

Remembering U.R. Ananthamurthy (1932-2014)

R. Umamaheshwari

Addressing students and faculty as the Chief Guest of the 40th Foundation Day of the Indian Institute of Management-Bangalore in the month of October 2013, Udupi Rajagopalacharya Ananthamurthy (or U.R. Ananthamurthy, henceforth, U.R.) spoke of the “three hungers of our time”.¹ The first hunger, he said, is the “hunger for equality” and here he located exemplars such as Martin Luther King, Gandhi and Mandela, whose essential fight was that for equality. “We shall overcome”, he went on to add, was the most moving prayer in the world, which still brought tears to his eyes. The second great hunger was the hunger for modernity. “All old traditions, or the young in the old traditions are attracted to modernity; I mean not the modern world system but modernity as a state of mind.” He said that the passion for English came along with the passion for modernity. The third hunger was “spiritual hunger”. “People who have a hunger for god turn to spirituality without a religion or a prophet...All these hungers are connected with the hunger for equality...In our times...to develop any new thought you have to develop a critique of technology and science and a critique of development...You can create real excellence only through equality.” U.R. reiterated the idea of “sarvodaya” —or “unto this last”. The challenge of our times, he added, was “to redefine intelligence” to include all kinds of intelligence and not merely that of the cerebral kind. He spoke at length about the importance of the idea of reservations, which was Ambedkar’s idea, which had brought in people from the lowest castes into the mainstream. “Naiveté”, he said, “is the basis of new thought” and cited the examples of Gandhi and Yeats. How would Gandhi, unless he was naïve, have thought that by lifting a handful of salt, the British Empire would fall? “The naiveté of Gandhi defeated all the intelligence of the British.”

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In an interview given to Rajya Sabha TV in the programme, “To The Point”, few months prior to the last elections in Karnataka, he again iterated that “our times are oppressive.”²

U.R. always seemed unafraid to speak his heart out. Between his birth in Melige, Tirthahalli (Shimoga) on 21 December 1932, and his demise on 22 August 2014, Bangalore had turned into Bengaluru (a move he supported) and an entire story of the Indian democracy experiment had been played out, to raise more questions than yield answers. In his loss, India lost one of its most consistent critical voices of the public intellectual. Winner of the Jnanpith award and the Padma Bhushan, this literary mind became the most visibly celebrated face of the ‘navya’ (new) movement in Kannada literature across the world. In 2013, he was nominated for the Man Booker prize. His novel *Bharatipura* was shortlisted for *The Hindu* Literary Prize in 2011.

His elementary education happened in a traditional Sanskrit school in Doorvasapura and in Tirthahalli and Mysore. He did his MA at the University of Mysore and went to England thereafter on a Commonwealth Scholarship. He was awarded a doctorate in 1966 from the University of Birmingham for his dissertation, *Politics and Fiction in the 1930s*. U.R. started his career as a lecturer in the English department of the University of Mysore in 1970. By 1987, he had attained the position of Vice-Chancellor of Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam, Kerala. He was also appointed Chairman of the National Book Trust in 1992 and was elected President of the Sahitya Academy in 1993. He was twice appointed the Chairperson of the Film and Television Institute of India, Pune³. In between, he was visiting professor to several Indian and foreign universities, including, among others, Jawaharlal Nehru University, University of Iowa and Tufts University.

His “critical insider-ness” is something many have commented on; being born into a Brahmin family and having lived in a tradition, he was able to bear out his

acute observation with a rare critical reflection. And this critical reflection was seen in his most famous and much commented-upon novel, *Samskara* (1965), which was translated by A.K. Ramanujan as *Samskara: A Rite for a Dead Man* in 1978. It was made into a film in 1970, directed and produced by T. Pattabhirama Reddy (with screenplay by Girish Karnad and Pattabhirama Reddy and cinematography by Australian cameraman Tom Cowan). The film was initially banned for having the potential to create trouble for its pronounced anti-Brahmin stance, but was later released and went on to win the National Award for the Best Feature Film in that year. The film also won the Bronze Leopard at the Locarno International Film Festival in 1972.

U.R. has left behind a large volume of work: short-story collections — *Endendhigu Mugiyada Kathe*, *Mouni* (Silent Man), *Prashne* (The Question), *Clip Joint*, *Ghata Shradda*, *Aakaasha mattu Bekku*, *Suryana Kudure* (The Stallion of the Sun), *Eradu dashakada kategalu*, *Aidu dashakada kategalu*; novels — *Samskara*, *Bharathipura*, *Avasthe*, *Bhava* and *Divya*. He also wrote a play, *Avahane*. And he wrote several essays in literary criticism, as well. His collections of poems are — “15 Padyagalalu”, “Mithuna” and “Ajjana Hegala Sukkugalu”. He also wrote a novella *Bara*.

