

Kesava Dev (1904-83), primarily a socialist and a realist, was a novelist, short story writer, playwright, critic and social reformer. Identified himself with the lower strata of society, he held revolutionary ideas. In his writings, he poignantly depicted the struggle of the weaker sections for their existence. Some of his novels tended to be tracts on social liberty. His awareness of the modern human situations and his deep sense of the need for social change, deserve special mention. His novel *Ayalkar* which won the Akademi award, gives a masterly social analysis and portrays a number of note worthy characters. He was the President of the Kerala Sahitya Akademi for some time.

Professor **K.P. Sasidharan**, teaches English in a Government College is a writer and critic in Malayalam. In this monograph he vividly describes the life of Kesava Dev and evaluates his works for the benefit of non-Malayalee readers.

Portrait drawing : Bapu

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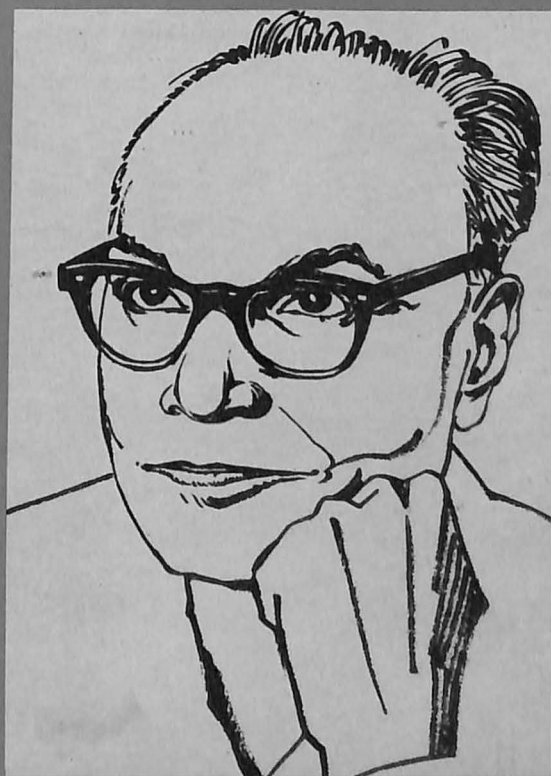
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REVEREL

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

From Nagarjunakonda, 2nd century A.D.

Courtesy: National Museum, New Delhi.

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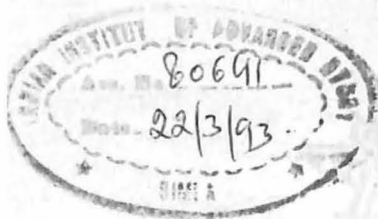
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I

The Man and the Times

Thakazhy, Poonkunnam Varky, Basheer, S.K.Pottekkat, Uroob and Kesava Dev are usually referred to as writers of the Renaissance in Malayalam. Their works of fiction differed considerably from the familiar norms in content as well as in form and their reformist zeal was something never before associated with works of prose fiction. These writers were endowed with a new social awareness and their humanism turned them prophets in arms. Their impact on society was truly amazing. It is not too much to say that in Kerala's socio-political history they can be titled as the Makers of the Modern Age.

Of these writers who carried on a crusade against social evils and injustice, Kesava Dev was the first and perhaps the foremost. He was not merely the principal figure of the movement but its progenitor, its dynamic chief and its most zealous spokesman and campaigner.

The story of Kesava Dev's life should interest any one. Absolutely he was a self-made man. A school drop-out at 13, he rose to become the head of the Academy for Literature in his State. Like Shakespeare, and Charles Dickens Kerala's Kesava Dev was a tramp who turned up a writer, and an outcast of the school who became one of the mentors of his time.

He was born on 20th July 1904 in an interior Village of the former Cochin State by name Ketamangalam. His mother Nalletathu Karthiyani Amma was one of the millions of meek and submissive women of her time. She had no education and no earnings of her own and was abjectly

dependent upon her self-centred uncle, the head of the household. In those days husbands were not expected to be responsible in any manner to their offsprings. Karthiyani Amma's husband was somewhat different. Kochuveetil Appu Pillai, a man of meagre resources, took keen interest in bringing up his children well and in educating them. It was he who gave Kesavan, his sixth child his first lessons in story telling.

The first memorable event in Kesava Dev's life was his asking the landlord's son to shut up when the latter was issuing commands to his father in an abusive language. Appu Pillai was accustomed to it and much more. But the six year old beside him, Kesavan, would not brook it. In fact, he did succeed in cowing down the tyrant. That was in the first year of Kesavan's school-going.

For some six years or so the boy attended school. He was in tattered clothes and for that he was often made fun of by fellow class mates. Kesava Dev, however, reacted to this with fury and took to arms when the occasion demanded it. Those were the formative years of Kesava Dev's life.

The young Kesavan always had a stock of stories of all kinds and with these he carved out for himself a way out as the favourite of certain boys, a sort of unofficial student leader of the school.

In the tenth year of his life, the boy staged a hunger strike at home when he was refused to be taken on a trip to the pilgrimage centre of Sabarimala. In the thirtieth hour of the fast he got his demand conceded and was permitted to join his father and uncle in their journey to the holy hill far away. It was a big adventure in those times traversing across miles and miles of dense forest where elephants roamed and tigers lurched. Back home, he bewitched numerous school boys with his travel accounts and our author's first royalties were lunch time snacks given to him as an honorarium for story telling.

In his thirteenth year Kesava Dev stopped going to school. The incident leading to it is in itself interesting and revealing. On one occasion Kesavan and his gang of friends had taken a sparrow to the class room and made some merriment for the idle class in the absence of the teacher. Soon the teacher appeared on the scene and sensing disorder he began thrashing the boys one by one. When it was Kesavan's turn, he received the blows with uncomplaining dignity. The next miscreant before the

teacher was the local munsif's son. The wrathful disciplinarian suddenly cooled down. With an affectionate word of advice to that boy, he proceeded to whip the rest of the boys. At that point Kesavan got up and openly told the class teacher as to how partial and unjust his act was. But the teacher would not listen. Thereupon the boy shouted to his class-mates: "You are all dogs. Else, you would not study in this school." Saying so, he walked out of the class- room.

For sometime thereafter he engaged himself in various other activities. He even tried to dissuade other boys from attending school. In this battle against injustice he met with little success. Its only outcome was that Kesavan lost interest even in company and merry-making. His mind was in a state of drift.

Then he went about in search of books and periodicals wherever he liked and did a lot of wading through verses. He participated in 'Aksharasloka melas,'* held in the nearby temples on festive occasions. This was rather extra ordinary considering the fact that he did not come from a particularly literary background. His father was an agricultural worker and his maternal and paternal uncles were police constables.

In the following months the lad wandered about in near and remote towns of his state seeking a job. He wanted to be a boat crew but was not successful. He tried to secure employment in a Coir Factory but failed even here. At last after an year's idling at home and roaming, he got a petty job, as a bill collector of a money lender in his home town. The wages he received were very poor. He soon learned that if he were to have a square meal a day, he had to do something else to supplement his income. So he started giving tuitions to children.

The job of Bill Collecting took him to people and books. He came across people who could lend him reading materials. And there the boy was soon poring over the novels of C.V.Raman Pillai, the celebrity of Malayalam fiction. It was a great discovery. With steady zeal he read many a similar story book (Such were Malayalam novels called then). His

* A literary pastime favourite with the Malayalees. It is a game in which one chants a quatrain specifying the letter with which the next should begin his quatrain. He passes on the challenge to his next and so on. Ultimately those who have a poorer stock of verses of the required norm will be eliminated from the game.

interest now was more in collecting books than in levying money due to his employer. So much so, that he was served with warnings on many occasions. Still the boy carried on his work and study.

One day the boy stumbled upon Swami Vivekananda's '*My Master*'. Although it was in English, Kesavan did read it himself with the aid of a small dictionary and in three days' time he translated the entire speech of the Swamiji's into his Malayalam.

In the weeks following, the lad acquired volumes of *Swarajya* and *Young India* and read them through with unremitting enthusiasm. His absorbing interest in books and the eventual neglect of duties resulted in his being thrown out of employment. Now he was a full time tuition master for a time. He joined an association of men with literary ambitions. This helped Kesavan to be acquainted with the works of Charles Dickens and Oliver Goldsmith in this period.

Driven by a certain restlessness and wanderlust characteristic of him although, Kesavan visited the scene of the Vaikom Sathyagraha*. He was also drawn to the Arya Samaj through a speech by Rishi Ram at a meeting held during the festival of Siva at Alwaye where Kesavan had gone as a Khadi cloth vendor. The Samaj doctrine that one born a Sudra could rise to be a Brahmin through his action appealed to him a lot. He read the *Sathyartha Prakasa* by Swami Dayananda Saraswathi and undertook a tedious journey to Trivandrum to meet the Arya Samaj Chief there. Trivandrum was then also, as now, less than 250 Km away from Ketamangalam but in those days it was nothing short of a herculean task to reach the place. He obtained an interview with Rishi Ram and apprised him of his desire to join the movement. He was directed to report at the Samaj headquarters at Palghat farther north from his hometown. He promptly turned up at Palghat and took the Samaj order. The new name which Kesavan assumed for himself was Kesava Dev. His characteristic

* The first significant uprising against oppressive casteism in the State which was a veritable mad-house as Swami Vivekananda put it considering the practices of caste distinctions. Kesavan who was going to give the world a masterpiece titled '*Bhranthalayam*' - (The Mad-house) in a few years time was quite early impressed of the justice of the demands of the lower classes. They were denied the right of passage through highways and entry into places of worship and school. The event of the year 1924 was a landmark in the history of the State.

explanation was: "I was to be either some Das, or some Dev. I never wanted to be anyone's Das. Hence I chose the name Kesava Dev."

Even earlier, the youngman had taken keen interest in offering resistance to communalism and indignity to man wherever he came across it. But now the youthful agitator took an extra active part in the battle against untouchability. Samaj volunteer, in charge of its book-stall, Kesava Dev armed himself with a dagger and along with the other workers led a demonstration against Brahmin conservatives of Palghat who denied the lower classes the right of passage through their part of the township. About a thousand armed goonda champions of Brahminism, fell upon them and beat them left and right. They beat to pulp a youngman who was going to do epoch-making things in the near future.

The incident did not deter the youth from carrying on his crusade against injustice. He plodded on with his quest and sweating as a Samaj missionary going about educating the masses. But doubts suddenly seized him one day. Did not some other matters also mean much, the laws of economics, for instance, and the laws and practice of politics? Gradually he was losing interest in chanting hymns and in performing religious rituals for the renovation of society.

He undertook another journey to Trivandrum. There he had momentous meetings with two of the foremost free-thinkers of the time, A. Balakrishna Pillai, the practitioner of New Criticism of the day and Bodheswaran, poet and freedom fighter.

During his stay at Trivandrum he got acquainted with a youngster who lent him a few novels of Tolstoy's. During his return journey from Trivandrum in a boat, the inquisitive youth read through a book he had bought as he was leaving the city. It was Jack London's *'I have a Right to Live'*. No doubt, Kesava Dev took him for a London rebel as he has himself confessed, and seemed to see in him the very model he had looked for. Odd as it should seem now he was now chanting to himself.

'thejocithejo mayi dehi'

(Let me be lively; let me be strong)

Back home the unemployed young Kesava Dev had several confrontations with his uncles. His mother and aunties however took tender care of him. With their backing, he went about in his usual style,

collecting books and ideas and poring through tales of the anguish of mankind.

He was also greatly attracted by the activities of the school of rationalists like Sahodaran Ayyappan and M.C. Joseph. But he could not accept Ayyappan's solution of embracing Buddhism as a remedy to the ills of casteism, the entire Hindu community at the time was suffering from. He stated his views on the subject in what might be called an essay and sent it to Ayyappan's weekly magazine '*Sahodaran*'. They readily published it. That was Kesava Dev's first published work. And the year was 1926.

The editor also wrote a letter to Kesava Dev urging him to write more of such essays "in the interest of our people". Kesava Dev was emerging as a writer.

That letter from the renowned editor-revolutionary, gave the youngster the right sort of impetus that he wanted. He now wandered through the dream lands of his reading, Bernard Shaw's '*Man and Superman*' and Bertard Russell's '*Road to Freedom*'. He was tormented with the most fundamental of all doubts, questions of being and becoming, of the nature of things and of the agony of the day today existence of millions around.

He felt like arguing it out with himself. He got hold of some scrap paper and a pencil and with that pieced out a story of two women in tears consoling each other.

Leela was a boisterously happy woman. Now suddenly bereft of her husband, she is in tears. Nalani, a widow for many years, tries to pacify her. The human predicament is mournful and there is no way out.

The first draft rather surprised him and he seemed to sense in it a something novel and good. Joyfully, he took pains to express his anguish fully and perfecting the form, made a fair copy of it, in two days time. Next day he sent it to a women's magazine '*Mahila Mandiram*', appearing from Trivandrum. They not only published the story but also sent him a letter of appreciation and urged him to make further contributions to their magazine.

The moral boost which this piece of writing gave him was tremendous. He now plunged headlong into the roaring intellectual

business of reading and writing, burning a lot of midnight oil in the process. In the light of the oil lamp, Kesava Dev read more and more of Tolstoy and Rabindranath Tagore.

Once he toyed with the idea of what he would do were he to acquire a large fortune. His actual state was utter penury, but like the French writer Alexander Dumas writing *Monte Christo* he was escaping from his wretched plight on the wings of poesy. He dreamed of purchasing an extensive plot of land building a large number of beautiful little houses and he would invite poor people of all castes and sects to live there. And the signboard at the gate would read: No admittance to policemen and army personnel. This type of an ideal state was soon committed to paper and despatched to the *Swadesabhimani* monthly. Its Editor, A.K. Pillai published it "with joy". However, he did not hesitate to caution the youngster against anarchist trends in his thinking.

Not long after Kesava Dev discovered for himself Victor Hugo and Karl Marx, Maxim Gorky and Knut Hamson. Marx's vision of a new world fired his imagination and he decided to stake his everything for those who have "nothing to lose but their chains."

Then for a time, the youthful self-appointed missionary undertook to serve as an organizer for the progressive journal founded by *Swadesabhimani*. It took him to near and far places, Pattambi, Trichur and Calicut and so on. At those places he met a few like-minded people. But their support by itself could not be of any substantial help to him. And the publication of the journal had to be suspended for a while.

This made Kesava Dev turn towards securing job elsewhere and he began touring places in search of a job. At long last, he got the post of editor of *Bhaje Bharatham* at the mofussil town of Chengannoor. Those were stirring times. The Lalaji incident had occurred. Saunders, the British police officer who had hit Lala Lajpat Rai on the forehead, was shot dead by an unknown avenger and the Government offered a reward to anyone who could capture the assassin.

On 8 April, 1929 Bhagat Singh and his comrades threw dynamite into the Delhi Legislative Assembly Chamber. Kesava Dev wrote an editorial entitled 'India's Reply', a tribute to the great hero of our nation's history, the daring Bhagat Singh. The proprietor of the publication asked him to drop the editorial. Kesava Dev was furious at that and he threw away the job.

The dialogue between the proprietor and the Editor ended as follows:

“We don’t want freedom through murder”

“There is no point in freedom coming to us after we all are murdered”

Now once again Kesava Dev was face to face with starvation and he set out in search of a job. This time, he arrived at Kottayam, the Central Travancore town, where a few printing presses had come up. He knocked at the door of the proprietor of a daily newspaper called ‘Prathidinam’ (the Daily). There he was offered the Editor-post on a salary of Rs.30/- per mensem.

As Editor, it was Kesava Dev’s routine to read through the *Hindu* and *Madras Mail* dailies arriving each day from Madras and meticulously fill the entire national and foreign news columns of his daily. In two months’ time Kesava Dev was tired of the hack- writing and gave up the job. He wanted to devote his time exclusively to his chosen intellectual pursuit. It was then he got an invitation from the proprietor of a cultural weekly to join as its Editor.

The arrangement seemed quite good at first. The work was pleasing and the stay at the proprietor’s residence was comfortable. But as days passed Kesava Dev all on a sudden found himself in an embarrassing situation. His employer’s wife began making overt advances to him. Kesava Dev was probably familiar with such situations in the novels and stories he had read. But he was shocked finding himself in such a predicament. His principles made him take to his heels from the house.

Kesava Dev had little savings to fall back upon. And he was starving in actuality for a whole fortnight. He subsisted for seven days on edibles worth 5.25 copper, corresponding to today’s 18 paise, doing without anything at all for the next seven days. A money order to the tune of five rupees sent by his affectionate mother, in response to a letter from him, rescued the young idealist from plain collapse. When that evening he was breaking his fast for many days taking a glass of sweetened lime juice he was, however, happy and proud beyond words. That was the temperament of the man.

Come to life again with food in the belly, Kesava Dev stepped into the old familiar daily’s office. There he pored over the past few days’

issues of daily newspapers. He was taken aback, as he read the news item regarding Gandhiji and Bhagat Singh. The hero of the nation's youth was going to be hanged, and Gandhiji was not going to boycott the Viceroy's conference on that count! In his typical emotionalist style Dev threw down the *Young India*. He was no more a follower of Mahatma Gandhi. He was now a Red. And he was not going to do nothing, he said to himself.

From Kottayam Kesava Dev proceeded to Trivandrum. He had big projects in his mind. He was going to carry on a battle against the ruling monarch and the prevailing loyalist trends in society. All that fancy ended up in smoke when at Trivandrum he learned that the man whom he had reckoned to be his principal supporter, his friend, A.K. Pillai, was closing shop.

The brave son in law of the exiled patriot, K.Ramakrishna Pillai, who had carried on his glorious predecessor's battle for the cause of democracy was now at his tether's end. He was going to beat a retreat. His new hopes overthrown, Kesava Dev plodded his way back home.

