

A NOTE ON *SPATIKAM*

I have been obsessed with Maharishi's SPATIKAM for the last 45 years - ever since I first read it back in home in India. The story haunted me - its inspiring protagonist, the authentic rural setting, the Brahmin community with the keen delineation of its customs and traditions - made quite an impression on me.

SPATIKAM was very much in my mind when, some twenty years ago, I began translating Tamil short stories and novels into English for publication in U.S. I knew exactly the date and year of the KALKI issue where the story appeared but, unfortunately, my attempts to locate it in various libraries - including the Library of Congress - proved futile. I almost gave up the idea.

Then, in March, 2011 when I visited Chennai I met with my old Salem friend T.R. Krishnan who personally knew Mr. T.K. Balasubramanian, the author with the pen name Maharishi. At my request and on my behalf TRK contacted Mr. Balasubramanian who graciously granted me the permission to translate his story into English.

I also asked for the author's permission to translate the story into Telugu because I believed my translation would equally appeal to Telugu readers. I have translated several short stories (and one novel) from Tamil to Telugu and they are available in my website www.kurinjipubs.com;

I want to thank TRK for his help and the author for his inspiration and encouragement. I am pleased my efforts have at last come to fruition. I hope the readers too will share my sentiments.

I also wish to thank my sister Mrs. Selvi Viswanathan in Los Alamos, N.M., for going through my initial draft of Telugu translation and offering suggestions to improve the idiom, style and the language of the narrative.

As usual, I have used the *Telugu Lipi* software for my translation. I would like to thank the developers of that software - Sirigina Srinivas and Radha - for their permission to use their software.

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Andy Sundaesan

'MAHARISHI', A TRADITIONALIST BY STYLE

By G. Satyamurthy

*"Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,
And waste its sweetness on the desert air."*

Thomas Gray

That's the precise description of the life of the brilliant Tamil novelist, *Maharishi*; if he were born elsewhere - in Bengal, or Kerala - he would have won tremendous recognition for his literary acumen and individuality. But unfortunately he's in Salem and writes in Tamil, that too constructively, which has become an anathema to the Tamilians who are serious patrons of pure titillation.

In its annual survey of the 22 languages and literatures of India since 1980, the Sahitya Akademy¹ pays a rich tribute to Maharishi in the chapter, *Tamil: The Progressive Path*.

"Maharishi's *Pudiyar Ardhangal* (new meaning) is a reflection of modern society and its many problems, changes, etc. It still remains a doubt whether Tamil would have seen any such in the past."

In this era of total irreverence, he's a traditionalist in style but revolutionary in thought. In this period of pure

anatomical expositions couched in catchy language, he's a social analyst laying more emphasis on the Miltonic dictum of ennobling hearts.

In the present generation of pretensions and fanfare, this totally unassuming, soft-spoken Electricity Board employee had contributed 90 novels, 70 of them major ones, to the Tamil literature. And six of them - *Panimalai*, *Bhadrakali*, *Bhuvana Oru Kelvikkuri?*, *Saythaadamma Saynthadu*, *Vattathukkul Oru Chaduram* and *Nathiyai Thedi Vantha Kadal* - have been made into films.

Among the important serials published in some famous magazines are *Jothi Vanthu Pirandaal*, *Puthiya Arthangal*, *Kadalarappookkal* and *Vittil Anaittha Vilakku*.

T.K. Balasubramaniam, who has assumed the pen-name of Maharishi because of his love for Hindu tradition, philosophy and its rich heritage, neither has racy style, nor fast pace nor likes fast life. Hence, he's not a pet of the magazines whose commercial proclivities can hardly accommodate him. For 16 of his novels he never approached any magazine at all and now also he writes for magazines only when they approach him. "And when you approach magazines and start pandering to their tastes for your livelihood, then what submission, what cringing and what

¹ The National Institute of Letters, New Delhi

fawning, what servility and what abject humiliation!" Maharishi shudders.

