



कोविलन

KOVILAN (V.V. AYYAPPAN)

कोविलन (व. वे. अय्यप्पन), जिन्हें साहित्य अकादेमी आज अपने सर्वोच्च सम्मान, महत्तर सदस्यता, से विभूषित कर रही है, देश के सर्वाधिक अनूठे कथाकारों में से एक हैं।

कोविलन का जन्म 1923 में तत्कालीन कोचीन राज्य में कंडास्सेरी के एक किसान परिवार में हुआ, जो कि बाद में केरल राज्य का अंग बना। अपने गाँव में आरंभिक शिक्षा प्राप्त कर 13 वर्ष की वय में आपने साहित्यदीपिका संस्कृत कॉलेज, पावरट्टी में प्रवेश लिया। यहीं एक लेखक के रूप में आपकी प्रतिभा उजागर हुई और के. पी. नारायण पिशारोडि, पी. सी. वासुदेवन एलायड, एम. पी. शंकुण्णी नायर और डॉ. श्रीकृष्ण शर्मा जैसे विद्वानों तथा प्रगतिशील लेखक चेरुकाड ने इसे और तीव्र किया।

एक विकसित होते हुए लेखक के रूप में कविता कोविलन के लिए मूलभूत भावावेग थी। लेकिन उनका किशोरावस्था का जीवन और समय—दमनात्मक उपनिवेशवादी और सामंती शासन, जातिवादी सामाजिक वातावरण, चारों तरफ गाँवों में व्याप्त गरीबी जो द्वितीय विश्वयुद्ध और बाद के वर्षों में अकाल के दौरान चरम सीमा पर जा पहुँची, कठोर पारिवारिक और सामाजिक बंधन और इन सबके खिलाफ विद्रोह करने की अंतःप्रेरणा—इन सबने आपको कथा की ओर मुड़ने को बाध्य किया, जहाँ आत्माभिव्यक्ति का क्षेत्र व्यापक था।

'भारत छोड़ो आंदोलन' के दौरान जब गांधीजी को गिरफ्तार किया गया, कोविलन ने कक्षाओं का बहिष्कार किया, जिसके कारण उन्हें कॉलेज से निष्कासित कर दिया गया। इसी के साथ आपकी औपचारिक अकादमिक शिक्षा की इतिश्री हो गई।

1943 में आपने इंडियन रॉयल नेवी में पदभार ग्रहण किया और एंटी सबमेरीन डिटेक्टर ऑपरेटर के रूप में बंगाल की खाड़ी, बर्मा और सिंगपुर में काम किया। आप भारतीय नौसैनिक विद्रोह के साक्षी रहे और 1946 में आप नौसेना से अलग हो गए।

1948 में आपने भारतीय सेना में पदभार ग्रहण किया और 20 वर्षों तक सिग्नल कार्प्स में रेडियो मैकेनिक के रूप में काम किया और 1968 में सेवानिवृत्त हुए। पाँच वर्षों तक हिमालय के सीमावर्ती क्षेत्रों में और एक वर्ष तक आई आई टी कानपुर परिसर में एन सी सी के इंस्ट्रक्टर के रूप में आपके अनुभवों ने आपकी कई महत्त्वपूर्ण कृतियों की पृष्ठभूमि के रूप में काम किया।

Kovilan, (V.V.Ayyappan) whom the Sahitya Akademi celebrates today with its highest honour, declaring him a Fellow of the Akademi, is one of the most unique living fiction writers of this country.

Kovilan was born in 1923 into a farmers' family of Kandanasseri in the erstwhile princely state of Cochin, which later formed part of Kerala State. Having had elementary schooling in his home village he joined the Sahityadeepika Sanskrit College, Pavaratty at the age of 13 where his talents as a writer were exposed to and whetted by eminent scholars and aestheticians like K.P. Narayana Pisharody, P.C. Vasudevan Elayad, M.P. Sankunni Nair and Dr. Sreekrishna Sharma and the progressive writer, Cherukadu.

As a budding writer, poetry was Kovilan's primary passion. But the life and times of his adolescence – the oppressive colonial and feudal rule, the casteist social milieu, widespread rural poverty that climaxed in stark famine during the years of the Second World War and after, the agony of the snapping familial and social bonds and the inner urge to rebel maturing into politically conscious militancy – compelled him to switch to fiction as it offered a wider arena of self-expression.

