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Village Life

My Encounter With a Divine Bovine

Basava, a temple's Zebu ox, blesses, advises, appoints, scolds and judges

By Choodie Shivaram, Bengaluru

The Temple of Kalabhairava in Chikka Arasinakere shot into fame following a televised report on Basava, the temple's remarkable ox. The ancient village is located near the town of Maddur, 80 km from Bengaluru (as Bangalore has been renamed) on the road to Mysore. Previously known only for its fried Maddur vada snacks, the town now attracts thousands of visitors a day who seek the blessings of the sacred bull.

For generations, the Kalabhairava temple at Chikka Arasinakere has owned and worshiped a succession of Basavas (basava is the Kannada word for ox). The tradition of maintaining and worshipping a temple ox is common practice in many Siva temples.

"This is the fifth Basava I have seen in my lifetime," said Jogi Gowda, the village president. The fourth, he explained, showed some unusual abilities, but nothing like the present Zebu ox whose mystical powers were recognized when he reclaimed the temple's original lands which had gradually been usurped. "We appealed to the people to vacate the illegal occupancy, but to no avail," recounts Nagaraj, an ardent devotee of Basava. Then one day Basava served notice on the encroachers by circling the temple in a route which accurately encompassed all the temple's rightful land. Thereafter, he laid siege at each encroacher's doorstep and refused to leave until they pleaded for mercy and promised to vacate the land.

"We were spellbound by his knowing the temple's boundaries according to ancient

land records. And Basava kept after each encroacher until they relented. What we mortals and the modern justice system couldn't achieve in years, Basava achieved in a jiffy," chuckled Nagaraj. "Theft, cheating and squabbles have overall been considerably reduced in the village. People respect and fear Basava--he's like a policeman."

"Basava alleviates the problems of those who seek his benevolence and renders justice to those faulted," says Thimme Gowda, from the neighboring village.

If anyone breaches a promise, Basava chases and pins them in a corner. He will not let go till they own up and vow to make amends. "Basava nudges the wrongdoer with his horns, intimidates them, but has never harmed anyone. Many a time he has chased a liar and held him captive until the liar uttered the truth," avers Nagaraj.

"It doesn't mean Basava corners and punishes just anyone, as we have all made mistakes. But if someone has forgotten his vow to a temple or Deity, or has stolen or embezzled the temple funds, Basava takes him to task," explains Reddy, a prosperous devotee from Bengaluru.

During this journalist's visit to meet the famous ox, I found him to be not fierce at all. On the contrary, he seems quite gentle. The Zebu breed, believed to be the first domesticated cattle, are naturally docile. I saw devotees place infants at his feet. Basava lovingly caressed and played with them. There was not a trace of fear either in the child or the parents. The parents believe that, once blessed by Basava, the child is divinely insured.

Basava's caretaker, Jogappa, 28, told me, "Last year, the distressed parents of a six-month-old baby suffering from a heart ailment brought the child to Basava after the doctors had given up hope. They sought Basava's blessings by placing the child at his feet. Basava thoughtfully stood across the baby for a while and then carefully stepped over it. Miraculously, the child regained health. Such cases of miraculous healing are numerous."

Jogappa claims he owes his life to Basava. "We were crossing a river. Suddenly there was a flash flood. I was drowning. Appearing out of nowhere, Basava swam through the overflowing river and shoved me to safety. He saved me. Since then, I have dedicated myself to his service."

Each day hundreds of devotees pack the Kalabhairava temple. They seek atonement for sins, curing of an illness or divine protection. When Basava performs his daily three pradakshina (circumambulations) around the temple, many wait in line to touch him; others lie on the ground in his path with their head toward the temple Deity. Basava carefully places his hoof between the devotees and deftly walks over them.

I met Basava at Nagaraj's house in Bengaluru late in the evening, when I arrived in town with my family (including son Skanda, who wrote the sidebar next page). Basava was housed in the family's living room. Hay had been liberally spread on the floor. After a few minutes, Basava lay down, signaling the end of our darshan session. We watched him slowly fall asleep and finally snore as a few ladies sang a folk lullaby. As I was leaving, satisfied that I had my story, Jogappa, the caretaker, came to the car saying, "Basava indicates he wants you to come back again in the morning." The following day being a working day, the prospect of ploughing back through 18 kms of Bengaluru traffic was not attractive, and I indicated as much, but Jogappa insisted.

At 6:30 the next morning, the house was already teeming with devotees and curious visitors. We watched as Basava walked over a row of devotees waiting to be blessed. He was then given a warm bath and serenaded with a folk song. Then the puja was performed to him. Now he was ready to give more blessings.

People kneeled with outstretched palms at Basava's feet. He refused to bless one lady, no matter how much she pleaded. He got increasingly annoyed as she persisted. I was apprehensive as our turn neared, and stories of his fierce horn nudges emerged from my memory. "Don't look at him as an animal. Approach with devotion, seeing God in him," someone counseled. I mustered my courage--and sent my husband first! Unfazed, he looked into Basava's eyes, softly chanted prayers, kneeled and spread his palms out. Basava quickly raised his hoof and gently placed it in his hands! Then each of us, taking turns, sought and received Basava's blessings in the same way.

I saw devotees offering lemons at Basava's feet, so I gave some to Nagaraj to be blessed. Basava refused. Nagaraj pleaded repeatedly but the bull angrily nudged him out. Exasperated, Nagaraj told me I must seek the blessings directly. I sat in front of the bull and prayed. He took the lemons aside, caressed them with his right hoof then pushed them towards me. He had sent a clear message--Divinity needs no intermediaries!

