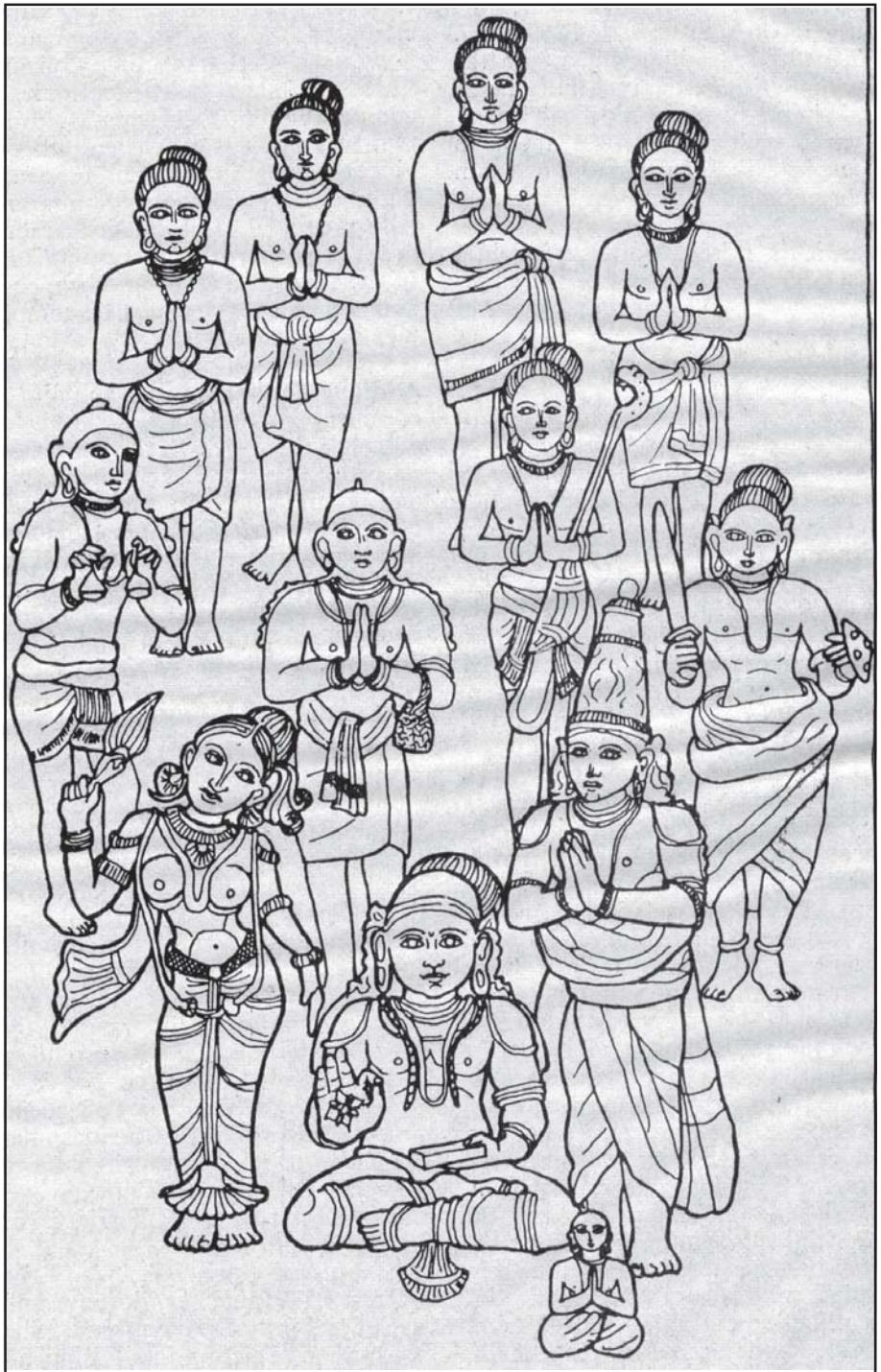


# Andal: She Who Rules

(based on a manuscript by C. Meenakshi, has been supplemented with material from Friedhelm Hardy, *Viraha Bhakti*, OUP, 1983, and Vidya Dehejia, *Slaves of the Lord*, Munshiram Manoharlal, 1988.)



