

Life and Works of Anantha Murthy

Dr. U.R. Anantha Murthy [Udupi Rajagopala Acharya Anantha Murthy] was born in 1932 at Melige, a remote Village in Tirthahalli Taluk, in Shimoga District. He belonged to an orthodox *vaidika* Brahmin family where his grandfather was a priest “propitiating gods for others”. His father not desiring to be the same learnt English stealthily and took London Matriculation Examination by teaching himself. He left the village and went to Benares and Bombay holding several jobs in succession, ending up managing a monastery. In the words of Anantha Murthy, “My father was a great metaphor. A meeting of the two worlds. When I was initiated, I had to learn the *suktas*, but he then made me learn, by heart the *Impeachment of Warren Hastings*.” The autodidact father, who had alternated between a cropped head and a tuft in his own life, had passed on to the son the habit of rebellion. Anantha Murthy had his early Sanskrit education in a traditional Patashala. He completed his graduation and Post-graduation from the University of Mysore in 1956. Later in 1966 he earned a PhD (English and Comparative Literature) from the University of Birmingham, U.K. by gaining a Commonwealth Fellowship.

Professional Experience

U.R. Anantha Murthy began his career as a Lecturer in English in 1956 and continued till 1963. During the period from 1970–80 he served as the Reader in English at Mysore University. He has served as a visiting Professor at a number of foreign and Indian universities like the Cornell University (2001), University of Hyderabad (2001), University of Iowa (1975), Shivaji University (1982), Kolhapur, University of Tubingen (1992) Germany, University of Pennsylvania (2000) and many other Universities. During the period 1987 to 1990 he served as the Vice-Chancellor of Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam. Besides, he has also served as the Chairman of the National Book Trust of India at Delhi in 1992–93, Indian Institute of Social Sciences in 1998 and The Film and Television Institute of India at Pune in 2002. He was the President of the Sahitya Academy from 1993 to 1998.

Fellowships and Awards

U.R. Anantha Murthy has been the winner of a number of awards both from the Government and also Academies for his invaluable contributions in different fields. Notable are the Jnanapeeta Award won in 1994 and the Padma Bhushana in 1998. Besides these, the other important awards are the Literary Distinction, awarded by the Government of Karnataka in 1984.

Karnataka Sahitya Academy conferred the Fiction Award and Award for Literary Achievement, in the year 1983 & 1984 respectively. He won the Masti Award in Literature in the year 1994. He is also the winner of the Ganakrishthi Award for Literary distinction, Kolkatta for the year 2002. Besides these awards mentioned above he has been the winner of a number of awards from the Karnataka Film Development Corporation for best stories like *Samskara*, *Ghatashiravada*, *Bara*, etc., at different periods.

Seminars, Lectures, Tours

Since 1974 to this present day Mr. U.R. Anantha Murthy has undertaken innumerable tours, attended thousands of Seminars and has given a number of lectures on various topics. He undertook tours as an Indian delegate to West Germany (1988) representing University Grants Commission. As a cultural representative he visited North Korea and Republic of China (1998). He visited Moscow as member of the International Advisory Board of "Inostrannaya Literatura" (Soviet Monthly) in 1989. In the year 2002 he visited Book Festivals at France, Berlin, and Munich and became a noted literary figure.

His lectures were on varied topics such as on politics, culture, literature, Art and a number of other present day issues. Important ones to be noted are the lecture on "Culture and Destiny", given at Bharat Bhavan, Bhopal, "Indian Literature", in the University of Madison and Chicago in 1985, "Indian Society, Culture, Politics, and Literature" delivered at the University of Birmingham, Alabama in 1987, "Colonialism and Indian Literature" delivered at University of California, "Art in the Modern Age" at Bangalore University in 1989. Apart from these, he has delivered lectures on various topics on different occasions.

