

“Poetry as Social Criticism: A Comparative Study of Poonthanam and Ayyappa Paniker”

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ABSTRACT--*The paper is an attempt to examine the poetry of two Malayalam poets, Poonthanam, a 16th century Bhakthi poet, and Dr.K.Ayyappa Paniker, a seminal influence on modern Malayalam poetry. Though belonging to two different historical backgrounds and socio-cultural milieus, their poetry closely reflected contemporary life and prevalent social issues. Poonthanam’s poetry attempted to articulate sombre philosophical concepts in simple lyrical style, easily accessible to common people, whereas Ayyappa Paniker’s poems were subtle expose’s, biting sarcasm in style. Casteism and upper-class hegemony were the prominent social issues which Poonthanam’s poetry addressed, whereas in the poetry of Ayyappa Paniker, these are only a few among other complex social issues engendered by modern age. The paper is an attempt to tease out the social dimensions in the works of Poonthanam and Ayyappa Paniker, taking into account, at the same time, the affinities and divergences in their poetry. Poonthanam’s Jnanappana*

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I. INTRODUCTION

The 16th century, in South India witnessed a religious renaissance which came to be known as the Bhakthi Movement. Major Figures of the movement in Kerala were Ezhuthachan, Melapathur Narayana Bhattathirippad, and Poonthanam. The movement posited the path of Bhakthi for God as the effective way to Self Realisation.

Poonthanam Namboodhiri was an ardent devotee of Lord Krishna. This Bhakthi stemmed from intense sufferings that he had faced in his personal life and he thus sought total refuge at the feet of Krishna. The untimely death of his son was a great shock to Poonthanam and the popular belief is that it led to the writing of *Jnanappana*. The poet however sublimates this sorrow, and the elegiac reflections move from the personal to the universal. The poem evolves as a poignant lament over the decline of spiritual values in the society. But the poem is redeemed from cynical pessimism by the poet’s unshakeable faith in the transcendent destiny of man vouchsafed by the philosophy of Vedanta. The elegiac consolation the poem offers is thus the prospect of a restoration of faith in God.

Jnanappana or the song of divine wisdom is a poem of 358 lines. It is an exposition of ‘jnana’ or the eternal Vedic wisdom in a simple lyrical form, known as ‘pana’. The poem discusses the meaninglessness and vanity of life, and posits ‘mukti’ or liberation as the ultimate goal of life.

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The broader social intention of Poonthanam in writing *Jnanappana* was to revive Bhakthi and enlighten his society which was bogged down in the mire of materialism. Poonthanam saw the cultural lapses of his day as a natural development of a historical continuity of caste system. His poetic praxis thus historicised the social problematic.

An awareness of the flagrant evils that existed in the society of his time cast a veil of sadness in Poonthanam's outlook. Life in the 16th C Kerala was beset with social discriminations like inequality, casteism and untouchability. These contemporary issues are reflected in the poetry of Poonthanam. The social dimensions of Poonthanam's *Jnanappana* it is addressed not to a particular elite community, but to all segments of society including the marginalized untouchables. The way in which he manages to include the whole humanity is by positing the inevitable perishability of life, a thought in the light of which petty practices of casteism and other forms of oppression appear puny preoccupations.

Poonthanam insistently underlined the idea that in the eyes of god, all creatures are equal. He reminds us of the absolute democracy of Death, in the light of which all human pursuits become trivial. At the same time, he sees death not as a final termination, but as a threshold of transformation, determined by one's Karma. Death may turn goats into elephants, foxes into men and women into foxes; a ruthless tyrant turns into a worm, and a fly into a cat. Such are god's leelas [play] [*Jnanappana*, lines 91 – 98].

II. RESULTS

The poet also speaks about the insatiable human greed. This everlasting desire (thrishna) leads men to indulge in materialistic pleasures, and diverts us from our divine goal. He says that the life that we live lasts only for a short span of time and in this short period of time we must live in harmony rather than in internecine competition. He laments those who fight and compete for power and positions. He criticizes the lust of man. Rather than looking after his wife and parents who do all the necessary chores for him, he seeks satisfaction outside:

“Fighting for power and position

Some live a shameless life,

Obsessed with ego clash

Some lose their sanity,

In the company of courtesans

Some do monkey dance,

Lackeys parade courts

As kolams flaunting vanity

Priesthood for some

Is only livelihood

And they toil from dawn to dusk

To just make both ends meet.” [*Jnanappana*, lines 203 – 212]

People have become so selfish that they refuse to look after their parents and provide for their legally wedded spouses. Upper-caste Brahmins have grown so megalomaniac that they have come to think they are above even

the gods. The merchant class have grown avaricious and predatory. In short, men do not enjoy any peace of mind because of their insatiable cravings [ibid 213 – 236].

Poonthanam wrote in the Pana style, a simple metrical form of a religious lyric. The simplicity of language helped them understand the deeper meanings embedded within the poem, and the lyrical lilt of the lines had a mnemonic hold over the popular imagination, so much so that its recital became a part of the daily chanting ritual in most Hindu households.

