Your early poetry shows strong strains of melancholy, morbidity and skepticism: could you please explain their sources?

My first collection of poems, Anchusooryan (Five Suns, 1971) is indeed dominated by a sense of sadness and doubt. May be something of it remains to this day though my poems no more have a single dominating voice or mood. The gloom and solitude of the early poems can perhaps be traced to my childhood which was not exactly happy and I was, by nature, given to brooding. The family was fighting hard to ward off poverty as my father did not have a regular job. The haunting memory of my two deceased sisters and the presence of three insane women, my grandmother and two of my mother’s sisters, in the larger family must have contributed to this somber mood. Even nature seemed to hold its terrors: the palm trees swaying crazily in the eastern wind with the yakshis, those beautiful man-eating demonesses inhabiting them, the djinns living in wells who emerged at night to leave tiny holes on the blue village rocks, the wandering spirits of those who had suffered violent deaths in the village, the sorcerers who could change shape as they wished and shock people into death at night, the wizards and oracles who seemed to be in touch with another mysterious world, the silent terror of the flooded fields and the dark monsoon skies: there was enough in the rural lore and the village landscape to scare any imaginative child. Not that there was no laughter and play, festivals and celebrations; but there certainly was something disturbingly haunting about my village. You
find it reflected not only in my early poems on nature, death and mutability but in some later ones like ‘Aswastham: Atmakatha, Onnam Kandam’ (Disquiet: Autobiography, First Canto). In my later poems this seems to develop into an ironic vision of life itself.

It can also be traced partly to my early influences: the Malayalam poets, Ezhuthachan and Kumaran Asan were essentially poets of contemplation and were at their best when presenting tragic situations; this was true to a great extent also of Idassery Govindan Nair and Vailoppilly Sreedhara Menon who were two of my senior contemporaries who left a deep impact on my imagination at its formative stage. The Holy Bible and Buddhist thought were two other early influences: I was fascinated by the life and crucifixion of Jesus Christ and especially loved the Book of Job and David’s psalms as also by the Buddha’s encounters with the misfortunes of life and his tragic vision of history. The tragedies of Shakespeare and Sophocles were another influence. It is deprivation, doubt, disease, solitude, injustice and unfreedom more than their opposites which have urged me to write. Here I am with Brecht: ‘Those who laugh have not yet heard the terrible tidings…’ I had begun to write at a time when our poetry was dominated by a sense of the tragic and the irony that it engendered. Baudelaire and T. S. Eliot had inspired my immediate predecessors like Ayyappa Paniker and N. N. Kakkad who had championed modernism in Malayalam poetry. I was, so to say, born into an atmosphere of angst and loneliness.

Can you say something more about the advent of modernism in Malayalam poetry that shaped your ideas of poetry?

Modern poetry in Malayalam, like in most Indian languages, was a product of diverse influences, though its advent in the language was rather delayed, as it gained prominence only in the 1960s, much after Mardhekar in Marathi or Muktibodh in Hindi. Of course there was the direct impact of European modernism and the champions of modernism in Malayalam, many of whom were English teachers, were quite familiar with Yeats, Hopkins, Eliot, Auden and others in English besides French poets like Baudelaire and Mallarme and German poets like Rilke and Paul Celan. Malayalam poetry at that juncture called out to be innovated as its idiom had grown stale and weary in the hands of the lesser poets who mimicked the great romantics. The Progressives were also mostly
indifferent to the questions of verbal economy and structural innovation. The revolt began with poets like Akkitham, N.V. Krishna Vairiyar, G.Kumara Pillai, M.N. Paloor, Vishnu Narayanan Namboodiri and M.Govindan, though the real turning point came with Ayyappa Paniker, N.N. Kakkad, Madhavan Ayyappath, Attoor Ravivarma and others. They employed fresh images, new metaphors, novel rhythms, free verse and prose of different registers, folk patterns and archetypes in an attempt to articulate the new reality. The questions they raised were mostly ontological, related to the solitude and angst of contemporary individuals. Ayyappa Paniker, the most conscious innovator among them, also launched a quarterly journal of poetry, *Kerala Kavita* with me too as one of its twenty founding members. The journal played a key role in the promotion and propagation of the new poetry by publishing original poetry, translations of poetry from across the world. I also translated Zbignew Herbert, Eugenio Montale, Chairil Anwar, Jibanananda Das and others for the journal, studies in new poetry and revaluations of older poets from contemporary perspectives and even modern verse-plays. Seminars, discussions and dramatic presentations and readings of modern poetry too were organized by the journal during the release of its issues in different cities and towns of Kerala. The mainstream magazines would not publish us then; we got published mostly in little magazines to begin with though the landscape changed in a few years and we began to be sought after. Most of the senior critics too, except M. Leelavaty, were dismissive of the new trend; but new critics came up in no time to interpret the new poetry, the first of them being poets themselves persuaded to play the double role in the absence of understanding critics.

*In the 70s your poetry seems to have turned political. How personal were the reasons for this transformation? How did you manage to transcend the introversion of the earlier years?*

Even while my poetry was somewhat somber and introspective, I had never turned my face away from what was happening around. As a post-graduate student at the Maharaja’s College at Ernakulam I was a sympathizer of the Left students’ movement, and even an independent candidate in the college elections supported by the undivided Students’ Federation of India. I had also been an avid follower of Jean Paul Sartre whose thoughts meant a lot for my generation. Sartre had now taken up
the publication of a Maoist paper that the French government had sought to ban. This was the time when the New Democracy Movement spearheaded by the Maoists was gaining ground in India. It had begun from a landless peasants’ revolt in Naxalbari and spread to different parts of India, being especially strong in states like West Bengal and Andhra Pradesh. Kerala too felt its impact which had its reflections in the cultural arena. It led to the formation of Janakeeya Samskarika Vedi or the Peoples’ Cultural Forum (PCF). Its activities attracted writers like me not only for its political radicalism but it stylistic innovativeness that was totally lacking in the aesthetically conservative Progressive Movement led by the mainstream Communist parties. It offered an opportunity to combine the revolutionary aspirations of the subaltern sections with a largely avant-garde sensibility. Thus it gave rise to a new awakening particularly in poetry and theatre and to some extent in fiction, cinema and the plastic arts.

