maṭhas* is not formally limited. Schouten refers to these two traditions as *gurusthalada* and *virakta*. The former word looks like an inflected form (genitive case) of a Kannada word *gurusthala*; I have not come across the use of this word in this context in my own reading, nor have Viraśaiva scholars in Karnataka whom I know personally (including the head of one of those monasteries). Even if this term is used somewhere, it would have been advisable to write about those monasteries, using commonly understood terms such as *gurumaṭha* or *pañcācāryamaṭha*. To write about certain people as “gurusthaladas” (p. 134) and about the head of one of these *maṭhas* as a “Gurusthalada” (p. 272) is grammatically ridiculous. This is reason for serious doubt about the author’s understanding of the Kannada language, as well as about the knowledge of his primary informant(s) and the quality of his communications with them.

The *Śūnyasampādane* is the popular fifteenth-century compilation of *vacanas* which gives these texts in an order which was considered meaningful at the time (and still is considered so by most believers); it is implicitly a commentary on the *vacanas*, in which the central place of importance in the twelfth-century Viraśaiva community at Kalyāṇa has been given to Allama. Tradition says that Basava, of brahmin background, recognized the low-caste Allama as his spiritual superior and honored him by having him occupy the *śūnyasiṃhāsana* or ‘throne of the void’. We should understand this as meaning that Allama was recognized as the leader of the Kalyāṇa community. There is no reason for us to disbelieve this tradition, and a comparative reading of the *vacanas* of Basava and Allama gives us an idea of the differences between these two personalities. The account in the *Śūnyasampādane* of the relationship between Allama and Basava fits in very nicely with the idea of the Viraśaivas as a community that disregarded the social background of its members; yet Schouten wishes to see the *Śūnyasampādane* as the product of a decadent age, in which the ideals of true Viraśaivism were forgotten or eclipsed. His reasoning is simple: the *Śūnyasampādane* does not emphasize revolutionary social ethics regarding caste and the position of women.¹⁶ Schouten says the book contains a reinterpretation of

¹⁵ Schouten refers to such writings: pp. 140 n. and 105 n. He does realize the shortcomings of modern writings (cf. p. 20), but apparently he has not been cautious enough in his appreciation of them.

¹⁶ See, e.g., pp. 64, 67, 70, 178, 199, 205. Schouten’s unfounded belief that Viraśaivism in the time of the *Śūnyasampādane* was decadent and untrue to what he considers its true nature is so strong that whenever he sees evidence of the contrary, he expresses astonishment instead of revising his view: cf., e.g., pp. 65, 73, 78, 202.

the *vacanas* in “new historical circumstances” (p. 13); but apparently it does not occur to him that his own interpretation, e.g., regarding what he considers the “ideals of Basava,” may be said to be a twentieth-century secularized Christian interpretation, nor does it occur to him that certain issues may become non-issues after three centuries.

A few statements by Schouten give a clue as to the reason for his dislike of the *Śūnyasampādane*. The main character is Allama, the mystic, and not Basava, the social organizer, and the *Śūnyasampādane* is composed with a mystical outlook. Schouten criticizes the idea that the removal of a person’s low-caste status “has more to do with the highest spiritual achievement than with social equality” (p. 64), and he complains that the fifteenth-century authors “were ultimately more interested in washermen mystics than in the social position of contemporary washermen” (p. 67). This analysis of the text is correct; but what Schouten fails to see is that this outlook has been there from the very beginning. The Viraśaiva religion of the twelfth century had not lost its mystical roots, nor had it in the fifteenth, unlike, for instance, most of twentieth-century Christianity. Indis- [529] criminate “social equality,” however conceived, was not a point on the Viraśaiva agenda; and if one looks into Viraśaiva theology and ontology one will see why it cannot be an issue for Viraśaivism. Classical Viraśaiva literature is quite explicit about this, as we see for instance in the best-known handbook of Viraśaiva doctrine, the *Siddhāntaśikhāmaṇi* of Śivayogin: “the glorious devotee of Śiva should not touch those who are averse to devotion to Śiva, not even look at them, nor live with them anywhere,”¹⁷ or, “one should eat in the houses of the initiated, those who are devoted to one’s own path, of one’s own caste [i.e., Viraśaivas¹⁸], and never in the houses of others.”¹⁹ This is surely not a plea for indiscriminate social equality in which the traditional rules of caste purity (which include rules of commensality) have been discarded. Schouten gives the thirteenth century as the time of composition of the *Siddhāntaśikhāmaṇi*, without giving a reference for this date;²⁰ other authors believe that the text is still older. Is the *Siddhāntaśikhāmaṇi* an example of the evil influence of “Brāhmaṇa values” and “Brāhmaṇa culture,” which Schouten brings up whenever he wants to explain away something?²¹ Was Basava really totally different? If so, then we will have to explain why some *vacanas* by Basava clearly show that he stressed inequality and criticized those who did not believe in his form of religion and whose ways of life differed from his.²² In one

