The philosophic poetry of the Azhwars Saints from South India collectively known as the Nalayira Divya Prabhandham is a rich heritage in Tamil literature and culture. Azhwars were saints of Sri Vaishnava tradition. They were totally immersed in the devotional love of God and literally God-intoxicated. They experienced the divine in and through all of its manifestations. The transcendental Reality to them was not an abstract nameless and formless entity or mere consciousness. The Reality was very Personal and was the Puroshottama, the Supreme Person, Sriman Narayana ("the support and the abode of hosts of souls") with all auspicious and glorious attributes. The physical world is like the body of the Lord and the Lord is the life and soul of the physical world (Sareeri Sareera Bhava). The most important attribute of the Lord is His compassion, represented by "Sri" (Maha Lakshmi) who is eternally resident in His heart. Hence Narayana is known as Sriman Narayana. The icons at the temple (the Arca form of the Lord) were alive and vibrant to the salutations of the Azhwars. Their ecstatic divine experience flowed out in the form of beautiful poetry. The Azhwars advocated surrendering to the Lord in utter devotion or Bhakthi as the simple means of attaining the Lord superior to other systems including the Vedic injunctions or practices.

Azhwars were twelve in number and they hailed from the fertile regions of the south surrounding the rivers Cauvery, Palar and Tamirabarani. They were from different walks of life and were not all contemporaries. Yet their individual and collective experience of the divine as expressed in their poetic verses is quite similar. Sri Swami Desikan in his "Sri Guruparamparaasaaram" states

"The garlands of verses in Tamil by the Azhwars help us understand more clearly the Vedas and Upanishads which are otherwise not easy to understand."

There is no wonder that the four thousand verses of the Azhwars are considered equivalent to the four Vedas. They brought the message of the Vedas and Upanishads to the common people in the vernacular.

The most celebrated and perhaps the most popular among the Azhwars is the only woman-saint among them, Sri Andal. Sri Andal is worshipped along with the Lord in all Sri Vaishnava homes and temples. In most villages young and old alike go to the temples in the early morning hours during the month of Margazhi (Dec 15-Jan 15) singing her famous Thiruppaavai verses. Whenever, verses form Divya Prabhandham are recited, during the celebration of the Thirunakshatrams (birth stars) of any of the Azhwars or Acharyas, Thiruppaavai is usually recited at the beginning and during the conclusion of the worship.
The story of Andal is relatively well known. Sri Andal is considered the incarnation of Bhoomi Devi (Mother Earth). She was like Sri Seetha born of Mother Earth. Divya Suri Charita records that she appeared as a child in the 97th year after the onset of Kali Yuga termed the Nala year, in the Tamil month of Adi in the Purva Phalguni asterism. She was found by Sri Vishnu Chittar (the other name of Sri Peri Azhwar) near a Tulasi plant in his garden, which he maintained for the purposes of growing fragrant flowers for making floral wreaths and garlands for Sri Vatapatra Sayi, the Lord at the temple in Sri Villiputur. Sri Vishnu Chittar named the child "Goda". The word Goda has several meanings: one who bestows the power of speech and expression, one who is bestowed by the Earth, one who has sweet curls, one who is like a flower garland and one who has control over the senses.

Swami Desikan, the famous Acharya of Sri Vaishnava tradition (1268 AD), in "Goda Stuthi" glorifying Sri Goda, states:

"O' Goda! You are the self of Bhoomi Devi. It is because of his birth from your ears, that sage Valmiki became the emperor among poets". (Vedas declare that anthills are the ears of Sri Bhoomi Devi, mother Earth)

He further goes on to say:

"O' Goda! It is because of your auspicious birth, attainable only through maturing effects of many meritorious deeds that even the Southern direction has attained the glory of being the best among the directions".

Goda was raised by Sri Peri Azhwar with special love and care.

