

The Akka Mahadevi: The Saint-Poet

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The Virashaiva Movement in the twelfth century Karnataka is essentially a bhakti movement, of which we may see different expressions at different stages in the spiritual history of India. Bhakti is central to the heritage of India, and is its essential ethos. The unique phenomena of the Bhakti tradition appears to have begun in South India, in Tamil Nadu even before seventh century with the Alvars and the Nayanmars and later the movement spread to other parts of the country. The bhakti cult found one of its strongest expressions in the Virashaiva movement of the Shivasharanas, spearheaded by Basavanna during the twelfth century in Karnataka. The Haridasas followed the Shivasharanas in the fifteenth century. The bhakti tradition continues with Tukaram and Namadev in Maharashtra, and Vallabhacharya and Narasimha Mehta in Gujarat. If Tulsidas, Kabirdas and Mirabai are the great mystics of the north, Chaitanya belongs to Bengal and Lalleshvari to Kashmir.

Irrespective of the religious and philosophical systems to which they belonged, all the mystics of the bhakti tradition speak the same language of loving devotion offered to God. In bhakti, rituals are replaced by devotion and there is an accent on purity in personal character. The mystic's bhakti involves a total dedication of the will. These mystics have made the supreme transition from the life of the senses to the life of the spirit. The intuition of the 'Real' lying at the root of the visible world and sustaining its life impels them to hanker for the communion with the Supreme Self. The quest for God constitutes the whole meaning of life for a mystic soul. When one's mind flows into God and harbors there, one has the experience of bhakti. Total self-surrender and self-conquest is the mark of a lover of God. True mystics are never self-seeking; on the contrary, they are god-centered men and women who have

made the utmost sacrifice of the will. In the 'Mystic Way', the self passes through different stages of development, which are identified broadly as Purgation, Illumination, and Ecstasy. At the beginning of this path, the individual soul is drawn to spiritual life, undergoes a process of purification and practices annihilation of the self. By directing the vital powers of the will towards the Higher Reality, the seeker is able to reach the illumination of the inner self and attain Inward Light. Through a constant practice of renunciation and purification, he/she is able to reach the experience of ecstasy in which the human soul enters consciously the presence of God.

The characteristics of the 'Mystic Way' though commonly coincide and are seen in almost all the mystics of the world, the order and degree of these spiritual states may not always be the same in all of them. But they are all seekers of God who have removed themselves from the entanglements of the sense-world and are rooted in God. The Shivasharanas of the Virashaiva movement belong to the band of god-seekers who exhibit a total dedication of the will to the service of God. The movement initiated by these Sharanas is distinct in a number of ways. A whole host of mystics converged in Kalyan under the banner of Virashaivism in the stewardship of Basavanna, one of the greatest of Virashaiva sharanas. It is necessary to recognize that the Virashaiva movement lead by Basavanna is essentially a spiritual movement which protested against an unjust religious system which prevailed at the time. The Vedic religious system of the time had been reduced to a set of mechanical rituals and religious injustices had paved the way for social injustices against the poor and the ignorant. The common people had been deliberately kept away from true knowledge; as a result they indulged in superstitions and worshipped all kinds gods and spirits. Sanskrit being the language of the learned, the ordinary man had no access to traditional religious texts or the knowledge of the true path to God. Women were denied both equality and independent thinking. Exploitation and oppression of caste and gender in the name religion and rituals was rampant. The Virashaiva movement launched a spiritual and social revolution against these injustices and strove for a radical change in the religious life of man. As religious life is closely bound up with social life, the spiritual revolution initiated radical changes in social life as well. The Virashaiva movement was double-edged. On the one hand, the Sharanas opposed the oppression and exploitation of the lower castes by the upper castes in the name of

religion, and on the other hand, they fought against the superstitions and the blind beliefs to which the lower caste people had resorted and tried to bring them to the path of true experience of God. The Sharanas responded to an urgent need to envisage a new concept of religious faith, a necessity to redefine the relation of man and man, man and God, and man's relation to life.

