

## Recovering the Truth of One's own inner Experience

*Sachidananda Mohanty speaks to  
celebrity writer U.R. Ananthamurthy*

There are few writers of post-independent India who are as eminent, influential and path-breaking as the Kannada writer U.R. Ananthamurthy. A charismatic personality who broke taboos in his life and writing career, Professor Ananthamurthy combines in him the qualities that lesser men would find totally incompatible. He has been a Professor of English at Mysore University, a Vice Chancellor at M.G. University, Kottayam and has occupied the prestigious post of the President of the Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi. While he lent distinction to these positions as an academic and academic administrator, he has remained steadfastly true to his primary self as a creative writer and novelist. He has always championed the cause of the Indian languages and has won well deserved praise for his path-breaking work *Samskara* in Kannada, ably translated by A.K. Ramanujan into English.

Professor Ananthamurthy has also been a social activist, deeply influenced by Marx, Gandhi, Sartre, Lohia and the spiritual traditions of India. He has taken the best from all, while remaining yoked to none. It is not ideology but one's felt experience that should guide a writer, he feels. He has been a conservative to the radicals and a radical to the conservatives. He looks at himself as a Gandhian Socialist, and despite his admiration for the left in general, finds Indian marxists "dishonest" and doctrinaire, unable to grasp the cultural richness of India.

Ananthamurthy speaks with passion and eloquence. Spontaneity in thought and action marks his approach to life. Not surprisingly, he is attracted to D.H. Lawrence. At home in many worlds, his intellectual brilliance, simple manners and genuine modesty disarm even his greatest critics.

I spoke to him at great length and this conversation was carried out over several sessions. What emerges is a creative mind with razor sharp perceptions and insights, and a courage to hold on to views that may be unpopular or politically incorrect.

Professor Ananthamurthy speaks here about his life and career as a creative writer, his views on art and ideology, and related issues. Excerpts from the conversation:

*Sachidananda Mohanty:* How and when did you begin writing?

*U.R. Ananthamurthy:* Most of us write because we enjoy solitude. I found that even children enjoy solitude. They want to play but at the same time they want to play with themselves. When I see my grandson talking to himself, I see the origin of my own writings. You want to talk to yourself. It is the moment when you discover that there is a *Sakshi* in you. In fact there are two selves: A self which participates in the play and a self that stands apart and watches, like the great image of the Upanishads, the bird which eats and the one that watches, the two golden birds. They are in all of us and are the source of all writings.

*Sachidananda Mohanty:* You have been described as a highly original writer of the Modernist School in Karnataka. In what way can we say that your first novel *Samskara*, dating back to 1965, was a modernist response to your received critical tradition?

*U.R. Ananthamurthy:* When I first published my second collection of stories (by Manohar Granthamala) they called it "Navya" and I was angry. I never thought that I was writing anything consciously like modernist tales. There is a story to it. During my honours, I took some of my stories to a writer in Kannada whom I admired. He was Anandam, a very fine writer who wrote beautiful stories like the one entitled "The Girl I Killed". He was an artist. He took a blue pencil and a red pencil and used them liberally. He said I was writing "foolish, modernist stuff". At that time I was a great admirer of Shelley. I loved Shelley! I think in my honours I had read practically everything by Shelley and I was against Eliot. I was surprised that I was being described as a modernist when I did not like modernism at all. I took my work to Gopal Krishna Adigar, a great modernist poet. I did not tell him what Anandam had said. He read them and remarked: "Oh you have the modernist element in you! That's how I

came to the "Navya" school. Something deep within me must have compelled me to do so! But it was not a self conscious ideological position, (I have never stuck to any such position. I have only been bothered that I should write about what is true at any given time about my own inner experience). That is all! The world around us is constantly giving us opinionated ideas and we begin mouthing them. You are a writer if you can recover in solitude truths of your inner self. That is difficult! Equally difficult is it to know how to express it because the expression can go against your feeling, because these are all habituated responses. I have struggled with that even till this day. We are surrounded by more opinions in the modern world than we did in the past.

*Sachidananda Mohanty:* You have two books of literary criticism *Pragya Mattu Parisara* and *Sannibesa*. What were your main objectives in writing these two books?