The campuses grew alive with theatre and poetry performances and campus magazines; several little magazines supported the new experiments directly or indirectly. Even those who did not completely approve of the political strategies of the Maoists, like me, felt the impact of the avant-garde cultural movement. There were other social movements that gave the avant-garde an impetus: the Dalit Panthers of Maharashtra, civil rights movements like People’s Union for Civil Liberties and People’s Union for Democratic Rights and the feminist awakenings in different parts of the country were examples. I had translated some Dalit poems by Daya Pawar, Arun Kamble, Narayan Surve, Namdeo Dhasal, J.V. Pawar, Arjun Dangle and others as also the Digambara poets of Telugu like Nikhileswar, Jwalamukhi, Cherabanda Raju and others many of whom later turned Naxalites. Many radical Bengali, Telugu, Hindi and Punjabi poets, from Buddhadev Dasgupta, Saroj Dutta and Varavara Rao to Dhoomil, Pash and Amarjeet Chandan also came to be introduced. Simultaneously, we got acquainted with the revolutionary poetic voices from Europe, Africa and Latin America. I edited an anthology of Latin American poetry with poets from Pablo Neruda to Nicanor Parra and Nicolas Guillen, and another, of Black poetry from three continents, that featured Leopold Senghor, Aime Cesaire, David Diop, Langston Hughes, Margaret Walker, Arna Bontemps, Wole Soyinka and Leroi Jones among others in Malayalam, besides translating, in collaboration with the
fellow-poet K. G. Sankara Pillai, Asian and European poets like Nazim Hikmet, Nizar Khabbani, Mahmoud Darwish, Mao-tse Dong, Luhshun, Kuo-mo Jo, Paul Eluard, Louis Aragon and others. I also translated and edited collections of the poems of Pablo Neruda, Bertolt Brecht and of the Russian poets from Alexander Blok and Mayakovsky to Evtushenko, Tsvetayeva, Akhmatova and Akhmadulina. Of course I was also translating other poets who were innovative though necessarily not politically radical—perhaps not conservative—like Octavio Paz, Cesar Vallejo, Yehuda Amichai, Vasko Popa, Salvatore Quasimodo, Giuseppe Ungaretti, Paul Celan and several others. These translations impacted the poetry of a whole generation in several ways. I adapted too some plays of W.B. Yeats, Lady Gregory and Bertolt Brecht (besides writing an independent play on the last days of Mahatma Gandhi much later for the Kerala Secular Forum) for the vibrant parallel theatre of the 70s in Kerala with both proscenium plays like Brecht’s adaptation of Gorky’s Mother and street plays like Nadugeddika, a ritualistic political play on the plight of the tribal people enacted by tribals themselves. We also roamed the whole of Kerala reading poetry in campuses, worker’s colonies and street corners. Little magazines like Yenan, Prasakti, Prerana, Vichintanam, Street, Samskarika Masika and Jayakeralam and publishing houses like Sikhā, Mulberry, Janakeeya Prasiddheekarana Kendram, Aksharam, Modern Books, Bodhi and Darsana Granthavedi, all with radical proclivities, mushroomed. In short they were tempestuous years and it was impossible for a young writer to be untouched by the goings-on. At the same time I kept a critical distance from the political movement as I could not forget Stalin’s crimes against humanity which the Naxalites would never openly condemn. I critiqued Stalinism in many poems of the period like ‘Mayakovsky Atmahatya Cheythathu Engine’ (How Did Mayakovsky Commit Suicide) and ‘Badha’ (Haunted) and my plays like Saktan Tampura, a free rewriting of Brecht’s The Trial of Lucullus. In fact I could never forget my early lessons imbibed from the critics of Soviet communism like M. N. Roy, M. Govindan and my other humanist friends. Later in the 1980s I would write articles in my theoretical journal Uttaram (Answer) upholding Rosa Luxemberg’s arguments for democratic freedoms in the Soviet Union—including a free press and a parliamentary opposition against Lenin’s concept of proletarian dictatorship which, I began to understand now, had paved the way for Stalinism albeit unwittingly. In
my poem ‘Randamkannu’ (The Second Eye) where my second eye like a black cat relentlessly and critically pursues my first eye turning its certainties into doubts, I have tried to express this schism in me, between fascination with Marxist ideas of an egalitarian society and the totalitarianism they had lead to in practice. I also came to read a lot of leftist critiques of Stalinism at around the same time, being a regular reader of journals like New Left Review that promoted critical thinking among Marxists, besides of course books by Antonio Gramsci, Theodor Adorno, Lucio Colletti, Perry Anderson, Andre Lefebvre, Goran Therborne, Althusser, Deleuze etc. followed later by thinkers like Zizek and Agamben. Some of us even founded a Gramsci institute to encourage fresh enquiries into a possible democratic model of Marxist praxis employing Gramscian concepts like ‘hegemony’ and ‘consent.’ I was closer to the critical rather than the orthodox Marxist tradition. My doctoral dissertation was also on the Marxist-post-Structuralist interface where I use the insights provided by Saussure, Bakhtin, Barthes, Derrida, Foucault, Deleuze, Rorty etc to revitalize the ideas of social resistance.

Gramsci also made me think of the category of ‘national-popular’, a concept I employed in my studies of Malayalam poets like Edassery Govindan Nair and Kadammanitta Ramakrishnan; I even edited an anthology of new Malayalam poetry, Nervazhikal (The Straight Passages) with non-atavistic nativism and national-popular consciousness as its organizing principles. I had expressed the tension between home and the world in my early poems like ‘Pani’ (Fever); now home, represented by house, became a central image around which several poems grew. I also wrote a series of poems on Kerala, our poets, heroes, fauna and flora and the language, Malayalam, though this was not done as part of a scheme. This was no insular regionalism or atavism, but a way of addressing the crisis of cultural federalism caused by the cultural nationalism of the rightwing Hindutva ideology on the one hand and the monolithic, ‘big’ nationalism on the other.

