Changampuzha

S. Guptan Nair

Makers of

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Makers of Indian Literature

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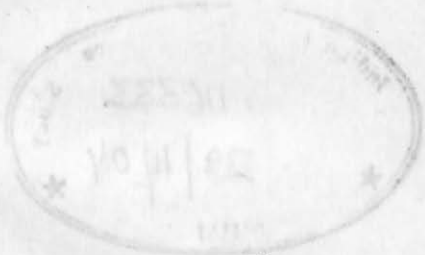

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Preface

When the Sahitya Akademi offered me the job of writing a monograph on Changampuzha, I felt I was being prodded by an unknown hand to fulfill an undischarged responsibility. I happen to be one of the two surviving classmates of his B.A. Honours days in Trivandrum.

I have written about him before, but that was in Malayalam. A compact work in English on this accomplished poet was indeed an urgent need. There were not many like him in the republic of letters. He was unique, himself an overcharged poem. Even fifty two years after his death his memory is fresh and fervent. His lines thrill us like a vibrato.

I hope this small book written with fraternal warmth will give the non-Malayali readers an idea of his tempestuous life and colourful personality.

S. Guptan Nair

July 2000

The Poetic Heritage

The dawn of the twentieth century was also the beginning of a new awareness in Indian Literature. Not that something cataclysmic happened in 1900 or 1901. But the slow but sure change in beliefs, customs, and manners was unmistakable. The gush of the wild west-wind blowing in through British windows made our youth sceptical about our dusty beliefs and die-hard traditions. Literature too was changing. The word romanticism and its approximate equivalents were slowly coming into use. Poets knew in a vague way that its emphasis was more on originality than on imitation and that metrical skill and overworked conceits were of little import. Personal experience, patriotic fervour and new interpretations of old classics found expression in poetry.

V.C. Balakrishna Panicker (1889-1915) gave some promise of a new vision in his 'Viswaroopam' (Cosmic Form). But he did not live long enough to fulfill his promise. Then came the 'Poetic tri'. Of the three, Ulloor (S. Parameswara Iyer 1877-1949) and Vallathol (Narayana Menon 1877-1949) took some time to shake off their inherited classical baggage. Vallathol's 'Badhira Vilapam' (A Deafman's Lament) is on the sufferings of the poet in struggling helplessly with a painful malady. His 'Mary Magdelena' carries with it the fragrance of Christ's noble presence. But more than his benign grace the poet seems to revel in the voluptuous charm of Mary whose beauty enticed the entire youth of the country. In his 'Achchanum Makalum' (Father and Daughter) he makes the impetuous Viswamitra melt like any other father before his forsaken daughter Sakuntala. Indeed a very dramatic poem ! Vallathol's style too fascinated a generation of poets. As Byron sang of the 'soft bastard Latin' his language melts like kisses from a female mouth and sounds as if it should be 'writ on Satin.'

Then there was Kumaran Asan (1873-1924) who in spite of his classical Sanskrit education and early monastic training was able to absorb the fresh fair of Indian renaissance having lived in Calcutta during the close of the 19th century. He got the rare chance of learning the seminal contributions of Tagore, Swami Vivekananda and other leaders of Indian renaissance. His 'Veena Poovu' (Fallen Flower 1907-08) was a short poem on the transience and tragedy of life as seen through the life of a flower falling from its queenly height to wither away in a dusty grave. His masterpiece 'The Pensive

Sita' (1919) introduces the banished queen of Ayodhya alone in Valmiki's hermitage ruminating over her past. 'Was she not' she asks herself, 'bonded slave in a palatial setting?' 'Was she not a plaything with no rights, only duties to perform?' The puranic heroine appears as a spirited advocate of all the women who assert their rights. The whole poem is in the vein of subconscious thoughts gathering speed and force as it flows.

Ulloor had a different background from the rest. Born in a Tamil Brahmin family and engaged throughout in very responsible government jobs, he found poetry an escape but an inescapable volition. He was an instinctive moraliser but gave poetry a high seriousness. He was never satiated with singing the heroism of our great mythological characters like Karna or Sita or Bhishma. True, his style was a little pedantic but his talent was unquestionably of a high order.

As we pass from these three masters, we meet another generation who no doubt learned from the masters but found their own expression, each one remarkably different from the other. There was Sankara Kurup (1901-1978), P. Kunhiraman Nair (1905-78) and Vyloppilly Sridhara Menon. Of the three, G. Sankara Kurup shot into national fame as the first recipient of the Jnanapith Award (1966). 'G', as he was popularly known, had a natural passion for far-away things. In many poems we find him exultingly in a state of cosmic communion. The longing of the lotus and the sunflower for their distant lover, the sun, takes the shape of mystic love-poems. Look at this passage from 'Sooryakaanthi':

> As my Lord departed at the close of day
> Why, O why did his face grow pale?
> Could it be that he read my thoughts aright?
> Could it be that he knew my hearts' desire?
> Silent we stood and gazed into each other's eyes
> When like an intruder the accursed Night arrived.
>
> (Tr. by K. Sridharan Nair)

Kunhiraman Nair was the most gifted of these poets. But his imagination was often unbridled as his images came rolling like waves in a turbulent ocean. Before you begin to grapple with one, another rolls in and yet another and overwhelms you.

This was the poetic climate in which Changampuzha grew up and lived and wrote inspiring lines during his brief but eventful life.

Birth and Background

That these high-strung poets should die young seems to be the inexorable law of nature. Keats died when he was only twenty six. Shelley died at thirty; Baudelaire at thirty seven; and Changampuzha too died at the age of thirty seven. But within that brief period of life this poet had produced a prodigious amount of poetry: charming, sensuous, delectable poetry. His lines were sung by the high and low, by the fashionable youth and the worker peasant. The music of his poetry was irresistible. One couldn't help being carried away by its rhythmic swing and rippling fluidity. Even if you are reluctant to accept his gloomy philosophy of life, you vote for him; you salute him for his exuberant inspiration and his opulent music. There is something infectious in his sincere outpourings. His lines have reached the remotest corner of the Malayalam-speaking world.

Like that of all supersensitive beings Changampuzha's life too went through several vicissitudes. There were periods of mental and physical suffering. There were years of penury and riches. He had normal health and a pleasing personality. But tuberculosis crept in silently and destroyed his body and spirit. It was too late when the enemy was detected and the poet had finally to succumb without much of a fight.

Is it relevant at all to ask today why this supreme genius lived so recklessly and burned the candle at both ends? He was a great believer in astrology and had a haunting fear that he would die young. It was W.B. Yeats who once said that 'providence has filled these poets with recklessness.' Astrologers have a strange name for a yoga which foretells one's early death. They call it 'Seetarasmi Yoga' (the yoga of cold rays). Changampuzha's horoscope clearly indicates this ominous Yoga. There was no escape, it seems.

Edappally, his birthplace, was once a small principality with a

Brahmin king as the head. During the time of our story he had no power, only a title. But the place had a distinct culture, an aura of the feudal milieu. The petty Raja was held in great respect. He was fairly wealthy. Most Nair houses of the village had something to do with the palace. All the odd jobs were performed by them. The Raja's wife and children belonged to the Nair community. When the king had a militia it consisted only of Nairs.

Changampuzha Krishna Pillai had an ancestor who was a kind of 'dalapati' in the army. Such Nairs were known by the title 'Panikkar' and Changampuzha too should normally have been carrying the surname 'Panikkar'. But instead he became a 'Pillai'. He says it was his grandfather who changed his surname and made him a 'Pillai'. There is a small book on his great ancestor, 'Changampuzha Marthandan,' written by P.K. Karunakara Menon. It tells the story of a valiant fighter who was misunderstood by his king. The loyal soldier was so upset that he committed suicide, with his full armour on. Our poet was greatly pained when he learned this story. Now the world knows our poet neither as Pillai nor as Panikkar, but by the name of his family, Changampuzha, a name that is on the lips of millions. There is magic in that name and the magic comes from the magic of his poetry.

Krishna Pillai's father T. Narayana Menon was a Vakil's clerk belonging to the neighbouring town of Mattaanchery. He had a reasonable income and had high hopes about his bright son. He wanted his son to marry his niece Ammu and seal a bond with his own family.* But fate willed it differently. Narayana Menon died when his son was hardly ten. Menon who spent lavishly had left little by way of savings and the family was deep in trouble following his death. Later in life Krishnan had few good words about his father because the man was such a hard task-master. Children of those days were treated like circus-animals. They were in a way surrounded by barbed wires and the tamer was nearby, with the intimidating whip in hand. Unquestioning obedience was demanded and the inevitable result was that children had nothing but hatred for their father.

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* It is the mother's family that is always considered one's own owing to the matrilineal system the Nairs followed.

Changampuzha wrote later :

> I was happy when my father died. I felt that the shackles that bound me, were now broken! When my mother and others shed tears in profusion, my infant heart was dancing in blissful abandon.

The boy became free only to be spoilt by a doting mother. She showered her excessive love on her first-born and the boy Kochukuttan (as she called him) in due course became a Gopikrishna among the Gopis of Edappally. He was a handsome lad with curly hair and bright eyes and the girls had a great fascination for him.

Later in life, he recollected an unholy incident that happened when he was only five. A voluptuous woman's sexual misadventure gave him some inexplicable thrill and the incident haunted him till the end of his life. His reputation as a poet was often shadowed by his reputation as a womanizer.

He joined a primary school at the age of six and was taught by competent teachers. He remembers with gratitude and reverence his teacher P.M. Achyutha Warriar who gave him a lot of love and encouragement. Warriar's home was a kind of shelter, even in later life. He could run to him in moments of trouble. Kochukuttan with all his vagaries wanted to appear before him as a clean boy. Warriar always stood by him when shafts of public slander persecuted him. He recognised the innate talent of the boy and foresaw a great literary future for his ward

Finishing the primary classes he joined the English School where there was another great teacher, K.P. Karunakara Menon. A staunch nationalist, an accomplished orator and a strong moralist, Karunakara Menon's influence on the boys was wholesome. He would never miss an opportunity to drive home a moral point and impress upon the boys the importance of right conduct. His classes were unparalleled as his personality was unforgettable.

Kochukuttan's companion and later fellow-poet, Edappally Raghavan Pillai was his senior by two years. But they found themselves in the same class when they reached the seventh standard. Both were precocious and were readily recognised by their teachers. P.K. Karunakara Menon, the Raja's son, was a great literary enthusiast and was a kindly soul. Boys used to gather in his spacious bungalow

to play. Menon encouraged them to compose poems. Topics were dictated and the boys wrote instant poems on tremendous trifles.

One day a well-known poet of Malabar, K.C. Kuttiappa Nampiar, arrived as the guest of the Raja. Karunakara Menon introduced our young poet to him. The poet had a few juvenile pieces in hand. Glancing at them and tasting a few in haste, Nampiar immediately recognised that a real genius was standing before him and he told Menon, "I tell you Menon, this is no ordinary boy. He will add lustre to our literature before long." The boy was exultant and Menon was immensely happy.

The boys who gathered in Menon's house vied with each other to write verses. Kochukuttan always excelled the others and stole the place of honour.

As he reached high school he had to go out of the village to continue his studies. Kochukuttan went to Aluva where he had a relative. But soon he had to abandon school and leave the place in shame. The boy, now an adolescent, was getting ripe for romance and he promptly started to court a girl of the neighbourhood. The relatives soon got wind of the affair and packed him off, after informing his mother that they couldn't afford to accommodate such a wayward boy in their genteel house.