*U.R. Ananthamurthy:* You know I have done a lot of creative essay writing, though not academic pieces. I do not even make any distinction these days between pieces of this kind and my short stories. A short story can become an essay and an essay can become a short story. I have been freely using this form. I have always worked out my ideas by submitting them to my experience, and my experience to the test of my ideas. I have done both in many of these essays. You know, I have been politically engaged, socially engaged and have had to swim against the current. I belonged to a group of rationalists and progressive thinkers. But even when I belonged to them, I had my own skeptical attitude. I grew up in a very orthodox surrounding with my skepticism. So what else can I do but write about them! I found the autobiographical essay path a good way of expressing myself. As a matter of fact, my recent work contains quite a few of controversial pieces. It has been translated into English. It is called "why not worship in the nude"? You know there is a place near Shimoga where women worship in the nude. They go in a procession after bathing in a river and worship Renuka. These women came from the lower castes. They would be possessed. Some cameramen went and took pictures of these nude women. I found the attitude of the protesters against this practice quite hypocritical because many of them who went to night clubs had never protested. I took quite an unpopular view. I said that this is a world to which I cannot relate because I am educated. But I would like to have a profound respect for cultural practices of such people. I have of course said much more than that. This is also an essay on literature and on art. Of course all my leftist friends and rationalists attacked me for writing this. Certainly I was not approving of this practice of nude worship. I went to our great story telling traditions. You know, a great mystic like Allamma would not approve of the practice in question. Because she takes a position that all the exhibitionistic expressions (including those of religion)

are not meaningful. And so the practice could have been criticized within the spiritual tradition. Our great religious traditions in India intervened, debated and disagreed. But modernization is totalistic. The modernization of the western kind leaves no space for any of these indigenous systems. This whole essay was a protest against that kind of westernization, an intolerance of expressions of faith. I also said that it was happening in my district. Strangely I never knew about this even when I was growing up. These women took the cameras and smashed them like coconuts offered to the deities.

*Sachidananda Mohanty:* Critics have often noticed the influence of D.H. Lawrence and Jean Paul Sartre in your works. How did you get interested in these two writers?

*U.R. Ananthamurthy:* Sartre for a while, because I was influenced by Marxism. When I went to England and wrote my doctoral thesis, I wrote about marxist writers and marxism was very important in my growth. I grew up as a kind of Gandhian socialist. But I am sure that marxism has enriched my understanding of Gandhian socialism represented by Jayaprakash Narayan, Ram Manohar Lohia and Achyut Patwardhan. As a critic, marxism and Sartre interested me, but my interest in Lawrence was much more profound than any of these. You know, when I read what (Sri) Aurobindo said of Lawrence that he was a Yogi who was lost in a white skin . . .

I went to Lawrence from J. Krishnamurthy and to J. Krishnamurthy from Lawrence. I also went to Lawrence after Shelley. And so all these influences are clearly interconnected.

*Sachidananda Mohanty:* Given the fact of your interest in Marx, Lohia and Gandhi, did you find Gandhi's views on social transformations inadequate?

*U.R. Ananthamurthy:* It's a good question! As a matter of fact, Lohia enriched my Gandhi. There is no Lohia without Gandhi! And I think Gandhi is the most original of the Indian thinkers. Lohia too was one of the most original minds of our

times. But he was a dreamer. He wanted the whole of the Indian society to be radicalized by the unity of all the non "dwijas". But that never happened, and that can never happen! What I find most remarkable in Lohia is that he stood by the Indian languages, and secondly, he was a great votary of decentralization. His notion of the "four pillar State" was also an influence of Gandhi. You know in cultural questions, no marxist in India has thought as deeply as Lohia. I went to Lohia and Gandhi because the Indian marxists did not teach me as to how I could deal with the richness of the Indian culture.

*Sachidananda Mohanty:* It is said that with the publication of your third novel *Awasthe* (1978) and *Surya Nambudire* (1989), you express profound disagreements with the project of modernity. To what extent do you think your interest in mysticism and other realms of religious experiences have shaped this world view?

*U.R. Ananthamurthy:* I grew up in a world where I saw a corruption of religion and hypocrisy of religion. I also noticed profound expressions of religious life. I could not write eulogistically about religion and forget about its abuses. You know religion serves many functions. Stalin made use of religion when Russia was attacked by the Nazis. He made use of the Russian Orthodox Church to fight Hitler. Religion is also very useful to safeguard the property of the rich. On the other hand religion is used by every mother in every home to educate the children in ethical values. Religion – all religions – show us the path of contemplation.

When we speak of religion, we should also be critical of the first two which we tend to forget. In a way Lohia helped me recover the right attitude to religion.

*Sachidananda Mohanty:* Some readers believe that you have more or less disowned your first collection of stories (written in 1955). It has been described as a book of sentimental stories. Is this true? And if it so, why have you disowned it?

