

The Magnificent Maiden of Maargazhi

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The Thiruppavai has been written about, transliterated, translated, analysed, interpreted, critiqued relentlessly over the centuries from different points of view. A glimpse of the poet Goda who is revered not only as an Alwar but as a poet.

In South India, the Maargazhi month which spans mid-December to mid-January is usually abuzz with activity especially in the morning hours. The little villages, towns and cities especially in Tamil Nadu, spring to life in the wee hours well before dawn. Young girls and women are seen sweeping the frontal areas of their homes and wiping it over with fresh cow dung. Then elaborate rangolis are drawn and filled with gay colours. The artists step back and examine their work with a critical eye till they are satisfied. Then a dollop of fresh cow dung is placed in the middle of the rangoli and a fresh pumpkin flower in a shade of fluorescent yellow is placed on the sap green dumpling to give it an ethereal look. Lamps are lit at the doorways of homes and passers-by can feast their eyes to a plethora of patterns and creativity. Even families living in high rise apartments manage to draw a rangoli or at least use a colourful sticker version of the art to grace the doorsteps of their homes.

Once the sense of sight is awakened, mellifluous music fills the air. Although different strains of classical music drift in the atmosphere, the Thiruppavai takes precedence over all. The thirty stanzas or *paasurams* as they are called echo through the streets, homes, ears and minds of the people. Even the people who do not listen with care will pick up a few random words and tune as the melodies that ensconce the atmosphere in a loop are dinned into their very being diligently, day after day for thirty days in a row.

Traditionally, people have cold-water baths which tingles their skins with its coldness and make the warm blood course through their veins as they make their way to the temples. The fragrance of fresh flowers, incense sticks and the aroma of Pongal laced with ghee emanating from various homes along the way have a way of teasing one's olfactory senses. Sooner or later the palate also gets a taste of a generous helping of Pongal Prasadam which leaves an indelible memory of eating a partial breakfast at an unearthly hour.

The Maargazhi treat to the sensory organs is definitely an enjoyable experience. Millions of people look forward to this annual festival and enjoy it year after year. However, continuous exposure and reflection on this celebration will make one realise that there must be definitely something more to the tradition when one scratches the surface.

It all began very long ago. Vishnu Chitthar *aka* Periazhwar a scholarly saint poet of eighth century Tamil Nadu heard the gurgling of an abandoned baby in his Brindavan. He hastened to pick her up with compassion. When he held this bundle of sheer poise and cuteness

in his arms he must have looked around for her parents. When he did not find anyone in the vicinity, he simply decided to bring her up. And bring her up, he did, with oodles of love and affection. However, he did not stop at that. He educated her by narrating all the stories he knew. She developed a taste of the stories of Krishna and often pretended to live in Gokula. Her amused foster father did not quite realise that his darling daughter had actually fallen in love with the hero of the stories she so loved to listen to.

When she got little older, little Goda started pining for her love. She expressed her feelings through poetry, she wove garlands for the lord. Over a period of time, she felt convinced that she could not take any mortal man for her husband. Her conviction came through in a very unconventional act. She started wearing the garland she wove as a bride would, admired herself in a mirror and then sent it to the lord. This act of love filled her with vicarious pleasure. Her foster father, who noticed this one morning was shocked by her unorthodox and unspeakable act. He raged and calmed but it did not make a difference in the attitude of Goda. Hence, he decided to get her married to the lord she loved at the behest of Lord Ranganatha who appeared in his dream.

It is believed that Goda was dressed as a bride was taken to the temple. One she reached the sanctum sanctorum her last breath mingled with that of the lord she adored so deeply. The spectators of this unearthly episode concluded that she must be a celestial being in human form. Thus, Choodikodutha Naachiyar or the lady who wore the garland before offering to the lord was assigned the rank of being the divine consort of MahaVishnu. Since there was absolutely no clue about her antecedents, it was assumed that she must be the incarnation of Mother Earth or Bhooma Devi. They decided to honour her with a grand temple in her native town Srivilliputtur and offer traditional worship. The fact that the Gopuram of this temple is the insignia of the state of Tamil Nadu speaks in volumes about her importance to this day.

