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Category : May 1992
Published by Anonymous on May. 01, 1992

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At age 9, relentlessly teased, Valli spoke shyly, her little girl's voice turned more airy by a lisp. It was an ironic karma. Her father, Sankaranarayana Sastri, was a prized national poet, known from his home in Madras to the capital in New Delhi. Eighty-one years later, the same Valli at age 90, died as Andavananda Mataji, an orange-robed songstress caught in the shining comet slipstream of Lord Muruga. She composed hundreds of songs out of her vision trances. And there was a paranormal event that puzzled many: a mid-life coma that turned into a dual occupancy of her physical body. She kept company with Swami Sivananda and Shankarachariya Chandrasekarar of Kanchi. The story of caterpillar Valli - born in 1899 - to butterfly Mataji - died 1990 - is written by a relative, Meera Prakash. Nearing age 10, one night Valli went to bed, an aching prayer in her heart. The next morning, she got up with great purpose and went to stand beside her father. Surprised, he asked gently, "Do you want to tell me something?" Valli nodded, closed her eyes and recited a poem, the gist of which went, "The One did become many; Creates, preserves and annihilates; That which is beyond the reach of the Vedas, and stands Alone, such Parabrahman do I. Maragathavalli (her full name) bow down to with both hands joined together in prayer that my speech may become poetry singing His praises."

Sankaranarayana Sastri gazed in thunderstruck amazement at her rhetoric and knowledge. "Where did you come by this gift?" he asked. She recounted how Payyan (Lord Muruga, Kartikeya in the north) came to her and asked her to put out her tongue and wrote Aum upon it with His spear. He sat beside her and blessed her with divine knowledge enabling her to find the nectar of the reality of wisdom. She lost her baby-like lisp and was able to sing His praises then.

This set Valli on a path of inspired writing to God in various forms: Krishna, Shiva, Devi, Muruga and so on. Nothing could stem the songs once started - not marital status, or children or household bonds. She performed her karmas fully, but always kept part of herself in a detached corner, reserved for her devotion to Lord Muruga.

Her on-going communion with Lord Muruga propelled her in a direction away from the family, the songs pouring out of her at temples, religious ceremonies and even at the time of the delivery of one of her children. In 1924, unheeding the cries of her newborn infant, Maragathavalli was in a state of trance, beholding Muruga in her vision, song after song pluming forth from deep within her - about 600 in all, jotted down by her niece sitting beside her.

Maragathavalli's mother-in-law was upset at this, predicting the fortunes of the family ending up as that of the renunciate Muruga. She extracted a promise from Valli that she would never again sing praises of Muruga. Tortured at this mental incarceration - for Muruga appeared again and again in her vision beseeching her to sing - Valli begged release from this plight. In her high strung state, she suffered a heart attack and sunk into a coma.

How did Muruga extricate her from this condition? He brought another player into her life. Ramakrishna, an ardent Devi worshipper and a siddha (accomplished yogi) lived in Pinnavasal near Nerur in Tamil Nadu. He carried his devotion to Devi to such an extent that he sadly overlooked his wife. Incensed, she cursed him to suffer the life of a neglected woman, as she had undergone.

Ramakrishna had been denied sannyas by Swami Sivananda at the time, but greatly desired it. Sensing death's stealth, he took self-sannyas, and before his mahasamadhi, mysteriously instructed his devotees to leave a gap in the center of his samadhi grave. The curse was on his mind, seriously. His final act was to search for a devout woman his astral body could function through after his death. He found Maragathavalli.

Valli came out of her coma with a jerk. The two astral bodies - Ramakrishna and Valli - were jointly anchored in Valli's frail body. He to live out his wife's curse, she given a reprieve to sonorously invoke Muruga. It is very difficult to understand the complexities behind this merging. The only explanation available is through her song, of such intense nature, intricately woven with mysterious allusions that it's difficult for lay eyes to fully perceive and understand the significance of this new transformation in her life. The concept left many puzzled. Only a few occult masters such as Swami Sivananda and Swami Mounananda recognized the double astral occupancy. The Kanchi Shankarachariya, Swami Chandrasekara, threw an historical light on the phenomenon by stating that Valli was the fifth recorded Hindu to host the astral body of another. The other four who entered host bodies

were Raja Vikramaditya, Adi Shankarachariya, Tirumular and Arunagirinathar.

The years streamed by. In 1953, circumstances led her to the steps of the Divine Life Center in Rishikesh, India. Swami Sivananda set her on a path of privation and rigorous duties. He initiated her in the same Shadakshara mantra as Muruga did when she was nine. Swami Sivananda instructed her to do 10 million mantras in a cave near the ashram. Nothing deterred her from the path she had set upon - not meager food, cold weather, insufficient clothing or her humble surroundings. She answered only to the call of Muruga, who kept urging her to come and get Him. One day she could ignore the voices no longer and her footsteps led to an opening above the cave where she discovered an idol of Muruga. A voice emerged out of the silence asking what had kept her so long, and asked her to establish Him in a suitable place. The deity was placed by Valli's own hands in the ashram's music hall.

Eventually, she was given diksha (initiation) and became a sannyasini, earning her name "Andavan Pichai" and subsequently "Andavananda Mataji." There was nothing new in this name. Since she was mad for the love of Muruga, she used to decry herself as pichi, "crazy," for Andavan, "God."

Her husband, Narasimha Sastri, and children strenuously objected to her sannyas. Realizing she had not fulfilled her karmas as a wife and mother yet, the Kanchi Shankarachariya gave her permission to stay at home until her husband's death. He had built a hut for her to live in after his death in Tamil Nadu. But circumstances again took her back to Rishikesh. She returned to Madras only when she became seriously ill at the age of 89, in 1988. She remained in Madras, served by relatives and devotees until her mahasamadhi on November 19, 1990. She left behind a legacy of wisdom in Tamil, Telegu and Sanskrit songs.

On one occasion songs to Devi poured out of her in the presence of the Sringeri Shankarachariya, nine in all, each one a beautiful rendering of poetry, music and rhythm. At the end, Mataji, totally unconscious of her surroundings, was bleeding from the crown of her head. The Shankarachariya, holding flowers and kumkum from the Devi puja pressed a handful of the kumkum to stop the blood.

Once Mataji went to the Nerur Samadhi, where some brahmins habitually recited

the Sri Rudram. When they saw her sitting in isolation chanting the Rudram, they took exception (they felt a lady should not be reciting it) and went to set separately to start their own chanting. To their bewilderment, they found they had all forgotten the words and could not proceed. Deeply ashamed and awed, they fell at her feet asking forgiveness. They recited the Rudram together.

Mataji's kirtana songs were published as Kirtanamala with musical notation in 1961. It was released at a function in Madras, at which many famous singers like M.S. Subbalakshmi, Musiri Subramanya Iyer, S. Lalitha honored Mataji by singing her songs in her presence.

Today, these songs and many more are being spread by her daughter Kamakshi, who has started the Andavan Pichai Bhajan Mandali.

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