

## Obituary

KOTTA SATCHIDANANDA MURTY  
(1924 - 2011)

Professor Kotta Satchidananda Murty passed away peacefully on January 24, 2011 in his native village Sangam Jagarlamudi, a remote village in District Guntur, Andhra Pradesh. He is survived by four sons.

Kotta Satchidananda Murty was born on September 25, 1924 in the family of a well-to-do farmer in Andhra Pradesh. Even before commencing his university education, he acquired extensive knowledge of Sanskrit. His first book was a commentary on *Bhagavadgītā* in Telugu. The book consisting of more than 500 pages was based on his study of more than thirty books in Sanskrit, Telugu and English. It was published in 1941 when he was just sixteen years of age. Soon after completing his MA degree in Philosophy in the year 1946 from Andhra University he plunged into reading, writing and publishing. His book *Hinduism and Its Development* was published in 1947 – just a year after the award of the MA degree to him, *Rhythm of the Real* dealing with issues in aesthetics, ethics, metaphysics and philosophy of history, *Thought and the Divine* dealing with natural theology were published in 1951 and *Evolution of Philosophy in India*, dealing with and re-interpreting the rich philosophical heritage of India published in 1952. In all these works, in addition to a discussion of Indian philosophers like Dadhichi, Badrayana and Śaṅkara, he also elucidated the thoughts of Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, and Bonaventura.

He revisited the problems in the philosophy of religion in his book *The Realm of Between* published in 1973. *Indian Spirit* published in 1965, and *Indian Philosophy Since 1498* are his other notable books. In the former Murty elucidates the cultural history of India by critically evaluating the writings of Sri Aurobindo, Rabindranath

Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi. In the latter, he convincingly argued that it is wrong to think that there was no philosophical activity in India between the sixteenth and nineteenth century. Through a survey of various writings from the year 1498 till the arrival of Raja Rammohun Roy he shows that there was 'intense philosophical activity of a high order' during this period. Infact Murty was opposed to categorizing philosophy as either Indian or Western.

During his lifetime, he published more than twenty-five books in English, eleven books in Telugu and one book in Hindi. Each book was widely acclaimed as a masterpiece. His books *Revelation and Reason in Advaita Vedanta* (1959), *Advaitic Notion* (1985) and *Vedic Hermeneutics* (1993), *Nāgarjuna* (1971, 1978, 1983), *Naiśreyasa Dharma* (1984) have been acknowledged as classics by his admirers as well as his critics.

In his writings, Murty was an iconoclast. He synthesized heterodox thinking with critical traditionalist approach. Only a few specialists in Advaita Vedanta have been as critical of this tradition as Murty has been in his *Revelation and Reason in Advaita Vedanta*. Interestingly, hardly any exposition or commentary presents such an admiring exposition of the Advaita tradition as has been done by him in his *Advaitic Notion* (1985). His interdisciplinary works on Indian culture and his contribution to peace studies are the outcome of his discussions with Bertrand Russell and Karl Jaspers. His book *The Quest for Peace* contained most harsh criticism of Marx. These texts as well as his pioneering work *Far Eastern Philosophies* (1976) contain original ideas, critical observations and insightful comparisons. Murty's writings range across Indian and Western philosophy, covering ethics, religious studies, social and political thought, culture, peace studies, philosophy of religion, philosophy of education and philosophical foundations of Indian foreign policy. His writings were according to famous Japanese philosopher Hajime Nakamura "a great contribution to further progress of philosophical thinking in the global setting in the years to come". They were commended by the well known Chinese philosopher Wing-tsit Chan for their 'high scholarship, strictly philosophical approach without sentimentality, freedom from misunderstanding or the usual cliches and many insights'. In his public lectures as well

as his other seminar, symposia, workshop presentations everything he said could be understood, however difficult, abstract and abstruse the theme might be, not because what he said was commonplace but because he talked with perfect mastery. His lectures were spruced with occasional humorous sallies.