U.R. was deeply involved with the question of Indian languages and the politics of language and in many of his speeches and writings we find him expressing the need to understand the idea of India through the linguistic discourse. In the Fourth Sumitra Chishti Memorial Lecture on ‘Globalisation, English and “Other” Languages’, delivered at the India International Center, New Delhi, on 3 March 2009, U.R. had said:

Every language has a ‘frontyard’ and a ‘backyard’. As an example, I take my own home in my village: a large house, with a *chavri*, a frontyard. We had an inner house, and we had a backyard, which also had a well. My father received his friends in the frontyard. He used to get the paper *Harijan*, and translate it to them, talk about the freedom struggle among other things, and also the *Ramayana*. But in our backyard, women from all castes would come and chat with my mother about various matters. As a child, I listened to all this and perhaps that is why I became a writer. If I had been only in the frontyard, perhaps I would have become a politician⁴. . . . Almost all Indian languages have a backyard and also an *ati-shudra*, who now have become literate and they bring their rich experiences. We have much more spoken literature, oral literature, than written literature. And, this is in the ‘backyard’. Our languages have a great future because the ‘backyard’ provides a continuous supply.⁵

Further, he comments:

There are three languages that most people know. I don’t call any of them mother tongue. Mother tongue is a word which can be used only in Europe. I call them, in Kannada: *Mane Mathu*, *Beedi Mathu*, *Attada Mathu*. *Mane Mathu* is the language

of the home... There are many writers and poets who write in Kannada, but speak Tamil at home; Bendre, who wrote in Kannada, spoke at home in Marathi. This is culturally necessary. No *Mane Mathu* is given up in India. *Beedi Mathu* is the language of the province, or the lively speech of the street. Kannada is the *beedi mathu*. *Attada Mathu* is the language of the upstairs or refinement. Ramanujan wrote a poem: When I was hungry I spoke to my mother in Tamil, to get my food. I talked to boys and girls in Kannada when I was mischievous. My father, a professor of mathematics, was upstairs and talked to me in English when he called me’... He would have spoken to Ramanujan in Persian, or at one time, in Samskrutha, or at some point in future, if China happens to be dominant, Chinese will be the international language. And, this has no meaning for me. But we need an *Attada Mathu* to communicate: Sankara needed it, Ramanujan needed it, Gandhi needed it. One must not emotionalise matters by talking only about the mother tongue. In all our territories all these languages survive. If Karnataka has place only for Kannada and not other languages, it becomes a fascist state...⁶

‘I must point out... that in my thinking a cosmopolitan thinker is Euro-centred whereas the community-based thinker is an organic intellectual, and universalist.’⁷

In many of his works, we find a deep reflection on the nature of Time in people’s lives. His *time* was usually one which the *bhasha / desi* (as opposed to *cosmopolitan / margā*) traditions are familiar with; the way time is constructed in terms of the movement of one generation to another in a kind of seamless connect between the two, yet different from each other. Two of his works can be cited to highlight this element. One was a poem called *Wrinkles on Grandpa’s Shoulders* (1989), which I quote below:

The wrinkles on grandpa’s shoulder
Are the contoured hills and valleys seen from above...

My great grandfather’s ride upon his grandpa’s shoulder
Too was similar, in the woods, like mine
Clutching grandpa’s tuft- riding
Elephant back...

It is the same forest seen every day,
The favorite path...

The trodden path of the affable eternity....
These are the memories-
The wrinkles on
My shoulder that wish to carry.

Then there is a story in the collection *Ghatashraddha⁸, Kabhi na Samapt Hone Wali Kahaani* (*The Never-Ending Tale*).

The story itself begins with T.S. Eliot:

“Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future
And time future contained in time past”

“*Wahi kahaani, wahi ek kahaani, wahi, wahi. Meri daadi ne jo mujhe*

*sunaayi thi. Meri tarah mere pote ka beta bhi apni pad-daadi se zid karke kahaani sun raha hai.*⁹

(That same story, the very same one. The one which my grandmother told me. Just like me, my grandson's son too is listening to the story which he adamantly demanded to hear from his great-grandmother.)

The story itself revolves around the almost circular motion of time and hints at the idea (without making any statement) of transmigration of soul (or the body being a mere garment each soul wears), a sentiment echoed in the lines of the Gita in the verses (which the story ends with):

*nainam chindanti shastraani, nainam dahati paavakah
Na cha kledayantyo na cha shoshyati marutah*¹⁰

(The soul can never be cut into pieces by any weapon, nor can he be burned by fire, nor moistened by water, nor withered by the wind.)