**The twelve Alvars, from individual bronze figures. Periyalvar holds cymbals and Andal a lotus**

*“Utpana Dravide saham vriddhim  
Karnatake gata kvachit kvachit  
maharashtre gurjare jirnatam gata...  
vrindavanam punah prapya navineva  
surupini jataham yuvati.”*

"Bhakti was born in Dravida, grew to womanhood in Maharashtra and Karnataka, and became old in Gujarat. On reaching Vrindavan, she again became a young and beautiful woman."

(*Bhagvat Mahatmya* I, 48-50)

Emotional Krishna *bhakti* seems to have originated with the Alvars, the Vaishnav saints of south India, and the Nayanars, Shaiva *bhaktas*, from the seventh century onwards.

The songs of the 12 Alvars are collected in the *Prabandham*, an anthology of 4,000 stanzas. Some of the songs in this anthology are among the greatest Krishna *bhakti* poems in India. The highly emotional form of *bhakti*, characteristic of the Alvars, became influential in the north only when translated into Sanskrit.

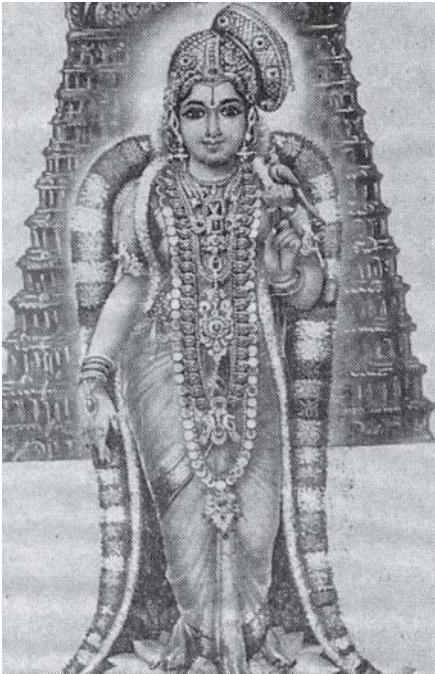
Andal, who probably lived in the ninth century AD, is the only woman among the Alvars. Along with Nammalvar, she is accepted as holding the highest place among them in terms of literary merit. The word “Andal” (she who rules) is the feminine form of “Alvar” (he who rules). Andal’s signature line in her songs indicates that she was the daughter of Vittuchittan (Sanskrit form Vishnuchitta), also one of the 12 Alvars, known as Periyalvar, or the great sage. According to the legend, she lived for only 16 years.

According to tradition, Periyalvar, who was a Brahman and a priest at the temple at Srivillipputtur, found Andal under a basil bush and raised her as his daughter. She was named Kodai which means "flower garland."

As the daughter of the temple priest, Kodai used daily to weave a garland for the image of the presiding deity, Vatapatrachayi, a form of Vishnu. As a little girl, Kodai used to wear the garland herself before it was offered to the deity. One day, Periyalvar happened to see her wearing the garland and looking at herself in the mirror. He did not offer the garland to god

that day, thinking it would be an offence to do so. It is believed that god then appeared to Periyalvar in a dream and expressed his desire to wear the garland worn by Kodai.

Overwhelmed with joy, Periyalvar called Kodai "Andal" from that day. She is also known as "chutikkottuttanachiyan" or "she who offered the garland to god after



## **Modern religious picture of Andal**

she had worn it."

In remembrance of Andal's legendary action, even today, a garland offered to her image at the temple in her hometown Srivilliputtur is taken to the famous Tirupati temple on the occasion of Venkatesa's wedding festival, and to Madurai every year in the month of Chittirai (April-May) to adorn the deity there. The legend

continues that Andal, as she grew up, refused to marry, declaring herself the bride of Krishna: "I will end my life if any talk arises about my marriage to any mortal man." Said to have received instructions from Vishnu, Periyalvar escorted the 16 year old Andal in bridal attire to the Srirangam temple where she is believed to have been absorbed into the stone image of Vishnu.

