

ANDAL: THE POET-SAINT'S JOURNEY FROM AWARENESS TO ENLIGHTENMENT

Dr. Meera Venkatesh

Assistant Professor
Department of English
K. J. Somaiya College of Arts & Commerce, Mumbai
Mail Id: meera.venkatesh@somaiya.edu

Abstract

This research paper presents the journey of poet-saint Andal, the lone woman saint among twelve male saints or Alwars of 10th century Tamil-Vaishnavite tradition, whose compositions in Tamil now correspond to Sanskrit Vedas. Andal's composition of Tiruppavai - a set of thirty verses known as paasurams are a section of a larger section of devout compositions of Alwars known as Divya Prabadam. In this paper the researcher traverses the journey of Andal-the young saint-poet, whose short life-span of physical existence of thirteen to sixteen years has left an indelible mark in the devotional, cultural, social and linguistic tapestry of India's Bhakti tradition for over twelve centuries now. Andal's compositions move in an order of chronological simplicity to creating awareness in individuals, to the collective power of satsang, reinforcing the gratitude for the excesses bestowed on human existence by the Supreme Godhead: Vishnu. The series of compositions include glories of Lord Vishnu in all that words can capture and conclude with reinstating that enlightenment is at the feet of the Lord Vishnu. Andal's legend and poetry are not limited to interpretations and roles of women in male-dominated spaces. Rather, reading Andal introduces her to us as a legend of Tamil Classical Poetry and any study of her life provide solutions to theological and existential debates while exploring philosophical traditions. Any familiarity with Tiruppavai triggers numerous aspects of research for a student of Literature, Oral Traditions, Sociology, Gender, Grammar, and Stylistics, with possibilities of more explorations. (242 Words)

Keywords: Alwar, Paasuram, Vaishnavite, Classical Poetry, Bhakti, Sharanagati, Enlightenment.

EARLY LIFE

The lives of many men and women saint-poets from this Bhoomi Bharat/India are riddled with mystery, wonderment, unbelievable faith and deep-rooted spiritualism. In the after-lives of the saint-poets, they achieve immortality by being embedded in the consciousness of religious practices and psyche of devotional publics across continents, for many centuries. Poet-Saints like Akka Mahadevi, Gyaneshwar, Tulsidas, Basava, Kabir, Ravidas, and Mirabai abide in the literary discourses, memory and imagination of the devout and have gone on to become expressions of communities and cultures of the people. One of the many saint-poets is Andal, representing the devotion of the Sri Vaishnavite culture, predominant to the worship of Lord Mahavishnu.

The poet-saint Andal is one of the twelve Alwars or Vaishnavite poets of medieval times (eighth to tenth century CE) who composed in Tamil, a language considered as ancient and sacred as Sanskrit. Four thousand songs written by Alwars are compiled in a treatise known as Naalaaiyara Divya Prabandam. The compositions of hymns of the Alwars captured the essence of the Vedas, making it more accessible to the common people. (Even today, the Prabandam or Song of Praise is chanted by those leading temple processions and the Vedas are chanted in Sanskrit by those following the deity). Amidst these realms of philosophy and piety, Andal, the lone woman Alwar, is revered across sections, for her compositions of devotion integrated into the Prabandam, namely the Tiruppavai consisting of thirty hymns and Nacchiyaar Tirumozhi consisting of hundred and forty three stanzas.

Any understanding of Andal's life and poetry is essentially linked to that of the poetry and philosophy of Alwars, which are primary to the formation, study and practice of Sri Vaishnava sect. Between 7th and 10th CE centuries, the twelve Alwars composed their poetry of dedication to Lord Vishnu. Andal belonged to the last phase of the devout poets. Legend states that she was found in a garden under a Tulasi plant, by the senior-most and revered Alwar, Periyalwar Vishnuchittan who named her Godai or Gift of the Earth. Along with her father, baby Godai was immersed in a life dedicated to the service of Lord Vishnu. Her intensity of worship was identified by her father Periyalwar when he found her strand of hair in the garland meant for the deity Lord Vishnu. Little Godai claimed that she is the bride of the Lord and on being admonished by her father, Lord Vishnu himself appeared and said that only those flowers adorned by Godai were acceptable to him.

On this incident, realisation dwelt on Periyalwar that Godai was divine and truly the bride of Lord Vishnu. As Godai grew up, her devotion turned deep and profound. Her prayers of praise and piety as compositions of Tiruppavai and Tirumozhi could have become an elaborate and complete treatise as Prabadam itself. Alas, this divinity had a short physical life span. Godai, now named Andal, meaning one who rules, by her father, refused to marry anyone except the Lord. As a young girl of about sixteen, she went in her bridal attire from her abode in Srivilliputtur to Lord Vishnu in the avatar of Ranganatha in the temple of Srirangam (in present day Tiruchanapalli district, Tamil Nadu). Even as the wedding ceremony was underway, Andal solemnised the marriage by immersing herself in the sanctum of the Lord and immortalised herself as the wife of Lord Ranganatha. From then on, Andal is worshipped as the wife of Lord Mahavishnu. Along with Sreedevi or Mahalaksmi, Andal appears as the consort of Lord Vishnu as Bhudevi – the personification of Mother Earth.

