Appendices

I. Excerpts from an Interview with Poet Sirpi

1.Q Your talent has expression in different literary forms. Which of them do you think has attracted you most?

A. It is poetry which has throughout charmed me. I have penned narrative poems, poetic plays, introspective poetry and even biographical poems. Thus I have done most of my literary work in the poetic form. My book on Bharathi, Bharathi Convict Number 253, is about poet Bharathi’s incarceration in Cuddalore jail for 25 days. It depicts his state of mind. He reflects on his life once more. He recollects his literary activities. This book portrays his stream of consciousness in such a way as to show the reader what happened each day. My aim is to write poetry in different forms describing different situations. Recently I wrote a book called A Hamlet’s River. It pictures my own birthplace, the people I have seen. If you turn to my collections of poems, The Sun’s Shadow, you will see most of the poems have been written from the scientific viewpoint. Another collection, A Chain of Zeroes, is in the form of a dialogue between a guru and his disciple. Here my attempt is to answer questions like
"What is time?" "What is God?" The title signifies what time really is. Apart from poems, I have written many essays. I am interested in these two genres. In my prose writings you see me discussing current issues and problems of contemporary life.

2.Q You have written many poems on Bharathi and Bharathidasan in your very first collection. But it seems that you have not penned any poem on Gandhiji.

A. Did Bala tell you so?

3.Q No. It is my own question.

A. I mentioned Bala because recently in a seminar in which Bala took part a man happened to refer to my writing about Bharathi and others except Gandhi. It appeared to me to be quite a gap. It is something that needs to be thought over. I have great respect for Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhiji’s ideals are in many ways relevant to our country. But I am not able to answer the question why I have not written about him. It is a question like “Why Bharathi has not written about Kattabomman?” He came from a place close to Kattabomman’s birthplace. I admit it to be a lapse.
4.Q You were an active member of the Vanambadi group of poets. This group could be termed the leftist poetic camp. Can you say that the loss of faith among its members resulted in its collapse?

A. The likes and dislikes of individuals – their egos – could be put down as the main cause of its collapse. I took the stand that its members should be leftists but not the literary mouthpiece of the party. As a poet I preferred poetry to ideology. Those who differed on this issue parted ways. Though there were various reasons for its collapse, this was the main cause. I led the camp proclaiming the superiority of ideology but ideology propagated with poetry.

5.Q Can one conclude that you have given up the ideology of this camp?

A. You cannot say I have left this camp. Poetic styles have changed over the years because perspectives keep changing from year to year. But basically humans need equality – gender equality, equality transcending caste, economic equality. We believed that the leftist ideology would help to bring about this kind of equality. My attachment to this ideology still remains. So I cannot claim to have come out of it. I am even now associated with the artistic forum that promotes this ideology.
6. Q  In what respects do you think your poems differ from those of Bala and Metha, your leftist comrades in the Vanambadi movement?

A.  It is something to be determined by the readers. Bala’s poems, I think, have a different idiom. In Metha’s poems, the emphasis is on the emotional aspect. He underscores love or the emotion that overpowers him. My poems are usually characterized by poise – neither too emotional nor too revolutionary in style. Poetry, according to Bharathi, comes out of lovely ideas expressed in simple words. This is what distinguishes my poetry.

7. Q  Apart from Bharathi and Bharathidasan, is there any Indian poet writing in English who has influenced you?

A.  Among the Indian poets writing in English, I like the poems of Madhavikutty (Kamala Das). They are different in the way they are written. Similarly I like the poems of Maharanth Paranj Pey. They are short poems with different matters. Apart from them I have met Daruwalla at several conferences. I have even heard him read his poems. Among the older poets, I like Aurobindo. I have read some of his short poems but not his great classic, Savitri. Similarly I like the poems of Toru Dutt.
8. Q  Do you think there are similarities between you and Keki N. Daruwalla who writes satirically on social evils?

A.  I cannot fully answer this question as I have not studied him in detail. He is a disciplined writer.

9. Q  You have written traditional poetry and new poetry. Do you think that new poetry is a better medium to give expression to social issues?

