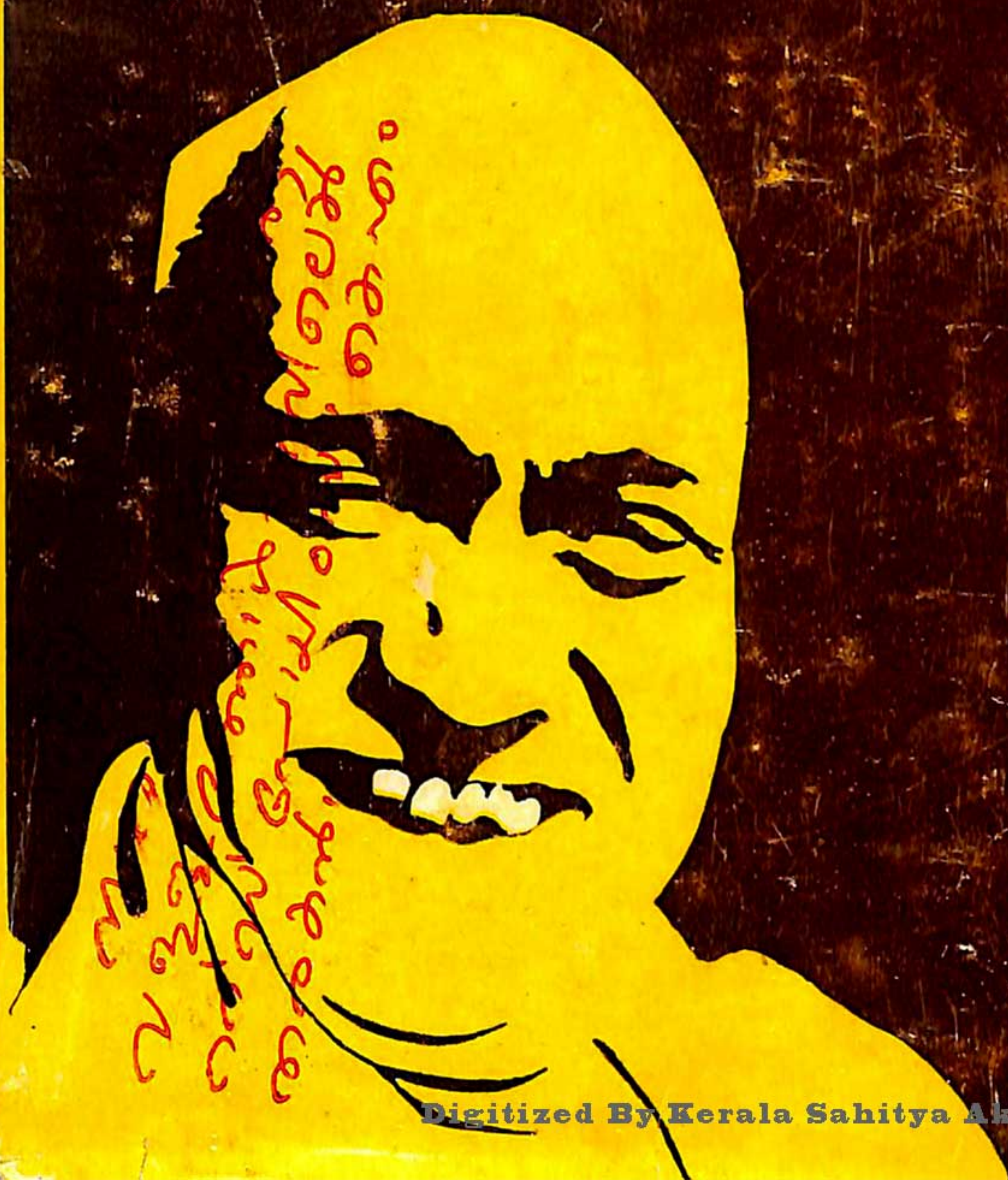


VALLATHOL

SELECTED POEMS



VALLATHOL

A BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Poet Vallathol Narayana Menon was born in October 1878. Vallathol is the family name of the poet. He was born in Chennara village, in the erstwhile Ponnani Taluq. His mother's name was Parvathi Amma. Father's name, Mallissery Damodaran Elayath.

In 1886 he began to study Sanskrit and Ayurveda. His teacher was his uncle Sri Vallathol Ramunni Menon, an Ayurvedic physician and Sanskrit Scholar himself.

As the poet himself declared, he began writing verses from his thirteenth age. The scholars and savants like the late Sri Punnassery Nilakanda Sarma, founder of the Sanskrit College in Pattambi, the great scholar Manavikrama Ettan (Zamorin) Raja of Calicut and the poet's teacher the great Sanskrit scholar Sri Kaikulangara Rama Warier and many other well-wishers encouraged him to compose poetry. In the beginning he wrote Sanskrit poems. His early Malayalam poems Kirathasatakam, Triyama, Sallapapuram are out of print for the last sixty years and not available now. He wrote "Rithuvilasam" after the mode of the "Rithusambhara" of Kalidasa. In early years he composed some books on Ayurveda in verse.

In 1901 he married Srimathi Chittazhi Madhavi Amma.

In 1904 he accepted the assignment as the manager of well known Publishing House, "Kerala Kalpadrumam" at Trichur. During this period he completed the translation of Valmiki Ramayana and got it published.

By 1909, he became totally deaf.

In 1910 his Mahakavya, "Chitrayogam" was published.

In 1914 he became the assistant editor of the Keralodayam bi-weekly. Afterwards he gave up managerial job at Trichur and shifted to Kunnankulam where he started editing the popular literary journal 'Atmaposhini.' During this decade he wrote his famous poems 'Ganapathi', 'Anirudhan', 'Oru Kathu', 'Sishyanum Makanum', 'Mary Magdalene', 'Kochu Seeta' and some lyrical works which set the pace for lyrics in Malayalam literature. He also translated four puranas: Padmapuranam, Markandeya Puranam, Matsya Puranam and Vamana Puranam besides some Sanskrit dramas of Bhasa.

(Contd. in last flap)

SELECTED POEMS

VALLATHOL NARAYANA MENON

SELECTED POEMS

VALLATHOL NARAYANA MENON

Translated from the original by:

Dr. Ayyappa Panicker, Prof. H. Jesudasan, Prof. C. Bhaskara Menon, T. C. Sankara Menon, Velloppillil Sreedhara Menon, B. Hridayakumari, Prof. T. R. K. Marar, Kainikkara Kumara Pillai, Prof. N. K. Seshan.

Edited by Prof. K. M. THARAKAN



KERALA SAHITYA AKADEMI
TRICHUR



Kerala Sahitya Akademi, October 1978

Printed at the Mathrubhumi Press, Calicut

Published by Kerala Sahitya Akademi

Trichur - 680 001

Sole Distributors: Orient Longman

Rs. 15/-



THE EDITOR'S NOTE

In connection with the birth centenary Celebrations of Mahakavi Vallathol C. Narayana Menon the Kerala Sahitya Akademi is bringing out this collection of his poems translated into English. It is hoped that this would help the non-Malayalam speaking "Sahridaya's" to get an insight into the poetic-site of the great poet and appreciate the solid contributions he has made to Indian nationalism and culture.

The poems are set in the chronological order which may help the reader perceive how the poetic mind unfolded itself and matured as years passed by. However, it may be borne in mind that these are translations; and whatever limitations that translations have, as pointed out by George Steiner in his introduction to 'The Penguin Book of Modern Verse Translations' this collection too may have; and a few more, because these renderings are by different distinguished men in different methods, whereas some have tried to retain the native note in the translation, others have tried to anglicize the original rhythm a bit. We have as far as possible tried to adhere to Nabokov's view that "The clumsiest literal translation is a thousand times more useful than the prettiest paraphrase"; that alone can do justice to the original. The reader may find these pieces often literal, but certainly not clumsy. The images, and the other figures of speech, allusions and compound words used by Vallathol are retained as far as possible. The conceits, as one may see, are all Indian and Keralite.

The greatest loss sustained by these poems in translation is of their mellifluous melody, their rich sonorous quality. Vallathol transformed experiences into ecstasies with the latent music of his diction. How could one trap the music of Vallathol in any other

language? One can compare it only with the music of Shelley in English; it is sweeter than the word sweet.

In his introduction to this collection Dr. Umasankar Joshi has given us a penetrating study of Vallathol. The Kerala Sahitya Akademi places on record its deep indebtedness to Dr. Umasankar Joshi for his openhearted appreciation of our great national poet.

The editor tenders his apology for the errors if any that may have crept into this collection.

Trichur,
21st October 1978

K. M. THARAKAN
for the publishers

FOREWORD

THOSE of us who began writing poetry in early 'thirties were familiar with two all—India names, those of Tagore and Iqbal. In fact both were internationally known Indian poets. A third name emerged by and by, that of Vallathol. In early 'forties, while on a 'grand tour' of the South, I passed Shornur junction. The beautiful Bharatapuzha river with its lush green banks presented a lovely sight in the afternoon sun. The vivid memory of that day has never left me. Somebody in the crowded compartment said that the Kerala Kala Mandalam was near by on the river bank. A worthy local for a poet, I thought. I was to meet him in 1947 at Ahmedabad. He was returning from Delhi with his Kathakali troupe after giving performances at the Asian Relations Conference. He spent more than an hour with Gujarati writers, speaking to them and replying to their questions. He was full of vitality. He was sensitive, sagacious and self-confident and possessed a sense of humour. To see the Kathakali performance was an experience for us. The last I heard of him was at a Sahitya Akademi meeting in mid—'fifties in connection with the publication of his translation of *Rigveda*. When I paid my tribute to him on the Ahmedabad Radio on his passing away in 1958, I spoke from some knowledge, for, by then, I had come across a few of his poems in translation,

The greatest homage one can pay to a poet is to make his work available to as many persons as possible through reprints, recitations, dramatic presentations, translations etc. A poem is best appreciated in the language in which it is written. However, in a multi-lingual country like India, we have to have translations, to begin with in Hindi and also, if possible, in English. As part of a break through programme, we should build up a central pool of translations of important books of all Indian languages in Hindi and may be in English too, which could be drawn upon for translations into other languages. It would be helpful if, in the case of poetry, transliteration of the original is also provided.

The Kerala Sahitya Akademi has been publishing the Malayalam Literary Survey, a quarterly journal, the first three issues of which have been devoted to the trinity of modern Malayalam poetry—Kumaran Asan, Ulloor and Vallathol. It has published G. Sankara Kurup's Selected Poems and the novels of Shri Basheer and P. Kesava Dev. It is proper that it should be coming out with quite a representative selection of Vallathol's poems on the occasion of his birth centenary.

The English-knowing Keralites, indefatigable translators as they are, have put the rest of their countrymen under a great debt of gratitude. Much of the significant work of Asan was presented in the 'Kumaran Asan Birth Centenary Volume'. I have had the privilege of meeting the late T. C. Sankara Menon, who has given happy renderings of some Vallathol Poems as well as poems by 'G'—It is difficult to convey through English the lilt and verve of a community song, but it seems not a little has survived in refrains like

'Bow to the mother, bow to the mother, Bow to her who is great.....' and 'higher and higher, still higher and higher and day by day, Must rise the holy flag.....'. The description of Krishna, swimming in the Jumna, seems to aim at suggesting the rhythmic quality of the original (*mungu, moredathu matteddathu poy—ppongum, malakal murichu neenthm—*)

He frisked about, rolling and glistening
As the sun's orb plays. setting a wavy stream aflame.
He dived, disappeared, rose again afar;
He swam with vigour, cutting across the waves.

The selection will help readers in forming some idea of the richness of Vallathol's poetic genius.

The story of how Vallathol grew and attained the stature of a major poet is astounding. It is an odyssey of untiring self-discovery.

Vallathol had before him some powerful work produced by Asan. His own creative faculty however, was slow to blossom. He arrived as late as 1910 when he was thirty two, with the poem, *Badhiravilapam* (Wailing of the Deaf one) written while he was struck stone-deaf. It was a personal cry, universal in its appeal. It did not fail to make a mark. However by then he had already translated Kalidasa's *Ritusamhara* and the whole of *Valmiki Ramayana*. Only Vallathol, a poet of prodigious energy, could afford such prolonged labour before achieving a distinct voice of his own.

The poet's deafness was perhaps compensated by two significant gains which took him nearer his people. The

first was in the auditory realm. He came to switch over from traditional Sanskrit metres to indigenous ones. *A Picture*—in *Sahityamanjari* (1916) is credited with being the first specimen of a Dravidian metre being used by a modern poet and started the vogue of using Dravidian metres freely. The second gain may be traced to the poet's increasing interest in visual presentation of poetry (*Drisnya Kavya*), his turning ultimately into a foremost exponent of Kathakali, Mohiniyattam, Kudiyaattam etc.—the traditional performing arts of Kerala.

The Khanda Kavyas (Narrative Poems) that were to follow *Badhiravilapam*, were an immediate success and put Vallathol unmistakably on the map of contemporary poetic writing in Malayalam. Far from giving in verse a rehash of the Puranic stuff, Vallathol allows his imagination a free play. In *Aniruddha, The Captive*, Usha pleads with her father's minister to take herself into custody as she was the culprit and not her husband Aniruddha and rushes straight to the dungeon. This poem could not have appeared at a more propitious hour. Indian womanhood was asserting itself in the matter of freedom to love, and the poem just came handy. *Rukmi's Regret*, a letter of apology and making amends for the Prince's misbehaviour with regard to his sister Rukmini's marriage, *Disciple and Son* dealing with the fight between Shiva's disciple Parashurama, and son Ganesha, and above all *Magdalena Mariam* are some of the more outstanding narrative pieces, which showed him as a master in that genre.

Magdalena Mariam is handled delicately and raises the subject to an unimpeachable height of sincerity by depicting

heartfelt repentance, which the Lord takes for true atonement. The poet's sympathetic reaching out to and identification with the Christian ethos is matched by the deft reference to the heavy parallelism of the Krishna and Gopi theme all through the poem.

In *Father and Daughter* written much later, Vallathol brings Vishvamitra and Shakuntala face to face. When the sage sanctimoniously gets worked up against Dushyanta for discarding her, she protects her husband from the sage's wrath, by reminding him that she, who was unfortunately abandoned by her parents once, has been abandoned by her husband too!

These narrative poems are so dramatic both in their treatment and outcome, that one wonders whether the technique of the great Kathakali tradition had not something to do with their unfailing effectiveness.

Vallathol does not allow himself to fall into a groove and to go on repeating himself. Having asserted his creative power in the narrative poems, he moves on. With *My Master* (1922), an appraisal of Gandhi, he catches up with the mainstream of Indian nationalism and sings fullthroatedly of it. He had already emphasized even in a panegyric upon the ancient seers, *The Puranas* (1918)—in which was heard the sound of the bangles of the Muse of Poesy caused by her gently fanning with her breast-cloth the sweat on the brows of the meditating sages—that 'liberty was very salvation', i.e., nothing except liberty could be the actual, visible form of salvation (*Svatantryam-Sakshat moksham*). Vallathol now emerged as a spokesman of the national upsurge. His

songs inspired people in their fight for independence. His poetry benefited, in as much as it attempted to measure the whole gamut of socio-political and cultural aspects of national life.

As a matter of fact, this period witnessed a widening of the poet's interest in and concern with human life, indeed with all life, as the harrowing picture of the 'rogue' of a bullock, being beaten to death by the cartman (*Please Forgive Us, Mother*), indicates. Song after song, poem after poem bore witness to the immediacy of the impact of the contemporary predicament on his consciousness. He seems to be shaken to the roots on having a clear sight of, rather insight into, what was happening around him, and even beyond the frontiers of the motherland.

The fierce rumblings in hundreds of thousands
Of starving stomachs burst in upon my ear;
India's skeletons.....

Has not the school come to be the market-place for us?
Where slavery is sold for enormous price.....
'Approach not!' 'Touch not!'—So long as
The din of these shouts,
With which we drive away ourselves, prevails.....
So long shall we, exiles, fail to return
To our homeland!

Sometimes the poet coaxes and cajoles his countrymen into a mood of unity by sweet reasoning:

The fight 'twixt brothers is no fight,
But the tug and tumble of fraternal love.
The waves of the sea howl and hurl themselves
One against another,

But at the same time they dissolve in laughter
Of froth and spray.

He strikes a note of optimism:

The iron chains of taboos that bind my feet
Will strain and break be themselves,
If only I swing my feet farther and farther,
Six or seven steps.

The optimistic vision is no less justified by the high
ideal inspiring the struggle than by the personal endeavours.

Is not that very Mahatma our helmsman?.....
The curtain is raised and Truth takes the stage.

He is thrilled at the sight of the confluence of the
Jumna in the form of twelve thousand farm workers who
marched to the Calcutta Congress Session in 1929 with the
Ganges of white-khaddar clad assembly of freedom fighters
in the pandal (*My Bath at Prayag*).

No wonder, Vallathol's awareness has a spiritual quality
about it, wrenching from his heart an agonised cry against
the ravages of war decades before he associated himself with
the Peace movement. In 1918 he writes:

Dark European firmament
With smokes from the guns of war
But darker the Indian skies
With privation's hot exhalations.

A year later, in *The Peasant's song* which begins with
an eloquent line 'If only iron had tears to shed', the poet
talks of the folly of forgoing destructive weapons instead of
farming tools from iron. Poet Meghani wrote in the same

vein in Gujarati in early 'thirties: 'The sledge-hammer speaks, the anvil listens....."

When Vallathol refers to a brighter future for India, it is always with a view to saving and helping others. Nothing short of the well-being of all mankind is his concern: 'May all the world be happy, free!' When he visits Lenin's tomb, he refers to his 'thoughts of universal weal' and talks of Lenin and Gandhi in the same breath.

One tore off the golden royal curtain
To bind the wounds of the world,
The other stitched together
The lacerated limbs of peace.
Karmayogins both alike
They strove to eradicate evil.....

Having indicated the roles of the two leaders, the poet blesses the victory of the host country,

The eleven parts of *Sahityamanjari* containing two hundred and odd short lyrical poems show a great variety of themes (one of them bears the title *A Tattered Pillow*). The poems dealing with nature, love and the mother-tongue are some of the more outstanding ones. Describing Kerala, the 'dear daughter of the ocean', the poet's fancy weaves an immortal word-picture:

The waves of the ocean
Like attendant maids
Put silver anklets of white foam
On your dainty divine feet
Dissatisfied they take them off
And try them on again and yet again

For his mother-tongue, the poet experiences an abounding sense of glory.

The grand style of the nearby sea
 The strength of the base Sahya hills,.....
 The purity of Ganges-like Periyar, the sweetness
 Of tender coconut juice,
 The fragrance of cardamom, cinnamon and sandal
 The inherent power of Sanskrit
 And the beauty of Tamil,
 Are commingled in my native tongue.

Vallathol himself with his continuous outpourings for about five decades added magnificently to the glory of this great language.

The poetic career of Vallathol shows how the creative sensibility unfailingly asserts itself against a number of odds. He did not know English. However, he was no ordinary student or writer of Sanskrit. He could perhaps have excelled as a Sanskrit poet. Iqbal, the great Urdu poet, resorted to Persian in order to reach a larger audience. Vallathol weened himself away from the Sanskrit tradition as a writer and popularised the use of Dravidan metres and a less-Sanskritised idiom. For putting across the unique cultural attainments of Kerala, he leaned rather on the Kathakali. This by the way, also indirectly helped, in no small measure, his recognition as an outstanding poet, both in India and abroad.

The inner enrichment which did contribute his ripening into a major poet was result of his constant turning himself to the spirit of the times. Lack of

knowledge of English did not come in his way. Being endowed with wider sympathies he could sense things from the total cultural milieu. Vallathol's success as a poet is an important pointer to how a poem needs to be rooted in time even as it was to reach beyond it.

One cannot afford to over-look the role that translation work has played in Vallathol's life. The poet always kept himself busy; in the beginning it was Ayurvedic work, management of the printing press and editorship of journals, then it was the organisation of the Kerala Kala Mandalam and the work of taking out troupes to far-off places in India as well as foreign lands, but above all there was the work of translating Sanskrit classics and scriptures in which he was engaged almost throughout his career. Apart from Valmiki's *Ramayana*, he translated five Bhasa Plays, Kalidasa's *Sakuntalam* and some other Prakrit and Sanskrit works. At the age of seventy-five, when his creative powers seemed to be flagging, he refused to rest on the oars and began translating *Rigveda*. To translate the complete Valmiki *Ramayana* and *Rigveda* in any language is no mean achievement. But Vallathol is a colossus who takes such self-assigned work in his stride. To think that he should have cared to translate the *Matsyapurana* and the rather longish and open-ended *Padmapurana*! Certainly, nothing must have been wasted on this dedicated poet who single-mindedly and unfalteringly pursued the creative instinct. The translations, apart from being a rich addition to the literature of the language, must have meant much to the creative artist in Vallathol in terms of development of tools of expression and the skill in character portrayal. Here is a

poet through whose hands have passed thousands and thousands of lines of other poets and are garbed in his native idiom.

It does him credit all the more that while dealing with Puranic material or motif creatively, he always prefers to invent. Indeed, he inherited the two great gifts of the Puranas, mellow wisdom and inventiveness. He projects Sita in the modern context in his *Little Sita*, which can be also looked upon as a sisterpoem to *Magdalena Mariam*. The Sita-theme, sort of an obsession with our poet after Asan's handling of it, finds yet another charming expression in *Kilikkonchal*, in which the child Sita, on hearing from the parrots about Rama marrying her in future, says, 'Nobody need marry me, but my mother'. The playful utterance is an excellent example of irony, for in future Sita, in spite of her purity being vindicated by sages and gods, is not to live with Rama but is to ask mother Earth to give her a quarter! *Radha's Sense of Fulfilment* dealing with a village girl's sentiments for her lover who has returned to the city and lives with his bride, has a Puranic dimension, reminiscent as it is of the Radha-Krishna-Kubja triangle. Thus Vallathol's pre-occupation with Sanskrit literature turned out to be an asset because of the creative interaction his mind always had with it.

The core-personality of Vallathol was that of a creator and that somehow always managed to flourish. As a matter of fact, it survived even his own indifferent writing, for example his epic *Chitrayogam* (1930). One rarely comes across a major poet, in the final assessment of whose work, a whole epic by him is kept out of consideration.

To know how Vallathol became the poet he is to us, is also to know what goes into the making of a Vallathol poem.

Vallathol's poems, by and large, have, to use the Aristotelian common place, a beginning, a middle and an end. There is a climax a little before the end begins, for a split-second there is even the suspension of the tension and then it suddenly resolves. The love of the theatre has stood the poet in good stead. Krishna's dealings with Kaliya and the confrontation of Parshurama and Ganesha have breath-taking moments and then immediately the atmosphere gets cleared. The quick transition from one sentiment (*Rasa*) to the other is registered with great felicity. This accounts for the overall satisfaction that his poems give even when they are sometimes cluttered with conventional ornamentation and often lack intellectual excitement. *Nagila* has the most astute denouement. The ascetic, returning to Magadha after many years, with a view to get united with his beloved Nagila, finds himself happy in contact with the Ganges, 'extremely sacred'. Thanks to the foot-prints of the ascetic Nagila, whom he has not yet seen. Ironically, the message he derives from the river is: 'Once we start on a journey.../ We and our likes never go back to the source of our being.' There is also a subtle foreboding in two birds' flying away in opposite directions. As the pining youth mutters 'Nagila', 'there she stood.....turned a nun'!

Usually Vallathol keeps the reader in suspense, even at the very outset. Parshurama is named after about forty lines, as also Humayun.

The poet just portrays and wants the thing to speak for itself. It is rarely that he intervenes, for example when he

sput a straight question to Vishvamitra as to which bliss the sage finds greater, that of founding a child. (The poet has a tender vision of childhood. *Rukmi's regret* is saved only by the touching memories of infancy. Vallathol revels in making the scene vivid, choosing the details meticulously. Humayun 'elbow-deep in pillow' rises as the lady is led to him and sits with 'his long fingers crossed,' On seeing Kaliya making towards Krishna, his companions on the bank stood 'hands to heart' and the cows 'with flanks...../ Watched their heads raised, nostrils wide open.'

There is a tendency to be didactic or oratorical towards the close of a poem, a common weakness with the poets of the Renaissance. For example, the taming of the Kaliya prompts the poet to make such an attempt.

One has a feeling that some short pieces could have been still shorter. The creative exuberance makes the poet exhaust all the expressional possibilities regarding the theme on hand. The lovely piece, *The Tattered Pillow*, instead of concentrating on some telling aspect, must refer to its being gently patted by the lady into shape in the past, to its exciting jealousy in the lover when she hid her face into it, to its getting scented when she spread her hair on it for drying! The luxuriant foliage of oriental compositions tends to jar all the more when rendered verbatim in a language like English, which rather thrives on under statement (That is why Tagore mercilessly cut out big chunks from his work while translating into English).

