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Research article

A Reflection on The Inter-Semiotic Transformation of Select Vacanas of Akka Mahadevi into a Music-Dance Production

[†]MA JYOTHI

*Musician and Independent Researcher
Mysore, India*

[†]Corresponding author: jomirle@gmail.com

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This project was set out to curate dance videos of select vacanas, meaning, religious free verses in Kannada, of Akka Mahadevi, a twelfth century poet from Karnataka, India. Vacanas are religious lyrics in free verse which mean 'a saying' or 'a thing said'. By translating Akka's vacanas to music and dance the project aimed to transport the essence of her poetry to the viewer. The symbols, images and metaphors used by the poet from discursive fields such as *Bhakthi* movement (a spiritual reform movement in India), Vedas, Upanishads, Yoga and feminism were re-interpreted through traditional music and dance styles recognized as classical arts by the national government, by a process of, what I theorize, as inter-semiotic transformation. Inter-semiotic transformation is the reinterpretation of symbols from one semiotic system, say, literature into others like music, dance, film or theatre. This paper analyses strategies of bringing poetry into the realm of aesthetic experience of viewers through the performing arts.

Keywords: inter semiotic transformation, Akka Mahadevi, vacanas, collaborative arts practice, Indian classical music, Indian classical dance

A reflection on the inter-Semiotic transformation of select Vacanas of Akka Mahadevi into a music-dance production

When the pandemic started in March of 2020, the general state of panic and closure of performances and public events affected me, as it did to many other artistes. I began learning some vacanas set to tune by my grandfather, late H. Yoganarasimham, more than fifty years ago, and was instantly drawn to both the lyrics and musicality in them. A vacanas is a religious lyric in Kannada free verse which literally means 'a saying, or thing said' (AK Ramanujam, 1973: 11). I wished to make music videos of these vacanas in collaboration with other artistes. I met up with Jyothi Shankar, a Kannada professor at the Karnataka state Open University, Mysore and an expert in vacanas literature, to first understand the meaning of these vacanas. Jyothi had worked with other dancers on similar lines and had an experience of the successes and challenges of translating poetry, a verbal medium to dance, a nonverbal medium. We discussed some of the vacanas and it was at this point that my interest in this form of literature grew and I approached a few dancer colleagues. Soon the project had eight people on board, ready to choreograph to vacanas and this collaborative project on Akka Mahadevi was born.

Background of Vacana Literature

The *Bhakti* movement in India began around the eighth century C.E. and continued until the eighteenth century. This was a reform movement aimed at bringing about equality in society especially with respect to religious practice and access to the masses. The movement had two main streams: vaishnavism, which proclaimed Vishnu as its supreme god and shaivism, which advocated Shiva as the supreme god. A slightly different ideology of shaivism called "Veerashaivism" evolved during the eleventh century in present day Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana regions. Veerashaivism drew from the *Upanishads*, *Vedas*, the Shaivism of Tamil Nadu (led by Nayanars) and *Tantras*. In the twelfth century, the movement reached its peak when their spiritual leader Basavanna, helped state its principles clearly. The movement saw the rise of vacanas literature.

Vacana literature reached its peak at a time when the region (of present-day Karnataka, Telangana and Andhra Pradesh) was in a state of huge political, religious and social turmoil. Veerashaivism rose as a response to Jainism and the hegemony of the upper class in Hinduism. Vacanas, composed by its followers – *sharanas* and *sharanes*, were meant as expressions and agents of social and religious reform. Vacanas were not composed as poetry or literary pieces of art but, in contrary, shunned affiliation to both the formal classical literature and folk lore. A.K. Ramanujam says, 'Vacanas are literature, but not merely literary. They are a literature in spite of itself, scorning artifice, ornament, learning, privilege: a religious literature, literary because religious; great voices of a sweeping movement of protest and reform in Hindu society; witnesses to conflict and ecstasy in gifted mystical men. Vacanas are our wisdom literature. They have been called the Kannada Upanishads' (1973). This form of *bhakti* literature stressed free expression through the spoken word, in contrast to the Brahminical texts which stressed listening to (*shruthi*) and recitation of pre-composed verses from memory (*smruti*). As vacanas were free verses, they have irregular meter and sometimes no rhyme, in contrast to poetry of classical Sanskrit literature (Alka Tyagi, 2008). Vacanas were composed in the local language, Kannada, rather than Sanskrit, the language of the learned with their concomitant casteist gate-keeping. Vacanas were usually simply uttered, but some were sung and presented in public.