This end signifies not only the intensity of Andal's devotion but of Periyalvar's too. In one song, in the person of the heroine's mother, he laments the loss of a daughter in a passage usually interpreted as a reference to his gift of Andal to Vishnu: "I had an only daughter and goddess like I brought her up: the fair eyed god has taken her." (*Tirumozhi*, III. VI.4)

Andal composed a 30 stanza long song, the *Tiruppavai*, and 14 songs with a total of 143 stanzas, collectively known as the *Nachiyar Tiru-mozhi*. *Tiruppavai* means “the song for *pavai*” *Pavai* means “doll.” Here, it refers to a sand image of the goddess constructed by young girls on the riverbank, early each morning, as part of a religious observance which probably originated in a fertility rite. The ritual, performed on every day of the month of Margazhi (December-January) by fasting girls, is supposed to bring abundant rains to the land and good husbands to the girls.

The song is pervaded by numerous descriptions of Krishna. Apart from many conventional epithets, there are some charged with emotion, as when the girls, standing before the bed on which he lies asleep, ask him to wake up:

*Will you not open  
slowly,*

*The legend indicates that Andal led Periyalvar to a higher level of devotion — from ritualistic to self immersing bhakti. Andal may be seen as inverting a ritual, if we compare her action with a verse of Periyalvar wherein he praises god in these words describing the temple ritual performed by seven generations of his ancestors:*

*“We are such servants: wearing the yellow garment which you have worn and then discarded, eating from your plate, and adorning ourselves with the tulsiflowers (...) which you have worn and discarded.”*

your lotus shaped,  
bell like eyes,  
eyes like the sun,  
the moon,  
and look on us,  
so that all maledictions  
may be destroyed?

(22)



The *Tiruppavai* has one stanza for each day of the month. Each stanza ends with a call to the girlfriends of the speaker: "O my friends." The song begins by awaking the girls to participating in the ritual, goes on to detail the observances they follow and their progress to awaken the sleeping Krishna, and ends by their asking him to grant them union with himself and to obliterate all desires from their minds except the desire to serve him.

The beauty of Krishna and the girls' praise of him is also linked to the beauty and prosperity of the land. They say that whenever they sing his praise:

*Rain will fall thrice a month  
throughout the land,  
and no evil befall.  
Paddy saplings shoot up apace,  
Fish merrily play,  
Shining bees sleep on  
blooming flowers,  
And healthy cows, when approached  
fearlessly,  
Each udder, when held steadily and  
pressed,  
Will fill the pitchers with never  
diminishing wealth,  
O girls, O my friends!*

(3)

All over Tamil Nadu, in the month of Margazhi, the *Tiruppavai* is recited every day by women in Vaishnav homes. Radio stations broadcast the entire work each



morning. Girls in Vaishnav homes are thus familiar with the song. In the month of Margazhi, Tamil Vaishnav temples throughout the country hold special celebrations in which Andal is worshipped along with Krishna.

The *Nachiyan Tirumozhi* (song of the heroine) is much less known, probably because of its frank use of sexual imagery. It is never sung in temples or recited in public. Only the sixth of the 24 hymns in the *Nachiyan Tirumozhi* is well known. This song is a dream related by the heroine to her friend. She dreams of her wedding



to Vishnu. It gives an elaborate account of the wedding ceremony. This song is recited at Tamil Vaishnav marriages even today:

*Today and in endless future births  
Our Lord Narayana, my Nambi  
will be my constant companion —  
with his holy lotus hands  
upon the ammi stone he placed my  
foot —  
This dream I dreamt, my friends.*



The mould and idiom in which the *Nachiyan Tirumozhi* is cast is derived from classical Tamil poetry, also known as Sangam poetry, which flourished in the first few centuries AD. This highly sophisticated poetry was formally divided into two categories — *puram* (the outside) dealing with war, politics, trade and, as a minor element, religion; and *aham* (inside) dealing with love. *Aham* poems depict the love of a man and woman before and after marriage, in union and in separation.