Do you think cultural identities are fixed entities? Do they have nothing to do with the present? How do you look at the present scenario in Kerala? I have in mind your poem ‘Madakkam’ (Return) on the ecstasy of returning to Kerala. Do you still feel the same way about the place and the people?
Over the years I have grown very critical of Kerala. Perhaps it was my moving over to Delhi and the distance it provided that made this possible. Just as I had a series of poems celebrating Kerala in the eighties, now I have a series critiquing it, though again this was never planned as a series. In retrospect, one can see the beginnings of this critique in my earlier poems like ‘Vilanganil,’ (On Mount Vilangan), ‘Kayikkarayile Mannu’ (The Soil of Kayikkara- Kumaran Asan’s birth place) and ‘Ivanekkoodi’ (This one, too) where I see dwarfs taking the place of the great heroes of the past. This critical vision becomes stronger in more recent poems like ‘Entinu Veendum’ (Why again?), a poem on the controversies surrounding the murder of Varghese, a revolutionary, ‘Madanggan Oridam’ (A Place to Return to) on the loss of nostalgia, ‘Etorma’ (Which Memory?) asking which memory will help us survive the painful present or ‘Atmahatyā Cheyta Karshakan Vellattekkurichi Samsarikunnu’ (The Farmer Who Committed Suicide Speaks about Water) where I allude to the death of agriculture and the whole culture surrounding it. A death has clearly happened in Kerala’s social life. The values that sustained the Kerala Renaissance, anti-colonial struggle, early communism and the radicalism of the Seventies seem to be on the wane. My poem, ‘Mahabali avasishtangaliloode nadakkunnu’ (Mahabali Walks along the Ruins) is almost an elegy for the present. There are isolated individuals and voluntary movements that still give some hope, but I am depressed by the increasing crime, the apathy of the intellectuals, the rat race for power among the politicians of all hues and insensitivity to others’ suffering. Gramsci had this for the motto of his journal: ‘Shame is a revolutionary feeling,’ I hope it works and change sets in from a moral self-critique.

The fragmentation of the Seventies’ movement seems to have led to disillusionment and silence among many writers. But you survived it, remained creative and your poetry even found new directions in the decades that followed. How did you transcend that moment of despair?

Look, I never thought of myself as a person totally given to politics; in that case I would have joined a political party which I never did. I was never deluded enough to believe that the collapse of any movement would mean eternal damnation and spell perpetual servitude for the people in India. I had, let me reiterate, kept a critical distance from the party and
the political movement and spelt out that difference in my poems and articles. The movement was essentially a middle class one, at least in Kerala, but for the participation of a section of the tribal people in Wayanad. The common people were either mystified or were at the most admiring onlookers when the movement took up popular issues like the corruption in the medical profession or issues of land and environment. Again it was not free from totalitarian orientations; I had experienced its authoritarianism while being associated with the People’s Cultural Forum. I had critiqued this politics of decimation and dogmatism in my poems like ‘Randamkannu’ (The Second Eye), ‘Viplavayantram’ (The Revolution Machine), ‘Vietnam -2,’ ‘Mayakovksy Atmahatya Cheythahthu Engine’ (How Did Mayakovksy Commit Suicide), ‘Thazhvaram’ (The Valley), and ‘Oduvil Nhan Otyakunnu’ (At Last I Am Alone), a tendency that has stayed with me. In later years I wrote poems like ‘Nanayam’ (The Coin), ‘Kodi’ (The Flag), ‘Samsayam-Viswasam’ (Doubt-Faith), ‘Jayam-Parajayam’ (Success-failure) and ‘Nandi’ (literally ‘Thanks’, also refers to Nandigram here) all of which continue this critique of actual communist practice in India. One can look at this as political inconsistency; but the fact is that my concerns have primarily been ethical, politics being only co-incidental. My commitment is not to an ideology, much less to a political party, but to the ideals of freedom, democracy and egalitarianism. I have opposed the left only when they seemed to me to deviate from what I consider to be the true leftist ideals where not only class issues, but issues of gender and caste, fundamental human rights and ecology also figure prominently. The ideas of progress and development cannot be the same for both ends of the ideological spectrum.

Do you believe in the opposition between ‘pure poetry’ and the poetry of social commitment and protest? Or is there a poetics that reconciles them? Does poetry oppose forms of power or does it go beyond them?

My inclusive concept of poetry does not recognize the much-debated distinction between ‘pure’ and ‘committed’ poetry. In a poem titled ‘Pencil’ I wrote in the same turbulent Seventies I have observed that the poet needs to talk of larger issues that concern man in general, but at times (s)he needs to forget his huge piano and play his one-stringed harp, singing, in his tremulous voice, about his solitude, pain, fear, love.
and death. The distinction is made by the reader, his/her perception of poetry, his/her priorities. You can look at a poem in terms of its thematic concerns; but you can also look at it from the point of view of form: the image and the metaphor, the rhyme and the rhythm, the syntax and structure. A committed poem can then be seen to have qualities of a ‘pure’ poem, and a ‘pure’ poem may assume a political function in certain contexts and becomes an act of resistance as when the State bans or the hegemonic ideology condemns love poetry as it happened under Hitler or Stalin. Several of my poems can be read in the light of class, caste, gender and ecological politics; but the political co-exists with the aesthetic here; not that one is subservient to the other. Sometimes it is the subtext that is political, like in most of my poems on Kerala. The feminist stance, ‘the personal is the political’ is a way of doing away with the whole distinction.

Poetry is protean; it is renewable precisely because it has no fixed rules and conventions. Several streams of modern poetry, Indian Dalit poetry, the poetry of the Beatles, the Fluxus poetry that included collages and concrete poems, the visual and performed forms of poetry including SMS poems or videos or collaborative poems do not necessarily follow what are deemed the fundamental principles of poetry by Eastern or Western poetics like dhvani /suggestion, ouchitya/propriety or rasa/evocation of a specific feeling or mood, even if we forget the more formal elements like metre and rhyme. Imagination is a law unto itself and one must seek poetry’s raison d’être within and not outside poetry. It is polyphonic by nature; one hears the voice one chooses to hear. Reading is a democratic practice.