Born in Oratta Naaadu in Tanjore District, 49-year old Maharishi has virtually settled in Salem.

Though he started writing as early as in 1955, his first novel *Panimalai* was published only seven years later and, even then, he had six other manuscripts on hand.

His break from the beaten track is excellently manifested in the first novel itself which portrays one who's wrongly convicted and his emotional conflict when he find that the persons who had engineered his imprisonment and on whom he wanted to take revenge, was actually protecting his family.

Born a Brahmin, he feels at home in their style of conversation but, unfortunately, this has been one of the major causes of even some very popular magazines rejecting him. He cares a hoot for this because "I am not prepared to sacrifice my way of expression just to pander to the whims of magazines. This is the language in which I can best express myself." All his novels are based only on the life of Hindus, especially Brahmins, highlighting some problem or the other. But most of these problems are common to all communities.

His *Oru Veedu Idhithukondirukkirathu* is a brilliant portrayal of the deterioration of the Brahmin community. In *Oru Puthiya Poo* he delineates the conflict among the Brahmins.

Maharishi is actually proud of calling himself a feminist. Even the famous comment on Shakespeare that he has "no heroes, only heroines," could be applied to him.

Gowri in *Mahanadi*, Dharmu in *Kadalnurai*, Maithreyi in *Uyirthudippu*, Subhadra in *Meghanizal*, Revathi in *Kadalorappookkal*, and Sumitra in *Nadhiyai Thedi Vantha Kadal*, have towering personalities.

Why does he give so much prominence to women? "In India it is the woman who suffers more because she has more responsibility. They are still not emancipated, hence have got to be educated. The women of earlier generations didn't face as much problems as the present one have to," he says. And he's trying to educate them purely from a social point of view. "I am not finding fault with anybody but would like to point out what's lacking in our society," he adds.

His belief in the *panchaboothas* (five elements) and the roles assigned to them, which are the fundamental tenets of Hindu philosophy, are symbolized in his *Mannin Manbu* (land), *Mahanadhi* (water), *Agnivalayam* (fire), *Ethirkaatru* (air) and *Meghanizal* (sky).

The last one has a number of autobiographical touches and it has been dedicated to his birthplace, and this could be said to be the only novel in Tamil which deals elaborately with paintings elaborately.

He's an R.K. Narayan to a certain extent because his novels rarely have the background of any places except Salem and Tanjore districts.

But despite his faith in the traditional marriage, he's not blind to the changing climate, hence wants some relaxation if it is beneficial to the society. His *Pudiyappoo*, *Kadalnurai*, *Nadhiyai Thedi Vantha Kadal*, *Puthiya Arthangal* and *Mannin Manbu* have such themes.

He admits that he had also done some commercial pieces like *Eerappudavai*, *Panichuvar*, *Vizahkkolam*, *Nilavaithedi*, *Chakkaram Ini Chuzalum*, and *Criminal Brain*. But he still scoffs at the weightless, commercial entertainers produced as 'new wave' ones as 'unhealthy signs'.

Regarding the monthly novels, which have now become a sort of craze among the Tamil readers, Maharishi says they were started with good objective and were also decent paying propositions. "But, alas! They have also begun pursuing trifles and fell into rat race. And after all, follies often repeated lose their absurdity and assume the appearance of reason," he shrugs.

He has strong views regarding the governmental encouragement to be extended to the writers which at present is "highly inadequate." In a recent memorandum to the Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi he has demanded, among other things, laws for uniform royalty, copyright rules and free legal aid and pension. Citing the virtual ban on purchase of books by the libraries under the State Government here, who are the major buyers with 1300-odd branches, he says this has dealt a crippling blow to the Tamil writers.

Salem Metro Jaycees honored him last year as "Man of Excellence."

But Maharishi deems the words of a scholar of the Madurai Kamaraj University who had chosen his works for doctoral thesis as the richest tribute paid to him: "After all, you are one among the very few modern Tamil writers who have individuality."

(Courtesy: Indian Express, March 2, 1985)