



Research Paper

## Akkamahadevi: An Eminent Shivasharaneer

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### PREFACE:

*Veerasaivism is a broad spectrum of social movement advocated by Guru Basaveshwara in the 12<sup>th</sup> century in the State of Karnataka. It is fiercely monotheistic and also free of temple worship. The Veerasaiva devotees who are otherwise called Shivasharanas substituted a linga (phallus) image worn on the body and symbolizing Shiva and hence the term Lingayat. Veerasaivism decisively rejected caste. It is new community not a religion. It allows all people irrespective of caste and cried to follow this system.*

### KEYWORDS:

*Veerasaivism – spectrum of social movement – state of Karnataka – Basaveshwara – the founder of Lingayat religion – five kinds of disciplines – Akkamahadevi – famous Shivasharanees - total devotion – surrender to lord Shiva – individual and personal state of experience.*

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### I. ORIGIN OF VEERASAIVISM:

Veerasaivism is neither a religious nor a communal movement but a broad spectrum of social movement advocated by Guru Basaveshwara in the 12<sup>th</sup> century in the State of Karnataka. Basava, a native of Bagevadi, was a Brahmin and the son of Madiraja and Maladamba. His maternal uncle Baladeva was a minister in the court of king Bijjala. When his uncle Baladeva fell sick and was bedridden, the latter's responsibilities were transferred to Basava. According to *Basavapurana*, when Basava assumed power, he began distributing gifts to all the devotees of Lord Siva. This episode had a profound effect on Basava. Another incident was that at the age of Eight, he also rebelled during his initiation ceremony, namely, "the holy thread ceremony" of the Brahmins. He then rebelled against the rigid practices of the caste system then prevalent and eventually began expounding his own theosophy with a casteless society at its core. Soon, his philosophy began attracting large number of people. Saints like Allama Prabhu, Akkamahadevi, Channabasavanna also played pivotal roles in founding and spearheading *Veerasaivism*.

### Doctrines of Veerasaivism:

Basava lived and thought in the northern part of the Karnataka State. Veerasaivism found its roots during the brief rule of the Southern Kalachuri dynasty in those parts of the State Basavashwara is the founder of Lingayath religion and its literature. Dr. P.B. Desai in his famous book *Basaveshwara and His Times* concluded by the study of various literatures like stone scriptures, puranas, kavya and vasana literature that Basaveshwara is the founder of Lingayath religion. According to Gail Omvett, veerasaivism under Basava was fiercely monotheistic and also free of temple worship. The Veerasaiva devotees who are otherwise called Shivasharanas substituted a linga (phallus) image worn on the body and symbolizing Shiva and hence the term *Lingayat*. Veerasaivism decisively rejected caste. Not only did Basava accept people from all castes into his new community, but he himself proclaimed his rejection of his Brahmin birth and his kinship with the oppressed castes. Basavanna states:

Our Anayya, the untouchable, is my father and our  
Kakkayya, the tanner is my uncle.

(Shouter 1995, 52).

Many vachanas from the 12<sup>th</sup> century movement often by oppressed castes and untouchables proclaimed equality. Basava's uncompromising attitude was prominent.

What does it mean? Which background you have?  
He who wears the linga of Siva is well-born! Should  
he inquire about the background among the devotees,  
after the castes have been mixed.

(Shouter 1995, 52).

Veerasaiva enforces five kinds of disciplines to its followers. It includes wearing linga, (*lingasaram*) linga discipline (*sadatcharam*), self-discipline (*sivacharam*) professional discipline (*Virrudhyacharam*) and social discipline (Ganacharam). Veerasaivism rejects caste system, untouchability, unwanted rituals and rigid religiosity. Even though veerasaivism was born and nurtured in the State of Karnataka, it gradually spreaded to Tamilnadu particularly in Kumbakonam, Kanjeevaram, Madurai, Coimbatore, Salem, Trichy, Chennai and Pondicherry.

#### **Principles of Shivasharanas:**

The word “Sharana” means “the surrendered one” and refers to a person who is surrendered to the deity Lord Shiva. In practice, it is a word used to denote a contemporary *lingayat*, the followers of Basava. Hence, the followers of Basava’s teachings in letter and spirit and contributors to the *Vachana Sathiya* were designated as true Sharanas. The term ‘Shiva sharanas’ and “Shivasharanees” can be roughly explained as devotees of Lord Shiva. The 12<sup>th</sup> century *Vachanakaras* are also known by this name. Sharana is somebody who has surrendered oneself to the will of the Lord. ‘Sharana’ is derived from this term and it denotes the action of surrendering to or an act of respecting others. Basavanna, Allama Prabhu, Akka Mahadevi and Madivala Machidiva are the prominent Shivasharanas of the *Veerasaivism*.