Changampuzha returned to Edappally and soon slipped into a life of debauchery. Most often he kept himself away from his mother for days together. The poor mother did not know how to tame this self-willed boy and grieved helplessly over him. As he roamed about the village like a ram let loose, a Muslim shopkeeper, a tinker by profession, took pity on him and offered him a clerk's job. The poet accepted it gladly because he was promised a princely sum of Rupees Two per day as salary ! It was certainly not a poet's vocation. But he took it up as a cover for his adventures. Instead of going home, he would go to the house of a school teacher, a middle-aged lady, living alone. Scandals soon began to spread. Even his trusted friends avoided him.

Life in Edappally was becoming increasingly intolerable. Gossip-mongers were busy minting their coins. The poet badly wanted an escape. A friend offered to get him a job in a coir factory at Alleppey (Alappuzha) and the poet readily took it up as a cover for

his adventures.

He chose to live as the paying guest of a middle-aged woman. Gradually the guest and the host became closer and an intimacy developed. This would have further thickened but for the interuption caused by an attack of smallpox. It was a welcome break to his licentious life and there was no other place to go to, except his home.

There he found his sad mother always willing to forgive the prodigal son. She carefully nursed him back to health. But the chartered libertine did not lose much time to relapse into his disreputable ways. Old friends once again deserted him and new friends of dubious reputation surrounded him. Quarrels were frequent. He shocked his mother one day by demanding his share of the property to enable him to live separately on his own.

Before things went too far, his teacher Achyutha Warriar intervened and admonished him to break free from the unwholesome company and return to poetry. This had an immediate effect. We have a letter written sometime in 1931 to the well-known poet of the time, K.S. Ezhuthacchan describing with pardonable pride his achievements and aspirations. The letter (without date) says:

> Six years ago I had to discontinue my studies because of a serious illness. I did not go to school for the next four years. But I was not idle. I must have read more than five hundred books—all English books. As a result I could pass the Matriculation examination standing first in the state of Cochin. Had I not been a Travancorean by birth I should have secured a State Scholarship. But that was not to be and I had to abandon all hopes of a college education. There was no money in the house and I have two younger brothers in high school. Their expenses have to be met. I told you, I read only books in English. I don't know Sanskrit. But I am learning Hindi and I very much want to learn Bengali. Can't say whether that will materialize. Raghavan Pillai and Srampical Padmanabha Menon are my best friends here. The goddess of Health is not very kindly disposed towards me . . . . Among the English poets I like Shelley most. Shakespeare of course is there—I like Russian novels and greatly admire the French writer Maupassant . . . ."

One need not wholly believe that he read only English books. Perhaps that was just to impress K.S. Ezhuthacchan. It is obvious that he did read Malayalam classics, particularly the works of Ezhuthacchan and Kunchan Nampiar. The easy flow of his poetry and felicity of expression are no doubt inspired but are also the result of a careful study of the classics.

The Sahitya Parishat

Changampuzha was sixteen when the first Kerala Sahitya Parishat was held (1927). It was a great event and that happened to take place in his birthplace. It was also a great boost to his literary aspirations. He was one of the volunteers. It was exciting to serve the great poets such as Vallathol and Ulloor. He adored Vallathol. He looked admiringly at that magnificent personality—tall, upright, khadi-clad, altogether an imposing figure.

Then there was Kuttipuzha Krishna Pillai of whom he had heard much from his college friends. His scholarly speech on 'Tagore-Sahitya' stirred his imagination. Nineteen years later, Changampuzha dedicated his long poem 'Yavanika' based on a Tagore story to the scholar, 'bowing before his luminous intellect.' It took another year for our hero to appear as a poet before his own people. The occasion was the marriage of C. Narayana Pillai, the stormy petrel of the Nationalist Movement of Travancore. The reading out of a few felicitatory poems on the occasion of marriages was a social custom then. Our young poet got a chance to read out a poem of his at C. Narayana Pillai's wedding. His friends were as jubilant as the poet himself by this unique honour.

By the age of twenty the poet had written a good number of verses and when his friends goaded him on, he decided to publish a book. Justice P.K. Narayana Pillai was the most reputed critic of the time and an introduction from him, he thought, would be invaluable in the book-market. Justice P.K., a confirmed classicist, was rather sceptical about contemporary poets and poetry. Even Kumaran Asan's works were of dubious merit in his eyes. Naturally he was cold when he received the young poet's manuscript which he left in a corner, and it lay there gathering dust. Years after Changampuzha's death, the manuscript was salvaged by an enthusiast and printed with an explanatory introduction.

Baashpaanjali

The climate was changing. The young poet was growing fast and becoming popular. Literary weeklies gave due prominence to his poems. At the time there were more poets writing almost the same brand of poetry—Edappally Raghavan Pillai, Pantalam K.P. Raman Pillai and Paala Narayanan Nair, to mention the most outstanding among them. Changampuzha and Raghavan Pillai were talked about as the wonder-twins of Edappally. They had their detractors too—people who condemned their pathological pessimism, their verbal excesses and their obsessive preoccupation with death.

There were insurmountable difficulties in publishing a book of poems. The great depression had affected the book trade too and 'verse was in the reverse' in the book-market. Without a patron, there was no hope of getting any kind of acceptance. Luckily he got one in E.V. Krishna Pillai, that irrepressible humourist and popular playwright. He was at that time a member of the Legislative Council and had considerable influence in several circles. E.V. admired Chagampuzha's poems, took pity on him and decided to encourage him. He introduced him to University students, presented him before literary gatherings and praised him profusely for his unique talents. This worked, and admirers gathered around him. E.V. also persuaded Messers B.V. Book Depot, the leading publishers of the capital to bring out a sumptuous collection. And thus appeared *Baashpaanjali* (Offerings of Tears), the Poet's first book (1934). Spontaneous lyricism was something novel to Malayalam and Changampuzha was nothing if not lyrical. Before you open the book, you read this couplet on the fly-leaf.

> My failure, I know well, is because I possess
> A sincere heart in a world of crooks and cheats.

Too naive, one would say today, but it drew genuine sympathy then, and there were many young ones to echo him. The poet quotes Sarojini Naidu in a later edition of the book, which is significant. "My sad life is doomed to be alas/Ruined and sore like a sorrow-trodden grass/My heart hath grown, plucked by the wind of grief."

This is echoed and re-echoed in several poems.

The opening poem which became immediately popular introduces a flower girl, out on the road to sell a garland.

Who will buy, who will
Buy this garden's thrill.

In the end, the girl does not sell her garland but gifts it to the shepherd boy who sits alone singing under the mango tree in the distance. This is indeed the exotic world of the perfect romantic. The flower girl is the poet himself but it also opens before us a beautiful romantic vision, "the sweet smile of indefinable dawn and its loveliness," as Krishna Chaitanya puts it.

Death-wish is a recurring theme in several of his poems. The poet waits for death as anxiously as a lover waits for his sweetheart.

Would I ignore death who calling me "my dear"
Invites me for a rendezvous.
Should I not hand over this frail vessel
And embrace her in blissful forgetfulness

Again

How I wish for that eternal rest
For that long, long night without a dawn.
To sleep without a break
With no disturbing thought
No more! I cannot endure this any longer
This heavy burden of life. (1934)

And again

Dear friends inscribe these lines
On the tombstone of this hapless friend :—
"Here lies a broken heart
Full of love's enduring sweetness
It often whispered that this world
Is wholly devoid of love;
That it is all darkness thick,
There's no light anywhere,
And no word of sympathy either;
Oh! gentle wayfarer, linger awhile

Shed a tear or two for this trampled heart
Linger awhile to give his soul a little peace" (1934)

But *Baashpaanjali* is not all tears. It also carries with it ineffable love lyrics which were almost inebriating to the youth of the day.

In the poem 'Divyaanubhooti' (Divine Experience) he sings:-

Through how many Saakuntalams
My dreamstream flowed in lazy ripples
How many Radhas have danced on myself and departed
How many damsels have not taken me to festivals of delight!
And how many wintry nights, to bear witness
To these incomparable thrills!

In another poem entitled 'Nirvriti' (Bliss) he sings :—

And you came suddenly leaving your golden throne
And I woke up hearing your rapturous flute
And then what a miracle!
The thick darkness around me vanished in a trice.
And I became a lamp my trickling tear-drops
Were quickly transformed into flowers of smile.

As Krishna Chaitanya observes, his poetry even after this maiden work "continued to oscillate between negation and affirmation because his moods were primarily determined by the unconscious depths of his temperament." Pathological depression this moment; excited sensuousness the next moment—this volatility was quite normal with him.

His pessimism provoked the wrath of moralists and conservatives. Even the novelty of his expressions was anathema to them. They branded his poetry as anti-social and unethical. Sanjayan, the redoubtable humourist, wrote parodies and lampoons. On the other hand, young admirers became more enthusiastic. They found that Changampuzha's lines were eminently suitable for teasing their own sweet-hearts.

With all this enthusiasm the poet found it extremely difficult to sell his books and not a penny came in by way of royalties. The poet

himself had to carry bundles of books and hawk them about.*

Let me hasten to add that this was not unusual those days. Even our venerable poet Vallathol went about selling books, 'carrying bundles on his bald head,' as he put it.

The small village of Edappally was truly a nest of singing birds. There were at least a dozen poets actively at work. But alas, posterity has willingly allowed their names to die, of course with the exception of Changampuzha and Raghavan Pillai.

E.V. Krishna Pillai's laudatory Introduction to *Baashpaanjali* was written with much gusto and it did exert some influence. Protests gradually died down and Changampuzha soon became the rage of poetry-lovers. In the meantime he was preparing for his Matriculation examination. To join the University to raise enough funds to meet the expenses there, and take a degree—that was his sole ambition. There was none to help him. Poetry was his only succour.

In a letter dated 1.4.1935 written to one of his closest friends** in Trivandrum the poet wrote :—

> I am going through critical times. I want to give a good education to my brother and for that I may require ten or twelve rupees a month and you know I don't even have ten pice by way of regular income. So I cannot continue this idle life any longer. I have told you everything about me, even my innermost secrets. To continue like this will not help either me or my people. So I should get a job. Anything will do. I had pinned all my hopes on *Baashpaanjali*. But that is a damp squib. I will come to Trivandrum in a week or two. I am thinking of starting a good magazine. I'll call it *Kalaavilaasini*. We should find out a thousand well-wishers willing to give an advance subscription for six months say, rupees four a year; sixty four pages in all. I am confident I can get good articles. But I'll have to travel across the country. If we do some sincere canvassing, we won't fail.
>
> I met poet Vallathol at North Paravur during a wedding. He asked me why I did not send him a copy of my book. I offered the excuse that it was because he was, on tour in Burma. Well, I should send him

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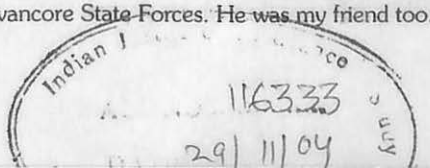
* I have a copy I bought in 1935 as a prize possession.

** V.M. Chandrasekharan Nair. This friend, himself a poet later joined the Travancore State Forces. He was my friend too.



a copy now. He also invited me to spend a day with him in Mulankunnathukavu*. I don't have a copy of my book with me at the moment. Hope you have one to spare after giving one each to Ulloor and P.K., preferably calico-bound copy.

I am coming to Trivandrum soon to settle the accounts of *Baashpaanjali* and secondly to publish *Hemanta Chandrika* through B.V. Book Depot. *Hemanta Chandrika* is somewhat a new model. It contains only love poems, almost on the model of Tagore's *Gardener*. I have finished sixteen. Will have to do another fourteen. You will soon read some of these poems in *Malayalarajyam* and *Mathrubhoomi* and *Srimathi*. I hear that *Service* carried a review of *Baashpaanjali***. I didn't see it....