The prolixity seems to be born of the poet's desire for exteriorization. He aims at concrete presentation. One

finds him ever reaching out for an image, a metaphor, a smile, though sometimes, for example in *Lenin's Tomb* he gives up the attempt saying, "Why say 'like'..." Often the image is conventional e. g, the lotus. At times overworked images are employed for uninhibited erotic overtones *a la* Sanskrit poets.

Two images recur again and again, those of the sunset and water. A depth-study of Vallathol's image could be highly rewarding. 'Sunset' and 'water',—are they somehow united in his universe of discourse? It is just the geography of Kerala which unites the sunset with the waters of the sea? Or has it some psychic significance, both with reference to the poet's personal as well as national life? Is the reference to 'sunset' an attempt at recapturing the fading view of something phenomenal? The preoccupation with 'water' undoubtedly is an assertion of the life-principle at all levels, from the frolicsome to the sublime.

Valtathol's language, to speak from the meagre acquaintance with some Sanskrit words in the text, which alone I can claim, has a freshness about it. One feels delighted to come across the word '*Krisheeshvari*' (the Goddess of Agriculture). For all one knows, it could be his coinage, and a very apt one too. He addresses the tiller as '*Snehita Karshaka*' (dear tiller). Parashurama is '*vishvaikayoddha*' (the one warrior in the world). In the *Peasant's Song* the evil masters are appropriately referred to as '*dushprabhu*.'

Vallathol's poetry seems to have little of humour. However, there is cold, vitriolic, satire in *Mappu* and there is stinging sarcasm in lines like 'to commit manslaughter to stop cowslaughter' (*Our Reply*) and in the high caste Nair

not permitting untouchables to fetch water from the well even for putting out the fire that was consuming his own house (*Shuddlahril Shuddhan.*)

On the whole, Vallathol's poetry evinces high seriousness and lofty idealism. In *The Song of Truth* written before Gandhi's appearance on the national scene, he says:

He who bends to kiss your feet
Will ever hold high his head.

Our Reply (1925) shows his deep and active concern for the younger generation, indeed for the future of man:

Forward shall I go now,
Trampling down the thorns on my path;
Tender feet that follow me
Shall not be pierced by pain.

Fifty years later in 1975, Shri Jayaprakash Narayan, who rarely uses the verse-form, ended his *Victory-Song*, from the sick-bed in the Bombay Jaslok hospital when he seemed to be very near to death, with almost the same sentiment:

My life, a failure, will be a hundred-fold fulfilled,
If the thorn-strewn path of like-minded dear youth,
Would be made a little easier to tread.

Vallathol is a major modern Indian poet. He came at the harvest-time of the Indian Renaissance. He garnered its rich fruits, singing with abandon about the past ideals whose presence he felt in his blood, the ever-renewing beauty of the native land, the fresh aspirations of a resurgent India and of Mankind.

—Umashankar Joshi

CONTENTS

1. Rukmi's Regret 1
2. Anirudda the Captive 8
3. Brand Wrapped in Silk 20
4. The Song of Truth 29
5. To the Mother Land 32
6. The Disciple and the Son 35
7. Salutation to the Mother 46
8. Nothing to Eat, Nothing to Wear 51
9. The Puranas 57
10. Peasants' Song 60
11. A Lullaby 63
12. My Ingratitude 66
13. Thunchanth Ezhuthachan 69
14. Sighs 73
15. The Tender Feet of This Land of Action 75
16. This Way, This Way 79
17. Radha's Sense of Fulfilment 81
18. The Morning Song 84
19. My Master 85
20. Higher and Higher 89
21. The Indian Womanhood 91
22. Unity Before Everything Else 99
23. Nagila 102
24. Our Reply 109
25. The Head of Malayalam 112
26. The Peasants' Life 118

- 27. My Mother Tongue 122
- 28. Knowledge 126
- 29. The Gift of Vishu 129
- 30. My Little Daughter 134
- 31. My Bath at Prayag 138
- 32. The Blood Must Boil 141
- 33. Father and Daughter 145
- 34. Please Forgive Us, Mother 153
- 35. Our Mother 156
- 36. The Lake of Geneva 159
- 37. Lenin's Tomb 161

RUKMI'S REGRET

Vallathol was not quite familiar with Browning's epistles or dramatic monologues. Such pieces are rare in Indian literature. Yet the poet came upon the epistolary form of monologue and carried it to its perfection. This poem is in the form of a letter written by Rukmi, to his sister. He had objected to Rukmini's love for Krishna. His plan was to give her in marriage to Sisupala. But Krishna overcame all opposition and married Rukmini. Now years have passed. Rukmini's son Pradyumna has grown into a fine warrior. Rukmi requests Rukmini to accept his daughter as the bride of her son. The request is warm, tender and appealing. It reveals the characters of both Rukmi and Rukmini and recounts Rukmi's affection for his sister and explains the circumstances under which Rukmi opposed Rukmini's marriage to Krishna. Rukmini emerges in this poem as a heroine devoted to her lord, filled with the spirit of forgiveness.

Vidarbha's son, in Bhojakadam forlorn,
Rukmi, for once addresses to the wife
Of Purushotthama, his sister, a letter, thus : 1

Dear Sister - although unworthy¹ I, to call
You thus in love, as my acts have proved, -
Yet this brother be your kindness shown ! 2

True Wife, may I enquire if, by the grace
Of Parvati, mother of all the world,
You and all yours are in the best of health ? 3

1. Rukmi feels that he is unworthy because he had opposed the marriage between Rukmini and Krishna.

As housewife, mother and spouse - of Womanhood
The touchstones - do you not rule with grace
Among your kindred, in cordial friendliness ? 4

To your husband's line you granted pure delight
Bearing that young warrior² fine, and I believe
That you are happy, living in this world. 5

But just one word I might have written to say
That in a way I'm happy too; though I,
Kind one, have even lost hold of happiness. 6

You from your filial duties never swerved :
My heart is breaking now, thinking of how
To you I've been so very rude of old. 7

To turn your mind from Pasupala³ away
To Sisupala, what graceless words I flung,
Hard-hearted me - into your very face ! 8

With my language horrible-harsh, what tears
Scalding, I drew down your face so beautiful,
So very like a newly-opened flower ! 9

All while I muttered this and that in rage,
You in your dignity unshaken stood,
The maiden of noble birth that you really were ! 10

Though many and cruel the words I hurled at you
Not once, sweet-spoken one, did from your lips
A syllable in retort take its shape. 11

2. Pradyumna, the Son of Lord Krishna.

3. Cow-herd, Krishna is the cow-herd.

The Father of all the world to me denied,
Wise one, one millionth part of your attributes,
Patience, discretion, and humility. 12

When reasonless I babbled words of blame,
Your meek face you bowed to me: I think
Of that, and now my tears fall hot and fast. 13

The day you crossed the threshold to maidenhood,
Ready for a husband, from then, alas ! I've been,
—To Sisupala bound - your enemy. 14

Always, and every day, when in infancy
You shed delight, I cherished and pampered you,
Your loving brother, more than our father did. 15

The guileless Dad grew jealous of me, because
Too rarely would his daughter leave the side
Of her beloved brother to seek him out ! 16

Scattering cool smiles around, with clustering curls,
Like bees, hovering round you, and playing your games
Till tired - that tender form I still recall. 17

But even now, before my inner eye,
With anklet and with bracelet ajingling you,
A child, came toddling over the ground to play. 18

How can my soul forget that lotus face,
Its childish smiles revealing ranks of pearl,
Its tears, and its pretty birdlike lisp ? 19

Impatiently, from far, with your rare smile,
You leaped to my embrace, and then you clasped
My knees, with little hands that rivalled flowers. 20

With love I bent, gathered you up to fold
Your tender form on my chest, and kissed your face
Repeatedly : today, refreshing memories !. 21

Those days I felt I'd not enough - although
So often I thrilled to clasp you, and to watch
Your clever pranks, and hear your honeyed lisp. 22

Upon your new-found joyous youth, I
Would even pray each day that your infancy
Might not be ended for many years to come. 23

Had God but granted my heart's impassioned desire
In full, would I have ended up today
As thus, my beloved only sister's foe ? 24

Out of your five brothers, who was the one
Who loved you most ? That it should be the same
Who later grew a stranger - hard to endure ! 25

O gentle one, it was my heady desire
To see you with a noble husband, that brought,
In truth, upon me all this weight of blame. 26

It was through boundless love for you, alas !
That, in Sisupala, I came to see
The one, worthy to be my sister's groom. 27

The Prince of Chethi⁴, of unfailing manliness,
Above reproach - how could a maiden's kin
Such a deserving suitor think to reject ? 28

4. The prince of chethi is Sisupala.

Would it not be the duty of a man,
When joining with another's, his sister's hand,
To seek to put a sceptre in its grasp ? 29

Because you spurned from you the title of Queen
Of Chethi the free country, you revealed
The real stature of your faithful love. 30

How the love of a pure woman can cross
All obstacles, and triumph in the end
Over failures; your story will illustrate. 31

What was the year of your marriage ? What the year
I write this to you ? God ! Sunk in this world,
We do not even know the flight of Time. 32

Daughter of the arts, you've risen above
Mere wifehood, into the status of Mother; your son
With many manly gifts, deserves his Home. 33

Though many lengthy days have passed, the grief,
Your prank, Mother of worthy son,
Caused me, remains eternally sharp and new. 34

Although in plenty and prosperity,
My heart being charged with pain, this world to me
Were hell; and life's journey, burdensome. 35

Wounded, and in bondage; to my own house
A stranger; to my subjects, an object of scorn;
—For the trouble I gave you, alas ! too mild a return. 36

Although I did so great a wrong as burn
Your flower-soft mind, remember, O faultless one !
It was your brother, and grant me the pardon I need. 37

But really, I don't have to tell you. For when your lord
 Came ready to end my life, you stopped him, in grief.
 A sister's love it was you showed that day. 38

Daughter of the mighty King, what wonder could be
 If you pardoned my crime? To pity those
 Who hurt us, we know, is true nobility. 39

Though in love forget my wrongs no bounds
 To my sorrows! But could we recall ourselves
 And seek a cure, the sinner might be saved. 40

That my daughter is approaching now the bloom
 Of womanhood, you know, I would atone
 For my sins and bestow on you that gift. 41

Virtuous woman, if for your darling son
 You could accept her, here's some little chance
 For your brother in pain to draw comfort. 42

As for that skilful young man, it would seem
 That he plays ball with the heads of Asuras
 Who in aggression do atrocious deeds. 43

Wearing upon his body the Kumkumam
 More blood-red than the Asura throats⁵ he has slashed,
 Glorious, victorious, he wedded the Veera Lakshmi⁶. 44

Krishna's race he exalted in this world
 By his good deeds - the powerful noble lord
 Who only equals Balarama⁷ in pride. 45

5. Throats of demons like Kharon.

6. Goddess of victory; Martial powers.

7. Elder brother of Krishna.

Shining like a blue moon in this world,
—Those who saw him, saw and praised him as
Another incarnation of Manmatha⁸. 46

You of the pearly teeth, through good deeds
Obtained the merit of having a warrior son,
So noble, whom the Kshatriya girls desire. 47

Such is my beloved nephew - always this pride
Of heart is mine ! As for my daughter, she
Though humble, is not the one not to love him. 48

Were your elder brother's daughter not fit
To be a warrior's bride, I would not think
To make for my beloved nephew a barren home. 49

Each day, from out our kindred, she is sought
By one or another in marriage. Do you not know
I cannot be always saying 'no' to such ? 50

Here is my wish : let your son take
As Murari⁹ you in Swayamvara
Properly, Rugmavathy, my child. 51

Herein is Rugmi's petition; if I were
To elaborate, it would be long; but think
Wise one, the sincerity of my regrets
Of one who has done you wrong. 52

8. God of love.

9. Enemy of Mura, the Asura, Krishna killed Mura.

ANIRUDDA, THE CAPTIVE

This is a "Khandakavya", or a short narrative, half descriptive and half dramatic. It is based on a puranic episode. Usha, the daughter of Bana, the Asura king, son of the great Mahabali, saw in a dream Anirudda, the grandson of Lord Krishna and fell in love with him. Chitrlekha, the friend and maid of Usha brought Anirudda to Usha's bed chamber. Bana came to know of it; he sent his warriors to capture Anirudda. The young man fought with them, but was finally overcome by delusive trickery. He was cast into prison. Kumbanda, the chief minister of Bana was in charge of the prisoner. Usha moves Kumbanda to let her into Anirudda's cell. Once in the cell she appeals to her lover to escape; but Anirudda refuses to leave the cell in stealth. He hopes that Lord Krishna himself will come with his army to rescue him.

There are three outstanding characters in the poem; Kumbanda, the grand old minister full of affection for Usha, Anirudda, valiant, optimistic and devoted to his beloved and Usha tender, self giving and loving. The poem abounds in a number of word pictures, both still and dynamic. The situation is dramatic and the dialogue is revealing of character.

After the conquest of fighting Anirudda
By many warriors, in that war of guile¹
The wise minister went to Usha's chamber
—Daughter of Bana - her maid having brought him word

1. Asuras were experts in playing deceitful tricks in warfare.

His eyes lively, that greying beard flowed down,
Upon his chest; wrinkled, his forehead broad,
Those arms, like long pounders reached his knees;
Sturdy and lofty, magnificent was he. 2

There on the palace verandah's lofty heights
Touching the clouds, and like the Himalayas
Exalted - listless, faded in her grief,
And motionless as a picture, Usha² appeared. 3

Her pensive face was bowed; her tender hands
Upheld her forehead, beaded with sweat: she
Of the beautiful face, lovely even in fear
Upon the cold white marble floor reclined. 4

The tresses of the lotus eyed rich like Thazha³
Brandished for Manmatha⁴, King of love,
On the marble floor, by now dishevelled
Like thick dark clouds against the autumnal sky. 5

On her of the pearly teeth, it would seem
Without her will, upon that sacred form
Those few priceless jewels wait in grief
Because with her they have a bond divine. 6

The soft - spun breast - cover upon her rising breast
Shaken by her heart - revealing sighs,
Moves ever so slightly from its place, and now
Wet through with tears, looks lack - lustre, dim. 7

2. Daughter of Bana.

3. A fabric of many folds symbolic of royalty.

4. Manmatha is kamadeva or the God of love.

Watching their mistress overwhelmed with grief,
 And wiping away, now and then, the tears
 Falling from their own, with the cooling fan
 With beautiful gold handle, maids fan her soft. 8

Kumbanda, though badly shaken, through love
 For the princess, to see the change that grief
 Had so completely worked upon her, stood
 Unmoving, like a pillar, where he stood. 9

Chitralkha, the maid⁵, in haste drew near
 Announcing that her father Kumbanda was come.
 As though awaking from sleep, the slender one
 To him, so faultless, extended welcome due. 10

In Love's great power, she'd called the minister
 To speak out some things; but now so overcome
 The girl was with her many feelings, that she
 Could hardly bring herself to open her mind 11

"Worried by a hundred thoughts, what is she
 -The privileged offspring of Mahabali's son⁶, alas!
 Going to say, now, to the minister?"
 Watching her anxiously thus, her maidens stand. 12

Oppressed by hosts of feelings that crowd and strive
 Now and again, so that her wits grow weak,
 What might this young girl to the minister
 So old and loving and like her father, speak? 13

5. This maid is not just a servant, but a confidant. She is the daughter of the minister Kumbanda.

6. Mahabali, was the great Asura emperor driven to the under-world by Vamana. Bana was his son.

Sorrow and anger striving in her breast,
 In the throbs of her heart beating the drum of war
 Over and over, the chaste one fought down
 Her bashfulness, and drew a long, long sigh. 14

With such sharp glances, it seemed that sparks of fire
 Flew wild, the venerable Minister
 She caused to feel the burning, before she spoke
 To him with anger, and in a voice most stern : 15

"Chief Minister to the Asura King
 Who had overcome the youth by deceit,
 Think, by his valour had he all alone
 Conquered the many hosts of warriors. 16

"Not to her who sinned, but as you pleased
 You gave to another the punishment; O. why?
 Your gentle policy, ever graciously so far
 Hasn't permitted to our kin a wrong? 17

'I sent for him and brought him here: he
 Did not come on his own: the manifold guilt
 Therefore is one's, another's the prison bonds.
 Is this the Dharma of Maha - Bali's race? 18

"Grant that the good-natured one had really sinned,
 How could my own great guilt be overlooked?
 Weak-souled, I set my pace wrong; but how
 Ignoring me, punish my follower? 19

"If, for him, the sentence is prison, mine
 How dreadful should have been! and still am I
 A warrior's wife in status: with that pride
 Of heart in me unceasing, let me die. 20

Or else, punishment enough have you given me
 Inch by inch you are putting me to death".
 She of the sweet utterance, here choking hard
 Like a child sobbing, grew confused in speech. 21

Where is the prison, suited for wicked men ?
 And where should he be, of spotless life, fit
 For comfort ? In this unlooked-for calamity
 How long can the King's daughter hold back her tears ? 22

Burdened with melting heart and in despair
 Of how to tender the needed comfort - thus
 Her father's minister stood worried; but eased
 By pauseless crying a little, she spoke again : 23

"To my own father, what is the disgrace
 If I have taken a liberty denied
 To womenfolk ? Which father would not agree
 To his daughter's being a stainless warrior's wife ? 24

"That prince's story has revealed that he
 Is valiant and of noble family.
 Where is the princess who would not desire
 To be handmaid to the son of Krishna's son⁷ ?" 25

The Minister, breathing hot sighs, thus said:
 "Dear one, do not be angry: all will be well
 Someday. God does not allow a course
 Obstacle-free, to the full river of love⁸ 26

7. Anirudda, the grandson of Krishna.

8. Vallathol arrives at his own conclusion about the nature of love. It is the same as that of the western poet who wrote "the course of true love never runs smooth."

"Although acceptable your pure and secret love
In loneliness so firm, O wise one, think
For him who values reputation as wealth.
Wouldn't he count serious the scandal of the world?" 27

"Let but his pauseless ire once abate,
All this I'll tell him, and see it through: but you
Take comfort" And rising to Chitralekha he said,
"Mind that your good friend surrender not to grief." 28

Like dewdrops on the newly-opened rose
On her pink cheeks from swollen-eyes
The tears fell again. She with the eyes
Like blue lotuses, said to the minister: 29

If Usha's kith has concern for her life
Broken and sunk in the sea of grief
Then let me be allowed to visit once
The place where my lover is confined alone. 30

Unexpected request! A lightning struck
On the heart of the royal officer,
Should he the daughter of the King allow
To meet him, punished for improper act. 31

Duty to his monarch, on one side; the sway
Of affection for his daughter, the other side:
These with each other strove in equal strength,
In this plight peculiar the latter won. 32

Because of the steadfastness of his mind
No changed expression came on the radiant face
Of the husband of Usha, who now sat
Squatting, erect, in prison, upon the floor. 33

His broad chest smeared with blood
 Which was sandalwood paste to warriors
 His handsome arms, just beneath, mighty
 As clubs, crossed, Krishna's grandson sat carefree. 34

Just as cheerful as in his jewelled home
 In his grandfather's sacred city, where radiant and pure
 Dwells Mahalakshmi⁹, so in the cell of stone
 Is seated that embodiment of valour. 35

His large eyebrows, broad forehead, bright eyes
 Of courage and beauty, and moustache glossy black
 All these, upon his lotus-countenance
 Entertained the goddess of youthfulness. 36

Upon his handsome shoulders, like a mess
 Of clouds, his long curly hair flowed down;
 Although with battle-dust brown and thick
 Still it was a pleasure to the eye. 37

The affectionate minister being mute, she
 Of the dark tresses like clouds, started to walk
 By herself - the sentries, with fear and trembling at once
 Opened - she entered by the door of the cell. 38

Ah! here's a jewelled lamp in an earthen pot;
 A sapling in time to yield mangoes sweet
 The fearful graveyard, a flower in smoke:
 An image in the dust, fortune dimmed by stars. 39

A young tusker sunk in the swamp; good fame
 Sullied by scandal unwarranted, like these
 The slender girl before her sees the youth
 Seated in the strong cellar of stone 40

9. The consort of the supreme Lord Mahavishnu; she is the Goddess of prosperity.

In the prison, in the darkness, like
The lord of the stars covered by the new clouds,
Or like the lovelorn Chakora grief—stricken
And plunged in misery, she saw her reputed lord. 41

Her tresses bee-cluster like flying loose
Unexpected, he saw his dear one come
In the dim light of that low cell of stone
That young man, his heart pounding hard. 42

Before the prisoner, in his flurry, could rise
And duly welcome his guest, she made for him,
Clad as he was in his dirtied yellow silk,
And threw herself, unthinking, upon his lap. 43

That world's beauty, her husband eager!y
Gathering up, fondled, in full measure,
Embraced her close, kissed the cheeks where curls
Prettily nestled, and softly wiped her tears. 44

Usha was disillusioned of being a heroine's bride
The dream of princesses, as with her hands
Like flowers, she caressed her husband's body
Injured by cruel weapons in the war. 45

On seeing his wife's anguish, the valorous one
Lost the courage he had never lost before;
His heart throbbed with burden, he sweated,
His nostrils widened, hot tears welled up in his eyes. 46

Hoarse in his throat, the young man gently said:
"What have you now begun? You, the gem
Of women, to your father's orders giving no heed,
How did you reach the captive criminal's cell? 47

- Beautiful one, now only am I guilty
 Because I have given cause to fast, soft as the Suganthi
flowers
 To tread upon the gravel in the dungeon-cell
 It's my ill-luck that has brought this fate to them 48
- "Even the poor man brings to his own roof
 The young bride whom he loves and weds: but you
 Who married this luckless one, your husband's home
 —O my beloved! is this prison-hole! 49
- "The pain of hundreds of arrows piercing me
 From Asura warriors, only now I feel
 In boundless sorrow, and in piteous plight the daughter-
in-law
 Of Krishna's son, has come to this cell of stone! 50
- "Sweet one, do not be lost in grief, because
 The¹⁰ unbound Anirudha, is now become
 Nirudda, the bound, if fate so wills
 Gods are worms, seas deserts, all in a trice. 51
- Chastest of all on earth, it's your love
 That is my weapon so long as its glory abides
 With me, if all the world's disasters throng
 Against me, I have no fears of defeat. 52
- "Do not delay to get back! This alone
 I ask you. What have you done it brings
 Shame to your father? In noble families
 No virtuous lady brings disrepute to her father." 53

10. Anirudda, means the unbound; he has now become the unbound.

Hearing these words of wisdom, she stood up, her hands
Folded, like lotus buds, saluting him.

