

The Unwritten Backyard

U.R. ANANTHAMURTHY

I am very happy to be here and to share this stage with Gopalkrishna Gandhi. As he spoke, I felt deeply moved, because in his words I was seeing someone who was very dear to me, his philosopher brother Ramachandra Gandhi.

Peter Ronald de'Souza is a friend from many years, with whom I share many concerns. I was among those who fought to keep the IAS as per Radhakrishnan's dreams, a sanctuary for scholars. Otherwise, in these days of rampant 'liberalisation' it would perhaps have ended up as another five-star hotel.

My health wouldn't have allowed me to travel for the lecture. I am happy that both Peter and Gopalkrishna Gandhi have come all the way to organise this lecture in Bangalore.

Today, I want to discuss a subject that I often speak about. What is it like to write in a regional language? It's not a profound question, for it ought not to be — Shakespeare wrote in a regional language, Dante and Milton did, so did our own Kuvempu. Our ancient poet Pampa also wrote in a regional language. Great books in English are written by those who view the language they write in as a regional language. No one writes any profound literary piece in the CNN or BBC language.

As far as creativity is concerned, being regional is not a limitation. But throw it into the world of commerce and it is a serious limitation — we cannot 'sell' our writings beyond a certain border. When Shakespeare was writing, most people in England spoke French at home. It didn't matter. When I started writing did I have a choice? Yes, many writers in Kannada thought they had a choice. Kuvempu, our great poet who wrote the epic *Ramayana Darshanam* and those two great novels *Kanooru Heggadithi*

and *Malegalalli Madumagalu* began writing in English. He met the English poet James H. Cousins and showed him his English poems. Cousins was all praise for Kuvempu's poems as they were as good as of an amateur poet of England. Cousins, however, told Kuvempu that writing English poems would leave him an incomplete writer. "You should write like Tagore in your own language," he told Kuvempu.

As I speak today, I have this great man Tagore in mind. There was once in the ancient past a pan-Indian literary figure and that was Kalidasa. He wrote in Sanskrit, a language that was prevalent among the educated classes all through the country. Every language writer wanted to model himself on Kalidasa, the first, greatest Indian literary figure. Even Pampa, the Kannada writer a thousand years ago had Kalidasa as his literary model, but wrote differently and with an originality that was natural to the Kannada language. After Kalidasa, the other tall litterateur born in India was Tagore. Most Indian writers, in pre-Independent India tried to inherit the spirit of Tagore into their writings. And what is remarkable is that Tagore wrote in a regional language Bengali, and not a pan-Indian language like Sanskrit in the past. This is magical — during the Independence movement, and the age of Gandhi, a regional writer like Tagore could achieve what a writer like Kalidasa, who wrote in a cosmopolite language, could in ancient India.

Tagore gave hope to every Indian writer writing in regional language. Bengali is neither as ancient as Tamil nor is it as widely spoken as Hindi. It is a language that is spoken by a small region. Yet, he could make a huge impact. Of course, English helped him because he was translated into English. Many of the early translations

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that were done by him were so unsatisfactory that they had to be retranslated. But something magical happened — many people across the country learnt Bengali in order to translate Tagore. There was a time in India when regional writers were read widely. The Bengali novelist Sharath Chandra was one such writer. He was so well-known in Andhra too — in fact more than Tagore — that many people thought that he was a Telugu writer.

We have had great bilingual writers as well, for instance, A.K. Ramanujan. He wrote in English as well as Kannada. The Russian novelist Nabokov was also one such, he wrote in Russian as well as English. I was born and brought up in a village and English came into my life only later. When I am writing a novel in Kannada, it's difficult for me to switch over to English. I even make mistakes in English. When I am using English I find very difficult to switch over to Kannada. I really believe that it is very difficult to be a bilingual writer. But some people manage to be bilingual. To me it appears as a strange thing that Nabokov wrote a different kind of a novel in Russian from what he wrote in English. This was true of Beckett too, and it certainly happened to Ramanujan too — he wrote a different kind of poetry in Kannada from what he wrote in English.