¹⁷ *śivabhakto mahātejaḥ śivabhaktiparāṇmukhān / na sprśen naiva vikṣeta na taiḥ saha vaset kvacit* (9:27), in Śivayogiśivācārya, *Siddhāntaśikhāmaṇiḥ* (Mysore: Panchacharya Electric Press, 1977. 3rd ed.).

¹⁸ Thus the seventeenth-century commentator Maritoṇṭadārya. This interpretation seems perfectly in keeping with the general tenor of the text.

¹⁹ *svamārgācāraniratāḥ svajātiyā dvijāstu ye / teṣāṃ grheṣu bhūñjita netareṣāṃ kadācana* (9:31).

²⁰ P. 13.

²¹ For examples of the ease with which Schouten uses the image of the evil brahmin (which is becoming increasingly popular in southern India in recent years), see, e.g., pp. 17, 37, 74-7, 99-100, 102, 193, 218-9.

²² Cf. the *vacanas* quoted on p. 26, where he distinguishes between believers and non-believers, and on pp. 40-1, where he condemns the consumption of liquor and meat. Here we must note that Basava’s stance was apparently not very consistent, because on the other hand he also wrote *vacanas* such as the one quoted on pp. 39-40, where he seems to discard the prohibition of liquor and meat. Or there may be a deeper

vacana we see Basava apologize for his working for the *bhavi* Bijjaḷa.²³ *Bhakta* and *bhavi*, devotee and non-believer, were not equal in Viraśaivism.

Caste is mentioned throughout Schouten's book, and a seventy-eight-page chapter is devoted to the subject. Given this prominence, it is curious that Schouten uses the word "caste" loosely: when he quotes lists of Viraśaiva sub-castes from colonial records, "caste" evidently means *jāti*; but he writes repeatedly about "the Brāhmaṇa caste," and then it obviously means *varṇa* and not one of the many *jātis* which have brahmin status. Actually, Viraśaivism provides us with interesting material that illustrates what *varṇa* and *jāti* are. The Viraśaiva community is a *jāti*, or rather: a super-*jāti* with sub-*jātis*.

One prominent Indian sociologist has given a list of six "main attributes" of *jāti*: endogamy; hierarchic gradation; traditional occupation; considerations of purity and pollution; a common culture; and, in several parts of India, mechanisms of social control and conflict resolution.²⁴ On closer observation, however, we must conclude that most of these attributes have not been stable in the course of time. From my own observations in Karnataka I can say that endogamy, if at all it ever has been perfectly strict, is clearly on the wane, and marriage alliances between certain castes are rather common. Hierarchic gradations are not definitely fixed. Although certain castes have traditional occupations, we will be hard put to find a caste of which all the members have the same occupation today. Yet castes continue to exist, and one can reasonably argue that casteist sentiments are actually increasing in intensity.

The one item in the list which seems uncontroverted by social practice is that of the common culture. It is useful to think of each caste as, in effect, an institutionalized form of a sub-culture, with its own norms and values and traditions which are passed on from one generation to the next. Because all these castes are living sub-cultures, they constantly respond dynamically to a large variety of factors in the social environment. All the outer manifestations of a caste may change to a larger or lesser extent, depending on specific circumstances, while the caste as a unit remains. When, within a caste, differences arise over an issue, this may lead to a split into two castes; other castes virtually merge. The notion of caste as a sub-culture also explains why Kannada-speakers speak about Christians, Muslims and foreigners as *jātis*: Christians, Muslims and the citizens of various other countries are perceived as belonging to cultural units different from that of the speaker, while the other five caste attributes [530] are clearly not applicable in these cases.²⁵ I believe this is sufficient reason for thinking of the sub-cultural characteristic of caste as the only essential one, and of all other characteristics as merely secondary; this also illustrates how the etymological meaning of *jāti* ('birth') is not, or no longer, the main characteristic of caste. Viraśaivism is an interesting example of how a new sub-culture / caste comes into existence, also because we have a large number of doc-

consistency which is not immediately apparent.

