

# KUMARAN ASAN

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THONNAKKAL**

KUMARAN ASAN

(Monograph with renderings of selected poems)

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KUMARAN ASAN (1873-1924)

## FOREWORD

This booklet is intended to introduce the great poet Kumaran Asan to readers outside the circle of the Malayalam-speaking people. Asan is well-known in Kerala and much has been written about him in Malayalam. But though almost half a century has gone by since his death and his birth centenary comes early next year, little is known about him beyond the borders of Kerala. This publication is a modest attempt to fill in the gap.

The Kumaran Asan Memorial Managing Committee which brings out this booklet is a body constituted by the Government of Kerala to administer the Memorial and to promote Asan studies. It was a happy departure in the cultural policy of the state when on the initiative of Prof. Joseph Mundassery, the then Education Minister, Kumaran Asan's cottage at Thonnakkal in the Trivandrum District was taken over from the poet's family on 26th January 1958 with a view to preserving it as a national monument. The foundation of a new Memorial Building was laid on

7-11-1958 and it was opened on 24-7-1966. The first Managing Committee was formed in 1965; the Committee has a three-year term and the present one is the third in the line. The Committee looks after the Memorial, maintains a library, helps scholars in Asan studies and conducts meetings and seminars. It has also brought out a collection of essays on the poet in Malayalam. Now the Committee is engaged in organizing the celebration of Kumaran Asan's birth centenary which falls on April 12, 1973.

This booklet consists of a short essay on Kumaran Asan's life and work and renderings of a few selections from his poetry. The Committee is grateful to the eminent writers who have made these contributions.

THONNAKKAL,  
12-4-1972.

K. PRABHAKARAN  
SECRETARY,  
KUMARAN ASAN MEMORIAL  
MANAGING COMMITTEE.

## KUMARAN ASAN

N. Kumaran Asan was one of the makers of modern Kerala. Along with Ullur S. Parameswara Iyer and Vallathol Narayana Menon, he belonged to the Trinity of the Romantic Revival in Malayalam poetry. But he was something more than an original poet who rebelled against outmoded literary conventions. Born in a community condemned for centuries to untouchability, he fought against the inequities of our caste-ridden society and passionately sang of individual dignity, social freedom and the brotherhood of man. The first great creative genius to come from the socially backward classes in modern Kerala, he unconsciously asserted, by his very emergence as a major poet, the cultural equality which was due to the down-trodden sections of our society. Thus he was, in more ways than one, a symbol of the consciousness of modern Kerala.

Kumaran, as he was called in his early years, was born on the 12th of April 1873 at Kayikkara, a small coastal village some twenty five miles to the north of Trivandrum. His

father was a petty trader by profession, but was in his own way a cultivated man who enjoyed some social position in the locality. Kumaran received little formal schooling. He had his first lessons in Malayalam and Sanskrit under village schoolmasters. This was followed by a few years' study at a Malayalam school. He was for a few months a schoolmaster and for two years a trader's clerk. After this interval he pursued his study of Sanskrit for another year.

It was in his 17th year that he came into contact with Shri Narayana Guru, the greatest social reformer of modern Kerala. Shri Narayana, who belonged like Asan to the large and industrious but socially backward Eazhava community, was then in the initial stages of his epoch-making career. Asan, who was of a religious bent of mind, was fascinated by the emerging spiritual leader of his community and he spent two years in close association with Shri Narayana. These were years of an intensive study of Hindu religious philosophy.

Shri Narayana Guru recognised the rare intellectual and spiritual gifts of his young disciple and decided to give him ample opportunities for development. Accordingly he was sent to Bangalore where a highly

talented member of the community, Dr. Palpu, occupied a high position in the Mysore Government service. Asan was a student of the Sanskrit College in Bangalore for a while. But he had to leave Bangalore owing to the outbreak of an epidemic in the city. From there he went to Madras and then to Calcutta where he spent two years. The five years he spent outside Kerala were of the greatest significance in the development of Asan's personality. These were years of strenuous study of Hindu and Buddhist philosophy and Sanskrit literature. It was at this time that he was also introduced to English language and literature with which he became closely acquainted. The wider horizons in the big cities must have extended his personality, and, in particular, the two years he spent in the heart of renascent Bengal must have enriched his inner life in an indefinable way.