During the turbulent days of Quit India Movement when Gandhiji was arrested, Kovilan boycotted his classes and was expelled from college. That marked the end of his formal academic education.

In 1943 he joined the Indian Royal Navy and served as an anti-submarine detector operator in the Bay of Bengal, Burma and Singapore. He was a ringside witness to the great Indian Naval Mutiny and left the Navy in 1946.

In 1948 he joined the Indian Army, worked as a radio mechanic in the Signal Corps for 20 years and retired in 1968. His experiences in the border areas of the Himalayas for five years and in the Kanpur IIT campus for a year as NCC instructor later would serve as background to some of his major works.

वापस घर लौटने पर कोविलन पूर्णकालीन लेखक के रूप में जीवन व्यतीत कर रहे हैं। गहरी सामाजिक चिन्ताओं वाले एक व्यक्ति के रूप में आप अपने को आम लोगों के उद्देश्यों और आंदोलनों से जोड़ते हैं और केरल के वर्तमान जीवन में अंतःकरण की आवाज़ माने जाते हैं।

कोविलन की 26 से अधिक कृतियाँ प्रकाशित हैं, जिनमें दस कहानी-संग्रह, बारह उपन्यास, एक नाटक और तीन विविध लेखन से संबंधित कृतियाँ शामिल हैं।

केरल साहित्य अकादेमी द्वारा आपके एक उपन्यास का अंग्रेज़ी अनुवाद *ए माइनस बी* नाम से प्रकाशित है। आपके उपन्यास *तोडंगळ* पर आधारित एक धारावाहिक दूरदर्शन पर प्रदर्शित किया गया। आपकी कुछ कहानियाँ भी छोटे परदे के लिए रूपांतरित की गईं।

कोविलन मलयाळम् कथा साहित्य और उसके आख्यानपरक पैटर्न के इतिहास में एक दुर्लभ व्यक्तित्व के रूप में खड़े नज़र आते हैं। यद्यपि आपने अपना लेखन प्रगतिशील लेखक आंदोलन से संबंधित महान कथाकारों से प्रभावित होकर शुरू किया और काफ़ी हद तक आपने सार्वभौम मानववाद और वर्ग पक्षधरता का साझा किया, लेकिन आपको पता चल गया कि आपकी संवेदनाएँ मूलभूत रूप से भिन्न थीं। और तब भी जब आप स्वयं को विनम्रतापूर्वक 'भूखों का कवि' कहते हैं—विषय के चयन से लेकर भाषा और बिम्ब का आपका उपयोग अनुठा है। आपका रचनात्मक लेखन हमेशा साहित्यिक मानदंडों को चुनौती देता रहा है।

अपने प्रथम उपन्यास *ताकण्णा हृदयंगळ*, जो कि 19 वर्ष की वय में लिखा गया, से लेकर आप इस बात के लिए बराबर चौकन्ने रहे कि आप किसी भी मॉडल का अनुकरण न करें, चाहे वह दूसरों द्वारा स्थापित हों या स्वयं आपके द्वारा। कोविलन की प्रत्येक कृति, चाहे वह कहानी-संग्रह हो या उपन्यास, प्रयोगधर्मी रही है। इस रचनात्मक अनुशासन ने एक लेखक के रूप में आपको अद्वितीय बनाए रखा और प्रायः आपकी कृतियों को लोकप्रिय पाठकीयता से विरत रखा। न तो आप किसी से प्रभावित रहे, न ही आपने किसी को इस तरह आकर्षित किया कि वह आपका अनुकरण करे। इसीलिए कोविलन की कृतियाँ काल, आंदोलन, दर्शन, शैली अथवा संरचना के संदर्भ में किसी भी तरह के वर्गीकरण की उपेक्षा करती हैं।