Akka Mahadevi was one of the foremost female poets of the movement who, through her vacanas, influenced minds then and continues to do so now. Akka Mahadevi, Basavanna, Allamma, and Chennabasavanna are some of the most well-known sharanas.

Akka's fiercely passionate vacanas on her beloved God, Chenna Mallikarjuna (Shiva) stand testimonial to her *bhakti* and her evolution as a great yogi. As a poet who walked naked, she represents a free spirit, an ideology! As a woman who lived beyond her times, she stood tall drawing attention to her core, her intelligence and creativity, transgressing stereotypical gender roles and expectations. It is this spirit which this project hopes to convey through dance and music.

Status of Vacanas Literature in classical music and dance today

Only in the last seven decades or so, the invaluable contribution of vacanas *karas*, as the composers of vacanas are known, to Kannada literature has been recognised giving vacanas the high literary status they deserve. There is also an earnest drive to showcase vacanas in music concerts and dance recitals. Still, vacanas are not as common as bhajans of Meera, Sur Das or Tulsi Das in classical dance concert repertoire. In this project, an experiment was attempted by inviting dancers to choreograph using traditional form of dance to vacanas literature, a relatively new content.

Inter-semiotic transformation

In bringing Akka's vacanas into the artistic realm of experience of viewers through dance and music, I theorise, that an inter-semiotic transformation (Tyagi 2008: 68) was carried out. The word 'inter-semiotic translation', which was first coined by Roman Jakobson (1959:233), means an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems. This translation includes an exchange of forms and styles across genres. For example, translation of the Sanskrit *Ramayana* into regional languages like Tamil (by Kamban) and Braj (by Tulsidas) and subsequently, into the genres of theatre as in the case of Ramalila of the North and Kathakkali (originally called Ramanattam) of the South (Tyagi 2008: 72).

Tyagi derives the term 'Inter-semiotic transformation' to denote the use of various semiotic systems in creative works like poetry. Tyagi refers to the use of images, metaphors, symbols and signs from Vedas, Upanishads, mythology, and contemporary secular traditions, rituals and folk-lore by poets Akka Mahadevi and Andal in their poetry as inter-semiotic transformation. Tyagi notes, 'the poets draw from discursive fields and mould it to suit their own individual experience creating new social and even religious realities'. (2008) Tyagi identifies a second type of transformation, which occurs when this poetry is reinterpreted in music, film, dance and theatre. This paper will highlight the inter-semiotic transformations carried out by the poet while composing the vacanas and how the poetry was further transformed to music and dance during the project.

The project

In this project I set out to curate dance videos of select works of Akka Mahadevi. For the participants, this process of transforming a poet's work into one's own embodied voice would essentially be a process of applying their creativity in choreographing to lesser-explored content of vacanas literature. Experiencing the joy of poetry is often limited to the intelligentsia. Translating vacanas to music and dance, as a powerful medium for story-telling, helps to transport its essence to a larger audience. The vacanas were carefully selected to enable the portrayal of Akka Mahadevi's immense courage, conviction, her profound thoughts and intellect through dance. The project aimed to transgress all barriers of faith, language or cultural identity in carrying this message.

Collaborative process

The project was conceived of as a collaborative work rather than as a direction of a single person. Eight dancers were invited to participate in the project. As the project

curator, I facilitated a discussion with a literary expert and provided reading material to help the dancers delve into vacanas literature. With the help of the literary expert, the musicians, including myself, set music to the vacanas which gave the dancers a basic structure to work with. Dancers used a judicious mix of narrating real-life instances, context building and artistic imagination in their choreography. The dancers gave their requirements for music - such as what embellishments, rhythm patterns, instrumental music and special effects were needed, this was conveyed to other musicians. The final music and choreography thus evolved through an organic process of reflection and feedback in an online platform. Once the music was finalised, an audio recording was done in a professional setting and the music shared with the dancers. After about two months of practise, the dancers were video graphed. The videos were edited, expert's narration was added to develop the music-literature-dance production titled *Akka Kellavva* (Listen, O sister!). The project helped bring new understandings in artistic practice as the dancers worked on vacanas literature, which have profound ideas in simple language.

