



Email: editorijless@gmail.com

Volume: 5, Issue1, 2018 (Jan-Mar)

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF LAW, EDUCATION, SOCIAL AND SPORTS STUDIES (IJLESS)

<http://www.ijless.kypublications.com/>

ISSN:2455-0418 (Print), 2394-9724 (online)

2013©KY PUBLICATIONS, INDIA

www.kypublications.com

Editor-in-Chief

Dr M BOSU BABU

(Education-Sports-Social Studies)

Editor-in-Chief

DONIPATI BABJI

(Law)

©KY PUBLICATIONS



POETRY OF VISHNU NARAYANAN NAMBOOTHIRI: A RETREAT TO THE GREEN REALMS OF THE VEDAS

Dr. E. Krishnan Namboothiri

Associate Professor of English
Sanatana Dharma College, Alappuzha, Kerala



ABSTRACT

Vishnu Narayanan Namboothiri is one of the stalwarts of the contemporary Malayalam poetry. Rich in ecological visions, poems of Vishnu Narayanan Namboothiri traverses back to ecological visions and wisdom of the Vedas. It can be said that the poems of Vishnu stand on the rock solid foundations of the Vedic visions. Besides being voicing his ecological stance, the poet has become a part of the major environmental movements of Kerala, a small state in the southern extremity of India. This environmental activism gives his literary creation very vibrant, significant and ecologically sensitive. The paper takes up for discussion a few select poems of Vishnu Narayanan Namboothiri to identify intrinsic green messages embedded in them.

Malayalam- The language of Kerala- a state in India.

Introduction

. Though basically a romantic, Vishnu Narayanan Namboothiri is not unaware of the contemporary issues of the society. This attitude of social commitment makes him respond to the global as well as local ecological issues. His poems are combinations of Indian spiritual wisdom unfolded by the Vedas and feelings imparted by his constant exposure to the Western poetic tradition. For Namboothiri, poetry is a spiritual journey to the world of Vedic knowledge. It is a retreat to the ancient Indian wisdom and has the holiness of a pilgrimage. The titles of Namboothiri's poetry collections, viz., *Aaranyakam*, *Bhoomigeethangal* and *Parikkramam* are expressive of the influence that the Indian tradition has on the poet. *Aranyakam* is a branch of the Vedas. *Bhoomigeethangal* corresponds to "Bhoomisookthangal", a chapter of Atharva Veda and *Parikramam* refers to circumlocution, an indispensable part of traditional rituals based on the Vedas. He succeeds in transforming his subjective feelings to the universal, making them socially valid.

Discussion

The poem "Kadinte Vili" ["Call of the Forest"], published in 1980, was written exclusively for *Vana Parva* [*The Forest Canto*]. The context of its publication shows the poet's strong obligation both to society and to nature. The opening stanza of the poem presents the agony emerging out of the surprising difference in attitude of the populace when they are in forests and in the country. The poem begins with the paradoxical picture of people moving together in mutual respect and love in forests, whereas they live as strangers in the country. This is the thematic pivot on which the poem revolves. The second stanza further enhances the idea with reference to the pilgrimage of people to the forest shrine in Kerala, Sabarimala. The devotees of Lord Ayyappa, from across Kerala, prepare themselves physically and spiritually to go to the holy hillock temple in the forest. The pilgrims tie up the holy bundle and start their journey in thousands to the divine destination. After passing

through many forests they come to the holy river, "Pamba", and take a dip which symbolises the cleansing of their body and mind from impurities. Then they mount the hills chanting "mantras" or holy verse praising lord Ayyappa together. Their strength is their unity. What surprises the poet is the unique unity and harmony shown by the pilgrims during their journey through the forest. They eat and sleep together in the shades of trees, showing the paradox that they are noble people in the forest but wild in the country, where they involve in numerous activities posing trouble to others. People become unsympathetic and selfish when they are away from the forest. This change in attitude of humans in different situations is articulated in the following lines:

Paradoxical this is
Surprising as well
Let the forest grow
To conserve country. (29-32)

