

By
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The world has not seen a greater literary miracle than the Ramayana. Here is a poetical composition whose author is known, his purpose explicitly stated and the circumstances of its creation described in detail. But in the course of the two or three millenia which have elapsed since it came into being, it has become an integral part of the daily life of one-fifth of mankind; its hero has become God whose name is on the lips of devotees every moment of their life and its heroine the ideal of womanhood. In a sense this epic is ~~greater~~ larger than life itself; it abides as the essence of transcendental reality amidst the fleeting, dream-like panorama of earthly existence. It is wrong to call it a story or poem or even an epic; it does not fit into any of the known categories of literary creation; it is human imagination that has been transmuted ~~into~~ into everlasting truth, the only instance I know of, of literature that has attained ultimate fulfilment.

The life of our people has lain under the spell of the Ramayana for as long as we can recall and it is only natural that we should be prompted to probe this mystery as much as we can with our limited intellects in order to reaffirm the perennial inspiration which this ancient land has received from this marvellous book. In this context I am aware that there have been attempts in the recent past by historians, archaeologists and I do not know who else, to dig the earth in ancient sites in order to excavate evidence to prove whether the Ramayana was true or not. I am amazed at the motivation of these puerile endeavours and am aghast at the utter futility of our education and scholarship if this is all that they could care to know about the Ramayana. I wish they had caught a glimpse of the grandeur of this great work, the enormous power of its impact on the cultural, social and spiritual aspirations of humanity, its apotheosis of Dharma, its debunking of history itself. But to get an insight into these phenomena you need instruments infinitely more subtle than the spade and the shovel; you must dig into the innermost strata of the Indian consciousness. I suppose it is too much to expect archaeologists and scientists to do this as they are concerned and trained only to deal with material evidence and do not even recognize or acknowledge spiritual values. Let us therefore try in our own humble way to follow the Ramayana as it has evolved in the traditions of the different regions of this great country and its many languages. It is our good fortune that we are enabled to do this with the blessings and in the immediate presence of Bhagavan Sri Satya Sai Baba, the Avtar of the Age.

The Ramayana came to Kerala with the Sanskrit language brought to that secluded south-western corner of the country bordered by the Western Ghats and the Arabian Sea by the Nambudiri Brahmins as they migrated far and wide in this vast land from their early settlements in North India. We are accustomed to tracing the course of history on the basis of written records and inscriptions, but these are the very things which are conspicuous by their absence in the earlier periods and we do not know exactly when this wonderful language of the gods came to Kerala. However if oral traditions are any guide we can say that the Rama story had percolated to the lowest strata of ~~society~~ society a long, long time back, even before Malayalam, the local language of Kerala, had become a distinct and recognizable vehicle of expression. This was about a thousand years ago. The ballads and folk songs of primitive tribes who were the original inhabitants of the region contain references to Rama, Sita and the monkeys and there can be little doubt that they are much older than this period. The language of these songs has the pristine simplicity and charm which characterize the medium of expression of unsophisticated people and the very fact that the story was familiar to them in those early days shows that it had already become very popular in the other sections of society. A Sanskrit drama called Ascharyachoodamani, based on the Ramayana, has come down to us and tradition has it that Saktibhadra, its author, was contemporary of Sankara and that he belonged to the village of Chenganur in South Kerala. Scholars say that this work is second only to Uttararamacharita of Bhavabhuti in literary and dramatic qualities. If we accept the latter half of the 7th century A.D. as the age of Sankara and give credence to the legend of Saktibhadra's

contemporaneity with him, then, it becomes clear that the Ramayana had been selected as a ~~theme~~ theme for the most refined literary composition in Kerala many centuries before it ever appeared in any form in Malayalam. And Saktibhadra had no hesitation in modifying Valmiki's story in appropriate places to suit the requirements of his drama. There is also a significant statement in one of the commentaries of the drama that the author was a devotee of Sri Rama which shows that the cult of Rama worship had already come into vogue in far-away Kerala too in the early centuries of the Christian era.