III. DISCUSSION

Social Criticism in the Poetry of Dr. K. Ayyappa Paniker:

Ayyappa Paniker is considered the pioneer of modern Malayalam poetry. His poetry was the reflection of contemporary life in Kerala and he portrayed it through biting satire and sarcasm. His poems like *Cartoon Poems* and *Stories of Maharaja* are perfect examples of his political satires.

The poems he wrote during 1952-55 present the scenes of rural life in Kuttanandu. Most of these poems are caricatures of the people around him. Through these poems he expresses his criticism, anger and even empathy through the language of satire. Throughout Paniker's poetry, a dichotomy is maintained between the pastoral and the urban. His consistent effort is to expose the realities of violent urbanisation. He confronts this social transformation with a bitter sarcasm that is sharpened by the binaries of individual/ society, the rustic/ the urban and tradition/ modernity. Very often, Paniker levels the satire against himself. The poet becomes a representative of multitudes who have lost their selfhood, caught up in the emotional sterility and mechanical routineness of modern city life. As he writes in *Passage to America* (1869 – 70):

“A Dog sustains his dignity with his tail I wish I had one.”

Paniker's poetry underwent a transformation by the 1970s. It began to assume a complex texture by the interweaving of the observation of a social critic, the laughter of a clown and the insights of a philosopher. From the tradition of Kunjan Nambiar he adopted the poetic possibilities of the vernacular, and from contemporary world poetry, the *Avant-garde* experimentations. Ayyappa Paniker's poem *Moshanam* (theft) is a classic example of his use of irony as a poetic tool for social criticism:

“I was only a petty thief And you called me a robber!” [“Moshanam”, (Paniker, Ayyappa K. *Mozhiyum Vazhiyum 60 Mozhichinthukal*, Rainbow Book Publishers, p; 35, 2003.)]

Paniker's political poems deal with the intricate manifestations of power craze, from the subtle trajectory of hegemonic forces to even the election campaign of a petty local leader. The stories he wrote under the title *Maharajakathakal* [stories of The Maharaja (1973 -78)], the stories he wrote before emergency, and the *Cartoon Poems* he wrote in the background of emergency (1976 -77) belong to this particular phase in his poetic career, the phase marked by humour and biting sarcasm. *The Stories of the Maharaja* is a poem that analyses in depth the mysteries of dictatorship and power- mongering. The poem contains six cantos which in turn examine the complex structures of disintegration in governance, such as 'Dictatorship', 'Power Mongerer', 'Oppression', 'Red Tapism', and 'The Cowardice of a Dictator'. Throughout the Maharaja Stories, Paniker uses the vocabulary related to the dictatorial culture of kingly rule, such as 'Manthripungavan', 'Harikkaran', etc. The usage of such a vocabulary infuses a particular humour into his poems.

Most of the pieces of 'Cartoon Poems' (1976 – 77) are very short lyrics that invoke the dark days of emergency through thought - provoking jokes. . Paniker seems to be the first Malayalam poet who has adopted the style of cartoons and caricatures. A caricature often exposes the follies and foibles of those who are held in high esteem in society. The method of a caricature is distortion. But Paniker's Cartoon Poems target not particular individuals but fictional characters who represent dark realms of the society. The style of these poems however, reveals the essential craftsmanship of actual cartoons. It is as though the poet is lighting a firework which explodes in the skies of the readers. In the words of Dr. Vinayachandran, these poems are the explosives thrown into a placid lake by a fisherman. ['*Rashtreeya Kavithakalile Hasyam*' *Ayyappa Panikerude Kavyashaily*. Shodhganaga, Accessed 8 March 2020.]

IV. CONCLUSION

Both Poonthanam and DR. Ayyappa Paniker were poets who possessed a strong sense of social commitment. As a Bhakthi poet, Poonthanam wanted to redeem his contemporary society from the morass of casteism and spiritual depravity. In this sense, his poetic concerns assume a universal dimension, positing a transcendental destiny for the whole humanity: "God is father to all
And the Earth our eternal Mother." [*Njanappana* l. 305-306]

In this sense, *Jnanappana* becomes not only a 'Bhakthikavyam' but also a 'Darshanika kavyam' (a poem of immense philosophical insights).

The literary milieu in which Ayyappa Paniker began his poetic career witnessed the birth of twentieth century modernism. Modernist English poets such as T.S. Eliot were a major influence on his early poetry. Poems such as *Mrithyu Pooja* [Worship of Death] are suffused with pessimistic worldview and a sense of annui. In his later poetry, this streak of obtrusive pessimism went into hiding behind irony. By 1970s, Paniker developed a poetic style, subtly satirical and biting sarcasmic at the same time. These poems approximate to 'cartoons' [as he himself calls them "Cartoon Kavithakal"], indicating the direction in which his poetry was moving towards serious social criticism.

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