THE DAWN OF A NEW AGE

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It was during a critical period in history that
Malayalam literature had the good fortune of being guided by
the colossal genius of Kerala Veram Vallya Ebril Thampuran
(1945-1915). Dr. V. V. Menon, in his book 'The Chairman,' among the wise of
his age, enjoyed this singular position by virtue of his
undisputed eminence. So also did Kerala Veram, as chairman
of the Government Text Book Committee, hold a similar position
among scholars of Malayalam literature. The Kerala Veram
period in Malayalam is like the 18th Century in English, a
period important for prose. Until the close of this period
only second-rate poetry of neo-classical orientation was
produced. Gradually it gave way to the splendid outburst of
Assamese poetry. Kerala Veram was a profound scholar in
Assamese. In this sense, he was also like Dr. Johnson, a high-
priest of the classical learning. He had a very good knowledge
of English which he acquired through private tuition. His

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It was during a critical period in history that Malayalam literature had the good fortune of being guided by the colossal genius of Kerala Varma Veliya Koyil Thampuran (1845-1915). Dr. Johnson was 'the Chairman' among the wits of his age, enjoying this symbolic position by virtue of his undisputed eminence. So also did Kerala Varma, as Chairman of the Government Text Book Committee, hold a similar position among scholars of Malayalam literature. The Kerala Varma period in Malayalam is like the 18th Century in English, a period important for prose. Until the close of this period only second-rate poetry of neo-classical formalism was produced. Gradually it gave way to the splendid outburst of Romantic poetry. Kerala Varma was a profound scholar in Sanskrit. In this sense, he was also like Dr. Johnson, a high-priest of the classical learning. He had a very good knowledge of English which he acquired through private tuition. His

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the style of Persian. Kerala Varma imitated the style of Persian and
in his early works in Malayalam and later in Sanskrit he
in the translation of an English book entitled 'Compendium
Vishnu Vasudevan Thirunal wrote the best
and it was compiled by Kerala Varma. The biographies of
were his contributions. This was the first attempt at bi-
verse composition in the traditional style. The latter is
an excellent illustration of the use of rymed verse. Dr. Johnson
that Kerala Varma is the father of modern Malayalam prose. His
best lives in the pages of his biographer, Boswell, and his
personality counts for more, than his literary work. Likewise
Kerala Varma is better known as a literary dictator and a law-
giver of the time than as an author. During his career, he
won the spontaneous love and admiration of his people. This
had nothing to do with his royal birth and official positions,
but was the pure outcome of his literary achievements and
colourful personality.

Kerala Varma standardised Malayalam prose and gave it
a respectable place among the South Indian languages. As
Chairman of the Text Book Committee, he wrote graded Malayalam
Readers for schools. It was his familiarity with English prose
writers that helped him a great deal in such activities.

Soranadu N. Kunjan Pillai, an eminent Malayalam scholar remarks:
"The services of Kerala Varma in the production of School Text
Books approximated to pioneering efforts in the building up of
a long narrative prose of classical prescription of the epic
style.

3. Translated from English, of an Original Work in Dutch.
4. The author of The Life of Samuel Johnson
modern prose". Kerala Varma imitated the style of Dr. Johnson
in his prose works in their pomposity and get up. Mahasaritha
Bendaram, is the translation of an English book called, Treasury
of Biographies. King Visakhram Thirunal began to write the book
the language, popularly known as Nithhegabhera orsa vada.
and it was completed by Kerala Varma. The biographies of
Alexander, Alfred, Archimedes, Aristotle and Bacon, in this book
were his contributions. This was the first attempt at bio-
ographical literature in Malayalam. It has been justly said
that Kerala Varma is the father of modern Malayalam prose. His
 contributions to this field of literature were the direct out-
come of English studies.

