Appendix

Prof. M.A. Lakshmithathacharya Swami on Sri Andal and Famous Srivaishnaivite Centre in Melkote, near Mysore in Karnataka.

Prof. M.A. Lakshmithathacharya Swami

Prof. M.A. Lakshmithathacharya Swami was born in 1936 in Melkote, Karnataka. He has served as the Head of The Academy of Sanskrit Research, Melkote for 25 years. Swamiji has touched many fields of knowledge with his profound talent. As a Sanskrit Scholar, he has raised this ‘language of gods’ to a new level of awareness in India and abroad. As a “Master of Ubhaya Vedanta”, “Bhagwad Vishayam” and “Vishishtadvaita,” he has not only fulfilled the traditional role admirably but also opened new practical vistas in these three supremely rich spiritual fountains of knowledge and shown how the common man can benefit from them in this age. Following are the excerpts of a conversation held with him on July 29, 2007 in his house in Jainagar, Mysore:

_Alka Tyagi_: Swamiji what is the essence of Srivaishnavism as a religion?

_Swamiji_: Srivaishnavism emphasizes the importance of the goddess ‘Sri’ or Lakshmi. Association of ‘Sri’ is very much stressed. ‘Sri’ is playing the role of the mother in the universe. The God, conceived as father, is generally supposed to be strict and unforgiving. Therefore mother brings in compassion and forgiveness in the life of devotees. Another aspect of ‘Sri’ as a woman is that of ‘female principle’ in general. Regarding this, I sometimes joke about how it is a religion of “Stree”.

Once someone asked Ramanuja, “Who is the right person to teach and learn _Tirupavai_?”

Ramanuja answered, “People who have moustache and rough cheeks are not the people to receive the teachings of _Tirupavai_. Such ruffians are not fit for this kind of learning. Only those people who have got ‘breasts’ can receive it and enjoy it. That means only women can receive it. Even among women, only
Andal can teach it and only Andal can receive it.” Here the word ‘breasts’ is not merely a physical attribute but is a symbol of compassion, of the heart: a heart that swells with Bhakti. Only a heart ever swelling with devotion can teach and understand ‘Tirupavai’. Hence richness of heart is required for Bhakti. Men can make themselves fit for Bhakti only if they develop a feminine swell of intense devotion in their heart. That might be the reason why all the saints before Andal, assumed themselves to be women with respect to their Lord God.

*Alka Tyagi:* What is the significance of Andal as an Alvar saint goddess?

*Swamiji:* Woman as a form of goddess assumes a position of great respect in this religion. Also Vaishnavism was brought to the forefront of Hindu culture only after great Alvar saints came up from sixth century A.D. onwards. All the Alvar saints considered themselves to be the brides of the Lord regardless of their human gender. They wanted to become one with the Lord who is considered to be the Husband par excellence. Most of the Alvar saints including Nammalvar superimposed on themselves a feminine consciousness in order to feel and express the love of a bride and beloved to the Lord. Hence ‘Bridal Mysticism’ is at the centre of ‘Srivaishanavism’.

Since Andal is actually a woman, probably that is the reason why she leaves behind all the other saints in expressing her passion towards the Lord. In ‘Nachiar Tirumoli’, she says, “Even at the mention of the idea that I should be given to someone in marriage, I will immediately collapse and die.” This is the devotion she had for Lord Ranganatha. (Stanza Wanadai Wallum). The clarity, the urgency and the depth of this kind of devotion is extraordinary. All the Alvar saints elevated the ‘bhava’ of human ‘sringara’ to ‘divine sringara’ where it becomes ‘Bhakti’ as the relationship with the Lord as Husband.

*Alka Tyagi:* I think the attitude of Bhakti serves as a tool to transcend all human desires which arise when human senses come in contact with their respective objects in the external material world. All these desires which have their objects in this world converge and become one single desire which has no object in this material world of senses but conceives of only one single transcendental Object.
in the form of ‘Ishta Devta’ which is what you call as ‘Archamurti’. It is this focus of the ‘chitta’ that leads to liberation or freedom from the attachments and bondages in the world.

Swamiji: Yes. However in order to engage the ‘chitta’ (mind) in the beginning it is important to have an object which is appealing to human mind. It is for this reason that Bhakti rituals in all religions involve the image of the ‘ishta devata’. For all Srivaishnava saints also ‘Archaavatara’ and ‘Archamurti’ become a major point of focus. That is why Icons are accorded great importance in this religion. ‘iconic worship’ is taken up with immaculate perfection in ritual techniques. Rituals are carried out exactly as they are laid down in the scriptures.

Through ‘iconic worship’ we re-live history in our routine existence. Beauty of iconic worship is that we live ancient times in the present: we live Ramayana, we live Mahabharata. We relate to the roots of the culture and feel great strength through this urgency that we invest in icons. Recently, a novel in four volumes has come up about how the statue of Ranganatha was protected by various communities during the Muslim invasions in fourteenth century. This Tamil novel by Renugopala is called “Tiruvaranganula” i.e. “Soujourn of Ranganatha.” This is the kind of importance we attach to the icons. They are not merely statues for us, they represent a living form of the ‘archadevata’.

Alka Tyagi: Acharya Ramanuja lived in Melkote for more than 12 years and transformed the the temple, making it a famous Srivaishnavite centre. Was it chosen for seclusion it offered needed in order to be away from the political turmoil of the times?

