

The Hill Temple

P. T. NARASIMHACHAR

Translated by
H. V. RANGACHAR

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*The Hill
Temple*

The sculpture reproduced on the endpaper depicts a scene where three soothsayers are interpreting to King Suddhodana the dream of Queen Maya, mother of Lord Buddha. Below them is a seated scribe recording the interpretation. This is perhaps the earliest pictorial record of the art of writing in India.

From Nagarjunakonda, 2nd century A.D.
Courtesy : National Museum, New Delhi

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P.T. NARASIMHACHAR

Translation from Kannada into English by
H. V. RANGACHAR



Sahitya Akademi

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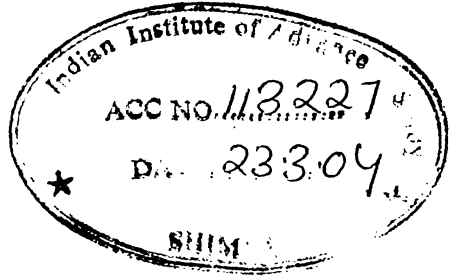
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TRANSLATOR’S FOREWORD

It gives me great pleasure to offer to the English reading public “The Hill Temple”, a work of translation of “ Maledegula” which is an important poetic work of modern Kannada literature. Its author, Dr. P.T. Narasimhachar, (popularly known as PuTiNa) is one of the most famous three poets of Kannada literature in the 20th century.

Kannada, a south Indian language of the Dravidian family, is blessed with a vast and rich treasure of great literary works, both ancient and modern, which is second to none in the world. It is a pity that they are not available to be enjoyed by the non-Kannadiga public because of the lack of competent translations. The need in this area is enormous and daunting. The Hill Temple is but a small contribution and offering it to the English reading public, I am overcome with humble feelings.

The feelings of humility had begun even as I commenced the work of translation many years ago. Although Maledegula is a small work among the large number of poetic works of PuTiNa, it is one of the most beautiful and also one of the tersest. It is full of motifs from Indian mythology, which are very difficult to convey to an audience of another culture without copious explanation. It carries the very delicate religious and philosophical sensibilities of the author. And there is an exposition of his new interpretations of the theory of rasa in it. These aspects of the work challenged the limits of my abilities and kept me working for many years and through many revisions. I was privileged to have had a close relationship with PuTiNa, and I took advantage of it during my meetings with him to discuss and determine the true meaning of several difficult passages.

Certain words such as *rasa* do not lend themselves to be accurately translated. It appears that there is no equivalent word or even an equivalent concept in English. I tried words such as joy or bliss at first but found them unsuitable. I realized that they have inappropriate meanings of their own. Then I decided to retain the word *rasa* in the translation as well and supported it with an explanation in the footnotes. There are many instances of special words causing similar difficulty in being correctly translated. Many words used in a philosophic context appear in Kannada literature with several acceptable meanings and this situation causes ambiguity in determining the author's true intended meaning. For example, *chitta* is often used to denote the soul, the mind, intention etc. *Jeeva* is often used to denote life, the *jeevatman* (soul), the self etc. *Bhava* is another such word that generally denotes the physical world or the field of action. My discussions with the author helped to determine the true intended meanings of some difficult passages.

Properly conveying the trans-cultural words and concepts to the English reading audience is a difficult problem faced by all translators working in this field. This concerns providing the appropriate amount of contextual information that is essential for meaningful appreciation and enjoyment. I have provided such information in the form of footnotes. Indian readers who are quite familiar with much of this material may consider that this as too trivial, but others of a foreign background may find it as insufficient. I beg excuse for any discomfort caused as a result of this. I have used my own family members who have grown up in the USA as target audience in judging the right measure.

The two accompanying essays provide detailed contextual information. The essay, "The Hill and the Temple" provides details of geography and the cultural history of the hill of Melukote and the

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temple on it, which is the principal object of address in this poem. The other essay, “ About the poem “ covers the poetic aspects and is intended to serve as guide to its enjoyment.

I have cast The Hill Temple in the format of free flowing verses, each verse corresponding to a sonnet of the original. Alliteration and rhymes have been employed opportunistically to enhance the lyrical quality. Semantic fidelity to the original has been given preference to the rendering of a literal version. I have strived hard to retain the pensive moods of philosophical enquiry, the rhetorics of questioning, and the inflections of thoughts, observations and conclusions.

My dear departed friend P. Sreenivasa Rao had preserved an earlier version of my manuscript for many years and had left it among his papers. It was later discovered by Dr. Sumatheendra Nadig, who appreciated its value and brought some individual verses from it to print in Current Literature. He also took great interest in the get up and the production of this current version. I express my sincere thanks to him for his generosity for this help. I feel greatly indebted to Dr. G.S.Sivarudrappa, a close companion of PuTiNa. He has showered encouragement on me to give the present shape to The Hill Temple. He took interest to recommend this translation to be published under the modern classics series. I acknowledge this help from him with many grateful thanks. I express my thanks to Sri. A. Krishna Murthy, the Regional Secretary of the Sahitya Akademi for his interest and administrative guidance to bring out this volume.

H. V. Rangachar
Millstone NJ, USA

1

Oh! Temple on the hill,
Where all my tired doubts come home to rest, seeking release;
A salve that calms the restlessness of my being,
Born of wandering in nature's reality and thirsting to know it;
Oh! Gift of the hearts of saints,
The stable center of this ever moving world of action¹,
That shows from each view point, a different view of joy or sorrow;
Dense with yogic² joy,
Free of values such as straight and crooked,
True and false, good and evil;

I humbly bow before you, my head weighed down,
My words stretched out by heavy thoughts.

-
1. Bhava has been translated as the world of action. This word is generally used to denote the dynamic phenomenal world.
 2. Yogic: Related to Yoga. The joy that is said to be experienced during a successful meditation.

2

Where I am, there, here or anywhere,
When I see with my eye the half dome of the sky, the rock,
Trees, birds, flowers, bushes, and stream,
I feel as if I stand with my head bowed in reverence,
Before the open doors of this temple on the hill.
The divine spirit hidden inside beckons from around the corner,
With a smile, a word, a flash of motion.
I feel the message sent, a call received.
I recall something, a yearning that returns to mind.

I stand here, Oh! temple, recollecting those memories and messages,
My mind groping tirelessly for their meanings, in your dark and
lovely womb.

3

I stand outside on the steps of the temple
With a freshly kindled, unfulfilled quest and longing;
Seeking the Full, the Perfect;
Endlessly chasing knowledge, enjoying pleasure sans end,
Has left me tired, with only grief to show.
I seek “That fullness that fills the atom without shrinking
And the cosmos without expanding¹;
That inexhaustible nectar that outlasts all creation’s consuming;”
That fullness of love that transforms to fullness of Good
Even as the desire is quenched and joy remains.

I remember the sages and saints of yore who stood here before,
I think that I too may hope to reach their state of fulfillment.
Thus, this temple is best as an aid in my quest.

1. “anoraneeyaan mahato maheeyaan.....” very famous line from the upanishads.

4

This is no house, no monastery, no palace, nor theater;
Nor a dormitory for students.
This is not a place of enjoyment of life's desires.
What meaning bears this stone of the hill,
This temple, holding up the night sky at its tower's tip,
Wearing a garland of twinkling stars,
Its locks of gathering clouds pouring forth streams like Ganga¹,
And decked with the young crescent moon?

The splendor of this sight quickens my heart.
Is this for man his last and lasting desire ?

1. *Ganga* : The river called Ganges by the English. This is the holiest of rivers and appears in many myths.

5

Is this your resting place? Hey!
You, ensconced in this world of sensual comfort,
Married to things of enjoyment,
Moving forward now, disliking this and disliking that,
You wish to pass up the pleasures of this life,
Spurning the body, spurning the mind and intellect's logic as well,
And you dream of a life of wayward wanderers,
Who roam this earth, a town a night ?
Hey! Soaring spirit, you rose from the dead to the living,
And from the living to the conscious.

Is this now your final resting place ?
This tower in front, with the five pinnacle¹ points,
Like sharp and flashing senses, and behind,
The single main dome, keen and bright like the mind ?

1. A simile for the five sense organs.

6

I don't like to enter, nor to retreat;
Just like to stand and look up.
Just feel light and peek into the dark shadow
Behind the doors of the tower, decked with figures.
I see parrots and pigeons flying
In and out of that darkness and wonder,
Is this how the manifest pretends to spring from the unmanifest ?
My mind ponders truly amazed.

What is lost and what remains when they enter the dark ?
What is gained and what is lost when they come out ?

7

That black darkness is depthless.
Not knowing its depth, intellect erects opinions and theories,
And overpowered, it surrenders, after lighting just a nearby circle.
Then, to survive, the mind turns to science.
Faced with death, it thinks about the hereafter.
Then, tired, it rests here in this darkness whose name is Shyam¹.
In Shyam's hands there is a flute that fills the world with melody.

That melody begins in His mind and pours forth from the flute.
It returns to His mind through His ears and there it ends.
What ends and what remains ? Is that creation ?

1. *Shyam*: Means dark colored. It is a name of Lord Krishna, who is a flute player.

8

In the stream of doubts, float the ice-floes of theories.
 When the mind gets tired of wading and rests a while,
 I see that these melt by contact and
 Merge into the stream and pass as before
 Leaving merely their awareness in their place.
 Senses have their objects; the mind, its thoughts.
 If there is life, there is the world. Thus thrives duality.¹
 Standing here, I see that other, and this, from thither.
 Is it one or two? the doubt continues to reign.

At last "It is only I" I declare.

And then, you differ and show me my lord. Is yours the final word ?

1. This is the idea that the mind and matter are separate and distinct, as espoused by René Descartes

9

Oh! That point at infinity where subject and object meet,
Moving in parallel planes, touching and yet separate;
After touching, the sensation melts away,
Only a shadow of its memory remains;
Oh! The joy that can't be directly sensed,
The inner experience which I can't say I haven't felt,
The benevolent love which I can't say I haven't known,
You have made me to love you.
You stretch your hands now, that love to receive.
Oh! Cosmic darkness lit with the radiance of great nebulae,

You wear the form spun from a myriad minds.
This temple is a monument for your greatness,
A deep pool in the stream of our prayers.

10

The woods rejoice in catching the brilliance of the sun
In the cupped palms of green leaves, making an offering¹ to life.
The sunlight rejoices in spreading color on the land
And raising sparkles of laughter on the water.
The roaring wind rejoices in jumping down from the blue,
Scaring the trees, and scattering the waves.
I, the grandson of light, wind, and the green,
Rejoice in taking in all this joy which surrounds.

The beauty of all this joyful message of fun and wonder
Lifts the fatigue of people who walk to here and bow,
From days of yore to now.

1. The word Arghya has been translated as offering. The word denotes a ritual act of respect to a deity, such as the sun, in the morning ritual of Sandhyaa Vandana for example. The act is taking water in your cupped palms and slowly pouring it, accompanied with the appropriate mantra.

11

The tree is weighed down with fruit;
The clouds, with the weight of droplets;
The virtuous rich is humbled by his wealth;
The scholar, by his knowledge;
The grieving by grief and the zealot by belief.
When thoughts come crowding, words humble the poet;
A scholar of many different faiths is humbled by his own.
Stripping all from their egos, old and venerable this temple has grown
And it stands humbled by the gifts received from everyone!

He who bows here stands tall everywhere else.
He who bends here walks straight everywhere else.

12

Oh! you prostrations before the temple!
 Kneelings of humility before the great!
 You are a prescription to put down my mighty conceit,
 A ritual sacrifice of pleasure to embrace joy.
 You are the soothing nectar to beat the venom of the rational mind.
 Like “carrying lake-water back to the lake and getting paid for it!”
 I have ebbed from my prime of life
 And become light, and I now place myself in virtue.
 A new shining ornament is now making me look better,
 Of being aware that there is something greater than myself.

To you, I surrender my all and you return it all with renewed vigor,
 Like my tainted blue blood passes through my breath
 And gets purified bright and red.

