

100 years of *Kavana Kaumudi*

Ajith Nair

Journalism in India on modern lines began in 1780 at Kolkata, with the publication of the 'Bengal Gazette' in English. This was followed by a number of periodicals in English, all run by Englishmen and for Englishmen.

Vernacular journalism was comparatively slow on the uptake. Nevertheless, a number of periodicals, most of them short-lived, appeared in India in the latter half of the 19th century. It took almost a century for the seeds of journalism sown in the Indian soil to take roots in Malayalam. The only newspapers published in the early period were 'Vignana Nikshepam' (1840) published from Kottayam and 'Paschima Tharaka' (1862), from Kochi.

By the early part of the 20th century, a positive trend was visible in the field of Malayalam journalism, with several newspapers getting themselves fairly well established in various parts of Kerala.

However, none would ever imagine a newspaper with all the printed matter in pure verse and nothing at all in prose. Such a novel and unique idea was conceived and also translated into action by none other than Pandalam Kerala Varma, himself a poet of high repute and wide recognition. It is to his credit that the 'KAVANA KAUMUDI', the first and perhaps the last too, a Malayalam periodical, all in verse began its publication.

It all started in the year 1904, at a time when new trends were emerging in Malayalam poetry. This period has later on come to be described as a golden age in Malayalam literature. Eyebrows were raised when Pandalam Kerala Varma brought out this fortnightly publication, with news, views, comments, and correspondence and even advertisements, all in verse. The literary circles, however, welcomed such an initiative.

The first issue saw the light of the day

on the first day of the Malayalam month of Vrischikam in 1080, which coincided with November 16, 1904. A hundred years hence, now is the time for celebrating the centenary of the 'Kavana Kaumudi, a pioneer in vernacular journalism.

Edited, printed, published and owned by Pandalam Kerala Varma, this fortnightly was to be published on the 1st and 15th of every Malayalam month. Till he breathed his last, Pandalam Kerala Varma served as the editor of this publication.

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That there was not one printing press in his native village of Pandalam was not to serve as a deterrent, for this scion of the local royal family. The earlier issues were printed at the Suvarnaratnaprabha Press in Kayamkulam. It was a broadsheet, with four pages and four columns in each page.

The fortnightly periodical became a monthly after the first three years. In the meantime, to be exact, in November 1905, the printing was shifted from Kayamkulam to the Kerala Kalpadrumam Press in Thrissur. The manager of this press then was the legendary poet Vallathol. Pandalam still remained to be the place of publication of the periodical. Kuttipurathu Kesavan Nair succeeded Vallathol as the press manager. But by March 1910, there again was a change in press and the printing was shifted to the Lakshmisahayam Press at Kottakkal.



Front page of Kavana Kaumudi

And around this time, P.V. Krishna Warriar assumed office as the Co-editor as well as owner of the publication. The founder editor, Pandalam Kerala Varma passed away in June 1919. Subsequently, P.V. Krishna Warriar took charge as the editor of 'Kavana Kaumudi'. Its publication continued till 1931.

There is another 'first' to the credit of 'Kavana Kaumudi'. Special issues were brought out for the first time by this publication. As many as nine such special issues were brought out in the meantime, though not entirely in verse alone.

In his editorials, all in verse, Pandalam Kerala Varma touched upon a whole lot of topics, ranging from legislature, police reforms, revenue, education including that of the women folk, agriculture and above all statesmanship.

The greatest contribution of 'Kavana Kaumudi' is that it served as a launching pad for many of the great writers who were perhaps novices at that time.

Besides its contributions to the Malayalam literary field, 'Kavana Kaumudi' served as a unifying factor, surpassing the regional differences and parochial discriminations. This publication also was instrumental in sowing the seeds of a State which later on came to be known as Kerala, following the integration of the princely domains of Travancore, Cochin and Malabar.

Pandalam Kerala Varma lived on this earth for just forty years. He was no ordinary mortal. He was a poet and a journalist among princes and a prince among poets and journalists. ■