At parting, A.K. Pillai had presented him with a set of books and Rs.10/- for his fares back home. One of the titles in the bundle of books he received was John Read's *Ten Days That Shook the World*. That book, the youngster read through with rapt attention. Now he seemed to himself quite convinced. The path to freedom for India was through a revolution of the Soviet type, he said to himself.

Back home in the village, Kesava Dev carried on his vigorous activities reading and propagating the idea of revolution. He now put on a Red Shirt. He began making public speeches exhorting people to change their style of thinking. He went on writing articles rather in the spirit of Chekhov exclaiming before his countrymen 'What an abominable life you live, O! Russians.'

Once he called up on V.T.Bhattathiripad, the veteran Nambudiri rebel and editor of *Unni Nambudiri*, a reformist publication. The grand senior embraced the promising younger revolutionary with all affection and enthusiasm. Also he gave the youngster some money as remuneration for articles already written for his journal. Two Nambudiri youths presently stepped out from an adjacent room and greeted the author before them storming the citadels of conservatism, with great regard and listened to him in breathless attention there. And of the two youths, one was E.M.S.

Nambudiripad, at that time an Intermediate student, about to take a plunge in politics, some years later the Communist Chief Minister of the State. Going about putting on his only red shirt, on an empty stomach often, driven to cover long distances on foot, his head always in the clouds, Kesava Dev carried on his missionary work. He was musing and meditating, arguing and debating with himself more than with others of the course of action for himself and his countrymen.

On one occasion on the highway he found a car had broken down and the driver was sweating in the hot sun trying all his engineering skill on the unmoving motor. Out of pity for him Kesava Dev went upto him offering help. It was then that the dandy, the owner of the car, who was all the time idly watching the repair work and the poor man's sweating rather too casually and too authoritatively ordered Dev to fetch him some refreshment. The arrogance of the wealthy guy enraged Kesava Dev. Shut up, said Dev. There was a scuffle and the youngster had ultimately to cow down the unmannered rich man at the point of an extemporised knife - a splintered glass tumbler.

The incident confirmed the youngman's convictions of the wealthy. They were a callous lot. Liquidating them physically seemed to him the only way out. At this stage, he crossed his limits ideologically. He was going to do whatever was in his power to bring about a revolution in the country.

Invitations from various places started pouring in for him to make public speeches. Now, he moved about more a storm than man. He exhorted workers and the youth to rise in revolt against the British and the monarchists and the capitalists. He was called upon to address a worker's conference at Alleppey. He was now oppressed by a sense of the sorrows of the poor around him. This brooding over the thorns in lives around resulted in the making of a short story. To his own great surprise that story of Kesava Dev's about the 'poor folk' was readily taken up for publication by Mathrubhumi, the prestigious cultural weekly of the time. That gave the youth intimations of immortality, so to say. He now knew what his calling was.

The speech delivered at the worker's conference at Alleppey made a sensation. The speaker's ideas were novel and his form dazzling. The chair person at the gathering, a moderate had harped on the need to be God-fearing and how and why workers have to be truly loyal to their

employers. And the speaker urged them, his 'comrades', to rise in revolt against the oppressors exploiting them!

The conference ended in a complete failure. However the outcome of the event came to be of importance in Kesava Dev's life. Now those workers of a town far away from his home wanted him to be their leader, their Association's General Secretary. The ruling Diwan's puppet Magistrate issued orders forbidding the miscreant from addressing any more meetings anywhere in Alleppey or the adjoining districts for a fortnight.

That appeared game indeed to Kesava Dev. Doubly delighted, he took charge as the General Secretary of the trade union and began organizing the workers of the town on a new line. That was the beginning of trade union movement in our part of the country. Kesava Dev engineered a series of strikes in some of the factories in the area in protest against pilfering by the factory managements from the poor workmen's wage bowl, against retrenchment and for better and more decent wages.

That was in the first year of the thirties, the momentous decade in which our nation rose in one body in revolt against the British, eager to break its shackles. Those years of true grandeur in the spirit of our nation found in Kesava Dev one of its fine spokesmen and steady champions.

For the next five decades, Kesava Dev's life was a long drawn out battle, a battle against evil in all forms and shapes, first against the evils of capitalists, the king and the Queen and the Rasputin types of Diwans in power and against the British oppressors, and then against all inefficient and corrupt elected rulers. In the first phase the police carried on a vigorous hunt for him. He went on all the more zealously with underground activities. Days and nights of hard work and harder tour programmes were ahead for him. He enjoyed it all - the stealthy moves through cobraholes at the dead of night organizing midnight study classes for workers and the expansive sleep in chimneys of deserted houses to escape from the police and so on in those pre-independence days of active struggle.

Kesava Dev was a born agitator and he enjoyed the life of an agitator to his fill. However, fundamentally he was a writer and he was now more than ever before greedily reading through the works of Victor Hugo,

Bernard Shaw, Maxim Gorky, Anton Chekhov, Upon Sinclair, Dostoevsky and their like.

He was a great admirer of Tolstoy's. Tagore's stories he liked much. But the mysticism of the seer of Santhi Niketan he found pointless. He did not have good opinion about the Chandu Menon's acclaimed master piece *Indulekha*. He thought he would write differently. It now appeared to him clear. Good intention alone was not enough. Study, and mastery of the craft of fiction also were essential. And he set out mastering the art of story telling.

Kesava Dev's theory of literature had by now taken actual shape and he went on writing down his short stories and essays propagating a wholly new cult of literature.*

It was a literature of revolt. It was a literature of active sympathy for the poor, a literature that championed the insulted and injured, the down-trodden. It was a literature of faith in man and hope in his magnificent powers. 'What a piece of work is man'! And how abominable the life people lived was!! In short it was a literature of the reawakening of the humanity of the free India, a brave new India. Kesava Dev and Thakazhy spearheaded this new movement in Malayalam literature.

The first cannon charge of the movement was one or other of the short stories Kesava Dev or Thakazhy wrote in the first years of the 1930s, the Turbulent Thirties as the period is usually spoken of. And its first resounding triumph was Kesava Dev's 'Otayil Ninnu' (From the Gutter), novel brought out in 1942 and the acclaimed masterpiece of Malayalam fiction by 1945,** placed as such in that year by the finest exponent of judicious criticism in the language.

* In the Penguin Companion to Literature R.E. Asher stated:

"Before his time (Viz. Thakzhy Sivasankara Pillai's) novels in Malayalam tended to have a relatively prosperous middle class setting".

In one of his characteristically cryptic observations, Prof. S.Guptan Nair recently made out the truth of the matter. He said: "When a truly historical history of Kerala's Age of Renaissance in Literature is written let not the truth be suppressed: Kesava Dev was its Founder and First Propagandist".

(Kesava Dev: a Revaluation in the *Bhasha Poshini* (April-May 84 Symposium))

** It was in 1949 that Thakazhy came out with his *Randitangazhi* (Two Measures of Rice) a work of the magnitude of 'From the Gutter' though his *Pathitha Pankajam*, novel of a fallen women, had appeared a little earlier

During this period of vigorous* activity, at one time Kesava Dev shifted his base from Alleppey to Trichur to work as Editor of a political newspaper called *Mahatma*. The move was also to escape from the Diwan's police. Besides the editorials he wrote for this publication a humorous serial story titled *Indrasabha* about an assembly of gods discussing problems of the day.

And the editorials he wrote attracted much public attention. The one he wrote apropos of the Guruvayur Sathyagraha, a Sathyagraha fight for the establishment of the right of entry into the temple for the lower classes, the editorial dated 1-10-1931 inspired new thinking in P.Krishna Pillai, one of the founder members of the Communist Party to be:

Not many days after, P.Krishna Pillai called on Kesava Dev at his residence and told him how he had become a convert of Kesava Dev's. They came to be friends and comrades and worked together in bringing about a new civic conscience and a new social awareness among the people.

In this period of his life Kesava Dev engaged himself in umpteen holy tasks, each of which was some kind of a pioneering work in the political and cultural history of the state. He was at his political mission organising workers' movement educating them now shifting his base to Alleppey then to Shertallai and then to Kayamkulam. He was equally active at the mission of his missions, writing stories and essays raising Socratic questions. Besides, he got some of his own Mathrubhumi and Manorama stories - printed anew and bound in book form, priced 4 annas (Rupee 1/4) and went about organizing sales (For many years, at a later stage he was the President of the Writers' Co-operative Society of Kerala, viz. the Sahitya Pravarthaka Co-operative Society).

In 1942, he also attempted his first stage play. His ambition was, as he has himself related the event at length in the preface to the novel 'Nati' (The Actress - 1945) to make use of the medium for the transformation of society. The conventionalists opposed him. He met with little success in this new role. But his association with Bohemian stage managers and

* Historians speak of the vigorous mundane activity of the glorious Elizabethan Era in English literature. In the literary career of this unique Kerala writer the finest creative period was also a period of hectic activity.

slavish actresses and their like gave him disturbing lessons and he carried on campaign to build a more decent community of 'art people', to use an expression of O'Henry's.

By 1935, Kesava Dev had settled down at his wife's place at Puthuppally Village, Kayamkulam. The couple had come to be joined in wedlock at the end of a rather puzzling odd series of events. A Mohammedan abducted an Ezhava actress known as Gomathy (real name Velumbi). Ezhava chiefs became enraged at this and there was some kind of a Rescue Gomathy operation in the offing. Kesava Dev with his typical Quixotic chivalry took up the cause and soon came to be one of the soldiers of the exploited in the forefront. The arrangement they ultimately reached was that a certain Ezhava chief by name Kuttan, known as Kuttan Singh, would marry the problem woman. That person however, backed out at the last minute. Thereupon Kesava Dev readily offered to marry her.

And he did marry her and live with her for about two decades. Their life together, however, was not particularly happy. Finally when early in 1955, he broke away from her, this shaper of the character of the self-sacrificing Pappu left all his earnings thereto, a plot of land with a few shop buildings in it and a field under paddy cultivation, to Gomathy.

In the same year he started from the scratch at Trivandrum working for a short spell as Programme Executive in the All India Radio. There he fell in love with another woman by name Seethalakshmi.

He married her by the end of the same year. This second marriage seems to have been somewhat happier than the previous fruitless liaison. Seethalakshmi bore him a son and the boy was Dev's true solace in old age despite hardships of responsibility due to poverty.

Through the stress and strain of all this Kesava Dev carried on his reformist work with unremitting zeal. In the first years of independence and self rule he fearlessly criticised the weak and inefficient among the ruling party chiefs and advocated a thorough reformation of the police administration. So too, he condemned the atrocities committed by Communist extremists upholding the Calcutta Thesis of terrorism and adventurism. When the Communists came to power in Kerala in 1957 Kesava Dev, the first unofficial Communist of Kerala was one of the first to oppose the new Government. He stubbornly resisted what seemed to him undemocratic authoritarianism and made a whole theory of opposition of

his own, promulgated in the autobiography 'Ethirppu' (Opposition). Like Byron, he believed that a writer has always to be of the opposition. But he was not an anti- Communist as some interested people make out. He has often stated that he was against Stalin and stalinism and not against communists or communism. It may be noted that he was made the president of Kerala Sahitya Akademi by a Communist Chief Minister, C. Achuta Menon.

Was it careerism that took him away from the revolutionaries and made a Lost Leader of him in the familiar style, leaving his party for 30 copper coins and a ribbon, as some progressives seem to think? That seems highly improbable. One of the interesting incidents of his child-hood was calling on and consoling a low caste boy beaten up by a Nair Chief of the locality. Sometime later it was during his stay at Kottayam in jolly youth that another one of his acts - a perfect act of humanitarian service- was performed on the highways. Kesava Dev never changed. Practical considerations seldom influenced his acts. Regardless of consequences he always championed the weak and defenceless.

And throughout his life he was an idealist, at home only with the opposition, a fighting humanist. Strange as it may sound, the truth may be that this atheist crusader for social justice was fantastically holding on to the Hebrew prophet's hand. "And do not conform to the present world".

Kesava Dev received the Central Sahitya Akademi Award in 1964 and the Soviet Land Nehru Award came to him in 1970. In 1974 he was appointed Chairman of Kerala's Sahitya Akademi and he manned it meritoriously for three years.

In the last phase of his life Kesava Dev was a needy old man in distress. His health failed him and he lay, as some have put it, like a caged lion. "The Kesava Dev who trailed blazes of glory through the last fifty years of Kerala history steadily, with a pen in his right hand and the torch of revolution in his left hand" as K.Surendran, novelist and critic of the

* He saw an elderly Harijan woman, a grass cutter, writhing in pain in the market place. A roaming bull had horned her on the abdomen and people standing by were watching the scene idly. Kesava Dev got the poor woman put into a rikshaw and took her to a hospital straightway totally forgetting his own itinerary for the day.

generation next to Kesava Dev's has put it, lay there in that state for some years.

As is common with writers Kesava Dev's was in dire need often despite Govt's help by way of relief measures.

It has been the fate of some writers. Kesava Dev had put up a somewhat good terraced building within the city of Trivandrum. In his distressful old age he found it difficult to be on the go, even to provide for the maintenance of his home.

He lay bed-ridden for a long while in one of history's odd drama of anticlimaxes. And the end came quietly on July 1, 1983.

II

NOVELIST

The teacher burst out: "Which fellow brought this bird into the class room?".

"Sir, I did it," Pappu answered readily.

"You, get out of the class."

Pappu got up quietly and walked out with the sparrow in his hand and stationed himself on the verandah.

"You upstart, go farther out, down there, to the countryard", the teacher roared on. Pappu, still undaunted, stepped down into the front yard.

"Who else made noise"?

That was to the other boys of the class in general. No one gave back a sound. "All of you, stand up", he ordered.

All of them got up.

With the cane firmly held in his grip, the big one advanced to the first of the tiny tots.

"Stretch out your right hand".

The boy in front of him did so.

"Show me your palm".

The boy awaited doom with the right hand stretched before. He gave the boy two blows. Then the second boy was also meted out the same punishment. The third, too, got his share. And now abruptly the teacher came to a halt before the fourth. That was the landlord's* grand son. There was an instant calming down in the wrathful disciplinarian. He slid close to the boy and asked him in a soft hush.

"Did you make noise?"

"Yes," the boy made an unwitting admission.

"You should not behave like this hereafter. And don't associate yourself with these urchins".

After passing on that advice to him and patting affectionately on the shoulder of the little darling, the tyrant turned on the boy standing next to him. He ordered that boy too, to stretch out his hand, as roughly as earlier, and gave him two blows in quick succession. It was then suddenly Pappu dashed on.

"Don't. I say, don't do it."

And then to the consternation of the teacher he shouted down:

"Don't touch one of these boys I say to you"

It appeared the roar of a lion cub.

.....

* In the author's personal experience, as related earlier it was a Munsif's son in whose favour the teacher acted wrongly. In the twist given to the incident we have the first proof of Kesava Dev's artistic sense though he never owned such a thing as interest in art. As a class, Munsifs were not such evil types. A landlord on the other hand was a very real menace to the people at that time. The tyranny of the landlords was put an end to only many years later through democratic legislation.

That is the opening scene of P.Kesava Dev's unquestioned masterpiece: "Otayil Ninnu." (From the Gutter).

That was a novel kind of episode in a language in which no one ever much thought of literature as any thing concerning actual human life. Literature was something dignified, and it was to concern itself with the fates and deeds of kings and queens and the like. Of course Chandu Menon had given them a novel of an unconventional love affair between an aristocratic Nair lady by name Indulekha and a Nair youth, by name Madhavan. But the story of the angry young one they were reading now was something truly unheard of, novel.

'Otayil Ninnu' appearing simultaneously with 'Balyakala Saghi' (Playmate of Childhood) by Vaikom Muhammed Basheer should have appeared at the time a shocking novelty. It was a novel employment of the word in the language: telling of a new kind of story, about a new kind of hero in an unconventional style.

"Otayil Ninnu" is the story of a boy who had to quit school as the result of a clash with the class teacher. The wicked school master sent him out of the class and the boy tried to organize a Resist Indignity Campaign and had to pack off when he found that he could not organize enough backing from people.

The boy went away from the place and emerged in time as a coolie in a nearby town. Later on he moved from headload work to beedi making and then to the job as a helper in a soda production unit and later still he took employment in a spinning mill. Wherever he was, he was the king pin of resistance to injustice and oppression.

At the spinning mill he could not stand by the atrocities of the headman, in silence. He revolted and drew a knife in a row with the villain. But there he was overpowered by the formidable machinery of the state and the capitalist employer in collusion. They implicated him in a criminal case and threw him behind the bars to rot there for a term.

* "The novel introduced a working class hero for the first time in the Malayalam novel" Prof. S.Guptan Nair. (The Development of the Malayalam Novel: Literary Survey Symposium)

The poor man who came to the light of day many months later turned to rickshaw pulling to make a living for himself. He was however a rickshaw puller with a difference, an image of dignity, an upright workman, a rebel, whom people styled the dare-devil.

One day it so happened that Pappu's rickshaw collided with a little girl with a small container with some rice and grocery in it. The unlucky one was knocked down and she fell into the gutter. She suddenly started crying. All the rice she had with her and all her other purchases had been spilled down. That was a turning point in the life of the hardened rebel. He felt sorry for the little one and bought her a quantity of rice and other things. That of course was much more than she had lost. And the grateful little girl invited him to her hutment to meet her mother. Pappu assented and accompanied her to the cottage. That was a momentous meeting. He liked the widow in distress and her child. He took up as it were the guardianship of the petty little girl and put up at her place as until that day he had no permanent lodging of his own and no one of his own to look after. The transformation of the reckless rough into a man craving for the touch of the fair sex was instantaneous. Time cunningly threw Lakshmi's mother into the arms of Pappu. He became soon busy as a bee making extra earnings for her sake and his foster child's sake. Not that he could earn anything much. Still he worked hard to keep house and maintain his darling child at school as comfortably as he could.