²³ Pp. 103-4.

²⁴ S.C. Dube, *Indian Society* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 1994), 54.

²⁵ I have given illustrations of such linguistic usage in my book, *The Calf Became An Orphan. Culturally specific themes in post-Independence Kannada fiction* (in press).

uments which have been produced throughout its history and which still await serious and impartial study.

Vīraśaivism differed from mainstream Hinduism in its understanding of *varṇa* and *jāti*. In its etymological sense, *jāti* was quite summarily dismissed by Basava and the other *vacanakāras* as a factor of any importance—as is well known. Any person was allowed to accept initiation into Vīraśaivism and thus join the Vīraśaiva community, irrespective of his / her social background; this liberal attitude, this openness of the community, is one of the main characteristics which distinguishes it from most Hindu communities to the present day. The single criterion for membership of the Vīraśaiva community was faith in the principles of the religion and living in accordance with them. Membership was open even to *mlecchas*, ‘foreign barbarians’, as the *Siddhāntaśikhāmaṇi* tells us: “The person in whom devotion has become steady, be he a *mleccha* or a splendid person of high caste, that person is dear to Śiva and is a brahmin; not dear is one who is devoid of devotion.”²⁶

In other words, the Vīraśaiva theologians declared that all Vīraśaivas were, by definition, brahmins, on the basis of their devotion. This is not really a new, revolutionary idea, if we remember the discussion of the characteristics of the four *varṇas* in the eighteenth chapter of the *Bhagavadgītā*, or the revisionist definition of the “brahmin” in the *Dhammapāda*; but the practice in the Hindu mainstream of the twelfth century was different, and the Vīraśaivas of Kalyāṇa broadcast their message assertively. The brahmins of the mainstream were later called mere *prākṛta brāhmaṇas*, ‘natural’ or ‘born’ brahmins, whereas the Vīraśaivas were *aprākṛta brāhmaṇas*, ‘supernatural’ brahmins, i.e., not by mere birth.²⁷ It is unclear when this terminology came into use, but already Basava uses the term *kulaja*, ‘of high birth’, to describe the Vīraśaivas. In other words, the basic attitude was already there in Basava’s writings. It should come as no surprise that many Vīraśaivas refuse to eat in the houses of other Hindus, including brahmins, which is the traditional casteist way of snubbing others;²⁸ nor is it surprising that in certain villages the Vīraśaivas are reportedly considered the highest caste. Schouten doubts whether this dominant position in the caste hierarchy can be considered “objective”,²⁹ but here we must realize that there is no universally valid ranking of castes. For instance, in some parts of Karnataka, Śrīvaiṣṇava brahmins (Ayyangars) are not considered brahmins at all; elsewhere, castes of comparable status will vie with each other for the favor of being recognized as higher by again other castes.

²⁶ *bhaktiḥ sthīrīkṛtā yasmīn mlecche vā dvijasattame / śambhoḥ priyaḥ sa vipraś ca na priyo bhaktivarjitaḥ* (9:5). It is probably impossible to say how many foreigners became Vīraśaivas in the past; but many years ago, on my first visit to a *gurumaṭha*, the abbot showed me a letter from a Swiss devotee who thanked the abbot again for having initiated him into Vīraśaivism. This letter was framed and hung on a wall as an object of pride.

²⁷ See Sakhare, op. cit., pp. 431-32, where he also quotes a lengthy passage from the Sanskrit text *Vīraśaivānandacandrikā*. He translates *aprākṛta brāhmaṇa* as “Super-Brahmin”.

²⁸ It is worth noting here that also certain Jainas behave in a similar manner. Just as the Vīraśaivas, the Jainas are an autonomous community that has no need of orthodox brahmins for anything.

²⁹ Pp. 91-2.