Curation of Akka's works

Akka Kellavva depicts the travails of Akka's life - as a woman, a seeker and a mystic. In curating this production, eight vacanas were carefully arranged to narrate the chronologically, the major events from Akka's real life.

Fig 1. SEQUENCE OF VACANAS USED IN THIS CURATION

| STAGES | VACANAS - DANCE FORM |
|--|--|
| I Mahadevi's early life - breaking free from the shackles of womanhood and choosing the life of a sharane. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>Giriyallade Hullu</i> – Kathak dance, Seema Vishwanath 2. <i>Pachcheya nelaghattu</i> – Mohini attam, Sreekrupa and Chinmayi 3. <i>Gurupaada teerthave</i> – Bharatanatyam, Niveditha S 4. <i>Hasive neenu Nillu Nillu</i> – Bharatanatyam, Aparna Shashank 5. <i>Giriyolu Banadolu</i> – Kuchipudi, Sreelakshmy Govardhanan |
| II Mahadevi is accepted into the community of Sharanas/es at Anubhava Mantapa and given the title 'Akka'. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 6. <i>Kayya Dhanava</i> – Medley 7. <i>Huttide sree guruvinu hastadalli</i> – Kuchipudi, Souparnika |
| III Akka continues her journey as a lone seeker. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 8. <i>Mooladharada bera metti</i> – Mohiniattam, Suchitra Anilkumar |

Understanding the verbal signs and symbols in Vacanas literature

In the section below, the various signs and symbols used in Akka's vacanas have been highlighted. This is followed by an illustration of how these were represented through music and dance.

Vacanas as personal statements

A typical characteristic of vacanas literature was that each poet called their god Shiva with their own special name. Akka profusely express her love for her personal God - Chenna Mallikarjuna, 'the lovely lord white as jasmine' (Ramanujan, 1973). In vacanas 1, Akka for instance says, '*I will not entertain any other God other than Chenna Mallikarjuna in my thoughts*'. In vacanas 2, she says, '*My people got me married off to my husband, Chenna Mallikarjuna*', while in vacanas 5 and vacanas 8 she addresses him as '*Deva*', Lord. Unlike other Bhakti literature where poets praise the extraordinary qualities of their favourite God, his physical attributes, glory and heroic acts, Akka's vacanas are mostly expressions of her personal feelings and emotions and are invariably in first person. In another vacanas, from which the project got its title, she addresses her friend as '*Akka*' (sister) and tells her about her dream, where she marries Chenna Mallikarjuna.

In presenting these vacanas through music and dance, both musicians and dancers were required to personify themselves as Akka and embody the vacanas. Only where it was necessary, did they play other roles, to aid in story-telling. This was the first requirement for the musicians and dancers. Here, Akka's persona was that of a fiercely passionate devotee and an equally dispassionate human being. This coexistence of two contrasting qualities makes Akka a most challenging character to perform.

Concept of Shiva in Vacanas Literature

In expressing devotion to their favorite God, devotees could worship one with form or without. Shiva, as mentioned in the puranas and folk lore, is an ash-smeared, long-haired god, with river Ganga and a crescent moon adorning his head, a snake around his neck, cymbals and *trishool* (a weapon) in hand and a tiger skin around his waist. Shiva is also said to be formless and is represented by the Linga (see Fig 1). The linga symbolises the Universal consciousness. The symbol of an aroused phallus represents the awakened state of consciousness even while the external world is not being perceived (Pattanaik, 2016).



Fig. 1a. Image of Shiva (Source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shiva>)

In the veerashaivism philosophy, both these concepts coexist. Allama says in one of his vacanas:

*Both Form and Formless Are abstractions
One is invocation and the other dissolution
One is involvement, the other non-involvement*

Beyond both these means "Is Goggeswara"
[Translation by H.S. Shivaprakash in Tyagi,
2008]



Fig. 1b: Symbol of Linga and its *mudra* in Indian dance. Kuchipudi dancer Souparnika in frame 2, Bharatanatyam dancer Niveditha S in frame 3.

In classical Indian dance, Shiva is usually depicted as Lord Nataraja, the God who performed the cosmic dance. However, in keeping with the idea of a formless god in Veerashaivism, the linga mudra was used by the dancers to depict Chenna Mallikarjuna, except when the vacanas called for a different treatment.

