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ĀṆDĀĻ- THE ETERNAL NĀYIKĀ
(The Influence of Bhakti Cult on Dance)
Krishna Preetha Ravikumar
Artistic Director, GURUKRUPA NATYASHALA
Jalahalli, Bangalore. gurukrupanatyashala@gmail.com

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Introduction

The term 'Bhakti' refers to 'deep devotion' or 'pure love'. As a movement, it is emphasized on the **mutual intense emotional attachment and love of a devotee toward a personal God and of the God for the devotee and ultimately salvation. Bhagavad Gītā** holds the Bhakti-mārga superior to the other two religious approaches namely the Jñāna-mārga (knowledge) and the karma-mārga (rituals/duties). This movement originated in Southern part of India especially in TamiḷNāḍu in the 6th and extended beyond the 12th century spreading to North India. [1]

The Bhakti movement played an important role in the revival of Medieval Hinduism when the entire subcontinent was dominated by the philosophies of Lord Buddha and Lord Mahavīra and later the Mugal invasions. This movement sought to bring about social and religious reforms by highlighting 'Bhakti' as the primary means for salvation, replacing ritualistic stipulations and hierarchies. Moreover, the regional languages were given more prominence which helped in reaching out to the masses in a faster and better way. Tamiḷ poet-saints namely Āḷvārs (Vaishṇavites) and Nāyaṇmārs (Śaivaites) were the major initial contributors to the Bhakti movement. These poet-saints began as mortals, who later acquired the status of sainthood owing to their strong devotion. [2][3]

Āṇḍāḷ

Āṇḍāḷ is one of the extraordinary personalities in religious history as she is the only female among the twelve Āḷvārs. She was a Tamiḷ poet and Bhakti saint, like Mīrā of the north and Akkā Mahādevi of the Kannaḍa region. As a young woman, she fell in love with Lord Kṛṣṇa and refused to get married to any mortal man. She was devoted, yet audacious. In one of her works she brings out essence of true Bhakti and in the other she asks for His embrace, demands His caress. A woman with agency around the eighth century! A fascinating woman! [4]

Āṇḍāḷ is believed to be an avatar of Goddess Bhūdevi and was the dearest to Lord Viṣṇu. In an inscription found at the temple of Aḷagar Kōvil, Madurai Lord himself addresses Āṇḍāḷ as "Nam Kōḍai" (Our Kōḍai), the reverence which none of the other Āḷvārs have enjoyed. [5] Her poetry was so attractive and philosophical that it cut across all barriers of caste and class, attracting all to their faith. Āṇḍāḷ, whose life and poetry are celebrated every December-January (Mārgaḷi/ Dhanurmāsa) is the most visible contributor to this heritage. Her impact on the temple traditions, arts and culture can be felt even today not just in India but Pan-Asia.

Objectives

- To fathom the importance of Bhakti movement
- To have deeper insights into Āṇḍāḷ and her works
- To know more about the ritualistic Araiyyar Cēvai
- To elucidate the impact of Āṇḍāḷ on dance

Scope

Dance (or any art) is a medium that portrays the mind of the artist and reflects the culture of the society. Analysing the works and impacts of various personalities/ poets results in deeper understanding of the art and culture that prevailed in that period. Tracing the roots and becoming aware of the temple traditions that are associated with the poet (Āṇḍāḷ) will enhance the performance of an artist aesthetically and spiritually. Understanding the philosophy of Āṇḍāḷ helps one to mentally experience the life and culture of



different eras – time in which Lord Kṛṣṇa lived, time in which Āṇḍāl lived and its relevance to the current generation.

Methodology

Personal observation is the major tool employed in this study. Primary, secondary and tertiary data were collected through Personal/telephonic interview with artists, Live dance programs, books, magazines, research articles, news reports, websites, social media such as Youtube videos, facebook etc.

Limitations

The current study is limited only to Āṇḍāl among the many poets who had immensely contributed to the Bhakti movement. The author's inability to do extensive fieldwork due to personal constraints.

