

Forerunners of Malayalam Literature

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PROFESSOR MURALIDHARAN RUSHED to the lecture hall. He dreaded this subject: the history of Malayalam literature. It was like reducing the poetry of literature to a dull drone. He had made up his mind. It was better to let the students do all the talking and he would moderate the discussion. By the time he reached the hall, it was full, thanks to his reputation of being a captivating teacher. ‘Good morning,’ he began; ‘I am afraid today’s lecture will not be very interesting. The topic is the history of Malayalam literature. To calm your nerves, I have a plan. You do the discussion and I will stand apart and help you, if need be. Will that be okay?’ ‘Yes,’ cheered the class. This was going to be interesting. The undergraduate literature students had been victims of hour-long listening, and now was the chance to chatter.

‘But Sir,’ Manju interrupted, ‘where do we begin?’ ‘Begin at the beginning. Talk about the origin of Malayalam.’ Muralidharan was feeling greatly relieved. He had now only to watch the drama.

‘Malayalam is one of the modern Indian languages,’ the topper Usha was the first to speak, as usual. ‘It started evolving as a separate language in the early part of the thirteenth century, when it developed an independent script. This script

called Vattezhuthu, round letter, was a descendant of Brahmi. Since the area where this language is spoken—present day Kerala—was under Tamil rule, it was highly influenced by the Tamil language. The early poetry was mainly in the form of folk songs.’

‘I know, these songs are called *nadan pattukkal*, country songs, *vadakkan pattukal*, northern songs, or *tekkkan pattukal*, southern songs,’ added Rajan, the singer in the class. ‘I like the *thoni pattu*, boat song.’ He started singing:

O young girl of the Kuttanadan fields,
sweet like the cuckoo,
get ready drums, get ready trumpets,
get ready women to greet us.
Get people to welcome us,
decorate the place with festoons.
We come cherishing victory!

Rajan was drawn into the mood of the song and began drumming his fingers on the desk. ‘Those were mainly romantic songs,’ said Indu, ‘and were followed by works in the Manipravala style, praising feminine beauty. These are called *champu kavya*, a mixture of prose and poetry, the famous works being *Unniyachi Charitam* (Life of Unniyachi),

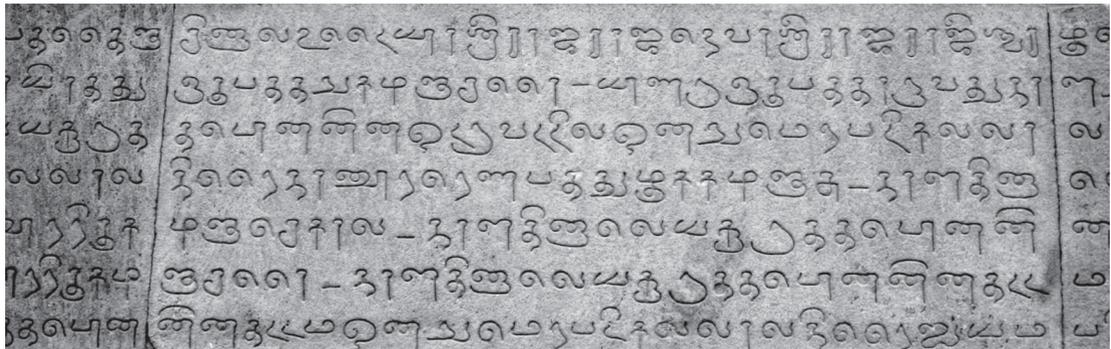


IMAGE: SRINIVASAN RAJAGOPALAN

Koka Sandesham (Message of the Goose), *Ramayana Champu*, and *Bharata Champu*.’

‘What a strange name, Manipravala!’ Rajan exclaimed. ‘Manipravala is a mixture of Malayalam and Sanskrit,’ remarked Usha. ‘*Mani* means gem and *pravala* stands for coral; so *manipravala* denotes the harmonious combination of gem and coral to fashion a beautiful garland. The literary finesse of both Malayalam and Sanskrit were exploited in this style. The language used in *Rama-charitam*, by Chiraman of the twelfth century, was also stylistically similar. This work was elaborated upon by Madhava Panicker, Shankara Panicker, and Rama Panicker of the Niranam family.’

