

**T**wo days before the Conference on Religions in the Indic Civilisation started, on December 16, 2003, I was in Bangalore, reviewing this paper at 4 a.m. Within an hour, my mother woke up, early even for her, to take a bath and cook *pongal* and then offer it to Andal and Vishnu in the family *pūja* room. This was the first day of the month of Margali, sacred to Andal, sacred to Vishnu in the Bhagavad Gita. As she lit the *diyas*, she recited the first verse and then the last two verses of Andal's *Tiruppavai*. By 5.30 a.m., Jaya TV was turned on at home, and as far as I could tell, in several neighbourhood houses. Ordinarily, on this station, the 5.30 a.m. broadcast begins with *darshan* of the famous Pillaiyar (Ganesha) temple in Pillaiyarpatti, Tamilnadu and continues immediately with twenty minutes of the Tamil version of the matin song, the *suprabhatam*, at the famous Balaji temple at Tirumala Tirupati. The 20<sup>th</sup> century Tamil version of the 15<sup>th</sup> century Sanskrit *suprabhatam*, recited by a woman singer, is as melodious as the original. However, on this, the first day of Margali, the *suprabhatam* is not recited in the South Indian Sri Vaishnava temples—including Tirupati—or, for that matter, on Jaya TV. Instead of the routine followed through the rest of the year, there were other songs. According to Sri Vaishnava practice, during this month the traditional *suprabhatam* prayer is not recited; instead, the deity is woken up with the *Tiruppavai*, the prayer that the 8th-century poet Andal composed to wake up Krishna.

By 6 a.m., on this, the first day of Margali, many radio and TV stations were focusing on the *Tiruppavai*. There were at least four TV stations where there was some music or

# Poetry, Passion and Power

## The Lyrics of Andal-Goda and the Music of Goda Mandali

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commentary connected with this 8th-century poem. Jaya TV started with a male voice reciting a traditional invocatory verse glorifying Andal. This was followed by young women students from the well-known Padma Seshadri High school in Chennai, all between 12 and 15 years, singing the first verse of the *Tiruppavai*; there were commentaries, not just by male Brahmins but by assorted men and women, in Telugu and in Tamil, on the other stations.

Later that morning at a neighbourhood Hanuman temple, all the attention was on Andal's shrine. Women came by to leave strings of flowers for her; this was the saint who had made garlands of flowers for

Krishna. In fact, Andal's real name is Kodai, which means *vrinda* or wreath of flowers, and she herself is known in Tamil as *choodi kodutta nacchiyar* or "the Lady who gave the garland after wearing it". The temple, as the South Indian Sri Vaishnava ones for this entire month do, gave *pongal* as *prasad* that morning. In many homes and temples, this is the dish of the month, for Margali culminates with the big festival of Pongal which is not just Vaishnava or even just Hindu, but as celebrated today, is a Tamil and Telugu festival. The receipt of even a spoonful of *pongal* cooked at dawn and offered to Andal along with the recitation of *Tiruppavai* is considered holy *prasad*; the two are closely intertwined not just in people's minds, but in Andal's poetry itself.

Who is Andal and what does her poetry deal with? We see her enshrined in all Sri Vaishnava temples in India and abroad—we see her in the Sri Vaishnava heartland in Srirangam, Kanchipuram, Sriperambudur and other places, as well as Pittsburgh, Atlanta, Toronto, Orlando, Chicago, Malibu and Rochester. And in all these places, during this month, her songs are recited. In many of the American temples, she is simply identified as Bhudevi or the Earth-Goddess, so people from other parts of India may have some understanding of who she is. But



A calendar picture of Andal

Andal did not think of herself as a goddess and she may have been identified as one perhaps several centuries after her time. Most South Indian men and women know her as a woman poet who was passionately in love with God. For many South Indian women now, she is also a woman who, like them, lived in a society where she probably faced similar social pressures. Certainly, at least according to later (13<sup>th</sup> century) biographies, her father wanted her to get married. Andal, however, did not want to get married and consider her husband as God; she wanted God as her husband. She even warned: “*Maanidavarkkenru pechuppadi vaazhakillen kandaay manmathane*” (I will not continue to live if it is planned to give me in marriage to a human being). Nay more, she even speaks of pulling her breasts out by the roots and throwing them on the chest of Krishna if He continues to ignore her: “*Kollum payanonrillaatha kongaiethann-aikkizhankodum allip pariththittu avan marvil erindhittu.*”

