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**THE ENDLESS EXODUS: A JOURNEY THROUGH
 AYYAPPA PANIKER'S SOUTHBOUND**

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Abstract:

Ever since life began on Earth, the human being has been on an incessant journey, seeking unexplored oases and uncharted realms both inside and outside. A glance through our myths, legends and history unravel a plethora of such cruises to possess the hitherto 'unpossessed.' Ayyappa Paniker, who is widely acclaimed for launching a new poetic sensibility in Malayalam, unveils the search for life, love, roots, tradition and meaning in the poems that he wrote. This quest again forms the crux of one of his best poems, 'Gotrayanam' translated into English as 'Southbound'. It recounts a tribal leader's exhortation to his people as they set out on a journey which is reminiscent of the historical Aryan movement towards the south of India. It is the tale of a collective voyage which transcends the mere physical dimensions of the journey to encompass the tribe's discovery of their own selves. Reading through the poem, we find that the 'gothram' is no more the Aryan race, but the whole of humanity. This paper seeks to traverse their path once again and examine how the journey unveils the process of the human being's maturing into life.

Key Words: *Incessant journey, tribal leader, gothram.*

And when old words die out on the tongue,
 new melodies break forth from the heart;
 And where the old tracks are lost,
 new country is revealed with its wonders.

(Tagore, *Gitanjali* 26)

The story of the human being is also the story of incessant journeys, seeking unexplored oases and uncharted realms both inside and outside. A glance through our myths, legends and history unravel a plethora of such cruises to possess the hitherto 'unpossessed.' On the way we meet Moses and the Israelites trekking towards the promised land of Canaan, Ulysses enticed by new adventures, Rama on the fringes of *Panchavati*, the Pandavas resolute for the *mahaprasthan*, and even Magellan circumnavigating the Earth. Thus the motif of journey dovetails all epochs and all ethnicities.

Ayyappa Paniker is widely acclaimed for launching a new poetic sensibility in Malayalam. Breaking away from the shackles of conventional poetic language and form, he made poetry a canvas for experimentation. His poems are not bound in a particular time warp, but can be extended to the past and also into the future. He unveils the search for life, love, roots, tradition and meaning in the poems that he wrote. It is this quest that forms the crux of one of his best poems, 'Gotrayanam', translated into English as 'Southbound'. It recounts a tribal leader's exhortation to his people as they set out on a journey which is reminiscent of the historical Aryan movement towards the south of India. The epic poem is moulded into twelve sections; the first one titled 'Desire' and the last one 'Journey.' Written in the *anustuph* metre, it is the tale of a collective voyage which transcends the mere physical dimensions of the journey to encompass the tribe's discovery of their own selves. In the words of Krishnarayan, the poem is "an important humanist statement which offers to a wounded generation a religion which is as new as it is old, a very personal creed composed of pain (resolved into acceptance, if only somewhat), love (consisting in kindness and charity)

and widely improbable as that may seem even just a little joy” (180).

Like the Buendías clan in Márquez's masterpiece *One hundred Years of Solitude* who crossed the mountains to locate Macondo, the tribe sets out on its journey towards Aryavarta. Their destination is unknown to geography and their time of arrival is unknown to history. For them, 'Only the movement matters/thus the endless exodus.' (8). Theirs is also a journey inward, symbolizing the quest for one's own self. In spite of all uncertainties, they are determined to move forward and never to let their minds down. Their grandfathers did not tell them where Aryavarta is and thus they have to draw the maps themselves. Like Ulysses who exhorted his followers to “follow knowledge like a sinking star” (Tennyson 146), the resolute leader tells his clan: “Not a step's waver/at this departing hour/Not a moment's repose till/The distant far is reached” (7).

Paniker also criticizes the counsels of the past that forbid people to digress from long trodden paths. This generation of Aryans have dared to throw away the idol, the conch and the lamp to follow the beckoning of future. With sun as their target during the day, moon during the night and with the radiance of the mind blazing their trail on moonless nights, they too have pledged to “strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield”(Tennyson 147). The leader also invokes the valiant predecessors like Gautama, Kashyapa, Vasishta, Parashara, Vishvamitra and Bharadwaja who went along the untrodden paths. The journey is a continuum; once they have begun it, there will be no return to recall the past. On a metaphorical plane, the journey is life itself with the instance of birth marking the commencement of that long voyage; “for man the traveller/travel itself is life” (19).

The poem carries the readers away to the beginning by reminding how all societies came to be 'constructed.' When people started leading a settled life, kingdoms were born with kings to rule them. People learned the new jargons of 'mine as well as the alien'(19), rules of judgement were writ, gods were divided and the entire order changed. From this dimension, Paniker also states the impermanence of life by saying, “Nothing is constant/except the inconstancy” (23). Thus the poem celebrates movement and change as inevitable to human existence.

