

[Veerashaivism Threatened, But Surviving In North America](#)

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300 L.A. Conferees Focus on Youth and Marriage In Struggle to Preserve Identity Amid New Culture

"If you didn't want us to belong to another culture, then why did you bring us to the West?" That challenging query was spoken by "Shankar," a youth in his early 20's, to 300 people gathered for the 9th Annual Convention of the Veerashaiva Samaja in Alhambra, California on Saturday, July 5th. He received no reply.

What could his elders say? They remained silently puzzled. The old ways weren't working; and no one had yet found new solutions to the new problems arising out of being reproached for not adopting a tradition his parents had neglected to inculcate in him - and all too often didn't exemplify in their own lives. Shankar had been inundated with pop culture, T.V., public school, afternoons at MacDonald's and the almost omnipotent pressure of his peers. Denied the religious and cultural training his parents had enjoyed in their youth, Shankar was now a typical American boy. Religion? That was for older people, a bit old-fashion, with little personal meaning for a modern young man.

From Shankar's point of view, this was the natural consequence of growing up in Southern California. From his community's, it was a tragedy. Shankar knew little about his faith, and his children would know next to nothing. Allowed to spread, such neglect of a uniquely profound and millenia-old spiritual path could sound the death knell for Lingayat Saivism in North America.

That's precisely why the L.A. conference didn't have much to say about religion, about the sacred Vacana hymns that are the Bible of Veerashaivism, about the humanitarian principles and dignity-of-work ethic which are so essential to the path. More pragmatic concerns were the need of the hour, so the weekend was to focus on encouraging young men and women to marry others with the same

background and beliefs. In recent years far too many of the small 600-family community had married partners with no particular interest in Veerashaivism and had subsequently forsaken the tradition.

Success and Failure: Dr. Gangadhar Kori knows the problem all too well. He brought his family to America from Bombay in 1952, received his Ph.D. and settled near Washington, D.C. Propelled by the famed "work is worship" ethic which has made Veerashaivites leaders in business and education, he saw that the West was awash in a crop glut, even paying farmers to not grow foods, while just a few thousand miles away people were starving. Dr. Kori became associates with the United Nation's wheat surplus program and now helps the U.S. government resolve shortage/surplus conditions, avoiding deficit spending for economic development and seeking to increase world food yields minimizing increases in health problems related to synthetic chemicals.

But Dr. Kori's occupational and financial success, common in the Veerashaiva community, is tempered by failure in another area. "When we came to America, we struggled for professional stability, and sadly, forgot the children for a while. I see many of my associates who now have wealth, but have lost their kids. All of a sudden the child was a teenager and the parents were saying 'Oops!' and unable to find peace of mind on the subject...The real problem showed up when our children, raised in a cross-cultural society, entered marriages with non-Veerashaivites. The couple didn't know how to raise their children. Our grandchildren, who then became cultural orphans. If raised by the father in the Hindu-Shiva tradition, the Christian mother will feel short-changed. She'll be disappointed. If you take the mother's tradition, the father will be hurt."

Formative Years: Seeking insight, elders turned to science to avert what Dr. Chekki, Veerashaivite Professor of Sociology at the University of Winnipeg, terms "cultural suicide." Dr. Kori explained, "To avoid this kind of dilemma, the behavioral sciences pointed the way. The best way to reach our children is before they reach age five or six, maximum is seven. They are sensing the world around them. Father and mother are the best people to explain what it's all about. The child is anxious then to learn about everything - what is that. They are open to religion. Thus the formative stage is the most critical stage to share with them the value system, the virtues.

"From 8-12 they start comparing, and at 16 or 18 they start having a thing or two

to tell the parents. So among my very close friends, there were personal losses like this. Nor could we catch up with our children's training later. By the time they were teenagers and we realized the problem, it was too late." He told Hinduism Today that religion begins with the family; what he implied without saying is it can end there unless intelligent and industrious steps are taken, and quickly.

Dr. Kori's personal evolution over the past 30 years carried him from efforts to unite all Hindus to a deep commitment to his Veerashaiva traditions. "We are broad-minded and respect the ideal of the universal citizen. But I remember the caution, 'Belonging to all people, we may end up belonging to none.'"

VSNA Conference: Nine years ago Dr. Kori, Dr. Siddhalingaya, Dr. K. Rajasedhara, Dr. Bilgiri and others started the Veerashaiva Samaja of North America (VSNA) with a handful of members. It has now blossomed into nine chapters with about 400 dedicated families. Chapters now exist in Washington, D.C., Detroit, New York, Pittsburgh, Maryland, Chicago, Los Angeles, Ohio and Toronto.