The fourth section of the poem refers to the great sage and social reformer of Kerala, Sree Narayana Guru, who installed a "Sivalinga" or idol of Siva at Aruvippuram after the ritual bath in a jungle river. It was an epoch-making event in the socio-cultural history of Kerala. By installing the idol, he broke the barrier of caste-related discriminations embedded in the social life of Kerala for many centuries. Sree Narayana Guru's revolutionary act took place on the lap of nature. The forest is the abode of prudence and the origin of all noble thoughts. Then the poet conveys the powerful ecological message to grow forests if a country is to remain a country. He warns:

To keep country as it is
Let the forest grow, countrymen.
For saving country from turning wild
Let the forest grow, countrymen. (52-55)

Another situation that the poet makes use of to illustrate his argument is the pilgrimage to the Himalayas. During their pilgrimage through the Himalayan forest valleys, people go together irrespective of their caste and creed. It is the mutual harmony and love that bind them together to overcome the hazards on their journey. Thus, the Himalayan forests make people come out of their parochial thinking and help them rediscover the virtuous qualities that make life worth living.

"Kadinte Vili" ["Call of the Forest"] conveys an ecologically insightful message that forests are highly necessary to keep the culture of a place, and to save country from turning barbarous. Nature (forest) is not distinct from culture; rather nature is culture itself. Here the poet very subtly but effectively emphasizes the vital importance of forests in determining human culture. Destruction of forests amounts to destruction of culture. The more people shift away from forest or nature, the more they become unnatural and artificial, hypocritical and mean. People call this attitude "wild." Evidences show that when people move close to forest, they are humble, considerate and loving. The poet skilfully makes a pun on the word "forest" ["Kadu"]. In one sense, the word denotes the abode and inspiration of noble culture. In another sense, the word is used to refer to unacceptable human attitudes that form the hallmark of the contemporary modern society. The central idea is very thought-provoking as it attempts to deconstruct the prevailing notion of nature and culture. Also, the poet reiterates the fact that the present chaos of the world originates from widespread deforestation.

The ecological views of Namboothiri reflected in the poem conform to the observation of the deep ecologist Freya Matthew, who highlights the faulty human vision that keeps nature away from culture, causing various ecological crises. Matthew observes: "What is wrong with our culture is that it offers us an inaccurate conception of the self. It depicts the personal self as existing in competition with and in opposition to nature. We fail to realise that if we destroy our environment, we are destroying what is in fact our larger self" (4).

Aaranyakam presents Namboothiri's search for self-identity in the Vedic heritage. The title itself conveys the message of reclaiming the forests and reinstating the wisdom of forest in the

society. The Vedas considered forests as part of human culture. The Vedic base of his tradition helps him discover the inseparability of humans and nature. While fixing his foot firmly in the physical world, the poet tries to understand the transcendental truth. Natural elements help him find this ultimate reality. The first poem "The Patriarchal Journey", in the collection *Aranyakam*, unfolds the poet's inseparable relatedness to nature and his attachment to it. The poem opens with the description of the last rites that the poet has done to his father. In the solemn situation he addresses the natural elements, viz., clouds, air and earth and requests them to accept the mortal remains of his father which are in fact nature itself. "Breathing darkness and wading through it" (4-6) the poet comes to the riverbank to offer the mortal remains of his father to the earth in the presence of the holy fire. Then he requests the earth that carries nectar, to receive his father who also is nothing but nectar. Here, the poet emphasizes the immortality of the basic elements of nature as well as the human soul. The poet is also addressing forests, herbs and the soul of the universe and he pleads with them to accept his father who had given him life. His prayer while doing the last rites of his father is highly ecological as well as spiritual:

O! Let my father fuse with
Grass, trees
Liquids, solids
Static and moving things
O! Seasons, months
Years, Desires and
Sprouts of consciousness

Kindly give me eyes to see
Give me ear to hear my father
And understand the truth. (31-40)

The first section of his poem "Pithruyanam" ["The Patriarchal Journey"] ends with the poet's humble prayer to enable him to see his father in nature, as he has become part of it. The poem thus takes the stamp of the poet's eco-spiritual attitude. The poet, while talking about his lineage, declares his strong commitment to the earth and defines his relation to her. He describes himself as a person who always sticks to the earth, remembers the earth songs; for him the earth is both his race and his heritage. "The Patriarchal Journey" is thus a perfect blending of the poet's ecological as well spiritual visions. The poet repeatedly upholds the principle of interconnectedness among all beings in nature and thereby discloses his understanding of and belief in both Indian tradition and modern ecological visions.

