

Goda Devi: The Saint of Srivilliputhur

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Bridal mysticism is a unique aspect of Hindu spiritual tradition, Rukmini, Mira and Goda being the most outstanding examples. Among the women saints of India, Mira Bai, the singing minstrel of Mewar, who expressed her devotion in prayer and melody to Shri Krishna, is widely venerated. So is Goda Devi of Tamil Nadu. She belonged to the distinguished galaxy of the Alwars or 'steeped souls' and is more popularly known as Andal, to mean one who held a sway over hearts. Andal's story is one of unwavering devotion to Lord Ranganatha.

Vishnu Chithar was a brahmin garland-maker of Srivilliputhur and

his mission in life was to cull flowers and sacred Tulasi leaves from his garden and weave them into garlands for Lord Vatapatra Sayee. He worshipped God by Archana (offerings of flowers, Tulasi), Vandana (obeisance) and Daasya (service). He was also known as Periyalwar, being one of the twelve canonised Alwars.

One day Vishnu Chithar found a beautiful baby girl in his tulasivana, (garden of Tulasi or ocimum sanctum) much as Sita, the daughter of Janaka, too, was born of the earth. He brought her home and named her Goda being a gift of Mother Earth. He instilled in her Bhakthi for Lord Krishna and told stories about Him. As



the girl grew, the more she heard of Krishna's Leelas from her father the more obsessed became her love and devotion for Him. The father was unaware that she even adorned herself with the sacred flowers collected for worship, so as to feel worthy of the Lord.

One day her father, who happened to notice this, was overwhelmed by the sheer audacity and naivete of the young girl. He asked for the Lord's forgiveness and chose to prepare

a garland of fresh flowers and offered it for worship. But he had reckoned without the Lord who appeared in his dream and told him that the garland put on by Andal were rendered doubly fragrant by her **bhakthi** and **atma nivedana**. He would cherish only those flowers. It is for this reason that Andal is known as **Soodi Kodutha Nachiyar** (i.e. devotee who donned-and-then-offered-flowers)

Anxious to do his paternal duty of performing the teen-ager's marriage samskara and at the same time aware of the divine supervision, Vishnu Chithar tried to probe her mind. If the best among mortal men would not do, then who among the deities presiding over the 108 shrines of this land was her choice?, he asked her. After hearing from him the glory of all the deities, Andal responded with ecstasy when the praise of Lord Ranganatha of Srirangam shrine was sung. There is no place for any other in the pedestal of my heart, she said.

Vishnu Chithar was overwhelmed. More shocks were to come. Lord Ranganatha appeared in the restless brahmin's vision and told him to bring Andal in her bridal finery to Srirangam where He would marry her. He

also instructed the priests at Srirangam to go to Srivilliputhur and bring Andal with pomp and ceremony.

Andal was bedecked as befitting a queen of the Lord and taken in a palanquin to Srirangam, to the accompaniment of drums and effulgence trumpets.

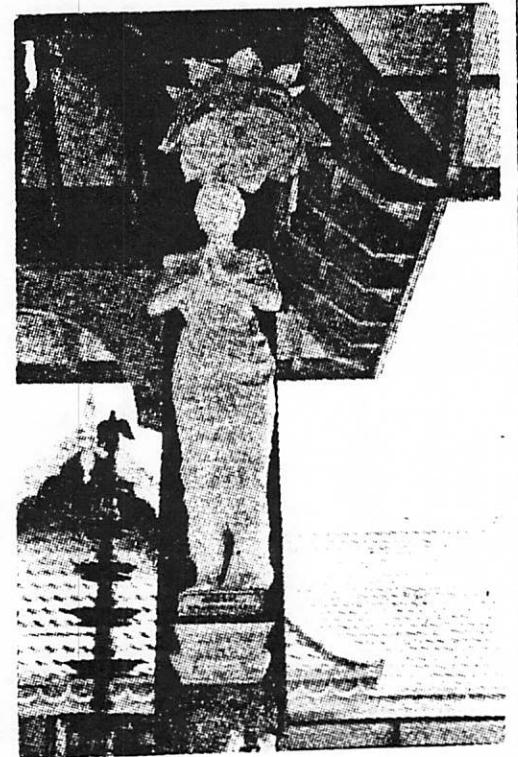
From Sri Ranganathar's holy precinct a **jyothi** came and escorted Andal to the lotus feet of the Lord who was reclining in his famous **sayana** posture on the coils of his serpent-couch. In a divine embrace Andal, who is considered an **amsam** of Bhoo Devi, merged into the Lord as the whole congregation watched in amazement. Her penance was thus fulfilled.

Andal is remembered for her famous composition **Thiruppaavai** which is a garland of thirty **paasurams** or stanzas in lyrical Tamil, unmatched not only for its poetic rhythm and felicity but also for its philosophical content. The milieu, the ethnic idioms and allegories used are redolent of Tamil fragrance and lyrical charm.

The founder of the Visishtadvaita philosophy, Sri Ramanuja was referred to as "Thiruppaavai Jeer" and he is said to have recited it every day. These

verses of stately elegance are recited in many Vaishnavite homes and forms part of what is referred to as **Nityanusandhaanam** or daily ritual.

The Thiruppaavai is the outpouring of a disconsolate heart yearning for the Lord. A spirit of self-surrender pervades the entire composition. It also features a dialogue between the Gopis or Yadava maids who were also aspiring to be His consorts. It is



a step by step climb to a higher life taking one to the lotus feet of the Lord.

The setting of Thiruppaavai is the Brindavan of yore. Andal imagines herself as a Gopi and gathers other **Sakhis**. They go in a body to wake Him up. To activate the **atma shakthi**, they perform in the Hemantha Ruthu the Katyayani Vratha, a penance of self-surrender. They extol and admonish Him playfully and go for the professed purpose of collecting material for the penance but really to win His heart.

The Thiruppaavai is also a narrative of the miracles performed by the young Krishna and underline the fact that He was not a mere mortal but a **paramatma**. Andal recalls Krishna's heroism and extols His beauty and qualities of mercy, The thirty **paasurams** are a diadem of thirty sparkling diamonds.

Of Andal's other literary works, the **Naachiyar Tirumozhi** of 143 stanzas contains the reputed composition **Vaaranam Ayiram**. In it she dreams of a marriage with herself as bride and the Lord as the bridegroom. She goes through the whole gamut of a Hindu wedding and dwells on her bridal experience. This Tamil decad of exquisite sweetness and

rhythm is invariably recited even today at weddings.

Andal was born in the month of Adi (July-August) under the **Pooram** star. Chroniclers assign her to the middle of the seventh century A.D. She has shrines in many Vaishnava temples of south India and a temple of her own in Srivilliputhur. During the **Margazhi** (Dhanur) month (December/January) discourses on Thiruppaavai are held all over Tamil Nadu and in major cities and towns of the country on all the 30 days.

The Thiruppaavai is revered as the quintessence of the Upanishads and its 29th **paasuram** or stanza is said to be the core and pith of the Thiruppaavai.

The gist of the said stanza goes as follows:

O Lord! At the wee hours of the morning we come and pay obeisance to your Lotus Feet. Listen oh, Govinda, to the aim of our penance which is that You, the Grand Shepherd, should give us a chance to slave for you. Brush aside our other desires and accept our solicitations to have holy communion with You in this and in the unborn generations to come." □□□