The Los Angeles conference was organized by VSNA to discuss and experimentally debate issues of youth and marriage. It was obviously too late to change Shankar and his friends, but hearing from them proved sobering and provided insights that might help the Veerashaiva community (and similar Hindu groups striving to preserve their heritage outside of India) avoid the same mistake in the future.

This was the 9th Annual Convention. The one-day session opened with over 300 delegates representing the 10 chapters. There were the obligatory cultural events and excursions to nearby Disneyland, but the real work before these men and women was to confront together specific issues: Are we letting go of our teachings? Who has the time to follow them? How will the tradition continue if our children don't marry within it? Why is it so hard to get financial contributions? How can we put up a Veerashaiva school and cultural center as soon as possible, before the next generation is lost?

Veerashaivas are not the kind to approach important matters casually. After all, they are largely involved in the medical and scientific professions. That discipline and dignity are apparent to all who encounter them. They convey an unmistakable firmness of mind - the heritage, quite probably, of a religious philosophy espousing

work instead of words, education for all and a democratic spirit of responsibility that the American founding fathers might have envied.

Debatable Debate: An eminent religious leader and swami from Karnataka, the central Indian state where most of the world's 5 million Veerashaivites live, had flown in for the occasion. So the stage was set for the most productive convention ever. The next generation sat watchfully in a separate group as their parents opened a creative debate, planned as a forum which would present and perhaps assess the problems. The debate topic: "Resolved that Veerashaiva youth living in North America should only get married to Veerashaivas."

On stage, two teams of six each - all parents except for one teenage girl - debated with good-natured seriousness an issue which seemed all the more poignant for the fact that youth in the U.S. are so scattered they rarely see each other but once a year at this convention. Nonetheless, the problem of preserving Veerashaivism clearly rests upon whom they marry and how their children are raised.

At least that's what the parents felt. The younger generation appeared unmoved by the gravity of the matter, applauding only the side opposed to the resolution. An uneasy feeling soon arose. Observers could not help but wonder that the well-intentioned drama was "too little and too late."

The debaters waxed eloquent, their perceptions profound, their points trenchantly driven home so equally that no winner could be discerned - unless all who better understood the complex issue could be counted the winners. Both sides concurred that affinity and compatibility in marriage are all-important, but disagreed as to how that is achieved in American society. Those in favor of the resolution argued convincingly that a marriage today has little going for it beyond a tenuous personal attraction which all too often breaks down without the underpinnings of shared culture and religion. They noted that ideally a marriage is not just a relationship between two people, but is a bond between two families and a means of perpetuating traditions rich in meaning, ethical values and usefulness.

The opposition was unmoved, suggesting that such views, while wholly appropriate in India in the Middle Ages, entirely miss the point here in modern America. Young people here are exposed to "a supermarket of cultures, attitudes

and belief systems." Expecting them to cling to the old ways in unrealistic, naive. Besides, they observed, without the extended family structure supporting a family "relationship is the foremost bond between husband and wife" and "couples have only each other to turn to and must therefore work out their own set of affinities at levels perhaps more subtle than shared cultural and religious background."

Finally given a chance to express themselves, the youth were advised that their time was limited and instructed to express either opinion or questions, but not both. Politely, diffidently, but intensely, a few came forward. They read a short list of observations, but obviously left more unsaid than said.

It was quite a scene: teen-age Indian Americans about to hear a resolution passed which everyone knew they would probably ignore; and their parents' saffron-robed Guru sitting quietly by, whom most, not all, of the youth appeared to ignore. Life in the West does not instruct Hindu youth in the basics of Guru protocol. That the spiritual master, or Guru, holds so central a place in Veerashaivism made the youth's unconscious impropriety all the more ironic to observers.

A Holy Man: The great man with whom they shared the summer afternoon and who had much wisdom to offer them, had they known to seek it out, was Jagadguru Sri Shivarathri Rajendra Mahaswamiji began his spiritual work in 1928 at the age of 12. That year he was ordained by his Guru as the 23rd pontiff of Suttur Mutt, situated on the Kapini river one hour's drive from Mysore, Karnataka. N. Vijayalakshmi of Bangalore describes the swami's multi-faceted work in glowing terms: "Its history can be traced back to the Chola Kingdom. In 1954 swami established the JSS Mahavidyapeetha, whose charter is to plan and execute educational and social service to society. Presently there are 9 technical colleges, (including a medical and engineering colleges), 6 first grade colleges, 4 junior colleges, 32 high schools, 13 primary and nursery schools, 28 hostels and 4 sanskrit patashalas. It is Swamiji's tireless efforts and vision that have brought it to fruition for the prosperity of humanity."

