

*Andal:*  
*Afterlife of a 9th Century*  
*Woman Poet*  
**Kamala Ganesh**

Department of Sociology (Formerly), University of Mumbai  
kamala.s.ganesh@gmail.com

## I. Introduction

Many saint poets, men and women, belonging to what has come to be known as the *bhakti* movement, have rich afterlives. Abiding in memory and imagination, they become expressions of communities, cultures, nations and people. Some achieve immortality in their lifetimes. Others were rediscovered and revived more recently to become part of literary discourses and mass-mediated popular culture. Akka Mahadevi, Andal, Basava, Chokhamela, Jnaneshwar, Kabir, Mirabai, Ravidas, Tulsidas and others have remained in the consciousness of the devotional public across regions for centuries.

Methodologically, the course of the afterlife of saint poets is hard to track. History and legend get interwoven in the narratives that emerge. Andal belongs to early India<sup>1</sup> for which documented historical sources are limited. Even for later saint poets like Mirabai or Sant Tukaram, popular stories are in active circulation, overwhelming the sparse documented accounts. But both contribute to our understanding, each in its own way.

Over time, afterlives may diminish or flourish. The narratives vary depending on the context and site. Whether they were in a fraternity or were lone voices, whether they were disturbing the social order, and other issues like the prevalent kinds of political patronage come into play in how the poetry is received at different

times. The authorship of a poem cannot always be established. As A.K. Ramanujan (1999, 281–4) points out, saints within a language formed clusters, being in familial relationships with each other, supporting each other, and thus making for ‘composite saints.’ Sometimes the genre (*abhang* or bhajan or *vachana*)<sup>2</sup> was the badge of identity, not the individual. Anonymous poets would take on the identity of a known poet, writing in that style. Genres and tropes moved from one poet to another and crossed geographical borders. Dates are always debated, more so for the early groups. The afterlife of a saint poet must be quilted together in a patchwork, from multiple sources. Fact and truth need to be integrated. This makes for methodological complexity.<sup>3</sup>

The concept of afterlife allows us to follow the story of a historical personage or institution or event or book or object as it travels in time and space, acquiring, so to say, a life of its own. The anthropological approach to afterlife that I take points out how, through memory and recursive practice, some form of the subject of our attention is kept alive as a link to the historical and mythological past. Each ‘site’ of afterlife that we may either stumble upon or approach purposefully represents the crucial institutional structures of a particular society/culture at a particular time. It is where the afterlife is made and unmade, some strands rendered visible and others erased. As part of the toolkit of writing biographies, the concept of afterlife moves our understanding of the subject to a dynamic plane.<sup>4</sup>

Andal is one of the twelve Alvar saint poets of the Sri Vaishnava tradition, the youngest and the only woman among them. The Alvars and the sixty three Saiva Nayanmars were venerated all over the region through their devotional hymns in Tamil composed between the 7th and 9th centuries CE. The emotionally charged outpourings for their personal God – Vishnu or Siva – were unlike any earlier genre of literature in any Indian language. They are considered to be inaugurators of a new genre of ecstatic mystical poetry which spread to many regions, through many languages in the country, over more than a thousand years.

Andal’s afterlife has been one of dazzling continuity. Within a century of her lifetime, her poetry was included in the Sri Vaishnava sacred canon. By the 12th

century, she was transformed into a goddess, the only Alvar to be deified. She started gaining a formal presence in temple liturgy, iconography, epigraphy and hagiography. It continues undimmed. Yet, despite all the attention being given to *Bhakti* and Sufism in current popular and academic discourses, Andal and the Alvars are not well-known outside southern India.

Andal has composed two poems – *Tiruppavai* and *Nacchiyar Tirumoli* – counted as among the finest in Tamil devotional literature. Both are part of the *Nalayira Divya Prabandham* – *Prabandham* in short – a compilation of Alvar poetry. *Tiruppavai*, consisting of congregational prayers to Vishnu for blessings, is extremely popular. Lesser known is *Nacchiyar Tirumoli* in Andal's individual voice, passionately expressing her love for Vishnu, sometimes in explicit physical terms. In Sri Vaishnava tradition, both poems are given a prominent place.<sup>5</sup>

The antiquity, literary excellence and musicality of Andal's poetry, its intensely personal voice, and her life story have inspired many devotees and admirers. *Nacchiyar Tirumoli* has also raised questions regarding a young unmarried woman not only composing poetry in the 'bridal mysticism' genre but expressing an intense desire for marriage to and physical union with Vishnu and acting upon it.

The present essay traverses some of the sites in which Andal's afterlife has played out – in canonical religion, politics, civil society and popular culture. It is a selective exercise, depending upon the kind of material available and the issues that I personally have an engagement with as an anthropologist with a feminist perspective.

The very first site for inquiry is Andal's own life and poetry. What were the circumstances that created *Nacchiyar Tirumoli*? For this we need to look at the Alvars as a collectivity. To do this, I focus on nascent Sri Vaishnavism from the century after Andal's lifetime, until a few centuries later, when it develops into a sect with a fully worked out theology and temple-centred liturgy, rituals and practice, in which Andal holds a central place. The most important question here is this: given the substance and style of *Nacchiyar Tirumoli*, how was it accepted as an integral part of the Sri Vaishnava canon? Another connected question: how

does this canonical acceptance manifest itself? Furthermore: when and how was Andal transformed into a goddess?

Three other sites of Andal's afterlife that I explore are contemporary: the popular culture of Tamil Nadu, the political domain of this state, and the intellectual discourses on *bhakti* and feminism. Andal's presence in popular devotional culture is palpable in the Tamil region and, to some extent, in the Telugu and Kannada regions too. How does Andal's poetry interweave through religious and secular realms, straddling multiple performative genres?

After independence, the politics of religion, secularism and cultural memory played out in different ways in the erstwhile Madras state during the Congress rule and later in the successive governments based on Dravidian nationalism. Between the latter's ideological roots in rationalism and atheism and its commitment to reviving ancient Tamil literature, the devotional poetry of the Alvars and Nayanmars posed uncomfortable contradictions. One controversy that arose in 2018 was regarding an allegedly disrespectful remark on Andal made by the famous poet and writer R. Vairamuthu. This is discussed later in the essay. He raised the possibility that Andal had been a *devadasi* in the Ranganatha temple of Srirangam, without contextualizing the meanings of that fraught term. The issue galvanized various sections of Tamil society including political parties, religious organizations and civil society. Underneath the sound and fury lurked a deeper question. How did groups ideologically and politically hostile to each other all lay claims to Andal's legacy and unite in denigrating the category of '*devadasi*'?

