



Scribbles on Akka

Starring: Seema Biswas, Sabitri Heisnam, Harish Khanna
Background Music: Shantanu Maitra
Editing: Shyamal Karmakar
Camera: A.Mukul Kishore, R.V.Ramani
Song Composition: Ilyaraja
Script & Direction: Madhusree Dutta

Run Time: 60 minutes

Language: Kannada, Hindi, English



'12th century - means more than eight hundred years back? Oh of course, the market for mythologicals is growing by the day. So, you are also joining the bandwagon.' 'Saint poet of the 12th century - sounds more like a TV series than a non-fiction film.'

No! It will not be a mythological, not even historical. It will be - well - a contemporary film on a 12th century poet - no, no, not an adaptation project - we shall look for the reflection of Mahadevi Akka in the contemporary mirror. Let me put it this way - we shall invest the many icons that Akka evoked into contemporary life and images. Sounds like an academic cliché? Ok - the film will be on our own time in the context of Mahadevi Akka, the 12th century bhakti poet.

But then why Akka? If it is a film on our time then the could have been anything/anybody else - less remote. Anyway, you don't even know Kannada. No, I don't. I am not well versed with the history of 12th century Karnataka either.

And that is where the film starts. An early twenty first century look from an unit of assorted urbane migrants to the oral literature phenomena of 12th century Kannada. The film is an exercise in building a bridge across eight hundred years. Mahadevi Akka, the poet, still influences the contemporary poets and painters. Mahadevi Akka, the deity, graces the packets of pickles and papads - prepared by ladies' co-operatives. Mahadevi Akka, the legendary nude saint, adorns pinup posters and music cassette covers. The bridge is already there. But how did it happen?



Why women poets of feminist era obsessively write pieces of dialogues with Akka? Why a painter in Baroda incessantly paints various images of Akka? Why is she still marketable as a brand name? Who is she? She was a commoner. It is impossible to trace her lineage, she is etched out of hundreds different local myths. The stories

overlap, lose the tail in anonymity; images get blurred, contradict each other - but she survives, has survived through eight hundred years.

We start shooting - a part of the film is cinema varite. Friends, acquaintances, strangers protagonists talk about their Akka - they create their very own Mahadevi Akka according to their belief - need - bhakti. Akka has survived - quietly without any media intervention - because we needed her, because we created a relationship with her. She survived in many contradictory fragments and in multiple selves - simultaneously, through eight centuries.



But the poet - her work? We first read her work in the brilliant translation by A K Ramanujan. Love poems to the god with the body as the metaphor. ... "When shall I crush you on my pitcher breast....", "...not one, not two, not three, I come through 84,00,000 vaginas....", -radical, bawdy, ruthless. What will be the appropriate music? Which genre of song picturisation?

In 20th century there have been a few attempts to codify her poems (Vachanas) into hindustani classical music by maestros like Mallikarjun Mansoor and Basavaraj Rajguru. But that somehow sanitised the rough edges of her compositions. Some folk tunes survived in some small pockets of Karnataka, which are hopelessly out of depth. Then what is the contemporary sound for such lyric - pop? Rap? MTV style hotch potch? Is this an occasion to pay tribute to the film music, the mortal love songs?



The music director will be Illyraja. A classical based modern - but not so modern - composer with a tremendous sense of cinema and poetry. The extra boon is that he is an admirer of Akka's writings. He agreed - thinking he would release a devotional album. We rejoiced - thinking finally Akka's Vachanas (poems) will be released off the burden of archaic and classical. A bit of tension - three sittings only to convince him the worth of the project.

Six songs are composed for a one hour non-fiction film. We picturised them on assorted images of contemporary women creating small spaces, making small transgressions, initiating minor revolts. In Bombay suburban train a woman commuter balances her limbs and cuts vegetables, in a Karnataka village a feudal housewife reads a forbidden text after the whole world falls asleep, in a gothic church an ordinary woman puts her wedding ring on herself - she marries Christ. They are different women, ordinary women - through whom Akka survives. But they should be played by one actress. The actress is Seema Biswas.

But there is still more to Akka, the nude poet who wrote - 'to the shameless girl/ wearing the White Jasmine Lord's/ Light of morning,/ You fool,/ what's the need for cover and jewel?' What can be the cinematic expression for such an assertion of desire and nudity? Can we accomplish it without the trivia or the rhetoric associated with it?

Well, it needs a body which would break the customary association of female body and take representations of desire beyond subversion, mark asceticism within the map of assertion. Hence Akka should be represented by two presence's - the everyday, the mundane, and a sublime, a strike. Enter the other actress - the middle aged Sabitri Heisnaam, the eminent theatre actress and dancer from Manipur. As she makes a final journey on behalf of Akka on screen, the film becomes a conveyor belt, a circular and constant move from everyday to asceticism, from popular culture to divinity, a modern bhakti saga.

The film has completed fifteen screenings and I must admit that we got more audience in the pre-30 generation than the middle aged classic cine goers. That is 800 years old Akka for you!

Madhusree Dutta is a graduate of Economics. She has studied dramatics in National School of Drama. Presently she is the executive director of Majlis, a centre for multi-cultural interactions. She has several documentaries to her credit.