This renowned leader has become the head of over 300 Veerashaiva mutts (monastery/temple complexes). Five years ago his students who had come to U.S. to find their fortune began urging him to visit, guide and uplift them. At last he had come, bringing his young successor-to-be with him and extracting himself from an awesome work load back home.

Hinduism Today asked the holy man to share his thoughts on the subject of the debate. Through his translator, the doe-eyed sannyasin gently conveyed that cultural affinity is very important between marriage partners and, should one of them not be Veerashaiva, then he or she should be initiated into Veerashaivism before the marriage (the faithful have historically and philosophically been inclined to accepting converts into their fold). The Swamiji did not object to marrying a partner who was not Veerashaiva by birth, but urged that the new husband or wife embrace Veerashaiva principles.

Swamiji's support for preserving the unique character and identity of Veerashaivism was predictable, but potent nonetheless. His challenge, not fully achieved that week, was to make his thoughtful words as practical and listened-to in sunny California as they are in sunny Karnataka. He and the lay men and women at the conference would have to find ways of reaching out to and more effectively communicating with the eclectic American Hindu youth who think for themselves and simply will not accept things on orders that they must do so. With so compassionate and enlightened a religion, the task should be effortless. But in practice it is not. Much thoughtful planning and work lies ahead. Now that the Swamiji has seen for himself what his young ones face, hopes are high that he will put his blessing on the establishment of a Veerashaiva school in the U.S. Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania has been suggested as a possible location. One of his Swamis would be trained to be his representative at the school and watch over the religious instruction.

More Resources Needed: Mrs. Vimala Channabasappa, now of Alexandria, Virginia, and originally from Hardwar and Bangalore, is acutely aware of the need for resources that inform the Veerashaiva youth from birth. Arriving in the U.S. in 1955 with her geologist husband, Vimala is painfully aware of the dearth of such tools and strives daily to fill the void. "We have some resources, including retreats and literature sources, but it's not nearly enough," the writer, poetess and homemaker told Hinduism Today. "We felt our children needed more religious explanation and cultural background. They were provided for well materially, but not spiritually. We determined to provide more on the Kannada language, history, vacanas [scriptural verses], story-telling and common prayers. They have to play and have some fun, too. We hoped the children could learn to read Kannada and talk to their grandparents...So we developed Sunday Schools in Washington D.C. and Detroit and have groups that meet to study Kannada language and literature. And there have been some summer retreats and youth gatherings at the annual conferences. But we need more. We need a Bible. We need a good library. We need more publications and more people who can help. Everyone now is part-time. Full time efforts must be there."

Dr. H. Siddhalingaya, in his 1981 state of the VSNA message urged Veerashaivites in North America to study, preserve and protect their traditions. He also had the courage to sound a solemn warning that is true today, not only for Veerashaivites, but for all who love the Hindu dharma in its varied but unified forms - "If we do not live up to the expectations of our religion, we are not worthy of it."

Dr. C. Biligi, the current president of VSNA and a senior medical consultant in the Canadian Ministry of Labor, takes a more moderate position. He notes, for one thing, that VSNA has no official policy on matters of youth and marriage. He has urged Veerashaivites to be flexible in resolving the complex problems of living outside of India, to be willing to make special efforts to "adopt the culture here in the West."

Dr. Biligi told Hinduism Today that there are, in fact, very few orthodox Veerashaivites living in North America. "Many believe in the basic principles, but a small percentage are true orthodox Veerashaivites. Of course, that is not to say there are none. A few are strict." He is referring, in part, to the fact that most Veerashaivites in North America now eat eggs and meat. More importantly, when asked whether Veerashaivites here still wear the Ishtalinga, Dr. Biligi stated they do not, adding, "Most have the Ishtalinga, but they don't wear it on their body. They keep it on an altar and worship it at home. This is because jobs may not permit it or it may be inconvenient. The majority still worship it, but only a minority carry it anymore."

When one realizes that it is the Ishtalinga, carried on the body, that is the single most sacred act of Veerashaivites, setting them apart from all other traditions, then the gravity of Dr. Biligi's words is appreciated. In defining Veerashaivism, Dr. K. Ishwara, in his 1983 book *Religion and Society Among the Lingayats of South India*, writes, "[Lingayats] constantly carry the Linga, the symbol of Siva, either around their necks or across their chests."