Strengthening her throbbing heart all she could
The sweet-spoken one, in love, addressed him thus : 54

“Though not a little, my lord, I’ve been the cause
Of putting you in this grievous plight, forgive
Me graciously, grant me the privilege
Of sitting ever, a slave, at your holy feet ! 55

“Lord of all my life, your body is bruised
And broken; your dwelling-place, this cell
So dirty : Do not, O gracious one, command
That I forget it, turn, and leave you thus ! 56

“From you, whose one wish is to cherish me
Where should I go to find some small relief ?
How much more comfort does this dark room give
Than in my jewelled mansion I’d hope to find ? 57

“My father will be angry: let that alone,
How can a woman her husband’s service forsake ?
Cruel my sorrow, because my greatest god
On earth, you have - alas! rejected me !” 58

The tears dropping from both her swollen eyes,
Having said so much, she cried, shaken with sobs,
Again. Her lotus face, wearily bowed
With clusters of heavy curls was sunk in grief. 59

Grasping his loved one’s folded hands, the youth
Kissed them, tortured by many feelings he stood
And strained her flowerlike form to his heart;
Then in the voice of ecstatic love, thus spoke : 60

"Mistress of my life, do not weep; my breast
Shall sure stand the various arrow-hosts
Shot by foe : But daughter of Bana, scarce
Shall Anirudda bear one tear-drop from your eyes ! 61

"This calamity's but the shadow thrown
By the light of good-fortune hereafter : so do not grieve.
Beloved with the thick eye-brows, go home now
Not making your tender form a prey to grief. 62

"True that, playing in battle, sportive
My body's a trifle weary. But otherwise
I've not received a really dangerous wound.
All your anxiety, therefore, is groundless. 63

"Your father, hard-pressed in battle, unable to stand
Used tricks on me : that is good-fortune too.
Great filial grief through me would else have come
To you, of the eyes like blown lotuses ! 64

"You of the lovely form, ill-luck shall never
Worm its way into the happiness of our love;
Planted deep and tended within our hearts
In time it shall sure bear glorious fruit. 65

"Beloved, quickly leave this place : Is not
The prison to be shunned by the women ?
I speak the truth - each moment that here you spend
Is more and more unbearable to me !" 66

Weary at this, a trifle hesitant
She said : "if then, lord of my soul, this
Is your command, for pity's sake today
Let me but pace behind you, on my return. 67

"Forgive straightway, my father's wicked deed
Caused by his anger at his daughter's fault.
Could anger, wrong-directed, for ever last?
Valorous warrior, in grace, do not refuse!" 68

The girl having made her meaning plain his face
Changed sudden. The youth, who to the Yadav race
Brought joy, said "Virtuous one! To flee
Prison in fear, is your husband a thief?" 69

"Daughter-in-law of the Yadav King, lose not
The heroic woman's state, by pity o'er thrown.
Soon will your new-found kinsmen come, to take
Me, with valour, from the prison-cell. 70

"Those fine men, to your father, will rightly prove
His son-in-law's manhood and nobility.
They'll welcome you as worthy of my love,
Like Jayalakshmi, to Krishna's capital. 71

"God will not throw away, O radiant one,
The seed of love we sowed between us;
Abandoning your grief get walking, we
Should not be guilty of breaking a father's¹¹ law 72

It seemed the cell itself gave out these words—
Echo softly sounded what he said.
She with her heavy burden and faltering steps,
Her lover sent upon her way. 73

11. The wish of Bana – He won't approve of Usha's visit to Anirudda.

BRAND WRAPPED IN SILK

This is one of the early productions of Vallathol. It is true that the poet loved life, and delighted in giving us excellent word - pictures of feminine beauty. Though it is often said that he preferred beauty to the narrow codes of ethics, always he upheld the high virtues of life. Chastity was a woman's true dower. In this poem, the poet recounts an episode from the life of the chieftain of Vettathu, a principality of the middle ages, who punished a noble woman who had betrayed her husband. It is interesting to observe that the poet belonged to the lineage of the minister of the king of Vettathu.

This poem is also a narrative piece, worthy to be qualified as realistic. The descriptive power of the poet is evident in this poem.

The title is suggestive of the story -

The moral of the story is given in stanza - 51.

In the long Karkitakam¹ month
The new moon night was dreadful;
"Vettam"² was a misleading name—
The region was entirely dark. .

1

From the Arabian Sea not far
To the West, came the sounding swell
Like bellows loud and louder;
Nature painted in black looks horrid³.

2

-
1. The last month of the year according to Malayalam Era; July - rainy month.
 2. A principality. Literally it means light.
 3. Like a Kathakali actor who took the role of an Asura.

- Thickly blanketed the place
All dark, not a spot of light
Convenient for the wicked
To commit any heinous deed 3
- The sky closely packed with clouds
Not the smallest vacant space
Nothing could be distinguished
The earth one big globe of steel 4
- On the blue canopy of the sky
Some stars scattered dimly twinkling
Like little lamps in humble homes
Which Lakshmi's eyes had ever missed. 5
- The night which has seduced
The region wears darkness with
Some fireflies glowed here and there
Like gold tinsel on costly robes 6
- To see if it is not so dark
Anywhere, while they stay there, waited
The packed clouds from time to time
Looked with flashes of lightning. 7
- From the skies turned black with clouds
Like regions burnt by forest fire
Ever and anon thunder boomed
Like the deep roars of the King of beasts. 8
- It was nearing midnight and the rains
Had abated a bit it appeared
That the assembled clouds above
Found it fit to rest a while? 9

4. Goddess of prosperity.

- Frightened by the ghostly night
Wakeful creatures closed their eyes
And pretended to be asleep as it were
While bats flew about full of joy. 10
- In the far - famed Mother's⁵ shrine
Patron deity of the Vettam Rajas
The doors were closed, silence reigned
The place seemed to be sound asleep. 11
- At the entrance to the temple
Stood banyan trees with branches
Intertwined to form a roof
Which made the darkness darker. 12
- From the trees on the north side
The day-blind owls were hooting happy
The eye-tex of darknees applied to their eyes
Seemed to restore the power of sight. 13
- Careless of the night and darkness
A figure with a hero's gait
Dressed in black to go with the night
From South reached the temple - front. 14
- He no common man, his limbs
Glowing and well proportioned
Though disguised lay his nightdress
It couldn't hide the grace it covered. 15
- Noble mould, age above forty, sure
Handsome youthful figure, yet
Vouchsafed to the prosperity and fulness
Easy life could attain by that age. 16

5. The temple of Mother Goddess.

Body atheletic, tall and straight
Muscles fit to take any strain,
And his broad chest proclaimed him
To be a soldier of the finest type. 17

But the thick brows, broad forehead
Long nose and grave face proclaimed
That he was born to give orders
Not to obey meek and mild. 18

For the brave, a suited aid
His right hand held a shapely stick
A gold band below the handle
It housed a snake-like sword. 19

He looked a true Kshatriya
Keeping the sword-stick 'neath his arm
With joint palms and deep devotion
To the mother he prayed a while. 20

From that face, bold and serene
The two eyes which shone like stars
Surveyed afresh far and near
Then that worthy walked forward. 21

Alone, but unassailable,
Bold as if with guards around;
Lightning, his illumination
Thunder, his escorting drums. 22

The stately form went along
Midnight seemed mid-day for him
For the baniyan trees rain drops fell
Like flowers along his route. 23

The massed bushes, here and there
 Like sport-mounds of the Ruler Darkness,
 Studied with fire flies looked
 As huge tusked with golden finery. 24

The tall coconut palms
 With rain drops lining their fronds
 Were like green umbrellas spread
 With borders of silver beads. 25

The dense date-palms were curtains
 Their new leaves waved in the wind
 Those whisks of lovely green, fanned⁶
 The lone rambler on his way. 26

The rainwater presented music
 Flowing through fields and canals
 Timely peals of thunder served
 As Mridangam accompaniment. 27

With eyes and ears intent
 Shrewdly surveying all around
 Swinging the stick, he calmly walked
 With the confident gait of a bull. 28

When thus he had gone ahead
 A mile or two he saw a sight
 Away in front there was someone
 With a torch, hurrying on 29

Lighted torch⁷ in the right hand
 A cadjan shade in the left
 What could be seen of the body
 With a white cloth was covered. 30

6. The flame of burning stick or brand.

7. Like Thazha, a matted fan held more for show than for use.

- On the touch-stone of the dark night
The swinging torch drew lines of gold
Our stroller saw a slim form
And guessed it was a woman. 31
- Who was it ? This midnight
When none would dare to stir outside
A woman, alone ! Tragedy
Uncertain, he followed to know 32
- Bangles of bronze on the hand
Glowed in the flare of the torch
Our sharp way-farer saw that sight
And it gave him an intense shock 33
- "She is a Namboodiri lady !
With a torch ! On such a night
She walks like other way—farers
Are my eyes deceiving me ?" 34
- With doubts in his mind
The expert night-rover followed
Saw the woman turn towards
The verandah of a humble home 35
- There in the hut, dirty as a cattle-shed
She put aside her shade and torch
While her stalker, attentive
In the yard stood well concealed 36
- The dark - haired one with lovely hands
Knocked gently on the door in front
Some sounds were heard from within
Preparation to welcome the guest 37

- The door opened - the noise lightened
 The dense silence of the night
 A hand lamp coming from inside
 Spread rays that caressed the delicate form. 38
- She laid aside her shoulder - cover
 With hands dainty as flower
 Wiped her feet, she seemed divine
 A creation of God of Love 39
- Ear rolls patting her rosy cheeks
 With faded sandal paste on the forehead
 Throwing amorous sharp glances
 Glowed the lotus - face of the red-lipped dame. 40
- The handsome youth, obviously stunned
 And dazed awhile, gazed on the beauty
 There was excitement on his face
 At his luck quite unexpected. 41
- In a husky voice he asked
 'Ah! my little lady! is not thy lord at home?'
 'Went to Alathiyoor⁸ for a share of the beaten rice'
 She replied and stepped inside. 42
- Who opened the door - a Sudra youth
 Who entered inside - a Brahmin lady
 The great distance between - Only an ant-hill
 Easily crossed by Manmatha's arrow. 43
- Hearing the lovers' exchanges
 The follower in the yard got a jolt
 Was he wandering about
 In a land of dreadful dreams ? 44

8. The idol there is of Hanuman - Brahmins used to gather at the temple for a share of the holy offering to the deity.

No mistake - the virtuous knew for certain
 How noble her caste, how ignoble her deed
 The world always the same - the more heinous are
 The vices of the more highly rated 45

Like rain water on salt lands
 Thulsi⁹ garlands on rubbish piles
 Oblations into funeral fires
 The high caste lady went inside 46

The one outside instantly
 Secured the torch left behind
 It was with Thattuvastram wrapped¹⁰
 The cloth which twice-born wear 47

In my honest innocence I could
 Never guess, Oh! burnt out torch!
 In the hands of a frail woman
 Was Manmatha's mighty missile of fire 48

'I did not imagine at first
 A high class girl mad with love
 Will bring the brand all the way
 To burn her bower of chastity 49

Chastity - how precious! The place she sold it
 Taking so much trouble was just
 A destitute abode of utter poverty,
 How low, a woman in folly will fall. 50

9. A type of flower.

10. The kind of cloth the brahmins wear on the occasions of religious ceremonies.

Pure women are jewels for the world,
Sacrifice of chastity is but suicide
You, brand, who came as an aid
Be sure, I won't let you get away 51

The hand, held with radiant devotion
By a saint, the chanter of holy hymns,
While in that hand, you threw her
Into an abyss of misery" 52

With thoughts like these he left the place
None else was he but the last chief of Vettam
From the next day on, the Sun never shone
On the foolish lover in a cell in prison 53

As the earth came out from the dark veil of the Night
The King's men with the brand wrapped in new silk
Reached the reputed house; enough evidence
—Her cadjan shade smashed¹¹ she was thrown
out, an outcaste. 54

11. Umbrella of palm leaves.

THE SONG OF TRUTH

This is a hymn to Truth. To the Indian philosopher Truth is the supreme object of all human pursuit, and everything is contingent upon Truth. In this hymn the poet draws on the expositions of Truth given in the Upanishads. It is significant to observe that to Mahatma Gandhi, his life itself was his experiments with Truth and that Independent India has accepted as its motto the dictum 'Truth alone triumphs.'

The poem is replete with conceits that spring forth spontaneously from a fecund imagination.

Victory to the mother, victory
Illustrious goddess of truth
Your peerless glory alone sustains
All the worlds in the universe. 1

In the vast desert wastes
Spreading boundless all above
How many flowers glisten
With the flashes from thy lustre 2

Donor of ease, any one can see
On the grand blue plate on high
Are etched in letters of gold
Some chapters of your history¹ 3

1. The history of the Goddess of goodness or Sankari.

- The sunlight which regulates
The rest and toil of mankind
Is only the brilliance of your sceptre
Lone majesty of three worlds 4
- From the golden orb atop your temple
The lovely myriad beams issue,
They scatter the pervading dusk
And give the world sanctifying light. 5
- Mother of the Universe, you raise aloft
A dish of silver every day
Out from it you pour for us
Sweet white milk, or is it love? 6
- Threatening the whole world to drown
The roaring seas incessantly come
Thy child, command², shoves them back
Only a trifling sport for him ! 7
- With clouds to serve as turbans
Trees and creepers as vestments
Mountains stand alert by you
To hear your least commands 8
- How many steamers hit the rocks
And soon to bits are broken
While blinding fog rolls along
Driven by your blowing gales 9
- Lightning, your royal sword, clouds
Your chariots, thunder drums of war
The ceaseless sounds from Nature
Your triumphant bugle calls 10

2. The command of Truth is represented as the child of Truth. The command of truth can drive away the seas of disorder.

Your light, showing the right path
 Man tries to hide with cobwebs
 Of bad desires; but it stands
 Eternal, resplendent as ever. 11

With boundless love you forgive
 And still shelter the erring children
 He who bends to kiss your feet
 Will ever hold high his head 12

In the shadow of your banner
 Is the only haven of bliss;
 Who keeps your feet on his head
 Is monarch truly crowned 13

Who your rare advice absorbed
 He is the scholar really learned
 Who can sing your silent songs
 He is the poet of genuine breed 14

By total sacrifice at your feet
 One performs Thyaga Dharmam³
 And contemplation of your
 Lovely form is Rajayogam⁴.

3. Thyaga dharmam — Self sacrifice is the duty.

4. One of the four yogas helpful for the attainment of the liberation of the soul, advocated in the Geeta. It entails absolute concentration of the mind. The other yogas are of Jnana (knowledge) Karma (Action) and Bhakthi (Devotion). Liberation of the soul comes from the realisation of truth.

TO THE MOTHER LAND

In this poem the poet exhorts his countrymen to shed their stupor and to help their allies in their fight against their enemies in the first world war. The poet pays tribute to the industry, fortitude and resilience of his country men. The children shall wipe away the tears that stain their mother's face.

Oh ! revered Mother
Why do you sit with our head bent ?
Could it be you are weeping silently ?
Though to disasters grievous you are used for long
Do your eyes. even now, smart with tears ?
Or though granite-hard in your own grief
Your heart is soft as butter in another's pain
How can our rough hands
Calloused, holding the spade
Wipe the tears from your gentle face ?
Here we dedicate at your feet
The wages of today's labour too.
Send this too.
To your sisters¹ in the peril of war
Let us do what little we can
Worry not we have to fast, oh ! mother
Fasting is an auspicious rite for us
Your children can live on water

1. The sisters are the allies.

Held in their cupped hand;²
 They have shown too they could hold
 The oceans of the world
 In the hollow of their hand and swallow them³
 Held in their hand is self restraint.
 Their hands lanky with starvation
 Can at one blow suppress mountains.
 An urban mansion, or a gloomy wilderness,
 A silken bed, or the surface of a rock
 Is all the same, Oh ! mother
 To us, your sons!
 Yourself, great soul, have taught your children
 The noblest of virtues is sacrifice.
 Where else in the world is a man
 Who would give up his body to save a bird ?
 The lullaby that rocks your sons to sleep
 Is the joyous song of 'Dharma.'
 They grow up ready to renounce all
 For the sake of 'Dharma' and truth.
 To your sons in the battlefield
 Fighting for righteousness's sake
 It matters not what they gain
 A shower of shots, or a shower of flowers-
 Unhappily, for sometime now
 Rust encrusts your sword⁵;
 Still, to the hosts of your foes
 Your sword is the thunderbolt

2. The Indians who adopt Vanaprastha practise to live on just a handful of water. Austerity is a virtue highly cherished by the Indians.

3. According to the Puranas, Agastya, the sage drank all the waters of the seas.

4. Reference is to Sibi.

5. The reference is to the law that forbids Indians carry weapons.

Let your enemies
Who their arrogant pride cannot contain
Turn their strength into smoke.
When the mind clears off the smoke
And cleanses bright the firmament
There will flutter against the sun
The flags of victory of your beloved friends.
Their victory, oh ! mother is ours too.

THE DISCIPLE AND THE SON

The clash between loyalties is one of the most powerful themes of dramatic treatment. In the Indian tradition a Guru treats his disciple as his own son. Parasu Rama is the most beloved disciple of Lord Siva; he has the rare privilege of even intruding upon the privacy of his master. Once when Siva is in his private chamber, Parasu Rama comes to see him on urgent mission. However Ganapathi forbids him to meet the Lord. There upon ensues a clash between Parasu Rama and Ganapathy in which Ganapathy loses one of his tusks. The situation is a little alarming. Parvathi can not bear to see her son soaked in blood. One is not quite sure of her reaction. But Radha and Krishna arrive at the scene and set things aright.

The poem may be, with slight modification presented as a short 'Attakkatha'. The characterisation is masterly.

It may be noted that Vallathol has had special regards and respects for Parasu Rama who had, according to tradition, raised this land of Kerala from the sea.

In Kubera's¹ matchless city
Whose golden domes sparkled
In the mellow afternoon sun,
Along a highway flanked by palaces
Strode a brahmin of noble mien
Towards Lord Shiva's mountain-abode.

1. The deity who commands the entire north; also the deity of wealth.

Attired he was in ascetic robes²,
Yet could be traced in his looks and bearing,
Not the beatitude³ that marks a saint⁴
But the virile grace of a fighter.

His matted hair and beads and deerskin—garb
And the sacred ash that smeared his every limb
Could scarce conceal the arrogance
That clothed this youthful anchorite;
And every pace he took disclosed
Nobility, valour and chivalric⁵ poise.

Here and there stood groups of men
Who gazed in awe and spoke in undertones,
And with gestures urged the others
To speak low

While yaksha⁶ damsels paused and garlanded
With lotus-eyes his youthful charms,
Dreaming the while of bearing sons
Cast in the self-same mould.

Squatters on either side got up;
For him the passers-by made way;
And all along the crowded highway
A solemn stillness spread.

2. Here it is the deerskin garb.

3. Calmness and composure.

4. Rishi or Tapsaweri.

5. The poet has in mind very many qualities such as valour, prowess, punctuality, elevation of mind, and nobility.

6. Yakshas are ethereal beings. They are the subjects of Kubera.

A breeze, fresh-bathed in the fabled Alakananda⁷,
 Dusted with pollen of Kalpaka blooms,
 And wafting the perfume of Sougandhika flowers,
 Blew meek and subdued as it tended him,
 For who can keep from shuddering
 At the fire-spitting blade of the hatchet
 Held in his mighty grip ?

'T was this self-same weapon,
 Washed and purified in the blood of foes,
 That hacked the thousand hands of the Hehaya King⁸,
 Like as many pieces of chamata stems.
 Bhargava Rama - yes, it was he,
 This radiant-looking brahmin,
 Now on his way to the Holy Mount
 To meet his lord and master.

II

Arrived at Kailas⁹, this redoubtable sage
 Who, with incantations learned from Agasthya,
 Had charmed Radha and Krishna¹⁰,
 Who'd won divine weapons from Shiva,
 And had the prowess to burn up hordes of foes,
 Walked up the mountain, past the jewelled gate,
 And, greeted by Nandi and his tribe,
 Reached the pleasure-house of the lord
 In the cool shade of a peepul tree.

7. A tributary of Ganga, that flows through Alaka.

8. Karthaveeryarjuna, the great Kshatriya king.

9. The seat of Lord Siva.

10. The poet refers to this power of Parasu Rama in advance; later in the story Radha and Krishna make their appearance.

Standing guard on the gem-studded piazza
Outside the door, on either side
Were Ganesha¹¹ and Guha¹². The valiant sage,
Eager to enter, sped past the sentinels.
"Why all this haste?" - There was gentle banter
In Ganesha's voice - "Here, stay awhile,
In there is father. Let him relax."

This brotherly submission Rama heeded not.
"No time, this, for trifling - My mission
Brooks no delay". With that he tore himself
From Ganesha's restraining hands.
Now Guha grasped his arm. "Dear brother"-
His voice was soft - "do you think it meet
To break in on his seclusion without his leave?"

But deaf to the protest, did Rama shake off
The hand that held him back. Never in his life
Had he retraced a step he'd already taken.
Circling the sage's shoulders with his trunk
Ganesha counselled: "Unannounced,
No one can enter there.
Stop here, my friend, and wait."
"You're wasting time. A loyal pupil
Has free access to his teacher.
Nor time nor place can bar him."
Rama surged forward - but Ganesha blocked the path
"Leave me, and let me go." "I won't." "Oh fie,
How dare you play your dirty tricks on Rama?"

11. The son of Lord Siva.

12. The younger brother of Ganesha. He is Subramaniam; A master of astrology he had foreknowledge of the consequence of the clash between Parasu Rama and Ganesha.

Moods quickly changed; ere long
They promptly came to shoves and thrusts.
Powerless to placate the chafing pair,
Gulha remained aloof;
While, roused by the boom of the noisy wrangle,
The chiefs among the lord's retinue
Came rushing - and stood agape !

Breaking loose from his opponent's grip
The brahmin warrior shook his axe.
But suddenly—
Caught by the heels by Ganesha's trunk,
The haughty Rama was wafted through the air
In a sprotive merry-go-round,
The while, spinning like a top,
He saw the nether regions one by one
Whirling before his eyes !

Giving him, thus, a glimpse of the universe,
Ganesha set him down on earth.
But what was meant to clear his arrogance
Did but inflame a bitter wrath.
Rama's brows contracted in a frown
At this his first - ever defeat.
The ancients of Bharath brooked not defeats
Even those imposed by Gods¹³.

III

Overwhelmed by anger
Spurred by self-respect,

13. Vallathol had great admiration for Parasu Rama,

Without a single moment's thought
The disciple swung and flung at the son
The axe he'd gained from the father¹⁴.

It gored Ganesha's cheek; and, as his left tusk
With a deafening thunderous crash
Dropped bleeding to the ground,
Even like a peak of Kailas
Sticking white from its laterite¹⁵ base
The entire universe gave forth a shudder.

Snow-haired Himavan lifted his head,
Dazed at his grandson's¹⁶ dire mishap;
And behind a cloud vanished the sun,
Reluctant to watch the scene.

Ganesha the fair, his tuskless cheek
Saffroned by the blood-gushing wound
Did the lovely autumn-cloud recall,
Tinged with the crimson of the setting sun.

Guha smiled; sad Ruru heaved a sigh;
In fury did Veerabhadra whirl his mace;
Aged Nandi closed his eyes in thought;
Kundodara impatiently wrung his hands;
And Chanda, astounded, bit his tongue.

Brave indeed were those that watched the scene,
And yet not one did dare oppose the sage,
For well they knew the Lord's especial love
For disciples, even when they err.

14. The axe was Siva's gift to Parasu Rama

15. Suggestive of the blood-stained base.

16. Ganapathy was the son of Parvathi, the daughter of Himavan.

32385

As their frenzied outcries rent the sky
There appeared upon the scene
Ganesha's parents - the parents
Of all the universe.

Shiva gazed at Ganesha, his blood-stained cheek,
At the penitent Rama prostrate at his feet,
And mingled feelings filled his heart,
Of compassion and of love.

But the flustered mother came on the run,
Drew to her lap her darling son,
And, as she fussed over his wounded cheek,
Guha disclosed in fair detail
Just what had happened and why.

Fire flashed from Parvathi's eyes. With her left hand,
Quickly sweeping her dishevelled hair
Back from her forehead, she glared at her lord.
"Recompense¹⁷ enough, I suppose
From your distinguished disciple?
Nay - divine weapons, if any
Remain still with you,
Bestow those as well, and throw
A blessing into the bargain.

What if a mere son is hurt - or dead?
Your great disciple is there -
The greatest indeed, of all!
Well knowledge should be given
Only to the deserving.

17. Usually disciples present the master with whatever the Guru asks of him, It is termed 'Dakshina'. Parvathi's words are packed with indignation and irony.

When the axe that gets its handle
Gifted by a kindly tree,
Turns round and hacks the donor -
what supreme gratitude!"

All this, and more besides,
Streamed from Parvathi's lips;
But silent stood the lord;
The on-lookers, with bated breath,
Longing to hear the the master's word,
waited in vain.

Sorely troubled was Shiva's heart
Over Ganesha's injury. But, then,
No more had the disciple done
Than valour demands in such a strait.
The supreme lord, though all-knowing,
Stood lost in thoght, unable to judge.

IV

Presently the gloom dissolved;
Of the inauspicious happening
No trace remained,
For, into the air over Kailas there came seeping
The nectar-sweet strains of a fluty melody¹⁸
Whose cadence, scarcely heard except by ancient seers,
Did everyone enchant;
Even Parvathi in her rage and grief
Was thrilled into forgetting all.

¹⁸. The flute is of Lord Krishna.

Aloft in the sky ere long was seen
A superb blaze of splendour,
By and by
It came winging down and took its stance
Between Lord Shiva and his spouse.
This luminous Cloud resolved itself anon
Into two forms; a celestial couple, ideally matched.

The one that stood by Shiva shone
Like a rain-cloud clothed in sheets of lightning,
In his hands he held a dainty flute,
And a bunch of peacock-quills adorned his curls.

Holding his hand was she whose face
Resembled a lotus unfurling at dawn;
Like sweet-smelling champak flowers were her limbs
In coral-red gossamer silks attired.

Soon were they recognized: Radha and Krishna;
And joyfull salutations filled the air,
As they with words of cordial welcome
Were to their seats of honour led.
And there, at their feet, bowing in obeisance,
Were Guha and Ganesha and Rama.

Dreading a curse from his master's spouse,
And saddened by the snapping of fraternal ties,
Stood Rama, restless and pale.

This did they notice with compassionate eyes,
The divine denizens of Gokula.

