



Akka Mahadevi and her relevance in Today's World

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Legacy behind this great poet

Bhakti movement started in the 7th century and spread to Karnataka, Tamilnadu, Maharashtra and finally reached to North India. This was against the social evil, especially against caste and culture of that time which had been emerging as a powerful tool to subjugate the normal people of this society in the name of caste, class, gender and culture. This movement was on its peak in 15th and 17th centuries but it spread into South India in 7th to 12th century with full swing. This movement gradually kept spreading throughout India because of anti-caste saints like Basavanna, Guru Nanak, Kabir, Namdev, Tukaram, Ravidas, Chaitanya Mahaprabhu and many others.

Akka Mahadevi was the woman who showed her courage against this powerful structure and established herself as a poet and a saint too. She was the follower of Basavanna. Akka Mahadevi had profound understanding about ancient women philosophers of that time, when women were only subject to domination and subjugation because of their identity in this patriarchal society.

Vira Shaiva (Shankar, 2019:2) movement encompasses the literary and Bhakti movement which had the legacy of resistance. This was also the kind of internal movement against all odds of this society against the existing discriminatory identity of male and female. This movement included many male and female saints. For instance, Akka Mahadevi who has the legacy of eliminating the powerful structure of patriarchy. The era of this Bhakti tradition started from South India to discourage the pervasive ideology of patriarchy, unequal society, and the hierarchical dominance. Women and marginalized were subjugated and harassed by the upper caste which became the central point of ideological opposition for Akka Mahadevi. So, this movement spread through south to north which included Kabir, Dadu Dayal, Meera, and many more. Tukaram and Namdev in Maharashtra, Vallabha Charya and Chaitnya in Bengal were also part of this movement.



Bhakti movement started from South India and encompassed the whole India through its legacy of radicalism and realism. Bhakti rituals are replaced by the idea of equality from the devotion to gods. Therefore, we can say that the Bhakti movement would actually pave the way for equality the emergence of this idea could be seen in the 7th century BC. The modern era discussion might suggest that ideas of equality, liberty and fraternity spread after the French revolution globally. But in India, it was adopted much earlier than the advent of the French revolution. It was led by the Vira Shaiva and against the unjust system of caste practice. Bhakti movement provided them a true path to unlearn discrimination and learn those things which would really be helpful for them and for their generations too. Among these Vira Shaiva and Sharana many of them were talented and influential in which like, Allama Prabhu, Akka Mahadevi were few who really rejuvenated the entire south India with their mystic work which was based on equality.

Akka wanted to break the orthodox rituals subjugating the women in their everyday life. Her main focus was to dismantle the orthodox rules of society enslaving women. She liberated those women from this orthodox identity. She paved the way for those women who fought for the liberation from the shackles of patriarchal slavery.

Revolutionary ideas of Akka Mahadevi

She rejected clothes and worldly life and this was her resistance towards this unequal society in order to gain equal status for the entire nature in general and women in particular. Moreover, women had been breaking the rules and come out of house to establish their own reign. So, traditional sources suggest that money, land and women were understood to be reasons of war. Thus, women were always at the center of sexual pleasure and nothing else. They become the brides of God, where they were compelled to surrender themselves. Here, the idea of liberation often comes when they discharged themselves from worldly things. The idea of liberation would come with the devotion in the name of saint and Sharana. Sometimes, women would give spiritual test in the camp of Vira Shaiva, where Akka Mahadevi went through the acid test in order to prove her spiritual tendency. Her hair covered her entire body which means that she has a great connection with the nature, nature of hope, devotion and learning the spiritual things which are based on equal opportunity for women. Sharana (Shankar, 2019:9), was always against this caste and gender discrimination that's why Akka Mahadevi was the icon for them and epitome of power and devotion. Akka would also reject the body desire which is nothing but to restrict women in the specific or private domain of subjugation and humiliation.