The little girl in due course grew to be a fair nymph. She caught the fancy of a wealthy youngster of the locality. He wished to marry her and told Lakshmi's mother so. She was overjoyed to see her daughter to be married off so well and she readily accepted the proposal. Lakshmi, and with her the mother shifted to the rich youngman's bungalow soon after the marriage.

Pappu thought he would find himself only a misfit in such a company. He walked away from the place, disappearing at last into the eternity of the void, coughing incessantly as he faded out into the night, right as the girl he had picked up from the gutter and brought up was beginning to bloom into a woman on the bridal bed in the arms of her lover.

Was not this novel of lowly people a revelation of the dignity of the common man?. The dazzling spectacle of the emergence of a hero from among common men in the novel was sensation at the time and a thrill. It set the trend in Malayalam fiction for years to come.

No wonder the impact of the lyrical and lyrically perfect novelette was spontaneous and massive. The deeper awareness of the author even as he was grappling with burning social problems should have impressed everybody. Many saw in the uncompromising attitude of the hero of the little novel (pp.108) the manifesto of a programme of regeneration of society. But then, more than that it was also an expression of the anguish of existence.

The author who had set out to glorify poor people was never blind to their weaknesses and when it was a question of pointing out their lapses he did it scrupulously.* In other words, trend setter as it was this novel of the heroic working class was also a riddle of life like any other great work of art, a Sphinx image of life, monster with the face of a woman and the body of a lion and with wings, profound and awe inspiring. It was a work of great historical importance. It is also a work of art of unique charm, a true masterpiece of a master story teller.

The novel creates the impression that Kesava Dev's muse is, whatever else it may not be, a muse of fire. Surprising as it is passages of the novel depicting the boyhood bravadoes of Pappu appear to be written with a sort of Mark Twain skill and facetiousness. Notes of tragic sublimity after those passages of comedy do not at all sound discordant. In this blending of impossibles is the artistic miracle of the work. With equal ease, two schools can maintain that 'From the Gutter' is a heroic novel and that it is a tale of the inescapable anguish of humanity conceived in the Existentialist spirit.

After 'From the Gutter' it took Kesava Dev seven or eight years to come out with another remarkable novel, another true masterpiece. One

* An interesting leftist critic of the state, the late Prof. Thayattu Sankaran used to maintain that in his last phase Dev abused the working class and poor middle classes. The beauty is that Kesava Dev was animated by a discontent at the sorry scheme of things all through. He loved the working class and adored them, and spent all his years in wretchedness working for their uplift. He did this more steadily throughout his life span than even the two doubly dear benefactors of our society, viz., Thakazhy and Basheer. Basheer who confidently touched Gandhiji in a crowd, rather shaking hands with him, in his 14th year and was thereby electrically charged is a specimen of nobility all of his own genre. But Kesava Dev was steady in his devotion to the cause of suffering fellow country men, more steady say, than even the impeccable Basheer and the inimitable Thakazhy.

needn't complain masterpieces do not grow on bushes. Moreover in this period Kesava Dev was also busy doing many odd things; experimenting with the short story being not one of the least of those many activities.

In the novel 'Nati' (The Actress) of the year 1945 Kesava Dev made a report of his exploration of the world of actresses and drama managers. It was a bold 'I accuse', some kind of an X-ray view of the theatre people, a vehement condemnation of the vices and corruption in the new trade of drama production as means of money making and sensual gratification for businessmen inclined to invest their capital on that line.

Kesava Dev's novel 'Nati' gives a shocking account of the cesspool and relates the story as to how a couple by name Pavithran and Meena made a heroic bid to uphold the dignity of man and woman in that sphere of activity and were martyred in the process. Passages of the novel are as good as the finest purple patches of poetry. For instance the portrayal of the village undertaker, the singing swain, driving his buffalo-cart carrying dead bodies in perfect glee. But with all the casual beauties the tale never seems to have risen to the stature of a novel.

Kesava Dev claimed his 'Oru Rathri' (One Night) (1946) to be a novel. But it is only one of his interesting short stories of the period. In this terse and vigorous account of the hours of a night in the life of a freedom fighter there is real drama, a drama of suspense. Will he survive the trial of strength? Or, will the enemies succeed, in reaching their hands to him, capture him and finish him off? In this suspense packed story Kesava Dev seems to sigh unlike as in his usual form rather mournfully: "How benevolent Nature is! And why should man alone make this earth a hell with wars between the oppressed and the oppressor, the exploited and the exploiters". That reflection in the story is touching, coming as it does at the psychological moment in the narrative. Even today many years after its first appearance the story hasn't lost even part of its charm and relevance.

'Oru Rathri' was followed by 'Ulakka' (The Wooden Pestle). Creator of Pappu* as he was often affectionately styled by admirers,

* "Pappu redeems mankind; he places man on a pinnacle of glory never before attained. He is the saint of our fiction, a great Rishi," says Dr.K.M.Tharakan in his History of Malayalam Novel.

himself quite joyfully owning the title 'Father of Pappu' in first person narrations of stories and in some of his speeches, Kesava Dev was a writer with a little too much of enthusiasm for melodrama in his make up. 'Ulakka' is one of his overdone melodramatic pieces.

The story takes us to an unbelievably primitive feudal social order in which the landed gentry used to commit crimes of Nazi cruelty. In the strict sense no happenings of the middle ages, it was the Kerala society of the day that Kesava Dev exposed in the tale. Kunjappan was done to death by the landlord's goondas, and his son was tortured by them and the police in the worst sadist manner possible. And a woman by name Unnooli braves all her sorrows with dignity.

Melodrama of various types spoils this tale. However defective in craft this work may be, it will have to be admitted that it was a well meant social criticism, a condemnation of the heartlessness of the land lordism of the day. It was another one of the author's crusades to humanise contemporary society. Tales like these are remembered as noble gestures in socio-political history.

Kesava Dev's next work was 'Bhranthalayam' (The Mad House) (1949). It is one of his superb works. The great champion of humanity, who, as it were lifted life of his time from the gutter in his 'Otayil Ninnu' gives us through this novel his vision of a new India in the oblique form. The tale relates a shattering tragedy of the partition period in our national history. The dream of an integrated India, a democratic socialist free India pulsates this novel and were it only on that count the work will be cherished by every Indian.

Unlike 'Otayil Ninnu' which is a novel with a highly dramatic beginning, an artistic marvel in which the tension of the first chapter is sustained to the end with real and unflagging intensity, 'Bhranthalayam' has a quiet beginning, rather a low pitch start. It was the wartime and folk in a sleepy Kerala village were warming up to gather an awareness of the times. They gathered together in a local teashop and began discussing matters. There each morning Abdu reads out aloud the newspaper for the listeners assembled. Customers pouring in for news and ordering tea was a profitable arrangement, the shopkeeper thought. He, therefore, entertained the performer with a nice cup of tea and some substantial eatables. And thus began the village gossiping and village speculation of war time happenings far away.

The capital piece of Abdu's news round up was the one regarding Hitler. The fight between the Germans and the British seemed the battle of battles to be heard of. Hitler appeared to Abdu a very heroic leader and some of his patrons were also as keen as the performer that the British should meet with defeat in the battles. Govinda Pillai, the well to do local chief quite agreed with him. But there were others in the company like Sanku Kurup the hoary wise man of the village and Ouseph, a peasant and Pappu, the tapioca seller, who all zealously sided with the British and looked upto their victory.

And Neelakanta Pillai the shopkeeper would support every speaker whatever the opinion expressed was on one condition; he should order tea and he should not ask for credit.

All this is related in a rare genial style. The reader feels the joy of pacing through happy scenes of idyllic life, full of mirth and laughter and the warmth of human companionship as he reads through the first few chapters of the narrative.

And the pity of it was that as days passed Abdu was overtaken by his own passion. The newspaper reading which started as a harmless pastime soon came to be the chief preoccupation of the man. He was one of strong will and character. The pastime in no time became Abdu's sole passion. Faith and ardour for the religious cause were his beall and endall now.

He had been lured in to it by a man who was no fanatic, not even a Muslim. His father once a thriving business man had turned pauper and died heart broken. His mother soon followed suit of her husband. Abdu could not force himself to be the dependent of a sister and brother-in-law and so, refusing to go along with them he had shut himself up in his hutment brooding and brooding all alone.

It was then that a Chrisian neighbour of his, a peasant by name Ouseph made a discovery of his old friend's son's odd lot. The elderly well wisher took the bereaved youngster for an outing. He took him to Neelakanta Pillai's tea shop there to take a cup of tea.

There Neelakanta Pillai handed over to Ouseph a newspaper asking him to read aloud a particular news item. Ouseph obliged Pillai. But the old man's unskilled stuttering and stammering did not please anyone in

the company. It was then someone suggested that the youngster beside him might make a trial. Abdu, though not quite confident at first, could read the newspaper to their true delight. Wonderful, they said. That was how Abdu came to be drawn to newspaper reading as a pastime and soon he became the star performer in the teashop liked by a few and disliked by certain others of the company for his vehemence.

As days passed interest in news items of the world war began to flag. When bombing and shelling came to be heard of as day to day events, no one found any excitement in such reports. Instead the Quit India Movement under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi and the demand for an Islamic nation put forth by Jinnah came to be sensations of the day.

On one side the wealthy Mohammedans who wanted to preserve in tact their right to exploit and rule over their less fortunate brethren were making a hue and cry of Islam in danger and on the other side Hindu conservatives clashed with one another on communal issues over countless battle fields at the same time. And they all jeered at one another with primitive barbarity. There were war cries on all sides. The whirlwind of hatred raged in newspaper columns and in platform speeches.

In the words of Kesava Dev "Between brother and brother and between neighbour and neighbour enmity grew. Every man became shameless. Our people who even during days of slavery and destitution stood by the higher ideals of humanism, all on a sudden found themselves transformed into ravaging blood thirsty vandals." Abdu came to be possessed by the demon of fanaticism in that darkest period in our national history, the period of the communal riots. He had been invaded by it and he could not shake it off. He was now a maniac raving.

And naturally there were confrontations between Abdu, the fanatic muslim and the other people of the locality who belonged to different other religious sects. Most of them had turned to the new news paper reading more as sport than as a serious activity. Would anyone take it all as seriously as Abdu did? However Abdu took it with a seriousness verging on madness. He began dreaming of the promised land of Islam, living as he was amidst people who did not much care for his creed. He began going to the towns some distance away only to listen to public speeches on the necessity of an Islamic nation and took great joy in eying the 'truly royal' Muslim leaders of the north whenever he could catch sight of them far away.

How an exserviceman, by name Usmankutty returned from the north fired Abdu's imagination at the time, is a fine comic interlude? Says Usmankutty.

"What have we got here in this poor place of ours? If you are to see Muslim men and Muslim women proper you have to go to the North. How tall people could ever be!"

'Had he heard of the wonder, Taj-Mahal? 'Usmankutty enquired of Abdu.

Did he know what it was? Had he seen the king's palace?

Well, said Usmankutty, Taj-mahal was a collage of a hundred crore palaces like that! It was all made of gold, he assured Abdu.

And how difficult it was to climb on to the second floor* of the Taj!

"Right at first sight they recognised me as a true Muslim and instantly they said'. 'O.K. you may go in'. I walked up and lo, there were diamonds and gold glittering on all sides. You reach up to the top of the staircase after a whole day's climb and there from the height you can see the whole globe under neath!"

"I stood looking at this village of ours from that spot for one whole hour", Usmankutty gloated over his great good fortune.

Had not the boasting soldier verily seen the Taj-mahal?

And the irony was that Abdu came to be involved in the affairs of people in an idyllic little household of the locality living in perfect harmony with the neighbours right then.

Kittan and Mammathu were members of a fraternity. The existence of such brotherhoods had always been a truly noble thing about life in Kerala from olden times. At one time the two worked together in the agricultural field. Later they became partners in an independent business.

* These comicorealistic interjections in this novel are as masterly as, say the similar interludes in the novels of the British author Thomas Hardy.

It was the modest business of purchase and resale of used gunny bags the two engaged themselves in.

Madhavi and Pathumma the wives of Kittan and Mammathu were also friends with each other, as sincere as their husbands. And the two families of Hindu and Muslim creeds knew nothing of barriers of communities standing between the two. They were denizens, so to say of a world Rabindranath Tagore would gladly have saluted. They lived in Abdu's Kerala village in love and cheer.

That loveliness, however, did not last long. Madhavi died in labour* leaving a new born girl beside her. Her last request to her friend was to take care of her little baby out of pity and love. Pathumma hesitated and wondered for a time if that would be possible as her means were limited. But then ultimately the loving heart in her took pity on the tiny little thing in rags in front of her. She pressed it to her heart. "All children are Allah's", she said.

And sometime later Kittan went away from the place and the two girls one of Hindu and the other of the Muslim parents, grew there like twin rose buds on the same stalk. Thatha and Jaleema, they were called. Ever since the death of her husband Pathumma had to work hard, very hard indeed, to provide for the two children. But she braved through all difficulties and the heroic daughter of the soil of our land did indeed grow a garden in the wilderness enveloping her. Working hard at making coir yarn and growing vegetables in her little plot of land, the woman lived there an image of dignity, love and compassion.

Of late, after many years wanderings abroad Kittan had returned to his village and put up there as a shopkeeper. He had always wanted to take his daughter back from the foster mother and now well equipped with means, Kittan who had of late come to be respectfully addressed Krishnan Muthalali (Krishnan the proprietor) tried all he could to take his daughter home. Pathumma relented at last agreeing to give the girl away. But then Thatha just could not bear to live apart from mother and her sister Jaleema. She could be at home only in their company. And she returned to Pathumma's hut, the very day Kittan had taken her home from there.

* The diagnosing of Madhavi's illness and the treatment given to her by the illiterate local medical man is in itself a remarkable comic sequence followed by a moving tragic episode.

It was into this household that Abdu had set his foot. His fate now was to be inseparably tied up with theirs, and how different they were in temperament and preferences from him! Pathumma had consented to marriage between Jalcema and Abdu in her helplessness. And the four souls lived together there for a time until at last peace was disrupted by the storm raging in Abdu's mind. Abdu had been ill-treated by the Hindu enthusiasts around. He was licking his wound, complaining of the faithless fellows, the enemies of God. And the idea of a journey to the Promised Land of Islam far away in the north fired his imagination now. He was setting out in search of it. Would they join him, he asked his wife and in-laws.

There was a real dilemma for Pathumma. She found no reason to leave her ancestral land. She was bound to it by a hundred ties of love.

"Who told you this is land of the enemies of Islam?" She asked her son in law, "All land is the lord's. And we are here in the valley of the merciful lord".

Abdu, however, had been haunted by visions of a paradise of Islam in the north, the promised land of golden pavements and diamond studded domes. And he was on every morrow all the more serious about his plan to leave the place, eager to migrate from the land of infidels, to be in the dream land Islam of his imagination.

At one stage Jalcema was half inclined to set out as her husband had wanted. But Pathumma would not give way. She was stubborn in her determination to stay. Then at last it was Thatha's sense of duty and spirit of self sacrifice that prevailed. Reluctant as she was to leave the place, she could not bear to think of separating Jalcema from her husband. She urged Jalcema to promise Abdu that they would join him in the exodus.

And the whole band set out in search of Abdu's dreamland. Where did they land? Had they the remotest idea of happenings in that happy North 'they would not have left home. They were hurled on to scenes of the most bloody carnage, of cold blooded murder and rape amidst shouting of 'Victory to Hindustan' and 'Victory to Pakistan.'

Even to read through Kesava Dev's account of the experiences of those three women and of the pitiable end of the man possessed by the demon of communalism and fanatical religious enthusiasm should be a

harrowing experience to any reader of that story. And even the most unsympathetic reader would not feel like complaining that it is melodrama, this higgledy-piggledy of huddled horrors. Even he would be stunned at a first reading of the story by the astounding artistic brilliance of this grand tragedy of passion.

Thatha had all along been cherishing her fond hopes of Abdu's brother Rahim - his straight set opposite - a youth who refused to toe the line of fanatics. She had all along been secretly in love with him. She has the fulfillment of her long cherished dream of meeting him again.

Rahim and Thatha emerge as towering light houses of the spirit of humanity in this novel of madness. As long as there are people like Rahim and Thatha and the grand dame Pathumma, we needn't despair of the human predicament and life in our country. It is with such a conviction that any one will lay down this classic of Malayalam fiction after perusal.

And the words of the author will be ringing in his ears:

"Countrymen, neighbours, don't let's kill each other". Words of grim trenchant seriousness by the author of the remarkable short story "Don't kill, Brother", an author whose religion was love of man.

The most militant humanist of our time, Kesava Dev registered his biggest triumph in this novel; 'Bhranthalayam'.

If the prime characteristics of Kesava Dev the man were his sense of values and his personal valour, his love of humanity, and optimistic fighting spirit it can well be seen that these characteristics of the writer are seen at their best expressed in this tale of the horrors of communalism, set in the context of the Hindu-Muslim riots of the partition period.

'Bhranthalayam' was followed only after the lapse of about half a dozen years by an other interesting work of fiction of technical perfection; this time an interior monologue of a novelette, titled *Kunchukkuruppinte Athmaketha* (The Autobiography of Kunchu Kurup).

In between these two works of great charm appeared a strange tale of the master's *Aarkkuvendi* (For Whom?). It is a crude melodrama of the purges of the Stalinist era transcribed to a Kerala milieu. A Stalinist Communist boss, by name Ravi, plots against his loyal lieutenant Veeryan

and manages to get him assassinated. Then he turns against his great benefactor, his wife's own brother, the party comrade by name Arkan. He could have eliminated Arkan anytime he wanted. But nothing that simple would do. He commands his wife Padma to strike down her brother. And there is a medley of melodrama, masochism and martyr like attitudes following the command and the whole thing dumped in a heap is what the novel '*Aarkkuvendi*' (1950) is.