Publications: Kannada

In Kannada Literature Mr. Murthy's works can be classified into stories, poems, novels and essays. His works like *Endendu Mugiyada Kathhe* (1955) *Mauni* (1967), *Prashne* (1962), *Akasha Mattu Bekku* (1983), *Mooru Dasakada Kathegalu* (collected stories), 1989, *Suryana Kudure* (1995), *Aidu Dashakada Kathegalu*, (Collected Stories) 2001 are stories. His poems like *Mithuna* (1992), *Ajiana Hegala Suktugalu* (1989), *15 Padyagalu* (1967), *Eevareginal Kavithegalu* (collected poems) 2001, *Eevareginal Kavithegalu* (collected poems) 2001 are famous. His essays include *Prajne Mattu Parisara* (literary and philosophical essays), *Samakshama* (essays on politics, culture, society, and literature), *Pallata* (Essays), *Abhinava* (2001) *Kannada, Karnataka* (selected essays), 2001). His novels include *Samskara*, (1965) which has been translated into English, Russian, French, Hungarian, German, Swedish, Hindi, Bengali, Malayalam, Marathi, Urdu, Tamil and Gujarati, *Bharathipura* (1974), *Diyya* (2001) and others which have earned for him national and international reputation.

Publications: English

Mr. Murthy's contribution to English language is no way less compared to Kannada. Many of his works in Kannada have been translated to English by different authors. For instance, 'Initiation' is a Kannada story translated by Gary Wills, 'Avasthe' a novel, translated by Shanthinath Desai, 'Bhava', & 'Twenty Vacanas from Sunya Sampadane' is a set of twenty poems translated from Kannada by Judith Kroll, 'Bharathipura' a novel has been translated by P. Srinivasa Rao. The other works in English include essays on various topics like, *Literature and Culture* (2002), "The Concept of Man in Kannada Literature" (1979) and others.

An Outline Story of the Novel: *Samskara*

Praneshacharya, the spiritual leader of Durvasapura agrahara:

Praneshacharya is a very learned and orthodox man belonging to the community of Madhva Brahmins. He has had his Vedic education in Kashi (Benares) gaining the title, 'The Crest Jewel of Vedic Learning' (*Vedanta Siromani*). He is living in the highly orthodox village of Durvasapura in Mysore Malnad. He is the judge of the agrahara in all matters of religion, ritual and conduct. His very life is a model of self-sacrifice and religious conventions. He married an invalid girl, Bhagirathi in order to render disinterested service and earn salvation. As advised in the Gita, he practices *Nishkama Yoga*, performing his duty without desiring the fruit thereof. He believes that the merciful Lord has put him to this way of ascetic life to test him. His heart overflows with gratitude for his bed-ridden wife Bhagirathi who, by becoming an invalid, has obliged him with the opportunity of becoming more perfect and mellow on the road to salvation, and he incessantly rejoices in his fate.

Chandri, the concubine of Naranappa, the reprobate Brahmin of the agrahara brings the news of his death to the Acharya:

The story opens on a hot and humid mid-summer day. As Praneshacharya is about to sit down to his mid-day meal, after attending to the daily routine of serving his invalid wife with bathing, medicine and porridge, Chandri, the concubine of Naranappa the degenerate Brahmin of the agrahara, brings the news to the Acharya that he is dead—of plague as we come to know later on. Naranappa was no ordinary reprobate. His unorthodoxy was planned and cultivated in deliberate opposition to Praneshacharya's orthodoxy. He defied Brahminhood with a malicious glee. He ate meals cooked by the low caste Chandri, and he ate even meat and that too in public. He drank liquor and abused the Brahmins of the agrahara and their orthodox ways. He threw the sacred stone (*saligrama*) into the temple pond offending the religious sentiments of his fellow Madhva Brahmins of the agrahara. He befriended the Muslims of the village and made them catch all the sacred fish in the pond dedicated to the temple of Ganapati for curry though he very well knew that it was an act of sacrilege and the offender would bleed to death.

