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A REPORT ON THE CURRENT SITUATION OF MALAYALAM
LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE
TO WOMEN'S CONTRIBUTION TO LITERATURE AND
LITERATURE FOR CHILDREN.

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The Background:

Malayalam is the mother-tongue of about 15 million people mostly inhabiting Kerala, the smallest of Indian States on the south-west coast, stretching from Kasargode near Mangalore to Vilavancode near Kanyakumari between the range of Western Ghats in the east and the Arabian sea in the West. One of the four main Dravidian languages, Malayalam has very close affinities with Tamil from which it is supposed to have separated more than a thousand years ago.

But the history of Malayalam literature is not as old as the history of Malayalam language. Even after Malayalam developed into a distinct language and was recognised as such by grammarians, Tamil, which was in a state of wonderful bloom, continued to be the medium of literary activity in Kerala. Gradually Sanskrit replaced Tamil as the language of the learned. The earliest literary composition in Malayalam that has yet come to light is assigned to the 14th century A.D.

After the 14th century, however, we find Malayalam literature developing with rapidity and mirroring a quick flowering of the regional genius. This early development was on three parallel lines. The pure local tradition continued to express itself in socio-religious songs, and ballads celebrating the loves and sorrows of a few famous heroes and heroines. These songs and ballads have simple metres and their language is more or less chaste Malayalam. The old Tamil traditions gave birth to a class of epic-devotional literature employing complicated metrical structures and a mixed Tamil-Malayalam dialect. Along with it, the influence of Sanskrit, which was very strong, created another literary dialect known as "Manipravālam", in which Sanskrit words of all categories freely mingled with Malayalam words, some of the latter even taking the conjugational and declensional terminations of Sanskrit. This dialect which was at first employed in erotic poems celebrating a few local beauties and temple deities later became the chief vehicle of Sanskrit love.

trends Towards the fifteenth century these three parallel developments began to converge. But it was in the works of Chunchath Achuthachan, the saint-social reformer of the 16th century, that the three traditions finally united to form what is the modern literary Malayalam.

Exhuthachan gave us versions of Adhyātmamāyanaṁ, Mahābhārata and Bhāgavatam which supplanted all previous translations of these classics. His disciples, following in the foot-steps of their Guru, rendered most of the Purāṇas into Malayalam verse. The vast literature of Kathakali, the justly famous Kerala Ballet, also originated at about this time. With Kunchan Nambiar of the 18th century this so-called "middle period" of Malayalam literature came to a close. Incidentally, ~~it may be noted that Nambiar is our humorist par-excellence; his match is perhaps rarely found in any Indian literature.~~

Modern period:

The influence of English education wrought profound changes both in the form and the content of Malayalam literature. Newspapers and Magazines broadened the basis of culture, and a lucid prose-style evolved which was not far removed from popular speech. The language of poetry also changed accordingly; but the content of poetry changed most. Romanticism replaced classicism. Kumaran Āśān, Ulloor Parameswara Iyer and Vallathol Narayana Menon were the three great poets who consummated this revolution. Fortunately for us Vallathol is still alive and active. Kumaran Āśān was the bard of social revolution. Ulloor sang about the ideals of ancient India while Vallathol identified himself completely with the Gandhian ideology.

Romanticism also gave birth to fiction. Social and historical novels came out in unbroken succession. The short story fought its way into a point of vantage. In the realm of drama light ^{or} faces were followed by serious historical and social ^{sociological} plays. Literary criticism also made rapid strides. A respectable body of translations from other literatures also accumulated.

Contemporary scene:

There was a short spell of mysticism in poetry heralded by Sri G. Sankara Kurup in the nineteen-thirties, but the social ~~side~~ being not congenial, it did not take deep roots. The slump of pre-war and the early war years found a host of dissatisfied young poets, headed by late Changampuzha Krishna Pillai, wallowing in defection and despondency. It was at this time that realism and naturalism found their way to the realm of fiction and psycho-analysis provided the pretext for much pornography.