Poetry can oppose power in its earthly manifestations and it is capable of this precisely because of its own power that cares little for these mundane forms of power; but it does so not by slogan-mongering, but by creating its own grammar and aesthetics, remaining a witness to the world around, not minding being ‘impure’ in the sense in which Pablo Neruda uses the term, portraying the human condition in its specific articulations, refusing to yield to power and courting its consequences without fear. We have several martyrs to the art, from Kabir who was beaten up in the market place for refusing to recognize any authority other than his Ram and Meera who was given poison for having left her...
court in pursuit of poetry and God to Lorca, Mandelstam, Nazim Hikmet, Mahmoud Darwish, Ai-Ching, Ken Saro Wiwa, Benjamin Molois and Saroj Datta punished in different ways, murdered or sentenced to jail or death for denouncing hegemonic ideologies and power-structures or dreaming of a better world. Czeslaw Milosz’s contention that poetry that does not address the destiny of nations is useless and Theodor Adorno’s statement that poetry is impossible after Auschwitz both point to poetry’s witnessing mission in different ways.

The Emergency clamped in the mid-Seventies was certainly a crisis in the democratic life of India. How did you view it and respond to it as a writer? How did the movement of which you were a sympathizer respond?

While the emergency was a major political event, a ‘state of exception’ to use Giorgio Agamben’s terminology, a threshold of indeterminacy between absolutism and democracy turning the abnormal into the normal, it was no less a cultural event as it used culture to promote the new politics of sycophancy and also produced a counter-culture of resistance against censorship and repression. Paradoxically, the sombre event rekindled my democratic convictions. The Maoists took as a natural event as they had already dubbed Indian democracy a sham, the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie. They did resist, but only by an intensification of their routine actions. But I could see the distinction between a time when people have civil rights including the fundamental right of expression and a time when they are denied these rights. That also meant for me a parting of ways with the Maoists in Kerala. As I began to realize more and more that people have nothing if they do not have democratic rights. I also felt that our task is not to fight democracy, but fight for a real democracy free from the triple hegemony it is under in India: of the upper classes, of the upper castes and of men in general. My reaction as a poet was instinctive; it was one of the most productive periods of my creative life. Censorship was not that severe in Kerala, so most of what I wrote got published like the poems, ‘Navumaram’ (The Tree of Tongues), ‘Vadakkan Paattu’ (The Northern Song), ‘Nishpakshata’ (Non-Commitment) and ‘Venal’ (Summer). Of these the poem ‘Nishpakshata’ was disallowed by the censor in one journal, but got published in another. The title of a new series of translations of poems around freedom-‘Swatantryageetangal’, The Songs of Liberty- was also
disallowed. I was interrogated by the CBI for having published the poem, ‘Visappu’ (Hunger) in a Maoist journal, *Yenan*. The poem carried lines like, “India, disgraced I freeze with not even a tricolour to hide my shame of having been born in your womb” heavily reminiscent of the strident poetry of say, an Allen Ginsberg. Writers like O. V. Vijayan, Anand, M. P. Narayana Pillai, M. Sukumaran, Pattathuvila Karunakaran, U. P. Jayaraj, Ayyappa Paniker, M. Govindan and others also responded to the call of democracy at that critical hour. It was ironical that the Modernist writers who had been criticized as apolitical were in the forefront of resistance along with the radical writers. Of course there were writers who supported the new regime as also some who were uncertain of its significance and moved from submission to rejection. In an article I wrote on the writers’ response to the times in *Indian Author*, I have used the fiddle and the drum as the symbols respectively for sycophancy and opposition.

You have been living in Delhi since 1992. How has this life in exile impacted your creativity?

My poetry has always had an organic relationship with my immediate environment. I would not have written many of the poems I have written had I not moved over to Delhi. Most of my poems on Kerala were written here, and it was here that I came to know more about the Bhakti and Sufi traditions in poetry and wrote a series of poems on those poets though I had already written its first poems, on Kabir and Meera while still in Kerala. Most of my travel poems were also written here as I began to travel more after moving over to Delhi. I also wrote a series of poems on Delhi titled ‘Dilli-Dali’ expressing my initial response to the city dominated by feelings of alienation, exile and homelessness. This feeling was also accompanied by nostalgia: I wrote many poems on Kerala-my poem ‘Malayalam’ on my language being the most significant- that I would perhaps not have written had I remained there. But being in Delhi also gave me a critical distance from Kerala; I could see things from a new vantage point and come out of many illusions that you can hardly shed unless you come out of Kerala- like the exaggerated notion of the role of the Left in Indian politics. I also became critical of many of the weaknesses of my fellowmen in Kerala, some of which I too might have shared: a total disregard for privacy, an obsession with polemics,
intellectual arrogance, an insistent refusal to recognize others’ talents and abilities, a tendency to politicize everything in life disregarding other dimensions of existence, sickening cynicism, pervasive, if masked, caste vanity. Many of my poems on Kerala in this period are very critical of these tendencies. I also wrote a series of ghazals, a reflection of the ghazal culture in the capital.

Yes, you have written a whole series of poems on the Bhakti and Sufi poets. Are they a part of your attempt at fighting communalism or your creative search for a poetics of protest?

Both. It all began with my poem on Kabir written in the background of the happenings in Ayodhya that preceded the demolition of Babri Masjid: it is Kabir who speaks in the poem about the irrelevance of ritualistic religion, the pointlessness of the whole quarrel in the name of Ram whom he finds everywhere and cannot be confined to a few cents of land. Kabir stands for the end of communal hatred, for universal love and harmony. You know that legend about his death: both Hindus and Muslims claimed his dead body; it then turned into flowers so that both could pick them up. To me Kabir is the very symbol of religious harmony and it is Gandhi’s Ram who is close to his Ram; certainly not that armed and belligerent Ram of the VHP-BJP posters. Then came the poems on the women saints: Meera, who symbolizes the association of spirituality with women’s emancipation, Andal who speaks of diverse kinds of love, her speech deeply informed by the representation of love and nature in Sangam poetry, Akka Mahadevi who contrasts the pains of domesticity with the joys of her near-erotic devotion to Shiva, Lal Ded who speaks against all man-made borders in the background of the violence in Kashmir where she had come from. In another poem, Basavanna addresses the peasants and dances with them identifying work with salvation while in yet another Namdeo denounces temples and idol worship. Tukaram quarrels with his Vittal who has given him only starvation and indifference and sorrows like the Brahmins throwing his abhang verses into the river and challenges him to appear before him. Chaitanya addresses a dying dog in another declaring the equality of all beings. The poem on Bulle Shah is again an indictment of the dogmatic and sectarian practices of religion and of the arrogance of wealth and power. Thyagaraja speaks of his Rama, realised as music. These poems
try to establish a dialogue between the past and the present, man and nature and the world and the spirit. I see Bhakti-Sufi movements as essentially subaltern, egalitarian and anti-hierarchical movements as they denounced caste and class differences, condemned all forms of worldly power, stood up against kings and lords, critiqued rituals and superstitions, replaced Sanskrit with the languages of the people, gave up conventional forms of poetry to produce several new forms and genres of oral and performed poetry taking poetry to the common people, upheld physical labour and believed in the sacredness of all creation. They protested against every form of inequality and created a new poetic mode that dissolved into an aesthetic unity social commentary, lyrical imagination and philosophic contemplation. I believe the roots of our poetry really lie in this movement with its secular and egalitarian spirituality and the confluence of the poetic and the political.