He portrayed the abyss where human beings, 'caught in the labyrinth of their daily grind', plunge and push to buy and sell them (Paniker *Selected Poems* 14). He foresaw the earth turning into a desert and the hands of man becoming attuned to violence (Paniker *Days and Nights* 212). He lamented the folly of human beings who 'after putting out every lamp...cries for “light, more light!” (Paniker *SP* 38) In 'Gotrayanam' too, he elucidates the destiny of man in the third section titled “Man's Fate”. The mind struggles in vain believing that happiness is within an arm's reach; profits prove to be losses and success turns out to be defeat; disasters and tidings obstruct the paths and the lover of life trots alone, restless and angry because, “along the path we tread are war/Disease, death, murder, deceit;/To-be or not-to-be riddles” (14). The only complete man, then, is the one who dares to tread a different path and put an end to the sorry plight of the race. It is he, who is born to create history and all creations await him. The reader is reminded of the redeemer whom Paniker alludes to in “A Textual Variant,” “To redeem the promise/Given at creation/A Kalki shall descend/Brandishing the world” (37).

It is this speculation about the impermanence of life and man's dolorous fate that leads him to assert that human beings complement each other. The strands of divergent nationalities, language, culture and colour shall be interwoven if the human race is to progress. The soul of one man shall merge with that of the other since we share an interdependent existence. We owe each moment of our life to others around us. The whole Creation rests on the scaffolds of interdependence. Paniker inscribes the reciprocity of Being thus:

When the hands are exhausted,
 Then the feet shall take over;
 When the feet begin to falter,
 Then the hands shall lend support;
 When the hand and feet are tired,

The mind shall give the lead;
And when the mind is flustered,
Then the soul shall keep guard! (25).

This mutuality prevails not only in the relationships among human beings but also in that between human beings and Nature. Paniker tangles the infallible knot saying, “fire is father, water mother/air spouse and earth children” (28). He expounds how human settlements are interlaced with the bounties of Nature. The leader asks the tribe to touch the earth in salutation, circle the orbit in imagination and bow to the sun and moon in meditation before they set out on their journey. The elements, the Pole Star, the nine prophetic planets are all alluded to during the course of the poem. Even beauty and virtue stand as complementary. When beauty is disdained, virtue gets decayed and when virtue decays, beauty is out of shape. Nature too stands supreme in an impeccable harmony. Whatever rises to the dizzy heights are the Himalayas and whatever flows incessantly is the Ganges; the holy river purifying the mighty mountain. Thus the wheel stays complete: the elements of Nature in a perfect consonance, human beings complementing each other's existence and Nature and Humans bound together as strands of the same web.

The poem illustrates the magnificence that clasped hands confer on the sense of touch. It celebrates the 'sense of touch', that brings human beings closer to each other.

With my hand on your head, I bless you
Stroking your forehead, I bless you
Touching your long eyebrows, I bless you
...My hands clasping your hands, I bless you (40-41).

'Clasped hands' here are the symbol of oneness despite the inherent heterogeneity. Trust and solidarity are the pillars that will support the generations to come. The leader narrates the story of the shepherd to exemplify this. When the demon asks the shepherd to choose between himself and the sheep, he happily sacrificed his own life to save the sheep.

The *mot-clef* that the poem offers for harmony and solidarity is love; for, “A little love sure/is man's best treasure” (21). The word Paniker uses is *sneham* and as Krishnarayan says, it has no other equivalent in English than 'loving kindness' (175). The entire human life is spent in search of the life-sustaining unguent of love bereft of which demons came to be born. It will act as the vanguard to lead the human race out of calamities. It will remove the cobwebs of hatred to usher humanity to a fresh dawn of aspirations.

As the poem implores to “hold on tight/ to the string of love” (30), the Mother emerges as the abode of selfless love. The tribal leader exhorts his companions to take care of the mothers in their clan since the mother's womb is the cradle of all creations. A thousand temples are equivalent to a pilgrim centre; a thousand pilgrim centres are equal to one cow, whereas a thousand cows are equal to a mother. Without the mother, no individual, no community, no society can exist. Thus it is important for mothers to survive and the leader says, “If tomorrow we fade away/ Mothers will the future keep/Where we ultimately reach/Remember that is our mother” (39). Life is a continuum; the voyage is a continuum and the human traveller clinches steadfast on his unwavering journey.

The poem too offers a continuum; with each knot the reader untangles, fresh knots appear; new meanings unfold. The end of the poem marks the moment of departure. From the desire for the journey, the reader moves through the preparations and invocations, to the moment when the journey begins. The actual journey, however is left out for the reader to imagine, thus making each of them a participant. The rhythm of the poem blends perfectly with the rhythm of the tribe's movement and the throb of life. The 'gothram' is no more the Aryan race, but the whole of humanity. In Krishnarayan's words, “...at the centre of the poem is not the Aryan ancestor who led the great wave of migration in an earlier time but the scion of mixed parentage who relives the experience today” (191). The journey unveils the process of the human

being's maturing into life. It is a whirlpool of love, life and memories. It craves for a future where customs, rites and beliefs of different races intermingle and all humanity is bound by a single string, the string of love.

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