Life of Āṇḍāl



Courtesy: www.divyadesam.com

Āṇḍāl also known as Kōtā/Kōḍai/Nācciyār is believed to be born during the 8th century in a small town named Śrīvilliputtūr (Thandipuram) in Tamiḷ Nāḍu. Some texts date her birth on the Tamiḷ year “Naḷa”, the 98th year of Kali yuga, “Ādi” month, Śuklapaksha Caturdaśī tithi and “Pūram” nakṣatram [6] A devout brahmin Viṣṇucitta also known as Periyālvār was in charge of maintaining the temple garden and making garlands for Vaṭapatraśāyi, the presiding deity of Śrīvilliputtūr. One morning, he found a baby girl lying near the Tulasi plant in the garden. He named her as Kōḍai (“Gift of Mother Earth”) and raised her as his own daughter. Kōḍai grew up listening to the miraculous stories of Lord Kṛṣṇa. The love which Viṣṇucitta had for his Lord intensified further in his daughter and she wanted to marry none other than the Lord of Br̥ndāvan himself.

Kōḍai imagining to be His bride, would adorn herself daily with the garland prepared for the Lord at the temple, without her father's knowledge. One day, Viṣṇucitta noticed a strand of hair on the garland and was shocked to know that it was Kōḍai's. He scolded her for the misuse and offered the lord a new one begging His pardon all the while. That night, the Lord appeared in Viṣṇucitta's dream and asked him to offer only the garland worn by Kōḍai. He also ordered to bring Kōḍai to Śrīraṅgam in all her wedding finery. When the wedding party approached Lord Raṅganāthā's shrine, Kōḍai ran into the temple sanctum and disappeared in a blaze of glory, having joined her Lord. [7]

Kōḍai's spiritual greatness was such that the Lord Himself wished to share her presence. From this day on, she became to be known as "Āṇḍāl", the girl who "ruled" over the Lord. Āṇḍāl is revered as “Cūḍikoḍutta Nācciyār” and has a shrine for her in many Vaiṣṇava temples. Till date garland from Śrīvilliputtūr goes to Tirumala Vēṅkaṭeśvara during Garuḍotsavam and to Madurai Aḷagar Kōvilduring Citrā Pournami. [8]

Āṇḍāl's Poetry

Āṇḍāl is known for her two wonderful compositions in Tamiḷ which are unique in their philosophical, literary and artistic content. The remarkable fact is she was just a teenager when she composed these



poems and at a time where there were not many women composers. The literary and religious maturity in her verses is far beyond her years.

Āṇḍāl's first work is Tiruppāvai (The path to Kṛṣṇa) consists of 30 poems or pācurams. She imagines herself to be a gopi or a cowherd girl during the time of Lord Kṛṣṇa. She undertakes the 'Kārtiyāni viratam' or 'pāvai nōṇpu', which the gopis were believed to have done, to reach the ultimatum. The pācurams are steeped in bhakti and urges the jīvātma (one which is sleeping) to wake up (gain the knowledge) and attain the paramātma. She was so selfless and wanted all her friends (satsaṅga) to join her in the path to attain the Supreme. She insists on shedding away one's ego and 'śaraṅgati' or complete surrender at the feet of the Lord.

The second work is the Nācciyār Tirumoḷi which translates to "Sacred saying of our Goddess", is a poem of 143 verses under 14 headings. Here Āṇḍāl sings for her individual need for spiritual and physical union with the Divine Beloved. She skilfully blends Tamil poetic conventions with stories from Samskrta Vedās and purāṇās. The image that she portrays is possibly unparalleled in the whole gamut of Indian Bhakti literature. Nācciyār Tirumoḷi belongs to an erotic genre of spirituality very similar to Jayadeva's Gīta Govinda. Tiruppāvai occurs from 474 to 503 and Nācciyār Tirumoḷi from 504 to 646 in the 4000 Divyapirapandam of the Ālvārs. [9]

Impact of Āṇḍāl's works

The impact of these works on the daily religious life of the South Indians has been tremendous. Pārāyaṇam / recitation of Tiruppāvai is done especially during the Tamil month of Mārgaḷi by people irrespective of gender, age and caste.

Both of Āṇḍāl's works, particularly the Tiruppāvai, have been commented on extensively by innumerable scholars in a number of languages over the centuries. Today, we are fortunate to have many translations of the Tiruppāvai in Western languages which make these poems available to an even wider audience.