I want to talk about a very rare text that a Sanskrit scholar like Sheldon Pollock studied, it's the *Kavirajamarga*. This text was written in the 9th century in Kannada. It is the book to guide writers in Kannada, without giving up the model of Sanskrit, but altering it suitably. *Kavirajamarga* makes sure that Sanskrit doesn't become the only model, because with that the indigenous strength of Kannada will be lost. It's a difficult text because it tries to tell what kind of a mixture of Kannada and Sanskrit would make the right aesthetic expression. Therefore it is a search for a Desi, without giving up the Marga, which is the great way of Sanskrit. So we lived and wrote as Indians and at the same time developed a certain language for Kannada. Nrupathunga or Srivijaya the author of *Kavirajamarga* defines Kannada as geographically bound and limited, a language spoken from Godavari to Cauvery. But this physical area reflects the world outside, and more importantly it is a world in itself.

Later, Dante said we should write in the language of the people rather than in Latin, a classical language. He presented this argument in Latin. Milton too expressed similar views not in English but in Latin. In the world of Science, Newton wrote in Latin, but Darwin wrote in English. Whoever wanted to make an impact on the whole community wrote in English. Only, exceptionally, *Kavirajamarga* is in Kannada, the language it champions.

Nrupatunga writing his *Kavirajamarga* borrowed ideas from Dandi and Bana, the two great Sanskrit scholars, and subtly transformed them to the need of Kannada. What our languages took from Sanskrit differed from language to language. Tamil is more ancient than Kannada. When Tamil took its script from Bramhi it took only those that were necessary to speak and write Tamil. Two centuries later, when Kannada evolved its script from Brahmi, it took the entire range of script, although all of them are not needed for writing or speaking Kannada. Therefore, its ability to receive words from other languages gained. I can easily write Clinton, but Tamils write it as Glinton. Gandhi can be written as Gandhi in Kannada, whereas in Tamil it is written differently, and pronounced differently. Since you can take any word from anywhere with all the phonetic scripts being brought into the language, Kannada could develop in a different way from Tamil. Tamil has its own glory because it stays very close to its roots, whereas Kannada absorbs from other languages.

Prior to *Kavirajamarga* there is no existing Kannada literary text, but the author takes many examples from literary texts, so we have to presume there was some literature before him in Kannada. But Nrupathunga doesn't approve much of it — he feels that it uses old forms in excess. He desires for a language that has the character of the Kannada land.

It was Nebrija, the Spanish scholar who told the catholic queen Isabella, that a good empire is of no use when people do not speak the same language. "One part of your empire doesn't understand the other. Let me create a grammar." Nebrija could establish an empire because he created a grammar. Language is again something that creates a nation. And way back in the 10th Century, *Kavirajamarga* spoke of "Kannadadol Bhavisida Janapadam", which means our people as imagined in the Kannada language. Hence, it's not a religion that defines Karnataka. It doesn't take a race to define Karnataka. It takes a language to define Karnataka.

The 12th century, when the literacy rate was lower than ours, the Shiva Sharanas, worshippers of Shiva, came. They were great poets. Their vachanas have been translated by Ramanujan, in his wonderful book, *Speaking of Siva*. Look at the world Vachana; it is that which is spoken, not written. It would be remembered by oral transmission. There are enough mnemonic devices in the verbal structure of the vachanas.

I still remember, when I was in China in the Tainaman Square along with other writers, we saw blood. A Chinese-Urdu scholar came to one of us who was an Urdu scholar and said, "I can't write what I want. But I will

put together a little poem in Urdu that can be easily remembered and also transmitted orally'. A Malayali poet can stand here and for half an hour recite a poem without looking at the paper. It's like Vedic chanting. It has that kind of a power. This is possible in Hindi as well. In fact, in all our Indian languages. All this has been lost in the language of international community.

English is still a living language. It has a frontyard and a backyard. English is still alive because it has a backyard. At one time America was its backyard. When English was exhausted in England, the Americans wrote a new kind of a literature. They brought their voice into the English language. For instance, Walt Whitman. He was almost like Ramakrishna Paramahansa. There is nothing on which he did not speak. There is another writer in my language who is like him, it is Purandaradasa. There is nothing on which Purandaradasa did not write. He even writes on a man who has two wives, and packs in a spiritual message.