In the Preface to the novel Kesava Dev speaks of his tormented self-questionings apropos of the volte face of communism, and of the shocks he experienced hearing of the fates of Bukarin, Kamanev and Zinoviev', of the Stalin-Hitler pact and of the Communist betrayal of the Quit India Movement of 1942. That is all truly moving. But the novel following the preface makes out that the magic of turning blood into ink for once eluded Kesava Dev, with all his various gifts. '*Kunchukkuruppinte Athmakatha*' which followed '*Aarkkuvendi*', however, made amends for the latter.

This story of an old man in the seventies told in moving first person narration is a lament of the mournfulness of mortal destiny. Kunchu Kurup was a man of sentiments and good sense and he worked hard all along to bring up his children and educate them properly. But in old age the man is quite wretched. Of his three sons, one has come to be a celebrity as a musician. However, neither that one nor his other two sons, one of whom lives the life of a professional goondah and the other spends his time lisping numbers and learning chants of revolution by rote, care for him. The lone one is overwhelmed by despair and a sense of futility, subsisting as he is on the meager allotments from a not too kind hearted son-in-law. The work is, so to say, a miracle of perfection as regards form and style. It amply proves that Kesava Dev was a master craftsman for all his profession of lack of interest in craft.

Dev's next novel '*Rowdy*' (1958) is in a particular sense one of his more typical works. The story concerns an orphan boy mercilessly abused and exploited by the authoritarian local chiefs, driven to take arms against a community of villains and frauds in self-defence.

Kesava Dev humorously described the novel as the tale of a knife. It is a somewhat melodramatic sequence of episodes. Nevertheless the psychological interest of the story is commendable.

A bully by name Ouso had ordered the making of a knife at a blacksmith's. No sooner had the craftsman given it finish and was ready to hand it over to the buyer, than the rogue tried tactics of intimidation up on him. He threatened to stab the poor fellow with the knife he had shaped when asked for the price and Ouso walked away with the weapon triumphantly as the artisan was left to his lamentation and cursing.

Paramu the cowardly orphan boy had been subjected to all kinds of ill-treatment, not excluding sexual abuse by the wealthy gay guys of the locality as long as he had been courteous and considerate to people. But at last he was driven to take an offensive posture, with a knife held aloft in his hand, a knife stained with the blood of a repute, and lo, on all sides he was beginning to have admirers and fans!

The destitute one had stolen the knife from Ouso's only to pay for the price of a meal and he found a formidable weapon in that knife to do away with all handicaps he had hitherto been labouring with. Well to do folk now began offering him hospitality, and pamper him and there he began a reign of terror in the village.

The unwanted boy now came to be a dreaded and revered champion fighter. In royal luxury now he carried on his affairs and rival landlords vied with one another in maintaining him as their personal bodyguard and their prize fighter.

All that part of the story is presented with a rare irony and the bravadoes of Paramu and Ouso as related in the tale amuse us very much. The transformation of Paramu the chameleon killer into Paramu the Rowdy and later still into every man's Big Brother Paramu is at the same time the story of a rare combination of pathos and humor. It is highly entertaining reading. Also a work of the author's most pungent criticism of contemporary society.

The delineation of Ouso the dwarf, rowdies such as Viper Veloo, Rogue Kaimal and their like and Paramu Pillai and Unni Pillai local shopkeepers and the landlords Govinda Kurup and Kunchu Panikkar, rival Nair chiefs engaged in their regular activity of annoying each other for sheer sadistic joy are all interesting.

However, the principal charm of this work by an author who more often delighted in attempting one-man-type novels is the delineation of

the coward driven in self-defense to pose as a rogue and the psychological realism of the evolution of his character.

In 1961 Kesava Dev came out with 'Kannati', (the Mirror) another novel, the circumstances of the writing of which are noteworthy.

Kesava Dev who was some kind of an unacknowledged Communist of the State before the founding of the Communist Party, opposed the Communists once they came to power in Kerala. As long as they remained in office, he was their most vociferous critic and an unrelenting anti-communist. But then, soon after the dismissal of the Communist Government there started a witchhunt in Harijan quarters as most of them were thought to be Communist sympathisers. Their sufferings roused Kesava Dev's pity and the spontaneous expression of his moral indignation turned out as a novel 'Kannati'. It was an impassioned utterance, a plain appeal to people at large to have pity on the unlucky, to be humane and charitable to fellow beings. In other words, it was a warning to citizens to stop behaving like stone.

The novel takes us back to the early forties: a period of great stress and strain; a time in the grip of the war time spirit or rather its soullessness, the days of the most unashamed exploitation of the workers in those first days of the factory system in the state. That most soulless state of our society which had all on a sudden given away its old feudal values of chivalry and charity and inculcated in its place the capitalist creed that approved of no value other than money value. Kesava Dev's novel holds a mirror upto that society with the cut-throat money mongering brood rampant all over, landlords turned factory owners with a new zeal and depicts the sorrows of the poor victims of their greed and avarice. It tells us, too, of the dawn of an awareness in the working classes of the state and of their struggle to emerge from the slough of despondence into which they were hurled unawares.

Kesava Dev's favourite form was the one man type story, but this modern Marlowe of Indian literature whose preference was always for fire and air techniques made a bold bid to get rid of that partiality in this new novel and quite succeeded in it. In this admirable orchestration of strata of Keralite men and women of three generations the principal figures are the first generation of submissive slaves represented by the Harijan couple by name Kandan and Azhaki, the second generation of their sons and daughters, slaves slowly waking from their inertia when

once shocked by the callousness of their masters, people who are yet too ill-equipped to meet the new challenge and are therefore in total dismay and bafflement, and the third generation of youth, children of the slaves in dismay now rising in revolt against cheats and frauds and oppressors and ultimately prevailing over their enemies.

Kandan's wife Azhaki was the keep of a local chief, a landlord by name Vakkachan. He begot a daughter in her. Kandan called her Neeli, giving her a Harijan name absolutely unmindful of the open secret of her blood. He and Azhaki lived in spite of all that a smug contented life as man and wife! The law of the land was the law of the jungle; might was right and no one ever thought of questioning the privileged people. Kandan had no other go. He put up with all humiliations.

When Neeli grew to be a plump fine lass, she fell in love with Kochuraman, an Ezhava worker, a guy one notch above the pulaya caste, the caste of the poorer agricultural community. Kochuraman's folk would not approve of matrimonial alliance between the two castes as they thought they were high castes in comparison with the pulayas. The youthful pair therefore ran away from their village, seeking shelter wherever it was to be availed. They had to go far away. At long last far away a wealthy Christian landlord offered them room, to put up a hutment in and agreed to pay them wages for work done on condition they give up their Hindu faith and embrace Christianity. Kochuraman and Neeli, christened Varky and Eli, now began a life of pious devotion and consistent allegiance to their employer, the landlord turned factory owner.

As years rolled by and as the children of the couple were growing up, the old male, female 'hands' realised that for all their profession of charity the monied men were only systematically cheating them, and robbing them and exploiting them in the farm yard and the factory alike. The abuses heaped upon the heads of those loyal servants of the vested interests and the atrocities committed upon their corporeal frames ultimately shocked the younger generation and they got up in an attempt to defend their right to live. And they did offer resistance. The sons and daughters of Kochuraman and Neeli, the grand children of Kandan and Azhaki, in due course put up a fight to abolish the night in their lives. Against all odds they triumphed.

This novel of the awakening of the working classes is a true index to Kesava Dev's mind. He was one never to be of a conspiracy of silence.

Always he spoke out, and whenever he spoke he spoke fearlessly. Was not 'Kannati' a warning against the reaction that replaced the communist hegemony? Most likely it was. It was a passionate plea for social justice and humanity.

Kesava Dev's depiction of the poor folk of Alleppey town and around is masterly. He seems to have a finer fellow feeling and warmth of sympathy for them than the chronicler of the working class hailing from Alleppey, viz., Thakazhy Sivasankara Pillai. Prof. Guptan Nair has testified in one of his essays. The finest proof for that is this novel; 'Kannati' of the year 1961, a work regarded by some, to be the most flawless and as such the best of Kesava Dev's novels.

In the Preface to the novel the author openly states that he is least bothered of literary norms and standards and is concerned only with the question as to how his fellow beings live and as to how betterment of their lot can be brought about.* However, the novel reveals a true mastery of the craft of fiction in the novelist, all the more surprising as the work is an experiment and a departure from the author's usual technique.

In the same year Kesava Dev brought out one more tale 'Oru Sundariyute Athmakatha' (The Autobiography of a Beauty). The tale running to 162 pages relates the life story of a freedom loving girl by name Bhavani, cornered by the wealthy local Romeos on the one hand and a woman all of a shark's appetite at home who would ditch her at the first available opportunity, a stepmother ready to pander to the desire of any monied man and trap her step daughter for his sake, if only he would pay for it. In the end she runs away from that house. In the town she is driven into a series of encounters with a wild variety of people.

At last she puts up with a noble savage, headload worker by name Matan (literally, the cattleman) and his gang of kind hearted boot-leggers,

* "I write, not because I ever wanted to make a work of literature. Nor have I ever wanted to be styled a writer. Literature never was my preoccupation. My concern all along has been with life around me. I am a critic and commentator of life and I just go on with my work of criticism and commentary and it turns out to be literature quite accidentally. All my works of literature are such. Even if some literary critic were to say, that these are no works of literature I will not be disturbed in the least. I will certainly, not be sorry at all for that." Preface to the novel: 'Kannati'.

bawds and the like - Pachi, Madhavi, and Kunji. Another gang of low class prostitutes Sulochana and her train turn against her in dreadful hostility. From that army of denizens of the under-world Matan guards the frail one and fondly looks after her for a time with tender care. In the end a well to do man comes across her and proposes to her. She deserts her magnanimous protector the poor illiterate Matan. He is left to his hard lot grieving for everything.

Matan the protagonist of this novel appears to be another incarnation of the spirit of the earlier glamour hero Pappu. His exit from the scene is as touching as Pappu's fade out in 'From the Gutter'. Kesava Dev here seems a social critic with unequivocal commitment to optimistic thinking rather overwhelmed by a sense of despair face to face with the nature of things. He was worried of the inconstancy of affections in the human heart. The tragic implications of the story of Bhavani's change of heart are as profound as those of Lakshmi's betrayal of Pappu in 'From the Gutter'. As Dr.K.M.Tharakan has cogently argued in his History of Malayalam Novel, this determination on the part of the author to find out the entire truth about man is a rare aspect of Dev's art and is also his truly unique distinction. In 'Oru Sundariyute Athmakatha' he tells us the truth about man, in its wholesome entirety. The story of Pappu and Matan are Kesava Dev's enigmatic answers to the question as to what true heroism of man consists in. He was all through concerned with that question, one of the most fundamental of all questions of life! What is the end of life? The stories of Pappu and Matan may also be viewed as revelation of heroic qualities among the low and lowly.

In Kesava Dev's projection of Pappu and Matan, as the cardinal types of heroes there is a certain flouting of convention in the Byronic spirit. The tendency is more unmistakable in 'Thyagiyaya Drohi' (The Self-sacrificing Menace) (1964). The novel sets forth in the author's characteristic lurid colours the story of a Nair chief coming to ruin. Proud feudal Nair headman Krishna Kurup was annoyed beyond bounds when he found his authority called in question by the nephews and nieces. The smouldering discontent of the passionate old man was duly worked up by a gang of parasite trouble shooters, the community of local lawyers and scribes. He was forced to sell out all his properties to carry on a warfare against his nephews and nieces. Simpleton as he was, without any hesitation he put on paper that he had actually been done to death by his nephew! As if, one could pen a statement after being murdered !

The fate of the old man is strange. In turn his story evokes pity, scorn and amusement and the novel (pp 208) is a powerful indictment of the self-seeking quacks of law of Kerala of the period of the break up of the Joint Family System.

In 1963 Kesava Dev completed his masterpiece 'Ayalkkar' (The Neighbours), novel that brought him laurels one after the other, including the central Sahitya Akademi Award and a Soviet Land Nehru Award.

'Ayalkkar' is a novel viewed differently and interpreted variously by people holding different theories of life and literature. According to some, it is a tragedy of the down fall of two Nair houses - two families of a leading community of Kerala to which Kesava Dev himself belonged. In that sense, the novel is a nostalgic recreation of the magnificent days of grandeur and glory in the annals of the Nair Community and as such an enchanting legend. The novel relates the decline and decay of the community. Two of the nieces of the grand Nair hero run away with low caste men, weary as they are of absolute destitution. That is as tragic as the fate of the Yadava Women at the fall of their heroes.

Prof. S.Guptan Nair on the other hand maintains that the novel is a chronicle of the three leading communities of Kerala, viz., Nair, Ezhava and Christian sections of the population as they half-heartedly bid good-bye to the feudal style of living and welcome the new age. How the transition was slow in pace and painfully self conscious in the beginning and how the bulldozer of history levelled everything Kesava Dev relates with what might be called scientific precision. In this sense, the novel is not a tragedy of the heroic Padmanabha Pillai, it is rather a saga of three generations of heroes and heroines of three communities of Kerala of the period of transition. The self-effacing loyalist from the lower caste at home in the traditional feudal set up, self-sacrificing heroic Kunjan is as prepossessing a person to encounter as the grand overlord of Kunjan's viz. Padmanabhan Pillai, the hero whose grand mother Kunjulekshmiamma was herself a legend: a woman who by herself cut down an anjili tree, as big as an Oak tree when the occasion demanded. And then, the younger ones of the Nair Community who are heirs to Padmanabha Pillai's tragic propensities, the struggling Ramachandran alias Ramachandran Nair of the modern time and his sister Vasumathi and their three counter parts in the Ezhava Community, Vasu, Divakaran and Yasodhara are all drawn in the novel with equal gusto and force and the delineation evinces true mastery.

This grand symphony of the love affairs and quarrels, festivals and feuds and action and reaction of a set of eminently interesting individual characters of the three major communities of Kerala through an eventful 50 year period on the eve of the dawn of independence, 'Ayalkkar' is a microscopic and macroscopic, at the same time, view of the history of Kerala in its transition.

Take the protagonist, and back-bone of the novel, Padmanabha Pillai. He is a stupendous towering character with magnificent vitality. He comes to ruin because of his magnanimity, and his uprightness and essential nobility of mind. But in a world of changing values, a world of cunning and craft and utilitarian entrepreneurs of the type of the Kunjuvareethu and his wife he is thwarted and defeated. He ends up ruined in spirit and body alike.

The feminine foils of this magnificent hero are also equally well-drawn. Devaki Amma, Padmanabha Pillai's first wife, is a decadent typical of the Nair Community. A woman of promiscuity, inevitably a product of the Nair culture with its peculiar traditions. His second spouse Dakshayani Amma is a dame of some kind of classical Roman dignity. Padmanabha Pillai's sister Sumathy Amma, a feminine counterpart of that admirable Nair chief is herself a spectacle of splendour of a certain sublimity as Dr. K.M.Tharakan, eminently dependable critic of Malayalam novel, author of the work Malayalam Novel Sahitya Charithram, puts it. Dr. Tharakan places this character of Kesava Dev's on a par with Subhadra, one of the most splendid of all men and women in the novels of C.V.Raman Pillai, the grand master of Kerala's fiction.

And more delighting is the contrast between the three women, the wives of Kunjuvareethu, Kunjan and Padmanabha Pillai, each a subtle delineation of the virtues of the women of Kerala. Kunjan's wife Kalyani is a sort of modern Oormila, from among one of the lowlier Dravidian segments of people, people nevertheless heirs to the heritage of the Ramayana.

The subtle studies in contrast presented in this novel are amazing, to say the least about it. As foils to the self sacrificing upright tragically

* There was a time when westerners envied the Nairs of Kerala for their free love life, witness the dreamland of love depicted in the *Empire of the Nairs* of W.W.Lawrence. A pervert heiress of that tradition in the modern period Devaki Amma is both a type and an individual.

heroic Padmanabha Pillai are drawn three figures from among his own clan in sharp contrast to him; three capricious and anarchic Bohemian Nair chiefs of passion.

Pappu Kurup is a perennial bridegroom who, as the novel shows us, did not marry a thirteenth time only because death prevented him from doing so, as after his twelfth marriage he passed away. Madhava Kurup is a kind of Napoleonic maniac as far as passion for cock fight is concerned and he once gave away acres of land to a fight-organizer as bribe only to secure victory for his cock in a prestige fight with a prestigious cock. And the kingpin of this gang of ruiners, Kunju Kurup married sixteen women one after the other. He is the real culprit behind the downfall of two Nair houses at war with each other, crumbling to ruin in the end. The Pachazhi and Mangallassery Nair houses fought each other stiffly and both eventually got swallowed up by the void.

The novel can be regarded as a history of the transition from feudalism to capitalism. In that perspective the subject matter of the narration is modernisation as it takes hold of the different strata of society in Kerala. In this sense, the novel is a depiction of two worlds; one dead and the other struggling to be born, and as such this story of three generations of men and women of Kerala is a precious socio political document. It is also a story of the awakening of the people to democratic consciousness and in that sense it is quite a thrilling tale.

Kesava Dev's depiction of the three communities is with equal ease, mastery and felicity. The pictures of the Nair Community with its feudal pride and affluent decadence is a cloud pattern lit up by an occasional aura of tragic heroism. So too the story of how the Ezhava Community, a resurrected new band so to say, the under privileged lower class of the previous era in their bafflement groping in the dark put on the path of freedom by the saintly revolutionary Narayana Guru and his lieutenant, Kumaran Asan the prophet-poet, is a thrilling epic narration. The refugees of the ruined Nair houses in the end seek asylum in Ezhava houses. The ill-treated low castes of the previous period rise to be avengers and protectors. Their former master's orphaned nieces are offered asylum in certain cases. In certain other cases, they are seduced by the newly rich low castes of the past.

Towards the finale, two of the principal protagonist's nieces, the beautiful Vilasini and the exceedingly fair Nandini are reported to have eloped with a Muslim merchant and an Ezhava artist.

