

D. R. Nagaraj, well-known Kannada critic and thinker, was just 44 when he passed away. That's surely no age for a critic of his caliber to die. It is an irreparable loss for Kannada and a lacuna for the intellectual landscape we are familiar with in India today. Here was a man who was deeply rooted in Kannada learning and culture which served him as a constant frame of reference, and at the same time intimate with the western culture and its ideologies.

His first important piece of writing was the thesis he wrote for his Ph.D. which was later printed with the title *Shakti Sharadeya Mela*. The invocation here is presumably to the goddess of energy (*shakti*), and to that of learning (*sharade*), and the analysis shows the ways by which the two attributes combine to produce significant poetry in Kannada. In his analysis of poetry D.R. is aware of the overwhelming impact the colonial agencies had on the poets, and the subterranean ways by which the latter, by exploiting the native sources of myth and symbol, developed their strong counter-voices, and a counter-discourse to match the all-powerful imperialist discourse of the west.

#### Social Thinker

The second book of great promise that he wrote was in English, which he called *The Flaming Feet*, the title invoking a well-known folk epic. This is to move from an application of poetics to an apprehension of politics, as being shaped by two archetypal forces in present-day India. That is, it is a force-field of tensions, a political theatre over-shadowed by the two powerful icons of Indian politics, Gandhi and Ambedkar. D. R. feels that they represent two crucial streams of thought, two models in contemporary India. In this 80 odd pages of a pamphlet that he wrote, D.R. comes out as a forceful social thinker with an unyielding grip on the socio-political issues involved in the debate which has exercised the Indian intelligentsia today. The critic in him deftly negotiates between two ideologies and shows how both represent our essential freedoms of necessity.

D. R. reads the difference between Gandhi and Ambedkar in the context of their respective orientations: Was the question of untouchability a civil rights issue or was it a part of a religious issue resolvable within Hinduism, as Gandhi saw it? Therefore, it is crucial for us in today's context to see Gandhi and Ambedkar as complementary. Moreover, there is a political necessity for such a hermeneutic exercise. This does not mean that D. R. is not aware of a certain ontological difference between the two approaches as exemplified by the two thinkers. Such a difference also exists between the contingent historical facts and the deeper historical

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TRS Sharma

concerns that the two thinkers shared.

The pamphlet debates a crucial aspect of the caste question, whether the panchayat system, introduced with much fanfare, has brought relief to the oppressed classes at the village level. The answer is a resounding No. The village, on the contrary, has disappeared as a 'distinct emotional entity because parts of its structure have stood apart or defied its constitutive rules', and 'the ideological and emotional bonds that cemented the old village are no longer valid.'

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A question that D. R. asks is the kind of poetics of the novel that shapes itself in the context of the hydra-headed caste system. His speculation on realism in fiction is salient; there is a worldview implicit behind the stylistic device of realism which is essentially monolithic, and which does not accept the legitimacy of other modes of being. That is, the philosophy behind realism is based upon 'the empirically verifiable structures' which the novelist cannot escape. But if one attends to the lower caste cosmologies that are virtually at work in, say, Devanoor Mahadeva's novel *Kusumabale*, a cosmology which enables the writer to function at multiple levels, then one wonders whether such a fictional phenomenon spells the death of the realist novel! Being perhaps a romantic at heart, D. R., while regretting the rather 'rambling' character of Devanoor's novel, looks forward to a novel which can combine multiple levels with the gripping power of a novel like *Samskara*. Can multiple levels move toward a point of dramatic convergence to acquire a kind of unitary power? This is a question that D. R. does not envisage.

## Signal Contribution

*Sahitya Kathana* (which means literary discourse), a collection of essays in Kannada, published in 1996, is a signal contribution to Kannada criticism. It contains D. R.'s deep engagement with philosophical, sociological thinking implicit in the Buddhist, Jain, and Sufi texts, often in opposition to Hindu texts, and in the contemporary thinkers such as Ananda Coomaraswamy and Ashis Nandi. In his sociological forays, D. R. confesses, Ashis Nandi was some kind of an intellectual mentor, a great influence on his thought and method. The method he endorses is that of the metaphoric thinking which Nandi, according to D. R., uses extensively in his social philosophy. Metaphor opens up more varied and heterogeneous sites for speculation/contestation than strict sociological thinking based on empirical evidence does. Nandi's enquiries are mostly confined to a frame of reference which includes and centralizes the relations between colonial powers and the forms of native resistance. The colonial is also the modern for Nandi, hence his assault on the western forms of modernity.

Similar is the case of Anand Coomaraswamy, and in some sense complementary too, for the latter hardly writes about the colonial or modern times. His primal strength instead lies in his ability to write a 'holistic' kind of art criticism to which history at times becomes an extension. His penchant is to see the historical binaries of the social and the spiritual as only apparent, which could merge effortlessly in his art criticism. Both the thinkers, in short, seem to resist modernity; Coomaraswamy by ignoring it, and Nandi by attacking it frontally.

D. R. sometimes writes as if the Hindu systems of thought and social arrangement are monolithic and ineluctably vitiated by structures of violence embedded in them. He seems to ignore at times that within the Hindu traditions there are sources of dissent and high revolt and that 'regulative principles' have often worked within them aided by human agency to moderate extremist positions. This happens specially when he is passionately involved in the cause of the dalits and against the bigoted brahminical orthodoxy. But then, since his major work has appeared in Kannada, he is our 'new grammarian of faith' who achieved a rare harmony between two dissimilar worlds, two discrepant cultures, ancient and modern, of east and west. In his writings there is a passion and an innovative search for new configurations, the excitement of a reveller in the carnival of ideas.

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