There were a few young poets in Trivandum who were jealous of Changampuzha's phenomenal popularity. They were actually conceited minor poets craving for recognition. Some of them honestly believed that they were better poets than Changampuzha. One of them went to the extent of writing a lampoon under the pseudonym "Pu Pu Pi," which was circulated privately. The poet was none other than N. Gopala Pillai, who later became a reputed scholar and Principal of the Sanskrit College, Trivandrum. All such minor turbulences soon died down.

He had some genuine friends too in Trivandrum who not only recognised his talents but always received him with warmth and camaraderie. Of them, Kunnukuzhi V. Narayanan Pillai (Chinchin) and Chalukkonam Kuttan Pillai were dearest to the poet. The poet Bodheswaran was another friend who encouraged him.

A rare quality of Changampuzha was his great concern for fellow writers. While he himself was struggling to make both ends meet he was ready to encourage deserving writers. I remember the case of N.G. Kartha of Paanaavally who later became famous as an astrologer. He entered the literary world as a shortstory writer.

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* Kerala Kalamandalam was functioning from there at the time and the poet too lived there. He later shifted to Cheruthuruttthi.

** This review was written by Kainikkara Kumara Pillai, a playwright and distinguished teacher. While appreciating the genuine worth of his poetry the reviewer found fault with the poet for not being able to deliver an optimistic message through his poems.

Changampuzha was impressed with his writing and offered to help him. He requested one of his friends K. Bhaskaran Nair, an upcoming critic, to give a boost to the writer by writing an 'elaborate' introduction. He even specified the length of the introduction—25 pages. But Bhaskaran Nair, it seems, was not in a mood to oblige and the scheme fizzled out.

In the Maharaja's College

As has been said before, to secure a degree and a decent job was a compelling desire with him. He knew very well that he would have to fend for himself. With just two books in the market he couldn't put together even a few rupees. But he had his eye on the weeklies and magazines which had started paying him small amounts of money. He was not unwilling to haggle a little with editors, fixing a rate of four annas per line!

The Maharaja's College, Ernakulam, was not very far from his home and he could complete his studies as a day scholar. He thoroughly enjoyed his two years in the college. There were a few friends willing to help him, either with text books or noon-meals. Being six or seven years senior to most of his classmates, they looked upon him as an elder brother. He remembers with reverence and admiration the great teachers who adorned the institution. There was the reputed linguist Prof. L.V. Ramaswami Iyer who was greatly impressed by Changampuzha's command of English and gave him high marks for his composition exercises. Then there was Kuttipurath Kesavan Nair, poet and brother-in-law of Vallathol. He praised Changampuzha in the open class and said that they should be proud to have such a distinguished poet amidst them.

Then there was G. Sankara Kurup, ten years his senior. Sankara Kurup was then the leader of the young generation of poets. He was a spell-binder and everyone listened to his lectures with bated breath. Changampuzha used to say that when 'Kurup Master' taught grammar it was as delectable as Kalidasa's poetry.

His second year in the College saw the retirement of his poet-teacher Kuttippurath Kesavan Nair. Naturally the onus of composing a farewell poem fell on him. He wrote one and recited it feelingly before a large gathering. This enhanced his reputation further.

G. Sankara Kurup, always a generous host, used to invite him to his home and give him good counsel and encouragement. But since there is no scarcity of vile people in our society the friendship between these two poets unexpectedly turned sour. Misunderstanding became mutual as scandal-mongers spread the news that 'G' was jealous of Changampuzha's talents. Our poet readily believed it and wrote a vitriolic poem *Visha Vriksham* (The Poison Tree). He showed it to his friends. A few good souls among them prevailed upon him not to publish it and make a fool of himself. The story did not end there. The penitent poet went to his teacher, wept profusely and begged his pardon. 'G' was touched and consoled his favourite pupil with kind words.

Changampuzha who was twenty five at the time was certainly not free from libidinous instincts and the college atmosphere was most conducive. He has admitted that he was in love with several girls at the same time. One affair advanced quite far and a formal proposal of marriage was made. She agreed. Had it materialized, it would have been hailed as a revolutionary inter-caste marriage. But her parents interfered. They did not appreciate their educated daughter marrying a wayward poet with no means of livelihood. Thus the tense drama came to a tepid climax.

Changampuzha used to earn a little money by publishing his poems in periodicals. But it was only a trifle. Hence he had to write to some generous souls for financial help. In one such letter addressed to Kainikkara Kumara Pillai, he underscores his self-respect by pleading:

Respected Sir,

I know you will help me with an open heart. And only before such persons will my poverty unfold itself. I have several rich acqaintances, here in Ernakulam itself, but I won't approach them. I know how grudgingly they extend their help. But when people like you give, be it a trickle, that will be great. Before such acts of kindness, I bow my head in eternal gratitude.

Your humble disciple

Sd/-

12.7.1936.

Changampuzha had only a casual acquintance with Kainikkara. But the great teacher's principled life and literary fame made our poet his silent admirer. Letters were written to Sardar K.M. Panikkar too who was then Prime Minister of Patiala. Panikkar belonged to one of the most aristocractic families of Kerala. The poet writes :-

> Though I am not unknown to you, you may not know much about my circumstances. I was born in penury. Yet with my own efforts I managed to pass the Matriculation. But I couldn't join college and thus wasted four to five years. Last year I joined the Maharaja's College and am now in the Senior Intermediate. My two younger brothers are in the High school. On my shoulders rest the burden of five members. *Mathrubhoomi* gives me rupees ten a month. I conduct tuition in two homes. I am very anxious to complete my college education and crown it with a degree. For that I want the generous help of noble people like you.
>
> It is only proper that, as a humble lover of literature, I should approach a noble leader of the domain of letters. Moreover I firmly believe that my request will be fruitful, if only I tell you frankly about myself.
>
> I have recently published a 'dramatic' poem—*Ramanan*. The first edition is almost over. I shall soon be sending you a 'presentation copy' now in print. I had already sent you my earlier works — *Baashpaanjali, Aaraadhakan* and *Hemanta Chandrika* — and you were good enough to write to me congratulating me on my poetic achievements. Another work — *Sankalpa Sushama* will be out soon, say by next Chingam (Aug-Sept) and I shall be sending you a copy of that too.
>
> God bless you.
>
> I request you to kindly send me a reply.
>
> Yours obediently,
>
> Changampuzha

A Friend's Suicide and An Elegy

The publication of *Ramanan* (1936) was a great literary event. No other work in modern poetry except perhaps Asan's *Fallen Flower* (Dec. 1907) had created such a sensation in literary circles before. The sensation was indirectly due to the terrible shock caused by the unexpected suicide of a young, talented poet, Edappally Raghavan Pillai. Suicides were not so common those days, particularly those of writers. Edappally Raghavan Pillai was like a brother to our poet and their poetry was marked by identical emotions, sensations and even similarity of diction. People hailed them as the "twins of Edappally."

Raghavan Pillai was deeper in poverty than Changampuzha. He too had completed his matriculation. From Edappally, he migrated to Kollam where a prosperous advocate whom he knew gave him shelter and food. The host knew very well the poet's sensitive nature and hence treated him with extreme care and solicitude. In spite of this protective help, he fell into the bottomless abyss of frustration. It was rumoured that he was in love with the advocate's daughter—unattainable though she was. The suicide took place on the night of the girl's marriage duly arranged by her parents in her home town. It was on that fateful day — 4th of July, 1936 — that the poet chose to end his life.

The incident sent a shock-wave among the literati of Kerala. Sincere unprompted articles mourning his untimely death appeared in every paper. There were also one or two pieces condemning the sickly mind and the impulsive haste of the poet. Such writings were naturally frowned upon by the majority.

Changampuzha's loss was deeply personal and immeasurable. He felt dazed and numb. There was none to be consoled and none to console him. Slowly he regained his calm and recollected his thoughts somewhat in tranquillity. The result was a short poem, the

'Broken Flute' :

O blessed nightingale
You have vanished
With you scourging despair
Your songs of melancholy sweetness
Alas ! will not be heard again
Were we not like two chirping little birds
Singing in tuneful harmony?
Where have you gone
Leaving me all alone?

The colleges had already reopened. But our poet still had not made up his mind about returning to college. The pain was still too raw. After a month he finally decided to rejoin college. When his classmates were curious to know more about the death of his friend, Changampuzha was visibly disturbed. It was annoying to face them and their questions. The incident haunted him like a nightmare and he finally decided to sublimate his feelings by writing a long poem. This in brief is the genesis of *Ramanan*. He dashed it off in a few weeks. Then came the usual problem of publishing. A friend, Hameed, who was no publisher but a glass merchant, was so moved by the poem that he voluntarily offered to invest the necessary funds and the book came out. In spite of its thematic appeal and the known excellence of Changampuzha's lilting lines, the poet had again to go about in search of buyers. People who now read the fiftieth or the fifty first edition of the book will hardly believe that *Ramanan* too was once hawker's stuff. The little money he made out of the book helped him to continue his education.

Ramanan

Ramanan, a simple pastoral elegy, occupies a very special place in the poetry of Changampuzha. Though his friend's suicide was the immediate cause of the poem it is not like Shelley's *Adonais* or Tennyson's *In memoriam* because the poet does not directly mention his poet-friend. The pastoral ethos compels the poet to make his chief characters simple shepherds. But it is obvious that Ramanan and his friend Madanan stand for Raghavan Pillai and his friend

Changampuzha.

The story of *Ramanan* is partly factual and partly fictional. The heroine Chandrika after giving full encouragement to her shepherd-lover suddenly makes an about-turn and reveals her heart to her maid. She tells her, "I want to enjoy the wine of life." The poet forgets to convince the reader about this volte-face. We don't know what the provocation really was; but the common reader did not worry about the inner logic of the story. They enjoyed the poem for different reasons.

The fascinating felicity of diction, descriptions of the resplendent vegetation of Kerala's beautiful villages, the sweet sentimental lines and above all their sympathy for the departed poet—all these contributed to the phenomenal success of the poem. Then came the war-years. Soldiers separated from their sweethearts and those sweating at the hot gates were the most ardent admirers of the poem. The book became a soldier's solace.

Each part starts with a chorus as becomes an opera. The poem opens with these lines :—

> Flower-decked thickets all around
> Soaked in verdure green
> The rural setting
> In all its virgin beauty
> fills your heart
> Wherever you turn your eyes
> Nothing but trees in floral splendour
> Even a gentle breeze
> Would let loose a rain of flowers.

When it comes to describing Nature's extravagance there are but few to equal Changampuzha.

The poem in the operatic form is either a conversation between Ramanan and Madanan or between Chandrika and her confidante, Bhanumati. Observations on the fickleness of life, the fidelity or sanctity of love and the incertitude of life make the poem sweetly sentimental. The final portion in which Ramanan bids farewell to everything around him is the most touching.

You my darlings
You the mountain blue
The jungles where the cuckoos sing
You, the beautiful bowers
In the flow of fragrance sunk:
You the rivers pure and full
Rolling with cool and crystal waves
You the blue shady recesses
With the blanket of green grass covered
Oh, you are matchless beyond doubt
Leaving you all, how can I go?

(Trans. by P.J. Sunny)

Now looking back from the distance of several decades, one is a little amazed at the tremendous popularity that the poem enjoyed once. But we also know that popularity need not always guarantee quality or excellence. There are various factors that make a poem or a novel popular. In this case it was mainly the people's profound sympathy for the departed poet that made them such admiring readers.

