

## Akka Mahadevi Caves: Lingayat memory & poetic space

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### Abstract

This paper is an attempt to map the tourist-pilgrim's journey and experience of the Akka Mahadevi caves in a manner where the material experience of the entire *yatra* (journey) subtly combines with the travel-narratives and spiritual persona of the 12<sup>th</sup> century Lingayat Virashaiva woman-saint-poet, in such a way as to create a complete and deeply enriching experience for the 21<sup>st</sup> century traveller. The journey to Akka Mahadevi Caves on the banks of River Krishna takes less than five hours of road-travel from Hyderabad, and the highway weaves through miles of farmland and forest area. Akka Mahadevi it is said was initiated to Shiva bhakti by a travelling sadhu when she was merely ten years of age; following a life ridden with challenges she fled from her marital home and was accepted into the Lingayat fold headed by Allama Prabhu and Bassavana. In the last phase of her ascetic life she left Kalyana city and moved to a forest where she devoted herself solely to the worship of Lord Shiva (Cenna Mallikarjuna) in a cave in the Srisailam-Nallamal forest on the banks of River Krishna across the temple town of Srisailam, Kurnool district. The essay weaves with actual travel, Akka's poetry (her *vacanas*) and lifeline and concludes with an analysis of the complex, radical challenges that fashioned the life and struggles of women ascetics like Mahadevi in an era that was primal and patriarchal. A reflection of the same is apparent in the semiotics of Mahadevi Akka's poetry. Such active-travel that fuses present with past, has the potential to yoke the travelling subject to a higher collective experience and memory.

**Keywords:** Pilgrimage, Lingayat, Virashaiva, Saguna Bhakti, Spiritual tourism.

It was like a stream  
running into the dry bed  
of a lake,  
like rain  
pouring on plants  
parched to sticks.

It was like this world's pleasure  
and the way to the other,  
both  
walking towards me.  
(V. 45)

\*

These are lines that draw images from their environment into the semiotic of the poetical sayings or *vacana*<sup>i</sup>, composed by Mahadeviakka, the vivacious and beautiful Lingayat devotee of Lord Shiva, locally worshipped as Mallikarjuna. This devi with enchanting eyes and flowing long hair 'like a stream running into the bed of a lake', is admired and worshipped all across the Karnataka-

Telangana region for her hymns, her ascetic grit and drive as she traversed the dark wilderness through forests and hamlets without a stitch of cloth to cover her but for her flowing tresses; alone she roamed searching for Shiva in the thick Nallamala-Srisailam forests in the company of tigers, snakes and other wild life. It is the lure of this petit wild goddess-saint that pulled me a few years ago to fly to Hyderabad from Baroda and set off in search of her last destination. Named after her, the Akka Mahadevi Cave is located in a scenic spot overlooking the Krishna River, this is where Akka (sister) had meditated in the last phase of her life and ultimately merged with her Cenna (beloved) Mallikarjuna. Here then is an account of my pilgrimage to Akka's grotto and my tribute to history and the Srisailam landscapes.

Over two hundred and thirty odd kilometres of highway-driving will reach you from Hyderabad to Srisailam: a temple town, dedicated to Shiva worship and well known for the tiger reserve forests and natural caves that surround it, a key feature being the Akka Mahadevi caves. Tucked away in the jungle terrain of the Nallamala hill range in Kurnool district, the caves are just a ten minute walk from the river bank but the climb is steep therefore one must pick one's way carefully through rock-rubble and loose soil, for a slip would land one directly into the swift flowing waters of Krishna that move swiftly through the Srisailam-Nallamala forest. So swift is the river-current here that there is a joke about it which says, if you fall into the river here you can get picked up at the Nagarjuna Sagar which is hundred and fifty kilometres downstream, for you would reach faster that way!