The history of the Ramayana in Malayalam seems to have followed two courses, both very strong, and in a sense vying with each other in its eagerness to please the people and contribute to their enjoyment and edification. These were folklore on the one hand, expressing itself in a profusion of songs and ballads and devotional hymns, and high-brow literature leaning heavily on Sanskrit and the scholastic tradition on the other. In folklore the Dravidian mode of composition called Pattu was the most popular and there is every reason to think that much of the earlier work in this line has never been recorded and has been lost to posterity. However the strange fact emerges that the earliest known literary work in Malayalam, called Ramacharita is composed in the Pattu form, but it cannot by any means be classified as folklore. It is a very sophisticated work reaching the highest levels of lyricism and poetic excellence. The author mentions ~~him~~ his name as Cheerama, which is the ancient Malayalam version of Sri Rama, and from internal evidence scholars have identified him as one of the Maharajas of Travancore, namely Sri Jeera Rama Varma who ruled over the state from 1195 to 1208 A.D. Ramacharita is a large work containing 1814 pattus, divided into 164 sections, but it deals only with the Yuddha Kanda of the Ramayana. The rest of the epic story comes in only casually by way of cross references and it is believed that the work was composed by the king primarily for the benefit of his fighting forces. Scholars say that the influence of Kamban, the prince among Tamil poets, is discernible in many parts of Ramacharita, but there is no doubt at all that it is an independent work characterised by extraordinary originality and soaring poetic qualities. Thus the history of Malayalam literature as we know it today may be said to have started with a fine work on the Ramayana theme.

There is another work called Ramakathappattu about which a lot of noise was made a few years ago. It deals with the whole of the Ramayana and is used even today in temples in South Kerala to entertain the crowds that gather during festival time. It is sung to the accompaniment of a huge bow with jingling bells, struck rhythmically. Though it has been recovered in fully recorded form this ballad is of indifferent literary quality and we cannot date it even approximately on linguistic evidence as there have been additions to the earlier version made during succeeding generations. However this folksong which has come down to us from a very early period shows how popular the Rama story had become among the masses of the southernmost region of India.

The next significant step in the adoption of the Ramayana into Malayalam literature was taken in the 14th century A.D. by a poet called Rama Panicker who rendered the whole story into beautiful verse. This great work is called Kannassa Ramayana from the family name of the gifted author. It may be mentioned in this connexion that it was another poet of this family who rendered the Bhagavad Gita into Malayalam more than 500 years ago. This I presume is the first translation of the sacred book into any language. Kannassa Ramayana is also written in the Dravidian pattu form, but unlike the Ramacharita its language is more akin to present-day Malayalam in so far as it has freely adopted Sanskrit words and mixed them with the indigenous vocabulary. In some of the lines we ~~may~~ find only Sanskrit words; for example, see the following passages:-

Pushkara patra manohara netre
Poorna sasanka nibhanana ramye.

* * * * *

Avyaktam paripoornam sham
Punarakhila charachara bhutam.

Though the author follows Valmiki closely in his rendering of the story he has not hesitated to expand or condense particular sections for making his narration more artistic and effective. It is also worth mentioning here that this work contains the Uttara Ramayana also and is thus the first complete narration of the Rama story in Malayalam.

The next work we have to consider is Ramayana Champu by Punam Nambudiri who is said to have lived in the 16th century A.D. He was one of the court poets of the Zamorin of Calicut. His Champu is composed in the Sanskrit tradition and contains slokas and the so-called Gadya passages which are highly alliterative rhythmical descriptions of situations and events. The language is ornamented and artificial and it is often difficult to say whether it is the Sanskrit or the Malayalam vocabulary which is more profusely used. But the work throbs with beauty from beginning to end and may be described as a veritable deluge of poetry. It has been compared to the skyscraper gopurams of South Indian temples in which every inch of space is filled with carving and sculpture and colour. Hundreds of slokas and even some gadyas and Dandakas have been selected from famous Sanskrit works and woven into the Champu. This seems to have been a fairly common practice in olden days when there were no copyright regulations. Apparently the poet was more concerned with the embellishment of his work than with his own originality. And it has to be said in fairness to him that he was supremely capable of composing passages of equal merit or even better ones.