*You also have several poems directly or obliquely inspired by travel.*

Yes. Travels have frequently stimulated my poetry. For me they are occasions for contemplation on life, history, memory and culture. For most of them I have employed the sequence form as that provides for a series of loosely connected independent poems. What connects them is the common context that has given rise to them. Quite a few of them are about travels within the country. There are poems set in Mysore, Ooty, Muthumala, Kodaikanal, Orissa, Bengal, Bihar, Madhyapradesh, Kashmir and Delhi, for example. My travels have been more into cultures than geographies. In ‘Kalighattam,’ my poem on Kolkata, for example, I recall Tagore and Nazrul as well as the ordinary people who made it a centre of civilization. This is equally true of the poems on Pune, Puri, Konark, Bhopal or Sreenagar. In a poem like, ‘Oh, Venice’ the landscape rather, the waterscape, comes to the fore while in the poems on Europe (‘Paschimakandam,’ The Western Canto), Russia (‘Manju’, The Snow and ‘Sidhilam,’ Fragments), China (‘Uttarakandam,’ The Northern Canto), USA (‘American Diary’) or Syria (‘Arabikkathakal,’ The Arabian Nights) Germany (‘Berlin Matil,’ The Berlin Wall) culture and politics, the whole human condition, gets foregrounded. In a poem like ‘Apoornam’ (Imperfect) France and Sweden become a theatre of love. In a poem like ‘Oru Madhyendian Vilapam’ (A Mid-Indian Elegy), Bhopal becomes a backdrop for the enactment of the gas tragedy. In ‘Indian
Sketchukal’ (The Indian Sketches) and ‘Ezhutatta Kattukal’ (The Unwritten Letters), different places in India are settings to reveal the plight of the victims of the system, sites of subaltern existence. As you are aware, I have also written travelogues where I deal with events and details; in the poems I deal with the affective dimensions, the emotional relationships I cultivate with the places and the peoples. Most of these are also dedicated to friends, especially poets, I came across in the respective countries. The poems can be critical too like those on the Tienanmen Square and on the poet Ai-Ching in the sequence on China (Northern Canto) or that addressed to the painter Mara in the first sequence on Russia (Snow) or on Stalin –Kamsa- in the second sequence (Fragments), many are ironic, especially the poems in the Italian sequence, Sins.

That brings me to the question of irony. You have remarked that poetry hangs head down from the tree of life and asks puzzling questions like the Vetal in the Vikramaditya tales. You have used irony in many contexts, especially to demythify experiences, de-idolise characters or to laugh at conventions.

To me irony is no mere poetic device, but an organic part of my vision of life as I am ever conscious of the paradoxes of experience. You can find it even in my early poems like those on my village or my heretical hymn for the goddess Kali, not to speak of later poems like ‘Granny,’ ‘Stammer,’ ‘The Mad,’ ‘Pomegranate,’ ‘Friends,’ ‘Samson,’ ‘Socrates and the Cock,’ ‘Poothana,’ ‘Noah Turns Back,’ ‘Rip van Winkle,’ ‘Head,’ ‘Witness,’ ‘Muslim,’ ‘A Problem of Grammar,’ ‘Cat,’ ‘Fox,’ ‘Sins,’ ‘Muslim,’ ‘Bhagavata’ and several others. At times it deconstructs a character or situation in the epics or sacred books, at times it is a comment on a social or political situation and at times a statement on the human condition and always it is a way of detaching myself from the object or situation I deal with. Let me also say irony is very typical of the Malayali vision of things: remember Kerala has produced most of the best cartoonists in India and Malayalam literature has a tradition of both humour and irony, right from Kunchan Nambiar of 16th Cent CE to Basheer, Sanjayan, V. K. N, O. V. Vijayan and Ayyappa Paniker of the last century. Irony also saves me from sentimentality that is the bane of bad poetry and keeps my mind alert when it tends to nod off. This comes from many sources like an ironic context, a character full of contradictions,
the juxtaposition of opposites, recalling another situation and connecting
the present with it, reference to a poem or proverb (I have a series of
poems that laugh at the wisdom of Malayalam proverbs and exposing
their collusion with conventional common sense and status quoist
notions). however ultimately it is an effect of the language.

You have also many poems on animals and objects. Is there a vision
informing their selection?

To begin with I was a ‘humanist’, but of late I have begun to feel
the limitations of an anthropocentric approach to the universe. It is man’s
hubris that he is the measure of all things and God made man in his own
image. No one has given man the mandate to tyrannise other beings and
abuse the gift of nature. The ecological disaster we are in is a product of
man’s arrogance that makes him think he is the master and lord of
everything on earth and even beyond it. We need to respect the mystery
of the cosmos and collaborate with nature rather than attacking or
conquering it. Early science used the patriarchal language of rape and
aggression to speak of nature. We are only students of nature, at the most
mimics who try to emulate her in creativity. Even the creation of parallel
worlds in art is such an act of mimesis. Our discoveries too are so minimal
when we place it in the background of the whole universe about which
we know very little: I mean both the macro-universe outside and the
micro-universe inside us. Great scientists like Einstein knew this, they
were free from ‘scientism’ that thinks of science as infallible, the only
source of true knowledge. I feel science is only one of the many ways of
knowing the universe; art for example is an equally valid way of knowing
and experiencing the cosmos, I will not deny that even mysticism can be
a way of apprehending the mystery that surrounds us. Intuition and
imagination play a key role even in science; it is not only reason. The
irrational is as much a part of life as is the rational anyway; instinct is an
example. I will not say so far as to say with Freud that civilization is the
denial of instinct, but we often underestimate the role of instinct in life.
My poems on animals and plants and objects—poems like ‘The Zoo’,
‘Stone’, ‘Objects’ and others, though written in different contexts perhaps
share this vision. I try to see the world also from the point of view of
insects, plants and inanimate objects so that I may escape the constraining anthropocentric vision. It may have something to do with the impact of Buddhist and Taoist thought on my thinking, or one may trace it to the hymn for peace in the Rigveda that prays for peace not only for man, but for animals and plants. I deeply admire St Francis of Assissi and had written a poem on him even before I was deeply moved by Nikos Kazantzakis’s *God’s Pauper*. J.M. Coetzee’s arguments against animal slaughter in *Elizabeth Costello* are also very convincing. Neruda’s *Odas Elementales* and the animal and bird poems by D.H. Lawrence, Ted Hughes and others have also may have left their stamp on my imagination.

