# Poetry as *Dharma* Re-visioned: A Study of A.K. Ramanujan's Poetic Discourse

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In the (Post)-modern[1] context of decentering and dispersal, the very invocation of the term *dharma*[2] to study and analyze contemporary poetry might appear quite anacharonistic and blatantly medieval. But in the Indian coantext where culture is not mere nostalgia but a living space, a tangible continuum, *dharma* as an important input of culture continues to be a way of life that cannot easily be brushed aside as mere medieval hangover. Negotiating *dharma* with postmodernism emerges as a challenge to a contemporary expatriate Indian writer like A.K. Ramanujan who shares the space of the two mutually contesting frames, one the inherited and 'filiative'[3] space of tradition and religion, another the acquired and 'affiliative' postmodernist space of Chicago. The two apparently dissimilar frames impinge upon the creative imagination of a dislocated modern writer in a much more sharp and subtle manner than they do on the people in general. Kunwar Narain, a contemporary poet of new Hindi poetry, explains the dialogic dynamics of the encounter:

> The pressures of an established tradition [read as an equivalent of *dharma*] work more on people in the form of set habits and customary ways of thinking, than on a writer who works under the greater pressures of new ideas and the urgent demands of modern life. This is bound to create a somewhat tense relationship between the new writing which tries to look ahead of times and the traditional sensibilities of the people which tend to lag behind. The slender ties between the two can snap if the drag is too much.[4]

The two contestatory frames have the potential to split the poet's

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consciousness and cause rifts in his creative purposes. The two frames can revise and counterbalance each other in such a way that *dharma* is updated and at the same time postmodernism becomes accountable to *dharma*. Of course it would be naive to expect an overtly *dharmic* poetic discourse against such a dynamic and heterogeneous backdrop, and equally facile it would be to think of a purely West-specific modernist discourse emanating from such a multivalent scenario.

Hitherto, the Hindu forbearings of A.K. Ramanujan as a poet have been over-emphasized without much problematization. Such an enthusiastic ethnic response not only underestimates the creative potential of poetry in re-defining and more importantly secularizing *dharma*, it also ignores the unmistakable impact of the West, the adopted abode of expatriate Indian English poets, on their creative output. Expatriation as a trope of cultural displacement not only accentuates nostalgia for nation but it also triggers off a more feverish invocation of *dharma*. This nostalgia or invocation, both of nation and *dharma*, need not necessarily be salutary or panegyric. In fact, displacement provides a critical distance too, to look at dispassionately the anomalies or inconsistencies within the 'granted' construct of *dharma*. A nostalgic pull is invariably counter-balanced by the critical pull, or if it is not exactly counter-balanced, it is constantly checkmated and re-viewed. The *dharma* (i.e. the credo) of Ramanujan's poetry therefore has to be seen in terms of his re-interpretation and re-contextualization of *dharma* (i.e. Hinduism) in the light of his high modernist surroundings.

*Dharma* is quite pertinent to the poetic *weltanschauung* of Ramanujan for two reasons —one, he is a Brahmin of the deep south, another, he is intellectually aware of Hindu mythos and rituals. While in the north, in the face of frequent attacks of the foreigners, viz. Greeks, Sakas, Kushanas, Hunas, Muslims etc., brahminism could not retain its rigid ritualistic hold over people. Since south India remained almost inaccessible to the foreign raiders during the medieval period—the period of intense religious one-up-manship, Hinduism continued to flourish in the magnificent temples of south India. Ramanujan inherits this relatively untainted form of brahminism. Secondly, as a translator of Shiva's hymns and the Sangam poetry of love and war, along with a compiler of Indian folk-tales from the oral tradition, Ramanujan's portfolio of being an extraordinary Hindu becomes almost complete and impeccable.