In 1900 Asan returned to Kerala. He stayed with the Guru at his headquarters at Aruvippuram, a village to the south of Trivandrum, giving lessons in Sanskrit and lending a helping hand in the conduct of the affairs of the temple there. In 1903 the Shri Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (S.N.D.P. Yogam) was started for the all-round



uplift of the Eazhava community. The Yogam was to play a great role in the social life of the State. Asan was its first General Secretary and he shouldered this heavy burden for 16 long years. To organise a socially, economically and educationally backward community of millions with a view to fighting for elementary human rights suppressed by age-old conventions was no easy task. The intellectual and spiritual gifts and the sheer physical energy needed for such an endeavour could not be expected from an average man. Asan's superhuman efforts in this direction paid rich dividends to the community. By the time he gave up his Secretaryship (1919), his community was well-knit and set firmly on the road to advancement. Asan was also the Editor of the Yogam journal *Vivekodayam* during his Secretaryship and he represented the community in the Travancore State Legislature as a nominated member for many years from 1913. He followed the moderation of a Liberal in his activities for social reform and he had little interest in the purely political aspects of the resurgence of India.

From his early youth Asan lived away from home, at first pursuing scholarship and then devoting himself to social work. Hence

many members of the community expected him to become a monk and be the Guru's spiritual successor. But he disappointed them. For in his early forties he fell in love with an accomplished girl whom he eventually married. It was in his fortyfifth year (1918) that Asan married Smt. Bhanumathi Amma. Two sons were born to the couple. Marriage and parenthood made him turn his attention to the material basis of life. He bought a piece of land in the village of Thonnakkal, fifteen miles to the north of Trivandrum on the Quilon road, and built a small house there. It is here that the Government of Kerala has built a memorial to Asan.

Asan was snatched away from us when he was still in the prime of life. He died at the age of fiftyone in a boat accident, the wreck of the *Redeemer*, at a place called Pallana near Alleppey on the 16th of January 1924. His mortal remains were buried near the site of the tragedy and the spot is known as Kumarakoti. Kayikkara, Thonnakkal and Pallana are three places of pilgrimage for the lovers of Malayalam poetry and for those who cherish humanistic values in life.

It is primarily as a poet of genius that Asan will be remembered by posterity. He

began to scribble verses when he was still in his teens and he continued his devoted worship of the muse upto the last moment of his life. His early poetry showed only a competent versifier in the neo-classical tradition. It was his later poetry, the poetry of his mature years, that brought out his originality and won for him an abiding place among the very highest in the line of poets who have enriched Malayalam literature.

In addition to a few dozen shorter pieces collected under the titles **The Garden** (*Pushpavati*) **A Chain of Gems** (*Manimala*) and **A Garland of Wild Flowers** (*Vanamala*) and a free rendering of Sir Edwin Arnold's 'Light of Asia' under the title *Shri Buddhacharitham*, Asan's mature works include the ode **The Fallen Flower** (*Veena Poovu*-1908), the monologue **The Meditations of Seetha** (*Chinthavishtayaya Seetha* - 1919), the elegy **The Lament** (*Prarodanam*-1919) and the narrative poems *Nalini* (1911), *Leela* (1914), **The Tragic Plight** (*Duravastha* - 1923) **The Outcaste Nun** (*Chandalabhikshuki*-1923) and **Compassion** (*Koruna* - 1924).