Cuddling Ganesha in a maternal hug,
Did Radha pat his blood-smeared cheek
With a palm that healed it in a trice,
(And healed, as well, the wound in Parvathi's heart),
A palm whose cooling nectar-touch
Could sooth afflicted devotees.

Fondling Ganesha with her tendril-like arms
Luminous with the golden glow of bracelets,
Radha spoke with a smile that brightened
The beauty of the pearls across her breast,
In a dulcet voice more melodious
Than the notes from her own Krishna's flute.

"When children in their pranks indulge,
Should a mother so much get incensed?
You've three sons now, remember, not two,
Since Rama is disciplined to your lord.
Without the pangs of child-birth did you get him:
Isn't he, then, the foremost of your sons?"

"Pre-destined is our Ganesha
To rest content with a single tusk
What's decreed by fate can ne'er be stayed.
Guha here, our little astrologer,
May well have all these things foreseen".

Smiling as he spoke, did Krishna clasp
Guha, bowing in humility,
To his bosom decked with the Kousthubha gem
And garlands of forest-flowers,

At a meaningful glance from her smiling lord
Parvathi, head bowed, and overcome by shame,
Raised the prostrate Rama with both her hands,
When, like a child nestling in its mother's bosom,
Shone the foremost fighter of the Universe¹⁹.

Shortly from the skies was heard
The thunderous clap of victory-drums,
And in its wake came a downpour of flowers-
All at once
The peacock²⁰ of Guha outspread its tail
Of rainbow-coloured feathers,
And broke into a lively dance
with gay abandon.

19. Once again the poet expresses his admiration for Parasu Rama.

20. Guha travels on his peacock.

SALUTATION TO THE MOTHER

The dominant note in Vallathol's poetry is his patriotism. He loved India and saw it as a whole. He was at the same time fully aware of the influence Kerala had exerted on him. He was never tired of praising the beauty of Kerala's landscape, its rich heritage, and its language. In this poem Vallathol pays tribute to the story of Kerala and inspires its people to stand by one another and work for its freedom. The poem is remarkable for its nature descriptions, rich allusiveness and the patriotic fervour it exudes.

Bow to the mother, bow to the mother,
Bow to her who is great,
Bow to her who grants boons.
Like the gem that long ago
The sun-god gave to Satrajit¹
Is not our land a matchless gem
The Ocean, the home of precious stones
In fond affection bestowed on
Jamadagni's son, supreme in ascetic might?
Bow to the goddess of prosperity²
Dear daughter of the ocean.

-
1. Syamantakom that the sun God presented to Satrajit. Kerala is a jewel that the sea presented to Parasu Rama. Hence the comparison.
 2. Lakshmi, the Goddess of prosperity rose from the sea of milk as it was churned.

The mother reclines
Her head on the green-clad Sahya Hills
Her feet encushioned on the sandy beach.
Guarding her on either side
Stand the Lord of Gokarna³ and the Goddess Kumari.
Bow to the mother, bow to the mother
Bow to her who is worshipped
Even by the gods we worship.

The waves of the ocean
Like attendant maids
Put silver anklets of white foam
On your dainty divine feet.
Dissatisfied they take them off
And try them on again and yet again.
Bow to the mother, bow to the mother
Bow to her who is supreme
In the glory of her fortune.

Dark rain clouds bright with lightning
Are elephants adorned with gold,
Loud thunder is the flourish of trumpets,
Indra's shining rainbow is festive decoration.
Where but in Bhargava's temple
Is such a festival of rains?⁴

Bow to the mother, bow to the mother
Bow to the presiding deity
Of plenty and of prosperity.

3. Gokarna marks the northern limit of Kerala. The Cape was the southern limit of ancient Kerala. Cape is often represented as a virgin endlessly waiting for her Lord Siva.

4. The rainy season is represented as a grant festival in a Kerala Temple.

The cardmom plants on your hills
Flags that fly aloft your fame,
Gracefully wave in the playful wind
That blows from your sandalwood groves
Far and wide over the world
They waft your fragrance everywhere.
Bow to the mother, bow to the mother
Bow to her whose virtues
Charm the peoples of the world.

The arecanut trees in your garden
United in wedlock to clinging betel vines,
And their heads humbled with weight of fruit
Dance in the wind
In their joy of serving the world
Bow to the mother, bow to the mother
Bow to her whose hospitality
Is sung aloud by her guests.

Supreme in bewitching beauty
Is this orchard of yours
Here coconut palms stand bearing
Pitchers of shining gold,
Clusters of coral adorn
Pepper vines in the fruitful days.
Bow to her who is adored
By all who wish for a life auspicious
Do not turn from us
Your face pale with pain
We swear we shall become
Again, Oh! mother, your children true
The ship of time ever rushing forward

Yet brings the voyagers back to the starting place⁵
Bow to the mother, bow to the mother,
Bow to her whose heart is wrung
With love for her offspring.

Her royal sword lies forgotten
Encrusted with mud
Let us take it up and burnish it
Let it stainless shine
Let the sun's effulgent rays
Kiss its spotless blade.
Bow to the mother, bow to the mother,
Bow to her whose breasts
Have nourished heroes great.
Our ancestors in days of old
With sword as well as tongue
Routed mighty foes.
Some drops of their blood still flow in us,
The warmth of that blood stirs us in our sleep.
Our eyes open a little at least now.
Bow to the mother, bow to the mother,
Bow to her who is blessed
With children great, from days of yore.

Can these curtains of mere cobwebs
Make division of our mother's house?
Our breath is enough to blow them off
If we stretch and blow a deep-drawn breath⁶.

-
5. The poet suggests that the wheel has come to a full circle; the time is ripe for the liberation of the motherland.
6. The suggestion is that Indians shall rise above their petty differences and fight for freedom, as the children of the self same mother.

Bow to the mother, bow to the mother,
Bow to her who is renowned
As the author of welfare.

Let this our new garland
Woven of many flowers
On the silken thread of brotherhood
Shine for ever, unspoilt, on mother's breast,
Giving her joy ecstatic.

Bow to the mother, bow to the mother,
Bow to her who teaches
The doctrine of 'Advaita'.

Let us take as our Veda mother's words;
Service to her be our noblest yajna⁷
Brothers dear, let us dedicate unto her
Our cherished lives entire;
What God but the mother is here for us?
Bow to the mother, bow to the mother,
Bow to her whose benevolence grants
All the desires of the heart.

7. The ceremonial sacrifice. It is a ritual prosecuted to propitiate the Gods; at the time it ennobles the devotee.

NOTHING TO EAT, NOTHING TO WEAR

The poem is a narrative piece bringing out the pathos of the lives of millions of people thrown into the jaws of poverty during the first world war. In this poem a young man who returns to the house of his wife finds his mother-in-law, a beautiful woman turned emaciated and thin with hardly any clothing to cover her nakedness. At the sight of the youngman the mother-in-law rushes into the inner room and hangs herself out of sheer shame. The details given are realistic, the style is rather terse. The poem shows that the great classicist and romanticist that Vallathol was, he excelled in producing realistic pieces as well.

There's the hut, no timely thatching;
Old fronds had sagged with the rains,
Between the rafters these stood out
Like the ribs of a starving destitute. 1

Through the holes in the worn-out roof
The sunbeams reached the cottage floor
Those circles of light crept about,
Cruel eyes of the demon of want.¹ 2

On the walls once clean, the stains
Were not from the rains leaking
Through the crumbling roof, red tresses loose
They are, of the goddess of misfortune². 3

1. The circles of light are the cruel eyes of the demon of poverty.

2. The evil Goddess of ill-luck.

Or, they are bloodstains from the eyes
Of the luckless weeping cottage
Which remembered days of prosperity
Then saw the slump into poverty. 4

On the sides of the little shed
Were cob-webs sticking everywhere
The front-doors ill omened, loose
Dangling like ear-discs made of lead³. 5

Who looks after its repairs?
She to whom the place belonged
No strength even to fill her lungs
In the kitchen she stood alone 6

This recluse, shrunk by a vow
To fast, imposed by the poverty
Weary, by the hearth, is she
Praying before the God of fire? 7

Let her garments be ragged and torn,
Though her face be pale and sad
One notes in that distressed form
Gentility but somewhat disguised. 8

Not more than eight and thirty years—
Still she had the figure of youth
Beautiful, with what remained
After winged devil of want had sucked away. 9

3. Such ear discs were worn by women.

For lack of oil now her hair
Is more like coconut fibre
Four to five months ago it was
A mass of shimmering blue⁴. 10

Why this decay? Her lands sold
And all the money spent for daily needs
Her spouse, about the future thinking
Gone and living a coolie's life. 11

Queen of the house, she'd lived at ease
With a husband full of love
Now racked by unquenched hunger
No cloth even to cover her limbs 12

Sunk in shame and sorrow
Suffer—thus decided the fates!
Lord of the worlds, in golden bloom⁵
Why fix so many cruel thorns? 13

With sweet jingle of bangles
Many you welcomed, feasted
Hands which gave abundant food
Now rarely get some grains of rice. 14

Today some neighbour kindly bent
Gave her a handful of rice
With it to cook some gruel
Into the kitchen she had gone. 15

4. Luxuriant as the matted fan held up by the attendant - Thazha.

5. The reference is to Kaitha, a thorny Plant with fragrant flowers.

II

Look! A young man of noble mien
Checking carefully all around,
Uncertain about what he saw
Slowly came to the shabby hut. 16

No! I have not missed my way
Sure, this is the self-same house,
But it has changed a lot,
What happened to relatives here? 17

With such thoughts he just entered
The front room, feeling puzzled
None to welcome the waiting guest
As was wont in by-gone days. 18

On the verandah, prostrating
Lay a dog, with lice all over
It's bony sides rising and falling
As it quickly breathed, in and out. 19

That dog raised its drowsy head
Slowly from its forelegs stretched;
Once looked the visitor up and down
With its worn-out bleary eyes. 20

The traveller started pacing
To and fro within the room;
Hearing soft foot-falls outside
The lady inside rose excited, 21

With her weak withered arms
Slowly covered her bosom pale,
Wearily into the front-room came,
Had a glimpse of the pacing figure. 22

The youth could not recognise
His wife's mother at the first glance
Silks then, now soiled rags—
How much her life had changed! 23

The famished one from her single glance
Could know who the visitor was
She felt scorching her body
An intense lightning shock. 24

As the youth stood looking dazed
The lady shivered and ran inside
And slipping into the northern room⁶
Quickly fastened the door within. 25

This visitor, don't you remember
Your daughter's spouse; all perplexed
Why spoke you no word of welcome
Why fled you from him to hide? 26

Anywhere if a male was present
Her feet would refuse to go
She shalln't be seen even by dames
Her body is now so bare 27

When the young man's confused mind
Somewhat cleared in course of time
He guessed his in-law's troubles
And came out to the open yard. 28

If hills tumble in two short years
What hopes for mounds of sand?
Lakshmy⁷ herself feels the pinch
For food and cloth! Such dire poverty! 29

6. Generally Hindu houses have four wings - one each in each direction.

7. The goddess of Good fortune and prosperity. The times are so bad.

- Dark European firmament
With smokes from the guns of war⁸
But darker the Indian skies
With privation's hot exhalations. 30
- Stirred by some such thoughts the youth
Reached the street of busy shops
Bought some clothes with a loving heart
Came back again to mother's place 31
- Noble son, the cloth you bought
For your wife's mother to wear in joy
Now a shroud. Ha! the scene is changed,
Go and open the inner door. 32
- Where there is no want, no grief
No strife nor any poison war
There has reached the noble dame
Where one is content and at peace. 33

8. The period of the first world war.

THE *PURANAS

This poem reveals the philosophical moorings of the poet. The great sages of India attained Truth through contemplation. Its ecstasies were often expressed in concrete situations and imagery in the puranas which are the perennial founts of Indian poetry. The Puranas embody in them the finest of ethical principles and the noblest of human ideals. They light the path of human life and lead humanity from thralldom to freedom.

The poem is also remarkable for the mellifluous melody which is a characteristic of Vallathol's poetry.

- * There are eighteen Puranas in Sanskrit. Purana means sacred ancient lore. Each Purana contains a series of episodes illustrating some philosophic or religious truths.

The great ancestral sages of India
Those who knew well the very foundations of the world
Devotees of yoga alone, with no desire for pleasure:
Their only wealth was sacrifice; and their dwellings
Were no better than frayed tenements
Thatched with wild grass and dry leaves;
Yet whatever jewels and gold were got from them
Are invaluable, no where else available.

The goddess of speech¹ loved the grass-leaf mattress
Of these good People better than beds of silk
We still hear in the Puranas the sounds of the bangles

1. Goddess of speech... is Saraswathi the goddess of art and learning.

That glitter upon the lovely hands of the goddess of speech,
 As she, overcome by love, gently fanned
 With the sheet of cloth² that covered her breasts
 Those blessed souls whenever in the heat of meditation,
 Their foreheads, broad and holy, soaked in sweat.
 My salutations to you, O charming colloquies
 That the great-souled rishis frequently held
 With the Muse of poesy, when they took time off
 To repose in between their spells of meditation on Brahma³

O glorious Puranas, I salute you,
 Treasure-houses of the resplendent Muse
 That fostered Bhasa,⁴ & ⁵ Kalidasa and others,
 Immaculate streams that have flowed forth
 From the mount of the Vedas⁶ of rare greatness,
 Temples of the gods of the lofty Upanishads,⁷
 Fields where grow the fourfold goals of life⁸
 Triumphal pillars of the reputed Aryas.

Here are pleasure-gardens with honey-sweet fruits,
 Cool breezes blowing upon freshly fragrant flowers
 And the songs of birds so cheerful at heart;
 Here again are ponds that look so bright
 Wrapped in the green silk of lotus leaves.

Elsewhere there are mountains and forests
 Filled with diverse trees wearing stars as crest-jewels.

2. The tip of the cloth with which a woman covered her breast.

3. The supreme God, the Absolute Truth.

4. & 5. Great dramatists in Sanskrit.

6. The sacred scriptures of the Hindus.

7. Upanishads are sacred philosophic expositions, the repository of ancient wisdom.

8. The four paths are of Dharma (duty) Artha (earning wealth) Kama (gratifying desire) and Moksha (liberation).

Again there are rushing, noisy rivers that scatter
 Crystals galore as they smite against rocks.
 Ah, beautiful by nature and gently dignified
 Your world is indeed worthy to be worshipped by the blessed.
 Frightening me with the threat of Punishment,
 Or holding me back by the unbroken power of friendship,
 Or embracing me with the loveliness of love,
 You have kept me from all acts of sin.
 You keep watch with eyelids never closed,
 And laugh at the games of Maya⁹ which makes dust appear
 gold,

Even as you weep out of grief at the thought
 Of the flower of human life falling into mud,
 Discriminating between justice and injustice,
 Dharama and Adharma,¹⁰ you regulate the world's course.

You sing lullabies and put to repose and joy
 Caressing out of love, this world, your child.
 You throw away the scepter and take up the Yogi's staff;
 Replace the crown of gold with a tuft of matted hair.
 Heaven to you is the equal of grass; in this world
 One thing alone is to be sought after liberty, real salvation.

To secure this liberty, three-syllabled like the holy Omkara¹¹
 Devote your entire thought, word and deed,
 Work in all humility, dear brothers;
 And seek fulfilment for your valuable human life.

9. Maya, means illusion - it is a philosophic concept.

10. Opposite of Dharmā.

11. Omkara, has three syllables. It is a complex of a, u, and m This word is mystical and enriched with philosophic and religious meaning.

PEASANTS' SONG

The poem was composed under the inspiration of Gandhiji's ideal of Ahimsa. The first world war had just ended. It showed the world the immensity of the destruction caused by war. The soul of the poem is the song of iron. Iron, which is to help man earn his livelihood is used to make moral weapons. Only the peasants of India realize the real purpose of iron. Only they have ears to hear its song. The poem is a plea for peace. It brings out the integrity and innocence of the peasants of India who love peace; they live in peace and work for the prosperity of their motherland.

If only iron had tears to shed
These would have fallen, drop by drop,
To inscribe just these alphabets:
"My brethren who should have been shaped
Into simple, common, farming tools
To nurture and sustain life's rich blood,
Are forged into dread weapons of war
That serve but to drain the blood of life

If, perchance, there rears a head¹
There swings at it a sneering sword,
A darting lance, a barking gun;
Fashioned into such helpless slaves,
What grievous slaughter do we not

1. If one nation seems to grow more powerful, others plan to suppress it.

Contrive for scheming evil lords?
When shall we be free of this stain of sin?
Who's there to read this but this land²
Dark land of unlettered peasants?

The people of this peninsula
Are not the kind of heroes, bold
Who render fair their names in fumes
Of cannon, that blacken the skies.
The heights attained by beating down
Others, just appear fake to them
Who are averse to injustice.

Is it by suppressing other hills
That India's Mountain-lord³ stands high?
That great soul, surveying others' heights
Wears a benign smile of perennial snow.
Let there be various plants in fields
Unassailed by rot or draught or flood,
But if love of brethren fail to sprout,
These fields to us are barren wastes.
O my body, stoop to scrape cow-dung⁴,
Stoop not in the presence of injustice.
Bear yoke and plough, my shoulders, bare,
Bear not the commands of selfishness

The hum of spinning wheels⁵ in huts,
Challenges no one to a fight;
Its dear voice but consoles the folk

2. Only peasants understand the significance of this song.

3. The Himalayas.

4. The peasants use cowdung as manure.

5. Under the inspiration of Gandhiji, Khadi was spun at every hut.

Whom slavery has stripped to nakedness.
This land of Ahimsa will never weave
Its livelihood with others' woes,
Build arches with others' backbones,
Its steps to heaven with their corpses.

It's not to crush and squeeze the world
That this realm of right actions struggles hard
To sever its handcuffs, but to pat
And console those, stricken with pain.
This elephant⁶ that's India breaks its chains,
Not to run amok, trampling the world,
But to help haul up with living trunk
Its kindred, trapped in yawning pits⁷.

This river of India breaks its dam
At long last, not to flood the earth
It's to slake the thirst of arid climes
And to bring these back to life and health.
Where humanity is pest-ridden
In this world, the verdant harvest-field
Of our Lord, the gracious CREATOR,
Shall we not blow again and again,
Ev'n with our very breath of life,
To drive away the dreadful scourge?
Didn't India sing from days of yore
"May all the world be happy, free!"⁸

6. The elephant is not ferocious, it is mighty; India is like an elephant.

7. Elephants are beguiled to fall into pits covered with bushes

8. This has been the motto of India right from the beginning 'Loka Samastha
Sukhino Bhavanthu'.

A LULLABY

According to many critics the finest lullaby in Malayalam is that composed by Irayimman Thampi, a nineteenth century Kathakali writer and poet. Thampi compares the baby to a number of beautiful things in life and in nature. This lullaby is reflective and has greater appeal to thought and imagination. Vallathol considered the innocent beauty of childhood as the finest manifestation of holiness on earth. The conceits in the poem captivate our imagination.

Hush thee my baby, hush thee my baby,
Hush thee my baby, my darling,
So that at dawn tomorrow, you may
Wake up with added vigour and joy.

It is time for all to repose
And refresh themselves on the lap of sleep;
Lo, the moonlight, bright as liquid silver,
Has spread an endless white bed.
Hush thee my baby.....vigour and joy.

The young koel, gay after feasting
On the tender leaves of the mango,
Is off and on playing the reed of his throat
To fill your ears with honey-sweet music.
Hush thee my baby.....vigour and joy.

Shaking the flower-laden sprays of the jasmine
Here comes the fresh breeze toddling up,
Eager to caress the tender pink body
Of my darling little son.
Hush thee my baby.....vigour and joy.

It will compose these locks, black as the rain-cloud
That have been ruffled by the gentle breeze,
And plant a kiss on your pretty face
Where lingers a smile as charming as moonlight.
Hush thee my baby.....vigour and joy.

Could it be to watch the beauty
Of the closing of your lily eyes,
That the moon, who ever opens the lilies,
Stands still in the sky gazing at you¹?
Hush thee my baby.....vigour and joy.

As my son did on the veranda this noon,
Which child, intent on play, did scatter
These white grains of roasted maize
On heaven's street at sunset²?
Hush thee my baby.....vigour and joy.

Night's comely baby lies nestling
On the breast of father Moon,
His tender little dark body
Motionless and relaxed³.
Hush thee my baby.....vigour and joy.

-
1. The moon is captivated by the charm of the child more charming than the moon.
 2. The poet wants us to guess who the cosmic child may be, that scatters the maize of stars on the verandah of the sky.
 3. The dark spot in the moon is taken as a baby held in close embrace by the moon.

When my son wakes again,
The fair dawn will come from the east
With a dazzling red-gold top in her hand,
To gather him to her bosom and fondle him.
Hush thee my baby.....vigour and joy.

May the great Mother⁴ look after my son!—
She, who, at the right hour sends to sleep
And wakes up with diverse silent songs
Every one of all the worlds, her offspring!
Hush thee my baby, hush thee my baby,
Hush thee my baby, my darling,
So that at dawn tomorrow, you may
Wake up with added vigour and joy!

4. The cosmic mother.

MY INGRATITUDE

This is intended to arouse in the compatriots a sense of remorse at their insensitiveness to the miserable plight of the Motherland. India was under the British rule. The struggle for India's freedom was gaining momentum under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. The poet considered it his bounden duty to awaken his fellowmen to the need of the time. The poem is written in the form of a confession of a young son who becomes conscious of his ingratitude to his mother. This mother is India. It is possible to posit this mother as the universal Mother also. But in the given context it is more significant to take mother for Mother India.

From some distant unknown hole of darkness
You picked me up, held me to your bosom full
of warm affection,
And brought me into this world of light, O Divine Mother !
Mother, you fed me on the nectar of your breast,
And I played about in your lap in heavenly bliss !

In order to cheer the child and make it laugh
Mother would smile through the jasmine flowers;
Make the peacock, its tail fanned out wide,
Dance to the drum-beat of darkening clouds;
Get the Night, clad in clear blue sky, to hold aloft
Her silver top of dazzling whiteness;
Toss the rounded dew-pearls one after another

Into the dainty little dishes of the rose;
 Make the lusty wind beat down and blow about
 The leaves and flowers of weak-stemmed climbers;
 Drape the branches of the cassia¹ with clusters
 Of golden bells artistically strung with green thread ! 2

If I happen to stumble and fall anywhere
 You steady me, stroke me with your flower-soft hands;
 Even in the night when I lie asleep,
 Your eyes, the stars, keep constant watch over me;
 You are always busily occupied thus
 With the duties of a loving mother;
 But alas ! as the son grows older and older,
 The thought of his mother grows fainter and fainter
 in his mind ! 3

When you are spreading for me tender leaves on my path
 I run away on my own into the thicket of brambles;
 When you light the crystal lamp and hold it aloft for me,
 I go after the fire-fly;
 When, in the pure sweet voice of joy, you sing into my ear
 Hymn after hymn of Dharma,
 Paying no heed to it, I go in search of the discarded 'veena'
 Lying somewhere with its strings all rusty and broken. 4

Why dilate ? Every breath of your life is meant
 for my good;

But I have no time even to think of you;
 I am so terribly busy day and night:
 I must build dams across the river Mirage to irrigate
 The vast rice-fields of my dreamland,

1. The tree mentioned as 'Konna' in the other poems. It is a tree with yellow flowers.

A rampart as high as Mount Gandhamadana² must I build
In the sky, in the city of the Gandharvas³;
I would silver-plate with the juice of the mistletoe
My nectar-bowl of sweet fancies⁴ 5

Alas! Mother, without touching your lotus feet
Which hold the eternal springs of divine elixir,
My hands are eager to squeeze lumps of rock—
Oh, sinner that I am! — to get something to drink.

It is an unbearable strain for my tongue to utter
Even occasionally, 'My obeisance, mother !'
But it knows no fatigue at all in singing paeans
Day and night in the royal court of Greed !

I have two eyes in my face, Mother, only to see
Lowly dust as purest gold!
Not one drop of tear drops from them to quench
The fires of the sorrows you suffer for the sake
Of your children.

Mother does not expect anything from the son;
But the son disclaim his duty to serve his mother?
How remiss I have been, failing to do what I ought to
have done !
How ungrateful I am who forgot his own mother!
Why did I occupy and sully the sacred sanctum of
your womb

Which had borne great spiritual heroes ever imbued
With the spirit of renunciation?
Wherefore was I born in human form? 10

2. A mountain in the north noted for its flowers.

3. Ethereal beings, supposed to be endowed with musical powers.

4. It is a pity that Indians pursue false ideals introduced into this land by the west. They squander their energy in trifles and neglect their duty to their mother.

