

PAGES FROM THE PAST

The mystic poet

Unconventional Kannada poet Akka Mahadevi was fierce in her love for Lord Shiva, and this shines through in her compelling work. Come, let's find out more about this 12th Century mystic

By Anusha Parthasarathy

A Kannada poet who left her home and family, renounced material wealth and possessions, and roamed the kingdoms looking for her one true love, God, became a symbol of social reform and female emancipation. Akka Mahadevi was a rebel, poet and mystic who took the world by storm in the 12th Century with her fierce love for Lord Shiva and unapologetic ways of letting the world know that there is no one else for her but him.

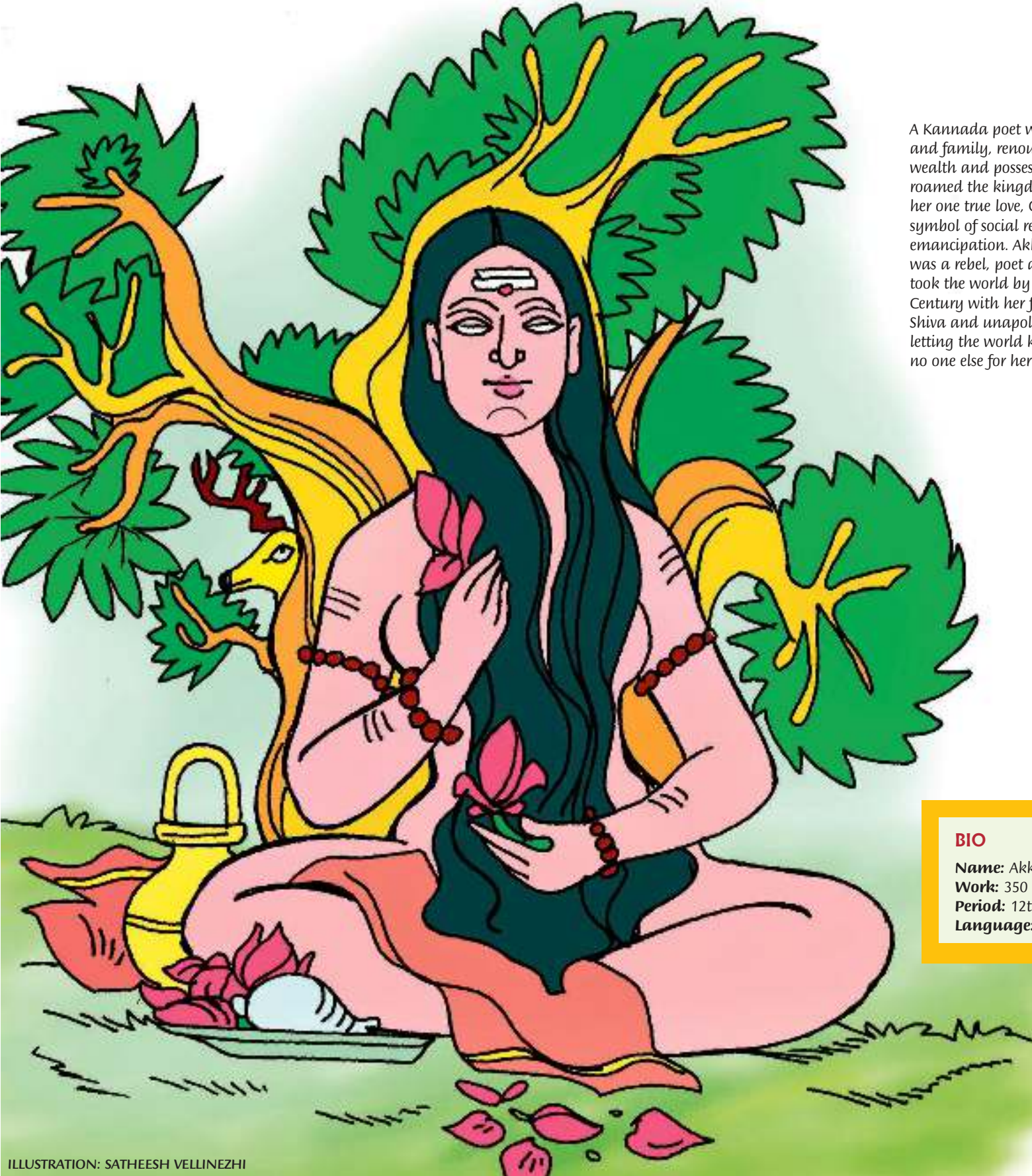
BIO

Name: Akka Mahadevi

Work: 350 Vachanas

Period: 12th Century

Language: Kannada



About

Mahadevi was born in Udupadi in present-day Karnataka around 1130 A.D.; the exact year is unknown. Her parents were spiritual and followers of Lord Shiva, and from a very young age, Mahadevi was taught to be devoted to the Lord. Beyond this detail, not much is known about Mahadevi's early life. Some say she decided not to marry and walked out of her birth home with nothing but her long tresses covering her body.