In its totality the Ramayana Champu is an artistic creation of breath-taking grandeur. It was widely used as a text for story-telling and for this purpose every sentiment, including Srngara, is portrayed in ample measure. Though Sri Rama is depicted as an Avatar, the descriptions are intensely human and the aim of artistic enjoyment was uppermost in the poet's mind. Valmiki and following him later poets have given detailed planetary positions and their astrological connotations at the time of the birth of Sri Rama, but Punam Nambudiri alone has given the horoscope of Ravana. This shows that the poet was concerned not only with the points of the story, but with the counter-points as well. Ramayana Champu is a comprehensive work. It starts with Ram Ravanodbhava and ends with the Swargarohana of Sri Rama where the Avatar reassumes the form of Vishnu.

We now come to an epochal point in the history of Malayalam literature. This was the middle of the 16th century A.D. and the key figure of this period is Thunchathu Ramamujan Ezhuthacchan who is rightly extolled as the greatest name in the language and its literature. This was a time when the whole of India was under a cloud. Her culture had declined; the glorious days of Sanskrit had long gone by and the regional languages had yet to acquire sufficient power and flexibility to become efficient media of expression. This was also the time when Western nations made their appearance on the Indian horizon and were trying to impose their mercantile civilization on an alien people. Ezhuthacchan realised the seriousness of the situation and the gloomy prospect confronting his people must have pained him greatly. He felt that a spiritual regeneration was the only hope for ~~himself~~ them, ~~enough~~ caught up as they were in a crisis of culture and character and a conspiracy of history. It was indeed a decline of Dharma that was taking place and he decided to redeem the situation by assuming the role of a teacher exhorting the people about the first and last things of life and instructing them how to dispel the gathering clouds of ignorance and illusion. He was a born poet, a man of wisdom endowed with the gift of penetrating spiritual insight and deeply learned in the scriptures. He knew that language was the key to the kingdom of the mind and the conviction grew in him that Malayalam had to be put on a firm footing if anything was to be achieved in Kerala. The dichotomy of culture represented by a snobbish scholasticism based on Sanskrit adopted by the upper classes of society and a weak and inefficient popular tongue leaning heavily on Tamil had to be ended. It is true that there was a long series of attempts to bring about a fusion of the two, but the product known by the name of Manipravala was an atrocious artificiality which failed to click. It also became addicted to an unabashed eroticism and got bogged down in a morass of futility.

Ezhuthacchan's genius forged a new linguistic tradition in the midst of this cultural catastrophe and saved the language and the people chaos. The new mode of expression and syntactic discipline that he brought into being have stood the test of time and turned out to be the greatest blessing received by Kerala at a crucial point in her history. They are alive and vibrant even today. Four hundred years of tribulation which the whole country passed through has not changed a syllable of his marvellous offering to his mother tongue. But this was only the vehicle. What he wanted to convey through it was a new culture

rooted in the ethos of the race and its immemorial heritage. Ad it was the Ramayana that he selected for the purpose. There is no doubt at all that he was a devotee of Valmiki, but it was not an epic poem that he wanted to give to his people, not literary enjoyment but spiritual enlightenment. Unerringly, he knew the limitations of philosophy and mysticism and the limited appeal of the Vedas and Upanishads. Bhakti and Namasmarana were the antidotes for the ills of the Kali Yuga; devotion was the surest means for the metamorphosis of the human psyche. Valmiki himself was the classical example of ~~the~~ this transformation and Ezhuthacchan was inspired more by the life of the Adikavi than by his Adikavya. He, therefore started singing:-

Sri Rama, Rama Rama, Sri Ramachandra Jaya
Sri Rama, Rama Rama, Sri Ramabhadra Jaya
Sri Rama, Rama Rama, Sitabhirama Jaya
Sri Rama, Rama Rama, lokabhirama Jaya.

