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KUMARAN ASAN.

Kumaran Asan, whose birth centenary is being celebrated as an year-long national festival in Kerala, was a great poet and social reformer. He was born on the 12th of April, 1873, at Kayikkara, a small village on the sandy shore of Arabian sea about 25 miles to the north of Trivandrum, as the second of nine children, and his father a petty trader, in indigent circumstances, belonged to the community of Ezhavas. Considered untouchable and even unapproachable, this community occupied almost a central position in the Hindu hierarchy of Kerala and counted into its fold almost 1/5 of the entire population of the region. While the majority of Ezhavas were humble agricultural labourers and toddy tappers, a few of them were wealthy landowners, profound Sanskrit scholars and renowned practitioners of Ayurveda, recognised and rewarded by the royal families of Kerala. Yet even this upper crust of the community was considered unapproachable, had to keep the prescribed distance from the so-called Caste Hindus, was denied entrance to temples and roads passing through the vicinity of temples. They were not allowed to enter Government service at certain levels or even schools established at public expense. Kerala in those days was divided into three components, the District of Malabar included in the Province of Madras and the two native States of Cochin and Travancore. While the rigours of caste were less irksome in Malabar which was under direct British administration and where modern education and entry into Government jobs were not denied to Ezhavas, the conditions were different in the native States whose rulers were also stout defenders of orthodoxy. It is no wonder then that the Ezhavas, the largest single community in these States, smarted under the indignities heaped on them in the name of caste and organised themselves for the amelioration of their disabilities under the inspiring leadership of Saint Sri Narayana, a profound philosopher and famed ascetic, whose message was "One Caste, One Religion, One God for Man".

Before he was 14 the boy Kumaran had his initial lessons in Sanskrit and 4 years of formal schooling. Denied the post of a teacher owing to his immaturity, he continued his Sanskrit studies under a local scholar, and then worked for two years as an accountant with a local trader. Not satisfied with this humdrum career he became the Aroka in a temple of Lord Subrahmanya and began to give lessons in Sanskrit to local children, thereby earning the surname "Asan", which

is a corrupted form of "Acarya". At this time he met the celebrated saint Sri Narayana, who immediately recognised the moral, spiritual and intellectual qualities of the youth. The attraction was mutual, and Kumaran Asan after sometime followed the revered Guru to his rural retreat at Aruvippuram near Trivandrum, where, later in 1903 the SNDP Yogan, the most potent instrument of social change in Kerala, came into existence.

Kumaran Asan surrendered himself completely to the Guru in 1891 at his 18th year, and followed him to his hermitage in 1893. He spent three years with the Swami studying Vedanta and practising austerities and came to be known as "Junior Swami" among the followers of the Guru. Desirous of making his disciple an erudite scholar in Sastras the Guru sent him in 1895 to Bangalore, where Asan joined the Government Sanskrit College and began to study Vedanta. Unfortunately, he had to leave Bangalore before the completion of the course. He continued his studies at Madras and Calcutta, and returned to Kerala in 1900, without taking the final examination. The short stay in Calcutta, had however, a decisive influence on his intellectual development. While studying higher texts in Nyaya Sastra at Calcutta, he also acquired some command over the English language and imbibed the spirit of Indian renaissance, that was then being expressed mainly through the writings of Swami Vivekananda and Port Tagore. The idea that the down-trodden communities can break their shackles only through their united effort and that any movement in India if it is to capture the imagination of the masses had to be spiritual in content - this idea found repeated expression in the writings of Swami Vivekananda became a conviction with him, and resulted in the establishment of the SNDP Yogan with Sri Narayana as President and himself as the Secretary. With single minded devotion he served this organisation as Secretary for 16 years. He edited "Vivekodayam", the monthly organ of the Yogan, represented his community as a nominated member in the Legislative Assembly of Travancore, agitated continuously through writings and platform speeches for eradication of social evils and for the recognition of civil rights of the backward communities and strived hard to spread among the masses the enlightening message of the Guru. At the late age of 45 he married, and six years later, on the 16th of January 1924, he met his watery grave when the steam boat in which he was travelling capsized - Ironically enough the boat carried the name "Redeemer" - at a spot now known as Kumarakoti in the Pallana waterway.