At one point Schouten quotes Buddhist Pāli texts which express a view of what a “brahmin” is that is similar to what we find many centuries later in Viraśaiva texts, and he speculates whether Buddhism has influenced Basava in his search for an alternative for “the strict Brāhmaṇa values of his family.”³⁰ But whereas Buddhism has left only few traces in Karnataka, we know that Jainism was very strong at the time, enjoying patronage from several aristocratic families. Only after the rise of Viraśaivism do we see a decline in support for Jainism. We know that many Jainas became Viraśaiva converts,³¹ and some Jaina texts tell us that many of these conversions were not voluntary, but the result of violent coercion at the hands of Viraśaivas. Rather than looking to the Buddhists as a source of inspiration for decrying the stolidness of the traditional caste mentality, it is more likely that the Jainas were the source of such of ideas. The influence of Jainism on the development of other religious traditions is still insufficiently studied, [531] and in the case of Karnataka this situation is worsened by the fact that Western researchers have yet to realize the rich material available in Kannada.³²

While on the one hand the Viraśaivas use the vocabulary of egalitarianism, they have also used the classical Indian vocabulary of hierarchic inequality throughout their entire history. Schouten has quoted twelfth-century *vacanas* which say that Viraśaiva devotees are of truly high birth³³ and that those whose conduct is reprehensible should be considered untouchables.³⁴ In other words, the Viraśaivas have always seen themselves as hierarchically above the rest of society. There is nothing intrinsically inconsistent in this attitude, but it poses a problem for Schouten, who wants to believe that Viraśaivism wanted complete social equality for all. He solves it by distinguishing between a “true Viraśaivism” and a later Viraśaivism that was apparently corrupted by orthodox brahminical influences. According to him, there is literary evidence that by the fifteenth century the fall from the original ideals is more or less complete, as no author has much to say about caste except in an orthodox Hindu way, and he quotes a *vacana* by Siddha-lingēśvara as an illustration (p. 68). But a closer look at this *vacana* shows that, quite on the contrary, there is nothing atavistic about it, and it follows perfectly the model of

³⁰ P. 61.

³¹ Including many members of the caste to which the royal family of Mysore belongs, which family again later converted to Śrīvaiṣṇavism.

³² Here I may refer to a short article of mine: “Jainism Endangered: The View of the Medieval Kannada Poet Brahmaśiva,” in *Minorities’ on Themselves*, ed. H.C.D. van Skyhawk, *South Asian Digest of Regional Writing*, vol. 11 (1985), 174-86. Brahmaśiva’s sometimes vicious depictions of other communities are a clear indication of the social tensions of his time, the twelfth century; since he does not mention the Viraśaivas, we may assume that that movement began after he had finished his main work, the *Samaya-parikṣe* (Investigation of Religions). The text also explicitly states that people from all walks of life are free to embrace the Jaina religion.

Elsewhere I have pointed out how, a century after Basava, Jainism made its influence felt in the Vaiṣṇava revival in the coastal area of Karnataka under Madhvācārya: “On the Jaina Background of Dvaita Vedānta,” in *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 19:249-271 (1991).

³³ Cf. pp. 32, 55, 57.

³⁴ Cf. pp. 32, 34, 56, 58.

the twelfth-century *vacanas*. Siddhalingēśvara criticizes those who refuse gifts given by the spiritually advanced in favor of those from a “rich low-caste bitch,” i.e. a person of no spiritual achievement, whose only claim to distinction is some worldly wealth. The quoted text rather disproves the point which the author is trying to establish. Another oddity is that if we believe with Schouten that Viraśaivism began with Basava (which, as we have already seen, is not true) and that the supposed degeneration of the original idealistic Viraśaivism already took place with Allama and Cannabasava (Basava’s own nephew, who succeeded Basava as leader of the community), we will have to conclude that “true Viraśaivism” existed for perhaps fifteen to twenty years at the most.

We can speak of a Viraśaiva tendency towards equality only in the sense that Viraśaivism was offered as an opportunity for self-improvement for those who wished to live in agreement with the Viraśaiva norms, which are typically *high-caste* norms, based on self-discipline and self-analysis. This equality was not a matter of total indifference towards the values which people hold, nor of glorifying lower levels of civilization and culture, as many self-proclaimed “progressives” in East and West now do. Only in most recent times have certain Viraśaivas, who are active in the cultural and political sphere and who wish to project themselves as “progressive,” hopped onto the anti-brahmin bandwagon in search of socio-political profits, and this has nothing to do with the religious tradition. They could do so using the image of the Viraśaiva community as an open one, disregarding a person’s birth, even though in the course of time traditional casteist thinking came to dominate the minds of many of its members,³⁵ which can hardly be called a result of “brahminical influence.”³⁶ Rather than abandoning high-caste (i.e. high-*varṇa*) norms, the Viraśaivas cultivated them, and they encouraged others to do the same. The idea that the *varṇa* status of a person should be considered a matter of personal qualification rather than a matter of birth is also found in other traditions, and we have already seen that also in Śaiva circles such ideas were circulating. Perhaps the main thing that can be called “revolutionary” about Viraśaivism in the twelfth century is the sudden increase in popularity of these ideas, thanks to the organizational talents of Basava.