With this sweet and sacred name of the Lord on his tongue he proceeded to make a free translation of the Adhyatma Ramayana from Sanskrit into Malayalam. Legend has it that it was from an original written in Telugu script, which he was conversant with, that the translation was made. It is a free and easy rendering that he has given us and nowhere does it read like a translation at all. It is said that the original Adhyatma Ramayana is not particularly noted for its literary quality and that in many places it reads like a metaphysical dissertation. But Ezhuthacchan's Malayalam translation while not exccwing philosophy, captures our imagination from beginning to end by its literary content and the beauty of its composition. He has expanded and condensed the original in many places and in some crucial contexts he has rejected the original and followed Valmiki, Kalidasa and other great Sanskrit poets and even some of the earlier Malayalam poets. This is particularly noteworthy in regard to Uttara Ramayana where frequent use is made of the ideas and method of treatment of Kannassa Ramayana.

Ezhuthacchan's Ramayana which was followed by an equally celebrated version of the Mahabharata had a revolutionary effect not only on the fate of the Malayalam language but also on the cultural development of the Malayalam-speaking people. As Vallayhol has said, the destiny of both these were re-delineated for all time by his palm-leaf stylet and Kerala found its soul. The great work became amazingly popular all over the region in spite of the political turmoil of the period and the social upheaval of succeeding generations. It acquired the aura of holiness which few books get and became sacred scripture during the author's life-time itself. Thousand of copies were made on palm-leaf and even people who could not read wanted to have a copy for worship. In spite of the printing press and the burgeoning book trade the tradition has not died out; people still venerate the palm-leaf copy of the Ramayana. None of the other books of old, not even the other works of Ezhuthacchan himself, have enjoyed this position of honour and adoration. It is the one book that is invariably used for Saraswati Pooja during the Navarathri season. Towards the end of the 19th century a very enterprising book-seller of Andhra extraction, Sri S.T.Reddiar, came to Kerala and was struck by the amazing popularity of the Ramayana. He immediately started printing it in very cheap paper-back editions and lakhs of copies were sold in a few Years' time. I know Christian homes in Kerala which preserve this early edition of the book as a prized possession and a family heirloom along with the Holy Bible. Law courts use it even today for the swearing of witnesses. Every year in the month of Karkataka (August-September) of the Malabar calendar, at the height of the rainy season, Hindu families perform ritual reading of the book for 21 days. In this context it has to be mentioned that the only religious observance followed in the ordinary Hindu household in Kerala, viz. the repetition of the sacred name of Rama (Nama Japan) as seen as the lamp is lit at dusk, must also have started from Ezhuthacchan's time. Parents insist that that children should wash themselves, sit round the lamp and do this without fail and it is indeed an elevating experience to hear the refrain,

Rama Rama, Rama Rama, Rama Rama pahimaam
arising from hundreds of little childre's throats and reverberating in the countryside as night falls softly and the air itself becomes still. I am afraid in the sweeping tide of modernisation that is

being unleashed over the country all this is vanishing and it is only the vulgar cinema songs that we hear now.

In the modern age books have become mere products of the pulp industry and are so commonplace that we hardly notice the rapid succession of their birth and death. But in Kerala at any rate this one book, Ezhuthacchan's *Adhyatma Ramayana*, has turned out to be an exception. It has triumphed over the tyranny of time and transcended the tragedy of transience, has imprinted itself on the memory of 25 million people and has been absorbed into their soul. In the course of four centuries it has transformed their entire outlook and changed the very sound of the mother tongue in their ears.

Ezhuthacchan has called his ~~book~~ work *Kilippattu* (bird song and has composed it as coming from the musical throat of a multicoloured member of the parrot family. He offers it milk and honey and all the sweet things of the world and coaxes and cajoles it to sing the glory of Rama:-

Sakala suka kula vimala thilakita kalebare
Saarasya peeyusha sara sarvaswame
Kathaya mama Kathaya mama kathakalathi saadaram
Kaakulsta leelakal kettaal mati varaa.

This great poet, the father figure of the Malayalam language and its glorious literature, takes his place on the same pedestal as Tulsidas and Kampan and Tyagaraja as the inspired minstrel of the *Ramayana* and deserves to be known all over the world.

