

# MAHĀDĒVI

*Kannada Original*

Dr. SIDDHAYYA PURANIK

*Translated by*

G. B. SAJJAN



Sri Murugod MahāntaShivayōgishwar Centenary Memorial

Sri Basaveshwar Peeth

INSTITUTE OF KANNADA STUDIES

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## PREFACE

The establishment of the 'Basaveshwara Peetha' (The Basava Chair), as part of the expanding frame of the Kannada Institute is a land-mark of achievement. The lofty objective which inspired the scheme has been to give world-wide publicity to the universal message of Basava and his personality as one of the all-time greats, to his mystical thought rendered in homely style and homespun imagery, to his writings which have a beauty far transcending that of any so-called world-classic.

To accomplish this aim, a four-fold scheme has been evolved—the introduction of a Diploma course in Basaveshwara Studies; the publication of definitive editions of the works of Basava and related literature, translation of this rare literature into other languages; and, finally, to promote research. Though a considerable body of literature exists about Basava in Telugu and Sanskrit (not to speak of Kannada, of course) and though many legends are current about him, in and outside Karnataka, many historical details by way of inscriptions and Palm-leaf manuscripts remain hidden away in private homes. The task of collecting all this material, of collating it, of sifting fact from legend, without being biased by personal predilections, and of publishing what is so authentically established, needs to be undertaken by such a 'Chair'.

One of the several projects undertaken towards fulfilment of such a multiple objective is the commissioning of biographies of the Veerashaiva Saints and of getting them translated into Hindi, English and other languages too—a project named the 'Lives of the Saints Series'.

We are indebted to Dr. Siddhayya Puranik, a well-known scholar in Veerashaiva literature, and poet of great repute, for fulfilling our request to write on Akka Mahadevi in this series. Our thanks are due to Vice-Chancellor Dr. Nanjundappa, who has always taken a keen interest in the activities of the 'Basaveshwara Peetha' and to all the members of the Advisory committee. Finally, we thank the Director of the Prasara and the Director of the University Press, too.

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This English translation of Dr. Siddhayya Puranik's *MAHADEVI* by Prin. G. B. Sajjan is the first flower of the Lives of the Saints Series Project. We are deeply indebted to Principal Sajjan whose translation, indeed, is a transcreation. Our thanks are due to Dr. C. R. Yaravintelimath for reading the proofs. Finally, we thank Shri G. B. Manvachar, I/c Director of the University Press and Shri S. B. Nayak, Director of the Prasara for printing and publishing respectively.

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Dr. M. M. Kalburgi  
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## AUTHOR'S FOREWORD

The institution of the 'Basava Peetha (Chair) in Karnataka University comes as the fulfilment of a historical need. It is a matter of gratification that the scheme is taking shape under the headship of Dr. M. M. Kalburgi.

Having resolved to bring out monographs on Basava, Allama Prabhudeva and Akka Mahadevi, as the first offerings of the Peetha's publication scheme, the Editorial Board assigned it to me to write on Akka Mahadevi myself. Though I agreed to undertake the responsibility, the writing seemed, as I proceeded, a more difficult task than I had thought—especially as I had busied myself with other ventures after retirement. I had to take myself off to my daughter Bharati's home in Bhadravati in order to complete the work. Part of the credit, therefore, of bringing the work undertaken to completion must go to daughter Smt. Bharati and son-in-law Sri Mrityunjayappa. I remember with gratitude the co-operation and the friendly and useful suggestions given me by Dr. M. S. Sunkapur and Dr. S. M. Vrishabhendra Swamy, as also by Dr. B. B. Hendi and Dr. Kalburgi.

The number of admirers and adorers of Akka Mahadevi is, happily, growing from day to day. I do not flatter myself to think that this little book has been written so as to gratify the differing tastes of all these. It is my humble belief that, though the work may not be acceptable in its entirety, it will be welcomed by all for the way I have endeavoured to bring out the best in Akka Mahadevi's thought-stream.

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—Siddhayya Puranik

## TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

I should consider it a privilege to have been asked to translate Dr. Siddayya Puranik's monograph on Akka Mahadevi published by the 'Basava Peetha' in the Institute of Kannada studies, Karnatak University. I was at first hesitant to take on the assignment, being diffident by reason of my inexperience in the field.

A translator's job is a difficult feat : it runs a double risk-of either keeping too close to the original and being too literal, or on the other hand, of being too free to be faithful. He has to walk upon a razor's edge, avoiding either pitfall.

And, besides, it calls for conversance in both the languages concerned— a challenge that is not easily met. However well the translator may have mastered the niceties of the second language, his knowledge of it will not be so deep and thorough as to compare with that of the mother tongue; and it is not axiomatic either that because a language happens to be one's mothertongue, one is necessarily quite adept at the literary nuances of it. However, one learns from one's experience as one goes along. The friendly inspection of the draft as it proceeds and suggestions thereon from knowledgeable souls might ease the task of the translator considerably, but, being in isolation, as I am placed in a corner of the state, I could not have the benefit of such guidance in the initial stages. However, Dr. Puranik filled that office in the end, and did it admirably well, both from the point of view of scholarship, literary acumen (in both the languages) judgement and, what is more, with great kindness and alacrity.

Writing a Foreword to a friend and former colleague's translation of 50 vacanas of Akka Mahādevi (*Akka Mahādevi : the Divine Cuckoo* by B. A. Patil, Siddhavageesha Prakashana, Gulbarga,

1975), I wrote: "every true work of translation is a transcreation, an original work in its own right, though the spark of inspiration may have come out of someone else's forge of experience".

Mine has been tertiary inspiration, if Dr. Puranik's was secondary to Akka's own 'forge of experience,' the forge of her spiritual travails and the sparks flying from the anvil of her amazingly creative soul.

All that I can say is that I have tried to do justice to the highly ornate, and quite poetic, prose of Dr. Puranik (as is only appropriate, since Akka's was no ordinary life and her thoughts and lyrical utterances were not of this earth and earthy, but she was a visitant from the celestial world, and as such her thoughts and utterances demanded highly figurative language and poetic treatment.)

It is for the readers to judge of the success of the work of translation. Suggestions from friendly souls and shafts from critics alike are welcome !

I thank Dr. S. M. Vrishabhendra Swamy and Dr. M. M. Kalburgi for almost 'thrusting it on me, which act, however, was a gesture of friendly faith. I thank the Members of the Committee, headed by Dr. D.M. Nanjundappa, for reposing their trust in me, which their ready assent to the proposal betokened.

S. S. Arts & Commerce College  
Chadchan

G. B. Sajjan  
Principal

## SHRI BASAVESHWAR CHAIR

It should be deemed a matter of God's grace that the 'Basaveshwara Peetha (Chair)' has come to be instituted as part of the Institute of Kannada studies of Karnatak University in commemoration of the centenary Birthday celebration of His Holiness Shri Mahanta Shivayogi, the Head of the Arabhavi Duradundeeshwar Siddha Samsthan Mutt.

His Holiness Shri Mahanta Shivayogiji was born at Salahalli in the Shalivahana Shaka year 1794. He was anointed Head of the Arabhavi Duradundeeshwara Siddha Samsthan Mutt in the year 1908 A.D.. As years rolled by, his gaze turned more and more inwards, to the concerns of the spirit, and he, therefore, entrusted the Headship to someone, and began to engage, whole time, in worship and meditation.

His Holiness's move to the Muragod Mutt and his settlement there transformed it into a shrine, as the saying "Where the devotee of Siva dwells is itself a Banares" goes. The Swamiji came to be looked upon as surrogate God. He made the four-fold treasure of worship of the Linga, of service to the Englightened souls, of walking in the footsteps of the Master, of transformation of every particle of the corporeal frame into a receptacle for the Grace of God-into the breath of his life, the ambience of his mind and spirit. When such a divine soul turned a century on the 28th of March 1969, his disciples and admirers spread over the length and breadth of the state came together to celebrate his centenary in a befitting manner. The commemoration of the holy event is the creation of "the Basaveshwara Peetha".

The Chair has been instituted with a view to propagating the ideology and message of the Basaveshwara, the great prophet of Veerashaivism, beyond the boundaries of Karanataka and of India.

To accomplish this noble end, the Chair will provide the right forum for proposed and on-going Research, Editing, creative writing, critical evaluation, Translation and other forms of study, through Indian and foreign languages.



His holiness Shri Mahanta Shivayogishwar  
Muragod

## THE SUBLIME LIFE OF MAHĀDEVI

Mahādevi Akka Stands to this day not only as a sublime personality, a soul force conjoining devotion, knowledge, and non-attachment, a pioneer of the movement of woman's emancipation, the pinnacle of the glory of Vacana literature, she is also an ever-shining example of a transcendental world-view, a supreme mystical vision. There possibly is no Kannadiga who hasn't felt the sublimity of this paragon of the highest spiritual attainment. None, whether learned, literate or otherwise, who hasn't been drawn by the spiritual magnetism of this great woman? That's the reason why men and women in all walks of life, ranging from rustic ballad-makers to famed poets like Harihara, from scholars versed in the English tongue to those who have attained to the Gaurishankar (the summit) of Sanskrit lore like the Gaurishankar Mahaswamiji, have sung of her, composed plays or written dissertations, or yet have discoursed on her life, her vision, and her attainment. The tide of celebratory literature or commentaries on Akka rises from year to year, which is a continuing monument to her immortal personality.

It is only to be expected that such a divine being had her cradle and nursery amidst the most appropriate environs. It was none other than Ballegāvi, the most enchanting part of the forest tract (called Malenād) forming the hinterland of the Western ghats and rightly sung of as 'My mother's place, and God's own abode' by Mahadevi herself. This belonged in those days to the tract of thousand villages coming under Banavāsi. Ballegāvi was an ancient centre of Shaiva settlement and was famed as a

mini-Kalyāna.<sup>1</sup> In the vicinity of Ballegāvi is a village by the name of Uḍutaḍi, nestled amid scenic surroundings. From the ruins discovered here it emerges that it must have once been the capital of a Kingdom. When Akka was born here, it was ruled by a king called Kaushika. There is no agreement among research scholars as to which Kaushika it was. Dr. Chidanand Murthy hazards the guess that the well-known Kasapayya himself must have been this Kaushika<sup>2</sup>. People to this day point to a place where the palace of Kaushika allegedly was situate. There is a temple known as 'Paradesi Mallappa's'. Scholars have therefore concluded that this more probably was the place of Akka's birth rather than the Mahagāon of Gulbarga district. If it is true, as Piḍuparthi Somanatha surmises, that 'Udataḍi', meaning a place near a watermass or lake, itself underwent a transformation in popular parlance and became 'Uḍutaḍi', in course of time, then the probability that the present-day village of that name, some 5 kms from Shiralkop, was the birth-place of Akka gains further ground. For, there is a beautiful lake by its side. It is said that there is still a *math* (school) called 'Guruvāḍi Math', which Akka is supposed to have attended. Besides, Harihara, Polkurike Somnātha, Chāmarasa, Siddhananjeshha and the Shivayogi of Ghana Math have surnamed Akka as the Akka of Uḍutaḍi only<sup>3</sup>.

It thus turns out that Uḍutaḍi had the rare privilege and honour of becoming the birth-place of Akka. She was born there in a noble family where piety overflowed. As to who her parents were, there is again no agreed opinion among scholars. Harihara, in the rush of writing the Lives of a number of men and women saints, merely refers to Akka's parents as 'Shivabhakta' and

1 Kalyāna, in present day Bidar dist. happened to be the beehive of a throng of sharanas (evolved souls) centred round Basavanna in the 12th century A.D.

2 Karnāṭaka Bhārati, Vol. VIII number 2

3 1) Mahādeviyakkana Ragale by Harihara (opening & concluding verses)

2) Panditārādhyā charite (chap. II verse 88)

3) Prabhulingaleele (Canto IX, verse 2)

4) Gururāja Charitre (Vol. IX, verse 88)

5) Bhaktisudhāsāra (verse 139).

'Shivabhakta' (He-devotee of Shiva and She-devotee of Shiva, or it could be their names as well).

Among those who have written about Akka, Chāmarasa, Valandura Harishwara, and Chennabasavānka have named Akka's parents as Nirmala and Sumati, while poet Rācha names them as Omkārasetti and Lingamma. Piḍuparthi Basava and poet Bālapāpāmba have named them yet differently as Vimala and Kutilāla. However, the names common to most of the writers and generally accepted are Nirmala and Sumati.