Through her words and actions, Andal presents an alternative lifestyle to what many *dharma shastras* perceive to be the role of women; she showed contempt at the idea of marrying a man and instead, gathered her friends and observed rites (*vratas*) to obtain Vishnu. For many South Indian women, therefore, she is a model of and model for piety and devotion. In this paper, I portray Andal as an exemplar not because she *can* or *ought* to be one, but in a more limited sense of how she *actually* functions as a model of a woman filled with devotion to the Lord to a group called Goda Mandali or “the circle of Andal.”

Goda, more popularly known as Andal (“she who rules”), is an 8<sup>th</sup>-century poet-saint whose presence is powerfully felt through her words and icons in the Sri Vaishnava community of South India. The Sri

Vaishnava community crystallized around the 10<sup>th</sup> century CE. This community worshiped Vishnu and the Goddess Sri, accepted the Vedanta philosophy of Ramanuja (11<sup>th</sup> century) as the correct interpretation of the Vedas and considered the four thousand Tamil hymns composed in praise of Vishnu as equivalent to the Sanskrit revelation. These songs were composed between the 7<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries CE by twelve poet-saints known as Alvars.

Andal is the only Alvar who is a woman. She is enshrined and worshiped in all Sri Vaishnava temples and her passionate poetry is recited and sung not just by members of the community, but also broadcast through many radio stations in the states of Tamilnadu, Andhra Pradesh, and Karnataka in the month of Margali (December 15 or 16 to January 13). Sri Vaishnava hagiographies are consistent in saying that she refused to get married, and instead longed for union with various forms of Vishnu—a wish which was apparently fulfilled, according to these biographical accounts.

In her two poems, the *Tiruppavai* and the *Nacchiyar Tirumoli*, Andal expresses this passionate desire to marry Vishnu, whom she sees as embodied in the forms of Krishna, Rama, or as the resident deity in several temples. In the *Tiruppavai*, she imagines herself as a young *gopi* or cowherd girl in the village of Aypati (the Tamil name for Gokula) where Krishna grew up. She wakes up her friends very early in the morning in the month of Margali and they all go to wake up Krishna and give Him their petition: their longing to be with Him and to serve Him for all time. Andal asks her friends to come with her to “bathe”; the Tamil word *niratal* or bathing was frequently used in Tamil literature to indicate a sexual, or a spiritual, union. Since Vishnu is frequently compared to a lotus pond, her intentions would be clear to those

who recite the poem, and if they were not, the commentators articulate this concept quite well. In her second poem the *Nacchiyar Tirumoli* (“The Sacred Words of the Lady”), Andal dreams that Vishnu came to her and marries her; she recounts the rituals of a wedding in eleven verses to her friend. These verses are still recited in Sri Vaishnava weddings. In the other verses in *Nacchiyar Tirumoli*, she talks of her intense love, sends messengers to communicate her love to the Lord and is desolate being separated from Vishnu. In the last set of verses, however, there is some peace. The verses are in the form of questions and answers, and to her query “Have you seen Krishna?” she gets the answer, “we have seen him here in Vrindavanam.”

*Like a boar  
that escapes from a net  
Madhavan, my precious gem,  
eludes me  
giving me  
nothing  
to hold on to—  
have you seen him,  
this lord?*

*With a flowing robe of gold  
He, like a calf  
dark as a thunderous cloud  
comes  
filling the streets—*

*We have seen him  
here, in Vrindavanam*

(*Nacchiyar Tirumoli 14.5*)

*A prankster  
who knows no dharma  
He whose eyebrows arch  
like the bow Saranga  
in his hand  
handsome one  
without equal  
have you seen him?*

*He whose form is dark  
whose face glows bright  
like the sun that fans  
on the peaks*

of the rising hills  
We have seen him  
here, in Vrindavanam.

