

Mahadevyakka (Mahadeviyakka or Akka Mahadevi)

Mahadevyakka was a twelfth century female mystic/saint within the Virasaivism movement. Mahadevyakka renounced her life and devoted herself to the worship of Siva. From her experiences she composed poetry in which she conveyed her stories and her love for Siva, whom she believed to be her husband (Blake-Michael 363).

Mahadevyakka is also known for her rebellions against social norms of the time.

Mahadevyakka was born in Udutadi, a village in Sivamogga (Ramanujan 111). Mahadevyakka's religious devotion began as a young girl. At a young age she became a Siva-worshipper and continued to grow up as a devout worshipper of the Lord. The form of Siva that she worshipped in his ascetic form as Cennamallikarjuna, translated as "the Lord White as Jasmine" (Ramanujan 111). It is said that Mahadevyakka's beauty caught the attention of King Kausika who wanted to marry her. It is debated by scholars as to whether she did marry him or if she rejected his proposals. One story claims that she married the King against her will. Mahadevyakka was very upset about the marriage because the King was a follower of Jainism (Blake-Michael 362). She asked him to convert but he refused. One evening, after rejecting his sexual advances, Mahadevyakka left the palace naked, covered only by her braids (Ramanujan 111). This began her spiritual journey in pursuit of spiritual union with Siva. She would wander to different towns and areas in search of union. Mahadevyakka believed that she was already the wife of Siva and would not marry any other man. In her journey Mahadevyakka found herself in Kalyana, which was a central city for Virasaivism at the time. She was, at this point, accepted into the group of saints after being questioned by the other saints (Blake-

Michael 363). The dialogue between Mahadevyakka and Allama, a guru of the school, has become a famous legend. In this legend Mahadevyakka won over Allama and joined the group as a result of her powerful and convincing words. She was able to prove to Allama that she has complete devotion to Siva as a good wife to her husband (Blake-Michael 363). After many years in Kalyana, Mahadevyakka decided to continue on her spiritual journey and left Kalyana. Her journey ended in her late twenties when she reached Sri Saila, a holy mountain. It is recounted that it was here that she found union with Siva (Ramanujan 113). A union of this variety cannot be expressed and only experienced, although Mahadevyakka used her poetry as an attempt to express her love for Siva and her pains of separation from his union. Her poetry and her opposition to social norms made her a revered saint of her time.

Mahadevyakka was a member of a Saiva sectarian movement called Virasaivism, which was founded in the twelfth century in South India by a man named Basava (Basavanna). Virasaivism translates as “heroic Saivas.” They still flourish today and are known as Lingayats, “wearers of the Linga” (Olson 409). This group, which has been referred to as a protest movement, rejects many of the social constructs of the time period. This group rejects the caste system and the marriage of children. They also allow widows to remarry and the dead are buried rather than cremated. Finally, they declare the sexes equal and that temple worship, sacrifices and pilgrimages are unnecessary. Virasaivis devotees believe in the equal access of salvation for everyone (Blake-Michael 361). With these protests to the social constructs of society of her time, Mahadevyakka became known as a rebellious woman but at the same time an important figure in the anti-Brahminical and anti-caste movement. Unlike the other female saints within

Virasaivism, Mahadevyakka was viewed as even more rebellious than other devotees. This was because she chose to wander naked and was unmarried. One half of the other female saints within Virasaivism at the time were married (Ramaswamy 43). The marriage status of these women was important in the explanation of their spirituality. Mahadevyakka remained independent from male domination. Her spiritual quest was different than that of the married housewives of Virasaivism because she did not rely on guidance from any male figures; she only trusted in her devotion to Siva. According to traditional Virasaivism, one was to work and be self-reliant, and Mahadevyakka represented a paragon of self-reliance (Ramaswamy 52). Typically, both presently and in the past, Virasaivism female saints who were married, were thought to collaborate with their husbands in their spiritual quests (Ramaswamy 22). Studies indicate that Mahadevyakka was criticized by other female saints for not wearing clothing. Her nakedness was seen as an ultimate defiance and thus Mahadevyakka is not paid homage to in any of the other female saints' writings (Ramaswamy 43). As a result of the anti-Brahminical and anti-caste beliefs of Virasaivism, Mahadevyakka became symbolic of rebel and female saint.

Mahadevyakka chose to reject the traditionally prescribed roles of a Hindu woman. Traditionally, it was believed that only high caste men were able to become renunciators. Hindu society identified women with family and sexual pleasures, and thus were not seen to possess the ability to become ascetics. Mahadevyakka disagreed with the power of the Brahmins. As a rejection of the traditional roles of men and women, Mahadevyakka strove to transcend her gender through her spiritual practices. As she described in her poetry, she is female in form, but is the male principle (Ramaswamy 14).