For example, in vacanas 5, Akka wanders in the forests, hills and shrubs, looking for her God. Here, she is seeking her God with a physical form and says 'show me kindness, reveal yourself!'. The dancer adds her imagination here climbers and creepers in the forest remind her of Mallikarjuna's mat of curly hair and the snake in the forest, could be the one around Shiva's neck? (See Fig.3)



Fig 2. Depiction of creepers and Mallikarjuna's mat of curls. Kuchipudi dancer Sreelakshmy Govardhanan



Fig. 3. Akka waiting to have a glimpse of Mallikarjuna – Sees a snake – Snake around Shiva's neck. Kuchipudi dancer Sreelakshmy Govardhanan

Akka eventually realises that God lies within. Depicting this realisation with the gesture of open arms symbolising surrender in panel 4. Special effects in videography and Tana (a type of rendering music without lyrics, with the word 'ananta') were used to enhance this.



Fig. 4. Akka's moment of realisation that God lies within. Kuchipudi dancer Sreelakshmy Govardhanan

Use of Imagery from Nature in Akka's vacanas

Akka was a child of nature. She uses a lot of metaphors and imagery from nature in her vacanas. In vacana 5, Akka looks for Mallikarjuna in the forests and hills and calls out 'Deva, O my Deva, come!' The outdoor shooting of this dance enhanced the imagery used by the poet. In vacanas 1, Akka argues that the peacock prefers the vast hills rather than a small mound of grass, the swan prefers large water bodies rather than puddles, the cuckoo sings only on the mango tree, and the wasp is drawn only to flowers with fragrance. How then, will I think of a God other than Chenna Mallikarjuna? The choreography depicted the dancing of the birds and wasp through body movements and intricate rhythm patterns on the percussion to suit them.

Depicting the major concepts of Veerashaivism through Dance Linga Worship

Veerashaivaites worship their God in the not in the form of an '*ishtalinga*' (a linga of one's wish) rather than idol as in other sects of Hinduism. The Linga is worn on their

body by placing it in a small casket and tied to a thread around the neck or waist. The current practices (ritual) for Ishtalinga worship were adapted into the choreography after discussing with veerashaivites and watching videos. These are significantly different from worship practices in other Hindu sects that practice idol worship.

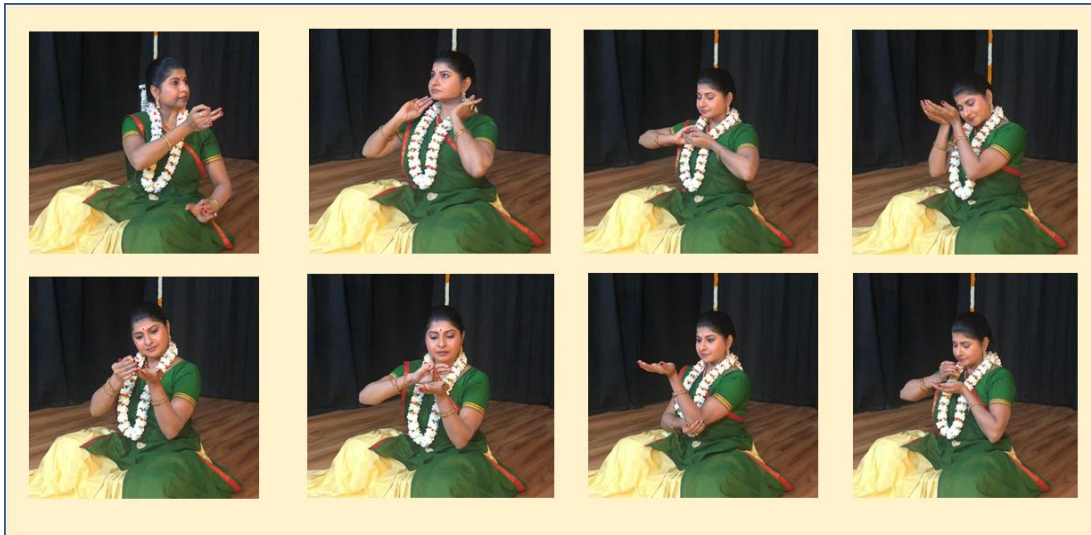


Fig 5. *Ishtalinga* worship. Kathak dancer, Seema Viswanath. Sequence from left to right: 1. A lamp is lit 2. Linga worn on the neck 3. Linga is removed from its casket 4. Touching to the eyes with devotion 5. Offering flowers 6. Applying ashes 7. Meditating with the Linga in the palm 8. Placing the Linga back inside.