Swamij: In Melcote, Ramanuja came in twelfth century and renovated this much more ancient Temple. This temple is unique in its conception. Generally temples are built after a community has settled in a certain region, in order to fulfill the religious needs of the people. Therefore most temples are actually called “Gramaashritaalaya” (lit., the temple which has existence due to the village). But here the temple is at the centre of the community as the community
came up only because the temple already existed here. Therefore Melkote is known as "Aalyaashritgrama" (lit. the village that depends on the temple for its existence.) Here everybody is there for the God in the temple. Here people of each and every community are important and have their own role in the life of the temple. Melcote temple is actually considered to be the house of the Lord Tirunarayana and the goddess accompanying Him is “Yadugirinayika”. Since these are not merely icons for us, we treat them as our royal father and mother living a grand life in their grand house where there are innumerable servants in the form of devotees who would do the routine work for them like giving ‘abhisheka’ or ritual bath. So a priest, a washerman, a cook, a barber, a trumpeter all serve the Lord in their own way. Each and every community joins in the life of the temple deities. Trumpet player, for instance, comes from the Harijan community.
Dr. Vasundhara Doraiswamy on Akka Mahadevi and on Choreographing Akka’s Vachanas

Dr. Vasundhara Doraiswamy

Dr. Vasundhara Doraiswamy is an internationally renowned Bharatnatyam dancer based in Mysore, Karnataka. She is a reputed choreographer and a venerable guru. She has choreographed and performed Akka Mahadevi’s vachanas at various places in Karnataka. Her latest dance recital based on Vachanas was in April, 2005 in Mysore, where she danced for two and a half hours transmitting the intense rhythmic passion of Veershaiva outpourings to a charmed audience. Following are the excerpts from a talk held with her at her dance school in Mysore.

Alka Tyagi: What inspired you to make Akka’s vachanas, the basis of your performance?

Vasundhara Doraiswamy: There is Nayak –Nayika bhava in her vachanas, which is very important in a performance and then there is this spiritual-bhakti element which is the basis of all classical dance or classical arts. In Akka Mahadevi’s vachanas Bhakti is the sthayi - bhava and other bhava-s are sanchari-bhava-s only. Bhakti in her vachanas is reflected in an intense desire for union with her chosen god –Chennamallikarjuna. In classical dance also,
union or yoga is the goal and the aesthetic elements are subsumed in the process of performance where the performer is constantly being led by desire for the union of atma, the individual soul with the Paramatma, the Divine.

Alka Tyagi: Which are the vachanas that you chose to choreograph in the performance?

Vasundhara Doraiswamy: I chose two vachanas of Akka Mahadevi. These were: “O Parrots Prattling away” and “Listen O Sister! (Akka Kelluvva)”.

Alka Tyagi: Is there any specific reason for choosing these particular vachanas from Akka’s oeuvre?

Vasundhara Doraiswamy: These vachanas have a very varied range of images which can be easily choreographed. In the first vachana i.e. “O parrots prattling away”, Akka is eagerly enquiring the birds and beasts of the forest about the whereabouts of her Lord and Lover Chennamallikarjuna. In the second vachana (“Listen O sister”) the poetess is relating in great excitement, her dream about the preparations of her marriage and her strange bridegroom, to her close friend (sakhi).

Due to their dialogic nature and the element of drama inherent in them, these vachanas provide a lot of scope for my imagination as a creative performer.

Alka Tyagi: What according to you, is the significance of Akka Mahadevi’s works for a modern woman?

Vasundhara Doraiswamy: Akka Mahadevi’s life and her songs which contain the essence of her lived experience can be very inspiring for a woman living in modern world. Akka is an example of a very strong will at work. This strong will drove her to choose and live her life in her own way. She achieved whatever she wanted to achieve, and that is what is most important for a modern woman too— to choose and then follow the choice to its logical end.

Alka Tyagi: How do you personally relate to Akka Mahadevi?

Vasundhara Doraiswamy: Akka Mahadevi was a part of a conventional society and she lived or at least tried to live within those conventions in the beginning,
but when it became difficult for her to live a life not in accordance with her inner calling, she chose to walk against the grain. She, with a steadfast and strong will, made society bend down to make way for. In spite of their initial doubts and harsh enquiries, senior *sharanas* could not ignore the fire of the pure soul that was shining in this young beautiful woman.

Finally she created her own identity in the “Anubhav Mantapa”. Society in India has not changed much since then. This kind of life-pattern relates to my own life and my growth as an individual. This is the reason why I find Akka Mahadevi so fascinating.
Alka Tyagi: Could you please tell us a little about your work in the field of vachana singing?

R. S. Nandkumar: Any musical composition of our country seeks to achieve two main goals: one, expression of the pure aesthetic and the other, to communicate an idea. To achieve both these, our music has developed various stages called forms of expression. These forms may be different for: rendering in the normal human voice or instrumental rendering of the musical notes or an intertwined composition of words and musical notes.

When it comes to such a musical composition, the intension of the word-content is very important, for, it is this that usually directs the musical flow throughout the composition. In South India, I believe, that Vachanas of Shivasharanas were the earliest available spoken and sung compositions in the dialect of the common man. The great Shivasharanas sought to convey many important facts and virtues of human life and endeavor in a comprehensive but simple manner that could be easily understood by the proverbial ‘man on the street’. It is
tantamount to an all time respected aphorism ‘speak as you sing and sing as you speak’.

Vachana is defined as ‘what is/can be said’ (vaachaneeya). But ‘how’ it is said and/or sung is also important. What seems to be ‘vachaneeya’, i.e. the focal thesis or the essential idea for the creation of that vachana is essential for a musical rendering. In Vachanas we find sometimes a group of ideas that work towards conveying a single idea. In fact this single idea is the focal point. This is the punch line and not the ‘ankita’ as is generally conceived.