Seeped in the sublime joys of Nature, this trip with the multi-faceted experience it offers, proves to be the modern pilgrim's panacea. The Hyderabad-Srisailam highway through the winding forest ghats is green and scenic, the fact that it is speckled with indigenous shrines of special relevance to the Lingayat Virashaiva community lends it a strange aura of holiness, age and mystique. A hundred and eighty five kilometres down the road from Hyderabad (and fifty kilometres short of the Mallikarjuna temple of Srisailam) are the Mallela Tirtham Waterfalls -- a refreshing tourist spot of immense natural beauty in the Nallamala forest near the village town of Achampet. If you love adventure and are physically fit, then this spot is a must-visit.

To reach the Mallela Tirtham waterfalls one must trudge (or drive) through a muddy forest-path and then comes a climb of over four hundred roughly cut steps that take you up to the waterfall! This needs some muscle for sure! But once you reach the top, the experience and the view is worth the effort, framed within fragrant plants and trees is an open air bath and the thinly falling water-curtain is a thrilling and refreshing treat! The falling water-curtain is a rivulet that flows through the Nallamala forest (ten months out of twelve each year) and later joins up with the Krishna as it flows on towards Srisailam through the Nallamala-Srisailam forests. On our way out, the winding mud-track, the deep calm and serenity surrounding the tranquil hill and forest, speckled here and then with sweet bird song, was extremely soothing and soul stirring. One must be careful however, of the aggressive monkeys – they are known to snatch your bags away. Also we have to be aware of the slippery rocks to the waterfall. They are not only steep and rough-cut but being laced with fungus are treacherously slippery - what with all that water vapour in the air!

Further as our destination approaches we are bound to pass the gigantic structure of Srisailam Dam and Hydro Power station on the banks of the Krishna; it is huge and looks extremely grand and spectacular at night when it is all lit up. As the road winds through the ghat forest region I'd recommend keeping a check on speed, for who knows if one is fortunate one might spot in the bushes or crossing the road a sambar deer, a mongoose or a wild rabbit or even a serpent quickly hastening for forest cover. And if you are lucky you might even sight a tiger – the likelihood of this is higher when one is travelling in the twilight period of dusk or dawn. Yes

we too saw some wild life – a mongoose with two babies scuttling for cover, a few peacocks and a fleeting glimpse of a sambar deer! It had such massive antlers!

On reaching Srisailam we booked into a hotel for the night -- there is an array of them to choose from. There is also the hotel run by Telangana State Tourism which is quite comfortable too. We went there to gather information for next day's boat ride to the Caves which are across the river. Another attraction at Srisailam is the ancient Saivite temple shrine set on top of a flat hill and dedicated to Lord Mallikarjuna and goddess Bramarambha, I'd highly recommend paying a visit. It is said the Lingayat saints, Allama Prabhu and Akka Mahadevi often sat in this temple in worship of Lord Shiva; besides, there are several references to this holy place in Hindu myth and scriptures. Since the temple is of immense religious significance there is always a long line of pilgrims, due to which *darshan* of the *jyotirlinga* in the sanctum sanctorium can take some time. Here in the ancient temple one comes face to face with Akka Mahadevi's Lord Mallikarjuna. According to A K Ramanujan in *Speaking of Shiva*, the name 'Mallikarjuna' can be translated as the 'Lord White as Jasmine', and also as 'Arjuna, Lord of goddess Mallika'. Akka Mahadevi in *vacana* 68, describes Lord Mallikarjuna as follows:

Locks of shining red hair  
a crown of diamonds  
small beautiful teeth  
and eyes in a laughing face  
that light up fourteen worlds –  
I saw His glory,  
and seeing, I quell today  
the famine in my eyes. (p. 120, Tr. A K Ramanujan)

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In his introduction to Mahadeviakka, Ramanujan says that she “a younger contemporary of Basavanna and Allama in the twelfth century, was born in Udutadi, a village in Sivamogga, near the birthplace of Allama. At ten she was initiated to Siva-worship by an unknown guru. She considered that moment the moment of her real birth. Apparently the form of Siva at the Udutadi temple was Mallikarjuna...”(p. 111). Just as Mirabai had betrothed herself to the idol of Lord Krishna, Mahadeviakka betrothed herself to Siva and would have none other. She sang:

