

MALAYALAM LITERATURE SINCE INDEPENDENCE.

(N.V. Krishna Warrier)

Of the three great renaissance poets of Malayalam, Ulloor and Vallathol lived to greet the dawn of Indian Independence. Ulloor who died in 1949 was engrossed in his last years in completing his magnum opus, a monumental History of Malayalam language and literature. Vallathol, who had turned his divine gift of poetry into a potent weapon in the fight against foreign oppressors, lived for eleven years in Independent India occupying himself with the translation of Avadhāna Kalpalata, a Buddhist classic, from Sanskrit, Gāthāsaptasati from Pāli and the Rig Veda. During these years he also worked tirelessly for the advancement of Kalamandalam, the Academy of classical dances founded by him at Cheruthuruthy, contributed his mite to the World Peace Movement and travelled extensively in Western Europe, Soviet Union and Peoples' China. In his Malayalam poem recited at the Paris Peace Conference, the war-weary Europe listened to the message of peace coming from the land of the Rishis.

The era of sentimental lyricism in Malayalam poetry came to a close with the death of Changampuzha Krishna Pillai in 1948. The poetry of G. Sankara Kurup with its high seriousness and scientific intellectualism dominated the scene, and by winning the first Jñānapiṭh Award in 1965 he was instrumental in projecting Malayalam literature in general and Malayalam poetry in particular on to the national consciousness.

Political polarisation which followed in the wake of freedom undermined the importance of the Progressive Writers' Movement which had serious consequences for Malayalam poetry. Romantic fervour was replaced by critical realism. A revolt against conventions both in the form and in the content tore the poetic medium into pieces and there arose genuine doubts in the minds of seasoned critics regarding the future of poetry. Genius, however, asserted itself, and a host of virile poets kept up the tradition of Malayalam poetry alive and vigorous. From exploring material sensibilities, Balamani Amma turned to the exploration of the dimly-lit spiritual recesses. The poetry of Vailoppillil Sridhara Menon combined sensuous beauty with

biting social comment. Itassery, whose death was widely mourned recently, was the poet par excellence of rural Kerala. P.Kunhiraman Nair sang tirelessly about the lost innocence of the Kerala landscape and "humanscape".

These masters were followed by a new generation of poets, whose main avocation was the exploration of finer aesthetic sensibilities not readily yielding to precise verbal expression. Some of them like O.N.V.Kurup and Vayalar Rama Varma, sang about the political disillusionment of the younger generation, while others like Sugathakumari and Vishnu Narayanan Mambuthiri preferred to contemplate the sad music of humanity. Modernism which discarded traditional metres and concentrated on the absurd predicament of urban life also found able exponents in Ayyappa Panicker, Kakhat and several others. Exhibitionism revelling in obscenity was also tried, but fortunately was soon discarded.

Attempts were also afoot to widen the horizons of poetry by translating classics from other languages. Mention may be made here of the contributions of G.Sankara Kurup, who translated a number of poems by Tagore, and those of Vennikkulam Gopala Kurup, who translated Ramacarithamanasa of Tuluidas from Hindi and Poet Bharati's works from Tamil.

The amateur stage movement received a tremendous boost in the early fifties, with the establishment of a large number of regional Kalasamithies. Playwrights like K.T.Mohamed, Cherukad and Thoppil Bhasi brought a new realism to the stage. Hundreds of new plays have been produced, but plays of real literary value have been few and far between. Recently the trend on the amateur stage has been towards symbolism and expressionism. Attempts are also afoot to revive poetic drama. In spite of all these efforts, drama has yet to establish itself in Kerala as a valid form of art. Lack of professional stage is the biggest stumbling block in the development of an authentic dramatic literature. As for traditional stage, Kathakali performances are still popular, thanks to the Kathakali Clubs in the towns. What the audience wants, however, is the repetition of well-worn classics by well-known artists; and the writing of Kathakali plays is an art almost extinct.