The Lyrical Ballads and Malaya Vilasam:
Curiously enough, Kerala Varma's efforts to build up
Malayalam prose hearlded a New Age in Malayalam poetry. In
poetry he belonged to the traditional school. His poetical
style was unpopular and unattractive. He and his followers
were neo-classicists. They believed that knowledge of Sanskrit
was essential to success in Malayalam literature. Following
the classical tradition they composed such 'mahakavyas' as
Chitrayogam and Umakeralam. These works abound in poetic

5. A Collection of poems by Wordsworth and S.T. Coleridge, of
which the first edition appeared in 1798 and the second with
new poems and a preface in 1800.
7. A long narrative poem of classical prescription or of the epic
style.
8. A long poem of the epic style by Vallathol Narayana Menon.
9. A long poem of the epic style by Ulloor S. Paramesware Iyer
embellishments like rhyme and metaphor, rhetoric and alliteration. The devotees of the traditional school blindly imitated these techniques. The result was the beginning of a controversy in the language, popularly known as Dwitheeyakshara prasa vada. (The Rhyme controversy).

Rhyme in English is the repetition of syllables having the same vowel sound and the same final consonant sound at the end of a line. There are end-rhymes as well as internal-rhymes. See how Byron uses end-rhymes in his address to husbands of learned ladies in Don Juan. 10.

But - Oh! ye lords of ladies intellectual
Inform us truly, have they not hen-pecked you all.

Rhymes which occur within the first and third lines of the following stanza from Coleridge's The Ancient Mariner are called internal (middle) rhymes.

In mist or cloud, on mast or shroud
It perched for vespers nine
While all the night through fog-smoke white
Glimmered the white moon-shine.

In Indian languages also we come across this feature of versification. For example end-rhyme was popular in Marathi language. The repetition of the second letter in

the beginning of each verse-line was in vogue in Malayalam even before Thunchathu Ezhuthachan. It is said that it was a remnant of the ancient Dravidian tradition. Alliteration or assonance in English is the repetition of consonantal or vowel sounds, generally, though not always, at the beginning of words in the same line. Among the English people, traditionally, a phrase or a sentence in which many of the syllables begin with the same consonantal or vowel sound had a greater appeal. Hence in pre-Chaucerian English verse, alliteration was a recognised feature of poetic expression. In Malayalam, Ezhuthachan and Kunchan Nambiar were adepts in the art of rhyming. Kerala Varma made it more rigorous and everybody in his time faithfully followed him. He became an ardent protagonist of this tradition. He practised rhyming not only in the consonantal but also in the vowel sounds.

Kerala Varma's illustrious nephew A.R. Rajaraja Varma had by this time, turned his attention in a scientific way to Malayalam literature. The renaissance in prose initiated by his great uncle had activated the nephew's free spirit against custom and tradition. He perceived that great harm was being done to the language by the excessive importance attached to mere sound effects like rhyming in poetry.

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11. A great Malayalam poet of the 15th Century, popularly known as the father of modern Malayalam poetry.
It was probably the revolt in English literature against the passion for rhymes and the excessive use of figures of speech that inspired A.R. Rajaraja Varma to undertake a similar crusade. In English poetry both Milton and Shakespeare had reacted strongly against these abuses of poetic diction.

Milton in the Preface to Paradise Lost endeavours to free poets from the tyranny of rhymes. Justifying the use of heroic verse without rhyme, he writes: "Rhyme is no necessary adjunct or true ornament of a poem or good verse; in longer works especially, but the invention of a barbarous age to set off wretched matter and lame metre.........a fault avoided by the learned ancients both in poetry and all good oratory. Not without cause, therefore, that some Italian and Spanish poets of prime note have rejected rhyme both in longer and shorter works, as have also long since our best English tragedies."

The point is that rhyme is not an essential part of poetry. Abundant rhyme often has the same effect as abundant ornament on a building or much fancy work in a design.