I am always trying to analyze the formal content or in other words, the form of the vacahnas. The form has often been negated as the vachanakaras themselves seemed to defy form and structure. Basavanna’s famous enunciation, “I sing as I please/ Without tarnishing the Shivatva (aanu oldante aanu paaduvenu.... ninage keedillaavaagi)” has served as a kind of directive to the vachana composers. I usually find that none of the contemporary vachana singers put their efforts to do what can be called as a kind of musical-quantification and they sing the vachanas either borrowing the form from the ‘pada’ tradition (the vachana was originally not composed in this form, either in its literary or ideological delineation) or simply repeated the first line of the vachana or the ankita (vachanakara’s signature-nomenclature) in the end (for the sake of ‘musical’ convenience). However this was not very conducive to communicate the theme of the vachana or the central idea or the punch line of the vachana. So the whole purpose of the vachana which is to articulate a specific idea is defeated.

Please take a look at the ‘pada’ format; its first line is called the ‘pallavi’ and it is at once an introduction as well as the conclusion of the ‘thesis’ of the composition. The main content of this thesis is usually in the most essential part, i.e, the charana. Sometimes, these two are bridged by another segment called the anupallavi (melapaka), thus called because it usually follows the ‘pallavi’. Hence, this musical form (the great Vaishnava movement took this form to sing praise of the Lord and perhaps this easy and organized singing and communicating made this movement pan-Indian in its scope). Now, we can
realize that most of the vachana’s thesis were not composed on this ‘logic’ and the musical rendition in this illogical order only make it more confusing and sometimes incoherent. However, please take a vachana, think about it as a ‘vaachaneeya’ thesis, find out the innermost focus, trace this focal point to its concomitant peripheral ideas in the form of other sentences hovering around this main sentence. Then sing the introductory portion of the ‘thesis’ of the vachana (it can be any sentence of the vachana, I call this the ‘udgraha khanda’) so many number of times that enshrines the central focus of this theme (this can be actually the central portion of the total length of the vachana – I call this the ‘dhruva’ portion). Sing this in matching proportion to its predecessor ‘udgraha khanda.’ Then we come to the main punch line of the vachana that gives out its inner and essential meaning (I call this the ‘amsha’ khanda). I can say or sing it as much as I please (refer to Basavanna’s saying ‘aanu olidante...’). I can do ‘aalapa’ (aesthetic freestyle musical delineation), I can do ‘svarakalpana’ (render musical notes to or without the ‘taala’ or ‘laya’) and sing this line to many musical varieties that enshrines and enlivens this central focus of the vachana. Then I come to the end portion of this vachana, that usually contains (however, it is not always the case with all the vachanas) the ‘ankita’ of the composer. I call this the ‘abhoga’ khanda. Now if you see, we have four khandas. Depending on the type and length of the vachana I can sing or say these khandas. Some vachanas may not establish all these four portions at all, making it more to the point of the thesis of the vachana. So, on the whole, if you take the entire gamut of the ‘vachana sahitya,’ the musical renditions in all its variety is mind boggling and perhaps a great challenge to a performer.

The questions that came to my mind as a singer and composer were related to creating a singing pattern that would not bring down the emphasis or misplace the emphasis. “How should one begin?”, “What should be repeated?”, “what is the punch line?” and “How should one end a vachana song?” are the major questions that have to be dealt with when you begin to work on vachana singing.

Considering these I evolved a way of singing in which the line that conveys the central idea is the line to end the vachana. I called this form “Vachana Sangati”
(Sangati is made of ‘san(g)’ and ‘gati’. where “sam” is “samyag” = comprehensive, all encompassing, combined; and “gati” is the converging point. So “Sangati” is the combined movement to arrive at the punch line where entire focus of the vachana is located)

Alka Tyagi: You did this program called “Vachana- Pada Vaidya” for All India Radio, Mysore which became very popular. Could you tell me a little about it?

R. S. Nandkumar: In this program we took vachanas and padas; specifically vachanas from Allama Prabhu along with some of the contemporary vachanakaras and sang them in ‘vachana –sangati’ format while elaborating upon the medical concepts portrayed in them. This caught on well with the vachana singing community in these parts.

Famous Hindustani musician from North Karnataka, Nagaraj Rao Havaldar who is a disciple (and in earlier days, disciple’s disciple) of Pandit Bhimsen Joshi seems to have caught on this form and later used it in his singing.

Alka Tyagi: How, in your opinion, did the tradition of vachana singing evolved with time?

R. S. Nandkumar: Vachanas flourished from the 12th cent. onwards. This was also the time when our music was not known by any distinctive categorization. Our music was just performed by our people as their music and they did not specify any name to it. This was done by others who heard it and felt the necessity to name it. I now quote an example; dichotomous nomenclature of Indian music in terms of Karnataka Music and Hindusthani Music of our Indian music happened only a few decades ago. We find the earliest reference to this in work by a Pune based Maharashtrian, Kashinatha Apatilasi, who in his work Sangita Sudhakara mentions this for the first time. He wrote it in the year 1914. Maybe a decade or two prior to his times, this dichotomy evolved.

In my opinion, vachanas were as much a voice of reform as they were an expression of bhakti. Vachanakaras’ primary emphasis in the vachanas always came upon new ways of interpreting the religious ideologies that was made
more and more complex and un-understandable, which posed as a hindrance on
the path of spirituality. Music and art were not their major domains. Vachanas
were simply recited and sung as a message of religious and ideological reform
and that of a movement of social evolution which believed in reinterpreting the
structures of caste, class and gender. Therefore vachanas were basically recited
and sometimes were recited in the mode of performance. Element of
performance came from a very common feature found in vachana compositions
viz., the element of dialogism.

Alka Tyagi: You are right in pointing out the dialogic nature of vachanas. This is
inherent in all vachana compositions as they were basically recited in the
company of other Shamas as a part of an ongoing dialogue on various issues that
concerned Shamas. Do you think the compositions had something innately
classical in them especially with regard to music?