The numerous passing references in Schouten’s book to “Brāhmaṇa culture,” “Brāhmaṇa values” and “Brāhmaṇa rules” always signify something oppressive and [532] exploitative. The author hardly elaborates on this, as though he takes it for granted that the reader is familiar with what he considers common knowledge. But just as Basava was not Jesus, the brahmins are not the Pharisees. We may assume that Schouten’s anti-brahmin prejudice is the result of his reading the modern writings of, and speaking with, Viraśaiva propagandists who are motivated more by contemporary caste-oriented politics than by religiosity or a desire for historical objectivity. Or perhaps the brahmins are the common

³⁵ Criticism of this tendency is found in modern Kannada literature by Viraśaiva authors. Cf. my discussion of Basavarāja Kaṭṭimani’s novel *Janivāra mattu śivadāra* in my *The Calf Became An Orphan*.

³⁶ It should be clear that though brahmins codified the *varṇa* system and gave themselves the top rank in it, the system of discrimination according to *jāti* cannot reasonably be called a brahminical creation. In social matters, brahminical orthodoxy tends to support the status quo, whatever it may be.

enemy of Viraśaivism and Christianity.³⁷ There is no serious attempt in this book at an analysis of the supposedly all-powerful brahmin grip on society, and whatever glimpses Schouten offers us have a clearly mythlike quality. For instance: “The Brāhmaṇas held the unquestioned top position in society, not only in socio-religious status, but likewise with regard to economic strength. They took great advantage of the belief that it was a meritorious act to make donations to Brāhmaṇas.”³⁸ I would like to hear Schouten explain why there are so many economically poor brahmins, not only throughout Karnataka, but all across India. Poverty among brahmins is not a recent phenomenon either.³⁹ In India it is nowadays just as ‘politically incorrect’ to speak about poor brahmins as it was to speak about poor Jews in central Europe in the 1930s, but scholarly integrity demands that we ask such questions.

In Viraśaiva theology all objects, and also all living beings, are in essence God, manifested through his *māyā* or creative power. Schouten translates *māyā* as “illusion”, which is customary when we speak about the Advaita sect of Vedānta; but this was not the original meaning of the word in Vedic literature, nor was it accepted by later Vedāntins such as Rāmānuja and Madhva, nor is this the Viraśaiva meaning, and Viraśaiva authors have very explicitly argued against such an interpretation of the term.⁴⁰ The universe is a divine play of the Lord, and through a religious life we can see the divine essence behind all the manifoldness and experientially return to it: this we should consider our true, mystical goal in life. This demands effort on our part, and because the universe is real and not an illusion, our effort, our *sādhana*, in and through the world, also by means of our physical being, has meaning.

Although Viraśaivism is a devotional religion, a devotee is not justified by his faith alone, as is the case in many forms of protestant Christianity, and membership of the Viraśaiva community, when the community was in its beginning stage, was not a purely formal affair. New members were expected to lead a life in agreement with principles which are considered conducive to self-purification: thus they were expected to forsake the use of intoxicants and to follow a vegetarian diet. This is characteristic of the highest castes, notably the brahmins, and so here again we may doubt what Schouten states repeatedly throughout his book, viz. that the “Brāhmaṇa norm” was abandoned by the

³⁷ The Rev. Schouten joins the earlier Rev. Brown in blaming the brahmins for having given false information about the Viraśaivas to the Abbé Dubois while the latter was writing his *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies*, and he remarks (while writing about the observance of traditional rules of purity): “He [Dubois] omits,’ adds Brown as a definite argument, ‘that in these very respects Christians are equally reviled by Bramins’ [sic]” (p. 214). The word “definite” gives food for thought here.

³⁸ P. 102.

³⁹ Nor can we claim that brahmins in Karnataka were rich. For illustrations see, e.g., my article “Some Examples from Mādhva Hagiography,” in *According to Tradition*, ed. W.M. Callewaert and R. Snell (Wiesbaden: O. Harrassowitz, 1994), 169-89. Even if we assume that the poor economic background of leading brahmin personalities in the thirteenth, sixteenth and eighteenth centuries is somewhat romanticized in this kind of literature, it can hardly be a total untruth.