(*Nacchiyar Tirumoli* 14.6)

Andal searches for her love; He eludes her, He is a prankster; He “knows no *dharmā*”! Andal, in her words of love, speaks of the same Krishna, who in the Bhagavad Gita says that He incarnates himself to establish *dharmā*, as the one who “knows no *dharmā*”. As Andal’s eyes search for him, her friends, the other *gopis*, say—yes, we have seen Him here in Vrindavan. Thus we get an indication that she has seen Him and has attained Him.

### Biographical Literature

The earliest biography on the Alvars, *The Splendour of the Succession of Teachers* (13<sup>th</sup> century), says that Andal was found as a baby in a garden tended by the Alvar Vishnu Chitta, popularly known as “Senior Azhvar” or Periyalvar. He raised her, and encouraged her to weave garlands for the Lord at the temple there; however, he did not know that Andal secretly wore the garland first and admired her reflection before offering it to the deity. In the Hindu tradition, of course, this is strictly prohibited; objects offered to the Lord cannot be used and defiled by human beings. Periyalvar found out about Andal’s wearing of the garland and was upset with her; however, the Lord appeared to him in his dream and said that He would only wear the garlands that Andal wore first. The power of her love begins to reverse the norms of traditional hierarchy and the hierarchies of power.

*The Splendour* portrays Andal as passionately in love with Vishnu. Her father, Periyalvar does not know what to do until Ranganatha (the particular manifestation of Vishnu at Srirangam), whom Andal desires to marry, appears in his dream and commands him to bring his daughter

to Srirangam. Ranganatha instructs Periyalvar thus: “Bring her to the sacred courtyard of the Sacred Rangan; I shall clasp her hands [and marry her] there.” The Lord at Srirangam then sends His servants to Srivilliputtur to fetch Andal with all due honours. Andal is dressed in all her finery and taken in a gem-studded palanquin to Srirangam; the palanquin is covered such that no one else can see Andal, who has single-minded devotion to her Lord at Srirangam. *The Splendour* says:

The Lady who weaved garlands for the Lord [i.e., Andal] was wearing her ...silk sari, flower garland and a mark made of musk on her forehead. With her large eyes which seemed to reach her ears, slim liana-like waist, full breasts, with her bracelets jingling, walking gracefully like a swan, in a manner that all could see, she went in front of the Handsome Bridegroom [the name of Vishnu at Srirangam], went in, saw Him till her eyes were satisfied, and as if she were to press His feet, she climbed on the serpent bed [on which the Lord reclines], joined with the Lord of Ranga who is on the fiery-mouthed snake, and disappeared while [it seemed to others] as if she was massaging Him. All those who beheld this, including the Alvar’s disciple, king Vallabha Deva [the Pandyan king], were astonished....

The biography makes it clear that Andal united with the Lord, with her full physical body. This is quite startling. While the Upanishads and most other texts in the Hindu canon speak of the physical body as contaminating and as a hindrance to liberation, the Sri Vaishnava tradition, in the case of Nammalvar and more clearly in the case of Andal portrays the body as quite acceptable, indeed enjoyable, to the Lord. Tiruppan Alvar, an “outcaste” saint is another

person who according to Sri Vaishnava stories, merges physically into the Lord at Srirangam; it is worth noting that in both cases (Andal and Tiruppan) where there is a physical union, it takes place in the Srirangam temple. The trope of a saint physically uniting with the Lord in a temple is popular in Tamil hagiography and not unique to the Sri Vaishnava community.