R. S. Nandkumar: Character of Indian music is defined by the ancient Indian
music shastras. Vachanas neither had the content nor the form that could be
contained or adapted to the classical theories of Indian music. For instance, great
musicologist Sharnagadeva, who was a contemporary of vachanakaras and who
has written about all the categories of music that were prevalent in his times, (he
even took into account the songs that a ‘Grahini’ sang while carrying out her
routine chores at home) does not mention the vachanas as a musical category.

If we look at the two streams of tradition viz. Maarga and Desi, vachanas
automatically fall into the latter. However there have always been harmonious
exchanges of various elements between these two streams. Maarga and Desi
streams of music find their distinction from the range and type of instruments
used. For instance Veena and Mridangam go with the Maargi and Tamate and
drum go generally with the Desi category. While Maarga category tends to
absorb the new art forms only if they reflect or cater to the classical or elite
culture, Desi category is more open and easily renders itself to the voices of the
masses. Vachanas basically contained a comprehensive range of voices where
there were people from highest social class like Basavanna and also people from
the lowest of lower classes like Sule Sunkavva. Most significant point of concern for us is that content of the vachanas undermined the established structures of politics, religion and society. Due to this basic counter theme of vachana poetry, they could hardly be adapted into the Maarga stream of music. It was only some two generations ago, say, one hundred years ago that the masters of classical music took up the vachana lore and rendered it in classical “Raagas” and “Taalas”.

Music is an art form and all art forms are a prerogative of a refined society which has taste and also the leisure to engage in that taste. If you see the context of vachana compositions, you will know that the society, at that time, was in the throes stormy changes and upheavals. In that context there was hardly a moment of leisure that could be conducive to composition of classical music variety. It is true that Basavanna says about the veena being his body and mentions the ‘batteesa raga’s. However, if one sees on a larger canvas, the then ‘classical (marga) music’ was such that it necessitated a formal training and such training was possible to a very few selected who could afford both the time and resource. Moreover, the ‘princely’ haves used this to regain ‘superiority’ to the extent of social abuse. The Vachanakaras realized this and perhaps used the ‘desi’ modes of expressions that could be sung by those who could and for those who couldn’t, they simply said the vachanas. Therefore organized music seems to have happened to the vachanas only as an afterthought in the last century or so. Theoretically, again as a afterthought, there are two kinds of vachanas called as nudi vachanas and “Swara Vachanas”. “Swara Vachanas” are the those which can easily be adapted to “Swara” (and hence, sometimes, laya = rhythm). And some of these could be rendered on the lines of ‘padas’.

*Alka Tyagi:* In recent times however vachana singing has touched its zenith in the hands of great maestros Mallikarjuna Mansoor. What according to you is the scope and significance of Vachana singing in modern times?

*R. S. Nandkumar:* In contemporary scenario however, Veershaiva community has evolved its own corpus of religious definitions and rituals based on those
definitions and ideologies. There is no doubt whatsoever about significance of vachanas being used as a major reference point in all the aspects of living in Veershaiva religion. Vachanas are carefully preserved texts which hold the status of nothing less than a sacred book for a Veershaiva in modern times. They look into the content of vachanas and draw inspiration from them regarding their religious, social, and family life. Moreover, some of the vachanas go beyond these religious pre/proscriptions and deal with the life itself. These are readily accepted and adopted for singing and saying by all who desire such valued of nuggets knowledge. Hence, the vachanas are now exposed to the world to look into and sing/say it as they please!

Now, it is natural that these texts have attracted the attention of music composers and singers and have been sung by great maestros like Mallikarjun Mansoor and Pandit Basavaraja Rajguru. I now have a point to say here: when it comes to ‘classical’ music arena, we have now arrived at confusing cross roads. The purists say that strict adherence to tradition is a must and hence the vachanas should be sung like a traditional classical musical composition (for which it was not originally conceived). Such purists recklessly apply ‘heavy’ alapas and tans and (in Karnataka music: neraval = various musical phrases to a given word phrase) and sometimes kalpana svaras = creative svara patterns sung with a organized end pattern svara called as a muktayi. All these, in my humble opinion, only contribute to destroy the subtle mood and enshrined idea of the vachana. On the other hand, the revolutionaries have started by singing these vachanas akin to their original intension and meaning, but alas, in order to make it more and more popular, they have made it more glitzy and hence commercial too.

It is time that we took notice of these and made suitable amendments so as to render these properly to their final inheritors; the common man, the most valued and essential part of our country.
Nandini Eswer, Rohitha and Rashmi Eswer

Nandini Eswer, famous virtuoso and an extremely sincere exponent of Indian classical dance forms, is the founder director of "Raasavrunda". "Raasavrunda" is a dance repertory based in Mysore, Karnataka in South of India. The institute is dedicated to reveal through classical dance forms, the richness and essence of Indian spiritual tradition as expounded in our sacred texts and ancient Shastras.

While Bharathanatyam is at the centre of major choreography projects taken up by "Raasavrunda", Nandini Eswer, with the support of the dynamic young couple dancers Rohitha Eswer and Rashmi Srinivasan, also provides training in other Indian Classical Dance forms to the enthusiasts and disciples from around the country. She invites eminent gurus to conduct work shops to impart knowledge regarding other classical art forms apart from Bharatanatyam.

They have used Andal's poetry as well as Akka’s vachanas in their dance performances. They have produced dance-dramas like Gokulanirgamana, Harinabhisarana, Kerege Hara, Dasarukanda Gopi Krishna, Savitri Satyavan etc. Another very significant dance
Some excerpts from a talk with Nandini Eswar, Rohitha Eswar and Rashmi Srinivasan:

**Alka Tyagi:** I came to know that you have done an entire dance sequence on life of Andal. Could you please tell me a little more about the programme?

