

Southern Indian Alwar Women Saints Andals: A Historical Perspective

Dr. Manju Devi

Assistant Professor

Department in History

C.M.K. National P.G. College, Sirsa

Email: dr.md158@gmail.com

Abstract

The Bhakti movement in medieval India was an important milestone in Indian culture. In this period, through religious reforms, the work of propagating devotion to God in different ways was done in society. Long before the arrival of the Turks in India, the Bhakti movement was going on here in which an attempt was made to emphasize the mystical relationship between the individual and God. The Bhakti movement in India first originated with the Alvars and Nayanars in South India, which later spread to the entire South Asia including North India. Between the 8th to 12th centuries, there were many Nayanar (Shaiva) and Alvar (Vaishnava) saints in South India who propagated the doctrine of Bhakti. Alvar is a word in the Tamil language that means "one who is immersed in bliss". A devotee who has reached the root of divine knowledge and remains engrossed in it, is an Alvar"¹

Keywords

Alvars, Divya Parbandhan, Napinna, Prapatti, Sect, Saint.

Reference to this paper should be made as follows:

Received: 22.06.2023

Approved: 29.06.2023

Dr. Manju Devi

Southern Indian Alwar Women Saints Andals: A Historical Perspective

Vol. XIV, No.1
Article No.27,
pp. 224-229

Similarity Check: 0%

Online available at
<https://anubooks.com/journal/journal-global-values>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31995/jgv.2023.v14i01.027>

There were twelve Alvars in South India between the 5th to 9th centuries – Poigai Alvar, Boothathalvear, Peyalwar, Thirumazhisai Alvar, Nammalwar, Madhurakavi Alvar, Kalasekara Alvar, Periyalwar, Andal Thondaradipodi Alvar, Thiruppan Alvar, Thirumangai Alvar. While leading a pious life, the Alvars composed many devotional verses using the Tamil language as a medium based on their spiritual experiences. Their compositions are collected in Naalayira Divya Prabandham, which was first edited by Acharya Nathamuni.²

The Alvars, rejecting the non-monogamy of Buddhists and Jains, told personal devotion to God as the only way to salvation. They also considered the service of the devotees as the service of God and used to address their deity by the names of Vasudev, Narayan, Ram, Krishna, etc. They spread the qualities of such a God who could come into the imagination of the common man. The Alvars opened the doors of Bhakti to all and rejected the varna and caste distinctions. In these saints, not only Brahamans but saints of different castes were also included. Apart from the caste system, they did not discriminate between men and women. Among the Alvar saints, Andal was the only woman saint who described the relationship of a devotee with God as that of a loving wife.³

Although there are mentions of many devotee saints in the medieval period, if we see in the context of female devotees, then mainly Meera's name comes at the top, who, despite being the daughter-in-law of the royal family, sacrificed everything for the devotion of Krishna. But in the historical development of the Bhakti movement, Andal was the first female devotee of Krishna, who was born about seven centuries before Meera (AD 715) in the Tamil region.⁴ The medieval Krishna devotee Sadhika Andal has an important place in the Bhakti literature of Tamil. Their other name was Kothas or Goda which means bunch of soft flowers. Andal's father's name was Periyalwar. Since childhood, she used to live in a devotional environment with her father, as a result of which she got attracted towards devotion to God since childhood. As she grew up, her devotion and dedication toward Krishna increased even more. Every day she used to wear the rosary with her father, singing songs with great love, which was dedicated in the temple of Shri Ranganath Ji. Goda has chosen Krishna as her husband since childhood.⁵ She used to get so engrossed in Krishna's love that wearing the knotted garland herself, she used to stand in front of God and ask "How a look in this fragrant garland? May I be your worthy wife".⁶ In this way, after decorating herself with the garland, she used to send her to Shri Ranganath Ji's temple, but one day her secret was revealed due to the sticking of hair in the garland. The Priest of the temple rejected the garland. On this Goda's father persuaded her not to do so. One day Shri Ranganath appeared to

Pariyalyar in a dream and said that he liked the garland worn by Andal more and he would like to marry those garlands only. Embellished since then Andal was named Chudikodatu Nachiyar (the one who offers the worn garland).⁷

