

The Polyphony That Echoes in The Varthamanappusthakam

Dr. Jose George

Assistant Professor, Research and PG Department of Language and Literature
St. Berchmans Autonomous College Changanacherry, Kerala,

Dr. Thomas Joseph Parathara

Assistant Professor, PG Department of History and Research Centre,
Assumption Autonomous College, Changanacherry,

Abstract: The Varthamanappusthakam is the description of the travel to Rome performed by Paremackal Thoma Kathanar and Kariyattil Joseph Malpan both of whom were members of the Kerala Nazrani Church. This is one of the early travelogues in the Indian languages and the first one in Malayalam. This book is considered from different angles in the history of literature. This work is not to be confined to the limits of the literary branch of travelogue; instead, it is a work that embraces literature, language, history and religion with its emphasis on difference of opinions. In other words, it is a narration that extends to different spheres of knowledge. It represents an important stage in the standardization of language. The basis of the historical importance of the Varthamanappusthakam is that it is the first Malayalam work in which the national feeling of India and the Indians was manifested. For the appreciators of travelogue, it is a historical document that gives in a picturesque manner the life styles and particulars of Europe and America which two Malayalis visited at a time when distant lands were a nightmare.

Keywords: prototype, polyphony, collective authorship, marthoma nazrani, syrian christians

INTRODUCTION

The Varthamanappusthakam is entirely a distinct work. Its contents attract not only persons of literary interest, but students of history and culture, philologists, leaders of christian learning as well. The plurality of the spheres of knowledge touched by this book prepares the way, again and again, for diverse studies. The identity crisis, the collective advances for defence and the attitudes rooted in democratic consciousness of the Marthoma Nazrani's who were Syrian Christians in the last quarter of the 18th century, are examined analytically and described carefully in this narration and consequently it has already become the object of interest among historical investigators. And this book remains as the best model, of all times, for the writing of the history of the syrian community. What fascinates the students of literature is the novelty and commonness identified in the language, structure and style of the Varthamanappusthakam. The current face of Malayalam prose of the 18th century is clearly visible in the narration. Above all, what makes the Varthamanappusthakam relevant to our times is its formal singularity. This work remains as the prototype of a literary form called travelogue which was not known until that time. The purpose of this article is to analyse certain layers and signs of the polyphony reflect in the Varthamanappu sthakam.

Polyphony: Concept and the Text

What are the characteristics that qualify a narration to be styled a polyphony? It is the presence and accompaniment of different kinds of discourses that mingle mutually and at the same time keep their distinctness. It was Michael Bakhtin, the Russian Formalist and literary critic, who theorised this doctrine. According to him it is the conflict between the worlds of ideas that are mutually in a state of discord and at loggerheads with each other (Ramakrishnan, 1997:23).

Bakhtin mentions about polyphony while analyzing the impact of the carnival celebrations of the western countries on European novels. In his opinion, there are two elements of medieval carnivals that exerted their influence on European novels. The first is the destructive and resisting political character that is part of the carnival; And the polyphony inherent in the carnival culture is the second (Ravindran, 1999:67).

The writer's one-world view has little importance in the narration dependent on polyphony. And the characters are not mere instruments conveying the writer's ideas and ideologies. The world of ideas represented by each character is self-sufficient and complete in itself. Their creation and survival are not in accordance with the rules and controls of the writer. The work is transformed into a place where the freely mingling characters and the clusters of ideas face each other and converse with each other.

The Varthamanappusthakam and the Marks of polyphony

The Varthamanappusthakam is a narration which, at first sight, appears to be in the form of uniformity of opinion. It is a work which depicts the standpoints and views of the Malankara community whose members are Marthomma Nazranis only; they consider their stances and views to be true in their relations with foreign religious organizations. To a certain extent, the Malankara community is one with a closed system. The community is not prepared to reconstruct the traditional practices in its religious structure, administrative arrangements, language and liturgical rules. It would not submit itself to experiments; nor would it borrow new ideas. It approaches and estimates, with a suspicious eye, the confrontations and all-round renaissance, made possible by imperiaslim in an irresistible manner. The general feeling of the community is that it will trigger off the destruction of its identify. Not only that; the Varthamanappusthakam places in the opposite side and sharply criticizes the Western religious organizations and

the changes which they forcibly introduced in the colonies to perpetuate their tradition, their established administrative systems and understandings. Throughout the work the authorship of the writer is concealed. The author of the Varthamanappusthakam stands as the general representative of Malankara. Hence the first reading of the works may give us the impression that he gives prominence only to descriptions, arguments and interpretations which arise from the viewpoint of the community.

