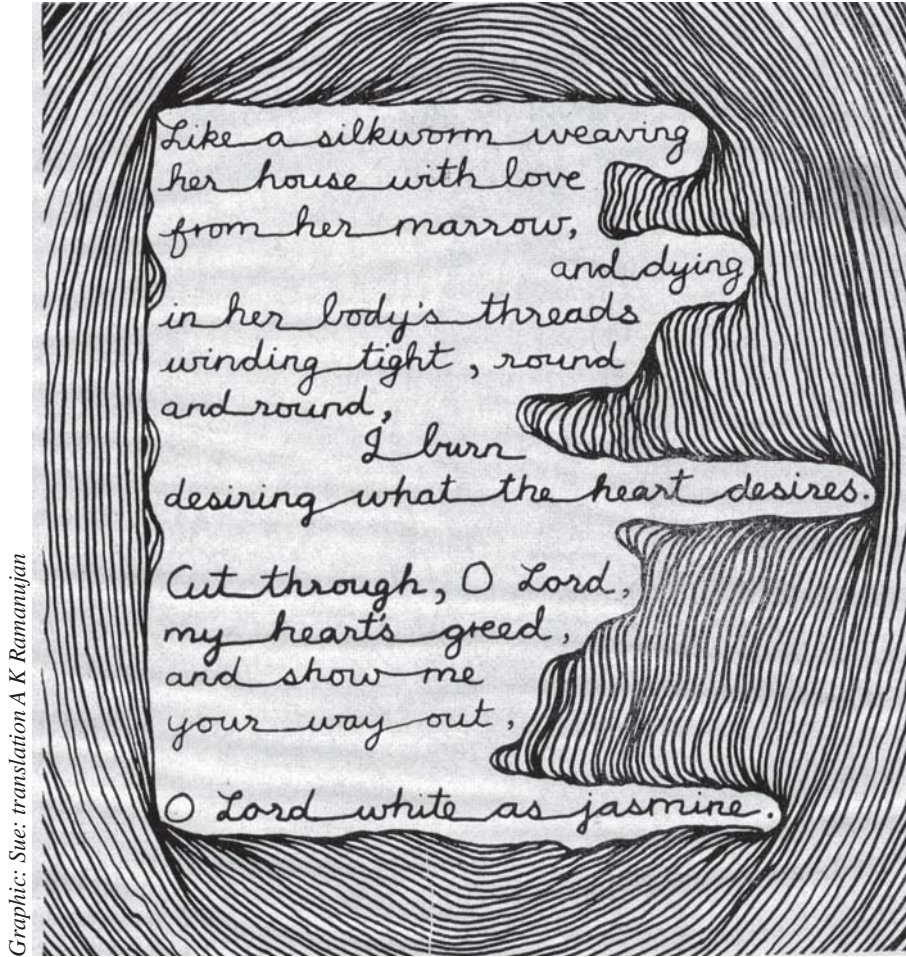


Akka Mahadevi

by Vijaya Dabbe and Robert Zydenbos



IT was only around AD' 1160 that women writers entered the literary history of Kannada. The women who began to express themselves at that time belonged to a new movement, known as Virashivism, which represented a very important turn in the history of the Kannada speaking area. Though it was primarily a religious movement, it included among its goals and in its programmes certain changes in social,

political and economic life. It denounced the traditionalistic, casteist social system of the time, criticised polytheism, priestcraft, and image worship.

Virashivism was a devotional religion from the beginning, which accepted Shiva as the one supreme god, at its inception opened its doors liberally to people of all castes and classes and also recognised the dignity of women. All the devotees

who joined the movement were thought of as equals.

From a woman's point of view this movement is very significant. Just as it condemned caste and class hierarchies, it accepted the idea that with regard to the soul or consciousness there is no distinction between men and women. The opportunity to progress on the spiritual path was not only open to women, but they