Dr. R. Blake Michael, a scholar at Ohio Wesleyan University specializing in Lingayat tradition, gave the following definition in his "Foundation Myths of the Two Denominations of Veerashavism:" [Veerashaivites] are distinguished from their Brahmanical Hindu neighbors by numerous characteristics, including their rejection of the caste system, their emphasis on the rights of women, their avoidance of elaborate temple rituals in veneration of Siva, and their practice of wearing always about the body a small stone emblem (linga or ishtalinga signifying the presence of

Lord Siva in the heart of each believer. In fact, the group's alternate name, Lingayata, means 'linga wearer.'"

When the "Linga-wearers" stop wearing the Linga, problems are bound to arise. Dr. Biligi realizes the importance of this matter, disclosing that he and others are seeking solutions. One which he considers promising is a proposal to modify the Ishtalinga so that it may be worn in the West unobtrusively on a pendant or chain. By this or some similar plan, they hope to overcome any resistance by both adults (whose Linga may become the focus of discomfiting inquiries in the club sauna) and children (who don't know how to respond to questions directed at them by peers during swimming practice or in the locker room).

It is an urgent problem for Veerashaivites, one which they cannot delay another five years. One leader lamented the poor example being set by parents and prayerfully hoped that they would provide a better model for their children by following the tradition and wearing the Linga without embarrassment or lapse. He noted that "Christians wear their crucifixes unapologetically, as Jews do their six-pointed Stars of David. Why should Veerashaivites feel even the slightest bit embarrassed by traditions that are much older? Where is the courage Basava [saintly reformer of the religion] had?"

Solutions Exist: If Veerashaivites can find that courage, there are solutions which, when implemented, will preserve this grand and egalitarian path in North America. Probably the most important of them is the Land and Mutt Project, also called the VSNA Community Center. Dr. K.R. Channarasappa, chairman of the Pittsburgh Chapter, describes this as a \$ -1 million undertaking that "might include a temple, auditorium, learning center, library and certain type of residential school which can be used for youth camps and other activities." The main advantage of a mutt would be stable, orthodox spiritual guidance provided by trained swamis. Spiritual leadership in the form of itinerant swamis has never been more needed or more relevant to Veerashaivites than today. Right now, there is not a single person working full-time in North America on behalf of Veerashaivism, and thus the community accomplishes its fine projects by dint of volunteer lay service - which is not ideal. A mutt would give the community the strong center in the form of a swami who embodies the ideals which all Veerashaivites seek. The first step in manifesting the Land and Mutt Project, for which pledges of \$21,000 have been received, will be to purchase land in a suitable location.

Dr. Channarasappa, in a recent VSNA bulletin, also noted that the community's long-term goals include study of spiritual literature and texts, noting that "religious instruction at the family level is very important. Parents must make a special effort to study Veerashaiva literature so that they might be able to guide and help their children. Study groups must be formed and meet regularly. Sunday schools and youth camps might play an important role...It is the desire of all of us that our children and grandchildren maintain Veerashaiva identity."

Dr. Biligi feels the crucial link in the chain is to be found in closeness, "The most important thing is to bring people together, make them feel at home here, make them feel they are part of a big family. If we accomplish this sense that you are not alone, that there are others like you, that we all care enough to hold hands with other families, that will be the best thing. That will give courage and [the security] that there is someone I can talk to, someone to share my with problems, someone who will listen to me and understand."

Another solution lies in the temple projects in which many are already involved. For the sake of harmony, Veerashaivites have become involved in two major Siva-Vishnu temples - something the staunch and uncompromising Basava would never have allowed. For him God was Siva and Siva alone, and his followers were strict Saivites, not ecumenists. So it becomes essential, if the North American Veerashaivites are to preserve Basava's spirit, that Siva temples be build for the next generation. Incidentally, though Veerashaivites started 800 years ago objecting to temples and their rituals (which were the focus of much abuse in those days), they have in the intervening centuries taken a more favorable attitude in this regard. Today devotees seek the blessings of Lord Ganesha, and worship freely in the sacred Siva temples.

One youth's views are instructive. Twelve-year old Deepak Dandapannivar was born in Canada and raised in California. Deepak has found it hard to get his young friends in the West to really understand his religion, saying, "If you're a Veerashaivite in the West, they think you're different. We can't say anything about our Gods when kids mention Christ. They don't understand, so we really never talk to other Americans about Siva."