As he himself has said, he spent the major portion of his active life serving the community as the Secretary of SNDP. Yogam, and setting in motion the process of rapid modernisation first among the Ezhava Community and then in other high and low communities constituting the social hierarchy in Kerala. Though his services as a social reformer are of a very high order, we are here mainly concerned with his role as a poet who revolutionised our concept of culture and heralded the romantic renaissance in Malayalam literature. Like many of his less gifted contemporaries, he too started his poetic career by composing devotional poems in the traditional form and translating from Sanskrit. These early writings attracted little attention and are significant today only as records of the different stages in the development of his poetic personality. The earliest of his major works, the ode on a "Fallen Flower", was published in 1908 when the poet was 35. This powerful poem consisting of 41 stanzas is a lament on the tragedy at the close of life and is the first significant Malayalam poem in the romantic strain, and was immediately recognised as ushering in a new era in our literature. This was followed by "Malini" and "Lila", two dramatic narratives of some length respectively highlighting the spiritual and secular aspects of romantic love that was so different from the vulgar sensuality parading in the name of love in the literature of that day. In the "Meditations of Sita", which some critics consider to be his magnum opus, the poet makes use of a situation taken out of the epic Ramayana to set forth his ideas on society on the duties of Government and on the role of woman in society, and to explore the sub conscious surgings of the mind running at times, unbridled through every forbidden track. In the "Lament" (Prasadam) which is an elegy on the demise of Prof. A. R. Rajamannar he expounds clearly and cogently his conception of poetry of high seriousness. In the long narrative poem "Duravastha" (The tragic plight) which contains his clarion call to the higher communities to change the outmoded laws lest they violently change the societies, the poet unites a Brahmin refugee girl with a youth of lowest caste in holy wedlock against the background of the bloody Moplah (Moslem) revolt in the District of Malabar. The powerful crusade against caste which found eloquent expression in this poem is carried further in the "Outcaste Son" (Candala Mahishuki) which has its theme taken from Buddhist legends. In "Cuckoo" which is a poem with autobiographical gender tones, he reveals his dis disgust at the petty



jealousy prevailing in the community and the decision to quit the social work to devote to his heart. His last poem "Compassion" (Karuna) also has a Buddhist theme and deals with the transitoriness of worldly glamour and the permanence of spiritual qualities. In addition to these, he has also given us an almost free render of Edwin Arnold's *Light of Asia* and a Children's Ramayana, and a few children's verses of supreme beauty. His poems have been collected into three volumes running to more than 1500 pages. He was also a writer of effective prose, his prose writings ranging from perceptive literary criticism to scathing social and political commentary.

The impact of Asan's personality on the sluggish society and tradition-bound literature of Kerala was tremendous. His political creed was liberalism verging on conservatism; he was singularly unaffected by the programme of the Indian National Congress and the emergence of Gandhi on India's political horizon. With immense satisfaction he received the honours bestowed on him by the British Government which poet Vallathol, who by then had chosen Gandhiji for his Gura and had identified himself with the cause of non-co-operation had rejected. Nevertheless he was an ardent believer in an intense sort of spiritual and cultural nationalism, and was never tired of referring back to the age-old wisdom enshrined in the Upanishads. It is also noteworthy that the locale of only two of his major poems is Kerala, while, in all others, the story takes place either in "the heavy Himalayan land", or in the Vindhya regions watered by river Narbada, or in such legendary towns of North India as Sravasti, Ayodhya and Mathura. It is strange that this poet, born and brought up on the sandy beach of Arabian sea never for once mentions the ocean in his poems but takes a peculiar delight in describing the snow-clad peaks and lush forests of the Himalaya region. Though he did not show any affinity with the nationalist movement of his time, his philosophy of social action went home to the down trodden, and the organisation he built up with patient assiduity provided the frame-work for chain-reacting social changes in Kerala. And above all his poetry with its inherent and severe purity has managed to retain its fresh appeal through these years, and seems to constantly renew its idiom and image to suit the sensibilities of ever new generations.

I have mentioned earlier about his short stay in Calcutta, and how the cultural links forged during this period gave definite shape to his whole outlook. For his philosophy of social action he owed

a deep debt to Swami Vivekananda, while for his philosophy of poetry the inspiration came from poet Tagore. Asan has paid eloquent tribute to these two eminent sons of Bengal. In his dedication to the translation of Vivekananda's Rajayoga occur the following verses composed in Sanskrit;

His tribute to Tagore, again in Sanskrit, is as follows:-