

# Rice and ragi: remembering URA

SHELDON POLLOCK

THERE is a time and place for impersonal scholarship to assess the creative work of U. R. Ananthamurthy, and to make sense of what it has meant and is likely to mean to Indian literature in the future. There is also a time and place for personal acquaintances to reflect on their friendship, and to make sense of what it has meant to their own lives. The recentness of URA's death and my long attachment to him prompt me now to reflection rather than assessment. And while I want to reminisce for the record – I know this is what URA would have appreciated – what I see emerging from these reminiscences are two larger, even defining features of his life and work around which I can organize my thoughts: his relationship with India's language order and his relationship with the order of the world.

The face of (a very young) Girish Karnad was staring from the screen at the end of the film version of

*Samskara* when I walked into a room at the University of Iowa in the spring of 1975, as a twenty-seven year-old professor just beginning my career, and met URA for the first time. I was coming to the university to teach Sanskrit but also to succeed him as instructor in Asian literary humanities. Something in that configuration of concerns – literature, Asia, and Sanskrit – and in fact in a particular sub-configuration of that configuration, was to lie at the core of our friendship for the next forty years. For it was a relationship that lived on and sustained itself through literature in general, Indian literature in particular, and the peculiar bond that exists between big and powerful languages like Sanskrit or English and smaller and more embattled languages like the one to which URA devoted himself heart and soul, Kannada.

I guess you could say that the single most consequential act in URA's

writerly life was the choice to take the side of the embattled – as he would do in all the rest of his life – and to use Kannada for his literary writing. Others in this issue of *Seminar* will no doubt have something to say about URA's postgraduate work in Birmingham UK in the late 1950s: about the remarkable circle of friends and mentors who surrounded him there (Richard Hogarth, Malcolm Bradbury, David Lodge, Stuart Hall); the historic intellectual moment he participated in that saw the dawning of cultural studies; the dissertation he wrote on the British Marxist novelist Edward Upward (who, it is astonishing to learn, died only five years ago, at the age of 105); and URA's immersion in English literature in general, for it was the field to which he would, academically, be affiliated through his active teaching career. What for me is most significant about this postgraduate experience, however, is the choice he made then to reject English in favour of Kannada.

Anyone who has ever read the utterly charming, seemingly artless English that URA wrote in his scholarly essays understands at once that the act of abandoning the language in his creative work was not a necessity but a choice. It was one that affiliated him with a deep history of choices of which he was fully aware, just as he was fully aware of the politics such a choice entailed. All these issues – political, historical, aesthetic, and existential – that were associated with the decision to use the particular literary language he did use marked as much as, or even more than anything else, URA's identity as a writer and – to move from great things to small – marked the intellectual impact he exercised on one particular friend.

I saw these forces vividly at work when at my invitation (and with the support of a Fulbright fellowship)

URA returned to Iowa City to spend the academic year 1986-1987. Soon after he arrived, we decided to sit down together and translate one of his first short stories, 'Prakriti'.<sup>1</sup> As we worked our way through the piece word by word – despite the fact that my Kannada then was rudimentary (as it has once again become) – I experienced at the most intimate level both the large structural relationship between Kannada and Sanskrit but also URA's very careful modulation and balancing between the two codes. I witnessed the powerful affective hold Kannada held for him, and the joy with which he explained its nuances to an (almost) outsider. The translation itself was to have appeared in one or another collections, yet never did; it is seeing the light of day, finally, in this issue of *Seminar*.

'Prakriti' is, for me at least, what Sanskrit would call an *anvarthana*, a word that perfectly embodies its referent, since the experience of translating it lingers as a *foundational* one in my memory and life. Not only would Kannada become a scholarly interest of mine from that point on, but a larger research project began to take shape in my mind, on what I would come to call the problem of cosmopolitan and vernacular in history. However vague at first, the project would come to obsess me for the next decade and a half, and it was one on which URA, in his own way as a contemporary writer grappling with the problem, would be an active interlocutor.

