



**B**orn in 1940, KTM Iqbal came to Singapore from Kadayannallur in Tamil Nadu in 1951. Iqbal is one of the best known and most prolific modern Tamil poets in Singapore, having richly contributed to the literary life of Singapore as a poet, advocate and mentor. Since Iqbal started writing in the 1960s, he has authored seven collections of poetry and contributed poems, children's songs, literary essays and short stories to the region's leading newspapers, magazines, as well as Radio Singapore. His collection of poems has been translated to English, and published in *The Evening Numbers & Other Poems* (2008).

Iqbal is a distinctly versatile and accomplished poet, whose writings address a wide span of topics from society, superstition, nature and to the common man. In spite of being strongly rooted in traditional poetry, he is also a forerunner and advocate of contemporary writing, and demonstrates a spirit of innovation and foresight through literary experimentations. His poems such as *Kaalai* (lit. Morning, 1975), *Kavithai Mochu* (lit. Breath of Poetry, 2000) and *Neelak Kannaadi* (lit. Blue Mirror, 1989) have been prescribed in textbooks for Singapore students, and have been the subject of scholarly research in universities.

His works possess the quality of poetic musicality while maintaining an enviable accessibility, thus making them achieve a reach beyond that of the Tamil literary community. In 1995, his poem, *Thanneer* (*Water*) was selected by the National Arts Council (NAC) for inscription on Mass Rapid Transit trains and later at the EXPO 2000 exhibition in Hanover, Germany, by Goethe Institute. Iqbal's poems have also

been translated to represent Singapore in various regional publications such as the *Representative Poetry of participating nations in 2005 APEC* (2005), and *From the Window of this Epoch: An Anthology of Malaysian and Singaporean Poems* (2010).

With his artistic integrity, high standards, and sustained dedication to the vocation of poetry, Iqbal is a befitting role model for young writers. He served as an associate editor of the anthologies, *Rhythms* (2000) and *Fifty on 50* (2009), published by NAC, and champions for the Tamil Digital Heritage Project (2013), in partnership with the National Library Board. Aside from contributing formally to literary projects and the wealth of Tamil poetry, Iqbal is also committed to the nurturing of the next generation of

writers through talks in schools and his decade long contributions to *Kavi Maalai* (*Poetic Forum*), an informal poetry society. As a mentor to aspiring young Tamil poets, he helps to critique and guide their development of new works.

Iqbal's gift of poetry and contributions to Tamil literature has been well acknowledged locally and internationally. He is the recipient of distinguished accolades such as the Montblanc–NUS Centre for the Arts Literary Award (1996); the Thamizhavel Award (1999) from the Association of Singapore Tamil Writers; the Singapore Literature Prize (2001) and the Kala Ratna (2004) from the Singapore Fine Arts Society. Beyond local shores, he was awarded the S.E.A (Southeast Asian) Write Award (2001).



## KTM Iqbal The Man and His Word

By Arun Mahizhnan

The essence that comes across most when one encounters KTM Iqbal as a person is very much what one comes across in his poetry: humaneness. The person and his poetry stem from the same seed. There is a pervasive sense of human concerns in his writings. He does lament the ills of society and yet he displays little pessimism, even less bitterness. There is an optimism that comes through his person as it does through his poetry. There is equanimity in whatever he does. Not for him the swagger of a celebrated poet nor the arrogance of literary gifts. If his poetry reflects his spirit, then Iqbal reflects his poetry.

Kuo Pao Kun, another Cultural Medallion recipient and the late doyen of the theatre community once said “one cannot make good art if one is not a good person.”<sup>1</sup> Iqbal is a good person.

It is necessary to understand the milieu Iqbal emerged from and continues to inhabit in order to understand the special quality of his poetry and his person. The Tamil literary world in Singapore is in many ways a disadvantaged and disparaged one – though it enjoys government support that is the envy of many in the Tamil diaspora around the world.

Over decades, Singapore had indeed fallen perceptibly in Tamil literary practice as English took over the public life of most school children and adults. Only recently has the Tamil literary scene been blooded by new immigrants with considerable literary inclination and talent.