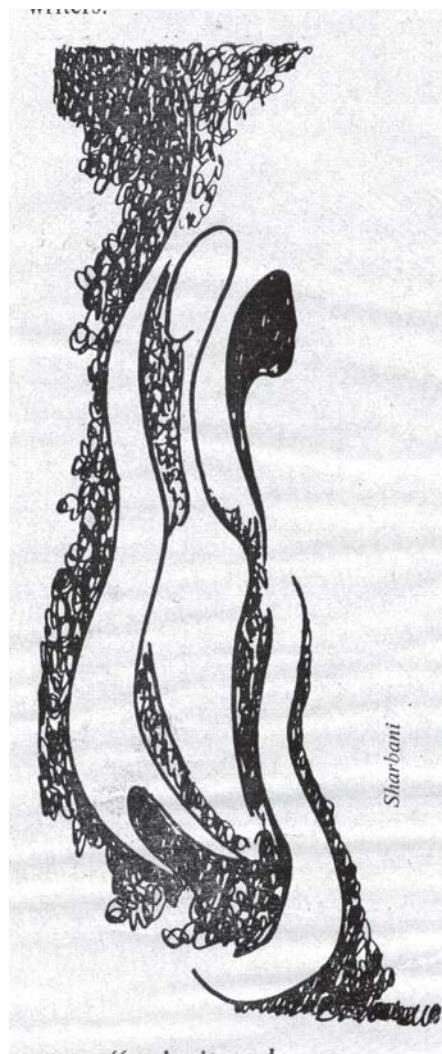
were actually encouraged to follow it. In the words of Jedara Dasimayya, one of the senior members of the movement:

*Suppose you cut a tall bamboo
in two;
make the bottom piece a woman,
the headpiece a man;
rub them together
till they kindle:
tell me now,
the fire that's born, is it male or female,
O Ramanatha?
(Speaking of Sim, p. 110)*

The position that was accorded to women did not just remain theoretical, but was also put into practice. Thus Sule Sankavva (Sankavva the prostitute), Suji Kayakada Remmavva (R.emmavva, who probably was a seamstress by profession), Kottanada Somavva (Somavva, whose profession was to grind grain), Kannadi Kayakada Revamma (Revamma, who probably sold mirrors and other such household articles) and a host of others participated in this movement and wrote *vachanas*. *Vachanas* are the characteristic literary expression of the Virashaivas: unbound by rhyme or metre, these writings may be considered short pieces of poetical prose.

As the names of these women indicate, they came from different social backgrounds, from a variety of castes and classes. The movement had people of royalty as well as working class people among its followers. The women also came from a variety of marital backgrounds: there were widows like Akka Nagamma, a co-wife like Nilalochane, and Akka Mahadevi, who denounced the institution of marriage altogether.

We also came across women who criticised their husbands and corrected their ways, and also some who freely questioned the leading intellectuals of the movement. Because of the opportunities which the Virashaiva movement offered, women could enter intellectual and mystical fields of activity.



“...is it male
or female...?”

Among the approximately 300 *vachana* authors who are known to us, 30 are women. Akka Mahadevi, the greatest mystic of that time, emerged from this group of writers.

‘Akka’ (older sister), as Akka Mahadevi came to be known, was admired by her contemporaries for the stature of her personality, the excellence of her *vachanas*, and her mystic heights. The *vachana* author Chennabasavva has said about her that others might be senior to her in years and might have performed a variety of penances and feats of asceticism, but Akka had really communed

with god. Other leading personalities of the movement, such as its founder Basavanna, Allamaprabhu, Siddharama and many others have remembered Akka with affection and respect, literature written about Akka grew enormously in the following centuries, although more attention was paid to the myths around her than to the historical aspects of her life.

There is no other woman personality in Kannada who has drawn so much attention from historians, poets and authors of *puranas*. It begins with the *Mahadeviyakkana ragale* of Harihara, in 1200 AD, who from the point of view of chronology was close to her. Even today, the body of literature about Akka keeps growing. In many histories of the *saranas* (the Virashaiva devotees) the story of Akka Mahadevi occupies a separate chapter.

Though between the twelfth century and today so much literature has appeared on Akka, numerous events in her life are still controversial. The Virashaiva movement, which began as a somewhat open movement, gradually became an institutionalised religion, and many times there occurred a rejecting, elaborating and twisting of history. We will not go into the details of the controversy in this article.

Akka Mahadevi was the daughter of devotees of Shiva in the village of Udatadi. The ruler of that region, Kaushika (or Kasapayya Nayaka, as he is mentioned in inscriptions), was enamoured of the beauty of young Mahadevi. There is an ongoing debate over whether Akka married Kaushika: however, it seems implicit in the statements by poets who were close to her and by her *vachanas*, that she had experienced married life. It seems that some people fear that if it is known that Akka had married and had experienced physical union with Kaushika, her stature as a religious personality would suffer.

