

Every writer has this urge to write his life. *Tales of Athiranippadam* by S.K. Pottekkatt is a masterly attempt by the author to share the throes of his first love, admiration for father and muted love for mother in the guise of fiction. It takes the reader through the pranks of adolescence and anxieties of being an adult. As the narrative winds its way, we also get vignettes of the land and its many-hued populace. We witness local strife, communal riots and also get a long distance view of the epoch making First World War. Set in the first half of the last century, the novel is a social document that graphically describes life in Athiranippadam, a marshy tract of land that slowly acquires the look of a hamlet.

S.K. Pottekkatt (1913), is known to the ordinary and pleasure loving readers of Malayalam literature as a writer of travelogues. With no academic or theoretical pretensions, he trekked far and wide and gave graphic descriptions of countries, nay continents, till then known to the Malayalee only by name. Going through those works now, we recognize them as instances of thick description, rich with details of life and rituals and credit Pottekkatt with an ethnographer's eye. *Tales*

#### TALES OF ATHIRANIPPADAM

By S.K. Pottekkatt. Translated by Sreedevi K. Nair and Radhika P. Menon  
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of *Athiranippadam*, the translation of *Oru Desathinte Katha* (The Story of a Locality) published in 1971 in Malayalam, carries this eye for detail that Pottekkatt had cultivated through his numerous travel writings. He dedicates the book to the people of Athiranippadam, a suburb of Calicut or Kozhikode where Vasco da Gama landed in 1498. But the turmoils that wracked the other parts of the state find mention in the novel only if they touched the lives of the motley crowd who inhabited the place and its neighbourhood.

Writing local histories has found acceptance only recently with the practitioners of historiography. Accounts of the lineage of kings and emperors, battles fought to annex regions or secure power or random listings of administrative reforms formed the bulk of our books of history. Here, the focus was largely on the lives of the high and the mighty. Shifts in perceptions of what could be considered as 'history' or the cultural turn in historiography has led to several changes, one of them being the valorization of everyday lives of people. S.K. Pottekkatt sketches, perhaps unconsciously, minute changes that occur in the habits and practices of a group of people, who in a way represent the rest of the Malabar coast. We learn about the travails of the

## Writing A Life

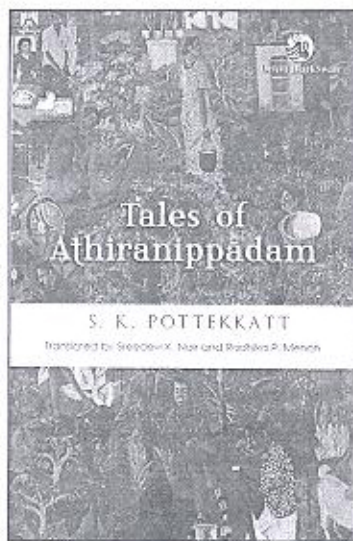
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Mappila Revolt from the lively sketches of characters like Appu and those who accompany him to the relative safety of the hero Sreedharan's maternal home, Elanjippoyilil. However, the blood-chilling account of the wagon tragedy in which around seventy Muslim prisoners got suffocated to death in a closed freight wagon of a train, given by Kittan Writer points to the cold violence that marked the revolt.

The attitude to the British that we can read from these sketches is ambiguous. While the Wagon Tragedy undoubtedly paints the British cruelty as matching that of the Nazis, we can discern a soft side for the English language and English ways in Krishnan Master, the father of the protagonist, Sreedharan. We can read it as a means for upward social mobility that access to the language provided. It can also be seen as the absolute success of the 'civilising mission' of the British, effected largely through Project Macaulay. The relative silence on another burning issue of the time, caste, is to be read in conjunction with this. The word 'caste' with its raw associations of discrimination is hardly ever used in the novel, or caste identity projected. Instead, the term 'community' masks caste identity and carries notions of a social formation find mention whenever there is the need to mention caste. This, in spite of the fact that Krishnan Master gets involved in caste related politics in his locality.

As with other books that give glimpses of history in the vernacular, *Tales of Athiranippadam* is a book of epic proportions. It is divided into four sections, the first three sections sketching everyday life in Athiranippadam, with the last sub section bidding adieu to the much loved landscape. Section four captures the later life of the hero Sreedharan. Though he has claimed great heights and has become an elected Member of Parliament, he retains a sense of nostalgia, revisiting his native place to learn the whereabouts of his kith and kin. The novel closes with touching words for the new generation, 'You watchman of the new generation of Athiranippadam, forgive me for trespassing....I am a traveller in search of old artefacts.'

Yes, traveller Pottekkatt was and traveller he remains in this magnum opus that fetched him the Jnanpith Award in 1980. It is a fine



account of cultural transition and Sreedevi K. Nair and Radhika Menon reinvent the received paradigms of translating culture to render into English the lengthy tale running to more than 500 pages. Faithfulness to the original is certainly not their credo

in attempting to recreate the ethos of a locality captured in what almost amounts to a regional dialect. They are very well aware of the dangers of standardization and skirt issues of equivalence with a skill that only those who are well-honed in the English language can attempt. There are any number of examples that one can point to in this translation for this kind of creative misprision.

What however sets the translation apart from the numerous passages to English that one finds in bookshelves these days is the insightful Translator's Note by Sreedevi K. Nair. It dwells in detail on the intricacies of word transfer. But beyond that she goes on to theorize the act of translation as performative, drawing an extended comparison with the highly stylized Sanskrit dance drama form, Kudiattam. To Dr. Nair, 'The act of translation is very much like the performing of Kudiattam', where the actor devises a text of her own, the *attaprakaram* or the performative text, where she exercises the freedom to go off at a tangent or take detours, where 'each translator creates her own attaprakaram or meta-text which is her interpretation/ re-interpretation as well as detailing of the original.' This liberates the translator from the clutches of 'faithfulness' an idea that we Indians have imbibed from the British. Further, it opens up possibilities of multiple interpretations. But most significantly, it views the act of translation as performative, placing it in a continuum, defying closure. The process of translation gets highlighted here, even inviting the reader to join the meaning making exercise. Dr. Nair's note suggests these and more. It is a fresh approach to Translation Studies and one hopes she will explore it in greater detail.

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