*Dharma* as a way of life manifests in Ramanujan's poetry in remarkably distinct ways; neither is it an unqualified or absolute metaphor of realization, nor just an exhausted signifier of ritual. (Post)-modernism likewise, too makes a visible dent in the poetic universe of the poet, but never is it heralded as an inevitable and exclusive credo of self-emancipation. Both *dharma* and postmodernism therefore parody each other, and in this process give rise to a dialogic discourse in which the imperatives of *dharma* puncture the bubble of postmodernism, and the splinters of postmodernism pierce through the granted narrative of *dharma.*

II

To begin with, let us consider some of the poems where some Hindu belief or philosophic ideal forms the main sub-text. In poems like 'Conventions of Despair'[5] 'A Devotee's Complaint', 'Guru', 'A Meditation', 'Pleasure' and 'Second Sight', the tension between *dharma* on one hand and modernism on the other hand create the basic dynamic of creativity. In 'Conventions of Despair', modernism itself becomes a trope of ritualism no less tyrannical than the so-called closed '*dharma*'.[6] This complexity of awareness does not condone modernism at the cost of *dharma,* or *dharma* at the cost of modernism, both become the target of the poet's critical despair. Modernism, or its latest *avatar* postmodernism, despite its rhetoric of freedom and choice is not free from the terrors of rituals. On the level of actual living, modernism, very much like *dharma,* boils down to some canonical practices which ossify later on into rituals. The rituals of modernism are constantly pitted against the rituals of *dharma.* In the poem, Ramanujan catalogues a number of rituals that construct and at the same time de-construct the discourse of modernism thus:

> Marry again. See strippers at the Tease.
> Touch Africa. Go to movies
>
> Impale a six-inch spider
> Under a lens. Join the Test-
> Ban, or become The Outsider
>
> Or pay to shake my fist
> or whatever-you-call-it) at a psychoanalyst. (p. 34)

These eight-nine images reveal beyond doubt the fetishism in-built

within the so-called emancipatory and progressive project of modernism.

The conventions of *dharma* are not easy to displace in order to give way to the 'conventions of modernism': 'But sorry, I cannot unlearn/conventions of despair.' *Dharma* obviously cannot be unlearnt despite its so-called traditionalism and antiquity. The 'conventions of despair'[7] constitute *dharma*. The association of despair with conventions is quite significant for at one level, it stands for Hindu ideal of forsaking of material gains or earthly joy, at another level it stands for poet's disenchantment with abstract spiritualism intrinsic to Hindu world-view. Hindu metaphysics of renouncing the worldly pleasures is ironically summed up thus: 'weep/iron tears for winning what I should have lost'. *Dharma* grows more intense informing the very momentum of Ramanujan's poetic progress.

Insight or the inner eye, which the Upanishadic seers describe rather enigmatically as the Eye of the eye is privileged over the normal human eye in the spiritualist accounts of Indian thought. In Shaiva-philosophy it is also termed as Third Eye, the eye of the mind over and above the two eye which ordinary mortals are born with. Standing in a queue in a departmental Store of Chicago, Ramanujan, a Hindu with supposedly second sight, feels quite helpless. The resultant comment is as much a prick at Hindu metaphysics, at it is on the 'Orientalist' Western onlookers who take it too literally:

> I fumble in my nine
> pockets like the night-blind
>
> Son-in-law groping
> in every room for his wife,... ('Second Sight', p. 191)

The imagery of 'pockets' and 'son-in-law groping/...for his wife' has material and sensuous connotations which are often underplayed vis-à-vis the so-called lofty Indian metaphysics. May be, Ramanujan is invoking some sort of epicureanism of the Charvakas or the Lokayatas which is usually kept aside from the essentialist accounts of Indian thought as a counter-discourse to the Vedantic scriptures. Informed by the dialectics of *dharma* and postmodernism, the poem concludes on a note of inversion:

> And strike a light to regain
> At one my first, and only Sight (p. 191)

The emphasis on 'first' and 'only' is an indication enough of how precariously the poet is caught between his inherited *dharma* on one hand, and the acquired post-modernism on the other. In order to counter the Orientalist construction of Hinduism as being mere 'metaphysical', the gross assertion of the physical through the 'first' and 'only/sight' leads the poet back to the colonial narrative of the material or the carnal. Richard King explains this predicament of Indian post-colonial intellectuals thus: '..., for in opposing British colonial rule, Hindu nationalists did not fully transcend the presuppositions of the West, but rather legitimized the Western Orientalist discourse by responding in a manner that did not fundamentally question the Orientalists' paradigm.'[8]

Ramanujan is not a mindless and submissive *bhakta*, prostrating at the feet of the divine eternally. He thinks and feels like an ordinary human being. In his 'A Devotee's Complaint', he disfavours the idea of absolute asceticism. If Shiva's touch dries out the human in the devotee, it is of hardly any human use. A *bhakta* should not cease to be a living and throbbing human being. His complaint as a devotee therefore is:

> If Shiva touches you—
> when you cut your finger
>
> In the kitchen
> not blood but ash spills
> from your cut as it did
> for that ascetic
>
> who dried out for Shiva (p. 237)

The ash-blood binary is the binary of *dharma* and postmodernism in its most fundamental form. The poet does seek the grace of Shiva, but at the same time he wants the blood to run through his veins. After all what can hold the devotee if he becomes a sack of ash? Ramanujan has a special penchant of testing divine's graces in spaces like kitchen, bathrooms and toilets.

