

An Inspirational Medieval Period Bhakthi Movement Feminine Poetess in South India

Amit Dhawan

Guru Kashi University, Talwandi Sabo

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Abstract

Andal is a popular Bhakthi Movement Poetess in the nineteenth century. She is one of the Azhvars in South India. She is the first Woman Vaishnavite Saint in the Bhakthi literature. She is well known for her spiritual elevation and accomplishment in the Bhakthi movement. Bhakthi literature says how she has reached the foot of the god using her popular philosophical composition 'Thiruppavai'. Thiruppavai is an admirable bhakthi poem for all the fanatic lovers. In North India, Radha Rani is celebrated as "Queen of Bhakthi". Similarly, in Tamil Nadu, Andal is known for her pure love and devotion. Andal tried to show her extraordinary bhakthi and devotion towards Lord Vishnu, when she was four years child. In her young age, she started to compose the hymns of Thiruppavai, Nachiyar Thirumozhi and Vaaranam Aayiram with much affection and care towards the lord Vishnu. Among the Vaishnavite Azhvars, Andal was the only female deity to be reincarnated. Andal's spiritual inclination towards Lord Vishnu remained us of the infinite mercy, that she had with the Lord Vishnu and the Bhakthi literature using her magical, devotional, imaginative technique and creativity. She praises the Lord Vishnu in the poetry Thiruppavai. Thiruppavai is a collection of thirty poems, which is composed by Andal in Tamil. In Thiruppavai, Andal gives a universal call to all the people to spell the name and glories of Lord Vishnu.

Andal's Thiruppavai is used as a ritual aid to the young girls' procurement of good husbands and happy marriages. Femininity in Andal is often viewed and recognized by the scholars as the heroine of a Kavya like text from the perspective of traditional Indian aesthetics. Andal's actions can be seen as a sacrifice of her worldly possessions in order to spiritually attain the path of Krishna. Andal is not merely expressing her feminine desire. She seems to be aware that bhakthi is a path towards moksha. This paper purports to analyze the influential feminine aspects of Andal in the Bhakthi Movement in South India.

Keywords: Andal, inclination, moksha, incarnation and aesthetics.

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Andal was born in Srivilliputtur in Virudhunagar district of Tamil Nadu in mid – ninth century. Andal is treated as Lakshmi incarnation. The myth states that the 14 year old Andal dreamt that Vishnu invited her to visit his shrine at Srirangam. While many saints are revered, Andal is unique because she alone is venerated as goddess Lakshmi in her aspects of joy, auspiciousness and prosperity. Incidents in Andal's life reflect the life of Sita in Ramayana. The legend states that Goddess Lakshmi has taken birth as Andal since she has desired to be the greatest devotee of Vishnu. Andal is found beside the Tulasi bush. She has given her soul for the Lord Thirumal alone. Periazhvar named her Kodai for her magnificent hair and she was popularly known as 'Kodai Andal'.

As a girl, she was making garlands for Vishnu – Thirumal and wore them in her father's absence and peered at her reflection in a well. After noticing the strange fragrance in the garlands, Periazhvar chided her for desecrating the offerings to the deity. Later, Thirumal appeared in a dream and informed Periazhvar that he wished to wear Andal's used garlands. Then the father realized the truth.

Andal's father VishnuChittalvar (Periazhvar) brought up the girl with enormous affection and care. He thought of her to be a gift of god. Andal grew up in Vishnuchitta's household in a very pious and devotional atmosphere. During Andal's period 'Bhakti' had captured the imagination of the people as the songs of love for showing divinity to the god.

“Andal grew up at a time when the Bhakti movement was in its noon day glory the first group of alvars had sung of the lord in manifold ways, and the general public fondly

repeated these songs as though they were the Tamil Versions of Vedas, for the songs were musical, literary and above all, embedded with wisdom of the ages. To Andal and her companions singing the pasurams must have been a favorite past time.”[**Devotional poets and mystics**].

Vishnuchitta was a great poet and saint. Under his guidance, Andal must have received the knowledge about the legends of Vishnu and his Avatars. The myth says about her consciousness which is infused with the Bhakti and the devotion towards the Krishna Avatara of Vishnu. She precociously fell in love with the lord and adored herself with the garland that her father kept for the temple deity. She imagined and felt that she had all the rights to wear it. According to the sacred practices and rituals, this act would be considered as an act of grievous sin. But, the lord himself appeared in Vishnu Chitta's dream and gave a legitimate sanction. The god also ordered him that henceforth the garlands worn by Andal would be acceptable to him.