Among the Virashaiva Sharanas, the great names that stand out are those of Basavanna, Allama Prabhu, Channabasavanna, Akka Mahadevi, Siddharam, and each of them had reached a unique spiritual height. But the saga of the spiritual attainment of Akka Mahadevi is one of the most fascinating. Akka has been acclaimed as a realized soul by many Sharanas of her time and is admired for her spiritual daring. She is a spiritual rebel who broke all conventions that had kept a woman from achieving liberation of the spirit. At a time when a woman's stature was no more than that of an instrument of physical satisfaction, she refused to conform. She was the daughter of God-fearing parents who belonged to a small village called Udatadi in Karnataka, and she had early taken to a life of devotion under the guidance of her guru. Forced into a marriage with a Jaina king Kaushika against her will, she would not submit to a worldly life and allow him to interrupt her devotional life. When he overstepped the restrictions she had set, she threw conventions to the winds, and broke out of the family bonds. She chose a life of austerity and embarked on a pathway to God. She left her home and wandered in search of her God-lover whom she names 'Chennamallikarjuna'. She then journeyed towards Kalyan seeking the spiritual companionship of Basavanna and the other saints. It is said that rejecting a worldly life with Kaushika, she also rejected the 'shame' of the body and the 'burden of clothes', which perhaps was part of her protest against the world, which treated woman merely as a 'body'. Like Lalleshvari, the mystic of Kashmir, Akka Mahadevi discarded the 'burden of clothes' in an ultimate defiance against the patriarchal social structure which stood in her way preventing her from a total surrender to God. Another woman saint, Mira, had danced with anklets on her feet, God-intoxicated, unmindful of worldly censure or family shame. These women saints broke out of the traditional role model of womanhood but at the same time, as great mystics transcend the boundaries of gender. Apparently female spirituality seems to clash with the demands of patriarchy and the urge of the women saints to seek ultimate union with God may appear as an

act of subversion. But it has been observed that in true spirituality, gender boundaries collapse and in the presence of God, the saint is an asexual being.

At a time when women were thought of as snares to male asceticism, these women saints walked out of their homes and attained communion with the divine and thereby breaking the patriarchal construct. One of the most common traditional images has been to regard woman, money and land as sources of temptation. The identification of woman as body-centered and the close association of sexuality with the feminine is another patriarchal construct that gets splintered by women saints like Akka Mahadevi, Mira and Lalleshvari. The case of the women saints perhaps projects a paradoxical situation where although they appear to reject the patriarchal structure at the physical level, they seem to operate within the same framework at the spiritual level. They move away from their roles as women in the patriarchal framework and stand as spiritual rebels on the one hand, and on the other, they call themselves the 'brides of God' returning to the role they have rejected. But it is also clear that they become 'brides of God' in the mystical sense of the term where it does not signify the limited sense of female submission and surrender, on the contrary, it foregrounds the sense of giving oneself completely with loving devotion to the divine.

The *Shunya Sampadane*, one of the most significant Virashaiva texts, which gives a poetic account of the spiritual deliberations held in the *Anubhava Mantapa* by the Sharanas, provides a moving description of how Akka Mahadevi was put to an acid test by the Sharanas before accepting her into their fold. She was a soul born with an 'instinct for the Absolute' and hence even before she arrived in Kalyan, she had been able to transcend the entanglements of the sensual world and root her self in the divine. She had made the transition from the life of the senses to the life of the spirit. Among the Sharanas, Akka Mahadevi was one of the finest examples of the intimate and affective type of contemplation, which expresses itself in an intense form of mystic love where the mystic sees herself as the beloved of God. She identifies the divine by the name 'Chennamallikarjuna' and He is her bridegroom, her eternal husband and her Supreme Lord. She has lost her Self in Him, having reached the summit of illumination. Foreseeing her arrival in Kalyan, Allama Prabhu who presides over the spiritual discourses at the Anubhava Mantapa, sends Kinnari Bommayya,

another sharana, to test Akka's dedication. But Akka Mahadevi was one who has achieved victory over Kama, the god of love himself. Kinnari Bommayya's encounter with Akka reveals the truth that she has 'lost the darkness of the body' and 'is arrayed in the eternal light of Chennamallikarjuna'. Although Allama is aware of her evolved state of spirit, he questions her severely to make sure her rapturous immersion in the divine is genuine for the benefit of others. For, her uncommon life, which involved rejection of the commonly held patriarchal attitudes, puzzled many. As Chidanandamurthy points out, the queries, which come from Allama Prabhu, are not really his but they were raised for the sake of others (p. 118). He deliberately begins by questioning her harshly, "Who is your husband? You may sit giving the identity of your husband or quit." The questions are loaded with patriarchal preconceptions denying her an identity of her own. Akka Mahadevi who has transcended the gender boundaries as true mystic, replies with feeling that she is married to her Lord Chennamallikarjuna and that she has nothing to do with the husbands of this world. Considering her hair-cover as her attachment to the sense world, Allama is not convinced by her claim to renunciation. He questions her further,

