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A Never-ending Quest

Shadakshari Settar (1935–2020)

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Shadakshari Settar's research covered various fields like history, archaeology, art history, Darshana Shastra, Jaina way of life, epigraphy, and classical Kannada, among others. More than 20 books and 100 research articles in these areas, besides several unfinished projects, speak volumes about his original contribution to historical studies in India.

Shadakshari Settar (1935–2020), breathed his last in February 2020 in Bengaluru. He was a committed researcher and Kannada writer, and a faculty in the Department of History and Archaeology at Karnatak University, Dharwad, from 1960 to 1996. Apart from a PhD from Karnatak University, he received another one from Cambridge University after working on the late medieval art and architecture of South India, the Hoysala temples in particular. He held distinguished positions as visiting professor at universities like Heidelberg, Chicago, Berlin, Harvard, to mention a few, besides heading eminent public institutions, including Indian Council of Historical Research (ICHR), New Delhi. When he died, he was the S Radhakrishnan Visiting Professor at the National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS), Bengaluru. In recognition of his scholarship and historical inquiries, more than 20 awards have been conferred upon him.

It is interesting to map the story of how a village boy in a remote corner of pre-independent India's Kannada-speaking region became a historian and writer with a difference. Settar, the historian, was as much a product of his intellectual milieu as his own talent and ambition.

Early Childhood and Education

Settar was born on 11 December 1935 in Hampasagara, a village in Ballari district, then under the Madras Presidency, now in the Hyderabad–Karnataka region. The village was submerged in the backwaters of the Tungabhadra dam later. Born into a Lingayat zamindar family, he went on to face hardships in life as his father was an unsuccessful businessman. In an interview with Rahamat Tarikere, eminent Kannada cultural critic, Settar recounted how his family was recognised as rich even while being poor, and the family, which owned horses and an elephant, was facing penury inside while maintaining the image of being a “royal” entity in the public eye (Tarikere 2011: 272). The glory of feudalism and zamindari system was vanishing, and Settar grew up in a period when the old order was making way for colonial modernity with all its ramifications.

He passed his intermediate examination at the Veerashaiva College, Ballari. While studying in Ballari, he read Rabindranath Tagore, and out of his admiration for the great poet, named his nephew Ravindra (Ravi Korisettar, one of the authors of this article). Later, when Korisettar began to see Settar as a writer contributing short stories, limericks, and plays to Kannada magazines, he was able to relate them with Settar's early interest in literature and admiration for Tagore. Settar was a voracious reader of Kannada classics,

both modern and premodern, and he was well-versed with Sanskrit works. These early interests shaped his later historical studies.

Mysuru Days

Settar chose Mysuru to do his higher studies, and he wanted to pursue literary studies. But fate had different plans for him, and he ended up choosing history for his graduate studies. While he was interested in doing Master of Arts (MA) in English literature, he happened to meet M V Krishna Rao, philosopher–teacher at the University of Mysore, who inspired him to study history. He was very much influenced by Krishna Rao and S Srikanta Sastri, another great history teacher. He continued his interest in literature, especially in Kannada literature, which later helped his historical inquiries. While he excelled in academics, passing BA honours and MA with laurels and gold medals under the guidance of teachers like Krishna Rao and Shastri, the Mysuru intellectual culture too shaped the life of his mind.

Settar used to often remember how his Mysuru days formed his attitudes towards learning and his training in logical thinking. His exposure to historical scholarship helped him recognise the limitations of his predecessors. While on study tour of historical sites, he always carried with him published material and would cross-check his observations with the published accounts, and would work further on the historical evidences to arrive at more insightful understanding. Perhaps, it was during this period that he began to appreciate and admire Ashoka Maurya, who later became one of his intellectual obsessions. His admiration for Ashoka was reflected in many ways; he named his first child Priyadarshini, and his pen name for all literary writings was Devanampriya. He was very fond of holding discussions with his colleagues on Ashoka.