The faults of the poem are obvious. The idea of a love affair between a shepherd boy and an affluent girl is in itself an unconvincing proposition in India. It was only for the sake of putting the story into the pastoral package that the poet did it. Then there is the unprovoked attack on society for not appreciating a love affair between unequals. Nevertheless the poem becomes quite vigorous when the poet puts society in the dock. Nothing can stop him when he wants to drive home a favourite idea. He freely gives vent to his pent-up feelings in impassioned eloquence. In a very significant quotation on the fly-leaf of the poem, taken from Nizami, the Persian poet, we read the following :—

Woman's desire is more intense
Than man's—more exquisite her sense,
But never blinded by her flame;
Gain and fruition—are her aim.
A woman's love is selfish all.
Possessions, wealth secure her fall;
How many false and cruel prove
And not one faithful in her love !

This certainly would draw angry protests from any woman of self-respect. But poets can cut both ways: They can soothe or smoulder at will and Changmpuzha was no exception. The tragic end of the hero created quite a stir in the minds of sensitive young men. But thank God, it did not create a wave of suicides like the *Sorrows of Werther* or similar works of despondence did elsewhere. The left-wing writers however frowned upon the poet for writing such a poem with a negative message. Their protests were echoed in several literary gatherings of the period. This continued till it reached a climax in 1941. A few purposeful detractors went to to the extent of even saying that Changampuzha should stop writing poems altogether. The poet in turn gave them a spirited reply. It was in a sense also an act of re-inforcing his self-confidence.

Poet thou art,
God taught you in heaven,
To go down and play your Veena and dance to the tune;
You didn't beg for anyone's permission to sing your songs
And if grinning clowns come and tell you to stop
Your care a damn for their silly words.
....
Don't falter my Muse:
Since your flag of victory is flying aloft
Dance on, my Muse, dance.

In spite of his best efforts the poet could not make much money out of *Ramanan* and he again approached generous people. In another letter to Sardar Panikkar he writes:—

... As an admirer of you I feel confident that you will extend a helping hand to me, if only I tell you frankly everything about me. And that is why I take courage in writing to you. I had sent you complimentary copies of *Baashppanjali, Aaraadhakan* and *Hemanta Chandrika* and you had graciously written to me complimenting me on my litērary efforts. Next Chingam (Aug—Sept) a new book, *Sankalpa Sushama**

* The book when printed a year after was named *Sankalpa or Kaanti.*

will be out. I shall be sending you a copy of the book along with *Ramanan*. (24 Aug 1937)

In the next letter also he appeals for help and adds :—

I have read your poem 'Apakwaphalam.' It has greatly inspired me.

He requests for a photograph of Panikkar and also for a copy of his book *Chintaa-tarangini*. The next letter addressed to Panikkar is plainly sycophantic. The substance of it is that he was quite thrilled by the praise showered on his (Panikkar's) books *Harsha* and *Malabar and the Portuguese* by his history teacher Prof. V. Ramanathan.

After finishing the Intermediate he wished to continue his studies at the Benares Hindu University for which also he sought Sardar K.M. Panikkar's help. It was only a dream which soon vanished and he came back to the idea of continuing in Ernakulam.

Life in the Maharaja's College he enjoyed thoroughly in spite of his great financial strain. He was adored by his classmates and encouraged by his teachers. There was no dearth of romantic adventures though they were all but fleeting experiences of elusive happiness. He boasted that several girls were after him and that he kept everybody in good humour by sending carbon copies of the same love letters. In a wager with friends he went to the extent of saying that he would even kiss one of those girls publicly, something unthinkable even today. And the blithe spirit that he was, fulfilled the bravado and stunned his friends ! Luckily the girl did not protest and there was no further commotion.

Drinking bouts were not infrequent. During this period he took to smoking ganja too and even wrote a poem "On the Wings of Ganja," describing the effect of the narcotic on his wild imagination. Here are a few lines :—

Thrills,
Thrills for the star-lit night and the
Dew-decked trees;
I sweat and am sinking
My soul is going down and down;
No stars in the firmament

It is all emptiness in front,
I feel sleepy but my eyelids refuse to close,
I want to cry, to cry aloud
Come my Sarada
Sure, I won't become a Sanyasin
I want you
Give me some water
O what fireworks!
The stars scatter across the heavens
Empty again!
I get wings, I fly
Serpents!
Shadows!
Pain!
Water! Water!

This surrealist fantasy excited only a few but exasperated many! The poem concludes on a philosophic note:

I hear some sweet sound coming from the depth of my being
What's it? Oh, only a silly cough;
Life is a floating bubble, a dream.
And the body is mortal
Only the soul is immortal.

Life in Trivandrum
(1939-42)

Changampuzha, with his good command of English, wished to join the English Honours course in the Maharaja's College of Arts, Trivandrum. But he could not get admission for want of a few marks and hence opted for the Malayalam Honours Course. This course was then starving for students. I was already there in the second year when Changampuzha joined in 1939.

The Maharaja's College, Trivandrum was a prestigious citadel of learning being the only institution in Kerala with several Honours courses in Literature and Humanities. There was real camaraderie between students and teachers. The Principal Sri P.G. Sahasranama Iyer, a great English teacher, was like a good-natured uncle, seldom magisterial but always affectionate. Dr. K. Goda Varma, Head of the Department of Malayalam, was a grand-nephew of the great artist Raja Ravi Varma. He was a sound scholar and an erudite philologist. Then there was Vidwan C.I. Gopala Pillai, a brilliant teacher and musician. He would recite poems, including those of Changampuzha in melodic sweetness and charm his students while teaching.

Among the students who later became renowned in public life were: K.R. Naryanan (now our Rashtrapati), G. Ravindra Varma, well-known Gandhian and P.C. Alexander (now Governor of Maharashtra). It was after much hesitation that Changampuzha decided to study in Trivandrum, since the city was then a more expensive place than Ernakulam. But his friend T.N. Gopinathan Nair, who later became a well-known poet and playwright, persuaded him to join and assured him help. T.N., even as a student, was known in the elite circles, as the son of Justice P.K. Narayana Pillai, a scholar of great distinction. But T.N.'s enthusiasm was not just enough. He sought the munificent patronage of Capt. V.P. Thampi, grandson of the late Maharaja of Travancore. Together they went to Thampi's mansion. Thampi was innocent of poetry but T.N.'s impassioned

rhetoric must have touched him. Thampi agreed to pay the poet's college fees until he finished his Honours course. It was a great relief and the poet settled down in a modest lodge.

I vividly recall those cheerful days we spent together in the College. We, his friends, never saw him as a struggling, impecunious poet or as a languishing pessimist. He was well-dressed like any other well-bred student with an 'angavastram' as an additional appendage. He attended most of the classes but sneaked out from a few less interesting ones. Philology was one of his pet aversions and he went straight to the library during those hours. It was a splendid library, particularly rich in Continental literature, which he devoured. The exhibitionist in him dashed off a signature at the end of every book he read, probably for the delight of latter-day admirers !

During the second year he brought his cousin Achutha Panikkar with him to be admitted to the Institute of Textile Technology. Years later when I met him in Ahmedabad he was the Superintendent of a textile mill there. It was most generous of our poet to have supported a cousin when he himself was straining to make both ends meet.

During this time he got in touch with an influential publishing firm—The Srirama Vilasom of Kollam. Their hold in the Government, the poet calculated, may procure him a text book and with that some money too. But nothing happened and he signed off three of his books for a paltry sum of Rs.450. One was in prose. As Shakespeare was always an attractive bait for the academics, our poet summarised in prose four of Shakespeare's plays—*The Tempest, Hamlet, Winter's Tale* and *Pericles.*

Another was a free rendering of Tennyson's narrative poem *Oenone*. He called it *Sudhaangada.* As we look back we find that all these books were pretty harmless and quite suitable for high school children. But the committee did not oblige, mostly because these books were written by a young poet who was not rated high by the hard-boiled conservatives of the committee. It is doubtful whether they read the books at all. The poet's name was enough to keep his books out.

Sudhaangada (1938) and its aftermath

Tennyson's *Oenone* attracted Changampuzha because of its highly

romantic story full of agony and ecstacy. Oenone tells her sad story to the mountain goddess and recaptiulates past incidents dramatically. The poem opens with a picturesque description of Ida in the original.

> There lies a vale in Ida
> Lovelier than all the valleys of Ionian hills.

In the adopted poem it is a Himalayan valley and our poet becomes eloquent in describing the divine beauty of the Himalayas. Ganges naturally forms a part of the scenery and the poet in the guise of Sudhaangada addresses Goddess Ganga and pays her rich tribute :

> Oh Mother listen kindly to my words
> Before I leave this world forever.

Tennyson's original has only 272 lines. But Changampuzha's version spreads out into 644 lines. This shows the kind of freedom that our poet takes with the original. But that was always his favourite pastime. He had a unique gift for flying off from the focal point. As one finishes the poem he cannot escape the conclusion that after all it is much *ado* about nothing. The story is so weak and slender that it had to be propped by verbal excesses.

But the poem immediately became a topic of hot discussion for an entirely non-poetic reason. The long poem carried a longer preface by the poet. Fifty eight solid pages of pedantry and self-projection. This provoked many a critic. But it must be said to Changampuzha's credit that his assessment of contemporary literature, though largely irrelevant was marked by an earnest desire to boost the new generation of writers that was slowly emerging.

Assailing the orthodox group of pundits "who quoted out-dated rules of grammar and rhetoric from Sanskrit texts and condemned everything new", he put forth the names of new writers such as Thakazhi, Kesava Dev and Pottekkatt. This harangue inserted as an introduction to a romantic Victorian poem, naturally provoked many readers. The mere length of the preface was amusing if not intimidating. Perhaps he was influenced by Bernard Shaw who always argued his case with impeccable logic coupled with irritating egoism. But adverse criticism did not unnerve him. I remember him telling us something like this: "You know I am not such an egoist, but one

has to assert oneself to get recognition in this arrantly selfish world." One cannot deny the charge.

Though the poet was known for his vagaries and vices he came to the classes as a well-dressed, decent young man. He was never found drunk inside the college. Once he came forward to act in a college play as Upagupta, the Buddhist Bhikshu. But he opted to get out during the rehearsals because of some domestic urgency.

All poets are impulsive by nature and Changampuzha was no exception. But when impulsiveness combines with foolhardiness, it can drown anyone in a sea of troubles. One such act of impetuosity was to invite the Sahitya Parishat to have its three-day anniversary in his home-town. He overestimated his popularity and innate capacity. Popularity he had in abudance but that was not just enough to collect money for conducting a literary festival of such proportions. The obstructionists sent anonymous letters to the invitees such as Vallathol, who fully believing the letter, did not care to attend. This was a great disappointment to the poet. Yet he went ahead with the arrangements and made the festival a moderate success, mainly because of Karunakara Menon, his early mentor who was an experienced hand in such matters. There was also the Revenue Divisional Officer whose son and Changampuzha were intimate friends. The presence of Chelanaatt Achutha Menon, Joseph Mundasseri and K. Vasudevan Moosath — all well-known scholars — contributed much to the success of the conference.

The poet, now in the second year, got a friend—a new classmate named Ignatius. No saint like Ignatius of Loyola but a very loving soul all the same. This friendship gradually thickened into a sort of unbreakable bond. A letter the poet wrote to his friend soon after the final examination speaks emotionally about their relationship.

1 April, 1942

My dear Ignatius,

I always remember the past two years we have been together. Oh, those exciting days! that brief period packed with myriad memories! Though they have now vanished into the frozen past, a slight quiver of the mind will bring everything back into our mind's mirror.

> If I begin to count the number of friends I have in this world, it may not amount to much. But my "Kocchu"! My Kocchu is not just a friend, but a brother, my most affectionate little brother. My heart has not pained in the parting of any other friend before. But our parting was indeed an agony. Even when we were living together, I had foreseen this situation and the consequent tension. But now I realise that it is something far beyond what I had imagined. I am certain that this kind of an unbreakable bond is the result of a kinship that existed in our previous birth.

