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meet the author

Akkitham Achuthan Namboodiri



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*Man as I am, even my breasts swelled up
And flowed towards all living beings*

This is quintessential Akkitham. Love towards all things great and small has remained his ideal. Wasn't he barely twenty-five when he wrote - "Absolute love would, / in course of time turn into strength. / This is beauty, this alone is truth / And practising it one's utmost duty". Many are such revelations in Akkitham's poetry. But Akkitham avers that he never consciously strived for such insights, they always visited him. Indeed, he claims it is not he who writes, but someone within. No wonder, his poetic career spanning over sixty years, does not lend itself for easy evaluation.

Akkitham is his family name. There were no issues in this ancient family of vedic scholars and he was born as a result of propitiating many gods. He was named Achuthan. Patriarchs of the family naturally wished that Achuthan would turn into a great vedic scholar. When he was eight, he was initiated by his father into learning Rigveda. Amazingly, he started writing Malayalam slokas in Sanskrit metres around that time. But his heart lay in drawing sketches and painting - a skill he would put to great advantage in his writing later. He joined the college after passing the matriculation

examination; but did not continue his studies further.

Poetry sustained him all these years. But it was his meeting with the legendary poet Edassery Govindan Nair (1906 - 74) that gave a new direction to his poetic pursuits. Akkitham gratefully regards Edassery as his mentor and maintains that it was Edassery's ruthless tutoring that helped him grow into a poet. His first collection of poems came out in 1946. Three years later he got married; he celebrated it with another book of poems.

Predictably, he started writing against the evil practices of his community with a reformatory zeal. Those were the days when communist ideology was taking roots in Kerala. E.M.S. Namboothiripad, with whom he had longstanding familial ties, was writing primers on socialism and communism, Akkitham was initially drawn to communism by these writings. But, curiously, it was the Rigveda that reaffirmed his faith in communism. Akkitham asserts that the *Samvaada Sookta* of Rigveda which talks about the communism of minds is the first instance of proto-communist literature. He turned a fellow - traveller and remained so for nearly seven years, from 1943 to 1949.

Akkitham had by then established himself as a poet of repute. He had published many books of poems including a narrative poem depicting the story of an agrarian struggle - "The Wet Clod". Wet by the blood of agricultural labourers shot dead by the police. He was also well known as a social activist.

It was easy to graduate from *Samvaada Sookta* to communism. But it was difficult to come to terms with the theory of class war. Gandhi's hold on him was too great to be shaken off and would not allow a continuing relationship with the party, which, anyway, was very ambiguous; he never became an official member - "I couldn't make myself believe that the purpose of my life was to become a member of the party founded by V.I. Lenin". Probably it was the Calcutta Thesis calling for armed revolution which settled the issue for him. Probably it was the death of his first - born which turned him towards spiritualism. He chose to publicly recant his faith in communism.

Initially he wrote three stanzas and thought it was all over:

*As I shed a tear for others,
There rise within me a thousand suns.
As I expend a smile for others,
Shines within me a full moon, eternal
and serene.*

I never knew of this heavenly bliss before ;

*Lamenting over that great loss again
and again I weep.*

These stanzas now preface the poem, "The Epic of the Twentieth Century", just short of eight hundred lines in length in the epic metre, divided into four cantos. Written as the confession of a repentant communist, Akkitham waited for many months before he sent it to press. Finally, it was at the behest of Edassery that he published it in the premier journal *Mathrubhumi* in August 1952. That was the time many intellectuals all over the world - Andre Gide, Arthur Koestler and Stephen Spender, to name a few - were talking about the "God that Failed". Here was Akkitham independently essaying on the basic impiety of communism.

Arguably, "Epic" is the first major poem in Malayalam which was opposed on political terms. And what is generally true of classics, applies to "Epic" as well - it is hardly read in entirety. Again, as in the case of many classics, some couplets tend to outshadow and outweigh the poem itself. Here is such an one -

Sobbing, I told this to the future citizen -

*"Light, O young one ! is sorrow ;
Darkness is pleasurable".*

Arguably again, this is one of the most - quoted couplets from modern Malayalam poetry.

It would appear as though it has flown away from the appointed space in the poem and perched itself in totally different discursive spheres. Ranging from everyday speech to political cartoons, gaining in contra - signification. For the poet's detractors it has come in handy as a stick to beat him with, as an evidence of his alleged regressive socio - political stance. Acquiring the status of an aphorism, it has now become the bane of the poet, dubbing him as an "enemy of the people !"