Andal's life and times have many parallels to other saint-poets of India and with Sita in Ramayana. Like Mirabai, Akka Mahadevi, Jenabai, Baghinabai, and many more, Andal transcended the physical human form and gender to demonstrate that anyone with devotion was accepted by the Supreme Being. Moreover, the compositions of the saint poets have stood the test of time, cultures and religion to serve humanity the essence of poetry and piety and bring people across social divides, into a fold. Within her short life-span and multi-dimensional persona, Andal- the one who rules leaves an indelible mark on the devotional history of India. Any study of the pan-India Bhakti Movement would be inadequate without the study of Andal.

Tiruppavai and Nacchiyaar Tirumozhi:

Within a century of her lifetime (approx. 11th century CE), Andal's poetry was included in the sacred canon of Sri Vaishnavism and by the end of 12th century CE she was a Goddess, the only Alwar to be deified. The two works Tiruppavai meaning The Path to the Divine and Nacchiyaar Tirumozhi- Sacred Songs of the Lady are the seminal works that are created with layers of awareness, piety, love, devotion and surrender to the Divine. In its thirty hymns, Tiruppavai adopts the pavai genre of songs of a Tamil tradition of unmarried girls performing rites and vows during the holy month of Marghazhi (December of CE). In these compositions, Andal assumes the role of a Gopi, performing her rites with the only intent of everlasting company of Lord. She invites her friends to join in her service to the Lord.

According to the hymns the symbolic undertone behind this entreaty is to wake up and seek Vishnu's fortification. These songs also subsume the essence of the three basic mantras in Vaishnava tradition – the Thirumantram, Dhyanam and Charama Shloka. Together they signify the truth of Paramatma or the Supreme Being who dwells in everything. Not only is the final destination defined, the means on the path are also elucidated. For instance in one paasuram Andal explains the significance of the Acharya (spiritual mentor) whose guidance is important for a disciple to get the essence of the trio of Mantras (Chanting) and thereon to realise the essence of Vedas too.

Here are samples of translation:

Paasuram 2

All ye who live in this world!
Listen to our plan of action for our Lord
Who, on the ocean, is asleep while we sing at his feet His praises?
We fast, forsake milk and ghee and Bathe early
Not decorate ourselves with kohl or flowers
Nor do inappropriate acts nor say harsh words
Will give charity, will give alms and be good to saints
Think noble thoughts to attain salvation, my girls

Paasuram 25

Being born to a woman
And in the same night hiding,
You became the son of another,
But this he could not tolerate,
And wanted to cause more harm to you,
And you great one, became,
The fire in the stomach of Kamsa and you killed Kamsa
We have come here with the desire of the drum,
And if you give the drum to us

We would sing of thine great fame and wealth
And would end our sorrows and become happy

The final verse is the Phalashruti (Paasuram 29), where Andal apparently is seeking bestowments from the Lord, but in actuality is a plea for salvation and enlightenment. It is the most famous verse of Tiruppavai and to this day is recited in isolation often in the daily prayers of most devotees. The plea is an expression of devout, emotional connects with Lord Vishnu.

Vangak Kadal kadaintha Madhavanaik Kesavanai
Thingal thirumugathuch cheyizhaiyar sendrirainji
Angap parai konda vaatrai anipuduvai
Painkamalath than theriyal pattarpiran Kodhai sonna
Sangath thamizh maalai muppadum thappame
Ingip parisuraippar eerirandu maal varaith tholl
Senkann thirumugaththu selvath thirumaalal
Engum thiruvarul pettru inburuvar empavai

The above verses, in original Tamil, are appeals by Andal to Lord Vishnu. She says that the repeated visits to him to bow at His Lotus feet and sing His praises is not just to get His Grace and boons alone but what is beseeched is: forever and ever- for the next seven births and generations that we may take, we worshippers should have the privilege to have a connection with you in all your Avatars and see that any other desire is banished from our minds. The final boon is for the Lord to be worshipped unwaveringly, unquestioningly with complete dedication on all occasions. Tiruppavai ends with a paasuram (30) in glory of Andal.

The first five stanzas of thirty of Tiruppavai introduces the idea of penance and prayers to Lord Vishnu (with simply flowers), as ways to get abundance of rain and prosperity to humanity. In the next ten stanzas the significance of community participation is highlighted: inviting friends to collect flowers, the colours of blossoms, essaying the ambience of her village (Srivilliputtur) with simple butter-churning, the chirping of birds, cattle with tinkling bells, conch sounds from temple, the early morning wake-up call to all of Andal's friends to join in for Darsanam at the temple. Together, the verses paint the tapestry with colours of sincere commitment.