According to the Vaiṣṇava tradition, in a marriage the groom is considered as Lord Raṅkamaṅṅār and the bride is considered as Āṇḍāl and is made to wear the characteristic 'Āṇḍālkoṇḍai'. The specific song "Mālai mārrināl Kōdai mālai mārrināl" is sung during the exchange of garlands.

The impact of Āṇḍāl in the performing arena is huge. Not many of the prabandams of the other Ālvārs are so popular like that of Tiruppāvai and Nācciyār Tirumoḷi and the entire month of Mārgaḷi is filled with dance and music concerts on these. Every female dancer at least once in her life would have danced wearing that 'Āṇḍālkoṇḍai' and 'Mālai'/garland.

The impact of Āṇḍāl is beyond our soil. An annual festival called "Trivambāve – Tribāve" is being celebrated by Thais. This festival is held for 15 days between December 14 to January 12 during our Mārgaḷi month in which the priests chant verses from Tiruppāvai and Tiruvempāvai written by Māṅikkavācagar. Till the last century Trivambāve- Tribāve was a national festival of Thailand along with the Swinging Ceremony at the Giant Swing. [10]

Araiyaṅ Cēvai- A Temple Ritual

Araiyaṅ Cēvai is a ritualistic performing art form which is performed only inside Vaiṣṇavite temples in front of the 'Utsava Mūrti' / temple's processional deity. This art is a wonderful amalgamation of all the three parts of Tamil language namely 'Iyal' (literature), 'Icai' (Music) and 'Nāṭakam' (drama) and is centred on the ritual singing and enactment of the 4000 Divyapirapandam. This is performed by hereditary performers called 'Araiyaṅs' who are the decedents of the celebrated saint Nātamūṇi who is credited to have started this performing art form. The word Araiyaṅ means the King (king of music) and Araital (noun form) means to orate. The other names for Araiyaṅs are 'viṅṅappamceivār', 'icaikāraṅ', 'pāḍuvār' and 'tambirāṅmār'. The Araiyaṅs have a specific but simple attire for this presentation namely 'pañcakaccam' (a style of wearing the dothi), Araiyaḷ Kullāi – an ornate conical hat made of either silk or velvet bearing the Vaiṣṇavite symbols namely Tirunāmam, Śaṅku and Cakram, 'parivattam' - a piece of cloth taken from a garment used by the temple deity and is tied to the hat. The Araiyaṅ wears a garland and wields cymbals known as 'Kuḷi tālam'. This is performed only in few temples in Tamil Nāḍu namely Śrīraṅgam, Śrīvilliputtūr Āṇḍāl temple, Ālvārs Tirunagari and Mēlkote temple in Karnāṭaka (its only sung and not enacted)



courtesy: The Hindu



The Araiyaṛ sevai commences with the issuance of commandment by the Lord to the Araiyaṛ with the ‘Aruḷa pāṭṭu’. The Araiyaṛ sevai consists of 3 parts:

Koṇḍāṭṭam – which sings the praises of Perumāḷ and his consort Nācciyār. Usually this is followed by ‘Maṅgaḷam’. Koṇḍāṭṭam is rendered in a unique melody.

Singing the ‘pāsuram’ and doing the appropriate abhinaya - depending on the day of performance the Araiyaṛ will select a set of pāsuras, sing them along with abhinaya using hand gestures, footwork and body/facial gestures. The abhinaya is subdued and is not elaborate as seen in the dance traditions. The explanation of the pāsuram is done with the ‘Tampirān-pāḍi’ commentary.

Dramatization of certain episodes – the Araiyaṛ picks out a specific line from the prabandam and enacts the story related to it like a drama. For example, ‘Kamsa Vadam’ from Nācciyār Tirumōḷi. The specific verse “Kaṅṅanai kāiṇḍha karuvilli” is used to dramatize the story starting from Kṛṣṇa’s birth to slaying of Kamsa.

The history of Araiyaṛ Cēvai dates back to 9th century. Saint Nātamuniḡaḷ retrieved the 4000 Divyapirabhandam which had been lost at that time and classified all the prabandams into ‘Iyaṛpā’ which was meant to be chanted and ‘Icaippā’ which was suitable for singing. He later set the pāsuras of Icaippā to specific ‘paṇ’ (tune) and trained his nephews Mēlai Agattu Āḷvān and Kīlai Agattu Āḷvān to sing the prabandams in front of the Lord at Śrīraṅgam. So, they were the first Araiyaṛs to have performed and since then this tradition has been handed down to the successive generations.