A lot has been written about the Buddhist strain your poetry. Where do you think it comes from?

It comes chiefly from the Malayalam poetic tradition. Though Buddhism is no longer present as a religion in Kerala- there was a time when it was- the Buddhist way of thinking has had great influence on many of our thinkers and poets. Many of the teachings of Sree Narayana Guru, while being directly inspired by the Tamil Shaivite siddhas, show the indirect impact of Buddhist thinking. And his disciple, the great poet Kumaran Asan, was deeply influenced by Buddhism as is evident in his narrative poems like ‘Karuna’ (Compassion) dealing with the story of Vasavadatta, a harlot and Upagupta, a Buddhist monk. He also translated Edwin Arnold’s *The Light of Asia*. Most of our important poets have at least one poem where Buddha appears, this continues up to Balachandran Chullikkad, a poet of the generation next to mine who actually converted to Buddhism some years ago. I too had grown up reading our poets and happened to read *Dhammapada* at a critical period in my life. Of course I interpret Buddhism in my own way, with opposition to institutionalised violence, rejection of power, egalitarian thinking and identification with the suffering as the key concepts. I bring the thought to bear on our own context as in poems like ‘Buddhan Kalahandiyil’ (Buddha in Kalahandi), ‘Buddhan Punjabil’ (Buddha in the Punjab), ‘Bodhavati’ (The Awakened Woman) and ‘Pani’ (Fever). There are many other poems where Buddha almost breaks in as a figure going round the villages and awakening the poor and the tormented- here his figure is something like that of Christ in Alexander Blok’s ‘Twelve’ where Christ leads a revolutionary procession.
What about your poems that pay homage to people—revolutionaries, poets, painters..? What do they serve?

Politics, poetry, painting and music are some of my passions though I do take interest in other arts, especially cinema. I have poems on freedom fighters, revolutionaries and martyrs, from Pazhassiraja and Mohammed Abdu Rahman who fought the colonizers to Varghese, the Maoist radical, who taught the tribals to claim their rights. This is one tradition I uphold. In Malyalam poetry I have created my own pantheon: Ezhuthacchan, Kumaran Asan, Idassery, P. Kunhiraman Nair. I have also poems addressed to contemporaries like Sugatakumari and Balachandran Chullikkad, though they are not in the homage mode. Even the ‘homage’ poems are not hymns, but are tense with encounters with the world after them. Then there the poems around the bhakti-sufi poets I have already talked about. There is an early poem on Ho Chi Minh written when I was translating his prison diary. Many are elegies like the ones for my friends, Narendra Parasad, playwright and actor (‘Murinju Poya sambhashanam,’ The Broken Conversation), John Abraham, film maker (‘Johnmanam,’ ‘Johnsmell’), Subramania Das, student and radical who committed suicide (‘Ozhinja Muri,’ The Empty Room), Vailoppilly (‘Ivanekkoodi,’ Him too) Ayyappa Paniker (‘Sesham,’ After) and Kadammanitta (‘Sodara,’ ‘Poroo,’ Come, My Brother!) both poets, Soman (‘Bhoomiyude Udarathtil,’ In the Womb of the Earth) and Meghanadan (‘Veruthe Chila Ormakal,’ Some Memories, just) and U. P. Jayaraj (‘Thudakkangal,’ The Beginnings) radical intellectuals and activists. There are too poems for musicians like Mallikarjun Mansoor, Kumar Gandharv and M. D. Ramanathan, painters like Picasso, Van Gogh, Salvador Dali, Paul Klee and Duchamp and poets from abroad like Tu-Fu, Ai Ching, Walt Whitman, Paul Celan, Carlos German Belli. I try here to capture their inscape, an echo of their voice, though the forms I employ are different, from conversation to monologue to invocation to recall.

Kamala Das in her last interview published posthumously said you are perhaps the only contemporary Malayalam poet to have shown respect to women in writing. You did write the first articles in Malayalam on feminism, and wrote elaborate introductions to Sara Joseph’s fiction in Malayalam (to Papathara—The Sin-ground—followed by a study of her Ramayana stories) and Kamala
Let me confess to me whatever I have done for or written about women is not part of any design or ‘project.’. And add that I take what Kamala said only as an expression of her special affection for me. Being a man born to woman and brought up, loved and cared for by women, I can never look down on women. Sexual difference may be nature-made, but gender difference is constructed by man, mostly by the male who gave woman a secondary status in domestic as well as public life. While writing poems on my mother, sister, daughter, love, friend, partner, collaborator, artist or activist –there are several such as you know– I am celebrating woman in her several roles and representations. Even my poems like ‘Bodhavati’ (The Conscious One, a poem based on the tale of the Chandalika that Tagore and Kumaran Asan have written about) and ‘Kayattam’ (The Ascent), a critique of myself as male and constantly interrogating the male ego, I am not consciously trying to propagate something, but examining myself and my society and trying to free myself of my prejudices: they are acts of penitence, self-liberation and self-purification that man urgently needs to perform. In poems like ‘Enne Radha Ennu Vilikkaruthe’ (Don’t Call me Radha), ‘Ini Onnu Visramikkatte’ (Let Me Rest Now), or ‘Thangukayenne’ (Hold me please), I am only trying to understand woman’s loneliness, feeling of abandonment and suffering and rejecting the stereotypes our poetry abounds in. Just as I try to look at the world from within other men, say, like the Bhakti poets, here I look at the world from within the soul of women, as best as I, as a male, can. Let me add that I have also a poem on the third gender.