1. A famous first line of the classic composition of PurandaraDasa “Kereya Neeranu kerege chelli...”

13

Let my prostration flow through
All the channels of my folded hands, and my body, toward the sacred
feet

With my spirit flowing clear, without the load of conceit
And remembering all the things I owe,
Toward the abode of all being. Let it shine through
The tiny holes in the wickerwork that covers my ego,
Washing the shores of my values of self-esteem,
Heritage, education, and family-pride.
Toward the home of mercy, let my mind flow,
Wet with love and friendship.

I hug the cool comfort of this floor, and as it bears my body's weight,
My mind plays, lightened, feeling free, dreaming of being free of being
born again.

14

Where is rest for the curious mind?
 For the dreamer of the rasa¹ state ?
 For the pilgrim who travels on a path with many forks,
 Who comes here to bow, to rest his travel weary limbs,
 And rises to leave, raising his burden back to the shoulder ?
 What path to his goal? What ends his quest ?
 To where does he drive his team of body, mind, and soul ?
 Whence this bondage ? I ask, by what means release?
 Who is the prisoner and who imprisons ?

Life drives this team of matter and soul with such great skill!
 Why doesn't it pause to take in the high joy of the union of the two
 As long as it breathes ?

1. *Rasa*: This is one of most important concepts in the Indian philosophy of arts. It denotes the final bliss that the audience is left with after the sensory input and the semantic input has been completed and has been extinguished. Narasimhachar had many original ideas on this subject and some of them are glimpsed throughout this work.

15

*A*t the pinnacle of being, bliss pours out
Reached by children, good men, saints, bards, yogis, and sages.
It is not mere pleasure as in a pain stopped or thirst quenched.
Not just some enjoyment.
It is a rare brilliance that shines forth
from the life-spirit, like the light of the stars
That spills off the tangles of Shiva's tresses.¹
When object strikes the senses, it rakes
Red sparkling embers off the burning spirit which reveals its presence.

In that rare, momentary glimpse, everyone desires the rasa² state.
Therefore, this prostration before God that ends sorrow
And this thirst to know.

-
1. Shiva's tresses are immense and mighty. When Ganga descended from the heavens, her force was irresistible by any thing or any one. Then Lord Shiva stopped her by containing her in his immense tresses from where she came to flow to the earth gently.
 2. See note on page 14

16

Singed by the touch of pleasure¹, branded with black marks,
 Will ever my mind attain that beauty, that brilliance ?
 The sense-objects² shun it. The spirit too shuns. Who loves the
 disfigured !

Who will lift up by its raised, folded hands
 And take it, as blemishless, into his home of virtue ?
 Knowledge, crawling much from doubt to doubt,
 When will it ever bring contentment and peace of mind ?

My ego is encircling the joy of my being like a serpent-guardian.³
 With its hood crushed by my repeated prostrations,
 Will thus my original joy be released from its coils ?

1. *Nalavu*: translated here as sensual pleasures

2. *Vishaya*: Translated as the objects as input to the senses.

3. In Indian myths, great hidden treasures are always guarded by large encircling serpents. Sometimes, they carry large beaming diamonds on their hoods. The hero always gets the treasure by killing the serpent.

17

How does mere music, freely filling the entire air,
Stand outside in the open, shelter within it such divine joy ?
Who puts the strength in the sharp point
Of the glances shot from lovely brows,
Which can pierce the peace of the most determined minds ?
What grace begs art, with its faded face raised,
Diffident, though expertly adorned with perfected skills?
What word utters the most unselfish friend and the never erring saint
When they think that they have sinned ?

Hey, that absolute spirit,
Is it possible to know where or whom you favor ?
You seem not to discriminate the deserving from the undeserving.
That is why I too raise my hopes.

18

The brook sings. The star with its needles of light
 Tattoos my mind with a myriad thoughts.
 Gathering the four quarters, the breath of land
 Comes greeting to welcome my inner being as friend,
 Who is overwhelmed with its beauty.
 Light and water mingle in this sparkling stream
 Erasing as well, the edge between my in and out.
 Each moment of awareness flashes like gems in jewels,
 While the edge of the bend in the sky hides its big secret.¹

This grand experience is enhanced by the grace of the arch of this temple,
 which shines, like a vessel for the rasa² of all life's worldly experiences.

1. The secret is the paramaārtha, which is the ground which is behind all perceived reality.

2. See note on page 14

19

This is not a mere stone shaped by a sculptor. An icon.
Not an open field that can bear any shape that fancy cares.
This is not mere love born of man's grief.
Not the body of stiff rules laid down by law.
From the inert to the living, from the living to the soul,
From soul to the station of bliss,¹
Draws this magnet force of the souls of ordinary folk,
All humanity finds freedom here.

This temple is founded by saints who have done the crossing,²
To refine the joy of experience from the attachment for the object.³

-
1. Rasapada: Translated here as the station of bliss. This was a firm conviction of Narasimhachar who was very deeply influenced by the theory of evolution and believed that it is directed. This came up many times in our discussions. He was also influenced by the ideas of Sri Aurobindo, who professed a theory of a supra-consciousness.
 2. This world of perception and action (Bhava) is always compared to a river in Indian literature. To be free of rebirth is to have done the crossing.
 3. Vishaya

20

This light, does it carry the varying moods and forms of various minds
 Like ordinary light, when it passes through different media?
 Does it favor the observers' fancies,
 Like the image that just simulates the original's form,
 Posing as not different from it ?
 The eyes are dazzled by the radiance of every limb
 Of this superhuman form and withdraw themselves into deep meditation.
 This celebration of creative ritual joy, is this art ?

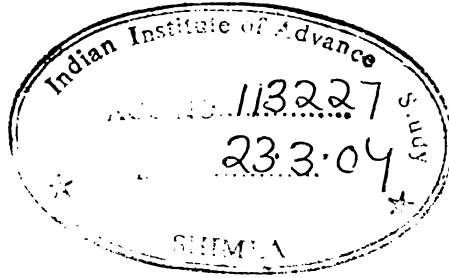
This is not that light, nor gilt; nor shine, nor art.
 Imagination founders here.
 The person separates himself from nature
 In a divine trick¹ displayed here.

1. *Tantra*: Translated here as trick. This is a word of many deep philosophical meanings; also the name of unorthodox beliefs and practices. The allusion here is to the concept of *Vikalpa*, which holds that at the immediate moment of sense experience, the observed and the observer are one and they separate at the moment of awareness.

21

Chiseling away birth after birth,
Primordial time has sculpted a new living form that is mine,
Out of a resplendent and energetic stream of consciousness.
Then beating it with the hammer of reality of enveloping changes,
And conducting it to safety through conflicts,
The intellect of old has now taken to a new mode,
That of collecting knowledge.

Now it kneels at the feet of this holy form,
This eternal life, this eternal mind¹,
And glows with a divine experience
Which it had never felt before.



1. *Chitta*: Translated here and elsewhere as mind, is also used in modern Kannada to denote consciousness, intention, etc.

22

When looks of lust dwell on smooth lustrous cheeks,
 A warning dart of sparkle the diamond earrings throw.
 When these lovely ladies of delicate bodies kneel
 And raise their folded hands, the bangles jingle words of caution.
 Since by gone days, the same sonorous up-down¹ chants of the Vedas²
 Enter the ears and silence the chattering minds,
 Making an august court of the assembled crowd.

That whiff of incense, those lamps, that rhythm, that symphony,
 Their holiness collects day by day and shines as this heavenly form.

-
1. Vedic chants are to be sung according to strict rules of intonations called *udaatta*, (the Up), and the *unudaatta* (the down) and clear enunciation. This produces a very peaceful mood in the listeners, even if they do not understand the language, like church music.
 2. *Vedas*: Scriptures of the Hindus, four in number. They are Rig, Yajur, Sama, and Atharvana. These are said to be of divine origin and the ultimate authority for spiritual knowledge, especially for the Vedantins.

23

However much I see this sight, I don't comprehend.
I am amazed here more than anywhere else.
This is not the reality of everyday life,
Nor an imaginary world of action.
Nor is it its mimicry. Real, but of what kind? I wonder.
It is a wonder that these folk
Who can find the solutions for their wants and woes
of the world there itself, come and find them here.
What can I say to the wonder of these others,
Who, unattached, rejecting all worldly things,
Come here to find complete satisfaction!

What such fullness is here that gives enough to each need ?
To fill the mind with enough knowledge ?
To fill the heart with enough love ?

24

Here, beauty stands on its toes
 Watching what may be across the fence.
 On its toes peeks knowledge
 To find what is strange on this side of the wicker fence.
 In prayer, naked grief falls at the door,
 in prostration, too weak to rise,
 And the mortal fear of samsara¹ comes running
 And panting to hide in this darkness.

Like the supplicant² retinue surrounding Shiva,
 Praising his glory, begging his grace,
 All the worries of the world are gathered here,
 Praying for a grant of grand recompense.

-
1. *Samsara*: The endless cycles of death and birth in the world of action. To be released from this, *Moksha* is the goal of highest priority for a Hindu, Buddhist, or Jain.
 2. Shiva is always accompanied by his Bhuta Gana, which are spirits waiting to do his bidding and get his blessings.

25

*L*istening with bated breath to the growth of the blades of grass,
And ever trying to fathom the depths of the sky,
Entering and leaving with each breath of air,
Traveling through the arteries, riding on the particles of blood,
Your body and all the actions of this world run automatically.
Realizing that this world goes on without your intervention,
And that you are irrelevant in all this cosmic commotion,
Hey, my ego, you suffer with self-pity from thinking
That you amount to nothing, a nobody.

You lose that miserable feeling here,
That you are separate from the rest of creation,
Even as you do not realize it!

26

The sky gathers itself to a point
 At the tip of the shining golden dome of the temple.
 In its yards sunlight crawls on its knees.
 The breeze wanders around this ground in silence,
 Carrying messages of holiness, with fingers pressed to lips.
 As soon as I realize their meaning, tears well up in my eyes.
 On incense fumes, uplifting thoughts rise,
 Of rich wellbeing and spiritual goals,
 With assurances of fulfillment right here,
 And the confidence to reach them.

Inside this temple, I met nature manifest as lord,
 Described by his eight-fold divisions.¹
 On this very spot, I say clearly His form as sachchidananda²
 Truth, Good, and Beauty, all in one.

1 The characteristics of *Ishvara*, the god of Hindu theology, are eight in number, enumerated in the *Amarakosha* as *AshiaBhutayah*. They are *Animaa*, *Mahimaa*, *Garimaa*, *Laghimaa*, *Praaptih*, *Praakaamyam*, *Eeshatva*, and *Vasishtam*.

2. This word denotes the nature of the Absolute of the Vedantins. It is a compound word made up of *Sat*, *Chit*, and *Ananda*, which denote existence, consciousness, and bliss.

27

No one else knows, or can explain
This institutional mix of life and spirit.
No words can unlock its secret.
Song, dance, or drama cannot break its seal,
Nor can sculpture, poetry, or art.
Among the various values of varying times,
This alone remains without value to the very end.
Nothing of the world depicts its desire.
The living is a loner; alone by himself.

Each person is a puzzle, a bundle of secrets, and so is this temple too.
Who knows how much one learns to see through oneself
In seeking to unravel this great temple's secret ?

28

The sun's rays, not knowing their own high brilliance,
 Realize it with pleasure, by passing through a diamond.
 The earth's essence, ignorant of its own life-giving nature,
 Realizes it with joy, in the aroma of flowers.
 One who has conquered the self, freed himself from everything,
 Finds self-love by loving everyone.
 The passing thoughts called objects, showing up and vanishing,
 Obtain permanence as symbols in this ground of no symbols.

The fluid of goodness¹ burns bright as if it surprises itself,
 Like the secret of divinity, caught in the minds of its devotees.

1. *Shaivarasyam*: Translated here as the fluid of goodness.

29

That which appears as this idol is not bound by it.
It is not little even if it can be contained in a small pitcher.¹
Its divinity is unstained even if involved in
Worldly transactions of blessings and offerings.
The senses are overwhelmed with this great experience.
This is the home where life was born,
Taking different forms, processed by different rituals,
The idol, the pitcher, the worship are but symbols.

Take fullness from fullness and fullness remains.²
The pilgrims feel that fullness and rise to a great height
While worshipping this idol here.