THUNCHATH EZHUTHACHAN

The poem is an excellent tribute to the poetic genius of Thunchath Ezhuthachan, the Father of Malayalam poetry. His poetic dictum set the tone of Malayalam poetry for the years to come. He, by his effortlessly grand versification standardised the poetic language of Malayalam and evolved the happiest mould for the happiest combination of Malayalam words.

The campus, Thunchan parambu or Thunchan estate, is sacred to Hanuman the great devotee of Rama, noted for his scholarship and strength. The Thunchan estate belongs to the part of land, once known as Vettathunadu to which Vallathol too belonged. Thunchath Ezhuthachan is therefore doubly dear to the poet.

Victory to that Ramaujacharya, a scion among men;
Victory to that ethereal minstrel¹ of Ramayana;
Who was born a saint of a 'Chakkala damsel'
Like Vyasa born of a fisherwoman²
And who cool'd the fret and fever of worldly life
With the elixir³ distilled from great works like
Mahabharata. I

1. Ezhuthachan is represented as a Gandharva singing Ramayana.

2. Vyasa was born of Parasara, the Rishi and Matsya gandhi, the fisher maid.

3. Ambrosia or Amrita.

- O Doyen of preceptors! The village of Alatur, by your
birth,
Has become illustrious for ever and anon;
Was it Hanuman⁴, the presiding deity of that village
Who taught you well the science of grammar? 2
- That which lived in you, astrologer as you were,
Like the long side-glances of the Muse
It was that self-same sacred quill⁵
That cast the horoscope of Malayalam in its infancy. 3
- The melodious warbling of the parrot
Whom you fondled as your own child
Roused the world from the darkness of its ignorance
And ushered in the dawn that shed its lustre all around. 4
- That parrot⁶, fed on honey, fruits and milk
Squatted on the jewel like arm of your charming poetry
And waddled in glee for long
By decorating it, as it were, with the cloven pearl
of its auspicious beak. 5

4. In the Ramayana Hanuman is described as past-master in grammar. He was taught grammar by the sun god.

5. The poet used a sharp pointed pinzer called Narayam. He wrote on leaves with it.

6. The Goddess of learning and poetry, Saraswathi has a parrot on her arm which she fondles. Ezhuthachan represented Ramayana and Bharata as having been recited by a parrot. Hence the poems are often called 'bird-song'.

The pearl like beak of the parrot glowed on the jewel like arm of poetry. Jewel stands for Sanskrit, and pearl stands for pure Malayalam. Ezhuthachan achieved a rare blend of Sanskrit and Malayalam words. Such a style is 'Manipravala' or 'Jewel-pearl' style.

71

The flapping wings of that parrot
 Were to 'Kairalee', a miraculous fan;
 While its tender babbling-notes that bore the essence
of sweetness
 Were a musical recital on Veena, unheard of before

You would teach your disciples the various sastras⁸
leisurely;
You would attain timely peace by meditating on
the 'supreme'
Thus did you lead a peaceful life,
Like a sage endowed with spiritual gifts.

The Chintaratnam⁹ born of the milky ocean
Of your heart, full of the essence of renunciation's nectar,
Shines on the bosom of Kairalee's literature
Like the 'Kaustubha' gem on the breast of Lord Vishnu. 8

In the ground of your hermitage, red with the carpet
Of roses strewn about in your honour by a gleeful Nature-
How many tunes lie submerged there, that had
Flowed out of your parrot's songs every day!

7. The language of Kerala; Malayalam.

8. There are six 'Sastras', books imparting knowledge on important topics.

9. 'Chintaratnam' or 'Thought-Jewel' is a work born of Ezhuthachan's imagination as the jewel 'Koustubha' from the sea of milk. Vishnu wore the jewel nearest his heart.

O Thunchan Campus! salutations to thee
 That shines as the crimson mark of Vettam's¹⁰ eternal
 fortune

Salutations to thee! O tender bush of green foliage
 Whereon the parrot lolled in dance set to music!

Salutations to thee! O sacred temple

Where lived the great Rishi that created modern

Malayalam. 10

10. Thunchan campus is in the old Vettathu principality. Vettathu wears the campus as an auspicious mark on its forehead.

SIGHS

Vallathol had little direct contact with western romantic poems like those of Shelley, Keats or Thomas More. His romanticism was purely eastern drawing inspiration from the poems of Kalidasa and Bhasa. 'Sighs' is a lyric expressing intense emotion without in the least slipping into the ditches of sentimentalism. Though shorter than Radha's Sense of Fulfilment and lacking in dramatic power, as a lyric this equals the finest of the species produced in any language. It is remarkable for its sensuousness, its music and its romantic spirit.

Where do you live in hiding, my lord,
Never once remembering me, your dasi¹ ?
Which is that cloudy night that from my eyes
Hides the glorious moon of my world ?
Many are there to worship you at all times:
For me you are the only lord, supreme.
Like my mind fades the jasmine bouquet meant for you
For want of your touch despite my sprinkling sandal water
Not for nothing did you, my bangles,

cry while doing the hair,

The holy hand has not arrived to deck it with this rose.
What do you whisper, gentle breeze ? That you did search
Every tender-leaved foliage in the pleasure garden
Every honey-filled creeper-cluster and mango groves

1. Handmaiden.

THE TENDER FEET OF THIS LAND OF ACTION

The poem is based on the famous episode of Krishna's suppression of the vile serpent Kalia whose poison contaminated the air. Kalia was in the river Kalindi. The boy Krishna threw himself into the river to meet the devil of the serpent. The description of Krishna's taming of Kalia is vivid. The poem has an allegorical significance. Krishna may stand for Mahatmaji or the morale of India; and Kalia for colonialism. India is often referred to as a land dedicated to action.

"Oh! Achutha, stay, stay", they cried
"Let's go and swim in the forest lake:
Danger lurks in Kalindi's waters,
Infested she is by Kaliya, mighty, terrible,
Who vomits venom as vicious as Kalakoota¹ itself"
Their words moved him not;
Sudden he took the plunge,
Yesoda's² darling, jewel of her love, fell with a splash
A string of pearls flung into the river's spread-out robe.
He swam, his palms, tender leaves
Smiting the water with playful, childish joy.
The waves sparkled, the white foam rose:
The river's breasts, sweetly tickled,
Dripping milk as from a mother's throbbing breasts

1. The deadly poison that Lord Siva drank to save the world.

2. Krishna was the son of Devaki. Yesoda was his foster mother.

His body, cleared of the forest-dust, shone golden;
 He frisked about, rolling and glistening,
 As the sun's orb plays, setting a wavy stream aflame.
 He dived, disappeared, rose again afar;
 He swam with vigour, cutting across the waves:
 Thus on the stage of the God of the waters
 He played the drama of worldly existence.
 Far ahead the quiet waters trembled, swelled the bubbles
 Fearful, evil, the threatening sprouts of some impending
 disaster.

There it comes! floating, mighty, dreadful;
 Could it be a tree thousand-branched, rolling on its way?
 Oh! how could the dear child face his vile, viperous power?
 The boys of Ambadi³ stood, hands to heart,
 Wailing aloud, stunned, panic-stricken.
 With them equally troubled, his cows,
 With flanks glossy, fed on Brindavan's⁴ silken grass,
 Watched; their heads raised, nostrils wide open.
 No wonder; for he, their breath, their life,
 Rushed, audacious, into the advancing serpent's fangs.
 Fast the hooded monster came, parting the waters,
 Hissing, ejecting jets of venom.
 But to the little one, splashing merrily along,
 The gusts of foul poison seemed but a breeze,
 Soft, gentle, wafting the scent of flowers.
 He leapt on to the monster's back; for a time
 The massive body was for him a mere log,
 A stage, awhile, to dance about at will.
 Its tail, thick, hideous as Yama's⁵ rope itself

3. The place where Krishna grew up.

4. The garden dear to Krishna.

5. God of death.

He pulled with his soft hand,
As though it were a toy-serpent's tail
Such as boys make with palm-fronds.
Then, prising open the dark, cavernous mouth,
Down the throat the little cowherd thrust his hands.
Anger rendered Kaliya mad;
He beat the water with his tail, slashing furiously round;
Rolled stubbornly upside down, shaking Kalindi into
turbulence,
Like a wild elephant romping in a small pool.
But the little one did not in the least relent.
Smiling, playful, danced on the hoods,
His anklets of gold ringing in merry tune.
His curly hair, adorned with peacock plumes,
Fell on his shoulders; on its ends
Water drops glistened-a line of silvery spangles.
From all points of the universe cries arose
As eyes numberless kept watch on the scene.
In fright they saw the soles of his feet
Strike the spread-out hoods rocky hard,
Alarmed lest they feel the bruised pain.
But vain their fears; as blood splattered from the hoods,
Their cry took on a different tune;
An appeal to the child to cease his cruel sport.
Beaten, broken by the little dancing feet,
His fangs spitting spouts of clotted blood
Kaliya bent his hoods in silent supplication,
Dripping blood, smearing dark Kalindi, as with marks of
Kumkumam⁶
With that the river's waters became pure again,

6. Red powder taken out of the plant of the same name.

Chastened, rid of the venom that defiled them.
The Devarshis⁷ watching the drama from above
Sent through the white, fleecy clouds a happy smile.
Which meant.....

'Such ever the way of the world;
Howsoever powerful the evil that towers over our holy land⁸
Its inner soul, simple, seemingly weak,
Has ever the spirit, innate, indefatigable,
To trample it down and emerge in glory again.

7. The noblest of the Rishis are the Devarshis.

8. The lines refer directly to our holy land, India, and its plight.

THIS WAY, THIS WAY

In this poem, the poet exhorts his countrymen to stand united under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi and to fight for India's freedom. He knows the right path, and he can steer us safe across the turbulent seas.

This is the path, this the right course
We have to take, on my brothers !
Let not confusion sap our strength again !
Let the lofty mansion of wickedness
Hit the sky and dazzle the world,—
Enough the lowly huts of virtue
For us who are poor.

1

Let the waves in the river grow violent,
Let the wind howl and blow with all its might,
Let the rain come down in torrents,—
Why should we care ?
Heart to heart, shoulder to shoulder,
With arms through which the same blood runs,
If we but ply our oars a dozen times in perfect unison,
This great boat of ours will reach the appointed shore !
He who, inculcating self-discipline, makes the lion
a lamb¹,—
Is not that very Mahatma our helmsman ?

2

1. Reference to Gandhiji's non-violence.

Let us seek the blessings of our one and only Mother:
 Obeisance to thee Mother, obeisance to thee Ever-blessed
 We pray thee, lift up your dauntless and serene head,
 Which for long has been bent under the load of
 sorrow and shame !

Behold our saintly Master-he who has
 Conquered all fear and doubt.
 Stands before thee, holding aloft in his hand—
 Alas! lean and shrivelled with austere penance !
 The crown that should appropriately adorn it !
 The same holy blood² that poured out of your heart
 To slake the thirst of the wild demons .
 Has now turned into the ceremonial saffron water
 For your royal consecration³.
 The eastern horizon turns red at first,
 The bright radiance that illumines rises after !
 Ineffable jubiliation marks this moment of victory !
 The ears are regaled by the hymns of heavenly beings;
 The goddess of peace takes up here divine veena
 In hands soft as the tender leaves of the mango,
 And starts playing on it !
 The curtain is raised, and Truth⁴ takes the stage,
 A sweet symphony spreads in the heavens.
 Great Queen of World⁵, may the sceptre in your lotus hand
 Shed in all quarters the rich radiance
 Of the rising sun !

3

-
2. It is significant that these lines came to be prophetic.
 3. After his martyrdom Gandhiji was hailed as the father of the nation; Vallathol looked upon him as a living sage. These lines are also prophetic.
 4. Truth shall triumph in the end. Truth means the freedom of India. The poet is optimistic about the future of his country.
 5. India shall be praised as the great queen of the world.

RADHA'S SENSE OF FULFILMENT

This is a moving poem that expresses the noble emotion of a young woman deserted by her lover. She learns that her lover is married to another, yet she harbours no ill will against the man; she loves him still. She shall spend her days, a maiden cherishing sweet memories of the love that her lover had once bestowed upon her. The spirit of the poem is romantic; it is healthy romanticism that enlivens most of Vallathol's poems. This poem is redeemed from sentimentalism by the indomitable spirit of Radha whose love triumphs over despair. The poem is an epistle, it has all the characteristics of a monologue. It gives us vivid dramatic scenes of the meeting between the lovers, and their present state. It may be noted how Vallathol celebrates the innocence of a rural maid and exposes the callousness of the rich city young man.

Dear Lor-oh¹, forgive this, my impudence :
Dark night stretched forth its hand to touch the sun !
This noble salutation, this divine nectar,
How can a hapless tongue presume to taste ?
I'm but a farmer's lass while you, indeed,
Are the peerless son of the city, of honoured state.
Let that lovely goddess, you have chosen, sport
In the heavenly garden of your heart's kindness.
For me, my father's farm, once sanctified

1. She does not have the self confidence to write 'Lord'.

By your august presence will afford solace enough.
Here the stone-girt seat beneath the old jack tree
Which many a day showed me a God of love
Still keeps the sandal prints of his soft feet,
Adequate, these prints, for my adoration.

Remember you the day, when you pressed in your hand,
A lemon fruit, my small present to you,
Saying, 'Tis the golden play-ball of your garden nymph',
Darting a smiling glance at my bewildered breast ?
Allow me to worship in heart, with tearful thrill,
That glance,- that note of wordless command to me
'Bow your head and tame your coyness, please'-
That key, which opens the inner cells of the heart,
That tail of the sacred conch, that pours out love.

Here you came one day, like summer fresh,
Well-groomed, in fine apparel, debonair, fair,
Charming my eyes with your gaily glowing cheeks
That added colour to the ruddy setting sun.
Didn't then my hands hardened at water-pots,
Place a bakul garland gently around your neck ?
Keep this, my lover's folly, from her who threw
The garland of her arms around your neck,
Mention it not ev'n in mirthful talk to her,
Lest it should cause that lady, heart's unease.

The evening breeze comes daily to this place,
Once more to roll in the scent of that garland, blessed
By the embrace of your neck, what shall I say ?
'The garland which I put there withered soon;

That which that lady gave will ev'r be fresh
Go there, kind breeze, and gain its hallowed touch
Before you become warm with my woeful sighs !

The same star that shone that day has once again
Risen in the sky, it now listens in vain;
The youth who made this garden a Brindaben²
With the lute of his playful talk here no more
What if that Brindavan is empty now ?
Your Radha is content, all wishes fulfilled.
Did she not with that Bakul garland lay
On those broad shoulders, the burden of her life ?

When thy golden self that was my all in life
Became the property of that fair one,
My father dear did fear calamity³;
But how, my lord, can I cast away my life ?
In this world, made bright by you in conjugal bliss
With your life-mate, so very fair and fortunate,
Content am I to live in some quiet nook;
May your wedded life flourish in peaceful weal.

2. Her lover is here compared to Lord Krishna who thrilled Brindavan.

3. He feared that his daughter deceived by the young man might commit suicide.

THE MORNING SONG

In this poem the poet represents morn as a maid who tidies the mansion of the universe. The entire setting is typically keralite, In the last couplets, the poet surprises us as in a sonnet taking us into the heart of the mystery of cosmic phenomenon which we perceive as dawn.

The resounding drum-beats of the billowy sea
Proclaimed the concluding segment of the night;
As if to gauge the progress of the night
The cocks raised their red-capped heads¹ and crowed aloud.
Dawn awoke at once and came with sukra² as a lamp in hand,
From her bangles arose the sounds of a myriad birds;
She swept up the star-flowers used by yester-night³,
Put away the silver moon platter filled with musk paste;
Sprinkling dew-drops, she put kumkum⁴ at the porch;
And like that maid's sigh blew the flower-scented breeze.
The ceiling and the floor of the Brahmanda⁵ palace
Alike grew pure and resplendent ever.
Praise be to the Parashakti⁶ who maintains afresh
A million such mansions and revels in them all.

1. Suggestive of the red cap of a police man.

2. Venus, popularly called the morning star.

3. The sky, the bed chamber of bride Night, is swept clean by the maid, dawn.

4. The red powder used to make the mark on the forehead.

5. The egg-shaped cosmos.

6. The supreme Goddess - the consort of Lord Siva.

MY MASTER

Poets of all times and climes are never tired of searching for the ideal hero. Oft they find their ideal man in the ancient lore, or in the pages of history. Sometimes some may try to idealise their patrons. It is seldom that a poet is able to find the hero of his imagination in his own time, and in his own country. Vallathol found his hero and master in Mahatma Gandhi. The poem pays unstinted tribute to the greatness of Gandhiji. My Master is hailed as one of the finest poems ever composed on the Mahatma by any poet, eastern or western.

Gandhiji was a karmayogi and Jeevan-muktha in the eyes of the poet. Yet he was fully human.

The whole world is his home;
Even the plants and grass and grubs are his kin;
Renunciation his only earning;
his very lowliness his eminence;
So reigns my Master,—the Sage of mystic wisdom¹. 1

It doesn't mind if it is decked with star-gems;
It does not mind if it is smudged with cloud-mud all over;
Nothing sticks to it, nothing besmirches it;—
The Sky is always invariably immaculate²;
So is my Master! 2

1. Gandhiji has attained communion with God. Enriched with that mystic experience he has dedicated himself to the service of mankind.
2. Being a yogin Gandhiji has cultivated disinterest. He is indifferent to praise or censure. He does his duty.

A river of rare holiness, uninfested by dread creatures,
 A sacred lamp of smokeless flame,
 A vast treasure-trove not haunted by serpents,
 Limpid moonlight that casts no ominous shadow—
 That is my Master! 3

Without weapons, he wages righteous³ wars
 Without texts, he gives lessons in godliness⁴
 Without drugs, he cures diseases,
 Without causing the least hurt, he performs sacrifices,
 My Master! 4

Absolute Non-violence is the solemn vow of his life;
 Peace has been his special Deity from early days;
 He is used to saying, "the matchless armour of non-violence
 Will blunt the deadly edge of even the hardest steel!" 5

The inspiring utterances of my Master are the sweet,
 Intimate words of Dharma to his mate⁵ whom he has
 found at last,

The symphony of the court of supreme truth,
 The chimes of the bejewelled anklets of Moksha⁶ 6

For this warrior who conquers the world with love
 The mystic OM is the bow, the soul the arrow,
 Brahma the target⁷.

He goes on refining and refining even Omkara,
 And takes only the finest, ultimate spirit of it! 7

3. Gandhiji is for nonviolent wars.

4. Godliness or virtue consists of self-control, spiritual power, charity and dedication to action and service.

5. The mate of Dharma is Ahimsa. Non violence is considered the consort of righteous duty or dharma.

6. Liberation.

7. The goal — The reference is to the process of contemplation. The rishi concentrates on the significance of the mystic word 'Om'.

If you wish to see the the renunciation of Lord Christ,
The strategy of Lord Krishna in defence of Dharma,
The Ahimsa of Lord Buddha, the intellectual might of
Sri Sankara,
The infinite mercy of Rantideva, the truthfulness of
Harischandra

And the intrepidity and constancy of Mohammed,
Blended in perfect harmony in one single person,
Go to my Master, or at least read his story. 8

Just one glimpse of his feet—and the coward turns a hero,
The cruel turns merciful, the miser munificent,
The harsh-tongued sweet-spoken, the unclean immaculate,
The indolent untiringly industrious!

Before this godly ascetic of boundless peace
The assassin's sword is a garland of blue lilies,
The sharp-fanged lion a fawn,
The vast ocean violently battering its shores
A harmless little pool!

To this leader⁸ deliberating on matters of moment,
Even the forest is a guilded council chamber,
To this mystic wrapt in deep meditation,
Even the heart of the city is the interior
Of a mountain cave!

The good work of this farmer of Dharma
Is raising crops of pure gold from every field⁹;
But the eyes of this great Seer see gold
As but the yellow sand of this earth !

8. The qualities of the hero are enumerated—They spring chiefly from disinterest.

9. Special reference to the gift of gold, made by women to Gandhiji.

To this man of supreme detachment, august imperial
splendour

Is but the devil grinning through the waving¹⁰ chowry;

This king of men who spreads velvet on the rugged
Path of freedom

So that tender feet may not get hurt

Lives always half-naked, wrapping himself

In a piece of some coarse bark !

13

Only the land that gave birth to the Geetha¹¹

Could bring forth a Karma Yogi of this calibre;

Only in the region between the Himalaya

And the Vindhyan ranges,

Could be found a lion¹² so disciplined in peace;

Only in the land washed by the holy Ganges could flourish

A Kalpaka¹³ tree which bears so much unmixed good !

10. Obviously imperialism is a demon.

11. The Sacred teaching of lord Krishna. Krishna gave this to Arjuna at the beginning of the Kurukshetra war. Gita preaches disinterested discharge of one's duties.

12. Gujarat is famous for its lions.

13. Kalpaka, the beneficent tree of heaven—It is similar to coconut tree.

HIGHER AND HIGHER

This poem is a panegyric on the flag of the Indian National congress; the flag symbolised India's struggle for freedom, India's victory in the struggle, and India's progress. It is a tricolour flag, red standing for the struggle and the sacrifice, white for peace, and green for progress. The poet wishes that it flies far and high boosting the morale of the Indian nation.

Higher and higher still higher and higher and day by day
Must rise the holy flags of the divine land of Bharat
And they must stir up fresh waves in lake of the sky
And show the way for those who work for the world's good!
Offspring of the same womb, let us unite and try
To wash our hands clean and take up this flag.
Let this be for injustice the winding sheet
Out of the cloth woven from the thread we have made
And let it flutter and glitter on the flagstaff of Truth :
A winding spray of eternal freedom for us
who are duty-bound.

The bright rays of the Lord¹, the witness to all action
Compete with one another and rush forward to kiss it.
To those who take up and lift this flag of Dharma²
That signals the festival of Progress in this temple of Karma³

1. The sun God.

2. The law of Righteousness.

3. Action.

To those great ones the binding chains are but bracelets,
 And the dark prisons but dainty mansions of pleasure.
 My brothers, it is the glory of your struggle for freedom
 That dances upon this flag of our Mother.
 May this flag of glory shine high up in the sky—
 This flag where green and white and red merge—
 And bring greater happiness to the sages of heaven⁴
 Verily like the flower-garland on the breast of Vasudeva⁵ !
 May this flag, on which the breeze from the Ganga⁶
 Gently sprinkles little drops of rosewater,
 Flutter and fan again to console the heavenly hosts
 Who had wept over the decline of Dharma in the world
 The emblem on this flag is good; this Sudarsana chakra⁷
 Is good; and there, already, the head of hell is cut off.
 Now you may celebrate it, oh Gods of heaven,
 And shower the flowers of your Nandana⁸ garden!
 May these flags of glory flutter at the threshold
 Of every house from hutments to lovely mansions !
 Dancing in joy and waving radiant colours galore
 May they beckon the liberation we have sought for long!
 Pure are we through your white; the garden of our desire
 Is vitalized by your unstinted splendour of green.
 Ah, flag of glory, your blushing red
 Forms the very dawn of our day of joy.
 Here with fervour we dedicate to you our lives;
 May you be pleased to raise this heavenward !

4. The flag rises to the height of heaven where Devarshis dwell.

5. Lord Vishnu; Krishna

6. The river Ganges.

7. There is the emblem of 'charka' at the centre of the flag. It is a wheel; it is rightly compared to chakra, the disc wielded by Vishnu. With his weapon Lord Vishnu killed the demon Naraka, and brought relief to the world. Naraka literally means hell. 'Charka' also brings relief to the people by helping them overcome the hell of poverty.

8. The garden of India.

THE INDIAN WOMANHOOD

The emotional integration of the Hindu and Muslim communities was one of the prime concerns of the Indian leaders of the freedom struggle. Vallathol wrote a few excellent narratives bringing out the innate nobility and goodness of both the Muslims and the Hindus. 'The Indian womanhood' is one of the best dramatic narratives he has composed. It is woven of a series of vivid scenes, the characterisation is masterly, dialogue reveals character. The classical style and the romantic spirit combine together to confer on the poem a vigour and freshness that defy the vagaries of time.

In her long eyes a deep perturbation:
Fuddled, frightened, as she listened to him
His words easy, assured, oozing satisfaction:
"Calm yourself, dear, I am no thief, no thug
Out to defile your sweet innocence;
Rather am I your slave,
Eager to serve, to please,
This simple home, a passing refuge
Offered by a docile devotee.
Accept my suggestion, proffered in humble adoration,
And bless me,
Opening before me visions bright of a future, splendid,
secure".
His words calmed not her fears,

But undeterred continued he:

"Why with your eyes so blue, their lashes dark and thick,
Gaze at me like a frightened doe?

I'm no hungry wolf, just a man generous, good.

I tell you beauty like yours

Regal, celestial,

Was ordained for no common palate.

