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Prelude:

During childhood days, my close familiarity was with deities than my neighbours. The apparition of the ‘patriarch’ wrapped in crimson woollen blanket in our prayer room diligently listening to my obstinate crying; the spirit of an ancestor draped in pure white, wandering in the moonlit courtyard fragrant with jasmine flowers; the deity by name ‘Bhuvaneswari’, whom my elder brother propitiated by offering ‘*Thanneeramrutu*’ (nectar of water) chanting mantras in low tone to the resonating sound of holy bells; another brother as he at times stumbled home late at night inebriated and frightened, lying on the veranda for some time and after gulping down cool water from the bronze jar, narrating his encounter with *the Yakshi* (alluring female fairy) exuding fragrance of jasmine flowers as she sauntered along her course of visitation, and how he narrowly escaped her enchantment; the stories, my elder sister, a master storyteller, spun about the naughty spirit behind the mysterious speck of light during nights known as the ‘will-o’-the-wisp’* visible through the open low-level windows of our ancient village house; The numerous ‘Poothams’ visiting every village courtyard during summer, affirming the existence of such supernatural powers. Frankly, my bond with them surpassed any other in this world.

The concept of 'Pootham' in this poem emerges from the mages of my childhood mind, like the tangled and esoteric phosphorescence of the 'will-o'-the-wisp'. The narration, reminiscent of the style of story-telling of my sister who never wrote a poem.

ODE TO POOTHAM **

EDASSERI

Sacred lamp is lit. Evening prayers are chanted. Minds half-awake, multiplication tables¹ are also recited. It is not yet time to dine. Don't sleep. Listen to a song about the mischievous spirit; the Pootham.

Have you not heard the clamour of brass anklets,
Mingled with the rhythm of the beats of drum?
Lo and behold the grand arrival of the dark Pootham,
Wearing tiny, bright crescent moons on her body.

Large brass studs droop from her ears;
Fanciful ornaments clang around her neck.
The dark Pootham wears a large headdress,
With tassels festooned in resplendent colours.
A garland of natural flowers slides prettily,
Upon her curvaceous breasts.
Knee-long copper hair let loose,
Veils the shape of her back complete.
Red velvety cloth on her upper body,
White skirt with bells clinking around waist.
Behold the grand arrival of the blessed Pootham,
She dances with stunning allure!

Where is this Pootham coming from? Listen closely:

On the other side of the Parayan hill, ²
Beneath the rocky ledges on the slope,
Pootham dwells throughout the day,
Staring vacantly through the tiny window,
With her protruding saucer-like eyes.
Young cowherds seek shade,
Beneath the cool grove at noon.
Swiftly emerges the crafty Pootham,
Suckles the udder of a wayward cow.
As dusk unfurls its fragrant veil,
Pootham misleads those hurrying home,
Leads them astray into distant realms,
And she collects betel-quid from them too. ³

Once the will-o'-the-wisp misleads, the wanderers astray into forgotten paths. If they are to awaken to their folly, they need to place betel-quid on the wayside. As they depart, the

spirit would appear, chew the betel-quin, and scatter-spit on the ixora shrub's bushes. That's how the ixora flowers bloom crimson!

In the midnight cosmos' loft,
 Where only emptiness prevails,
 Magic lanterns are lit in arrays.
 She stands languidly by wayside,
 Smoothing tangled hair tresses,
 A coy smile graces her pretty face.
 Wicked youth wander into late night,
 Lured and skilfully led by her artful tact,
 On the palm's summit, they're positioned,
 A seven-storied mansion, it seems to them.
 As they slumber ensnared by her magic touch,
 She drinks their saline crimson blood slurping.
 Bones and hair are scattered on the hard rock,
 On the other side of the Parayan hill.

Wonder why we are offering rice and dhoti to this wretched Pootham? Ah, my dears, it would be a sin not to. These were done by the Pootham long ago, and now she harms no one. Pootham is forever melancholic. Why is the Pootham so sad? Listen;

In a mansion, on the bank of the river,
 Unni was born after fervent prayers.
 His waistband of gold jingled with bells,
 Tiny trinkets adorned his ears.
 Nangeli fed him food and milk,
 She also gave him dolls to play.
 Calling crows and cats in her singsong voice,
 Showing the bright moon in the sky,
 Nangeli fed Unni, rice kneaded in buttermilk.

Would ants sting if left on the ground?
 Would lice wander if kept on the head?
 Upon the silken sheet, on a cot of gold,
 Singing lullabies, patting chubby baby thighs,
 Nangeli dozes off, lying on her side.

Unni turned seven, mind swift and nosy,
 Yearning within grew for going to school.
 Nangeli wrapped the thin-lined border dhoti,
 On the white rippled boyish tummy.
 Secured his tuft-of-hair with a vine.⁴
 Then, she tenderly wiped his bright cheek.
 A metal stylus with a golden knob,
 And a smoothed palm leaf in his hand,
 Nangeli watched Unni from the gatehouse,
 As he strolled through the paddy field,
 Reached the corner, entered alleyways,

Until he disappeared beneath the pipal tree;
Its canopy spread like a large pandal.