Iqbal himself was an immigrant when he was brought over to Singapore as an 11-year-old in 1951. In the late forties, his mother died of cholera and three younger brothers also died in quick succession due to other illnesses. He and his father took off to Singapore to ‘escape’ this terrible fate. Though Iqbal enrolled in the Umar Pulavar Tamil school, his formal education lasted just a few months. He was put to work in various capacities to earn his own keep. It was not till 1963 and after marriage and a child that he returned to school, attending part-time night classes. He completed his “O” levels in 1967 while still keeping a full time job as peon. It is remarkable how determined he was to have an education despite heavy odds.

It was the same kind of determination that led him to write poetry while nothing in his family or workplace could possibly be



KTM Iqbal at the book launch of Pan Sandararaju's Selected Works in 2007. Photo courtesy of KTM Iqbal



KTM Iqbal (second from left) at the S.E.A. (Southeast Asian) Write Award Ceremony in 2001. Photo courtesy of KTM Iqbal



KTM Iqbal (second row, third from right) with the Crown Prince of Thailand Maha Vajiralongkorn and fellow awardees of the S.E.A. (Southeast Asian) Write Award in 2001. Photo courtesy of KTM Iqbal

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nac.gov.sg/docs/cmyaa/t-sasitharan.pdf>. Accessed on 15 September 2014.



considered conducive to his literary yearnings. His first stirrings came in 1956 through the poems of Mathithasan who wrote regularly in the *Malaya Nanban*, a popular Tamil daily at that time. The next year, Iqbal embarked on his first publication as a compiler of literary writings. It was a commemoration issue on Umar Pulavar, a great Tamil Muslim scholar in Tamil Nadu. His collaborator was to become a famous author himself – Kadyanallur Jamila. Iqbal's menial job and miserly salary did not deter him from indulging in his literary forays.

He started dabbling in poetry from then on, writing during recess in his night classes. To this day, Iqbal remembers with much gratitude the expositions on the grammar of poetry inaugurated by Murugu Subranmaniam in *Tamil Murasu*, where he worked as an editor. Spurred by this formal instruction, Iqbal acquired a voracious appetite for reading widely and deeply. It was almost like a time of Renaissance in Tamil poetry in both Tamil Nadu and Singapore. Then, as today, mainly those who came from Tamil Nadu dominated the literary scene here. The Tamil Nadu imprint was strong and widespread. The so-called Singapore literature was very much in the future. Mimicking Tamil Nadu literary trends and styles was in vogue – much like what was happening in the English literary scene where imitating the British and other Western trends was the preoccupation among the Singapore English-language literati.

However, Iqbal was alive to change. His great love of traditional poetry and his continued practice of churning out verses in the conventional meters was confronted by what came to be known as *Puthu Kavithai* ( புது கவிதை ), or New Poetry, a variant of free verse. For Iqbal, an eye-opener was a leading Tamil Muslim poet in Tamil Nadu, Abdul Rahman. Iqbal says that it was his works that “converted (him) to the new religion” of free verse. But he was not a fanatic convert. He embraced both religions with equal enthusiasm.

## CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

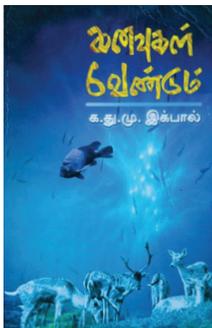
- 2013 Poem *Book* is anthologised in the GCE “A” Level text *Elakkiyach Charal* launched by the Ministry of Education in collaboration with the National Arts Council and Marshall Cavendish
- 2008 Poems *Morning and Blue Mirror* were included in Tamil GCE “O” Level texts for Singapore schools
- 2001 Awarded the S.E.A. (Southeast Asian) Write Award
- 2000 Poem *Thaneer (Water)* selected for display at EXPO 2000 by Goethe Institute, Hanover, Germany
- 1996 Awarded the Mont Blanc Literary Award by NUS Centre for the Arts



*Kaakitha Vaasam*  
(Lit. Fragrance of Paper, 2003)



*Vanavargal Mannil Irukkirkalkal*  
(Lit. The Angels Are On Earth, 2005)



*Kanavukal Vendum*  
(lit. In Need Of Dreams, 2000)

Thus Iqbal grew up deprived in material ways but enriched by a literary milieu that inspired and nurtured him. Perhaps it is this equilibrium between the dark and bright worlds that enabled him to achieve a balanced outlook in his life and poetry. One of his much-cited poems – *Water* – reflects this equanimity:

*Sang in praise of your  
wonderful life-giving spirit  
till you showed  
the drowned*