The poetry Goda composed with great fervour gained the status of prayers. Her devotion and knowledge were acknowledged and she was assigned the position of an Alvar. The only lady, in a male bastion, completed the full dozen of revered souls of stellar spiritual stature.

The Thiruppavai

This background is essential for a better understanding of her persona and her poetry. She wrote the *Thiruppavai* consisting of thirty verses and the *Nachiyar Thirumozhi* in 143 stanzas. The central figure in both her compositions happens to be Krishna, her love interest. Goda, who was also known as Andal, or the one who ruled started ruling the lives of people by being a beacon light in more ways than one. The young lady who inhabited our planet for a short period came up with these gems of Tamil literature when she was a teenager.

The Paasurams which appear to be written in a conversational tone reflect many aspects of everyday life. The seemingly simple lines which drip with romantic love and intense personal thoughts and emotions also display a wisdom which goes well beyond her age and experience. The Paasurams reflect her deep connection with her object of love, her innate understanding of Vedic philosophy and also her knowledge of the epics and Puranas. It is no wonder that they have been included in the esteemed anthology of the four thousand sacred verses known as *Naalaayira Divya Prabandham* which is recited every single day in most Vaishnavite temples.

The *Thiruppavai* takes the pedestal during Maargazhi. In this composition, young Goda imagines herself to be a Gopika living in Gokula. She appreciates the elements of nature and subtly establishes a connection with them. She takes up the '*Paavai Nombu*' (a harsh ritual involving a lot of hardships and discipline taken up by young unmarried girls) through the winter month to attain Krishna as her husband. It is interesting to note that she ensures that her friends also participate in this exercise which at the outset appears to be of a very personal nature. When she arrives at the door of the temple, she follows the protocol of appealing to everyone right from the security guard to Nappinnai, the consort of Krishna, to awaken the lord. She sings his praises which range from the almost frivolous to the utmost humble to seek his blessings and his '*parai*'.

The poetess revels in giving a detailed description of the panoramic pastoral countryside, and the agricultural and dairy economy which sustain the society come alive like a word painting. The vagaries of social strata from which her friends come, the traditional objects used in worship, lifestyle of her contemporaries in terms of housing, bedding, clothing, accessories, food, relationships among other such features show that she was a wordsmith of a very high calibre.

It is remarkable to note that a small-town girl of negligible age and experience came up with global ideas which ring a bell at the environmental and economic level even to this day. Her universality of thought and inclusive trait unshackled the confines of a closed community. Her ability to think globally in a local language Tamil opened frontiers hitherto unknown in the realms of intensely personal poetry.

A deeper understanding of her poesy reveal that she represents herself as the microcosm or *jivatma* who wants to merge with the macrocosm or *paramatma*. Hence it is no wonder that a person with such a deep insight would want everyone around her also to grow spiritually. The fact that she resorts to altruism and self-denial show that she was aware of the importance of self-discipline and self-control to achieve the lofty goal she had set for herself. When she chooses to confront Nappinnai as against the sixteen thousand plus wives of Krishna show that she was impressed by the stories of Nappinnai that she had imbued from the local culture and lore. When her tone plummets from one of gaiety to piety it shows that she could

perceive the immensity of the omnipotent almighty. It is then that her aspiration to be the lord's bride suddenly gains humongous proportions that transcend time and space.

The *Thiruppavai* has been written about, transliterated, translated, analysed, interpreted, critiqued relentlessly over the centuries from different points of view. Truth be told, this gold mine has still plenty to offer!

She set very high benchmarks in the areas of literature, devotion, romance, social responsibility and human values in her short lifetime. She has given us food for thought and scope to explore the esoteric questions of life through her life and works. It is no wonder we celebrate the magnificent maiden of Maargazhi in such magnitude!

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