If we look at the status of women in the period in which Andal was born in Indian history, it is clear that their status was considered inferior to that of men. The field of work of an Indian woman was limited only to the four walls of the house. Till the time of keeping her husband happy and proving herself virtuous, she was expected to have all her thoughts. In earlier jurisprudence, a woman, irrespective of the class she belonged to, was treated as equal to a Shudra.”⁸ Under such circumstances, the humanist approach of the Bhakti movement, which treated all as equals in bhakti irrespective of caste, creed and gender, As a result, women left their homes, family and family ties and beliefs and came to the shelter of devotion to God. Among these women, Andal is the first vivid example of medieval Indian history who, through her devotion to Krishna, made her identity in the society as a devotee of Krishna in Southern India.”⁹ Andal herself was aware of her circumstances. She knew that the path she was walking was not an easy one. She says that I know that if someone’s daughter leaves her parents and relatives and goes on the path of love, then her family gets a lot of bad name in society and because of this bad name, it is necessary to remove the stigma on their family. It was a difficult task. The pride of my family is likely to vanish and they will not be able to show their face anywhere.”¹⁰ This statement of hers is enough to show the condition and suffering of women in the medieval period and also tells us how women could not dare to come in devotion due to gender discrimination, they were afraid of society, and defamation of their family. But despite all this, Andal chewed on her devotion and devotion without caring about the mind-modesty of her family in the society and she devoted herself to it. She had chosen Shri Krishna as her husband. She was not even ready to hear about her marriage with a worldly person. When Andal’s father talked about her marriage, she clearly said, “I have chosen the Lord of Srirangam as my husband.” If someone says that I belong to someone else, I will give up my life.”¹¹ How much she was devoted to Krishna is confirmed by her words – These Peen Payodhar of mine originated for Lord Shri Ranganath. Breasts are for his consumption, they are not for the common man, I cannot survive just hearing the proposal of their enjoyment by any human being. Reunite me with the Lord.”¹² This fiery speech of Andal openly challenges Indian social conventions and rules which was a very difficult task for a woman at that time.

But Aanandal’s love for Krishna was not limited to this only, she also married Krishna and became his consort. Shri Ranganath appeared in a dream to Pariyalwar

and gave a message that “Bring my beloved Andal to Shri Rangam after decorating her with all the ornaments, I will marry her.”¹³ As per his order, Pariyalwar dedicated Andal to God by getting Andal married in the temple of Sri Rangam. When Andal entered the sanctum sanctorum, she merged with the idol of Sri Ranganatha and since then became famous as Goda Andal. The meaning of the word ‘Andal’ is ‘one who has attained God’. Even today, the marriage festival of Andal is celebrated every year in all the temples of southern.¹⁴ Through her marriage, Andal has thrown light on the marriage rituals of that time. It is a custom in the Tamil region that the marriage of a Mameri girl is arranged with a Phupher Ladke. Mentioning this, she says, “My dearest cousin Madhusudan came and took my panigrahan in a mandap decorated with pearls.”¹⁵

Like the Alvars, Andal has also described devotion to God as the means to attain God. In her posts, there is philosophy of the Saguna Bhakti. Analyzing his thoughts related to devotion to God, it appears that he renounced all worldly bonds and went to the shelter of God, Prapati (exclusive devotion) is forbidden. She has addressed Shri Krishna as the God of all gods and Lord of the world. According to Andal, the way parents protect their children with great love, is in the same way God also protects his devotees. But the worldly person remains trapped in this illusion and his attention does not go towards devotion to God. The main feature of Andal’s devotion to Krishna is the way Radhavallabh Sect and other Krishna Bhakti Sect have given primacy to Radha. Similarly, Andal has also considered herself to be Krishna’s Napinna. The only difference is that in Alvar literature, Napinna is considered as Krishna’s consort and in other sects, Radha is seen as Krishna’s beloved.”¹⁶