"Her devotion and love of the Lord grew enormously. As a young girl she used to adorn herself with the wreaths of flowers made by her father meant for offering to the Lord at the temple to see for herself whether she was a good match for her Lord. Sri Peri Azhwar on one occasion discovered her at this game. He chided her for her transgressions and withheld the offering of floral wreaths to the Lord on that day. However, that night the Lord appeared in his dreams and stated that He actually was enjoying the wreaths worn by Goda and instructed Sri Peri Azhwar that henceforth He should receive the floral wreaths only after they have been worn by Goda. Sri Peri Azhwar was wonder struck with this dream and thereafter did the bidding of the Lord. Sri
Goda came to be called by him as ("அந்தல்") "Andal" as the one who had come to rule over the Lord and "அந்தல் பிறந்து தானீயமா காண்போடு" meaning "The Queen that wore and gave". As she grew into her maiden years, her love of the Lord (who came as Sri Krishna in the cowherds clan) also became quite intense. (சோந்தம் விளங்கியுள்ள காலத்தில் அய்காடாதீ, மா நெடுநிலம் மலர் - Irandaam Thiruvandhadhi - 27). She declared openly that she would die if any mention is made of marriage to mortals ("அந்தல் பிறந்து தானீயமா நம்பியே சொல்லிவிட்டால் தனியே" - Naachiyaar Thirumozhi 1-5). She ultimately became the epitome of Bhakti for the Lord, giving her total self to Him. Her wishes to become His bride eventually materialized with Lord Sri Ranganatha Himself instructing the authorities of the temple in Srirangam to bring her fully decorated as a bride to His sanctum. Finally Sri Goda merged completely with the Lord in the sanctum sanctorum in Srirangam in front of everyone who had assembled there including her father Sri Peri Azhwar.

"அந்தல் ஆட்சிய முனைவரூட்டினா கல்வூத்து பத்தணம்
அந்தல் பிறந்து தானீயமா நம்பியே சொல்லிவிட்டால் தனியே விளங்கியே விளங்கியே"

(Peri Azhwar Thirumozhi 3-8-4)

Sri Andal like Sri Madhurakavi Azhwar is sometimes not counted along with the rest of the Azhwars, because of her "நாசர் விற்சார் காண்க முடியாது - Bhagavata Seshatvam meaning being the servant of the devotee of the Lord. She considered herself "நாசர் பிறந்து தானீயமா - Bhattar Piran's Goda." similar to Sri Madhurakavi Azhwar who always considered himself the devotee of Sri Nammazhwar ("எதுர் மாஞ்சங்கன்"- Kaminuchiruttambu). Their devotion excels even that of the Azhwars as indicated by Sri Thirumazhisai Piran,

ான்நுக்கான் பரிசாந் விளங்கியே விளங்கியே
நாவலகய அதிகாரியே என்னார்
சன்னிபிள்ளையார் என்னென்று என்னென்று
சான்னிபிள்ளையார் கேள்வு
(Naanmukan Thiruvandhadhi –18)

"நாசர் பிறந்து தானீயமா" means one who has a special understanding of the Lord's efforts as the saviour; who hails and adores the Lord; has concerns for the safety of even the Lord and pours out songs of benediction for Him. The like of such devotion is seen in Sri Peri Azhwar ("நாசர் பிறந்து தானீயமா விளங்கியே விளங்கியே விளங்கியே" -Thiruppallaandu-6).

"நாசர் பிறந்து தானீயமா" - refers to those who serve and adore the holy feet of the Lord's devotees. Here Sri Periyavacchaan Pillai cites Sri Andal as example. Sri Andal says that the Lord is more likely to come to her on account of the grace of Sri Peri Azhwar. She tells her friend, " Please do not worry, there is a way for our rescue and we will see the Lord when somehow Vittuchittar would call Him".

3
Sri Andal is also different from the other Azhwars, for she is considered the incarnation of Sri Bhoomi Piratti, therefore her status is that of the queen of the Lord.

The concept of "Sri" in Visishta Advaitam has been extensively commented upon by eminent Sri Vaishanava Acharyas. In the Dvaya Mantra Adhikara of Srimad Rahasya Traya Saram, Sri Vedanta Desika commenting on the meaning of Sriman Narayana quotes the following sloka (of Sri Arulala Perumal Emperumanar)

"~kari]sT viwfwa[mf ~kar wa[ p>rfvkmf

"The knowledge of a qualified object is possible only through the attribute. So knowing first Sri who is an Aakara or Visheshana, the Aakari or Visheshya – the Lord is to be known".

He then gives six derivative meanings of the word "Sri", illustrating her Purushakaaratvam. Sri or MahaLakshmi is co-eternal with the Lord and ever resident in the chest of the Lord. She not only acts to bring the grace of the Lord to the jeeva but also actively helps in the redemption of the individual selves. In this role, She is considered as a compassionate mediator (Purushakaara Bhoothai) The Acharyas point not only to the Vedas but also to the Azhwars' works as evidence or the Pramaana for this.

In Sri Suktam we find Sri described as the Sovereign of all the souls (रहस्य सदा सुखमेतम). In Vishnu Purana, the most authoritative among all the Puranas, Sri is described as the divine mother who is eternal (तत्सत्यम्), inseparable from the Lord (तदस्यादस्य) and all pervasive (सर्वविशेषं).