-
1. *Kumbha*: Literally a pot. The allusion here is to a worship procedure in which the idol is placed in a vessel to make an offering of holy bath.
 2. This is a very famous line from the Upanishads : *poornasya poornamaadaaya Poornamevaavashishyate*

30

The message of the drive to dig and bring out to light
 Metals and precious stones hidden in the dark caverns of the earth;
 The message of the word of wisdom that makes one aware of
 The light of good thought, hidden in the dark caves of the heart;
 The message of the perpetual stream of daily rituals,
 Which match the intentions to the aspirations of the mind;
 The message that I am a mere wave
 In the stream of actions, and this is its ocean;

These messages of action, dedication, knowledge, and service
 Are symbolized by this idol in this temple. In one wave of rasa¹
 Let all life's wishes become fulfilled here in this temple.

1. See note on page 14

31

What offering do you bear? Hey Mind! Coming to His direct presence,
Whose head represents joy, the body, knowledge and the feet, peace ?
Will you just as usual constantly search and present
Things bearing hope, fear, and greed ?
Surveying the aspects of being a husband, a son, or a father,
A friend or relation, given to you by this world of action,
busily counting the strands of fortunes of the rays of the grace of the
Benevolent,
How can you forget your innermost core — the soul ?

Grasp His feet and get peace.
Embrace His body and become wise.
Touch His head to become joyful.
He will flood your inner being with His compassionate light.

32

As the musical scale is bound by “sa” and “pa”¹
 The virtues are a harmony bound by fearlessness and humility.
 They combine in various arrangements in folk songs,
 In many a beautiful devotional fest.
 They are an ocean of the rasa² of heroism,
 Sweet and intoxicating to the soul.
 These celebrations are the festivals of our hearts.
 In these, the traveler in the world of action will find rest.

Hey, hallowed center of meditation,
 Dwelling place of great minds who knew the good,
 Come and stay in my heart,
 Cleanse the stains off my mind and give me joy,
 Whenever I think of you.

1. Narasimhachar is referring to the scale of folk music here. The 7 note scale of the classical music of India is, of course, bound by Sa and Ni.
 2. See note on page 14. The rasa indicated here is *Veera Rasa*.

33

Great men like Ramakrishna¹ possessed of the highest spirit,
Capable of overcoming evil, have now left.
These friends of the earth established here
Values which are unseen anywhere.
These fearless people held back the powerful stream of evil,
Flowing with the terrible force of pleasure in the bed of the senses,
Like Shiva, the Ganga,² in the tresses of their lives.
Such cultivators of the soul have now returned home.

But they still breathe in the idols and sculptures of this temple,
In these artful sacred rituals and in the melodies of the agama³ chants.

-
1. A great Hindu saint of modern times, the guru of Vivekananda and the founding father of the Ramakrishna Order of Sannyasis.
 2. See note on page 15
 3. *Agama Shashtra* are scriptures which describe the rules and procedures by which the deities are worshipped in all orthodox Hindu temples.

34

Rising high on a single stem, hitting the sky,
And suddenly breaking its bundle there,
And spreading its fluttering leaves in all directions, stands this palm
tree, I see.

My mind then finds home and rests
Among the tender leaves of this mango tree, shaped like the
temple's tower,
Getting wet in drizzle, gathering nourishment
From the falling sprinkles, as if the leaves are sucking the udders
of the sky.

A divine music from a flute flows and it spreads
An inexpressible confluence of beauty and bliss.
My heart is lost in thoughts of the Lord,
My inner being is drowned in joy, wave after wave.

35

Ah! That joy! Splendor of mind peculiar to life!
You get crushed and dry up when the chariots of words roll!
You are too delicate. Common words of everyday life
Can't catch you without crimping you.
So, knowing this, the man who advocates the Absolute,
Takes to Tantric¹ rituals
With kalasha,² koorcha,³ ankura,⁴ mudra,⁵ and the like
And mutters mantras which transcend meaning.

Alas, Joy! I have no room to contain you
In my worldly consciousness.
So, I now feel right to salute any and every thing I see,
That which moves and that which moves not!

-
1. Tantric: Related to Tantra, which means an extension; in this case, from a verbally expressed meaning bound ritual to verbally inexpressible form of ritual full of symbolic objects and actions.
 2. A pot usually of brass, sometimes wrapped around with sacred string in criss - cross design
 3. A sprinkler, formed by tying three *darbha* (a kind of grass) strands into a knot with a free end, which is dipped in holy water to sprinkle on objects of worship and on people.
 4. *Ankura*: freshly sprouted seedlings of some legumes
 5. *Mudra*: These are gestures made with the fingers of both hands. Many of these have Tantric significance. They are also used as part of meditation postures.

36

Immersed in the divine rays of grace are these pious men,
 Who have met the self, leaving behind the world of action,
 Who have passed through the winter of mind,
 And arrived at the spring of consciousness.
 They walk sprinkling everything with droplets of joy.
 As everything we see highlights the brilliance of the light waves from
 the sun,
 These men, pouring forth from the temple like a stream from a cavern,
 highlight for me the light of divinity radiating from far beyond the
 temple bounds.

Purity, contentment, humility, and love adorn this cow-pen with life
 spirit as well,
 like the originators¹ of humanity, born of the unborn and its mind.

1. These are Marcechi, Atri, Angeeras, Pulastya, Pulaha, and Kratu, the mental children of Brahma, the unborn (Aja).

37

Like the ocean swells and overflows when it sees the full moon,
When I see the throng of these men filling this temple,
My mind swells out of control with feelings of the spreading joy.
Seeing this beautiful figure of the Lord, decked with that immense
diamond¹,
Of his crown, fed by a drop of the bright blue sky,
My mind breaks through the tight sheath of logic,
And my heart blooms into a new humility.

It seems to me that the self itself indulges in the sensual,
As if the hidden rasa² itself flourishes thus in the other world.

-
1. This famous diamond is very large indeed and it is an uncut blue diamond. It is a gift from KrishnaRaja Wodeyar, the Maharaja of Mysore State to God Cheluva Narayana of Melukote.
 2. See note on page 14

38

The world's poison is arrested in this temple, as by Shiva¹ in his neck.
 Life rejoices as with a newborn mind, bright as a freshly washed pearl.
 The self breathes this flame of joy
 Of the people who are gathered outside.
 When I see this human stream entering and leaving, like a playful wave,
 Hear their sounds of conches,² jagates,³ and piercing shouts of the
 Lord's names,
 I know of no other pleasure than of this leisure,
 Felt while sitting on the steps of the surrounding walls.

This temple is a successful bank, briskly engaged in giving and taking,
 Conducting a commerce between Vishaya⁴ and atman.⁵

-
1. Alludes to the incident in the war between the Angels and the Demons (Devaasura Yuddha). The first product of churning the ocean of milk with Vaasuki, the serpent, as rope, was deadly poison, which threatened to destroy the world. Shiva, then swallowed all that poison, but held it in his neck, and saved the world.
 2. Conches are fitted with a brass tube and are blown like a pipe during parades and chariot processions. They make a deep and resounding sound.
 3. *Jagate*: This is a folk instrument of percussion, used in worship and processions. It is a pan, about 18" diameter, made of bell metal or thick brass. It is hit with a round block of wood to make a sound like a bell.
 4. *Vishaya*: This is the object in its absolute form, not the perceived object.
 5. *Atman*: Self, the perceiver, in this case.
 6. See page 14

39

Dragging along load after load of the lifeless,
Banging mind against mind, being pushed along this field of deeds,
This pompous procession of life passes,
Of kings, with courtiers who declare at every step, "Oh, my Lord, your
grace ?

My eyes don't enjoy this.
They open wide for these pilgrims,
Their lives light, wandering at the tip of a blissful state
Of rasa, and bouncing me into it;

Severing the cord at birth, breathing, feeding, clothing,
Posing as I, all this is really worthwhile now,
Because of the pleasure of seeing these good men,
Who take to such toil to attain the divine, in the cause of this temple.

40

The know - how to tame the lightning, to capture the sun,
 To turn the bottom up and loot the ocean floor,
 To dragnet the sky and to measure the stars,
 To expose the secrets of the tiniest of the tiny,
 To know the powerful forces hidden inside matter,
 To create new aids to enhance pleasure,
 The mind plays unrepressed, tearing this and tearing that,
 In the playpen in the yard and life watches it.

Casting a permissive, loving glance over all this disfiguring play,
 Stands this king¹ of wealth, with wealth² beside in procession,
 With a smile that is too sweet to bear !

-
1. King of Wealth: A pun; alludes to Narayana, another name of Vishnu, who is the consort (and Lord) of Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth. The God at Melukote is also known as Shelva Narayana in Tamil, and shelvam in that language means wealth and prosperity.
 2. This alludes to Lakshmi, the consort of Narayana. When the deities are taken in processions, they are always accompanied by their consorts.

41

The fiercest among the fierce, most peaceful among the peaceful,
The indifferent among the indifferent,
The One who lifts His lovers and
The One who drops the haters,
Thus, He is seen in many ways.
He, She, It, thus He appears to me in different forms
As the fountain of pleasures and pains.
I think of Him with wonder,
Of Him who is hidden in everything with a myriad faces.
Him, how can I forget ?

I have become a portal for him in this corner.
Let him see through my ego, and bring joy to all His subjects.

42

The tree of deeds of all the world's living things,
 Humming with the noise of fluttering leaves,
 Breathing light, is eager, vibrant, and radiant,
 Thanking the goodness of the essence at the root.
 Life is a gift; the universe, a field to cultivate the good.
 Joy has wiped away all boundaries.
 Shedding the covers of knowledge, naked awareness has awakened.
 I babble thus to speak, not minding the concern of the wise!

On waves of the ocean¹ of milk, He rests on venom.²
 Joy comes crowding when Him I contemplate.

-
1. *Ksheerasagara*: Vishnu is usually shown as reposing on a sevenhooded serpent, Adishesha (the primordial serpent), floating on the waves of the ocean of milk.
 2. Alludes to the serpent on whom Narayana is reposing.

43

When the rising green sap mingles with light
That is relaxing on the balcony of twilight clouds,
And as the rainbow hangs unmoving on a roaring waterfall,
He plays upon this everchanging world of action
Like the light that is caught and brought forth
In the petals of flowers on trees that wither too soon,
Like the dream embodied in the solid silence of the hill,
Like the shimmer that swings on a tender shoot.

Outside, the king¹ of beauty beckons to come hither,
To a friend, my joy-seeking soul,
Hiding in his of house of knowledge, afraid to come out.

1. Alludes to the name of the same God of Melukote in Kannada, Cheluva Narayana. Cheluva in Kannada means handsome.

44

This is just this much, nothing less,
That which I see is perfect, and full.
Here, on this hill's rising ground, at the temple's tip,
From where the blue sky spreads all around,
Under which, I lie,
At the center of creation, filling everything,
Spreading everywhere without bound, I rest, and just exist,
Devoid of all value judgments,
Feeling the same in everything,
Like the beat of the heart of an enlightened being.

I am and I just am; becoming one with the awareness of nothing to sense,
My eyes seeing all around, my ears heaving everything, and I, silent.

45

*A*s the birds flock unafraid to a tree,
to a saint, a man filled with love, people flock.
To me standing here still, hesitant thoughts flock.
My curious nature points them out to me,
Remarking playfully about how friendly they are.
I welcome them and caress some with the fingers of my words
In my verses and show them to the world.
By doing so, I attain a kind of freedom, a detachment,
To lead my life freely as it flows in the valleys of other lives.

In this temple's inner sanctum, architected with
The tempest, the oceans, the vast vacant space, the earth and the fire¹
I let the radiance of these various experiences light my inner self
As they enter my kindled mind.

1. These of course are the five primary elements, the Pancha Mahabhutas. The allusion is that the temple is akin to the body made up of these very same primary elements.

46

There is no world when we sleep. No theories in dreams.
 The world of concepts arises in wakefulness.
 In the conscious state, in the world that throws its tendrils toward rasa,
 Theories yield their place to truth.
 This idea that truth is based in thought
 Is the price of living in the world of action
 And the basis for Heaven and such other realms.
 It carries on its back Gods like Indra,¹ Agni,² and Varuna.³
 And from it, man becomes aware of beauty.

Truth is the suburb of rasa. All the phases of the heart shine there.
 In the center of rasa, though, there is joy, overflowing with truth.

