

THE CONTROVERSIAL BARD: U. R. ANANTHAMURTHY

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Udupi Rajagopalacharya Ananthamurthy or *Ananthu* as I affectionately called him was one of the Bards of Indian polity. Not unlike William Shakespeare, the Bard of Avon, he commented on events, ridiculed fundamentalism and mocked authority. From his deeply embedded Socialist convictions he examined modern times through the lens of Democracy. He questioned all things and analysed all motives in the belief that it would lead to a deepening of democracy. On January 26, 2014 he said; *"...everything is politics. In a democracy, one has to constantly respond...it is not about what is right in the eternal sense. We'll have to do some things that are right at the moment. But that is politics and we'll have to do what is right."* He believed that the role of a watch dog was not a duty that can be abdicated by anyone irrespective of who they were.

Our paths first crossed in 1967. I was 15 and though my parents were not in politics they had many friends in the Socialist Party that shared their political beliefs, but also their love for art, music and literature. One day over lunch at our home Shantaveri Gopal Gowda, a long time friend of Ananthamurthy's and the one who introduced him to Lohia Socialism and shared his passion for Kannada literature, told the story of Ananthamurthy's novel, *Samskara* to Dr. Lohia and Madhu Limaye. He said that Ananthu was a Lohia follower [though he had never met Lohia in person]. My parents Sneha and Pattabhi were struck by the story and decided to make it into a film. Dr. Lohia encouraged them and with the help of many talented friends the film was made¹ and Ananthu became a part of the 'Family Pattabhic'.

Interestingly 'Samskara' the novel was inspired by a film. When Ananthamurthy was in England he went to see "The Seventh Seal" by the celebrated Swedish Director Ingmar Bergman with his teacher Malcolm Bradbury. Thought it didn't have subtitles he 'experienced' the film and could relate to the plague, the atmosphere of death and the indecision of the Protagonist. There had been a plague in his hometown and he remembered how the upper casts were treated by the doctor while the Dalits were not.

¹ T. Pattabhi Rama Reddy /"What Life Has Taught Me" - Deccan Herald November 13 1993

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Ananthu was intrigued by the fact that time was so linear in the West while in India they ran spirally like an archaeological site where the layers of time were sandwiched together as Ananthu said; *“You in England or Europe in order to create the medieval ages, you have to go back to a library and collect all information. But the medieval times are already there in me. They are there in my mother. I can see and feel the 18th century in my mother and the 10th century in my grandmother. Different times in Europe are simultaneously present in India. As we walk the road, we are simultaneously walking the different times².”*

Malcolm Bradbury challenged Ananthu to write and apparently the novel ‘Samskara’ was written as my father said; *“in four furious days, synchronising with the four day time lapse in the novel. A very great part of the novel reads like a film script. The details and mannerism of the Brahmins are so graphic and visual possibly, due to the influence of the film on the novel. Besides these superficial similarities the novel is brilliantly original.³”* He wrote it in 1965.

The book created a literary sensation in Karnataka and when the film was banned by the Censor Board it sparked a major political controversy. It was finally released in 1970 and won the National Award for Best Film and several International Awards including the Bronze Leopard at Locarno. A. K. Ramanujan Professor of linguistics at the University of Chicago saw the film and said; *“If I had seen this film in Chicago, I would have danced in the streets with joy!”* In 1976 he translated Samskara into English and began using it as course material. The film was path breaking and ushered in the parallel cinema movement in South India and took Ananthu to the International Stage.

Interestingly the controversy around the book was after its publication while the controversy generated by the film died out after its release. My father felt that this had something to do with the treatment of the story in the film. *“One major departure of the film from the novel is the later half. In the novel the burning of Narayanappa's body, takes place halfway through. In a way, the story ends half*

² The Inner World of U. R. Ananthamurthy/An interview by Arvind Radhakrishnan, Editor-in-Chief of The Bangalore Review (TBR) and Sudeep Reguna, Executive Editor of TBR/[link](#)

³ T. Pattabhi Rama Reddy/ “Literature and Film”/ Paper presented at the International Seminar on Indian literature and film, September 24-26, 1992 and published in Abhinandana Gandham.

way through the novel” wrote my father in his paper ‘Literature and Film’. He said; *“The interest in the novel is sustained by Praneshacharya meeting Putta and undergoing experiences the exact opposite of his earlier experiences. His previous religious ritualistic Brahminical world is contrasted with the amoral physical world of the Non-Brahmins, with its cock fights, prostitutes and sensual entertainment. The novel's interest is further sustained by the devise of dramatic irony and black humour where the Brahmins prepare for an elaborate funeral for a non-existing body, which has already been spirited away by the Muslims.”* He felt that this will not work in the film. *“Both the novel and the film start with the problem of the dead body. If the dead body is disposed of half way through the film as in the novel, the film will lose interest. In the novel, literary devices like dramatic irony could be made use of to keep interest. Not so in the film. The film starts with the conflict of to burn or not to burn the body of Narayanappa. The conflict is resolved in the very end when Praneshacharya returns back to the village to do the cremation. Thus the interest is sustained till the very end.*