The next five stanzas describe the visit to the temple: right from coaxing the temple guard to let Andal and her friends in first, seeking blessings from Devaki and Vasudeva, and begging them to wake up Vishnu (Krishna) early and recite Suprabhatam to appease Lord Vishnu and thereafter seek blessings of Mother Earth (Mahalakshmi). On the Darsanam of Lord Mahavishnu, there's an out-pouring of glories of the Lord. The young devotee (all of just thirteen years) Andal lists her demands from Lord Vishnu- milk, lamps, flowers, costumes, jewellery, plenty of ghee and butter. (What more endearment could a young child ask for and how could the Almighty not fulfil them?) The innocence of the bhakt (devotee) is the underlying trope of the composition.

The last stanza is an envoie, identifying Andal as the daughter of Vishnuchittan who has made this offering of thirty paasurams to Lord Vishnu and wishes all to sing the praises along for the blessings of Lord Vishnu and Goddess Mahalakshmi. The stanzas convey all essential aspects of human life: commitment, community living, innocence, faith, and sincerity which are not only the cardinal principles of Sri Vaishnavism but other subsequently formed canons of religious practices.

The second seminal composition by Andal is Nacchiyaar Tirumozhi, a poem of hundred and forty three verses. The title means 'Sacred Sayings of Our Goddess'. The verses are organised in fourteen sections of ten paasurams each. The description of each section follows:

- Andal prays to Kamadeva the Lord of Love to make Lord Vishnu (Krishna) accept her.
- While playing with her friends in making castles, Andal pleads with Lord to keep the castle intact.
- Andal appeals to Lord not to be mischievous and play pranks on her friends and her.
- Andal wishes for her soul to be emerged with the Supreme Being.
- In this group of paasurams popularly known as Kuyil Paattu or Songs of the Koel.
- Andal seeks the help of the koel birds to be her messenger to the Lord.
- In this group of paasuram known as Varanamaayiram all songs of wedding rituals are grouped together, recounting all the rites performed at a marriage ceremony.
- This group is known as the Panchajanyam referring to the Conch in the hands of Lord Vishnu and the glories of the Conch.
- The Clouds are addressed and asked to be messengers to the Lord
- In this group Andal is offering prasadam of milk and ghee in hundred vessels in her sense of gratitude

<https://www.gapbodhitaru.org/>

- Andal addresses aspects of Nature and relates her miseries undergone due to her love for the Lord.
- In this section, Andal fondly expresses her love for Srirangam, the abode of her Lord.
- In this group, the paasurams express Andal's wish to visit all the places where her Lord resided - Mathura, Vrindavan, and Dwarka.
- Andal's request to treat her with things connected to the Lord as a panacea for her love sickness is beautifully conveyed.
- The presence of the Lord in Vrindavan is fondly recounted in the stanzas in this section.

In this work too, the devotion to Lord Vishnu is unparalleled, but the classical Tamilzh poetic convention of imagery, rhyme and intermix of stories are exemplified. It is created in the classic pattern of madhurya bhakti and viraha bhakti (devotion to a personal God, in this case Lord Vishnu). The verses are bound in steep devotion but are simultaneously unfettered by freedom of thought and feeling. This genre was later on replicated by other successors of the Bhakti movement.

CONCLUSION

A reading of Andal's seminal works is seemingly singular in their tone of seeking and devotion, but as researcher of literary works, the underlying message and tenor cannot be dismissed. Beseech and appeals are not for material bestowal and appeasement of the senses but that of creating awareness of the final destination for a mortal life. The human life's journey riddled with wants, greed, envy, disillusionment and violence cannot be emancipated, unless the individual longs for redemption. One of the ways, as is suggested and obvious in Andal's poetry, is to seek the blessings of the Creator and chalk paths and means towards this redemption. The purpose of poetry is to express the most profound thoughts in the most refined language and here Andal's seminal works fulfil the undertaking with utmost commitment.

Andal's poetry is obviously and discreetly, multifaceted. As a philosophical treatise, it sets the benchmark for the depth of emotion and devotion that ninth century classical literature could offer. With its elucidations of the praises of the Supreme Being, the template is set for practice of worship for the forthcoming generations. The spiritual founding laid by these practices further led on to establishing sects and philosophies (Vaishnavism, in this case). The innocence and simplicity of the processes and poetic form make the paasurams appealing and engaging. Simultaneously these paasurams are also loaded with the deepest and profound knowledge of the Ultimate: the Path to Moksha: Salvation/ Enlightenment. An easy, simple yet comprehensive compendium of the meaning and purpose of human life is the bequest of Andal's composition.

Andal's journey as a young individual conveys the need of all human beings, irrespective of gender, to be aware of their final destination of salvation and enlightenment, early in their life time. As with passage in a mortal lifetime, the essence of enlightenment seems inevitable. Since the paths are multiple and choices are to be taken carefully, several aspects of the intellect would be engaged. If the paths are traversed with the innocence and acceptance of the single, ultimate truth, then the present day world of egoistic rule, violence and injustice could be redirected to that of peace and enlightenment. For that, readings and re-readings of the saint-poets like Andal keep us grounded, relaying signs to keep the mortal lives on the right track - from being aware to attaining enlightenment.

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