With stick raised high, Illusion herds  
the worlds.  
Lord white as jasmine  
no one can overcome  
your illusion.  
(V. 26)

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Towards the last phase of her life, Mahadevi who was lovingly addressed as Akka (elder sister), moved out of Kalyana city which was the headquarters of the Lingayat sect “and wandered off ... towards Srisaila, the Holy Mountain, where she found him and lost herself. Her search is recorded in her *vacanas* as a search for her love...” (p. 113). Eventually Akka settled in a cave in the Holy Mountain of the Nallamala hill range, that same place which is located on the banks of the Krishna across the temple city of Srisailam in Kurnool district; the cave where she meditated so rigorously has a naturally formed Shiva Linga and is venerated today as the Akka Mahadevi Cave. Both the forest and the caves, located at a height on the banks of river Krishna, have become a

major tourist attraction today for the pious as well as the nature/adventure loving visitor. A trip by motorboat to the Akkamahadevi Caves across the swirling river should ideally be made in the later part of the morning after one has breakfasted as there is not provision for food on the other side, except for tea and cold drinks and such. There is also a ropeway service which has its own charm both for the curious or devoted visitor; we however preferred to boat it.

On the other side of the Krishna, through the rough terrain as we approached the Akka Mahadevi Caves we saw snuggled among scabby trees and in sheets of sunlight: a massive flat column of beige coloured indigenous weathered rock - a naturally formed arched piece of rock-roof at the entrance leads to jagged columns spread in a stubby row like a cluster of yawning mouths framed in thick green foliage. Usually, we were told, there is a long line at the cave entrance and people have to wait, we that day were lucky for it was a working day and in the off season. As you step inside you realise the cave runs narrow and deep, the ground rises as you go and the burrow like tunnel gets tighter and tighter, it is dark and damp. One must negotiate one's way through unrelenting rock-mass, bats, bat stench and a general shortage of clean air and light. It is like entering a womb through a narrow tight passage roughly lined with stone, where even light does not reach. At the dead end is an extremely narrow space - the ceiling caves in low so one has to bend and there is just room enough for one person to sit. In this narrow dark alcove jutting out of the floor is a natural oblong stone in the shape of a *linga* which Akka is believed to have worshipped and meditated on. And of course in that womblike space in the rock mass you cannot miss the intense silence and stillness.

Centuries ago, conditions in and around the cave must have been far more severe and wild, but today the cave site is a place of pilgrimage marked with all kinds of hoardings and signs that indicate state and tourist presence. At the entrance of the caves for instance, is kept an imaginary portrait of Mahadevi Akka - according to lingayat and local myth she was a beautiful woman with resplendent long-hair that she used to cover her body - the picture at the cave entrance however presents the woman ascetic quite groomed and sitting cross legged in a honey brown attire that blends with the colour of her hair; before her on a banana leaf are placed, a copper pot, a copper thali (plate) and a copper bowl filled with rice, her forehead is smeared with ash, in her neck she wears beads, her left hand holds a green coloured fruit while in the right hand are held rosary beads.

We know of Mahadeviakka as a radical woman ascetic and poet. Where and how exactly was she located in the matrix of bhakti and myth? What was her life story like? And to what extent was it determined by her gender? I shall proceed to briefly explore these questions from this point. Bhakti was a phenomenon that emerged in the religious and cultural margins of medieval Indian society and gathered momentum as from 8<sup>th</sup> century Tamilnadu it moved upwards, bhakti hymns written in local language mostly by non-brahmin saints spread among the marginalised masses and eventually found their way into temple worship and took their place besides mainstream Vedic scriptures in Sanskrit. The path of Bhakti centered around the worship of God as Shiva or Vishnu and known as Saguna<sup>2</sup> bhakti. One branch of Saguna Bhakti that organised itself around the worship of Lord Shiva and which emerged in 10<sup>th</sup> century Karnataka, was known as the ViraShaiva movement. The Lingayats (Akka Mahadevi was one of them) were saints /ascetics who led the ViraShaiva movement and were located at its centre.