कोविलन के जीवन के दो दशक वर्दी में बैरकों में, साथ ही युद्धभूमि में व्यतीत हुए और इस दौरान आपको अत्यंत पीड़ादायी वैयक्तिक अनुभव हुए जो कि आपको पागलपन की सीमा तक ले गए। इसने हमारे उपमहाद्वीप के उन व्यक्तियों और संस्कृतियों से आपका परिचय कभी नहीं कराया, जो विविध स्रोतों से आते हैं। कोविलन जैसे लेखक के लिए यह कच्चे माल का एक अनंत स्रोत था और अपनी कहानियों के माध्यम से आप मलयाळम् पाठकों को नए क्षेत्रों तक ले गए।

कोविलन को मलयाळम् कथा साहित्य में सबसे उल्लेखनीय भारतीय लेखक कहा जा सकता है।

आपकी कहानियों और उपन्यासों में बैरक एक लघु भारत को उद्घाटित करते हैं—इसकी व्यापक भौगोलिक विविधताओं और

Back home, Kovilan lives a fulltime writer. A man with deep social concerns, he aligns himself with people's causes and movements and is a most sought after voice of conscience in Kerala's public life today.

Kovilan has, to his credit, more than 26 published works including 10 short-story collections, 12 novels, one play and three volumes of miscellaneous writings.

An English rendering of his novel, *A Minus B*, has been brought out by the Kerala Sahitya Akademi. A tele-serial based on his novel *Thottangal* was beamed on the Doordarshan. Some of his short stories also have been adapted for the mini-screen.

Kovilan stands out as a rare phenomenon in Malayalam fiction and in the history of its narrative patterns. Though he started writing close on the heels of the master fiction-writers belonging to the progressive writers' movement and to a larger extent shared the universal humanism and the inquiry they led into class bias in literature, he could identify that his own sensibilities were radically different. And even when he humbly opts to be called "a writer of the hungry," his oeuvre reflects the uncompromising struggle he waged throughout to shun the commonplace – from the choice of subject to the use of language and imagery. His efforts almost always embarrassed the literary canons in vogue.

Right from his debut novel, *Thakarnna Hridayangal* written at the age of 19, he was obsessively vigilant not to emulate any models, set not only by others but by himself as well. Every work of Kovilan, whether short-story or novel, was inventive. This creative adamancy kept him inimitable as a writer and quite often estranged his works from popular readership. He had no masters, nor did he attract any followers. The works of Kovilan, therefore, defy any critical attempt for categorization with reference to métiers of period, movement, philosophy, style or structure.

Kovilan's life in uniform for more than two decades in the barracks as well as in the field exposed him to excruciating personal experiences leading him to virtual madness; nevertheless it introduced him to men and cultures belonging to a variety of sources in our subcontinent. For a writer like Kovilan, this was an unending source of raw material and he, through his stories, led the readers of Malayalam fiction to unmapped territories.

Kovilan can best be described as the most notable 'Indian writer' in Malayalam fiction.

In his stories and novels the barracks revealed a miniature India with its vast geographical diversities and varied cultural identities, with its poverty and destitution, rustic innocence and seeming absurdities—all these, bound by a common thread of struggle for existence and survival. Simultaneously

विविध सांस्कृतिक अस्मिताओं के साथ, इसकी गरीबी और साधनहीनता के साथ, सहज निष्कपटता और प्रतीयमान अर्थहीनता के साथ—ये सभी अस्तित्व और जीवित रहने के संघर्ष के धागे के साथ बँधी हुई हैं। इसी के साथ आपके चरित्रों का अंकन इसे उजागर करता है कि किस प्रकार सत्ता ने कठोर नियंत्रण द्वारा मानवीय गरिमा और स्वतंत्रता को ठेस पहुँचायी है, चाहे वह सेना हो या नागर समाज और यह औपनिवेशिक शासन में तो होता ही था, स्वतंत्र भारत में भी जारी है। तथापि आप अपनी नियति को अप्रश्नांकित रूप में स्वीकार नहीं करते। कोविलन अपने चरित्रों में प्रतिरोध और विद्रोह के तत्त्वों को जीवंत बनाए रखते हैं।

