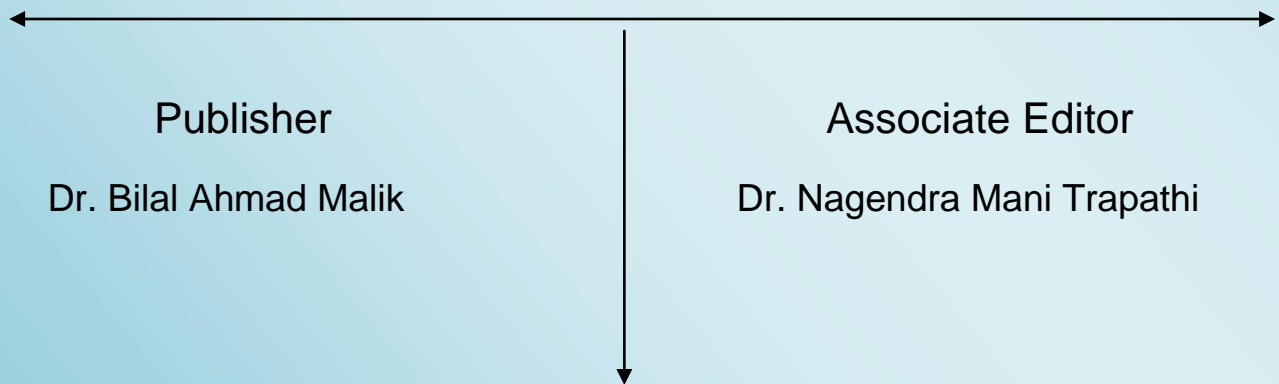


# North Asian International Research Journal Consortium

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# VIRASHAVISM AND AKKA DEVI

**Dr. JOHN MOHAMMAD PAUL**

## INTRODUCTION

The erotic spirituality of the women saints and mystics appears in the Bhakti movement in India. The devotional mode of spirituality appealed to both men and women as an alternative to intellectual (Jnana) or work focused (Karma) paths to union with God. Bhakti - Yoga is laid out as early as the epic period Bhagavad Gita. As a full-fledged devotional movement, it worked its way through India starting in the far south spreading throughout whole India. Women's voice emerged in full force in this movement. We see in this movement the great women saints and mystics emerged in medieval India.

Akka Mahadevi of 12th century the legendary figure unrevealed sum heart throwing realities which could have been otherwise remain really a great personality of her times. Who paved the path for those women who were having the same stance and taste like her? She proved to the world that a woman can reach to the zenith of spirituality if she is wholly and solely devoted to the love of the Lord. Akka Mahadevi by discarding her garments threw a challenge to the male dominated society by posing a dreadful question to which no one was able to answer with boldness. I, personally admire this legendary figure of our times to a great extent because she gave to world a new type of women empowerment. The vacanas which she gave to the world have become a torch for countless people to reach one's ultimate reality and they (vacanas) have enlightened their souls and moulded their life and gave them better shape to have the courage to face the challenges of life which are waiting for them to greet with open arms.

The fall of the Rashtrakuta to the western Chalukyas in the tenth century, coinciding with the defeat of the western Ganga dynasty by the Cholas in Gangavadi, consisted a setback to Jainism. The growth of Virashaivism in the Chalukya territory and Vaishnava Hinduism in the Hoysala region paralleled a general decreased interest in Jainism, although the succeeding kingdoms continued to be religiously tolerant. Two locations of Jain worship in the Hoysala territory continued to be patronaged Shravanabelagola and Kambadahavi. The decline of Buddhism in South India had begun in 8th century with the spread of Adi Shankara's Advaita philosophy.<sup>1</sup> No mention of religious conflict exists in the writing and inscription of the time

which suggest a smooth religious transition. Although the origin of the Virashaiva faith has been debated, the movement grew through its association with Basavanna in the twelfth century.<sup>ii</sup>

Basavanna and other Virashaivism saints preached of a faith without a caste system. In his vachanas (poetry), Basavanna appealed to the masses in simple Kannada and wrote "work is worship" (Kayakave Kailasa). Also known as the Lingayats (worshippers of the linga, the universal symbol of Shiva), those Virashaivas questioned many of the established norms of society such as the belief in rituals and the theory of rebirth and supported the remarriage of widows and the marriage of unwed older women.<sup>iii</sup> That gave more social freedom to women although prohibited from one priesthood.