It true that
You laid the blame and left him?
Casting away clothing and body bare
Illusion of mind's pride not lost;
Hair still screens the form
How then is shame shed?
This attire befits not
Our Guheshwaralinga

A rebel woman mystic is not easily accepted even by Virashaiva sharanas who had themselves opposed caste and gender discrimination. Akka rejects the implication of body-consciousness and replies with the power of detachment and introversion,

What if body darkens black?
What if body shines bright ?
Once Inward purity gained
Body that Chennamallikarjuna loves
What matters how it is

When Allama still persists, she says unhesitatingly,

Lest it pain you
To see the stamp of Kama
I covered myself

Akka entreats the Sharanas not to pester her, as she is one who is immersed in her God Chennamallikarjuna and reveals her unique communion with the Infinite in the following vachana:

I love the Handsome One
The deathless, decayless, formless One
Mother, I love the beautiful One
Matchless and infinite
Markless and complete
I love Him
Who has no bond or fear
No clan or land
Lord Chennamallikarjuna
Is my handsome husband

Take away these
Dying, decaying husbands
And throw them into the kitchen fire

Allama and the other Sharanas are finally convinced that Akka is a deeply contemplative soul that dwells in God and that hers is an extreme form of the personal and intimate communion of the going forth of the beloved to the lover. Although the concept of 'Sharana sati – Linga pati' in which Sharana, the spiritual seeker, whatever the gender, is seen as the wife and God as the pati, the eternal husband is a typical feature of Virashaivism, similar belief may be found in western mysticism too. St. John of the Cross, St. Catherine of Avila considered themselves as the beloveds of God.

The long debate between Akka and Allama in the *Shunya Sampadane* highlights the extreme austerity of Akka's personality and also her total dedication. In the act of contemplation, the mystic's whole personality, directed by love and devotion, transcends the worldly distractions. Casting off its attachments, it then rises to the freedom of the spirit. The mystic constantly practices self-naughting and self-surrender and discovers that 'And there is death in fruition, and a melting and dying into the nudity of Pure Being' (*Mysticism*, p. 345). It is this 'nudity of Pure Being', which belongs to Akka Mahadevi in her state of union with her Lord Chennamallikarjuna.

The purgation of the senses and selfhood are placed first in the order in the Mystic Way. Purification of the soul of imperfections to make it a worthy dwelling for the divine is seen as a perpetual process. The mystics of all ages and all faiths agree that the three virtues which are the essential virtues of the mystical quest are poverty (of possessions), chastity (poverty of senses), and obedience (poverty of will). The well-known western mystic Meister Eckhart says, 'God is Pure Good in Himself, therefore will He dwell nowhere but in a pure soul. ...What is Purity? It is that a man should have turned himself away from all creatures and have set his heart so entirely on the Pure Good that no creature is to him a comfort, that he has no desire for anything creaturely save so far as he may apprehend therein the Pure Good, which is God.' The Sharanas also put forth that detachment keeps the soul away from the distractions of the sense world which dissipate its precious energies and have contempt for all things which are not God.

Although Akka Mahadevi agrees with the Sharanas on the importance of detachment, yet she lays a greater emphasis on chastity of the body and the chastity of the senses. She sees chastity of the body as paving the way for the chastity of the mind. Her *vachanas* underline the fact that spiritual freedom is achieved at the cutting edge of the victory over the physical desires. The transition from the world of the senses to the world of the spirit is seen as a formidable task. When Akka emphasizes the purity of the body, she seems to speak as a woman saint for the world had forced the woman to think that the body was the province of her power. Akka subtly rejects this patriarchal proposition in a spiritual sense and highlights the need to achieve loss of the 'shame' of the body and stand before the Divine Reality in the 'nudity of Pure Being'. Basavanna praising Akka in one of his *vachanas*, testifies to the fact that her spiritual enlightenment had reached this very level,

Illusion of body's shame lost
 Love of life's shame lost
 Memory of mind's shame burnt
 Knowing that mind's merging
 Is to stand nude before God
 Shedding eagerness,
 Affection and commerce
 Lord Kudalasangamadeva
 This is mother Mahadevi's stance.