The close relatives of the deceased raise their objections to perform the samskara for him to their leader Pranasha:

On hearing the news through Praneshacharya, all the Brahmins of the agrahara gather before his house. The question before the Brahmins—

the close relatives of Naranappa and others equally—is whether this willful defiant of Brahminic ways is entitled to Brahminic rites of cremation. They all look up to the authoritative pronouncement of Praneshacharya. It transpires that at least two of them—Garudacharya and Lakshmanacharya—had close family ties with the deceased Naranappa and are entitled to perform the last rites for him. But they aver to the Acharya that they have broken their ties with the dead man and are unwilling to perform the *samskara* for him as he had deviated from Brahminhood and denigrated it openly by packing his cards with sin and the devil.

Chandri's offer of her gold jewels for Naranappa's cremation expenses complicates the issue:

What unfortunately complicates the issue is that Naranappa's concubine Chandri offers her gold jewels for the funeral expenses and the two close relatives of Naranappa, Garuda and Lakshmana by this new factor in the situation. Garuda and Lakshmana who were unwilling to perform the cremation of Naranappa now make a somersault at the sight of Chandri's gold as goaded by their wives. Garuda wants to use the gold for getting the discharge of his son in the army and Lakshmana wants to get the gold as it belonged to his late sister-in-law. Praneshacharya who is a genuinely honest soul is nonplussed at the warring greediness of Garuda and Lakshmana. He retires to study the books of *sastra* and find an answer out of this dilemma. It had better be a quick one. Unpleasant things happen to corpses rather quickly in a hot climate. Moreover, the Brahmins of the agrahara cannot eat anything until the dead body is cremated. An empty Brahmin stomach in midsummer is a well of anguish.

The predicament of Praneshacharya to solve the vexatious problems created by the unorthodox ways of the reprobate Naranappa:

To the utter disappointment of Praneshacharya, the books of *sastra* are totally unhelpful in solving this predicament. He sits down to reason out the matter in his mind: The problem has arisen because Naranappa was not excommunicated from the cast while he was alive. They had not dared to do it since Naranappa had threatened to become a Muslim and defile the Brahmin agrahara. But, Praneshacharya asks himself if this was this all the real reason; if there was not also compassion or a firm resolve to redeem the sinner Naranappa with saintly patience and goodness from his side. But the basic question remains: Why did Naranappa break away Brahminhood at all in the first instance? The books say that none can be born a Brahmin without the merit of many good deeds in former births. Naranappa, having thus born to a valuable heritage, proceeded to throw it into the gutter. But in the final analysis, we are all at the mercy of our inner nature. Naranappa's dying lips have probably muttered the name of God, and he has reached God. Whereas for himself (that is for Praneshacharya) who wears out in work and worship, birth after birth is laid down to achieve salvation. Who knows but

Naranappa's inner being was taken up with God but his own is with what? Thus begins Praneshacharya's quest for self-discovery, for his inner identity, which forms the theme of the novel.

The visit of the Durvasapura Brahmins to Parijatapura:

In the meanwhile the agrahara Brahmins, at the suggestion of Dasacharya and with the knowledge of Praneshacharya, proceed to Parijatapura where late Naranappa has had good friends. They proceed to the house of Manjayya, the good friend of Naranappa and seek his help to cremate Naranappa's body. But on seeing the complications in the issue, Manjayya offers to bear the expenses to cremate the body of his late friend, Naranappa. So the Durvasapura Brahmins return home disappointed to seek the guidance of Praneshacharya. As the Acharya has gone to seek the divine guidance of Maruti at the temple nearby, they wait for him patiently at his house.

The accidental mating of the Acharya with Chandri while returning from the temple of Maruti to get a divine decree to solve the problem of Naranappa's cremation:

As the books do not offer him any guidance for the pressing problem on hand, Praneshacharya decides to seek a sign from the community deity, Hanuman housed in a temple nearby. Before going to the temple, he hands over Chandri's gold ornaments to her for her upkeep. With his wet dhoti, he prays to Hanuman till the fall of night to give him a sign whether to proceed with the cremation of Naranappa or not. There is no sign from the deity; he seems to be wholly preoccupied with the mountain (*the Sanjeevi Parvatham*) he has uplifted (for effecting the cure of the mortally wounded Lakshmana, the brother of Rama). Naranappa's concubine, Chandri is anxiously waiting outside the temple for the verdict.