In U.R. you had a person who observed the world and engaged with it at always close quarters, be it as a critical insider (when it came to writing about the outdated traditions that kept people imprisoned) or a political commentator of the times. In his latter role, he more often than not, fell out with many of his earlier supporters and flirted with controversy more than once. In his personal life, though, he lived by his convictions. Yet, it may occur to people who watched him closely as to why he was given a traditional ritual cremation in the end. The answer could only be that here was a man who lived with his contradictions, but openly so.

Be that as it may, so many years after *Samskara* was penned, we are still haunted by the subject-matter of that famous novel: caste, in news reports such as these (as late as July 2015):

Sometime around the second week of May, 45 Madiga families in Pathapally village of Telangana were driven out of the land that had been allotted to them by the government, by members of the Boya (upper caste) community. This was allegedly a reaction to an earlier incident, where Raghuram, a Dalit, had tried to access the village temple. After driving the Dalit families out, "*members of the Boya community then proceeded to bury their dead in this land to ensure that the displaced families cannot return,*" The Hindu reported. The report also says that the Revenue Divisional Officer and the DSP pulled down the huts and a shop owned by Dalits, alleging that they are encroachment, although they have documents to prove otherwise. They have also been denied water from a reservoir.¹¹

In the same case, there was also a call for a shutdown of the temple by the brahmin priest and to open it only after a 'purification ritual'. Moreover, the upper caste people implemented a social boycott of the Madigas and also tried to stop sale of groceries, etc to the Madigas.

So, the agrahara, Durvasa, of U.R.'s novel seems to live on in eerie replicas, though there are more of the complexities of caste-class and the politics of land and a kind of identity crisis forced upon rural India thanks to the economic model currently adopted, as 'add-ons' to this ancient tale. And there is no radical 'un-brahmin' Naranappa at the centre of this tale. At this point, let me revert to U.R.'s address to students and faculty at IIM-B, where he ended his speech with a poem, *London*, by William Blake, who was also, according to him 'naïve' enough to have composed the poem in 1794, at the height of the Industrial Revolution in England:

I wandered through each chartered street,
Near where the chartered Thames does flow,
A mark in every face I meet,
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

In every cry of every man,
In every infant's cry of fear,
In every voice, in every ban,
The mind-forged manacles I hear:

How the chimney-sweeper's cry
Every blackening church appals,
And the hapless soldier's sigh
Runs in blood down palace-walls.

But most, through midnight streets I hear
How the youthful harlot's curse
Blasts the new-born infant's tear,
And blights with plagues the marriage-hearse.

Ananthamurthy remarked, at the end of the poem, that we need to ask the kind of question of 'development' today that Blake had asked of industrialised England of his time. "Does Indian development now harm people? Yes! Tribal people loose their homes, land and ways of living..." with this development, he said.

Finally, A.K. Ramanujan, in his Afterword to the translated *Samskara* wrote:

One could reasonably take the view that this novel, written in the sixties, is really presenting a decadent Hinduism through the career of a limited hero, capable only of arcs, not full circles. As said earlier, the last phase of the Acharya's initiation is an anxious return, a waiting on the threshold; his questions seem to find no restful answers. What is suggested is a movement, not a closure. The novel ends, but does not conclude.¹²

Similarly, the physical raiment of U.R. Ananthamurthy has dissolved. The writings have ended; but the questions raised by his pen – in *Samskara* and thereafter – do not end.

Notes

1. The whole speech is posted on the IIM-B official website.
2. Rajya Sabha TV. URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=an0yx21NQu4
3. Currently site of a political struggle on behalf of the students and former alumni of the institution.
4. U.R. did try to enter politics. He made an attempt to run for the Lok Sabha elections, stating, simply, that his "prime ideological objective in opting to contest the elections was to fight the BJP." The Janata Dal (Secular) leader and former Prime Minister of India, H.D. Deve Gowda had made an offer for Murthy to contest for his party. But when the JD (Secular) sought power-sharing with BJP, Murthy is reported to have remarked, "I will never forgive my friends in the Janata Dal (Secular) for joining hands with the BJP." He also contested for the Rajya Sabha elections in 2006.
5. Adapted and Abridged in 'Words and the World', *IIC Quarterly*, vol. 36, No. 1 (Summer 2009)
6. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
8. I refer to a Hindi translation of the same. B.R. Narayana, *Ghatashraddha (Stories)*, Radhakrishna Prakashan, New Delhi, 2008.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 7-9.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
11. Abhishek Jha, 'How Land Continues To Be A Tool For Dalit Oppression: The Case Of Pathapally', <http://www.youthkiawaaz.com/2015/07/land-rights-for-dalits/>
12. U.R. Ananthamurthy's *Samskara*, Translated by A.K. Ramanujan, OUP, 1978, pp. 146-7