She emphasized mainly on the detachment because it would prevent us from destruction whether it is worldly or based on lust. She rejected the worldly marriage and devoted herself to the god of Chenna Mallikarjuna (Shankar, 2019:23) with whom she might have spent her rest of life in order to gain spiritual ideas in this unequal world. She was greatly devoted to Vachanas (Shankar, 2019:31), which is based on spiritual ideology, where one can exercise their right to life, especially those women who were confined only to the home domain. She used to write in regional language so that people would understand their verses and vachanas in order to understand this world order which is beyond this hierarchical space. She uses colloquial language to understand the audience of that time with perfection and her wit. The language which has been touching the intense feeling of the people and women of that time and they would follow these lines in order to gain spiritual identity. These verses were earlier composed verses by the first women of that time Akka Mahadevi with wit and spiritual tendency.

Social aspect of a radical poet

Akka Mahadevi was not only a poet but also a mystic-revolutionary and social activist, who would always think about the changes in existing society. Her emphasis would always be on women counterpart and the values which society would impose upon them. Her vachanas and poetry were based on free verses and metaphor which would explain the ideas of social order and its values in many terms. At that time, we would see clear differences between bhakti and dharma. Bhakti in which we could see the inner devotion and peace towards God and the people of this society. It was the defiance of conventional and orthodox ideas to prove herself as modern as she has wit and knowledge. She was very much ahead of her time where women were only seen as nothing but the form of bodily objects. She described this perception in the 7th century. Such ideas were affirmed by the radical or post-modernists in modern times in order to show that women identity is nothing but the objectification of lust. So, she was far modern woman of that time. She is the symbol of dignity and hope for the women. It shows her relevance in this 21st century as well. These vachanas of Akka Mahadevi show that how she devoted her entire life to shiva. She recorded these vachanas in search of love that she had been searching since ages so that she could be accepted by shiva. In her poem love and separation both things are divine which shows the ultimate feeling and strong devotion towards women's rights and dignity. For instance (Guttal, 1990:138)

I love the Handsome One:

he has no death decay nor form no place or side no end nor birthmarks.

I love him O mother. Listen.

I love the Beautiful One with no bond nor fear no clan no land no landmarks for his beauty.



So, my lord, white as jasmine, is my husband.

Anti-cultural aspect of Akka Mahadevi

Her love is free from rituals and traditional activities which would do nothing but further the pain and suffering for men and women in particular. She praises the idea of equal opportunity and liberty for the entire universe and women were treated as special because of their condition. She criticised and demeaned the pervasiveness of the religion as powerful symbol to dominate women in the name of rituals. Her main task was to locate those lacunas in the 7th century society where women were only tool to maintain the patriarchal system. Here, in her poem jasmine flower represents the idea of innocence and purity which we could see in the literature as well. Basically, it is the symbol of respect, dignity and purity to show her dedication towards shiva and entire society. She denotes many forms of fires in her poem so that she could show the physiological and psychological benefits of fire in this society. Fire accommodates many forms of desires within its nature, Kama(desire), Krodha(anger) and Udara (digestion). She represents the inner and outer ambience of society and person in this poem so that we would be able to understand the real idea of human and social nature. Thus, these customs and rituals would provoke the patriarchal notion towards women in order to maintain the legacy of patriarchy. So, she breaks all kinds of oppressive system against women through her poems and Vachanas and that is why she was always relevant for the entire society and the women community as well.

Her vachanas and Verses

India has witnessed many revolutions and cultural movement in India in order to improve the status of socio-cultural condition of Indians.

It was started by Basavanna in Karnataka and Akka Mahadevi was the staunch follower of Basavanna because of his devotion and dedication to Shiva.

She was regarded as one of the first women saints of India. She believes in hard-work rather than prayer of gods in temple. Work is worship was her motto to change the social traditions of hierarchy and subjugation by caste and class in the Indian society because due to this phenomenon women of this society would become more vulnerable and subjugated. So, she broke those traditional values which might change the fate of women in this society. India is famous for her socio-political and cultural movement to change the existing scenario so that it could change the persisting hegemony of upper caste and class which would dominate the marginalised for being a marginalised. It took place in 12th century



by Basavanna in Karnataka to rejuvenate the status of south Indian perspective towards society and women. This movement known as Vera Shaiva or Sharana movement. It was greater than Reformation in Europe, which was based on church regulation and new invention so that Europe would achieve the ultimate goal of development in this world order.