#### **Akkamahadevi: An Eminent Shivasharanee :**

Akka Mahadevi (C.1130-1160) one of the early female poets in the Kannada language was a prominent Shivasharanee in the Veerashaiva Bhakti movement of the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Her 430 extent Vachana poems, a form of spontaneous mystical poems and the two short writings called *Mantrogopya* and the *Yogangatrinidhi* are considered her most notable contributions to Kannada literature. She composed relatively fewer poems than other saints of the movement. Yet the term ‘Akka’ (elder sister) which is an honorific given to her by great Veerashaiva saints such as Basavanna, Sidharama and Allama Prabhu is an indication of her contribution to the spiritual discussion held at the “Anubhava Mantapa”. She is in hindsight seen as an inspirational woman for Kannada literature and the history of Karnataka. She is known to have considered the god Shiva, Chenna Mallikarjuna as her husband. Akka Mahadevi was born in 1130 in Udutadi near the ancient city of Banavasi in the modern Shimoga district of Karnataka State.

#### **Akkamahadevi: Arduous Devotion:**

Akkamahadevi is considered by modern scholars to be a prominent figure in the field of female emancipation. A household name in Karnataka, Akka Mahadevi said that she was a woman only in name and that her mind, body and soul belonged to Lord Shiva. During the time of strife and political uncertainty in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Akkamahadevi chose spiritual enlightenment and stood by her choice. In search for her eternal soul mate, Lord Shiva, she made the animals, flowers and birds her friends and companions, rejecting family life and worldly attachment. Akka was a revelation and she pursued enlightenment recording her journey in Vachanas of simple language but great cognitive vigour. Akka’s poetry explores the themes of rejecting mortal love in favour of the everlasting love of God. Her Vachanas also told about the methods that the path of enlightenment demand of the seeker, such as killing the “I” conquering desires and the senses and so on.

Akkamahadevi rejected her life of luxury to live as a wandering poet-saint traveling throughout the region and singing in praise of Lord Shiva. She went in search of fellow seekers or Sharanas she found the company of such Sharanas in Basavakalyana in Bidar district. Akka utters many Vachanas in praise of them. Akka’s spiritual journey ends at Kaladi, the nearby thick forest area of Shirisaila where she is supposed to have experienced union with Chennamallikarjuna.

Recent work on the period suggests that understanding Akka Mahadevi as an inspiration for Women’s empowerment is a deeply anachronistic reading. Such readings were products of the colonial schemes of interpretation that initially took great interest in Virasaivism and for its declarations about Shiva as the supreme God. Akka is seen as representing the whole Vachana movement and she is clearly a major figure in the social empowerment of women. One of her famous Vachanaa runs thus:

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 word, how can, you be modest?

When, all the word is the eye of the lord

On looking everywhere, What can you

cover and conceal?

Again she shings:

For hunger, there is the village rice in the begging bowl,

For thirst, there are tanks and streams and wells

For sleep temple ruins do well.

For the company of the Soul,

I have you, Chenna Mallikarjuna

**Message of Akkamahadevi:**

Akka Mahadevi's entire life is filled with many a horrowing experiences and a testimony to the power of indelible courage and faith. She proved that a woman has every right to pursue a life solely engaged in the exploration of the divine, while being deeply involved in none other than the seeker herself. Mahadevi was an extraordinarily beautiful girl with long tresses. This bodily beauty that she was blessed with was a liability for a long time in her short life. She calls this body as the site of dirt, lust, greed and rage. Her spirit belonged to space and not to her individual equipment. Intellectually, too she was not like many other prominent saints of her time. The reformers, saints and Sharanas who gathered at the *Anubava Mantapa* at Kalyana when she visited that place had to accept her individual search for the Lord.

Akka had 60 Shivasharanees to follow her. She was the beacon light of all. She could stand in comparison with any women mystic ether of India or of the rest of the world. Her sayings are characterized by the exuberance of emotion, the sublimation of elegance and the transfiguration of grace. Akka stated that man can never be fully and wholly fulfilled through self discipline and knowledge, though self-discipline is arduous and knowledge is superior. A more human approach to God lies through pure and unselfish love which withdraws most of the obstacles that the ego interposes between the divine and the devotee.

**II. CONCLUSION:**

Shivasharanas and Shivasharanees are the selfless sect of saints who advocated the creeds of Veera Saivism in the State of Karnataka during the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Akkamahadevi is the supreme shivasharanee to establish Lord Shiva as the ultimate end of all human endeavours. The holy atmosphere, the beauty of the natural surroundings and the innate Godward tendency made Mahadevi a genuine mystic. The divinity already inherent in her began to manifest all its radiance while she was yet in her teens. At the age of eight she was initiated into the secrets of Linga. At the age of sixteen this concept ripened into full resolve and she could state with firm conviction. So Akka sings thus:

“Listen Oh! Mother. I Love Him.

He is the one, The only. One.

He knows no birth and death  
He is uncombined by caste or clime.  
He is boundless changeless, Fortress  
All other fade away and die at last.  
I will have none of them  
My Lord shall forever be.

The One Channamallikarjuna. (23)

Personal idealism finds its exponent in Mahadevi who is emotional in temperament. She is deeply religious. Her religious mind is concerned primarily not with the explanation of things but with the experiences of values. It regards experience and treats things from the stand point of value. The religious man relates all values to the supreme God. Mahadevi emphasizes the individual and personal states of experience to realize the ultimate ground of Reality. The life and message of Akkamahadevi should be followed by everyone at anytime It is our duty to spread the message of Akkamahadevi at every household.

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