But Akkitham was primarily concerned about these people. People who unsuspectingly fell victims to the designs of the party and its leaders. People who laid down their lives in the "war of liberation". He was basically opposed to the inherent element of violence. Vengefulness, he asserted, cannot ever give birth to peace and happiness. Akkitham believes that, over the last fifty years, ground realities of international polity have proved him right. The poem has gained in eternal relevance considering the ideological metamorphosis the party



Receiving Sahitya Akademi Award in 1973



In America

itself has undergone. It would now seem that there are no points of serious divergence between what Akkitham wrote and the party now professes.

It is not just with the red flag and the rosary beads that Akkitham tussled. The disparateness of what he learnt by rote and what he actually confronted - *With the mouth that chanted the Vedic hymns, I was made to swallow / nauseating fish and meat*, the irreconcilable swallow value systems of the village and the city - *The city throbbing all around / turned me into another being, even as I refused to budge* - such opposites are strewn all over his poetry which lends an ever-abiding tension to his poetry and enlarges its spectrum. How he metamorphosed from the assertion, *My tongue shall henceforth chant no names of Gods* to the exhortation, *O tongue! ruthlessly fill the barrenness of skies with God's names* has to be seen to be believed. So is the way he untiringly tries to link ancient Indian wisdom to modern science and technology - regardless of the "revivalist" abuses showered on him. Indeed he unabashedly pleads for the revival of the Indian Kaliyuga calendar, a unified Devanagari script for all Indian languages and the resurrection of Sanskrit. Tradition, for him, is no fossil; it needs to be purposefully integrated into the modern times. So is it with the poetic tradition. In one of the finest poems written in Malayalam on Kalidasa, "The Eternal Cloud", he seeks to redefine the role of tradition. In numerous poems he problematises the dichotomy between faith and reason - *Why wear the sacred thread?, What signifies a Brahmin?* Talking of Brahminism, Akkitham approached the problem of removing untouchability more as the consummation

of his all-encompassing love than as a social reformation measure. He wrote about the untouchables not on account of a need to be politically correct but because of his spiritual communion with them. He would be in the forefront of organizing yagas; but will not swerve from the ideal of popularizing Vedic studies among non-Brahmins. Even the stupendous work of translating the Bhagavata into Malayalam was aimed at making it intelligible to all. Culture is no preserve forest for him.

Sex, parenthood, family - every aspect of life is a cause for celebration in Akkitham's poetry. The farmer's slang and the heightened sanskritised poetic diction of the Vedas he embraces alike. Both folk tunes and intricate Sanskrit metres occur to him naturally. So do sonnets and muktakas. Some of the finest children's verse in Malayalam is written by Akkitham. So will you find some of the best allegoric contemplative poetry in his oeuvre. Judge him in terms of verbal felicity, ease and abundance or by the parameters of copiousness, variety and subtlety, Akkitham would score on all counts. But most probably his fame would eternally rest not on these accomplishments. Most likely it would rest on the limitless compassion reflecting in his poems - compassion for children, compassion for the disabled, compassion for the underprivileged. Tears of this compassion irrigate his poetic landscape. Indeed the teardrop, around which he has woven new myths, is a major motif of his poetry. Tears are nothing but life-giving water. Water and not fire, is Akkitham's basic element. It cannot be otherwise with a poet who wrote about the failure of a much acclaimed revolution.