With the translation of Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai's "Chemmin" into several Indian and foreign languages, Malayalam fiction began to arouse considerable interest among the discerning readers all over the country. The post-Independence period in Kerala has been very fertile as far as fiction is concerned. Enippatikal (Ladder-rungs) by Thakazhi, Avalkkar (The Neighbours) by Kesava Dev, Ummachu and Sundaran-narum Sundarikalum by P.C.Kuttikrishnan and Oru Theruvinte Katha (Story of a Street) and Oru Desathinte Katha (Story of a village) by Pottakkat are significant contributions from the earlier generation. With such works as Nalukettu, Aguravittu and Kalam by M.T.Vasudevan Nair, Malayalam novel attained a new dimension of poetic sensibility. Novels of Kovilan, Nandanar and Parappurathu introduced our readers to the grim realities of the life in India's military camps. Ara Nāzhika Neram (Twelve Minutes) by Parappurathu is a masterpiece of the stream-of-consciousness variety. With his Khasakkinte Itihāsam (Story of the Village Khasak) O.V.Vijayan explored existentialist dilemmas in a Palghat village. Contributions of K.Surendran, G.Vivekanandan and Vilāsinī (M.K.Menon) also deserve mention here. The still younger generation of fiction-writers is represented by Kakkanadan, M.Mukundan and a host of others.

The quarter of a century before the attainment of freedom had been the golden age of Malayalam short story. In the post-Independence years, the short-story has undergone a sea-change. Stories of plot and character have been replaced by stories of atmosphere, sensibility and even non-sense. Pioneers in this field were Madhavikkutty (Mrs.Kamala Das), Kakkanadan, Zacharia and a number of other young writers. With his hilarious laughter, V.K.N. has added a new dimension to contemporary short story.

The post-Independence period has been very active as regards literary criticism, with such stalwarts as Kuttikrishna Nārar, Kuttipuzha Krishna Pillai and Joseph Mundasseri in the field, whose main effort was to bring out the real significance of the romantic movement in our literature. Incidentally, they also paved the way for sociological criticism, which however is yet to bear fruit.

With us literature had been conterminous with the literature of power, the literature of knowledge having been very slow to emerge.



Viewed from this angle, the recent growth of the literature of knowledge in Malayalam deserves special mention. The publication of a ten-volume Encyclopaedia of 10,000 pages in a period of less than seven years was a remarkable achievement bringing credit to the Writers' Co-operative Society at Kottayam. This Society has also been instrumental in bringing about a minor revolution in Malayalam book production.

The establishment of the State Institute of Languages in 1968 marked another milestone in the growth of literature of knowledge in Malayalam. This Institute has evolved a scientific idiom in Malayalam by publishing 12 Glossaries of Scientific and Technical terminology. Besides, the Institute has also brought out 350 books on various branches of knowledge.

The proliferation of types has been a stumbling block in the progress of printing and typing in Malayalam. A simple but effective script reform has recently been adopted by the Government of Kerala and this may have revolutionary consequences as regards mechanical writing and composing. This is expected to improve the production standards of our Newspapers and Weeklies, which have been the main instruments in the development and popularisation of our literature.

The State of Kerala came into existence in 1956. The unity of administration brought in its wake uniformity of the system of education all over the Malayalam-speaking area, paving the way for the development of a unified Kerala culture. The establishment of the three Government sponsored Akademies was intended to bring about this constancy which was the cherished dream of every Malayalee. Though the ground has been thus prepared, the hopes proved to be dupes. Political instability and Governmental lethargy, incessant party squabbles and continuous preoccupation with infructuous elections drew away attention and energy from creative channels, and frittered away the scarce human and material resources. And in the recent years the all-engrossing social and material crisis which has made every one scared about his security and future irrespective of his present position, has been drying up the springs of idealism which alone can nourish literature. Really significant works are rare at any time; and the

recent phenomenal increase in the cost of book production and the almost total unavailability of printing paper has compelled even entrenched publishers to pack up. The future of literature in Kerala seems very bleak indeed.

Still, looking back through the 27 years of Independence, the Malayalee has every reason to feel proud. From being a faceless Madrassee he has emancipated himself and has established his own sub-national identity. Politically fragmented from time immemorial, the Malayalam-speaking area has been for the first time brought under one administration. With the lowest per capita income and the highest density of population in the sub-continent, Kerala still has the commendable distinction of having the highest percentage of literacy in the country. The land is covered by a network of rural libraries and served effectively by a number of lively newspapers. In the hands of demagogues, the language has developed into a sharp-edged weapon for subtle ideological warfare. The knowledge-content of the literature is fast developing and the literature of Malayalam has already come to occupy a prominent place among the regional literatures of India.

---ooOoo---

N.V.Krishna Warrior,  
Director, The State Institute of Languages,  
Trivandrum.

18.12.1974.