There is a flourishing cottage industry of informed devotees writing on Andal, especially in internet chat groups. Translations of her poetry abound.<sup>6</sup> There are scholarly analyses from the literary, *bhakti* and feminist perspectives. How does Andal's story fit into the notion of a pan-Indian *bhakti* movement? Are we able to interpret her poetry through a particularly feminist lens, since she is a woman and wrote with what might seem like a combination of radicalism and conservatism? This is the site in which, through my writing, I too am adding a few strands to her afterlife.

In each of these sites, overlapping questions and issues get thrown up. But the central question about the spark that created *Nacchiyar Tirumoli* remains a mystery. Growing up in a Tamil home, I have, as a child, listened to Andal's story, wide-eyed at the magical moment when she walks into the Srirangam temple dressed in bridal finery, climbs into the *sanctum* near the idol of Ranganatha and simply disappears. As a student of classical music, I have spent enchanted evenings learning the *Tiruppavai* songs, without giving much thought to the meanings. Lately, my intellectual engagements in the fields of gender and culture have pulled me back to themes that I had absorbed unselfconsciously as a young girl.

## II. Andal among the Alvars

Andal's life and poetry are inseparable from the Alvars' poetry which is foundational for the Sri Vaishnava sect in its formation, philosophy and practice.<sup>7</sup> The twelve Alvars composed their poetry over three centuries from 7th century CE to 9th century CE. Andal belonged to the last phase and was the adoptive daughter of Periyalvar, a highly revered and popular Alvar. The Alvars were drawn from all the four *varnas*.<sup>8</sup> They did not campaign against caste. But they were insistent on direct access to and communication with God, welcoming all devotees of Vishnu. The Tamil devotional communities that were formed in this era "cut across caste, sex and other hierarchies of orthodox Hinduism ... (more) a movement towards communal solidarity than an expression of social protest" (Peterson 1989, 9). The peripatetic Alvars visited the important Vishnu temples in the region and composed hymns called *mangalashasanams* on them.<sup>9</sup>

These hundred and eight temples are known as *divya desams* and make up the sacred geography of Sri Vaishnavism (Neelakrishnan 1992). The poetry of the Alvars and Nayanmars is the first literary expression of *bhakti*, the first sizable corpus of full-fledged religious poems in Tamil and the first Hindu sectarian scripture in a language other than Sanskrit.<sup>10</sup>

By the 10th century, Alvar poetry – the individual songs being called *pasurams* ('song of praise') – had been compiled into the '*Nalayira Divya Prabandham*' (*The*

*Four thousand Divine Hymns*) by the theologian Nathamuni. It soon became the most sacred of the Sri Vaishnava texts, referred to as *Tamizh Marai* or Tamil Veda. We shall return to this later in the section.

Andal was the only Alvar who acquired divine status. She is considered an incarnation (*avataram*) of Bhooma Devi, consort of Vishnu, whereas the other Alvars are each an aspect (*amsam*) of one of Vishnu's symbols – conch, discus and so on. While Alvar idols are consecrated in smaller shrines around the *sanctum* of the temple, Andal is the presiding deity in the temple in her birthplace of Srivilliputtur.

## Life story

Andal's life story as gleaned from her own poetry, hagiographic accounts, commentaries on the *Prabandham* and popular legends has been widely published. I only give a brief sketch here.<sup>11</sup>

Andal was a foundling, her caste unknown, discovered by the Vishnu devotee Vishnuchittar under the Tulsi plant in the temple garden near his home. A Brahmin by birth, he was a priest at the Srivilliputtur temple. He had himself composed devotional poetry, was recognized as an Alvar, and widely known as Periyalvar. Vishnuchittar raised his daughter, Kothai/Goda devi as she was named, in an atmosphere of prayer and worship, teaching her the Alvar hymns. The little girl developed a deep devotion towards Vishnu in the form of Lord Ranganatha, the presiding deity of Srirangam, dreaming that she would marry only him. In *Nacchiyar Tirumoli*, she cries in anguish that she would rather give up her life than marry an earthly mortal, when her body and soul were for Ranganatha alone. Vishnuchittar also got divine signals in his dreams that Ranganatha would marry her. Eventually, after failing to dissuade her, he accompanied Andal, who set out in bridal attire, in a grand procession from Srivilliputtur to Srirangam to marry her Lord. As she entered the *sanctum*, she vanished. Hagiographies say that she united with Ranganatha with her physical body.

## ***Tiruppavai* and *Nacchiyar Tirumoli***

Andal's first poetic composition is *Tiruppavai* in which she imagines herself as a *gopi* (cowherd girl) and leads the other *gopis* to perform special austerities (*vratas*) and rituals in the sacred month of Margali to get Vishnu's blessings. The *gopis* go to wake him up and express their desire to serve him forever. *Tiruppavai* is widely considered to be an allegorical interpretation of the mystic longing of the finite self for union with the Infinite. In practice, it has come to symbolize young unmarried women's penances to find a worthy husband.

My focus here is however on Andal's later poem *Nacchiyar Tirumoli*. I am not doing a formal analysis of the poetry, but rather trying to identify the circumstances that enabled a very young Andal to compose such a poem. It is written in Andal's individual voice (although interspersed occasionally with the chorus of *gopis*). The poem is a "profoundly intimate journey into the interior" (Venkatesan 2007, 20) with Andal expressing her love and yearning for marriage and physical union with Vishnu. She dreams of her wedding with him, recounts the rituals, sends messages to him about her longing, and expresses anger and sorrow when he does not respond. "Have you seen him here," she asks the *gopis* at the end of the poem in a becalmed mood. They reply: "Yes, we saw him here in Vrindavana," indicating that she has found him (Chabria and Shankar 2015, 163-67).<sup>12</sup>

That *Nacchiyar Tirumoli* was composed by Andal no later than in the 9th century cannot be doubted. It is part of the *Prabandham* whose centrality and sanctity as a canonical text make it hard to tinker with.

## ***Madhurya Bhakti/Agapporul/Bridal mysticism***

*Nacchiyar Tirumoli* is cast in the classic pattern of *madhurya bhakti* or devotion to a personal god (most often Vishnu) expressed as a woman's love for her beloved. The Tamil literary term *agapporul* is a close equivalent. The sweetness of union is conjoined with *viraha bhakti* or the anguish of separation and the pining for union. After the Alvar era, this genre passed on to different regions of India, in



various languages. Majority of the poets were male. In Brindavan's popular Raas Lila festival, Krishna is deemed to be the only male. All other devotees, male and female, take on the '*gopi bhava*' in the manner of the cowherd women of Gokul. The theme has found its way into many classical and folk genres of music and dance. 'Bridal mysticism' is also known in Sufi poetry and in medieval Christianity. Everywhere it is understood as the quest of the individual soul to merge with the divine/absolute reality. Human sexual union becomes a metaphor for expressing transcendental union. At this level there is no issue with males becoming female. Two Alvars, both men, Tirumangai Alvar and Nammalvar, addressed Vishnu in the voice of a woman pining for her beloved. Their style is different from Andal's who composes with a directness unmatched in the Alvar tradition. Here are some glimpses from the poetry of Tirumangaiyalar and Nammalvar –

When she covers her round breasts  
With perfume, sandal paste and pearls  
They turn to fire.

