

Tiruppavai – Sacred vow

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The Tiruppavai is a poem of 30 songs, composed by Andal, the only lady Alwar of the twelve Alwars whose compositions of devotion and divine experiences, put together is termed in Tamil language as Nalayira Divya Prabandham (4000 divine hymns). Tiruppavai consists of two words namely “Tiru” meaning sacred, holy and auspicious and “Pavai” meaning vow and also a girl. Thus Tiruppavai is a poetic description of a sacred vow taken by a girl. The theme of Tiruppavai is spiritual awakening of an individual soul, which then yearns for the Divine Union. This great poem of 30 songs is sung in the month of Margali (mid-December to mid-Jan), auspicious to Lord Krishna. Also, in Srivaishnava tradition of Bhagavadaaradhana (Lord’s worship) done at homes and temples, the last two songs of Tiruppavai are sung at the end.

Sri Vishnuchitta also known as Periyalwar or Pattarpiran was a very pious devotee in Srivilliputtur. Once he found a baby girl in his garden near a Tulasi plant. He gave her the name Kodai or Goda, meaning maiden or singing girl. Goda was fond of singing and naturally devoted to Lord Krishna. She learnt all about Lord Krishna from her foster father Sri Vishnuchitta. Goda began to love Lord Krishna in her heart and longed to be married to Him. She would secretly wear the garlands meant for the Lord, and imagine and visualize herself as the Lord’s bride. Sri Vishnuchitta came to know of this act of Goda and admonished her. However, that night the Lord appeared in the dream of Sri Vishnuchitta, and said that “ Only the garland worn by Goda would be acceptable to Him and one day He would come to marry Goda”. Hence she is known as “Shoodikudutta Nachiyar” meaning ‘a consort who first wore the flowers before offering to the Lord.’ At a very young age, ‘Goda sang the Tiruppavai, and after this she composed and sang a poem of 143 verses steeped in her love for Lord Krishna, called Nachiyar Tirumoli. Later on an appointed day, through instructions by the Lord Ranganatha in dreams of the head priest of Srirangam temple, the Pandyan king and Sri Vishnuchitta, the divine wedding got fulfilled through her merger with the deity of Lord Sri Ranganatha of Srirangam. Thus, Goda achieved her divine union, and from then she is called Andal (liegess).

In Tiruppavai, the first five songs introduce the nature of the sacred vow. Goda sends a clarion call for her girl friends desirous of observing the sacred vow of the Margali month, to secure, from Lord Narayana, the much-coveted drum, a symbol of divine joy of union with him. She says that, they should gather, with a dip in the sacred waters, early in the morning, as the first step. The rigors of the vow are then

stated, such as abstinence from fatty food and avoidance of bad words, decoration with jewels, etc. The lasting benefits of spirituality and prosperity accruing from the observance of the vow to the participants and the country are mentioned. Goda says that, when the Lord is worshipped with utter devotion combined with mental and bodily purity, all the age long sins will be burnt like cotton in the fire.

Songs 6 through 15, deal with waking up of the girls who are still asleep, by Goda, one after another. They are coaxed, cajoled, teased, and even ridiculed by Goda to wake them up from their seemingly slumber, lethargy and laziness and join the group in observing the vow. Then in songs 16 to 20, Goda with all her girl friends imagines herself as going to Nandagopa, the foster-father of Lord Krishna and chief of Gokula with a view to meeting Him. Goda and her companions wake up, respectively, Nandagopa, his wife Yashoda, Balarama (elder brother of Krishna), Niladevi (Krishna's consort) and finally Lord Krishna Himself.

In the songs 21-28, the expression of utter surrender of Goda and her companions to Lord Krishna, eschewing all self-related feelings is described. The appearance of Lord Krishna before them inspite of their worthlessness is an indication of the greatness and compassion of Him. Goda requests for the grant of the drum and things like conches, musical instruments, beautiful lamps and canopies for the proper observance of the sacred vow. Now that the sacred vow is about to be completed, the girls will wear beautiful – Jewels and lovely robes and taste the rice cooked with sumptuous milk and ghee.

In the 29th song, which is the most important one in Tiruppavai, Goda says to Lord that they have come to Him, not to receive the coveted drum, but to be with Him, serve Him and Him alone, eternally. They pray to the Lord Krishna that all their desires and passions should be turned into Divine desires and Divine passions. The last song sets out the fruits of the sincere study of this poem, which is in the form of a garland of thirty songs in Sangam (classical) Tamil. The fruits of the sincere and devoted study of Tiruppavai are the Grace of the Lord, Perennial Joy and Blissful happiness.

References:

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