A Chronology

- 1926 Born on 18 March at Akkitham Mana, Kumaranallur, Palakkad Dist. Kerala
Father: Akkitham Vasudevan Namboodiri, Mother: Chekkoor Parvathy Antharjanam
- 1946 First collection of poems published
- 1946-1949 Member of Yoga Kshema Sabha. Printer and publisher of "Unni Namboodiri" weekly, Sub Editor, "Yoga Kshemam" and "Mangalodayam" weekly /monthly
- 1947 Took part in the Paliyam Sathyagraha which was a fight against untouchability.
- 1949 Married at the age of 23; wife: Sreedevi Antharjanam, Alampilly Mana, Pattambi. Two sons and four daughters.
- 1950-1952 Secretary of Ponnani Kendra Kalasamiti. 'Irupatam Nootandinte Ithihasam' published. (Epic of the Twentieth Century.)
- 1953-1954 President of Ponnani Kendra Kalasamiti
- 1956-1975 Script writer, All India Radio, Kozhikode
- 1975-1985 Editor, All India Radio, Thrissur
- 1972 Kerala Sahitya Akademi award for 'Balidarsanam'
- 1973 Kendra Sahitya Akademi Award for 'Balidarsanam', 'Sahitya Nipuna' Title with Gold Medal conferred by the Government Sanskrit College, Pattambi. Odakkuzhal Award for 'Nimisha Kshetram'. Director, SPCS-Kottayam
- 1974-1977 Member, Kerala Sahitya Akademi
- 1978-1982 Fellow of Department of Education, Government of India, New Delhi
- 1985-1992 Translated 'Sreemat Bhagavatham' into Malayalam
- 1985-1990 Vice-President, Kerala Sahitya Akademi, Thrissur
- 1985 onwards President, Edassery Smaraka Samithi, Ponnani
- 1989 onwards President, Vallathol Educational Trust
- 1994 Ulloor Award for 'Sparsamanikal'
- 1994 Asan Award (Chennai) for 'Sparsamanikal'. Visited U.S.A., Canada, U.K., France.
- 1995 Antharjanam Award (Thiruvananthapuram) for total contribution to Malayalam literature.
- 1995 onwards President, Vedic Trust, Panjal.
- 1996 Vallathol Award (Thiruvananthapuram) for total contribution to Malayalam literature.
- 1997 Krishna Geethi Award (Kozhikode) for 'Sparsamanikal'.
- 1998 Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award for total contribution to Malayalam literature. 'Dharma Sooryan', a long poem on Mahatmaji's life and works.
- 2000 Krishnashtamy Award for total contribution to Malayalam literature. Devi Prasad Award for total contribution to Malayalam literature.
- 2000 onwards President, Vilwamangalam Memorial Trust, Tavanur. President, Kadavallur Anyonya Parishat.
- 2003 Sanjayan Award for total contribution to Malayalam literature. Patmaprabha Award (Kalpatta) for total contribution to Malayalam literature. Amrutha Keerthi Award (Amruthapuri, Kollam) for his contribution to Vedic literature.
- 2005 K.P. Narayana Pisharody Award for total contribution to Malayalam literature.
- 2006 Fellowship of Kerala Sahitya Akademi. Abudhabi Malayali Samajam Award for total contribution to Malayalam literature.

A Select Bibliography

Collections of Poems

1. Manassakshiyute Pookal
2. Madhu Vidhu
3. Karatalamalakom
4. Anaswarante Ganam
5. Idinjupolinja Lokam
6. Vennakkallinte Katha
7. Manasa Pooja
8. Nimishakshetram
9. Sparsamanikal
10. Balidarsanam

Prose Works

1. Upanayanam
2. Samavartham



Storm in the Tea Cup

'If you want to sip the hot tea in the cup,
 You'll have to sip the storm in the cup too.'
 The smoke arising from the sweetened tea,
 Put on the table by my beloved,
 Said : 'O man seeking peace,
 Give up your grief and get up quick !
 Crooked is the way leading to the heights,
 But if that saddens you, you will ever be sad.
 Do not cherish any hope to stay quiet
 In this village looking after your parents,
 Confined to the will of your better half,
 Stand on all fours while the kids ride on your back,
 Wash yourselves in the pond two times a day.
 Turn your life into a temple of eternal light
 In silent meditation upon the Lord's feet,
 Suck the sweetness of wonder from the bitter gourd
 Born of your leisure time sweat,
 And light up the smiles of people around
 With good thoughts and words, and propitiate
 Guests at the porch with refreshments and
 betel nut.

Go to the rabble of the town and do
 Whatever duties the Lord has assigned to you.
 Hard it may be, but where else can one find
 The joy of performing one's own duty?
 That today is the holy fountain, that is the sacrifice,
 That alone is the heaven on earth.
 Tears of separation constitute the language
 Of this dust-dimmed age-love's touchstone is
 nowhere else.'

I was getting up, having emptied the cup,
 But the storm in that cup will never subside.
 Behind me, as I go down the steps like a stone,
 The pathos in the eyes of my child glistening
 with tears
 Fills my five senses with weariness,
 The everlasting source of the strength of my heart.

(Translated by Ayyappa Paniker)

From The Berry in the Hand

Did you hear the anguished cry of this age,
 O my dear, from my mouth?
 Did you see the horrid image of this age,
 O my dear, in my eyes ?
 Did you inhale the stink of this age,
 From the air I breathed out ?
 Did your heart come to know the explosion
 of this age,
 My dear, from my sinews ?
 And did you taste the bitterness of this age,
 My dear, from my lips ?

If you did, why should I keep
 A secret of that terrible truth :
 Once when I took your hand
 In my hand and muttered,
 'I take your hand for happiness' sake,'
 My body was all sweat, beloved.
 That keeps my worthless life
 Safe from the rains, safe from the winds,
 Safe from the heat of the sun?

From The Tortoise

I cannot gambol and revel
 Or run fast
 Or stand on my head
 Or turn a somersault.
 Everyday I reach my rendezvous late;
 Yet I cherish loyalty to my armour.
 When I cling to myself inside this,
 Even lightning crumples
 Whoever brandishes it.

(Translated by Ayyappa Paniker)