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## Akka Mahādevī



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### Synonyms

[Mahādeviakkā](#); [Mahādeviyakkā](#)

### Definition

Akka Mahādevī is a woman saint of medieval South India, who uttered *vacanas*, a spontaneous verbalization of experiences while on the path of enlightenment. Her 300 and odd *vacanas* are mostly short couplets and dialogic in nature. They are addressed to her favorite deity, Chennamal-likārjuna, or to others around her, always ending with an invocation of the deity, a form of Śiva. Akka Mahādevī also composed the *Yogāṅga Trividhi*, which refers to a number of spiritual paths, while emphasizing on the significance of her own path and elucidating and recording her experiences. The prefix “Akka” means sister and could be a respectful form of addressing a renunciate.

### Life

Hagiographical sources record her birthplace as Udutadi and her parents as Vimala and Sumati. These texts tell us that Akka Mahādevī was a *rudrakannike*, a heavenly maid or a “pure portion” of Pārvati, Śiva’s spouse, who came down to earth with a mission. The available sources on Akka Mahādevī can be classified as the *vacanas* (of the twelfth century), the hagiographies (written between the twelfth and the fifteenth centuries), and modern scholarship of the colonial and postcolonial period. The hagiographies include the four *Śūnyasampādane* (the acquisition of emptiness) texts, *Prabhuliṅga Līle* by Chāmarasa, *Udutadiya Mahādeviyakkana Ragale (1200 A D)* by Harihara, *Mahādeviyakkana Purana (1550 A D)* by Chennabasavānka, and *Mahādeviakkana Sāṅgatya (1200 A D)* by Rāchakavi.

Akka Mahādevī walked out on her husband and though hagiographic material varies on the details, she left him and everything including her clothes and traveled to Kalyana, a town in which Basavanna, another saint of the twelfth-century Vīraśaiva Bhakti period, resided. There, she received guidance from other senior seekers such as Allama Prabhu and also taught others at the Anubhava Mantapa, a forum for the discussion of spiritual goals and outcomes. Akka Mahādevī is said to have walked to the Kadali forests and given up her body.

## Context

Though the hagiographical stories are simple and forthcoming, understanding Akka Mahādevī and her *vacanas* can still be a challenge. This has mostly to do with the frameworks brought to bear upon her, some historical and cultural and other recent ones, ideological. Historically, the *vacanas* and the bhakti period all across India's regions evoked the interest of colonial historians and missionaries since they perceived a similarity between Bhakti and the Christian devotional traditions. Monotheism was a major theme during this time, since, for the predominantly Christian, European historians, who viewed India from the perspective of their cultural locations, India was a heathen culture with many gods. Any declaration to the contrary, that is, devotion to a single God, as in Bhakti, caught their attention. Today, this framework has been questioned and considered orientalist. That the nature of theism in India is different from that of the Judeo-Christian religious traditions is instead recognized. The declaration in the *vacanas* that Śiva is the only God is thus to be understood as the fervent declarations of a lover/loving devotee.

A post-structuralist analysis, a common method of reading the *vacanas*, is the result of the influential nature of literary analysis and also follows from A K Ramanujan's work, an early translator of the *vacanas*. Ramanujan's translations, aimed at the west, were modernist and also universalizing, as argued by Tejaswini Niranjana [1]. Yet, the framework of viewing the *vacanas* as literary objects is so strong that even when they are read through old-fashioned philological analyses, they are still viewed mostly as literary objects, i.e., as poems. The difficulty in understanding the *vacanas* also arises from the conceptual distance between our current location in modernity and the precolonial understanding of the world rather than their linguistic form, which is a simple form of Kannada that approximates to contemporary spoken language.

In order to preserve the coherence of texts such as the *vacanas*, a possible task is to adjust our subject positions as readers and theorize the content, significance, and the subjectivity supposed

by the text. However, modern readings privilege the reader and the reader's imagination outside of the text's boundaries. This is when readings may be considered ideological and distortive. As a result of such readings, those who view Akka Mahādevī as proto-feminist fail to explain why she upheld *strīdharmā*, a duty of subservience to the husband and his family. Most ideological readings lead to the exclusion of some sources, historical anachronisms, inconsistent explanations, selective readings, and gaps in the interpretation of the *vacanas*. It is possible that these readings derive their energy from the earlier Orientalist readings that view Bhakti as a movement akin to Protestantism. However, the *vacanas* are neither literary works nor poetic, although somewhat aesthetically inclined. Their aesthetics is most likely an unintended by-product of the cognitive and experiential richness of the *vacanakaras*. To say this is not to theologize or mystify the *vacanas*, but to locate them within the human mind and body, as a self-transformative, precise, and exact tradition.

It is from the comparison of Bhakti with the protestant movement that Bhakti has been problematically viewed as a "social reform" movement, while in reality it could have well been a peak in the spiritual achievements of, and completely internal to, the Indian intellectual traditions. The difficulty of understanding the *vacanas* also comes from the fact that they are the utterances of the already-enlightened; the experiences and cognitive categories are markedly different and a stretch to the unenlightened. The view that Bhakti is anti-Veda or anti-brahminical also needs reworking in the face of evidence such as Akka Mahādevī praising Śiva as *Vedopanishadgāyatri*. While a mechanized performance of rituals is criticized by Akka Mahādevī and other seekers of the period, as argued by Blake Michael [2], it would be hard to assert more. That Akka Mahādevī upheld *strīdharmā* and viewed it as a valid spiritual, gender-neutral path suggests that it is not spirituality that gave women relief from patriarchy but that there was a direct and heavy investment in enlightenment by women.

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**References**

1. Niranjana T (1992) *Siting translation: history, post-structuralism, and the colonial context*. University of California Press, Berkeley
2. Michael B (1992) *The origins of Vīraśaiva sects: a typological analysis of ritual and associational patterns in the Śūnyasāmpādane*. Motilal Banarasidass Publishers, Delhi