Praneshacharya comes out of the temple dejected and exhausted. Chandri is moved at the sincerity and piety of this lone Brahmin, the solitary genuine specimen in Durvasapura agrahara and goes down on her knees by groping in the darkness for his feet. Her breasts accidentally touch Praneshacharya's knees. Those knees already weak and unsteady with physical hunger and spiritual disillusionment, give way. He strokes her hair and wishes to pronounce a benediction in Sanskrit. But the appropriate words evade him at this critical juncture. Chandri warms up at the tenderness of this gesture, and embraces the Acharya tightly. As soon as her firm breasts press against him, the sleeping tiger in the Acharya wakes up all of a sudden. Chandri has no difficulty in making him sit down and lean against her for support. The hunger that he has not so far appeased begins to make its urgent claims now and the Acharya faintly calls out, 'Ma'. Chandri feeds him with the bananas that she had helped herself with while slow starvation was eroding the wits of the Brahmins of Durvasapura. Afterwards, she takes off her sari and spreads it on the ground and tightly clasping the Acharya, sobs her heart out. The first part of the novel ends here.

Praneshacharya's awakening in the forest—both literal and metaphoric:

The second part of the novel begins with Praneshacharya's awakening in the forest—both literal and metaphorical. He tells Chandri that she should announce to the agrahara Brahmins what transpired between them in the forest, and he confesses that he has no longer the authority to decide for the agrahara. "I am qualified to perform the *samskaras* only for myself." After this confession he feels that he unburdened a heavy load off his shoulders. He asks Chandri to follow him to the agrahara. But Chandri, who is unwilling to expose the Acharya before the Brahmins of the agrahara, goes direct to Naranappa's house. As she cannot stand the sight of Naranappa's body rot and reek, she manages to cremate it with the help of a Muslim fish-merchant by name Ahmad Bari whom late Naranappa had helped in difficult times. But the agrahara people do not know about this.

The efforts of the young friends of Naranappa to cremate the body of their patron, Naranappa:

The young friends of late Naranappa practicing a drama rehearsal at Parijatapura feel sad at the demise of their good friend and patron. They decide to cremate the Naranappa and rush to his house at Durvasapura at night. Finding that the house deserted without the body of Naranappa they become scared and think that the spirit of Naranappa has walked away. They rush out of the house in fear and panic. The nocturnal movement of the cart and the sound of the feet of people rushing in and out make Lakshmidamma, the mad widow belch and screech at night adding to the eerie atmosphere of the agrahara. The women and children remain indoors in breathless fear and anxiety.

Praneshacharya's altered persona after his sexual affair with Chandri:

When Praneshacharya goes back home to his invalid wife, his hand becomes unsteady while giving her the daily dose of medicine and porridge. The sensation that he had often experienced in his dreams, of falling into a bottomless pit and drawing up his legs in instinctive terror, revives to him when he sees the virtually visionless eyes of his flat-chested, utterly lean and skinny wife who has served to function as a symbol of his sacrifice. The sight of her recoils him as if she were the source of all stink that troubled his nostrils. He feels like a small monkey that has left the safe refuge of his mother's body and springing from branch to branch has happened to miss its hold. He is at a loss to know what made him attend on this ailing woman—compassion or a sense of obligation deriving from a Decalogue. He was sixteen and she twelve when he married her. Either a life of sanyasa or a life of self-mortification—out of this sour resolve had emerged his choice of a stemless invalid girl. He left her with a grateful father-in-law and went away to Benares to become a *Vedanta Siromani*. When he returned he gladly engaged himself in the nursing of his wife, for it had seemed to him that God had made her invalid and deposited her with him to test his perseverance in

“desireless action” (*nishkama karma*). He attended on her; he cooked food for her, worshipped the idols of the domestic deities, and in the evening ladled out discourses on the Holy Scriptures to the agrahara Brahmins and widows with shaven heads. Like a miser he had hoarded all the pretty coins of his daily penance. And now he felt he was back where he were when he was sixteen.

