



Beat of Thudi and Clatter of Chilambu

Translation of
Edasseri's essay
'Thudikottum
Chimboliyum'

1

Beat of Thudi and Clatter of Chilambu Edasseri

I shall try to document here some minutiae which still linger in my memory related to my small poem 'Poothappattu' (Ode to Pootham**).

An invitation was received from All India Radio, Kozhikkode, to recite a poem for broadcasting. There was enough time for composing the poem. May be because of that very reason, the matter had almost slipped my mind. When I received intimation from All India Radio to send the script, my mind was blank and I was in a state of panic. I did not know what to write. I did not have even a feeble rhythm on the strings of my consciousness!

There is a famous stanza from an old Malayalam poem starting with "my daughter shall have none less than a noble king". Similar is my literary aspiration. The desire to write is intense. But when I sit down to write, I don't have sufficient time; don't have enough concentration; don't remember anything I had studied; no books to refer to; no apt words coming to my mind; What more; when I finish writing, instead of the noble king, it would turn out to be just the opposite, a rogue!

I must have either walked aimlessly in the courtyard with a troubled mind or stood looking far into the paddy fields which lay bathed in intense sunlight. No distinct or dynamic image got imprinted in my mind that could stir up my imagination. How can mind where even a pleasant day-dream does not enter, be creatively oriented? I must have been mauled mercilessly by the routine noises around me; noises that normally

(*)"Thudi" is the festive drum of Kerala that makes loud thudding noise and "Chilambu" is the thick festive Anklet that makes loud metallic clatter.

(**) 'Pootham', in real world, is a folklore idolatry character enacted by a village performing artist who traditionally visits the village homes after the summer harvesting. Once inside the courtyard, she dances to the rhythm of drum beats accompanied by the wailing tune of short-pipe (a shorter version of bagpipe). Usually men dress up in women's attire to act as the "Pootham". The grotesque figure will be adorned from head to toe with classic brass ornaments which make an eerie clattering sound as it moves on. The "Pootham" wears a garland of flowers around the neck, loosely covering the bosom. Its body also bears a typical piece of ornament in the crescent shape of moon. Pootham's blond hair covers its entire backside and flows down to its knee level. The white cloth that the "Pootham" wraps around its body is decorated with red tassels and is tied to the waist with waistband fitted with umpteen numbers of small bells. This dark figure wears a colourful coronet on head. Villagers devotedly await the arrival of the "Pootham" in their courtyard and children, even though a little scared, wait in anticipation with mixed feelings. A rough translation of Pootham can be 'Poltergeist' in English.

we never give our ear to while immersed in work, but if heard are those that bring only hatred and despise due to their grossness - chit chat between servants, disturbing sounds neighbors make while quarreling, smart talk by the vegetable vendor. Some of these might have affected me on that day too. I am not recalling these from my lucid memory. But, I vividly recollect only one thing about the moment of the sprouting of



Beat of Thudi and Clatter of Chilambu

Translation of
Edasseri's essay
'Thudikottum
Chimboliyum'

2

this poem. The sound of a thudi beat which was coming from far away, in the midst of all those annoyances. As I heard that veiled, intermittent, solitary and echoing sound coming from the horizon like that of a woodpecker thudding on a tall hard-wood tree with its strong bills - a sound that you hear while walking through a coconut grove- my mind was filled with creative anxiety. It withdrew itself from all other disturbing sounds around me and attained a state required for meditating on something yet not very clear. It is the arrival of 'Pootham'. I can recognize it from long familiarity. And my mind started murmuring spontaneously; "Do you want Unni? Do you want Unni?" its strings had acquired the desired rhythm!

(Note: A male child in Kerala is generally called unni)

Childhood is full of imagination and intent on creativity. So, once a childlike state of mind is attained, you cannot help molding some shapes out of mud!. I have particular reasons to mention 'a child's environment' when I recollect this poem (Poothappattu). When this poem was first published in the anthology of selected poems, I had written a short prologue with the reminiscences of childhood. Reproducing the same here is unnecessary. As mentioned in that brief note, for a villager who is born and brought up in the first half of twentieth century, the numerous deities appearing in different costumes and characteristics in their court yards were as familiar as the people staying next door. Before the sense of distinction between man, animal, bird and other things get rooted in a child, he plays and quarrels with them all with a sense of equality. All along, a child's mind also enthrones in his imaginary world, even though with a shudder, the deities installed in his mind through the grotesque figures and attires he frequently comes across. Thus the infant imagination expands deep into an unseen realm of the universe as well.

As the Pootham, who brings wellness and prosperity to the family, arrives at the courtyard along with its troupe and its performance is over, the offerings are kept ready. Unni, full of enthusiasm is in front of his mother who brings the offerings. He is not content with looking at the Pootham again and again. At the same time, he is scared by the sight of Pootham and steps back. Eyes wide open with enthrallment; the little hero is clinging tight to his mother's attire making her forward movement difficult. It is at this juncture that the elders in the house ask the pootham "Do you want Unni; do you want Unni". Ever new and charming scene!