It became impossible for Akka, for whom only mystical aspirations were important, to live with worldly desires. Her decision: “A husband inside, a husband outside. One cannot have both, sister. One cannot have both a worldly and a supernatural one”, must have grown



inside her. The conflict between her inner spirituality and the worldliness around her reached a peak. Literature says that when leaving Kaushika, she stripped off all her clothing and walked out of the palace naked. Nudity is mentioned in her *vachanas* too.

In agreement with the description of the authors of the *Sunyasam-padane*, that when she walked away naked she covered her body with her long hair, we usually see her depicted with her hair covering her body.

After leaving Kaushika, Akka had to experience various hardships. According to Harihara, Kaushika was still so infatuated with her that he bribed the religious dignitaries of two *maths* which lay on her way in an attempt to make her turn back, but the attempt failed. In one of her *vachinas*, she has written about the outside world which kept pursuing her:

*When I entered a rock, you too
entered the rock;
When I entered a mountain, you too
entered the mountain;
Hurray for life! You came following
me,
Lord, who is as white as jasmine,
what else shall I do?*

Although Akka was immersed in her thoughts about Shiva and was detached from the outer world around her, it is not surprising that that world was aware only of her outer presence. This is indicated by some *vachanas* which may have been reactions of the beautiful young woman to the gazes of numerous lechers.

After having rejected Kaushika's sensualism and left him, she must have explained many times, with pain and anger, her rejection of the world to those who

approached her with sensualist purpose. Many of her *vachanas* show the hardships she had to experience when she became detached from the world and acted in opposition to the commonly held view that a woman's body should always be available for sensual pleasure and for nothing else. Akka looked upon all men besides 'Chennamallikarjuna' (her name for Shiva) as her brothers. The *vachan* below stands as a testimony to the sufferings she endured.

*You have come seeing the beauty
Of rounded breasts and the fullness of
youth, brother.*

Brother, I am not a woman!

Brother, I am not a whore!

Brother, seeing me again and again

For whom have you come?

Look, brother, any man

*Other than the lord who is as white as
jasmine*

Is a face I cant stand.



According to Harihara, Akka did not go to Kalyana, which was the centre of the Virashaiva movement, but went directly to Srisaila, where she united with Shiva. But as *vachanas* by her and by others tell us, she did go to Kalyana and became acquainted with the members of the movement. We can see in the *vachanas* that Basavanna, Allama, Chennabasavanna and others all treated her with great respect and faith. For this Akka was deeply thankful.

The days which she spent in Kalyana together with people of like mind gave her mystical nature great satisfaction and joy. She expressed her faith and gratitude towards Kalyana in some *vachanas*. One such expression goes: "Having

understood what is inside, I loved the lord who is as white as jasmine; when I lost both kinds of shame I saw Kalyana and kept bowing to it."

Though the movement at Kalyana accepted her, she must have been subjected to several kinds of tests in the beginning. The *Sunyasampadanes*, which are attempts at reconstructing the condition of the movement in the twelfth century on the basis of *vachanas*, tell how Akka was examined by Allama and others in religio-mystical gatherings at that time. Though some events in the life story of Akka may have undergone some change in the one or two centuries after she lived, the description of this episode is intriguing. Allama's first question is: "Describe your husband." Akka's description is "Chennamallikarjuna is my husband, I have no relationship with other men in this world, sir." The next question concerns her nudity. When asked why she tried to cover her body with her hair, although she was naked, she answered:

*If the fruit inside is not ripe, the
outer skin will not have its ripe
colour;*

*If you see what causes sexual desire,
you might feel hurt:*

*Thinking so, I have hidden it. Why
grieve about that?*

*Brother, do not bother me, who has
entered the god of gods,
the lord who is as white as
jasmine.*

It seems that the concern of the *Sunyasampadane* writers with covering her nudity lies behind this description. It is difficult to cull the historical fragments from the episode as the *Sunyasampadanes* depict it; but this depiction shows that possibly the young woman who had rejected the institution of marriage was harassed by society with many questions and reactions. The *sarana* society accepted and respected her unflinching personality. Thus the *Sunyasampadanes* emphatically state that the *saranas* tested



her level of mystical development and accepted her.

When the movement at Kalyana began to ignore the traditional caste framework, the time had come for direct confrontations. The people who had gathered in the movement were forced to disperse in different directions. It was probably at this time that Akka went to Srisaila. More or less all her biographers agree that she spent her last days at Srisaila engaged in mystical pursuits.