Considering that Akka's challenges as a woman ascetic were taller than those of her male companion-saints, the fact of her travels and survival in the thick and virile 12<sup>th</sup> century terrain of the Nallamala-Srisailam forests becomes all the more daunting and impressive. Reformist in zeal and modernist in its ethos, the Bhakti path was regarded suitable for the spiritually inclined

householder and also considered as the ordinary mortal's panacea to God and divinity. Male ascetics (unlike females) generally had the option to choose whether they wished or not to get married. This was rarely or never, the case with girls who were inclined to bhakti. Located in the patriarchal system they were generally pushed into marriage where their devotion to an absent male God was mis-read and misinterpreted and in turn would lead to domestic abuse, beating and general hostility. As a result most women ascetics like Mahadevi Akka, Mirabai, or Lalla of Kashmir were compelled to abandon their married homes and opt for a life of vagabond sainthood. We therefore say that women mystics of the bhakti sampradaya of medieval India between 9<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> centuries (including a few in the 19<sup>th</sup> century) provide an interesting scope for research in the interface between women's quest for enlightenment and their encountering of patriarchal subordination, sexual stereotyping, and abuse which they must confront both at home and in the world outside despite the fact that they are located within the broad normative of spiritual convention.

As woman ascetic and poet in the Lingayat tradition of Saguna Shaiva bhakti, Mahadevi was often referred to as Akka – elder sister. It is said that at age ten, an unknown travelling sadhu had initiated her to Shiva bhakti. That moment of initiation, she grew up to consider as the real moment of her birth and soon after she betrothed herself to lord Shiva who sat in the Udatadi temple in the form of *Mallikarjuna*. The endearment 'Cenna' means dear, lovely and beautiful. So Mahadevi fell in love with *Cennamallikarjuna*. She composed *vacanas* addressed to Him and took his name for a signature in all the songs that she wrote. The God-path drove Mahadeviakka to abandon home and marriage and travel to the Lingayat academy in Kalyana and from there later, to the Srisailam forests – mountain and there a deep cave where she is said to have meditated and finally disappeared from. I quote from A K Ramanujan's translations some *vacanas* that reflect the harsh struggle and sublime tenor of Mahadevi's inscape.

If sparks fly  
I shall think my thirst and hunger quelled.

If the skies tear down  
I shall think them pouring for my bath.

If a hillside slide on me  
I shall think it flower for my hair.

O lord white as jasmine, if my head falls from my shoulders  
I shall think it your offering. (120)

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In her growing-up years she appears to have had no special claims to social privilege or protection, except that she had lustrous tresses and was exceptionally beautiful. So much so that Kaushika – who was the king or chieftain of the land, fell madly in love with her. He wooed her and chased her and harassed her parents with profuse declarations of love and subtle intimidation. Scared for her parent's well being, the young Mahadevi at last relented, and they were married. The lusty king was a non-believer which made the odds even steeper. Finally when conjugal life became unbearable, Mahadevi abandoned home, family and city and walked all the way to the Lingayat headquarters in Kalyana where after much discourse with Allama Prabhu and Basavanna, she was accepted into the Lingayat fold as an ascetic initiate. Around this time she came to be addressed as akka – elder sister which henceforth was used with her name an

appendage. Mahadeviakka flourished in the stress free environs and plunged herself in devotion. The following *vacana* of hers is replete with joy and has all the features of *saguna bhakti*. It also reveals the degree of the poet's surrender and detachment from the world as she moves in it internally awakened and lit.

Locks of shining hair  
A crown of diamonds  
Small beautiful teeth  
And eyes in a laughing face  
that light up fourteen worlds –  
I saw His glory,  
and seeing, I quell today  
the famine in my eyes.