When Andal received this sign of confirmation of reciprocation of her love from the lord, she automatically immersed in emotion of intense love for the good and craved for a union with him. Her life time goal became a successful one, when she joined with her chosen lord at Srirangam. Vishnu - Chitta was directed in a dream to prepare for Andal's marriage with the lord. Andal's poetry creates a religious legacy on the holy month of Margali with the philosophical recitation of her verses in Tamilnadu.

Accordingly, Andal decked up as a bride and was taken to Srirangam in a procession using palanquin. She merged with the god at Srirangam. The story of her life

came down to us through various myths and legends. She struggled a lot and attained the status of an alwar saint. She was the only woman alwar saint in bhakti marg.

Andal's famous philosophical compositions 'Thiruppavai and Nachiar Thirumozhi' are the two beautiful garlands of thirty and one hundred and forty three songs respectively.

Thiruppavai songs can be conventionally categorized as Madhurya Bhakti, because the poetic personals are none other than Krishna and Gopikas. The songs in Nachiyar Thirumozhi are a standard example of bridal mysticism. These songs express the anguish of a beloved bhakta bride from her ishta.

Bridal mysticism (Virada Bhakti) is the chief sentiment that flows through most of the Bhakti movement poetry. In Virada Bhakti, the bhakta (devotee) plays the role of god's beloved bride and expresses her deep anguish due to the separation from her lover(god). Nachiar Thirumozhi is exclusive in approach, where as Thiruppavai is inclusive in approach.

The Songs in Tiruppavai and Nachiyar Thirumozhi are about an intense desire to merge with the god physically as well as metaphysically. In Nachiar Thirumozhi, she depicts various episodes of her love affair with the God himself. In the fourteenth decades of Nachiar Thirumozhi, the sixth one is extremely popular where Andal is picturing the dream of her marriage to the Lord Himself:

I had a dream o sister! The town was decked

With festoons and golden urns.

Surrounded by a thousand caparisoned elephants

Our lord Narayana came walking towards me(Srirama Bharti; 2000:112)

The sequence called Varana – mayiram is considered very auspicious in Tamil Nadu. It is sung at the time of weddings by the priests. Andal describes every rites and rituals of marriage in minutest detail revealing the divine bridegroom in all its glory. In this song, she is actually mentioning the vision of the lord as seen in her dream. Andal tries to share her relation to the god through her song. Thus, the entire poem then becomes a medium of expression of an experience of Bhakti that for bhata(surrender to the foot of the god) is the ultimate goal.

The poem Thiruppavai is written based on the significance of living in higher realms of awareness. The whole poem is a complex work of art, interwoven with a highly symbolic theological base. Bhakti, is expressed by the poetess in the scheme of the poem as how bhakti has been conceived in Vaishnavism. A closer look at the structure of the poem, would reveal the subtle message, which is to dissolve lower forms of desires into the highest desire to become one with the lord.

In stanza 26 of Thiruppavai, Andal says:

“We have performed the margali rites as our elders decreed. Now hear what we want: Conch us like your milk-white panchahjanya which reverberates through all creation with its becoming sound, a big wide drum and singers, who sing pallandu, a bright lamb, festoons and flags – O Lord grand us these.”

As the poem progresses, this desire is taken over by a single overriding desire which is to be with Krishna in all the births. It is important to note down Andal's bhakti scheme 'Madhuryabhava'. It is predominant in the poem and starts to fall into place naturally due to gender. This experience (bhava) is purely an act of imagination for other Alvars as all of them belong to the masculine gender. For Bhaktas like Andal, it was extremely important to ascribe the specific form to god. They could not be related to him, without conceiving the form.

Feminist understanding of medieval Bhakti is problematic on many levels historically, since it is tied to the protestant egalitarian level. The scholars recognize a femininity in Andal, when she is analyzed as the Kavya like text from the perspective of traditional Indian aesthetic woman. As the result of aestheticization, Thiruppvai and Thirumozhi are viewed as the examples of bhakti and divine love poetries. Andal conveys an alternative life style to what many dharmashastras perceive to be the role of women, through her poetical and

philosophical words. She shows a divine idea of marrying a god to all the women. The women must see her as a person who attained salvation, not by worshipping her husband as God, but by approaching God directly.

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