Akka is one of the best poets in Kannada. The number of her *vachanas*, which can be culled from various sources, is approximately 350. Besides these *vachanas*, some songs and two works titled 'The *Vachana* of Creation' and 'Yoganga trividh' are in her name. 'Chennamallikarjuna', 'the lord who is as white as jasmine', is the *ankita* of Akka's *vachanas*, a word towards the end of a *vachana* by which the author can be recognised. The manner in which Akka's profound detachment regarding all worldly things, the depth of her love for Shiva, the agony of being separated from him and the joyous rapture of uniting with him are expressed in language, is astonishing. The intensity of her feelings, her introspection and their personal touch make Akka's writings dear to us.

Akka opposed societal restrictions on her and followed only her own inner motivations. The scorn, censure and mockery Akka must have had to face, can only be imagined. But although she suffered at times from this censure and criticism, her inner calm remained unruffled:

*Don't fear, my mind, don't be afraid,
my mind:
Having found out what is true, do*

*not worry.
Millions of people will throw stones
at the tree that bears fruit,
In order to get the fruit;
I see no one throwing stones at the
silk-cotton tree.*

*Millions of people will abuse those
who possess devotion;
I see no one abusing those who
possess no devotion.*

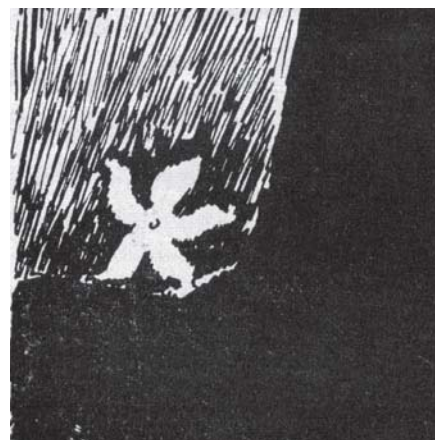
*It is the words of our devotees that
for me are a ladder to the goal, Oh lord
who is as white as jasmine.*

Her attitude is that after being born in the world, one must not be angry at praise or censure and must remain calm.

The courage and firmness which Akka's mystic absorbedness and her strong religiosity have given her are surprising:

*Do not worry
That I am completely alone.
Whatever they do, I will not be afraid.
I will eat dried leaves,
I will sleep on a sword.
Oh lord who is as white as jasmine,
If you want to examine me,
I will offer up my body and soul to
you and be pure.*

Akka's *vachanas* also reflect the inner conflict which arose when she was trying to liberate herself from her worldly position. Resisting the temptations of the



attractive material world become the touchstone for this mystic.

Though at times she displays courage, saying "I am not afraid of your *maya*", her own experience that the path of a detached person is not easy, finds expression in many *vachanas*:

*The stream behind,
the river in front,
Tell me which way to go.
The pond behind, the net in front,
Tell me where safety is.*

The goal which has been propounded by all the religious aspirants of this devotional path is to uproot all attachment to one's ego completely and unite with Shiva. Akka asks of Shiva to give her opportunities in life which can eradicate this egoism:

*Make me beg, lord, stretching out my
hands and not missing a house;
Make them not give anything when
I beg, lord;
If they give anything, make it fall
to the ground, lord',
If it falls to the ground, then
before I pick it up
Make a dog come and pick it up,
Lord who is as white as jasmine,*

The *vachana* writers strongly opposed the Vedic tradition. This movement condemned the ways and thought of that tradition as well as its sources, the Vedas and Agamas. It is the belief of Virashaivism that devotion to Shiva alone is the way to the upliftment of man. This opposition and faith is expressed in a *vachana* by Akka: "Look, you are dehusking the things called Vedas, Puranas and Agamas and have only grit and chaff. Must you keep pounding them?"

Almost all Akka's *vachanas* are about her love for Shiva. The focal points of Akka's writings are separation from Shiva, the memory of Shiva, and the dream of Shiva. In accordance with the feeling



Modern religious picture of Akka Mahadevi

sarana sati — linga pati ('the devotee is the faithful wife — Shiva is the husband'), she sees Shiva as her beloved and master. She desires to see him and unite with him, and searches everywhere for him. She sighs, looking for him on mountains, in forests and in every plant but finding him nowhere: "Oh parrots reading chirpingly/ Haven't you seen him? Haven't you seen him?/Oh swans, playing in the lake,/ Haven't you seen him? Haven't you seen him?"