⁴⁰ Sakhare (op. cit., 282-3) gives a long Sanskrit quotation from Maritōṅṭadārya’s commentary on the *Siddhāntaśikhāmaṇi*; other texts which refute *māyāvāda* are the *Śivādvaitadarpaṇa* and the *Śivādvaitamañjarī*.

Vīraśaivas. We also see Basava chiding devotees who lapse into their old ways.⁴¹ The social pressure to conform to the norms of the group of kin is enormous in India (this lies at the base of the caste system, and is one reason why also most Indian Christians discriminate among themselves according to caste background), and thus new Vīraśaiva devotees from certain backgrounds must have found it harder to adapt themselves to the new, disciplined lifestyle which Vīraśaivism demanded of them.

Schouten is disconcerted that Cannabasava, Basava's own nephew, who became the main leader of the Vīraśaiva community after Basava, quotes an *āgama* which lists four different probationary periods for aspirants (three, six, nine and twelve years), according to their *varṇa* status (pp. 42-3). But outcastes are not mentioned here at all, although we know that also people of such a background were admitted to the community. Hence we seem justified in assuming that the quoted text from the *āgama* was not meant to be taken literally, and that we should understand *varṇa* in a sense similar to what we [533] find in the Bhagavadgītā: a categorization of dominant proclivities in people, which make the adoption of the Vīraśaiva way of life more, or less, easy. Together with Cannabasava's other *vacana* (quoted on pp. 41-2: "If a donkey becomes a devotee, could it stop eating dirt?" etc.), it seems to record that certain people had been admitted to the Vīraśaiva community too easily, and that only in name they had become Vīraśaivas, without achieving any inner development and refinement, as their vulgar behavior demonstrated. To conclude that these texts mark an end of the "early revolutionary idealism of Vīraśaivism," that "traditional values were taken up again"⁴² and that due to this the *vacanakāras* other than Basava were hesitant about admitting low-caste people to the community,⁴³ is unwarranted.

Another distinctive aspect of Vīraśaivism is the concept of *kāyaka*, and Schouten gives a good deal of attention to it. The consideration of working through the world for our salvation is important for the Vīraśaiva appreciation of *kāyaka*, which can be work of any kind, including humble manual labor. The awareness that the entire universe is essentially divine and that work in the world can be part of one's *sādhanā* led to the understanding that no work should be considered intrinsically inferior, and this revaluation of manual labor had a far-reaching social effect in the twelfth century. The word *kāyaka* is a Sanskrit adjective meaning 'corporeal', and in Kannada it is used substantively, always meaning worshipful work in the Vīraśaiva sense. Schouten translates *kāyaka* as "vocation",⁴⁴ which is a rather poor translation. *Kāyaka* is a very concrete act, which may either be a part of one's profession or totally unrelated to it. The mechanical day-to-day execution of one's job is not *kāyaka*; any bit of work, carried out in a proper spirit of humility and devotion, as an offering to God, is *kāyaka*. To quote from the *Siddhāntaśikhāmaṇi* again: "The service which is performed wholly or partly, is called

⁴¹ Cf. the *vacana* on p. 40: "Because of a bodily desire they drink liquor and eat meat," etc.

⁴² P. 43.

⁴³ P. 62.

⁴⁴ E.g., pp. 105, 123 and elsewhere.

bhakti; it is again divided into three [types], according to whether it is carried out by means of the mind, of speech, or of the body. The service which consists of thinking of Śiva is known as mental; the service which consists of prayers, etc., is vocal; and worship through work (*karmapūjā*) is bodily (*kāyiki*).⁴⁵ (*Kāyiki* is the feminine of *kāyaka*, agreeing with *pūjā*.) It should be clear from the parallelism (thinking of God, prayer, *kāyaka*) that *kāyaka* is not just any physical act, nor a blind daily routine, just as thinking of God is a special kind of thinking and prayer (*japa*) is a special kind of speech. *Kāyaka* later came to mean all kinds of worshipful work, whether physical or not. This does not mean that one's profession automatically is *kāyaka*, as Schouten appears to believe; and *kāyaka* is characteristic of devotees, not of the many non-devotees who all have their professional lives too.

