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A PRESIDENTIAL SPEECH (1951)

(Relevant for All Times)

EDASSERI

A note by the translator:

This speech was delivered at a time when several writers and artists including Edasseri were taking arts and literature to masses. This period saw notable contributions from writers to the Navodhana Movement or renaissance in Kerala. Edasseri's play Koottukrishi was accepted enthusiastically by the audience in Kerala, consisting of a wide spectrum of intellectuals, workers and farmers. His poem Puthankalavum Arivalum was creating ripples at that time and even today this poem remain unsurpassed as the poem which handled the theme of tenant farmer in an exceptionally balanced, political and yet remarkably poetic manner. Edasseri did not write that poem at the behest of any political party.

Friends,

I want to talk first about Progressive Literature. A little while ago, there was a debate here during which it was said that people from Kerala including me are steering clear of the current issues; or something to that effect. There is no truth in this allegation. Nothing untoward will happen to us if we candidly express our opinions. As far as I am concerned, I am not going to contest any elections and by the time my turn comes for being elevated to the position of the state poet, my sixtieth death anniversary would have passed!

Aim of creative writing shall be cultural advancement of the people. A writer should line up people in the struggle for economical equality. There is no difference of opinion over these two statements. How to achieve these? Clarity is required in this aspect. This is not a subject that can be confined to a single speech. Writers should always be on the side of majority of ailing mass. And the writers shall also realise that they are part of the society. This need be emphasized. This is because the writer should always be on the side of the common man and not on the side of political parties. When he writes with conviction on issues of paramount importance for the wellbeing of people, he is not bothered about which political party is going to get more votes by his doing so. The writer who does not have political ambitions knows for sure that the party which leads the common man through the way lighted by him will win.



So, the difference will be this; today congress party will say, do write something about constructive work. The poet looks around and sees a bridge coming up at Kuttippuram; immediately the congress poet should write "Oh! How beautiful this bridge is!" or the communist party will say, "tomorrow we are to announce at Calicut, a tool down strike", do write about it. Then the communist poet has to sing "March forward! March forward! Time has come for the real fight!" This stance has to be turned on its head. Instead, the writer shall create awareness among common people about their cultural and economic slavery and instil courage in them to rip off the chains of bondage. Whatever is required to achieve that goal shall form part of the writer's work. No one needs to instruct him. He knows it pretty well and is doing that. Thanks to his work, the common people are getting more and more aware; may be slowly but definitely. While taking such enlightened people along, a political party with progressive outlook and conviction about their aim will be able to politically inspire them in the building of a strong nation. That's all what is required!

Nowadays, we are listening to heated debates on what all themes are to be selected for progressive writing. The series of suggestions starting from 'one shall write on contemporary issues and the like' have now reached the level of a 'command' that one should write only about 'day to day issues'. When it has reached that stage, I have a natural curiosity to do some retrospection. If the plot is related to an ancient time, it seems now a foregone conclusion that the literary work is retrograde. But is it really so?

I happened to read a book which was published some time during the last couple of weeks of the year 1950. The author has retold a few stories from 'Vyasa Mahabharath' and has given his interpretations for certain specific issues or incidence. Kuttikrishna Marar who somehow got the negative name as one who is an enemy of progressive literature is the author of this book. So it ought to be retrograde. But after reading it, I did not feel so.

There is a story in that book titled "Kiraatha Moorthy" (Lord Siva in the form of a hunter). Pandavas were living in exile in the forest following their failure in the wager of the game of dice. Like many who came and paid respect to the Pandava king, sage Markkandeya also visited him one day. Sages were impartial in those days. They would visit Duryodhana's palace as well as Pandava's hermitage. Because Pandavas were good people and were living in the forest like the sages, they were favourably dispensed towards them. So Markkandeya came. He smiled when he saw Yudhishtira. Seeing the smile on the sage's face, the king was uncomfortable and asked Markkandeya something like 'why are you laughing at my grief'. Markkandeya uttered a sentence in reply. The events that followed in the essay are the interpretation of that sentence. The sage's reply was this, "Nese Balaseythi Charedadharmam" - "What you do at a time you don't feel strong will be adharma" - (Note: This incident and its explanation is detailed in the



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essay titled - 'Nese Balaseyathi Charedadharmam' - from the same book). He cited examples of Sri Rama whom he saw living in the forest like Yudhishtira, when he was supposed to rule his kingdom fighting wars and looking after the welfare of his citizens; also about the mighty elephants who subject themselves to the order of the mahout etc. After saying this, he left. What followed was a war of words against the king by his wife Paanchali who was fed up with remaining in the forest and Bhima, the mightiest of all and also the young heir to the throne. The complaint was against leading a forest life and not allowing them to fight and regain the throne. In Marar's language it was a sort of exorcism that was conducted on the king by both, from either side. And at the end of this, the real reason came out of that just king! He said "Bhima, Paanjali; whatever you both said is correct. So, we may fight. But think before that. Bhishma, Drona, Karna and Aswathama are on their side. And all of them are indomitable. Without conquering them, you cannot defeat Duryodhana and kill him." After this, Bhima did not say a word. Pandavas decided to gain more strength; Arjuna went for long penance and gained divine weapons; so on and so forth the story continues.