Murty made a deep impact on his seniors and contemporaries. In 1963 when Murty was less than forty years of age Hamayun Kabir, an eminent literary scholar and philosopher, and a minister in the Government of India, spoke of him as one of “the outstanding philosophers of the younger generation”. In the year 1970 the great Suniti Kumar Chatterjee described him as the one on whom the “mantle of Dr. Radhakrishnan has fallen worthily”. The great Mimamsaka Pandit Pattabhiram Shastri described him in the year 1980 as “*nānāśāstraprkaśalitmativaibhava*” – a mind embellished by the study of many philosophical texts. In 1988 Dr Paulos Mar Gregorios, Metropolitan of Delhi and the North described him “as the leading philosopher of my country”. Acharya Tulsi the famous Jain Muni, in the year 1989, commented on Murty’s personality thus: “The vision and the capacity to realize it as noticed in Professor Murty are found in rare persons only. In the modern age such honesty authenticity and integrity of purpose as found in him are not commonly found”. Syed Vahiduddin had the following to say about him in 1994: “There are indeed a few persons of vision who have transcended day-to-day happenings and with the knowledge of the past and contemporaneity contribute creatively. Professor K. Satchidananda Murty is one of those.... there are very few intellectuals in our country who embody better than him our complex, yet integrated, composite national culture. It is difficult to think of another eminent Indian philosopher, who having specialized in classical Indian philosophy, has also studied philosophies of other cultures, such as the Islamic, Chinese and Japanese”.

His contemporaries too were also dazzled by Murty’s wide range of reading, “not only in the field of philosophy but in that of literature also spanning all centuries and both the Eastern and the Western traditions. He also displays a deep insight and understanding of philosophical traditions both of India and the West, a combination which is rare indeed....Few philosophers in India seem so much

at home in literature as Murty seems to be” (Daya Krishna). N. K. Devaraja thought that “Murty is one of the very few scholar-thinkers in contemporary India actively engaged in exploring and cultivating the fields of philosophy, religion and culture in their varied forms and expressions”. He upheld the view that “Murty is a savant with a truly catholic taste, a wide range of academic and literary interests and almost encyclopedic scope of learning to keep those interests engaged and the taste fed and nourished”. D. P. Chattopadhyaya wrote that Murty besides being “equally at home with classical Indian thought and contemporary thought of East and West, has written extensively on many themes which are relevant to our time and its needs”. S. S. Barlingay thought that “Murty’s place in the Twentieth century philosophic world in India is unique....His scholarship in history is as profound as his understanding of Western logic and Nyāya.... He does not brush aside tradition but rather makes use of it skillfully and with open mind. He has paid attention even to those parts of tradition which have been ignored by other writers who look to with factional interest”. Sangaku Mayeda the leading Indian and Buddhist Studies scholar of Japan wrote, “Murty is a rare Indian philosopher who has paid much attention to the socio-political setting of modern or contemporary Indian philosophy.... He has even taken up for discussion, though briefly, the Caste Problem which has hardly been argued by Indian philosophers past and present”. Murty was hailed by P. Sriramachandrudu a leading Sanskrit and Telugu scholar in the following verse:

Śāstrāntānadhijagmuṣī sukavitāē sphītāē samāṣī  
 Vādāntānadhitaṣṭhuṣī budhajanāmodarī samāseduṣī  
 Deśāntān samupeyuṣī bahuvīdhā goṣṭīē samadhyāsuṣī  
 Vedāntānkhilān muhurdadruṣuṣī dhanyā hi te śemuṣī

That is, Praiseworthy is your intellect which has delved deep into the Sastras, which is the connoisseur of the best in poetics, which has scaled the height of debates, which has dominated the discussion in various conferences and seminars of scholars, which has investigated and reviewed time and again the Vedanta texts, and whose praise is sung by scholars from far and wide”.

Murty joined as the faculty of the Department of Philosophy of Andhra University, his *alma mater* where he studied Philosophy in the early 1940's. Until his retirement at the age of sixty years, Murty taught in Andhra University for thirty-five years with the exception from 1975 to 1978 when he took over the responsibility of the office of Vice-chancellor, Sri Venkateshwara University, Tirupati. As the Vice-chancellor, he introduced new courses of study, carried out many academic reforms, and augmented infrastructure in the University. He established the Centre for Studies on Peace and Non-violence and also the Centre for Human and Social Development. It was during his term as Vice-chancellor that the first ever dialogue between the traditional Indian scholars – scholars taught and trained through the indigenous *guru-sishya prampara*, or through *gurukulas* and other non-university traditional institutions of learning, and the scholars trained in modern universities, was held in Tirupati.