1. *Indra*: A principal God of the *Rigveda*, he is the god of lightning and thunder, the equivalent of the Greek Zeus and the Roman Jupiter

2. *Agni*: The most important God of the Vedas. he carries the sacrificial offerings to the gods in heaven.

3. *Varuna*: Another god of the Vedic age. he represents the waters of the world and also officiates at the religious sacrifices; equivalent of Uranus of the Greeks.

47

When the sound “Cheluva Narayana”¹ hits my ears,
Teardrops rain down my cheeks, said the sage, filled with poetic bliss,
A master of the art of silence.
And a true dweller of the land of truth...
That was perhaps, in answer to my quest.
When the name “Hari”² is uttered,
The saint takes wing and rides the wind like a swan,
While my weak self, in this temple nest,
Is anxiously fluttering to fly away,
Showing only its naivet .

Below, stalk the hunters, desire, fear, and greed,
Eager for the flesh of my self.
With compassion, the saints are watching, smiling, and inspiring
confidence.

-
1. Meaning “Narayana, the handsome” in Kannada. The idol of this Melukote temple which is carried in processions, is popularly considered as of extraordinary beauty.
 2. *Hari*: Another name of Vishnu. This word also has numerous other meanings.

48

The sun, by his rays, lifts the waters of the ocean
 And covers the earth with clouds, shining above them.
 Life on earth longs for that sunlight playing high above,
 On such a cloud covered day.
 The sacred rites rid the cloudy darkness¹
 And release the sun's rays to descend to earth...
 Without such ritual festivals, processions, and gathering of saints,
 the earth is suffering, I feel the sorrow of its plight.

My hopes revive with the thought of the temple,
 That it is able to remove the suffering and restore its joy.

1. This belief is an ancient one and is mentioned in the vedas. The poet appears to subscribe to that belief, but for metaphorical reasons, it seems to me. Here, the earth's longing for the pleasures of the sunlight is a metaphor for the mind's longing for pleasurable experience, i.e. attachment. The sacred rituals replace these with the higher joy of the *rasa* state, lifting the mind to a higher plane.

49

*F*rom the days of my boyhood to now,
Things and persons have always caused me wonder.
As soon as you think that they are empty or petty,
They come at you with their might to cause pleasure and pain.
Who can answer the riddle that
My feelings are known only to me; that the rest is myth?
Who can feel any happiness in this world of action,
Born of the much trusted senses, which plot to deceive ?

Inspiring men with developed spirits have attained the brilliance of stars.
For lesser men like me, we have this temple,
Bestowed as a gift to us by their compassion and grace.

50

I wouldn't say
 The life supporting the body is but fleeting
 and it is of a few moments.
 For, by the strategy of employing the six enemies,¹
 It achieves a kind of permanence, harnessing itself to desires,
 By inventing to be born again and again,
 Life challenges inert matter and wins.
 Life is the abode of the spirit! In it, it lives or leaves.
 Even divine feelings emerge and vanish with it.
 Practice of self control, strict virtuous conduct,
 Meditations and such methods empower
 Consciousness, to find expression in life.

What traveler, seeking the bliss of the rasa state, won't grow
 Garuda's² wings,
 By the graceful glance of Lord Narayana,
 The most exalted product of inspired minds ?

-
1. *Arishatka*: Translated as the six enemies of spiritual progress, *Kama*, *Krodha*, *Lobha*, *Mada*, and *Matsarya*, which are desire, frustration (or anger), greed, personal pride (haughtiness), and envy (or jealousy).
 2. *Garuda*: The golden eagle of India. Vishnu rides on him.

51

A beam of that side glance and His graceful smile
Lit up these good thoughts in my mind's inner quarters,
After I had wandered in the inner and the outer precincts of this temple,
and they took shape thus in this string of verses as
an account of my wandering in my inner and outer self.
The stream of our experiences, in our life that is human,
Is only relative. It is, like this temple,
With its sweet songs, words of wisdom, a bundle of symbols.
Born from the Absolute as perceived truth.

This life is a fountain of rasa, which keeps washing all pollution
from its soul.
It is devised by the compassionate adepts to lift dull minds to the
tip of bliss.

52

Residing in all the senses,
 Let my favorite Lord,
 Curb the drift to the inert.
 Reflecting His renowned presence in all things known,
 Let all virtuous thoughts reign.

Opposing evil with evil,
 Unhesitating to don the terrible form,
 And then, sitting peacefully in this yogic pose,
 Let Lord Narasimha¹ bring us all good fortunes.

Let the six enemies² tremble with fear.
 They who know Him, do not fear His sharp chakra,³ His conch,
 or the club.
 Narayana⁴ our lord shelters and protects us all from evil things.

-
1. This is an avatar of Vishnu, a chimera form of half-human and half-lion, which he assumed to kill the bad king *Hiranya Kashipu*, the father of Prahlada. See *VishnuPurana*. The idol in the temple on the Hill at Melukote is of this deity, although his name is being mentioned for the first time at the end of the work. The idol is sculpted in the Yogic pose.
 2. See page 50
 3. *Chakra*: A rotating sharp-edged discus, which is a characteristic weapon of Vishnu, along with the conch and the club. We do not know how it was used in battle. The conch was used to challenge and warn the enemy.
 4. Another name of Vishnu. This is the deity that is variously called as the Shelva Narayana or the Cheluva Narayana to whom a large part of this work applies. The temple is in the center of the town, not on the hill.

53

We bow to him,
The Infinite, of thousand forms,
Of thousand feet, eyes, heads, legs, and arms,
Of thousand names, the eternal Person,²
And who sustains thousands of millions of eons.

-
1. This last verse is from the Bhagavadgita, from the chapter on the *Vishvaroopadarshana*, inserted here by the poet as prayerful finale.
 2. *Purusha*: The central, unmoving and unchanging entity of the *Samkhya* philosophical system.

THE HILL & THE TEMPLE

This essay is about the historical and geographical aspects of the temple, which is featured in this long poem, and the town of Melukote, where it is situated. My intention here is to provide a context which will enhance the appreciation of the poem and which may hopefully inspire the reader to visit the town and the temple. The poem is philosophical in its theme and therefore, I have emphasized the historical events, especially the life and legends of Sri Ramanuja, whose philosophy greatly influenced the thoughts of P.T. Narasimhachar, the author of this poem.

On the road from Mysore to Bangalore in Karnataka, South India, there is the little-known town of Pandavapura, also known as French Rocks. The first name is really ancient, deriving from a belief that the Pandavas of the MahaBharata had once lived here, when they were in exile, living incognito. The second name is of rather recent origin, only about 250 years old, derived from the garrisons of French soldiers who had camped here during the reign of Tippu Sultan, who had an alliance with Napoleon Bonaparte in his wars against the British.

The road to “the Hill Temple” takes off to the west from here, passes through miles of green farmland of tall sugar cane, weaves across many canals and river beds and after about fifteen miles, arrives at a busy bus stand village of JakkanaHalli. The name of this village is probably derived from Hakka Raya, the first ruler of the famous Vijayanagar Empire, 1200 - 1600 AD, who had camped here to settle a dispute between the Jain community and the Sri Vaishnava community of this area. Or perhaps it is named

after the renowned sculptor and engineer, Jakkanachari, who built the famous and beautiful Hoysala temples at Belur and Halebidu. Or may be it is a name derived from Yaksha, a mythical guardian spirit, who protects sacred places.

From here, as the eyes reluctantly move away from the lovely view of the lake and the valley of the little ravine ahead, you can see a magnificent view of “the Temple” and its tower, dominating the southwest, poised tall on a little plateau of huge rocks, “holding up the sky at its tip” or “gathering the sky to a single point” depending upon which verse you are reading from the poem of this book. At the foot of the hill, you can see the ancient and sacred little village of Melukote, nestled among the rocks and trees, on a narrow plateau that barely covers 800 square yards. This is the birthplace of the poet and it is the temple on this hill that inspired him to write the poem. The road then descends into the ravine bed with the lake on its right flank, and ascends steeply for about a half mile to a bus stand, a little before you reach the narrow gate of the old and dilapidated fort’s entrance to the village. From across the fort wall on the left, you catch glimpses of ancient stone constructions of Mantapa-s and a bathing pond with stone steps, which is in an utter state of ruin and neglect.

This little road, which brings us up the gentler slope of the northern side, is of very recent origin, put down perhaps in the 1920s. The traditional approaches to the town are all stone-stepped ascent paths, approaching from the southern and the western sides.

There are seven such paths up this hill. At about the termination of the steep ascent to this plateau, there is a turnoff to the west, which takes one to the historic sites of Channa Raya Pattana and Shravana Belagola, where, on the Chandra Betta, the very

famous tall, naked, 58foot stone statue of Gommateshvara is situated. Legend has it that Chandragupta Mourya, the most successful emperor of the Magadha empire (200 BC), who ruled from Pataliputra, (Modern Patna, in Bihar), retired to live here during his vanaprastha days after he handed the power to his heirs.

The hill and the plateau on which the town stands, forms part of the eastern edge of the much larger plateau of Karnataka, which was known as the Malayadri complex in ancient geographical writings, such as the *Matsya Purana*¹. The eastern edge of the southern plateau is generally much craggier and full of huge outcroppings of granite rock formations than the Western Ghats, probably because of the thinner forest cover and the consequent greater erosion of loose soil. Because of its strategic importance of prominently jutting into the surrounding flat countryside, this place has always been settled, even from pre-historic times. In the distant past, before extensive human settlement and consequent cultivation, this area was covered with very thick forest, which was home to many wild animals, notably tigers and black leopards known as 'kiruba.'

There are indeed, many references to the Malaya country in ancient literature. The area has been mentioned in the play Nagananda of Sri Harsha. Its forests have been famous for sandal wood, large snakes, elephants, and the pre-monsoon breezes which blow from here to the north to cool the burning hearts of separated lovers there. Modern Malayasia got its name from this Malaya, from Indian merchants who traveled there in search of gold and other minerals and settled there many centuries before the beginning of the Christian era.

1. This reference also appears in Al Beruni's India. Also see the Appendix section of Sanskrit Dictionary, V.S. Apte.

Known early history takes us to the times of the Hoysala empire (800 - 1200AD). at which time this formed the south-eastern boundary of its power. It was involved in constant skirmishes with its southern rivals of the Tamil country. In those days, this little town and the plateau was fortified for defense purposes and it was mainly a military outpost. It was perhaps at this time that the town acquired the name Melukote, which means “the fort on the high ground.” There is also another name, “Yadugiri” or “YaduShaila,” which means the “rocky hill of the Yadu-s,” which links it to the Yadu clan of SriKrishna and BalaRama. In fact, these are the names by which this holy place is known in all Sri Vaishnava writing.

The early history of the state of Mysore reveals that two brothers, Vijaya and Krishna of the Yadu clan came here from the northern region of Dwaraka (15th century), and settled in an area very close to the city of Mysore, which was ruled by a chieftain called MaraNayaka. They later challenged MaraNayaka to save a local princess from his undesired advances and defeated him in a battle. Krishna then became King of Mysore. Ever since, the Hindu kings of Mysore have been Yadu-s and very devoted benefactors of the temples at Melukote. More about this later.

There is also a left turn at the foot of the northern ascent, and that path takes you to a complex of ancient eighth century shrines in the little village of Thondanur, a Tamil word meaning ‘the village of the (reckless) devotee.’

This name was given to this village by the great Ramanujacharya (1017 - 1137), who founded the Vishishtadvaita form of Vedanta and the corresponding Sri Vaishnava religion and brought it to the Karnataka region. He fled his native Tamil country then to escape the persecutions of the Chola king because of his

Vaishnava religion and temporarily stayed in this village complex of temples disguised as a mendicant. He named this place Thondanur, after his favorite disciple and collaborator Kuresha, who impersonated Ramanuja when the cruel king's men had come to take him prisoner, and whose eyes were plucked out for punishment. Later, he made Melukote his residence, which was at that time a deserted outpost. His coming completely changed its character from a military town of dwindling importance to one of the divine holy places (DivyaKshetra-s) for Sri Vaishnavas, one in line with Sri Rangam and Sri Venkatadri (popularly known as Thirupati). I shall now digress a bit and narrate the story of the many happy accidental events that happened to this great sanyasi when he was took refuge in this part of Karnataka, which changed him and the fortunes of this little village of Melukote.