After reading the stories of Mahabharatha one doesn't think of the feud between kings who lived long ago. Those kings are gone leaving their thrones behind! Still there are rulers and the ruled. Instead of the kings, we have now with us the political parties. In place of the ruled, we have the same old common man. Even now we see periodical exiles and incognito life of political parties. Dharma of both those kings of olden times as well as the present political parties is not to live in incognito but to fight for power and rule the country. There shall be no compromise on this issue. Rather than doing this, if they say, "Forest is the only refuge before us now," it is Adharma. If they do so, it is neither because of compassion towards their fellow brothers nor due to their adherence with non-violence. It is sheer weakness! To overcome this, they need to get hold of the divine arrow which now is the people's mandate. So if somebody happens to read this story in 1951, he will not see what sage Markkandeya told Yudhishtira, but Kuttikrishna Marar consoling E.M.S with a smile, "What you do at a time you don't feel strong will be adharma" and advising him to gain strength and people's mandate and get to power to rule!

There may be people who are saying that this is nothing but madness, and that Marar being a congress man, his literary activity will in no way serve the purpose of the communists. This only means that they have not understood Marar or for that matter any writer. As I said earlier, when a writer does creative work, he is not bothered about who gets more votes because of his creation.

So, can anyone who reads "Bharatha paryadanam" say that a literary work that was written thousands of years ago about the exile of Pandavas be considered as retrograde in the era of progressive literature? If the answer is yes, then there is some serious issue with my understanding of progressive literature. I am still learning. If anyone

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can convince me I am wrong, I am ready to correct myself without any preconditions.

In short, whether the theme is old or new is not at all the criterion. As what Tennyson in his 1842 poem "The Poet's Song" said, the poet is speaking about how this world would be after centuries pass. The world moves along with centuries. Even a poet's song coming from many centuries past, is about what the world would be after centuries to come.

This is enough. When I started this presidential speech, it was not the intention to wander in the sky after ideologies. Let me briefly perform my duty as well. I believe that if I speak aloud in this great city of Madras, it will have more impact than if I shout at the top of my voice from my little village. It is in this city that the fate of our great state is decided.

The present day demand is that writers shall interact with people in their day to day activities and work for their cultural and economic well being. It is for this purpose that the literary forums and cultural forums are functioning in every nook and corner. We gratefully appreciate the cooperation and encouragement given to us by our friends in Madras for the formation and functioning of these forums. Government of Madras which is spending liberally on the education of the elderly people need to recognise the potential of these forums as well. There is no better platform than the stage, to educate the mass. It is necessary that the government help people like us who are volunteering. Instead, what we see is that the government is not heeding to our requests despite our loud cries to remove certain obstacles in front of us. I shall point out two very important issues that we face. There is a rule stating that prior approval is needed from the government for staging any drama. It is not a small inconvenience that this rule has created. It is the police officers who are to review the script and grant permission. All police officers cannot be expected to be capable of appreciating literature. Due to this many a time permission is not granted to even innocent but purposeful dramas. Just one article that appeared in the recent edition of "Jayakeralam" shows how ridiculous such situations could be. Permission was not granted to perform a drama by Ponkunnam Varkey because the name of the drama was "Prema Viplavam" (Revolution in Love). Permission was not granted citing the reason that there is "Viplavam" (Revolution) in the title; not in the content! I vehemently protest against the government's decision to examine a drama before it is being enacted. We cannot accept any type of barriers in front of the people's desire for knowledge and information or on the artist's freedom of expression. For the time being, I am not going to that extent. If you want to examine the script, please entrust the work with people who are capable of understanding literature. Cultural forums and literary forums are responsible entities; make them responsible and if any problem arises then only the government official's valuable time be spent!



Second is the issue of entertainment tax. None of us have entered this field hoping to make money out of drama performance. Under cultural forums, drama is not an industry. These are done by people who are engaged in other trades and because they want to have some entertainment for themselves as well as for the common man. This does not entail much money. Still, some finance is required. Do we, the poor hunger stricken people have to shell out from our own pockets? So, when we sell ticket to meet such expenses, there is no justification in asking us to "pay tax out of it". Taking into consideration the public benefit reaped from out of such performances... I mean elevation of the mass; all these stages are actually to be sponsored by the government. Leave it for now, if they are not prepared. But what an injustice, what an absurdity is it to collect tax when the youths of a locality unselfishly come forward for doing it? Dramas, which are enacted by amateurs, need be exempted from tax. Hope Madras government will not reject this plea from the cultural forums and the literary forums.

Namaskaram. my dear friends!

Notes:

1. *Edasseri made this speech in Madras city, during January 1951. At the time of its formation in 1950, the state of Madras included Malabar region of North Kerala along with parts of coastal Andhra and certain districts of Karnataka. Later in 1956, Malabar District was merged with Travancore-Cochin to form the state of Kerala.*
2. *For detailed understanding of Marar's essays, please read his book "Bharatha Paryadanam", published by 'Marar Sahitya Prakasham, Near Sree Ramakrishna Ashram, P.O. Kallai, Calicut - 673 003. Tel: 0495-2321938.*

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