Akka Mahadevi's losing the awareness of the body by losing herself in the Divine Reality is one form of subversion of patriarchy, she also approaches the traditional belief that the female is a snare to the male ascetic in her own unique way. In one of her *vachanas*, she speaks of it lucidly,

Maya plagues man
 As the pride of woman
 Maya plagues woman
 As the pride of man
 To the maya of this world
 The way of the sharanas seems insane
 The sharana Chennamallikarjuna loves
 Has no maya, nor forgetfulness,
 Nor pride.

Akka Mahadevi sees 'maya' or illusion as a universal phenomena which dogs all seekers on the pathway to God and she visualizes the path of bhakti as the only means to reach the truth. Here she not only rejects the patriarchal construct that woman is a snare to the spiritual aspirations of man but subverts it by saying that man is as much a snare to the woman. She extends the meaning of the idea when she points out the universality of the concept.

Akka Mahadevi is a mystic who rises above the worldly notions of the body and the feminine qualities and having lost body-consciousness, she had attained a spiritual state in which she was ever one with the Divine. Allama Prabhu, the most austere of Virashaiva saints, recognizes the spiritual splendour of Akka and pays homage to her,

She became
 Companion of Linga
 Body-consciousness lost;
 Companion of awareness
 Mind-consciousness lost;
 Dazzling Light
 Self-consciousness lost;
 Division of self and other lost;
 One with our Gogeshwara Linga,
 To the stance of Mahadeviyakka
 I bow.

The unique feature of Akka's spiritual attainment is her supreme self-abandonment and an extreme purity of soul. She had shed

the 'burden of the body and its pride', and her soul stood 'nude' before the divine. There is a deep inwardness of soul which she cultivates and her *vachanas* give a powerful expression to the inseparable bond she forges with the divine.

If there seems to be a paradox at the heart of Akka Mahadevi's mystical vision, as she had renounced all desires and attachments on the physical plane, and resorts to them on the spiritual plane, perhaps one has to admit that it is a paradox which is part of the mystical life itself. She regards herself as the bride of God Chennamallikarjuna in whom her Self is merged in a spiritual marriage and she employs the whole gamut of feelings that surround the image of conjugal love and describes her feelings of longing, the pain of separation and the rapture of the union with her spiritual husband most poetically with the intensity of the actual. When an evolved spirit like Akka Mahadevi who is said to have shed her very quality of femaleness and had detached herself from the world of the senses, takes recourse to descriptions from conjugal life like beloved, wife, husband, marriage, it is not in any conventional sense. She uses them as metaphors to express her powerful spiritual vision of the union with the divine. For even a mystic has to give expression to the highest experience of the divine in terms of the worldly life and its experiences in order to be understood. The uniqueness of these metaphors is that they at once convey the sense of the personal and the spiritual, extending the meaning beyond the particular symbols and metaphors. Like all great mystics, Akka Mahadevi borrows symbols and metaphors from the material plane to articulate her transcendental perceptions, for the transcendental experience to be grasped by surface consciousness, there is a need to employ symbolic devices. Akka Mahadevi embodies her spiritual perceptions in the '*Vachanas*', a form the Sharanas discovered and her *vachanas* are clothed in a great poetic beauty. Like all other sharana poets, she too chose to write in Kannada, the language of the common people unlike the writers of the time who composed in Sanskrit. Although the Sharanas are not poets primarily, some of them like Basavanna, Allama Prabhu and Akka Mahadevi excelled in the use the poetic idiom and the manner in which they expressed the metaphysical thoughts in the colloquial language. Akka Mahadevi was one of the most poetic of the sharanas and her *vachanas* were especially known for their nature imagery. Her writings carry a rare sense of immediacy and involvement and abound in poetic similes and

metaphors. Her language was supple, rhythmical and lucid. Akka Mahadevi's *vachanas* are among some of the earliest compositions by women in our country. Her contribution in terms of mystic vision and poetic imagery has enriched *vachana* literature too.

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