So, this movement was far different from the capitalist mode of movement, where humanity and purity were the main reason to contest the odd nature of this society. It started on the basis of the transformation of human mind of this society. It was basically social reform movement with cultural and social values to stop this society from the contamination of caste-based rigidity. This was against women's oppression and caste-based oppression. The ultimate goal of the movement had to clarify the real space for women and marginalised. Basavanna was not only in this fight but other reformers like, Akka Mahadevi, Allama Prabhu were those who led the legacy of Basavanna. Thus, this movement created a great social change in this social order. They developed unique body of literature which was known as "Vachana literature", which would promote the local people ideas and based on local language so that common people could relate themselves with this literature easily. So, this literature is known as common literature for all. A literature of common people. That was the time when priest and upper caste people would write their scripts and literature in their own traditional language, which was created a distance between common people and the elite one. So, this movement would actually fill this gap of hegemony, where literature played prominent role to subjugate certain people of this society.

The movement encouraged women a lot and because of this, thirty women came out from the four walls of home and create history. So, this movement gave equality and liberty to those who had never been able to experience equality earlier in this orthodox society. These women are, for instance, Jangama , Kayaka (Tallur, 2021:40) but Akka Mahadevi was more popular and established female saints of this time.

Early life of Akka Mahadevi

She was born in 12th century in Udu Tadi in Karnataka. Her father Nirmala Shetty and mother Sumati both were devotee of Shiva. So obviously, she was the apple of their eyes. In childhood days, she married to Linga Pati or God which led them to the separation of human or male husband. But after she grew as a girl, one day Kaushika the king of Udu Tadi came and saw her and he liked her and eventually sent a proposal to her father in order to marry her. Soon, they became husband and wife, since the king told her that he accepted her all proposals regarding her devotion towards God and human. So, she accepted all kind of things which was not valuable for her. But these promises of king would not last long and she



refused to stay in the palace and gave up all clothes and went to the forest with her long hair, clothes which covered her half body. The refusal of God and its existence by her husband led them to give up her human tendencies and lived her life like a saint in the forest. She died early in her twenties and gave up all her desires to God whom she dedicated her life in childhood.

Like buddha, she believes in human free from desire because desires lead them to wrong-doing. According to her, simple life is more important and good life for each and every human being. She says we should focus on inner thinking because it enhances your creativity in more ways. She believes in five kinds of purity, for instance, conduct, speech, body, mind and heart. She is regarded as the first feminist in the world order because the age at which she achieved spirituality it was not possible by the other women of this society. Her questions provide intellectual insights for future generations especially for women of that time. She created a history in the world of literature and religion, which would pave the way for future goal not only for equal society but for the casteless society as well. Her main arguments relied on the empowerment of women.

Popular saints of that time

However, “Sharana group” developed with the passing of time which would relate themselves for the cause of social reform, where male and female would take part equally so that they could change the existing level of society. Thus, this social movement was very important to take a leap in order to enhance this idea of equal opportunity in this unequal society in the name of patriarchy and caste-gender nexus. This Sharana group would actually fight for women for they were in pitiable condition in the name of mother, daughter and wife.

The tendency of domination actually ended by this movement and started flourishing as prominent issue with devoted saints. It should have the legacy of resistance and struggle because it was based on Shaiva praise and bhakti. So, experience was the most evident and essential asset for the Sharana because they would think that experience may differ from male to female or from caste to class. So, the idea of experience is here to accept the diverse phenomenal tendency of people of this society so that they would understand the inner values of this society in very different manner. Women were always in the center for this group because according to them women were more marginalized section of this society.