The Acharya disowns all responsibilities:

Thus when the Brahmins troop to him again to ask what they should do with the corpse of Naranappa, he tells them they are free to do what they like. Saying this, Praneshacharya feels a weight has slipped off him, the weight of playing the guru. “I am not a superhuman. Like the rest of you, I am human too and my life is charged with all attachments and aversions of workaday humanity.” Is this public confession of a sign of humility or of the fall of pride or the first lesson of my life?—He wonders.

The Acharya lacks courage to admit to the Brahmins of his agrahara that he slept with Chandri in the forest:

He calls out to Chandri to strike off his shackles, to take down from his throbbing head the increasing weight of gurudum. But after the meeting in the forest, Chandri was nowhere to be seen; she had walked away, like Urvasi. He cannot bring himself to admit to the Brahmins that he too shared in the ecstasy of Naranappa. For the first time in his life, the desire is born in him to lie, to hide, and to plan for his own security. He finds he does not have the courage to run the risk of blasting the trust the Brahmins have in him. Is this remorse or anxiety to save his skin, or an automatic habit or a hidden guile in his character?—He wonders. The prayer (*mantra*), which had become a habit of his being, comes to his mind: “I am the sin: I am the sinner ...” (*Papoham, papakarmaham*) No, that is a lie too. One must eject all the *mantras* that have squatted in one’s soul and make one’s life clean and clear like that of a young boy.

The Acharya is happy that Chandri is not there to depose for him to the Brahmins:

He did not feel “sin” (*papoham*) when he pressed Chandri’s breasts. In a way, he is glad that Chandri is not there to strip him of his respectability before the Brahmins. What one thinks after the experience is over, when awareness returns, is one thing, but what one feels while the experience lasts, when awareness has absconded, is altogether different. He feels he must banish his awareness again in Chandri’s arms and while still in her embrace, recall it; only thus he can heal the self-division within. “Though I left desire, desire would not leave me. Why did I touch her at all? Was it out of compassion? Was it not rather desire masquerading then as a softly purring, just a little overgrown, cat, house-trained for a while by the rituals he had rigorously practised? But the moment Chandri’s breasts had touched him the beast had sprung. I did not really live all these days. The *mantras* and formulae I had learnt by rote lived my life for me.”

The Brahmins proceed to Kaimara at the suggestion of Dasacharya:

Surprised at the reply of Praneshacharya, the Brahmins of Durvasapura set out to Kaimara to meet Subbanacharya. He feeds the Brahmins but says that he cannot offer them any guidance in the matter of performing samskara for Naranappa, which the great Praneshacharya himself cannot decide. As they are about to leave for meeting the guru at the Mutt, Dasacharya develops high fever and coma. So they leave him behind and meet the guru and explain to him their predicament. He promptly orders them to burn the body of Naranappa and hand over the gold to the Mutt, as Naranappa has died heirless. The Brahmins leave the Mutt after taking the ceremonial meals there. They leave Gundacharya behind as he develops a crippling fever like Dasacharya.

