

Classic Poetry Series

**Akka Mahadevi**  
**- poems -**

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# Akka Mahadevi(1130 - 1160)

Akka Mahadevi (???? ??????) or Mahadevi or Mahadeviyakkha, a brilliant medieval Kannada poet, rebel and mystic, was a prominent figure of the Veerashaiva Bhakti movement of the 12th century Karnataka. Her Vachanas in Kannada, a form of didactic poetry are considered her greatest contribution to Kannada Bhakti literature. It is said that she was the first woman to write Vachanas in Kannada literature. In all she wrote about 430 Vachanas which is relatively fewer than that compared to some other saints of her time. Yet the term 'Akka' (elder Sister) which is an honorific given to her by great Veerashaiva saints like Basavanna, Chenna Basavanna, Kinnari Bommayya, Siddharama, Allamaprabhu and Dasimayya speaks volumes of her contribution to the movement that was underway. She is in hindsight seen as a great and inspirational woman for Kannada literature and the history of Karnataka. She is said to have accepted the god Shiva ('Chenna Mallikarjuna') as her husband, traditionally understood as the 'madhura bhava' or 'madhurya' form of devotion (similar to how centuries later Meera, a 16th century saint, considered herself married to Krishna).

## <b> Early life </b>

Born in Udatadi (or Udugani) near the ancient city of Banavasi (in Shikaripura taluk Shimoga district). She lived in the 12th Century in the south of India. She worked for the welfare of women.

## <b> Biography </b>

From an early age she was initiated into the worship of Shiva. She considered this initiation to be the most important moment of her life and she became a devoted worshipper of Shiva. The form of Shiva she worshipped was known as Chennamallikarjuna., which translates as " The Beautiful Lord, white as jasmine." Much of Mahadeviyakkha's poetry refers to her vivid descriptions of her beautiful Lord. And indeed she always signed her poems O Lord White as Jasmine.

Legend says that the local Jain King of the area desired Mahadeviyakkha for she was a woman of un-surpassing beauty. Her family naturally agreed, and perhaps were a little fearful of incurring the King's displeasure should Mahadeviyakkha be uncooperative. The wedding is said to have taken place (although some scholars dispute this) however Mahadeviyakkha was unwilling to reciprocate the desire of the King. Mahadeviyakkha was immersed in devotion to her Lord and she could not accept a life of servitude to an atheistic King.

Her family were highly critical of her "unorthodox" behaviour and this led Mahadevia to renounce her worldly life. Mahadevi left her marriage and place of birth to live the life of a wandering mendicant. Mahadevi is said to have worn only long tresses. She felt clothes were a needless adornment for one seeking the Lord.

Mahadeviyakha is said to have then travelled to the region of Kalyana. Kalyana was a refuge for genuine Shiva bhakti, it stood out from the normal religious and social customs of the time. One of the leading saints Basavanna is said to be one of the first socialists because he spoke out against the inequities of the caste system. But primarily Basavanna and Allama were uniting those dedicated to Shiva worship

However even the leaders of this community Basavanna and Allama had some trouble accepting Mahadevi, they were somewhat disturbed by her naked appearance. However Allama was eventually impressed by both her humility and genuine spirituality and Mahadevi was accepted into the community.

Much of her poetry relates to the dialogues Mahadevi had with Allama as she was seeking to prove her spiritual intent. Her advice was to wholeheartedly yearn for the Divine without any inhibition. Mahadevi felt that outer rituals were mostly unimportant, what was important was the inner consecration the inner worship

"The arrow that is shot should penetrate so deeply  
that even the feathers do not show.  
Hug the body of the Lord so tightly  
that the bones must be crushed to crumble.  
Weld to the divine until the very welding disappears. "  
- Mahadevi

Despite her years of great tapas Mahadevi still had not had the ultimate experience of merging into the infinite – into her Chennamallikarjuna. It is said that towards the end of her life she retreated to the cave where her last desire was fulfilled. Merging into the infinite she quietly left the earthly stage, leaving behind a legacy of illumining poetry.

"In her intense devotion to Lord Shiva and single minded quest of Him she spurned the riches and comforts of a palace, cut asunder domestic bonds, and set out as a wandering devotee meeting with and overcoming many hardships on her journey to this final goal. In addition, she had the gift of imaginative expression. A few of the outpourings of her experience are preserved for

posterity in the shape of Vachanas "sayings" in rhythmic Kanada prose.. Her vachanas are characterized by intense feeling and deep insight."

-T.N. Sreekantaiya Ma on Akka Mahadevi

The life of Mahadeviyakkha to some extent mirrors that of Mirabai. Both female saints had to renounce the comforts and expectations of a family life. Both suffered censure and displeasure from parts of society who didn't appreciate their devotion to spirituality. However despite the difficulties both faced, the intensity of their divine intoxication is startlingly revealed in their poetry.

"Akka's poems are moving, haunting, unforgettable. For women, her work embodies a radical legitimacy as she struggles in her poetry to go beyond much of Virasaiva poetry to include the struggles of her body, struggles against the pettiness of roles she is forced into as a woman, struggles against a man who is also a prince and a Jain, and against the social expectations that restrain her."

# Don'T Despise Me

Don't despise me as

She who has no one

I'm not one to be afraid,

Whatever you do.

I exist chewing dry leaves.

