

Winning Recognition for Our Own Literatures

*Celebrity poet R. Parthasarathy
speaks to Sachidananda Mohanty
of his Works and translation of old Tamil epics.*

R. Parthasarathy is undoubtedly one of the most distinguished Indian English poets and translators in post-independent India. His *Rough Passage* (1977) will always remain a classic. It deals with the issue of bilingual creativity, and was a runner-up for the Poetry Prize London, 1977. Parthasarathy's poems and translations have appeared in *Chelsea*, *Chicago Review*, *Encounter Indian Literature*, *London Magazine*, *New Letters*, *Times Literary Supplement* and in numerous anthologies, including *The Norton Anthology of World Masterpieces* Vol. I and *The Penguin New Writing in India*.

Parthasarathy's translation of the fifth century Tamil epic *The Tale of an Anklet* (Cilappathikaram), published by Columbia University Press in 1993, was awarded the 1996 A.K. Ramanujan Book Prize for translation and the 1995 Sahitya Akademi Translation Prize. "R. Parthasarathy's *Tale of an Anklet*, wrote Raja Rao, "is without doubt the most remarkable translation of an Indian text made in a century..."

Parthasarathy was an editor with the Oxford University Press, New Delhi before moving to Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, New York where he currently teaches Indian Literature.

His forthcoming books are: *Darjeeling Tea*, a long poem; *The Forked Tongue: Essays on the Indian Writer and Tradition*, and a monograph on literary theory and practice in Tamil, Sanskrit and English. He is currently working on a translation of the sixth century Tamil Buddhist epic *Manimekalai*.

Parthasarathy looks serious and withdrawn. He chooses his words with care and occasionally pauses for emphasis. He might use mild humour but he is a far cry from the stereotypical image of a casual and carefree poet. In this conversation with **Sachidananda Mohanty**, he speaks on the reasons of the extraordinary success of his early work *Rough Passage*, about his later publications, including translations, the new literary taste in India and the United States and above all, his forthcoming poetical work *Darjeeling Tea* and the translation of the old Tamil Buddhist epic *Manimekalai*.

Excerpts from the interview. During January 2001 Professor Parthasarathy was in Delhi for the Sahitya Akademi Seminar "Translating India" where he gave the keynote address.

Sachidananda Mohanty: Professor Parthasarathy, you are best known for *Rough Passage*, a pioneering poetical work that deals with the problem of bilingual creativity. Looking back, could you tell us something about the circumstances that prompted you to compose this work?

R. Parthasarathy: In the 1960's I was trying to put together a book of poems. I wanted to make a book rather than a collection of poems. I achieved this feat sometime in mid-70's. The book was called *Rough Passage*, published in 1977 by the Oxford University Press. It had three parts: "Exile", "Trial" and "Home

Coming". It's a sequence of poems that explores the three themes.

What were the cultural compulsions?

Writing in English posed a certain problem about which I've written somewhere, particularly in *Whoring after Foreign Gods*. Basically, I am bilingual in more than one language: Tamil, Hindi, Sanskrit and English. The poems themselves set off a tension as a result of the conflict. Part of the process of writing *Rough Passage* was to resolve this tension. At one point I had seriously thought of giving up writing English altogether and writing in Tamil. I did

write in Tamil when I went to Madras and stayed there from 1972 to 1978. I did not get very far in it and I continued to write in English. Right now, I have no self-consciousness which I had in the 60's and 70's. In fact, *Rough Passage* is part of a longer trilogy I am working on now. The second book is ready for publication. It is called *Darjeeling Tea*. It's a single long poem of 125 pages, comprising some 1300 lines, and it will be followed by a third part called *Srirangam*. Many of the poems in the last work are already anticipated in *Darjeeling Tea*.

Coming back to my first question, were you surprised by the warm reception of critics and readers alike?

Well, *Rough Passage* has got into three different printings, the last one came out in 1989. Some of the poems here have been included in *Darjeeling Tea*. Yes, one is always surprised when one has interested readers and listeners. Of course, a lot has been written by scholars and critics. I can single out the one by Brijraj Singh and M. Sivaramakrishna.

As the editor of the Oxford University Press, were you encouraged to write poetry?

I was an editor with the Oxford University Press from 1971-1982 and we had a new General Manager from Nairobi, East Africa. He was very keen on publishing Indian Literature in English as well as regional Literature in translation. This was the right climate and as a result the very first book that I thought of was an anthology of Indian Poetry in English. The success of it is truly amazing! It's gone into 22 prints and sold over 60,000 copies all over as a text book. Wherever I go, that's the book I am best remembered by.

*Indeed, the anthology has become a classic like *Rough Passage*. What has been your experience as an anthologist?*

Going back to your question of institutional encouragement, I think this was the beginning of a series called *New Poetry in English*. Similarly, under *New Drama in English* we published Girish Karnad's plays and under *New Fiction*, U.R. Ananthamurthy's *Samskara*. All of these came out at a time when the press was ready to give recognition to our writing. Many of these books came to be adopted as text books in schools and colleges. It was both profitable and did extremely well. Unfortunately soon after my leaving the OUP in 1982, the series was discontinued, although occasional titles continued to appear here and there. But now it's thing of the past. Very little poetry is published all over the world these days.

Yes, of course, that's a separate story altogether. Tell me how did you go about the selection of the texts in your anthology in the first place? What's magical about the number ten?

At that time, the best known poets were Nissim Ezekiel and A.K. Ramanujan. I hadn't even published a book in 1976. I drew largely from manuscripts since many of the poems had not been published in book form. Then I sent out a questionnaire to fill in. That's how it all began. I wanted to make sure of the quality. I started with ten poets, based on the poets I knew best. I am sure if I were to do it again, I would include many other poets such as Aga Shahid Ali, Sujatha Bhatt and others.