‘But Indu, do you know when the present form of Malayalam first appeared?’ Manju was getting interested. ‘With the *Krishna Gatha* (Story of Krishna), written by Cheruseri, Malayalam took a definite turn towards the present form. This was the first work that attempted to free Malayalam from the pervasive Sanskrit influence and led to its development as an independent language. In this work Cheruseri incorporated all the Sanskrit figures of speech—*upama*, simile, *rupaka*, metaphor, and the like—into Malayalam. His description of Krishna learning to walk is wonderful:

‘He began standing up, bending his knees;
many days passed thus in trying,
walking a little, overcoming difficulties,
falling down, and then crying.

‘Further, he describes the spring season thus:

‘O red flower, you have become
the red mark on the forehead
of blooming trees.
Like the lotus (blooming) in winter
(Krishna) has come near us.

‘He was extraordinary in his use of simile. Many of the proverbs extant now have their origin in his works.’

‘Whatever you may say,’ said Manju, ‘it was Tunchat Ezhuttachchhan who gave a new shape to Malayalam. He adopted a new script of fifty-one letters in place of the Vattezhuthu of thirty letters. This gave birth to modern Malayalam and that is why he is called the father of modern Malayalam. He created a new style called Kilipattu, in which a parrot narrates the story. Born in the sixteenth century at Tirur in the Malappuram district of Kerala in a house called Tunjan Parambu, Ezhuttachchhan wrote *Adhyatma Ramayanam Kilipattu* (Parrot-song of the Adhyatma Ramayana), which is sung

even today in virtually all Hindu households of Kerala, particularly in the Malayalam month of Karkidakam, which falls in July-August. Apart from *Adhyatma Ramayanam Kilipattu*, he wrote *Mahabharatam Kilipattu* (Parrot-song of the Mahabharata), *Bhagavatam Kilipattu* (Parrot-song of the Bhagavata), *Harinama Sankirtanam* (Song to the Glory of Hari), and *Irupattinvalu Vrittam* (Twenty-four Metres). He summarized the teachings of the epics in a simple language accessible to the masses. With him, the use of Malayalam without much of Sanskrit vocabulary became prevalent. His work on the Ramayana can be

Tunchat Ezhuttachchhan's house at Tirur



equated with that of Tulsidas's, though *Ramcharit-manas* is sung by the people of a much bigger geographical area.'

'I particularly like Ezhuttachchhan's teaching ethical principles through his poetry,' said Rajan. 'His lines on anger in *Adhyatma Ramayanam* are remarkable:

'People perish by anger
Anger begets hatred
Anger binds men to the world
Anger distracts from duties.
Mortals should give up anger
Surely, anger has become death
and, desire the river of doom.
The garden of Krishna alone
is the source of happiness.

'At a time when Kerala society was being influenced by Western culture, consequent on Western states making inroads into India, Ezhuttachchhan's works helped people to remain focused on native values. His *Mahabharatam Kilipattu* contains profound thoughts. He could deftly use everyday words and give them deep meaning. He vividly portrayed different scenes with relevant messages, like the following conversation between Sarama and her son, the dog Sarameya, who had been beaten by officiants at Janamejaya's yajna for no fault of his:

'Why cry baby? Who beat you thus?
What punishment this?
Tell, what wrong you did to them?
Asked thus, he said,
No punishment this, I have not erred,
Not smelled the offering,
neither touched nor seen.
Mother, there ought to be no punishment
for this if one thinks it over.'