Whatever the names, the fact that they were a pious couple is beyond doubt. They were followers of the Shaiva cult. They worshipped the Guru (Master), Linga (the symbol) and Jangama (the enlightened as the earth-pacing Shiva) as forms of God Himself. That such should have no issue to begin with, but should get it, by the grace of God pleased with their devotion, and that such issue, whether daughter or son, being chips of the saintly block, should, in their due time, become epoch makers—heroes and heroines of the spiritual history of the race—is the common story-line of many celebratory lives of Saints and Sacred Hearts. The Life of Akka Mahadevi, as written by different poet-biographers, is also true to pattern. Whether it is Harihara, or Chāmarasa or Chennabasavānka or Virupākshapandita, they conceive Akka as the incarnation of Paravati, the consort of Shiva, and she grew up in the womb of Sumati as does the pearl in an oyster-shell.

Fortunately, controversy does not bedevil the name of Akka, though shades of it do trouble our certitude. For, Panditārādhyā, in his Gaṇasahasranāmāvali, gives 'Kamalawwā' as the alias of 'Mahadevi of Uḍutaḍi'. But the Sanskrit word, which means 'alias' in the context, could also mean 'also'. And the difficulty has been resolved by Dr. R. C. Hiremath, arguing congenitally that if we took 'Kamalawwā' as being the alias of 'Mahadevi', there would be a difference in count of the number of Amara Ganas as between the Kannada Rosary and the Sanskrit Rosary of the names of the Heavenly Host. This darling of the devout couple, then, came to be cradled and named 'Mahadevi' thrice, as the custom goes, Harihara narrates.

Kannada poetry is not poor in descriptions of the frolics of infancy. Even so, one would do well to look at this poetic account which Harihara gives of Mahādevi's girlhood days, to savour its beauty. "She grew up in the shade of her mother, nourished by mother's milk, rocked in the cradle, lulled by those who loved her, fondled by those who would pick her up, pressed by the tender touch of those who would enfold her in their arms.... whimpering at times like a bee shut within a folded lotus, parting her lips in a smile like the petals of a just-opening lotus, her eyelids now closing like a 'Kumuda' now opening as if they unveiled the treasure of devotion, waving as if she were a creeper swayed by the breeze, now steadying like constancy firming up, now again learning to walk as if Felicity itself were lolling about, lisping her first words which sound like the notes of a Veena. She grows, waxing like the moon from day to day, filling up with the sap of life and lustre".

The same poet, however, skips over the years of her growth from girlhood through early youth, summing them up in this fashion: "Thus did she, who stepped through one, four, five and ten years, this maiden of austere beauty with stern eyes, Vibhuti-smearing and leading a life vowed to discipline, attain youth, girlhood slipping away from her".

He then mentions the rite of her initiation at the hallowed hands of Shivāgamācharya (Harihara fails to name the Acharya. It might be 'Gurulingadeva' as some have guessed), and then speaks of Akka becoming a mistress of all the arts, especially of the art of letters. That she became a devotee whose very breath was the Linga she worshipped and who was endowed with the knowledge of divinity is undeniable. But when and where did her Kannada shape into the language of poetry—was it at Uḍutaḍi or was it at Kalyāna? Maybe, at Uḍutaḍi itself.

What besides was Akka acquiring, mastering, during this period between infancy and youth, apart from schooling? We have a reference in her own Vacanas, which guides as through this unrecorded tract of her life.

Like the strayed elephant  
That recollects the Vindhya her home,  
Like the parrot which in its cage  
Recalls his free brother of the airy kingdom,  
I remember and remember Thee.  
Call Thou me to Thee O Lord Cenna Mallikārjuna,  
As a mother does her babe.

This picture of an alienated soul affords us a glimpse into the state of Akka's heart while at Uḍutaḍi itself. At what age, precisely, is a question that is not answered easily. Perhaps at the threshold of a dawning consciousness. Here is another vacana of hers which seeks to paint the dream bred by love's fantasy in early maidenhood.

Listen, sister dear, O Listen!  
I dreamt a dream where - in I saw  
The auspicious rice, areca, palm-leaf and coconut.  
He came to me in the habit of a beggar—  
He with pretty locks and gleaming teeth—  
And as he passed by heedlessly,  
I followed and took him by the hand!  
He was none but my Cenna Mallikārjuna  
And the moment I faced Him I wak'd.

In the life of every maiden there comes a time when fantasy begins to picture the lineaments of the 'man' she would like to come along, take her by the hand and lead to the altar. But in Akka's case, it isn't any earthly lover who comes along, to take her standing passively, and lead her to the altar. She has already wedded the Lord in her heart. He fills her being, every pore of her flesh and bone, mind and heart. It is she who goes seeking Him through the wide world, with a yearning that was not of this earth and earthy. She pictured Him to herself in earthly habiliments, and longed for union with Him, as any earthly maiden would with a swain. It is possible to attribute the vacanas that describe Cenna Mallikārjuna, in all his resplendent beauty and ravishing power, to Akka's period before her advent at the Anubhava Mantapa of Kalyāna. But, then, Akka's fancy flew unfettered between the two

conceptual worlds of Shiva as the Absolute without attributes, and Shiva as an anthropomorphic God.

Ravished by Cenna Mallikārjuna, Akka must have experienced 'aloneness' even in the company of her parents and friends. Who, of this world, would understand the mystery of her soul, of this her divine madness, this lover's pain in her for a god? Maybe, at the appropriate age, when her parents proposed marriage, as the only desirable state for a grown-up daughter, with her companions, too, adding their persuasive appeal, Akka is supposed to have answered, (and all those events in her life are dramatized in her Vacanas, which are her informal autobiography—both spiritual and material) :

Tell me friends, doth the peacock ever frolic in barren land,  
Leaving aside the mountain valley?  
Doth the cuckoo haunt anywhere but a mango-grove?  
Doth the bee make toward a flower that is devoid  
of fragrance?  
Would my soul ever long except for Cenna Mallikārjuna?

The irreconcilability of her love for the Lord and lusting for anything herebelow are brought out in yet another verse of hers :

Doth one who wants to see ever enter darkness?  
Doth he that would scale the mountains  
Descend into the Valleys?  
Longing as I do for the peace  
That comes of union with Thee  
How do I hanker for anything else?

Mahādevi was not one born to be mated with anything lowly and low—Hers was 'the desire of the moth for the star, the devotion to something a far, from the sphere of our sorrow'.

It was a divine moth and a Divine Star, a celestial hind and a Celestial Moon, and the mating was possible. For, it was in contemplation of that Divine Lover that Akka is lost, morn and eve, day and night. The whole universe with its sun and sky, wind and water, tree and flower, light and colour, by day, and with its moon and stars by night, lifts up its adoration to the Maker.

Akka, who grew up amidst the scenic landscape of Malenād, learned, early in her life, to recognise the Presence of the One-in-many writlarge in every leaf and bud, hill and dale.

As the manifest light of the sun, the expanse of sky,  
The wind's motion, the six-fold colours of leaf and bud,  
Of tree, bush and creeper,  
Are the day-time worship of Nature,  
So are the moon's light, and whatever is effulgent—  
Stars, fire and lightning—  
The nightly adoration that She lifts above,  
And I'm lost in this pageant of Thy adoration  
night and day,  
O Lord Cenna Mallikarjuna!

Nature, as the cradle which had nurtured her infancy, forms not just a store-house for her image-making poetical faculty, but it lent body and soul to her worship of Nature as His manifestation. Here is a vacana which must have issued from her lip on way to Shrishaila, a testimony to the mystical pantheism of Akka :

Whichever way I look, it's Thy glory I see  
The leafy opulence of the Tree,  
The many-coloured splendour of the wood  
Blaze forth Thy glory :  
The birds do but chant thy name—  
Even so, Thou dodgest me who long to see Thy visage  
Do but vouchsafe a glimpse, O my Cenna Mallikarjuna!

At the threshold of youth, when the natural impulses of flesh and blood were just awakening in her, spurring the fantasy to a conception of the Ideal Lover, Akka, unlike the generality of maidens, had the anthropomorphic picture of the Absolute imprinted on her young mind, and she surrendered herself, entire, to Him. He is the one-and-only true Lover, she declared, in contradistinction with whom earthly lovers or husbands, mortals all, would pale into insignificance. She would, therefore, have none of them, but Him alone. Earthly love is only 'an expense of spirit and a waste of shame'.

How would the conservative society accept this idea, a society that has been brought up to believe that for every maiden born there must be a male match somewhere, and that marriage is the only way of fulfilment for woman? Though Akka's parents dreaded the day when they would have to part with this transcendent beauty born to them, and tended her "as the monsoon sky does the young moon behind the curtain of clouds", to quote Harihara, the destined day did come.

As Providence would have it, Akka was sitting one day in the verandah of her house, circled by her maids-in-waiting when the king happened to pass that way, returning in state from an invasion. How could Kaushika resist the charms of one whose loveliness conquered everyone who gazed upon her? Kaushika would not take his eyes off her, sensing which Mahādevi turned and went into the house.

Some say that the marriage between Mahādevi and Kaushika, king as he was and would have his wish, whatever the odds or resistance, did take place; some say that the alliance, though proposed by Kaushika, did not come through. According to poet Harihara's version, Mahādevi agrees to wed Kaushika on three conditions (to protect her parents from the wrath of the king, it may be,) which he breaks soon after marriage, and then Mahādevi leaves the palace and goes on her way as a sanyasin, renouncing the world, even her parents. According to poet Chāmarasa, Akka goes to the palace on condition that Kaushika should respect her wishes. When Kaushika, in the eagerness of his lust, forces himself on her, Akka says: 'If you will become a devotee of shiva, a union is possible between you and me, or else not'. And Kaushika replying that he had no time for it. Akka is supposed to have said, 'Then is no marriage possible between you and me', and then gone away, renouncing everything.

It's all one whether Mahādevi was married in reality or wasn't married, for she does recognise in one of her vacanas how irresistible are the impulses of the blood for worldlings—God created maya—lust and attachment—for man in the form of Woman and

for woman in the form of Man. Disentangling one-self from the trammels of attachment is possible only for blessed souls like Akka's and Allama's. Kaushika came in the way of Akka as a real or seeming impediment but was soon set aside. The ways of the sharanas, however, are different from those of worldlings. To the latter, the conduct of the saints may seem like madness. But, as she declares, there is no attachment, no forgetfulness, nor pride in the sharana.

We now seek Akka renouncing house and parents, renouncing the self and luxury of Kaushika's palace, and making her way—to where? Harihara makes no mention of her visit to Kalyāṇa, and the duologue that takes place between Allama and Akka at the Anubhavamantapa. He also makes Kaushika, unable to bear the pangs of love and to live without Mahādevi, don the robe of a devotee, and go to Shrishaila, and beg her of her favour. But Mahadevi's answer is categorical. There can be no affinity between darkness (of the soul) and light (enlightenment) and sends him on his way.

Other biographers speak of her going to Kalyāṇa first after leaving Uḍutaḍi. A fact that has been commonly recorded by Harihara and Chāmarasa is her setting out from Uḍutaḍi in near nakedness. She had no clothes on her—she must have discarded them as the last vestiges of a sansarin—of a worldling. Now that she was a sanyasin—had renounced the world—what need of covering oneself with clothes?

Some might be shocked by this fact. Though in this country nakedness in male saints is not unknown, nakedness in female saints is something unheard of. It defies all convention; but Akka was a rebel in thought and deed.

We shall not pretend that this is but a legendary accretion over fact and truth. For, there are lines in Akka's vacanas themselves, which point to Akka's attitude at the moment to her state of nakedness, which leaves no doubt as to the fact: "The

1 Allama Prabhu, another liberated soul, who as the supreme intellectual among the sharanas of the age, tried and tested some, and guided them on to the right path.

firmament itself is my grand raiment. Sex-differentiation lies in the illusory eye of man or woman. When woman is Woman she yet perceives the image of man shadowing her self; when man is man, he yet perceives the image of Woman shadowing his self. All the world is prey to 'the original sin'. When you have put an end to the sex-complex in your mind, how does body-sex affect you at all? To our Cenna Mallikārjuna, O listen You, all the world is woman". She continues, "Man and woman are overpowered by shame when their clothes suffer the least disarray in presence of each other. But when Thou, O Lord, art present everywhere, is there room for coyness and shame? When the world looks on, with inward eyes, how shall I cover myself?" she questions.

She defends her disregard for body and clothes in these words: Does one, who has killed the Cupid in herself and conquered this world, have anything like a body? There is no reversion to the prior state, as there is none in the case of a corpse or a piece of thread that is burnt to ashes.

