

VALLATHOL CENTENARY CELEBRATIONS

Seminar on Modern Malayalam Poetry (MODERN MALAYALAM POETRY— ITS IMPORTANT THRUST)

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22-10-78

Modern Malayalam Poetry - Its Important Thrust

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About thirty years ago, reviewing an anthology of poems written by an esteemed friend, I wondered whether poetry in Malayalam was not passing through a period of stunted growth. To my surprise, which was not at all agreeable, this short article published in a not very popular weekly journal, created a flutter in the literary dovecotes, and the title of the article, if not the argument contained in it, reverberated for considerable time in the musty corridors of periodical journalism and platform oratory in Kerala. As it happens so often, the core of the problem posed in my article was conveniently forgotten, and it was made out that I was pleading for nothing short of the absolute abolition of poetry.

Since the present time does not lack issues, some of them really grave, to challenge the attention of literary busybodies, I need, perhaps, not fear a repetition of my earlier experience, if I timidly put forward my fear that contemporary Malayalam poetry is in doldrums, and its thrust, if it has any, is by and large a negative one. It may perhaps be safer to make my meaning unambiguously clear at the very outset: the torch of Malayalam poetry is held aloft today by the generation of middle-aged or near-middle-aged poets who had made their reputations in the fifties or earlier; and that the later entrants, in spite of their lusty efforts are yet to succeed in wresting it from their elders' unwilling hands.

This older generation, which keeps its grip firm on the torch of Malayalam poetry, consists mainly of the post-romanticists. Though several of them started their poetic career as full-blooded romanticists, their romanticism had from the very beginning, been tempered with an almost classical sense of proportion and a near-perfect artistic finish. Their accent, which had at first been heavily in favour of Beauty (with a capital letter), underwent a gradual shift in favour of Truth, and

realism came to be their prevalent mode of expression. As time passed they became more and more involved in the current political, social and economic dilemmas, and their commitment to the cause of the under-privileged was unmistakable. Yet they knew that there are no simple and cut-and-dried solutions applicable to the human predicament as they saw it, and that, in any case, the specific function which poetry is expected to discharge, is not the solution of any of these current problems but a deepening of the understanding and enlargement of the extent of human sympathy. Though saddened by disillusionment, they never turned sour; their darkness had streaks of optimism. A few of these poets, especially those who came into prominence in the late fifties, were gifted with a haunting melody and evocative diction laying bare the intense spiritual suffering of a sensitive soul condemned to live through a period of the utter collapse of all values. Many of these poets had also evolved a distinct scheme of symbolism and imagery of their own.

It is against this background that the so-called "modern" poetry of the late sixties and early seventies has to be viewed and evaluated. As can be readily observed the phenomenon of "modernism" was comparatively late in making its debut in Malayalam literature. Utterly disgusted with the present, the "moderns" wanted to tear the veil off the face of socio-political hypocrisy and in order to achieve this aim they required a new idiom strong, rough, shocking and even disgusting. Some of the pioneers of "modern" poetry in Malayalam were under the wholesome influence of T. S. Eliot, but later, as the movement gained momentum, the poets of the beat generation, especially those of U. S. A., and their Indian imitators came to be the fashion-setters. As has happened elsewhere in India, pointless pornography, deliberate obscenity, calculated destruction of form, inane imagery and consequent opacity of diction came to be regarded as the distinctive characteristics of modernity in poetry. The use of traditional metres was largely discarded, but instead of employing virile prose rhythms, tiresome and monotonous chanting rhythms were experimented with. Sarcasm, ridicule, invective and downright abuse were pressed into service. Non-sense was

presented as the highest sense. Attempts were made to recapture the magic of ritualistic incantations and oracular utterances. Sheer irresponsibility, lack of involvement in social problems and absence of commitment to anything except one's own inner truth were made articles of faith. Naturally the reader-response to this variety of "modern" poetry was remarkably lukewarm, and a vigorous educative campaign for a thorough renewal of the artistic sensibility of the readers was launched. Efforts were also made to take poetry to the common people through stage performances of poetry recitals with the accompaniment of musical instruments and sometimes even with facial make-up and stage properties. All this certainly afforded a type of notoriety to several of the exponents of "modernism", and some of them, with considerable histrionic and musical talents have become popular stage performers. But it is extremely doubtful whether poetry in Malayalam has undergone the sea-change expected of it as result of this moment for "modernity".

The political non-alignment preached as a basic tenet by the "moderns" soon encountered massive opposition from literary front-organisations of left political parties, who were successful in weaning some of the leaders of the "modernists" and inducting them into their own ranks. Ground having thus been prepared, there bloomed second spring of the old progressive movement, this time with emphasis on ultra-left politics. To begin with, the intention was to introduce the "fighting poetry" of African and Latin-American anti-colonialists into Malayalam. As the translators had no direct knowledge of the originals, only the substance of these filtered through double-translation could be presented to readers and no wonder that the effect produced was anything but spectacular.

These neo-progressives had their moment of destiny just after the emergency was lifted. The "fascist" barbarity of Indira Gandhi and her local henchmen came to be assailed in countless creations of varying quality, and those who refused to join in this pathetic display of post-battle heroism were subjected to scurrilous calumny. In spite of the initial exuberance, this self-styled "poetry of intolerance" also does

not appear to have made much of an impact on Malayalam poetry as a whole, and it remains to be seen, once the sound and fury subsides, what the real achievement of this outburst of energy has been.

Thus the mainstream of Malayalam poetry continues to be the post-romantic, realistic, lyric poetry. The periodical press, which in its struggle for survival does not leave any stone unturned, is a particularly fertile field for the proliferation of this variety of poetry. From time to time these short pieces are ceremoniously taken out of the periodicals and collected into slim volumes of anthologies, intended to slake the thirst for poetry of discerning readers. Poems of considerable length, let alone Mahakavyas, are seldom composed in these days. The poetic drama is yet to come into vogue in Kerala. The average Malayalam reader does not seem to possess any marked enthusiasm for poetry, though he is quite willing to encourage the publication of cheap editions of classics and collected works of known poets by paying pre-publication subscriptions. The number of aspirants for poetic fame is still legion, but the number of really talented youngsters opting in all seriousness for a poetic career is grievously small. The celebrations in quick succession of the centenaries of the great trio, viz., Asan, Ulloor and Vallathol, though they have afforded wholesome diversion to people to alleviate the boredom of humdrum existence, do not seem to have contributed significantly in restoring to poetry the dignity which it enjoyed at the life-time of these stalwarts. □