*The Fallen Flower* is a landmark in the development of Malayalam poetry. The first significant Malayalam poem in the new romantic strain, it delineates, under the sym-

bolism of a flower, the vicissitudes of human life and the essential tragedy at the core of existence. In *The Meditations of Seetha*, the poet probes the depths of the consciousness of Seetha as she reviews her past in the solitude occasioned by the departure of her sons to Ayodhya with Valmiki in order to participate in Shri Rama's 'Aswamedhayaga'. With luminous insight the poet explores the whole gamut of her emotions - wounded pride, resentment, love for her husband, solicitude for his welfare and philosophical detachment which enables her to view steadily the pageant of life with its chequered pattern of light and shade. In *The Lament* the poet mourns the death of A. R. Raja Raja Varma, one of the great builders of modern Malayalam literature.

*Nalini* and *Leela* which are named after the heroines are dramatic narratives dealing with the tragedy of young love. In the former the heroine's love is frustrated because the hero, who is inspired by a divine discontent, renounces the world. The heroine loses all interest in life and wanders into the forest where she is saved from suicide by a 'yogini'. She leads an ascetic life with the 'yogini', but accidentally meets her lover and dies in the rapture of reunion. In the latter,

the lovers are separated because the heroine is married to another young man against her will. She is unable to forget her lover, and, when freed by the unexpected death of her husband, she wanders along with a friend in search of her lover. At last she meets him, but he is now a madman. She embraces him, but he escapes and jumps into a river and she follows him

*The Outcaste Nun* and *Compassion* have Buddhist legends for their themes. In the former an outcaste girl who falls in love with Ananda, one of Buddha's disciples, goes in search of him to the great Master's presence and is converted by him to the way of spiritual love. The poet makes use of the opportunity provided by the story to condemn social inequality and to glorify love. In the latter, a fascinating courtesan, Vasavadatha, falls in love with Upaguptha, one of the disciples of Buddha and invites him to her house; but the young ascetic refuses to come to her until she is spiritually prepared to receive him. He meets her at last at the burial ground where she awaits death, her beautiful body mutilated by the executioner's axe as a punishment for a crime committed by her in the course of her over-amorous life. Upaguptha administers to her the message of Buddha, the

message of 'Nirvana' and gives her his love, the highest love being compassion.

*The Tragic Plight* is the only narrative poem in which the poet chooses a contemporary setting. Here a Brahmin girl, Savithri, who providentially escapes the holocaust of the Moplah Mutiny in Malabar, takes refuge in the hut of an untouchable of the lowest class, a Pulaya, and finally invites him to share her life. This poem contains much of Asan's overt criticism of untouchability and caste and is rated high by the champions of progressive literature though the poet himself considered it inferior in poetic quality.

It was in the longer poems that Asan's genius found its fullest expression. But his shorter pieces are of no inferior order. They include charming children's poems, profound hymns of universal appeal, vivid descriptions of nature and moving reflections on social evils. Some of the shorter poems are occasional verses, but even these are generally of high literary merit.

Asan was the foremost among the Malayalam poets of the Indian Renaissance. Steeped in the ancient Hindu and Buddhist lore of India, he came under the influence of European culture which spurred him on to

explore the essence of Indian thought. Thus he came to his own vision of life, a vision which is essentially tragic. Life is transient and darkened by man's cruelty to man; but life at its best is irradiated with love even under the shadow of sorrow and death; in fact love is the primal force that animates the whole universe. This vision he embodied in forms of rare freshness and genuineness. In the face of the imitative stuff of the neo-classical poets, he asserted the primacy of individual imagination. Thus he created a new movement in Malayalam poetry.

**G. Kumara Pillai**

## POEMS

### DEATH AND THE BEYOND

[ The passage given below forms the eight concluding stanzas of *The Lament* (1919) ]

140

Forbear O Mind ! ... why should you go wild pursuing  
this great man ?

Why do you indulge in this post-mortem dissection  
and exploration ?

Shed your tears : it will relieve your grief.

Let this tired traveller sleep in peace !

In profound awe, let me offer my obeisance and  
depart.

141

One couldn't recognise Death unless she herself comes  
and whispers in one's ear : she never speaks  
aloud from a distance.

Master, in your solicitude for us, you might try this  
day to tell us about her :

I fear it might turn out to be a mute's message  
delivered in darkness



To give up everything, -- to submit to Fate, -- Life to  
end at the pyre ! -- So be it Lord.