कोविलन ने अपने सैनिक जीवन के अनुभवों के आधार पर चार उपन्यास लिखे हैं—*ए माइनस बी*, *एषमेडांगळ* (फ़ौजी पत्नियों), *ताष्वराकळ* (घाटियाँ) और *हिमालयम्*। इन उपन्यासों और अनेक कहानियों के माध्यम से सर्व-भारतीय जीवन और भूभाग के चित्रण के साथ आपने आख्यानपरक अवधारणाओं को पुनर्निर्मित किया और मलयाळम् कथा साहित्य के परिचित पैटर्न को अतिक्रमित किया। कोविलन ने एक नायक के गिर्द बुने जानेवाले रेखीय आख्यान को परे फेंक दिया। आपने विविध चरित्रों की नई तकनीक के साथ प्रयोग किया, जो कि एक साथ विविध स्थलों पर एक तंतुजाल जैसे पैटर्न में स्वयं को उद्घाटित करते हैं। इस पैटर्न ने रूढ़िवादी और शास्त्रीय संवेदनाओं को चकित कर दिया, लेकिन मलयाळम् लेखन की सीमाओं को विस्तृत किया।

सैनिक जीवन पर आधारित उपन्यासों *एषमेडांगळ*, *ताष्वराकळ* और *हिमालयम्* को एक त्रयी के रूप में देखा जा सकता है। आसन्न भारत-चीन युद्ध की पृष्ठभूमि में इन उपन्यासों के पात्र एक इलहामी तात्कालिकता के साथ अपनी खुद की शैली में जीवन और मृत्यु के तत्त्वशास्त्रीय प्रश्नों का सामना करते हैं। *हिमालयम्* में नृत्यरत शिव की आद्य छवि जलविप्लव जैसे युद्ध के साथ देश और काल में समकालित की गई है और इसे एक अनूठे जटिल स्थापत्य और काव्य-शैली में रूपायित किया गया है। इस त्रयी की कास्मिक विमाएँ साहित्यिक पंडितों को चकित कर देती हैं।

थोट्टंगळ कोविलन का प्रथम 'पोस्ट-मिलिटरी' उपन्यास है, जो अपने उदात्त सौन्दर्य के साथ ऐसी भाषा में वर्णित है, जो मंत्रोच्चार की भाषा लगती है और प्रार्थना की घंटियों-सी प्रतीत होती है। यह मृत्यु की रात एक वृद्ध औरत की स्मृतियों का वर्णन करती है, उसका पूरा जीवन कुंठा में बीत गया और बचपन के सुनहरे ख़्वाब भयावह स्वप्न बन गए। 100 पृष्ठों की इस पुस्तक में कुछ अभागों, उनके परिवारों, उनकी सामाजिक-राजनीतिक स्थितियों में ऐतिहासिक रूप से अपरिहार्य दुःखान्त रूपांतरों की कथा है। यह अपने आप में क्षणिक इतिहास है, जिसे वैयक्तिक नियतियों द्वारा प्रतिबिम्बित किया गया है; जो कि जादुई रूप से समय की एक बूँद में संकेन्द्रित हो गया है।

भरतन, जो आपात्काल के दौरान प्रकाशित हुआ, जिसका नायक भरतन एक ऐतिहासिक रूपक है, जो स्वातंत्र्योत्तर भारत के सामाजिक-राजनीतिक यथार्थ का चित्रण करता है। इस सत्ता-संरचना में प्रत्येक

his characters depicted, subtly, how human dignity and freedom are hollowed out through regimentation, whether in the army or in civil society, by powers that be in Independent India too, just as it used to be during the colonial regime. They, however, do not accept their destiny unquestioned. Kovilan keeps this element of resistance and rebellion burning in his characters.

Kovilan has written four novels with his experiences in the military as their background —*A Minus B*, *Ezhamedangal* (Army Wives), *Thazhvarakal* (The Valleys) and *Himalayam*. Apart from the pan-Indian lives and terrains that he introduced, through these novels (and numerous short stories as well) he restructured the narrative concepts, deviating seriously from patterns hitherto familiar to Malayalam fiction. Kovilan jettisoned the idea of linear narrative woven around a protagonist. He experimented with the new technique of many characters revealing themselves at many junctures simultaneously in a cobweb-like narrative pattern. This startled the conservative and scholastic sensibilities but, however, expanded the frontiers of writing in Malayalam.

