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FOLK POETRY OF INDIA

Words and Music based on the Ballads of Malabar.

(N.V.Krishna Warrior)

The night is hot and the air is sultry. Not a leaf trembles in the garden surrounding the homestead. The spreading mango tree is a huddled mass of darkness. The plantains are asleep in the pale moonlight, and the fronds of tall and slender areca palms forming the skyline in the lower end of the garden are glistening like steel. The stillness is oppressive and disconcerting. The mind is languidly aware of a vague yearning for something indefinable. The silence is suffocating.

A miracle happens. All on a sudden the silence is shattered by the magic strains of monotonous chant. An untrained rustic male voice is pouring out in slow, uniform measure. The sultry air and the pale moonlight vibrate in response to the gentle cadence. The solo is followed by the chorus. The solo which leads is a deep male voice, very masculine and very distinct. The chorus which follows is a confused medley of male and female voices, some soft, some shrill, all indistinct.

The occasion for this festival of music is unmistakable. In the low-lying waterlogged paddy fields the agricultural operations have just started. The rain water collected through the monsoon months in the Puncha fields has to be emptied so that the sprouting paddy seeds may embed themselves in the oozing soft mud. The water, however, has to be preserved for irrigating the paddy plants in the hot and rain-less months to come. This is made possible by pushing the water up into canals crisscrossing the entire field, with the aid of giant water-wheels. These wheels are kept in motion by sturdy young men and women, who, half hanging on a scaffold made of bamboo poles on one side of the wheels, kick their ~~xxxxx~~ broad spokes rhythmically with their feet. It appears as though they are ascending an escalator which is moving down. And the music is helpful in keeping the uniform rhythm of their powerful kicks. It also transforms the tedium of their manual labour into the ecstasy of a delightful dance.

Now listen to the leading solo male voice. Each line of the song, as it is spelled out distinctly, is divided into three feet, the first two composed of three measures or mathras and the third foot composed of four measures. It is music; it is also literature. The music is monotonous, but the literature is many-splendoured. Be attentive, and you can follow the well-known ~~xx~~ ~~Shekavar~~, ~~xx~~ ~~fighter's~~ career of Arosal Shekavar, the valiant prize-fighter, his affair with the beautiful maiden Thumpolarcha, his resounding victory over the veteran Aringodar in a celebrated dual and his tragic death by the hand of his own trusted ~~xxxxxxxx~~ but treacherous attendant Chanthu in his twentysecond year. Here is tragedy in all its classical grandeur. And as you listen, the slow monotonous cadence and the regular rhythm of the music form a perfect harmony with the slow but sure grinding of the relentless gods' mill. It grinds finer and finer, and the voice of the soloist becomes surcharged with troumous grief. The grief which has no remedy. The grief which has to be borne in silence and submission. The grief which is identical with the grief of ~~the~~ generations of oppressed and long-suffering peasantry. The grief which forms the stuff of great literature.

The hours lengthen, the night glides and the shadows creep. The shift changes at the waterwheel. The tired feet and the tired voices are replaced. A fresh batch takes the place of the old. And the music also changes. The cadences are the same. The monotony still persists. But the theme has changed and there is a matching change in the lilt of the melody. The theme is the strange love of Komappan, the tenth son of Kappulli Palat Konki Amma, whose nine elder sons were mercilessly murdered the Kurups of the House of the Ninety. Young Komappan, just emerging from his hiding, happens to see the charming ~~young sister~~ Unniyamma, the younger sister of his bloodthirsty enemies. And seeing in this case was falling in love head over heels. He follows her into the bathing tank. Recognising him Unniyamma's elder sister Unichiruta hurries home to bring her brothers to hunt the defenceless youngster down. Sensing the danger Unniyamma stripes herself half naked, gets into the water upto her neck, and spreading her profuse hair hides the young man under it. The assassins search the whole of the tank, but do not suspect their innocent-looking sister of having given shelter, close to her bare body and under her spreading wavy hair, to their inveterate enemy. Now they decide that their quarry has given them the slip and hurry from there. Now the maiden climbs out of the water, followed by her admirer and the delightful act of courting goes on the typical rustic way. With the least trace of inhibition the charming maid invites her valiant but inexperienced young man to her home and through various adventures their love is fulfilled. Feud, Jealousy, manly courage and womanly guile, all have their full play. and the song flows rhythmically, till the night turns into dawn.

The Northern Ballads, as we call them, are long narratives in the same metre. They are without any discernible indication of personal authorship. They are strong, bare, objective and free from any kind of moralising or philosophical reflection. The life depicted in them is singularly a-moral. They sing of blind love and furious hate. Deception is applauded and death is the consummation to be wished for. Having been submitted for long to a process of oral transmission among unsophisticated people fairly homogeneous in life, habit and outlook, they have all acquired a set pattern of thought and expression, which is below the level of conscious literary art. Percy Mac Queen, a former collector of Malabar, is said to have collected about 400 of such songs. Out of this collection 52 songs have been published from the University of Madras. Recently two more collections have appeared thanks to the efforts of certain researchers.

With these words of introduction let me take you to some selected pieces from these ballads. The first piece is from the Song Of Koman. Koman, the tenth son of Kappulli Palat Konki Amma, chanced to see the maidens going to bathe in the village tank. Knowing that they are the sisters of his inveterate enemies, he follows them to the tank. His mother warns him of the dangers that lie ahead of him, but blinded by the passion welling up in his youthful heart, he goes to the tank without arms, where the seven Kurup brothers with their attendants come to murder him in cold blood. The younger maiden, Unniyamma, gives him temporary shelter under water, close to her bare body. After a futile search the brothers go away. Now the young lovers emerge from water, and Koman declares his love for her and which is promptly reciprocated.

The next selection is from the Duel of Aromal. The young prize-fighter has vanquished his veteran rival, but his own trusted ~~companion~~ but trecherous companion has stabbed in his wound with a burning iron rod while he was resting after the duel. The wound has now become fatal and the prize-fighter has to be transported home in a palanquin. At home he meets his father, mother, brother, wife and child. Entrusting his ~~only~~ infant son to the care of his younger brother, Aromal loosens the Kacha or the long piece of cloth tied around his waste and breaths his last.

The third piece is from the song of Unniyaroha. This valiant damsel wants to go to the festival at the Allimalarkkavu temple, but her husband kunjiraman is afraid of the Moplas on the way and dissuades her. But Unniyaroha is determined to go by herself. She goes to the tank and bathes elaborately. Having said her prayers, she comes home and drapes herself in silk. Decking herself with all her resplendent jewellery she ties her Urumi or belt-like sword around her waist. The parents of her husband are unable to restrain her, but her cowardly husband threatens to beat her if she left home. She disregards this threat, and starts alone. On the road a fight the Moplas develops in which she proves her mettle.