The next important event in the history of the *Ramayana* in Malayalam is something for which not only keralites but the whole world has to be grateful. This is inferred to have happened in the 17th century A.D. One of the smaller Rajas of ~~South~~ South Kerala who ruled over the kingdom of Kottarakkara was greatly interested in the art of dance. The mighty Zamorin of Calicut had cultivated a form of art called Krishnanattam (Krishna dance). The small Raja is said to have requested the Zamorin to send his troupe to Kottarakkara for a performance. The Zamorin declined the request. Thereupon the Raja decided to avenge the humiliation by developing his own dance form. He based it on the *Ramayana* and called it *Ramanattam* (Rama dance). It is this art which has become world famous as Kathakali today. There are many experts who claim that this superb dance-drama is Kerala's greatest contribution to world culture. The fact that it is a highly technical and recondite form of theatrical art with all its literature available only in the not-too-well-known language of the land of its birth has not stood in the way of lovers of art from the five continents appreciating its entrancing beauty and intrinsic greatness. It is the traditional art of a distinctive people who have enjoyed a certain degree of isolation even from the rest of India. It is the same impulse and inspiration which elsewhere in India flowered into the architectural magnificence of rock-cut temples, or which covered wall spaces as at Ajanta and Bagh with forms of infinite beauty that have found expression in Kathakali in Kerala. Though in its present form it cannot be said to be more than three hundred years old, there is no doubt that it has its roots in the ancient culture of Kerala and that it has drawn heavily on very old art forms like cult plays coming down from Pre-Aryan days, distinguished by bizarre make-up, magic and religious associations. There is also welded into it the wonderful art of story-telling practiced by the *Chackiyar* community which has preserved the traditions of the Sanskrit stage for nearly two thousand years. It has to be emphasised that Kathakali is not mere dance; nor is it all music and rhythm. There is intense drama in it and the perfection of histrionic art is its very soul. As Bharatha Iyer says in his fine book on Kathakali, "What is unravelled ~~in Kathakali~~ is a world of might and power, where light and darkness, good and evil, wage a titanic conflict in which great aspirations, noble endeavours, massive achievements, loves and hatreds, struggles, failures and victories tell their imperishable tales What is seen on the stage is a world of dreams and they are dreams of our deepest longings."

It *Ramayana* that inspired this astonishing art. The Raja of Kottarakkara fashioned eight Kathakali plays out of the epic, each one intended for a night's performance. These plays are not a form of literature and are to be looked upon, rather, as scenarios for the stage. But literary beauty can also contribute to its effectiveness.

Unfortunately the Raja was poorly endowed in this respect, but some of his plays are stage-worthy all the same and are enacted even today. There is ample scope for gripping drama in the Ramayana and it was the later playwrights who made the fullest use of famous episodes of the great epic for the Kathakali stage. I still remember most vividly a performance which I saw in my boyhood in our local temple. The story was Ravana's penance. In addition to the traditional orchestra consisting of four members, all the drums and drummers of the temple were commandeered for the scene. There were not less than a dozen additional drums of different shapes and deafening sounds and a demoniacal percussion ~~was~~ was worked up which echoed and re-echoed within the high walls of the temple premises. In the midst of this terrifying scene stood Ravana, looking every inch a king but of fierce mien, determined to wrest his boon from his deity at all costs and prepared for any sacrifice including the supreme one. When he found that all his ritual offerings were of no avail he started cutting his ten heads one after the other and offering them in the sacrificial fire. The superb acting made me feel that I had ten heads on my shoulders and with each stroke one of them was being severed and automatically my hand stroked my neck to feel the stump! There is a transformation on the Kathakali stage in which both the actor and the spectator participate and which no other art ~~which~~ I have witnessed is able to create to such a measure of intensity of experience. Perhaps only the best classical music has this power, but there the experience is more or less instinctive, unconscious and impersonal and extremely transient. This is the mystery of Kathakali; the actors on the stage are no longer men simulating a divine or diabolic entity; they are the thing itself. Acting is no adequate term for their embodied acts and passions. Every time a play is staged the fabled heroes, demons and devas, come to life. Surely the great art of Kathakali has enabled the people of Kerala to see Rama, Sita, Lakshmana, Hanuman, Bali, Sugriva, Thataka, Soorpanakha and even Kusa and Lava not merely as characters in the story but in a totally different and life-like dimension.