He was a National Fellow of the Indian Council of Philosophical Research. He occupied the office of Vice-chairman of University Grants Commission from 1986 to 1989. He was the President of the Indian Philosophical Congress from 1980 to 1998. In 1984, he became the first recipient of Dr Bidhan Chandra Roy National Award – the highest possible distinction in India for achievement in the field of Philosophy. He was awarded the degree of Dr. Phil. h.c. of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, USSR, and was conferred an honorary doctorate by the University of Halle, Germany. In recognition of his scholarship and services rendered to the academic world, the Government of India first awarded him Padma Bhushan in 1984, and later in the year 2001 awarded him Padma Vibhushan. The last time he visited Delhi was to receive this award.

Murty was a member of the Indian Council of Philosophical Research from 1988 to 1991 and again from 1992 to 1995. He was the member of its Governing Body from 1981 to 1984. He was the Chairman of Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies, Sarnath. He was conferred an honorary Professorship of the People's University of China. Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi appointed him as its Honorary Professor. He was conferred Honorary doctorates by several universities. The first of these was conferred on him in the year 1980. Despite his severe criticisms of non-dualistic Vedanta,

*varnasarama vyavastha*, the belief in the infallibility and inerrancy of the Vedas, he was honoured by H.H. the Shankracharya of Sringeri and the Sanskrit Universities in India several times. Both are regarded by many as the bastions of orthodoxy. Similarly, despite his most severe criticism of Marx, Marxism and communist dictatorships and without being a card-holder or a camp-follower of the Marxist party he was honoured by various universities in the then communist countries.

In 1992, an international seminar was organized on his philosophy. Professor Murty was present throughout the seminar. In its concluding session, he responded to all those participants who had written on one or another aspect of his philosophical writings. He never interfered with the manner, method and planning of the seminar, or the editorial and other decisions relating to the publication of the book, leaving it entirely to the discretion of the editors. The only advise he repeatedly gave to the Directors of the seminar and the Editors of the volume was “You are not to remind anyone who did not reply to your first letter (the letter of invitation) or anyone who having agreed to write does not send you his paper. Follow the Confucian principle of Reciprocity. Even when you happen to meet by chance anyone of that sort, please do NOT mention this matter at all”. A selection of the revised articles presented in the seminar was published in 1995 in the form of a book titled *The Philosophy of K. Satchidananda Murty*. State University of New York Press, Albany, New York recognizing the worth of the anthology agreed to “take Eight hundred copies of the book”.

Those who had the privilege of knowing Murty personally knew that besides being a profound scholar, a prolific writer, a distinguished teacher and an efficient and able administrator, he had many endearing qualities. His unmatched wit, quick repartees and great sense of humour made an impact on all those who came in even casual contact with him. He was like a coconut – hard from outside and tender and sweet from inside. Many a time it seemed to me that he deliberately kept a formidable exterior to keep sycophants at a distance.

I first met Murty in 1977 when he was working on the project ‘Philosophy in India: Traditions, Teaching and Research’. He called

me to meet him in his room in the India International Centre (IIC) to discuss my role and the contribution expected from me to the project. He explained to me the details of the project, the honorarium I would receive on the *completion* of the project in a manner which struck me as arrogant, unnecessary and too matter of fact. In due course of time, I came to realize that it was his characteristic style. He repeated the term completion several times to make the terms of the contract clear to me, which at that time I found very odd as I was not used to such plainspeak. However, as I realized later during my more than thirty years of association with him, he as a matter of principle believed in making things clear beforehand so that there is no heart burning later. He did not want any disagreements, differences and confusions later on. Within a week of submitting my report, I received a draft for the amount payable to me. Incidentally, the findings of the project were published in the form of a book with the same title in 1985. The names of those who had assisted Murty were prominently and duly acknowledged. During my long association with him, I noted that he whole-heartedly acknowledged the help received for all his academic and other endeavours even from the most junior persons. He was a tough task master as far as the professional work was concerned, but was a very caring and loving person when it came to personal relationships. His colleagues and juniors were literally scared of him in the office but loved him for the personal touch and care he bestowed on them and their families in sorting out the problems faced by them. They were quite amazed by his knowledge of their personal difficulties even though they had not informed him about them.