As already stated, the Honours classes were always thin. There was just one girl in that class—Devakikutty. She was not much of a beauty but she had a beautiful heart. Coquetry was quite foreign to her nature. Formal but genuine friendship was all that she had to offer. Changampuzha toyed with the idea of proposing to her for quite some time and finally took courage to meet her mother and seek her consent. But it seems she was not in favour and the proposal fell through. The girl was disappointed and remained single for many years.

About this time Changampuzha's marriage was being arranged by his relatives at home. One day he surprised us all by announcing that his marriage was fixed and immediately added with a smile, "It is not a love marriage, mind you." It made us wonder how he consented to such a conventional marriage like an obedient son. This slave of passions with the seductive cunning of a Casanova was going to marry a village girl of modest means and meagre accomplishments. We couldn't believe it. Life, after all, is a series of accidents! The marriage was duly conducted on 9th May, 1940. It was a simple ceremony in the presence of near relatives and close friends. The poet settled down with his wife and gave up, for a time, his waywardness.

When the College re-opened we were eager to ask him about his wife. He looked cheerful and in a humorous vein narrated stories about her utter naivette. He said his wife had never seen a film in her life and that when he took her to a cinema she rose up to leave when the lights flashed for the interval.

The poet, his friend Ignatius and cousin Achyutha Panikkar were living in a lodge enjoying the freedom of a bachelor's den. The oddities of life there inspired him to write a poem in a lighter vein. He called it "Things as They are." The poem is also a dig at stark realism which was being advertised by some as the only technique of modern writing.

> My little brother learning
> textile technology dozing off,
> his text book in hand;
> The post-master who lives
> next door breaking the silence
> of the night with his husky
> coughs at irregular intervals.
> And the inept musician
> fumbling with his sa-ri-ga-ma
> in the dusty second storey opposite.

When the poet recited this hilarious poem in the college assembly he was wildly cheered.

Though Changampuzha had only Malayalam to learn during the second and third Honours classes his passion for English literature was steadily growing. He read a good deal and translated many works under the influence of that heterodox critic, A. Balakrishna Pillai. Young writers were getting crazy about European literature other than English. He writes to Sardar Panikkar on 15.1.1940 :—

> I have an idea of publishing an anthology on the model of *an anthology of World Poetry* I have already translated some of the best poets of the world—Verheren, Verlaine, Rimbaud, Baudelaire, Mallarme, La Forge et al. I have already done Ibsen's *Doll's House* and *Wild Duck* and Chekhov's *Seagull, Betrothal* and a few of his short stories too. And Hauptmann's *Hannelle,* Materlink's *Blue Bird* and a few Russian plays. But I don't have money to publish these volumes myself and publishers who are willing do not pay much. I really do not know what to do with these volumes ....

In a letter he wrote to me (April 1945) the same ideas are repeated. He also asked me to translate a novel, perferably a French novel. By this time he had joined the famous Mangalodayam

Publishing House of Trichur and was somewhat confident about bringing out a few worthwhile titles. It was Prof. Joseph Mundasseri who recommended him to the proprietors and he joined the editorial board of *Mangalodayam* magazine. He was brimming with ideas about publishing and wrote to friends to take up translations. He wrote to me :

> A. Balakrishna Pillai's Russain short stories will be out soon. I am writing a *History of Russian Literature* also. At the moment I am translating the Norwegian novelist Sigrid Undset's *Gunner's Daughter* (This was later published).
>
> .... Some eight years ago when I happened to read Materlink's beautiful drama *Mary Magdalene*, I was fascinated and wanted to do something like that. Now I don't remember much of the original. So I began in my own way. My Mary, you will see, is not Vallathol's Mary. Neither is it Ponkunnam Damodaran's. I want to write about Mary's early life, the voluptuous beauty, the rage of lovers and above all the consummate connoisseur. Her craving for the comforts of life, her epicurean ways, will come first and then the sins of over-indulgence and the great transformation after meeting Christ. So, you see, my poem will be a psychological exploratiotn, not strictly Biblical....

The poet made a beautiful beginning and went half-way but did not complete the poem. Two years after his death it appeared as an incomplete poem (1950).

It introduces the free-living, vivacious beauty before whom the pleasure-seeking men of the land danced like puppets. But she was dissatisfied since Jesus remained distant and unapproachable; to possesss him as a prize catch was her greatest ambition. It is well known that when Changampuzha attempts to capture feminine beauty or amorous adventures there is no stopping him. The flirtatious Mary was for him the right heroine in the right situation. But he does not forget to express his profound admiration for Jesus which comes through the mouth of Mary herself. She says :

> I wonder what power it is
> that makes my heart throb
> when I hear his name.
> Aye ! It is that luminous face!

Fathomless as the sea
Pure as the flower
Sublime as the mountains
And he performs miracles!
Jesus, they say, is the Lord
of the universe
He is devoid of desires and
yet he is the incarnation of love!

Sankalpa Kaanti

One of the most significant collection of poems by Changampuzha was published during his Honours days—*Sankalpa Kaanti* (1942). There were odes, love-lyrics and one elegy in it. When he made the selection, he was careful to include only 'clean' poems because he hoped to get the collection prescribed as a text book and he got Mahakavi Ulloor to write a Foreword. Ullor was indeed magnanimous and wrote an appreciative, nevertheless balanced, evaluation of the poet and his work. The senior poet calls him a master of diction blessed by Goddess Saraswati. But in spite of this strong recommendation, the book did not get through the committee.

An outstanding poem in this collection, which is also the opening poem, is on Kalidasa:

I see you sitting high
on the golden throne in heaven
And the celestial beauties
showering the unfading flowers
of the Kalpaka tree on you.
There stands beside you
Your Sakuntala of eternal youth
and blooming beauty,
Whom you caressed so lovingly
While Urvasi fans you with
the milk-white whisk of the yaktail.

This is rather an unusual phase of Changampuzha's poetry since we find him more often attacking all that is glorious in the past. The

word "aarsha" was anathema to him. But let us remember that each poem is the product of a particular frame of mind. The poet does not care if he contradicts himself.

He dedicated *Sankalpa Kaanti* to his benefactor Capt. V.P. Thampi. He was also seeking the help of Sardar Panikkar and K.P.S. Menon, two of the most eminent Keralites of the period and both used to send him occasional remittances.

Changampuzha, with all his poetic talent and vast reading, did not do well in the examination. Sure, he must have neglected his pet aversions like grammar and linguistics. Yet he hoped to get a second class, but as his professor Dr. Goda Varma says, his answer papers were at vastly contrasting levels. Some were exceedingly good, while others were absolutely poor, and he was awarded only a third class. Naturally he was quite upset and attributed his low grade to his Professor's dislike. In that distressed state of mind he dashed off a highly emotional letter to his Professor. In this letter he says that he is a true 'Rajabhakta' (the Professor being a Raja) and that he had the highest respect for him.

Dr. Varma with whom I had the privilege of working for many years had told me that he was absolutely helpless in the case of Changampuzha's result unless he went far out of the way. And so, nothing better than a third class could be awarded.

The poet knocked at a few doors for a job, but none opened before him.

Rakta Pushpangal *(Crimson Flowers)*

Crimson Flowers, a well-known collection, was another product of his Honours days. There is a visible change in the tone and temper of these poems. He is no longer the frustrated fatalist but an assertive rebel. Some of those poems lack the level-headedness of a sober thinker. But we know that poetry after all is not philosophy. As Harindranath Chattopadhyaya (whom he quotes on the fly-leafs) says:

> Today the music that yields is sharp
> And takes the unsuspecting unawares
> Since many do not know that true born writers
> Are also true born fighters

For what is singing worth if singing fails
To shame the tyrant's bullets, bombs and shells?

Echoes of Shelley are discernible in many of his poems, particularly pieces like 'After the Hurricane,' 'The Flute-music of Lunacy' and 'That Hurricane.' No wonder he quotes, with a sense of approval, from Shelley the following lines:

I have suffered what I write or viler pain
And so my words have seeds of misery.

Of all the pieces in *Crimson Flowers,* "Vaazhakkula" (A Bunch of Plantains) attracted the greatest attention. It was a moving poem on the plight of the tenant who had to gift his best farm-product to the land-lord. When the bunch of plantains was slowly getting ripe, his children danced around the plant in glee and quarrelled among themselves for the biggest share. But alas, the head of the family knows that the best should go to the land-lord as an offering and he stoically accepted the inevitable and amidst the loud wailings of his hungry children stood like a statue for a while. Then slowly he moved away from them as their shrill cries became increasingly unbearable. The story is dramatically narrated and the readers are thrilled. The Progressive writers were very happy. They were all praise for his sympathy for the suffering peasant. The poem was brilliant for its metrical novelty and rhythmic flow. The unusual courage of the poet is manifest in including a Foreword that openly criticised the poet and his so-called 'socialist' view of life. The Foreword was written by a scholarly Catholic priest, who, in spite of his great erudition, could not shake off his ecclesiastical background and conservative beliefs.

Upheavals

The poet, still searching for a job, got an unexpected call from his friend Ignatius who was invited by another friend to teach in a tutorial college in Kayamkulam. Together they joined the college and started teaching. The students liked the poet, nay, adored him. They found in him an eloquent teacher and a joyous human being. The year was 1942. The Second World War was raging and there was a great demand for soldiers and civilian clerks. Within a few months Ignatius decided to join the army. He went ahead and joined as a clerk and persuaded Changampuzha to follow suit. The poet was a little reluctant in the beginning but his friend persisted and finally the poet agreed and proceeded to Poona and on the 3rd of November, 1942, the poet became a Havildar Clerk in the army.

That night sitting alone in the lodge while his friends slept, he thought of life and wrote a poem ;—

No more sleep, it is dawn
Adieu to all sweet dreams
Open your eyes to cry
Yes, to cry my darling,
No more of those love-charged heart-throbs;
Everything is over and your
Weary lover is alas, dead.
No crying my tender sweet-heart
Here I place at your feet
My heart sweetened by your love
Let me say farewell
Farewell to you
Farewell to all.

Was the thought of death haunting him? It looks like that.

Though he was not in the war front, war is frightening because it trades death.

Life in Poona was happy. Work in the office was not heavy either. Evenings were spent in roaming the streets. The red-street, something he had not seen in Kerala, attracted him. He went only as far as enjoying their dance sessions. After about six months in Poona, the poet got a transfer to Cochin. It was A.P.B. Nair, then Assistant Controller of Accounts, a great lover of poetry, who helped him to get the transfer.

Life in Cochin began on a pleasant note. He took a house on rent and settled down like any other householder. But a placid life was an impossible proposition with this passionate being. He once had to see a doctor for some minor ailment, but returned love-sick from the clinic. There, he saw the doctor's charming wife with longing eyes. The spell was already working. She was the mother of a few grown-up children, but her charm was irresistible and she was an admirer of the poet too.

Apparently there was something deeper than mere sensual excitement in their relation. She did not even feel that she was doing something wrong. It is certain that purity is an essential element of every woman's character. Yet a woman sometimes succumbs to the call of her inner self. The criteria of the moral and the immoral are in such cases irrelevant. The doctor's wife was no doubt dissatisfied with her married life. She had at last realised that she was nothing more than a 'delivery machine.' There was none to respond to her finer feelings. But suddenly she found someone who responded not only emotionally but aesthetically as well. They yearned for each other. However, accepted beliefs and tabulated codes could not be easily eroded. Letters were exchanged. But secret meetings were impossible. Even after her husband's discovery of the goings on, she could not retrace her steps. She accepts the lover as a moral challenge from within. It is more of a purity of purpose than a purity of mind. And to the poet, who considered—all his previous affairs as transitory, now feels that he is experiencing a very different kind of emotion. It was beyond sex. She, it seems, was the "mother-kind" taking the man wholly and entirely unto herself.