We will plant your sacred name and tend it, watering  
it with our tears.

It will grow and spread and bless all the world with  
the sweet smell of its flowers: even the great  
fire of final destruction will not touch it !

I stand lost, at my wit's end, and babble all sorts of  
things: the grief-stricken mind might stray into  
untoward paths.

O Sun, you might be shining with dazzling brightness  
somewhere; but for this world, it is darkness,  
and the glow-worm might wander about in it.

Eyes set on the stars this little worm is flying upwards;  
its wings are frail, and fright is mounting at the  
thought of it, O Lord !

Your mercy alone is its protection; let it not become  
the prey of the night-bird; let no evil befall this  
tiny morsel of your effulgence !

There is no hitch in the heavens: driving his chariot of Dharma, the Sun is certain to arrive in the fulness of splendour: utter darkness will not last for ever.

The shadows of illusory fears will vanish; and into the supreme glory of the Abode of Eternal Bliss, the glow-worm will disappear along with the myriad stars!

Assuming in particles of your own being these opposite of darkness and light in their endless variations, O Eternal Power of Dharma, you perform this Cosmic Ball-dance!

You caress and comfort the devotee of love and feed him with ambrosia; and then on his own he seeks the supreme bliss of immaculate peace beyond all desire and attachment!

Salutation! Salutation!

To that Infine Cosmic Empyrean which holds within it countless worlds and firmaments, that Stupendous Luminance which reduces the dazzling sun into a speck of darkness, --

To that one and only Abode of Eternal Peace, before which the purest happiness fades into sorrow! --

Salutation! Salutation!

(Translated by Kainikkara M. Kumara Pillai)

## REFLECTIONS OF A THIYYA BOY

[ This short poem written in 1908 brings out Asan's deep concern about the miserable plight of his down trodden community. *Thiyya* is another name for *Eazhava*]

Undimmed flourishes envy, and men do forget,  
Alas, they are descended from God;  
Their old innocence has faded into an illusion,  
For among the people thrives nothing but strife.

The humble they plot to trample underneath;  
In assemblies they brag about principles;  
None but the snobs and the crooked flourish;  
The poor and the meek remain low and suffer.

Poverty used to be the scholar's mark,  
But now it belongs to the uneducated;  
No fee was there for instruction in the past,  
But no one without money can acquire it now.

And no one can today hope to prosper  
Without graduation from an English college;  
And then you need a lot of money for it;  
But all our folks are without any wealth.

There aren't many families to boast of amongst us;  
There aren't many people who have high-paid jobs;  
If one or two somehow manage to rise high.  
They too slowly go down; for ours is a big community.

Alas, our future is bleak, and there are some  
Who rejoice in it, while we might not notice;  
Our fortune is on the wane; and not many among us  
Do take any interest in the affairs of the community.

Let these people remain unlettered in the future ✓  
Let them lose jobs and lose their strength :  
With these intentions, some pitiless ones  
Obstruct our schools and our hostels too.

Why shouldst thou wail, then, O Bharat ?  
Thy slavery is thy destiny, O Mother !  
Thy sons, blinded by caste, clash among themselves  
And get killed; what for is freedom, then ?

It is best for us to think of our own good;  
Prosperity comes to anyone with hard work.  
Our luck, alas, arises from the Lord's kindness,  
And our glorious yogam known as S. N. D P.

Believe me, my brothers, we can surely achieve it,  
If united at heart we make the effort.  
Remember the kind Lord who shares his body with his  
consort,  
Remember, He helps those who help themselves.

(Translated by Dr. K. Ayyappa Paniker)

## THE DIVINE NIGHTINGALE

[This poem was written to greet Rabindranath Tagore on his visit to Trivandrum in 1922. It shows Asan's great admiration for the foremost poet of the Indian Renaissance.