While Ramanuja was at Thondanur, he ran out of his stock of white clay, which is most essential for the daily ritual of a SriVaishnava, for putting on the prescribed twelve nama-s on the forehead and other parts of the upper body. These nama-s are the distinguishing mark of all practicing SriVaishnavas. It declares their faith in the tenets of that religion for all to see.

In this predicament, he was sitting there in Thondanur one afternoon, thinking about his problem. Then, he felt that he was being led by someone by the hand to a spot on the side of Melukote hill. There, he saw huge deposits of just the sort of white clay that he needed, and that it was of the best quality possible. After this delightful discovery, he lost no time at all in moving his residence to a small hut in the beautiful fortified village on the plateau and to happily continue to practice his new religion there.

His presence there became known to the Hoysala king,

BittiDeva Raya who was at the time beset with a problem of his young princess's health. She was suffering from a severe form of depression. Because of it, she was unenthusiastic and suicidal, never being able to laugh or take part in any of the fun with the young people of the royal family. This may have been a reaction of the young girl, who misunderstood her religion, Jainism, which imposes a very strict and puritanical moral code on its adherents involving high levels of self denial and penances of body mortification. Jainism was the royal religion of the court of the Hoysala kings. The king's court physicians and religious leaders were unable to cure her; in fact, the more they tried their remedies and counselings, the worse it got. The king was very unhappy and he was desperately searching for a remedy. He was especially open minded to spiritual advice.

BittiDeva Raya sent for the refugee sanyasi as soon as he heard about him and put the problem before him. Ramanuja wanted to meet the girl and a meeting was arranged. From the first moment, she liked him and because of his easy and relaxed manner with all and his compassionate approach, he won her confidence very easily. Then he taught his new religion to her. He talked to her about the benevolent and compassionate nature of God, how to love Him and surrender oneself to Him, and the art of renunciation without self mortification. This had a wonderful liberating influence on her. She began to feel the joy of living bubble up within her. She spontaneously began to laugh.

The change in her was phenomenal and her depression was completely cured. The king too was very highly impressed with this sanyasi's teachings and the miraculous cure he had accomplished. This was sufficient for him to embrace the new religion of Sri Vaishnavism. Likewise, a large number of his courtiers and his

countrymen flocked to the great sanyasi's residence to receive the new teachings from him and to follow the new religion. Thus began the transformation of Melukote from a military outpost to a holy place of pilgrimage for the growing number of new SriVaishnavas.

At the time of Ramanuja's arrival in Melukote, there was already a temple at the top of the hill on the eastern edge of the plateau. This is a temple for the god Narasimha, and it is after this god that our poet was named Narasimhachar. Lord Narasimha here is depicted as sitting in a rare yoga posture of meditation to regain peace of mind after the brutal act of killing Hiranya Kashyapa. Although equipped with an ornate tower of the usual southern style, a gate and domes, which find beautiful description in the verses of the poem, the temple itself is fairly common and rustic. What it lacks in architectural merit, it has certainly made up in its history and holiness as a shrine, which gave Ramanuja refuge to pray and worship.

The natural beauty of this temple and its tower, situated on the most elevated tip of the hill overlooking the flat countryside surrounding it, blending evenly with the rock and the hill, unostentatious and yet very noticeable, is truly magnificent. Much of the poem is about this beauty of the hill, this temple and their lifelong imprint on the poet's psyche. That imprint created in him a fascinating urge to renounce the world and seek liberation. The deliberations on this urge of the past, which will blend later with the *rasa* state generated by the beauty of the religious experience of the temple's rituals of worship, form the main theme of the poem.

Ramanuja had another dream in which he saw a stone statue of Lord Narayana, which was completely buried in the mud of a

nearby lake. When he went there to investigate, he found that the dream was indeed true and he could see the outline of a buried idol in the mud of the lake. He became very excited and approached his new friend, King BittiDeva for help. The idol was excavated and brought up the hill and a new temple was constructed to house and worship the idol. This is the Lord ThiruNarayana's temple of Melukote, which is situated at the center of the plateau. Both the poet's father and his son bear this god's name.

At this time, the king generously provided for the administration and maintenance of the temple and rebuilt the fort, and constructed many ponds paved with stone steps, called Pushkarinis, which dot this town. These supply water for its inhabitants. There are eight of these. They are the most distinguishing feature of this ancient holy place and serve as a superb example of how the Hindu community made use of natural resources in planning a holy city. The largest of these is called Kalyani, named by Ramanuja himself, because he was on the steps of this pond when he heard the news that the bigoted Chola king's reign was over and Tamil country was safe for his return. Kalyani means "the lady of good luck." This magnificent body of water is immense and has a flight of 32 steps from the top to the water level. Pillared halls surround it on all four sides and they are truly worth seeing. There is a companion lake to this, which has a pavilion at its center that is meant for a festival called the Theppotsava. The idol of the God is taken in a procession on this holy day, which ends in a ride on raft to this pavillion.

It is very sad that all these water resources built during the Hoysala times are now spoilt and are in a severely dilapidated state. Even in this sorry plight, they are a really admirable sight. With two great temples and all these water resources, Melukote

began to attract residents in large numbers, and the quarter square mile inside the fort began to fill up and develop into a center of great culture and commerce. Being situated in a commanding location of very productive farmland, it had a natural advantage favoring it to become an industrial and commercial hub. Besides that, it was a celebrated holy place also.

Temple towns in South India, as in medieval Europe, became magnet towns which attracted culture and commerce. First, a sizable community of learned brahmanas moved in and with them, schools began to teach the Vedas, the Smritis, philosophy, logic, Sanskrit literature, grammar, etc. Then, came the shopkeepers and administrators. Melukote soon became a center for fine textiles and gained a reputation for the manufacture of a certain style of “panche,” the white dhoti with rich purple borders. The temples created a calendar of festival days, with grand processions of the gods through the streets, which attracted worshippers and spectators. Fairs developed around these events. Merchants came with goods and money poured in. There was much dancing and singing in these festivals and so artists moved in.

But for the constraints imposed by the lack of real estate inside the little fortress and the supporting plateau itself, Melukote would have grown into a much larger town. It grew to fill the available resources and continued to flourish through the next few centuries, even after the Hoysala dynasty waned and vanished. It enjoyed periods of prosperity and suffered plunder and ruin by invading marauders, as was the fate of most such temple towns. But before I proceed further, I must narrate to you another story, the story of the portable idol (this is the idol that is carried in processions), called “Shelvapillai” (the handsome lad). This too concerns Ramanuja’s remarkable psychic intuition of locating needed objects.

When BittiDevaRaya took to SriVaishnavism, Melukote grew as an important center of holy shrines, but it did not have a decent portable idol to takeout on processions during the holy days of the calendar. Ramanuja thought about this all the time. One day, he had a dream. In this dream, he saw a beautiful portable idol, made of the auspicious “panchaloha” (an alloy of copper, gold, silver, tin and lead), in the best classical South Indian style, and it was of Narayana, his favorite god. But there was one problem. It was in the toy collection of the daughter of the sultan of Delhi, and it was one of her favorites. Undaunted, Ramanuja sent a letter with a trusted desciple of his, along with some of the king’s men, requesting the Muslim ruler to donate the idol to him, explaining, that it was needed in his temple for worship. Perhaps he took the opportunity to give him a very persuasive gist of his philosophy. Miraculously, the Muslim monarch of Delhi was moved by the words of this South Indian ascetic. He talked his daughter into parting with her most favorite toy and sent it with Ramanuja’s men. They lost no time in hurrying back with it to Melukote. The idol was nicknamed as “Shelva Pillai,” and consecrated as the portable idol for Lord ThiruNarayana and, interestingly, to serve YogaNarasimha of the hill temple also. As far as I know, this is a very unusual arrangement of one portable idol serving two deities. The Shelva Pillai idol is judged to be one of the most beautiful and well proportioned sculptures among all such idols of the temples of South India.

After parting with the idol of Shelva Pillai, the princess of Delhi could not bear to be without it and she was in great distress. She cried daily and longed for it. She could not eat or sleep. At last, she determined to go to the place where it was and persuaded her father to send her there. Seeing no other option, the sultan sent her south with a retinue of servants and soldiers. But

alas, the party was unfamiliar with the southern country and could not succeed in crossing the Vindhya and its fierce forests. They were lost. The psychic Ramanuja knew that the lord had taken his beloved companion to his abode and to commemorate her goodness and generosity, he instituted the practice of making her a companion of Shelva Pillai, on all processions. She can be seen in the form of a small icon at the foot of the portable idol, serving the lord, on all processions at Melukote. Whatever be the historical merit of this legend, it has always made a great impression on me. Ramanuja, the intrepid ascetic with his love of humanity crossing all barriers, the sultan of Delhi, trying to cooperate with the infidels, much to the wrath of the Muslim clergy, and a Muslim princess who loves a toy that is a sacred symbol of Hindu divinity, all joined across the bitter chasm which has always divided these two religions! Ah, I dearly wish it is all true.

Ramanuja resided for about 14 years in Melukote, which he had come to love. When he received news that it was safe to return to SriRangam, he stood on the steps of the Kalyani and soon after, he decided to return to SriRangam. This was of course very sad news for the residents of the city that he had built. With tears in their eyes, they all begged him not to go. But the ascetic had determined to leave, lest he became too attached to one place, which is not recommended to ascetics. Then people made a life like statue of him in panchaloha, which would symbolically continue his presence in Melukote, and he embraced it to infuse it with his spirit. This statue may be seen in the ThiruNarayana temple even now, showing him in the lotus pose, his face bright and tranquil, his hands folded in a pose of prayer to Narayana, who is the lord and protector of the universe. Then, he gave his last advice to the assembled people thus: "Completely surrender yourself to ThiruNarayana, put up a small hut and live here in

Yadugiri all your life.” Then he descended the steep stone steps on the southern side, cast a grateful, longing look at the hill, and briskly walked away toward SriRangam. He was accompanied by a few chosen disciples. He was then 94 years old.

Ramanuja preached a philosophy, which is called Vishishtadvaita, a special form of monotheism. He believed that the universe of one experience is real. It is not Maya, but it is as we perceive it. It is the body of the Lord (Ishwara). In the words of the Ishaavaasya upanishat, the universe is the dwelling place of God. It also runs solely according to his intentions. “Not even a straw can move without him!” says another Upanishadic statement. That Lord is Narayana.

In the practice of his philosophy, Ramanuja’s choice is that of Bhakti, out of the three paths described in the BhagavadGita. These are Jnaana (the intellectual), the Bhakti (the path of faith, love and loyalty), and the Karma (the path of action with nonattachment). Bhakti demands intense and exclusive devotion, just as success in meditation demands pointed concentration. Because it will be diluted and rendered ineffective by accepting many choices, Ramanuja recommends only Narayana (Vishnu) as the personal God to be worshipped by all his followers. In addition, because all conscious elements in the universe come in two varieties, male and female, he recommends Lakshmi (Sri, the female aspect of the Lord) for worship as much as Vishnu. Hence his religion has come to be known as SriVaishnavism.

The practice of this religion is based on the Agama scriptures, which make use of heavy anthropomorphising of all the important concepts of philosophy and the rich store of ancient Hindu mythological lore (Puranas). The worship ceremonies involve ritual acts of daily bathing (Abhisheka) and dressing the idols, decorating

with jewelry and garlands of flowers, offerings of perfumery, food delicacies and fruits, prayers, dances and songs. Processions around the main streets of the towns is a regular feature and these involve much fanfare, with big bands with pipe music and drums and other fun events. People come from distant places to witness these events to express their piety, and for entertainment. These are simple spiritual entertainments which uplift the life of the rural people and relieve the monotony of village life.

Ramanuja is well known as the acharya who actively pursued a movement to break down the rigidity of the caste system which had fractured Hindu society thoroughly in his time. Unfortunately, it is still a source of much of its weakness. A great lover of humanity, he helped everyone, without regard to any social distinctions. Many of his close friends were of the Sudra and untouchable castes. He called the latter “ThiruKulattar,” people of the holy tribes,” much like Mahatma Gandhi in our times, who called them “harijan”, meaning people of God. Ramanuja accepted, however, that any complicated organic system such as a society has to have parts which are based on distinctions, such as professions and stations of responsibility, without which there would be only chaos and death. He worked also for the equality of women with men. Women have been treated as inferior according to the customary injunctions of the ancient DharmaShastras: Especially neglected are the rights of widows, the childless and the sex workers.