Meditation is an exercise of knowing one's own self through concentration. It is an act of internalizing the external, of self-realization. Ramanujan, once again, as self-conscious *bhakta*, does not seek a meditation that reduces the devotee into a blank entity, forgetful of the mundane and even excremental realities of life. In the poem 'A Meditation', the poet expresses his apprehensions of losing the normal human touch in the process of meditation: 'In

the course of a meditation/I thought all day I was a black/ walnut tree' (p. 239). It is not only the fear of rigidity that meditation might breed in him, it is the fear of insensitivity that troubles him all the more:

> as I stood waiting for the traffic
> light, (the golden retriever) lifted its hind leg
> and honoured me
> with its warm piss. (p. 239)

The site of traffic light is suggestive of hectic modern life, where any exclusive meditation is bound to recoil. The poet is not against meditation, provided it does not immobilize the *bhakta* mentally as well as physically. The dog's warm piss is a raw reminder of life's compelling ordinariness.

The denial of sensual pleasure in favour of a long celibacy to vindicate one's commitment to spirituality or higher *dharma* is problematized in the poem 'Pleasure'. The poem describes rather vividly how a Jain monk is ripped apart by his oath of long celibacy and the sensuous 'spring/fever':

> lusting now as never before
> for the reek and sight
>
> of a mango bud, now tight and now
>
> loosening into petal
> stamen and butterfly,
> his several mouths
>
> thirsting for breast,
> buttocks, smells of finger,
> long hair, short hair, ... (p. 139)

The carnal desires are aroused all the more by the non-human act of their denial. A point comes when celibacy itself becomes a kind of perverted pleasure:

> skin roused even by
> whips, self touching self,
> all philosophy slimed
>
> by its own saliva,
> cool Ganges turning
> sensual on him, (p. 139)

Ramanujan apparently does not approve the orthodox religious ideal of abnegation of sensual pleasure. The spiritual is to be realized through the sensuous.

The self-styled repositories of *dharma*, the pseudo-saints that occupy the spiritual market are targeted in the poem 'The Guru'. Ramanujan is not an easy docile worshipper whose devotion to the guru can be taken for granted. Guru's message to 'forgive the weasel his tooth', 'the tiger his claw' is well taken, but the latter part of message—'do not give woman her freedom/nor man his midday meal till he begs'— is not acceptable to the poet. Befittingly, he as per the sacred directions of the guru, gives 'the dog his bone', 'the parrot/his seed', 'the pet snake his mouse' but leaves the luxurious guru 'to clean his own shoe/for I (he) remembered I (he) was a man born of woman' (p. 251). Clearly, to him worshipping is not an act of boot-licking. The dignity and esteem of the self is paramount to the modern worshipper who would not let his guru go unaccountable.

## III

Ramanujan's 'Hindoo Poems' offer insights into this interface between *dharma* and postmodernism in an extended and exclusive manner. In canonical Hinduism, the body-soul conflict is settled invariably in favour of the claims of the soul.[9] It is believed that after death, the imperishable soul— the so-called essence of life leaves the physical frame and rises upwards the sky. Ramanujan with his characteristic prankishness caricaturizes the body-soul fissure created in all religious discourses, including Hinduism through a very non-religious, if not irreverent and heathen, invocation to 'dear body' that 'brought me (him)/curled in womb and memory'. In his 'A Hindu to His Body' (p. 40), the poet inverts the traditional Hindu focus by asserting the participation of the physical in the spiritual. Without physical attestation, the experience of the so-called ecstatic spiritual is nothing more than a rarefied rumour. Body is a metaphor of the poet's tangible being for it empowers him to 'clutch/ at grace, at malice, and ruffle/ someone else's hair'. Self-caricaturization is an important strategy to engender an air of impersonality and intellectual withdrawal from the emotive issue/situation. Therefore, when the poet pleads the soul not to abandon him, he is aware of his being garrulous: 'my garrulous face'. In fact in many ways, Ramanujan's entire attitude

towards *dharma* is marked by this garrulity which acts like a double-edged weapon in his poetry. The poetry becomes a plea for and against the self, the metaphor of essential *dharma.*