When even the full moon's white rays  
Burn, she grows thin.

When the wave-tossed sea cries aloud,  
she too cries aloud.

Her body, the colour of young mango leaf,  
Has turned sickly gold.

The bangles do not stay tight  
on her hands.

What indeed are your intentions  
about my daughter,  
my girl covered with jewels?

Tirumankai Alvar, 3 (Ramanujan 1994, 75-76)

\*

Evening has come,  
but not the Dark One.

The bulls,  
their bells jingling,  
have mated with the cows  
and the cows are frisky.

The flutes play cruel songs,  
bees flutter in their bright  
white jasmine  
and the blue-black lily.

The sea leaps into the sky  
and cries aloud.

Without him here,  
what shall I say?  
how shall I survive?

Nammalvar, 9.9.10 (Ramanujan 1981, 33)

Keeping in mind the gap of centuries between Andal and the other women saints, the present discussion pertains only to Andal.

Sri Vaishnava commentators and devotees alike hold that, in this genre, Andal's is a unique and authentic voice. Archana Venkatesan underlines the poetic conventions adopted by the two male Alvars to construct female longing, whereas Andal was talking about herself. She did not need interlocutors (Venkatesan 2007, 23). The three poems presented here convey Andal's intensity, unfettered imaginative genius, complete absorption in her love and an articulation of great freedom of thought and feeling.

O Manmatha! My voluptuous breasts swell  
For that lord alone who holds aloft  
flaming discus and conch.  
If there is even mere talk  
of offering this, my body to mortal men,  
then I cannot live.

*Nacchiyar Tirumoli* 1.4 (Venkatesan 2007, 20)

\*

Whirling clouds, you enlarge in anger  
and growl across the sky rending it open

with lightning. Spilling honey you tear  
flowers, petals spatter like blood on earth.

Go to the fierce lord who roars and mauls  
Tossing his mane as his paws rips insides out.

Tell him I'm bloodied. He must heal me  
with long caresses, still me in his thrall.  
engorged with anger

nails extending he kills  
plunging wrists in blood

from these very hands I seek  
fondling  
gather in my swollen ripeness

as spilling nectar  
my body's blood flower  
bursts  
*Nacchiyar Tirumoli* (Chabria and Shankar 2015, 103–4)

\*

I dissolve in anguish awaiting his glance.  
But the duplicitous Lord of Govardhana  
Cares not if I live or die though he rains attention  
On everyone else. If that looter, that  
Plunderer but looks in my direction I shall pluck  
Out my useless breasts by the roots and fling  
Them at his chest.

*Nachiyar Thirumozhi* (Chabria and Shankar 2015, 156)

Even for a contemporary woman poet, such articulation of female desire would be an incredible accomplishment. Without taking away from Andal's pioneering poetry, we could now look at the enabling circumstances.

Andal was brought up by Vishnuchittar, an Alvar himself, in an atmosphere of devotion, hearing and learning about the other Alvars. In hagiographies, Andal is embedded in familial relationships with other Alvars and Acharyas. The *Divya Suri Charitam* describes Nammalvar as having conducted the wedding of Andal with Ranganatha – a fatherly or brotherly gesture. Though chronologically two centuries later than her, Ramanuja is known as Andal's older brother with special affection for her. He lived on *bhiksha*, and chanting Andal's *pasurams* would go with a bowl in his hand collecting food from his bhaktas. He was therefore known as *Tiruppavai* Jeeyar.<sup>13</sup> We see Andal then as part of the Alvar family, her poetry supported by them. She must have been inspired by Tirumangai Alvar and in turn she may have inspired Nammalvar.

Andal, Nammalvar and Tirumangai Alvar expressed 'bridal mysticism' in such an accomplished manner as to allow us to presume that this mode must have been known even earlier. As argued by several scholars, a modified Brahminical Hinduism from northern India and the indigenous literature and culture of the

Sangam era (2nd BCE to 3rd CE) were both powerful components in the making of Tamil *bhakti* (Karashima 2014, 82–120). Venkatesan (2007, 16) shows how Andal made connections with Sangam literature, particularly the *agam* poems, though there are points of departure too. The erotic love between man and woman that is the subject of the Sangam *agam* poems were the inspiration but with a twist: in *bhakti*, the lover is imbued with divinity and identified specifically with Vishnu. The tone also changes. The *pasurams*' sacred quality is not found in Sangam literature (Ramanujan 1999, 243).<sup>14</sup>

After the Sangam era and before the first Alvars and Nayanmars, the Kalabhras, who were Jains from the Deccan, ruled over the Tamil region. Literature in Tamil is scarce for this period except for a few late-Sangam poems, which functioned as a bridge to the new devotional literature.<sup>15</sup> But, given the powerful argument that Tamil *bhakti* was a reaction to the domination of the heterodox Sramanic religions, oral traditions are likely to have existed expressing nascent ideas of love for a personal God. Andal's individual accomplishments in Tamil poetry and her striking expressions of passion must have been influenced by pre-existing modes with adaptations to her own era's ethos.

### III. The Context of Sri Vaishnava Canon and Practice

Between the end of Andal's mortal life and her being enshrined as a goddess in Sri Vaishnava canon and practice lies the first phase of her afterlife. The questions of when and how this author of *Nacchiyar Tirumoli* became a goddess and why and how she came to be accepted in Sri Vaishnavism are related. The latter however can be addressed more easily because there are textual, liturgical, iconographic and ceremonial sites where her footprints abound. As for the former, popular legends hold that the instant she entered Ranganatha's *sanctum* and vanished, she became a goddess. Scholarship puts it at a few centuries later.<sup>16</sup> It is no surprise that this first phase of Andal's afterlife is implicated in the birth and growth of the Sri Vaishnava sect and community, beginning from the 10th century CE.<sup>17</sup>