The second world war gave a boost to literary production and the momentum then gained is not yet spent. India attained Independence, and the great calamity which followed the partition

of the country was no more than a distant rumbling of thunder for the people of Kerala. ^a The life continued at an accelerated pace no doubt, but without major social upheaval. Fashions in literature rose and fell. The "Progressive Movement" which began its career a few years before the war, and was at first a broad united front of writers for democracy and socialism, later split into rival factions as a result of the extreme politics of the Communist Party. The slogan of socialist realism and the tirade against formalism and bourgeois decadence reverberated through ~~narrow~~ literary corridors. Gradually the storm subsided and some sort of unity of purpose was established within the movement.

Current situation:

In the realm of poetry, Vallathol is still productive, though his present compositions rarely rise to the heights of his former masterpieces. His verse-rendering of the Rig Veda, however, is a notable achievement, especially at his age. G. Sankara Kurup continues to write lyrics suffused with a fine humanistic Internationalism. His symbolism, of late, ^{has} become the target of much criticism. Still there is no doubt that he is the most significant poet of contemporary Malayalam. Srimathi Balamani Anna, who burst into Malayalam poetry as the bard of Motherhood and wedded bliss, has become more and more subjective and reflective. In the cycle of elegies which she composed after the death of Nilappat Narayana Menon, her uncle and himself a celebrated poet, prose-writer and thinker, there is a ^{delicate} fragile ethereal haunting quality not found elsewhere in our literature. Mr. Vailloppillil Sreedhara Menon is the high-priest of beauty, and his "Eviction" is an unparalleled gem of a long poem on revolution. There are about a score of other practising poets, most of them young, endowed with insight into life and ^{having a} felicity of expression.

Yet we can hardly point to any single poetical work as epitomising the spirit of the time. It seems that our poetry has descended from the high snow-clad peaks and is now following through more or less flat plain, where one may, of course, obtain views of charming flower-gardens and fruit-orchards, but the awe-inspiring summits have become a bygone memory.

The Stage is of late showing signs of great animation. The tradition of staging Sanskrit plays in the old Natyasastra technique is still kept alive in our temples. Kerala is also the land of Kathakali. Yet, the art of drama in the modern sense was a very late development. At first translations of Sanskrit plays such as Shakuntalam were put on ^{the} board, and proved immensely popular. Then Tamil musicals flooded the theatre to the detriment of real drama. The social farces of C.R. Raman Pillai gradually won recognition and were followed by those of E.V. Krishna Pillai. E.V. also contributed a few good historical plays in the ^{correct} right romantic tradition. [With the problem plays of Sri N. Krishna

Pillai, the conception of drama underwent a great change. The influence of ~~Ibsen~~ and Shaw on the earlier work of Mr. Krishna Pillai is unmistakable. Following him, many other young writers came on the stage among whom Sri K.T. Mohammed, Cherukad, Ponkunnan Varky and T.N. Gopinathan Nair, ^{deserve} ~~deserve~~ special mention. These writers were able to present slices of life on the stage and convey a definite message of social reform. [The social musicals like "You made me a Communist" by Toppil Bhasi, "We are one" by Cherukad and "This is Earth" by K.T. Mohammed have ^{become very} ~~attained great~~ popularity. Still, the lack of theatres and theatrical equipment, as well as the want of facilities for training in stage-craft, is ^a great drag ^{to the progress} ~~on the onward march of~~ ~~the art~~ of drama.

The field of fiction continues to be fertile. The romantic novels of earlier days were replaced by realistic ones. Kesavadev's "From the Gutter", Thakazhi's "Two Measures of Paddy", Basheer's "My Grandfather had an Elephant" and Pottakkat's "Poison-girl" are some of the more popular novels of this type. Among more recent productions, Thakazhi's "Prawn" depicting the lives of fisherfolk in Central Travancore, and 'Uroob's' "Ummachu", dealing with the Moplah community of South Malabar, deserve special mention. Recently, Sirdar K.M. Panikkar has written a historical novel on Jhansi Rani. A recent trend worth mentioning is the detailed and realistic ^{it} ~~pro~~portrayal of life in the barrackerooms. 'Kovilan's' "A minus B", Parappurath's "Bloodstained Foot prints", and Nandanar's "Unknown Humans", may be taken as typical examples of this trend.