Among the military novels, *Ezhamedangal*, *Thazhvarakal* and *Himalayam* can be considered a trilogy. Set against the impending India-China war, the characters in these novels encounter the ontological questions of life and death in their own way with an apocalyptic urgency. In *Himalayam*, the archetypal image of the dancing Shiva, synchronized in time and space with the deluge-like war, is invoked through a wonderfully complex architecture and a distilled poetic diction. The cosmic dimensions of this trilogy still elude literary pundits.

Thottangal (Incantations), Kovilan's first post-military novel, is a work of unsurpassable beauty as subtle as a glass statuette, in a language that turns into a chant, as musical as the chiming prayer bells. It narrates the delirious memories of an old woman on the night of her death; her entire life had presented her with the utmost frustration, turning the dreams of her childhood into nightmares. This slender volume of hardly 100 pages deftly encompasses the historically unavoidable tragic transformations in the life of certain hapless souls, their families, their socio-economic conditions and the very nature surrounding them by the passage of time. It is fleeting history itself, refracted through personal destinies, that is magically condensed to a drop of time.

Bharathan, the protagonist of the novel *Bharathan* published during the Emergency, is a historical metaphor that incises the socio-political realities of post-Independent India. The predatory power-structure finds every common man, the poor and the downtrodden, the toiling villager, the hungry street urchin, the widowed mother and the orphaned

आम आदमी, गरीब और दलित, मेहनतकश ग्रामवासी, सड़क पर भूखे पेट जीवन व्यतीत करनेवाले, विधवा माँ और अनाथ बच्चे को अपने अस्तित्व पर खतरा महसूस होता है और षड्यंत्र तथा यंत्रणा का ही मानों शासन है। भरतन सत्ता के झूठे न्यायालय में पकड़ा जाता है, उस पर अभियोग लगाया जाता है और उसे मौत की सजा दी जाती है। यह उजागर होता है कि हमारे छद्म समाज में निष्कपटता का पुरस्कार उसकी समाप्ति से कम कुछ भी नहीं है।

तट्टकम् कोविलन का वृहद उपन्यास है और एक महत्त्वपूर्ण कृति है—न केवल मलयाळम् उपन्यास के इतिहास में एक दुर्लभ योगदान, बल्कि किसी भी भारतीय भाषा में। यह एक महाकाव्यात्मक स्वरूप का महान आख्यान है, जिसमें एक भूखंड और उसके लोगों, उसके पौराणिक सृष्टिचक्र और एक नागर समाज तक पहुँचने की उसकी यात्रा की गाथा है। उपन्यास का ताना-बाना अनेक लोक-कथाओं, किंवदंतियों, फंतासियों और ऐतिहासिक घटनाओं के इर्द-गिर्द बुना गया है। इसकी संरचना आपस में जुड़े धारावाहिकों की सी है, जो एक महाख्यान की रचना करते हैं, जो हमारे महाकाव्यों की याद दिलाते हैं। यह आख्यान अपने देशकाल की तलाश स्वयं करता है और यह अतीत, वर्तमान और भविष्य की असंख्य पीढ़ियों को खुला मार्ग प्रदान करता है। अपने इस उद्देश्य में कोविलन एक भाषाई सिंफ़नी की रचना करते हैं, जो सामाजिक स्तर पर बोलियों और भाषाओं का सम्मिश्रण करती है।

अपने साहित्यिक योगदान के लिए कोविलन को अनेक पुरस्कारों एवं सम्मानों से विभूषित किया गया है, जिनमें केरल साहित्य अकादेमी पुरस्कार दो बार (*तोडंगळ* उपन्यास के लिए 1972, *शकुनम्* कहानी-संग्रह के लिए 1977), मुत्तातु वरकी पुरस्कार (1995), बशीर पुरस्कार (क्रतर प्रवासी द्वारा, 1995), ए. पी. बुलाक्कड पुरस्कार (1997), केरल साहित्य परिषद पुरस्कार (1998), साहित्य अकादेमी पुरस्कार (1998), एन. वी. पुरस्कारम् (1999), वायलार पुरस्कार (1999) शामिल हैं। आपको केरल साहित्य अकादेमी फ़ेलोशिप से भी सम्मानित किया गया है।