The poet writes in his diary for 2.11.1944 :—

My heart aches and the queen of my heart is miles and miles away. What wonderful changes in me because of my association with that embodiment of love! She has added lustre to my life within a few days. I feel the pain of separation when I think of those sweet days. What am I do to?

3.11.1994

My Devi, why did you become so beautiful? It is intoxicating, divinely intoxicating. I have not seen a more beautiful woman than you in my entire life. And I don't think I will ever see another like you. The animal instincts in me evaporate as I see you. You have been sent by God to lift me up from the deep pit of frustration into heavenly heights. I love you, I adore you.

4.11.1944

My dear, you say that many are jealous of me. May be. But it is not my fault. Nobody except one, knows me well. Who is that individual? That supreme charmer in whose blue eyes stars glitter? Why did she steal my heart? I will punish her for that. And she knows what punishment I am going to give her.

6.11.1994

The stars have not seen till this day, lovers who do not weep. They have not seen hearts that do not break if love-stricken! My dear why should we grieve. We know it is meaningless yet we grieve. Sorrow, sweet sorrow !

This spiritual bond suprises me. Honestly I have not loved anyone till this day. My heart, I do admit is devoid of that faculty. But now my heart is changed into a vast ocean of impassioned love. Don't you see, oh Devi, my soul which I want to place before you as a floral offering.

My darling it is better to give me death, not life. I crave for death. Why did we love each other like this in this pitiless wretched world? Why? Can we separate? Try that if you can. It is impossible I say. The more I try, the more I dissolve unto you.

In her letters of which only very few survive, we find that she had accepted the poet as her real husband and a wedding ring was

presented to him. She implores him not to part with it at any cost. Once they even thought of eloping to live together elsewhere. But when better sense prevailed she withdrew. She realised the social constraints and the consequent tremors that the family would experience. And to the poet, to continue within her magic circle and the emotion-charged state of mind was a torture. Moreover, Edappally had become a hot-house of steamy scandals. Thus he threw away his job and went to Madras to join the Law College. Sure, he had no illusions about a legal career. It was sheer escape from all the wagging tongues of gossip-mongers.

Two collections of exquisite lyrics appeared during this high-voltage interlude — *Onappookkal* (Onam Flowers) and *Spandikkunna Asthimaadam* (The Throbbing Sepulchre). Kesari A. Balakrishna Pillai, veteran critic, who was always ready to boost the new generation, unerringly declared that these two collections contain Changampuzha's best poems, because of the poet's intense emotional involvement in each poem. Every poem is the spontaneous overflow of a turbulent mind. The poet admits his failings and calls himself a veritable poisonous snake and yet he feels happy when he knows that 'she' alone had the eye to see beauty in this poisonous creature.

> Your kindly eyes see this repelling snake
> As an idol of great virtue
> yes before you, I promise, I shall ever
> remain virtuous
> I promise, I shall not err before you.

In another poem he calls himself a vulture, a vulture who pretends to be a skylark. In yet another poem he pictures himself as a singing devil. Weary with life, he visualizes his impending death and pens the lines to be inscribed on his tombstone :

> Unto dust have I returned
> But every atom of my being
> dances in joy with the sweet
> remembrance of your love
> for me O Devi !

Devi (goddess) was the name the poet chose to address his new-

found love, and she in turn replied with the signet "Devi, your wife".

One of her letters runs like this :—

> To my lord, life of my life.
>
> I do not want a pie from my husband and I won't ask him for money. My life, alas, is now completely shattered. I don't have anything with me as your memento. The ring you gave me was taken away by him. All your letters were burnt. But my dear, I cannot wipe off your image from my heart. Your poems irritate him. Whatever you write is condemned as sheer nonsense ! Can't you for my sake change the tone of your poems ? Don't you feel sorry for my sad plight ? ..... Please do not write to every other woman. Don't waste your money on lustful adventures. Your money should go to your children. I will never hate you, I cannot. God knows how much I love you. Those books you gave me too were burnt. Please don't go to Madras.
>
> Your own Devi

To her life at home was becoming unbearable and in a bid to escape she went off to Bombay to spend a few days with her relatives there. But that did not calm down her mind and she returned within a few days.

Writing again to the poet she states :

> I had sent two letters to you. But there was no indication of those letters in your recent poems. You should not frequently write to me nor to him. The sequel to each letter yours is an unendurable tirade against me. How do you compromise with your wife's suffering and strain? Will you please return those articles belonging to my children? None will hurt you. Don't remove that ring from your finger. Are you giving me grief upon grief? I hear that you have grown a beard. What is the matter with you? Some illness? Or is it a vow to achieve something? How I crave for a sight of you, at least once! And then I don't mind even facing death. My eyes are athirst to have a glimpse of you. Don't forget me. I write this tears dripping. How I wish to get at least a two-line note from my dear! But I know there is no chance. Will

> you remember me once in a while? The ring that you gave me earlier was forcibly taken away by him. Will you give me another, only if it is not too difficult. I know you are my priceless possession.

In another letter :

> When I return from the temple, please wait for me at the toll-gate. It may not be possible to come to you and talk. I don't mind that. I shall be happy if I can see you from a distance.....

One is reminded of Tolstoy's Anna pining for Vronsky and accusing him about his evasiveness. This woman is almost in the same situation as Anna with a respectable husband, a comfortable house and some bright children. But she does not go hysterical like Anna. She is, as I said earlier what Tagore calls the 'mother-kind,' the protective, self-effacing woman who takes up the entire responsibility of her lover, the woman who wants to row him safely across the stormy waters of life. Yet her love is intense. It is with great effort that she tries to keep it at bay. But to the sensitive poet the emotions are overwhelming, exacting and even fatiguing. He fills page after page of his diary pouring out all his pent-up feelings in profuse strains.

It may look strange that Changampuzha who had many affairs with many women, some casual and some intimate, was so thoroughly shaken by a woman who was somebody else's wife. Wise men say that love is the last surviving relic of the Lost Paradise. The poet probably had a glimpse of that paradise for the first time in his life. It was an instantaneous union of hearts. They were unmindful of public scandals. Wagging tongues did not extinguish the flame of magic existence.

To Madras

As mentioned earlier, the poet tried to escape by going away to Madras. But the stay in Madras only complicated matters. Fate was conspiring to ruin the poet's life. The poet chose to live with his sweet-heart's two sons who were studying in Madras for professional courses. Sheer foolhardiness, one would think.

As could be expected, he was indifferent to his studies. He spent

more time in the Public Library than in the College. Moore Market where second-hand books were available at cheap rates was another haunt. He tried his best to drown himself in books but could not forget the woman who ignited his soul. Her letters sent to the College came in quick succession. They were full of burning passion. The poet could not write back because he knew they would be intercepted and each letter, as she had warned, would set off a storm in that depressed domestic atmosphere.

All the while the poet ignored his wife who was finding it extremely hard to run the home. There were two children to care for. The poet himself proposed a legal divorce and the wife agreed out of sheer despair. She was even more worried to find herself the target of slander. Yes, in a man's world, the woman was not to question but to submit.

A revealing letter written during this period (30 Oct 1944) to his old class-mate Devakikutty opens out his mind :—

> ... Anyone in my place would have committed suicide. I am craving for death, but alas, even death is unkind to me. I don't write to anyone now. My friends are angry because of my silence. This one I am writing after days of silence. I want the whole world to hate me. I don't deserve anyone's love and sympathy and I won't ask for it either. No, never. Once I believed that with some money in hand, I could live in peace. Alas, no. Now I have enough money. I can indulge in luxuries. But my mind is a burning furnace. You are among the few, who still have love and sympathy for me. I am really amazed at your goodness .... I am a brute, a despicable devil, yes, a singing devil ... I am tired of this mask, tired of this self-deception. You read my latest poem "The Singing Devil". You will find in it, the most vengeful, the most agonising thoughts couched in enthralling music. No one else in this world can write like that. Try to evade it. No, you can't. It will haunt you. Is it not a wonder to find such a cruel vulture inside a singing skylark?
>
> Today I am a mere machine. This machine works since there is an undying dynamo inside. But I tell you, don't love me with your pure and sacred heart. It chokes me. I don't want anyone

to love me. Please don't write to me again. God tempts and tests the devil. That there are angels in this world was first revealed to me by my Ammini (wife). That inocent dove had to mate with a vulture and everything ended up in tears. Keep this letter and read it again after the news of my death reaches you.

Yours etc. ....

Devakikutty was perhaps the one and only girl who refused to hate him.

Rumours were fast spreading about the poet's Jekyll and Hyde existence. His teacher and distinguished poet Sankara Kurup was awfully worried and wrote a very touching letter to his old student to which the poet replied :

It was a letter that made me cry. It burns my body and soul. I don't deserve your love and affection. I know yours is not a formal letter and that behind every line of yours is a tender, loving heart.

Let me tell you, frankly it was material splendour and reputation that spoiled me, that made me sink so low. But now neither tempts me. I want to pulverize everything and vanish from this world. I hate everything. I was fortunate when I had no money or prosperity. Then I had a heart as tender as a flower. I had a soul filled with idealistic dreams. But alas, now ..... Yes I am a singing devil. Up to my twenty-second year, I was as pure as an angel. It was E.V. Krishna Pillai who introduced me to the literary world. Today I don't thank him for that. True, money came with fame. There were garden parties, receptions and what not ! Yes, that was the cause of my ego, my self-esteem. With this white silver, you certainly can buy a pack of cigarettes, a bottle of whisky but not mental peace .....

He mentions in this letter that he was so pure that people called him Swami Vivekananda, eunuch, etc. But later on it was women it seems, who took the initiative. They hunted him down held him. He was compelled to write love letters to different girls. In the same letter he mentions about his wife :

My marriage seems to have been a dream. She is so pure, so loving. No one who gets a partner like her can go astray. But

alas ! I was different. I love my wife deeply. Only God knows how much I love her. And yet .... I have not treated her with love or kindness. She endures all my sadistic inflictions without a murmur. And yet her husband !

One can take the statements about his purity, only with a pinch of salt. His boyhood friends, such as G.P. Sankaramangalam, do not wholly subscribe to his plea of perfect innocence. In a sense, he was building up a defence line before his venerable teacher.

The Poet Leaves Madras

One day in December 1944, the poet suddenly developed a severe pain in the abdomen. His friends took him to a clinic and the pain was diagnosed as that of appendicitis. Without wasting much time he was operated upon. Consequently he had to be an in-patient for a few days. During his post-surgical convalescence he was much worried about the letters that would be coming in his address. Because he knew that among them will be those written by his Devi. He muttered 'letter, letter' in his delirium. One of the boys attending on the poet was the son of his heroine. He thought he would go to the Law College and collect the poet's letters. He went and found on the letter board a familiar hand. Was it not his mother's handwriting? What could it be? His curiosity was aflame and he tore it open to find an impassioned love letter! It upset him and instead of going to the nursing home he ran to the lodge and broke open the poet's box. There, he and his brother found a bundle of letters all written by their mother. They could not believe their eyes. Were they dreaming? Was it their mother who was pouring out her heart in fits of excitement? Something was going wrong somewhere. But first things first. They promptly made a bonfire of the letters and threw out the box and the poet's entire belongings.

The poet returned from the nursing home weak and sickly and found to his dismay his belgongings strewn all over the place and the boys in a menacing mood. He understood. It was a clear notice for his own forcible removal. He quietly picked up his belongings and left the place, without a word to even his relative Sankaramangalam. He left Madras for Edappally. With a frail frame and an unkempt beard, he looked the very picture of despondency. His wife and

children were not there to receive him, since they had already gone to their parents.