The vacanas which speak of Akka's choice of a distinct pathway through the world—her electing none but the Lord Himself for spouse, her rejection of the mere mortal Kaushika, her throwing away all awareness of body and the need to cover it before the eyes of the world—hard ones by any standard—may have been composed later and not in the instant of decision-making. But they do reflect the stern stuff that Akka was made of, the iron will behind those hard decisions. Sooner or later, the agitation felt in the wake of the decision must have subsided into the calm of reconciliation. There is a vacana which says:

There's no dreading the beasts  
When you have made a home in the mountain forest.  
There's no dreading the waves  
When you have set up house on the sea-shore.  
There's no running away from the noise  
When you have come to dwell in the marketplace.  
O Cenna Mallikārjuna,  
There's no heeding the praise or blame  
When one has been born into this world.

To herself she has the auto-suggestive consolation: 'The world throws stones at a tree that bears fruit, not at a tree that bears none. It finds faults, with people who are devout, but passes by those who are not. Fear not, my heart, the contumely of society. Fear not, my body, the wickedness of the world. O Cenna Mallikārjuna, Thy word alone is my heaven and my ladder to Thee'.

She must have been dogged by the lewd attentions of men who took her for an ordinary woman and were attracted by her extraordinary beauty. To all such despicable lubbers her word of admonition was clear and unmistakable:

You that have been attracted to me  
Have seen my female form and followed me.  
You are blinded by the vision of the duct  
that throws out urine,  
You have bartered spiritual bliss  
For the pleasures of a moment—  
You know not that this is the way to Hell.  
Know ye that Cenna Mallikārjuna alone is man for me!  
The rest are but brothers.  
If you can understand this language,  
Go your ways.

Many a man did Akka turn away in this fashion, of whom Kinnari Bommayya, who met her near Kalyāṇa, is also said to have been one. According to one version, he had been sent by Allama Prabhu on purpose to try and test Akka. Whatever the truth, not inconsiderable were the difficulties, the trials and tribulations that Akka faced on her way to Kalyāṇa. And the courage and invincibility of spirit that she exhibited were of a transcendent order.

After walking many a weary mile, amidst all kinds of dangers, Akka reached Kalyāṇa. It was no ordinary human habitation. It was in Akka's conception God's own city where only the saints should inhabit. Its very name conveyed a sense of its inward and outward holiness. As such, Akka felt, none should enter it who was not pure of soul. Of herself, she knew she had cast off the shame

in both body and mind. And by that was she qualified, she thought, to enter this kingdom of Heaven on earth. She was eager to meet the prime spirit which moved this heaven viz Basavaṇṇa, of whom she had heard such glowing accounts. However, a further test awaited her at the Anubhavamantapa, a severe test to which Allama subjected her.

He questions her : 'If you go about in a state of nakedness, will not the lewd world react madly about it ?' Akka, calm and collected, replies "Yes, it is in order not to hurt the world's eye or yet to rouse men's passions that I have covered myself with the hair cascading all around me".

"Isn't that an indication of the shame that is in your mind which, you boast, you have cast off ?"

Akka's reply was : "It is for the sake of the world, unused to seeing a female walking naked in the streets, that I have covered my parts, the sight of which may hurt the world's eye or rouse people's passion. It isn't for my own sake. I have extinguished my sense of body -It's no matter to me whether it flashes like the lightning or has gone black like charcoal. It is inward purity that is supreme. I have given myself up to Cenna Mallikārjuna".

It was only when she came out unscathed and triumphant from the rigorous questioning to which Allama subjected her that she was accepted by all the saints foregathered there as a truly emancipated soul and not as some wandering lunatic. It seems she bided at Kalyāṇa for some time, being the most loved child of all, the 'daughter' of Nīlamma and Basavaṇṇa, the 'daughter-in-law' of Prabhudeva, and as the 'bride' of Cenna Mallikārjuna. She, who had wandered far in search of Cenna-Mallikārjuna, now came to conceive of Him as embodied in the Ishtalinga (the cosmic symbol installed in her palm as the object of individual worship). 'He was near and yet far. She sometimes carried on a dialogue with Him : "O Lord, I came thirsting after you, thinking you dwelt afar. But when you have installed yourself in my palm, my eyes are riveted on you. My soul has gone out to you". Yet in another Vacana we read :

If like the husbands of the world  
You had gone to war or assembly,  
I would have forborne.  
But when you are installed in my palm  
And dwell in my heart.  
How shall I forbear if You do not speak ?

She knows she cannot win Him over by the eight-fold worship, for He is beyond rites and ritual, she cannot win Him over by meditation, for He is beyond word and Mind; she cannot win Him over by chanting hymns, for He is beyond Sound; she cannot win Him over by knowledge of the soul, for He is beyond Conceptualisation. "Shall I enclose you within the petals of my heart ?" She asks herself, and answers, "You are full-bodied. When this is the reality about You, it is not in me to win You over unless You make me Thine, O Cenna Mallikārjuna !"

She has wooed and pined for Him without end, but her Lord hasn't so far bestowed His favour on her. Somehow this love of hers is beginning to seem to her as worldly and selfish. She therefore will not ask that He necessarily requite her love. She will love Him for His own sake rather than for herself. Whether He listens to her or no, she will sing His praises. Whether He will bestow His favour or no, she will continue her loving and longing. Whether He turns to glance at her or no, she will gaze on Him and dance with keen joyance. 'O Cenna Mallikārjuna, I will abandon myself to the ecstasies of Your adoration, she vows.

Gone is the fevered anxiety, the anguished heart-throb for glimpsing her God-lover, the anticipated rapture of embracing, of being made one with Him, when she with importunate ardour pleaded for acceptance. She has now attained to the phase of self-confidence of a resolute will. On her way to Kalyāṇa, perhaps she had sought the help of trees to still the pangs of hunger. "They proffered of their bounty and became true devotees, but I became a wordling, having sought their alms. Upon my soul, I shall not beg hereafter, be thou my witness O Cenna Mallikārjuna", Akka had said in challenging tones.

Now she asked Prabhudeva, "What is the way to attain the transcendent bliss of union with the Ultimate?" Prabhudeva, who alone could judge of the Keeness—of Akka's longing, instructed her: "You will have a 'Pisgah'—view of the plain of Absoluteness when, having wiped out the distinction between 'I' and 'You', you ascend the mountain Trikuta. There is a rare Plantain Grove, where, if you enter, you will see a lamp. Go you there, you 'mother mine', and attain oneness with that Holy Presence".

The words 'Shrishaila', 'Trikuta' and 'Kadaḷi' rang in Akka's ears, carrying a sweet thrill to the depths of her being. Envisioning those places of unearthly grandeur and beauty, she set out on the further lap of her long journey on foot. Go she must and tarry she could not. When Prabhudeva himself had bidden her farewell, who could bar her way, though many of the saints who felt a fatherly tenderness for her would have done so?

It was a scene on which the gods themselves would have rained incense, a parting that wrung everybody's heart, and so tears coursed down their cheeks. Grief had struck them dumb.

When she had set out from Uḍutaḍi her parents had felt the pangs of impending separation. But she who had bidden goodbye with a cheerful heart was now dismayed at having to leave such loving folks behind and go forth on her way alone. Sentiment surged up in her breast and choked her. She writhed in pain, feeling she should rather be dead than part from those great souls who taught her the highest wisdom and showed her the path leading to the bosom of God. When she was able to check her brimming tears and found her tongue, she spoke:

Having vanquished the six passions and become  
The trinity of body, thought and speech;  
Having ended the trinity and become twain—  
I and the Absolute;  
Having ended the duality and become a unity  
Is because of the grace of you all.  
I salute Basavaṇṇa and all assembled here.

1 Name of mountain from where Moses had a view of the Promised Land.

Blessed was I by Allama my Master—  
Bless me all that I may join my Cenna Mallikārjuna  
Good bye! Good-bye!

The silence of grief was getting oppressive to all the fatherly and motherly hearts assembled to bid farewell to Akka. None had any words to say. It was only Akka who found something within her soul that laboured for expressions.

I was born by the grace of my Master;  
Grew I in the tender sunshine of many peoples love—  
They fed me on the milk of sentiment,  
The creamy essence of Right-knowledge,  
They served me the sugar of metaphysics—  
Thus did they pour the three-fold ambrosia into my plate  
And tended me with great love and care.  
They married me, finding the proper match  
And now, you have all assembled  
To see me off to my husband's.  
I Pledge I will do nothing that may bring dishonour—  
Kindly heed, I will bring only laurels  
To grace your brows and mine.  
Please go back and let me wend my way onward  
Goodbye, good-bye!

The concourse of people gathered to bid Akka farewell followed her with their eyes, shading them from the sun with their hands until she was out of sight and turned back sobbing. Akka's parting words still rang in their inward ears:

I will do nothing that may bring dishonour—  
I will bring only laurels  
To grace your brows and mine.

Now Akka is seen making quick steps, her eagerness expressed so plainly in her gait. She has no time to look about, nor to speak to anybody. All her attention is focused on the one object—the Cenna Mallikārjuna of Shrishaila, her Divine Consort-to-be.

Her path was again attended with dangers as before. She must have suffered harassment from lecherous men. She pleads

with them to be let alone. Let them not plague her because she has none to protect her. But, she protests, she is without fear. She can live on dry leaves, sleep on rock. And if something untoward should happen to her, she is always prepared to offer up her life to her Mallikārjuna.

She had put fear away—fear whether of human beasts or of nature's vagaries. What could she, who had offered up her being to God, have to fear?

The journey's end is in sight now. Akka nears the goal of her arduous quest. The sight of the peak and the spires of Shrishaila delights her eyes. The wooded mountain side looks like being peopled by wish-granting trees. The land feels to be sacred ground, the water wears the look of nectar, every stone appears like the Thought-reading stone. Rounding the hill, the beloved haunt of her Cenna Mallikārjuna, Akka came upon the 'Kadali Vana', the Plantain Grove. This was the journey's end. Looking upon it, Akka forgot herself. She intuited its symbolism and sang :

Kadali is the Body  
Kadali is the Mind,  
Kadali is the Passions !  
Kadali is wordly Life !  
Having conquered the Kadali Grove  
And found renewed life  
I saw the Saviour embrace His daughter,  
With love's pity surging up for her suffering—  
And I became enfolded within his heart's lotus.

That is the end of the story of her striving, her spiritual agony, her longing for union with the Lord, the one-and-only husband she would marry. Though she was born an emancipated soul, as one of the 'elect', and had a vision of her destiny while in her teens, she had yet to undergo the hard discipline of spiritual apprenticeship. She had learnt the lessons of Bhakti (devotion) from Basavanna. But Akka puts the same fact in a different way, so as to appear to be acknowledging her debt to him and to all

whom she groomed her for the spiritual journey she had undertaken.

Basavanna gave me the dower of devotion, as  
to his very own daughter,  
Prabhudeva blessed me with Higher  
Knowledge, as his very own servant's daughter.  
Thus did one and another confer upon me  
Their especial blessings,  
And treat me as their favoured child, fondle me,  
And thus raise to be worthy of Cenna Mallikārjuna.

The times were certainly miraculous in as much as there came together at Kalyāṇa not only a number of saints such as no age before or after had or has produced, but also in that each one of them excelled in his own way, in his chosen field of spiritual attainment—Devotion, Spiritual Knowledge, Renunciation and so on. The 12th century was an age which produced a community of saints in Kārnāṭaka (though some from far off places also came and joined them). It was an age when every saint was a spiritual genius striking out on his own and being second to none. The miracle of miracles, however, was Akka Mahādevi, who combined in herself all the three attributes—of Bhakti (Devotion), jnana (Higher knowledge), and Vairagya (self-surrender, non-attachment or Renunciation). She was the supreme synthesis of all the three modes of spiritual life. And that is why, Allama paid her the tribute : "Lo, here is one who has put an end to duality, who has through her spiritual experience attained true understanding, whose very sight has become one with the symbol she holds in the palm of her hand. I bow before Mahadeviyakka in acknowledgement of her spiritual standing".

Who would not endorse this testimony from the greatest-of-greats-ever Allama ?