Whenever he came to Delhi he would invariably send me a postcard and ask me to meet him at the place of his stay. Almost all his personal communications with his friends were on a postcard or an inland letter form, he hardly ever used an envelop to post his letters. He would discuss with me his academic work and read anything that I had published since I met him last. There would of course be some gossip about the Indian philosophical world. He enjoyed the *tête-a-tête* and would take the chitchat as seriously as the discussions on academic matters. What surprised me was the extent to which he was informed about the mundane details of persons, personalities

and happenings in the contemporary Indian philosophical world. I was wonderstruck by the veracity of his information. Almost every day when he was in Delhi, we used to meet in the evening at the IIC where he normally stayed. Sometimes he would request me to buy something from the market on my way to the IIC which either he needed or had to carry back home. The first question he would ask me after the exchange of greetings was the cost of the goods and even before I could sit down he would hand over the cash that I had spent.

That it was a habit with him to be clean on sharing his expenses is narrated by Professor JP Shukla. Professor Shukla and Murty had to travel to Haridwar to attend a session of the Indian Philosophical Congress by a taxi, as they could not get a confirmed seat in the train. As soon as the taxi reached their destination, Murty even before alighting from the taxi handed over to Shukla half of the fare settled by them in Delhi.

Before choosing anyone as a friend or a co-worker Murty tested and tried him in a variety of ways. Before he accepted me as his co-author for writing *Radhakrishnan: His Life and Ideas* he asked me to lend him my book *Wittgenstein's Philosophy of Mind* and copies of my other published articles. I did not know what was on his mind. After about ten days he called me to his home (he had started residing in Delhi, as at that time he was the Vice-chairman of the UGC). My book and articles were lying on the central table of his sparsely furnished drawing room. He discussed with me a few issues arising from my writings and asked me if I would like to be his co-author for a book on Radhakrishnan. Of course, I readily agreed as I considered it a rare privilege. He handed over a number of books and the notes he had made over the years. I saw his style of working during the preparation of the manuscript. He respected my views, took pains to correct the manuscript after discussing *each and every* proposed change. Nothing was altered without my consent. If I staunchly disagreed and won the argument he would without rancor accept it. The final version of the manuscript as we said in the Preface of the book was 'discussed by both, jointly edited and finalised'. It was really an intellectual pleasure to be with him during these discussions. We followed the same method for preparing the

abridged and the revised text. The original text was published by Ajanta Publications, Delhi; the revised text was published by State University of New York Press, New York; and the abridged text was published by Orient Paperbacks, New Delhi.

He would invariably serve south Indian Andhra food to the visitors at his home in Delhi. The menu remained the same even at the dinners hosted by him irrespective of whether the guests were Indians or foreigners. The food was always prepared by his wife who also did all the shopping herself. To the question how he was able to publish so much, he replied that it was because he did not go to clubs and restaurants, did not play tennis or cricket, did not take any responsibility for household chores which were left completely to his wife. This made it possible for him to devote his time fully to reading and writing.

After his wife passed away about a couple of years before Murty's death, in response to a condolence message he wrote, "My wife's name was Vedavati. She always advised me to conquer *rāga* – attachment, and *dveṣa* – avarice or hatred. She taught me how to get rid of the two. Because of her company and continuous cajoling I could conquer *dveṣa*. But despite her best efforts, due to my own weakness I could not get rid of *rāga*".

The truth of Murty's confession is evident from his day-to-day behavior. Murty was visibly hurt when one of his 'friends' who admitted to him that "none ever did as much as you have for me in my life", and who had indeed benefitted from his kindness in several ways, started ignoring him after he retired as the Vice-chairman of the UGC and started gradually withdrawing from active involvement in administrative matters. Murty often complained to his acquaintances against this friend's behavior. Nevertheless, he never bore any ill will against this friend.