कोविलन के भीतर का व्यक्ति और लेखक समकालीन समाज और उसकी दुहरी मूल्य व्यवस्था का आलोचक है। आपका कहना है कि हमारा समाज एक आपराधिक समाज है। अपने लेखों और वक्तव्यों में आपने सत्ता की कड़ी आलोचना की है। न तो उम्र और न ही ख्याति इस बूढ़े सैनिक की युयुत्सु आत्मा को इस संघर्ष से विरत कर सकी है।

मलयाळम् में लिखनेवाले भारतीय कथाकार कोविलन को, जिन्होंने अपनी कहानियों और अपने उपन्यासों से एक नई दुनिया सृजित की है, साहित्य अकादेमी अपनी महत्तर सदस्यता अर्पित करते हुए स्वयं को गौरवान्वित महसूस कर रही है।

child a threat to its existence and unleashes the reign of conspiracy and torture. Bharathan is implicated, persecuted and tried in a mock court of establishment and sentenced to the destined death. It is revealed that the wages of innocence in our pseudo society is nothing lesser than its elimination.

Thattakam (The Terrain of the Goddess), Kovilan's magnum opus, is a monumental work, a rare contribution to the history of novel not only of Malayalam, but in any Indian language. A grand narrative of epic dimensions it is the saga of a land and its people, its mythical genesis and long sojourn to reach a civil society. The novel unfolds itself through innumerable anecdotes sprouting from legends, oracles, revelations, fantasies and historical events. Its structure closely follows the magic of loosely connected episodes being integrated into a meta-narrative, reminiscent of the great Indian epics. The narrative invents its own time and space that allows free passage of countless generations across the past, the present and the future. In this mission, Kovilan develops a linguistic symphony that blends the dialects and languages of a myriad social strata. *Thattakam* will certainly leave its reader spell-bound to muse over the superhuman imagination and artistic stamina that its author is endowed with.

Awards and honours conferred on Kovilan are many, such as, Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award (1972) for *Thottangal* (novel), Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award (1977) for *Sakunam* (stories), Muttathu Varkey Award (1995), Basheer Award (by Qatar 'Pravasi') (1995), A.P. Kulakkad Award (1997), Kerala Sahitya Parishath Award (1998), Sahitya Akademi Award (1998), N.V. Puraskkaram (1999), Vayalar Award (1999)—the last four awards for his novel, *Thattakam* — and Kerala Sahitya Akademi Fellowship (1997).

The man and writer in Kovilan are highly critical of the contemporary society and its dubious value system. Self-critically, he asserts that "ours is a criminal society". His articles and speeches are cannons trained against the establishment. Neither age nor fame could dampen the fighting spirit of this old soldier. Still, he keeps the powder dry.

It is this towering Indian fiction writer in Malayalam, Kovilan, who created a whole new world through his inimitable novels and stories, whom Sahitya Akademi has today made its Fellow.

ACCEPTANCE SPEECH KOVILAN (V.V. AYYAPPAN)

THE PANGS OF BEING A FELLOW

Moothedan Sekharan said:

“Kovilan has won something; what it is, isn’t clear. I tuned in to the Indiavision Channel on the TV and waited for some time. And got out for a while in between. Coming back I just heard, ‘Kovilan....’ As I rushed in, the photo was there on the screen, but the news had just got over.”

It was late afternoon. Not yet five O Clock. Venu might still be there in his office. Venu Idakkazhiyoor is my friend and ‘media manager.’ I rang up Venu and placed before him the puzzle Sekharan had presented me with.

Venu said: “No problem, I’ll call you right back.”

I put down the handset and waited for some time. And then the call came.

“It’s there on all the TV Channels. Kovilan is elected a Fellow of the Sahitya Akademi!”

God! There is no joy surging within! Hasn’t the one who would have been excited with joy, left forever?

Sat dazed for some time: Kovilan is a loner now!

Moothedathu Sekharan is a half-brother of mine; a cousin in my mother’s line. My mother is my God. Sekharan was a prankster from childhood on. And his pranks finally landed him in the Madras Regiment. Kovilan had reached the Corps of Signals earlier. When I got to know about his joining the Army, I wrote to him. ‘Aren’t you in the Infantry? You can become a J.C.O. within ten years; you must.’