## II

### TRANSCENDENTAL ACHIEVEMENTS

M.R. Sri, of thrice-hallowed memory, has written about the three-fold achievements of Akka Mahadevi<sup>1</sup>. No one who knows the history of this country would fail to recognise that each of them is unprecedented in its own way. Why in this country alone? In no country has a woman been easily granted freedom, nor has she ever enjoyed it in actual fact. In a male-dominated society like ours it is not surprising if the idea of woman's freedom has been pooh-poohed. No doubt every prophet and law-giver of the world was born the son of woman; yet has he given only a secondary place to woman in the Scheme of things that he propounded in his religion. There is no poet of the world but was born of the womb of woman. Yet did he deny her equality with man. In the Western world, she, as Eve, has been the cause of Man's mythical fall and since then the source of 'original sin'. Even the greatest of philosophers have lent countenance to this view of woman being subordinate to man, never his equal. Plato, the great philosopher of ancient Greece, thanked God that he was created man, not woman. Didn't Shakespeare exclaim, 'Frailty, thy name is woman'.

We have an analogous verse in the Bhagavad Gītā. In chapter IX, verse 32, woman is ascribed the status of the shudras (the lowest of the low in society), of those born in sin.

May be, it is an interpolation. When elsewhere one reads the Lord God as saying that He is the embodiment of all the glory, the good, the sweetness, of endurance, of fortitude that are usually

1 Life of Mahādevi Akka : An account of a woman's Struggle for Emancipation, Social Respectability and Spiritual Attainment (in Kannada) .....

found in woman one does suspect such denunciation of woman to be but an interpolation. Or perhaps it is not, because it echoes the strain of thinking and outlook that has come down from time immemorial to this day. Woman, whatever the caste in which she happens to have been born, is a shudra. The scriptures, where they mention woman, do not give a description of her caste and status, as they do in the case of men; they seem to think there is no need, for isn't she, by birth, a shudra?<sup>1</sup>

Worse plight for woman was for her to be regarded, as she was in fact, as chattel,<sup>2</sup> as part of the property, silver, land and cattle that a man (her husband) owned. That was why she could be mortgaged, and the interest that was charged was one seventieth part of her value, according to the author of Agnipurāṇa (I, 253, 63-64).

In sum, she was not an independent entity, not a being with a soul that she could call her own, but an ornament, a piece of jewellery in man's possession. Resistless and quiescent woman acquiesced in this social dispensation. There could be no better proof of this than the exhortation of Sanchi Honnamma: "What existence has woman, who is but an ornamental jewel, other than the one ordained by her husband and master?" (*The Religion of a Married Woman*)

When this was the dispensation accepted by woman herself, where or how does the question arise of woman's independent status, her equality with man, equality of opportunity and of social justice for her? All the theological treatises and scriptures were massed against her being accorded equal status. The great Manu, the Patriarch and Law-giver of Hindu society, Shukra, Chānakya, Yādnyavalkya and Vasishtha have all spoken with one voice in this matter. Even the Buddha said, "If they get a suitable lover, all women would stray from the right path"<sup>3</sup>. At the first opportunity, they would betray their husbands—be they high-born

1 For example, *Manusmṛiti* : 7. XI, 153.

2 See *Light on Early Indian Society & Economy* : R.S. Sharan, P. 23.

3 Quoted from the *Milindapantha*

or low, beautiful or otherwise, married or maidens", says the Mahabharata.<sup>1</sup>

"The high-born should therefore always be guarded by maids-in-waiting", enjoins the Shivapurāṇa. Even the Devipurāṇa speaks of them as being lustful, who only make a show of husband-devotion and chastity.

There seems to be a dichotomy implicit in the thought and behaviour of our folk, who have extolled woman as mother, as being equal to God, and have assigned to her, in their Purāṇas, the role of the Goddess Terrible, who came to the rescue of the gods in any war with the demons. There was hardly any place in the Hindu mind of those days, guilty of double-think as it was, for the modern conception of woman's role as the radiance that lights up, elevates and fills our life with beauty.

It is against this background that Mahādevi Akka's life, her struggle and attainment, are to be seen and evaluated. The social values of today might have changed—they have but in word, though not so much in deed. Howsoever that be, the revolutionary step that Akka took in those convention-bound days is not something to be sneezed at. It must have shaken the very foundations of the thought-moulds of those days. Such a rebellion must be placed in the context of its times and judged.

Akka was no doubt born heir to the customs and mores of her times, but fortunately for her, in the distant Kalyāṇa, Basavaṇṇa was spearheading a revolution, as a result of which woman was gaining equality and respectability. The soul is a sexless entity, declared he; man and woman are known apart only by externals, not by the God that dwells within. "Where the two are united in devotion to the God within both, there is nothing like it in all this world", he said. "I regard woman, other than my own wife, as the Goddess Consort of Shiva" he added. Siddharāma declared, "Woman is God". "When the Linga itself becomes the Master of either, does the wife remain wife, and the husband, husband?" said Allama Prabhu.

1 Anushāsanaṣarva.

The wall that stood between Man and woman for ages was thus demolished, and both of them sought the rapture that is beyond sex in the worship of God as Husband & Master of all creation. And Basava was its forerunner.<sup>1</sup> Was it a spark of this electric wave of emancipated thought that flashed at Uḍutaḍi? Perhaps yes. Or perhaps, the emancipation was in the air and found its manifestation in more than one place at the same time. Be that as it may, Akka was chosen as one of its several manifestations, and she shone as the brightest star in the firmament of Feminism of those days.

It is on the threshold of marriage that a woman's testing time comes. Whether, as Harihara recounts, Akka married Kaushika on certain conditions, the breach of which by him in the aftermath released her from the bondage, or, as Chāmarasa makes out, she rejected Kaushika's suit outright, it is to be admitted that Mahadevi was taking a bold and unconventional step unknown to the woman of those days. That, according to one version, she repudiated Kaushika when he wouldn't abide by her stipulations, and straightaway walked out on him, in an age when it was unthinkable for a married woman to separate from her husband, until death do part them, was equally revolutionary. And she must have been barred from going away by her loving parents, kith and kin. But she who had fixed her gaze on the distant star, her Divine Lover, would not be stayed nor stopped by any ties of blood or the silken bonds of filial sentiment. "I'll have none of your motherhood and mothering", said she to her mother, who had brought her out of her womb. And then, questioning why, if a male saint or sanyasi can throw away all vestiges of clothing, can't a woman saint do the same, she set out, discarding all her raiments, which act was the climax of her fight against tradition and the culmination of her

1 "The honour of being the first to declare woman as man's equal and winning for her freedom should go to Basavaṇṇa. The first to grant freedom of thought to woman was again he. The fact that many a woman took part in the spiritualist discussions of those days (at Anubhavamantapa), and that quite a number of them turned out verses of great literary merit, bears witness to this fact" *Basavasamhite*, Dr.D.Javaregouda

revolutionary ideology and stance. When one perceives the logic behind her step, that she would not have two husbands, one for this world and another for the other, but only one, one would quite agree that there was no irrationality involved here, that Akka was no lunatic, but that she was saner than the sanest of this world. That she, forsaking hearth and home, undertook the journey from Uḍutaḍi to Kalyāṇa and thence to Shrishaila to join her Divine Consort in the Plantain Grove, single-handed and regardless of the dangers of travel and fearless of the beasts of the forest, buffeting the advances of lechers and debauchees, is the most bewildering act of her dramatic spiritual career. That, further she should have stood the searching test of Allama at the Anubhavamantapa of Kalyāṇa is the roof and crowning glory of her pilgrim soul.

The duologue that took place between Allama and Akka must be reproduced in its entirety—for it does not easily lend itself to condensation. Allama put question after question of a challenging nature more to demonstrate to the assembly of Sharaṇas the ripeness and nobility of Akka's thought and mind than to test and find them out for himself. Possessed of a rare power or percipience, Allama knew at a glance.

His first question itself was floorer :

"If you, who are in the first bloom of youth, will tell us who your husband is, you have our leave to join this assembly. Or else, your way lies elsewhere". But Akka was not going to be flustered. She calmly answered.

"I did penance through life after life so that Cenna Mallikārjuna should take me for consort. My kinsfolk, knowing my wish, have decked me out to be His bride—Lo here is the Bhasma (the Holy Powder) with which I am smeared, and the Kankaṇa (the bracelet) which signifies my betrothal to Him)".

Continuing she said :

"All mankind are my parents. It's they  
Who made this matchless match of mine  
With Cenna Mallikārjuna,

While all the stars and planets looked on.  
My guru was the one who gave my hand into His.  
The Linga became the Groom  
And I the Bride.  
Therefore is Cenna Mallikārjuna my Husband

And I've no truck with any other of this world" Her imagination fantasized to her in vivid colours the suspicious ceremony of her being led to the altar by her Divine Consort. She accordingly waxed eloquent, describing the ritual, as if it had taken place in fact. It was a pandal where the pillars were diamond studded, the archway was of gold, the floor paved with emeralds, and the roof was of corals. Yes, a celestial event like that should have a celestial setting!

Allama countered nonetheless :

"Is it true that you made a scapegoat of your husband  
To achieve your own end?  
Do you know that the body may cast off clothing,  
But the mind does not cast off its sense of shame?  
Is that why you cover your body with your hair?  
This kind of double-think and vanity  
Will not find favour with the Lord"

To which Mahādevi Akka rejoined :

It's only when the fruit is ripe within  
That the outside doth lose colour.  
If I covered the symbol of sex,  
It's lest it hurt your eyes.  
Why does it needle you, O Brothers?  
Spare this poor maid  
Who has surrendered herself to Cenna Mallikārjuna.

Allama was intent on subjecting her to more and yet more searching examination. He said,

"We know not whether you dwell in Him  
Or He dwells in you—

This we do know in sooth :  
When the skin doth lose its lustre  
The fruit within has begun to rot.

Yes, ripeness and rot are not far apart. How is one to tell? But Akka's thought soared onto a higher plane than the subliminal. Good and evil accrue as long as this house of clay harboured Lust and Covetousness, Anger and Infatuation, Pride and Envy. It's only when these were extinct that one hankered after God. The faculty of visualizing as also of emoting stood purged of all dross. "Why do you then look for good or evil in me, when I say, I'm the bride of the Lord", pleaded Akka.

Allama would not stop short thereat. He questions her :

Tell me how to know  
That one has conquered Lust—  
Lust which is the root of all the Six  
Deadly enemies of Man?

Her reply was:

Is there a throw-back to the earlier state  
When the Fire has burnt the corpse,  
When the puppet has slipped off the string,  
The tank's bed is dry and caked up,  
The thread has burnt up into nothingness?

In sum, her answer was a question : When body itself, which is the theatre of sex and all his allies, is extinguished, and sublimated to a level where it is filled with the being of Linga (the Deity, the Paramâtman, the Ultimate Reality) and is at one with it, where is any room for the bodily impulses?

Allama carries the test a step further. He asks, "As long as anyone's body wears the unholy impress of sex, how can we credit your talk of this impossible union between God and yourself?"

Akka's retort is unanswerable :

If you can untooth a snake and play with it,  
Nothing better than a snake's company.

If you can 'unlust' the body and be as if you are bodyless,  
Nothing better than that.

A body gone to seed is like a mother turned monster.  
Do not therefore say that those favoured of the Lord  
Were ever housed in the body.

If that is so, persisted Allama, one should be pure of body, mind and sense in order to be acceptable to God.

Yes, said Akka, quickly seizing upon the argument and turning it completely into her favour :

My body was purified by the food  
served me by the devout.  
My mind was purged by remembrance of the  
countless (parents).  
My eyes were purified by the sight of the Patriarchs,  
My ears were purified by hearing of their glories.  
My sense of smell was purified by the  
fragrance offered at your feet.  
My tongue got purified by what the Sharaṇās  
imparted to me.  
Such purity of thought is my being now,  
O fatherly Lord,  
Worshipping Cenna Mallikārjuna with all my heart  
I tore away the trammels of earthly Being"

Still Allama is not satisfied. He would like to know how one tells the One apart and yet achieves union with Him. Akka's answer, proof of her intellection and extraordinary presence of mind, is : Yes, as the Lamp and Light are one, as you well can see. So why do you subject to unnecessary harassment one who has extinguished her mind by merging with the Lord? 'One who has extinguished her mind' was taken by Allama to mean 'one who has lost her mind (or 'one who is off her Mind'), which is why he was quick to ask : 'Then how come you do all this clever talking? Did ever a corpse call out? Did ever the milk soured for curdling turn sweet?' Pat came Akka's reply, clinching the argument once and for all.

Yes, corpses have been known to call out,  
 As where a person has started out of a dream in sleep.  
 Hasn't milk soured for curdling turned sweet  
 As when it is churned into butter and then ghee?

