

Evolution of Carnatic music- a series

By Smitha K. Prasad

Dear readers, in this month's column, we continue to look at the role of women, both composers and performers, in Carnatic music. This time, we focus on two other early woman composers- Akka Mahadevi, who was one of the proponents of the 12th century *Bhakti* movement and Meerabai, another proponent of the *Bhakti* movement in the North India.

The *Veerashaiva Bhakti* movement came into existence around the 12th century to protest the existing social order in Hindu society. Akka Mahadevi was part of this movement that made her an inspiration for women, who were suppressed by society. Her poetry in Kannada called *vacahanas* spoke out against caste system and spoke of social and gender equality. These *vachanas* (about 400 in number) which are in praise of Lord Shiva are considered her greatest contribution to Kannada *Bhakti* literature. Having renounced her life of luxury, she lived as a wandering poet-saint. Akka Mahadevi, along with the other two *Veerashaiva* saints Allamaprabu and Basaveshwarah are considered the trinity of the *Veerashaiva* movement.

Akka Mahadevi's *vachanas* are included as part of a Carnatic music concert, usually in the *tukkadas* section. Of late, concerts based solely on *vacahanas* are gaining popularity due to their devotional meaning.

Another exponent of the *Bhakti* movement in the northern part of India was the Rajput princess Meera. Despite being born in a royal family, Meera worshipped Lord Krishna, dancing and singing in the streets with gay abandon. For this, she was ill-treated by her in-laws after the death of her husband. Meerabai's poetry is in simple verse form in the Braj dialect and exudes complete surrender to the Lord.

Meera *bhajans* are also a common inclusion in Carnatic music concerts. The popularity of Meera *bhajans* among Carnatic musicians soared after the legendary musician M. S. Subbulakshmi portrayed the character of Meera and sang a number of Meera *bhajans* in the 1945 film "Meera".

Till we meet next time, do try and listen to *vacahanas* of Akka Mahadevi as well as to renditions of Meera *bhajans*. The beauty of these compositions lies in their simplicity.

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