We see Mahadevi who is searching for

Shiva in some *vachanas*, and in some other *vachanas* we see the Mahadevi who, though everything around her is Shiva, is still concerned that she is not seeing him. "Have you not seen him, have you not seen him?" she asks a swarm of bees, a mango tree, the full moon and a cuckoo. Akka's love for Shiva makes her forget her hunger, thirst and sleep. Though this soul, which is thirsting for the mercy and vision of Shiva, does not experience his love and mercy, still she will die loving him, she says:

Lord, if you listen to me, listen; if

you do not listen, leave it at that. I cannot bear it if I do not sing about you. Lord, if you love me, love', if you do

not love me, leave it at that. I cannot bear it if I do not worship you.

It is clear that Akka's longing is so intense that she will not care about the response she gets. This love is an inescapable urge within her. She is immersed in a happiness of glorification which pays no attention to results.

Though Akka thinks of Shiva as formless, she also depicts him as having form. To those who are close to her she explains how to recognise Shiva, and she tells them to call her if they see such a person. In another *vachana* when we see Akka calling Shiva and waiting for him, Shiva appears in all worldly detail:

Come, man, come, you pearl of goodness, after having bathed in turmeric powder,

Having put on golden ornaments and dressed yourself in silk.

Your coming is the coming of my life, lord!

I am waiting longingly,

Thinking that he may come, the lord who is as white as jasmine.

For Akka's desire for Shiva, there is no difference between day and night, dream and reality. This is how Akka grasps the Shiva whom she saw in a dream and describes him intimately:

Listen, sister, listen, I have seen a dream:

I saw rice, betel, earrings and a coconut;

I saw a mendicant with short braids of hair and shining teeth

Who came to the house for alms.

He was about to move beyond my reach, I followed him and grabbed his hand,

I saw the lord who is as white as jasmine, and I opened my eyes.

It seems that Akka, who has staked her life on the coming of Shiva, cannot bear pleasant objects without him. Having told her suffering to her friend and asked for help, Akka fills the following *vachana* with the intensity of her longing for Shiva:

*My restless mind has been turned
upside down,
The whirling wind has become
scorching,
The moonlight has become the heat of the
sun, my friend,
I have been roaming like a tax collector
in the city!
Tell him the way things are, bring
him here;
The lord who is as white as jasmine
is angry.*

A mind that is completely immersed in longing for Shiva can oppose and abandon anything that is opposed to that longing or comes in its way. It is not surprising that she broke the relationship with men of this world which could come between her and Shiva. Again and again Akka had to state that she did not want any worldly man.

Rejecting any bonds to a worldly man, she would accept only Chennamallikarjuna as her husband. "One husband for this world, another husband for the next?" she asks. Though she does not accept men of this world, the intense, intimate relationship she has with Shiva is shown in the form of a relationship of a

man and a woman. She waits for him saying "your coming is the coming of my life, come." She asks her companions to bring him, she tells her companions to adorn themselves and welcome him. Akka's writing is the soliloquy of her intense love for Shiva.

For many reasons Akka's personality is special in the Virashaiva movement. The women who participated in the movement usually had the support of their husbands and brothers. Even if they used an *ankita*



they would use the *ankita* of their husbands by adding the particular *ankita* which was dear to their husbands. For instance, the *ankita* of the *vachana* writer Appanna is 'Kudala Channabasavanna, dear to Basava.' The *ankita* of his wife Lingamma is 'Channabasavanna; dear to Appanna' But Akka's situation is different. The position which she attained in the movement depends entirely on her own achievement.

Akka wrote more *vachanas* than any other woman *vachara* writer. Her *vuchanas* are also known for their literary value. The *vachanas* by other women *vachana* writers that are equal in quality

to those of Akka are very few.

It is only natural, due to all these reasons, that it is Akka who among the women *vachana* writers attracted the attention of later historians and critics most (in this regard Nilalochane and Muktayakka come after Akka). Also, today, Akka Mahadevi is remembered when people think of women's assertiveness, boldness, liberation and achievements. Among the Kannada women poets, who in the seventies have begun to establish a new awareness of womanhood in poetry, one hardly finds one who has not written a poem about Akka. Even those who had aims and views of life that were different from those of Akka have remembered her, while showing their differences by appraising or criticising her.

Often, her rejection of the traditional social framework is seen as more important than the question of the goal she strove towards. For a number of readers today, her rejection of a worldly husband seems more attractive than her acceptance of an otherworldly husband.

Since Akka Mahadevi's poetry is rooted in otherworldly interests, modern protest literature may not find a model in Akka. But her achievements as a poet and a mystic to some extent seem to have a positive effect on the moral strength and creativity of women.

All translations of poems accompanying this article are by Robert Zydembos, unless otherwise indicated.