The advent of A.R. Rajaraja Varma into Malayalam literature awakened it from the stupor in which it had lain for long and his contribution served as an elixir-vitae to the
moribund language. He argued that such devices as rhyme and alliteration did not enhance either the beauty or originality of versification. He abandoned this convention himself in 12. Megha Dootam and convinced the readers that rhyme is not indispensable to good poetry. A.R. Rajaraja Varma wanted to turn a new chapter in Kerala history, by setting Malayalam free from the bondage to Sanskrit. He endeavoured to make her independent, so that she may not plume herself on borrowed feathers. About A.R. Rajaraja Varma's services to the language, Professor C. Kunhan Raja, a great scholar, writes - "He standardised the language, rejecting alike the Sanskritisation followed by Kerala Varma and the colloquialism attempted by the Venmani poets".

The controversy on the use of initial rhyme started in 1891 with an anonymous article published in Malayala Manorama under the title 'Malayala Bhasha'. The poets and critics of the period at once divided themselves into two groups. Prominent poets of the time like Kunju Kuttan Thampuren and Ulloor S. Parameswara Iyer took the side of Kerala Varma while


13. Venmani Nambuthiris, father and son, inaugurated the simple and familiar style of versification against the domination of Sanskrit in the second half of the 19th Century.

14. The term applied to the three poets who resided in the neighbourhood of the English Lakes.
A.R. Rajaraja Varma's main supporters were K.C. Kesava Pillai and V.C. Balakrishna Panicker. Many young poets and authors found in A.R. Rajaraja Varma a new literary force. His critical pronouncements during this period had on Malayalam literature a great influence. This may be compared to the tremendous impact of the 'Preface to Lyrical Ballads' on English poetry.

It is generally seen that an age of original writing is followed by one of mere repetition, which often in untalented hands sinks into servile imitation. So it was in the literature of England in the middle of the 18th Century. It was altogether an artificial age. The minds of men at length grew weary of this constant reproduction of the same style, and there arose a race of poets animated by the French Revolution. Cowper, Burns and Blake were the harbingers of the New Age.

The three Lake Poets, Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey with the publication of Lyrical Ballads in 1796, carried forward the process of reformation. Every heart in Great Britain was warmed and thrilled by the poetic fire they newly rekindled.

The Lake Poets through their experiment in the subject matter of poetry widened the limits of men's sympathies making them more comprehensive and universal. Their experiments with

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14. The term applied to the three poets who resided in the neighbourhood of the English Lakes.

14a. F.R. (1745-1813) became poet laureate in 1796 and was the constant butt of contemporary ridicule.
the language were no less timely and important. They wanted that poetry should be written in a simpler vocabulary with a more natural sentence-organization than that used by the poets of the 18th Century—using the language of conversation of the middle and lower classes of society. It is true that at a later stage Wordsworth modified his practice and abandoned his theories about the language of poetry. Yet his theories and experiments in language have their vital place in the development of English poetry, for it was the simple diction of the Lyrical Ballads which killed stone deaf for ever the pomposities of the prevailing school represented by the poet-laureate Henry James Pye.

Like the Romantic poets Wordsworth and Shelley and Coleridge, the poets of the New Age in Malayalam poetry also broke away from the earlier literary tradition. They composed shorter and predominantly lyrical poems, popularly called Khanda Kavyas. The French Revolution animated the feelings of English Romantic poets; similarly the Indian struggle for freedom was a factor that roused the patriotic fervour of the Malayalam poets who revolted against the prevailing artificialities. A.R. Rajeraja Varma evolved his new and revolutionary ideas on poetry when he was professor and principal of the Maharaja's College (now University College)

15. Pye (1745-1813) became poet laureate in 1790 and was the constant butt of contemporary ridicule.
at Trivandrum. Within its walls, by contact with scholars of English literature, he came to appreciate beauties of Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth and Tennyson. He was inspired by their noble thoughts and sentiments. In the Primary Reader, he composed during these days for schools, he introduced translations from Campbell, Addison, Goldsmith, Lamb and Macaulay. Uddala Charitham is an adaptation of Othello, similar to Lamb’s Tales from Shakespeare. Thus his knowledge of English language and literature powerfully stimulated his poetic theories and practices. While other contemporary men of letters were interested in mere ornamentation, A.R. Rajaraja Varma was busy laying and strengthening the foundation of the edifice of Malayalam literature.

