

Women Composers of India - Andal

- Smt.Chardra Bhanu, Sub Editor "Kinnera"

The devotional hymns of the Alvars, collectively known as Divya Prabandhams, contributed to the establishment of a culture that broke away from the ritual – oriented Vedic religion and propagated the Sri Vaishnava philosophy that believes in devotion as the only path for salvation. These hymns were regularly sung in temples, set to tunes using ancient Panns (equivalent to present day Ragas). Thus they played a major role in the evolution of our system of music.

Sri Andal, the only female saint poetess among the Alvars, is considered as the incarnation of Bhoomi Devi and worshipped in all Sri Vaishnava temples. In the short span of fifteen years that she lived, she composed two great works that are considered equal to the Vedas. Her first work is the Thiruppavai, consisting of 30 hymns called Pasurams wherein she describes the Paavai vow observed during the month of Margazhi(Dhanur masam). The second one is Nachiyar Thirumozhi, a poem containing 143 verses. This title literally means 'the sacred sayings of our Goddess' and it reveals Andal's intense longing for Vishnu, her Divine Beloved.

Hagiography

A devout brahmin named Vishnuchitta (later came to be known as Periazhvar) lived between 6th and 7th centuries in a small town called Srivilliputtur near Madurai in Tamil Nadu. He had deep devotion to Lord Krishna and the Pasurams composed by him reflect his motherly love towards Krishna. He daily served the Lord by making garlands of flowers from his garden. One day as he was passing through his garden, he found a girl baby lying under a tulasi plant. Vishnuchitta was overwhelmed on seeing the child and felt that it was God's gift to him, who had no family of his own. He named her as Godai, meaning 'gift of Mother Earth' and brought her up with great care and affection. Godai grew up in an atmosphere filled with devotion and love for Lord Krishna, listening to His stories and singing His praise. By the time she was a



teenage girl, she was passionately in love with the Lord and decided that she would marry none other than Lord Krishna. She imagined herself as His bride and used to adorn herself with the garland her father prepared for the temple deity. After seeing her reflection in the well in their garden she used to put it back in its place for her father to take it to the temple. Ignorant of all this, Vishnuchitta used to take the garland and adorn the deity with that. One day he noticed a strand of hair in the garland and was terribly upset. He chided Godai for wearing the garland meant for the deity in the temple, discarded that garland, prepared another one and offered that to the Lord. That night Lord Krishna appeared in Vishnuchitta's dream and asked him why he discarded the garland worn by Godai which was very dear to Him and told that He would love to have the garland only after it was adorned by Godai. Vishnuchitta realised the spiritual greatness of his daughter and from that day Godai was named **Andal**, meaning girl who 'ruled' over the Lord.

As Andal grew into a beautiful young woman, Vishnuchitta wanted to get her married, but Andal stubbornly refused to accept anybody other than Sri Ranganatha of Srirangam as her husband. Vishnuchitta was perplexed at his daughter's strange behaviour and worried how her wish could be fulfilled. Again Lord Ranganatha appeared in his dream and asked him to bring Andal, bedecked as a bride to Srirangam. Simultaneously He appeared in the dream of the priests at Srirangam and told them to make preparations for receiving Andal. Vishnuchitta was extremely happy that his daughter is going to achieve her goal of getting united with Lord Ranganatha but at the same time he was very sad that he would lose her. Andal was taken in a palanquin with all wedding finery to Srirangam. She was so excited at her union with the Lord that as soon as they entered the temple she jumped out of the palanquin and ran towards the sanctum sanctorum, embraced the idol of Sri Ranganatha and merged with Him.

Even today, the tulsi garden where Andal was found is preserved in Srivilliputtur. The house where Vishnuchitta lived is converted into a temple in honour of Andal, along with the well where she used to see her reflection, wearing Lord's garlands.