It was the literary Mysuru that made a lasting impact on Settar. The then Mysuru was a Mysore of Kuvempu, a great Kannada writer; it was a hub of literary conversations and activities. TaRaSu (T R Subba Rao), a popular Kannada novelist, was his close companion, besides veteran Kannada men of letters like P Lankesh, U R Ananthamurthy, Poornachandra Tejaswi, Rajeev Taranath, and Lakshminarayan Bhat, among others. He continued to be in conversation with Kannada scholars and *littérateurs* all his life. Immediately after his MA, he worked for some time as a journalist, besides writing plays, satires and limericks.

Dharwad Days

It was in the 1960s that he moved to Dharwad and took up a career in teaching at the Karnatak College, Dharwad, and later in the Department of History and Archaeology, Karnatak University, Dharwad. While continuing his interest in literary pursuits and creative writing, he focused on historical studies. Having opted to be a historian, he identified potential areas for furthering his research interests and embarked on a PhD programme, initially under P B Desai and later under G S Diskhit, both professors of history at the Karnatak University. He was keenly interested in medieval Karnataka and studied the Shravanabelagola monuments for his PhD. He was also affected by the then Dharwad literary culture. His interactions with Kannada scholars at Karnatak University helped his historical research and, later, his work on classical Kannada.

As a historian, Settar produced his major works in the English language while he was in Dharwad. His extensive field notes on the Hoysala monuments and his inquisitive mind compelled him to become an art historian and an art critic, which later led him to obtain a second PhD from the University of Cambridge as a Commonwealth Fellow (1967–70). Both Shravanabelagola and Hoysala temples continued to receive his serious attention during the following two decades. His mastery over the historical sources, personal field

data, and a thorough knowledge of classical Kannada literature and epigraphical sources, was a great help in this regard.

While working on classical Kannada literature, he produced a concordance of these texts (now being published) and gained an in-depth knowledge of Jain philosophy, iconography of Jaina deities, religious practices, etc. This led him to return to the Shravanabelagola, resulting in the publication of *Inviting Death: Historical Experiments on Sepulchral Hill* (1988) and *Pursuing Death: Philosophy and Practice of Voluntary Termination of Life* (1990), focusing on voluntary termination of life by Jaina pious men and women, and laity. These works have seen several editions and have been translated into other languages. As H S Shivaprakash, a contemporary Kannada poet and playwright, notes, Settar explored unusual themes and problems but made them topical (Shivaprakash 2011: xvi).

Settar's research interest in art history covered major historical periods of Karnataka history in particular and South Indian history in general, especially the Chalukya, Rashtrakuta and Vijayanagara periods. He felt the need to write a history of artists, including scribes, sculptors and architects and wrote several articles and guided doctoral research studies on these topics.

The Kannada Turn

Settar's choice of language for his research writing was strongly criticised. "Why did he write in English and neglect his immediate Kannada audience?" his critics asked. While responding to such criticism, in his interview with Tarikere, Settar said that he was preparing himself for writing in Kannada, especially after his retirement during the late 1990s. He said, "I have started working in Kannada, every day I won't sleep without having read Kannada classical poetry, wait and see what will be its result after four to five years" (Tarikere 2011: 281).

Towards the end of his career, he deliberately chose to write only in Kannada, and as a result, he produced monumental works in Kannada: *Sangam Tamilagam Mattu Kannada Nadu-Nudi (The Sangam Tamilagam and Kannada Land and Language: Reflections on the Early Dravidian Relations)* (2007); *Halagannada: Lipi, Lipikara, Lipi Vyavasaya (Ancient Kannada Script, Scribe and Cultivation of Letters)* (2014); *Halagannada: Bhashe, Bhasha Vikas, Bhasha Bandhavya* (2017); *Prakruta Jagadvalaya (Prakrut Cosmopolis)* (2018). These works are a landmark in the study of Dravidian culture, especially classical Kannada language, literature and culture. Without these works, Settar would have been referred to simply as a historian of art or as an unknown author of the Jaina notion of death. His first work in this Kannada phase *Sangam Tamilagam* ran to 11 editions within a span of four years after its first publication. This work, while tracing the early Dravidian relations, raised new questions about Tamil and Kannada intellectual relations, and it brought to light new evidences that subverted hitherto held views on classical Kannada texts like *Kavirajamarga* and classical Tamil texts like *Tolkāppiyam*.