Ramanuja accomplished a paradigm shift to cure these social ills. He established the principle that a person of any caste or gender can worship with Bhakti and complete surrender, and achieve Moksha. The traditional injunctions that the working classes and women were not entitled to the study of the Vedas, which was the sole means of realizing the Brahman, a prerequisite for

Moksha in the Advaita system, was bypassed by Ramanuja. He gave the status of the Vedas to the 4,000 scriptures called “pasurams,” which are Bhakti writings written in Tamil by Rishis called Alvars. He made everyone entitled to study them, regardless of caste or gender restrictions. He said Bhakti alone is sufficient to obtain Moksha. It is evident that all these flow as a natural consequence of the paradigm shift which he created in the philosophical system.

A significant worldly aspect of Ramanuja’s philosophy is that environmental purity, natural beauty, and “rasa,” the detached joy which comes from the appreciation of good art, are all divine attributes. This is a topic that will touch the hearts of modern environmentalists and artists. Narasimhachar, was deeply influenced by this aspect of the religion and it forms the core theme of the poem of this book. In this poem, the poet speaks to himself about the natural beauty that surrounds his native place and of his favorite deity in the temple on the hill, and the beauty of the elaborate worship ceremonies which he witnesses there. He remembers the tenets of the philosophy which call him to renounce his complacent and comfortable urban life and to seek the state of spiritual freedom. He takes flight toward it on a wave of rasa, induced by this total experience.

Melukote continued to flourish on this hilltop through many ups and downs. Soon after Ramanuja, Malik Kafur invaded the south from Delhi, with his Muslim army, and ended Hoysala rule. He looted Melukote, SriRangam and other temple towns; destroyed them just for the loot. The famous temple at Halebidu was among them. He withdrew as fast as he came, for he was bent on mere plunder. The town recovered quickly and thrived again under the Vijayanagar kings.

During this time, Gopal Raya, a feudal governor of the emperor, undertook to build a grandiose entrance gate for Melukote at the traditional southern side of the fort. This gate was to be very high, the columns supporting it rise to a height which is sufficient to admit a large elephant, carrying a tall howdah on its back. This would have been magnificent gate, but for reasons unknown, the work was never completed. Many of the beautifully carved slabs that were intended to support the gate are scattered about, left in the positions as abandoned by the workers.

The Marathas, ransacked the town next, in 1771, purely out of greed, and desecrated the temple property, even though they were Hindu, and interestingly enough, Tippu sultan of Mysore, came up with help to restore the damage to the temples. After Tippu was defeated by the British, the throne of Mysore passed back to the rulers of the Yadu clan, and during their rule, Melukote, received continuous grants and gifts and flourished again until our time.

During Narasimhachar's boyhood, it was a very lively rural town, with about 500 houses. Life here was full of the busy schedule of temple festivals and the very active Sanskrit Pathashala turning out scholars of literature, grammar and philosophy. It was here that he learned Sanskrit and achieved mastery in it. Those boyhood days in Melukote, its natural beauty and the philosophy of Ramanuja, left a very deep impression on his mind, and its effect is to be seen in all his works.

The rulers of Mysore, who are connected to Melukote by ancient allegiance as the abode of the Yadava clan, became generous benefactors and patrons of the temple after the defeat of Tippu Sultan. They showered Lord ThiruNarayana with all kinds of costly jewels, with rare emeralds, rubies and other precious

stones and diamonds, like a modern version the Emperor Kroesus of ancient Greece giving gifts to the oracle of Delphi. Special mention must be made of a diamond, which is uncut, yet brilliant and extraordinarily large. It is set in a very large crown, called VairaMudi (the crown of the diamond). This crown is quite out of proportion to the size of the ShelvaPillai idol, and when it is placed on his head, it is an awesome sight.

There is a special festival, called VairaMudi Utsava, which usually falls around the middle of March, when the god is taken out in procession, wearing this crown with the large diamond. This procession draws immense crowds from all over the country, who throng here to see the jewels of the lord and to participate in the procession and the fair associated with it. It is fairly common to see a hundred thousand people at this festival. The jewels of the kings' gift to the lord are displayed for everyone to see in the afternoon of the festival day and the crowd inside the hall where the display is held is so thick with people that it is impossible to drop even a sesame seed to the ground.

The main procession begins at about 10 o'clock at night, takes all night to cover the four peripheral streets; the god is placed on a decorated carrier carried by the devotees. The gait is slow and stretched out, by a very deliberate forward and backward motion, including swerves which expose the great diamond and the precious gems to emit sparkling flashes into the dark of the night. There will be people everywhere on this night in this town; on the streets, porches of houses, balconies and on roof tops, hanging on to fragile tiles, trying to get a glimpse of the lord, gleaming with sparkling shafts of lights in every direction. Loud bands of all kinds of folk instruments accompanies the procession, and a retinue of brahmanas, loudly reciting from the vedas follows

behind. This most unusual sight transports one back by many centuries.

The procession returns to the temple at about 4 a.m., and immediately afterward, the huge crowd quickly disperses. Everyone hurries home for a little sleep and to talk to each other after waking up, as if recapitulating an elusive dream.

Another festival of great beauty is the festival of the sun, called *RathaSaptami*, which comes around the third week of January. The festival is for rejoicing the coming of the sun northward from the southern latitudes. We must remember that the poor folk here have a rough time in the winter, even if it is ever so mild, because they live in a hot climate all year round and are ill equipped for chilly weather. The hilltop town is a bit uncomfortable in the early hours of the morning, and you may see wellto do residents wrap themselves in their colorful wool shawls or put on sweaters. Little children don *kulavi-s* and *topi-s*. This festival draws a much smaller crowd than the one of mammoth proportions of *VairaMudi* and the experience is so much more relaxed and enjoyable.

On *RathaSaptami* day, the procession of *ShelvaPillai* is in the early morning; in fact, it is well timed to start from the temple so that it arrives at the diagonally opposite corner of the village exactly at the time of sunrise over the temple of *YogaNarasimha* on the hill. The weather in mid-January is pleasantly chilly and usually the skies are cloudless. Sometimes, there is some fog covering the hill, as if a white shawl is wrapped around it. But it burns off after a few minutes when sunlight hits it. The portable idol is decorated again with all the fine jewels with the diamonds and the precious stones. It is set on a platform with a solar disc at the back to signify the sun. God is shown driving a team of seven horses and with his queens, *SriDevi* and *BhuDevi*, on the sides and the prin-

cess of Delhi at his feet. All decorations on this day are in warm colors and the sight is magnificent. The flower garlands and the sweet scent of perfumes fill the air. The procession arrives at every doorstep and the ladies of the houses rush to celebrate the lord's coming with an aarati and a song, flinging shy side glances at each other. People prostrate right there on the street with finery and shawls aflutter and those who do not have such rich things, just throw themselves down with whatever they have on, getting up with folded palms and their teeth chattering in the morning cold breeze.

At the designated corner, which happens to be near the poet's house, the procession deliberately pauses, and the carriers of the platform rock it gently in a well practiced swerve to give all the diamonds and the gems a chance to sparkle with brilliance, as the beams from the rising sun from the tip of tower of the temple on the hill lovingly hit them from all directions. The beauty of this is truly indescribable. Because the crowd is very small, you can really see this magnificent display up close, a rare sight which is natural and artificial at the same time, The joy is sure to bring tears to the eyes and the rasa state is so high that it will not let you down for days.

At that precise moment, a great burst of song and melody is released from all the thousand kinds of folk instruments of poor and devoted folk who have come here to serve their lord. Group after group of kolata dancers, in colorful dresses, begin their dances with the melodious and rhythmic klick-klick sounds of their sticks, whirling round and round in ever complicated patterns. What an exotic way to welcome the sun! A most unforgettable experience! There are verses in this poem which allude to it.

At Melukote, the year is a string of such festivals, a few big

ones and many small ones. The VairaMudi is the most popular and famous. RathaSaptami is the most beautiful and enjoyable. The industrial age has lost these communal events which used to break the tedium of small-town life and rejuvenate the life of the common man with clean fun mingled with great spirituality.

Today Melukote is hardly surviving by adjusting to its changed circumstances. The town's population has actually increased but its character has changed. It is more commercial now. Reckless pollution and neglect, which is going on all over the country, is extending its vicious sway here too. The water constructions are all completely neglected and highly polluted. But the town is surviving. Many of the SriVaishnavas who live here now are carrying on their traditions in a hide-bound and desperate manner. They are very poor. Their white dhotis with purple borders have turned brown and tattered with use. Their sons and daughters have left town long ago to go to Bangalore and become computer engineers. Some of them live in America. But they have their ancient little huts, and they are clinging tightly to the side of Yadugiri, faithful to the advice of the great ascetic.

Just two doors from the corner where the great diamonds sparkle on RathaSaptami day, on the right side of the street, is the house in which Narasimhachar was born, on VairaMudi day in the year 1905. He went on to become one of the greatest of poets of modern Kannada literature. As we leave the town by the same gate on the north, through which we entered the town, we pass the new bus station and some fields. Then we come soon to a spot, from which you can see a new square black cement platform at the edge of a playground. It is hard to notice. But, if you ask someone, they will surely show it to you. That's where his body was cremated in 1998.

He died in Jayanagar, a suburb of Bangalore, on 13 October, and he was honored by the Karnataka Government with a 21 gun salute. His body was brought to his beloved birthplace in a huge procession over the distance of 80 miles, accompanied by thousands of mourners, and was cremated on that slab. He was a rare and valuable link between the past and the present, and excelled in all that is best in both. His mind was so flexible that he could be perceived at once as very conservative and most modern. Melukote fashioned that mind.

About two miles from that spot, to the north, there is a ravine with a brook which has flowed there from times immemorial, hidden in a bed of oddly shaped eroded rocks, filling the surrounding forest air with an enchantingly melodious sound. This place is called Thottila Madu by the locals. This was his most favourite hideout. Here, he wrote many of his most delightful essays. The place symbolizes his qualities; the rock for his faith in the eternal, enduring traditions of our land and the sonorous water for his poetry, full of incisive intellect and joyful creativity.

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ABOUT THE POEM

Male Degula is a rare type of poem in modern Kannada, published first in 1954. It is a long poem and its theme is philosophical and religious. Moreover, the author, Dr. Purohita Thiru Narayana Narasimhachar, (PuTiNa, as he is lovingly known by his pen name throughout Karnataka) makes extensive use of imagery taken from the sciences. Modern Kannada poets avoid all these characteristics; the first, for reasons of a new style, the second, for the all pervading sense of secularism, and the third for reasons of ignorance of the sciences and a cultivated sense of indifference toward them.

PuTiNa was born and brought up in the historic holy town of Melukote in the traditions of the Srivaishnava religion. He studied literature and philosophy at the University of Mysore during the early 1920's and was a star pupil of Hiriyanayya, who was a renowned scholar and teacher of Indian philosophies. While he was at the university, PuTiNa developed a keen interest and fascination for the new knowledge about the natural world as revealed by modern science. He made close friends with physicists, chemists, and biologists. They influenced his world view to a very significant degree. He skillfully employed science in his imagery, which gives him a unique position among Kannada poets. One can find many stunningly beautiful examples of such imagery in Male Degula.

Even though much of modern science has contributed to remove the concept of God from the worldview, PuTiNa's faith in God remained unshakable and fundamental for his world view. Ironically,

he was very deeply impressed by Darwinism, which is generally accepted as leading toward an atheistic world view. He was inclined toward the group of biologists who believed in directed evolution, with a *scala natura* of progression from the low to the high (see verse 5). He was constantly synthesizing the ancient and traditional wisdom which was transmitted to him in his younger days with the new knowledge brought to us by science of our time. He had one foot firmly planted in the past and the other planted as firmly in the present. He was a link personality, a very essential thinker for our time of renaissance. Male Degula brings to us this state of his mind with clarity, and beauty.

