

## Experiencing the Sublime — The Contributions of Akka Mahadevi

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### Abstract

*This paper discusses the significant contributions of women — writers, philosophers, saints and philanthropists. The paper is a biographical account to understand the works and preaching of Akka Mahadevi, a twelfth century woman saint poet of Karnataka who practised Shaivism. Her poetry instills a sense of bhakti, coupled with her feminist instincts, and an unconventional life that she lived.*

### INTRODUCTION

The Indian subcontinent has records of the contributions of women in different fields across centuries. They showed the vastness of knowledge and exposition in language and literature during the Bhakti Movement. One of the noted women saint poets of India during those times was Akka Mahadevi. Her works are well-known even to this day. This paper presents an account of this great woman saint poet, and the relevance of her life and work.

Akka Mahadevi, a twelfth century woman saint poet of Karnataka, was

a prominent figure of the Veerashaiva Bhakti Movement. A devotee of Shiva, she was introduced to Virashaivism, when she was a young girl. She was born in 1130 A.D. to Sumati and Nirmalshetti (Sharma, 1908) in Udathadi (also, Udutadi), a village near Shimoga in Karnataka. Her parents were also staunch followers of Shaivism. Being born and brought up in such an atmosphere, she developed devotion for Shiva. She refers to Shiva as ‘Chenna Mallikarjuna’, meaning ‘the beautiful lord as white as jasmine’ (Tharu, et al., 1991).

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Mahadevi is said to have contributed immensely towards the enrichment of the Kannada literature. She has composed nearly 400 *vachanas* in Kannada, which are in the form of didactic poetry, educative with moral lessons and values. Her *vachanas* have an inherent simplicity with similes taken from nature and everyday life.

Legend has it that when Mahadevi grew up, she was married to a local king. But the marriage did not last and Mahadevi decided to walk out of it. The king, then, asked her to return all the jewellery and clothing that he had gifted her. From then on, Mahadevi stripped herself and stepped out onto the streets as a saint without clothes. The following couplets by Mahadevi testify the circumstances that occurred in her life.

*Husband inside,  
Lover outside.  
I can't manage them both.*

*The last thread of clothing can  
be stripped away,  
but who can peel off emptiness,  
that nakedness covering all?  
Fools — while I dress in the  
Jasmine Lord's morning light,  
I cannot be shamed;  
What would you have me  
hide under, silk and the glitter  
of jewels?*

*I am in love with the one, who  
knows no death, no evil, no form.  
I am in love with the one,  
who knows no place, no space,  
no beginning, no end.  
I am in love with the one,  
who knows no fears nor the  
snares of this world,  
the boundless one, who  
knows no bounds.  
More and more, I am in love  
with my husband known by the  
name of Chenna Mallikarjuna.  
Take these husbands who die,  
decay and feed them to your  
kitchen fires.*

Therefore, the relationship with a mortal man as companion or husband was not satisfactory for Mahadevi and she considered mortal man as 'thorn under a smooth leaf'. Once she left her earthly husband, she became free to seek spiritual solace in Shiva.

### **AKKA MAHADEVI'S VACHANAS**

Akka Mahadevi's *vachanas* are the most dependable source of information about her life and thoughts. Some of the famous *vachanas* composed by Akka Mahadevi are as follows.

*I have cast away pride of  
riches, caste and learning.  
For Thou has blest me  
with Thy grace.*

*I am no helpless woman  
 I utter no futile threats  
 I am nothing daunted  
 I shall dare hunger and pain  
 I shall steal out of withered  
 leaves a wholesome meal  
 And on pointed sword  
 Shall make my bed  
 I am ready for your sake  
 To dare the worst  
 To die this instant  
 The readiness is all  
 Oh! My Chenna Mallikarjuna.*

*Can sandalwood cease to  
 emit the fragrance,  
 when it is cut into pieces?  
 Can a piece of gold when cut  
 and heated lose its lustre?  
 Can sugarcane when squeezed  
 in a press and heated  
 lose its sweetness?  
 So, also, can this body of mine  
 in a female form and ephemeral  
 in existence not contain deep  
 and abiding love for the lord?*

Akka Mahadevi's compositions depict that body was no obstacle for her, but a site, a medium by way of which her piety and perseverance towards Shiva was conveyed. Her perception of God was not narrowed within the patriarchal construct. She did not relinquish her individuality, the female identity, which is fabricated by the body, rather worked within the framework of physical firmness, brilliantly articulated through her *vachanas*.

Her compositions are of immense poetic merit, characterised by simplicity of expression. They are replete with references to the daily chores, turmoil and tribulations that beset one's lives. All her works end with the mention of Shiva as 'Chenna Mallikarjuna'. The simplicity and care with which she expressed herself can be understood from the following composition.

*Associating with the ignorant is  
 like to light a fire  
 by rubbing stones; associating  
 with the wise is like taking  
 butter after churning curd  
 Oh! Chenna Mallikarjuna,  
 jasmine tender, associating  
 with your devotees is like a hill  
 of camphor catching fire.*

This popular *vachana* by Akka Mahadevi is a prayer to Lord Shiva for blessing the human race with strength and equanimity.

*After building a house on the  
 mountain, how can you be  
 afraid of wild animals around it?  
 After building a house on the  
 seashore, how can you be afraid  
 of the lofty waves?  
 After building a house in a  
 shanty town (flea market), how  
 can you be concerned with  
 the noise? Oh! Lord Chenna  
 Mallikarjuna, listen!  
 While born and living in this*

*world, the praise and blames  
come along; you have to face  
them without getting angry and  
maintain the calmness of mind.*

*“All mankind are my parents”  
“Having been born in this world  
We must be calm, without  
being angry”*

The works that she left behind in a short span are popular among people across different sections of society.

She has also been depicted as Meera Bai of the South. The reason for comparing her with Meera Bai is that both the women saint poets had renounced worldly pleasures, and had suffered family and societal wrath.

As a mystic poet, she is known for enriching the Kannnda literature through her *vachanas*. The title ‘Akka’ was given to her by Veerashaiva saints like Basavanna, Chenna Basavanna, Kinnari Bommayya, Siddharama, Allamaprabhu and Dasimayya. Her works have inspired both men and women in the time she composed and continue till date.

She overcame the hardships put forth by her family and others. It was her conviction that gave her courage and confidence to follow the path of devotion. Some of the messages in her *vachanas* relate to society and daily life, such as the following.

## CONCLUSION

Teachers can explain the message of Akka Mahadevi’s *vachanas* to children. They may also refer to the messages in her *vachanas* while teaching. Akka Mahadevi believed that everyone irrespective of gender has the right to follow one’s conviction and faith. Her life and work can serve as examples to contribute to the development of self concepts in young minds, particularly, girl children at the primary stage of education, and instill confidence in them, an important quality that may be emphasised by teachers. Additionally, confidence while communicating ideas, developing expression skills — both oral and written — and all forms of creativity can be encouraged in the children. A brief introduction about a prominent woman like Akka Mahadevi will empower girl children as they can internalise the fact that given an opportunity they, too, can excel in any field that they want.

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