Young Deepak isn't giving up his faith. He speaks as if he holds its treasures quietly in his heart and admits that he relies heavily on occasional contact with other Veerashaiva youth. His advice to young Hindus living in the West is pure

simplicity: "First of all, make good friends and don't follow anything bad. Don't let them lead you into drugs or something. Then follow Veerashaivism closely, 'cause there's another life after this and you want that life to be good."

In 1924 Mahatma Gandhi stood before the All-India Congress in Belgaum and held aloft a biography of the great Basavana, saying: "I have not been able to practice all the principles preached by Basavesvara 800 years ago. I have practiced a few of them, but Basavana practiced all he preached. If you, his followers, translate all his principles into practice, you can uplift not only India but even the whole world."

Veerashaivism in a Nutshell

Veerashaivism is one of the most dynamic of modern-day Saivite schools. Founded at the dawn of history, it was reformed and revitalized by saint Basavanna who lived from 1105 to 1167. Veera (Sanskrit for "heroic") Saivites are also known as Lingam all members carry constantly. Of this practice, Thavathiru Santhalinga Ramasamy of Coimbatore recently said, "I can say that Veera Saiva worship is the best form of worship because Siva Linga is worn on our body and it unites the soul with the Omnipresence. We are always in touch with the Lord, without even a few seconds break."

Like the 16th century Protestant revolt against Catholic authority, the Lingayat movement rebelled against a powerful Brahmanical system of four ashrams, a multiplicity of gods, the magico-ritualistic (and allegedly self-aggrandizing) priestcraft, karmic bondage, the existence of inner worlds, duality of God and soul, earning merit through devotion, temple worship and the idea of ritual purity-pollution.

Lingayats place emphasis on this life, on equality of all members (regardless of caste, education, sex, etc.), on intense social involvement and service to the community. The faith's pillars are Guru, Linga and Jangama (wandering monk) to which may be added Kayaka (serving or mission). It should be noted that many Veerashaivites today do not strictly follow the founders' "revolutionary" principles.

Veerashaivism possesses Eight Supportive Devices: Guru, Linga, Padodaka (Guru's feet), Prasada (sacred offering), Vibuthi (holy ash), Rudraksha (holy beads) and Mantra (Nama Sivaya).

Veerashaiva spiritual authority derives from the lives and writings (called Vacanas) of the Siva-Saranas. The foremost of these were Basavanna and Allama Prabhu. Basavanna was a reflective and defiant Brahmin youth who rejected much of the Saivism practiced in his day, tore off his sacred thread at age 16 and fled to a life of solitude. He found a Saivite Brahmin Guru, Isanya Guru, and studied with him. At age 28, Basavanna arrived at the insight that the brotherhood of man rests on the doctrine of a personalized, individual Godhood in the form of Ishtalinga.

He sought service in the royal court of Bijjala, prompted by a dream of Siva as Lord Kudalasangama. He rose to become chief officer of the Royal Treasury. Minister to a king in a troubled country at odds with Buddhism and Jainism. This position led to the swift spreading of his message. Basavanna wedded two wives. Opposition to his egalitarian community that rejected convention later led to violence which Basavanna failed to restrain. He left the region, defeated, and soon died. King Bijjala turned against the community and was assassinated by Veerashaiva extremists. Riots erupted and the Lingayats were scattered far and wide.

If Basavanna was the faith's intellectual and social architect, Allama Prabhu was its austere mystical powerhouse. The doctrines of these two founders are contained in the Vacanas or prose lyrics. Roughly 450 of these scriptures have been identified. The Vacanas ("what is said") scorn the Vedas, reject the legends of gods and goddesses and mock ritual. To them, formal religions are the "establishment," the static institutions that promise man security and predictability, whereas religion must be dynamic, spontaneous, freed of bargains extracted in exchange for Salvation.

These scriptures reject "doing good" so one may go to heaven. Allama says: "Feed the poor, tell the truth and build tanks for a town. You may go to heaven after death, but you'll be nowhere near the truth of our Lord. And the man who knows our Lord, he gets no results." The Vacanas are incandescent poetry, full of humor, ridicule and the white heat of truth-seeking, bristling with monotheism, commanding devotees to enter the awesome realm of personal spirituality.

Veerashaivites follow a progressive 6-stage path of devotion and surrender bringing oneness with Siva: Bhakti (devotion), Mahesvara (steadfast discipline), Prasada (life as a sacred offering), Porana Linga (experience of all as Siva), Sarana (egoless refuge) and finally Aiyka (oneness with Siva, likened to a river flowing into the ocean of Being).