PUBLISHERS’ NOTE

Malayalam, perhaps the only language with a palindro-mic appellation, is a comparatively young language. However during the last century its literature made rapid strides and earned it a place among the most developed languages of India. Many of the notable works of modern Malayalam have been translated into various Indian languages. Nevertheless the fact remains that they have found access to only a limited readership.

Tarjuma is an organization that we have started with the purpose of publishing English translations of some of the selected works in Malayalam so that they may reach a wider readership than what is open to them at present.

We made O. Chandu Menon’s Indulekha our first choice for publication because it is the first novel in Malayalam. While it is true that prior to the publication of Indulekha a few books that had some of the characteristics of novels had been published, it is almost universally recognized that Chandu Menon’s remains the earliest work that truly conforms to the accepted norms of the modern novel.

The novel presents a vivid picture of the social milieu of Kerala in the nineteenth century. It follows a well knit story line. At the same time the author studiously pursues his objective of stressing the need for the modernization of society by the inculcation of the English language and modern science. In this sense too it is a pioneering work.

The period of transition from the twentieth century to the twenty first is curiously similar to the times when Chandu Menon wrote Indulekha. The recent decades have witnessed the growth of information technology and the rapid integration of western knowledge with our day to day life. Hence the threshold on which we now find ourselves is similar to the one at which Madhavan and Indulekha, the prin-
TRANSLATOR’S PREFACE

If it is true that no book should be written without justification, then it is certainly true that no book was ever written with greater justification than the Malayalam novel ‘Indulekha’. Valuable as the literature of the Dravidian languages may be considered for the purposes of archaeology or philology, nevertheless all who have studied it with any other object in view must remember the sense of weariness and disappointment with which they rose from the task.

The popular literature, with all its unnatural and supernatural paraphernalia, belongs to an age when the human mind was still in a go-cart, its language is as obsolete as the language of Piers the Plowman, and as it is without exception founded on the venerable Sanskrit, there is a total absence of originality. But Mr. Chandu Menon has quit the well-worn track, paved with plagiarism; modern Malabar is depicted in his pages and the language of Indulekha is the living Malayalam of the present day. It is no part of my province or intention to discuss the merits of the work itself, but I may perhaps be permitted to observe that if this descent into a valley of bones which are very dry, is followed by their revival the author deserves well of all who, from birth, inclination or necessity are interested in a regeneration of oriental literature.

So far as Europeans are concerned, the value of a book like ‘Indulekha’ can hardly be overestimated. Few amongst us have opportunities of learning the colloquial and idiomatic language of the country, which, so far as I am competent to express an opinion, is far more important for the ends of administration than all the monuments of archaic ingenuity which we read and mark and leave undigested under the present “Rules for the encouragement of the study of Oriental Languages.” In this respect, therefore, a novel supplies a distinct want, and I would respectfully commend this point to the consideration of the powers who regulate such matters.
I began to read English novels extensively after I left Calicut in the end of 1886, and I then devoted all the leisure which my official duties left me, to novel reading. Thereupon I found that my circle of intimates with whom I had been accustomed to pass the time in social conversation and amusement considered itself somewhat neglected, and I accordingly endeavoured to find means by which I could conciliate its members without in any degree foregoing my novels. With this object in view, I attempted at first to convey to them in Malayalam the gist of the story contained in some of the novels I had read, but my hearers did not seem particularly interested in the versions which I gave them of two or three of these books. At last it happened that one of these individuals was greatly taken with Lord Beaconsfield’s “Henrietta Temple,” and the taste then acquired for listening to novels translated orally, gradually developed into a passion. The importunity of this personage in the matter was so great that I had seldom time to read a book on my own account. Occasionally, even when I was alone and studying a treatise on law, my friend (mistaking it for a novel) would come and tease me saying, “There again, you are reading a novel to yourself. I must have it translated orally”. Thus in one way and another, it appeared to me that by trying not to give umbrage to my associates, I had succeeded in giving considerable inconvenience at any rate to myself.

Finally, I was urged to produce a written translation of the novel by Beaconsfield which I have mentioned, and I consented. But when I had made some little progress in the work, I, thought the matter over, and decided that a translation thus made would be absolutely without value. I find no great difficulty in communicating to my friends who are ignorant of English, a fairly accurate idea of an English novel by means of an oral rendering, but I think it is wholly impossible to transmit a correct impression of the story through a written translation. The reason of this
To

W. DUMERGUE, Esq., M. C. S.,
&c., &c., &c.,
Hosur.

Sir,

I respectfully beg to submit herewith a copy of my Malayalam novel for your kind acceptance and perusal.

The reasons that induced me to write a novel in Malayalam are fully set forth in the Preface.

Briefly stated, they are as follows:-

First, my wife’s oft-expressed desire to read in her own language a novel written after the English fashion, and secondly, a desire on my own part to try whether I should be able to create a taste amongst my Malayalee readers, not conversant with English, for that class of literature represented in the English language by novels, of which at present they (accustomed as they are to read and admire works of fiction in Malayalam abounding in events and incidents foreign to nature and often absurd and impossible) have no idea, and to see whether they could appreciate a story that contains only such facts and incidents as may happen in their own households under a given state of circumstances—to illustrate to my Malayalee brethren the position, power and influence that our Nair women, who are noted for their natural intelligence and beauty, would attain in society, if they are given a good English education; and finally—to contribute my mite towards the improvement of Malayalam literature which I regret to observe is fast dying out by disuse as well as by abuse.

The book is written generally in the style of Malayalam which I speak at home with such Sanskrit words as I might use in conversation with an educated Malayalee.

It will be seen that my story commences with a conversation between Madhavan, the hero of the novel, and his relations (all members of a Nair Tarwad) about a quarrel that Madhavan had with his karanavan or chief of his house, concerning the education of a juvenile member of the Tarwad. The events are supposed to have taken place in our own times in some part of South Malabar. The scene of the principal events in the story may not inappropriately be fixed at some place not far away from Native Cochin.
Chapter 1

“What is the matter, Madhavan?” said Chather Menon. “Why did you speak so rashly? But, man, this is not proper. The Karanavan must do as he likes, and we must obey him. Your tongue ran away with you.”

“Not a bit of it” replied Madhavan. “Such partiality ought never to be shown, but if he will not do his duty, why, he need not. I will take Shinnan myself and have him educated.”

“No, my dear,” interposed Kummini amma. “Shinnan and I have never been separated. You may take Chather or Gopalan and have them educated. Anyhow the head of the house is displeased with you. I know he used to be on bad terms with us, but he always thought a great deal about you.”

“That’s all very well,” retorted Madhavan, “but it would be a fine thing, wouldn’t it, if I took Chather, the eldest of the sons, and Gopalan and put them to school now?”

While these individuals were standing talking, a servant ran up and said that Madhavan’s uncle, Sankara Menon, wanted him. Madhavan immediately started for his uncle’s apartment. We may take this opportunity of understanding Madhavan’s position before we proceed further with the story.

I have already given earlier some particulars of Madhavan’s age, of his relationship to Panchu Menon, and of the examinations he had passed; and I will now tell my readers something of his character and person.

Madhavan was a young man gifted with great abilities and a remarkably handsome appearance. The fame which he had acquired by an uninterrupted series of triumphs in the schools from the time he began to learn English until he graduated in arts, clearly and fully proclaimed the rare talents with which he was endowed. He had never failed in an examination, be it what it might. He passed the First in Arts