After this great popularity which the Ramayana achieved in Kerala about 300 years ago and which is still continuing in undiminished vigour there have been only two major developments which are worthy of mention in a brief and hurried survey like this. These were attempts to translate Valmiki's ~~work~~ original work into Malayalam. The first of these was by a warrior prince who originally came from the northern part of Kerala but was later adopted by the royal house of Travancore. He was born in the same family as that of the illustrious Raja of Pazhassi who proved more than a match to Colonel Wellesley (the later Duke of Wellington who defeated Napoleon) in the wars with the British in the hills of Wayanad on the Coorg border. His name was Kerala Varma and the translation is known as Kerala Varma Ramayana. Only the first five Kandas have been rendered into Malayalam and the translation is fairly faithful, but done in Dravidian metres. It does not lack literary quality and deserves commendation as the first attempt to make Malayalam readers familiar with Valmiki's work without any alteration.

The next translation was done more than two hundred years later and it was a far more ambitious work. The author was none other than Vallathol Narayana Menon, internationally known as Mahakavi Vallathol. It is a very faithful rendering of the entire work including the Uttara Ramayana, sloka by sloka and in the same Sanskrit metre. Vallathol was only 26 years old when he did this stupendous work and he took only 23 months to complete it. He was not so very well known then and had to undergo great hardship to publish the translation. After many struggles he brought it out in fascicles and the first issue reached the public in April 1907. This mighty task ~~was~~ did earn for him the reputation as a great translator capable of taking immense pains, but in this respect the fame of everyone else is eclipsed by Kunhikkuttan Tampuran, indeed a prodigy of a poet, who translated the Mahabharata all by himself, sloka by sloka in the same metre, in less than three years' time (874 days to be exact). It may also be mentioned here that Vallathol accomplished yet another massive work of translation when he was 75 years old. This was the Rig Veda into Malayalam. His rendering of the 24,000 slokas of the Valmiki Ramayana is very faithful, simple and beautiful.

With the phenomenal expansion of the book trade during the last hundred years innumerable publications on the Ramayana have appeared in Malayalam, the majority of them in prose, but quite a few in verse as well, for different classes of readers like children, women, neo-literates, etc. There have been more than one serialisation also, giving the original Valmiki verses in Sanskrit (in Devanagari or Malayalam script) and exhaustive commentaries of each of them in prose.

The fascination of the Rama story seems to be perennial. Many distinguished writers of the modern period have returned to the theme again and again, in spite of the all-too-obvious tendency of the present day to draw inspiration from Western culture and to popularise foreign books. Some of our outstanding poets who loudly declared that they were breaking away from the past have dwelt on the theme and produced beautiful works on the Ramayana. Mahakavi Kumaran Asan is one such example. He has been extolled as a revolutionary and even as a poet of revolution, but two out of the eighteen titles listed in his complete works (poetry) deal with the Ramayana. One of them is the exquisite Balaramayana (1916) which unfortunately ends with the Aranya Kanda. The other Chintavishtayaya Sita is a very famous work which describes Sita's anguished thoughts in the loneliness of Valmiki's Asrama on the night previous to her fateful last journey to Sri Rama's court. Asan has put some very irreverent thoughts on Sri Rama into the mind of Sita, particularly regarding his action in banishing her because of some bazar gossip about her chastity. This work has been translated into beautiful Sanskrit verse by the late Sri N. Gopala Pillai under the title Sitavicharalahari. Let me quote the last sloka from this translation:-

'Vatse ma sma suchonuyahi sukha'mityasamsino yoginah
Padabje Nihitekshanaa nrupasabham samprapyachadhomukhi
Tushneematikametya tantvanusaya klaantaasyamaalokayat
Kantam pouasamakshaevamatha sa tatyaja lokam sati.'

