
Contributions of Missionaries to Malayalam Language and Literature

Dr. N. MARY USHA

Assistant. Professor in History

Muslim College of Education, Thiruvithancode.

The C.M.S. Missionaries who came and worked in Travancore and Cochin were evangelists. But they rendered signal services in other fields as well. Their contributions to the development of Malayalam language and literature are recognized even today; for evangelism, knowledge of the vernacular, the language of the common man was absolutely necessary. So, they learned the language and popularized its study on scientific lines by providing the necessary study aids in the form of lexicons and books on grammar.

Keywords: Missionaries, Malayalam Language, and Literature and Verse Literature.

Malayalam Grammar

In the similar way the C.M.S. Missionaries were also interested in preparing Malayalam Grammar Books. It was in 1799 that the first Malayalam Grammar by an Englishman was published. The author was Robert Drummond. Another Englishman F. Spring also compiled a Malayalam grammar book. Both these were intended for the use of the officials of the English East India Company. There is clear evidence to show that Drummond based his work on the materials collected by Carmelite Missionaries of Verapoly near Cochin. The first C.M.S. Missionary to write a grammar book of Malayalam was Thomas Dawson. It was written in 1818 and was called "English-Portuguese and Malayalam. But it was not printed and published Joseph Peet also compiled a Malayalam Grammar. It was published in 1841 and was widely accepted as standard work. Its claim to distinction rests on the fact that it contains samples of Malayalam correspondence from 1789 onwards.

In 1864 Collins published "A short Grammar and Analysis of Malayalam language. This was intended for the use of Kottayam College and higher classes of Schools. It considered of four parts. First part was an introduction as it traced the history of the language. It also provided a discussion on the letters and their sounds. Part II provided a classification of words and paradigms. Malayalam syntax was explained in part three, and the last part familiarized the readers with analysis of sentences and principles of punctuation. Collins however acknowledged his indebtedness to Caldwell's comparative Grammar of the Dravidian or South Indian Family of languages. The work was a source of great help in the early days. Another significant work that emerged in the latter half of the 19th century was Malayazhmayude Vyakaranam, by George Matthan. Though the work was completed by 1851, it could be published only in 1863. In fact it has to be admitted that George Matthan's meritorious piece of work was published even before the publication of Gundert's Grammar.

The difference between Gundart's Grammar and that of George Matthan is that while the former gives only the fundamental principles of grammatical structures, the latter interprets the fundamental principles with illustrative details. In a sense it was the first of its kind. It sought to bring out the intricacies of Malayalam Grammar and make them simple and accessible to speech sounds of the vernacular. Not only did the work classify Malayalam speech sounds in a systematic manner but also dealt with the parts of speech and the rules of declensions and conjugation.

Running to 214 pages the book illustrates the author's dedication to the task of language research. Thus, in the field of Malayalam Grammar, George Matthan was one of the pioneers. From the above account it is very clear that the contribution of the missionaries to the development of Malayalam was no small one. Study of the vernacular was designed on a scientific basis with the complication of suitable grammar books and lexicons. In this way they laid a secure foundation to the language and opened it to the influence of other languages and also to the literary forms other than those prevalent then. Thus, the language grew abundantly producing magnificent prose and verse literature.

Malayalam Literature

It must be remembered that early Malayalam was a colloquial tongue and it emerged as a literary language distinct from Tamil only in the 19th century A.D. It was called Manipravalam, as it was a curious mixture of Sanskrit and Tamil. After the 11th century this language developed its verse form. The 15th and 16th centuries witnesses the total liberation of Malayalam from Tamil. At the same time it imbibed fully the influence of Sanskrit poetry. Many such poetic works emerged and won great popularity.

But the literary form of prose did not emerge till the 18th century, except some old documents, treaties on traditional sciences and some puranas. By the beginning of the century some Christian writers started producing prose works. The Varthamana Pusthakam by Paramakkal Thomas Kathanar a Catholic priest was the first example. In 1718 appeared another called Veda Tharakam by Rev. Joseph Kariyattil. These literary compositions did not have any literary importance. Yet they served as a model for the C.M.S. Missionaries to contribute their might.

The first C.M.S. Missionary Thomas Norton started the work of translating portions of the Bible for the benefit of converts. Norton also produced a large number of hymns and tracts. Bailey continued the work of Norton. His contribution to Malayalam prose came in the form of translations from such languages as Sanskrit, Hebrew, Syriac and English. In this work he was considerably helped by one scholar Chanthu Menon. During the years 1824-1825 Bailey published two books in Malayalam, the Gospel of St. Mathew and a set of short stories for little children, translated from English.

The latter was eight short stories and has 197 pages. Bailey also translated and published such works as Homily on the Right use of the Church. Watt's Two Catechisms and Murray's A bridged Grammar. Besides he translated several tracts and books for daily use in the college. Bailey's translations had one distinct quality. As against the prevailing long unwieldy and clumsily constructed sentences crammed Sanskrit words, Bailey's style was direct, simple and

lucid. This was found to be of immense use by latter writers. The contributions of later missionaries though little, still played their due part in the development of Malayalam literature.

Henry Baker (Sr.) translated into Malayalam Watt's scripture History. Besides he contributed several hymns and tracts. Joseph Peet, did not undertake any translation work as his predecessors. Still he published a book Malayalam Grammar, a Geography book in Malayalam and various tracts. Henry Baker (Jr.) was the author of a Malayalam Commentary on St. Mathew. His pamphlet on the Arayan Mission is also noteworthy.

Richard Collins was a devoted literary figure among the C.M.S. Missionaries. He was a scholar in both English and Malayalam. His momentous works of the Malayalam dictionary and grammar book bear out his linguistic talents. Though he was not directly involved in the development of Malayalam prose, his first wife Francis wrote an English novel called Slayer Slain. The theme centers round the change effected by Missionary enterprise in the caste ridden society of Travancore and the services that the mission rendered for the uplift of the slave community. Mrs. Collins herself began to translate it into Malayalam. But before completing it she breathed it in 1878 under the title Khasthakaradham. It was printed at the C.M.S. Press and only 800 copies were printed in the first issue. Modern critics in Malayalam are unanimous in their opinion that his novel was published nine years before the appearance of Appu Nedungadi's Kundaletha has the status of being the first work of prose fiction in Malayalam.

Reference

Register of Missionaries, p.7.

Parameswara Aiyar, op.cit., p.145.

Mathan Tharakan, K.M., Rev. George Mathan-Biography (n.d.) pp.34-35.

Collins, R., "A Short Grammar and analysis of the Malayalam Language".