Basava, now eleven years old, was purchased by the Kalabhairava Temple at the cattle fair nine years ago, right after his predecessor died. Reddy recounts, "His owner initially refused to sell Basava and offered other bulls instead. But we felt this bull had all the spiritual indicators. We kept a trishula near him for vibrations; we looked for a snake's head on his forehead and other significant characteristics, as directed by the elders. We persisted, and finally the owner agreed. We bought him for us\$180."

Village leaders and elders run the temple according to Basava's instructions. No activity is done without his consent. "We wanted to build a dining hall and had chosen a place. But Basava led us to a different place and indicated the building should be there. He even inspects the construction work." Basava insists that the temple premises be kept clean. He grunts if there is trash lying around and charges at anyone he finds dirtying the place.

As you can see from the photos, Basava receives lots of money--thousands or tens of thousands of rupees a day are tied to his head. He himself decides what to do with the money--it either goes to his temple or to a temple he visits. There is increasing demand for him to visit surrounding villages and cities. "We receive requests from devotees in other places who are eager to receive his grace," Reddy tells us. "At times Basava himself chooses to visit a certain temple, village or home." Basava seems especially drawn to temples in need of repair or improvement. By standing close to the contribution box, he indicates that the money he carries should be given to that temple." In February, 2008, he was a guest of honor for the three-day dedication of the huge Lord Kalabhairava Temple at Adichunchanagiri Hills in Karnataka. Our editor spent two hours with him during the rituals.

The village of Chikka Arasinakere abounds in tales of Basava's marvels. He is their

boon giver, their moral police and justice dispenser. His word is the holy verdict no one dares discount. Personally, my family and I experienced the power of his blessings. Call it faith, belief or divinity; no one can dispute the powers of this holy bull. Basava is an experience.

How Basava Selected a New Priest

By Skanda Prasad, Bengaluru

It was afternoon when we reached the Kalabhairava Temple at Chikka Arasinakere village situated next to the Shimsha River. Entering the temple, we first paid our obeisance to Basava, who was resting in a small pen. Basava rose and began walking around the temple prakara. People were lying down in his path waiting for him to walk across them. I was initially scared, but then lay down, and Basava walked over me.

Outside the temple, a gaggle of brightly attired and exuberant people waited, their foreheads adorned with sandalwood paste and vermilion. We learned that they were from the surrounding villages, gathered to witness a momentous event. The nearby temple of the village Goddesses Manchamma and Mariamma had fallen into disuse, and the temple administrators had sought Basava's help in choosing a suitable priest. Basava has chosen priests for other temples as well.

Elaborate ceremonies had been going on for two days. The temple's utsava murthis (parade Deities) were cleansed, and a purification ritual was performed to re-energize the edifice. Yagnas were performed. Now it was time for the choosing of the priest. Villagers from all surrounding villages had arrived, heeding Basava's call--anyone among them could be selected as the priest, irrespective of age, caste or even religion.

"If the priest determined by Basava is not among those assembled, he will go in search of him. If that person is far away, Basava will wait for him to return to the village to anoint him. A month before, Basava had climbed on the rooftop of a house to choose as priest for another temple a 12-year-old boy who was playing there." says Jogi Gowda, one of the temple trustees.

1. As we follow Basava outside the temple, there is sudden silence (see photo 1 from my cellphone in the above sequence of events). The late afternoon sun is searing, and the asphalt is like burning coal. But no one in the barefoot crowd seems bothered. 2. The excitement is heightened by the temple drummers. 3. Basava sets out from the temple and walks to the riverside ghat, where some of the hopefuls are standing. As he rushes forward, it is clear that he has found the new priest. Basava charges towards a young man and the visibly bewildered youth is herded towards the riverside by the ecstatic villagers. He is 20-year-old Basavesha, a farm laborer from Chikka village. As Basava pushes him into the river, cries of joy erupt from the thronging crowd--many of them are precariously balanced on the river bund, me included. Basava's push is so strong that others standing nearby fall into the water.

Immediately, Basavesha goes into a trance. 4. Emerging from the river, he walks beside Basava, both intuitively heading to the same destination. The crowd follows. No one is sure where they are going--some say they are going to the temple, some say they are going to another village. I follow close behind trying to keep pace. The crowd is so large that the only way I can get a clear view is from the river itself. Soon I'm waist deep in the water trying to get clear pictures. 5. As we watch, Basavesha is again pushed into the river by Basava. People hold on to prevent the youth from going into deeper waters.

With this water ritual completed, the duo walk back to the first riverside ghat. This time, Basavesha leads the way. 6. Then, as his first act as the new priest, Basavesha performs arati to the utsava murtis of the two Goddesses. Basava now leads him to the Kalabhairava Temple, where they circumambulate the temple and seek the blessings of Kalabhairava.

Still in a trance, Basavesha is led outside the temple, where the festivities continue. Basava returns to his enclosure to bless the waiting crowd of devotees. The first to seek his blessings are the temple administrators of the Manchamma-Maramma temple, who seek Basava's approval of the ceremony and the decision, and request him to bless their temple.

Before we leave, my father and I go back to Basava to seek his feet in blessing. 7. Gently he places his hoof into our outstretched palms. I feel graced, since Basava

either crosses a devotee or offers his foot, but seldom both on the same day.

As we leave, I feel a surge of energy and profound spirituality. When we went to the temple that day, it was just to seek the blessings of Basava. Little did we know that such a great event was taking place. Witnessing such a Godly spectacle was itself a blessing.

Skanda Prasad, 20, is an undergraduate in electronics and communication engineering and has had a distinguished academic career. He has studied Hinduism and Sanskrit chanting since age 9 and loves Indian classical music. Skanda