

Current Situation In Malayalam Literature

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THE BACKGROUND.

One of the four main Dravidian languages, Malayalam has very close affinities with Tamil, whence it is supposed to have separated about a thousand years ago. It is the mother tongue of 15 million Malayalees, most of whom inhabit Kerala on the South-west Coast, the smallest as well as the most densely populated of Indian States.

The history of Malayalam literature, however, is not as old as the history of Malayalam language. Even after, Malayalam developed a distinct individuality of its own, Tamil continued to be the medium of literary activity in Kerala. Gradually, as a result of large-scale Aryan immigration Sanskrit replaced Tamil as the language of the learned.

The earliest literary composition in Malayalam that has yet come to light is assigned to the 13th Century A.D.

The following two centuries witnessed a vigorous development of Malayalam literature on three parallel lines. The pure native tradition expressed itself in socio-religious songs and ballads celebrating the loves and the wars of a number of folk heroes and heroines. These songs and ballads have simple metres and their language is more or less chaster. The Tamil tradition on the other hand, gave birth to a class of devotional epics employing complicated metrical structures and a mixed Tamil-Malayalam dialect. The influence of Sanskrit created the literary dialect known as Manipravalam, wherein Sanskrit words of all categories freely mingled with Malayalam words, some of the latter even taking conjugational and declensional termination of Sanskrit. This dialect was at first used in erotic poems, and later became the chief vehicle of Sanskritic lore.

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In the fifteenth century which gave us the literary gem of Krishnagatha by Cherusseri, these three parallel trends began to converge. But it was in the works of Tunchath Ezhuthachan, the saint-reformer of the 16th century, that finally united to form what is the modern literary Malayalam. Ezhuthachan gave us versions of Adhyatma Ramayanam, Mahabharatam, and Bhagavatam, which supplanted all previous translations of these classics. His disciples, following in the footsteps of their Guru, rendered most of the Puranas into Malayalam verse. The vast literature of Kathakali also took shape at about this time. With Kunchan Nambiar of the 18th Century, who through his Tullal songs provided hilarious humour and scathing social criticism, the so-called middle period of Malayalam literature came to a close.

THE MODERN PERIOD.

The impact of English education was profound both on the form and the content of Malayalam literature. Newspapers and Magazines, the earliest of which appeared about 120 years ago, broadened the basis of literature, and a lucid prose-style evolved which was not far removed from popular speech. As the language of Poetry kept pace with the language of prose, the content of poetry underwent a profound revolution. Romanticism was firmly established in Malayalam poetry by the celebrated triad of Asan, Vallathol and Ulloor. While Asan was the bard of Social revolt, Vallathol identified himself with the Gandhian movement. From poetry the spirit of romanticism spread into prose. Social and historical novels came in rapid succession. The short story emerged as the most typical literary form of the day. In drama, light farces were succeeded by serious historical and social plays. Literary criticism also made rapid strides. A respectable body of translations from other literatures also accumulated.

There was a short spell of mysticism in poetry in the Nineteen-thirties. The severe economic depression of early war years gave birth to a host of younger poets, headed by late Changampuzha Krishna Pillai, who gave poignant expression to dejection and despondency of the times. It was the same zeit-geist which ushered realism and naturalism into the realm

of fiction. The later war-years changed the scene. The depression was relieved. India attained freedom and the pace of life accelerated. The movement of "Progressive Literature" gained ascendancy, as a broad united front of writers for democracy and socialism. Split into rival factions as a result of political differences, the organisational structure of the movement gradually disintegrated. Still the fact remains that his movement has left an abiding impression on the present generation of writers.

CONTEMPORARY SCENE.

It is not possible to do justice, in this short paper, to the contemporary scene in Malayalam literature which is very animated, very noisy and very confusing. Turning our eyes first to poetry we see that the void created by the death of Vallathol is not yet filled. Sri. G. Sankara Kurup continues to give us an occasional gem of lyric, but his attention is mainly concentrated in the translation of the poetical works of Tagore, from original Bengali, of which Gitanjali has already been published. Srimathi Balamani Amma who burst into Malayalam poetry as the bard of Motherhood and Wedded bliss, is of late exploring the depths of spiritual experience in her ethereal poems. Sri. Vailopilli Sridhara Menon still combines literary charm with Scientific accuracy in his lyrical compositions. There are about a score of other practising poets, endowed with insight into life and felicity of expression. Yet the fact remains that poetry is not having the best of days and the reasons are worth investigating.

Unlike Poetry, Drama is having an efflorescence. There are about half-a-dozen professional and a thousand amateur dramatic troupes: and the quantity of plays produced annually is staggering. Though the quantity is not matched by quality, some really good plays are being written and produced and the interest in the stage movement is still mounting.

The field of fiction continues to yield a rich crop. "Chemmin" (prawn) the celebrated novel of Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai, which was awarded a national prize by the Sahitya Akademy, has been translated into English under the

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auspices of the UNESCO. The social epics of Uroob, and the military masterpieces of Kovilan, Parappurath and Nandanar are still very popular. The recently released "Arab Golden" by M.T.V. Nair and N.P. Mohammed portraying the lives of the gold-smugglers of the west-coast is a welcome departure from the beaten track. Women writers like Rajalakshmy are giving variety and depth to our fiction. Most of our novelists are also accomplished short story writers. Thanks to the encouragement provided by the AIR, one-act plays and full-length radio plays are gaining popularity.

Another branch of literature which came into its own during the recent years is Travelogue. Besides describing various parts of the world and different strata of life, some of our travellers have also delved deep into social, economic, political and philosophical problems in their works.

Among recent autobiographies, "Bygone days" by KPK Menon, which was awarded a national prize, is worth mentioning.

Literary criticism too shows signs of a new animation. The monumental "History of Kerala Literature" by Mahakavi Ulloor was published posthumously by the Kerala University. In addition to magazine articles, we have had several full-length studies of authors, contemporary as well as classical.

As interest in modern Science increases, more and more books on various Scientific subjects are being published. Many of these are translations or adaptations but there are also some original ones. "The birds of Kerala" by Induchudan, published by the Kerala Sahitya Akademi, is easily the best among these.

This brings us to our literary organisations. The Kerala Sahitya Akademy is maintaining steady progress. Sahitya Parishad, which was our largest and most representative literary organisation, is, however passing through a critical period. It is not functioning normally at present, and its routine affairs are

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under the supervision of a receiver appointed by the High Court. There are various literary organisations functioning on a local and regional basis

There are about 40 daily newspapers in Kerala and a dozen weeklies. The standard of printing etc., has to improve a lot, and good scholarly journals are a rarity. Among publishers of books, the 'writers' co-operative at Kottayam maintains a leading position both in regard to the capital invested and the number of publications. It may be mentioned here that this society released its 1000th publication last year.

Under the Kerala University the work of a comprehensive Malayalam Lexicon is progressing. But when we come to think of Scholarly dissertations and volumes embodying the result of patient research, we come to realise how little real progress is being made.
