

Ananthamurthy and URA

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U R Ananthamurthy was a writer, public intellectual, a philosopher, a keeper of public conscience and much more. The complexity of Ananthamurthy was that he belonged to multiple worlds and was a critical insider in all of them.

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Just about a year ago, U R Ananthamurthy was invited to the Indian Institute of Management Bangalore (IIMB) to deliver the foundation day lecture. It was a scheduled day of his dialysis and he had made some adjustments to be there to spend the evening with us. He came wearing a full suit, spoke in impeccable English about the three hungers of the modern day.

For a person who is usually more modestly dressed I was a bit surprised that he chose to come in a suit to IIMB. I asked him, and he told me that this suit was specially made for his attendance at the Man Booker International Prize ceremonies and his daughter suggested that he wear it for the day. On a different

day, he would have possibly told me how it is important to blend with the corporate crowd – and critically look at them from within.

He had the capability of picking up the mundane and converting that into a dense metaphor. He was not mischievous in doing this, but it genuinely represented his persona – that there was a meaning and a metaphor in most simple acts. When he insisted on renaming Bangalore as Bengaluru some of us found that he was chasing the trivial, but this act of renaming did something to the way Kannada people identified with the city; it did something to the locals in a large metropolis fast losing their identity. It was not about being fundamentalist, but it was about subtly asserting the identity. It was teaching the outsiders one word in Kannada, even if they would not like to learn the more of the language. For us, it was a metaphorical act.

Three Hungers

Of late, he was talking of the three hungers – the hunger for equality, the hunger for modernity and hunger for spirituality. This was what he spoke at IIMB. It was late in the evening, he had not had his dialysis and he appeared frail, but insisted that he would stand and speak. And when he delivered his talk for about an hour, all the physical strain and stress was forgotten. He took questions and won hearts.

One of the rituals on a foundation day was to award a small token of appreciation for people who had completed 20 years of service at IIMB. Each of the staff who were awarded received it from the board member on the dais, but on their way out touched Ananthamurthy's feet. One of them – Gopal – told me the next day – "I was really honoured that my service to the Institute was recognised in the presence of Ananthamurthy. He is our own." It is to this person that the renaming of Bengaluru made sense in the literal. Ananthamurthy asked the jam-packed hall "Can you re-define intelligence to include not merely what happens in the cerebral area, but in the whole body of the human being? Then you change the whole criteria of Arhata (qualification)?" This question would have resonated with Gopal. But, this comment was not targeted at him, it was asked of us, the gatekeepers, at an elevated level of discussion on the definition of equality.

For Gopal, Ananthamurthy represented his own aspiration and a space in the metropolis. He might not have read Ananthamurthy's literature and was unlikely to engage in a debate on the nuances of brahminism in *Samskara* or the political undertone of *Bharatipura* or *Awasthe*. Yet there was a way in which Ananthamurthy had touched him in a way that no other writer of his generation and the next had. That was also because Ananthamurthy was not only a master story writer, he was a master storyteller as well. He had woven the story of several people on the fringes of the hall into his discourse that day.

Appeal of Ananthamurthy's Art

Ananthamurthy's art was in appealing to people at different levels. In a recent documentary by Girish Kasaravalli,

Ananthamurthy – reflecting on *Samskara* – tells us how the story starts as a realistic story in Agraharas of Tirthahalli and surrounding villages a locale where the story is set; it becomes increasingly nuanced as it moves away – from a specific real story in the village, to a story about the Madhwa sect when it is discussed in Shimoga; about brahmins when discussed in Karnataka and about Hindus in India. He said that being allegorical while being real was how he became relevant as a writer. As a thinker and a speaker too, he had this quality of being real as well as being metaphorical.

There was an apparent sense of duality and internal contradiction in the way he came across, leading some of the critics to refer to him as *dwandwa-murthy* (of a dual personality). This apparent duality was what put him in the centre of many a controversy. While it took effort to understand the layers of his argument, people often did not have the time and the patience to engage with him. He was a person who loved a good argument, always listened attentively and carefully to the opposing strands of opinions and engaged in a dignified conversation. Nobody ever felt offended when they talked to him. He was able to raise the level of the mundane to the level of a treatise and explain the nuances of a single short headline.

That enriching conversation was to be had through the medium of essays in journals like *Sakshi* (edited by Adiga, where he was a regular contributor) and *Rujuvatu* (which he himself edited). However, of late the medium has moved from little magazines and literary journals to the world of television channels looking for a byte, space constrained newspapers, and social media. If he was grossly misunderstood towards the end, that was largely because his style did not suit the medium. The medium was black and white, that of instantaneous conclusions and Ananthamurthy was all about unpeeling the shades of grey.

There were two aspects to Ananthamurthy, both intertwined together. One was as a writer and one of the most significant voices of the *Navya* (modernist) movement. He represented the Gopalakrishna Adiga legacy (though he was

on record many times that he rebelled at the influence of Adiga) and was bracketed along with P Lankesh, Shantinath Desai, Yashwant Chittal, A K Ramanujan, K V Tirumalesh, Ramachandra Sharma and Poornachandra Tejaswi. He of course, towered over all his contemporaries, partly because of the great literature he produced, but also because he operated on a much larger political canvas. His works of non-fiction were anthropological, sociological and political, all at the same time.