The Acharya goes for a swim in the village river, his nostalgic thoughts of his boyhood days and his visit to the place in the forest where he took Chandri:

After departure of the Brahmins, Praneshacharya goes for a swim in the village river. Swimming about in the cool waters, he recollects his boyhood when giving a slip to the vigil of his mother; how he would swim in the river and afterwards roll about on the warm sands to dry him lest his mother should detect his escapade. He is surprised that the long forgotten desire of his boyhood should revive now. Is there, he wonders, a pleasure to equal that of rolling in the warm sands on the riverbank after a cool swim in the river? He gets up and goes back to the spot in the forest where Chandri and he had lain together—the spot where his life had changed course. The print of their bodies on the green turf still lay afresh. He plucks the tender grass shoots and smells them. To rest thus in the shade of the tree seems to him in itself a goal of life. He wants to remain thus, awake to the grass, to the flower, to shine and shadow; to set aside all desire and wealth and to live unaccommodated and receiving gratefully whatever emerged from the Unmanifest calling out, 'Here I am. Take me. Hold me.'

Praneshacharya walks out of the agrahara after cremating his wife Bhagirathi:

Praneshacharya comes back home from the forest. His wife has caught the plague and is soon dead. He cremates her and sets off without going back home towards the East. The fifteen lace-embroidered shawls, the two hundred rupees, the balsam necklace set in gold, all that had been conferred on him by the Mutt in honour of his erudition and forensic skill are left behind in the deserted house. The second part of the novel ends here.

Pranesh's meeting of Putta during his aimless wanderings and Putta sticking to him like the sin of his previous birth:

The third part of the novel describes Praneshacharya's wanderings. He decides to proceed towards Kundapura and meet Chandri. On the way, a

village headman offers him fruits as the Acharya denies his suggestion to cook his own meals. He mistakes the Acharya for mendicant Brahmin seeking alms. As the Acharya leaves the village, he meets a young man by name Putta belonging to Malera caste. Putta wants to come with the Acharya to Kundapura and follows him like the sin of his previous birth. He is highly talkative and plies the Acharya with riddles. Try as he does, the Acharya is not able to give a slip to Putta and go on his own way.

The Acharya's experiences with Putta at Melige and his meeting of Padmavati:

Putta takes the Acharya to the temple festival at Melige. The Acharya sees the decorated temple car surrounded by people offering worship to it. He also sees a crowd of people in festive mood. He sees a cockfight nearby and then a young girl full of curves performing acrobatics on a bamboo poll. The Acharya is attracted to the serpentine curves of the acrobatic girl and is reminded of Chandri's charms. Then Putta takes the Acharya to a restaurant and gets him a cup of coffee. Then he takes him to the house of a young woman by name Padmavati living alone in a farmhouse. Padmavati is very charming and Putta suggests that the Acharya stay there in the cottage of Padmavati for the night and proceed to Kundapura on the morning. Telling Padmavati that he will return with the Acharya, Putta takes him to the temple feast intended only for Brahmins. He stays outside and waits for the Acharya to finish his meals.

The Acharya's sudden decision to return to Durvasapura to redefine his personality without any fear or guilt:

At the temple meals-line, the Acharya eats the ceremonial-meal. His neighbour in the line seeks the help of the Acharya to marry his young girl off before she comes of age. The cook serving the meals is able to identify the Acharya after some hard thinking and proceeds to inform his master about the presence of the great Praneshacharya. So the Acharya abruptly breaks the meal and rushes out. Putta catches with him and helps him wash his hands in the nearby pond. Then he asks the Acharya to come along with him to Padmavati's house. But the Acharya overcomes his temptation, decides to return to Durvasapura, and tell the truth to the Brahmins and complete the samskara for Naranappa. He wants to overcome his fear of society for transgressing its code. To be rid of this fear, he must go back to the village and tell the Brahmins the whole truth—not in confession or repentance but simply as the truth, one's truth. So he tells Putta that he has to return to his village, as a relative of his is very serious. Putta offers to accompany him, as he wants to meet his friend Naranappa for an obligation. But the Acharya desists from telling Putta the death of Naranappa as it may lead to fresh complications. As they proceed on the road, a bullock cart proceeding to Durvasapura offers to take one of them. Putta asks the Acharya to go by the cart and proceeds to meet his wife living with her parents at Tirthahalli. The novel ends with Praneshacharya journeying back to Durvasapura in anxious expectation.