



AKKA MAHADEVI: VEERSHAIVITE WOMAN SAINT

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ABSTRACT

The entire movement of Veershaivism was propelled by the contemporary needs of social reformation in 12th century Kamataka. The medieval kingdom of king Bijjala included a large territory of present day Kamataka and Andhra Pradesh and had its capital at the city of Kalyana. King Bijjala had given enormous freedom of action to his extremely radical prime minister Basveshvara, who was the leader of the Sharana movement and finally also became instrumental in bringing the movement to an unexpected culmination.



KEYWORDS: Akka Mahadevi, Veershaivism.

INTRODUCTION

Sharanas, Sharanes and their Vachanas

What is striking about this movement, is not so much the social upheaval that it created in the process of fighting the orthodoxy of the caste-system, that almost destroyed the city of Kalyana, but the undying spirit of change that it could breathe into the orthodox religious orders of the day? Veershaiva movement like the original spirit of its parent religion of Siva did not ever make distinctions between mundane and the sacred. And therefore the movement sustainably maintained its focus on two important aspects of human existence social and spiritual. Both these aspects found central place in the socio-political and spiritual agendas of Veershaiva movement. Both the agendas therefore form the subject matter of the vachanas composed by Sharanas and Shaames. Their social agenda proved to be an important breakthrough in the socio-historical evolution of Hindu society in India especially in South of India. It challenged the caste and gender based discrimination and floated some very positive alternative concepts for the society like 'Kayaka' (lit. work done by the body) and 'Dasoha' (lit. service to men). The concept of 'Kayaka' directly challenged the age old menace of 'Varnashrama Dharma' (caste distinctions based on birth of an individual). According to 'Kayaka' philosophy, no work is considered menial. All work is taken up as a sacred venture and the fruits of the work are surrendered at the 'service of other men' (Dasoha) or at the community or for social welfare. For instance, woman vachana poet, AyadakkiLakkamma lovingly chides her husband SharanaMarayya in one of her vachanas, telling him, Jest he should forget, that Kayaka in itself is the fruit and is not to be regarded as a means to a reward - physical or spiritual:

If you want to work to go to heaven
By doing work and rendering service,
Do you think heaven is a wage for your work?

If you stay absorbed in your work
 Imagining no future and recollecting no past,
 Where MarrayyaPriyaAmareshvaralinga is
 There is heaven.

[Yaravintelimath:2006:28.]

Another vachana by shameyaAkkamma reveals the essence of 'Kayaka philosophy as it was conceived by Veershaivas:

One should go about doing one's daily work
 As long as one can,
 And thereafter one should go to see the guru,
 To worship the Linga and serve the Jangama.
 As also to hold discourse with Siva devotees,
 And to spend time in their company.
 It is proper for a devotee to know this rule.
 He alone is the dynamic spirit
 Rameshvaralinga
 To whom right conduct itself is life- breath.
 Nothing remained there
 When the spinning cord broke
 I did not embrace any vow-breaker.

[Yaravintelimath:2006:28]

Hence 'Sharana movement' was a reform movement in the social context and a reform movement in spiritual context also. Vachana literature refers to both these facets of Veershaiva movement and not always in exclusion to each other as is evident from the vachana quoted above.

In fact, this movement for the first time in the religious history of India openly added the dimension of a personal spiritual path hitherto available only to the ones who left the material world and took to esoteric forms of 'sadhana-s' (spiritual practices). Through this movement, choice of freedom from the available religious paths was made available to common people in their own social context (house -holder or ascetic- wanderer) and at their own social status (regardless of their caste and class).

Every individual was welcome in the "AnubhavaMantapa" (lit. the house of experience) set up in the great capital of Bijjala's empire, Kalyana, by his visionary prime minister Basavanna. The idea of "AnubhavaMantapa" and "Mahamane" (the great house) was to allow a space for every sharana to share and discuss their own insights into a path to the Absolute Consciousness conceived as Shiva in this system.

The philosophical tenets of the Veershaiva sect were defined by its later followers especially after the king ProudhaDevaraya (1419-1447) of Vijayanagaraempire took personal interest in the collection and systemic compilation of Sharana literature. However, a close look at the vachanas of Shiva-sharanas reveals that each one conceived and moved on their own path. A link that validates this idea, is the fact that every vachanakara uses an 'ankita ', a signature name which is his/her own conception of the Absolute Shiva Consciousness.