When I say URA 'chose' to write in Kannada, I want to make clear, if it is not already, that both the possibility of literary language choice and the obligation to choose truly exist for many contemporary postcolonial writers,

1. I feel sure he told me it was his first, but the original appeared only in his second collection, *Prashne*, in 1963. URA apparently

especially Indian writers, in a way and with a degree of compulsion (and anxiety) that they do not for others, the so-called metropolitan writers. And in India, as elsewhere if less intensely, this choice is by no means postcolonial; instead, the literary world had long been structured by a complex 'language order' (a concept I borrow from Andrew Ollett). For two thousand years, being a writer in India had always entailed the necessity of choosing and, by that choice, affiliating oneself with one or another competing – and sometimes conflicting – aesthetic, social and political vision.

Ananthamurthy was fully aware of all this, since he was deeply interested in the deep past, if less expertly knowledgeable about it than he would have wished. (He could not help me with Old Kannada himself, but he had the foresight to direct me to the great scholar T. V. Venkatachala Sastry of Mysore.) Indeed, it was from discussions with him that my own long gestating ideas took on greater nuance and cultural-political urgency. I began to see that, as in so other many instances of deep cultural theory, classical India had a great deal to teach the rest of the world: it had actual categories for cultural phenomena that were common elsewhere but completely unnamed, and hence, unknown. In this case the terms are *marga* and *desi*, languages of the 'Great Way' and those 'of Place', which, for reasons I have tried elsewhere to clarify, I would eventually decide to translate as 'cosmopolitan' and 'vernacular'.

found unsatisfactory the translation by Sumatindra Nadig (in *Sixty Years of Kannada Short Story*, ed. L.S. Seshagiri Rao, Kannada Sahitya Parishad, 1978; he mentioned another, earlier and very bad version that cannot now be traced). Narayan Hegde, the translator of URA's short stories, published a Hindi version in *Ajkal* in 1963. (I thank him for this bibliographical information.)

I began to see that these were not only literary-critical terms but broadly cultural, informing traditional understandings of diversity in everything from dance to music to food. And they were, or could arguably be held as, broadly political, since they were associated with varying forms of (respectively) transregional and regional power. According to the analysis of Indian culture-power I began to develop in the 1990s, Sanskrit ruled as the language of empire for a millennium or more starting around the beginning of the Common Era, and would eventually be replaced, some ten centuries later, by other, more circumscribed formations that I called vernacular polities, in part because they prioritized regional language for the expression of political power.

Of course, in many ways a vernacular-political language such as Kannada could itself take on a certain cosmopolitan character, both in its interaction with Sanskrit and in its domineering relationship with languages of smaller worlds such as Kodagu or Konkani or Havyaka (in which a movie version of the ‘Prakriti’ story has, somewhat ironically, just been produced), or indeed, URA’s own language, which was basically Tulu.<sup>2</sup>

This peculiar kind of synthesis that India found generally so easy to effect – in contrast to more assimilative formations, whether ancient empires such as Rome or modern nation-states such as England or France – offered a kind of template that URA readily transferred to contemporary politics. An example he was fond of citing was the election in December 1984, which saw the ‘marga’ candidate Rajiv Gandhi elected from the all-India Congress Party as prime minister of India, and the ‘desi’ candidate Ramakrishna Hegde

from the locally-inflected Janata Party as Karnataka chief minister. He could similarly think of sociological categories in the same terms: thus, class was ‘marga’ whereas caste was ‘desi’.

With URA’s help, I began to see that Kannada itself was conspicuous in world literary history for its richly layered, long-term arbitration of these different valences, not uniquely so – given, in India, the somewhat later history of Telugu, among other examples, or, in Europe, the considerably later history of Italian, again among others – but conspicuously so. With the characteristically earthy wit of the Shimoga villager he was always proud to be, he gave expression to this categorical diversity through the metaphor of *rice versus ragi*, the ubiquitous white refined food of the urban elites (and high-caste ritual specialists) and the very local hearty millet of the rural poor. This was a conceit he long cherished: he mentioned it to me in conversation first around 1986; so far as I can tell it first appeared in print in an introductory essay to the photo album *Karnataka: Impressions*, 1989, and more recently in these pages in a 2010 interview with Chandan Gowda (it derives ultimately from the 17th century Kannada poet Kanakadasa).