This dish divine, incredibly lovely,

I plan to place before my Lord himself,

Emperor, King of Kings,

That my purpose:

So I managed to spirit you away, as,

Unaware of your fate, you returned from the temple

Your palanquin-bearers connived

Their eyes dazzled by my gold

Showered in rich profusion."

As she listened, incredulous,

In a sudden heave of sorrow rose her breasts

Eloquent of a chaste woman's natural dread.

His cheap mind was baffled.

"How" he asked,

"Could one welcome timely Fortune thus,

Washing Her feet with tears?

Does loss of caste frighten you?

Needless that fear.

Let it not cloud the moonlike brightness of your face.

My royal master is no fanatic; in his harem

Hindu women retain, pure, their creed;

The inflowing stream, still fresh,

Undeiled by the brackish expanse it has joined.

The famed tolerance of the Moghuls shines

Deeper, truer, in great Humayoon.
Under him his people follow their varied ways,
Unrestrained, free."
Her red lips trembled,
Soft petals in a breeze,
As though some thought stirred within her.
But before she could speak,
Usman Khan, Emperor's favourite, intervened,
His voice softer, eager to explain, persuade:
"It happened ten days ago.
His Majesty, out on a joy-ride looked up,
And saw at a window glass-panelled,
Your face, its charm alluring,
Like the moon gleaming through the long, light autumn
clouds.
He gazed, and gazed again, and spoke
In a soft voice that I, standing by, could hear:
"Ha, a golden rose amidst an ambrosial garden of blooms!"
From that day I saw, by signs familiar,
How your small lovely form had enchanted him,
Filling the immeasurable depth and vastness of his mind.
Fortune's minion you are:
You little flower, till now blushing unseen,
Opens its loveliness aflame, to unite with him
Whose hand India, in her glory, has kissed and blessed.
He to whom you have pledged your faith
May be rich, prosperous today,
But what of the long days ahead?
Turn your mind to the grand contrast,
A small fog-hidden hill

Yonder, the snow-clad glory of the Himalayas¹ !
Who sets a bound to well-being ?
Does not happiness beget its own eagerness ?
The night, clad in the soft silver sheen of the moon
Still yearns, hurrying to embrace the red glory of the dawn.
A future, its promise limitless, awaits you and me.
Tomorrow finds you Empress of this land,
And humble Usman, its Chief of Ministers.
This setting sun, casting its fading rays on one so common
Will rise again,
His red radiance bathing Bharat's Queen,
Himself happy in the happiness of us all.
Endure awhile your stay in this hovel,
It's a passing, necessary phase:
Such a raindrop in its shell,
Before it emerges a brilliant pearl,
Like you, a gem born to glitter on a monarch's breast."
In silence she heard his exhortation;
Well she knew no words would move him.
From her heart rose a silent prayer,
A plea fervent to her King,
Not to defile the chastity of a helpless dame,
With that she flung herself down in the palanquin
Prostrate, as in entreaty before her Lord and King.

II

It was dark as they entered, the city
Closed its doors and casements,
As if unable to bear her inconsolable sorrow—

1. The highest mountain ranges in Northern border of India—fringes of this.
The ranges could be seen from Agra.

Slowly silence enveloped the night
And the moon stood still
Quiet witness to the sad ways of a sick world.
Meanwhile, Humayoon, King of Kings, sat musing alone
The royal chamber bright, its air
Sweet from burning myrrh and choice bloom.
On a bedstead he lay, of sweet sandal, richly carved
Its coverlet white, silken, gleaming pure,
Majestic as an elephant resting on a mound of sand.
His face spoke of preoccupation; sweet sleep
Seemed to await assent to soothe the royal brows.
Restless oft a King's mind, prey to rolling thoughts,
It knows not the bliss the poor enjoy,
Restful sleep's quick, sweet oblivion.
Yet, as one could guess, no kingly worry
Harried, this night, smiling,
As if by thoughts of love's delight moved.
He seemed in a dream-world,
Wrought by Manmatha's² crafty conjuration,
Its centre, perhaps, the "pretty rose" seen in a fleeting vision
Soft steps stirred in the nearby hall;
Humayoon rose, elbow deep in the pillow,
Black-bearded face resting at a slant
In a majestic spread-out palm.
A ray of light flashed through that chamber of gold,
The door dazzled with a flow of lightning
Behind it, the dark of Usman's form.
He could enter always the royal chamber,
So went the special kingly command
The King sat up, surprise and disbelief on his face.

2. The God of love.

The golden rose of ambrossial garden appeared dream like
Here was wish fulfilled, lust's fancy come true!

"Oh! Lord of the World, look and see
She, who ruled your heart for ten days
Stands before you; she is yours;
Take her, you, in whose arms
So many have known love's ecstasy!"

She and Usman fell at the Emperor's feet,
Quick, instinctive, their obeisance.
He sat there, his long fingere crossed,
His legs, clad in gold-bordered salwars, swaying.
His gaze flitted over her form,
From dark tresses slightly loosend, to the long bushy brows,
Thence to the rose-blooms of her cheeks—
So thrilled, he knew not where to rest his glance.
He looked, eager, curious, at his man,
Who answered thus the unspoken word:
"At your feet, in humble homage, I place,
This precious jewel."
A sweet smile suffused fast the royal lips;
Usman saw in it the finishing gloss to the castle of his
dreams.

Then in tones mild, sweet the King addressed her:
"Noble one, do you accept willingly
The hand of this adorer."
Her limbs together in respect drawn, her palms in
prayer pressed,

She spoke: her voice quivered:
"I'm no virgin—a husband dear as life—
Another man—No! Your Majesty- feel, forgive."
At that, suddenly, Humayoon's face changed;

Anger rose in that soul pure, to whom
 Another's woman was but a doll,
 Dull, lifeless, unapproachable.
 To Usman, he thundered:
 "How does this good woman happen to be here?"
 At this from her, head bent in prayer, escaped
 A long, suppressed sigh of gratitude.
 In a voice, dry from terror, Usman told the tale,
 Hiding nothing.
 The majestic eyes indignant rolled,
 Through the selfish man passed a lightning from the royal
 eyes
 "Who is there? Take this rogue, foe to my subjects,
 Clamp him at once, in a cell!"
 Fate doled out to Usman his due,
 Manacles for hands that craved for bangles of ringing gold.
 As a lone miser, whose cellar built to house his hoard,
 Finds it prove at last his gaol.
 His eyes resting on the weeping figure,
 Humayoon spoke:
 "Cry not, dear one, I know such tears
 Spell but the ruin of my State.
 Pardon a Muslim's crime, and in so doing
 Pardon me, Humayoon, your king.
 At once my bearers will take you home;
 From me, accept, good wishes for happy days to come."
 She bowed to her monarch, a gesture of thanks,
 And said: "One prayer I have:
 Show the grace, Your Majesty, to pardon your man,
 To err, after all, is human³

3. The woman rises to the height of greatness in this request.

Her words touched Humayoon deep,
They spoke of the Indian woman's heart,
By nature kindly, pure, humane.
"Usman", the King said, "you stand saved by her you
harméd."

Then he faced her, and in moving words affectionate,
Made this plea:
"Dear child, accept this simple token of my regard."
So saying, he drew from his neck a strand of priceless pearls
And placed it round hers,
His eyes agleam with a father's deep affection.

UNITY BEFORE EVERYTHING ELSE

This is a reflective poem imbued with patriotism. The poet is deeply moved at the tragic plight of his motherland which has become a bog of abject misery and stark poverty. The majority of the people are victims of exploitation by the few privileged people. Ignorant and imbecile as they are, their sufferings seem to have no ending. The Indians should realize that they should be unified as one people if they are to attain freedom. Equality and liberty are to be achieved at all costs. The pictures that the poem gives of the misery of the people are realistic. The charge was sometimes levelled against Vallathol that he was too much a lover of beauty to see the seamy side of life. The poem shows that the charge is without foundation. In this poem the poet criticizes the haves and the high—caste people of his country, who ill-treat the have—nots and the casteless.

My feeble head could ill stand
The tidal onslaught of sad thoughts;
In my court-yard, white washed by moon-light,
I lay stretched on my back.
In the far distance above my eyes,
The sea of the sky lay frothing with stars
An unseen cool hand—the gentle breeze—
Stroked my limbs again and again.
The bright full moon, too good-natured
To nurse any grouse,
Who decks in silver this earth of man

Which smudges him with its shadow,
Mercifully rubbed my body with camphor. 1

The goddess of Nature laboured to comfort
Her son with her motherly ministrations;
But even the free flow of her ambrosial affection
Did not bring any relief that night to my burning brow
Though the rest-giving night had ordained
Undisturbed silence everywhere,
The fierce rumblings in hundreds of thousands
Of starving stomachs burst in upon my ear! 2

India's skeletons, whose flesh and blood
Had been licked off by others
Suddenly ranged themselves one by one before me!—
My God! who am I to presume to quench with my tears
The thirst of these miserable beings? 3

The wealth that Father gave in common to all his children
Has become the property of a few who are strong;
These poor brothers may not even go and beg for it,
For they are closed in by the high bastions of caste!
Ah, the strange justice of this ordinance of caste!
Pure are the masters who persecute their own brothers,
And these hapless creatures are unclean, who melt
Their life's energy to mint gold currency for their
overlords! 4

What crime have these poor people done
That they should lie curled up in the dungeons of bondage?
Or, perhaps, they know not the distress of dependence:
We are like grubs that breed in a poisonous brew!
Has not the school come to be the market-place for us

Where slavery is sold for an enormous price?
 'Higher Education'¹—the higher education that is
 Sewn into one's clothes!—

Alas! how much hasn't it degraded us! 5

Oh! where is that inner refinement, where that sense of
 equality,

Where that grand renunciation, where that constant
 Thought of liberation?²

'Approach not!', 'Touch not!'—so long as

The din of these shouts

With which we drive away ourselves prevails,

So long shall we fail to hear the hymn

Of our ancient Dharma,

So long shall we, exiles, fail to return

To our homeland! 6

The stars—the souls of the departed guardians

Of Dharma—gazed intently on my face;

There in the heavens some white clouds from

The North together moved southwards;

They did not ask the dark clouds that had

Gathered before them to move away;

In fact they mingled with them!

That union was as beautiful as the confluence

Of the Ganges and Kalindi³

Unity is to be sought above everything else!

1. Vallathol was one of the first to sense the dangers of higher education which created a new caste of privileged people in India.
2. These were the goals of higher education in the true sense, but modern education did not help people reach these goals.
3. Ganga stands for the high caste people, Kalindi, for the casteless. Just as the two rivers mix at Prayaga, in the modern India, people should mix and become one nation.

NAGILA

This poem is based on an episode taken from Buddhistic Puranas. The story narrates the spiritual struggle of a young man Bhavadeva who was persuaded by his brother Bhavadatta a monk to renounce his wife and accept the monastic order. The young man deserts his wife to join a monastic order. After a period he finds it too difficult to live separated from his wife Nagila; and returns to her. But by the time Nagila has reached a stage of 'renunciation'. She now persuades her husband to stay a monk. The story gives us a dramatic presentation of the struggle between love of the world and devotion to monasticism. It brings out the spiritual qualities of Nagila, who rises in our estimate as a true heroine. The poem gives plenty of scope for psychological studies.

The master¹ broke his silence:— "who
Is this young man in the fresh clothes of a bridegroom?"
The disciple bowed before him, "My brother,
Seeking initiation to the holy orders."
The brother felt benumbed, "shall I
Throw away this elixir of love
And go seeking alms with bowl
To gather food from time to time."

1. Buddha.

How can Bhavadeva excuse himself ?
His brotherly love had quite enslaved him !
Bhavadatta, who had entered the orders
In early youth, spoke to the master again:—
“At home he was bedecking
The noble virgin, his newly-wed bride
He was engaged in decorative work
Upon the bow of the God of love² !

I reached home just at that time,
And hearing about my arrival there
He came out of his bride's presence
To greet me, his elder brother.

Our relatives who could not tolerate
The breach in the normal ritual
Intervened, but drawn by fraternal love
He came away with me on the instant.

By putting manure with his hands
To the tender sapling of desire,
He stands tainted all over—
Let him be cleansed with the holy water of your feet !

Moved by compassion the Master asked
The younger brother : “Are you ready for penance ?”
Somehow he blurted out : “Only
My brother's words shouldn't go to waste”

Bhavadatta was gratified:
Before his brother descended into
The ocean of this worldliness
He was lucky to pull him away.
His face shone with rapture

2, Kamadeva,

At having been able to rescue
One who was leaping into fire,
Taking it for a red lotus pond !

Climbing the steps into a home of joy
Young Bhavadeva entered the hut
Of a worn-out fasting monk;
The world was taken by surprise.

To the breasts of the half-bedecked wife
Resembling golden pots, by decree of god
The string of teardrops due to this separation
Became a garland of pearls.

Bidding farewell to his noble home
He turned a monk for love of a brother;
His intense love, so chaste and pure
Remained hidden for long behind a yellow cowl.

II

For eight years without a break
He wandered, in his eyes eight aeons,
Desire was never quite extinguished;
The glue of worldliness sticks, if touched !
The course of the world during this time
Might have changed in numerous ways
But his affection was now the same as before
The hand of the god of time did not touch it.
Never shall I touch gold again³;
So goes one of his tenfold vows;
But this Buddhist monk was helpless
To keep his wife's gold image from his mind.

3. One of the ten vows taken by the monk.

When he sat down in a deserted place
 For the stipulated meditation, he saw
 Before his eyes, like the seed of great bliss,
 A half-bedecked body bowed down by huge breasts.

The black tresses scented with the smoke of eagle wood⁴
 Decked with flowers like stars, among these clouds,
 The glowing sap on the golden feet
 Like liquid resinous lac, still not dry.
 The mark on the forehead like a piece of crescent⁵
 No, it is the tightened bow of Kamadeva dependent on curls,
 On the shining cheeks the natural kumkum glow
 Made visible by love, like a maid
 The lotus petal eyes painted with beetle-black collyrium,
 The neck with only the string for the wedding locket,
 On the high breasts new sandal paste smeared,
 The hips about to be brightened with a waist chain.
 "You too will get soon" says the left hand
 To the right hand through the jingle of bangles:
 Amidst two maids⁶ he saw all these, in mind
 So often, lost in contemplation of his wife!
 Not that he had not tried through fear of failure,
 To blot out all these by forgetfulness and repression,
 But he could not erase the figure drawn by hope
 Upon the mind's wall, the image of Nagila.

The young man tried several rounds
 To concentrate all his power to visualize,

4. The brides do this.

5. The crescent mark on the forehead is compared to the bow of the God of love. This bow is set in the overhanging curl of hair.

6. The bride is attended on by two maids.

But he could never see on salvation's⁷ shrivelled face
 The beauty and grace Nagila was blessed with.
 "My Nagila, except through your embrace
 Bhavadeva has no release, even if salvation comes,
 Who thought of it then? From the desert of ascetic practice
 They say, comes heavenly bliss; science⁸ has betrayed us!
 For my brother's truth did I undertake
 This penance and vow, at great grief to me;
 He is already gone to heaven⁹, so
 What is wrong if I too go back to my heaven.

"Is it not unjust that the woman should be a widow
 When her husband is alive?" So thinking
 That Sanyasi finally left the hermitage,
 Stages of salvation and returned to worldly ways!

III

Slowly he approached his native place
 Beautiful Magadha, longed to see for long;
 With thirsty eyes the monk began
 To enjoy that fertile part of the earth.
 There his village came forth to his view,
 Happy in contact with the white waters of Ganga;
 With unstinted glory, extremely sacred,
 Thanks to the foot-prints of the ascetic Nagila¹⁰
 "I salute you, Bhagirathi,¹¹ giver of glory!

7. Liberation that monasticism guarantees.

8. Sastra, or knowledge.

9. Strictly speaking Buddhists have no conception of heaven. The monk has attained liberation.

10. The poet prepares us for the meeting between Bhavdeva and Nagila.

11. Ganges flowed in heaven, it was brought down to earth by the penance of Bagiratha. Hence Bhagirathi means Ganges.

I salute you, India's living pulse!
What is the immortal message Mother gives us
Through the sounds of these lovely waves?"
Is it that once we start on a journey
Leading to a perfect and lasting Place of refuge
We and our likes never go back
To the source of our being?¹²

His feet would not move forward,
Held back by inordinate shame;
If a sanyasi re-enters the life of a householder
How much the people would laugh at it?
"Wait, relax from travel fatigue", he said;
And had his bath in the cool water of Ganga;
And sat on the grass-covered bank
Under a fig tree, lost in a myriad thoughts.
The cool breeze coming from the river
And stirring the trees and creepers, flowing with honey,
Gently caressed his body and the traveller
Sat there in happiness and had a nap.

Just then two beautiful birds
Of the same hue flew in opposite directions
Lispings sweet nothings in exchange
Above the place where he was lying.
The youth felt choked for a while;
His forehead began to perspire;
The closed eyes opened; Why does
The mendicant walk about in his day dream!
Muttering 'Nagila' in agitation

12. The river suggests the thought: Bhavadeva can not now come back to worldly life; a river never flows back to its source.

He stared again and again in haste;
And there she stood, tender of body,
Her clothes wet from her bath in the Ganga.

He scrambled to his feet, "Come, my dear
You have grown too thin and turned a nun!"
Speaking thus to the girl in a broken voice,
The monk stretched out his hand towards her.

"Touch me not, lord, touch not; do not
Cherish desire in the worthless object once cast off!"
Saying this with love and regard,
With inner resolve she stepped aside.

"Forgive me, my lady, for the wrong
I did, rejecting you for love of my brother;
I have, through the austerities of a monk,
Endured in full consequential grief!

For the riches of the next world we don't have
To sacrifice foolishly this world's wealth;
Through garhastya¹³ shall we achieve
Happiness more perfect than salvation!"

He spoke like a thirsty person looking for muddy water,
Forsaking the stream of fresh water through illusion;
Interrupting him the noble lady said "Alas,
How sinful! it is suicide for a monk to break his vows!

Thinking of the master¹⁴ who gave up everything
For salvation's sake, the crown of a King, his Queen
And his dearest child - Let not Nagila be
An obstruction to her lord's penance,

O wise one, by your blessing!"

13. Garhastya is domestic life the stage when man lives with his wife and children. The comparison between the merits of domestic life and ascetic life was specially dear to the poet see; his 'Father and Daughter'.

14. Gautama Buddha.

OUR REPLY

The poet is acutely aware of the thousand ills that afflict the flesh of India. But he believes that India's spirit is indomitable. The people are in the clutches of poverty; yet they find themselves torn to pieces by internal strifes. Often they grow timid, and fear seems to cripple them; but they shall not succumb to fear. With the sword of Dharma they shall fight their enemies, both within and without.

Bharat is the land of my birth
And the sages of old,
Courageous in calmness,
My great-grand fathers;
The Upanishads,
The early rays of the sun of enlightenment
My traditional texts;
Any my goal in all three worlds,
Deliverance¹ complete and permanent.

I may reach the goal,
Or death may claim me on the way;
Forward shall I go now,
Trampling down the thorns in my path;
Tender feet² that follow me
Shall not be pierced by pain
Darkness may come and cover them,

1. Deliverance or liberation of the soul.

But jasmine buds will blow,
 And the cool evening breeze
 Will waft their fragrance in the air,
 The iron chains of taboos that bind my feet
 Will strain and break by themselves,
 If only I swing my feet farther and farther,
 Six or seven steps.
 Will strifes of religions and sects
 Render a land unfit for freedom?
 The fight twixt brothers is no fight,
 But the tug and tumble of fraternal love.
 The waves of the sea howl and hurl themselves
 One against another,
 But the same time, they dissolve in laughter
 Of froth and spray³

My country is an ocean,
 Solemn and deep,
 An exhaustless mine of priceless gems;
 And its vapours rain vivifying showers
 Over the earth, far and near.
 But, do we reflect on this proud heritage?
 Do we realise, that to commit manslaughter
 To stop cow-slaughter⁴
 Is sheer madness
 That, if Allah⁵, the Soul of music
 Dislikes festive songs and pipes and drums
 The seas won't beat their tambours

2. The younger generation.

3. The Indians seem to be fighting among themselves. But they are like the sea waves that dash against each other sportively.

4. Hindus and Muslims clash. Hindus kill the Muslims who kill the cows.

5. The supreme God, as understood by the Muslims.

Or the Koels sing?
 Unmindful of this,
 These hands, right and left,
 Fight between themselves, as if frenzied,
 Spilling blood.
 Still, even in that blood,⁶
 I see the blush of a beautiful dawn
 About to break over my dear country.
 True, much of the health and wealth of this land
 Are burnt up in the poisonous fumes⁷ of liquor,
 Well, have we not streams of nectar
 Flowing as threads from spinning wheels?

What am I but an unarmed soldier?
 Dharma⁸ not the sword, is India's weapon.
 Where, in this domain of Rishis,
 Are ghouls to dine on gory⁹ stuff?
 No page of India's history
 Shall be imprinted with letters of slavery.
 Should my mother-land,
 Who threw wide open for all,
 The doors of deliverance,
 Languish in this prison?
 This should be our reply
 If cowardly doubt bid us retreat.

6. The shedding of blood needn't be viewed with apprehension. It presages the dawn of freedom.

7. Gandhiji was for total prohibition.

8. Dharma's mate is Ahimsa, not violence.

9. The peace loving Indians can never be demons who eat blood stained stuff.

THE HEAD OF MALAYALAM

The poem is based on an episode in the life of Sree Sankara, the great philosopher who expounded the system of advaita philosophy. Sree Sankara was born in Kalady in Kerala. In this poem he is represented as the pride of Malayalam. Once a Kapali, one who believed in human sacrifice as helpful for the attainment of liberation, asked of Sankara his head. The great master readily agreed to be beheaded by the Kapali. The timely intervention of Sanandana, a disciple of Sree Sankara, saved the master. The poem reveals the greatness of Sree Sankara who was absolutely fearless and ever self-giving. The poem is noted for its dramatic presentation.

“If my head is what you want
To destroy the Vrtra¹ of mundane ills,
Why this hesitation to tell me that ?
Wasn't Datheechi² born in our land ?

It's a trifle you seek, noble sir,
A lump of clay, a globe that tops my worthless frame;
If that will serve to fulfil your 'tapas',
Why, the glory will be mine, and cheaply won at that !

-
1. A demon killed by Indra with the Vajrayudha, his weapon. Sankaracharya looked upon earthly life as of little consequence, even as a demon to be overcome.
 2. The great rishi or sage who offered his rib to Indra for him to make Vajrayudha in order to kill Vrtra.

Karna³ tore off his cherished armour,
 For one that importuned for it,
 And bared his chest to the slings of Death.
 Wasn't he our own forbear ?
 Why then, demur in making me do my duty ?
 Jeemutavahanan⁴, our King
 Didn't he fling his youthful body
 For the famished Garuda to peck,
 Just to prolong the life-span of a snake ?
 When Sibi⁵ slashed his limb
 To provide food for a hungry kite,
 And thereby save its victim dove,
 Didn't his blood trickle into a saffron tilak
 That still adorns the face of our motherland ?
 Ranthideva⁶ aspired
 To take on the sufferings of his fellowmen,
 And make the world happy.
 Isn't his spirit there
 In the very air we breathe ?
 So spoke Sankaracharya. The Kapali⁷,
 Greedy for Sivaloka⁸, was thirsting for his blood.
 But to Sankara it seemed no more
 Than a yearning for water.
 With kindly eyes he spoke again :

3. In Mahabharatam, was born to Kunti, with armour and earrings as part of his body. He offered it to Indra who asked for it.
4. Jeemootha vahanan offered himself as prey to Garuda, the bird king, to save from him, sankuhooda, a serpent.
5. Sibi, the king who offered his flesh to a kite, to save from it, a pigeon. The kite, and the pigeon were 'devas' who came to put Sibi to test.
6. Ranthideva, who led a life of sacrifice asked of God, no boon except to be in every being to share its suffering.
7. Kapalika form a sect. They worship Siva. They believe in human sacrifice as effective in propitiating Lord Siva. According to them if a fixed number of humans are sacrificed the devotee can rise to the heaven of Siva in flesh.

Take me not amiss, Holy one.

To earn the blessing of those like you

This head of mine will ne'er refuse to bow

And you, whose body rigorous tapas has wizened,

You are my guest, you seek my help,

And so are honoured here.

If my head, knowing it's needed to complete your sacrifice

Bends not to suffer a little heat for it,

Why do I on these shoulders bear

This packet of my motherland's first disgrace?

Here, with tears of joy, do I offer you

This sacrificial object you demand,

Only-choose a time when my disciples are not near,

And take it away at your will."

