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MALAYALAM LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE.

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Malayalam is one of the four Dravidian languages listed in the Constitution of India. Mother tongue of more than twenty million people, it is the regional language of the State of Kerala and is closest to Tamil in Grammar and vocabulary, differing from it chiefly in the absence of personal terminations for verbs, a liberal use of Sanskrit derivatives and consequent adoption of a phonemic system embracing all Sanskrit and Tamil phonemes, which in their turn necessitated the use of a distinct script derived from the Tamil Grantha known as Tulu-Malayalam script as it was shared in common by these languages of the West Coast.

Early period.

Even in the earliest known phase in the development of Malayalam two distinct literary and linguistic traditions are discernible. The tradition with a tilt towards Tamil employed indigenous metres and rhyming patterns known collectively as Pattu and an idiom known as Bhasha or Tamil consisting mainly of Dravidian words sparsely intermingled with Sanskrit words in the Tadbhava form with Dravidian terminations, while the highly Sanskritised tradition known as Manipravalam made use of Sanskritic metres and an idiom characterised by profligate use of Sanskrit words in the Tatsama form with Sanskrit terminations, the latter occasionally being appended to even pure Dravidian bases. This Manipravalam style had been entrenched before the 9th century A.D. and has left its indelible impression not only on literary works, but on inscriptions also. In course of time the word Malayalam came to be used for both these styles. The word Malayalam which originally denoted the geographical area comprising roughly the Malabar District of the erstwhile Madras Presidency gained currency as the name of the language only in the 19th century.

The earliest inscription in Malayalam known as the Vasthappalli inscription belongs to c. 830 A.D., while Vaisikatantram, a treatise on the wiles of courtesans, which, perhaps, is the earliest Manipravalam poem is ascribed to the 12th or early 13th century A.D. The earliest epic poem in the indigenous Pattu form is Ramacaritam supposed to have been composed in the 13th century. The earliest prose work,

a commentary on Kautilya's Arthashastra, is also believed to be of this period. This is in the Manipravalam tradition, which is contained in the actors' manuals known as Attaprekarams setting forth the rules of staging Sanskrit plays in temples. This temple drama called Kutiyattam gave birth to Puranic discourses which called into being voluminous Prabandha or campu literature which is supposed to be the high watermark of the Manipravalam style.

Medieval period.

Meanwhile the Pattu tradition also had its efflorescence in the early 15th century in the Bhagavadgita of Madhava Panikkar and Ramayanam, Bharatam and Bhagavatam of Rama Panikkar. Finally these two traditions were permanently blended in a graceful literary idiom in the early 16th century by Tuncettu Ramanujan Ezhuttacchan whose Adhyatma ramayanam, Bharatam and Bhagavatam became holy scriptures to be recited daily in every Hindu household irrespective of caste differences. No wonder Ezhuttacchan is still gratefully remembered as the father of Malayalam literature.

Ezhuttacchan had a host of imitators who translated in indigenous metres almost the whole of Purana literature from Sanskrit. About this time the dance drama known as Kathakali gained wide currency and was enthusiastically patronised by several royal households necessitating the creation of a voluminous Attakkatha literature, much of it of doubtful literary merit, but some like the Nalacaritam of Unnayi Variyar attaining classical excellence. Tullal, another genre of performing art, gave birth to an equally large corpus of poetical compositions the most celebrated of which are by Kuncan Nampiyar (middle of the 13th century), the poet par excellence of wit and social satire.

Modern period.

Christian missionaries had established the first printing press in Kerala at Cochin while Tuncattu Ezhuttacchan was still writing his classics on palm leaves with an iron stylus. The first Malayalam book to be printed, a Biblical tract, was however produced in Rome in 1772 A.D. The year 1817 is memorable because in that year the Princely State of Travancore made provision for education of the people at Public expense. The State of Cochin followed suit in

the next year. Modern education brought the literate elite face to face with modern European literature, and this encounter was destined to transform the entire literary tradition. The royal poets of Kotungallur and their proteges who still carried on the old tradition were instrumental in modernising the poetical idiom by colloquialising and prosifying it. Kerala Varma, a prince-consort of Travancore, broadened the bases of literature by importing western ideas and literary forms, particularly to meet the text book needs of the newly opened schools and colleges. The first really modern novel of Malayalam, *Indulekha* by Cantu Menon, was published in 1889. This was followed by *Martanda Varma*, a historical romance by C.V. Raman Pilla, in 1891. Soon there was a flood of imitative fiction. Journalism also gained strength, the first periodical being *Pasei-modayam* (1847) edited by the Scholar Missionary Hermann Gundert who is also the first lexicographer of Malayalam.

The Romantic transformation of Malayalam poetry was effected mainly by three stalwarts: Kumaran Asan, whose birth centenary was celebrated in 1973, Vallattol Narayana Menon, in whose writings the nationalist aspirations of Kerala attained creative expression, and Ulloor Parameswara Iyer, whose greatest contribution, perhaps, is the monumental *History of Literature in Kerala*. The names of Changampuzha, whose premature death in 1948 was widely mourned and G.Sankara Kurup, who was awarded the first Jnanapith award in 1965 may also be mentioned in passing.

Malayalam literature has made rapid strides in short story, Drama, Travelogue and criticism in the last four decades. The late thirties witnessed an unprecedented political awakening with a pronounced left slant which had its reflection in literature in the form of a very strong progressive movement. The progressives did not stop at the mere denunciation of the old, the irrelevant, the decadent and the bourgeois; they also created the new, the relevant, the revolutionary and the proletarian. In his novel *Odayil Nilavu* (from the sewer) Kesava Dev portrayed the life of a Rickshaw puller; Basheer by his *Balyakalasakhi* (Girl friend of childhood) placed the backward Moslem Community in literature; Takazhi Sivasankara Pillai in his *Rantitangazhi* (Two measures of paddy) gave voice to the life of the Pulaya of Kuttanad paddy lands. Through his political

play Pattabacki (Unpaid rent) K.Damodaran brought class war onto the stage. Powerful support to this movement was rendered by critics like M.P.Paul, Prof. Mundassery and Kuttipuzha Krishna Pillai.

Post-Independence Period.

The progressive movement weakened with the advent of freedom owing chiefly to political reasons and emphasis on formal beauty gained ascendancy. The novels of P.G.Kuttikrishnan with their wide canvasses and the intensely introspective stories of M.T. Vasudevan Nair are the products of this period. The so-called modernist trends emerged only in the late sixties. In poetry modernism appeared as anti-metrist, broken images, a cult of obscure and the like. Modernism, however, has had only a very superficial effect on poetry. The fiction seems to have been more deeply affected, and with the novel Khassakkinte Itihassam (The epic of the Village Khassak) the anti-hero has come to stay. The greatest effect of modernism was on short story, which has been completely transformed. Modernism perhaps had a debilitating effect on the theatre movement, and the popular theatre movement has all but died. A great efflorescence of scientific literature has been the most significant feature of the current decade. As the language is finding increased use in administration and higher education a shift of emphasis from the imaginative to the informational is inevitable, and this shift in turn is sure to influence the course of development of the language itself.