A.  When I started my poetic career, I was surrounded by traditionalists. Among them were Bharathi and Bharathidasan. Bharathidasan wrote the foreword for my first collection. Those were days when traditional poetry reigned. We wrote traditional poetry then because it alone was considered to be poetry. Towards the end of the 1960s and at the beginning of the 70s I began to be familiarised with new poetry through the magazine called Ezhuttu. Then some of us youngsters writing traditional poetry got together and discussed the new way of writing which appeared to be attractive. Poetry is the essence of experience recreated by the poet. And your reaction towards an incident that takes place around you will get registered in your mind and will automatically come out in your writings. New poetry was brief and direct in expression. The acceptance of this medium for the expression of our ideas also resulted in the launching of Vanambadi
movement. It turned out to be a skilful means of discussing social as well as other issues. Whatever is written in an untraditional conversational manner does not constitute new poetry. Its composition demands a special talent.

10.Q In your poetry you have highlighted the problems of the poor and the downtrodden. You have also created awareness for their liberation. Do you think your message has percolated down to the lowest social level?

A. Creation of awareness through literature is just pointing out the direction. Through writing hints can be dropped. Literary productions through their characters show people how things in life or society could be bettered. Writers like Bharathi gave us the inspiration to propagate the need to create a better social order through the portrayal of people with social and familial ideals. Good writing, I believe, has the power to do it. Yet good writing alone could not bring about reforms. It can only serve as a handmaiden. Very powerful political or economical writings like those of Voltaire or Rousseau could have their direct impact. Literature is only an instrument to inculcate a change of one's mentality. It sows seeds for reforming one's life.
11.Q In many of your poems you have portrayed social degeneration through the corrupt practices of politicians. What do you think of the people who give them the power to ruin social values?

A. There is criminalization of politics. Politicians were men of integrity during the struggle for Independence. They made sacrifices. Men like Jawaharlal Nehru did not seek to make money for themselves. They lived mostly on the royalties of their literary creations. Their incomes were limited. They suffered terrible losses. Yet they were proud of their selfless services. Politics now has come to be seen as a way for politicians to make money. It is exposed in literature and even through the mass media. The film is a powerful medium but it is used by vested interest to extend their power. So it is now necessary to point out how society degenerates under the clutches of corrupt politicians. Literature can show people how democracy can prosper only if the right kind of leaders are elected. Literature does much more than what elected leaders do. That is why Shelley has said, "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world". They are unelected members of the great assembly of the world. The voice of literature is loud and clear whether people hear it or not. Its message is received by all kinds of people like the different kinds of places where the seeds
sown fall – the rocky place, the thorny place as well as the fertile ground. The message of literature could reach the right kind of readers. That is the solace one has.

12.Q In your writings one sees the need for the creation of a social order based on peace, equality and fraternity. Do you think religion today stands in the way?

A. I don’t think so. Like literature religion too seeks to reform human behaviour. Although religions are good some of the leaders in them are bad and so some people think that religions are bad as well. No religion asks you to harm others. Religion is used as a tool by selfish people who really want it to serve their private interests. Religion like politics is abused. But I am not a religionist. Although I have no faith in religion or God, I see certain good deeds caused by religion. Some restriction and virtues are promoted by religion. Some people abstain from committing offences out of their fear of God. Religion becomes harmful and riots break out when traitors inside religions proclaim the superiority of their religion and inferiorize the religion of their fellow-humans. If our religious leaders move in the direction of a rational religion, as Vivekananda called it, there is bound to be no harm from any religion.
13.Q What are your views on conventional religion?

A. It is not conventional but revolutionary religion that we need. It should energize humans. Kuntrakudi Adigalar considered humanity to be the greatest religion. He used to function as a bridge between war in communities. Religion is useful only if it improves human behaviour and inspires humans with courage and makes them sensitive to the sufferings of their fellow-humans. Ritualistic religion will not serve its purpose. No religion is of any use to us which does not consider humans to be human. If you say God is one and feel that our God does not care for the people of other religions, we go wrong.

