

## Poetry as a radical discourse of demystification

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One of the defining features of Malayalam poetry in the 20th century has been its concern with social issues. With modernism in the 1960s, the focus shifted towards greater linguistic experimentation, as can be seen in the vibrant tones and resonant images of poets like Ayyappa Paniker and K Satchidanandan. The formalist phase of modernist Malayalam poetry soon gave way to a politically aware and socially sensitive idiom in the early 1970s. K G Sankara Pillai's poetry played a crucial role in renovating the poetic idiom of Malayalam during this phase, curbing its romantic and nostalgic excesses as well as its insular, hermetic tendencies.

His poetry can only be understood against the backdrop of the shifts in the sensibility of Malayalam poetry in general in the post-1960s period, and the internal dynamics of its modernist poetry in particular. In turning away from the constricted and narcissistic idiom of aesthetic modernism, his poetry retained the liberating potential of modernism and welded it with the social and critical responsiveness of the dominant tradition of Malayalam poetry. His poems address the ethical problems of living in a turbulent society. This is as much a problem of language in poetry as its treatment of sociopolitical themes. For him, radicalism is not a matter of sloganeering but a self-critical attitude that requires a continuous reevaluation of one's relation with oneself as the self's relation with the world. His ability to assimilate an interior realm of self-doubt within a larger discourse of social criticism makes him an exceptional poet.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, K G Sankara Pillai (KGS) had affiliations with some political movements that enabled him to participate in the social life of the masses. He has observed from close quarters how ideologies become mass rituals and how radical minds turn regressive with time. Poems such as 'Baldness' and 'The Gecko's Tail' are attempts to diagnose the moral crisis born of the death of ideology in our times. In the former poem he says that there is a crocodile living in the swamp of our brains, feeding on us. It is this erosion of inner spaces that reduces language to a mere instrument of concealment. Reality is finally reduced to mere spectacle. 'Photos in Various Poses' analyzes photography as the ritual of a society that substitutes images for reality. 'Trees of Cochin' traces a trajectory of loss which is as much cultivated amnesia, as a willed state of aphasia. Ecological concerns point to deeper ethical problems that cannot be resolved within the realm of art. This is where KGS, even as he documents the crisis of our times, communicates the need to renovate the very apparatus of poetry. His interest in art, particularly painting, sculpture and cinema, has deeply influenced his art of poetry. He is one of the few Malayalam poets who has closely followed developments in these fields and internalized the creative possibilities of these media in poetic discourses.

The poems of KGS often investigate intersecting points of politics, history and culture. The bird in 'Between Nectar and Poison' moves between different domains of experience, because it can simultaneously evoke multiple worlds. KGS has consciously constructed a polyphonous idiom in his poetry that can invoke the lost worlds of poetic traditions through subtle phrases and images. It is his use of irony that lights up the page and transforms what reads as a statement on the mundane into a deeply felt experience of anguish about contemporary life. His brand of irony becomes a tightrope walk along the manifestations of contemporary culture, recovering a critical sense that can see through the games of everyday life. Kerala is a land of excesses where positive indicators of social development that match with developed countries coexist with dark areas of violence and oppression. KGS is particularly concerned with the slow erosion of the secular and humanist ideals, painstakingly built during the progressive phase of social struggles. His poems warn that behind the glitter of the neon-lit cities are demons that can drag us back to an age of barbarism.

He has been closely associated with many organizations working in the fields of human rights and legal aid. Some of the villages in Thrissur could be declared 'litigation-free' through the dedicated efforts of organizations like Jananeethi, for which he edits a periodical. This commitment to the cause of the larger common good translates itself in his poetry as a tone of resistance against the neocolonial tendencies in our contemporary culture. The narcotic gaze of the market can paralyze us into mindless complacency if we do not retain our critical sense. His poetry, above all, is a reminder to reexamine our constructions of reality, which increasingly resemble the nightmarish fantasies of a dazed somnambulist.

KGS is one of the few Indian poets who have interpreted modernity consistently in his poetry. He hardly uses traditional metre in his poetry, but retains the music of everyday Malayalam in all its complexity. As a professor of Malayalam he is definitely well informed about its intricate history. But he knows that traditions of Indian poetry are not monolithic. There is a strong centrifugal impulse in Malayalam poetry, as elsewhere in other traditions in Indian literature, which looks towards the peripheral and the quotidian. He combines the aphoristic simplicity of traditional poetry with the subversive irony of everyday speech in his best poems.

His poems are political in the best sense of the term, since he demonstrates how ideologies shape us and also contain us. Poetry cannot but be political in an age when the ideological permeates everyday life through subterfuges. Poetry can easily lose sight of its greater responsibility of renovating the sensibility of an age and a living society by becoming a prey to what it should track down and conquer. In an age when poetry has become increasingly dissociated from the moral fulcrum of the social imaginary, KGS has unwaveringly held on to a critical gaze that unsettles our ritualistic habits of thinking. That he has sustained it over three decades, against all odds, resisting the temptation of becoming a popular and prolific poet, makes his achievement all the more remarkable.