And then the British had Africa in their backyard. Yeats and other writers came from Ireland, which was the backyard of England. But our languages have a long backyard. Our languages have oral epics in abundance.

The frontyard is occupied by people like us who know either Sanskrit or English or Persian. If you take the usual village home of a rich Indian, it has a frontyard where people gather. And then it has a middle place which is dark and cool. This leads to the kitchen which has entry only for the mother. After the kitchen there is a backyard and a well. When the metaphor of the frontyard and backyard came to me, all this conjured up in my imagination.

My mother brings water from the well and women from other communities also come there. The women talk what matters to them, much of which they cannot speak before men. They talk about husbands not being loyal to them, their own physical problems and several other things. If a boy doesn't haunt the backyard, he will not become a novelist. He will become only an engineer or scientist. My grandfather could go and find a medicinal plant in the backyard. And my mother could cook a quick dish for a guest who came in an untimely hour from the leaves that grew in the backyard. India had a very rich backyard.

Now, Dalit women and backward people are getting education. As a result, there is more vibrant literature. Indian languages have acquired a new political consciousness, a consciousness of the human dignity of the people who speak these innumerable languages, Even though I know English, I have to make a conscious effort to write in it. When you write in your regional language,

it should never be written in the hope that it will be translated into English. One should write what is difficult to translate. Probably then it is possible to have a Tagore kind of figure in every Indian language. Our languages are in no way inferior to the European languages. Many European languages are also like our languages. Some words in English have an inherent condescension towards the regional. For instance, the word ethnic. I hate the word. If I write in a vernacular, even Shakespeare wrote in vernacular, Dante wrote in a vernacular, Milton wrote in a vernacular. We use the word *bhasha* for to all the Indian languages. If we all spoke the same language, then we could all get an IT job anywhere in India. Then I think India will become a tasteless, colourless country. We are a democracy because of these languages. Although there is an attempt to kill them through commercialization, we must hold on to them. We must make a plea for them. Even at 80, my political aim is to see all children go to a common school.

I became a writer because I went to a common school. That means I wore a shirt, not a little piece of cloth on my Brahminical body that I wore while at home. I wore a shirt and sat with other shirted children of all castes. I mingled with them and street knowledge came to me through them. I became a writer in my language. But now our children go to very special schools where they don't mix with each other.

I use a great story of *Mahabharata* to talk about this. Krishna was a king. He had a friend called Kuchela in school. Kuchela was very poor. Later in his life, Kuchela's wife said, 'Your friend is such a big king why don't you go and ask him for some money?' Kuchela goes to him with a fistful of beaten rice, which is all he had. Krishna eats the humble beaten rice and Kuchela grows rich. In these times, Kuchela and Krishna don't go to the same school. Therefore neither glory comes to the Krishnas of our land, nor do the poor share their experience with the rich.

My commitment to write in my language, therefore, extends to this commitment for a common school. I keep writing about it without being tired of it. At one time Sanskrit was necessary for Kannada, now English is necessary for Kannada. I had to go to school in a town and come back to my village where there was a Sanskrit school. There used to be debates in Sanskrit, and we had produced a handwritten magazine. There used to be articles in English, in Sanskrit and in Kannada. This was even before India become independent. It was called *Tarangini*, and later on *Samskara* was born with an article that I wrote for this magazine.

A Brahmin boy in my village had an affair with a Dalit

woman. Soon there was plague in our village and many Dalits died because they were not inoculated. But this pretty woman who had an affair with the Brahmin ran away. This reminded me of the story of the Sleeping Princess who comes back to life because a charming prince touches her. Touch became a very important theme for me, and it was also when Gandhi was talking about untouchability.

Kannada is my "Jeernagni", it has digested English, Sanskrit, and through the vachanakaras the essence of

Upanishads. Many of us, Kannada writers like B.M. Shree and Gopalkrishna Adiga learnt English but wrote in Kannada. So it is this Jeernagni that makes it rich. How does it matter if it exists within a geographical space? When I write Kannada, I not only have Camus and Sartre as my contemporaries, but even Pampa and the Vachanakaras. It is a combination of the modern and the folk world, in the unwritten backyard — all three come in.

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