Guru

A Guru is considered most sacred in Veerashaivism . It is the Guru who initiates one into the sect by tying the linga around his/her neck. The Guru is the one who, through his teachings, shows the path of righteousness and knowledge of the supreme. Two vacanas- vacanas 3 and vacanas 7, focus on the concept of Guru. In both these vacanas, Akka brilliantly weaves the tenets of Veerashaivism into the cultural practices of the time to declare her own unflinching stance.

In vacanas 3, Akka states: 'Water from the Guru's feet is my holy bath.... The dust from my Guru's tread, sandal paste.' Here Akka uses contrasting imagery to describe herself; a true Veerashaiviate - a renunciant to that of Chenna Mallikarjuna's bride, to justify her own decision to renounce all attire.

*Water from the Guru's feet is my holy bath....
Ashes are turmeric
The directions my choicest clothes
The dust from my Guru's tread, sandal paste
Rudrakshi is my bridal veil
Sharana's slippers make my bridal head gear
Chenna Mallikarjuna is my husband
I am Chenna Mallikarjuna's bride
Why would I need any other ornaments?
Tell me, O my sisters!
(Translated by Jyothi MA)*

To this day, a married woman is considered lucky for others and 'blessed' in Indian society. Akka cleverly uses this sentiment to declare her ascetic state - dressed with rudraksha and nothing but her hair for clothing she holds her own stand, breaking away from all societal norms.

The music for this vacanas was composed in raga *vasanta*, a raga which denotes *srungara* or romance. Alternatively, this raga also denotes valor and is aptly suited to state Akka's bold declaration. The music composer used the last two lines as an alliteration – Why would I need any other adornments? In choreographing this piece, the dancer overcame the challenge of depicting a naked Akka by introducing several characters who react in different ways to Akka's state, in a short prelude to the vacanas.

In vacanas 7, Akka states:

*In the holy Guru's palm I was born
I grew up with the empathy of many.
Milk of emotions, ghee of knowledge
Sugar of Ultimate Truth, they fed me with, you see
Giving these three essences in plenty
They nurtured me
You married me off to an extraordinary husband
To see me off to my husband's home,
You have gathered in great numbers.
Worthy of BasavaNna's praise,
I shall build my family
By holding Chenna Maallikarjuna's hand
I shall bring flowers to your head and not grass
Bowing to all your feet
I take leave...*

(Translated by Jyothi MA)

In the above vacanas, Akka announces her decision to lead a life of absolute serenity and *vyragya* (renunciation) to the sharana community. Akka uses the metaphor of parental home vs. husband's home here. This is a cultural practice (prevalent even today) that the woman leaves the parental home to enter the husband's home. Akka addresses all the Sharanas assembled at the Anubhava Mantapa as her Gurus and expresses her gratitude for nurturing her with the best of sensitivities, knowledge and service to Lord as ideals and getting her married to Shiva. She seeks their permission to go to her husband's home and lead a family life with Him, softening the blow that she wanted to get away from them! This is the poetic brilliance of Akka.

Raga *Hameer Kalyani* was used for this vacanas to portray Akka's gratitude and the peaceful state of mind that she was in as she bid goodbye to the sharanas/es. In the dance choreography, limited movements and apt facial expressions were used to show Akka's gratitude as she bids adieu to the sharana community to go to Srisaila and become one with Mallikarjuna

Concept of Acharas

In vacanas 8, Akka says, '*holding onto the roots of acharas, I climbed to the summit of aikya...*' Here, the words '*Achara*' and '*Aikya*' are two important concepts of Veerashaivism. Veerashaivism was highly inclusive in welcoming people into its sect. Nevertheless, it prescribed a code of conduct (acharas) for its followers. There were five '*acharas*' to be observed by the followers for spiritual progress. These *acharas* were depicted by the dancer in her choreography.

Concept of Aikya

Aikya in common language, refers to unity. In the Veerashaiva philosophy, it refers to the last of the six stages in a person's spiritual journey. In the beginning, there is God referred to as '*Anadi*' or one who has no beginning, from whom every individual originates.