I saw the haughty Master  
for whom men, all men,  
are but women, wives.

I saw the Great One  
who plays at love  
with Sakti,  
original to the world,

I saw His stance  
and began to live. (120)

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Concluding his introduction to Mahadeviakka, A K Ramanujan says, "Like other bhaktas, her struggle was with her condition, as body, as woman, as social being tyrannized by social roles, / as a human confined to a place and time. Through these shackles she bursts, defiant in her quest for ecstasy." (pp. 113-114) And one wonders if Mahadeviakka's struggle to unshackle herself from societal pulls and norms can be equated with the struggle of her male saint-colleagues. Was it not more difficult for women bhaktas to hold their own on the path of God? Mahadevi who had given up her clothes and used only her long tresses was also harassed at times by unwanted male attention and abuse; note the *vacana* where she refers to the body as 'dirt'. "My body is dirt,/ my spirit is space:/ which shall I grab, O Lord? How/ and what/ shall I think of you? (p. 116) In Mahadevi's context gender/ sexuality seems to become a liability, causing her distress and some confusion. How then must she think of Mallikarjuna who in spiritual parlance is the only "Master for whom men, all men are but women, wives." He that is "the Great One/ who plays at love/ with Shakti, original to the world."

How is it, one wonders, that among male saints from Saguna and Nirguna bhakti, none (almost none other than Jnaneshvar) were inspired to leave their marital home while a lot of women bhaktas – such as Mahadevi, Lal Ded, Mira - were harassed into crossing the thresholds of their marriages and homes in order to pursue their spiritual calling. Research into women ascetics in India, indicates that theoretically women (like Shudras) in Vedic culture and later in the Bhakti tradition, were allowed to take to asceticism but the ascetic's life was regarded as unnatural and unsuitable for the female gender. Even socially the scene was quite complex: widows or women who wished to remain unmarried were often suspected of using asceticism as a

ploy to escape the normative of life. Another aspect was the concept of ‘*stridharma*’ which perceived marriage, wifhood and motherhood as a woman’s prime and ultimate goal and was prescribed by authoritative texts like *Manusmriti* and the *Dharmashastra*.

Mahadevi the Lingayat, who had surrendered to her Lord Mallika-Arjuna as beloved and master, seems to write from a state of anxiety, sometimes even with ambiguity towards her own body. Her body in one *vacana* is likened to an abandoned carcass – as a thing that has been used and discarded by the Lord and therefore now it is of little consequence if someone else invades it. The ordeals of Mahadevi’s vagrant life, her conscious choice to walk a path of severe austerities seem to take her beyond the limits of detachment and body consciousness. The tenor of Mahadeviakka’s *vacana* compositions oscillates between her Cenna lord sometimes as legitimate husband and sometimes as illicit lover. Also, the turn of her phrase is more ascetic and celibate.

Considering the Hindu normative for women as a class was that they were incapable of independent thinking and therefore in need of male protection, guidance and domination, I would like to recall A K Ramanujan’s thoughtful but passing comment where he likens Mahadeviakka’s struggles to those of “other bhaktas,” and yet at the same time mentions the specifics of her struggle “as body, as woman, [and] as social being tyrannized by social roles, / as a human confined to a place and time.” One is grateful to A K Ramanujan for acknowledging (even in passing) the uniqueness of the bhakti context for the women bhakta. It needs to be reiterated here (with more emphasis however) that Bhakti for women was a path ridden with severe social stigma, issues of marital and familial rejection, psychological and emotional abuse which translated into issues of severe physical, mental and existential stress – even with reference to saint personalities, these are daunting contexts that need due acknowledgement, and appreciation.