J.C.O.: Junior Commissioned Officer.

Sekharan finished his service when he was in the rank of a Subedar Major and came back home; Honorary Captain (Retired).

Sekharan was caught in the 1962 Chinese aggression. He was stationed in Arunachal Pradesh, then known vaguely as the North East Frontier Agency. It is history that the Indian Army was caught unawares and was scattered, in the flash-flood-like inundation by the Red Army that had fast advanced down the thickly forested valley near the Shola Pass and Tawang Buddhist Monastery. Sekharan who survived it, was like one who was being reborn. The tragic experiences of Sekharan and thousands of soldiers like him, became the prime mover for my two novels *Thazhvarakal* (Valleys) and *Himalayam*. Before the Chinese aggression, the first draft of *Ezhamedangal* had been completed. That was supposed to be

my last work in the background of military life. The publisher had chided me saying that my works have no fleshiness or smoothness. My friends back home grumbled that they somehow struggled through them, merely out of the consideration: “Aren’t these our Ayyappettan’s works, after all!”

My home turf was the Corps of Signals. Signals does not have a regional character like Madras Regiment, Bihar Regiment, or the Sikh/Punjab Regiments have. Its jurisdiction extends over the vast region stretching from the Himalayas to Kerala/Kanyakumari, from Assam to Punjab. My mates, colleagues and friends were from many lands, speaking many languages. Among them were Malayalees too. I thus got to know more about India and understand it better. I more or less understood how India stands as a unified entity in spite of the many languages, and their variations, different customs, beliefs, lifestyles and food habits. This was made possible only because I lived in the Signals for twenty years. I might not have succeeded in adequately enlightening my readers about all these, through my stories, novels, and notes. That would be the reason for the reservations of the readers. I am not sad about my limitations; the lizard, if it runs, can reach only up to the fence, as the saying goes.

My characters were not Malayalees alone. Anmolak Ram of Himachal Pradesh, Seva Singh and Niranjan of Punjab, Muneeshvar Prasad of Uttar Pradesh, Balabhadra Prasad of Bihar, Sourendra Mohan Pal of Bengal, Nagiah of Andhra, Joseph Thomas, Seetharaman, Vidyadharan, Madhavan etc..of Kerala...All of them were Indian. I have transliterated their idioms and colloquial usages and folk songs, in the Malayalam alphabet, without any hesitation. I am unable to find a suitable equivalent for “Chaa Pilaavaa?”— a term of courtesy in Punjabi. I wrote about a Punjabi experience of the most sublime love, titled “Chaa Pilaavaa?” And wanted to have it translated into Punjabi and have my friend Gurdial Singh read it.

Would the Malayalee give me up?

Who should I be writing for?

An editor who was like a guru to me, consoled me saying I need not worry at all. And yet, I was apprehensive. With *Ezhamedangal*, I must stop writing in the backdrop of the military, I decided.

Ezhamedangal represents several facets of female dominance I encountered in military camps. I decided not to

have the novel serialized in a weekly. I had come to know, through 'batsman', that the mother of an officer featured in the novel was a regular reader of the *Mathrubhoomi* Weekly. (Let me add, the dear son of that mother retired as a Lt. General). I couldn't afford to face a summary court martial. Military service was my livelihood.

There was no change in my decision not to serialize *Ezhamedangal*. But my firm resolution not to touch military background for a novel again, dissolved. The sufferings thousands like Moothedan Sekharan underwent could not be overlooked. There is a lad, Uttaran, in the *Mahabharata* (in the "Viraata Parva".) Uttaran, the archer who pursued the army of Trigarta, who was fleeing with the stolen cattle, wept in front of the charioteer, throwing tantrums and demanding that he must see his mother immediately. When the Red Army swept down the valleys, the Commander of the Indian Army flew to Delhi, to have himself treated for diarrhoea!