The impact of those religious developments on the culture, literature and architecture in South India had been profound. Important works of metaphysics and poetry based on the teaching of those philosophers has been written over next centuries. Akka Mahadevi, Alluma Prabhu, and a host of Basavanna's followers, including Chenna Basava, Prabhudeva, Siddharama, and Kondaguli Kesiraja wrote hundreds of poems called Vachanas in praise of Lord Shiva.<sup>iv</sup> The esteemed scholar in the Hoysala court, Harihara and Raghavanka, has been Virashaivas. This tradition continued into the Vijaya Nagar Empire with such well known scholar as Singiraja, Mallanarya, Lakkana Dandesa and other prolific writers of Virashaiva literature.

The rise of *Virashaivism* was revolutionary and challenged the prevailing Hindu caste system which retained royal support. All the Virashaiva vachanas make it clear that given the paradigm of "Shakti Visishta Advaita" which is the guiding philosophy of virasaivism there is no gender or caste differentiation and hence the idea of pollution whether in the case of the female or of the untouchable is illogical and redundant.<sup>v</sup>

Shakti Visishta Advaita lies at the root of Lingayat philosophy and is infact used as an alternative name for Virasaivism. According to this while Siva by himself is a pure principle in a state of rest, the entire creation take place through his symbolic relationship with Parma Shakti or maya who herself emanates from him. This completely overturns the Brahmanical and Patriarchal notions of caste pollution and gender inequality since nothing which emanates from the pure can be impure. The ultimate development in the Shakti Visishta Advaita of Virasaivism is the devotee turning and rogyous and in the process transcending genders itself.

According to Basava Linga is fire itself and one who wears it automatically burns away al impurities. Therefore the five kinds of pollution which are imposed on women in Vedic Brahmanism are absent in

Virasaivism. These are called Pancha Sutakas which comprise (1) Pollution during the menstrual period, (2) The period of twelve days (among orthodox Brahmins forty days). After child birth when both mother and child are regarded as polluted; (3) the permanent pollution associated with widowhood. The other two pollutions of caste and death are not gender distinctive. What is remarkable in the removal of gender associated pollution is that it has a positive connotation. Women going through their menstrual cycle can perform worship for the Linga which in Brahmanism, women even during their periods of purity, cannot do (this taboo applies equally to the lower castes). In Virashaivism, women can perform, worship or participate in all rituals without any taint of pollution. Secondly not only there is no stigma or pollution attached to widow but they have equal right to remarriage as the widowers have.

Women within Virashaivism had almost, all the rights to have spiritual life with one notable exception. It is due to the close association between feminists and spirituality that the Virasaivite women saints enjoy a distinct advantage over their male counterparts.

Basra has to metamorphose himself into a women and bride - vis-a-vis his Ishta Linga, Kudala Sangama, while so no much effort is required on the part of the female mystics. A guiding feature of Virasaivism is the belief Sharana-Sati-Linga Pati, meaning the Sharana or spiritual aspirant whether male or female is always the virtuous wife and Siva the eternal bridegroom. In Vira Shaivism 34 women have been listed. In term of gender division, they roughly comprise one-third of the important Virasaivite saints of this period.<sup>vi</sup>

Akka Mahadevi was a prominent figure and Kannada poet of the Virashaivate. Bhakti Movement of the 12th century. "Akka" who is popularly known as Akka Mahadevi of twelfth century, stands to this day not only as a sublime personality, a soul force conjoining devotion, knowledge and non-attachment , a pinnacle of the glory of vachana literature, she is also an ever-shining example of transcendental world-view, a supreme mystical vision.