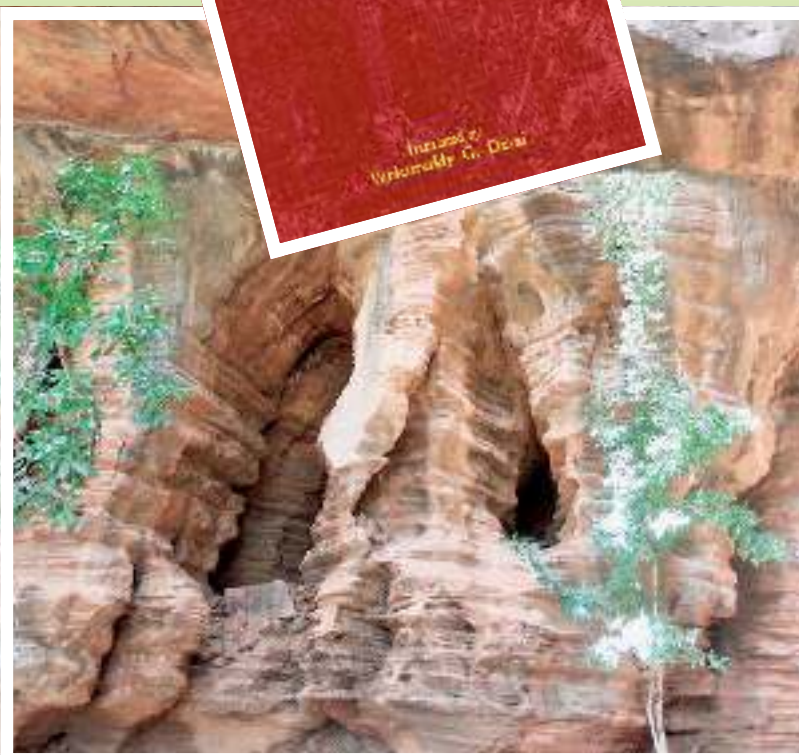
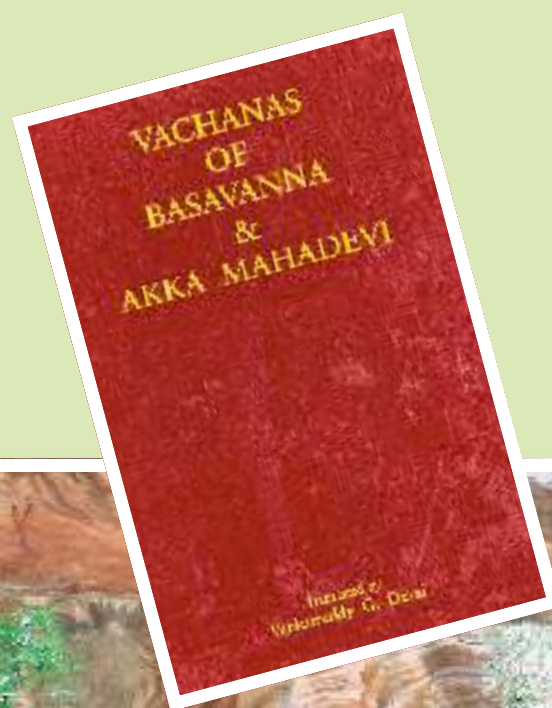
Another story goes that the Jain ruler of the area, Kaushika, fell in love with her and proposed marriage. The marriage took place under the dictate that he would not disturb her prayers or touch her without her consent. Kaushika failed to keep his promise and she left his home, leaving behind everything from her clothes to material wealth.

She began to wander the entire State searching for Lord Shiva and finally found Kalyana, the place where two principal Veerashaivite saints Basava and Allama Prabhu lived. These saints conferred her with the title 'Akka' or 'elder sister'.

In Kalyana, she composed many of her poems and her unique 'ankita' or signature that allowed later scholars to define which work was hers. She always referred to Shiva as Chennamallikarjuna or 'Lord as white as Jasmine.'

She later moved to Kadali near Srisailam (in Andhra Pradesh), where she spent her last days.

Mahadevi's poetry was mostly spiritual and often about her love for Chennamallikarjuna.



Akka Mahadevi caves near Srisailam where the poet is said to have spent some time. PHOTO: JONAIKOBANGALI / WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Did you know?

When Mahadevi arrived at the anubhava mantapa in Kalyana, she was put to test by Allama Prabhu. These interactions were compiled in a 15th Century anthology of vachanas called Sunya Sampadane. Of the 350 vachanas that bear her ankita, the most complex and brilliant are those in this compilation.