The ending of the poem reveals unmistakably the poet's desire to experience physically the spiritual fullness. This is an unusual desire, for spiritual fullness is not possible by being aware of the body at the same time. The poet pleads:

> let me go with you and feel the weight
> of honey-hives in my branching
> and the burlap-weave of weaver-birds
> in my hair. (p. 40)

'Honey-hives' and 'burlap weave' are signifiers of soul's refulgence. There is an underlying metaphor of human-body-as-tree holding honey-hives and nests of weaver-birds. The poet-as-pleader would not mind losing the human face or his 'unkissed/alien mind' in the process of death, but he is not ready to part away with his sensory perceptions. The poem, once again, brings into focus, the metaphysical vagueness in-built in Hinduism. As a self-reflexive modernist, Ramanujan fails to reconcile with the so-called grand spiritual course of the soul. There is no attempt to absolutize either *dharma* to the total exclusion of modern imperatives and vice versa.

Disinterestedness as a principle of equanimity and equipoise forms the core of Hindu concept of *sthitprajna.* In his poem 'The Hindoo: he reads his *Gita* and is calm at all events' (p. 79), Ramanujan punctures this high metaphysical doctrine first through overstatement and then through understatement. On the simplified plane of existence, disinterestedness may well become an equivalent of indifference and insensitivity. The poet's chosen terms are 'unstuck' and 'stand apart' which over-simplify the concept of withdrawal implicit in disinterestedness. In this rarefied concept, withdrawal is not a state of being neutral or inert; rather it marks a higher stage of consciousness which is perennially involved and engaged in human action and yet has the capacity to think impartially and dispassionately about life and its complex configurations. In lines quoted below the poet brings forth the existential dimensions of the metaphysical doctrine thus:

> ..., I do not marvel
> when I see good and evil: I just walk
>
> over the iridescence

of horsepiss after rain. Knives, bombs, scandal,
And cowdung fall on women in wedding lace: (p. 79)

Disinterestedness as a principle of self-denial stand transformed into an existential precept of survival. *Dharma* as concept takes on a rather mundane form on the level of praxis. In the face of all-round violence and chaos, the poet's preferred response is that of careful and calculated silence: 'I say nothing, I take care not to gloat.'

The unreality of disinterestedness is suggested through another telling reversal towards the end of the poem. The impossibility of rising above the genealogical past is brought forth thus:

Yet when I meet on a little boy's face
the prehistoric yellow eyes of a goat
I choke, for ancient hands are at my throat (p. 79)

Inheritance is an inescapable aspect of life that no intellectual or meditational endeavour can wish away. One may choose to overlook the outer violence, but the inner violence, i.e. violence caused by the tyrannical genetic code is impossible to get rid of. The Darwinian dictum that man is a descendent of monkey belittles man's grand claims to metaphysics. The pre-historic and the archaic is eternally present in us to checkmate and, as the poet says, even 'choke' our high designs. Built around the dialectics of cohesive *dharma* on one hand and amorphous existence, on the other, the poem brings forth the diverse pulls within the poet's Hindu self. Not satisfied at the rarefied abstractions of *dharma*, Ramanujan seeks *dharma* at the level of praxis.

Violence is negation of life. Non-violence therefore constitutes the core of Hindu metaphysics for it not only fits into the non-dual frame of *advait*; it also facilitates a stable and relatively quiet social order. In his poem 'The Hindoo: he doesn't hurt a fly or a spider either' (pp. 62-3), Ramanujan traces the roots of non-violence in him from the impotency and cowardice of his great grandfather who could not save his 'great swinging grandmother' from 'the fisherman lover who waylaid her/ on the ropes in the Madras harbour'. The high principle of non-violence has deliberately been equated with non-action or some latent weakness in character. The poet as a descendent of his 'still' and mute great grandfather bears not only 'his name', he inherits 'his spirit' too. Indirectly, the poet

does acknowledge the inescapable hold of *dharma* on his mental being, but not without exposing its politics. The postmodern strategy of misreading history does enable the poet in understanding the politics of *dharma*.