Akka Mahadevi was Basaverwara's contemporary. She was born in a well-to-do Virashaiva family. It is said that Mahadevi was married by arrangement to Kaushika Jain king<sup>vii</sup>, but later did not get along with as the king disrespected some conditions set by her. There were immediate tensions; however, as Kausika was a Jain, belonging to much wealthy group and the marriage compelled the rest of the members of the group to show much resentment to their mirage. Much of Akka's poetry explores the themes of rejecting mortal love in favour of the everlasting, love of God, and this seems to be path she chooses as well. She rejected her life of luxury to live as a wandering poet-saint, like Lal Ded of Kashmir, travelling throughout the region and singing praises of her lord

Shiva. However, there were inevitable differences of opinion. Akka Mahadevi chose separation. The legend of Karaikkal Ammaiyar and her usual life could have inspired Akka Mahadevi to take the extreme step of discarding even her garments.<sup>viii</sup>

From sublimation of sexuality to an androgynous state marks a distinct development in spiritual evolution. Sexual transcendence however constituted the highest stage in the spiritual journey. From the sublimation of worldly love Akka Mahadevi passes on to transcendence. Reaching the heights of sexual transcendence, where gender differences become meaningless, the saint, male or female, begins to go naked. While male nudity despite being unusual is not socially shocking. At this level of sexual transcendence the Pangs of separation and passion, both cease to be:

*The guru gave a spear*

*Called Linga into the hands*

*Of one fully-concentrated.*

*I fight, I win*

*a man called Kama (love)*

*Krodha (anger) and others were*

*Defeated and ran away.*

*Since the spear was buried deep*

*Inside me and vanished (from sight)*

*Inside the Palm I have caught*

*The Linga of Chenna Mallikarjuan.*

*(Chennaiah: 1974-38)*

Here it is apparent that Akka Mahadevi in the ultimate analysis transcends the paradigms of love and sex as spiritual love is not in the context of human love or sexuality. It is in this light that her radical step of discarding her clothes is to be seen. The woman saint unlike her male counterpart could be totally free from inhabitations.<sup>ix</sup>

Lal Ded, the celebrated lady mystic of Kashmir is also said to have discarded her clothes and danced and singing naked, claiming that she felt no shame since she saw not men but sheep around her.<sup>x</sup> Akka Mahadevi went naked with her body covered only with her long luxurious hair and wrote in her vachana;<sup>xi</sup>

*To the shameless girl*

*Wearing Mallikarjuna's light, you fool*

*Where is the need you cover and jewel?'*

*(Ramanujan, 1973: V-:124:129)*

She travelled widely in search of emancipations and finally became a sanyasini (women saint) before setting down in Basavakalyana, Bidar district. Her non-conformist ways caused a lot of consternation in a conservative society and even her eventual guru Allama Prabhu had to initially face difficulties' in enlisting her in the gatherings at Anubhavamantapa. A true ascetic, Akka Mahadevi is said to have refused to wear any clothing - a common practice among male ascetics, but shocking for a women. Legend has it that due to her true love and devotion with God her whole body was protected by hair. Akka Mahadevi remained in Kalyan where she interacted with some famous Virashaivites like siddharama and Allama Prabhu and even answered the questions posed to her in the "Annubhava Mantapa" where Virashaivites examined their experiences and argued over matters of theology. Some of these discussions have been recorded in the anthology "Soonya Sampadane" (fifth century).

Kalyan was the spiritual capital of the Virashivates. Akka Mahadevi was welcomed in the outskirts of Kinnara Bommaiyya. The members of the academy respected her but also quizzed her. Why should a young and beautiful lady like her come into public places, especially a place where religious and spiritual matters being discussed? Also, is it not a matter for shame that she had dared to come in the nude? Is she married? If so, who is her husband?

Akka Mahadevi's reply can be gauged from immortal vachanas (saying). She considered no mortal to be her husband:

*Listen, O Mother,*

*I love him,*

*He's the one, the only one;*  
*He knows no birth, no death;*  
*He's uncabinned by caste or clime;*  
*He's boundless, changeless, formless;*  
*He's beautiful beyond compare,*  
*All others fade away*  
*And die at last;*  
*I'll have none of them.*  
*My Lord fore'er shall be*  
*To one Chennamallikarjuna.<sup>xii</sup>*

As for her being in the nude, what does it matter whether the body where Chennamallikarjuna has come to stay is covered or not? She had lost her heart to the shoreless joy and will have nothing to do with anything mortal. Her search was for the supreme! After spending some enriched months in the Anubhava Mantapa interacting with fellow aspirants who included women like Neelamma, Akka Nagamma and Lakkamma, Akka Mahadevi took the advice of Allama Prabhu and went towards Srisailism.