It is interesting to note that the poetics of Mahadevi’s *vacanas* leans towards the *nirguna* aspect of bhakti despite the fact that it is broadly located in the realm of *saguna* temple worship. In Mahadevi akka we have the narrative of not the householder saint but the aspect of one who has given up the world of family, household and marriage to live a celibate life of solitude and austerity in the single minded pursuit of enlightenment and *mukti* (freedom). And from what we know today of the Akka Mahadevi cave, hers was a life that was harsh, stoic and ascetic to the extreme. Shiva himself was a great wandering yogi – a Mahayogi, Adi Yogi, or often known as Mahadev – the greatest of all Gods. Mythical lore connects Shiva the primal Yogi with severe penance and ascetic practise, classical music and dance and with the subversive esoteric of *tantra* and dark cosmology – profound, scientific metaphysics of honing and accessing latent potential of the human body. Mahadevi’s spiritual quest and life-path, even the manner of its unfolding resonates intensely with the energies and general persona of Lord Shiva whom she addresses in her *vacanas* as Cenna Mallikarjuna – sweet Lord white as Jasmine<sup>2</sup>.

Every tree  
in the forest was the All-Giving Tree,  
every bush  
the life-reviving herb,  
every stone the Philosopher’s Stone,  
all the land a pilgrim’s holy place,  
all the water nectar against age,  
every beast the golden dear,  
every pebble I stumble on  
the Wishing Crystal:

walking round  
 the Jasmine Lord's favourite hill,  
 I happened  
 on the Plantain Grove. (133, V. 274)

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Mahadeviakka's is a voice that has baked in the ordinary family grill and churned in the mill of societal pressure and yet the rigours and pain of life are rarely mentioned in her poems. Her general disillusionment with the world can perhaps be traced in the tone of fatigue and dejection that we sometimes find in her poems which express her deep desire for a total merger with the divine. As a poet she comes across as a brilliant mystic who wrote poetry of the spiritual quest and was brilliantly imagistic. Today, English translations of her *vacanas* have become part of mainstream Bhakti studies in Departments of English in universities across the country. In fact over the last five years I have been teaching her poems along with those of Andal and Kabir which in fact made my trip to the Mahadevi Akka Caves all the more significant as it was *bhakti*, adventure and academics all rolled into one. I discovered that in her poems (which are like conversations with her Cenna Mallikarjuna) Mahadevi had woven into her poetic inscapes, striking images from the hills, forest and natural landscapes that she saw around her and I was moved that I too was walking through that same jungle, cave, river, temple where she had moved and lived nine hundred years ago.

As we emerged from the dark recesses of Akka's caves and drove back to Hyderabad, Akka's spiritual courage, the depth and beauty of her compositions merged with the lush green forests that flanked the Hyderabad-Srisailam highway, I am stunned by the sublime resilience, spirit and courage of the woman saint poet. My vision of the great Lingayat saint comes together once again as a song in a tea shop radio (where we had stopped for refreshments) plays in Kannada the same lyric that is quoted in translation below. Once again Mahadevi comes alive as she roams and sings in the forest :

You are like milk  
 In water: I cannot tell  
 what comes before,  
 what after;  
 which is the master,  
 which the slave;  
 what's big,  
 what's small. (115, V. 11)

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#### Notes:

<sup>i</sup>*Vacana* – "The Virasahiva saints called their compositions *vacana*, or 'what is said'. *Vacana* as an active mode, stands in opposition to both *sruti* and *smrti*: not what is heard, but what is said; not remembered or received, but uttered here and now." (Ramanujan, 'Introduction', *Speaking of Shiva* p. 37.)

<sup>ii</sup>*Saguna bhakti* – Sa + Guna means [the One] with physical attributes; the term 'bhakti' refers to an emotional form of devotion and worship which became prevalent in India as a movement from the indigenous margins and was perceived as reformist, radical and anti-brahminical.



<sup>iii</sup>Mallikarjuna is another name for Shiva in the Kurnool district of Telangana, also made famous by Mahadevi akka who refers to Shiva by the same title in her *vacanas*. The whiteness of the Lord (white as jasmine) however, does not fit in with our general perception of Shiva as Mahadev, Bholenath, KaalBhairav.

### References

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