The era of the Alvars also marked certain broader developments in southern India which shaped the political dynamics and religious fabric of the time. Fueled by the growth of agriculture, new types of states arose from the earlier chiefdoms. The features of this period included fights between the Pallavas, Pandyas and Chalukyas for political power, indifference or hostility towards the Sramanic religions (which had started receding), and an accepting attitude to Vedic Hinduism. Tamil *bhakti* is seen to be a reaction to the Sramanic dominance of the post Sangam period. It was born through a merging of the Brahminical tradition of northern India in association with newly produced puranas and *agamas* that acted as a bridge to the indigenous Sangam beliefs and traditions (Karashima 2014, 82 & 104–105; Peterson 2007, 5–8). The essential features of early Sri Vaishnavism are to be seen in this backdrop.<sup>18</sup>

## **Tamil Veda and *Ubhaya Vedanta***

While Nathamuni is revered as the first Acharya of Sri Vaishnavism, Ramanuja (11th century CE) is considered the most important. His foundational writings gave a formal philosophical and theological structure to the nascent Sri Vaishnavism. He drew from Sanskrit metaphysical and Vedantic thought as well as from the Tamil poetry of the Alvars to develop his philosophy of Vishishtadvaita as a modification of Sankara's Advaita. The successive Acharyas and commentators also wrote on the *Prabandham*'s equivalence to the Vedas and consolidated a syncretic Tamil-Sanskrit theological culture. The moniker *ubhaya vedanta* (the dual vedantas) came to be used for this fusion between the two textual traditions.<sup>19</sup> The syncretic interleaving of Sanskrit and Tamil traditions, which Andal embodies, can be seen in many facets of Sri Vaishnava practice: its sacred geography, temple network and organization, liturgical cycles, recitations, rituals and ceremonies and their mutual interconnections.

Tamil being on par with Sanskrit in a canonically significant way had a positive impact on Sri Vaishnavism's access to all classes and to women. Sanskrit had traditionally been open only to males from the twice born castes. Sri Vaishnavism during the first few centuries of its evolution was relatively speaking, open to the

entry of all castes<sup>20</sup> and the use of the common language of the people in liturgy aided this to a large extent. It placed the worship of Lakshmi or Sri at its centre, as an integral part of Vishnu. It developed an elaborate and intricate commentarial tradition on the philosophy and theology of the *agapporul* poetry of the three Alvars. This crystallized into a fundamental Sri Vaishnava principle that all souls are ultimately female with Vishnu as the only male.

In orthodox Brahminical Hinduism, moksha is only possible through Vedic knowledge which women and shudras are not entitled to. They are thus spiritually disenfranchised. Young (1983, 183-6) argues that early Sri Vaishnavism made such knowledge accessible to women and shudras through the 'Tamil Veda'. It went even further in bypassing scriptural knowledge and ascetism altogether; moksha was available to anyone, regardless of caste, creed and gender, through unconditional surrender (*prapatti*) to the Lord. Furthermore, absorbing the spirit of the Sangam age, Sri Vaishnavism celebrated the householder's life and expressed positive regard for women. This suffused not just practice but the canon as well.

So, the central question of this site on how *Nacchiyar Tirumoli* got accepted within the canon is partially answered by the spirit of early Sri Vaishnavism.

More specifically, Andal was not married; she had no husband or in laws to seek permission from. She had the blessings of her father in her quest to marry Vishnu. She was not against marriage for women. Nor was she against Vedic knowledge and *agamic* rituals. *Tiruppavai* is considered in Sri Vaishnava theology to be the very source and seed of the Vedas. She did not rest with writing poetry but acted on her passion and travelled to Ranganatha's temple to marry him. This was her difference from the other two Alvars. What happens when a metaphor is made literal? Mahalakshmi (2014, 113) insightfully interprets Andal's disappearance into the idol of Ranganatha, thus ending her mortal life, as a price for her audacious action. An emergent theology gave her goddess status as a way of fructifying her desire of marriage to Ranganatha in an acceptable realm. Weddings and amorous affection between gods and their consorts are the stuff of Hindu religious lore.

While *Nacchiyar Tirumoli* is not recited ubiquitously the way *Tiruppavai* is, it has by no means been erased. As composed, it conveys a sense of equality with Vishnu the lover, addressing him with intimacy, chiding and scolding him and pleading with him. According to Venkatesan (2007, 18), Alvars' *agapporul* poetry could be read as continuous narrative cycles of union and separation, but in the commentaries, they are completed by allegorizing the female as a dependent soul seeking the ineffable divine.

## Cycles of Transaction and Exchange among Temples

I end this section with vignettes of transactions among four important Sri Vaishnava temples. It is a fascinating tale of special ceremonies and exchanges of auspicious gifts linking them together, setting the seal of acceptance for Andal's relationship with Vishnu (Rao 2012, 195–199; Jeyalakshmi 2020). Andal is the presiding deity at the temple of Srivilliputtur, her place of birth. She had special affection towards certain forms of Vishnu as evidenced from her poetry: Ranganatha of Srirangam, Kallalagar of Alagar Koyil and Venkateswara of Tiruppati. The four temples are part of the *divya desams* of Sri Vaishnava sacred geography. Their special connections with Andal are acknowledged in their liturgical cycles. During the ten-day annual 'chariot festival' at Srivilliputtur culminating with Aadi pooram, Andal's birth star, 'sayana utsavam' is held in a grand ceremony on the seventh evening. It is attended by huge crowds. The idol of Ranganatha is made to recline on the lap of the idol of Andal, symbolic of their union. On the tenth day, special silks are sent by the Srirangam temple to the Srivilliputtur temple. The idol of Andal goes out in procession that evening draped in silks. On Bhogi, the day preceding Pongal festival, the wedding rituals of Andal and Ranganatha are conducted at the Srirangam temple. At the annual festival in Alagar Koyil, the idol of the presiding deity Kallalagar enters the river Vaigai in a procession, wearing the garland of Andal sent by the Srivilliputtur temple. During the garudotsavam festival at the famous temple at Tiruppati, the garland of Andal is sent for Venkateswara from Srivilliputtur. In the same temple, the morning recitation of *suprabhatam* throughout the year is in Sanskrit. In the month of Margali alone the *pasurams* of *Tiruppavai* replace it. Such practices

form an intricate tapestry, coding historical and mythological relations and interconnections. They carry an aura of eternity. But, unlike the *Prabandham*, they may have evolved over time, adding and subtracting details, while in essence conveying official sanction.

## IV. Contemporary Sites of Afterlife

The three contemporary sites of Andal's afterlife taken up here – popular culture, politics and intellectual discourse – are rich and complex and can be read in different ways. Within the scope of this essay, I have merely gestured to possibilities.

### Icon of popular culture

Given that Andal's poetry is in old Tamil, *Tiruppavai* has somewhat esoteric meanings and *Nacchiyar Tirumoli* is relatively unknown, one would imagine that recitation is limited to arcane Sri Vaishnava devotional groups. The visitor to Tamil Nadu in the month of Margali may be surprised to find Andal a ubiquitous presence in popular media.