Andal's Poetry

Andal is remembered more for her poetry, which is highly artistic, religious as well as philosophical. In her first work **Thiruppavai**, she imagines herself as a cowherd girl living during the time of Krishna avatara. Along with her other cowherd girl friends she performs the Paavai Nonbu or vratam to obtain the grace of Lord Krishna.

In the first five stanzas she describes the principle and purpose of the main theme i.e. the Pavai vratam which is observed for one full month of Margazhi (which is from 16 December to 15 January). The next ten stanzas describe how she goes to each house, wakes up her friends to join her in taking bath in the nearby pond and gather flowers for offering Krishna. Her picturesque

description of her village ,where one could hear the musical sound emanating from the churning of butter and tinkling of bells tied to cattle, give us a feeling that Andal is in Gokulam and she and her friends are gopikas yearning to be with Krishna. The next five stanzas describe how they all befriend the temple guards and make them open the doors for them and enter the temple. They pray to Krishna's parents and beg them to wake up Krishna and Balarama. In the last nine stanzas she sings the glories of Lord Krishna and surrenders at His Lotus Feet. In the concluding stanza she identifies her as the daughter of Vishnuchitta who lives in Villiputtur and says that whoever recites these 30 pasurams with devotion will receive Lord Krishnas's blessings. All the Pasurams end with the refrain 'yelorempavai' meaning 'oh my dear friend'.

Apart from the literal meaning of these pasurams they contain a deep inner philosophical thought. It is the soul's inner craving to get liberated from the cycle of birth and rebirth and to become one with the Lord. These pasurams are recited daily in the Vaishnavite temples all through the year and they gain more significance during the month of Margazhi, so much so that the days of the month are named after the first few words of the pasurams i.e. one for each of the 30 days. The first day is called 'Margazhi tingal', second day is 'Vaiyattu valvirgal' and so on.

Just like the Ramayana and Mahabharata, one is never tired of listening to the discourses on Thiruppavai. There have been innumerable commentaries written by eminent people on this great work. It has been translated into a number of Indian and Western languages. In Telugu it has been translated by Sri Devulapally Krishna Sastry and Sriman Nallan Chakravarthula Sampathkumara Venkata Parthasarathy. These verses are set to music and sung by eminent musicians and they are sung during concerts also. The most famous is the one rendered by Dr.M.L.Vasantakumari and It is played daily during the month of Margazhi in all temples. Another interesting point is that Thiruppavai is recited even in Thailand and the last two stanzas are recited during the coronation of the king of Thailand.

The second work **Nachiyar Thirumozhi** is not as popular as Thiruppavai may be because it belongs to the erotic genre of spirituality like the Ashtapadis of Jayadeva. There are 14 segments in this work and each segment has about 10 verses and deals with a particular topic. These are named after the first few phrases of the first pasuram of each segment. In the first thirumozhi, Andal pleads to Kamadeva to help her in uniting with her Beloved Lord. The other thirumozhis depict the different efforts she makes to get united with her Lord, her impatient waiting and finally the union. The most popular of these verses is the 6th Tirumozhi, 'Varanam ayiram". Here Andal describes in detail about the dream she had to her 'thozhi' (friend), in which she visualised her wedding ceremony with Sriman Narayana. Starting from how the mandapam was decorated, to who all attended the wedding, and all the rituals starting from tying kankanam till the end are

described beautifully with great poetic imagination. Even today this verse is sung during vedic weddings. It is choreographed by Bharatanatyam dancers and presented on stage.

All these Thirumozhis reflect Andal's eagerness to get united with the Lord. It should be taken as Andal's advice to mankind about how the jivatma should make relentless efforts to unite with the paramatma.

Both the works are in her native tongue Tamil and they reveal her extraordinary talent at such a young age. Her poetry is so attractive that it reaches all, cutting across the barriers of caste and creed. It evokes intensely emotional bhakti in those who recite her Pasurams, with the understanding of their inner meaning and gives peace, prosperity and above all Divine Grace.