The poet's mother received him with mixed feelings. He was so shattered in spirit that he could not even talk to her. Days went by and the future appeared bleak. Luckily for the poet, a close relative arrived to patch up the quarrel between the volatile poet and the aggrieved woman. He took the poet to his wife's house and was persuaded to beg everybody's pardon. He requested his wife to return and she dutifully obliged.

The poet looked a changed man. Peace was reigning in the household. But it did not last long. It was at this time that the call came from the proprietors of Mangalodayam Publishing Company, requesting the poet to assist them in editing their prestigious magazine. Prof. Joseph Mundasseri, the Chief Editor, was busy with his teaching assignment. Mundasseri was actually in search of a competent assistant and he found the right man in Changampuzha. He shifted to Trichur and started work in earnest. The poet was bristling with ideas. As we have seen before, he was already in love with European literature and therefore translations from World Classics proved to be a great attraction for him. Then came seriously written book-reviews. All these ideas were put into practice. Apart from the editorial board, there was a board of critics too and I was asked to be a member of that board. In a letter he wrote to me on 14 April, 1948 he writes:

My dear Guptan,

> I want your sincere help ....
>
> You will be a member of the Book Review Committee. You will have full freedom of expression, but one thing we insist upon is that there should be no personal attack on the author. The length of the review may be as long as four pages, not more. Your name in full will appear along with the review and you will get a remuneration of five rupees.

The Review Committee was impressive, with A. Balakrishna Pillai's name on top. Kuttipuzha Krishna Pillai, another of his heroes was there too. I was the youngest of the group. I knew well that it was Changampuzha's liberal mind that got me into that distinguished group. Naturally I felt proud. Many writers in later life have expressed

their indebtedness to Changampuzha for encouraging them in their formative years.

The Progressive Writers' Association

The Progressive Writers' Association of Kerala had by this time become a live force. Young writers who were not particularly known for their scholarship in any language had suddenly become important. New writing, inspite of the cynicism of the die-hards, was heartily welcomed by the readers. Most of them were short-story writers such as Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai, Kesava Dev, Ponkunnam Varkey, S.K. Pottekkatt, et al. They were animated advocates of the down-trodden, the lowly, neglected farm worker and the poverty-stricken villager. Prose, which was hitherto considered less important than poetry, suddenly shot into the limelight. It was at such a time that the All Kerala Progressive Writers' Association held its second anniversary at Kottayam (1945, May 29—30). Changampuzha was chosen as the President of the Young Writers' session. (And I was one of the speakers.) It was in a way an honour bestowed upon the poet. And the poet made the best use of the situation by ventilating his bold ideas with vehemence. It was a long speech (seventy pages) well-prepared and printed in advance as a booklet. It surveyed the contemporary literary scene, denounced the old and the orthodox, defended new writing and praised the younger writers. With the air of a zealot he delivered the speech in an assertive tone. The audience was appreciative and endured the ninety minute speech with great patience. Paradoxically the speaker acclaimed the contributions of great aesthetes such as Walter Pater, Benedito Croce, D'Anuncio and Yon Noguchi.

A Marxist critic came out with a strong protest. He reminded the readers that Europe had rejected those fascist reactionaries and worshippers of pure beauty and had installed new images, those of Alexei Tolstoy, Ilya Ehrenberg and others. This protest was the result of a historic schism in the Progressive movement between left and right. Leftist writers accepted only those writings with a slant towards communist ideology.

But Changampuzha, with his vast reading, did not care much for such literary prejudices. He was always on the side of the classics.

The speech was commendable also for the emphasis it gave to the development of prose, particularly literary criticism. He praised the younger writers unreservedly.

Ignore the impiety of its tone yet the speech remains an impressive piece of critical writing. Along with this, one can also read his long introduction to *Sankalpa Kaanti* and the still longer one to *Sudhaangada*. To my mind, no other poet, including even that redoubtable scholar Ulloor Parameswara Iyer, had absorbed so much of Western literature. Of course, much of this taste was created by Kesari A. Balakrishna Pillai through his consistently heterodox but comprehensive writings. Balakrishna Pillai was a great admirer of French and Scandinavian masters and had denounced English literature as the least imaginative of Europe's writing. Our writers who never ventured to go beyond the narrow confines of English writing had seldom bothered to read Ibsen or Balzac or Strindberg. To most Indians, English, the language of the colonisers, was the only other langauge worthy of study and its literature, the only model for emulation.

In a letter the poet wrote to me during this time he asks me to translate a Russian classic and I did make a tentative start with Gogol's *Dead Souls*, which I am sorry to say, was abandoned after some time.

Changampuzha also encouraged me to collect my scattered writings and undertook to publish it through Mangalodayam. But I did not have enough courage to tie up my amateur stuff in book form. I say this only to underscore his solicitous interest in the literary endeavours of his friends. He too, like Kesari Balakrishna Pillai, wanted to be a galvanizer of sorts and he did succeed to a great extent. He himself translated a good deal during the Mangalodayam days. Anton Chekhov's *The Bear* and *Proposal*, Gerhart Hauptmann's *Hannelle*, Materlinks's *Pellis and Melisanda*, Singrid Undset's *The Vampire* and a Yiddish work, *The Immortal Song*. These translations must have been done in great speed. Yet, they show the poet's mastery over prose. He followed the original works faithfully. In addition to these prose translations, he also translated two immortal poems— Solomon's *Divine Songs* and Jayadeva's *Gitagovindam*. He was rather apologetic when he took

up *Gitagovindam* on the plea that he was not much of a Sanskrit Scholar.

> Pardon my foolhardy adventure
> I know I am no competent scholar (30-1-1945)

Changampuzha was by no means a 'bhakta', yet he was fascinated by the poetry of Solomon and Jayadeva. He did not care to go into the inner meaning of these immortal love-poems. In Jayadeva it was the lustful metaphors and the jingling of words that fascinated him. He was indeed our Jayadeva without his devotion. He wrote a provocative Foreword in which he argued that the typical Hindu had no objection to obscenity or gross violation of moral principles if it comes in the guise of religion. He is unable to see any spiritual meaning in this famous poem. To him it was nothing but the acme of 'Sambhoga Sringara,' recollected by Radha in her 'Vipralambha' state.

As we now look back on the large quantity of translations accomplished by the poet, we feel that he was not very prudent in his selections. It was more fun than firmness of disposition. It was also a kind of intellectual exercise for him. With regard to translating poetry he had a theory which maintained that expansion is not a literary crime. A couplet spills over and becomes a quartet. A quartet expands into a hexameter. His favourite poet Shelley echoes in several of his lines such as :

> Heard melodies are sweet
> But those unheard are sweeter
> or
> Love's very pain is sweet

etc. appear in expanded versions.

The End

His Trichur days were, on the whole, exciting and profitable too. The employer, A.K.T.K.M. Vasudevan Nampoothiri, was an aristocrat with an agreeable disposition. He did not interfere in the editor's work. The literary circle consisting of Prof. Joseph Mundassery, Vaikom Muhammed Basheer and P.C. Kuttikrishnan was stimulating. And liquor often added to the stimulation. But the shadow of tragedy followed Changampuzha there too. A child was born to him in January 1946 and the astrologers predicted ominous consequences for the father.

Our poet had often talked about death with indifference. But now everything was changed. He was forced to think seriously. He now had something to look forward to. He had ample means to live by and yet death was threatening to swallow him. The child as predicted died in less than a year. Now it was his turn, he reckoned, and his health steadily declined.

The first physician he met diagnosed his illness wrongly and the treatment misfired. He was actually suffering from acute tuberculosis, when the physician treated him for rheumatism. Friends suggested the name of a well-known TB specialist of Coimbatore. The poet was taken to Dr. Marar's clinic at Coimbatore. Marar at once realised the seriousness of the disease. He knew it was too late and hence advised him to go back and have himself treated at home.

He came back, and even while suffering, looked after Mangalodayam. He wrote to several friends for articles, wrote poems and completed the translation of Jayadeva's *Gitagovindam*. Such hectic activity naturally aggravated his illness. Friends suggested one more meeting with Dr. Marar. But the poet preferred the Mangalodayam Nursing Home at Trichur. The clock of life was ticking away and on the eighth day all was over. As Victor Hugo wrote,

Some mighty angel was (perhaps) standing there
with outstretched hands waiting
for the soul of this fellow angel.

A year ago he had addressed death thus :—

O Death! It is days and months since I began
Waiting with impatience
The approaching festival of death
Alone in this lovely mansion

And now it came with sure and silent steps and snatched him away. That was the tragic end of a tempestuous life marked by emotional extravagance and poetic exuberance. It sent shockwaves across the length and breadth of the Malayalam-speaking world. Spontaneous obituaries, and mournful editorials followed. Every one — even those who seldom read poety — felt that it was a personal loss. Such was his popularity.

The Pessimist

When Changampuzha burst on the Malayalam poetic arena he was at once recognised as a genius. Young men were raving about him while the old grudgingly admitted his unusual gifts. There was something magnetic about his lines. All the young poets of the period wished to write like him. Imitations were aplenty and yet he was unique. He was our first lyricist who spoke uninhibitedly about his emotions, his sufferings and his suffocating experience.

His poetic career roughly covered a period of seventeen years, but within that short period, he had composed a great amount of genuine poetry. When he died there were a number of poems waiting to be compiled into collections. In final reckoning, there were fifty eight volumes, including those posthumously published. Many likened him to an angel a 'gaana gandharva' who came down to the earth on account of some curse. Indeed, Changampuzha was the victim of some curse. Otherwise how could he live in such imprudent recklessness? When he started life he had no money and had to beg but when the end came he had earned enough and spent enough and more.

No contemporary poet had earned such admiration. He was indeed a people's poet, not in the sense Marxists use, but in the way he reached the remotest corners. Was it his lyrical excellence or was it his erotic evocations? Indeed there was a bit of a Casanova in him. But that was not his only quality. His verbal music was inimitable and his flights of fancy incomparable.

True, he went too much after the jingling of sounds, which provoked Sanjayan and company to take their critical cudgels against him. They thought his poetry was verbosity at its worst. That was certainly very uncharitable and now reading his lines at this distance of seventy years, we know his strength was much more than mere music. He was a rare genius who appears once in a century.

Though love was his main concern he gave expression to a wide variety of experiences. He could sing songs in praise of our ancient glory. He could also vehemently condemn the pretentions of our sanctimonious hypocrites. Towards the middle of his career, he had cast off his pessimism and had come out with candid protests and a healthier view of the world. He too, like the angry poets of the period, spoke up for the poor and the downtrodden.

The Longer Poems

***Mohini** (1944)*

It was Browning's *Porphyria's Lover*' that inspired our poet to write a similar poem and the result was *Mohini*. It first appeared in an annual number of the *Mathrubhoomi* in 1935 but came out as a book only in 1944.

Changampuzha, as we have already noticed, was fascinated by abnormal psychology Browning's poem is a beautiful example of sadism, the kind of sexual perversion characterised by maltreatment of the opposite sex. Changampuzha's hero Somasekharan, in a moment of delirious happiness, stabs his sweetheart and kills her, advancing the fallacious argument that she should die at that supreme moment to immortalise her supernal beauty. Unfortunately, our poet did not pay attention to the subtle details which Browning beautifully wove into the poem to make the abnormal look normal. In Browning's poem the hero strangles his lady love to death almost unconsciously, by winding her beautiful hair around her neck. It was certainly a perverse expression of love. Yet there is a touch of probability within the improbable.

Changampuzha's hero perpetrates a deliberate act. The dagger appears from nowhere and he performs the act with a masterly stroke. Even this obviously irrational poem had its ready admirers. But the satirist Sanjayan came out with his characteristically corrosive attack. He condemned the poem as not only unethical but irrational too.