14.Q In the poem “Jesus Disappeared” there seems to be the charge that Christianity is not practised. What do you feel?

A. It is a poem written originally by Oscar Wilde. In his poem Jesus comes back to earth only to see that whatever good he did has been turned into evil. So he disappears thinking that it is better to stay away and not to return. Oscar Wilde here tries to get across the point that false values flourish as true Christian doctrines are not followed.

15.Q What are your personal reactions to the prevalence of corruption, hypocrisy and degeneration of human values in present society?
A. There are two or three reasons for the origin of these social evils. The first one is the emergence of a political system motivated by profit. Its aim, in fact, should be to rule over people for their good. Corruption is bound to come when political activity is carried on for selfish ends. If the degeneration of human values is to be prevented, religion has to play its primary role of humanizing men and women. Religious leaders fail to do it. In the same way, literature has its role. Education in their mother tongue is essential if literary ideals are to reach children and youngsters. The denial of education in the mother tongue is the cause of many of our troubles. Those who do not receive this kind of education fail to be taught who Thaiyumanavar or Vallalar were or what they stood for or what their poems celebrate. One who receives education in Tamil will have to refer to these writers sometime in one’s life. One is not taught Ramayana or Mahabharatha in one’s mother tongue. Education in English separates one from one’s culture. One gets culturally uprooted resulting in one’s loss of attachment to one’s language or land or its ideals. One should love one’s language as one loves one’s mother. We can protect our values only when the right kind of medium is chosen for the education of young people.
16.Q You have presented women in your poems from different perspectives and portrayed their miseries realistically with a tinge of pathos. Do you think equality will mitigate their misery?

A. Certainly. Because in all respects women are equal to men and in some they are better than men. The twenty-first century is the century of women. It is women students who score higher marks. They are on their way to occupy all higher positions like those of the collector and the police officer. So the process cannot be reversed. In the future women will have to decide on the question of providing equality of opportunity.

17.Q What you say about female equality is likely to materialize on the social front but will it create greater conflict on the familial plane?

A. Even on the familial front the woman has a greater role to play. In primitive times what we had was a matriarchal society. Our society was basically matriarchal. The woman became the head of the family. Then she fought for her life and hunted for her food. She had physical strength. The woman was not then treated as a softy. Because she was the head she possessed physical vitality. She had then the personality to play her role. She lost her position of eminence when the right to property came into existence. During that period men began to impose
certain conditions for possession of this right. Only now the female child is given its share of property. The male member gradually gained the right to be the king. When armies got organized and wars became frequent women were relegated to the domestic sphere in the name of familial duty. So the woman became naturally weaker in body. Women who used to hunt animals with weapons now have been made fighters in the kitchen with knives and vegetables. The male world by and by completed her fall. The woman was deceived and defeated. But the future belongs to the woman.

18.Q Your poems generally present progressive thoughts. Do you really believe that there has been social progress?

A. Today we wish to propagate progressive ideas. We would like all humans to be treated on equal terms. This is the aim of progressive literature. This is the goal of humanism. In its attainment is the future of humanity. If it fails, it will not be the failure of letters but the defeat of human society. Literature is created in the hope that there is a bright future for humanity. One can say there is social progress if these literary ideals benefit their readers and consequently men and women are encouraged to seek equality of opportunity in all spheres of life.
II. Excerpts from an Interview with Poet Bala

1.Q When did you start writing your poems?

A. I don’t know when I penned my first poem. I remember it was sometimes during my college days when I was 18 or 19, when I was surrounded by a bunch of big poets like Kannadasan, Mudiarasan who visited the college. Right from my school days, I had listened to great personalities like Rajaji who attended our school day function and Bharathidasan, the famous bard of revolution who visited our school.

2.Q You were an active member of the Vanambadi group of poets. This group could be termed the leftist poetic camp. Can you tell us if the loss of faith among its members resulted in its collapse?