The thickly-wooded mountain, alas,

Didn't break out in goose-flesh, although

Through its myriad flowery eyes,

It saw the noble Namburi Sage

And heard him offer his precious head,

The repository of spiritual and temporal lore,

For that old Charlatan to sacrifice,

And bodily transport himself to Kailas.

At the foot of this mountain,

Whose crown was a shrine of Siva⁹

Meandered a tributary of Ganga¹⁰

Undulating like a white silken shawl

That had slid sometime from the mountain's shoulders,

And sang its placid songs, as before.

8. The heaven of Lord Siva.

9. Mallikarjuna Temple.

10. This tributary was called 'Pathala.'

And the breeze, perfumed by the mountain-flowers,
Didn't for a moment cease to blow
Serving the needy even with one's life
Is no rare deed in Bharat's history.

The Kapali was gratified;
A diabolic smile overspread his face:
An omniscient head he'd won let pyre be lit;

The sacrifice performed, he can bodily rise to Kailas,
The Sun sought the ocean; to the river repaired
Sankara's disciples for their evening bath.
The sunset-sky turned fiery-red: had the Kapali
Near the Western mountain built his fire?

At this moment,
Steeped in blessed meditation alone,
Sat the author of 'Saririka'¹¹ intent
On helping the Kapali wind up his sacrifice.
Behind this embodied Godness came creeping
The horrible form of Evil Incarnate;
Behind the Soul of Benevolence was peeping
The murk of selfish greed.
Was this the same Kapali as had earlier come?
His blood-red eyes and shrunken cheeks,
Scraggy beard, snake-like matted hair,
Arid body liberally smeared with ash,
A skull-chain dangling on his bony chest,
His tiger-skin garment reaching to the knees,
His right hand holding a fire-spitting trident -
This is how, like some graveyard ghoul,

11. A commentary on Brahmasutram, composed by Sankara.

The Kapali came, He raised his hand
Against that dear and sacred neck;
His trident—O eyes, close your lids !

Suddenly,
A deafening roar that threatened,
To smash up the universe,
Rent the sky, disturbing Sankara.
He opened his eyes and saw
Sanandan, his Namburi disciple¹², standing before him,
And the Kapali stretched out in a pool of blood,
His belly cleft, and entrails all spilled.

How did this happen ? Let the crooked one's soul¹³
Supply the answer :
My trident had barely touched the Sage's neck,
When (my ill-luck) Sanandan came rushing
From his body there burst
A lightning flash with a clap of thunder;
It took shape with a man's body and a lion's head,
And in a trice made a Hiranya¹⁴ of me !

Looking at Sanandan, who by his power
Had enacted a second avatar of Narasimha,
The World's Master, stricken by grief, began:
"It's a pity that this old ascetic....."
But Sanandan, bowing low, his eyes still red
With his recent rage, made his submission,
Encircled by the group of flustered disciples:

12. He belonged to 'Vettam.' His name was Sananda; Padmapada was another name.

13. For dramatic effect, the spirit of the Kapalika is made to say this.

14. Hiranyakasipu, the mighty Asura was torn to pieces by Vishnu who incarnated himself as Narasimha. Narasimha had the body of a man and the head of a lion.

“Salutations, Master! Should this divine head,
Powerful to make a Kailas of this world,
Be burnt in the fire of a Kailas-dreamer’s greed?
Benevolence should have its limits.”

Such humanity, compassion and solicitude,
Such sacrifice of self, devotion to Guru and power of tapas—
These, O Namburi brahmins, are your heritage!
And unequalled ever is thy all-knowing head,
O Malanad¹⁵, mayst thou thrive for ever.

THE PEASANTS' LIFE

Agriculture is of vital importance from the point of view of the economy of India. The majority of people of India are either agriculturists or peasants. They increase the yield from the earth and live on it. They are honest and straight forward, noble and industrious. The poet praises the virtues of the peasants' life. Almost like Rousseau the poet views the new civilization built by industrialization with suspicion and extols the native glory of the peasant culture.

Thou by whose grace man's hand
Raises the royal sceptre
And wields the ascetic's wand¹,
And counts the silver and gold
Of commercial enterprise,
To thee, Goddess of Agriculture,
My humble salutations!

Even the Vedas proclaim,
O Goddess, thy² greatness;
May be, what sings thy praise
Is alone the vedic truth.

If thy power drives not
The blood through his veins,

-
1. The short staff called Dhandu, used by ascetics.
 2. The goddess of Agriculture.

Can the writer lift his quill
Or the painter move his brush,
Or the musician twang his veena-strings,
Or the dancer his mudras³ display?

The blade of grass offered at thy feet
Blossoms into a sheaf of gold;
When to thy devotees
Thou thus yielddest gold,
In other fields we grope,
Fools that we are,
And bear the burden of poverty,

To those caught in the coils,
Of our senseless civilization⁴
You, friend tiller,
Are an object of scorn;
And yet it is thy silent work
That sets this mighty wheel agoing.

If you shed no drop of sweat,
Can diamonds ever be born?
From the mud on your body,
As you work in the field.

Emerges the musk that smears
The limbs of the rich
From the lowly hutments
Where you toil each day
Spring forth the city-towers
That whisper to the skies.

3. Symbolic gestures shown by the hand. They are used by Kathakali actors.

4. Criticism of urban civilization — Romantics are sensitive to the evils of urbanisation.

When the gifts of honest toil
Come to be harvested,
In every courtyard there stand
Little mounds of gold⁵.

Sceptres may glimmer
In many a kingly hand,
But the cattle-goad⁶ in yours
Truly sustains the land.

O you rxan, your mothers,
Gave us as well their milk;
It is but meet, therefore,
That you, our brethren,
Lead and show us the way
To earn our livelihood;

May your bodies glisten
With the oil⁷ of our love;
May the tinkling of the bells
Round the necks of prancing calves
Thrill us with their music.

This land of action, did find
Ahimsa the highest Dharma
If ancient glory should return,
And our heads be held high,
If plentitude and happiness

5. These are mounds of sheafs of corn.

6. Reference to the cattle-goad used by Krishna.

7. The word is 'Sneha' which means both love and oil,

And freedom should come back
Let us uphold the peasants' life
Refined as Time dictates,
Let us, in this creator's farm,
Nurture goodness, like peasants.

MY MOTHER TONGUE

As an Indian, Vallathol's prime concern was the freedom and progress of India. As a poet he was dedicated to the service of beauty. His patriotism and his aestheticism combined to nourish his love of his mother tongue. In the poem, the poet says that Malayalam is competent to express the finest of sentiments and the subtlest of thoughts. He exhorts Keralites who master other languages to bring their entire learning to the service of their mother-tongue. The day shall come when people shall to Kerala to learn Malayalam with a view to acquiring knowledge about the various subjects.

The poem in the original is remarkable for its effortless music and imagery that has an immediate impact upon the Keralite imagination.

The strength of base of the Sahya Hills,
The grand style of the near-by sea,
The blissfulness of Gokarna's shrine,
Kumari's lucid charm,
The purity of Ganges-like Perar, the sweetness
Of tender coconut juice,
The fragrance of cardamon, cinnamon and sandal,
So pleasing to the sense of smell,
The inherent power of Sanskrit, too,
And the beauty of Tamil,
Are commingled in my native tongue,
O dance for joy, my pride !

When the little child begins to lisp
First, on the tender lips,
Does not the fond word, Amma¹ appear
Mixed with breast-milk drops ?
Other dialects are nurses, all
The native speech is mother.
Babes have full growth only if fed
On the maternal milk of love.
Even nectar to us will taste like nectar
Only if served by mother.
Vedas or Science or literature,
Whatever text it be,
It's only when it comes from the mother-tongue's mouth,
That the words just go to the heart.
One's own language forms the honey
In the flower of human heart;
The words of other languages
Are dews on its outer part.
The first epic² and the fifth Veda³
The Smritis⁴ and Upanishads,
The Muse of Kerala sang to us
Who'll say she is not deft ?
If we do not weave into our own tongue
The threads of varied thoughts,
What other cord is there to lift
Our land from this pitch-dark pit ?
What time a people's language lacks
Currency, strength or breadth,

1. Mother.

2. The Ramayana is the first epic

3. The Mahabharata is considered the fifth Veda.

4. Smritis are thoughts and ideas committed to memory.

That time that people stays infirm
 Immature of mind, obscure.
 Regal Sanskrit, the speech of the Gods
 Is hand-maiden of language mine
 Moreover her sons, how many of them,
 Haven't stored from other shores
 Vast wealth of knowledge, still shall she
 Remain in penurious woe?

O lucky ones who have dived deep
 In the seas of other scripts,
 In vain your toil if you do not gift
 To your mother the gems you have earned?

Is not our language still in the state
 Of old Kuchela's spouse,
 Unable to stay her children's crave
 For the food of goodly books?
 How shameful, how sorrowful!
 Forget not your filial due.
 Unless you slave for your mother-tongue,
 You're unfit to command anywhere
 If it bow not before its native tongue
 How can a head hold high?
 O brethren bright, please labour hard
 To the wealth of your language to add,
 Give funeral ablutions to indolence⁵
 With the profuse sweat of your brow.

Why many words, from tomorrow
 Whoever chooses to come

5. The poet exhorts us to shed away laziness and be industrious.

To the court-yard of the Kerala Muse
For the alms of scholarship
Should return thence with grateful heart
And bag filled to the brim
Are not Keralites famed from old
For hospitality?

KNOWLEDGE

Indian sages have always considered knowledge, the absolute end of all human pursuit. Knowledge is liberation, as well as the attainment of truth. Everything in the universe aspires for Gnana or knowledge and tends towards it. The attainment of knowledge is Mukthi according to the Gita; Gnana yoga is one of the four yogas leading to liberation. The poem is a hymn to knowledge.

Immeasurably vast and deep
Thy greatness is eternal, perfect.
The oceans which are but a few drops
Of that greatness,
Always get excited and turbulent:
They proclaim but their pettiness
By this beating of their big drums;
They face of dazzling brightness,
O Supreme Knowledge,
Is sealed in eternal silence¹.

1

It was your august silence that gave man
The language to express his thoughts—
Why did you give me no word
To describe your beautiful form?

2

1. Supreme knowledge is ineffable, beyond words.

The trees—futile desires
 That shoot up from the heart of the earth—
 Continually ask the heavens through the murmur
 Of their leaves about your truth².
 And what is the answer for it? — the crash of thunder,
 Or the flourish of the cane, bright as a golden rod?
 Let be, the importance of ignorant over-lords
 Is built upon shouts and threats!

3

The Sun³, who, in his boyhood, came with bird-songs
 That gladdened the hearts of varied flowers,
 And grew and grew in his darkness-dispelling radiance,
 When, after reaching the zenith of the sky,
 Starts scanning your entire Universe,
 doesn't even he, great Goddess, turn pale
 At the thought, 'What do I know?',
 And bend down his humbled head?
 What is the acme of superior knowledge to the wise
 Except the realisation of one's ignorance?

4

From the beginning of the world up till now,
 From the primitive to the highly cultured,
 In how many ways and in how many places
 Haven't men sought Thee self-impelled!
 In the heart of what dread forest,
 In what inaccessible spot stands
 Your miraculous medicinal herb
 Which alone has the power to quell all malady?
 O thou without beginning and end,
 In what flint lies hidden your fire

5

2. The trees rise high in quest of knowledge.

3. The sun who is a great scholar himself, has not grasped knowledge, which is transcendental.

That dispels the cold inertness of mind?
In what mountain cavern lie buried thy priceless
Imperishable gems that can wipe out all poverty? 6

I prostrate before my forbears, who, by dint of
Ceaseless effort, gathered one by one
And pieced together little bits of thy light.
How else could there be a few fire-flies⁴
Even in the night that surrounds the like of me? 7

However high man might soar with the wings
Acquired through his intelligence,
Your firmament, O Goddess of Knowledge,
Is still as far away from him as before.
Yet he would never give up his endeavour to rise⁵;
Who ever could sustain life if he does not breathe
The pure air of thy transcendental empyrean?

4. The little knowledge that man possesses is like fire-flies.

5. The pursuit of knowledge is a perpetual flight to attain the transcendental truth.

THE GIFT OF VISHU

Vishu marks the equinox. There are two such occasions, the first is on 1st of Thulam. The second is the 1st of Metam. The second Vishu marks the new year day, according to the Malayalam Era. The day is auspicious for every one. The first sight that a person sees as the day breaks must be rich. In fact that decides his fortune for the whole year. So a collection of the finest items symbolic of plenty, may be put before a lighted lamp on the Vishu Eve for the inmates of the house to see the next morning. The poem not only celebrates this ancient custom of the Keralite; it brings out some of the sterling qualities of the Indians.

The green robes of luxuriant vegetation
Worn on their bodies in rich profusion
Still wet from showers and rich in hue
The damsels-of the four directions
Praise the glories of someone
Through the sounds of cranes and swans.

Whose elephant in rut is the Wind,
Bearing the fragrance of Pala¹ flowers
Whose ruby cups of honey are
The perfumed red flowers of lotus;
Who is the Lord that is fanned

1. A Tree; the smells of Pala and the elephant in rut are alike.

By the white floral clusters of kasha²
 That Vishu of autumn
 We do not turn into a festival.
 Has this land of rishis³ from days of old
 Ever found pleasure in pomp and show ?
 It is the Vishu of the first season
 That we find sweet and precious :
 When the deep lakes and wells
 Send almost all their spiritual wealth, as water
 Turned into steam, to the sky
 That is burning in the hot sun;
 When these sink into utter poverty⁴
 Ever cherished by good men,
 When clouds like children of moon-light
 Forget the pride of their caste and colour⁵
 And freely take in close embrace
 The clouds blackened like thick darkness
 By their labour incessant, to give
 Life to the earth taking off its drought.
 When water-lilies, as if ready
 To fly into the world of the stars,
 Blossom on stalks that rise
 High above the sinking water level;
 The Keralites are steeped in generosity,
 Cherishing unbroken fraternity,
 Admiring the will to rise.
 Glory be to you, goddess of spring !

2. A Tree

3. A Men devoted to meditation—sages. Men who have attained liberation.

4. State highly valued by sages.

5. White clouds admire the black clouds for their hard work and mix with them freely, without any caste or colour discrimination.

Our Champak trees in full bloom
 Stand ready everywhere in all modesty
 To offer worship to you with the lights.
 While in other regions the mango-trees
 Eager to listen to the songs of the koels
 Have but started to put forth flowers
 Touched by the breeze you blow with your Chaitra⁶ face.
 The lovely mango trees of this land of hills
 Extend a courteous and ceremonious welcome
 To you, whose body is flower-soft,
 With the rich and ripened honeyed fruits.
 Why do you, O lady, smile with your jasmine flowers?
 We are in the forefront in hospitality,
 Although we may be behind in affluence
 Because of chains on the feet for long
 Alas, in the burning heat
 Your lovely face must perspire hard
 So we have hung yellow handkerchiefs
 Upon the twigs of the Vishu Konna⁷
 Setting fire to heaps of rubbish
 In the premises of their houses.
 Children entertain some new joy
 Shouting 'Kumpiri'⁸ in the name of fireworks,
 Time and again veirily they create
 Asoka⁹ saplings covered with blossoms,
 The quick spattering fireworks
 Lighted by the hands of children

6. Spring. Mango trees flower in this season.

7. A tree noted for its fine yellow flowers.

8. They shout just 'Kumpiri' an exclamation of joy.

9. The plant that flowers at the touch of the feet of chaste women.

Reveal the rapture that thrills
The houses at the arrival of Vishu
While even the sky explodes the sparklers
With thunder and the flashes of lightning,
While the first dawn of the month of Aries,
Stands drenched in the devotional tears of clouds,
Among the auspicious objects offered
On a platter which appears like the solar globe—
White rice, water gourd that looks
Like nugget gold, batel nuts and leaves,
A bronze mirror, yellow cloth
Paint for the face, and a vial of collyrium—
O spirit of transit visible to all
In these objects, I salut you!
May the wicks of rice-filled clothes
Kept aflame in the two halves of a coconut¹⁰
Like two golden beams sprouting from
Your kindness and generosity,
Bring eye-sight to he people, removing
The pain of darkness, O myriad-splendoured Sun!
In this auspicious platter of plenty
Is a palm-leaf text with a jewelled locket.
What else to say, by your might indeed
Has the goddess of wealth embraced
The Muse of speech¹¹ without grudge
O Sun, your holy presence
Drives away the darkness of evil,

10. Each of these items is typically Keralite.

11. Lakshmy, the goddess of wealth and Saraswathi, the goddess of learning
suspend their rivalry and unite at Vishu.

When first in the morning we see,
With sleepless eyes, you who sow light
The necklace of gold and the garland
Of Konna flowers seem alike to me,
So are the coins of silver
And these new cakes of camphor,
O glorious Light of eternal Truth!
Awakened by your vision for a while,
We are today the true countrymen
Of the master of Advaita¹².

12. The school of thought established by the great Sankara, who was born in Kalady, a village in Kerala.

According to the Advaita, the ultimate Truth is the one, indivisible. Multiplicity is just illusory.

MY LITTLE DAUGHTER

Vallathol delighted in singing the praise of childhood. He has given us memorable pictures of Lord Krishna, as a child or as a boy. In this poem he extols the innocent grace of his little daughter. The child embodies all that is charming and delightful in life. The poem is also reflective, it arouses in us a number of thoughts about human existence. It also gives us a picture of the miserable plight of contemporary India.

This twilight glow of red, the enchanting
Rose garden in the palace of the sea god,
Why do you stretch out your little hand towards it,
Moved by the fancy natural to your kind?
You will not get even a single petal from it,
My childish poesy, in your hand.
But suddenly my breast became
Bedecked with a beautiful holy flower
My little daughter was brought to me
And handed to me by her mother
With her toothless, flower-soft mouth
She smiled at me as I kissed her again
In the little flower-soft smile
On her tender lips are collected
All the blossomings of the roses
Freely blossoming all over the world,
All the openings of the little vials

Of beauty made out of rubies,
All the spreadings of silken stuff
That by mere touch could be thrilled
All the overflowings of fragrance
Made moist with drops of honey,
All the spilling-over of noble virtues
Most suitable to heaven.

Let the evening stretch the curtain
For the entry of darkness;
To my luck, it is the dawn of pure light
That has descended on me.
You are the ray of joy, beautiful from birth;
You are the imperial sceptre of bliss;
You are the faith in God, the realization of advaita¹;
You are my soul indeed, dear darling;
Your tender feet are made of velvet.
The most precious kind in the sky;
But the earth where they will have to walk
In future are full of thorns all along,
Is it because you somehow learned
How painful this worldly journey is to be
That you started crying at your birth
In your sweet voice, my little child?
The day turns scarlet in the face,
Whenever it arrives and departs;
But man alas, cries restless
Both at birth and at death.
If he grieves over having come away
From the lap of the void, then

1. The child creates in the poet the sense of oneness with God. The eternal soul and the individual soul are one and the same according to Advaita.

Why should he wet his way with tears
When he is on his journey thither?
Screaming, startled; bursting into laughter:
Is this world still a child!
Is it to quickly calm down my oppressed heart
Worried by questions with no answers in sight
That my dear daughter strikes on my chest
With her tender little hands?
What does Ammu's² little hand know
Except to caress the nipples
And to bedeck with bright red coral
Father's chest, fast yielding to grey
Aren't you, flower soft hands, eager now
To pull at the kitten's tail,
To play at throwing up sand,
To hurl top and ball all around?
How hard is the work that remains
To be done by your hands, tender like lotus stalk,
However hard it may be,
May all the needed strength be theirs!
May these little hands never go dry
That are now moist with the honey of her drop
To moisten mouths going³ dry for penury!
With all grief removed
Through ignorance, child-widowhood,
Through lack of liberty, evil customs,
How many helpless sisters are there
In this land of Savitri⁴ Devi!

2. A common name for darling.

3. Mouths parched for want of food and drinks.

4. A great heroine of the Puranas. By her dedication and determination she brought back her dead husband to life.

All the necessary strength to lift
Atleast one of them from grief,
May the ever-generous father, mine and yours,
And of all things movable and immovable,
Grant to your tender hand, my child.

MY BATH AT PRAYAG

Prayag is the confluence of the Ganges, and Kalindi; Ganges stands for 'Sathvaguna,' for whatever is noble, heavenly, and bright. Kalindi is black, and stands for the 'Thamoguna', the low born and the earthy. But any confluence is sacred for the Indians; Bath at Prayag is considered beneficent, helpful to the attainment of Moksha. Here prayag is used symbolically by the poet; it stands for 'All India Congress Meeting' attended by the upper and middleclass people as well as nearly twelve thousand Harrijans who called the attention of the meeting to their plight and moved a resolution demanding full independence to India. These labourers carried the day. The poem shows the tremendous impact that the workmen of India had on India's struggle for freedom.

Has indecency entered the Indian Congress ?
Have black clouds spread across the bright sky ?
Have the crows without hesitation broken into the swanfold ?
Has satva guna¹ been tainted with tamas² ?
The burning lamps, mistaking their shadows close by
For darkness, became embarrassed.
Suddenly into the Pandal³ there entered about twelve thousand
Black labourers, marching in unity.

-
1. There are three gunas, or qualities, the Sattva Guna, or the Noble quality, the Rajo Guna or Valour, and the Thamo Guna or evil quality.
 2. The labourers are but the shadows of the well-to-do, in this context.
 3. Pavilion.

No learning, no knowledge these poor people had;
 No good clothes either; their bodies no elegance, no charm.
 They must be thrown out; why did they enter
 The Assembly, this ignorant crowd of manual workers ?
 The big pole held in front by those who obstructed them
 Was no more than a plantain string to the elephant-like ones.
 Hurting no one, and with no change of mood,
 They marched forward, quiet and dignified.
 This new venture cannot brook any obstruction.
 In these humble people hunger and thirst have
awakened humanity,

The clang of the chains on the feet of Mother India
 Reaches and pierces its ears, causing great pain.
 In a single unbroken line they entered the Pandal
 These dark-skinned people, innocent of letters
 With their own bodies they drew a black line
 Under the foot of the faded note of freedom⁴
 People so sucked up by suffering;
 How can they remain content with half-freedom ?
 To be out of the python's mouth up to the waist :
 Can that be called true liberty ?
 Indian Congress, you may offer welcome to these
 Brave guests, who bring with them due respect.
 Only today in so many years, your fortune
 Is perfected by the presence of those who ought to be there
 To clear up the jungle of slavery,
 To sow the seed of chaffless fraternity,
 To grow in the field of plentiful yield,
 These warm-blooded hands must move
 These farm workers, sunk somewhere on earth,

4. They underscored with this black line the demand for full freedom.

Are indeed the roots of all prosperity,
They put all the sweet food into the palaces;
They keep all thirst and hunger in their own cottages;
They grow black in order to whiten⁵ others
They are the selfless Karmayogis⁶ of old
They work at all times for the good of the world,
Suffering rain and cold and wind and heat;
They live on minimal food—they are
The first born of this holy land of the rishis.
By the noble presence of these wage-labourers
Whose bodies were all black and dark
That assemblage came to be seen that day
Like Ganga waters mixed with Kalindi
At prayaga, the holiest place of Pilgrimage,
Enjoy thy fill, my good luck again and again;
I myself took a deep dip into it and was thrilled all over.

5. To make others prosperous.

6. One dedicated to action.

THE BLOOD MUST BOIL

The poem is a panegyric on Kerala, the land of the poet. In his felicitous expressions the poet captures the entire beauty of the Kerala landscape, its mountains, vales and rivers. He brings out the charm of the traditions and customs of Kerala, its folk arts, and its festivals. He praises his mother tongue enriched by Sanskrit as well as Tamil. One has to look into Shakesperean plays, like Richard II, or Oedipus at colonus to come across poetic passages burning with such patriotic fervour. The name Bharata fills our hearts with pride, and the name Kerala shall set ablaze our veins with the fire of patriotism.