Settar's engagement with Dravidian classicism continued in three more monumental works that followed: *Halagannada: Lipi, Lipikara, Lipi Vyavasaya (Ancient Kannada Script, Scribe and Cultivation of Letters)* (2014); *Halagannada: Bhashe, Bhasha Vikas, Bhasha Bhandavya (Ancient Kannada: Language, Evolution and Language Association)* (2017); *Prakruta Jagadvalaya: Convergence of Prakrit, Kannada and Sanskrit Language* (2018). The two volumes on classical Kannada trace the history of Kannada letters by reading literary history and rereading the social history of classical Kannada culture. In *Prakruta Jagadvalaya*, Settar tells the story of the Prakrit language, its rise and fall as a language of cosmopolitanism in the context of classical Kannada and Sanskrit.

In these works, Settar does not engage directly with his interlocutor Sheldon Pollock, the author of *Language of Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India* (2009), but these works in a way are both a continuation of the Pollock kind of inquiries and, at the same time, critiques of Pollock's engagement with Indian classicism, especially that of the relationship between Kannada and Sanskrit. The entire project of Settar's research of this period tries to explore how, in the past, different linguistic communities found polyphonic expressions and many ways of living together (Shashikumar 2018: 182). Beneath these historical narratives, the mind of Settar is restless with the present forms of oppressions. His works, finally, are in search of how past literary and intellectual cultures flourished in fearless sociopolitical milieus. His monograph *Karnataka, Bahutvada Ayamagalu* (2018) articulates this search by undertaking to study the literary culture of old Kannada and its engagement with royal power.

What is distinctive about the later phase of Settar's research into classical Kannada is not simply about critiquing earlier assumptions and understandings by showing new historical evidences, but his attempt to fashion the Kannada language for research—choice of words and formation of syntax. He has refashioned a fine vocabulary for articulating historical research in the contemporary Kannada. If the early researcher in Settar writes like a social scientist, the later researcher writes like a storyteller. He has definitely made contemporary Kannada a language of historical narrative.

As a historian, his methodology was not radically different, and he did not create a new epistemology of historical studies, but he insisted on scepticism as the beginning of a research work. He, accordingly, was able to show the limitations of his predecessors in the field and provide us with new historical understanding. As a researcher, he was very clear that he was not presenting conclusions in his works, but interventions and provocations.

Despite his increasingly failing health during the last one year, he was committed to writing and research. He was sure that he would live for two more years, adequate for completing his ongoing projects on various aspects of Kannada literature, including Vachana Sahitya, Jain literature, eight-volume work on *Modala Sahasramanada Kannada Shasanagal*, revised version of his *Hoysala Temples, a History of Vijayanagara*, among others. While ill health troubled him, he used to tell about the importance of his ongoing projects and would wish that he needed two more years to complete them.

Learning from Settar

Settar's passion for intellectual work and writing continue to inspire many. His legacy shall motivate generations of researchers in social sciences to be inquisitive explorers not in search of—to use his own metaphors for a research work—full stops but semicolons (Settar 2015). Research, according to Settar, is a never-ending quest.

He was a workaholic, committed to seeking the truth through rigorous study and erudition, however tentative it was. He belonged to a generation of scholars who delighted in pursuing knowledge for its own sake. What drove this scholar to read *Pampa Bharatha*, a great Kannada classic, more than 50 times? We feel it was his sheer calling for scholarship as his vocation.

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