And the modern style of living Christians of the country take to with unparalleled zeal is related with the utmost care. Not even a biased critic today can complain that Kesava Dev's understanding of one or other three communities is inadequate. There is a rare and consistent mastery in the manner in which the novelist makes a magic design of fiction of infinite artistic charm, weaving and interweaving threads of reality and filaments of moon beams into one another all in a design of his own. There seems to be some kind of magic realism about the style of the work though that term came to be in vogue only recently with the advent of the Nobel laureate.

Kesava Dev had given the world his best in the 'Ayalkar' and all his subsequent attempts to write fiction were anti-climaxes of a kind. He never afterwards reached the height that he had scaled in that massive novel.

Of these last novels 'Sughikkan Vendi' (To be Gay) is the story of a wanton woman. The setting of the lurid tale is a famine that hit part of the coastal area of the state in the second world war period and that is touchingly recreated. The opening scene of the narrative relating the death of the heroine's father, Sanku, a wealthy landlord who had turned to industry and could not thrive in it is gripping. The bankrupt businessman drops dead on the highway unable to defend himself from a straydog pouncing on him as the poor man is carrying home a bowl of rice gruel stolen in the dark from one of the houses in the locality. He had done that for two of his starving daughters. But the old man never reached home. He succumbed to the attack of the straydog on the street.

Sanku's daughters reached the town and there they flouted the conventions of society by entering into open flesh trade and they flourished. The work is a novel written, in part, in Shavian spirit. Passages of the novel, especially, scenes depicting the atrocity of the famine prove that some of the author's faculties are still in tact in his 63rd year. Still 'Sughikkan Vendi' cannot be regarded a remarkable work of Kesava Dev's.

'Adyathe Kadha' (The First Story) (1968) was not upto the expectations. It is a tale about a young man who put up in a far away place to satisfy a craving for the exotic and devote all his time to writing. He is, however, drawn into the currents and cross-currents in the lives of his neighbours. There he has to take up the guardianship of a poor girl tormented by a seducer and he does rescue the girl dropping his original plan.

In parts the tale may remind us of Kesava Dev's own life-story. But even with that autobiographical pinch about it, the odd work is tedious as no other work of his is.

However, Kesava Dev was an author of a somewhat fitful nature and in the same year he surprised the world with another one of his notable warnings to contemporaries, the novel 'Adhikaram' (Power).

He begins this novel with an introduction, not an author's Preface-setting forth a legend of frogs that went on a deputation to Lord Brahma asking for a King to rule over them.

The lord gave them a wooden block. The frogs were disappointed in finding their king mute and passive. They went back to Him and asked for an active King and the Lord said 'OK' and suddenly they found a crane perched on that same wooden block lying in their midst in the pond.

Kesava Dev adds: "Thus started the rule of king Crane over frogs in the kingdom of frogs. Even today Cranemen rule over frogmen".

The novel relates the transformation of life in Chelikkara an imaginary village of independent India, a thinly veiled mofussil town of Kerala, the home town of a heroic freedom fighter. As the pulse reading of an Indian hamlet in transition from colonial slavery to the status of independence the novel is a significant document. It takes a survey of the changes coming about and places significant findings about the socio-political and moral norms of our society in perspective, couched in the forceful style of the indignant prophet of rage that Kesava Dev at his best ever was.

'Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely'.

Gopalan Nair was a freedom fighter every one admired. The self-sacrificing hero and crusader for justice changed overnight when once history invested him with power. 'Adhikaram' tells us how that impeccable people's leader came to be corrupted to the core and ultimately ruined, once he was in power. Bundles of currency notes and real estate had their charm, so had garlanding and dinner and public reception and flunkeys around.

The novel begins with the fanfare of a reception to the newly elected legislator Gopalan Nair, and its finale is a public reception to the

Communist legislator who trounced Gopalan Nair in an election battle. In both cases the reception committee consists of the self same elements, landlord Panaveli Govinda Pillai, crook with communalist politics supported by the conservative establishment, a cut-throat money-lender styled 'Banker Thomas now, though until very recently a seller of eggs, the hawker by name Maitheen now respectfully addressed Maitheen Haji, all of them representatives of the vested interests. "There is nothing new. It is all a repetition of the same events", to quote Dev.

Of course the poet in this novel, Shri Palot, is also with the opportunists of the day here. The guy who was ever ready with a 'Hail to the King' as long as the king was in power has his 'Hail to the Minister' now ready as ever. The pity of it is that Raghavan the crippled freedom fighter and the TB. Patient Ramakrishna Pillai, Sivarama Pillai and their like have no place in the scheme of things!

There is some humour in the presentation of the teashop gossip politics and rivalries between the managements of 'Hotel Proletarian' and 'Mahatma Restaurant' and the Communalists special favourite courtesans Rambha, Kamalakshi, Mariyam and Sainaba, with their Nair, Ezhava, Christian and Muslim politics. So also there is some comedy in the battling between the son and son-in-law of the communalist Govinda Pillai. Their mutual recriminations are an eyewash. They are for all practical purposes one and the same. Considering those things it could be said that the novel is shattering data regarding the life of the times. It is, in other words, the story of the stinking corrupt practices and conspiracies behind some of our well meant urbanisation projects.

Not that alone either. Our wicked school/college running business of the modern times is exposed here comically and severely shaken by the shoulder and the history of the Mass Conversion of the Hindus in the first years of discontent with the caste system is amply explained in this chronicle.

All that is entertaining, no doubt. Still the tone of the work is tragic. The tragedy of the fall of a hero who chants to himself the verses of Kumaran Asan, our grand prophet poet of revolution and social justice.

"Freedom is a nectar divine

It is life and its lack is awesome as Death"

When once in power he forgot how he had been accustomed to chanting all that in earnest !

Said the British Poet:

"Angels are bright though the brightest fell" - Though the history of Gopalan Nair, is a depressing reflection on life, one of the perennial attractions of the novel likely to remain is the portrait of the freedom fighter Siva Rama Pillai presented in it. Beside the despicable specimens of humanity in the narrative, there is this towering light house of human possibility also a reality, to our great relief we discover as we read through the tale.

The problem of power left Kesava Dev is anguish and the anguish of the heart that feels it all is unmistakable in this narrative.

In the chronological order the next novel of Kesava Dev is 'Laksham Rupayum Oru Karum' (One Lakh of Rupee and a Car) (1969). It is the story of a certain labourer, by name Madhavan who one day suddenly becomes rich. He won a lottery of one lakh rupees*. Instantly he became a V.I.P. in his village. All his relations who had never cared for him flocked to him eager to serve him and please him. All his acquaintances and all the people of the locality including the big landlord pour in to offer their respects to him and solicit financial help. The Secretaries of the communal organisations, innumerable people rush to him. He is being accorded a grand reception in his place. One Minister and His Excellency the Governor of the state participate in the function !

This no doubt is a scathing condemnation of the prevailing Mammon-worship. In the novel Dev, exposes the decay of our body politic.

The atrocity of the dowry system, the fantastic stature to which nepotism has grown, the essential heartlessness and insensibility of the people of our time to all these social ills, these appear to be vexing our ever militant humanist in this work. The novel obviously is a satire. At the same time the tragic undertones of the narration are unmistakable.

There is plenty of comedy in this novel. The journey of the country gull to the town for example, with a huge container for Rs. One lakh to be

* (God of greed).

carried home, not aware a wee-bit of governmental business transactions is a funny episode indeed. The novel is remarkable as social criticism.

In the Introduction to this work Kesava Dev once again made his theory of literature explicit.

“What I hope to do is to better the lot of the community and alleviate the sorrows of my fellow beings. The shadow of that hope falls on all my works. That can be seen in this novelette also.”

Truly.

As days passed old age began its ravages on the mind of Kesava Dev. The man who had risen swiftly was now falling like a stick. *Premaviddi* (The Fool of Love) (1972) appeared an odd jest, the story of a simpleton who came to be a martyr of love for no fault of his own or anyone elses. The tale is neither touching nor amusing. The only mystery remains why in decrepit old age Kesava Dev came out with such a title.

However, there was another flickering of the dying fire in him in 1974. Kesava Dev brought out another one of his poignant ‘I accuse you’, the novel *Nondiyute Kadha* (The Story of a Cripple).

The main characters of the story are, Damu and Thoma. They move out of their village in search of jobs. When they could find nothing else they at last relieve a Sanyasin asleep on the foot path of his baggage consisting of some holy ashes and ochre and a wooden bow of dance divine and run away with those precious possessions!

In the adjacent village, they pose as young Sanyasins and there they flourish!

Two women come to them; a mother and her daughter. The mother enquires of the sanyasin;; Would her daughter ever become a mother? As if Damu and Thoma knew all about it and were more than gynec experts. There is little doubt in the minds of the youthful seers. They act readily. They bless the young woman and say ‘thou shalt be mother soon’. There is the godman’s tip ready and Damu and Thoma are revered as holy Godmen. Later on they find that sale of Gandhi cap on commission basis and raising funds for party are more profitable business than posing as godmen. So they porceed to the town selling Gandhi cap and asking for

donations to build the party fund, though no one had authorised them to do that. They thrive in that trade for a time.

Later still the frauds set their eyes on a plump round woman of ample means living by herself after a quarrel with her husband. They trap her and her gullible father and float a hotel business with the money from her properties. They freely exploit her sexually also. At one stage they turn to unlicensed brothel business along with hoteliering and make some fast buck that way. Sathyananda and Gnananda, the scoundrels in their new garb, out of their greed at last have their patron, financier and bed fellow Lady Vijaya murdered. Eventually they are booked by the police and thrown behind the bars.

'Nondiyute Kadha' is an old mixture of the comic and the tragic and as such an unsuccessful essay. Kesava Dev's jokes of the gullibility of our illiterate womenfolk and villagers are pungent, no doubt. But that by itself is no substance for a lengthy study of society running to 253 pages.

That same year witnessed the publication of another title of a similar nature: 'Velicham Kerunnu' (Light is Spreading).

In 1976, Kesava Dev's last novel came out of the press 'Vilpanakkaran'. (The Salesman).

It is the story of an indecent fellow who made a living for himself pandering for his own daughter. This Sonia of Kesava Dev's, girl by name Thankamma, commits suicide when she finds that there is no way for her to live decently. The depiction of the dilemma of the wench and the sketches of the villains Sankaran and Paili local money bags and, Malay returned Ramakrishnan, are interesting. With all that, the tract appears dull. It is seldom a moving account of human endeavours worth recording.

"The best that can be said about them is that they are not bad." We may say of Kesava Dev's two works not discussed here so far in detail, viz., 'Nana Thettukaran' (It's me to Be Blamed) a family planning propaganda piece and 'Swapnam' (The Dream) a love story, that they are not bad reading material.

III

Kesava Dev as short story writer

Despite various activities during the 50 years' active public life, Kesava Dev wrote more than 300 short stories; of which some are of very high standard and can be included among the best in Malayalam.

Consider the story 'Vathil Thurakkam' (I'll Open the Door). It is nothing short of an artistic miracle, a short story out of a surprisingly thin dialogue between a female and a male within and without a chamber, with the words "I will open the Door" from her at the climax. This is a remarkable love story, a sort of serenade in prose plus a something more, a certain indefinable something unique and absolutely original about it and it is likely to thrill readers in all climates. It is a short story that has something truly great about it. It is the voices of Eve and her Adam in perfect blend, the eternal bass and shrill in harmony, an astounding poetic performance in a language with its unique characteristics and genius, a language with fifty one sound patterns and letters.

Or, take 'Kartanupirakil' (Behind the Curtain). It is a lovely short story of a jealous and quarrelsome husband and wife, a quarrel beginning abruptly, rising to a crescendo and then coming down like a retreating wave giving place to a realisation in two hearts of their basic need for companionship and the climatic embrace between the two. It is a short story that any reader may like.

'Vathil Thurakkam' and 'Kartanupirakil' are two love stories that summon moonlight charm and moonlight sweetness upon the readers

senses. That, however, is not the effect this author produces at his typical. His quality is heat and fire, and his more remarkable characteristics are force and prophetic zeal.

'Kollaruthaniya, Kollaruthu' (Don't kill Brother, Don't Kill) is as significant as a commandment as an entertaining short story. The occasion of the story was the gathering of the storm of violence in our society due to crazy party politics. It was Kesava Dev's open defiance of the communist party as it was getting ready for a bloody uprising all over their strong holds, theoretically arming themselves with what is known as the Calcutta Thesis of dagger and acid bulb war of liberation. Man's humanity is in understanding man and in feeling for the sorrows of fellow beings not in teeth and nail confrontation with sorrowing and suffering individuals around and spreading a philosophy of hatred, Dev warned his people in this story.

He declared in the story how it was wicked to shed blood with a view to wiping out the tears of fellow beings. All this is said in the story in absolutely unobtrusive language, through the presentation of a drama in life, in other words, in fine artistic style, not in didactic form.

Some of Kesava Dev's best short stories present heroism in ordinary people as touching as real. In the story 'Sthreedhanam' a village girl by name Mariyakkutty defies the wicked dowry system in an act worth a hundred eulogies. "I don't want a purchased husband", she proclaims in the psychological moment of the story. Her father had fainted in the church as the bridegroom had refused to go up the steps to the altar as there was a shortage in the amount of the dowry.

Dev's delineation of the bulls and butterflies of the marriage stock market in the story is memorable.

"Muthalali and Mangadan, and the Third Party went on with their deliberations. One thousand five hundred rupees was the lowest quotation Mangadan could think of, he said. And then, he added: "Offer up to Rs.Four Thousand has already come. But then, their girl was no good. Even if one were to give up a thousand rupees the bride should be fair and an aristocrat, I told myself. And here is my word now, as your daughter is a good looking girl and as you are of an ancient house, an aristocrat, Rs.One thousand five hundred is enough. And this marriage cannot take place if you are prepared to pass only one thousand four hundred and

ninety nine rupees. We must get one thousand five hundred solid round rupees, not one single copper less, you can take it form me.”

A beautiful girl on her blessed wedding day, right as she is being edged on to go up the steps to the altar, and as one of her friends exclaims how Avirachan, the groom will find it the very heaven that night, wistfully casting a glance at her reflection in the looking glass before them and as Mariyakutty blushes to hear that compliment to her shape, presently report is brought that the moneylender hasn't kept word with her father, and that he is not in a position to clear the dues of dowry and that the bridegroom will not oblige them by agreeing to make any adjustment. It is when her parents are in this fix that Mariyakutty suddenly tells those assembled there: “I am not willing to marry this Avirachan. I don't like him”. She saved their honour.

This story of the self sacrificing country girl by name Mariyakutty, ‘Sthreedhanam’ is one of Kesav Dev's significant stories. It is also a representative work of his.

Kesava Dev was a prolific writer. In some of his stories, the format has not been properly laid. However his mastery of form is truly astounding in many a story.

Take the two stories ‘Deenamma’ and ‘Muthalapparu’ for example. One is the story of a wench by name Deenamma who was a female singularly without beauty. She was ridiculed by everyone around her for her peculiar features and she felt all the pangs of sorrow whenever someone trod on her corns. However, she bore no one any grudge. She stoically admitted the fact that it was her profile that amused them and edged them all to make fun of her. A picture of dignity, Deenamma sat like patience on a monument smiling at grief and in the end there emerged an artist with an eye for her beauty, the beauty of her mind. He looked into her heart and was thrilled to find her possessing a rare loveliness in her soul.

How different the story of ‘Muthalapparu’ (Crocodile Paru) is! Paru was an ugly and repellent female. People therefore styled her the crocodile. She was however, like any other woman, a creature of flesh and blood, sentiment and vanity. Her infinite longing to feel the smell of a male in her nostrils made her eagerly watch out for comments from passers by. She responded to a nod with surprising zeal. But there those nods of

acquaintances never yielded her a nice word from a male. Her sole companions and kin were a dog she named Kuttan (Darling) and a cat she called Kandan (Jack).

And it so happened that on one occasion a young man by name Rahim accosted the love starved maid in her late twenties on the highway. She was thrilled. Her response encouraged him and he made overtures to her. She felt flattered all the more. She was all excitement now. Her physical charm, she thought, had at last won her an admirer ! And she was eager to make an offering of her everything before him. Rahim then asked her slyly had she any money with her. Yes, she had some money, she gladly owned. Would she give him some money if he married her? To be sure she said, she would give away to him herself and all her earnings hitherto - earnings through hard work: washing of dirty linen and slaving at the millstone and so on. "Shall I call on you to night? ", he asked. She said 'Yes' in great excitement.

And that night she was all thrill when Rahim embraced her and kissed her. Her joy knew no bounds when he told her that he loved her and that he was going to marry her very soon. And suddenly when after sometime she woke from her slumber she found that there was no Rahim beside her in her bed of matting on the floor. He had disappeared ! She lighted up the lamp and made a search for him. Alas, the entire rag baggage of her one rupee, two rupee, five rupee notes: her life's earnings, she never even knew the count of, was also gone. And Rahim was not to be seen anywhere there.

A gunpowder charge of truth, this unusual love story of the truth about man and the nature of things is shattering as one might say. But the miracle is how, of the self same material Kesava Dev shaped two stories as different as 'Deenamma' and 'Muthalaparu'.

And yet another story of Kesava Dev's the story titled 'Bhavivaran' (Future Bridegroom) is a more amazing variation on the same theme.

Sarojini had too long been dreaming of the ideal husband. The bored spinster at last wants somehow to put an end to her single blessedness. Any body will be as good as any other, she says to herself at last. And it is then Konthy Annan (Brother Konthy) comes her way.

The fifty five year old bachelor of uncouth features is on his way home after close of the day's tea shop business. He squats, down on the floor of the hutment as usual at Sarojini's just for a minutes customary, 'how do you do' before proceeding to his loner's corner.

It is then suddenly two hearts catch fire. Opening his beetle wallet, Konthy Annan asked her "Saro, what are you dreaming about at this hour here?"

