

ANUBHAVA MANTAPA: A CENTRE OF CHURNING IDEAS

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ABSTRACT

Anubhava Mantapa, established in the 12th century by the great social reformer and philosopher Bhagavan Basavanna, is widely recognized as the world's first democratic socio-religious parliament. It emerged as a pioneering centre for philosophical dialogue, social reform, and intellectual discourse. Functioning under the spiritual guidance of Basavanna and his contemporaries, including Allama Prabhu and Akka Mahadevi, Anubhava Mantapa became a crucible where ideas on equality, human values, and devotion converged. This research paper explores the historical evolution, philosophical foundations, socio-cultural contributions, and contemporary relevance of Anubhava Mantapa as an epicentre of transformative ideas.

KEYWORDS: *Anubhava Mantapa, Basavanna, 12th-century Karnataka, Sharana movement, Vachana literature, socio-religious reform, equality, spiritual democracy, caste free society, women empowerment, humanism, Bhakti movement, experiential learning, dialogue tradition, community ethics, social justice, Indian philosophy, democratic discourse, Lingayat movement.*

1. INTRODUCTION

India's intellectual tradition has been marked by a long-standing culture of dialogue, debate, and philosophical reflection. Among the various centres that nurtured such vibrant discourse, Anubhava Mantapa occupies a singular and transformative place in history. Established in the 12th century at Kalyana (present-day Basavakalyan, Karnataka) under the guidance of Jagadguru Basavanna, it functioned as an open, democratic forum where individuals from diverse social backgrounds irrespective of caste, class, gender, occupation, or sect gathered to discuss spiritual, social, ethical, and political matters.

Unlike the traditional religious institutions of the period that were rooted in ritualism and hereditary hierarchy, Anubhava Mantapa emphasized experience (anubhava) as the basis of knowledge. It promoted an egalitarian mode of engagement in which every participant, from kings to cobblers and from scholars to women saints, had an equal voice. This radical inclusivity challenged the rigid caste system and the priest-centric religious structure that dominated medieval Indian society.

Often described as the world's first parliament of spiritual democracy, the Mantapa represented a revolutionary step toward democratizing knowledge, redistributing intellectual authority, and reimagining community life on the principles of equality, justice, reason, and dignity of labour. The discussions and deliberations held within this institution were later codified in the form of Vachana literature, offering timeless reflections on morality, devotion, governance, and social conduct.

This research paper explores Anubhava Mantapa as both a historical institution and a pioneering space for social transformation. It investigates its philosophical foundations, organizational structure, socio-religious impact, and its contemporary relevance as a model of participatory discourse and humanistic values. In doing so, the paper highlights how Anubhava Mantapa remains a cornerstone of India's intellectual heritage and a symbol of churning ideas that continue to inspire modern democratic and ethical thought.

2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Anubhava Mantapa emerged in the 12th century during a period marked by deep social stratification, religious orthodoxy, and ritual dominance. Under the progressive leadership of Basavanna, a visionary philosopher and statesman, the Mantapa became the intellectual nucleus of the Lingayat (Sharana) movement

Basavanna, serving as the Prime Minister in the court of King Bijjala II of the Kalachuri dynasty, envisioned a society rooted in equality, dignity of labour, compassion, and experiential spirituality. Supported by eminent sharanas such as Allama Prabhu, Akka Mahadevi, Channabasavanna, Siddharama, and others, the Mantapa nurtured an atmosphere where conventional hierarchies were rejected and critical reflection was encouraged.

The socio-political environment of the time characterized by Brahmanical dominance, caste rigidity, gender discrimination, and economic disparities served as the backdrop for the Mantapa's revolutionary agenda. Its establishment marked a shift from scriptural authority to lived experience, from blind faith to reasoned devotion, and from hierarchical control to participatory equality.

3. PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS

The core philosophy of Anubhava Mantapa rests on four interconnected pillars:

a. Anubhava (Experience as Knowledge)

The Mantapa upheld that personal experience is the ultimate source of truth. Knowledge derived from one's direct engagement with life, work, and devotion was considered superior to ritualistic or scriptural learning. This concept democratized spirituality by making enlightenment accessible to all.

b. Kayaka (Dignity of Labour)

Kayaka emphasized that every type of work whether performed by a potter, farmer, trader, or scholar holds inherent value. Labour was not merely an economic activity but a spiritual pursuit. This philosophy challenged caste-based division of labour and promoted socio-economic self-reliance.

c. Dasoha (Selfless Sharing)

Dasoha refers to the practice of sharing wealth, knowledge, and resources without expectation. It encouraged a culture of compassion, equity, and social responsibility principles that bind a community together.

d. Equality and Social Justice

Anubhava Mantapa strongly opposed caste hierarchy, gender discrimination, and social exclusion. Women saints such as Akka Mahadevi participated freely and contributed significantly, marking a revolutionary step toward gender equality in medieval India.