A. Yes. You should know something about the literary movements. Literary movements are not eternal institutions. They appear, they grow, they disperse and finally when they fulfil their vision or the motifs, they are likely to disintegrate. This is the story of all literary movements like romanticism or symbolism or imagism whatever literary movement you think of. You find the movement generating some kind of new significance because it comes up with new ideas to literature and life and it gets its own young practitioners and literature
is one domain in which we always seek the new, and the Vanambadi movement was the fine band of young writers dedicated to the cause of uplift of the poor. They had great sympathy for the suffering and most of them were naturally inclined towards progressive, social and Marxist groups and it could not be called an outfit of any political party. Though many communist parties of all hues and colours thought that the movement had something to share with them. So we had writers who owed allegiance to the communist party, the Marxist party and even extremist groups. But I was a very young person and even among the Vanambadies I was a very young poet then and I was attracted towards the writings because of their sympathies for the underdog. That made me think about the Marxist ideology. So I also had some kind of initiation into the communist party ideologists. But I was not very much associated with the communist party. In fact my first essay was published in Thamarai a CPI magazine which issued my first article on Mu.Metha. It was entitled “Three Poems of Mu.Metha”.

3.Q Can one conclude that you have given up the ideology of this camp?

A. No. I have now a better understanding of the principles of Marxism. I was emotionally involved during those days. Now I still share that the Marxist and communist ideology could do something to
society. But I find that there is a difference between the party politics and communist principles. So these principles have to be turned into realities by parties. Perhaps I was not very much involved in party activities. But I still have a sympathy for the great understanding and belief in communist principles.

4.Q In what respects do you think your poems differ from those of Sirpi and Metha, your leftist comrades in the Vanambadi movement?

A. It is a very good question. Mu.Metha is one of the significant poets of our days. He is a wonderful versifier who could turn his poetry into fine, fluent passages of rhyme and rhythm. He could capture an audience with his modulation and I always admire him. In fact, he began as a congress party sympathiser. He had great respect for the then Indian National Congress. And later he was attracted towards the communist party during the 70s. This happened to most of the poets who wrote in those days because 70s was the period of dislodgement of the Congress party in Tamil Nadu and the arrival to power of the Dravidian Movement and we in general were not satisfied with the performance of the Dravidian party. As we were not satisfied with what Congress had done to the nation, naturally the only alternative was the third group, the Marxist. And I consider Sirpi as a
poet who has been very loyal to the communist party right from his early days. His early poetry was only traditional poetry. During the days of Vanambadi, he switched over to modern poetry. And his poetry has more depth and more metaphors and images. And I should say he is a conscious artist while Metha is a natural artist.

5.Q Could you tell me which of the poets influenced you?

A. That is a difficult question because sometimes you don’t know you are unconscious of your influences. During the early days, I was attracted towards Bharathidasan. I liked the first and second poetry collections of Bharathidasan. Though I was a student of science, I read Bharathidasan’s poetry during leisure hours. I liked most of the ideas there. I feel that my influences are basically from Kannadasan, Mudiarasan, and Bharathidasan. Bharathidasan I read a lot. Mudiarasan and Kannadasan I heard a lot. And in those days during the 60s Tamil Nadu witnessed a new phenomenon of performances of poetry known as Kaviarangams. I remember most of the Kaviarangams in which I listened to the poems of Muruhu Sundaram, Tamilanban, Abdul Rahman and even Karunanidhi.
Could you tell us about the influences of Indian poets writing in English, sir?

Yes. Indian poetry in English was introduced to me only as a curriculum subject, to tell you the truth. But when during the 70s I published my first mini collection of poems, it was in reality an anthology of poems written by many people. When I sent the collection to Ezekiel, when he was the editor of *Indian Pen* surprisingly Ezekiel went through the booklet, he liked the paintings there, the pictures there, the way it was printed and immediately he wrote me a letter asking me to translate some of the poems and also to give him some idea of what kind of writing was going on in Tamil modern poetry. Thereafter I read Ezekiel and I liked his poems like “Night of the Scorpion” and “Enterprise”. And slowly I found that I became an admirer of poets like Parthasarathy, Ramanujan and Ezekiel. I was not very much attracted to the other poets like Kamala Das or Sarojini Naidu. I liked the art of Toru Dutt but there is a kind of special voice in Ezekiel’s poetry and there is a kind of expression which is specific in Ramanujan’s poetry. I liked the images and symbols of Parthasarathy’s poetry.
7.Q  Do you think there is similarity between your poems and those of Ezekiel?