**Nandini Eswar:** One of my disciples, Manimala who is a Srivaishnavite, was to have her “Ranga Pravesha” back in the year 1991. Being a Srivaishnavite, she was very familiar with the life story of Andal. Together we realized that it would be a very auspicious beginning for her if she begins with the story of a saint who rose to the status of a goddess. We consulted the material available. Krishananad drvaya’s Amuktamalyada, Garudvahana Pandita’s Divyasuricharitam, and Pinpalakiya Perumal Jiya’s Kuruparamparapirapavam are the major hagiographical works which serve as a resource for information on Andal’s life. However renowned Sanskrit scholar Vidwan L. Vasudeva Bhatt wrote the script in Kannada language for us and lyrics were set to music by Smt., S.K. Vasumati. It was a two-hour performance, which ran in two phases. First phase was solo performance by Manimala where she alone dealt all the characters. In the next phase, few years later, this was constructed as a dance drama. It was a full fledge dance drama with complete traditional costumes. It was a very fulfilling experience to see the life of an Alvar woman saint brought down to the stage in front of an audience which comprised of the devotees as well as laymen.

**Alka Tyagi:** You have used Akka Mahadevi’s vachanas in your choreographies. What kind of vachanas fascinate you most?
**Nandini Eswer:** We have used a few of Akka’s vachanas like for ex. The vachana where the poet is asking a bird about her Lord Chennamallikarjuna.

What is significant for me in this vachana is the urgency felt by the bhakta with relation to the divine. The image of the bird, who is posited here in many roles, becomes the metaphor to convey this urgency. Bird here is invoked as a “Sakhi”, as a messenger as well as in its original form as a bird itself.

**Alka Tyagi:** How do you inculcate a vachana in a dance sequence?

**Nandini Eswer:** Every dance sequence has a well defined path, which is called Maarga. In Bharathanatyam, various stages of Maarga are: Alaripu; Jattiswara; Shabdam; padavarna; padam; ashtapadi; devarnama; tillana or tarana and finally obeisance to God.

It is in the seventh stage where we can bring a vachana or a shloka.

Vachanas are usually danced in place of a Devaranama or after a devaranama before Tillana.

**Alka Tyagi:** Rashmiji I just discovered that you are a Srivaishnavite. For me it is a joy as I would really like to know how the Srivaishnaviite religion conserves itself in the hands of young and educated. Especially when we know that our post-colonial education system feeds us on secularism at schools and college levels and only a few fortunate ones like you get a parallel education in the traditional and classical inheritance of our culture. So first of all, I would like to know, is it difficult to find a bridge between the two systems that is the modern education and the religious legacy? Then to be more particular could you please tell me, what does the story of Sri Andal mean to a classical dancer like you who is located in modern times?

**Rashmi Srinivasan:** Firstly, I would like to thank you; it is my pleasure to share my views and opinion about what you have asked.

I am a Srivaishnaviite being brought up in a very traditional and orthodox family. Infact it is those customs and traditions which was imbibed in my childhood has made me god fearing and has helped me to uphold our culture. In
my opinion bridging of two systems i.e. modern education and religious legacy is not difficult but in turn the blend of the two always gives a clarity to your vision and thought process.

Right from my childhood I am familiar with the story of Andal and as a classical dancer, it has been one of my dream characters. However, to enact that role, one has to understand, visualize and realize the core philosophy, religious, spiritual and aesthetic content conveyed in the lyrics.

Rituals at home play a vital role, it enhances your imagination and evokes the concept of divinity, which needs to be understood and realized. This is my personal opinion as a dancer. I do not have a particular daily routine as a Srivaishnavite. I do offer my daily prayers after my bath and perform tulasi pooja regularly.

Alka Tyagi: Nandinji your engagements with various dance ventures at Raasvruna are unique in many ways. I realize that lot of your work is experimental in nature. At Raasvruna you have successfully worked on projects like, “Moksha- Maarga-Philosophy based dance feature”; “Compositions of Jaina literature in Prakrut and Kannada Language”; “The Essence of Bhagwad Geeta”; “Philosophy and Bhakti in saint Thyagraja’s Pancharatna Kritis” etc. This is just to name a few, but clearly your attempts seem to be focused on bringing all that is esoteric in Indian philosophy and spirituality to the stage in such a way that it becomes accessible to everyone – regardless of whether they are formally aware of or educated about the tradition or not. The brochure on “Raasvruna” also states, “Its (Raasvruna’s) mission is to attempt through the eternal bliss of dance to facilitate the realization of the divine spirit and true happiness [Ananda] within us.”

I am very keen to understand how you accomplish this task of giving a form that too a very visible emotional form with human gestures to concepts like ‘Jnanayoga’ for instance.

Nandini Eswer: I have always tried to take the traditional form of classical dance a little further than merely being an expression of Sringara and Bhakti. To
work on Jnana and to literally show that it can be transformed into Bhakti by using the same form which is associated with Bhakti, has been my effort at Raasvruna. I have deep conviction that through the structure and scheme of Indian Classical dance we can convey the essence of all spiritual theories in a manner which can evoke spiritual joy in the heart of all Sahrudayas. It is this conviction that makes me venture into concepts and ideas unknown in the realm of classical dance.