As an admirer thus sums up the lofty endeavours of A.R. Rajaraja Varma that inaugurated a new era in Malayalam literature: "He was at once the wonder and despair of the scholars of the traditional school of his time. He represented all that is best in Western and Indian disciplines of knowledge and served as an inexhaustible fountain-head, inspiring generations of pupils to work out new and varied channels of literary activity in Malayalam. His own monumental works on Grammar, Poetics, Prosody and Criticism which bear the stamp of his erudition, scientific outlook and critical insight and balanced judgement laid the stable foundation of modern Malayalam and raised its status and prestige in the academic world.” 15a

a contemporary poet and prose writer remarks: "Although in Volume A.R. Rajaraja Verma's contribution to Malayalam literature was not considerable, his influence on our mother-tongue was so potent as to start a new epoch in history".

The renovation A.R. Rajaraja Verma started in his translation Megha Bootam was followed up in his only verse composition in Malayalam called Malaya Vilasam (1895). The poem was a clarion-call to all progressive poets to throw away the bondage of the traditional style in poetry. He wrote it under the thrill induced by the grandeur of the mountain ranges (westerghates) dales and rivers he passed while travelling from Tamil Nadu to Trivandrum. He remembers the occasion in his diary thus: "I was so deeply impressed by the sight of the mighty hills in the Western boundary of Travancore, surrounded by vast groups of moving clouds even at noon, that they at once fired my poetic imagination". The poet here visualises the jagged mountainpeaks that mark off the boundary of Travancore as a gigantic 'saw' splitting up the horizon. Such audacities of imagination are, in fact typical of English Romantic poetry as well as Modern Malayalam poetry.

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Hazlitt said that one could gather from Wordsworth's poetry that it was written in a mountainous country from its barrenness, its simplicity, its loftiness and grandeur.

His poems certainly give the impression of vast spaces, of solitude and of great height. An equally impressive picture is built up in the mind when one reads the lines describing the panoramic view of the 'Sahya hills' in Malaya Vilasam. The tall cliff that lifts its awful form, is a cradle to many a stream; it swells from the valley, leaving rolling clouds spread all round its breast causing rain and fertility to the teeming millions that look up to it as their great guardian, for it gives them food and water. The poet sings:

How high you lift your lofty eminence
Proud Mountains, the clouds are round your breast
Well nigh you block the progress of the sun,
The 'eye unique' of all the world we live. 17.

With its lyricism, nature-worship and emotional intensity spreading over twenty four short stanzas Malaya Vilasam justly deserves the pride of place in inaugurating the New Age in Malayalam poetry. R. Narayana Panicker, in his well-known history of Malayalam literature, writes about this: "Malaya vilasam marks the beginning of Khanda Kavyas in Malayalam literature. The publication of this poem definitely announced the dawn of English influence on Malayalam poetry"
way of constructive acceptance and the way of revolt. The one is the road of the builders, the other of the pioneers. And there will always be these two great highways to a common goal. The creative assimilation of what is handed down constitutes the great conservative force in poetry. The radical force is destructive, because it consigns the old to the scrap-heap. It is also constructive because it wants the new and sets forth to find it. With the spirit of the radical, there often goes hand in hand the spirit of the pioneer. For, after the pioneers come those who transmute what the adventures have brought within circle, into something imperishable.