Through this sentiment Mahadevyakka was able to dissolve the notions of women as untrustworthy and temptresses. Sexual transcendence was seen as a higher stage of spirituality. The gender boundaries were erased and the saint becomes asexual. As Mahadevyakka expresses:

Transcending the company of both,
I have attained to peace.
After forgetting this cluster of words,
What if one lives
An integral life?
Once I am joined
To Lord Cennamallikarjuna,
I do not recognize myself
As anything. (Olson 498)

It is at this point that the saint becomes naked. For male saints this does not represent any social disturbance, yet for female saints this was seen as even more freeing due to the prohibitions placed on females within society (Ramaswamy 40). Mahadevyakka renounced her family and her clothing and freed herself from any social conventions. She had but her braids to cover her private body parts to decrease the temptation of others (Ramaswamy 41). For Mahadevyakka and many other saints, she viewed her body as an aide to her self realization and spirituality.

A further act of rebellion by Mahadevyakka was that she remained unmarried physically to a man. This resulted in society viewing her as 'deviant' (Ramaswamy 27). Within Hindu society, unmarried women are largely viewed as temptations to men yet Mahadevyakka believed that she was married to Siva and that he was her groom (*pati*) (Ramaswamy 34). She also journeyed with no male escort. In conventional society, this would be viewed as a very dangerous act for a woman. Mahadevyakka believed she had transcended gender and caste and thereby believed that she could take part in living as

any of the other male ascetics and saints. Through Mahadevyakka's poetry it is clear that her spiritual quest is for union with Siva. Her poetry exemplifies her beliefs and quest for union with Siva, while she opposed society's views and presented the independent strength of the female saint.

The poetry of Virasaivism was passed on orally for centuries prior to being collected into what is called Sunyasampadane. The type of poetry that Mahadevyakka composed was medieval *bhakti* (devotion) poetry called *vacanas* or sayings of their saints. Mahadevyakka's poetry consists of what can be interpreted as the three forms of love: love forbidden, love during separation, and love in union (Ramanujan 113). Her poetry expresses her quest to find love and union with Siva, while wandering:

O swarm of bees
O mango tree
O moonlight
O koilbird
I beg of you all
one
favour:
If you should see my lord anywhere
my lord white as jasmine
call out
and show him to me. (Ramanujan 122)

In her poetry Mahadevyakka refers to Siva as "...my lord white as jasmine," or, as in the previous poem, "Lord Cennamallikarjuna". Through her poetry, Mahadevyakka also expresses her emotions of being torn between being female and at the same time as being human. Her yearning is expressed by her desire to transcend the boundaries placed on her as female and human to achieve true union with Siva. As she states with reference to gender limitations:

As long as woman is woman, then
A man defiles her;

As long as man is man,
A woman defiles him.
When the mind's taint is gone, is there room for the body's taint?...
(Ramaswamy 15)

Further study of Mahadevyakka's poetry reveals her life story. One can follow Mahadevyakka's life through her poetry with respect to her marriage to Siva. Her poetry begins with King Kausika, her rejection of the world and ends with her final union with Siva through whom she escapes the human world. Her final union with Siva is described in her *vacana*:

Hear me, O Father Linga:
This feeling has become my life...
Mark you, Cennamallikarjuna:
Worshipping Thee with all my heart,
My wheel of births has ceased! (Olson 495)

Mahadevyakka's metaphors of human love are expressions of her mystic journey. She is revered as the most poetic saint among the Virasaiva saints (Ramanujan 113).

References and Further Recommended Reading

- Blake Michael, R. (1983) "Woman of the Śūnyasampādane: Housewives and Saints in Virasaivism." *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 103, No. 2.
- Olson, Carl (2007) *Hindu Primary Sources*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Oxtoby, Willard G. (2002) *World Religions: Eastern Traditions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ramanujan, A.K. (1973) *Speaking of Śiva*. Hollingsworth : Penguin Publishing.
- Ramaswamy, Vijaya (1996) *Divinity and Deviance: Women in Virasaivism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Related Topics for Further Investigation

Female mystic

Saint

Guru

Virasaivism

Lingayats

Linga

Basava (Basavanna)

Female Pollution

Bhakti

Siva

Saiva Devotionalism

Noteworthy Websites Related to the Topic

<http://www.indiyogi.com/content/indiangurus/female-saint-mahadeviyakka.aspx>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Akka_Mahadevi

<http://sacred-songs.blogspot.com/2007/06/mahadeviyakka.html>

Article written by: Virginia Williams (April 2010) who is solely responsible for its contents.