Jeet Tayyil, in his introduction to you in the Blood Axe Book of Contemporary Indian Poetry, has pointed to the performance aspect of your reading. Is poetry to be performed, or as some say, read silently in solitude?

It is difficult for me to generalise. There are some poems that appeal to me more when I read them in silence, and some others that invite me to read them aloud with the necessary intonations, pauses and emphases. It depends a lot on the nature of the poem, the voice. While doing a public reading- as different from a private reading, alone, or to a single friend or a small circle of friends- I prefer poems that have a performative
element inherent in them, for example, poems with several voices or modulations inherent in the text. I do not perform in the sense in which say, a Benjamin Sephania or a Kazuko Shraishi or even Jeet himself at times performs, with movements and gestures, but I do suggest these through the modulations of my tone and voice. In Kerala there are people who ‘sing’ poems, there are albums where professionals have rendered them, including my poems- a feat I cannot perform. But let me say I do not write in order to perform like many poets especially Beatles did and most Black poet do where the poem itself carries elements of performance. I do admire them as all of us in India belong to a long and great tradition of performed poetry- our folksongs, folk plays, modern verseplays, and dances are all poetry in performance; so for us there is nothing unnatural about it. Only I will not allow the music or the movement to drown my meaning, metaphor and image.

Language is a constant theme in your poetry and you seem often to think of the possibility of a parallel language. You have also employed irony to escape the cliché. Does poetry have a language of its own? Can you elaborate?

When you say this I become conscious of it too. Even in early poems like ‘Syamageetam’ (The Dark Song) I have spoken of the inadequacy of language to express oneself fully. There was even a brief period in my youth when I had a writer’s block, lost faith in language completely and took to painting. In ‘Mulchedi’ (Cactus) I see it creating ‘a sharp, piercing parallel language’ and in ‘Vikku’ (Stammer) I see stammer itself as a language. Madness too is another language. I have also laughed at stale language in poems like ‘Matalam’ (Pomegranate), ‘Chila Kavikal’ (Some Poets) and ‘Nalla Kavi’ (The Good Poet). One of my poems, on violence in north Kerala, is called ‘Sambhashanathinoru Sramam’ (An Attempt at Conversation) and one poem on a friend is ‘Murinju Poya Sambhashanam.’ This concern may have something to do with our times when writers are in search of new idioms free from conventions and cliches and language and ‘discourse’ more than anything else are the subjects of philosophy and critical thinking. My generation also passed through a crisis when we wanted to express new feelings and speak about the new world with a new perspective. Now the marginalised too are in search of their ‘lost’ language, women trying to create a ‘mother-tongue’, dalits attempting to construct a language.
from the daily conversations in the slums and on the streets, tribals struggling to articulate their old and new worlds, religious and ethnic minorities looking for a language of their own, sexual minorities groping for a language free from gender biases...there is something choking and at the same time exciting about our times of turmoil. Remember Tadeus Rozewicz, the Polish poet, speaking of post-war poetry as “a poetry for the horror-stricken, for those abandoned to butchery, for survivors, created out of a remnant of words, salvaged words, out of uninteresting words from the great rubbish dump.” Ultimately poetry is its words. As Paz says, “the poet is a man whose very being becomes one with his words. Therefore only he can make possible a new dialogue.” The problems of poetry are also the problems of making a new dialogue with oneself, with others, with nature and the mystery that surrounds us that some choose to call God.

You have been a prolific translator of poetry, especially from, through and into English. You have also been a critic, an interpreter of the new in Malayalam literature as also other literatures in India. What kind of relationship do these activities have with your poetry?

I began translating poetry quite early, when I was in high school. I remember translating verses from the Fitzgerald version of Omar Khayyam’s Rubaiyat and some poems by Keats, Shelley, John Masefield etc during the student days. When Kerala Kavita was launched, Ayyappa Paniker turned all the new poets into translators. I was asked to do the Indonesian poet Chairil Anwar, the Italian Eugenio Montale, the Polish Zbignew Herbert, the Bangla Jibanananda Das etc. Now from Rilke and Celan to Prevert and Zsymborsca, I have hundreds of European, African, Latin American and Asian poets including many Indian poets in translation, all together around 1600 pages of poetry. Mostly I was responding to aesthetic and social needs: they expedited the transformation of sensibility and idiom in both the phases of Modernism and in the 70s also carried the message of social change. This was when Neruda, Brecht, Eluard, Aragon, David Diop, Senghor, Langston Hughes, Leroi Jones, Blok, Mayakovsky, Evtushenko, Lu Hsun, Kuo Mojo and others got translated. To me as a poet they offered a challenge and an opportunity to test the strength of Malayalam; doing poets like Rilke, Vallejo and Celan was especially challenging. It was like watching
masters at work at close quarters, passing again through the routes of imagination they had taken and following their approach to language, syntax and metaphor. I was a stalker and a cannibal, a transposer of heads, a transmigrant. Translating from Malayalam into English was another kind of learning: Malayalam tends to overstate and to be too emotional that we seldom notice in the original, but English with its precision and pithiness exposes this overeloquence and sentimentality. This serves as a warning when you write in Malayalam again; you are more careful in the handling of words, your poetry becomes more understated. Translation, no doubt, is a training in language and form for practising writers.

I became a critic by default: we had few critics to interpret the new sensibility and idiom when we launched the new mode, so the poets had themselves to turn critics. Once you are there, you extend your critical activity to other fields, so I began to write on other genres like short story, novel and drama, and other arts like painting which is another of my passions. Political activism also led me to social theory; academic demands led me to contemporary literary theories, Marxist, Modernist, post-Modernist, Feminist, Subaltern, post-Colonial as well as post-Structuralist. They did not help me in writing poetry, but they did give me deeper insights into the working of language, especially Bakhtin, Saussure, Barthes, Derrida, Foucault. I read the Indian theories too, Bhartruhari, Panini, Anandavardhana, Bharata, Bhamaha, Kuntaka and others, some of whom foreshadow the modern European theories. They made a lot of verbal play natural and possible. Teaching literary texts also gave me new insights, every time I found the same text different, yielding new semantic and semiotic possibilities. Moving to Delhi, I was compelled to write in English too, as I had to give lectures, present papers at seminars, do reviews, launch books. So besides 16 books of critical essays in Malayalam, now I have four in English too.

