

THE THULLAL OF KERALA

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In a book of 1943 entitled *The Bugbear of Literacy* which has if anything gained in topical relevance today, Coomaraswamy warned against the dangers of confusing literacy (increase in the readers of the yellow press and porn books?) with education and culture and analysed the profound achievement of epochs in which the literary tradition was mostly oral and visual. The Greeks had the tremendous cathartic ritual of the tragic drama and the cleansing by boisterous ridicule of Aristophanian comedy. Kunchan Nambiar of eighteenth century Kerala created the Thullal which served the same role as Greek comedy, though the art form was totally different.

Two centuries earlier when the social ethos had degenerated due to various historical reasons, Ezhuthachan had brought down the river of heaven for a pure ablution of the earth. He abridged the great Sanskrit epics in rendering them into Malayalam verse and handled them freely to make them the vehicle of his profoundly moral and serious vision of the nature and goals of man. Nambiar was of the earth, earthy. He believed that a rational sanity with healthy roots in earth could achieve a clean re-ordering of life. That was the belief of Aristophanes, and of Rabelais too, and Nambiar has great affinities with them, not only in outlook, but also in the boisterous temperament.

The Thullal is danced narration and it has a full-fledged verse libretto. That, beneath his spontaneity and exuberant extroversion, Nambiar was an acute social engineer is clear from the thought he devoted to his diction and his histrionic presentation, for both are aimed at the maximum efficacy in mass communication. He wants to benefit everybody: "the big shot, the elders, the aristocrats, the soldiers and common people, women and kids." G.L. Kittredge would have liked him; for this defender of oral culture who belongs to our own times has pointed out that such culture interes-

ted not only all classes but also all ages of the population. Ezhuthachan had enriched the language and stepped up its orchestral powers by a deliberate Sanskritisation; but this had inevitably created a distance between the literary elite and the common people. Nambiar saw that the grand diction was not the medium for the purpose he had in mind.

*Orchestrate in thunder with polysyllabic Sanskrit
And you will see the public stampeding at the exit.*

So he prescribed for himself these canons:

*Speak in verses with a limpid style
With words that peal out a ringing sense
And rhymes that keep up a lively beat.*

He opted for the simplest diction. He had a gift for neologisms and picturesque slang which surpasses that of Wodehouse. He can also swear like a trooper on occasions. The internal rhymes in his torrential verse keep up a lively percussive tempo and he can deliver hammer-blows with his end rhymes with a smashing impact that makes the best lines in Dryden's *MacFlecknoe* seem weak and lacking in punch.

Nambiar also realises that the times have changed. If one starts sermonising, "people will start planning a smooth get-away." Humour is the only thing that will make them stay. And apart from irony, loaded with social comment, there is lot of broad humour in his narration, and often it is worked up into slapstick, into Mack Sennet-type of episodes. Like Wodehouse, he gets unsophisticated delight in odd sights, like for instance, a bald head. "The jolly egg with a practically hairless dome" is there in many of Wodehouse's stories and Nambiar's Thullals. Nambiar sees the old Brahmin trekking somewhere for a wedding where he hopes to gorge himself with food. The bald head glitters in the sun. "You can roast rice into crispies on that sun-baked pan of a pate." Now he becomes Rabelaisian. In the scene where Rukmini makes her appearance to choose her bridegroom, one of the suitors gets so excited that he drums a hot number on the bald head of another suitor sitting in front.

The most prestigious model before Nambiar was the *Kathakali*. Nambiar, however, was not after full-fledged dance-drama, but an effective form for dramatic narration. In the *Thullal* the raconteur is the actor and the only actor. One contributing factor of the preciousness of *Kathakali* is the separation of the actor and the singer or the articulate utterer of the actual lines of dialogue. Nambiar removed this hurdle in communication by making the actor the narrator as well. He used the gesture-language, but vestigially and transparently, not with the elaborate segmentation and often hermetic symbolism of *Kathakali*, so that his mimetic narration gained in speed and benefited by rapid communication. The full painting of the face is retained for accenting the expressive mobility of the visage.

Costume is picturesque. The raconteur-actor is supported by a singer who repeats his lines, a drummer and a cymbalist. The narration is accompanied by dancing. In dancing style and tempo, Nambiar seems to have accepted cues from the mimetic folk dances of the strata considered lowest in caste-ridden Kerala. The *Parayan*, one of the three styles of Thullal in terms of tempo, has obvious associations with the dances of the Pariah caste.

Very subtle is the aesthetic action of this art-form. The roles of the raconteur and actor are perpetually interchanged in the same man with the aesthetic effect which characterizes the continuity of films that have had the benefit of subtle and imaginative direction. In one moment the actor is the narrator and his gesture makes us listen inwardly to the unheard hum and busy life in Gokul, the pastoral village where Krishna spent his childhood. In the next second we have rapidly drawn near and the actor is before us in the guise of a cowherd boy or a milkmaid churning the curd. Again, in one moment the actor is depicting the comic antics of a vain fop with a complete self-identification. The delicious posture and gesture involve the spectator through empathy and he too, mentally, struts and attitudinises, precisely because no man is wholly free from vanity and vanity depends upon the temporary failure of the power of critical self-awareness. But a shock-treatment immediately restores the spectator to sanity. For in the next second the actor melts back into the role of the raconteur, who sheds the self-oblivion of the earlier sequence of pure mimesis, becomes devastatingly ironical and indulges in an inimitable gesture which means: "There you are! That is the sort of clown who sets himself up as a rival to Krishna for the hand of Rukmini." The gesture is the ultimate in ridicule and the annihilation is complete. For it not only ridicules the comic egoist, seen as the wholly other, but also brings to light and destroys the foolish fantasies and self-image hugged by everyone deep within himself, thus achieving an astonishingly effective catharsis through a wholesome technique which leaves no bruises behind. The narrative thus emerges with a continuously shifting focus, the camera now quite close, penetrating into the interior world of men's fantasies and day-dreams, now remote, seeing things with saner objectivity, correcting vanity with raillery and deeper fixations with a cathartic, caricaturist distortion.