*Kairali*: Malayalam; *Thunchan*: Thunchathu Ezhuthacchan, the father of modern Malayalam poetry; *Vanchi*: Travancore ]

O divine nightingale that flies about the glorious garden of the Lord Eternal, singing your songs in unadulterated delight, triumphant are the noble melodies pouring out from your golden throat.

The cool embrace of those nectar-sweet waves even in the idiot's ear arouses the nerves, thrills the heart, melts the mind and enraptures the soul, breaking through its dull somnolence.

Its very gentle but powerful tone sends surge after surge into the encircling air and creates a new dynamic that sets this terrestrial orb bounding towards the Kingdom of God.

Your celestial body is bright with the fine pollen gathered in your flight among the golden blossoms of the moving stars; and the very presence of that luminous body is a delight to the eye.

Else, are you not, great bird, *Ravi*, the sun-god, gently swinging your reddish wings of fine feathery rays in the sky and clearing the earth's face of the inky stain smeared by night?

Besides, does not the tide of Vedic hymns spring from the heart of *Ravi*, the sun, those songs of love that preserve the soundness of the world, checking all disruption concomitant to change?

Hail to you light, hail to your song, hail to you that lovingly fondle with your golden rays all flowers alike, wherever they stand, whatever their colour, whatever the seed from which they sprang

Sing, oh sing, golden nightingale, flying in the garden of the Lord, stroking with the fringes of your wings those divine lotus-feet; and live long in joy for the prosperity of *Viswa*, the world.

Though you are the guest, you have more than entertained our senses with a sumptuous feast of honey. O Rishi-born radiance, the auspicious day of your arrival shall never set for us in darkness.

Bright soul, we greet you, we who are enrobed in a joyous thrill at your very sight, we who are your bond-slaves in love; we greet you in the name of Kairali that has known the caress of Thunchan, in the name of this land of Vanchi

(Translated by G. Kumara Pillai)

## REPLACE THE LAWS

[These lines form the peroration of the poem *The Tragic Plight* (1922). It gives direct expression to Asan's deep feelings about the inequities of the caste system.]

Wake up, oh you gardeners, wake up and toil, spring is at hand.

In this garden enriched by beautiful blossoms on high boughs and low, remember there is not a single flower which does not delight the Lord.

In deference to His will each blossom develops steadily, reaching out to perfection. Beware, their course shall not be hindered by force.

The benign breeze and sunlight and the divine rain water God offers them daily with ever-new joy and he shows no distinction.

Let every flower blossom and waft its fragrance, let every flower radiate its colourful beauty.

Let all open out their petals, let all wax to their fullest growth and gain a sense of well-being.

Weave them in artistic patterns; flowers get enhanced glory if mingled with one another.

It will please the Lord; it is His way, the way of the great Maker of miracles.

Save them from pressure; destroy, be vigilant to destroy, the canker of hatred and malicious rivalry that gnaw into their vitals.

Water the roots with love and offer them the manure of sympathy.

With the golden mean of the dharma of the times, with that golden wire, fence the garden in.

This garden which you rear will, with the splendour of its merits, excel even the garden of Heaven. And the god of gods is sure to felicitate you.

O revered priests of Vedic persuasion, I venture to tell you a truth. I venture, though I have no right, to tell you a truth for fear of our land and our religion, for fear of even your learned selves.

Times have changed, the threads of tradition have become too old, men shall no longer remain bound with this feeble thread which cannot hold.

Come forward and replace the laws, or else they are sure to displace you.

There is a raging wind unceasingly reverberating with this utterance in today's Kerala. Time from all the four directions declares the self-same thing; and even the earth beneath your feet resounds with the din of unrest.

Lost in the midst of pressing preoccupations and the chatter of fawning flatterers, you may not heed it; nay, it may not even reach your ears.



Moved beyond measure by this tragic plight, I utter these  
words:

And if my words lack delicacy, forgive me, for I speak in  
good faith.

Kindly ponder a little, O revered ones, I pray you, this  
lowly self of mine begs you. And I place at your feet the  
humble petition of this doggerel and salute you.

(Translated by G. Kumara Pillai)



