



Bhakti Movement in Tamil Nadu: A Study of Aesthetic Dimensions in the Divine Verses of Periyazhwar and Andal

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Abstract

The Tamil Bhakti Movement swept the Tamil-speaking country during the Medieval Period roughly from the sixth century CE through the twelfth century CE. The cult was spearheaded by the divine verses of both the Saivaite as well as the Vaishnavite saint poets of Tamilnadu. The sixty-three Saivaite saint poets - the Nayanmars and the twelve Vaishnavite saint poets- the Azhwars practiced Bhakti Yoga by employing the five kinds of Bhavas (Temperaments). The bhavas articulated in their divine verses were instrumental in enunciating their desires to attain oneness with God. This paper overviews the aesthetic magnitude of two Azhwar poets – Periyazhwar and Andal. It delineates the aesthetic enrichments of Vatsalya bhava and Madhura bhava found in the verses of this parental-filial duo. An aesthetic appeal could be identified in the dissemination of the profound Bhakti towards Lord Vishnu by the father and the daughter who were chronologically placed in the eighth and ninth order among the twelve Azhwars. The paper further analyses the aesthetic dimensions acting as great succor to the supreme quest for eternal unity with God and the delusional devotion furnishing great aesthetic expressions either way.

Keywords: Aestheticism, Bhakti, Azhwars, Bhavas, Vatsalya Bhava, Madhura Bhava



Quality Education

Introduction

The Tamil Bhakti Movement poets Periyazhwar and Andal played significant roles in the revival of devotion among the Tamil-speaking society in the 8th or 9th century BCE. The composition of this father-daughter duo has been compiled in the first thousand verses (Mudhalayiram) of Nalayira Divya Prabhandham – a compilation of divine verses by the Azhwars. Nalayiram in Tamil means four thousand, 'divya' means divine, and 'prabhandham' means well-knit. Nalayira Divya Prabhandham was compiled in its present form by Nathamuni. The Azhwars followed Vaishnavite tradition and were the ardent devotees of Lord Vishnu. They practiced Bhakti yoga and versified their

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devotion through different bhavas (temperaments). This paper analyses the bhavas employed by the select poets Periyazhwar and Andal in their divine verses – Vatsalya bhava and Madhura bhava. These bhavas were aesthetically employed to express their supreme bhakti experience. This paper analyses the sensual imagery employed by Periyazhwar and Andal aesthetically to enhance their delusional devotion, their connection to divinity, and their communion with God.

Literature Review

Several studies in English have been carried out on the verses of Andal based upon mysticism, feministic overview, and the concept of an afterlife. A few studies are available on Periyazhwar on the temperament employed by him. Charyulu (2012) analyzed Andal with a Vedantic approach. Andal had been viewed as a bride through a mystical lens. Somasundaram (2019) explored faith, fiction, and history merging into a seamless whole in the life and poetry of Andal. Rangarajan (2020) explained Andal's legacy through a feministic approach. Vijayalakshmi (2019) dissects the temperament employed by Periyazhwar in his verses. The present study analyses the aesthetic dimensions employed through the sensory imagery and the temperaments employed by both Periyazhwar and Andal in their verses.

Method of research

The present study applies the new aesthetic approach by Charles Altieri and examines how the aesthetic effects, such as emotion, feelings, passion, and mood bring out the themes in an effective manner through sensory imagery and the temperaments employed. In Altieri's opinion, the earlier critical methods seem "to overread for 'meaning' while underreading for the specific modes specific modes of affective engagement presented by works of art" (Altieri, 2003, p. 2). The analysis of aesthetics in the delineation of the theme of divine devotion is attempted in the present study.

Periyazhwar

Periyazhwar was originally known as Vishnu Chitta. He was doing the Kaingaryam of tending a flower garden, stringing garlands, and offering them to the prime deity of Srivilliputtur, "Vatapathra Sayee". His extreme devotion to Lord Vishnu gained him success in enlightening the King. While accepting the honour of his procession on the elephant back, he relished the darshan of Lord Vishnu with beautiful adornments. Vishnu Chitta was aesthetically inclined and sang the divine verse of Thirupallaandu to ward off any evil eye. This motherly protection towards the supreme power got him the name Periyazhwar – the great devotee. He was also called as Bhattar Piran. His 473 verses are compiled as Periya Thirumozhi and Thirupallandu.

Andal

Andal was the foster daughter of Periyazhwar, who is celebrated for her communion with Ranganatha Perumal (Lord Vishnu) of Srirangam. She was christened as Gotha/Kodha by her father, who raised her with the divine stories of Vishnu's ten incarnations

(Dasavathara). Her devotion turned into carnal love for the Lord. She had been dreaming of becoming the consort of Lord Vishnu. Her love for God made her adorn the garland before offering it to the Lord. Her father considered the act blasphemous. But, the God preferred it that way. Hence, she was called Soodikkodutha Nachiyar and Andal after the Lord accepted the garland worn by her. Her 173 verses were compiled as Thiruppavai and Nachiyar Thirumozhi.