In many parts of India, this month<sup>21</sup> is associated with piety and spiritual growth. For Tamils, the entire month is dedicated to Andal. Special worship is done in Sri Vaishnava temples and homes. The chanting of *Tiruppavai* verses in groups, on the streets around temples, is a hallmark of the month. Folk musical forms like *Ammanai* and *Kummi*, narrating her life story, are also prevalent. Traditionally, these devotional activities were widespread but in locations of face-to-face interaction. From the 1940s, they started entering secular, public fora too: in concert halls, on stage, in broadcast and telecast channels. The annual festivals at the major Vishnu temples feature Andal prominently. They always drew huge crowds but with electronic and digital media, their popularity has ballooned. There are *katha kalakshepams* (musical discourses) on Andal's life, literary events on her poetry, her *pasurams* are sung and danced to in classical Bharatanatyam



and Carnatic music performances as the last or second last piece, a slot usually reserved for bhajans.

Since the 1960s, a striking development in urban Tamil Nadu is the formation of women's groups generically called Goda Mandalis (Goda/Kothai being the given name of Andal). They study and recite her poetry together in regular classes. They also perform as groups in public gatherings and processions (Narayanan 2006, 37). Inspired by Andal's spirit, they endeavor to live a life of piety and devotion.

The icon of Andal, hair tied up in a side knot, wearing her distinctive, heavy garland, her left hand holding a parrot is abundantly visible not only in Sri Vaishnava temples, in the shrines and on walls, but also in Thanjavur paintings, street art and calendar art.

The story of Andal entered the world of commercial films with a film titled *Andal* in 1948 and another in 1968 titled '*Thirumal Peruma*' (The Glory of Vishnu). The first was reasonably successful and the second was a box office hit. She has been acknowledged in the credits for the Tamil film *Hey Ram* as one of the lyricists<sup>22</sup> and an acclaimed novel has been published drawing upon her life.<sup>23</sup>

In the digital world of YouTube, *Tiruppavai* sung in fusion style with orchestra<sup>24</sup> can be found nestling cheek by jowl with the traditional devotional, classical and folk versions. Her birthday even finds a place in Amar Chitra Katha's Twitter account.

How is it that Andal has moved out of a sectarian framework into the popular religion and performing arts domain? The authentic voice of her poetry is no doubt an important factor. Besides, in contemporary times, various segments of popular culture overlap, often using the same technology and platforms. With huge innovations in recording, reproduction and communication technology, Andal's poetry has reached out to newer audiences. Her strong presence in traditional devotional culture continues and feeds into the popular domain, where classical, folk and contemporary are spliced, fused and remixed with much ado.

## Political drama over legacy

From the 1980s onwards, the acrimonious interface of religion and secularism in India has inevitably become a matter of debate in politics and civil society. Even a remote historical figure like Andal, symbol of piety, pure love and syncretism is not exempt. A recent page in her afterlife tells us more about the politics of our times than hers.

For two weeks in January 2018, there was a volatile political altercation in Tamil Nadu around an issue of religious belief. It drew in voices from across the political spectrum and from all walks of life. The controversy was over a statement made by the Tamil poet and film lyricist R. Vairamuthu that Andal may have been a *devadasi* in the Srirangam temple.

The ensuing furore dredged out issues that were simmering underneath the surface of Tamil politics for decades like Dravidianism and Hinduism; faith, devotion and atheism; women, chastity and prostitution; gender, patriarchy and feminism; myth and history.

Vairamuthu is an influential public personality with links to the literary, cinematic and political networks of the Dravidian movement. BJP leader in Tamil Nadu, H. Raja launched an abusive campaign against Vairamuthu for terming Andal a *devadasi* (Aravamudan 2018). The system of dedicating women to a temple, as 'servants of God' (*devadasi*), was known in early India and there is evidence that they were respected in society. Over the centuries, practices and meanings changed and *devadasi* got conflated with the loaded term 'prostitute.' It was this latter meaning that Raja invoked, breathing fury at the wounding of Hindu sentiments and threatening violence. Vairamuthu should, he said, beg forgiveness at the feet of the Andal idol at her temple in Srivilliputtur and apologize to her devotees.<sup>25</sup> There followed both spontaneous outrage from Andal devotees and a canny mobilization of religious sensitivities by the BJP and allied organizations. Within days, criticism of Vairamuthu burst out in several media not only from personalities from the religious fold and the political Hindu right, but also from non-sectarian, non-political devotees and non-devotees prominent in public life (The New Indian Express 2018). A criminal case was filed against Vairamuthu

(Rajasekaran 2018). There were echoes of the cry “Andal is our divine mother. How can he demean her?” in the Indian diaspora too (The News Minute 2018). Vairamuthu gave a qualified apology that he had only quoted from another scholar’s work. He praised Andal’s contribution to Tamil literature, saying, “She is my mother who fed me the milk of Tamil. For forty years it is Andal whose voice has been singing inside me.”<sup>26</sup>

Meanwhile, responses supporting Vairamuthu also came in thick and fast. Individuals from the Congress and from all the Dravidian parties except for the ruling AIADMK condemned the threats of violence and lauded Vairamuthu’s accomplishments. But they were careful not to endorse his original statement. He was only quoting someone else’s view; he had apologized; the matter should end there – this was the prevailing consensus among his supporters. Despite their roots in Periyar’s rationalism and atheism, the Dravidian political parties, operating within electoral compulsions, could not afford a direct confrontation with the religiosity of the majority. Furthermore, a commitment to Tamil language and literature was also part of their credo, complicating their response to Andal. Eventually, the Madras High Court stayed all criminal proceedings against Vairamuthu observing that he had not expressed a personal opinion but merely quoted a researcher (Rajasekaran 2018).

The fundamental question for me is about the very terms of the discourse, in which both opponents and supporters of Vairamuthu left the category of ‘*devadasi*’ untouched, without any contextualization or analysis. In effect, they endorsed the stereotyping of ‘*devadasi*’ as a woman who dispensed sexual favours for a consideration. From a feminist perspective, this is problematic.

Hardly any statements issued in the fracas had clarity or depth.<sup>27</sup> A sensitive voice, that of Nrithya Pillai (2018), from within the Isai Vellalar (formerly *devadasi*) community, said this was a matter for historical debate and expressed outrage at the public shaming of her foremothers and the misrecognition of their role in the preservation of the traditional arts.

It was poet and feminist Perundevi’s response that captured the essential principle at stake. Conceding Vairamuthu’s right of free speech, she questioned

his apology. Only Andal could decide whether or not she was a *devadasī*. It was not Mr. Vairamuthu's call to make. Without citing supporting evidence, without clarifying ambiguities in the label of *devadasī*, his statement was misleading. By implying that the sexual explicitness of Andal's later poetry raised questions about her identity, Vairamuthu had displayed a socially regressive and patriarchal mindset. He was suggesting that women from respectable lineages did not write thus (Perundevi 2018).