'Was Ezhuttachchhan's *Adhyatma Ramayanam* a translation of the Sanskrit work?' asked Indu. 'No,' Usha was in a hurry to display her knowledge, 'the original Sanskrit work has 4,218 verses of two lines each, while Ezhuttachchhan's work has 19,718 lines or 9,859 verses, more than twice the volume of the Sanskrit version. Ezhuttachchhan followed the broad tenor of the Sanskrit work, but retold the

entire story in his own style, adding metaphors and similes. He let the poetry flow slowly, not making it cryptic, and harmoniously included teachings on ethical principles. A good example of this is the scene where sage Vishwamitra imparts the knowledge of Bala and Atibala to Rama, knowing which one could be free from hunger and exhaustion. The Sanskrit *Adhyatma Ramayana* describes this incident in verses 4.24-5 of the 'Bala Kanda':

*'Kinchid-desham-atikramya
ramam-abuya bhaktitah;
Dadau balam chatibalam
vidye dve deva-nirmite.
Yayor-grahana-matrena
kshut-kshamadi na jayate.*

'After journeying a little, he lovingly called Rama and instructed him in the two sciences, Bala and Atibala, which were founded by the gods and knowing which one is free from hunger and exhaustion.

'The same verse has been thus retold by Ezhuttachchhan:

'Walking slowly, traversing some distance
Smiling softly, the sage spoke thus:
Hear, Rama, Raghava, Rama, Lakshmana
Indeed, you are gentle, soft kids
But, O lions, your true bodies are that
Untouched by hunger and thirst
Learn these two great Vidyas
O kids, and practise them.

'The poet not only retold the story of the Sanskrit *Adhyatma Ramayana*, he also made it more musical.'

'Things are not that simple,' said Indu. 'There is a lot of criticism of Ezhuttachchhan's poetry. For instance, he is considered verbose. He adopted the style and sometimes the very ideas of Valmiki, Kalidasa, Magha, Rajashekhara, and others. He profusely used adages and proverbs from standard Sanskrit literature, and his works like *Adhyatma Ramayanam Kilipattu* and *Mahabharatam Kilipattu* have many repetitions. A critical analysis of his writings reveals that he lacked the kind of vision or



Punthanam's house at Kizhatthur

literary acumen that a Valmiki or Vyasa had.' 'All the same,' Manju interjected, 'it was Ezhuttachchan who touched the hearts of common people with his enchanting storytelling, and he continues to do so. Literary criticism apart, Ezhuttachchan's works are a devotee's perspective on the great epics. They are independent works born of devotion following the tradition of great masters like Valmiki and Vyasa.'

'I remember,' said Rajan, 'sitting next to my granny when she used to sing the *Ramayanam Kili-pattu* in the month of Karkidakam. I used to love the song's special tune. The reward of listening was *unniyappam* [a delicacy from Kerala]. I can still hear the lines:

'Mark, all vices furiously attack
those attached to the body.
"I am the body"—this idea
brings ignorance, delusion to humans.
Listen, to the knowledge of the Self
the slayer of delusion. Indeed
bondage is created by ignorance,
bondage is destroyed by knowledge.

'It is said that Ezhuttachchan married a girl from a family in Ammakavu, near Kutanad in the Palghat district of Kerala. After the birth of a daughter and subsequent death of his wife, he took sannyasa and visited many places in Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka,

Tamil Nadu, and Kerala. Finally, he settled down at Chittur in Kerala and established an ashrama there. He had many disciples who turned out to be great scholars and writers.'

'Our society does not spare anyone,' lamented Indu, 'not even Ezhuttachchan. Some time back his admirers wanted to erect a statue at his birthplace, but were prevented by religious fundamentalists. This is the fate of one whose words inspire everyone. Even today, thousands take their children to his house for *vidyarambha*, initiation into learning, on Vijayadashami day. Kerala is definitely in an eternal debt to Ezhuttachchan. His

works are the backbone of Malayalam language and have been holding it upright for hundreds of years.'