During one's lifetime, through one's deeds, elimination of Karma or the flow of the continuity can result in the elimination of suffering. '*Aikya*' refers to the final release from *bhava* or suffering where the soul leaves the physical body and merges with the Supreme.

Relationship with God: *Linga-Pati, Sharana-Sati*

In Veerashaivism, the concept of *Linga-pati, sharana-sati* states that Linga (Shiva) is the husband and all devotees (*sharanas/sharanes*) his dutiful wives. In vacanas 2, Akka says,

*A mat of emeralds,
buntings of gold,
pillar of diamonds,
a mantap of corals,
pearls and precious stones adorning it,
my people got me married off,
tying the sacred thread which binds us for life,
and blessing us with holy rice grains,
my people married me off to my husband Chenna Mallikarjuna*
(Translated by Jyothi MA)

This vacanas, seemingly simple, is a perfect example of Akka's mystic experiences (*anubhaava*). In this vacanas, the riches – emerald, gold, diamonds, corals, pearls and rubies stand for all things precious, beautiful and invaluable; marriage with the Lord - a permanent bond; and 'my people' refers to the community of *sharanas* and *sharanes* to which she belongs, not her family members.

As a prelude to the above vacanas, the dancer depicts Mahadevi's marriage to the Jain King Kaushika; her putting forth 3 conditions for marriage; his failing to keep his word and Mahadevi's subsequent leaving the palace to lead the life of a *sharane*. This builds the context for the vacanas where Mahadevi narrates her marriage to God Chenna Mallikarjuna.



Fig. 6. King Kaushika claiming his right over Mahadevi. Mohini attam dancers Sree Krupa and Chinmayi.



Fig. 7. Akka's mystic experience of being married to Chenna Mallikarjuna. Mohini attam dancer Chinmayi.

In composing the music to this vacanas, the musician used the raga *yadukula kamboji*, a raga used in traditional wedding songs of South India, to denote the auspicious marriage between the Lord and Akka. This is a perfect example of inter-semiotic transformation through music.

Yoga and Tantra

Veerashaivism is also said to have borrowed ideas from the Shakta philosophy. Here, God is conceived to be qualified by Shakti or cosmic energy. According to this, cosmic energy resides in seven chakras within the human body, five in the human spinal column and two in the head. Although they are said to be 'located' in seven places of the human body, these places are not perceivable through the senses. Through the practice of Yoga a seeker activates this energy within the body and reaches the supreme state of consciousness.

The references to Yoga in Akka's vacanas, point that Akka was a great Yogi who had attained mastery over her body and mind. Vacanas 4 and vacanas 8, depicted this aspect of her persona. Each chakra, symbolised by a lotus, was shown using the mudra (gesture) at the corresponding point in the body. The position of the hands corresponds to the position of the chakra.

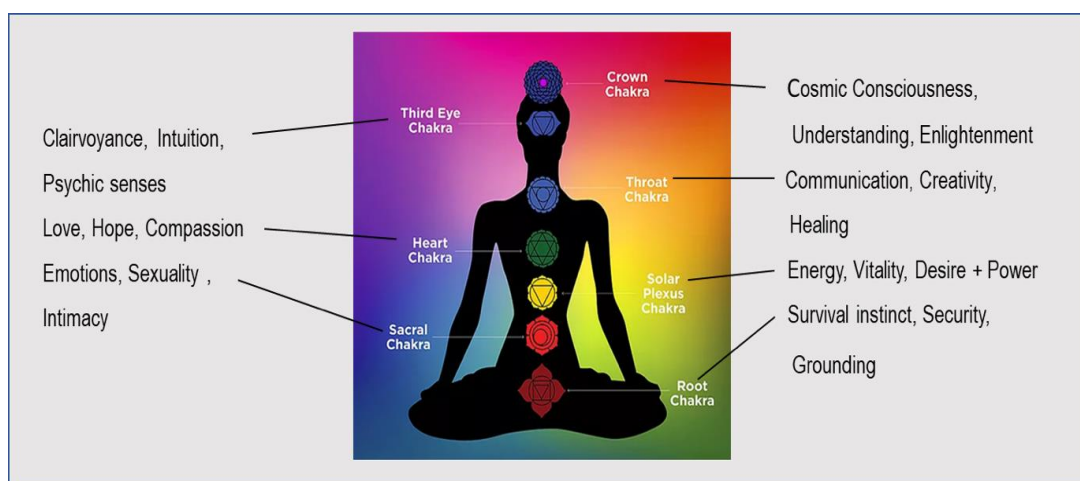


Fig. 8. The seven *chakras* according to Yoga (Adapted from <https://stylecaster.com/beauty/chakras-guide/>).