Yet, the feeling remains that novel too, like poetry and drama, is suffering from ^{a sort of} ~~anaemia~~. Not so the short story. Here the old masters, like Thakazhi, Kesavadev, Basheer, Pottakkat, Karur, P.C. Kuttikrishnan, Ponkunnan Varky, ² ~~V~~attoor Raman Nair, Raphi and Nagavallil R.S. Kurup are still in the prime of their productivity. [A notable feature in short-story is the large number of young writers who are winning recognition. K.T. Mohammed who won the first prize in the first all India Short Story Competition, M.T. Vasudevan Nair, T. Padmanabhan, G.N. Srikanthan Nair, Nandanar, Parappurath, Kovilan, N.P. Mohammed and other new entrants are enriching this field by their varied contributions. "Madhavikutty (Mrs. Kamaladas) has brought a highly sensitive feminine mind to ^{bear upon} ~~the~~ problems of domestic discord, disease and juvenile mind and artistic temperament. "Rajalakshmy", in her long short story "Daughter", has dealt with the problem of ^{the} ~~educated~~ middle-class woman. B. Saraswathi's stories are noted for their delicate humour.

In the realm of one-act plays and radio plays we ^{have not} ~~cannot~~ show much progress, though these, too, are gaining popularity ^{owing} ~~chiefly~~ chiefly to the exertions of the All India Radio.

Another branch of literature which came to its own during recent years is that of travelogue. Messrs. K.P. Kesava Menon, Sirdar K.M. Panicker, S.K. Pottekkat, K.C. Peter, A.K. Gopalan, Joseph Mundassery, Dr. K.K. Raja, Dr. K. Raghavan Pillai, Dr. K. Bhaskaran Nair, Miss Annie Joseph and Dr. C.R. Krishna Pillai are among those who have contributed their share to this branch. ^{library form} Almost all parts of this world, and many strata of life, have been covered by these writers, some of whom, in their accounts have gone ^{into} deeper philosophical and social problems, usually not found discussed in such books.

The fund of autobiographies and biographies is also growing. Among the former, the "Atmakatha" by K.M. Panicker, "Jeevitha Samaram" by C. Kesavan and "Days Bygone" by K.P.K. Menon are notable recent additions. Literary criticism too shows signs of ^a new life. Ullor's monumental "History of Kerala Literature", in five volumes embracing contributions by writers of Kerala both in Sanskrit and in Malayalam, is being published posthumously by the University of Travancore. Mr. Sukumaran Azhicode has recently contributed two substantial volumes to the criticism of poetry. Mr. Kuttikrishna Marar, Joseph Mundasseri, P.A. Warriar, M.P. Sankunni Nair and a number of other critics have brought well-trained and highly sensitive minds to the reflection of various aspects of current literature.

Through translations more and more Malayalees are becoming ^{and} acquainted with world classics. I have already referred to the translation of Rig Veda by Mahakavi Vallathol. Sirdar K.M. Panicker has to his credit several translations from Chinese and Greek classics. A recent welcome development is the appearance in translations of famous European novels and plays.

When we come to think of literature of a more serious nature, viz. scholarly dissertations, scientific expositions and volumes embodying the results of devoted research, we come to realise how little real progress is being made. A comprehensive Malayalam Lexicon is under preparation. A good Encyclopaedia remains as a long-felt need. Outline books on all branches of knowledge also remain as a long-cherished yet unfulfilled wish. In the

In the number of newspapers and their total circulation Kerala heads other States of India. There are some twenty daily newspapers and about a dozen Weeklies. The standard of printing, etc., has to improve a lot, and good scholarly magazines are still a rarity.