My life resting on a knife edge

If you must torment me,

Chennamallikarjuna,

My life, my body

I'll offer you and be cleansed.

Akka Mahadevi

# Him Who Illumines

I have seen Him in His divine form,  
Him with the matted locks,  
Him with the jewelled crown,  
Him with the gleaming teeth,  
Him with the smiling face,  
Him who illumines the fourteen worlds with  
the light of His eyes.

I have Him and the thirst of my eyes is  
quenched.

I have seen the great Lord whom the men  
among men serve but as wives.

I have seen the Supreme Guru Chenna Mallikarjuna  
sporting with the Primeval Sakti,  
And saved am I.

Akka Mahadevi

# How Can You Be Modest

People,  
male and female,  
blush when a cloth covering their shame  
comes loose

When the lord of lives  
lives drowned without a face  
in the world, how can you be modest?

When all the world is the eye of the lord,  
onlooking everywhere, what can you  
cover and conceal?

Akka Mahadevi

# I Do Not Say

I do not say it is the Linga,  
I do not say it is oneness with the Linga,  
I do not say it is union,  
I do not say it is harmony,  
I do not say it has occurred,  
I do not say it has not occurred,  
I do not say it is You,  
I do not say it is I  
After becoming one with the Linga  
in Chenna Mallikarjuna,  
I say nothing whatever.

Akka Mahadevi



# I Have Fallen In Love

I have fallen in love, O mother with the  
Beautiful One, who knows no death,  
knows no decay and has no form;

I have fallen in love, O mother with the  
Beautiful One, who has no middle, has  
no end, has no parts and has no features;

I have fallen in love, O mother with the  
Beautiful One, who knows no birth and  
knows no fear.

I have fallen in love, O mother with the  
Beautiful One, who is without any family,  
without any country and without any peer;  
Chenna Mallikarjuna, the Beautiful, is my husband.  
Fling into the fire the husbands who are subject  
to death and decay.

Akka Mahadevi

# I Have Maya For Mother In Law

I have Maya for mother-in-law,  
the world for father-in-law;  
three brothers-in-law, like tigers;  
and the husband's thoughts  
are full of laughing women;  
no god, this man,  
And I cannot cross the sister-in-law.  
But I will  
give this wench the slip  
and go cuckold my husband with  
Hara, my Lord.  
My mind is my maid:  
by her kindness, I join  
my Lord,  
my utterly beautiful Lord  
from the mountain peaks,  
my lord white as jasmine,  
and I will make Him  
my good husband

Akka Mahadevi

# Lord Your Maya

Oh! Lord your Maya does not give me up even  
When I have given it up. In spite of my  
resistance it clings to me and follows me.

Your Maya becomes Yogini to the Yogin. It  
becomes a nun to the monk, it becomes a  
herald to the saint. It adapts itself to  
each according to his nature.

When I climbed up the hill, your Maya too  
came up; when I entered the forest, your  
Maya too entered behind me.  
So the world does not take its hand off  
my back even now!

O, Lord of infinite mercy, your Maya frightens  
me. O Lord Mallikarjuna, bestow your grace on me.

Akka Mahadevi

# Love's Marvellous Ways

Look at  
love's marvellous  
ways:

if you shoot an arrow  
plant it  
till no feather shows;  
if you hug  
a body, bones  
must crunch and crumble;  
weld,  
the welding must vanish.

Love is then  
our lord's love

Akka Mahadevi

# O Lord, Listen To Me

O Lord, listen to me if you will, listen not  
if you will not: I cannot rest contented  
unless I sing of you.

O Lord, accept me if you will, accept not  
if you will not: I cannot rest contented unless  
I worship you.

O Lord, love me if you will, love not  
if you will not: I cannot rest contented unless I hold  
you in my arms

O Lord, look at me if you will, look not  
if you will not: I cannot rest contented unless  
I gaze at you in overpowering longing.

O Lord Chenna Mallikarjuna, I worship you and revel in a thrill of pleasure.

Akka Mahadevi

# O Lord, White As Jasmine

You're like milk  
In water: I cannot tell  
What comes before,  
What after;  
Which is the master,  
Which is the slave;  
What's big.  
What's small.

O lord white as jasmine  
If an ant should love you  
And praise you.  
Will he not grow  
To demon powers?

Akka Mahadevi

# Show Me Your Way Out

Like a silkworm weaving  
her house with love  
from her marrow,  
    and dying  
in her body's threads  
winding tight, round  
and round,  
    I burn  
desiring what the heart desires.

Cut through, O Lord,  
my heart's greed,  
and show me  
your way out,

O Lord white as jasmine

Akka Mahadevi

# Sunlight Made Visible

Sunlight made visible  
the whole length of a sky,  
movement of wind,  
leaf, flower, all six colours  
on tree, bush and creeper:  
all this  
is the day's worship.

Night and day  
in your worship  
I forget myself  
O lord white as jasmine.

Akka Mahadevi



# Would A Circling Surface Vulture

Would a circling surface vulture  
know such depths of sky  
as the moon would know?

would a weed on the riverbank  
know such depths of water  
as the lotus would know?

would a fly darting nearby  
know the smell of flowers  
as the bee would know?

O Lord white as jasmine  
only you would know  
the way of your devotees:  
how would these  
these  
mosquitos  
on the buffalo's hides?

Akka Mahadevi