4. STRUCTURE AND FUNCTIONING OF ANUBHAVA MANTAPA

Anubhava Mantapa operated as a **democratic deliberative body**, often compared to a modern parliament due to its structural openness and participatory governance.

a. Leadership

- 1) **Allama Prabhu** served as the presiding spiritual head (Pradhana Guru).
- 2) **Basavanna** acted as the social reformer and administrator.

- 3) **Channabasavanna** codified many discussions into Vachanas.

b. Membership

Unlike traditional councils dominated by elites, the Mantapa welcomed:

- 1) Men and women
- 2) All castes and occupations
- 3) Intellectuals, workers, mystics, householders, and youth

This inclusivity positioned the Mantapa as a revolutionary institution far ahead of its time.

c. Deliberation Process

Members gathered to:

- 1) Discuss ethical, spiritual, and social issues
- 2) Debate philosophical concerns
- 3) Solve community disputes
- 4) Formulate guiding principles for daily life

The outcomes of these deliberations were expressed in **Vachanas**, forming a repository of collective wisdom.

d. Output: Vachana Literature

The Vachanas that emerged from the Mantapa were concise, poetic, and profound expressions of spiritual insight and social critique. They rejected ritualism, upheld monotheism, condemned social injustices, and emphasized inner purity.

5. IMPACT AND LEGACY

Anubhava Mantapa left an enduring imprint on Indian society:

a. Social Reform

The Mantapa dismantled caste barriers and offered radical ideas on equality, especially gender equality. It provided one of the earliest models of an inclusive community based on human dignity.

b. Democratic Culture

Its open-discussion format served as a precursor to modern democratic practices. Scholars often regard it as the **first spiritual parliament** in the world.

c. Literary Contributions

Vachana literature enriched Kannada literature with its simplicity, philosophical depth, and social realism. It influenced future generations of poets, philosophers, and reformers.

d. Ethical and Spiritual Legacy

The principles of Kayaka and Dasoha continue to find relevance in contemporary discourses on ethical labour, social justice, cooperative economy, and humanistic spirituality.

e. Modern Relevance

In an age marked by inequality, identity conflicts, and moral dilemmas, the Anubhava Mantapa stands as a reminder of the value of dialogue, inclusivity, and ethical responsibility. Its model is frequently invoked in discussions about democratic reforms, social equity, and experiential learning.

6. CONCLUSION

Anubhava Mantapa remains a luminous and unparalleled chapter in India's socio-cultural, intellectual, and philosophical heritage. As one of the earliest platforms for collective reflection and dialogue, it embodied a revolutionary spirit that challenged the rigid foundations of ritualistic orthodoxy, caste-based discrimination, and gender inequality. Under the guidance of Basavanna and the enlightened sharanas, the Mantapa offered a transformative paradigm centered on human dignity, experiential wisdom (anubhava), reason, compassion, and spiritual democracy.

By bringing together individuals from diverse social, economic, and occupational backgrounds, Anubhava Mantapa demonstrated the power of inclusive dialogue and participatory governance long before such concepts became integral to modern political systems. Its insistence on equality, ethical labour (kayaka), and selfless sharing (dasoha) helped redefine the role of spirituality as a force for social reform, moral accountability, and community welfare.

The legacy of Anubhava Mantapa continues to resonate in contemporary movements advocating social justice, gender empowerment, democratic values, and human rights. Its teachings provide critical insights for addressing modern societal challenges be it economic inequality, social fragmentation, or ethical dilemmas in governance. The Mantapa's philosophy encourages societies to re-embrace dialogue over dogma, experience over ritual, and cooperation over hierarchy.

In essence, Anubhava Mantapa stands not merely as a historical institution but as a timeless beacon of progressive thought. Its contributions continue to inspire scholars, reformers, policymakers, and citizens alike. Truly, it remains a centre of churning ideas, shaping India's intellectual and moral consciousness across centuries and reinforcing the enduring relevance of justice, equality, and experiential knowledge in building a harmonious and enlightened society.

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