Male Degula, the title of the poem, is a compound word, made of Male (ma lay), meaning Hill and Degula (they gula), meaning the house of God, commonly, a temple. Accordingly, I have given the title of the translation as The Hill Temple. As mentioned earlier, it is a work with a philosophical and devotional theme. The tradition of poetry about religious yearnings and philosophical quests is very old in Kannada, as in other Indian languages. Much of religious literature is in poetry, due to the necessity for memorizing, praying and chanting in temples. In fact, it was a staple of most of Kannada poetry until our time. So, Male Degula is very much in such genuine poetic tradition. But it is not sacred poetry. The theme of this is traditional, but the craftsmanship is thoroughly modern. The thoughts are from the crucible of our time, infused with new viewpoints and influenced by modern science.

The title of the work, Male Degula, is direct and very definitive. It represents the center of attention in the subject matter of the poem. The poet makes it boldly clear that the theme he is going to be engaged in is religious and philosophical. He is not apologetic

or pretentious about it. He is very self assured to take the reader into confidence and expose his inner most thoughts and feelings of religious ecstasy. The format of the verses and the richness of language are especially chosen to bring about a thorough appreciation of the experience.

Male Degula is a long poem of 53 verses, and each verse is in the format of a new kind of sonnet of the poet's own invention. Kannada poets have adapted the sonnet from English poetry quite enthusiastically and many of PuTiNa's generation, notably K.V. Puttapa, have shown excellent skill with it. But instead of the classical eight line preamble and the finishing flourish of the following six, the sonnets of this poem have a format of eight and two. The first eight lines are arranged into four pairs, each having a *matra gana* structure as follows:

$$\begin{array}{ccccccc} 5 & 5 & 5 & 5 & & & \\ & 5 & 5 & 5 & 3 & & \end{array}$$

There is a rhyme usually at the end line of the pairs. The last two lines are arranged in a similar fashion, thus.

$$\begin{array}{cccccc} 5 & 5 & 5 & 5 & 5 & v \\ 5 & 5 & 5 & 5 & 5 & v, \end{array}$$

v being variable, sometimes 5, 3, or even 3, 3 occasionally. The last pair of lines, often contains a couple of extra 5-matra units before reaching the concluding 3. The brevity and the interestingly variable quality of it add crispness and change of pace.

The lyrical quality of this arrangement is magnificent. It flows with a slow, deliberate and jaunty stride, which is eminently suited to the inward and pensive deliberations of the subject matter of these verses. The choice of 5 for each unit is brilliant, because it

can occur in one of thirteen arrangements of the long and the short *matra*-s and the lines roll out rich with variation. The 5 *matra* unit is especially well suited for long Sanskrit words, which are abundant in this work.

The language is a wonderful mix of Kannada and Sanskrit, which has the capacity to express the subtlest of feelings and the most complex of philosophical thoughts with precision and beauty. This language was fashioned by pundits of both Kannada and Sanskrit, who selected the best qualities of each and blended them. It has enriched Kannada literature with works of everlasting beauty from the 8th century to the recent past.

By the time PuTiNa composed *Male Degula*, he had experimented extensively in his earlier poems with the words of intrinsically Kannada origin and knew their strengths and weaknesses thoroughly. He had moved away from that form of expression to a style with more Sanskrit in his later compositions. But he always remained a master in the art of choosing the right words. They are exact for the thought, and lyrically beautiful. His works always carry wonderful metric beauty and rhythm, one of the principal reasons why he could write so many successful operas.

Male Degula is a sort of soliloquy, where the poet engages in conversation with himself, with the temple, and sometimes even with his own actions, such as his prostrations to the Lord etc. Often, he presents his thoughts in the form of a question, affecting a sense of uncertainty. This style bears resemblance to another famous long poem, the very famous *Meghadutam* of another great poet, Kalidasa.

In the poem, PuTiNa describes a visit to his favorite temple on the hill of Melukote. It is a detailed narration of the experience,

from the moment of approaching the gate at the main entrance to the last moment when he loses himself in prayer. He takes us through the acts of hesitantly entering the gates, the countless prostrations, standing in the congregation with all the other visitors, some of whom are lay people like himself, and a few others, who are dedicated to a life of renunciation and total surrender to God.

The sight of the latter who have renounced the world, kindles in the mind of the poet a desire to follow their example and to renounce the world. That is the message that he had received from his upbringing in the temple town of Melukote and the theme of all the prayer songs and rituals in its temples. After some deliberations, the poet's heart finds an alternate path to liberation and divinity. This is the path offered by *rasa*, derived from the beauty of the temple precincts and the rituals of worship.

Together with the devotees and the lay worshippers, he enjoys the ritual ceremonies of worship, listening to the sacred chants in Sanskrit and Tamil and to the sounds of the musical instruments of the devotees and their folk songs. This experience raises him to a very ecstatic state called the *rasapada*, in which he finds liberation. In the end, he withdraws himself into a deep prayerful state of mind.

The flow through these different stages of experience is continuous, smooth, and appears like a single visit. But in reality is a composite of experiences, which are culled from the poet's countless visits to this temple, from boyhood days to his middle age. When he wrote this poem, he was "happily ensconced in marital felicity," in the urbane atmosphere of Bangalore. It is deftly crafted to look like a single experience. In fact, it is difficult to discern from the descriptions which of the two main temples of

Melukote was visited. The temple on the hill, *Yoga Narasimha* has the prominent tower whose beauty is so well described. The other temple does not have a tower. But most of the religious rituals that raise the poet to the state of *rasa* are definitely from the temple is at the center of the town of Melukote, the temple of *Cheluva Narayana*. The natural beauty of the temple on the hill and its tower are overlayed onto the grand religious experience the author experienced so often in the *Cheluva Narayana* temple and the combination makes a terrific blend. The differences become irrelevant and the unity forms a single experience of ecstasy.

In the thoughts of the soliloquy, the poet reveals his extraordinarily sophisticated mind, rich with traditional and modern imagery, which is combined with a sensitive and aspiring religious fervor. This latter quality is extremely rare in modern poetry. Just like the physical aspects of the visit, this noumenal part is also a composite of pieces, which belong to other visits of distant past and recent times. Here we encounter a superb tapestry of imagery, with the expression of his philosophical convictions and religious feelings, which possess great beauty and intellectual appeal.

I will first discuss the author's art of imagery, (*alankara-s*, literally ornamentation). These are really numerous in this work. Practically every verse has one or two excellent examples of them. These examples are my favorites, as every reader will have his own.

The tower with its tip supporting the blue sky, appears in the poet's imagination as if it is holding up the entire sky at one point (verse 4) or that the entire sky is gathered at its tip (verse 26). On a stormy night with clouds and a crescent moon, it resembles the tresses of Lord Shiva in its grandeur. In pouring rain, it evokes the sight of the holy Ganga flowing from His tresses! These are

beautiful similes and they carry the important connection to our rich mythological tradition to produce the appropriate religious emotional setting. At other times, the tower, drenched with rain (verse 34), is seen as suckling like a calf from the udder of the clouds. The domes on the tower are arranged in a group of five in the front and a large main one in their back. To the poet, this arrangement symbolizes the five senses and the mind, and the extended metaphor is, of course, that the temple is like all life, a dwelling place of consciousness. All this imagery is just about one thing, the temple tower. There are many such throughout the poem.

Let us now look at some imagery that are meant to elucidate and adorn philosophical ideas.

“In a stream of doubts, float the ice floes of theories. When the mind gets tired, and rests a while, ... these melt by contact and merge into the stream and pass as before” (verse 8). What a wonderful way to express the tentative nature of knowledge! The mind constructs theories to resolve many doubts, which appear in our current state of understanding. When it has finished constructing a new theory to explain away the doubts, it rests and the theory is put to test by experience. Then, the newly constructed theory often melts away and new doubts appear afresh.

“..... That point at infinity, where the subject (the experiencer) and the object (the experienced, prior to perception) meet, moving in parallel planes, touching and yet separate: After touching, the sensation melts away, only a shadow (the perceived object) remains” (verse 9). This is a superb mathematical simile. The point of contact between subject and the object is as imaginary as the point of contact between lines on parallel planes. The perceived object is indeed a shadow, a neural shadow. Who says that

mathematics and poetry can't meet? Surely, they meet at the point at infinity when they surrender to a poet like PuTiNa.

Look at this description of our ordinary life, which is compared to a procession: “....(We pass) dragging along our possessions of inert matter, wearily through the field of Karma, banging our minds with other minds!” (verse 39). Who except a man of true renunciation can express himself in this manner?

Now look at some of these, which are just stunning because of their beauty and freshness.

“....The star with its needles of light tattoos my mind with a myriad thoughts” (verse 18).

And this also in the same verse: “Light and water mingle in this sparkling stream, erasing as well the edge between my in and out.”

“...Whence the irrepressible strength of the sharp point of the dart, shot from lovely eyebrows, which pierce the peace of the most resolute minds?” (verse 17). In exotic poetic statement, an idea expressed in an old Sanskrit Subhaashita has reappeared to dazzle us with new brilliance... “Only he, who has been stung with such side glances of his beloved, knows how sharp as darts they can be!”

Look at this really obtuse ones : “...When looks of lust dwell on lustrous cheeks, a chastising dart of sparkle the diamond earrings throw” (Verse 22). Does this not make you stop and try to savor its beauty?

Look at these two about the difficulty of expressing thoughts with words. “When thoughts come crowding, words humble the

poet” (verse 11). “Oh! Splendor of mind peculiar to life, you get crushed and dry up when the chariots of words roll...” (verse 35).

Then there are these wonderful statements which have a scientific content :

“I, the grandson of light. wind and sun rejoice in taking all this joy around” (verse 10).

Look at this example, which demonstrates the poet’s belief in the theory of evolution with a purpose. “From inert matter to the living, from the living to the soul, from soul to bliss, draws this magnet force....” (verse 20).

This one is with a physiological reference: “....Entering and leaving with each breath of air, traveling through arteries, riding on particles of blood, your body and all its actions... run automatically” (verse 25).

Also look at the metaphor of comparing modern man’s exploration and exploitation of nature to the destructive play of an innocent child while God is overlooking all that with a tolerant smile of a permissive parent (verse 40)

There are many more, often many in a single verse. These are truly remarkable examples of the poet’s mastery of his art. These are examples of a very skillful blend of art and intellect, which is a hallmark of PuTiNa’s poetry. They are priceless gems, like the diamonds, sapphires, and rubies that Cheluva Narayana wears for the Vairamudi procession. They deserve to be taken out in a regal procession of their own, on caparisoned elephants.

These gems are strung together to make a necklace with a golden thread of three stands, which are the philosophy of

Vishishtadvaita, the theory of rasa, and the religion of Srivaishnavism.

Vishishtadvaita puts forward a world view in which the entire universe, comprising all entities whether living or non-living, is considered to be a single organic being, endowed with a universal soul called the paramatman. The universal soul is the Ishvara or Lord and everything happens with the intentions of the Lord, for the welfare of the entire cosmic being. Vishishtadvaitin-s belong to the realist school of Indian philosophers who do not believe in the illusory nature of the perceived world, the so called Maya of the Advaita of Shankara. The Sarvaastivadin-s among the Buddhists, the Jain-s, and the Dvaitin-s of the Madhva school all share this fundamental belief of realism. The world view accepted is mostly in concordance with the modern scientific view; except for the fact that the theological Godhead is taken as an unquestionable principle by the Vishishtadvaitin-s. The Universe is God's body, his abode in the words of the Ishaavaasya.

PuTiNa's knowledge of Indian philosophy was vast and deep. He was, by upbringing, a Vishishtadvaitin, but he could readily appreciate the attractive features of other schools, as he was taught by Hiriyanayya, an eminent exponent of Advaita. He had developed a tolerant attitude and an open mind, which he expressed quite openly in his writings. But when it came to personal convictions and religious practice, he was conservative and remained a staunch Vishishtadvaitin to the very end. He occasionally swung toward Advaita, as in the lead poem in his famous work, the GokulaNirgamana, which alludes to the Maya which envelopes this world. But he remained true to the tenets of Vishishtadvaita for all practical purposes.