"Not dreaming, Konthy Annan. I had no sleep coming on and was just musing of things in general" she said. And then, "Shall I wake mother," She asked. Within, her mother lay already fast asleep. She could wake her up or not as he wished.

'No, no, you needn't wake her. I shall be gone in a minute, he said. And then, nibbling at the beetle leaf between his fingers the aging old bachelor asked her in a soft hush:

"How long are you going to remain like this, Saro?" She pretended not to have grasped his meaning for some time and then said slowly: "No no, Konthy Annan, I am not going to be here for long. I was about to lie down."

He laughed at it and said. "O, the fun of it ! What I asked, you my dear, was how long you are going to live like this alone?"

And there she was out with her thought: "You are also a loner. Why do you live like this alone?" She hadn't quite completed the sentence when Konthy Annan's expression changed.

"Don't worry on my account," he said to her. Her ready rejoinder was: "You don't worry for me either". That was the moment of each ones worrying for the other. That was also the end of their singleness.

If 'Bhavivaran' is a story of fundamental passion, the short story, 'Thyagam' is a story of man's (and woman's) humanity and power to rise above passion. It depicts the anguish and despair of a widow whose dilemma is whether to carry on her fancies of a remarriage or not. This counter part of the Phaedra of the legend in Kesava Dev's fiction, dame by name Chandrika, after some hesitation stifles the passion on her bosom.

Duty to her son was more important to her than her own infatuation, she said to herself and that was the end of an affair. There the story ends.

The story of 'Meenakaran Koran (Koran the Fisherman) is quite different. That is, so to say, a sombre short story rising to the pitch of a miniature Moby Dick, the tragedy of passion of an Ahab type individual, an odd fisherman called Koran.

Kesava Dev never thought too highly of this work of his so much so that he never cared to include the story in his *Selected Short Stories, First Series*, consisting of 38 of his best stories. However, Meenakaran Koran is doubly a masterpiece of a short story, one of the most telling of all its author's works.

Koran the fisherman who used to revel in sadistically torturing cats and dogs, tearing them to pieces whenever he could reach them, one day took pity on a little motherless pup. He had been all along alone in his hut, doomed to such a lonely life as he was far from handsome and acceptable to a woman. In his aloneness this new interest in the little pup grew to be a genuine affection, an infatuation and he began feeding her and fondling her with a romantic zeal quite contrary to his habit.

What a fond love it was ! And how intense a passion it was he felt for the young bitch he affectionately named his Katha.

And yet one day it so happened that Koran sighted her as she was mating with a male of her own species in a shady recess. Mad with jealousy Koran pounced on the two and struck them down with his oar. The male was reduced to a pulp of flesh in no time. He lifted it up and hurled it away. Where was the bitch, he was now searching for her in mad fury.

As the study of an elemental passion 'Meenakaran Koran' is a matchless short story, one of the more astounding performances of a master craftsman who strangely professed indifference to form and style!

So also Kesava Dev's 'Vasuvum Varcethum' (Vasu and Vareed) is a little classic. It is a grim account of the experiences of two kids by name Vasu and Vareed. At the dead of night, after some hours' continuous downpour the two are spotted as ferreling through the dead still deserted street. They are researching, says Dev, not into the meaning of the world

nor the ultimate truth of life at this hour. They are hungry and are in search of something to eat, some eatables, anything, at this unearthly hour. They have been starving for quite some time.

Vasu and Vareed, two boys who had come to the town from the village seeking employment had wandered up and down for sometime and they had made friends with each other at the bus station as fellow porters. The second day of their joint effort there was a general strike and they got no work at all and had nothing to eat for hours. Now, at midnight they are going out to try obtain something to eat.

After some idle wandering these two babes in the wood of the modern age stumble upon the Talkative Lady of the Bazar, a crazy beggar woman, lying asleep in the front yard of a shop clasping her baggage. To their great joy, they find that she lies there a corpse and all her savings are to be found in a bundle of rags beside her. It consists mostly of 2 pie, 3 pie, and 5 pie coins. And there are two grand one rupee notes too among them. And a small ring of gold, obviously a baby ring probably stolen from somewhere.

The boys are eager to take a count of the lot. But then it occurs to Vasu that they might do that afterwards at some safe spot, at leisure. The main thing now is to get away from the scene with the catch.

And so they hurry through the alley.

And then there is a loud shout: "Stop. Who are you? Stop there".

That is the police constable on his usual round.

The frightened kids make a bid to run away.

"Throw it into the gutter", Vareedu whispers to his partner.

And Vasu cleverly puts it in the gutter, placing it somewhere there carefully.

The constable chases them around and catches hold of them by the wrist in seconds' time. He hits them hard on their head, shouting to them in the meanwhile - "What were you up to?"

"Thieving at night, weren't you, tell me where you were going to." .. They told him they never wanted to steal any thing any where, in the most courteous manner possible. One of the two added, they were coolies of the bus station. Then the constable cross- questioned them as to why they tried to run away.

Vasu assured the constable they had done so only because they were scared. Then he ordered them to prove they had nothing hidden in their under clothing. They did so. "Now run away rats, he said to the two, passing on to both of them one hit each on the head.

And the little boys ran away crying for their aching heads, and of the might of the murderer and laughing up their sleeves in the meanwhile over their successful attempt to hoodwink the dreaded one.

Then minutes hence the two reach their chosen spot gasping for breath. They have left there a treasure. But by then it had again started raining cats and dogs and in the rain they groped for the money in the gutter at the corner by the dust bin, they had noted apart.

Alas, the whole thing had vanished!

Might have been washed away by the rain water rushing through the gutter.

"At first the murderer police constable. And then the rain. Between them two, they ruined us," the boys wept. Drenched in the rain they carry on the search for some more time. But that is all in vain.

"Does not the omniscient god see it all?", one asks.

"May be not" the other says in answer.

This story of the two little ones' struggle for existence is another solemn evidence of the bleeding humanity of this writer. The quality of his sympathy was unique.

'Kanju Kuti Muticho ! (Our Kanji is Taken Away From us) is the story of an unusual romance and matrimonial alliance between a glutton by name Thomman and a fellow worker of his by name Eli. Whatever Thomman got as wages was not enough to satisfy his hunger and Eli had

her dependent elderly parents. Thomman, however, consented to give away half of Eli's wages for the sake of her parents and on that condition they got married.

And there the couple started making a home of their own. How their love grew with the passage of time and how they fared through stress and strain are related in the story with admirable skill. The change that came about Thomman, the voracious eater, was surprising. The sacrifices he made for his wife and child made him feel very ill. Yet he plodded on weary and weak, working hard to support his wife and child, eating as little as he could, sparing as much for them as possible.

And one day he fell down as he was working on the hill side on empty stomach.

And Eli mourned as she heard how he collapsed.

'O! Lord, the little gruel that we had is taken away from us' was her lament.

Stories like the above and 'Avan Valiya Udyogasthana' (He is a Big Officer), the story of a villager in town face to face with the sordid realities of the life of a poorly paid clerk in the capital are touching indeed. Sanku Nair had set out for the capital with his friend Kunchu Pillai to pay a visit to his son, a graduate clerk in the capital, a big officer as the father had thought. But the pity of the odd finding: The old man's middle class morality was still urging him to take pride in the son who was an officer of the government. The quality of sympathy seen in such stories makes it clear that in spite of all his sense of humour and flair for satire Kesava Dev was a writer who was truly anguished about the misery and wretchedness around him.

Some of Kesava Dev's stories are notable for their marvellous blend of humour and pathos. 'Vayanasala Vasu Pillai' (Vasu Pillai of the Reading Room) is one such story. It is an elaborate account of the heroic efforts of a civic conscious, well meaning villager by name Vasu Pillai who applied himself to setting up a library and reading room in his village with little educational facility. He meets with different types of cold shouldering from his people and he is quite often in dismay not knowing how to reconcile the warring factions of interests and individuals among the villagers.

A Nair Youth who is a junior B.A. Student is keen on going on with the play acting programme for the opening of the library as he is gloating over his own histrionic talents as he has already made an appearance on the campus stage with the costume of a waiter on. And his father, the prospective principal patron of the reading room is dead against their play acting as they plan it. For, in the present schedule Divakaran, a low caste chap is to take the role of the employee of his son. In the play the low caste is to address him 'eta' - second person pronoun denoting lowly people unlike 'ningal' and 'angunnu' second person pronouns used to address respectable people.

The beauty is that Vasu Pillai dashes on in spite of all hurdles and has the reading room and library set up at last. Not only that. He steers its management skillfully through all difficulties. Amusing at times, admirable on occasions and engaging all through the portrait of the book lover is endearing. Are we to take him comically as a Quixote in the conventional sense or as an undaunted missionary of sweetness and light? Both the views are tenable and that is the art of the short story of Kesava Dev's.

In stories like 'Manthri Paranju' (The Minister Said) and 'Gusthi' (The Wrestling) this mixing of matter to feel indignant about and to be broken hearted of produces a rare effect.

It is something novel: a unique combination of mirth and seriousness of a writer of high seriousness.

And the art of it is amazing.

'Manthri Paranju', for example, recounts the boasts of a certain petty local leader by name Vakakkadan about his influence on the Hon'ble Minister and unfolds his Machiavellian design on a poor girl in need of a job. It is a sad tale of the machinations of a parasite to ruin an unemployed little lass banking on the good intentions of a local chief posing as her well wisher bent upon robbing her of her most priceless possession.

So also 'Gusthi' recounts the excitement in the customers of a petty tea-shop as one reads out from a hand bill detailing the whereabouts of a wrestling contest soon to be, between a certain Nanu Pillai known in local circles as the 'Gama of Kerala' and a wrestler by name Muhammad Hussain, a celebrity from the Punjab. The humorous story takes a dramatic

turn as we are told how Hindus and Muslims among the idlers sipping their tea at Pappu Pillai's ramshackle teashop suddenly started taking sides and how the whole episode took a ghastly turn when heads rolled over the issue of competence is wrestling Hindus and Muslims possess as estimated on the communal basis. The short story is a fine piece of gentle ridiculing.

In a story like 'Chayakkatayil' (In the Teashop) Kesava Dev surprises us with the bleeding humanity, along with the ardour of a militant fighter for social justice. Recall the grand master's depiction of village folk and here Dev's story holds the same attraction in it in this case not of a chapter of a novel but a short story proper, of a poor couple carrying on hotel business, and their customers, a cross section of the people of Kerala.

So again Kesava Dev's 'Bassuyathra' (Bus Journey) is a very realistic account of the life of a needy government employee, one Padmanabhan Nair, a munsif's court head clerk. A bus journey he undertakes along with his family, consisting of his wife Kamalakshy and their baby still far to go to do without breast feeding reveals all about his life. The story of their poor relations at home and in their native village whose lives also related somewhat in detail through the account of a journey. A story of the humanity and petty pride and dilemmas of a poor low paid government employee, this 'Bassuyathra' is a very engaging Malayalam short story, one of the touching stories in the language, a masterly rendering of the still sad music of humanity in the limited span of a short story.

So also 'Panathekkal Valutha Manushyan' (Man is more than Money). It is the story of a poor man's revenge on a so called higher up in society. Pachan was a destitute character. When his wife was in labour pain in great need of help a medical practitioner had turned down his entreaty to attend on her insisting on formalities at a time when he ought to have acted promptly to save a life. The poor carter lost his wife through that neglect. Now the doctor is in need of help from him and Pachan humiliates the villain with his simple humanity. Similar if of larger dimensions, is the story 'Maracheeni (Tapioca). A clerk in the capital is called on by his in-laws on a 29th of a month, that is to say, two days before pay day. He is driven stealthily to pull out a handful of tapioca roots from his neighbour's carefully guarded little tapioca plantation. Caught red handed the poor guy is most embarrassed. But when he makes a

confession of his sad plight his neighbour overwhelms him by his compassion and love. He makes a present of a good quantity of the food item to the culprit.

Some of Kesava Dev's short stories are intriguing riddles of man and woman relation. Two of the more remarkable such stories are 'Swargathil Oru Chekuthan' (A Devil in Heaven) and 'Yamuna Ekagramayi Ozjukunnu' (Yamuna Flows Steady). The former relates a situation in which a lawyer consoles his wife that the criminal whose story frightened her is going to be hanged as convict in a murder case. The simpleton is awfully unaware of the background. The criminal had earlier raped the lawyer's sweet wife, then an immaculate virgin. She had meekly given way to him, partly out of fear and partly out of her furtive craving for the sensation. Another girl in her position afterwards had offered him stiff resistance and the rogue had killed her in cold blood and the wretch is now going to pay for that crime.

'Yamuna Ekagramayi Ozjukunnu' tells the story of a college girl by name Yamuna, a belle betrothed to a youth by name Madhu. She goes out to meet another youth, a poet by name Ravi and submits her body entire to him. Ravi who had all along been her silent admirer is shocked at the discovery of the psychology of love as it works in Yamuna's heart.

Stories like 'Nootti Nalpathy Rupa' (Rupees One Hundred and Forty) and 'Kruthaghnatha' (Ingratitude) relate simple incidents of cheating and man's inhumanity to his fellow beings. How they break the hearts of people ! "Nootti Nalpathu Rupa' tells us how on one occasion the author was relieved of a fortune of his by a thief whom he had trusted in a mood of joy and gaiety. 'Kruthaghnatha' is an account of a more heart breaking treachery done to a poor rest house waiter by a well to do person. The unfortunate fellow and his sister, a victim to man's villainous intentions tell another tale of evil in man in powerful language.

An occasional story of Kesava Dev's like 'Cooldrinks' may appear the simple derivative of the masterpiece of masterpieces 'Kabuliwalah'. The author of that story being Rabindranath Tagore, this imitation attempted in an apprenticeship period need not vex any one. The one thing that cannot normally be said about Kesava Dev is that he was a bookish writer. His short stories are more or less actual recordings of the actual

experiences of people, related always with a view to improving the conditions of life lived around.

As a short story writer Kesava Dev's range is impressive. His sympathy was always with the under dog. Some of his short stories are merely a series of barks in defence of the defenceless. Stories like 'Irulil' (In the Dark) and 'Raghavante Amma' (Raghavan's Mother) are example. But even in these crude reportage, the genuine fire of moral indignation, Dev felt at the wretchedness and sorrow around animates the whole thing. So too a story like 'Nurse' is remarkable as pioneering work. Subsequently artists like Parappurathu demonstrated how that area of life could be a veritable gold mine for artists and social reformers. However, it was Kesava Dev who drew attention to that theme. In the story Dev made a touching rendering of the wounded heart of a soul for ever dressing the wounds of the suffering.

IV

Playwright

Kesava Dev was first and foremost a novelist and story teller. Odd though it may sound the most striking characteristic of this master of the prose epic was his predilection for drama. In writings and in speeches, he almost always aimed at and invariably always produced dramatic effects. There was an instinctive preference for drama in the man, one is tempted to surmise.

And he wrote a few plays, 7 full length plays and 17 one act plays.

His first attempts in playmaking were one-act plays, it has been revealed by one of his associates of the period, one whom he himself selected for taking roles in his plays, no less a person than Prof.S.Guptan Nair. His one-act plays were brought out in book form, however, only in and after 1954, while his first five act play titled 'Munnottu' appeared in print in 1947 and was followed next year by his second play 'Pradhanamanthri'.

'Munnoottu' depicts the hollowness of a rich man's family life and is an Ibsenist X-raying of the corruption and decay of his home. It depicts the currents and cross-currents in a cesspool of wickedness and vice. The play presents the story of a fretful old husband, a money bag and his youthful wife. She is a shameless wanton. The weak willed husband meekly puts up with her ways submitting himself to her whims on condition he is not hampered in his money-making. (It may be recalled here that in one of his earlier writings, Dev had made a bid to shape a short

story about a man who in his eagerness to make money, forgets all about living).

Not that 'Munnoottu' is remarkable as a work of drama. It was after all only a novelist's first essay in playmaking. Kesava Dev's second work of drama, 'Pradhanamanthri' (The Prime Minister) was a stupendous ridiculing of the first elected Ministry of the State after the abolition of monarchy. The State of Travancore - which later on with the merger of the Cochin State and Malabar district has come to be the present Kerala State, got a new elected Government and styled itself a Sovereign State and the chief Minister of the small principality was designated 'Prime Minister'. It is of that Prime Minister and the doings of his greedy womenfolk that Kesava Dev made the stage play, 'The Prime Minister'.

The Prime Minister is one Muttam. He is depicted in the play as being attended on by a P.W.D. contractor. The Prime Minister's daughter is getting married and all the anti social elements of the place rush to him, with offer of assistance and gifts. The unscrupulous Prime Minister pampers the estate owners and money lenders and all other self-seekers to make his daughter's wedding a grand event. The citizens of the State are left wondering why all the mountainous labours of their hundreds of freedom fighters should have brought about only the gain of such a mouse birth for them.

There is an uprising of the democrats of the land led by a heroic and self sacrificing man by name Pothan, a militant worker of the Indian National Congress and Ravi, the Prime Minister's own son, an idealist youth. They organize a demonstration of freedom loving citizens of the state in protest against the rank careerism and opportunism of the megalomaniac in office. The finale of the drama is the fall of Pothan drenched in blood, bullets having been pumped into his noble heart by the police.

'Pradhanmanthri' is a portentous account of the beginning of certain dangerous tendencies in the politics of our state at one of the critical periods, the period of transition. It is a moving tragedy of the catastrophe that hit our people and set in motion a series of unfortunate events in the history of the state. Of all the writers of the period, Kesava Dev alone had the guts to speak out in such a tricky situation.

Though thus a work of high seriousness, and of historical value, the play is also an entertaining piece of writing, with its fine satiric humour

and wit. If the jokes about fellows who eat 'flea chops' and the 'ruloos' (rules as everybody knows) in the dialogues of the illiterates are somewhat too obvious, the smartness of the plea of the opportunists in self defence before people in power will make even grim serious folk burst into laughter. "I was all along of your party. You see, when I was to have instructed the goondahs at my disposal to throw stones at you people, you know how I was regardful of you all? I instructed them definitively: don't hit them hard" says one guy.