The extension that he could have made but did not, or did not wish to, make was that rural people do not actually want to eat ragi, however wholesome they know it to be. They prefer to eat the white rice that will weaken them... and to learn the English that will weaken, or even kill, Kannada. Indeed, what pained URA as much as anything in the world was to observe the long arc of the nourishing vernacular tending toward decline under the power of white-rice English.

All these ideas – about the writer’s commitment to Kannada and about

the great Kannada poets and thinkers past and present – manifested themselves not just in our purely intellectual exchanges but in the relationships that URA made possible for me. It is to him that I owe my friendship with the great Dalit poet Devanur Mahadeva and the inimitable Girish Karnad, my acquaintanceship with the playwright Chandrashekhara Kambar and the literary historian and critic Kirtinatha Kurtakoti, among countless others. Even my interactions with my dear colleague A.K. Ramanujan took on a special aura because of URA (Raman actually edited the draft translation of ‘Prakriti’ in 1989).

But foremost among all these new friends was D.R. Nagaraj, who before his tragic death in 1996 was about to accept a professorial appointment at the University of Chicago (I had thought of him as the successor – a man from the world of ragi rather than the world of rice – for Raman, who died in 1993). It was his support for DR over many years, his affection for and loyalty to him, his engagement with his ideas, his shared temperament, that embodies for me everything that was so wonderful about URA: passion for literature; genuine admiration for learning with real depth; profound connection with Kannada as both an old and new literary language; lifelong commitment to the battle against social inequality; and last but hardly least and hardly negligible, magnetic charm and joyful playfulness.

Ananthamurthy’s commitment to Kannada was inseparable from his love of Karnataka. A good deal of his prose writing was about the land and the people and the ways of life on that wonderful spot of earth, object of such remarkable emotional attachment from as early as the 9th century. ‘Between the Kaveri and the Godavari rivers’, so the great Kannada treatise on poetry

2. 2013; directed by Panchakshari, produced by Art Films, Bangalore.

and polity, 'The Way of the King of Poets' (*Kavirajamarga*), puts it 'is that culture-land (*nadu*) in Kannada, a well known people-place (*janapada*), an illustrious, outstanding political realm within the circle of the earth.'

From an early date Kannadigas had known to situate this special place in the wider world. Entirely typical is a 12th century inscription from north-west Karnataka from a tiny Brahman settlement: 'In Jambudvipa, best of all continents, lies Bharatavarsha, most exalted of regions... In it is found Belvala, native soil of the multitude of all tribes... In it lies the Nareyangal Twelve, and therein is found the celebrated *agrahara* named Ittagi.' (In a way I cannot quite articulate, this telescoping in – bringing the big world into the little – seems to me different from and preferable to that of the telescoping out – projecting the little world into the big – found in say Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist*: 'Stephen Dedalus, Class of Elements, Clongowes Wood College, Sallins, County Kildare, Ireland, Europe, The World, The Universe.')

This peculiar orientation is a perfect geographical counterpart to the 'cosmopolitan vernacularism' of Kannada writers and thinkers, both ancient and modern, where the two great tendencies in culture and power could each find its proper place. And it is entirely evocative of URA's own way of being: he lived his life and made his art in such a way that the whole world was meant to be contained in the language and themes of the 'land of the black earth.'

I was fortunate to have been able to travel through much of the state with URA, typically on the high hard seat of an Ambassador on loan to him in connection with this or that administrative posting. I remember the glorious days we spent in Kodagu amidst the coffee fields, or in the western ghats

en route to the wildlife preserve in Thekkady, where after several early risings we succeeded in sighting not much more than some elephant turd and Lord Rama's three-striped squirrel. But then, seeing animals was not really the point of the trip.