In vacanas 8, Akka says, '*Suppressing the 'mooladhara' by its roots, I climbed to the point between the brows*'. This refers to her conquering the chakras from *mooladhara* to the *Agna* (third eye) chakra. The implied meaning is that she has overcome bodily needs, desires of the world, affections, pain and pleasure to be immersed only in the thought of God. The dancer uses whole body posture and hand movement to create the visual effect of the *kundalini shakthi* rising from the root up to the point between the brows.



Fig. 9. The conquering of various *chakras* from *Mooladhara* to *Agna*. Mohini attam dancer Kalamandalam Suchitra Anilkumar.

Depicting the connections between chakras and emotions

This conquering of mind and body did not happen overnight for Akka Mahadevi. In vacanas 4, Akka expresses her struggle within as she seeks to gain control over her own needs and unite with Chenna Mallikarjuna.

Hunger, Stop Stop!
Thirst, Stop Stop!
Sleep, Stop Stop!
Lust, Stop Stop!
Anger, Stop Stop!
Attachment, Stop Stop!
Greed, Stop Stop!
Pride, Stop Stop!
Jealousy, Stop Stop!
Fickle-mindedness, Stop Stop!
I am carrying an urgent letter to Chenna Mallikarjuna

After enormous struggle, Akka manages to gain control over her emotions and needs, as depicted in the above vacanas. Each chakra is said to have an emotion associated with it. The dancer expresses this struggle of conquering hunger, thirst, and emotions and symbolically represented it as Akka conquering each chakra. This may be seen in the figures below: Facial expression for each need, conquest shown by the mudra of lotus (picture to the farthest right) with a serene expression. Chants *Lam, Vam, Yam, Ram* and *Om* associated with each chakra, were added to the music enhancing this reference to Yoga. Raga *Revathi*, a melody used for vedic chants was used while composing music for this vacanas.

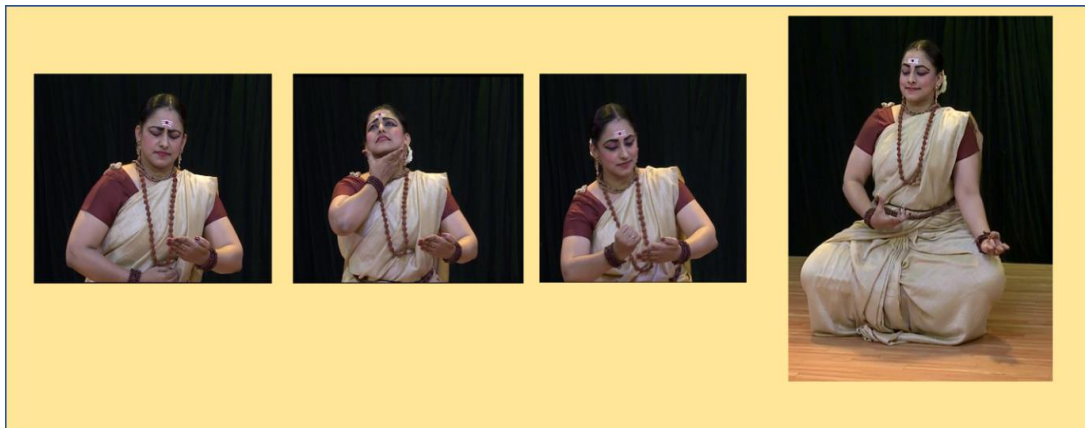


Fig. 10. Emotions and Chakras. Bharatanatyam dancer Aparna Shashank depicting Akka's struggle with hunger, thirst and sleep. The last frame depicts Akka's conquest of the Mooladhara chakra, the chakra which relates to physical needs, through meditation.