WOMEN'S CONTRIBUTION:

Though Kerala had been the land of Matriarchy, and women had equal property rights with men, ~~and~~ the contribution by women to our literature has not been adequate. There had been great women-scholars like Manorama Thampuratty, but they have contributed hardly anything to the literature. The earliest woman to write anything in Malayalam is perhaps Kurūr Amma, whose Bhajanas on lord Krishna of Guruvayoor Temple are still sung by devotees. Subradra Tampuran of Cochin royal family has also composed some devotional lyrics. Ambādi Ikkāvamma's "Subhadrā Dhananjayam" in the early nineteenth century created quite a stir. B. Kalyanaamma's "Vyāzharattā Smaranakal" enshrines for ever the memory of her husband, K. Ramakrishna Pillai, who had to sacrifice everything, including his health, on the alter of journalistic ideals and had to suffer confiscation of property and banishment from the State of Travancore. Tharavath Ammalu Amma's translation of "Bhaktamāla" was also a great favourite. ^{at one time} T.C. Kalyāni Amma translated several Bengali novels into Malayalam. Ambādi Ikkāvamma is another lady whose contributions to our prose literature deserve mention. [Coming to more recent times, I have already referred to the ^{poems of} Nalappat Balamani Amma. In the depth of ~~her~~ ^{these} perception and the finished artistry of ~~her~~ in expression she stands unparalleled in our literature. She is a mystic without being mystifying and the best of Indian thought and culture has put an indelible stamp on every one of her lines. Srimathi Kadathanāt Mādhavi Amma and ^{Latitha} Lalithambika Antarjanam have also contributed much to our poetry. In Kūthattukulam Mary John's poems we get a glimpse of fully indianized christianity, ~~while~~ Sugathakumari's poems ^{by the} cause a deep stir in heart by their thought content. Nalina Kumari's jingling words have a pleasing musical quality.

In the realm of short story I have already referred to three young women, Madhavaikutty, Rajalakshmi and B. Saraswathy. Lalithambika Antarjanam, K. Saraswathy Amma and Mrs. Sarala Ramavarma are regarded as "old masters." I have also referred to the services of Miss Annie Joseph to travelogue. She has also translated a few novels from English. Mrs. Helen Thomas has contributed a few volumes on mother-craft and sex. Yet on the whole the feeling remains that women of Kerala with all their education and position in society, have not contributed their quota to our literature. It is also noteworthy that the land of matriarchy has produced few women, who have gained recognition as politicians, administrators, scientists and social leaders. The reasons for this anomaly is worth investigating.

JUVENILE LITERATURE:

Juvenile literature is as neglected as ever. Well-written and attractively produced books for children are non-existent. Perhaps this state of affairs is not due to the lack of creative talent but to the deplorable state of printing and publishing trade. Among people for children Āśān's "Pushpavāṭi", G's "Tender lips" and Vailoppilly's "Kunnimanikal" stand head and shoulders above the rest. There is a children's version of Rāmāyana and Mhabharata translated from Bengali. Nehru's letters to his daughter is also translated. There are also a few stories, biographies and scientific books intended for children. But their number is not impressive. Above all, they are not able to appeal to the aesthetic sensibility of children. Printed on bad paper, mostly newsprint, full of errors, they are, most of them, a crying shame and an eyesore. About them there is an offensive odour of classroom text books. Among the more important publishers of juvenile literature the Balan Publications of Trivandrum, National Book Stall, Kottayam, Mangalodayam, Trichur and Mathrubhumi, Kozhikode may be mentioned.

There is ^{no} good children's magazine or paper in Malayalam and the Malayalam version of Telugu "Ampli Kuman" can hardly have any appeal to Malayalee boys or girls. Most journals in Malayalam devote one or two pages ^{to} for a "Children's Column", but these columns, too, are usually a hotch-potch.

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