“According to Sri A.K.Ramanujan who translated Samskara into English, Samskara is a novel of decadent Hinduism. This is exemplified by the Madhva Brahmin Community's concern with materialism and greed and their internecine quarrels. Even Praneshacharya, though inspired by noble motives, is forever in the grip of indecision and scarcely shows any leadership. The dead body is a symbol of decadent Hinduism and the Brahmin community is unable even to dispose of it, where as the Muslims cart it away in a jiffy and cremate it. When we made the film, we had no doubt that the Muslims stealing the body and burning it should totally be omitted. There arose a big literary controversy when the book was released. We did not want that to become a communal controversy when the film is released, besides the censors would have certainly objected to it. We tried to tone down the literary controversy that the novel was anti Madhva by ennobling the character of Praneshacharya in the film. Praneshacharya in the book discusses his inner feelings of guilt of doing secretly what Narayanappa did brazenly, but he is unable to tell anyone. In the film by his open confession to Putta, his stature rises immeasurably. The film has a positive ending and Praneshacharya redeems himself by his open confession of his guilt and his new determination to act; that is to cremate the dead body.”

Strangely ‘Samskara’ has several associations with the lives of both Ananthu and my father. It brought them together, not only on the artistic plane but politically as

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well. They were both writers with strong political moorings in socialism. They were good friends. When my father was alive they would visit each other at least once a month to discuss their latest ideas or work. Invariably, the personal intertwined with the intellectual as they both drew heavily from their life experiences. They had much in common and yet were very different beings. Their life in a way mimicked their art – or was it the other way around?

Ananthamurthy is considered one of the pioneers of the 'Navya (new) movement' in Kannada literature that began with his novel 'Samskara' that was a scathing attack on decadent Hinduism and critic of Brahmanism, its superstitions and hypocrisies. My father is considered the father of modern Telugu Poetry as he rebelled against the sweet, rhythmic poetry of Tagore under whom he studied at Shantiniketan and wrote instead about the squalor and filth of Calcutta city.

They both fell in love and married Christians – Ananthu made that a political statement; while my father never did. We, even as their children, were never conscious of the fact that our parents not belonging to the same religion was a daring and courageous step to take in those times. Marrying the person you loved was just the right thing to do!

Ananthu who was born on 21 December, 1932 in the village of Melige, in Tirthahalli taluk in Shimoga District, grew up in an orthodox Madhava Brahmin family as the grandson of a priest. His schooling began in a traditional Sanskrit school before he went to the University of Mysore and to Birmingham, England, for a doctorate in English on a Commonwealth Scholarship where he was awarded a doctorate in 1966 for his dissertation on 'Politics and Fiction in the 1930's'.

The amalgam between politics and his literary expression began early and as he grew older developed into a literary activism very few writers have achieved in history. In a TV interview he stated that *"We should not be politically correct - then we are NOT correct. If there are enough people who can swim against the tide, then democracy is safe. Hence political correctness which places all value on the majority is a wrong thing. Even one voice is enough, because ideas have a way of living... We should be able to say whatever is unpleasant..."*⁴

⁴ Interview with Girish Nikam, anchor and senior journalist, in the programme 'To the Point' for Rajya Sabha TV

Ananthu was greatly influenced by Lohia's writings and that was another thread that bound us. Just before Indira Gandhi promulgated a State of Emergency, we saw a lot of Ananthu. My father and mother were shooting 'Chanda Marutha' [Wild Wind], an uncanny prediction of things to come. Then my mother passed away after eight months in jail. Ananthamurthy wrote her obituary in which he said; *"It is hard to believe that Snehalata is dead at the age of forty-four. She will remain a vivid memory for people from all walks of life: socialist leaders and intellectuals, theatre artists from India and abroad, writers and above all many young people still searching for a meaning and purpose in life. She could never tolerate injustice and ugliness.she is one of the martyrs of our age. By her manner of life and death she has redeemed us who have had to live in a state of sin, because of our quietism and indifference in the face of evil."*

This was perhaps a turning point in Ananthu's life. The Emergency strengthened his convictions and he became the most vocal secular, socialist voice Karnataka has seen in recent years. Ananthamurthy was greatly influenced by Mahatma Gandhi and Shakespeare during his childhood, which shaped his political and social conscience. He was also a close associate of stalwarts of socialist movement, like Jayaprakash Narayan, Madhu Limaye and Shanthaveri Gopala Gowda.