When we reach the inner chamber of the textual analysis of the Varthamanappusthakam, the layers of polyphony become clear, one after the other, which is different from uniformity of opinion. This book is a common place where different discourses join together. Many branches of literature and forms of narration are presented there and they mingle with each other. Different models of form can be seen in the Varthamanappusthakam such as conversations (chapters 11, 21, 29), descriptions (chapters 26, 53, 77), statements (chapters 4, 7), hints of puranas (chapters 46), proverbs (chapters 50), requests (chapters 33, 47), letters (chapters 42, 72) and declarations of rights (chapters 37). Besides, different models of styles of speech are used in descriptions. In general, mutually mingling elements which keep their distinctness are found in the work. They are opposed to uniformity of opinion and single-mindedness. The differences of sounds and the models of different viewpoints of the Malankara community and the Western religious organizations are found in parallel manner in the body of the book; this completes the afore-said inference.

Moreover, the fact that global models and proceedings of democracy, autocracy, monarchy, theocracy and bureaucratic malpractices have found a place in the narration is a textual justification of polyphony.

The Collective Authorship in the Writing

In all types of literary creations, the elements of a movement play an important part in determining the form and substance of narration. To a certain extent, that is the strength and limitation of writing. Experiments ignoring such boundaries are not uncommon in the literary world. For long, the Varthamanappusthakam has been included in the literary genre called travelogue. The reason is the similarity of the work to the models of form of the literature of travel. It is justified by its structure, narration and description. Usually, a travelogue is attributed to a single author. The reason is that, generally, it contains the subjective confrontations, sights, views and reactions of a traveller. The style of composition will be entirely subjective. But the Varthamanappusthakam, the first model of travelogue in Malayalam, is the product of collective authorship. Paremackal Thommakathanar limits himself to the role of one who represents Malankara community. The authorship is attributed not to the unity of himself but to plurality of the community. What is indicated here is the authorship based on partnership. Varthamanappusthakam is not the intellectual product of a single person but the collective work of body of persons who laboured with a single purpose. The work testifies that Paremackal Thommakathanar is only one among them. It is made clear in the preface:

“The intention in writing this book is to let our brethren and friends know how the above mentioned appointment took place, what experiences we had in Portugal, in the city of Rome, on the way after our departure for Europe, and how God Almighty helped and protected us in a very special manner” (Vartha., 1971:29).

The content of the Varthamanappusthakam is the differences of voice of a community daring to defend itself against the uncontrolled interventions of Western religious authority. Hence it is natural that resistances, protest and lamentations find their place in the work. When those things are recorded, it is not individuals but the community that is in the role of the narrator. In such contexts, forms of names that agree with general representations rather than proper nouns are used. Forms like Malankara (pp. 36, 37, 79, 126), ‘Yogam’ or assembly (pp. 46, 47), those of the same caste or ‘Jathikarar’ (pp. 36), Nazrani (p. 40), those of the Church or ‘Pallikaran’ (pp. 37, 38), Mappilas (p. 42), Parish or ‘Edavaka’ (p. 38) are examples. Paremackal does not install himself, in the work, as the author of Varthamanappusthakam. His observations and narration are not inclusive of him. He views things from a distance. And that is in perfect harmony with the thoughts and sentiments of the community. In the contexts when he is compelled to indicate himself, he writes ‘Paremackal Thomma Kathanar’ (pp. 55, 60, 87, 88, 98, 99, 101, 106, 107, 114, 130, 131, 136, 143, 160, 272). Even in support of his own opinions, pronouns referring to oneself such as ‘I’ and ‘We’ are rarely seen. Even there plural forms like ‘We’ and ‘Our’ etc. are preferred.

Through the authorship of the community, the travellers, perhaps aim at the state of authority regarding the authorship. That is, when the authorship of the work contracts to a representative of a community, which is stamped as backward, uncivilized and ignorant by the Westerners, it is possible that the authority of content, as far as the powerful are concerned, becomes dubious. The standpoints based on the community are stronger than isolated expressions of opinions. Hence the authority is confirmed by attributing the authorship of the books to the community. The new approach that writing is a social act (Brock&Walters, 1993:90) also gives a logically perfect justification to the collective authorship of the Varthamanappusthakam.