The other aspect of Ananthamurthy was that he was indeed a political person. Here he embraced socialism, kept the company of Lohiaites and offered his own unique insights into the larger societal discourse. In the process he hobnobbed with politicians of all colours, backed political parties because of the set of people who were there at the moment and genuinely believed that he was constructively engaging with them.

In Multiple Worlds

The complexity of Ananthamurthy was because he always belonged to multiple worlds. He was a brahmin. He was not apologetic about it. If he were a staunch leftist, he would have rejected his caste and would have rebelled and moved on. But he did not rebel, he engaged with that fact. He often called himself a critical insider, and was genuinely both. He was critical, constantly questioning and bringing the larger world view not only from the West, but from the rest of the world, from other parts of India, from the languages, from tribals, from disempowered people to his society; and as an insider he was trying to engage with the outer world about his roots, conventions, practices and rituals. Looking at these two together it is possible to hurriedly conclude that he did not have a clear stand, or his stands were often contradictory. But he represented the complex world, strayed and stayed in the shades of grey. He often mentioned that when faced with such difficult dilemma he would become creative. That was his genius.

The writer intellectuals of his time were either non-brahmins or not as vocal in the discourse outside of literature,

particularly in day-to-day politics and political processes. People like Lankesh, D R Nagaraj, Devanuru Mahadeva, and Tejaswi could easily get into a societal treatise without being accused of pandering to the disempowered. They represented the disempowered. They could not even be accused of betraying their ancestry. Alternately the brahmin writers were not too political whether it was Chittal, Ramanujan or Sharma. The only exception to this argument was Adiga who engaged in active political discourse, but avoided duality by aligning with the Jana Sangh of that time, a fact that was not appreciated by many of his own admirers, prominent among them being Ananthamurthy himself. Ananthamurthy had to live this life of a critical insider throughout, but it had become increasingly difficult for him when the medium of discourse got more electronic.

Metaphor on Modi's India

The last big controversy of Ananthamurthy was when he declared that he would not like to live in a land ruled by Modi. The metaphor and poetry was lost on the right-wing activists. It was variously interpreted as Ananthamurthy leaving the country and settling elsewhere. That was the last thing he would have done having been a critical insider all his life. That was one instance where Ananthamurthy seemed to have lost the metaphor to the literal, because his statements justifying and clarifying his stand, picked up the argument from the literal. He was ridiculed, abused and people even claimed to have sent one-way ticket to Karachi when Modi won. Ananthamurthy was stoic and unruffled. He went on to write a 80-page essay titled *Hindutva or Hind Swaraj?*, a book that would have gone to print on the day he died, if he was able to insert a paragraph in his foreword two days before he passed away. The book will eventually come out without that crucial paragraph, but has all the nuanced arguments on why it was important for him to oppose Modi. Narendra Modi for him is not a person, but a manifestation of a style of politics. The style which possibly cannot be mastered by a non-Hindi-speaking south Indian politician so critical to the

federal nature of this republic. He therefore was looking at Modi the phenomenon, rather than Modi the person.

He starts the book by first rejecting the argument that because somebody has been elected by the majority he should be acceptable. The basic foundations of democracy, he argues, is having an opportunity of not having a majority and not being majoritarian. He then enters into a conversation with his reader, explaining his politics from a spiritual, philosophical, social and contemporary frame. He elevates this discourse to a new high – drawing from the Old Testament, from Napoleon, from Dostoevsky, from Savarkar and Gandhi and also from brahminical and Hindu rituals. He demonstrates what distilled intellect could achieve and how this mundane of receiving a one-way ticket to Karachi could be countered by sheer scholarship – all told like a series of stories in 80 pages of great philosophy.

Contradiction and Consistency

In his passing away, Ananthamurthy converted the metaphor into literal. He had said that he did not want to live in a land ruled by Modi. He did not even give the opportunity for Modi to complete a 100 days with Ananthamurthy as a citizen. Even in his death, Ananthamurthy has left the Kannada literary world to debate on how his funeral should have been held, where it should have been held and what religious rites were to be performed. For all those indulging in this debate, we

have to remember that Ananthamurthy never rejected religion or rituals, he engaged with them, tried to understand them, tried to see meaning in them and was always critical of them. While he was critical of each of these, he never ceased to be an insider. That was the apparent contradiction that people saw, that was also the consistency he maintained.

In his death Ananthamurthy has left behind two sets of people. The first set did not understand him fully, would never understand him fully and would continue to deconstruct him, very much the way we continue to deconstruct Gandhi. There are many scholars and a lifetime left to do this. The other set plain misunderstood him. Those handful of people who celebrated his death by bursting crackers did not even attempt to understand him. For a majority of the others – the thousands who came to pay homage at his residence “Suragi” and in Ravindra Kalakshetra where his body was kept, he continued to be somebody immediately relevant, and eternally mystical.

It is not just a loss to Kannada literature as Modi tweeted, the loss is much more. The condolences should not just reach Ananthamurthy's family, but to a much larger set of friends and admirers. We have lost a true public intellectual, a conscience keeper, a guide, a philosopher and most importantly a great friend. The loss is as much metaphorical, and as much a loss to the world as it is literal and personal.

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