The debate had lasted less than a month. But for a moment, it illuminated the landscape of Tamil Nadu brilliantly, revealing current political fault lines, the simmering tensions between Dravidianism and Hinduism and the caution with which the Dravidian parties were now facing off with Hindutva. The underlying idea threading through the binary of mother/prostitute and the patriarchy in both right-wing discourses and the vocabulary of progressivism, explicit in the former and camouflaged in the latter,<sup>28</sup> continue to pose disturbing questions. Andal had been but an instrument for an exercise in political posturing.

## **Discourses on *Bhakti* and Feminism**

The last site I explore is the contemporary intellectual discourse on *bhakti* informed by feminist perspectives.

Most saint poets were known and revered in their own regions and sometimes across contiguous regions. The popular idea that *bhakti* was a pan-Indian movement starting in southern India that spread to other regions is a creation of the modern era according to recent historiography. It served to reinforce the idea of the unity of India in the nation building project.<sup>29</sup> In this classical view, the movement was egalitarian and reformist. Cumulative developments in vernacular languages consolidated it as a lower caste protest against hierarchy and power, and against Brahminical, Sanskritic orthodoxy. It preached direct access to God without intermediaries. Intentionality and conscious thrust on the part of the saints were implied.

Later empirical research and writings have found inconsistencies and contradictions in the assertions of egalitarianism. Nor was it, argues Hawley a 'movement' in the sense of revolutionary dissent or planned pursuit of a goal. As an alternative, he proposes the idea of a far-reaching *bhakti* network that is sensitive to economic and social contexts and pays attention to the original voice of the poet.<sup>30</sup> *Bhakti* literature is rich, increasingly complex and nuanced. I merely evoke it as a context for situating Andal.

The feminist movement in India from the 1980s onwards was searching for indigenous sources of women's autonomy and empowerment. There was a felt need to counter criticism that feminists were overemphasizing victimhood of women and were imitating western feminists.<sup>31</sup> To rebut this, the writings of saints like Akka Mahadevi, Lal Dyad, Bahinabai, Jenabai, Mira and others were retrieved and re-examined.<sup>32</sup> The search continues. There are broadly two approaches, with some overlaps. One views women saints as rebels against the patriarchal and caste based social order of their time. They offer lessons for contemporary women struggling against gender biased social structures.<sup>33</sup> The other more complex position is taken by academics who have been part of the women's movement.<sup>34</sup> They agree on the power and rigidity of patriarchy but see the women's rebellion as either incomplete or inconsistent or lacking feminist awareness and eventually becoming contained by patriarchy. Despite this, women saints break conventions, wrest some space for themselves, gesturing to the possibility of a different understanding of gender relations.<sup>35</sup> Both approaches imbue women with agency. What is also common to both is the assumption that women saints struggled consciously against patriarchy – an implicit judgment of their actions with a contemporary yardstick.

The question here is whether gender was indeed the significant lens through which the women saints mapped the world and acted in it. But then, how can we even ask even this question about all women saints in general, given their varied time, space and social configurations?

Still, we can view our subjects through a broad-based feminist framework, without necessarily attributing feminist intent to them. We can recognize systemic patriarchy and equally spot traces and residues of past cultures differently

organized, where gender may have been constituted in other ways and where cognitive space for women was not ruled out.

I can attempt to address this issue only through my engagement with Andal. Although first in the genre, it is not easy to characterize Tamil *bhakti* poetry as an exemplar. Rather it is a forerunner with distinctive features. Arising as a reaction to Sramana dominance in the preceding centuries, it fuses a Vedanta inspired metaphysical quest and indigenous Sangam traditions leading to a new personal and emotional language of devotion. The Alvars' poetry gave birth to and also itself flourished in the sectarian context of Sri Vaishnavism. I have earlier, in Sections 2 and 3, discussed Andal's lifeworld; her placement within the ethos of the Alvars and Sri Vaishnavism. Andal's access to the *agapporul* tradition of the Alvars, Nayanmars and Sangam literature helped to nourish her own individual genius. Her yearning for union with Ranganatha was cast within the Sri Vaishnava goal of moksha by total surrender and uniting the individual soul with the infinite. If this were not so, then one could ask, why did males write in this genre?

Andal's refusal to consider marriage to a mortal human being is not a statement of opposition to marriage, but her steadfastness in thought and action – to marry a god – is surely agentic. The freedom and honesty of her poetry also reflects agency, but as Kannan (2018) points out, *Nacchiyar Tirumoli* is not just about sexual desire but also Andal's suffering, self-deprivation and denial which come close to ascetism. Kannan makes the larger point that Andal (and Tamil *bhakti* in general) fuses the householder and ascetic paths to achieve moksha. It is only by viewing Andal through this lens that we can enter her interior world.

Finally, what of the question of impact? Andal's life and poetry have inspired many for different reasons, some diametrically opposed. On the one hand, the women in the Goda Mandalis sing her poems and experience a sense of agency in attempting to live a life of piety and devotion. Then there are the young women who want to reclaim her legacy as an early feminist of Tamil Nadu, whose true voice has been erased by patriarchy. The political fracas of 2018 in her name illuminated contemporary battle-lines rather than any attempt to listen to her voice. Andal's iconic presence and her words, powerful and moving, travel across the centuries, triggering unintended and unforeseen consequences.

\*\*\*

Acknowledgments: The Guftagu team and St. Andrews Centre for Philosophy and Performing Arts; Ashish Upadhyay, Bharatwaj Iyer, Gita Chadha, Gopal Srinivasan, Indra Munshi, Irfan Engineer, Kanchana Mahadevan, Nasreen Fazalbhoy and Vibha Kamat.

\*\*\*

## References

Aravamudan, Gita. 2018. "Behind the storm over Tamil lyricist Vairamuthu's comments over poet-saint Andal." *First Post*, January 15, 2018. <https://www.firstpost.com/living/behind-the-storm-over-tamil-lyricist-vairamuthus-comments-over-poet-saint-andal-4303495.html>. Accessed on 6 June 2021.

Bhagwat, Vidyut. 2005. "Heritage of *Bhakti*: Sant women's writings." in *Culture and the making of Identity in Contemporary India*, edited by Kamala Ganesh and Usha Thakkar, 164–183. New Delhi: Sage.

Chabria, Priya Sarukkai and Ravi Shankar. 2015. *Andal: The Autobiography of a Goddess*. New Delhi: Zubaan.