In Moksha-Marga, for instance we worked on the three main streams of vedantic thought i.e. Dvaita, Advaita, and Vishishtadvaita. I was specifically talking to you about the Bhagavadgita production. Here we used three level stages. One to depict Dhritarashtra and Sanjaya, the next level, the philosophers and at the base level Krishna and Arjuna. The philosophers represented the thought process of Krishna on the battlefield. They also depicted the concepts of Bhagavagita adopted in daily life and how a common man should see Krihna’s philosophy in his day to day life and adopt it in his living.

When we have to work on philosophical concepts we have to conceive and create new vocabulary of gestures and emotional attitudes. We have to create our own dictionary actually. We do create one and keep referring back to it. Rohitha here is my co-composer and a constant source of inspiration.

Rohitha Eswer: Yes we have to visualize and give a tangible form to all that is abstract in a lyric or script. For a dancer, visualization is all and it becomes a very big challenge if you take up an entire sequence from Bhagwad Gita.

Alka Tyagi: Rohithaji, Could you please tell me again about that lyric in which you talked about the image of mother Yashoda playing with child Krishna?

Rohitha Eswer:

The Lyrics are:

Adisidale Yashodha jagadodharana
Anoraniyana Mahatomahiyana
Aprameyana Adisidaleyashodha
Adisidale Yashodha = mother yashodha is making her child play

Jagadodharana= the one who protects the world

Anoraniyana= smaller than atom

Mahatomahiyana= bigger than the biggest (universe) (Krishna)

It is this Krishna where Yashodha is making him to "play" (here she is making the protector of the world to play). Alvar saints especially Vishnuchitta Alvar and Tirumangai Alvar have written verses on Krishna's childhood with similar theme.
M.A. Jaishree on Srivaishnavism and Musical Rendering of Tiruppavai.

Dr. M.A. Jayashree

Dr. M.A. Jayashree, Professor of Sanskrit, from India has authored many books in the fields of Sanskrit, Yoga, Ancient Sciences, Indian history, Indian Culture and Music.

She is a musician with a melodious voice, an artist in the Mysore school of Painting, delivers discourses on Puranas, Tiruppavai & Philosophy and a great teacher of spoken Sanskrit.

As a propounder of 'Sruti parampara' the oral tradition, she has cut many CD's, to enable learning of Sanskrit by chanting and memorizing and to understand Yoga Sutras effectively and has a large number of overseas students to her credit.

_Alka Tyagi_: You have released this beautiful CD on "Udbhaya Veda", where you have sung _Gadyatrayam_ of Ramanujacharya, _Mukundmala_ of Kulshekhralwar and _Tiruppavai_ of Sri Andal. Andal's _Tiruppavai_ is sung in a manner that provides the listener an opportunity to learn it by heart. You underline the importance of listening here and it involves recitation and
repetition. The method that you employ is easy to follow and can help the interested learners a great deal. What significance does it hold for a learner except for giving them a chance to sing these hymns?

M.A. Jayashree: Actually the method employed here comes from 'Shruti Parampara'. In ancient times disciples used to learn entire texts of Vedas by heart through this method itself. Besides allowing them to sing these hymns, this kind of CD also helps them to get deeper into the tradition.

In these days of skepticism there is a belief that if any communication has to be effective we have to have logical understanding of the communication not only in terms of expression but also in terms of its language content. In this world where logic dominates over emotions only rational understanding is supposed to be valid and any emotional affectation is considered as weakness, subjective experience is suspected even if it is your own. But in this domain of faith, devotion and love, it is the domination of emotion. We do not realise the impact of emotion on us until and unless we face a traumatic experience.

So going back to the beliefs of the Indian pious minds, we know by historical evidence that words do have their impact on the psyche whether the meaning is understood or not. That is why many words are called as mantras which literally means, by remembering it, it will protect the person. That is why there has been so much emphasis on the efficacy of literature which is rendered by the highly evolved, for it has the force of transformation in its tonal value itself let alone in terms of meaning. So the primary impact of a good literature is by its tonal value and for this if we add melody. So it becomes all the more endearing and can capture any mind and set it on the path of spirituality. Indian system has devised methods to use all types of inducement to bring individuals on to the path of spirituality or evolution.

We all know by experience that frequent exposure to an activity induces a sense of affinity to the thing and here affinity to the tune and hence to the text and then on to its meaning and about the composer, so with least amount of effort one can enter into the spiritual path.
Alka Tyagi: In what way is Andal’s Tiruppavai integrated in a common Srivaishnava home and their ways of worship?

M.A. Jayashree: Every Srivaishnava home will be having an idol or a picture of Andal. Every day as a part of Nityaanusandhaana (daily worship), Tiruppavai is sung. The last two verses are integrated into Shattumorai, a procedure where the devout Srivaishnava offers his gratitude to all those who contributed to this system of worship and wishes that the tradition should live for hundred years more. The Vaazi Tirunamam of Andal is chanted at the time of Teertha distribution.

During the month of ‘Marhazi’ (Dec-Jan), every day one verse of the Tiruppavai is sung in the temples and homes early morning. Pongal as prasadam is distributed. It is said Sri Ramanujacharya decided in consultation with his Ayurveda physician Garuda Vahana Pandita, what offering should be prepared in different seasons and different times. So even the offerings have a rational basis behind them.

Why Andal’s hymns only would be a natural question. Andal is revered in the provocations pantheon because of her extraordinary devotion to the Lord. She represents the epitome of the Srivaishnava Sarangati concept of Ananyarhatva.

In the moth of ‘Marhazi’ (Dec-Jan), there will be discourses every year on the Tiruppavai hymns of Andal which is heard with reverence by the devout Srivaishnava. The commentators to the hymns have shown how her thirty compositions have in them the very essence of Srivaishnavism, that is, the attitude of the soul and that of god, the relationship between the master and the disciple, the components of Prapatti and so on. All these are explained at three levels to the lay public.