Akka Mahadevi’s work and life

Her vachanas and religious texture of that time encouraged more people to incline towards religion and bhakti of equal opportunity. She was the finest Vachana karas among the Sharana people. This was the



time when “Shoonya Sampada” (Shankar’2019:20), a content built with a positive political reason in order to put people into different introspection so that they would be more vibrant in this hierarchical society. Thus, the grouping of the Vachanas and their composers incorporated into the Shoonya Sampada. She was advanced and innovative person of her time, because she advanced the version of vachanas which transcended the social reality of that time and included the female, male and many more other performers of this society in order to create an equal society for all. At the age of 16, she gave up all social rituals of marriage and morality and discard her clothes to accept idea of renunciation and accept the reality of Shiva. The main purpose of her life was to know the relevance of God Shiva in this mundane world. In the era of 12th Century, she was the lady of extraordinary courage. Some of them could not find any extraordinary things in her vachanas, because it does not locate philosophical or religious publicity at all and that does not make sense for the entire but some sections of this society. Her vachanas are based on supernatural power but it could relate the idea of religious contemplation in each and every age. Her vachanas investigate the real solution for this unequal society. At the same time, her vachanas penetrate the inner idea of society where caste, gender and class are normal phenomena to subjugate some people of this society for nothing.

She would be the future queen of revolution in the existing society, where women were at the bottom. So, Akka Mahadevi was the part of this egalitarian movement (Shankar, 2009, p.n. 1) which began in the northern part of Karnataka in order to provide equality for the entire marginalized sections and for women especially. Her verses, (Tharu and Lalita,1993:79).

Don't despise me as
She who has no one
I am not one to be afraid,
Whatever you do.

This was the time when socio, cultural, political all issues had been against the masses and that's the reason veer Shaiva and Sharana came into existence. How the hostile society could have accepted this radical movement in order to change their fate of marginalization and inequality. Sharana movement would basically break all the religious odds of the society in the name of establishing rebellious, revolutionary society.

Society, where most of the persons were illiterate but they would participate with courage and enthusiasm in order to fighting against the caste and hierarchy. The rebellious ideas of this movement gave them impetus to release their inner voice.



Basavanna, hero of that time, thought that he was out of wedlock and born in a field. He was born in Shaiva orthodox brahmin family but his thoughts are completely different from his own family. He was the pioneer of this anti-caste movement in order to establish equal society for sure. Akka Mahadevi was the disciple of this radical man in this movement. Basavanna redefined and relocate the concept of untouchability in this society and Akka Mahadevi learned a lot from this, which we could have seen in her verses. Here, Basavanna narrates a kind of radicalism through his verses, for instance,

He is an untouchable

Who kills;

He is an untouchable

Who eats dirt

To what caste do these belong?

To what caste tell me?

The cumulative effect of these vachanas was that caste nexus began fading which was based on occupation. So, the entire occupation base identity would become false and people started to live with equality. The main idea of these vachanas was the legacy of ideology which gave poor and marginalized people a kind of self-confidence and assertiveness in this hierarchical society.

Her relevance in today's world

Thus, it was the first time when so many lower-caste people participated in this movement with courage and confidence to change their fate of discrimination in this society; play positive and active role in the cultural life of their community. Moreover, this movement has its roots in the life of common men and women of that time because it started with the motive of giving equality and liberty to those who had been suffering since ages. So, from here 27 women writers of that time involved with Akka Mahadevi and with her vision of new ideas. We find that the Sharana movement invoked Dalit and marginalized caste of that community and they participated with enthusiasm in this radical anti-caste movement. So, they would follow and determine the path of the de-brahmanization of this society. This was the time, when socio- cultural surge came up with new women literary writers with their powerful folklores and writings against this caste and patriarchal system. In this radical upcoming of new women writers with Akka Mahadevi gave a new turn to this movement with radical upliftment. Thus, Akka was the epitome of revolutionary ideas, who questioned all the sections of this society.



She was really genius, who at one time fuse with two personality like saint and poet too. She can do everything that shows in her poetry and the personality of saints. Her poetry presents such a unique combination of both. For instance, she presented in her poetry the two very famous name like, Longinus , who discussed the great quality of poetry and he was a great critic too. Sappho , who was the most celebrated women writers of that time. How these writers influenced Akka Mahadevi writings in many ways in order to change their perspective towards writing poetry and to see this unlawful world.

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This is a review essay and the author's personal opinions feature heavily here. Also, this needs thorough proof-reading and editing.