Allama Prabhu shows her the further way of attaining the transcendent bliss of ultimate union with Lord ChenniMallikarjuna. There are many heart-rending vacanas by her which rival those of Karaikkal ammaiyar in the longing for a vision of Siva.

*Ye Parrots singing*  
*In mirthful ease;*  
*And oh ye swans*  
*Frolicking near the lake;*  
*And ye joyous wekoos*



*Piping full throated;*  
*And ye proud peacocks*  
*Strutling up and down in glee,*  
*Over hill and dale*  
*Tell me, o tell me,*  
*Ye one and all,*  
*Did you ever chance to see?*  
*My Lover,*  
*My own Chennamallikarjuna'.<sup>xiii</sup>*

When she reached Srisalim, it was as if she had at last come to the native space of her soul. She spent the rest of her life in a plantain grove in this holy spots and merged in Shiva. One remembered the nature of the union. Spell out in a verse of Akka Mahadevi;

*O my mind*  
*It is you, in you*  
*May it trust and rest you,*  
*Seek and loose and find it*  
*In only you*  
*Moan and exult by turns*  
*Melt and fuse itself at last*  
*In only you;*  
*May my five senses*

*Like burring camphor amidst flames*

*Purify themselves,*

*And merge in you*

*My own Chennanamallikarjuna.*

Akka Mahadevi relates a realistic dream in which Siva had appeared as her bridegroom. For the Virashivates, be they men or women, all are brides and Siva alone is one bridegroom. This is the concept of Saran Sati: Linga Pali (the devotee is the chaste wife, Siva is the husband).

*Liste, 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*

*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.<sup>xiv</sup>*

Whether rebels or housewives, women saints had a strong tendency to perceive themselves as brides of lord. It would be necessary to point out here that the two are not being suggested to be mutually exclusive categories. Elements of rebellion have been strongly present in married women as in those who opted out of marriage and became open rebels against the system. The distinction between the two categories however lies in the fact that walking out of a marriage on the part of some women, such as Akka Mahadevi (or Lal Ded of Kashmir) was a second order rebellion since they had initially accepted the yoke of marriage. Therefore, it would be logical to talk of a further split even within the "housewives" category which could have rebels as well as conformists in the context of the social norms marriage and family. In the case of the married women this involved rejection of their

worldly husband and the identification of Shiva as their bridegroom or pati. The oral tradition regarding Akka Mahadevi's renunciation of marital ties comes down to us from Harihara who was almost contemporaneous with Basava. It is believed that she scorned King Kausika's sexual advance towards her by walking out naked from the king's palace with her long hair as her only covering. Before the Lingayat spiritual council, the Anubhava Mantapa, she declared her mystical union with Shiva.<sup>xv</sup>

Her vacanas are known for their poetic and aesthetic appeal as well as the density of spiritual experiences. She used to participate actively in philosophic forums like Anubhava Mantapa. Her famous statement, "I am a female, only by name but a male by substance" reveals her confidence on the one side and her recognition of male superiority on the other.<sup>xvi</sup> But the above lines have the implication that she was beyond the male or female sexuality.

Akka Mahadevi she is liked as a symbol of protest against a Patriarchal Society, her own life does not stand witness to this view. It is true she preferred to remain separated from her husband but this was because her heart had completely surrendered to Shiva and she could not continue with the lie of living an ordinary married life. For her life had become a secedocry of serving Siva and there could be no place for anyone else in the spaces of her heart. Akka Mahadevi thus belonged to that group of women which included Lal Ded, Mira Bai, Sri Andal, etc. who had all through their lives consecrated themselves to the service of God.<sup>xvii</sup> Though there were several saintly women in this Virashaivism movement, Akka Mahadevi has remained the best known.

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