One could also see his sense of hurt when two candidates, despite their contacts in bureaucracy and political influence were rejected for the post of Professor, by the selection committee of which he was a member. The same evening when they came to know from one of the non-expert members who was close to one of them that a candidate far superior to them in research, teaching and publications, was selected they wrote a derogatory letter

against Murty and other members of the committee to the Vice-chancellor to set aside the decision of the Selection Committee. They also circulated the letter to several members of the Academic and Executive Council of the university. Without knowing his and other expert members published work and teaching in analytic and Western Philosophy, they alleged that the expert members of the selection committee were not able to assess them, as they did not know Western Philosophy. Such uninformed, spiteful and foul criticism would hurt anyone but a sensitive, just and fair-minded person like Murty was affected by it more than others. As he felt that such malicious, uninformed and unjustified criticism of the selectors by the candidates for a post reflects their own quality and disrespect for the established norms, he vowed not to attend any selection committee meetings thereafter, and he never did.

Murty believed in the maxim 'once a friend forever so' and was indeed a friend of friends and helped, in quiet ways, all of them. However, he never violated any rule, norm, or convention for any of them. He would never make a public show of what he had done for his friends. He would not even talk about his help to the beneficiary. In professional meetings too he would participate in a non-interfering way. He seemed very casual and unconcerned. However, behind this outward casual appearance he was very alert about the proceedings. In case any decision, which he thought, wrong and biased was about to be taken, he would in his crisp, sharp, no nonsense way speak out his mind. His logical and matter of fact argument would prevent the committee members from taking any wrong decision. This was possible because before coming to any meeting he would read the agenda carefully and acquaint himself with the details of the issues involved. The committees chaired by him were always a pleasure to attend. He would summarize the issues in clear terms at the beginning. In the ensuing discussion he would not allow the speakers to divert from the issue. At the end of the meeting, he would articulate the decisions incorporating the diverse views. I do not recollect any meeting chaired by him in which any member disagreed with his summarizing.

Once he decided to take retirement, despite several invitations, he refused to go to any public functions – seminars, symposiums,

workshops, lectures, selection committees or attend any official meetings. In the true spirit of the lifestyle prescribed in the *sannayasāśrama* of the *varnāśrama vyavastha*, he lived all by himself like a recluse in the palatial two-storied house built by his father in his native place Sangam Jagarlamudi. Just as he did not acquire any property either in Vishakhapatnam where he spent major part of his life, or in Delhi where he lived for sometime, he also did not acquire any furniture. His books in the house were placed in piles on the floor and covered with sheets. He did not have any bookcases or cupboards to keep them. Seldom would he meet the students and teachers – some of them his own students from the Andhra University where he was the Honorary Professor of Philosophy, or the students and faculty of the nearby Acharya Nagarjuna University. Nagarjuna University is about twenty kilometers from Sangam Jagarlamudi. It has a centre for the study of Afro-Asian Philosophies and is called ‘Professor K.S. Murthi Centre for the study of Afro-Asian Philosophies’. It places special emphasis on Indian, Chinese and African Philosophies. He was also the Honorary Director of its Buddhist Studies Centre.

In the true Jaina tradition of *Sallekhana* – “rite of fasting to death” which is “undertaken only when the practitioner perceives clear signs of approaching death or feels his utter incapacity to fulfil his religious vows”, Murty first started reducing his intake of food and then fasted regularly. Finally, he gave up all food and drink about a week before the day of his death.

K. Satchidananda Murty lived an ideal life, a true exemplar of the authentic life. He lived what he preached; he taught what he believed in. He was an ideal man; an ideal scholar, an ideal colleague and an ideal friend. He believed, preached and practiced that “daily there would be occasions which ‘let-down’ and ‘let-up’ one and it is wise to preserve equanimity without being depressed or elated”. These qualities make him tower over his peers. It will be difficult to fill the vacuum created by his passing away.

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