



Carnatic Music
The Month of Margazhi and Tiruppavai Tradition

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The collection of 30 verses known as the Tiruppavai is traditionally rendered during the Tamizh month of Margazhi (mid December-mid January). The Tiruppavai verses were composed by Andal – the only female Azhwar and one of the greatest devotees of Lord Vishnu. The story of Andal describes how the young girl devoted all her energies to the service of the Lord and imagined herself to be his bride. Everyday, she would playfully wear the garland that her father would have painstakingly made for the Lord. The story culminates in Andal uniting with Lord Vishnu in celestial splendor.

The Tiruppavai verses are in beautifully descriptive Tamizh. Andal imagines herself as a cowherd girl in the company of Lord Krishna. She describes the Paavai nonbu (religious vow) that she and the other



cowherd girls would take to fulfill their desire to unite with the Lord. The Tiruppavai verses, believed to have been composed by Andal as a young girl around the 10th century, have been studied by numerous scholars and their exceptional imagery and literary quality continue to captivate us till today. For example, in the 3rd verse, she describes the Lord as one who measured the three worlds, thereby alluding to the Vamana avataram (one of the 10 incarnations of Lord Vishnu). She states that true devotion to the Lord shall result in prosperity and joy. In the 5th verse, her use of alliterations (Maayanai mannu vada madurai maindhanai) to describe Krishna as the magician who is the heir of the northern city of Mathura is awe inspiring. She also mentions many of the exploits of Krishna such as the destruction of the evil Chakataasura who came in the guise of a wheel. The verses are addressed to a cowherd girl, asking her to shed her sleep and observe worship of the Lord. In the 10th verse, Andal playfully likens the cowherd girl's sleep to that of Kumbarnan. Andal weaves a scene where she describes the rise of Venus and the setting of Jupiter, with flowers abounding in the garden and ascetics going to the temple to blow the conch. She asks the girl to open the door to the Lord's abode. The way Andal has incorporated rhyme in her poetry such as "kappam thavirkum" (remover of fears), 'seppam udaiyaay" (the embodiment of perfection) and "veppam kodukkum" (one who scorches enemies) in the 20th verse once again establishes the truly outstanding quality of these poems that has made them stand the test of time. The simple yet profound lyrics as in "Oruththi maganaay pirandhu" (born to one but raised by another) make these verses appeal to the layman and connoisseur alike.

The Tiruppavai verses have now become a regular feature in the post-main segment of many Carnatic concerts. The late Sri Ariyakkudi Ramanuja Iyengar tuned these verses to distinct ragams and popularized them on the concert platform. It is interesting to note that Sri Ariyakkudi tuned the first 5 verses in the 5 ghana ragams of Nattai, Gowlai, Arabhi, Varali and Sri, in the same order. The ragams chosen include a mix of heavy ones such as Bhairavi, Shankarabharanam and Dhanyasi

as well as lighter ragams like Sindhubhairavi and Behag. The verses have been set to different talams in masterful fashion. The renderings by Smt. M L Vasantakumari, Sri K V Narayanaswamy and Smt. Sudha Raganathan are extremely popular. Many musicians perform the Tiruppavai of the day during the December music festival.

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