Bhavas

Bhakti Yoga employs five kinds of Bhavas (temperaments) viz., Santa Bhava, Madhurya Bhava, Vatsalya Bhava, Dasya Bhava, and Sakhya Bhava. Santa Bhava is practiced by Sannyasi Bhaktas (ascetics). In Madhurya Bhava, the devotees consider their bond with the divinity as between the lover and the beloved. In Sakhya Bhava, the devotee practices companionship with the Omnipotent. Vatsalya Bhava is the maternal instinct of the devotee towards the Divine. In Dasya Bhava, the devotee considers himself as the servant and the Lord as his master.

Bhavas employed by Periyazhwar and Andal

Periyazhwar got his name at the display of his maternal instinct toward Lord Vishnu as he had the darshan of God. His Thirupallandu was an attempt to protect his Lord from any evil eye. It was a unique emotion. The 12 pasurams (verses) of Thirupallandu were aesthetically interwoven with sensory imagery to highlight the union with God. The Vatsalya bhava employed by Periyazhwar in his wishes for the omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient, and eternal Lord Vishnu to live longer.

Pallandu, pallandu pallayirathaandu,
Pala kodi noorayiram,
Mallanda thin thol manivaNNa, un,
SEvadi chevvi thirukappu.

Oh Lord, who is of the colour of emerald gem,
Who with his powerful shoulders won over the wrestlers,
May the prettiness of your divine red feet be protected,
For many years, many years, for many thousands of years,
For several crores of thousand years...

The divine poet gives out a clarion call to the devotees to join him in wishing the lord many more divine years.

Yedu nilathil iduvathan munnam vandhu yengal kuzhaam pugundhu,
Koodu manam udayeerkal varambu ozhi vanthollai koodumino,
Nadum Nagaramum nanu ariya Namu Narayanaya endru,
Padu manamudai patharuller, Vandhu pallandu koorumine.

Those who are interested to join our group, before you are put in the cremation ground,

Please come and enter our group and join us quickly before crossing the limit,
And let those who have devotion among you recite "Om Namo Narayanaya"

So that the villages and cities do understand it properly and sing "Many more divine u years"

All the twelve verses of Thirupallandu epitomize the vatsalya bhava of Periyazhwar and his extravagant bhakthi – devotion. His other work *Periya Thirumozhi*, a compilation of two hundred and sixty-one verses projects Periyazhwar's exhaustive maternal instinct in a picturesque description. The aesthetic effect of feelings and mood helps him attain oneness with God through his verses. Periyazhwar imagines himself as Yashodha- the mother of Krishna in his Periyazhwar Thirumozhi. His Periyazhwar Thirumozhi has a close resemblance with the famous Tamil literary form, Pillaithamizh.

The work exalts Krishna's childhood starting from his birth. The Tamil Vaishnavites celebrating Janmashtami recite the first verse of Periyazhwar Thirumozhi.

The birth of Krishna is rhapsodized in the first verse which describes how the town of Thirukkoshthiyur is adorned and how the townsmen groomed themselves to welcome Krishna.

*vaNNamaadangkaL suuzh thirukkOttiyuur
kaNNan kEsavan nambipiRanthinil
eNNeysuNNam ethirethir thuuvidak
kaNNanmuRRam kalanththu aLaraayiRRE.*

Kaṇṇan, Kesavan, the lovely child,
was born in Thirukkoṭṭiyur
filled with beautiful palaces.
When the cowherds sprinkled oil
and turmeric powder mixed with fragrance
on each other in front of Kaṇṇan's house
they made the front yards of the houses muddy.

The exotic temperament is further beautified by the proud sulking of a mother about her son. A mother never averts the naughty acts of her child. Her complaints about her child are laced with glee and pride. The Vatsalya bhava's aesthetic appeal is evident in the following verse,

*kidakkil thottil kizhiya udhaiithidum
yedutthuk koLLil marungaiyiRutthidum
odukki pulgil udharatthE paayndhidum
midukkilAmaiyAl naan melindhEn nangaay!*

Oh, good lady! (nangaay- poorNamaanavaL- A healthy one?! This Kutti KaNNan- when lying in the cradle- kicks it so violently that the cradle appears to be tearing off; When lifted and placed on the waist, He makes the waist break off; With force, when tamed and hugged to the chest, He kicks into the stomach and jumps off (from us) With such trouble, due to lack of stamina, I have become thinner and thinner (says the Lucky YasOdhA) as I am not like you with stamina)

Andal's Thiruppavai calls out the lasses of Gokul to observe the Paavainonbu / Kathyayini Vrata. She evokes sensuous love as the path to attain soulful communion with Krishna. When the affective mode is very absorbing and becomes "a primary aspect of one's identity," it is a passion (Aliteri, 2003, p. 2). The sensation is the mark of feelings, the effect is "characterized by an imaginative engagement in the immediate process of sensation" (Aliteri, 2003, p. 2). The bhakti is displayed through carnal and erotic bhava in the below verse of Thiruppavai. Andal employs madhura bhava by depicting an early morning visual of the divine couple.