'Punthanam was another poet who wrote in the language of the people,' said Rajan. 'His real name is not known. Punthanam is the name of his house. He was born at Kizhatthur in the Malappuram district of Kerala. He was a contemporary of Ezhuttachchan and Melpattur Narayana Bhattathiri, the Sanskrit scholar and author of *Narayaniyam*. Punthanam was a devout brahmana who used to regularly worship Guruvayurappan. Though married, he did not have any children for a long time. All rituals and observances having been fruitless, he wrote the story of Santanagopala, as found in the Bhagavata, in the Pana style. This was the first work produced in this style and was called *Kumaraharanam* (Stealing of Children). Soon, Punthanam was blessed with a son. After one year the son's rice-feeding ceremony was to take place. Many people were invited. Punthanam's wife bathed and dressed the child and put him to sleep on a mat. The guests put away their old clothes in the room that the child was lying in, had their bath, and donned new garments. But, when the time for the ceremony was at hand, the child was found to have died out of suffocation from the clothes that had been accidentally piled on it. Punthanam was benumbed with grief. Being an ardent devotee, he

had nowhere to go but to his beloved Guruvayurappan. With his dead son in his arms, he spontaneously sang the song 'Jnanapana' (Song of Wisdom), also composed in the Pana style.

'The song, ringing with words of profound wisdom, began thus:

Krishna, Krishna, Mukunda, Janardana
Krishna, Govinda, Narayana, Harey
Achyutananda, Govinda, Madhava
Satchidananda, Narayana, Harey.

'Let my Master be with me ever
Let divine names be on my tongue
And let me not be away from them
So that my human birth may be fulfilled.

'I knew not what would occur till yesterday
Know not what will happen tomorrow
Destruction of this body—
Know not when it will be.

'The depth of thought contained in these lines is unparalleled. This song summarizes the beginning and evolution of a spiritual life. The transitory nature of this world is emphasized:

'In a few days you make one ascend the throne.
You lay rags on the king living in a palace.

'He sang of the futility of the desire for a child:

'When little Krishna is playing in my mind,
Do I need babies as my children?'

'There are many anecdotes about Punthanam,' said Indu. 'It is believed that Punthanam did not have Vedic education. After the death of his son, he would live in the precincts of the Guruvayur temple. When Punthanam wrote *Kumarabharanam*, he requested Melpattur Narayana Bhattathiri to go through it and correct mistakes, if any. Being a Sanskrit scholar, Melpattur Bhattathiri did not think well of Punthanam, who wrote only in the popular Malayalam language. Bhattathiri told Punthanam, "What is there to read in Malayalam? It will surely be full of errors? Moreover, you do not have the knowledge of *vibhakti* [declension]!" As Bhattathiri said this in the temple in front of many people,

Punthanam felt dejected and burst out crying. At the same time, the deity Guruvayurappan spoke out from inside the temple, "Punthanam may not know *vibhakti* like Bhattathiri, but he has more bhakti than Bhattathiri." Hearing this, Bhattathiri apologized, went through the text of *Kumarabharanam*, and carried out appropriate corrections.

'Punthanam spent the rest of his life reading the Bhagavata in simple Malayalam in the Guruvayur temple. His reading was listened to by countless devotees as it was charged with devotional fervour. He wrote *Bhasha Karnamritam* (Language Nectar to the Ear) and *Ananda Karnamritam* (Nectar of Bliss to the Ear). Legend has it that he was taken to Vaikuntha, the abode of Bhagavan Vishnu, from his house by the messengers of Bhagavan.

'Well, this was more interesting than I expected,' said Muralidharan. 'We need to always remember that these stalwarts have given Malayalam its present shape. They have infused into the language power and clarity demonstrating as well how it can be effectively used as a medium to propagate traditional cultural and spiritual values. It is our duty to carry this tradition onward.'



'**G**ynapana' is indeed the gift the 'Eternal One' has bounteously bestowed upon his devotee for as long as the earth will be. There is nothing more that a poet devoted to his Lord could ask for, than to be seen and sung everywhere, every time, and have a place forever along with, and always close beside, the Eternal One Himself. ... Throughout 'Gynapana' Poonthanam is like the good teacher who can teach effortlessly and effectively, because he is so firm in his dharma, that all those who listen intently to him shall surely understand the philosophy underneath his poetry, even while one enjoys the child-like simplicity of his poetry. Poonthanam does all the thinking and analysis of the Vedas in clear and sparkling terms for us. All we have to do is just listen to him and he takes us almost instantly, so close to beauty, and hence naturally, to the gates of God.

—Gopi Krishnan Kottoor,

Poonthanam's Hymns—Gynapana, 7-9