The asceticism in-built in Hinduism has emerged as a perfect metaphor for a creative postmodernist revision in Ramanujan's religion-centred poems. True that life is a 'bottomless/enterprise' but it needs to be lived fully. Instead of being bogged by cold morality, the poet advises us to 'keep the heart's simple given beat/ through a neighbour's striptease or a friend's suicide' ('The Hindoo: the only risk', p. 90). The 'neighbour's striptease' and 'friend's suicide' are symptomatic of volatile postmodern life style. The poet subverts the Hindu ideal for fasting or abstaining of food when he says: 'Always and everywhere, to eat/three square meals at regular hours.' The petty and petulant, the dirty and murky realities of life must be faced head on with a sense of challenge. The ascetic-moral frame if stretched to its extemes, can breed in an element of 'heartlessness' in an orthodox Hindu. The post-modern misreading of asceticism within Hinduism does enable the poet to critique it.

## IV

In his treatment of Hindu myths, Ramanujan once again reveals his predicament of being a product of hyper-real constructs of both *dharma* and postmodernism. Myths as grand fables do attract him, but their grandeur does not remain intact. The archetypal hold of mythology on the poet's religious mindset and the enticement of postmodernism inherent in the Chicago milieu generate a unique poetic mix in which nothing remains insular or unmixed.

In 'Mythologies 1', the divine becomes 'Terror with a baby face'. But the irony is that it is this 'Terror' only that redeems him; it 'suck[s] me [him] dry. Drink[s] my (his) venom/Renew[s] my [his] breath' (p. 221). The poet identifies himself with a demon full of 'poison and milk'. The acceptance of mythology is typically playful. The seemingly contradictory combination of 'poison and milk' and 'Terror with a baby face' once again point out to a mixed character of Ramanujan's poetic universe. It is this playfulness that lends a distinct creative edge in Ramanujan's poetry. He does not rationalize myths, nor does he sulk under them as a helpless spell-bound, submissive conservative. Ramanujan's poetry does neither

valorize, nor rationalize any of the constructs of either *dharma* or postmodernism, it is more a poetry of negotiation between these two opposite cultural pulls.

'Mythologies 2' (p. 226) is a creative reflection on famous Hiranyakashyapa-myth were Vishnu taking the shape of halfman, half-lion, i.e. Narasimha 'disembowels the pride' of arrogant and clever king Hiranyakashyapa who earlier through 'the perfect boon' of 'not to be slain by demon, god, or by/beast, not by day nor by night,/by no manufactured weapon' etc. had ensured immortality for himself. Instead of seeking the perfect insularity from death, the poet as devotee seeks his ordinary vision to be re-adjusted to 'see all things double'. Such a vision is more useful than the impossible immortality. Immortality is blindness. 'Seeing thing double' is not doubt or lack of sight, it is rather seeing the ambivalence of things clearly.

In 'Mythologies 3', the fashionable binary of the sensuous and the spiritual has once again been invoked to underline their complimentary and inclusiveness in the making of the self. The groom of Shiva's worshipper Akka encounters unprecedented situation, a unique experience which is neither sensuous, nor spiritual, 'a caress like nothing on earth' as Akka becomes 'death-/ly cold to [his] mortal touch' but remains 'hot for God's/first move' (p. 228). But soon as the groom continues to hover around her, she after initial indifference, throws 'away her modesty, as the rods/and cones of her eyes gave [give] the world a new birth'. It is through the groom that Akka sees 'Him then, unborn, form of forms, the Rider'.

## V

In Ramanujan's 'prayer-poems', the double-edgedness of 'Hindoo poems' becomes all more sharp and acute as the divine is invoked and deflated at the same time. The invocation is not unconditional and unqualified. The poet's 'Prayers to Lord Murugan' present an ironic and humanized version of *Tirumurugattrupadai* (A Guide top the Holy Murugan) in which fifth-century Tamil poet Nakkirar sings the praises of Lord Murugan, the ancient Dravidian god of fertility, joy, youth, beauty, war and love. In this original Tamil Guide, Murugan is valorized as 'the war god of the Dravidians, and the patron deity of the Kuravas or hunting tribes of the Dravidian country'.[10] The ironic subversion begins right at the outset. In the

original Tamil prayers, Lord Murugan 'shows his presence at all festivals/that are with much pomp held on holidays'.[11] The rejoicing followers herald his arrival and presence with 'the flag that bears/ the image of cock'. In 'Prayer-1', the sceptic persona of Ramanujan's prayers does not herald His arrival as simply an arrival of goodwill and harmony among the worshipping tribal; rivalries too appear with his arrival. The image of cock as symbol of victory in war reveals the rivalries within the tribes. Therefore the intellectual persona sees in His arrival, the arrival of both love and hate:

> lovers and rival
> arrive
> at once with cockfight and banner-
> dance. (p. 113)

The wishfulness in-built in the religious psalms, hymns and prayers is undone by the intervention of self-reflexive persona of the modern poetry.