Alka: Which are the verses from Nachiar Tirumoli that are generally printed on the Wedding Invitation cards? What is the importance of such an invocation?

Jaishree: Andal has composed 143 verses in addition to 30 verses of the Tiruppavai verses. “Vaaranamaayiram” contains the rest of the verses which are divided in to 14 sections. The 6th section which is specifically called
"Vaaranamaayiram", is sung during the wedding of a Srivaishnava marriage. There are 10 verses in this section and the first verse starts with the word "Vaaranamaayiram". Here Andal describes her wedding to her friend as she saw in her dreams. She says at the end of each verse, "Kenaa kanden tozi naan" (O friend, I saw a dream). These verses describes the Srivaishnava wedding procedure.

The Srivaishnava Wedding Invitation cards may have one of these ten verses. Andal speaks of her marriage with the lord, her devotion as well as the grace of the Lord. So it is the message for the bride and the bride groom, how they should pattern their relationship to each other.
Andal Talks about Love

By K. Satchidanandan

Andal is the only woman among the Alvars, the Vaishnavite ascetics of Tamil Nadu of the post-Sangam period. Daughter of Periyalvar, Andal is believed to have lived in the 9th century AD. Devotion and lust appear with equal force in the poetry of Andal who was a devotee of Vishnu from her early childhood. Legend has it that Andal was adamant that she would not marry anyone else other than the One who Lies on the Serpent-bed in the Srirangam Temple, and that Vishnu appeared in dream to the priests of Srirangam Temple and command them to ceremoniously bring Andal from Srivilliputtur to Srirangam for the wedding, and that as she got down from the palanquin and came into the Sanctum, she disappeared into Vishnu’s idol. She is believed to have been only fifteen then. Her chief works are Tiruppavai and Naachiar Tirumozhi. In this poem, I am trying to imagine how it would be if ‘Andal Talks about Love’—The Poet.

Andal Talks about Love

Thinking that if she so much as utters a word,
With the soft warmth of that word it may dissolve
Like snow—without speaking to him, and
Containing it within herself, stifled, like
The goblin that lives under water on the riverbed;
With the discomfiture of an ant whose tiny legs
Got stuck in honey; to see in the sea-eye,
Him sprouting a golden feather on the fourteenth-day moon,
Leaning the dark-rosewood-body on the blossomed cassia tree
And sniffing it and caressing it softly, hiding it from her mother;
Deeming the bed as soft as the body of a hare, as a thorny murikku
Tree and feeling her body smarting; and turning into a karaveera plant
That strains its ears for a little breeze to throw down a flower on him;
And, disentangling her hair at dawn, confused that it is a bunch of tender
leaves,
Heaving a deep sigh and like a mad woman whose mind does not settle down,
The long eyes smarting with pain, sitting with her chin on her palm—
This is one kind of love.
At the slope of the hill where he arrives following the tunes of the reed-flute
With the herd of cattle, his twirling eyes following the swirling whip—
Along that stream where honey flows, strewing her bangles, anklets
Ear-rings, pearl-necklesses and dresses, daily, as if unawares,
Laughing like the wild-rivers, bowing low in a dance, like
The milky moonlight on the coconut palm-fronds during an aatira night;
Standing in waist-deep water at the bathing ghat, at a time when he is due to arrive,
Smearing her kayaam-flower-coloured(dark-blue-hued) body with the foaming
Juices of ulunchikka and tender shoots of vellila, and the rare naalpaamaram
And the fragrant nenmeni powder, declaring to all within-earshot
Of her presence; and if by all this he somehow does not take notice,
Uprooting a seetamudi from the banks, and tying a stone to it, and
Hurling it right in front of him; and if even that is not enough,
Stopping the water-sports then and there, and winding a wet cloth
Around her naked body, like a mermaid, climbing on the embankment
Smearing the fine chempanji sap on her two feet calloused with
Running after her cattle, and henna on her palms with blood-red lifelines, and
Sitting pretty on the grassy lawn, like the bloomed ashoka tree in the soft sun
Waiting for the cowherd—
This is another kind of love.
As the hillock covered with flowers shakes like
The flower-bedecked kavadi in the sound of the murasu,
As the water in the Kaveri goes down to the level of the sands
Shivering in fear, hearing the booming perumpara
Like the trumpeting of mad elephants; as the steeds,
Elephants, the army, chariots all, raising their pennants
And standards, and bursting crackers, rush on, bent on battle—
As the clouds of billowing dust form a giant wall
Separating man from his adversary, imprison him
In the dark, stinking of blood—at that moment,
Adorning her husband with the tilak for battle
With the lifeblood flowing from her sundered heart
And throwing around his neck kaanchi-flowers, garlands
And crowning him with vanchi flowers, and handing him
The sword, and accompanying him till the threshold of
Their nuptial chamber smelling of akil smoke;
Then following him till the small courtyard where
Mango-blooms lie strewn; then, till the bathing pond
Where, in the cradle of the petal of the white-water lily
The manchadikkuru fallen, swings; then, till the clump of bamboos
Whose skin is peeled by the creeping bean-vines; then till the path
Where spreads the silken carpet of the mayilellu flowers; then till
The jowar fields—following him thus and finally covering him with
The blue-koovla-flowers, garlands of her unceasing gaze;
Then, turning back and as if afraid to look back, rushing—
Like deluvial waters and storm, along the same mud-dyke
She had come on coy steps like ebbing water once, as a newlywed bride—
And falling like a corpse at the threshold:
That is yet another kind of love.
As time passes, as bamboos flower, as in the vales where bloom
Screw-pines, silk-cotton trees, karunochi, indam, bakul, churappunna
Payini, vaani, cherupoola, punali, punna, as the mind and body
Are awakened in the bird-calls in which flow the memories of
honeymoon,
Like a sleep-walker, without anyone knowing, following the tunes of a
flute,
Under the shade of a big venga tree, like the rays of the full moon
embracing
The raincloud, dissolving in him, and then, the kajal running down her
eyes
And with the bindi brushed away, her fine clothes now sticking with
Sand-grains and tiny grass-seeds, and the sliver of a peacock feather
Got entangled in her hair, with the marks of a pair of blue lips
Wandering all over her body, with welts here and there that sprout
Sweet memories, with a mind battling out good and bad,
With a body fatigued by bearing intense pleasure
With lips on which rise the Madhuraashtakam,
With thoughts burning and churning as to what the taste of the sin
Of the lone, separated one—whether it is sweet,
Sour, salty, astringent, smarting hot—with bent head and walking slowly,
Reaching home and without anyone noticing,
Changing her clothes furtively—
This too is another kind of love.
Turning body into an infinitely sacred temple
With nine doors, having sculpted Him with the chisel of meditation
On the soft stone of dream, washing Him with my tears
And installing Him in the sanctum of my heart with
Eight kisses, and daily waving the aarati of my flaming eyes
And offering the soft petals of my lips
And adorning Him with the deep-blue silk cloth
Of my tresses washed in the breeze from Kaveri
And smearing the sandal paste of marrow from my bosom
Where only love blossoms; like the anklet
That strains its ears for the tunes of the flute
Like the hoods that rise in the Yamuna, yearning
For the flowery-feet dancing on them,
Turning the entire body into ears, with palms folded,
Holding my breath, thinking that each fish is He,
He, the turtles, tigers, boars, the dwarfs that pass
Through the street, He the hill-tribes wearing bows and arrows,
Labourers who go with hoes and axes slung across their shoulders,
He, the cowherd blowing on his reed-pipe,
He, the soldier wearing the sword—
Seeing the Purusha who took ten incarnations in
Each being thus, and paying Him obeisance,
And untouched by thirst, hunger, lust,
Unaware of rain or shine or mist
Unmindful of hairs turning gray, and
Body aging, sitting at the base of
The ancient kadamba tree and
Doing penance—
This is my kind of love.