Feminine agency

Ultimately, what makes Akka's vacanas relevant to today's times is her absolute power of conviction and determination to make her own choices in life. Subjected to all kinds of physical and mental threats, shame and disrespect, she still pursued her path of devotion and overcame limiting forces, established herself as a person of high intellect and creativity. Vijaya Ramaswamy (1992: 134) states the status of women in medieval India:

'In brief, the role assigned to women in traditional Indian society consisted of these two extremes - the sacrificing mother, chaste wife, or obedient daughter or, alternately, the prostitute. Thus, traditional society seemed to provide no scope for either the independence or the self-expression of women. But is a woman to be perceived only in terms of the various roles she performs vis-à-vis man as daughter, wife, and mother? Did contemporary society provide any scope for a woman to express her individuality without accepting either marriage or motherhood? The spiritual path helped women to break out of all stereotypes. As a saint, she made the unacceptable acceptable. She broke out of the chains of tradition, orthodoxy, and convention which attempted to control her sexuality, and sought God whether as a naked saint (Akka Mahādēvi) or as a skeletal being (Kāraikkāl Ammaiār).'

When Akka reaches Anubhava Mantapa, Allamma challenges her in front of the assembly of sharanas and sharanes. Stunned at the sight of a naked woman among their midst, the sharanas/es are uncomfortable when Akka arrives at the assembly. Allama, although aware of Akka's devotion, questions her as to why she still covers herself with her long tresses? In Vacanas 6, below, Akka tells people that it is her mind that matters and not the body!

*The hand that earned wealth can be taxed.
But can the beauty of the body be taxed?
You can snatch my dress and ornaments.*

*But can you snatch away
the Peace that wraps me round?
Does one who, being clad in
The light of Chennamallikarjuna,
Has shed all shame,
Need clothes and ornaments,
O fool?*
(Aravintellimath 2006, in Tyagi 2008.)

Akka's reply is perhaps the best example of feminine agency - refusing to be treated as a material object, but to be valued for her mind and spirit! In depicting this vacanas, a medley of videos was used to convey the difficult content of the vacanas.

Learnings from the project

First of all, care was taken to select vacanas which lent themselves to dance as vacanas had both abstract and mystic content. In undertaking an exercise in inter-semiotic transformation of the vacanas, the focus was on retaining the essence of the poet's meaning and not on adding one's own imagination to the choreography or music. The challenge of choreographing abstract concepts, spiritual aspects and psychological states of mind was a learning curve for all the dancers. Working with literary and dance experts was an absolutely essential part of the project to understand the hidden symbols, meanings, imagery and references to Veerashaivism concepts. Sufficient study went into the effort before attempting to tune or choreograph the vacanas. For example, what are chakras and how can they be represented through dance? How to show *acharas* through dance? While depicting symbols from Yoga in dance, the gestures must be simple and should not require further esoteric knowledge for understanding them. The narration and subtitles in English helped a great deal. Authenticity of historical facts, rituals, beliefs and terminology and respect to the sentiments of community in question was not compromised at any point.

Guru Nandini Esver's insights regarding choreographing to abstract literature such as Akka's vacanas, is noteworthy. Two sequences were given by her to aid the dancers in their choreography:

- a. Understand the literary content – understand the poet's psychological state – Translate into body movement, facial expression
- b. Identify spiritual state of character – psychological state – physical translation of expression (abhinaya).

For example, as Akka conquers each chakra, movement may be shown. But as the character portrayed reaches *agna* chakra, the dancer has to show visually that the person/character is no longer conscious of the world around them, hence absolute stillness and serene face to depict the psychological and spiritual state.

As a musician, singing and composing music to Akka's vacanas was an inspiring process. Setting music appropriately for the meaning becomes absolutely essential for choreographing effectively. Music was composed using the instruments commonly used for certain forms of dance – for example, tabla for kathak, Mrudanga and kanjira for Mohini attam. Working with several dancers and musicians gave insights into the transformation process as words became sounds and movements; making the tangible intangible and vice versa.

In retrospect, the project of presenting Akka's vacanas through dance and music was a most enjoyable process and has been a deeply satisfying journey for me as a musician as well as a curator of the project. I owe my gratitude to all the participants who made this possible. The response to this dance-for-film-project has been gratifying. The production gave the viewers the essence of Akka's poetry – narration by Jyothi Shankar

added immense value. The emotions portrayed through music and dance made the vacanas intensely performative.

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