The poet traces the origin of his poetry to the multifarious voice of nature that echoed in his serene village. As a child, Namboothiri was a keen observer of nature and he listened to her many voices. The rustic background helped him translate the voice of birds into popular folk songs. Nature is represented in his poems as things possessing human qualities which have influenced him as a poet. This is not an anthropocentric vision; rather, this vision takes its origin from the poet's strong desire to become part of nature or his wish to see nature as his fellow-being. This is an attempt to identify himself with nature and vice versa. Namboothiri considers this realization of self in nature as the basic inspiration for him as a poet. Thus the poetic process of Namboothiri itself has an ecological foundation. The poet says in his preface to *Aranyakam* about the close association between the poetic creation and nature in the following words:

It can be said that the seed of a poem sprouts when a subject from his surroundings dissolves into the poet's self . . . I tried to identify the face of a familiar human face among the smoky figures on the wall. It gave me the excitement of a discovery.... There appeared in the gray clouds of the summer the rhythm of the familiar 'thiruvathira' [a traditional dance]. It also

was a discovery. I often doubt whether it is in the moments of identifying myself in other objects lies the seed of my poetic creation. It should be so. (30)

In his childhood days, when the poet was swimming hard to reach the river bank, the branches of trees hanging over water felt to him like the helping hands of his loving grandfather. The Vedic vision too highlights the same ecological wisdom of personifying nature and thereby prompts him to give due respect to the natural world. Yajur Veda starts with the sublime ecological hymn of hermits seeking permission of the tree to cut off its tender branches. Here, the tree is represented as a lively subject. The Vedic tradition of respecting nature takes its origin from the concept of seeing the underlying thread of divinity in all beings on the planet.

The poem "Sonamithran" reflects the poet's strong stand against exploitation, which has become the order of the contemporary world. In the poem, Namboothiri conveys the anti-capitalist ideals of "surplus value" and "surplus labour". Sonamithran, the defender of law, kills Vaisyan for exploiting others and plundering their wealth without doing any work. The poem is in the form of a dialogue between Sonamithran and Sangapalan on exploitation. Sangapalan asks Sonamithran the reason for killing Vaisyan. Sonamithran, in turn, justifies his act by saying that a person who eats others' wealth deserves death. He, then, describes the economic theory that those who enjoy surplus value thrive on surplus labour, which is nothing but exploiting others. Sangapalan confesses that he also has been living on the surplus value at the expense of others' surplus labour and hence has been exploiting others. He pleads with Sonamithran to kill him as he had committed the crime of exploiting others. Sonamithran grants his request. The lines run like this:

Man should eat
Only the fruit of his effort
Those who eat on others wealth
To be killed for world's sake

Those who eat the surplus value
Are eating the surplus labour
For surplus labour, the master
Harasses the people. (33-36, 49- 52)

Once he became the King, Sonamithran also does the same crime of eating on others' labour. Sonamithran becomes aware of his wrongdoing when a male bird comes and tells him about it. He wants to make amends and requests the bird to show him the right and noble path of non-exploitation. The bird takes him to the valley of the Himalayas and from the lap of nature Sonamithran realizes the truth and overcomes his dilemma. He realizes the principle of equality of all beings. Thus, through the myth of Sonamithra and Sangapalan, the poet conveys his stand against capitalism. The poet, thus, powerfully explains the capitalist labour theory of exploitation in spiritual terms. The anti- capitalist vision expressed in the poem is highly ecological as the surplus labour ends in exploiting nature more and more for the surplus value.