Sri is the personification of compassion or Daya. Bhoo represents Bhoomi Devi who stands for forgiveness (Kshama) and Neela Devi is of the nature of enchanting beauty and represents the Lord's anubhava -sukham and is also personification of forgiveness or kshama. (In Sri Periyavacchan Pillai’s words "அனுப்பவை அனுப்பவை நயியை நயியை பிரித்தான், அனுப்ப கங்கல்களை கங்கல்களை ராகினிகளுடன் பிரித்தான், கங்கல் மையக்கூட வித்துத் துவிளையான பிரித்தான்").
Azhwars's verses also refer to all the three consorts of the Lord indicating clearly their Purushakaaratvam.

In the single invocatory verse glorifying Sri Andal,

"அன்னை குடம் குண்ணருளிய அல்லாஹ்லியின் ஆலை குடனே மீண்டும் படித்து குவித்துவிக்கிறார்... கூரையை காண்புயில மீண்டும் கிழக்கு வெள்ளிய பொன்றால் கிழக்கு வெள்ளிய நெடுஞ்சாய் நெடுஞ்சாய்..."

Sri Thirukkannamangai Andan, calls her the sweet companion of Sri MahaLakshmi (on account of her gunas of compassion and forgiveness) and declares her to be ever resident in Sri Krishna the king of the Ayar (the cowherd) clan and verily a lamp obtained by Sri Peri Azhwar, who is from the Veyar clan. This is quite an apt description of Sri Andal. The nature of the lamp is to throw light and therefore enlighten everything around it. Sri Andal and her two famous works have for ever remained a guiding light to all true seekers of spiritual emancipation. Her life and her works Naachiyaar Thirumozhi and Thiruppaavai are admired and commented upon extensively by many Sri Vaishnava Acharyas.

In Thiruppaavai, Sri Andal along with her companions, observes the ancient religious rite of "பாவை நோண்டு பாவை NOnbu" which the cowherdesses of Vraja observed in the bygone age to obtain Sri Krishna's hand in marriage. Each and every one of the thirty verses has been shown to contain many hidden inner meanings of high philosophical import. Several Acharyas have written commentaries on the same. Notable among these "vyakhyanams" are Sri Periyavacchaan
Pillai's (பில்லை), Sri Azhagiyanamanavala Perumal Nayanar's (அழகியமனவல பூரதனநாயகர்) and Sri Jananyacharyar's (ஜானாந்யசாகரர்). In Sri Jananyacharyar's words, Sri Andal was the heiress to the collective wealth of knowledge of the ten Azhvars, being their only daughter ("நம்பியர் பூராவையுடன் எடுத்துச் சேர்ந்த அல்லாஹ்வுருவுக்குச் சார்ந்த பெண்: மாலர்க்கள் நாடு கைடு பிரித்தைத்தியிட்டு").

It has also been recorded that Sri Ramanuja had great admiration for Thiruppaavai of Andal. He himself was known as Thiruppaavai jeer. Presumably he spent a lot of his time in contemplation of this great work of Andal, inspired and enthralled by its inner meanings. He was also known to have given erudite discourses on the same. In the திருப்பாவையுடன் வய்க்யானனம், the following is recorded about Sri Ramanuja's comments regarding Thiruppaavai. When asked once to explain the meaning for one or two of the Thiruppaavai verses, Sri Ramanuja is quoted as saying "திரும்பாவையுடன் முறல் அவ்விதோடு அவ் சொக்கம் ... பொன்சு அருள்பாற்கனால் நாகர்குமாரத்துல்லிகளை தன்னால் என்று தென்பதவன் " meaning the full import of these verses is best learnt directly from Sri Andal for she is the quintessence of the ten Azhvars.

Sri Parasara Bhattar who came after Sri Ramanuja, sums up the message of Thiruppaavai, in his single invocatory verse.

The famous Upanishadic statement entreats everyone to rise, awake and learn (உண்மீதானப் போற்றும் போல் குறிப்பிட்டு). In Thiruppaavai, Andal wakes everyone up including the Lord. She shows that the Lord is our "means" ("upaya") and assures us of His grace ("நாராயணசுக்தம் பார்த்தால் அருள் கருதப்படும்") and shows us all how to surrender to the Lord. She reminds the Lord of her "பரதாண்டியம்" ("Paratantriym" meaning "dependence on the transcendental Lord") which is expounded in the many Vedic and Vedanta texts and scriptures. ("பொன்சு அருள்தோணவன் " – meaning the Lord of the Universe -Sri Narayana Suktham, "நாராயணசுக்தம்: சாம்பலூருவில் கார்மேந்தர் பார்த்தால் :) meaning all individual selves are by nature subservient to Paramatma"). Azhvars also have stated this relationship in their divya sukthies:

"நாராயணப் பார்த்தால் பார்த்தால்" (Thiruppallaandu -11)
Andal reminds the Lord of this "SEsha- SEshi Bhavam" (Naanmukan Thiruvandhadhi 59) that "O'Lord Govinda. Please change all our other desires so that we will be of Thee and serve Thee alone even if we were to be born seven and seven times over"), at the same time indicating to us "the goals" ("Praapyam") of service to the Lord.