Unni ascended the small hill's crest,
He saw calves and cows grazing.
Ixora flowers beaming amidst green shrubs.
A flock of lambs playing on the barren rocks.
Black beetles encircling the blossoms of,
Red-pon, mountain-ebony and other trees.
Unni strolled forward as the path unfolded,
Unni saw the Parayan's Mandakam. ⁵
Then, in confident strides he did slide,
To the other side of the Parayan hill.
At that moment, the Pootham unfurled,
The wee window of the rocky crag.
Pootham beheld the boy strolling,
A night-blooming water-lily
Drifting in a gentle ramble,
A crescent moon wavering in delight,
A golden pot, a ripe Poovan banana. ⁶

Within the Pootham's bosom, a tickle stirred,
Goosebumps rising, emotions anew,
Transformed herself into a lovely girl,
She found her place beneath a blossomed tree.

Then the Pootham spoke to Unni in a coquettish tone:

“Unni, my darling, my beloved,
Oncoming sunbeam of golden hue!
Into the thicket, cast away
The stylus, palm leaf, and come to me.”
“If I throw them into the thicket
Teacher would surely quarrel with me,
Sweet little girl weaving allure,
Sitting beneath the blossomed tree.”
“Unni, my darling, my beloved,
Oncoming sunbeam of golden hue!
In the breeze under shade of the tree,
Sitting on the blue foliated rock,
As smooth as a black beetle's outer shell,
We shall write on tender mango leaves
With tiny silver jasmine buds.
Fling the stylus into the thicket and join me.”
“Sweet little girl weaving allure,
Sitting beneath the blossomed tree,
Here I toss into the thicket,
The stylus and the palm leaf.”

Unni then did not go to school. He must have thought it to be a joy forever. Now listen. The stylus is made of iron. The moment iron was discarded, the spirit, the Pootham, came and slowly took him away.

Day light waned; rays softened to pale gold.
 In the courtyard of the horizon,
 The white clouds now blushed crimson.
 The child away for study has not yet returned,
 Nangeli's silent tears churned with concern.
 Along the riverbanks, she wandered,
 Calling Unni by his name.
 The minnow fish darting and frolicking,
 Stood motionless in the river flow.
 None in sight, mother meandered,
 Her voice echoed through the vast fields.
 New sigh arose from beneath the ploughed earth.
 Along the hill slope on the jagged rocks,
 Mother was disconsolate in search of Unni.
 Small owls peered asking, "What? What?"
 She trod on to the hill-top and in to the thicket,
 Not seeing, the mother kept on walking crying.
 As Pootham sat beneath the blossomed tree,
 Enjoying stringing flowers into a cute garland,
 Along with the adorable Unni,
 She heard the saddest of these sobs.

She was least affected. But this nuisance needs to be stopped.

Pootham tried scaring away the mother;
 The mother stood serene, and composed.
 As a whirlwind, the Pootham swirled,
 Mother remained firm, like a stump.
 A looming wildfire, scared the Pootham,
 With her tears, the mother put out the flames.
 Pootham took forms of tiger and leopard
 Mother adamant, demanded her child back.

It didn't work. So, Pootham changed her tactics.

As easy as plucking a pandanus flower,
 Pootham removed the big flat rock
 Revealing the treasure cave in the hill.
 Unfolded in it lay dazzling heaps,
 Of gold, Jewels and precious stones.
 "Gold, jewels and precious stones,
 I'll share in a bag-full, but
 This child in return, shall be mine."
 Not looking at the gold ornaments,
 Not looking at the precious stones,

Mother plucked her own eyes.
 Like morning red lotus flowers,
 She offered them to the Pootham,
 Made this plea with folded palms;
 “More precious than these is my darling,
 Give him back to me, be kind and gracious.”

See how clever the Pootham is! Mother has lost her eyesight!

Pootham severed fig from a Thechi shrub,
 Then chanted mantras with ardent whispers;
 Thus, another child came into being.
 In grace, Pootham urged the mother to take.
 Mother, in affection, kissed and embraced,
 Caressed the boy’s head again and again;
 Then the mother declared in a jiffy,
 “This is not my own!”
 Mother reproved Pootham for betraying
 The womb that gave birth to the child.
 Anger surged within the mother’s core,
 Hand raised, a damnable curse she’d throw!
 Pootham wary, trembled with fear,
 Returned the precious child in a haste.
 “No longer will I hold your child, O Mother,
 Contain your rage, don’t drain my Vigor.
 Your eyesight will now be restored,
 Confirm that this is your child.”
 Pootham stood trembling, palms folded,
 Retreated tamed, wholly defeated.
 Before the very own eyes of the mother,
 Unni stood, in his true essence,
 Radiantly beaming like the moon,
 Smile spreading a cool embrace!

Indeed, the mother reclaimed Unni. But what about the Pootham? Poor thing!