The Unity ground of the sky
Where clouds black as coal,
And clouds white as camphor
Move in joy, shoulder to shoulder,
The opulence of a bright morning
Rising behind the Sahya Hills,
The handicraft of the evening
Fixing gold plates upon the sky
And growing red corals here and there
In the waters of the Western sea;
The manifold music of the rivers
Listened to in all eagerness
By mountains, handsome within
With scented sandal and cardamom,
The smile of generosity at the porch

Of every charming house,
 Seen amidst the green that rises
 Above the walls around the premises,
 The cheerful chitchat of a language¹
 Aided by Sanskrit and brought up by Tamil,
 The excess of gentleness in the heart
 Revealing itself through white clothes;
 The festival of Onam² trumpeting
 The reign of the victorious Ma(ha)bali
 Through the songs of the Women's Dance³
 And the bow song and the flower song
 The clear autumnal nights
 When the stars high up in the sky
 And the water lilies of the lovely pond
 Glance at each other and chat in whispers,
 The Koothampalam⁴ that opens to show
 Drama at its highest pinnacle,
 And the pandals where Kathakali⁵
 Celebrates its triumphant histrionics—
 Which is the land perfect in all these ?
 Kerala, Kerala, Kerala alone.
 Whose feet immaculate from birth
 The waves of the south sea wash,
 Those holy feet constitute
 The land where we were born

-
1. Malayalam has been replenished by these languages.
 2. Onam is the chief Kerala festival; According to the Puranas it marks the day in the year when Mahabali the great King of Kerala, driven underground, pays his visit to Kerala.
 3. Women clap their palms upon one anothers', sing, and dance. Bow song is sung to the accompaniment of a single bow. Flower Song is another type of Song. The dance, as well as the Songs mark the celebration of onam.
 4. The dancing hall, the temple for dancing.
 5. A composite art exploiting dance, song, acting, and musical instruments.

And we are indeed the servants
Of the land of Bharat, renowned in purity-
We are all Keralites, children of one mother,
Whatever foreign land we may live in,
Lost in myriad thoughts, in myriad acts
Living in a myriad different ways.

The self-same gentle breeze that blows
In Perar, Pampa and Thriperiar⁶
Gently lifting the sheath of the coconut trees
Fan of peacock plumes of Lakshmi
Goes out through every breath of ours,
Even if we be in foreign lands.
Wherever we Keralites might stay,
We always live in Kerala :
Whatever distances they may traverse
The Sun's rays are in the Sun himself !
The foreign land may verily be
A heaven itself in affluence,
But even if we live in heaven,
Our glances point to the holy face of Kerala
Great men, your high status,
Knowledge and everything else you have,
Surrender them at the holy feet
Of the motherland, our queen.

The world is not running, but flying
To reach its goal these days
Join and tie to its wings
All threads of self uplift

6. These are various rivers in Kerala.

Or else, will not my land now
Lag behind the bird, just an ant⁷ ?
Hearing the name of Bharat
Our mind must be filled with pride,
And if the name Kerala is heard
Our blood must boil in our veins.

7. When other nations fly ahead like birds, India will lag behind like an ant.

FATHER AND DAUGHTER

There are very many scholars who consider 'Father and Daughter', Vallathol's master piece. It gives us a dramatic representation of the meeting between Viswamitra, the Kshtriya King who became a sage by his penance, and his daughter Sakuntala. Once when Viswamitra continuously prosecuted tapas for years, Indra, the King of the Devas, felt that by his spiritual power, Viswamitra might earn the right to be the King of Devas, and thus dethrone him. He therefore sent Menaka, one of the voluptuous dancers of his court to upset the concentration of Viswamitra. Menaka succeeded in her mission. Viswamitra had sexual union with Menaka. In course of time, Menaka gave birth to Sakuntala; She left the child with Viswamitra and returned to Indra; Viswamitra became repentant of his folly, he too deserted Sakuntala. The little baby was brought up by sage Kanva. When she attained maidenhood King Dushyanta who came to Kanva's hermitage, married her in secret. (It was Gandharva marriage an accepted form in the Indian tradition). However because of a curse by Durvasa, he failed to remember the pregnant Sakuntala brought to his court by Kanva's disciples., The rejected Sakuntala was taken by Menaka to the hermitage of the great Kasyapa the teacher of the Devas. At Kasyapa's hermitage Sakuntala gave birth to a boy, who was named Sarvadamana. When Sakuntala and Sarvadamana were at the hermitage of Kasyapa, Viswamitra came that way to pay his respects to Kasyapa. These are the circumstances under which the father sees his daughter after a long period. Learning that Dushyanta had rejected Sakuntala the great Rishi grew angry. He was about to curse Dushyanta when Sakuntala brought him to the realization of the

implication of such a curse. Vallathol shows that even such a sage as Viswamitra is not free from human passions; and also how Sakuntala the tender girl of Kanva's hermitage has matured into a wise woman. As the other Khanda Kavyas of Vallathol, this too abounds in a number of vivid pictures. Many descriptions are so detailed that a Kathakali actor can enact them effectively.

"Go my son, Sunassepha¹, and find out the time
When I could see my venerable Guru²
And offer my obeisance;
I will wait in the shade of this Asoka,"
Said he in words, sweet and sonorous
As the boom of big battle drums,
Which rose once upon a time, breaking the afternoon
Stillness of the sylvan hermitage of Kashyapa
On the slope of Mount Hemakoota.

Hardly had the visiting Rishi sought the shade
Of the Asoka, having despatched his dutiful
Disciple, when a little boy ran up to him
Lisping in honey-sweet words,
"I will take you to my grandpa!"
Who is this winsome child that could refer
To Lord Kashyapa as his grandfather?
Could it be Jayanta³ But Indra's son
Should be older; besides, it is human majesty
That is manifest in this boy.

1. Suneseptha, nephew of Viswamitra, and constant companion of the sage. Viswamitra had redeemed him from death when he was offered as sacrifice.
2. Kasyapa, the patriarch of the devas, the Teacher; the father of India.
3. Could he be Jayanta the son of Indra? But the boy is more human than deva-like.

The great sage was more inclined to fold him
Instantly to his chest than to inquire
As to who he was !

Lo ! the impetuous child has in a moment dragged
That liberated soul⁴ down to the world again !
The hallowed sage bent down and gathered the child
In his powerful arms and held him close
To his heart.

On his chest with its deer-skin cross-belt
The child beamed like a bright star in a black sky !
Softly drawing aside with one hand the thick
Curly hair rippling down to his shoulders,
And still moist with the sweat of playful exertion,
The holy one⁵ pressed his long-bearded face
Against the flower-soft cheek of the child !
The tender shoot of martial⁶ glory
And the hard core of spiritual⁷ glory blended
Augmenting each other to make a fascinating sight !
The boy unhesitatingly rested his head
On the stranger's shoulder as if moved
By some mysterious kinship !
Did the happy kid feel as if he were
Being fondled by another grandfather ?
Or, may be, little children know not the difference
Between one's own and another's :
Any gentle hand can fondle those blossoms.

4. The Rishi is supposed to have overcome all worldly emotions. But Sarva-damana arouses in him paternal feelings. The poet suggests that even Rishis are susceptible to such human emotions.

5. Viswamitra becomes a real grandfather.

6&7. 'Martial' stands for Kshatriya power and 'spiritual' stands for Brahmanic power.

May I ask in all humility, O great Rishi
Which did you find more delectable :
The heavenly bliss inherent in meditation,
Or the bliss you experienced in fondling
The flower-soft body of this tender child ?⁸

The ascetic closed his eyes in the happiness
Of holding the child close to his heart
As for the boy, his eyes scoring the distance,
He suddenly started laughing, and shouted,
"Mother I am here !"

And hearing that voice sweet as a bell
A young woman suddenly appeared there :
Soiled clothes, a wealth of plaited hair
Body emaciated but graceful, with no ornaments
Except its own native grace
She looked the very embodiment of sorrow !
The moment the sage set his eyes on her
They started moistening fast;
Perhaps his lips were shaping to say
"What change has come over you, Menaka⁹?"—
But it was thus that he presently spoke :
"Who are you, my daughter, who is the mother
Of this child with the distinct birth-marks
Of an emperor¹⁰?"

8. It is difficult to discriminate between the excellence of the joy of meditation and the joy of human affection. The poet often suggests that the joy of pure domestic affection excels even the highest of spiritual joys.

9. Sakuntala resembles her mother, Menaka.

10. Even when he was born, the birth-marks of an emperor. It was Sarvadāmana who later became Bharata, the celebrated emperor of India. It is after him that India is called Bhārata.

Meanwhile, that son, shouting,
 *Ah there in the hands of Markandaye¹¹
 Is a painted clay-peacock?"
 Leaped down from the chest of the Rishi,
 Wriggled out of his mother's attempted hold,
 And ran away in desperate hurry!
 Watching the spirit of her son, she heaved
 A deep sigh, and repressing her tears
 With great effort, with folded hands,
 Full of veneration and, even surpassing it,
 Love the good lady told the Rishi her own story:

"O liberated Soul, I was abandoned in the forest
 By my mother and father on the very day I was born,
 Picked up and fostered by Sage Kanva,
 Married in secrecy by king Dushyanta:
 As for my father, he is the far-famed Viswamitra!"
 "Me!" — the Maharshi was astounded!—
 O Rishi's daughter, it is your own father
 That is now speaking to you!
 "Ah! yes, I remember,—Menaka is your mother!"—
 Do your eyes fill with tears, you who have
 Crossed all worldly sufferings¹²?
 "I am blessed by the sight of my father"—
 The sage instantly raised his daughter from
 The ground, as overwhelmed with happiness,
 She prostrated at his feet;

11. Playmate of the boy.

The Poet who introduced Sarvadamana to bring sage Viswamitra to the domestic realms now draws away the boy from him to render the meeting between the father and the daughter dramatically effective.

12&13. The struggle between human passions and divine disinterest is stressed.

He fervently kissed her forehead a hundred times
Wiped away her tears with his right hand,
While gently patting her back with the other,
and also inquired about the welfare of his son-in-law,
Ah parental affection, even the ascetic who has
Conquered all emotions, is swayed by you!¹³
“Darling what is your name? Tell me and the name
Of your son.

Wherefore did you, the consort of a great King,
Came into this forest?”

A voice, sweet as the note of the veena,
Quivered out of the handsome woman:

“Father Kanva named me Shakuntala,
And thy grandson bears the name ‘Sarvadaman’;
By my mother’s blessing, this holy hermitage became
My lying-in chamber in the hour of my great sorrow!
When I was with child, I was sent from the asram
By father Kanva, with his love and blessings;
And when I reached the palace—”
Unable to bear her grief, she wept bitterly
For a while:—

“I was disowned by my gentle husband”

The aspect of that incarnate power of destruction
Suddenly changed, sparks of burning fire
Shot out of his eyes; his eyebrows arched;
The brow wrinkled¹⁴; even the leaves stood still;
The wind ceased to stir anywhere!
“Who is this Dushyanta who dares to remain alive
After having flung my daughter into unbearable shame?

14. Such a scene may best be exploited by a Kathakali actor.

This one hand is enough to raise men to heaven
In the fraction of a second, and to fling them
Into hell!

Hasn't the king ever heard of the dire
Experiences of Trisanku¹⁵ and Harischandra¹⁶
Brought about by Kausika's¹⁷ prowess
Lo! let the world unmistakably behold once again
The dread spiritual might of Viswamitra
Achieved by dint of fierce penance:
"Wicked soul, who, having spoused an innocent
Woman on your own initiative, have now
Heartlessly, causelessly abandoned her—"

The mighty Viswamitra had started uttering
These words, placing the fist of his right arm,
Clenched in anger, on his chest¹⁸.
That arm with which, after having forced Brahma,
By the might of his penance, to appear before
Him in person, he had extorted from him the highest
Honour—the order of Brahmarshi!
If only he were to fling it forward,
It would spell the very end!—
It will become the thunderbolt that would
Annihilate her husband with his entire race!

Fully aware of the dread consequence, she instantly
Clutched that missile of destruction
With both her hands and cried:

15. For Trisanku who sought his help Viswamitra created a new heaven between the earth and the heaven.

16. Harischandra who adhered to truth was put to the severest test by Viswamitra.

17. Another name of Viswamitra.

18. Another scene instinct with Kathakali type of histrionic potentiality.

“Father, for my sake, forbear ! Let not your
Daughter become the destroyer of her husband !
Let her not be consumed by the fire of dire widowhood”—
Abandoned earlier by her parents once, she has now
Been abandoned freely by her husband¹⁹ too,

That is all;

Let my life be completely destitute;
But let not my son too become an outcast
On account of my sin !”

The fire of his anger having been quenched
By the tears of his daughter,
The father, now feeling extremely happy,
Commended her :

“Fare thee well ! Your goodness has pulled me
Out of moral ruin;
May you along with your son, soon join your lord !

19. Highly suggestive lines packed with the controlled indignation of Sakuntala, potent enough to smite the conscience of her father. These words became Viswamitra.

PLEASE FORGIVE US, MOTHER

The poem gives us a moving picture of the untold suffering of a bull that can hardly bear the yoke; and stumbles down. The cart-driver lashes the mute being without pity. The poet asks forgiveness of God, for such cruel acts committed by his ignorant fellow men. Of late the Indians seem to have forgotten the lessons taught by Lord Buddha, the great son of India.

The plight of the miserable bull is comparable to the misery of the Indians who groan under the British rule.

Along the road laboured the bullockcart,
Loaded with granite chips
Like iron coins.
And the bullocks, skeletons which yet had breath,
Moved slowly forward.
Alas, exhaustion frothed at their mouth,
And tears ran down their tired, discoloured eyes.
The topless cart, rising and falling,
 heaving up and swinging sideways,
Seemed to proclaim, through the groans of its wheels,
The trials and travails in its driver's trail of life,
Stones lay half submerged
Like tortoises on the dirt road,
Drab as a flood-drain;
And these threw up angry sparks
As the iron sheaths of the cart-wheels ground over them.

Ah, stony hardness, why this protest ?
 You have ever been bruising and tormenting
 The feet of poor way-farers :
 Who would deign to kindly cover your nakedness ?
 You must grind and grind to dust, sinner that you are !
 Four bullocks are barely adequate
 To move this cart with its cargo of stones.
 And these two are faint and famished;
 They must have been at it since dawn

Ah, one of the bullocks has stumbled and fallen.
 Down sprang the cart-man, who has been sitting at the yoke,
 Sending up coils of beedi-smoke from his mouth
 Into the darkening dusk.
 Pulling down his rag of a turban
 He tied it around his waist¹
 And stood with whip in hand to thrash—
 O ancient land of farms and fields,
 See your concern for cattle has come to such a pass !
 As the man thrashed the supine 'rogue'² of a bullock,
 Kicked it and bit it and tortured it almost to death,
 The very stones seemed to weep
 As the feeble sunlight melted on their pale chips.
 While that poor old animal
 Whose daily labour had pumped blood into its aggressor's
 veins,

And put flesh to his body³
 Lay helpless,
 The cart-man stood, holding his bloody whip,

1. He does it, like a warrior ready to meet an opponent.

2. Used ironically.

3. The poet reveals his insight into the nature of exploitation.

Like the sceptre of ingratitude.
A red stream ran down the side
Of that dark beast.
Who took the picture, I wonder;
There, in the West, could be seen, a grey cloud,
With a ruddy streak of sun-set glow
On its side⁴.

Once it is said,
The divine cow of heaven⁵
Shed tears at the sight of a bull-calf on earth
Being belaboured at the plough
Won't she shed tears of blood
If she behold this crime ?
Please forgive us, O India,
Mother of the Prince of compassion⁶ !

4. The ruddy streak is suggestive of the blood stained body of the bull.

5. There is a story to this effect. The divine cow Kamadhenu was moved to pity at the misery of a bull calf on earth,

6. Gautama Buddha.

OUR MOTHER

The poem was composed, on the first death Anniversary of Bapuji, the Father of our nation. The poet says that we shall re-dedicate ourselves to the service of our mother. The martyrdom of the Mahatma enjoins upon us this solemn duty.

We are the bravest of the brave!
Haven't we borne without breaking our hearts
The loss of Bapuji who was our everything?—
We need no other training in endurance
To put up with any conceivable affliction!
Till but a year ago we had you as our
Benign Mentor in all things:
What if the Ganges dried up?
What if the Himalayas crumbled?
This holy land would remain just the same.
If only you wouldn't leave it!
That peerless Karmayogi¹ brought to me
The substance of real freedom,
And taught us for long how to bear its burden:
And himself lent support to those
Whose shoulders bent under its weight,
Alas! that blessed half-year² is gone

1. Mahatma Gandhiji.

2. The short period during which Gandhiji guided independent India.

The howls and barks and screeches and commotions
 Of deadly conflict started rising from various places;
 Dense smoke surging up from hamlets
 That hate had consigned to the flames,
 Spread dark clouds across the skies;
 Human blood rained in torrents; there was no place
 Where its crimson did not create an untimely sunset;
 The raging conflagration of revenge that spread
 From house to house, shot meteors in all directions;
 The life-breaths that fled the split throats
 Of millions of people
 Gathered into a tempest that shook the terrestrial sphere
 Shook the mighty mountains, churned the oceans,
 As on the day of the Ultimate Deluge;
 Sinister portents every one of them!³
 Still never did we suspect that they presaged
 This stupendous calamity!
 Who could have imagined that a gun⁴ would ever be found
 To shatter a heart that was so full of the nectar
 Of purest love.

2

No more tears!—

Let us make this day on which that Light of the world went
out,

The day of Sarvodaya⁵ — Universal Welfare!

Awake, you who are idle!

Wipe off the darkness of hatred!

Open out to the full the lotuses of your hearts!

3. The reference is to the communal riots. The horror of the riots is fully brought out.

4. The gun of Nathu Ram Godse.

5. The prosperity of each and every individual which was the goal of Gandhiji.

Spread bright light into all quarters of the world
Standing before the holy lamp of timeless Dharma
With its five lighted wicks of Renunciation,
Wisdom, Truth, Non-violence and Unity,
Let us take this solemn vow:
We will zealously protect the rights of others
Even at the risk of our lives;
With the eyes that the Mahatama taught to see,
We will discriminate between good and evil;
We will wish free, unhampered life even to the lowliest:
They are brothers to us, we are brothers to them;
The terrestrial orb is one single common Home!
She is our Mother who sang long ago:
"Let all the world be happy!"⁶

6. This was the great ideal upheld by the Indian sages. India wishes well for every other country in the world.

THE LAKE OF GENEVA

Vallathol visited both Europe and Russia. At Geneva he visited the Geneva lake celebrated for its enthialling beauty. The sight inspired the poet. It is interesting to note how the poet handles foreign names in his original verse without in the least disturbing its rhythm. Also it is to be noted that the poet takes pride in such western writers and poets as Byron, Roussean, and Balzac.

O! Lake, which I would deem
The joyous flood of nature's beauty,
The hoary Alps¹ blanketed in snow
Peers fondly at you, like a father his child,
You are the mirror beside the city of Geneva,
Lovely as Paris, to behold her beauty in.
Like the Vistuala² to Warsaw, and the Seine³ to Paris
You lend glory to gentle Geneva
The electric lights of diverse huses,
Which deck the streets daily at dusk
Conjured up in your waters, a magic garden,
With their myriad glows of reflections,
In the century gone by, you were the pilgrim font of art
Which drew to its sides
Illustrious men like Byron, Balzac and Rousseau.

1. It is from the mountain, Alps that water has flowed into the lake.

2. River that flows beside Warsaw, the capital of Poland.

3. The river that flows past Paris.

The lively imagination
Of those grand lovers of the Muses
Must have mingled with your wavelets
And enriched your sweat waters
In far-off, by gone days.

1
1

LENIN'S TOMB

Vallathol was enthusiastic about the Soviet Union and its achievements. He paid a visit to Russia. At Moscow he paid his respects to the mortal remains of Lenin at his tomb. The poet had unstinted admiration for Lenin, the saviour of Russia.

Who-ever is not bewildered
By this Moscow, which combines
The gaiety of Paris, the greatness of London,
And the generous prosperity of New York ?
Where, where, shall I first cast my eyes ?

In the charming and spacious square of Moscow
Crowded with people, comely and clever,
If you descend steps of black marble, slippery-smooth,
You reach the underground vault,
Where lies in state, Lenin, the pure-souled.
The fair body glows
In the lovely lustre of electric lights
Like the fair dawn in human form.
Why say 'like ?
Is not this frame the glorious dawn
That drove away darkness in Russia
And is fit to awaken anyone ?
A sacred temple, this, for this people and visitors,

Thanks to the bodily presence of the great mentor¹ long dead.
 We offered flowers, and bowed before the feet,
 Which treaded the path of freedom
 With single-minded devotion.

Even now, twenty-seven years since
 The hero² sent up his soul to heaven,
 Is it due to thoughts of universal weal
 That his far-seeing eyes remain closed ?
 The hands, which raised up this nation
 From the hell of misery,
 Into which the Tsar's imperial tyranny had plunged it,
 Those hands, lie motionless on either side
 Humane Lenin blanketed this land
 In the warm ruddy flames of revolution
 While Gandhiji spread over India, the moonlight of
Satyagraha,

Sun and moon, these are to us
 They freed us from blindness
 One tore off the golden royal curtain
 To bind the wounds of the world,
 The other stitched together
 The lacerated limbs of peace.
 Karmayogins both alike
 They strived to radicate evil
 And were prisoners of injustice.

A little away from the vault,
 Which holds this embalmed body,

1. Lenin; His body is preserved.

2. Vallathol admired the hero who saved his land after a bloody battle; as well as the hero who won independences for his land through nonviolence. He could blend two ideologies that seemed opposed to each other.

Stretches a long ridge, hardly a metre high,
Carpeted with fresh green grass
And with a front of marble wall.
There, underneath, have been laid to rest
The heroes who fought for freedom.
Here you sleep, in the cells of the earth,
Covered with a common blanket of grass;
But your country which lay numb in long slumber
Has woke up and risen again.
Soldiers of justice, who pledge their lives
To the honour and glory of the land of their birth
Do they ever die, gentlemen ?
O Russia, there is none that is sad or idle or unlettered
Among thy twenty-five crores of children.
Men and women, all are equal,
And of one mind,
Thy victory, indeed, is victory.

In 1921 he met Mahatma Gandhi whom he accepted his teacher, at Vaikom during the Temple Entry Satyagraha. The same year he declined the award from the Prince of Wales as a protest against the Jallian Walla Bagh massacre of the British Imperialists.

In 1924 the poet initiated his great mission of building Kerala Kalamandalam, the famous Kathakali art-centre, which came into bloom in 1930.

In 1935 he travelled the whole of India with his Kathakali troupe. In 1936 he moved to Cheruthuruthy and lived there permanently until his death. In 1935 he translated Kalidasa's *Sakuntalam* and wrote his famous poem "Achanum Makalum."

In 1939 he visited Calcutta and Santiniketan with his Kathakali Troupe and met Rabindranath Tagore.

In 1948 he was decorated 'poet laureate' by the Madras Government.

In 1950 he went to Poland to participate in the Warsaw World Peace Congress. He became one of the Vice-President of the World Peace Council. On his return, he visited England, France, Italy and Switzerland.

In 1951 he visited the Soviet Union as leader of a cultural delegation and wrote a poem in memory of the travel: "In Russia." This and some of his other poems were translated into Russian language and published there in 1952 and 1958.

In 1953 he visited China and met Mao-tse-tong and other Chinese leaders. He began his translation of *Rigveda* in 1952.

In 1955 the Silver Jubilee of Kerala Kalamandalam was celebrated. Prime Minister Nehru decorated Vallathol with a Golden 'Manihara' in honour of the inauguration of the celebration.

In 1956 he was made Vice-President of the Kerala Sahitya Akademi. He was also a member of the general council of the Sahitya Akademi of India. He was also the President of the All Kerala Sahitya Parishath the premier association of the writers of Kerala.

In 1958 on the 13th March he expired leaving behind his wife, children and grand children.

In 1966 he was posthumously awarded Nehru Peace prize by the Soviet Land.

A Vallathol Samadhi stands at the spot where his last remains were cremated within the premises of the Kerala Kalamandalam, which is visited by people from all over the world today as a place of pilgrimage.

— PAVANAN

VALLATHOL

Selected Poems

Those of us who began writing poetry in early thirties were familiar with two all-India names, those of Tagore and Iqbal. In fact, both were internationally known Indian poets. A third name emerged by and by, that of Vallathol.... He came at the harvest-time of the Indian renaissance. He garnered its rich fruits singing with abandon about the past ideals whose presence he felt in his blood, the ever-renewing beauty of the native land, the fresh aspirations of a resurgent India and of mankind, says Dr. Umashankar Joshi in his foreword to this collection.

This book presents, in a sensitive English translation, the Selected Poems of the great poet. There is no doubt that this valuable collection will be useful to the non-Malayalee readers to get an insight into the poetic-spirit of the great poet and appreciate the solid contributions he has made to Indian nationalism and culture.

Sole Distributors :

ORIENT LONGMAN LTD.

Registered Office :

3/5 Asaf Ali Road, New Delhi - 110002

Other Offices :

Kamani Marg, Ballard Estate, Bombay-400038

17 Chittaranjan Avenue, Calcutta-700072

36 A Anna Salai, Madras-600002

1/24 Asaf Ali Road, New Delhi-110002

80/1 Mahatma Gandhi Road, Bangalore-560001

3-5-820 Hyderguda, Hyderabad-500001

S. P. Verma Street, Patna-800001