[Translation by A.J. Thomas.]
Akka Speaking

O Shiva O Chennamallikarjuna
Open the door
I have come, Word, all naked
Yours, all my hidden fire,
The coconut flower in my body
Yours, this offering, the crescent moon
Of my dreams. Yours,
The divine Ganga of my words
Yours too, the kalakootha venom
That I drink every day
So is the damaru of my pranas
So too the dance of time that my feet,
Freed from ankle,ets dance
Yours, too, this minute
Born in countless yonis,
Having seen countless worlds,
Having traversed hells
I have come
Like a shepherd grazing many
Magical worlds greeted by the unripe mango
Of joy, afraid, I began searching
For you in mountains and forests,
Unaware of your being in my womb-vessel
Without giving out even a little finger
Silent, like the fragrance of champak,
Like the glow inside gold
Like pungent taste in the chilli,
Unaware that you pervaded me
I dressed myself in countless coral
Beads of Kailas,
I became all alone, yet not alone,
In the world
For me, kalpavrikshas, all trees
Sanjivinins, all plants
Shivalingams, all stones
Holy places, all my destinations,
Amrit, all drinking water
Kalyana saugandhikas, all followers
So long as my Beloved is within me
You glow inside me without flames
Penetrating me without bleeding
You ecstasy of union without copulation
Taking me, without slightest movements,
Beyond planets
Sprouting without sowing
You, parrot’s eye and nest,
The nest and the flowering tree,
Tree and the forest,
Forest and earth,
Earth and the(five-fold) world, the world and dream
The mind-stuff the dream inhabits

O Hara O Mallikarjuna
I have shut the door
I am coming step by step
Lightenings are bathing me
Floods are decking my hair with jasmines
I, standing, naked, clothed with morning sunlight
Come o blue-throated one
With your snake-garland

I hear the echoes of hooves of your ox
In the ghats
I see your crescent glow
Turning into emerald the sandal leaves
Filling the breeze with Ganga

No more the smoke of kitchen fire
Or the daggers of the wicked eyes
Embrace me with your blue arms
Put out my awareness
Suck my life out with just a kiss

From now on, just the two of us
In eternity's waves
My life-breath will sing blue
Against which the elephant has rubbed its body

By K.Satchidanandan

[Translated by H.S. Shivaprakash]
Picture 1: Popular depiction of Andal as a Goddess
Picture 2: Popular Depiction of Krishna and Gopikas. (This picture reflects the background for many bhakti songs that use Gopikas' passion for Krishna as a metaphor for individual souls longing for the union with the Divine soul)
Depiction of Andal in Contemporary Performances

Picture 3: ‘Pavai Nonbu’ a dance ballet based on Andal’s Tiruppavai performed by Bharat Natyam dancer Padma Subramaniam at Vani Mahal, Chennai on December 31, 2005.

Picture 4: An exploration of mystical, musical poetry by two female saint-poets—Andal of 8th century India and Hildegard von Bingen of 11th century Germany—set to a haunting, evocative score that uniquely pairs Medieval and South Indian classical vocal styles by contemporary dancers from India and Germany.
Popular renderings of Akka Mahadevi's life in Film, Calendar and Painting
Two Pictures from Madhushree Datta’s Film on Akka Mahadevi

Picture 5: A girl child dressed up as Akka Mahadevi for a procession

Picture 6: Neelima Sheikh’s sketch on Akka
Picture 7: Famous painter Neelima Sheikh with a sketch of Akka in the background. (Picture from Madhushree Datta's Film)