Classical Tamil poets had developed a system whereby a particular landscape and season corresponded to a particular mood of the lovers. The poem was never addressed by the poet to the reader, but was spoken by an unnamed character to another character. These were the hero, the heroine, the hero's friend or messenger, the heroine's friend, her foster mother, and passers by.

The innovation of the Alvars was to use the *aham* mode in the religious context of the *bhakta* identified with the girl or *gopi*, in communication with the lover, Krishna. Seven Alvars have written songs in the *aham* genre, and Nammalvar has



written the largest number of such songs.

The special quality of Andal's songs in the *Nachiyan Tirumozhi* is the use of bridal and erotic imagery in a highly passionate vocabulary to express longing for union with the lord and complete surrender to him. Her being a woman seems to make more complete her identification with the girl speaker of the songs.

The song begins with a description of Krishna's teasing the young girls, goes on to the speaker's dream of her wedding with him, and her addresses to different natural objects such as flowers, animals,

clouds, conch shell, and to her mother and friends, lamenting her separation from Krishna and the pain caused by her unfulfilled love. For example, she asks the conch shell which is held in Vishnu's hand and touches his lips when he blows on it:

*Smell they of camphor  
or lotus blossom new?  
do they taste sweet  
his lips of coral hue?  
O tell me  
white conch from the vast deep sea  
I ask longingly  
I need to know  
How do they taste?  
how smell the lips  
of Madhavan who broke the tusk?*

The Nachiyat Tirumozhi reaches its

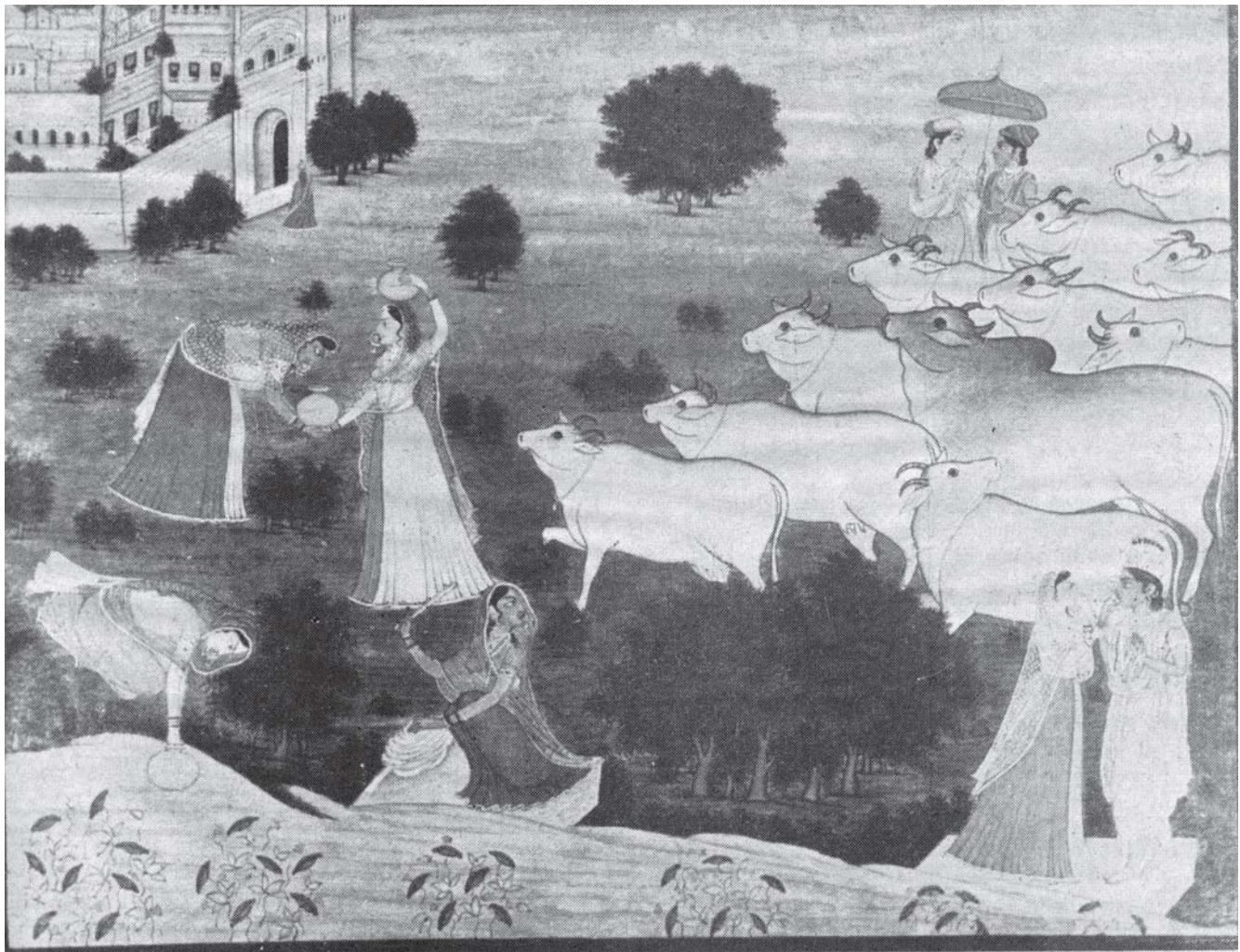
climax in song 13:

*In vain I waft for a sight of my dark  
Lord  
he knows not the sorrow of women I look  
for soft words  
but you pour acid into my open  
wound—  
Bring me the yellow silk the Lord wraps  
around his waist  
fan me with it  
cool the burning of my heart.*

*Like soft earth trampled by black bull  
broken and crushed am I  
by him who stole the hearts  
of the maidens of Ayarpadi —  
what now can bring me solace?  
only the nectar of the Lord's mouth  
the Lord who is himself*

*the nectar that never cloys  
bring me that nectar  
let me taste it  
it will wipe away my pain.  
I pine and languish  
but he cares not whether I live or  
die—  
if I see that thief Govardhana  
that looting robber, that plunderer  
I shall pluck out by their roots  
these breasts that have known no gain  
I shall take them  
and fling them at his chest  
putting out the hell-fire  
which burns within me.*

The last song ends on a quiet note of acceptance and a sense of hope. In the first half of each stanza, Andal asks "Have



you seen Krishna?" and the second half answers: "We have seen him in Vrindavan";

*...With eyebrows arched  
like the elegant bow he holds  
that lawless bandit  
that inconsistent Lord  
did you see him come this way?  
A glowing face, a dark-hued form  
like the sun rising on mountain tops  
we saw him there in Vrindavan.*

Andal's poems excel in verbal music and show a rare sense of word values. The Alvars made a major contribution to a reconsolidated Tamil awareness. Such an awareness was implied in Sangam literature and is reestablished by the Alvars. When Nammalvar says "Ichhan who makes me sing lovely Tamil verses about himself", Tamil is accepted as capable of containing revelation, parallel to the Vedanta. Andal, too, in the last stanza of the *Tiruppavai*, playing on her name and its meaning, stresses the legacy she inherits from Sangam culture, a legacy which she transmitted through her fresh and beautiful use of it, to future generations:

*Kodai — daughter of Periyalvar,  
The fresh lotus garlanded*

*Sripattar\*—  
Sings this song in Sangam Tamil,  
Strings this thirty stanza garland —  
They who sing it, flawless,  
To the four shouldered god,  
The red eyed, the beautiful faced,  
The resplendent one,  
Will be uplifted into bliss,  
O girls, O my friends!*

(30)

\* Another name for Periyalvar, meaning "saint."

The status of Vishnu's consort Bhudevi has been conferred upon Andal

in Tamil Vaishnav tradition. Paintings frequently depict her as a young and beautiful woman, holding a parrot, standing at Vishnu's right hand. In many temples, her image is installed along with his. Thus, the name Andal may be said to have become appropriate in her.

Translations from *Nachiya Tirumozhi* are from Vidya Dehejia, *Slaves of the Lord; The Path of the Tamil Saints*, Munshiram Manoharlal, Delhi, 1988; and those from *Tiruppavai* are by Prabha Rani and Ruth Vanita.



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