After the Emergency during the Chickmagalur elections where I campaigned against Mrs. Gandhi, Ananthu had been campaigning too and when I was beaten by the police and lay in a semiconscious state he visited me. He was the person who accompanied me back home from the hospital to Bangalore at night shining a torch on my face so the crowds that had gathered could see me.

In 2013, he made a statement that in the Mahabharata it is described how the Brahmin community used to eat beef, but this was claimed as baseless by several prominent people like the Pejavar Mutta Swamijee and the Vishwasha Thirtha Swami, Udupi. The Pejavar Mutta also requested Ananthamurthy to reconsider his statement, as it hurt sentiments of a caste, but Ananthamurthy ignored his request.

He set off another controversy when he denounced the politics of Gopalkrishna Adiga even though he considered him to be one of the leading poets. He believed

that being left of centre was better than being right of centre and that it was important to say these things out loud.

Many people create controversies, some unknowingly, some to stay in the news and most out of stupidity, not so in Ananthu's case. These were not just spontaneous acts based on emotion, not principled responses to situations – even though that may have been the original motivation – but well thought out calculated and sculpted political interventions designed to cause ripples of controversy and debate. This also ensured that the space for democratic dissent remained intact.

The controversies reached a new height during the recent elections, when he said he does not want to live in an India where Modi rules. In a telephonic interview with CNN-IBN from his hospital bed in Bangalore, he said; *"I won't live in a country ruled by Narendra Modi. When I was young, I used to criticise Prime Minister Nehru. But, his supporters never attacked us. They always respected our views. Modi supporters are now behaving like Fascists. They are behaving like the Fascists in Germany during Hitler. I don't want to see a man like Modi in the chair, where once a man like Nehru sat and ruled. I am too old and unwell. If Modi becomes the PM, it will be a big shock to me. I won't live⁵."*

Ananthu was gracious enough to attend a screening of Samskara just three weeks before he passed away. He came and spent two hours interacting with Tom Cowan the Australian cinematographer of Samskara, the audience and the press. On the dais he whispered to me about Modi. He was concerned that Modi would bring about a *"shift in our civilization."* He said; *"I have a feeling that we are slowly losing our democratic rights or civil rights, but much more than that when there is a bully we become cowards."* I added that we were already in a state of emergency, but only this time, Modi did not have to promulgate it – he was doing it through the brute force of his election mandate.

That was the last time we met. He was his charming and affectionate self though one could see the strain his illness was having on him. I spoke to him a couple of times after, inviting him to lunch at home, but he could not make it as he was in hospital that day undergoing dialysis.

⁵ [Telephonic interview](#) with CNN-IBN

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During the last months he often joked about his illness and the extreme cleanliness it imposed on him and those around and compared it to the 'Madi' or cleanliness he had to observe in his orthodox Brahmin home as a child where he could not touch anything without washing and bathing

The day he died, I went to visit him in hospital with another close friend Dr. Ratna, not knowing that a few hours later he would be no more. He was on a ventilator, but looked so peaceful and serene. We did not want to disturb him so we spent time with Ester, the children and grand children. The doctor's prognosis was positive, so we left with the hope that he would recover as he had done so many times before. After all he was a fighter!

By the time I reached home we got the news that he was no more. He had threatened to leave India if Modi came to power and some members of the Sangh Parivar had bought him a ticket to Pakistan. Ananthu then recanted his statement and said; "*That was too much to say because I can't live anywhere except India.*" Ananthu decided his own departure – not by an Emirates flight, but his own.

I said my goodbyes to Ananthu in the privacy of his home the evening he died. I did not want to share that moment with the large crowds that would be part of the State Honours. Ester was inconsolable and I was at a loss for words. What can you say to a partner of more than 50 years, one who cared and watched over him? Despite her own ailments she guarded and protected Ananthu zealously. She was his strength and foundation. Ananthu could not have done what he did without her. Though this was rarely recognized, Ester is the reason for the person Ananthamurthy is.

Many were surprised that his last rights were performed according to religious convention. Though Ananthu broke all traditions, his fascination for the spiritual was deeply imbedded and perhaps his inner strength came from this. My father was the same and this was not a contradiction, but an intellectual rejection of the negative aspects of organised religion while pursuing the search for a greater truth.

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Now Ananthu is in good company – my father and mother, Lankesh, Lohia, Gopal Gowda, Madhu Limaye, Karanth and Ramanujan and many others with whom I am sure he is debating our predicament here in this world.

Farewell my dear friend and God speed. May your journey to the other world be safe and adventurous and your search of answers exciting. May the mysteries of the universe unfold and your explorations take on another dimension. We thank you for your legacy – we who remain, will try and keep it alive by taking the struggle forward.