Surely this was there in my mind. I don't know when; It must have occupied my mind with all its grandeur but without any specific pattern. Was it an idea? No. It was not even an image. It may be wiser to describe it as something that could act as a catalyst for a mind rapt for creation. But there was nothing to sprout from that alone. It must have remained there awaiting a favorable environment and a dynamic will power, to pop up. I had the feeling, an ecstasy that the mind had thrown to the rubbish along with other seepage, which was awaiting the pollen, a favorable climate and an energetic willpower. It had the capability to accept the pollen and reproduce. However, that impregnation was an accident.

I have got an atmosphere really conducive for writing a poem. I could withdraw fully to myself behind the closed doors of my mind; take out the shells from my little pot, spread it out, arrange, demolish and rearrange them in various shapes and repeat the same to my delight. An imaginary world of mine as I wished for emerged as if out of the pre dawn haze and slowly revealed itself. Along with this, another very important thing evolved. I have my elder sister, an accomplished story teller who had told me



Beat of Thudi and Clatter of Chilambu

Translation of
Edasseri's essay
'Thudikottum
Chimboliyum'

3

many stories in her singsong voice, lovingly and convincingly when I was a child. My mind was trying to catch up with her style of storytelling. It is a good omen to get clarity on the contours of the world that is under creation along with continuous flow of apt words to describe. Thus, a potentially eloquent object, though of vague shape and rhythm, has taken shape.

Now, the mind is traversing through the most anxious and apprehensive phase. It is during this period that I start misbehaving pathetically to the height of being ridiculed. Many a time the much needed solitude is broken. As the toothed disc of the battle for life continues piercing into the flesh, one cannot remain in meditation-mode for long. The way- side pond may be trying to keep its inner self still for the celestial brilliance to get reflected in it, but it has no right to prevent the washer-man from laundering a bundle of dirty linen in it. However, it would continue in its pursuit, incessantly carrying in its shattering little waves the transient images of the radiant face of the sun. But this time, before the tranquility of mind turned murky; I could dish out the first verse of the poem,

"Havent you heard the Thudi thumping,
With the clatter of anklets, interlacing?"

I started writing the remaining verses again only after a night's sleep. I was a bit shaken on the thought that the previous night's imagery might have been shattered to pieces. I was not very optimistic about the capability of human mind to rise from the bleeding fresh wounds straight to a world of imagination and blissful thoughts. But, after reciting the first stanza a couple of times, my mind became poignant and I could continue writing smoothly and in quick rhythm. What remained were only intellectual manipulations. I will cite an example that will illustrate the situation. After Pootham was introduced with the basic descriptions, I was a bit confused as to how to start and proceed with the story. I was apprehensive of using prose in between to explain certain situations; that will prevent the flow of the poem. But, All India Radio officials had advised me informally that while broadcasting long poems, the poet was at liberty to use short passages, to explain situations if necessary. As a person still limping in the path of poetry I felt that advice difficult to be put into practice. But my mind advised that it was a good trick. I was once again confused. Finally, I did it with a sinful mind. The first sentence that I wrote was "Then why are we giving new cloth and grain to this wretched Pootham?" Then I added narrations in the beginning of the poem and in between for the sake of uniformity.

It is almost a futile exercise for the author himself to read the script immediately after writing, to assess its effectiveness. There may not be congruence between the imagery that existed in the poet's mind at the time of writing and the finite form that has been transferred to the paper. Much of that existed in the poet's imagination as raw material at the time of writing the poem, has made an exit. Consequently it is difficult to know from an instant reading whether the poem has acquired necessary lucidity and luster. For me to look at that piece of poem - which later to be known as mine - as an outsider, it is imperative that the favorable circumstances that existed in my imagination for its creation has to fade away. But it is not because of this that I did not feel like reading the poem even once after completing it. A feeling of utter failure haunted me. If an analogy 'like a mother who gave still birth' can be said about a male, I turned my face away from it, having denied of even the pleasure of sorrow. The brakeless wheels of the life's hardship had already started rolling on, carrying me along.



Beat of Thudi and Clatter of Chilambu

Translation of
Edasseri's essay
'Thudikottum
Chimboliyum'

4

In the meantime, my wife had collected and arranged the bits of papers on which I had scribbled the poem and copied them down in good sheets. No poem can survive in that indecipherable* handwriting! I copied that into sheets of glossy white paper in my own good handwriting after making necessary corrections. I read it. Not once, but many a time. Like the money in the hands of a miser, I went through it several times. Once to know whether the poem can be recited in the allotted time; then to check my own voice quality; in fact each time to enjoy my own beauty. Is it to put a small 'bindi' on her forehead that the charming young lady remains in front of the mirror for ages!

Even after all these, my confidence level was pathetically low, while I was sitting in front of the officer, himself an accomplished poet, in the recording studio of All India Radio.

* Edasseri's wife had legible hand writing. As was his wont, a playful teasing!

This essay appeared in 'Mathrubhoomi weekly' dated November 24, 1968
Translated Edasseri Trust Team