During the early decades of this Century a remarkable change came to the whole of Malayalam literature, which manifested itself especially in poetry. The change was largely due to the impact of English and it generated a new atmosphere. The changes were so significant that they brought about a new era. The new period is widely approved as the golden period in the history of Malayalam poetry. Every age has its pioneers who blaze the trail for the masters. The most remarkable pioneers, who prepared the way for the great poets Asan, Vallathol, and Ulloor of the New Age in Malayalam poetry are A.R.Raja-raja Varma, K.C.Kesava Pillai, C.S.Subramonyan Potti and V.C.Balakrishna Panicker.
The Dioscuri of the Dawn:

Before a brief study of the pioneers, who inaugurated the important era of English influence on Malayalam poetry is made, it is only relevant that we know something about two English poets who initiated reforms in poetry in its early days of evolution. They are Sir Thomas Wyatt and Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey. These poets represent the central line in English Renaissance poetry; Shakespeare, Spenser and Milton being only its magnificent offshoots. They are often grouped together and are known as the 'Dioscuri of the Dawn'. The English debt to these two great poets is immense. J.C. Collins sums up this debt in his introduction to Sir Thomas Wyatt thus:

"They introduced and naturalised the Sonnet. In Surrey, we find the first germ of the Eclectic Elegy (Pastoral poetry). In Wyatt, we have our first classical satirist. Their tone, their style, their rhythm, their measures were at once adopted by a school of disciples, and have ever since maintained their popularity among poets. In their lyrics indeed is to be found the seed of everything that is most charming in the form of Jonson and Herrick. They gave us—yet this is the glory of Surrey alone—the first specimen of blank verse that our language can boast. They enriched diction with fulness and involution. They were the first of our poets who had learned the great secret of transfusing the spirit of one language into that of another, who had the good taste to select the best models and the good sense to adhere to them. They gave a death blow to the poetry of mediævalism and fixed the permanent standard of our versification. To
them we are indebted for the great reform which substituted
a metrical for a rhythmical structure. 19.

We shall now proceed to make a brief survey of some
biographical aspects of the pioneers of the New Age in Malaya-

lam poetry.

(1) K.C. Kesava Pillai, the oldest of them, is well-known
as the lieutenant of A.R. Rajaraja Varma, in his literary
reforms. Though he received only Sanskrit and Malayalam edu-
cation in schools, he later acquired good proficiency in
English language through self-study and private tuition. There
cannot be a better proof of K.C. Kesava Pillai’s talents than
the comments of his own teacher Rama Kurup, B.A.; on one of his
early compositions, namely Hiranyakasura Vadham. 20 “I think the
author of this book will one day be able to astonish us with
excellent poetry, if he busily works in the field of such
compositions. The little of this I have gone through has
favouredly impressed me”. This pioneer became prominent with
the popular controversy on rhyme. In the year 1891, K.C. Kesava-
Pillai made a speech on ‘Vernacular Poetry’ in one of the
meetings of the Literary Association held at the Maharajah's

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20. A poem based on the murder of Hiranya, a character
in the Hindu mythology.

College, Trivandrum. The champions as well as the enemies of the use of rhyme rallied round Kerala Varma and A.R. Rajaraja Varma respectively. It is widely accepted that this Rhyme controversy has enriched the literature. Kesava Pillai's bold experiments were the direct outcome of this literary conflict. His pioneering work extended to the reform of both the theme and form of poetry. He also opened a new path in translating English poems into Malayalam.

(2) C.R. Subramonyan Potti is not a great poet; but an outstanding pioneer. He is perhaps one of the first Malayalam poets to receive University education through English medium.

Potti was a school teacher for some time. Then he served the Government as an Assistant Translator. It was from his cultured mother that he acquired an early taste for literature. Magazines like Malayala Monorama and Bhasa Poshini, provided Potti the needed opportunity to exercise his poetic skill. Soon his first creative work Oru Vilapam (An elegy) appeared in Bhasa Poshini in 1903. This is the first of its kind in Malayalam, initiating an English elegy. Potti also did some pioneering work in translating English poems into Malayalam.