Vallathol Asan and Ulloor Parameswara Iyer constituted the great trio of poets of the modern period in Malayalam. Mahakavi Ulloor whose birth centenary is being celebrated now has also written on the Ramayana. His book Pingala contains some of the finest lines of Malayalam poetry ever written. It deals with the legend of the transformation of a beautiful woman from evil ways to the life of the spirit, from darkness to light, in the course of a few hours. She lived in Sri Sita's Mithila and the total change is brought about by a sudden focussing of attention, in a situation of great distress, on a picture of Sri Rama. But it is not the story but the story-telling in soul-entrancing poetry that works the miracle in the reader's mind. The poet waxes into ecstatic eloquence when he deals with Rama and Sita and the traditions of Dharma which sustain India. I cannot help quoting a few lines, though they are in Malayalam and may not be quite intelligible. Here is what he says about Sita:-

Maataave vennalum maahaatmya saalini,
Sitaakhye Chitsuma maadhveedhare
Bharata bhoothala bhaagyaabdhii chandriko
Charitra digjayappolpatake.

And on Sri Rama:-

Bhotaavalambana bhootanum bhoomithan
Dhataave bhartaave jaamaateve
Maanusha sarthaika maargopadeshtaave
Bhamuvansaakumbhara bhaanumaane

Limitations of space do not permit me to deal with the works of other authors of the modern period. There are some famous temples dedicated to Sri Rama in different parts of Kerala as at Thiruvilvamaala (Vilvadi) and Thripayar and these centres of pilgrimage have produced a large number of hymns and songs drenched in bhakti and lyricism which have kept alive the cult of Rama worship initiated by Ezhuthacchan. It is not possible to describe them even briefly. Even the purely literary works based on the Ramayana are too many in number to be discussed here. I may however mention a dramatic trilogy written by Srikanth Nair who died prematurely a few months back. They are entitled Saaketa, Kaanchana Sita and Lanka Lakshmi and have proved great successes on the stage. It is reported that Kaanchana Sita is being made into a film and that the shooting is done in the Godavari regions and hilly tracts of Andhra Pradesh.

This in brief is the history of the Ramayana in Malayalam. I do hope I have been able to convince you that the people of Kerala have enjoyed Ramayana Sudha Madhuri to the full for a thousand years through their own language and the creations of their great poets. I know my efforts to convey at least a little of that delectable experience have not been successful. This is tragedy of Indian literature expressing itself in multi-tongued diversity. We are forced to resort to English for intercommunication knowing fully that this foreign language, great and beautiful in its own way, cannot even represent all the basic sounds of our alphabets. Even otherwise, the printed word is no substitute for the poet's living, vibrant, utterance; it can convey little more than meanings and ideas. But meaning is only one of the many properties of those magical things called words through which literary insight and inspiration find expression. And it seems to me, with particular reference to the present context, that the Ramayana involves more of feeling than philosophy, more of direct intuitive experience than explanatory discourse or analytical discussion and that this is the reason why it has been a greater inspiration than other epics and puranas to our poets and singers (as distinct from thinkers, sages and teachers) and the unsophisticated and even unlettered millions of our countrymen for countless generations. There is a standing example of this great truth in living memory. Gandhiji was the light of our lives; "out of dust he made us into men." We owe him more than we can tell, and infinitely more than we can ever repay. In the evening of his life, in that tragic twilight of history, he bequeathed to his fellowmen the quintessence of his life's work and the monumental wisdom gained by his matchless sadhana, through the medium of a melodious couplet borrowed from Tulsidas:-

Raghupati Raghava Raja Ram
Patita paavana Sita Ram.

Today as we listen to that unforgettable prayer song, not only his timeless message, but the memory of his martyrdom too, comes out of it as a haunting experience elevating us to eternity. That is the power of the Ramayana.

I am convinced that the people of Kerala who still enjoy the poetry of Ezhuthacchan will never lose the taste for Ramayana Sudha; they have found it to be the best antidote for the torments of existence, both in individual and collective experience, the source of the greatest solace in the sojourn of life. In Malayalam we pronounce it not as Ramayana, but as Ramayana in accordance with the genius of the language and in this form it can be interpreted as Ra (Rathri - night) - Maayana (must fade out) and this I would say is the message of this great epic of India - the darkness enveloping the soul must vanish and man should strive and reach light everlasting to fulfil his destiny. Let us therefore repeat the great prayer: Tamaso ma jyotir gamaya.