'Pradhanamanthri' was followed in two years' time by 'Chekuthanum Katalinum Itayil' (Between the Devil and the Sea). It is Kesava Dev's account of the predicament of the poor in the early fifties.

"What we see in our country today, is the pathetic spectacle of the common man horned by mad extremists on the one hand and by the guardians of law on the other hand."

Dev stated his case thus in the Preface to the play. The pity is that the people were led at that time by a peculiar lot of leaders, 'those who go about with pikes to lift the poor people's as Dakshayani, a working class woman who has seen through the designs of Machiavellians in search of power, puts it. Their lordships of the House of Devendrath, literally house of the king of gods who own elephants and extensive areas of land, carry on their systematic exploitation of the masses in a novel fashion. They go over to the hutments of the poor Harijans professing commitment to their cause and carry on their exploitation in a score of ways under that facade. The deeds of the congress leader Gopala Pillai - who puts on that mask conveniently, and commits atrocities of the most terrific magnitude are not less shocking. He is no wiht different from the fraudulent wealthy and the wicked who go about propagating the theory of the equality of men and in practice maintain how they are above the rest and are more equal than others. He is in fact in a vantage position and he exploits the helpless.

Chinnan, an agricultural labourer of Harijan stock has also seen through the designs. What communism is this when rogues and rowdies call themselves communists and crooks are engaged in renovation of society, he asks. Chinnan's alternative is equally bad, standing by the police and slaving for them, were it to dress their chicken for them or performing massage for them when they so desire !

The mode of action of the police is shabby, to say the least. Says a policeman: 'Only by his moustache it could be inferred that he is a communist', glancing at a prospective prey of his. And another sadist police constable propounds his theory of maintenance of order.

"The fellow's frame is so well built that no one can resist the temptation to beat him". And their deeds of cruelty are far too many. One fellow explains a trade secret.

"There is a goat at the fellow's. I have already sent a messenger to the house. He is a stingy fellow and will not easily part with his animal for us to make mutton of. But you see, he has to. His, brother in law's younger brother's in law goes about sporting a moustache and he reads newspapers. What more evidence is needed to establish that he is a communist? I have given him a good shaking. May be the fool will now make a present of his goat to us to ward off danger". The strategy of men who are in charge of looking into matters of law and order and safeguarding the people !

"Whatever be the reigning party the propertied classes and thieves get into power and deceive the poor. And in the end, they are all one and we people are outsiders", say an intelligent poor farmer by name Mathai Mappila who is still a devout Christian.

The play thus presents a baffling situation, the dilemma of the common man who finds himself between the devil and the sea. A most enlightened plea for humanity, this early essay of Kesava Dev's in dramatic writing successfully exposes frauds in our politics. The youth of the upper classes in a changing political situation resort to strategy of a very clever kind by becoming communists overnight only to misguide the popular movement! In the words of Kesava Dev, 'whoever thought that there could be such Machiavellianism in men?'. "Whoever thought that those Kochumbras (their lordships of the younger generation) would come down to our huts, partake of the meagre fare of our food and betray us en masse?" as an outspoken Harijan puts it in the play. And those frauds lecture for ever and always of things that would benefit the poor ('Pavathungakku Konam Varunna Karyangal' as he puts it, literally matters that would bring about good for the poor).

The play may not be conforming to the standards of perfection as drama. However, it cannot be denied that this essay in play writing, is

another one of Kesava Dev's anguished cries of despair, the cry of a conscientious Keralite, as he surveys the ways of the world.

Kesava Dev's next work in chronological order was 'Njanippakkammunistavum' (I am going to be a Communist), a hard hitting attack on pseudo-revolutionaries and a parody of a famous play 'Ningalenne Kammunistakki' (You turned a Communist of me) by Thoppil Bhasi. It was a humanist criticism of the ways of the business interests in politics. It was more particularly a bitter indictment of the men at the helm of the affairs of the misguided political movements of the time.

Frauds posing as leaders of the parties had been cheating their followers systematically and consistently. At one stage a Harijan finds out 'Kammyunnisakkaru thamprakkanmaru Kutiyirakkiya Chothikkanarum illa' ("When their lordships, the communists evict you there is no one to complain to"). Also it is found "Ippazh valya valya veedukalilellam Kammyunisamalle? (Are not all the wealthy folk now communists?). The work is honest reportage, but reportage cannot be called drama and one can have little else to say in praise of this work that it served its purpose of educating the masses.

However, in 1959 Kesava Dev demonstrated how even reportage can become great drama as often it happens with that great master dramatist of Russia, Anton Chekhov. Kesava Dev's 'Oru Muri Thenga' (Half a Coconut), is a marvel piece of drama out of absolutely nothing. 'Oru Muri Thenga' is a full length play of practically little matter, but nevertheless a play lively and intensely interesting from start to finish. There were two adjoining houses with a boy in one and a girl in the other and the two were in love with each other. The alliance being acceptable to the parents of both the parties the wedding celebration appeared almost at hand.

It was then that suddenly a quarrel broke out between the two houses - on the issue of half a coconut in this land of coconuts on all sides. The drama is as to how the quarrel breaks out and how it gathers momentum and how ultimately it is patched up, the houses agreeing to be friends as usual. A drama with absolutely nothing happening in the course of it and yet a masterly drama, that is what 'Oru Muri Thenga' is. The members of the two houses were friends before the outbreak of the quarrel and when the curtain comes down, on the rift between them they are again friends. 'Oru Muri Thenga' appears all the more to be Kesava Dev's finest dramatic work.

'Oru Muri Thenga' was followed next year by 'Chainaway' another one of Kesava Dev's plain political pamphleteerings. The play is a broad farce making fun of communists. One Gopala Krishna Kurup, calls himself 'Gopi Shi' in imitation of Chinese style and the drama is of the odd doings of this Gopishi. A literary hack by name Kittu, self styled Maya Tse Lung, goes about as a devoted Gopishi-ist. A poor working class girl who gave protection to the comrades at their darkest hour, risking her life and everything for them is deserted by them and cruelly insulted by them.

There is in the play one Nanukurup who tells the party leaders how in their dictionary there is only one word: selfishness, "Ningakkellam nalla innum njangakkellam nalla naleem, allayo?" (For you people always it is good today, for us only good tomorrow. Isn't it so?).

Part of the humour of the play is too thin.

But the intention of the playwright atones for his lapses: it is razor sharp criticism of the lapses of the politicians of the day. They sanctioned Government loans for a project to make rubber from sand, at one point the caricaturist in Dev relates!

Lung's plan to make a Kathakali of the incident of the shooting of a would be mother by name Flory, 'Flory Vadham' as he calls it in imitation of 'Duryodhanavadham', 'Keermira Vadham' and the like, dance drama of the slaying of monstrous villains, is another one of the funny episodes in the drama.

'Tharavadu' (the Ancestral House) (1962), is one of Kesava Dev's unsuccessful exercises in play making. It has a very solemn theme - national integration - the solidarity of the people of all India. It is a pity that Kesava Dev did not quite succeed in this noble venture.

Indefatigable optimist that he was Kesava Dev brought out in 1971, a drama of the pity of the human predicament - 'Malika Paniyan' (To Build a Two-Storeyed Building). It relates the tragedy of the efforts of a mason who wanted to build a two storeyed building for himself. He started dreaming of a two storeyed house of his own as he had built so many houses for others. His wife was more pragmatic. She limited her ambition to the ordering of a silver girdle for her daughter and started setting apart one rupee coins and two rupee notes she could save for the girdle fund. The husband took away the money to invest in a private chit fund so as to

make a handsome amount with which to commence his building project. The private chit fund Managing Director was an elderly woman of the locality, a toothless gossip. The mason paid the first premium for the chit from the funds his aggressive Xanthippe* type wife had kept apart for the girdle and the matter raised a veritable storm in the family tea cup. The storm in the cup of this sad couple is atlast hushed by the brother-in-law and the man and wife go on severally labouring to attain their life's ambition - a girdle for the girl as the mother intends and a two storeyed house for her as the father aspires.

The poor mason's landlord with all his train of bulldogs and rowdies and the showers from above joined in collusion to thwart their plans. His wife fell ill and had to be hospitalised and all the money the man saved had to be shelled out on that account. All their plans were upset and the old man and his old wife are left in total dismay. The poor artisan's frustration is presented here with a rare sympathy and love. Kesava Dev was no dweller of any ivory tower. He was the common man's poet. He proved how the simple annals of the poor could be theme for poetry of grandeur.

'Manthriyakkalle' (Please Don't Make me a Minister) is an interesting one act play.

It is a broad farce of the fashions and foibles in current politics. It ridicules every political sect of the country in rather stout language, using more often animal imagery. Thus 'revolutionary reptiles' and wolves with Gandhi caps on and freedom fighter asses' are paraded in the comedy. There are hirelings of the communalist organizations winning elections and ruling the roost as MLAs, and writers pandering to the whims and fancies of illiterate money bags. The central issue of the playlet is a citizen's desire to escape being made a minister. He is a decent human being and as such he deems it crime to take the oath of office as minister, sensing that in the event of his accepting ministership he is doomed once for ever. The quality of the satire is peculiar and the play is shocking.

The earliest of Kesava Dev's one act play was probably 'Thaskara Sanghom' (The Gang of Thieves), a playlet of the living conditions of an Editor. And Editor by name Panikkar, lives in utter wretchedness and

* shrewish woman or wife (name of Socrates's wife)

squalour, thanks to his stingy and crooked employer, a newspaper owner by name Unni Pillai, who leads a life of luxury, systematically exploiting his employees, from editor to packer. The editor is ultimately driven to throw away his job. For some time he laboured under the delusion that he had to work for social uplift even in such unfavourable circumstances; but in the end he realises that he has to act in a manly manner, defying his employer. He refuses to write editorials opposing the new democratic move to bring about progressive legislation.

There is plenty of grim satiric humour in the one act play exposing the Fourth estate which has become a veritable slaughter house of the arts and an establishment for pandering to the requirements of the vested interests of communalists. The jokes about politics, tricks of politics and the cartoon quips about newspapers, such as Kasubandhu (obviously a parody of 'Desabandhu' - the guardian of cash no Guardian of the State), Dhanorama (parody of Manorama - Cashwinner' for heart winner), Kazhuthadhwani (parody of Pouradhawani - the voice of the Ass for the voice of the People), characters such as 'Prathisandhippillai (Crisis-Pillai) and Chacko Vishki, Keralite name Chacko with a Russian ending, Nair writers, Ezhava writers and Christian writers - all communist litterateurs - the ridiculing of parasites who take up the agency of communism and revolution for money making and then switch on to the agency of the dogma of the church, again for money, these make entertaining titbits and as closet drama the playlet is interesting even today.

'Thaskara Sanghom' was followed five years later by the collection 'Thondu kari', in 1954.

There are six playlets in this collection viz 'Rehearsal Camp', 'Student's Lodge', 'Mannathi', 'Irulinte Maravil', 'Socialist Realism' and the title piece 'Thondu kari'.

'Rehearsal Camp' relates the ins and outs of a rehearsal camp, where a silly drama manager insists on his getting the text of a selected drama changed lock stock and barrel for his whimsical requirement. The playwright is driven to take to his heels from such a rehearsal camp.

Part of the wit of the play consists of puerile malapropisms, 'stage affection' for 'stage effect' as the end of drama according to the manager, and the 'passengers' coming for drama - 'people who hold passes for it'.

'Students' Lodge' tells us the story as to how a seemingly over religious fellow seduced a servant maid and murdered her after raping her. A lodge mate of his, an atheist inmate of the same lodge is the first suspect. Ultimately the villain is unmasked. There is nothing much striking about the little play except the element of mystery in it, which is worked upon somewhat artfully.

'Mannathi' (the Washer Woman) is the pathetic story of a washer man's distresses. His sister was raped and he was beaten up and laid down as a bundle of ill-health. The disabled husband, the whining fatherless babe and the scapegoat wench bear all indignities meekly. 'What an abominable life you live' Kesava Dev asks the gentry of the land. The description of the life of these defenceless have not is notable if only for the quality of compassion it evinces. The play is one of Dev's finer works.

'Irulinte Maravil' (Behind the Curtain of Darkness) is also one of Kesava Dev's interesting playlets. It sets forth the adventures of a needy couple in a troubled night. They feel a strong urge for some good food. The man poaches a hen from a nearby poorman's poultry perch. He and the wife dress it up in furious hurry and are caught in the act by an inquisitive neighbour as eager for some catables as the busy couple. Naturally, he is also invited to share the meat lest he should turn an informant. Alas, there is no fire wood enough and the diners are compelled to swallow the whole thing half boiled. The sauce of chilly being equally insufficient they find it hard work to push it down their throat. They do it, somehow, at great pains.

Here again the remarkable thing is the quality of sympathy in the playwright. His skill in dramatising a sequence of events not quite dramatic in the conventional sense with no scope for conflict is commendable.

The playlet 'Socialist Realism' presents a fantastic communist leader lecturing a young man as to how to alter his work of drama to conform to the party standards and make it perfectly right by the canon of socialist realism.

The satire is spicy and that makes this otherwise not remarkable playlet one of some interest.

'Thondukari' (the Coconut Husk thresher) tells the story of poor coir worker girls ruined by the overlords of the coconut husk trade. Much in the manner of the prophet of revolution who said that man is in chains everywhere, Kesava Dev makes out through this little play that the poor are duped by the rich every where and always. Though not one of his remarkable works, this playlet is interesting as one more proof of the playwright's warm humanity.

The collection 'Mazhayangum Kutayingum' ('Rain's here and Umbrella there far away') is also of the same year. There are three plays in this volume.

The title piece is a criticism of the communist leaders of the day. They maintain that as and when there is a rain in Russia, Keralites have to carry umbrella with them.

The whole thing is a farce and all the characters of the play are mere caricatures. The historian known as 'Badayiski' say in English, Exaggerationski, and the traveller 'Nunayov' (-Licov) are two of the more telling specimens of the species. Their plans and projects are of enormous ridiculousness and wickedness. One example is that of the campaign against the Five Year Plans. They set out to organize an agitation in defence of rats for the reason that the rodents could aggravate distress in the country and that would help the revolution in the offing. They propose to organize a series of sathyagraha by deserted lovers. It could be posh fasting demonstration. At night the Sathyagrahi might have his fill of the choicest food with the gaslight off. Only thing is the form of the fast should be kept up, they insist !

The playlet recounts how party men go about in search of a dead body. When a poor man died of cholera, they try to organize a protest rally shouting 'Punish the Killers of Ayyappan'. To their great consternation, the man wakes up in the middle. The humour of the play consists of such comic inventions as an organisation known as 'Sympathy Workers Union', the amusing word coinage fusing Indian names and Russian endings of nouns - names such as Mathayiski Gopalanov. Ayyappanovich Raghavanov, Vilasinina Kalyaninovna, Sankarina Karthiayaninovna.

There is some humour in the ridiculing of popular literary fashions. A nonchalant versifier makes a poem of a wood cutter's fall from a jack tree and his eventual death. As the unlucky guy's wife is mourning for her

husband a bird makes its portentous appearance and lectures her on the need of the hour - preparation of a mass petition to be sent up to the President of the United States of America, in protest against their policies.

'Mazhayangum Kutayingum' no doubt is only one of Kesava Dev's little playlets. Still its thematic importance and stylistic nuances make it one of his finer performances in words.

The second piece included in this collection is titled 'Bhayam' (Fear). It is another one of Dev's amazing performances: a successful attempt in making a gripping drama of material obviously too thin for drama. 'Bhayam' has for its theme another ordinary incident of quarrel between a man and his wife culminating in a reconciliation between the two. 'Vazhi Theliyunnu' (the Way is Cleared) is a prosaic and uncharacteristically dull treatise of the false pride of the elder generation of economically backward Nairs who are loath to work in the farm yard along with agricultural labourers of the lower castes. One elderly Nair Chief stubbornly opposes the making of a road through his plot of land on ground of casteism. The old man in the end is made to give way to the younger generation.

'Nee Marichu' (You are Dead) (56) is another collection of playlets and it consists of two theatre pieces 'Nee Marichu' (You are Dead) and 'Nuna Nerakumo'? (Can falsehood become Truth?) the former makes fun of a retired revenue official absolutely unfamiliar with anything other than revenue manual and a band of illiterate richmen posing as patrons of literature. Ill-equipped as they are for any such mission they are lionised by a gang of worthless quill drivers and the comedy of the playlet consists in their odd manipulations to curry the favour of the society lions. And the quality of the verses they manufacture is odd indeed. "O tiger blue, O tiger blue" and the like, obviously a parody of the popular snatches of the day's revolt-raising versifications.

'Nuna Nerakumo' (Can falsehood become Truth?) is an other farce involving a man, his wife and a secret love affair of the man's. There is some comedy in the clever manoeuvres of the husband with his allies, a gang of liars and an incorrigible blunder-bus of a servant. There is little that is original about this comic piece.

Kesava Dev's truly good stage plays prove that he was an author of remarkable versatility. And his unsuccessful ventures in the making of works of drama which sometimes end up merely as stage dialogues are witnesses to his humanitarian aspirations.

V

Miscellany

Besides a good number of novels, short stories and plays Kesava Dev wrote a few miscellaneous prose works.

Foremost of these is his Thesis of Opposition, advanced through the autobiographical account 'Ethirppu' (The Opposition). This is a massive treatise amazingly gripping as reading material, a reminiscence of Kesava Dev's early days as well as an exposition of his theory of being. In the Prefectory Note the author claims that in the book he is attempting to view his own early life in a disinterested spirit, 'viewing his own past through the eyes of a third party' as it were, to recall the author's actual words. But like many a fictional autobiography the book presents an idealized self portrait of the author and recounts his quarrels with various people and an elaboration of his theory of nonconformism. He was from the very start, the author tells us, a thorough dissenter.