***Yavanika** (1946)*

This is a poetic adaptation of Rabindranath Tagore's lyrical story *Victory*. It is a tale full of poetic charm. The hero is himself a poet,

a highly gifted one but self-effacing and was attached to the royal court. One day, there came a scholarly poet full of pedantry and hauteur. The king arranged a contest between the two poets. The king and his courtiers were awed by the pundit and his ballyhoo. But the king's discerning daughter, who was always seated behind a silk curtain in the durbar hall, knew the real worth of the local poet. She was a silent admirer of the poet and he had sensed it too:

> Doubts never arose in his mind
> as to whose shadow it was
> that moved behind the screen
> and whose ankles they were
> that sang to the time of his
> beating heart (Tagore)

The poet was inspired by her silent admiration. One day the princess sent her maid to the poet with her message of love. The maid herself falls in love with the poet and it became the scandal of the village. In the poetic contest the pedantic poet was declared winner by the king and the humble local poet returns home humiliated. He was totally upset and became sick and now waits for the inevitable end. The love and sympathy of the princess were like flowers wasted on a corpse.

Our poet has, in a manner of speaking, smuggled his own vision of poetry into this poem. He has also ventilated his anger against pedantry and conservative stupidity which often gets ready applause while the genuine stuff goes unrecognised and unhonoured.

***Manaswini** (1948)*

This is one of his last poems, perhaps the very last. Introducing this poem Dr. S.K. Nayar goes into raptures. Let me quote Dr. Nayar:

> As I got this poem by post I devoured it. I read it again and again, until I learned it by heart. It thrilled me like no other poem of his. There must be a strong urge behind it, I thought, and wrote to him asking for an explanatory note. He obligingly wrote back. "There is nothing very special about it," he said, "But it was my wife's unbounded love and endurance that touched every

tendon of my heart to pen those lines. Her patient nursing during these days of my illness stirred my heart beyond measure and I wrote the poem. Let me add, my illness is going from bad to worse."

This does not mean that the poem is all about his wife. It is at once a ghastly vision and a dreamy recapitulation. A penitent poet remorseful about his past misdeeds, feelingly pays tributes to his faithful wife who stood by him with fortitude and forbearance during his reckless days. As he now looks at her emaciated form he is scared by the ghostly figure that was once the very picture of beauty and poise. As he recalls her youthful figure, images come crowding into his mind, a bunch of yellow flowers, an angel without wings, glistering waves of gold, etc. But, alas, everything is now gone and in great agony he asks her :-

> Why did you choose to become my spouse? I pity your horoscope!
>
> Beautiful maidens came one after the other to take my hand. They praised me in glowing words. But they were after money and I shuddered. But you said, 'I want only your tuneful songs/ your reed flute is pure gold to me ....' And now you bleed like a bird stricken with a hunter's arrow.

He concludes the poem with the following excited lines:—

> Pain, pain, intoxicating pain
> Let it soak my whole being
> And then will rise from my soul,
> A soft and tender note of divine song.

As in several other poems of Changampuzha we notice his ceaseless flirtation with pain and his caressing concern for death. Here was a poet who reached the connoisseur and the common man with equal ease and facility. His was the magic wand that set stones to music. True, he wept too often but made weeping itself a fine art. He could also roar like a lion when he felt like it. He had self-confidence and no force on earth could stop him or the incessant flow of his music. One thing he always asserted—his liberty to write. He once expressed thus :—

> No one ever asked me to write poetry and no one taught me how to write. I have not waited in whispering humbleness before anyone. For, whatever I have written, good or bad, I alone am responsible. I am the supreme master of all my utterances and I shall go on with my verse as long as my inspiration stirs within me. (In a letter to a friend)

And he did, to his last breath.

Selections from Poetry

Manaswini

Translated by G.S. Pillai

I

As morning burst into flames of glory
Like a bunch of yellow flowers,
Beloved, you came before me, beautiful and bright,
Like a golden beam of delight.

The gold dome of the temple
Glowed afar in the morning light;
Atop its golden flagstaff
Fluttered a colourful flag.

Beyond, among the snow-capped mountains,
Girdled with emerald-green forests,
As the water nymph Dawn
Made her offerings with myriad beams of gold,
A divine melody filled and overflowed the forest air,
As though the unseen forest deities
Whose halo alone betrayed their lordly presence
Played upon the viewless strings of Art!

As the soft yellow light spread,
The mists cleared
And a sweet murmur arose among the leaves.

On your beautiful brow
Adorned with a *tilak* of sandalwood paste,
Dark blue curls of hair played
Like a row of lovely honey bees.
Your face shone like a fresh lotus
Arising from the depths of virtue;
Your dark tresses of curly hair
Tied at the end and adorned with a single rose
Resembled a huge black snake
With a single hood, its thousand bodies intertwined,
Lying face-downward on a sandalwood creeper.

You were sweet like a song, like a poem,
My beloved ! Seeing you, my heart leaped up
And along with it a poem—
A poem like a red, red flower
Dripping with my heart's blood!

A mad desire awoke in me
To write and write and create beauty—
Seizing the rainbow for a pen
And dipping it in moonlight!
My fancy soared and I lost myself in the oblivion of
self-effacement.
I wandered in a magic world
Where dreams flowered in profusion;
Spellbound I stood
In a magnetic field of ecstasy.

II

The scene changed,
Ruthless Time played havoc with our fortunes.
Smallpox made you hideous, blotting out your beauty.
You lost your vision, your hearing.
Your skin, smoother and lovelier than alabaster,
Was marred, O, marred forever
By a thousand ugly scars!

Tragedy, O, why, why did you ever become my spouse?
Many women came to me before
And those that came cared only for gain!
They praised me to the skies—
Their eyes gleamed with the lust for gold—
I was shocked.

But then came you, you angel without wings,
you made no demands,
You saw only the poet in me and you were content!
You thrilled me,
Bringing eternity to my doors!
A wonder-world opened up before my eyes,
As if by magic,
And I was its crowned king!

And what has become of you today, beloved?
My heart burns, it bleeds!

As I step on the threshold of this once-happy home,
O, my deaf, blind darling,
How is it that your face lights up
With sudden sweet smiles?

When that light,
Coming out of the eternal darkness of your world,
Fills every crevice of this abode of ours with radiance,
Why, O, why should I grope in darkness?

As evil instincts
Conspire and gather strength,
It gives me power, stuff to resist their onslaught
And the struggle ends reducing them to helpless impotence.

No protest notes have ever jarred
Upon the harmonious goodness of your soul.
And yet, and yet,
Does not a voiceless anguish
Linger in your innermost heart?

In that face which has lost
The power of the play of emotions,
Do not occasions show
Some deep lines of smouldering grief?
In the solemn stillness of souls, sad solitude,
Do not tears flow freely from your eyes?

In the dead of night during the July months,

when rains rage with thunderstorms
And you sleep in peace like a babe
Oblivious of the riot of the elements,
As deafening roars arise
Deep down from the fathomless caves
Of the foaming, perilous seas,
Sending a shudder through your frame,
Does not your harassed soul
Writhe in an anguish of undivinable cause,
Like a helpless fawn
Under the fatal arrow of the hunter?

Waves upon waves of darkness
Surge and solidify in your world.
No colour, no light,
No shade, no sound.
Not even a glowworm in that dark immensity!

May be, when in fondness I approach,
A shadow stirs for a moment;
And then, and then that endlessly still night!

Overwhelmed with grief, helpless, powerless,
I escape into the realm of fancy.
O, this anguish, heady anguish!
Let me leap into its depths,
And as I go down and down,
Let music, sweet music, flow from my soul!

Look Not So Deep

Translated by the poet

Look not so deep into it, dear.
The well has its own abysses:
Each abyss its own charms
And each charm its own poison;
The more you approach it,
The more you are tortured!

Reflected shines the far-off hillocks,
Robed in green, at the depths of its bottom:
Scarce could you suspect anything of its
Death-hidden caverns.
Silently numerous they stand
With their wide-open jaws
Breathing out venom—
Turn away your head, dear,
From its all-conquering magic
And rest your gaze upon
Those, your ever-changing mountains

Hard they seem, but hardly threatening;
Misty they appear, but never misleading;
Where all fatigue could have dream-woven repose
And every thirst ever-quenching nectar.

That enchanted fountain where Death abides your host,
That uncharming mountain where Life welcomes the most
One or the other; I falter as you are my dear,
Ah, Life, Life, I adore you, sweet, forever!

The Singing Devil

Translated by K. Sridharan Nair

Section 8

Stupid world that garlands the singing devil,
And lauds him as a heavenly singer!
Is there no limit to your ignorance and folly?
Why don't you look at me and study my face?
What, after all, do you know of me!
Don't you see my sharp fangs, hooked and fierce?
Don't you see the hellfire that burns in my eyes?
This tongue athirst and drenched in maddening blood?
Look at me, dear, and tell me the truth
Am I the heavenly singer?
Or God's most favoured flautist?
Am I not a horrid, terrifying dragon of Hades?
I will sing you to sleep and while yet in sleep suck out your warm blood,
I shall befriend you with a treacherous smile
And engage you with a caressing touch,

And then slowly, softly dig my nails into your downy soft flesh—
Startled, you draw back, and then with a winsome smile
I hug you to your delight while my talons work.
Thus again and again
I pierce your flesh deeper and deeper
When all of a sudden, with a roar
I leap up and dance, beating, tearing at your stomach
And dig up your entrails dripping blood
Helpless and in agony of death
Your limbs in wild frenzy move
I go on drinking your hot blood to my fill.
Then donning your entrails
I dance around in Satanic glee.
Now look this side once again please,
Do you, now atleast, recognise this devil?
Away, with all your speed
If you love yourself, and love your life!
Get away quick,
I am not the minstrel of the gods,
I am a singing and dancing devil.

Section 10

My darling, dismiss me like a frightful dream,
And for God's sake forget this murderous canker of a man.
I tormented you beyond all limits
And heartless as I am, I crushed between my fingers
Your tender flower-soft self.

I wonder who else would have a mind like yours
So sweet, so fragrant, so innocent!
I was aware of your compelling charm,
Yet I came not to you to console or caress,
Far worse, I tore up the soft petals of your heart
With my wicked, vicious claws.
Unable to stand the pain
You let out your grief
In heart-rending sobs,
While I was away,
Hugging, as ever,
Ever new pleasures,
Ever new delights,
And flitting from flower to flowers fresh
Hovering around and humming a carefree tune.
You knew it all,
Yet how could you,
Your heart smouldering in anguish
Remain at my side till I left on my own, O! innocent one.
It was so thrilling, so pleasurable, your loving rites
Yet I cannot remember any time
When I thanked you
For all you did for me.
Beat as I am, I contemptuously brushed you aside
Yet could I not see even the shadow of a cloud on your face
Wonder of wonders,
How could such a delicate heart as yours

Hold in restraint the thumping volcano within.

Changampuzha Krishna Pillai (1911-1948) was the first Malayalam lyricist who spoke uninhibitedly about his deepest emotions and his suffocating agonies. Here was a poet who reached the connoisseur and the common man with equal ease and facility.

In a brief span of thirty seven years Changampuzha produced a prodigious amount of poetry : charming, sensuous, delectable poetry. The lyrical excellence of his poetry attracted masses. There was something so infectious in his sincere outpourings that his lines reached the remotest corner of the Malayalam-speaking world. In several poems of Changampuzha we notice his ceaseless flirtation with pain and his caressing concern for death.

S. Guptan Nair is a renowned Malayalam critic, essayist and lexicographer. He has more than eight books to his credit including an English-Malayalam Dictionary. He won the Sahitya Akademi award for his book of essays, *Tiranjedutta Prabandhangal* (Selected Essays) in 1983.

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