*The Divya Suri Charitam* gives an elaborate account of Andal’s *svayamvara*; manifestations of Vishnu from the various temples stand under the sacred Tamarind tree where Nammalvar abides, and Andal’s friend, Anugraha, is told by Nammalvar to take her to each Vishnu and introduce her, and sing the praises of that deity (DSC 12. 31-115). Finally, she comes to Ranganatha, the Lord of Srirangam, and Andal garlands this Lord, thus showing her preference for Him. The wedding of Andal is then celebrated in suitable style by Nammalvar. Each manifestation is seen as having its own personality, and this incident is typical of Sri Vaishnava belief and practice: while Vishnu is the supreme Lord, he is seldom worshipped in his generic form; a particular manifestation of Vishnu in one of the sacred places becomes the *ishta devatha* or the preferred personal deity and is praised by the devotee. Andal, in her poetry, does not indicate any preference for a particular temple manifestation of Vishnu (she sings about Vishnu in Tiruvenkatam, Tirumaliruncolai and Srirangam extensively, and a few others in passing), but does address Krishna in her *Tiruppavai*. Her biographies, however, clearly portray her as being given a choice among the Vishnus of the various temples; each with his own name, distinguishing characteristics and personality. She chooses the Lord at Srirangam.

Andal’s songs have been recited daily in domestic and temple liturgies

and her lyrics have been set to *ragas* and performed on sacred and secular stages. Her *Tiruppavai* and the wedding sequence from the *Nacchiyar Tirumoli* have been part of the repertoire for all Bharata Natyam dancers in the last half of the 20th century. Women like Usha Narayanan have choreographed large tracts of the Alvar hymns in a style known as *araiyar sevai* (the “service of araiyars” or traditional *male* performers in Sri Vaishnava temples) and have performed them on television. In the last few years, many groups of women in the suburbs of Chennai have formed “circles” (*mandalis*) to sing the poems of Andal and other Vaishnavite Tamil saints. The groups I met have interesting names: Goda Mandali (Goda’s Circle), Sreyas Mandali (the Group of the Higher Path), Ranganatha Paduka Mandali (the Circle that Venerates the Sandals of Ranganatha), Subhasri Mandali (the Very Auspicious Circle) and Bhaktanjali (the Devotional Group). The groups meet once or twice a week, and also perform in music-fests (like the Tamil Music Association festival in December) and temples. Sometimes, they raise money for the upkeep of various shrines through their singing. These *bhajan* groups are not very stable; they tend to last between three to about twenty years before they become casualties to urban mobility and life-cycle changes. Between the 1970s and 1990s, the Goda Mandali (Goda’s circle), located in T.Nagar, Madras, has used the medium of singing to reappropriate and participate in the passion of Andal-Goda. The piety of the Goda Mandali and the other groups has also achieved considerable visibility through television and radio, leading to the formation of more circles, through which the passion of Andal continues



Young people enacting the Andal story

to find contemporary expression.

Milton Singer and Venkateswaran wrote about the many *bhajan* groups in Madras (1964). Many of these were Brahmin based and the lead roles were frequently taken by men. Singer estimated that only about 10 per cent of this group was Sri Vaishnava. After 1980 or so, many more *bhajan* groups have sprung up all over Chennai and in many other cities as well; but these are not the eclectic groups that Singer wrote about. Rather, they are self-consciously sectarian, being either Sri Vaishnava, Smarta, or Shaiva, and they are predominantly run by women. There are also some largely Brahmanical groups which pick up an extended song like the *Tiruppugazh*, dedicated to the deity Murugan. The Sri Vaishnava groups concentrate only on the songs of the Alvars and some *acharyas* and do not sing the poems of other saints, even if they are Vaishnavas. The groups usually cluster around houses or apartments in a particular suburb; very few travel very far for the classes and singing practice.

Goda Mandali, appropriately named after the only woman Alvar was first formed in 1970 and met in Bhagavantam Gupta Street, Chennai.

Since 1982, it has been meeting at the home of Chitra Raghunathan, at 16 Mahalakshmi Street, Theagarayanagar, Madras. The women met twice a week, Tuesdays and Fridays, from 1.30 to 3 p.m., learning one verse a day. The learning process took about a half hour to forty five minutes and they practised the older verses for the rest of the time. In the classes that I went to, the teacher and students worked together in matters of rhythm and beat; because the women are familiar with Carnatic music and all have good voices, they were able to grasp the musical modes quickly. Each line was repeated several times; the teacher sang once and the students repeated in chorus. Almost all the *ragas* seemed unusual;<sup>1</sup> when I questioned the teacher, he replied, simply: “That is the way it is; I teach what I hear.” While this group is taught by Sri Venkata Varadhan—a man all the others that I visited had women teachers. The women were all Brahmins; of the 18 who attended regularly only two were from Smarta (Advaitin) families; all others were Sri Vaishnava.