Some translations and interpretations of *vacanas* in Schouten's book are unacceptably free, e.g., on p. 104. Here Basava has been accused of not living up to his proclaimed ideals: instead of avoiding all dealings with the *bhavi* king Bijjala, he actually serves him in the prestigious position of minister. Basava replies (addressing himself to God): "also when I enter the houses of the lowest untouchables, / and also when I do manual labor, / I will burn for your greatness."⁴⁶ Schouten turns this into: "Whenever I went to the house of the lowest untouchables, / I have always worked hard with my hands, / set ablaze for your majesty." This is grammatically incorrect: the first two lines both end in conditional verb forms, and no sequence or consequence between the actions expressed is indicated. It is true that manual labor is respected in Viraśaivism, and it is also true that by being an open community, the Viraśaivas offered opportunities of self-improvement also to people from the lowest social strata. But this does not imply that "charitable work, particularly for the degraded sections of society" is enjoined, or that Basava entered the houses of untouchables "to undertake all kinds of manual work for their benefit."⁴⁷ The text is merely an expression of Basava's impartiality (he also enters the houses of untouchables, not just palaces) and humbleness (though a minister, he does not think that manual work is demeaning). Schouten's poor translation serves a tendentious interpretation, or perhaps was inspired by it.

The Viraśaivas were innovative also in the sphere of gender relations. Schouten devotes the largest chapter of his book to the position of women in Viraśaivism, giving ample attention to the two best known women *vacanakāras*,⁴⁸ Akka Mahādēvi and Muk-tāy akka. It is, of course, most noteworthy that women participated in religious life, theological debates, et cetera, on a par with [534] their male coreligionists; but this does not mean that women's overall position in society changed instantaneously. The life story of Akka Mahādēvi can be read as a tale of individual revolt against the kind of

⁴⁵ *sāṅgā nyūnā ca yā sevā sā bhaktir iti kathyate / sa punar bhidyate tredhā manovākkāyasādhanaiḥ // Śivarūpādicintā yā sāvā sevā mānasī smṛtā / japādīr vācaki sevā karmapūjā tu kāyiki* (9:15-16).

⁴⁶ *hole holeyara maneya hokkādaḍeyū / saḷe kaikūliya māḍiyādaḍeyū / nimma nilaviṅge kudivenu*, p. 104.

⁴⁷ P. 104.

⁴⁸ Perhaps the author was not aware that in Kannada, a woman *vacanakāra* is referred to by the feminine form of the word, *vacanakārti*.

male chauvinism that regards women as objects of lust; but we must note that Mahādēvi's way out of the problem was to abandon worldly life altogether and to follow a mystic path of self-realization—society and the religious life are here placed in opposition to each other. Mukṭāyakkā, on the other hand, did not follow Mahādēvi's radical path, and the statements in her *vacanas* are correspondingly less confrontational and extreme. Even her *anikita* (the short phrase, or word, which the authors of *vacanas* insert in their compositions as a mark of their authorship), which refers to her brother, indicates a compliant subordination, just as other women authors refer to their husbands. Obviously there were limits to feasible change under the circumstances of that time. (We can dismiss Schouten's remarks that the position of Vīraśaiva women deteriorated due, as usual, to brahminical influence.)

In the chapter on women, Schouten gives secularized interpretations to mystical utterances. Akka Mahādēvi's *vacana* on p. 165 (which begins *kāmāriya gelidenu*) is particularly badly translated.⁴⁹ Mahādēvi states: "So what, if I am called a woman? There is a male form to think of, by your grace, Basava. To join the lustful, lovely Lord white as jasmine, I merged with him, not knowing either." Schouten's comment ("her femaleness, here also interpreted as subordination, has lost its meaning [...] The main emphasis of the poem [...] is not on the thinking and the willing of the saint, but on how other people judge her," p. 165) seems out of place. She has transcended gender, as certain mystics in other religious traditions have done too; other mystics experience the other gender. We may recall that in recent times, Ramakrishna Paramahansa said that he had experienced womanhood during his mystical experiences, and we can hardly say that this means that as a man he felt socially subordinated.

Chapter four of Schouten's study deals with the Vīraśaiva contribution to education in Karnataka, i.e., to modern formal education following Western models. The main message of this chapter seems to be, once again, that Vīraśaivism holds out prospects of modernization and development towards a Westernized society where other religious communities do not, and that Basava is the main reason behind this.

The number of educational institutions which are run today in Karnataka by Vīraśaiva organizations is impressive. According to Schouten, the *viraktamaṭhas* took up modern education before the *gurumaṭhas* did, because they are "more oriented towards the ideals of Basava,"⁵⁰ while the *gurumaṭhas* attacked the egalitarian values of Basava, which led to "an enormous loss of respect among the more enlightened sections of the population."⁵¹ However, the two leading sources of Vīraśaiva support for education today are the *gurumaṭhas* at Sirigere and Suttur, and Schouten finds this remarkable, since the latter "was originally not very much in favour of the ideals of Basava."⁵² Here too, Schouten's *idées*

⁴⁹ *Sōmadharana hiḍitappenu* means "I cannot escape from the grip of him who bears the moon (Śiva)," and not "I captured the Master of the Moon"; *bhāvisalu gaṃḍu rūpa* cannot mean "my image has become male".