Cradling Unni, ready to depart,
 Pootham kissed his head many a time,
 Saucer-eyes welled, a rivulet of tears,
 A sigh of sorrow escaped her mouth ajar.
 The true mother, who birthed Unni,
 Her heart softened with compassion,
 Fervently spoke to the Pootham, beaming:
 “After the Capricorn harvest season,
 When ‘Calama’⁷ grains form golden hills
 On the threshing-floor of our houses;
 When the fields lie dry, ready to plough,
 Call on us every year to return with joy,
 For bringing happiness to the lovely Unni,

For bringing wellness to our household,
For us to have everlasting wellbeing.”
Pootham agreed and swiftly vanished.

Each year, after the Capricorn harvest,
Pootham visits households, seeking Unni’s home.
Needs to find the house where Unni was born.
Forgot to ask; Nangeli’s silence held the secret.
Perhaps Nangeli too forgot, may be fear arose,
The Pootham would abduct her darling again;
Who knows for sure, the absolute truth!
Pootham, swollen with longing’s embrace,
Wanders through households dancing,
A hopeful chase, Unni still elusive.
Treading, frolicking, she goes running,
To the next house, thinking Unni be there.
“Do you want Unni?” echoes again and again;
Villagers tease her, make her dance.
Drum beats in rhythm with its heartbeats,
Short pipes’ sound akin to her sobs.

Have you not heard the clamour of brass anklets,
Mingled with the rhythm of the beats of drum?
Lo and behold the grand arrival of the dark Pootham,
Wearing tiny, bright crescent moons on her body.

Poothappaattu – Edasseri. (This poem in Malayalam language was first broadcast by All India Radio, Calicut in 1951. Essay by Edasseri ‘Beats of Thudi and Clatter of Chilambu’ available for reading at www.edasseri.org throws some light into the birth of this poem.)

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Translated by Asokakumar Edasseri, April 19, 2024.

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Notes by the translator:

* Will-o’-the-wisp’: Modern science explains the light aspect of will-o’-the-wisp as natural phenomenon such as bioluminescence or chemiluminescence. These lights result from the oxidation of the gases like phosphine (PH₂), di-phosphine (P₂H₄) and methane (CH₄) produced during organic decay. So, while these ghostly lights once bewildered travellers, we now understand their earthly origins. Remember, chasing a will-o’-the-wisp might lead you astray, much like pursuing an elusive dream.

** The name ‘Pootham’ has its origins in Indian (Sanskrit) scriptures. It carries a beautiful meaning, signifying the ‘pure self’ or ‘Pure soul’. In the context of Vishnusahasranamam, it represents the one with an extremely pure essence, unaffected by the impurities of ‘Maya’ (Illusion).

While a broad approximate translation might render ‘Pootham’ as ‘Fairy’, ‘Poltergeist’ or ‘trickster Devil’, none of these capture the essence of the real Pootham.

The dance of Pootham is a ritualistic folk-art form primarily performed in the Valluvanad region of central Kerala during Devi temple festivals. In the real world, ‘Pootham’ assumes different mythical characters in various regions within Kerala enacted traditionally by village performing artists. The performance involves spirited dancing, accompanied by drum and a short pipe. Edasseri has woven a unique myth, both universal and secular, in this poem about the enigmatic “Pootham”.

1. It is a practice for children in India to recite multiplication tables after evening prayers.
2. The headgear worn by Pootham is an immensely big decorated semi-circular crown made of palm leaves and is sometimes referred to as ‘Mudi’. Various types of dyes are used to decorate the headgear. The peripherals of the headgear are decorated with frills. Pootham wears a face covering, with mouth kept agape and the tongue sticking out.

2 & 5. Parayan and Parayan’s Mandakam. Parayan form a caste in Kerala society. Mandakam is a small brick and clay structure, where various types of rituals are performed by Parayans. The people of this caste were artistically proficient in witchcraft and were believed to possess magical powers.

3. Betel-quid is a combination of betel leaf, quick lime and a few pieces of areca-nut. Once chewed, the saliva turns into dark crimson red.

4. Tuft of hair – In olden days, people used to grow their hair without grooming. Usually, the tuft will be tied using a piece of cloth. In the poem, Nangeli uses a piece of vine to tie Unni’s tuft.

6. Poovan is a small banana variety cultivated across Kerala. When ripe, it attains attractive bright yellow colour. Ripe Poovan is without any flaw, as it is resistant to fruit cracking.

7. Kalama is a type of high-quality paddy grain.

Following paragraph is taken from the book ‘Edasseri Govindan Nair’ written by the famous and most revered critic of Malayalam literature Dr. M. Leelavathi in the series of books under the banner ‘Makers of Indian Literature’. The book is published in 1998 by Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi.

‘The picturesque description of the whole performance gives the poem an extremely charming exterior. But it is the vision into the innermost emotional depth of the legend that endows the poem with exquisite interior charm. The archetype of the great mother with her infinite capacity for self-sacrifice is awakened. The transformation of the evil spirit has two-fold significance. Yearning for motherhood is the first transformational power by which she gets changed into a human mother, benevolent and affectionate to the kid, with simultaneous retention of her dark nature which is capable of utmost cruelty to others. The wrath of the

human mother is the other transformational power, the thunders of which make her (the Pootham) the meekest and the weakest of all beings and against which all her superhuman strength and destructive forces are futile.'