All the students sit in a semi-circular fashion on the floor, while the

teacher alone sits on a chair, facing them. For these lessons, there were no accompanying instruments except the harmonium. They frequently sing for events connected with temples, and occasionally, they sing for a secular audience. For temple events, they choose songs appropriate to that shrine: for a Hanuman temple, they chose songs that deal with Rama-devotion from the *Divya Prabandham*, because Hanuman was the paradigmatic devotee of this incarnation of Vishnu. When performing on the secular stage, they may be accompanied by a violin, a veena, and a percussion instrument, but for temple performances, the accompanying instruments are generally not included, so as to concentrate fully on the words of the Alvar.

All practice sessions and performances begin with a unique invocation. In the Sri Vaishnava community, recitation of the *Divya Prabandham* generally begins with the line “I take refuge with the sacred feet of the Alvar (Nammalvar) and Emperumanar (Ramanuja).” The Goda Mandali however, begins with the line “Alvar, Andal Emperumanar tiruvatikale caranam, Andal tiruvatikale caranam” (“I take refuge with the sacred feet of Nammalvar, Andal and Ramanuja; I take refuge with the sacred feet of Andal.”) This special emphasis on Andal is unique to this circle of her companions in the Goda Mandali and some of the other women’s groups. The Goda Mandali also has a unique “mangalam” or last song. In almost all Carnatic music concerts, the last auspicious song of benediction (mangalam) focuses, by tradition, on Rama and a song of Thyagaraja or Ramdas is sung. The Goda Mandali, however, sings a song praising the Goddess Lakshmi in Srirangam.

The students of the Goda Mandali highlight the importance of the music and the words; one of them stated:

“If the audience wants to hear the *Kamboji raga*, they can go to the Music Academy (a famous institution in Madras where the classical Carnatic music-fest in December is extremely popular); but if they want to hear the beauty of the words of the Alvars and the beauty of music, if they want to see the beauty of the meaning, they come to hear us.”

It is this involvement with the music and words of the Alvars that sets these groups apart from the dozens of other *bhajan* groups in the city. The distinguishing feature of this circle is their intense Sri Vaishnava outlook. In an interview, Chitra Raghunathan recounted how she became involved with this group. She had always been interested in devotional music and went regularly to a “syncretic” *bhajan* group a few blocks away. One day, her father, an ardent Sri Vaishnava, accosted Chitra’s friend who was Vaishnava by birth and asked her why she wore the *vibhuti* (the sacred ash) on her forehead. This ash was from the local Shiva temple. The friend thought quickly and replied: “Probably for the same reason that makes your daughter go to the *bhajan* groups and sing loudly about Shiva and Parvati.” Chitra heard about this conversation through her friend; eventually she said she began to seek out a Sri Vaishnava group, and found the Goda Mandali. Since 1982, they have met in her house. Intensely involved with this group, Chitra Raghunathan planned the group activities, practised and sang the “prayers” with them.

The Goda Mandali is not an isolated example of how women today appropriate Andal. Srinidhi Rangarajan, a physician and noted Bharat Natyam dancer, rearranged the verses of Andal’s works to reflect her experience of a spiritually progressive sequence and choreographed them. This performance was held in

December 1994 to inaugurate the festival of Tiruppavai. Following the performance of Dr. Rangarajan, students and teachers from the Padma Seshadri school in Madras went around the streets in a lighted float, singing the verses of Andal. This float was subsequently taken out at dawn for several days in the month of Markali through various suburbs in Chennai.

Another example of a *bhajan* group, like the Goda Mandali, is the Bhaktanjanli group of Kothai Venkatachalapathy. Many of these groups are founded and headed by women who also know the meaning of the verses. Kothai (a version of ‘Goda’ and therefore the name of Andal) is the granddaughter of Karpangadu Swami, a famous exponent of the Sri Vaishnava scriptures.