Kuthuvilakkeria kottukkal kattil mel
Meththendra panjasayanaththin meleri
Kothalar poonkuzhal Nappinnaik kongaimel
Vaitthtu kidanda malarmaarba! Vaay thiravaay
Maiththadan kanninay nee un manalanai
Eththanaipodum thuyilezha vottay kann
Eththanayelum pirivattru killayaal
Thaththuvamandru thagavelor empavai

The Lord is in his sleeping chamber, on a majestic cot with legs made of Ivory and an ambiance heightened by the tall lamps, resting on a soft mattress with a beautiful Nappinnai bedecked with beautiful flowers in her tresses closely by His side and leaning on His broad chest. The girls beseech Him to open his mouth and plead with Nappinnai "Oh beautiful-eyed one, why cannot you let go of your Lord and allow Him to wake up even though it is well past dawn now, we know you cannot bear separation from Him even for a second, but that is not fair; this should not be your nature!"

Andal's *Nachiyar Thirumozhi* comprising one hundred forty-three verses illustrates her madhura bhakthi towards Lord Vishnu. She imagines herself as a bride and dreams of an aesthetically elaborate and grand wedding. Her dreams formulate into oneness with God.

Sensory Imagery

Periyazhwar and Andal achieve their motto of divine communion in their verse by employing sensory imagery through numerous images. Their verses abound in imagery that caters to the five senses viz., Sight, Auditory, Tactile, Gustative, and Olfactory senses. "In literary usage, imagery refers to images produced in the mind by

language, whose words may refer either to experiences which could produce physical perceptions were the reader actually to have those experiences, or to the sense-impressions themselves" (New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics, 560). The following verse from Thirupallandu appeals to the gustative and tactile senses.

Neyyidai nallathor chorum niyathamum athani sevagamum,
Kai adaikayum, Kazhuthukku poonodu, kathukku kundalamum,
Meyyida nallathor santhamum thanthu yennai velluyir aakka valla,
Payyudai naga pagai kodiyaanukku pallandu kooruvane.

That God gave me high-quality food with ghee, several constant assistance,
Betel leaves and nuts from his divine hands apart from the ornament for the neck,
Golden globes for the ears and very good quality sandal paste to apply on my body,
So that I would become a good being and I wish "several years" to him,
Who has on his flag Garuda who is the enemy of the hooded serpent.

Andal appeases the visual senses through the imagery of her wedding festivities. As the wedding bells ring, she drenches herself with strong aesthetic visual imagery.

vAraNam Ayiram sUzha valam seydhu
nAraNa nambi nadakkinRAn enRedhir
pUraNa poRkudam vaiththup puRamengum
thOraNam nAttak kanAk kaNdEn thOzhI! nAn

Oh, my dear friend! SrIman nArAyana, who is complete in all qualities, is coming around the place in a clockwise fashion, surrounded by a thousand elephants. Golden purna kumbhams (a traditional method of receiving guests with water in pots, covered with mango leaves and coconut) have been placed opposite him. The entire town has been decorated with arches and pillars. I enjoyed all these in my dream... (Dhivya Prabandham)

The following verse of Nachiyar Thirumozhi strongly appeals to the visual, olfactory, tactile, and gustative senses.

karuppUram nARumO kamalappU nARumO
thiruppavaLach chevvaYdhAn thiththithirukkumO?
marupposiththa mAdhavan than vAych chuvaiyum nARRamum
viruppuRRukkEtkinREn sollAzhi veNsangE!

Oh SrI pAnchajanyAzhwAn who is profoundly white in colour! I ask you desirously about the taste and smell of the divine lips of kaNNapirAn (SrI krishNa) who snapped the tusk of kuvalayApIdam, the regal elephant of kamsa. Will that emperumAn's divine lips which are reddish in colour have the smell of medicated camphor? Or will they

have the smell of lotus flower? Will they have a sweet taste? You have to tell me.
(Dhivya Prabandham)

Conclusion

The present study examines the aesthetic dimensions of the verses of the select two Vaishnavite saint poets of the medieval Tamil Bhakti Movement and concludes that through the different bhavas and sensory imagery, they achieve the desired goal – oneness with God aesthetically. There is scope for further research in the aesthetics of other Azhwars and this paper leaves scope for other researchers to explore the rest of the ten Azhwars further.

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