Napinna is considered an essential part of Krishna’s realization in Alvar’s literature and Andal was the model of this part. Andal’s two compositions Thiruppavai and Nachiyar *Tirumoli* are collected in *Divya Prabandham*. In Tiruppavai, there is a description of Katyayani Vrat of girls, which was observed by unmarried girls to get a good groom. In Nachiyar Tirumoli, Andal describes his devotional thoughts to Krishna, her marriage to Krishna in a dream and the traditions.”¹⁷ The significance of Andal’s creation even at that time is confirmed by the fact that Tiruppavai is sung- Ramanujacharya himself used to become infatuated with singing. Vedanta Desikacharya has composed a work named Goda-Stuti in praise of Andal. Vijayanagara ruler Krishnadevaraya composed a poem called Amuktamalyada in Telugu, based on Andal’s love practice.¹⁸

The Alvars gave a new message of devotion to God to the masses in South India through the medium of Tamil language and by reforming the Vedic devotion

(which was earlier accessible to a few people and the general public had no right in it) according to the demands of the contemporary era. They made accessible it to the public. The Alwars gave the message of monotheism. They considered Brahma, Shiva as a part of the same Parabrahma, Vishnu. Andal was also one of these Alwars and she had a deep impact on his ideology as well. Like other Alwars, she has also described Bhakti as a means to attain God. Andal has considered the attainment of bliss in this world to be better than salvation.”¹⁹ The credit goes to Ramanujacharya for inventing the Prapatti Marg in devotion and taking it to the masses. In the path of devotion, this word is used in the form of a surrender element. Andal has also expressed this fact in her posts.

It is clear from the analysis of the facts made in the context of Andal that despite being born into a middle-class family, she made her identity as a devotee of Krishna, despite the adverse social conditions. She was so devoted to Krishna that she refused to marry a worldly man and stuck to her devotional path. She wanted to merge into the supernatural form of Krishna without being afraid of the then-social norms. On the ground of worldly contact, she had only relation with the saintly society, because, in the saintly society, she used to get the inspiration of divine love. If Andal’s love for Krishna is compared with that of medieval famous Krishna devotee Saint Meera, then both appear to be on the same ground. But the rebellion inside Meera is not in Andal. The difference is the time and circumstances moving between both saints. When Andal originated, at that time Indian culture was getting a new direction. But this does not mean that Andal’s path of devotion was easy. She has confirmed how at that time a woman walking on the path of God’s love used to become a cause of social infamy for her and her family. But Andal was not afraid of this kind of social situation, instead, by giving tribute to social beliefs, she declared herself as Krishna’s Napinna and she merged in the same devotion.

References

1. Sundaram, N., Prabandha, Divya. (2004). *Alwar Praneeth Padas Sanchayan*. Sahitya Akademi: New Delhi. Pg. 14.
2. Above. Pg. 14.
3. Chandra, Satish. (2003). *Medieval India Sultanate Period to Mughal Period*. Delhi Sultanate, 1206-1526 AD. Jawahar Publ.: New Delhi. Pg. 255.
4. Prabandha, Divya. *Alwar Praneeth Padas Sanchayan*. Pg. 116.
5. Above. Pg. 117.
6. Above.

7. Seth, Ravindra Kumar. (ed.). (1976). *Alwar Sahitya, Research Institute*. New Delhi. Pg. **127-128**.
8. Habib, Irfan. (1999). *Medieval Period in Indian History*. Ramesh Rawat., Granth Shilpi. New Delhi. Pg. **34-35**.
9. Prabandha, Divya. *Alwar Praneeth Padas Sanchayan*. Pg. **116-117**.
10. Above. Pg. **138-139**.
11. Above. Pg. **117**.
12. Above. Pg. **118**.
13. Raghvan-1, Nivasan. (1975). *Divya Prabandha, Speeches of Alvars, Nachiyar Tirumoli*. Hindi Bhavan, Visva Bharati Santiniketan: Calcutta. verses. 1-5.
14. Prabandha, Divya. *Alwar Praneeth Padas Sanchayan*. Pg. **119**.
15. Prabandha, Divya. *Speeches of the Alvars, Nachiyar Tirumoli*. Pg. **63**.
16. Above. Pg. **124**.
17. Above. Pg. **118-119**.
18. Jayaraman, P. (2003). *Dimensions of Bhakti*. Vani Prakashan: New Delhi. Pg. **117**.
19. Mohammed, Malik. (1964). *Tamil Prabandham and Hindi Krishna Poetry of Alwar Devotees*. Vinod Pustar Mandir: Agra. Pg. **56**.