Chakravarti, Uma. 1989. "The World of the *Bhaktin* in South Indian traditions – The Body and Beyond." *Manushi* 10, Nos. 50–52: 18–29.

Chaudhury, Maitrayee. 2004. *Feminism in India*. New Delhi: Women Unlimited/Kali.

Dehejia, Vidya. 1990. *Antal and Her Path of Love: Poems of a Woman Saint from South India*. New York: SUNY Press

Desai, Neera. 1994. "Women and the *Bhakti* Movement." In *Women and Culture*, edited by Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, 71–83. Bombay: Research Centre for Women's Studies.

Govindarajan, Vinita. 2018. "Tamil poet Vairamuthu's speech on seventh-century mystic Andal sparks controversy." *Scroll*, January 11, 2018. <https://scroll.in/article/864573/tamil-poet-vairamuthus-speech-on-seventh-century-mystic-andal-sparks-controversy>. Accessed on 6 June 2021.

Hawley, John Stratton. 2015. *A Storm of Songs: India and the Idea of the Bhakti Movement*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Jain, Jasbir. 2011. *Indigenous Roots of Feminism: Culture, Subjectivity and Agency*. New Delhi: Sage.

Jeyalakshmi, C. 2020. "Adippooram: Srivilliputtur Andalukku pattu vastiram parisalitta Srirangam Ranganathar." *Oneindia* (Tamil), July 24, 2020. <https://tamil.oneindia.com/astrology/news/srirangam-sri-ranganathaswamy-gifts-to-aandal-for-aadi-pooram-392274.html?story=3>. Accessed on 6 June 2021.

Kannan, Sushumna. 2018. "Rethinking Femininity and Transgression in Andal's *Bhakti*." *Indiafacts*,

September 18, 2018. <http://indiafacts.org/rethinking-femininity-and-transgression-in-andal/>. Accessed on 6 June 2021.

Karashima, Noboru. 2014. *A Concise History of South India: Issues and Interpretations*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Kishwar, Madhu and Ruth Vanita, ed. 1989. *Women Bhakta Poets*. New Delhi: Manushi.

Krishnamoorthy, Divya. 2019. "Understanding Andal: Desexualised Mother and her Erotic Desires." *Feminism in India*, July 5, 2019. <https://feminisminindia.com/2019/07/05/andal-desexualised-mother-and-her-erotic-desires/>. Accessed on 6 June 2021.

Lakshmi, C. 1990. "Mother, Mother-Community and Mother-Politics in Tamil Nadu." *Economic and Political Weekly* 25, no. 42/43 (October): 72–83.

Mahalakshmi, R. 2014. "Women in Premodern South Indian Society" in *A Concise History of South India: Issues and Interpretations*, edited by Noboru Karashima, 115–119. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Manivannan, Sharanya. 2018. *The Queen of Jasmine Country*. New Delhi: HarperCollins.

Narayanan, Vasudha. 2006. "Poetry, Passion and Power: The lyrics of Andal-Goda and the music of Goda Mandali." *Manushi* 152: 32–38.

Neelakrishnan, P.M. 1992 "Sri Vaishnava Divya Desams." *Ancient Science of Life* 11, no. 3-4 (January–April):193–197.

Perundeivi. 2018. "Only Andal Can Decide Who She Is, Not Vairamuthu or the BJP." *The Wire*, January 21, 2018. <https://thewire.in/gender/andal-can-decide-not-vairamuthu-bjp>. Accessed on 6 June 2021.

Peterson, Indira Viswanathan. 2007. *Poems to Siva: The Hymns of the Tamil Saints*. New Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass.

Pillai, Nrithya. 2018. "Being called *Devadasi* is not an abuse, calling it an abuse is insulting to women." *The News Minute*, January 11, 2018. <https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/being-called-devadasi-not-abuse-calling-it-abuse-insulting-women-74560>. Accessed on 6 June 2021.

Rajasekaran, Ilangovan. 2018. "In the name of Andal." *Frontline*, February 16, 2018. <https://frontline.thehindu.com/the-nation/in-the-name-of-andal/article10055463.ece>. Accessed on 6 June 2021.

Ramanujan, A.K. 1981. *Hymns for the Drowning: Poems for Vishnu by Nammalvar*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Ramanujan, A.K. 1994. "Tirumankai Alvar." *Indian Literature* 37, no. 4 (July–August): 74–80.

Ramanujan, A.K. 1999. "Men, Women and Saints." in *The Collected Essays of A.K.Ramanujan*, edited by Vinay Dharwadkar, 279–294. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Ramanujan, A.K. and Norman Cutler. 1999. "From Classicism to *Bhakti*" in *The Collected Essays of A.K.Ramanujan*, edited by Vinay Dharwadkar, 232–260. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Rangarajan, Upasana. 2020. "The Legacy of Andal: Exploring the Impact of Andal's Poetry on the Identity of the Modern Tamil Woman." *Confluence: Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 4. <https://cjid.in/volume-iv-2020/the-legacy-of-andal-exploring-the-impact-of-andals-poetry-on-the-identity-of-the-modern-tamil-woman-2/the-legacy-of-andal-exploring-the-impact-of-andals-poetry-on-the-identity-of-the-modern-tamil-woman/>



Rao, A.V.Shankaranarayana. 2012. *Temples of Tamil Nadu*. Bangalore: Vasana Publications.

Sarkar, Tanika and Urvashi Butalia, ed. 1995. *Women and the Hindu Right: A collection of Essays*. New Delhi: Zubaan.

Sharma, Krishna. 1987. *Bhakti and the Bhakti Movement: A New Perspective: A Study in the History of Ideas*. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers.

Thaosen, Maduli. 2017. "The *Bhakti* movement and Roots of Indian Feminism." *Feminism in India*, April 3, 2017. <https://feminisminindia.com/2017/04/03/bhakti-movement-women/>. Accessed on 6 June 2021

Tharu, Susie and K. Lalitha. 1991. *Women writing in India: 600 BC to the Early Twentieth Century*. New York: Feminist Press.

The New Indian Express. January 15, 2018. "Chennai: Devotees protest against lyricist Vairamuthu, demand apology for Andal remark." <https://www.newindianexpress.com/cities/chennai/2018/jan/15/chennai-devotees-protest-against-lyricist-vairamuthu-demand-apology-for-andal-remark-1754812.html>. Accessed on 6 June 2021.

The News Minute. February 19, 2018. "Andal controversy: Criminal proceedings against lyricist Vairamuthu stayed by HC." <https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/andal-controversy-criminal-proceedings-against-lyricist-vairamuthu-stayed-hc-75006>. Accessed on 6 June 2021.