Kothai, too, emphasizes the role of divine inspiration in singing and recitation; she thinks that without being in touch with the divine, one cannot perform. She calls this “intuition” and described it more in terms of getting the music from a divine source, and singing songs appropriate to the time. Thus, before the annual celebration of Andal’s birthday in 1991, she taught her students many verses from the *Nacchiyar Tirumoli*, speaking of the emotional tensions of Andal as she passed from one representative song to another. She is convinced that regular recitation of these verses brought her the element of success and victory in a situation over which she had no control.

Kothai and the Goda Mandali are all examples from a generation involved in singing the *Divya Prabandham* with all the beauty and richness of the *ragas* conceptualized in the last four hundred years. The teachers of the music claim inspiration, intuition, and express the passion of their involvement with the sound and the words over and over

again. A listener cannot but be struck by their overpowering enthusiasm and zeal; it is almost as if they are transmitting revelation and are filled with the power of the salvific word.

How do these groups relate to Andal? What kind of role model has she provided for the women and for the Sri Vaishnava community in general? The questions can be answered on several levels.

The women of Goda Mandali see Andal's words and the words of the other saints as portraying their own emotions and spiritual longing and giving them direct access to the Lord. Chitra Raghunathan, one of the members, says that singing with this group is the most fulfilling aspect of her religious life; in fact, she added, this is her only real religious life, this is her direct prayer.

In temples, special groups (like the *adhyapakas* and *araiyars*, the traditional male cantors) have the religious and often the legal right to recite and pray; in household rituals a man may officiate; but through the singing and dancing, the women communicate directly with the deity. In this context, two factors are important: the companionship of the group which is like the collective prayer of Andal and her friends, and secondly, the opportunity to sing the sacred words in private and public forums. The advent and growing popularity of these women's groups which sing the prayers in sacred and secular forums is leading to an increase in the feminization of ritual patterns in some Hindu communities.

In Sri Vaishnava theology, Andal is clearly a paradigmatic devotee and by identifying with or imitating (*anukarana*) her love, it may be possible to reach the Lord. Her poems are recited by the community every morning; if the entire *Tiruppavai* cannot be recited, at least the penultimate verse ought to be. Bhattar, a 12th-century theologian is quoted as advising his disciple that



**Singing of the *Tiruppavai* in a Tamil Vaishnav home, Delhi**

he ought to recite the entire *Tiruppavai* every morning and experience its emotions.

Commentarial literature says that by the practice of some rituals, the cowherd girls got Krishna; by imitation of those rituals (which constituted their vratas), Andal reached Krishna. By making the words of Andal her words, the devotee is extolled to be like Andal, imitating her passion, emulating and appropriating her devotion. In other words, one seeks union with Vishnu through the words of Andal and by sharing her passion and her power. It is this feature of imitation and appropriation of emotion which is the basis of many Hindu theories of singing, acting, and dancing as ways to salvation.

Andal invites selective emulation; human beings can identify with her and hope to achieve, however distant it may be, some of the passion she felt for the Lord. Every Sri Vaishnava bride is dressed like Andal and during wedding rituals, the songs of Andal's wedding-dream are recited. In one sense, the bride is likened to Andal; but the explanation that is repeated frequently by Sri Vaishnava teachers is that *all* human beings, namely the bride, the bridegroom and the guests, ought to be like Andal—all devotees of the

Lord. Later teachers of the community, like Vedanta Desika (13th century) liken a human being to a bride, Vishnu to a bridegroom, and the teacher who initiates one to the Sri Vaishnava community as the father who gives away his daughter in marriage. What is important to note here is that the community has avoided the issue of making Andal a social or *dharmic* role model, and has instead opted to make her a theological model or a model of one who seeks *moksha*; she then becomes a model for all human beings. Thus, the Sri Vaishnava community does not encourage young girls to imitate Andal's life; girls are not encouraged to be unmarried and dedicate their lives to the Lord. Andal's rejection of marriage and her subsequent union with the Lord is seen as a unique event and as suitable only for her.