It must be remembered here that Potti and Kumaran Asan were good friends. Potti had the enviable privilege of introducing Veena Poovu, the first significant achievement in Modern Malayalam poetry to the public. It is also pointed out by
certain writers that Asan derived some poetic inspiration
from Potti and M. Rajaraja Varma for his future poetic
flights.

(3) V.C. Balakrishna Panicker has a distinctive place
among the pioneers of this New Age in Malayalam poetry. Like
Keats in English poetry, he is to us an 'inheritor of unful-
filled renown'. This promising poet had only a very short term
of life. He served the muse of poetry only for nine years, when
untimely death snatched him away at the age of 26. He did not
write much, but the little he wrote — the two poems Viswaroopam
and Oru Vilapam — was enough to confer immortality on him.

Panicker was an infant prodigy. He had his education in
the Gurukula style. He is indebted to a great scholar of his
time named Mana Vikrama Itten Thampuran for his education. It
was with his help that Panicker first tasted the fruit of
English education. Panicker started his life as a journalist,
and edited several daily papers and magazines. In his
profession he was evidently under the influence of English
journalism. Without fear or favour he used his pen against
many wrongs, one failed to reciprocate it fully. He
did not use the intensity of Panicker's love to his distress. In due
quantity of his achievement great care was taken with his contemporaries.

V.C. Balakrishna Panicker was only 19, when he composed
Oru Vilapam. It is certainly a commendable achievement.

22. M.P. Appan, a living Sonneteer, has traced in one of his
published articles, some echoes of M. Rajaraja Varma's
Priyavilapam in Asan's poems.
M.R. Nair, a critic, has pointed out Panicker's indebtedness to Thomas Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Church Yard* in the composition of *Oru Vilapam*. All great poets including Shakespeare and Kalidasa have been borrowers. It is in the treatment of the borrowed materials that poets show their skill. Panicker has transformed, whatever he borrowed, from other poets by the magic of his poetry. He could make any subject interesting and appealing. For example, European history was not a popular subject with readers of Malayalam poetry. But Panicker wrote a poem on Hanover dynasty which was highly successful. In another poem entitled *Bhoopala Mangalam*, he extols King George. It was written during the coronation of the King.

If we make a comparative study of the lives of Keats and V.C. Balakrishna Panicker, we could trace several points of poetic and biographical affinities. Both poets died of consumption at their 26th year. Each was deeply attached to the woman he loved. Keats fell passionately in love with Fanny Browne, who failed to reciprocate his passion. No less was the intensity of Panicker's love to his mistress. In mere quantity of his achievements Keats can never stand in comparison with his contemporaries. So is the case with Panicker. But

23. It is believed that Keat's worry over the obstacles to marry Fanny Browne, may have aggravated his disease (tuberculosis).
in quality the best work in narrative and lyrical poetry, of both is worth its weight in gold. Sensuousness is a pre-
dominant element in their nature poetry. They had also a meeting ground in their great passion for beauty in nature, in the human world and in the ideal world of imagination.

It is obvious that Panicker's poetic style and technique were considerably influenced by English thought, culture and letters. We do not have another example in the history of Malayalam poetry of a poet who in his sixteenth year wielded poetry with such great mastery. He was a rare genius.
The concluding words of Marlowe on the death of Doctor Faustus may be applied to V.C.B. Panicker.

'Cut is the branch that might have grown full straight And burned is Apollo's laurel bough.'

Panicker's early death was a great misfortune to Malayalam poetry. Just when he was developing excellent poetic powers, his career was cut short; and the reader is left to judge the splendour of his imaginative life more by the promise of his work than by his actual performance in the field of poetry.

The new epoch in Malayalam poetry that began with A.R.

24. An English Dramatist (1564-1593)
25. The hero of the play, Dr. Faustus by Marlowe.
Rajaraja Varma, K.C. Kesava Pillai, Potti and Panicker, gradually grew up, flourished and fructified in less than fifty years. But the influence of English is by no means dead or exhausted, it continues undiminished even today.