What circumstances were responsible for your departure to the West?

Primarily I visited the West twice. Once in 1963-64 as a British Council Scholar at the University of Leeds in U.K. and again in 1978-79 as a Fellow for the State Department and a Writer in residence at the University of Iowa. It was then that I decided that I needed time to do my own writing. Publishing is a 24 hour job and so is teaching. I think the environment in the USA is far more friendly. And so I decided to pack up and leave. The first ten years I spent in translating one of the great classics of Indian Literature, *The Tale of an Anklet*.

Did you ever have any regrets that you left India?

Not at all! The work that I have done in the last fifteen years, I have not done in the previous fifty years.

Amazing!

I mean *Rough Passage* is nothing compared to *Darjeeling Tea*. As you know, I don't write much but I have published in journals in England and America. In a sense between 1982-1996 when I revisited India I simply non-existed. That doesn't bother me! Last summer I completed *Darjeeling Tea* and

I have also completed a book called *The Forked Tongue*, a collection of eight essays that I have published in journals. It examines the problem of the responsibility of the Indian writer today and to what extent he can connect himself with the Indian literary tradition and to what extent the past can be reinvented and made use of by the writer today.

I want to ask you two questions at this stage. One, did you ever teach?

As a matter of fact I did, in three different Colleges in Bombay.

And what was your experience?

Somehow I thought that teaching English in India is a dead-end. This was my experience. I have spoken about it extensively in my last visit, especially at the M.S. University of Baroda. That is my feeling. Many of us including yourself who teach English must face a big question mark about the future of the profession. I think English has taken over out of all proportion the teaching and study of Literature. I have suggested a few things to rectify this misbalance such as introducing Courses of Indian Literature in English and Courses in Translation.

Your efforts must have been pioneering?

I have often thought: why go on hacking to death British and American literary texts for one's Ph.D. when there are plenty of texts in the regional literature available in the translation form. I think this would be a more creative approach and you would then be teaching with greater enthusiasm and greater feeling. I think there are hundreds of classics in each language waiting to be translated.

When did you first moot this idea?

When I was at Skidmore College, USA. My American students know far more about Indian Literature than many English teachers in the country do!

You won the famous A.K. Ramanujan Award for translation. What were the factors

that inspired you to take up translation in such a big way?

Well, I have always been bilingual even when I was a graduate student at the University of Leeds in 1963-64. This was very much at the back of my mind that my English poetry in order to have such strength must align itself with our own literary traditions. You must read your own poetry in the original. You have to appreciate this literature and make it speak in an English voice. So, as far back as 1963 I wanted to translate the Tamil epics. Thirty years later it took me ten years to do it. It is an epic of ten thousand lines. It is extremely difficult – this old Tamil. Very few modern speakers of Tamil understand this language. I used to spend hours every day working on this.

How did you deal with the problem that in the U.S. you did not have ready access to Tamil language and culture?

In the early years, my family had moved from Tamil Nadu to Maharashtra and every summer I used to go and visit my grandparents at Srirangam. The atmosphere in every Tamil home is fairly orthodox: Tamil at home, Sanskrit for rituals, English at School, Hindi and

Marathi for neighbourhood. I had no problem at all. Our home in America is very much like our home in India. I am completely involved in winning recognition for our own literature.

Could you recall your association with Raja Rao and A.K. Ramanujan?

I was Raja Rao's editor. I produced an annotated edition of *Kanthapura* and *The Serpent and the Rope*. I also edited two of his last works. I lived with him for six months in Austin, Texas where I went back to the Graduate School. In the evening we used to cook together, and after dinner go over the day's work. So, in this way I had a complete understanding of how Raja Rao functions as a writer. To me he has been a one-man university. He completely changed my attitude towards the Word. To us Indians, the Word is Mantra.

And again, A.K. Ramanujan I knew quite well. I knew his wife in college and met him for the first time in 1967 in Madras. I was also his publisher. I published his poetry under the OUP as well as the translation of *Samskara*. I have been to Chicago and he has been to Saratoga. And, of course, in terms of Indian poetry in English he opened many doors.

What was the presence of Indian writers like when you went for the first to the US?

There were very few then but many more now. There was Ramanujan, Aga Shahid Ali, Meena Alexander and myself apart from G.S. Saratehandra. The audience for Indian poetry in English in USA would always be a limited one unless you speak to a captive audience on campus as I do. The real audience for Indian poetry of course is in India.

Any plan of returning to India for good?

No! I mean I won't categorically say one way or the other. What I would like to ideally do is to spend a year in India and another in the US. I think we are all mobile these days. One's home is where one's family ultimately is and my two sons and my extended family are over there now.

Well, we certainly look forward to the publication of *Darjeeling Tea*.

Bon Voyage!

Sachidananda Mohanty is a Professor of English at the University of Hyderabad

Latest from the Indian Institute of Advanced Study

Where Mortals and Mountain Gods Meet
Laxman S. Thakur (ed.)

Basic Objects: Case Studies in Theoretical Primitives
Monima Chadha and A. K. Raina (eds.)

Beyond the Four Varnas
Prabhathi Mukherjee

Minority Rights Discourse in India
I. P. Massey

India's Tibetan Connection
L. L. Mehrotra

Aspects of the Medieval History of Assam
Chandra Dhar Tripathi

Violence as Political Discourse
Birender Pal Singh

Secular and Pluralistic Elements in the Idea of State in Early India
Sibesh Bhattacharya

New Insights on Delhi Iron Pillar
R. Balasubramaniam

Jain Bronzes of Haryana
Devendra Handa

Consciousness and Scientific Knowledge
D. P. Chattopadhyaya