A clear preference for Vishishtadvaita in the poet's mind can

be seen in verse 8, but a trace of a doubt is expressed in the concluding words. This sonnet deals with the tentative nature of theories, which is a very liberal modern attitude. From a simple act of perception, it first arrives at the theoretical concept of duality, the separateness of I and the Other, mind and matter, a Cartesian idea. Then the thought that the perceived world is unreal crosses his mind and his next conclusion is that "...it is only I". That is Advaitic thought. Immediately afterward another idea flashes through his mind and he exclaims, "You (the temple) differ and show me my Lord." That is the truth according to the Vishishtadvaitic fundamentals, the reality, which comprises the triad, the world, the "I", and the "Ishwara." Yet in this sonnet, I consider that the final expression of doubt in the words "Is yours the final word?" is very significant. It expresses a trace of doubt. This statement shows the ability of the poet to accept an uncertainty about "truth," clearly a liberal and modern outlook.

In this philosophical framework, knowledge as gathered by scientific activity, however precise and "true" it may be, is considered as merely worldly. It gives only worldly benefits and pleasures. Spiritual knowledge, on the other hand, will generate a special love for Ishvara, which is called Bhakti. The knower then becomes free of desire, craving, or attachment to the objects and worldly pleasures. And that state is called Vairagya.

In Bhakti, enjoyment of beauty of Nature, such as mountains, streams, forests, etc., or of the artificial, such as that of works of art, do not produce the base instincts of desire to possess, craving or attachment. On the contrary, it becomes a liberating experience, and takes the experiencer to a state of joy called Ananda, accompanied by complete detachment from the perceived world. This is the *rasa* state that is so often mentioned in this poem. In

this state one is supposed to be transported to the direct precincts of the Lord, to a place as close to Him as possible. Thus beauty becomes a vehicle to divinity.

This link between beauty, goodness, and truth, (the kalyana guna-s in the words of Sri Ramanuja), and the divine detached state of rasa is very characteristic of the thoughts of PuTiNa. This is a major theme of one of his very early and secular operatic work, called “Doniya Binada.” In Male Degula, it reappears as the core thought, reinforced with its fundamental religious impact.

For a Vishishtadvaitin, knowledge takes a second place in relation to Bhakti. Knowledge is expected to lead to Bhakti. For him, God is revealed in every act of perception and scientific study. In this poem, one detects throughout, a condescending attitude toward knowledge as a mere activity of acquisition. The lower status accorded to it will, perhaps, puzzle the Western reader, who is used to accord a high value to knowledge because of its power over the world. But for the Vishishtadvaitin, it is not important if it does not produce Bhakti, the love for God.

The concept of the rasa state, as introduced above, is the second strand, the aesthetic one, of the golden thread of the necklace of ornaments mentioned earlier. The concept of the divinity of rasa obtained from the detached enjoyment of beauty in nature and art has been developed by PuTiNa in great detail in RasaPrajne, RasaSarasvati, and KavyaKutuhala and such other works.

Indian savants discovered the concept of rasa for the first time in the field of performing arts, such as dance and theater. From there, it spread to literature and it is now discussed at great length, mostly in poetics. The original meaning of the word is “juice,” and

it is applied as a metaphor in this sense to the arts, to define what we may find interesting in them. This is in the same sense as we apply the adjective juicy to a novel, that catches our attention and the opposite term dry to some thing uninteresting.

But in Indian aesthetics, especially in poetics, the *rasa* concept has been elevated to the level that it is considered really as the purpose or the end point of all art. It is *rasa* that art transmits to the lover of art. It is not the type of art, not the medium nor style, not the particular message, story, song or poem, none of these. It is ultimately *rasa* that the art lover receives from the artist. It is a measure of the value of the creative activity that the piece of art represents to him.

Rasa is classified into many varieties, based on the emotive quality of the piece of art. These are romance or love of all kinds, heroism, compassion, surprise or wonder, terror, horror, fear, humor, and peace. A great work of art, such as an epic, may contain combinations of all these categories. Love of God or *Bhakti* is also an important kind of *rasa*. The ultimate state of joy, the *rasapada* can be attained through any of these *rasa*-s. Male *Degula* is full of the *rasa*-s of *Bhakti*, wonder, surprise, devotion, humility, and such others. All these uplifting emotions take the reader to a very serene state of *rasapada*, where he will dwell for a long time in communion with divinity, completely detached from any worldly things. This is the classical standard of success for a piece of this kind of literary art.

The *rasapada* is an enjoyable and proactive alternative to meditation and *samadhi*, for artists and art lovers who are on the path to higher spiritual advancement. PuTiNa was a very consummate artist in this regard. He was constantly found lost to this world, in his *rasapada*, taken there by something that he had

just read or some thought that had just occurred to him in the middle of a poem that he was composing at the moment. Many of his friends knew well about this aspect of PuTiNa. He was thought of as a *rasa-rishi*, a *rasa* sage, because he also led a life in which he enjoyed the pleasures of the senses liberally, but with much discrimination and detachment, instead of embracing renunciation, which he holds as an ideal in this poem.

The climax point of *Male Degula* is when the poet is drawn into the *rasa* state, (verse 44), when he exclaims about his condition thus: “I am and I just am, becoming one with the awareness of nothing to sense, my eyes seeing all around, my ears hearing everything, and I silent.” This is a state of *samadhi*, which a well-practiced spiritual person attains in a successful session of meditation. In Zen, it is called “*satori*,” an inexpressible state of being one with everything.

The path to this climatic state begins with the senses (*karana-s*) and the act of perception of the “other,” the object (*vishaya*). There is a long chain of a casual pathway, from the moment the object with distinctive features, impinges and reacts with the sense organs to finally end in a division into two principles, i.e. the self and the perceived object. This end process is called *Vikalpa*. The self and its corresponding world are built up through such a series of processes of experience. This is the classical theory of perception from which *rasa* originates. The perceived object provides semantic meaning to the self and the semantic meaning produces the emotional responses from which one reaches the *rasa* state. This path way must not be impeded at any stage by errors or imperfections. If so impeded, the proper *rasa* will not be generated and the *rasa* state will not be reached.

For example, a sound which we hear, or a word which we

read, conveys to us the physical shape of a word. The word then, generates a meaning in our mind; the meaning, its corresponding emotion, and that in turn is capable of lifting us to the *rasa* state. If this chain is broken anywhere, for example, by a badly chosen word or one with an indistinct meaning, the mind remains suspended at that point. At every stage, the transmission must be complete and the previous process must completely cease. The subsequent process does not begin if the previous one lingers on. When every step is in perfect coordination, the art lover, whose heart is in the art, is certainly taken to the state of joy. The complete cessation of the signal from the previous stage ensures that the *rasa* state will be an isolated and detached state of joy with no vestige of the memory of the things that were set in motion to reach that state.

The third strand in the golden thread is that of religious feeling. I consider this part to be the most delicate and difficult one to convey in a translation. I feel uncertain about how well I have succeeded in this dimension.

PuTiNa was a person of deep religious feelings and he was quite orthodox in the practice of his religion of Sri Vaishnavism. This religion is characterized by the worship of Vishnu (also known as Narayana), the Lord (Ishvara) of the Universe, and Sri (another name for Lakshmi), who represents the female aspect of the same principle. The religion emphasizes Bhakti, love of the Lord. It is the practical aspect of the philosophy of Vishishtadvaita, which places Bhakti above knowledge (Jnaana) as a path to liberation. Bhakti, to be effective, must be exclusively toward the deity of personal choice, in this case Narayana. Orthodox practitioners of this religion do not worship God in any form other than Vishnu; for example, Shiva or things related to Shiva are not worshipped.

PuTiNa was very open minded and receptive to ideas from

every field, as evidenced by much of the imagery taken from the physical and the biological sciences. But he maintained a well-guarded core of conservatism. His conservatism was not based on dogma but was well fortified by reasoning. Thus he moved with intellectual freedom and fearlessness. Although in his worship, he reserved his Bhakti for the Lord as Narayana, he displayed no prejudicial rejection of the Lord as Shiva. He gave Shiva a very special place in his poetry as seen from the many examples in this work. He was a very enthusiastic participant in the Ganesha festival and Ganesha's icons were to be seen very prominently in his house, which is somewhat unusual in orthodox SriVaishnava households. He has composed a very beautiful and witty long poem called "Ganesha Darshana" in the name of this very popular son of Shiva.

PuTiNa was sensitized to have an awakened and vibrant relation towards his religion in his boyhood days in the holy city of Melukote. He was raised in an orthodox brahmana family under the strict tutelage of his father, who was the chief priest (purohita) of the town. During his boyhood, he absorbed the religious and the artistic atmosphere of Melukote. He was constantly exposed to the religious chanting of the great poetic works of the ancient Alvars, of the great Desikacharya and of Yamunacharya. He participated with great enthusiasm in the many rituals of worship at the two famous temples. These are the temples at which SriRamanuja himself had worshipped. For that reason, Melukote is one of the 8 divine holy places for the SriVaishnavites. Great throngs of pilgrims congregate in that town on festival days periodically around the year, when there are great fairs with music concerts, dances and plays. All that artistic and religious activity contributed to excite and finetune his psyche.

Many of PuTiNa's works have a religious substratum. In Male Degula, one can detect the subtle influence of the traditional prayer poetry of the SriVaishnavas. But it distinguishes itself because of the quality of the philosophical deliberations of liberal outlook and the modern scientific imagery, and is not so full of the Lord's praise or the devotee's supplications to Him. In this regard, it resembles poetry found in Buddhist works, such as Saddharma Pundarika or Bodhicharyavatara. So it stands out as a class by itself, perhaps the last such poem to be composed in an era when Kannada poetry has been moving away from such themes. It is a significant and precious work indeed.

PuTiNa attached great importance to the agama rituals of worship and associated festivities, which have come down to us from the past as artistic creative endeavours. These not only link us organically to our ancient traditions but also act to lift the community as a whole to a state of *rasa*. He held a very romantic and idealistic view about them. They are great psychological cleansers, he used to remark, and wrote about this in many of his prose writings of his later years. In Male Degula too, you may see this expressed in verse 49.

These events of great artistic beauty and religious fervor link our present time with our very ancient past. They have evolved from the *yajnas* of the vedic era, reaching back to the times of the *Rigveda*, or even earlier. The evolution has been very much in the humanistic direction, with the elimination of the gory animal sacrifices and preservation of all the elements of art and religion beautifully. He felt sad that it would become extinct now.

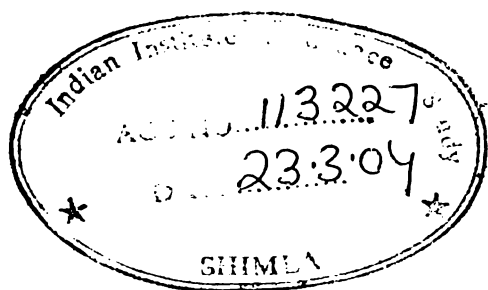
The intensity of the devotion in the performance of these grand events had reduced considerably during the poet's lifetime. This

was very saddening to him. He recognized that the root cause for this is what we call modernism. It is the same cause that has resulted in the neglect and decay of other treasures of Melukote, which are its magnificent old historic gateways, pushkaranis, mantapas, sacred groves, and even the grand granite rocks which support the town.

At the end of this long poem, in the intense joy of the rasa state, the poet withdraws himself into a mood of prayer. This is symbolic of his offering the poem to his beloved God, Cheluva Narayana, "whose mere name, falling on his ears, causes tears to flow from his eyes."

H.V. Rangachar

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P. T. Narasimhachar (1905-1998) - Fellow of the Sahitya Akademi and Akademi award winner for his musical plays in Kannada for the year 1966. He is the recipient of the prestigious *Pampa Prashasti* by the Government of Karnataka in 1991. He is one among the very important Navodaya poets of modern Kannada literature popularly known as PuTiNa, born in Melukote in Karnataka.

His "*Male Dēgula*" (The Hill Temple) was published in 1954. It is a long poem of 53 verses each reflecting upon the meaning and significance of the temple on the hill of Melukote in his life. It is deeply philosophical and religious. Here one can find extensive use of imagery, which are taken from modern sciences, which gives him a unique position among modern Kannada Poets.

H. V. Rangachar, the translator of *Male Dēgula* into English is an Engineer by profession settled in the United States. He has written poetry, essays and literary articles in Kannada and has a deep knowledge of the ancient Kannada literature and culture. His valuable contribution to Kannada is the translation of "Histories" of Herodatus the first Greek historian of 5th century B.C.

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