Malankara a Community of Polyphony

The Malankara community introduced by the Varthamanappusthakam is a religious body based on the concepts of polyphony. In this community we find ‘the puthenkur’ (new party) and ‘the pazhayakur’ (old party) which parted from each other owing to disharmony. There are two sections divided under the jurisdictions of ‘Cranganore and Verapoly; there are those who oppose foreign domination and support it covertly; there are ‘the Vadakumbhagar’ and ‘the teckkumbhagar’; there are Christians converted from upper-class Hindus and those who joined the ‘Way’ of the Nazranis leaving their paganism. Thus the Malankara community is a scene of plurality.

The religious assembly called the ‘Yogam’ in which the ultimate authority of the community was fully invested, gives the most secure model of polyphony. The ‘Yogam’ acted not according to a conception of authority that was hierarchically organized in the style of monarchy or feudalism instead it acted on the basis of collective discussions and decisions of the representatives of the people. In the Malankara Nazrani community the supreme spiritual authority was the bishop and the administrator of material things was the archdeacon.

But both had no chances for uncontrolled exercise of power or dictatorship in their spheres of activity; they had only the rights and responsibilities to act according to the decisions of the ‘Yogam’. The style of the ‘Yogam’ was to act according to the general will

of the people (Vartha. 40). The Malankara 'Yogam' based on decentralization may be marked as the stage of polyphony. The Varthamanappusthakam testifies to the fact that there was room for reaction, disagreement and boycott (Vartha. 35).

The seeds of division were sown by the colonising powers in Malankara which existed as a community till the 16th century. The strategies of force practiced by the colonial powers who came to Kerala in different periods deepened the split. With the arrival of the Roman Propaganda stopping the autocracy of the Portuguese Padroado, the Malankara community came under two centres of authority. One section remained obedient to the Archbishop of Cranganore appointed by Padroado; the second section came under the jurisdiction of the Malabar Vicar Apostolic, acting with Verapoly as the centre in accordance with the instruction of propaganda. Although they were under two different systems of authority, the two sections acted in unison in all events and enterprises affecting the community as a whole. The bursal of Bishop Florence and the Angamali Yogam following it, and the selection of the body of envoys reveals the polyphony of the community (Vartha. 35ff).

Malankara Yogam and its Collective Nature

There are indications at the very beginning of the Varthamanappusthakam which give an idea of the style of activity of the Malankara community. The foremost among them is the importance given to the 'Yogam' as the practical form of popular participation. The selection of the representatives for the adventurous and expensive European journey is not done by any superior; it is done by the unanimous decision of the 'Yogam' that stands high on the foundations of democratic ideas. The following part gives indication about the participation in the yogam:

"Seeing the invitation of the churches...the representatives of several churches set out for Angamale. They took with them what was necessary for their expenses, and had the conviction that they were in duty bound to be at Angamale" (Vartha. 34).

The details of the decisions of the 'yogam' were to be found in the 14th and the 15th chapters. But these chapters were lost from the original copy. The inference of historians about its contents is this: "The Syrians assembled at Athirampuzha, Angamali and Malayattoor and pondered over the programmes for the Roman journey. Consequently, they (the members of the yogam) decided to send to Rome a body of representatives comprising nine persons and to collect the necessary money from the churches" (Koodappuzha, 2012:585-86).

In this joint effort the two sections of Malankara will participate (Vartha. 107). "The Malabar Church did so thinking that they could get a just and impartial judgement for obtaining peace and concord regarding matters pertaining to their churches and the Christian life, if they submitted their petitions to the Pope, the visible head of the Church of God" (Vartha.153).

When the request of Bishop Marthoma VI for reunion is submitted to the Pope, they will acquaint themselves as selected representatives of the Malankara 'yogam'. The body of envoys always keep in mind the consciousness that their authority is not self-attained but given by the 'yogam'. "Our Churches had authorised us to do all things whatever would be conducive to the good of our Malabar Church in general" (Varthamanappusthakam: 107).The priests also were aware of the collective nature of the 'yogam' (Vartha. 56, 70, 72, 195).

Conclusion

The confrontations of uniformity and differences of opinion may often lead to conflicts. The reason is that the journey from traditional centralization to reluctant decentralization is not easy. We find the meeting of two worlds, the Western and the Eastern, in the narrations of the Varthamanappusthakam. There the conflict is between the uniformity of the West and the polyphony of the East. The author reveals clearly, through many a selected context, the diversity of voice that reaches to the bottom of the Malankara community.

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