In 'Prayer-2', the poet expresses his sense of bewilderment at the six faces of Lord Murugan:

> Twelve etched arrowheads
> for eyes and six unforeseen
> faces and you were not
> embarrassed. (p. 113)

More than simply deprecating the supernatural divine, the poet deprecates his own shaky and tentative self. The poet wonders how twelve eyes and six faces of the divine make love to one woman when he with his only one human face and two eyes finds it difficult to do so. It is at once an admission of the fallible human love and a dig at divine's extra-ordinary indulgence.

In 'Prayers 3, 4, 5' the poet juxtaposes the mythical with the existential. As a denizen of a modern city Chicago, the poet asks the red god Murugan:

> will the red flower ever
> come to the branches
> of the blueprint
>
> city? (p. 114)

The mythical red is set in contrast with the modern blue. The colour red in the original prayers is suggestive of vibrant tribal life. The red robes made up of red flowers and leaves of *aśoka* symbolize

healthy fearless life. The poet questions the relevance of red when 'Our blood is brown;/our collars white' (p. 116). The colours brown and white represent the cold and corrupt urban sensibility. Questioning the divine is not non-religious or irreligious, it may well be a strategy of self-criticism.

The crisis of retaining and preserving the average human face needs to be addressed first and foremost:

> Lord
> of faces,
> find us the face
> we lost early
> this morning (p. 116)

Only gods can afford the luxury of having six faces while the poet struggles to save his one and only face. His plea for the preservation of his only human face may be taken as a hearty laugh at the multi-faced god, but it also is a naughty dig at the unfaithful and dishonest worshipper.

The poet true to his postmodern leanings does not want god to be in the headlines, at the same time he does not want god to be absolutely absent:

> Lord of headlines,
> help us read
> the small print. (p. 116)

The very idea of being endowed with a rarefied sixth sense is fanciful and remote to his human experience:

> Lord of the sixth sense,
> give us back
> our five senses

The poet seeks intuitive as well as empirical knowledge for both together sustain human life. Only 'sixth sense' is not enough to sustain it, the ordinary 'five senses' must respond first; the sixth is to be achieved through first five.

Ramanujan as worshipper seeks dissolution but without any risk of drowning:

> Lord of solutions,
> teach us to dissolve
> and not to drown. (p. 116)

To G.N. Devy, the prayers in a way mark the limited range of Ramanujan's plunge into the unknown infinite: 'To belong is to drown oneself in one's particular context. Ramanujan would be willing to drown himself only 'eye-deep'. . . he would altogether resist drowning.'[12] In fact, Ramanujan's religious poetry is neither a total denial of self, nor an unabashed assertion of it. It is poetry of a man in the process as against man as product. It is a poetry of a 'critical' devotee in the process of dissolution as against the non-critical worshipper who is already drowned.

In 'Prayer-9', the poet caught in the discourse of absences and aporias seeks a deliverance from them:

> Deliver us O presence
> from proxies
> and absences

Being needs to be defined both in terms of the presence and the absence. The poet does never think in terms of abandoning the religion altogether, but he does not want to live in the world of the 'absent' or the 'non-material' perpetually.

S. Sengupta rightly sums up the poetic credo of Ramanujan's religious poems thus: '[his poetry] seems to be engaged in wresting existential meanings in God and religion through down to earth mocking images.'[13] More than the criticism the divine, the prayers are petitions for self-appraisal. Postmodernism in this particular way becomes an enabling, if not an ennobling aspect for the devout Hindu poet.