The congregation of men and women, all earned in spiritual lore and given to living the Life Divine, heaved a sigh of relief, astounded and glad that the test, the toughest of tests, was at long last over, and this tender maiden had come out of it triumphant; that she had demonstrated, to the satisfaction of all, the probity of her mind, and justified her unconventional appearance, which had made her acceptance difficult. If the female saints gathered over there beamed with motherly pride, they were to that extent human and earthly. They showered their blessings on her, saying:

It's not age that confers respectability  
 What if one has performed penance till the  
 ant-hill grew around him?  
 What if one is doubled and walks with the  
 help of a stick, grey-haired and senile,  
 Is one, though far-gone in years, who talks nineteen  
 to the dozen, is he an elder?  
 Here truly is one who knows the ultimate in knowledge,  
 Has entered the bosom of God—  
 Hers is the greatness above all greatness!

If that was how Cenna Basavanna, one of the wisest, offered his salutations in acknowledgement of Akka's greatness, everyone else present, Basavanna included, spoke words of praise and admiration for her. Mahadevi hung down her head in humility. "I am the child of your mercy", she spoke. "You three have given me each a dower : Basavanna his devoutness, Prabhudeva his transcendent wisdom and Cenna Basavanna the quintessence of his mystical experience". There speaks forth the grandeur of Akka's soul and the grace of a loveliness that was not of this earth.

Of course, Akka did answer Allama's posers, one by one, to the pleased amazement of all assembled, but may be, in the same

context more, by way of guidance than by argument to meet, challenging argument, must have been sought from her. And so, in verse after verse, she spells out the secret of her achievement, the dynamics of the mode of spiritual endeavour that she had elected. It was the same that Meera too chose for herself: devotion to God for either took the form of a conjugal relationship so intimate, so inviolable, so enduring. No matter whether the devotee is male or female, in relation to God, he/she is wife, and God the husband. Akka's was such a cult of devotion. It was the general cult of the day, and many a saintly devotee professed such a relationship with God. Akka explains the secret of her conjugality in more than One vacana :

Body became Unbodied, offering itself up to the Linga;  
 Mind suffered annihilation offering itself  
 up to Right Perception;  
 Sentiment yielded place to contentment and set  
 itself at naught;  
 Bodily existence thus was wholly spiritualized.  
 The Linga who weds my bodiless being  
 Is thus my Lord and Master and I His spouse—  
 This surely is the secret of my conjugality  
 With Cenna Mallikārjuna!

Yet how does the twin principle of 'Anga (Body) and 'Linga' (the Bodiless Absolute) become merged in to one while the body still exists apart as an independent entity? Yes, there is no contrariety :

The Form penetrates the Formless  
 And both are blended into one.  
 Mind penetrates the Absolute  
 And so it becomes one with the Absolute.  
 Conceit doth likewise pierce into the Linga  
 And so doth it stand sucked into it.  
 Thus did I fuse with the Infinite  
 By the grace of my Lord.

She established a unity in place of the Twin-ity of the Finite and the Infinite. She had killed all awareness of Body, its impulses

as Body. The very senses and consciousness were a door thrown open to the Presence of God. Her whole Being breathed that Presence, the food she ate was God. In a word, she lived, moved and had her being in Him.

To the three-fold achievement of Akka spoken of by M. R. Sri (which we have referred to earlier on in this chapter) of gaining for Woman her freedom, her social respectability, and of establishing her rightful place alongside of man in the field of spiritual endeavour (so uniquely and spectacularly demonstrating her own excellence as to humble the pride of the chauvinistic male)—Mahadevi added yet one more dimension of glory. And that was in the field of letters. Her achievement even here was unprecedented. For such an Opulence of the spirit as hers to shine forth, in all its effulgent power and beauty and yet to be comprehended by the world at large, there was need of a language of rare expressive and poetic power. Or, may be, her (intensely lived' experiences, and intensely 'felt' moments of illumination, fashioned a fit vehicle out of the language she had known from childhood. In the white heat of the forge of her sensibility, whatever passed through came out burnished and pure. It was language marked by a divine iquidity of diction, a divine power of articulating the ineffable, a supremely poetic mode of purging out her emotions, of stamping the language of daily usage with beauty and vitality.

Here are a few vacanas which breathe the agony of separation :

"I wait for Thy coming, O Lord!  
Thou whose coming is my very life-breath,  
Come Thou, bathed in turmeric water,  
And clad in gold-tinted robes—  
Thou treasure-trove of Good!  
I grow weary with watching for Thee"

\* \* \* \*

"Agitation hath overturned my mind  
The coolest breeze is like a flame for me,  
Moonlight is hottest noon, O friend!  
I suffer anguish like the turnpike taxman

Do thou counsel me, O my companion!  
Fetch me my Lord Cenna Mallikārjuna,  
Who is so unrelenting".

\* \* \* \*

"I wash away like the black soil in rain  
I slip and shift like the sand,  
Anguished in dream I start awake,  
And burn like the fire in the forge,  
Comrades have I none in my woe—  
O Cenna Mallikārjuna, do Thou grant me of Thy mercy  
A body that is not grappled by the groping hand,  
And the ecstasy that comes of union without uniting!"

It is a wound that has been inflicted without a stroke, she says, a fireless flame that burns her from within. She is lost in thoughts of the Lover all the twelve hours of the day and of night. She has lost out to Him, has passionately yearned and pined and languished for him, has gone nuts' about Him, and if, in spite of all this devotion on her part, He will not bestow His favours on her, what will she do (she thinks with dismay). The poetic expression of all this writhing, agonizing and poignant despair bears the stamp of Akka's originality and genius.

That is one more of the dimensions of personality which added lustre to her brief but eminently 'fulfilled' life. No other woman through the whole history of Kannada literature has accomplished anything comparable to her passionate outpouring, nor challenges comparison with her in poetic stature. All of her 340 (or are there more?) vacanas are each a gem. Her *Three-fold-yoga-path*, "*Vacanas of Creation*" and "*Vacana Songs*" are a precious heritage of the Kannadigas. *The Foreword of Akka*", which the author of *Kavicharite* ('Lives of Poets') mentions, is not extant today. And the most surprising part of it is that all this was produced by Akka within the span of less than 25 years that she lived. Within these 25 years of less, she who had been cradled in the undulating hills and rivers and valleys of the Malenad (the mountainous tract), went through the alternating currents of joy and sorrow, of rapture and anguish; she made the acqui-

intance of the hundred faces of love she who had been fed on the affection of countless devotees of Shiva and had herself sought the hand of the Immortal Lover. She was a man in all but the form. She had to be. Hadn't she challenged : Who will point a finger at one who has sliced the head of Cupid gouged the eye of time and plucked the sun and moon and gobbled them? Tender of age and limb, she was yet made of diamond stuff. A spirit, less brave than hers would not have dared to speak of such a love let alone seek its fulfilment. It was all right for the men saints of the times to speak of their love of the Lord as of a beloved for her Lover, and of the goal of Union with the Absolute as the union of husband and wife. (Shiva, the Absolute himself is Two in-One—Half of him is Parvati, and He only the other Half). In the case of Basavanna and some other men saints, who wrote of the man-God relationship in terms of the woman-man relationship, one may say their psyche evolved a metaphysical mode of expression; for after all, they were men. But for a woman, to take the medium as the message, to translate it into her life, spurning the convention of an arranged marriage with a 'mortal', it was not an ordinary thing. It can have been only divine madness in Akka's case. The poetic conceit was no mere conceit for her; She conceived of God and human life in terms of the Husband-&-Wife relationship and lived it literally, intensely, without a schism in her thought or a crack showing in the spiritual integrity of her soul. The language she speaks as one intent of joining her lover—now unrelating, now 'rousing' her by his appearance in dream in all the grandeur of his male beauty—has the stamp of any woman of this world in similar love-lorn state. The images aren't rarefied and 'thinned out' as being shaped by an imagination out of touch with reality. The anguish of separation and the dramatisation of the see-saw—of hope and despair, of ecstasy and anguish, is too intense to be unreal or only conceptual. It is a state of mind where the image has filled the consciousness and become one with the person's being.

If at one moment she can think of the trees and flowers, the wood itself and its winged denizens, as His manifestation,

at another she longs for an intimate glimpse of her Cenna-Mallikārjuna's visage. If in her mad search for Him, she can ask "Have you seen my Cenna Mallikārjuna, O you trees, you parrots, or you peacocks?" in cooler moments, she knows that the object of her adoration is the immanent God, that God-realisation is the temple at the summit, and not a point in the pilgrimage of life. It is also possible that the two moments are set apart by a period in which thought has ripened, and the throbbing anticipation of early love has composed itself into a calm acceptance of His being near and yet far away, beyond the horizon of this life. Similar are the down-swing and up-swing of a mind that at one moment feels that she might not make it to God's bosom, that the Lord is a hard-hearted Lover and tarries, and at another moment is "calm of mind, all passion spent". The senses are the root of the mind's goings-on, even as the sun is the prime mover of all this world's goings-on, She sings. 'When I have reposed my mind in you, O Lord, where is any worldly 'being' for me?

She speaks but the language that she had heard from the lips of common folk. Yet does that language sprout wings and soar, as her imagination does, as her thought vegetates, as her feelings effervesce. She found the idiom that responded to the subtlest nuances of the swayings of her heart. It became a willing and pliant instrument in her hands. Akka did not write in order to compose poetry. She only sang her soul into her vacanas, and they came out spontaneously with the fire and movement of poetry of the highest order.

The language (in the original Kannada) that is instinct with poetic imagery and poetic sentiment, the command of alliterative and assonant sound-effects, the play of a poetic sensibility that exploits the resources of sound and sense to masterly effect, are all evidence of the literary tour de force that Akka's vacanas are.

She has poured into them the three-fold ambrosia—the milk of her pure sentiment, the ghee of right knowledge and the sugar of metaphysics—even as she spoke of the three-fold ambrosia which her countless parents had fed her on. We should forever be beholden to her for this priceless literature.

### III

#### THE AMBRESIA OF AKKA'S MUSINGS

The intellect coruscates as much as does the fullness of heart impress itself upon us in Akka's works. The two meet in an electric embrace there as it were. We see the confluence of thought, feeling and knowledge in the speech of one who had been fed on the milk of sentiment, the ghee of right knowledge and the sugar of metaphysical thought. In a sense, the origin of all three seems to be the heart. Haven't all great truths emanated from the heart? There is a saying that the heart holds within itself, in seed-form, the while of the animate and in animate universe. Perhaps this is true in the case of Akka whose outpourings but echoed what her intellect cogitated and her inner eye saw as intuition. Therefore is a rare harmony to be discerned between her reason, sentiment and intuition. Her mystical experience has come out in her *Vacanas*, dipped in all the sweetness of the heart's holy affections. Her heart and intuitive knowledge of the Life Divine siezed upon as truth what reason unaided by the inner eye, the letter-mined study of theology and the scriptures, or the vacuous debates in the councils of the world, or yet the preachings in congregations could not have gleaned for her as nuggets of ever-lasting and integral wisdom. We may quote in this context the relevant part of Harihara's poetic account of Akka's life: She lived in bliss, being the support of the proliferating congregation, having planted the songs of the Patriarchs in the soil of her mind and watering them with her tears of joy, manuring them with the thrills of devotional fervour, training the sun and moon of her piety and wisdom on them, decking them with the flowers of discussion, and singing new hymns picked from the fruit-of-bliss-

bearing trees of music as accompaniment to her mystical communion with God, bathing in the waters of devotion, and emerging into the knowledge of the Absolute, renouncing everything, chasing away all attachment and allure.

Did Akka have a pre-sentiment of her early end? May be yes, may be not. At any rate, she held life to be a brief candle snuffed out in no time. Before your life-span, measured by Morn and Eve, is spent, fasten your thoughts on Him, she exhorts the laity. For, you will have no opportunity afterwards. Life is *vanitatem vanitores*. It is Void. Before Void fades out into Void, do live in the company of Cenna Mallikārjuna's devotees, with a will and determination. Before you are far gone with this world, do embrace Shiva, and don't trust this body and its breath. Before the body's five elements are dispersed, do surrender to Cenna Mallikārjuna".

Such percipience does not down upon us, however advanced, in years we may be. But Akka had it given to her as a gift of God early in her life. She cries in anguish:

My body is dust,  
My breath belongs to the Void:  
How do I grasp them?  
And how shall I meditate on Thee?

She knew, in spite of her apparent inexperience and youth the true nature of life in this world, even better than many a philosopher does:

Existence was begotten  
Where I was born;  
Where Existence began  
There was born stupefaction;  
Where stupefaction arose  
There went Desire with it;  
Where there was Desire  
There was Anger, too.  
The smoke of that fire of Anger  
Beclouded my understanding:  
Thus did I forget thee  
And opened the doors to Grief in me.