*U.R. Ananthamurthy:* I haven't disowned it! I never disowned my writings! As a matter of fact, through that book I got to know my Kannada. You know Gopal Krishna Adiga wrote an introduction to that book. And he was so critical that he spoke of only two stories in that collection. There is a story called "Tai" ("mother"). It's a story within a story. It's quite experimental. And when it has been translated into other languages without telling the readers that it is one of my earlier stories, it has been liked. It happened in Kerala once. And I feel good about it. I do not know how good I write, I need the readers or a good critic to tell me so.

*Sachidananda Mohanty:* In the publication brought out on the occasion of your winning the Gyanpith award, D.R. Nagaraj says: "Ananthamurthy appears like a conservative radical and as a destabilizing progressive". Your comments?

*U.R. Ananthamurthy:* Well I have talked about it already. I make a difference between a reactionary and a conservative. I have always liked the comment of John Stuart Mill who told his very progressive disciples that they should go and read Coleridge. Because Coleridge represents a profound conservative tradition and Mill felt that if one didn't read Coleridge, their liberalism would be thin and would not be based on a deeper understanding of the human predicament. I tend to be very restless with the leftists' simplicities, simplifications and dishonesties. And of course my quarrel with the traditionalists is well defined. You know the traditionalist in India is on his way out. The multinational is much more dangerous to the earth than the worst of the Zamindars. Oppose the traditionalists and conservatives by all means, for they may stifle life. But life may be stifled in many other ways too! Soviet land stifled life! I believe a writer has no business to take sides and forget the truth.

*Sachidananda Mohanty:* Did you ever find any contradictions between your belonging to English Studies and your

passionate advocacy of Indian languages?

*U.R. Ananthamurthy:* I didn't find it contradictory, because whatever I admired in English literature, whether it was Wordsworth or Shelley, later on Lawrence, Eliot or Yeats, or even the writings of F.R. Leavis, they sent me back to my own concepts and culture. I have always made this distinction: that British imperialism brought English literature. But the main tradition in English literature was opposed to British imperialism. India chose from the colonial impact whatever it wanted to choose so far as literature was concerned. English was used by us to read many of the European Masters who were opposed to British imperialism. The gift of English would never be belittled. And what does it do to a man like me? It sends me back to my vernaculars. I do not therefore see any contradictions.

*Sachidananda Mohanty:* Looking back, what do you think have been your major achievements during your stint as the President of the Sahitya Akademi and what would you consider your significant failures?

*U.R. Ananthamurthy:* I am very happy about certain things: The setting up of the Ananda Kumaraswamy fellowships, for instance. I felt that we are so Euro-centered that we know even secondary people in Europe. But we don't know the first rate people in Asia: In Indonesia, Malaysia, in Sri Lanka. . . . Because all our eyes have been riveted to the West. Ananda Kumaraswamy was a great sage. I consider him a sage because he was one of the first great Indian thinkers who told us that we need not be ashamed of the Indian heritage. He has been a very great eye opener, to Indian art, Indian painting, Indian sculpture. . . . So I set up Ananda Kumaraswamy fellowships. Secondly, quite a few tribal languages came to me and said they wanted to get recognition from Sahitya Akademi.

I then took a stand that the eighth schedule be scrapped because it has been used mostly for political purpose.

All languages of India are languages of the land. They need not be listed. I said: "Sahitya Akademi is not there to recognize languages, but to recognize literature. If there is literature in any of the remote and far away languages of India, we should recognize them". And so we began the "Bhasha Sammans".

Thirdly, we set up a centre for translation in Bangalore with Dr. D.R. Nagaraj as the Honorary Director. There were also important changes in the constitution of the Sahitya Akademi. No member of the Akademi, for instance, is now on the Jury that selects the prize winning titles. As for the quality of the books that win the Sahitya Akademi prizes, you know, the Akademi administration cannot ensure the quality. This has to be done by the languages themselves. We have to function democratically. Democracy has its own virtues, and limitations. In literature, democratic decisions, based on a majority decision, may be wrong but we have no option in this regard.

*Sachidananda Mohanty:* Some critics feel that the very notion of Indian literature tends to homogenize our collective experience. Therefore they are against such a notion. It seems to me, however, that while pluralism is fine, we cannot have the notion of the Indian sensibility unless we have the notion of a core experience of the Indian culture? What, in your view, would constitute such a core experience?

*U.R. Ananthamurthy:* I don't think it is a good idea to define what a core experience is, because if you try to define, then perhaps you would be exercising some kind of invisible power. There are many cultural strands that have brought us together. These have enriched our literary cultural experience, and thereby constitute what has come to be known and celebrated as Indian literature.

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