In Naachiyaar Thirumozhi containing about one hundred and forty three verses, Sri Andal pours her love out for her Lord Sri Krishna. One can feel the emotional intensity of the love-lorn state and the pining that her heart feels for the Lord. Sri Andal's verses portray clearly the various feelings of the God-intoxicated being. The Nayaki--Nayaka Bhava expressed in these verses is natural and profoundly beautiful. Finding herself helpless she addresses the clouds and sends them as her messenger to convey to the Lord of Thiruvenkatam of her plight.

"நேர்ந்துமே மின்னபாடு விரித்துக்குறிக்கையிலும் மையக்குள்ளார்
நேர்ந்துமே திகள்வூரை செய்துக்காண்டு நேர்ந்துமே வாழ்க்கை வாழ்க்கை வாழ்க்கை" (Naachiyaar Thirumozhi 8-1)

While walking around in the plush garden of her father, full of variety of fragrant flowers, she feels as if they had been sent there in full blossom by her lover Sri Krishna to torture her. Seeing a mullai flower creeper all in bloom reminds her of the beautiful smiling countenance of her Lord when He had promised her not to let her down- referring here to the words of Sri Rama such as ("பிரதமருடன் வில்லி பாடல் அட்டை கோடை கோடை கோடை கோடை கோடை கோடை கோடை கோடை கோடை கோடை கோடை கோடை கோடை")- Ramayanam Yuddhakaandam 18-3). She states that if those words of her loving Lord are untrue then her birth as Sri Peri Azhwar's daughter is also untrue.

"மூண்டீஸ்கோவில் பாரியால் வருசயன்பட்டின்முதல்
மூண்டீஸ்கோவில் கவித்துக்குறிக்கை எடுக்கின்றது
காரண்கொண்டால் காரண்கொண்டால் காரண்கொண்டால்
காரண்கொண்டால் காரண்கொண்டால் பொது பொது பொது பொது பொது பொது பொது பொது பொது
பொது பொது பொது பொது பொது பொது பொது பொது பொது பொது") (Naachiyaar Thirumozhi 10-4)

It is believed that the Lord delayed the fulfillment of her wishes for union, in order to demonstrate to the world her Parama Bhakti. At one stage, to ensure the mere physical sustenance of His dear "Sudik-koduttha Naachiyar", the Lord appears for her in her dreams and
weds her through proper Vedic rituals. Sri Andal's description of her glorious bridal dreams to her friend, becomes the subject of the sixth decad beginning with Varanamayiram. This decad is quite famous and very popular among Sri Vaishnavas of the South. It is customary to sing or recite these verses soon after the Vedic ritual of the wedding, in order to invoke the auspicious grace of Sri Andal and Sri Krishna on the couple so that they will be blessed with good children. ("திருநாசியார் புகழ் வரம்புத் தீர்த்தங்கர தொன்மையாளன நன்மைகளால் இயற்கையுடைய மகிழ்ச்சியுடன்") as stated by Sri Andal herself. Sri Andal gives a detailed description of the various aspects of a wedding performed according to the Vedic practices and rituals. In these ten verses also, one can find the clear philosophic message of Sri Andal direct and unmistakable.

"நந்தகங்கு திருமண பரிநில்கள் ராகத்தங்காள்
மன்னர்முன்னாள் ராகத்தங்காள் மன்னரா"  (Naachiyaar Thirumozhi 6-8)

"Sriman Narayana is our refuge now and for ever and He will not let us down, for we are His possessions".

Sri Andal reminds us of this "SEsha- SEshi Bhavam" திருமண பாடல் பாடல் and indicates also that the Lord is our ultimate refuge.

The philosophic import of the mystic experiences recorded in Naachiyaar Thirumozhi, resolve into pangs of separation, joys of temporary union, and ecstasy of the ultimate spiritual reunion of the individual self (jeeva) with the Paramatma. The state of bliss attained by total surrender of body, mind and soul (Atma samarpanam) is reflected in Sri Andal's wedding with the Lord திருநாசியார் புகழ் வரம்புத் தீர்த்தங்கரால்.

By Adiyen Ranganathan