That, for you is a prognostication of the malady which is life in this world. Death alone may seem to be the final curtain run, down upon this tragic drama of human life. But is there no remedy to this suffering and woe, between the cradle and the grave, that goes by the name of 'human life'? is the question which has confronted the intellectuals of the world, from Buddha's time to this day. It is an ever-teasing question, to which (if you please) there is an answer in Akka's vacana, quoted above. Where stupefaction prevails, about the true nature of life, there suffering is. The passage to bliss lies backwards through Anger to Desire to Ignorance to a state where Existence is not a trammel but an ornamental archway. When besotted Man has awakened into the dawn of true knowledge and become a Sharana (literally, 'Surrendered Soul', but, in technical parlance, seer, saint, Devotee, all rolled into one) suffering has ceased for him.

And where does this knowledge come from and how? This is not the 'Advancement of Learning' that modern times have witnessed, the progress of science and technology. All the knowledge of 20th century man heaped together will amount to a zero without a number preceding it. Knowledge, which is all of the spirit, and which alone can guide our steps to our destiny, should come as His grace, as these lines of Akka do testify:

Thou, Cenna Mallikārjuna,  
Shouldst lift me up with Thy tender grace  
Do away with my oblivion  
And vonchsafe a glimpse of Thy feet :  
Knowledge that leaves Him out is no knowledge at all,  
declares Akka.

What use is riches without generosity ?  
What use is a cow, if it be dry ?  
What use is beauty without virtue ?  
So is my being no use  
As long as I have not known you, O Cenna Mallikārjuna.

That is why she is thankful to Him for having guided her steps to the understanding of Him. It was His tender mercy, His grace.. He is at once nearer than the nearest and farther

than the farthest corner of the earth from her. But all the while He was seated at her heart. How near ! She needed only to look within herself, She celebrated her delighted awakening in these lines :

Thou, the light that dwells within the lotus  
of my heart, O God !  
Do Thou implode into the dawn that circles  
the edge of my mind !  
Do Thou come into me, O Master, O Boon, O  
the Ultimate !  
Do Thou come, O God, the quitesence of Good,  
the Serpent-garlanded one.  
Veerabhadra, Rudra, Sin-Remover, the Universal Self !  
Come Thou the fruit, the juice of the fruit,  
the sweet joy of the savour of the fruit,  
Come Thou the Perfect one, the Redeemer from  
the slough of Despond, the celebrated Mallinātha<sup>1</sup>

Such lines can overflow from a heart that is given up entirely to the other Being, has felt the pangs of separation and been electrified by the envisioned glimpse of Him, and the anticipation of her mergence with the Divine Lover. Love that is Bhakti (Devotion) and Bhakti that is Love overflow in a confluence here. The vacanas are the stream that bear the tide of her love and Bhakti towards the sea of the Divine. Such divine madness as is hers finds its aptest expression through metaphor and symbol. Witness, for example, these verses :

Lord and Master, I trust thee  
Thou, husband of Ambika,<sup>2</sup> my Boatman !  
See how swift the gleaming current flows !  
How turbulent are the waters !  
I am fallen into the whirlpool !  
Thou alone must pull me out of the vortex.  
<sup>3</sup>The six-fold wave is bearing down, see Thou Boatman,

<sup>1</sup> Harihara : Life of Mahādevi akka (In blank verse), cant. V

<sup>2</sup> Ambika = Parvati

<sup>3</sup> The six deadly lusts, the six enemies, as they are usually spoken of: Lust, Anger, covetousness, Infatuation, Pride & Envy.

It speeds like the wave of the Deluge  
 Kick it aside and row me safe ashore.  
 Put me not away, Thou Boatman,  
 Thou Lodestar that art Bhakti,  
 Carry me to Cenna Mallikārjuna's Haven of Bliss.

The river of universal life bears upon its bosom the ark of the individual life. Shiva himself must be the earman for the ark. Truth is the ear, and devotion the path. If such be the conduct of life, it will not be a tragedy that we often, in our ignorance, make of it. Devotion is not a thing to be undertaken for fear of hell or for the favour of attaining heaven. It should be the passage-way for our life's bark. Rab'ia the woman-saint of Arabia, was once seen walking the street with fire in one hand and water in the other. When someone questioned her as to the import of her act, she is said to have replied : "With the water in this hand, I'm out to quench the flames of Hell. With the fire in the other, I want to burn down Heaven. It is only then that the mortals of this world, rid of the fear of Hell and the lure of Heaven, will know true devotion".

Today even Bhakti has become merchandise. The priest charges so much for this and so much for the other form of worship, promising varying kinds of rewards appropriate to the form of worship. Forms of worship carrying different price-tags have been elaborated by the religious middlemen—the priest, the person, the paster, the deacon the Bishop. Akka is critical about this 'middle-man' -ry between man and God.

What need of the present of food to One  
 who has no hunger ?  
 What need of ablution for One who is at once  
 the deeps and the Vault of Heaven ?  
 What need of lamp-worship to One who is Himself  
 the source of Light?  
 What need of flowers to One who, comphor-white  
 of complexion, exudes a subtle fragrance?  
 Work that is devoid of faith  
 And devotion that is prey to pride—  
 What use are they?

Akka divides the Shaivas—worshippers of Shiva—into two kinds. Those who are Shaiva by caste hanker after the pleasures of paradise. Those who are Shaiva by inclination surrender their all to the Absolute, to his symbol the Linga, and to the spiritual Guide, the Jangama (the Enlightened itinerant Preacher, who is the living embodiment of God). The worship offered by the Shaiva-born is like the loyalty of a prostitute! The devotion of those who cannot resist the lure of Woman, Gold and Land is the worship of the small. "Show me such as offer themselves up to God and find fulfilment in it". Akka belongs to that other category who are the salt of the earth. She is one who goes into ecstasies over her self-surrender. "Thou art my mind, my motion, my breath. Before high heaven I swear, I shall not think of aught else", declares she. When true knowledge has dawned on one, one finds that the self and the Other self are not different but one. One's preceptor can only be understanding of this truth.

Of course, the pilgrim soul's journey does not end here. The inner quest has to be squared with conduct in the outside world. Where Word and Deed are dichotomous, there is no spiritual attainment. Right knowledge, Right (moral) thinking and Right conduct go hand in hand. The three Rights are the triple path of enlightened soul. Such a one walks in the light that comes from within.

This, surely, is the glorious path that Akka has shown to us. That is the ambrosial cream of her cogitations, her spiritual, inner debate, the 'obstinate questionings' of her mind, and the answers she found in her own soul. There is knowledge of one kind and another, similarly, there is Action (or conduct) of the right kind and wrong kind. And so is there a difference between true morality and the false kind.

This raises, incidentally, the question of Ends and Means. For men like Gandhiji, ends and means must be in accord with each other. For those like Marx, if the end was good, it could justify the means, whatever they be. For Akka, Thought, word and Deed should be integrated into a holy trinity, It is because

we have gone 'whoring after false gods' that we have missed our true destination, We have acquired piles and piles of knowledge but in the process missed wisdom altogether. Didn't Eliot, the greatest of 20th century poets, lament :

Where is the knowledge that we have lost in information ?

Where is the wisdom that we have lost in knowledge?

Akka's own prognostication is that Maya (Illusion, Infatuation with the Unreal) is the real stumbling-block. Even the greatest of them have fallen prey to Maya—not even Hari (Vishnu—one of the Trinity of Gods) and Brahma (another of the Trinity) excepted. But will falling prey to it be the inevitable destiny for such a one as me? asks Akka of herself. 'No, never a chance with one who has taken refuge with Cenna Mallikārjuna!' She is cock-sure, it will never deflect her, never befog her.

The world and the Maya which envelops it were created by the Lord Almighty for his sport. And we must accept life, its trials and tribulations, and the Maya that wraps us into the fold of worldly Attachment—all must be accepted as part of the Game that God plays. It is to Him that we must resort for protection and deliverance from the trammels of Attachment. He alone can redeem us from the strangulating knot of Nescience and Worldly Lure. If we, in our agony, call out to God for help, He will see us through the miasma. But if we, in our ignorance, revile against God, our Creator, we will be like the owl that abuses the sun; like the crow which, not being able to see by night, belittles the moon. We will be like the blind man who, not being able to look in the Mirror, sets it at naught. Yes, if wrapped up in the miasma of Attachment, we deny the existence of God, negate all order and a Supreme Being behind that order, Cenna Mallikarjuna will send us to hell!

The same Akka, who has wedded Cenna Mallikārjuna in her heart, sees no contradiction in sometimes addressing Him as 'O, Father', and pleading that, barring Him, she has no one to turn to, no deliverer. "Thou art my sole resort, Thou art my mind. There is none but Thee to listen to my pleading. Do Thou, therefore, listen, O father, heed my request and extend Thy Protection to me".

The consciousness of Previous births, the cycle of a thousand thousand existences of heretofore, plagues her. Whatever might have been my ups and downs in those lives, let the cycle stop here and may I attain Kaivalya (Nirvāna) through Your grace, says one of her vacanas.

She knows that there is no way to find a place in the bosom of God but that of self-surrender:

Too much reading of the Vedas can lead to Argumentation;

Too much of the knower's ego could reduce the Āgamas<sup>1</sup> importance to half,

In their vanity of supplying the answers to abiding questions,

The Purāṇas<sup>2</sup> have gone to Jeriche?

All of this book-lore is one that is doomed to death. We must therefore, seek knowledge that is deathless. Faith in Him alone can show you the right path. When you are with Light, where is the fear of being benighted? Akka, therefore, rhapsodizes that she knew happiness of every kind by attaining true knowledge and putting away Nescience.

Does this knowledge that passeth all worldly lore, and faith than can move more than the mountains, come of its own accord, like peace dropping from the veils of the morning to where a devout soul exists or does it come through any external stimuli? Is it something that can be attained by anyone, provided he or she has the aspiration and sedulously strives after it or is it the destined goal where only the elect of God, the blessed ones, the 'chosen few' arrive?

It is possible that such knowledge and faith can come from within, as an impulse divinely caused, but it can also be aroused and fostered by the open temple of God which is the universe the infinite variety, the mind - boggling vastnesses, the ever-changing colours and wondrous beauty of this universe can so touch a devout

1 Āgamas = Scriptures

2 Purāṇas = Legendary history

heart as to enthrall it quite to a conception of the Lord God, The Maker. The unheard voices that come from every quarter of this planet, and the firmament above, can touch only those that have their ears open.

Akka's greatness lies in the fact that the child's sense of wonder in her was never dimmed. She kept open her eyes and ears as windows through which the Divine Presence, writ in every little object, in the littlest atom, could flow in and suffuse her whole being. Her intellect endorsed what the heart silently felt. The wonder that she felt as a child is now shot with an adult's understanding wonder at the mysteries of creation.

Who poured the acid water into the lime, the  
mango and the '*madala*'?

And who gave the sugar-cane and the cocoa-nut  
their sweet water?

Who, by the way, put the rice-pith into paddy?

Who, again, injected into the jasmine and the rose  
their fragrance?

Though water, soil and sun were one and the same,  
They bred in these their several forms and essences.

The lord immanent has many forms and attributes,

But, transcendent, Me is but Himself and none of these.

It isn't as if none had observed the phenomena of the mango, the lemon, the sugar-cane springing from the same soil, drinking in the same sun and water, but growing into their different essences. But and Akka alone could drive home the point by phrasing the Creator's mighty magic in those terms.

The child's wonder has yielded to the adult's mystic insight, which wonder pierces home through the illusion of to Truth itself.

There may be an apparent contradiction between the vision that perceives the Far as Near at hand, in the form of the symbol, and the vision that sees the symbol as only a symbol which cannot *per se* be the Absolute. When the Absolute Principle itself is paradoxical, this double vision is inevitable, but it need not puzzle or perplex the reader.

The young mind, awash with divine grace, and yearning towards Light, will, if in due season planted with the seed of True Knowledge, grow up into the human-made-divine. The company of like minds, of enlightened souls, is nonetheless necessary as the proper clime or habitat for its flowering. The importance of the 'go(o) dly fellowship' is brought out by Akka in one of her vacanas:

Tree brushing against tree begets a spark  
That burns the clump and the brushwood.  
When soul brushes with insightful soul  
There is born the fire of True Knowledge  
That burns up all the ills of Body.  
Gain me the goodly fellowship of saints,  
O Lord, Cenna Mallikārjuna;  
And thus make me worthy of Thy grace.