## VI

Another pertinent aspect remains to be addressed: Can Ramanujan be placed in the *bhakti* tradition of poets or poetry for his being eclectic and unconventional towards the canonical *dharma*? Most often by critics[14] and Indian English poets themselves, the contemporary Indian English poetry[15] is placed in the protest discourses of say Kabir or Tukaram or any other *bhakti* saint. True that in respect of negotiating and even subverting the religious paradigms, its orthodox practices and rituals, Indian English poets seem to carry forward the *bhakti* tradition of iconoclasm. But their claims to *bhakti* tradition cannot be stretched beyond a point. In *bhakti* poetry, the divine is never ridiculed, questioned or lampooned, it's the brahmanical order that institutionalized and

monopolized religion that comes under fire. The *bhakti* poets, even in their moments of vehement protest, remain essentialist or spiritualist.

The Indian English poets including Ramanujan approach the divine with humanistic considerations—considerations which do not necessarily lionize the human as an alternate centre of universe, but as one who is corruptible and fallible. In other words, the protest in *bhakti* poetry stems from a deep conviction of the spiritual and the sacred, whereas in the poetry of Ramanujan the protest stems from a deep awareness of the devotee being an ordinary vulnerable human being who cannot live on mere abstract ideals. Secondly, in terms of language too, the *bhakti* poetry use the native idiom, the local dialects; Ramanujan's medium is not only alien, it is colonial too. *Bhakti* movement was a social protest, a people's movement; Indian English poetry is at best an elite intellectual response from outside.

Ramanujan's poetry, therefore is neither a substitute of *dharma*, nor just a trick to blow up the established images/icons upside-down. It does neither rise up to the quasi-religious expectations of Arnold; nor does it end up as a playful discourse of utter irreverence. It does not tread any middle path either. *Dharma*, in its canonical form, proves to be an unrealistic proposition; and postmodernism, with all its irresponsible playfulness, an utterly non-viable credo. This poetry therefore is a double-edged discourse which does not throw any easy alternatives. Even in poems where postmodern poetics of sobversion and caricaturization operate overtly, *dharma* as an underlying impulse of order counterbalances the parodic drift. This inner drama of sublime and the subliminal generates a poetry of process in which there is a constant re-defining of the granted and the trendy, the inherited and the prevalent, the past and the present, the native and the foreign.

In the cross-fire of the two grand-narratives of *dharma* and postmodernism what ultimately stands out is the poet's *kavi-karma*. Ramanujan's *kavi-karma* lies in his being creatively responsive to the reality, inherited as well as adopted, context-specific as well as context-free.[16] This responsiveness, as shown above, at times might lend a partly non-reverential edge to his poetry, but it does vindicate his *dharma* of being a poet. The *dharma* of poetry consists in being sceptic about and interrogative towards the received notions of *dharma* per se.

With the kind critical revisionism in-built in Ramanujan's

creative responses, question of his placement in the stereotypical matrices of tradition versus modernity, nativism versus globalism, regional versus universalist becomes quite complex. Is Ramanujan a 'critical traditionalist' or a 'critical modernist'[17] or both? Or, in other words, is he a critical insider or a critical outsider or both? His Hindu background makes him a critical insider; his location in Chicago makes him a critical outsider. In fact the very binary of insider and outsider becomes redundant in case of expatriate Indian poets like A.K. Ramanujan. Since critical traditionalists as well as critical modernists do not believe in the absolutization of either tradition or modernity, Ramanujan can be placed anywhere between these two hybridized categories.

## NOTES

1. In the context of the paper postmodernism as a movement is seen more as an extended version of modernism rather than its negation. It can well be interpreted as 'late modernism' instead of 'anti-modernism'. The human self of modernism becomes more and more self-reflexive and even self-deprecatory during postmodernism.
2. Etymologically, *dharma* derives its meaning from the root *dhr* which means 'to hold', 'to sustain', 'to nourish' etc. Sudhir Kakkar defines *dharma* as 'both the principle and the vision of an organic society in which all the participating members are interdependent, their roles complementary', see Kakkar, *The Inner World*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1981, p. 40.
3. Edward Said uses the terms 'filiative' and 'affilative' to describe the location of critics situated in home and abroad thus ... two formidable and related powers engaging critical attention. One is the culture to which critics are bound filiatively (by birth, nationality, profession); the other is a method or system acquired affiliatively (by social and political conviction, economic and historical circumstances, voluntary effort and willed deliberation. See E. Said, 'The Secular Criticism', *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1983, pp. 24-5.
4. Kunwar Narain, 'The Pressures of the Ancient Past: Redefinition of Tradition', *Indian Literature*, 153, Jan.-Feb., 1993, p. 150.
5. A.K. Ramanujan, *The Collected Poems*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1995. The poems quoted in this paper have been taken from this collection. No separate footnotes have been given for the quotes, however, the respective page number has been mentioned in parenthesis at the end of each quote.
6. Gandhi in his *Hind Swaraj* significantly enough also observes more dangers in the ritualism in-built in the discourse of modernity than in the so-called supersitions of religion: 'Civilization is like a mouse gnawing while it is soothing us. When its full effect is realized, we will see that religious superstition is harmless compared to that of modern civilization'; 'The

condition of India', in Anthony J. Parel, ed., *Hind Swaraj and Other Writings*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997, p. 43.