⁵⁰ P. 270.

⁵¹ P. 271. For "enlightened" we should presumably read "Westernized". Schouten sees the conservatism of these *maṭhas* also in their lack of support for the Indian independence movement; i.e., he obviously sees little value in the separation of church and state.

fixes that nothing can be done for the common good unless it is proclaimed anti-brahminical and is done in the name of Basava, and that the *gurumathas* by definition are not inclined to do anything of the kind, are contradicted by the very facts which he provides us. Furthermore, by their very nature, *mathas* (of whatever tradition: also non-Viraśaiva) were and in a sense still are centres of learning and education, and to say that brahmins “held the monopoly position in this domain”⁵³ is an unfounded statement.

The treatment of the question of education in this chapter leaves too many questions open. Would the mystic Basava have disparaged the religious learning in the *mathas* in favor of modern polytechnical colleges such as now are managed by Viraśaiva institutions? Would the Viraśaivas have given attention to modern education without being confronted with secular Western models of development? Why were those “ideals of Basava” neglected in the first place, and why should they be revived only now? The Viraśaivas were in a good position to set up modern educational facilities because of the concentration of financial and human resources in the *mathas*; so why were they educationally “backward” in the nineteenth century?⁵⁴ And we must also note here that the most highly educated part of Karnataka (where 100% literacy has been declared recently) is South Kanara District, where there are no Viraśaivas, and where we find educational institutions run by brahmins and Jainas, which, like the Viraśaiva institutions, are open to stu- [535] dents from all social backgrounds. The Viraśaiva contribution to modern education in Karnataka is undoubtedly great: but we may doubt whether the “ideals of Basava” made the Viraśaiva effort a distinctive one.

Finally we may point out some minor factual errors in Schouten’s book. In the list of leading scholars in the field of *vacana* studies, T.S. Śāmarāya is mentioned as a Viraśaiva, but he is a Smārta brahmin (p. 19). The *matha* at Sringeri is not Śaiva, but the main seat of the Smārta tradition (pp. 244, 266). *Basadis* are not Jaina monasteries (which are called *mathas*, and of which six are still functioning in Karnataka), but temples (p. 244).

Viraśaivism is an interesting, vigorously living religious culture and is one of the very few instances of an open community in Indian society, in which respect it has remained true to its origins. Schouten’s book is the result of considerable toil, and the author was clearly driven by great enthusiasm for the subject. At the same time it is an illustration of how the social sciences, as practiced in the West, are not a proper base for a Western understanding of Indian religion or society. The author has not been able to penetrate sufficiently deep into the available material; he has been eager to establish parallels between Viraśaivism and developments in certain branches of nineteenth- and twentieth-century secularized protestant Christianity where similarities are only superficial, and in the process he has taken unacceptable liberties in his interpreting of Viraśaiva literature; in this he has surely been misled by apologists and by radical reformists on the fringe of Viraśaiva society who write in English and who actually present a hybridized

⁵² P. 277.

⁵³ P. 278.

⁵⁴ P. 270.

form of religion which, just as some other forms of neo-Hinduism, has imbibed Western secular and Christian ideas. Perhaps elements of the Vīraśaiva tradition have made the community more open to new ideas from various sources in recent times; but to write that Vīraśaivism has been “democratic,” “feminist,” or “egalitarian” from the beginning, as some modern writers do, is somewhat like writing that nuclear weapons were used in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, as some other authors do.

The book provides us with many bits of interesting information; but of the numerous conclusions which the author draws from his material, we can accept only very few, also because the author shows a lack of ideological as well as social impartiality, such as we see in his anti-brahmin prejudice. In order to do full justice to the religious and social achievements of Vīraśaivism, more basic research needs to be done first, based on a direct access to the source materials and with an open mind. Such studies can only be carried out by Indologists, not by social scientists with insufficient training in the humanities. But we must be grateful to Rev. Dr. Schouten for drawing attention to the Vīraśaiva tradition through his work, which may inspire further study and discussion amongst colleagues both in the West and in India, where the book has recently been brought out in an Indian edition.