Akka, however, cautions us that there is company of the right sort and of the wrong sort. Association with one who knows not the Truth is like striking flint and inviting fire, while keeping company with the learned and the wise is like churning up butter from the curds. Best of all is the company of your devotees, O Cenna Mallikārjuna, declares Akka, for it is like setting a burning match to the camphor-hill.

Fire is begotten of association :  
It's not without union that a seed doth sprout,  
It's in saintly fellowship that bliss doth abide,  
It was in the company of your mystic devotees,  
O Cenna Mallikārjuna,  
That I attained that bliss of Paradise.

Glorying in the purification which she has thus undergone Akka exclaims :

My wordly being is at an end  
As the reward of associating with Thy elect,  
Even as the hillocks suffer dissolution  
From the Holy Ganga's turbulent flood,  
Even as Darkness is put to flight  
When it meant to play with Light.

There is rejoicing in her qualifying for the grace of God, as also thanksgiving towards the enlightened souls of Kalyana, who made it their endeavour to groom her spiritually for the acceptance of her Lord :

Purged was I in body,  
Purged was I in mind and soul  
By the divine company of Thy elect,  
O Lord Cenna Mallikārjuna!  
They it was who tried and tested me  
on their touchstone,  
Therefore am I made fit ornament to Thee.

The ascent upward to the summit of mystical thought is not impossible. But 'staying put' there and not suffering oneself to climb down is an even more difficult task. The greatest impediment to the attainment of Perfection is the monkey fickle Mind of Man. 'The Enemy is us' as they say.

Just as the silkworm weaves a cocoon out of  
its own slime,  
And makes a noose of the same,  
The Mind is enslaved by its own impulses.  
Thou alone, Cenna Mallikārjuna, canst cut the  
strings of māyā binding me,  
And lead me towards Thee.

Annihilating the mind is easier said than done. The mind is a phoenix which 'dies' only to rise out of its ashes. But if one knows how to slash off the hood of 'Mind', there is no need to read the Vedas and Āgamas (the Scriptures)

Akka did not have to go through a long period of preparation, marked by penance and poring over scriptural tomes. One wonders where and how she gathered the lore that she distils into her verses. She had not only mastered the vedic lore, maybe through oral tradition, but had even gone beyond them. Hers was wisdom that surpasses knowledge. Experience and observation of the working of the Universe had crystallized into pearls of wisdom, which the mere study of the Vedas could not have given her. With her,

experience, observation, and knowledge had all passed into an understanding and a wisdom that were a divine gift of insight.

The vedas are so much booklore which is no more than chaff, if you can go straight to the heart of the matter-and that is to steady, to stabilize, to fix the mind in the contemplation of God. That surely is to rise to the plateau of True Knowledge. And that was Akka's transcendental attainment-a feat impossible for spirits of softer stuff. These latter do not turn into proper bricks in the kiln of the spirit's making. They remain a clump, a clod, soon dissolved by the rain. Akka's transformation, on the contrary, was, to use her own imagery, like the water that turns into a pearl.

The pearl forms out of water  
So does the hailstone.  
The salt crystal dissolves  
Even as the hailstone melts into water.  
But there's none who has witnessed  
The pearl dissolving into water.  
Mere mortals remain what they are-  
Thy radiance, O Cenna Mallikārjuna,  
Will not touch their inner being.  
But I became charred in Thy fiery essence.

Into that Heavenly Radiance had Akka's being entwined itself. She loved Him, with all her heart, with all her mind, with all her strength, with all her spirit.

The Master is my body,  
God Himself my Mind,  
The Jangama my spiritual Face

Sang Akka. Her hymn of thanksgiving is worded like this:

Thou didst uplift me  
From the unease of the Body,  
From the Temptation felt by Mind.  
I fumble for words to image forth  
Thy matchless grace  
Which tore the trammels of existence for me.  
Having taken refuge in Thy feet, O Cenna Mallikārjuna,

Like the Chakora that sets its heart upon the Moonrise,  
I splash about in the tide of Bliss.

The right knowledge is the first step in spiritual life. Rightness of conduct cannot come where right knowledge is wanting. That was why Akka said,

What use is dousing the husk with holy water?  
Will it ever make it sprout?  
If conduct will not go with True Knowledge  
How will it bring the happiness of perfection?  
Will the perfume sprinkled on from outside  
Ever stay with one?  
Those that know not Cenna Mallikārjuna  
Have no Right Conduct, mind you!

Conduct that is of the surface is blind : if it does not originate from insight it is no use. Right knowledge must issue in Action. There is no harmony like that between Right knowledge and Right Action.

Yet, Akka would give all the credit to Basavanna (though elsewhere she has apportioned the credit to several of her benefactors, Basavanna stood at the centre of the circle. If anybody symbolized within himself all that Kalyāna was and did, it was he). He it was, indeed, who inculcated into her, says Akka by way of tribute, the concept that true knowledge was personified in the Jangama.

He, indeed, is my spiritual father (she sums up) who taught me that the life of the spirit is verily the Linga, that right knowledge is embodied in the Jangama. Her sense of dedication to the Linga was so entire that she lived for nothing else. She sings :

It's for the Linga that I wear,  
It's for the Linga that I perform,  
It's for the Linga that I see.  
My life—inward and outward is all for the Linga  
I do and yet I do not.  
Having entered the bosom of Cenna Mallikārjuna,  
I am and yet am not of this world.

She lived all for the Linga and as such she had no existence apart from the contemplation of the Supreme, yet did she belong, as long as she was at Kalyāna, to the Goodly Fellowship of the Enlightened souls, where singing and discourse were 'a feast of Reason and a flow of soul'.

She lived, moved and had her being amidst such souls at Kalyāna, and knew not, nor sought to know, any others. She regarded herself, amidst these evolved souls, as 'the servant of the servants'. She 'served' these elders, offering her very tears of joy for water to wash their feet, worshipping them with the petals of the very lotus of her heart, lifting up the auspicious light-offering which is her own knowledge of the Supreme. . . . . "I will sing and dance out of the joy that passeth all bounds. I will do obeisance at their feet with all my devotion. I will revel in the company of the everlasting. . . ."

She was in the world, yet not of it — like the lotus that rises out of slush and yet does not stain itself with it. God, she knew, dwelt in the womb of his devotees, and would feel the hurt, as does the child in the womb of a pregnant mother, if a devotee was hurt. That was why they called the Lord the "devotee-bodied". He lives within them. To serve them is to serve Him. If at all the lonely soul that is a devotee seeks society, it is the society of like minds, of like devotees.

The truth has a wider implication than appears to the casual eye. All mortals, not the devotees alone, are children of this earth, are the off-springs of God. Even if you hurt one of them, you are hurting Him. Therefore, live so as not to hurt the merest, the lowliest of these beings.

When you overlook this truth, you trespass the rules of social living which make for a harmonious, healthy society. A society is built upon secure foundations only when everyone has consideration and regard for everyone else. It is because this ethical basis is sinking that human society is foundering upon the rocks today. Rightly did Akka stress the holy trinity of Right Knowledge, Right action and Right morality. If Basavanna was

the crown-jewel of humanity, explains Akka, it was because not only did he live the life of the spirit, in thought, word and deed, but also lived a life of chastity, not lusting after another's wife, another's wealth, not maligning another soul, never telling an untruth, never in ficting violence, never mixing with 'infidels' or those of diabolical propensities, and lived a life of complete dedication to the service of others. Basavanna thus excelled in fifty-two righteous ways, extols Akka.

Lest the expression 'He will not mix with the non-devotee' ('infidel') be is construed as religious bigotry, Akka offers an explanation :

Let those who prattle about (righteous) conduct tell me if they know what forms its sheet-anchor. And if they know not, let them heed : Lust is the first infidel, the second is Anger, the third is Greed; Infatuation the fourth; pride the fifth; Envy the sixth and Lure the Seventh. So do not call him that is without Linga a Bhavi (x 'infidel'). It is those who harbour the seven Deadly sins within and yet, to all appearances, wear a Linga on their person, who are Bhavis. Will Cenna Mallikārjuna be pleased with those fakes who cheat the world by carrying out the ritual of worship at specified hours of the day?

This, truly, was a revolutionary concept. The world goes by appearances; words are mere counters to the generality. Who reflects on the true meaning of a word? An infidel is one who does not follow *our* path of worship. But aren't there other forms, other ways of reaching God? After all, it is inward purity that counts. If you put a shine on the outside of a vessel, but fail to wash the inside, of what use is that kind of cleanliness?

Akka's penetrating intellect, herd discernment, have revealed truths which the world in its mad rush does not heed nor divine. Did she not revealingly comment upon the world's practice of non-violence by giving the analogy of the fisherman, who feels for his child when it is in pain but never a jot does his conscience prick when he kills fish in hundreds and thousands? The ethics of her difinition are higher in conception than we have ever had from other saints and social reformers.

Some of the ethical gems that have come out of the mine of her thinking, the steel with which she reinforced herself while she walked the testing ground of this world, are :

Wherever the brave may turn, he hath no fear.  
The coward is never at ease, listen O my brethren!  
He that gives can never be faulted, —  
He that melts with pity never sins.  
O Cenna Mallikārjuna,  
He that, having touched Thee, will not  
Touch others' money and others' wives  
Hath nothing to fear.

\* \* \* \*

"He who knoweth Truth from Untruth  
alone is a Sharana  
Untruth is the 'untouchable'.

\* \* \* \*

"Chastity of heart, of mind, of word, of deed, of taste—  
These are the Five 'holy waters' (not those  
collected from 'holy'-reputed springs)"

\* \* \* \*

"Show me those that are chaste of body,  
Chaste of mind and chaste of heart,  
Those that are right of conduct,  
Whose speech is gospel  
And who are ever-pure in this wise"

\* \* \* \*

"He is a sharana who hies for his day-labour  
Who thinks not of yesterday nor tomorrow"

\* \* \* \*

"I am too busy today, for  
We have a festival at home;  
So ye passions, we have no time  
Even for a word of courtesy to you.  
Go ye your way"

\* \* \* \*

I am without pride of caste  
 Without pride of resolute will am I.  
 I have cast away the arrogance of riches,  
 Of the pride of learning also I have none.  
 No manner of pride dare come near me,  
 For Thou hast blest me with Thy Grace.

Such ethics as Akka set for herself were cavaire to the general. Not many in society would pass muster by this most exacting of standards. She saw through the parade of vanity, imposition, hypocrisy, self-will, pride, selfishness and what have you. Men who had too much to do with the world could not easily be won over to the ways of enlightened souls or highly evolved beings. She therefore, in no uncertain terms, castigates those worldings and pseudo-enlightened ones whom those evils rode rough-shod :

Ye, who are ridden by original pride,  
 The pride, besides, of race and clan.  
 The pride of will, or caste,  
 Of nomenclature, of colour, of status  
 The vanity of faith and scripture,  
 The fallacy of logic, the lure of Kingship  
 The illusory solace of money, of grain-store,  
 Of son and friend,  
 The false pride of riches, of sacrifice,  
 Of enjoyment and of living the 'Life Divine',  
 The pride of flesh, of the senses  
 And the lure of sensual pleasures,  
 The attachment to breath, to mind,  
 And feeling and life as ever-lasting,  
 The conceit of self-effacement,  
 Of self-doubt and of self - as - Absolute  
 Such and such-like  
 Fallacies and conceits, numbering two and thirty  
 Have possessed many a mortal  
 Parading in false attire.  
 I turn away from these to Thee  
 O Cenna Mallikārjuna,

Being ashamed to call them 'sharanas' and 'Jangamas' Akka was out and out a revolutionary. At one blow, she makes minee-meet of all that stood between man and man, and man and God. The false and the deceitful must have found shelter even under the garb of the new religion. Akka was not one to be taken in by false appearances. Basavanna might have been too much of a Mahatma to see anything but gold in all men. Only a woman such as Mahādevi, preternaturally beautiful, and alone and defenceless, could have seen the lascivious leer and the cloven hooves of the satyrs in Sharanas' clothing.

If she appears to be only politely expressing her indignation at the hypocrites here, elsewhere she is seen to be using somewhat harsh language. She calls them 'barking pups' in other words canting dilettantes' who, not knowing what the terms 'Chidanga' 'Bhakta', 'Prasādi', 'Mahesha', stand for or mean, give themselves those attributes and prattle about the Master (Guru), the peripatetic one (Jangama) and the Other (the Absolute) 'Their cunning astonishes me'. She points to the authentic gold of Basavanna's profession and practice, and of the early Shaivites, in contrast to whom these sundry followers of the cult are pynchbeck. "Stupid Knaves", she calls them.