Now this 'ankita' has no material manifestation of the deity. This ankita is an individual conception of the metaphysical idea of Shiv a. When we talk about '*ankita*' in Bhakti context, it becomes the personal god of the seeker as is found in the Tamil Alvar and Nayanamar Bhakti. However, the major point of difference is that personal gods of Alvars and Nayanmars were chosen from specific

temples in a specific locale while Veershaivaankita-swere truly metaphysical and experiential. Experience was the most important facet of spiritual life for *sharanas*. AllamaPrabhu says in one of his *vachanas*:

Can the spark in the stone
Kindle?
Can the tree in the seed
Rustle?
Guheshvara's majesty,
Being unapparent,
Does not shine out
For the common eye:
He only knows it
Who has tasted the joy
Of the experience!

[Nandimath, Menezes and Hiremath: 1965.:56. Vol.I]

"AnubhavaMantapa", that was presided over by the mystics like AllamaPrabhu, validated all experience if it stood the test of seeker-sharana's own conviction. This again leads to the fact that sharana, movement actually defied all structures especially temple structures and institutions which had turned extremely exploitative by this time.

Akka's Works and Her Life

Akka Mahadevi's life and her work are inseparable from each other. In fact, her poetry is the most dependable source of information about her life, her ideas and the way of living she chose. No historical details support the hagiographies that evolved later as a part of development of Veershaiva religion. Harihara {1190-1230} was the first biographer and was closest to Akka in time and locale. In his poetic MahadeviyakkanaRagale, hedelineates the major events in Mahadevi' s life. Mahadevi was born to pious parentsNirmala and SumatiShetty in the village of Udutadi, near Balligavi in Shimoga district. Her parents, it seems, were already on Sharana path. This family must have been welleducated and cultured as she seems to have lived in the company of the wise from thebeginning. Her vachanas reveal a very fine sense of the scriptural and religious tradition. She was also initiated into the Sharana tradition early in life. One of her vachanasconfirms this:

I got Linga by Guru· s grace
And Jangama by Guru's grace
I got Padodaka by Guru's grace
And prasada by Guru's grace
I conversed with gentle devotees by
guru's grace.
Because, no sooner was I born
Than the holy Guru smeared
The sacred ash on my brow,
And put Linga on my body
[Yaravintellimath:2006: 146.]

At the age of sixteen, she seems to have caught the attention of a feudal lord often mentioned as a Jaina king named Kaushika. Kaushika wanted to marry this beautiful girl by all means. Akka however

was not keen on marrying anyone. She believed, like sixteenth century Rajasthani woman saint Meera, that her marriage had already taken place and that her husband is Shiva (Chennamallikarjuna). But probably King Kaushika threatened her parents into giving Mahadevi's hand in marriage to him. Marriage did take place but didn't last as Kaushika could not keep the promises he had made to Mahadevi before tying the knot with her. Consequently Mahadevi simply walked out of the marriage leaving behind all modesty and shame. Harihara's account finishes at this point where Mahadevi, now AkkaMahadevi, (sister Mahadevi) goes on her spiritual journey worshipping Shiva in every form of creation. To quote from Harihara:

The flower bearing plants were meant for Mahadevi's puja
 As if their faces had flowered in love and joy
 In the streams
 Among bamboos
 In ponds, lakes, tanks and rivers
 In hills and valleys
 Among hoards of tigers and deers
 Among bears, wild elephants and bulls
 She came walking
 Remembering Mallinatha everywhere.
 [Trans by H.S. Shivaprakash. Harihara. P.77.]