The poem "Brahmadathan" in *Aaranyakam* (8-13) by Namboothiri presents the young son of an orthodox saint who happened to have an illicit relationship with a lady. Brahmadathan, the central figure of the poem, turns guilty conscious and spiritually perplexed. In order to find an answer to the question whether his action was right or wrong, Brahmadathan approaches his erudite father. Instead of answering his queries, the father tells his son to find out an answer through his own penance. Following the instruction of his father, Brahmadathan undertakes the penance, travelling from place to place. Taking blessings from his father, the son starts his journey in search of a solution for the spiritual riddle. What he requires is a definition to his illicit relationship with the woman. He wants to know the first motive behind the sparks of creation; is it mere sensuousness or procreative urge? Brahmadathan spends years in search of an answer. He addresses everything in nature as though living things are capable of solving his spiritual confusion. He approaches flowing water,

great mountains, green plants, birds, animals, the pollen-carrying flowers, etc., for an answer to solve his spiritual bafflement. Finally, it is nature that enlightens and answers his spiritual riddles.

The poem "Ganganarayanan" in the same collection also is a young man's journey to discover the spiritual truth, which he understands from nature. Being excommunicated from his tribal community for his immoral activities, Ganganarayanan undertakes a spiritual journey through various places and finally reaches the valley of the Himalayas. He asks himself various questions to justify his licentious life and requests the wind that carries fragrance of flowers, lotus flowers, snow, branches, race of royal swans, the sun, etc., to answer his questions. After rigorous penance on the lap of nature, Ganganarayanan is enlightened and gets answers to his questions of spiritual dimension. He understands the reality that he was not responsible for his actions. At last, he fuses himself with the highest truth. The poem exemplifies the poet's deep understanding of the Indian spiritual tradition where the saints always go to nature for getting answers to their questions related to life. Ganganarayanan requests the entities of nature, viz., breeze, flowers, snow, mountains, swans, the sun and "the god that guards the mind /with never shut eyes"() to solve his spiritual conflicts. The poetic persona finally dissolves himself in the serenity of nature or he becomes nature itself and merges into the ultimate truth.

Bhoomigeethangal [Earth Songs] is another example of the poet's deep ecological realizations. It opens with an epigram by Kalidasa who expresses his exhilaration at the splendid beauty and loftiness of the earth. Dushantha, the hero of his magnum opus *Sakuntala*, makes the comment while seeing the unfolding earth of sublime beauty on his journey back from the sky. The epigram seems to be thoughtfully given by the poet as it goes well with the theme and message of "this worldliness" articulated by the poems in the collection. For the poet, the sky and the earth are bound to each other and his poems show the convergence of them. He is not a poet who takes off from the earth on romantic dreams. Fixing his feet firmly on the earth, the poet wants to bring the world above to merge with the earth. It is this holistic vision that makes the poems deeply ecological in perspective.

Conclusion

The ecological sensibilities of Vishnu Narayanan Namboothiri have taken shape from his Vedic erudition. Being a scholar of Sanskrit and the Vedic teachings, Namboothiri has been a very keen observer of the emergence of ecological thinking and theories and he makes his presence felt in various environmental movements in Kerala. The ecological visions and the spiritual bend of mind, coupled with a slight empathy towards social activism, inspire Namboothiri to work against exploitation and political oppression of any sort.

Works Cited

Namboothiri, Vishnu Narayanan. *Swatanthriathekurichu Oru Geetham*. Kottayam: NBS, 1968.

---. *Aaranyakam*. Calicut: Mathrubhoomi.

---. *Bhoomigeethangal*. Kottayam: NBS, 1978.

---. *Indian Enna Vikaram*. Kottayam: Sahitya Pravarthaka Co-operative Society, 1979.

---. *Athirthiyekku Oru Yatra*. Kottayam: D.C. Books, 1984.

---. *Aparajitha*. Kottayam: Little Prince, 1984.

Matthew, Freya."On the Evolution of Nature & Culture: Human, Society, Ecology, Life,TheEnvironment& Universe". [http:// www. Spaceandmotion.com/evolution-ecology-nature-culture-society.htm](http://www.Spaceandmotion.com/evolution-ecology-nature-culture-society.htm).