Our new camp, Hashimara, was in a forest area in North Bengal, below the mountain ranges of Bhutan. The reserve forest was connected to the Jaldapara Wildlife Sanctuary, in the Jaipalguri district. In the eastern boundary of the reserve forest, there was a perennially-flowing immaculate stream with pools to dip, while taking bath. By nightfall, no one could approach it. The stream then turned into a watering source for wild animals like tigers, bears, leopards, wolves and others. The Brigade Signal Company pitched tents in the reserve forest. To the extreme north of the camp, beyond the lankar, were the radio mechanics, and their workshop, along with the battery charging centre. The whistling sound from the charging centres rose throughout the day. This was precisely why we were kept secluded in a corner, at a considerable distance from the Signal Centre and offices, far away from everything.

There was a snake-pit around each tent—a foot wide and two feet deep, to prevent snakes from crossing over. A courtyard, with the undergrowth and rubbish cleared away, all around the camp. Each one had a rifle and ten cartridges in hand. Even when one slept, they were there, ready and handy. Once startled awake from sleep, one couldn't help if one got the urge to urinate. One had to get up. Likewise, I once got out gingerly into the courtyard. Beyond, in the thick undergrowth, two blazing flames. A tiger. Gathering the soul in my hands, walking backwards, I got into the tent, panting and perspiring. Which way did the urine vanish, in evaporation!

The lankar was close by. Wastes of meat and the like would have been thrown away in the vicinity. Hyenas came scouting around for tidbits. Fights, howling, the din...

Such experiences of a war! The consolation was that no one lost life. For anyone interested to know more about these experiences, *Thazhvarakal* would provide more details.

From Hashimara, we climbed the Himalayas straight up. No. One shouldn't make a wrong description of it. Not straight up. But through winding stairs, hairpin bends, through the thread-like bridges over hell, along the apology for a road—

in an ant's pace. Spent a total of four years, in the valleys and the Himalayas. This was the biggest achievement or gain in my life. The Himalayas converted me totally into an Indian, and handed me back, as such.

Then came the Signal Company, N.C.C., I.I.T. Kanpur.

Kovilan was being given a compassionate 'home posting' for having meritoriously served, without giving room for any criticism, the 64th Mountain Brigade Signal Company for a total period of seven years—in Kanpur! And where is Kerala, my home!

But, it was actually a blessing in disguise.

When I put down in writing my experiences at the I.I.T., it became *Bharatan*, a novella. The writing was done during the Emergency. The challenge was how to survive the Emergency, in writing. I wrote it in the form of a parable. I feel really sad about it now; none of the cultured, including very big names, could sense the undercurrents of *Bharatan*.

It may be that techniques such as innuendo, dwani and the like are relevant only in poetry. It's just fine to repeat the aphorism, *Vaakyam rasaatmakam kaavyam!*

If one has to understand *Bharatan*, one must know what 420 is. Four Twenty—*Chaar sou bees*. In North India, any *unpath aadmi* knows the meaning of *Chaar sou bees*. The human incarnation of traits like impersonation, fraud and so on is manifested in *Chaar sou bees*. No one would even imagine that this is a Section in the Indian Penal Code. It maybe because the habit of earning one's livelihood through fraudulent means is comparatively less among the generally peace-loving Keralites, that for them Section 420 of the I.P.C. becomes almost irrelevant in their reckoning. Kovilan feels sad that writing *Bharatan* was a futile exercise.

I am aware of my limitations and weaknesses, somewhat. A plain man who grew up at the grassroots level, an infantryman, stands stupefied at the honour of being a Fellow of the Sahitya Akademi. "Congratulations." The telegram from Professor Gopichand Narang ji, President, Sahitya Akademi. The official communication from Professor K.Satchidanandan, Secretary, Sahitya Akademi: '...your unanimous election as a Fellow of the Sahitya Akademi....'

My knowledge of languages is limited; mustn't try translation.

When ridicule, neglect or harsh words had become unbearable at a particular juncture, I remember quoting Tunchat Acharya:

Though I am but a feeble boy,
Remember my dignified Father...

Punya accumulated by the ancestors?

I do not at all believe that I eminently deserve to be a Fellow of the Sahitya Akademi or that from among the Malayalam writers, it is only I who deserve this honour. Yet, trusting the blessings of my Acharya and the good will of my readers, I humbly accept this great honour—of having been elected a Fellow of the Sahitya Akademi.