7. 'Despair' has been one of the most important motifs of Indian philsophy. Ramakant A. Sinari observes: 'The feeling of weariness, absurdity, despair, sickness or bondage (*dukha, bandha, samsara*) that Buddha, Vardhamana Mahavira and the Vedic Upanisadic thinkers, ... found unbearable has remained the main characteristic of Indian consciousness'. See A. Sinari, *The Structure of Indian Thought*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1984, p. 22.
8. Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and the Mystic East*, Routledge, London and New York, 1999, pp. 116-17.
9. Except for the hedonistic Charvaka school and the empirical Nyaya-Vaisesika school, Indian philosophy by and large gives precedence to transcendence over concrete empirical reality, soul over body. S. Radhakrishnan, in his introductory remarks to *Indian Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, Fifth Impression, vol. I, 1999, p. 24 states, 'Philosophy in India is essentially spiritual'.
10. *Pattupattu: The Tamil Idylls*, tr. J.V. Chellliah, Tamil University, Tanjavur, 1985, p. 332.
11. Ibid.
12. G.N. Devy, 'Alienation as Means of Self-exploration: A Study of A.K. Ramanujan's Poetry', *Chandrabhaga*, no. 6, Winter 1981, p. 18.
13. S. Sengupta, 'Quest for Identity or Reappraisal?: A Second Look at Ramanujan's Poetry', in R.S. Pathak, ed., *Quest for Identity in Indian English Writings*, vol. II, Bahri Publications, Delhi, 1992, p. 88.
14. Bruce King, a perceptive critic of Indian English poetry, discovers, in the poetry of A.K. Ramanujan an 'irony often found in Indian medieval devotional poets'. See his, 'A.K. Ramanujan: 1957-1976', *Three Indian Poets*, Oxford University Press, Madras, 1991, p. 79.
15. Indian English poets tend to appropriate the Bhakti tradition in their poetic *weltanschauung*. Arun Kolatkar's following observation on his brand of irreverence amply reveals how desperate the contemporary Indian English poets are in positioning their products in native tradition: 'As far as irreverence goes, there is irreverence found in Tukaram. Just because it is devotional poetry it is not wishy-washy. Irreverence as an attitude is to be found in the saint poetry. Sometimes they make fun of the poses of the God. Tukaram says he is willing to come down to gutter level if necessary in dealing with God'. Cited in Eunice de Souza's 'Interviews with Four Indian English Poets', *The Bombay Review*, no. 1, 1989, p. 82.
16. In his essay 'Is There an Indian Way of Thinking? An Informal Chat', Ramanujan holds modernism to be a context-free phenomenon as against 'the context-sensitive nature of dharma'. This is how he describes the process of India's modernization: 'One might see "modernization" in India as a movement from context-sensitive to the context-free in all realms: an erosion of contexts, at least in principle' in McKim Marriott, ed., *India Through Hindu Categories*, Sage, New Delhi, 1990, p. 54.
17. Ashis Nandy underlines the futility of stereotype binary of tradition versus modernity in post-Einsteinian world; he favours critical modernism and critical traditionalism as two relevant frames of reference thus: 'Today, the

battle of minds rarely involves a choice between modernity and traditions in their pure forms. The ravages of modernity are known and, since the past cannot be resurrected but only owned up, pure traditions, too, are a choice not given to us. Even if such a choice were given, I doubt if going back 2,500 years into the past is any better than going 5,000 miles to the West for ideas, especially in a post-Einsteinian world in which space and time are inter-translatable variable. Ultimately, the choice is between critical modernism and critical traditionalism. It is a choice between two frames of reference and two world views'. See Ashis Nandy, 'Cultural Frames ...', in Fred Dallmayr and G.N. Devy, eds., *Between Tradition and Modernity*, Sage, New Delhi, 1998.