You have also been an activist involved in various causes like human rights, land rights for tribals and ecological issues. How do you view the relationship between poetry and activism?

Poetry is autonomous. It is not mandatory for a poet to be an activist even if (s)he comments on social issues in his/her poetry. However there are certain critical moments in one’s life that test the strength and sincerity
of one’s convictions. It was difficult for me not to respond to the Emergency, the genocide of Sikhs in Delhi in 1984, the demolition of Babri Masjid, the Bhopal gas disaster, the Gujarat pogroms, the wholesale condemnation of the religious minorities especially the Muslims as terrorists, the double terror in Kashmir valley and the North-East, the foreign interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq and the dangerous governmental interventions in ecology and the displacement of people in the name of development in many places including the Narmada valley, not only through poetry but in other more direct ways. In a sense they are an organic extension of my poetry; but I will be the last to insist that poets should lead demonstrations or to glorify my modest interventions. I can only say that the same ethical concerns might have energized my poetry and my interventions.

After more than forty years of life dedicated to poetry, how do you view poetry? What is its central mission? Are freedom and joy that you have been seeking through your poetry any more real today than when you began writing?

My readings across the globe have helped reaffirm my faith in the power of poetry to speak to people across nations, languages and communities; it is the shared mother tongue of human beings that survived the Babel. No wonder it has survived Plato’s Republic, Hitler’s Auschwitz and Stalin’s Gulag, and still whispers its uneasy truths into the human ear trained through centuries to capture the most nuanced of voices.

Poetry as I conceive it is no mere combinatorial game; It rises up from the ocean of the unsayable, tries to say what it cannot say, to name the nameless and to give a voice to the voiceless. It is no mere reproduction of established values and recognised truths; it is, as Italo Calvino says, an eye that sees beyond the colour spectrum of everyday politics and an ear that goes beyond the frequencies of sociology. It upturns the virgin soil, advances on the blank page, to use Nicanor Parra’s famous phrase. The truths it discovers may not often be of immediate use; but it will gradually become part of social consciousness. I also share Neruda’s concept of impure poetry, poetry that bears the dust of distances and smells of lilies and urine, a poetry that is often created out of words salvaged from the wreck of languages and nations. Poetry differs from prose not by following a metre or rhythm; there are many metrical poems
that are worse than prose. The difference lies in its power to dissolve paradoxes and its way of imagining things into being and connecting words and memories; rhyme and rhythm may, of course, help to invoke an atmosphere. Its attraction is in what lies beyond the dictionary; it recovers words and experiences exiled from memory. Lorca used to speak of *duende*, a common term in Andalusin popular discourse: that sudden vision of godhead in Arabic music and dance that makes the audience cry, *Allah, Allah*. It is the intangible mystery Goethe found in Paganini’s art, the divine persuasion that the Gypsy dancer La Malena felt in Bach’s music played by Brailovsky. The search for it is a solitary trip without maps. Poetry too has those moments of revelation when like a whirlwind it subverts all logic and pulls down all preconceived projects. Every poet worth his/her salt must have felt the thrill and the terror of such moments of epiphany at least in the best moments of their inspiration. I too have experienced this while writing some poems which seemed to have been dictated to me. Tadeuz Rosewicz, the Polish poet said poetry should lay its eggs not on the chaff of half and a quarter words but directly in the abyss, and J.Swaminathan while speaking of the geometry of colours remarked that the triangle, the rectangle and the circle are coloured windows that open into the inexpressible and the ambiguous. He saw how in the tribal art nature and its creation envelop each other. This reciprocity is vital to any art today to liberate ourselves from the anthropocentric Western thought that speaks of nature in the language of war and rape and leads to the annihilation of man and earth.

I have often been asked what the central themes of my poetry are. It is difficult to reduce poetry to themes as any complex-enough poem works at many levels. As Umberto Eco says in a recent interview, works are more intelligent than their authors; they may contain possibilities that the author might never have known or imagined. Gauded into a response, I will say justice, freedom, love, nature, language and death are the central concerns of my poetry as perhaps of all poetry. And the chief elements that helped shape me as a poet have perhaps been the traditions of poetry, local, national as well as global, experience, observation-of nature and of human beings, travel, interaction with other arts like music, painting and cinema, reading and translation, all turning into the fibres of my imagination. And I have been open-minded when it comes to forms having employed several verbal registers in Malayalam,
from street talk to the language of legal documents and a diversity of metrical and non-metrical devices, folk, classical and modern.

The responsiveness of the Seventies is still alive in my poetry though I have distanced myself from all dogma. My commitment is largely ethical- to certain values, like justice, equality, freedom, love, respect for all forms of life. These have become all the more significant in a world governed by the values of the market and increasingly and violently being colonised by the forces of globalisation. While I have continuously raised the issues of women’s emancipation, the rights of the marginalised, ecological harmony and a world without wars, and kept responding to the tragic turns of social events, from the Emergency to the rise of communalism in our society, I have not ceased asking the deeper existential questions, of being, freedom, instincts, nature, relationships, death. I find no contradiction between the sacred and the secular; I can well be spiritual without being religious. This is something I have learnt from our Saint and Sufi poets and reformers like Kabir and Gandhi who battled against hierarchies of every kind, challenged Power in its diverse manifestations and interrogated the superfluous externals of practised religion. A poet does not need any religion other than poetry itself. Nothing can scare poetry except perhaps the empty white paper where, as Wislawa Szymborsca says, the poet has to await the incarnation of his/her essence in total solitude behind put-on masks and closed doors. I fear only the suffocating silence of a world where the soul has ceased to speak and man cannot decipher the language of leaves and waterfalls. I hope not to survive to see that day when the universe is deprived of its sacredness and evil prevails unquestioned.

(This is an updated and abridged version in English of a longer interview in Malayalam done by Rizio Raj for the comprehensive collection of K. Satchidanandan’s poetry from 1965 to 2005 edited by her).