

Varthamanapusthakam: A Travelogue and a Minority Narrative

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Introduction

Varthamanapusthakam is considered to be the first travelogue in Malayalam and argued to be one among the first in India which represents the minorities: Malayali Christians. Travelogue or travel writing is one of the most favourite collections that readers are generally fond of. People are always interested to know about a land, its inhabitants, their life styles and social circumstances. This is one of the reasons why travelogues are very popular among readers. Travelogues have its own historical significance. It helps to identify the language, culture, lifestyle and ethnicity of people across the globe. Apart from other historical works, travelogues were supposed to be more authentic since this mainly describes the travel context without any fallacies; which were usual in other historic works. Though the matter of objectivity can be questioned, it never affects the historicity, as the subject matter in a travelogue is an outlook by the traveller's experience.

The culture of travel dates back to the earliest days in the geographical space of Kerala. The initial literary expressions of this culture were mainly in verse, as *Sandeshakavyas* (message poems), a by-product of *Manipravaḷa* mode of literature, would testify. We can trace the sparks of travelogue even in *Ramayana*, the great epic. The term *Ramayana* itself indicates *Ayana* (Travel) of Rama. It describes the journey of Rama from Ayodhya to Lanka.

Travel Narration(s) in Malayalam

Travelogues in Malayalam are short but are exciting and absorbing. The first travelogue written in Malayalam is *Varthamanapusthakam* by Paremakal Thoma Kathanar (1736-99), supposed to have been written between 1790 and 1799, the travelogue was published in 1936. But the first printed travelogue book is that of Geevarghese Mar Gregorios' (Parumala Tirumeni) book *Urslom Yatra Vivaranam* (1895). The Malayalam version of Yohanan's Portuguese book titled *Urslom Thira Yatra* was published in 1880. Poems on travel were also published during this period. They were published before the 18th century. The first travel-poem was Fabir Mohan Senapathy's *Ulkal Bramanam*. Some others who were active in this field were Vaikom Pachu Moothathu, Kodungalloor Kunjikuttan Thampuran, Naduvathachan Namboothiri, Venmani Mahan Namboothirippadu, Kottarathil Sankunni, K.C. Kesava Pillai. Travelogues received a new lease of life with the development of Malayalam prose. Kadayattu Govinda Menon's *Kasi Yatra Report* published in 1872, is a remarkable travelogue. Work by G.P Pillai's entitled *London and Paris* was published in 1877. The first book of poetry and travel is the one on *Dharmaraja's Rameshwaram Journey* (1784) by an unknown writer.

S. K. Pottakkadu is one of the most famous travel writers in Malayalam. *Kashmir, Nile Dairies, Soviet Dairies, Kappirikalude Naatti, London Note Book* etc. were some of his works. It was him, Pottakkadu made the travelogues popular. Unlike today when there were not many

amenities for travel and stay, he visited many foreign countries and wrote about the places. Others who were prominent in the field of travel-writing were K. P. Kesava Menon, Mannathu Padmanabhan, M. V. Kutti Krishna Menon, K. M. Panicker, N. V. Krishna Warriar, Dr. K. M. Geroje, Dr. J. Kattakkal, Dr. K. Bhaskaran Nair, K. C. Chacko, M. T. Vasudevan Nair, E. M. S., K. P. S. Menon, V. R. Krishna Iyer, Pavanan, Nithya Chaithanaya Yati etc. With modern facilities travel-writing as a branch of literature has flourished. Thus Malayalam occupies a prominent place in travel narratives.