Such a balance was to manifest itself in another critical literary battlefield in the 1980s. It was indeed a battle between the champions of traditional poetry and the writers of New Poetry in Tamil. The traditionalists simply would not allow the term 'poetry' to be sullied by what was just clever prose. Poetry was poetry and prose, just prose, went the arguments. Battle lines were drawn and literary factions mobilised. Iqbal, being a leading practitioner of traditional poetry was naturally expected to take up arms on behalf of the traditionalists. He took up new poetry instead. For an established and celebrated poet who would not risk his reputation nor the goodwill of his compatriots, Iqbal surprised many – on both sides of the fence. He saw merit in 'new poetry' as he read it extensively. Then he decided to write new poetry himself. Today, Iqbal is widely acknowledged to have considerable facility in new as well as traditional poetry.

Another instance of Iqbal's personal 'modernisation' project is his acquisition of computer skills. He was one of the early adopters of new technologies among the elderly Tamil literati. He saw what was coming and embraced it with alacrity. He composed his poetry on the computer, entered the email world and started sending SMSes – all when he was already in his late sixties.

It is this openness and adaptability that makes Iqbal an unusual elder statesman among the Tamil literary community in Singapore.

He was not only willing to educate himself in a life-long fashion but was also willing to help others go through the process. He has conducted many poetry workshops for members of the Association of Singapore Tamil Writers and young poets of the Kavimaalai literary group. He continues to mentor whoever is seeking his guiding hand in writing Tamil poetry.

Iqbal has always been modest and gentle in his personal demeanor but his poems sometimes display a subtle yet sharp tongue when he feels deeply troubled. He did not shrink from expressing his rejection of social norms that needed reform – when the occasion demanded. Yet, he is not known for demagoguery or preachy pontifications.

Iqbal's Tamil poetry has fortunately found a wider audience beyond the Tamil world thanks to a clutch of translations in a handful of English anthologies such as *Rhythms* (2000), *Fifty* (2009) on 50 and *From the Window of this Epoch* (2010). His verses are also at MRT stations that gave room to display and promote Singapore's literary and visual artists. There is only one anthology of Iqbal's poems in English, *Evening Number & Other Poems* (2008), translated by R. Balachandran of India. Those who have taken the trouble to read translations of his poetry will find Iqbal a very different kind of literary practitioner.

As his translator observes there is a 'Zen element'<sup>3</sup> in his poetry. He brings the sublime and the mundane in surprising proximity and cajoles the reader to read and reflect, instead of traipsing over the sheer beauty of the Tamil word, which is the common currency in many a Tamil poet's wordbank. "In none of his poems we find the verbosity of the wordsmith," says Balachandran.<sup>4</sup>

It is an enduring literary deficit in Singapore that so little has been achieved by way of multilingual translation – a fate shared by all official mother tongues in Singapore – be it Tamil, Malay or even Chinese. When translation becomes commonplace in Singapore, the legacy of Iqbal may find much resonance beyond the Tamil world.

#### About the writer

Arun Mahizhan is Special Research Adviser at the Institute of Policy Studies. He has been involved in the development of arts and arts policies for more than three decades. He has also been on the boards of several arts institutions.

## WORDS OF APPRECIATION

*"I am highly honoured to receive the esteemed Cultural Medallion and wish to express my sincere thanks and gratitude to the following organisations, literary friends and readers whose appreciation, support and encouragement have helped me keep writing:*

*The Chairman and officers of the National Library Board who have put forward this award nomination.*

*The Cultural Medallion Specialist Panel.*

*Mr Arun Mahizhan, Special Research Adviser, Institute of Policy Studies,*

*Cultural Medallion recipients Emeritus Professor Edwin Thumboo, Mr J.M. Sali, Mr Ma Ilankannan and Mr T. Sasitharan*

*And The Singapore Literature Prize Winner Mr Ramanathan Vairavan for their strong support of my nomination.*

*The late Dr Balachandran (Bala), the noted poet, writer and former convener of the Tamil Advisory Board of the Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi who rendered my poems into English titled Evening Number & Other Poems.*

*My late wife, Aisha Beevi, who showered me with her kind words of appreciation of my poems and took care of me for nearly fifty years.*

KTM Iqbal

<sup>3</sup> Balachandran, R. *Evening Number & Other Poems*. Tanjavor: Akaram, 2008. Print.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*