Akka Mahadevi was a great devotee of Shiva and chose the form of *Chennamallikarjuna* as her personal god or Ishtadevata. Chennamallikarjuna is also her ankita i.e. the signature used by her in all her poetic expression. Her relationship with Shiva, her chosen god, cannot be defined merely in terms that are commonly used by critics and scholars like 'bridal-mysticism' or even by other conventional forms of reading Bhakti Poetry. It is simply beyond all conceivable definitions of love. This mystical relationship feeds on the indefinable, occultist religion of Shiva. Her vachanas reflect an enormous range of emotions which inform of her relation to her *Ishta-Chennamallikarjuna*

Akka's Vachanas

Akka Mahadevi is considered to be one of the finest vachanakaras among the Sharana(s). Her name is taken in same breath as the names of the Sharana stalwarts like Allama, Basavanna, Siddharammya, Ajaganna (Ajaganna's compositions are not available but his vachanas were regarded by other vachanakaras especially his sister Muktayakka in high esteem) and Chennabasavanna. Akka's vachanas have played a very significant role in expositing Veershaivaphilosophy. Furthermore a large number of them seem to have been written exclusively with such a purpose in mind. Some 360 of her vachanas are extant. Besides vachanas, she wrote four other works: *YogangaTrividhi*, *ShrstiyaVachana*, *Padagalu*, *AkkagalaPithike*.

The compilation of her vachanas by various anthologists throws up an interesting fact. Almost all the anthologies arranged her vachanas according to Shatsthala (Six stage/phase system) philosophy and all the anthological compilations happened after *ShoonyaSampadane*.

ShoonyaSampadane was compiled in the beginning of the fifteenth century which was three hundred years after the Sharana movement took place in Kalyana. This sudden focus on bringing together Sharana compositions was not without a reason. Vijayanagara emperors, in the process of strengthening their empire, started patronizing Veershaiva faith which during the 14th century Sharana movement had brought together all sections of society in its fold and now could be conveniently upheld as state ideology that supported all social groups. In addition, due to its affiliations with "ShaivaSiddhanta" philosophy, it helped to appropriate the Shaiva- Mathas which had become very powerful in Kamataka by this time. Hence, it has to be kept in mind, while studying the vachanas, that

ShoonyaSampadane is a text constructed with a definite political purpose. There is no way of knowing the actual sequence of the vachanas in the oeuvres of Sharanas included in *ShoonyaSampadane*. The Shatsthala scheme could have been imposed on the available compositions of the vachanakaras by *ShoonyaSampadane* editors.

Therefore, it is difficult to determine the sequence of AkkaMahadevi'svachanas also.

Another feature associated with Akka'svachanas and her life is her journey to "AnubhavaMantapa" in Kalyana, which, in fact, is the point of focus in *ShoonyaSampadane*.

However, this journey is not mentioned at all by her first biographer Harihara's in his text *MahadeviyakkanaRagale*. In fact, Harihara does not mention 'Kalyana' at all, not even in his accounts of Prabhudeva's and Basavanna's life. It is strange that though historically, geographically and even in terms of time or public memory, Harihara was closest to the centre of Sharana rising. It appears to be strange, that he did not care to write about 'Kalyana' and "AnubhavaMantapa". In one of his essays, called "Journeying to Kalyana", Prof.H.S. Shivaprakash says:

Surrounding a lake on the outskirts of the city, are the caves where the leading saints are said to have performed their sadhana over eight hundred years ago. These and a few ancient structures nearby are the only signs that history sought to remake itself in this very place. [Sen and Kaushal:2004: 215]

Also the Veershaiva proposition, that Akka's spiritual progress happened exactly in the six phases as expounded by Veershaiva philosophy, is a conjecture which might have been imposed by the 15th century vachana compilers who were working with a set framework for consolidation of Lingayat religion under the regime of Vijayanagara emperors. Another objection for this kind of sequencing is, that it presupposes an evolutionary model for human consciousness. Though a common mind seems to attain maturity in gradual stages of development, there have been examples throughout history where humans have shown themselves capable of extraordinary creative powers at a very young age. AadiShankaracharya stands out as an example. A creative mind need not necessarily show higher levels of creativity or evolution in successive stages of an increasing time frame. Saint poets including AkkaMahadevi were highly evolved and creative human beings.

Akka Mahadevi was only sixteen years old, when she defied the social norms by walking out of her marriage and shedding all signs of civil modesty including her clothes. The works that she has left behind in the short span of her life indicate her spiritual and mystical achievement. This, for a woman in the 12th century, is extraordinary!

Therefore, all the available frames of studying poetry fall short of understanding her poetry and her life.

Only after granting that she was an extraordinary woman, one can proceed to look at her creative expression. It is quite probable that her strength as a poetess and her creative genius were clearly perceived by the pioneers of the Sharana movement. And when she was received at "AnubhavaMantapa" after a tough and thorough examination of her spiritual attainments by chief sharnas like AllamaPrabhu, she was assigned this work of expounding Veershaiva concepts and beliefs in her compositions. In other words, it is quite possible that she was used by these leader saints as one of their women spokespersons.