Placing ‘Varthamanapusthakam’

Varthamanapusthakam is an account of travel by the writer who is an amalgam of both literary figure and a traveller, who records the nature of a place through the individuals he encounters and various phenomena that could be emulated. For instance, we may recall that the accounts of Marco Polo who travelled throughout Asia in thirteenth century or of Hieun Tsang who visited India about 1350 years ago weigh more as travel writings with their magnificent presentation than those of Columbus or Vasco-da-Gama which are historically relevant. The aesthetics of travel writing calls for the imaginary — where history and fiction grapple with each other — and not a literal account of travel

Varthamanapusthakam written in 1785 by Paremakal Thoma Kathanar (1736-1799) is considered one of the earliest travel narratives in Indian languages and the first of its kind in Malayalam. ‘Kathanar’ in Malayalam, the language that the book was written in, denotes a Christian priest. The work was the result of a journey undertaken by the author and Kariyatti Ouseph Malppan (1742-1786), who was a professor at the seminary at Alannattu, from Kerala to Rome to meet the Pope. They travelled from Alangad in central Kerala to Rome on 14 October 1778 in order to meet the Pope and seek a solution to the religious and political challenges to bring the Kerala church under Malayali Christians who were also known as ‘Thomas Christians.’ Considered as the first travelogue as per the modern understanding of the genre by the literary historians of the language, the narrative is also recognised as a very significant document that pertains to the religious history of Christianity in Kerala. *Varthamanapusthakam* thus is a valuable literary source of community history, regional history, ecumenical history and doctrinal history of early Christianity in India. Treating it as a unique work which resists the compartmentalization of genres.

Varthamanapusthakam is generally an account of the history of Malabar Church between the years 1773 and 1786 with special emphasis on the events connected with the journey from Malabar to Rome via Lisbon and back undertaken by Malpan Mar Joseph Cariattil Thomman Paremmakal Kathanar. The work by Thoma Kathanar gives a general picture of the contemporary Christian society and its religious practices. With ancestors of Christians from the Middle East who immigrated over the centuries, there was a strong Christian Republic in Kerala isolated from other Christian communities and with a head among themselves. Hence the Kerala Christian community was free from the centralized ruling system and theological disputes or duels between the patriarchs for power, of their counterparts in the West and the East. The religious rituals and associated practices of those communities were foreign to the Kerala Christians as well.

Paremakal Thoma Kathanar criticizes the interests of different churches who were interested in coming to India for missionary work. He says they had vested interests like the Carmelites. He also criticizes the exploitation of the Kerala church and the India church by the extravagant European church. It is evident from his work that the religious administration of Rome was very much within the clutches of aristocracy and therefore, it was power-centred.

Moreover, it could be observed that Kathanar has indirectly paved way to a new sensibility of the language. In an age when Malayalam was complex with tiresome sentence construction and highly Sanskritised vocabulary, *Varthamanapusthakam* reached the masses with a simple language, exerting momentous influence on the prose of his times and after. The author was experimental in adapting the contemporary Malayalam to the language of the general reader.

A thousand copies of the first part of the text, though incomplete, came out in print for the first time in 1936, published by Luka Mathai from St. Mary's Press, Athirampuzha in Kottayam district. Though only seventy four chapters have been retrieved in it, textual scholars in Malayalam guess that there could be eighty. That not enough study has been done in this work undeniably invites much more critical observation as a document of both cultural and literary history.

Conclusion

Apart from its literary value, *Vartamanapusthakam* is a book of enormous social, cultural and political documentary value. We find the author-narrator as a pilgrim, traveller and cultural historian, although Kathanar's mission was mainly religio-political. More than a mere travel document which gives a vivid picture of South America, Portugal, Italy, and South India, *Varthamanapusthakam* also records the history of Christianity in Kerala and the foreign connection of Keralites. It should be noticed that Kathanar wrote his travelogue in a modified Malayalam slightly influenced by Syrian and Latin much before the times of Keralavarma Valiakoyi Tampuran (1845-1915) during whose reign Malayalam prose flourished. The manuscript of *Varthamanapusthakam* has a small but valuable appendix which deals with the four continents Kathanar visited — Asia, Africa, Europe, America, some countries like Germany, France, Spain and England. Thus, *Varthamanapusthakam* gives a picture of the socio-cultural history in the Eighteenth century and it marks a period in the history of the Malayalam language and literature.

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