A. Only people like you who are studying this should tell. But basically I think that Ezekiel is a very modern poet because his dominant language is irony. And I also feel that I have developed my own irony using the native aura of Tamil expressions. So in that respect, I think that I have something to share with him. Though I won’t say that I was influenced by him.

8.Q  Do you think you are something of a patriarch like Ezekiel in your portrayal of women?

A. You see that many of my readers find my poetry difficult sometimes, particularly the poems which say something about women. and there is very strong irony and strong sympathy for the womenkind that I feel in these poems. Many friends find that in my poetry there is something against women. But I don’t consider it so. So I think that I have great sympathy. I believe in the emancipation of women and I share the ideas of Subramania Bharathi in giving a new kind of life to the women of India. But my language actually complicates and puts the entire issue. I think that one should be quite alive to the intricacies of poetry to understand the full dimensions of my poems.
9.Q What are your impressions of Daruwalla?

A. Daruwalla, I think, gives more importance to sexuality in his poetry. Mahapatra goes from sexuality to poverty or reaches poverty and sexuality as a common framework that gives him an idea of depicting contemporary India. But I find that Daruwalla is not as natural as Mahapatra. That is my perception. He is rather laboured, complicated and tough like his profession.

10.Q What are your views on new poetry?

A. New poetry is a temporal phenomenon. Today’s new poetry will become tomorrow’s old poetry. There are two ideas about poetry: that poetry should be timeless and poetry should reflect the time. As a Marxist, or as a socially committed person, or as one who is alive to the times, I want to record what I find around. In that respect I think I share something with Philip Larkin of Britain. Because he has both irony and the response to the world in its empirical sense. My poetry also contains these two elements. So I feel that new poetry is a kind of art which should have carried the stamp of individuality. We all have different faces. We all have different voices. We can’t write the same kind of poetry.
11.Q In your poetry you have highlighted the problems of the poor and the downtrodden. You have also created an awareness for their liberation. Do you think your message has gone down to the lowest social level?

A. I can’t say that they have reached the masses. I know the divide between the art. But what is important to me is not the propaganda but the reality of my experience. Poetry is still a substitute syndrome which cannot substitute what a politician or an economist could do.

12.Q You have ridiculed politicians in poems like “Papery Rain”. But your criticism is subdued and not explicit as in the case of Sirpi or Metha. What do you have to say?

A. Yes. They are professors of Tamil. I have no idea of the Pandit tradition. So my poetry is different – different from the poetry of Mu.Metha and different from the poetry of Sirpi though we were in the Vanambadi group and that is what you can say about everybody who was in Vanambadi movement. They had a common platform to share and yet they were creating their own language through their exclusive and distinctive style of expression. So in my poetry I feel that I maintain my individuality.
13.Q What are your views on conventional religion?

A. I believe that we have to foster the Tamil tradition when it comes to faith. I share with most of the Tamilalogists that the early Tamils were not religious people. And if at all they had religion, they had folk religion. In my poems there is subtle criticism of the religious wars or the fight on religious grounds.

14.Q What do you think of modern Indian poets and their counterparts in the west?

A. The most significant question that concerns my modern poet of India is the crisis of choice between subjectivity and social amiability. Modern poets have to be either single or voices floating in the air, a lark that sings only for itself, or as a social being like a singer on the stage who enthralls the audience. Western modernists with their bloated images of their selves were like birds and the globe for them was only an egg to be hatched. For an Indian vernacular writer the world is a theatre of communion between a thinking poet and a listening reader.