Nambiar adopted some brilliant strategies for his therapy of ridicule. The temple was the venue and it was associated with the recitals of Puranic stories in various forms. So Nambiar also adopted Puranic stories. But, by a deliberate and impudent anachronism, he made the Nairs, Christians and Muslims of Kerala the citizens of the lands of the old legends, whether they be Dwarka, Mithila or even hell. Like Brecht, he would involve the audience in the episodic stream of the story, especially for a dramatic take-off. In one play, *Pulindi-Moksham*, the opening is boisterous. It is a *Parayan Thullal* and the raconteur-actor is supposed to be a Pariah. When he makes his appearance, angry shouts are heard from the audience.

*Who the hell are you, beef-eating Pariah
To dish out lofty thoughts?*

The raconteur-actor stands his ground and answers that there is absolutely no difference between the Pariah and the Brahmin, as the indwelling spirit of both is Brahman (God). In the *Clouds* of Aristophane, one character asserts that dishonesty is the best way to success and when another demurs, he points to the audience and asks, "Now look about you. Which class among our friends here seems the most numerous?" The other gravely examines the audience and admits, "The blackguards have it by a large majority." Such direct trouncing was the staple of Nambiar's method.

No community escaped his attack. The Namputiri, jacked up to the apex of the economic and social pyramid by the peculiar history of Kerala, had a lot of leisure which he assiduously used to cultivate his libido. According to Nambiar these are the Namputiri ideals,

*To sup well and sleep well
To spend time in small talk
To mock all men
And make all women.*

The Nairs, the militia, had their heyday when every square mile in Kerala was a principality. But Marthanda Varma unified the land by war and the feudal chieftains could no longer maintain their soldiery. The demobbed Nair would not take up another livelihood because of his stupid pride. So he pawned his weapons to become a drunkard. Thus, in one *Thullal*, Duryodhana wants to attack the Pandavas, but feels utter despair when he thinks of his Nair soldiers,

*No use to any one are these Nairs,
Without weapons are most of them.
For one thing only are they good,
For taking dope and getting drunk.*

Nothing if not thorough, Nambiar attacked messy social habits too. Here are the types who will never let public bathing places remain clean,

*When they bathe they must soak
Even their eyeballs in oil
And pour it down their ear and nose
And make a greasy mess of the whole damn place.*

In most of the temples, the Brahmins could get free food. They charged into the hall shouting like maniacs and attacked their food in a manner which horrified Nambiar,

*Rice and curd and plantain fruit
Are mashed into a pulpy mess.
With this stuff they stoke themselves
In a squelchy, slimy, ghastly way.*

"The world wallows in quarrels over wealth and wench," Nambiar wrote. The solution was not ascetic self-denial of either; but excessive libido and avarice should be avoided. Kumbhakarna tells his brother Ravana a story about a Nair veteran who returned from war and found reasons to suspect that his wife had been amusing herself with a lover in his absence. But he is a fair-minded man and is not willing to proceed on the basis of mere suspicion. So he pretends to have become blind in the war. This is very convenient for the other two. They are caught red-handed, if that is the phrase, and the lover loses his ear and nose. The story has very ribald passages and it is quite clear that the low comedy of the old days still retains its fascination for both audience and author. But Nambiar is adroit enough to find a salutary justification for the salacious, for Kumbhakarna told the story to rub in a moral: coveting other people's wives can lead to inconvenient consequences for Ravana. Nambiar does not seem to be sensitive to the finer yearning, tenderness or graces of romantic love. But decent domesticity is the irreducible minimum he insists upon. Similarly, if he wrote that "when wealth gets growing, virtue starts waning," he also points out that "only he who has enough to eat at home will ever be invited to eat at the neighbour's." Everyone should work hard for a decent livelihood and this social habit of purposeful industry will bring in the wake a sense of responsibility. There will be far fewer of these "drunkards and dope addicts, the bums who, every time you see them, make you itch irrepressibly to give them a kick you know where." For Nambiar, the basic programme for civilising the primate into man is the tempering and socialisation of his fundamental drives: the acquisitive and the libidinous. And with his enormous energy he was able to drive it through as a crash programme. He hoped other graces of civilization would follow: the bright curiosity of the intellect which leads to science and the fertile sensitivity of the heart which creates the arts, "the gift for an overflowing joy when a good poem is overheard." But first things first. God knows it is a man-sized job in itself; but thank God you can laugh while you work and, what is more incredible, make people laugh too while you work on them the exquisite third degree of tickling.

Since the time of Nambiar over two dozen writers have written *Thullal* plays, keeping up this vigorous tradition of social comment to the contemporary period.