Kesava Dev resented the partiality and favouritism of his teachers, no less than the tyranny of uncles. He tells us at length in the first chapter of the narration as to how he was a problem child at home in his early life. Born at midnight in the month of Karkataka, viewed by Keralites in general as an inauspicious month - under the zodiacal sign of cancer - he was, he tells us, not a mewling infant, nor even a new entrant crying in the King Lear style that we are come/to this great stage of fools. Instead he made a leap into the world from his mother's womb Kesava Dev tells us. And he made a big roar at the time, it is told.

In the following chapters of the reminiscence the author relates as to how he grew to be a menace to his parents and teachers, throwing stones at disagreeable people, defying uncles and making ballads of wicked aunties and putting awkward questions to school masters and so on. He tells us, too, as to how he was compelled to pay homage to an uncouth old Nambudiri at a 'Kettukalyanam', an abominable practice of the day in the community to which he belonged, of girls being ceremoniously given away to Nambudiri-octagenarians at a very tender age as brides according to a caste convention. This Kesavan resented and the bitterness of the matter remained with him throughout his life though he had the satisfaction of flouting the convention as vehemently as he could.

In this particular sense 'Ethirppu' is a brilliant account of the genesis of a rebel and as such one of the most interesting of all Kesava Dev's works. In the story he traces his early life rather meticulously and tells us in detail how every factor in his life conspired to make a dissenter of him. And the principal charm of this work is the theory of life it advances, a theory of being as opposition to evil, a religion as it were of fight with establishment and oppressive institutions of all kinds as the path of salvation for man. No wonder that it should be so. Kesava Dev was, whatever else he may not have been, the most thorough going of all non-conformists and radicals of his time.

Another one of Kesava Dev's autobiographical writings, 'Kesava Dev Kal Noottantinu Mumpu' (The Kesava Dev of Quarter a Century Ago) gives us in a nutshell another one of his neat expositions of a new theory of life and literature. In the Prefactory Note he tells us how all along, his intention has been to bring about a moral rearmament in the society to which he belonged and which he heartily hated and detested.

The book gives us a pretty good account of the Byronically boastful self styled 'Pariah of literature' - a Devil's Disciple of literature as one might say. His first cannon charge was on the universally revered seer of Malayalam poetry, Ezhuthachan, the great poet of the Bhakthi cult, the most adored of all our poets all along, the cleanest and the most sublime of all our ancient writers. This was, so to say, some kind of a literary stunt, an attempt to make a sensation, something like the modernist T.S. Eliot's tirade against Milton which was in a certain sense a mere draw attention motion by a youthful and vigorous litterateur of a new school. In this attack

* Pariahs were out - castes notorious for thier devilry.

on Ezhuthachan, Dev's intent was also probably to deliver a death blow to the tradition of devotional literature in Malayalam. Of the essays included in this volume the most important is the one of 'Ezhuthachan and Malayalam Literature' a call to throw overboard the old world poet of the Bhakthi cult, a sensation in our kingdom of letters for quite some time. Another one of the essays of some importance is a corollary, 'Kalayum Kalakaranum' (Art and the Artist), a powerful clarion call of a new theory of literature calling upon writers to take arms against all traditionalists in literature, the Epicurean genteels of poetry whose solemn concern has been the perpetuation of the existing social order and the preservation of its senseless norms and conventions of life and literature. A third essay of the volume is a positive statement of the new theory of literature of revolt. In yet another essay of the volume Kesava Dev speaks of the then popular theory of literature as an outlandish enormity and urges all writers to do away with it. Etukkatha Rupa; as she calls it, that sort of literature was a fake. "Counterfeit Money" that is the title of the piece. In another essay in the volume Kesava Dev argues that the basis of casteism is basically financial. In yet another essay, he calls upon the have nots to unite and fight injustice of all kinds, and march on to the making of a socialist society. That was, let it be remembered, long ago, long before the great Indian national movement opted for socialism as the nation's goal. To sum up, the volume is a brave proclamation of democratic values of life and literature and a call to heralding a new age in the history of our country, giving a decent burial to the values feudalist literature of the past upheld. The impact the book made on the socio-political order and the literary scene should have been remarkable.

Two of the author's other Reminiscences titled 'Thirinjunttam' ("A Look Back") and 'Ente Suhruthukkal' (My Friends) are literary curios and no works of abiding worth as literature. They are also, it will have to be admitted, devoid of the usual fire of the man, being a kind of table talk. Kesava Dev was not very good at that sort of writing.

His 'Jeevitha Veekshanam' (View of Life) propounds the author's views on casteism and brings out the socialist imperative. Here, of course, the argument is conducted in a new style and that makes it somewhat interesting. One of the notes in the collection is of disarmament as a must for the big powers of the world and of the rationale of the battle against Fascists. Another essay contained in this volume is a reflection on the moral norms for our cinema and yet another essay is a historical survey of trade union movement in the country, and it offers general guidelines for the trade union worker.

Similarly, too, 'Enikku Thonnunanathu' (What I Think) is an assortment of essays on various subjects, two of the themes of discussion being the connection between literature and politics, and the need to save our cinema from business interests. In some of the other essays of the volume Kesava Dev expatiates upon his theory of fiction and warns people against social tendencies such as growing Americanism in our style of living etc. In one of the essays in the collection he condemns linguistic fanaticism and makes a noble plea for effective national integration.

Another one of the essays in the collection is of the wickedness and cruelty of war and yet another one is of religion and sex. There are essays too, of the animal in man, and of the purpose of literature to humanize mankind. Two of the finer pieces are one an impassioned utterance urging for a resurrection of Christ and Karl Marx in one among us and the other is an appreciative study of the work of Prof. Joseph Mundasseri as a critic. Kesava Dev's tribute to the great critic and social reformer, as the destroyer-preserve wind on the Kerala literary landscape is an inspiring account of the life's work of that masterspirit of our time.

Of the odd assortments of creative work and essays of the author, 'Kamukante Kathu' (the Letter from a Lover) and 'Chitrasala' (The Picture Gallery) are two of the oldest of his books. The former is of the year 1930 and the latter of 1945.

The themes for discussion in the former are the business of poetry, how to bring about a change in the prevailing social order and how to bring about an ideal state of society and what its features ought to be etc. There is, too, an occasional treatment of psychological subjects such as the causes of depression and its cure.

'Chitrasala' is a collection of reflections on problems of poverty affecting the masses, the need for social justice and a way out of the stalemate of the time. The moral fervour of each individual utterance is commendable though, on the whole, it is all the work of a social reformer groping in the dark for a way out.

Kesava Dev's 'Agniym Sphulingavum' (The Fire and the Spark) and 'Rassyayute Kamukan' (The Lover of Russia) are two of his characteristic miscellanies. The former, the first booklet ever written of the October Revolution in Malayalam, was a glorification of the Soviet

system and the latter a vociferous condemnation of the same, written of course many years later, in the years of the author's disillusionment. It may be said in fairness to Kesava Dev that all along he was an idealist and that 'Russyayute Kamukan' was just another expression of his baffled idealism.

The miscellaneous works of Kesava Dev, though not remarkable as works of literature, are interesting on the whole as so many foot notes to his life's work - his creative fiction. And like all footnotes they are cumbersome to an extent and are useful nevertheless.

VI

Summing Up

Kesava Dev was thus a man of manifold achievement. He was novelist, short story writer, play wright, critic and social reformer, a man who had in a very real sense half a dozen titles to immortality. He was, as has already been pointed out, one of the principal forces of his time, one of the makers of a Renaissance in the socio-political history of our state and a sage who passed on to his people the dream of a brave new India of just and humane and freedom loving peoples, up-holding the dignity of man. It is thus, as a soldier in the war of liberation of humanity that Kesava Dev has his sure and secure place in the annals of our nation.

The late A. Balakrishna Pillai who was, so to say, a lawgiver of our literature in his own day, used to maintain, that Kesava Dev ought to be deemed a 'Mahakavi' - a great poet - of our language - were it only for his pioneering work as the first democrat in our literature. More than any one else of that noble fraternity of men of letters of the age who had taken a vow to bring about a new social order in our country and a new social awareness in our people it was he who spearheaded that battle for a new order. For this work alone, Kesava Dev has to be regarded a great poet, A. Balakrishna Pillai proclaimed as far back as in 1945.

And yet if we use the word poet in the rigid and conventional sense of the term, viz, in the sense that it denotes one notable for his felicity of phrase and the exquisite workmanship which makes 'jewels five words long' and so on, it will have to be conceded that Kesava Dev's gift was not of that line.

He was abundantly in possession of the power of hewing colossuses from rocks, not of carving figures on cherry stones. If the faculty of the poet consists, as Arthur Quiller Couch has assured us it does, in the power of turning men and women of ink and paper, Kesava Dev was truly a man of the most admirable poetic gift. Witness the ever praiseworthy portrait gallery of this great artist's making. If Pappu, Padmanabha Pillai, Abdu, Kunjan, Paramu, Krishna Kurup, Matan, Kunchu Kurup, the disembodied spirit of revolution named 'Kattu' in the novel 'Kannadi', Sumathy Amma, Dakshayani Amma, Thatha, Pathumma, Lakshmi, Eli, Sarah etc. are full length studies of men and women presented amply through lengthy novels, his Mariyakutty and Koran and Deenamma and many a similar other miniature study related through the lightning flashes in brief short stories of his are equally praiseworthy creations of his. They remain in the memory of his readers for ever for their sheer power and originality. True, some of these are no round characters in the familiar and accepted sense of the term. But there is, invariably always, something enduring about each one of these creations of Kesava Dev's.

Only consider the character of Sumathy Amma, flood lit in a single scene, the scene of the confrontation with her villainous detractors. The fellows of the Pachazhi house could not bear to look on the low caste Kunjan looking after the affairs of the Mangalasseri household as their steward in the most efficient and admirable manner possible, always guarding them from the onslaughts of those rivals of theirs. And as the women and kids of Mangalasseri house were seen returning from the temple on a day one of them, the dare devil Damodara Kurup said aloud:

"There go the Ezhava Cohorts of Kunjan", meaning they were the keeps of Kunjan, the low-caste.

"Phew!" Sumathy Amma spat at him. The whole temple edifice and the temple campus seemed to shake and quake at that, says Dev. As if she were the very wrathful goddess of the shrine, he adds: She dashed ahead and lashed out at the ill mannered boor.

"You, cur, can you repeat that once?"

Everyone in that crowd was taken aback. And she said once more:

"You, Cur Can you?"

That 'phew' of Sumathy Amma's will be ringing for ever in the memory of all Keralities as an unforgettable war cry in defence of Kerala's womanhood, says Dr. K.M.Tharakan, histriogropher. And the critic adds: "With a single masterstroke Kesava Dev raises her to the stature of the renowned epic heroine, Panchali, fronting Dusasana the diabolic Villain".

That takes us naturally to a consideration of the sensibility of our author. Kesava Dev was, by no means, a writer of the modernist sensibility. The young man who doesn't care to remember if it was yesterday or day before yesterday that his mother died and proceeds to call at the brothel may be a typical youth of the post-Camus, post-Kafka era in literature. But Kesava Dev never knew such a type and never either cared to know of such types in life or letters. He was a traditionalist pure and simple, a new fangled modernist may complain.

Yet another modernist criticism of Kesava Dev may be that he never conformed to the modernist line of thinking that all art, of necessity, has to be impersonal. He was rather a Shelleyan type, well aware that his call was that of the unacknowledged legislator and he was a writer bent upon making the world acknowledge him as the legislator.

Naturally, on occasions his characters speak in the author's own idiom. A complaint voiced by some critics is that he made his characters his own mouthpieces. That, however, is not the case always. He had the story teller's mastery over the medium and could adapt his style to the requirement of the moment. Prof. S.Guptan Nair, himself a master stylist of our language, marvelled how admirably Kesava Dev could reproduce the vigour and vitality of the colloquial jargon of his low characters in a story like 'Prathijna'(The Vow). Not in a, here and there, story alone, in most of his plays and in the novels depicting the lives of the lowly folk Kesava Dev almost always and without fail, produces the effect he intends. And the criticism that he knew only one style of speech will have to be brushed aside as irrelevance.

No doubt, on occasion Kesava Dev relied a little too much on his own rhetorical devices. That was, however, always to produce a certain desired effect. He might be seen on occasions piling word upon word in a Miltonic fashion and repeating the same phrase a good number of times. Thus, in the concluding chapter of 'Otayil Ninnu' he tells us twenty four times, over four printed pages, how Pappu coughed and coughed and coughed. That nevertheless, is one of the most masterly of all passages in

the writings of Dev and there is no denying the fact that there has been nothing much so far in Malayam fiction to equal that inimitable ending of the novel 'Otayil Ninnu'.

He was, as it has already been admitted, a writer expressing himself in a slipshod style on occasions and he was no Thomas Gray always insisting on standards of perfection, writing eight lines a year. He never pretended to offer the world only all gold poetry. As much as Mahatmaji's mentor, the great John Ruskin, he knew that 'the true task of the modern poet is to give an unerring transcript of actuality with a view to bettering the lot of men and women and children around' and he earnestly endeavoured to work for it. Whatever failings he may have had, it cannot be denied even by his most unsympathetic critic that he was one with those very few great artists of the world,

Who feel the giant agony of the world
And more, like slaves to poor humanity
Labour for mortal good.

KESAVA DEV'S WORKS: A CHECKLIST

NOVELS

Aarkku Vendi?
Adhikaram
Adyathe Katha
Ayalkkar
Bhranthalayam
Cheri Thirivu
Engottu?
Enikku Jeevikkanam
Kannati
Kunchukuruppinte Athmakatha
Laksham Rupayum Orukarum
Maranathil Ninnu
Mathru Hrudayam
Nai
Nondiyute Katha
Oru Rathri
Oru Sundariyute Katha
Pankalakshiyute Diary
Prema Viddi
Randu Ammayum Oru Makanum
Rowdy
Saghavu Karottu Karanavar

Sughikkan Vendi
 Swapnam
 Thyagiyaya Drohi
 Ulakka
 Vilpanakkaran

SHORT STORY COLLECTIONS:

Anandakaramaya Atimatham
 Annathe Katha
 Bhavi Varan
 Deenamma
 Jeevitha Chakram
 Kollaruthaniya, Kollaruthu
 Kotichi
 Maravil
 Murukkankatayum Swargarajyavum
 Muthalapparu
 Pankalakshiyute Kathukal
 Pravaham
 Premikkan Neramilla
 Randu Perum Natuvittu
 Red Volunteer
 Swargathil Oru Chekuthan
 Yamuna Ekagramayi Ozhukunnu
 Selected Stories of Kesava Dev - Series I, II

PLAYS

Chekuthanum Katalinum Itayil
 Chainaway
 Malika Paniyan
 Manthriyakkolle
 Munnottu

Nanippakkamyunistavum

Nataka Kruthu

Oru Muri Thenga

Pradhanamanthri

Tharavadu

Thaskara Sanghom

ONE ACT PLAY COLLECTIONS

Kollanum Kollatheem Onnu

Mazhayangum Kutayingum

Nee Marichu

Ona Blaus

Thondukari

Samarakavi

Yachaka Premam

ESSAYS

Agniyum Sphulingavum

Chithrasala

Enikku Thonunnathu

Ente Suhruthukkal

Jeevitha Veekshanam

Kamukante Kathu

Russiyayute Kamukan

REMINISCENCES

Ethirppu

Kesava Dev Kal Noottantinu Mumpu

Ormakalute Lokathil

Thirinju Nottam

Bibliography

So far neither a biography nor a critical study of Kesava Dev's works has appeared in print. Some of the useful volumes of History of Literature and other reading materials are:

1. Kairaliyute Katha *N. Krishna Pillai*
2. Malayala Novel Sahithya Charithram *Dr.K.M. Tharakan*
3. A History of Malayam Literature *Krishna Chaitanya*
4. Gadya Sahithya Charithram *T.M. Chummar*
5. Malayala Sahithya Charithram *P.K. Parameswaran Nair*
6. Bhasha Poshini April - May 1984 *Symposium on Kesava Dev*
7. Malayalam Literary Survey April-June '83 *Symposium - The Development of the Malayalam Novel*

Important Events in Kesava Dev's Life

| | |
|------------|---|
| 20-7-1904 | Born at Ketamangalam |
| June 1910 | Begins going to School |
| Oct 1917 | Leaves School |
| 1919 | Takes up job as bill collector |
| 1924 | Visits the scene of Vaikon Sathyagraha |
| 1924 | Joins the Arya Samaj |
| 1926 | First article published in the <i>Sahodaran</i> |
| 1926 | First Story published in <i>Mahila Mandiram</i> |
| 1928 | Appointed Editor of <i>Bhaje Bharatham</i> Daily |
| April 1929 | Leaves the job |
| Nov 1929 | Editor of <i>Prathidinam</i> Daily |
| April 1930 | <i>Kamukante Kathu</i> , first book, published |
| July 1930 | Speech at Workers' Conference at Alleppey Elected Workers' Union Secretary |
| Aug 1931 | Editor of <i>Mahatma</i> Daily |
| 1935 | Marries Gomathy |
| 1935 | Settles at Puthuppally, Kayamkulam |
| 1941 | <i>Otayil Ninnu</i> Written |
| 1942 | <i>Otayil Ninnu</i> Published |
| 1949 | <i>Bhranthalayam</i> published |
| 1950 | Break with the Communist Party <i>Aarkkuvendi?</i> published |
| 1955 | Marries Seethalakshmi |

| | | |
|-----|--------|--|
| | 1963 | <i>Ayalkkar</i> published |
| | 1964 | Wins National Award for Literature |
| | 1966 | Elected President of the Writers' Co-op. Society |
| Nov | 1970 | Recipient of Soviet Land Nehru Award |
| | 1974 | Becomes Chairman of the Kerala Sahitya Akademi |
| | 1.7.83 | Death |