The Araiyaṛ Cēvai is performed in Śrīraṅgam during the 22 days ‘Tirudyayana Utsavam’ starting from ‘Ammāvāsai’ before ‘Vaikuṅṭa Ekādaśi’ and 10 days after the ekādaśi. On the new moon day, the ‘Muttukkuri’ from ‘Tiruneduntāṇḍakam’ of Saint Tirumaṅkaiāḷvār is presented. The next 10 days are called as the ‘Pagal pattu’ where prabandams of all the Āḷvārs excluding Nammāḷvār is performed. The performance of Tiruppāvaipāsuras happens during the pagal pattu. The 10 days after Vaikuṅṭa Ekādaśi is called ‘Rāppattu’, which is also called the ‘Tiruvāimoḷi Tiruviḷa’, is exclusive for Nammāḷvār’s ‘Tiruvāimoḷi’.[11]

‘Nīrāṭṭal Utsavam’ at Śrīvilliputtūr is another temple festival in which the pāsuram “Māle Maṇi Vaṅṅā” is recited by an Araiyaṛ when the Utsavamūrti of Āṇḍāḷ is brought to the temple tank for her ceremonial bath.[12][13]

Significance of Araiyar Cēvai

It's because of Saint Nātamuni's great efforts that we got back all the 4000 prabandhams written by the 12 Ālvārs which were lost. Further he introduced this Araiyar Cēvai in temples to popularise the Ālvārabandhams. But for him we would have lost this great literary treasure.

Āṇḍāl– The Eternal Nāyikā

Āṇḍāl is the most celebrated among the 12 Ālvārs in the field of dance. Her Tiruppāvai is praised as 'Vēdattin Vittu' (The Seed of Vedas). Year after year so many dancers come up with new interpretations and choreographies of Tiruppāvai and 'Vāranam Āyiram' from Nācciyār Tirumōḷi. To name a few Sangattamizh Mālai by Smt. Vijayanthi Mala Bali

Nācciyar, Nācciyar Next, Godha's Garland by Ms. Anitha Rathnam

Maname Brindhāvaname by Smt. Malavika Sarukkai

Godhākalyanam by Smt. Urmila Sathynarayanan

Presentation with explanation for all the 30 Thiruppavi by Sri Devi Nrithyalaya

A varnam based on compiled verses from Tiruppāvai by Smt. Srinidhi Chidambaram

"Āṇḍāland Mānikkavāsagar" by Sri. Shankar Kandaswamy



Āṇḍāl occupies a special place in the performing arena not only through her works but through many compositions on her. Some of the significant works on Āṇḍāl are 'Godā Stuti' by Vedānta Deśikar, 'Āmuktamālyada' by Mahārāja Kṛṣṇa Devarāyā in Telugu, 'Enta chenavu icchitavo' by Annamācārya. 'Raṅganāta nāyiki' in Cārukesi rāgam by Sri. VV Srivatsa, 'Kaṅṅanai nēcittu kaipiḍitta kōdai' in Raṅjani rāgam by Smt. Nalini Sadagopan, 'Śrī kōdā devīm upāsmāhe' by Kalyāṇapuram Śrī Aravāmudācārya are some contemporary compositions on Āṇḍāl.

Āṇḍāl also has a dance composition, a kavuttuvam on her- the Kōdai/Nācciyār kavuttuvam. This is one among the 18 traditional kavuttuvams (9 Navasandhi kavuttuvams and other 9 on Devatās) written by Śrī Kaṅkaimuttu Naṭṭuvaṅṅār.

Conclusion

Āṇḍāl, the only female Ālvār, was much ahead of her time. When the Bhakti movement was in its nascent stage, Jainism and Buddhism still dominating, this 12-year-old little girl, brought up in a conservative milieu, boldly expressed her love for the Lord. Her poetry is different from that of her male counterparts and for that pure devotion, she is hailed as a goddess, with a separate shrine in many of the temples. Her image is so deeply entrenched in the repertoires of classical dancers that they keep returning to her Tiruppāvai, Nācciyār Tirumōḷi or works on her like Āmuktamālyada. Āṇḍāl is that eternal Nāyikā who will continue to be the muse of many dancers.

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