Vasudevan, Geetha. 2012. "Thiruppavai Jeeyar." *Geetha Vasudevan's Yathiraja Padhuka*, August 2, 2012. <https://geethavasudevan.wordpress.com/>

Venkatesan, Archana. 2007. "A Woman's Kind of Love: Female Longing in the Tamil Alvar Poetry." *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies* 20, (January): 16–24.

Venkatesan, Archana. 2010. *The Secret Garland: Anta's Tiruppavai and Nacchiar Tirumoli*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Young, K. 1983. "Śrīvaisnava feminism: Intent or effect?" *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 12, no. 2 (June): 183–190. <https://doi.org/10.1177/000842988301200205>

## Notes

1. I follow the widely accepted periodization and nomenclature of Indian history that puts 500–900 CE as early India, 900–1000 as early medieval, 1100–1300 as medieval, 1300 – 1500 as late medieval and 1500–1800 as early modern.
2. For non-English words, popularly accepted spellings are used.
3. One must first arrive at what questions one is seeking answers to and then choose the source.
4. The afterlife of Andal is more than the 'reception' to her work. As a concept, it lets us bring together multiple aspects of her work and life, its endurance over time, its social anchoring and the different contexts and various ways in which people connect with her, bend her story and make her their own or not.
5. In the canon, *Tiruppavai* is more exalted, but the hagiographies quote almost exclusively from

*Nacchiyar Tirumoli* (Venkatesan 2007, 20).

6. Dehejia (1990), Venkatesan (2010) and Chabria and Shankar (2015) are fine examples.
7. Sri Vaishnavism emerged in South India after the Alvars. It follows the Vishistadvaita philosophy of Sri Ramanuja (11th century CE).
8. Tiruppan Alvar was from an untouchable caste and Tirumangai Alvar from a tribe.
9. With the exception of Madurakavi Alvar who only composed on Nammalvar.
10. Peterson (2007,4). She refers to them as cults and not as a movement.
11. The earliest account of Andal's life is in the 13th century Tamil work *Guru Parampara Prabhavam*. A detailed account of her wedding to Lord Ranganatha is found in the late 15th century Sanskrit text *Divya Suri Charitam*.
12. Song 14 has 10 verses in the form of questions and answers, with the refrain "Yes, we saw him here in Vrindavana" interpreted as Vrindavana of the heart.
13. See for instance Vasudevan (2012). There are numerous hagiographical stories about this relationship. In Verse 9.6 of *Nacchiyar Tirumoli*, Andal takes a vow to offer a hundred vats of butter and a hundred brimming vats of akkara adisil (sweetened rice) to Kallalagar. When Ramanuja fulfilled her vow at the Maliruncholai temple, it is believed that she came out of the idol and addressed him as Anna (elder brother) thanking him for this act.
14. Ramanujan (1999, 246–55) shows how Nammalwar uses elements from classical Sangam poetry; "while he follows the classical score closely, he transposes it to a new key." (Ibid, 252)
15. Ramanujan's article with Norman Cutler titled "From Classicism to *Bhakti*" (1999) explores the intricacies of this bridging.
16. By the 13th century, *Guru Parampara Prabhavam* mentions it as an established fact.
17. In this period, there were disagreements on whether Andal and Madura Kavi should be included as Alvars. Eventually, they were. Regretfully, I have been unable to pursue this debate for this essay.
18. It is not within the scope of this essay to provide a detailed exposition of Sri Vaishnavism. I only highlight some aspects which could throw light on the place of *Nacchiyar Tirumoli* in its canon.
19. The relative significance of the two was debated in the later centuries which led to a gradual split into two sub sects, Vatakalai and Tenkalai, which gave greater emphasis on Sanskrit and Tamil respectively.
20. Textual exegesis and practice did not necessarily reinforce each other. Ramanuja's *Sri Bhashyam* takes the position that only male Brahmins are entitled to Vedic knowledge, but popular tradition holds that in practice Ramanuja and the Acharyas of that period encouraged people from various backgrounds to become part of the Sri Vaishnava devotional community. In his *Saranagati Gadyam*, Ramanuja himself espoused the idea of achieving moksha through saranagati or prapatti, i.e., total surrender to Lord Narayana, thus making it possible for anyone to achieve moksha. According to hagiographic tradition, Ramanuja performed saranagati in Srirangam in Ranganatha's *sanctum* and he was granted the boon he sought. Here is an accessible translation of the text – <https://www.sadagopan.org/pdfuploads/Saranagathi%20Gadyam.pdf>
21. Also known as Margashirsha/Dhanur masa.

22. A song from *Nacchiyar Tirumoli* plays as the background score, during the scene of the wedding rituals of the hero and heroine.
23. *The Queen of Jasmine Country* by Sharanya Manivannan
24. For an example of this, view “Thiruppavai Margazhi Thingal (Carnatic fusion)” <https://youtu.be/M7wjqtVdNwQ>
25. View H. Raja’s Speech delivered on January 9, 2018 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P\\_Yx83fmJvM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P_Yx83fmJvM)
26. View Vairamuthu’s emotional response to the Andal controversy from January 20, 2018 <https://youtu.be/Nvelbr4vEQw>
27. Exceptions include Musician T.M. Krishna who questioned outright the denigration of the category *devadasi* in whatever sense it was used (Govindarajan 2018) and writer Indira Parthasarathy who rued the absence of contextualization of the term. View the latter’s statement on the controversial remarks on Andal by Vairamuthu <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z2EgdQVXdbo>
28. See Sarkar and Butalia (1995) and C.S. Lakshmi (1990) respectively for sharp analyses.
29. It was shaped in the late 19th and 20th centuries, by British and Indian Orientalists like Grierson, Farquhar and Bhandarkar, leaders like M.G. Ranade and Bipin Chandra Pal, and nationalist scholars of literature and history like Ramachandra Shukla, Hazari Prasad Dwivedi and V.Raghavan (Hawley 2015, 13–58). Krishna Sharma (1987) was among the earliest scholars to challenge this model. Rich empirical studies are since emerging to nuance the idea of a movement.
30. In his chapter ‘What should the *Bhakti* movement be’, Hawley (2015, 285–341) marshals a formidable array of life stories and poetry of saints from different regions to support his view on *bhakti* as movement vs network.
31. Chaudhuri (2004), Jain (2011) among others offer overviews of feminist discussions on this issue.
32. Kishwar and Vanita (1989) and Tharu and Lalitha (1991) are analytical and insightful contributions to this literature.
33. Some recent examples are Rangarajan (2020), Krishnamoorthy (2019), and Thaosen (2017).
34. Prominent voices include Uma Chakravarti (1989), Vidyut Bhagwat (2005) and Neera Desai (1994).

# MEDIEVAL PORTRAYALS