This is *the* way to reach God for anybody, whatever his religion. Only the technical terms used by Akka or the other enlightened souls of the period may need to be changed so as to fit the most universal concepts forming the common grist of all religions. The way that Akka has shown to us in simple terms is the right path wherein Right Knowledge, Right Morality, and Right Action are harmonized.

Akka defined romance in these unconventional terms :

The sight of elders is beautiful to one's eyes :  
 The songs of the Sharanas of old are romance to the ear;  
 Truth is the ornament of speech;  
 The language that the devotees do use  
 Adorns dialogue and discourse .  
 The hand is beautiful that beautiful does  
 By giving to the deserved.  
 The goodly fellowship of these sharanas  
 Is the consummation of corporate living.  
 What is life, if devoid of these raptures?

Could we ever make these words the motto of our lives, we  
 would be paying Akka an appropriate tribute.

#### IV

#### AKKA'S PERSONALITY

Womankind has given to the world more than one empress, warrior and freedom-fighter, more than one anchorite, artist and scholar; but it has given only one Akka Mahādevi. It may be asked : Hasn't it given the Sappho of Greece, the Theresa of Christianity, the Lalleshwari of Kashmir, the Rabia of Arabia, the 'Andal' of Tamilnadu, the Meerā of Rajasthan, and the Mukṭāyakka and Helvanakatte Giryamma of Karnataka itself ? Doubtless, all these are the precious gems of the spiritual realm. However, Akka is beyond all comparison—her personality stands out as unique, as more complex and weighty than that of any other. This is no exaggeration prompted by admiration. The radiance of Akka's personality, the white-hot intensity with which she lived out her all-too-brief life, the non-pareil character of her quest and its modality of fulfilment have all lent to her personality a luminosity, an exaltation and a power of appeal which are unparelled in the history of mankind.

The poetry of Sappho might enchant one; but the core of its content is one of extroversion; there is none of the inner drama which we see in Akka's *vacanas*. The vivacity which apparently lends life to her poems did not spring from the bottom of her heart. And so, she couldn't conquer the dejection which drove her to suicide by drowning in the sea.

The austere purity of St. Theresa's life divine, and her mystical longing for union with God, are of course outstanding, but she hasn't made any contribution to enrich the literary heritage of mankind like Akka.

There is a reflective strain in Rabia, an exalted awareness and the sweet languor of love's pining, but the lack of sublimity or complexity, which inner conflict alone would lend to a person's character, makes itself felt. Lalleshwari, the famed anchorite of Kashmir, was born in 1335, that is, six or seven decades after Akka Mahādevi had departed this world. Lalleshwari, too, in the fashion of Akka Mahādevi, forsook the house and home of her husband where she had a loving father-in-law but a nag for mother-in-law, and set out without a shred of cloth on her. The flaccid abdomen helped cover her private parts as had the cascading long hair in Akka Mahādevi's case. (For 'lalla' means 'flaccid abdomen' in Kashmiri) And so she came to be known as Lalladeedi ('The sister with the flaccid abdomen') or Lallamātā ('Mātā' meaning mother). Just as Akka was not dismayed by the taunts and jabs of the world, Lalleshwari too took the world's praise or blame with equipoise. She too passed through the phase of suffering and travail of the spirit, as any saint has to, before reaching the state of perfection. She had to engage in a debate with the hermit Nanda and the saint Nasruddin, and came out triumphant. Her words are almost an echo of Akka's :

All that I do is Pooja (Worship),  
All that I utter is Mantra (hymns),  
All that I get is the wherewithal of worship,  
And all that I see happen is God's play.

In every respect Lalleshwari's life is awe-inspiring. Even so, if we look for the transcendental beauty of emotion, beauty of language and the beauty of thought prompted by mystical experience, all wedded together, which we see in Akka, we will perhaps be disappointed. The 'Vaks' of Lalleshwari, which explain, in more or less technical language, dense matters such as the spiritual quest, self-examination, self-realization, practice of yoga and the pathway to immortality, are worlds away from the uncluttered sweetness and divine liquidity of Akka's outpourings. The debates which she had with Nanda Risi and Nasruddin appear, in point of dramatic force, less scintillating than the dialogue which Akka carried on with Allama at the Anubhavamantapa.

Muktāyakka would probably have been ranked beside Akka, if full details of her life had been secured. She no sooner hits our eye like a beam of light than she merges into the broad daylight and is lost to view. The glory of passing the acid test of Allama Prabhu belongs to both equally, but the parallel ceases at this point, for beyond this common factor their lives move along different lines. That of Muktāyakka disappears into an underground cavern to run a subterranean course like the river Saraswati, while Akka's flows before our eyes as a nectarine confluence—of the milky Ganga of Feeling, the Yamuna of the ghee of understanding and the sugary Saraswati of metaphysics.

'Andal' is a synonym for self-surrender. Her verses composed as the love-expression of a woman born to be the consort of Ranganātha and who sings out the agony of her separation from Him, are a signal contribution to Tamil literature. She, who has lost her heart to the loveliest of the universe, is agog to appear beautiful enough to be accepted by Him. And so she wears the garland that she has made for Him and takes a look at herself in the mirror in order to be convinced that she does look her loveliest. 'Am I not beautiful enough to attract my Lover'? She asks of herself. She seeks the help of the Love-God Manmatha, as Parvati had enlisted it in her mission to conquer the heart of Shiva. Her Lover, unlike as in the case of Girijia (Parvati), who had to undergo ever-greater penance, easily bestows His favour. Ranganātha appears in a dream of the temple priest and the marriage takes place between 'Andal' and her celestial Lover. She does not marry a mortal, in the first instance, in obedience to the dictates of her parents or the conventions of the world as Akka had done, or is subjected, like her, to the teasing attentions of lewd men on her journey to join her heavenly Husband. Nor yet has she to pass a searching test and establish the credentials of her holy passions, as Akka had to.

The life and achievement of Heḷavanakatte Giriyaṁma more or less follow the pattern of 'Andal's. However, the only mystic light which invites comparison with Mahādevi Akka is Meerabai. Though Mahadevi of Uḍṭaḍi and Meera of Kuḍaki in Rajasthan

were separated by three centuries in point of time, the life, the mission and achievements of the two show interesting parallels, so much so that one wonders if Meera was a reincarnation of Mahādevi ! If Mahādevi had, even as a young girl, set her heart upon wedding Mallikārjuna, Meera longed to be Giridhar (the mountain-dwelling) Gopal's consort. If Akka declared, "Dump into the dustbin these males who succumb to Age and Death. I'll marry the Deathless and Ageless", Meera too declared, "What shall I do with these mortal males ? I will wed Krishna the only true husband". Both of them forsook hearth and home, throwing all conventions to the winds, and went on their thorn-strewn path, not heeding the praise or blame of the world. If Meerā said, "What do they know of the pain of the wounded who have never suffered wounds ?" Akka exclaimed, "What does the childless woman know of the pangs of a mother ?" Both of them braved all odds and went ahead on their path undaunted. Akka said, in challenging tone, "O Cenna Mallikārjuna, do not try to dodge me, because I am an orphan and have none to help. But I fear nothing. I can live on dry leaves, can sleep on a bed of daggers. If you will put me through the severest of travails, I shall render up my body and breath to you and thus keep above stigma or reproach, no mistake about it". Meerabai too spoke out in similarly bold accents, but her challenge was thrown at the world, because she was confident of the Lord coming to her succour. Akka, on the contrary, is piqued into challenging even Lord Mallikārjuna, seeing Him as a most trying and tormenting Lover. But, in another sense, the world's infliction of torture is of the Lord's causing—it is the mill through which He makes the sādḥaka (the spiritual pilgrim) pass. And that was why Akka hurled her challenge at Mallikārjuna, as also at the world when rakes and dissolute men pestered her. These saint-heroines recked not the world, nor set too great a store by the body's requirements. The Lord's own scheme of things had provided for their sustenance. They had trees to offer fruit when they were hungry, or they begged it; there were wells and streams to drink from when they were thirsty; there were old ruined temples, if not good ones, to spend

the night in. And the Lord was their companion at all times ! The hemlock that Rāṇā (her brother-in-law) sent to Meerā in order to finish her off was transformed into the elixir !

And when, after braving all kinds of odds, they arrive, Akka at Kalyāṇa and Meera at Brindāvan, the reception they get is identical. If Allama Prabhu said to Akka, "If you can name your husband, do come and take your seat in this assembly; or else turn away, good lady", Jeeva Goswami of Brindavan did not even deign to look at Meerā because she was a woman. Meerā replied to Jeeva Goswami, "Dear Swamiji, I had thought Krishna the only Purusha (the Male Principle) in the world. It's only now that I come to know He has a rival here in Brindāvan ! If you think it sin even to look at a woman, how come you worship Radha (the consort of Krishna) ? And how do you preach the joy of devotion to Lord Mādhava (Krishna) and his consort Radha ?"

Akka's stand was also similar; for her, Cenna Mallikārjuna, was the only Purusha; all creation was woman to Him. What Akka thought of Cenna Mallikārjuna, Meera thought of Krishna. The differentiation of sex concerns only the exterior. Man and woman both, in so far as they yearn for union with the Absolute, represent the female principle.

Akka and Meera spoke out what they thought was right; they had the courage of their convictions. They said or did nothing to please the world. If Akka, at a certain stage, renounced even the desire that Cenna Mallikārjuna should requite her love, declaring that she would nonetheless seek Him out, Meera dismisses Krishna, in a huff, as one whose requital of her love she does not expect at all. "Get you gone, O Hari, don't I know that Your love is without ardour or passion or attachment ?"

These two specimens of womanhood raised the banner of their kind sky-high because they steadfastly refused to bend their knee before the Male, because they refused even to beg before the Lord whom they had wedded at heart, because they gave no quarter at all to any kind of weakness and never lost their self-confidence a bit.

When all is said and done, the life and achievements of Akka will leave the imprint on our minds of a unique personality. When we consider her long trek to Kalyāṇa and from Kalyāṇa to Shreeshaila, her spiritual pilgrimage, the Kaushika episode in her life, which must have caused her much inner conflict and agony, we cannot but be certain that she alone could have come out of that difficult test, with her sublime truth and transcendental spiritual stature vindicated. Nothing can equal the dramatic tension and triumph of Akka's engagement in a philosophical debate with Allama – not even Meerā's with Jeeva Goswami. Apart from the Vacanas, whose uniqueness is undisputed, Akka composed, in the short span of life that was given to her *Yoganga Trividhi*, and lyrical vacanas as also the vacana of Korawanji, all of which bear witness to her myriad-minded genius.

What was the secret of this many-splendoured flowering of her genius, of this unprecedented combination of several dimensions? Perhaps Dr. Alexis Carrel is right when he says: "It is dangerous to be exclusively an intellectual or a mystic, a logician or intuitive, a scientist or a poet. It is by the simultaneous upward trend of his intellectual, moral, aesthetic and religious faculty that each one can attain the highest level compatible with his inherited latent powers".\*

Akka had all these faculties – intellectual brilliance, moral probity, aesthetic sensibility, religious fervour – all given to her as nature's endowments. And she had put in all of her energies to realise the fullest potential of those faculties. And therefore did she achieve a harmonious culmination of all these dimensions of her personality, not just the intellectual, the logical, the mystical or the poetical. It was an organic outgrowth, which fact accounts for the electrical arc between the reflective and the emotional element, the intuitive and the mystical, between the poetry and the scientism.

In sum, Akka stands as the greatest miracle ever witnessed of womankind – Akka, who had cast off the conception of bodily shame, the shameful infatuation of the Being with Life; Akka,

\* Dr. Alexis Carrel, *Reflections on Life*, P. 112

who had burnt down the very remembrance of shame felt in the conscious; Akka, who proclaimed that she was woman in nothing but the name, who vowed that she would change the lot of the Love-God who had been killed by Shiva in body but spared to live on unbodied; Akka, who said (putting it rhetorically) that she was too busy with the festival at home to have time for the passions, who vowed she would not be a slave to Karma, but would vanquish it; who even challenged her God-Lover, saying, "I am none of your lily-livered, chicken-hearted fools – I'm not afraid of the miasma which you have created to put mortal man on the false scent;" Akka, who asserted this of herself:

I'll slash Cupid's head,  
I'll gouge Time's eyes,  
Sun and Moon will I pulverize  
And eat them up.  
Who will call such a one any names?

Yes, none dare call a nonpareil like Akka any names. None there is who will nod in approval of the path she took in fulfilment of her dream. And, without doubt, none who will not bow his head in reverence!