This isolation of Andal's position is done by divinizing her character and by making her more than human in some ways. She is portrayed in later literature as an incarnation of the Earth-Goddess, who sought a human life to experience an intimate and physical relationship with the Lord.<sup>2</sup> The idea is that as the Goddess, she is constrained in her behaviour and has to act with decorum and formally as the correct Hindu wife ought to

(this is the Manu model); however, as a lover, she is freed of her constraints and can let her heart rule her actions. In other words, the local legends recounted in the *Sthala Mahatmayam* say that Andal is not constrained by the idea of a *dharmic* wife (as the Earth-Goddess, consort of Vishnu would be). She goes to the Lord herself, seeking a union and asks the Lord to come to her. This union is consummated, physically, in a ritual in Srivilliputtur, the birthplace of Andal. Here, during her birthday celebrations in the month of Ati (July 15-Aug.14), on the seventh day, the Lord (in statuary form) is taken to her chambers and made to recline on her. The sight of the Lord reclining (*sayana tirukkolam*) on her is one that is celebrated by all devotees as an overt example of His accessibility on the one hand and acknowledgment of the power of Andal's passion on the other. The very physical nature of the union between Andal and the Lord is celebrated. The liberation of saints like Andal and Tiruppan, therefore, is not a colourless *moksha* that is beyond human ken; rather, it is a full-blooded union of the flesh and the spirit.

Andal's life then offers a theological model—a model of a human *bhakta*—for all human beings. Women see in her a person who attained salvation, not by worshipping her husband as God (as Manu would have it), but by approaching God directly and wanting a union with him. The women of Goda Mandali see her words and the words of the Alvars as portraying their own emotions and spiritual longing and giving them direct access to the Lord. Since the 1940s the singing of the Alvar hymns have for the first time since their composition moved outside the halls of the temples and home shrines and into the secular auditoriums. Unlike

a temple, where only those males who have certain rights can recite formally for ritual occasions, in a secular auditorium, anyone can sing. Thus one may argue that the movement of sacred hymns into secular forums has provided the opportunity for women to sing devotional hymns in public. The increasing popularity of television and radio has also helped the spread of these groups in the last part of the 20th century.

Andal, then, functions as a role model for all human beings who seek *moksha*, not as a model of *stri dharma*. And yet, she is not a generic *bhakti* saint like one of the other male Alvars; the circles of women explicitly honour her, venerate her, before beginning to sing her hymns. Although they are Andal's companions hundreds of years after her time, the women still participate in the passion of her songs. They find meaning in the words and express

it through the emotions of the *ragas* of this century. In the *Tiruppavai*, Andal wakes up her friends to go seek the Lord and “bathe” in him; in the late 20th century, Andal continues to wake up her circles of women companions by making them sing directly to the Lord and seek Him through their music. □

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> *Some of the pans or ragas which seemed unusual were: Antali Kurinji, Viya Yalmuri, Palam Pancharam, Chatari, Manolayam, Puranirmai. In addition to these, he also taught some more familiar ragas: Senjurutti, Bilahari, Hindolam, Vasantha, Sindhu Bhairavi, Kapi, Karaharapiya, Tilang, Sahana, Hamsanandi, Mandu.*

<sup>2</sup> *Srivilliputtur mahatmymayam, p.22*

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## Women Bhakta Poets

*“No one can stop you - Mira set out in ecstasy.  
Modesty, shame, family honour - all these I threw off my head.  
Flinging away praise and blame, I took the narrow path of knowledge.  
Tall the towers, red the windows - a formless bed is spread,  
Auspicious the five-coloured necklace, made of flowers and buds,  
Beautiful armlets and bracelets, vermillion in my hair parting,  
The tray of remembrance in my hand - a beauty more true.  
Mira sleeps on the bed of happiness - auspicious the hour today.  
Rana, you go to your house - you and I cannot pull together.  
No one can stop you - Mira set out in ecstasy.”*

*Mirabai*

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