In the spring of 1987, URA asked me to sit and talk with him about an invitation he had just received from the then chief minister of Kerala to become vice chancellor of Mahatma Gandhi University, a new postgraduate institution in Kottayam. Or perhaps the invitation was mediated by Ramakrishna Hegde, the chief minister of Karnataka, for part of the issue in URA's decision whether to accept or refuse was the worry of disappointing political associates in his home state. It was clear to me at the time, and even more to URA himself, that accepting such a position for so long – I think it was at least a two-year appointment – would seriously interrupt his literary career.

And indeed, most readers would probably agree that his output from the 1990s on did not reach the heights of commitment and passion and artistry of the earlier works. But URA's decision to accept was based, aside from local political concerns, on another core aspect of his character: his commitment to social and economic justice, and to equal intellectual opportunity. To help build a new university in a progressive state to serve the needs of common people spoke too directly to many of his concerns to ignore. Perhaps the best way to illustrate this is by telling a few Kottayam stories.

When URA got to the Kerala university he needed someone to help with the cooking. An acquaintance of his, a political activist and member of the Irava community, had recently died, leaving his family destitute. URA immediately hired his late friend's

sixteen-year-old son as cook. It was inconsequential to him that the boy could hardly find his way around a kitchen (he once succeeded in turning magnificent fresh fish I had bought on a backwater boat ride into shoe leather). It was entirely typical of URA that he preferred to eat poorly for two years, as he wound up doing, rather than forego the chance to help a person in need.

I was not present during the drive in 1989 (one not started by URA but vigorously promoted by him) to make Kottayam the first city in India to achieve one-hundred per cent literacy; among other things, URA arranged for reading glasses for aged illiterates eager to be able, finally, to learn to read (the Silver Jubilee of this event was celebrated in Kottayam this past June 25).

Another visit of mine to Kottayam later in that same summer coincided with the tragic events of Tiananmen Square. I accompanied URA to a tense meeting of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) in central Kerala (I forget now where; it might have been Alleppey). While the last Stalinists in the world were busy purging any member who denounced the state atrocity, URA stood up and gave an impassioned speech in defence of the slaughtered students, entirely secure in the conviction that he must speak regardless of the mood of the gathering.

URA ran his vice chancellorship of MGU in the same way, receiving on a daily basis streams of what seemed petitioners or even suppliants, whether from the staff, the students, or, most typically, a union representative, who came seeking URA's intercession in this or that cause or with this or that person abusing their authority. At the same time the vice chancellor was encouraging the most intense discussions around freedom and dignity in

the university's School of Social Theory. There was no theory-practice contradiction in URA.

It had been much the same during his Fulbright year in Iowa City. URA had gathered around him a group of brilliant young Indian students, all of them at once artistically creative and politically radical, just like himself: Suketu Mehta, Kabir Mohanty and Sharmistha Mohanty, V. Geetha, the late Bala Kailasam, among others. His quest for social transformation was infectious. At the same time, he travelled widely in the US, most memorably to the deep South, where he talked to African-American youngsters about social change, non-violence, and the ties that bound him and them together. URA believed that honest men and women committed to real revolution must put their time and energy where their mouths are, and unlike most of us, he did so constantly.

Others in this issue of Seminar will, I hope, discuss more deeply than I am able to do URA's actual political life in Karnataka, such as his relationship to the old Socialist Party and Janata Party of Karnataka, his unwavering resistance to the Emergency, or his lifelong admiration for the (largely if unjustly forgotten) political theorist and anticolonial revolutionary Ram Manohar Lohia, Ananthu's admiration no doubt in part stemming from Lohia's own sense of priority of the anthropological *desi* – caste – over the sociological *marga* – class.

Progressive politics was baked into URA's character, and it is no surprise he preserved that spirit to the very end of his life, as his profound concern at the 2014 election testifies. His death is a source not only of deep sorrow to his friends but of worry to anyone who cares about the orders he cared about, the order of language and the order of the world, and understands, as URA understood so well, how deeply the two are connected.