At the same time a substantial number of her vachana compositions seem to be bursting out of this idiom of propaganda into finest expression of her mystical experiences. In such vachanas, one does not find any theological exposition or religious propaganda, rather a simple statement of immediate urgency of the experience of a different state of consciousness.

A new frame for her journey on the spiritual path in the light of above mentioned suggestions must be conceived, where, though the physical and geographical journey to Kalyana and then to "Kadalivana", is given significance, but the progress towards the final goal is considered more as mental process than as a physical progress.

Akka Mahadevi's vachanas are like a magical text that opens itself only on the page which suits the seeker at the moment of choice. They reveal an extensive range of her engagements with esoteric ways of sadhana. Her vachanas explore a simple pathway to the chosen deity, expound major tenets of Veershaivism and reveal the sufferings and ecstasies of a woman in love. Above all, her vachanas hold a key to the esoteric techniques of Yoga and Tantra. This subject is dealt at length by her in a less popular work called *YogangaTrividhi*. What is special about Akka's quest is that she enjoins Bhakti i.e. loving devotion with Yogic and Tantric sadhana. For her, as in fact for all bhaktas, liberation or 'Moksha' is secondary to 'Bhakti' or loving union with the chosen one. AkkaMahadevi becomes more and more established in her oneness with Shiva, 'Chennamallikarjuna' as she crosses all other hurdles on the path of 'Bhakti'- the body, the mind, the intellect and the ego through bhakti and through other Yogic techniques that she mentions in her vachanas in a highly symbolic language wrapped up in deceptively simple vocabulary. For example:

Associating with the ignorant
Is like to light a fire
By rubbing stones;
Associating with the wise
Is like taking butter
After churning curd.
O Chennamallikarjuna, jasmine tender,
Associating with your devotees
Is like a hill of camphor
Catching fire.
[VinayaChaitanya: 2005:84.]

and:

Can a dry bamboo sprout again?
Can a burnt pot become clay again?
Can a fruit dropped from its stalk
Return to it again?
If the toiling and moiling men
Utter a word unknowingly,
Do the steadfast devotees
Return to earth again,
O Chennamallikarjuna!
[Yaravintelimath: 2006: 128]

As has been stated earlier, the path of Bhakti is the path of complete surrender. Anything that comes in the way of Bhakti-internal or external, of the world or of the mind, has to be surrendered. Major hurdles are posed by the senses (the body), the mind, the intellect and the ego. There are ways and means to overcome these hurdles. Besides Yoga and Tantra, three other paths of liberation expounded in the classical Hindu scripture, *Bhagwad Gita* are: *Karmayoga*, *Jnana yoga* and *Bhakti yoga*. Karma yoga begins with the body and purifies the being through detached action; Jnana yoga takes up the instrument of mind and conquers it by understanding the transitory nature of the world; Bhakti yoga is the only path that works simultaneously on the body (engaging the senses through worship and ritual), mind and intellect (focusing it on one object- God in exclusion to all other objects) and ego (surrendering it at the service of the God and fellow devotees) and leads the bhakta to ecstatic bliss of union with the ever expansive Cosmic Consciousness which is considered to be higher than the

liberation or Moksha. It is for this reason that all the scriptures and classical texts acknowledge the supremacy of the path of Bhakti over that of Jnana and Karma. In addition esoteric practices of Tantra and Yoga sometimes go hand in hand with other chosen paths. AkkaMahadevi's work *YogangaTrividhi* reveals that she had been practicing extreme austerities and other Tantric sadhanas at certain stages in her life.

We can thus see, that Akka's life and works are a confluence of two distinct strains of Indian spirituality: the path of Yoga I Tantra emphasizing discipline and austerity and the Path of Bhakti underscoring surrender and spontaneity. The former is expressed in her *YogangaTrividhi* and the latter in her vachanas. At the same time we can say that elements of bhakti and Yoga and Tantra intermingle in her works and all her works are inclusive of these elements in various degrees. It is interesting to note, that in most of the later transformations of her works, Akka's Yogic/Tantric facet is more or less neglected.

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